

Architecture: The Fourth R

Architecture and its Public

'Architecture and the built environment have such a major impact on our lives that they merit more public engagement.'

These essays by Sunand Prasad were originally broadcast over five consecutive nights in October 2010, as part of the BBC Radio 3 series 'The Essay'.

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In 1971 there was a talented young architect called Brian Anson working at the Greater London Council. He was quietly helping with the future plans for the redevelopment of Covent Garden that would follow the removal of the vegetable market to Nine Elms. The proposals were based on the demolition of three-quarters of the area's buildings, streets and lanes. It dawned on Brian just what was about to be erased: not only the market halls and the setting of Inigo Jones' marvellous church, but with it, the character of a place slowly accumulated over 200 years: whole ways of life and the livelihoods of communities. They would be replaced by developments based very much on highways engineering and large buildings. He blew the whistle, the proposals were made public, and he was sacked.

What followed has come to be known as the Battle for Covent Garden, one of the most celebrated stories in British planning. It marks the point when people stopped being resigned to the wholesale demolition and redevelopment of old neighbourhoods in the name of progress. Brian, who died last year, was critical of the end result. The poorer communities that he most cared for benefited little, or even suffered, from the commercial success of the conservation and tourism-based regeneration of the area. But to many of us studying then at

the Architectural Association, where the word 'barricade' became forever associated with Brian's teaching, the most inspiring aspect of the episode was the popular participation in the campaign that he had sparked. The people were engaging with architecture and town planning. They were bringing a great deal of knowledge and understanding to bear on the problems of the area. It is hard now to believe that Covent Garden was then utterly run down, with hundred of empty shops and houses, and with no financially sound development plan to replace the bureaucratic and centralised version that was on the way out.

The basic point of these essays has been that architecture and the built environment have such a major impact on our lives that they merit more public engagement. Engagement not just for the sake of it – absorbing and fascinating though the subjects are – but because, in order to get the future right, we architects, developers, planners and engineers need to engage with those who use and grapple with the built environment in other ways than ours. The Battle for Covent Garden, and hundreds of other lesser known skirmishes round the country that drew strength from it, show that, at times of crisis, such engagement does come forth and proves its value.

The stretch of street I was later to live on was going to be demolished in 1979. The now much prized mid nineteenth-century houses had been bought up by the council for clearance years earlier. Many, standing empty, had become vandalised and derelict. Alan Miller, an artist who had bought a disused pub up the road, got wind of the plans and threatened an injunction to stop the demolition. The council moved in swiftly to try and render the houses unfit, so that their demolition would be inevitable. Alan was equally fast, but by the time the injunction was granted, one side of the street was beyond saving. With the help of a housing association, a co-operative society was set up to occupy the saved houses on peppercorn short-term lets, and to improve them through self-build. For twenty years, with extensive participation of members, the co-op successfully managed the properties that Alan had saved from the authorities and they had rescued from the elements. Much of the management was about designing spaces for changing households, making improvements, considering long-term plans. Not high architecture, but the everyday stuff of making liveable places, carried out with some invention and style.

It can be done.

Officially, the interface between the public and built environment is the planning system. Although democratic consultation is embedded in the system, we are confused about its role. In operation, the current system is mainly about development control, which is the chance to stop things happening, rather than plan-making, which is imagining and working out what the future of an area should be. Such imagining is hard to share with the public, especially when local authority resources have been depleted. It is much easier to engage with the negative feelings of people who may, for perfectly valid or purely selfish reasons, want to oppose development. And they have votes that councillors need.

The solution in theory is simple, and I have yet to meet a politician or professional who does not accept the principle. We should be actively engaging citizens in the forward planning for the future of their districts and neighbourhoods. Such planning should be like a framework that provides guidance on what sort of development is welcomed, and where. When applications are made and found to be in line with the plans, they should generally be approved. Democratically elected councillors will be there to ensure that the process is well governed and to take ultimate responsibility for the decisions they have delegated to

officers. There will be special cases where such delegation is not appropriate, and councillors must get involved. Not only do most people agree that this is the right way, the system is supposed to be run on these lines. But it does not happen. The planning process today is incredibly wasteful and uncertain. It causes unnecessary tensions, confrontation and delays. One of my partners was punched, admittedly rather feebly by an old lady, just for being the designer of a school extension that had become mired in politics.

Through its essential connection with development and planning, architecture is inevitably political. Powerful interests, of both private and state sectors, compete to control cities. The evolution of cities contains forgotten dramas. Baron Haussmann is famous for reshaping Paris and building its wide, tree-lined boulevards. One reason for his employment in 1852 by Napoleon III was to do away with the twisting winding lanes of the medieval city that the revolutionaries of the 1848 uprising had used effectively. Haussmann's streets were too broad for barricades, as Brian Anson would have told us. That, and the quick deployment of artillery that they enabled, made it easy for the authorities to crush the breakaway Paris Commune of 1871. After the anti-Colonial Indian uprising of 1857, the British demolished

all houses within 200 yards of the Red Fort in the old walled city of Delhi. The clearance, which enabled easier defence of the fort with clear lines of fire, destroyed some of the city's finest mansions, some dating back to 1648 when the city – which western visitors called the Rome of the East – was founded by Shah Jahan, who was responsible for the construction of the Taj Mahal. The British built a new railway station, slicing off part of the magnificent Queen's Gardens to the north of the city spine. By bringing the railway into the heart of the city and close to the fort, they ensured that soldiers could be very quickly deployed to suppress trouble.

Modern planning and development may have less violent intent, but it can have even more radical consequences, as I have related in earlier essays. That is why the role of democracy within it is so important and why we must get it right. To do so we have to empower people, not just through procedures, but also through equipping them with the tools needed to make sound and well-informed decisions. Let me illustrate this with a story about a large school and a famous architect asked to redesign the dining hall and lunch provision. Sir John Sorrell, advising the school, surprised the architect by asking how many fast food joints his practice had designed, which, as he knew,

Given the chance, young people become fascinated with architecture and design, as this school workshop at Penoyre & Prasad illustrates.



was none. John offered to make the children into discriminating and expert clients for the project to make its success more likely. He took them to a range of restaurants, some of a poshness they had never seen, some they were familiar with. They learned to analyse exactly what made a good lunch break, such as a choice of places for socialising, the right acoustics and furniture, reduced queuing time and a feeling of security. They became expert and enthusiastic clients and used the experience as part of their course work.

Consultation is sometimes disparaged: if a horse was designed by a committee, we are told, the result would be a camel. Consultation, it is said, does not support innovation and can even stifle it. But Will Alsop, one of the most flamboyant inventors of architectural shape today, believes passionately in what has been called the intelligence of crowds. His highly conceptual masterplan for Barnsley came out of a series of energetic workshops with local people, in which he says he 'gave them the pencil'. The team managed to reach a part that few public consultations do, and produced a highly ambitious and easily understood physical vision for the town, based on its topography. The masterplan was based on creating an equivalent of an Italian hill town with six gateways in its enclosing

wall. Those who derided the huge coloured plastic model exhibited at the Royal Academy missed the point. The technique had captured the imagination of the people of Barnsley. It does not provide a blueprint that can be built immediately, but is a way of thinking about the future of their town. And it has an ambition that previously could not have been thought possible. Some of the principles of the plan are now being turned into schemes.

The Barnsley masterplan exercise both built on and ignored the huge experience of public participation, designed to capture people's knowledge and expression, that has been accumulated since the Battle of Covent Garden: techniques such as 'Planning for Real' by the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation and 'Enquiry by Design' by the Prince's Foundation. Imagine how much more powerful public participation in planning and development would be, if primary and secondary schools nurtured in their students a real interest in the environment and architecture; if it was thought of as another kind of literacy and numeracy. How much more of their experience and knowledge would citizens then be able to contribute in a focused and critical way. Imagine if engineers, planners or architects were not a rarity in parliament. But that's another story.

As I previously argued, there is a new reason why we all have to become more numerate and literate about the environment: the realisation that the earth has a finite capacity to support human life, and that as a developed country we have already exceeded our proportion of it. The onus right now is on professionals to learn the new currency of energy and carbon and find the right language to engage people in the creation and care of the built environment. The Cape Farewell programme is inspiring in this respect. For over thirty years, scientists have been alerting us to the risk posed by climate change but with little impact until recently. David Buckland, the photographer, had the idea that if artists could accompany scientists on Arctic and other expeditions they, being fundamentally communicators, might reach a far larger audience. I went on the 2008 expedition along with musicians, writers, a poet, a comedian and a ceramicist; and most of us produced work that communicates climate change in a new way. This was a broader cultural response to climate change, not simply a scientific or technological one.

Making shelter is a fundamental human activity. Despite millennia of overlaying it with expertise, it remains more transparent to people than many related aspects of civilisation such as science, literature and art. In that respect, it

is more akin to the need for food and clothing. But as I explored earlier, the relatively large cost of buildings makes their value hard to grasp, and perhaps that extends to the value of talking about architecture. Things are not helped by the general belief that architecture is all about designing buildings as objects. The great Le Corbusier said that “architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of volumes brought together in light”. I suggest that we could equally say that “architecture is the masterly and correct play of resources for creating magnificent settings to support life”. Rather than singular works of art, if we think of architecture as the continual tuning and remaking of the built world that we inhabit, it will make it easier and more rewarding for everyone to take part in it.

I am confident that in the future we will recover the fundamental connection between people and the creation of shelter. We will find a way of constructing our built environment that is better informed by the knowledge, inventiveness and wisdom of the public. To get there we need to add a fourth R to the essential educational toolkit of Reading, WRiting and ARithmetic. That could be ARchitecture, the enviRONment or, perhaps, simply Resources.

Penoyre & Prasad's programme of practice events regularly bring together practitioners and policy makers with an invited audience, to debate issues such as value, collaboration and identity.

Left to right: Jonathan Dove, John Worthington, Anna Coote, Sunand Prasad and David Buckland.



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