

Catch and Steer

Version AF

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Introduction

After the Second World War, an extensive spatial planning system was established in London and the United Kingdom, as throughout Western Europe, with the main aim of rebuilding the country. This system remained in operation until Margaret Thatcher took the helm in the 1980s. Under her regime, the planning system was rapidly dismantled. From then on, the government stepped back to play an evaluative role, focusing on core competences in the areas of the environment and infrastructure. Central and local government authorities in the UK adopted a more administrative approach when it came to building projects and urban regeneration, with private parties being the ones who actually took the initiative. London provides a very good example of what happens when Government takes a step backwards. In the context of similar international trends at the moment, London is a useful tenet to explore.



Sketch Borough High Street, Catch and Steer

This research focuses on the design methodology as developed by the two founders of London-based practice “East”, Mark Brearley and Julian Lewis. Imaginatively, Brearley once referred to this as *Catch and Steer*, suggesting an urban design approach based on existing investment

flows and building initiatives – the aim being to pool, reinforce and exploit these flows, and in turn lure in fresh investment. To ensure a proper understanding of what this design approach is about, it is necessary to clarify the historical, professional and social context in which it is set. Limiting the research to the work of Brearley and Lewis can have both an enlightening and obfuscating effect. It is enlightening in that their design approach can be described more or less exactly within the planning practices of London. It is interesting to describe this design approach based on the work of design practice East and later work of Brearley on behalf of the Greater London Authority. Correlations between the Catch and Steer design approach in the private and public sector can be examined and identified. It is obfuscating in that limiting the research in this way means that different approaches and works of other interesting designers [which may or may not be related] cannot be included. Because this research is about design methodology, the option was taken to focus on two closely related yet different professional practices, rather than adopt a comprehensive approach.

The decision was also taken to approach the topic from a specific perspective of design, i.e. urban design. This is understood to cover a wide range of design instruments for cities. In semantic terms, planning, urban development and architecture suggest a substantial degree of abstraction from the actual reality of the city. Urban design in this paper stands for all design instruments that serve the purpose of improving the city, from policy document to choices of lamp posts, from zoning plan to landscape design, from railway viaduct to shop fronts, from paint to signage.

Finally, it should be noted that Catch and Steer is an interpretive term for a practice that is still continuing to develop. It is definitely too early to hermetically enshrine this practice in a theoretical or methodological framework, or to produce a historiography of it. This study is based on the status quo existing today and is limited to exploring an important, and perhaps promising, innovation in urban design.

London, implicit projects for the Unique City

As with any metropolitan area, London is steeped in its own mythology. This could not be reflected more clearly than in Steen Eiler Rasmussen's book, 'London, The Unique City'.¹ According to this myth, London is not a city, but a collection of villages that have grown into one. Unlike on mainland Western Europe, London has not pooled the administrative power of

¹ Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *London, the Unique City*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1937.

kings or emperors who have created monumental urban space through breakthrough avenues in the city. Nor is London the product of a civil consensus society, such as in the Netherlands. London has never experienced a political era supporting a vast programme of renovations, such as Haussmann's baroque city in Paris, nor did it undergo the strict self-regulation of the Bourgeoisie in Amsterdam's city centre during the Golden Age. London obviously has a whole network of public areas, streets and squares made of stone. However, nature is never far away. This Unique City boasts an extensive secondary network of parks and gardens, also referred to as Human Nature.

The breakthrough created for Regent Street, designed by John Nash, is the exception to the rule. Even Nash's plan incidentally illustrates two persistent features of urban design in London: Plans are rarely perfectly implemented and nature plays an important role in how the city functions. Rasmussen shows how Nash's design lost its radical notion of axuality after the various phases of negotiation, and points out how important it was for this plan to create a link between the City and the Human Nature of Hampstead Heath.

According to this same mythology, it is not surprising that the garden city concept originated in London. The first garden cities in Welwyn and Hampstead were located at a distance from the city and their success depended on the interlying green space, the unurbanised areas between the City and the suburbs. There is a continuous line running from the village-like urbanisation of London, via the garden city concept, to the still ever valiantly defended green belts around London. Back in 1580, Queen Elisabeth I prohibited any new building within a distance of 3 miles from the city gates. In 1657, an act was passed stipulating that houses could only be built on privately owned land within a radius of 10 miles from London, which meant that only a low density of urban expansion was possible. In the first half of the twentieth century, authorities in the suburb areas bought up land to prevent it being built on. It was not until 1947 that the Town and Planning Act was passed, which gave local authorities the legal means of rejecting building initiatives. The need to develop these instruments is fed by ideas generated within the design world. For instance, the 1933 proposal of Sir Raymond Unwin [an architect inextricably linked with the garden city concept] for a Green Girdle with recreational green areas and sports grounds around London and the Greater London Plan created by Sir Patrick Abercrombie in 1944. The dialectic relationship between what is currently known as design-based research and policy-making stretches back many years in the United Kingdom.

French architectural critic Irénée Scalbert believes that there are different factors at work here than in urban design on the European mainland.² According to him, it is all to do with the role

² Interview with Irénée Scalbert by Hans van der Heijden and Patrick van der Klooster, London, April 19, 2013.

of government. The United Kingdom does not have the centrally controlled bureaucracy and legal instruments that are typical of urban planning in mainland Europe. Hampstead Garden City was a private initiative. Building projects, whether big or small, have the tendency to be negotiated in microcontextual relationships. Certainly in London, there is a high level of local activism that rears its head whenever any change to the status quo is suggested. Intervention plays an ad-hoc role far more so than in the top-down planning on the mainland. Conversely, Londoners – unlike Parisians, for example – cannot rely on the fact that building initiatives have been taken into careful consideration at an official and administrative level.

According to Scalbert, the latent local activism of the British is culturally determined and is absolutely essential in their habitat.³ According to Scalbert, this does not necessarily mean that there is no plan. Concepts such as the Green Belt have to be interpreted as implicit projects that are presented through stories, customs and aspirations, and are then fought and defended using various legal means. A recent variant of such an implicit project is the regeneration of London's South Bank that was challenged by Lord Richard Rogers using a mix of architectural aspirations: modern high tech as a style, pictorial cityscape [inspired by the townscapes of Gordon Cullen], Mediterranean-style street life with café terraces. This was all combined with the *Biotic Space*, popular in the world of High Tech architecture. The South Bank was not planned top-down, it was developed step by step on the basis of undisputed contemporary aspirations, dreams and desires – in other words a form of consensus.

Scalbert points out that in the process of preparing policy, apart from design-based research, another British tradition cannot be ignored, i.e. the narrative culture. The telling of stories in the form of Shared Literature opens up local cultures which ultimately gives them their value, so that they can filter through to the political arena. Scalbert not only refers to the tales of Charles Dickens, but also today's psychogeographical fiction and non-fiction of the author Ian Sinclair on London. For example, his book *London Orbital* [2002] was a story about walks around the M25 orbital motorway.

³ This observation by Scalbert seems plausible. From my own experience, I know how culture and building practices differ in the Netherlands and United Kingdom. The central government set-up has bypassed the UK. Apart from the Roman occupation, the UK has not had to go through any dictatorships or occupations – even the Romans did not interfere with tribal law nor introduce their imperialistic Roman Law. The UK does not have a constitution. Business conflicts are settled via case law. It is quite common for building codes to only formulate the social need and prerequisite for rules via Acts, with the actual rules being developed by common law. By way of comparison: the usefulness and necessity of a regional and national plan were greatly debated in the Netherlands before the Second World War, but when the country was occupied by the Nazis, they were introduced in the Netherlands and not rescinded.



Psychogeographical fiction

In terms of implicit projects for the city, as referred to by Scalbert, the post-war more or less centralistic reconstruction system was a temporary affair. Some boroughs in London produced valiant results. For instance, the social housing in Camden designed by Neave Brown among others. Nevertheless, the reconstruction system only existed for as long as it was deemed necessary to produce large quantities of housing. In the 1980s, Lady Margaret Thatcher put an end to centrally managed urban design.

Urban design under Thatcher

Thatcher's policy is inextricably linked to the economic crisis of the 1980s, which hit the United Kingdom hard. The British punk movement rebelled. The gloominess and fatalism of this period were reflected in the 'No' slogans of the time: the No Nukes of the anti-nuclear weapons movement, the No Future of the punks, the 'There is No such Thing as Society' of Thatcher. This period was marked by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the nuclear arms race [in the final stages of the Cold War, although no-one knew that at the time], the mine closures and Falkland War - Thatcher had to use all the rhetorical talent she possessed to convey her belief in the free market: 'The very existence of the state, with its huge capacity for evil, is a potential threat to all the moral, cultural, social and economic benefits from freedom.'⁴ The government and planning system that had shaped the reconstruction of the United Kingdom was quickly dismantled. The city of London, with all its entangled interests of the Greater London governing body and local boroughs was placed under the direct supervision of the Cabinet.

⁴ Speech by Lady Margaret Thatcher, the Guardian, January 12, 1996.

The polarisation resulting from this political situation also led to a crisis in the architectural community. With the dwindling consensus that had built up during the post-war boom period and assurances offered by government intervention in urban design, the profession was in need of review.

Critic Ian Latham painted a clear picture of the situation in 1990. The large flow of construction projects had dried up. 'Social housing, aside from estate repair, much of which is rightly handled by local authority architecture departments, has come to a virtual standstill. Large, reliable, low-risk practices tend to get the jobs that are available, and the Property Services Agency and government architects departments tend to get the remainder.'⁵ Latham identified the problems in quality that he believed came to the fore in this social economic reality: 'It seems that all buildings have become shopping malls; from railway stations to museums to airports. Fast returns are required to finance our transport infrastructure.'⁶ The quality issue in urban design was paradoxical. According to Latham, it was not due to a lack of talent, nor even to the lack of coverage about this talent in the media. Rather the design potential appeared to have become separated from the everyday development practices or vice versa. 'At first it is surprising that the 1980s – the decade of the designer tag and the unprecedented media coverage of matters architectural – have also seen the further marginalisation of the art of architecture in Britain. But then perhaps these trivialising tendencies can be held partially responsible for the dearth of fine buildings.'⁷ Latham presented the design discipline as a divided landscape in ideological and operational terms.

Latham pointed out the internationalisation of construction output and the tension and ineffectiveness in spatial planning that the drastically retreating government allowed to emerge. 'Fundamental questions have to be asked about the nature of architectural commissioning in Britain. The immediate prospect of European unity lends this a certain urgency, not least because it may exacerbate the present situation whereby this country's best architects build their best projects beyond these shores. Has greed come to usurp simple profit as the prime motive of most commissioners of buildings? [...] The role of architecture has been curtailed from both directions: with no political leadership or motivating force to establish a consensus at grass-roots level.'⁸

⁵ Ian Latham, *Politics, philosophy and getting work*, in: Rosamund Diamond, Wilfried Wang [red.], *Reality and Project, Four British Architects*, 9H Publications, London 1990, p. 4.

⁶ Ibid note 5, p. 3.

⁷ Ibid note 5, p. 3.

⁸ Ibid note 5, p. 3.

The tone of Latham's words reflected the gloomy semantics of this period. It is not insignificant that he wrote these words in the catalogue published for the 'Reality and Project' exhibition in which four young London-based architectural practices were set up as a *counter-movement*. Armstrong Associates, Pierre d'Avoine, Tony Fretton and Tim Ronalds were presented as 'responsible' architects who met this 'reality' with a good dose of 'humility', and were thus critically compared with the looming scenario sketched earlier. Latham emphasised the ethics of the group and its socially responsible attitude, ultimately letting their architectural ideas speak for themselves.



In search of public space, asphalt romanticism

In 1997, work created by nearly the same group of architects [Armstrong Associates was replaced by Eric Parry] was exhibited in Antwerp. The catalogue accompanying this exhibition inevitably included a long, questioning text, this time written by curator William Mann. But the message of this exhibition was significantly different to that of the previous one. In any event, for the duration of the exhibition, focus was placed on the content and architectural output of the London counter-movement. The title of the exhibition was 'In search of public space.' By making the step from the design of architectural objects to urban design, Mann was able to make a critical comparison of the designers and the legacy of the Thatcher years in which they had worked. The state of the country still remained worrying, but Mann believed there was a glimmer of hope. 'Nowhere are the results of this period more evident than in the state of the country's public space: battered, but, in a strange way, liberated. After the benign control of the Welfare State, and the cumulative entropy of the privatised state, perhaps there is now the possibility of a new equilibrium.'⁹

⁹ William Mann, *De openbare ruimte en de 'geprivatiseerde staat'/ Public Space and the Privatised State*, in: William Mann, Kristien Gerets, Katrien Vandermarliere [red.], *Op zoek naar openbare ruimte/ In search of public space*, de Singel, Antwerp 1997, p. 12.

This last quotation, however, shows us something else as well. Mann loaded the battered asphalt of the city of London in a distinctly romantic way. Mann's essay in the catalogue for 'In search of public space' was illustrated with large black-and-white photos by Lorenzo Albaz. His images presented edgy views of everyday places in London. After the punk period, the Unique City became sexy again for the younger generation.

Mann provided insight into the operational problems caused by the British government stepping back. 'The benign concerns of the architectural community, with earnest talk of the virtues of the European city, have been overtaken by the realities of extra-urban development, and by the shift of power in the development process. Public interest has come to be considered in terms of a trade off, where a public amenity [this is sometimes nothing more beneficial than parking space] is given in return for permission for large-scale development: this process is known as 'planning gain'. Local authorities' shortage of funds limits their ability to put forward alternative proposals, leaving them in a position where they can only reject or accept projects before them.'¹⁰ Urban development could not be steered, not only because of a lack of power and funds, but also because the government was no longer able to play a proactive role. For larger cultural projects, the British society was dependent for example on the willingness to invest of the National Lottery. Design for public buildings was disengaged from urban design, so it could no longer be integrated into area-based urban developments.

According to Mann, the market also made the most of it in terms of style, with 'the rejection of positive planning and the fetishisation of domesticity'. Buildings were given a 'nostalgic, supposedly humane veneer over the often brutal processes of narrow economic self-interest.' This 'veneration of the symbols of traditional morality simultaneous with the willing destruction of structures of communality'¹¹ 'has led to the bizarre state of affairs where every building type, whatever the scale, whether house, supermarket, police station or library, can be dressed up with a variety of domestic details and materials – brick with steeply pitched roof in slate or tile, with projecting eaves and dormer windows – and the fundamental nature of the development will be ignored.'¹² The market parties were apparently doing their utmost to normalise architectural output as much as possible. Mann believed that urban design in the United Kingdom had developed into a practice intended to avoid any conflict. The instruments of the design world were quickly adjusted to ensure this.

Mann concluded his questioning by asking about the future of urban design. This was in 1997. Labour, headed by Tony Blair, was on the cusp of a historical electoral victory. The British

¹⁰ Ibid note 9, p. 16.

¹¹ Ibid note 5, p. 21.

¹² Ibid note 5, p. 19.

political counter-movements were full of expectation. ‘Two questions in particular are pertinent. Firstly, how long will public opinion and the government continue to support the emphasis on building projects for Lottery grants, or could a greater strategic focus consolidate the slightly haphazard achievements thus far? Secondly, if, as seems likely, the centre-left Labour party comes to power in the general election this year, can it bring a genuinely progressive intent to questions of planning and architecture, using the potential of architecture as a vehicle for the renewal of the body politic?’¹³

Mann placed public urban space at the heart of the debate. He called for innovation in urban design, not just in terms of the architectural object but also with respect to the strategy and politics of the modern city. In retrospect, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the architects taking part in the exhibition supported this programme or even exemplified it. However, this opinion on urban design openly presented by critic and up-and-coming architect Mann is interesting within the scope of this research. Mann was familiar with his classics. It was the ‘patient approach in Barcelona’ that gave inspiration, just as in so many other countries in Western Europe.¹⁴ ‘The scale of action does not need to be immense; rather, a cumulative effect should be sought.’ These last words in particular resonated with the ideas of Mann’s contemporaries in London who did not intend to shut themselves away in a counter-movement.

East

Mark Brearley was one such contemporary. In the Thatcher years, he studied at Cambridge, under Peter Salter among others. Phenomenology, the subjective experience and personal observation of architecture, was highly regarded. Brearley developed an interest in the visceral every-day city. After graduating, he exchanged ideas with other architects and artists, such as Liza Fior, Peter Beard, Peter St John and Tony Fretton mentioned above, who had a comparable interest in phenomena such as the neglected areas of East London. However, unlike the others, Brearley’s emerging sensibility was not ‘a vehicle for architectural aesthetic’.¹⁵ The grittiness of London was not a source of inspiration for design, but a means of opening up a large area for study, recording and critical reflection. In the 1990s, Brearley went on long walks through East London, charting the surrounding areas in sketches, photos and maps, and talking to local residents. He developed a special interest in taking a narrative approach with respect to the city, as adopted by Ian Sinclair, referred to above.

¹³ Ibid note 5, p. 23.

¹⁴ Ibid note 5, p. 31.

¹⁵ Irénée Scalbert, *London After the Green Belt*, AA Files #66, p. 8.

In 1995, Mark Brearley and Julian Lewis came together to found the architecture practice East. Lewis had studied in London and moved in the same circle of architects and artists as Brearley. He was influenced by German architect Florian Beigel, who had built the Half Moon Theatre using scant resources.¹⁶ As a keen skateboarder, Lewis had first-hand experience of the asphalt of London. In 1994, he won the European competition, but was not awarded a contract to build the project.

One of the reasons for setting up their own practice was that neither of them could find their place in the architectural practices as described above by Latham and Mann. Another reason was the simple fact that it was impossible at that time of economic recession to find long-term employment contracts. Paradoxically, the shared aversion and mistrust of Brearley and Lewis vis-à-vis the prevailing architectural culture brought them together in their enjoyment of design and preference for precision and clarity in form. Their aversion ensured that the architectural project was no longer the focus of their attention, with their thoughts turning instead to the notion of places. Their initial projects were developed without buildings to drive their endeavours. Architecture could be 'allowed' when it positively engaged with the place. In the words of Lewis, places were the 'method and medium'.¹⁶ The benefit was twofold.



Urban analysis East

First of all, places were understood to form part of the urban space. The place was analysed specifically in this way, rather than presenting diagrams of the city using spots, symbols and arrows. The city was not an abstract issue and was presented as a collection of concrete things: roads, trees, grass, water, buildings, etc. Their hand-drawn bird's eye views may show a slight

¹⁶ Interview with Julian Lewis by the author, E-mails August 20 and 28, 2013.

departure from reality, but they are not abstract depictions. The city was simplified into a cartoon that could be understood easily by non-experts, but it was not alienated into an image that could only make sense to specialists. East portrayed the city as a living environment, a habitat. In addition to a diagrammatic representation of the city, areas such as East London were subjected to varied forms of scrutiny. This clearly highlighted the narrative aspect. Memories, desires, comments and criticisms of the various stakeholders and experiences of residents were recorded by the architects of East in photographs and sketches. They then documented the policy goals and corresponding flows of funding, and recorded private and public investments.

Secondly, places were addressed in the design through discreet measures, sometimes using just paint, signs and nameplates. At first this involved holding back. ‘No client, no money, just the place made its demands.’¹⁷



River Places

One of the first initiatives in 1996 was River Places, which involved studying the river landscape between Dartford and Tilbury.¹⁸ It was self-initiated, because it did not seem possible to secure a paid contract. The marshlands and grassy landfill spaces were presented as a collective visitor destination across the river. Henri Cartier-Bresson’s famous photo of a picnic was collaged into a photo of the grassy river banks in the London river landscape. The photo collage does not illustrate any design. It was an image [not a plan] intended to stimulate imagination. Was it possible to envisage the post-industrial wastelands by the river as an arcadian setting for a family picnic? And how could the forgotten popular culture of Bresson’s picnic be reconciled with the visceral, poorly urbanised Green Belt landscape?

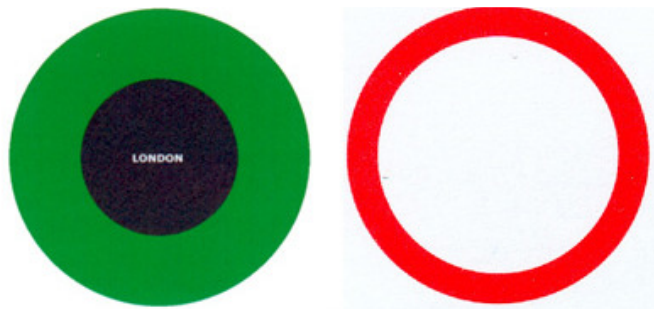
The agenda-setting intentions of River Places were expressed even more clearly in the publication of an “ideas brochure and ideas list” [2002], entitled *Picnics in the Green Belt*.¹⁹ This time with financial support from RIBA, it presented the issue of the London Green Belt as an

¹⁷ Ibid note 17.

¹⁸ See for example: Arno Ritter, Peter Allison [red], *Outside In, London Architecture*, Verlag Anton Pustet, Salzburg, 2000, p. 68-71.

¹⁹ East, *Picnics in the Green Belt*, own publication of East, London 2002.

unused neglected space, which tied in – in an unproductive way – with the overcrowded and ever expanding metropolis. The main medium of the brochure was the word. The style was rhetorical. Short soundbites and compact diagrams and images were collated to advocate a positive appreciation of the Green Belt and integration of this space into the urban functioning of the metropolis of London. ‘Say you live in London and one summer’s day you want to go and look at cows in the wonderful British countryside, you’ve heard of the Green Belt, the protected green space around the city, and you go there, getting out at the last stop on the tube line. This big conceptual unpopulated space, the place for anything without form, how do you actually get there, what’s the point of it all and where and when you can build a hut on it so that you can spend weekends there? [...] People have recently been telling us that we have to build on brown fields and that we’re not allowed to touch any green space. But just as with a colour swatch, it’s not in fact so easy to work out exactly what is what.’



Picnics in the Green Belt

In the meantime, East had started working in inner London on projects such as Borough High Street [1996-1998]. This was the project in which the term Catch and Steer was coined by Brearley. Borough High Street was a main street, a high street, in Southwark, at the time a neglected borough to the south of the Thames. East based the project on extensive consultation with local stakeholders. This dialogue was tied in with policy-related objectives at a higher level. The regeneration of Southwark was embedded in politics at borough and Greater London level. For example, work was already well under way on restoring the listed turbine hall, which would later be converted into Tate Modern by Swiss architectural practice, Herzog De Meuron. The survey carried out by East resulted in a long list of proposed investments that by definition was not very cohesive. East’s project simply pooled together these various proposals and placed them in a wider perspective, i.e. the urban regeneration of Southwark. Local initiatives were interlinked with London-level policy. By placing the proposals in a clear perspective, the project was expected to encourage sufficient readiness to invest among local and London-level, private and public parties, so that future interventions could be steered in more or less the same direction. It was hoped that these investments would reinforce each other and draw in new investment.

The project map did not have any images. The public realm of the planned area, Borough High Street, a few traffic intersections and junctions with side roads, was shown in a grid. An extensive series of captions indicated, for each situation, exactly what processes had to be executed in order to implement the project. The map showed what permits had to be applied for from the public works and transport departments, to install traffic lights, replace pavements, incorporate zebra crossings and red lights, set up street signs, where negotiations were needed in order to get private parties on board and where coordination was needed with the designers of neighbouring regeneration projects.



Map Borough High Street

East's project departed from the public realm by coming up with proposals for re-paving, re-planning and enhancing the public space, re-designing squares, changing signage and improving pedestrian crossings. London Underground was persuaded to adjust the design of its bridge to the proposals of East. One of the most eye-catching interventions is the lettering. The area of Southwark was given a name via clear signs, and was tied in to the walkway along the Thames with signage. Streetnames were incorporated into kerbs. The lettering of the names of shops and companies on Borough High Street were set out in stainless steel letters on large terrazzo tiles. The tiles were then integrated into the kerbs for the shops and companies in question. One may think that the area was branded for pedestrians, were it not for the fact that the lettering completely refrained from conveying short simple messages. More likely, the intention was to use the lettering to portray an intricate and diverse local culture.

The architectural design of the project had certain brutalist features. The interventions were clear in their strong geometry and incorporation of non-local materials. The name tiles varied in

colour and size. The stainless steel sans-serif lettering and various shades of grey terrazzo tiles did not contrast significantly with all the existing asphalt and concrete slabs, but introduced a second order of 'luxury' materials in the existing gritty pallet of materials. This design should be understood as an update to the *Without Rhetoric* approach of Alison and Peter Smithson. The project was not thrust upon anyone who did not want to experience it.



Lettering Borough High Street

The pictorial aspect of the design takes on greater significance than its stylistic relationship with British brutalism. This involved a combination of lesser and greater interventions like strokes of paint on a painting: the image can only be seen clearly at a distance. Hardly any mandatory aesthetic principles were imposed on the design in advance.

For a relatively modest investment, the borough of Southwark took the initiative to proceed with urban regeneration around Borough High Street.²⁰ However, this investment was largely covered by existing maintenance budgets. The pre-investment in the public realm entailed a secondary return on investment, such as an increase in the value of the adjacent real estate and the corresponding physical improvement of this.

The agenda-setting philosophy of the initial East projects shifted from theory to operational practice. It would be good to dwell on this for a moment. Expressed *ex negativo*, the pragmatism of the Borough High Street plan is not in the least the outcome of an opportunistic 'if you can't do what you have to do, then you have to do what you can' approach, and it is most certainly not what is currently referred to as a bottom-up project. Catch and Steer is a catchy term that succinctly reflects the operational philosophy of East, but does not specify exactly what has to be caught and steered. If a project is understood as a defined set of activities that have to be implemented once only within a specific period of time for a fixed amount of money, it is up to the architect to map the intended activities and work out whether implementation is

²⁰ The construction contract drawn up by East was based on building costs of GBP 1.2 million. Dann Jessen, Julian Lewis, Judith Lösing, Kieran Long, Jonathan Sergison, *East, Expressing Interest*, London, 2009, p. 45.

possible. Not every design, let alone every architectural image, is actually a project. The difference obviously lies in the extent to which the design can be implemented and conceived and the extent to which it corresponds to the implementation practices, taking all the related budgetary, planning, organisational and procedural aspects, etc. into account. East's design turned into a project because it subscribed to the metropolitan reality of Southwark. The project combined Greater London objectives with local initiatives, defining the specifications in architectural terms. Greater London and local needs entered into a reciprocal relationship. The project worked as a negotiation document, by assigning the various conceivable interventions and providing for a joint programme or development vision. The project did not include the nature and signature of the architectural design and authorship of the various interventions. It was robust enough to accommodate setbacks, deletions, adjustments, differences in penmanship and unexpected additions.

In 2001, Brearley and Lewis parted ways. After Brearley left, Lewis carried on at East with two new partners, Dann Jessen and Judith Lösing. The practice expanded and succeeded in specialising in high street design. It has extended its range of design instruments. Apart from urban realm projects, the practice has also designed various buildings and interiors.

Architecture and Urbanism Unit

Brearley became an official at the Greater London Authority [GLA]. He joined the recently formed Architecture and Urbanism Unit headed by Lord Richard Rogers.²¹ He felt that this move put him in a better position than before to contribute to urban design in London. Lewis continued at East with two new partners.

Under the Third Way, led by Prime Minister Tony Blair and London's first elected mayor, Ken Livingstone, London experienced a new heyday. The gloominess of the 1980s was long past. Architecture had a role to play again, albeit merely to provide the city with new icons and tourist attractions. And this was possible in the new boom period.

However, London urban policy – understood here in the sense of a battle of ideas – was not exclusively limited to the public arena. The debate on spatial planning continued to flourish on plenty of other platforms. What was noticeable was the close-knit nature of these discussions, with the following all playing a role at the same time: national, Greater London and local

²¹ In 2008 it became Design for London, headed by Peter Bishop. Mark Brearley headed the unit as of 2010.

authorities, quangos [quasi non-governmental organisations] and think-tanks such as Design for London [DFL], Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment [CABE], as well as various private associations, such as the foundation set up by the Prince of Wales. Much more so than on the European mainland, building projects and urban design were initiated by the private sector, with the various social organisations maintaining a diffuse field of influence. Policy, design and implementation were not in any sequential relationship. No individual could exert any control over the city, let alone prescribe how it should be. The all important thing was the initiative. Whoever paid could decide. And just as bluntly: the rest was a matter of influence.

It was against this background that Rogers launched the debate on the Urban Renaissance of London. As Brearley explains: 'We worked by building relationships between people with a stake, people who could steer, aiming to influence the local governments, and charm budgets in good directions. We played some part in shifting enthusiasm towards public life and the public outdoors. We nurtured emphasis on a bigger mix of nimble actions, to help key localities grow, and boost the vibrancy of high streets. We dipped into research, statistical and economic work, planning and cultural work.'²²

Within the GLA, Rogers was particularly interested in revitalising the South Bank. Brearley was busy with the Green Grid project, which studied the green infrastructure of the conurbation of London, and explored the phenomenon of high streets. In doing so, he returned to the areas of interest that had previously prompted River Places and Picnics in the Green Belt and the urban projects of East. As a city official, his hands held a number of new trump cards, but they were also tied. The Architecture and Urbanism Unit may have rubbed up happily against policy-makers, but it was ultimately an advisory and not a policy-making body, so it did not have any operational mandates.

The green infrastructure of the conurbation of London was mapped by the team headed by Brearley. Municipal boundaries and abstract notions of the Green Belt were tacitly ignored. This research led to publications such as the East London Green Grid Primer,²³ in which the green spaces of East London were drawn as a continuous, interlinked network. The whole city was covered in green. Buildings, infrastructure and other artefacts were ignored in the drawings. However, the water of the Thames estuary remained a prominent feature. Based on established policy objectives, areas in the city where there was insufficient access to open space. It became clear where the green infrastructure needed to be reinforced and where links or access points were required. The Primer included a large pull-out map pinpointing various conceivable and desirable projects.

²² Elke Krasny, unpublished interview with Mark Brearley, March 2013.

²³ Mayor of London, *East London Green Grid Primer*, GLA, London 2006.



East London Green Grid Primer

Brearley's name is not included in the document. However, various cultural experts in the field each in their own way contributed essays and photos reflecting their fascination with the green structure of London, in addition to the maps. The publication therefore did not ostensibly argue for the positive appreciation of the Green Belt and for this space to be integrated in the urban functioning of the metropolis of London, as previously sought by East. Such arguments seemed to have become political reality with the Primer, as Mayor Ken Livingstone wrote in large letters on the back cover: 'The East London Green Grid will offer scope for solitude and sociability, physical activity and engagement with nature. By catering for a range of expectations and by addressing the environmental challenges ahead, it will grow to become the living thread that weaves together the communities of East London – old and new.'

According to Brearley, the maps had a number of different effects.²⁴ By not presenting the green infrastructure of London as an ideal but as a reality, it was articulated as an independent spatial theme. Looking at the maps, it was immediately apparent where new green spaces needed to be built, where linkages had to be made or improved, and where access to open space had to be improved. Because the drawings were made on the basis of objective policy criteria, it was not possible to enforce the mapped initiatives, but they could certainly be challenged. Documents such as the Primer provided a sort of policy framework and made local initiatives within this framework not just plausible, but presented them as desirable. The Primer therefore was not a document with a prescriptive or even initiating role. It was in fact a document complementing projects that have since been implemented in the city. It did not form part of top-down bureaucracy, but was rather an aid to programme local developments and move things more or less in the same direction. As such, it can be seen as a suitable instrument for the negotiating practices of urban design in Britain.

²⁴ Discussion with the author, London, April 2, 2014.

Similarly, the high street project within the GLA combined an agenda-setting and exploratory approach. This combination is clarified in the manuscript entitled 'An Extravert Economy'.²⁵ It observed that if all multifunctional high streets in London were placed end-to-end, they would stretch for about 500 km, from London all the way to the Scottish border. 'Three weeks to walk it, if you kept your pace up, and each step of the way you would pass a vibrant and visible economy.' One of the longest such routes in London runs for 51 km, along which 5,500 businesses and institutions are based and 80,000 jobs are provided, so on this high street alone, almost as much economic potential is represented as the brand new Canary Wharf in the Docklands. Brearley compared these figures and the 'joyful', heterogeneous face of the old-fashioned British town centres with the spectre of the Dutch suburbs he visited, where 'it's the economy that's tucked away beyond the trees, out of view. The office blocks and the industry are off on their own, landscaped and screened'.

The capacity of the high streets was an important topic in this extravert economy. This capacity could be utilised to meet the ever growing demand for housing. Simple maths can be applied here too. In an e-mail to Richard Rogers, he calculated as follows: 'If each of London's 600 high street places took an average of 700 new homes each, and that's not a huge number, then they would yield 420,000 homes.'²⁶ There was a lot to be said for making careful use of opportunity areas, but although they appeared to be straightforward to develop, it would entail higher cost and greater damage to London's economic diversity. In this respect, he pointed out that the domination of housing in the high streets as well as in opportunity areas outside town centres would lead to the same problem. The huge demand for dwellings suffocates the chance of maintaining employment. According to Brearley, the 420,000 high street homes referred to above would be to the detriment of 15% of total employment in London. So it would indeed be better to make strategic use of the Green Belt.

For Brearley, urban programming [housing and commercial buildings] comprised programmatic interconnected vessels. Focusing excessively on one programme would lead to sparsity elsewhere in the city. Within the GLA, Brearley argued for a close-knit approach to urban design, in which extravert economy was given prime consideration. This discussion also returned to the agenda in the context of the conurbation of London, in which the city centre was at risk of suffocating within the Green Belt, while satellite towns were forming artificial settlements at the cost of huge infrastructural effort, not to mention all the congestion created as a result.

²⁵ Mark Brearley, *I'll take the High Road*, Architectural Review, March 2015, p. 20.

²⁶ E-mail from Mark Brearley to Richard Rogers.

Brearley's work on high streets did not lead to a policy document, as was the case for his work on the Green Belt. No High Street Primer has been published. Maybe behind the scenes, his work helped set the agenda. In any event, a large number of high street projects have been carried out. The Greater London administrative authority, fed by this agenda, has participated in it, albeit with a limited mandate.

In autumn 2013, Brearley's contract at the GLA came to an end. The Urban Renaissance in London had passed its peak and political enthusiasm for initiating policy had dwindled.

Outline

It makes sense not to restrict Catch and Steer to the name of a design method developed within East for disentangling and designing high streets. It was observed above that Catch and Steer does not describe a bottom-up practice – it is based on a strong reciprocity between local interests and metropolitan policy. The provocation of urban policy was turned into a key topic by Brearley, in his work at East as well as for the GLA. As a public official, he was, to a certain extent, in a position to programme and stimulate interventions especially in high streets. It is too risky to extend the term Catch and Steer to include a comprehensive design method bringing together government and private sector designers. After all, the Catch and Steer work of Brearley at the GLA could not be concretely implemented, was not sufficiently embraced by politicians and was not satisfactorily conceptualised in an administrative framework. Unlike the work of East, it has necessarily remained part of the implicit urban project that is so characteristic of the city of London. On the other hand, the 'accidental' presence of similar design methods in the private design sector and the Greater London authority clearly shows what the reciprocity between the local level and policy-makers actually consisted of in terms of Catch and Steer.

It is therefore appropriate to expand the term Catch and Steer. Catch and Steer can be defined as follows: An incentive for a multipolar design method for urban design. It goes without saying that the multipolar aspect covers not only contributions from city authorities and designers in the field, but also contributions from other parties involved [which have not been identified in this paper].

Catch and Steer can be outlined as follows:

- A means of provoking urban policy, winning people over with a wide range of media instruments [text, image, photography, outlines, drawings, etc.] and analysis instruments [such as statistics, policy, data, sociology, urban material, etc.].
- A means of documenting the design issue and the place, again using a wide range of media and analysis instruments, while placing a certain emphasis on the narrative aspect.
- Pooling and influencing existing investment flows based on shareable programmatic objectives.
- Reciprocity of policy at local and Greater London level.
- A planned and effective means of putting the design into operation.

Practice

Catch and Steer, understood as an incentive for a mutipolar design method, has never borne this name and has never been applied as a finite or even documented method. Nevertheless, many London-based practices have worked along these lines from the 1990s onwards, for instance the art and architecture collective MUF and the architectural practice Caruso St John Architects. These two practices have very different agendas – MUF can be described as an activist even subversive practice at one end of the spectrum, while Caruso St John is much more of a typical architectural practice with international aspirations at the other.

MUF, led by architect Liza Fior and artist Katherine Clarke, focuses on urban developments based on creative class programmes and projects such as Making Space in Dalston and Sustaining Creativity for the area of Hackney Wick. Compared with East, their attitude towards design is sometimes more disorienting than operational. The incorporation of art programmes in buildings and architectural plans is set in such terms. Their contribution to a recent urban design plan in Hackney Wick involved the mandatory inclusion of playgrounds in every plot. The form and location of the playgrounds was arranged by MUF in such a way that the efficiency of the buildings would be disrupted. This would in turn ensure that each building had to be designed specific to each location, would challenge the involvement of design practices and would thus move away from generic project developer approaches. This disruptive strategy implicitly assumes that the involvement of an architect is favourable and that of a project developer is not.²⁷

²⁷ Interview by Patrick van der Klooster and the author with Liza Fior and Katherine Clarke, London April 19, 2013.



Bankside

Caruso St John Architects is an architectural practice that has built up a leading position in Western European architecture over the last twenty years. Founders Adam Caruso and Peter St John are long time friends and collaborators with Brearley. The practice is currently working on an international portfolio. One of the practice's early designs from 1998, however, was a signage project for Bankside, along the banks of the river Thames. The project was in the direct vicinity of East's Borough High Street project and was prompted by the same borough policy.

Adam Caruso expresses his reservations with regards to master planning, 'which can be cynically read as a late-capitalist hedging of property value'.²⁸ He believes that a certain amount of consensus is needed to make a good city. He supports a spatial form of urban design that moves away from flexible grids and abstract design concepts in favour of a more qualitative approach, where the design focus is on the atmosphere of the city. Caruso is also critical of 'pseudo-knowledge' that is taught on most architecture courses which has resulted in architects no longer understanding the cultural basis of their discipline and lacking a sensitivity for material and how buildings can make relationships with their setting. He has therefore always placed considerable emphasis on looking and surveying in his own teaching, as a professor at ETH Zurich among other places, and on his students' own experiences, with photography being a useful tool in this respect.

Caruso's interest resonates with East's commitment to the city, the experience and recording of it and the approach developed by East for processing knowledge. An explicit link between the Bankside project of Caruso St John and the East project on Borough High Street is the focus on lettering. Viaducts, tunnels, fencing and embankment walls all have the name 'Bankside' on them, manhole covers have place names on them new directions are provided to guide visitors through the area. Just as in the East project, the aim was not to achieve uniformity. Unlike this project, attention was paid to explicitly making the architectural vocabulary aesthetic, in that for example archaic shapes were incorporated in the signposts as a reference to local traditions.

²⁸ Interview with Adam Caruso by the author, E-mail August 19, 2013.

Caruso does not avoid giving his opinion about the Bankside project. When asked about the sustainability of the project, Caruso says: 'I always liked that project [...], it was cheap, and reasonably fast and easy. Some of it is still there and is still useful. But, quite arbitrary parts have been replaced by exactly the sort of signage that we replaced 15 years ago. So, I always thought the project was a bit of a fantasy, or a bit too much of an art piece. In a sensible city, say in Zurich, all of these minor bits of infrastructure would have been chosen and would be applied in an appropriate way, and then they would be maintained and changed as required. In Southwark, the typical turnover and lack of coordination meant that our little start [on revitalising Southwark, HvdH] could never become consolidated, and in fact will eventually disappear bit by bit.

Caruso has clearly identified a shortcoming in the Catch and Steer practice in London. The design method is highly dependent on the agenda-setting and momentum of urban processes, but lacks management and maintenance mechanisms [at least in the projects that have spawned to date under this banner]. Aspects such as street furniture, signage, paving, etc. are currently highly regulated in each city in the regulation books of the local authorities, utilities, transport authorities, etc. According to Caruso, this all – for example the ease with which the public realm around their Walsall Art Gallery project could be substantially redeveloped less than 10 years after that project's completion – shows how lacking in sustainability the British system of urban design is.

When asked about the long-term effect of the high street projects designed by East, Julian Lewis is much more positive.³⁰ 'I think one answer to this is about a belief in the process of architectural practice that sits across the various things that motivate, excite and produce architecture. This means that the completed building is only one product, and source of value, amidst a range of others. It means that when something is built, what happens afterwards is of consequent and dynamic significance. I suppose I have an idea of social sustainability in this way, in terms of making good cities. Over 16 years I have seen a number of public realm projects, including ours, be influenced by our previous built results as well as written pieces and on site dialogues or visits. There is a kind of resonance that gets produced over the years that means even inexperienced clients are aware that an "approach" can be taken to designing public realm works, even if they don't know quite what that means.' Lewis apparently accepts the fact that not one pavement will last 16 years. The dark paving of Borough High Street has since been replaced with standard municipal materials: concrete and brick. Various terrazzo tiles have remained intact together with their lettering. The names do not always still refer to the

³⁰ Ibid note 16.

companies on the high street, instead they reflect the history of the place. In Lewis' opinion, the Borough High Street project provided value in that it put Southwark on the map, so it had a similar stimulating effect as Tate Modern or the Wobbly Bridge designed by Norman Foster [pedestrian footbridge over the Thames]. According to Lewis, the reality is that this also stimulated interim quality coffee shops, although as a result this meant the loss of some of the local cafes that had been there since the 1950s.

Lewis can be more positive about his project than Caruso, because his work is based on the dynamic of the city rather than the untouchable finesse of the architectural product. East has since produced a map of London showing large interconnected areas that have been studied by the practice, together with the corresponding plans and proposals. All this work has had an effect, even if nothing has actually been implemented. East refers to 'hands-on urbanism' in this respect.

East does not talk about interventions or renovation, but about 'joining in', participating in the battle of ideas on developing the metropolis of London, while acknowledging that this is a world of compromise and negotiation. In all its sparseness, the product delivered by East can be seen as a contribution to the ongoing development of Steen Eiler Rasmussen's *Unique City*, the implicit urban design referred to by Irénée Scalbert, the living environment written about by Ian Sinclair and Charles Dickens, the asphalt romanticism of William Mann, etc.

After Brearley left, East gained expertise in pairing up desirable developments with existing or imminent flows of funding, as a result of which initiatives were perhaps not optimally but certainly realistically defined. What stands out is that the practice displayed a renewed self-confidence. For example, East claims that design can attract investment, with the initiative lying to a significant extent with designers. Lewis puts it simply: a non-plan situation can be good.

CV

Hans van der Heijden [the Hague, 1963] studied Architecture and Urban Design at TU Delft. He is the co-founder of the Rotterdam architecture studio *biq* and he acted as the firm's design director from 1994-2014. In 2014 he moved to Amsterdam to establish his own design studio *Hans van der Heijden Architect* and to continue his practice as an independent designer. He is an editor of the Dutch Architecture Yearbook. Hans van der Heijden published articles in different professional magazines and the books *Architecture in the Fractured City* and *Habitat*. In 1996 he won the European-4 competition for young architects. On behalf of AIR Foundation Hans van der Heijden curated the debate series ArchitectuurCases from 2009-2010. He was the Visiting Professor at Cambridge University and Visiting Fellow at Jesus College in Cambridge. In 2008 the restoration and extension of the Bluecoat arts centre in Liverpool was completed to international acclaim. The portfolio of Hans van der Heijden includes numerous housing and urban design projects in the Netherlands including regeneration projects for Hessenberg [Nijmegen], Kloosterbuuren [the Hague] and Oranjeboomstraat [Rotterdam].

Colophon

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