



The outdoor room

In most urban environments access to private green or open outdoor space is considered a luxury, often linked to income. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has seen people working from or confined to their home, has brutally clarified the extent of that privilege: people with access to balconies, roofs, gardens or parks were able to derive some benefit from the lockdown, while those without were trapped inside during the U.K.'s sunniest spring on record. One result is a change in the way the public, designers and architects are thinking about this issue and how 'home' – where we dwell – may be redefined. In the future most of us will need more flexible spaces and reconfigurable rooms, with outside space a given rather than a luxury. It is indicative that real estate agents and architects are reporting that clients say they will never again live in a house or apartment that does not have at least a small outdoor space.

In search of the practical outdoor room

Until very recently nearly all social housing realised by developers in the 20th-21st C provides little in the way of space beyond the scheduled rooms, and possibly a token balcony. This minimal exterior architectural element is intended to serve as the front garden, back yard, flower garden, vegetable plot, sundeck, clothesline and playground all in one – yet is too small to accept these activities. Traditionally, architects have to justify our design decisions to our clients through the quantifiable – economy and efficiency. How many of us consider the impact of what we design upon the minds and health of the users when we fail to address the issue of natural human behaviour and needs?

Left as an undefined minimal area the ubiquitous glazed and very public balconies of apartment buildings, off the living room and facing the street, often become storage

Above

Scotland's Home of Tomorrow – typical floor plan as built

© Ian Ritchie Architects

“Although few architects have reinvestigated this crucial space, the balcony / terrace / loggia is a key area for architectural innovation in plan section and urban facade composition. It is an important space which can provide for very diverse living needs and expression.”

areas: because they are too cold or windy and afford no privacy, or because not enough storage space is provided in the apartment itself. Conservatories or glazed-in balconies are only indifferently successful because they are often too hot or cold for much of the year, although they are promoted by heating cost experts/the eco-minded and architects passionate about glassy buildings and “transparency”. They are not about gardening as their diurnal temperature fluctuations are too high, they lack proper irrigation and soil depth, and a successful elevated garden places a time demand on tenants for which they may not be prepared.

The crucial missing spaces in a typical apartment or tenement block are an “outdoor room”, along with an internal “escape” room-space to provide moments of privacy and quiet. This short essay examines the outdoor room and what it provides.

Although few architects have reinvestigated this crucial space, the balcony / terrace / loggia is a key area for architectural innovation in plan section and urban facade composition. It is an important space which can provide for very diverse living needs and expression. We named it “The Outdoor Room” for Scotland's Home of Tomorrow competition in 1997, emphasising its importance as a vital additional living space in a dense urban environment.

At the time – prophetically – we maintained that the idea of the “outdoor” room and a redefined living space offered

ways of addressing the new synergy between architectural spaces and inhabitants at a time when modernism's segregation of work, play and living accommodation is no longer valid. A contemporary shelter must provide flexibility and adapt to changing financial security for non-owners, and is fundamentally a space which can be economically built and repeatedly customised over many decades in response to changes in family structure, living patterns and mobility.

The outdoor room is not the same as a balcony: it consists of two generous spaces – at least 102 metres – read as one space, equivalent to the front and rear yard of the terraced house, providing an important threshold accessible from the main entrance, the kitchen and the main bedroom. They are essentially covered loggias, rather than balconies or open terraces, and so offer more potential in the ways that they could be used by tenants.

Outdoor rooms are a safe play space, workout place, growing space. A place to relax in privacy or with friends, mend and store the bike, hang the washing, to grow vegetables or flowers, smoke a cigarette, to store muddy boots or indulge in messy or a little boisterous activity, and for the domestic pet. They are even capable of becoming a landscape if the occupant has the time and desire to create it.

They can be protected from wind and rain by using perforated horticultural netting (40%) or glass louvres to the north, or extended with an open balcony to the south. They could even be enclosed if desired. The entry to the apartment leads through the front outdoor room, and directly off it is the apartment's main storage area. The rear outdoor room adjoins the bedroom(s), bathroom and washing machine. The entire outdoor area can be overlooked by parents to supervise young children playing outside.

The outdoor room is an integral part of the building's dynamic design in terms of energy use, the building envelope, the microclimate within the dwelling and its spatial feeling. Our design approach acknowledges the changing seasons, and above all the natural psychology and behaviour of the occupants.



Designing for all the senses

Although at the time the physiological and neurological links between our senses, our well-being, green spaces, and the buildings we inhabit were just beginning to be established, we formulated our thinking and design upon a fundamental regard for all the human senses to arrive at an integrated proposition which was fundamentally about the quality of habitat.

Our engagement with architecture is multi-sensory: our bodies measure qualities of matter, space and scale with our eyes, ears, nose, skin, skeleton and muscle. Even the eye collaborates with the other senses. Yet few architects appear to consciously design to engage with all the senses. The visual sense – aesthetic – is usually of primary consideration for the designer but is only part of total design. The primacy of the tactile realm in our embodied experience of architecture underscores its importance as an ingredient in bringing architecture to life. Materials and surfaces have

a language of their own, and materials in themselves have particular tactile qualities, but it is also through shape and surface texture that tactility can be expressed: buildings feel “friendly” if they can be caressed.

Another aspect of hapticity is feeling the air on our skin. As we are discovering, being able to feel the caress of a gentle breeze while remaining within the territory of our private home is vital to our physical and mental health. Good quality air is vital, and air movement is inextricably linked to comfort: the transfer of sound, smell, warmth and coolth, and humidity.

One of the most important attributes of both the external and internal environment often overlooked by architects but not by those who live within the buildings is smell. Smell is usually considered as a factor to overcome – e.g. neighbours’ cooking odours, or vehicle exhausts. External windows and open areas can help alleviate disagreeable odours as well as provide space for judiciously placed or scented planting.

Clockwise from top left

Scotland’s Home of Tomorrow – view from south east

© Alan Crumlish

Common outdoor room, social housing, Paris – Michel Kagan

© Ian Ritchie

1960-70s housing balconies, Garton House, Bow London

© Ian Ritchie

Scotland’s Home of Tomorrow competition – perspective view, 1998

© Ian Ritchie Architects

“Materials and surfaces have a language of their own, and materials in themselves have particular tactile qualities, but it is also through shape and surface texture that tactility can be expressed: buildings feel “friendly” if they can be caressed.”

Above right top

Balconies, 19th century social housing, Milan

© Ian Ritchie

Above right

Balconies, social housing, Bourbon Lane, London – Cartwright Pickard Architects

© Ian Ritchie

Natural light is the essential material of all architecture. No artificial light source is a substitute. It is psychologically and physically health-giving and makes space come alive. People of all income levels deserve a good quality of light and sunlight without the problems of overheating or draughts. Not incidentally, natural light reduces the time artificial light is required, reducing energy consumption and costs reflected in quarterly bills, which also improves the quality of life.

And consider the acoustic world we create: designers can respond efficiently to current recommended or legal requirements about noise insulation and noise levels upon occupants within the buildings we design, but how often do we consider the first and second reflections of noise? Understanding and taking into consideration the indirect and hidden dimensions of our designs, as well as the obvious, is an increasing responsibility of the architect.



Surviving and thriving are two different things, and everyone deserves to be able to do both, regardless of income. When we speak about the quality of habitat we are speaking about ‘Venustas’ or delight, and society as a whole cannot thrive if only some of us can take delight in our surroundings for granted.

The power of aesthetics is measured in the senses and mind. The lack of it is like drip-water torture, it numbs the mind and soul. It is the lack of this aesthetic dimension which renders the cumulative effect of many parts of our built environment so demoralising.

Architecture has to engage with its users and occupants to enable place to be made from space. It does this through the functional and aesthetic rhythms of space and the ‘reading’ and experience of them. Architectural building for all the senses can serve to emotionally and physically move occupants – elevating their experience. ■

Ian Ritchie CBE Hon FRIAS