

JKWIS 2014 Architecture in Society

Architecture: The Effect Of and On the Individual

The architecture's easy; it's thinking how to use the building that's challenging.

Frank Duffy

The conversation – between the citizen and the city – will be immensely improved over the years.

Patrik Cerwall

[Eric Hobsbawm](#), one of the most eminent – and entrancing – historians of his time, wrote presciently in his introduction to *Age of Extremes* that students at the beginning of the twenty-first century would find it hard to credit that so much of the preceding century was seen as a struggle between two secular ideologies: those of capitalism and communism, the architecture of which we examined last month. Perhaps this is less startling for students of JKWIS, some of whom live in societies literally still bearing the shapes of those ideologies.

We also saw last month how religion has conveyed a message through the form of its buildings. Many of these ideological statements – secular and religious – attempt to site the individual within some larger context; indeed, they can sometimes be intended to convey the relative insignificance of the individual compared to the larger whole. Yet architecture might be thought of as beginning with the individual (*when two bricks are put together well*, as per Mies van der Rohe's definition) and ending with him/her too, since each must interact on a personal level with the built environment. A church needs room for the individual to sit or to stand or to listen; Speer's parade grounds looked magnificent when full of people but needed those individuals to be precisely sited; [Sydney Opera House](#) is iconic and on the UNESCO list of world heritage sites, but would surely be less revered if its acoustics did not carry well the notes of the soprano. This month we turn to look at architecture and the effect of, and on, the individual.



Sydney Opera House (under construction in 1966); Utzon, 1973

Today is perhaps the age of the “Starchitect”, despite [Frank Gehry’s](#) distaste for the word (expressed pungently in [this recent FT interview](#)). Look at this [stylised and musical and wonderful A-Z](#) of architects and their creations. Throughout the JKWIS work so far we have noted the contributions of the individual architect to the development of the discipline; *do you think this is any more relevant today than it has ever been, or is today’s cult of celebrity the reason for the particular reverence shown to modern architects?*

In our second month’s work on the reflection of art and culture, we noted how one artist or architect’s work could shape – or reflect – the culture of the period itself. *Are modern architects similarly able to define today’s generation, or the spirit of the age?*

From the age of industrialization onwards, it was recognized that much output would now be created within buildings, and thus appropriate areas had to be designed and created. The design of work space has long been a focus of interest and research: if a company can increase the productivity of its workers, without increasing its costs proportionately, then this makes (apparent) business sense.

[Sir John Soane](#) is thought by many to be the father of commercial architecture in general, and office design in particular. His four-per-cent office at the Bank of England was an elegant early example of the need to maximize efficiency within the working environment, yet it retains the elegant simplicity of neo-classical architecture that we have encountered before.



The Four Per Cent Office, Bank of England, London; Soane, 1793

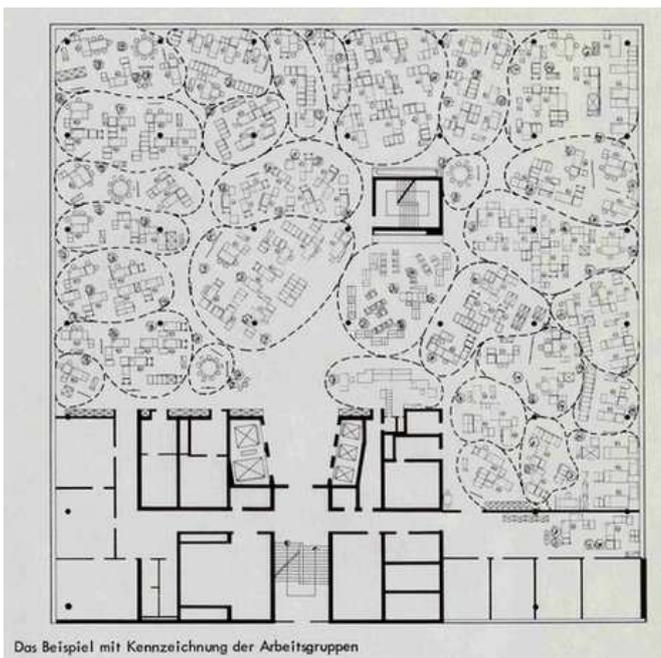
With more repetitive processing tasks, economists and management theorists like [Frederick Taylor](#) viewed the division of labour as an essential component of a firm’s successful growth; and with this came the more brutal and functional office design, sometimes known as [Taylorism](#). These offices were

generally large and classroom-style, with workers sitting in rows without much interaction and under obvious supervision.



Taylorist-style office; US, 1930s

A departure from this method, according to architect Frank Duffy in this compelling [BBC podcast](#) on the history of the open-plan office, was devised by German consultants Quickborner “as a reaction against Nazism” and named [Burolandschaft](#), or “office landscaping”. Examine [this Architectural Review article](#) on the development of the office.



Quickborner plan for Osram Office, Munich, 1965

[Recent research](#) has tended to cast doubt on the efficiency of the open-plan office, particularly with regard to its deleterious effect on motivation, its lack of privacy, and the negative effect on concentration from so-called pink noise. While American offices tend to remain on the open-plan or cubicle style, Scandinavian and German companies have moved away from this model. *Is this a cultural phenomenon, or an economic one; and what does the future hold for the office worker?* We might think that technology allows the ever-more efficient working at distance – and indeed some firms have taken the [hot-desk](#) idea to heart – yet in February 2013 the new CEO of Yahoo reversed this trend with a [now-famous memo](#). Marissa Meyer believed the benefits from sharing ideas in the same physical space outweighed disadvantages of pink noise, daily commuting, and rental costs. [This BBC article](#) brings together some of the arguments regarding “teleworking”.

Technology is increasing the power of the individual, and weakening that of the great ideologies of the past. *YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter* all appear to have empowered the individual, and reduced the power of the state (although Edward Snowden’s revelations have caused many to question the extent of genuine personal autonomy and privacy). In our evolving individual interactions with urban environments, and the future planning of those environments, technology must surely be a key factor. Look at [this fascinating short film](#) by French think-tank [The City Factory](#) on how technology is affecting – and will affect – those interactions.

An extension to the idea of the empowerment of the individual – and a partial solution to one of the problems of poverty – might be to reduce the role of the professional architect, and increase that of the amateur. Thus arose the idea of the [Wikihouse](#), described in [this provocative TED talk](#) by Alastair Parvin as “architecture for the people, by the people”. *How viable do you see such individualized solutions in your own communities and countries?*



Wikihouse, London; Parvin, 2013

Some regard the veneration of the “starchitect” as inimical to the solution of wider human problems; indeed, [Architecture for Humanity](#) argues more for open-source architecture, and a recognition that modern technology can much more effectively address problems of urban decay and absence than in

the past. Thus the [Open Architecture](#) network attempts to solve many of the world's most immediate housing crises by drawing on "100 million solutions". An example of such collaboration and initiative is the Collège Coeur Immaculé, in Haiti, being rebuilt in one year after the 2010 earthquake.



Collège Coeur Immaculé, Haiti; Architecture for Humanity, 2013

The very creation of the built environment might pose problems for human health; as the [World Health Organisation](#) puts it, "Urbanization is a major public health challenge in the 21st century." From the reduction in simple walking to school, to the congestion and pollution of our cities, to the inequalities arising out the economic systems of many countries, the way in which we build and live today has major repercussions; even our modern tendency to sit [can be lethal](#). *How far do architects have a responsibility towards the health of those who use their buildings?*

In 1998 the architect Richard Rogers was commissioned by the UK government to examine how future urban development could be achieved without significant environmental degradation. Here is his [final report](#), together with [an article](#) by Rogers, lamenting politicians' "fear of beauty". He noted that [John Nash](#)'s Georgian terraces were still widely admired: "beauty pays". *Do you agree with another conclusion of Rogers that "raising architectural standards is just as important as raising standards in our schools and hospitals"?*



Park Crescent, London; Nash, 1821

The [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) recently produced [a report on the social value of public spaces](#) in the UK. In a world where land is scarce, and economic forces can easily assess the commercial value of land, it can be difficult for local and central government to resist the opportunity to transform public space into private space. Consider how public space is protected in your own communities. *Is it sensible always to protect public space when the money realized from its sale could go towards other public services, such as healthcare and education? Do the same arguments hold for the sale of school playing fields, for instance?*

We have seen throughout JKWIS that as society evolves, so does the built environment, and our responses to it. Eric Hobsbawm himself acknowledged that historians have had little success as visionaries – “the only horse races whose results we can safely predict are those already run” – but perhaps one certainty is that society will continue to change, and with it architecture and its impact on us as individuals.

For the fourth essay in the JKWIS 2013-14, I would like you to address the following dual question, after a month of online debate among yourselves and with me and your teachers:

**How significant a figure is the individual architect?
How do you see architecture’s impact on the individual evolving over your lifetime?**

Post your responses, containing appropriate examples to support your argument, online in fewer than 750 words and by March 9, 2014.

Tim Parkinson,
February 9, 2014