

# Creating Habitable Cities From The Bottom Up: A New Role For Archaeology In Urban Planning And Design

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Looking to uses of the term 'public art' over the last century, there is a particular discernible trend.

From Duchamp onwards, we see an idea that art must be part of daily life, summed up by Naumberg in 1955:

*"We can no longer... consider the art of today as something to be valued apart from other aspects of living. The artist, like the man in the street, is at present reacting to the stress and threats of this 'Age of Anxiety'"*<sup>1</sup>

With the later development of Mass Art and Pop Art, we see a development of the same concern, namely that art is now very much 'of the people'. Bensman and Gerver define Mass Art as:

*a) uncontroversial, b) easily identifiable, c) determined by its audience, d) self-maintaining, (uncritical,) and e) conservative.*<sup>2</sup>

Through the 1960s and 1970s, at the same time as Sculpture-In-Architecture and percent For Art, we see the same words reappearing, as in these quotes from Hal Foster:

*"...the creative power of the vernacular..."*, *"...humanizing the urban scene..."*

Essentially, in reference directly to urban space, art was thought capable of making human sense of an otherwise impersonal world.

Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, private public space is in the ascendancy but a loss of public space runs alongside an increase in public art commissioning. Roslyn Deutsche in her writing on public art in New York in the period returns to the terms polite and vernacular, the former being commissioned *within the city* and the latter being uncommissioned and *contributing to the city*. There is an air here between collaboration and resistance. In the UK, the cultural aspirations of the era become enshrined in the PPGs as a series of buzz phrases still recognisable in today's literature:

*"1) Bridging the public/private divide, 2) Going with the grain, 3) Diversity and choice, 4) Vitality and flow, 5) Safety, 6) Access, 7) Environmental quality, 8) Accountability and participation, 9) Cosmopolitanism, 10) Economic vitality, 11) Identity, 12) The evening economy, 13) Sense of place and aesthetic quality, 14) Legibility"*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Naumberg, M. 1955. Art as Symbolic Speech. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 13, No. 4 (June 1955), pp435-450

<sup>2</sup> Bensman, J. and I. Gerver. 1958. Art and Mass Society. *Social Problems* Vol. 6, No. 1 (Summer 1958), p4-10

<sup>3</sup> Montgomery, J. 1990. Cities and the Art of Cultural Planning. *Planning Practice and Research* 5:2, p17-24

Thus in post-war planning we move from art that puts people back into urban environment to art that backs up centrally defined cultural aspirations...but the other stuff is still going on.

## LEGIBILITY



*Bristol Legible City*

Legibility can be nicely summed up by projects like Bristol Legible City, a project aimed at directing people around the town and making it literally easy to read (it has its own font, Bristol Transit). It does discuss public art, but only really in terms of landmarks and 'way-faring'. What is noticeable about Bristol Legible City as described in its own literature is that its target users are a nurse in Bristol on a short contract, a family on holiday and a businessman in town for the day. None of the projected users are local. If locals aren't part of Legibility, where are they?

## HABITABILITY

Habitability is a concept I use to oppose legibility, my use of the term deriving in part from geographical work on urban ecologies, like that of Sarah Whatmore, and critics of the politics of public art like Mark Hutchinson. It is, in my work, located in the manifestations of people's attempts to live their lives in, around and in opposition to those institutional attempts at imposing certain narratives onto the city and the ways that people relate to built space.<sup>4</sup>

The art of the habitable is everywhere, a few examples:

<sup>4</sup> See Hutchinson, M. 2002. Four Stages of Public Art. *Third Text* 16:4, p429-438





*Food For Free, Heath Bunting and Kayle Brandon*



*Graffiti and other work by the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, Bristol*





*Art collectives and temporary spaces, The Parlour Showrooms, Bristol*



*Multiple phases of marking, 1990 – 2008, Stokes Croft, Bristol*

## **IDEAS**

Legibility is about cultural aspiration, often centrally defined. Habitability is about getting by and operates at a complex level of individuals. Non-institutional art like that in the above examples starts to give us a critique of legibility that gets us close to lived daily lives. Although being expressed here through public art, the tension between legibility and habitability exists in all facets of place-making and appreciating the difference is central to understanding urban landscapes. Archaeology, at least as far as the PPGs go, developed in parallel. That being so, what is the archaeology of legibility? What do we gain by looking beyond the legible to the archaeology of the habitable?

It's a bad idea to accept artistic 'interpretations' of places uncritically – remember to ask why and how the work has been made and what the artists' intentions are in making it. If funding bodies or corporate commissions are involved, people have actively chosen to promote one narrative over a number of others, equally valid. It's also a bad idea to accept archaeological practices uncritically – remember to ask why archaeologists are involved with a place, who is paying them and why. Archaeology too makes many narrative choices that privilege certain ideas of culture and history over others in ways that are, although generally passively obtained in the present, deeply rooted in 'big P' politics running across generations.

## **A NEW ROLE FOR ARCHAEOLOGY IN URBAN PLANNING?**

Recent developments in planning legislation suggest the possibility for archaeologists to engage with the development process in new ways that take the field to the creative end of projects. Rather than primarily mitigating development impacts, might archaeology look to models of inclusive, sustainable, socially engaged planning and development to create a new role as a driver of change? Archaeology already occupies a position between developers and local communities, between development and the built environment, and, conceptually, in understanding and analysing the relationship between past and future as manifested in the present. It is not too great a step to foresee a working model wherein detailed archaeological analysis of specific local places could become central to both the identification of locations conducive to particular kinds of development and to the creation and design of sympathetic, sustainable developments which deliver long-term cultural benefits for existing and future residents.

## **PUBLIC SPACE**

The archaeological approach to the subject can be summed up as, initially at least, defining public space through how people act within urban landscapes, where spaces and people are taken to be mutually constitutive. The aim is to create an inclusive definition of the term (and the phenomenon).

## CRICKLEWOOD

In 2013 I took part in a discussion event on the street in Cricklewood, North London, based on the idea that Cricklewood doesn't have public space. Being a contrary archaeologist, I spent the afternoon trying to disprove that statement. Here are the public spaces I found:

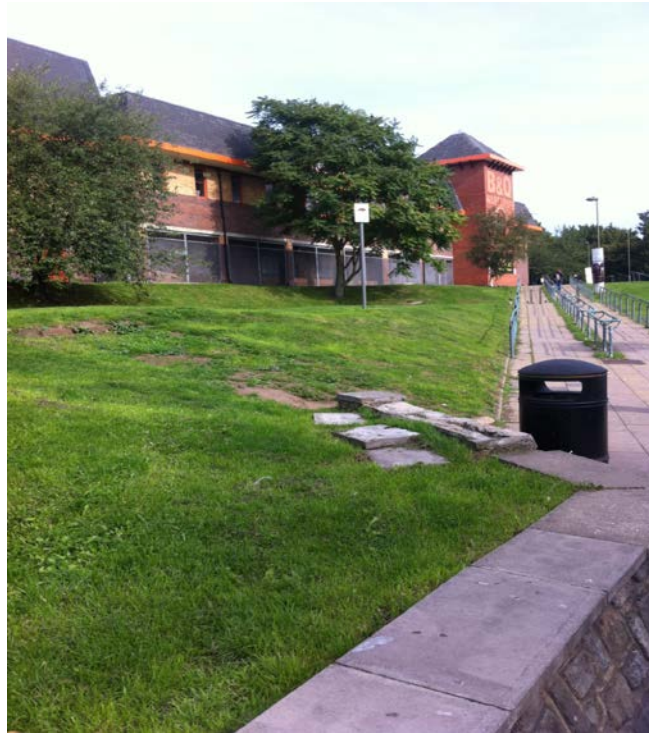


*A 50cm wide band of scratched names, many overlaying each other, between about 1.20m and 1.70m high on a gable-end of a terrace. Due to the uniform height and the stratigraphy of names, I take this to be a space used by children of a certain age, but over multiple generations.*



*Private Property, No Littering. Very much not a public space, except that the bushes behind the sign contained a homeless sleeping site, a kind of public space not accessible to all or accessible all the time, but a kind of public space nonetheless.*





*Bank outside B&Q, part of that shop's property and private space, but popular with locals for the views it gives over the road to the station.*



*A more conventional public space, but hidden away down a residential street and covered in prohibitive signage.*

## **PUBLIC SPACE CONCLUSIONS**

There are a lot of useful kinds of public space that don't look like conventional public spaces. There are useful public spaces that aren't accessible to everyone. There are useful public spaces that aren't available all the time. Understanding urban landscapes benefits from this inclusive definition.

## **LANDSCAPE FORENSICS?**

We also find habitability in, for instance, rioting, where despite immediate causes of most riot events, the context for those causes to emerge and be acted on can often be seen to be long-term and with tangible landscape influences, notably bad post-war planning in inner cities, in the case of the 1980/81 riots in Brixton, Toxteth and St Pauls. The historically deep landscapes of riots must sit alongside their contemporary politics as mutually constitutive, but, importantly, can be seen on the ground.

Likewise, the movement of objects around urban spaces is key to habitability. Around the fringes of central planning, usually in town-centres, usually commercial, there are large numbers of people often collected into local amenity societies, who oppose those centrally-defined notions of what tomorrow should look like by buying or otherwise acquiring street furniture and other items to back up their own alternative visions of the future. The international market in 'heritage-style' lamp posts is a key indicator.

## **WHERE DOES THIS PERSPECTIVE LEAVE ARCHAEOLOGY?**

Central questions for future research:

- How a service model based on the archaeology of legibility and habitability can be used by potential developers looking to create sustainable developments
- Whether there is a 'right kind' and a 'wrong kind' of developer and how archaeologists engage with each
- How this service model could be used by local communities looking to engage particular kinds of developer or in the creation of Neighbourhood Partnerships
- What this service model would mean for the relationship between private sector archaeology firms and local government
- What impact this service model would have on existing archaeological services
- The potential for service models of this kind to be written into planning policy and guidance

This talk is a small part of ongoing research elsewhere. Please contact me at [jdixon@mola.org.uk](mailto:jdixon@mola.org.uk) with any questions or for further information.