



DULUX STUDY TOUR 2012

Post Tour Report - Weian Lim

*"This tour could only be as wonderful as it has because of the calibre of the other winners...It's every archiNerds dream to tour these wonderful cities, practices and building with people of like mind and a desire to interrogate the architecture beyond the obvious, the smoke screens and the superficial. "*

-taken from Shaun Carter's DST blog entry, 16th May 2012



Top (L-R) Phil White (Dulux), Weian Lim (DST 2012), James Coombe (DST 2012), Emily Ouston (DST 2012), Kahlea McGeechan (AIA)  
Bottom (L-R): Tina White, Anna Maskiell (DST 2012), Shaun Carter (DST 2012), Sarah Nadenbousch (Dulux)



## FOREWORD

It seemed like only yesterday when our collective band of winners and sponsor representatives of this coveted Tour first met face to face in Adelaide for the 2012 Australian Achievement in Architecture Awards. The nervous and polite niceties quickly made way for the impending excitement for the tour and experiences to come. And once it kicked off, the excitement never waned.

As the tour concludes its fifth consecutive year, it's hard not to appreciate how fortunate we have been. This year saw us travel to the United Arab Emirates, Berlin and London. For many of us it was our first time setting foot in the Middle East. To have the velvet curtain drawn back for us and have a rare opportunity to peek into the opulence, decadence and sheer luxury of this part of the world was a privilege. The stark contrast then drawn with the European cities offered a different perspective and generated interesting discourse throughout our trip.

My heartfelt thanks and gratitude go out to Dulux for their generosity and vision for gifting this wonderful opportunity to young architects, and championing emerging architectural talent. Many thanks to Phil White for his wisdom, humour and all-rounded guidance, to Sarah for her effervescence and spirit, and to Kahlea from the Institute for her saint-like patience and grace.

It was a wonderful privilege travelling and sharing this journey with such like-minded people; comrades-in-arms I have found in Shaun, Anna, Emily and James. They all epitomise the grand spirit of the tour and I promise you they will be ones to look out for in the very near future.

The Dulux Study Tour truly lives up to its claim as a 'once in a lifetime' opportunity and like my fellow Tour winners before me, I strongly urge every young architect passionate about their craft to participate and experience this for themselves.

Weian Lim  
June 2012

## SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR PROUD SPONSORS





View of the 180m tall atrium in the Burj Al Arab, Dubai.



## ICONIC vs HISTORIC

One of the most prevalent reference points during the course of the tour was the comparison made between the urban skyline and architecture of Dubai/Abu Dhabi against the more established European cities of Berlin and London. The term 'iconic architecture' has been used carelessly in the past decade to describe the biggest, tallest, latest mega-superstructures, yet the term has fallen into disrepute. In London, Davis Langdon solidified this thought by posing us the question, "*how many tall icons can a city sustain?*"

From the 124th floor observation deck of the Burj Khalifa, we were in awe of the clusters of free-standing engineering marvels lining the vast desert—towering follies testament to the oil wealth they are surrounded by.

Practices such as Arup, Aedas, and Atkins have managed to secure enviable projects before the bursting of the UAE construction bubble. Architects we have spoken to hail Dubai as a mecca for realising architectural fantasies, but in the same breath they acknowledge the fragility of the economy and the temporal nature of their place in a foreign land.

In contrast, the architectural approach in Berlin is more sensitive due to the social, cultural and economic drivers of a city laden with battle scars from history. There is a raw energy flowing through Berlin – it is cool and exciting, but holds on to an impetus to conserve, restore and re-stitch the old Baroque city centre, whilst tending to the social fabric after the reunification of East and West Berlin.

This ambition of bringing the past into the present is exemplified in the restoration and reconstruction works of Chipperfield's Neues Museum. During our Berlin bicycle tour Georg Dux, we learnt that there is even a plan to reconstruct the formerly demolished Berlin City Palace, albeit a slightly updated version.

## SUSTAINABILITY ON THE LIPS

The site visit to Masdar City in Abu Dhabi was a revelation to all of us. This self-contained city envisioned by Fosters is touted to be the world's first zero-carbon city. Due to the financial crash and the current limitations of renewable energy, this vision was not completely realized. The partially constructed part of the city (Masdar Institute and its student dormitories) now aims for low carbon targets instead.

Despite this, we were still thoroughly awe-struck with the intent and courage to go through with this vision. It could have been very easy to dismiss this as a PR stunt. After all we as architects are conditioned to question everything and challenge the status quo. The sell of a truly zero-carbon city just sounds too good to be true.

But unlike the Abu Dhabi Investment Council Headquarters, Masdar City has some genuine clout to it. As a case study for the future of cities tackling the ever-present topic of sustainability, we have much to learn from the outcomes of this mega exercise. The city employs some technological wizardry (the Personal Rapid Transport cars are very Tron-esque) but at the heart of it is the smart and extensive use of passive solar design. Only in the Middle East will such an experimental petri-dish hold its own next to towers of concrete and glass in such sharp juxtaposition.





Colonnade of the Neues Museum in Berlin. Original design by Friedrich August Stüler, restoration works by David Chipperfield.



## ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTIES

The escalation of the GFC and volatility in European markets bring uncertainty to architectural practice. Larger practices like Atkins, Fosters, Rogers Stirk Harbour and Wilkinson Eyre are fortunate to be able to weather the economic downturn better than their contemporaries. A common example of managing efficiencies is to organise in-house specialist management groups as a way of streamlining the design and project delivery processes, and expanding their client base regionally and/or globally.

A multi-disciplinary practice with a sustainable yet commercial business model seems to be proving its mettle during these tough times.

## ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE

Despite the current poor economic form, more modest practices are still able to keep their head above water and push through with notable projects. Practice visits to FAT, Realities United and Carmody Groak showed us how they positioned themselves in niche markets, while being able to embrace and push the limits of architecture within their given capacity.

It was interesting to see the type of projects these practices undertake. In a way economic strife means practices cannot be choosy with work, but what is commendable is the way certain practices are able to manufacture a work methodology that allows them to explore their flavor of architecture. Dedication to research, experimentation and hybridization were some of the keys-words heard throughout the tour.

## MODELS, MODELS, MODELS

What struck me during our practice visits was the strong presence of scale models, both as design tools and works of art (Rogers has their models beautifully displayed in their office foyer, as does Fosters and Wilkinson Eyre). It was always refreshing and encouraging walking into these offices and appreciating the high level of detail they employ to these scaled masterpieces.

In an age where a heavy reliance on CAD and 3D software removes the designer away from tangible craft, the importance of model making cannot be underestimated. Jens Lorbeer from Chipperfield's Berlin office iterates this point by showing us the effort put into their intricate models; all the intangible qualities of space can be realistically and accurately replicated for the client unlike any 3D modeling software out there.

From FAT's simple colourful study models, to Realities United's experimental light installations, and to Foster's and Arup's own impressive in-house model-making facilities, it seems like most offices placed a strong emphasis on the importance of creating physical artifacts to study and evaluate.

## COLLABORATION + NETWORKING

The importance of architectural competitions, JVs with fellow design offices and cross-disciplinary collaborations were highlighted as ways to sustain business. An alignment of common interest is an effective approach to acquire projects in a diminishing economy. The collegiate nature of our profession is as apparent overseas as it is here at home in Australia.

Which brings me to my gratitude and appreciation to the people and architects who welcomed us into their offices with open arms. A success of the DST is the networking opportunity it presents to emerging architects. Establishing ties with foreign offices is greatly advantageous, especially in an era when global thinking has become a necessity to stay relevant and connected.





View of the entry canopy of the 'Gherkin' - 30 St Mary Axe, London.





## WORK + LIFESTYLE CULTURE

The business culture we had seen in the three countries could not have been more different. A “when in Rome” mentality had to be adopted by the practices working in the Middle East. The difference in culture comes with differences in building and business standards. As Duncan Parkinson from Woods Bagot succinctly pointed out, “*any market is only as strong as the rule of law*”. Simon Crispe of Atkins gave us a further insight into the unorthodox business practises in Dubai whilst we were enjoying lunch atop the Burj Al Arab.

In the UAE, cultural by-laws influence and filter into corporate hierarchy. Those not familiar with the way the locals conduct business may find it frustrating dealing with middle-men instead of communicating directly with the decision makers.

Surprisingly, when quizzed about the work and lifestyle in Dubai, almost every working architect we asked responded positively. They recognise that the lifestyle in Dubai is not suited to everyone’s taste, however it has worked out for them and some even set up families there.

## POST-TOUR THOUGHTS

To be back on Australian soil a month after traipsing across the globe to 3 fascinating countries seems almost too surreal. As the jetlag subsides, we can all look back fondly on the memories and unique experiences had in some of the most exciting architectural cities of the world today.

As mentioned before, the contributing factor to the success of this tour is its people – the people we have met and engaged with along the way have stimulated and challenged our pre-conceived architectural notions and predilections. Charismatic and thought-provoking individuals such as Simon Crispe (Atkins), Shaun Killa (Atkins), Lars Kruckeberg (Graft), Andy Groake (Carmody Groake) and even venerable Kevin McCloud have all left significant lasting impressions.

From standing over the world in the Burj Khalifa, to exploring beautiful Berlin on bikes, to witnessing the sleek urbanscape of London, this journey has been such a well-rounded experience catered to archi-nerds like us. Visits to practices – from the rigors of offices focused on bespoke detail-orientated architecture to the more commercial giants - have given me a renewed appreciation for our profession. It has perhaps allowed me to re-discover my passion for our craft, and more importantly, inspired me on both a personal and professional level.

Once again, my sincere thanks to Dulux, the Institute, and to Shaun, Anna, Emily and James for their dedication and inspiration.



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