

Pointless City



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Growing pains
Ben Rogers
Malcolm Smith
Katy Ghabremani

Off the grid
Richard Upton
Alistair Shaw
Charlie Gent

Micro-hoods
Jan Kattein
Paul Eaton
Kat Hana

Life lessons
Juliette Morgan
Charlie Green
Tom Sleigh

Cultural Cramps
Chris Michaels
Ross Bailey
William Kraemer
Tara Cranswick

MICRO-HOODS

Jan Kattein

JAN KATTEIN ARCHITECTS

Jan Kattein is the founder of Jan Kattein Architects a design studio that advocates socially engaged working methods.

FP – You describe a lot of the projects that you work on as 'bottom-up' projects. Can you explain what this means?

JK – The sector that we often work in and our clients work in is regeneration. The thing that's important to recognise about regeneration is that it's not entirely or even primarily about doing buildings. It's about delivering jobs, it's about delivering culture, it's about delivering education and in the end it's about delivering a more cohesive community that's got bags of opportunities going forward.

Bottom up for me means that it considers the people and not just the spaces that are now populated with the people. The key to achieving this is seeing architecture as a process as opposed to a product. A process which grows with a section of the population or a particular community group.

FP – The theme that we are talking about today is micro-hoods. What are your initial thoughts on that concept?

JK – I think it's how all successful cities in the world work. They ultimately break down into smaller communities. Initially maybe a borough and then maybe a ward or a neighbourhood and then a street and then a household. That's really how I understand the city anyway.

The nice thing is that micro-hoods exist at all scales. Where a community is very successful and cohesive it can grow and take on a greater number of people. Where it's struggling and where there is social division it can shrink.

The city is very much about micro-hoods and it can only work that way because we can't relate to an 8 million population city.

FP – Do you see micro-hoods as existing communities or can we create new micro-hoods through regeneration?

JK – I see the city as an organic organism that, if it's healthy, can grow and shrink and also that's what I think about micro-hoods. In a healthy city they will grow and shrink and they will always evolve and there won't ever be a point when they are static or frozen.

So yes I do think you can create micro-hoods. Architecture and urban design are really quite powerful tools to get communities to come together and think about how they want to live but ultimately the trick is to know where to stop designing and where to let things roll. The best moments are when we can fade away and the vision that we started to create with the people in that place continues and actually takes on unexpected turns.

FP – The identity of these newly forming micro-hoods, is that formed from the bottom up, driven by environment, enforced top down or a mixture?

JK – It's a mix, it always is.

Every neighbourhood in London is different and that's why it's such a great city. The social context of any regeneration site and the physical context and economic context is vastly different.

Where regeneration really works is where the municipality, the private investors and the community work together on a vision where everybody benefits. The investor makes some money out of



it, the municipality meets some of their social and environmental goals and the community are able to benefit in terms of being more cohesive as a unit and having their needs met. In London we are very good at getting everybody to muck in and that's how we get good results.

What makes it a lot more difficult for us all to work together is that space in London has become a commodity that people invest in and that's really where it all falls down. That's for me where the greatest friction lies, when people invest in the city who have no interest in the city.

Where we see success is when you have developers or investors who have long term interests in their assets. When you have communities that have an interest in contributing to a cohesive society and a municipality which is responsive but also flexible and prepared to share the risk.

FP – Do you think it is important that micro-hoods have a relationship with the rest of the city?

JK – Again this has got to do with my vision of the city as a flexible organism and micro-hoods not being something that in planning terms have a defined border and boundary drawn around them. The way we do town planning is really quite antiquated. We go and look at a map and we draw lines around areas that we define as having a particular character. But actually in terms of the growth of the city, what's most interesting is the places where two of these micro-

hoods overlap and intersect. Those are the areas of opportunity and historically the areas where innovation has happened and those are the places where the city moves forward.

FP – What challenges do you see for London?

JK – One of the biggest problems we have is that we assume everyone is the same and that we've got to adopt standard solutions to providing workspace and to providing housing.

There are 8 million people in London and I think everybody has a slightly different need and the way we are building the city doesn't accommodate nearly enough variance of needs of Londoners.

We are not very flexible in the way that we build our cities. Things are built forever and they are built with materials and technologies that make them very rigid and difficult to change. What's so great about Victorian London is that the terraces that people built have so much inherent flexibility. They can be split up, they can be used for commercial as well as residential, they can be extended, they can be repaired. A lot of the housing that we build these days just doesn't have that flexibility.

It's actually very unsustainable and at a time when things are so fluctuant socially, economically and culturally, to build a city in such a rigid way and to think of it as something that isn't going to change for the next 100 years is a real problem.