IMAGINATION AS TEAMWORK

Design as a Three-legged Race

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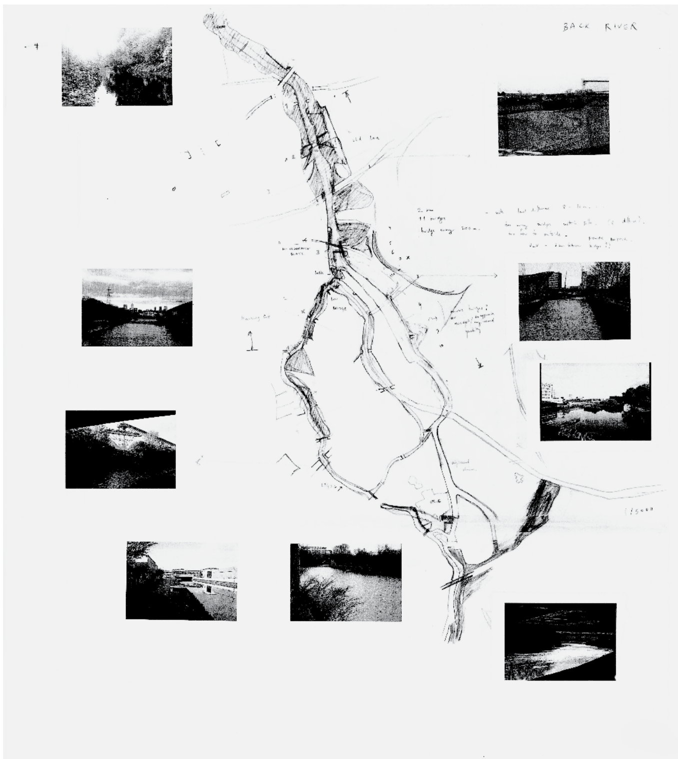
“WitherfoWatsuMann”: the longer we work together, the more garbled our group identity becomes. It’s a well-worn name that covers the three of us – me, Stephen and Chris – who’ve now cooked up a hundred designs, and built a dozen of them; six of us, with Freddie, Pepyn and Philippa, who have driven projects and shaped our studio culture; sixteen of us as we are now – nimble minds, skilful hands, tired bodies.

For better or worse, we are a collective personality, bound together in an exaggerated form of the three-legged race. We combine our individual skills, compensate for each other’s deepest shortcomings, and compound our stubbornest character traits.

Someone recently asked me about our way of working with clients and the public, and the closest I could get was Monty Burns’ description of Homer Simpson: that we are “feisty but spineless”. This talk is an attempt to approximate this collective personality more closely, more flatteringly; in the process talking about this strange mix of giving in and pushing back that makes up architectural design.

There are five actions that start to define our collective personality:

- we look with our boots on
- we listen to the passion for change
- we find the smallest key to the largest door
- we inhabit imaginary rooms
- we push back at the weight of the world



Mapping of the River Lea between Hackney Wick and Stratford

We look with our boots on

That's how we started off – about 15 years ago. We used to meet once a week at half six in the morning and walk the edge landscapes of London: the Westway, Smithfield, Spitalfields and the Lea Valley. We didn't yet have an office, our only motive was curiosity. The only thing we planned in advance was the starting point.

A couple of hours at a time we can slowly imprint places and conditions on our bodies. Maps and plans are useful but wildly insufficient – they are like sorbet at the end of a meal that helps you digest what you've just eaten. By tramping places month on month, we'd move from the surface to the underlying deep structure.

So, in the case of the Lea Valley, if you looked on the map, it looked empty. Walk it, and you found a riot of contrasts: industry and wild landscape, mills and marshes, London's biggest playing field and small but intense patches of woodland; cormorants and herons watching over TV studios; aggregate crushing and sushi making side by side. Highways, railways, powerlines, sewers, aqueducts, rivers, canals and drainage channels each follow their own specific logic, and together cut the area up into fields and islands, forming a set of parallel and interlinked ecologies.

For us this became an insight into complexity, the web of interdependencies that makes up the city; and this way of observing intensely and

digesting slowly became a model for us, which we've tried to carry over into our everyday work: looking beyond the apparent emptiness of the site and the blankness of the paper to the rich reality that precedes and underlies each building.

When we came upon the ruined castle at Astley, we knew a bit about old buildings, but more than this we knew not to take the craggy pile of stones at face value. Maybe half the project or more was a process of slowly disentangling eight centuries of construction and several different states of decay.

The characteristics of a place or a building point you towards their capacity for change.

We listen to the passion for change

The real energy for change comes from our clients. It has to, really, because it's their risk, both financial and institutional.

They are building because of what it enables them to do, not because it's fun. In Amnesty's case, they built so they could finally be in one home, not split over several rented offices, and could host members and partners and public into their home, not a room hired for the occasion. The Whitechapel Gallery built so they could stay open all year round, rather than closing for more than two months each year, and take their amazing archive of more than

a hundred years out from the under-stair cupboard and into public view. The Landmark Trust wanted to build so that the ruins wouldn't fall down, and to contribute to their upkeep.

So when the joiners fitted a window stay at Astley, and it buckled, and they said "architect's specified the wrong product", Mark Sharratt of the Landmark Trust looked up the installation instructions on the internet and went round fitting them to the oak doors himself. It helps that he trained as a carpenter, but the key thing here is the passion for building well that runs through the organisation.

At Amnesty, the director of campaigns, Stephen Bowen would tease us by jumping between grandiose visions and mundane realities. But as we agonised over how (if at all) the building should represent the organisation, he was clear: "It's not a monument to the victims, it's a theatre for the struggle".

At the Whitechapel, we toyed with half a dozen options to display the archive, until the director Iwona Blazwick pushed us, against our better judgement, to choose the most technically challenging one. She was able to do this because she had clearest view of both the culture and the politics of the project – and she was spot on, it's a place in the gallery where public and scholars, avant-garde and convention rub shoulders, in the setting of one of the old library's finest rooms.

Olympic Legacy Masterplan – sketch for the public realm strategy, focusing on the relation between three distinct levels

The beauty and complexity of architecture is that emotions and identities are entangled with things. Every challenge is amenable to many solutions, some of which require us to change our environment, others to change our behaviour. What we try to do as architects is negotiate an alignment between our clients' deep values and the fundamental characteristics of their building.

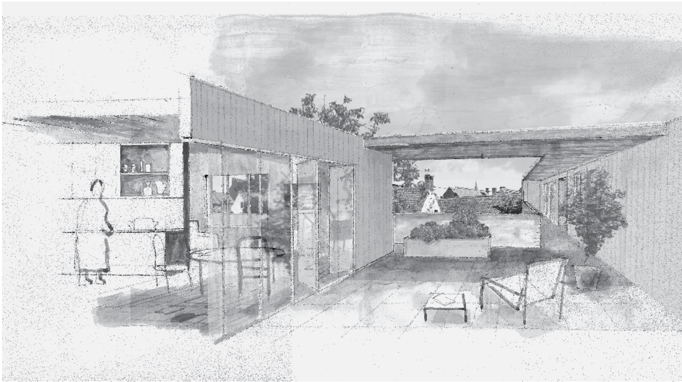
We look for the smallest key to the largest door

We try and do this as economically as possible. Not as cheaply as we can, but with as little new construction as possible.

We'd say that positive social change is not proportionate to the scale of construction. Because buildings crystallise habits, relations and conventions, clearing away and starting again is often counter-productive. So what we're looking for is a kind of leverage, where we can achieve the greatest change with the smallest intervention.

That's where, if we understand the deep structure of a building, a group of buildings, a city district, we can find the focused points where we can unlock the possibilities of what's already there.

So, at Amnesty, we took a 4 metre sliver of pavement and a small light court, and with 10% new construction unlocked the relations between the rooms of the existing factory buildings.



Gistel social housing – sketch of a first floor roof terrace

Astley Castle, the first floor hall

This left capacity for future growth – both upwards onto the roof and outwards at the edge of the courtyard.

On the Olympic site, for the post-games Legacy masterplan, we dissected its three-dimensional complexity, and concluded firstly that the centre – where it is divided by not 1 but 2 railway lines couldn't be anything other than a constriction, like the centre of an hourglass. So we proposed to reinforce this characteristic, shaping and focusing it, with a terrace of new buildings atop the 12metre level difference. Secondly, we saw that the canal edge – the Hackney Cut – at the site boundary had the capacity to serve both the new developments and the existing areas of Hackney Wick and Fish Island, opening the Olympic enclave outwards.

At Astley, once we'd digested its very cellular structure – it's a cluster of stone rooms – we could both reinforce this characteristic, and enjoy the way that decay had undermined it. So we could build just enough wall and roof to hold the crumbling remains together, and just enough to imply its overall extent. You get rooms with big gashes in the side and outdoor rooms with a roof around the edge. The castle used to be strong and closed, now it is porous and open; accepting its structure didn't stop us making it something else, it enabled this transformation.

We do this in our different ways with our different brains; I'll do big sprawling drawings

in HB, Stephen will draw painstakingly in 2H or jot a diagram in his notebook, Chris will draw it firmly and unambiguously, already thinking ahead to how we make it. But when we see what each other has done we recognise the struggle and the possibility.

We inhabit imaginary rooms

Whether we're building new or piecing into existing structures, and whether we're at the scale of the city or the interior, sooner or later we have to face up to the challenge of making a good room – a room where you can concentrate, where you can meet, where you can rest. These all ask for slightly different atmospheres.

There are all sorts of interesting questions about proportion and light and scale and materials, but these aren't solvable by logic or strategy – because they're about how your body feels. The only way we know to design a room is to imagine we're in it. This is 5% skill and 95% emotional projection: the 5% skill is drawing a box in perspective. As soon as we know roughly the size that's what we'll sketch. The trickier bit is imagining yourself to be a 60 year old Belgian living in a small town – for example.

That's what we drew for our housing scheme in Gistel, near Ostend. The drawing shows the roof terrace beside the living rooms on the first

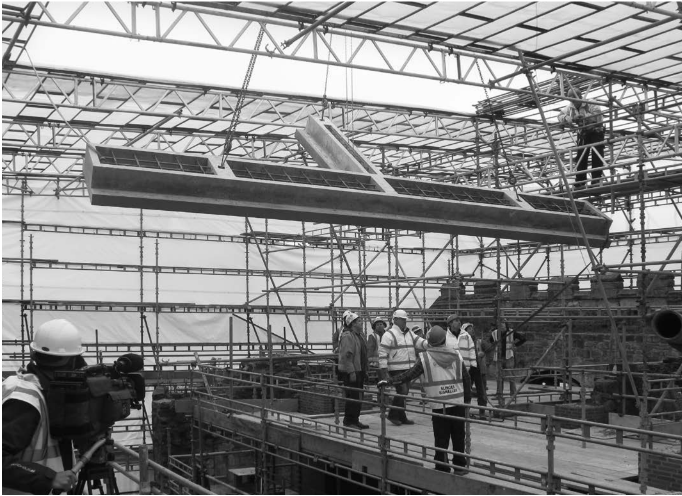
floor. It's about wanting your own space, but liking contact with others; about looking down to the little communal garden and café terrace below; about feeling a kind of reflective distance from your life in the small town, as you look over the pantiled roofs of the old rural inn to the medieval churchtower.

11 years on, the contractor for the courtyard has gone bankrupt, the court looks like the Somme, and housing allocation policy has changed, but that emotional projection remains valid, it's key to our attempt to make architecture that's about social relations, not just abstract composition.

For Astley Castle, we must have drawn the first floor hall fifty times over the five years, and slowly it morphed from a big stone tunnel to three rooms in one, with little bays and niches by the windows. I spent two days in that room last spring, more or less snowed in with my kids and my in-laws. The balance of intimacy and collective feeling, of focus without claustrophobia, felt a little bit like déjà vu.

We push back at the weight of the world

At the point that our collective hallucination is crystallising, we have to figure out how to hold it up. Too soon and the logic of construction



Astley Castle, lowering the hollow concrete “T” lintel into place

takes over, like Procrustes stretching or cutting his guests to fit his bed. Too late and it’s riddled with the irrational and the personal. Just right and we can balance the logic of things with the right to push back.

The Whitechapel gallery has one front door and is on a red route, so we couldn’t close the High Street for weeks while we craned in oven-ready bits of construction. Altering it was like building a ship in a bottle, bringing in lots of little bits and pulling them together inside. It’s like jumbo domestic construction, and that helps give the place a warm, personal feel.

A critic reviewing Astley Castle made a throwaway comment about the “structural engineer’s structure”, and I wrote back politely but firmly pointing out that if you took away the structure, there wouldn’t be any architecture left – so could we share the credit please? David Derby of Price and Myers is a key part of our collective effort, and is fundamental to our ability to build in a way that is supple but rigorous. The trick at Astley is that the new construction is strong but relatively light: diaphragm brick walls, hollow concrete lintels filled on site, and laminated timber. It buttresses and ties the old stone walls – but it meets them softly – the concrete never touches the rubble, it is always connected by the shallow bricks and soft lime mortar that can tolerate a bit of movement. Because the structure is the architecture, that’s

what endures. The eminent French architect Viollet-le-Duc wrote that the architect should "finish what others have started, and start what others will finish". We're keen to apply what we've learnt from fiddling with old buildings to making new ones – trying to build in spare capacity for addition, for alteration.

As Rafael Moneo writes:

> "If architecture is established with firmness it will remain open to new interventions which prolong the life of the building indefinitely... The life of buildings is supported by its architecture, by the durability of its most characteristic formal means. Although it seems paradoxical it is this durability which makes change perceptible. Respect for architectonic identity is what makes change possible, what guarantees its life."

So... as a collective personality we are: restless, passionate, nimble, dreamy and down-to-earth. It sounds a worrying combination – but shared out between us, it works for us.

We pool our skills and temperaments, to rise to respond to the challenges of change, and our interpretation of the job as being first of all about change, and only after that about construction.

Witherford Watson Mann started off their collaboration nearly twenty years ago, with a series of walks through the edges of London; since then, they have approached every project as an open-ended enquiry. They have no stock answers for how change will translate into building; instead they find out through dialogue and adaptive design, helping progressive institutions realise their ambitions and reinforce their values.

Whether adapting an old furniture factory for Amnesty or shaping the city plan for London's Olympic quarter, they have always made the most of what is already there, adding judiciously to maintain the distinctiveness of each place but transform its capacity. Their best known building, Astley Castle for the Landmark Trust, won the 2013 RIBA Stirling Prize for its distinctive entwining of past and present.

Recently completed projects include social housing in Belgium, two small art galleries, and public spaces in Bankside, South London. A new generation of projects includes buildings for higher education, for small businesses, and for older people. Witherford Watson Mann distil the complexities of contemporary collectives, of urban sites and public processes into durable, economical solutions that remain open to future change.

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