

The Renewal of the Whitechapel Gallery and the Imagination of the East End

William Mann

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Inside and outside, or content and surroundings, have always been fundamental to the perception of the Whitechapel Art Gallery. In my own experience, the Whitechapel introduced me to a number of singular artists, but, more than this, its shows occasioned my first encounters with a part of my adoptive city, the East End of London. I remember wandering through streets, estates and markets, the unfamiliar diversity, or was it inequality, of the city's life dulled by drab winter light, my mind still vivid with Emil Nolde's violent colours and brushstrokes.

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Years later, in the summer of 2003, firming up impressions and developing ideas for the selection process with Paul and our colleagues from Ghent and London, we scuttled between the two front doors, past the Evening Standard seller at the tube entrance ('Shock Surge in Sex Disease', the billboard in one of Paul's photographs screams). Our minds were forced to digest several disjunctions: between the two street facades, one static and solid, the other picturesque and transparent; between the luminous air-conditioned halls where Franz West or Gerhard Richter hung, and the peeling, pub-brown reading room with its resident readers, disrespectful but appreciative of this home from home; and between these differences and the underlying structure of the buildings, remarkably similar behind these superficial appearances.

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As the library slowly wound down, our plans came to life. Readers, then books, then librarians moved on to the Idea Store at Whitechapel – though not all of these made that journey. We experienced at second hand the slowing pulse of this popular community facility - whose move was the cause, not the effect, of our project. Our designs were first sketched by hand in pencil, then by inkjet plotter on crisp rolls of paper, then at an accelerating tempo by scaffold pole, chisel and steel beam. Until, finally last January, after months of breaking up dense concrete, a small hole for a cable between the two buildings turned into a large doorway on the ground floor.

Anyone who has knocked through from dining room to living room (there were, apparently 30,000 of you last year) or from house to house (as Londoners have always done!) will know something of the feeling that we experienced, when we were at last able to walk freely, in our hard hats, stiff boots and fluorescent jackets, from one building to another.

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These were not, of course, ordinary houses or rooms. Both gallery and library were complex conglomerations of rooms, stretching back deep from their street frontage. The Whitechapel's expansion project assembles a complex that is twenty-six metres wide, thirty-five metres deep, and four

storeys high. In relative terms, it stretches the public space of the gallery to twice its previous width, and, through the new education spaces at the top of the former library, to twice its previous height.

I believe that the project's architectural power comes from this new sense of scale and proportion, measured out in the existing rooms. But this transformation at the scale of the buildings is experienced with an increased intensity because it is paralleled by the spread and rise of the financial sector all around, across the City border, out to Canary Wharf and Stratford; and both these transformations are underpinned and intensified by the substantial remaining traces of domestic scale in the fabric of the buildings and the streets of Aldgate, Whitechapel and the East End. You cannot fail to be engaged by the story of growth, decay and new growth at the Whitechapel Art Gallery or of the London - subjects which others have treated with great eloquence and knowledge. My subject in this essay is both more ambitious, and more modest: I try here to trace the relation between house, gallery and city - a relationship measured out in the simple units of rooms, lives and centuries, and transformed through the collaboration of a hundred or so souls over a period of five years. It is presented as a series of observations, about the buildings old and new and the surrounding streets, that have occurred to me through the design and construction process, as one of the architects of the project. (731)

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The houses at numbers 77 to 82 were four metres in width: one room wide terrace plots, typical of London's ancient structure. This repetitive rhythm underlies the City of London and the highways that radiate from it, like a sixteen-beat bar, high tempo, restless. Along the Whitechapel High Street the beat stretches and quickens, as at the implausibly narrow café at number 93. A series of alleys prise open narrow gaps between the terrace fronts, branching out or narrowing down unpredictably, feeding a network of courts, closes and yards. These rhythms are played out against the easing and meandering of the high street, the Roman road to Essex imperfectly and expediently retraced by medieval hands. [described as 'magnificent boulevard'] These are the common traits of a medieval city of north-western Europe, instantly recognisable to a visitor from Antwerp or Lübeck.

While the city around was rebuilt, infilled and built up to accommodate London's growth, the houses and alleys along the Whitechapel High Street barely changed. Originally homogeneous with its surroundings, the area became radically differentiated in terms of building stock and population. While docks were carved out of the marshy ground to the south and east to transfer goods from across the world, and the City to the west transformed itself into a financial centre to broker, insure and finance these transactions, on the Whitechapel High Street real estate was static, and it was labour that was mobile. In a situation typical of many a city edge, wave after wave of migrants – from Ireland, then Germany, then Jews from eastern Europe and Russia - settled in the tightly packed, poorly maintained houses lining the courts and alleys.

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Fired by Christian Socialism, taking advantage of his unpromising position as minister to a ghetto parish, and using considerable skills of advocacy and fundraising, Samuel and Henrietta Barnett initiated a series of projects in the area. After campaigning for the clearance of the Flower and Dean Street rookery for new tenement housing (1875)ⁱⁱ, they led the foundation of the university settlement at Toynbee Hall round the corner on Commercial Street (1885), before leading campaigning and fundraising efforts for the Whitechapel Library (1892) and Whitechapel Art Gallery (1901), both projects

receiving substantial contributions from John Passmore Edwards. Henrietta went on to found Hampstead Garden Suburb and to safeguard Hampstead Heath Extension (1905). Beyond the anecdotal interest of the career of these remarkable Victorian social entrepreneurs, it is worth noting several points: firstly, that the library and gallery have a common point of origin and shared purpose; secondly that they belong to a social project of remarkable breadth and scale; and thirdly, the architectural idioms of these projects are associative of the Barnetts' 'practical socialism' – there are echoes of Webb and Morris – but are neither explicitly political nor clearly linked to one another.

The library was both civic and domestic in feel, its mixed character paralleled by its hybrid construction, its range of rooms spanned according to size by timber joists, concrete slabs and steel beams. The substantial reading room at the rear of the ground floor was the grandest of all the rooms, with its high, coffered plaster ceiling; yet it also had five fireplaces, these hearths helping to give it the quality of a 'home from home' which it retained ninety years on. The size of rooms and generosity of stairs diminished exponentially on the way to the caretaker's flat on the third floor, passing through the toplit museum space at the back and the reference library with its almost uninterrupted wall of leaded glass to the street.

Showing that first breath of modern spirit, the gallery is a brutally direct assembly of the ceremonial and the industrial. As at Townsend's Bishopsgate Institute, there is something of the church about its street façade, with its twin towers and heavy round-arched entrance, though the blank walls, horizontal banded windows, wider proportions and offset entrance make it something stranger. Behind the street front, there was little to it, but what little there was was bold, hard, generous: a large blank hall at the level of the pavement and only a few steps from it, with two slashes of glazing on either side of the ceiling. Perhaps it is the worthily utilitarian goods on display, but a photograph of the 1913 Trades exhibition has the feel of an exhibition hall knocked up for a World Fair. Above, served by brick and stone stairs in opposite corners, was the upper gallery, a curious mix of narrow claustrophobia and generous expanse.

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Both buildings were altered between idea and realisation, and underwent further change after occupation. These contingencies, adapting idealised room forms to awkward sites, or accommodating changes in patterns of use, mark each building substantially, making them both feel incomplete. The imperfections and alterations are part of the language of the two buildings, and have as such provided a number of opportunities, and countless clues, for our project.

The library plan had a straightforward symmetry, with a central corridor proceeding from the front door. The plan also accommodated a light-court carved out of its eastern flank to maintain daylight to its neighbour, resulting in the main reading room being L-shaped. The original lending library was ceded to the street in the 1930s to form a stair down to the District Line. A combination of maintenance difficulties and bomb blast truncated the top floor, removing some of the distinctive streetfront profile and capping the building with an unremarkable flat roofed caretaker's apartment. On top of these substantial truncations and lopsidings were many small scratchings at the building's clarity, with stairs cut and then blocked in several locations between basement and ground floor, and between first and second floors, and in the large reading room glassy mezzanines installed to deter book theft.

The gallery was dramatically lopsided from the start. While an early elevation drawing shows a wide facade with a central arch and turrets topped with domed pavilions framing a mosaic panel, domes and mosaic were omitted and the arch was squeezed into a facade three houses wide, its curved embrasure undercutting the left turret. The building widened to the rear (back yard sites were cheaper than street frontage), imbalance turning into poise, the vaulted hallway feeding into the nave of the wide lower gallery.

After eighty years of use the gallery was refurbished and extended, the narrow alley site of the old Ragged School used to provide a lecture theatre, cafe and offices. The old staircases were demolished and replaced by the grand sweep of the main steps up to the first floor gallery and the spiral return stair. The crazed granolithic concrete, which had provided a counterpoint to Rothko's breeze block walls and singing colours, and to Pollock's crazed murals, was replaced by oak parquet. Throughout, these shifts of organisation and character were accompanied by a picturesque eye for incident and detail, making a series of rooms and in-between spaces of idiosyncratic, distinctive character.

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Most of this history of the buildings and their surroundings we didn't know at first. But you get a nose for these things after years of building and altering, so I think it's fair to say that we quickly sensed much about what we were working with from careful looking, though some of it took several years to fall into place. "Would the Victorians have changed structural framing from first to second floors?" you ask yourself "or was this a botched repair after bomb damage?" - yes, they would and did, you conclude; you notice the funny shapes on plan that you hadn't noticed when in a room, and admire the way that the architects used detail to help make an irregular shaped room feel natural, regular; you notice a slight change in wall thickness in plan, or just the grain of a part of the building, and get suspicious about the different construction you will eventually find there.

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The first steps in the architectural response were taken in the brief formulated by director Iwona Blazwick and the staff of the Whitechapel Art Gallery. In making the Whitechapel Art Gallery's archive of 120 years' activity a central part of the new building project, they showed a historical self-awareness that would also be relevant to the design. In their proposal to use the large ground floor reading room for commissioned works, they addressed the basic incompatibility of this room with the requirements of conventional display (poor daylighting of the walls, the relief that pilasters and chimneybreasts gave to the walls, and the decorative detail of the plasterwork); this decision displayed a clear understanding on the client's part of the need to fit the design brief to the building as much as to adapt the building to new requirements. Finally, the significant space for the education programme cemented the idea of the former library as a complement to, rather than just an extension of the gallery building. (2233) [greater diversity again, more localised]

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In formulating our design approach, supported by the buildings' common origin as well as the logic of future use, we considered gallery and library as a single building. This was initially a way of pointing towards this ambition, but came to seem increasingly a statement of fact.

We took clear positions on what most clearly did and didn't work - or what to leave alone and what to transform. These were, respectively, the main rooms and the circulation.

Across the two buildings, we counted five rooms of exceptional quality, each of them distinctive in terms of scale, proportion and light: the two large ground floor rooms at the rear of each building, and on the first floor the upper gallery, the reference library at the front and the old museum at the back. Toying with these on paper, and turning them around in our minds, we realised with some excitement how well matched these rooms were: putting aside the stylistic differences of the facades, here, on the interior, the buildings had a sibling quality. There were unexpected similarities in terms of detail, such as the square piers with high plinths and strong capitals in the two ground floor spaces, or the flat curves of the bow trusses of the upper gallery and the purlins of the old museum. In terms of dimensions, proportions and orientation they were complementary, the library rooms more compact and squarer compared to the grand scale of the gallery. While also having the feel of a large hall, the ground floor old reading room tempered the grand height of the lower gallery, and had a more centred feel.

We didn't exactly leave these five rooms alone, since we had to insulate and ventilate to meet museum loan standards, introduce daylight in places, and (in the old reference library) make space for circulation. However, the intent, which has been achieved, was to maintain or enhance the existing character of each of these rooms.

The most dramatic alterations were to the old ground floor reading room, the Commissions Gallery, where we have reasserted the idea implicit in the form and detail of the room, extending it into the light-court to turn the L into a rectangular room. We cut in rooflights in the four corners, responding to what Paul referred to as its 'Greek cross' form, reinforcing its distinctiveness and its kindred quality to the adjacent lower gallery.

The jumble of rooms that made up the caretaker's flat were not original, nor was the flat roof over them. We realised that the opportunity existed for a sixth remarkable room, in the attic at the front of the library. In the new creative studio on the third floor the mansard profile is reinstated to the street front, but quickly distorted into a sawtooth profile, introducing daylight from above, and by reversing the form in a part of the roof forming a natural subdivision, so that the studio can be used as one or two classrooms.

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The library was served by a tangle of stairs. There was, of course, no connection between gallery and library. With five main exhibition spaces operating on different cycles, it was necessary to make a legible circuit of rooms when all galleries are open, but equally to be able to access individual galleries directly, for occasions when only some of the exhibition spaces are open. A single stair and lift to serve galleries was a necessity. Having resolved to leave the main rooms well alone, it was equally clear that we would have to wield the knife ruthlessly in the remaining areas to join the buildings up satisfactorily.

We looked for where you could link the two buildings, and two pockets of space within the plan of the gallery offered this possibility with the least impact on the gallery spaces: the old light court between the streetfront and the main gallery (occupied latterly by a concrete and terrazzo stair), and the corner bay of the lower gallery, partly separated from the main space by a brick cross-wall.

Removing the gallery terrazzo stair and linking through across the width of the two buildings from the arched entrance to the refurbished library stair, the four small rooms we inherited are formed into two rooms which interlock at the corner. As you enter the new foyer, you glimpse the foot of the stair to the first floor galleries. Upstairs, the Community and Children's Galleries are intimately scaled gallery spaces which close the visitor circuit. Linking the Collections Gallery to the front of the Upper Gallery they are two of a series of three rooms, joined at the corner.

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Interlocking rooms are a leitmotif in this project. The doorway connecting the old museum, the Collections Gallery, to the Upper Gallery is driven through the very corner of the room. If you look in plan you will see that there is almost nowhere else for it to go, indeed the rooflight to the Commissions Gallery below is tight to its edge: but this doesn't make it the obvious solution. I think it is a solution that most people would have shied away from, but Paul went for it with unblinking confidence. While we talked for months about where to locate the lift, we never discussed this, just did it. So it's only now we've built it that I can see quite what it does: it coolly maximises the uninterrupted hanging space on the walls at the same time that it gently destabilises the static poise of the gallery.

The interlocked rooms are both easy and awkward: easy in the sense that the doorways lead you in the direction you need to go, awkward in the sense that this is not normally where doors are, and our movements through spaces are conditioned by deeply ingrained habit. The corner openings make the content of the gallery central and circulation subservient. This intent is also carried through in the enclosure of the new stair and lift. They are where they need to be, but their presence is discreet.

In neo-classical architecture, movement between rooms is formalised, elevated to an almost processional pitch, as for example at the National Gallery or Tate Britain, and the rooms have a sober, formal calm. In modernist or hi-tech architecture circulation is celebrated in a spectacle of dramatic ramps, sculptural stairs, or freestanding lifts: for all the qualities of the best buildings in this line of thought, this restlessness, what one architectural critic used to refer to as 'architectural noise', can distract from or compete with the experience of art. The Hayward Gallery sits at the edge of this approach, with each exhibition design struggling, for the most part successfully, to tame the ramps and stairs within a legible but surprising suite of rooms. The tactic of diagonal movement between exhibition rooms is a sly way around these dilemmas, achieving a balance between repose and displacement which the visitor activates for themselves. Robbrecht en Daem have used this tactic before, for example in the disposition of the Documenta Pavilions at Kassel, digesting the possibilities shown at Mies' Esters and Lange Houses, masterpieces of understated but powerful modernism now in use as galleries. At the Whitechapel, this tactic has found its natural home: a complex set of rooms in the existing building, and an institution that is both established and still unsettled. (3385)

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The new rooms and interventions are built in a way that interprets the existing constructions: interpretation in the sense of a distillation, an exaggeration, a distortion. The new rooms, formed in load-bearing brick like the original upper storeys, are topped by a roofscape of zinc and glass.

The roofscape - that is, the landscape of roofs - is the second key motif of this project. The roofs pitch and distort in a way that accommodates the accidents of the existing conjunction of buildings, that

permits the introduction of daylight into this or that room, and that builds up a sense of gentle coherence. Most simply, you see most of this roofscape from the third floor balcony, as the dark grey zinc roofs ripple and the rooflights punch through against the slate roofs of the gallery and the old museum, against the backdrop of the city.

However, this roofscape is palpable on the inside too. The loose, dynamic assembly of existing and new rooms is modulated and punctuated by daylight, from ground floor to third floor. The truncated pyramidal rooflights illuminate the corners of the Commissions Gallery, emphasising its expanse, but softer than the linear patent glazing of the Lower Gallery. Similar truncated pyramidal rooflights are placed centrally in the Children's and Community Galleries and over the main stair, centering these rooms individually and emphasising the dynamic movement between them, echoing the poise of the Collections Gallery and the Upper Gallery. The ceiling of the Creative Studio folds and steps to form its two rooms, drawing daylight down its pinstripe boarding.

The motifs of roofscape and interlocked rooms coincide here in the Creative Studio, but also in the first floor central lightcourt. It is T-shaped in plan, combining one lateral strip of glazing over the Lower Gallery, across the old dividing wall, with one rooflight over the Commissions Gallery. It is literally the negative of the galleries, a void permitting the introduction of light, but is the negative in colour too, its dark grey in contrast to the white of the gallery walls. At the end of each of its legs is a new window, in the front and rear link spaces, and in the Community Gallery. The windows provide a break from the focused, internalised character of the main galleries, but also help give a sense of orientation in the now expanded suite of galleries. The light court you look out on is both mundane and abstractly beautiful.

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The Dutch architect Aldo Van Eyck, contemporary of the Smithsons, used to speak of 'labyrinthine clarity' as a way of describing the complex spatial and social order of groups of rooms. He probably didn't have this in mind, nor have I heard Paul talk of Van Eyck (at least not of Aldo). But I think this is a useful idea to have in mind as a contrast to the clarity and legibility to which we have become too accustomed: it is one of the hallmarks of the hi-tech architecture that has infiltrated to the deepest recesses of the City (though has made little impact on the East End) that you come into a large space where you can read the building in a single careful look, identify where you want to go, and spot the lift or stair that will get you there.

It is at moments in the Whitechapel that you can look out over the building from within it that you understand the distinctiveness of this approach. From the ground floor galleries, large glazed doors make the street directly visible; from a series of points within the upper floors you can register where you are, and see where you have come from. Whereas in a hi-tech building (or any building attempting a similar diagrammatic logic) you see where you are going, here you follow the gentle clues through the building, and then see where you have come from. This is an idea of architecture that is lower key, but it is richer for it: this is an architecture that reveals itself through use, over time. (4147)

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Contemporary gallery spaces are by convention as materially abstract and scaleless as possible, allowing the works displayed to establish their own materiality and scale. The gallery spaces formed within the former library follow this convention largely.

However, in the background and at the edges of the project, materials and their assembly follow the complex journey of the host structures up the building, and reinforce its identity. The floors start off mineral, a light grey terrazzo tile running throughout the foyer, and a polished cement screed bringing a sense of extent to the Commissions Gallery; the main stair takes the stone of the street up to the threshold of the first floor. The main doors are glazed, with substantial hardwood frames and satisfying moulded timber handles. It is just the hardwood doors and oak floorboards which maintain a sense of material in the first floor galleries: with the stain to the doors and the lye (a kind of bleaching process), the timber retains its texture and warmth to touch, but its impact on the spaces is restrained slightly.

It is in the staircase and creative studio that the most consistent material language is established, and in both these spaces the joinery is used to create a large scale and fine rhythms within. The stair is domestic in form and detail, with steps on the half landing and repeating timber balusters with a wreathed handrail, but the flights (on steel stringers) are also wide and long. In the creative studio, the fine slats of the ceiling contrast with the large openings of the structural glass window to the front and the 3 metre wide sliding glazed door leaves to the balcony. The framing of scale is playful, alternately disorienting and reassuring. Throughout this construction newness is present only in the adaptation of familiar forms and techniques through contemporary means.

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The breakthrough between gallery and library early in 2008 was paralleled by a linkage in the wider area. With the closure of the Aldgate Gyratory, and the conversion of the Whitechapel High Street back to two-way traffic, a significant barrier between the Whitechapel and the City was breached. It is now possible to walk from Aldgate underground station to the gallery without leaving ground level into the maze of subways. Two-way traffic also has a different character, less of a racetrack feel.

It is likely that St. Botolph's Gyratory will also be closed and returned to two-way working soon. The subways will be made redundant, and, hopefully, filled in. New public spaces are being planned in space liberated from the highway, at Braham Street, south of the Whitechapel High Street, and between St. Botolph's church and the Sir John Cass School.

These transformations are accompanied by new medium and high-rise office construction - indeed, in London's opportunistic development model, the transformations will be paid for by them. This is likely to create some jarring (or possibly stimulating) contrasts of scale, with the once grand 'Whitechapel Art Palace' dwarfed by twenty storey construction, like Townsend's Bishopsgate Institute already is.

With development in flux in the current economic conditions, it is impossible to know what will be built and when, even of projects which have planning consent. Given the booms and slumps of office construction in previous decades, it still seems most likely Aldgate will continue to grow as a development cluster. The Whitechapel will sit on a sharpened edge between the City and the East End.

The emergence of other development poles, at Stratford and Canary Wharf, along the A11 and A13 respectively, reinforces the importance of Aldgate at the apex of this triangle, and gives the modest landmark of the Whitechapel an increased prominence in the topography of the city.

All around, and in particular in office construction, the patterns of development follow the fast-slow, demolish and rebuild mode that Richard Sennett has described as the 'Brittle City' - where overdetermination of function and layout limit the useful life of buildings to little over a generation. This is fundamentally different to the slow, additive change that has taken place in this project, but also in the surrounding streets grouped in the Whitechapel High Street Conservation Area - though my argument is about adaptation, not conservation. Twenty years ago, the Lloyds building sketched out a compelling vision of stability and change within a building and within the city, with its concrete exoskeleton and stainless steel pods. It is an emblem of adaptive architecture - although, unchanged since completion, its real tests will doubtless lie in the decades ahead.

The new Whitechapel is emblematic of a different idea of the adaptive city - more Ernesto than Richard Rogers. Its approach is one of continuity and change in equal measure, with the city constantly remade and adapted. Newness is filtered through the a careful understanding of the host structure - each graft to the existing offers new possibilities, but is judged on its compatibility with the existing base structure. It is an approach that is deeply understood in Mediterranean countries, and by a few Belgians.

The new Whitechapel and the city around it stretch out and up, one through adaptation, the other through profound transformation. Reintegrated in the public realm of the area, the contrast between the Whitechapel and East London is resharpener. From the Creative Studio balcony, the small cityscape of the Whitechapel is viewed against the spectacle of wealth generation and impoverishment across the City Fringe. But it's not necessary to stand on the balcony to have this experience - it's an emblem of the gallery. Adapted to new circumstances, more diverse, the Whitechapel will continue to offer the visitor this space for inner vision, and the politics and aesthetics of the city teeming outside will be interpreted by the artists, and translated by the visitors.

ⁱ Sharon Marcus, Apartment Stories

ⁱⁱ It took until 1892 to build the affordable housing, since the Metropolitan Board of Works were empowered only to buy and clear the land, but not to develop it (does this sound familiar?).