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People Power



© Third Nature, The Climate Tile

The 20th century city was dominated by the car and increased urban density but new models are now emerging for both architecture and city planning that prioritise people. Simon Mills reports.

As links between health, wellbeing and the built environment are increasingly supported by evidence-based research, the need for a smart, integrated and interdisciplinary approach that accepts the value of people based design has never been greater. Based on a survey it conducted, the British Council for Offices concluded that “There will be great impact, and with it a return on investment, if workplaces are aligned with a culture of wellbeing specific to the company’s business, employees and physical environments.”

Architects have been at the vanguard of this approach. “People-centric architecture can by definition mean many things to many people, but at its core is the idea that buildings and places should serve people and not vice-versa. This may not herald the end of architecture as icon or status symbol, but it signals a positive step in the right direction as architects consider how people can engage meaningfully with the built environment,” explains Dieter Kleiner, Director, RCKa.

This approach is evident in all RCKa’s work. The creation of the residents’ meeting gallery for retirement specialist PegasusLife (Hortsley, Seaford, UK), encourages innovative

circulation solutions that increase chance meetings and combat loneliness. And the OpenEye gallery in Liverpool, UK utilises underused public space as an active event and exhibition venue. “Complex mixed-use projects have the potential to create truly successful communities; each responding to site context and opportunity, and the specific needs of local people,” explains Kleiner. He adds: “By exploiting synergies of proximity and use we are able to increase activity and natural surveillance, which improves safety and helps create a cohesive community. While this approach is undoubtedly challenging, as conscientious designers engaged in shaping the built environment, we believe the opportunity to create places that fix problems outside of the brief and are more relevant for local people is an opportunity all too important to ignore.”

In many countries it is the climate that poses challenges for architects aiming to create humane, inviting outdoor space. An excellent current example of overcoming these sorts of issues is Jacaranda Avenue, the award-winning design of the 2016 AIA Phoenix Metro Design Competition by blank studio design + architecture, based in Phoenix. The project aims to craft unique



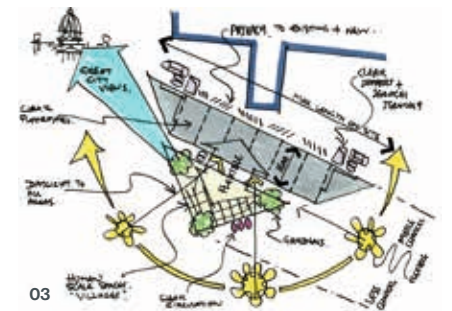
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corridors of inhabitable, comfortable, public space within the city, adapting areas that are part of the existing transportation infrastructure (streets), rather than requiring parcels (blocks) appropriated as destinations.

Studio design principal Matthew Trzebiatowski explains: "A Japanese word, komorebi, describes the ephemeral dappling of sunlight beneath a tree canopy. We asked what could happen if this dappled shade condition was generated over large swaths of this Sonoran Desert city." A steel framework spanning the streets would create an armature to suspend thick strands of natural fibre rope. Below this canopy the streets would be completely pedestrian with grey water waste from adjacent buildings to support the new, extensive plantings. As opposed to a static canopy, the proposed mile-long interventions allow the rope extensions to sway freely in the breeze. ▶



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01 White Arkitekter, Skanstull, Stockholm
© White Arkitekter

02 & 03 Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners / Stantec,
Guy's Hospital, London

04 City of Helsinki, Image Jussi Hellsten

The City of Helsinki is rapidly growing and has made the decision to increase the share of journeys taken by bicycle by 15 per cent by 2020 from its current level of 10 per cent in an effort to tackle pollution. A network of cycling connections will criss-cross the city with a total length of 130km. To justify this investment, the City of Helsinki has evaluated the project, estimating that the decision will produce societal benefits that are worth millions of Euros each year. “The calculation proves that one Euro invested in cycle paths can bring nearly eight Euros worth of benefits to society. Compared to typical transport investments the benefits are several times higher,” explains Reetta Keisanen, the city’s cycling co-ordinator.

Swedish based White Arkitekter is also interested in rethinking our relationship to cars. The practice was commissioned by the City of Malmö to transform a quiet area into two connected public squares, St Johannesplan and Konsthall Square in anticipation of the arrival of new transport links to the square. “In recognition that our cities will be transformed in the near future by the arrival of the driverless car, the car is diverted underground and relegated to drop off points on the periphery of the square, creating more space for the flow of pedestrians and bicycles. Signage is minimal to ensure an uncluttered civic space, with zones allocated to bicycle parking and demarcated cycles lanes crossing the square,” explains Niels de Bruin, Landscape Architect and Partner, White Arkitekter.

Light coloured concrete paving is used throughout to create an open pedestrian-prioritised space which can accommodate the 37,000 commuters pouring into the square from City Tunnel Station at rush hour. At the centre of the square is an elevated concrete disc which functions equally as a stage or a bench, with its smooth contours inviting interaction from skate boarders. “Public

space is the life blood of our cities. To build truly sustainable cities we have to preserve our public space, designing in flexibility to accommodate a wide spectrum of uses which meet the needs of today and of tomorrow without stripping away character and conviviality,” says de Bruin.

Projects don’t need to be on the grand scale of city planning; some of the most successful are small and often embrace a grass roots approach. Take MVRDV’s folly, ‘Back to the Roots’, one of ten pavilions designed to sit within the landscape of the Fraeylemaborg estate in Slochteren, Netherlands. In 2014 a design contest was organised by the Fraeylemaborg Estate Foundation to create the follies, to be used as public exhibition spaces.

Back to the Roots creates a new meeting place at the Heritage Square located in the heart of the village. Centred around a tree, the terraced landscape becomes a multi-sided podium, playground and exhibition space all in one. The 30,000 multi-coloured, textured bricks are laid in a way that forms an earthy camouflage-like gradient stepping up towards the tree, and then back down creating seating around its trunk. A group of MVRDV architects and co-founder Nathalie de Vries, with assistance of local students, spent five days building the folly layer by layer. The project is designed to remain on site for at least five years and will be maintained by volunteers. Throughout this time, the tree in the centre will continue to grow into its place.

Sometimes something as small as a tile can make all the difference. In Heimdalsgade on Nørrebro in Copenhagen, Denmark, an innovative rainwater managing pavement tile is about to be tested. The climate tile designed by the architectural studio Third Nature (Tredje Natur) aims to handle the effects of climate changes.

The design is a modular system that allows the water to run down into an integrated and underground water handling system. The pavements retain fundamental function but will also provide and add opportunity to bring the city a number of new qualities and functions.

The water management system can connect to a series of urban elements, such as vegetation and water and playground equipment. This can motivate activities, play and stay in the city while providing vibrant and natural urban spaces. “We wish to show the world that climate proofing isn’t just hidden technology, but also a chance for everybody to participate in the improvement of our everyday spaces where we understand the city’s hidden connections and offer greater life quality,” explains Jeppe Ecklon, Project Manager, Third Nature.

And finally, alongside city planning, public buildings are becoming more focused on the needs of the people that use them. A case in point, the new cancer centre at Guy’s Hospital, London, designed by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners and healthcare specialist architects Stantec, has been thoughtfully designed around the needs of patients and staff. The aim was to create an uplifting, non-institutional and clinically efficient healthcare environment for people under extreme stress.

Ivan Harbour, Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners’ Partner in charge of the project, explains: “Architecture has the ability and responsibility to improve people’s lives and nowhere is this more important than in a building dedicated to making people well. Our aim has been to create a place equally focused on patient care and treatment, a welcoming building of human scale that does not feel like a hospital but delivers state-of-the-art treatment in an uplifting environment for visitors and staff.” ■



01 RCKa, Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool UK
Image Sinta Tantra

02 RCKa, Pegasus Life, Hortsley UK
Image Forbes Massie

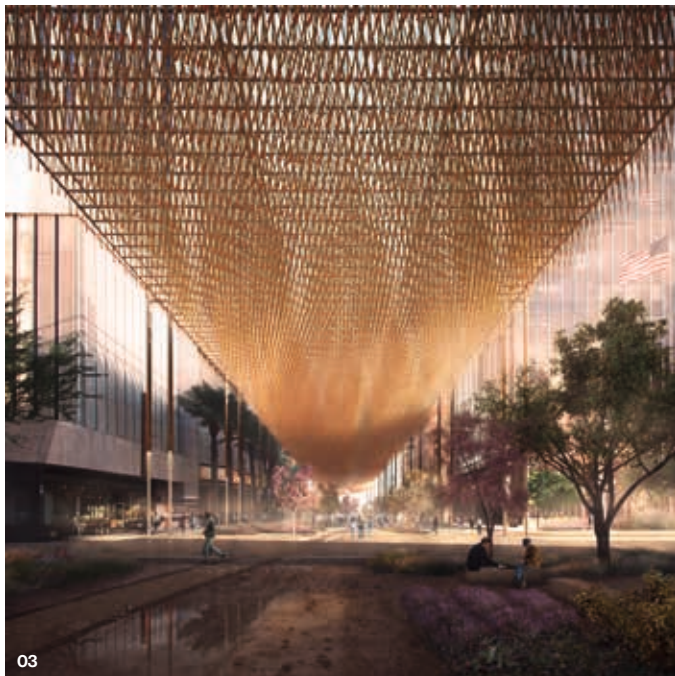
03 blank studio design + architecture,
Jacaranda Avenue
Image Forbes Massie

04 MVRDV, Back to the Roots
Image © Harry Cock

05 White Arkitekter, St Johannesplan and
Konsthall Square, Malmö
Image © Hanns Joosten



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