



# PUBLIC REALM

THE LIFE OF URBAN PLACES

Paul Keogh

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Image  
The Liffey Boardwalk and Bachelors Walk, Dublin



The seismic shift in architectural theory that occurred sometime around the nineteen sixties is illustrated nowhere better than in the juxtaposition of Le Corbusier's Unité d'habitation and Vasari's Uffizi that Colin Rowe used to exemplify the volte-face that replaced the object-fixated urbanism of the modern movement - "the magnificent play of volumes brought together in light" - with an architecture focused on the primacy of urban space - "the streets and squares that form the public realm of the city".

Speculating that the Uffizi might be imagined as the "jelly mould" for the Unité, Rowe extended his analogy to contrast the figure-ground plans of two similarly opposed urban models - Le Corbusier's masterplan for Saint Die and the historic core of Parma. Contrasting the tabula rasa of the former's buildings as objects in space with the latter's spaces shaped by buildings, Rowe saw the "bricolage" of the historic city as being capable of accommodating many ideals simultaneously, compared with the single-minded utopianism of Le Corbusier's proposition.

Published in 1975, Rowe's *Collage City* echoes writings by contemporaries such as Aldo Rossi, Kevin Lynch and the brothers Leon and Rob Krier. Arguing that the twentieth century had lost sight of the concept of urban space, the latter's Urban Space specified the precondition - radical in the context of the modernist ethos still prevailing at the time - that every building "must be subordinate to an overall plan...its type, scale and architectural language must harmonise with the existing fabric" and "the conception of urban space must not be destroyed, but complimented by the new building".

Principles such as these resonate with the assault on modernist planning that Jane Jacobs had published so forcefully a decade earlier in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Ridiculed on its publication by an architectural and planning establishment devoted to the *Ville Radieuse* principles that Le Corbusier had enshrined in the 1933 Charter of Athens, Jacobs championed the streets and squares of New York's Greenwich Village as the ideal urban environment. Whereas Le Corbusier considered the street to be "altogether disgusting", Jacobs saw streets and the sidewalk contacts they generated as "the small change from which a city's wealth and public life may grow".

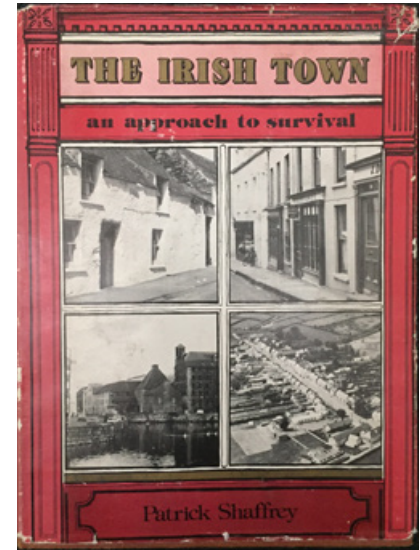
A lone voice in Irish architecture at that time, Patrick Shaffrey's 1975 *The Irish Town, An Approach to Survival* similarly championed the value of the streets and public spaces that shape the plans of Irish towns, which, he said, "epitomise all that is desirable and attractive about urban living". Warning that the development projected for the decades ahead could destroy their character and quality forever, Shaffrey questioned whether this construction could not be directed in ways that would preserve our urban heritage, inter alia, by "inserting a new building into an existing street, which, although modern and functional in design, might respect the character and scale of the street in question".

Almost a half-century later, these concepts are commonplace and today it's widely accepted that 'quality of place' is not just about buildings and their architecture; it's as much about the streets, squares and other spaces that comprise the public realm of cities,

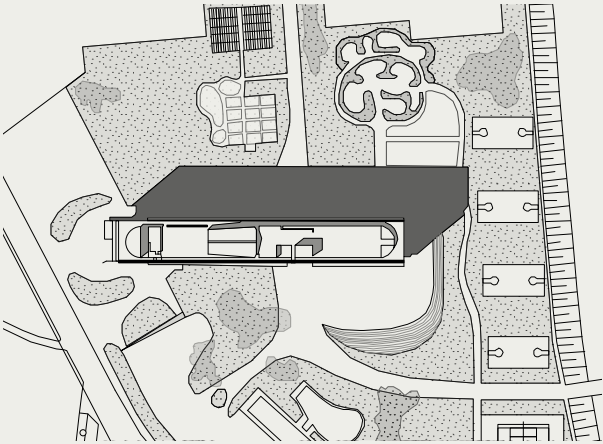
towns and villages. The 2007 EU *Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities*, for example, emphasised that public spaces and their architecture play an important role, not only on the living conditions of urban populations, but also, as "soft locational factors" they are important in attracting knowledge-based industries, creative workforces and tourism to urban places.

Barcelona, perhaps more than any other city, has been to the forefront in highlighting the value of a high quality public realm. Inheriting a city that had become increasingly rundown throughout the Franco years, Mayor Pasqual Maragall focused on regeneration of the historic core as a key priority and, stimulated by the award of the 1992 Olympic games, Barcelona became synonymous with high quality architecture and urban design in the decades that followed. As was quoted on the occasion of his 2010 Dublin visit to accept an RIAI honorary membership, Maragall has said: "Barcelona sought its future by improving her urban quality...the trick was quality first and quantity second...a network of high quality plazas, parks and public buildings was the cause of our success".

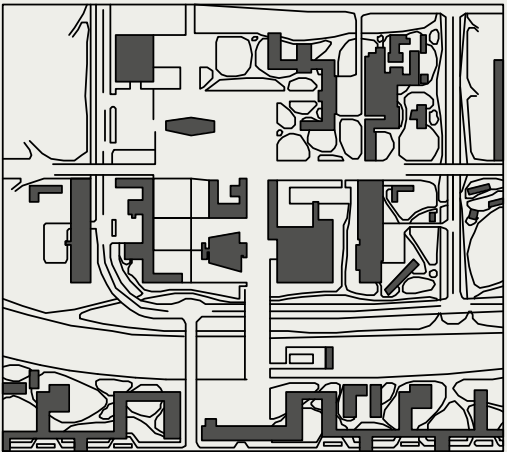
Subsequently, cities such as Copenhagen, Lyon, London and even New York followed Barcelona's lead in implementing visionary public realm initiatives. The 1991 Temple Bar Architectural Framework Plan was the first to introduce these concepts to an Irish audience. Notwithstanding the numerous award-winning buildings commissioned by Temple Bar Properties - the State company set up to implement the project - it is perhaps the plan's proposals for new streets and squares that led to Group 91 being awarded the Patrick Abercrombie Medal for town planning at the 1999 Union of International Architects convention in Berlin.



- Image
- 2 Mercado Santa Caterina, Barcelona
  - 3 Exhibition Road, London
  - 4 Place des Terreaux, Lyon
  - 5 Meeting House Square, Dublin



Unité d'Habitation, Marseilles, Le Corbusier



Historic Urban Core, Parma



Uffizi Gallery, Florence



St. Die - Masterplan, Le Corbusier



and wind impact so much on the usability of urban spaces. The quality of landscaping, furniture and lighting determines the attractiveness of streets and squares; especially seating: “No matter how many variables we checked, one point kept coming through: ‘people tend to sit most where there are places to sit’”, said the 1980s New York *Project for Public Spaces*.

The location of urban spaces is critical to their vitality and vibrancy; squares and plazas need to be situated at key “node points” within the urban structure of their locations; i.e. in places where there will be sufficient footfall and attractions to generate activity and social interaction - at various times of the day, days of the week and seasons of the year - by people of different ages, genders, occupations, etc. Attractions that draw people to urban places vary from cafés and shops to landmark buildings and public art, as well as events such as markets and concerts. As is often said, “what attracts people most to urban places is the presence of other people”.

This reflects the lessons from Copenhagen and the fact that the numbers of people using the city centre grew by over 300 per cent as the area of the city’s pedestrianised space was expanded during the eighties and nineties, creating with it an urban culture which dispelled the myth that “we are Danes, not Italians; it’s too cold here and it rains too much; we like cosy meals at home, not outdoor cafes”.

Streets are the “connectors” within the urban structure or, as William H Whyte described them in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, “the rivers of life of the city - the places where people come to participate in urban life”. These too require attractions, especially ground floor uses - to generate footfall and to encourage walking - whether to work, to school or to shop. Research by the BMW Guggenheim Lab in New York found that people were significantly “happier” on streets with active frontages than on those without. Today, some cities - Melbourne, Copenhagen and New York, for example - require developers to limit the extent of blank facades and to increase the frequency of doorways as a means to improving the sociability of their urban streetscapes.

While there is now a widespread acceptance of the value of quality urban space, there is still the question of what is it that makes a place successful? From a non-exhaustive trawl of the literature, five key principles stand out. First, public spaces are *public* and they are *social* – they are the places where people come together to enjoy the city and each other. For Richard Sennett, professor of sociology at LSE and co-chair of the advisory board of the Urban Age, the key issue is *civility*. Enabling people to live together in the complex society that is the city is the key element that needs to be engrained into the fabric of urban places. In other words, urban spaces must be welcoming, safe, diverse and accessible by all.

For this to be achieved requires “buy-in”, or to quote Jane Jacobs: “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody”. While it may be true that community and stakeholder engagement is important, what’s needed most is a champion to drive a *vision* for the place in question: Pasqual Maragall in Barcelona, Janette Sadik-Kahn in New York and Jan Gehl in Copenhagen being prime examples. In Ireland, the most successful public realm projects have been implemented by public authorities with in-house architects; a position that the RIAI had lobbied for over many years and which the Government Policy on Architecture lists as a key objective: “Government recognises that the availability of architectural expertise at appropriate levels in the public service is a key requirement in the delivery of a quality built environment”. In short, design needs to be applied by skilled practitioners and appointment of design teams with the expertise and experience to deliver quality is essential; “If you want good architecture, employ a good architect”.

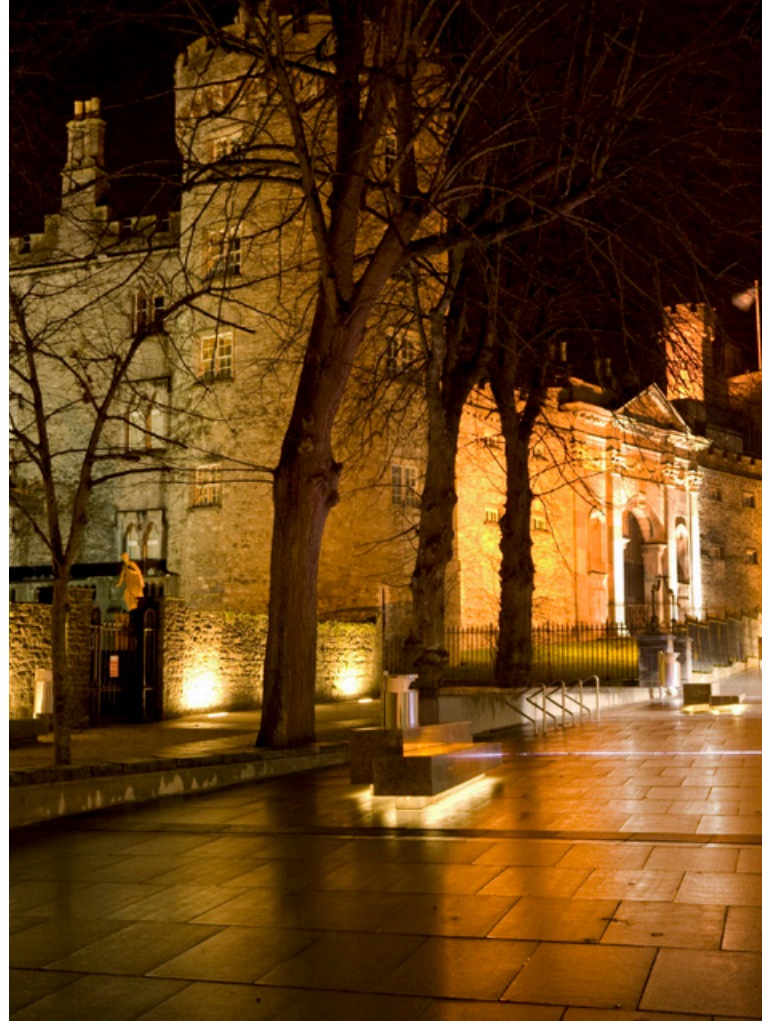
Urban design encompasses everything from the scale, character and identity of a place to the elements from which it’s made. Indigenous materials contribute to integrating a design into its context, thereby enhancing a location’s sense of place. Trees make spaces more attractive; they attract birds and wildlife, and they reduce air pollution. Microclimate considerations are fundamental, especially in this northern location where sun

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Image  
6 Viking Triangle, Waterford  
7 Market Square, Abbeyleix







These are but some of the qualities that determine the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of urban places. The economic case for investment in public realm quality has been campaigned for over many years by Richard Rogers, chairman of Britain's Urban Task Force. Reflecting on its research in Spain, Germany and the Netherlands, the Task Force's final report *Towards an Urban Renaissance* stated that "well designed urban places succeed because they recognise the primary importance of the public realm... the shape of public spaces and the way they link together is essential to the cohesion of urban neighbourhoods and their communities".

From a social perspective, the Danish urbanist Jan Gehl has extensively researched the behaviour of people in public places. His 1971 *Space between Buildings* grouped people's activities into three categories: *necessary activities* - going to work, doing errands, etc.; *optional activities* - taking a walk, standing about, etc.; and *social activities* - children playing, people talking, etc. He concluded that those activities which involve engaging with others - *social activities* - are far more likely to occur in places of high quality, i.e. in well-designed urban spaces.

Policies to curtail vehicular traffic - especially private motoring - and putting pedestrians at the top of the movement hierarchy are not only about reducing carbon emissions and fighting climate change; they are as much about enhancing the quality of life in urban places. "Reducing private automobile traffic in cities is a primary condition for improving environmental conditions, enhancing public spaces and making them more liveable" was one of the key principles in the *Charter on Urban Space* published in association with the United Nations Programme on Human Settlement. In Paris, for example, less than 50 per cent of households now own a car.

While projects such as the remodelling of Dublin's O'Connell Street and Galway's Eyre Square were stand-alone initiatives to upgrade the most important 'ceremonial' spaces of their locations, many of the country's recent public realm improvements have occurred on the back of other developments, as opposed to being driven by a conscious *vision* for the place in question. Funding for the remodelling of Patrick Street in Cork came out of levies from the €300 million out-of-town Mahon Point development. The award-winning streetscape improvements to Clonakilty were a consequence of the town's main sewers needing to be renewed. De Blacam and Meagher's adaptation of the Abbeyleix market house into a town library was the catalyst for the environmental improvements to its surroundings. And Dublin's College Green plaza project might not be happening were it not for the Luas cross-city line making it impossible for through traffic to cross the historic core.

That said, the last decades have seen a number of high quality plans to improve the quality of our city and town centres. As is often recited by the Mayo town's architect, Simon Wall, Westport's millennium project was to invest in the making of an integrated area plan to address concerns around the impacts of out-of town development on its historic core. Kilkenny's 2004 local area plan led to the local authority holding an architectural competition for remodelling of the Castle Parade; won with a design of the highest quality by a young emerging practice, GKMP Architects. The success of the pedestrianisation and remodeling of John Roberts Square sowed the seed for Waterford implementing its highly positive Viking Triangle cultural quarter initiative. Dublin City Council's *Your City Your Space* strategy underlines the extent to which the city considers the public realm to be a contributor to the city's attractiveness and its competitiveness in comparison with its international peers.

These precedents give hope that public realm strategies will become the norm for all planning authorities. The statement that "the creation of walkable, cycleable and public transport-orientated communities requires that designers re-examine the way streets are designed" in the Department of Transport's *Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets* echoes the recommendation in the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht publication *Shaping the Future - Case Studies in Adaptation and Reuse in Historic Urban Environments* that qualitative public realm strategies should form part of all statutory development and local area plans. As Ireland becomes increasingly urbanised, it is essential that these guidelines are adopted - to ensure that our city and town centres are planned and designed to provide the quality of public space required for them to become attractive and viable places for people to live, to work, to shop and to visit.

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Image

- 8 O'Connell Street, Dublin
- 9 The Castle Parade, Kilkenny
- 10 Asna Square, Clonakilty
- 11 Pedestrian Street, Westport
- 12 The Metals, Dun Laoghaire
- 13 Eyre Square, Galway

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**Paul Keogh** FRIAI, RIAI president for the 2010-2011 term, Paul Keogh is a board member of the Irish Architecture Foundation and co-chair of the DHPLG / RIAI Sustainable Communities and Housing Committee. In partnership with Rachael Chidlow since 1984, current PKA projects include housing, conservation and urban regeneration schemes in Limerick and Dublin as well as the Dublin Mountains Visitor Centre and the College Green Civic Plaza.