RAIA Dulux Study Tour *12 May–16 May 2008*

Report

Drew Williamson *McBride Charles Ryan*

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London Calling

It was once known as the capital of the world.

Eliot called it the *Unreal City / Under the brown fog of a winter noon.*

Hobbes called it a Leviathan.

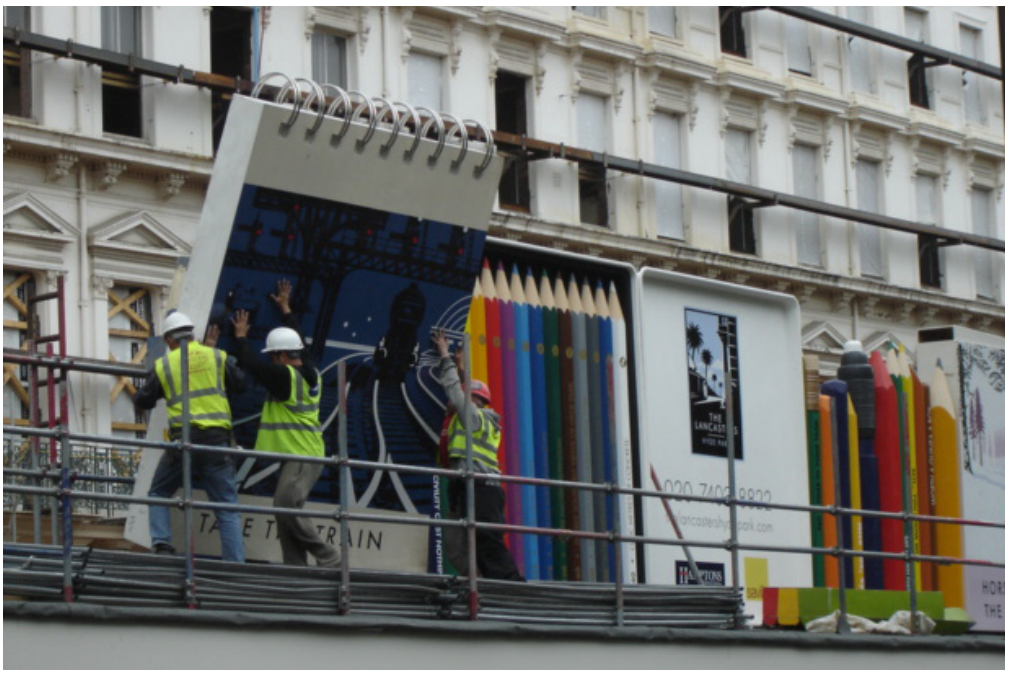
And Peter Ackroyd has made a career out of calling it just about anything he cares to.

Yet, of all the things you could call London, "colourful" wouldn't be one of them. "Well-mannered"? Yes. "Measured"? Without a doubt. Even "polite" in parts. But "colourful"? No. One need only walk the respectable backstreets of Notting Hill, along endless white-rendered terraces to find that in London even the Ferraris are a respectable dark grey.

On the surface, this made the decision to choose London as the destination for the inaugural RAIA Dulux Study Tour a rather curious one. Staid, grey, conservative London: an inspiration for young architects? Coordinated by an Institute of Architecture (formerly Royal, admittedly) and sponsored by a paint and coatings company principally known to architects in Australia for their colour awards?

Yet after five days of insightful guided walks and visits to the offices of internationally renowned practices in both London and Manchester – five days admiring remarkable architecture that has emerged against a backdrop of calculated conservatism – a different picture emerged entirely.

Here are some highlights.



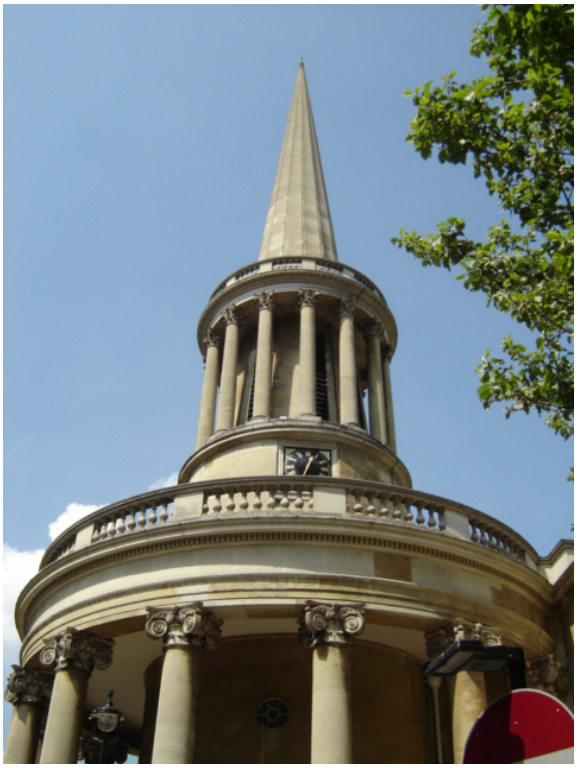
The Weight of Words

Growth Rings of a Baroque City

The initial challenge was to inform our understanding of the city beyond the apparent ubiquity of white paint, face brick, steel and glass. To assist us in this endeavour, our time in London began with a walking tour from Portland Place to the tower, the course of which took us about eight kilometres and at least as many centuries back through the history of urban development in the city.

Despite some inadvertent detours into the anachronistic dichotomy of Po-Mo vs. High-Tech, our erudite guide steered us through the history of the capital on foot, traversing the layers of the city in reverse from the late-18th century Regency street realignments, through the late-baroque evangelism of the 50 churches act, the rebuilding of the city churches following the Great Fire, the medieval antagonism between the city populace and Westminster, the Saxon settlement of Lundenwic and the Roman remains of Londinium.

With a trusty supply of chalk in hand, Ken Allinson mapped out the stages of development across millennia, and then proceeded to lead us to examine the scars first hand. Beginning with John Nash's gloriously bizarre All Souls Church (best characterised as a circular Ionic portico topped by a smaller version of itself – "Mini Me" architecture if you like – skewered with a conical spire), we explored the 'secret gardens' of the Inns of Court, and made the churchyard of St Paul's our shaded destination, across the underground river (the Fleet) and over Ludgate Hill.



All Souls Church – John Nash

St Stephen Walbrook – Sir Christopher Wren

Exploring the old city, beneath the silhouette of baroque churches, one could imagine Boyd's vision of an "England now practically dead: of spires, buttered toast and distant bells." Of the 24 city churches rebuilt by Wren following the Fire of 1666, our guide recommended we make time to visit St Stephen Walbrook. Hidden behind a modest exterior, the church interior was a revelation; a radiant dome carried on arches and freestanding columns above a travertine alter carved by Henry Moore.

St George's Bloomsbury – Nicholas Hawksmoor

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. / Flowed up the hill and down King William Street, / To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours / with a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

With the exception of St Mary Woolnoth (whose flat-top turrets bear an uncanny resemblance to a commercial imitation in Melbourne), Nicholas Hawksmoor's churches are largely situated beyond the fringe of the city destroyed by fire. Characterising these churches as evangelical missions among the heathen (sub)urban wasteland helps to explain some of their formal playfulness and their overt symbolism. It is particularly hard to ignore the explicit conflation of church and state in the statuary of a number of these works, such as the lion and the unicorn locked in combat astride the stepped spire of St George's Bloomsbury, or the same sharing a more convivial moment above the pulpit of Christ Church in Spitalfields.

The Norman Conquest

Supplanting the historical city, we saw a lot of steel and glass. Recognising the monotony of this, some, like Lord Rogers, have chosen to colour-code the steel in their megaliths, providing a literal explication, even if based on something as prosaic as function. Hence we find a lot of yellow structure encasing blue supply air-shafts and red exhausts (the orange handrails at the Millennium Dome offering a more recent expansion of the vocabulary…).

A thousand years ago, the Normans conquered England. To look at the skyline of London today, you could be excused for thinking that about ten years ago a second Norman conquest occurred. The unfortunate resemblance to Dr Evil (and persistent rumours of Stalinist airbrushing of history following a personnel purge) aside, it is hard to avoid the impact that Norman Foster has had on contemporary London architecture.

While a great quantity of it is perfectly non-descript, buildings such as St Mary Axe (the Gherkin), Willis Lime Street and City Hall are pivotal in shaping the fabric of contemporary London. City Hall, for example, with its distorted spherical geometry and descending spiral catwalk above the council assembly, is a singular and profound work that manages to achieve what a lot of buildings aspire to: it articulates a position beyond the circumstantial requirements of support and enclosure (in this case democracy and the notion of the civic) through the materiality of built form.

The enclosure to the Great Court at the British Museum is another of Foster's projects that has come to define civic space in London. Located in literary Bloomsbury (Dickens enthusiasts note the antiquarian bookseller 'Jarndyce and Jarndyce' across the road on Great Russell Street), the roof to the Great Court performs a remarkable feat in that it not only floats thousands of individually sized glazed panels with an elegance of expression, its obscure glazing manages to replicate the idiosyncratically diffuse daylight of London regardless of external conditions.

City Hall – Norman Foster, Baron Foster of Thames Bank

Two to Tango

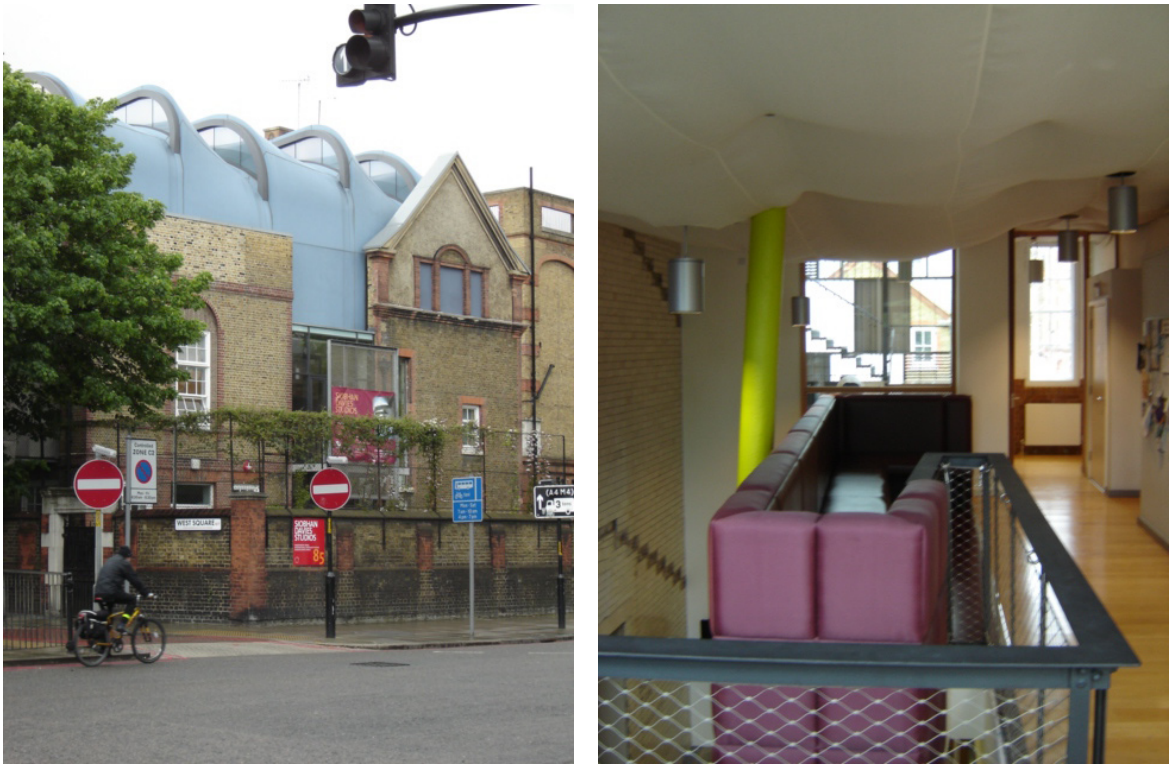
It may well be a coincidence but two of the most exceptional recent buildings we encountered were centres for contemporary dance.

The first of these was Herzog and de Meuron's Laban Dance Centre; a riotous arrangement of textured concrete, undulating handrails and inclined floors encased in a fading plastic skin of once-iridescent colour. We came to Deptford via Greenwich and Canary Wharf when an opportunity arose in our schedule following a morning visit to the construction site for the 2012 Olympics. A less-than-scenic approach, replete with the strewn carcasses of maritime engineering debris, belied the infectious dynamism of what appears in this context as a highly unlikely object (and frankly even less likely landscaping).

Laban Dance Centre – Herzog and de Meuron

Another recommendation from our guide was to visit the Siobhan Davies Dance Studios in Lambeth. Sited adjacent to the Imperial War Museum and away from the tourist trail, this studio by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects supplants the remains of a post-war high school with a rooftop studio that appears to be as agile and graceful as its inhabitants. The studio's timber-lined shells are sequenced asymmetrically, providing a halo of light throughout the space, while its blue waterproofing membrane makes it appear little short of alien in what is an otherwise overwhelmingly bland environment.

Between the entry foyer and the rooftop studio hovers a mezzanine of richly coloured taut fabric and leather upholstery. While this space offers 'break-out' seating for the adjacent offices, its primary purpose appears to be joy of the space itself. Although perfectly irrational, this 'joy' is a quality we rarely experienced in our exploration of London architecture (and architectural practices): a quality that rendered both the Siobhan Davies and Laban Dance Centres indelibly memorable.



Siobhan Davies Dance Studios – Sarah Wigglesworth, exterior (left) and mezzanine (right)

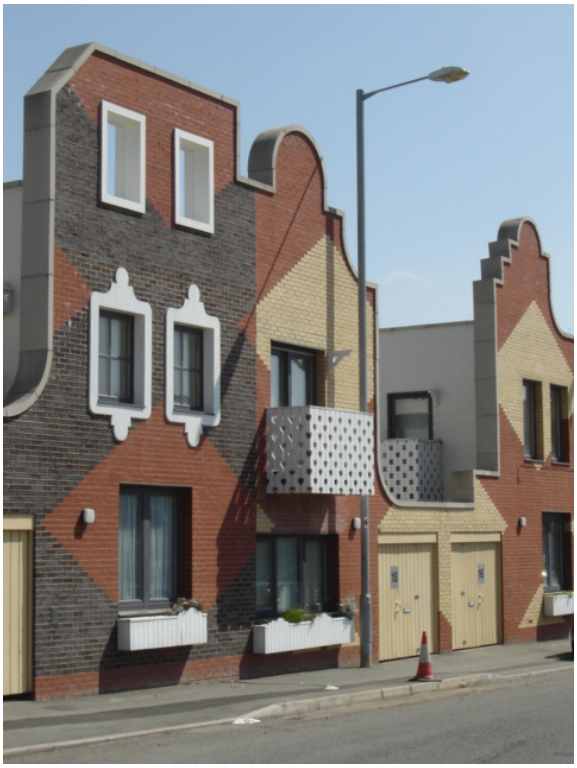
Mad-chester

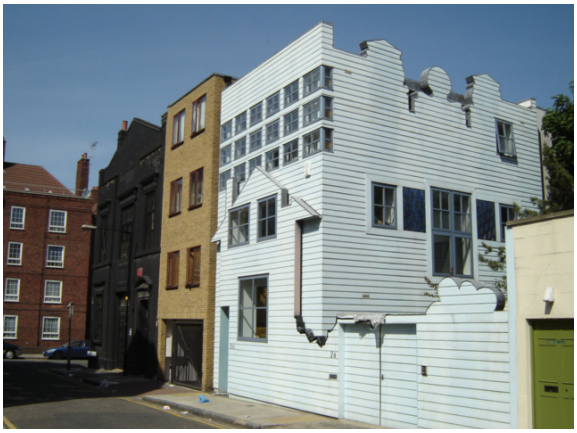
If London is grey, then Manchester is a dirty shade of brown. Or at least it would have been had, the day we visited, the city not been flooded by a deluge of Royal Blue courtesy of the UEFA Cup final and 100,000 rabid Glaswegian Rangers supporters. I hadn't even conceived it were feasible for a contemporary city to be siphoned dry by the mid-afternoon.

Our architectural guide to Manchester, Phil Griffin, began our Mancunian experience in Ancoats: "the world's first industrial suburb" which, if not the birthplace of the industrial revolution, can at least lay claim to being the well-spring of what we now recognise as globalised capitalism.

The approach to Ancoats took us along the city's canals, and between bouts of BBC location spotting (D.I. Sam Tyler and the Gene Genie, anyone?) we ventured to the desolate plains of Will Alsop's proposed New Islington ("a millennium community"). New Islington is the centrepiece of Urban Splash's redevelopment of the Cardroom Estate, a notorious housing estate that somehow managed to magnify the misery of the "mind-forg'd manacles" and "dark satanic mills" that it was designed to replace. Represented through some remarkably graphic billboards, New Islington's slogan is "Bricks, Mortar, Water, Sky, Hope", at least two of which were present in abundance for our visit.

Across the road from New Islington is FAT's (Fashion Architecture Taste) Islington Square housing. A riot of polychromatic brickwork and dutch gables, this project included among its aims to be "comfortable and cosy", and given its execution it is not surprising to learn that it has been hailed as an "inspirational landmark for social housing with a bold and joyful presence."





Housing – Fashion Architecture Taste (FAT),

New Islington (left)

House near Shoreditch (above)

As we traversed the city with our guide, studiously avoiding public squares and their inebriated blue-shirted masses, a curious undercurrent repeatedly resurfaced in the Mancunian architectural mythology. It centres on the 1996 Manchester bombing by the provisional IRA, a terrorist attack (yes, they did occur in the 20th Century) that flattened the commercial centre and involved the largest bomb to explode in Great Britain since the Second World War, yet miraculously, one that involved no fatalities.

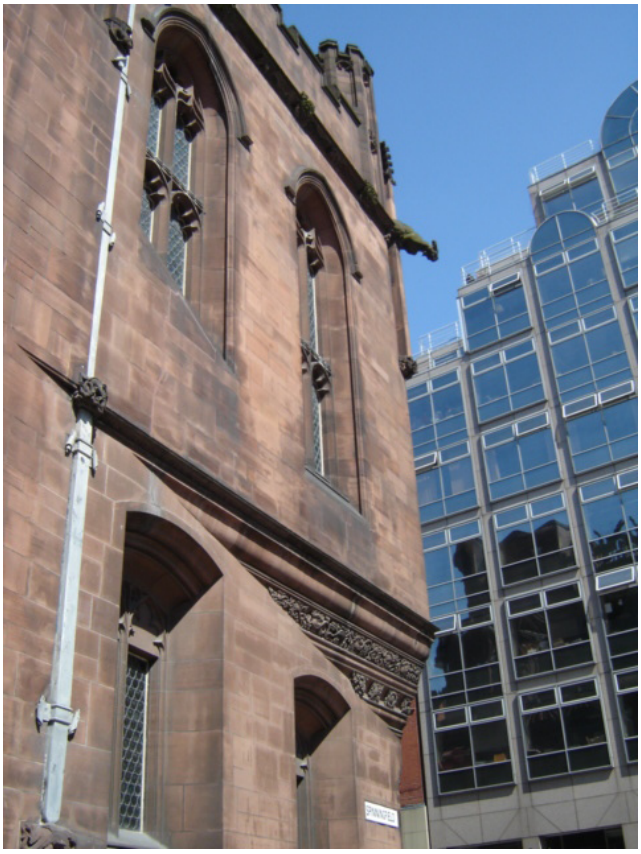
To our architectural guide, the wake of the attack left nothing but urban opportunity. Streets were realigned, churches relocated, contemporary building projects undertaken with unprecedented vigour in the lead up to the 2002 Commonwealth Games. Perhaps it is due to the absence of death resulting from the attack (bringing to mind Tom Waits as Dr Heller, inventing immobilising but non-lethal weapons in 1999's *Mystery Men*: the 'Blamethrower' for example), but to the casual observer it would appear that the bombing has had the unintended consequence of creating the conditions for the architecture that Manchester is so proud of today.

Does this posit terrorism as a positive act of urban renewal? It hard to go past David Brent's appraisal (in series one of *The Office*) of Sir John Betjeman's poem *Slough*in summing this up: "Right, I don't think you solve town planning problems by dropping bombs all over the place. So he's embarrassed himself there. Next."

But Manchester can be justifiably proud of its at times frankly eclectic (if not eccentric) array of world class projects. Whether it is a 'museum for the modern city', (Urbis), a Calatrava footbridge, DCM at their clearest and most confident (the Civil Justice Centre in Spinningfields), or Levitt Bernstein's acid-munching Royal Exchange Theatre, the city is dotted with unexpected gems.

One such gem is the John Rylands Library. While it is hard enough not to fall immediately for a building described by our guide as "High Victorian Gothick meets the Scottish Baronial style", so long as you can ignore the recent sterile gift shop and DDA compliance extension to its rear, it is harder still to imagine a greater degree of spark and wit carved in sandstone. Need to turn the corner at street level? No worries. The ornament effortlessly emerges in reverse to complete the idealised geometry of the citadel above.

Ah, Manchester. So much to answer for…



John Rylands Library – Basil Champneys

Rain and RIBA

By Thursday, London was itself again, what Zusak might describe as "like spillage – cold and heavy, slippery and grey."

> *The street, overall, was a lengthy tube of grey – a corridor of dampness, people stooped in the cold, and the splashed sound of watery footsteps.*

Taking refuge in the Tate Modern and the Great Court of the British Museum offered some respite before the skies cleared. The mildness that followed seemed to augur our suburban pilgrimage to Chipperfield's office. As with each of the practices we visited, this office was itself emblematic of its own architectural ethos. While we were repeatedly indoctrinated with the mantra of "no gimmicks" it may well as been "please whisper". We had similar experiences at Foster's office, where two thirds of the office appeared to either be missing or not have desks (just don't mention outsourcing), and at Zaha Hadid's, where a battery system had been employed within a rabbit warren to manufacture immediate results from a steady supply of undergraduate software bunnies.

The afternoon saw us braving the meanstreets of gallery-laden Shoreditch and Whitechapel, as we embarked on an Adjaye-inspired wanderlust of optical richness and clunky detailing. The immediateness of buildings such as Rivington Place, the 'Dirty House' and the Whitechapel Idea Store was entirely engaging. These were all buildings with a message: the message just happened to be "photograph from a distance".

RIBA Headquarters – Grey Wornum

At RIBA (still very much 'Royal') we were feted with the most generous of functions. In a building more Indiana Jones than Edwin Lutyens (and yes, designed by a gentleman named Grey), we marvelled at the cast brass detailing, the marble clad columns and the complete lack of membership under the age of 50. Indeed, make no mistake, we were in the presence of "**A Learn-ed** (two syllables) **Society of Like-minded Professionals**". The speeches were kindly, the business cards were shuffled and every introduction asked after the well-being of a shared acquaintance; the net effect being a microcosm of the study tour itself – an invaluable series of remarkable chance meetings and experiences offering an Antipodean an insight into the once-capital of the world; a insight that despite the promise of global communication still needs to be experienced physically; one that is neither closer nor more lucid, rather stationed inexorably half a world away.

Epilogue

Part of practising as an architect in Australia entails a recognition of, if not critical engagement with, Blainey's concept of the "tyranny of distance". Despite the quality of our architectural output locally, this distance has resulted in a limited recognition of Australian architecture on an international stage other than in stereotypical terms: as one director of a leading London practice put it at the RIBA-hosted function, "you're a nation of sticks and steel – beyond Murcutt and Godsell, what is there?"

While in the past such 'tyranny' may have been expressed in part through a national inferiority complex or cultural cringe, what the Dulux Study Tour offers a group of emerging architects is an opportunity to explore two cities that have played pivotal roles in our own nation's development, experiencing first-hand the practices shaping the future of their built environment and touring the city streets where history rises in the urban fabric like damp, and to reflect on how this all relates to our own architectural culture and practice. Architecture, by its very nature, is experiential. With the experience of the Dulux Study Tour, we now return to work with a richer understanding of what it means to be 'world-class' and a confidence in what our local culture can offer the future of global architectural dialogue.