

Dulux Study Tour 2012 – A celebration of upcoming young representatives in Australian architecture – a chance to get a varied group of like-minded individuals together to tour outside their normal working environments to reflect upon the spread of philosophy, art, environs, history, culture, work ethic and even malaise of a small range of international architects.

It's telling, and unfair not to recognize that the practices and buildings we visited are all somewhat renowned globally – otherwise of course we wouldn't be there in the first place. It has to be noted that with this renown comes a sort of experience, of both work and philosophy (or preaching as I'd like to say) of the ideal basis of a firm's work.

Some were better at justifying what they do, some were overly accommodating, some embodied an ideal through and through, some seemed almost baffled by which long-term direction they were taking, and others were nonchalant in their efforts to communicate with us. One thing was common however, and that was a passion for the efforts they were putting in to create whatever it was that they were working on, and making it worthwhile either for them or the end user, whoever that may be.

The UAE is an interesting part of the world – a stone's throw away from violent conflict, wealthy beyond measure and structured by faith above all else (and seemingly retail – the new guiding religion in town). Grandeur really is the name of the game there. Home to the world's first 7-Star hotel, the world's tallest structure, the world's largest mall, and of course a 'miniature' man-made archipelago of islands shaped like the world itself in the neighbouring seas.



Firms there are supersized. In fact everything there is supersized... If it wasn't obvious, Dubai in particular (and now Abu Dhabi) fostered a gold rush of building through the last decade or two since the Gulf War ended. This rush of building appears to be waning, a result of the GFC more than anything else, but I expect it to come back in a number of years. That being said, there are still western architectural offices there numbering employees into the hundreds. Firms such as Atkins, Arup, Woods Bagot, Foster and Partners, all requiring many staff to power through jobs, doing literally dozens of projects at once that are all huge, spectacular, ridiculous and quite incredible, however not so many actually being built in the UAE. The UAE is now the business base for the design firms (which number highly in engineers as well as architects) that are working in neighbouring countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, India, Kuwait and even Iran and Syria – although the companies involved in these last were instructed to pull out by NATO.

A political hotspot, tax haven, design-poor and a capitalising capitalist growth area - the UAE has placed its mark on the world stage while trying to retain some sense of a unique history with between 85-90% of the population being expatriate. A measure of the country's growth can be extolled by the expatriate percentage mentioned before, along with the mere fact that if you are a non-resident – you are forced to leave the country within 30 days of having no work. This is a country where national pride in their sheiks (or kings) is actually justified by their fully realized visions of growth and gratuitous spending. Nary was a building visited without portraits of the three sheiks adorning the walls, and we eagerly toured opulent presidential suites in almost every building we visited, delivered on the off chance that a sheik may want to visit (they generally won't...).

Development is abundant there, leading to massive vacancy rates in buildings from oversupply, and a certain lack of clear design mentality. Probably a result of developing so fast and haphazardly. I think the biggest shock was the realization that the Burj Khalifa - tallest building in the world, is neighbored by bare plots on some sides - an incongruous oddity for a super-tall building anywhere else in the world. Nobody walks there (obviously the heat is the factor) and this mentality leads to non-existent building interfaces. There is no urban design at all. We were told that a multi-storey shopping centre would simply not work in the UAE as the experience is to drive in one end of the mall, walk through browsing, and then get your driver to pick you up at the other end – escalators not required!

The firms we visited were only too proud to gesticulate about the opportunity of being able to work in world-leading developments and openly stated that pushing the boundaries is only possible here as the costs are so astronomical.

This was only too obvious – diagrids, completely non-modular designs requiring complex CAD/CAM modeling, curves, and epic scale along with opulence was evident everywhere. Subtlety was hard to find, yet even the most mundane of structures, such as freeway podiums, retain a sense of the Arabic – an Arabian swirl, a hint of a scimitar's edge or a touch of gold.



Capital Gate (Hyatt) Left, Masdar City Podcar Right

You play big there, or go home. Tales were recounted of Sheik's angrily firing interior designers on the spot due to dissatisfaction of the colour schemes in the Burj al Arab, only for another foreign designer to come in and somewhat grotesquely disfigure the spaces with rainbow schemes and leopard print (however that *was* to the satisfaction of the sheik).

This is a nation where a utopian prototype city actually gets rationalised, realised, expanded and ultimately continued with, even with it being an abject failure to take off. Foster's Masdar City hits you like a set from *Minority Report*. Driverless podcars transport you around the lower entry hub to the upper level boarding areas that further lead onto a promenade of apartments, labs and well-planned comfortable leisure (exterior!) areas – all with the goal of being entirely driven by solar and other renewable energy sources, while being zero-carbon and zero-waste.

Germany on the other hand (or at least Berlin), is steeped in rich heritage, and seems fresh from the freedom of oppression, looking for ways to overtly push ahead from a turbulent past and break free from socialism and all that it entails. There was a palpable energy in the air there, not hampered by the economy too much, although clearly things are going poorly in Europe.

Despite the difficulty there was a sense of hope in all the firms we visited. A sense of pride and great ambition to keep pushing to do what is right and expected from design. An almost patriotic awareness that even though

times are tough, the Germans will carry on being successful and make the most of what they are given, such as increasingly cheap rent allowing the offices to still operate relatively smoothly and stave-off the recession for a long time while concentrating on commissions outside of their home town. Collaboration featured heavily in many firms there – whether between architects, artists or even the community.

It seemed that in a city full of personalities itching to break through and prove that yes, they are themselves - there seemed to be appropriate niches to each different take on what they were architecturally doing. This is a town where graphic and video artistry can be realised by complex lighting designs, political posturing enabled by savvy business moves, and charitable projects managed by a firm wholly displaced from the locality of disaster such as seen in New Orleans.

This is also the town where the most ‘experiential’ building I’ve had the pleasure to visit is located – The Jewish Museum by Daniel Libeskind. This is a building that defies description, apart from being an obvious influence to Federation Square. A building that quite disturbingly succeeds in making you feel awkward, sullen and somewhat ill-at-ease by actually being there, not necessarily through the weight of what it represents. If there was ever proof that humans seem to like straight lines and right angles, surely this building goes far to prove that.



Jewish Museum Left, Neues Museum Right

Yet even with this mix of creativity being on full display, there's still space in Berlin left for respectful, minimal, 'soft' architecture that speaks to what already exists. David Chipperfield Architects clearly embody an ethos to the extreme not only in their work, but working environment. An office exactly how you would imagine it – structured, whitewashed, detailed, contemplative, *foreign*, and responsible for unifying the city's historical district. Perhaps only a non-German firm could actually do justice to 'Museum Island' and the partially destroyed Neues Museum.

Berlin embodied a rich history, a centuries-old account of both prosperity and conflict, which oozed from every brick in every wall, both new and old. There is sensitivity in Berlin that few cities appear to have, that must be partly what the UAE is striving for in their great new city, but will definitely not achieve for many, many years to come. The new developments we toured and observed in Berlin tended to blend in with the vernacular spectacularly well, whilst clearly being cut from a different cloth. This is a city where war-torn remnants are proudly (and attractively) retained alongside the ultra-modern sleekness of glass and metal, acting more than a sum of all the parts. Berlin was culturally aware and respectful, both of its past and ever present potential future.

London is the old fashioned town perhaps too caught up in its faltering heritage. Clearly the most affected economy from the cities we visited, even with the Olympics keeping the industry afloat for the immediate future. A city whose largest tower (the Shard) seemed much maligned by the public for whatever reason. Cold, wet, gridlocked, but still admirable. Even surpassing Berlin in the legacy to the past, rich urban design drips from every property you walk past. Not an inch is left wasted in London, either a result from rocketing real-estate values or massive population density. There's a certain stoic, stuffiness to this city, torn between holding up monarchist values and breaking free into the globalisation of every country on our planet.

Our mentor firms straddled the line between challenging and understanding the cultural cringe of what London seems to be. Only can a knight charge huge amounts of money to actually lend his personal hand to an architectural project at a client's (costly) whim. Foster + Partners was a well-oiled machine and wholly impressive not only in respect to us, but pure unadulterated quality of presentation, visible work ethic and size. Nowhere else would you see the worker bees of a company occupy a 3 storey void space in rows and rows of desks, let alone have their own café, extensive multiple storey model workshop and incredible samples library. Of course the office is full of their own designer furniture and associated products. Very sleek.

Rogers Stirk Harbour, probably Foster's prime competitor in the UK, could not be more diametrically opposed. Haphazard, colourful, compact and the complete opposite of sleek - yet still probably the only other super-celebrity architect in the UK. Visiting these firms back to back was quite astonishing, yet they were both overtly 'British'. Both are known for monumental showpiece projects, have a pronounced style, and do not cross into each other's niches, comfortably competing and winning opposing bids.

Arup and Wilkinson Eyre rounded out the larger firms for our trip. Obviously multidisciplinary, well-oiled machines that thrive on teams working together to make buildings work both programmatically, structurally and aesthetically. Virtual one-stop shops like the other large companies we visited but more architecturally driven than by engineering.

Davis Langdon were more enlightening as to how the blunt end of the industry manages the economics of delivering skyscrapers to a city that acts to belligerently defy any major change to the skyline, all the while being ecologically sustainable and financially sound.

London cannot be complete without mention of the Barbican Estate – the second utopian ‘city’ construction we visited on this tour. This estate built in the 60 & 70’s to high modernist ideals in the vein of Eames and Le Corbusier in brutalist fashion is only just now becoming respected and moving beyond having the air of a housing commission development. The housing towers and podium levels are fully integrated into surrounding public promenades, gardens, designed public spaces including many ponds and lower transportation levels. Fantastic architectural ditties and details were found throughout the site and it wasn’t a surprise that we wanted to dawdle in this estate much longer than we were allowed to explore. The similarities to the utterly contemporary Masdar City were very apparent.



The Barbican Estate

Of alternate interest, were the smaller firms Carmody Groarke and F.A.T. Again both completely opposed on the architectural scales. CG a more traditional firm interested in creating works likened to pieces of art and an ordered rationale, of which the memorial in Hyde Park to the victims of the London Bombings in 2005 was of particular interest - a project that struggled with what is typically perceived as necessary for a memorial of loss to represent. Notions of ownership and representation were debated with victim’s next of kin so that the ‘totems’ of the victims did not become owned by particular kin and thus require specific placement of

commemorative flowers for example. Even the question of whether the four bombers should be represented by the memorial as victims was brought up, yet duly (perhaps sadly) decided to be improper.

F.A.T. projects on the other hand are the pop-art of the architectural world - strange and 'Dutch' in appearance but British in wit. Bright colours, bold shapes and altogether striking takes on what are heavily entrenched ideas of space and how we use it from day to day. This is a company that turns an office into a miniature garden playground, or a house into a comic block of flats. Detail, embellishments and decoration adorn their projects, and give them a completely unique feel. A whole lot of fun with maybe only a little bit of seriousness.

Lastly RIBA - finally an all too clear emphasis as to how the Australian Institute is managed and the tradition that it upholds. A true guildhall of craftsmen from back when the romance of building was still present. Our gracious hosts embody the tradition of architecture as only they could. A wistful tendency to feel responsibility is imparted on an architect in these halls and this rounded off a great tour across incredibly varied locales.

If nothing else, this trip made it simply obvious to me that architecture covers a massive range of both paid and unpaid work, and has the opportunity to spread ever wider than what architects the world over are already partaking in right now. Our responsibility as designers is far further reaching than just simply buildings, sculptures, interiors, furniture, colours, patterns, objects, art and ideas. We are the arbiters of a global condition that is economically biased, environmentally conscious (or unconscious?) socially accountable and indelible on history. We are the purveyors of what is socially acceptable in all walks of life and all areas of design, and along with that comes a great responsibility to uphold what is good and right with what we do - whether economically, socially, sustainably, aesthetically, ethnically and above all humanely. I've learnt a new respect for architects all over the world, the assorted challenges they face, the wisdom experience gains and the power that we have to work together to be custodians of our cultural future. Each and every one of us does this differently at least in some small way. That's our legacy and responsibility.

I'd like to emphatically thank Kahlea for organizing most of the trip and keeping us on our toes when we needed it, Phil and Tina for the fantastic company and crooning, Sarah for her humour and enthusiasm, all of our gracious hosts and guides for freely imparting their knowledge onto us, and lastly my fellow compatriots Shaun, Weian, Anna and Emily, who together made for an absolutely unforgettable experience. I can't wait to see where the tour will venture in 2013!



Anna, Emily, James, Shaun and Weian