

SPOTLIGHT ON...



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The Space Between Perspectives on ‘Party Voids’

In this article, award-winning architect Michel Mossessian and Capital Watch editor Richard Pickering trade views on the importance of space between buildings.



By Michel Mossessian,
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Director of
Mossessian
Architecture

Looking back

It was the heady mix of 17th century catastrophe (the Great Fire of London) and selfishness (on the part of the then gentleman landowners) that in effect created the unique fabric of London's streets and shared spaces that still exists today. Private ownership triumphed over Wren's exquisite vision of orderliness and instead the true force of party wall agreements came into play.

The events of 1666 were, if you like, a fanfare for participatory architecture, empowering landowners to customise and craft whatever fell within their domain. Now we're in the interesting position that we place more

and more value on ‘party voids’, the spaces between buildings and we're reliant on either adjoining landowners' agreements, or a new element of legislation to realise these.

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I think that it is this very ‘selfishness’ that ‘has been a blessing for London’
— *Financial Times*, Oct 2014

London's juxtapositions

It is thanks to the individualistic stamp of London's landowners that the city is an enchanting mix of the impressive and the mundane, the old and new, a jumble of juxtapositions that could never occur in the formal Hausmann boulevards of Paris. The latter were driven by a holistic planning vision, to move troops from east to west, or north to south. London has allowed for quirks, like the conversion of the mews from horse to human habitat, bringing a welcome personalisation of place and the opportunity for pockets of tight-knit community space.

Free space

I have already written (*Financial Times*, June 2014) about my concerns that London's great estates – Cadogan, Grosvenor, The Crown Estate – in whose interest it is to maintain and constantly improve their plots and who currently don't make us feel as though we need a pass to enter their domain, may in time be eaten up by dotcom campuses. The fear is that the latter would challenge public access, limiting engagement and deadening activity.

We need to ensure that these new landlords learn from the old, creating buffer zones of free space, upholding the generosity that endowed London with its parks and squares and welcoming different uses, for different publics, at different times of day, if necessary.

This seems to be an increasing trend; a fine line that shifts, according to the time of day and day of the week, between private and public space, so that working environments might become shopping zones, or a central city plaza might become a play space after hours or on weekends.

Work, rest and play

In fact, the curators of the British Pavilion this year at the Venice Architecture Biennale are dividing up their exhibition up into five rooms that correspond to measurements of time: hours, days, months, years and decades, to reflect the changing use of domestic space – space which might be occupied only at either end of a working day in the office, or constantly.

The same applies to public space that shifts between non-commercial and commercial use and caters for a totally different demographic according to the time of day.

The Argent development site at King's Cross is a good example of this. Students and the public gather to eat their sandwiches on the purpose-built slope down to the canal outside Granary Square, but they might be joined by others who are passing through for a meeting in one of the office buildings. Night-time events then encourage an entirely new wave of visitors.

One mass; one void; two buildings

We were asked to create two office buildings on the King's Cross site, but the concept that we pushed for is: one mass; one void; two buildings.

We felt it was vital to create a 'party void' between the two buildings, encouraging flow around and through the site, to make it a seamless part of the campus, to justify its relationship to the ground, public space and its fellow campus buildings.

We added a small public square, accessed through our 'void', that becomes both a resting space and part of the pathway that leads pedestrians through the varied densities of the site.

As part of the London Festival of Architecture this June, I am speaking in my capacity as Visiting Professor at Imperial College, about our increasing openness to sharing space, thinking around the built environment's potential to positively impact on community wellbeing.

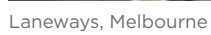
This is all part of the same story: freeing up space that might otherwise be locked into private ownership and allowing the local community to bring it back to life – because this is where the dynamism of the city resides: in the hands of the people who use it.

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We need to welcome 'different users, for different publics, at different times of the day'



S1 / S2 – 'one mass, one void, two buildings'



Space to collaborate

In the property industry we naturally focus on the space within buildings.

This is the commodity that is measured, demised and rented. However, while the value of an office is typically a function of its demised area, modern business activities are increasingly more porous.

It is now common for meetings to happen in coffee shops, and for clients to 'drop-in' to make use of shared facilities.

Added value

In a world increasingly driven by collaboration – how beneficial is it really to keep private space private? How does a tenant actually derive value from its accommodation, and so how should the landlord price this?

The shopping centre model intrinsically recognises the value of the semi-private space. The more recent rise of co-working space and the charging of membership fees perhaps more readily reflects the value to the tenant of areas outside the demise.

There is obviously a challenge to valuing space around an office building, such as a park or a river, which is owned by someone else. However, external environment factors have a significant part to play in location choices, and how much a tenant is willing to pay in enhanced rent.

The place-makers

A recent number of large regeneration schemes in London, each competing to create a unique sense of place, present an opportunity for the use and form of space between buildings to become a factor of this competition.

Common ownership, and a blank canvas allow us to critically rethink the approach to these otherwise lost spaces. The large utilitarian tower schemes of the 1980s and 1990s largely ignored this component – their focus being an internal efficiency and density.

However, large swathes of open urban space between towers are not good at creating the sense of place that establishes value for developers.

Headspace

It has been empirically proven that boundaries, edges and tight spaces trigger cognitive recognition of space.

Ongoing work by the UCL Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, for example, links such conditions to the firing of 'place' and 'grid' cells in the hippocampus, which in turn can be used to recreate visual imagery.

This confirms intuition that tighter spaces, packed with plenty of activity, stimulate place memory. The narrow streets of Soho are a good example of this. The Australian equivalent might be Melbourne's 'Laneways'.



By Richard Pickering, Partner, Central London Development

“Common ownership, and a blank canvas allow us to critically rethink the approach to these otherwise lost spaces

Micro-restaurants, bars and street art

Forming part of Melbourne's new urbanist 'Hoddle Grid', the Laneways are narrow alleys in-between high-rise offices. They were originally service streets but as these functions found new homes in the basements of buildings, the alleys became redundant and fell into disrepair.

However, the Laneways took on a new life in the 90s and many are now populated with micro-restaurants, bars and street art.

Such is the sense of place now created in these spaces crammed between buildings that they have become one of Melbourne's principal tourist attractions.

This fact was not lost on Australian developer giant, Lendlease, when planning the 3.0m sq ft Barangaroo CBD extension in Sydney.

Barangaroo's podium structure deliberately tightens the gap between buildings at grade level, synthesising the Laneways environment, and filling them with restaurants, bars and coffee shops.

"We know that people in Sydney's inner CBD are serious about their coffee. At Barangaroo we wanted to create a memorable place, with the best baristas, where the public can grab a coffee, relax and enjoy our vibrant laneways", affirms Gary Horwitz, Head of Retail, Lendlease.

Blurred lines

The lines between 'in' and 'out' of the office will continue to blur.

If emerging working practices demand more 'out' than 'in', then the challenge will be set for developers to provide external venues, and the bigger challenge will be to capture the value that they create.



Barangaroo, Sydney. Source: Lendlease, May 2016