

Architecture, the urban, and the politics of public space

Thursday May 26th - Friday May 27th, 2022



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University of York

Room LMB/002A, Law and Management Building, Heslington East Campus

Architecture, the Urban, and the Politics of Public Space

Two-day Interdisciplinary Symposium
University of York
May 26 – 27, 2022

“Citizenship means different groups of people coming together for a common, civic purpose. So cities need a centre where people can gather... In a successful city centre, people dominate the streets.”
(Rogers and Power 2000: 279)

These are words taken from the manifesto for urban living arising from the work of the Urban Task Force, which was the last truly ambitious national government sponsored initiative in the UK aimed at shaping a sense of vitality in the public realm and a vision for cities based on more than purely economic growth. The Urban Task Force was led by the recently deceased Richard Rogers. More than most major architects, Rogers’s ideas about the social purpose of architecture shaped the debates of policy makers, and connected questions of aesthetics and politics in direct and practical ways. From our contemporary vantage point, though, the legacies of Rogers in particular, and the Urban Task Force more generally, have been mixed on the ground. These ambivalent signs were there from earlier in Rogers’s career; as Owen Hatherley asked recently, with reference to his Lloyd’s of London building, ‘What does this building by a supposedly ‘civic’ architect that meets the street with a moat give to the city around it, other than a mindboggling monument?’ (2022: 71).

This symposium gathers a range of speakers from different backgrounds to consider the intersections between architecture and the urban, and the politics of exclusion played out in the design of public space. Contributors to the beginning of the symposium will analyse the ambivalent legacy of Richard Rogers and the Urban Task Force in particular, before the conference broadens its scope, with speakers addressing the much wider themes that his designs and writings express, whilst challenging the social norms on which they are based. The symposium brings art historians into dialogue with urban sociologists, community organisers into conversation with social historians, and practising architects into discussion with political theorists. It does so to debate the public life of the city, the influence of urban design in the articulation of new cultures of citizenship, and the role of architecture in shaping patterns of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary cities.

Schedule

Day 1: Thursday 26th May

12:00-12:10 Introduction

12:10-13:30 Panel 1

- Owen Hatherley: Constructivism, Capitalism and Community Architecture on Coin Street
- Simon Parker: The Urban Renaissance Revisited: Richard Rogers and the Idea of Planning as a Public Good

13:30-14:00 Lunch

14:00-15:20 Panel 2

- Rowland Atkinson and Martha Mingay: Mansion blocks to prime blocks: London's ultralands and its consequences for the public city
- Paul Jones: Situating the Atrium: A Cultural Political Economy

15:20-15:40 Tea/Coffee

15:40-17:00 Panel 3

- Ola Uduku: Architecture and Public Space - an Africa view
 - Richard Williams: The Politics of Public Space on São Paulo's Big Worm
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Day 2: Friday 27th

9:30-10:50 Panel 4

- Jos Boys: Creatively Crippling Urban Space?
- Joshua Mardell: Hidden in Plain Sight: retrieving the forgotten and unsung in the built environment

10:50-11:10 Tea/Coffee

11:10-12:30 Panel 5

- Julia Udall: Co-dreaming climates: public space and planetarity
- Ken Worpole: Be Kind Quickly: Sharing and caring in later life

13:00-13:30 Lunch

13:30-15:00 Panel 6

- Irena Bauman: Radically Social: Built InCommon
- Alice Wilson: To Take Care we have to Make Care: Renovating a Decommissioned Care Home in York
- Phil Bixby: YoCo's community plan - making public space for being collectively creative

15:00-15:10 Concluding remarks

Abstracts

Mansion blocks to prime blocks: London's ultralands and its consequences for the public city

Rowland Atkinson and Martha Mingay, University of Sheffield

London's new-build, super-luxury housing blocks have become symbolic of all that is wrong with contemporary urban life – speculatively built, socially antiseptic and founded on towering wealth inequalities that play across the globe. This article considers the transition to this emphatically enclosed model of development, its drivers and consequences for the local street-life and wider urbanism of cities like London. These new blocks form islands containing luxury apartment homes, frequently sold to international buyers for their privacy - secure, yet 'foot to the floor' access points to the city's safe central streets. These 'ultralands' form a space reliant on the moneyland archipelago of offshore finance, implicated in money laundering and tax evasion that speaks of geopolitics, sanctions and economic crime. To look only at these places as physical structures thus belies their deeper connections into the deep structures of the global economy and its production of receptive points for capital and accommodation of the world's wealth elite. Through a string of examples we develop the argument that there has been a qualitative social, and architectural, deepening of the state of London's West End that matches the move into extra-territoriality of capital and elite bodies. These spaces are more enclosed, secure and anti-social than anything the city has seen before. The consequence for street-life and urban social vitality is one of reduction, the production of a null space or void that sucks in bodies, adornments and lifestyles that is the antithesis of urban renaissance blueprints for the city.

Radically Social: Built InCommon

Irena Bauman, Consultant to Bauman-Lyons Architects and Director of MassBespoke

Architecture belongs firmly in the world of Financial Capital. But the ideals of many architects are concerned with social capital. Architects are up against it! The Financial and the Social are two worlds that, although intrinsically connected and mutually dependent, are nourished by contrasting sets of values with insufficient crossovers. The public realm, which served as the interface between the two, is no longer owned in common and is increasingly commodified and controlled. With Climate Emergency, Covid, and the implications of the Ukraine war, we are rapidly becoming more local and increasingly concerned with neighbourhood resilience. Local resilience requires social capital which needs to grow significantly for society to manage changes ahead in a socially just way.

Built InCommon is one of many emerging radical concepts seeking to remodel financial capital and profit into social capital and social value. The challenge is how to scale this up.

YoCo's community plan - making public space for being collectively creative

Phil Bixby, YoCo, and Constructive Individuals, York

How do we think about places in a really holistic way – not simply about homes or workplaces or public space, but about how the places in which we live our lives – cities and neighbourhoods – accommodate the activities we want and provide the quality of surroundings which help make our lives rich. How broad do we need to cast our net when shaping these places? As an architect, I've learned that I need to go WAY beyond my profession's traditional borders – both in who I engage with, and what I engage about. It's not

just about the buildings, nor about the spaces, nor about simply finding out what people want – it's far more complex and interconnected. Recent work with YoCo – York Central Co-Owned – has given an opportunity to really explore this, and forms the basis for this talk.

Creatively Crippling Urban Space?

Jos Boys, UCL, and Co-Director, DisOrdinary Architecture Project

The DisOrdinary Architecture Project was set up in 2008 with the aim of promoting new models of practice for the built environment, led by the creativity and experiences of disabled, Deaf and Neurodivergent artists. By bringing disabled artists and architects into diverse collaborations with built environment students, educators and professionals, we have found a variety of innovative ways to challenge and subvert the normative and ableist in both built environment practices and in the design of our built surroundings. In this talk I will outline some of the activities of DisOrdinary Architecture, as well as exploring some of the creative and critical interventions coming out of contemporary disability activism, arts and scholarship internationally. These centre on ideas of access as emergent care and love; on social, spatial, material and design justice; and on what happens when you begin from difference to creatively 'crip' space, rather than seeing disability as an 'add-on' problem to be solved, once buildings and cities have already been designed for 'normal' people.

Constructivism, Capitalism and Community Architecture on Coin Street

Owen Hatherley, Architectural Writer and Journalist

A few years before he became effectively an unofficial spokesman on architecture and planning for the Labour Party, a Richard Rogers scheme on the river Thames set the architect against the municipal left. In the mid-1980s, Coin Street, a site around the former Oxo cold store, was about to be taken over by developers for an office complex designed by the Richard Rogers Partnership, in a dramatic style which owed much to the Soviet Constructivism of 1920s/1930s architects such as Iakov Chernikhov. The Greater London Council set against it a community plan by local residents for low-rise housing, a co-operative, and small-scale retail, and given their enormous planning powers, they were able to win the battle with the developers, just in time before the GLC was abolished by Margaret Thatcher. Their victory resulted in what has gradually become one of London's most successful (and certainly most desirable) social housing schemes, but also marked a divorce between radical politics and radical architecture in London, which have never really become reconciled. How did activists and politicians interpret Rogers' ideas for the site? Did the dramatic battle have much effect on Rogers' later architecture, or upon his political career as a Labour adviser and peer? And with schemes far inferior to this one now likely to be waved through in a broken planning system, what can we learn from this episode today?

Situating the Atrium: A Cultural Political Economy

Paul Jones, University of Liverpool

Effectively a double-height or larger void internal to a building, the atrium is a familiar architectural feature the world over. This article approaches the global popularity of atrium spaces in contemporary new buildings - including hotels, shopping malls, hospitals, museums, galleries, libraries, schools, office blocks, and universities - as a somewhat puzzling development, ripe for critical sociological analysis.

Cultural political economy (CPE) helps to situate the atrium vis-a-vis production of material and symbolic surplus values. By interrogating the atrium's distinctive role in adding momentum and meaning to accumulative strategies, CPE illuminates the space's paradoxical relationships to the intensification of rentiership in very tall buildings, and with respect to the demarcation of insider-outsider boundaries associated with elitist internationalised consumption. A general argument is that in allowing for theoretically sophisticated inquiry into how this element of the built environment stabilises and furthers capitalist arrangements, CPE contributes much to emergent sociologies of architecture.

Hidden in Plain Sight: retrieving the forgotten and unsung in the built environment

Joshua Mardell, University of York

This paper will discuss two aspects of my work relating to retrieval. The first part will introduce a new atlas of Queer Spaces (RIBA Publishing, 2022), an accessible, multi-authored, interdisciplinary and jargon-free survey that offers an array of examples of, and a legitimate pedigree for, queer existence in the sphere of the built environment across geographies, temporalities, and socio-economic strata. It will examine different "queer" typologies, from domesticities, to spaces of reappropriation, to archives, while arguing that queer spatiality upends conventional categories, smashing open what is considered architecture and design by retrieving previously marginalised sites worthy of memorialisation. The second part of the paper will link this research to a concurrent project on 20th century architecture in York, in a sense queering the city anew by foregrounding, and subjectively remapping, its unsung and lambasted C20 heritage, that – like queer spaces – is seemingly hidden in plain sight. Why has York so spectacularly failed to answer Lord Esher's call in 1969 to preserve social and aesthetic benefits of the traditional city while reaping the benefits of modernity? This paper is particularly relevant as the University of York comes (grudgingly?) to terms with its new role as custodian of a nationally significant, and now partially listed, post-war campus.

The Urban Renaissance Revisited: Richard Rogers and the Idea of Planning as a Public Good.

Simon Parker, University of York

Richard Rogers' leadership of the Urban Task Force at the invitation of Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott in 1998 and its subsequent report *Towards an Urban Renaissance* was heralded at the time as an opportunity to champion 'a holistic approach to urban regeneration'. The UTF's brief was to tackle three specific urban challenges: 1. The decline of regional inner-city areas and communities. 2. The need to provide homes for up to 4 million additional households. 3. Suburban sprawl and associated social and economic decline within inner-city areas. Supporters of the Rogers' report point to the implementation of 'PPG3' which sought to direct policy away from new build development on greenfield sites towards higher density development using brownfield or urban sites. *Towards an Urban Renaissance* led to an Urban White Paper and an Urban Summit, as well as Michael Parkinson's influential 'State of The Cities' report. The Urban Task Force also paved the way for the establishment in England of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) in 1999, before it was merged with the Design Council in 2010. In this paper I consider the extent to which Rogers' ambitions in *Towards an Urban Renaissance* were realised in practice, what were the obstacles to success in the decades that followed and what are the prospects for planning as a public good nearly 25 years on.

Co-dreaming climates: public space and planetarity

Julia Udall, Sheffield Hallam University, and Director, Studio Polpo



Photograph, Driving The Human - 16 Oct 2021 - Radialsystem Berlin © Camille Blake

Julia Udall will explore three experiments in assembling publics around questions of climate justice, drawn from her collaborative work over the past two years. In developing this work as an architectural researcher, with performance makers, sonic artists, urban curators, and community and cultural organisations, Udall co-designs modes and tools of sensitisation and attunement that seek to enable greater collective climate ‘respons-ability’ (Haraway, 2017). The sonic is understood ‘as a means for enabling new conceptualizations of the public sphere and expressions of emancipatory practices’ (La Belle, 2018), and operates in affective, political and ecological registers. Each of the three experiments - Sonic Acts of Noticing, Amplifying Climate Dialogues, and ark-sheffield - develops and supports practices of listening as productive of public space that challenges human exceptionalism, and recognises the need to ‘make inhabitable worlds in common’ (Reed, 2021). Each mode of sonic practice allowed for different rhythms, intensities, realisations, and stories to unfold. Each had different protocols, affordances and potentials. All three projects are in progress, and in inviting you to listen today, I will share some of the qualities of public space that each approach fostered, and offer questions about what such work may make possible as part of the urban realm.

Architecture and Public Space - an Africa view

Ola Uduku, University of Liverpool

This is a working paper that examines certain African cities' relationship to public-communal space, as opposed to the 'private' spaces that urban life has arguably promoted in Africa's new global cities and private/ised) neighbourhood spaces. It begins from the premise that much of African life and livelihoods has historically been communal, but with colonisation and post-colony the 'private' has taken precedence over the 'public', as has been the case elsewhere in rapidly urbanising cities in the Global south. This contribution questions whether current events, not the least Covid and public demonstrations, claiming collective city 'right(s)' might herald a new era of urban engagement and policy that reclaims the public commons and spaces for 21st century urban Africa. This might be contrasted with the equally engaging 'Afrofuturist' dream cityscapes also gracing the 21st century African landscape.

The Politics of Public Space on São Paulo's Big Worm

Richard Williams, University of Edinburgh

São Paulo's Minhocão (Big Worm) is a 3.5km elevated expressway that cuts across a dense part of the central city, and has been for decades the site of an unusually rich debate about the nature of public space. Opened in 1971, the Minhocão was controversial from the start, widely held responsible for the decline of the city's historic centre in the 1970s and 1980s. However it has been gradually tamed over the years, first closed to traffic at night, and then at weekends and on holidays, in the process becoming an impromptu, and weirdly spectacular park. Those informal closures have been accompanied by numerous architectural schemes over the years to make the Minhocão a permanent park on the lines of New York's High Line. But the Minhocão in its present condition represents a stand-off between various interest groups, all of whom have claims on it as public space: the advocates of the park, the local residents, the 75,000 motorists who use it on weekdays, and the sizeable homeless population that lives underneath. A measure of the complexity of the Minhocão is the considerable security presence required at weekends to keep out 'undesirable' elements. Often spoken of as a democratic space, the Minhocão is a space that excludes as much as it includes. This talk explores the complex politics of the Minhocão, the nature of the different claims on it as public space, and the lessons that might be drawn from it for similar experiments elsewhere.

To Take Care we have to Make Care: Renovating a Decommissioned Care Home in York

Alice Wilson, OpHouse, York

OpHouse is a Community Benefit Society that myself and my colleague Rebecca Carr set up in January 2020 with the aim of bringing forward self-build tiny house plots in the city of York to address the escalating unaffordability of both renting and buying in the city. After several strategic pivots, the project has metamorphosed. We are now working to buy and renovate Morrell House, a decommissioned care home in Clifton, York. This presentation will explore the dual role of ideas and actions in creating networks of care through our co-housing development. We will interrogate the pitfalls and the joys of relying on mutual aid and taking care of each other whilst running a volunteer led housing project over the last two years. By centering the issue of civic participation, this presentation will offer interpretations of how exclusion and inclusion is modulated by our individual and collective capacity to take care of each other and our city.

Be Kind Quickly: Sharing and caring in later life

Ken Worpole, Writer and Social Historian



Almshouse, Reydon, Suffolk

In previous generations, most people died before they got old. No longer. The ageing population provides an increasing proportion of any community's demographic make-up. This is a cause for thinking about how we provide care and shelter - and a sense of belonging and attachment - for many who will be left on their own or in a frail state in their later years. Over 65s now make up 18% of the UK population, but by 2046 this figure will be 25%. The Covid epidemic showed that the 'out of sight, out of mind' location and culture of many residential care homes is no longer acceptable for both medical and social reasons, and ought to be reintegrated back into the shared world of the public domain. This is now happening. The UK has been innovative in producing the internationally admired hospice movement, now complemented by the growth of Maggie's Cancer Care Centres. Both involved the development of new building types, buildings that remain 'porous' to the life of the community outside. In addition, we are witnessing a revival of the traditional almshouse, re-inventing a historic building where older people can live individually but also companionably in more sociable conditions than living alone. Retirement villages, housing co-ops for older people, and other more sociable 'open house' forms of providing accommodation and a social life for older people, are in development, and will provide the background to my contribution, illustrated with slides.

Speaker Biographies

Rowland Atkinson is Research Chair in Inclusive Societies at the University of Sheffield. His research has focused on the spatial impacts of social inequalities, taking in work on gentrification and displacement, gated communities, public housing, social exclusion, fortress homes and, most recently, the super-rich. His books include *Alpha City, Domestic Fortress* (with Sarah Blandy) and *Urban Criminology* (with Gareth Millington).

Irena Bauman is an architect and co-founder, along with Maurice Lyons, of Bauman Lyons Architects, a firm which is notable for its commitment to local projects, no more than 70 miles from its offices, in order to work with an understanding of the politics and cultures of the places they design in. Their significant projects include Huddersfield Media Centre and Tower Works in Leeds. She is Director of MassBespoke, which is a digitally enabled construction system that integrates design, structure and fabrication into an automated system that can quickly process bespoke designs.

Phil Bixby has lived and worked in York for many years and loves the city but believes we need to plan for future change, and spends much of his time telling people this. As a designer of buildings he's learned that the best results come from the best brief, where building users really think about, and creatively describe, how they want to use future places and spaces. He believes that York needs the same approach from its residents. He's an architect who has worked on community self-build, masterplanning and community decision-making in York and elsewhere, and spends a lot of his time watching and learning about York from the saddle of a bicycle.

Jos Boys is an architect, activist, educator, and writer. She was a founder member of Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative and co-author of their book *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment* (recently republished by Verso). Since 2008 she has been Co-director of *The DisOrdinary Architecture Project* with disabled artist Zoe Partington, a disability-led platform that works with disabled artists to explore new ways to think about disability in architectural and design discourse and practice. She currently works as Director of the Learning Environments Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Centre (LEEDIC), at The Bartlett Faculty of Built Environment, UCL.

Owen Hatherley is a writer and journalist who writes primarily on architecture, politics and culture. He writes for *Architectural Review*, *the Guardian* and the *London Review of Books*, among others. He is the author of many books on architecture, politics and cities, including *A Guide to the New Ruins of Urban Britain*, *A New Kind of Bleak*, *Trans-Europe Express*, *The Ministry of Nostalgia* and, most recently, *Modern Buildings in Britain: a Gazetteer*.

Paul Jones is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Liverpool. His research interests centre on the affinities between architecture and urban political-economy. His many publications on the intersections between these include *The Sociology of Architecture: Constructing Identities*. Paul was the inaugural 'Sociologist in Residence' at Liverpool's Bluecoat Gallery, working through teaching, reading groups and conferences to open up sociological work to a broader public.

Joshua Mardell is Lecturer in Art History at the University of York, and also Research Collections Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. He is an architectural historian with broad specialisms, mostly in British architectural history of the 19th and 20th centuries, conservation, and the historiography of British architectural history. He edits the 'Building of the Month' feature for the *Twentieth Century Society Magazine*. He is one of the oral history researchers for the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, and also sits on the Society's LGBTQIA+ panel helping to promote diversity in the discipline. With Adam Nathaniel Furman, he has recently edited the *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories* book.

Martha Mingay is a PhD Student at the University of Sheffield, in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. Her current research explores urban Community Land Trust activism as a political response to the housing affordability crisis. She has a longer background in urban policy, having worked as a Policy and Scrutiny Research Officer for the London Assembly Labour Group, Greater London Authority, 2008 - 2017.

Simon Parker is Professor of Politics at the University of York. His research interests broadly centre on urban studies and urban theory, socio-spatial informatics, the politics of asylum and immigration, and comparative European politics. Simon is the author of many publications on urban politics, including *Cities, Politics and Power* and *Urban Theory and the Urban Experience: Encountering the City*.

Julia Udall Julia Udall is Senior Lecturer in Architecture at Sheffield Hallam University. She works at the intersection of artistic spatial practice, critical architectural pedagogy and design activism. Her work seeks to develop ways to re-make urban space by drawing attention to, and supporting forms of collectivity, interdependence and mutual support, between humans and non-humans, in the face of this precarious moment in the Anthropocene. Julia is a director of architectural collective Studio Polpo, who contributed to the 2021 British Pavilion 'The Garden of Privatised Delights'.

Ola Uduku is a British African architect who is Head of the Architecture School at the University of Liverpool. She is a member of the Nigerian Institute of Architects and the Royal Institute of British Architects, and her research focuses on African educational architecture. She is a founding member of ArchiAfrika, a non-profit organisation which looks to improve contemporary architectural history in Africa, and she is committed to ensuring issues of diversity and inclusion are intertwined through all aspects of architectural teaching and research.

Richard Williams is Professor of Contemporary Visual Cultures at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh. For over twenty years his teaching and research has explored the visualisation of the city, through case studies chiefly in the USA, Brazil and the UK. His books on architecture and urbanism include *The Anxious City*, *Why Cities Look the Way They Do* and, most recently, *Reyner Banham Revisited*.

Alice Wilson is Co-Director of OpHouse, a social enterprise which is working with the City of York Council on a project that will offer self-build tiny house plots in the city, in a radical attempt to address the lack of affordable housing in York. Alice is also a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of York, where she is completing a project exploring the experiences of women living in tiny housing, in the UK and internationally.

Ken Worpole is a writer and social historian, whose work includes many books on architecture, landscape and public policy. Ken's most recent book is *No Matter How Many Skies Have Fallen*, a history of the Frating Hall Farm community in Essex. His principal interests concern the planning and design of new settlements, landscapes and public institutions - streets, parks, playgrounds, libraries, informal education - based on the pioneering achievements of 20th century social democracy and the environmental movement. Ken has served on the UK government's Urban Green Spaces Task Force, on the Expert Panel of the Heritage Lottery Fund, and as an adviser to the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. He was a founder member of the Demos think-tank and of Opendemocracy.



Sociology