

**On 26 March, Open House became Open City. What does this mean?**

The change largely reflects the scope of the initiatives that we are involved in now. We started in 1992 as a small, not-for-profit organisation to promote public awareness and appreciation of the capital's building design and architecture. The intention was to open up London's splendid buildings to the general public who don't otherwise have access. We saw this as a way of helping the wider community to become more knowledgeable, engage in dialogue and make informed judgements on architecture.

But over the past 18 years, there has also been a great shift in the public's way of looking at a city. Public spaces, including landscape architecture, are now recognised as essential parts of a city. Open City is taking the original initiative one step further by including public spaces. While the public may already have access to these areas, the point of Open City is to draw attention to the value that public space offers to the community, broadening dialogue further.

**Are you advocates for public space and landscape architecture?**

Our main role is advocacy. We help challenge perceptions, break down barriers and inspire people to demand high-quality places for current and future generations. Our pioneering programmes and initiatives are designed to meet the needs of decision-makers, young people and the wider community. And it is the success of our approach as an advocacy body that has positioned us as a progressive and influential authority among these groups.

**The Open House event has been broadened to include public space and landscape architecture – places that people already have access to. Why do you think that this additional element will appeal to the public?**

When it comes to public space, people already move within and around it. Yet the one thing we do not learn in schools is the fabric of a place that surrounds us, such as the structure, framework or composition. The urban fabric of our community has such a strong impact on us on an everyday basis, but we never learn about it in schools.

Another important aspect is that the public domain is created without the public's involvement. Essentially, it's something

'done to the public', who usually have no choice but to hope that those who are responsible for creating and developing that space will do so in their best interests. So our mantra is that this must become part of our education system, and Open City attempts to do just that.

**Your organisation plays an important role in getting different parts of society together, such as councillors and architects, to discuss issues, visit buildings and explore architecture and design. Why is this important?**

Collaborating with different parts of society ensures that the dialogue is open, educational and creative. We work with professionals to explore what makes good places in which to live, work, play and learn, and thereby provide Londoners direct access to the knowledge that shapes the urban fabric. We aim to reach as diverse a group as possible, connecting with hundreds of thousands of Londoners, providing them with a forum to express what they would like for their city.

Participants in all our programmes learn from each other as much as from experts.

In particular, we felt from early on that it was important to include the stakeholders in the dialogue, those who we refer to as the 'gatekeepers' to good-quality design, such as planning councillors. So we ask planning councillors how we can better help them to articulate the challenges they face so they can make the best-informed decisions.

Projects such as Open House Exemplar provide vital support to councillors in their design arbiter role by giving them experience of developments, and by drawing lessons about how good design can be encouraged, assessed and delivered.

Our Open House Exemplar masterclasses, for example, bring together planning councillors to encounter a wide range of perspectives. Open discussion allows the sharing of knowledge and the 'unpacking' of differences of opinion about what is good and bad design.

**In the future, would you like landscape architects to be more involved in these discussions as well?**

It is very important to involve different professionals in the dialogue. Everyone plays a relevant part. For example, when councillors are deciding to give planning

permission, we work with them to examine the design, which is the abstract, and ask what the reality is. Essentially it's being able to read between the abstract and reality. The reality is the space in which the building planning takes place. That's why it's important to involve architects and landscape architects.

Core to our beliefs and values is having direct experience. You can't make an informed decision merely through abstract images, such as photos and illustrations. You need to be engaged with the space in question to know what the reality is. Having these professionals meet on site to impart their different insights, look at what is viable or assess the fabric of the public space can result in a positive outcome.

**You've also carried out extensive research on architectural design and public attitudes. Some of your polls ask controversial questions, such as whether Prince Charles is good for British architecture. Are controversial issues important to tackle?**

With more than 350,000 visits to Open House London every year, we have a huge and diverse community, both lay and professional. This represents a large section of society – and we feel that it's important that we capture the insights and viewpoints of as many people as possible, since the results inform our own programmes and provide insight into what matters most to the public: producing a more informed debate.

Our position is not one of confrontation or consultation, but one of engagement to determine the real issues. For example, for the polls we run on our website, we ask questions that can be answered either in the affirmative or negative, but we also provide an opportunity for individuals to comment and even elaborate their viewpoints. This way you get to the heart of the issue.

**What would you like to achieve in the next couple of years?**

Success for us would be a society in which there is a more informed, intelligent debate from the top tier of society to the grassroots. Currently, I think there is that gap, so for us it's vital to assist that translation between those sections of society and bring them together. ●

[www.londonopenhouse.org/](http://www.londonopenhouse.org/)

Photograph: Johanna Ward

# A CITY WITHOUT LIMITS

Victoria Thornton, the founding director of the London Open House architectural organisation, explains why it is broadening its remit and heading into the landscape