

Have buildings, will travel by Stuart Burch

The Nazis planned to move Nelson's Column to Berlin had they won the Second World War. Odd thought, isn't it? Why would fascists take time out from their busy genocidal schedule to carry a column and its disabled occupant to the Fatherland? Because it would have provided enduring symbolic confirmation of their victory. Yes, Britain once ruled the waves; but now it was the Thousand-Year Reich that reigned supreme.

Fantasies of a Nazi Nelson died with Hitler. There are, however, more successful precedents when it comes to relocating monuments. Cleopatra's Needle on the banks of the River Thames is a good example. New empires like to build on the remnants of the old. That's why it's not just London that has an ancient Egyptian obelisk. So too do Paris and New York. Museums in all three of these so-called 'world cities' are full of stuff from elsewhere. Visitors to Manhattan's Metropolitan Museum of Art can turn a corner and find themselves transported in time and space. Enter one room and they are catapulted back to the eighteenth century dining room of Lansdowne House in central London. It was bought in 1931 and moved to the Met. It looks authentic enough, even if the walls have been reversed, the marble statues turned to plaster and the furniture filched from elsewhere.¹

This piece of posh IKEA features in Carol Duncan's classic *Civilizing Rituals* (1995). Her list of 'art-collecting, robber-baron mansion-builders' includes Isabella Stewart Gardner. She amassed a stockpile of Renaissance building material out of which to construct her museum-mausoleum. Gardner clearly didn't want such cultural vacuuming to catch on: her will stipulated that not even the flower arrangements were to be altered.²

Gardner's ability to acquire stuff is a confirmation that money talks. But sometimes the motivation for moving things around is preservation rather than profit. Skansen in Stockholm set the trend for open air museums and was the inspiration for other such ventures, including *Eesti Vabaõhumuuseum* near Tallinn.

There is a long (ig)noble tradition of moving monuments, relocating rooms and rebuilding buildings. Even those structures that look untouched cannot escape change. Nowhere is this more evident than with London's most visited tourist attraction: Tate Modern. What once produced electricity now generates culture. A bridge built to mark the millennium links this artistic powerhouse to St Paul's Cathedral on the other side of the river. It is ironic that you can get into the museum for free but have to pay to enter the temple. Perhaps on his next weekend break to London Jesus will pop in and chuck out the money changers?

The commercialisation of St Paul's is a reminder that buildings have to move with the times. Refusal to change can lead to a slow death. Take, for instance, the Houses of Parliament. In its day this Victorian vision was an incredibly innovative building constructed on the ruins of a burnt out palace. Today the building is rightly a World Heritage Site. But thanks to the ineptitude of politicians it is falling to pieces, just like the supposedly United Kingdom over which it governs.

If Big Ben and the British parliament are to survive, its occupants will have to move out to allow for costly and time-consuming renovations. Critics of the Westminster parliament argue that the hopelessly anachronistic building is no place to run a democracy and should instead be left as it is: a museum to a bygone age.

This echoes an earlier debate concerning another local landmark: the Baltic Exchange in the City of London. Technological developments had rendered the grandiose trading floor redundant by the time a bunch of terrorists arrived to blow it up.

Should the wounded building have been rescued? 'Yes!' cried the heritage lobby – but to no avail. And in its place is a giant Gherkin or, to give it its proper but less interesting name, 30 St Mary Axe. Construction began in 2001, meaning that it was going up when the World Trade Center was crashing down.

Designed by Foster + Partners, this pickle of a building ushered in London's increasingly high-rise era. Old iconic structures like Big Ben and St Paul's Cathedral are protected by 'sight lines' to ensure that they don't get dwarfed by ever taller skyscrapers. Indeed, the negative impact on the Tower of London was one reason why construction of The Pinnacle was delayed. Now known as '22 Bishopsgate' this 62 storey, 278m colossus is due to be finished in 2018. By then Norman Foster's bulge will resemble more of a broad bean than a gherkin.

This lust for ever bigger erections comes at the same time that most Londoners can't even afford to live in the capital. The quaint-sounding Gherkin – plus the Cheesegrater, Walkie-Talkie and Shard – represent a London that is, quite literally, out of the reach of the vast majority. Confirmation that fantasy economics hides behind their glittering façades came with the great financial crisis of 2007-8. It is fitting, therefore, that London's most famous insurance market should be housed in an 'inside-out' structure, namely the Lloyd's building by Richard Rogers (1978-86). This Alice in Wonderland assemblage is at its most bizarre when approached from Leadenhall Street. The entrance here dates from the 1920s. But only the façade of this almost-vanished neo-Roman building was saved: the rest was demolished to make way for the surreal network of elevators and pipes that cling to the replacement structure.

But what does all this have to say about the theme of this exhibition? First, the idea of architecture on the move is nothing new. Second, buildings can be converted to entirely new purposes, even uses that are completely different from that originally intended. Third, interiors can be housed behind façades that are jarringly different in terms of scale, style and vintage. Fourth, being bold can result in the heritage of the future: the Gherkin is as iconic as Big Ben; Lloyd's of London is England's youngest Grade-I protected building.³

So three cheers for those who, with more money than sense, decided to make a Baltic exchange by buying bits of a bombed-damaged London building and shipping them to Tallinn!

Yet, as with all successful marriages and elopements, good communication is essential. This needs to be borne in mind if and when the Baltic Exchange gets rebuilt: residents, visitors and passers-by alike need to be told its history so that it retains its old memories and shapes new ones. An excellent example of what *not* to do is provided by a cryptic inscription at the base of the Gherkin:

In memory of
Paul Butt
Danielle Carter
Tom Casey
who died on 10 April 1992

This defective memorial forgets far more than it remembers. It says nothing about where, how or why these three people lost their lives. Paul, Tom and fifteen-year-old Danielle died along with the Baltic Exchange. The reason why they must never be forgotten is apparent from the nearby St Ethelburga church. This tiny medieval jewel withstood the Great Fire of London, the Nelson-grabbing Nazis and a devastating IRA bomb planted a year after they attacked the Baltic Exchange. The radically restored church is now a centre for peace and reconciliation. What could be more necessary – or more *moving*?

Endnotes

¹ See 'Dining room from Lansdowne House, London', <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/32.12>.

² Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, London & New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 79.

³ Richard Waite, 'Rogers' Lloyd's becomes youngest Grade-I listed building', *AJ*, 19 December 2011, <http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/daily-news/rogers-lloyds-becomes-youngest-grade-i-listed-building/8624035.article>.