A Social Infrastructure of Beauty, Vitality and Meaning

A thought starter by Adam Khan

A hundred years ago the pioneering social housing reformers Basil Jellicoe and Irene Barclay proclaimed, 'Housing is not Enough'. Faced with the direst slums of St Pancras, their intimate knowledge of the neighbourhood told them that places to come together were the foundation of a sustainable, resilient community.

London has a fantastic successful history of diversity, community entrepreneurship and social mobility – yet the recent past has seen a slew of sterile dormitory developments. Gated or socially segregated, these short-sighted approaches run counter to that decent London tradition.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many of the glaring inequalities and inadequacies of our housing and public space, and so as we plan for recovery, as we face up to our own housing crisis and start to build again, we are fortunate to have an emerging consensus on the need for Good Growth, founded on the social

infrastructure that will allow new homes to become vibrant, resilient neighbourhoods. That infrastructure was already under strain, with capacity tested by increasing densities, the loss of many informal spaces such as the room over the pub, austerity enforced cuts, and the current model of large-scale development which introduces rapid shocks to these fragile ecosystems. And all this against a backdrop of continuing high property values and gentrification, of increasing wealth polarisation in the pandemic, and a poverty and mental health crisis, makes social integration more urgent than ever.

And so, we need to understand how social infrastructure works as an engine of social integration, how to do this at scale, and where best to apply leverage. As designers, we come to know our communities and projects well and to understand the fine grain of specific requirements. But translating that to wider policy and distilling best practice is not straightforward; the subject is complex, involving multiple voices, agencies, and skillsets. How can one generalise in such a tangled web? How can we map the terrain and establish some shared methods and ways of understanding?

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What emerges is the complete interdependence and synergy of the soft and hard networks. But whilst digital connectivity becomes ever cheaper and ubiquitous, physical places to gather are becoming rare assets, particularly for those with least means. The fabric of community life and organisation relies on the ready availability of spaces which are affordable and flexible, able to host a multitude of functions.

But these shared spaces must also lift the spirits. To become adopted and gather meaning and significance they must be highly attractive to use and, yes, poetic. They are entrusted with some of the really significant moments of life – the weddings, parties and funerals – and, to truly support social integration, they must be places where those with choice also choose to go. The emotional capacity of these places can therefore bring viability and long-term sustainability, founded on a strong desire to use and adapt the space.

In recent years there has been an understandable tendency towards rationalising community spaces into centralised hubs, with stakeholders accessing them on a timetable basis. Whilst these may appear efficient from the providers perspective, they can also result in bland spaces with little feeling of place or belonging. Whilst technically multi-functional, they can miss out on the appropriation and customisation that comes from the strong sense of ownership and empowerment found in dedicated or community-made facilities. Paradoxically, it can be this very specificity which makes the spaces then attractive to other very different groups, and hence securely viable.

We know that physical place plays such an important part in social identity, agency and belonging. Just as our planning departments rebrand to placemaking, we need to see that social infrastructure is highly dependent on sense of place, and some of the most powerful and effective facilities are found amongst a dispersed network of micro-spaces. These small, informal facilities are key to growing communities from the ground up.

We are at a critical moment with so much infrastructure lost or under threat, and yet the large scale of development underway brings fresh opportunities. There is a burgeoning appetite amongst communities to design, shape and manage an ambitious range of facilities, and many local authorities are moving towards enabling these in partnership with communities. The potential renaissance of social infrastructure requires designers with a powerful set of skills – to understand how to work with communities, how to enable communities to design, to understand how spaces can be robust, practical, and flexible, and above all to create shared spaces full of beauty, vitality and meaning.