
Reflections on the 2008 **Dulux Study Tour: Emerging Architects Award**
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I have recently had the very good fortune of travelling to London with a group of remarkable professionals on a study tour experience sponsored by Dulux, the AIA (Formerly RAlA) and Virgin Atlantic. Designed to provide a unique exploration opportunity for several young professionals, the Dulux Study Tour was guided by the AIA enabling us to visit several outstanding buildings, practices and professional bodies across a period of five days. London-city walking tours hosted by 'Architectural Dialogue' were wonderfully insightful and grounded our reading of the city considerably beyond the *London A-Z*. Upon this cultural foundation, select site visits to destinations such as Manchester's Civil Justice Centre, the Rylands Library: Manchester, Wilkinson Eyre's works and master-planning within the beautiful Kew Gardens, the New Islington development by Urban Splash: Manchester, Westfield's new development at White City London, were undoubtedly thought-provoking. One of the most inspiring memories I have brought home with me however was the opportunity to visit some remarkable architectural practices for an insight into how each operated, what they are currently working on and the processes by which each explore and produce their range of projects.

Foster & Partners showed us their offices' primary working floor and models of current/ past projects. LOCOG showed us the beginnings of the 2012 London Olympic site and amazed us with the scale of works being undertaken. Zaha Hadid's office welcomed us into their labyrinth of people, models and books for a brief insight and Carmody Groake inspired us with their ideology, inspired design process and lots of delightfully crafted models. David Chipperfields' office impressed us with more impressive models, a beautiful studio space and wide range of current works while a visit to several of David Adjaye's public buildings used up a lot of spare memory-card space on our cameras. The AA opened its doors to us for a wander around and opportunity to re-consider post graduate study, while Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners refreshed our faith in the archi-kind with their staff-friendly and philanthropic practice culture. The wealth of inspiring projects both built and imagined we were able to access through these office practice insights, has been hugely inspiring. The diversity of practice cultures and personalities within each firm was also remarkable. In short, some lessons learned from these practice visits are outlined below, listing untested interpretation and both rumour and fact amongst the cumulative enlightenment reached en-tour.

17 ½ Lessons from Architectural Tour:

1. An architectural offices' culture is reflected to some extent within in their design products.
Large efficient office structures = large technical and efficient buildings;
Interactive and social team-based offices = cultural/ socially-orientated building types;
Small offices = big collaborative ideas built into smaller-scaled projects
2. The larger the number of staff in an architectural office, the more strongly "branded" the design output of each seems to be.
3. The notion of 'Branding' design output is an acknowledged design approach, and can be re-enforced by internal marketing practices such as the publication of books about one's self, or a particular series of projects.
4. The larger the number of staff in an architectural office, the more frequently a design review panel (of 1 or more senior staff members) is used to critique and adjudicate the office's design output. (See also no 2.)
5. Those with the most power in an office are often around the least.
6. "Starchitects" are real people. Some of them are cranky, some let others do the talking, and some know they are beautiful, wonderful creatures.
7. Apparently if you don't like someone else within the office receiving kudos for a particular building, you can Photoshop them out of media photographs to make things even again.
8. If HR staff disagree over the number of staff currently employed within an office, it may or may not be true the difference in estimates is directly equal to the number of students working there for free.
9. The fastest way of instilling fear into staff is to enable the key designer access to a walkway platform or glass office box suspended above the main working office floor.
10. Three dimensional printers for in-house resin 3D-model making are a fast and efficient means of inspiring awe and respect into the humble young Australian Architect.
11. Physical model making, both via computer generated means and hand-made versions, are an essential design tool used by most scales of visited architectural practices in order to explore form or detail concepts relevant for each project. Time and materials required to generate models and the design exploration gained from this process is seen as integral/ basic to typical client fee-agreements negotiated.

12. Material Research teams are an in-house skill specialty identified by select firms as a necessity to their teams due to the complex nature of their technical and/ or construction detailing and design development processes.
13. Extensive use of glass does not always translate into a 'transparent' building.
14. The order and efficiency of a given firms' research, model or material library may or may not relate directly to the amount of chaos experienced within the firm's social structure.
15. There is a huge variety of modes by which architects and designers explore project criteria, cultural social and theoretical contexts, brief problems etc to generate a response that strives to achieve programmatic satisfaction but also engages with the building's audience. Some of the design modes demonstrated by the various practices visited involved beginning with a concept drawing or painting and virtual-modeling a sculptural form to-taste which is then applied to site and adjusted to suit programmatic requirements. Some design modes included foundational research into the social and cultural drivers for a particular commission and extensive material research with skilled ironmongers and the like. Some seemed based on editing and refining previous project precedents; all equally fascinating.
16. Designating a significant portion of the practices' annual profits to selected charities (selected by staff members) is one of Richard Rogers' inspiring cultural principles. Limiting projects to restrain staff growth to a manageable office size, staff lunches and 'green' transport incentives are other practices quite distinctive to this firm's ethos.
17. Amazing things can be made with ply, rubber brackets and a few turnbuckles at the AA.

This list should not be read as exhaustive nor entirely indicative of the full appreciation gained by visiting real leading Architectural practices, as a young design professional. The opportunity to see briefly into these select practices brings with it as much challenge as it does intrigue. The challenge presented is that the 'Starchitects' driving these practices them are real people- is their level of conviction or desire to make a difference any different from any young professionals'? How hence, have they been successful in achieving what they seek to change or impart to the built environment, to culture or society? Quite apart from the impressive façade each firm has established through their built works, awards, cultural respect and the peer rumor-mill, the personalities and beliefs of the real people directing these practices and the influence of such on both the design process and outcome, is a humbling revelation. How the various firms' diverse thought processes, design manifestos, business decisions and creative whims, appears to affect their culture as much as their built works has been a fantastic discovery from this adventure.

Questioning the success of leading Architectural firms regarding their intended participation within the built realm is not something I am yet experienced (or game) enough to provide critique on, but it does test my own convictions of what I believe 'Architecture' should impart to any given project- irrespective of scale or budget. How 'Architecture' can successfully impart various experiences, opportunities, interpretations etc is a challenge I suspect will take a lifetime of learning, and one I look forward to. Reflecting further on how this challenge has followed me home, the importance of a practice's culture on the works produced has provided simple clarity: soul-less design processes (and practice cultures) can never produce soul-full buildings; a note I hope to remember well for my professional experiences/ time to come.

For this insight, and the entirely wonderful experience of the Dulux Study Tour, it is with much thanks to Dulux, the AIA and Virgin for their generosity and their faith in the power of travel to ignite creative minds.