

PUBLIC SPACE AND THE ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT

London Modernist Case Study Briefing

(c. 2016 FABE Research Team, University of Westminster)

THE BRITISH LIBRARY



CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| SUMMARY | 3 |
| 1. BUILDING CHRONOLOGY | 4 |
| 2. POLICY AND IDEOLOGY | 7 |
| 3. AGENTS | 12 |
| 4. BRIEF | 14 |
| 5. DESIGN | 16 |
| 6. MATERIALS/CONSTRUCTION/ENVIRONMENT | 22 |
| 7. RECEPTION | 22 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 26 |

PROJECT INFORMATION

Case Study: The British Library, 96 Euston Rd, London NW1 2DB

Dates: 1962 - 1998 (final plan 1977, build 1982-1999, staggered opening November 1997- June 1999)

Architects: Colin St John Wilson with M.J. Long, John Collier, John Honer, Douglas Lanham, Peter Carolin

Client: The British Museum, then The British Library (following Act of Parliament 1972)

Contractors: Phase 1A, Laing Management Contracting Ltd. Completion phase, McAlpine/Haden Joint Venture

Financing: National government

Site area: 112,643 m² (building footprint is 3.1 hectares, on a site of 5 hectares)

Tender price: £511 million. Budget overrun: £350 million

SUMMARY

The British Library, the United Kingdom's national library and one of six statutory legal depositories for published material, was designed and constructed over a 30-year period. It was designed by Colin St John Wilson (1922 – 2007) with his partner M J Long (1939 –), and opened to the public in 1997. As well as a functioning research library, conference centre and exhibition space, the British Library is a national monument, listed Grade I in 2015. Brian Lang, Chief Executive of the British Library during the 1990s, described it as “the memory of the nation”, there to ‘serve education and learning, research, economic development and cultural enrichment.’¹

The nucleus of what is now known as the British Library was, until 1972, known as the British Museum Library. It had been housed since 1857 in the round Reading Room in the central court of the British Museum designed by Sydney Smirke. The interior was restored by Foster and Partners as part of the creation of the Great Court in the late 1990s.

There had been a perennial lack of storage space as the Library's collection grew over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The need for a new centralised facility for storage and ease of consultation became increasingly pressing in the post-war period as the museum library took on responsibility for more and more bibliographic functions. A new library, designed in partnership by Sir Leslie Martin and St John Wilson between 1962 and 1964, was intended to form part of an expanded mixed-use development between the British Museum and Hawksmoor's St George's, Bloomsbury which would have provided the church with a more spacious setting. The development required the demolition of swathes of Bloomsbury's Georgian heritage and the Bloomsbury Association, a group of local residents determined to preserve their historic environment, was formed to resist the scheme.

Concurrently and partly as a result of the surrounding controversy, Frederick Dainton, the eminent scientist and university administrator, was asked by the Government to lead an inquiry into the future of national libraries, which also looked at aspects of the ‘British Library’ question. The resulting *Report of the National Libraries Committee*, published in June 1969, led in part to the British Library Act (1972). The Act created a new central British Library Board, bringing together the administration of the former British Museum Library, the new National Reference Library of Science and Invention (formerly the Patent Office Library), the National Central Library for Students, National Lending Library, and various other library bodies. The fundamental programme of the new library would now accommodate the British Museum Library and the National Reference Library for Science and Invention.

An alternative scheme was drawn up by St John Wilson between 1970 and 1973 after Martin left the project. After further agitation by the preservationist lobby in Bloomsbury – one of the great success stories of the ‘Heroic Period of Conservation’² – another site at St Pancras, adjacent to George Gilbert Scott's Midland Grand Hotel on the Euston Road was eventually purchased by the Government in 1976.

Fresh proposals for the newly established British Library at the St Pancras site were drawn up over the 1970s by St John Wilson, M J Long and others in Wilson's expanding practice. A final scheme was produced in 1977. Repeated political arguments over funding delayed initial construction until 1982, and postponed various phases of project completion. The building was opened in 1997, some 35 years after its conception.

¹ Quoted in R. Stonehouse, *The architecture of the British Library at St. Pancras*, (London, 2004), p.xxi and p.xxv.

² See A. Powers and E. Harwood (eds.), *Twentieth Century Architecture: The Heroic Period of Conservation*, vol. 7 (2004).

In spite of the complexity of the project and changes in government priorities, there are important continuities in the fundamentals of the design vision, programme and public space which this briefing note highlights. From its earliest iterations for the Bloomsbury site, the scheme for the new library included provision for public space in the form of plazas and piazzas connecting buildings and functions. Wilson's completed building at St Pancras includes a large forecourt which caps the subterranean book stack, and links with a series of internal public spaces running through the building. These were conceived and designed by the design team, and form an integral part of the building's programme and use.

1. BUILDING CHRONOLOGY

Events of relevance to the career and development of Colin St John Wilson are italicised.

Background

- 1753 The British Museum's Department of Printed Books was founded in 1753, the same year as the museum itself was established.
- 1857 The Museum reading room opened in 1857. Designed by Sydney Smirke at the instigation of Sir Anthony Panizzi, Principal Librarian 1827-1866, it was built in the museum courtyard.
- 1945 Post-WW2 emerged a need for a 'comprehensive scientific and technological network in the UK'.
- 1951 County of London Plan proposal to relocate the British Museum Library, and Prints and Drawings collection, to land between Great Russell Street and Bloomsbury Way.

Project Initiation

- 1956 *Colin St. John Wilson started teaching and practicing in Cambridge*
- 1957 *Alvar Aalto delivered his address at 'The RIBA Annual Discourse'. St John Wilson and Leslie Martin won the Harvey Court commission for Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge.*
- 1959 *Bodleian Law Library, Oxford commission awarded to St John Wilson and Martin (finished 1964)*

Bloomsbury Schemes

- 1962 Colin St John Wilson and Leslie Martin selected for the new British Museum Library project (chosen by 'competitive interview', selected for their work on Bodleian Law Library, Oxford). Harvey Court completed.
- 1964 Wilson and Martin presented the 'New British Museum Library Report', which was accepted in principle. Mixed-use design that included residential and commercial to compensate for demolished buildings; closure of Great Russell Street with 'broad plaza' connecting museum to library and church of St George Bloomsbury. Proposed library was 102,300m² and had space for 2,500 readers.

Conservative government under PM Alec Douglas-Home (63-64) approved scheme, but incoming Labour government bowed to conservationist pressures in Bloomsbury and put it on hold. Martin withdrew, and St. John Wilson remained.

- 1966 September, St John Wilson visits Finland with a member of the Department of Printed Books at the British Museum. They visit Helsinki University Library, Helsinki Students Library, new Aalto university buildings at Otanomi (including the auditorium and the library for the architecture school)³
- 1969 Report of the National Libraries Committee under the Chairmanship of Lord Dainton
- 1970 St John Wilson commissioned to prepare a new study for the National Library in Bloomsbury to include the British Museum Library and the National Reference Library of Science, and take into consideration conservationist interests by maintaining the original Victorian buildings on the western edge of Bloomsbury Square. M.J. Long the principal for this project, and in December presented the 'National Library in Bloomsbury: Feasibility Study Report', with 165,041m² and room for 3,565 readers.
- 1971 A White Paper published recommending the setting up of a national library for the UK ('the British Library'). The White Paper recognised that the British Library was short of space. St John Wilson was commissioned to prepare building proposals for Bloomsbury.
- 1972 The British Library Act was passed by Parliament, bringing the Library into operation with effect from 1 July 1973.
- 1973 In February, St. John Wilson presented the 'British Library Bloomsbury: Preliminary Design Report.' The library again bigger at 188,549m² because of the amalgamation but still included a pedestrian avenue. The scheme with the science library was felt to overwhelm the site, and the Library Board sought a new one.
- 1974 Library Board agreed to examine with the Government the feasibility of siting a building on a former rail goods yard fronting onto Euston Road next to St Pancras Station.
- 1975 St. John Wilson was commissioned to produce feasibility study of the St Pancras site – for which each of the firm's four partners (St. John Wilson, Long, Carolin, Lanham) developed sketch designs. M.J. Long's was chosen. The 'British Library Euston: Feasibility Report' proposed a building of 197,349m². In August, the report received a ministerial statement of intent to start construction of the first phase in 1979-80, and in the autumn St. John Wilson was officially commissioned to develop the detailed building design.

St Pancras Scheme

- 1976 The British Library site was acquired at St Pancras by the Government at a cost of £6 million.

³ British Library Corporate Archives, DH72/475, Folder entitled 'Proposed New Library, 1965 – 1967', 2nd file.

- 1977 Final plans from St. John Wilson published in the 'British Library Euston: Final Design Report' which the Government approved in November, but offered no detailed financial commitment.
- 1978 The project received detailed planning consent and Royal Fine Art Commission approval. Secretary of State for Education Shirley Williams announced start of construction in 1979.
- 1979 New Conservative government replaced Labour, and ordered a review of all government spending.

Construction and Delivery

Phase 1

- 1980 First stage of construction approved by Conservative government, with the funding reduced by 58%.
- 1981 Construction of Sub-phase 1A is subdivided into sub-stage 1AA and 1AB, and in June the government announced construction to start in 1982.
- 1982 Work began in April on the excavation of the basement. Prince of Wales placed foundation stone.
- 1984 Excavation of basements and work on superstructure started (Sub-stage 1AA)
- 1985 Government announced that sub-stage 1AB to start in 1987, but gave no firm financial commitment.
- 1986 Central catalogue hall removed from the brief because of innovations in computing and cataloguing technologies. In October, 'Stage 1B/1C Feasibility Report' completed.
- 1987 Government gave full financial approval to sub-stage 1AB in April, and in December announced a Feasibility Study for Completion Phase that would include the King's Library and the India Office Library and Records, as well as a north elevation that would preclude any further extension.
- 1988 In June, the 'Completion Phase Feasibility Study Report' agreed. Conservative government agreed to complete the British Library on approximately two-thirds of the original site.

Completion Phase

- 1990 Final report published: 'The British Library Completion Phase – Project Execution Plan Report'.
- 1995 St. John Wilson published *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: the uncompleted project*.
- 1997 First reading room opened (Humanities).
- 1998 British Library was opened by HM The Queen. The total library area 112,643m², with space for 1,277 readers, and approximately 1200 staff.

1999 Final reading room (Science) opened.

2. POLICY AND IDEOLOGY

i. National

Policy and political ideology at a national level played a significant role in the development of the British Library project for three main reasons:

- The length of time between approval of the final scheme, the initiation of construction, and the completion of the project during a period of significant political, economic and technological change
- The inherently political nature of creating and giving form to a new national institution
- The considerable capital expenditure involved in building a state-of-the-art facility with new operational and storage facilities using public money

The fortunes of the British Library often changed depending on the colour of the national Government during the thirty-year period in which it came into being:

10 January 1957 – 18 October 1963 - Conservative (Harold Macmillan)
19 October 1963 – 16 October 1964 - Conservative (Alec Douglas-Home)
16 October 1964 – 19 June 1970 - Labour (Harold Wilson)
19 June 1970 – 4 March 1974 - Conservative (Edward Heath)
4 March 1974 – 5 April 1976 - Labour (Harold Wilson)
5 April 1976 – 4 May 1979 - Labour (James Callaghan)
4 May 1979 – 28 November 1990 - Conservative (Margaret Thatcher)
28 November 1990 – 2 May 1997 - Conservative (John Major)
2 May 1997 – 27 June 2007 - Labour (Tony Blair)

Changes in Government had real impacts on the project, in particular the Thatcher government throughout the 1980s. A number of illustrative examples of how changes in policy affected the project are listed below. The British Library, as a non-departmental public body, was and remains answerable to government departments. These departments and their expenditure were subject to parliamentary and public scrutiny throughout the design and construction phases of the building. A number of changes in departmental responsibility over the course of construction also often frustrated the project:

Before 1988, financial accountability had been with the Property Services Agency (PSA), the government's construction and facilities management body,⁴ but was later moved to the Office of Arts and Libraries. The PSA retained a project management role. The British Library, which had been closely linked with the PSA became 'untied...and assumed full responsibility for the maintenance of their buildings.'⁵

In April 1992, the project sponsor for the new building changed from the Office of Arts and Libraries to the new Department of National Heritage (predecessor body of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport under New Labour).

The separation of the PSA from the British Library, and the subsequent subsuming of PSA contracts by the Department of National Heritage led to the creation of 'effectively two clients

⁴ The PSA was privatised in the late 1980s.

⁵ National Audit Office, *Progress in Completing the New British Library* (15 May 1996), p.2

for the project, but with potentially conflicting objectives. The Department have sought to deliver the best possible building within the cash limits. The library's main concern, as the eventual user of the building, has been to ensure safety, operability and maintainability.⁶

In October 1989, the Office of Arts and Libraries had given responsibility to the British Library for signing off the building. The Library recruited a facilities management team over 1995 though only 'one of these staff had been involved in drawing up the original design brief.'⁷

Public Expenditure

With regard to public expenditure, the Thatcher government's rolling back of funding for arts organisations and major capital projects over its decade in power often affected the British Library.

The arts budget was continuously slashed over the 1980s, to point where the Library had to warn in 1984 that 'job losses, cuts in book conservation projects, and the export of precious books to foreign institutions' were all likely.⁸ Even as late as 1991, the management of the library was having to make public challenges via the press to urge the government to provide adequate funding and complete the project.

Writing in *The Times* in February 1989, David Walker summed the project up effectively arguing that the new library showed 'the extent – and the limits – of the organization reform that has gone on in Whitehall during the 1980s,' showing the 'paradox of Whitehall project management in the 1980s. The mechanics of management are working well...what Parliament has given them is a cut-rate spatch-cocked project to manage.'⁹

Aside from the government, the project was also carefully scrutinised by parliamentary bodies, non-partisan select committees, and by the Comptroller and Auditor General. The Committee of Public Accounts produced a report in October 1990 entitled 'New Building for the British Library'¹⁰ which outlined weaknesses in project management, and towards the end of the project in 1996, the National Audit Office compiled a report entitled 'Progress in Completing the New British Library' which summarised many of the project's historic shortcomings.

In terms of planning and urban development, government policy had little direct impact. The library was a one-off project for a new national institution. But as government departments and agencies were project sponsors and clients respectively, they were subject to local authority planning stipulations. Changes to local government structure which brought the London Borough of Camden into being in 1965, and policy impetus given to regeneration in run down areas such as St Pancras and King's Cross, resulting towards the end of the 1980s in a much more developer-led scheme than local authority proposals at the beginning of the decade (see below) had a less direct impact on the British Library.

ii. Municipal

The London County Council (LCC) from 1955–1965 was dominated by the Labour Party. The first Greater London Council (GLC) government elected in 1964, and taking power on 1 April 1965, was also Labour. From then on, it was:

⁶ National Audit Office, *Progress in Completing the New British Library* (15 May 1996), p.2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁸ 'British Library's cuts warning', *The Times* (20 December 1984), p.3.

⁹ D. Walker, 'Shortcomings dog the British Library', *The Times* (27 February 1989), p.7.

¹⁰ Committee of Public Accounts, *New Building for the British Library* (October, 1990).

1967 – Conservative
1970 – Conservative
1973 – Labour
1977 – Conservative
1981 – Labour

In 1985, the Thatcher government abolished the GLC, effective 1 July 1986. London was without municipal representation until the New Labour government created a new body, the Greater London Authority, in 1999.

The municipal governance of London through the Greater London Council (GLC) had little effect on the British Library project. The local authority concerned with both the Bloomsbury and St Pancras sites for the British Library was, from 1965, Camden Borough Council. Camden and the project were, of course, subject to interim and statutory planning documents issued by the GLC.

iii. Local Authority

Camden was in Labour control for most its existence, with a small window of Conservative majority between 1968 and 1971. Around the late 1960s and 1970s, a number of now prominent Labour figures were active in local Camden politics including Frank Dobson (later Health Secretary in the first New Labour administration), Tessa Jowell (later Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport), and Ken Livingstone (later Mayor of London, and instigator of the ‘100 Public Spaces’ programme).

Camden Council’s role in the planning of the British Library was significant because it was they who proposed to the government that the former railway lands around St Pancras and Somers Town could be used for the national library with less disruption to the historic fabric and Camden residents. As the responsible planning authority, they nominally had a voice in the design process.

Open Space

Camden had based its planning policy on public open space on outdated advice in the London Development Plan (1951) and Interim Development Plan (1964).¹¹ These set a goal of 1.6 hectares (4 acres) open space for 1000 residents, with a more realistic ‘interim’ target of 1 hectare (2.5 acres).

By the mid-1970s, Camden had begun to adopt the advice of the Greater London Development Plan (1969): ‘it is less important to aim for overall population-to-open-space ratios than to make sure that there is an adequate distribution of different sizes of open space catering for different activities within appropriate travelling distances of all residential areas.’¹²

There was thus a clear priority for open public space in Camden Council’s planning policy, including the British Library site. There was a preference for soft landscape design for public open space rather than the hard landscaping in evidence at the Economist, South Bank Arts Centre and other architect-designed spaces.

Conservation and Community Action

The second and connected policy area related to planning and urban development

¹¹ Camden Council Archives and Local Studies Centre, *Community Planning and Resources, Railway Lands Sub-Committee, 10.7.74 – 13.7.77*, f.23. The minutes refer to the Initial Development Plan (1951), but this seems to be a muddled reference to the two plans described above.

¹² Ibid.

concerned conservation and community action, which had direct impact on the British Library project.

The first, better known instance, was in Bloomsbury, where the local community was very much against the idea of the proposed location for the library. Residents formed the Bloomsbury Neighbourhood Association, and over time were able to galvanize the political support of the local council. As the London Borough of Camden put it in 1974, the area proposed for demolition was 'the last genuinely residential community in Bloomsbury,' and it would not allow "the demolition of a long-settled London neighbourhood,' particularly one that was 'part of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.'¹³

Around the same time, the Somers Town Group was formed, made up of tenants' organisations, local councilors, and Lena Jeger, local Labour MP. The Group's plan for the railway lands, submitted to Camden Council in 1973, had a noticeable effect on the Council's own proposals for development in the area. The Group's report lobbied for good quality low-rise housing, but also 'intensively landscaped open space', providing 'a vital lung for a desperately deprived area.'¹⁴ Though happy to accept the potential siting of the new British Library, they were adamant that they were 'not prepared to accept the library if it means a diminution of the amount of open space we have asked for and desperately need. Neither are we prepared to accept the library or any other such building if it means, in exchange, giving up our basic aims of a good amount of open space and housing of not more than four-storeys.'¹⁵

Railway Lands Project

Somers Town and the Railway Lands, comprising some 46 acres was already by this time considered an area ripe for a large-scale mixed-use development, long before Argent's King's Cross Central development which now occupies most of the area. 'Site A', identified by the Railway Lands Sub-Committee, comprised a large triangular site running back from the Euston Road, on which the British Library was later built.

This Sub-Committee produced a planning study for the overall area in December 1974. The delivery of public space was a high-priority, along with housing, for any potential development. Based on planning advice from Initial Development Plan and Greater London Plan, the report advised that 6 acres of public open space on the overall site was achievable, proposing three options:

- A. Six acres of open space in a single central position linking with St Pancras Gardens
- B. Six acres of open space divided and distributed around the overall area.
- C. A combination of A and B 'linking a string of dispersed spaces with a narrow "greenway."¹⁶

A cost benefit analysis considered construction costs, pedestrian access, potential for programming and the 'scope offered by each in terms of landscape design.'¹⁷ Though ultimately the Council opted for Option C, it is notable that Option B showed a 'proposed open space' on Euston Road on the site now occupied by the British Library forecourt.¹⁸

¹³ J. Pendlebury, *Conservation in the Age of Consensus* (London, 2008), p.65.

¹⁴ CCA, Community Planning and Resources, Railway Lands Sub-Committee Minutes (10.7.74-13.7.77), appended to f.9, 'Somers Town Action Group Report', p.5.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.7

¹⁶ CCA, Community Planning and Resources, Railway Lands Sub-Committee Minutes (10.7.74-13.7.77), Railway Lands Project: Planning Studies of the Overall Area (December, 1974), f.23.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Outline proposals for the library were sent to the Council in December 1974, and detailed proposals submitted in April 1978.

In response to the 1978 submission, the Council requested further information on the 'detailed design and treatment of the proposed square and the entrance to the building and the public spaces under the wing flanking the square on the eastern site, including details of railings, steps, ramps, lighting, landscaping etc. and materials and arrangements for vehicular movement and control.'¹⁹

The architects and their clients responded to the questions and concerns raised with more detailed drawings. This exchange demonstrates that the design of the forecourt underwent a number of iterations that were subject to influence from and scrutiny by the planning authority.

The architects had also 'investigated the extension of the forecourt to include an area that is available as a part of the pedestrianisation of Ossulton Street', and the library authorities were 'prepared to be flexible in its policy on the public opening hours of the forecourt at St Pancras...The positive aim will be to preserve an appropriate approach to the National Library and a pleasant place for library users, local residents, workers and visitors to enjoy the open air.'²⁰

By 1984, concerns were strongly raised by the Council's Development Control sub-committee regarding public space and crucially public access for local residents. In a sternly worded letter from the Council to the Property Services Agency, the Director of Planning and Communications at Camden wrote:

In respect of the details now submitted, the Council is very concerned at the likely restriction on public access to the forecourt of the building and the not very explicit statement on this matter. The Council would urge that the space should be available for public use as extensively as possible and the Council would wish to receive further details regarding the intention of those responsible in relation to this aspect²¹

The Project Manager for the Property Services Agency responded defending design alterations since the late 1970s, which had been submitted in October 1983:

The drawings substantially redesign the forecourt and the entrance to the Library from that submitted in March 1978 and incorporate observations and comments made by the Council's Officers. This design enlivens the forecourt, responding to the problems of noise of the Euston Road Traffic, the technical problems of smoke venting, the siting of air inlets, and creates a series of quiet spaces appropriate to the Library²²

¹⁹ CCA, Miscellaneous clippings and pamphlets relating to British Library, Development Control Sub-Committee Minutes (12 February 1984), f.2

²⁰ Ibid., f.5.

²¹ CCA, Miscellaneous clippings and pamphlets relating to the British Library, Development Control Sub-Committee Minutes, Report of the Director of Planning and Communications (15 May 1984).

²² CCA, Miscellaneous clippings and pamphlets relating to the British Library, letter from G O Miller, Project Manager (Property Services Agency) to Dr Schlaffenberg, Camden Council Director of Planning and Communications (2 April 1984).

The summary of this often complex and changing policy context shows the environment in which key agents were operating and key relationships were forged.

3. AGENTS

i. Client

The identification of the 'client' is complex because of the long period of time that elapsed between the initiation of the project and the opening of the building, and because of changes in the corporate status of the library body and the UK Government.

To summarise:

- c.1959 – 1960 – British Museum Director and Principal Librarian's Office
- 1960 - 1962 – British Museum Working Party on New Library Building
- 1962 - 1968 – Amendments emanating from Department of Printed Books
- 1971 - 1972 – British Museum Library Planning Group (brief to include NRLSI)
- 1971 - 1973 – British Library Organising Committee (BLOC) Buildings Planning Group
- 1973 – c.1997 – British Library Board, David Roger and Brian Holt (Planning Officers at the British Library who had worked on the scheme from the late 1960s)

Initially, the Department of Education and Science was the government project sponsor for the project, 'responsible for appraising and approving the British Library's brief for the new building and for providing funds for its construction.'²³ Upon the formation of the British Library board in 1972, the Library received a grant-in-aid from the department.²⁴ The project sponsor role was inherited by the Office for Arts and Libraries upon its creation in 1979. The Department of National Heritage, created in 1992, then assumed responsibility for the project, before its responsibilities transferred to the newly created Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

In spite of the frequently changing client liaison, the various committees of librarians and academics were left relatively free from political interference. There is little evidence of these committees resisting top-down changes to library administration, the site or programme brought about by government policy and action. There was a commitment by them to provide a full and thorough brief for the library services and common areas, and little concern for questions of architectural treatment and decoration. That commitment and belief in the project was not necessarily shared at higher levels of museum and library administration throughout its lifespan. For the purposes of this briefing 'the client' refers to the various client liaison bodies and personnel listed above.

ii. Architect

Though Colin St John Wilson remained involved in the project until its completion and was the lead architect for much of the period, there were variations of the design team throughout the lifespan of the project.

Leslie Martin and Colin St John Wilson (1962 – 1964)

In 1962, St John Wilson and Leslie Martin were chosen by competitive interview to prepare a report about the possibility of a new British Museum Library on a site in Bloomsbury directly opposite the British Museum. After two years of work, St John Wilson and Martin presented the 'New British Museum Library Report', which was approved by the then government.

²³ Committee of Public Accounts, *New Building for the British Library* (October, 1990), p.x.

²⁴ D. Croft and P. Ryalls, 'The British Library', *ARUP Journal*, vol.13 no.4 (December, 1978), p.2.

However, when Labour replaced the Conservatives in October of 1964, the project was put on hold. At this point Martin withdrew because the project was becoming too political, but St John Wilson remained.

Martin was the senior partner in his and Wilson's collaboration. Wilson taught with him in the Department of Architecture at Cambridge and they worked in practice together specialising in university buildings and in particular libraries, such as the library complex for English and Law on Manor Road for Oxford University.

Colin St John Wilson and Partners

After 1964, St John Wilson became the lead architect and began to build up his practice. As the practice grew over the course of the 1960s, the project team for the British Library eventually numbered over 50, including six partners:

- St John Wilson (client liaison and overall design work)
- M J Long (client liaison and overall design work)
- John Collier (production drawings, programming and coordination of consultants)
- John Honer (1983 – 1997) (superintendence of all work carried out on site)
- Peter Carolin (1965 – 1980) (British Library, Bloomsbury)
- Douglas Lanham (1972 – 1991) (building construction at St Pancras)

11 associates and a number of assistant architects also worked on the project.²⁵

The size and diversity of the design team is fundamental to understanding the architect's (or rather, architects') ideas in pulling together the second Bloomsbury Scheme and the later St Pancras scheme.

Mary Jane (MJ) Long and Peter Carolin joined the practice in 1965.²⁶ They, along with Douglas Lanham, had been involved in the Bloomsbury schemes and therefore knew the programme well. M J Long recalls that once the Euston Road site had been selected, the four partners went on a 'Think Week' to come up with a renewed programme for the site, using familiar elements from the Bloomsbury scheme. St John Wilson described this 'design procedure' (his phrase), in which two or more contrasted solutions were produced to expose the 'critical conflicts in value between the various factors and relationships interacting within that brief' on the basis that 'the best criticism of one hypothesis is an alternative hypothesis.'²⁷ Long's disposition of the main programmatic elements was chosen.

Long, whom St John Wilson had met while teaching at Yale, was of particular importance to the scheme and in the development of an 'ideology' or attitude to the project. With Peter Carolin she co-authored an *AD (Architectural Design) Briefing Guide for Libraries* (1974), and with St John Wilson she went on to design the library for Queen Mary College, University of London (1989). St John Wilson, an academic as well as an architect, made the majority of public pronouncements on the practice and the Library.

iii. Pivotal relationships

The relationship between the architects and the Library authorities' spanned thirty-seven

²⁵ From 'Appendices' in R. Stonehouse and G. Stromberg, *The Architecture of the British Library at St Pancras* (Abingdon, 2004), p.258. Stonehouse notes it is based on information in C. St John Wilson, *The Design and Construction of the British Library* (London, 1998), p.93.

²⁶ Stonehouse, *The Architecture of the British Library at St Pancras*, p.253.

²⁷ C. St John Wilson, 'Architecture – Public Good and Private Necessity', *RIBA Journal* (March 1979), p.112.

years (1962 – 1999), and included institutional, site, governmental, and budget changes, and the waning of architectural modernism. The importance of maintaining a strong client-architect relationship was understood by both parties. Wilson, an architect in private practice, understood the structure and decision making processes for a public client – his role within a university and experience in designing projects for them, as well as insights from his mentor Leslie Martin, who had experience in the public sector, were instructive.

A strong client-architect relationship was fundamental to understanding the complex programmatic functions of the library and the ensuing design: 'the inspiration must spring from a rigorous factual appreciation of the required conditions and not, as so often the case, the imposition of preconceived forms and ideas upon the real desires and necessities at issue.'²⁸

The principle of close co-operation and partnership was established early on. In an article entitled 'Talk to your client about architecture', M.J. Long reflected that 'If you believe, as we do, that architecture is a practical art, that its form must be related to what it is, what it does, and how it works, then talking with the client is essential. No really good building can come out of a refusal to talk to the client. But equally, what a client says about the form of the building should not be taken too literally.'²⁹ By way of further elaboration: 'we learned only to listen to our clients when they stated a problem, and not when they gave us what they thought was the architectural solution.'³⁰

4. BRIEF

i. The British Museum – Bloomsbury

At the time of project initiation, the client was the British Museum Library. Within the museum's organisational structure, Sir Frank Francis, Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum, was the main point of contact between the museum and the architects to develop the brief. He wrote in 1963, 'I have already told the Architects that the normal channel of communication on all matters relating to the new building is through me. This is the only way of avoiding chaos.'³¹ Francis's office had collected comments and feedback during an initial consultation in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Comments in response to a questionnaire circulated in May 1959 stressed the need for 'amenities': 'Rest-rooms or courts are an obvious need...There is a constant demand for a rest-room, colonnade or other space where readers may take a break, have a cigarette and buy light refreshments. This space should form part of the controlled area. Some sort of garden, courtyard or colonnade where the public may rest is also desirable.'³²

After initial considerations, responsibility for the building brief fell with the Department of Printed Books in the British Museum. Within that department a Library Planning Group was formed and a brief was produced in 1962 with a schedule of requirements and flow charts. Amendments to that brief were produced until 1968. In the same year, St John Wilson prepared a paper in May entitled 'Spatial implications of the growth of the collections.'

²⁸ C. St John Wilson, *The Design and Construction of the British Library*, p.18.

²⁹ M. J. Long and C. St John Wilson, 'Talk to your client about architecture', *The Journal of Architecture* vol.7 (Winter, 2002), p.339

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.341.

³¹ British Library Corporate Archive (hereafter BLCA), DH72/474 Folder entitled 'Proposed New Library', letter from Frank Francis to R A Wilson, Principal Keeper of Printed Books (10 May 1962).

³² BLCA, DH72/474 Folder entitled 'Proposed New Library', comments from the Director's questionnaire (May 1959).

ii. The British Museum Library, the National Reference Library for Science and Invention, and the Department of Education and Science – Bloomsbury

In 1966, the former Patent Office Library came under control of the British Museum as part of an effort to create the National Reference Library of Science and Invention.

Within the museum, an outline brief was prepared by R J Fulford, the Keeper and Director of the Department of Printed Books, also in July 1970 entitled 'British Museum Library: space requirements for new building.'

After Wilson's appointment as architect was confirmed, the Director of the British Museum, John Wolfenden, set up a Library Planning Group to press on with the planning of the new buildings until a new administrative body for the proposed British Library had been established.

The Library Planning Group included representatives from the Department of Printed books, the National Reference Library of Science and Innovation, the Department of Manuscripts and the Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts. The Group was chaired by Ms Maysie Webb, former director of the Patent Office Library, Keeper of the National Reference Library of Science and Invention (from 1966), and the first female Assistant Director of the British Museum (1968). At the request of the architect, this group released 'batches' of the briefs as soon as they were ready. The Group formed working parties to develop the briefs:

- A. Brief for Science Reference Library
- B. Matters of Common concern between Science Reference Library and British Museum Library (essentially, 'Common Services')
- C. Brief for British Museum Library

Though the librarians had ideas about what should be built and how, they worked in continuous dialogue with the architects. Rigorous discussion ranged from programme and use, down to the kinds and quantity of furniture that might be useful, thus constructing an idea of the library from the inside out, as M. J. Long would put it much later in 2002:

We were given an initial list of rooms and areas which the Library staff put together themselves based upon the sizes of their existing accommodation and some idea of expansion. It became clear, however, that a real picture of the future needs of the Library could only be reached by building up an understanding of the individual work stations and pieces of furniture required. Together, we devised a way of recording that information, which allowed us over the years to test different occupancy scenarios, knowing that in each case, the required area would reflect accurately what was needed. It may sound a mechanical exercise, but in fact it gave us a thorough understanding of the building blocks of the brief, and it meant that we were never forced to jam furniture into building areas which were inadequate in size, spatial type, or servicing provision.³³

The British Museum Library Brief was produced in July 1971. St John Wilson described computerising 'the "programme" for the British Library', for which the architects entered '8,000 bits of information. And it's not just in size but in complexity, and in the odd scenarios

³³ M. J. Long and C. St John Wilson 2002, p.339.

of agencies by which the brief comes into being.' 38 agencies had to be consulted for approval at a time where there was no 'pre-existent building language to have the capacity to copy with such demands.'³⁴

From June 1971, the briefs were coordinated by the Department of Education and Science (DES). After the British Library White Paper had been published, the DES set up an Organising Committee (BLOC) in 1971 to coordinate the establishment of the new institution. This working group established a Buildings Planning Group in June 1971 to deal with library accommodation. The British Museum Library Planning Group, in tandem with the BLOC group continued to meet until 1972.

It is important to note that the briefs for the library services, the BML and SRL, were developed separately. The architects were very anxious to understand how these two libraries would be connected on the same site or even in the same building – they were keen to know what the reader traffic would be and what the relationship between certain services would be. A sense of 'duality' was to become a key concept for the subsequent development of the building's internal and external public space.

iii. The British Library – St Pancras

M J Long recalls David Roger and Brian Holt, planning officers for the British Library, as being the key client liaison for the St Pancras site. They were involved in the development of the brief and the early phases of coordinating the move to the new buildings. As the Library authorities grew ever more frustrated with budget cuts and consequent spatial reductions for the programme, the planning officers' positive working relationship with the architects helped steer the library and decision-making process.³⁵

Because of the delays to the project and the phased construction, changes to the brief continued. There were, for instance, initial reservations about allowing in too much daylight, which was thought to place some of the reading material and artefacts at risk. The architects, keen 'that the difference between morning and evening should make itself felt in the building,'³⁶ and eventually the librarians accepted the idea of allowing the outside in: 'Living light is the essence in a library building. ... By constantly changing, daylight and sunlight keep scholars awake and stimulated.'³⁷

5. DESIGN

i. Design intentions

The architect's broad design intentions in terms of composition of plan and elevation can be summarised by three phrases which recur in St John Wilson's public pronouncements about the building and in his writings about architectural theory and design.

The 'English Free School'

St. John Wilson was heavily influenced by what he described as the mid-19th century English Free School, a phrase borrowed from Leslie Martin, and its organic asymmetries; a 'School' represented by Gothic Revivalists such as William Butterfield, Augustus Pugin and Alfred

³⁴ C. St John Wilson, 'Architecture – Public Good and Private Necessity', *RIBA Journal* (March, 1979), p.107.

³⁵ M J Long, British Library: National Life Story Collection, Part 10, <http://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Architects-Lives/021M-C0467X0026XX-0001V0>, accessed July 2016.

³⁶ Wilson, (1998), p.21.

³⁷ Spring, (1997), p.43.

Waterhouse.³⁸ Wilson's construct of the 'English Free School' could be traced, via US architects like Henry Hobson Richardson, Frank Furness and Frank Lloyd Wright, through to less doctrinaire Modernist architects in Austria, Holland and Scandinavia, including Hans Scharoun, St John Wilson's hero and mentor, Alvar Aalto, and others.

The English Free School's idea of 'composition' was defined by Martin as 'the process by which an architect invents and organises the relationship of forms to produce a total coherence.'³⁹ Stonehouse paraphrases this in relation to the British Library, describing composition as 'the creation of places of a form and character which are responsive to the differing purpose of each place and the experiences of the people involved in the activities of that purpose.'⁴⁰

The 'Other Tradition' of Modernism

Part of this less doctrinaire Modernism concerned a recalibration between external form and programmatic function in an unusual way, typical of a generation moving away from the functionalism debunked by Reyner Banham and others in the 1960s. St. John Wilson maintained that function should be removed from its grounding in technological imperatives, and instead applied to programmatic function: 'the inspiration must spring from a rigorous factual appreciation of the required conditions and not, as so often the case, the imposition of preconceived forms and ideas upon the real desires and necessities at issue.'⁴¹ The idea of universal space, the abstract and infinitely extendable grid, here gives way to bespoke space – highly differentiated responses to a wide range of programmatic functions and psychological and physical needs.

Furthermore, St John Wilson's notion of the 'new' in architectural design differed from the increasingly fetishised search for novelty and disregard for precedent in post-war Modernist design. For Wilson, the new was part of an inescapable historical continuum: '...it is very much in the nature of the Modernism to which I feel an allegiance (Eliot, Picasso, Stravinsky) that it is imbued with the historical sense of continuity and the practice of allusion rather than the clean slate of "Modernismus" which denied all connection to the past.'⁴² The introduction to the reprinted edition of St. John Wilson's *Architectural Reflections* (Manchester University Press 2000), says of the architect's largest project:

...despite the acclaim and success, in many ways the British Library is an unfashionable building. ... not merely a consequence of the fact that the design which has been built is 25 years old. It is because it is rooted in what Wilson has called "The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture"⁴³

The expression of 'duality'

Wilson's insistence on duality in his asymmetrical and programme-led scheme was deliberately set against the inherited wisdom that had informed aspects of his own training. Wilson had been taught by Albert Richardson at the Bartlett, a stalwart of classicism and the

³⁸ See L. Martin, *Buildings and Ideas, 1933-83 from the studio of Leslie Martin and his associates* (Cambridge, 1983). Peter Blundell Jones would recount in 1998 that 'Wilson has long been an advocate for the English Free Architecture that grew from the Gothic Revival', see P. Blundell Jones, 'Speaking Volumes', *The Architectural Review* vol.203 no.1216 (June, 1998), p.34.

³⁹ L. Martin, *Buildings and Ideas* (1983), p.6.

⁴⁰ R. Stonehouse and G. Stromberg, *The Architecture of the British Library at St Pancras*, p.43.

⁴¹ C. St John Wilson, *The Design and Construction of the British Library*, p.18.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.30.

⁴³ Introduction to C. St John Wilson, *Architectural Reflections: Studies in the Philosophy and Practice of Architecture* (2nd edn) (Manchester, 2000), p.20. See also C. St John Wilson, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture* (London, 1995).

neo-Georgian architecture in the first half of the twentieth century. Those generations of architects active in the interwar years, advocates of Beaux-Arts training and design, theorised against what they termed ‘unresolved duality.’

‘Unresolved duality’ was a phrase popularised by the architect-planner and critic, Arthur Trystan Edwards, in the first half of the twentieth century. Edwards’s grammar of architectural form drew a distinction between unity, duality and plurality in composition. Duality was particularly problematic – any number larger than two could represent a group constituting a unity, ‘whereas two separate and conflicting wholes cannot be so conceived, for their duality is so pronounced that it is impossible to avoid thinking of them as “two”’⁴⁴ Edwards claimed that ‘any association consisting of only two things seems to invite the act of severance.’ Duality thus needs to be resolved. In the instance of human hands, for instance, they are ‘so shaped that each of them is, as it were a half.’⁴⁵ What is pertinent here is that this theory of composition – ‘unresolved duality’ - also appears in some of St John Wilson’s writings. He no doubt encountered the phrase through Richardson’s teachings, who himself was echoing Arthur Trystan Edwards. St John Wilson talked of the duality of the library programme – the closed stack Humanities readings rooms and the open stack long range Science reading rooms – but dismissed the need to resolve this duality of function and form, instead seeking to mediate between them: ‘This juxtaposition of elements [the humanities and science reading room ranges] prevailed, in spite of difficulties in reconciling it with phased subdivision and in spite of (or because of?) the formal issues raised by such a fundamental duality.’⁴⁶

ii. Design development

When the original plans were commissioned, it was proposed that work could be completed within a decade. Thirty-five years later, the building was finally finished. There is ample criticism of, and debate about, the circumstances of the delay. The primary blame is laid at the door of government, particularly by the architect:

If you really want to devise an insane way of developing a building, you would go about it the way the politicians have done. When Mrs Thatcher came, it was constantly stop-go, stop-go, which was infinitely more expensive. They pulled the building up by the roots every 18 months, chopped a bit off and put it back in the ground to grow.⁴⁷

One of the quantity surveyors on the project remembered, ‘The project was incredibly badly handled at government agency level. They kept changing responsible departments, and every time the department changed, so did the personnel. It was inevitable this was going to delay the project.’⁴⁸ Similarly, the project director, David Trench, observed, ‘You can’t run a long-term project on Treasury allocations that change each year and can’t be passed on to the following year. This meant it had to be run on a cost-reimbursable basis, so the consultants and contractors had no financial incentive to contain costs.’⁴⁹

The architect, Patrick Hodgkinson, however, laid the blame on the architects themselves. He argued that St. John Wilson and Martin’s ‘heroic’ scheme for Bloomsbury need not have been so large as to provoke political antagonisms and the need for a new site, which further

⁴⁴ A. T. Edwards, *The Things Which Are Seen* (London, 1921), p.137-138.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *The Things Which Are Seen*, p.140.

⁴⁶ St John Wilson, ‘Architecture – Public Good and Private Necessity’, p.112.

⁴⁷ Colin St. John Wilson quoted in M. Spring, ‘Gentle Giant’, *Building* (1997), p.43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.45.

delayed the project. He wrote '[Colin St. John Wilson] has had to navigate an ocean of political icebergs which could, I believe, have been avoided had he and Martin worked to hard-felt [sic] instructions originally...'⁵⁰

As described above, the basic site components, the 'ingredients', had been worked out for the second Bloomsbury scheme. The fundamental design principle of top-lit 'auditoria' of readers for the British Museum Library (i.e. reading rooms for western and oriental printed books and manuscripts) using closed-access reading materials, and long ranges of open-access material in the National Reference Library for Science and Invention was transferred to the St Pancras scheme.

This site, though, required a different disposition of elements and the partners in Wilson's practice played with different 'recipes' to fit it. Whereas the Bloomsbury site required a number of frontages to the streets (namely Great Russell Street and New Oxford Street), the St Pancras site had a clear 'front-door' from the Euston Road.

iii. Design as built

M J Long's parti formed the basis of the final scheme. On the new site, the dual library function of the building would meet at a fulcrum, or pivot point, of common services – restaurants and other rest spaces as well as the catalogue hall (eventually rendered obsolete by rapidly changing computer technology, and replaced with the glass box containing the 'King's Library'). The closed-access, stack-served humanities reading rooms were placed to the west of the site, and the 'prow' (as it was described by the architects and the press) of the science reading rooms was pulled forward towards Euston Road, terminating in conference facilities with their own separate entrance.⁵¹ The main book stacks were to be placed in basements along the middle of the site running longitudinally.

The new site also allowed the building to be constructed in phases in a way that would not have been possible with the Bloomsbury site: 'The deliberate duality of this organization ensured that even that the end of the first phase of building the Library would present itself as a completed composition. (How often have Beaux-Arts essays in monumental symmetry left major public buildings for years with one wing seemingly amputated?)'⁵²

In 1982, Wilson authored an article on the public spaces of the new library in Haig Beck and Jackie Cooper's *International Architect*. Entitled 'Mediation/Duality' it provided a clear explanation of how the public space was intended to interact with this dual function at a crucial moment in the scheme's development when the forecourt was being thought through in detail.⁵³

Unlike the Bloomsbury schemes, in which separate entrances for the two libraries were required 'in order to preserve a connection from the church to the museum', the St Pancras site allowed for single, central entrance: 'The "legibility" of this necessarily complex entrance area, remains of crucial importance to the success of the building in use.'⁵⁴

⁵⁰ P. Hodgkinson, 'The two minds of architecture: the quick and the dead', *The Journal of Architecture* vol.2 (Winter, 1997), p.350.

⁵¹ See, for instance, M. Swenarton, 'The British Library Takes Shape', *Building Design* (17 June 1998), p.12.

⁵² C. St John Wilson, 'Mediation/Duality: Public Spaces of the New British Library', *International Architect* (1982), p.35.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.32.

⁵⁴ S. Cantacuzino, 'A necessary giant', *The Architectural Review* (December, 1978), p.338.

The mediation of the duality of the British Library's fundamental programme had been a question of growing urgency for the architect in the early 1970s for the second Bloomsbury scheme. Wilson wrote to the British Library Organising committee in November 1971 that 'any questions of primary connectivity either between the two libraries, or between the libraries and their shared facilities should be clarified as soon as possible...The basic connectivities can most easily be considered under four functional categories: staff, book stack, readers, and public.'⁵⁵ The St Pancras site allowed for fuller exploration and expression of these connectivities.

Forecourt

Design for the forecourt advanced in the late 1970s. In late 1978, drawings and models of the final scheme show a forecourt protected from the Euston Road with a thin line of trees, and without an entrance portico or sunken auditorium. A lightweight structure roughly where the café is now placed is indicated. This unarticulated forecourt suggested a much more permeable membrane, or border, between the library and the city.

By early 1979, the designs had progressed such that an established space was now proposed 'firmly enough screened from the maelstrom of traffic in Euston Road to be a desirable place of repose as well as means of access.' Wilson described a 'thickening' of the texture of screening elements, and the inclusion of a portico. Overall the forecourt became a much more heavily articulated public realm integrated into the overall design intentions of the building and providing a varied spatial experience of its own.

There are four interrelated factors which determined the ultimate placement and form of the building's public space:

1. *Shape of the site:*

As stated above, a key design intention for the architects was for the visitor/reader to be able to quickly read the building's fundamental dual function from a single entrance point. The triangular shape of the site meant that the entrance was pushed back deep into the site in order, as MJ Long has described, 'to get enough building on either side.'⁵⁶

2. *Planning restrictions and regulations:*

- a. Fire regulations – As stated above, there was a commitment to mass book storage underground on the site. Books had to be contained within stipulated fire compartments. Fire regulations required that ventilation shafts amounted to 2.5% of the floor area leading up to a fresh air source and that they should be placed at opposite sides of each of the compartments.
In addition, Tube tunnels sandwich the site so that the basement stack had to be sited south of the Victoria Line tunnels (now underneath the main bulk of the building). Because of the rectangular fire compartments, smoke vents were placed in the middle of the blocks. A forecourt capping the basement stacks provided a convenient design solution.
- b. Views and daylight requirements for neighbouring buildings –
 - i. Levita House – Daylight requirements for a neighbouring residential block (part of the Ossulton Estate) were better served by stepping back the mass of the building to the west of the site (and led in part to the sloping roof).⁵⁷

⁵⁵ DH72/444, Libraries Advisory Group (November 1971), 'Priority Decisions Needed in Order to Proceed with Preliminary Design: Note by the Architect to British Library Organizing Committee' (4 November 1971).

⁵⁶ Audio recorded interview with M J Long, conducted April 22, 2015 by FABE Team.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

- ii. Midland Grand Hotel – architects and council agreed that views of the roofline of Gilbert Scott’s hotel building fronting St Pancras Station should be preserved.
- c. *Public open space* – Camden Council included preference for public space provision in their brief for the site.

3. *Noise insulation:*

‘The traffic noise on Euston Road pushed the reading rooms towards the sides and rear of the site, leaving a semi-public open space at the front which is screened on the east from the noisy Midland Road intersection, and addresses the theatre, local library, and the pub on the western corner – forming a forecourt to these facilities as well as to the library.’⁵⁸

4. *Typology:*

The British Museum has a prominent forecourt, and the architects wanted to carry through this provision into the new British Library designs. A large piazza was therefore part of the library designs from the earliest designs in the 1960s.

The forecourt is comprised of the following primary elements:

1. *Screening*

- a. Entrance portico – ‘serving not only as a formal focus on the street frontage but also embracing certain secondary functions (such as the advertising of exhibitions and general information and enclosing escape stairs from the basements below)’⁵⁹
- b. Trees and wall lining Euston Road

2. *Access and Entrances*

- a. Entrance Portico on Euston Road
- b. Access Road (and secondary entrances to the site) connecting Midland Road to Ossulton Street running in front of the building’s main entrance

3. *Levels*

- a. Upper terrace – running ‘the complete length of the western flank’, offering ‘the possibility of hosting such activities as second-hand book stalls, open-air celebrations or fairs.’⁶⁰
- b. Main (lower) level – reached by steps and a ramp providing places for ‘meeting or simply private relaxation in good weather’⁶¹
- c. Sunken rotunda – mediating between the two levels of the piazza and including secluded seating

4. *Public Art*

Edward Paolozzi – Newton (after Blake) (1995)
 David Kindersley – Iron gates for Portico
 Anthony Gormley – ‘Planets’ (2002)

⁵⁸ C. St John Wilson, ‘Mediation/Duality: Public Spaces of the New British Library’, *International Architect*

⁵⁹ C. St John Wilson, ‘Architecture – Public Good and Private Necessity’, *RIBA Journal* (March, 1979), p.114.

⁶⁰ C. St John Wilson, *The Design and Construction of the British Library* (London, 1980), p.36.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

6. MATERIALS/ CONSTRUCTION/ ENVIRONMENT

When the British Library was completed in 1999, it was approximately two-thirds of the intended size of the final scheme; only the first of the three phases was funded to completion. The building takes up three hectares of the five-hectare site, much of the remaining site now sold off and occupied by the new Francis Crick Institute at the rear.

As built, there is a total floor area of over 112,000 square metres spread over 14 floors - 9 above ground, 5 below. The basements extend to a depth of 24.5 metres. Over 10 million bricks, 50,000 Welsh slates, 150,000 tonnes of reinforced steel and 180,000 tonnes of concrete were used.

The dominant material is brick, the same brick as was used on the St. Pancras Chambers. In fact, "the long-closed brickworks were reopened for its manufacture" (Stonehouse, 2004:57). The slates on the roof are also of the same style of slate as the roof of St Pancras. Also externally, there are green metal louvres over the windows, red enamel columns, beams, and eaves, and large columns clad in polished granite on the east and south elevations. The forecourt is made of brick paving set within a French limestone lattice; the interplay of these material flow into the entrance atrium.

In the Final Design Report from November 1977, St. John Wilson articulates the importance of the materials used:

In a public building of this size and significance, it is most important to use materials which have excellent weathering properties for reasons of appearance and maintenance and which invite approach.

In general colour and tonality the building is intended to accord with St. Pancras Station, its neighbour across Midland Road. Careful colour studies will have to be carried out before any final decision is reached on this point.

Inside, a range of materials is suggested which would help to gradate spaces from public to private in terms of progressive softening of texture and increase of acoustic control.

The main entrance hall is seen as an internal continuation of the forecourt, with a paved floor, brick walls and internal planting on a large scale.

From this public atmosphere, spaces will become increasingly quiet...⁶²

7. RECEPTION

i. Design (trade press and critical commentary)

'The British Library: Review'. *RIBA Journal*, Volume 86, Number 4, April 1978: 144
Colin St. John Wilson's intention is to raise the level of the building beyond mere services to create an environment which is vivid, pleasurable and memorable, while fitting with responsibility and sensitivity into its context.

⁶² Final Design Report, (1977), pp.12-13.

The choice of external materials also reflects this contextual awareness, with the red brick and bronze coloured metal cladding designed to relate to St. Pancras when cleaned.

To quote Lord Eccles, “the strength and beauty of the design, its massing, materials and ingenuity of internal planning, will give London one of the few outstanding buildings of this century.

Haig Beck, ‘Reading the New British Library’. *International Architect*, Volume 1, Number 7. 1982: 30

However, the British Library does call for a certain dignity, and this is provided by the choice of materials – bricks, marble, and polished metal in high-wear areas, softening to carpet, timber, and plaster where readers sit and work. And it is the detailing of these materials with their explicit references to Aalto that suggests something of the architectural character to be expected throughout the building.

This formalist play on unresolved duality not only introduces a tension to the building, but also avoids the rhetoric of monumentality by breaking down the scale of its enormous mass.’

Contextualism provides no clue: with the urban fabric in such tatters, there is little chance that any single building could stitch it back together; neither pastiche historicism nor bland modernity will suffice; nor does it permit any compromise between them: any attempt at a hybrid would border on the kitsch; and it is untenable to *hide* the British Library behind the remains of a Victorian railway-yard wall (no matter how handsome it might be). Instead, the architects deal with the problems of characterisation without recourse to historicism, kitsch, or forced monumentality, but through shifts in scale and form, and the choice of materials.’

Martin Spring, ‘Gentle Giant’, *Building*, 31 October 1997: 40-45

With its asymmetrical layers of brick walls, monopitched roofs, strip windows and dark green metal sun-screens, the building looks like an overgrown municipal civic centre of 1970s vintage. ... But venture inside the new library and contempt is likely to give way to admiration. A spectacular five-storey entrance hall lined in red brickwork and white Travertine marble leads into three large light-filled, sumptuously furnished reading rooms.’ (43)

As for the much-criticised exterior of the building, this improves when viewed from the new courtyard, which the two large wings partly enclose.

The extensive piazza in front of the library has as much presence as the internal halls of the building. It features a beautifully paved floor in red brick and creamy white Portland stone and a powerful bronze sculpture of Isaac Newton by Eduardo Paolozzi. It is the only public open space in an area of London that has long been neglected, but is now set to become the gateway to Europe with the opening of the high-speed Channel Tunnel Rail Link terminal.

ii. Post-occupancy (trade and general press)

Paul Finch, ‘Booking a place in history...’, *The Architects’ Journal*, 20 November 1997: 47-56:

The first reading room in the new British Library opens next week. Criticism will be of almost everything – except architecture.

In short, whatever critical axe one has to grind, one can find something in the BL on which to exercise it. Sir John Summerson once described St Pancras Chambers next door as a ‘fruit salad of Gothic references’. This comment has been adapted by one of the most maliciously witty of Sandy’s contemporaries, who views the new library as “a fruit salad ... in which all the fruit is canned”; certainly if you are looking for quotations from other architects, or little

homages as Wilson like to put it, they are there a plenty, from Aalto (to which the entire building is a form of homage), to Corb, to James Stirling. For another observer, this implies that the British Library has taken on aspects of Post Modern ideology, to produce “the most Venturi-like building in London, other than the one Venturi himself designed. Something for every taste.

It is a rare thing for an old building to become a new one, unless it is a refurbishment. But this is what has happened in the Euston Road: fortunately for the architect, tastes have changed so dramatically that it is possible that the building will receive much greater popular support than it might have five years ago. It is very obviously *not* Lottery architecture.

Patrick Hodgkinson, ‘The two minds of architecture: the quick and the dead’. *The Journal of Architecture*, Volume 2, Winter 1997: 337-354:

Colin St John Wilson openly states: “This is where I say my thanks,” to those he conducts round his library. And he is correct, for almost every detail has been quoted from modern masters he admires, making the whole just a revivalist’s fruit salad, the fruits being canned. Whereas Utzon [architect of the Sydney Opera House] is a true Modernist, Wilson has merely followed Post-modernism, that great black hole into which Modernism fell.

The British Library just has a lofty entrance hall where we take off our galoshes. No antespace separates it from outside, and with its staircases, escalators and different levels there will be no feeling of calm, or of arrival. It is just something that leads on.

Roger Stonehouse, ‘Inside story: the British Library at St Pancras’. *Architecture Today*, Number 84, January 1998, pp.22-29:

The building, book-like in so many ways, is quiet but has immense power. Embracing and welcoming behind the screen of trees and railings set on the layered plinth, this forecourt will become a favourite oasis for meetings and assignations.

Through an entrance which is low and almost domestic (no monumental flight of steps here!) we enter a space which rises majestically but beckoningly before us. There has been no space to compare with this in the UK since the foyers of the Royal Festival Hall. It lifts the spirits and nourishes the mind and eye – and also the hand and foot.

Circulation within the building is clear and direct but of ever-changing character and interest.

[*On the spaces to the rear of the King’s library – now the restaurant foyer*]: Here is a fragment of Alberti’s ideal city, with balconies and a belvedere and near and distant views through and across the busy life of the foyer back to the entrance. This disentangling of complex and often conflicting circulation requirements with such apparent ease is one of the great achievements of the building. This is not an architecture of circulation pattern and system, but one of grace and ease based on a clear understanding of movement and orientation.

Peter Blundell Jones, ‘Speaking Volumes’. *The Architectural Review*, June 1998: 34-51
After almost unimaginable vicissitudes, the British Library is at last open, and is revealed not only to be an awesome repository of knowledge, but a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and great public building in its own right.

[St. John Wilson] felt that an irregular articulated building exploiting the givens of the site and displaying the disposition of the programme would sympathize with St Pancras. His red brick and slate roofs echo the station directly; even the red pain of the library metalwork has its counterpart across the road, but essential kinship with the older building is much deeper: a kinship of process and inner articulation.

The route [through the forecourt to the entrance hall] is not fully prescribed, leaving an element of choice, but an even rhythm develops in the layout of the paving.

The court has a number of subsidiary parts with inviting seats along the way, used even on winter days, so it should become even more tempting as a meeting place in the summer. ... The court encourages varied use and its subsidiary areas are intimate without destroying the sense of the whole. ... There is no doubt where the entrance is, but also no rhetorical flight of steps to overwhelm the visitor.

The foyer is the *pièce de résistance* with inviting flights of steps flowing on and up to the reading rooms.

Moving around, you discover the foyer as one continuous space, a complex and exciting internal landscape with rich multi-layered views in all directions, yet organized in a seemingly natural way and easy to navigate. There is no better space of this kind in London. Contrast with the labyrinth of the Barbican Arts Centre underlines the significance of the art of spatial manipulation, and the importance of escaping the neutralizing homotopia of a construction grid.'

Since it opened to the public...readership attendance has risen by 50 per cent and reader applications have soared.

The outside has always been more controversial ... and it has always produced criticism from those who prefer a well-ordered Classical object. ... A rigid Classical plan would not have fitted the site and would never have been flexible enough to absorb the design changes between the ambitious multi-stage first version and the curtailed one finally built.'

Caroline Pung, Ann Clarke, and Laurie Patten, 'Measuring the economic impact of the British library'. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 10:1, 2004, pp.79-102

'The study demonstrates that the Library generates value of around 4.4 times the level of its annual public funding of £83m.' (79)

Fiona MacCarthy, 'A house for the mind', *The Guardian*, 23 February 2008

The architectural attitudes that shaped it are those of its inception in the early 1960s. In time and feeling, it is closer to the Royal Festival Hall than the Scottish Parliament.

[St. John Wilson] did not live to see the thing he had looked forward to: the resurrection of St Pancras station as the main Eurostar terminal, allowing international publishers, booksellers and "the wandering scholars of the laptop", as he called them, to step off the train and converge on the piazza. This is now a vision beginning to come true, as Wilson's building takes on the quality of permanence, the sense of deep embeddedness he himself had always looked for in defining a great building. It is now so well-established a presence in the city, it is hard to remember the time when it was not there.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archives

Camden Council Archives and Local Studies Centre

Council Minutes

Community Planning and Resources, Railway Lands Sub-Committee

Development Control Minutes

British Library Corporate Archives

Department of Printed Books: Principal Keeper's Files (DH/72 series)

British Library: National Life Story Collection (Architects' Lives)

Colin St Wilson (interviewed September 1996)

<http://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Architects-Lives/021M-C0467X0017XX-0001V0>,

accessed July 2016

Mary Jane Long (interviewed October 1997)

<http://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Architects-Lives/021M-C0467X0026XX-0001V0>,

accessed July 2016

The Times Digital Archive

Grey Literature

National Audit Office, *Progress in Completing the New British Library* (15 May 1996)

Committee of Public Accounts, *New Building for the British Library* (October, 1990)

Secondary Material

Works by Wilson

Long, M. J. and St John Wilson, C., 'Talk to your client about architecture', *The Journal of Architecture* vol.7 (Winter, 2002), pp.339-348.

St John Wilson, C., 'Architecture – Public Good and Private Necessity', *RIBA Journal* (March 1979), pp.107 - 115

St John Wilson, C., 'Mediation/Duality: Public Spaces of the New British Library', *International Architect* (1982), pp.30-42

St John Wilson, C., *Architectural Reflections: Studies in the Philosophy and Practice of Architecture* (2nd edn) (Manchester, 2000)

St John Wilson, C., *The Design and Construction of the British Library* (London, 1998)

St John Wilson, C., *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture* (London, 1995)

Other secondary material

Blundell Jones, P., 'Speaking Volumes', *The Architectural Review* vol.203 no.1216 (June, 1998), p.34

Cantacuzino, S., 'A necessary giant', *The Architectural Review* (December, 1978), pp.337-339.

Croft, D. and Ryalls, P., 'The British Library', *ARUP Journal*, vol.13 no.4 (December, 1978), pp.2-6.

Edwards, A. T., *The Things Which Are Seen* (London, 1921)

Hodgkinson, P., 'The two minds of architecture: the quick and the dead', *The Journal of Architecture* vol. 2 (Winter, 1997) pp.337-354.

Martin, L., *Buildings and Ideas, 1933-83 from the studio of Leslie Martin and his associates* (Cambridge, 1983)

Pendlebury, J., *Conservation in the Age of Consensus* (London, 2008), p.65.

Powers, A. and Harwood, E. (eds.), *Twentieth Century Architecture: The Heroic Period of Conservation*, vol. 7 (2004)

Stonehouse, R. and Stromberg, G., *The Architecture of the British Library at St Pancras* (Abingdon, 2004)