

# *The Myth of the City*

*On broadening public access to the esoteric Square Mile*

The year began with a deep fascination for the City of London; its history, contradictions and enduring myths. The financial district is a peculiar place, busier with workers than residents or falling silent after business hours to name but a few of its oddities. Wandering its streets, one can easily become lost among ancient monuments and gleaming corporate towers. The open-ended nature of the Explore Lab studio provided the opportunity to transform this fascination into a project, becoming a space in which I could further explore and examine my curiosities about the City.

Throughout history, the City of London has attracted criticism from many corners of society, including artists, writers and architects. In this regard, my project is not breaking new ground. Yet, the City is now undergoing a period of transformation, seeking to become more diverse and to move beyond its once esoteric and inaccessible character. My projects build upon this moment of change, aiming both to advance this renewed vision and offer critique where it falls short.

The project is an investigation into the City of London, combining personal experience, historical research and theoretical writing. Using various media, the work is an ongoing process aimed at making the City more accessible and rooted in its surroundings. Given the site-specific nature of the research, contextual studies were undertaken to reveal new insights that would inform design explorations. These explorations, in turn, prompted further investigations into the City of London. Alongside this process, the history, myths and accessibility of the Square Mile were examined through archival drawings, maps, stories and conversations with stake holders and City officials. Throughout the year two site visits were made, each very important to the project as a whole. The first visit marked the beginning of most of the studies, encompassing photography, sound recording, painting and an exploration of my experience as an outsider in the city. The second visit involved more precise investigations into the site and provided an opportunity to reflect on key design themes. The entire process was compiled into a journal-style document accompanied by several supporting essays.

The work established a perspective on what an accessible layer of architecture could entail in the City of London. It emphasised the importance of unconventional spaces within the Square Mile, alleyways, rooftops or other, and recognising their potential value. Within this project the alleys and roofs proved essential for integrating the new proposed interventions at the Carpenters' Company site, addressing issues of both inaccessibility and privateness on the horizontal and vertical plane. Passageways were transformed into entrances, while rooftops provided the largest areas of open space suitable for development. Both enabled the project to be rooted within its context rather than starting a new and also aligning with the City's initiative to expand its alleyway network. The new structures introduced a variety of interconnected spaces, allowing members of the Carpenters' Company to expand their hall, students at the Craft College to exhibit or store their work and the public to make use of the spaces. The three structures are organised along a range of accessibility; the most open and public plaza, a more secluded yet still public exhibition space and a semi-public library with a more inward focus. While the library may be closed in the evenings, the pathway connecting Great Winchester Street to Throgmorton Avenue remains open. The outcome is a gradient of public to semi-public functions, unified through their materiality and atmosphere.

To conclude, it is worth asking the question of what the very essence of an urban environment is. The City of London is a unique phenomenon, there is only one, but its distinctly neoliberal character is increasingly found in other urban places around the world. Spaces with meaning and deep relations to their context are increasingly replaced with shallow capitalistic ventures, what once was accessible and public turned private. Within a time when urban living and its spatial qualities have become more of a privilege than a right, it remains up to the architect, positioned between competing social, political and economic forces, to mediate their impact on the city.

*tom punte*