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East is an award winning architecture, landscape and urban design practice established in London since 1995, interested in places, uses and the way they come about. By places East mean cities, spaces within them, buildings, and landscapes. Concentrated on projects of public relevance they have a close understanding of urban change. Their work has come to be internationally recognised for a patient and innovative role in adjusting and improving the urban fabric and its uses. Taking on the wide range of factors influencing and surrounding any process of creation is key to its success and usefulness. These factors include financial constraints, what is happening at the edge and around any project area, political intricacies affecting delivery, and close dialogue with users through carefully designed consultation processes.

Sustaining Urban Life

Preamble:

I think that entrants should look harder at the place they are designing into; what exists, before designing projects. They should present the site as an exciting and vivid place, not just a place to build in, or to just changing comprehensively. Places usually get adjusted rather than newly built, even with large housing projects. Ideas about places could lead the whole project theme. Project entries should take a strong public realm led approach. Themes such as 'selective urbanism', 'adjusting places', or 'sustaining urban life' could help ensure that competition entries are encouraged to make stronger ideas about public space, and use, consequently making the architecture more exciting and place specific.

Background to this thought:

The word 'urban' has an unstable meaning for many in this country. It brings forward connotations of density (itself a word of subjective value), social proximity, buildings ('urban' buildings tend to be 'ugly' or 'not ugly'), and places of economic activity. This has sometimes - often associated with the energy of the Netherlands building programme - been described as 'urbanism, a useful attempt to turn a neutral concept into an activity. 'Urban' tends to suggest a polarising of town and country; urban/not urban.

We have found that over the years, the concept of urban living actually exists everywhere, in ways that respond to the specifics of places. Instead of a generalised concept, urban living has become a shorthand for describing a successful place for groups of people to live. The aspects of density, and the notions of urban renaissance as proclaimed by Richard Rogers in the late 90's have become secondary to an interest in shaping places so that they are good for living in. Most people want good urban life. As architects, we think good urban life requires good spatial relationships that enable convenient choices for co-existing with others. In staking out where these relationships are, and may be found, or created, or adjusted, each place has new requirements and opportunities. We also see a need to not just make changes, but to see what relationships already exist; to document and observe the 'as-found' condition. In fact, deciding what it is that has been found is a creative activity, and an important one in deciding how to apply design efforts. When discussing how urban design needs to become revitalised within economic constraints, East have described this as an approach of 'selective urbanism'.

In recent times of renewed economic constraint and with brakes put on growth, it has become even more important for architects to be pro-active in animating urban activity; helping shape and design it. There is today an emphasis on communities and local engagement in terms of public urban projects. New hybrid groups are and will be the delivery vehicles for public projects, such as retail, high street upgrades, public realm projects, and retail and leisure developments. This means that urban design has moved from being a desk top genre, to being a hands on tool for developing clear briefs, and exerting creative energies in targeting how places need to change to be successful social, and therefore successful economic, places. It also means that because client groups need to work together to attract support and money, the client group is more urban than ever, even in out of town contexts.

With this background, architects can become more important, rather than less, in helping shape the city with clear narratives, close reading of real conditions, and ambitions for excellent places to live.