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This strange time of year, when our everyday existence pauses for a week, makes us look more closely at who we are, where we live and the work that we do

Life less ordinary

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You will have moved on from thinking about the organisation and enjoyment of Christmas by now, but it is worth thinking about it in another way – through work; that is, through buildings, cities and the home.

Christmas is a special time of year. For all the obvious reasons but more. It is a time when we experience and see the home and the city in a different way. The metropolis in which we live loses its immigrants and regains its émigrés. Trains out of London are rammed – this year being particularly extreme owing to the fog – as the capital empties and people return to their roots, or fly south.

It is a time of heightened domesticity, and it is also a time when the notions of home and loyalty are questioned. Where do you come from? Where do you belong? The emphasis on family and home is more acute. Home becomes filled with people, fires are burned in the empty grates, tables are extended to accommodate new members of the family. Streets are deserted, offices empty, shops close and restaurants no longer have such allure, as it is the home that is the preserve of family gatherings.

You can step out into the parks or the great public spaces of our city and be almost alone. It is a time when the public realm ceases to have meaning and throws buildings into sharper relief. Your appreciation of architecture is, therefore, more pronounced and more formal.

There are just a few days in the year when the city is not about energy and people but about streets and avenues and the structures that bound them. It is the only time you see buildings as they have been designed and drawn – absent of motion and people! Functionality has less meaning – buildings are not tested as they normally are because the populace is not there. The tempo slackens, traffic is slight and the appropriate way to view the capital is on foot or by bicycle. The dynamic of the city is transformed and architecture exists momentarily in a plastic almost abstract form, part of a city in frozen animation.

In architecture we tend to focus on the public realm. But over Christmas for the vast majority the home is where meaning is held. Most usually it is in the everyday terraced house or a flat carved out of a larger building. It is easy to ignore this as the moment is so fleeting and normality is so quickly resumed, but it is a very significant way to engage with architecture and the built environment. Emotions, reminiscences and memories are particularly potent at this time of year and can overwhelm our experience of design. But I bet many of you will have spent Christmas with a relative for whom design and space are a recent and exciting discovery – an acknowledgement that the private realm has a real value and that appreciation of design is slowly seeping into our national consciousness.

In the context of an office it is also a unique moment. Despite competitions that have deadlines at dawn at the beginning of January – a source of sadistic pleasure no doubt for those of you that initiate such anti-social practice – it is the only time in the year when everyone takes a break at the same time.

The collective sense of winding down is palpable and necessary. A time to reflect on what has been achieved; to review and critique the work we have done and to question where we are going. A time for inter-office relationships to loosen and for new alliances to be forged. A time to be alone in the office and dream of what can be done next year.

Of course the sanctity of Christmas day has been eroded. It is a bit like the disappearance of the specialness that made Sundays feel different from every other day of the week. For me it is nothing to do with religion but with the purity a special day or occasion has for our culture and for how it throws us back into ourselves.

Multiculturalism, which is such a positive force in so many ways, is changing this time of year, as is the fact that we are now a secular society. Christmas may not be with us as we know it for ever. The challenge is, I guess, to find a way in which the specialness of Christmas can be preserved and captured in a way that can be shared and understood by everyone.

A very happy new year to you all.

Postscript :

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