

# TWO LONDON SQUARES AND A THEORY OF THE BEIGE HOLE

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BY TIM WATERMAN

**T**HIS ARTICLE attempts a tricky critique of two new London squares (privately owned public spaces) in a very fine-grained part of the historic West End; of processes and products of development and real estate speculation in a wildly distorted market; of place and non-place, and taste and non-taste. The first project, completed in 2016, is GROSS.MAX.'s design for Fitzroy Place, and the second is Gustafson Porter + Bowman's Rathbone Square, completed in September 2017. These two squares are only a block apart, though "block" is a term that doesn't quite apply to the irregular knot of streets that is characteristic of the area. A further complicating factor is me. I live a block away from Fitzroy Place and two blocks from Rathbone Square, and as a landscape architect, urbanist, and resident of the area, I have some fairly strong opinions.

Rathbone Square and Fitzroy Place (so named because there is already a Rathbone Place and a Fitzroy Square) are both developments that are responding directly to market forces. They are, as the title of Carol Willis's 1995 book suggests, results of the fact that "form follows finance." Each plays games with elevations and massing to hide its excessive bulk and deep, dark floor plates. Fitzroy Place even went through the acrobatics of hiring two architects (Sheppard Robson and Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands) to provide differentiation between the blocks. In both cases the distribution of the buildings on the site and their massing were determined by the architects, with the landscape architects brought in later in the process.

In each, no expense is spared on the landscape, as these landscapes are what will drive the sales of the apartments on overseas speculative markets, along with images of the interiors. All aspects of the design are geared toward their imageability on real estate websites and in glossy brochures. Wainwright doesn't pull any punches when I talk

to him about the developments: They are "the kind of generic could-be-anywhere development that sucks the life out of Fitzrovia," he said. "The developer claims to be giving back to the public, by opening up a space in the center of the site that has long been off-limits, but the residual canyons have clearly only been designed as a 'visual amenity' for the well-heeled residents above—it is not the kind of space where anyone would want to dwell." Of the development at Fitzroy Place, he says it feels like "a bleak promotional computer-generated image."

I also spoke with Anna Minton, a journalist and the author of the recent *Big Capital: Who is London For?* and *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-first-century City*. She agrees. "Fitzroy Place and Rathbone Square are the sort of developments that are ripping the heart and soul out of London. There is nothing about this sterile, privately owned, high-security enclave that connects it to the wider area—it could be a high spec development anywhere in the world." Indirectly, Eelco Hooftman of GROSS.MAX. acknowledges

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Map of neighborhoods  
and detail of two sites  
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as much. "The market has changed," he says. "All the public work in London now is with private clients." And further, "Landscape is a commodity."

Of course, it can be argued that landscape has always been a commodity—certainly when it is employed as the scenography of power and private wealth, as it has so often been. It is an irony, though, at a time when our profession is more focused than ever on themes of sustainability and ecology and social benefit, that the most lucrative work for Britain's best landscape practices is rooted elsewhere—and nowhere. The scenography of contemporary capital demands a virgin space so that its business logic is not disrupted by the ethical obligations that the real city demands. The late Zygmunt Bauman put it so well in his essay "City of Fears, City of Hopes": that the goal of such development is "to raze to the ground the old quarters of the city; to dig up a black hole in which old meanings sink and disappear, first from view and soon after from memory, and to fill the void with brand new logic, unbound by the worries of continuity and relieved from its burdens."

#### **Fitzrovia**

**T**HE NEIGHBORHOOD of Fitzrovia fails to appear, for the most part, on most people's mental maps of London, which might seem surprising once one finds out just how central it is. It is bounded on the west by genteel Marylebone, on the east by leafy Bloomsbury, on the north by the thundering Euston Road, and to the south by all the hubbub of Oxford Street and Soho. It has, in the past, been known as North Soho, and briefly in the 1930s, as the Old Latin Quarter, but since the 1940s it has taken its name from the Fitzroy Tavern on Charlotte Street. Fitzrovia is a fancy sounding name, but the Fitzroy Tavern (still standing) is a good emblem for the neighborhood and its history.

The Fitzroy Tavern sits on a corner of Charlotte Street, which has long been home to exotic restaurants, and which has even longer been home to artists, artisans, actors, writers, socialists and anarchists, gays and lesbians, immigrants, and, as the town planner Nick Bailey notes in his book *Fitzrovia*, "the eccentric and impecunious." Bailey

goes on to comment that the area has always been marginal though at the heart of the West End. “The explanation for this must lie in the way the area was developed—mainly by piecemeal speculation over many years—and the resulting medley of different ownerships, tenancies, and leaseholders.”

The philosopher Walter Benjamin could have been writing of Soho and Fitzrovia when he says of the dense, fine-grained urban landscape of the city in the title of his famous essay “Naples” that “Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything, they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts it ‘thus and not otherwise.’ This is how architecture, the most binding part of the communal rhythm, comes into being here.” Like Soho and Fitzrovia, Naples is “anarchic, embroiled, village-like in the center,” and all its nooks and crannies were haunts for a who’s who of 19th and 20th century luminaries: Karl Marx, Peter Kropotkin, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Rimbaud, Aleister Crowley, Dylan Thomas, Virginia Woolf, Quentin Crisp, Roger Waters, Siouxsie Sioux.

Fitzrovia’s urbanism is both the result of and the reason for its particular sociality. Everywhere different floors of the same building yield space

for different uses: a tailor or a lampshade maker below street level under a mansion block; a studio over an embroiderer over a café. Tiny mews streets filled with work spaces are capped at their ends with cozy pubs that become raucous as Friday approaches. The scale and grain of the area is changing fast, though, as it “modernizes.”

#### **The Beige Holes of Modernization**

ROBERT FITCH, in his 1993 book *The Assassination of New York*, wrote of the postindustrial city that it “is a mutation masquerading as a modernization.” The industrial city in the extensive phase of capitalism, in which labor, resources, and thus “surplus” wealth were extracted from far-flung empires and agricultural hinterlands, could afford the illusion of “inevitable” progress. Earlier a more agrarian extensive capitalism had declared vast stretches of land “empty”—as *terra nullius*—to justify colonialism, simply erasing lives and cultures in the process. The Jeffersonian grid is an emblem of that ideology of emptiness. Now the postindustrial city is driven by *intensive* capitalism, which is forced to transform itself from within, shaping itself around markets and services that cannibalize the city.

Asset stripping in colonialism gridded vast territories, mapping them for exploitation. Now cities are turned inward, and the new *terra nullius* must be found within. All the nooks and crannies nec-

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essary to everyday life in urbanism are ironed out, and the Jeffersonian grid manifests itself as vast floor plates: office space and lateral apartments. The ideology rationalizing these tyrannical spaces visualizes them as “open,” “democratic,” and “free” “spaces of engagement” just as the colonial grid was spuriously theorized as a guarantor of spatial equity. As the grid of extensive capitalism worked a mutation upon rural land, so the grid of intensive capitalism now skews the space of the city. As Darwin saw, however, mutation rarely leads to evolution.

The urban spaces within which these vast grids are being realized are a phenomenon I have come to think of as “beige holes.” Like black holes in the universe, they have the power to attract, compress, and trap money in the financial system as black holes consume all matter in their supergravity. Beige, though, because driven by real estate imageability they must be styled to be sleek, tidy, and generic; currency which, like the Euro, must be all things to all people and therefore nothing. Beige because they reflect the non-tastes of the elites in the FIRE (finance, insurance, real estate) sector. Beige because they must place the power of the transaction over local distinctiveness. Realtors and developers themselves call these places “safe-deposit boxes in the sky” or “concrete gold,” which clarifies their function as financial instruments rather than as places for living, working, or playing, or for dwelling.

A whole generation of architects and landscape architects have, as students, read Marc Augé’s 1995 book-length essay *Non-Places*, and yet find themselves trapped in a system that endlessly replicates the model. The non-place is defined as a place of transit, a space that defies acts of dwelling, and is exemplified by the modern airport. “The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude.” “Since non-places are there to be passed through, they are measured in units of time.”

The beige hole is a type of non-place—a place of transit. In this case the beige hole is a place of the transient wealthy and of money in transit—the units of time with which these spaces are measured are amortized in mortgages, counted in leasehold years, in annual contracts, in fluctuations of boom and bust. They are the relics of a financial system in which transience itself is the operative factor. If money in the current system ever stopped for long enough, it would only take a moment’s examination to discover its value is baseless and placeless, a fiction in motion, of motion. As Augé says, “the user of a non-place is in contractual relations with it (or with the powers that govern it),” and these contracts are temporal. Beige holes are non-places that exist as records of transactions and contracts, as intangible and impermanent as flickering numbers on a stock market screen.

says Eelco Hoofman of GROSS.MAX. landscape architects as he and his partner Nigel Sampey show me the small site at the center of the large new development at Fitzroy Place in London's Fitzrovia. "This is not a statement project." Indeed, it is luxurious understatement as a cipher for a certain moneyed sophistication and the financialized non-taste that characterizes the project. I have written scathingly about the architectural style of these developments in the past, which the architecture critic Owen Hatherley has described as "pseudomodernism" in his 2010 *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* and which I have derided as blang—a mix of bland and bling. Fitzroy Place, launched

where many Fitzrovians both came into the world and left it (those leaving it including Rudyard Kipling and Peter Sellers). It is now home to Estée Lauder's London office and some of London's most expensive apartments, starting at about \$1.5 million for a one-bedroom flat (in Britain, price is calculated more by number of bedrooms than by square footage).

All that is left of the hospital is an exquisite chapel by the architect John Loughborough Pearson (designed 1891, completed 1929), and a street-length facade along the west side of the site, both exhibiting on their exteriors the very high-quality bricks, brickwork, and stone and stonework lavished on

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early 20th-century public projects in London. The chapel juts into the new square, but because it is so dwarfed by the scale of the surrounding buildings, it was clearly not possible to use it as the square's focal point. A Cor-Ten steel colonnade and pergola, developed by GROSS.MAX. with the architects Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands, helps to step down the scale of the surrounding buildings to the chapel. Then the chapel is shrouded behind a screen of evergreen *Magnolia grandiflora* trees. A stone sculpture (*The One and the Many* by Peter Randall-Page), suggesting a neolithic standing stone, and etched with polyglot lettering, echoing the Rosetta stone housed at the nearby British Museum, serves to refocus the square, while further stepping the scale down to the human. These are deft tricks, exercising the designers to new levels of virtuosity, but to

ends that could have been avoided earlier in the design process.

The plantings in the square have suffered since they were installed, and this may be the result of further tricks by the architects to appease the planners or the clients. It is my hunch that renderings of sun and shade might have been overly optimistic, and that the physic-garden plants chosen to reflect the site's medical history simply aren't getting enough sun. The plants that have flourished most are graceful multitrunk *Amelanchier lamarckii*, which have been placed in giant gunmetal-gray containers, and which all receive angular shafts of light longer into the afternoon, placed as they are on the pedestrian lanes that serve the square. Elegant as they are, their body language is aggressive. They are

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placed as obstacles, as effective deterrents as beefy bouncers to physical and visual access into the site from the surrounding neighborhood. This is a clear statement that the pretensions to publicness expressed in the planning applications were the usual whitewash.

**Rathbone Square**

**R**ATHBONE SQUARE, just completed in 2017, has become the new London headquarters for Facebook as part of a mixed commercial/residential complex. Its central gated square was designed by Gustafson Porter + Bowman, and the surrounding buildings by Make Architects. The square, like Fitzroy Place, opens up important east-west pedestrian access in an area with a pronounced north-south grain. Here no beloved community building was cleared to create the site;

rather, a grim postal sorting office and a barbed-wire-frilled parking lot were the pre-existing condition. It was a palpable relief when they were demolished.

Here the gravest planning error was committed early on, with a failure to provide a direct east-west pedestrian connection at the very north of the site that would have created ease of passage for locals as well as new small retail possibilities. Instead the route jogs south, frustrating access in the same way the *Amelanchier* planters do at Fitzroy Place, and the passage is constricted through verdigris-green ceramic-clad gated tunnels. These do have the effect of squeezing the visitor just a bit so that the square appears to open out generously after they issue forth into the space. Inside the space, the building massing is more successful

than at Fitzroy Place. The buildings step down to allow generous light in from the south, so the prognosis for both the success of the plantings and the square's actual and emotional warmth are better.

Donncha O Shea, who along with Mary Bowman designed the square, spoke proudly of the oblong rectangular fountains that organize two of the entrances to the square. "They celebrate the entrances and pull people in with the reflections and the sound of water." Gustafson Porter + Bowman may well be the finest designers with water in Britain, and these fountains are no exception. Each was tested extensively. "You have to test water—you can't wait for day one," says O Shea. Testing began with foam and moved to stone,

"each time becoming more real." Visitors to the square reflexively dabble their fingers in the placid water as they pass, and it sheets elegantly down the fountains' convoluted stone sides.

Seating is similarly refined, stepping up and down at right angles to provide a maximum of sittable space and defining a dark grid against the light grid of the Canadian granite paving that establishes a rhythm with the building's facades. Here, though, the richness of the square's materials is at odds with the building cladding, which, as does the cladding at Fitzroy Place, appears to be stretched as thinly as cling film across the surface of the buildings. Windows are set into metallic panels at Rathbone Square that possess the dull luster of a disposable aluminum turkey pan.

At the center of Rathbone Square, curving into the edge of Facebook's offices, a crescent of lawn has been provided. Lawn is *de rigueur* in London squares, and in heritage squares is often a statutory requirement. Here it is intended as a catalyst for activity. "Private squares in London don't sup-

port actual activity," says O Shea, and time will tell whether Rathbone Square, with its alluring water features, actually comes to serve as a community space or whether it merely serves as a place for the building's workers to perch at lunch.

#### **A World Less Beige**

**I**HOPE I have not portrayed GROSS.MAX. and Gustafson Porter + Bowman as villains or failures. They are neither. Indeed, they are two of Britain's most illustrious landscape architecture practices, stuffed to bursting with talent, ambition, and verve. If there is villainy or failure, it is systemic, and bred in the bone of development processes that are conceived of first and foremost as extractive and profit-driven. These forces also militate against artistry and urbanism, catering to generic international non-tastes and imageable outputs. William Morris, whose famous furnishing company was located near Fitzrovia on several sites, diagnosed the same problems in his time in *Hopes and Fears for Art*, and the words are still true: "Only we must not lay the fault upon the builders, as some people seem inclined to do:

