

The repugnant stage: a tragi-comedy of british urban space

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Abstract

The subject of this symposium is timely. The periods when the piazza as a type has undergone sustained study as an urban phenomenon, in the latter half of the nineteenth century as exemplified by Sitte, and in the post Second World War period with the development of townscape, were both times of immense transformation in cities, when traditional forms of urbanism and society were under severe pressure. In contrast, the period of reassessment which took place from the mid 1960s to the mid 1990s under the leadership of figures such as Aldo Rossi and the Krier brothers, was one of relative stagnation. In the present time, the urban situation has experienced a dramatic transformation over the last two decades as new development encroached on urban centres, but once again the piazza features as an identifying characteristic of urban quality, a word which might be applied to the most unlikely open areas of hard landscape and 'space left over after planning', as if the name itself was a guarantee of sophistication and pleasure.

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The morphological character of public space in the contemporary city is one where the individual identity of buildings dominates. The relationship between these buildings is often so attenuated as to make the space between them redundant, either as a functional entity or as a form of intangible matter binding urban forms together. It can therefore be initially observed that quantity of space is not an issue for concern, rather the quality of public space available. In contrast to the present situation, the ambiguities of space in traditional cities represented a positive civic value that was implicitly eclectic, because, however the spaces were developed or designed, they paid some deference to the rich tradition of the European public square. Their equivocal nature as realizations of the individual and the collective, and their appropriation by citizens for shared activities reinforced the structure of a society. Space in the contemporary city struggles to fulfill those roles leading to the question of whether the collective experience of the existing public realm, or indeed the quasi-urban spaces of new commercial developments, have a significant role to play in the future of public space? Are they the appropriate locations for continued political discourse or is the future of the phenomenon of the public square inevitably tied to, and limited by, the rich legacy of its past?



Figure 1 Liverpool One (photo by the author – all rights reserved)

The erosion of any overt political aspect to these public spaces is itself a political symptom of the passivity of populations in established democratic societies. In the contemporary British context this is a result both of the abandonment of political expression to the communications media, but also to the typically undemonstrative character of urban form. If, until quite recently, overt political representation was largely absent, it is in the changing life of urban spaces that the metaphor of the city as theatre has its most profound expression. This phenomenon has deep roots but not always positive effects.



Figure 2 Occupy London (photo by the author – all rights reserved)

For example, Aldo Rossi recognized the split between intentions and experiences in his discussion of *locus* and context in relation to the Roman Forum. In *The Architecture of the City* he wrote

Locus ... is not unrelated to context; but context seems strangely bound up with illusion, with illusionism. As such it has nothing to do with the architecture of the city, but rather with the making of a scene, ... saddening us like would-be tourists of a vanished world. It is hardly surprising that this concept of context is espoused and applied by those who pretend to preserve the historical cities by retaining their ancient facades or reconstructing them in such a way as to maintain their silhouettes and colours and other such things; but what do we find after these operations when they are actually realised? An empty, often repugnant stage.

In this paper I wish to explore two implicitly theatrical contemporary spaces, Spinningfields in Manchester and MediaCity:UK in Salford which attempt to create variety of urban form as a means of replicating the historic development of an urban environment. The commodification of culture tends towards the devaluing of space in favour of the self-evident attractions of the architectural object, as the skyline of any developing city attests. In parallel with this tendency at the macro scale, in the life of individuals in the developed world the functional necessity of the public forum has been superseded by the availability of virtual communication and information through electronic media, perhaps liberating traditional public spaces to be more overtly rhetorical in the expression of the ethics of a community.

It is however important to acknowledge that the worth and appreciation of the historic phenomenon of the public space, and at the same time the treatment of the defined urban space as a mundane form has two possible interpretations. Firstly, there is the widely held suspicion that the type of enclosed public space that the piazza represents has become an outmoded form. Secondly, and directly opposed to the former, there is the position that the lessons such places contain present an exemplary type of public space. They demonstrate that variety, flexibility, historical memory and contemporary aspiration, the most everyday events and the most sacred spaces might be layered into each other and create richly inspirational spaces which continue to demonstrate the importance of the physical experience, in terms of the authenticity of the familiar and the directness of sensation. Curiously, these two positions seem equally valid. One can, of course, enjoy the facilities of an existing space without regarding that experience to be replicable in new situations. It is perfectly possible to hold both views simultaneously, a phenomenon I would ascribe to the strangely fascinating power of the public space, its ability to subsume all types of phenomena into a sense of a shared experience.



Figure 3 *Piazza Constantini, Concordia Sagittaria (photo by the author – all rights reserved)*

Historic environments have been preserved and continue to serve their original social functions, but the influence of commercial urbanism of the United States makes itself felt in the development of business districts and peripheral areas of the major cities. In this context the elements of public space are often appropriated as a theatrical component of the developer's armoury in creating a successful segment of the city, yet they are exclusive environments without the diversity which authentic urban situations contain as



a matter of course. They repeat the impermeable design solutions which characterised the megastructures of previous decades, while the deliberate creation of a lack of integration between parts of the city through its public spaces is unlikely to be ameliorated substantially by the introduction of exclusive shops as a screen to the parking decks.

In the spectacular but more ephemeral presence of advertising the global dominance of fashion and technology brands present an ideology that mitigates against the inclusive nature of traditional urban space. Occasionally such elements become permanent features of the urban space, as in the case of the Armani Wall on Via dell' Orso, in Milan, or Diesel Wall, adjacent to San Lorenzo, but the two examples provide different lessons in the direction of urban space. While the Armani Wall concerns itself directly with advertising and is transparent about its relationship to consumer products, its relationship to urban space is studiously neutral and undemonstrative. The Diesel Wall's relationship to marketing is more obscure, the material displayed on the wall, supplied from an open invitation to artists, having an association with the company through the sponsoring of public space. While the artwork's presence and message is direct, that of the 'subversive' fashion brand is open to more speculation and interpretation.

One noticeable aspect of this presence of such billboards in public places is the collapse of conventional issues of scale. Distinctions between media are seen as irrelevant as the city's contemporary appearance is increasingly determined by the brand and what it promises. In contrast to such ephemerality it is the quality of endurance that gives traditional public space its ultimate character. It is risky to make generalisations, but the discreet integration of a piazza with its containing city, the length of time spent in the design and construction of the place and the ambiguity with which it accommodates different functions are what differentiate such spaces from the functionally specific, provisionally constructed and attention seeking urbanism of the present day.

While that phenomenon has many possible causes, its relationship to the formerly communicative nature of public space is worth emphasising. The qualities of traditional space, in the allowance for spontaneity within the public sphere, represent the most direct means of balancing the negative effects of the mediated world, through personal encounters with all the agreements and disagreements, pleasures and conflicts they bring. In the current confused state of architectural and civic debate, accusations of discontinuity between intentions and results are commonplace. This situation is most evident in the Spinningfields development in central Manchester, sited around the former Crown Square, a civic area of court and municipal buildings which has been rebranded as a financial and retail centre by the developer Allied London. The new buildings of the area are without any sense of place, and are glumly staid, a small scale vision of the technocratic urban centre fundamentally delineated by Le Corbusier eighty years ago. They stand around the area awkwardly misaligned with each other and unconvincingly heterogenous in their exterior forms, different wrappings around the same sort of functional space. But at least they have a genuine function, unlike the public space of the area, where the same futile decorative mentality attempts to modify the obvious meaninglessness of the ensemble.

Utilitarian messages are commonplace in Manchester architecture, so the lack of coherence could be thought of as a demonstration of the *genius loci* of the city. The attempt to produce a 'community' out of office workers that is offered by Spinningfields



represents an especially impoverished form of generic urbanism. Attention lights on the palette of accumulated brands precisely because the physical environment (buildings and spaces) in which they are contained is so banal and devoid of consolation.

The public spaces are particularly redundant, because the spaces have no real use, not the sort of the fluid changes of occupation one would witness in an authentic place. The spaces created as part of the development are so stupendously formless they can only indicate their eventual occupation by yet more office building. Large patches of lawn suggest future development plots which might give more definition to these late manifestations of s.l.o.a.p. (space left over after planning).

The inevitable arrival of economic stagnation brought some sense of closure to recent developments. They have introduced often dramatic change into the Mancunian cityscape, in the wake of the 1996 I.R.A. bomb, but the incompleteness of their resolution and the fragmentary discontinuity their thwarted plans produce is firmly rooted in a local urban tradition. The commercial failure the Spinningfields development is experiencing has induced one extraordinary theatrical reaction. The façade of the Crown Court now has a companion in the construction of a new pub, The Oast House, a work of imagineering which scenographically contrasts with its modern surroundings. Apparently aged brick and dry-stone walling, a rusting corrugated metal roof and a wooden shingle clad tower attempt to evoke an authentic sense of place, but only since October 2011. This, however, is not the type of seasonal and ephemeral structure which the commercial churn requires. Rather it is a semi-permanent solution to overcome the problem of empty, very expensive shops which have failed to provide the promised sense of community in the public space. The level of scenographic skill is quite remarkable and the pub itself, at least, is very busy, but its position in a square originally created as a civic setting for the dignity of the law raises the question of the values public space is now assumed to represent.



Figure 4 *The Oast House, Spinningfields, Manchester (photo by the author – all rights reserved)*

There is a related but slightly different form of expression of public space at another recent development in the neighbouring city of Salford. MediaCity:UK is a brownfield development by Peel Holdings of derelict land adjacent to the Manchester Ship Canal, designed as the new northern headquarters of the BBC and other prominent media companies. The University of Salford also houses its expanding media department there and the metrolink tram system had a special branch line created to connect this business outpost to central Manchester and onward train connections to London.

The masterplan used the existing successful cultural landmarks of The Lowry (Michael Wilford 2000) and the Imperial War Museum – North (Daniel Libeskind 2002) as foci for the public spaces of the new development. A large paved plaza, called The Stage exploits The Lowry as a piece of urban scenography across the water of the dock. From this space a curving street leads round to a new footbridge which connects to the Imperial War Museum. The large public space is relatively uncluttered, and is bounded on its open eastern edge by a stoa-like structure between it and an area of soft landscape and planting.



Figure 5 MediaCity:UK, Salford (photo by the author – all rights reserved)

If these strategic moves are sensible the same could not be said of the architecture which forms the backdrop to the public space. A series of slabs, clearly intended to appear as distinct from one another rise up from the lower buildings and demonstrate various levels

of ingenuity in their cantilevering forms. There is also a small forest of towers, from the banal blocks of a generic hotel to more individually expressed blocks of apartments, offering views over water but often by convoluted means. Office accommodation is more assertively appointed, especially the diagonally patterned 'Orange' block which loudly announces the availability of speculative office space with its visual disturbance. Less dramatically the street edge is formed by the usual ubiquitous branded outlets.

Now it would be facile to expect a development which began from a *tabula rasa* to foster any spontaneous character but no provision has been made for such an occurrence. The planning betrays all the efficiency of a popular television format, a high degree of artificiality requiring a complete suspension of disbelief. The public space presents too exposed an arena in the jolt between open and enclosed, the glass skin proving a very effective barrier between the controlled world of the office space and the only marginally less controlled world outside for those without a security pass.

Each of these developments has a distinct strategic intention for their theatrical function. The events in the public space in Salford will be designed to integrate with the television schedules, providing a virtual audience for this still rather isolated location. At MediaCity:UK the events are part of the mission of the place. In contrast, the event calendar of Spinningfields is designed to induce further commercial development and provide customers for the shops and restaurants. But whereas in central Manchester such a strategy of spectacle for the public realm could gain some value from the changeable ephemerality of the events, at Salford Quays it promises all the deadening jollity of highly planned enforced entertainment.

Yet despite the patently disappointing qualities of these spaces, one searches for a method to draw them back into some meaningful urban narrative. With their diversely appointed languages, their confusions of scale and compressions in space their scenographic qualities are to the fore. Perhaps, therefore they could be compared to two of the most significant images of urban theatricality in the Western canon, Serlio's tragic and comic scenes. The tragic scene shows palaces and temples with the distant view to funereal obelisks and pyramids marking the dignity of the action to be staged. In contrast the comic scene presents a jostle of disparate buildings, some hinting at lack of occupation and appearing over the roof of a lower bawdy house in the middle ground. In this comparison the tragic scene might be paired with the rigid formality of MediaCity:UK and therefore the insertion of The Oast House in the partially vacant Spinningfields fulfils the parallel with the comic scene.

This interpretation perhaps stretches credibility. But it stands for the creative idea that no matter how distasteful the context within which the urbanist or architect has to work the route out of poor urban spaces, whether they are accidentally achieved or simply the result of poor design, the reading of that context in a positive way is imperative if the situation is to be improved. The complexity of that reworking might even add to the qualities of resulting public space.

In summary it is possible to assert that the most successful of urban spaces show the same three characteristics, that they are genuinely open and permeable, that they are relatively unadorned, and that they are clearly defined. To consider the first of these aspects, openness is significant as a guarantor of the public nature of such spaces. This sounds banal, but it has to be contrasted to the twin contemporary phenomena, the



privatisation of public space and the simulation of public space in the private sphere, particularly for commercial purposes, which my two examples demonstrate. Although public spaces have traditionally been sites of liberty, an important safety valve in any open society, they also help form conventions which hold the collective and the individual in equilibrium. Such permeability leads to social benefits in the ownership of spaces being assumed by a diverse local population.

The second aspect is their liberality of space. A certain severity and robustness of materials far from deterring activity, ensures that a multiplicity of uses are possible within such a space and that variety encourages a vibrant social occupation which an over prescriptive arrangement might prevent. In a paradoxical way, the aspects of use and of the representation of use are often confused and a tranquil treatment of a space allows its qualities to be explored in an ambient way, the extent of which few designers could fathom, the spontaneous and unintentional always having a high degree of significance.

Lastly the clarity of definition reinforces the specificities of place and identity by distinguishing itself from other parts of the city. This aspect of form contrasts with the social manner of openness to create spaces that engage the visitor with the phenomenological experience of the place itself. This haptic appropriation of space precedes any intellectual comprehension.

The visual sense has to be understood as primary. The ambient show this provides to the city underscores the latent theatricality of public space. That only a simulation of this phenomenon is provided by privatized public space should not need stressing. The life of public spaces grew up organically with the juxtaposition of commercial and civic activities rather than being solely the product of commercial ambition. The mistake many contemporary spaces make is in trying to produce that history immediately, leading to inevitable disappointment in the results.

The suburban models that dominate the developed world place a value on unoccupied space which is determined solely by the distance which can be preserved between one citizen and another. Conversely any public spaces worthy of the name functions by encouraging proximity, the contamination of one purpose by another, the variable flow of activities during a day. The possibilities that occur from these planned and fortuitous contacts then fertilize these small patches of urban space so that they assume the specific and sophisticated characteristics of place.

Even a site such as Spinningfields is capable of redemption. On July 5 2009 central Manchester was the site of a performance piece *Procession* by the artist Jeremy Deller that featured a series of surprising tableaux. In particular it had a series of familiar and unfamiliar sections evoking some populist mythic scenarios. The Rose Queens of Manchester's largely defunct Whit Walks traditions were joined by a robust outing from The Ramblers. The all-singing, all-dancing, mock-baroque of 'The Adoration of the Chip' contrasted with a fleet of hearses commemorating closed but legendary nightclubs, from The Hacienda to Rotters. The Big Issue Sellers and Unrepentant Smokers provided the smudge of 'gritty northern realism' but the procession concluded with the crowd gleefully following along Deansgate to the sweetly syncopated works of The Buzzcocks and Joy Division.



Figure 6 Jeremy Deller: *Procession* (photo by the author – all rights reserved)

Perhaps the performance of *Procession* did not have the transcendent qualities of a great urban narrative reenactment such as the Panathenaic procession, but it said more about the notions of civic pride and place than the banal receptacles of spectacular consumption which form Manchester and Salford's recent cosmetically enhanced cityscape. Early in the sequence a truck mocked up as a textile mill complete with a smoking chimney brought the fundamental built environment of the city into the spectators' consciousness, the *ur*-form of industrial space drawn as a memorial icon through the placelessness of Spinningfields. The root from which urban theatricality springs is representation, and combined with its political dimension such potent performances reinforce the importance of public spaces as an urban phenomenon, uniting the present day to the origins of the place. In this respect the true value of historic examples perhaps lie in their transformation over time rather than the notion of enduring and fixed form. During the present economic difficulties contemporary public space is of enhanced importance in democratic societies, and the values it represents, rather than necessarily the forms with which it is expressed, require protection and reaffirmation.

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