

Unlocking Pentonville: Architectural Liberation in Self Initiated Projects



Architecture and planning create the setting in which civic life is played out. Yet on the whole the public realm and the quality of our buildings come about through the instruments of capital. As agents of those commissioning buildings, architects and planners are inherently caught between two potentially conflicting concerns: to satisfy the client's wishes on the one hand, and to answer to their discipline's societal contract on the other. The notion of impartial service to society is embedded not only in the very definition of professionalism, but also explicitly in the Architects' Registration Board (ARB) 'Architects' Code', and in clause 3.1 of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) 'Code of Professional Conduct'. This states that the architect should 'have a proper concern and due regard for the effect that their work may have on its users and the local community', and should 'be aware of the environmental impact of their work'. Note that nothing stronger than 'awareness' is now required.

Over the course of my career, the balance between societal and personal gain has shifted. Training in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was still understood that working for the benefit of society was our ethical goal. In the UK, local authority architects' departments carried out impressive work, and experimentation was sanctioned through sponsorship by the public purse. This era saw the invention of innovative spatial typologies, and the emergence of Matrix (representing women's views on the built environment) and the community architecture movement. Some flagship schemes included the redevelopment of two of London's historic markets in Spitalfields and Covent Garden, the building of new forms of housing across London, and ambitious infrastructure projects such as the Thames Barrier at Woolwich, which prevents East and Central London being flooded by storm surges and very high tides.

Since the premiership of Margaret Thatcher and the growth of globalisation, the role of the state has been demonised and its reach eroded. The experimentation that was funded publicly is now under both critical review and development pressure. Despite their well-publicised problems, which originate partly from poor maintenance and flawed policies of housing allocation, politicians are calling for the regeneration of 'failing' 1970s social housing estates such as the Heygate and Aylesbury in South London, and the demolition of unloved buildings such as the Brutalist Robin Hood Gardens (1972) in Poplar, East London, designed by Alison and Peter Smithson. A new caution is in the air, with housing in particular solidifying into typologies based on historic archetypes such as mansion blocks, terraced houses and Tyneside flats. There is a shift away from the Corbusian model of large towers in parkland settings and Radburn layouts towards an urbanism with an emphasis on 'place-making' – the creation of identity in the public realm based on streets and squares, clear demarcations of public and private space, private gardens or balconies as amenity space, and familiar materials such as brick cladding – what in the capital is becoming known as the 'new London vernacular'. Here, the need for social housing under current funding regimes has meant London is both rising in height and cost while simultaneously being hollowed out as private housing is bought by absentee owners living abroad. With legislation leaning in favour of developers, and the reduced power of local authority planning departments to deal with this imbalance, the question is begged: whose responsibility is it to uphold civic values? At the institutional level, the ARB (established by Parliament to regulate the profession in the UK) is focused predominantly on the 'consumer' of architectural service in demanding that architects have appropriate training and insurance, and on the misuse by practitioners of the title 'architect'. The RIBA has periodic and recurring anxiety about architects' ethical position, but its message is as incoherent

as its remit, and reflects prevailing dogmas. While purporting to safeguard architectural knowledge and upholding the social contract, the RIBA behaves sycophantically to government and the agents of big business, generally turning a blind eye to ethical abuses and the bad behaviour of its members while sanctioning the vanity of its more famous public figures. The absence of a clear ethical position by the bodies that represent architects in society brings all of the profession into disrepute, and does not provide a positive narrative around which we could cohere.

Locating Liberation

Architects and planners face difficult choices in dealing with these changes. The first point to make is that everyone involved in building operates within the same political and economic framework, and room for manoeuvre is restricted on all sides. The large, successful practices are good at aligning themselves with their influential clients and navigating away from ethical problems. The smaller firms have less to lose, but they understand that it is commercial suicide to bite the hand that feeds them. Most architects are treading a fine line trying to uphold their principles while working within the parameters that allow building to take place at all.

In a highly competitive business, architects have to be realistic about where their work comes from. Challenging clients on their ethics means potentially losing work. As a result it is rare to find an architect candid enough to debate either the system or the manner in which buildings are procured, much less criticise a client. For example, before demolition was made inevitable, my own firm – Sarah Wigglesworth Architects – was effectively blacklisted by the developer of the Robin Hood Gardens site for carrying out a pro-bono feasibility study on behalf of the Twentieth Century Society (an organisation that campaigns for the safeguarding of 20th-

century British architecture) that they viewed as challenging their project, as it aimed to show that the estate could be upgraded environmentally and converted into larger flats meeting the needs of the families that were crowded into unfit accommodation.

Accordingly, critical architecture is confined to academia, where dispassionate, independent examination of issues is encouraged and where there is a client-free environment. Interestingly, the focus in a number of schools is now on work that aims to engage with communities, to empower them through knowledge, language and action to hold to account those responsible for the built environment visited upon them. This has resulted in the emergence of 'live projects' in which teams of students work with such groups to offer their design, management, communication, planning and building skills, learning to provide services similar to those they will use later in practice. Whether or not this genuinely challenges the ethics of conventional practice, or merely co-opts naive but willing students into unpaid labour, is debatable. What seems clear, though, is that this is a reaction to the unrelenting narrative of capitalism played out in practice and the desire to spread access to architecture's ways of knowing and doing into sectors of the community that are affected by our work, but rarely involved in its briefing and processes. Academia has perhaps become the only place where this is possible.

Many of those interested in the built environment, and especially architects, seek a critique of the effects that global capital is having on our cities, a better understanding of how finance controls development, and how land supply and planning issues come together to create the environment making up our rural areas, towns and cities. However, there does not appear to be any school of architecture in the UK that situates its work within this context and gives students the skills to navigate the realities of development with

a good grounding in land economy. Isolated from the practice context and with little knowledge of its conditions and drivers, it is unlikely that architectural academics will invent new processes and financial models that could potentially change the status quo.

This leaves architects interested in breaking free from these constraints with an interesting dilemma: where and how can agency be achieved and how could this alter current conditions?

One method my firm has experimented with is to carry out projects where the agenda is initiated and driven by us. By doing so we hope to engage new audiences and generate debate so as to influence the outcomes of development. In the majority of our projects we are invited on board once the development parameters (density, land price, market context, planning brief, building standards and so on) have been established by others. What this leaves for the architect is the relatively restricted, and often provides great challenges, such as trying to break down the mass of a very large building by visually 'reducing' the bulk of a proposal. If architects were invited to participate earlier in the decision making on matters of spatial organisation, appropriate density or material expression, and there were open debate that included the local community, this would be more likely to create a more interesting, meaningful and responsive built environment, and one that is less adversarial.

Escaping Architectural Confinement

Unlocking Pentonville (2017) illustrates the idea and is in the tradition of the self-initiated research-led projects that started in 1995 with my own house and office at 9/10 Stock Orchard Street in Islington, North London. A speculative project initiated and carried out by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, it focuses on Pentonville Prison, which is situated less

than a mile from our office. While based on a real, timely situation, it aims to tackle the problem of social exclusion that results in serial incarceration from a spatial organisation and socioeconomic perspective, with the wellbeing of residents and the local community in mind rather than being the product of financial calculations and policy fulfilment. Moreover, as it involves the potential reinvention of the prison site, it engages ideas of freedom and social justice, and the role of the built environment in securing these for everyone.

Her Majesty's Prison Service is selling its inner-city jails, releasing these sites for redevelopment. The area is subject to pressure from the nearby King's Cross development, a 27-hectares (67-acre) new urban quarter currently being constructed on the site of former railway lands north of Kings Cross and St Pancras stations in London. Taking into account local concerns around housing and its affordability, and in view of Pentonville Prison's history and the listed status of some of its buildings, the challenge was to envision a new life for the site that communicates its past and considers its relevance for the future. Unlocking Pentonville therefore imagines a radical new vision for this area of Caledonian Road in North London.

Completed in 1842, Pentonville served as a model for many other British prisons and is still operational. It is a Category B/C Local Prison serving the surrounding population, and also holds remand prisoners and some longer-term inmates. Colonel Joshua Jebb's design was based on two key ideas: individual confinement using the separate cell system (each cell measures 4.1 x 2.3 metres/13.5 x 7.5 feet) and surveillance along the arms of the radial plan. Originally designed to hold 520 prisoners, it now houses 1,264 as a result of extensions and additions to the original five wings. Violence, including murders, have taken place within its walls.

It costs over £30,000 per annum to keep someone in a Category B/C prison like Pentonville.¹ Questions therefore arise as to who is criminalised and which crimes are most likely to lead to imprisonment. The London Borough of Islington has one of the highest crime rates and youth reoffending rates in London. Although crime occurs across all sections of society, young people, ethnic minorities and those living in poverty are more likely to end up in prison. The Caledonian Ward, in which the prison is located, is one of the most deprived in the UK and the most deprived in Islington, with very high densities, poorer than average educational and skills attainment, access to open space and healthcare, and higher levels of obesity and life expectancy than national averages. High housing costs are a primary cause of inequality. Public-sector cuts and welfare reforms are exacerbating these trends.

The Pentonville prison site presents a unique opportunity to respond to these complex social, physical and historical contexts. The aim of the Unlocking Pentonville project is to configure a new neighbourhood that breaks down the prison walls connecting the site and the surrounding streets, and replaces the all-seeing perspectival surveillance point at the focus of the radial arms with a new public space at the heart of the site. The intention is to open up and reveal the existing historic structures, offering opportunities to remember and learn from the prison's past while redeeming the buildings for new uses relevant to a post-prison future.

The proposal consists of a range of multi-generational housing with sizes and values related to income and facilities for education and training that could potentially help reduce crime and reoffending. At the foundation of this work is a desire to create a socially just neighbourhood, with improved access to local health advice and fitness facilities alongside new public spaces, gardens and community

buildings that contribute to an increased sense of wellbeing in order to make a place that uses creativity (and the self-definition that arises from this) as a thread that binds together all the activities proposed for the site. For example, a crèche staffed by local people and assisted by third-agers feeds a School of Creative Arts that educates children through an arts-based curriculum, and will form a feeder for local colleges. Along the Caledonian Road, four storeys of apartments (both general needs and for older people) sit over maker spaces and retail outlets serviced by a makers' yard and live/work units to the rear. The prison buildings are variously converted into housing and workshop spaces, retaining their former identity but with reconfigured fenestration, roof profiles and elements of their interiors. To the northeast corner of the site, a youth centre and sport facilities would occupy a converted prison wing.

The listed Chapel remains at the heart of the proposal, facing the new public square, but is repurposed as a community building, radio station and, at ground level, a market. Its east wall can serve as an outdoor cinema screen viewed from deck chairs in the square. A cafe and flower shop occupy the northeast corner of the square, behind which the ruined facade of the former prison hosts a vertical garden, with more live/work and growing beds occupying the footprint of the ghost cells.

Unlocking Pentonville was showcased at a public exhibition in an empty shop on Caledonian Road during June 2017, accompanied by three debates on the themes of Memory, Equality and Justice, and Wellbeing. The event was well attended and elicited a great deal of interest from the community who offered their opinions on the future of the site and comments on the proposal. It provided an opportunity to engage politicians, local people and opinion-formers in a debate about the potential future of the neighbourhood – an important aspect of the proposal. The hope is that with the freedom

to make proposals before the economic parameters are set, it becomes possible to explore the spatial, economic and cultural agendas of such sites at a stage when people can see how ambitious a development could be, and we can influence the way we renew our cities. By clearly showing the links between crime and social justice, Unlocking Pentonville challenges the notion of 'best value' as the highest price paid for the land, and shows that social justice and equality, stable communities and beauty also have a value, if only we could recognise it.

Sarah Wigglesworth

Notes

1. Ministry of Justice, 'Costs per prison place and cost per prisoner by individual prison establishment', National Offender Management Service', National Offender Management Service Annual Report and Accounts 2015–16, 27 October 2016: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-performance-statistics-2015-to-2016.

This article can be found in: Architectural Design Volume 88, Issue 3 Special Issue: Architecture and Freedom: Searching for Agency in a Changing World (May/June 2018)