

Architecture, Laughter and Animals - a tribute beyond words to Dalibor Vesely

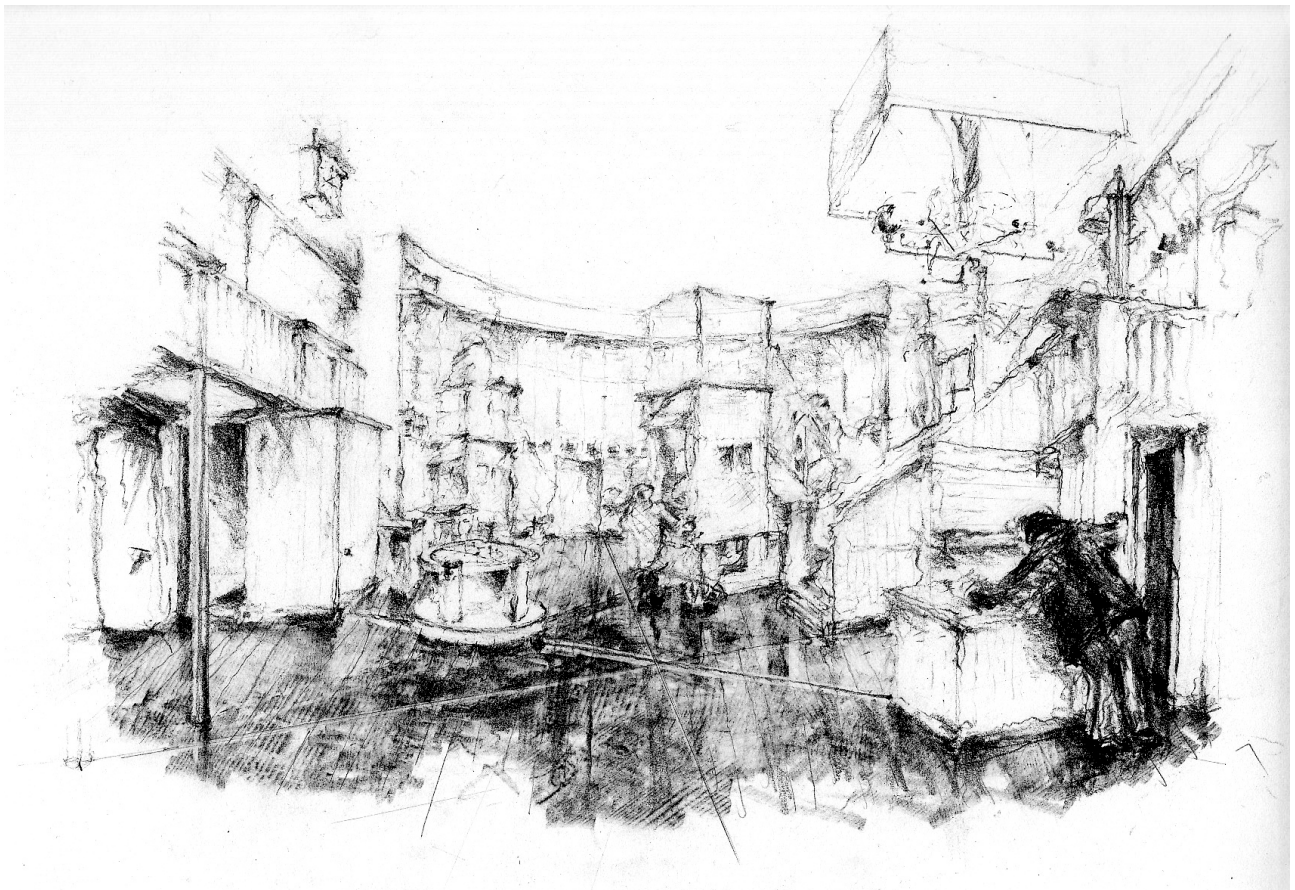
David Bass

I knew I was doing something right whenever Dalibor laughed at my work. His wide repertoire of laughs provided a finely calibrated language of architectural comment.

When discussing buildings with him, I frequently found that once the foundations of understanding were laid out, further scrutiny brought about various kinds of laughter as well as deeper, more conventionally articulated critique. When visiting European cities with Dalibor, we would first grasp the major forces at play, and then attention would turn to this or that corner or alley, this or that eccentric shop, an inexplicable piece of stonework, the sound of music from a window... All of these fragments were part of the city, each the product of someone's best efforts. The grunts, harrumphs, chuckles and titters acknowledged various provocations: a paradoxical and otherwise inexpressible truth, a brilliant strategic move, an example of individual audacity or courage, or sometimes an unforgivable banality.

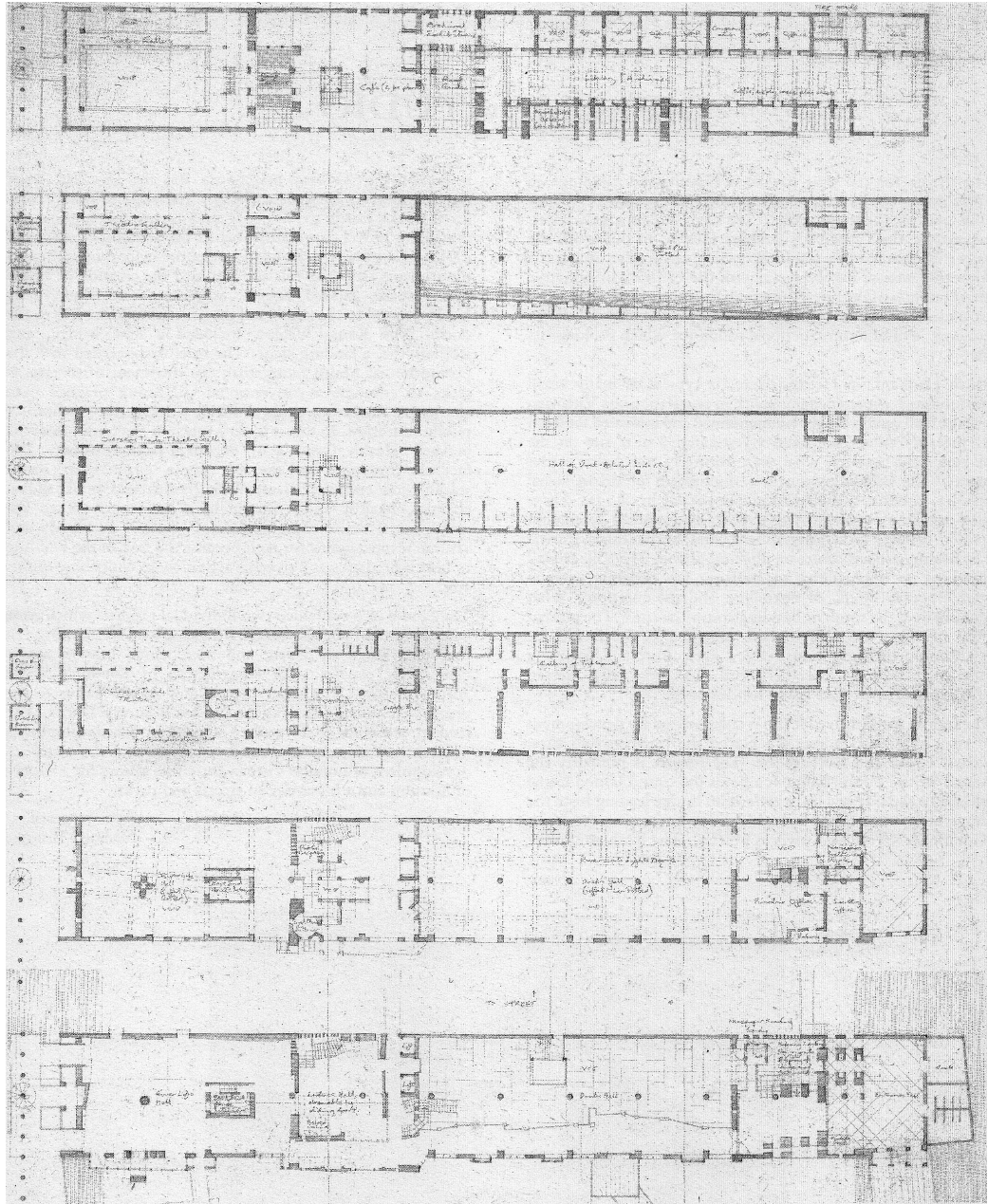
Dalibor's teaching on architecture, cities and culture was so undeniably accurate, insightful and productive that I tried to make it underlie all my work as a student. And yet, there was great scope for freedom within the understanding that he outlined. As long as a project was sound in its basics, much of the rest seemed up for grabs. In my final Diploma year (1984-85) at Cambridge, Dalibor - together with his colleagues Eric Parry, Peter Carl and a visiting Peter Waldman - felt as much co-conspirators as teachers. I'll give two examples:

An introductory project in Studio 1 concerned a room in Trinity House, the shipping and navigation charity. To address the studio brief I decided to generate a maritime map, to float the room on it, and to mine the unforeseeable results for their architectural possibilities. I had little sense of the potential gravity of my transgression: I was playing a meaningless game (a harebrained process of translating Rimbaud's poem *Le Bateau Ivre* into digits, thence into coordinates, thence into a map) in the studio where meaning seemed to be of paramount importance. And yet my teachers all seemed mighty amused by it. The space worked, it embodied productive tensions, but it felt good.



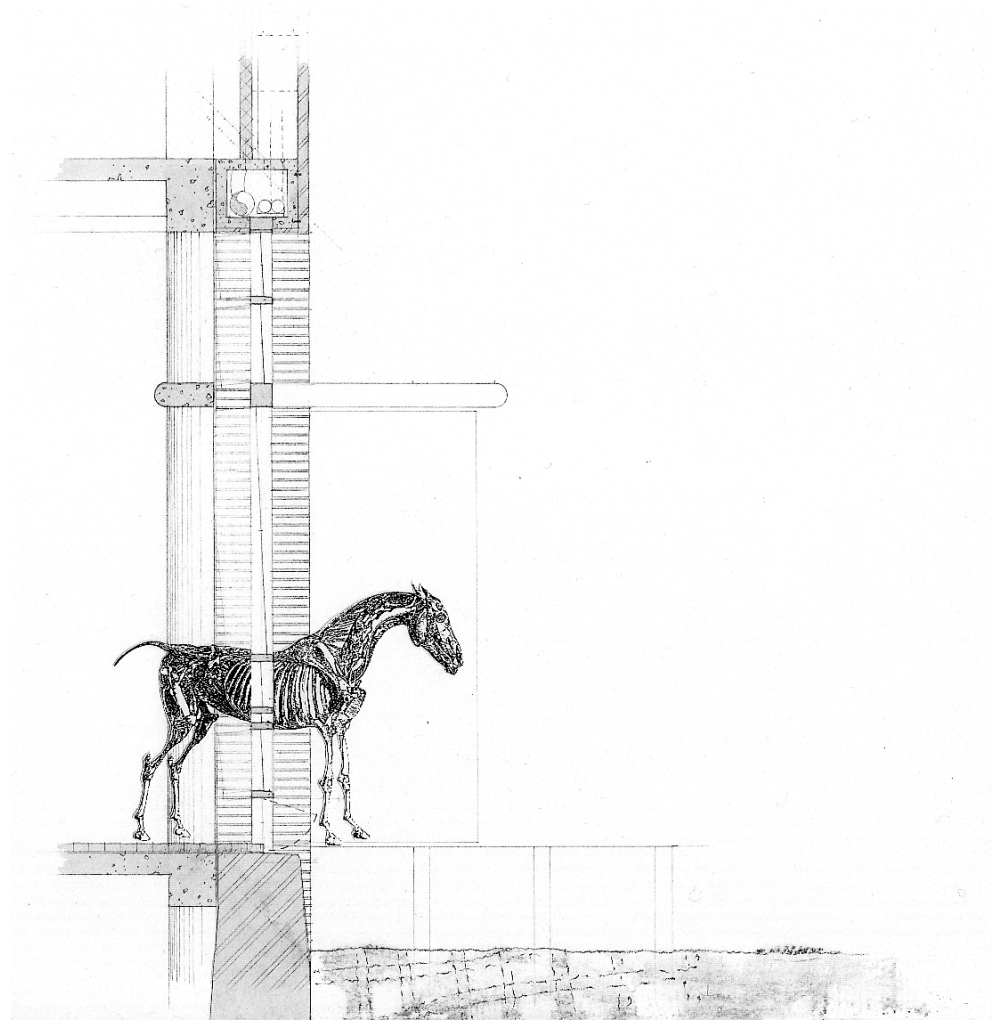
Trinity House project: interior sketch - David Bass 1984

For the major project that year I took as a starting point the rumour that horses were being kept in an office building where exhibits for the future Museum of London Docklands were stored. Our brief was for such a museum, our site the west side of Limehouse Basin. The building I designed became, amongst other things, a processional route for horses between an island where they would live undisturbed and an island where they would perform the dockside work their forebears used to do - work on which human prosperity was based. Fortuitous discrepancies between various kinds of North in the site became the basis of a series of productive distortions. I also played another game, this time one of rhythmic disruption, upon the building. Dalibor and I devised the deployment of *poissons solubles*, or quietly rusting pieces of harbourside machinery, in the waters surrounding the museum.



Museum of Docklands project: plans - David Bass 1985

This project engaged me totally. There was a congruence between my design concerns and the work of Benedikt Ried, which I studied that same year for my dissertation with Dalibor. I relished Ried's twisted vaulting in the Wenceslas Hall and Riders' Staircase in Prague, and how these works concerned animals as well as people and God. I also relished how my own background as - among other things - an apostate economist and an erstwhile bass-player with destructive tendencies, could inform my modest contribution to the work and life of the studio.



Museum of Docklands project: wall section - David Bass 1985

The enjoyment I took from this work, and the sense that a student could bring an individual hinterland to their work in architecture, underlay my subsequent 27 years of teaching, first at Cambridge, then at the AA, and then at UEL. This enterprise combined education with a kind of midwifery.

Exploring cities of the Mediterranean with my UEL students and setting design projects in these places brought forth astonishing results. The students were from highly diverse backgrounds, which reacted in often revealing ways with conditions in the host city. This sequence of studio projects developed the work I did during a year's scholarship at The British School at Rome in 1993-94. Here, I looked closely at how the city was represented and understood in movies. Published as "Insiders and Outsiders: Latent Urban Thinking in Movies of Modern Rome" in *Cinema and Architecture* (Penz, Thomas) my research revealed and attempted to categorise an enormous diversity of perspectives on the city.

Throughout my career I have been fortunate to work closely with architects such as John Outram and now Marcus Beale, who share Dalibor's deep understanding of how architecture relates to its cultural context.

I've also contributed in a small way on my own to the world's stock of buildings. Currently, I'm working on larger projects in Britain as well as in Ghana. I remember staggering, happy and with ringing in my ears, back to my flat from a jazz club in North Ridge, Accra, looking forward not only to my air-conditioned arrival, but to passing the Scott House - a favourite way station where I stop and wonder. As I took in the house's concise architectural thesis - it is a box raised above ground and snakes, deeply shaded on its north and south sides from the sun's wayward tropical hysteresis, and shielded on its east and west by vertical baffles - I wondered what Dalibor would make of Kenneth "Winky" Scott's fine building from 1961.

His response would be more than the doubtless articulate and eloquent words he could say or write. Moved by the possible proximity of animals, he would probably also give the situation some silence - I remember seeing him transfixed and fascinated by the slowness of the slow lorises in London Zoo. To be more nuanced and specific in his meaning, he might laugh. Dalibor's response to the world he found himself in always went beyond mere words.