
Understanding transactions

Richard MacCormac
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This is a speculative study in its infancy. What has seemed important to me is to convert rather static observations about the nature of the European city into an understanding of it as a process, not simply as a product that exists in stasis. This would allow us to make better judgements about the nature of change and how we should guide change in old fabrics. I think that the unpopularity of what is called the 'modern environment' is partly to do with a deep sense of incongruity and a feeling that the nature of change is such that instead of affirming what exists and adding to it, the modern environment is perceived to have destroyed what was good and not to have improved on it. I want to investigate why.

The idea of looking at cross sections is to test a proposition about the traditional nature of the West End of London: it's hard to do in the City for reasons of rapidity of change. The validity of the proposition is yet to be established, though I have a sense that some of the things I am going to discuss were intentional in the development of the great land holdings, like the Bedford Estate.

The first example is north of where I work and live, in Spitalfields. In Cheshire Street market the Victorian houses are in multi-use. I managed to get them listed about three years ago to stop them being demolished – the borough planned to demolish everything here to build warehouses – partly to ensure the preservation of a social characteristic of this part of London. The key characteristic of this environment is that it supports what I call 'local transactions': people living behind their own front doors, restaurants and shops of all kinds and small local businesses and, of course, pubs. Local transactions are threatened if people who plan areas of this kind do not understand the threat which bland warehousing represents. Transactions

such as distributive warehousing on the Bethnal Green Road, and such functions as wholesale markets, banks and office buildings, are destructive of local character because they don't primarily serve local people and the transactions do not take place across the pavement. I call these 'foreign transactions' because they operate on a regional, national or international level. The warehouses do not belong to the road they are in because they abruptly interrupt its local character. They are incongruous.

I want to explore the way that cities can be made up of successfully co-existent functions of different sorts that find their right place. I want to try to understand architectural and urban structures as being rather like coral reefs that are re-inhabited over and over again. There seems to be a pattern in the relationships which recurs though the functions change. For example, in the eighteenth-century city, large houses on primary streets were inhabited by high income families and the mews behind serviced them. Today the houses might be offices of an international/national kind with a mews inhabited by people selling services to the primary users, like printing, employment agencies or sandwich bars.

Observations of this kind have prompted me to think about how to resolve the problem posed by the warehouse development on Bethnal Green Road. You organise the development so that the frontage to the road contains local transactions: chambers like buildings of a modest scale which have frequent access from the pavement and which contain small businesses, retailing, whatever. All these uses facing onto the road sustain the idea of the road as a place in which people can transact and the regional or national distribution function of the warehouses is relegated to its own hinterland. So there is a precinct