



KING'S CROSS-ROADS

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I had forgotten about my own design for King's Cross in London from 1988. It was interesting, therefore, to see the current scheme by Allies & Morrison as one of the four redevelopment sites presented at the London Urban Age conference. I have to say I don't really have great hopes for any of the four; that is because, when regenerating very large urban areas, it is extremely difficult to inject them with the qualities we expect from the city we have already got. Areas such as Soho, Covent Garden and Notting Hill in London are attractive because they have stories of all social and cultural kinds woven into them. These stories inform the accumulated sense of place: their legend, history and custom, through to the aspirational strands that set up the future. These narratives come more from the people who use and shape London than they do from the architect. It seems to me that architects find it difficult to step out of the box and think about the cultural dynamics of what really sustains a city as a living organism. Is it not the responsibility of the architect to strive for more, and build diversity, freedom and identity into the DNA of their designs? As Ricky Burdett said in his introduction, London has grown organically and chaotically. To deny this is to stop it in its tracks.

Reading between the lines of the conference transcript, I have to agree that King's Cross does highlight how London is changing, though I hope not for the worse. Some may have misunderstood my comments on the scheme as an attempt to preserve the rough edges for the sake of it. This is not what I meant. My original take on the site, in the 1988 scheme, not only included integration with the surrounding city, but also a new story that capitalised on the new Channel Tunnel link to Europe. I called it Eurofields. This largely polemical project anticipated the need for new identities to be layered over the old ones, an approach that the current proposal avoids. Perhaps it would be too risky now. The chosen urban model echoes universal principles of the block/boulevard/plaza (ironically the rational mid-European model) without either connecting to the haphazard evolutionary character of London or creating a framework that is open to interpretation and change. Of course, I understand the need for redevelopments such as these to provide desirable, saleable property. I

am as used to working within these constraints as the next person. That is the main point of the exercise, to make use of this redundant part of the city; but unless you actually take what is special about that particular area, the results are destined to dismantle its true urban qualities. At King's Cross this means thinking about what the area means to Londoners: local ones and far flung ones, ones of every culture and lifestyle, including the nightlifers who boogie until dawn, the drug users and sellers, and the prostitutes whose wellbeing depends on the good people with nice comfy jobs and cute little homes elsewhere.

Like major termini the world over, King's Cross is a confluence of people in transit who want to move with ease and in safety, but it is also a place where people in London can hide from so-called normality. And if this attendant life is a social given, when the new development is built, and is indeed handling the vast numbers of travellers predicted, this attendant culture will not only stay put, but magnify. Having places to hide is one of the features that make cities tolerable. Many people say they came to London in the first place because 'you can be what you want to be, and no one will turn a hair'. We suspect the future King's Cross will be hypercontrolled with cameras pointing at every corner and every entrance, which makes it all the more important to build in disjunctions and gaps that diverse cultures can either spar at or latch on to. Over recent years numerous art projects and one off clubs have made clever use of left-over buildings and the derelict landscape. Up to now, I think the identity of King's Cross has been contingent on its being loosely controlled. Cultural as well as social and technological innovation needs this looseness. According to Richard Florida, a city's (or in this case an area's) new creative class indicates a city's economic health. His three indicators are ethnic diversity, proportion of gay residents and the number of patent applications per head. King's Cross has always been an area of London that favours living outside the norm, as if it were a 'university' for learning to live in cities.

So it bothers me that the plan seems to ignore all that. Its blocks and boulevards and trees and niceness try to

knit it into the rest of the city, though in reality they merely separate it further. We saw Rem Koolhaas and OMA doing something similar with his White City scheme. I think King’s Cross should be much more body-like, much more layered, much more to do with the fibrous, muscular quality of the canal, the tunnels, shunting yards and railway lines. It should favour looseness instead of using architecture as wallpaper. I fully acknowledge this unbelievably dense layering of movement through all the transport and pedestrian layers that come to bear, but what has not been said is that these layers constitute a narrative in themselves. This should affect the urban relation between streets and buildings as well as the local vocabulary of urban space. Even the ticket halls in the stations are urban spaces. We do not need to return to the standard formula of the plaza, but should seek to generate new spaces by adapting the minor typologies that already exist across the area. From my point of view, the central issue is how to build experiential depth into any of these huge developments. Constructing no-where land, even if it is commercially viable, is not an answer. Too many people use design as a sedative when it should be a mild stimulant. I advocate evolving what exists into what will be, using cues derived from what exists. King’s Cross will work if it has got stories that both grasp and interpret what really makes this part of London tick.

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