

The Cultural Significance of Architecture: In Memory of Dalibor Vesely

Session 3 – Legacy, New Horizons

The Urban Interior – A Territory for Sharing

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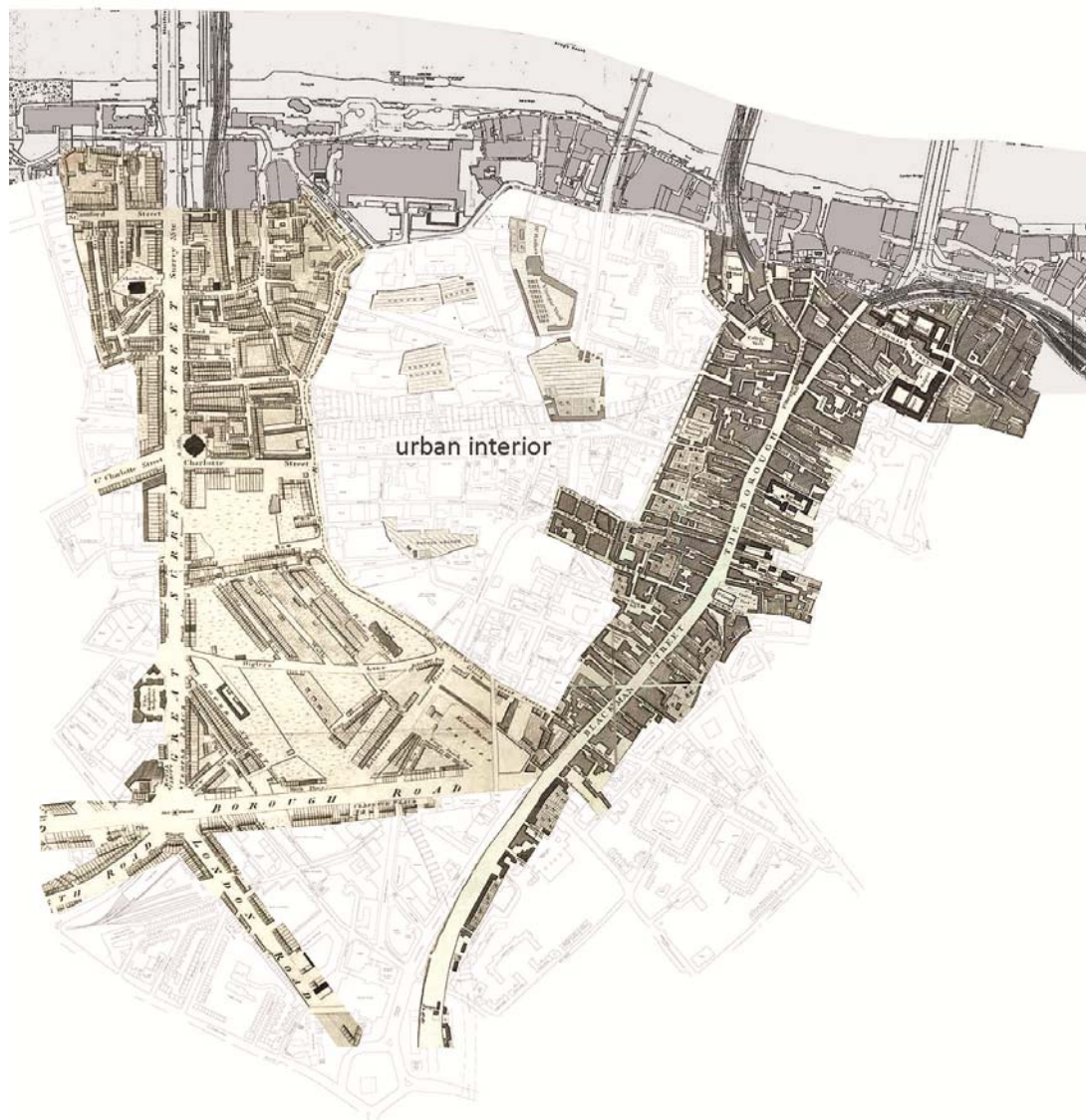
It takes a long time to digest what great teachers teach. With Dalibor, there were the challenges of the philosophical language he adopted combined with the significant effort of un-learning the formal or abstract thinking that underpins most of one's previous education. This runs in parallel with the re-learning to trust what you feel inside, indeed learning to recognise what it is that you are feeling. The leap of faith demanded is made possible with the deep recognition that the reawakening taking place is familiar. There are other challenges too, but the shortfall in personal life experiences of what city might mean: the rich and complex human interactions that constitute city, is the one that cannot be resolved during the timeframe of the design studio.

It was not until leaving Cambridge, and a decade of working in London that lived experiences began to agitate and stir dusty fragments of teachings. It took a conscious effort to begin to learn 'city'. Walking very early one morning each week with another of Dalibor's students, William Mann, we carefully observed each of four historic or contemporary edges of London. We wandered in unfamiliar places and submitted to what we encountered, to the degree of not fully controlling where we went and what we thought - another skill that required degrees of re-learning (you spend much of your childhood doing just this). There was no project in mind and liberated from any necessity to have to focus on anything in particular, you begin to notice THINGS. Breaks or changes in the grain of something, where people congregate, how they occupy spaces, what gets pinned up on different cafe walls, what is being demolished and what is replacing it, where you can climb into, what you are not allowed to do, and who stops you. The walks repeat, different old maps are pulled out and you EXPERIENCE that what exists often carries something of what no longer exists, as well as encountering people and things that resist removal – different sorts of CONTINUITY.

'Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. But to lose oneself in a city - as one loses oneself in a forest - that calls for a quite different schooling. Then, signboard and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its centre.' Walter Benjamin, A Berlin Chronicle, from 'One Way Street and Other Writings', Verso, 1979.

In 2006, our practice was invited to make proposals under a competition to provide a strategic framework for how to improve the public spaces in Bankside, between the Thames and Elephant and Castle. The brief, a collage of anxieties from different public and private organisations, anticipated the 'answer' – a set of design guidelines that would facilitate the

delivery of an identifiable visual brand for the area. It seemed to us that this outcome, still currently in vogue, was part of a dominant culture in London, one that seeks to control commercial interests by determining the life that a place will support. Under these conditions, distinction comes to determine the location of activities into organised clusters, the self-image of a large-scale development defining who might live, work or visit there. The societal benefits of the 'mixed city', the 'diverse city' are frequently invoked but seldom delivered. In their place we witness the making of new neighbourhoods by clearing away what exists, either wholesale on larger sites, or through the piecemeal construction of increasingly familiar individual 'products', like those for hotel groups, supermarket chains, offices and corporate public spaces. This type of action seeks to erase the awkward and messy parts of the past, individuals and odd businesses that interrupt the abstract logic of efficiency and legibility – yet the physical and social conditions of these existing places are often the very things that contribute to the rich complexity of a city.



Collage of the three historic urban structures (institutions): Blackfriars Road to the west, Borough High Street to the east, and the river edge to the north, enclosing the 'urban interior'.

Despite London's size, there are not many places where you can lose yourself in the sense that Benjamin describes. Bankside is however, one of these places, where you quickly encounter a territory of intense historic depth whose ancient topography remains close to the surface. Wandering and losing ourselves we encountered the complex depth of an 'urban interior' that led us to make a series of drawings which were not about mapping in an abstract or factual way. We gradually gained a sense of the deep structure of the area. In response to this we developed an incremental framework for how the shared spaces: streets, passages, gardens small parks and odd squares, could be intensified and added to. We drew on the interpretive world of metaphor to re-imagine this interior as the Bankside Urban Forest.

Through the metaphor of the forest we opened the possibility for a profound metamorphosis – from a city into a natural metabolism. Working with the deep structure and within the fine-grain of the neighbourhood we have implanted an idea in the public consciousness, and provoked others to make individual projects that add to the quality and diversity of life in this place. Through the incremental making of mostly negotiated small-scale interventions: new gardens and small public squares combining with those already planned or underway and the creation of more vivid public places within proposed new developments, we have sought to establish a relationship between the depth of the urban interior and its exterior. This approach opens up further opportunities for social exchange and public life, a commitment to the diverse ecologies and exchanges that make our cities vivid landscapes of the collective imagination.



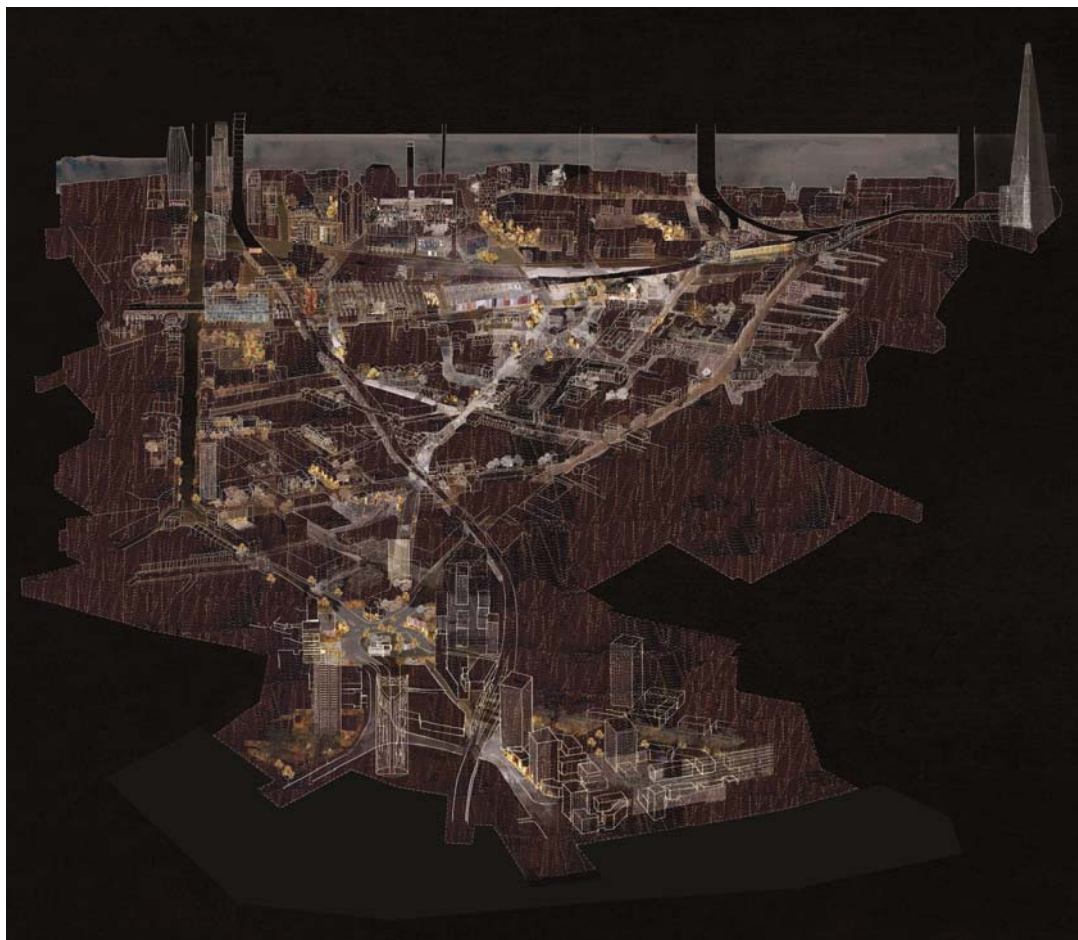
Drawing of the re-imagined Flat Iron Square, one road is closed and the ground extended to connect to the shops. The café roof is wrapped with a planted canopy to bind in the two existing plane trees, like a woodland hut in a clearing. Witherford Watson Mann Architects

“The relative intimacy of a city, any city, of a hundred or more years ago is as hard to overstate as it is to convey...The exigencies of money and the proclivities of bureaucrats – as terrified of anomalies as of germs, chaos, dissipation, laughter, unanswerable questions – have conspired to sanitize the city to the point where there will be no surprises, no hazards, no spontaneous outbreaks, no weeds....As a consequence of these and other changes, we have forgotten what a city was.” Luc Sante, 'The Other Paris', Faber & Faber, 2015

In the New Year of 2007, following our selection to develop the framework for Bankside's public spaces, I went to see Dalibor at his home and showed him the drawings. He recognised in them, at a different scale, a condition that had structured many of the projects he created for the design studio - an URBAN INTERIOR. This was his term and one we included on the drawings. For Dalibor, these particular territories in a city were the places where activities and spaces could evolve beyond the institutions that circumscribe them; high streets, charities and corporate organisations. The urban interior was not something to be considered simply in opposition to these institutions, but as a territory where activities can take place through reciprocal exchanges of mutual interests and values. Then, in a moment of incredible precision and clarity, more so than I could recall previously, he summarised the entire endeavour that we had struggled through;

'Well Stevie, what you are doing is about as much as we can do - simply increasing the opportunities for sharing.'

Of the many things that Dalibor taught us, the one that may be most relevant when designing in the contemporary climate, is the necessity and richness of human sharing and a deep respect for the creation of conditions that are conducive to supporting this.



Drawing of the Bankside Urban Forest as the imagined shared spaces gradually evolve and intertwine. Blackfriars Road and Borough High Street converge in the south at the Elephant and Castle where a huge public square is under construction. Witherford Watson Mann Architects