

06: Embracing D&B: the seven-year itch

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I have realised that the title of my paper reflects exactly my position, which is that really this will be the reflections on an unreflective architect. Listening to Leon van Schaik, I have realised exactly why: when I was a public schoolboy in the Sixties, it was completely uncool to think about yourself, it was a really bad thing. You should not think about yourself, you should think about everybody else. Of course, I *never* do that, but to think about yourself in an analytical way was close to going to a psychiatrist, which was tragic. I have therefore always lived by accepting entirely as I found the world, rather than being hugely inquisitive. I have totally swapped curiosity with a plethora of guidance – *which of course I read assiduously* – because you do not need to be curious any more because everybody tells you exactly what to do. The world is so full of people telling you what to do that curiosity is not necessary.

I do not do research and so I am the perfect person really in every respect to give you some antithesis lecture. The reason I do not do research is because I cannot concentrate long enough, I cannot wait for the result. I am a bad analyst and an extremely poor research person because I cannot give the time, the energy or the effort to find out what the answer was.

I stand before you as somebody who wanted to be a pop architect. When I first met Leon, I was working. I was supposed to be a student at the AA but in fact I had some really nice jobs and this was one of them, Knitwit in South Molton Street (illustration 1).



*Illustration 1: Knitwit,
South Molton Street*

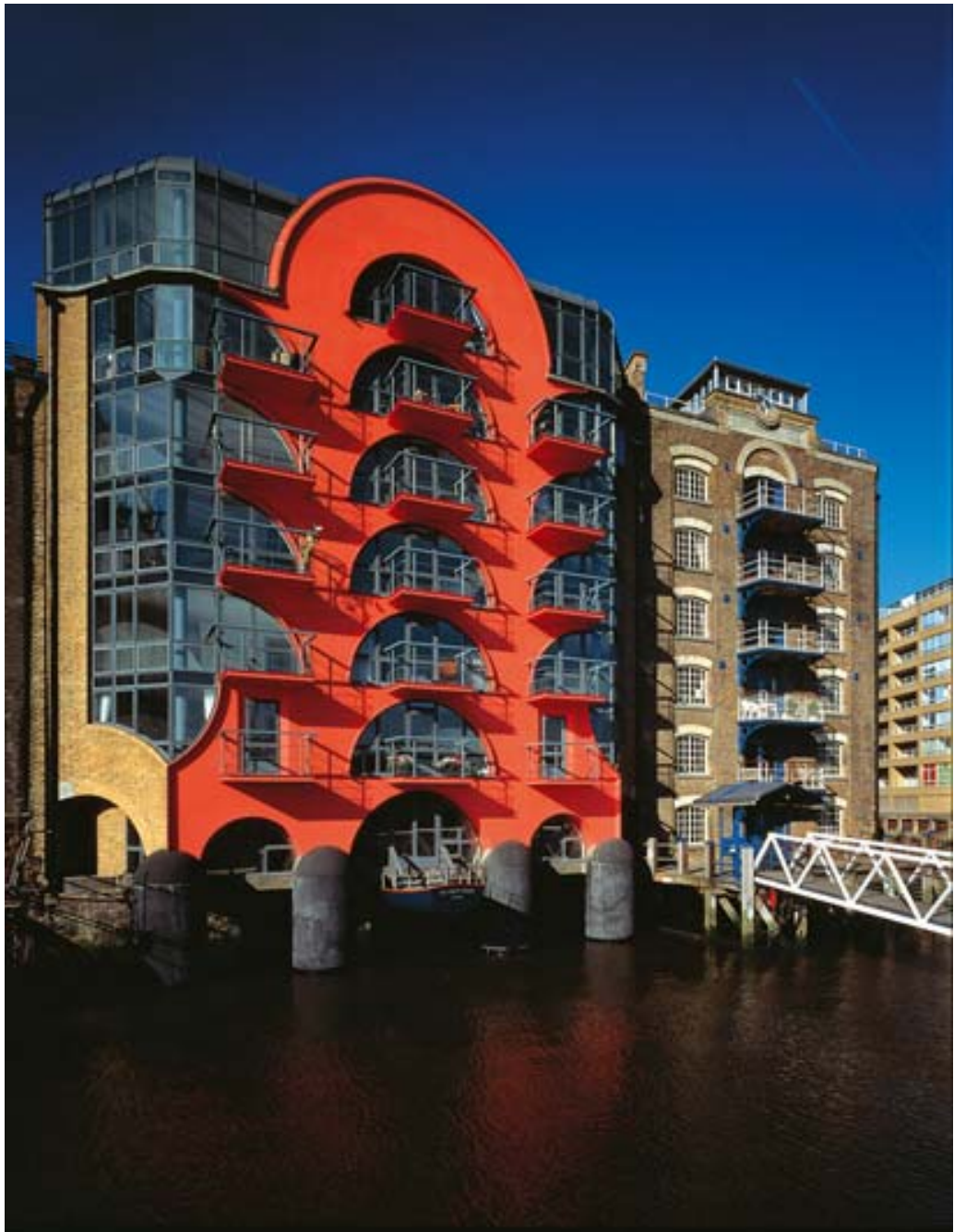
Here I am at the top left, and being published – it is heady stuff, I am still a student supposedly. Leon was in the college, Peter Cook was my tutor, but I never had a word with him. He was my hero and I never talked to him because I was too busy building shops. He used to say to me, “Oh great, how do you get the work?” That was our relationship; it was pretty weird. I really do just wish that Leon had been around and had had his brilliant thought that we should get architects to explain themselves to themselves – explaining themselves externally is all very well, but explain themselves to themselves. While I was doing walk-in pop art – this was supposed to be a Hockney in South Molton Street – I was missing out on my education and I have never taken it up again, and I have always been a bit embarrassed about the fact that I really did not work at all hard or do anything very much really at college in my final years (illustration 2).



Illustration 2: Knitwit, interior

By fortuitous positioning I found myself in practice at the start of the London Docklands Development Corporation tenure and one of the great things about the LDDC was that it was not democratic. The planning committee was just four blokes and if they liked you they liked you. You did not even have to write a design report, you could just put the drawings in and go round and see Ted Hollanby, and he would

take his pencil out and say “Dear boy, I think you should do this”. You would ignore him and then you would build it (illustration 3).



*Illustration 3: CZWG,
China Wharf, Bermondsey*

What was brilliant about those times and is not brilliant now not only were we allowed to design whatever we liked – and in my case rather eclectic buildings – they got beautifully built. This was the Eighties, before cynicism, and before Design & Build, and Harry Neal built this building (illustration 4).



*Illustration 4: CZWG,
China Wharf, Bermondsey, detail of
elevation*

We specified a mastic between the steel and the concrete but the site foreman called up and said, “Where am I to put the mastic?” and I said, “In the gap between the steel and the concrete.” He said, “There isn’t a gap between the steel and the concrete; they exactly fit each other because we have built it perfectly.” The guy who built the brickwork – there was not that much of it – got a brickwork award; it was brilliant. We got awards all over the place –from the Civic Trust, the RIBA. Everybody gave us awards because you could actually go to the building and touch it and it felt good. It seemed to be made of something (illustration 5).



*Illustration 5: CZWG,
China Wharf, Bermondsey*

All the people who bought cars of course matched the building in those days, because people were respectful of architects and thought they were marvellous, did not argue too much and NIMBYs had not invented themselves.



Illustration 6: London Docklands, 1980s, with Cascades

Long before Canary Wharf, we built Cascades. We had fabulous sites on the river – that was another great thing of the period, there were all these industrial sites on the river which were sumptuous and spectacular and you could propose spectacular buildings (illustration 6). Our research really has tended to have been to look back, to skip a generation back and see what they were doing then. They were building tower blocks. But in the Eighties, everybody disliked tower blocks, the message was don't do it. Our research was that you get a really good view from the top of a tower block – all right, it is trite research.

Even this block was built out of brick, all the way up, 20 storeys of it, gorgeous, solid, real; it is going to stay there (illustration 7).



*Illustration 7:
CZWG, Cascades,
London*

The actual theory of what I am trying to describe in a way is: why did we never codify or think about what we wanted to think? Part of the reason was that we just kept on wanting to do different buildings, we did not really want to know what we thought because we thought that once we knew what we thought we might stop. As a pop artist you are kind of carried along on a wave of zeitgeist and image, particularly image, and image is very, very important. Therefore, the images that come into you, the images of place, the images that you see in magazines and the images that you meet in the street in terms of clothes or that you understand from books, from your imagination and so on, these are all things which, once you have put them all down, you are stuck with them. My excuse has always been that if I ever was sensible enough to do a self-analysis, I would then be stuck with my self-analysis, and I am public schoolboy enough to think that I do not really want to know what I think because it might not be very nice – I might dislike a lot of other architects, for instance, which would be very unfortunate: I could not go to parties.

The recession was the kind of marvellous moment when we could have thought about things and done some self curation. But what we did instead was build our only ever public building, a public lavatory in Westbourne Grove (illustration 8) – that is what happens in a recession, you can build public buildings because they have still got money and the builders do not have anything much else to do except build your building very nicely, so we could build this seemingly very expensive building out of glazed brick in a recession. So a recession is very good for building public buildings well.



Illustration 8: CZWG, public lavatories, Westbourne Grove

This is the treat end of our life. This is when I went on the International series that Leon van Schaik criticised (Paper 02), and got a free trip to Melbourne and lectured to 2000 people – I had never talked to so many people ever, before or since. Afterwards somebody said to me, “Great lecture, shame about the projects.” I went back to London and improved the projects. The cathartic thing of building has been the absolute excuse for my life incidentally. If you want to be published in a European magazine, put a blank wall on your building. Patently, this building was published from the other side by all the English magazines, but almost only this side by Spanish ones because they love a blank wall. (illustration 9) If you want to get internationally famous, put plenty of blank walls into your work. Frank Gehry said, “If it was not for windows I could have been famous earlier”.



Illustration 9: CZWG, public lavatories, Westbourne Grove, detail showing wall

Subsequent to the recession, as Britons got richer and more successful by an extraordinary sort of thing, all the money has gone to landowners and so we get lots of projects; we have a really terrific portfolio but the buildings are badly built because nobody has got the money any more to actually build them properly and nobody really has the time, it is all very busy, busy, busy, we have swapped brick for render – bricks are slow so everybody does render and buildings do not appear to weigh anything any more; they are all like they are in Australia or somewhere rather than being solid, good, British buildings.



Illustration 10: 'streets in the air' at Carysfort Road, Stoke Newington

My partner Rex is completely brilliant and managed to reinvents streets in the air and celebrate them, (illustration 10) which I am very jealous of. I think it is absolutely great, because this is all part of our practice which is again being perverse and looking back at things that people used to do and wanting to do them again (illustration 11).



Illustration 11: CZWG, Carysfort Road, Stoke Newington

If you look on the left hand wall, that is supposed to be a really smooth piece of insulated render, done by a proper applicator, but look at that top edge of that curve and look at that rough wall. It is Design & Build, what can we do? Absolutely nothing. You can say to the client it does not seem to be up to much, but he says, "I have not really got time for that." Contractors used to sweep the floor in front of us when we used to go on site, they used to really treat the architect with great respect,

but now you go on site and say that is not right and they go, “Yes, so what do you want us to do about it?” meaning, “We are not going to do anything about it and you can go and whinge to the client if you like, then we will see”, and of course the client says “We don’t want to bother the builder too much because we really want them to finish the job.”

We have gone into a more lightweight world. I feel I have to react (illustration 12). Westferry, right next to Canary Wharf, is my America. I much prefer this America to the Canary Wharf America. I prefer the big billboard but why I am doing an electronic sign in brick is more tricky to explain and I probably do not have time, happily.



Illustration 12: CZWG, Westferry Circus

You can see we do cheap buildings now and they seem to get cheaper. Look at those *gorgeous* tie rods coming down the wall (illustration 13). You have to get decoration anywhere.



Illustration 13: CZWG, Westferry Circus, interior

Where we used to build on rivers and exciting places, now we build next to railway lines. This is the nature of working in London, which is that the juicy sites used to be next to natural infrastructure, now they are next to Victorian infrastructure and you have to take pleasure looking up and down a railway line. Frankly, of course, it is probably more exciting than the river because rivers are a bit wide, they are a bit wet and a bit cold. At least trains go up and down much more and make a lot more noise. Next to a Shell filling station at Elephant and Castle: (illustration 14) is the new world, this is the world we work in and the world in which we build these lightweight floating buildings that appear to weigh nothing but are completely and brilliantly planned of course. You get a terrace, you get a balcony.



Illustration 14: CZWG, flats at Steedman Street, Elephant and Castle

Finally, we go to Liverpool. The design champion for Liverpool, a councillor, said of our design for this building – and this for me is the ultimate pop compliment – “I have seen a lot of buildings because Grosvenor are building 50 buildings and there are 100s of other buildings being built, but this is the first one that reminds me of Liverpool” (illustration 15).



Illustration 15: CZWG in Liverpool

The whole problem with having a theory of practice is that you may just forget to react to the place you are really in rather than the place that you wish you were in or the place that you are always in, and it is very dangerous to have systems and mindsets that ignore the fact that you are in a different place. Sometimes you might be working in Brighton, and sometimes you might be working in Liverpool, sometimes in London and so on. It seems to me that you should understand where you are working and you should somehow enhance that place, because I do not think our cities deserve to be homogenised, they deserve to be exemplified by their characters. One's reaction to that character is a really important thing. This is patently a vulgar building, but my whole experience of Liverpool is of a spectacularly and gorgeously vulgar place – the Three Graces, the swagger of the people, their language, their attitude. These are massive generalisations, but I do not care because I am probably only ever going to get to do one building in Liverpool and it might just as well add to what I feel Liverpool was about, and it was good for me to have it recognised.

Doing Design & Build, I have woken up at last to the fact that it is best to use things like curtain wallings from Germany because they cannot really get them wrong. You cannot really build good curtain walling badly because the sub contractors are just not capable of badness, they are too good at it. My new defence mechanism is to try and use systems in Design & Build that prevent the embarrassments of indifference. That is my message today: you have to embrace Design & Build, but try and find things to build it of that do not get screwed up so easily. That said, of course, these big bling things are hand built on site and the building would have been finished on time had some natty scouser not come by and stolen all the gold in rolls before it had actually been put up. “*Gold* – it must be valuable, let us nick it.” This building is for a hairdresser, incidentally, called Herbert of Liverpool. If you are ever in Liverpool and need a haircut I strongly recommend gorgeous Herbert and his building.

I apologise for not being reflective, I apologise for not doing any research, but perhaps I am the scary antidote: I am 37 years in practice – or maybe more like 40 – I do not know what to do next, I did not know what to lecture on. I used to know what I thought, I used to give international lecture series but now I have not got a clue. If I were you I would do research and self curations because it might stop you from turning into me.