

ARCHITECT AND PROFESSOR DEBORAH SAUNT LED A POSTGRADUATE STUDY BY 14 STUDENTS AT LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY INTO ASPECTS OF LIFE IN MAYFAIR - AND CAME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT OTHER CITIES COULD LEARN FROM GROSVENOR'S STEWARDSHIP OF ITS MAYFAIR ESTATE



“I’m a director of my own practice, which is called DSDHA. I’ve always taught, and last year I was a professor teaching in Switzerland and also in London. Every year, the postgraduate architecture students at London Metropolitan University have a year-long design project where they look at a big issue affecting a city. The research project we set for ourselves was: what we could learn from Mayfair.

A lot of student projects tend to be outside of the city in areas of regeneration, or they go for more exotic locations. So we thought it would be useful to look at a very successful part of the city and see how it worked. In particular we were looking at the role of embassies in the city, given the departure of the American embassy.

In order to understand Mayfair, our methodology of testing was to map physical phenomena like a traditional map, but then to look at other ways of mapping to expose the more human qualities of the place.

So, that’s why we have maps ranging from where people smile in Mayfair to where people park very expensive cars, or where people feel overlooked and

anxious or under surveillance with CCTV – or where there’s lots of visual activity, like shops.

Mapping in this way provides a more perceptual overview of the way a city works rather than just mapping roads, the heights of buildings, the more traditional uses of buildings or the geographic or topographic features.

The mapping took about a month and the students went out in the course of a week or so and literally walked every street in Mayfair and then recorded their data in set time series. Sometimes they were looking over a 24 hour time period and sometimes over a smaller window. Then they drew up their maps.

It took a bit of time to get the maps to work but the questions the maps raised helped the students formulate projects.

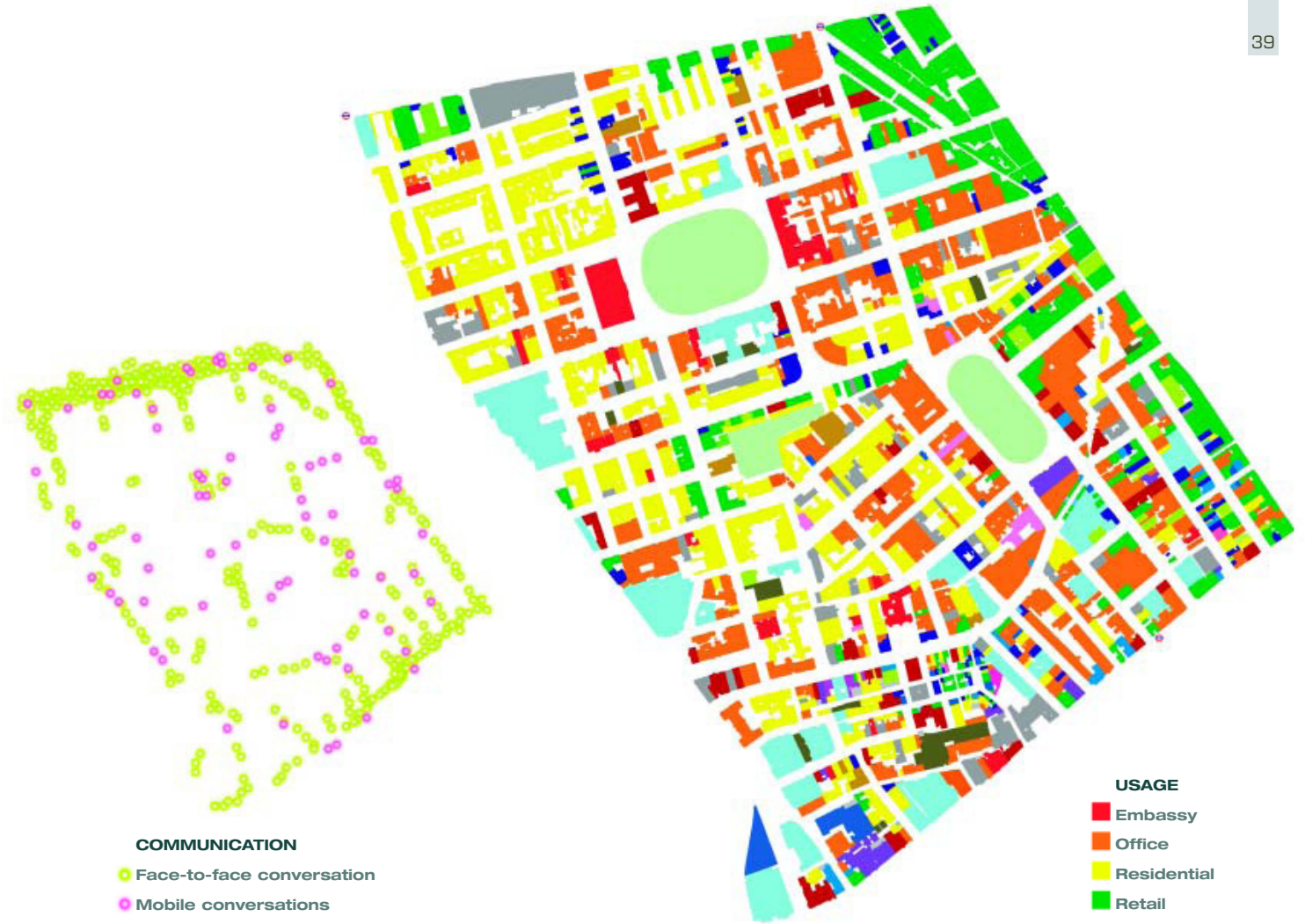
For instance, areas that aren’t very permeable, that are very private, actually lend themselves to things like diplomatic functions – embassies – because they are secure naturally, rather than having to deploy machine guns and road bollards. Quite a few existing embassies managed to not have any show of security, to achieve a

Mapping Mayfair



STUDENTS FROM LONDON METROPOLITAN MAPPED THE NUMBER OF TIMES PEOPLE SMILED (THIS PAGE), BUILDING USES AND COMMUNICATIONS (OPPOSITE PAGE)

SMILES
 Ignored
 Made eye contact
 Smiled



COMMUNICATION
 Face-to-face conversation
 Mobile conversations

USAGE
 Embassy
 Office
 Residential
 Retail

level of security by being very discreet. There were lots of other things they learned. The way that Mayfair is incredibly unknown – most Londoners you talk to never go to Mayfair but everybody knows about Mayfair, so it’s got a high profile without necessarily having a high number of people walking through it. We debated whether it should be more open or less open, but we all agreed it was rather nice the way it was.

Everybody’s preconceptions were that Mayfair would have private gardens and private squares, but it doesn’t. The squares are publicly accessible. The nice thing about Mayfair is that when you do come in, there is somewhere to sit down.

I think the main thing the students really enjoyed was the diversity of people who live in Mayfair. It really pleasantly surprised them that it wasn’t the preserve of simply one type of occupant, that in fact there is affordable housing and various types of unexpected activity going on that they didn’t expect to find. They didn’t expect that at all and it was really great to see them realise that the city is very complicated.

They all looked at different sites. So, one of the students looked at what would happen if you adapted the existing US Embassy building at Grosvenor Square to become a centre for non-governmental organisations, for charitable organisations but also for other key roles in international development. Currently they don’t tend to occupy prestigious

addresses, but it might be positive to have the NGOs near the embassies so that communication could be encouraged between different interests.

We became interested in questioning whether we need embassies any more. In fact, the students discovered that European embassies will be disappearing over the next few years as they get consolidated into EU embassies. I don’t know when this will happen, but over a long time the EU is planning to get rid of individual countries’ embassies – Germany, France, Spain, Italy – and just have single missions within Europe, because in a way their embassies and their ambassadorial role is slightly different now because international relations are primarily being conducted through the EU.

We also discovered lots of smaller countries in the world who don’t have representation. One of the students had designed a new embassy near Shepherd Market for the Vatican. When the Pope visited London, he had to trek all the way out to Wimbledon – there’s a little semi-detached embassy the Vatican has out there. The student felt that it was more appropriate for the Vatican to have a more central location given that the Roman Catholic church is the second-largest funder of development work in the third world.

We enjoyed learning just how Grosvenor manages its estate, and just what a full-time job that is, how it’s not about quick wins. Grosvenor does have a unique

ability to take a longer view and there’s definitely something to be learned from that for other people who make cities – that maybe just going after the most profitable immediate solution isn’t necessarily good for the city in the long run, and having a different time frame to review where value lies is absolutely critical.

Since we did the study, we have heard other local authorities and developers talk about what Grosvenor does in Mayfair as a really interesting potential model for future development – namely that when you make areas of the city you do have certain ideals and standards that you aspire to and they help you make decisions in the long term, rather than just saying, “What can I develop now, here, today?”

We carried out our project independently of Grosvenor and then when Grosvenor found out that we were interested in Mayfair they invited us to share our results – the work of the students – with a public consultation event at Brown Hart Gardens in the summer as part of the London Festival of Architecture. Over 600 people came and we had really wonderful feedback on the work the students had done.”

DSDHA was Richard Feilden Architect of the Year 2010 and Education Architect of the Year 2010 at last year’s Building Design Architect of the Year Awards.

Feature sponsored by

GROSVENOR
 Living cities
 www.grosvenor.com