

DULUX STUDY TOUR 2016

POST-TOUR REPORT

Mathew van Kooy

The winners and participants of the 2016 Dulux Study Tour included myself, Chris Gilbert, Qianyi Lim, Katy Moir and Hannah Slater. We were organised and corralled by a remarkable team including Daniela Crawley, Mat Henson, Phil & Tina White and Katelin Butler. I would like to extend my thanks to all who were involved in such an extraordinary adventure.

Over 11 days the tour visited Copenhagen, Malmo, London and Madrid. The tour visited the following practices, projects and locations: Bagsvaerd Church, Jan Utzon, VM Mountain Housing, VM Housing, 8-House, Tietgen Student Housing, Holmen – Campus for Creativity, Nordre Tolbod, BOO, The Turning Torso, Sigurd Lewerentz Eastern Cemetery, Tornbuset, BIG, Jan Gehl, Tegnestuen Vandkunsten, 3XN, Lundgaard & Tranberg, Royal Playhouse, Kvæsthus, Tea Building, Rogers Stirk Harbour, Leddenhall Building, British Museum Extension, The Gherkin, The Walkie Talkie, drmm, Trafalga Place, Piercy & Co, RIBA, Zaha Hadid, WilkinsonEyre, Studio Octopi, Assemble, David Chipperfield Architects, Foster & Partners, Madrid Airport, Burgos & Garrido Arquitectos Asociados, Rio Madrid, Estudio Entresitio, Foster Foundation, Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid, AGI Arquitectos, AMID Cero9, Langarita-Navarro Arquitectos, Andrés Jaque Architects, Selgas Cano - and many more.

INTRODUCTION

The content of this report was initially produced on tour as a series of blog posts, these alone convey the furious pace of the tour and the extraordinary experience it was. This report is a post-script to the tour and along with the blog posts includes my observations of models of contemporary practice which became apparent during the tour.

We are a profession which is closed in so many ways, both inwardly to our peers and outwardly to those other to the profession. The Dulux Study Tour offers a chance to broaden the conversation internally and it affords the group the opportunity to engage with practices on the other side of the world in a different context and to perhaps see things from outside.

Valuable critical reflection is difficult to undertake while embedded in the day to day of practice. Dan Hill poignantly reinforces this in his introduction to Rory Hydes book *Future Practice: Conversations from the Edge of Architecture*:

People within a profession are often least well-placed to see the disruptive challenge or the “adjacent

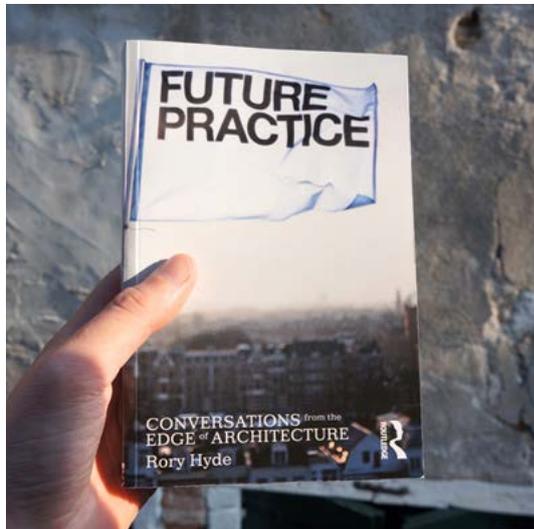


Image: *Future Practice* by Rory Hyde

possibles”, as Steven Johnson puts it. Don’t ask an architect about the future of architecture. Most won’t know. Just as few journalists, say, will know the future of journalism, or few retailers will be able to contemplate the future of retail.

From within, it is difficult to even perceive, and so question, the deeper values, motives, models or possibilities for the profession; hence, many professional bodies tend to be slowly fossilising within the compacting strata of their habits, discourse, and silent assumptions.¹

I have an interested in the way architects practice and how they represent themselves outwardly. The way they describe their work and how this compares to what they actually do on a day to day basis. This interest in part, was area of focus of my submission to the Dulux Study Tour selection criteria, it was an area that I anticipated the tour would provide the opportunity to explore. And it did, in two ways; the first being intimate discussions with the other four on the tour and the second being open discussions with the practices visited.

¹ Dan Hill, City of Sound <http://bit.ly/28XkOEI>

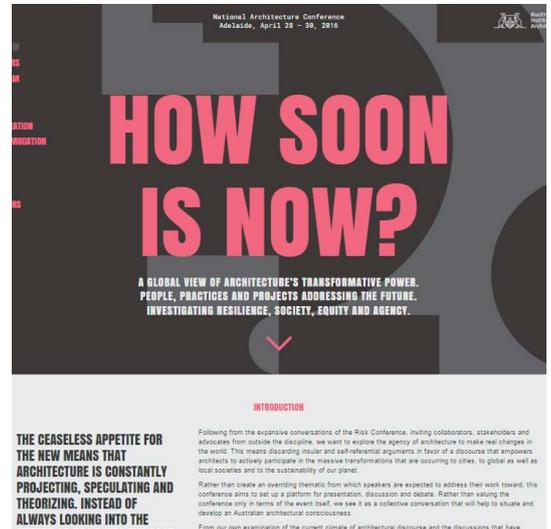


Image: *How Soon is Now* Frontispice ALA

To frame the context of the tour, the group left a fortnight after the conclusion of the 2016 Australian Institute of Architects Conference “How Soon is Now”² a conference which seemingly was dominated by the hand wringing of a profession in disarray as its speakers attempted to grappled with the relevance and value of the profession in a tumultuous age. As the conference evolved, attendees pitched their agendas at each other, it became apparent to me that as a profession we are fundamentally not collegiate nor do we talk plainly or effectively about the most basic of concerns that the profession faces. Concerns that are often phrased as “imposed” by external forces, occasionally imagined hardships which are simply the evolution of business and technology all professions are facing in the name of change.

And so the agenda was set: to interrogate different modes of practice, different scales of practice and to gain an understanding of the issues globally that architects encounter.

²AIA How Soon is Now <http://bit.ly/1VVqd1U>



Image: The Dulux Study Group with Jan Utzon

HOW THINGS WERE

We left Melbourne on the most beautiful autumnal day, off into the anywhere of airports, taxis and planes. We've arrived in Copenhagen. No one lost their bags and we have managed leave the airport quickly. Our taxi took us to the wrong hotel, this wouldn't have been a problem. However, our itinerary was back to back and the first project visit was within two hours of landing closing at 4pm promptly, it was a church after all.

Eventually we arrive at the hotel with 15mins

to spare, hurriedly we check in before another taxi is booked to take us to the Bagsvaerd Church. The taxis are already at the hotel as we disembark the first. This is no doubt a perfect opportunity to order nine different coffees in the hotel foyer. The taxis can wait, after a 21 hour flight simple pleasures seem important and coffee is essential (a shower would also be good). Nevertheless, everyone is buoyant after their coffee and we scrape together our collective knowledge on everything related to Jorn Utzon in order to be somewhat prepared to meet Jan Utzon at the Church. Our ability



Image: Makers marks, Bagsvaerd Church

to gather critical facts is somewhat impaired by the onset of jet lag, the effect of the coffee isn't working as well as some of us hoped.

Bagsvaerd Church is in a quiet suburb and there is no one in sight as we topple out of the taxis, we are however on time. Jan Utzon emerges from the small white washed pine door to greet us. Jan ushers our group into the first vestibule and gracefully describes the building, its materiality, construction methodology, detail and history. Jan talks effortlessly about a project that he knows intimately, he made the first model in his fathers office during his final year studying and took over the project management soon after. Having been involved with the project for so long he has wonderful stories about the day to day and changes that have occurred over time. He recalls a few years ago the interior was repainted and the painter proudly showing him the fine work he had done painting all of the raw exposed steel handrails, this wasn't meant to be and the poor man spent a month stripping back the paint. The hand rails are exquisite and still retain their patina unaffected by the small mishap.



Image: Pounding the street with Ken Allinson

It's a project that was holistically designed by the architects including the furniture and textiles, there are stories about these as well but that might have to wait for another time. I asked Jan where the bells came from, bells are interesting objects and often have their own history. These were made in a foundry in Denmark as was every part of the building, some of the makers still work with Utzon to repair items designed for the church. The white patterned carpet was remade by the same weavers and looms a few years ago.

The quality of light brought into the space through the improbably thin concrete shell roof is extraordinary. While we all know the project interior, most of us have never seen the exterior of the building, it is surprisingly blank and defensive and predicted the widening of a road which never eventuated. The predominantly blank masonry perimeter is composed of matte pre cast concrete and gloss enamel tiles which reflect the interior undulations of the shell roof in an abstract pattern.

Meeting Jan Utzon reminded me of a moment in time, his descriptions of the Bagsvaerd

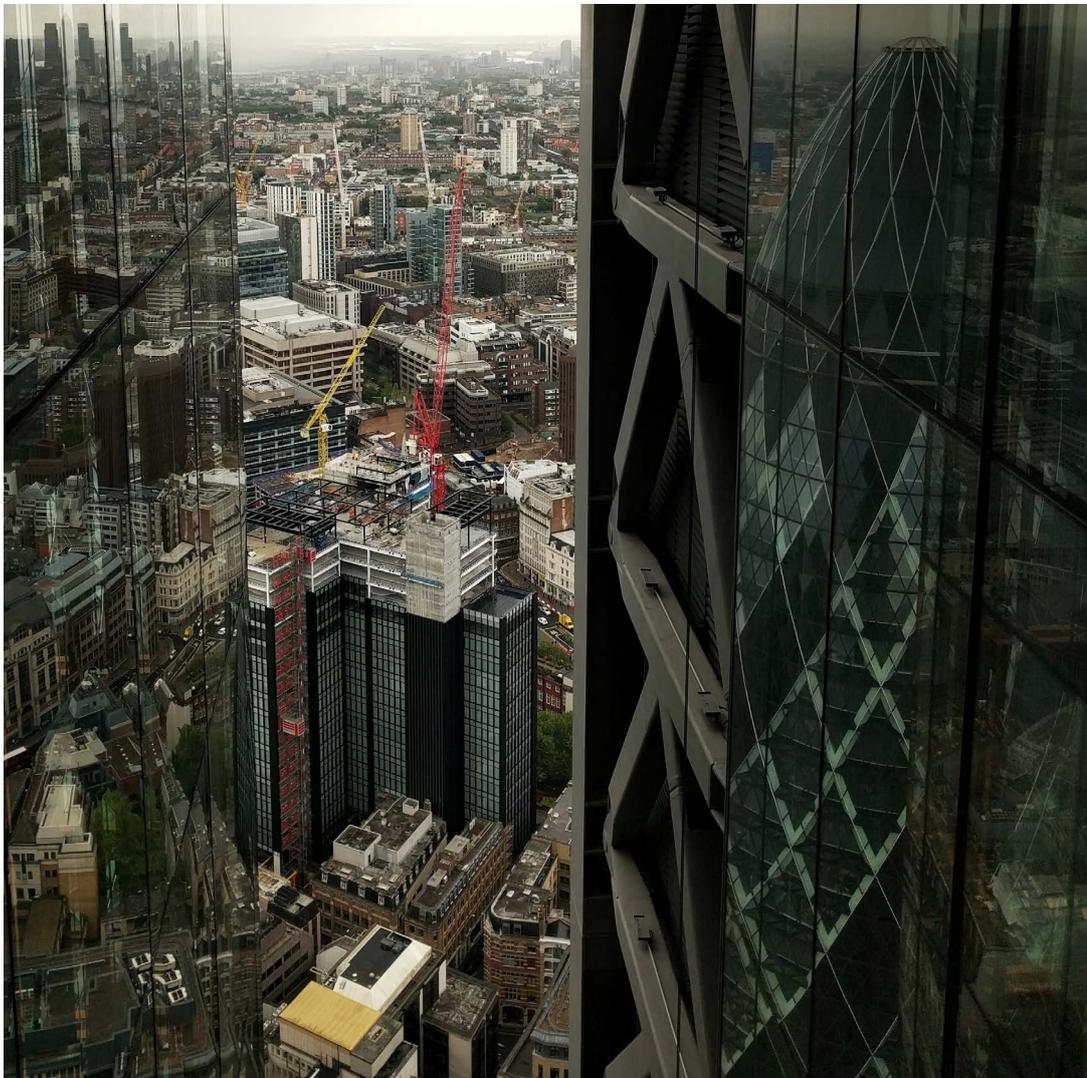


Image: View from the Lendal Building, London

Church had a nostalgia about them, when architects designed everything with exacting control over the work and its execution. This is a world somewhat past, however the idea is still held onto by the profession and taught to students by academics as gospel. Utzon's description of the world when this building was conceived seems far removed from the environment in which architects operate today, it was romantic ultimately confident in its singularity. An element that seems missing from many conversations about the direction of practice today.

LONDON - RAPID GROWTH

Ken Allinson knows London architecture, every part of it. The sixth edition of his book "London's Contemporary Architecture" catalogues the city intimately. His knowledge of the city and its history is as formidable as his unrelenting pace on the street. The tours dizzying pace encapsulated the spirit of the city transported within the one mile grid by pounding the street, via the tube, ferries, taxis. Rain, less rain and more rain. Icons, classics, mistakes and monstrosities fly past, facts come deftly from Ken, rapid fire on foot. Following in

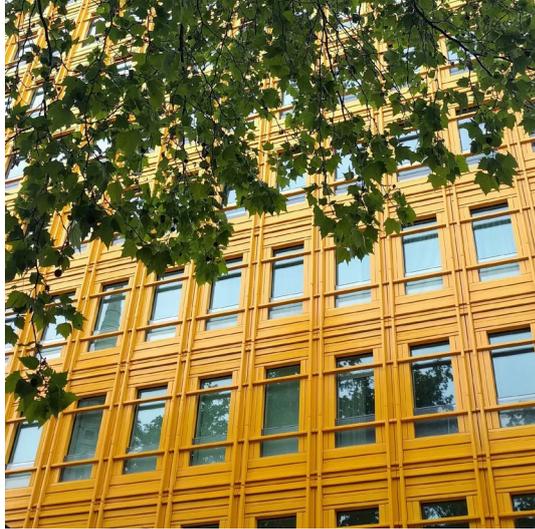


Image: London Sunshine

Ken's wake the tour passed some of the largest, most iconic and recent projects, the result of a construction boom that London is in the midst of with over 89 tall buildings currently under construction and 233 having received approval³.

The tour passed the products of this insatiable appetite for growth amongst others:

- The Walkie Talkie / 20 Fenchurch Street (Rafael Viñoly)
- London Eye
- Jubilee Gardens (West 8)
- The White Collar Factory (AHMM)
- TEA (AHMM)
- The British Museum (Foster)
- The Brunswick (Patrick Hodgkinson)
- The Leadenhall Building (Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners)
- St Mary Axe (Foster + Partners)

THE BRITISH HIGH TECH

London's stable of iconic commercial towers is continuously growing in a construction boom. A fine collection of deadly instruments colloquially

³ New London Architecture <http://bit.ly/297kZem>



Image: Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners

known as the scalpel, gherkin, the shard, walkie talkie and cheese grater. The latter is the Leadenhall Building by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, a project almost complete, occupied by the practice recently.

In all aspects, the building looks and feels like it was been designed for the future, but a future imagined in the past and a future that hasn't yet happened and may never. British High Tech is a curious creature of its own, it's tectonic language codified in the 70s, Richard Rogers is a master of the movement. Leadenhall adheres relentlessly to High Tech principals: exposed structure, expressed services, slick impervious skin and absolute definition of served and service zones.

It is an extraordinary building in so many ways, spatially rich, visually and organisationally complex and equally pushing the edge of construction technology and systems. Daniel Wright, Associate Partner, explained that the project is over 80% prefabricated requiring unprecedented coordination between contractors and trades. The lifts are a feat of engineering and industrial design excellence,

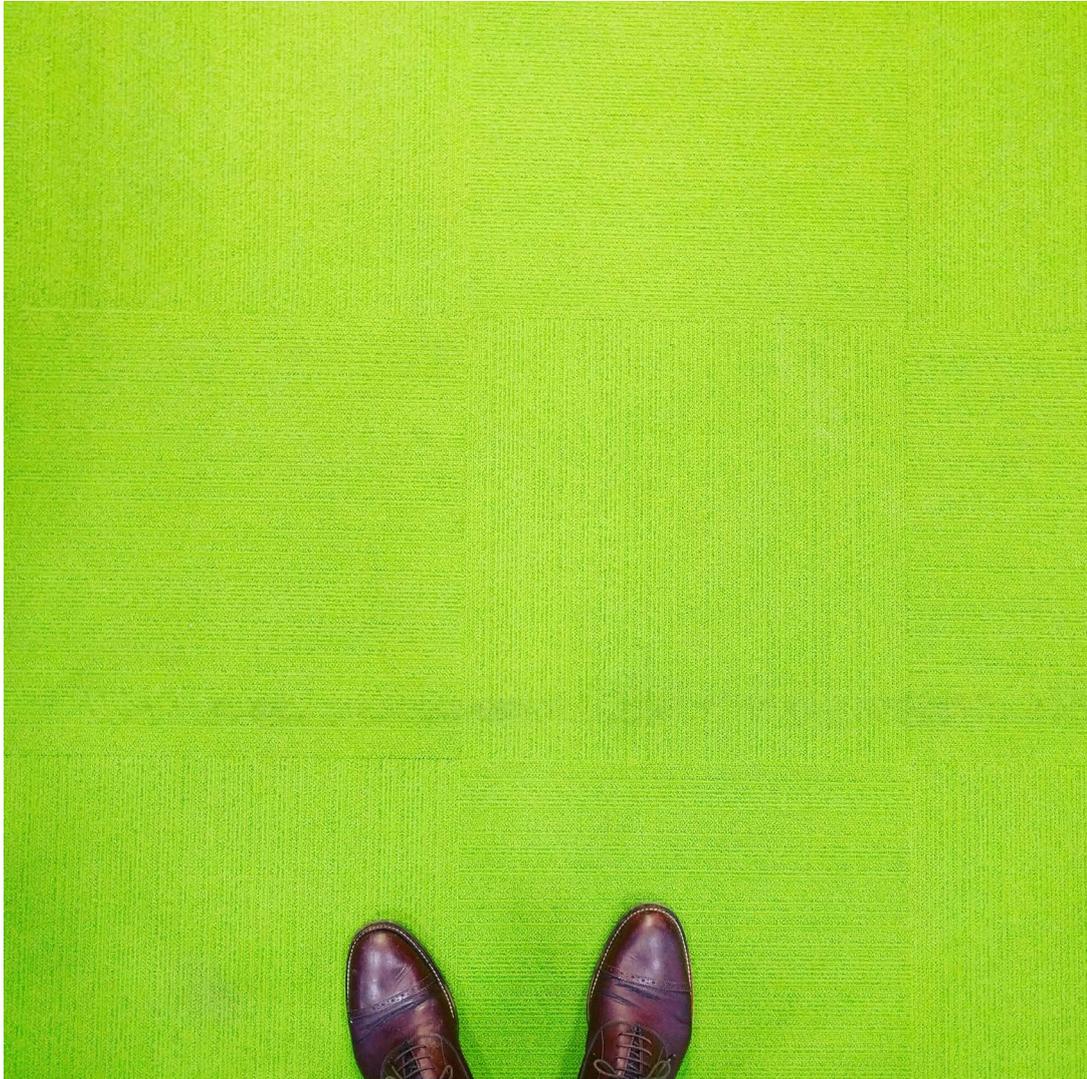


Image: RSH+P Phosphorescent Green Floor

almost completely transparent exhibiting and rarefying each mechanism and elemental part in vivid colour like the back of a Swiss watch.

These are currently the fastest in Europe, the combined acceleration thrust and transparency is akin to Willy Wonka's phantasmagorical glass elevator which heroically bursts out of the bleak greyness of the city into the glistening futuristic skyline propelling Charlie into the future.

RSH+P occupies the 23rd floor of the building. Their acid green carpet is distinct and jarring after the greyness of London's streets. Lloyd's

Building completed 1986 by RSH+P fills the view south of their phosphorescent interior, perhaps in this moment the future imagined by the British High Tech is now.

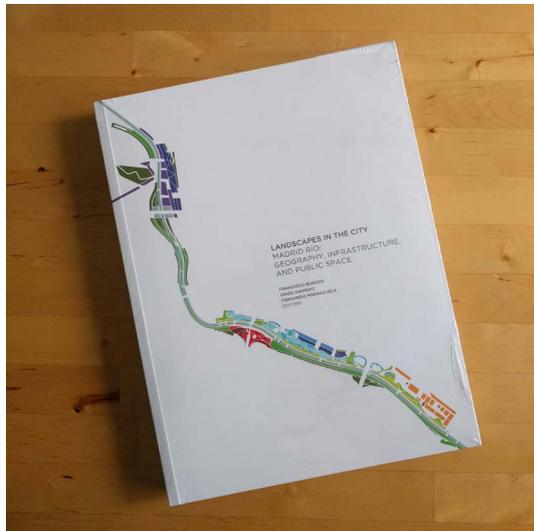


Image: Landscapes in the City, Madrid Río

MASSIVE CHANGE

Madrid Río symbolises massive change, the 156 hectare landscape urbanism project is perhaps the most important, disruptive and most changeful the city has experienced in the past ten years.

Burgos & Garrido, West 8, La Casta Arquitectos and Rubio & Álvarez-Sala won the project through competition in 2005, the ambitious plan launched by Madrid's mayor Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón. Their submission proposed a solution to the urban problem through a macro social and ecological vision resolved exclusively by means of landscape architecture and urbanism.

Symbolic of what can be achieved by an empowered politician, exclusive access to municipal funds, the 4.4 billion euro project was 80% funded by the Madrid municipality and built entirely on council land, unencumbered by protracted land negotiations. Conceived and built over two four year political terms, the project opened in 2013 and was completed in 2015 - a clear lesson for often myopic Australian governance.

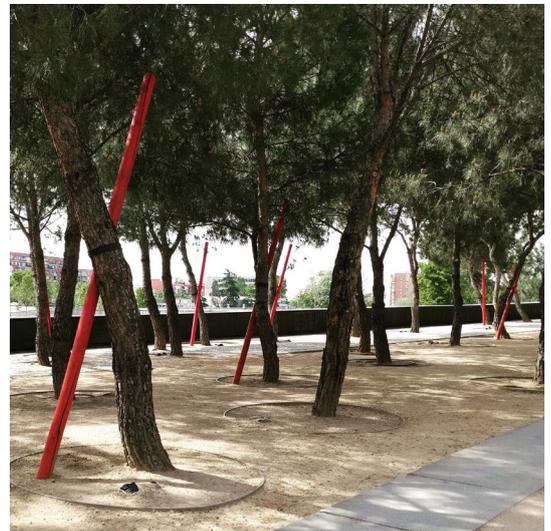


Image: Madrid Río

Massive change has brought massive reward.

The project has renewed a vast six kilometer tranche of inner city land with a linear park, promenade, bicycle paths, water gardens, playgrounds, small cultural interventions and a renewed relationship between the city and river.

The quality of the landscape is extraordinary. Rosemary as mass planting scents the park with a subtle honey combined with crisp pine from the 9,000 pine trees planted in the reserve. The Stone Pines have an ancient character beyond the few short years the park has been open, their irregularities are intentional, the crooked awkward forms were chosen for their agelessness over perfectly straight specimens.

MODEL FATIGUE

“Models are a part of the way we work.” This line is delivered singularly, emphatically and earnestly to the group at each practice visit in Copenhagen, London and Madrid. It seems that everyone makes models, big models, small models, abstract models and prototypes.

Sketches and diagrams don't appear any more, whatever happened to drawing? The single



Image: Models of Various Practices

authored napkin sketch, the hand of God, isn't enough. It probably never was, perhaps in their own way these models lend an authority and reality to a project yet to be realised, cemented in reality within an economic climate where nothing is certain.

Model making is certainly centred around the identity of what it is to be a credible architect. Miniature dreams, instantaneously realised and transported into the future, authorised by the maquette. It's a fetish peculiar to Architects, the object rendered in various scales, competition

models are wheeled out for inspection like cadavers on display. Their little bodies piled high in dark corners of the studios, evidence of opportunity that can launch a young practice and conversely the burden of time invested in a rat race competitive process. Madrid Rio was won by competition and has propelled the authors into a specialist realm of large scale landscape architecture and urbanism.

In retrospect, after a nine days of intense saturation, descriptions of process across the days of practice visits seem homogeneous,



Image: RSH+P Madrid Airport

conventional and almost universal. Descriptions of process to the group seem to revolve around models and in some cases seem like a deferral from what the practices actually do day to day.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

Challenging convention are practices like Jan Gehl, an architect who doesn't build anything, Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners and Foster + Partners pushing the boundary of technology, similarly Assemble in their own way. These are practices on the edge as it were, and in different ways challenge architecture practice models. However, they are in the end, tangibly conventional.

The prolific success of Foster + Partners is intriguing. A practice which is conventional in so many ways. Nevertheless a practice on the edge of technology and able to resource it's own internal laboratory and foundation in Madrid. Fosters are re-imagining and broadening the scope of their service model, a leap made through technology.

Within the attic of the foundation is Foster Lab, the projective vision of the future it seems



Image: Foster + Partners Desk

is still making models. These are didactic, demonstrative and possess an uncanny authority as descriptions of alien systems and improbable ideas. Perhaps models are the future paradigm?

In the end, models are an aside, they are simply representations of ideas and occasionally the embodiment of practices identities. The medium isn't necessarily the problem, it could be the message. What resonates at F+P and RSH+P is an agenda, these are models which are the embodiment of a manifesto. Formed within practices bent on influencing and changing the construction industry through technology at rapid pace. Shifting the pendulum back to the architect as being contributory to the construction industry.

Is this important? It's pertinent in light of the national AIA conference "How Soon is Now", where a part of the conversation was dominated by the hand wringing and pearl clutching of a conflicted industry, grappling with its own relevance. These practices are moving forward in familiar and conventional ways by becoming once again the architect as a specialist in architecture as so many have



Image: RSH+P 2016 Venice Biennale Arsenale

embraced diversification. While this is by no means an answer in total, it's reassuring someone is looking inward to be projective.

POST SCRIPT

Visiting the Venice Biennale a few days after the tour allowed a re-engagement and reassessment with a handful of practices the tour visited and exhibited as a part of it.

The British High Tech: Foster + Partners and RSH+P each had project demonstrations that affirmed their position as technological and social leaders within the field. Foster's pavilion under the guise of the Norman Foster Foundation. *Drone Port*⁴ is a holistic proposal which was broader than architecture but singularly facilitated by it, Foster proposed a network of drone ports to deliver medical supplies and other necessities to areas of Africa that are difficult to access due to a lack of roads or other infrastructure and the ambition is that every small town in Africa and in other emerging economies will have its own droneport by 2030.⁴ Architecture imagined through technology both new and old, revisiting Catalan vaults and small



Image: Rogers Foster + Partners 2016 Venice Biennale Arsenale

high tech drone craft.

Timber Towers - 'Saving the city' by RSH+P demonstrated their ongoing study of the housing crisis and their development of sustainable housing on a large scale. The exhibition included their 'tree house' project which provides low-cost highly insulated homes, based on a kit of parts that can be assembled in low-tech factories on-site using sustainably sourced timber. The practice is invested in, and has a firm belief, that technology can provide a mechanism by which the ever-growing social malaise caused by housing shortage may be alleviated.⁵

The Humanist: After a day exploring the Giardini a final stop at the Danish Pavilion, an exhibit that contains the work of Jan Gehl and the many diagrammatic models of BIG the tour had experienced first hand in Ørestad, practices with diametric ideas about human inhabitation – divided poignantly by a corridor.

⁴ Foster + Partners <http://bit.ly/1WwkFV7>

⁵ Design Boom <http://bit.ly/1X2xsoF>



Image: MVRDV Model 2016 Venice Biennale Giardini

On leaving the exhibit, I noticed perched upon high amongst an array of models, one by MVRDV, an archaic thing I recalled from my early years at university.

I wondered - What ever happened to the SuperDutch?

A movement that fascinated me as a student, a time of prodigious publishing by Dutch architects, equally a time of extreme economic austerity.

MVRDV, in this era dominated a conversation that hinged on data as the rational for everything. An agenda which has all but disappeared from boarder discussion. It seems that even the practice which authored the very idea has deferred away from its authority, perhaps it will be revisited again one day.