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PAUL EDWARDS  
DULUX STUDY TOUR

LONDON – PARIS – LONDON  
10 -17 May 2009



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Being announced as one of the lucky 5 emerging Australian Architects to embark on this year's Dulux Study Tour was a surprising honour. It was humbling to be considered to have made a significant contribution to projects and the architectural profession in my relatively short career.

After reviewing the planned itinerary on the 24 hour flight to London, I was filled with anticipation and uncertainty as to what the week would reveal about architecture, practice and the 4 other Australian architects.

The tour offered me a view in to the everyday workings of a number of very different practices; Zaha Hadid's cluttered rabbit warren, the prototyping workshop of Urban Salon and the almost monastic feel of Studio Milou, to name a few. These practice visits together with the tours of projects and significant places in London and Paris, sparked many engaging discussions and debates among the group about architecture, practice and where we all fit in.

In writing this report, I didn't think it would be interesting or appropriate to simply recount the chronological events of the tour through my personal narration; rather I have elected to describe my personal experiences and thoughts on the **Profession, Place, Projects, Practice** and **People**, from the tour.



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## PROFESSION

The tour commenced with a visit to Royal Institute of British Architects at 66 Portland Place, who in 2009 are celebrating 175 years.

We were introduced to the activities of RIBA in the midst of recession and noted that the institute were offering recession survival kits to aid those architects that are in the 30% reportedly affected. RIBA has become a 'helpline' for many with one of their aids being information packs and seminars on how to start up a business in the current tight economy. They also discussed their activities with lobbying government to initiate infrastructure projects and other key civic works to stimulate the economy – primarily in health and education.

We were given a tour of **RIBA headquarters** built in 1930's and purposely designed for RIBA. It is a Grade 2 listed building and seems to be on the tour itinerary for London Bus Tours. The building has a café, exhibition and conference spaces used regularly by the public for seminars, exhibitions, weddings, and events such as BBC filming. It has an extensive reference book library and catalogued archive of around 4M drawings, sketches and images of buildings.

The most interesting aspect of RIBA for me was the fact they open the doors to the public as a venue for hire. Their location in the heart of London makes this a much sort after venue which they get a return on – monetary and through public awareness of the RIBA, its activities and architecture in general. RIBA welcomes and accommodates further public interaction with the profession through exhibitions, the book shop and café.

It is obvious that the attitude of RIBA towards engaging with the public has no doubt contributed to the respect and appreciation the profession has within the English community. This makes me think of how the WA Chapter of the Institute could improve their 'mix' with the public in the same manner as RIBA. The recent relocation to the western suburbs from the CBD, for me, was a move away from the public. When I think of many of my friends that do not know what an architect really does, I ask myself, what more can our local chapters do to permeate the profession into the public?





## PLACE

Ex Archigram and author of *London's Contemporary Architecture*, Ken Allinson, took us on a 'brisk' walking tour of the fringes of London. The '**East End**' is a mix of the old and new, where the commercial sky scrapers were taking over the old working class flats and warehouses. Warehouses are converted into apartments and offices, or are being knocked down to make way for sprouting little residential gems or galleries such as Rivington Place.

This area seemed to suffer from an identity crisis – a typical trait of all cities inner mixed zones. Consequentially, this results in delightful hidden public spaces dotted among the mix revealed through the narrow alley ways.

Some interesting contrasts were seen in the commercial quarter between the POMO of SOM vs the recent works of SOM and Arup. Rodgers' Lloyds of London, and the old open market where Fosters has invaded with a new commercial take over bringing with it, increased rents and driving out the spirit and richness of the former markets.

In another contrast, we were given a guided tour of **La Defense** – the commercial hub of a new Paris and the end of the 'Axe Historique'. The tour involved a visit to the Espace Info La Defense, a museum of the history of La Defense showing models and original proposals of the master plan including iconic buildings by international architects. The museum was fascinating and shows the importance that the French Government gave (and continues to give) to planning and architecture.

A host of buildings were pointed out by our French historian and their significance in the development of La Defense was recounted. The tour lead us to an exhibition of Master Plans recently completed by 10 planners / architects for Paris at La Cite de L'Architecture et du Patrimoine - both the master planning exercise and the City of Architecture and Heritage are orchestrations of President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The commitment of the leading government to master planning for the future development of Paris and getting these ideas (whether feasible or not) into the public realm, is admirable. It makes me feel how our state government's efforts fall well short of achieving similar successful outcomes for architecture in Perth. Obviously Perth is no comparison to Paris with its large population and long history, therefore I would think it would be a much simpler?

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## PROJECTS

The tour presented only a couple of specific project visits, outside of the usual London and Paris landmark attractions, Le Grande Arche and London Eye included.

After visiting David Chipperfield's practice and being treated like a group of interrupting students we felt right at home at [Queen Mary University of London](#), although they do not offer architecture as a course of study. The student housing had recently received a RIBA Award and was meant to have significant architectural merit.

The facilities manager who we had difficulty pronouncing his name, spoke highly of the Universities 'success' in attracting quality students through providing interesting unique architecture and spaces. The accommodation campus 'feel' and planning appeared forced, with a collection of seemingly random, unrelated buildings of various decades sitting awkwardly among each other.

At first glance the student housing projects appeared to have the ingredients to live up to premise of the Award. Numerous boxes clad with copper, timber and brickwork created an interesting external fabric which seemed to follow the current trend in materials.

Once inside, the projects lost their taste and fell immediately into mediocrity. Poor choices of finishes and materials internally meant that it looked tired after only a short few years of service. The copper cladding was also reported as 'a mistake' as it was an ongoing maintenance issue for the University. It was revealed they were completed through a Design and Construct process which seemed to answer the rest of our questions. The new Humanities Building by Wilkinson Eyre currently under construction promises to introduce the campus to architecture which goes beyond facadism.

The 'success' of the external spaces these buildings created was challenged by the band that played music in a central courtyard to a captivated audience of only four, two of whom appeared to be staff members. Perhaps it was the pending exams, the poor selection of music genre, or the typical cold English weather that kept the students, mostly from Asia, locked away in their rooms.



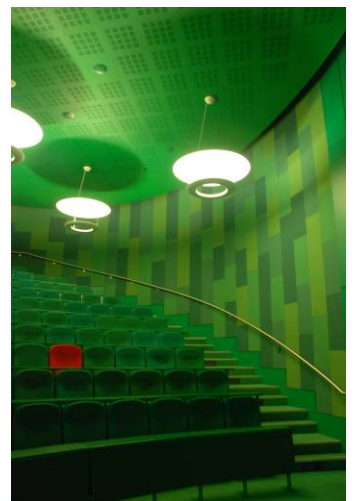
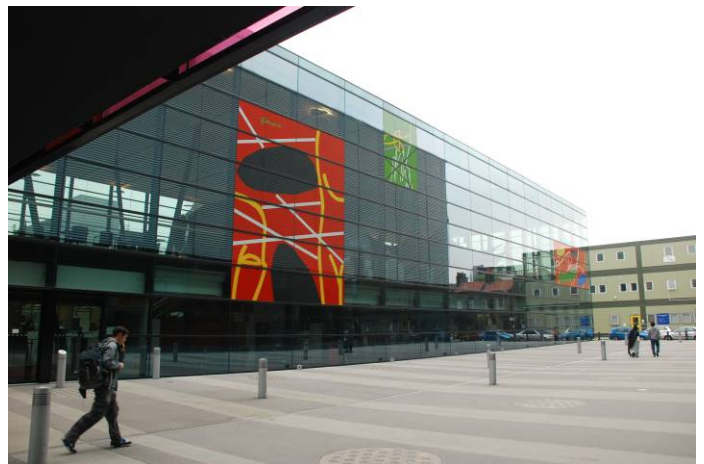
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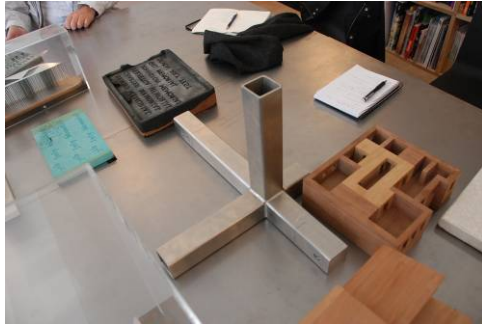
Another 2008 RIBA Award winner, the Cell and Molecular Science Institute or **Blizard building** by Will Alsop was exceptional. The two symmetrical glass boxes reveal little of their internal delights from the vast entry courtyard. The playful forms of 'molecules and cells' create an animated working and learning environment. We all walked around in awe of the way the building challenged traditional models of white walled corridors of laboratory cells and managed the complex servicing and access issues associated with medical research facilities.

The modern glass building sits in a mixed socioeconomic demographic with an equally mixed built environment consisting mainly of aging hospital architecture. The glass façade camouflages the use through reflecting the surrounding buildings and the inner courtyard creates an open relief from the tight, dust bin and car filled surrounding streets.

The facilities manager was a wealth of knowledge on the history of the building, the process and the success of the built outcome. Overall, the tour of this facility was informative and inspirational. It made me feel that with architectural rigour (and a willing client with plenty of money), anything is achievable. Alsop's work doesn't appeal to everyone as it can appear like meaningless adornment, excessive or over engineered folly. Elements of this building can be easily labelled as such without experiencing them first hand, or by viewing pictures out of context.

It is the experience that these facilities provide that has won them an Architectural Award but, more importantly, has attracted world class scientists leading cancer and stem cell research. Although the architecture of Will Alsop often makes me question the relevance, in this project, the relevance is very clear when the building is experienced. This reinforces my belief that one should avoid passing comment or judging architecture through images or during construction. Architecture is not a drawing, idea or concept, like art and sculpture, it is to be experienced. The Blizard Building is proof of this notion.





## PRACTICE

Since being in my own practice for a couple of years, I have gained strong interest in other architectural practices, their principles and culture and how these influence their work. With a diverse line up of practice visits from the large and famous to the small and unknown, I was looking forward to some interesting insights.

It is surprising how quickly I established or changed my opinion about a practice and architects work after visiting their practice. We visited the offices of **Zaha Hadid** where I am baffled as to how such a segregated and overcrowded workplace culture can create consistently *successful* projects. I can only put it down to arrogant personalities of Zaha and Patrik, which could also be responsible for a consistently high turn over (of staff and profit!). Being artists, this shoe seemed a good fit. In an office where 'senior staff' related to anyone with more than 12 months continual employment, I felt that the architectural outcomes were directly proportional with the Rhino CAD skills of the foreign worker on the project at the time.

After failing to adequately answer even the most simplest of questions about the practice and how it operated, our err...ummm...'senior staff' host left me feeling disappointed.

**Urban Salon**, a small practice established from an exhibition / branding background, brought us all back into the human world of architectural craft. Rather than form production. The practice's work is diverse and there was a clear emphasis on the *making* of architecture evidenced by an office which is mostly a model and prototyping workshop.

We visited the Hyde Park 2005 London Bombing Memorial currently in construction, by **Carmody Groarke**. Louis described winning the competition through not providing a design solution but by offering a process - working with the victim's families to establish the brief for the memorial. Carmody Groarke created a memorial for the victim's families but also for the survivors. The process involved extensive collaboration without being too influenced by victims preconceived ideas of what a memorial should look like.

**"...it should be blue as it is my sons favourite colour."**

We later visited their office where we had an engaging discussion on the project and the practices process. The best thing I got out of this was the rigour the firm goes through to get the finish / design outcome they feel is required. They liaise direct with trades and gain an understanding of their processes to be able to come in at the right moments to be able to influence the outcome. For example, through working with a local foundry they learned about temperature affects of molten steel, different properties of sands and their affect of burn finishes on steel, rate of pouring (wave on top as it cools), casting letters and the font / size - steel cant get into the gaps - different results (almost random outcomes).

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Working closely with the trades encourages the trades to think and refine their own skills to create better outcomes (become craftsmen) which they wouldn't normally get the opportunity (generates a greater sense of pride).

Kenga **Kuma Associates** is another practice where I felt there was a sense of *making* architecture. The cluttered office of models and material samples supported a practice exploration in texture and its affect on light. Again, I see a rigorous testing ground of consistent and deliberate architectural ideas like CG through drawings and models.

**Jean François Milou**, director of the small French practice Studio Milou, gave us an intimate presentation of the practice history and projects. Milou was able to really describe how he likes to work and you could see how this influenced the practice; its office culture and the projects. Clear desks and a quiet, almost monastic office environment is believed by Milou to produce a calm restraint in their work.

Studio Milou's projects are generally museums, adaptive re-use or restorations and he sees these as an opportunity to change the way you see the existing but essentially change nothing – to reinvent the experience of the existing but not recreate something new which obstructs or mars the existing – “link with the past but not changing anything.”

Milou's work revealed that even large scale projects can have the craft and attention to detail of much smaller, delicate projects. Mulhouse Automobile Exhibition (2006) – the exhibition was also designed by the practice including all photographic and graphic design. Milou hired a graphic artist to work in the office which demonstrates their 'holistic' approach to design - to have enough 'control' to be able to realise an idea. This is similar to Carmody and Groarke who experiment and work with trades to get the desired outcome. Could we work with trades persons in the same manner as we work with sub consultants?

Unlike the trend of model making and prototyping set by Urban Salon and Carmody Groarke, Milou use computer modelling. Believing that physical models aren't precise enough, Milou uses 3D cad models for designing which can be worked over before being given to trades, consultants, etc. two different ways of working, I can see merits of both methods depending on the outcome you are seeking. I have favoured hand made models in the past but in recent times have found myself needing to translate more complex ideas into translatable instructions which is where the computer has stepped in.





## PEOPLE

For me, the interaction with people over the tour was just as rewarding as the projects and practices. On the first day in London, I walked through Hyde Park into Oxford with Scott. Over a couple of hours, Scott discussed his views on the profession and that through traditional tendering and administration processes, budgets are almost always exceeded and the architect is held responsible. As a result, the role of the architect can be perceived as diminishing in favour for construction management procurement methods and design and Construct, where the architect's role is reduced to a drafting role for the main contractor.

As custodians of the profession, we held mutual feelings that we had a responsibility to ensure that architects remained in or improved their current respect and therefore responsibility as the leader in design and building. We discussed possibilities for architects to play a more active role during the tendering process and on site. This could be through liaising direct with the sub contractors and tendering separate packages to try and minimise the loss of information and misunderstandings of the design intent. Additionally, this would increase sub contractors input in to design, construction process and cost control to achieve the desired outcomes.

As main contractors seem to be just managers and the design intent is often not 100 percent clear or fully captured through drawings and specifications, communication breakdowns can occur when translations rely on information from architect to main contractor through to subcontractor and then trades on site. A more direct dialogue between architects and Trades could improve the quality of projects and minimise costs.

This exchange with Scott on the first day made me view and question the practices we visited to help answer some of the questions this view posed. Like Carmody Groarke's engagement of the steel foundry through an independent sub contractor tender process, or Studio Milou's holistic design of the building, exhibition and graphics for the Mulhouse Automobile exhibition, I learned that successful architecture results from architects having a certain level of authority but not being dictatorial.

Where Carmody Groarke learned of the temperatures needed to achieve certain metal finishes from the trades persons, the trades learned new skills and developed a new passion for their craft throughout the process of pushing their skill and beliefs to achieve an architectural intent. Both architect and tradesperson developed a mutually rewarding partnership, somewhat reminiscent of earlier times when architects were 'master builders'. Could we work with trades persons in the same manner as we work with sub consultants? A topic for future thought.

Another interesting discussion arose with Amelia on Chandigarh, over dinner. After studying the Indian capital at university it was interesting to hear from someone who had recently visited the place. I had developed mixed views through university of Le Corbusier's rigid city planning around a hierarchy of transport routes which catered for citizens who generally walk or cycled. Amelia's experiences were that the road

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networks were slowly coming into use as the Indian people drove more cars than they did 50 years ago, when the city was built. Should it take 50 years before a project becomes successful?

The tour offered many other opportunities for discussion with the other winners which I have gained a lot. From Lee's work with affordable housing and sharing a similar position in his career to myself, we were able to exchange similar storeys of success and failures. Whether it was with each other, the representatives from Dulux, RIBA, the practice individuals, associates or directors, the meetings and interaction with other people over the tour I feel contributed significantly to the learning experience.

At **Carmody Groarke**, we met Louis - a very intelligent and competent architect who made a positive impression on us all with his knowledge and passion for architecture. Seeing one of his projects in construction, triggered many questions about the process which he then was able to elaborate on during his office visit later that day. He extended his time with us to give us a tour of other London Memorials and following the practice tour, furthered discussions late into the evening.

**Jean François Milou** make a good impression on me with his personal presentation of the practice. After he gave us an overview on how he started the practice, I was really able to feel where their values lie, what drove their practice culture and how it influenced their work. They work very much as a team, collaboratively on projects within the office. Milou sees himself as acting like a 'funnel' for all the information and ideas and directs it into the project.

From the practice Visit, I gained a better appreciation of **Jean Nouvel's** work which I attribute to Practice Partner Brian Wait's welcoming respect for us as fellow professionals. Unlike the other big name practices, Fosters, Hadid and Chipperfield, Wait selflessly gave us his time rather than palming us off to a practice subordinate. This had a significant impact on me and as a result, I felt repelled by the pomposity of these other practices - practices that produce good work but appear to not have a good working environment.



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## SUMMARY

The Dulux Study Tour really reinforced some values and principles in architectural practice that I have been developing for some time. Through practices such as Carmody Groarke, Urban Salon, Kuma Associates and Studio Milou, you can see the outcomes of a rigorous process and methods of testing ideas through models. Carmody Groarke show that through creative thinking, traditional processes of procuring projects can be challenged (2005 London bombings Memorial) where working direct with trades people is necessary to achieve desired outcomes.

Working closer with trades is an idea which counters the issues raised by Scott in the fact that Construction Managers are diminishing the role of the architect. Architecture is a difficult profession and it is easy to slip into just designing buildings without exploring ideas or testing boundaries. This is where meaningful, symbolic architecture lies.

Through seeing the work and practice principles behind the work of numerous London and Paris practices, the tour has rejuvenated my passion to create architecture. If you stick to your principles within practice, a strong philosophy emerges making architectural outcomes have substance, a sense of purpose and create or contribute to creating a sense of place.

Although some of the practice visits were not as positive as I expected, such as Chipperfield and Fosters, they still made a contribution to the tour. The contrast clearly identifies to me that if you're not careful, a practice can become impersonal and lose what essentially creates good architecture – human spirit. They may have it, but I certainly didn't feel it from the visit like the other practices.

I feel honoured to be one of this year's Dulux Study Tour winners and I thank Dulux, the Australian Institute of Architects and Virgin Atlantic for sponsoring such an experience. In the fast paced week I have gained valuable insight into architectural practice and a renewed enthusiasm for creating architecture which I have started to implement within my own practice. The tour also gave me the opportunity to extend my experience with a self directed study tour of educational and commercial projects in the UK. I unreservedly recommend any emerging architect or experienced graduate to enter and support this prestigious prize.

**Paul Edwards**

**Site** Architecture Studio

