



We need more front doors: City Heritage Society meeting: February 24th 2009. “Enterprise Culture”

Prior to Big Bang it was normal for City enterprises to have their own buildings with their own front doors. Quite small businesses had post-war buildings three windows wide and six storeys tall. After the mid 80s, organisations changed their thinking. They switched to preferring to have one or more large floors in managed, multi-tenanted buildings, USA style. Single floor spaces work far better than multiple floors for a company, allowing staff to interact more easily and being flexible for constant reorganisation. One's own front door became far less important. There was also a trend to larger organisations that still get their own front door, but in a big building.

The developers of new office buildings could have profitably filled the ground floor with retail units but found that tenants prefer grand entrance halls on street frontages without shops or shoppers where they can alight from their cab into an ordered world. Prestige equals sterility.

Large employers often encourage staff to stay in the building all day, minimising break times but maximising staff interaction. They provide restaurant and gym facilities to retain them, taking life out of the streets around.

Security concerns favour clear views around entrances, single entrances to any building and the elimination of through movement for the public. Servicing increasingly takes place in purpose built docks on back streets, maintaining dignity for the front door area.

Retailers want larger units these days, again with only one entrance. They want some display windows but not too many: interior space is preferred windowless, even if on a corner or side street, to allow sales fitments and controlled lighting once



customers are inside. Mall locations, introverted from the street and with stores facing each other in close proximity, work best for retailers. The City will get its first mall at New Change shortly. What are the street frontages going to be like?

All these factors favour fewer front doors: office frontages separate from retail frontages, less incident and fewer entries to retail units. It's hard to legislate against them as they are driven by economics, the City's lifeblood.

Are there any mitigating factors in enterprise culture which favour more street life? The arrival of 3G phones, Wifi and Wimax, together with the increase in independent and mobile workers, favour people working in the street and in cafes. Cafes are proliferating to serve them, replacing shops which the same innovations have undermined through online retailing. Kiosk retailing is prospering, on barrows in malls, at stations, in streets where allowed. As the City makes more areas pedestrian only, people will spend more time outside, animating the street. Cafe tables will colonise pavements, as will sales points, sculptures, gardens and fountains. The bland backdrop of office lobbies and mall exteriors will be far less of an issue then.

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