

## **DULUX STUDY TOUR 2017**

Alberto Quizon

### Post-Tour Report

**With special thanks to :**

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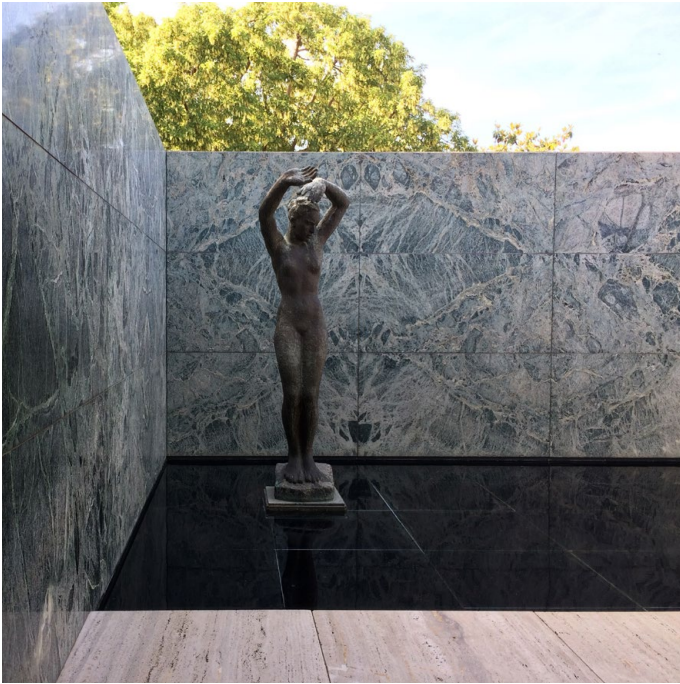
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The excitement of being in a new city overpowers the exhaustion of our long haul flight. We arrive, settle in to the hotel and immediately head out to explore Barcelona on an impromptu tour with no itinerary. Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion is our first stop. It is a timeless and unrelenting composition of materiality, grid and plane. Small in scale, enormous in its impact, an architecture that still reverberates in the collective subconscious of the discipline. It walls out the city and creates its own atmosphere, separated from time.

The next day we meet James at his bicycle shop. With a joyful and bubbly demeanor he introduced himself, ran through our itinerary for the day and handed each of us 3 speed bicycles. Following his lead, we coasted through quiet lane ways, carefully navigating around the other tourists and occasionally stopping at key landmarks. I had forgotten the simple joys of being on a push bike, feeling the changes of texture under the wheels, meandering through the lesser known lane ways and playfully swerving across the city's many open squares.



We ride to the new beach side precinct. While the sun and sand is pleasant, the public space itself is unremarkable. Despite this, the promenade bustles with a diversity of social gatherings. The sand is elemental, simple and adaptable, everyone has a sense of ownership. In contrast we arrive at EMBT's Diagonal Mar Park, a carefully choreographed public space, joyfully detailed with many lyrical moments but almost totally empty. The design is beautiful but imposing in its own way, as if you need permission to sit and dwell.



We are delirious and jet lagged but we press on. We settle for evening drinks at a square fronting the Museum of Modern Art by Richard Meier. Though the square itself is relatively unadorned and unremarkable the blankness and subtle falls of the plaza has made it a haven for skateboarders. The square echoes with the racket of wheels hitting pavement, it has become a vibrant spectacle that attracts its own diverse audience. We sit with our drinks and observe the chaos of skateboarders. Typically considered a menace by facility managers, here they are a vital urban activator.





Day 3 we take taxis out west beyond Barcelona's iconic city grid to Ricardo Boffil's Walden 7 development. I notice it emerge from the rooftops as we approach from the highway and I am immediately confronted by its aesthetic. It is an imposing, brutish, earthy red mass, fortress like and otherworldly. It bulges in the middle and is split by cavernous voids. Its relentlessly symmetrical facade is articulated by curved balconies that seem to reference the silos that populated the former industrial estate the development stands in.



We meet Alexandra, a local resident with a beaming smile and a playful sense of humour. We gather for coffee from one of the ground floor shop front cafes before being led into one of the caverns. The development is consists of 18 towers leaning against each other creating a series of courtyards and atria, a sky blue vertical labyrinth of outdoor corridors linked by stairwells, cantilevered walkways and a network of bridges. As we ascend my sense of vertigo escalates and I find my self gripping the blue tiled balustrades with every step. It is an architecture that imposes on you its own sense of reality.



From the roof top we catch a glimpse of Ricardo Boffil's fabled office complex. It is a beautiful ruin, nestled in a canopy of trees and draped with vines. We take the lift down and walk across, our excitement builds. Arriving at the entry courtyard we are greeted by Vanessa, a young architect at Ricardo Boffil's office, and we are led through the main gate towards the entry of one of the silos. The entry courtyard is sublime, the ruins of the original concrete silos are consumed with hanging vines and punctured with Gothic like apertures.



The fine details, deep fenestration and material layers create a delicate dialogue with the brutish post industrial concrete forms. The office spaces and living spaces occupy the circular geometries of the existing silos, with a large spiral stair linking the various levels. The work spaces are small and intimate, with each silo lending itself to a clustered arrangement of desks and workstations. The old and new geometrics are perfectly composed, softened and unified by the lush planting. Vanessa leads us back to the central courtyard.





We are ushered into a small hall and confronted with two heavy timber doors. Prying them open reveals a glorious main hall, cathedral like in its volume and in the sense reverence it inspires. Enormous frameless glass walls pour light deep into the space and offer views into a lush hidden fern garden. Massive steel funnels hang like stalactites and the remnant concrete pillars give structure to the grand space. Artifacts of the practice are curated and carefully arranged about the place. After emerging from the hall we sit in silence for a while.

With some time to spare until our next appointment Arturo offers to take us on an impromptu tour of the EMBT office. We excitedly accept. We are led through the bustling Plaça Reial, down a few narrow lanes and towards a grand 4 storey heritage building. We under a hatch set within grand timber stable doors into a foyer that once held horses and carts. The office is full of character and adorned with finely crafted models and stacks of books. It is a homely and welcoming place, unpretentious and reverant.



Our next appointment was with the venerable and impassioned Carme Pinos at the construction site of her La Massana School of Arts project. She introduces the project through a model and we are given hard hats before being led through the sequence of spaces rising around the central atrium of the building. She points out the nuances of the project, talks through the details and articulates the reasoning behind every move. Her energy and self assurance is inspiring and resonates with us long after we've parted ways.



We split into taxis and meet back at the old city in front of Santa Caterina Markets by EMBT. On approach, its joyfully coloured undulating roof can be seen peering over an existing market facade. We find a table and order beer and tapas not long before Arturo, our local guide from EMBT arrives. After sharing lunch they walk us through the new market revealing the design process and the layers of history that confronts any architect that hopes to build in the old city. This is an elegant symbiosis between the new and the old, with the dialogue between these layers creating a rich material narrative.

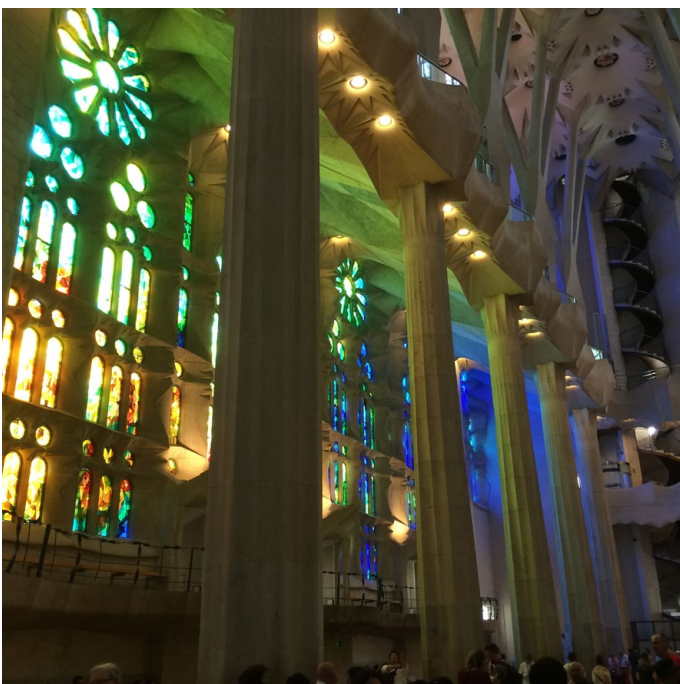




The fourth day of the tour is our last in Barcelona and it ends with a quintessential tour of the Sagrada Familia. The building has been a construction site for over 135 years and will continue to be incomplete for another decade. Setting aside the overwhelming mass of tourists, the project itself is fascinating. The cathedral is a collage of diverse styles and formal languages that have been added incrementally yet despite this it has a sense of coherence. It is a composition unified by a relentless search for ever increasing complexity.



The nave is a sublime and joyful space. The hierarchy of detail is such that the eye is enticed upwards and met with a polyphony of intersecting geometries and a spectrum of colours. A procession of stained glass windows surrounds the nave, shifting from one end of the colour spectrum to the other and fragmented with cubist compositions. The fractal soffit is punctured by apertures of light and merges with the branched sandstone columns. It is a space that is maddening in its complexity, a kaleidoscope of surface, form and light.



That same day we boarded a flight and landed in London, settled into our hotel in Paddington and crashed. The next morning we prepared ourselves for a full day walking tour. The first stop was an unusual speculative residential development designed for a very specific lifestyle. Every space and every element is highly bespoke and loaded with Corbusian references. While we were enthralled by the architecture I couldn't help wondering how such a development could possibly turn a profit.



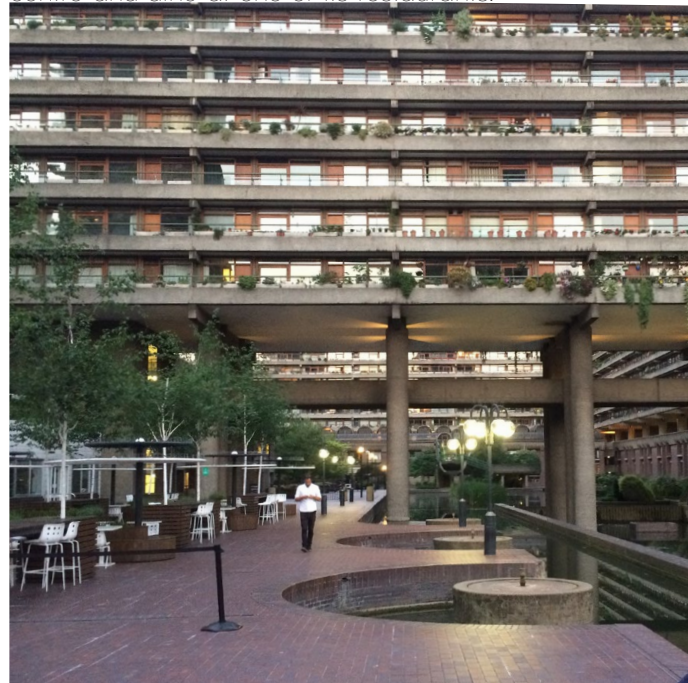
In quick succession we walked through John Pawson's new interior for the London Design Museum, we gathered for lunch atop the Herzog de Muron addition to the Tate Modern, dwelled in the panorama at the viewing platform atop the clunky 'Walky Talkie' by Rafael Vinoly and wandered through Jame's Stirling's famously ugly, post modern No. 1 Poultry St building. We are led through the Leadenhall market as local office workers spilled out for an afternoon beer and are greeted on the other side by Richard Roger's classic Lloyds of London building.





Its gleaming stainless steel services elements and exposed trusses had the allure of a naked motorcycle. It was brutal and raw but its elegantly coordinated services aggregated into compelling compositions that rose up like Gothic columns. We cross the road to a more recent addition to the London skyline, also by RSHP. The aptly named 'cheesgrater' is lifted off the ground to define a covered extension to the street. A generous gesture, but the lack of occupation suggests it could have benefited from more nuance at the human scale.

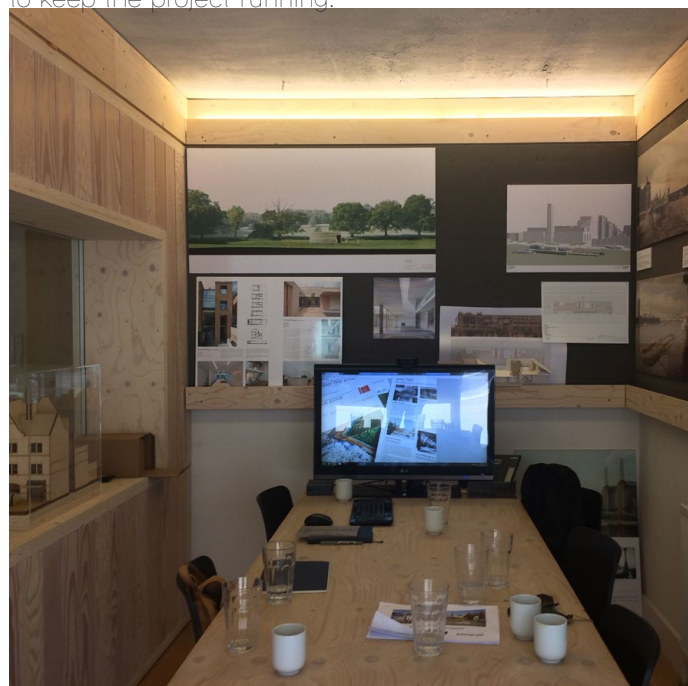
Despite its awkwardly provocative form, its detailing and structural resolution is remarkably elegant. Its tessellated glazing system creates a beautiful mosaic skin that pixellates the reflections of the surrounding city. We have a booking at the pinnacle of the tower and on arrival we are greeted with panoramic views of London and spend our time with champagne in hand retracing our steps from this new perspective. After watching the sunset we are back on the streets searching for an unplanned dinner venue. We decide to pay a visit to the Barbican centre and dine at one of its restaurants.



Studio Octopi is an emerging London practice that was thrust into the public light by their own unsolicited proposal for a floating Thames Baths, inspired by the New York's Plus Pool. Even if this provocative proposal never leaves the drawing board it has at least become a clever marketing platform for the practice, giving them access to the media, local politicians and global brand awareness. It is a fascinating growth strategy for the brand, through not without its challenges. Chris tells us of the huge financial burdens the practice has had to bear to keep the project running.



An all glass lift brings us hurtling upwards to the RSHP office where we are greeted with a display of models and a distinctive lime green carpet. Markings on the curtain walls encompassing the office floor highlight the myriad of RSHP projects around London, a visual reminder of the office's prolific portfolio. As we descend again through the lift we see Foster's politely named 'Gherkin', our next stop. The ground plane of 30 Mary Axe is blank aside from a few stone benches along the perimeter. It seems to be a space reserved for the sole purpose of gazing up at the building.





Moving onto a more established practice we visit Zaha Hadid Architects where we are introduced to their growing portfolio of Australian projects. In a shopfront gallery space on the ground floor the office displays an array of projects as tectonic and typological groupings. The exhibition's unrelenting emphasis on object, form and surface treatment reveals the practice's underlying values. The day wraps up with a gathering of Australian architects at the RIBA where we present a rapid fire run through of our experiences that lead up to the DST.



Day 7 begins at AL\_A offices where we are asked to remove our shoes before entering the studio. A large, day lit warehouse space unified by a vibrant red carpet is lined with rows of white desks and scattered with models, prototypes, furniture experiments, material samples and test prints. The office is founded on material experimentation, using furniture pieces as a testing ground for larger formal and tectonic techniques. Their extension to the V&A museum is a delicate insertion into heritage fabric, with subtle folds and cuts in the plaza revealing the new subterranean exhibition spaces.



With a few hours of free time we decide to catch taxis to the V&A museum and wander around the area. The street life pulses with Londoners celebrating the clear blue sky, a rare sight for the locals. These rare breaks in the DST itinerary were valuable moments to observe the day to day life of the city. It's the everyday building stock that gives a city its character, and while the heroes that punctuate this fabric offer valuable learning experiences so too does an observant stroll through the city's lesser known streets and lanes.



The central courtyard of the V&A is a wonderful civic arena. At the centre sits a shallow dish of water populated by children. This simple gesture transforms the space and offers the public a generous invitation to play, a wonderful contrast to the displays of high culture within the museum. Inspired by the picnic rugs and sunbathers we head north to Hyde park for a stroll through the trees and a sneaky afternoon nap in the sun. Our final stop for the day is the university-like office campus of Foster + Partners.





The practice has over 1000 employees spread across the world in 12 permanent offices and many more temporary site offices. The opportunity to glimpse the internal machinations of one of the largest architectural offices in the world was an exciting prospect. The central hall that houses the bulk of the workforce is packed with rows of workstations and can be surveyed from a mezzanine walkway above that links the meeting spaces. Rising through the ranks and getting noticed must be an immense challenge in this environment.



Thouria is our guide and she runs through an introduction of the practice before leading us through the various departments. It is a practice that has fully resourced teams in architecture, engineering, graphic design, visualisation, product design and even music production. The enormous investment required to achieve such a high level of control across all of the practice's businesses outputs is staggering. We imagine the vast hierarchies, control groups, peer reviews and internal meetings that must be required to coordinate the practice's day to day operations.

Day 8 begins with a 4:30am wake up, a panicked rush to the train and a flight to Prague. Today is our only day off during the tour and we hope to make the most of it. Our hotel is situated in the middle of the Old Town so we decide to plot a course for Petřínské skalky, Prague's main park situated on a hill overlooking the old town. Prague's historic centre is incredibly beautiful. Narrow cobblestone paved lanes lead to bustling public squares surrounded by perfectly preserved heritage fabric. The relentless adornment in the facades are enthralling and I'm reminded of the humanising power of decoration.



The sheer volume of tourists however is overwhelming. This is a city that has become reliant on tourism as its primary industry and the Old Town has fully embraced this reality. Having been largely spared from the destruction of the war the city reads as a collage of pre modern architectural styles, each aligning with a particular movement in time and reflecting a particular set of values. Gothic, Baroque, Art Nouveau, Czech National Style, Cubism and Functionalism adorn the streets, unified by a beautiful landscape of terracotta roofs.





Day 9 begins with a walking tour through the lesser known lanes and arcades of Prague, led by local architect, Martin. These passageways provide shortcuts through the large medieval city blocks and offer a welcome respite from the crowded main streets. One such passageway was day lit by a remarkable vaulted ceiling constructed of glass bricks. We are introduced to the cubist style, an architectural movement unique to the Czech Republic that was defined by a decorative language inspired by cubist paintings. The style is angular, faceted and highly expressive.



The formation of the new sovereign state of Czechoslovakia inspired a number of experiments in what would come to be known as the National Style. Architecture served as a tool to establish a new collective identity. As we move between different architectural movements I find myself enthralled by the intricacies of stylistic decoration, the rhythms, layering, the depth in the facade and the subdivision of mass down to the human scale. I become convinced that adornment can also serve a functional purpose.



I am particularly enamoured by the rows of ornate merchant houses by the river, each rendered with a different pastel hue. Each is a Romanticist collage of stylistic tropes from different movements, yet despite this anachronistic mash up, taken as a holistic composition the resulting streetscape is undeniably beautiful. After a pleasant stroll by the river we board a tram to Prague Castle. The former fortress for the King is now opened up to the public as a popular tourist destination with commanding views over Prague.



We are introduced to the work of Jože Plečnik who was engaged by the new president during the forging of their new nation to modernise Prague Castle and return it to the people. His work during the 1920s and 1930s resulted in a range of subtle but transformative small scale interventions, incisions, connections and view corridors. The work is intricate and layered, humble yet masterfully choreographed. The distinction between old and new is incredibly subtle, but can be identified by their inherent playfulness and almost post-modern demeanor.





From the castle grounds we are granted sweeping vistas across the terracotta rooftops of Prague. The incredible uniformity of the medieval city is a treasured sight, the texture of the terracotta roof tiles punctuated with dormers and chimneys, the deep city blocks subdivided by hidden courtyards and plazas, the collisions of setout grids that bear no visible relation to each other. We descend through the castle vineyard and into Prague's exceptionally efficient metro system and emerge in front of an unusual church also designed by Jože Plečnik.



The Church of the Most Sacred Heart of Our Lord was completed in 1932 and was Plečnik's last work. It is distinctly modern, yet ornate in an almost post-modern sense. The fold of a surface, an incredibly contemporary gesture, is capped by neoclassical moldings. A grid of protruding vertical bricks creates an unusual sense of depth in the surface as they cast shadows across the facade. The interior is square in plan and adorned with an equally unsettling stylistic language. It is a building that is both awkward and compelling, alienating yet familiar.

The next day is guided by Jaroslav Safer, or Jaro as he liked to be called, a Czech architect who had spent 13 years in Australia working for Daryl Jackson in Melbourne and Perth. He now heads his own practice in Prague, Safer Hajek Architekti. He introduces us to projects that provide a view into the direction contemporary Czech architecture has begun to take. Common to many of the projects is a high regard for materiality and detailing as a technique for de-scaling and humanising the architecture.



That evening we meet with our Czech guides for a last supper. The tour draws to a close but the memories continue to resonate. I hope the bonds we formed during our brief but highly intense experience will continue to grow over time. It was a deeply enjoyable experience, one that amplified my passion for the discipline. I was incredibly fortunate to find in my travel companions kindred spirits, with shared values, generosity and plenty of good humour. Thank you to everyone involved for this life changing experience.

