

A School of Place



How a New School of Architecture can
Revitalise Britain's Built Environment

Ike Ijeh

Foreword by Rt Hon Michael Gove MP



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Foreword

By Rt. Hon. Michael Gove MP

Why is architectural education a national issue? Architecture in this country has a long and proud history of autonomous professional accreditation without government oversight, the first architecture university degrees were not conferred until 1902, over 800 years after the role of the master mason, the medieval forbears of the modern architect, was first established.

Moreover, this historic tradition has helped produce some of the greatest architects not just in Britain's history but in global history and the works of towering figures like Sir Christopher Wren, Sir John Soane and Sir Edwin Lutyens helped to create, influence and inspire places and people around the world.

Even today British architecture remains a coveted national brand with internationally renowned figures like Norman Foster and the late Zaha Hadid and Richard Rogers playing key roles in the development of late modern architecture and exporting British buildings and design to an eager worldwide audience, fuelling our soft power status abroad.

But while the tradition of great architecture continues to flourish, all too frequently in Britain the places around it do not. How often have we seen what would otherwise be good housing developments let down by poor landscaping or indifferent or insipid urban character? How many town centres in our great cities are still gridlocked by arterial highways that sever them from the suburban communities they are meant to both serve and represent?

How many public spaces are poorly designed, managed and maintained with the vibrancy their attendant public realm has the innate potential to offer duly squandered and suppressed? And how many of our high streets - once the vibrant commercial arteries of our shopkeeper nation but now at the mercy of seismic shifts in retail patterns and digital technology - do not fully utilise the manifest opportunities their physical infrastructure offers for alternative cultural, leisure and recreational experiences? Places must be at the heart of levelling up but if places themselves have no heart and soul, then levelling up too will falter.

Of course there are a whole variety of reasons why places might underperform and these will invariably encompass socio-economic, environmental, demographic, historic and yes political issues. But it is also more than likely that the physical design of these places, with the architectural and urban conditions that this design has bequeathed, will be absolutely critical to their success or failure.

So if we accept that places are integral to levelling up and design is integral to places, then what can we identify as being central to design?

Talent and creativity yes but what other intervention can nurture that talent, bolster creativity and dispense skills? The answer, as I am well aware from my own tenure as Secretary of State for Education, is an unmistakably clear one: education.

It is for all these reasons that I am pleased to see this paper contribute so productively to the debate on how we improve our homes and communities. We must do all we can to ensure a new generation of built environment professionals are armed with the best skills and techniques possible to enable them to go out and build beautiful, sustainable places in which people and communities can thrive.

It is important too to not only protect our heritage and improve our shared urban landscape but also to help address the housing crisis. Much of the opposition to new housing developments is often grounded in a fear that the quality of the new buildings and places created will be deficient and therefore detrimental to existing neighbourhoods and properties. If a general improvement in the standard of design reassures the general public that this will in fact not be the case, then they may be less likely to oppose it.

I am further encouraged by the robust multi-disciplinary and multi-vocational approach this paper proposes. Public realm is a product of many ingredients and as well as architecture this includes, amongst other things, town planning, urban design, transport, engineering, landscaping, public art, heritage conservation and commercial development. By bringing all these disciplines together in a spirit of collaborative unanimity, many of the latent hierarchical and institutional impediments that traditionally afflict both the teaching and practice of urban renewal strategies could be erased.

And finally, the placemaking skills gap was identified by the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission's landmark report, *Living With Beauty* as a key obstacle to the attainment of the higher quality urban environment we all strive for. In seeking to plug this gap, the report proposed various reforms to professional education and the establishment of "new pathways" by which alternative professional accreditation outcomes could be secured.

There is no silver bullet to solve the housing crisis, nor to transform British towns and cities overnight or instantaneously deliver a workforce imbued with the skills to make that transformation possible. But it is important we continue to sow the seeds from which future rewards can be reaped and those rewards hold the promise of turning our homes, towns, cities and communities into vibrant, beautiful places in which we can be genuinely proud. Rome was not built in a day. But it would never have been built at all if those who dedicated their lives and careers to its creation did not first know how to build it.

Executive Summary

This paper proposes that the UK government encourages, promotes or establishes a new school of architecture and urban design dedicated to placemaking. The School of Place would seek to ensure that architects, planners and built environment professionals have access to the best theories, principles and most importantly practices that will enable them to consistently deliver liveable, successful and sustainable places that embody the very highest standards of architectural and urban design.

Such a step would be part of a wider government strategy to meet a number of critical political objectives. Promoting a wider understanding of placemaking was one of the key recommendations of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission's *Living With Beauty* report, the political evolution of Policy Exchange's Building Beautiful programme which calls for the reinstatement of beauty in our urban landscapes.

Also, repeated historic and recent Policy Exchange polling has revealed widespread public dissatisfaction with the standard of much of contemporary architecture, sentiments disproportionately concentrated within the housing sector. As well as this Britain is currently in the grip of a housing crisis and one of the biggest obstacles to the construction of new homes required to abate it is objections from local communities fearful that the poor quality of new housing will blight their neighbourhoods.

If a new school of architecture proved effective in ensuring a generally higher quality of architecture and placemaking then this could help diffuse much of the aesthetic opposition to new housing that, despite the housing crisis, is still all too common in many British towns and cities. Raising standards of urban and public realm awareness amongst built environment professionals could also pre-emptively resolve many of the tensions that have often been a feature of British urban development within the modern era and are inherent in issues such as the consolidation of tall buildings within heritage contexts and the efficacy of protections afforded to urban character.

All these benefits subscribe to the government's levelling up agenda which, in seeking to embed places at the heart of UK economic and demographic rebalancing, provides for perhaps the first time since the Second World War an invaluable opportunity for placemaking to genuinely rejuvenate our built environment and assume a central role in our political debate and national life.

Additionally, in dissecting places to ensure that our architects and planners have a much better understanding of placemaking principles the new School of Place will equip them with the skills to deliver better places that could potentially have a transformative effect on the kind of new communities and society we build.

1. What would a School of Place do?

The new School of Place would provide a course of architectural and urban design study that would prioritise placemaking and provide an education grounded in the principles, methodologies and approaches designed to produce the highest quality placemaking outcomes possible. It will offer courses designed to confer best practice skills onto its students and equip them with the theoretical and practical means necessary to deliver thriving, successful and beautiful places. This will widen their architectural skills sets and introduce more choice with regard to specialist areas of study.

Traditionally architectural education has focused on the design of buildings and while there is happily much more awareness of the intrinsic role that public realm and urban design play in creating good architecture, the ideological configuration of architectural education remains inextricably invested, perhaps for understandable reasons, in the creation of buildings rather than the spaces between them.

Conversely, town planning and urban design courses focus on these spaces but pay smaller regard to the how these spaces might work in conjunction with the design of buildings themselves. Education alone is not to blame for this dichotomy, it is disseminated through society at large in architects and planners often being seen as rival and sometimes directly competing forces with their own separate academic qualification protocols and their own separate professional representatives in the form of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI).

There are perfectly reasonable logical, professional and historic reasons why these two disciplines are treated differently. However this separation is increasingly ill-equipped to effectively represent new pluralistic approaches to the design of our towns and cities. As well as architectural design, these include all manner of other related considerations such as public space, public realm, environmental sustainability, transport connectivity, social conditions, well-being and local identity.

These elements are now collectively summarised under a relatively new term, placemaking. This is essentially the art of making better places. The placemaking trend grew from the glut of post-war redevelopments that often provided ample public and open spaces which for reasons unbeknownst at the time became windswept, abandoned and unloved and singularly failed to foster vibrant and successful urban environments.

These were often a feature of large grassed open spaces in public housing

estates of the 1960s and 70s and commercial plazas like London's original Paternoster Square (1967) which Robert Finch, former Lord Mayor of London, once referred to as being occupied by “ghastly, monolithic constructions without definition or character”¹.

As a result, by the post-modern era of the 1980s there was a growing awareness that providing the physical constituents of public space or architectural design was not enough, all manner of social, cultural, urban, civic, functional, climactic, environmental and behavioural conditions also needed to be forensically considered in order to create truly successful urban places. Thus the placemaking movement was born.

Today placemaking is a firmly established ambition for architects, planners, politicians and developers and in an architecture industry that is often contractually, professionally and academically aligned towards confrontation, an extraordinary level of cultural consensus has settled around the belief that unlike architecture or urban design, placemaking is always a general and inherent good for society.

The issues arise however in how to achieve good placemaking and this is where the new School of Place will seek to play a pivotal role. By its nature, placemaking is an amorphous and generic term, relating to all manner of important built environment conditions but beyond the practice of ‘making places’, offering no conclusive instructions on how these good places are to be achieved or assessed.

As a result the term has been hijacked across the planning, architecture and developer professions by some who often have little understanding of what placemaking actually means or how it can be practically delivered. Instead many built environment actors, conspicuously aware of placemaking's marketing currency, play lip service to it and reduce it to a mere tick-box exercise solely designed to elicit superficial statutory compliance. When something is difficult to define it can be easy to ignore and despite all the platitudinous regard placemaking is now given with our public sphere, there is a real risk that failure to understand or classify it properly will lead to repetition of the mistakes of the past.

The new School of Place will seek to ensure that this does not happen. It will build on the Building Beautiful principles Policy Exchange first established in its ground-breaking 2018 *Building More, Building Beautiful* report and which so heavily informed the government's 2019 Building Beautiful Building Better Commission to ensure that aesthetic regard once again plays a central role in the assembly of our built environment.

By fusing architecture and urban design together the new School of Place will promote a new holistic understanding of the totality of place and academically interrogate the roles played by its constituent parts so as to provide students with the richest possible understanding of how successful places work and the steps professionals need to take to deliver them. It will also provide extensive study on the theory and practice of design codes, now resurrected on a national level in the National Model Design Code adopted in 2021 as a means to control quality and disseminate national design policy down to a local level.

1. Wonders and blunders | Architecture | The Guardian

Embedded in all these processes will also be forensic dissemination of why places fail and extensive case study evidence from the wealth of urban history will be used to construct a full pedagogical framework from which the anatomy of placemaking can be fully discerned.

2. What would a School of Place Not do?

2.1. Educational Collaboration

Unlike most of Europe architectural education has historically been conferred by professional practitioners and associations rather than state-certified universities. For centuries this took the form of informal apprentices and pupillages, it wasn't until the 20th century that the typology of architecture schools we recognise today was formally established. And even then these schools were often loosely related to universities and relied on their professional validation from the RIBA rather than the government, practices still replicated by other vocational professions like medicine and law.

So the history of architectural education in Britain is one irretrievably linked to two things: professional rather than state certification through the RIBA and the institution of the school rather than the university as the chief academic vessel for learning. As recently as 1958 only 22% of architecture students were actually enrolled in university with the latter progressing their education through schools, polytechnics or architectural practices². Considering that for 600 years England had only two universities, Oxford and Cambridge, this is perhaps not surprising.

These are long-established historic and professional conventions which the new School of Place would not seek to disrupt. In fact, the concept and format of a school, whether it be independent or part of the state-funded university system, would sit perfectly within the schools heritage that architectural education still proudly maintains to this day.

However, the very existence of the School of Place does speak of the urgent need for reform in the architectural education system, a challenge explored in Section 3 of this paper. Therefore, while it is intended that full negotiations would take place with the RIBA, RPTI and other relevant professional bodies to decide how exactly the school would be embedded into their professional examination, validation and qualification structures in order to provide the best possible chances of its respective donor professions easily assimilating its alumni, an inability to conclusively conclude some or all of these discussions should present the opportunity for a new, alternative accreditation system to be established.

Not only might this make it easier to incorporate some of the less academic educational routes many in the industry have been calling for (such as apprenticeships) it would enable the school to operate with a greater degree of pedagogical independence, should that be the institutional

2. 1958 RIBA Conference on Architectural Education Report by the Chairman, Sir Leslie Martin

model decided upon. So in summary the new School of Place will attempt to strike a balance between the established educational structures already in place and newer and innovative forms of teaching that acknowledge the need for educational reform while still equipping its students with the best chance of assimilation into the established professional hierarchies of which the built environment industry is comprised.

2.2. Stylistic Neutrality

While style is obviously a useful tool for the public to classify architecture, it remains an intensely polarising issue for architects. In simplistic terms, many architects are broadly arranged into two camps. First there are the modernists who favour contemporary aesthetics and industrialised production systems which prioritise structural expressionism and the prodigious use of glass, steel and concrete.

And then there are the traditionalists who are preoccupied with a more historicist design approach which distils usually classical principles into a contemporary idiom and favours the use of traditional materials like brick and stone while promoting architectural interventions that specifically respond to local context and vernacular.

As it is intended that the new School of Place remains mindful of Building Beautiful principles, there might be a temptation to ensure that it outwardly favours and focuses on traditional design. A number of U.S. architecture schools have achieved great success and acclaim in this manner, chief amongst them is Indiana's Notre Dame School of Architecture (see section 4.3).

This approach however should be resisted. While traditional design principles and techniques should certainly form a significant part of the school's syllabus and thereby address a prejudicial stylistic imbalance that persists in many architecture schools today, these should not be exclusively studied and a broad range of other stylistic approaches should be assessed in order to give the fullest possible understanding of their comparative performance against a set placemaking criteria.

Such diplomacy is necessary because the unfortunate fact remains that any perceived political bias towards traditionalism would provoke an immediate and hostile reaction from many within the architectural community, as seen by the hysterical response in some architectural circles to the government's inauguration of the Building Beautiful Building Better Commission. Such a reaction would inevitably stigmatise and alienate the school from the very professional community it is seeking to solicit.

Equally, when it comes to traditional architecture what is sometimes known as the New Classical Movement is simply more advanced and established in the USA than it is in the UK and direct importation of its tactics is highly unlikely to lead to similar levels of success. Moreover British architects practising in this tradition have consistently found themselves marginalised by an architectural establishment whose ideology remains structurally wedded to modernity. Leading English classicist Quinlan Terry has said:

“We admire the great classical buildings today more than any others. I acknowledge that many intellectuals are opposed to carrying on in that tradition and it is therefore difficult for architects like me to get commissions for public buildings.”³

And finally, there is an unfortunate history of occasions where architectural style has been too closely aligned with political ideology thus causing the resultant architecture to have a natural alienating effect on those opposed to said political ideology. Potentially reanimating this dynamic will merely incentivise those already misguided enough to misconstrue a traditional architecture revival as a right-wing plot to culturally cleanse society.

The new School of Place will seek to wholeheartedly revive traditional architecture from the annals of obscurity to which contemporary architectural education has unfairly consigned it. It will further make rigorous attempts to ensure that none of the institutional or professional bias that can be said to have been waged against classicism or traditionalism is reflected in either its syllabus or curriculum. Finally, it will also explore methodologies by which classical architecture and urban planning can be imported into modernism, a much under represented branch of architectural academia but one that offers opportunities for pragmatic ideological reconciliation.

But it will also offer a broad range of other stylistic approaches in order to construct as inclusive a syllabus as possible, attract the widest possible range of students and dispense the deepest academic knowledge about the rich variety of architectural aesthetic expressions. Not only will this more pluralistic approach neuter the style wars antagonists, it will offer more value by ensuring that the aims of the school are more rigorously invested in placemaking quality rather than the stylistic route taken to achieve it.

2.3. Curricular Freedom

The School of Place will also be firmly modelled on the principle of curricular freedom. Regrettably the modern university experience has often become one where all too often indoctrination has replaced inquiry, where a set inventory of rules and ideas is presented to students as accepted fact from which deviation is not encouraged as intellectual enrichment but almost dismissed as moral deficiency. In recent years even placemaking has become an arena for some of these tribalistic skirmishes with some, for instance, exploiting it as a means to universally punish car use or propagate forms of environmental extremism.

While the school curriculum should fully reflect the balance of contemporary academic discourse and expertise, it should also resist all forms of ideological indoctrination and lend itself as a forum where all ideas pertinent to the built environment can be freely discussed and debated in the singular pursuit of an enhanced public realm that prioritises people and places.

3. Stroik, Duncan D; Quinlan Terry: *The Survival of Classicism*; The Institute for Sacred Architecture; Winter 2006; Volume XII

3. Why is a School of Place Needed?

Britain's housing crisis is already well established in the public consciousness but there are also a number of other critical systemic shortfalls that make the establishment of a new School of Place a pressing and urgent concern. All of these are itemised below.

3.1. Housing Crisis

While in some parts of the country housing is affordable and supply is able to meet demand, nationally this is not the case. Lack of affordability and chronic supply shortages are still a feature in multiple locations, particularly in London and the South-East. The government is not yet close to meeting its target of 300,000 new homes being built a year. While annual completions have now hit 30-year highs, 175,390 new homes were built in 2020-21, a 19% increase on the previous year. But even allowing for the Covid pandemic, this is still well below the government's target.⁴

The government has rightly identified that one of the biggest obstacles to housebuilding (although by no means not the only one) is local opposition to new housing being built. And much of this opposition is often centred on local fears that the new housing will be of poor architectural quality that will blight their neighbourhoods.

One of the ways of diluting this opposition and making the public less hostile to new housing would be to ensure that its architectural quality is increased. And one of the most proactive long-term strategies for doing this would be to produce architects and planners with better training in placemaking design principles and a richer understanding of what it takes to make places work.

3.2 Skills Gap

In the Building Beautiful Building Better Commission's *Living with Beauty* report, Matthew Carmona, Professor of Planning and Urban Design at the Bartlett School of Planning, said the following:

"Many planning schools do no actual "designing" with their students and only teach a rudimentary design appreciation [...] urban design is typically seen as a specialism rather than a common grounding that all built environment students should cover."⁵

This enshrines what the report goes onto describe as a placemaking "skills

4. Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities; Statistical Release - Housing Supply: Indicators of New Supply, England, October to December 2021

5. Building Better Building Beautiful Commission; *Living With Beauty*, January 2020

gap”, an educational deficit already referred to in this paper. Consequently one of the report’s key recommendations was to “promote a wider understanding of placemaking” so that, in the report’s words, “the bodies that make key decisions in our system [have] the necessary knowledge and skills [...] it needs.”⁶ This will be the core ambition of the new School of Place.

3.3. Architectural Education Reform

Architecture remains, and has been for some time, a popular course of study for students. At present there are around 20,000 students studying architecture in the UK and more university applications to study architecture were received in 2020 than in any previous year.⁷ Many of them will one day join an industry that currently has 42,547 registered architects.⁸

And yet, while architecture remains popular academically, many within the industry believe the case of architectural educational reform is overwhelming. The Architects Registration Board is the UK’s statutory regulator of architects and while its output must be seen within the context of its ongoing drive for a more authoritative role in the operation of architectural practice, recent polling it has undertaken amongst those who work in the industry (albeit from a very small sample) has revealed some interesting result. 65% of respondents thought that the structure of architectural education and training needed to change from the current approach, which famously takes a minimum of seven years before full qualification. The figure rose to 95% amongst architecture students themselves and, crucially, 90% amongst non-architect built environment professionals⁹.

Generally the findings reveal a desire for a faster and more flexible educational route to qualification and one that is more closely aligned to an outcome rather than the current rules based assessment approach. These are sentiments replicated in the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission’s *Living with Beauty* report which, while accepting that “extended formal study is valuable for many architecture students” described the elongated length of time it takes to fully qualify as an architect as too “slow and expensive” and called on the government and professional bodies to “consider what further steps can be taken further to open pathways to registering as an architect.”¹⁰

It is clear therefore that there is very much a current appetite for reform in architectural education and as well as helping fill the placemaking “skills gap”, the new School of Place could play a key role in defining the new “pathways” various bodies have called for. One of the ways it could do this could be to establish vital links with professional practices and practitioners to enable students to more readily apply their learning to real world scenarios.

This offers obvious benefits for any assessment of placemaking performance, a process that by its nature takes several years to fully evaluate and which may rely extensively on post-completion data which is usually in the possession of landlords or developers. Despite the professional roots of architectural education, severance from professional practice remains

6. Building Better Building Beautiful Commission; *Living With Beauty*, January 2020
7. RIBA; RIBA Educational Statistics; 2019/20
8. ARB; ARB Annual Report & Accounts; 2019
9. ARB; Modernising Initial Education & Training; June 2022
10. Building Better Building Beautiful Commission; *Living With Beauty*, January 2020

one of the biggest criticisms of architectural education. But a School of Place working closely with industry could be a powerful example of new “integrated programmes with a greater emphasis on professional practice” that the RIBA radically called for in its 2019 Education Review.¹¹

3.4. Public Disenfranchisement

At present there is a critical disconnect between the architecture the public is given and the architecture the public wants. In recent years, Policy Exchange polling has been at the forefront of exposing these ruptures. The inaugural 2018 Building Beautiful poll revealed that 85% of respondents across all socioeconomic groups thought homes should fit in with their more traditional surroundings or be similar to homes already in their area.¹² This was further endorsed last year when a poll found that that an overwhelming 84% of respondents picked a traditional architectural style as their preferred choice while just 16% selected a modern style¹³. And yet the market tends to either instruct the public that traditionalism is an anachronistic irrelevance in the modern world or regurgitate matchbox showroom homes that amount to an appalling Lilliputian pastiche of classical architecture.

These schisms are evident in other areas too. London has been blanketed with tall buildings in recent years, fully endorsed by mayors and a developer industry that insists they are essential for London’s economic competitiveness and that they pose no harm to the capital’s historic character. Yet the most extensive polling on the subject undertaken in years (also compiled by Policy Exchange) revealed earlier this year that 71% of respondents believed that tall buildings should not be allowed to interfere with historic views and 43% believed that London had been made uglier by their imposition as opposed to 23% who saw improvement.¹⁴

Potentially even worse, despite the fact that Londoners being informed that they are comfortable with these buildings, 64% believed they had been inadequately consulted by the planning system as to whether they wanted tall buildings in the first place and 56% believed the current planning system was ill-equipped to manage this kind of development.¹⁵

It is important to note that for very good reasons architecture is a professional vocation that requires unique skills and abilities from its highly-trained practitioners. Accordingly this paper is not by any means calling for our buildings, towns and cities to be subject to public popularity contests or votes where public opinion, rather than professional competence, becomes the overriding assessment factor.

But alternately, this current level of disenfranchisement between architecture and the public it is meant to serve is both detrimental and unsustainable and cannot continue without risk of causing serious damage to public trust in architecture and public confidence in the planning system charged with delivering it. As part of its recommendations, the *Living with Beauty* report also called for higher recognition of “people’s visual preferences”¹⁶.

Good architecture is not about following public opinion but it

11. RIBA; RIBA Education Review; 2019

12. Policy Exchange; *Building More Building Beautiful*, 2018

13. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/press-release/overwhelming-public-support-for-traditional-building-design-and-they-dont-like-high-rise/>

14. Policy Exchange; *A Call for a Tall Buildings Policy*; January 2022

15. Policy Exchange; *A Call for a Tall Buildings Policy*; January 2022

16. Building Better Building Beautiful Commission; *Living With Beauty*, January 2020

should be about recognising it and providing a discursive forum for ideas between professionals and the public to be exchanged. The idea of ‘provable popularity’, a concept Policy Exchange has promoted in the past where the public is polled on its opinion of recently completed buildings, could definitely help inform the kind of balanced input model the school promotes where professional output is informed, but not dictated by public opinion. A new School of Place explicitly designed to forensically dissect public demand and use best practice principles to convert that demand into an effective design response that enhances and reaffirms place could prove invaluable in bridging the gap between architecture and her audience.

3.5. Levelling Up

The Levelling Up White Paper published in February 2022 made clear that places are central to the government’s attempts to economically and demographically rebalance the nation. It rightly stated that “people’s lives are shaped by the social and physical fabric of their communities”¹⁷ and sought a places “renaissance” in the deprived, left-behind communities that have played a disproportionately significant role in the various political tumults of recent years.

This policy trajectory is hugely encouraging and it is right that placemaking, for so long a key tenet of the built environment sphere, now has the potential to be transformed into valuable political currency too. However, beyond cautious clerical commitments to relocate civil servants away from London and the promotion of government schemes like Pride in Place which essentially seeks to ensure that people feel better about their local neighbourhoods by 2030, there has been little in the form of specific information or direction about how exactly places are to be transformed.

This is where the new School of Place could potentially play a leading role. By providing the educational methodologies required to turn policy into practice, it could be a key engine of the levelling up agenda. Like placemaking itself to a degree, levelling up is an amorphous indistinct term with long-range socio-economic outcomes related to data like employment rates and life expectancy that, unlike a new aircraft carrier or a hospital, will be difficult to measure and even harder to visually ascertain.

But one way it could be effectively quantified is in the look, feel and character of our high streets, neighbourhoods and public spaces. If a new School of Place is able to help produce places that eventually look and feel better and foster a thriving public realm where previously there was neglect and degradation, then this could potentially become one of the most powerful political indicators that levelling up has worked.

3.6. Wellbeing

In recent years the link between health (mental and physical) and place has become a well-established rudiment of how we design our buildings, towns and cities. Public Health England’s Healthy Places guidance made clear the government’s commitment to “ensure that the design of the

17. Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities; Levelling Up White Paper; February 2022

built and natural environment contributes to improving public health and reducing health inequalities.”¹⁸

The wellbeing mantra has now become a familiar one throughout all elements of the building industry and the vast majority of our built fabric – from schools to skyscrapers – is now assessed through the lens of its impact on issues like personal happiness, healthcare outcomes and emotional wellbeing. Placemaking, with its cumulative preoccupation with all aspects of the built environment, lends itself as an obvious vessel through which positive wellbeing outcomes can be achieved and the new School of Place should make every effort to ensure this is the case.

18. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/phe-healthy-places/phe-healthy-places>

4. What are the new School of Place's precedents?

Within architecture the term “school” very often refers to a movement of or period in architecture, a measure of the enormous extent to which the question of style habitually defines the profession. Many examples abound. The first Chicago School for instance premiered in the 1880s and became synonymous with the pioneering early development of the skyscraper and masonry-clad steel frame buildings and was adopted by iconic American architects like Daniel Burnham and Louis Sullivan.

And the Prairie School, of whom Frank Lloyd Wright remains the most revered exponent, evolved almost simultaneously as a U.S. variant of the English Arts & Crafts movement that sought to inspire a new and distinctly American residential vernacular inspired by the linear horizontality of native Midwest landscapes.

However throughout history there have been a number of architectural educational institutions proper that have had an enormous impact not only on architecture but on wider society as a whole. These could well form a template for Britain's new School of Architecture and could offer useful historic insights for what this new school has the potential to achieve.

4.1. The Ecole des Beaux Arts (France)

There is a strong argument to claim that the Ecole des Beaux-Arts may well be the most influential architectural school in history. The school, whose name essentially translates as ‘Fine Arts’, has origins that date back to the mid-seventeenth century when it was set up by Louis XIV's chief minister to train gifted pupils in all art forms. But it was not until Napoleon III granted it independence in 1863 at the height of the Second Empire that it really became universally synonymous with the particular architectural style the school had developed and from then on it grew exponentially in global reach and influence.

That style was a sublimely ostentatious one, a florid and highly ornamental form of neoclassicism garnished with profuse Baroque and Renaissance decorative influences and totemically epitomised by Paris's sumptuous Garnier Opera House (1875). By the late 19th century the style had virtually become the de facto aesthetic for public buildings across the world and had made a particular impact in America where architects would dutifully churn out buildings indebted to its precepts (such as New York's Grand Central Terminal (1913) and San Francisco City Hall (1916)) well into the next century.

Only England, clinging stubbornly to the Gothic Revival of High Victoriana, remained cautiously resistant. But the later the Edwardian Baroque did covertly adopt many Beaux-Arts influences, evident in buildings like London's Selfridges (1909) and the Victory Arch Entrance to Waterloo Station (1922).

The Ecole des Beaux Arts therefore offers three lessons for a new British School of Place. The first is that architecture and placemaking are synonymous, Beaux-Arts also popularised a form of city planning that prioritised ideas of formal beauty and rationality. The second is if the School of Place was able to attract sufficient international students, it could form an effective means to export British placemaking principles across the world and subsequently exert substantial soft power, something admittedly British architecture – now a coveted international brand – is already adept at doing. The reason why Beaux-Arts dominated America is simply because so many of its prominent architects, from Cass Gilbert to Charles McKim, were attracted by its excellent standards and clear didactic philosophy and studied there.

And the final lesson is that were the government to directly set up the School of Place, the Ecole des Beaux Arts offers a superlative example of the institutional muscularity that state backing could potentially bring. The Ecole was an academic institution funded, certified and run by the state. Historically the state's involvement in architectural education in France has always been far more pronounced than in Britain where professional practitioners, institutionally embodied today by the RIBA, have been largely (though not entirely) left to their own devices.

During the 19th century 41% of prominent French architects attended the Ecole while another 13% schooled elsewhere. At the same time, only 20% of prominent English architects had received any academic training at all.¹⁹ However, were the government to decide to play a more active role in delivering the new School of Place, the Ecole des Beaux Arts offers a compelling treatise in the benefits it could potentially yield.

4.2. Bauhaus (Germany)

Famously seminal German architect Walter Gropius never learned how to draw. However this did not prevent his name forever being synonymous with the world renowned architecture school he ran and which lent its name to one of the most influential art movements of the 20th century, Bauhaus. Upon appointment as master there in 1919 Gropius changed the name of Weimar's Grand-Ducal Saxon School of Arts and Crafts to Bauhaus which literally translates as 'Building House'. And over the next decade both he and the school popularised the distinctive, cleanly geometric and expressionistically colourful modern style that influenced buildings as far afield as London's Barbican Estate and Tel Aviv's White City.

Bauhaus was so successful for two reasons which could theoretically be applied to a new School of Place. First, it sought to bring beauty not just to architecture but to all aspects of domestic life. This included all manner of lifestyle accoutrements from furniture and door handles to lighting

19. <https://www.archsoc.com/kcas/Historyed.html>

and fabrics. Bauhaus was preoccupied with *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the totality of the work of art and in so doing combined multiple materials including ceramics, pottery and glassware. It must be intrinsic in the messaging adopted by a School of Place that its mandate too extends to all aspects of the public realm, from buildings to benches, planning to pavements.

Secondly Bauhaus harnessed industrial design and manufacture as a means to percolate its philosophy through to a mass consumer audience. In other words the mass production of the product was an intrinsic part of its design. In the same way, the School of Place must find a way to ensure that objective placemaking principles can be applied and efficiently disseminated to a wide variety of specific local contexts. Here, design codes could well be the solution.

4.3. Notre Dame School of Architecture (USA)

The Notre Dame School of Architecture is one of the seven colleges that form Notre Dame University, located just outside the city of South Bend in Indiana. Founded by a French missionary priest in 1842, 56 years later the institution was the first private Catholic university in the United States to offer a degree in architecture.

But it is not for its history that Notre Dame is particularly famous, it is renowned because of the type of architecture it teaches. Notre Dame offers courses centred on classical and traditional design principles and vernaculars, “timeless skills” that in its own words, “emphasise the principles of the traditional city and its architecture as a prism through which to learn about and solve the problems of contemporary life.”²⁰

The approach appears to have been successful. Notre Dame’s school of architecture is consistently in the top ten of the Niche rankings²¹, one of the main performance ratings for U.S. schools and universities. It can also name some iconic American architecture figures amongst its alumni including Francis Ching, the revered architectural writer and illustrator known to architecture students the world over and John Burgee, one half of the seminal Johnson/Burgee powerhouse architectural duo that spearheaded the post-modernism movement in the 1980s and whose influence was felt as far afield as buildings like the MI6 HQ in London.

While the School of Place will aim for stylistic neutrality, it will however focus on some of the traditional architecture and urbanism principles that have perhaps been poorly represented in contemporary architectural education. In so doing it will seek to provide as broad an academic basis as possible to benefit from the best theoretical precedents history has to offer.

4.4. Architectural Association (UK)

While the School of Place should not seek to emulate the Architectural Association’s reputation for avant-garde elitism, the school does offer lessons for how marginal and niche educational institutions can deliver profound cultural and academic change. The history, identity and curriculum of the AA are inextricably linked to the principle of non-

20. <https://architecture.nd.edu/about/our-approach/>

21. <https://www.mastersportal.com/articles/2822/best-architecture-schools-in-the-us-university-rankings-2022.html>

conformity. While it is the oldest architecture school in the UK after being founded by disgruntled draughtsmen in 1847, it has always deliberately remained outside mainstream architectural education. Despite being located within its de facto Bloomsbury campus in central London, it refused to come under the auspices of the University of London and - sitting outside the state-funded university system and not participating in university rankings - it fiercely maintains its independence to this day.

And yet today the AA is one of the most famous and respected architecture schools in the world and has an ironic blue plaque beside its prestigious Bedford Square entrance proclaiming that 'Most Famous Architects Have Been Here (Sooner or Later)'. It also hosts one of the highest proportions of foreign students of any architecture school in the UK. It attained this reputation largely by fostering radical, alternative design theories which culminated in the neo-futuristic and highly influential Archigram group based there in the 1960s and which influenced a whole generation of late-Modernist architects including Richard Rogers and early Norman Foster.

While this is not necessarily the disruptive counter-cultural design pedigree the School of Place would seek to ape, the AA provides an useful lesson in how the focussed development of a unique brand offer could enable the new school, which too will inevitably assume a peripheral academic presence at first, to eventually evolve into a meaningful cultural presence in its own right.

5. What would the new School of Place's benefits be?

5.1. Better Architects, Better Architecture

Seminal Danish urbanist and architect Jan Gehl once bemoaned about architectural education that it is “easier for architects to study form than life²²”. In so doing he succinctly summarised a modernist architectural pedagogy that essentially treated buildings as isolated objects and he yearned instead for a new pioneering academic approach to architecture that instead placed people and places first.

This is exactly what the new School of Place would seek to do. By teaching methodologies centred around the needs of the public the school will seek to carve places and buildings that offer a more vivid reflection of local character and identity. This will not be architecture by public popularity contest and professionals will still be expected to deploy their training and skills to make value judgements on best practice. But by personalising architecture to generate place, the school can help deliver places that have the potential to feel as loved and familiar to us as our family and friends.

5.2. Better Planners, Better Planning

Planners and architects usually take it in turns to occupy the toxic role of weakest link in the built environment professional chain. Nonetheless there can be little doubt that the planning system is frequently cited as the chief source of urban dysfunction. It will be beyond the School of Place's remit to resolve the structural flaws of the planning system. But it will be able to encourage architects and planners to work more closely together, promote more careful consideration of local character and identity and provide the skills necessary to more effectively convert planning policy into placemaking benefit.

The school will also seek to initiate a revival in the discipline of town planning. While the planning system is often the subject of criticism, much of this criticism originates from the lack of investment, skills and training in both the planning industry and its practitioners. This is not to obviate the truism that planning done well can be both positive and transformative. There are many precedents, over the past 200 years the Metropolitan Board of Works, the London County Council and, albeit to a lesser degree, the Greater London Council that preceded them were all in their own ways responsible for some of the most successful urban

22. Ijeh, Ike (2022): “The 50 Greatest Architects: The People Whose Buildings Have Shaped Our World”, (London: Arcturus), p. 170

improvement exercises the capital has ever seen. This is a proud planning legacy the new school would seek to reclaim.

5.3. Better Places

The ultimate goal of the School of Place will be to create better places. Places that offer fine public spaces, vibrant public realm, high-quality architecture, attractive urban landscapes, inviting urban streetscapes, sculpted skylines, viewpoints and vistas, discreet but well-designed street furniture, ornamental features, amenable social conditions, children's play areas, defined entrances, a healthy public realm, efficient public transport, physical connectivity, digital connectivity, legible wayfinding, intelligent density, innovative lighting solutions, adequate supporting infrastructure, pedestrian safety, cultural amenities, active frontages, seasonal illuminations and decorations, emotional well-being and perhaps most importantly of all, civic pride. All these aspects exist within the various subsets of architecture and planning ranging from elevational detailing to traffic engineering. But perhaps for the first time the School of Place will provide the means for them to be considered and procured jointly.

Places already enjoy a raised political profile with the Office for Place established last year to enable communities to utilise the design expertise necessary to enhance their neighbourhoods and to provide government with a clearer understanding of the public's preferences. The School of Place will merely be an extension of this expanding theme.

5.4. Better Productivity

Britain's productivity riddle takes on an even more curious form when one considers that according to a Centre for Cities report, unlike many continental cities, in British cities (with the exception of London) productivity does not proportionally increase the larger the city gets. It calculated that though Rome and Manchester are roughly the same size, the former is 55% more productive than the latter.²³ Various reasons are tabled for this including national underrepresentation of regional mass transport systems, smaller city centre residential populations and bigger expanses of low-density suburbs. But one potential reason not explored is the potential role that the quality of place may play in attracting people to the city centre.

The relationship between place and productivity is a fledgling area of academic study and the difference in relative performance algorithms (productivity is easy to measure and convert into data, place isn't) makes comparison difficult. But if more deprived areas are to be steered away from fiscal dependency on GDP revenues generated in London then they will simply have to increase their productivity. And if placemaking is somehow able to contribute to this process, then the School of Place could potentially become a critical levelling up lever.

23. Centre for Cities; Measuring Up: Comparing Public Transport in the UK & Europe's biggest Cities; November 2021

5.5. Better Democracy

As part of its strategy to extinguish the local opposition to new houses that often prevents them from being constructed, the government looks set to allow people power, or at least limited forms of it, to play a bigger role in determining how our communities and urban landscapes look. Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Secretary Michael Gove has repeatedly gone on record to indicate that the public will be given a bigger say in the planning process and Street Votes, the proposals contained in the Policy Exchange *Strong Suburbs* report (2021) that advocate local votes to determine street-by-street redevelopment, has now been formally adopted into the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.

This principle of greater democratisation of the planning system builds on core Building Beautiful ideas and will be wholeheartedly embedded into the DNA of the new School of Architecture. In so doing it will hopefully become emblematic of a new generation of architectural education and public consultation where the public's views in the development of our built environment enjoy a more prominent role than has ever been the case before.

6. How Could A School of Place Be Set Up?

The paper wishes to primarily concern itself with the function, benefits and necessity of a School of Place and does not wish to distract from this mandate by dictating the procedural route by which such a school could be established and by whom. The strong tradition of independent, professional and non-governmental UK architectural education institutions has already been explored and its most recent permutation, the London School of Architecture (established in 2015 as the UK's first independent architectural schools since the formation of the Architectural Association in 1847²⁴) could well form a template for how the independent model could also be applied to a new School of Place.

However, as beauty and better places have been repeatedly affirmed as key government priorities in recent years, government interest and potential involvement in the establishment of a school specifically conceived to realise these outcomes might not be unexpected.

Were this to be the case one possible route could be for the Office for Place, a new department within the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities which helps stakeholders and communities deliver better quality homes and neighbourhoods, to run a competition whose brief should clearly set out the intentions of the school and solicit proposals for how it should be structured, managed and set up. Compulsory commitments to deliver the objectives outlined in chapters 1 and 2 of this paper could also be hardwired into the brief.

An expert judging panel could then be convened with applications invited from established universities or private individuals or organisations willing to establish the school. The winning entry would then win a grant or endowment from which the school could then be set up.

Once again this scenario is not presented as a definitive procurement route, merely an option. The overriding priority must be that however or whomever establishes the school, it must have the full support of the government and (ideally) the various concerned professional bodies (i.e. RIBA, RTPI) in order to ensure that its professional accreditation is fully recognised in the wider built environment industry.

24. <https://solidspace.co.uk/projects/london-school-of-architecture/>

7. Conclusion

This paper is not naive enough to maintain that a new School of Place will solve all of Britain's housing or architectural problems. The School of Place will not immediately fix the housing crisis nor will lead to an instantaneous increase in the quality of British housing or render Nimbyist agitation a thing of the past. Additionally, while the value of better education is indisputable, it is always one of the slowest ways to effect change. It took 200 years and an Industrial Revolution to enable what began as the Académie des Beaux-Arts to mature into an architectural movement that had any impact beyond France and it might equally take several years before the output of students from the new School of Place translates into a transformative impact on Britain's towns and cities.

Equally, architects alone are not responsible for bad architecture and even the works of the most well-trained architect can only flourish in the unlikely instance of it first being able to survive a fearsome procedural assault course that routinely considers quality to be the exception rather than the rule. This degenerative process includes a labyrinthine planning system that consistently fails to prioritise quality, a local authority establishment generally more seduced by quantity than quality, a housebuilding industry that often sees no structural market incentive to consistently provide quality and an economic ecosystem that doesn't even require quality to increase value.

But what the new School of Place could provide is the slow and steady building blocks for an architectural renaissance that could eventually help realise a new people and placemaking-focussed architecture that better serves the public. This in turn could also help construct a public realm that more authentically conveys their needs, desires and preferences. In policy terms, it would also be a powerful example of government commitment to the kind of long-term strategic thinking that is rarely politically seductive but could reap considerable rewards in the future.

In an ideal world a separate school for style or placemaking would not be necessary as these principles and understandings would be embedded into conventional architectural education. Nonetheless there is no question that the iconic Bauhaus and Beaux-Arts architecture schools produced some of the greatest architectural movements of their respective centuries and in their own small ways helped change the world. We should not shirk from the challenge of trying to do so again.



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