

The Unruly Subject of Social Urban Landscapes

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Cities are inherently messy places. However much we order and systemise, rebuild, plan and rebuild again, all is contested. Our cities are places full of conflict. This is both the human and the urban condition. It is productive, unruly, beautiful and needs to be celebrated.

Understanding the social and cultural within urban planning is the richest and most complex subject in the panoply of thinking and practice around sustainability. To date it has been massively overlooked. The maximisation of resources is the challenge of the 21st century – these resources are social and cultural as well as material, so we urgently need to address this imbalance. This fundamental and necessary shift in outlook will require us to step back from the modernist ideal – that every day will be a brighter future, if only we could clean and rationalise, to create order in our cities. It is more realistic, and more interesting, to become better acquainted with the intimate complexities: to begin to decipher how we actually live and behave, how the city is used and navigated, and how the delicate and interdependent social, cultural and spatial networks, overlap and enrich.

A great city is a place of constant renewal, fluctuation, adaptability and change. It is able to learn. In London, as in the cities of many other post-industrial nations, we are re-building and expanding development on previously used land. In an unprecedented moment of rapid global urbanisation many are building cities anew or with a *tabula rasa*; in the desert; on the plain; on former agricultural land. We must all adapt to learn more of what is useful, as we build and rebuild. Our starting point should be the value of distinct places of integrity and the notion of *civic* identity.

“In cities, liveliness and variety attract more liveliness; deadness and monotony repel life. And this is a principle vital not only to the ways cities behave socially, but also to the ways they behave economically.”

Jacobs, 1961¹

Civic identity requires diversity, human interaction and discourse, and a recognisable human scale. In short, civic identity is drawn from our public realm. The public realm is the stage of our lives - it is symbolic as well as functional. It is the common reservoir of a society's values as well as the physical spaces and infrastructure in-between buildings that organise our towns and cities. Whether formal or informal the public realm of any urban settlement is not purely spatial, it is also social and cultural.

The public realm provides us with variety, opportunities to embrace our inherent sociability, a place where we meet strangers, interact with others, experience surprise and joy, where conflict and differences are played out - the lived experience of urban life. Crucially, it is found in the small, intimate spaces of our cities as well as the formal and grand public places; inside buildings as well as outside. You cannot manufacture these aspects of the urban condition or plan where they take place. This fine balance of human activity is fragile, precious and of immeasurable value. It is extremely difficult to replicate and very easy to destroy. We must begin to measure and to value the distinctiveness that makes places unique and build this analysis into our designs and plans.

1 The City of Neighbourhoods

Our cities, however large, are urban settlements, made up of distinct neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods, understood by those that use them (whether as places that represent home, work, business or amenity) all have a complex identity that is the embodiment of layered meanings and varied perspectives - the *social* within the built characteristics that define physical form, and the multiple *uses* that inform activity. Understanding this combination, a layered and complex picture of urban life, is crucial to their success, to their ability to thrive, adapt and sustain change in the long-term.

It must also be emphasised that making places civic requires the existence of consistent and stable communities, to build social capital and social networks.

¹ Jacobs, J., 1961, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Edition: Modern Library Series, 1993, Random House, New York, USA, pp 129.

Development that forces communities to scatter or fragment leads to unsustainable and wasteful cities. Without security of tenure and employment for its citizens, no investment in an area will be well spent.

At Publica, our work focuses on understanding, demystifying and sharing the complexities of urban neighbourhoods. At the heart of our daily practice is the significance of the public realm within urban planning. By conducting detailed surveys we attempt to understand the landscape of places, often where change is anticipated or planned. We believe that the character and contested nature of an urban neighbourhood arises from the multiple perspectives of that place. Consequently, our method involves seeking out these different perspectives through surveying and mapping. From these investigations we create visually accessible area portraits, which provide base-line intelligence about an area's assets, social networks and character. This becomes the starting point for master planning and decision-making about urban change.

These profiles are used by landowners, public planning authorities, city government, private sector developers and local community organisations, as a means of understanding specific opportunities for integrating existing neighbourhoods with new development. Most of our clients take an enlightened view of long-term investment in the city, and there is an implicit regard for its custodianship. In both method and presentation the findings provide a clearly communicable tool, that considers patterns of use, fine grain land-use and infrastructure, collective memories and histories, how local people organise themselves, governance and decision-making, and how the area might compare with other places locally or internationally. In summary, they show that identity comes from use and people, as well as physical constraints and attributes. They reveal that there is an inherent value and an attraction to the diversity and the mix found in urban neighbourhoods. The very act of investigating and documenting what is valued means we consider our cities in a different way – at a different scale and with different expectations about the objectives of urban change. This approach, and this practice, is in clear contrast to mainstream architectural, planning and construction in the 21st century.

2 Abstraction and Reality

The metabolism of our cities is quickening at a spectacular pace. This generation is witnessing and assessing the impact of rapid global urbanisation and its attendant repercussions. Land and property are so heavily commoditized that an investment made in one continent can radically change the urban configuration of a district in another. Processes of building, although becoming ever more efficient, will by their very nature always remain behind technological advancement in communications. We are creating large areas of urban fabric that have been outpaced and outdated before practical completion, and that, more often than not, do not deliver the culture of urban life necessary for the human condition to flourish. So we have cities full of new but inflexible and bland spaces that do not meet our needs, and others, hundreds of years old, that resonate in our imagination and culture. Why is this? This global abstraction of the process of city building and the measure of value in short-term successes (financial or political) presents the most serious threat to our cities and their future.

The qualities of individual cities are distinct and vital – this is not about building types, materials or style, but the lived culture of a city. Currently, the process of urban change relies on an abstract 'hope value' instead of a reality-check of what assets are already present, how they can be amplified, reused or simply better utilised. The only way one can begin to unpick and understand this is by observing very closely, and by standing still.

At Publica, we spend our time on site, watching, looking, learning, drawing, talking and listening, visiting at different times of day or late at night. We make films and record through sketching and street photography. We ask others (children, often) to make films about a local condition for us, from their perspective. We always try to find individuals who have been born locally as well as newcomers, often assembling our teams with local people to help bring further insights to the investigation. And we analyse. We try to capture lived experience. Our work finds practical application in the development briefs for master plans and new developments, and is important to our clients when investing in design, planning and building as it provides strategies for long-term thinking.

When we are asked to work on a new master plan we always start with a wider area survey and are always uncovering surprising insights to the functioning of neighbourhoods – we start on the outside, as we believe that the clues to meaningful integration and sensitised urban planning needs to recognise the assets, real desire lines and connections, patterns of use and social infrastructure in the adjacent communities. From this, the gaps and deficiencies as well as the strong local assets can be mapped and inform the development of the client's brief and therefore land-use. Our contribution to the process is to provide the evidence-base of the local assets and identify opportunities for integration - socially, culturally and spatially. This work helps to inform the narrative for the scheme and therefore its identity.

3 Participative Mapping

Mapping is a process of showing what exists but also deciding what is of value. Too often we look at an urban district for potential in its buildings, whilst neglecting the value of its social infrastructure. What is required is a process of understanding, charting, and developing tools to record and visualise information that can too easily be discounted or not recognised. The development process often brushes aside the ordinary or the ‘unimportant’, but the opportunity to involve a wide range of users means that the notion of value can be reassessed.

Shaping practice through participative mapping is radical and it is happening around the world. Open source technology is informing decision-making and allowing for the participation of ordinary citizens within the globalised information economy. From the mapping of areas of informal housing with local communities in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil as a tool for leveraging access to various urban services²; to the use of GIS data as civic tool for citizens (OASIS - Open Accessible Space Information System³) in New York to understand neighbourhood amenity and infrastructure; to the sensitized approach of planners in the Bester’s Camp township in South Africa⁴ or in East Whadat in Jordan, where participation in mapping is used to secure our ability to map; sharing information to utilise local knowledge is a radical departure from previous generations’ professional, and therefore more remote approach to decision making. An example of the efficacy of the participative model is a project called *Mapping Kibera*, a Wiki-map project in Nairobi, Kenya, aimed to tackle the problem of misinformation:

“In the absence of actual data (such as an official census), NGO staff make a back-of-envelope estimate in order to plan their projects; a postgraduate visiting the NGO staff tweaks that estimate for his thesis research; a journalist interviews the researcher and includes the estimate in a newspaper article; a UN officer reads the article and copies the estimate into her report; a television station picks up the report and the estimate becomes the headline; NGO staff see the television report and update their original estimate accordingly.”

Curron, 2010

In November 2009 young Kiberans created the first free and open digital map of their own community, documenting topography, structures and services, as well as population distribution and density. Map Kibera has now grown into a complete interactive community information project.⁵

4 Trespassing to Reveal Value

The increased professionalization and fragmentation of the different consultant roles within the construction and planning industries has widened the gap between city-makers and citizens. A language of architecture and planning has evolved which has become harder to reconcile with lived experience. This is not new, it is the same condition that Jane Jacobs described in *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the difference between seeing the world from above, or from the street. Glossy visualisations of an imagined future are used for the purposes of gaining a planning consent and marketing the scheme. In reality, they prevent meaningful conversations about urban change, thereby diminishing their value and in the process public trust in development.

The notion of participative planning through the cultural act of placing information about urban development in the public domain - and allowing the users of our cities to act as the agents of change - has led to a generation of practitioners working in a cross-disciplinary function, rooting their work in accessible

² The Bento Rubiao Foundation, started by a group of slum leaders and technical professionals, has initiated a ‘Right to Land’ scheme, providing legal, social, and urban advice in order access and secure land tenure to groups who are either homeless, under threat of eviction, or eligible for land tenure regularisation. The foundation is working with the city to map out and title 8,000 properties in Rocinha, which serve as a tool for leveraging access to urban services, and contributing to the communities becoming a more integrated part of the city (Redes de Desenvolvimento da Maré, 2012)

³ OASIS – the Open Accessible Space Information System – is a free, open access online resource, combining local authority and federal data, community mapping and academic research findings. It uses GIS (Geographical Information Systems) to enable New York citizens to characterize and learn about their surroundings, and thus to participate fully in the planning process.

⁴ Bester’s Camp in Durban, South Africa, was a shack settlement that underwent a holistic upgrading process consisting of housing, infrastructure and communal facilities. What distinguishes the planning process in Bester’s Camp was its sensitivity to the needs of the residents. Site boundaries were established and footpaths were defined around the existing shacks, causing minimum disturbance to the residents and to the dense urban pattern that had developed organically over time. When this plan was almost ready, a surveyor pegged out the sites based on the working plan. Residents were given a few days to confirm that the pegs were correctly positioned. A dispute resolution process was put in place in those few cases - about 0.5% - where arguments arose.

⁵ Curron, C., 2010, Lies, damned lies and you know the rest (online). Available from: <http://www.humanitarian.info/2010/09/13/liesdamned-lies-and-you-know-the-rest/> (accessed January 2013)

methods of communication. This is both a more common-sense and nuanced approach that considers the impact of policy and architecture on lived culture. At Publica, we are often asked what our ‘discipline’ is, and though the answer is many, the reality is that there is a new field of practice, evident across the globe, characterised by the notion of trespass. Practitioners are straying outside and beyond the historical confines of a single discipline to work in a broader, more strategic and critical role that considers long-term resource management and the macro and micro effects of development.

This practice is both new and rooted in the philosophical and practical debates of preceding decades. We are particularly interested in revisiting how practitioners from earlier generations undertook the type of research-led investigations into planning and neighbourhoods that we ourselves practice.

5 A Female Perspective on Town Planning

Behind the accepted history of our cities you can find a group of practitioners and advocates who promoted a different approach to planning and neighbourhoods - one that did not conform to the dominant discourses of their day (some of them are well known, others perhaps marginalised, forgotten or never written about). All of them were women. From the 21st century we can appreciate how foresighted and bold their ideas were, and just how relevant to contemporary practice those ideas continue to be. Operating outside or on the fringes of architecture and planning, they shared a clear principled approach, a commitment to fieldwork and to building a research-led body of evidence with practical application to test their thinking. We call this action research - the idea of learning by doing, testing the applicability of your theory in the field and then disseminating that learning. These women crossed professional and nonprofessional boundaries, and blurred the line between the domestic and public spheres. Free agents, brave enough to challenge the dominant orthodoxies of their day, all of them wanted to know what makes an urban neighbourhood work; what that means for children and the elderly; and to invest in the social infrastructure that sustains neighbourhoods long-term. This unique female perspective of town planning – from the Municipal Housekeepers⁶ in mid-19th century America cities; Irene Barclay⁷ an ardent practitioner of mapping social networks within housing settlements in the 1930s and 40s in British cities; Elizabeth Denby⁸, who studied the reinterpretation of British town planning as exported, to campaign for building at higher densities on brownfield land; Majory Allen⁹, a landscape architect and children’s rights activist, who championed the concept of play as a civilizing force in an urban environment; and of course, Jane Jacobs, the great researcher and advocate of the street and the neighbourhood, and her seminal work *the Life and Death of Great American Cities*, illustrated using real people – never abstracted. What is particularly striking about all of these women is that they weren’t interested in making grand plans but wanted to promote a common-sense approach to urban change. Their line of vision was not from the abstraction of a plan or city model, but firmly rooted within the social networks of the neighbourhood.

6 The Special Condition of the Historic Neighbourhood

Much of our recent work has been in central London, a series of historic neighbourhoods with an extraordinarily complex mixture of infrastructure and inhabitants. A typical block in the West End in central London houses a combination of shops, pubs, contemporary office space, small creative industries, highly desirable flats, flats for social rent, ancient churches, fashionable restaurants, perhaps even a historic theatre. Many of these typologies work in a continuous street frontage, creating a clear public threshold and a bold street presence at ground level. Residential and commercial uses create subtly complex thresholds to maintain an essential degree of privacy in an area of such vitality. Certain uses may be placed at higher levels or have more solid frontages. This mix and 24 hour life is unimaginable in a shopping centre or

⁶ A pioneering network of women who explored the notion of ‘municipal housekeeping’ – an argument that if the emerging city government could not or would not provide for its citizens then women and mothers would show the way. The Municipal Housekeepers thought that the needs of the city could only be understood by those who also understood how to feed, teach, care and nurse children, could manage household expenditure and ensure street cleansing and therefore they should be given responsibility over the city by up-scaling their skills and taking over city hall as a reaction to the corruption of the nascent municipal authorities.

⁷ 1894 – 1989, the first woman in Britain to qualify as a chartered surveyor, Irene Barclay wanted to understand patterns of use and cross generational need as a reaction to the London County Council’s desk based surveying which declared ‘slum clearances’ for wholesale demolition on the basis of largely external physical surveys, a practice that continued up until the 1960s and 1970s in Britain.

⁸ In the 1930s Denby’s analysis of European housing covered every conceivable aspect of urban planning and argued it should be principled and humane, focusing on well-functioning, high-density, compact neighbourhoods. She wrote, ‘Europe re-housed’, 1937, and put her research to practice at Kensal House with the architect Maxwell Fry in the 1940s.

⁹ Marjorie Allen had visited Denmark in the 1930s and observed and documented the concept of junk playgrounds. During World War II she led a public campaign to reform the institutional care of orphaned, abandoned or illegitimate children. Her activities led to the 1948 Children’s Act. She promoted the idea of the junk playground (which she renamed the adventure playground) and suggested that as there were so many vacant lots available for redevelopment they should be used as opportunities for social renewal.

business district centred on a single purpose. Occupation is ensured at different times of day and night, helping to avoid the ‘on/off’ condition of areas with a single predominant land use. Elsewhere it may be necessary to traverse an entire city to find so much interest and excitement. It is this mixture and complexity that is the West End’s strength, with opposing uses feeding off one another, adding to the diversity and drawing people in. This richness of uses is sadly increasingly rare as the market for rapid urbanization has rubbed out such complexity and such conflict.

In London we now benefit from a wide consensus in national and local planning of ‘mixed-use’ development policy,¹⁰ where the city is no longer zoned into distinct land uses. However laudable the policy, the commercial reality is that policy accommodates the amplification of scale, so new investment is in mixed-use buildings rather than mixed-use neighbourhoods. This means that only commercial activities, for example a business model based around spaces only for consumption, sit within one large-scale building. This does not provide the fine grain flexibility to accommodate different types of users as well as non-commercial uses. This condition of an often unrecognizable scale, with prescriptive and highly controlled use, is stultifying civic identity.

7 Flexibility

Successful urban landscapes have always been made up of enormous diversity of building stock and have aged and been rebuilt in a continuous pattern of renewal and the balance and fluctuations in land values and shifts in societal patterns of behaviour. For 21st century urban communities to thrive, they need flexibility, affordability, cheap informal spaces (what Jane Jacobs called old buildings for new ideas), alongside more formal ones, spaces for appropriation as well as the formal provision of social and physical infrastructure.

“The main characteristic of the area is its mixture... Its component parts are scattered widely, yet the area is compact. When looked at closely it is rather like a newspaper photograph, all random dots and seemingly without reason... Land tenure is mixed with freehold, long and short leasehold and tenancies all jumbled together. There are no single areas of consolidated land ownership. Much investment has taken place in new building in the past twenty years and this too has been piecemeal, cheek-by-jowl with older worn out property.”

*Theis, 1971*¹¹

This is a quote from a 1971 Redevelopment Study of South Shoreditch in London, which concluded that the existing building should not be razed (as planned) and that the building stock was robust enough and wholly adaptable. Instead what was needed was “to improve the amenity, convenience and efficiency of these areas of employment and thus foster and enhance the prosperity of the many businesses and the people who work there”¹². The author, Michael Theis, a town planner, was clear that he did not know what the future uses would be, but he believed that over time, the buildings would be appropriated and that the area’s social and environmental value was too great to be swept away. Urban change needs time and patience, evidenced in the fact that this is now one of London’s most successful neighbourhoods. A resurgence of spirit in the current moment of thinking in urbanism values existing strengths, addresses need, and celebrates character rather than trying to replace it.

8 Governance: Who does what to whom?

Communication, transparency and accountability in disseminating information in the public domain as a ‘conversation in public’ is the vital link in the meeting of professional skills and local knowledge. The findings about neighbourhood character, assets and values, need to be communicated to diverse public and professional audiences, and the most effective way of doing this is visually and publically. Additionally, strong local or city-wide leadership and clear, visible principles built from research, need a participative public debate, where conflict and opposing views can be aired. This is an essential component of leadership in urban planning.

The commitment to communicating a principle-led approach to urban change is something that Amanda Burden, Chair of the New York City Planning Commission, is promoting actively, having re-established an urban design team at City Hall and set out a Zoning Handbook to demystify the process of

¹⁰ With the exception of the City of London financial district, The London Plan, London’s city-wide policy document, states that within the Central Activities Zone, wherever increases in office floor space are proposed they should provide for a mix of uses including housing.

¹¹ Theis, M., 1971, *South Shoreditch Redevelopment Study*, Max Lock Centre/University of Westminster Archive Services.

¹² *ibid*

planning and decision-making for users and residents “so people and communities can advocate for their neighbourhoods.” (Burden, 2012)¹³

Burden describes New York as a “city of opportunity *and* a city of neighbourhoods.” Setting out to understand the 200 different neighbourhoods and radically change the public realm, assessing projects by “how they feel from the street. We want to diagnose the DNA of each neighbourhood and build on those strengths. Our aim is to grow but not change.” In practical terms, this means satellite offices of the NYC Department of City Planning in all five boroughs and 59 community districts, each represented by a community board with the power to propose plans, policy and zoning. A range of tools and support is available¹⁴ including the illustrated zoning handbooks used to communicate regulations – previously the reserve of ‘professionals’ – through use of simple descriptions and three-dimensional illustrations. Burden and her officers walk the neighbourhood and hold regular forums to hear evidence in public from different local voices and perspectives. Reducing the distance between the amateur and the professional requires not only making information accessible, but generating a framework that allows for policy to be guided by communities. Since the Netherlands developed the first comprehensive cross-departmental government architecture and urban policy in 1991, several cultural institutions have been established which help to bridge the gap between government and citizen, acting as links between national policies and local practice and experience. These institutions work closely with 50 local ‘architecture centres’¹⁵ across the country at a micro local level (EFAP, 2011). The Architectuur Lokaal connects the centres and helps to not only implement current policies, but also influence future policies. Their aim is to strengthen “building culture” as “not a matter for professionals alone. Rather, it is the responsibility of society as a whole” (Architectuur Lokaal, 2012).

9 Resetting – if we had a blank sheet what would we do?

After the devastation of a natural disaster, city leaders face the desperate need to make decisions about reconstruction. New Zealand and Japan are two examples where local and national government, planners, architects and engineers, community leaders and residents have used this urgent need for restoration as the point to reset their approach and objectives to urban planning. In post-earthquake Christchurch, New Zealand, the city authority was faced with the challenge of rebuilding the badly damaged city centre. It embarked on a survey of local residents, gathering over 100,000 impassioned ‘ideas for the city’. The resulting plan is for a predominantly 5-6 storey, high-density, walkable and cycle-friendly city centre with small, concentrated retail. This recovery plan has been supported by a robust evidence base and an unprecedented level of public engagement.

The inverse of ‘leveraging regional skills and metabolism’ is optimising global systems and markets - our current global and unsustainable situation. It is inefficient and unstable. As architects, as planners, as developers, as citizens, and as custodians of our urban futures - we need to consider how to meet the challenges of urban development and the long-term sustainability of our cities.

“The alternative is increasing formlessness, attenuation, exhaustion of variety and in Italo Calvino’s words the end of cities.”¹⁶

Worpole, 1991

If some of the most advanced economies in the world are choosing to rethink their cities as cities of opportunities and cities of neighbourhoods, the implications for sharing this practice internationally are profound. The call for shared and participatory frameworks in places like Christchurch and New York have shown us a new way of working that emphasises a user perspective, a human scale and a communitarian ethos. Without an understanding of the constraints of the social and cultural specificity as well as the physical and spatial constraints we are missing a big trick in our thinking about sustainability in urban development, architecture and construction. The answers are in the way we organise ourselves, how we adapt policies and laws, how we achieve a transparent and accountable system of governance to manage our finite and delicate resources, social and environmental. But it also is evident in the informal and small action, the mix and the diversity, the conflict and multiple perspectives. We need to consider these issues at

¹³ Burden, A., 2012, *Revitalising London's Spaces - What Can we Learn from New York?* (lecture), London Conference 2012, London, UK, 27 November 2012.

¹⁴ For larger projects, such as traffic improvement or code enforcement, an inter-agency Task Force paired with community boards in order to develop a strategy sensitive to the local context. Wiki tools are available online for the boards to use and adapt, and an ‘Urban Planning Graduate Fellowship Program’ nurtures tomorrow’s planners. (NYC DCP, 2012). Burden has overseen 115 re-zoning plans covering more than 10,300 blocks; by the end of her administration, the department is expected to have re-zoned about 40 percent of New York.

¹⁵ Architectuur Lokaal, 2012, *English Summary* (online). Architectuur Lokaal. Available from <http://arch-lokaal.nl/englishsummary> (accessed December 2012). correct citation: Architectuur Lokaal, 2012

¹⁶ Worpole, K., 1991, *Trading Places: The City Workshop in Fisher*. In Fisher, M., Owen, U., (Eds) *Whose Cities*, Penguin Books, London, UK, pp 152

an informal as well as a formal level as they will unlock the key to the symbolic value, the understanding of the significance of meaning within place, and through this will provide us with the answers for long term civic identity, maximization of resources – material, human or economic – and a strategic approach towards achieving maximum effect with minimal means.

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