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## Orchestrated public space: the curatorial dimensions of the transformation of London's Southbank Centre

### Book section

**Original citation:** Originally published in: Golchehr, Saba, Ainley, Rosa, Friend, Adrian, Johns, Kathy and Raczynska, Karolina, (eds.) *Mediations: Art & Design Agency and participation in public space, conference proceedings*. London, UK : Royal College of Art, 2016, pp. 244-257.

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## **ORCHESTRATED PUBLIC SPACE**

### **The Curatorial Dimensions Of The Transformation Of London's Southbank Centre**

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*Keywords: Public Space, Open Space, Curation, Southbank Centre, Ethnographic*

#### ABSTRACT

Since 1999, London's Southbank Centre, an assemblage of arts venues and constituent public spaces in central London, has been undergoing a gradual 'transformation' that continues to this day (Southbank Centre, 2016). In addition to works to refurbish the arts venues, this transformation has involved the renewal of the public realm between, around and (most infamously) beneath those venues. Using ethnographic data I seek to unpack the curatorial dimensions of the redesign and reappropriation of public space at this site.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A curious tension characterises contemporary writing about urban public space. On the one hand, a number of commentators and practitioners, in design fields in particular, have proclaimed a public realm renaissance. In the UK context, this was signalled by the publication of the Urban Task Force (1999) report *Towards an Urban Renaissance* with the Chair of this task force, Richard Rogers, pronouncing that 'we are on the way to giving London the best public spaces of any city' (in Barker, 2007:53). And yet, while the landscaping of areas of public realm that were until recently treated as merely 'spaces between buildings' (Gehl, 1996) gains increasing attention, many scholars lament the end of public space (especially Sorkin, 1992).

There appears to be a fundamental misalignment then, between the sorts of public spaces that many urban theorists fear are disappearing and the sorts of public spaces that are presently being produced in city centres. As Amin and Thrift (2002:135) observe:

The erosion of public spaces is seen to threaten the public sphere. And so urban leaders are pressed to rehabilitate derelict spaces, reintroduce cafes, fairs and bazaars in public places, pedestrianise streets, plan multifunctional spaces .... The aesthetic desire cannot be faulted, but are the above necessarily civic spaces?

While there is a renewed emphasis on the production of urban public realm, this does not necessarily translate into the manifestation of characteristically 'civic' urban public space; of space that affords 'mutual engagement, and so mutual obligation and loyalty' (Sennett, 1999:24). Notably, many of the claims about the revitalisation of public space and counter-claims about its decline have been made in abstract, decontextualised accounts. City authorities on the one hand emphasise the centrality of revitalised urban public spaces to their visions, while critics lament the loss of seemingly idealised forms of public space and constituent civic-ness.

This paper adds to a sparse but growing corpus of studies of how urban public space (and the production of that space) is experienced (Low, 2000; Degen, 2008). The paper speaks to a set of interrelated literatures. Theoretically, the paper takes Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad – spatial practice, representations of space and spaces of representation – as a basis for moving beyond a focus on architectural objects to the production of space; as a means to understand how urban space is constituted dialectically at the interface of physical form and social relations. In addition, the paper is situated substantively in relation to two parallel, but rather disconnected, urban studies literatures – the first pertaining to the commodification of 'disneyfication' of the urban public realm (e.g. Sorkin, 1992) and the second to the emergence of 'creative city' approaches to urban governance (e.g. Mould, 2015). Finally, a separate literature on the increasing prevalence of curatorial practices in contemporary social life (O'Neill, 2012; Balzer, 2015), including in urban planning and governance (Wong, 2011), underpins this work. Specifically, the paper takes this literature as a starting point for thinking about the sociological implications of a curatorial approach to place-making – whereby 'curatorship' is understood as 'a potentially independent, critically engaged and experimental form of exhibition-making practice' (O'Neill, 2012:2) – on London's South Bank.

The data analysed for this paper were collected intensively over a four-year period (2003–7) and supplemented through a number of follow-up visits to the Southbank Centre. The fieldwork was conducted during the ongoing transformation of the Centre and sought to explore how visitors used the public spaces available to them, how professionals charged with redesigning and managing its spaces accounted for the transformation of these spaces and how the proposed changes were represented in formal designs for, and accounts of, the transformation. This multi-faceted approach afforded a more holistic understanding of the spatial production

processes constitutive of Lefebvre's spatial triad, by amassing data on how the spaces are architecturally and managerially produced, how they are used and how they are represented.

In particular, through a thematic analysis of accounts of the experience, use and production of public space at the Southbank Centre, this paper elucidates one reason why we might be experiencing the concomitant production and decline of public space. This argument draws on Kevin Lynch's (1965) notion of the 'openness of open space.' At the Southbank Centre the transformation (and importantly *realisation*) of public space appears to threaten to 'enclose' that space (to extend Lynch's conceptual terminology). Moreover, this threat to the openness of space experienced around the Southbank Centre is not only material (in terms of how the local morphology is physically configured) but also symbolic (in terms of how the 'use value' (Lefebvre 1991) of public space is arguably increasingly prescribed by the Southbank Centre). That is, in accounts of those responsible for transforming the Southbank Centre there is an evident will not only to physically reshape the Centre's urban realm but also to *curate the content of that realm*.

## 2. THE SOUTHBANK CENTRE

The South Bank, the riverside district on the south embankment of the Thames in which the Southbank Centre is located, has a long history as a site of leisure. This dates back to the opening of Cuper's Gardens, one of London's main pleasure gardens, in the area in the 1630s. Leisure gave way to more industrial and transport-infrastructure uses in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and right up to the Second World War. During the war extensive bomb damage left much of the area gutted and seemingly abandoned (Mullins, 2007:26) and as a result by the early postwar period '[t]he South Bank had become "a term of despair and reproach"' (Ackroyd, 2007:212).

It was at this point that aspects of a proposal to regenerate the South Bank as a cultural district (as part of the 1943 County of London Plan) were revived. Specifically, Clement Attlee's Labour Government (1945–51) chose a 29-acre parcel of land on the South Bank for the centrepiece of the 'Festival of Britain.' This 'South Bank Exhibition' – comprising a concert hall (the Royal Festival Hall (RFH)), arts festival and temporary industrial design installations – attracted 8.5 million people over its five-month (May–September 1951) run.

While the subsequently elected Conservative Government decided to raze the entire exhibition site, except the RFH, to the ground, a new and continuing era of cultural activities in the area had been initiated. Thus a series of additional arts venues (the National Film Theatre, the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Hayward Gallery) were built in the environs of the RFH between 1958 and 1967. Their delivery was presided over by the London County Council (LCC) and its successor the Greater London Council (GLC). Notably, these additions were the product of post-war LCC/GLC commitment to civic, rather than 'narrowly cultural,' policy (after Matarasso, 2001:24). When the GLC was abolished in 1986, responsibility for the then 'South Bank Centre' (comprising all of the institutions listed above except the Royal National Theatre) was handed to the Arts Council and an independent South Bank Board set up in 1987. The influence of the Arts Council, a much more arts-focused organisation than the GLC, signalled a refashioning of the purpose of the Centre towards much more artistic (and access-to-the-arts) ends.

Given this diverse history, the 'design and content' of the Southbank Centre has been described as being an 'agglomeration of layers and meanings rather than a coherent whole' (Matarasso, 2001:24). With a view to addressing this perceived incoherence the Centre has been the subject of numerous redevelopment proposals, none of which got off the drawing board until Mather's

'masterplan' was adopted in 1999. In the context of this disjointed physical form, 'lost cultural vision' (Kettle, 2002) and 'paralysing inertia' (Sudjic, 2002), the Centre's public realm became ripe for appropriation – from the emergence of bookstalls under Waterloo Bridge, to the occupation of the Waterloo roundabout underpasses by homeless people, to the use of the Queen Elizabeth Hall undercroft by skateboarders. It is against this backdrop that work to deliver the Mather masterplan (by Rick Mather Architects) for the Centre began in 1999.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The argument that follows is based primarily on the analysis of two sets of interview data:

- Semi-structured 'street-intercept interviews' with passers-by at the Southbank Centre (n=46). Respondents were purposively sampled according to observable demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity) as well as activity and whether they were alone or in a group;
- Semi-structured 'expert interviews' (n=18) with senior staff at the Southbank Centre (as well as others involved or invested in the development and management of the local area);

In addition, fieldnotes and documentary data collected over the course of fieldwork inform the analysis that follows.

Through the interviews described above I sought to understand not only how the Centre was being used and transformed, but also how users and shapers of the Southbank Centre accounted for their practice. Data were coded and analysed thematically with a view to distilling salient themes in the transcripts.

### 4. FINDINGS

In this section I first consider the ways that visitors to the Southbank Centre experienced the public realm available there. Street-

intercept interviews were conducted at a relatively early stage in the transformation of the Centre and so these capture accounts of how public spaces were experienced as the site was starting to be transformed. At the start of the fieldwork the Royal Festival Hall (and the public realm skirting it) was being refurbished, but other parts of the Centre's estate remained largely untouched. However, as the fieldwork proceeded an increasing number of public art (and other) interventions took place across the estate and these interventions, as well as the broader set of discourses guiding the Centre's transformation, form the backdrop to the analysis that follows.

#### 4.1 *Openness at the Southbank Centre*

When questioned about what they valued about the Southbank Centre as a place to visit and to 'be', interviewees consistently articulated the importance of the 'openness' of the area to them. Notably, the perceived openness of space articulated in and around the Centre was multi-dimensional. At one level, then, interviewees referred to the (relative) sense of topographic openness experienced at the Southbank Centre (Figure 1) and recorded in field observations.

The public spaces around the Southbank Centre were, for instance, contrasted with 'everywhere' else that is getting 'built up' by one interviewee, while another described how 'it is good walking space ... because it's very open, and there's no cars, and there's interesting things to look at.' Another likened their experience of the South Bank to a 'stroll along the banks of the Seine,' noting how the north embankment of the Thames was not so conducive to walking because of the presence of a main road.

As well as being 'one of the places [in London] where you get ... a little bit of a distant view' (as another interviewee put it), the area was also experienced as 'open' in the sense of being edge-less. Thus, for users of the South Bank, as well as those involved in its production and management, there



Figure 1 The expansive (relative to other central London walkways)  
Queen's Walk fronting the Southbank Centre (source: author's collection)

was a sense of ambiguity about where the Southbank Centre started and finished. Thus, an employee for a local employers' umbrella organisation stated that 'there's something about the way that it's a kind of *seamless* ... space' [emphasis in speech]. Likewise, a passer-by described how the area was distinctive because it was characterised by 'totally big spaces, central places for people to come to rather than some localised regions with some *edge* around it' [emphasis in speech].

Deriving from this spatial experience of openness, one interviewee reported how 'the fact it's so open here *is* conducive ... to a fairly relaxed atmosphere' [emphasis in speech]. This relaxed ambience reverberated through the accounts given by others. Thus, for another interviewee, visiting the South Bank was distinctive because any perceived mandates on behaviour in other parts of the city (e.g. malls being for shopping, restaurants for eating, offices for working, etc.) were absent:

[P]eople come here to ... *unwind and do what they like. It's **spacious**, and, it's ... quite relaxed, here ... and you can find something to your tastes, you can ... do what you like here* [emphasis in speech]

This capacity to act freely around the Southbank Centre is perhaps most vividly demonstrated by the use, since the 1970s, of the Queen Elizabeth Hall undercroft by skateboarders.

#### 4.2 Openness at risk

These interrelated characteristics of the Southbank Centre – a relatively open, unbounded topography and an ambience perceived as relaxed – are constituent parts of Kevin Lynch's conceptualisation of 'open space.' Not only did Lynch (1965:396) conceive of open space in material terms, therefore, but he also advocated a 'behavioural definition':

We proceed directly from the meaning of 'open:' to be free to be entered or used, unobstructed, unrestricted, accessible, available, exposed, extended, candid, undetermined, loose, disengaged, responsive, ready to hear or see as in open heart, open eyes, open hand, open mind, open house, open city. Open spaces in this sense are all those regions in the environment which are open to the freely chosen and spontaneous actions of people: [...] a space is open if it allows people to act freely [emphasis added].

In this reading, the degree to which a (public) space can be understood as 'open' is a function of the extent to which uses of that space, and meanings ascribed to it, can be self-determined. For a space to be more 'open,' Lynch (1965:397) argues that it should have 'a lower intensity of human use, and appear ... less structured to the human eye.' Open space characterised in this way can then be experienced as:

[A] space of relaxation, of stimulus release in contrast to the intense and meaning-loaded communications encountered in the remainder of the city (Lynch, 1965:397).

Relatively devoid of 'meaning-loaded' institutional and architectural ascriptions of function and use then, the open space around the Southbank Centre during the period of planning inertia (1970s–1990s) became home to a distinctive public life; this space was *produced*, in a Lefebvrian sense, as civic space. However, as the transformation of the Centre proceeded during my fieldwork, a number of forces potentially inimical to the prevailing 'open' qualities of space could gradually be discerned. Intriguingly, these stemmed not so much from an institutional will to erase public realm around the Southbank Centre but precisely from a desire (discussed at the start of this paper) *to produce and enhance* this public realm. As the Southbank Centre webpages of the Rick Mather

Architects website state:

The masterplan *provides a framework* for the improvement and extension of existing cultural facilities and public realm at this important central London site (Rick Mather Architects, 2016).

My analysis suggested four interrelated functions of the Centre's transformation that potentially pose a risk to the openness of local public space. Three of these are more evident in planning documents that constitute the Mather masterplan and in other materials produced by planners, architects and urban designers responsible for the various projects commissioned under the rubric of this masterplan. They can be summarised as:

- *The realisation of public space.* According to expert interviewees, the urban realm available to the public at the Centre was being fully recognised for the first time;
- *The demarcation of public space.* A number of planning interventions involved demarcating edges around and within the Southbank Centre estate in order to create a more readily identifiable cultural district;
- *The animation and orchestration of public space.* An explicit will to exploit public realm for consumer ends – to assert the 'exchange value' (Lefebvre, 1991) of that space – was evident.

The fourth process, and the focus of this paper, can be traced not so much to the (master)planning proposals for the site as to the ways that the Southbank Centre management planned to *curate* the function of public realm.

### 3.3 *The curation of public space*

The 'transformation' of the Southbank Centre can be seen to involve conventional urban planning and design components (led by the overarching Rick Mather masterplan for the site) alongside a restructuring of the Centre's organisational 'vision'. As the-then chairperson of the Southbank Centre (Michael Lynch) put it in 2006, when he joined the Centre (in 2002)

one of his core objectives was to formulate 'a creative vision for the site'.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the transformation encompasses reshaping of the material urban form as well as the *function* of the Southbank Centre. Importantly for the present paper these two dimensions of the transformation are very much interrelated, insofar as the 'creative vision' for how the Southbank Centre operates (and delivers its arts mandate) has implications for the public realm available in and around the Centre's constituent venues.

Central to the 'creative vision' developed is the recognition of the extent of the public space comprised in the Centre's 21-acre estate and a desire to 'celebrate' this space (as a senior architect in the renovation of the Royal Festival Hall put it). This aspiration is reflected in a published interview with the Southbank Centre's Artistic Director, Jude Kelly, in which she states that post-transformation 'arts won't simply happen inside The Hayward [Gallery] but across the 21-acre site' (quoted in Thompson, 2007:13).

While concerns about the changing nature of urban public space tend to focus on its commercial privatisation (e.g. Sorkin, 1992; Low and Smith, 2005; Langeegger, 2016), at the Southbank Centre such processes are secondary to a wider arts-based regeneration strategy (e.g. Lim, 1993; Cameron and Coaffee, 2005). The heavily arts-inflected nature of the ongoing transformation of the Southbank Centre must be seen in context. First, owing to a complex ownership arrangement (see Jones, 2014:7), the Southbank Centre itself manages the 21-acre site in which its constituent venues are located and so has significant, albeit not complete (e.g. Ong, 2016) control over how that estate is used. Unlike other instances of 'urban curation' (e.g. Mar and Anderson, 2012) where arts organisations are invited to participate

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the London SE1 community website online article 'Southbank Centre announces a new vision'. Available at <http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/2233> [accessed on 14 June 2016].



as outsiders to a civic or corporate planning process, at the Southbank Centre the planning process for the 'transformation' is arts-led.

Importantly, the 'South Bank Exhibition' heritage described earlier is central to the ongoing transformation of the Southbank Centre and very much guides the 'creative vision' being pursued. Thus a senior Centre executive reported how:

[T]he most profound influence on me about the site was its original purpose ... this phrase, that they used, landscape of the imagination it seems to me to be a unique heritage.

Taking this influence of the 'landscape of the imagination' idea from the South Bank Exhibition further, this interviewee expanded on how they envisioned public space at the Centre:

[M]y sense of what the public space ought to feel like, is ... it should not feel like a space for tourism plus arts spaces where you buy tickets. ... [I]t should feel like a unique cultural space. And by that, ... you would expect to see ... on a continual basis ... a deliberate curation of the outdoor spaces, through installations, through exhibitions, through gardening projects, through fountains, through live encounters with performance [emphasis added].

In turn, a curator at one of the Centre's arts venues reported how in her view the Southbank Centre leadership wanted 'creative staff to be thinking about programming not just for their building or for their stage, but for the whole site.' By invoking the South Bank Exhibition in the Centre's 'creative vision' then, an intention to reinterpret the hitherto residual public space of the Southbank Centre as space for curation was evident. The goal of this new approach was, as a senior executive at the Southbank Centre put it, to reach the point 'where you'd be amazed if nothing was on outside' the Centre venues.

Indeed, over the course of the fieldwork for this study an increasing use of external space by the Southbank Centre was recorded. This included conventional, albeit temporary, public art installations (such as a regular commission for an artist to design a flag for a flagpole at the site) alongside more interactive installations (e.g. a boating lake, see Figure 2).

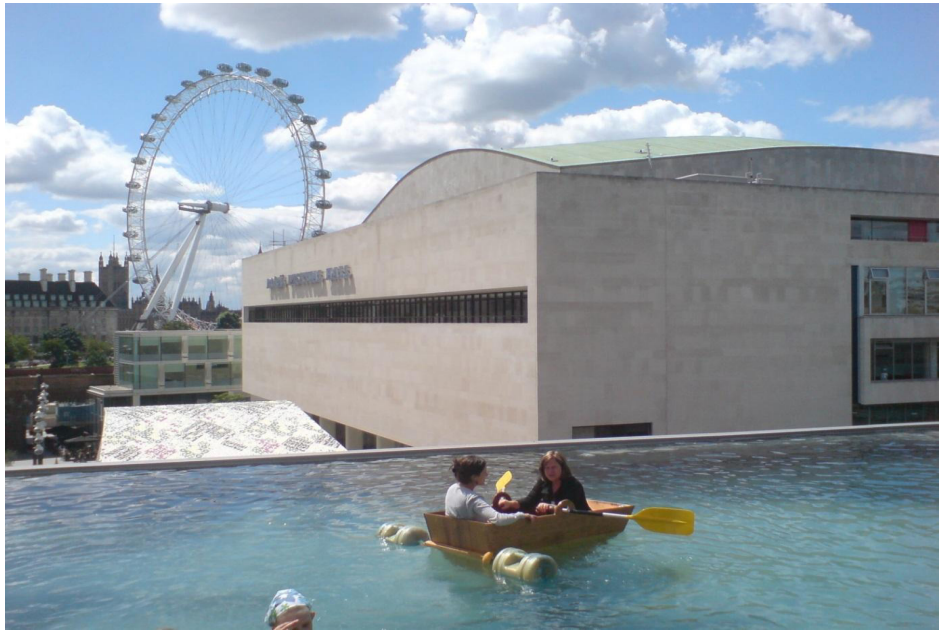
Additionally, site-wide festivals (such as the 'Festival of Neighbourhood with MasterCard') have increasingly been put on, for which virtually the entire Southbank Centre estate is appropriated and curated as festival space (see Figure 3).

In these instances an almost complete shift from open space to curated space can be observed across external spaces of the Southbank Centre. This is to such an extent that the area is – albeit without the toll booths of the original 'South Bank Exhibition' – arguably once again produced as 'exhibition', as 'a temporary space for public presentation within which an overarching curatorial framework is provided' as O'Neill (2012:131) defines it.

## **5. CONCLUSION 'PRIVATISATION' AND THE END OF OPEN SPACE ON SOUTH BANK?**

The privatisation of space occurs by making it monofunctional. ...[T]he more that play between the disorder of public spaces and conventional behaviour can be exploited and encouraged, the more public life is enhanced. (Sennett, 2000:385)

A number of scholars explore the relationship between the design of public space and public life (especially Carr et al., 2010; Madanipour, 2010). Likewise, there is a growing ethnographic literature exploring how urban public spaces are used (e.g. Low, 2000; Makagon, 2004; Degen, 2008). Less empirical attention, however, has been paid to what has been referred to as the 'management dimension' of public space (Carmona et al.,



2



3

Figure 2 Austrian art collective Gelitin's boating lake 'Normally, Proceeding and Unrestricted With Without Title' (2008). This was installed as part of the Hayward Gallery's *PsychoBuildings – Artists Take on Architecture* exhibition. (source: author's collection)

Figure 3 Pervasive curation of public realm on the Southbank Centre during the 'Festival of Neighbourhood with MasterCard' (May-September 2013). (source: author's collection)

2008).

Situating itself in relation to a central paradox that characterises contemporary discussions of urban public space – whereby at one and the same time the production and demise of public space is reported – the present paper has sought to use ethnographic data to explore the management of public space in and around London's Southbank Centre. In particular, the paper has drawn out the curatorial dimensions of the management and provision of public space at the Centre as its transformation and 'creative vision' are realised.

These curatorial aspects of the ongoing redevelopment of the Southbank Centre have resulted in a site-wide realisation of public realm there as arts or festival space, in a way that can be seen as part of a broader trend whereby 'nascent internationalist cultural institutions in the post-war period ... produced a new set of presuppositions about the festival's regenerative capacity' (Jamieson, 2014:294). In turn, expanses of public space around the Centre that had until recently been treated (or more precisely ignored) as residual spaces between buildings, and so experienced as 'open' space by users, have been animated on a periodic basis by an increasing number of public art (and other) installations.

Notably, the curation of the public spaces of the Southbank Centre in this way was identified by a senior Southbank Centre executive as a means to reveal what they identified as the 'playful' 'vibe' and 'personality' of the site. In this reading, the installations and interventions do not so much displace or undermine the ludic ways that the public spaces were previously used or experienced (Jones, 2013) as amplify and celebrate these existing uses and appropriations. Moreover, unlike more commercially oriented appropriations, for instance, the artistic curation of public space at the Southbank Centre is first of all underpinned by a push to encourage 'public access and participation' (Jude Kelly, quoted in Thompson, 2007:13) and, secondly, designed to actively include

voices that precisely provoke users to think about issues pertaining to the use and management of public space.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite these laudable motivations, there is a clear risk at the Southbank Centre that organisational curation of public space serves not to reinforce existing uses but rather to dominate the ways that the site is experienced. There is a danger, in particular, that public space is privatised not in the sense of being overrun by commercial interests, but through the 'monofunctional' (to borrow from Richard Sennett) use of these spaces as exhibition space. The external spaces of the Southbank Centre can in this respect be seen as part of a wider trend towards 'curationism' and the curation of diverse aspects of contemporary life (after Balzer, 2015). Even when oriented towards the playful, such singular and dominant productions of the urban realm run counter to definitively *uncommitted* qualities of 'open' space – qualities that arguably foster playful interpretations of public space and allow users to participate in the everyday production of space.

As Low and Smith (2005:1) put it, cities are witnessing 'multiple closures, erasures, inundations and transfigurations of public space at the behest of state and corporate strategies.' Although follow-up fieldwork at the Centre is needed, my analysis indicates that arts-led regeneration and 'Creative City' policies (Mould, 2015) can likewise 'inundate' public space – and the ways that this space is experienced and attributed meaning – to the detriment of qualities of 'openness' that characterise more residual forms.

The 'curation' of public space at the Southbank Centre arguably falls foul of

2 For example, curatorial notes about the public sculpture 'Urban Fox' (Mike de Butts and Alex Geldenhuys, 2011) state the work encourages the audience 'to look differently at [their...] environment and to question ideas of ownership, access and authority' [quoted from <http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/find/0/tickets/urban-fox-1000125>, accessed on 14 June 2016].

Lefebvre's (1996:173) cautioning that '[t]o put art at the service of the urban does not mean to prettify urban space with works of art.' For Lefebvre, we should instead aspire to a situation where 'time-spaces become works of art and ... former art reconsiders itself as source and model of appropriation of space and time' (1996:173; emphasis in original). This is not to say that curation of public realm should be discounted, but rather to encourage a rethinking of what constitutes 'putting art at the service of the urban' in the public realm. At the Southbank Centre this would imply being attentive to existing time-spaces – such as the Queen Elizabeth Hall undercroft – and practices therein, alongside commissioning extrinsic arts-led curatorial interventions.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Alasdair Jones is an interdisciplinary urbanist and an Assistant Professor in Qualitative Research Methodology at the LSE. He is interested in the relationship between built form in cities and social practices, and his research has centred on public space, public transport and the ways that citizenship is experienced in urban settings.

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