9

IMAGINING THE PRESENT

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The city exists

The territory that we design into is there before we start. But what is it? The existing condition is not a fixed fact, but it is real. In everyday experience, everything around you is changing, growing or dilapidating, being added to or removed from. Views, colours, materials, sounds are too complex in variety and quantity to perceive evenly or with any equivalence. Depending on what you are doing there and who you are, you might not notice the colour of the roofs or the make of the passing car, or you might be struck by the tonal continuity of the brickwork or the bright reflections of trees in rainy windows. Signs may leap to your foreground if you are looking for a shop, or a still-open park gate may put a spring in your step as you arrive at twilight. Yet, after your walk, having moved within it, you have experienced a slice of the city, and if required you could no doubt recall a few special details and highlights. Georges Perec puts it well when he writes: "I like my town, but I can't say exactly what I like about it. I don't think it's the smell. I'm too accustomed to the monuments to want to look at them. I like certain lights, a few bridges, café terraces. I love passing through a place I haven't seen for a long time".[1]

It is sometimes difficult to enter into this sensory kaleidoscope as an architect and engage with it. This is partly because, although human senses are good at synthesising the general city into a complex and rich experience, clients and consultants involved in design and construction tend not to use the senses as a means by which to assess the value of the city. Instead, the profession often refers to what is known in the jargon of urban planning as *context* to assess and convey the quantity and elements of the place. Context is a familiar convention used to document urban conditions, often employing an evidence-based mapping of footprints, uses,

DOI: 10.4324/9781003107309-13

and routes to construct an anatomy of a place or site. But though useful for conveying certain layers of information in proving the suitability of urban proposals at planning stages, this kind of mapping is too weak and neutral a tool to mine the raw vitality of the diverse and combined qualities of an area and fails to address time as a human component in experiencing the city. More precise tools are needed to identify such urban heterogeneity.

When we design, it is possible to engage with the city environment not as a closed image but as an open condition that only comes into being upon observation. Observing the city requires dynamic reading. Careful methods of representation are required to do this, such as photography, written notes following site visits and dialogue with colleagues, drawings that respond to untested thoughts, plans that scope the shape of a site, and sketches that respond to the place and the experience of being there. Such forms of representation often contain moments of proposition within the documentary. By imagining the present, the complexity of the city can become vivid and compelling by describing architectural ideas about the situation as-found.

Building on a site means redesigning what exists next to it and the resulting urban constellation is what should hold our interest. Above all, we must be alive to the figures, spaces, and their relationships that hold spatial significance. Artists are sometimes better at this than architects. Look at Lee Friedlander's photographs of New York, or Jason Orton's of East London. Each in their own way manages to reflect qualities of the city that are open enough for others to experience, whilst being precise in their viewpoint. They do not preach or tell stories, but they do take a position.

Over the years, architectural and urban practice East has engaged with places in ways that enable architecture to be informed by the city scale and to take an urban perspective in all aspects of design. This is because we see the urban role in architectural design as integral to social value. We are interested in achieving good results with economy and manage our design urges alongside the influences of other players in the process of delivering urban change. Because cities form the environment for everyday life, we judge where to provide foreground and when to design into the background.

The following *slices* of text expand on this approach of working with and within the city. Captioned images provide project examples by East to further illustrate what is meant by *imagining the present*.

Wild mesh

Cities have changed over the last 60 years in ways both sublime and shocking. In London, Rotterdam, São Paulo, and Paris, to name just a few, the process by which city clients and their designers threw layers of infrastructure and ambitious housing projects across and into the existing urban fabric was often propelled by a profound

disregard of place coupled with an enviable clarity of purpose: a simple aim to deliver singular projects for new futures on behalf of the whole city.

But cities don't get improved as a whole, instead they get worked over, interrupted, and displaced, creating urban structures, economies, and social fabric that are diverse and fractured. Big ambitious projects often have unintended consequences at their edges, giving rise to unplanned relationships with ignored backgrounds. Their drive for a singular future has given way to the various demands of the city's complex history, texture, and social-economic layering, rawly exposed around unplanned edges.

In London, these edges are part of a wild mesh that constitutes a vast hidden landscape in full view. It can be found where masterplans clash, where Boroughs join, where streets roam, where the geometry of a twentieth-century road greets the footprint of an eighteenth-century pub. Iain Sinclair's peregrination around the acoustic footprint of the M25 documented in his book and also in Chris Petit's film, *London Orbital*, describes a special example, but this is only one of the more emblematic of the extraordinary catalogue of spaces that constitutes London's biggest asset. These are the areas where complex relationships exist, usually unnoticed, between unalike conditions created for different purposes. Unique places that provoke the imagination. They are not about the future, and, as they are rarely properly identified, they barely exist in the present. They are the spaces between buildings, structures, and facades that resist typological identity. Look out of your window now, and you will see it; that part that was never drawn in plan or elevation; that view, that gap, that colour. Ugly? Beautiful? Neither word says it.

In film, the combining of the near and the far in editing is often essential to drama and narrative. By contrast, although anyone walking through the city could appreciate the fact that it is possible to trip over a paving stone at the same time as viewing a skyline, architecture is seldom designed with such different scales in mind. Yet the city that exists is rarely constrained to the middle distance, when experienced in movement. This is largely because so much of it has not been designed or has been designed by many people, to different briefs, timescales, and budgets. The effects of this are often surprising, creating unexpected situations. Scale can become significant in terms of spatial relationships, rather than dimensions. It is possible for a door handle, for example, to be experienced as a landmark (just think of the Royal Festival Hall door handles, with their civic welcome) and for a 200m-long Georgian façade to sit as a backdrop to life on the street.

It feels as if we might benefit from appreciating the city as complex rather than singular and accept it more often in its imperfect state of unevenness rather than wish it were different. We could even try to see specific urban contexts; each differently perceived depending on your scope of view, as lucky to encourage the potential to design with generosity.

Stringy

There is an advantage to looking more closely at the differences that go to make up our familiar environments. It means that, when we design, we do not have to try to complete anything, and it also means that we already have a lot to work with when making decisions about form, presence, image, and identity. The ways in which this might happen are specific to urban structures in each city. In New York, the survey framework mapped across the eighteenth-century landscape of a largely unpopulated Manhattan Island set an agenda for development to grow within a vast grid, with architectural design parameters guided and managed per plot. Streets matured only over time as the buildings combined. Today, within a substantially filled city latticework, it is the exceptions to the grid that have started to be reconsidered. These include the successful and well-documented High Line – which reuses spaces formed between railway infrastructure and the streets– and the ecological sanctuary of Inwood Hill Park, which retains a shape and wild value untamed by the grid.

Conversely it was the many long and often straight Roman roads laid down for soldiers, pilgrims, and other travellers that connected London's far-reaching landscape with other cities and towns. London's High Streets have developed around these routes, and, as we know, they have struggled in recent years to maintain a good balance of retail uses, further challenged by the assault on public space that has been one of the hallmarks of the COVID-19 pandemic.

So, what happened to the High Street? For various reasons, they have often become clustered around centres or decamped to covered arcades. There has been some confusion around the distinction between town centres and streets, often because there is a perception that, unless you make a destination into a round-shaped centre, people will not travel to it or know where it is. In this way the primary asset of High Streets, their length, has been ignored. In addition to this, uses have become too similar and the liveliness of the High Street too dependent on cheap shops. But if we consider not just the centres but the entire length of High Streets there is ample potential to accommodate other uses and amenities such as play space, food production, workspace, offices, sport, recreation, cafes and restaurants, training and community uses, green spaces, exhibitions, nurseries, and other social uses, including shops, all of which could enliven a much longer, much more stringy High Street.

Think of a long thread unevenly laced with beads, gems, and charms. Each part can function separately and look different, but they are all connected. In the same way, the side roads, yards and other adjacent spaces that connect residential communities to High Streets could offer potential for social reinvigoration if the routes that hold them together are given priority. High Streets could be viewed as destinations for all the reasons that you might wish to visit a park or gallery; for pleasure, education, social vitality, health, and recreation as well as retail uses, and they are already there, available at any part along their length.

FIGURE 9.1 Borough High Street improvements project, on site (commenced 1997).

FIGURE 9.2 Borough High Street improvements project, *Catch and Steer* (drawing 1996).

One of East's first projects was to design improvements to Borough High Street, for Southwark Council, in anticipation of the new millennium and alongside the opening of the new Tate Modern gallery at Bankside. The project opened a fresh window onto the city we thought we already knew well, vividly revealing London's

living complexity. Particular to the exercise was a focus on managing impulses to overdesign, in other words, to respond to the vague design brief to improve the High Street in ways that resisted improving everything. By looking closely, we documented what existed, without presuming merit or value.

Through photography, dialogue, and care in drawing it became possible not only to curate a precise unevenly scoped design response to the project but also to communicate a quality of *splicing-in* in using drawings intended to represent the place as we saw it, sometimes unchanged. One drawing we made – using scalpel, photocopies, tracing paper, and tape – precisely collaged together proposals of players changing the High Street, including London Underground, Network Rail, developers, and East's own scope. Caught in a moment between documentary and proposition, this so-called *Catch and Steer* drawing expressed a desire to remain open to the situation before enacting judgement in design.

Good relationships

The future is always somewhere else, and yet we must continue to plan the city. Perhaps this is an impossible paradox, though it offers something fascinating and useful. Cities can never be fully planned or completed, and the open nature of the combinations of buildings in varied proximities, with ever incomplete relationships that invite new readings, invites new ways to act in time.

The complexity of the city is a resource that awaits engagement, a good thing to marshal for social benefit. But this complexity, full of richness and heterogenous qualities, uses and buildings never planned together, has become problematic rather than interesting for the developers and collective landowners who seek change. New developments in recent years driven by dismayingly ruthless financial aims have increasingly homogenised the city through an unwillingness to accommodate physical complexity, preferring replacement over reuse. The public city has disappeared behind a suite of individual projects, each taking advantage of the city location but at the expense of the urban opportunity for its inhabitants.

Imagining the city that exists involves combining two seemingly divergent – although they are in fact complementary – positions. Looking carefully and openly at what exists, with neutrality and without judgement, enriches what is perceived. At the same time a critical perspective on what urban and architectural relationships might mean in this context is fundamental in understanding the value of the city for social use. The imaginative role in this sense; through thinking, drawing, and dialogue, recasts the as-found as proposition.

More than anything, this is about designing into the city with precision in ways that can be shared, that support social interaction, including the provision of places where you do not have to spend money to reside. With critical thinking, it is possible to find ways of enriching our collective human relationships with the spaces, objects, infrastructure, and uses that make up the urban landscape.

Whilst the architectural product must have something to offer the city, the architectural value of the design cannot reside only in the building itself, because it is the

setting, the *situation*, that helps enable architecture to be experienced in time and space. This means that, for architecture to give something valuable, it must take responsibility for the effects it creates with other parts. It means making good relationships with other buildings in space to bring an outward-looking dimension to the architecture.

FIGURE 9.3 Park House hotel and housing, West Ham Lane, Stratford (completed 2018).

In Stratford, East designed a new building that took account of various scales and characteristics of the place and sought to make clear relationships with the unremarkable and varied urban condition surrounding the site. The intention was to take the place at face value, to treat it with respect, and to find qualities that offered more than might be initially expected, in the context of a new relationship provided by the new building.

The building holds a mix of uses, including apart-hotel and residential units, community facilities, a gym, a café, and a restaurant. The design is placed within a familiar setting in London: a recreation ground, a car park, and a suite of buildings of varying densities and massing built in the 1940s, 1960s, and 1980s.

We responded to this everyday setting with the kind of care reserved for more historic parts of London deemed of merit because of historic significance and received conventions of *quality*. The building looks around itself at all faces, not just at the street front but at the slacker spaces; the backs.

The north façade seeks to engage with the council-owned green space by providing openable doors to the space. At the third floor, a semi-public terrace is provided to enable visitors to view the city at the mid-height of the building; a

vantage point level with the tops of the trees and a pleasurable spot to appreciate the park, street, green, and city mix. The roof matches the height of the 1960s slab as a sign of companionship.

To the south, a 1980s three-story terrace of housing makes a weak corner to the street. A positive relationship is sought by reflecting the mass and height of the block to form a new street. Chamfering the corner encourages pedestrian and cycle access past a residential entrance. One-way mirrored windows play with the windowed elevation behind which cars access the car park, whilst allowing reflections of pedestrians to be superimposed.

To the west, adjacent to an informal space defined by car parking and back gardens, the block is shaped on plan and steps back in elevation. The grid of the large windows softens in elevation slightly by becoming misaligned by a few bricks each floor, creating a backdrop that corresponds to the surrounding loose urban structure. The window cills project more deeply, enlivening the brickwork with more shadows. The building places emphasis on its shape to provide architectural quality.

At the eastern park face the building is allowed to take on a New York hotel-like quality in image and presence, acting up to the mature trees and the deep green of the recreation ground. The cills and windows are flat to the façade. The windows are large, at the top getting larger.

The only detailing we allowed ourselves was to use two mortar colors: red opposite the park, the rest a grey/buff. The effect is mixed in the eye, creating two brick colors.

The roof terrace is slightly shifted in plan to bring some tension with the alignment of the building below as if distorted to align with the incredible views across the Olympic Parklands and the broader city horizons. At the ground plane, we pulled the building back from the ownership line to widen the public footway and enhance the legibility of the canopied main entrance as well as the entrances at the other sides of the building. At the ground, a concrete plinth responds to the sloping ground and concrete car park, providing some measure of scale and local topography. The concrete holds windows and doors and is designed to be seen close up and touched; flecks of brick in the mix redden and texture the concrete and suggest some continuity with the brick envelope of the building and other buildings around.

Everything is spatial

Because the city is not limitless, space is significant. Not just in terms of quantity – for the facility of living together in proximity – but because human experience can only happen in space, moving through light, between edges, across thresholds, and into streets. Everything in the city is spatial. It is therefore the relationship between figures and spaces; where architecture resides, where it matters most.

Some artists have found ways to present objects meaningfully in space a rich source of investigation. Donald Judd took care in measuring perceived space with objects at a human scale within the epic landscape of the Texan desert. Alberto Giacometti made sculptures of people that used particular intensities of form and proportion to reveal the weight and human significance of space pressing in on and around them. In Ed Ruscha's project *Every Building On The Sunset Strip* in 1966, the photographs of a series of building elevations that are presented to show the facades and spaces between a whole street of buildings as equivalent in importance show more about the nature of the Sunset Strip than the buildings themselves. Georgio Morandi painted still lives of vases and other vessels in arrangements that evoked social groupings, with forms and tones rendered in specific and subtle ways that held the figures of the objects and spaces in states of compelling ambiguity.

These ideas are not only about space. Whilst being precise in their formal scope, they are interested in the experience of being in the world, and, in this way, they also address time. Architect Philip Christou has said that maintaining some uncertainty during the short span of the design process is important as it allows for the design to develop slowly in a way that is detectable in the quality of the completed building. "The ambiguous quality of the sketch, and of the solid and void in the sketch, is just the essential part. . . . The other parts will be developed in time – things can change and be drawn in. Because it's not so fixed, maybe there is a way that the built architecture can be not so finite". And in the words of Philip's long-term partner and architect Florian Beigel, 'It's neither this nor that – it's both".[2]

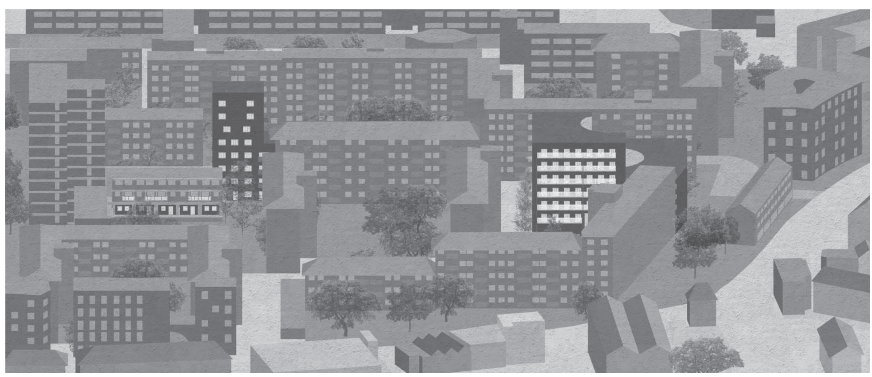

FIGURE 9.4 Frampton Estate in Hackney, new housing and community uses.

Our architectural projects are always constrained in some way, whether by budget, space, or time. We find this liberating because it affords us a chance to focus on how we can make the best use of what is available. At Frampton Estate in Hackney, new housing and community uses designed by East for Hackney Council will reanimate the existing urban structure, defined by large courtyards and streets surrounded by substantial brick bars and blocks of 1950's LCC housing. Whilst the scale of these existing buildings is singular and bold, with a tectonic identity created through repetition and a simple material palette, there is a complementary and straightforward delicacy to the layers of steelwork comprising balconies and balustrades. Our architectural response takes pleasure in finding ways to join in with this open urban structure of varied scales and material texture. The new buildings are designed to join into the setting of the Estate, using strong forms geared less toward asserting themselves as objects and more toward engaging with the streets and spaces they animate, enriching the urban ensemble as a whole. Other architectural decisions are informed by qualities of repetition, formal expression, and clarity in public and private access. Clear ideas about public and private spaces are delivered at the larger courtyard block, where the private spaces are materially distinct from the public. The oval courtyard is accessed through passageways, leading to a contained space open to the sky that feels protected and inviting, light in tone and material, and embellished with a shared steelwork oval deck access layering. By contrast the brick public outer facades are muted in expression to provide a shared background to all streets surrounding the block. At the ground floor, blank walls invite playful activity engaging with the adjacent street made inaccessible to vehicles, with good overlooking provided at the first and upper floors.

The new spatial and material relationships are informed by architectural and urban decisions intended to reanimate the public spaces and streets for community uses. This is about using a collage-like approach to the place that we see not just as providing continuity of the urban situation but as a stimulant to urban life that helps provide choices for social activity.

Civic edges

These ideas may sound academic, but space is real. For anyone walking through a street, it doesn't take long to come up against the edges of the city. The pedestrian experience in cities is largely defined by limits obstructing access and views across territories of different ownership. These edges are often designed around hermetic determinants such as security, structural resistance, ownerships, or material expedience in construction. They are rarely designed to be looked at or experienced, and often they are only there to stop things happening. Fences, railings, walls, guarding, and even buildings comprise a very large blind spot in the popular discourse on contemporary urban design. Yet it is these bounded edges where spaces are often formed, where one condition meets another, and where differences speak the language of the living city. Space runs out, and the city must work hardest at its limits to offer ways for civic and architectural identity to be experienced.

FIGURE 9.5 West Croydon public realm and transport interchange improvements (completed 2017).

In West Croydon, for a project designed by East for the Council, it became clear that the scope of the project comprised almost nothing but edges. The wall of the church car park adjacent to the bus station. The fence of the railway station that bounded the strip of footway. The shopfronts and commercial curtilages.

East made a drawing that viewed these unpromising edges and strips as unavoidable and therefore intrinsic to the spatial identity of the place. We noticed how the image of Croydon had been undervalued in many ways, and we communicated our approach around a notion of *Croydonness*, which was a shorthand term we used to capture a shared feeling of what was valuable about the place, without always knowing what, exactly, it was that was shared.

The linear and extended nature of the boundary treatments offered an opportunity for scenographic generosity. So we widened the footway and made a giant hoop-top planted mesh station fence framed around an image based on the vulnerable arched Victorian shopfronts nearby.

In the footways, we celebrated the civic identity of the place by using the standard streetscape palette of materials – but in two tones – to provide a striking chequerboard pattern within the limited footway space. To further accommodate the realities of everyday maintenance, we designed the paving to be tolerant of being mislaid. The intention to preplan failure into the laying of the paving was inspired by a photograph by artist Richard Wentworth of a poorly, though beautifully, laid chequer-tiled kitchen floor.

At the church wall, we placed a concrete Rose Window to dramatise the deep space of the car park and make visible the larger Rose Window at the Church façade. Each of these boundaries became a positive threshold to other spaces, using a public scenography that resisted telling a story but that allowed enough *Croydenness* within its imagery to bring a place-specific spatial clarity and positive image to these town-centre edges.

Public foreground

If there is one thing that connects the projects we have worked on over the years and provides the essential ingredients for cities to work, it is the need to bring the value of publicness into the foreground of architecture.

Public spaces are often still thought of in terms of simple types, such as squares, streets, and parks, but, as has been mentioned earlier, there are many more ways to shape a public city, and, furthermore, it is the relationship between the public spaces and uses that makes a city feel inviting and accessible. Some of this already exists, even if unnoticed, and some of it needs to be made to happen through casting collective imaginations across the city fabric, alongside new developments and projects.

It seems increasingly necessary to enhance the status of the public city beyond the limiting idea of spaces between buildings and towards an anticipatory infrastructure that leads on shaping and influencing urban change across the section of the city as well as the plan. More than this, it should use time as an available urban asset; starting now, rehearsing potential, testing uses, anticipating the future with what can be imagined today.

Strengthening the role of the public realm in statutory and local authority policy terms would encourage all those involved in regenerative growth to embed their proposals in the city in ways specific to the nature of each proposed development. This would bring the public realm forward as a leading component of the value of each project.

In addition to helping guide individual players to deliver on an expanded role for public space, a strategic perspective would move the scope of opportunities for social vitality beyond individual sites and across the wider shared city. It would help assert the primary role of public space as an infrastructure aimed at facilitating the metropolitan potential of urban life.

Such a strategy would be able to say "the public realm is here; let's enrich it". Or, to say it more strongly, the public realm is where the city lives.

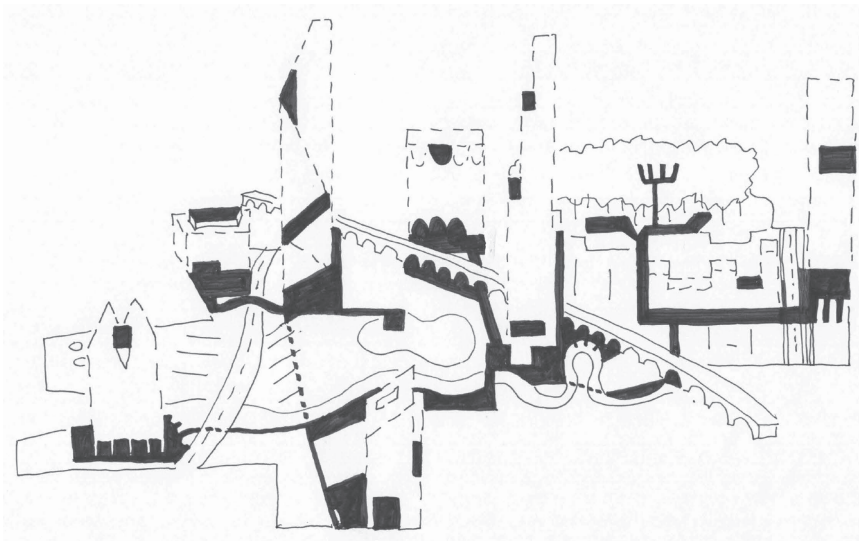

FIGURE 9.6 London imagined; a sketch for the Mayor of London to bring the public realm to the forefront of London (2018).

This drawing presents a condensed image of London's city environment with an extraordinary rich and diverse condition. It was made as a manifesto for bringing the public realm to the foreground of the city, designed to catch the attention of the Mayor of London. As in the real city, the drawing imagines a range of building typologies, existing, new, and emerging, with different uses, from residential, industrial, community, leisure, and infrastructure. In black ink, a radically extensive public realm is drawn across the city fabric, showing how public space could become deeply enmeshed within the city, anticipating and shaping the buildings that come later. The drawing is a kind of brief – a visual provocation – for an enhanced policy and public realm manifesto for London.

Notes

1 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, "The Town" (London: Penguin Classics, 2008) page 63.
2 Philip Christou and Florian Beigel – *Searching for the* Essential; Article by Louis Maye, [Architecture Today, AT 310, October 2020].