

Foster's London

Landmarks and lost opportunities

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Published in Architecture Today, May 2007

We nearly lost him. When the Team 4 partnership with Richard and Su Rogers broke up in 1968, Norman and Wendy Foster, having no work, seriously considered emigrating to the States. Then, just in time, along came a progressive client with a sizable job: an amenity centre – showers, toilets, a canteen and some offices – for workers at the then still active Millwall dock on Isle of Dogs. It was not, on the face of it, a promising commission on which to base an architectural reputation, but when the finished building was published in the Architects' Journal, students and young architects up and down the country gazed into the mirror of that sheer glass, neoprene-gasketed wall and saw the future. We had already admired Team 4's Reliance Controls factory in Swindon – its Miesian steel frame with exposed cross bracing (destined to be imitated ad nauseam in the years to come) and the way that it refused to distinguish between offices and factory – but the Fred Olsen amenity centre went further. This wasn't Miesian, this was new. We sensed the colours, the green carpet and the mauve walls, even though the photographs were in black and white. And when we looked closely at the plans and the perspective section we marvelled at the utter simplicity of the concept. It was so obvious. Why hadn't we thought of it?

Norman Foster has been doing this ever since: solving problems in obvious ways, or rather ways that look obvious in hindsight. That penetrating, organising, maximising mind is now the centre of a powerhouse of architecture. Foster doesn't any longer design all the buildings himself - how could he? - but his way of thinking is transmitted around the globe through the medium of the hundreds of trained minds that he employs or has employed. Where would London architecture be without the Foster office to attract all the bright students, give them jobs, train them up and send them out (sometimes reluctantly) to

make their way in the world? The list of architects that have passed through the Foster office and gone on to found important practices of their own includes Julia Barfield, David Chipperfield, Birkin Haward, Michael Hopkins, Richard Horden, Jan Kaplicky, Alex Lifschutz, David Morley, Ian Ritchie, Ken Shuttleworth, Alan Stanton, Chris Wilkinson and probably a lot more. London would not be the architectural Mecca it is today without the Foster office. Foster himself sits there at the end desk in the big double-height studio at Riverside as if he were just one of the workers. But that's part of the design. For Foster, everything is design and everything can be improved by design, including London itself.

It took some time for London to appreciate this fact. A decade after the completion of the Fred Olsen amenity building, Foster had built almost nothing in London, unless you count the direct follow-ons from Olsen – a linear, lightweight passenger terminal, a refit of a travel agency in Regent Street and an elegant little tin shed in Thamesmead for the company that fitted the mirror glass wall. There were some small projects like a clothes shop in Sloane Street for Joseph and, in a different London, a special school for disabled children in Hackney, but neither of these allowed Foster to do what he does best, which is to take a difficult brief, see through to its heart and make a new concept out of it. Meanwhile, outside London he was daring to put the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts into a stainless stainless-steel-clad hangar at the University of East Anglia, and reinventing the office block in the form of the seminal Willis Faber Dumas building in Ipswich. In the almost-London of Greenford, 15 miles west of the city centre, the practice was proving beyond all doubt that it knew how to build fast and cheap for an international big business client. The Installation Support Centre for IBM at Greenford was commissioned in February of 1977 and handed over just nine months later. Not unlike a bigger version of the Fred Olsen amenity building, its glass walls, raised floors, modular partitions and yellow-painted steel frames, not to mention its fast-track management contracts, were the all state of the art. IBM loved it, ordered more of the same and wondered why all its buildings could not be this good.

But in London proper, nothing yet, though not for want of trying. Foster's attempt in 1977 to sort out the dreary mess of the Hammersmith roundabout was the first of several abortive urban schemes for the capital. London Transport needed to upgrade its bus and tube stations and proposed to pay for this by building 60,000 square metres of offices. Foster's solution was, as usual, simple and obvious-looking, though it took a lot of option-evaluation to arrive at it. The District Line trench was covered over to make a garden the size of Trafalgar Square and the offices were pushed to the perimeter like a castle wall but with open corners instead of turrets or bastions. Bold enough so far, but the feature that lifted the project above the ordinary was the Teflon-coated glass fibre canopy covering the whole site. This canopy was no optional extra but an essential element of the design that paid for itself by reducing the required weather resistance of the inward-facing walls of the offices. In other words this was one enormous building. This tendency to put everything under one shed-like roof, to unify rather than articulate and to look inward rather than outward, is characteristic of many Foster projects, not all of them successful. Had the Hammersmith scheme been built we might now, thirty years on, be tearing it down to replace it with something more varied and adaptable.

Five years later Foster still hadn't redesigned London but he got the chance to improve an important bit of it in the commission to design a new headquarters for BBC Radio on the site of the Langham Hotel opposite Broadcasting House. By now the habit of exploring every possible strategic option for a project had become an obsession but in this case the process of elimination produced a design of real maturity - simple, as always, but also tangible and believable. It was a technically focussed answer to the broadcasters' needs but it was also a brilliant piece of urban design, a late contribution to John Nash's famous Regent Street plan. Here we see another favourite Foster motif, not the shed but the toast rack. The proposed building filled its island site but was sliced diagonally into strips that step down from the Langham Place at the front to the more domestic scale of Portland Square at the back. At right angles

to the strips, a publicly accessible atrium lined up with the spire of Nash's All Souls church and beyond that with what was then called the Post Office Tower. The design, complete with 200 option study models, was exhibited to general acclaim at the landmark Foster, Rogers, Stirling show at the Royal Academy in 1986 but by then it was already a dead duck, victim of bureaucratic caution and a changed management ethos at the BBC - something Richard McCormac knows all about.

That toast rack motif was to crop up again a couple of years later in another unrealised urban plan for an even more important part of London, Paternoster Square on the north side of St Paul's Cathedral. The existing loosely planned office precinct designed by William Holford was not much more than 20 years old but was considered to be obsolete and unsuitable for the needs of modern financial institutions. Half a dozen big name architects, including Foster's old partner and rival Richard Rogers, were invited to submit masterplans in competition for the redevelopment of the site. Most followed the prevailing orthodoxy, proposing traditional urban quarters, with streets and island buildings. In this company Foster's proposal looked suspiciously like an old fashioned megastructure, a kind of urban machine. Straight, parallel 18 metre wide strips of office accommodation with retail at ground level were laid across the site and simply chopped off some distance from the cathedral as if they were anticipating its demolition. Given the sensitivity of the site and the mood of hostility to abstract modernism, it was never going to be more than an also-ran. In the end none of the schemes was built and the site became a stylistic battle ground until William Whitfield produced the bland compromise we see today.

And then there was Kings Cross, the biggest opportunity yet for Foster to make his mark on London. In 1988 British Rail decided to terminate the Channel Tunnel Rail Link at Kings Cross (yes, it was almost twenty years ago, and the train from Paris has still not arrived) and teamed up with a consortium of developers to make proposals for the vast area of derelict railway land to the north of the stations. After an unsuccessful first attempt by Skidmore Owings

and Merrill, the task was entrusted to Foster in the hope that he might produce something more sensitive. It obviously had to be an English, not an American plan, and what could be more English than a park? The mixed commercial and residential development was planned around a big oval green space, some distance north of the Euston road. The hope was that the park would create value by becoming a new London "address", like "St James's Park" or "Islington Green". Bill Hillier's "space syntax" people were called in to analyse the problem and give the designers' hunches a degree of scientific respectability. Then the decision was taken to shift the CTRL terminus to next door St Pancras, which screwed up the plans, and anyway by now the early 90s property slump had deepened and the whole project had become unviable.

So that makes four abortive urban schemes in the 70s and 80s, if we include the BBC. Foster was not necessarily greatly concerned. Bear in mind that meanwhile, in a city far away, he was building one of the great buildings of the twentieth century, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, and beginning to establish the practice as a global, not a local business. But there was perhaps one "urban" project in London that was successful – the Sackler Gallery at the Royal Academy. Urban? Well yes, in the sense that it dealt with the space between existing historic buildings, though the space in question was no more than a lightwell in the middle of the Academy complex, between the old Burlington House and the later Victorian galleries. The brief was straightforward: to revamp the galleries on the top floor. But how to get to it? The solution was one those that seems obvious in hindsight: put the vertical circulation in the glazed over lightwell and at the same time reveal and restore the handsome Palladian garden front of the house. Foster has always been very proud of the Sackler. It was his first major public building in London and his first close encounter with a historic building. It also foretold greater glories to come at the National Gallery, the British Museum and Tate Modern.

In 1996 Foster's urban planning ambitions were awakened once again when he was called in by the GLA and other interested organisations to prepare

a study of the heart of tourist London called World Squares for All. The feeling was that some of the nation's greatest architectural monuments were being presented to the world in a poor light. Basically, they were being strangled by traffic, so the probable solution was some kind of pedestrianisation. Foster once again called in Bill Hillier and extensive studies produced satisfactory results, some blindingly obvious, some less so. One of the less obvious ones was the mysterious attractiveness to tourists of a little island refuge at the top of Whitehall. It turned out to be the best place from which to take photographs. More obvious was the finding that the pavement in front of the National Gallery was dangerously congested. People had been wishing they could walk straight out of the gallery into the square ever since the gallery had been built. Foster duly closed the road, made some more subtle changes to the hard landscaping of the square, inserted some public toilets into the change of level and received the grateful thanks of the nation and its visitors.

But that was not until 2003, by which time Foster was active all over the capital. Colin St John Wilson had finally managed to move the British Library to St Pancras, leaving a big hole in the middle of the British Museum, and Foster was called in to fill it. Once again, he set about doing the not-so-obvious thing. This was the Sackler Gallery writ large, and this time with clear urban implications. History was the guide. Robert Smirke had always intended the museum to have a courtyard, but his cousin Sidney had put the circular reading room in the middle of it and filled up the surrounding gap with bookstacks. Foster's solution was simple: leave the reading room but take out the bookstacks, creating a big new circulation space in the middle of the museum. This transforms the museum-going experience. What used to be a trudge from room to room around the perimeter becomes a set of rational choices accessed calmly from the centre. But the Great Court is more than just a circulation space; it's an urban square, a monumental event on an important new Bloomsbury thoroughfare. It's almost always too hot, the acoustic ambience is irritating, the

light filtered through the impossibly delicate roof has a strangely flat quality, and the café tables are uninviting. But we certainly wouldn't be without it now.

Nor would we be without the Millennium Bridge, despite the farce of its opening when thousands queued to cross it and almost fell over as the wobbling gathered momentum. The engineers had made the mistake of believing their computers rather than trusting their instincts. But the architectural design was peculiar too. Nobody but Foster could see how it was a "blade of light" and how was bringing the suspension cables down to eye level supposed to improve the panoramic view? Surely a conventional Clifton-type suspension bridge would have looked and felt better. But that would not have been innovative and the urge to innovate, or rather the inability to refrain from innovating, is hard wired in Foster's character. In the event the hydraulic dampers fitted to cure the wobble not only worked perfectly but looked as if they had always been there. Provided they continue to work, the wobbles will soon be forgotten and the bridge will come to be known for its simple usefulness as a route to Tate Modern and for that glorious axial view of the dome of St Paul's.

Trafalgar Square, Great Court, the Millennium Bridge: with these three simple, obvious urban interventions, Norman Foster has changed not just the face, but also the feel of London. Because of them London feels like a city at ease with itself, well balanced, obsessed with neither the past nor the future. Every moderately active tourist sees all three, and the locals are quietly proud of them.

Workaday London has also benefited belatedly from the efforts of its adopted Liverpoolian son. The Jubilee Line extension is a kind of architectural exhibition, skilfully curated by Roland Paolotti, but of all the stations Canary Wharf is the most memorable, partly because it's the biggest but also because of the complete assurance with which it is handled. A simple idea, of course: take an existing disused dock, shape it into a big underground box and cover it with a landscaped park but allow big glass bubbles to swell up from below, serving as entrances and as projectors of Piranesian shafts of daylight into the interior.

There are no tunnels or corridors, just a great big concrete hall with cascades of escalators, all facing the same way. There is not much need for signs; it's obvious which way to go: towards the light or away from it. It's a joy to use, and something to ponder when you're next subjected to a hell-hole like Tottenham Court Road or Camden Town.

Surfacing at Canary wharf, we are not far from two of Foster's biggest London buildings: 33 Canada Square and 8 Canada Square. The latter is one of the two supporting companions of Cesar Pelli's One Canada Square, which for ten years stood in splendid isolation like an obelisk, the image most people think of when they hear the name Canary Wharf. At 45 storeys, Number 8 is a true skyscraper even by American standards, but Foster does not seem to be very proud of it. You will find no mention of it on the practice's web site. Actually it is a very competent piece of work – a straight, square tower with rounded corners, like an outsize version of Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson's Wax tower but without the unusual section. Ironically, the building, completed in 2002, is occupied by HSBC (Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank) - the client of a very different skyscraper completed 15 years earlier.

On the other side of town, a cluster of handsome everyday buildings for Imperial College confirms that perceptions of Foster among British clients have shifted decisively from 'dangerously innovative designer' to 'safe pair of hands'. In the early 90s Foster drew up a master plan for "Albertopolis", the big city block stretching from Natural History Museum in the south to the Albert Hall in the north and including the Imperial College campus. The plan was meant to provide a framework for other architects to fill in but since then lots of it has been filled in by Foster himself. Here we see him (or his practice) dealing with difficult building types, in particular laboratories with their complex servicing requirements, competently and without fuss. These are mostly quite plain, medium-size box-like buildings, designed to appeal mainly to their users. The Tanaka Business School, however, is more prominent, forming a new main entrance to the campus on Exhibition Road. It is a clever extension to the Grade

II listed Royal School of Mines which has been refurbished to house the office areas. Teaching accommodation takes the form of six circular lecture theatres stacked in a tall silver drum which stands in a glass walled atrium facing the street - exciting for students and intriguing for passers-by.

Foster is not known as a social architect. Apart from luxury flats like those in the practice's own Riverside building and the new Albion Riverside next door, Foster has never done much housing. (We will pass over the infamous 1975 tin boxes in Milton Keynes.) Domesticity just isn't his style. Schools, however, have lately become something of a speciality. Domesticity is not required for the government's commercially sponsored City Academies, so it was perhaps natural that Foster should be called upon to give the programme a high architectural profile. London now has four Foster City Academies. They are all in far flung suburbs (Willesden, Edgware, Northolt and Bexley) but in media terms they are more central, often appearing on the local television news. They are all different, but share certain characteristics. Bexley Business Academy is typical: a three storey box clad in continuous vertical brise-soleils, with three atriums inside to act as social hubs, the largest of them housing a mini stock exchange as well as a café and a television studio. The classrooms themselves are open to the atriums and there are no corridors. It is remarkably like an office building, and therefore bread and butter to the Foster designers. Unfortunately, an Ofsted report condemned the school as inadequate in January 2006, three years after it opened, but that was probably not the architect's fault.

Back in visible, tourist London, Foster has recently made a big difference to the environment around the Tower of London and Tower Bridge. On the north bank, next to All Hallows church, Tower Place is a couple of routine medium-rise office blocks made extraordinary by a linking roof that forms a huge triangular atrium. The technology is impressive, especially the incredibly delicate glass curtains that keep the wind out of the atrium, but in this context the building is a bit of monster. The atrium is supposed to be public but is not much used because it is soulless and leads nowhere special. The security men who police it,

forbidding photography right here in the tourist heart of London, do not help. The overall form of the building is inappropriate too – a big flat-topped mass among spires and towers and turrets.

On the other side of the river the extraordinary GLA building is real crowd pleaser with its mad toppling-over-backwards form like a high tech Easter Island statue. Inside, it is equally amusing. Dizzy spiral ramps eat up the space and one wonders: is this really practical? Where are the offices? How would you ever extend it? Is it really a Foster building? It seems somehow to have escaped that disciplined, problem-solving ethos that normally regulates the office's output. Perhaps it was inspired by the Reichstag in Berlin, not an entirely appropriate precedent. The setting of the GLA building is by Foster too. It's called "More London", a big new master-planned office quarter. Some buildings are by Foster, some by other architects. This is mostly dull developers' stuff, though slickly executed. The buildings are all roughly the same height, presumably to take maximum advantage of the planning restrictions, but there is, if anything, too much space around them, all paved in dull grey stone, cold and forbidding. In twenty years time it will look like Croydon.

Until well into the 90s Foster's only office building in inner London was the ITN headquarters in Gray's Inn Road, a rather quiet building, the calm atrium of which still features regularly as a television interview background. It's impact on the city was purely local. Foster contributed nothing to the 80s "big bang" office building boom. Now it seems there is a Foster office building on almost every corner in the City. He is becoming the Richard Seifert of our time, though he would not take that as a compliment. Stylistically it is a varied collection of buildings, though bluish glass seems to be the favourite material. There are great slabs of it at Bishops Square by Spitalfields market; it forms the eight storey high street-facing atrium wall at 33 Holborn Circus; at One London Wall it curves restlessly, following the site boundary and recalling strongly the now thirty year old Willis Faber Dumas building which is still the key reference point of the practice's thinking about offices; and it wraps up the ugly, squatting form

of Moor House that turns its fat backside to a little surviving Victorian terrace on the corner of Moorgate. But there is traditional elegance too, in the polite limestone façade of 100 Wood Street and the Miesian steel framed windows of Gresham Street. Soon the triple curves of a new 29 storey Foster skyscraper at 51 Lime Street, near the Lloyds building, will receive its blue glass skin and be ready for its tenants, the Willis insurance group, now without Faber and Dumas.

And finally there is 30 St Mary Axe. Who would have thought that a sore-thumb-shaped object such as this would have become the peoples' favourite? Opinion could so easily have swung the other way. We must be grateful, for this is a great building, the culmination of a development process that goes back thirty years via the Commerzbank Tower in Frankfurt and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank to Willis Faber Dumas. Sky gardens, spiralling atriums, natural ventilation, column free spaces, geodesic structure, streamlined form – all are brought together in a conceptually satisfying organic whole. It is said that Foster wanted to call it "the pine cone". You can see why (opens and closes according to the weather) but it was never going to catch on. The public has decided that it's a gherkin and there is no going back. But actually, especially close to, it looks more like a cartoon rocket. There is no podium of any kind, it just stands on triangular legs in a shallow round depression in the paving. Imagine the roar of the motors, the flames spurting from the base, the slow lift off. Norman would be at the controls, of course, Captain Kirk-style in that panoramic glazed nose cone, gazing down (or up) from a low orbit at a city, and a planet, on which he has made a considerable mark.

Colin Davies 2007