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Book section

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Introduction: urban austerity and design dispositions

Austerity is more than the limited availability of public resources. Austerity, as we have come to know it over recent years, is a severe restriction on public resources as a matter of political action pursued in a context of economic fragility. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, 'austerity' has been used to preface national ideologies of fiscal restriction, with distinctive effects in the limitation of public resources, thereby fundamentally altering the composition of the urban landscape[1]. Here, I bring together the state commitment to 'Austerity Britain', with the on-going evolution of a public space project in Bankside, south London. The aim of this chapter is to explore the role of design in an economic context of state cut backs paralleled with burgeoning urban regeneration. By following the early stages of the 'Bankside Urban Forest' project, an initiative framed by its incremental and potentially 'economical' approach, I explore what imaginations and participations are possible within a modest design process. The questions that emerge are whether an incremental design process is sufficiently agile and adaptive to circumvent the strictures of austerity, or whether design-by-accretion inadvertently pays lip service to public inclusion through constrained forms of public delivery.

In the course of the chapter the fieldwork material suggests that 'austerity urbanism' is not simply a condition of aggressive market logics (although 'accumulation by dispossession'[2]

Is feature of recent redevelopment in the broader south London area in which the Bankside Urban Forest is located). Austerity urbanism is also a context of limitations in which creative forms of public activism and alternative design processes challenge dominant design and regeneration logics invested in the 'world-class city' motif.[3] Public resistance to the current mode of austerity governance has voiced pressing public concerns: Who gets?; Who pays?; Who is rewarded?; and perhaps most crucially, Who is penalized? These questions are raised across a public spectrum, often in creative re-interpretations of public action and redress.[4] Such concerns have also entered into architectural practice, with consequences for how public projects are conceived of and delivered during a frugal and conservative dispensation.[5] In considering how to recognize and envision the social dimensions of public space, design potentially engages with the formalized shapes and textures of place and with how local capacities are actively incorporated in the making and maintenance of public space.[6] This chapter addresses a design economy that allows for less formalized consultation and more vivid public involvement, and less programme in the interest of more interpretation. In outlining, at the early stages of the Bankside Urban Forest, the emergence of two of its initial projects - Red Cross Way and the Urban Orchard - the tactile dimensions of space are analysed, alongside interviews with architects, policy and delivery agencies and individuals who live and work in Bankside.

The Bankside Urban Forest project emerged in 2007 on the cusp of an era of economic prosperity and New Left optimism for the role of design in the transformation of public urban space. The 'Mayor's 100 Public Space Programme' launched in 2002 by mayor Ken Livingstone provided a key reference point, while public organizations like CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) and the Architecture Foundation developed an infrastructure of ideas, intelligentsia and programmes to promote and support design capacities in the shaping of urban environments. By 2008 the mayor's Public Space Programme had been cut, and in 2011 CABE had been dismantled and substantially

reduced to merge with the Design Council. However, pre 2008 regeneration ebullience foresaw the launch of an invited design competition with the remit of recomposing the urban realm broadly between the River Thames and the Elephant and Castle, and Blackfriars Road and Borough High Street. The competition and subsequent project was overseen by 'Better Bankside', an independent, business-owned and led BID (Business Improvement District) company, with partners including the London Borough of Southwark, Tate Modern, Design For London, the Architecture Foundation, and well-established community organizations such as the Bankside Residents' Forum and Bankside Open Spaces Trust.

In 2007 Witherford Watson Mann Architects (WWM) were appointed as lead consultants for the public space regeneration process in the Bankside area. Their report *Bankside Urban Forest* (May 2007)[7], commissioned through an invited competition, contained procedural and spatial ideas about regeneration that were explicitly embedded in local texture. In their detailed report, WWM's urban framework included mappings of existing interior landscapes, patterns of activity and networks of local civic groups, and visual and interview material from individuals and groups who lived in the area. The project is equally embedded in a complex urban landscape, actively developed over the last decade by both public and private programmes, and is associated with an urban land market that can be described as nothing less than buoyant. While the Bankside area is marketed as a highly desirable area in which to live, work and invest, remnants of an industrial river landscape endure. A less prestigious but entirely significant network of spaces and practices support 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 recognize and meet local needs, then this challenge cannot be separated from the challenge of attending to varied, and at times conflicting needs. How do architects think about the different and competing values of public space? By referring to aspects of an emerging, imperfect and exploratory project, this chapter expands on the economy of city-

making in the context of austerity: as the imaginative pursuit of what is possible, within the

necessary adage of using less to build more.

An incremental approach:

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 local expertise is fostered. The design intent is encapsulated in three

core ideas, the first of which emphasizes the role of small interventions that support an

existing network of spaces central to the everyday life of residents in the area, including

schools, parks, churchyards and a public library. From this spatial perspective follows the

second idea of working with the expertise of large and small organizations in the area,

ranging from community groups to businesses. Finally, a reflective approach to delivery and

project reviews is proposed, where lessons learnt from the early projects refine further

strategies and projects. The proposed incremental approach is 'do-able': small budgets can

be readily accessed through less bureaucratically incumbent procedures; and the order of

the projects can shift with necessarily 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, former head 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.[8]

In reality, however, an incremental approach relies on coordinating diverse and competing interests, and 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 interest groups, all of whom are differently funded, and some of whom are required to give of their labour, local capital and expertise. Further, the complexity of including diverse user groups through a process of public place-making, is compounded by the disparate physical and social urban fabric of Bankside. This is nowhere made more apparent than in taking a walk along the east-west stretch of Southwark Street, with its northern edge fronted by large blocks of new, corporate development rendered in plate glass and granite, synonymous with the formation of prestigious global cityscapes.[9] An historic array of brick buildings form the southern background to Southwark Street, including small shops, social housing estates 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.[10]

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 include 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, and who are housed in an increasingly profitable and privatized form of housing provision for students in London. Even shorter–term

occupations are evidenced in the increasing stream of tourists who venture between London Bridge and Westminster Bridge, along the River Thames. The idea of a 'mixed community' was therefore expressed by the residents neither in terms of class nor ethnicity, but in temporal terms as those who have a long-term investment in the local area, versus those who use the area fleetingly and whose needs and affiliations are 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 These included elements as perfunctory as sitting spaces, with one resident insisting, 'You shouldn't have to buy a cup of coffee to sit down.' Residents raised both the loss of established spaces associated with day-to-day life in the local area and also the emergence of new kinds of public space and activities more inclined towards tourists and office workers. Through the notion of an 'urban forest' the architects' conception of public space resonates with an 'everyday urbanism',[11] and is spatialized as a web-like series of places 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'.' [12]

However, these are precisely the public worlds that are often publicly sponsored, places in which since 2008, programmes or actual spaces have been operationally reduced or simply closed as part of the austerity rationale.

From the outset, WWM's observations and 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 formalized, and the 'Bankside Urban Pioneers' initiative was steered by the Architecture Foundation, an independent non-profit agency, with their remit 'to engage teams of 16 to 19 year olds in areas of London undergoing dramatic transformation'.[13] Learning from the base of the Urban Forest Project, the initiative expanded under the leadership of the Architecture Foundation, to regeneration areas including South Bank, King's Cross, Deptford, Battersea, Upper Lea Valley, Barking, Canada Water, Willesden Green and Heathrow, and the Architecture Foundation also established an 'Urban Sages' programme to incorporate the expertise of elderly residents. Together with the energy of other organizations such as the Bankside Open Spaces Trust, the notion of a spatial web of public worlds readily expanded, to include existing and imminent webs of social worlds. The spatial web is an interpretation of public space as that which emerges, not simply through official design, procurement and authorization, but through the engagement of informal memberships and local 'know how'. While this involvement represents a public process of participation and making, it is also a fragile and asymmetrical process, dependent on a loose cohesion of resources and expertise, many of which are publicly funded, and whose efficacy in times of austerity is therefore reduced or immobilized. In contrast, Better Bankside, the appointed Business Improvement District company, whose income is in part drawn from an annual levy of some 480 companies in the BID area, retains an income stream and a motivation, 'to improve the area for commercial activity'[14] - notwithstanding its significant community outreach programme.

The incremental process proposed in the Urban Forest project, which inherently supports an urbanism of accretion as opposed to completion, is developed in the architects' language as 'seeds' within a framework. 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 organizational, where inclusion through place-making takes a variety of organizational forms. Initiatives are potentially spearheaded by different organizations, under the umbrella of Better Bankside. The early teething pains that were identified in a variety of interviews relate to institutional overlaps and limited funding. Many of the well-established community-based organizations have little funding and largely operate off the input of volunteers. But this is input, as stressed by local organizations, which is already stretched to capacity. For these organizations to be further involved, and for their local expertise to be recognized and valued, not only notionally but in organizational 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-organize is, according to residents, a long-established response to the large-scale regeneration of the area, a response in which individuals and groups are increasingly competent:

> 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.[15]

Figure 1. Seeds of the Urban Forest (with permission of Witherford Watson Mann).

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. This is an economy of place-making rooted in the gradual processes of observation and participation over time, an overarching design ethos immersed in the spatial and social presence of place. The modest framework serves to establish a particular sensibility to influence large and small contributions and investments. The spatial and social mechanisms for maintaining exemplary project standards were not yet fully established during my six-month period of analysis in 2010 to 2011; how design principles translate into the procurement, briefing, management and evaluation processes were evolving - not without teething pains - alongside the delivery of the first projects. In seeking to establish inclusive design processes, however, the quality of the design framework, and how it translates into a publicly attuned, appropriately 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, and that also have a sense of optimism.
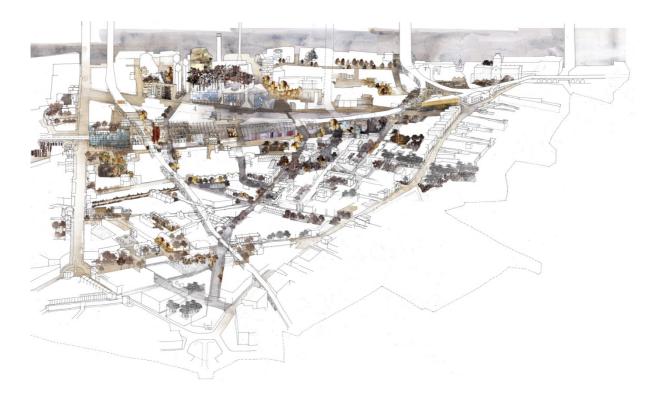
Figure 2. Maturing the Forest (with permission of Witherford Watson Mann).

Two projects:

Development partners spoke frequently of the strategic value of small projects, where projects aggregate into larger social and spatial initiatives. The potential of a small intervention was shown in the first implemented project at 'Redcross Way', a space that links a local school and community garden. The contract value was a comparatively modest £279,700.00 and funding was pooled from Transport for London, the Forestry Commission, Section 106 agreements[16] and other smaller funds. The lustrous suggestions of space in the Witherford Watson Mann drawings in the initial report, however, were somewhat diminished in the translation built in 2010. But public space is not simply what can be seen on site: there are social spinoffs accrued by the Redcross Way process. Local residents supported an application to Southwark's 'Cleaner, Greener, Safer' programme, and secured £60,000 to support initiatives to link surrounding housing estates and streets, incorporating a planting scheme for the Babington and Pattison social housing estates. Although the tactile

components of the public space remain somewhat demure, here is a modest project that is a starting point for building on everyday networks and capacities.

In contrast to the RedCross Way project, a hoarded-off piece of land next to one of the railway bridges in Union Street was converted for two weeks over the summer of 2010 into a sensuous and social wonderland. The use of the land was granted by a benevolent landowner, and the energies of the Architecture Foundation, The Wayward Plant Registry, Better Bankside and the Bankside Resident's Forum combined to realise an 'interim use' 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.[17] The project literally grew, and in fourteen days over the summer, it became a public space that encouraged the imaginations of young and old and local and outsider. Heather Ring of The Wayward Plant Registry commented, 'Embedded in the design was a process that facilitated collaboration and experimentation'.[18] This seemingly temporary initiative has grown into more permanent projects where residents worked directly with The Wayward Plant Registry in local landscape and agriculture projects.

Conclusions: the incongruity of incrementalism and austerity

The strategic design framework and the socio-spatial public projects evoked by the Bankside Urban Forest suggest an incremental process of making public space with the potential to generate additional spaces, activities and investments over time. The incremental aspect accommodates exploration, flexibility and affordability, but such processes are only possible with the sustained investment of creativity, expertise and social capital developed by a network of organizations. The network often operates in an asymmetrical consortium, with disparate availabilities of income and resources, an imbalance compounded by cuts back in

public funding. While the fiscal capacities of local authorities, public organizations outside of the state, and community-based groups are diminished under the austerity regime, the commercial funding stream for Business Improvement Districts such as Better Bankside remain comparatively intact, potentially placing important public space experiments effectively in the hands of the private sector.

The Bankside Urban Forest project nonetheless reflects emerging modes of architectural practice that offer poetic, participatory and pragmatic possibilities for embedded processes of city-making in a context of limited resources. As conceived, the Bankside Urban Forest remains an appropriately modest - but never less than aspirational project - that probes, in both spatial and procedural dimensions, what it means 'to grow' public spaces rather than to complete them. For architects to engage in the economics of an urbanism of accretion, requires organizational and imaginative capacity, where the creative potentials of making reside as much in the sensualities of form as they do in the processes that animate space. They also require of architects endurance; a commitment to sticking with extended design and delivery processes often without significant financial remuneration. Such a design commitment is made all the more difficult in a climate of recession, where comparatively small but innovative design practices - that are significantly invested in public projects pushing the boundaries of what clients and users comprehend of as public space - are themselves pushed into the stringent realities of financially maintaining their practices. Since 2008, numerous design practices, with abundant reserves of social and spatial imagination, have fallen to the ruthless effects of recession. Incremental projects are crucial processes of spatial exploration, but for the architects involved, they are not necessarily sustainable ventures in financial terms.

In the larger context, the ideology of 'Austerity Britain' - despite the accompanying rhetoric of decentralized control and regard for local initiatives[19] - has inculcated an economic

centralization that has effectively undermined local authorities,[20] and local capacities, through the severity of fiscal restraints. 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 diverse and at times competitive groupings that requires structures and systems of representation and accountability. Whether in a context of prosperity or austerity, local public space projects therefore require more rather than less public financial support, more rather than less leadership, and more rather than less co-ordination between variegated groups. The current neo-liberal proposition, for a decentralization of power, without a decentralization of resources, is therefore more than an unfortunate paradox skewed in the interests of the private sector. Both financial and political reform is required if the design of public space is to have any potential to genuinely engage with participatory transformations of the urban landscape.

Acknowledgements:

Notes

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