

AN ANATOMY OF LONDON

By Richard MacCormac

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By understanding how places have evolved, we are better able to guide development and change in the urban fabric, and avoid the incongruity created by so much of the 'modern environment'. Examination of 'sections' of London shows that functions of a very different type can co-exist successfully if they are in the right place; it is not a question of architectural style, but of purpose and use, and of scale and symmetry across places.

This is a speculative study. The work is in a familiar tradition of speculation about the nature of cities; a tradition which people like Rob and Leon Krier represent. But what has seemed important to me is to convert static observations about the nature of the European or the British city into a kind of understanding that might enable us to comprehend the situation as a process and not simply as a product that exists in stasis. This would enable us to make better judgements about the nature of change and how we should guide that change in old fabrics. I think that the unpopularity of what is called the 'modern environment' is partly to do with a profound sense of incongruity and a feeling that the nature of change is such that instead of affirming what exists and adding to it and making new wonderful things, the modern environment is perceived to have destroyed what was good and not to have made something better. And so what I want to investigate is why. I am putting forward propositions about architecture which go beyond the planning process.

I will start with some cross sections. The idea of looking at cross sections is to test a proposition about the traditional organization of the West End of London; this is not very easy to do in the City of London for reasons of rapidity of change. The validity of the proposition is yet to be established, though I have a sense, having recently reread Donald Olsen's *Town Planning in London* (published 1964), that some of the principles I am going to talk about were intentional in the development of the great estates, like the Bedford Estate.

The first example is north of where I work and live, in Spitalfields, the wonderfully vigorous Cheshire Street market with Victorian houses in multi-use. I managed to get these listed about eight years ago to stop them being demolished; the local authority planned to demolish everything here to build warehouses, the kind of warehousing you see further north in the Bethnal Green Road. Part of my reason for getting these buildings listed was to ensure that a social characteristic of this part of London was preserved, and the key characteristic of this environment is that it supports what I call 'local transactions' that is people living behind their own front doors; restaurants and shops of all kinds and local businesses and, of course, pubs. Local transactions are threatened if planning professionals do not understand the threat which building types like warehousing represent. The threat arises because transactions such as distributive warehousing, along with wholesale markets, banks and office buildings, are destructive of local character simply because they do not primarily serve local people. I call these 'foreign transactions' because they operate on a regional, national or international level.

The warehouses do not belong in retailing situations such as the Bethnal Green Road, because they abruptly interrupt its local transactional character. They are incongruous.

What I want to explore is the way that cities can be made up of successfully co-existent functions of very different sorts that find their right place. I am not going to attempt to explain the origins of such relationships or how they took place originally. But in some ways I perceive the architectural and urban structures I am going to examine as being rather like coral reefs that are re-inhabited over and over again and there seems to be a pattern in the relationships which reoccurs over time though the functions change. For example, in the eighteenth-century-city large houses on primary streets were inhabited by high-income families and the mews behind serviced them. Today the houses might be offices with the mews inhabited by businesses selling services - commercial or professional - like photocopying, printing or sandwich bars to the primary users.

Observations of this kind have prompted me to consider how the problem posed by the warehouse development on Bethnal Green Road might have been resolved. You organize the development so that the frontage to the road sustains 'local transactions': chambers-like buildings of a modest scale which have frequent access from the street and which contain small businesses or retailing. These uses, facing onto the street, sustain the idea of the street as a place for people to transact, and the regional or national distribution function of the warehouses is relegated to its own hinterland. So there is a precinct or service area behind the street which belongs to the activities around it and confines them. The sections through the street and this service yard are symmetrical while the section through the block between them is asymmetrical. This leads to a proposition that, traditionally, similar uses housed in a similar scale of building, faced each other across streets and change of use and scale occurred within the block enabling a succession of adjacent streets to be different from one another. The symmetry in the street affirms its character as a place. It follows that the symmetry across the block characteristic of so much modern development produces either uniformity across the urban fabric as a whole or a series of places of ambiguous function and scale.

Some of us, in my office, disconcerted by the local borough planning policy for the Cheshire Street area, looked at how these ideas might be applied. We discovered that the existing section was very intriguing with the railway in a cutting going into Liverpool Street station, bounded to the south by run down warehousing looking into an existing plot of public open space called Allen's Gardens. We showed how the lively character of the street could be sustained by preserving existing buildings and functions and how the hinterland could be developed for servicing warehousing without affecting the street scene.

We considered housing to be a more appropriate use to border the public open space which becomes the enclosed garden which its name suggests. But we also perceived an economic aspect to this, which is that new housing primes the value of the adjacent commercial site giving confidence to potential small-scale investors in the little workshops and businesses between the housing and the railway. There is a sequence here: railway, small business, giving acoustic protection to the housing, and the housing making an appropriate edge to the garden,

to which it has a claim which small businesses do not. There is an idea here which is analogous to the game of dominoes where certain values attach to each other and certain ones do not and it was this expression of congruity that prompted an investigation of certain sections of the West End of London, to see if such arrangements were characteristic.

The first section examined is from the Festival Hall to Centre Point. There is a general sense of congruity across the river, with the Royal Festival Hall, the National Theatre, County Hall facing the Savoy Hotel, Shell Mex and Embankment Place on the north bank. All are equivalent kinds of building, set pieces, public or commercial 'palaces'. So there are symmetries of intention even across a river which respond to the symbolic status which the river confers. If we look at what is happening, sectionally, on the north bank we find that on the slope from the Embankment itself up to the Strand we get an enormous change of scale, we also get a change of type, through the section, the Savoy Hotel being the most interesting example.

What happens is that the hotel changes from being a 14-storey palace, with all the other ones looking across the river, to being a terraced structure which subsumes its rhetoric into that of the Strand. It becomes equivalent to other buildings which line the Strand which are mostly stone or stucco clad and 5 to 7 storeys, with busy retailing at ground level on both sides of the street. The Savoy Hotel itself is immensely interesting because there is a series of transformations within it; it is like a Parisian Hotel de Ville which invites you into the centre of the block where various points of access are offered including the entrance into the theatre. It has a special identity as a place rather than as an elevation to the street.

In this argument the concern is not with architectural style, but with purpose and use, probably material to some extent, and with scale. Different architectural idioms could be mixed within these conventions. Moving one street to the north we find another character in Maiden Lane which is a service street with solicitors' chambers, flats, occasional pubs and small businesses, and a diminutive scale in relation to the Strand. The whole street is quite distinct and again there is symmetry of use across it and asymmetry across the block. Another asymmetry occurs between Maiden Lane and Covent Garden Piazza. Very little survived of Inigo Jones' original project which was a symmetrical Piazza of substantial scale into which the market was later introduced. The church is on the axis of a central aisle through the symmetrical market. North of the Piazza is Long Acre, and the section varies from the large scale of the Piazza buildings down to the smaller scale of Floral Street, which is a service street, and then up to Long Acre which is a major street nearly equal in scale and function to the Strand. We are seeing an alternation of scale and activity which, while not universal, is often a characteristic of these West End developments of seventeenth to nineteenth century origin. Consider, for a moment, Canary Wharf, and the Isle of Dogs Free Enterprise Zone, and imagine whether you could find any equivalent arrangements which allow primary and secondary and tertiary activities to coexist. There is nothing of the sort.

The series of warehouses north of Long Acre is another circumstance altogether and is sometimes the exception to the proposition, being asymmetrical across the street and symmetrical across the block. This warehousing served the fruit and vegetable market originally

and has now found new uses in housing small professional businesses, retailing, restaurants and bars.

Sometimes the arrangements invert the original intention. The service space which would have been for carts and drayhorses and at the back of buildings that faced onto streets, has become an oasis of traffic free activity. So the old coral reef, the old structure has been re-interpreted and inverted to create a new kind of place.

Monmouth Street and Shaftesbury Avenue form the boundary to this area. This part of Shaftesbury Avenue is curiously without local transactions and dominated by large impersonal office buildings and to the north backs onto a desolate hinterland. The character changes again to small intensely used service streets off Charing Cross Road which are abruptly terminated by St. Giles' Circus. In the 1960s, the office tower Centre Point took out the end of the block of St. Giles' High Street, and joined onto the intersection of Oxford Street and Charing Cross Road. Consequently the fabric has been amputated. The amputation is concealed with advertisements, a kind of commercial bandaging on the end of the block. It is that kind of disruption without any healing, which makes modern interventions so crude and unresolved. Which is not to say that you cannot find places for this type of building. Centre Point is a visually interesting tower, but the problem is a contextual one and a question of congruity. There should be a process, between planning and architecture, of urban design to establish an environment for a total change of scale and use of this sort.

The second section examined is of a very different sort and runs from St. James's Park up to Golden Square in Soho. The proposition is not really sustained to the north of Regent Street, but what is interesting about thinking about London in this way is that it leads to questions which produce unexpected answers. For example, it was originally Nash's intention to have another Carlton House Terrace on the other side of the Mall, a proposal which would have made the North boundary of St. James's Park rather different. He intended the Mall to be a ceremonial axis to the Palace, like a great boulevard in St Petersburg. What is interesting about Carlton House Terrace is that it 'fronts' the Park, but is entered from the other side. A lot of modern buildings have a back and front, but eighteenth-century buildings often have two 'fronts'. Nash's building demonstrates this very successfully. Then there is the garden at the back of the Pall Mall clubs, a slightly strange space here, very quiet and with a special character. But it is not entirely symmetrical; you do not enter clubs from this side, you enter them from Pall Mall, a great street of social and commercial institutions.

To the north is a strange arrangement, the block between St. James's Square and Pall Mall is very thin, thinner than the depth of the block containing the clubs. This is because when St James's Square was developed in the 1660s Pall Mall was already established as a primary street so the buildings on the south side of St. James's Square originally presented their fronts to Pall Mall and their backs to St. James's Square. Now some of them are back to back, to sustain frontage to both street and square. St. James's Square has a general symmetry, and then to the north Apple Tree Yard forms a mews between St. James's Square and Jermyn Street. So there is a section through asymmetrical blocks and symmetrical spaces going from the primary activity

of the square through the mews and up again to the scale of Jermyn Street. Then we come to Norman Shaw's Piccadilly Hotel. This kind of analysis has made me see these buildings in a completely new way because what we find in plan is that the site is the meeting point between Piccadilly and Regent Street which forms a wedge shaped block. The hotel conforms absolutely to an urban proposition which is to do with its palace-like relationship to Piccadilly and the crescent of Regent Street to the North. The hotel presents itself as a distinct building on its entrance side to Piccadilly but is entirely subsumed into the rhetoric of Regent Street. If you cut through Regent Street to the back of Glasshouse Street, you get the sense that even cities of the commercial power of London cannot sustain commercial activity universally. There has to be quiet, and Glasshouse Street is very quiet; it is not a transactional street. It has become a relatively low rental office street which collides with the old bit of Soho and then, this part becomes dissonant.

The proposition is about symmetry across places, but of course it does not happen everywhere. There are collisions off Regent Street where everything is dissonant, strange and interesting. Golden Square is full of one-offs, competing with each other, in a manner that is uncharacteristic of the eighteenth-century urban ideal. Generally the estate surveyors, for example on the Bedford Estate in the eighteenth-century, felt sure that the longterm value of the estates depended upon the style of the, estate being maintained and upon leases that constrained people from creating incongruity.

These issues affected me when I was working on the masterplanning for the redevelopment of Spitalfields Market. Early proposals for Spitalfields explored changes of scale and the reconciliation of local interests, local transactions with financial functions in office buildings - foreign transactions. The final scheme was highly complex in its attempt to come to grips with these ideas, and also introduced other more metaphorical conceptions. There was to be a major retail area, and as with the Savoy, a series of Hotel de Ville-like courts which belonged to huge office buildings. Some of these courts were on Brushfield Street which is the street with Hawksmoor's Christ Church Spitalfields at the end, with a predominantly eighteenth-century scale. The terrace addressing the street consisted of small chambers buildings for retail use, made of stone and brick 4 or 5 storeys high, backing onto further shops to make a relationship across the little alleyways: local transactions. The tall offices behind and above are quite different; they are prestigious and belong to the world of Frankfurt, New York, Tokyo, London: foreign transactions. The scheme was an attempt to reconcile incongruities of use and scale using asymmetry through blocks, to protect the character of Brushfield Street and to allow very different kinds of places and functions to coexist in an incredibly dense commercial development.

One last point: for 10 years or so I have had reprints from Booth's London Poverty maps of 1889 on my wall. I suddenly realized, that their observation of demographic variety seems to show that change of wealth always occurs through the block, and never across the street.

Richard MacCormac