

Introduction

The Cities Programme

The Cities Programme at the London School of Economics is an innovative centre for teaching and research on urban issues. The Programme studies the relations between the physical and social aspects of cities. We see design as a mode of research and practice that shapes urban environments, responds to urban issues, and connects social and material forms in the city. We take a multi-disciplinary approach to these issues, drawing on expertise and insights from the social sciences, architecture, urban design, engineering, planning and other fields. The MSc City Design and Social Science aims to promote a new generation of urbanists who can engage across these disciplinary boundaries, and have a positive impact on the making of cities in the future. The City Design Research Studio is the central unit of the Master's programme, linking theoretical issues and research debates with the practical analysis of problems of city design and original proposals for urban intervention. It promotes an understanding of the city as a social as well as a built environment, and of the complexities of urban design and development processes.

In 2008-9, the Studio went to London's 'City fringe'. On the Bishopsgate site, the students traced the intersection of different social and economic cultures, the border zone of different political authorities, and the stark abutment of different built forms. The work this year takes its place in a series of City Design Studios concerned with urban edges – seams in the city that act as both lines of division and points of contact: in this case, the fringe between the City of London as a site of global financial power and inner east London's more vernacular cityscapes. We begin from the premise that such 'edges' work in complicated ways: opening up common ground or segregating urban space; marking out sites of encounter or illusory adjacencies. Students worked together in interdisciplinary groups to explore the border conditions of this site, and to propose resourceful modes of urban intervention against a deepening backdrop of economic downturn. Their analyses and propositions form the basis of this publication.

Fran Tonkiss
Director, Cities Programme

The Bishopsgate Studio

One hundred years ago and more, when London not only brokered and insured, but also stored and transhipped the world's trades, the chain of commerce spread eastward from the Bank of England for miles, from private banks, exchanges, and offices out to factories, warehouses, utilities and docks. The East India Company's goods and looted curiosities were stored in extensive warehouses at Fenchurch Street and Houndsditch, and furs and timbers were traded at the Baltic Exchange at St. Mary Axe.

Yet this functional chain was mostly directed along the river, and the north-eastern edges of the City were given over to more mundane purposes: Finsbury Square was lined with Georgian town-houses, surrounding streets were dominated by the manufacture of furniture and leather goods, and beyond the wholesale vegetable market tightly packed houses sprawled out to the River Lea.

Since then, with each boom in stocks and property, the workplaces of London's financial sector have spread to the north and east, out across London Wall and Moorgate, displacing housing and workshops, and filling any large sites with particular eagerness, as at the former rail yards at Liverpool Street and Aldgate, and Spitalfields Market. The spread has been halted temporarily by cyclical downturns before resuming: inexorable, inevitable.

This is how it seemed at Bishopsgate Goods Yard, with a preferred development partner in place and a process of negotiation and consultation already several years underway. However, this is not a routine cyclical slump, and Bishopsgate at this point is no ordinary boundary.

The rapid retrenchment of the commercial development sector has led to the indefinite postponement of construction of a number of office towers, in turn calling into question London's acquired habits of city-making: is the need for a longer term agenda and for good value counter-cyclical investment served when the public sector contents itself solely with piggy-backing on private development, and the renewal of the city grinds to a halt in recession?

Great Eastern Street and Commercial Street, at whose junction the Bishopsgate Goods Yard site is located, crystallise the border between City and East End like no other boundary. Grand infrastructure projects of the late nineteenth century, they were carved through areas of housing and industry to connect the northern railway termini with the docks. These streets continue to

form part of London's Inner Ring, assembled under Abercrombie's 1943 County of London Plan, and as a result also form the edge of the Congestion Charging Zone. The City of London Police's 'Ring of Steel', a security control of traffic into the City initiated after IRA attacks in 1990 and 1993, runs just within this line.

Individuals' opportunities and the structures of collective life differ radically on either side of this boundary. These social dynamics take place within built environments whose scale, grain and character move to ever greater contrast. The relations between patterns of social life and their spatial framework would be difficult to analyse in a stable environment: but our ambition for the studio extends beyond such an analysis, and conditions are volatile.

Approaching this area, this site, and this moment with a view to action, requires a willingness to change the very conditions one is describing perhaps before one has fully understood them, distancing studio work from much social science; equally, for democratic accountability it is necessary to maintain a coherence of reasoning across strategic and design scales that is unusual for the planning and construction professions, and might be considered inimical to creativity. The risk of this ambition is that the results have value neither as social science nor as design; the potential reward is that the bones of a discourse linking observation to spatial action can be formed, both in itself, and in the understanding of the students. The one limit that makes this task workable is the localisation to a single site of defined area.

With the diverse and deep experience of the individual students of partial aspects of the problem in hand, supplemented with awkward questions from their tutors, the Studio has covered a wide spatial, temporal and thematic range. A number of substantial issues have been unearthed and explored in the course of the Studio's allotted time across two terms.

The relations between what is retained and conserved, and what is destroyed and remade, are channelled through the rhetoric and regulatory structures of conservation and renewal. The pattern of the City's development becomes clear in several of the maps prepared in the Studio: an area of rapid change and substantial development freedom sandwiched between conservation areas at the heart of the city and the historic eastern suburbs. Yet it is clear that the nature of 'creative destruction' that ensures the renewal of city economies can take a number of forms and scales, and that conservation and redevelopment are the vehicles of a number of different processes which vary widely

in the intensity of capitalisation, and therefore of the returns required. There appears to be little social or economic justification for the polarisation between physical preservation and transformation across the City fringes, and every reason for this de facto planning settlement to be challenged.

With large sites generally requiring long periods to negotiate, to build, or both, there is a clear relation between the physical and temporal scales of development: study of Broadgate and Spitalfields Markets clarifies this picture. The recent completion of the 1985 Broadgate masterplan with a tower reflects a 25-year market cycle, in which time London has regained a measure of self-government, has embraced tall buildings, and the deep plan trading floors of the early phases have been superseded by the smaller floorplate requirements of the growing number of legal firms in the area - resulting in a complete change of development model, to the point that a number of 'groundscrapers' from the original development are now identified for future replacement by towers. At Spitalfields, the redevelopment of the market site has been a prolonged battle over uses, architectural heritage and community and corporate models of public space. As at Bishopsgate, the planning process delivered a Solomonic judgement, brutally implemented, cutting the baby in half in order to satisfy competing demands for low density conservation and high density development. With Bishopsgate Goods Yard located across a borough boundary, and outside the City, the play of competing interests across the site could potentially follow a number of different paths, from the antagonistic to the inclusive, all with their associated timeframe.

These examples illustrate the tendency referred to by Richard Sennett as the 'Brittle City': "Modern urban environments decay much more quickly than urban fabric inherited from the past. As uses change, buildings are now destroyed rather than adapted; indeed, the over-specification of form and function makes the modern urban environment peculiarly susceptible to decay." The project speculations developed in the Studio all examine the possibility of greater resilience of new-build environments to economic and social change over the life of structures and districts.

The construction of value on the site has to date assumed high density construction over the East London Line viaduct. The need for large bridging structures and limited utility of the lower building floors allows for no halves: either one builds over, and high, or one avoids overbuilding, accepting significantly reduced

density. While the latter approach has its arguments in the current economic climate, it also raises questions of the particularly narrow model of the self-financing of infrastructure which does not reflect the spread of benefits from the new public transport. The decision as to which model to use, and the implications for timescale, financing and inclusiveness, are at high stakes.

It is in terms of public space, a positive but vaguely defined deliverable of the regeneration process, that the choices are starkest. At extremes of this political scale, public space is seen on the one hand as a space for participation in the process of development, an ongoing process of economic empowerment and citizenship; on the other as compensation for the impacts of new development and mitigation of cumulative inequalities. As well as its political construction, in which strategic differences are reflected in the dynamics of the street, public space, as it is experienced and observed, also relies on a local spatial disposition, which can even be considered to have a scenographic or performative aspect. Fleeting, and fragmentarily, the divergent relations between political construct and social experience are evoked in the imagination of public space developed in the diverse studio projects.

The approaches explored, and the means by which they have been investigated and presented, are not tools or methods that have been inculcated into malleable students. Rather, they are parts of a wide-ranging discussion around the experience of city life, the forces at play in individual and collective behaviour within the constraints of the physical environment, and acting on those constraints. These are not additive modules which can be summed to form a complete perspective, but are fragments of a bolder, more pressing project to imagine a city that responds to our short- and long-term challenges.

The cleansing effects of slumps in construction activity can be exaggerated. However, the current downturn has offered us both the opportunity and the incentive to reflect on the longer term, to develop critically tested alternatives. As such, the Studio has approached the educational challenge not in the sense of training junior professionals, but rather as a need to reflect on emerging city paradigms. With the focus, energy and maturity of our graduate students, that is what this year's Bishopsgate Studio does.

Integrating the social and spatial life of the city:

a Studio exploration

On meeting the new students in the Cities Programme for the first time, one is struck by the diversity of skills and backgrounds within the group. This year we had a group of architects and planners, a geographer, a lawyer, a journalist, a sociologist, a transport engineer and a property developer: almost a complete integrated design team. The convergence of diverse cultural and disciplinary bases brought by the variegated student group is core to our design studio exploration. A central aim of our Studio is to explore the question of who imagines the city, and for whom, and to consider what an overlap of different lenses might yield for a new or alternative kind of urban imagination.

From the platform of this diverse disciplinary base, part of our Studio challenge is to understand what design is, and what forms of provocation and processes of problem-solving are key to expanding our urban imagination. Our first working principle is that conceptual exploration is integral to analytic exploration. An understanding of the city emerges from the iterative process of seeing and assessing what is already there, together with conceiving the possibilities of what might be. The Studio findings therefore emerge out of four related explorations: an understanding of the forces, activities and spaces that shape a site; a provocation as to what the key issues at stake are; a design framework that connects the spatial idea to aspects of delivery; and detailed understanding of a strategic part of the design.

These explorations are underpinned by the second working principle of our Studio, where the spatial and social life of the city are seen as integral. This principle is supported by the location of the Cities Programme within the Department of Sociology at the LSE, together with the courses and teaching staff that span these learning environments. Essential to the Studio are the questions of how the spatial and social life of the city is constituted, and what combination of methods are required for seeing, understanding and imagining the city. This involves testing and adapting conventions of interviewing, photographing and drawing, as well as investigating the different forms of information yielded by qualitative and quantitative techniques.

We started our Studio at the fringe of the City of London in December 2008, and focused on the redevelopment of the Bishopsgate Goods Yard. A month later Britain had officially entered into an economic recession, the impact of which entirely reconfigured the sense of what would be possible for the

Bishopsgate site. As the prospects of a large-scale redevelopment initiative led by private sector investment rapidly faded, our students began to test alternative forms and modes of urban development. Economic adversity spawned a wider view of development and delivery alternatives, and ideas around incremental development, multiple forms of ownership, and community-oriented investment were actively pursued. The students were divided into four groups that represented the diversity of disciplinary backgrounds within the year as a whole. In addition, the four research themes – Borders and Boundaries, Contact Zones, Development Processes and Spatial Economies – were intended to provide different thematic lenses to explore possibilities for the site. It is worth briefly outlining the core approaches that have emerged from this interdisciplinary process of exploration.

The Borders and Boundaries group analysed the spatial boundaries represented by former rail lines and Goods Yard enclosures, together with the different political and jurisdictional boundaries that intersect on the site. The broad aim of their project, to ‘weave the city fringe’, emerged from in-depth analysis of these boundary effects and involved identifying ways of cutting across these divisions in order to create more spatially and socially permeable border conditions between neighbouring locales. Their proposal sought to establish a place or a ‘catalyst’ from which development could emerge over time. Key to the idea of a catalyst is the particular grouping of public spaces and public amenities, which both open the site to its immediate, local surroundings and provide a forecourt to the new East London Line station.

The Contact Zones group took an explicitly political stance on the future development of the site, devoting much of their exploration to how a smaller-scaled, more incremental process of development could be structured, and what this might look like in spatial terms. Under the motif of ‘one-to-one colonisation’, they developed an alternative system of regulation and control, in which local citizens and smaller investors would collaborate to deliver, manage and occupy the Bishopsgate site over a period of time. By adopting this stance, city space is conceptualised first and foremost as a process, out of which a spatial configuration develops. In contrast the Development Processes group began from the starting-point of a more conventional approach to privately-led development, going on to explore ways in which development conventions could be expanded to include greater

participation in the development process, not only during the formal consultation period, but also in the process of occupation. By researching the potential for innovative economies to grow out of the recession, this group also expanded on what role local, creative and green economies might play in establishing a primary space for innovation on the Bishopsgate site.

If urban space is understood as an asset or resource for a range of users, then the idea of its economic value needs to expand to include ideas of social and cultural value. The distribution of spatial resources in processes of urban regeneration is therefore not simply a matter of market-led allocation or short-term speculative gain. The idea of spatial justice suggests not only thinking through how mixed users are able to access and benefit from mixed uses, but what spatial assets form a public framework for urban development. This was the underlying premise of the exploration undertaken by the Spatial Economies group, who focused on a large-scale, linear, green link from the southern edge of the Bishopsgate site to the wider east end of London and beyond. The focus of this proposal is how to connect and re-activate an existing series of green spaces, whose current usage is confined by their comparatively local or disconnected settings.

The Studio process, structured around four interdisciplinary groups within four themes, yielded four very different forms and modes of proposition. Common to all groups, is the notion that development processes and spatial outcomes are integrally related. For some, the starting point is the catalytic strength of space itself, for others, the organisation of the process is the starting point from which to effect change. For all groups, the complexity and scale of urban intervention requires a strategy, not only about where to start, but also where to focus exploratory efforts in order to take both analysis and proposition beyond the rhetoric of good urban form.

Alain Chiaradia, Juliet Davis and Suzanne Hall
LSE Fellows, Cities Programme