**Making the civic city: architectural interventions and experiments in the urban**

**Daryl Martin and Alice Wilson, Department of Sociology, University of York**

**Abstract**

This Special Feature seeks to inform contemporary debates about the role of architectural design on the development (or not) of civic cultures within our cities. Contributors to this Special Feature present research that covers a wide spectrum of case studies that demonstrate the influence of urban design on the articulation of new models of citizenship, and the role of architecture in shaping patterns of exclusion in contemporary cities. In response to these issues, we highlight how the effects of architectural elements within their individual buildings can have much wider social implications in terms of the often impoverished dynamics of the urban spaces they foster; we offer examples of how urban infrastructures hold the potential for animating more just public cultures; and we review examples of the convivial cultures that support citizenship on the ground in cities today. In the final analysis of the impact of architectural interventions in the development of civic cultures, we argue that urban researchers should work with methods that trace the sonic qualities of public space in order to supplement visual approaches to the urban.

Keywords: Architecture; citizenship; conviviality; public space; urban infrastructure.

**Introduction**

Citizenship means different groups of people coming together for a common, civic purpose. So cities need a centre where people can gather; where services thrive and multiply; where different activities intermingle; where public spaces draw people in; where public transport minimises the impact of the car and maximises street space and social contact. In a successful city centre, people dominate the streets. (Rogers and Power 2000, 274)

In this Special Feature, we are going to learn about city spaces where people do, indeed, dominate the streets – to such an extent that they take over urban highways in order to make them into parks, and they animate high-streets in such a way as to make them as much infrastructures of care as centres of urban commerce. We will also, however, learn about contemporary cities where there is a withdrawal of spaces of encounter, where streets uncannily echo the internal architectural tics of privatised commercial buildings, and where claims to citizenship are being deliberately shut down via the ostensibly equal administrative processes of town planning. In all of these cases, both progressive and regressive in their underlying motives, we understand the efficacy of architecture and the importance of the built environment in shaping contemporary urban cultures.

This collection has its roots in a symposium held at the University of York in May 2022, where architects, art historians, community organisers, housing activists, political scientists, and urban sociologists gathered together in order to debate the legacies of the UK’s Urban Task Force (1999). This Task Force was the last significant national government initiative in the UK aimed at developing a vision for cities based on more than purely economic growth (although it was certainly lamentable in its biases towards new forms of property ownership and professional and middle class colonisation of the inner city, as noted by critical voices at the time (Amin, Massey and Thrift 2000; Doron 2002; Lees 2003)). The York symposium was preceded by the death of the Urban Task Force’s Chair, Richard Rogers, whose ideas about the social purpose of design, more than most major architects of his period, shaped the understanding of policy makers, and connected questions of aesthetics and politics in direct, albeit misguided, ways. Rogers was a well-connected public figure and insistent advocate of the potential of architecture to inform the public cultures of cities and to facilitate civic engagement, and he worried openly, and often, about the capture of his profession by privatised market forces. ‘”Form follows profit”’, he once wrote, ‘is the aesthetic principle of our times’ (2013, 20); as a consequence, Rogers argued that architecture’s ‘immense power to damage or delight’ necessitated ‘the voice of the citizen’ to temper and guide its impact on the development of cities today (2013, 283). An urbanist as much as an architect at heart, who believed in design as an ethical and aesthetic endeavour (Melvin 2013), Rogers considered good urban planning to be as important to economic development as entrepreneurial cultures (Rogers and Power 2000). At the time of leading the Urban Task Force, he was somewhat evangelical about the potential for London to develop as a model of the humanist city (Rogers 1997).

As contributions to this collection make clear (see e.g. Atkinson and Mingay, this issue), despite the laudable aspirations contained within Rogers’s writings, the influence of his Urban Task Force – and of some of the individual buildings designed by his practice in London since that report - has been pernicious on the ground. Even if we take the recommendations of the original Urban Task Force report at face value in their prescriptions of convivial cities characterised by strong cultures of citizenship, democracy, and good governance, alongside high quality urban design (1999), the intervening decades have seen the acceleration of models of highly securitised and privatised public space (McLeod and Johnstone 2012) alongside the decreasing diversity of housing tenures in contemporary cities (Lees 2014a). Despite Rogers’s hopes for its humane development, this has been especially the case in London, because of the rippling effects of the Task Force’s ideas around urban renewal and renaissance (Lees 2014b). With the distance of time, we can see the development of London since the Urban Task Force as a morphing into an urban environment resting on a politically thin understanding of public culture (Madden 2017), which borrows the aesthetics but not the ethical basis of civic participation. As Atkinson and Mingay note in their discussion of central London neighbourhoods in this collection, a ‘logic of markets, wealth and capital in these districts underwrites the move toward forms of renewal or rebuilding, albeit in the form of a kind of ‘dark’ renaissance’. Throughout this Special Feature, we look at the role of spatial design within such urban logics and in the making of civic cities. In this editorial introduction, we offer a precis of intersecting arguments threaded throughout the individual papers and their case studies. Separately and together, the papers in this collection help us to think through the ambivalences of public cultures today, the influence of urban design on the articulation of new models of citizenship, and the role of architecture in shaping patterns of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary cities. In the next section, we look at certain building types and their architectural elements in order to understand how they accelerate deeply unequal urban environments today.

**Architecture: elements, connections, and contradictions**

As Jones (this issue) reminds us in his contribution to this collection, although architectural designs cannot be simply read across from the economic systems in which they arise, they do advance certain visions of the social over others (see also Jones 2009). Individual buildings have the power to inform social relations, and the agency of some groups over the agency of others, because of their symbolic *and* material qualities (Gieryn 2002). Elsewhere in this collection, Yardimci and Martin (this issue) detail the symbolic power of Islamic architecture in their case study of the recently completed mosque in the Northern English city of York. Specifically, they highlight the ways in which the dome and minaret of the original design were prioritised in many objections received during the public planning consultation around the mosque. Although the eventual building included neither a dome nor a minaret, these two architectural elements served as lightning rods around which a determined group of respondents registered their disapproval of the plans more generally. In Yardimci and Martin’s analysis, these architectural elements elicited a deeper fear of cultural otherness amongst those engaging with the planning process. Within Jones’s own paper on atrium design in modern architecture, this almost ubiquitous architectural typology within corporate buildings today is explored in terms of its material qualities, and the work it does in legitimating contemporary forms of capitalism, the labour relations they thrive on, and the logics of exclusion they enact, ironically, within such transparent arrangements of space. The materiality of air itself within atrium design serves as a differentiating point within these buildings, working to sort their different population groups into those who inhabit their spaces in highly valued ways, against those whose presence is less valued. The title of Atkinson and Mingay’s paper – *Arrive and retreat* – points to the process of social exclusion elected for by the super-rich of London’s ultralands (see Atkinson 2020), and facilitated by their buildings’ sweep drives and underground parking lots. Atkinson and Mingay highlight the almost carceral qualities of these entry and exit points to the elite residential blocks of London’s West End, in how they minimise contact between residents of these buildings and the wider city. What the examples of minarets, domes, atria, and sweep drives in these different papers suggest is the analytical richness gained from studying the work done by individual architectural elements within their larger buildings (Koolhaas 2014; cf. Latour’s sociology of a door handle, in Johnson 1988).

Of course, a focus on the individual architectural elements within the wider built environment should not mask their role in brokering connections with other parts of their buildings and, moreover, with other parts of the city. Williams (this issue), in his account of the history of São Paulo’s Parque Minhocão, brings to our attention the surprising effects of this elevated expressway in brokering a sense of connection with the city for many of its residents. Since the community activism of Jane Jacobs in her response to a planned expressway in New York in the 1950s (Jacobs 1962), we have been accustomed to understanding roads as threats to the conviviality of traditional patterns of street-life. In the Minhocão, we see counter-intuitive uses of this stretch of the road network, at least partially, with its subversion at different points of the week by different social groups who have appropriated the expressway as a kind of urban park. In Atkinson and Mingay’s portrait of London’s ultralands, we see a very different set of social dynamics set in motion by the connections facilitated through the privacy of their residential blocks. Rather than the social mixing observed in São Paulo’s Minhocão, in London’s ultralands we can discern a hermetically sealed model of the social, where the residential blocks share services with adjacent hotels, smoothed through physical portals away from street level, such as the connecting corridors between London’s Mandarin Oriental Hotel and the residential block of One Hyde Park (designed by Richard Rogers’s architectural practice). Such connecting spaces, served as they are by the underlying infrastructure of concierges, cleaners and security staff, produce an ersatz sense of the social. As Atkinson and Mingay suggest, in such developments, the ‘key effect is one of social ‘reduction’—the sense of null spaces that absorb bodies, furnishings and cars in ways that are the antithesis of earlier ambitions for socially vital and democratic urban spaces’, such as those prescribed in Rogers’s Urban Task Force report, if not some of the buildings his practice actually designed in later years.

The ultralands developments of present-day London offer a version of the social replete with contradictions, most notably their deliberate situation within the middle of the contemporary city’s high end retail, leisure, and cultural areas of activity, alongside the architectural strategies these buildings employ to design out actual encounters between their property owners and the residents of the wider city. In his piece on the development of atrium design, Jones notes the many contradictory forces at play within this architectural typology; for him, ‘atriums are purposefully designed, active spaces, made with the generation of surplus value in mind, but that such a production reflects and embeds all manner of contradictions’. Richard Rogers, in one of his many reflections on the surrender of architecture to market forces, characterised design skill as ‘measured today by the architect’s ability to build the largest possible enclosure for the smallest investment in the quickest time’; the result, he suggested, was ‘invariably a single-activity building in the form of a thin-skinned box – a shopping centre, an office building or a block of flats – with no unprofitable public space, no expressive or innovative structural features’ (2013, 20-21). However, as Jones points out, the evolution of the atrium as an architectural form offers a conundrum at first sight, in light of its surrender of rentable space through the deliberate inclusion of voided space within the central volume of the building. Jones explains how the loss of rentable space is more than compensated by the addition of value leveraged through the ‘spectacular internal views’ opened up for corporate users, the absorption of corporate aesthetics into public buildings through the inclusion of atria, and the retail atmospherics that these facilitate. The contradictions Williams finds in his account of the Minhocão – that is, the sense that it holds in tension competing aspirations from very different social groups enthusiastic about its role in the city – articulates its inherently urban qualities. It is to the portraits of the contemporary city in this issue’s papers that we turn to in the next section.

**The urban: emptiness, infrastructure, and animation**

The contradictions Jones points to in terms of the atrium’s extraction of surplus value through the emptiness it creates within the centre of buildings echoes the wider spatial strategy of the ultraland developments detailed by Atkinson and Mingay. Here, within the Alpha City (Atkinson 2020), the density of development is not maximised as one might expect, given the high land values of the plots that these buildings occupy. Rather, space is more selectively utilised, in order to create buffer zones around the properties (and, of course, their residents), but also to indicate architectural quality – less is more, when architectural restraint can be priced into the value of the real estate. This restraint on the ground results in ‘architectural forms that truncate social contact’, and creates environments that ‘help to put into place a kind of dark space urbanism’. Atkinson and Mingay define dark space urbanism as ‘a form of urban life and culture that combines high levels of emptiness alongside low levels of street-based interaction, fuelled by design forms and high levels of capital intensity as it bears down on investment locales that are insufficiently protected by planning rules’. Against the sunlit uplands of the Urban Task Force’s portrait of convivial streets hosting diverse communities and an engaged citizenry, we find eerily empty environments in the ultralands, characterised by what is missing – a sense of social encounter. People are certainly light on the ground on the streets and, moreover, often within the buildings too, in which apartments are often purchased as investments rather than primary residences (Atkinson 2020). If the residential blocks here are operating according to a strategy of value extraction through a certain voiding of urban space, this is accompanied by a logic of absorption too – the absorption of capital into the physical stock of the building and the absorption of wealthy bodies too, *into* but also *away from* the city. Here is a form of urbanism in which ‘a kind of antisociality is strongly embedded through physical changes that valorise the presence of capital or of its holders’ (Atkinson and Mingay, this issue). It is an extrapolation at the level of a city of the same spatial and economic logics enacted by atria within individual buildings (Jones, this volume).

Within the logics of capital, value extraction and social exclusion, the atrium is exemplary, illustrating how architecture can act in an infrastructural way; in other contributions to this issue, we see how architectural artefacts and urban infrastructures intersect. For Yardimci and Martin, everyday elements of the built environment become entangled within disputes about the planning of a new mosque building and, by extension, larger political agendas about citizenship, multiculturalism and national identity. So, within their case study, individual roads, vehicles on streets, and the value of nearby terraced housing are all artefacts that are interpellated within the narratives of those wishing to block the development of the York Mosque. The mosque, as an architectural typology, acts somewhat like a boundary object in their study (Leigh Star 2010), a quilting point through which wildly differing discourses are threaded about the role of Muslim communities in contemporary Britain. The proposed place of an Islamic building within a city primarily defined by its Christian heritage ‘shows how architecture sits within wider urban infrastructures, and plays a role in configuring new cultures of citizenship within a wider politics of public space’ (Yardimci and Martin, this issue). That is, the mosque exemplifies how urban infrastructures can act as a kind of ‘collective unconscious’ to inculcate civic attachments and shape attitudes towards otherness (including fear of the other) in contemporary urban environments (Amin 2012). Although in the York Mosque we see urban infrastructures wrapped into fearful and, indeed, fear-inducing discourses that are Islamophobic in origin, in Udall’s contribution to the collection (this issue), we find more hopeful examples of an ‘infrastructuring of care’ within contemporary cities. In this case, in Udall’s description of the *High Streets of Exchanges* installation, we see how highstreets in Sheffield have been reimagined as an infrastructure of mutuality, self-organisation, and civic action, with field recordings documenting the everyday soundscapes of hairdresser studios, food markets, and library spaces (Studio Polpo 2021). In Udall’s contribution, we observe the depth of social engagement and support routinely occurring in routine encounters on the streets of contemporary cities, and the convivial cultures that arise in the everyday (Hall et al. 2015; Neal et al. 2019).

The lively street cultures presented in Udall’s paper clearly contrasts with the deadened spaces and architectures of enclosure in Central London’s ultralands; they compare more closely with the types of street culture represented in Williams’s account of São Paulo’s Minhocão. As Williams makes clear, the social life of the Minhocão is unpredictable, as it oscillates between fulfilling its function as an expressway alongside its frequent appropriation as an urban park, as well as serving as a platform for various and conflicting visions of the city by very different groups, from commercial developers and governing elites to homeless and marginalised populations. And yet, what arises clearly from Williams’s article is the animation of the city’s politics and culture through this architectural artefact; although not a building as such, it is clear that the Minhocão conforms to Latour and Yaneva’s understanding of architecture as ‘as an animated series of projects, successful and failing, as a changing and criss-crossing trajectory of unstable definitions and expertises, of recalcitrant materials and building technologies, of flip-flopping users’ concerns and communities’ appraisals’ (2008, 87). Even the changing name of this expressway, evolving from its formal designation Elevado João Goulart to the Minhocão, a word that translates as the ‘Big Worm’, symbolises the profoundly animated character of this space; the different stories, and their variety, recounted by Williams indicates that this is a place transformed through spatial practices (de Certeau 1984). The changing uses, views, and cultural practices traceable through the history of the Minhocão presents as ‘not a static object but a moving *project*’; it has certainly been ‘transformed by its users, modified by all of what happens inside and outside, and that it will pass or be renovated, adulterated and transformed beyond recognition’ (Latour and Yaneva 2008, 80). In sum, the Minhocão offers proof that architecture is, indeed, political, and integral to the urban politics of public space.

**The politics of public space: conviviality, citizenship, and future imaginaries**

At root within the different articles for this Special Feature lies the question of convivial urban cultures, and the ways in which architecture can help to foster moments of social encounter, at scales from the operation of individual elements of individual buildings to the use of larger areas in the city. Andy Merrifield has argued that ‘the urban confers the reality of the encounter, of the political encounter, and of the possibility for more encounters’ (2012, 269); the buildings analysed by Atkinson and Mingay signal the social implications of architecture that actively designs out opportunities for encounter. Yardimci and Martin, in their paper on planning objections to the York Mosque, detail the appropriation of democratic processes by those with Islamophobic beliefs to draw up barriers against the sharing of public space with Muslim communities and to consolidate narrative of nativist sentiments and intolerance of cultural difference (Amin 2023). Against those forms of urban environment we find the examples of sociability described by Udall in her projects in Berlin and Sheffield. In the *Sonic Acts of Noticing* project in Berlin, the River Spree becomes the trail along which participants can explore ecological, political, and cultural questions alongside others. In the *Ark-sheffield* project, Udall worked with a range of community organisations in the city, using the sharing of food to broker conversations – sometimes difficult – amongst very different resident groups about the climate emergency. This was a site-specific project – as Udall writes, it arose from an interest ‘in what it means to start a conversation in a *particular place* – in what kinds of practices of discussion already existed in that context, what ways of speaking about climate might emerge from the histories of that site, and what kinds of knowledges were produced through bringing people together to hear one another’ (emphasis added). Udall details the contributions from many marginalised communities in the city, and what emerges from the projects detailed in this piece is the space they offer for political dialogue between different groups, mediated through everyday social encounters; what seems to matter are the opportunities for people to simply be ‘in common’ with one another in convivial urban environments (cf. Neal 2019), despite the gaps in their experiences, as noted in Emre and Stasha’s conversation in Udall’s piece.

Central to the projects Udall describes is the importance of everyday opportunities that facilitate practices of commoning; for her, to common ‘is to seek to develop approaches that challenge exclusions, displacements, and enclosures, and support the development of new subjectivities, and practices of care and mutuality’. Commoning is an urban process, linked to cultures of political engagement and offering spaces for citizens to actively shape their environments (Stavrides 2016; Leontidou 2017). When reflecting upon the intersections of architecture and urban planning, Rogers and Power once argued that ‘cities not only concentrate problems but also solutions – the vital role of citizens’ (2000: 290); whilst they were not wrong, there is an underestimation of the sharp inequalities in whose views are emphasised in the working out of urban policies and planning. Yardimci and Martin’s analysis of the responses to the construction of a new mosque in York did not find one point of view only; far from it. However, their analysis did find that loudest contributions came from respondents objecting to the plans on both material and symbolic grounds and that many objections were posted by participants outside of the city. Moreover, they found that the volume of these objections had the effect of tilting the conversation overall, to the point that the project became, to an uncomfortable degree, about the airing of nativist opinions about English identity, ethnicity, and which groups held the right to claim space within the city. This is, then, an example of perennial debates about the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre 1996; Merrifield 2011), and the question of which citizens are most valued in processes of urban governance. For all the diversity of use in the Minhocão, and the environmental gains from clearing the road of vehicular traffic for large stretches of time, Williams is right to sound a cautionary note about the middle-class agendas driving many moves to gentrify the space, taking their cues from the development of New York’s High Line, with its attendant impact on property speculation in the city.

These observations bring to the fore the important question of whose voices are heard in contemporary urban governance and public culture more generally (Lipietz, Lee and Hayward 2014; Couldry 2010). Specifically, there is a question of whose voices are brought into debates about urban futures that are shared, and who gets to author the future. Whilst Jones astutely highlights the ambiguities of any form of envisaging future imaginaries, given that the architecture of the present holds the seeds of its eventual ruination (this issue), the question of how different voices are weighted in the articulation of future imaginaries is key, especially in light of the climate emergency that hangs over all struggles over public culture. Udall argues that ‘questions of how space for public conversation and learning around climate crisis might be produced, in ways that are connected to, and grow from the particularities of their urban context’ (this issue). This framing of place-specific civic engagement, building on cultures of conviviality and ‘being in common’ in the contemporary city is a model of public space that we would seek to encourage, in light of the insights arising from the research in the articles compiled for this Special Feature. In addition, we would argue that architecture is always a political project, and always key to the ways in which we shape the future, and cities yet to come.

**Conclusion**

In reviewing the variety of sites and projects across the contributions to this Special Feature, the Parque Minhocão is a valuable case to think about the intersections of architecture, the urban, and the politics of public space. As Williams (this issue) notes, ‘through a mixture of activism, accident and some design’, this expressway is a temporary form of public space that – just about – holds conflicting claims by different groups in creative tension. It is an animated space which, although materially fixed, has multiple symbolic functions, depending on who is using it, how, and when. It is an imaginatively rich, affectively charged space: as Williams suggests, ‘as a complex, *multi-authored process*, it holds diverse and contradictory interests held in balance’ (emphasis added). Specifically, its lack of resolution and definitive social purpose is valuable in allowing it to serve the needs of different publics. As a result, it affords a sense of openness to those using it, and this openness licences a feeling that they can be active in the making, and re-making, of their city.

And yet, as Williams also notes, in its role as backdrop to wider regeneration strategies for the city it does offer a model of public space ‘envisaged as a species of theatre, the city in effect as stage set’. The Parque Minhocão cannot be separated from its role in the place marketing of São Paulo; it is ‘a profoundly aesthetic project; it is, in large part, its images’ (Williams, this issue). This is a crucial point, as it points to the limits of architectural design in the making of urban environments – at least when it is understood as a primarily visual practice, interested in spectacular rather than empathic design (Pallasmaa 2005). Indeed, thinking in primarily visual terms may be a barrier to responding to the environmental crisis in the present; as Udall notes, ‘images of the Anthropocene often focus on spectacular and dramatic events, such as melting ice caps and natural disasters, rather than the more commonplace and systemic forms of environmental degradation that are caused by capitalist development and colonialism’. This is what makes the focus of the projects described in her article so interesting and hopeful, where ‘listening is deployed to produce personal and social affects, space for political encounter, and attunement to ecological relations’ (Udall, this issue). In the projects Udall describes, the sonic becomes a mode of brokering difficult, uncomfortable, and yet necessary conversations across different social groups. For Udall, the sonic is a vital mode in the ‘making of worlds’ and as a basis of solidarity in the contemporary moment. The art of listening is an important skill to be practised by architectural scholars and urban researchers (Back 2007), offering ‘a way to rethink how publics and the social are composed’ (Udall, this issue). Listening as an architectural, activist, research, and social practice may be the best place to start in the re-imagining of the built environment, and the re-making of more just cities and urban futures.

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Daryl Martin is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of York. Email: [daryl.martin@york.ac.uk](mailto:daryl.martin@york.ac.uk)

Alice Wilson received her PhD in Sociology from the University of York. Email: [aew579@york.ac.uk](mailto:aew579@york.ac.uk)