

WELCOME TO THE SYMPOSIUM AND INTRODUCTION OF SIR NORMAN FOSTER

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It now falls to me to have the great honour as a totally under qualified person, but one who is emotionally very close to many of the people in this room, to welcome you to Space Syntax - First International Symposium and chair the first morning session of this three day conference. My name is Ricky Burdett and I am the former Director of The Architecture Foundation and now the Course Director of the new MSc in City Design and Social Science course at the London School of Economics.

I want to do two brief things; first, to set out what these three days are about; and second, to introduce Sir Norman Foster, who is giving the opening address to the symposium. As Professor Patrick O'Sullivan pointed out, this is the coming of age of space syntax and, quite possibly, the long overdue first symposium on the subject. I am told by the organisers that twenty-five countries are represented in the papers which are to be presented to you over the next three days. I am not sure how many countries are represented in the room but I would have estimated a similar figure. Representatives from thirty-three universities sent in papers for inclusion in this conference and the organisers really felt they had a success when an enquiry came from a military base at the South Pole, asking if they could send in a paper. I think that this is a sign that not only is there a genuine international research network centred on the Bartlett, University College London and its staff, but that this intellectual discipline has permeated a whole generation, or possibly even now two or three generations, of architects, designers, researchers, thinkers. It is really an extraordinary thing and this is an extraordinary event in which to celebrate it.

On a personal note, I was a student and then worked with Bill Hillier and his team in the 1980's, and I am one of the generation - second generation I would say - strongly influenced by the ideas of Bill Hillier, Julianne Hanson and John Peponis who are here today. What was that influence? It is one which put space at the forefront of the architectural agenda. That may seem odd now but many of us were in the past were involved in completely different things but talking about architecture on the fringes. The relationship between architecture and the public culture were, in a way, reinforced by the intellectual precision of the year I spent studying at the Bartlett.

Space is something which mattered, that space is something you could define and talk about and is, of course, the one thing which has certainly informed my belief in that what happened at the surface is one thing, fashionable styles of architecture whether it be modernism or post-modernism, and what has happened at an underlying level is something which is very, very strong. This has certainly informed me and many others in this room here but more importantly many others who are not here today.

I mentioned this matter of the styles. I think possibly that Bill and his team, you could say, have won the battle. If you think back to ten or fifteen years ago, words like public realm, continuity, permeability, even the hard to pronounce intelligibility, have actually become common today, part of the debates used by politicians in assessing whether schemes are acceptable or not. This sort of objective introduction to the debate is a very, very important element which has been brought along by this theory and set of techniques. What I think is the most important thing, which is very much underlined by the presence of Sir Norman Foster and Professor Bill Hillier here today, is the link between theory and design. It is pretty good to have one of the leading theoreticians of architecture and one of the leading architects in the world if we are going to talk about two sides of the same thing.

But it is the fact that space syntax has been able to make this link between theory and design, and what is interesting is that it has actually happened in a very pragmatic English design world. You could be very critical if one were an Italian, for example, and say that there has been a great absence of theoretical discourse and discussion surrounding architecture but slowly and quietly, and I think sometimes during a rather lonely existence, the people at the Bartlett have developed a very precise tool. And it is the precision of this tool which has appealed to so many architects around the world.

Now allow me to introduce Sir Norman Foster with the word precision, sort of at the front of the agenda when anyone talks about Norman. Norman has been at it as an architect for 30 years. He now runs probably one of the largest and most successful design firms in the world. Foster and Partners have 200 architects in London but also have a presence in Hong Kong, Frankfurt and other satellite offices around the world. The range of projects is enormous, from small buildings, door handles and tables to the largest building project in the world at the moment, which is Chek Lap Kok International Airport in Hong Kong.

He started in the 1960's with the now famous Spice Girls and Boys team - Team 4 - with Richard Rogers and went on to design and create, what I would certainly consider and many other would, economical buildings of post war modernism. The beautiful curved black Willis Faber building in Ipswich, the Sainsbury Centre and that beautiful grid frame standing in the middle of the landscape in the University of East Anglia are all examples. But I think these qualities of synthesis of technology, form and light, which may have a classical quality when you look at these buildings, has continued in a very different language in projects such as Stansted Airport, Carnet d' Arre in Nimes, and the Sackler Gallery here in London.

But what is extraordinary is that there is this passion and rigour which really cuts through everything Norman does. It cuts through his design, obviously, you will hear it in the way he speaks about his projects, but it cuts through other things. It cuts through the way he flies, the way he skis. I mean for a man of his age, and please take this with great respect, he is obscenely fit. He did one of these skiing marathons which only Olympic champions do a few weeks ago and came something ridiculously close to Olympic records or something. This sort of passion drives him all the way through and it is actually a passion - an interest in getting things right - which absolutely plugs into his interest in space syntax.

It is this line - I will call it intuition, theoretical thinking and practice which all come together very neatly. Over the last few years there has been a great interest in the urban scale and that is why space syntax has come into its own in allowing Foster and Partners to really tackle some of the big issues in cities. Rotterdam, Duesburg, Barcelona, and particularly of course, in London. In London, he has worked on the Kings Cross project and the World Squares for All Project, both of which will be talked about later. But it is just as important to note as you walk around London that he is also responsible for the refurbishment of the British Museum. He is building a pedestrian bridge, the Millennium Bridge, between St Paul's Cathedral and the new Tate Gallery at Bankside. Also there is this small project for the tallest tower in Europe called the Millennium Tower in the middle of the City of London which I also know the space syntax team has been involved. Anyway I think that this overall combination and interest in the sort of architectural issues, the environmental dimension, the social dimension, and this nearly animal-like intuition with a very rare intellectual precision is that which has made the link between space syntax - between Bill Hillier and his team, and Norman Foster and his team - really work very well.