

Precincts: Green-field and Cleared Brown-field Sites

Many cities around the world have precincts that have been largely abandoned; there are many yet-to-be-built-on areas on the periphery of cities that are ripe for development as cities expand. The former sites are primarily the results of changes in the technology of manufacturing and transportation, but the desire to upgrade areas has also been a motivating factor in their renewal. Port areas with their finger wharfs and/or small docks have been abandoned in cities across the world: Baltimore, London, Cape Town, New York, Rotterdam and Sydney amongst them. The same cities and many others have abandoned railyards, often extensive in size, close to their cores. Military establishments such as naval yards and barrack areas have become redundant and their sites available for redevelopment.

Ten schemes are presented here to illustrate the diversity of urban design. One, the Citizen Centre in Shenzhen is presented as a brief note as it is still under construction. It stands in strong contrast to total civic urban design projects. Four of the schemes set out to be new business districts to rival those already existing in their cities. They are, in approximately chronological order, La Défense in Paris, Canary Wharf in London, Euralille in Lille and the Lujiazui area of Pudong in Shanghai. Each follows a different design paradigm. The first two were planned to retain Paris and London's pre-eminent places in the world. Euralille and Lujiazui have been designed to join the club. From a design point of view they are interesting because of the different ways in which they handle traffic. The purpose of the sixth scheme, Battery Park City, was to enliven the Lower Manhattan business area in New York by injecting new housing into it and opening up the Hudson River waterfront to the public. The Paternoster development, the seventh example, was built on a bombed out site in London in the 1960s following Modernist principles. It was deemed to be boring and dreary. It was demolished in the 1990s, rebuilt and completed in 2003. The eighth scheme, Pariser Platz in Berlin, has had a very different purpose; it has been to recapture the sense of place it had in its citizens' hearts before having been destroyed in World War II and left that way for 40 years in a divided Berlin. The final scheme, the Potsdamer Platz district, also in Berlin, has a very different character. Its nodes are inside buildings not open-air squares. A note on the proposed World Trade Center site in New York has been included to bring this set of examples up-to-date. What it will end up being like is open to conjecture.

The development of only a couple of these ten schemes has taken place in a straightforward linear step-by-step manner. Most have tangled histories although the central idea behind each (with the exception of Battery Park City) has remained remarkably intact. Each shows the impact of politics and politicians and world and local economic conditions on their histories. They also show the debates that took place amongst stakeholders over the appropriate architectural paradigm to employ. The longer the development period the more marked are the ups and downs of the implementation process. This reality is something that theories of architecture seldom reveal. Case studies yield a truer picture.