

Making Architecture in Cities: An Overview of Sir Jeremy Dixon's Approach to Design

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London is a unique city. Unlike other European cities it is less dense and consists largely of houses rather than of flats, all, as a result of a particular historical background. Other European cities had been under threat, encircled by walls and as a result were densely developed. This trend continued right up to the end of the 19th century. London by contrast has remained unfortified since 11th century and has spread without constraint, thus becoming a city of streets of houses. Working in London requires an understanding of this special context.

The Opera House is an extra-ordinary institution in England. In a way it represents many of the social problems that England has. It is an institution that had an assumption of privilege rather like the Royal Family. Situated in the context of a square, called the "Covent Garden Square", the extension to the Royal Opera House typifies the approach Jeremy Dixon takes to making Architecture. The context was an extremely important historical one. A great contribution to town planning, it was originally an arcade, with all but one of its edges now gone and with a fine church on the one side. All around it was the pleasant interesting city of London.

During the last few years, London has seen an extraordinary period involving the construction of new projects and

indeed the rest of the country, possibly resulting from the coincidence between the ambition for new buildings and for the Millennium and the creation of a National Lottery. Whether the Lottery had been deliberately created for the funding of Millennium projects or not, it had helped immensely the rejuvenation of many buildings and projects in England, both in London and outside.

Sir Jeremy Dixon's office has been involved in a number of projects located in London, executed in this context. They represent very different aspects of public arts commissioning but what they all seem to have in common is the fact that they are existing institutions dramatically revitalised by new buildings and new interventions.

The first of the projects is the recreation of the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. Sir Jeremy Dixon won the competition in 1984 and the building opened for the Millennium. Sixteen years seems a long time and the Opera House itself has gone through some traumas during the period. The project is as much to do with Town Planning as it is to do with the theatre and the way it has been dealt is worth looking at.

The site for the Royal Opera House occupied a whole city block in Covent Garden and the area is much valued for its diversity and small scale. The

challenge seems to have been to place a very large new building in a context of much smaller buildings.

The Old Opera house was built in the middle of the 19th century and had equipment installed around 1900. Everything backstage was either too small or about to collapse. The new building had extensive new stage areas, fly tower, dressing rooms, etc etc. to make the Royal Opera House as well equipped as that of anywhere in the World. This is important because the productions are exchanged between houses. The Royal ballet used to be based on an outer suburb of London and the project allowed the company to have a proper home at Covent Garden with all the rehearsal studios and special facilities they needed.

From the outset, Sir Jeremy proposed that the character of the surrounding streets and square should take precedence over the overall consistency of the new building. In other words, where the project forms the edge of the Covent Garden Square, Inigo Jone's great urban preposition, the manner of building he proposed, Sir Jeremy argues should reflect the historical importance of the square. The other façades faced streets of greater diversity and the design manner could be more straightforwardly modern. Add to this were the retention of the existing Opera House auditorium and pedimented front, and the recreation of the cast iron Floral Hall as a foyer and there was the kind of Collage that is typical of a city block.

Sir Jeremy says that when you are faced with such a task as having to make a big addition to a project of this nature, it is the piece of history that comes uppermost from its context. "You have a huge responsibility to that area. A project of this nature owes its responsibility to history in as much as to the modernity. It has to deal with history and make a modern building. It has to do both".



Sir Jeremy searched for the history of the Covent Garden, and constructed an image of its historical presence. Earlier on, Covent Garden had been a residential area with arcaded edges and then had developed into a market square. At one corner was the entrance to the theatre of the Arcadian square. At the same time, the market had grown. What was once a pleasant place for the front doors had become a place for back doors with a vegetable market. The theatre burned down several times and was rebuilt over and over again always entered from the corner of the square. The present theatre was somehow wholly entered from the Bow Street ignoring the Covent Garden, which was then wholly a market square. The pattern of the city had awkwardly changed, the wholesale market had invaded and the theatre was found isolated with this entrance over on Bow Street. Sir

Jeremy asked himself as to how one can make the theatre reach back to the people and this was perhaps his main concern in dealing with the public realities of space.

From the early drawings, it was found that the Covent Garden was a regular arcaded square and that there was no other square like that in London. The brief projected asked first of all to replace all the worn out aspects of the theatre. But Sir Jeremy knew that this was not the main issue. Despite the fact that such removal and reinstallation would have been a hugely complicated and technical aspect of theatre building, in the process, one would have wiped out the whole building except the auditorium. In the back of his mind however, there was this historical complex, which was physically not there, but had to be reckoned with in any planned interventions.

Sir Jeremy approached the project skilfully and sensitively, remaking the first missing edges of the square which of course was part of the project itself. So in a way, the historicity came alive although anything that was worthwhile had long disappeared. Sir Jeremy remade the regular edge so that the irregular city beyond could be made visible. This way, uniformity was infused in order to strengthen and make visible the irregularity of the city; making one with the other!

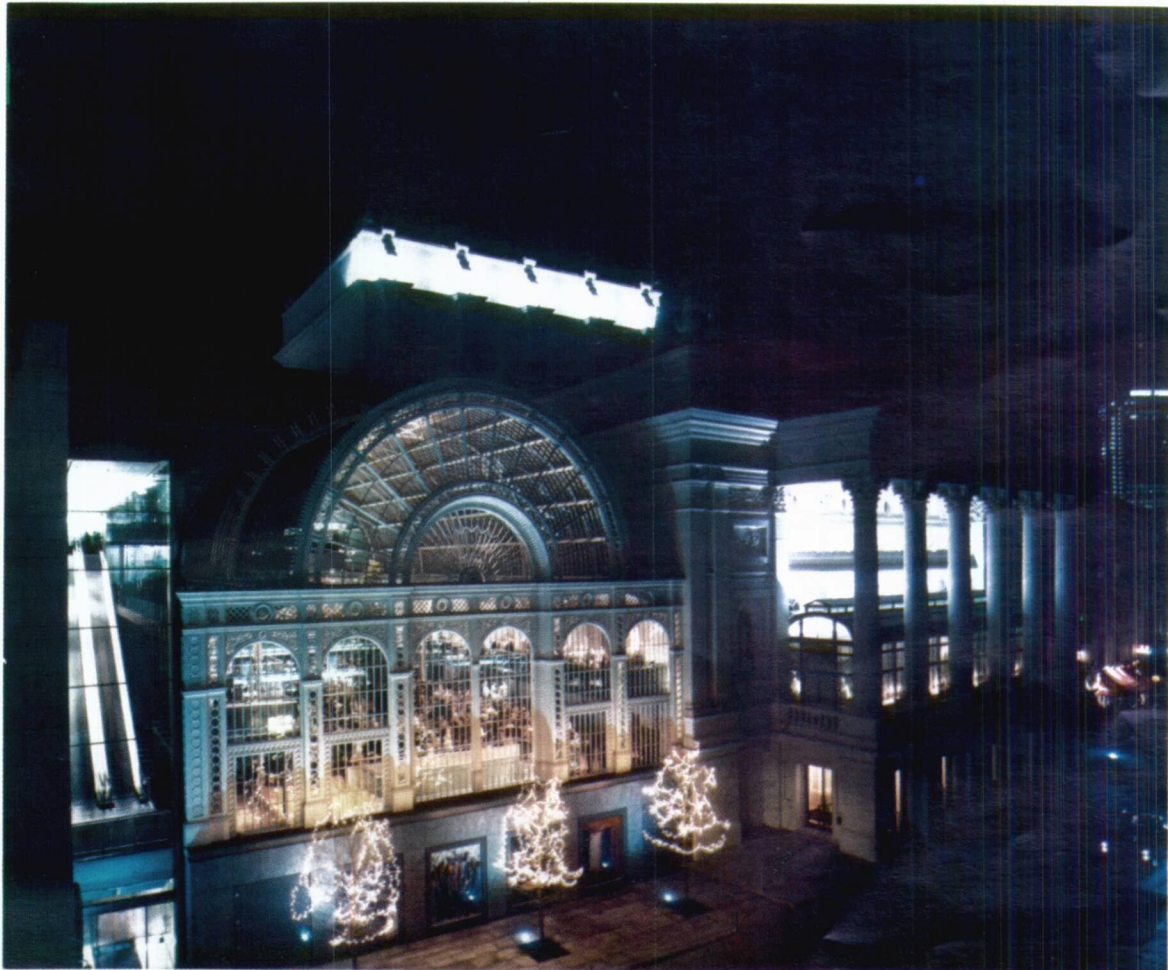
The main entrance from the Bow Street was left in tact since it has now grown into an entity by itself. A new entrance however was brought in from the new Arcade where the historical entrance to the earliest theatre would have been. Indeed this divided the block through both the street and the square in such a way that the public could walk through the ticket office, book shops, and the

information office that is open all day long. The two entrances then meet underneath the main hall of the Floral hall. This was the shared zone for the services and cloaks toilets etc. Shops that needed light opened up into the Arcade with the stage and the back stage areas creeping all over behind them.

Equally importantly Sir Jeremy felt, that the general public needed far better foyers and a sense that the Royal Opera House was to be accessible in a way that would make it properly a part of the city. (Illustration 1) In the project, a new entrance located in the recreated arcades of the Covent Garden Square opened up a new access route for the public both to the Opera House and Bow Street. New foyers however needed to reflect social change. The distinction between the "Grand Tier" and the "Gods" has been undermined in the new project

by introducing escalators to connect the floral hall with the Amphitheatre Foyer. There is an open Loggia at Amphitheatre level allowing the audience to overlook Covent Garden Square with the result that as many members of the audience are now moving upwards in the interval as downwards.

Where the Royal Opera House was the subject of continuous public scrutiny, the project at the National Portrait Gallery has been a well-kept secret. The site was a hidden courtyard between the Portrait Gallery and the National Gallery. As with so many 19th century institutions, the Portrait Gallery had seen an enormous increase in the number of visitors and urgently needed to catch up with facilities for the public. Like the Opera House, the existing building had a vertical organisation with a chronological



'hang' of pictures starting on the second floor. The project again used an escalator to take the visitor to a new gallery displaying the wonderful collection of Tudor portraits. In the past, these important paintings had been largely ignored because of the inconvenience of staircase access. Daylight combines with an ambitious structure and the escalator provides a dramatic sense of arrival.

In this project, the use of the courtyard has involved a kind of brokering a 'deal' between the National Gallery and the Portrait Gallery. Part of the Portrait Gallery that was in the natural territory of the National Gallery has been exchanged for the right to build in the courtyard. This co-operation indeed is unusual for two institutions that have in the past held each other at arms length. Filling the courtyard has enabled a restaurant at roof level to look over the National Gallery towards Trafalgar Square, Nelson, Whitehall, Big Ben and Westminster Abbey. This extraordinary view has been a discovery during the architectural competition and had been unknown even to the Gallery Staff.

In contrast to these, the Summerset House demonstrates the way in which an important historic building that has been shamefully under used and allowed to dilapidate has been resurrected. An 18th century William Chambers, this building had gone through a series of stages of transformations; once there had been a palace and then it had been used as a naval office and so on. In the front there was a terrace that was completely unused for a great period of time. The brief wanted to use the terrace in whatever way it is possible and the courtyard on the other side which had fallen into disuse also had to be regained. Chambers did not want any trees around and in any case this was prime urban space.

In the Summerset House, Sir Jeremy focussed on the courtyard and the terrace and transformed this to wonderful modern urban spaces. The concern has been on the urban consequences of the physically small-scale moves. In so doing, what was once a courtyard full of cars and an inaccessible riverside terrace has been transformed into a new meeting place in London. A small gesture of a fountain in the courtyard and a few canopies with a bridge to the terrace has made the terrace one of the most exciting social spaces. The Bridge from Westminster Bridge to the terrace opened up a new route in this area in London. Commuters crossing Westminster Bridge can now walk along the terrace and through Kings College to the Aldwych and the legal area in London. The fountain laid out in a grid like a grove of trees, gives a popular focus and accessibility to what is otherwise a rather severe neo-classical involvement. In the summerset house, one sees that architecture can be made with small gestures of intervention, supporting the patterns that can be brought to life. This however requires a great deal of faith in the existing, even when things are dilapidated, disused and chaotic, the ability to discover the

order from chaos and a sensitivity to know and understand the most powerful and essential ingredients that should be put together.

These three projects and the way in which the issues have been recognised, articulated and dealt with amply demonstrate Sir Jeremy Dixon's approach to making architecture in cities. If making architecture is about making places and constructing experiences to strengthen the ones already there and planting gestures to enable new ones, Sir Jeremy shows a deep sense of understanding of both an ability to position and shape spaces defined by the most appropriate materials and means to do so. In the words of Inigo Jones, it is the 'manner' in which architecture is brought into being that matters and the making of life and worlds for others driven by insights, understandings and compassion is what making architecture almost always entails. Sir Jeremy shows us how the simplest of the architectural acts involve conscious and deep sense of understanding and concern together with a dexterity to imagine the invisible and the intangible.

