

OBSERVATIONS ON THE CO-DESIGN PROCESS  
PECKHAM RYE STATION SQUARE

Writing as an architect with previous planning experience, and having been intermittently involved in community design/planning matters for some 50 years, the co-design programmes carried out by Southwark Council in Peckham town centre have therefore been of some interest. In the end I was only involved in the Station Square proposal but my conclusion is that both the outcome and the process left much to be desired, to the point that I seriously question the concept of 'co-design' in the planning sphere.

There are several issues concerning both the overall process as it related to the development of the station square, and the way the outcome was generated. First it was disconcerting to see how the scope of the project changed from a comprehensive overview of all Network Rail to a limited vision of how to create a small square in front of a local railway station. This process may well have avoided an unduly oppressive commercial outcome, but it seemed to have taken several years mostly by allowing various building owners and tenants to opt out progressively and thereby reducing the scope of the scheme. This is not to argue in favour of a larger built project but these limited parameters could have been decided at the outset. It can hardly have helped that the time scale was so protracted.

My initial objection to 'co-design' is that it was an undefined term and no-one in the local community seems to have been consulted on what it meant, how it was to be implemented and what it was meant to achieve. The idea of 'co-design' as applied to planning projects is mostly untried in this country but seems to have been offered here as an emollient and placatory response to the original overly commercial Weston Williamson scheme.

In principle the idea of a participatory planning process in the public realm which is inclusive and collaborative seems an entirely progressive idea. In practice it turned out to be a limited exercise and little more than an intensive consultation exercise. I would make the following observations.

\* There were two separate stages involving different designers with quite differing remits, the first with *Ash Sakula* architects was concerned with background aspirations and was effectively devolved to *What if*, another practice altogether. The second part, the realisation aspect of the brief was done by *Landolt and Brown*. Thus it was a long winded process and one suspects very confusing for the public.

\* The first part invited members of the public to contribute to a series of events which lead to the so-called 'Weeklies' and that looked at aspects of Peckham from which insights might be derived into how the proposed square might be designed. This was held to be educative except it was never clear who was supposed to be educating whom. It seemed a very roundabout way of assembling a brief yet didn't seem to extend any sense that the public were part of an actual design methodology. The so-called 'atlas of aspirations' that resulted at the end of this stage was a weak document which could have been assembled in a fraction of the time, with little physical involvement and with no less sense of public engagement.

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- \* The second part certainly got the public to concentrate on the actual design outcomes, the sequence of design decisions and dealt with some of the practical constraints in some detail. That was fine but was really peripheral to a collaborative process.
- \* Although never properly defined, it was generally assumed that co-design would involve explaining the practical details and restrictions to the public and then getting them to participate in the decision making process. This appeared to be a potentially good way of getting lay members to see design options as conditional preferences but ultimately seems to confirm the power to take design decisions has to be vested in the one stakeholder who acts as the designer. It would of course be a useful exercise to try and develop a process of joint decision making between the architect and the public. But this in turn raises further questions about the respective roles of everyone involved in the procurement of buildings.
- \* There are several problems with the public acting as a significant participant in a design narrative. One is lack of knowledge both technical and procedural. Equally important is the difficulty of how the public can be defined as stakeholders since they can't be held liable and therefore accountable. The public is not an incorporated body and instead is made up of individuals with widely differing levels of identification and feelings of engagement. It is difficult to see how a design process predicated on specific outcomes can incorporate such an amorphous entity.
- \* It has been pointed out that the most important objective in a public project like this is to obtain consent even at the expense of consensus. So the comments above shouldn't be taken to mean that engagement at some stages in the design process isn't of value. It has potential educative value, and if the architects had spent more time explaining what they intended doing rather than pretending it was a joint venture then consent might have been more forthcoming.
- \* Finally some positive suggestions. Even if a truly 'co-design' may turn out to be impossible as a straightforward model to be imposed on the public, it may be that a gradual incremental approach offers many of the advantages of co-design. Don't automatically dismiss the value of consultation even if it doesn't seem particularly inclusive at first.
- \* The design process can be long winded, and not all stages will may offer equal levels of interest or access to the public. Consider breaking down the process into its constituent parts and involve the public accordingly. Also don't forget how the process of design relates to the process of procurement, e.g. how do matters of contracts, the interests of other stakeholders, assembly of land, etc directly affect the stages of design. Who has agency and who doesn't?
- \* Don't bother the public with cultural and general economic factors unless the public has an anterior interest. Contrary to received wisdom, these factors don't usually affect design outcomes or design satisfaction.
- \* If one must look at how design outcomes are derived, then consider setting up a series of design charettes. These can be useful tools in forcing everyone to confront the limitations of

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design outcomes but they make considerable demands on participants.

\* Perhaps re-define the role of the 'designer'. This is usually deemed to be the architect but could be expanded to include participants from other design disciplines. At the same time it is usually only someone with a background in architecture who has the integrated ability to make collective design decisions. Also don't forget the importance architects place on the question of 'ownership'.

\* In the slightly different sense of ownership, ask if it is possible to redefine the role of the primary stakeholders, Southwark Council and Network Rail in this case. To some degree architects were prisoners of their employers; i.e. required to produce a solution that met cost, time and quality criteria. Public engagement projects that generate genuine consent and public approval by those who use them are frequently the products of a somewhat anarchic design process, e.g.. Cedric Price's Interaction Centre in Kentish Town some years ago and the more recent Granby Four Streets Liverpool project by Assemble which won the Turner prize.

\* So far these observations haven't touched on the final design itself. To point out that the level of architectural design was poor is, on the face of it, not the same as adversely commenting on the design process. But it is suggested the two must be inked in some way and should form part of the Council's more detailed analysis. It would be useful to enquire whether any lack of enthusiasm for the process was conditioned by a poor response to the actual built form being proposed for example. There are many other questions but it is hoped these notes offer something that contributes to further study.

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