



SIGNALLING CHANGES

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Cedric Price was an English architect who built almost nothing while he was alive. He had a way with ideas and words that have left more of a legacy than most architects who spend their entire careers building. It was Price who suggested that, given the treacle-like speed of the construction process, all buildings are out of date before they are finished. A modern office used to be built around its mainframe computer sitting at the centre of a deep plan block housed in sterile conditions like a hospital operating theatre. But even before its acolytes had moved into those offices, this pampered computer god had been supplanted by a flock of laptops sitting on every desk. Airports that were first planned for Boeing 707's will have to operate with the Airbus 380. Financial services offices used to be built around trading rooms the size of football pitches but that was no longer the way the dealers did business even before they were finished, and those trading rooms were instantly made redundant.

Even Cedric Price might have been a little unnerved by Shanghai. Architecture happens so fast there, that the city might seem as if it stands a better chance than most places of avoiding the particular trap that he warned against. It's not being made redundant before it's finished, that's the trouble in Shanghai. The problem may more likely be that construction starts so fast that there is no time to work out just exactly what the building is going to do before it's built. Very often it seems to turn into something else en-route. Shanghai is one of those cities that had to build an idea of what it was going to be before it could start living that future. When the City Planning Museum, which is one of the places that all new visitors come to see in Shanghai, was first put up the city, as far as the world outside China was concerned, was a place that might have been seen as gone to sleep. It was no longer the financial centre that it had once been, nor the cosmopolitan hub that it was in the 1930s. So the first step that it took to transform itself into a new kind of metropolis was to announce to the world what it was going to be and that ultimately was Shanghai built a new skyline that is famous now, a skyline that could be understood as an attempt to measure itself against its rivals. "Pay attention" is the message of all those towers. They may

not be as beautiful but they send precisely the same signal that Siena wanted to send when it built a tower for its town hall almost 300 feet high 600 years ago. "Build the towers" seems to be the message and "people will follow" still seems to be the same unstated belief now as it was in Siena. Towers are symbols but they are also a vital step in achieving substance. Shanghai of course is not the only city in the world that believes in the uses of symbolism as a practical planning tool. Look for example at the enormous symbolic investment it wasn't just that the original towers were very tall; there were two of them which, banal a gesture as it might be, ensured that the world knew exactly where they belonged because they didn't look like anywhere else. Their mooted replacement, the Statue of Liberty in abstract form, is a reminder of the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence of 1776 as spelled out by the height of the tower in feet, a gesture of continuity and defiance and of course those original two towers had themselves been an attempt to create a distinctive landmark for New York London is also using tall buildings to signal something about itself. Renzo Piano's tower for Irvine Sellars at London Bridge is certainly an example of the highly symbolic uses of building. Mr Sellars, the developer of the London Bridge Tower, has managed to sign up his first tenant, the Shangri-La Hotel Group. Without the prospect of putting their hotel in what will be the tallest building in Europe it's absolutely inconceivable that the company would ever have dreamed of putting a luxury hotel in this particular location on top of a commuter railway station in the midst of a bleak piece of inner city on the unfashionable south side of the river. No doubt the decision to bring the Olympics to London in 2012 will make them think they weren't taking quite such a crazy gamble.

in the reconstruction of the open wound in Lower Manhattan at Ground Zero. Despite the best efforts of Larry Silverstein, the developer, and David Childs of SOM as architect, to persuade us that they are motivated simply by the cold logic of hard cash. It's perfectly clear that the Freedom Tower at Ground Zero is intended to send a signal or signals. The project is full of symbolic readings. It's an attempt to build a skyline that is telling

us something about the nature of the city it belongs to or at least the nature of the city as certain significant individuals see it and even the latest, most negative readings still seem to send a symbolic message about how New York sees itself. a statement about what it was going to look like. No European city has done more to re-invent itself in the last decade than London. It is a city that is going through a once in a lifetime burst of growth and transformation on a scale of ambition not seen in Britain since the 19th century when London went through its first or perhaps last great period of metropolitan growth. That was the era that saw the huge expansion of the underground railway system, the completion of the main line railway network, the cutting of major new roads through the existing urban fabric. Then as now a concentration of large-scale interventions has served to transform the geography of the city and it is in this context that the cumulative impact of individual projects needs to be understood. The shift began in the 1980s when a financial centre on a world scale in the shape of Canary Wharf erupted from the site of what had been a derelict banana warehouse in just 5 years. It happened through a combination of the unforeseen use of tax subsidies urgently devised to encourage light industry within the city and the more relaxed planning regime. This then was an old economic order giving way to a new one made visible on the skyline. The shipping container killed off the old Port of London. The glittering towers of Canary Wharf loom over the brow beaten streets of the east end of the city, in which the cleaners and the catering staff who service these towers live in another parallel world. “Why does it have to be so tall?” the Prince of Wales once asked about the first and tallest of the Canary Wharf towers to its American architect Cesar Pelli. The answer of course that he was too polite to give was obvious, to make nowhere into somewhere. This was grand vision British style. The offices went up first. The infrastructure to get people to fill the buildings came second or third but when they were built there was a deliberate attempt to give them a visual coherence. The new Jubilee underground mass transit line was built after the towers went up in a bid to convince Londoners that the underground was a civilised transport system, a reflection of a civilised public realm.

London was going through political as well as social changes, which will also have a physical dimension. Twenty years ago the Government of Margaret Thatcher abolished the Greater London Council and to make sure there was no chance the administration that she hated so much would ever return, the County Hall building in which its Councillors had deliberated for almost a

century was sold off to a Japanese financier and turned into a curious mix of hotel, art gallery, Chinese restaurant and aquarium. Tony Blair’s administration resurrected pan-London government and it was time to send another clear visual signal. The new London Assembly’s 500 staff and its 26 elected members could easily have been accommodated in an anonymous office building with no public face or graphic significance. It would have been presented as the financially responsible option but it would have left London’s government invisible and lacking any sense of authority in its physical presence. Ken Livingstone’s seat of power you could say is British municipal politics given the baseball treatment. No more English cricket whites, instead the old game is played out under floodlights with the players in lime green pyjamas or in the case of City Hall, local democracy has a background of a purple carpet and yellow walls that look good on television and one of the most conspicuous new buildings in London. Fundamentally City Hall looks the way it does because it’s trying to tell us something about itself. And that is an aspect of the way that every city from Shanghai to New York to London presents itself. Before it can become what it wants to be, it has to imagine what it will look like.

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