

What's the use(s)?

Old is the New New, says Neil Parkyn

starts.....

A true urban drama. You are charged with 'selling' a residential project to London Docklands – resi above a ground floor to be filled with something – retail by chance, artists' workplaces, housing association one-stop shops etc etc but soon you run out of credible uses. There simply isn't enough 'stuff' to fill out a convincing ground floor. It's a challenging assignment for any RICS guy or girl.

If you look in the right pile you can hopefully unearth your own dogeared copy of Jane Jacobs' masterwork, 'The Death and Life of the Great American Cities'. It remains an evergreen serenade to the City, notably for her plea for diversity at street level. It celebrates – amongst many other qualities – the principle and practice of Mixed Use, that happy mélange of functions with front doors on the street, be they secondhand vinyl record shops, pet grooming parlours or ethnic eateries. Few would dispute that this makes for a lively urban scene, even if it can sometimes resemble a sound stage from 'West Side Story'.

It's a cry against monoculture – the creation of single-use complexes which give nothing back, for all their architectural eminence. Here we

might set the otherwise successful London Barbican, admittedly enhanced by cultural elements, yet bereft of shopping, unless you count the shops of Golden Lane. Quite a walk, then, to buy your copy of the Radio Times or a bag of sweets. One could compare this with the Coin Street development, with The Cut not so far away and plenty of retail buzz nearby.

Old is the New New

One solution often rolled out is the 'repurposing' (an ughh! word) of offices or industrial premises in fringe but now aching fashionable areas ringing the central core. A simple recipe. Take a typical '60s office block, retain the concrete frame and infill with instant resi. What's NOT to like? Only this: it's rather tricky to provide any decent amenity for each and every flat, apart from the familiar cascade of clip-on balconies; hard to provide much in the way of residents' parking space on these tight inner city sites; problematic to open up the facades to provide more glazing than the office floors could offer, not at all easy to access and service the building deftly.

Better, one finds, to light upon former industrial premises which can be rebranded as 'The Old

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Printing Works', 'The Old Foundry', The Old Courthouse', 'The Old tax Office' and so on, as long as it's an old something. You can always hang onto some silent machinery to grace the lobby. High ceilings, 'character' facades and a fascinating back story.... The marketing brochure writes itself. You've only to look at The Gasholders at Kings Cross to see how to do it. An exemplary project.

What we are seeking is the effortless inclusion of those bijou uses such as the proverbial convenience store, sandwich bar, dry cleaners and so on, composed with such obvious rightness as the cut-off corners and half levels of the superblocks of Cerdà's Barcelona.

Why not drop in for a quick tapas when searching for shoelaces or a sink plunger? It's an attractive prototype based on practical use, much more convincing than the 'shopping street' halfway up one of Le Corbusier's housing unités, whatever their merits as sculpture.

Retail apart, one can bemoan the impoverishment of our housing projects in the absence of freestanding public buildings such as Tecton/Lubetkin's Finsbury Health Centre (1938), when they shone out as beacons of a caring community, distinguished works of architecture in their own right. Today such social uses tend to be all too readily compressed into the ground floor of a housing block as impromptu 'filler', while they just need air to breathe and individual expression.

A trio of templates

It might help the prospective mixed-user to recall three sterling models of best practice. Certainly there are others, but these three are easily visited with your One-Day Travelcard or trusty Oyster.



Victorian/Edwardian Hugh Street

This model is to be found everywhere in our inner suburbs, simply miles of it ; with bike repair shops hugger mugger with Colombian eateries and iron-mongers.

Simply flats over mixed retail, sometimes with a continuous roof/terrace if the flats are set back. A robust and reliable model ensuring an animated street frontage. Pictured in Highbury, BELOW

The Sicilian Arcade, Holborn

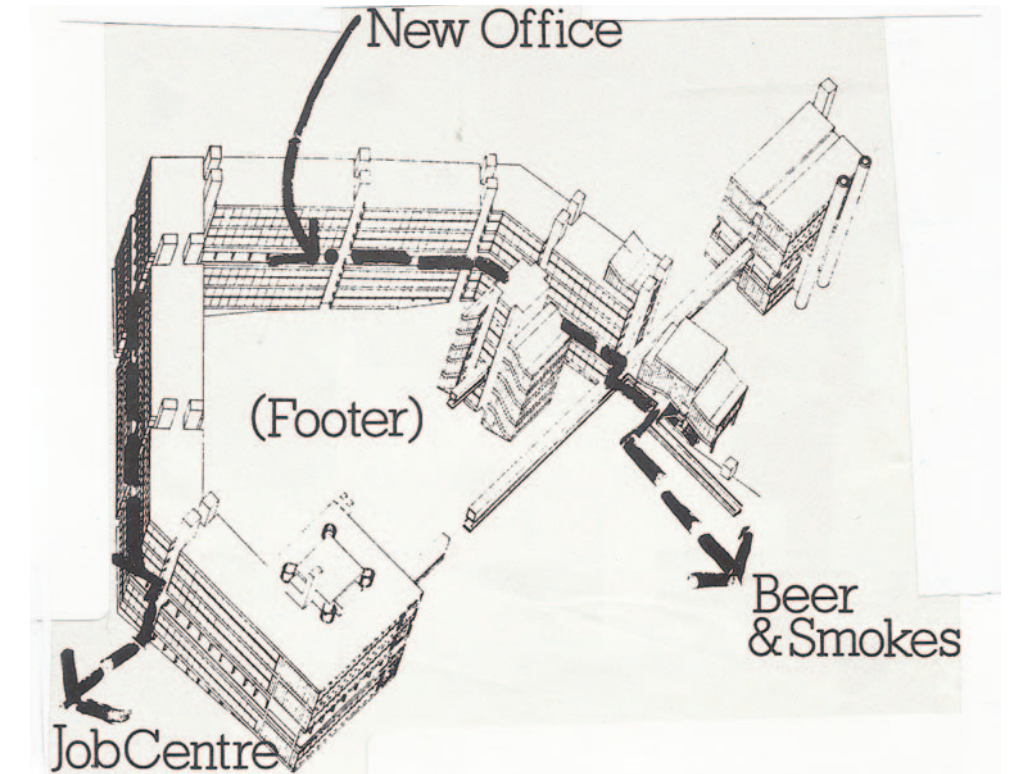
Pictured LEFT, this is a real cracker, with an elegant sopping/restaurant arcade shortcutting an urban corner, purpose designed as part of a mansion



block development. It offers richly modelled shopfronts and assured taste while being well used as a pedestrian route. When visiting, treat yourself to an escalope valdostana and a large glass of Montipulciano before or after your site visit, admiring the Arcade in action from your table. Or seek out the shopping arcade leading off the southern end of Belgrave Square.

The Brunswick Centre, Bloomsbury

Finally, after a long and painful gestation, Patrick Hodgkinson's masterpeice has come into its own- a textbook stepped section design with a central 'valley' of shopping and eateries framed by rising terrace of flats featuring generous private sun-decks. Even a Waitrose. It' all very animated and a valuable role model for other urban superblocks, if



LEFT: vertical mix, tried and tested: Highbury

only one could solve the dilemma of the stepped section – how to fill the backside, apart from the Brunswick's epic colonnade.

But why stop there ? If ever you find yourself in Manhattan, it's well worth a morning at the Rockefeller Center, a 19 building complex that's a model for any aspiring urbanist. Mixed Use – you've got it ! Offices, shops, cafés, public gardens, even a seasonal ice rink, unified by an architecture which works so successfully within its chosen design code. Catch it on a pre-Christmas evening and you have a genuine (mixed use) Winter Wonderland. ■

