

# Changing building typologies forum – Observations from practice

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Designing buildings for flexibility and change**

**Oliver Marlow**  
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## O S S 'I was curious about how it would happen.' Designing buildings for flexibility and change

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TILT designs building for change, believing that only when a space is occupied does it becomes alive. As architect Lina Bo Bardi said, 'Until man enters a building, climbs the steps, and takes possession of the space in a "human adventure" that develops over time, architecture does not exist.'

So what is this human adventure and how can it be thought through to help design better buildings? Using a recent project and an insight into TILT's unique codesign methodology, this article will explore how to listen, measure and iterate space, to understand how, by placing users at the centre of space design, one can create truly enabling spaces that are alive for change.

There is, and always will be, a tension between the human and physical architecture of a building or space. Bo Bardi's 'human adventure' is a good critical frame by which to understand and appreciate whether the tension between the human and physical architecture is effective, successful and in tune with the intention of the space itself. One can choose very palpable examples of this, for example, the prison cell and the boudoir. Their human adventure plays out in certain ways; the prison cell and boudoir could not be mistaken for each other. Yet they can be and often are. We appropriate space and challenge typologies as a matter of course, and it is this challenge that we as designers can sometimes find hard to accommodate: when one designs spaces that fulfil civic functions, include complex briefs, and are required above all to include opportunities for change, the above examples demonstrate how hard it is to be definitive about how the human adventure can be accommodated.

Studio TILT's codesign methodology is directed at this interstice. Firstly we frame our work by

suggesting that space is an ever-evolving and iterative conversation, not simply a container in which to place people or things. This imaginative leap is demonstrated by our use of Imaginary Tables, one of our workshop activities:



**Figure 1:**

*Workshop activities:  
Imaginary Tables.*

We begin with tape on the floor, with participants around these tables, talking, drawing, socialising. Throughout the course of the workshop, as one gets up and moves around, participants return to their tables but walk around these imaginary tables. Through collective use and imagination they are now real. For us this imaginative breakthrough is twofold: space suddenly becomes palpable, and with that one understands how a designer thinks - to visualise something and then make it real.

Architecture is heavy, slow, and monumental. But spatial agency is quick and easy. For Studio TILT there is a series of fundamental assumptions that we challenge through our codesign process. Some of these assumptions are historical, some economic, some simply rest within the tenets of the knowledge within our professions, the tautology of architecture and design, that allow certain things to happen and others not.

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The most important aspect is the agency of design itself. We are told there are those who are creative, who can design, others who cannot. For us this expression of creativity is dependent on so many more things than whether one has ideas, or can paint or draw for example. We suggest that one needs only to access the tacit and behavioural knowledge we all have of our surroundings and put that to work to shift perspectives and disrupt normal associative models. By doing this one can discover something new. And for us this is something everyone can do. The emphasis instead falls on establishing the right environment for people to enact and express these things.

And for us this is design. As Victor Papanek said, 'everyone is a designer, since every decision, or organising impulse is design'. So rather than just engaging a user, we are offering the tools and cre-

ating the conditions within which they themselves are leading the design process. Our role, as the professionals so to speak, is to frame these conditions, these constraints, whether they are to do with money or time - as is most often the case - or other factors. We facilitate this process, synthesise and synergise the results, and in doing so make sure the qualities of the outcomes are valid, viable and effective.

In our recent project remodelling of the Silk Mill Museum in Derby we demonstrated the effectiveness of these ideas. The Mill itself is the site of the world's oldest factory, constituting a UNESCO world heritage site and the birthplace of mechanised silk production. These precedents became the brief not for a museum of silk or the industrial revolution, but for making. Studio TILT joined the team as Maker in Residence, leading this trans-

**Figure 2:**

*The Silk Mill Museum in Derby.*



formation: devising, formulating and implementing this open participation to design and prototype, interpret artefacts, prepare collections, and develop audiences. Reference Images from Derby-Silk-Mill-Museum

As a definitive brief the project was explicitly about changing building typologies, not only the evidence and need for acknowledging the way we understand building use as changing, but also in finding a new and people-centred way of understanding and delivering to this need. Simply, we turned the museum on its head by allowing aspects of usage to take centre stage. The historical precedent of making informs the need to experiment, prototype and test, and this in turn created the vision for a space that was, in itself, a prototype. This mirroring created a very powerful message for the project: we began with the enlightenment mindset, multifaceted, cross-disciplinary and curious. We then are able to map the vision of the Museum itself, then the vision of the project, established through the codesign process. At the centre is the space itself, the catalyst and location of these complimentary visions, with four keywords, again drawn from the codesign process, defining the atmosphere we will go on to create - cyclical, iterative and open to change.

This shift to iteration and change challenges wider cultural understandings. While we know everything is in flux, that things always change, we fixate on what can be fixed. It is overly daunting to think about this idea of constant change too much. So we categorise, plan, build buildings, and think about how the future will be a lot like today. Le Corbusier, with the best of intentions, thought he could design how millions would live; but this did not work out exactly as he intended.

Look at cities, for example. The most effective are those that have developed amongst all sorts of competing, complimentary and complex conditions. They are not, and cannot ever be the domain



**Figure 3:**

**Workshop participants:  
Spaces as process.**

of one mind, one designer. And it is this that one needs to accept. The role is to become a part of these iterations and changes and work well and effectively within them. This allows us to think of space as process, as a conversation.

These notions can be directly related to a single building, to a single space within a building. If we fashion our understanding of building usage as the condition by which the space gains meaning, we can go a long way to understanding how changing building typologies are conditioned by use. And for Studio TILT, this imaginative approach is the 'human adventure'.

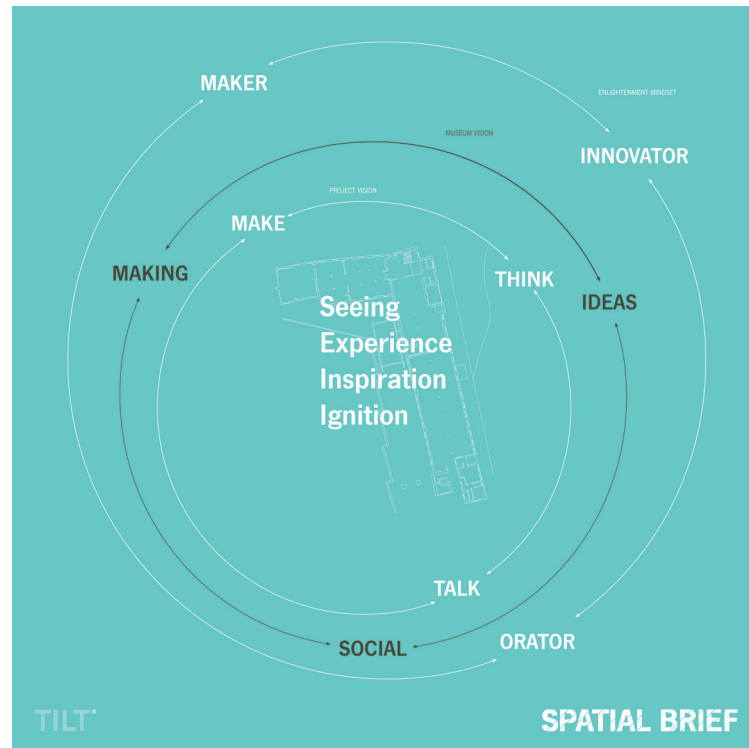
At the Silk Mill Museum we were focused on being very open and transparent about the need for flexibility, to changing needs and the creation of a space always in flux. It takes a highly ambitious client to do this and we are very thankful to the team at the Silk Mill. We have also built a resilient

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Figure 4:

Studio TILT's  
codesign process.



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community of users as part of the project, who said at the beginning, 'I was curious about how it would happen,' before talking in effusive terms about how much the process has transformed their relationship to space, each other and most importantly what a museum is and can be. This video brings together some great comments from the whole process.

So we have covered client, brief, user and designer. Overall, the fascinating crossover to more mainstream projects, and as suggested by the questions at the heart of this special issue, lies in where this shift in use and typology takes us? So where can the future lead? And our answer is anywhere we want to go! By maintaining a relationship with people, the real subject of architecture, one is able to take this proposition very seriously indeed. Building typologies may be changing, but Studio TILT's codesign process centres around keeping the human the one constant variable.

#### References

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#### About the author:

**Oliver Marlow** ([oliver.marlow@studiotilt.com](mailto:oliver.marlow@studiotilt.com)) is a multi-platform designer, with a unique skill set as a designer, craftsman, academic and facilitator, working on all levels of the design process. Oliver founded Studio TILT with Dermot Egan in 2010 after they worked together at The Impact Hub, where Oliver was Head of Design. Oliver leads the design and architectural team pioneering new collaborative design techniques to engage end users in the design and creation of spaces. His portfolio includes projects with the National Health Service, Design Council, CABE, Local Authorities in England, and Workspaces internationally. As a leading expert on the design of codesign, collaborative spaces, and the relationship between space and creativity, Oliver regularly leads keynote forums and runs workshops all over the world. He is a visiting professor at IE Madrid as part of their Revolution in Work series, and has delivered speeches at numerous international conferences in London, Madrid, Beijing, Los Angeles and Moscow. Their unique approach is the subject of a book, *Codesigning Space*, authored by Studio TILT founders Oliver Marlow and Dermot Egan, published by Artifice Books in 2013.