Changing building typologies forum – Observations from practice

User-focused design – A view from practice

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This note is a ‘perspective from practice’ that explores the topic of Changing Building Typologies by briefly outlining the growing application of evidence-based design approaches in the creation and transformation of cities and buildings. The intention is to illustrate how the concept of ‘space’ has evolved and is now recognised as a design variable that can generate tangible and intangible value. If shaped adequately, space will not only increase the value of a development or regeneration project by improving, for example, retail revenue will also create long-term value by creating places that allow people to move through, dwell and interact – a key condition for the development of civic life.

Buildings are no longer conceived of as isolated entities but are being designed as part of a continuous network of spaces of the city. ‘Embedding’ buildings into the urban context is a key condition across all public building typologies: hospitals, university campuses, museums, shops and offices. Successful buildings and the organisations that occupy them are those that engage with the urban context and both benefit from and contribute to their urban condition.
A good project to start with is Broadgate, the largest office development in the City of London, where access to the city and to high quality public space has become as important as the architectural quality of its buildings. In our first Broadgate project in 1990, Space Syntax Limited showed that urban life could occur within highly commercial urban developments if such a development was simply laid out and directly connected into the wider context. More recently our collaboration with David Chipperfield and West 8 for the design of the public realm of Elizabeth House, a mixed-use office and residential development adjacent to London’s Waterloo Station, went further by proposing not only a series of important public open spaces, but also provided internal public space. Space that would have typically been allocated to revenue generating uses such as retail or office space has instead been given over to a double-height publicly accessible space. As well as a gallery and a café, it will accommodate unprogrammed and informal uses – places to sit without the need to buy anything – not unlike the ones found in the foyer of the neighbouring Royal Festival Hall. The concept of an unprogrammed space in a public building is not as common as it seems, so its appearance in commercial real estate shows that public accessible space can also generate value.

While increasingly important in the private sector, access, in the widest sense of the word, becomes a fundamental resource in public buildings. In cultural buildings, access is a key component to enable the dissemination of artistic and cultural programmes and increasingly is a benchmark to secure public funding. Let’s now turn to one of the most accessible cultural venues to talk about the two transformations outlined at the beginning of the note.

Much more than a concert venue or a cultural complex, the Royal Festival Hall (RFH) in London’s South Bank, has become since its opening in 1951, part of the city experience. The ‘people’s palace’ successfully brings together concert goers, commuters, tourists, children and adults into the artistic programme of the venue. The accessibility potential of the hall is understood to those who manage it and has become a fundamental element in the delivery and dissemination of its arts programme. The building creates opportunities for high-brow and low-brow, the planned and the serendipitous, the formal and the informal, the playful and the serious, work and play. The building transforms throughout the day and simultaneously works as an impromptu crèche, office, rehearsal space for musicians and dancers, library, meeting point, picnic area – all of these activities happening alongside the programmed events.

As with any public space, its success depends on the degree to which it integrates into the urban context. The result is an all-embracing space that is reflected in all design elements. For example, the concert hall was designed to provide a ‘democratic acoustic’ so that every seat in the house gives access to the same high quality sound. It is therefore not surprising that the Southbank Centre, the organisation in charge of the RFH, is aware of the spatial qualities of the building and their effect on visitor experience. The success of the RFH as
a cultural building lies in its capacity to work as a public space. The Centre is able to use the public spaces of the building to engage new audiences including, most importantly, those who otherwise would not have become involved.

The robustness of its original design – an open foyer with multiple points of access giving way to a parallel set of staircases that then lead to the upper foyers with views to the river – has helped the building respond to changes in the context.

Perhaps the fastest transforming area in London, the South Bank has seen dramatic spatial and functional changes since Space Syntax Limited began studying the area in 1992. The London Eye, Jubilee Gardens, Tate Modern (its extension is currently being built), the rebuilding of the Globe Theatre, new pedestrian bridges – Hungerford and Golden Jubilee Bridges, the Millennium Bridge and a proposal for the Garden Bridge, the coming and going of the Eurostar terminal at Waterloo Station, a new underground line, the redevelopment of Blackfriars Station and the development of individual sites as luxury residential apartments and prime offices that compete with the West End and the City, have radically transformed the South Bank. To give a perspective of the transformation, we can look at the change in pedestrian movement along Queen’s Walk. Pedestrian movement along the river walk increased fivefold from an average of 683 people per hour in 1998 to 3,310 in 2012 on a typical weekend day at lunchtime.

The changes in the area and their impact on movement patterns have addressed some of the problems that were of concern in the 1990s. The relative spatial segregation and lack of pedestrian movement allowed unused spaces to be colonised by unplanned activities: skateboards and cardboard cities. The young and destitute claimed the affordances of the unused covered spaces of the South Bank.
The homeless occupying the pedestrian underpasses of the IMAX cinema (then the Bull Ring) were evicted and rehoused in 1998. Skateboarding, on the other hand, is now a mainstream activity that rather than being a threat, has become part of the character of the South Bank. So much so, that plans for the next phase of the Southbank Centre’s redevelopment to extend and improve its cultural offer have been put on hold as a result of the decision by the Mayor of London to oppose the proposal to relocate the skaters to a bespoke skate park 120 metres along the river walk.

The conflict between users over the ‘ownership’ of a space is as much a result of spatial transformations as of socio-economic transformations. The spatial changes to the South Bank have brought high movement levels to the previously underused spaces occupied by the skateboarders. The affordances of the space that gave rise to skateboarding have changed and now are able to support different uses. This change has encouraged a mix of communities and has enriched the cultural life of the area.

In terms of economic transformations, the increase of visitors using the Queen’s Walk has also raised the economic potential of the site which is now able to sustain successful retail units. Shops and restaurants, introduced in the 2007 refurbishment of the RFH, added to the land use mix of the area and now provide an important revenue stream for the Centre.

In the context of the changes to public arts funding with funding cuts and increased emphasis on organisations to demonstrate value, retail has become a prominent and sometimes necessary component of cultural institutions. As a result, shops, restaurants and bars have the potential to complement a museum or a concert visit. Unfortunately, these uses now also compete for space in buildings that are often occupied at capacity.

The RFH is a good example by which to explore the wider implications of change and how building and city projects are grounded in the wider spatial, social and economic transformations. More than ever, the pressure for cities to grow will accelerate their transformation.
The use of evidence-based design tools such as space syntax are fundamental to continue to describe, explain, test and measure the impact that spatial transformations have on human activity. The methods and tools are also changing, allowing us to understand and design cities and buildings as mixed-use, multi-mode, multi-scale objects; that is, places that work for different users, using different modes of transport and varieties of space across time.

Within the transformation of cities and buildings, there are perhaps only two constants. Firstly, that the design remains an iterative process of ‘variety reduction’ – from a large number of possible design solutions to the eventual choice of one solution by a conjecture-analysis process; and secondly, that the final design product is creating patterns of movement and co-presence that continue to be the fundamental function of cities and buildings.