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To Economise and to Localise:

Austerity and a real life view of the Bankside Urban Forest project

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Introduction

A context of national austerity does not necessarily prompt thoughts on the organisation of civic power, the recognition of local capacity, and their relationships with the making of public space. However, I started writing this paper during the week of large-scale working peoples' protests at the immense scale and pace of cuts being rolled out across Britain since the Liberal Democrat-Conservative alliance took power in May 2010. Since then, there have been further protests, including a week of street 'riots' across urban centres in the UK during early August 2011, all of which cumulatively suggest a growing civil unease with the enforced thrift required to tackle the fallout of the global 2008 financial crisis. Parallel with the pronounced political imperative 'to economise' is the ideological project 'to localise' as encapsulated by David Cameron's notion of the 'Big Society' and its legal counterpart detailed in 'The Localism Bill', first passed for parliamentary consideration in December 2010 (DCLG 2011; HM Government 2010). This paper explores what it really means to simultaneously economise and localise, and more particularly what the implications are for how public space is designed and delivered.

The variety of marches and strikes broadly give voice to core public concerns: Who gets? Who pays? Who is rewarded? Who is penalised? Crucially, these questions have real consequence for how we conceive of and make the city during a frugal dispensation. In considering how to recognise and envision the social and spatial dimensions of the public realm, architects and urban designers are increasingly involved not only in the shapes and textures of public space but also with how local capacities are recognised in the making and maintenance of meeting places (see for example Anglès 2011). To animate this question, I focus on the emergence of the Bankside Urban Forest project from its inception in 2007, on the cusp of an era of economic prosperity and associated optimism in urban development projects of both public and private forms. Set within the London Borough of Southwark, between the River Thames and the Elephant and Castle, and Blackfriars Road and Borough High Street, the Bankside Urban Forest is embedded in an urban landscape actively developed over the last decade by both public and private interests. The Tate Modern, opened in 2000, the South Bank river promenade and Borough Market epitomise a flourishing public realm and are associated with an urban land market that can be described as nothing less than buoyant.

But this is not simply a highly desirable area in which to live, work and invest. It is a territory of saturated histories in which the work and life of an industrial river landscape was paramount, and in which a less prestigious but no less pertinent network of spaces supports a range of established residents who are confronted by escalations in land value, a rise in public and speculative interests, and a dramatic increase in tourism. If a core issue for the Bankside Urban Forest is to not only meet local needs, but to influence the substantial scale of developer-driven investment, what kinds of public spaces are up to the challenge? How do architects think about the different values of different kinds of public space: about how spaces are activated, whether they are connected or hidden, who uses them at what times, and how initiatives are supported and managed?

By referring to the real life aspects of an emerging, imperfect and exploratory project, this paper expands on the practice of city making as the imaginative pursuit of what is possible, within the necessary adage of using less to build more. It probes into the spatial forms, shapes of procurement and strategies for upkeep and operation, where modesty is an underlying concern: less formalised consultation and more vivid involvement; less programme in the interest of more interpretation; and less regulation by way of greater legibility. This paper captures, at an early stage of the Bankside Urban Forest, the emergence of two of its early projects – Red Cross Way and the Urban Orchard. The tactile dimensions of space are analysed alongside interviews with its aggregation of diverse agents including architects, policy and delivery agencies and individuals who live and work in Bankside.

Early days:

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 invited 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.

The Bankside Urban Forest report expressed a number of ideas for thinking about local regeneration as a collection of small-scale initiatives alongside a slower-paced delivery process, through which expertise is fostered. The design intent is encapsulated in three core ideas, the first of which emphasises the role of small interventions many of which support an existing

network of spaces. From this spatial perspective follows the idea of working with the expertise of large and small organisations in the area ranging from community groups to businesses. Finally, an incremental approach to delivery and project reviews is proposed, where lessons learnt from the early projects refine further strategies and 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 (see for example Planning Policy Statement 1 2005; Local Development Frameworks 2004). In an endorsement of the essence of the project Peter Bishop of the London Development Agency states:

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 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. (Interview 2010).

Ordinary publics:

In reality, however, an incremental approach relies on coordinating diverse and competing interests, and on retaining the integrity of key ideas over what is often a lengthy and distorting timeframe. Similarly, a key challenge for Bankside Urban Forest project lies in the co-ordination of a diverse client body and the collaboration of equally diverse user groups. Further, as is evident in the Urban Forest project, the complexity of including diverse user groups through place making, is compounded by the disparate urban fabric of Bankside/Borough. This is nowhere made more apparent than in taking a walk along the east-west stretch of Southwark Street, where the northern edge is fronted by large blocks of mainly new, corporate development rendered in plate glass and granite, synonymous with the formation of prestigious global

cityscapes (Sklair 2006; Gospodini 2002). An historic array of brick buildings form the southern background to Southwark Street, and includes small shops, social housing estates, churches and schools.

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.

(Interview 2009)

Local residents of SE1 described their mixed and changing neighbourhood as a transient place, and talked about the benefits and frustrations of living in an area in which so many people pass through. These short-term occupations range from the large student population who reside in the area in close proximity to education institutions such as South Bank University and the London College of Communication, to the ever-increasing stream of tourists who venture between London Bridge and Westminster Bridge, along the River Thames. The idea of a 'mixed community' was expressed by the residents neither in terms of class nor ethnicity, but in terms of those who have a long-term investment in the local area versus those who use the area fleetingly and whose needs are therefore more short term.

The sense of a public world sought after by longer-term residents was encapsulated by a comparatively informal, commonplace public, as described as, 'in-off-the-street', and 'don't-book-in-advance' spaces, including elements as perfunctory but necessary as sitting spaces, 'You shouldn't have to buy a cup of coffee to sit down.' These residents raised both the loss of established spaces associated with day-to-day life in the local area but also the emergence of

new kinds of public space and activities more inclined towards tourists and office workers. The architects' conception of public space resonates with an 'everyday urbanism' (Chase, Crawford and Kaliski 1999), and is spatialised as a web-like series of connected and disconnected spaces, and small spaces within local enclaves as well as more overt 'places of exchange'. The underlying essence of these public worlds, is that the architecture should support a 'less prescriptive sociality':

There are a number of existing places in 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: 27).

In the early competition stage, the defining feature that was said to distinguish Witherford Watson Mann's competition entry from those of the two more established practices in the final running - Herzog & DeMueron and Caruso St John Architects - was the attention to local texture. This included not only mappings of existing interior landscapes and hidden places, but also patterns of activity and networks of local civic groups, in which the area is particularly well endowed (figure 1). From the outset, site analysis included fine-grained records of spaces and activities across the day and night. This early process of analysis engaged local expertise including the involvement of local young people in mapping their area. Their participation subsequently became formalised, and the 'Bankside Urban Pioneers' is now 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 have also established a 'Bankside Urban Sages' project to incorporate the expertise of elderly residents. The notion of a spatial web of public worlds readily expanded, with institutional help, to include existing and imminent webs of social worlds. This is an interpretation of public space as that which emerges, not simply through official design, procurement and authorisation, but through the engagement of informal memberships and local 'know how'.



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).

(Note: All drawings reproduced with permission of Witherford Watson Mann Architects.)

Urban accretion:

How do designed public spaces come into being? Or more importantly, how do they reach fruition? Let's return to the incremental process proposed in the Urban Forest project, which

inherently supports an urbanism of accretion as opposed to completion, developed in the architects' language as seeds, within a framework.

Seeds

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. The "seeds" of Bankside Urban Forest are both spatial and organisational, where inclusion through place making takes a variety of forms. Initiatives are potentially spearheaded by different organisations, under the umbrella of Better Bankside. Early teething pains relate to institutional overlaps and limited funding. Many of the well-established community-based organisation such as BOST and the Bankside Resident's Forum, have little funding and largely operate off the input of volunteers. But this is input, as stressed by local organisations, which is already stretched to capacity. For these organisations to be further involved, and for their local expertise to be recognised and valued, not only notionally but in organisational and financial terms, a far more detailed consideration of their participation in local development initiatives is required. However, local expertise and in particular the capacity to self-organise is, according to residents, a long-established response to the large-scale regeneration of the area:

So there is now a tradition around here of people who are consulted, and people working dynamically, usually in small groups [...]. So these projects have grown people within. There are already, if you like, places for people to go to with their ideas.
(Interview 2010)



Figure 2. Seeds of the Urban Forest (Witherford Watson Mann 2007).

A framework

The framework for the Bankside Urban Forest project is conceived of and drawn as a stage-by-stage process. The architects' evocative 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 spatial qualities and social aims - establish a reputation to influence large and small contributions and investments is a primary challenge. The spatial and social mechanisms for maintaining exemplary project standards are not yet fully established, and how design principles translate into the procurement, briefing, management and evaluation processes is evolving alongside the delivery of the first projects. In seeking to establish an inclusive design processes however, the quality of the design framework, and how it translates into a sensuous and optimistic 'first layer' cannot be underestimated. At this point, I turn to two of the early projects in the Urban Forest to explore their limitations and achievements as public spaces: places that attend to everyday needs, but that also have a sense of optimism.



Figure 3. Maturing the Forest (Witherford Watson Mann 2007).

Two projects:

Development partners have spoken of the strategic value of small projects, where projects aggregate into larger social and spatial initiatives. The potential of a small intervention is shown in the first implemented project at 'Redcross Way' a space that links a local school and community garden. The contract value was £279,700.00 and funding was pooled from Transport for London, the Forestry Commission, Section 106 and other smaller funds. The lustrous suggestions in the Witherford Watson Man image, however, have been somewhat diminished in the fairly demure translation built in 2010. But what we as visitor to the site cannot see, is the richness of social spinoffs accrued by the Redcross Way project. 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. It is a project that builds on the everyday, although its spatial components remain somewhat demure.



Figure 4 & 5. RedCross Way as built (above) and as imagined by the architects (below: Witherford Watson Mann 2007).

In contrast, for two weeks over the summer of 2010, a hoarded-off piece of land next to one of the railway bridges in Union Street was converted into a sensuous and social wonderland. The energies of the Architecture Foundation, The Wayward Plant Registry, Better Bankside and the Bankside Resident's Forum joined forces to realise the project. As part of the aspirant exploration afforded by 'interim use' projects, the four-month transformation of the derelict site into 'The Union Street Urban Orchard', produced a profuse collage of trees, plants, seeds, vegetables and recycled materials (The Architecture Foundation 2011). The project grew, and in the fourteen days of summer, it became a public space that encouraged the imaginations of young and old and local and outsider. As Heather Ring of The Wayward Plant Registry stated, 'Embedded in the design was a process that facilitated collaboration and experimentation' (2011: 33). These seemingly temporary initiative has grown into a more permanent project where residents are working directly with The Wayward Plant Registry in local landscape and agriculture projects.



Figure 6. Author's photograph of the Union Street Urban Orchard, Summer 2010

The ideology and realities of localising:

The strategic design framework and the spatial and social projects evoked by the Bankside Urban Forest suggests 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 on going development of leadership, networks of organisations, and communication strategies is essential. I'll turn briefly now to the Localism Bill, and draw on the complexities of what it means to localise, through lessons of the Bankside Urban Forest. The Localism Bill, introduced for parliamentary consideration in December 2010, is essentially a tripartite political proposal: for the decentralisation of power (but not resources) away from centralised authority; for participatory decision-making through local authorities and neighbourhood groups; and for alternative modes of service delivery outside of the state. The neo-liberal ambition for 'radical decentralisation' as articulated in *Decentralisation and the Localism Bill* report (HM Government 2010) will have discernable implications for planning, not least because of the emphatic shift away from regional planning strategies in favour of neighbourhood planning. This will permit 'communities' to draw up 'neighbourhood development plans', build small developments and establish social enterprises and community groups to provide services.

The vehicles for the envisaged empowerment of local authorities, includes a 'General Power of Competence' that permits local authorities greater freedom to make decisions provided they act within the centralised framework of legality. At the neighbourhood scale, the Bill seeks to allow local government more control over funding streams, 'place-based' or 'community budgets' and a reformed Community Infrastructure Levy allowing for funds for both capital and operational budgets.

From the contextual perspective of the Bankside Urban Forest project as a place constituted by many, often conflicting local groups, and as a place occupied by both established residents and far more transitory populations, four key challenges are raised:

- i) Can a decentralised, participatory local politics – 'Localism' – have any actual, scaled-up impact in the light of global economic forces and fundamental structural inequalities that are deeply evidenced in the polarised geography of London's local places? Questions here are: do the loudest, more powerful, more well-organised constituencies get more credibility and cash?; NGO's and volunteers who are active in the area already complain about the limited stretch of their tight budgets, so will the implication of their greater involvement be duly compensated for?
- ii) Is 'the local' a confined territorial entity where parochial concerns are legitimised over broader concerns, moreover one that belongs 'more' to those who reside in, rather than those who work in local areas? Here we need to think about what the structures of representation and accountability are, as well as how are parochial concerns are vetted. (See Frug 2011)
- iii) How do we recognise local forms of knowledge and resource networks, such as the small shops, markets, and small-scale groups that lie outside of less culturally dominant value systems?

Conclusions

A political shift towards recognising and supporting local capacities warrants support. But 'the local', as suggested by the Bankside Urban Forest context, is a highly varied and complex terrain that consists of actors with differing access to power and resources, differing needs, and varied commitments to fleeting or long-term investment. 'The local' is anything but a static, homogenous and small grouping. Rather, it is an aggregation of groupings that requires

structures and systems of representation, accountability and organisation. Whether in a context of prosperity or austerity, the local therefore requires more rather than less financial support, more rather than less leadership, and more rather than less co-ordination between variegated local groups. The current neo-liberal proposition, for a decentralisation of power, without a decentralisation of resources, is therefore more than an unfortunate paradox that will need institutional and financial resolution if the local is to have any capacity to genuinely participate and deliver.

On a more positive note, there are emerging modes of architectural and urban design practice that offer poetic, political and pragmatic possibilities for embedded processes of city making in contexts of limited resources. Amongst these is the Bankside Urban Forest, an appropriately modest but no less than aspirational project, that is probing, in both spatial and procedural dimensions, what it means 'to grow' public spaces, rather than to complete them. To engage in an urbanism of accretion, requires organisational and imaginative capacity, where the creative potentials of architecture reside as much in the sensualities of form as they do in the processes that animate space.

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

Client: inter organisational, steered by Better Bankside

Planning Authority: London Borough of Southwark

Sources of funding: The main funding of £6.4m comes from a wide range of sources, including the London Development Agency, Better Bankside and other contributions, London Borough of Southwark and Transport for London.

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