Changing building typologies forum – Observations from practice

Walk the line: What do people really want from public space?

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Over the past 10 years I have been involved as a designer or observer in several small public projects, either buildings and interiors, or external spaces, which seek to alter how the city is occupied by its residential, working, and visitor populations. Like Nolli’s mid 18th century figure ground urban depiction of Rome, in which external and internal public space was shown as a continuum, central London has recently been remaking itself as a more accessible city. Collective social experience has become associated with lively sustainable urbanity in which the enjoyment of external spaces, and the occupation of the accessible parts of public buildings, is encouraged. The changes include the transformation of previously inaccessible buildings with new public squares or foyers, and altering existing streets and open spaces with small urban or building interventions. Prominent examples include Somerset House, where the central courtyard was transformed from a civil service car park into a public square, and the surrounding buildings’ interiors, now housing restaurants and exhibition spaces, have been made accessible. Responding to local conditions, adaptations have been made to less familiar parts of the city, for example Gillett Square in Hackney or the Old Street ‘Promenade of Light’. Unused city spaces have been activated by using temporary new buildings to programme them. It appears that the purpose of the recent interventions is to improve London’s publicly habitable environment, simultaneously linking state and privately run places through typological adaptations and their programming. But functional and building interventions, however modest, can also affect an area’s existing social and economic demographic. New uses can invigorate spaces for all inhabitants or privilege the affluent through commercially based enterprises. Allowing unprogrammed spaces where users are encouraged to gather is less controllable and resists London’s more recent surveilled and managed controlled public environment. By mapping and briefly discussing the occupation and use of three recent examples, located in central and more remote London locations (Figures 1 and 2), this short paper sets out to identify characteristics generated as consequences of their changes, comparing strategies for activating public use.

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Figures 1 and 2:
Examples of recent interventions in London.
Spaces are identified as:
1. Whitecross Street,
2. Podium,
3. Duke of York Square,
4. Folly for a Flyover.
The Whitecross Street and Podium projects (the latter designed by my practice) are both components of the local authority funded Whitecross Street Open Spaces Strategy (2005). Focused on a Clerkenwell street connecting Islington and the City, this aimed to generate continuity in the local urban environment, connecting residential and working inhabitants. It envisaged a coherent public domain, equalising main and subsidiary streets in the area, and sought to activate existing ‘dead’ spaces in local housing developments, of which the Podium formed part. Whitecross Street’s existing uses, including shops, cafés, social housing and a primary school, result in a mix of constituted and unconstituted frontages. The new scheme’s main physical change has been to narrow vehicle access and expand the pedestrian domain through ground treatment, along with the introduction of market stalls which Islington have designated as weekday lunch stalls serving local workers. The changes to Whitecross Street did not include strategic additions such as fixed street furniture, for local residents and visitors to congregate in what might be identified as a ‘democratic’ approach to public inhabitation. Fractured connections to the street from the adjacent social housing estate, visually blocked by street planters have not been changed. Figures 3 to 8 illustrate weekday patterns at three times (early morning, middle of the day and late afternoon) to show that whilst there is pedestrian movement, the density increase – predominantly of workers – appears to be associated with the temporary food stalls which serve local workers’ lunch needs without encouraging much inhabitation. After the stalls have been removed the street reverts to being reasonably well used as a route, while static inhabitation is largely associated with external restaurant seating.

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4 The Podium project designed by Diamond Architects was completed in 2009. An earlier more ambitious version included commercially letting redundant spaces as an income stream to fund a community room building extruded from the tower lobby.

5 muf art architecture collaborative was commissioned in 2005 by Islington Council with EC1 New Deal for Communities.

6 In this context, ‘constituted’ is a term used to describe streets validated as public space by the presence of building entrances and direct street connections.

7 Islington first introduced the stalls as an occasional specialist food market, and soon altered their use to weekday street food stalls predominantly for workers.

8 A temporary coffee stand on a crossroad pitch, which stays open for the longest time period, generates a more social environment by providing its customers with temporary street seating.
The Whitecross Street Open Spaces Strategy identified as a component the raised podium behind Braithwaite House: a residential tower in a social housing estate, typically disconnected by its restricted access and level change from the local streets. The design of the Podium which was initially a ‘bottom-up’ project, generated by local engagement events to identify resident needs, included outdoor ‘rooms’ with concrete armchairs and benches as a landscape of external living space with low level lighting. The furniture encountered some local resistance from residents who believed it would encourage lingerers and anti-social behaviour, preferring its quiet, remote character. Figures 9 to 12 of weekday movement show increased use at midday, or early afternoon by parents watching their children in the adjacent playground, and workers using the Podium as an outdoor salon to meet and eat lunch. This suggests the potential in a modest permanent external scheme for more mixed user occupation and some natural surveillance.

The two other examples, Cadogan Café and Folly for a Flyover represent different strategies to activating public space with buildings and landscaping. The Duke of York Square is a recent commercial development with a shopping and restaurant precinct, and the Saatchi Gallery set back from King’s Road, near Sloane Square, in one of London’s most affluent areas. Its green space continues the idea of the public urban square, but like many of those nearby, has controlled access. The small freestanding Cadogan Café building was included as an integral part of the development at the King’s Road end. The café and the nearby restaurants have fixed external seating areas. The external space around the café was designed as a

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9 The resistance to connection of the Quaker community.

10 Developed by the private Cadogan Estate in 2003, on the site of old military barracks, the commercial part of the development is on the north side of the new Duke of York Square bounded by King’s Road.

Figures 9-12:
The Podium, London.
flowing extension of the pavement, fusing the public and privately owned spaces. Street furniture near the café, in the form of low seating walls, is aligned to the general movement flows of shoppers between the private retail court and the public street. Figures 13 to 16 show daytime occupation associated with the precinct’s opening times, and the external seating used particularly in the middle of the day, with sparse random movement otherwise. Duke of York is a private equivalent of the ‘top down’ commercially oriented project at Whitecross Street. Free outdoor events, as a carefully controlled area enhancement include occasional Saturday food markets and film screenings, located on the space around the café and linked to the site’s restaurants, as a commercial adjunct. This suggests that the conditions for public engagement with lingering groups were not one of the scheme’s functions. Both the council and privately commissioned schemes use different kinds of commerce to attract users, without making places to support unprogrammed public activities, purposefully available to all as more democratically accessible places.  

**Folly for a Flyover**, a temporary building under the A12, is by far the most remote project, constructed in a part of London blighted by national road infrastructure. Its site in a typically dystopic urban place of overlapping infrastructures, felt spatially disconnected. Yet it was located near the south edge of Hackney Marshes and Victoria Park, on a canal network linked to central London. Conceived as a catalyst to engage the local community, in a ‘bottom-up’ approach to enlivening the public domain in a neglected area, the project was commissioned and publicised by the Barbican Arts Centre. Housing a cinema and performance space, with screenings, workshops and events and a ‘pop-up’ café, the Folly attracted activity to
the area. Its semi-open form then sustained unprogrammed gatherings, invigorating the canal side and existing local pedestrian and cyclist routes. Figures 17 to 21 show daytime and early evening inhabitation in and around the building, including random gatherings and associated events. The London Legacy Development Corporation has since installed permanent infrastructure for the site to continue as an events and cultural public space.

The three schemes represent different approaches to the regeneration of the city as a sustainable phenomenon, questioning the potential roles and affects of commercially led interventions. In Whitecross Street and Duke of York Square there is a direct relationship between the commercial ventures and apparently controlled occupation patterns. The Podium is the only example with no commercial component, with a modest yet significant increase in use generated by its design. Located in a place of little commercial value and control, the Folly project presented the possibility of using architecture to programme disused urban space and attract engagement, also raising the issue of whether programmed and unprogrammed functions can be distinguished as urban types. Whilst its café and screenings generated occupation, its striking presence attracted users. This raises questions as to whether recently invigorated public places and their commercial functions are interdependent or if places can be enlivened for all the city’s users irrespective of wealth.

About the author:
Rosamund Diamond (rosd@diamondarchitects.co.uk) graduated from the Bartlett School UCL, where she occasionally contributes seminars as part of the AAS MSc programme. She established her practice Diamond Architects in 1995. She has taught at architecture schools in the UK including Oxford and the Architectural Association, and has been guest critic at schools in the US and Switzerland. She is currently running a Degree design studio in Nottingham. She has contributed essays in books and magazines including werk, bauen + wohnen, and Architecture Today. She has edited several books including From City to Detail: Diener & Diener with Wilfried Wang, with whom she was editor of the journal 9H.