

## **The Southbank: An Invitation to Participate**

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**Abstract:** As part of the trend to distinguish space for traffic and pedestrians, London's South Bank was transformed between 1960 and 1968 to make way for a development which became known as the Southbank Centre. Controversial from the beginning, the Southbank Centre - comprising the Hayward Gallery, Purcell Room, Queen Elizabeth Hall, and a remodelled Royal Festival Hall - had, as one of its most recognisable features, a tangle of seemingly endless walkways, undercrofts and staircases. The architects' responsible later suggested that the site had been deliberately undefined, and that users were expected to 'take advantage of the potential of different and scattered elements congealing together in an apparently random way'. Such claims prompted speculation that the users of the resulting spaces were in a sense being empowered, and were effectively being encouraged to participate within the design process.

Yet the Southbank Centre's labyrinth of levels failed to produce the type of 'gregarious pedestrians' and empowered citizens its designers had buoyantly hoped for, a failure which raises a number of serious questions regarding the definition of space for particular uses; for instance, how can architects provide for change and appropriation of space? Is it possible to design for undefined use? And how does defined space fit into wider concepts of the public realm? By examining the initial occupation of the Southbank Centre's walkways and undercrofts in the 1980s to the present, this paper will examine the tension between spaces appropriated through their use and spaces devised in order to impose order. More specifically, it will examine the systematic fencing-in that has taken place during the current regeneration of the site and the removal of the 'dysfunctional' spaces, to investigate what impact such an approach may have on the nature of subverting space more generally.

### **The Southbank: An Invitation to Participate**

Of all London's architectural assets and burdens, the Southbank Centre is arguably one of the most contentious. At least for the last fifty years, it can legitimately claim to have consistently generated more conflicting public opinion than any other. On paper this quality could conceivably be one other arts centres might envy, all publicity being good publicity after all. However, the fluctuating fortunes of the Southbank Centre might compel them to take a different view. Since Queen Elizabeth Hall was voted 'Britain's ugliest building' in 1967 to the description of the Hayward Gallery as a 'dirty, gnarled, bunker of a building' in 2001, it seems only diplomatic to say that the complex as a whole has posed an enduring challenge to the tastes and sensibilities of the British public.<sup>1</sup>

Somewhat ambiguously lodged along the Thames hinterland, the Southbank Centre is generally perceived to occupy the area between Westminster and Waterloo bridges, or the bend in the river Thames, which juts out ninety degrees from Lambeth. Housing Europe's largest concentration of cultural centres, this thin strip of river boasts, among others, the National Film Theatre, the Royal Festival Hall, and the Royal National Theatre. Unusually for a site of national and cultural significance, it has never been complete, and its character has developed through a process of compromise and change. Indeed it has been referred to as 'the most splendid building site in London'.<sup>2</sup> Few years have passed without a modification or renewal in some sense, and the site visibly negotiates the tide of architectural fashions. It has

been perceived by some as the paradigm of a particularly raw period on Britain's otherwise clean record of nostalgic architecture, an ill-advised foray into Brutalism; and hailed by others as the remnants of a utopian legacy. The site is, in effect, a physical resource documenting post-war British architectural history. Yet, this history is an awkward one and does not fit comfortably within the framework of a single narrative. There are many histories at stake on the South Bank, especially in the contested arena that constitutes its 'public' spaces.



Figure 1: Aerial view of the South Bank, South Bank Masterplan: Urban Design Strategy Draft Two, March 2000, cover image, Rick Mather Architects.

This paper asks, in whose image and for whose benefit have the external spaces of the Southbank Centre been shaped, and how has the public's right to participate in the processes of each phase been articulated? By examining the external spaces of the Southbank Centre - particularly the walkways and undercrofts - from their conception in the 1960s to the present, this paper will examine the extent to which public space is appropriated through use, or devised to impose order.<sup>3</sup> It may not be possible to resolve these matters fully as the process of development and change on the site continues to this day. However, by asking these questions, a strong sense of the many possible answers may be gained.

Between 1960 and 1968, out of the demolished remains of the Festival of Britain emerged a series of monolithic fortresses of shuttered wood-grained concrete, among them the Hayward Gallery and the Purcell Room. Reluctant to reveal so much as a front door, the design deliberately opted for bends and camouflaged staircases borrowing cubes and rectangles, cylinders and half-cylinders from the language of Cubism. It resisted compositional finality, preferring a free-floating sculptural approach hovering between six levels. At certain points along the walkway the design conceded visual access to the river Thames, at others, concealed it. Thus the user was only indirectly aware of his/her position in relation to this key geographical feature. In some ways, the river had an offstage presence, limited to a momentary hint of a funnel over a low wall. For the user, there was an explicit loss of orientation to the site, for objects frustratingly disappeared or were concealed at every turn, often never to be reached. With seemingly random sweeps, concealed internal volumes jugged out and by doing so, created a rash of angular concrete cliffs and ravines against soft curving

decks. The contrast was, in the words of Reyner Banham, 'both romantic and picturesque', terms one might not normally associate with the Southbank Centre.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps most strikingly, the development introduced walkways or 'circulation decks' at a variety of levels on a much wider scale than had previously been the case, and they quickly became one of the most recognisable features of the site. The design partly reflected a wider trend towards distinguishing space for traffic and pedestrians, as LCC documents from the time record,

These terraces will add to the open space available to the public and form a continuous pedestrian promenade...Terraces at a still higher level will provide...spacious observation and seating areas away from the more busy levels.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2: Photograph of Hayward Gallery, Queen Elizabeth Hall and Purcell room from river perspective, circa 1967, (Reference Code: GB 0237/PJM/LCC/E.4.7, the Percy Johnson Marshall Collection).

That this open site could be a 'continuous pedestrian promenade' has prompted subsequent speculation that the walkways were driven by an ambiguous form of populism. Indeed, some have argued that the users of the spaces created were in a sense being empowered, and were effectively being encouraged to participate within the design process by the architect.

While the development may have been an LCC commissioned project, three of the original designers later became affiliated with the Archigram group, the iconoclastic architecture collective from 1964. Indeed, the implication of some subsequent literature is that this development was an Archigram project.<sup>6</sup> It has been claimed by Peter Cook, later an Archigram colleague of the designers involved, that the site was deliberately undefined, and that the users were expected to take advantage of the potential of different and scattered elements congealing together in an apparently random way.<sup>7</sup> Cook does not specify what exactly the user was expected to do with the conditions of his or her environment, and as such it rings out as a somewhat empty call. Yet, Cook insisted that the design of the Southbank Centre was primarily for the user's benefit:

So once again the pedestrian, the gregarious nature of people and their movement is uppermost in our minds and the built demarcation of space used to channel and direct patterns of movement.<sup>8</sup>

The implication is that Cook, and by extension Herron, Chalk and Crompton anticipated that the user of the Southbank Centre would interpret the walkways as an opportunity to enjoy the freedom of space. Thus the spaces of the Southbank Centre became walkways rather than destinations or places in themselves. They were no longer viewpoints or restaurants spilling outdoors; they were intended to be experienced whilst in motion. In other words, rather than being mutely inhabited, the walkways provided a continuous shift of perspective on the surrounding environment.

In theory, there was to be neither 'one' moment nor an obligatory route one had to follow at the Southbank Centre, and the user was not meant to feel channelled or directed. Arguably, these values pre-date 'non-plan', a theory conceived by Reyner Banham, Cedric Price, Peter Hall and Paul Barker in 1967, which according to Barker's essay, *Thinking the Unthinkable*, was 'essentially a very humble idea: that it is very difficult to decide what is best for *other* people' [Italics writers own].<sup>9</sup> As a group they asked, why not have the courage, where practical, to let people shape their own environment?<sup>10</sup> Yet this approach contains more than a few paradoxes and raises broader questions about the ethical consequences of the non-plan, for if the architect was disempowered, how then was the public's right to participate in the architectural process articulated? There is an implicit tension in the non-plan in that it cannot but create precise boundaries for the users field of activity; even the most open ended space, determines in advance the depth of participation. To participate in something is to cross the psychological boundaries between the self and other and to feel the defining tension of these boundaries. Genuine participation inevitably courts anarchy, for by inviting the participant to make a choice of some kind, they may alter the space, or even destroy it. Arguably, the deliberately undefined spaces of the Southbank Centre inadvertently defined a user, and equally excluded whole sections of the public. Presumably by accident, the space effectively prioritised those already fluent in the language of modern spatial design, but failed to equip the anonymous public with the necessary vocabulary and grammar. Exchanging the detritus of life down below for a city in the sky may have been an attractive utopian fantasy for the architects and perhaps even an appropriate gesture for an arts centre. However, as a consequence of the incomprehensible design and lack of straightforward ground level access, does it not stand to reason that at some point, the user would want to get down?

As early as 1971 there were already signs that the Southbank Centre was not as successful as the GLC would have hoped. Critics deemed the stress laid on the terraces as spaces for circulation rather than habitation, as pointless.<sup>11</sup> In reality, these spaces were for the most part dark, windy and unwelcoming, and its users interpreted what had been designed as unplanned space ready to be activated, as 'too much draughty open space'.<sup>12</sup> Writing in 1979 for the *Financial Times*, Colin Amery stated,

The wonderland has vanished. Dreary acres of stained concrete and wind swept terraces are the uninviting surroundings of London's cultural centre.<sup>13</sup>

Amery continued to describe the South Bank as 'municipal and puritan', proclaiming 'there's not enough sin on the south bank'.<sup>14</sup> The irony of Amery's statement soon became apparent as the homeless erected a 'cardboard city' underneath the southern approach to the

Southbank Centre.<sup>15</sup> The area was perceived as a dangerous place to walk alone. Even the Metropolitan Police washed their hands of the Southbank Centre.<sup>16</sup> For the most part, problems arose when the undercroft spaces filled up with people who had nowhere else to go, but other people (the non-homeless) had to move through these same spaces.<sup>17</sup> These problems, which were arguably largely social and economic, were then projected on to the design itself. As such, a formerly glorified landscape was quickly perceived to be an uncivilised and threatening cultural ghetto in splendid isolation across the Thames; which in turn resulted in the perception that the Southbank Centre had 'failed'.

Since 2000, these 'failures' have been addressed, and in part remedied by reintegrating the ground level of the site. The 1968 design had temporarily weakened the ground level denoting it as purely a zone for traffic, while pedestrian movement occurred at an elevated level. Although the Royal Festival Hall was extensively remodelled concurrently, it retained its ground level access while the other structures - the Hayward Gallery, for instance - did not. This meant that the two structures operated at vastly different levels and effectively undermined each other. Indeed, it has been suggested that many of the subsequent problems on the Southbank Centre site were the result of this discrepancy.<sup>18</sup>

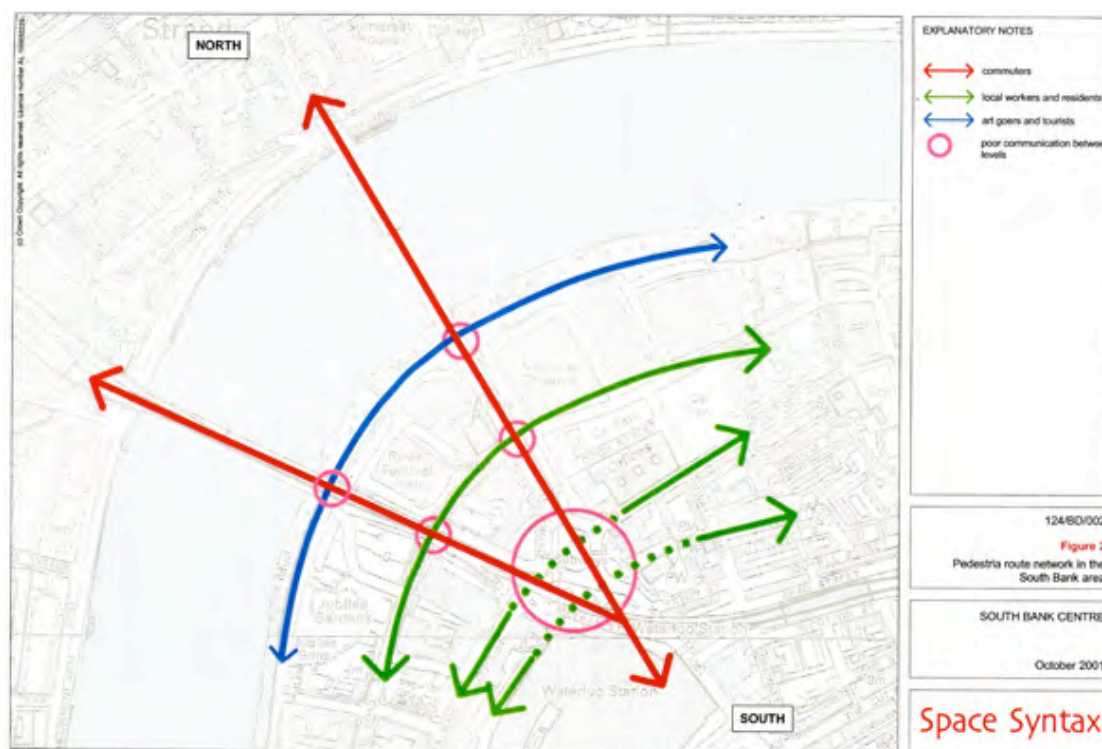


Figure 3: Pedestrian Route Network in the South Bank Area, October 2001, Space Syntax

The general aim of the Masterplanners currently overseeing the regeneration – Rick Mather Architects who were appointed in 2000 - has been to restore ground level access, and extend the private foyers to support a variety of retail opportunities.<sup>19</sup> By essentially removing all undefined space, and infilling all the undercrofts, the now largely reinstated ground level is a defined space where the user is appointed the role of consumer. Rick Mather Architects concede that undefined space is ideologically problematic.<sup>20</sup> Yet, defining all space for particular uses raises a number of serious questions, such as how can architects provide for change and appropriation of space? Is it possible to design for undefined use? And how does defined space fit into wider concepts of the public realm?



In such a high profile renovation project as the one currently taking place at the South Bank, there is unsurprisingly a need to prove the designer's approach is a valid one, particularly considering the problems of the past. The current climate is one in which investors are unlikely to make significant funding decisions based on an architect's interpretation of function alone. On this basis, one of the organisations consulted during the Southbank Centre's redevelopment has been Space Syntax, which has been studying the South Bank informally since the early 1980s.<sup>21</sup> According to Professor Alan Penn, one of the Non-Executive Directors of Space Syntax, their role as consultants to the Southbank Centre has been to work closely with Rick Mather by examining how the spaces proposed will relate to one another in terms of patterns of movement. In practical terms, the central foundation of the Space Syntax approach is that if a pedestrian can see where they are headed but the built environment prevents them from taking the straightest route this creates a general lack of satisfaction. Space Syntax believes that the Southbank Centre was misappropriated because of the way in which it was spatially configured. To pacify the space, they contend that it needs to work on an economic level; and by opening up the facades, the Southbank Centre does this by channelling people towards the retail sector.

Yet, implicit in the 1960s design rhetoric was the suggestion that user and the architecture could interact, and in this sense the original design of the Southbank Centre cuts right against the grain of Space Syntax's principles. In direct contrast to the 1960s approach, the scope of activity has now been curtailed, and the user's democratic rights are translated into consumer rights. Professor Penn however, believes that when a space has an undefined use, and may appear to be producing conflict, the introduction of a retail venue 'sanctions the use and pacifies the space'.<sup>22</sup> According to Professor Penn, it is indeed possible to 'design conflict out', and equally to 'design it in'.<sup>23</sup> Conflict implies a clash between different interests or opinions, however, for democracy to exist, difference should not be suppressed. Conflict, or tension, should be recognised as a constructive force. Yet by removing conflict, Penn argues, the space becomes, what he would regard as, much more 'urban', that is, fully integrated. This, Penn explains, is due to the fact that isolated strategic space, i.e. spaces that are underutilised, always get taken over by unsanctioned and illicit uses. By way of example, Penn believes that the 'cardboard cities', which were built by the homeless underneath the Southbank Centre during the 1980s, developed in this way.<sup>24</sup> However, although the appropriation of space is quite systematic, and almost happens by principle in urban space, Professor Penn concedes that even in the optimal system, where every space is defined and everyone is satisfied, eventually somebody will subvert the space, which inevitably creates a conflict. While it is possible for very successful things to happen without design, Professor Penn claims that for this to happen 'all rules have to be removed, for problems only arise when the appropriation cannot happen due to a rule'.<sup>25</sup> Rules however, are inevitable because most space belongs to someone.

The role of the Skateboarders may be an interesting paradigm in this instance. Since the 1980s skateboarders have appropriated the undercrofts and walkways of the Southbank Centre. According to Professor Iain Borden, Head of the Bartlett School of Architecture:

Under the calm lines of the high culture bastion of the South Bank lies the heart and mother of English skating...its gloomy cavernous slopes alive with yelling and clatter, transformed into an alternative spectacle of social practice.<sup>26</sup>

Although the Southbank Centre could not find an appropriate use for these undefined spaces themselves, they were nevertheless extremely unhappy with its appropriation by the skateboarding community, and waged an 'all-out war' against them.<sup>27</sup> Despite trying to 'manage them away', the skateboarders would always return. According to Borden, the skateboarders were drawn to the 'slack space' of the Southbank Centre, or its everyday spaces which lacked meaning or symbolism.<sup>28</sup> Their appropriation of these spaces at a time when the Southbank Centre had effectively abandoned them has been recognised as valid enough to grant them an informal lease until 2010.<sup>29</sup> This somewhat anarchic group now have a legitimate right to be represented in decisions, which may impact on their use of the space. What is interesting about the role of the skateboarders is that, although originally illicit, their presence has become a valued feature of the Southbank Centre. Indeed to coincide with the 2004 Roy Lichtenstein exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, Southbank officials asked the skateboarders to graffiti their skateboards, and the walls of the undercrofts, with Lichtenstein-style imagery.<sup>30</sup> Whether this request was granted is perhaps immaterial, however the fact that it was even requested says enough about the stratifying effects of space management. As the example of the skateboarders illustrates, there seems to be a twin belief that all conflicts between all interests are resolvable and that mutual agreement on outcomes may be reached. Moreover there is a sense that such consensus is a desirable normative principle. As Jeremy Till explains, consensus is an extremely powerful rhetorical strategy for those in authority, for it promotes an image of widespread public participation under the banner of 'social cohesion and non-conflictive process'.<sup>31</sup> Yet consensus inevitably falls short of the ideal. With consensus, debate is unattainable, for non-conflictive processes explicitly exclude initial differences from discussion, focusing instead on areas of common interest, then seek to build shared visions. The result is that in a pluralistic society, those who are in positions of authority may affirm every citizen's rights to his own opinion as an excuse for ignoring any citizen's challenge. The skateboarders may initially have subverted the undercroft spaces, but over time, their presence has increasingly been regarded as mere entertainment.

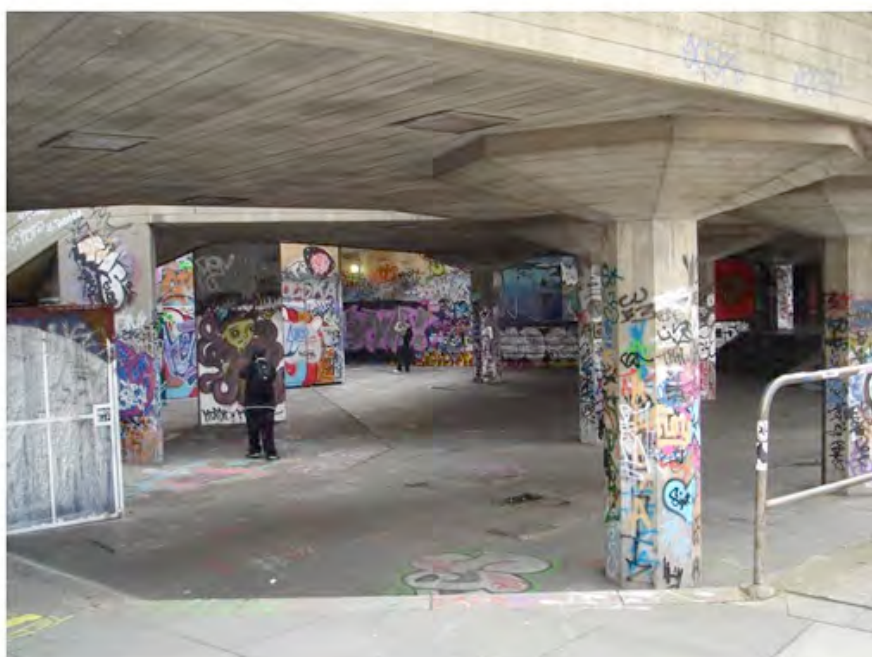


Figure 4: Undercroft of South Bank Centre, detail with Skateboarders, 26 January 2007, authors photograph

Under the banner of democracy, any form of political agency has been removed from the citizen - or 'user' - of these designed spaces. However, Professor Penn argues that on the contrary, the Space Syntax approach restores a sense of agency to the user:

What makes a space dangerous are things, which are so heavily constraining, they remove peoples autonomy. For instance, the South Bank Centre was so complicated and mazelike, people couldn't find their way through it. Therefore you remove freedom of will because you aren't given the knowledge of where everything is and how to get to it.<sup>32</sup>

Yet the social implications of Space Syntax's formula are worryingly familiar. For it resembles a twenty first century version of environmental determinism, which has two outcomes: it confers ultimate accountability to the designer of that environment for its effects on society, and by doing so, excuses those in authority of the need to act on any of the wider factors which contribute to social problems. Despite this, Professor Penn argues that it need not be a negative quality,

Environmental determinism as a position is a given, yet it does not mean it determines everything... it does not determine free will, but it does determine how people behave. Some people take as an anathema the notion that design can do anything and it lessens the individuals' agency. We don't see this as a problem.<sup>33</sup>

The architect can only aim at a generalised satisfaction of averaged social needs which may then satisfy nothing. The ultimate stakeholder, the user, may then decide to take it out on the building, or worse, on other users. In actual fact, the blame for such breakdowns, from indifferent vandalism to violent anarchy, should be laid in varying proportions at many doors: managers, deficient welfare services, commissioning authorities, builders, architects etc. Yet it is usually the design which gets the blame. By focusing on the design or 'configuration' of the built environment independent from other factors, such as geography or economics, Space Syntax rather conveniently overlook the wider social and political structures. The Southbank Centre is located in an area which has many social and economic problems, so to identify these as symptomatic of inappropriate spatial configuration, seems curious to say the least. The mechanisms of determinist thinking are reductive, and work by deflecting attention away from the real problems, which are far more complex than merely a matter of positioning.

In conclusion, it would seem that the architects of the 1960s Southbank Centre inadvertently created what is regarded by the current developers as 'dysfunctional' space, that is, un-programmed space. Today, this lack of spatial programming is considered a blind spot, which led to misinterpretation and appropriation by the 'wrong' sort of users: namely the homeless and the skateboarders. Moreover, although the Southbank Centre was initially designed with an active user in mind, the user was expected to access the walkway from either end and then explore the space within a frame of concrete balustrades, which separated the user from the rest of the site. The irony is that while the rhetoric accompanying the 1960s development on the South Bank may have included references to 'connection', 'choice' and 'participation', the walkways and their balustrades proved instead to be a huge barrier as they narrowed down the flexibility of the space.

Ultimately this scene exposes a tension central to the site, that which exists between theory and praxis. Despite the rhetoric, the walkways did much to fragment and inhibit the users, and



potential communities from emerging. The lasting effects of this development on the site effectively atomised the community by sacking the public realm, and ostracising the Southbank Centre from its surroundings. By contrast, the current approach marks a trend away from the 1960s ideal of the city as an open stage for dialogue, towards a controlled, enclosed sphere. Yet, the management of space does little to increase the agency of the user, for commercial space is still controlled space, and its presence at the Southbank Centre is symptomatic of a wider trend to homogenise space. This approach reflects the increasing demand for the Southbank Centre to be sanitised, and for its undesirable dead spaces to be closed down or reduced in numbers. While these formerly 'dead' spaces hosted users who subverted the Southbank and created new functions - ones which its original authors could not have anticipated - the reality is that public space has never encompassed everyone in society; there are merely degrees of public-ness.<sup>1</sup>

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Charles Jencks, *Architectural Review*, July 1967; Claire Barrett, *Hayward Gallery Revisited*, December 2003, Twentieth Century Society

<http://www.c20society.org.uk/docs/casework/hayward.html> [accessed 16 February 2007].

<sup>2</sup> *South Bank Waste Land*, *The Observer Weekend Review*, Sunday 23 October 1960, pp. 17.

<sup>3</sup> It may be important to note that while internal spaces of a building can also be defined as public, the premise of this paper is that buildings, and the spaces outside of those buildings, condition ones behaviour differently. Once 'inside', the user's public rights are ultimately diminished by the private character of a space. As such, the potential opportunity to use internal spaces freely may be curtailed in a different way to the external spaces. While this may be somewhat muddled by the fact that the twenty-one acres of land occupied by the Southbank Centre are privately owned, nevertheless it remains that public and private dimensions form the basis of social relations. Dividing public and private in such a way might be construed as self-inflicted blindness, however the internal spaces deserve a case study all of their own

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Simon Sadler, *Archigram. Architecture without Architecture*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press: 2005), pp. 135.

<sup>5</sup> London County Council, *South Bank from Royal Festival Hall to Waterloo Bridge Development*, 23 March 1961, Percy Johnson Marshall Collection Reference Code: GB 0237/PJM/LCC/B/1.

<sup>6</sup> Banham, Reyner, (1969) *The Architecture of the Well Tempered Environment*, London: Architectural Press, , pp. 256; Peter Cook, (Ed) supported by Warren Chalk; Dennis Crompton; David Greene; Ron Herron; Mike Webb, *Archigram*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 1999), pp. 16; Simon Sadler, *Archigram. Architecture without Architecture*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press: 2005, pp. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Cook, Peter. (Ed) (1999) supported by Warren Chalk; Dennis Crompton; David Greene; Ron Herron; Mike Webb, *Archigram*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, pp. 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Barker, Paul. (2000) *Thinking the Unthinkable* in Jonathan Hughes, Simon Sadler (Eds), *Non-Plan: Essays on Freedom, Participation and Change in Modern Architecture and Urbanism*, Oxford: Architectural Press, pp. 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 7.

<sup>11</sup> McKean, John, (2001) *Architecture in Detail: Royal Festival Hall*. London County Council. Leslie Martin and Peter Moro, London: Phaidon Press Limited, pp. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Amery, Colin. *A cure for the South Bank*, The Financial Times, 2 July 1979

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> The IMAX Cinema now occupies the site formerly used by the homeless.

<sup>16</sup> Sadler, Simon (2005) *Archigram. Architecture without Architecture*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press: 2005, pp. 32.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, local employers ITN used to minibus their staff to and from Waterloo station, as they felt uncomfortable having to walk through what appeared to be threatening space.

<sup>18</sup> Culley, Peter Interview, 26 January 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Professor Alan Penn, Interview, 26 March 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Borden, Iain in Joe Kerr, Andrew Gibson (Eds), (2003) *London: From Punk to Blair*, London: Reaktion Books, pp. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Mike McCart and Ian Blackburn, Interview, 26 January 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body* in Malcom Miles, Iain Borden, *The City Cultures Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.188.

<sup>29</sup> Mike McCart and Ian Blackburn, Interview, 26 January 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu, Jeremy Till, *Architecture and Participation*, (Oxon: Spoon Press, 2005), pp. 79.

<sup>32</sup> Professor Alan Penn, Interview, 26 March 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.