

### 13: Specificity and research: never the same building twice

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I suppose the really interesting thing about participating in this Symposium is the fact that you have to review your own practice, as Leon van Schaik has pointed out. David Hills and I set up DSDHA in 1998, and in 1999 we went on holiday to Australia. We decided to put on our architectural investigatory hats. We went to Melbourne, arrived with a copy of *Monument* magazine, and proceeded to phone five or six architects. I have never received such a welcome from complete strangers. Within an hour, I was sharing drinks with wonderful young architects who were combining research and practice and who all talked about Leon. It is quite interesting finally to meet him because David and I were really influenced by a generation of architects in Australia, very marginal, who took themselves incredibly seriously but also knew how to have fun. Those have been abiding principles in our practice.

One of our stated missions when we set up the practice was that we would combine research and practice. We were not really sure what the result of this ambition would be. We knew that lots of people that we admired seemed to do this thing called teaching, but we were not really quite sure what we would teach. However, we knew we could ask questions and we wanted to question our own preconceptions fundamentally because there is nothing worse than riding on an assumption that you know what things are. A strange thing happened. We said we were very serious and that we could produce great architecture, and suddenly people started commissioning us. A series of buildings followed that were all quite different; there were public buildings – a nursery (illustration 1) – there were private buildings (a house and studio in Deptford, illustration 2) and then there were these new types of hybrid buildings, quite literally, where we became sort of conscious and tried to question what we were doing.



*Illustration 1: DSDHA, Nursery, Colchester*



*Illustration 2: DSDHA, Studio, Deptford*

It was a conversation with a friend of ours who said “what you seem to do is combine social innovation with technical innovation” and I thought, that is a pretty good summary of this ambition to really deal with people fundamentally within architecture and to talk about people, but also to talk about new forms of architecture. Thus illustration three shows a hybrid building, literally, with 7000 plants. We completed it about a year ago; it’s in Islington.



*Illustration 3: DSDHA, Paradise Park Children's Centre, Islington*

Then there were investigations into materials. In one project in Colchester, a completely timber-clad building, our level of consciousness resulted in us instituting a formal design review structure within our practice. We said we were collaborative, but what did that really mean? It means that as we develop a design we insist putting it up on the wall and charting its progress, constantly coming back to see whether we have made the right decisions.

In a children's centre in Dagenham (illustration 4), we investigated issues of scale and an emotional resonance with materiality – the raw aluminium was used almost as an echo of the kind of industrial heritage of Dagenham. We became aware that we really were not producing the same thing twice and we were succeeding in our ambition not to have a house style and not to mimic people that we do respect, some of our previous generations, but to produce work that was fresh.



*Illustration 4: DSDHA, Children's Centre, Dagenham*

Another part of our initial aim when founding the practice was that we were interested in urbanism. We entered lots of competitions and we won some, like “Designs on Democracy”, where we came up with a strategy for new types of democratic space to do with the town hall. Then a miraculous thing happened. The phone rang and Foster and Partners made us a very interesting offer: would we like to be on their team for the redesign of Parliament Square. Having fallen off my chair I then got back onto it and said, “Yes, that would be quite wonderful”, so we are now working on the next phase of the redesign of Parliament Square which is its realisation with Hawkins Brown.

The consciousness we have brought to our practice has meant we have achieved things that we could only dream of. We are working on a scheme at the moment in Vauxhall, re-imagining the site of the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens (illustration 5).



*Illustration 5: DSDHA, Scheme for Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens*

It is a public commission but it combines our abiding research-level interest, relating to the space between infrastructure and intimacy, and that is something that has always embraced our work all the way through.

The relationship between infrastructure and intimacy is seen in one project very well. It is called Potters' Field Park and it is an area in between Tower Bridge and City Hall. The park has been designed by Gross Max and the setting, City Hall, is again by Fosters. We received another one of those amazing telephone calls: having met a rather nice developer at an awards ceremony, he said, “I would really like to meet you, would you like to come over to my office, I would like to talk to you about a project.” We use a local cab company called Elephant Cabs and there is a driver who we quite regularly have called Roy. We said we would like to go to Potters' Field Park, and he said, “Potters' Field Park, bleeding heck, I haven't been there for ages. We used to play there as kids on the bombsites.” We thought that was very interesting.

We got to the site and it was its own kind of bombsite. It was surrounded by hoardings and it was an extraordinarily barren environment for something so new.

Despite some fantastic iconic buildings, there were these extraordinarily anonymous spaces. We were reminded of the work of Saskia Sassoan, which we greatly appreciated, who conjured up the question: “how do you create a specific environment in this time of globalisation in these places?”, which she calls “micro-environments of global span” and which basically means you could be in New York, you could be in Tokyo but you certainly do not feel like you are near a bombsite that Roy was talking about.

We recorded on the site the fact that it was entirely private, and we were shown by the client to the rear of City Hall. We went up City Hall and he asked us to look out of the window. If you looked out of the window at that time you could see a site of really quite poor quality green space. There were two sites that he wanted us to work on. For the Blossom Square site by Tower Hill, he said,

“I’d like you to design a kiosk. I have to build it as part of my Section 106 agreement; in order to do my big development, I have to make this small kiosk. I have had to pay for this park, but the trust that has been set up to run the park will not have the money to look after it, so this little kiosk is going to be a cash cow: every pound spent there will contribute in its profit towards the running of the park. The big site that you can see below you, Deborah, which is the box, has three enormous vents in it, which is basically the plant room to the GLA City Hall building, while you are at it I would like you to build me a kiosk, and that will make lots of money for me. It will also deal with a bit of a pressing problem that I have which is that when Foster designed this beautiful building his team failed to include any window cleaning facilities.”

It was a strange location for us to be in and it felt very tense: how should we respond to the self-aggrandising architecture of Tower Bridge and City Hall, but in the shadow of something as loaded as the Tower of London itself on the other side of the river?

We went back to our research because we had felt this kind of tension before, and it came through in the research we had been looking at with our students, namely a very open-ended question that had arisen from reading a draft version of the London Plan at the end of the Nineties. What was the new type of public space going to be, arising out of locations like Canary Wharf? With our students, we had been looking at areas like Vauxhall, and we had been considering the relationship between the use of infrastructure and the evolving economic changes that were going with it. We had also looked at the critical provision of open space, because whenever anybody wanted to develop in these areas, everybody was fighting about their green space. We wanted to find out just what it was that they were fighting about.



*Illustration 6:  
Signed public  
space,  
New York*

When we were teaching at the AA we went on some interesting field trips again investigating privately owned public spaces. There is a similar phenomenon in New York, which has developed as a way of structuring Section 106 agreements to provide new spaces for the public there in exchange for increased development rights (illustration 6). We found these kinds of spaces are public spaces. Do not be mistaken if you go to New York, they are public and there are even signs to tell you so. While you are within these public spaces you find these very strange spectacles. They even have signs up that encourage you to eat and to sit down because people cannot believe it is public, yet simultaneously they create an environment of suspicion by hanging these strange birds in the trees (illustration 7).



*Illustration 7: CCTV cameras, New York*

With our students at the AA we were interested the issue of intimacy in public space, and we began looking at the idea of personal landscapes and the way in which people occupy zones at ground level, up to two to five metres. They did studies looking at time in these very intimate locations and seeing how new kinds of architectures could come out of it.

Back on our London site, we carried out our standard analysis of the situation, which really encompasses starting at ground level and looking at viewing cones. We used a series of viewing cones across the site and then we overlaid them all together along with movement routes and desire lines showing what people wanted. We realised that our site was in a critical location where, if we built a large building there, we would be ostensibly creating a strong barrier between the privately-owned public space and the genuinely public space of the park.

In terms of the site we also really wanted to work on the idea of an emotional resonance, so we went back to Roy and his comment about the bombs dropping. Indeed, Roy was correct, a number of devices had fallen on the site, as bomb maps confirm. We wanted to take his reference very seriously because there was little sense of danger on the site; it had been completely neutralised as a global environment. At the same time, we were keen to carry on our research into landscapes and things that had been lost in contemporary landscapes. One of the things that we think has really disappeared, and we cannot think why, is the sense of fear and positive kind of tension that you get in these sublime and dangerous environments that are called grottoes. We studied grottoes, these strange, mysterious destinations that filled

eighteenth century landscapes with this combination of intimacy and infrastructure (illustration 8).



*Illustration 8: the eighteenth-century landscape, with a grotto*

We started developing the design and it was very free. We looked at a number of objects placed around the base of City Hall (illustration 9). In the early scheme, a mound on the left would house the window-cleaning machine and the mound on the right would house the café. We built models and tested them, and then we tested flows and movement across the site, taking back that methodology, but we were still obstructing the view a great deal with this cluster of small buildings. Then we decided, with our client, to generate a single building that would house both the great big machine and the café within, and using form Z we generated a carved and eroded structure and made models that really investigated how we could produce the maximum degree of enclosure for our café but also how we could encourage the creation of views through the site (illustration 9).



*Illustration 9: DSDHA, café proposal*

Critically, underneath a very large cantilever, we would create some sheltered public space, because what we discovered was that in New York you have this propensity for sheltered, privately owned public space, but in London there was none, so we felt this

large cantilever was important. Of course, the grotto really does have a beast within it because that the machine was housed inside it.

Then the crucial issue of audiences came into play. Who was going to use this building? Was it the corporate businessman or the local community or the tourist nearby coming to view the Tower and Tower Bridge? We tried to find a materiality that would somehow mediate between the sharp limestone material of MoreLondon and the more traditional architecture of the park, and we arrived at the idea of an ossification of timber that had almost been made to look like stone. We went through many, many iterations of what it could be. We finally decided to get our blowtorches out and to burn timber, so it would be charred. We employed a fantastic carpenter to work with us and test these ideas of burning and the degree to which we could burn. They had a great deal of fun burning timber and then they reluctantly had to put it out. They also spray-jetted it and we came up with a finish that we were very happy with.

We had to write a specification for this, so we went to TRADA and said, “You are the specialists, how do you char timber?” and they said, “Never heard of it; nobody’s done that, you’re going to have to do it yourself.” So we had to write our own specification about how long we should burn it for and we carried on working with the same sub-contractor. We drew every layer of the building and then every layer was made by the craftsman in the workshop, and then little by little a very traditional steel structure was clad in this beautiful timber. So you have this timber that is part timber and part charred, and it varies between brown and black and between a permanent finish and something that is quite temporary. The timber stacks and rises and creates this fabulous grotto environment. One of our most rewarding elements about this building is the fact that it is never the same building twice. When you go back, the scale of it alters so dramatically as you approach it. It looks very small from the distance and then its colossal scale reveals itself as you step beneath it.



*Illustration 10: the overarching scale of the building*

A funny thing is also happening to this building, even before it is complete. It is taking on its next life. A group of Japanese students came to visit it a few weeks ago, and the resonance of this project has gone out already. It has been published, obviously, and people are coming to visit it. We kind of celebrate the fact that it takes on a life of its own and begins to resonate culturally and becomes this cultural artefact over which we have very little control. It is like releasing this terrifying beast into the world.

The Japanese connection had a wonderful coincidence in that last September I went to the Venice Biennale and I overheard a conversation where somebody said, "Have you seen that charred timber down at the Japanese pavilion?" I was shocked; who on earth could have thought of the same idea? The name was Fujimori. He is a very well-respected and fantastic Japanese architect who made the pavilion. To enter the pavilion, you had to take your shoes off and climb through a charred wall into this exhibition of a huge number of projects made from charred timber. In fact, the process is a very, very old traditional timber process called *yakisugi* and it has been going on for many thousands of years. I have, therefore, to call into question TRADA's claims to be a world expert on timber. There was a wonderful point of closure on this in that, having found out this process, if you put it into the internet you can find this timber, ready-prepared for you, in sheets of 8' x 4', varying thicknesses and varying finishes and it is there for the taking if you would like it (illustration 11).

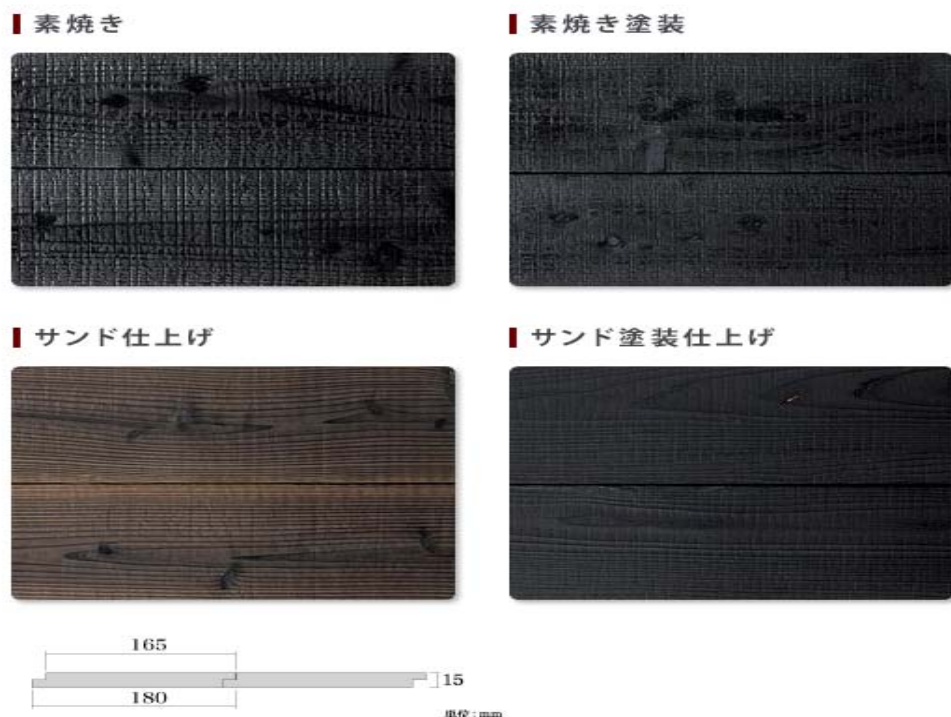


Illustration 11: Japanese timber catalogue



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