

**ROYAL ACADEMY
THE CITY AS SCULPTURE: FROM SKYLINE TO PLINTH
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SILENT AND STILL

I love cities for their wildness born of change and of the unknown. This is man's constructed wilderness where mothers traditionally feared their daughters would tread - the sexy teenage trampoline - a serendipitous stepping-stone.

As Bill Woodrow remarked, that other city - the green city that man has constructed but pretends is natural, surrounds the brown city - the two connected by the grey land of mechanical communication.

In her presentation, Phyllida Barlow gave us a poetic insight into her reading of the city - using the body as a metaphor of the city, i.e. heart, bowels, soul

The exterior view of this organism, which, from a distance from can be read as a silent, unpolluted, placid sculptural silhouette, contrasted with her description of its interior of movement, noise, and the manifest frailties of its visceral parts - infrastructure systems.

This ambivalence, the view from the green city and the inner dynamic, manifests itself in the thought processes of designers of the city - city as events, and city as sculpture.

In the distant reading of the city, we are also in the still and silent world that characterises sculpture according to Antony Gormley.

There are no people, there is no disturbance - or if there is, it is the noise or traced line of an aeroplane and the still red lights, or the flashing white light of aviation warning atop the tallest building.

However, the skyline is rarely still. The commercial skyline has continuously shifting patterns of light.

This view is a real one and is, perhaps, consistent with the neutrality of the skyline being a mirror of anonymity - the desire to disappear into the crowd. It is also a view that has invariably seduced architects when imaging and planning utopian cities. For they too, in their minds, are distant from a future reality of the occupied city - the interior that Phyllida described.

Perhaps, at the risk of being over-simplistic, the skyline has traditionally been the domain of power - whether secular or religious - and its expression of domination. It takes a lot of money to change the skyline!

We can all recognise military examples - San Gimignano - and commercial ones - the inhabited (mostly offices) and communications towers (uninhabited) and bridges. In London we protect views of St Paul's dome, while Paris celebrates the Sacre Coeur on the hill of Montmartre.

The Sacre Coeur exploits topography whereas London tries to ensure a tree-lined horizon to the north and south. Here, the plinth is the natural topography.

In Paris since the 60's, except for one error of judgement by André Malraux that allowed the Tour Montparnasse to be erected, this secular expression of power has been banished from the centre to the west at la Défense. This is Paris' brave new world - isolated like Canary Wharf.

However, sculptors have been excluded from participating in the creation of this external view, which still remains the domain of planners, engineers and architects. Why?

Antony made his position clear - leave architecture to architects. Is this the same as leaving the skyline to them as well? The pre-twentieth century sculpture that inhabits building façades like the pantheon of Burlington Gardens is not Antony's territory.

But surely, abdicating this historic niche should not mean that sculptors are left on the pavement with or without a plinth. The sculptor's mind is used to scale, both physical scale and the scale of intent. And it is in the silhouette of the city that both become really evident.

Historically, artist, architect, engineer and planner were often found in the same person. Individuals, such as Brunelleschi (Florence) informed the skyline as well as the plinth.

You cannot look at Canary Wharf or the City profile without reading intention as well as form. However, if the accumulation of architectures creates the silent city, would not a sculptor be interested in contributing to its evolution?

Should architects invite the sculptor to the skyline?

Architects are not sculptors. Architects might occasionally think they are, but sculptors perceive form, surface and light quite differently.

Film appears to do this very successfully in exploring the outer limits of the architectural/urban image - Metropolis and Bladerunner immediately come to mind.

This raises another question - how important is the skyline?

Before computer simulation, it was not so easy to imagine all the perspective views, but now with computer manipulation of images, this exercise is so much easier. A couple of years ago, Hays Davidson produced an image of new towers in London - towers that could be constructed in and around the City of London by site assembly and without contravening the protected view corridors of St. Paul's dome.

Recently I was surprised to find that English Heritage did not have a standard issue of the 'protected views' of St Paul's Cathedral. Each time, the architect has to obtain his own photographs from the specific point - waiting for the clear view - and construct his own cones of view from the co-ordinates. The city's skyline does not change that fast. I am sure English Heritage could produce and sell an 'official view' digital information pack to architects (with a five yearly update).

Planners, ostensibly the guardians of our cities for the past century, are under strain. There are fewer of them and attracting those few to work in local authorities is becoming almost impossible. Compared to other careers, planning is slipping away into oblivion. Thatcherism triggered this demise. Serving society on low pay and with increasingly limited budgets was no longer attractive.

During this period, most of us silently stood by as the 'non-plan' policy exploited the Isle of Dogs and created a separated city skyline for London. We know that it is borrowed from Battery Park, NY - the developer and principal architect are the same, as too was their thinking. The classical pyramid composition of tall buildings at Canary Wharf - even the top of its centre building being a pyramid - combines with its axial planning and grid. This manifest hierarchy is a traditional form that feels isolated in its surroundings and somewhat artificial within.

The key players operate in a global market, so why change your thinking or your architecture? Why shouldn't it mark a new (York) skyline for London?

It makes evident the fine line between democracy and autocracy.

From the skyline, we may be able to read the economic geography of the city if not its geology, its demographic migration if not its history. This is perhaps why we take to the water, or the hill, or the skies to orientate ourselves - to get out before getting involved, or to remind ourselves who and where we are. This is why the skyline matters.

The skyline is man-made so why should we not make it beautiful?

There is little tension induced from a distance, but inside all hell can break loose. Within this interior,

Richard Cork suggested that sculpture has to compete with the metal dynamic.

WHERE ARE THE 'ROOMS' AND SPACES FOR SCULPTURE WITHIN THE DYNAMIC CITY?

NOISY AND MOVING

Space is in here as well as out there. Space is a continuum between inside and outside, both physically and mentally. Light is the basic material of space - it defines inside and outside, surface texture and colour. To complement light, sound defines another layer of space together with structure and its proportion.

Art, like our beloved Ministry of Culture, is for most people, including politicians, a luxury to be indulged after we have completed the necessities of living. This distinction between necessity and luxury is reflected in the way we spend our time. In broad terms, there is committed time and uncommitted time. The latter offers us the chance to be at leisure.

Presumably there should be places where necessity is not the *raison d'être* of the place. Today, in this consumer society, it is difficult to convince developers, highway engineers and others of the social value of places and spaces that are not recognised as an intrinsic necessity to the consumer way of life. For many architects, designing in a consumer market is difficult:

In the present society the quantitative and qualitative criteria for judging design can be summed up as: does it attract the consumer?

Designers have always had more noble standards of appreciating their creations, but in practice the question of functionality, as in doing the job set out for it, of originality of design, of cultural sensitivity or of environmental impact are in this society predicated on the ultimate determining factors - does it in a direct or indirect manner generate financial wealth and/or serve to perpetuate the political and economic status quo? (Pippo Lionni, *Up Against A Well Designed Wall*, Paris 1993)

This reference makes the point that design is, for the most part in our consumer society, a useful tool to enhance 'sales'.

We are currently designing an urban environment of 17 hectares at White City - Shepherd's Bush. Its *raison d'être* is shopping, which for many is now a leisure activity. As such, it has entered the uncommitted time world where most art seems to reside. The development also includes affordable housing, offices, a library, a nature reserve, two tube stations, a railway station and a bus station. At its centre is a covered space the size of a football pitch.

I have written on and discussed the subject of architectural space with our client some time ago. I quote from a short essay sent to Chelsfield:

What is our position with regard to the spaces we are creating?

How do we synthesise and reconcile the different spatial perceptions between Ian Ritchie Architects, our client, Chelsfield, and other consultants including our client's retail/investment advisors, interior designers for shops, politicians, and the general public.

Architecture is synthesis, not separation - the synthesis of ideas, people, and materials and ultimately the synthesis of the man-made with nature. We have to make the spatial synthesis of Whitecity exciting.

We, as architects, have to imagine and create, through our design methodology, solutions that can be seen to respond positively to the above, but also to go beyond that produced as a by-product of functional commercial planning and 'surfaces that sell'. We must invest in our thinking and design skills in order to generate an urban sense of place that engages with the scale of London and this part of the city, and with sensuality that people can appreciate and get excited about. Through the senses, we reach memory as well as excite the mind with new ideas. Too many spaces deprive us of quality sensory experience, or have sensory overload by confusing the visual, audible and the tactile.

We have sought and secured the political and planning support for the landscape transformation of Shepherd's Bush Green, underpinned by the idea of a permanent urban art gallery for transient work that can both engage the world of international art and the local community. We are developing the idea of four seasonal 'events' per annum with Simon Faithfull and Sue Jones of the non-profit making arts group e-2 and the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham.

Several years ago, as a visiting professor to the TU Vienna, I ran a design programme based upon the notions of 'a space before, a space between and a space after'. The essence of this programme dealt initially with the designer's own memory of what constitutes space by asking them to design a space to be made. Then with the investigation of the late 20th architectural space invader - advertising and finally with an attempt to synthesise these two investigations to create a future architectural space.

There are parallels with the process of designing Whitecity.

In the case of Whitecity, the 'space before' has two characteristics - the local physical and social memory and the preconceptions of what characterises a 'shopping centre', most clearly communicated through the views of our client, Chelsfield.

The 'space between' is that part of the design process through which we are currently travelling - the design and planning process. Here, consideration of the media world - the role of promotion and advertising - and its inevitable invasion of the 'space after' is not yet at the forefront of our minds. Why? Probably because, like Lionni explained, we feel nobler than others when it comes to creating 'space'. We know that the advertising teams and interior designers will arrive later, and we hope that our 'architectural space' is strong enough to:

- a) keep its identity and character
- b) remain exciting no matter what the changing world of fashion and commerce puts into it.

We have to remind our client and ourselves that memorable spaces are usually exciting, unique and of recognisable quality. They are spaces that are not static. People and events move through them like light and sound. They are spaces that are continually changing with time and the changing density of human activity within them, but they do not surrender their intrinsic and enduring qualities. Such spaces have immense potential to attract visitors. In a highly competitive marketplace, the creation of such spaces must be of value not only to the development itself, but also the locality and, in this case, London as well.

So we have come full circle. Architectural space is not in conflict with the commercial world, for ultimately, a measure of its quality is that it will attract the consumer. Architecture is, at a very different scale, to be consumed and hopefully retained in the memory. It is genuinely capable of transformation which gives it spatial sustainability.

When architects removed the places for sculpture on their buildings, sculpture found itself upon the city plinth - the pavement and the piazza.

The piazza was designed to create space and distance to appreciate the architecture, not, to my knowledge, to create extra space for sculpture.

Since most sculpture is silent and still, it became, perhaps, an apt companion for the piazza - an area a little 'removed' from rushing metal and the dynamic of the city.

When not in a piazza or park, sculpture having hit the pavement finds itself occupying quirky left over spaces - a chance encounter with Elizabeth Frink's Horse and Rider just along Piccadilly?

However, new piazzas of varying scale are becoming a luxury within the city and as the densified city emerges, probably fewer and smaller will be the reality. Canary Wharf's Cabot Square is 'filled' with 'urban' water at its centre.

There is no real sense of place, and the sculptures of Lynn Chadwick are edged out without relationship to the Square. Tinguley's approach above IRCAM in Paris is both apposite and happy and contrasts with the corporate world's approach to space and sculpture.

Someone commented that public art galleries and museums are like 'hospitals for art'. Maybe we should be advocating that hospitals are equally valid places for major art. I would support expanding the idea 'art for hospitals' as major urban spaces, both indoors and out.

WHERE IS THE PLINTH OF THE SKYLINE?

One thing is certain. As the silhouette of the city changes, you can be sure that someone nearby has lost some sky. The impact of objects or buildings varies greatly in their significance at street level.

One can see the space under and around the Eiffel Tower and the St Louis Arch, but compare this to the Chrysler building, which is just another building within the street, defining the back edge of the pavement, or London's Post Office tower.

Commercial buildings that add to the skyline either add to or detract from the streetscape where we encounter them physically. The piazza in front of the Rockefeller Centre is renowned for its ice rink - but how many of us have experienced the back at ground level. Can we afford to ignore this?

The Saint Louis Arch is an exceptional structure of pure catenary form, of beautiful mathematics. How did it come about? It was through an architectural competition launched in the 1930's by the city fathers to upgrade a derelict area. Eero Saarinen's design won. Construction began 30 years later in 1962 when funds and the site were finally cleared. It was completed more than three years later after Saarinen's death. Saarinen set out to represent the future - and he did so through form and reflective surface - with a dynamic that linked it to our present time.

When we construct commemorative monuments or sculptures, we are very conscious of the need to construct the space around them and this space is often the most contentious element in any proposal that manifests thought and feeling, angst and joy, fear and hope.

Antony and Phillida both touched on these emotional and atavistic qualities within sculpture, but making evident moral and ethical values is far more difficult, and certainly so if they are counter to the prevailing culture.

If we are up against this 'well designed wall', one that sees only 'attracting the customer', it is vitally important that non-consumer values find expression not only in sculpture, but also in architecture.

When presenting the Dublin Monument - the Millennium Spire - I was often asked: why no stair or lift so that we can see our city from the air? Several thoughts cross my mind:

- a) the person remembers the fact that one could climb the steps of Nelson's Pillar that was blown up by the IRA
- b) the person has not seen the elegance of the Spire that I see, or does, and believes that this could be lost to a higher social purpose - the pleasure to the consumer who can enjoy the ride and view - for a stair or lift will destroy its proportion.

I usually suggest they visit the nearby hills that surround Dublin and see their city as a whole.

The Millennium Spire is essentially optimistic. It is like a candle that all the darkness of the world cannot extinguish. There is no traditional plinth to the Millennium Spire.

It slips through a cast bronze disc flush with the ground without touching it - an expanding cone heading towards the centre of the earth where its diameter roughly equates to the area of County Dublin. The Millennium Spire 'extends' to infinity above celestial acupuncture - playing with light through capturing the life of the sky over Dublin and allowing it to flow to the street below and to disappear into the earth along with any rainwater from its surface. The base of the Spire itself is partially polished in order to reflect the light of street life. Its abstract polished surface is defined by a pattern created by the interference of a core of the rock, taken from the site below, that was 'rolled' across the double helix of DNA (a reference to the Irish diaspora, as too is the expanding spiral of the cone itself).

Out in the 'Green city', our designs for new pylons for Electricité de France, like grasses, also have no plinth. They too appear to come from the earth within which they are placed. Alba di Milano has a plinth in the form of its feet that counteract the cantilever forces of the arms stretching upwards at an angle. These feet are important elements in providing seats within the plaza.

The subject, **CITY AS SCULPTURE: FROM SKYLINE TO PLINTH** raises many questions.

Should we design skylines, or can we only attempt to control them?
I know that Dublin is thinking very hard about this matter right now.

Is it more interesting to leave them to chance?
Chance in the skyline may well reflect Stanley Diamond's observation:

Civilisation may be regarded as a system in internal disequilibrium; technology or ideology or social organisation are always out of joint with each other - that is what propels the system along a given track. Our sense of movement, of incompleteness, contributes to the idea of progress. (Joseph Kosuth, Art after Philosophy and After)

As an object that man makes, I believe that it is essential that it is considered proactively, both in considering adding to it, as well as deducting from it. Demolition is, as we have all recently witnessed, a significant part of a skyline's evolution.

If we do feel it important to 'design' the skyline, then who should be involved to inform its qualities? There is an absence of sculptors and their sensibilities from the skyline of most cities and this is because they are simply not in the frame of thought of those (with more power) who create the skyline.

Is there an apparent sculptural quality within the city? We all know that lifting one's eyes much above the ground plane usually means taking a risk with the kinetic activities - whether inorganic or organic!

The interior of the city is kinetic, and can we really escape this?

Is the idea of a still and silent sculpture a necessary antidote to the frenzy?

Is the frenzy simply too overwhelming for sculpture?

Is our inner urban spatial environment more dominated by the highway engineer and the infrastructure companies than the planner or the architect?

Do architects consider the role of sculpture other than as decoration?

Do clients and architects fear empty space - such as a piazza - and consequently 'fill' it?

Andy Warhol said of New York's skyline:

'When I see the New York skyline, I think only of money.'

Skylines are monuments and monumental. Given their significance, they ought to make us happy.

Skylines are a focal point, and perhaps the future skylines will be more interesting as landscape, technology, architecture and sculpture converge in design thinking and intent and, importantly, when laced with sufficient money from those who harbour beauty as well as ego.

After realising the Concert Platform in Crystal Palace Park, I was asked what is the difference between architecture and sculpture. I replied that the difference between architecture and public sculpture is that the former has functioning toilets.

Annexe: 2 poems

LIGHT MONUMENT FOR IRELAND (Dublin Millennium Spire)

Drawing inspiration from Ireland's light
its skies, its landscape, its history
A 21st century monument by day and night.

a high and elegant structure
To symbolise growth, search, release, thrust,
and Ireland's future.

It is a 21st century interpretation
of standing stones and obelisks.
and of Ireland's condition.

Anchored firmly in the street
Reflecting climate, a cone 120 metres high
of rolled stainless steel sheet

shot peened to reflect, softly, the changing
light of the sky,
gently in the wind swaying.

Illuminated at night
Surmounting the monument
a white conical glass light.

On a base of Wicklow white granite,
or Kilkenny black marble
the monument is rooted to its site.

A hand drawn Celtic spiral in stone
reflects history and continuous motion
of both life and cone.

pulsating mercury
flows as youth and vigour
of Ireland's dynamic new society.

Spiral and light, symbols past and present
The synergy between tip, cone and base
embrace light as the essence of the monument.

Figures and words, creativity
and human scale at street level
a spiral extends beyond the city.

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L'ALBA - A LIGHT MONUMENT FOR MILAN - an Investigative Text and Poem

The first order questions that we have considered are:-

What symbolic meaning do we have to help define the idea?

At what scale does a sculpture or object become monumental on this site?

How visible should it be in daytime?

From where should it be visible?

What memory do we hold from the first impression when leaving the station?

How should the monument change the nature of Piazza Duca D'Aosta?

Should the Monument humanise the Piazza?

Should the monument be more than a light sign?

Some second order questions that stem from the above are:-

What should we celebrate about Milan?

How can the monument itself humanise the piazza?

Should the monument also be an umbrella to nature's own light pen?

Can artificial light compete with the sun during daytime?

An Investigation into Light as Communications - a potential symbol

How have we developed the use of light to communicate during the second millennium?

Light has carried ever increasing amounts of information - from simple warnings using bonfires, to coded messages using solar and moon reflectors, to multi-coloured incandescent and fluorescent light bulb arrays and Bell's Photophone. The Photophone transmitted spoken messages using sunlight - unfortunately sunlight proved rather unreliable - electrical cables proved more successful, although they did disfigure most of our towns and villages for well over a century.

At the same time, the means of transmitting information went outside of the wavelengths visible too us. These invisible wavelengths gave us radio, X-rays for diagnosis and television. Light as images communicating information has come closer and closer to our eyes. The vehicles for getting it to us have evolved phenomenally during the last period of this millennium. In the mid 1800's Maxwell discovered that electromagnetic waves could move through a vacuum - light did the same. Marconi transmitted radio waves a mile in 1895 and across the Atlantic by 1905. In 1895, X-rays were discovered by Roentgen, and from work by Gabor on X-rays in 1940's, lasers were identified as a possibility. In 1960 they were real.

In 1870, John Tyndal, a British physicist shone a light into a spout of water as it gushed out of a tank. The water fell in an arc toward the ground, and the light went with it, following the same curve. Light was trapped in the curving water. The spout of water was a light pipe.

In about 1880, an English physicist, Charles Vernon Boys fired molten quartz attached to an arrow into the air. He made fine glass fibres. In 1880 the ingredients for light transmission through glass fibre were in place.

The latest developments in glass products have stemmed from an understanding of the structural chemistry responsible for the versatile properties of the glassy state - states which extend from the familiar insulating behaviour which we are exploiting more and more in architecture, to the metallic. The classic example of a new glass is optical glass fibre. It represents a peak in our scientific and industrial capacity to create some of the most perfect solids ever manufactured - on a par with device-grade silicon. The revolution in telecommunications is a direct result of this invention. Yet this development, which required several technological breakthroughs, including the fabrication processes to produce ultra-pure glasses and the ability to graduate the refractive index of glass fibres is only thirty years old. So far, the maximum distance that an optical signal has been transmitted through a glass fibre is 100 miles.

Its potential is far from being exhausted, and the glass scientists are trying to develop a glass which allows the refractive index to be changed as a function of modest optical power such that all parts of the telecommunications system can function using light and no direct electrical energy.

The age of the photon is here, and through optical communications and lasers, the synthesis of telephone, television and computer is imminent.

This weaving together of the beauty of light trapped in water, to the complete light-powered personal communicator incorporating huge optical memory storage has inspired us to propose a light monument which also communicates Milan's renown as the worlds centre of fashion and design.

©Ian Ritchie London, 7 November 1999

ALBA DI MILANO (DAWN OF MILAN)

I shone a light beam into a spout of water.
As the water flowed in an arc towards the ground,
the light went with it, following the same curve.
The light was trapped in the curving water,
and I saw the idea of a light pipe.

The weaving together of the beauty of trapped light,
and the complete light-powered personal communicator
incorporating huge optical memory storage
has inspired us to propose a woven fabric of changing light
which communicates Milan's world renown
as the centre of fashion, design style, quality and innovation.

She is visible during the day,
her curve concentrating the light,
and her flowing light
is scintillating at night.
She is light that bends,
and moves gently in the wind.
She springs like the water from the ground
conducting visible wavelengths.

She is a sunshade
and she humanises the Piazza Duca D'Aosta.
She conveys the idea of the hand of the weaver,
and the designer,
the screen world
and the deluge of information we have to live with today.

She reflects the spirit of our age
in which light is image,
material and the information carrier of the 21st century.
The photonic age is here,
and through optical communications and lasers,
the synthesis of telephone, television and computer is imminent.
She is a symbol of connexity where
communications hierarchy has no top, bottom or centre.

Her underlying metaphors are made manifest.
Her body is of randomly fractured
optical glass fibres, encased in a transparent skin
and woven with fine stainless steel wire
to produce a unique light emitting fabric.

She will imprint upon the memory
an unforgettable image that is
both beautiful and emotional.

We have synthesised optical glass fibre,
one of the most perfect solids ever manufactured,
with poetry of intent and composition
to give Milan an icon announcing the third millennium.

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