

# postcards from paris + london

This series of postcards is an expression of my experience on the 2009 Dulux study tour to Paris and London. In the Atelier Jean Nouvel sense it is a dossier of my experiences, a series of tools or references, which I will use to inspire my future work.

The highlight of the tour in my mind was the practice visits as these gave a taste of different modes of practice and architectural processes, which lie at the core of the architecture produced by each studio. Critically, these were experiences that we as emerging architects might not have been exposed to undertaking independent travel and additionally visiting these offices with the study tour group allowed a critical insight into the work of these practices beyond simply going to work for one of these architects. There was room for judgment and discussion.

The best presentations gave frank candid insights into the essence of their architectural practices, beyond tours of room layouts and finding out which cad program was the most popular. These candid discussions also exposed me to a series of architectural organizations working to encourage young innovative architects develop their work and have opportunities to realize projects.\*

At the core of my experience of the tour was the question "what kind of architect do we want to be", The most refreshing aspect of the tour was to discover there are many answers to this question and perhaps multiple modes of working are available to us all.

\* The Sorrel, Foundation, The Architecture Foundation and The Chicago Ideas Competition (Chicago Architectural Club Burnham Prize)



MELISSA MEDCALF  
AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF  
ARCHITECTS  
LEVEL 2, 7 NATIONAL CIRCUIT  
BARTON ACT 2600



"Architecture defines the public realm, and it should help to define us as human beings, and to symbolise the way we look at the world; it affects our psychological well-being, and it can either enhance or detract from a sense of community. As such, we are profoundly influenced by it: by the presence, or absence, of beauty and harmony. I don't think it is too much to say that beauty and harmony lie at the heart of genuine sustainability" (HRH The Prince of Wales, RIBA Trust Annual Lecture, 12 May 2009)



Our tour began with a visit to the Royal Institute of British Architects headquarters in the west end of London, the day before Prince Charles was due to present their institutes annual lecture. As we were reminded many times during our initial welcome, we are currently in the midst of a financial crisis. As a profession whose livelihood depends on confidence and buoyancy to build and therefore progress, the future is uncertain.

The building is a symbolic representation of British architecture and British architects, including colonial references. As a piece of architecture it is full of symbolism and detail, with references to both the past and the future. The plan is crafted in such a way as to encourage a particular progression through the building, which both encourages and denies degrees of public access. The staircase is a museum of symbolic architectural motifs though the most striking feature in my mind is the grandness of the facade, which firmly declares the intentions of the institute to the street. As a piece of architecture and a place to start our tour it is not without political agenda.

For me architecture is intrinsically linked to time and place. Architects work within the public realm and therefore must engage in both political and historical discourse. From the first moments of our tour we were provided with both a physical and political setting for our visit. A number of high profile London architects had called on a boycott of the lecture. While we were not physically present at the lecture (tickets were hard to come by from all reports) this event gave our week in London a defining architectural news item to remember.



RIBA  
66 PORTLAND PLACE  
LONDON W1B 1AD  
UNITED KINGDOM



From the RIBA in the west end to a walking tour of East London with Ken Allinson we moved from the viewpoint of the institution to that of the individual architectural character. We became flaneurs for the afternoon\*. If the RIBA set the tone for politics and economics circa London, May 2009, then Ken introduced us to London in its historical and geographical context. Armed with his initial chalk diagrams of London on the pavement outside Liverpool street station his tour allowed us to map this dynamic part of London through walking, engaging in architecture from the perspective of the pavement.

Ken was full of anecdotes and details about London architecture, refreshingly, not biasing contemporary, modern or classical. The trip meandered its way past Rogers' Lloyds of London, Soane's Bank of England and Adjaye's Dirty House (painted in anti vandal black paint down an undistinguished side street)

Ken presented us with an optimism and enthusiasm about architecture, that made this tour so very enjoyable. He pointed out small details in buildings that he thought were exciting or different or trying to hard, he made us notice elements like the terracotta tiles in the lower levels of the Lloyds building or the asymmetry of the arcades in the Leadenhall market.

Ken's claim that the best architecture occurred when the architect was "being loose and enjoying it" was a typically wise remark.

\* "The flaneur plays the role of the scout in the marketplace. As such, he is also the explorer of the crowd." (Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project)



## ARCHITECTURAL DIALOGUE EAST END LONDON UNITED KINGDOM

# SPECIFICATION

definition:  
"a detailed description or assessment of requirements, dimensions,  
materials, etc., as of a proposed building, machine, bridge, etc."

Late afternoon beers at Davis Langdon concluded the prologue that was our first day.

As project managers, specification writers, design managers and cost consultants they were perfectly placed to pose questions relating to realising a project to a group of young architects. What does it mean to "make" architecture in the current market? Have construction sites become assembly points rather than building grounds? How do you describe architectural intent not just visual intent or performance criteria? Should architects be outsourcing work they aren't traditionally good at?

Each of the tour participants brought a different perspective to these issues. My lasting impression was of how I would write a specification for the trip. What would be the trades involved? The hold points and the referenced standards? Who would define the preliminaries?



DAVIS LANGDON  
71 HIGH HOLBORN  
LONDON  
UNITED KINGDOM



Not being familiar with their work or processes I had no preconceptions entering the office of Urban Salon for our first architectural practice visit. Fundamental to this multidisciplinary practice seems to be an understanding of architecture as urban branding. There is a strong graphic intent in their work evident in both the way they present their projects and the physical realisation of their designs, developed as 1:1 prototypes within the studio. Also fundamental to their work was an intimate collaboration with their clients, most spectacularly illustrated with their work with the Sorrel Foundation on the Falmouth School project where a group of school students became the client group for the project, acting out the brief as a play, reviewing the designs against their objectives and budget, commenting on the choice of materials and landscaping and participation in site visits during construction. This methodology was refreshing given the constraints that face much public work of this scale in Australia. A recent contract for a school project in Sydney expressly forbid the architect to engage in conversation discussing the project with either the school principal or the students. The joy evident in Urban Salon's project reinstalled my faith that these types of dialogues can exist and even might be encouraged by groups like the Sorrel Foundation alongside government bodies to enable architecture which is free of ego and arrogance and focuses on a bottom up approach.\*

\* not too dissimilar to many of the agendas underlying HRH address though without the classical references.

+ this postcard is a wayfinder to look at your surroundings through a single point, enabling other ideas to unfold



URBAN SALON  
UNIT A & D  
FLAT IRON YARD  
AYRES STREET  
LONDON SE11ES  
UNITED KINGDOM



As we sat around the communal table at Carmody Groarke, Lewis, a young project architect in the office presents the work of the studio. His discussion, following our earlier site visit to their 7 July memorial construction site focuses around the definition of "worth" in their architectural projects and practice. What makes a project worth something? And by association what makes it interesting to work on? This is a question I am familiar with from my work at Neeson Murcutt architects. In our studio each project is developed from a questioning of what makes it architecturally interesting and relevant beyond simply the demands of brief or program.\*

There is a beautiful density of detail in their working methods and outputs, defined by Lewis as the "bespoke intention" of the office. Fundamental to this type of practice is questions of craft and validation that demand close relationships with fabricators and craftsmen, again demands made on the project beyond the particulars of the client's brief.

The project of the Christmas card laser cut from a piece of bronze for me sums up the "worth" of the work of the office. There is a certain delight in the tactile quality of the object and an inherent beauty in the treatment of the material. It is unexpected and uses technology to create architecture rather than making architecture that is a celebration of technology (to paraphrase Lewis again).

\* It is still unclear to me whether this is best described as worth or originality though perhaps not originality of plan or detail but rather of strategy.

+ this postcard is the answer the question "what would a map of London look like made by the office of Carmody Groarke?"



CARMODY GROARKE  
25 DENMARK STREET  
LONDON WC2H 8NJ  
UNITED KINGDOM





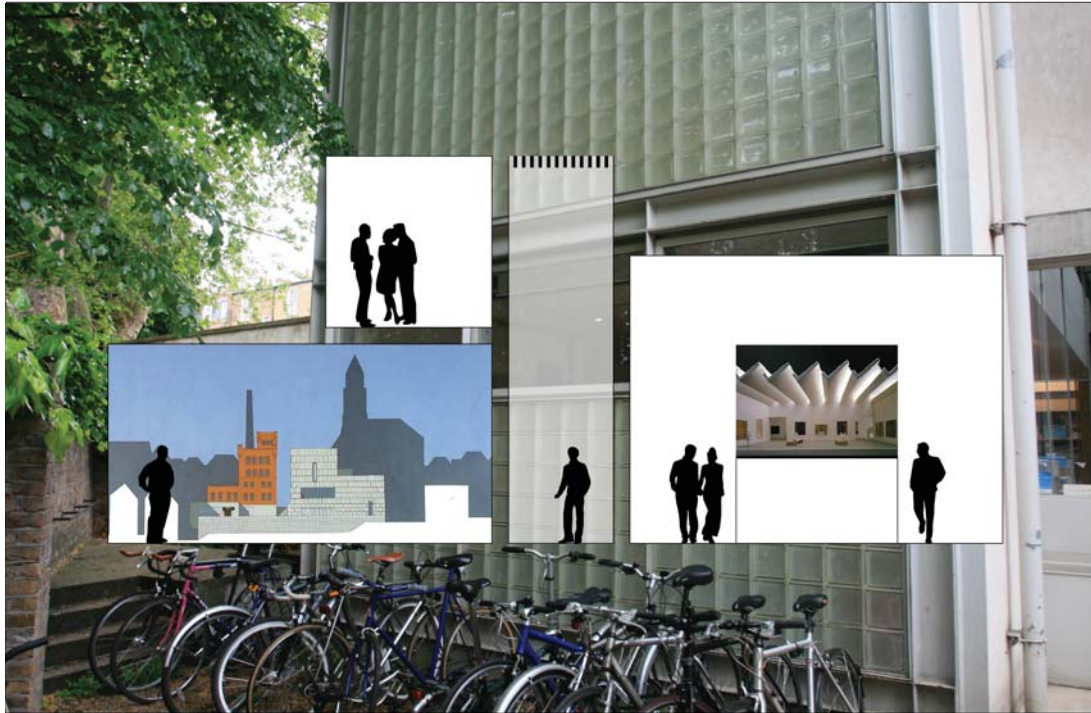
We arrived at Zaha Hadids studio at 9am in order to ensure our tour didn't interrupt anything important.

As was explained, due to the GFC, a number of staff have been let go over the last 6 months, so it is now possible to secure a computer without having to time shifts with another employee. This must be little compensation to staff members working in an environment so confidential and secure, not even they are let in on the particulars of a project.

It is a temporary building filled with temporary staff members with no sense of time or place, a blob without a beginning or end, fighting traditions without reference to real or practical concerns much like the architecture produced there. The studio is maze like, scale less, dark and damp and their glossy marketing portfolio was sadly not particularly insightful.



ZAHA HADID ARCHITECTS  
10 BOWLING GREEN LANE  
LONDON EC1R 0BQ  
UNITED KINGDOM



For me, David Chipperfield is an architect's architect so it came as no shock that his studio is an architect's architects studio, purpose built at the end of a lane, on the site of an old scrap yard, filled with natural light, beautiful models, ample working spaces and young attractive Spanish boy architects. Being in the office there is a feeling of standing in very precise mess, surrounded by people who are working very hard.

The office is filled with rough working study models and beautiful precise presentation models – the majority of which are made through the collaboration with a furniture maker close by who has been working with the office in this way for the last 20 years. There is a competition room upstairs and a machine room downstairs, during our visit they were holding CPD in the carpark, meetings in both the conference room and the meeting table in the office and a junior architect was making room to discuss the projects and methodologies with us in the hallway.

This visit also confirmed my belief in the importance of lineage in architectural practice, of the role of the mentor in developing technique and strategy as an emerging architect. Both directors of Carmody Groarke worked for Chipperfield for a number of years and the similarity in working practices and output between the studios is striking. As someone who has chosen to work with architects whose practice I would love to emulate and be honoured to be compared to one day, this is encouraging.



DAVID CHIPPERFIELD  
ARCHITECTS  
COBHAM MEWS, AGAR GROVE  
LONDON NW19SB  
UNITED KINGDOM





Foster + Partners is a big office. So big it is actually 6 architectural offices in one.

Walking up the staircase of intimidation, you have to wonder if any architecture actually happens here?

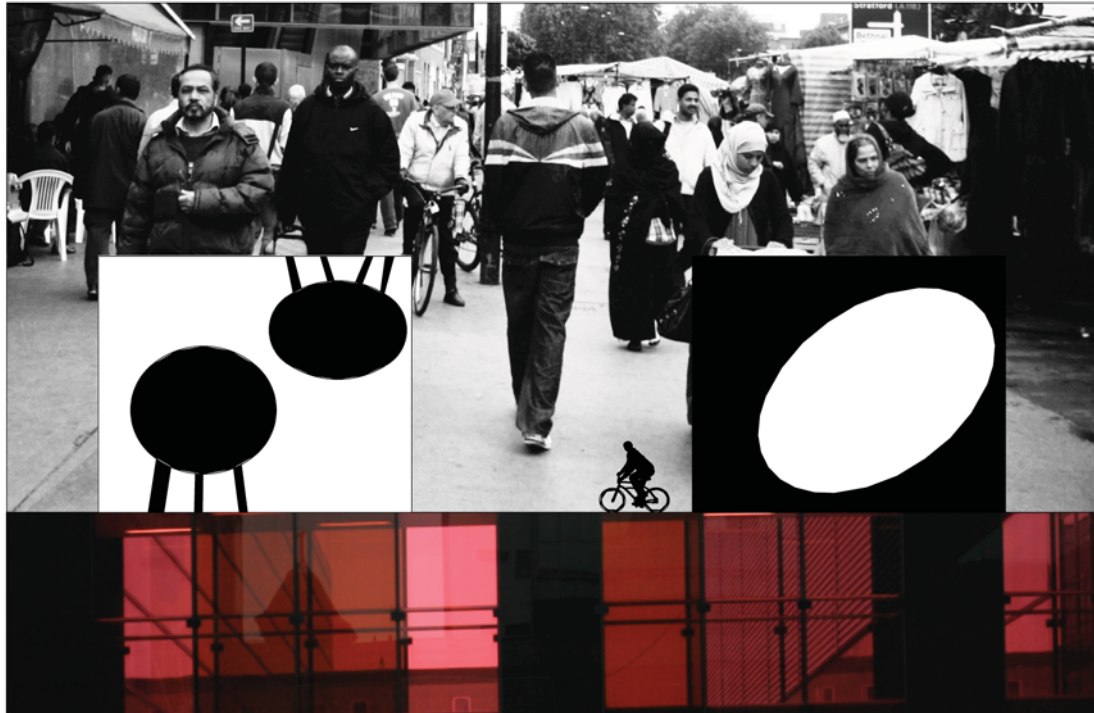
The simple answer appears to be no.

The gallery space at the heart of the office is filled with glossy 3D renderings, professionally made competition models and hard at work administration assistants and is devoid of soul, fun or in my definition architectural "worth".

A giant bronze statue of the man himself in the middle of the space would not feel out of place.



FOSTER & PARTNERS  
RIVERSIDE III  
22 HESTER ROAD  
BATTERSEA SW11 4AN  
UNITED KINGDOM



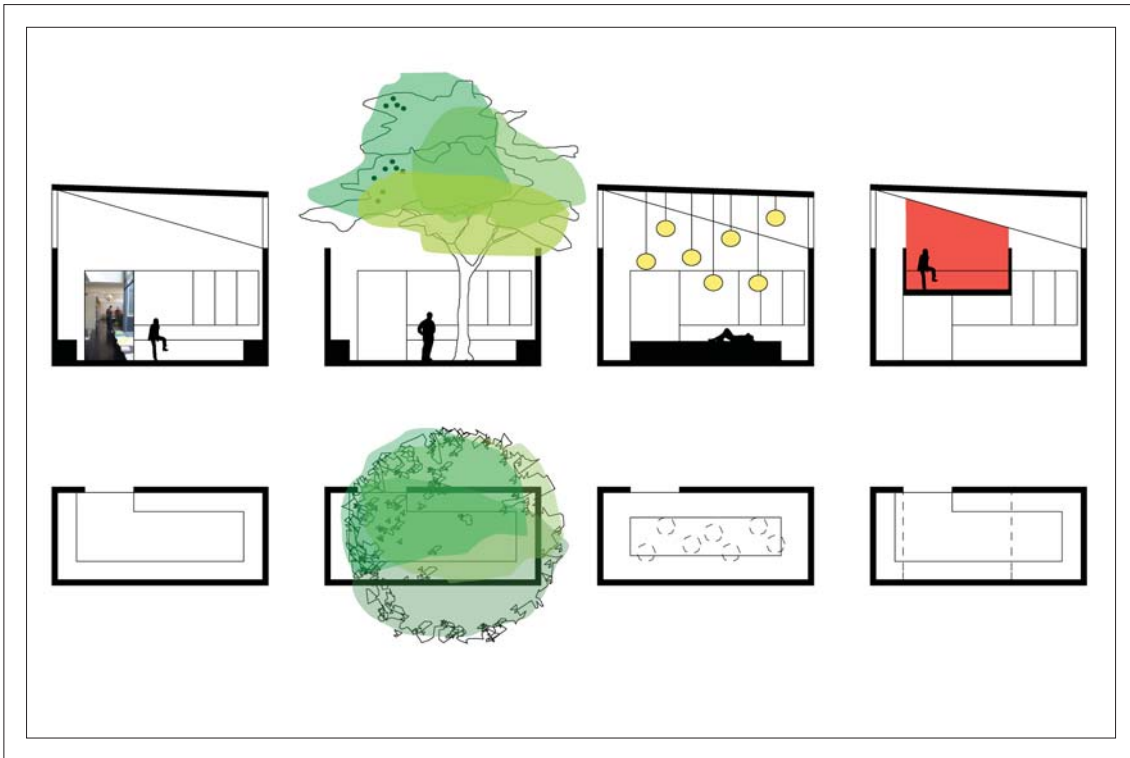
The Blizzard building won the 2006 RIBA Civic Trust award.

It's a kind of Monty Python of architecture in the flesh.

A complex and expressive glass home to a series of floating pods dropped in the middle of grimy Whitechapel with art for sale on the walls. As a piece of architecture it is immediately recognisable as a Will Alsop creation through the use of playful forms and bright colours. This is architecture with a big ego, which if executed with lesser skill may have been dismissed but is saved in my mind by the strength of the narrative diagram.



WILL ALSOP ARCHITECTS  
C/O  
THE BLIZZARD BUILDING  
WHITECHAPEL CAMPUS  
QUEEN MARY  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON  
UNITED KINGDOM



The studio of Jean Francois Milou is a small intense working environment producing rich considered projects. Milou describes his team as efficient, focussed and disciplined, and his workplace as a monastic environment for producing architecture. Speaking candidly Milou sees himself as the filter through which all the work of the office is processed. The work of the office is generally characterised by a simple plan and a complex section, complexity of materials and a lightness of touch in adaptive reuse. I had an image in my mind while sitting in the office that the place seemed to be transformed from an old discarded box or similar. For me there was a sensual allure to the practice and its methods which spoke of a committed engagement with architecture as an art and a practice. Milou gave a very personal account of the narrative of his practice and how he started out as an architect. As a young graduate he travelled around the small cities of France proposing solutions to problems he identified. He spent a day working for free in each city, approached the mayor and presented his work. Milou spoke of the two main outcomes from this work, firstly an understanding of the problems cities have and secondly an understanding that such work is architectural research and central to the investment in his own studio. Milou categorised his work as being about giving new perceptions to an existing condition, changing everything by changing nothing, much like the insight I received on architectural practice from visiting his studio.

+ This postcard is a series of proposals to reorganise my current workplace, looking at inserting an idea into the space to change the way it might be perceived.



STUDIO MILOU  
85 RUE DU TEMPLE  
75003 PARIS  
FRANCE



Kengo Kuma's satellite Paris office is an international multi lingual studio operating in a somewhat haphazard, temporary space filled with IKEA furniture and leftover bits of working models. It feels almost as if the office has been established in an international chain hotel room with the curtains drawn and its occupants not allowed out to experience the new city they are in. There is a feeling that the office could be flat packed at any moment and sent back to Japan and all the staff members sent home to their countries of origin. At the core of the work however is an inventiveness with materials and construction techniques that is explored at various scales and across various mediums in the studio. There is a relaxed intensity in the method that appears to translate into thoughtful and considered though very Japanese projects. However I am left with a lingering feeling of displacement and wonder exactly where I am in the world?



KUMA + ASSOCIATES EUROPE  
16 RUE MARTEL  
75010  
PARIS, FRANCE



Resisting the ultimate Paris cliché (Tour Eiffel) we caught the lift through the cabled canopy of la grande arche of la defence. Over the last 30 years there has been a trend in large historic cities to remove the central business district from the heart of the city. London has Canary Wharf, Sydney has North Sydney and Paris has La Defence. The architecture that tends to characterise these places in of the big ego variety with glossy glass, shiny stone, pedestrian tunnels and international food courts with varying degree of architectural success.

The giant plaza of la defence is an exercise in removal + denial of the historic Paris street, opened up as they were post revolution in order to control the masses. From a planning perspective it is an exercise in scale and density, a tool of governance to control large crowds in a public square, which both isolates and inspires in the same manner as Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

However once we remove ourselves from the ground plane, Paris exposes herself beneath us.



TOIT DE LA GRANDE ARCHE  
LA DEFENCE  
PARIS, FRANCE





Another purpose built architect's architects' studio, logically thought out, with characteristic Perrault detailing and a logic of plan and spatial organisation. There is a focus on competitions in the office, which employees work very hard on. Unfortunately I am left with a feeling that perhaps that they are all taking themselves a little too seriously? The details suddenly appear overdesigned and without any sense of playfulness, and the place stark and cold. But perhaps we expect architects offices to be places of magic rather than work and perhaps really it is the limited insight into the working methods of the studio that is the most disappointing.



DOMINIQUE PERRAULT  
6 RUE BOUVIER  
F-75011  
PARIS, FRANCE



At the Atelier Jean Nouvel, I am humbled that Brian Wait, a senior partner engages in a personal and candid discussion with our group. Jean Nouvel's practice is one of the largest and most successful in France with projects completed around the world. As the principal, Nouvel still maintains direct involvement in each project and yes this is still most definitely architecture with a big ego. However there is a charming arrogance about the practice which is in my mind very French and captured in the frank and candid dialogue we engage with from Brian.

Nouvel's workplace is not called an office or a studio but is rather an atelier – an artist's workshop. It was interesting to note that interdisciplinary collaboration appears fundamental to the architecture produced. As "artist-architects" they choose to work with "artists" rather than "consultants" in realising their projects. Graphic designers research new façade treatments, in house model makers experiment with materials and the architects are apparently not bogged down by the processes of producing something new. Brian is not ashamed to state they have a reputation for getting things done which others may not have attempted, which for me makes there work consistently interesting. There is a recognition that they aren't afraid to try something new.

Brian hinted at architectural ideas that are always of interest to the office – light reflections, depth and ambiguity and a belief that architecture and landscape are one and the same thing. It also seems that on top of these there is a spirit of the place that lends itself to reinvention and creativity at the core of the work.



ATELIER JEAN NOUVEL  
10 CITÉ D'ANGOULÊME  
75011  
PARIS, FRANCE