THE COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION OF THE CITY

The Whitechapel Gallery and London's East End

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The ground floor of the Whitechapel Gallery is one of London's most memorable art spaces: because of its grand scale and proportions, and soft, even light; but also because of its incomparably direct connection to one of London's most distinctive streets, at the heart of the traditional immigrant quarter. Juxtaposed with the cacophony of the surrounding streets, estates and markets, every brushstroke or pixel takes on additional force.

This resonance between gallery and city is both intentional and unavoidable: it shaped the location and original design of the gallery building, and has informed the content and layout of its exhibitions. But it is a complex relationship, filtered through conventions of representation and the shared or divided values of the community of visitors. The price of admission to Picasso's "Guernica" in 1939 is emblematic of this symbolic exchange between street and gallery: a pair of boots, fit for the front.

The gallery's extension into the former library next door, the work of the recent transformation, changes and complicates this relation to the city, as does the expansion of the financial district to the doors of the gallery. As one of the architects of the project, a collaboration between Robbrecht en Daem Architecten and Witherford Watson Mann Architects, I have reflected on the bond between the building and its hinterland, and how this influences the visitor's experience.

Street market, Wentworth Street

The first floor Research Library in the 1930s

My essay, though concerned with the physical fabric of architecture and the city is not about inert matter: it is about the collective imagination of the city.

Until the last decade of the nineteenth century, numbers 77 to 82 Whitechapel High Street were one room wide terrace houses, typical of London's ancient structure. This repetitive rhythm underlies the City and the highways that radiate from its gates, stretching and quickening along the Whitechapel High Street. A series of alleys prise open narrow gaps, 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 the East imperfectly and expediently retraced by medieval hands. These are the common traits of a medieval city of north-western Europe, instantly recognisable to a visitor from Antwerp or Lübeck.

As is typical for a city edge, the area attracted foreigners. Wave after wave of migrants arrived – dissenters from Flanders and the Netherlands, Jews, the Hugenots, the Irish fleeing famine, democrats from Germany's failed revolution.[1] In Bernard Kops' topical phrase:

> "This East End... is like an Olympic torch, handed from one community to the next."[2]

The area resounded with distant struggles, intertwining the local and international. The city around was rebuilt to accommodate London's prodigious economic growth in the nineteenth century: docks were carved out of the marshy ground to the south and east to transfer goods from across the world, the City to the west transformed itself into a financial centre to broker, insure and fund these transactions, and Commercial Road was cut between the two. But on the Whitechapel High Street and Brick Lane, real estate was static and the building stock deteriorating; labour was mobile, and the population becoming more marginal. An influx of Jews from eastern Europe and Russia in the 1880s filled the tightly packed houses around Whitechapel. The poverty and insanitary conditions led to a burst of philanthropic and municipal concern. Charles Booth's "Map Descriptive of London Poverty", completed in 1889, marks out these inner edge slums in black, a clear rejoinder to action.

Fired by Christian Socialism, a local minister and his wife used their considerable skills to initiate a series of projects in the area. Samuel and Henrietta Barnett campaigned for the clearance of the Flower and Dean "rookery" just to the north of the current gallery, to create new tenement housing (1875).[3] They took a lead in the foundation of Toynbee Hall, a settlement for university men to carry out educational

and social work in the East End, off the newly-formed Commercial Street (1885). They led fundraising efforts for the Whitechapel Library (1892) and Whitechapel Art Gallery (1901).[4] The Barnetts' work amounted to a social project of remarkable breadth, covering housing, education and art in the space of two city blocks. The architectural idioms of these projects are associative of their "Practicable Socialism" – with echoes of Philip Webb at Toynbee Hall, William Morris at the art gallery, and a playful reworking of the large windowed brick Board Schools at the library. In short, Library and Gallery were carved out of similar sites, and shared the same parentage and lofty ambitions.

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.

The gallery was a brutally direct assembly of the ceremonial and the industrial, a first breath of modern spirit. Charles Harrison Townsend's design for the street façade was that of a thinly disguised church, with its twin towers and heavy round-arched entrance; the transcultural details – friezes of laurel leaves and heavy curved turrets – dispelled or at least diluted this association. 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. Above, served by brick and stone stairs in opposite corners, was the upper gallery, curiously narrow and long. Both buildings adapted idealised room forms to awkward sites, and were altered over time to accommodate changes in patterns of use, rendering each in some sense incomplete. The library was symmetrical, with a central corridor proceeding from the front door to the large reading room. A light-court on its eastern flank cut a corner out of this room, while the original lending library on the streetfront was appropriated in the 1930s to form a stair down to the District Line.
The gallery, in its translation from a drawing on the walls of the Royal Academy to construction on the Whitechapel High Street, was left incomplete as well as dramatically lopsided. Domes and mosaic panel were omitted, and

the arch was squeezed into a narrower facade, its curved embrasure undercutting the left turret. The gallery widened to the rear, imbalance turning into poise as the vaulted hallway fed into the nave of the broad lower gallery.

The importance of the library in the life of the area cannot be overstated. Generations of readers recalled its spaciousness with awe: *"What I remember is a rather – to me – very grand staircase, with a sort of iron balustrade curving upwards, as it might be a mansion that you'd see in the films...".* [5]

For residents of the wider area the library, was a living educational resource, earning it the unofficial title of "University of the Ghetto" "*... Straw [from the hay market] used to float up to the door of the library...And yet as soon as you got through the doorway it was all peace and quiet...And you knew you were somewhere which was different, and this is what they were dishing out and you could get it free."* [6] Bernard Kops is even more direct: *"I emerged out of childhood with nowhere to hide, / when a door called my name / and pulled me inside."* [7]

The library developed an unrivalled collection of Yiddish books, and a number of clubs, including the famous Whitechapel Arts group.[8]

The Gallery's early exhibitions were mostly didactic, a mix of the utilitarian, orientalist and canonical. With the notable exception of Picasso's "Guernica", few prewar exhibitions

appear to have commanded the gallery space. Early installations appear crowded, with panelling on the walls and works hung close together. The 1911 "Trade Schools" show, with worthily utilitarian goods ranged in the tall, light gallery, has the feel of a World Exhibition. As the finance and energy of the initial years waned, exhibitions by the 1930s tended towards the local, in the form of various art clubs, with occasional private collections.

Having been little touched by renewal in the nineteenth century, Whitechapel was, along with most of East London, down for comprehensive redevelopment in the 1943 County of London Plan. Indeed:

> "...St Mary's (Whitechapel) was one of Abercrombie's special study areas. He recognised it needed immediate attention. The County Plan had exact diagrams showing the new ten-storey blocks, the simplified road layout, the annihilation of 'non-conforming' industries... No brick would remain standing."[9]

Reconstruction swept from Bethnal Green to Canning Town, reflected in the Whitechapel's 1952 exhibition "Setting up Home with Bill and Betty"–but failed to materialise in the streets of Whitechapel. Yet even without redevelopment there was signifcant population change: where poverty had brought the first Jewish migrants

to the area, greater prosperity slowly drew their descendents away to the north London suburbs.

The economic stagnation and demographic change in the area coincided with a period of intense vitality at the gallery. While the annual East End Academy featuring the work of local artists was dropped from the calendar, a succession of monographic shows championed painters such as De Staël, Nolan, Pollock, Rothko and Rauschenberg. The scale and chromatism of their paintings achieved an unrivalled fit with the gallery space–even the crazed granolithic concrete floor provided a textural counterpoint to the harmonies and conflicts of these works. If Abstract Expressionism brought out the cathedral in the gallery, Pop brought out its proximity to the street: the seminal 1956 exhibition "This is Tomorrow" was divided on the principle of a series of market stalls,[10] while the work of Robert Rauschenberg, shown in 1964, was read as displaying characteristics and tonalities *"more like those of the Whitechapel High Street than like any kind of picture, abstract or naturalistic."*[11]

The "simplified road layout" of Abercrombie's wartime County of London Plan was in implemented in a highly convoluted form in the 1970's. A series of one-way loops destroyed much of the southern side of the Whitechapel High Street, to form an environment that was disorienting for both motorist and pedestrian.

The "planning blight" of these changes accelerated the change of population, the Jewish presence growing ever weaker, replaced by Bangladeshis following historic ties, and fleeing civil war with the Pakistan.

While these physical and social changes were not the direct cause of the gallery's crisis of the mid-seventies, they must at least have exacerbated it. The Whitechapel was now physically cut off from the City, long a source of funding, while its ties with the locality had been weakened during the adventurous exhibition programme of preceding decades. The politics, as always were complex, and the board of Trustees debated *"whether to be parochial or international."*[12] One was unequivocal: *"The gallery has generously done its bit towards helping the work of the Avant-Garde to be seen; and can with honour turn its efforts towards homelier forms of helping the public whom we exist to serve."*[13]

Operating on the border of City and East End had become a precarious balancing act, but the1985 refurbishment and extension carried out by Colquhoun and Miller provided the tools to carry out a more varied programme. The narrow alley site of the old Ragged School was used to provide a lecture theatre, cafe, education room and offices, with a bookshop installed at the streetfront. These new spaces catered for both corporate sponsors and local schools, and offered

the wider range of facilities expected by visitors. The old staircases were demolished and replaced by a grand sweep of steps up to the first floor gallery and a spiral exit stair, and a new foyer was formed between street and gallery. The new rooms and circulation increased the Gallery's ceremonial formality, tempering this with moments of intimacy and picturesque detail.

The gallery and library had at their construction been part of a cluster of civic and commercial buildings, but were progressively isolated. St. Mary's – a red-brick Victorian church built on the site of the original "White Chapel" – was destroyed in the Second World War: its churchyard is now the Altab Ali Park. Gardiners' department store, at the apex of Commercial Road and the Whitechapel High Street, was demolished as a part of the highways scheme. With these disappearances, and the construction of a large supermarket at the corner of Cambridge Heath Road, Whitechapel's centre of gravity seemed to shift eastwards. Although the library remained well-used until the end, the move to the Idea Store along the Whitechapel Road follows an inexorable logic. Brick Lane and the Whitechapel High Street are no longer local centres, and the library has followed the shops. The name and architectural language of the Idea Store are a "Third Way" hybrid of public sector values and commercial realism. The departure of the library created an opportunity for the

View over the roofs, looking back towards the High Street, with the third floor Creative Studio in the centre

The ground floor Commissions Gallery, with installation by Goshka Macuga

Whitechapel Gallery to renew and broaden its founding ambitions, and to alter its relation to the changed surroundings by expanding into the space of the former library. The brief for the new space was complementary to the existing gallery, not simply more of the same: a gallery for site-specific works; a gallery for loaned collections; space to view and consult the remarkable archive; and substantially larger education facilities – now a prerequisite for arts institutions, but part of the Whitechapel's programme from the start.

In formulating our design approach for the recently completed transformation, we considered gallery and library as a single organism, supported by the buildings' common origin as well as the logic of future use. We took clear positions on what most clearly did and did not work – or what to retain and what to change. We largely left the main rooms alone, and transformed the circulation.

By the simple act of joining the two buildings, the gallery now has five major exhibition spaces, as well as several highly visible secondary spaces. It is not just the number of galleries, or their contrasting uses, it is the complementary spatial character of these rooms that gives the new Whitechapel a surprising richness.

The scale now ranges from the intimate Project Galleries on the first floor, to the grand scale of the original ground floor gallery, with several steps and modulations in between: the

Commissions Gallery on the ground floor and the Collections Gallery on the first floor echo their neighbours in their details (tall square piers supporting a lattice of beams, arched purlin brackets and bow trusses). With their squarer proportions and more centred compositions, the repose of the library rooms complements the more linear quality of the original galleries. The new galleries have been brought into kinship with the existing rooms through their roofs and openings, forming a "roofscape" of well-modulated volumes, each distinctively daylit. Within this range of unity and multiplicity, the gallery's different strands and its diverse constituencies can each find a space. The choice between "parochial or international" need no longer be so stark.

The new Whitechapel is made up of overlapping circuits, on the ground and first floors, and between Colquhoun and Miller's grand stair and the old library stair. This configuration allows great versatility, for example at the changeover between temporary shows, but is also expansive in character when all galleries are in use.

The incomplete nature of each building has eased and enriched the task of joining them together. The imperfections and imbalances, and the adjustments of line or level required by the act of linking, become something of a binding thread. Neither the formal enfilade of an establishment gallery nor the showy circulation

of a new institution, a series of interlocked rooms link the main galleries – the ground floor foyers, the project galleries and front and rear link spaces on the first floor. These paired rooms, with doorways at their corners, are both easy and uncommon. Maximising the hanging space but gently decentering the room, the content of the gallery becomes central and movement is implied but not emphasised.

Throughout the renewed galleries new doors and windows allow you to register where you are, and see where you have come from: openings that are both reflective and retrospective. From the ground floor galleries, large glazed doors make the street directly visible. As you cross over the former dividing wall between gallery and library, you glimpse a T-shaped lightcourt that crosses this division, binding gallery and library together. Windows in the third floor creative studio look out onto the terracotta gable and the weathervane; from the second and third floor education areas you can see out over the gallery roofs to the skyline of towers, warehouses and terraces beyond. The Whitechapel is an institution that is very aware of its history and its place in the city's life: these retrospective and extrovert views give physical form to the gallery's complex collective psychology.

In sum, though discreet, the alterations to gallery and library fundamentally alter the Whitechapel's identity: where before it was

singular, it becomes multiple; originally deep and linear, it has become wide and gently dynamic; where it was once introvert but assertive, now it is more extrovert and reflective.

The unification of gallery and library is paralleled by changes in the wider area. With the closure of the Aldgate Gyratory in autumn 2008, it is now possible to walk from the City to the gallery at street level. The maze of subways across the gyratory are now redundant, and new public spaces are being planned in spaces liberated from the highway.[14]

These transformations are accompanied – indeed, in London's opportunistic development model, paid for – by new office construction. This seems likely to create some jarring contrasts of scale, with the once grand "Whitechapel Art Palace" dwarfed by twenty storey construction. At the same time that it is linked in to a network of public spaces, the Whitechapel will sit on a sharpened edge between the City and the East End. The City becomes ever more restless, the population of East London ever more multinational. All around, the patterns of development follow the demolish-and-rebuild model that Richard Sennett has described as the "Brittle City."[15] Canary Wharf, Stratford, the City are made and remade fast and tall. This stands in stark contrast to the adjacent conservation areas, and the danger of branded ossification that these face.

Situated in between these two poles of rapid change and total preservation, the slow, additive change that has taken place in the recent transformation of the Whitechapel Gallery is emblematic of the adaptive city. Its approach is one of continuity and change in equal measure, with the city incrementally remade on top of existing structures and foundations. Newness is filtered through the a careful understanding of the host structure – each graft to the existing is an outgrowth from the existing grain, but the whole keeps growing and changing.

The gallery and the city around it stretch outwards and upwards – wider, higher. Adapted to new circumstances, more diverse, the buildings of the Whitechapel will quickly recede into the background. They will serve as a vivid frame within which the politics and aesthetics of the city outside will be translated by artists, to be interpreted by the gallery's community of visitors.

1 The area practically deserves its own chapter in Robert Winder's informative and balanced Bloody Foreigners: the Story of Immigration to Britain, 2004

2 Bernard Kops, "Returning We Hear the Larks", in Bernard Kops' East End: By the Waters of Whitechapel, (2006), p.174

3 It took until 1887 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. The gateway, marked "the Four Percent Industrial Dwellings Company Ltd", a reference to the steady returns from philanthropic investment, is all that survives. See Jerry White, Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block 1887–1920, (1980)

4 Henrietta went on to found Hampstead Garden Suburb and to safeguard Hampstead Heath Extension (1905); she remained a trustee of the Whitechapel Art Gallery into the 1930s.

5 Harold Rosen, speaking to Alan Dein for the Radio 4 programme "Voices from the Reading Room", broadcast 14 February 2002. With thanks to Alan for providing me with a disc of this vivid broadcast.

6 Stan Sokolow describing the library in the1920s, ibid

7 Bernard Kops, "Whitechapel Library, Aldgate East", in Bernard Kops' East End: By the Waters of Whitechapel, (2006), p.7

8 The Whitechapel Arts group counted Gertler, Rosenberg, Bomberg and Bronowski among its members. See Rachel Lichtenstein and Alan Dein "the University of the Ghetto: Stories of the Whitechapel Library", The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review, (2001), p.9–11

9 Charlie Forman, Spitalfields: a battle for land, (1989), p.18

10 "We...agreed that each group should have the equivalent of a stall-space in a market in which they could do their own thing": Colin St John Wilson on "This is Tomorrow", in article of same name by Jeremy Millar in The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review, (2001), p.68

11 Andrew Forge, review in the New Statesman quoted in Brandon Taylor "The Rauschenberg Retrospective in 1964", The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review, (2001), p.74

12 Draft letter from Viscount Bearsted to The Times, 1971, quoted in Janeen Haythornwaite "Roller-Coasters and Helter Skelters, Missionaries and Philanthropists. A History of Patronage and Funding at the Whitechapel Art Gallery" in The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review, (2001), p.18–22

13 Letter from Lady Henriques to Viscount Bearsted, 1971, ibid

14 See the "Aldgate Public Realm Strategy" prepared by Witherford Watson Mann Architects and General Public Agency, available on Design for London's and London Borough of Tower Hamlets' websites.

15 Richard Sennett, "The Open City", essay published by Urban Age (2006), available at www.urban-age.net

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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This essay explores the relation between high street and gallery at Whitechapel, tracing how each has changed over the last century. This account puts in context the cultural ambitions and the architectural tactics of the 2009 transformation by Robbrecht en Daem Architecten and Witherford Watson Mann Architects.