

1 Contemporary urban space-making at the water's edge

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In an article devoted to the public realm, Peter Davey, expressing a widely held view, laments that “we have almost forgotten how to build cities” (Davey, 1999:32). This sentiment stems from a common feeling of disappointment toward the contemporary city. Today we find many articles and books that condemn the current condition of our urban environments. Everyone, it seems, is anti-city. However, the condition in which we find ourselves is not an issue of memory. We have not forgotten how cities were made, rather our ideas of what a city is and how to put it together seem at odds with the way the world works today. A nostalgia for earlier times reinforces conceptions of older models of the city. Our cities have changed faster than we have been able to adjust our thinking and because of this the contemporary crisis of public space is due to a lack of confidence in knowing what works today. Our problem is not one of memory; it is one of adjusting our ideas of what is an appropriate urban form to be in line with the current reality of our culture and society. What is needed in urban design today, above all else, is a re-calibration of our ideas to the currency of our time.

The city is becoming less the result of design and more the expression of economic and social forces. The size of contemporary urban agglomerations means that no one single authority controls the form of the city. A mixture of bureaucracy and market forces defines the form of the city. The city is a physical container of our culture and, as such, it is the expression of us. The city is a mirror of the complexity of modern life. The result is a city environment where instability is the only constant. The results of half a century of urban space-making have left us with a diffused urban structure; a city pieced together from heterogeneous elements that when combined create a homogeneous aesthetic. This amorphous city appears abstract, disordered, confused and illogical. This abstraction acts to diffuse meaningful relationships for those that live in the city and inevitably leads us to feelings of loss and a yearning for a better place, for an idealized urban environment.

It is within these present difficulties that a space has opened up in the city which allows expressions of hope for urban vitality. The urban waterfront provides us with this space. On the waterfront, we see glimpses of