

### BEYOND BOW BELLS

#### A discussion involving Richard MacCormac, Iain Sinclair and Alice Rawsthorne

**As London looks eastward, RA Magazine asked three commentators on urban space to consider how new architecture can affect the quality of people's lives**

'Go East young man', seems to have been the rallying cry of over-congested London over the past decade. Artists, designers and other creative types long ago began migrating to Hackney in search of more space at affordable rates, the debate continues about whether to bid to hold the Olympics in East London and the Government has recently announced plans to develop the Thames Gateway. The vast area around City Airport remains a post-industrial no man's land ripe for development and the Dome across the river is still an empty shell. Meanwhile the City has been an almost constant construction site over the past decade and is erecting some of London's new icons, such as the Norman Foster 'gherkin'. As central London reaches bursting point and the City's financial muscle begins to weaken, how might architects work together with developers to encourage more equitable urban development for London? How can more human-centred design improve Londoners' lives? How can we design for the future without burying London's past? What are the new monuments for London? RA Magazine asked three prominent figures in the world of architecture, design and media to discuss this topic.

Alice Rawsthorn is director of London's Design Museum. Richard MacCormac RA is an architect who lives and works in Spitalfields. He strives to integrate the historic and future elements of a space, and his projects include the Jubilee line's new Southwark station and the extension to the BBC's Broadcasting House. The writer Iain Sinclair lives in Hackney and takes the fabric of London as his subject in books, such as *Downriver* and *London Orbital*, that consider how the city's past impacts on its present in unexpected ways.

**Alice Rawsthorn:** We think of London as a dynamic city which is constantly evolving, but until recent additions to the skyline - like the 'gherkin', Foster's Swiss Re headquarters - the topographic changes have been horizontal rather than vertical. For years the city sprawled outwards.

**Iain Sinclair:** Ever since the Thatcherite period, the river has become the focus to be fought over by various interests. It now fragments into this wonderful series of architectural pastiches from the funfair of the Eye, which is deemed to be a success, to the Dome, which is a failure. The Dome was built on an area where whale meat and bones were bundled into vats to make the oil used for light houses. The magnate who made his money from that was Turner's greatest patron, Elhanan Bicknell. He lived in Herne Hill in a house where Turner could retreat from the city. His wealth came from these stinking vats on the marshes which became this great Millennial folly. Eventually, the Dome will become an extension of Docklands to shift the development across the river.

**Richard MacCormac:** The huge Royal Victoria and Albert Docks near City airport cover the same distance as between Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London, yet there was nothing much there until recently. If you drove for twenty minutes from City airport past Canary Wharf you would find that the topography of the area is very distinctive. There are big visual events like the Dome, the Thames and Canary Wharf. But the topography is on a different scale with the rest of London. If you walked for twenty minutes here, you'd barely see anything, whereas if you walked for twenty minutes down Whitehall, it would be full of visual events. It operates on a pedestrian scale, a human pace, whereas the East is only really accessible at the pace of a car.

**Iain Sinclair:** You'd be driving east down the A13 from the Isle of Dogs and a drive down there is like the credit sequence of *The Sopranos*.

**Richard MacCormac:** I'm trying to suggest that there is an emerging topography in east London. But it risks becoming like US urban sprawl, where the only way to get around is by car, not foot. Neighbourhoods need both to function.

**Iain Sinclair:** If you drove down the A13 there'd be no way of accessing the stories and memories because they're all a bit off-road. Whereas bits and pieces of memories and history are scattered all over the City. The

Swiss Re building in Leadenhall Street has within it the remains of the Holy Trinity Priory once the major church of east London. The archway is left in the basement of this very modern office block like a chunk of memory

**Richard MacCormac:** What I'm interested in is how this layering - this psychic archaeology - can survive redevelopment. What concerns me about the City is the difficulty of sustaining layers of alternative activity, because the business of the City is conducted through electronic communications that have nothing to do with human activity on the street. Anarchic and creative activities are banished because they threaten commercial activity.

**Iain Sinclair:** Spitalfields works well because there are the crucial elements you must have in London: a hospital, market and dramatic church. On one side of the street you have the City and on the other the illegitimate culture of the Brick Lane street markets which once spread across an entire landscape. It was a zone which was away from the machinations of the City, but now it is constantly being eaten up.

**Richard MacCormac:** I've got prints of Booth's Poverty Maps of 1889, which code the city street by street according to wealth. Very wealthy streets are yellow, red is the merchant class, blue is artisans and a dirty indigo black is the poor. You get alternations of classes, street by street. That is still true of parts of London. It's what I like about Spitalfields, where I live. But the City, with its definition of monolithic wealth, fights against it.

**Iain Sinclair:** I think that London is being turned inside out. Instead of living in a safe suburb, because transport is so impossible, people want to live in an inner city equivalent with underground parking and security guards. When I moved into Hackney in 1968, it was a network of bedraggled Victorian terraces. The plan was to clear this and put up tower blocks, but they never worked. Most of them have been blown up and in their place are these mustard brick houses. They have recreated a suburb without shops surrounded by an area of drug crime, and the old Hackney has drifted out to the seaside.

**Richard MacCormac:** There are paradoxes here. One is that the indigenous Cockney population escaped to suburbia, doing what the nineteenth century middle classes did by escaping the high density city. Over the last generation, the opposite has happened for the middle classes who can choose where they live. It first happened in places like Islington in the '50s. Ever since, there's been an emigration of people wanting to escape what an area stands for and an immigration of people with a different image of that area who want to reconstruct it.

**Alice Rawsthorn:** What are the totems of contemporary London? Recently London school children were asked to identify their favourite symbol of the city - 85% chose the Eye. It's remarkable that they have adopted it in so short a time.

**Iain Sinclair:** For a long time it was Tower Bridge. Hitchcock always began his films there. When he came back to shoot *Frenzy*, set in the Covent Garden fruit market, he starts off at Tower Bridge and ends up at the Houses of Parliament. But those symbols of London no longer play

**Richard MacCormac:** What I've noticed is that the modern monument is one where social activity takes place. Whereas people accepted the notions of monumentality imposed on them in the nineteenth century, today what matters about a place is what happens there. Trafalgar Square is an interesting example. Few people remember the battle of Trafalgar. Instead the square has become a multilayered symbol of democratic outbursts: celebrations, poll tax riots, anti-war marches. And now that it's being pedestrianised it's becoming a new, human-scaled axis for Londoners. I'm interested in the expression 'take place' - it implies that a place is taken over by the human activity that occurs there. For me, a key to the future of cities is to design places and not just buildings. We need to consider the intangible as well as the tangible qualities of architecture. And we still have a lot to understand about what it is that gives places particular resonance in terms of their social, political and aesthetic appeal. It's almost like seeking a fourth dimension to architecture.

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This article first appeared in the RA Magazine Spring 2003