

14: Low rise, high density urbanism at Donnybrook Quarter**Peter Barber****Peter Barber Architects**

Illustration 1: Peter Barber Architects, Donnybrook Quarter

One of the really pertinent questions we have to ask architectural practitioners is how, when you are in practice, do you find time to speculate and to develop ideas, and to be progressive and innovative in the way that you think about things? My answer to that is quite simple. I have taught all fifteen years that I have been in practice, every week, initially two days and now one, and I have held onto that as being an absolutely pivotal component of the process of making architecture and developing ideas. The inspirations I have drawn from working with tutors at academic institutions (the Bartlett, where I was unit tutor for 10 years, Westminster where I am now, and at Oxford Brookes) lie absolutely at the heart of what we do, and my design projects

could not have emerged without that. The agendas I looked at as a student twenty years ago are there no more. Architectural culture moves on and we have to move with it, and I think without that involvement in academia there would be no possibility of me doing that, because the commercial culture of making buildings is extremely resistant to risk, to experimentation, and to ideas.

The other thing that I do all the time is that I live in a sketchbook. I do a ten-hour day, and probably three or four hours of that are spent drawing and energetically trying to unravel design problems. These are set by clients who have asked for a solution to a problem, but also result from thinking about ideas without a client. Tom Chapman-Andrews has described his bridge which emerged as an experiment in advance of his actually finding a client, and that is what I do all the time, particularly in relation to the experiments that we are doing with urbanism and, in particular, with our increasingly larger scale housing projects.

It is important to give the work some kind of cultural and political context by providing a couple of preambles. These are not lengthy but have been really important for me and continue to be so when I work on projects. The first is a very brief quotation from a fantastic book, *One Way Street* by Walter Benjamin, the extraordinary cultural critic and Marxist philosopher of the early part of the twentieth century. In this book he describes six or seven European cities. My favourite description is of the city of Naples, and I like it because it teases out something complex. In it, he talks about the relationship between people and space. It is a reciprocal relationship, because we make buildings and we make cities, but, by the same token, they impact back on us. In one beautiful, short quotation, he captures this complex relationship. He says this:

“The passion for improvisation demands that space and opportunity be at any price preserved. Buildings are used as a popular stage, they are all divided into innumerable simultaneously animated theatres: balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes.”

Here we have the idea of architecture and cities being animated by the activity of their occupants and architecture being nothing until the people have overlaid their lives onto it. That is something which almost at every step of a project is in my mind or comes back to me when we are working.

The second preamble that I want to cite is an image of one of my favourite places in the world which is Djemaa el Fna, on the edge of the ancient city of Marrakesh (illustration 2). You would call this an urban space, but really it is more of a clearing. It is not made from monuments, but rather is a space which fills up in the cool of the evening with people and activity and little pieces of mobile architecture. It is an architectural performance, because there are fire-eaters and snake-charmers and little theatrical groups at work, and little temporary kitchens scuttle out into the space. To that extent, it is space that Archigram might have liked, because it represents the idea of architecture as festival and so it echoes the Walter Benjamin quote but it also says something else as well. Djemaa el Fna can be translated as “mosque of nothing”, and I love the idea of urban space, public space, belonging to everybody but belonging to nobody. It is the kind of space which is to some extent unprogrammed, in which ideology is a little bit non-specific. People are able to express themselves relatively freely because they are in the public domain.

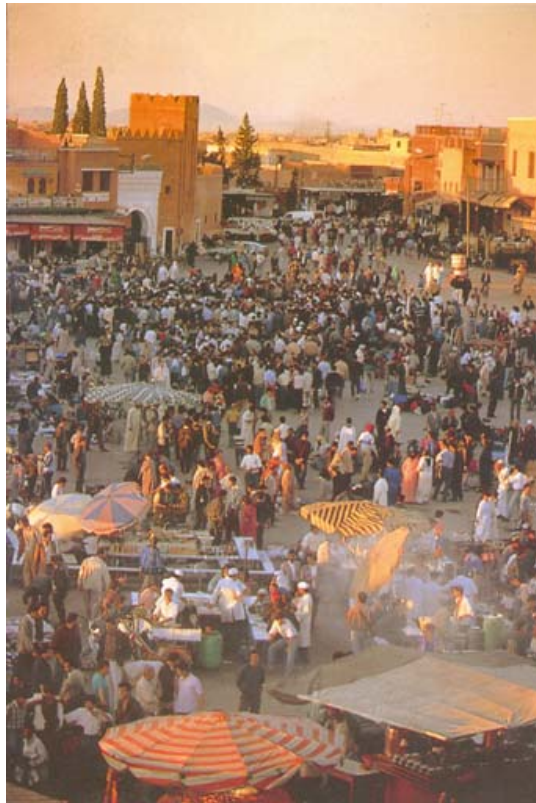


Illustration 2: Djemaa el Fna, Marrakech

It is made even more poignant by the presence alongside this space of the grand mosque of Marrakesh, a massive stone edifice, solid and immovable, a place where ideas are somewhat fixed and have been for hundreds of years. It contrasts with this mobile space right next to it. This has a real resonance for me in my thinking about public space and the way we create space in the city.

Bringing it a little bit closer to home, I love streets and I think streets are the obvious way to organise cities because they do lots of really good things. They compress social activity into limited spaces which means that people are able to observe each other quite easily, people from diverse social and economic groups and racial groups are pushed together and are able to mix or watch each other, and it is the very reverse of many of the inter-war housing estates where public space is highly dispersed and poorly overlooked. So this is a place where people feel safe because it is overlooked, it has a life 100% of the time because there are shops there, there are businesses there, there is a pub on the corner and there are residences above, and it is a space which is useful because it connects the city, it connects disparate neighbourhoods of people who are from different kinds of backgrounds.

These sorts of empirical observations are another part of the research which I would say is part of what we do as a practice: looking and seeing and observing what seems to work. One of my great heroes is Jane Jacobs, who in her rather didactic way captures and explains for me how cities work. She is another great inspiration in the work of the practice.

A project that I did with Ben Stringer, my teaching partner, was our first attempt at a piece of urbanism. It is a master plan for an area of Warsaw which has the twenty- or thirty-storey Palace of Culture at the centre of it. We attempted to create, in a city with quite a dispersed spatiality (very large city blocks, a sort of imperial grid), a more intimate spatiality. We became interested in the idea of two types of streets: one

which makes very simple connections across the city to existing streets, and another kind of street which is a winding kind of space, where you cannot quite see where you are going and where another kind of culture might emerge. Although this is a plan, residing within this plan are notions of a culture that might emerge around different kinds of streets.

We worked on a scheme in Haggerston in the East End of London. We hoped that it would be our first large-scale built project. It was not, but it turned out to be a really important test bed for the practice. The Grand Union Canal runs through the middle and the Kingsland Road runs up one side. These were two hugely problematic estates with patches of grass, bits of concrete, burnt-out cars, tarmac. We worked with residents for over a year in the development of this scheme, with two-weekly meetings, so it became a very useful vehicle for us to understand how cities work by talking to people.

Peoples' ideas and responses varied. But there was a significant number, particularly women, older people and those from racial minorities, who were at times frightened to leave their homes because of the layout of the estate. They felt completely alone in places because the spatiality was so dispersed and because the spaces were not well overlooked. That is an incredible indictment on the people who made the original proposal for these estates, and it affected and will continue to affect and make life difficult for generations of people who live there.

In addition the estate turns its back on the rest of the city. It is a ghetto. There are no streets through it. I lived five minutes from here without even knowing it existed. You would never have gone there unless you lived there, knew somebody there, or had a particular reason to go there

Our primary objective was to clarify the layout of public space by introducing some direct cross-site streets, which connect with adjacent neighbourhoods: the middle-class housing in Victorian villas to the north east, an industrial area, an area of 1980's cottages, and with the post war blocks in the south. We wanted to link the site with the rest of the city. The proposal was done in the abstract in models, and in plans which tried to analyse movement around the city, but it was also very much done by talking to people in the area, trying to understand what they want from their environment. A number of things emerged – and this is them speaking, not me – really clear street layouts, no back alleys, no blind corners. There were also very divergent views as to what people wanted from a home, and two themes in particular. One was, “We would love to have our own front door, preferably on the street, and not to have to share a stair or a lift with 100 other properties as we do at the moment” and the other thing they said was “We would love to have our own bit of outdoor space.” We discovered that in Tower Hamlets, 75% of the social housing has no outside space, not even a balcony. So our project has a very strong emphasis on streets, and a very strong emphasis on public space. Unlike a lot of master planners who work exclusively with the diagram, we get into the architecture early on because I think the culture of a place is partly about the architecture.

We also often refer to precedent and in examining the possibility of these raised courtyards which we explored in the Haggerston project, we discovered a late Victorian worker housing scheme which was going to be demolished and was saved by residents camping out on the roof and preventing the bulldozers from pulling it down (illustration 3). It has a fantastic rooftop garden which is an adjunct to the social housing which is around it, and it is an inspiration to our work.



Illustration 3: Victorian terrace with rooftop gardens

This brings us to Donnybrook, which was shortlisted last year for the Stirling Prize and has had a lot of publicity (illustration 4).



Illustration 4: Donnybrook Quarter from the air

People are talking about it as an innovation. In a way, however, it is actually a reactionary project because it refers back to a great number of precedents. It creates a street with a curve which is morphed by the geometry of the city. It creates a new street through it, which widens out into public space and allows another street to run through it, so it is very strongly connected with the streets around it. The buildings are slightly higher on the front edge where they meet Old Ford Road and there are non-residential uses added. It is conceived as a piece of city, not as a piece of housing. There are non-residential, retail uses, on one frontage; there was to have been a doctors' surgery at the far end which was lost. The public space remains the

most important space within the project and its peculiar geometries come from the geometries of the city around. The row of front doors straight onto the street reworks the 'back of pavement terrace', the ubiquitous worker housing of the late Victorian period, rarely done in the twentieth century, and a struggle for our clients, Circle 33, to get their heads around. We showed them the Victorian terraces in Mile End, some of the most valuable real estate in Tower Hamlets. It creates an extraordinary intimacy.

We work in models all the time. There are two units in each kind of bay at Donnybrook, a ground floor two-bedroom and a two-storey two-bedroom maisonette up above. It won the Circle 33's Innovations in Housing competition, and our rallying cry in the competition entry was that this scheme was a celebration of the public social life of the street. The housing was an afterthought. Again, we discovered while we were developing the project that 70% of all the buildings that make up a city like London is housing; housing is what creates the streets, it is what makes a hard edge to the public spaces and it is what contains those public spaces, so again we conceived of this as a piece of urbanism.

It is picturesque in a way, in that it celebrates particular corners (illustration 5) and particular views and explores the boundary between public and private space. Balconies overhang the streets, bay windows create strong visual connections with the street and also act like little display cabinets. When you go back there are flower arrangements in windows, teddies, and things like that. It all comes back to the Walter Benjamin idea.



Illustration 5: the buildings of the quarter respond to and shape the streetscape

I guess if I was a modernist architect speaking about this kind of project seventy or eighty years ago, I would have been thinking of it as complete, but in my view of it is far from that now. I think that when a project is finished, it is not complete, and that we are planning to go back as part of our ongoing research on this project each summer over the next ten years to take photographs of it and to see how people's lives have impacted on it and what is starting to happen and emerge in these

courtyards. They are already filling up with barbecues and funny little structures, sheds and so on. We welcome these interventions into the project. We borrowed a phrase from Cedric Price: he talks about “slack space” in a project, space which is unprogrammed and which invites occupation – again going back to Walter Benjamin – and that is how we see these upper courtyards and these balconies. During the World Cup we went back and there were banners down the street hanging from the balconies.

An ongoing piece of work, a mission in a way, is to think about how we can address the problem of increasing numbers of apartment blocks being thrown up on the periphery of our cities which really give nothing to the public space. We want to balance what the house builders need to do, which is get high densities to achieve their yield, with something which in the longer term will enable a kind of social world to emerge on these streets where people are more likely to at least recognise their neighbours, and maybe even become friendly with them.

The work goes on: we have a tenement style project on a larger scale, but still a human scale, where there is a matrix of terraces building up. It overlooks the waterfront at Brighton. There is one in Barking designed with Ben Stringer, where we are becoming interested in the idea of self-build and little house boats on the front, so the thing would have an urban presence at that end of it but it would break down as it arrives at the river to a point where people would be able to design their own homes on the riverside itself.

We have other projects: very conventional urbanism in a project in Southampton for Berkeley Homes, for example. Another provides large seven-bedroom houses for the Islamic community in Stepney on a site owned by a housing association. Again, there is a matrix of spaces building up and overlooking a little neighbourhood park, so although there are very small amounts of outside spaces there is the potential for kids to play with their parents watching them in the garden opposite. Another scheme is like a piece of Kentish Town transported into Milton Keynes, replacing a series of closes. We have cut right through the site and it becomes a much more public-spirited thing. We are doing back-to-back housing in Lancashire.

All of these are kind of reworkings of terrace typologies, terrace/courtyard hybrid typologies, and one leads to the next in terms of an experiment. But it is kind of dogged and here I take a slightly different view from Deborah Saunt. For us, there is something we got hold of and we want to find out more about; that is what these later projects start to do. All of the houses are back-to-back, as I say, but you have a roof terrace on the top and a little entrance courtyard. We are getting extraordinarily high densities here, with a three-storey high project, where everybody gets a house, there are no flats here.

In a competition scheme, we explored the idea of folded space and the Corbusian ideas of a floor being a horizontal wall and the interchangeability of surface. It exists as a paper project which was never going to be built, but it has found its way into a project for a homeless hostel in Clapham which is being built. Thus the research done in the context of a competition has found a place in an actual built project.

A new question is emerging in my mind. What happens if you give people freedom to make their own homes? In describing the division of labour, Karl Marx said ‘we are a stranger to the things we make.’ This is pertinent in the context of mass housing provision. The house builders build everything for a generic Mr and Mrs Absolutely Normal, and that is why most housing is incredibly boring. What would happen if we

gave people the opportunity, maybe even the money to do their own thing? 60% of the social housing in Uruguay is built by small co-operatives householders employing their own architect, fulfilling their own desires and dreams. I wonder whether there is a model here which we could use in thinking about housing production and architecture.