

Community

And how public spaces help people to build communities and relationships

Abstract

Living in a society we have always pushed to organise and create public areas and spaces, regardless of the size of the local community. Be it a big capital city or smaller country town we are drawn together. Humans are gregarious mammals, it is in our nature to seek out others and form tribes. Even the most introverted and reclusive have the propensity to talk to someone to share their thoughts and emotions, and feel that they are not alone.

Essay

There are many ways that we seek to grow these bonds and form relationships; in some cases it may be a group sharing the same interest, participating in religious events, or supporting each other through personal struggles.

In others the purpose is for a particular activity, debate or even spending time on online activities. The precise purpose does not matter, each of these subjects need proper spaces; interiors which will help to bring people together and allow them to spend 'quality time'.

In this essay I will explore how architects and interior designers, working alongside other specialists, create thoughtful projects for the community that impact our shared experiences; how they help bring us closer, create relationships and feelings of belonging. Spaces created for public use must 'tick all the boxes' during planning and designing: they should be user friendly and respond in some sort of way to the user whilst depending on the targeted audience, be relevant to the main focus point or context.

Oftentimes a public space is repurposed with time, either with approval and intent by the managing body, or informally by those that continue to visit and inhabit a space. Franck describes the latter concept as a 'loose space', whereby "people create loose space through their own actions. With their bodies they lay claim to public spaces, pursuing activities of their choice, activities not intended in the design or program of these spaces"¹.

These concepts will be explored throughout three select examples, each of which appear at first to be very different, yet all share a commonality in that their purposes have evolved over time to meet the needs of the community and bring people together.

¹ Franck, K. and Stevens, Q., Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life, Routledge, 2007.

Introduction

Before we can consider how public spaces drive community, we must first understand what constitutes a public space by defining its common features. The main one of course being that it is public and therefore available to anyone, allowing everyone to participate in some form even if that differs from person to person.

Other important aspects to define the concept of a public space include the fulfilment of the needs of its users, as well as social contact due to its location and shared use. This can naturally develop into friendly relationship building.

Finally, in Micek and Staszewska's article 'Urban and Rural Public Spaces: Development Issues and Qualitative Assessment' they state that a public space can be defined as a "...physical area in which any human being may find themselves"². I am in broad agreement with the sentiment behind this statement but would like to also acknowledge the technology present in society today that offers amazing opportunities to overcome our dependence on physical space; such as the ever growing number of immersive experiences found in virtual worlds in VR (Virtual Reality).



Figure 1 - A social gathering in AltSpaceVR³. One of many virtual worlds that collectively make up the 'Metaverse', a series of persistent virtual shared spaces representing a new form of public space and interaction.

² Micek, M. and Staszewska, S., Urban and Rural Public Spaces: Development Issues and Qualitative Assessment, 2019.

³ AltSpaceVR [online]. Available at: <https://altvr.com/> (Accessed: 26th January 2021).

The variety of virtual experiences available today is already quite impressive, with interest in VR rising not only amongst gamers and private home users but also amongst businesses. Virtual Reality is expected to be a major industry disruptor in Location Based Entertainment⁴, and this trend appears to be set to continue with not only dedicated spaces appearing in cities across the world but also major investment from existing entities such as Museums that intend to create blended physical and digital experiences⁵.

I had the pleasure of taking part in a VR experience and must admit that it is impressive how well thought through these projects are, and how well they can bring people together. Ranging from virtual gaming and exercising areas to lounges for socialising, comedy clubs and art galleries. The following image in Figure 2 showcases a type of 'virtual lobby' in Facebook's social Venues platform, allowing people to meet, socialise and travel to different locations together.



Figure 2 - Facebook Venues⁶ allows users to create their own worlds and explore those created by others, but also features several public spaces for building communities and engaging with different experiences.

It is convincing that you do not need a physical space to consider it a public space. There are constraints for participation such as requirements for appropriate equipment and space to wander, but it is apparent that we are heading towards this becoming more common in our lifestyles as the virtual continues to blend with the physical.

⁴ Rogers, S., The VR Companies Shaking Up Location-Based Entertainment, Forbes [online], 2019. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/solrogers/2019/11/08/the-vr-companies-shaking-up-location-based-entertainment/> (Accessed: 26th January 2021).

⁵ Coates, C., Virtual Reality is a big trend in museums, but what are the best examples of museums using VR?, MuseumNext [online], 2020. Available at: <https://www.museumnext.com/article/how-museums-are-using-virtual-reality/> (Accessed: 26th January 2021).

⁶ Hayden, S., Facebook Expands Access to 'Venues' Beta Ahead of Connect Next Week, RoadtoVR [online], 2020. Available at: <https://www.roadtovr.com/oculus-social-vr-app-venues-gets-overhaul-preparation-facebook-horizon/> (Accessed: 26th January 2021).

Context

Considering the features of a public space that were previously introduced it is important to consider what actual 'needs' must be fulfilled so that a user can happily participate and engage with the space and others within it, alongside which we will consider how a public space that is enjoyable and fosters social behaviour can help build relationships amongst those who visit it - "Among city buildings, there is a network of spaces that create and strengthen connections at different levels of influence"⁷.

In 'Public Space' Stephen Carr states there are five needs which should be satisfied within a public space, these are: the needs of discovery, comfort, relaxation, passive engagement and active engagement⁸. This can be seen as a journey, from initial discovery, which leads to curiosity and cautious engagement provided one can remain comfortable and present.

The need for comfort and relaxation can be seen as highly connected to the sense of belonging as the person needs to feel safe, protected and welcome within the space to lower our instinctive guards from social embarrassment; this rare feeling of connection may then allow them to then interact and bond with other users. Should they feel discomfort it may elicit the opposite behaviour, resulting in negative thoughts that lead to prioritisation of personal needs rather than positive engagement with others, or potentially leaving the space altogether.

However, before this challenge can be addressed the space must first attract people or 'encourage discovery' through user friendly design. To achieve project success and offer benefits to society, such as happiness or wellbeing for visitors, designers need to carefully consider the potential of the idea so that the end result will benefit from lasting popularity.

"A public space is attractive only when it is largely surrounded by or filled with objects and entities of a commercial nature such as cafeterias, restaurants, shops, entertainment venues and cultural institutions"⁹. This means designing for purpose, anticipating audience needs, and taking advantage of the broader environment, making sure the flow of people connects them with the things that they value. Participants may have different intentions and perform different activities so the space must account for broad requirements.

We are pulled into public spaces for many different reasons; entertainment, curiosity or our innate need for social interaction. The main aspect which we cannot avoid is contact with other people and for this reason they are one of the main sources of creating social groups and relationships, 'they are environments for interaction and exchange of ideas that impact the quality of the urban environment.'⁷

⁷ Pacheco, P., Public Spaces: 10 Principles for Connecting People and the Streets, 2017.

⁸ Carr, S., Public space, University Press, 2009.

⁹ Micek, M. and Staszewska, S., Urban and Rural Public Spaces: Development Issues and Qualitative Assessment, 2019.

In this way, if we are keen to, we can create bonds with other users and over time develop those feelings into a sense of belonging. Including attachment to the space, the people that frequently visit it, and the memories it becomes associated with.

The following three case studies offer examples of good examples of public spaces, each with their own unique origins, that connect people in their own way. Allowing us to better understand how these spaces form, thrive and connect people.

Southbank Skatepark

"Southbank, London—the sequence of spaces along the south bank of the Thames in central London have been transformed in recent years and now host a variety of 'fun' activities from public art, to performance, to consumption"¹⁰. One of the public spaces within this urban area is Undercroft skatepark, also known as Southbank skatepark; located under the Queen Elizabeth Hall, it has been in use by skateboarders since the 1970s, which makes it the longest continually used skatepark in the world.

It is particularly an interesting space which was not originally designed to fulfil the role of a skatepark, but was gradually adapted to be used and considered as one, to the point it is now mainstream and known as the home of British skateboarding. Continuous creative repurposing of the space has added to the element of 'shared discovery' amongst its skateboarders, making them feel like they have grown together alongside it. As described in Ravenscroft's article "the potential of the original space for free and creative interpretation has fostered a culturally significant community building a sense of belonging"¹¹.

This is a great example of a public place where people will build relationships and a community by sharing thoughts related to their passion and simply helping each other.



Figure 3 - Skateboarders and creatives gather by the sides to wait, observe and make conversation. ¹⁰

¹⁰ Carmona, M., Principles for public space design, planning to do better, URBAN DESIGN International, 2018.

¹¹ Ravenscroft, T., Refurbished Undercroft skatepark reopens beneath London's Southbank Centre, Dezeen [online], 2019. Available at: <https://www.dezeen.com/2019/08/08/undercroft-skatepark-southbank-centre-london-feilden-clegg-bradley-studios/> (Accessed: 27th January 2021).

Undercroft has been recently repaired and refurbished, including the addition of an extension to the skatepark allowing more space for a still growing community. Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios, the company which undertook the renovation, aimed to keep the original materials and 'feel of the space' from the early years of its glory as it was a requirement from the architectural and skateboarding heritage point of view.¹⁰

The intention was to get as close as possible to the original atmosphere of the place and avoid making radical changes which could ruin the shared appeal of the space or impact the sense of connection that long time visitors feel towards it. They had to redesign it in a way that would suit the surrounding area of the South Bank whilst maintaining the iconic 'subterranean skatepark vibe'.

To investigate this further, the position of the site which is underneath the Queen Elizabeth Hall creates a feeling of closure within, theoretically, an open space area. It is protecting users from any type of weather, making them feel sheltered. This offers them a sense of belonging in a place of respite from the often-stormy British weather.

The space rides the boundary between openness and privacy. There are no doors or windows but rather a wide open entryway exposed to the busy Queen's Walk promenade. The lack of the façade is a strength of this space, offering freedom of choice to stay out and watch from a distance, allowing for a degree of showmanship whereby onlookers can appreciate the devotion of the community to developing their skateboarding ability. However, it also offers the skateboarders within a sense of privacy and protection by clearly defining the line between spectatorship and participation. First with the outer railing, but also with the inner divide between the 'outside' and 'underground' environments.

Franck states that when people create a loose space and lay claim to a public space for their own activities "they use the physical features of their surroundings when they find those features helpful, and overcome or ignore them when they are constraining" ¹. In this sense the underground aspect of the space offers both shelter and a form of perceived protection from outsiders by being slightly intimidating to those outside the skating community; whilst the sloped terrain and brutalist shaping of objects within the space offers ideal conditions for skateboarding, likely contributing to the initial appropriation of this space.



Figure 4 - Onlookers gather in crowds to watch as they pass by during the day. 10

Despite its popularity and acceptance found today, the existence of the skatepark has historically seen controversy. When a space is appropriated the purposes for doing so "may conflict with the objectives of those who exert authority over the space"². Originally intended as a simple walkway to connect amenities in the area the presence of skateboarders caused friction with the intended functional purpose of the space leading to the planned closure of the space in 2013, prevented by mass campaigning and support from the general public.¹²

From this we can see how some public spaces are more functionally-driven rather than supportive of social and community-building activities. The appropriation of a space for community purposes can give a space a new form of value, in this case preferred by the wider public due to its more social merits.

As stated in Ravenscroft's article 'The 1960s brutalist complex will continue to evolve but its future will certainly include the Undercroft community, providing a free space in central London for young and old alike to come together.'¹⁰ This statement confirms the effects of public space on building community, and the strong ties between a space and the community that inhabits it. Once a sense of belonging and connection has been established, people will be drawn to the space repeatedly provided the correct conditions are carefully maintained.

The Sherriff Centre

'A unique space for everyone in the community.'¹³ This is the slogan which appears on the official website of The Sherriff Centre, indicating that it is a place focused on nurturing the community and building connections between all residents of the local area.

Opened in 2014, the Sherriff Centre is a 'unique social enterprise' organisation located inside of St James' Church in West Hampstead. The main purpose of this public space is supporting people and sharing advice, free of charge. Alongside this the centre also features a post office, stationary shop, lending library, and children's soft play centre. Entry is free, with profits earned from other facilities going to their charity to keep providing services to the community. Visitors are welcome to join groups and participate in weekly classes or chat on the sofas with a cup of coffee and slice of homemade cake.

Separate to these public facilities, the centre is co-located with St James' Church and its ongoing religious functions. The parallel and somewhat complementary relationship between these two entities is interesting in that they both fulfil a public need and may potentially attract shared visitors expanding their related communities.

¹² Long Live Southbank [online], The Project. Available at: <http://www.llsb.com/theproject/> (Accessed: 27th January 2021).

¹³ The Sherriff Centre [online]. Available at: <https://thesherriffcentre.co.uk/> (Accessed: 27th January 2021).



Figure 5 - Families with children gather in the centre during the day. 12

Once Church attendance started to drop due to wider cultural shifts to more secular values the importance of adapting the space to serve the community in new ways grew. As described by Stone, "because their structure tends to outlive their function, buildings have continuously been adapted to new uses - a fact which has enabled generation after generation to derive a sense of continuity and stability from their physical surroundings"¹⁴. Here we see a rare example of a building between both phases; adapted yet maintaining its original function concurrently.

The two spaces within the Church are both complementary and contradictory, one encourages tranquillity and worship whilst the other encourages lively activity and practicality. Yet the original ecclesiastical architecture is far from unsuitable for the Sheriff Centre, it encourages a sense of continuity in its lasting meaningful structure and purpose. Despite being a holy place, churches have served as a central gathering place for hundreds of years and offer a familiar comforting appearance for the Sheriff Centre's adapted but continued presence in the community.

Likewise, despite its many additional features, what makes the centre unique is that the underlying purpose is supporting the community, a central purpose shared with the Church itself. The other offerings are nice-to-have conveniences that would otherwise be found in their own separate buildings - the Sheriff Centre brings them together to offer a central rest point for the community where people's paths may cross.



Figure 6 - Regular church seating is maintained at the back of the main hall. 12

In Pacheco's '10 Principles for Connecting People and the Streets' she claims that "public areas shape community ties in neighborhoods." ⁷ In our first case study the central community was the local skateboarders and enthusiastic onlookers, tied by interest and passion for a sport with urban roots. In this case the central community is based on locality and geography, with the ties between people being those of mutual care, humanity and family. We learn from this that some public spaces indirectly build communities, yet for others their very purpose may be centred around this idea.

The general interior of this particular space was not designed to work as a multi-purpose public centre, but rather a place of worship. A Church of England building may inspire caution in those of non-Christian beliefs, however, with the smart combination of many facilities and a comforting home-like style of modern interior the centre has developed into a public space loved by the local community. The blend of two aesthetics, antiquated and modern is well established in society today, often emulated for desired effect in newer buildings, further establishing the space as 'openly public' rather than exclusive to those of a certain religious belief.

The process of altering old buildings for new purpose is described by Stone as “a form of rewriting on the same ‘canvas’, where the previous old ‘story’ of a building can be seen through the writing of the new ‘plot’ on top” 13. The previous heritage is not disguised, but the intentions of the adaptation is clear. Friendliness of the interior indicates a clearly positive and welcoming purpose being neutral in design, like that of a personal lounge space rather than a religious building. This allows people to feel at home and protected, open to bonding with others.

Overcoming this challenge of developing an inclusive space is fundamental to widely serving public spaces like the Sheriff Centre which encourage diversity being open and welcoming to all. In doing so they open great possibilities for communication that may otherwise have never occurred, fostering new friendships for those from all walks of life. Given how the space has been adapted, it shows that with a bit of encouragement and charisma any interior or exterior area can be well purposed as a thriving and popular public space. Similar to what we saw exhibited in the Southbank Skatepark, a public space gives back to the community however it may also come to reflect the needs of the community over time.

Barbican Centre

A monument of brutalist architecture, the Barbican Centre is a major cultural and performing arts centre found in central London, built as part of a wide-scale regeneration project following devastation left by bombing during the Second World War¹⁵.

As a multi-purpose complex hosting many events it attracts a variety of visitors for music, theatre, dining, tours and all forms of exhibitions. Its central shared space and lobby areas act as a form of public space whereby numerous visitors with differing purposes overlap and interact whether their interest is in a specific performance, installation or simply a leisurely visit to enjoy the architecture and atmosphere.



Figure 7 - The wider Barbican complex. 15

15 Barbican [online], Our story. Available at: <https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story> (Accessed: 27th January 2021).

Unlike our previous case studies the Barbican was purpose built to act as a popular public space, yet what makes it interesting is how it can be considered as a highly curated space that also performs as a continuously evolving ‘loose space’ adopted and moulded by the people therein. It is as though the designers had this very principle in mind, to connect people’s paths in a form of loosely organised chaos to encourage memorable experiences, with such breadth of activity to emulate what might be found in an ever-changing city centre. This is well described by Franck, “the city of loose spaces is not only seen but felt. The overlapping of different activities and the softening of boundaries between one space and another create visually and sensually rich experiences” 1.

By encouraging such experiences the public space becomes more vibrant and engaging. Graduation groups cross paths with tourists and local residents alike, surrounded by art installations that are changed on a regular basis to offer a fresh experience for repeat visitors and maintain an ongoing sense of wonder. When defining a public space we introduced that it may be a “physical area in which any human being may find themselves” 2 ; perhaps being surrounded by such a complex blend of experiences, visuals, and people can be considered as an ideal environment for self discovery.



Figure 8 - Wide carpeted interiors allow many people to stand, talk and pass one another. 16

16 Lowe, A., The Barbican Centre, Antonia Lowe Interiors [online], 2016. Available at: <https://antonialowinteriors.com/the-barbican-centre> (Accessed: 27th January 2021).

The interior of the Barbican Centre largely reflects its exterior. Simple and functional with some modern detail and charm to specific fixtures. Perhaps its most apparent feature is its grand expansive spaces with high ceilings and enough width to allow passage of many people. However, despite its scale the interior manages to create a certain cosiness; with elongated shapes, pillars and underpasses dividing larger spaces into a series of more private areas. These many 'hideaways' allow individuals and groups to feel at ease stopping and standing for conversation, rather than being forced to continue moving from point-to-point.

Likewise, the number of bends throughout the building combined with continued use of soft carpeting and rough textured walls prevent voices from travelling or echoing. This allows for more comfortable conversation, even when larger crowds are sharing the same space, and offers a more warm and inviting atmosphere despite the brutalist materials in use.

When we bring both the stimulating passage of people in a dynamic environment, with the accommodately spacious yet comfortable interior, we start to understand how the Barbican Centre encourages interaction between strangers and groups. Kindling potential new relationships and a community bound to a common public space.

Conclusion

From our three case studies it is evident that public spaces often come to reflect the needs of its users. In some cases these spaces are intelligently designed for a purpose, as with the Barbican Centre, in others they form naturally as 'loose spaces' - in some cases becoming a persistent addition to the urban landscape once their newfound purpose has gained acceptance in the local community, as with the Southbank Skatepark.

This transition, or adaptation, is not always to the benefit of the site authority or governing system, such as with the Southbank Skatepark where we saw resistance from the owners due to conflict with the site's perceived function. The Sherriff Centre may have been developed with site approval but its existence was only made possible by changing circumstances. The original creators could not have estimated so many years ago how long their Church would continue to be relevant to public needs.

In this sense, as we look to the future at the expected impacts to public space, it is important to consider not just the aesthetic principles that society chooses to adopt but rather the wider changes to society itself and how communities wish to interact.

Such as with the rise of the Internet as a form of digital public space¹⁷, we can now see signs of a convergence between our digital reality and physical world through new technologies such as augmented and virtual reality. Rather than see the digital age as a threat to physical space, it may instead offer new opportunities and give communities further reach.

Our society is built on functional systems that require practical structures, this extends to our public spaces. However, our communities and relationships grow organically in often unpredictable ways... establishing new requirements not accounted for in our initial designs. In this way, heavily function-focused spaces may try to battle against this concept but for those that serve the fundamental needs of a public space it is beneficial to encourage this free flowing behaviour with loose administration. In doing so, the best conditions are set for new relationships to form allowing the space's community to grow.

¹⁷ Chester, J., Internet as a Commons: Public Space in the Digital Age, Center For Digital Democracy [online], 2015. Available at: <https://www.democraticmedia.org/content/internet-commons-public-space-digital-age> (Accessed: 27th January 2021).

Appendices

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