

# Finding meaning in a negotiated space

## *Abstract*

*Jonathan Manns believes urban areas exist as 'negotiated spaces', reflecting the shared heritage and collective values of those who inhabit and experience them. He cites one of the major challenges facing cities as the need to properly identify and reflect this shared meaning and ensure it is put at the heart of place-making. He compares successful urban planning to poetry, and considers the role of design, operation and perspective in the meaning of places and buildings.*

“We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us”, Britain’s then prime minister stated to the House of Commons in October 1943, following destruction of the Commons Chamber by incendiary bombs. Winston Churchill’s point, made during a debate about the rebuilding of the chamber, was that its adversarial rectangular pattern was inseparable from the historic two-party system at the heart of British parliamentary democracy. More broadly, however, the same tenet holds equally true at city level. Urban areas, as the places in which the world’s population increasingly live, work and play, exist as negotiated reflections of our shared heritage and collective values. The key challenge facing all cities, not least those in Europe, is therefore a fundamental one:

identifying and reflecting the shared meaning, which these spaces imbue, and putting it at the heart of place-making.

## > The importance of meaning

It’s nearly three-quarters of a century since Churchill spoke to the Commons, then in the midst of a global conflict, but the challenges today are no less significant. We live in a world that is increasingly defined by fragmented and polarised views of religion and economics. We have witnessed the warping of otherwise open, tolerant, and pluralistic religious and political texts by those seeking to create a schism between East and West, and experienced a crisis of capitalism, which has recast the nature of state involvement in banking and

other institutions, whilst enlarging the gap between rich and poor.

The European Union, comprising twenty-eight member states across the continent, is today confronting some of the most significant collective social and political challenges since its origins in the 1950s. Over a million refugees fled war and persecution to arrive during 2015. The largest mass migration since 1945, the vast majority of newcomers have survived arduous journeys by sea to Greece, Italy, Spain, Cyprus and Malta. They have crossed into an area that's also growingly defined by violent unrest within and beyond its national borders; from terrorist episodes in France (most recently the Île-de-France, Saint-Quentin-Fallavier, Thalys and November attacks) to the Syrian civil war and Russia's re-conquest of Eastern Ukraine. There is also economic uncertainty: both from Britain's potential exit from the European Union to the Greek government debt crisis, which has alone resulted in the largest sovereign debt default in history. Such instabilities, by their very nature, necessitate questions about the type of societies we wish to create and, consequently, the types of places.

It is nonetheless important to note that all cities face significant challenges, even those which are, by virtue of their geographical location, perceived as stable and transparent places to live and invest. In these instances, such considerations are distinct only to the extent that they are politely sugar-coated as "problems of success". London, for example, is suffering from a significant and well-documented housing crisis. Moreover, the scale of the problem is so considerable that Sir Steve Bullock, mayor of the London Borough of Lewisham, has claimed that "the dictionary defines a crisis as a crucial stage or turning point in the course of something. London's housing crisis has been with us for many years and so should perhaps now be called a housing disaster". The city has an overwhelming shortage of housing and the current London Plan targets 6,600 fewer new homes per year than the objectively assessed need. Moreover, whilst the 'squeezed middle' struggle with homeownership, all Londoners must grapple

with the impacts this has on creativity, vibrancy and success.

Herein is the real importance of urban planning: that the decisions we make about our built environment have direct implications, which run far more deeply and intrinsically affect our societies. They don't only shape our environment, but our future. London's housing crisis does not exist in a vacuum and modern Britain is one of the least equal economies in the world, with the Equality Trust finding that the combined wealth of the country's wealthiest people is equivalent to that of the poorest 18 million. The approach to housing provision, therefore, has considerable impacts for those who lack access to finance. At the bottom of the housing ladder, those living in social rented accommodation are estimated by the Human City Institute to have an average of just £500 in savings, with eight in ten having no savings at all. Then, very firmly off the ladder, are those living in temporary accommodation with an uncertain future, including some of the most vulnerable people in society. Centrepoint estimates that some 80,000 young people experience forms of homelessness every year in England, whilst the government has recorded an increase of 104% in the number of rough sleepers in London over the period 2010-2015. Even these statistics ignore those not technically counted as homeless, such as those living in temporary accommodation or 'couch surfing' with friends and family. Whilst housing is only one of many issues for urban planners to consider, the way in which it is approached, as with so many other matters, cuts to the very heart of questions about the meaning of citizenship in modern Europe.

### > Expressions of meaning

Building an understanding of the importance of meaning in cities therefore demands that we perceive them as more than layers of architecture: they are the physical expressions of a society and its journey to the present day (or, as the Victorian polymath Patrick Geddes eloquently put it, "a city is more than a place in space, it is a drama in time"). Each place,

then, is a product of the context in which it is conceived. By the same token, the meaning of any particular place or building is inferred from our own individual experience of it. This is most commonly conveyed through the mediums of design, operation, and perspective.

### > Design

Planners have long considered the appearance of our cities, not least the symbolic importance of architectural and urban design. Together, these serve to physically embody the values from which places are created. Take, for example, the desire for legitimising neoclassical design in Napoleonic France and the correlated rise of Gothicism in the German romantic movement. It's undeniable that globalisation has brought a greater degree of internationalism to the way in which we plan and had a homogenising effect on design, but this reflects the world today and doesn't undermine the role that design has in our lives.

Tall buildings neatly encapsulate these issues and are an increasingly accepted feature of European cities. Whilst the relative scale of buildings has changed, tall structures have long been dominant and recognisable features of the cityscape. Historically, these almost exclusively symbolised the political and cultural power of the state and religion. Yet, since their emergence en masse during the 1970s, this has shifted dramatically. Moreover, the early 21st century has also witnessed a significant expansion in the number constructed, with 193 buildings over 100m being completed in the first decade alone. Istanbul now has over 60 buildings of this height. Likewise, whilst of a smaller scale, London has some 439 buildings over 20 storeys high in the development pipeline. Common to each city is that these structures attract many valid criticisms, from their design quality and often uncoordinated arrival on the skyline to their impact on microclimatic conditions and long-term maintenance strategies. Yet, much of the objection such proposals face is, in essence, an emotional response to the perceived values, which they embody.

For critics, such as Léon Krier, tall buildings represent an impoverishment of traditional city forms and a consequent shift away from a city form that is at once “ecological, aesthetic and ethical”. Meanwhile, for supporters, such as Peter Stewart, they conversely symbolise “progress, regeneration [and] investment”. Importantly, what binds each position together is the understanding of tall buildings as powerful social representations of the financial and political capital required for their construction. This, clearly, indicates that architecture and design, as represented in urban skylines, is representative of a society's prevailing collective values and identity. However you approach design, it demands recognition that what happens to our cities can be variously interpreted, understood as intended or otherwise misconstrued. This makes it essential to ensure that there is a dialogue around the future of the built environment, and that this occurs as an embrasive discussion with which the whole community can be engaged.

### > Operation

The way in which our cities are used is, in many respects, the other side of the same coin. Masaccio's fresco of 'St Peter Healing the Sick with His Shadow' is a favourite painting of the architect Richard Rogers, which he considers to encapsulate “that framework: cities are for the rich and the poor, the old and the young”. Whilst this is more about use than appearance, it's increasingly difficult to secure such civic ambitions and Rogers' own schemes have fallen short on this basis. His Leadenhall Building, which opened in 2014, rises 224.5m above a new 0.2 hectare extension to an adjoining public space in the City of London. Yet, rather than acting as public space in the truest sense, it provides privately owned, publicly accessible space, tightly controlled and actively managed. It is part of an increasingly exaggerated trend. London's proposed 175m Garden Bridge over the River Thames is set, for example, to have some thirty rules governing its use, including no running, no music, no picnics, no groups of eight or more, no kite flying and no visits after

midnight. Visitors may also have their mobile phone signals tracked and could be obliged to provide their names and addresses to security staff where suspected of rule-breaking.

There are logical commercial and social reasons for enforcing the conduct of those using public spaces, but there is a risk that this detracts from the democratic importance such places have always had. Whether as the place of execution and pillory or demonstration and protest, the ability for residents to freely gather for the exchange of knowledge and goods is profoundly important and directly related to the very origins of cities. The restriction, deliberate or otherwise, of access to public space makes the streets a space which therefore defines the relationship between citizens and their cities. Critical Mass is a mass bicycle ride held worldwide on the last Friday of each month. Whilst cycling is an everyday form of transportation for some, most famously in Amsterdam, it provides an opportunity for those in more restrictive environments to safely convey a social and political statement (such as with Bicicritical in Madrid). Such events also provide an opportunity to simply participate in an activity, which might otherwise be too dangerous to enjoy as an individual. The Paris Rando, for example, enables the city's roller skating community to cover some 25-30km of the city centre each week with the safety of a police escort and public support, attracting up to 25,000 people in the summer months. The use of functional space for social purposes therefore sits at the intersection of architecture and urban planning. As such, whilst the test of good architecture may be the human experience of a building at ground floor level, an intrinsic test of urban planning is whether these experiences occur in the first instance. Cities are dynamic places, designed for living. What makes them liveable is not onerous regulation, but sympathetic curation, enabling life to occur within them.

## > Perspective

The design and use of land is the output of the urban planning systems, which guide new development. The way in which we seek to prioritise objectives and achieve them is nonetheless intrinsically political. Whether we wish to secure the highest design quality in new buildings or deliver the greatest quantum of new homes and workplaces, our approach to managing the built environment depends upon the way we wish to see it evolve. Contemporary Europe's prevailing neoliberal mindset has been responsible for both substantial improvements in quality of life and the growing disparity between rich and poor. It has resulted in the successful regeneration of many urban areas, but also driven us to build the wrong homes in the wrong places. The problem is a structural one. The prevalent development model means that changes in what is to be built, the financial value created or the cost of delivering a particular scheme will always impact on either profit or residual land value. In a world where the private sector is largely responsible for delivery, this in turn drives the business decisions that are ultimately responsible for what urban planners can achieve.

Little more than a century ago, rapid industrialisation in Western Europe fostered the civic desire to reshape our cities and gave birth to the modern planning movement. The role that urban planning played in creating financial value was recognised, and various options were mooted to capture the uplift created. Some lobbied to extend land ownership from the aristocracy to the working class, others for the nationalisation and collective ownership of land, or the trustification of land value to support new communities. However, a century later, land prices, particularly its affordability, either negate the merit in regenerating an area or negate the social benefit of whatever occurs there. Politicians and citizens each recognise the social and environmental benefits of good place making, reflected in the liveability of places built, but are forced to make compromises. This is because it's difficult to put equity and fairness

at the centre of the decision taking and policy making process without impacting on delivery. All solutions, to either control land values or take profit out of the equation, such as through restrictions on the market or with the state acting as developer, demand exceptional political bravery. Overcoming this requires a shared perspective on the role of planning and its objectives.

### > The future of meaning

Europe faces significant challenges which, if they are to be properly addressed, make proactive and visionary urban planning essential. To do this, we must recognise that good planning is poetry, not prose. It captures the imagination and cements collective visions for a shared future. There is no silver bullet, but we have arguably focused too heavily on managing spaces, rather than supporting the people who use them. We have bureaucratised planning, regulating and controlling development, rather than confronting challenging questions about the kind of places we wish to create.

The question we need to answer is not about the affordability of residential property in London or Paris. Nor is it about corporate pluralism in Sweden, corruption in Italy, or poorly defined property rights in Greece and Spain. It is a shared question about the kind of continent we wish to build and the way in which we should conceive and undertake development. It's a challenge to each city, to identify themselves as both a collective responsibility and generational artefact, drawing on each to innovate and secure settlements that are not only sustainable and resilient but inclusive and democratic. In doing so, it's imperative for us to understand that whilst urban planning is the means by which we bridge the richly layered divide between physical and social, we each have a responsibility to ensure it is moulded into the tool we need to do the job we want.