

CONTINUING ON THE THEME of the threats facing our common spaces [PNYX #49, #52], this week Lucy Musgrave puts forward the case for a civic urbanism, with a particular focus on London. Lucy's is an optimism that does not shy away from the challenges we face, drawing on cases of exemplary civic leadership and policy-making to argue for our agency both in caring for and changing the city.—EDS.

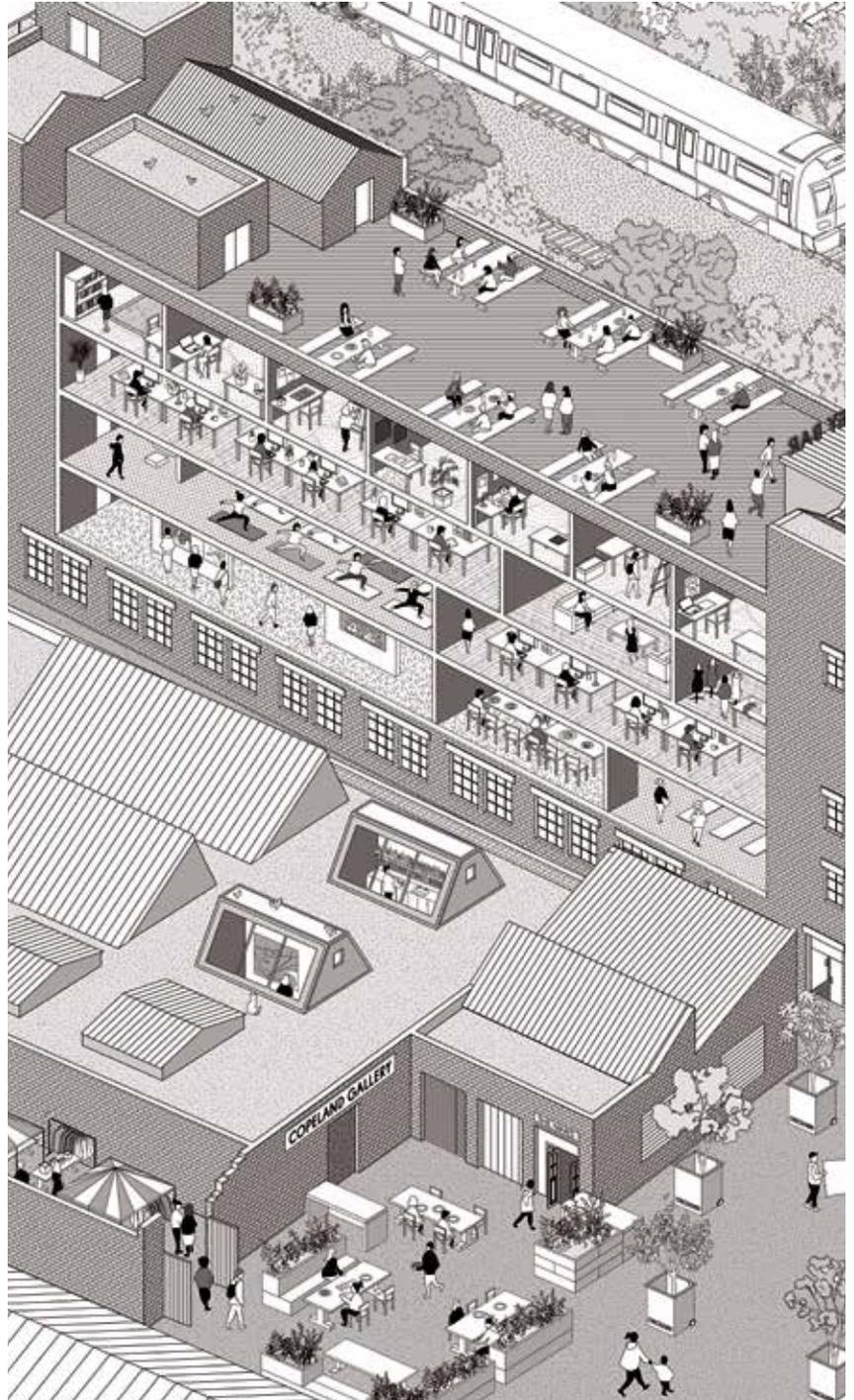
CIVIC URBANISM

Lucy Musgrave

OVER SOME DECADES London's civic realm has been eroded by carelessness; a tendency to see the space between buildings as a secondary concern. As such, any intervention in the city that seeks to address this neglect should be considered not as a standalone object but as a contribution to a place which is both changeable and complex; as an opportunity to enrich civic space.

Policy-makers and practitioners have a responsibility to research, record and analyse those places which they seek to change. To understand how the area is used and how patterns of use fluctuate throughout the day, throughout the year. To study the way people and policies have changed our cities for the better—or otherwise—and to draw on that knowledge to suggest and communicate opportunities for positive change. To know that it is impossible (and irresponsible to claim) that the practice of urban design can be disassociated from the practice of research; that we have a duty to learn from best practice, and to monitor and understand the complex forces which shape our city.

Crucial to envisioning our urban future is a wider appreciation of the existing conditions and lived experience in the city. We need only look to the practitioners who surveyed social, cultural, spatial and economic conditions who came before us to show us how this might be done. Many of these pioneers have been forgotten by history, but all



Left: Bussey Building by day. (Image: Publica).

made a valuable contribution to our approach to urban change. The social entrepreneur Octavia Hill (1838-1912), co-founder of the National Trust and perhaps best known for her efforts to preserve open land for public use, who championed an approach to social housing rooted in direct action, fieldwork and a detailed understanding of communities and the problems which they face. Irene Barclay, (1894–1989), the UK’s first female qualified surveyor, who produced a series of pioneering social and housing surveys which highlighted the crucial role of social networks in alleviating the plight of urban dwellers. The urban planner, reformer and campaigner Elizabeth Denby (1894-1965), whose book *Europe Rehoused*, a survey of social housing across Europe, was one of the most influential housing texts of the 1930s and the inspiration behind *Vital Neighbourhoods*, a survey of international housing renewal projects published by Publica this year.

Our own practice sees itself as building on the legacy of these pioneering practitioners, women who worked outside or across the boundaries of conventional professional practice; who sought to draw on local knowledge rather than impose expertise; who viewed spatial and social issues as inextricably linked. Publica is rooted in a belief that fieldwork and research are critical to urban renewal and improvements, and to this end we produce careful, detailed neighbourhood surveys of spatial, cultural, social and economic conditions to help inform decision-making and policy at district, city-wide and national levels. We do this by listening, watching and recording. By mapping and drawing and using photography and film as an integral part of our work. By carrying out ethnographic studies and reviewing the body of the literature and policy documents that have shaped or described the areas in which we work. By talking to the people who live, work, study or spend leisure time in particular neighbourhoods. By learning from history, and analysing the impacts of urban interventions.

This approach to the city—which we call civic urbanism—we can see being adopted by many other practitioners in the field. Its value has seen us work with politicians, planners and landowners with major agency in the city. Clients such as Westminster City Council, the Greater London Authority (GLA), the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC), the University of Oxford, Selfridges, leading developers, major cultural institutions, and the Great Estates—all have asked us to help them shape the city for the better.

We are at a pivotal moment where the



Above: Bussey Building by night. (Image: Publica).

public and private sector organisations share an appetite for transformational—and truly civic—urban change. In London, with a progressive Mayor at the helm, and many outstanding leaders at the boroughs, the public realm has been newly championed. Initiatives such as the Mayor’s Design Advocates programme, his Night Time Commission, the Public London Charter, and initiatives like Public Practice all reflect an understanding that a vibrant, safe, and attractive public realm is a pre-requisite for a successful society and economic growth.

In October Publica completed the redesign and revitalisation of Bond Street and in January work starts on our complete restoration of Hanover Square, two ambitious projects that will transform these streets and spaces. Current projects include creating a strategy for the Oxford Street District for an attractive, inclusive, environmentally-friendly neighbourhood which is welcoming for residents, workers and visitors alike. This represents a larger wave of change underfoot. But the challenge remains—to focus on the appetite and momentum for both change and delivery.

Cities across the world are finding different ways to tackle the same subjects—social infrastructure, environmental strategies, housing, transport, heritage and conservation, creativity, culture, play, public art. At the office we are always looking to learn from just such other approaches. In May, I travelled to Bogotá to spend time with Mayor Peñalosa, discussing the work we are doing for the GLA and the Port of London Authority on a

cultural vision for the River Thames (London’s largest public space) in relation to his plans for the 37km river of Bogota; and to Medellín to research their experiments in what former Mayor Sergio Fajardo calls social urbanism to find out how a city previously renowned for violence and criminality has been transformed into a more productive, better educated and safer society.

Cultural and civic identity are fundamental to our urban future, a progressive agenda which unites public and private sector interests, transcends political differences, and delivers lasting value. Now, more than ever, there is an understanding of the importance of thinking holistically and working collaboratively. Perhaps, most of all, there is a recognition that successful cities are dependent on the spaces where civic life can thrive.

Lucy Musgrave is the founding director of Publica, a London-based practice that specialises in strategies and design for public space, urban design and masterplanning. Over a 25-year career, Lucy has played a key advisory role in policy recommendations, strategic planning and the advocacy of design quality. She is currently a Mayor’s Design Advocate and sits on the Mayor’s Night Time Commission and the Sounding Board for the Mayor’s Public London Charter. Lucy is a member of the Barbican Centre Board and the National Infrastructure Commission’s Shadow Design Group and Expert Advisory Group.