

## City of Time-“site, structure, skin, services, space plan, stuff’ and then what?

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### 1 Introduction

DEGW was an international research based design company that pioneered new ways of thinking about architecture and the built environment generally. The firm was founded in London in 1971 and was in continuous operation until its eventual merger with Davis Langdon and later AECOM in 2011.

The themes running through many of the issues explored by DEGW over four decades of practice relate to the introduction of information technology and its subsequent social and organisational consequences. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this focus was completely clear in the early days of the practice. It took a long time for DEGW to realise and then to articulate the idea that buildings, especially office buildings, are essentially based on layers of differing longevity. Their idea was that architecture and interior design should be understood not as finite objects, rather as speculations about what might or might not be needed either in the immediate or more distant future. Unfortunately, putting this insight into practice was difficult, as the information available on which to make the case for possible future projects tended to be largely derived from precedents or from what came to hand at the time during each “design process”. In the early decades of the rapidly evolving IT revolution this was particularly problematic, especially given the extended time horizons and slow processes that were inherent in the design and delivery of individual office buildings.

An image that articulated this key DEGW idea is what became known as The DEGW diagram. This consists of a series of houses within houses, with each house representing a different constructional or occupational layer of a building. Each ‘house’ in the diagram represented in turn the ‘Site, Structure, Skin, Services, Space Plan, Stuff’. The diagram was useful in explaining that a building is not a fixed object but is rather a set of assembled systems that changed over time but at differing rates. Once understood in this way, the design of a building could be seen as the engagement with one or more of these changing systems. The consequence being that we have to ‘design for change’ not permanence. For many architects this insight was a shocking revelation quite contrary to their training and sensibilities as aspiring creators of unchanging architectural masterpieces.

The idea proved seminal to other thinkers such as Stuart Brand in *How Buildings Learn* (Stewart Brand –Viking Press 1994) who demonstrated how the best outcomes are often achieved in flexible, simply designed buildings and spaces that can accommodate change over time.

The DEGW diagram captured a series of positions about the way organisations use space and the nature of the office and workspace they might need. These ideas included the early adoption of the open plan office to later ideas about business lounges, hot-desking and remote working. It soon became apparent that this new way of thinking about buildings and the environment in terms of systems and time rather than form and space was relevant to many areas of architectural and environmental design beyond the narrow world of the workspace and office.

Close attention to the implications of the DEGW diagram leads to conclusions that dissolve the boundaries between urbanism, architecture, and interior design and additionally that specialised spatial typologies for different activities becoming less and less useful. The closer we look the more architecture disappears as a discrete discipline and the more that we analyse how space is used the less specific it needs to be.

This diagram remained, however, essentially building-focused. It described:

- A conception of architecture as nestled systems of different durability
- A contrast to the idea of architecture as fixed spaces and fabric of solid and void
- A systemic rather than spatial conception
- Architecture as a spatial order containing and expressing the systemic order of the institution it houses
- A building being subject to variable rates of change from the diurnal to the once in a century
- A concept of space that embraced the potential of information to subvert the need for synchronicity and collocation and hence to revolutionise conceptions of what space is for

What has happened post-DEGW, as the internet age has taken an ever-greater hold on organisations and culture, is the continuing development of this train of thought to take into account the following changes:

- Synchronicity and co-location are increasingly no longer essential to institutional order
- The systemic order of an institution is no longer tied to specific locations and buildings
- We can work anywhere
- The organisation has left the building
- Spatial architecture no longer holds a monopoly of providing organisational order efficiency and convenience
- The connection between form and function or efficiency, effectiveness and expression is dissolving
- There is a shift from architectural to urbanistic forms of organisation
- A shift from centres to distributed quarters
- A shift from headquarters to hubs, clubs and cafes
- Adoption urban descriptors and language (town squares, interior streets etc) for giant scale interior design projects
- A search for narrative and meaning in organisations, interior spaces, buildings and urban space
- An architectural retreat from relevance into gratuitous abstraction in an increasingly placeless world
- A cultural realignment in which architecture has lost its leading status as the mother of the arts

## 2.0 The City of Time

The concept of the city as being composed of multiple interdependent systems, each of which is changing at different rates, provides a dynamic model of the city in which change is constant.

It provides a contrast to an architectural conception of the city composed of fixed buildings and open spaces where change is controlled and rare.

To explore this idea we might think of an axis with the most rapidly changing systems at one end and the slower changing systems at the other. The axis can be divided into two groups. *The Ephemeral City*, at one end of the axis, includes all the rapidly changing systems while those that change more slowly are collected together as the Material City at the other.

### 2.1 The Ephemeral City

*The Ephemeral City* includes the infinitely complex confusion of fleeting events that make up the bustle of urban life. Changing slightly more slowly are the temporary props that support and surround events. These may include shop displays and exhibitions that endure for a few days or weeks. More enduring still are the installations such as markets that come and go, hoardings, advertisements and signs that may endure for a short while and temporary structures that might last for a few years.

The Ephemeral embraces the daily parades of commuters, the setting up and taking down of countless stalls and markets, rituals of opening and closing, of the repeated small dramas of daily life and work; of feast days, holidays, carnivals, and the performance of local and national identity and the symbolic enactment of governance.

Paradoxically although these aspects of the city are short lived themselves, regular re-enactment may endure for generations, even outlasting the apparently durable architecture and spaces in which they occur.

### 2.2 The Material City

*The Material City* includes those aspects of the city that change much more slowly, so slowly indeed that they are often assumed to be permanent. These are the conventional concerns of architecture and town planning. This part of the axis includes architecture, that might exceptionally last for hundreds of years, public space, monuments, infrastructure systems each of which change more slowly, and finally to the city's underlying landscape and topography that changes so slowly that it appears to be permanent. The changes to these parts of the city are slow compared to the ephemeral elements but they do gradually change none-the-less.

Architecture is continuously, cleaned, patched, repaired, adapted and reinvented from the day of completion to its eventual decline to ruin. The surface of public space wears away, is excavated and replaced, monuments endure but even they are eventually torn down or moved, infrastructure is constantly reinvented requiring change to public space as the surface is dug up and replaced over and over. Finally the topography of the city, though apparently durable, slowly changes and is periodically dramatically remodelled by human force, nature or chance.

## 2.3 Consequences

There are two important insights that arise from this shift from a conception of **City of Space** to the **City of Time**.

The first is the realisation that the purpose of the city is ephemeral. It is about conversation, performance, exchange, display, trade festivals, events and all the other fleeting experiences that provide the foreground to urban life. From this it is clear that the purpose of the material city is merely to provide a frame and ornament to the ephemeral. It does not, by some remarkable alchemy, induce it, as many planners and architects seem to believe.

The second insight is in respect of city governance and, by extension, town planning. The first focus of city governance should be on the hosting and curation of the temporary changing life of the city to establish a viable ephemeral culture. Only then should the secondary concern of providing meaningful ornament to the events, including defined public space and architecture, become important. Additionally architecture and the design of public space should defer to the form and patterns of the ephemeral and not seek to impose its arbitrary geometries upon it.

This hierarchy, placing the ephemeral above the material, may seem counter intuitive. In fact it reconnects urbanism with its ancient roots in which the founding of cities and making architecture was the outcome of complex ceremony and ritual directed at bringing good fortune to the enterprise.

We no longer have traditional vernacular connections with ritual to deploy in the making of architecture and cities. Our modern condition imposes upon us the creative opportunity and duty to invent relevant ephemeral festivals of art, culture and exchange, which provide meaning and validate our identity. It is these new patterns of behaviour that should guide us in the invention of the contemporary material city.

## 2.4 Case Study- Southbank Centre London

These thoughts about the City of Time gradually developed during work on a number of urban narrative projects with Southbank Centre, in central London, over a period of five years.

The Southbank Centre is the largest integrated arts foundation in the world. Created in 1951 for the Festival of Britain, the 8.5ha site on the Thames Embankment includes the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, the Hayward Gallery, and the Saison Poetry Library.

The Southbank Centre is an organisation whose deep cultural output and audience engagement requires that they are skilled in curating an experience that embraces every dimension of time from the most ephemeral to the most enduring across the architecture and landscape of their entire site.

The Centre's Festival programme, led by Artistic Director Jude Kelly, provides the cultural framework for a diverse programme that challenges and inspires engagement, dialogue and debate between audiences, performers and visitors. Our role has been to create the spatial logic to support the Festival, and to exploit underused space so that festival inspiration reaches every corner of the site.

In addition we explored how the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and Hayward Gallery, (now renamed the Festival Wing), could be restored and reinvented to support contemporary arts programming. We proposed a series of low cost temporary interventions as part of the festival programme to test ideas before making commitments to expensive permanent alterations. Working with dozens of artists, designers and makers, roof gardens have been planted; hidden spaces opened up for events; lost outdoor gallery spaces re-inhabited; temporary staircases have made new connections and transformed patterns of movement; paint, banners and graphics have invigorated the

buildings; and pop-up restaurants have been located in recycled containers and abandoned temporary structures.

Through our collaboration, the Southbank Centre has rediscovered the radical architectural ideas that inspired its creation. The ground-breaking 1960s architects conceived the site as a concrete landscape primed for the overlay of artworks, graphic installations and ephemeral additions. Fifty years on, festival interventions reveal the power of these founding architectural concepts and bring them vividly to life.

We prepared the architectural brief and carried out the technical feasibility study for the refurbishment and adaptation of the Festival Wing. This analysed the conceptual ideas in terms of engineering viability, established a project budget, and evidence to support a successful bid to attract major Arts Council UK funding. The work provided the basis for a selection process to choose the architects and consultants to take the project forward to the design stages.

The methods we have explored with the Southbank Centre have enabled the organisation to develop a coherent narrative for the site as a whole. Public spaces and buildings are integrally connected to the remarkable architectural legacy, and festival programming continues to create a dynamic hub in the cultural life of London.

At the Southbank Centre we encountered a client who completely and intuitively understands that great places generate compelling narratives. These can be communicated through live encounters between people, and through performances, events, exhibits and installations. For this organisation public spaces and architecture merely provide locations and scenery around encounters, and are only thought to be successful if they support and amplify the drama.

Their focus on the ephemeral above the material in city-making provides profound lessons for all those engaged in the creation of cities, especially for those whose training suggests an inversion of this way of apprehending the experience of the city.

### **3 Conclusions**

- The DEGW diagram remains a potent idea for developing new thinking about organisations of many types and the spaces they use and need
- A shift in design thinking to consider the environment as a context of continual change is becoming ever more necessary in response to the dynamics of the accelerating information technological revolution
- There is a necessity to redefine the role of architecture (and architects) in this emergent context
- The experience suggests that the individual building or space is become a less and less meaningful unit of analysis and is being replaced by design discussions about networks, connections, overlapping functions and above all about creating design narratives to give new types of organisations and spaces purpose and meaning