PLANNING FINE GRAIN NEIGHBOURHOODS FOR COMMUNITY & LIVABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Three recent campaigns in London for Save Britain’s Heritage and the Spitalfields Trust – Smithfield Market / Kings College Strand / Spitalfields

Smithfield Market - After three years work widely disseminating groundbreaking ideas and vivid imagery for a successful Public Inquiry, London’s historic Smithfield Market was saved from being demolished just to make way for a private office building. It will now be restored as a New Museum of London as a fully public building. The success established new conservation case law, valuing character and uses, not just facades.

The Strand - An alternative strategy for a new public space opposed the demolition of a terrace of historic buildings and shops and the public outcry resulted in King’s College withdrawing plans for a single building. There are now discussions about how the Strand, next to Kings College and Somerset House, could become a new publicly accessible university precinct.

Norton Folgate, Spitalfields - Where the planning process and democratic planning decisions were ignored and overruled prompting legal challenges for a Judicial Review. The current threat of the demolition of scores of premises in the historic Norton Folgate district and replacement with six over-scaled office buildings by a single organisation is being opposed using viable alternative more enlightened proposals. The community backed scheme is going through the planning process and returning businesses, new occupiers, and affordable housing providers await the opportunity to return and preserve the scale and vibrant culture of this part of London.
**Intro**

My name is John Burrell. I am an architect, urban designer and I also teach. I have been in practice for over 40 years and I head up Burrell Foley Fischer’s offices based in London and Birmingham. We carry out a wide variety of projects. The practice ethos is to exclusively work on projects only where we identify and believe in the brief, and where there is a prospect of a fruitful intelligent dialogue with the client in whatever form they are constituted. I am also a consultant director of Urban Initiatives Studio specialising in neighbourhood design.

**Topic**

This talk is about my work on three campaigns commissioned by amenity and conservation groups in London. Each demonstrates alternative viable strategies that avoid schemes that would otherwise result in the unnecessary wholesale demolition of buildings and streets, the eradication of neighbourhoods and the loss of truly public space.

This physical erosion and loss of an open public realm due to large scale development in one ownership results in a reduction in diversity, the loss of local businesses and traditions and the driving out of small scale mixed use enterprises. It also works against a vibrant street based culture. The continuity of life and history built up by generations and mediated by familiar landmarks, places and spaces is disrupted along with the built city fabric. The mix of varied enterprises is supplanted by corporate finance, single ownership, remote management and an alien ethos. An ethos that does not see the city as a lived place but as a medium for international currency and investment. Individuals and potential smaller scale start-up enterprises and organisations cannot gain an interest because ownership and control is invested in fewer larger organisations. The form and scale of the city are an expression of that.

Whilst the briefs for these three projects originate from a concern for historic buildings and conservation issues, they are symptomatic of wider, more serious failings in planning, architecture and the ways that our cities are shaped, especially during intense periods of rapid acceleration of global development.

There is a reason why conservation policies are often the fulcrum of campaigns.

**Powers to uphold good, appropriate design**

It is still the case that government policy, and development procedures have the ultimate sanction to allow or promote development. It’s still the case that the only enforceable way of demanding that development is reconsidered, or abandoned, in the city is to use procedures first put forward in the Civic Amenities Act of 1967.

However, all too often this mechanism fails to work. Conservation policies are not
enforced and qualitative attributes are not given sufficient weight in planning negotiations. Principles are abandoned in the face of political and development pressure. In most cases the occupants of the site have been moved out, so there is no local voice. Added to which the quality of thinking and commitment of the people within the authorities who are charged with upholding design and development policies is increasingly absent, or very poor. Poor planning decisions get ‘rubber stamped’ and planning briefs are not adhered to.

So who is safeguarding the historic quality, character and appearance of our unique, vibrant places? Whether listed or not! In the case of London, the Mayor has power to override democratic planning committee decisions as well! Boris Johnson, former Mayor of London, overruled every one of the dozen or so refused applications that were referred to him and gave consent to projects that people did not want.

Creating tomorrow’s heritage and continuity

The use of conservation legislation has led to the conservationist lobby being caricatured as negative, anti-development, and anti-modern. However with thoughtful design it is possible to reconcile differences of approach to include heritage assets as part of a new revitalised vibrant context. Organisations such as SAVE Britain’s Heritage to their credit promote innovative new designs for traditional buildings. They seek an alternative viable scheme and they encourage vision and imagination.

So the driver and interest for me is creating and brokering bespoke solutions to city sites that take account of their accrued history. To ensure that new projects relate to the wider physical context, neighbourhoods, public spaces, and local character. Local character is not just determined by the buildings but the life and activity generated by the people who are able to relate and engage with the scale, size tenure, height and relationship to the streets and public places. They all play their part in a holistic way.

As I will demonstrate, my alternative projects retain space for a diversity of activities, businesses and homes, without the loss of historic character and continuity. In the case of Smithfield Market it will result in a new home for the Museum of London, and for King’s College retained historic public street facades fronting a new piazza to The Strand. The future of Norton Folgate site in Spitalfields is ongoing since the then Mayor of London Boris Johnson overruled the democratic decision to reject the current proposals.

SMITHFIELD MARKET

It is hard to imagine a more crucial London site. The area could go the way of much of the new city centre, to office slabs and investment flats, or it could become a truly new Covent Garden. This was the last quarter of the city of any size to still to await its fate in “death or glory”.

The Smithfield General Market buildings, which comprise of three blocks - the General Market, the Annex (formerly the fish market), which is joined to the ‘Red
Smithfield is becoming one of London’s major centres. The question of its heritage has never been more important as visitor numbers increase. The site connects the Barbican with Holborn Circus and Fleet Street, while Charterhouse, Hatton Garden, Clerkenwell, Barts and the City all nestle around it. What the City chooses to do with the General Market will set a precedent for the future of the entire market complex. It must be treated as an ensemble, with a complete roofscape rather than broken up piecemeal. Heritage must be at the centre of any new development if it is to serve London and thrive in the long term.

A NEW LONDON PIAZZA AND PUBLIC SPACE...OR A FOOD COURT AND A FEW OFFICES?

London’s Evening Standard, February 2014

“This is the last big one. Westminster has Covent Garden, Tower Hamlets has Spitalfields, Southwark has Borough. The City of London has only Smithfield market to bank on — but for how long?

It is the last chance to see if the City can set aside short-term commercialism and embrace a “Covent Garden” of its own.

A history of the loss of public space and street activity.

Smithfield was always the public’s space - originally known as “smooth field” and...
the place where St Bartholomew’s Fair took place…until it got out of hand and was ended. Sir Horace Jones designed (he did Tower Bridge and Leadenhall Market) a superb range of large scale, highly innovative, naturally ventilated buildings with wide streets. Despite World War II bombs and a fire, the replacement buildings have respected the “grand procession of buildings” referred to by Marcus Binney. The ensemble includes a listed 1960’s shell roof Poultry Market building.

Anna Minton has for some time been flagging up the issue of the erosion of public space. The first Smithfield Market wholesale redevelopment proposals were rejected at a previous Public Inquiry in 2008. If the revised Henderson’s Global proposals, again opposed by SAVE, had been implemented it would have destroyed any hope of recreating the bustling street life and character of the area and would have replaced it with a single office building with a controlled food court (M&S?) replacing the open ground level market floor and free pedestrian links across the site.

The current market building, which is also fully open to the public, supported many traders and was the replacement of two earlier street markets in the area lost to a road widening scheme. Covent Garden has made the transition from a working market into one of London’s major public spaces and attractions, and the scaling down of the meat market at Smithfield and the wide granite-set streets alongside it open up the possibility of a new second major London public space on the same scale and an opportunity not to be missed.

**Our proposal to create a new public realm**

Central to my approach was to not only save the buildings, which are well suited to smaller business, but to also flag up and demonstrate how the availability of the streets could make new piazza-like public space that could act as a focus to the dense surrounding streets that are home to a wide variety of well-established historic districts, each with a distinct identity. These include the Clerkenwell creative arts quarter, the Charterhouse Conservation Area, the Barbican Arts and Cultural Centre, the City, St Paul’s, the River Thames and the South Bank, Barts Hospital and specialist teaching, the Inns of Court and the legal profession, and of course the new Elizabeth Line, an international rail/air link. The vision was to ensure that the market site acts as a focus to mediate the differing uses.

The sections through the buildings as reconceived explain the potential of the varied architectural spaces and connections:

- Travel hub
- Venues
- Theatre
- Cinema
- Galleries
- Museum
- Shops
- Restaurants
Crucially the second and final inquiry, to which I gave evidence on design issues, established new case law.

Since Smithfield, it is not enough to just retain a thin façade in front of a gutted interior as a way of showing compliance with conservation area policies and to justify demolition. Whether a building is listed or not (despite its unique features this part of the Smithfield buildings is not listed), it is the retention of the number and scale of the individual spaces that enables a diversity of people to live and work in them that is seen as important. This is especially significant for cities as traditional buildings have many more entrances to the street compared with large building complexes. This is good for the individual. Large floor plates served by a controlled single stair and lift core are not conducive to supporting the culture and special character and diversity.

Sir Simon Jenkins commented in the Evening Standard during the campaign:
“There can be no argument. The key to the revival of these places lies in keeping their old market buildings and linked spaces. Wherever they have been demolished, attempts to recapture lost appeal fail, most spectacularly at Paris’s Les Halles. The magic lies in the stones.”

Well, the stones, cast iron, wrought iron, glass and timber have been saved and the General Market will be the new Museum of London.

Charles Clover writing in the Sunday Times:

“The significance of what Pickles has done is endorsing the even-handed but unpalatable scheme which would have brought the demolition of parts of the 1863 West Market buildings designed by Sir Horace Jones; the surveyor to the City of London and builder of Tower Bridge – will smash into the area and go for beyond Smithfield or the capital itself. For it says all buildings in conservation areas enjoy protection.

Pickles and Ball have turned the tide of demolition sanctioned by the City and by London’s mayor, Boris Johnson, in which, until now, anything went. They have revalued heritage within the planning system for decades to come.”
SAVE OUR STRAND

In March of 2015 King’s College London put forward proposals for re-configuring part of their campus that included the demolition of 154-158 Strand, leaving only the façade of 152-3, which is Grade II-listed. This short terrace of charming 19th century buildings, on their original narrow medieval plots, are all that are left of the original terrace, following the demolition of a substantial number of them in the 1960s to make way for the Brutalist concrete building constructed in the 1970s. These buildings form a buffer between that building and Somerset House. The King’s College demolition plans, which were about to be approved by Westminster City Council and Historic England, were a failure to appreciate the effect and showed no vision.

This streetscape has already been damaged by King’s College’s Brutalist building to the east of Somerset House. This is built on the site of at least a dozen similar buildings that were demolished for the new development. No further encroachment of this kind was wanted. The character of central London depends on a balance between large institutional and commercial buildings and smaller scale buildings on narrow plots. These buildings are in an important conservation area; they contribute significantly to its special character and must be retained.

King’s College wished to replace the four buildings Nos. 154-158 Strand with a single New Academic Building and leave only the listed façades of Nos. 152/153. The buildings, with their rich variety of individual frontages, were to have been replaced with one new seven storey monolithic structure and one architectural language, with a single motif of grey bricks with pierced openings of 27 identical windows and set back screen walls.
SAVE argued that the existing buildings are of merit and are worthy of being preserved, and that King’s needs can be met with an imaginative and sensitive design solution.

Those who supported SAVE’s objections to the proposals included: the Ancient Monuments Society, the Victorian Society, the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, the Council for British Archaeology, the Somerset House Trust, the Courtauld Institute, and over 64 other major organisations. The Somerset House Trust and Courtauld Institute’s objections centred on an additional proposed new tower extension to the King’s Strand building and the impact it will have on the setting of Somerset House.

SAVE’s petition picked up 10,000 signatures in a matter of weeks. It was their fastest growing petition ever, reflecting the strong public sense of outrage on the matter. The strong interest of The Times, reflected in a stream of letters, raised the profile of the campaign nationwide.

Retention of entire historic buildings as opposed to just façades is not down to whether internal details survive or not but is rather about layout, interior spaces, and the preservation of a historic building as a whole. Thanks to their variety and narrow plots, these buildings provide an excellent setting to the surrounding listed buildings: they manage to be distinctive without being overbearing.

Our proposals for SAVE proposes turning the whole of the southside of the Aldwych into a pedestrian precinct, as suggested by Lucy Musgrave’s Publica, rerouting traffic to the north. This will create a pedestrian precinct even more impressive and startling than that created by the closing of the road in front of the National Gallery on Trafalgar Square that created new and wonderful views of the Gallery and St Martin-in-the-Fields.
Pedestrianising this part of the Strand will mean that Gibbs’s wonderful church, St Mary le Strand, is no longer marooned on a traffic island and three deep with buses, but becomes the focal point of a splendid new public space. Both Somerset House and King’s College will gain a spacious new setting - the most beautiful piece of new public realm in the capital for years.

Creating a new entrance aligned on the portico of St Mary-le-Strand will open up one of the great lost views of London, through to one of the arched bridges over the Thames designed by Sir William Chambers. The vista will be a delight in both directions and the once threatened buildings will enjoy a new lease of life embellishing the Strand, the nation’s main processional route.

King’s College withdrew this planning application. Buildings are to be retained and new public space will link King’s, Somerset House, St Mary le Strand and the Courtauld Institute in a new place in London.

The campaigns continue…

A PLACE CALLED NORTON FOLGATE

Forty years ago, the newly formed Spitalfields Trust stopped British Land from redeveloping Elder Street in Norton Folgate. The Trust, including Dan Cruickshank and with the support of Sir John Betjeman, continues to fight now even larger proposals are tabled which will obliterate the neighbourhood. The current 2015 development plans show no respect for one of the last fragments of distinctive
Spitalfields streetscape. Evolving piecemeal over centuries, the historic frontages are being replaced by bland, corporate office blocks, over four times the height of the existing rooftops. The new blocks offer little in the way of diversity which suit the eclectic mix of tech industries, creative studios and small business that thrive in the East End.

Dan Cruickshank and the Spitalfields Trust launched a campaign to stop this destruction and save the Ancient Liberty of Norton Folgate. The area possesses a rich cultural and social history which the Trust strive to protect. The Trust’s alternative scheme, devised by Burrell Foley Fischer, demonstrates how this is possible. Norton Folgate is an area that is capable of continuous regeneration and renewal at human scale, one that is appropriate and compliant with its designation as a Conservation Area. New, improved and adapted buildings are proposed on a scale that responds to the historic grain of the area, and to enhance what is existing.

The focus of The Spitalfields Trust’s brief and vision for the future of Norton Folgate respects history. Re-using the existing buildings and providing a wide variety of spaces suited to businesses of different scales can deliver jobs for local people, greatly increasing the amount of housing, including affordable housing.

In addition to an exhibition and events, there has been a groundswell of public support and a series of talks, readings and walks exploring Norton Folgate’s lively history. Notably celebrating the presence, lives and works of Christopher Marlowe, Charles Dickens and Sir John Betjeman in Norton Folgate.

Encroachment

With the encroachment by new development comes the loss of human scale. The exclusion of diverse, small businesses, destroys the unique quality of the urban grain. This grain has evolved over centuries, defined by the particular combination of buildings, trades within them, the culture of the owners and, above all, the presence of the people living and working there.
The, still current, proposal obliterates the complex fabric and character of all these buildings that have evolved for diverse uses over centuries, in favour of large corporate offices for single use. They want to impose buildings in which each undivided floor is the length of an entire street, with retail units at ground level tailored to chain stores.

**Diversity vs. Uniformity**

The grain and quality of the area are losing its human scale and variety as interesting small scale enterprises become excluded. Streets, historically, have always been made up of a multitude of buildings, ownerships, individuals, and this created its unique character.

Many individual enterprises and people have occupied both street level and upper levels and this must remain if the area is to retain its identity. The current development proposal obliterates the individual buildings in favour of large, upper floor single use occupiers (offices). The vast single occupancy undivided floors span the width of an entire block and street length, e.g., from Blossom Street to Shoreditch High Street. The pavement level commercial units will be much larger shops and are inevitably more suited to businesses that are part of a national chain, and will not be attractive to more bespoke, innovative smaller scale local traders.

The range of different trades, uses and institutions we envisage contrasts greatly with the mono-functional office scale of the developer’s proposals, an issue that unfortunately is becoming more and more familiar in our cities.

**The City Deconstructed**

Why an alternative Plan for Norton Folgate?

Here are the effects of a large scale, profit-driven development on an area that has regenerated incrementally and survived over centuries without a ‘grand plan’ is that:
- 72% of the volume of buildings marking up the Conservation Area of Spitalfields above street level will be demolished.

- 88% of the site will become a new concrete basement for service equipment, bikes, showers and stores.

- The basement excavation will be up to 8 m deep.

- It will extend under the historic, listed roadway of Blossom Street at its northern end adjoining the enclosing walls to the railway cutting.

- The few remaining buildings and their external walls (fewer windows) will only be part salvaged.

- Historic fabric will be left disconnected, shored-up temporarily, in an area of devastation.

- The rear walls of Norton Folgate and Shoreditch High Street buildings will be demolished and the interiors gutted and re-planned.

**Our Approach to Restore and Complete Norton Folgate**

Norton Folgate is a tight-knit group of terraced building of distinctive facades and streets. This pattern defines its scale and way of life - it is not a monolith. It supports a balance of activities; defined and valued by its inhabitants rather than its financial value to a remote investor. Quality, character and uniqueness take precedence over quantity.

It is made up of an aggregation of individual buildings each with its own architectural character, purpose and unique history that is readable at street level. We propose:

- **Infill, in-scale buildings, traditional or contemporary style**

- **New buildings that respond to and respect indigenous local styles e.g. warehouses or ordered brick facades**

- **Discreet additions to existing buildings to improve, update and enhance them.**

- **Future development carried out incrementally on individual sites seen as part of the whole Norton Folgate ensemble, with individual buildings of individual styles.**

- **Changes of use accommodated within a collection of buildings which are flexible and accept change.**

- **The involvement of many different people and agencies that have a genuine interest, ie. Not one all-controlling owner**
As the Smithfield Inquiry showed, proposals for Conservation Areas have to consider all heritage assets, whether designated or not and their contribution to the continuance of the historic character and quality of an area. The interpretation of the Tower Hamlet Conservation policies for the Elder Street Conservation Area should be taking account of the Smithfield Market public enquiry decision by the Secretary of State Eric Pickles in 2014.

It is no longer tenable to allow wholesale demolition of the buildings and spaces that are an essential ingredient in the make-up of the character and quality of ‘Place’. Conservation areas such as Spitalfields with its very well documented history depends fundamentally on the unique streets and its idiosyncratic facets. Partial retention of a fraction of the facades does nothing to conserve the essential character and is an empty gesture leading to a superficial confused design approach that lacks architectural integrity, wit, style or meaning.

Norton Folgate and its streets are a place – it is not a building site! The developer’s proposal destroys the area and it exceeds the volume of the previously consented scheme that also failed to successfully respond and retain the unique attributes of Spitalfields.

Conclusion on Norton Folgate

Nothing has happened yet on this site. Our costings showed that the rebuild development was not viable. Since receiving consent the buildings have been used for temporary events, trade fairs by IKEA etc. but currently a slowdown in rising office rent levels, elections, Brexit confusion and depression are making investors cautious, and as long as our cities are regarded more and more as profit vehicles rather than places for people, they will suffer. This site has been blighted for decades.
Last week the site owners British Land commissioned graphic artists to decorate the historic façades.

It is a street – but is it art?

Is it urbanism-turned-vandalism?

SUMMING IT UP

The projects shown are typical and expose serious issues

- **human scale** in the physical environment we inhabit

- the increasingly **alienating process** of effecting changes with no public involvement

- the size of the enterprise organisations and the power of fewer and fewer people and owners

- the increasing size of the spaces and the **uniformity and incompatibility** with diverse uses of different sizes narrows the range of potential uses

- the loss of **continuity in the process** along with the richness and diversity of the city swept away

- Change and progression should be incremental where individuals and a range of organisations have a say in the final outcome and content of our cities, as well as a sense of ownership (and actual ownership) to make liveable good places