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Penguin City

What do penguins have to teach modern London ?

James Fischelis

As a father of two young children a visit to London Zoo is a near-obligatory and regular part of my life. One of our favourite experiences is to watch the penguins in the recently opened Penguin Beach. With its theatre-style banking for shows and underwater viewing bubble it is the perfect place for children to learn more about these delightful creatures. The penguins are also well catered for, with a design that mimics the South American coast - the penguin's natural habitat - complete with burrows, submerged rocks and shingle beaches.

Penguin Beach – just a good ordinary place for penguins, unknown to architects



Less than 100 yards away lies another penguin pool - now empty and unused, designed by the celebrated modernist architect Berthold Lubetkin, and completed in 1933. Its sweeping semi-circular ramps make it one of the finest examples of the versatility of steel reinforced concrete, though this is of little benefit to the penguins. Its hard concrete surfaces and shallow pool left these birds with aching joints and unable to dive and swim as they would in the wild.

The penguin's new home might not represent the greatest revolution in architecture but it signifies a significant change in focus from creating great architectural masterworks to designing spaces that meet the animals' needs; something that seems to have frequently been missed by the designers of spaces for people. The modernist blocks put up in the 1960s and 1970s met their fate at the end of a wrecking ball not because they were ugly, but because their inhabitants led lives lacking in the positive social and economic interactions that are so essential to our wellbeing.

Lubetkin's penguin pool – award winning architecture but not good for penguins



So how do we design space for *homo sapiens*: the most intelligent, complex and highly developed ape? Maybe we should learn from the zoologists and look at two important indicators; first, how we live in the wild and second, our natural innate behaviours.

Both these routes lead to the same surprisingly simple conclusion – that streets form the bedrock of human habitation. Villages created by people without input from urban designers, from Africa to St Kilda, are built around streets. Ancient cities like Pompeii and Herculaneum are also built around streets.

Our natural behaviour also requires streets. Humans are tribal, status obsessed and crave stimulation and company. Streets - through the shops, cafes, restaurants and pubs as well as the inevitable social interactions of knowing your neighbours - provide the stage on which we live our lives; they are vital to develop the social bonds so important to people.

London is made up of many different buildings including terraced houses, flats, mansions, shops, offices and parks, all linked by a network of streets. Yet today, many new developments, such as Mount Pleasant or Battersea, have forgotten this essential ingredient in making our city liveable and viable and are creating cold soulless dormitories, places without streets - those spaces needed for interaction so that we can flourish as human beings.

If we are to avoid more failed space let's take a lesson from the penguins and design places for the urban primate, in keeping with our natural habitat – streets.

About the author

James Fischelis is an urban consultant and designer who has worked on major urban projects in the UK and Far East. He specialises in creating and adapting spaces to fulfil their social, economic and cultural potential in the context of the institutions, markets, financial systems, technology and regulations that are fundamental to urban life. James spent his early career as a service and product designer working for a number of blue chip companies including O2, Barclays and BT, before gaining a Masters Degree in Urban Design from the Bartlett, UCL.

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