

KALEI DOSCOPE

CITY

REFLECTIONS ON PLANNING & LONDON

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First Edition

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A FUTURE WITHOUT STARCHITECTS

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London could develop in several very different ways. One of them follows the urbanicidal model applied liberally across the globe in the past decades, whilst others will implement known techniques to generate and support a living, resilient urban fabric. The first model kills the living city fabric by driving skyscrapers into it at some point, in the same way one might kill a vampire by driving a stake through his/her heart. Indeed, although the intention of erecting a skyscraper is different (the promise of financial returns for the property owner, contractor, engineering firm, and mercenary architect), the result is the same: the death of the immediate region. Contrary to much-publicized views in the media, overconcentration and vertical isolation only adds unmanageable strain to infrastructure and transport, while not helping actual city life. A living city functions at various intermediate densities, as shown in the successful parts of London (successful in having a vibrant urban life like the West End and not a useless flux of transient workers like the City of London). This is not only well evidenced, but the lessons of biourbanism suggest some simple reforms of the planning system which could secure this vibrancy and resilience across the capital.

THE LESSONS OF BIOURBANISM

The way forward is very easy, in theory at least. Local planning authorities (in London, the Boroughs and the Mayor) should take a firmer approach to the grant of planning permission and apply stricter planning policy criteria for all new construction, with similar criteria for deciding what to preserve or allow to be demolished. Biourbanistic research has produced readily-available results on adaptive urban complexity. These allow us to judge, with a good degree of accuracy, which environments have the right type of complexity to be resilient. Glass-and-steel skyscrapers are not; in fact, they are the opposite of resilient buildings, even those skyscrapers with a good LEED, Green Star or BREEAM environmental rating. This has been demonstrated again and again by energy

studies. Wherever only the economy of scale is applied, you are guaranteed to get a non-resilient building or urban fabric. This means that giant buildings, monotonously repetitive units, and the minimalist expressions at the core of modernist ideology are out. They have no place in the resilient city of the future. Resilience requires an entirely 'new' type of geometry: innovative, never-before-seen, yet which resembles traditional urban geometry because its genetic code is very much the same.

A healthy future for London therefore depends upon moving away from decisions that were automatically and unthinkingly taken in the past. We can legislate other steps today that will remain in place for the next several decades, and which may save London from collapse, but those urbanicidal elements already in place (such as the increasing number of giant skyscrapers gaining permission to litter London's skyline) are perhaps destined to either become vertical slums or abandoned altogether. Only areas of organic urban fabric, mixing uses in a horizontal network of paths, mixing architectural styles adapted to human beings (which means mostly traditional nineteenth-century typologies), mixing new styles that blend well with traditional architecture (and don't go out of their way to contrast with traditional expressions), can claim to be healthy components of future urban development.

A FEW SIMPLE RULES

What needs to be done to bring London to the forefront of human-scale urbanism, and how should we repair the damage already done by several generations of architects? I propose a simple set of rules to be adopted and introduced through regional policy:

1. No planning permission to be granted for any proposal over eight stories above ground level, with the exception of non-functional monuments.
2. Every application for planning permission to be evaluated against three mathematical criteria, being:

- (a) Compute the 'Degree of Life' of the visible façades according to a model of architectural complexity and biophilia. This would consider a high density of visible (not transparent) sub-structure on a variety of scales from the size of the building down to material details. A natural hierarchy requires the component structures not to be too far apart in scale (i.e. ruling out a blank wall without subdivisions). Since humans evolved with gravity, most symmetry axes need to be vertical. All these symmetries should relate harmoniously to each other. If the 'Degree of Life' is low, don't approve it.
 - (b) Compute the 'Degree of Adaptability' of the new building to the surrounding urban fabric. This criterion would respect and enhance urban spaces, pedestrian traffic, and visual nourishment from architectural detail at ground level, using measures of geometrical coherence and path continuity. Ban structures and surfaces that cause anxiety. Approve it only if it increases the overall coherence, which is measured by how well separated structures mutually help each other, both visually and in their function.
 - (c) Compute the 'Degree of Connectivity' with the outside, namely through windows and doors. This would evaluate the visual and psychological connectivity of users both inside and outside the building to each other, and to information coming from architectural detail and natural elements. Ensure that the amount of connective wallspace is high enough to avoid feeling imprisoned. Use human spatial intuition and movement on the human scale to define entrances and pedestrian access, and don't approve any building that arrogantly closes in on itself.
3. Hire no architect who has previously been part of schemes which can be shown to visibly destroy living urban fabric.

It's worth noting at this point that urbanicidal forces almost inevitably arise from the influence of the architectural cult of modernism. Visually striking, these buildings commonly fail to function sustainably in the 'real world'. Nonetheless a few fanatical people (some of them extremely influential) follow a pseudo-religious movement whose key dogma appears to be that the world should be made out of glass and steel or crude 'brutalist' concrete, and then only in certain very precise and boxy mechanical geometries. Those geometries are deliberately anti-biophilic, that is, contrary to any resemblance to biological or natural forms. When we experience these buildings, the message is often therefore quite inhuman. The human perceptive system is shocked by those forms (as we know from the various individual and amenity society responses to planning consultations), but architectural cult followers love them, perhaps for this very reason. Yet, more often than not it isn't enough for the 'cult of starchitecture' to convert others to its ideology: all the adaptive, human-scale architectures must be replaced wherever possible. The result is that individuals who allow their natural preference for human-scale geometries to guide them in how London should be structured in the future are apostates, and forced to accept the 'anointed forms' for their own good wherever the opportunity permits – increasingly East London, the City and Southbank.

As Canary Wharf extends towards Wood Wharf and beyond into Newham, so we see the intrinsic problems facing the possible evolution of London — away from being a wonderful global metropolis with lots of local character but steadily converted into a dead copy of some dysfunctional new Asian city. The starchitect's strategy is to intervene in the living urban fabric so as to demonstrate his/her hegemony. Historical regions are damaged by the insertion of a flashy 'icon' or 'gateway' building, and it suffices for one such intervention to destroy the coherence of an urban area. This architectural movement has already destroyed vast stretches of what were formerly living portions of London, with a common but lame excuse for urbanicide across the world being social degradation. Here the opportunity to regenerate an area is used

as a neat trick to buy up devalued property with solid human-scale building stock and then tear it down to build some monstrous skyscraper — often with ‘viability’ considerations used to justify additional height. A clever few have made a mountain of money from this trick, converting living urban fabric (which could have been easily renovated) into a sterile wasteland.

THE MENACE OF STARCHITECTURE

There are several factors contributing to urban failure, which are essential to understand if we are to stop the entire city being destroyed by urbanicidal building typologies. Historically in London, particularly during the 1960s, and now elsewhere across the world such as in China’s Hutongs, concerns for social justice have been abused to sell anti-human building developments. Followers of this totally confused movement, often resident in our top architecture schools, have aggressively sought to eliminate traditional urban fabric and replace it with modernist and utilitarian blocks. In doing so, they have removed precisely those portions of London and other cities that have had the most ‘Degrees of Life’. The common excuse has been that those regions are architecturally ‘messy’ and suffer socio-economic problems. This much may be true, but does not mean that redevelopment is the answer. It’s also a mindset that makes it difficult for a student or practitioner to learn techniques for building new urban fabric with the required living qualities, since it will inevitably resemble (in an essential manner) more traditional environments.

As if this were not enough, there exists a vastly profitable industry of building non-resilient buildings in the middle of historic cities. London is no exception and we must look no further than the UNESCO status debates surrounding the cumulative impact of development on the Tower of London or that of the Elisabeth House and St George Wharf proposals on the Houses of Parliament to see this writ large across the capital. This urbanicidal model profits a few elite members of the upper levels of

the economy, but destroys the city's long-term viability. The preferred structures for this game are ever-taller skyscrapers, ever-bigger buildings or complexes, all designed on the basis of negating the organized complexity of living environments. Politicians collude with unscrupulous so-called developers, eager for a quick (but substantial) profit, who then leave the city with a decaying megalith for decades to come. Perhaps the most reprehensible players in this sordid game are the starchitects, who are their paid mercenaries. Created by the media system, they are in turn beholden to it and pay back their indebtedness by designing fashionably anti-human environments (but get paid very well for it and are even awarded an architecture prize or two).

As for necessary repair, most of the open spaces surrounding many signature buildings have to be either filled in by new, smaller buildings, or re-structured to create useful urban space. Portions of buildings that arrogantly interfere with this essential pedestrian catalysis have to be demolished so that the urban spaces and pedestrian paths are all connected, and each urban space is again defined by surrounding building fronts. Throughout the living urban web, priority is naturally given to the pedestrian. The space surrounding a building has to be an organic part of the pedestrian fabric, to encourage movement, momentary stops, and the interaction of different types of people. This requires ignoring architectural flashiness, and cutting through the now-standard barriers and useless public spaces that serve only to showcase some built monstrosity.

SUBSTANCE OVER STYLE

These proposals will surely meet stiff resistance from many in the established architectural régime. The current architectural zeitgeist ignores humanly-adaptive architecture to focus almost exclusively upon 'style'. As a result, any serious and decent proposal will often face a massive media assault with accusations of being unmodern, behind the times or politically reactionary. This has worked splendidly in the past to bully insecure politicians into submitting one more time. Look, for example, to the debate

over redevelopment of Chelsea Barracks to see this in action. However, if London wishes to save at least part of itself for its residents and users, then it is high time to begin to resist the hegemony of the starchitectural cult. People are continuously manipulated by emotional triggers such as allusions to 'freedom', 'equality', 'defiance to conservative tastes', and other strong emotions which all serve to advance an architectural movement that simply isn't sustainable.

London is an example to the world. For the most part, it's also been giving the job of restructuring urban fabric to people who are driven by an anti-adaptive agenda; with local, regional and national politicians far quicker to lay claim to the towering proposals of an international architecture practice than something more mundane, traditional and ordinary. They are responsible for creating an inhuman city where great swathes are increasingly defined solely by a fanatically rigid industrial geometry. People are fooled into thinking this is good because it looks flashy in the pictures shown in architectural magazines and newspapers, but all we need do is look to those regions of London that were converted according to an inhuman industrial model after the Second World War. They don't work in a sustainable fashion and are now largely being torn down and replaced. Yes, activity may occur there, but they are not resilient. They suck energy from the rest of the city: indeed, from the rest of the country.

We hear grandiose statements about sustainable buildings that continue the glass-and-steel dogma, 'honest' materials that comprise even more thousands of tons of brutalist concrete — now magically converted into an allegedly sustainable design tool — and titanium buildings that don't weather (but do leak). The architectural régime is desperately trying to save itself and its fanatical belief system. Its members are reading about genuine proposed solutions to sustainability. They copy the words and twist these methods, not to actually design something sustainable or resilient, but to make their own ideological constructs with the language of sustainability and continue to sell dysfunctional buildings

to gullible clients who in turn are financially successful. So far, judging by the enthusiasm that both the professional and popular media show for promises by the same people who ruined our cities, this subterfuge seems to be working; but it is wrong to ignore genuine solutions while phony substitutions are being adopted. The past hundred years have been dominated by our ability to unleash the potential of construction materials and the vogue for this continues — just another deception in a string of deceptions now a century old.

THE NEED TO ACT

Legislators, journalists, and politicians waking up to London's urban diseases turn to those responsible for them for solutions. Yet those who made a mess of things can offer only the same dysfunctional advice, or worse — camouflage it so that it looks more appetizing. That has proven damaging to the city, and pronouncements that 'architecture needs to open up a dialogue with other disciplines to achieve sustainability' are dishonest to boot. Quite true that change needs to happen, but those of us working outside the control of the architectural establishment have been doing just that for decades, publishing thousands of pages of practical information. The architectural régime deliberately ignores our results because they disprove the ethos of modern and post-modern design. Those who have contributed to the problem now pretend not to know the genuine solutions developed while they were making a mess of London and elsewhere. The same people also want to be paid to 'discover' solutions to their mess.

As the world enters into a long-term energy re-adjustment away from fossil fuels, it will become increasingly unfeasible (by virtue of being uneconomical) to support non-resilient parts of urban London. Doubtlessly, the state will continue to do it up to the point that it becomes bankrupt, but political forces will then kick in to save the rest of the country from collapse. The overwhelming need to change will correctly identify the wrong urban geometry as contributing to economic and social malaise. For London,

a continued fascination with tall buildings makes this a very real scenario that might play out in the future. It would therefore be preferable if the city could prepare itself for the inevitable by designing its places well ahead of time. Planners have the ability to achieve this and, whether professional or lay, we all know it is infinitely wiser to anticipate problem situations before they arise, through almost no government does that. Instead, the politics of planning are commonly beholden to special interests, and decision-makers 'sell out' the rest of the population's future in exchange for a large immediate profit for an elite few. It has always worked like this, even in countries under very different political systems. Corruption is endemic to human nature to the same extent as good architecture.

The future of London depends upon society having memory. There are numerous scientific evaluations of the abysmal failure of buildings and urban interventions by members of the starchitectural régime. This information is, however, largely ignored and denied in public discussion. It is rarely, if ever, taught in architecture schools. Collective amnesia reigns here: all the better to continue to sell dysfunctional products to the city. Yet we live in an age which offers instant access to humankind's accumulated store of information. If even one tiny segment of the population puts together the facts damning the starchitects' non-resilient buildings, that could put a stop to erecting more monstrosities. It would also help create support for planning guidelines that could help save and upgrade our living urban fabric. There is nothing wrong with making money ethically by building a living city. A society with a memory could see through the usual confidence trick of architecture prizes given to mercenary starchitects (to attract yet another major commission) and instead reward those honest architects so often marginalized. It is these to whom we should now turn and they who are London's hope for a healthy, sustainable, and resilient future.