

What's so great about 'timeless'?

Architecture and the Prince, again

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Whoever succeeds in redeveloping the Chelsea Barracks site will probably produce a small book to mark its completion. This will include an account of the site's history, illustrated with maps and engravings, rather furry black-and-white photographs and a selection of press cuttings. There will be timelines charting the schemes produced, the matings and divorces within successive development teams, the arrival of the Prince of Wales, and the point at which one particular architectural vision triumphed. All the competing designs will be documented, helping to write the strengths of the completed scheme into history. Just such a book was produced at the end of the Paternoster Square development, next to St Paul's Cathedral.¹

The redevelopment of the Chelsea Barracks site shows signs of becoming another Paternoster. There are the competing urban and architectural visions and the serpentine planning politics, pumped up by vast amounts of money. The chronicler of the early stage of the process may have a more challenging task than usual, however, because this time the Prince of Wales's intervention has been judged 'unexpected and unwelcome' by Mr Justice Vos in the High Court.

As part of the Clarence House programme of opposition to Richard Rogers's site plan, the Prince had written to the prime minister of Qatar with his personal response to the scheme. The existence of the letter was leaked, as it was bound or even intended to be. Extracts have been read in court as part of the dispute between the co-developers over the withdrawal of the planning application, and the letter has recently been published in full.² The strategies of all concerned are now being made public, but this letter deserves detailed consideration. Not because it so strangely identifies Rogers's scheme as 'Brutalist'. Nor even for the propriety of the intervention, the underlinings, the emotion and the shameless plugging of the Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment and Quinlan Terry's alternative plans for the site. The letter needs examination because of the assumptions about cities embedded within it.

Value over time

Much is tied up in the Prince's use of the word 'timeless'. It needs to be distinguished from its kindlier cousin, 'old-fashioned'. 'Old-fashioned' descriptively supports a concept of urban virtues synonymous with seemliness. This topographically selective urban is epitomized by Mayfair, St James's, Bath, eighteenth-century Edinburgh: apparently places where 'so many people want to live'. There's a touch of commercial advantage shimmering in the background. Such places, writes the Prince, 'consistently retain, and increase, their value over time'. This particular trajectory seems to rule out a wider interpretation than asset value. Stretching its remit, 'old-fashioned' then offers a bit of flavour to 'beauty', leaving the question of whether the Prince is promoting an old-fashioned species of this particular commodity or simply beauty itself, the concept of which is old-fashioned.

'Timeless' is more complicated. The urban qualities the Prince praises are 'based on the "old-fashioned" – I would call them timeless – virtues of squares, mansion blocks and terraces'. Timeless here is an intensification of old-fashioned. These timeless virtues aren't named as such, but they either complement the character, elegance, livability and atmosphere the Prince has asserted, or, in a neat piece of circularity, are just those qualities. There's another important characteristic: squares, terraces and mansion blocks provide comparable development density to that achieved by high-rise blocks – that is, the Rogers approach to the Barracks site. Timeless, as virtue, doesn't rule out profit from development, the Prince is careful to imply.

The princely assertion of timeless virtues has been around for a long time. It's a strange proposition. You can't have 'place', the site of these virtues, without time butting in and carrying its baggage with it. The squares of Mayfair and St James's (Grosvenor, Hanover, Berkeley and St James's) are clearly palimpsests, retaining only in their footprints and a very few buildings the original intentions of their developers. Originally late-seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century spaces, they continue to evolve in response to the incentives and constraints of commerce, fashion and regulation. Trees have grown in them (only Grosvenor Square originally featured a garden) and many of the surrounding buildings been replaced by much larger ones. Ratios of footprint



to verticality have shifted: a sneaky move on time's part to make sure that its work can't be ignored. And even within the locale, these squares' diversity of form and connection to the surrounding city make generalization fairly meaningless. Probably only in the 1720s' world of Sutton Nicholls's engravings, with their bird's eye

view, might there ever have been a single means of representation to unify them and accommodate their variety – and that only if Berkeley Square had got under way a bit earlier. These squares no more exemplify timelessness than do those of Milton Keynes; unless 'timeless' actually means 'difficult to date with any precision'.

'Timeless' makes its second appearance in the letter in a reference to a planning and design approach existing as an alternative to modernism. Given the choice, asserts the Prince, 'communities ... invariably prefer the more timeless approach'. For non-initiates, this is the general proposition that architecture should be 'bound to place not to time';³ bound too to Nature and her organic forms and traditional architectural practice. It's all there in the writings of Christopher Alexander and the New Urbanists. The timeless design approach apparently 'enhances all those qualities of neighbourliness, community, human-scale, proportion and ... beauty'. Are these derived from the first context for timeless: the squares and terraces of Mayfair, Bath, and so on? Or do they exist everywhere and just need a bit of nurture to make them grow? Or are these the qualities that the timeless approach actually exists to institute?

In the timeless philosophy of the built environment, time is trumped by place in a hierarchy of design incentives. Yet timeless and timelessness are asserted as virtues without the assumption that time has been a bad boy. Rather, they imply that time must be simultaneously absent yet present; its accruals available but unobtrusive.

Or historical expression?

The Prince pointed to the Quinlan Terry scheme (developed for the Barracks site at the behest of local residents) as a means by which time might be put in its place, so to speak.⁴ The Terry scheme, with its assembly of terraces and quadrangles, is a highly selective response to place that takes in the nearby Royal Hospital by Wren, completes its enclosures in the manner of Oxbridge colleges and adds the comforting scale of the Escorial. Fronting the race track that is the Chelsea Bridge Road and the earlier Terry design of the new Infirmary building for the Hospital, it turns its back on the heterogeneity of Pimlico. It is hard to see how it can be regarded as timeless, given its obvious genealogy, and its impermeability and inward focus certainly offer as great a challenge to the locale as the Rogers scheme. But the Prince suggests that it is appropriate because it introduces the ‘ever-popular terraces, squares and crescents that are such an enduring and profitable characteristic of London’.

Perhaps what the Prince means by asserting the timeless quality of squares and their terraces is simply their familiarity as elements of London. Their formation was a distinctive and almost continual feature of the development of residential estates for nearly 250 years from the middle of the seventeenth century. The pattern of terraces surrounding a railed and planted space is distinctive and the subject of admiring commentary from architecturally minded historians or historically inclined architects. The Prince has often eulogized the nurturing qualities of enclosed spaces. Well-designed enclosures, he wrote in 1989, breed community spirit, ‘their virtues are timeless, still providing privacy, beauty and a feeling of total safety’.⁵ It is at once a powerful and a prescriptive representation, and one that shows a mutual making between ideas and the material world. But it is perfectly possible to feel constrained and frightened in enclosed spaces if you are locked in with uncongenial people. The erstwhile railed Chelsea Barracks parade ground probably did not exemplify all of enclosure’s timeless virtues, if privacy and beauty were top of the list. And even if community, safety and harmony were universal goods – and it’s perfectly possible to disagree⁶ – they too must be subjected to this hierarchy of timeless virtues.

In fact, as early as the 1840s there was a clash of evaluation between those who regarded London’s squares as the city’s lungs or as charming breaks in a forest of buildings, and those who saw in them only the exclusionary practices that kept London’s children in the filth of the streets. Contradictory representations – and urban rhetorics – persist. The recent re-Georgianizing of Bloomsbury is considered by some to be a successful heritage initiative and by others as an unwelcome sanitizing force. This is the big problem if you are a fan of the timeless: these disruptive ingredients in the would-be harmonious ordering of cities and their citizens. Timeless wants it all done: complete, controlled and impermeably valued. The fact that this is impossible does not stop it from being sinister. Time is inalienably a component of places, and even if you are a sufficiently discriminating observer of the past to enable you to construct its semblance in the present, something of the messiness of now will always mark it. What’s so uncomfortable about this that we would want to turn our back on it?

Notes

1. Nicola Jackson, *The Story of Paternoster: A New Square for London*, Wordsearch, London, 2003.
2. www.telegraph.co.uk/telegraph/multimedia/archive/01665/letter_1665159a.gif; accessed 25 June 2010.
3. www.architecture.com/TheRIBA/175thAnniversary/AnnualLecture/speech.aspx; accessed 27 June 2010.
4. www.e-architect.co.uk/images/jpgs/architects/chelsea_barracks_qt.jpg; accessed 5 July 2010.
5. Prince of Wales, *A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture*, Doubleday, London, 1989, pp. 86–7.
6. ‘Contrasting Concepts of Harmony in Architecture: 1982 Debate between Christopher Alexander and Peter Eisenman’, *Katarxis* 3.