PUBLIC INTENTIONS FOR PRIVATE SPACES: EXPLORING ARCHITECTS' TACTICS TO SHAPE SHARED SPACE IN PRIVATE-LED DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

From the late 20th into the 21st centuries, the private market increasingly gained control from public authorities over strategic decisions affecting the quality of, and accessibility to, new urban development. This paper argues for architects to act more explicitly to promote greater open-ness and use-value, rather than more objectified and controlled exchange-value approaches to the public domain in private-led development. The paper analyses two London-based residential case studies and interviews with the architects about perceptions of, and approaches to, private-led development decision-making processes. It compares the individual practitioner's experiences of architecture practice with explicit intentions to influence better quality shared city space, examining professional norms vis-à-vis commercial clients and wider society. The paper concludes that greater awareness of architects' knowledge, skills, and a range of tactics to influence future shared environments can contribute to improved professional practice frameworks for more effective engagement in an increasingly globalised and privatised urban society.

Keywords: *Private-led development; shared residential environments; shared space; architecture; critical practice*

INTRODUCTION

Inner-city redevelopment remains one of the most dynamic, and volatile aspects of an increasingly globalised and privatised urban society. Larger scale residential urban redevelopment can impact people's everyday lives by adjoining, occupying, or replacing existing buildings and public spaces. Architects, once key professional actors in the decision-making processes affecting the built environment, have lost influence on strategic and detailed decisions affecting the quality of, and accessibility within, the majority of larger urban schemes. Architects working in more contested contexts are also often associated with an increasingly dynamic and complex range of clients and stakeholders, affecting all scales of decision-making from urban design to building shapes and material details (Carmona et al., 2002, p. 146). Research suggests that more studies are required to investigate the relationship between physical characteristics of residential environments and a more qualitative "sense of community" (Moustafa, 2009, p. 72). Sanoff argues that qualities of place, "sense of community and place attachment are linked to participation" in key decision-making processes (Sanoff, 2008, p. 61). However there is less evidence about who has the right to make certain decisions (including members of the public, affected communities, and built environment professionals) or how decision-making impacts qualitative outcomes when publicly owned property is transferred to private developers.

This paper compares and contrasts architects' accounts about project roles and commissions with their perceived intentions to meet, challenge, or at times subvert private client's expectations for the quality of, and public access within, new residential and mixed-use developments. It traces the privatisation of urban redevelopment processes from the late 20th into the 21st century and discusses concepts of urban place and qualities of what are described as

more open, compared to more closed, types of urban space in larger-scale mixed-use projects. Through an interpretive phenomenological approach it investigates both the spatial and social implications of architects' actions to influence private developer-clients and stakeholders, who might have opposing commercial expectations and social ambitions about the quality of residential environments and the broader public domain. Case studies have been selected from the author's larger body of research between 2009 and 2014, which includes interviews with six international architects and a number of additional project studies in the UK, continental Europe and farther afield. Given its available scope, this paper focuses onto two projects completed in the last ten years as examples of redevelopment in existing inner-city neighbourhoods in London, including private and public or shared public-private space and high density residential, commercial, and civic uses. In-depth interviews and project studies with the following UK-based practitioners are analysed:

- Peter Barber (Peter Barber Architects, London); Donnybrook, Bow, London.
- Liza Fior (muf architecture/art LLP, London); Barking Square, Barking, London.

Barber and Fior represent a sole practitioner and a small-medium sized office with more traditional, building, projects as well as collaborative architecture/art practices that defy traditional categorisation. The selection criteria included each person's/practice's engagement in private-led development processes and their perceived relevance to on-going debates within the UK and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) about current and future architectural practice.

Changing norms of architectural agency and urban regeneration

During the late 20th and early 21st centuries UK regeneration policy shifted toward market-led mechanisms where private institutions, not government, became the primary investors in urban redevelopment, and gained increasing control over the shape and management of large areas of existing cities (Minton, 2006). Associated changes in urban development processes and policies included the commodification of both public space and architecture while public authorities became "enablers" for private development projects rather than "providers" of large scale public works themselves (Madanipour, 2006). A number of sources have accused architects of "succumbing" to or perpetuating the effects of the market-shift upon society during this period of ideological and economic change (Dovey, 1999; Dutton & Mann, 1996; Graham & Marvin, 2001; Kaminer et al., 2010). Dutton and Mann (1996, p. 02), for example, argue that during this period architecture's "emancipatory social project of modernity…lost its moral authority and its momentum" and was replaced "seemingly overnight" by the hegemony of global capitalism.

Debating qualities of shared space in private-led residential redevelopment projects

Research about residential and mixed-use redevelopment projects, across architecture and other built environment disciplines, supports arguments that private-led projects prioritise the provision of amenities controlled for the benefit of private users and vehicles over more shared and accessible "people-centred" spaces (Barrett, 2013; Gehl, 2006; Madanipour, 1999). A loss of active spaces for people and connections to the wider existing network of city spaces result from the nature of market-based residential developments which prioritise private *exchange values* over public *use value* (Healey, 1998, p. 216). While research from property and surveying sources associates the success of regeneration with levels of private investment and business or property-led models (Singhal et al., 2009), the conclusions of more critical evaluations contend that profit-driven development models lead to greater segregation and gentrification rather than inclusive aims (Imrie & Raco, 2003; Kaminer et al., 2010; Social Exclusion Unit, 2000). Developers of exclusive residential projects often refer to "market pressures" as a rationale for restrictive private access (Zukin, 2011, p. 41). Sustainably diverse, open, and dynamic shared city spaces on the other hand prioritise pedestrian-level activity, unrestricted access (i.e. the

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opposite of control) and a multiplicity of uses and users. A recent *Demos* study in the UK supports this view (Mean & Tims, 2005, p. 10), arguing against "sanitised, frictionless consumer environments where architecture and technology are used to filter out undesirable people and groups." As an illustration, the diagram below (Figure 1) sets out the author's interpretation of qualities viewed as contributing to either more open and accessible or more closed and exclusive public spaces .
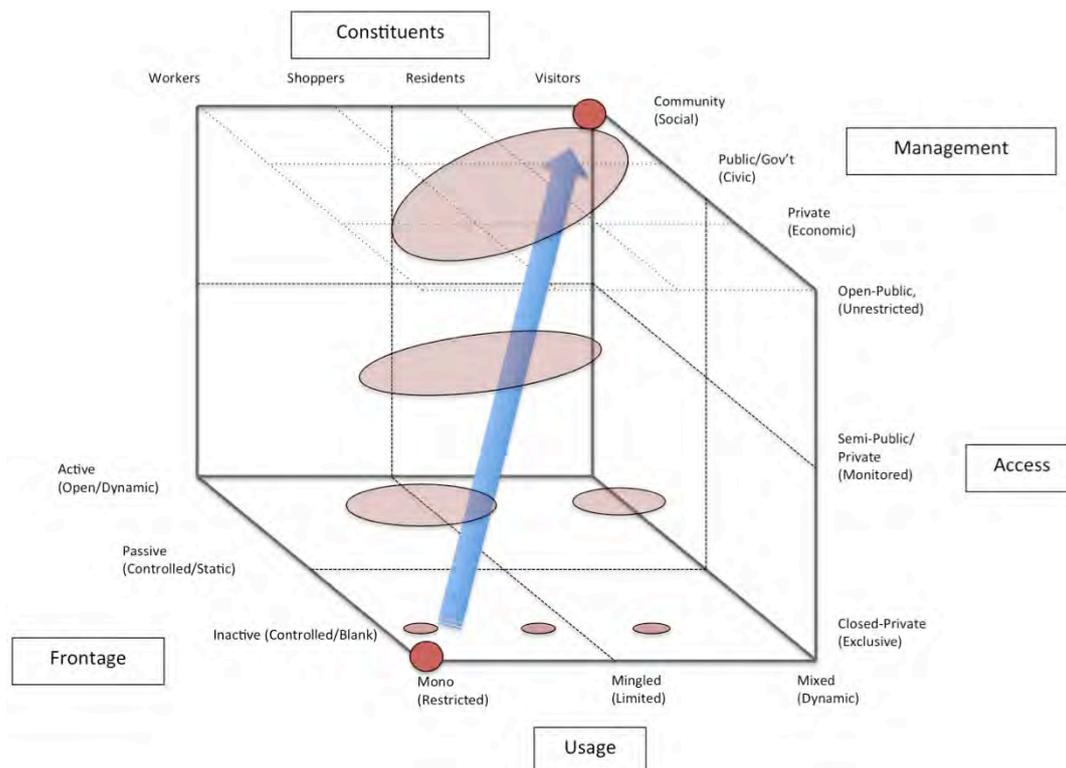

Figure 1. City Space Quality. Criteria for open versus closed environments (Source: Authors, 2015)

Case Study 1: Peter Barber Architects' Donnybrook Housing, Bow, London

Peter Barber Architects are a small London-based practice. Barber is the lead designer, supported by assisting architectural and administrative staff. Barber's practice output has been referred to as "a far more convincing attempt at community building […which] deserves serious attention as a model for […] future development" (Woodman, 2007). His practice generally consists of urban housing with a few private dwellings, and homeless-care residential hostel clients in England.

Barber's key housing projects since 2000 are primarily London-based, including: Doris' Place (2000/2001) in Haggerston; Donnybrook Quarter (competition 2001, completed 2006) in Bow; Tanner Street Housing in Barking (2008); and Hannibal Road Gardens (2011) in Stepney. The practice was twice awarded the RIBA's Building Design Architect of the Year prize for Housing (2007/08 and 2010/11), and has won multiple RIBA awards and commendations for its built projects. In 2012, Barber was appointed to the Olympic Park Quality Review panel by The London Legacy Corporation (London Legacy Development Corporation, 2012). Barber sums up his practice intentions in his manifesto: "We think that space conditions, and is in turn conditioned by, society and culture and that architecture can create the potential for social action and activity" (Barber, 2015).

Creating new public space: Donnybrook Quarter housing, Bow, London

Donnybrook Quarter (see Figure 2 and 3), is an award-winning housing and public space project in Bow, east London, described as having "redrawn the template for urban terraced housing" (Woodman, 2006). Barber's design resulted from a 2001-2002 *Circle33/Architecture Foundation* competition "seeking innovative housing," which Barber won from over 150 international submissions (French, 2002, p. 10).
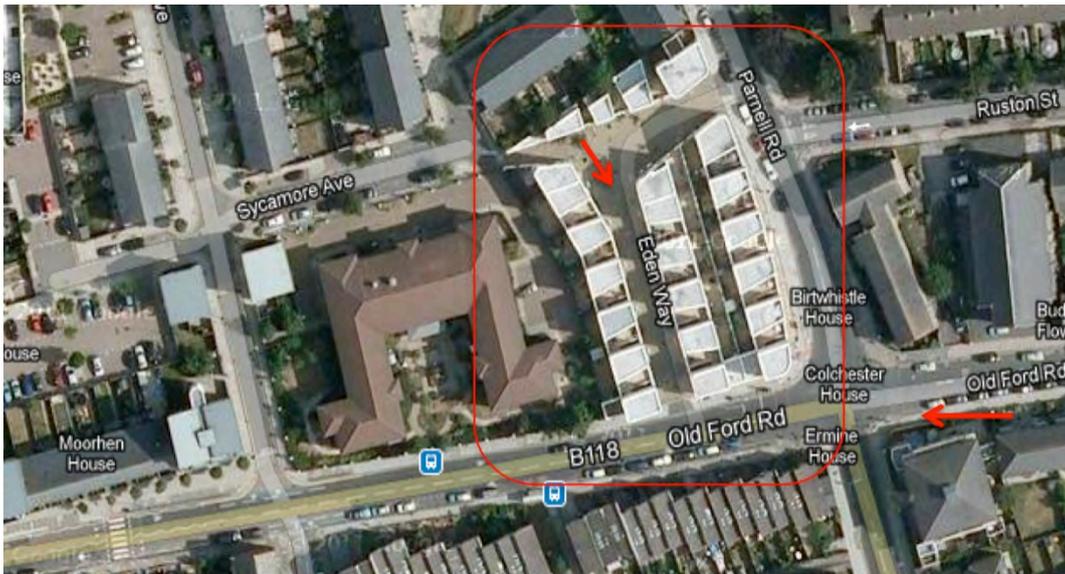

Figure 2. Donnybrook Quarter, London. Aerial view (Source: Google Earth, Authors, 2015)

Figure 3. Donnybrook Quarter, London. (Left) Picture of completed project at Eden Way (Source: Authors, 2015); (Right) Picture of completed project from Old Ford Road (Source: Authors, 2015)

Donnybrook Quarter is atypical as a case study in some respects because the design and appointment began with the open competition rather than a fee bid or interview with potential clients, however the process of defining and defending social intentions through commercial pressures remains relevant. The project is an example of an increasingly common situation where both public land and previously publicly managed social housing stock are transferred from local authorities (Tower Hamlets in this example) to a private landlord and/or developer (i.e. *Circle 33*, who are both developer and a registered social-housing landlord).

Donnybrook Quarter was completed in 2006, after a series of design changes and challenges to the competition-winning scheme. Barber had previously completed only a few small-scale bespoke housing developments until the Circle 33 competition, therefore his ideas and aspirations had yet to be fully tested in reality. The final project delivered 35 flats, maisonettes, and houses with a mix of private and subsidized (social) tenures; 520 habitable rooms per hectare, which at the time was more than double the allowable density under Tower Hamlets planning policy (which had been capped at 247 habitable rooms per hectare) (French, 2002, p. 11). In conversation with the author Barber recalled that he thought it would not be built or would get "watered down" as the practice was required to work with "a really hard nosed kind of contractor," Wilmott Dixon. While the scheme did change over the first six months, Barber notes that, rather than getting watered down, his practice "managed to actually intensify it,"

> For some people getting into the real world, rolling their sleeves up, is just such a nightmare because they have to negotiate and they have to, you know, collaborate, and they have to, try to accommodate so many different points of view […] but I'm always, I try to be positive and, as I say, an opportunist (Barber, 2013).

Overcoming challenges to accessible shared space

One of the challenges that Barber had to overcome between competition and completion was the client agent's insistence that the project should become a more traditional "gated community" on the basis of estate agent advice that the private units would not otherwise sell. This change would have restricted access to the streets to residents only and the core area of the scheme would no longer be public space. Barber challenged this advice to the original client body and the final project result retains the competition vision.

> That was a nightmare. Yeah, I mean it was slightly, slightly strange. The competition was set up with a real, you know, ambition but then it got handed over to, middle men, one particular guy who told us, you know, what the agent said […] that our scheme, which we in the first instance said was a celebration of the public social life - that the street shouldn't be a public street anymore. ((laughs)) So, I escalated it back to the people on the very top, on the board on the Housing Association, which is, you should never do that, you know, but it was the only thing to do, you know. […] Some people wouldn't have done it, you know, but, yeah, we had, we had to get it, get it right (Barber, 2013).

The suggestion to create a "gated" community is more often the result of economic assumptions for residential development over more general societal considerations. Architects working for commercial clients inevitably encounter such constraints in their practice and have to make choices about whether, or in what way, to effectively resist arguments in favour of more closed networks of space.

An example of a closed situation (not by Peter Barber Architects) is a project called *Chronos* (see Figure 4 & 5 overleaf), which is contemporary to – and geographically near – Donnybrook Quarter. It is also an award-winning residential development of apartments, maisonettes and retail/commercial space located on a corner site within a dense existing neighbourhood in east London (Sherwood, 2002). While the background to Chronos is outside the scope of this study it is included to illustrate the more typical outcome for urban residential projects where no public access is included in the final built scheme.
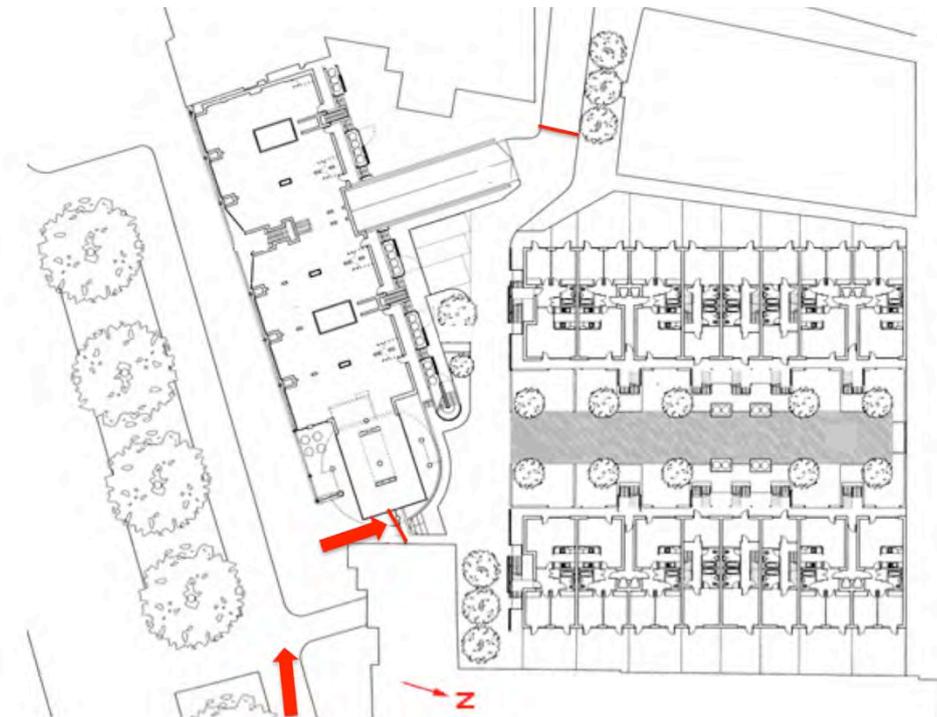
Figure 4. Chronos Housing, Whitechapel, London, Procter Matthews Architects, 2002. Corner site, gated for residents' access only. Site Plan (Source: Sherwood, 2002, Annotated by Authors 2015)

Figure 5. Chronos Housing, London. Procter Matthews Architects, 2002. (Left) Picture into gated inner-courtyard (Source: Authors, 2015); (Right) View from Whitechapel Road (Source: Authors, 2015)

Reflecting on project outcomes at Donnybrook Quarter

Barber reflected on the possibility that his aspirations for Donnybrook Quarter could have also become a similarly gated development like Chronos. He said a gated outcome "would have been a great shame," and noted that he was not under any illusions, even at competition stage,

that Donnybrook would have "streets full of people," saying "it was never really going to be like that," he felt the effort to keep open access was worthwhile (Barber, 2013).

> [T]here's a trickle of people that go through there, choose to kind of go through there, and choose rather than walk along the main road particularly at sort of school time, you know, people walk, mums, prams and kids and things like that which is a lovely thing to see […] people kind of taking control of their environment, and it's absolutely what you hope for (Barber, 2013).

As completed (see pictures in Figure 3, taken in 2013) Donnybrook Quarter maintains regular use as a public through-route, connecting the site to the surrounding neighbourhood and enlivening the interior "street," which has been designed with doors and windows onto the shared space. The space has been maintained as a public street, now called Eden Way, with no restrictions as to who may or may not access through the site other than self-regulation. Barber spoke further about the success the project has had and what it means to his ability to promote more open accessible shared space in other housing projects:

> Donnybrook replaced a building that sat in the middle of the site, it had loads of space 'round it which nobody used and which was giving nothing. So I'll say to the developers, I don't think we need to build 5, 6, 7, 8 stories high, if we just, you know, just concentrate on covering the site, I mean really intense public space, this is a better way of doing it (Barber, 2013).

Barber is also pragmatic about the results, saying "architecture can go to a certain point, and then there are so many other variables, cultural and economic, social." He notes however that the practice manifesto is on the front of every brochure and feasibility study the practice produces:

> However hard-nosed the developer is, that's in there[…] I'm not afraid to say to somebody 'Are you sure? Because if we do that then that-', it can be a logical conversation (Barber, 2013).

Case Study 2: MUF Architecture/Art LLP's Barking Town Square, Barking, London

Muf architecture/art LLP is a multi-disciplinary collective of "contributing" architects, artists, designers, and researchers founded in 1994 by Liza Fior, Katherine Clarke and Juliet Bidgood. While muf has a track record of "architecture" outputs, including buildings, built installations, urban furniture, and the preparation of a number of urban development guidelines associated with architecture and urban design practice, it defies any typical characterisation in this regard. As an art practice, muf is particularly associated with site-based and publicly staged interventions; performative and participatory approaches to urban projects that challenge clients and given briefs with attention to visible and intangible qualities of public space. Their online practice profile states,

> Access is understood not as a concession but as the gorgeous norm; creating spaces that have an equivalence for all who navigate them both physically and conceptually, muf deliver quality and strategically durable projects that inspire a sense of ownership through occupation ("Profile," 2015).

In muf's 2001 manifesto, *This is What We Do*, commentator Rosa Ainley wrote that "[t]heir focus on the process involves a recognition of the political context of how projects are constructed, and reveals complex attitudes to design and creativity" (Muf et al., 2001, p. 225). Liza Fior and Katherine Clarke trained in architecture schools and Fior is muf's most visible architectural practitioner through her international profile of completed projects, and numerous writing, speaking, and teaching roles. However, throughout the practice's history the founding partners have also explicitly "colluded with journalists' projections of [them] as three women set apart from the architectural mainstream" (Muf et al., 2001, p. 09).

Most of muf's completed and proposed work is within London's east end boroughs and outlying suburbs, including key projects in Dalston, Hackney (Making Space), and both around

and inside the London Olympic Park (Hackney Wick), where they are part of the team developing Legacy community and residential projects ("Profile," 2015). Since 2008, when the practice's Barking Town Square design won the European Prize for Urban Public Space, muf's profile and international recognition has increased notably within the UK professional architectural mainstream, and across international academic and philanthropic circles. With Clarke, for example, Fior was awarded the Louis I. Kahn Visiting Assistant Professorship at the Yale School of Architecture in 2009 and the practice was also commissioned to curate the British Pavilion at the 2010 Venice Biennale. In 2011 muf were awarded the RIBA's Building Design Award for Public Realm Architect of the Year ("Profile," 2015), and the US-based Graham Foundation's included the practice as one of its prestigious 2014 Grant recipients ("Graham Foundation 2014 Grantees," 2014).

Leveraging shared space: Barking Town Square public realm, Barking, London

Barking Town Square, completed in 2008, is in the centre of Barking, 10km from the City of London along the Thames River. It was awarded the 2008 Best European Urban Public Space prize (a UK first) as "a risky venture which, by means of a freshly conceived intervention, has transformed a formless space into a recognisable and meaningful place" ("Public Space," 2008). The scheme originated from the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham's (LBBD) efforts to address dereliction in Barking. According to LBBD, the existing site area was a "backland" behind the High Street consisting of a poorly used space in front of the early 20th century Town Hall, a 1960s library building, and extensive car parks (LBBD, 2003).

In 1999-2000 Barking received arts funding to improve its public realm, precipitated by the UK New Labour government's Urban Renaissance initiatives, which included a shift in national development policy from suburban to urban investment-focused models. The funding led to an architecture/ urban design competition for public realm and buildings in an existing area from the Town Hall to the High Street. The winning scheme by the developer Urban Catalyst with Avery Associates Architects, Gustafson Porter Landscape Architects, and artist Shelagh Wakely, featured an arc-shaped set of buildings with a mix of ground floor retail space, a new library and Gallery, residential units (See Figure 6). The proposed autonomous new building form culminated in a new central "town square" as performance space in front of the existing Town Hall. The surrounding spaces were treated as background servicing areas and car parks; more private "social" spaces were proposed as residential courtyards and rooftop gardens (LBBD, 2013).
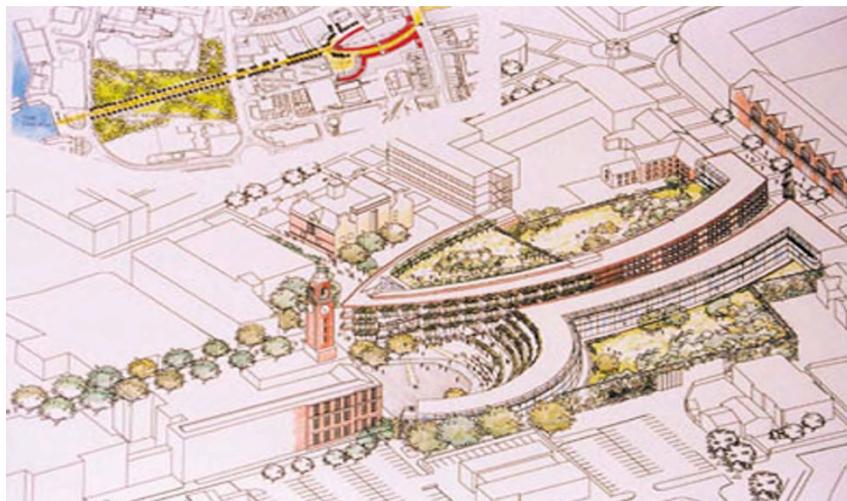

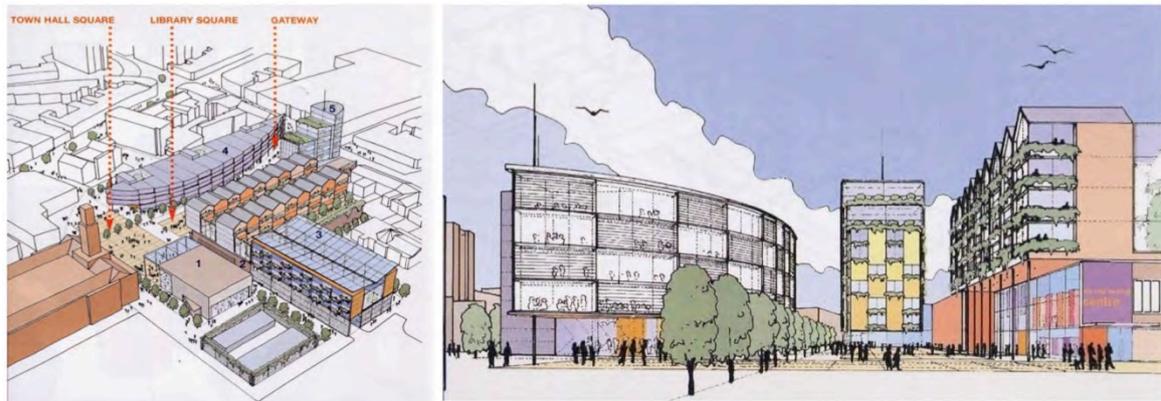Figure 6: Barking Square, Urban Catalyst/Avery Architects scheme, 2000. (Source: LBBD, 2013)

Figure 7: Barking Town Square 2002, Urban Catalyst/AHMM Design Team (Source: LBBD, 2013)

Between 2002-2005 Alford Hall Monaghan Morris (AHMM) architects replaced Avery Associates. During this time the UK government created the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation, an organization with powers to address large planning applications, including Barking Square, and to acquire land through compulsory purchase for regeneration (LBBD, 2013). As a result, AHMM's 2002 scheme (see Figure 7) amended the original with more surrounding development, adding tall "gateway" buildings, and widened the central "street" as a "Library Square" to complement a revised "Town Hall Square".

In 2005, muf were appointed as designers for the public realm, working with AHMM as building architects, and clients LBBD and Redrow, a commercial-volume housing developer who replaced Urban Catalyst. The key buildings and public realm works were completed over two stages by 2008, providing approximately 500 new residential units (see Figure 8). The public realm comprises "two-linked spaces: one empty, one filled" (Fior & Clarke, 2011, p. 337). A hard-landscape area fronts the Town Hall, while an "urban arboretum" consisting of 40 mature trees of 16 different species 'fills' the space between the refurbished library and new mixed-use residential/commercial/leisure buildings. Along one edge, a carefully detailed terrazzo-tiled arcade with bespoke light fittings 'links' the new Town Hall square and arboretum directly to the existing High Street (Carrera et al., 2010, p. 90).

Figure 8: Barking Town Square. (Left) Site plan Redrow/muf/AHMM Barking Square Design Team (Source: LBBD, 2008, Annotated by Authors, 2015); (Right) View into public realm (Source: Authors, 2015)

Figure 9: Barking Town Square (Figure 8 key map view 1), showing muf designed arboretum.
Redrow/muf/AHMM Barking Square Design Team (Source: Authors, 2015)

Writing about the project, Fior (Fior & Clarke, 2011, p. 337) noted that muf's original commission was to create "a sunny space for new and existing communities to meet and drink coffee in the sun […] a platform for social cohesion," which preliminary environmental analysis demonstrated was flawed because the new building proposals shaded, and directed wind into, the proposed open spaces.

> This reading allowed us to make the first move to divide the site in two and make shady more shady, our understanding of public space not as an unremitting condition of cheeriness but the assertion that mystery, moodiness, and the desire to be alone have their place (Fior & Clarke, 2011, p. 337).

Fior also described how, through weekly meetings with AHMM the building footprint became a negotiable aspect, evolving along with the public realm (See Figures 9 & 10); "one building became two. Pedestrian routes, as rights of way, made their way through the site (Fior & Clarke, 2011, p. 337)." In conversation with the author, she expanded on this process:

> [T]his took five years. When we started [play] was not on the agenda at all. It wasn't in the brief. In fact the developer didn't really want any play. […] we worked really closely with the architects [AHMM…] and we were able to use public space as the excuse or driver, or power – an instrument, exactly – being able to *use* it as an instrument so the architects could use it as a way to argue to the developer that in order for them to get the planning they needed to listen to public space as being the driver (Fior, 2011).

She spoke about the process of negotiation as "Stage D-eep" (after the RIBA's Work Stage D for design development in a typical architectural project), saying, "So we invented Stage D-eep, when you make relationships, both public relationships through consultation and private relationships with those who hold the power for decision-making in earnest" (Fior, 2011).
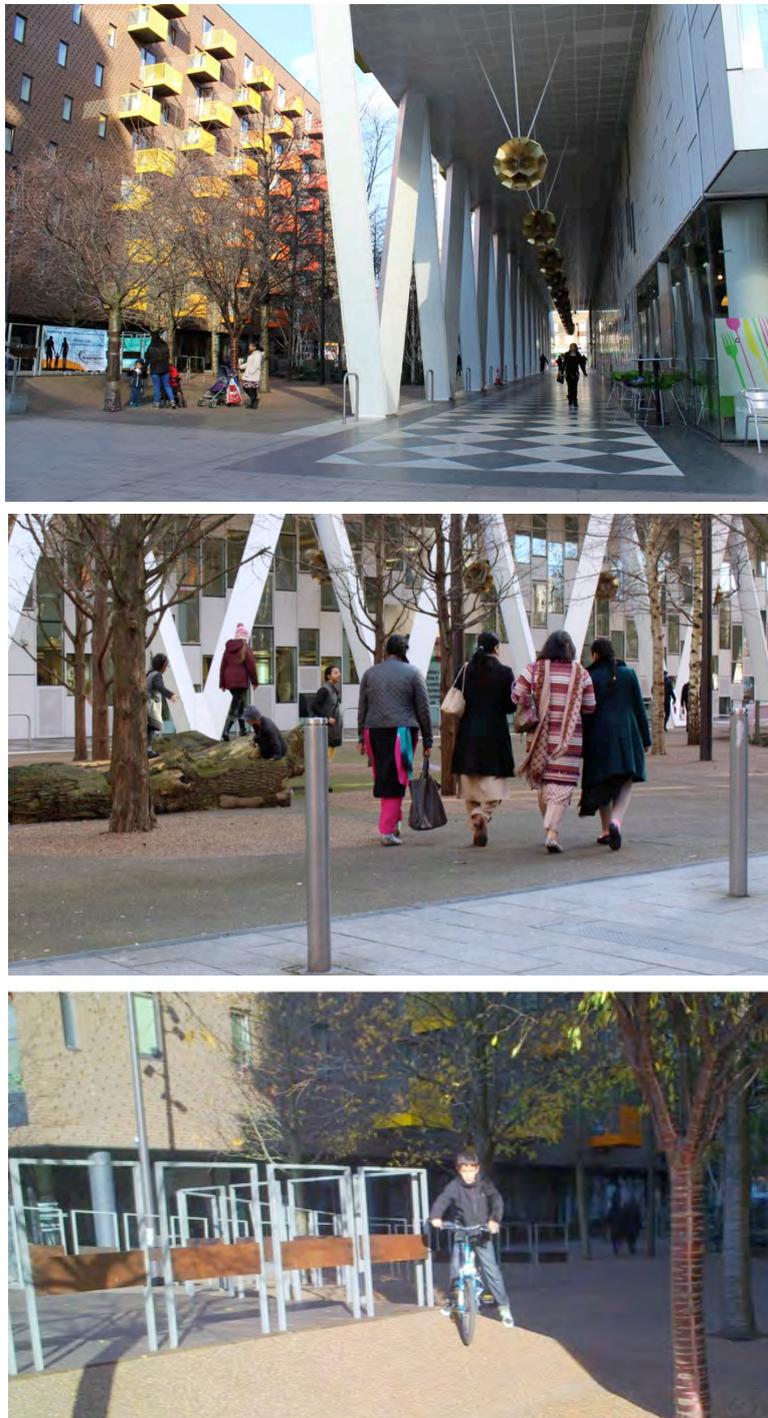
Figure 10: Barking Square (Figure 8, views 2-4), showing *muf* designed public realm and children's "stealth play" spaces. Redrow/muf/AHMM Barking Square Design Team. (Source: Authors, 2015).

Reflecting on project outcomes at Barking Town Square

Fior referred to the processes by which client and inter-agent relationships develop, and which afford practices like muf the opportunity to negotiate with and influence developers, as being fraught with challenges and constraints. She described the process as "unsolicited

research," what she refers to as muf's "enterprise," when the practice chooses to work outside, and sometimes against, a commissioned brief:

> So we get a commission for A, and we do F; because what we do is in fact we're interested in making space public- i.e.: making it out of the richness of more than one thing at a time, and questioning who the public is in the conversation, and making it available. (Fior, 2011).

That process, she said, can be both "accidental" (i.e. over the course of an architectural project you wait for opportunities to "tweak" a brief and make it "more public, more meaningful") and it can also require conscious compromise (i.e. involving a choice to work with developer clients who might be adversarial to the public realm, and whom many 'publicly' and socially minded architects choose to avoid); "but in becoming compromised you get closer to the centre of the universe" (Fior, 2011).

> I think the idea of quantifying value of, of being interested and not just being involved in administration is something we are attempting to do – trying to get *paid* for it in order to survive on that and carry on doing it (Fior, 2011).

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The accounts of both architects' experiences in the above case studies suggest how architects in similarly dynamic and contentious private-led practice contexts can potentially increase their own influence and value by acting and using their design skills more explicitly. In Barber's experience at Donnybrook and Fior's at Barking, a more open "public" realm was resisted at first by the project developers because of potential economic liabilities to selling their private units. Fior's and Barber's experiences reflect how the constraints of working as architects *for* one's commercial client *and* for the public realm can be approached as an opportunity to argue how a better quality (i.e., more open and flexible) public realm can be mutually beneficial; supported by empirical examples of economic success and qualitative recognition by the public and professional peers.

The examples do not provide a specific set of techniques or 'easy' routes to redress architects' declining influence, however they demonstrate that greater open-ness and design quality can both enrich everyday experiences of urban residents while also providing real value to developers. The examples and insights reveal aspects of agency that can vary between approaching "negotiation" as an active, even subversive process compared to an "administrative" or instrumental acquiescence to practice changes and architects' declining levels of influence in larger private-led decision-making processes. Among the themes that might be drawn from the interview discussions: *intentions and tactics, and constraints and affordance* relate to the paper's argument that greater awareness of one's intentions in practice can combine with tacit knowledge and skills to develop a range of tactics to take advantage of opportunities to subvert or influence market-driven constraints toward higher quality shared environments. As the interviewees acknowledge, working outside the status quo of traditional agency can be difficult to balance against the commercial reality of running an office, yet their experience also reveals an explicit understanding of their situation and their conscious intentions to continually connect their personal ambitions with their project/practice approaches.

Finally, the case study examples, while limited to specific contexts and practice narratives, support arguments that mainstream practice and practice training can learn to better appreciate the full range of aesthetic, economic, social, and other variables and actors that impact the delivery of larger-scale residential projects. Examples and discussions suggest that, while successfully influencing decision-making processes cannot be guaranteed through any combination of tactics, the potential exists to (re)frame the way architects understand their creative instrumental knowledge toward a more transformative critical praxis when engaged in private-led urban development and larger-scale residential projects. Compromise, complicity, and

participation in the contexts of private urban development are terms to be reconsidered with new meanings as tactics to engage clients and contentious projects. Further research aims to investigate the extent to which individual intentions for more critical and socially-minded practice can transfer to more mainstream architectural approaches and training, to better address market-driven and private-led decision-making processes.

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