THEATRUM

MUNDI

MAKING CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

John Bingham-Hall and Adam Kaasa

Making Cultural Infrastructure comes out of a seminar held in November 2015 at The White Building in Hackney Wick, as the first event in a series called 'New Spaces for Culture', one of TM's two core themes for 2016. This paper is a summary of discussions that took place with thoughts, references and interpretation added.

For more information see theatrum-mundi.org/activities/new-spaces-for-culture-2/

Background

This symposium brought together figures involved in the creation of art and its infrastructure at a time when the future of culture in cities is under question. In London, the legacy of the 2012 Olympics has created the opportunity to carve out a new cultural precinct from ex-industrial land on the fringe of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. In Hamburg, grass-roots work at Oberhafen has seeded a cluster of creative activity in warehouses in the city's port, now being re-imagined as a cultural quarter for the redevelopment of the area.

The following provocations were offered to those gathered for this discussion:

- what should new cultural spaces do for art and performance in cities?
- what can they do for the politics of civic life?
- how should they be designed?
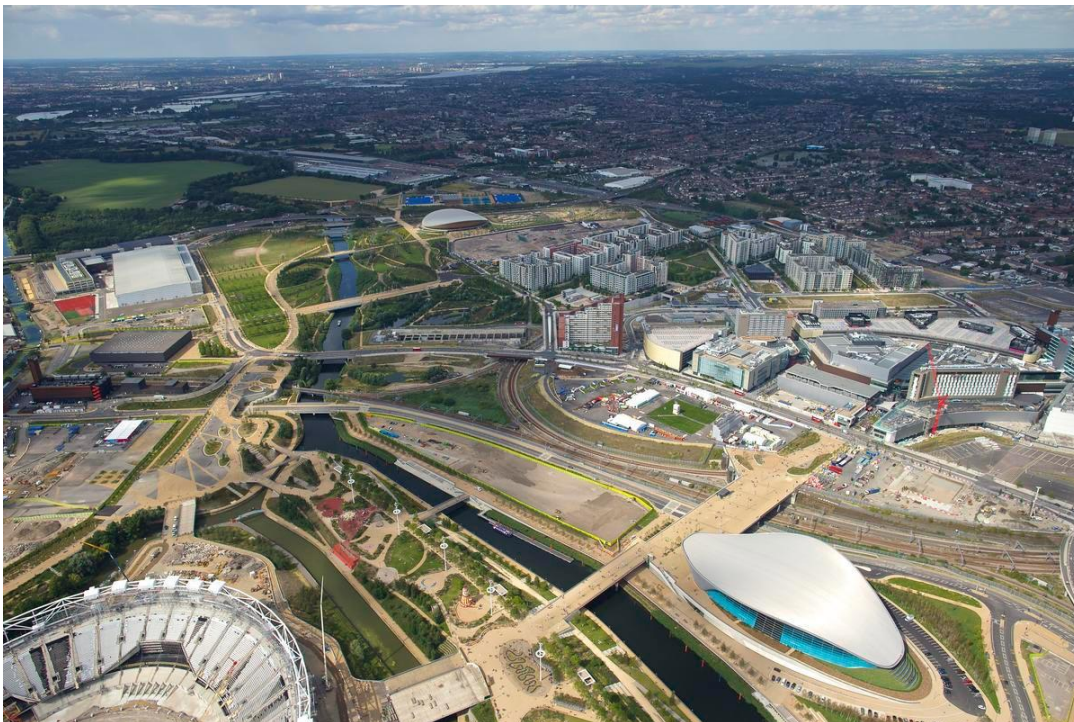
Stratford Waterfront (Image Credit: LLDC)

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View of Stratford Waterfront from the south (Image Credit: Aron Bohmann and Melissa Chin)

Presentation of Olympicopolis

The London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) is a development agency and planning authority for the Olympic Park, funded by the Mayor's Office and with a broad brief to ensure an Olympic legacy for east London and beyond. Research by the LLDC, like the commissioned Lea Valley Drift map, catalogued the character of the area within which Olympicopolis – its proposed new cultural precinct – would be developed. Hackney Wick and Fish Island, just over the River Lea, are also recognised as areas with the highest densities of artist studios in Europe, as highlighted by the "Creative Factories" survey by artist Richard Brown in 2013, and across London these spaces are in crisis, in part because of development pressures due to an increase in property prices.

The questions raised by the LLDC, then, were: how could Olympicopolis knit into an existing cultural map?; can a new build development have character, histories and narratives designed in?; can designers lead these narratives or will they inevitably come later, led by its public, through layers of appropriation?; can Hackney Wick and Fish Island benefit from Olympicopolis by becoming the "R&D department" that generate the new ideas feeding into programmes at the new institutional spaces there? Or would the possibility of increased land value rises from cultural investment fundamentally transform the nature and character of these historic artistic sites?

The 'Olympicopolis' consists of a parcel of land on Stratford Waterfront, to the north of Zaha Hadid's Aquatics Centre and facing the Olympic Stadium, within which new interlinked spaces will be constructed for Sadler's Wells dance theatre, the V&A and the Smithsonian. Some 500 metres to the south, in the shadow of Anish Kapoor's ArcelorMittal Orbit, will be a new educational cluster including UCL East and the London College of Fashion. By co-locating and sharing common elements such as gallery spaces, studios and workshops, there is the hope that faculties, departments and institutions will work together on programming and education, rather than in silos. As such, it was suggested by the presenters that Olympicopolis is not about creating offshoot institutions from their existing locations but creating a new form of cultural provision that foregrounds cultural productions as much as display: how does work like curating, conservation and artist residencies figure in the design of a museum or dance theatre? The public realm was raised as a key issue, with the aim presented as being a seamless movement between exterior and interior as well as creating programmed spaces between buildings.

Presentation of Sadler's Wells

In answer to the question, what is a new Sadler's Wells space for: it answers the pre-existing need for a middle-scale (500-600 seat) dance theatre which is missing in London, but exists in cities across Europe, often in post-industrial spaces. Works being created for these spaces across Europe, by choreographers such as William Forsyth, were being staged in a space in London that completely changed their spatial relationship to audiences. Works produced by the Forsythe Company in its Bockenheimer Depot base, an old railways building in Frankfurt, were difficult to translate to London's existing spaces. The desire to remedy this came before the opportunity of the project in Stratford. A new building makes a statement about the health of dance as an art form, which is strong, growing, and of the moment.

Presentation of Oberhafen

Oberhafen is a cluster of railway depot buildings in Hamburg's port, falling under the major ongoing port redevelopment project HafenCity. Its occupation by artists and creative workers was borne from a self-governing creative community that had already developed in a small network of alley streets and townhouses known as *Gangeviertel* (alley quarter), surviving amongst the modern city centre offices and residential towers. The *Gangeviertel* had been sold by the city for development but was inhabited through illegal occupation by artists and opened up to the public with a free festival, helping win wide support for a campaign to retain the site as is on the basis of heritage protection. As a result, the city bought back Gangeviertel and leased it to a cooperative of residents who now operate it as a collection of affordable housing, art studios and small business spaces. At its centre is the *Fabrique* (factory) building – a public destination for people wanting to show and create their own work – including a radio station, film production studio, dance studio and open workshops.

Oberhafen was the result of a search for temporary space to house these uses during the refurbishment of the *Fabrique*, and was offered by the city. The rise of creative activity there since has led to a change in city policy to include cultural infrastructure in the plans for HafenCity. So whilst some artists already using parts of the buildings were due to be moved out, this legitimisation drew attention to the potential draw of Oberhafen for cultural tourists, creatives and students at the nearby HafenCity University, which focuses on art and architectural education. Hamburg's *Kreativgesellchaft* – the agency dealing with the

Oberhafen buildings, has put out a call for proposals to use the spaces, but the immensity and age of the buildings lead to logistical issues that have left some still empty. Among its tenants are a jazz club, a photo studio, dance rehearsal room, film editing studio and open art studio. There is no formal contract in place for use and the possibility of development is on the horizon, including city-led ideas for the public realm around the buildings.

Oberhafen and Gangeviertel offer an opposite model to Olympicopolis for the creation of cultural space. They were borne of necessity – the need to live, find space to work, and protect the last piece of historic central Hamburg. They suggest asking for *forgiveness* from planning authorities, rather than permission. However because of their adoption of the language of heritage, the artists here managed to appeal to a city-led way of thinking. Finally, these are very much spaces of production and not display, but are becoming destinations as such: production *as,* rather than *vs,* display.
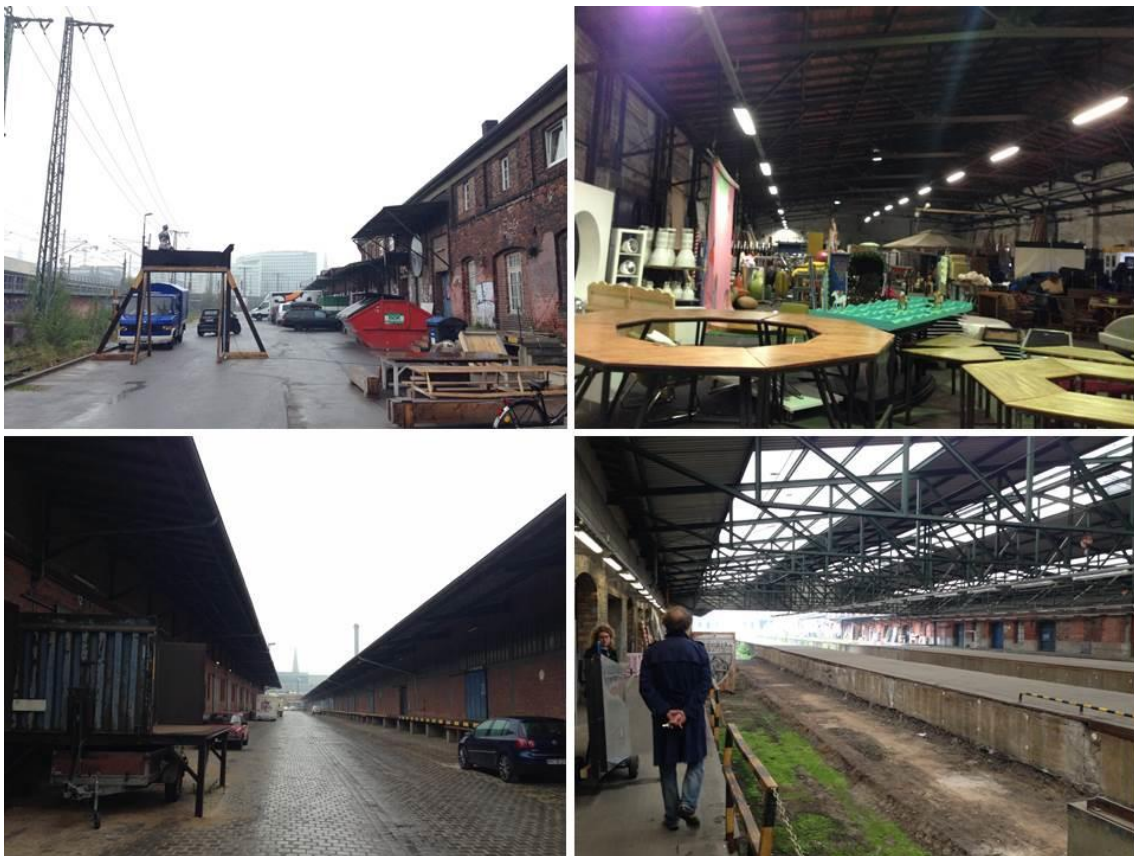
Oberhafen (Image Credits: John Bingham-Hall)

Inside the Gangeviertel (Image Credit: John Bingham-Hall)

Found and Created

The two cases present vastly different conditions: one in which an appointed authority creates newly formed spaces for culture from a tabula rasa condition but linked to adjacent cultural sites, and another in which artists find and transform existing spaces because of a need to produce, protecting those spaces in doing so.

To begin a comparative conversation, we asked what might occur if their conditions were switched. That is, could the qualities of Oberhafen or Gangeviertel be built from scratch, and could the Olympicopolis be created in found spaces? If not, what are the qualities of found space that might inform the way Olympicopolis is designed? Proximity and density are things found in the intricate interiors of the studio buildings in Hackney Wick, many of which open out onto intimate shared yards that relate in kind to the alleyways of Gangeviertel. They are somewhat unprogrammed and rough enough to be used informally as both exterior work and social space.

The Yard Theatre in Hackney Wick relishes the friction of its found space. It does not romanticise the industrial but came to it through necessity. Artists are stimulated by the challenge of a non purpose-built space. If small and highly site-specific organisations like the Yard Theatre move to a purpose-built space, do they become institutional, what would that look like, and is this desirable? Can friction be designed?

There can be a difficulty raised in over-romanticizing post-industrial spaces, which are often not fit for purpose. Sadler's Wells was innovative and purpose-built in 1998, but within its 300 year history on the same site, people still sit in the same place every evening watching a performance in ostensibly the same way. Being purpose-built also allows for a distribution of cultural work across the world. Productions created for dance theatres can travel to similar, purpose-built spaces globally. If the spaces in which artists create are fundamentally specific to one location, then the work becomes difficult to translate beyond its original setting.

The re-use of space is often tied up with the rhetoric of innovation – in terms of thinking of new ways to occupy old buildings. But what does innovation actually mean in this context? Is it simply a question about the relation of that space to a formal outcome (i.e. the art form) or could there be innovation in the process of making itself. A discussion emerged

around whether an architect could work with a client, and other stakeholders so that concern rests not just with the design of the building, but in rethinking the institutional organization itself through innovating the design of the building.

Thinking the the link between the internal organisation of an institution and a new building can be complicated by the thinking forward an an institution in time. That is, how to be sure a building can respond to unforeseen changes in the future? The V&A and UCL are both needing to consider the long-term. In the 200-year planned lifespan of such a building, it is almost impossible to know how its spaces will need to be used in future. How do you create in the design of a new building itself the opportunity to revisit, change mind, admit that things are not right? This requires fighting against several strong orthodoxies – planning, project management, real estate – that physically shape these spaces and tend to work against the possibility for adaptation, longevity and appropriation.

The Yard Theatre (Image Credit: timeout.com)

Flexibility and Specificity

The discussion around found versus designed spaces leads to questions of flexibility and specificity. Post-industrial spaces are often thought to be highly flexible and adaptable, while much architecture of the last 50 years has been seen to be overly-specified and static, both due to the increased technologisation of buildings – leading to shorter lifespans and higher redundancy – and the spatial separation of functions, which means more contemporary warehouses and industrial spaces are away from the urban circulations of culture and innovation that might lead to their re-use.

A major problem is that architects and clients want finished, finite projects. In 1961, Cedric Price the concept of the Fun Palace, an idea for a cultural space that could be messy, constantly developed by its users and privileging incompleteness. The Pompidou used this rhetoric, but the reality is that built projects, which are products not only of architecture but of property law, capital finance and engineering – tend towards becoming complete, closed systems that allow little room for growth. Perhaps for a museum, with high value objects, this is the only option because of issues of insurance, but for a theatre or dance space where production is always unfolding and not artefactual, perhaps this could be achieved?

In their article *The Unfinished Theatre*, Steve Tompkins and Andrew Todd ask: "*if the theatrical mind set draws its charge from conditions of instability and impermanence, shouldn't theatre architects be attempting to suppress the ingrained urge towards permanence and full resolution?"* This suggests an alternative to the framework of the flexible building within which is contained the issue of too much freedom with nothing to push against. In contrast arises the notion of 'potential', a reframing that includes the idea of accretion over time, which even if it is "fast-forwarded", so the accretion is done as part of the design process as an idea, the tension that affords potential can be retained.

As a thought experiment, what would it mean to build half of a Sadler's Wells, half of a cultural institution? Could we imagine using the saved capital costs invested as operational costs protected specifically for its future disruption (not renovation…)? This raises an important question: what is the minimal frame for artistic production and display? Taking this experiment to the end point of an 'unfinished' building raised the question about the language we use to describe architecture. Something is unfinished only if the conditions of measuring its completeness recognise it as lacking. Process-based thinking and incomplete

form challenges the RIBA's plan of works by including things like interim use, a flexible idea of what the finished product is and how finance for such a project work. This kind of work, however, could also challenge an architects' sense of their own relationship to their work, and the way it is photographed, reviewed and communicated.
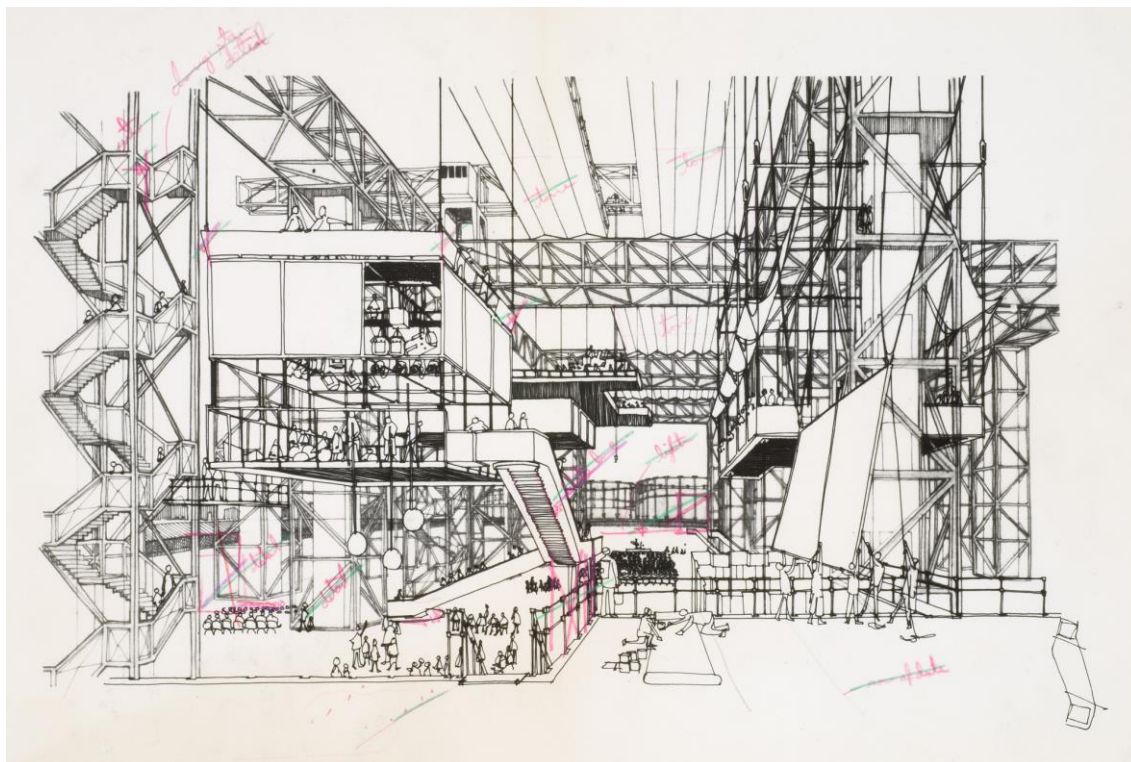
Cedric Price's Fun Palace design

Institutions and Artists

The introduction of the Olympicopolis and the Hamburg cases raised questions about the relationship between institutions as both buildings and organisations, and the artists and thinkers who will populate their programmes. It was asked whether artists can ever be more than guests in institutional structures (understood both organisationally and architecturally): will they be allowed to "lurk" in them, be messy, and use them productively at odd times of day and night?

Over time, as artists have protected have reinvigorated Gangeviertel through what might otherwise have been seen as a disruptive occupation, the City of Hamburg has come to trust these artists to manage it, and use it to create social and cultural value for other citizens. This raises an interesting potential: could institutions foster such a culture of valuable disruption? Could they devolve trust to artists for the space itself, beyond programmatic elements such as curation, residencies or education? This kind of thinking, however, presents a paradox: "fostering disruption" is a conflict in terms. As we have seen, the mode of occupation in Hamburg was a reflection of an urgent need. The artists took hold of their potential agency in order to fulfil this need. If agency is *given* by institutions, it cannot be *taken* by artists. Even providing studios and residencies is very "top-down": could artists squat the V&A to create this space themselves?

This raises huge problems for urban planners. Can this kind of artist-led, grassroots activity never be designed-in to cities? Is it never possible to strategise for grassroots activity? Can state-led cultural regeneration *only* produce centralised cultural institutions? Clearly, by manufacturing a post-industrial *style* of space (open, flexible, unprogrammed) we cannot simply hope for an artist-led culture of productive and innovative work to emerge. Attempts to manufacture this culture were described as the production of "symptoms" rather than root causes. On the other hand, the counter-argument was made that disruption should be planned for through wider urban policies, rather than the design of cultural spaces themselves. If there is provision for affordable living and working, that very practically creates the opportunity for artists to disrupt.

Moving beyond the relationship between artists and organisations, the potential was raised for the institution to act as a civic space, stimulating democratic involvement for a wider public. This potential could take two forms. One is through a participatory process in which

visitors participate democratically in the development of a new organisational structure for an institution given the opportunity to change its shape in a new location. This would be an alternative model of a museum with spaces for research into local political issues and dedicated places that local people can show work. The other is quite literally as a place to vote, to demonstrate and debate, a function that has clear architectural realities not represented in many of the forbidding, ceremonial and deep spatial layouts of existing buildings.

Sadler's Wells theatre on Rosebery Avenue

Architecture and the Urban

A final theme that emerged through the symposium was how the architecture of an institution relates to the urban form of their surroundings. What spatial conditions are needed for cultural space to stimulate the value and texture of public life beyond the envelope?

Participants raised that there could be a danger built into the current plans for the Olympicopolis in that it compresses culture together as a ghetto, relying on narratives of an agglomeration effect for its legitimacy. Its site is strikingly bound by road and river and the local planning context seems more like one of zones rather than of dense mixed use. Given the constraints of its site, what can we learn about the need or possibility of 'spill over' into and out from the surroundings. Is 'spill over' something that can be designed formally? Or only ever programmatically? Sadler's Wells in Islington sits within a very urban context, in amongst very different sets of buildings, roads, parks, businesses, public and private realm, all of which lends it its city-ness: cities are not about campuses. The conversation considered the difference between the West End and Stratford. Was it only time, that is, the city in time, or needing time to become complex? Or are there strategies written within planning legislation, or ownership models of certain sites that preclude the concept of urban mix, urban spill, urban connections?

An example was raised about UCL's current spatial context in Bloomsbury. As an institution, it sits among many buildings that are highly flexible - not through emptiness, but because of their granularity - that can be re-purposed as teaching space and then later returned to residential or commercial use. This kind of formal mix means it can expand and contract without re-organising the surrounding urban fabric. What happens to specific cultural infrastructure vwhen, at a certain point in time, the areas around them change, the dynamics of the institutions shift, or the demographics of a polulation shift in their cultural priorities? This adaptation is made much harder when a site is surrounded with hard boundaries rather than meshing into an urban fabric. Milton Keynes was raised as a comparison. There, infrastructures and buildings are separated by green boundaries intended to prevent them spilling over. As a result, building functions remain static and cultures stay in designated spaces rather than growing and shrinking over time. So can we talk about a resilient cultural infrastructure? Or are we bound to design spaces built for future obsolescence?

The problems in in this type of space come on the boundaries between one thing and another, where no-one has responsibility. Perhaps, though, these un-owned cracks might become the liminal space in-between, that allow transgression and the "lurkiness" that was spoken of previously, to leak in?

Links can also be made organisationally across spatial boundaries. The university can do this through teaching modes that open its programmes to different types of users: modular courses that can be banked and returned to; 10% of places funded for borough residents; strong collaboration with borough councils. Similarly some of the infrastructure of a cultural institution could be built beyond the boundaries of the site: studio spaces funded in the surrounding area rather than within the envelope of the main building.

Sheila O'Donnell's sketch for Olympicopolis

Top: Map of built form (black) around Stratford Waterfront site (grey)

Bottom: Comparison of site (pink outline) with LSE's urban setting in Aldwych

(Image Credits: Aron Bohmann and Melissa Chin)