

The role of the university in urban regeneration

The sources of Bruno Taut's *Glashaus*

Collaborations on the periphery

Your recent issue (arq 18.4) emphasises the evolution of London's Olympic Park regeneration strategy away from an East London-focused renewal and 'convergence' agenda – bringing local social and economic opportunities in line with other parts of the city – towards a rebranding and globalising initiative positioning the site in a symbolic relationship to national economic and imaging priorities. The contributions focus attention on masterplanning and design processes as tools for the marshalling, control, and reordering of the formerly 'unruly' and heterogeneous site. The intended outcome of this process has been a coherent framework for material development, including the repurposing of Olympic facilities, in order to create a destination for tourists over-and-above a resource for local communities.

The latest revision of the Legacy Communities Scheme to accommodate Mayor Boris Johnson's 'Olympicopolis' vision, announced in late 2013, has been boosted with a hefty chunk of government money (£1.41m), to smooth the way towards this outcome. I am based at University College London (UCL) Urban Laboratory conducting independent research on university-led regeneration, in the context of UCL's plans for involvement in that development. UCL has been promised a significant proportion of that government sum to build a new campus, UCL East, on the site of the designated University Quarter in the southern sector of the park (Marshgate Wharf) close to the ArcelorMittal Orbit, and between

the Olympics Stadium and the Aquatics centre. In the words of the Provost, Michael Arthur, 'The development represents one of the most important moments in UCL's history and will, for the first time since the development of the Bloomsbury campus, allow us to consider how best to plan a university fit for future generations of our community.'

Olympicopolis, including the University Quarter, might well be perceived as a barely disguised political manoeuvre by London's mayor to ensure the perpetuation of his own legacy at the Olympic Park, and he has successfully pushed this through. As Andrew Smith's article in arq 18.4 underlines (pp. 315–23, p. 318), this concept reaffirms the shift away from a localism-driven agenda towards destination marketing, with an injection of high-level

culture and education delivered by globally-recognised brands.

Alongside UCL, these include the V&A, Smithsonian, and Guggenheim museums, as well as Sadler's Wells and the London College of Fashion, part of the University of the Arts, London (UAL). Of these, UAL has already proved itself a highly successful 'anchor' for regeneration development at King's Cross, invited to relocate to the site by developers Argent, and so presents a positive precedent for the effects which might be replicated at the Olympic site by a multiplication of similar institutions alongside each other.

My research shows that universities are increasingly being expected to play a role in urban renewal processes, in partnership with local authorities and other regeneration agencies, which in



1 A view across the South Park towards the ArcelorMittal Orbit: The UK's tallest 'sculpture'

most cases they are keen to fulfil. Higher education institutions in the US have led the way in this field since the 1980s when a number of high profile universities signed the Campus Compact (1985) and later Declaration (1990) of commitment to community regeneration. In 1992, Durham University established a model in the UK for a partnership development with Teesside Development Corporation, Teesside Polytechnic, and Stockton Borough Council, supported by government funding, which resulted in the opening of its Queen's Campus site. This initiative was specifically intended to expand educational opportunities for the local and regional population and contribute to economic and social regeneration (especially issues around the relationship between unemployment and health and wellbeing) following the demise of North East England's industrial base. Since the collapse in public funding for regeneration initiatives in the last decade, universities have increasingly been exhorted by Higher Education Funding for England (HEFCE) and a succession of UK government reviews to demonstrate how they can step in to fill the gap.

So it would seem logical that universities be encouraged to engage with the regeneration agenda in Stratford – and indeed, the University of East London and Birkbeck, University of London, have already established an initiative at 1 Stratford Square. But at the same time, there's a need to address the fact that that UCL might be seen as having been manipulated into playing a role in an essentially politically-led regeneration game by the promise of subsidised land. As powerful, elite organisations, universities have always been the focus of both pride and criticism by local populations, and town/gown conflicts have long histories. Johnson maintains that the creation of Olympicopolis and the University Quarter is not merely symbolic and marketing-led but an essential foundation for the continued future economic vitality of the site in terms of job creation (a projected 10,000), which could not be achieved through the construction of housing alone. Housing allocation has fallen by 3000 units to 7000 to make way for the new cultural and educational facilities, of which UCL's site comprises 11 acres, or 125,000m² of new university space. UCL needs to find more space, within the

context of a global race among universities to establish themselves in key international cities as the major players in an intensely competitive market for students, staff, and research funding. But UCL has also emphasised its historic philanthropic mission and commitment to engaging with an economic and social regeneration agenda in East London through its acquisition of a site in the area. Having suffered setbacks in its first development proposal for the Carpenters Estate just outside the park boundary in 2012, strongly opposed by objectors both within and outside the university community because of its displacement effects, it has all the more reason to deliver on its promises with the new site inside the boundary.

UCL's Public Engagement Unit has been actively developing links with local groups and through UCL-sponsored initiatives in Newham since 2013, with a view to raising awareness of what UCL might mean to local communities, as well as developing the university's own local knowledge about the social dynamics in the area. My own role in the Urban Laboratory has been concerned with amassing comparative research on other university development projects to understand the contexts and processes by which higher education institutions can transform their presence in urban settings from one of isolation and self-fortification to collaboration, interaction, and engagement with a wider constituency, beyond the university itself, through a mixture of education and outreach. While it is evident that there are many factors which do not help universities to make that shift, including the way that research funding is allocated and outcomes evaluated, internal bureaucracy, lack of communication between departments, faculties, management and facilities, and poor local knowledge on the part of staff and students recruited over very wide areas, it is also clear that the majority of publicly funded higher education institutions are committed through research impact, widening access, and public outreach to demonstrating their relevance to society and addressing urban problems. Notwithstanding the imperatives imposed by real estate and facilities management, spatial development plans often constitute solid platforms for developing renewed visions of the ways that universities

operate, and new partnerships with external stakeholders, underpinned by substantial investments from mixed sources.

However, in the early stages of development, universities rarely know exactly what activities and facilities they want and need to develop on a site and are unwilling to commit themselves to public statements about their plans until they do so. This makes communication processes difficult and ambivalent since public audiences depend on concrete statements of intent and clear visual images of building projects to form opinions about university developments and the implications of a university presence in their midst; without these, rumour, distrust, and suspicion are easily fomented. But at the same time, and as Smith affirms 'legacies [...] emerge' (arq 18.4, p. 320) rather than appearing fully formed, and the engagement being established within and beyond UCL represents a framework within which those emergent processes might occur – so long as development processes do not force them into being before their time.

During the autumn of 2014, UCL convened a Campus Concept Group (CCG) made up of academics, estates, and student representatives including a long-term Newham resident, which met in a number of workshops to debate widely the criteria and objectives for a new site in the Olympic Park and to generate a brief for the project. The outcome of these debates was a clear consensus that UCL's presence should be permeable to the wider public at a number of material and conceptual levels, providing resources and generous physical spaces for cross-disciplinary, non-faculty based activities with an emphasis on making, interaction, dissemination, and wider learning opportunities in collaboration with other cultural institutions in the Park that the University does not have in Bloomsbury. From the Urban Laboratory's perspective, for example, it could be an exciting opportunity to develop further innovative research on urban futures, which develops the strengths of UCL's existing 300 urbanists working on cities worldwide.

The brief which has been developed on the basis of the CCG's deliberations, and will be presented to the masterplanners due to be appointed in April, stresses aspiration rather than actual space requirements and will be translated into a spatial and

functional framework by the masterplanners in conjunction with the CCG through further workshops in May 2015. Key to the emerging vision is that UCL East should be an integrated and also flexible place, allowing for evolution over time, to welcome and accommodate all sorts of people, as the Masterplan Brief suggests, 'with curious minds who wish to expand their horizons regardless of age, gender, religion, economic and cultural background' in the spirit of UCL's historic mission.

What UCL will have to contend with, of course, is the fact that not only is the allocated site notably inaccessible, bounded by inhospitable and largely impassable urban infrastructure that served a functional role in the isolation and securitisation of the Olympic Park during the games but now symbolises everything that the brief professes to challenge; but also that ordinary people, even those with moderately 'curious minds', often need a huge amount of encouragement and persuasion to see universities in any other light than impenetrable and elitist, and in any way relevant to their own lives. Notwithstanding the massification of higher education, there are still significant social, economic, and psychological barriers between large proportions of the population and university institutions, regardless of the permeability of their physical sites and efforts to invite the public in. UCL will have to work hard long into the future, and in close collaboration with established organisations on the ground in East London, if it is to materialise its ambitions for social and physical integration and a merging into the periphery which fulfils anything of the early promises of the original East London regeneration programme. Otherwise, it faces the risk of simply being one element of a marketing strategy based on an over-proliferation of signs in a spectacular but homogenous global brandscape best viewed from the top of the Orbit.

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Taut's *Glashaus* and the spirit of Scheerbart

David Nielsen's and Anoma Kumarasuriyar's essay 'The lily, client and measure of Bruno Taut's *Glashaus*' (arq 18.3, pp. 257–66) questions an overemphasis on the role of Expressionism and the writer Paul Scheerbart in existing literature (including my own) on the architect's Glass House at the 1914 *Werkbund* Exhibition in Cologne. They seek to establish more clearly Taut's own voice by citing earlier botanical and exhibition pavilions, as well as through the specific influence of what they erroneously claim to be the 'client' for the *Glashaus*.

They write that the debate surrounding this building 'has largely ignored the role of its architect' and suggest that a 'fabricated' Expressionism was imposed on the building by Taut's friend, the critic Adolf Behne, following Kai Gutschow's assertion that Behne had 'ulterior Expressionist motives'. But the designation of movements is nearly always imposed after the fact and rarely comes from its originators. The *Glashaus* can be called Symbolist and/or Expressionist, and neither term would diminish Taut's role.

The authors suggest a possible connection to the *Victoria regia* pavilion at the Berlin-Dahlem Botanical Garden, whose plan indeed seems to exhibit some similarities to that of the *Glashaus*. They state that Taut could have seen this since his office was only about seven or eight kilometers from Dahlem. However, any architect in Berlin at his time would certainly have been aware of the construction of the Botanical

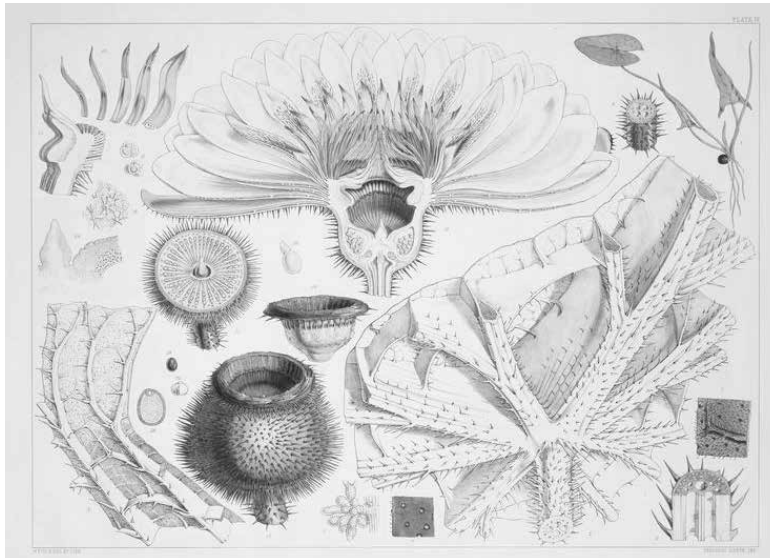
Garden glass houses. More important, Scheerbart (though not a 'Bohemian' poet) in his *Glass Architecture of 1914* (dedicated to Taut) mentions the Dahlem greenhouses as an important precedent.

Taut was indeed interested in nature, but his attitude changed from a conventional naturalism of his 1904 essays to a more abstracted understanding in his 1920 essay, the latter cited by Nielsen and Kumaraiyar to establish the link to the *Victoria regia* water lily's forms as an influence on the *Glashaus* design. While Taut mentions the *Victoria regia* in this text, his comments are suffused with typical Scheerbartian fantasy. Botanical characteristics of this lily and its supposed reflection in the *Glashaus* are not convincing and to claim that his phrase 'architectural flower' refers specifically to the *Victoria regia* is incorrect. Taut had used the image of an architectural flower ('valley as Flower') in one of the plates for his *Alpine Architecture* of 1919 but it has no relationship with the *Victoria regia* plant form.

More convincingly, the authors cite exhibition pavilions from the 1893 Chicago and 1900 Paris World's Fairs that employed water, mirrors and, in some cases, electric lights as possible precedents for Taut's use of water, mirrored surfaces, and coloured glass to produce magical effects. Since there is no evidence that Taut saw or knew of these earlier pavilions, Nielsen and Kumarasuriyar suggest that the Luxfer Prism Company was in fact Taut's client, and that Frederick Louis Keppler, the director of the German *Luxfer Prismen Syndikat* could have seen these exhibition



2 Bruno Taut's *Glashaus*



3 The *Victoria regia* Lily

pavilions and transmitted this information to Taut. They base this speculative hypothesis on the Luxfer Coompany's donation of materials for the *Glashaus*: the Luxfer Prism Company chose Bruno Taut to design their *Glashaus*. While it is true that the Luxfer Company donated the most of the structure's materials, other companies were asked to do so as well by Taut, who acted as his own client. The *Werkbund* at first rejected Taut's design for the exhibit but eventually relented, assigned him to a lesser place in the exhibition grounds, and gave him a subvention of 10,000 marks. Taut later wrote that he spent 20,000 marks of his own money on the design. All of this and more is listed in great detail in Angelika Thierkötter's *Kristallisationen, Splitterungen: Bruno Taut's Glashaus*, a book cited by the authors for its reference to earlier fair pavilions, but this important point about the building's sponsorship is not addressed by them at all. An advertisement most likely placed by the Luxfer Prism Company appeared in the catalogue of the *Werkbund* Exhibition under the title '*Das gläserne Haus*' and lists where in the building Luxfer materials were used. Significantly, the advertisement does not refer to the building as that of the Luxfer Prism Company. At any rate, Taut certainly did not follow 'marketing strategies' of glass manufacturers as Nielsen and Kumarasuriyar would have us believe.

Although Scheerbart did not have a direct role in the design of the *Glashaus*, the authors fail to mention that Taut placed Scheerbart couplets around the exterior of the structure. The

building thus proclaimed the spirit of Scheerbart, who was not just 'important at some point' for Taut, since Taut continued to cite and reproduce his writings until the early 1920s. That influence only wanes when Taut turned from his utopian projects to the construction of social housing during that decade.

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