

Dulux Study Tour Report

Le Corbusier famously said "Eyes that do not see".

He was talking about the ignorant. About people who failed to understand architecture, not through lack of knowledge, but lack of experience. Architecture is best understood when experienced. When you actually stand in, and move through the spaces architecture has created.

Winning a place on the Dulux Study Tour was for me, a wonderful opportunity to experience architecture from around the world that I hadn't yet experienced. Whilst I believe that humans are fundamentally more similar than we are different, different cultures and climates produce different architectural responses. Different schools and materials will also have some effect. The Dulux Study Tour was an opportunity to understand these differences and evaluate their relevance to my practice of architecture. It was also an opportunity to reflect on, and add to the conversation on what is an appropriate architecture for Sydney and perhaps more broadly, Australia.

Dubai + Abu Dhabi **JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN SHOULD YOU?**

Just because you can, should you?



Fig 1. View from the Burj Khalifa: the wonderland below. Yes this is real!

What do you do as a nation when suddenly you are incredibly wealthy, yet can see a time in the not too distant future, when the rivers of gold will run out? If you're sane, you plan for your future, which is exactly what the Emirates are doing for themselves.

Dubai, the most famous of the Emirates in the United Arab Emirates has stridently set the pace of reinvention. It has sought to redefine itself as a global tourist destination and international business hub, underpinned by initiatives like littering the place with every conceivable entertainment house [water slides, museums, art galleries, theme parks] and backed by free trade and low tax zone.

How do you get the world's attention? You metaphorically stick the biggest arms you can in the air and wave them about in a manic fashion.

Typical cities, like Sydney are composed mainly of background buildings that line well formed, gridded or topographical streets, with the rare exceptional building, such as Utzon's designed Sydney Opera House as the stand-out foreground building. In Dubai, it seems, every building has actively been designed to seek attention.

Dubai is not about background. No; not for this once nomadic tribes people, not anymore, it's about foreground, and lots of it.

This modus operandi, and an ever expanding metropolis, means that enabling one's building to differentiate itself becomes an ever more difficult task. The Burj Al Arab is a classic case in point. It is the world's first six star hotel [whatever that means], and sees its own significance as such that it has carved its own site out of the ocean so that it sits apart from anything else. The surrounding land becomes a viewing platform for taking in the building's vista. The Burj Al Arab is an iconic, almost diagrammatic form, standing sentinel to welcome the world to Dubai's fantastical shores. Anchored by a 180 metre high central void that sits above the entry, retrofitted in garish colours so bawdy they take on a Moulin Rouge-esque quality oozing old world opulence in a stunning contemporary building.

It's odd, but compelling.

Of course there's more! The "complimentary-set-of-steak-knives" crescendo of the Al Arab is the horizontally cantilevered restaurant as close to 300metres above sea level as one cares to get, with a spectacular view un-encumbered by anything, seemingly not even structure. This is the counter weight to the perched helipad the scene of outrageous golf and tennis advertisements by the super stars du jour.

How can one top this?

They do, because they can. The Burj Khalifa is 817metres of world record shining monument to the cause. Yet this building, through necessity, is immediately more rigorous than most loitering Dubai 80 storey skyscrapers, simply because physics demands it. When you build higher than anyone has ever built before, you challenge every conceivable parameter, every constraint just to make it stand up. Add to that a hot and harsh sea and desert environment, and you have a well resolved building: the Empire State of its time. So tall it begins to lose scale. Yet it is your constant orientation point not matter where you are.

As an aside, setting the Burj Khalifa adjacent to what seems like the world's largest fountain, next to the world's largest shopping mall gives you the world's largest overkill. The point got lost long ago, but this one is for the dummies, get it? This is DUBAI!



Fig 2. The Shimmering Burj Khalifa

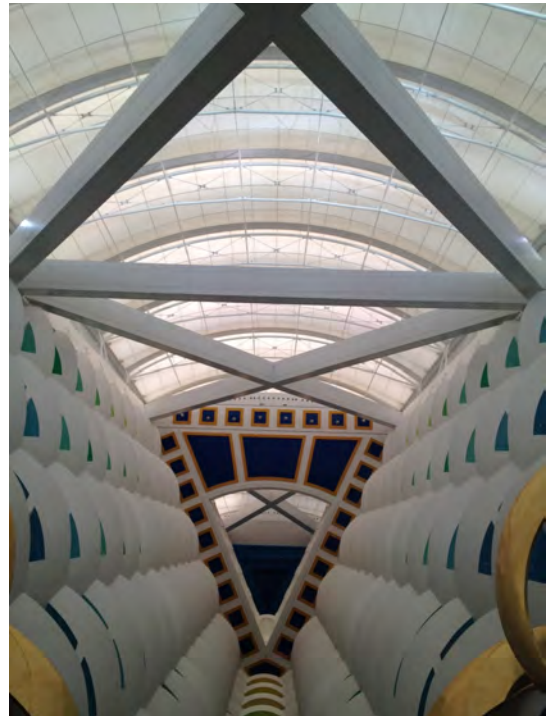


Fig 3. 180metres of Void: Burj Al Arab

Abu Dhabi by contrast is more sober, and not just physically. Here buildings seem to have some ordered street grid about them, even some proper streets. Abu Dhabi is the wealthiest of the five Emirates and appears to feel no need to rush headlong into reconstructing a new reality. It will do it at its own pace-frantic as opposed to manic. Abu Dhabi also seems more self assured [again, all these are relative measures], but it too is focused on foreground and BIGNESS.

Besides the Burj Khalifa, the most impressive buildings we see at this stage of the tour, and certainly the ones with the most architectural merit, are in Abu Dhabi. The Sheikh's Grand Mosque is beautifully done in white marble; a glistening white jewel in celebration of Islam. The Mosque has a presence on par with St Peters Cathedral and a monumentality that doesn't simply infer a higher power, but displays it. A vast inlaid marble courtyard has been built to house the 20,000 worshippers who spill out of the Grand Mosque, surrounded by what appears room for another 10,000 in the ornately decorated colonnades. Grand buildings on this scale requires grand gestures, like the 120 Iranian women employed for two years to weave the rug for prayers in one single piece. The mosque certainly has gravitas.

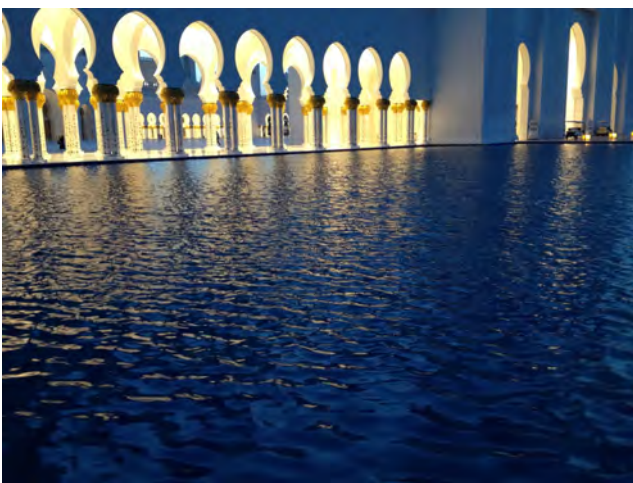


Fig 4. The Grand Mosque, Abu Dhabi



Fig 5. The forecourt of the Grand Mosque, Abu Dhabi

High architecture was proving elusive until we visited Foster’s Souk Central Markets, located beside a series of undulating and scalloped skinned glass towers, all over seventy storeys high. The markets provided the first glimpse of a vernacular architecture for hot, arid coastal climates. The pattern of internal streets created tall, dark noir spaces four storeys tall, lined with fine grain market stalls which were double-stacked, so that each shop had a mezzanine and a three metre frontage. A cool breeze drifted through the dimly lit internal spaces, the sun held off and the protected thermal mass kept cool. The centre of each market opens onto a covered square with an opening roof to draw down more light for greater social activity. The materiality of the work and the attention to detail is impressive world class architecture.



Fig 6. Souk Central Markets, Abu Dhabi



Fig 7. Souk Central Markets, Abu Dhabi

The other notable mention, and perhaps my favourite building of the whole tour was found in Foster’s Masdar City, Abu Dhabi. Not since Le Corbusier dreamed of utopian modernist cities, drawn and ordered in linear and logical efficiency, has anyone dared to build Utopia again. Masdar City is a self contained city complete with town, university and residences, but with one exception; it is built atop a twelve metre, three storey carpark and basement complex. It lifts the residents above and beyond the metaphorical ramble. In Masdar City you are a sophisticate, living on an island within a completely dislocated and disconnected built environment, surrounded by a sea of sand. Not heeding warnings from Orwell’s 1984, or Blade Runner’s bleak city noir, Masdar City assumes you have no need to think. Once inside the city, driverless cars transport you to where you should go, even if it’s not where you want to go.

Foster’s densely packed university housing constructed from an undulating skin of burnt red earth-coloured glass fibre reinforced concrete is again a reference to the vernacular, and also to the skilled hands of a clever architecture team. It interprets the local custom of screened light with a contemporary brise soleil.



Fig 8. Foster's Student Housing, Masdar City, Abu Dhabi

Berlin

CRAZY BRAVE

Who works for five years on an urban project, for no fee, to give back to Berliners a swimming pool they once had, then wins an international environmental award worth \$100,000 and ploughs it straight back into the project? Realities United did! Amazing. Crazy brave is another way of describing it.

That seems to be the Berlin spirit.

This spirit was evident in every Architect we met during our time in Berlin. They created their own reality. At first glance this seemed at odds with an outsider's view of the place. Berlin is after all, famous and infamous, simultaneously. But perhaps it is because the city is burdened with so much history, that it is emancipated from traditional constraints. I imagine there is a critical moment when the pressure, the weight of something becomes so great, that it exceeds the mind's ability to constantly process and comprehend, and it simply lets go. Ironically, the constraint liberates.

Berlin was the perfect foil to the wonderland that was Dubai/ Abu Dhabi. Straight away we found ourselves in a fine-grained city of interlocking courtyard housing, with streets formed purely by the buildings that framed them. A bicycle tour instantly gave up the way Berliners operated - they freely embraced their city: the car was neither omnipresent nor dominant.



Fig 9. Interlocking Courtyards: Berlin

The young turks of Berlin were singularly impressive and their generous undertakings linger in memory. Realities United's cleansing of the tributary around Museum Island off the river Spree, provided a 700 metre stretch that could be again enjoyed by locals for swimming.

Graft Studio's heroic "Make it Right" movement in collaboration with film star Brad Pitt, provides housing to New Orleans's residents left behind by their government; building a new community from designs of 100 of the world's better known architects.

To Deadline Architects self-funded and self-briefed project that builds their future as an every evolving programmed building that is now a fixture on the alternative hotel market. Just extraordinary.

Berlin, with its wonderful fine grained urban environment, and flat topography is a cyclist dream. So, what better way to tour the city's architectural delights than by bike. Thomas, our guide was the quintessential German architect; tall, thin, neat, precise and detailed. It's why they are desired the world over. The tour

could easily have gone for eight hours and still not have been long enough.

The Neues museum by David Chipperfield on Museum Island was, and is, the antithesis of everything Dubai represents. Careful, considered, deliberate infill and intervention to remake a museum bombed in the 2nd world war. Chipperfield’s detailing at Neues is sublime. From the deliberate use of exposed brick for the new infill walls, which differentiate them from the old, to the careful, extraordinarily detailed cast masonry elements that came together with the precision of a Swiss watch. No line or alignment was missed. The spaces seemed perfectly at rest and tranquil; this happens when architecture aligns and lines up well. The spaces are at rest because the eye and brain is at rest.

For me, the Neues Museum is an exemplar of what architecture can be. It doesn’t need structure flying everywhere, no crazed patterning, lighting bling, monumental voids, or wall movement to show itself. Chipperfield’s confident hand, his careful consideration, his fundamental understanding of space and a simple, minimal material palette has produced wonderful architecture. I find myself still thinking about the Neues today, long after the tour ended. Special moments like these affect careers.



Fig 10 +11. “God is in the Detail”: Chipperfield’s Neues Museum, Berlin

I had long anticipated Libeskind’s Jewish Museum. It had dominated university design classes, media and even replicated itself, in form and imagery at least, on local buildings since it was complete. My expectation wasn’t so much to see the jagged, angular form or detailing, but the story that the Museum was left unfilled for 18 months as the experience was powerful enough as a bare, empty, solemn monument to the Jewish people of the Holocaust, and Jews everywhere.

Rarely does a building, or anything in life, live up to the expectation. Libeskind’s Jewish museum didn’t for me. That it followed Chipperfield’s Neues museum didn’t help. Despite this there were three significant moments that were exceptional. The 49 inclined pillars art installation designed to give you the distorted feeling one feels when displaced, did, exactly that. This is rare. The dark enclosed space, locked behind a steel door with a sliver of angled light on the bare walls, was as intended, frightening. But not overtly. It tapped into an inner understanding of the experience in concentration camps. The darkness of the human soul.

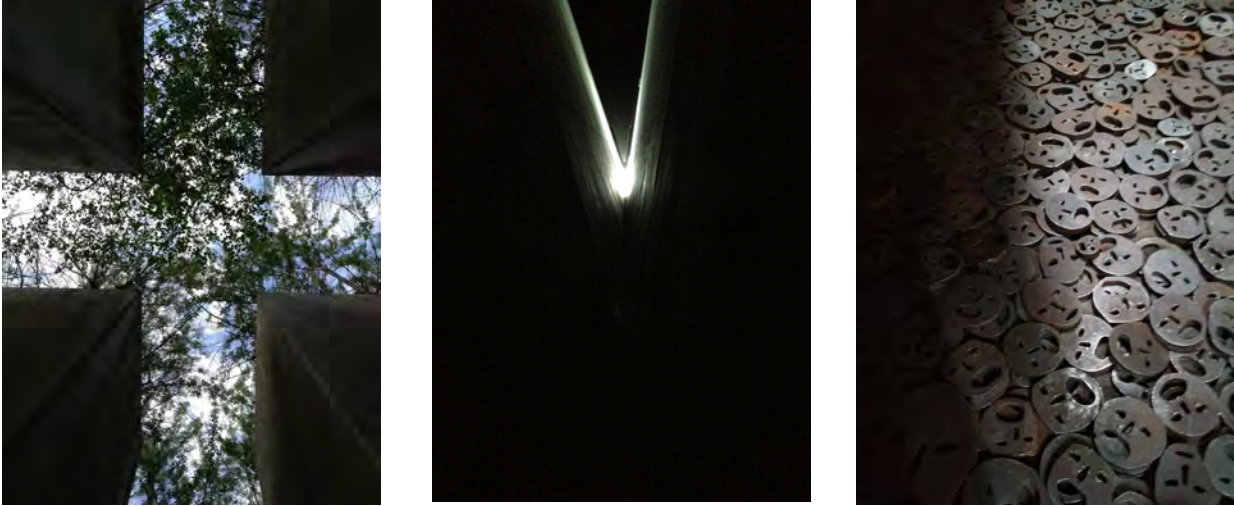


Fig. 12 + 13 + 14: The three sublime moments of Libeskind's Jewish Museum, Berlin

The genocide exhibit, of 10,000 scared faces, flame-cut in steel discs, designed to walk on, was haunting. Each faced seemed real. It took all ones energy to walk on the faces. It's dedicated to the people affected by genocide everywhere. It is something everyone should experience.

Our tour guide at the Jewish Museum was perhaps the most comprehensive tour guide of our tour, of any tour I have every experienced. A ten year veteran, he was clearly in his element. He gave something most tour guides don't; he gave us some of himself. His insights, his observations, his idiosyncrasies. He was a delight to watch, be with and listen too. Just wonderful.

As an aside, the composition of the tour in retrospect significantly added to the experience. Staying at the Campers Hotel (of Campers shoe fame) helped add to the understanding of a bohemian, fun and funky Berlin experience. A crazy, brave undercurrent amidst the old fine-grained city.

London

COMMERCIAL'S NOT A DIRTY WORD

Starchitects doing it RIGHT and other greatness.

I've been to London many times. I've lived there. I have family there. It feels like a second home. But this tour changed my perspective, through meeting its architects, getting under its skin, a little more of London became known.

I have long loved the urban-ness of London. Paddington's grand classical terrace apartments line the streets, reminding us of the greatness of the Victorian Period and the British Empire. It's not all like this of course, but it's a powerful memory.



Fig 15. London's Paddington terrace lined streets

London is the home of many of the world's Starchitects. Architects that are a brand, in a superficial sense, that cities and countries employ to lift the local tone of architecture, to break local planning codes with the shock and awe of their celebrity, and quite simply, to put themselves on the world map.

Foster, Rogers, Hadid, to name but a few, plus the grand second tier, Grimshaw, Chipperfield, Pawson et al, strike a fairly imposing presence on the world architecture scene, but it's the small firm of FAT [Fashion, Architecture, Taste] that instantly shift the base.

FAT, whose lyrical and playful work could best be describe as Neo Post Modern was incredibly thoughtful, local and refreshing. It was also deliberately honest, even in its tricks. FAT was in many ways a humanized form of architecture- the clothes it wore, the fashion, was simply that; it was the taste of the personality of the house/building/office to express themselves as they saw fit, but underneath, there was substance.

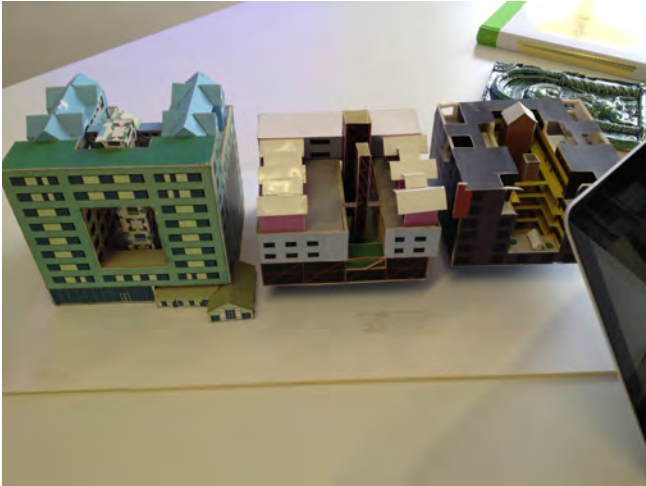


Fig 16. FAT's models, London

In stark contrast was Carmondy Groake- an impressive young firm winning and building international competitions. They were a nice bunch of people; very personable, but the moment we talked architecture, I felt the opposite. The language became a little bit impenetrable “archibabble” – which seems to litter universities today, a language that is not used nor understood by the many. There were clear trends in their work, but they didn't agree. There was also a lineage from their time in senior roles at Chipperfield's, but with little recognition of that line. I was disappointed probably because they are good, but measured through my own beliefs of accessible language and open paths, I felt the obfuscation rendered the beauty of their work into something less. Mine is a personal experience and one that doesn't diminish their work, but remains useful for my development.

The next double (Foster + Rogers) was the reverse. I was expecting Foster's to be disappointing, and Rogers' to be better than Foster's. Not just in the quality of their work, but in their approach. Instead Foster's campus was the more impressive; three model shops, a materials library the size of many medium sized practices and the generous giving of Thoria Istephan's time (a partner at Forster's) was a great start. Then to hear the story of the firm and Norman Foster's own personal success and now fortune, was for me, heartening – for I share the belief that architecture and architects should take themselves financially seriously.



Fig. 17. Foster's Model wall, London



Fig 18. One of Foster's model shops, London

Indeed the overarching impression from Foster's was that being COMMERCIAL, in architecture, is not a dirty word and can be synonymous with good architecture. Architecture is as professional as the top professions and Foster's understood this. It is how I hope to run my practice. To undertake good design, but also make a professional's income.

And their work is impressive: as evidenced in Abu Dhabi or with the British Museum, the Gherkin, the list was endless. I expected to like Foster's the least and I think I left the tour with their work some of my favourites. Impressive!



Fig 19. Foster's British Museum, London

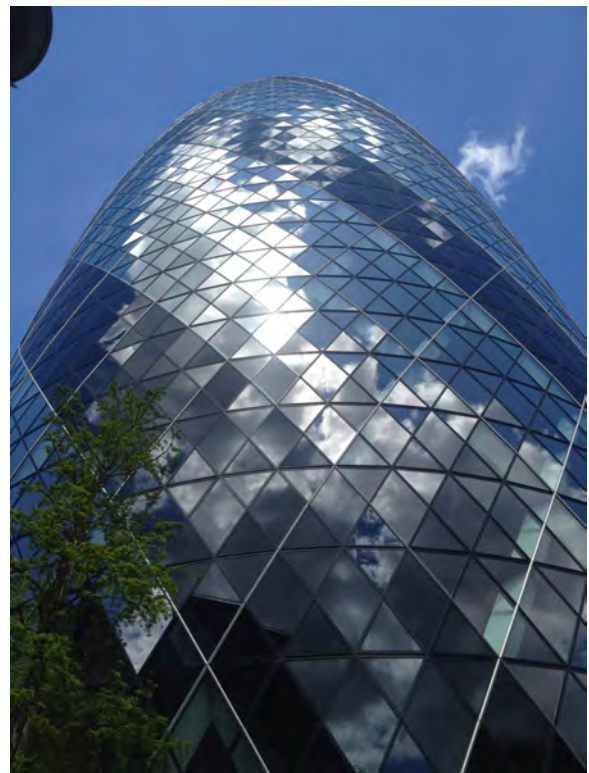


Fig 20. Foster's Gherkin, London

Rogers' next and a similar impression permeated the place, but to a lesser degree. The usual resident Aussie was trotted out to take us on a limited tour of the place with no real substance despite the fact the place obviously had it in truck loads. I wanted to meet Richard Rogers, his personality; in the form of bold primary colours, was everywhere. What were the firm's beliefs? What did they see their architecture as? How is their work evolving? I wanted to hear the incredible story of the Pompidou Centre. Instead nothing. Well nothing more than we could glean from our pleasant hosts and the work on the desks and walls. I was a little disappointed, probably because of the raised bar Foster's set.

In my practice we build physical scale models of our work. We think it is important in the understanding and formulation of three-dimensional space. In the big, professional and very commercial world of Foster, Rogers right the way down to FAT, model making was important. So important in fact that in many firms it was their main show-piece. That, to me, was telling.



Fig 21. Rogers' Model display, front foyer, London

Money, models, professional and commercial. These are not dirty words. These are the cornerstone, the bedrock of the firms in London and I found that refreshing.

The Dulux Study Tour is a special tour for an architect; a once in a lifetime experience. To see the quality work we did, meet the quality of architects we met, and all have them give up their time to show us around their practices and their work was a rare gift. I felt privileged.

The gift the Australian Institute of Architects and Dulux has given us, the current tourists of 2012, past tourists and the tourists to come cannot yet be fully known. But I am sure the Dulux Study Tours, a legacy of the Grand tours of Europe will live on long and for many.

A tour like this opens your eyes. It makes you see. Corb would approve.