

Riverside Three

This is an edited version of a text first published in Norman Foster, Buildings and Projects, Volume 4, Watermark, 1990.

Riverside is a pioneering example of a modern British building, which reintroduces the idea of mixed-use development. By helping to create a new network of pedestrian routes, the project has also played a major role in regenerating the local neighbourhood. Significantly, the building's completion also marked a watershed in the evolution of Foster and Partners, as the practice is now known.

Although it has recently become fashionable to advocate the virtues of mixing uses such as living and working in one location, there are, at the time of writing, few contemporary examples of these ideas in Britain. It is easy to cite historical examples of such coexistence in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, even up to the nineteenth century. For example, the tenement buildings of Glasgow combined shops and pubs at ground level, offices immediately above, and then several levels of residential accommodation over that — rising between five and seven storeys in all.

Such compact communities, however, are in direct contrast to most of today's planning guidelines, which specify separate zones for residential, commercial or industrial use, or for leisure and culture. The consequent problems of this approach to urban planning — the social alienation, the need for extensive commuting with all its associated traffic and pollution, and the ecological impact of low-density sprawl — are only now beginning to be fully appreciated.

In the past, it was the blighting nature of heavy industry that was responsible for many of these zoning policies. Today, however, the 'clean' industries — such as micro-electronics — and the new service-sector offices and studios are totally compatible with residential areas. In our work in Duisburg, we have demonstrated that the inner city can be revitalised by introducing these newer industries and locating them alongside housing and schools — even creating more green spaces in the process. Furthermore, we have shown that such buildings can be ecologically sensitive and strive towards sustainability.

Riverside was an early example of applying this philosophy to the way that we, as an office, might live and work — a version of trying to practise what we preached. Foster Associates, as it then was, had occupied a variety of office locations in central London. But the word 'office' has always been inappropriate for the way that we design. More than any practice I know we develop models, full-size mock-ups and prototypes as an integral part of the design process.

But the modern property market cannot accommodate these realities, with the result that we were forever splitting these activities, one from the other. Even the studio in Great Portland Street, where we were before the move to Riverside, was split, with model-makers on a separate level. Eventually, they overflowed to a warehouse several miles away. It was then that a vision for the future emerged where all of these activities would be integrated, as far as possible, in one space and on one site. Ideally, also, this would be combined with urban living and a riverside perspective.

The search for a suitable location was long drawn out. In the mid-1980s, however, a site was identified on the south side of the River Thames between Albert and Battersea Bridges, opposite Cheyne Walk. In reality, the site was made up of many separate lots, most with decaying industrial structures on them, creating an area of seedy dereliction, which extended up to the edge of the river. On one side was a dock, filled with rotting debris and stagnant water. Working with an enterprising estate agent, a site was finally assembled and then secured with the help of a bank loan.

The next task was to turn the site into a project and, in particular, a home for the practice. So conversations started in earnest with potential developers who might buy the site and create space for the practice to rent. In parallel we were exploring design options. As architects, with an eye on the potential of the site, it seemed obvious that in a mixed development the flats and offices should share the best views on to the river.

It also seemed inevitable that the work places would be close to the ground with the living spaces elevated above, where they would enjoy privacy and the best views, as well as command a higher price — which would help the development equation. With the creation of a private courtyard we were able to show that it was possible to provide separate access and security to both those who would work in the building and those who would live there.

However, we were soon to discover an apparently irresolvable conflict. All the financial institutions behind the developers insisted that, for funding purposes, there should be two separate buildings: one for offices, the other for apartments. Worse still, it was argued that the higher-value residential spaces should overlook the Thames and a separate office block should overlook the dock. All our arguments for an integrated mixed-use building were to no avail.

By contrast, the planners and the local authority of Wandsworth were totally supportive. There was a shared enthusiasm to see the dock cleaned up and brought back to life, and European Community funds were pursued for its rehabilitation. In the negotiations that followed, we worked with the borough's chief planner to develop a network of pedestrian routes, which would open up the river and the dock to the public with good connections through to the surrounding streets. It was this early planning decision that was to prove so important to the future regeneration of the river and the areas that extended beyond the site.

At this time, quite by chance, I happened to meet David Gabbay, who was one of the developers for the site on the other side of the dock. We agreed to have lunch together. His group was just about to submit a relatively conventional scheme of apartments for planning consent. We got on extremely well together and shared an excellent meal. Over dessert I explained the seemingly impossible dilemma that we faced with our site. To my surprise, he was immediately sympathetic and agreed to help.

David and his then partners eventually became the developer, client and builder of the project. We worked to a very simple formula, which was shaking hands on whatever was agreed. It drove the flocks of lawyers and accountants to despair but it worked.

The apartments were generously planned with virtually no waste circulation or corridors. Sliding windows maximised the view. David's company exercised the right to change details such as the kitchen and bathroom fittings, or the internal finishes, door furniture and staircase detailing. Given that he was taking the financial risk for the apartments — as opposed to the offices that we would fit-out and rent from him — it was difficult to argue the point; and, according to David, most people would do their own fit-out anyway. The reality was that the project was being realised against all the odds and the main priorities were still intact, although the project went through several upheavals — one caused by the collapse of a major subcontractor halfway through the job.

It is easy to look back now, in the light of experience, and demonstrate from conversations with many of the present owners of the apartments that the interiors as originally planned would have commanded a tangible value. But it also has to be conceded that a significant proportion of the flats have been stripped out and rebuilt — one owner bought three and joined them together to make one huge unit. More recently, another purchased two with the same intention. There was also a delightfully 'extreme' conversion by Claudio Silvestrin — now sadly stripped out — in which he removed just about everything except the supporting columns!

Commercially, the apartments have been extremely successful; not only selling at a period when the market experienced a downturn, but much sought after since and still continuing to change hands at high values. The group, of which David Gabbay was a part, has since split but we remain good friends and still enjoy excellent lunches together.

During the early stages of construction, the developer secured an option on a site that backed on to the rear of the project. Plans were hurriedly redrawn and permissions secured to add a two-storey pavilion and a gallery entrance, which was extended to create a gateway to the private courtyard.

A grand staircase in the gallery ascends to the main studio space, at first-floor level, a two-storey high volume with good connections to other secondary spaces on a mezzanine level and on the ground floor. The total space offered opportunities for subletting as well as scope for future expansion, which has since proved to be a lifeline for the practice.

More important than anything else was the opportunity to create a properly integrated studio, which could be tailored to our own special needs. Not surprisingly, it is unlike any other space that I know. Even so, if economic pressures demanded, the main space can be easily converted — by inserting the missing floor — into two storeys of conventional offices, or twelve apartments, or a combination of the two kinds of space, each capable of being served by a separate entrance.

The period leading up to the fitting out of our new spaces was one of intense debate back in the Great Portland Street office. The design team, headed by Ken Shuttleworth and Howard Gilbey, assumed that everyone would want some degree of privacy in the open space and many versions of carrels were mocked-up at full size for comment. The reactions were as positive as they were unexpected — nearly everyone wanted less privacy and more openness. By way of explanation they pointed to the central wall in the existing office, which despite its openings was a substantial division and undermined the concept of optimum communication. The process of consultation continued and it was from this dialogue that the present rows of big benches were to evolve.

Riverside was realised at a time when the practice faced some of its most difficult challenges. This was in the aftermath of the Hongkong Bank project, which was inaugurated towards the end of 1985. There was great pressure on the practice to move to Hong Kong in its entirety during this period, especially when the office there was peaking at 120 employees, while the London office had dropped to a mere sixteen. One of my present partners, Spencer de Grey, had made the initial move to Hong Kong to open our start-up office there in 1980. On his return, at the end of 1982, virtually all the other key individuals had to leave en masse for Hong Kong to follow through the design which had been developed in London. I was torn between commuting to Hong Kong, Japan, America and Europe — all the places where the Bank was being made — and having to start a new practice with Spencer, virtually from scratch.

While the Hongkong Bank was on site — growing simultaneously up into the sky and down into the ground — the London office was completing projects such as the Renault Distribution Centre; winning international competitions such as the Frankfurt athletics stadium, the BBC Radio Centre and the Carré d'Art in Nîmes; and competitively securing projects like Stansted Airport and the new headquarters for Televisa in Mexico City. The mental and physical stresses pushed us to the limits. Although we were unaware of it at the time, we were laying the foundations for a better way of working and it is impossible to separate the practice now, in Riverside, from that collective experience which forged very personal bonds.

In 1985 the remainder of my present design partners — Graham Phillips, David Nelson and Ken Shuttleworth — returned from Hong Kong, and nearly all the other directors in the practice today hail from that critical period in Hong Kong and London.

The regrouping in London could have been an unsettling anticlimax after the triumph of the Bank. Instead, it was the reverse. There was a collective energy and experience eager to tackle new projects and to move forward. It was that same drive which later enabled us to fight off a domestic recession and successfully go out and compete for work internationally.

Begun at the end of 1986, the Riverside project was an opportunity to question everything about the way that we designed but with a renewed enthusiasm. Nothing was too important or trivial to merit discussion. Many of the changes that the move achieved were, in retrospect, radical — although we now take them for granted. For example, some of us thought it would be better to have a 'no-smoking' office. The idea was floated, but we never expected it to happen because we assumed one group would feel alienated. To our surprise, however, it was the heaviest smokers, who saw it as an opportunity to help curb their habit, who were the strongest supporters. This hardly seems radical today, but then attitudes have changed since the late 1980s.

Some of the later alterations to the project mentioned earlier, such as the addition of the gallery entrance, were also turned to social advantage. For example, most places of work ensure that the visitor is carefully shielded from the activities within. From the very beginning, our office has been open to scrutiny. Meetings, whether formal or informal, take place in the midst of the creative process itself. The essence of the spaces has always been about lifestyle and communication. In that spirit, the revised entrance dispensed with the traditional waiting area and, instead, the visitor can enjoy the bar, which is the social focus of the office, and drink a coffee, read a newspaper or make a phone call if there is any need to wait.

The double-height glass façade of the main studio space overlooks the river — in terms of shading and solar gain, it was helpful that it was north facing. Along this edge, interspersed with whatever models and mock-ups might be under current review, are small tables. All day long they are in use, for random meetings or by individuals working quietly on solitary tasks.

On the opposite side of the space is a mezzanine, which contains the three main meeting and presentation spaces, as well as our library — all open and visually connected. Underneath are the model shop and back-up areas — enclosed behind glass where the processes are noisy or have special needs, such as dust or fume extraction. Otherwise, almost everyone else has a place at a bench — directors, students, partners, model-makers, computer operators, secretaries and architects. The only exceptions are those people working on competition projects, which might require special security, or small overflow groups concerned with accounts and finance.

The materials which enclose this main space are simple — painted concrete, stretched fabric and carpet tiles to the full access floor, which is essential to cope with the frequent changes in layout of computer and communications hardware. It is the calm ambience that surprises most visitors. This is, in part, due to the carefully designed acoustic environment, which can easily cope with up to 250 people, including visitors for meetings, and still ensure privacy.

The tempo of the office changes by the week, the day and the hour. The bar is a lively meeting place from early breakfast-time, through lunch to evening drinks. Smaller groups might gather in the early hours, as the office is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There are no pressures or rewards for working antisocial hours; preferences and attitudes vary between individuals and this is reflected in a degree of choice — the important thing is that people are together when they need to be. Riverside is virtually a self-contained world with its own printing shop and photographic studio.

Although design is centralised in London and management flows out from there, it is impossible to think of the practice in isolation from the network of project offices around the world. The dynamic of Riverside owes much to the interaction and movement between these different places and cultures.

Communication is at the heart of our work as architects. A building must communicate to those who will use it, live in it and look at it. But it must be born out of their needs. There is no substitute for discussion and debate about the issues that will inform the design — this is an essential part of the creative process. Much of that research and exploration has to take place on the home ground of the client and the building users — the two may not necessarily share the same point of view. Often, some of the most important exchanges need neutral space, or the kind of venue where people can interact with models or full-size mock-ups. It would not be unusual, at the start of such a meeting in Riverside, to preview a prototype and suggest changes that the model-makers can implement before the end of the same meeting.

Ultimately, the quality of thinking transcends these practical benefits. The art of architecture can be practised just as successfully out of a bed-sit in Hampstead (as my wife Wendy and I did originally) but the shift from that environment to the present one is not only more pleasurable: it has made it possible to contemplate far wider ranges of scale — from large-scale infrastructure projects to individual product design studies for door handles or bath taps. There is also an issue of principle. It is self-evident that if we suggest that an environment can influence the quality of our lives then it is inevitable that we should try to set an example in the environment that we create for ourselves as architects.

If Riverside demonstrates the value of good communication and a sharing of the main space by everyone on an equal basis, this should not be confused with an absence of hierarchy. Every Monday morning at nine o'clock the directors meet at the round table in the far corner of the studio. This regular forum reviews every aspect of the practice and makes the critical decisions, such as which projects to accept or compete for. But there is also an interaction with other meetings, which take place and involve a wider body of the practice.

For me, Riverside is a rare combination of a wonderful team and a great place to work. So much so that I contemplate the start of each day with eager anticipation. But the ultimate luxury is being able to live and work in the same location. I am not alone in that respect. At different times, for several people in the building, it has been a place to live as well as a place to work. Two individuals that I know of have leased office space in the building and commuted by lift from their apartments above — others have used the flexibility of their domestic spaces to blur the edges between their private and professional lives.

I have emphasised the importance of communication in the creative process and I have hinted at the link between creativity and sustained endeavour. The counterpoint to this is the physical communication that Riverside has created locally and how that relates to the wider context of London. For all of us there is contrast and stimulation in being able to move out through the network of pedestrian routes that we have helped to create. Sometimes these generate their own focus of social and commercial activity. For example, at the junction between the local road and the pedestrian path, which leads down from the river, a lively shopping and café life has developed which spills out on to terraces overlooking the dock.

There is no road between Riverside and the Thames, unlike the Embankment opposite, which is always busy with traffic. The result for those of us who live in the apartments is the luxury of a surprisingly calm style of urban living. This is particularly true at weekends when I often equate the experience to that of a rural retreat.

From the apartments, whether they are on the third or eighth storey, you look out across London and not down on it. The skyline is constantly fascinating and punctuated by a surprising amount of greenery. London is an essentially low-rise city and the area of Chelsea and Kensington that the building overlooks is, by European standards, quite dense. But the contact with the sky and the weather is sublime. Another unexpected surprise is the bird-life — for a wide variety of species the Thames seems like a play space and aerial highway. Although there is no doubt that one is in the midst of a city, the proximity of Battersea Park and the ease of being able to walk everywhere gives this place a village-like quality.

I find intuitively that the most pleasant routes always take precedence over the others — even though they might be longer. For example, it is a shorter distance to walk to and from the local cinema via Battersea Bridge, but the journey is not as pleasant as using Albert Bridge, and the walk along the edge of the river is much more interesting than by the road which is a part of the other route.

I think most designers would welcome a second chance with any project — whether it is a building or an artefact. I know I would. But, more than any project, I would like other opportunities to explore the integration of spaces for living and working, particularly in an urban environment. Perhaps that is, in part, because I have learnt so much from the personal experience of Riverside and because I believe that it offers so many optimistic lessons for the future of cities. But, more than anything, it is because of the sheer pleasure, proximity and privacy that this way of life offers.

Norman Foster

1990