

BIRTHDAY CARD TO GABI EPSTEIN

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Professor Gabriel Epstein AA Dipl (Hons), Hon.D.Litt, FRIBA, SADG was 90 on 25 October.

One might imagine that such a milestone in the life of so distinguished an architect, planner and teacher would be marked with fanfares and grand public tributes. But not in Gabi's case, and neither would he wish it. As a personality trait such modesty is admirable, but as a measure of his contribution to architecture and planning it is unworthy, as anyone who has worked with or was taught by him would surely testify. Indeed to work with Gabi was to be taught by him—as I was fortunate to experience for nearly ten years from 1973 to 1982—and the lessons have endured.

This brief essay is an attempt to reprise Gabi Epstein's ideas and work, not just as a birthday tribute—though this provides a topical pretext—but because it seems to me that their underlying good sense and application are as convincing and relevant as in his prime years of practice in the 1960s and 70s. Indeed perhaps even more so.

Gabriel Epstein was born in the Rhineland in 1918 and educated in Germany, Belgium, Israel and England. He was apprenticed to Eric Mendelsohn, 1937-8, who recommended he come to London to study at the Architectural Association from which he graduated with honours in 1949 having served with the Royal Engineers during the war. As Gabi himself later recalled "The AA has always been a second home for me, a place where I could breathe freely amongst friends..." (Presidential Address: Private View—AAQ, 1963). The association took root as Epstein went on to teach at the AA from 1949-56, was a member of its Council from 1956-65 and became President 1963-4.

Joining the practice of Derek Bridgwater and Peter Shephard in 1949, Epstein began to make his mark with housing and educational projects, becoming a partner in 1955, but his vision always extended beyond individual buildings to embrace the wider context, the neighbourhood, the town, the city—as will become clear. When I arrived in 1973 it had become Shephard & Epstein (later Shephard, Epstein & Hunter), Bridgwater having retired in 1962, and the firm—numbering probably less than twenty all up—was busy with housing in London's East End and various university and college projects. At first it seemed as though there was no underlying 'practice philosophy' at all, or rather that the philosophy was so pragmatic and 'reality based' that no further 'theory' need be articulated. This was deceptive for the real philosophy was so deeply ingrained as to have become almost instinctual.

A glance across the range of schemes of this period immediately reveals a particular kind of consistency. I am not referring to an architectural or stylistic consistency—though there is certainly a distinctive Shep-Ep building vocabulary recognisable to any trained eye in its determinedly understated use of stock brick, grey slate and white trim. Rather it is the consistency of approach to *land design*—to which this architectural language contributes. The core Epstein theme that I want to identify is the consistency with which buildings are used to define external spaces, organise their inter-relationship and establish their linkage to a surrounding city context.



One of its clearest applications is the housing scheme in Royal College Street, Camden, designed in the early 1960s. The accommodation comprising flats and maisonettes, even artist's studios, is formed into terraces and L-shaped blocks that combine to create a series of south and west facing greens or courts. Everything unfolds from this simple diagram. The cars have their place on the perimeter, the spaces are enriched with tree planting and the size of the courts (approx 80ft square) interlocks with the height of the buildings—such that a mother can call to her child playing below. Then the overall layout joins pedestrian movement with the adjacent streets where, on the south edge, the estate is served by a parade of shops. This is more than a technical exposition of low-rise high-density housing design—though it was one of the first of its kind at 146 persons per acre, and won various awards in its day. It is really the microcosm of a vision of city planning whereby a balance is achieved between privacy, scale, landscape, shelter and urban connectivity.

Epstein's commitment to this generic idea may be seen in its deployment across a whole range of projects—both residential and educational. As far as housing was concerned its diversity in application is well illustrated at Pigott Street, Tower Hamlets—on which I worked with Gabi in the mid 1970s. Here the wildly irregular site enabled a richly differentiated series of spaces to be created, some formal and hard-paved, some informal and soft, integrating many fine existing trees and again including a local centre with shops. A pedestrian spine that connected a new bus terminal at the south west extremity through the site to earlier sections of the Lansbury Estate, on which Peter Shephard had originally worked for the Festival of Britain, and to which this project provided such a satisfying conclusion thirty years later.

Planning historians will recognise much in this thesis as deriving from the 'neighbourhood unit' concept promoted by Patrick Abercrombie in the London Plan, but Epstein was to develop the idea far beyond its initial domestic connotation. To adapt Louis Khan's aphorism where he talks of 'the building that wants to be a street', it might be said that in their consistent integration of architecture, landscape, systems of movement and provision for change, Epstein's major assignments were in

essence all building projects that 'wanted to be towns'. Certainly the closest approximation was Lancaster University which would be better understood not as an educational campus but rather as a sort of city in miniature—or the New Town that Epstein never built.

The way in which the Lancaster University commission was won in 1963 had entered the firm's folklore long before I joined. Being invited at the interview to suggest how they might approach the task Epstein, asking for a pencil and paper, proceeded to sketch out his whole philosophy for the university's development in a matter of minutes. But the concept of mixed-use colleges, combining residential, social and teaching accommodation served by a pedestrian spine, with a central 'town square' and perimeter vehicular servicing was not a sudden brainwave—it was the summation of years of reflection and preparation for such a task. Specifically, in Epstein's own words, it was not a masterplan in the conventional sense but a plan for a *system of growth*.

The detailed story of Lancaster University has been well told elsewhere (see Muthesius, *The Postwar University*, Yale UP, 2000) and can hardly be elaborated on here. Suffice to say that Lancaster provides the clearest built evidence of the primacy of urbanism in Gabi Epstein's professional credo, and a worked example of how in his value system architecture's proper role is to contribute to the realisation of the larger environmental idea, not become an autonomous formal preoccupation.

Although a reluctant writer Epstein has occasionally committed his planning philosophy to paper in powerful expositions of his 'Centre City' concept whereby forms of linear urban development, or 'string settlement', combine walkable proximity between home and the centre, economical public transport and balanced city growth—such organisms being both susceptible to future change yet also 'complete' at all stages of their development. *Planning Forms for 20th Century Cities* (Habitat Journal Vol.1 No.1, Pergamon Press, 1976) and *Well-Being in Cities—The Low Energy City* (NATO Advanced Study Institute, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, 1979) illustrate cogent applications of his principles in competition schemes for Bratislava (1968) and Vienna South (1971). These papers are now thirty years old but to read them again today is to be made aware of how relevant and sustainable their propositions remain, and how timeless is their underlying humanity.

Yet if it is unjustifiable that Epstein's work is not better known it is also unsurprising. His preoccupation with *land design*, whether at local, city or regional scale, occurred at a time when architects (and architectural commentators) have been fixated with *land marks*. Historiography has typically reiterated the same version of Britain's post-war reconstruction challenge that conventional modernists defined for themselves—namely that urban answers would be found in new kinds of buildings and rather than adapting the proven morphology of streets, squares and terraces to a contemporary application which assigned appropriate priorities to the two great urban invaders—the car and the superblock—that instead a whole new lexicon of architectural forms was required.

Within a mile of Shephard & Epstein's housing at Lansbury stands Goldfinger's Balfour Tower and the Smithsons' Robin Hood Gardens—which along with the other 'signature works' employing towers, megastructures or 'streets in the air' have continued to dominate orthodox accounts of housing in the 60s and 70s. But Brutalism was anathema to Epstein. 'Unselfconscious', 'friendly', 'cheerful' were the sort of terms he preferred to use to convey the architectural values he was seeking. And consequently Epstein's housing has suffered few of the familiar problems that characterise those high profile schemes. The brick has mellowed, the landscape has matured, the social environment is stable—



indeed his projects are no longer 'projects'. They have simply and quietly blended into the fabric of London—just as Gabi wanted.

Epstein retired from practice in the mid-1980s, and after a period of teaching at Stuttgart University and various consultancy assignments, now lives quietly in Paris. His recreational sketches of local scenes would hardly turn a critic's eye, but they are replete with the insight of an urbanist absorbed in the ambiance of human settlements where building, nature and social commerce co-exist in a benign and fruitful balance.

From time to time over the years I have sent Gabi various publications on the latest architectural developments in the UK. Whilst always being kindly acknowledged they have usually prompted a gentle note of demur—"fascinating book, John, but it's all about individual buildings...what about cities? I think the values we look for, and which become a question of survival, can only be found in *planning* solutions not in 'architecture'. We celebrate false masterpieces when the actual task is to build a new universe with things that exist already." On the last such exchange was the suffix "...but don't mind me—I come from a country which does not yet exist."

In a certain way, however, such a country does exist, because Gabi Epstein's ideas and insights endure through all who learnt from him and will always be rediscovered in the neighbourhoods, towns and cities where that vital balance is attained.

Gabi—your friends, former colleagues and students salute you. Many happy returns!



Facing Page: Rue de la Montagne, Paris 2001 sketch by Epstein **Top Right:** Pigott Street Housing, Lansbury 1982 **Left:** Lancaster University plan, 1963 **Above:** Housing at Royal College Street, Camden 1960