

Reclaim the streets

Humanising Public Spaces

By Jess Harris

The past decade has seen some of the highest levels of investment in civic buildings for a generation. Big name architecture has been employed in many towns and cities in an effort to bring about the regeneration of their urban centres, through the creation of show-stopping icons. Yet often it is the public areas around these buildings that have the greater impact upon our daily lives. Here, Jess Harris argues that more attention should be paid to the benefits of well-designed and managed public spaces.

It seems as if no city is complete without its own Foster, Gehry, Libeskind or Alsop and there is a long list of developments still on the drawing board: London Bridge's Shard of Glass, the Twin Towers site in New York, the development of Waterloo by P&O, Gehry's plans for Hove seafront and the 'Pasta Towers' in Milan, for example. However, as the competition has increased between cities to create a sense of place and 'wow' factor, it seems as if each design has to be more shocking and more flashy than the last. This 'my tower's bigger than yours' approach – or 'weeing-up-the-wall architecture' as the Guardian's architecture critic Jonathan Glancey has labelled it – has perhaps dominated our thinking about the development of urban spaces and how they should benefit the people who use them.

If one looks at how these developments are actually used in practise it is often not the signature building itself but rather the public space around the development that is used most regularly and by the widest group of people. For example, whilst an office development might be visited only by the business community, the public space around the building is used by a much more diverse group of people – walking through it on the way to work, as a spot to eat lunch or a place to meet friends. Furthermore, whilst an office development is likely to have limited opening hours, the public space is accessible 24/7 and open to all – regardless of cultural, social or financial barriers. This public space may therefore be making as significant a contribution to creating a 'sense of place' for the urban area as the shiny new building.

In research carried out for Cabe, 85 percent of people surveyed felt that the quality of public space and the built environment has a direct impact on their lives and on the way they feel. If public space can be both designed and managed effectively and works well, it can serve as a stage for our public lives and there can be real benefits for everyone.





Economic Benefits

Many cities that have invested in high quality public spaces have seen commercial property prices increasing in surrounding locations. Well-planned improvements to public spaces within town centres can boost commercial trading by up to 40 percent and generate significant private sector investment. For example, in Coventry, improved pedestrianisation, a new civic square, clearer signage and better placement of street furniture have made the city centre a much more pleasant place to be, as have the introduction of CCTV and an alcohol free zone. As a direct result, footfall in the city centre has increased by 25 percent on Saturdays, benefiting local traders enormously.

There is also evidence that well kept public spaces can have significant impact on private house prices. In New York, real-estate neighbouring Bryant Park, Central Park, Prospect Park and Riverside park famously commands the highest property values in the city. Likewise, in the towns of Emmen, Appeldoorn and Leiden in the Netherlands, a view of a park raises house prices by 8 percent and having a park nearby by 6 percent. This compares with a view of an apartment block, which can reduce the price by 7 percent.

Public Safety Benefits

Fear has played a significant role in the way urban areas have been developed, and fear for personal safety is still a significant barrier for many people to using public spaces. This can include both fear of large-scale threats, such as terrorist attacks (which contributed to poor ticket sales at this year's Olympic Games), and of local concerns, for example fear of groups of young people or 'undesirables'. Some design responses have translated this fear into a fortress mentality, seeking to restrict opportunities for congregation of people by minimising seating, shelter and other public amenities, resulting in spaces that are barren and unwelcoming. However, everyone from park wardens to masterplanners increasingly accepts that an actively used and thriving public space is much safer, cheaper and easier to police than an empty one. Through encouraging residents to use public spaces by ensuring they are well lit and offer decent seating, and by scheduling events and activities, they become self-policing. For example, Birmingham City Council achieved a 70 percent drop in theft from shopping bags by increasing the lighting of street markets and widening footpaths to allow pedestrians more space. A similar scheme in Dudley has been credited with encouraging more pedestrians, especially women, to use the streets at night.

Social Benefits

Good public spaces can also be democratic spaces, providing a platform for encouraging community cohesion. On the Continent, town and village squares are central to creating a focus for local people and help shape the identity of an area. The public spaces tend to be successful because they encourage social behaviour – eating and drinking, promenading and playing, and as a focus for civic celebrations.

This link between communal activity and the provision of good quality public space is borne out by research undertaken by the University of Copenhagen, into the

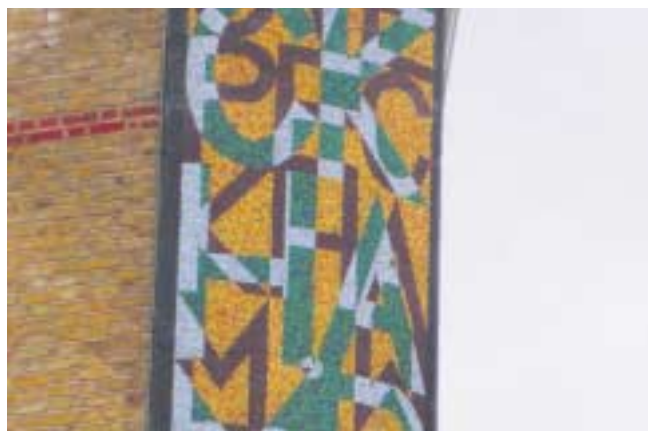
contribution of public spaces to the civic life in the city. Since the research began in 1965 it has consistently shown that wherever public spaces of good quality are provided an increase in public life also takes place. As a result, despite the difference in weather, the level of public outdoor activity in Copenhagen on a summer's day equals that of Rome.

Importantly, Continental public spaces are used as places for the interaction of whole communities: whole families gather for an early evening drink, children can play safely, teenagers can hang out. In contrast, many of the more lively public spaces in the UK tend to have quite narrow demographic appeal, particularly at night, and this makes them inaccessible to everyone else. If you visit the majority of British market town centres on a Friday or Saturday evening you'd be hard pressed to find many people over 35 after 6pm. Instead the streets are dominated by groups of young people getting progressively more drunk, who can be intimidating to families and older people. Good public spaces need to offer a range of social activities with cross-cultural and cross-generational appeal if they are to generate true social cohesion.

Public Space Design and Management

Despite such benefits, public space can be a bit of an after-thought when developing new landmark buildings – the focus instead being on the main attraction of jaw-dropping architecture. At best these public spaces can be neat but empty voids that serve simply to frame the surrounding buildings whilst pushing pedestrians to the periphery. They can be sterile and bland – as a resident of Milton Keynes pointed out on the Council's chat room, "MK is pretty good... but it can seem a little clinical, with everything laid out like an architect's model. A little human clutter and colour would be very welcome". At the other end of the scale these spaces are miserable wastelands. They feel unsafe with litter, graffiti and vandalism endemic. When a public space is barren, unkempt or unused, it is generally an indication that something is very wrong with its design, or its management, or both.

A European survey of attitudes towards town centres showed that the problem is particularly acute in Britain, where by far the highest incidence of disliking town centres was recorded. Part of the problem in Britain is the fragmented ownership of public spaces with no single agency in charge, coupled with the drastic decline in numbers of park keepers, street cleaners and caretakers in the past three decades. The management of public spaces can therefore fall between several stools and small everyday problems such as chewing gum, fly-posting, fly-tipping, graffiti and dog-fouling compound, resulting in spaces nobody wants to use. However, there have been calls from the government's Urban Task Force for a ring-fenced street conditions budget to deal with the issue. Plans have also been proposed to raise fines for damage to public spaces by both utility companies, which have a tendency to dig them up, and the general public. These fines would be kept by local authorities and spent on the upkeep of open spaces.





In addition to management issues there are a number of design problems that crop up on a regular basis:

- **Lack of places to sit** – well designed places to sit are a fundamental tool in encouraging people to linger in public spaces. If seating is not provided, or it is of poor design, people are often forced to adapt to the situation by sitting on steps or paving.
- **Lack of gathering points** – this includes features people want or need such as playgrounds or places to shelter. Food in particular can often be highly effective way of encouraging people to use a space.
- **Poor entrances and visually inaccessible spaces** – people need to know a space is there and accessible. Entrances need to be light and open, with the space visible from the street.
- **Dysfunctional features** – often features are designed to punctuate spaces, rather than to encourage activity to occur around them. Features should have a clear purpose.
- **Paths that don't go where people want to go** – paths that lead nowhere or take a convoluted route are useless and quickly abandoned by people trying to get quickly from A to B.
- **Domination of a space by vehicles** – being surrounded by parked or moving traffic does not encourage people to use public spaces. Good public spaces prioritise the movement of pedestrians and screen people from traffic
- **Blank walls or dead zones around the edges of a space** – the areas around public spaces are as important to the design and management of the space itself. Blank walls and service areas contribute nothing to social activity.



Case study :

Exchange Square, Manchester

Exchange Square is situated in the heart of Manchester at the centre of the new retail and entertainment district that has sprung up following the 1996 bombing. The Square, designed by Martha Schwartz Inc., has been developed to act as a 'front porch' to the surrounding buildings, extending out to carefully 'borrow' the activity of the shops and offices. This creates places for programmed activities, provides a setting for the surrounding buildings, and makes the square accessible to all.

The Square features three levels that are connected using a series of ramps and stairs that facilitate movement and provides informal seating. Set within the curving walls of the ramps are internally lit glass boxes in which are embedded artefacts of the industrial revolution that contextualise the history of the City and provide features of interest.

Flush-mounted rail tracks with inset coloured lights mark the historical importance of the railroads in Manchester and create a dramatic and warm addition to the public realm. At the lowest level is an area that gets the most sunshine and accommodates dining. A fountain feeds into an excavated 'ditch' that is filled with stepping-stones and gushing water. This creates a casual area which children especially enjoy playing in.

Fundamental to the success of public spaces is that they feel 'human'. The scale of new flagship buildings, especially skyscrapers, can be out of scale with the street, leaving the pedestrian feeling intimidated and alienated. Likewise, many new buildings give little obvious indication of their content and purpose. Obvious entrances, signage and window displays help orient people but are currently out of fashion as they tend to get in the way of the overall architectural vision. The entrance to the Guggenheim in Bilbao is ingeniously discreet – but fails to help make the space understandable and therefore accessible to visitors.



New Approaches

Unlike traditional urban streets, which have a profusion of shop and restaurant fronts at street level, many large civic buildings present lots of blank walls punctuated by little more than ugly service entrances. The new Selfridges building in Birmingham, designed by Future Systems, is a good example of this. Whilst overall the building is undeniably gorgeous – all gleaming, futurist curves – round the back at street level it is not so pretty. There are just a few low-key openings at ground level to give passers by a hint at what is inside as department stores don't need windows because they detract from internal displays. This leaves the space around the building out of scale with the rest of the streetscape and creates a hostile environment for pedestrians who are sandwiched between a one-way traffic system on one side and blank shiny walls sweeping up on the other. Nobody wants to hang around in a space where they feel dwarfed. Good public spaces need to be welcoming – with cafes, retail or activities. The Bullring side of Selfridges offers these in spades a level up from the difficult street entrance.



Case study :

Royal Victoria Square, London

Royal Victoria Square is a good example of how, despite significant financial investment, a public space can fail if the design and management is not right. The Square, a former brownfield site in a once rundown area of London, was conceived by the former London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) as a new high quality, functional addition to the public realm. The landscape works were part of the initial regeneration phase, increasing the potential value of local sites to future developers and provide open space for the proposed new communities. It was intended to provide a catalyst for the establishment of a new city district, extending the City of London eastward.

In fact, the site, which is now on a long lease from the former English Partnerships and managed on a day-to-day basis by ExCeL, is rundown and bleak just 4 years after completion. The centrepiece plane of grass is now overgrown, street furniture has weathered badly, there is no programme of events and the interactive fountain is not in use. The Square feels open and exposed, there is no food offer and with the fountain out of use there is a lack of punctuating features that would encourage people to linger. Significantly, the local business and residential communities have not yet arrived and so the lack of people using the Square is compounding the problem and has resulted in a place that does not feel safe.

An innovative project is currently underdevelopment for the public space around the South Bank Centre. The site, effectively the underbelly of the Queen Elizabeth's Hall, was a leftover, dead space that was unused and a prime area for muggings and anti-social behaviour. However, over the past thirty years it has become one of the world's most iconic skateboarding sites, with skaters attracted in droves to its swathes of angled concrete. Over the years a multitude of anti-skate devices have been installed by the managers of the site, and in turn removed by skaters in an on-going battle. Now this conflict is set to be resolved with a unique partnership between the South Bank Centre and art collective the Side Effects of Urethane to commission five artworks that are not only 'skatable' but also double as seats for other users of the site. The project recognises the contribution skating makes to the 'sense of place' at the South Bank and that as a cultural centre the South Bank should be rooted in the community. It also suggests an admission by the South Bank Centre that skaters have as much right to the public realm as anyone else. We will have to wait and see how the project works in practise, but it represents the beginning of a shift away from designing public spaces that exclude certain parts of society.



It is time that more thought was given to the truly public aspects of new architecturally-driven regeneration developments. Clearly, well-designed and managed public spaces can bring about enormous benefits for residents, visitors and traders alike, by injecting people and activity back into our urban spaces. Happily this challenge might be met by interventions as simple as providing people with somewhere to sit down or with something to look at. But it is not until the development of public spaces around our shiny new buildings are designed and managed for people, that they can claim to be truly public.

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Case study :

Bellenden Road, Peckham

Peckham was once one of the most unfashionable inner-city addresses, infamous on one hand as the setting for the wide-boy comedy of 'Only Fools and Horses', and on the other hand for the bleak estates where schoolboy Damilola Taylor was murdered. However, the Bellenden Road area has been transformed in the last few years into a highly desirable urban village by a regeneration project that focused on significantly enhancing its public spaces coupled with improving the housing stock.

Improvements to the public spaces within the regeneration area have been achieved with the help of some of Britain's most respected artists and designers. The area now boasts bollards in bright pink and rust, new shop fronts, barcode-patterned pavements, a giant silver arch for a wildlife garden and street lamps that illuminate in a neon heart shape. These were created by fashion designer Zandra Rhodes, the creator of the Angel of the North, Antony Gormley and Tom Phillips the painter in collaboration with the local community. The community wildlife garden has been created with the help of Charlie Dimmock and local artist Helen Harrison has created park sculptures and play areas.

Funding for the artists came jointly from Southwark Council, which covers Peckham, and Arts & Business, a body set up to channel resources to fledgling artists in return for publicity and improvements to shops and business buildings. So as well as the streets, several small firms operating in the area look stunningly attractive too.

Although the project did not set out to raise house prices, the imaginative interventions in the streetscape has seen Peckham's demand in the property market rise by 50 percent since 2000. For example, a three-bedroom mid-terrace house would sell for £140,000 in 2000 before the artwork was created. Market inflation means it should be £200,000 now, but they are achieving £250,000 because of the improvements to the area.