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This Insight Study is published by New London Architecture (NLA) in April 2015 to accompany NLA’s 10th anniversary exhibition Public London: Ten Years of Transforming Spaces, together with the Never Mind the Bollards installation in Store Street South Crescent curated by Sarah Gaventa.

23 April – 11 July 2015

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ISBN 978-0-9927189-4-7
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NLA INSIGHT STUDY 03
It is ten years since New London Architecture opened its doors; ten years since London won the bid to host the 2012 Olympics; 30 years since Richard Rogers first published plans to create a pedestrian-friendly environment in Trafalgar Square, Parliament Square and along the Victoria Embankment, and 30 years since Stuart Lipton, borrowing from the Rockefeller Center in New York, built Broadgate where the spaces between the buildings were as important as the buildings themselves. And it is over 40 years since public protests halted the massive urban road building programme that prioritised motor vehicles over people. It has been slow going, but we have evolved as a city in our understanding of the public realm; from a city where planners believed our climate unsuited to the sorts of piazzas and plazas found in other cities, where local authorities frowned on cafes whose tables and chairs ‘blocked’ pavements, to a city that understands the value of good public spaces and that our streets are places too – not merely polluted corridors for vehicular movement.

Over the past decade NLA has strongly supported this shift though exhibitions, think tanks, debates and seminars. Together with The Building Centre we campaigned to turn the Crescent outside our own building into a pedestrianised space. Over the next few years this area will experience major change with the arrival of Crossrail, significant improvements to the ground plane around St Giles’s Circus and the removal of the gyratory of Tottenham Court Road and Gower Street. It is an example of what is happening across London to improve the lot of pedestrians and cyclists, to provide a more equitable distribution of road space and encourage active transportation strategies.

This Insight Study and the accompanying exhibition set out the progress that has been made to date, look at what is planned to take place and alert us to the issues that might slow positive change as a result of increasing cuts in public expenditure, while looking at the role of the private sector in delivering equitable public spaces.

Peter Murray
Chairman, New London Architecture
April 2015
Public space is where the daily life of the city is played out – where we meet, sit, relax, eat, play, wander, reflect, do business and a whole host of other activities. It provides the essential fabric to our quality of life. Over the last decade there has been an extraordinary transformation in London – a momentous shift in understanding that the spaces in, around and linking buildings are as important, if not more so, than individual structures in a city – they are not just the ‘in between’ parts. Public space has become a fundamentally important element of making places work for people.

Since 2004 an injection of investment, closer partnership and collaboration between private and public sectors, political ambition, and economic, social and design shifts have combined to drive a revolution in attitudes towards, and delivery of, new and regenerated public space. This is not just in the traditional squares and parks so familiar as part of London’s distinctive urban landscape, but in its streets and high streets, town centres, transport hubs, infrastructure and spaces inside buildings. What we perceive as public space has expanded and the definitions between public and private are breaking down.

Developers and landowners have come to recognise that public space is an essential value-adding asset beyond the ‘red line’ of development, while the visible effects of regeneration, especially in redeveloped industrial lands such as King’s Cross and the Olympic Park, means that society has demanded (and is demanding) more and better-quality public spaces. The private sector’s role in owning, delivering and managing high-quality public space has expanded radically, especially in the last five years, while the traditional function of the public sector as its custodian is shifting. Our understanding of public realm as a fundamental element of placemaking, and placekeeping, is continuously evolving, and attention has now turned to how roads and infrastructure can function as places as well as movement corridors, as the city’s population continues to expand and the use of space becomes ever more pressured.

1.1 Definitions: what do we mean by ‘public space’ and ‘public realm’?

Public space is commonly defined as any space that is free and open to everyone. The London Plan (2011) describes it as ‘the space between and within buildings that is publicly accessible, including streets, squares, forecourts, parks and open spaces.’

In general terms, types of public space include:

— publicly owned streets, carriageways, pathways and rights of ways (and those that are privately owned but allow free limited or unlimited public access)
— urban and suburban squares
— parks, publicly accessible gardens and other green spaces
— footpaths, footways and walkways
— cycleways
— bridges
— transport hubs, junctions, interchanges and connections (at ground level); concourses in and around transport hubs, for example major railway stations
— publicly accessible waterfronts and riversides – and other ‘blue spaces’ (canals, lakes and reservoirs)
— other spaces inside, between or around buildings, such as atria

‘First life, then spaces, then buildings – the other way around never works.’

Jan Gehl
The complexity of defining what public realm comprises has been acknowledged in key documents such as the City of Westminster public realm material (Westminster Way), which gives two definitions: one that refers to ‘all those parts of the built and natural environment that the public can view or visit’, and another that also encompasses privately-owned enclosed spaces such as shopping centres.2

That definitions of ‘public space’ and ‘public realm’ are fluid is in itself a reflection of how public realm design is still, relatively speaking, very much a new field, and also of how our thinking is continually expanding about what public space actually is. This is particularly apparent in the opening up of enclosed public spaces and the interiors of commercial, retail and cultural buildings – such as ground-floor spaces, lobbies and viewing galleries, for example at the Angel Building and 20 Fenchurch Street – showing that developers and landowners are aware that opening up their buildings to the wider public can be beneficial in developing a better mix of uses and a more inclusive environment.

‘Public realm’ also encompasses a wider meaning including the social and cultural value and civic identity that places have for people, as a ‘self-organising’ shared resource that individuals and communities use on a daily basis, and which has been the subject of extensive academic discourse and debate – especially with the rise of interdisciplinary studies that have brought geographical, sociological and anthropological viewpoints to bear on urban design and planning. Many public spaces that people use are local ones they visit regularly, often quite banal or ‘untidy’ (such as street markets and car boot sales), but which nevertheless retain important social functions.3

1.2 ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

There is now a remarkable degree of consensus between designers, developers and policymakers that well-designed and well-managed public space is essential to the health of a city in every sense. But this change in attitude is still very recent and has been driven by major shifts in how we live and work. Undoubtedly the biggest change over the past 10 years has been the phenomenally rapid progress in smart technology and Wi-Fi networks, to the extent that public space is now as much digital as physical. High-quality public spaces not only benefit business in attracting customers, employees and services but also are almost universally used as workspace – whether for meetings or working alone. Spaces for mobile working are especially important for small businesses and start-ups, which make up 99.8 per cent of the private sector in London.4

It is also important to consider London’s pre-eminent position as a global business and financial centre in the wider context of how public realm has moved up the planning agenda. Studies comparing the attractiveness of global cities as a business location, such as the Global Financial Centres Index, consistently rank London at either number 1 or 2 in the world.5 The need to attract and retain talent has a strong influence on the demand for more attractive, high-quality urban spaces, as well as buildings. Landowners, developers and businesses are therefore increasingly thinking about the spaces outside their buildings to create successful places. Alongside this, the mix of uses needed for 24-hour activity rather than a daytime office district – especially evident in the City of London – requires more intensive and creative use of the public realm.

Yet the streets, squares and other spaces of the city still retain a fundamentally important role in supporting social life. Central London especially has seen a resurgence of a pavement culture outside bars and restaurants – the compulsory smoking ban in enclosed public places, introduced in 2007, has no doubt been a
factor in drawing social life out on to the street, as has perhaps more awareness ofcontinental outdoor life in cities such as Barcelona (partly due to the rise of the citybreak via low-cost airlines). Shopping has become much more about experience than simple transaction: a recent CBS Outdoor UK study found that 97 per cent of people surveyed extend their London shopping trips to include lunch (72 per cent) and meeting friends (57 per cent women, 40 per cent men). This counters the suggestion that mobile technology is making us more socially isolated than before: studies of pedestrians filmed 30 years apart in four public spaces in Boston, New York City and Philadelphia showed that over this time groups had increased relative to people who were alone. The 2012 Olympics and Paralympics have also had enormous impact in focusing public attention on London’s spaces and their potential.

Green space and green infrastructure have become essential parts of creating a liveable city, bringing a wealth of environmental benefits such as reducing the urban heat island effect, air cooling, absorbing pollutants and promoting biodiversity. Alongside this, the transfer of public health responsibilities to local authorities in 2013 has led to a much increased focus on the benefits of green space, in particular, for both physical and mental health and wellbeing for children and adults.