

ELLE DECORATION





Collection Grand Life
design Christophe Pillet



SOCIAL DESIGN

From Trafalgar Square to the South Bank, and Bristol Bearpit to Brighton's North Laine, public spaces in their myriad forms connect the citizens and spaces of our cities. 'Climates and cultures differ all over the world,' wrote Danish architect, urbanist and the patron saint of communal space Jan Gehl, 'but people are the same. They will gather in public if you give them a good place to do it.'

As the increasing privatisation of these spaces sweeps through London and other Western cities, it is ever more important to remind ourselves of their value as social and political assets worth defending. According to director and president of Berlin's Academy of Fine Arts Jeanine Meerapfel, public spaces aren't just a nice place to hang out, but 'an achievement of democratic society'.

Building on the historic example of social spaces – landmark parks, squares and riversides – a new generation of urban designers and architects is reinventing public areas for the 21st century, using emerging technology, radical urban tactics and, more simply, exuberant colour and pattern.

'For me, London can be quite a grey city,' muses London-based designer Yinka Ilori. 'Sometimes we all need uplifting, and colour is a powerful ►

Our streets and squares don't have to be dull – a new breed of designers and architects is bringing fun to public spaces Words GEORGE KAFKA

Adam Nathaniel Furman's 'Look Down to Look Up' art project is bringing joy to the streets of Croydon, south London

tool. It helps people to feel happy and to engage with each other; to have conversations.' Trained as a furniture designer, Ilori's upcoming work will see him step into the public realm as he transforms a Battersea underpass into 'Happy Street', a bright kaleidoscope of clashing pattern informed by the 16 varieties of positive emotion, as used by medical researchers at Cornell University, New York.

Besides adding colour and fun, architects also play a vital role in preserving public spaces for the future by encouraging new uses. The Amos Rex art museum in Helsinki is one such example. When local practice JKMM was faced with transforming a 19th-century open space in the city, it decided to fit its new gallery around what the architect Asmo Jaaksi described as 'an essential part of the mental landscape and common memory of the Helsinki people'. The result is a playful vista of mounds and skylights that hint at the cavernous underground galleries beneath, while creating a new arena for exploration and relaxation. 'It's a place for a new urban culture, and for experiencing the city in a completely fresh way,' says Jaaksi.

In Barcelona, a more extreme approach is being investigated, with new social spaces being created where previously there were roads. The so-called *Superilles* (superblocks) project, introduced by the city government in 2016, aims to reduce the



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domination of traffic – roads currently take up 60 per cent of the city's public space – by restricting vehicle access and prioritising pedestrians, bicycles and some public transport. At the superblock in the district of Sant Martí, for example, a green zone of 8,273 square metres was created in 2017 and populated with a new playground, street furniture and bike lanes. At road intersections, micro-plazas create new places for communities to gather. Despite some political struggles around the project, Barcelona's progressive incumbent mayor Ada Colau aims to divide the city into 503 superblocks as part of its wider transport and mobility plan.

Similar thinking is informing the approach to social design in Croydon, south London, where the local council has become one of the capital's leaders in creating innovative public spaces. 'The city around us is the biggest gallery, of life, materials and compositions, and its buildings can provide endless delight,' explains designer and artist Adam Nathaniel Furman, whose 'Look Down to Look Up' intervention has revamped pedestrian crossings in the town centre using polychromatic, abstract interpretations of the urban skyline. ➤

This page Helsinki's Amos Rex gallery by JKMM architects has created a new public art space in the centre of the capital. **Opposite** The streets of Barcelona's hip Poblenou district have been transformed into bike and pedestrian-friendly public spaces thanks to the city-wide Superblocks initiative

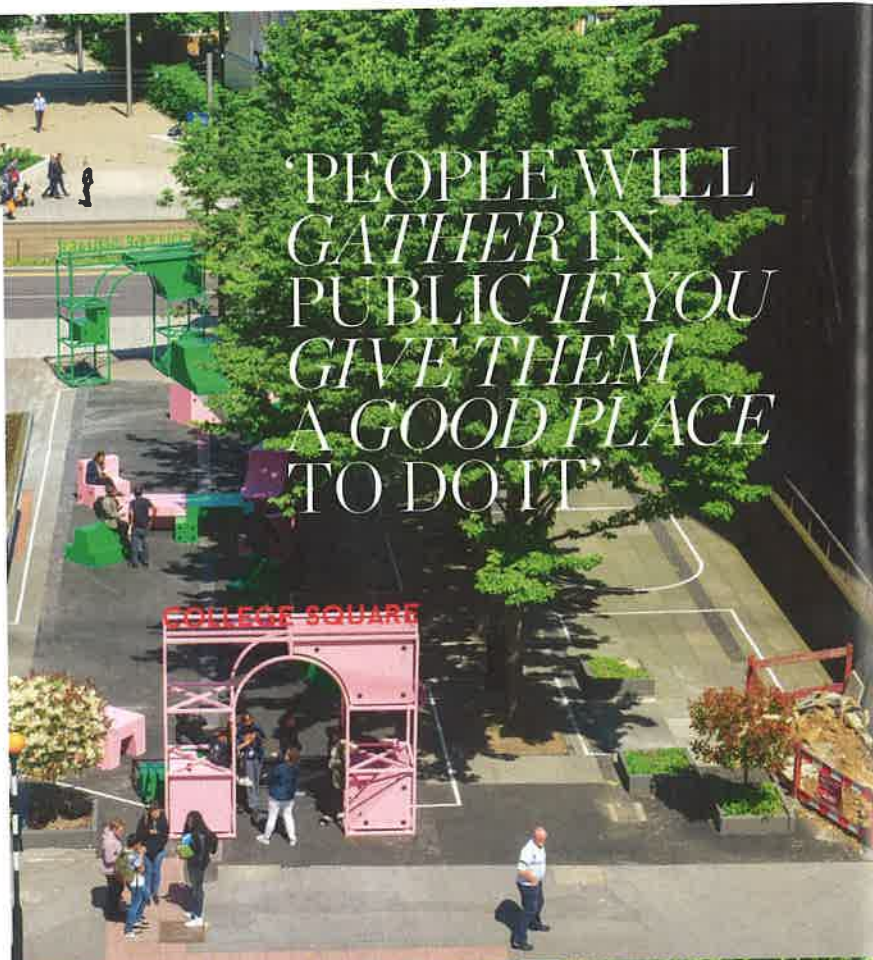


Elsewhere in the borough, Central Saint Martins Spatial Practices graduates Fiona Hartley and Ellie Fox Johnson have designed green and pink furniture and two entranceways for the newly christened College Square. According to Anisha Jogani of the Croydon Council Placemaking Team, projects like this are 'important for enlivening places for people in the short term, as well as for testing ideas about how areas can be transformed in the long term'.

Rotterdam-based designers The New Raw are taking community feedback and participation in public spaces to the next level with their Print Your City project in Thessaloniki, Greece. Here, citizens can bring their plastic waste to a Zero Waste Lab where it will be ground up and used by a 3D printer to produce new street furniture. The residents can shape the form, colour and functions of the plastic furniture, even deciding where they want it to be placed. 'We wanted to involve citizens in the decision-making and design process of public spaces,' explains Maria Azzurra of The New Raw.

While all innovative, new and exciting, these schemes still uphold the original aim of social architecture: that these spaces should involve, and be open to, all. In the words of the urbanist and journalist Jane Jacobs: 'Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.' **ED**

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Reinvigorated by splashes of bright pink and green, Croydon's College Square is now a cool meeting place for locals and students