

THE REBUILDING OF THE GUILDHALL ART GALLERY

Read by Richard Gilbert Scott

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The saga of the present Art Gallery begins immediately after the Second World War when, I suspect, some of you had hardly left the cradle. After the Blitz, the Guildhall roof had gone, the old Art Gallery was a shell, the Council Chamber, Members' accommodation and the Corporation offices to the north of Guildhall had all been destroyed. The only surviving buildings adjacent to Guildhall were the Old Library and the Magistrates' Courts building which was attached to the west side of the Dance Porch.

To protect the remains of Guildhall and the Art Gallery and to bring these buildings back into some semblance of working order, temporary steel roofs were erected over their walls, the one over the Art Gallery remaining there for nearly fifty years.

Such was the scene of destruction when my father, Giles Gilbert Scott, was asked to begin the work of restoration by designing a new roof for Guildhall (its fourth since the Great Fire of 1666). Upon completion of the roof he was invited to submit a plan for both enlarging the Yard and building an office block for the Officers of the Corporation, north of Guildhall. It is perhaps worth noting here that father had been commissioned as far back as 1934 by the City Corporation to re-plan areas around Guildhall with plans approved by Common Council in 1939. These activities were, however, brought to a close by the outbreak of the Second World War, but with the completion of the Art Gallery there had been a Gilbert Scott association with the City Corporation for 65 years.

In the early 50's Guildhall Yard was no wider than the Dance Porch. The Yard was contained on its west side by the Courts building and on the other by the remains of the Art Gallery. The Yard's width was such that it did not permit a London taxi to complete a turn without reversing, so one can imagine the chaos which could have ensued without the most careful planning by the Remembrancer when many hundreds arrived by taxi and car for a City banquet. From this Yard too the Guildhall was notable for its absence. Only the roof and parapet could be seen.

The proposal submitted by my father for the new Yard was very constricted for it excluded a large bombed out area called Bradbury Greatorex along Aldermanbury, and Portland House, an existing building along Basinghall.

The plan showed a small single storey Art Gallery on the east side of a slightly enlarged Yard, the width of which was dictated by the turning circle of the Lord Mayor's car. Also included in the proposal was the office block north of Guildhall.

This plan was passed by Common Council in 1951, but the Minister to whom it was referred did not give planning consent until 1954 - an interval of three years - which indicated some difficulty in accepting the proposed treatment of the Yard. (In his proposal father had, in a somewhat cavalier fashion, done away with the two side wings of the Dance Porch.)

The office building was completed in 1958 but no work was undertaken in the Yard area. Meanwhile the Corporation had acquired the properties owned by Messrs Bradbury Greatorex and my father's new scheme for the Yard area included this, together with Portland

House, making way for a very much larger single storey Art Gallery on the east side of the Porch.

The scheme was submitted to the recently constituted Guildhall Reconstruction Committee in 1957, but the Yard it proposed was still much too small for ceremonial purposes, and he was invited to think yet again. Which he did - by handing the job to me: I was by then a partner in his practice Giles Scott, Son & Partner. My father died in 1960 and later that year we presented new outline proposals to the Guildhall Reconstruction Committee in which the Yard proposed was much the same size as it is today.

It was the one consistent element in all the different plans which followed. The brief had changed, and was changing all the time, but by the end of 1961 an outline plan was agreed upon by the Committee, and Common Council gave the necessary authority for an outline planning application to be made to the LCC. This authority - since the proposals were deemed by some to be so radical (both in style and the introduction of a large open space in front of Guildhall) - referred the matter to the Minister of Housing & Local Government who required a Public Inquiry to be set up.

At this Inquiry there was vehement opposition from the Victorian and Georgian Societies, who objected to the demolition of the Courts building and wanted the small, narrow streets of the original site perpetuated. The Royal Fine Arts Commission, though, was generally in favour. Planning consent for the layout was finally granted in 1964.

Thereafter much detailed planning took place. The new Art Gallery was in the third phase of the development. The brief for this building was pretty vague - there being no Art Curator to contend with - and we learnt for the first time of the existence of the Gibraltar picture!

Generally speaking it was left to the architect to fit the building into the context of the site, (respecting Guildhall and the Dance Porch as the principal players in the new Yard). The design for this Gallery was very different to what it is today, being only two storeys in height. The top floor - the main Gallery floor - was top lit, (there being no offices above), with a subsidiary gallery at Yard level beneath. The building was connected to Guildhall by an Ambulatory, similar to that on the west side of the Porch, though of different design. And Cloakroom accommodation was provided beneath the gallery. A brochure explaining the overall plans was presented to Common Council in 1966 and authority was granted to implement them.

Before work could begin on the new Art Gallery certain other phases of the plan had to be completed. The first was the underground car park and buildings to the north of Guildhall (Members of Common Council who used the car park - with their large cars - had difficulty in negotiating its tight corners, and complained constantly about the width of the parking bays).

The next phase was, of course, this West Wing, including the new Library and Ambulatory. At this time - the early 70's - concrete held sway in architecture and my aim with this building was to echo the arch forms of the Gothic in this material, in an effort to unite the old Guildhall with the new.

In those days too, no archaeological dig was required but the contract was initially delayed by some months, by the discovery of a graveyard next to the churchyard of St. Lawrence Jewry, while the bodies were exhumed and reburied elsewhere.

The West Wing contract also included the restoration of the original West Crypt beneath Guildhall and the building of flank walls to the Dance Porch. All this work was completed in the latter half of the 1970's. Half Guildhall had now been revealed and two-thirds of the new Yard completed. The stage was now set for the next phase of the reconstruction plan - the Guildhall Art Gallery. However, all further building came to a complete stop while the Corporation wrestled with the financial complexities and construction of the Barbican.

In 1986, some eight years after completion of the West Wing, I received a call from Richard Adams, Deputy Town Clerk, who asked, in effect, was I alive and still in practice? I assured him that I was, though I had merged my firm, Sir Giles Scott, Son & Partner, with the larger multi-disciplinary practice of D Y Davies. After interviews with the newly constituted Guildhall Yard East Committee, during which I affirmed that I had designed the building in which the Committee was sitting - even down to the chair Patrick Roney, the Chairman, occupied. He responded that it was so uncomfortable he wished I hadn't told him that. Nevertheless the Corporation confirmed, in due course, that while I was to design the proposed new Art Gallery, D Y Davies were appointed as Architects and Project Managers.

What had given the Art Gallery project a belated kick-start was the need to provide the Lord Mayor with temporary accommodation while the Mansion House was being refurbished: it had been suggested that this could be temporarily provided in offices proposed above the new Gallery.

The site was very much smaller than it eventually became, and did not include Portland House - which though owned by the Corporation had a further fifteen years of its lease to run. The resultant site was thus squashed between Portland House and a new building line set up to reveal the full length of Guildhall at the entrance to the Yard.

This proposal, however, all ended in tears. The building was shaped like a matchbox on its side - neither large enough for the Lord Mayor, nor big enough for an Art Gallery. The elevation facing the Yard, all in pre-cast concrete, was similar to that of the West Wing. In the event the Lord Mayor found other accommodation and the Corporation acquired the remaining lease of Portland House. Thus the site became what it is today.

The brief was clear and in much detail. The specification called for the building to last indefinitely and to be totally bomb-proof. The City Surveyor required the building to pay for itself by providing sufficient rentable office space above the Art Gallery. The Remembrancer needed the Art Gallery spaces to be used for ceremonial purposes with a floor to ceiling height in the main gallery sufficient to allow the Pikemen to do their drill; also to provide cloakroom accommodation for 1200 people attending Civic Banquets.

The Art Curator naturally required the space to hang, conserve and store the Corporation's collection, which had survived the war in storage, including that enormous painting 'The Relief of the Floating Batteries'. This collection is, I believe, the largest in Britain, after the National and Tate Galleries.

In addition, provision had to be made for the Manuscript Store, then currently under the Old Library and Print Room.

The varied use of the building was decidedly complex, both in planning and structure. There were levels to be tied in with adjoining buildings, while visually it needed to sit comfortably within the historical context of the site and somehow to express the long traditions of the City of London - and yet be modern - up to date. There were authorities, Societies and a Commission to be consulted, and while an archaeological investigation would be required, the Roman remains slumbered on, as yet undiscovered, beneath the site,

The first design was submitted in 1988. It was for a seven-storey building of five bays in width, facing the Yard. There were five floors of offices above a double-storey Art Gallery with cloakrooms, conservation and storage areas beneath. Visually it had all the characteristics of the present building, but was taller because of the offices and shorter in length. The Ambulatory connection to Guildhall was similar in design to that on the west side of the Dance Porch. The Department of the Environment, to whom the Planning Application went, required a Public Inquiry. At the Inquiry the design was strongly opposed by the Royal Fine Arts Commission, the Secretary of whom wrote saying 'The design did not hold the promise of a fine building and the Commissioners were very disappointed'!

English Heritage objected to the height of the building in relation to Guildhall and the continuation of the Ambulatory design to the East of the Dance Porch. In the light of these objections, the DoE refused the application, though the Inspector in this report, while agreeing with English Heritage, had fortunately praised the design generally. In the event I was instructed to take these objections into account and produce a new design. This was about 1990.

A new design eventually emerged, and after some revisions to the upper levels, it was approved by a substantial majority of Common Council. The design was as it stands today, and the planning application went again to the DoE.

The Royal Fine Arts Commission opposed the design; their attitude was described by English Heritage as being 'unhelpful'. The matter very much hung in the balance. The Town Clerk wrote an impassioned letter to the Minister and behind the scenes, Gavin Stamp, who supported the design, wrote to English Heritage, who in reply described it as 'an arresting essay in eclectic expressionism' - whatever that may mean...

Finally all went well and the Minister gave his consent to the building. D Y Davies was instructed to proceed with the working drawings, while I as part of that firm was to be responsible for the design and detail of the building. I was despatched to the Continent to study recently built art galleries, particularly in Germany. Meanwhile, the archaeological dig to be carried out by the London Museum, under the auspices of D Y Davies, was being set up.

However, when all was ready for the dig, a nesting bird was discovered in one of the bushes that had grown up in a derelict part of the site. This was identified as a Black Redstart - a rare protected species. It had laid three eggs. English Nature ordered that this nest should remain undisturbed until the birds had flown. This delayed the demolition of the buildings on site, and consequently the dig, by some months!

During the course of this investigation a discovery which had a profound effect on the planning of the building was made. The remains of the entrance archway to a Roman amphitheatre were discovered, along with many other ancient artefacts. A new Amphitheatre Chamber had to be created and the cloakroom accommodation re-planned elsewhere. The Remains were declared to be a National Monument, on a par with Stonehenge. They were not to be moved by one inch, and any soil beneath to a depth of a metre and a half was to be retained.

All this presented not only planning problems but also engineering and technical problems of some magnitude. The building was of considerable depth with its two basement levels, but with the addition of an Amphitheatre Chamber of some height, the lowest level would penetrate the existing water table and a sump beneath the lowest levels had to be built. Furthermore the position of columns of the building above would disturb the Roman remains if they were carried down to basement levels, as would be normal. The engineers had to devise an enormous steel raft immediately below the Art Gallery to transfer the weight of the superstructure above on to suitably placed piles. This raft - about a metre in depth - became known as the transfer deck and weighed over 700 tons.

The retention of the Roman stones, which had to be cocooned in their own mini-chamber at an even temperature, and suspended during construction, must make them the most expensive stones in Britain.

During the excavation the Old Library corridor was demolished and the stones of the Gothic arch in the corridor were carefully retained to be reassembled later in the new building.

Meanwhile there was a mad rush to complete all the details to be incorporated into working drawings, to produce a Bill of Quantities, and to go out to Tender. When the tenders came in they were below the Quantity Surveyor's estimate for the building. Everyone was delighted. That of Mowlem's was accepted. A mock-up of a typical bay of the Art Gallery with its tented ceiling was erected in the Corporation's warehouse in Eagle Wharf Road, and representatives of the Committee with the Art Curator and myself visited the Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris to examine methods of lighting, the hanging of pictures, security and a host of other details, to see whether there was anything to be learned. Such details that were applicable were all tried out in this mock-up - enabling finishes to be demonstrated and finalised.

However storm clouds were gathering on site. It became evident that the computerised drawings which formed the basis of the Contract, (and there were masses of them), did not take into account all the details of this highly individualistic and complicated building. The standard details a computer can produce at the drop of a hat were not applicable in this case. The production of drawings became a very labouring business. To add to the difficulty, D Y Davies, by then a public company which had over extended itself with other directions, went bust.

The liquidators locked the entrance doors to our offices, with all the detailed working drawings inside. Apart from removal of personal effects we were not allowed to take anything away. Potentially a truly calamitous situation! However, an obscure back door to the offices had escaped the liquidator's attention and with the aid of the Contractor, who supplied a van and willing hands, we managed to sneak most of the drawings out of the building, under the noses of the security guards. Quite a frightening experience!

After this debacle the Corporation provided the D Y Davies Guildhall team, and there were six of us, with offices and equipment in the Dance Porch, while eventually appointing W S Atkins as Project Managers and Architects to take over the team.

During the course of the contract there was inevitably much anxiety over rising costs. I don't think anybody had truly appreciated the complexity of this building. Mowlem's put in a team of surveyors to recover the shortfall created by their original tender. The Corporation was naturally keen to resist this and project managers were anxious to show their worth by making savings. I too was anxious that the character and quality of the building were maintained. It was an unholy Trinity which led to many uncomfortable moments, but nevertheless those involved on site with the construction of the building remained wholly committed to producing a building of the highest quality. It was a labour of love.

The Lord Mayor laid the Foundation Stone in 1994 and the building was formally opened by Her Majesty the Queen in 1999. In the Millennium year 2000, it received the City Heritage New Architecture Award for enhancing the city's environment, and I suppose I wouldn't be standing here if you didn't like the building, and I take great satisfaction from that.

In conclusion I would like to pay tribute to the Chairman of the Guildhall Yard East Committee, Patrick Roney, and the City Surveyor, Ted Hartill. I know that without their determination, through thick and thin, to get this building built it might never have happened.