

## 2008 Dulux Study Tour

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(10 to 15 May 2008 - London 4x Days / Manchester 1x Days)



### **Peter Walker**

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## DAY 01: Steel + Glass

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RIBA Head Quarters, London Walking Tour (pt 1) A Small Church (Wren), Conservatory Kew Gardens (Wilkinson Eyre), Architectural Office Visit (Foster)

London felt foreign and yet familiar at the same. We were re-introduced to the city by a walking tour of architecture by an ex-architect turned guide. For me it highlighted the significance of context (both environmentally and culturally) to appreciating buildings, as well as the importance of telling the story of architecture. An opinion formed instantly by the first impressions of a form, may be re-evaluated by another's insight. The tour was fact paced, so any anecdotes were useful in trying to understand the buildings we were seeing. Our guide was obviously a lover of structural tectonics, which influenced tour destinations, but then, everyone's opinion is biased towards something.

After a day of rushing through the corporate parts of the city we should have guessed what to expect in ending the day at one of the practices that has greatly influenced the city's recent architecture. Even still the cold security lobby that detained us while we waited for our escort left us chilled. I could not help feeling it was rather like the architecture that the office produced - cold steel and glass. Serious, corporate, and guarded, with everything and everyone in its place.

But not all of the steel and glass architecture that day felt cold and uninviting. The office visit was preceded by a notable exception in the form of a glasshouse for alpine plants designed by Wilkinson Eyre. To me this felt human. Its main purpose was to provide a space where humans could encounter plants and to cater for the requirements of both. But why did it feel different to the corporate structures during the day. Maybe the park context? Maybe it was the scale or attention to detail, or the ability to clearly read the idea of the building through its architectural expression. Maybe I was just jealous of the budget for a building whose only service requirements was drip irrigation?

Or maybe, as with the other standout building of the day - a small church by Wren from 1679 - it was a sense of lightness and spirit that is hard to define.

## DAY 02: Sweat Shops vs Architecture

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Olympic Games Site, Canary Wharf Tube Station (Foster) Laban Dance School (Herzog + de Meuron), Office Visit (Zaha Hadid), Office Visit (Carmedy Gorke)

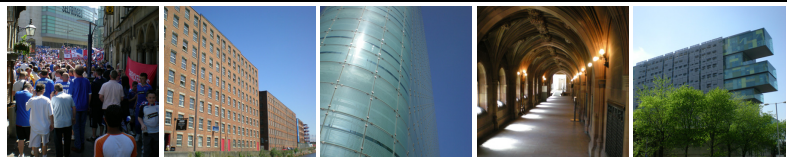
If visiting Foster's office was sobering, the office of Zaha Hadid was even more so. 200+ staff packed into a maze of offices that would surely contravene any workplace standards, each room a language based project team working on projects from different parts of the world. All dedicated to expanding brand identity. Is the office's work about anything more than an investigation into continuous folding surface? "Well Zaha does donate to various aid organisations", our PR girl tells us. But continuous surface (one small project contained over 70 custom individual double curving glass panels, after rationalisation), they do well. Or at least, we will have to take their word on it, as they haven't stamped her brand in London yet.

Contrast this against the small office of Carmedy Gorke, winner of the BD Young Architects of the Year Award 2007. You can tell they are just starting out, not only by the plywood fit-out above a dodgy music store, but by the fact that they seem keen to see us. They were also still passionate about architectural ideas - each project explored through models which strived to distil a unique proposition.

In between these offices was a piece from Foster that I actually enjoyed. Canary Wharf Tube Station (the biggest of a number of architecturally designed stations on the Jubilee line) is a subtle glass bubble at the edge of a public square from above but as you descend it opens into a cavernous underground cathedral. It's like being in Batman's lair or a medieval church. It is interesting to think that maybe tube stations are where the majority of the London public come into contact with architecture... and it's a pity they are not all as good as this one.

The other noteworthy event of the day was a detour to Laban dance school. It's one of those buildings that is more interesting in reality than in pictures (although I've seen some beautiful images of it). It is subtle but loud, and complex but simple. And although the facade is starting to show some age, its patterning, the colours and how these shifts in differing light and perspective is quite beautiful. I also enjoyed the sculpted earth embankments that form the entry and external social spaces (it was not until later did I find out by chance that aptly Laban meant soft earth). But mostly I could imagine the seductive idea that you could see the shadow of the dancers against the translucent walls at night. It was an idea far from the modus operandi of sweatshop branding.

### **DAY 03: Soccer Hooligans and a Pleasant Surprise.**



Refurbished Manchester Industrial (Various), Urbis (Simpson) The Royal Exchange (Bernstein) John Rylands Library Extension (Austin-Smith) and Manchester Civil Court (Denton Corker Marshall)

Apart from, what was for me, the most memorable moment of the tour, Manchester could well have been avoided. Our guide was interesting and full of humorous anecdotes but the architectural highlights of the city were a long way from the cutting edge of modern architecture. We negotiated groups of fans from St Petersburg and Glasgow who had converged on mass to the city for the UEFA football final. The industrial refurbishment projects did not add anything to their existing buildings, the urban renewal / planning was dull and the commercial city buildings were uninspiring. And although the DCM Civil Court was well executed and architecturally interesting it felt very much like every DCM building and more like a commercial office than a family law court. Of further disappointment was that the mediocre was at the expense of visiting the Imperial War Museum, which our guide avoided because, in his words "...Libeskind is not a very good architect."

However, this aside, a moment of surprise and delight at the John Rylands Library made the trip worthwhile. This small extension forms a new entry foyer for a 1900 gothic library building and rationalizes its circulation and access requirements. We entered a white ante space that is a thin void (partly concealing and revealing the old façade), and rose up a flight of stairs to a timber portal in a white wall. One by one I saw the expression of each of the group change as we arrived at the opening that revealed a vaulted stone corridor extending into the distance. It was this contrast between the light airiness of pure clean white against the heavy sombre shadowy passage steeped in history, that left a last impression much greater than the rising mayhem of the football fans outside.

## DAY 04: More Big Names and a little bit Unknown

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London Walking Tour (pt 2) London Town Hall (Foster) British Library (Foster) Tate Modern (Herzog + de Meuron) Palestra Offices (Alsop) Office Building (Piano) Office Visit (Chipperfield), Rivington Place (Adjaye) Idea Store Whitechapel (Adjaye)

London seemed peaceful compared to Manchester despite another hectic walking tour. Some more London architectural icons blurred past...

First stop, London Town Hall, more steel and glass from Foster. This time a little off balance, although I don't know London well enough to know if this is a political comment. There is a bit of "how did they do that" as each disc (each level) slides out slightly further over the edge. Even still it did not seem to hold the group's attention as much as a small timber clad cafe adjacent (by architect unknown), which said quietly by its simplicity "I don't care how you did it".

Tate Modern was beautiful, but I expected it would be. The project inherits much from the previous building, however H+dm have made the most of what they got. The simple new extensions / insertions contrast the old so that both are legible and compliment each other. The expansive entry space was empty when we arrived and I sympathized with any artists trying to take on this space - it needs something at least equally strong to compete.

After the previous big name office visits, there was a collective sigh of relief on entering Chipperfield's office. Admittedly it was not as large as Foster or Hadid but it was every bit as serious. However, ideas seemed to be important here... each project had a different premise to be explored rather than stylistic trademarks.

Two projects not originally on the itinerary were projects by David Adjaye. I was not really familiar with his work and he represented for me an emerging stream of London architects that are producing buildings not just about structural tectonics. Both projects were interesting and explored scale, façade, and context. I would have liked to see more.

## DAY 05: A Big Shopping Centre and a Little Shelter

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Westfields Shopping Centre Richmond (Buchan Group), Architecture Association, DRL Ten Pavilion (Dempsey Huang), Office Visit (Rogers)

For me, the last day provided the most blatant example of the gulf between bad + good architecture. And highlighted how the distress of experiencing the former makes you appreciate the latter all the more.

The day started with a guided tour of the construction site for Westfield's new shopping centre... the result of formulas for directing people and selling products - formulas for placing brands, moving stock, locating food outlets, etc all located in a big decorated shed. Very big and by the time it is finished, very decorated, with some feature architectural elements thrown in to keep the punters occupied... Consumer + Time = Sales. In between the sheds is the project's prize feature element and the closest it comes to a sense of delight. It is an undulating glazed roof supported by branching tree like columns. But the roof has to try hard to compete with the clamour

around it and is a poor comparison to the glazed roof at Foster's British Library that appeared jewel like in its unadorned surround.

The delight of the day, however, was much more humble in both its scale and program located on the edge of a garden square outside the Architecture Association. The pavilion (a student research project) was a beautiful array of fanning curved criss-crossing laser cut fibre cement beams that are open yet give the impression of enclosure.

## Summary

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I am thankful to RAIA and Dulux for the opportunity to be part of the study tour. It was an intense and immersive five-days, but what can you learn about a place or culture in a week? There are small things, such as "orange juice tastes better in Australia," but these don't really help professionally that much.

Rather than a report about the facts of our tour this is mostly about my impressions. And whether they are true is not really the point, but for me these impressions are valuable lessons in the experiencing of architecture.

There are so many other things that influence our experience of Architecture... the amount of sleep we have the night before, how hungry we are, how rushed we are, the people we are with (and the way they talk about it), and amongst all this our own subjective ideals of what architecture should be. Each piece not only has to stand on its own, it has to cut through all of these other factors. Its a big ask.

Of all the buildings that we visited there were only about 3 projects that I was really inspired by. I had hoped that the tour would be more of an architectural 'insiders' look at London... and as it was aimed at emerging architects, that there be some more adventurous projects. However, I would greatly like to see the program continue as it reminded me of the type of Architecture I want to strive towards making. Buildings that are about ideas, space and light.

One final comment. It seems to me that this award reflects the nature of each participant's firms as much as it does us as recipients of the award... that each practice values their staff, promotes their engagement in architecture, and gives them recognition for their contribution. Thank-you Robert and Julie (directors of MNA) for supporting and encouraging me in my Architectural career.

**Peter Walker**  
JULY 2008