Suzanne Hall

Building confidence: the emergence of the Bankside urban forest project: process case study

Report

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CABE research project on 'Place making and inclusion'
Building confidence: the emergence of the Bankside Urban Forest Project
Process Case study

Suzanne Hall
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The process of inclusion through place making is as much a spatial concern as it is an organisational one. How spaces are activated, whether they are connected or hidden, who uses them at what times, and how initiatives are supported and managed are questions at the core of the Bankside Urban Forest project. This report captures, at an early stage of the project, interviews with the architects, policy and delivery agencies and individuals who live and work in Bankside, and their diverse perceptions of inclusion and place making associated with the Bankside Urban Forest Project.

1. Background:

In 2007 Witherford Watson Mann Architects were appointed as lead consultants for a public space regeneration process in the Bankside area of south London. Their report *Bankside Urban Forest* (May 2007), commissioned through an invited competition, contained procedural and spatial ideas about regeneration that stood out from eleven other competitors. The competition was overseen by 'Better Bankside', an independent, business-owned and led BID company, with partners including the London Borough of Southwark, Tate Modern, Design For London, the Architecture Foundation, and well-established community organisations such as the Bankside Residents Forum and Bankside Open Spaces Trust.

Set between the River Thames and the Elephant and Castle, and Blackfriars Road and Borough High Street, the Bankside Urban Forest offers a counter point to comprehensive master planning. The design intent is encapsulated in three core ideas:

- working with the expertise of large and small organisations in the area ranging from community groups to businesses;
- emphasising the role of small interventions many of which support existing spaces;
- establishing an incremental approach to delivery and project reviews, where lessons learnt from the early projects refine further projects.

The proposed projects are 'do-able': small budgets can be readily accessed through less bureaucratically incumbent procedures; and the order of the projects can shift with changing priorities. Moreover, public projects delivered in partnerships with local interest groups accords with planning policy in the UK (Planning Policy Statement 1 2005; Local Development Frameworks

2004). In reality the Bankside Urban Forest project relies on including diverse and sometimes competing interests. A key challenge therefore lies in the co-ordination of the co-operation of a diverse client body and the collaboration of equally diverse user groups. The complexity of the challenge of inclusion through place making is further compounded by the strategic urban location of Bankside. As a highly desirable area in which to live, work and invest, established residents are confronted by escalations in land value, a rise in public and speculative interests, and a dramatic increase in tourism. The Bankside Urban Forest projects aims to not only meet local needs, but to influence the substantial scale of developer-driven investment.

2. Process

The Bankside Urban Forest project emphasises the role of smaller scale, incremental initiatives in the regeneration process and is underpinned by core strategies:

- the initiation of small projects, often associated with existing public spaces, that catalyses the formation of further projects through the active involvement of user groups. Small projects are conceptualised as "seeds" for *an accretion* of the networks of spaces, people and activities;
- the role of an overarching design *framework* to direct investment over time. The projects need to establish a repute that challenges the conventions of how corporate landscapes are delivered, as well as involving large and small organisations in the activation and transformation of their respective spaces;
- the role of *places of exchange* including local and broader meeting spaces. Interventions in the public realm are also used to influence what happens in the private edges associated with the project areas.

"Seeds" and the accretion of spaces and networks

A member of the design team stated, 'Basically the idea of the Urban Forest is that public space is made by people; it doesn't exist without people.' Small interventions in the physical landscape or "seeds" are explored as catalysts to engage and release further projects and initiatives. From the outset, site analysis included fine-grained mappings of spaces and activities across the day and night [figure 1.jpg]. The process of analysis engaged local expertise including the involvement of local young people in mapping their area. Their participation has become formalised, and the 'Bankside Urban Pioneers' is steered by the Architecture Foundation with their remit 'to engage teams of 16 to 19 year olds in areas of London undergoing dramatic transformation.' (www.architecturefoundation.org.uk). The Architecture Foundation are currently establishing a 'Bankside Urban Sages' project to harness the expertise of elderly residents. Better Bankside has also initiated a process to establish a Charter with individuals from the Bankside Open Spaces Trust and the Bankside Residents Forum. The initial purpose is to communicate the principles of

the Bankside Urban Forest, while longer-term aims are to establish procurement protocols and good practice principles for project briefs.

- **The "seeds" of Bankside Urban Forest are both spatial and organisational, where inclusion through place making takes a variety of forms. Initiatives are spearheaded by different organisations, under the umbrella of Better Bankside. The inclusion of well-established community-based organisation, who have little funding and largely operate off the input of volunteers needs further consideration.**

Figure 1. 'Local networks: spatial relationships between local residents and the local places they frequent', a visualisation of the local area from interview material (Witherford Watson Mann 2007, p. 14).
(Note: All drawings reproduced with permission of Witherford Watson Mann Architects.)

An emerging framework

The framework for the Bankside Urban Forest project is conceived of and drawn as a stage-by-stage process [figure 2.jpg]. The drawings reflect the network of local spaces associated with schools, churches, and housing estates, as well as prominent destinations like Tate Modern and Borough Market. Because this approach to place making is rooted in a gradual process over time, how the overarching design ethos - both the social aims and spatial qualities – establish a repute to influence large and small contributions and investments is a challenge.

- **The spatial and social mechanisms for maintaining exemplary project standards are not yet fully established. How design principles translate into the procurement, briefing, management and evaluation processes is evolving alongside the delivery of the first projects.**
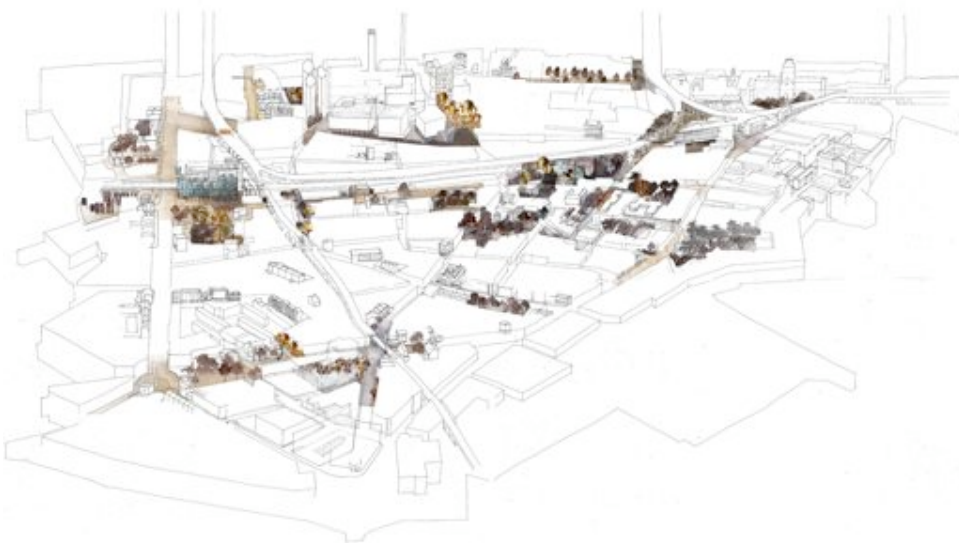
Figure 2. 'The seeds of the framework, spreading roots, and maturing of the framework' (WWM 2007, p. 29-34).

Places of exchange

'There are a number of existing places within Bankside and Borough which in differing ways have the capacity to bring people who do not know each other into contact, places which "suggest" social engagement between different racial, ethnic and class communities, where people can flourish – Places of Exchange.' (Witherford Watson Mann 2007, p. 27) [figure 3.jpg]. But how do locals conceive of their spaces, in the face of urban change? Some residents portray their mixed and changing neighbourhood as a 'transient place', and talk about the benefits and frustrations of living in an area in which much of the occupation is fleeting or short term. In reflecting on development trends, an elderly resident who has lived and worked in Borough since the late 1970s comments:

> a little too much Tate, and the mania for bars and cafes […] If you go to Bankside 3 and look around there, there's all these corners identical, they all look exactly the same […] What about people with children, what about pensioners? What about families? They don't go to those sort of places […] But, you know, we desperately need ordinary shops and ordinary cafes, somewhere where you can take children and families […] most people here are not on £30,000 a year.

- **'Places of exchange' aims to balance the provision of active public spaces with high flows of a general public including tourists, with the enhancement of reprieve spaces often claimed by smaller, more local groups. The projects will generally improve pedestrian movement through the area as many of the principles relate to slowing traffic down. The project locations, often at key intersections, should also improve way-finding. However, the design framework also recognises the need for more hidden spaces that are often located one layer back from prominent public spaces.**
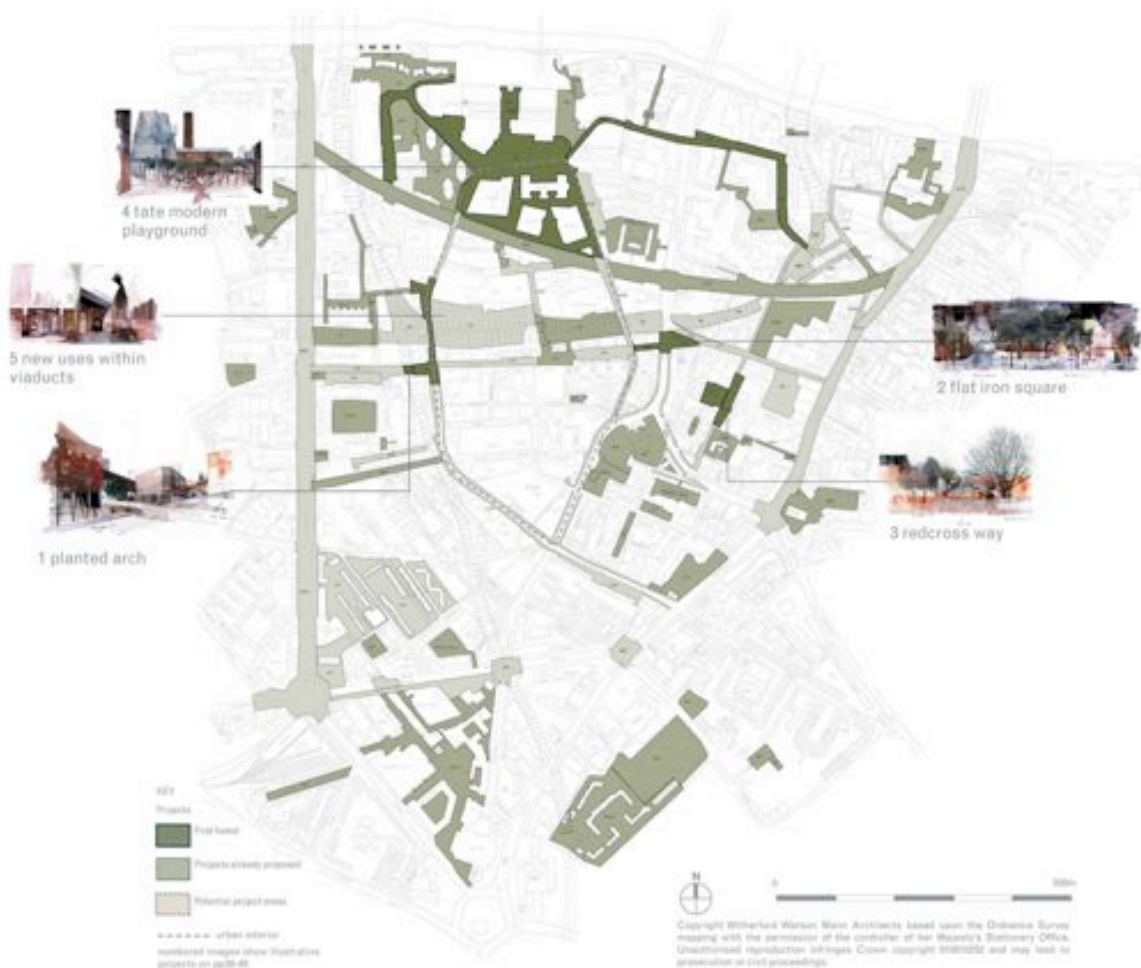
Figure 3. 'Project mapping and illustrative projects' (Witherford Watson Mann 2007**,** p. 36).

3. Evaluation:

Communication and involvement over time

The strategic design framework and the spatial and social projects evoked by the Bankside Urban Forest suggest a set of projects that have the potential to generate additional spaces, activities and investments over time . However, to capture the large and small investments of expertise, time and capital, the ongoing communication of these ideas to range of individuals and organisations is essential.

- **The evolution of the Bankside Urban Forest project depends on building a visibility for what the collection of projects offer. A component of building visibility is a communications strategy that reaches residents, businesses and users of the area. A measure of the communications strategy will be whether local organisations are actively engaged in the process of communication.**

Incremental programmes and implementation

> The Urban Forest has a robust approach. It is robust because this is a time when you are constantly shifting: shifting because of changes in funding and changes in opportunity; shifting because of big politics and small politics; and shifting as you learn, as you implement, as indeed you should do. One of the attractive points of the Bankside Urban Forest Project is that it is incremental; it fits in with the pressures we have with our budgets. We know where we are trying to end up, and we can get the sequences different. We can take the opportunities as they come and we can amend and change our plans according to any of the external factors. And that makes this almost an exemplar. (Peter Bishop, London Development Agency)

Planners involved with the budgeting, implementation and maintenance of the projects echoed Peter Bishop's advocacy of the robust approach of the Bankside Urban Forest Project. Smaller projects are regarded as easier to fund while involving less bureaucratic procedures. Funds from different budget sources can also be pooled from a variety of development partners.

- **Leadership is crucial to how the core ambitions of the project are retained and reviewed. Project coordination is maintained with project partners through the Better Bankside Steering Group, where strategies for project priorities and budgets are pursued. The Bankside Urban Forest needs championing at GLA and Borough levels, and interviews with individuals at the LDA, DFL and LB Southwark, suggest that the project has good institutional support. Inter-agency collaboration will be central to how the projects are funded.**

Small projects, early wins and project review

Development partners have spoken of the strategic value of small projects, where part of the challenge lies in how these projects aggregate into larger social and spatial initiatives. The potential of a small intervention is shown in the first implemented project at 'Redcross Way' [figure 4.jpg], a space that links a local school and community garden. The contract value was £279,700, and funding was pooled from Transport For London, the Forestry Commission, Section 106 and other smaller funds. Crucial to the success of the Redcross Way project is its social spin-offs. Local residents supported an application to Southwark's 'Cleaner, Greener, Safer' programme, and secured £60,000 to support initiatives to link surrounding estates and streets, as well as a planting scheme for the Babington and Pattison House estates. As the use and active programming of local spaces acquires momentum, the longer-term maintenance of the projects will requires ongoing support and funding.

- **An accretion of small projects that evolve over time, requires both early wins as well as a structure for project review, to assess how the project as a whole needs to grow and refine. The question of review is pertinent for the spatial and social evolution of**

the project, for influencing local Spatial Development Frameworks, as well as contributing to policy and design principles targeted at place making and inclusion.

- Revenue and organisational support to sustain the physical quality and social vitality of public spaces also requires consideration.

Figure 4. 'Redcross Way' (above) and 'Flat Iron Square' (below) (Witherford Watson Mann 2007, p. 41-42).

4. Project Summary

- The Bankside Urban Forest project is a design framework by Witherford Watson Mann Architects, for the incremental development of a collection of public realm projects. It relies on working with existing public spaces and organisations, through the coordination of the Bankside Urban Forest Management Group.

- The project is located in a rapidly changing inner city area in south London. Poised between a history of well-established local networks and recent large-scale public and private regeneration, is the challenge of balancing the needs of local residents with the emerging needs of those who work in and visit the area.

- The project was initiated by Better Bankside in 2007 through an invited competition. The first project, Redcross Way, was initiated in 2009, and has lead to additional associated projects.

- The Bankside Urban Forest framework is without statutory powers, but provides a direction to harness local and large-scale investments. Early projects need to deliver on both spatial and social dimensions so as to provide exemplars for Better Bankside to attract and influence further investment.

- A multi-tiered communications strategy that reaches residents, users, investors and policy makers is key. Early initiatives such as the Bankside Urban Pioneers and Sages, as well as the first stage of a Charter are underway.

- Better Bankside provides a structure to ensure leadership and collaboration amongst development partners over time. A structure to evaluate the social and design benchmarks of the Bankside Urban Forest project is still emerging.

- Early projects provide the platform for project review. Lessons should feed back into how the overall project evolves, and ultimately contribute to policy.

5. Further Information

Project Name: Bankside Urban Forest

Lead architects: Witherford Watson Mann Architects

Project type: Urban design framework, and small incremental public space projects

Year commenced: 2007 and ongoing

Location:, south London, between the River Thames and the Elephant and Castle, and Blackfriars Road and Borough High Street

Location type: inner city

Client: inter organisational, steered by Better Bankside

Planning Authority: London Borough of Southwark

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