



# Learning from Piacenza and Sheppey

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In 1991, the whole school fitted into Scroope Terrace, and it was packed to the gills. Second years were squirreled away in every conceivable corner of the attic, dreaming away their afternoons. Often frazzled fifth years toiled in the shaded basement, accompanied by the sporadic percussion of workshop machinery. Everyone gathered for crits in Sandy Wilson's 'pit' straining with bleary eyes to see the work through the post-charrette soup of smoke. There was much camaraderie and shared purpose, cemented by too many late nights slicing brown cardboard for uhu-ed models no doubt.

At the time, many of the studio tutors also gave lectures: Dalibor Vesely and Peter Carl on the Greek Polis and Architecture and Continuity; Marcial Echenique on the Origins of Cities; Eric Parry on the Iconography of Materials; Sandy Wilson on Design Theory; Dean Hawkes on the Environment, to name but a few. Consequently, the lectures provided theoretical frameworks for the studio teaching, avoiding the more commonplace and

*'The White Building' (photograph by Will Pryce).*

undesirable segregation of the two. The common theoretical currency among many of the studios was phenomenology and perhaps the most recurrent question was how to work with the historic European city.

In this context, I was taken by the idea that being an architect could mean maintaining so many varied and seemingly interdependent interests. The fact that each new teaching direction required a visit to an exemplar was an added bonus and two field trips from my undergraduate years stood out. The first was a road trip from Cambridge to Italy during the winter of my second year. Our studio tutors, Eric Parry and Mary Ann Steane, accompanied by Peter Carl, drove the twelve of us students pretty much non-stop to Piacenza. On arrival we fanned out across the town to survey its palaces. Wearing fingerless gloves and armed with tape measures we attempted the mind-boggling Baroque scissor stair topped with trompe-l'oeil vaults that forms the entrance to the Palazzo Somaglia. An appreciation of the structure's permanent form of theatre, geometric complexity and exquisite craft was galvanised through the making of a large-scale model upon our return.

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The following year, Mark Brearley and Dominic Cullinan took the studio to Sheppey, an island at the mouth of the River Thames. The landscape is characterised by open marshland, provisional uses, small holdings, caravan sites and epic North Sea defenses. We were encouraged to look closely at everything we found, from how spaces were defined at the scale of the landscape to the detail of thresholds at their perimeters. After having gorged ourselves on high architecture in the lecture room, Piacenza and Rome, it was liberating to apply the same level of care and interpretation to everyday spaces and situations nearer to home.

To some degree, the work of our practice can be understood through the concerns of these two field trips. On the one hand a preoccupation with how things are made, with an understanding of craft, architectural language, a delight in the theatre of public rooms and the continuity of the city. On the other, an interest in working in diverse

situations, reading the histories of marginal places through their informal landscapes and ad hoc materiality. In our projects we have sought to make architecture that has gravitas through the calibration of its proportions, the fineness of its construction, and its engagement with its physical and cultural contexts, but also a lightness suggesting openness to different modes of inhabitation that can change over time.

A recent project in Hackney Wick, adjacent to the Olympic Park, is an arts venue called 'The White Building'. A former sweet factory, it was established as a base for local arts organisations, providing studios, exhibition spaces, a café and microbrewery. The area had previously been under wholesale threat of demolition despite being home to the largest concentration of artists' studios in Europe. We set ourselves the rule that as much of the construction as possible should use local skills and labour. The metalwork throughout was fabricated in the yard adjacent and the café owner moved in from down the road. In the larger spaces we created soft vaults of sheep's wool suspended in fishnets that improved the thermal and acoustic performance of the interior but also gave the spaces a playful aspect and strong spatial identity.

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Another project completed this year was 'A Room for London', a one room installation on the roof of the Southbank's Queen Elizabeth Hall in collaboration with the artist Fiona Banner. The room can be hired for a night by members of the public and also hosts musicians and writers-in-residence. We wanted to create a space in which the occupant was both at the centre of the city but also set apart, both literally and metaphorically. Taking the form of a boat, we named the room 'Le Roi des Belges', after the boat Joseph Conrad sailed up the Congo that inspired his novella 'Heart of Darkness.' As Conrad's story is narrated aboard a boat on the banks of the River Thames, so passengers aboard the Room are invited to complete the ship's log and contribute to the growing account of interior journeys made. Consequently the smallest of spaces is connected to the widest of horizons.

Since its inception our practice has also been involved in teaching. Each year we set



QUEEN ELIZABETH HALL  
PURCELL ROOM

POWER  
1950  
1955  
1960

our students a research project that matches the concerns of our office: for example transforming industrial architecture into arts spaces; music spaces for school children; self-build housing; or comfort in café design. What remains consistent is our desire to teach how to look carefully at the existing context of a project. Through observation, recording and researching, a design approach particular to each situation is able to emerge. This requires a willingness to hold the seemingly incompatible together, operating at extremes of scale, and from the most permanent, earthbound construction to the most fleeting of uses.

Cambridge excelled in setting the broadest of contexts for shaping an architectural project. This is to be commended, defended and expanded. The research carried out by the students attempted to replicate that being carried out by the staff: how to effectively sustain so many diverse and critical factors through the course of a project to a final outcome where they are all still present, and delighted in. This is the particular skill of designers, one that is of increasing importance in a world where we are only too aware that the segregation and protection of areas of knowledge does not allow us to address the complex problems that surround us.