

# Perceiving Postmodernism

David Kohn

## Learning from London's Marshlands





David Kohn,  
Thames river wall  
at Thurrock,  
Essex,  
1996

In 1996 Kohn photographed the lower Thames corridor, from Barking to Tilbury and from Woolwich to Gravesend, taking photographs of the varied landscapes. This was a generous urbanism that welcomed all-comers and suggested an unassuming model for other places.

David Kohn Architects  
and Fiona Banner,  
A Room for London,  
Queen Elizabeth Hall,  
London,  
2012

The view from A Room for London stretches from the Houses of Parliament in the west to St Paul's Cathedral in the east. In the centre of this panorama is the Savoy Hotel (1899) which opened the same year as Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* was published. It was the first luxury hotel of its kind in Britain and designed to attract international visitors to the capital.

**David Kohn**, director of London-based David Kohn Architects and diploma tutor at the Architectural Association, takes us on an almost psychogeographic *dérive* along the River Thames and into its marshy hinterland, picking up nuances, his own buildings and high points of the postmodern past. Along the way he explains what is important and inspiring for him and his practice.



Can it really be true that not all views are equal? And if this is the case, is it possible, or desirable, to make the narrative embedded in the view of London that is spread out before me available to everybody in Britain?

— Caryl Phillips, 'A Bend in the River', 2013<sup>1</sup>

Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect.

— Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 1972<sup>2</sup>

Across the River Thames from Canary Wharf, beside London's O2 Arena, a small, light industrial building designed by David Kohn Architects is under construction. It is one of 16 buildings aiming to provide affordable workspace for creative businesses on the Greenwich Peninsula, a kind of modern-day guild-house quarter. An oversized illuminated sign on its roof announces your arrival at the Design District. At the building's base is a squat red colonnade that seems scaled more to the whole district than to the building itself. Between the sign and the colonnade is a grid of green aluminium frames that make it difficult to read how many storeys the building contains. On its front corners stand two 4-metre- (13-foot-) tall figures with outstretched arms.

This building references many sources: from Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's 1972 ode to signs, *Learning from Las Vegas*, to the use of statuary in the facades of craft guilds of Venice and Antwerp, to James Stirling's 1984 Stuttgart Neue Staatsgalerie and his 1988 conversion of the mid-19th-century Albert Dock into Tate Liverpool. Despite appearances, it was not the intention to either make a 'postmodern' building or to reference this style, which was popularised during the 1960s–70s and achieved notoriety in the 1980s–90s. So why the quotation, the ornament, the ambiguity? Why the indeterminacy, the signs, the sculpture, the colour – and crucially, why now?

To address these questions, this article traces a journey from the centre of London to the marshlands in the east of the city and beyond. En route landmarks, landscapes and previous work by DKA are discussed in order to shed light on those aspects of Postmodernism that are meaningful to the practice's design approach and how this is relevant to contemporary architectural discourse in the widest sense.

David Kohn Architects,  
Design District, Greenwich,  
London,  
due for completion 2021

*opposite:* The building makes references to the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, James Stirling, Pierre Chareau and the guild houses of Venice.

*right:* Being on a peninsula that projects into the Thames, the Design District appears close to Canary Wharf, even though there is a gulf between them.



### Thanks for the Blinds

An important earlier DKA project that has informed the practice's approach at the Greenwich Design District was A Room for London. The brief was to create a venue on the roof of the Queen Elizabeth Hall for the duration of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad that would allow visitors to contemplate the capital. Designed in collaboration with the artist Fiona Banner, the Room liberally employed quotation and narrative as design tools in the hope of creating a context in which London's contemporary cultural and political issues might be addressed. The design was inspired by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,<sup>3</sup> a novella written in 1899 that begins with a sailor, Charles Marlow, on the deck of a ship moored on the banks of the Thames, recounting a journey he made to the Congo to find a shadowy figure named Kurtz. The story is a terrifying dissection of the mindset of empire, revealing the depths to which Kurtz has descended in his treatment of the local population, and was written three years after the International Olympics Committee hosted the first modern Olympics in Athens – a project of empires to which most non-European nations were not invited.

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David Kohn Architects  
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London, 2012

The one-room installation, perched high above the South Bank, was inspired by Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899).



The design took the form of a boat-like pavilion, named the *Roi des Belges* after the paddle steamer Conrad had himself piloted up the Congo. Banner and DKA recognised that a vehicle able to connect contemporary London to its colonial past would encourage discussion about this relationship and its ongoing impact on Britain and the world. The form of the boat was built from fragments of Conrad's text and quotations from London landmarks, such as a riveted hull recalling Marlow's repairs to his steamboat and the rooftop steeple referencing Nicholas Hawksmoor's Christ Church, Spitalfields (1729). The hull was cantilevered over the edge of the Brutalist Queen Elizabeth Hall and offered a truly staggering view, from the Houses of Parliament in the west to St Paul's Cathedral in the east. The co-commissioner, Artangel, invited 13 writers-in-residence to stay aboard during the year. The novelist Caryl Phillips joined in April and wrote about the state of Britain in 2012. Phillips touched on issues ranging from identity and racism and the 7/7 bombings, to parliamentary reform and the roles of the monarchy and church in a modern state, and ideas of belonging through the literature of 1950s migrants from the West Indies. He also discussed the architecture of the iconic buildings along the north bank of the Thames which he saw as emblematic of 'exclusivity; privilege; power'.<sup>4</sup> Phillips did not want to 'dismiss the evidence of grandeur, achievement and tradition suggested by this landscape'<sup>5</sup> but was nevertheless compelled to ask how this view of central London might reflect 'the narrative of a twenty-first-century, multicultural, multiracial people'?<sup>6</sup> He concluded, 'Not for the first time I'm glad that Mr Conrad's boat has come equipped with window blinds'.<sup>7</sup>

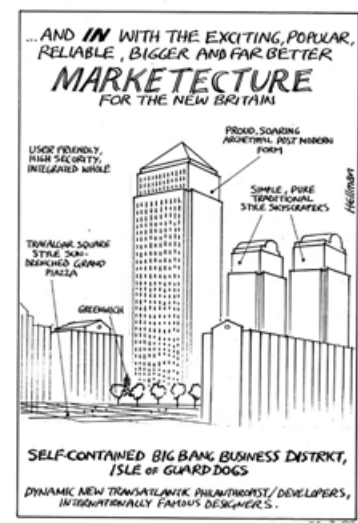
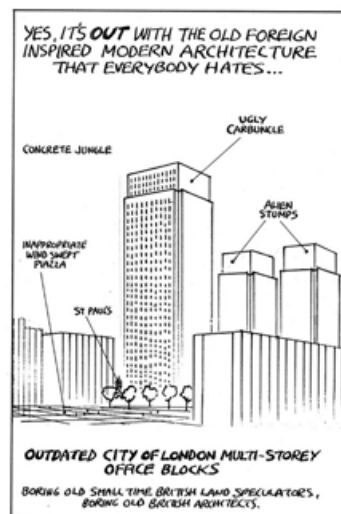
Later, Phillips decided to take a trip downstream on a Thames Clipper in search of 'other visions of London'. Along the way he called out various landmarks he encountered – from the Tower of London to Canary Wharf and the O2 Arena – which he variously described as an 'astonishing array',<sup>8</sup> 'mirage'<sup>9</sup> and 'extraterrestrial'.<sup>10</sup> On his 'return to my own little rooftop boat',<sup>11</sup> Phillips reflected how he had 'found many Londons which ... made me feel slightly more comfortable with my iconically powerful view'.<sup>12</sup> He wondered how the city might learn from its periphery, which is 'no less representative' of London but which ultimately offers no substitute for the role the centre of London performs as symbolic of British culture.

### A Monumental Joke

Marking the boundary between the city proper and its eastern hinterland, One Canada Square is the tallest and most distinctive building in Canary Wharf – described by Phillips as a 'Dubai-like spectacle'.<sup>13</sup> Designed by Cesar Pelli, when completed in 1991 it was also the tallest tower in the country. Its 50 storeys topped with a pyramid and flashing light to ward off planes approaching City Airport, the building is arguably the type of Postmodernism that architects loved to hate: brash, shiny, superficial, seemingly hollowed-out. That the style was used for a boosterist regeneration

project that dramatically failed with the 1993 collapse of the owners, Canadian property giant Olympia & York, added Schadenfreude to the general air of disapproval.

Projects like One Canada Square were one of the final nails in Postmodernism's coffin, even though at the same time Venturi Scott Brown's complex alternative vision of Postmodernism was taking centre stage next door to the National Gallery. It was perhaps the lack of complexity in the form of One Canada Square that made it a monumental joke of the kind that seeks to assert superiority. In so doing, Postmodernism's goliath pitted itself against Modernism's own corporate variety, in an unedifying fight to the death. But in truth Canary Wharf, like the banks after it, was too big to fail and nowadays is grudgingly accepted as having succeeded on its own terms, even if the original ambition to create such a monocultural second financial hub for London remains tragically misguided.



Louis Hellman,  
Marketecture,  
*Architect's Journal*,  
6 April 1988

One Canada Square (1991), the centrepiece of Canary Wharf, was the largest and most conspicuous postmodern building of its day. As such it was the brunt of jokes about the superficial transformation of corporate Modernism into something that might appeal more to traditionalists.

Phillips concludes his journey a little further downstream: 'And beyond this? Well, less development and a reminder of an earlier, unregenerated Thames.' Sixteen years before Phillips's trip in the summer of 1996, I had made a similar voyage of discovery, working my way around the lower Thames corridor with a camera and methodically recording the landscapes I found. I was looking for incongruous moments where an allotment garden was beside a power station, or garden furniture laid out for tea in front of a car breaker's yard. I found that places like Rainham and Grays on the river's Essex banks had a time all of their own that stood in stark contrast to central London. Beehives hummed while mudflats wheezed as tankers crept along the horizon and Ford cars rolled off the production line.

The East Thames Corridor has, in some places, a dream-like quality where the fragments of urbanity that one knows from wildly different moments in the past now appear in new and unexpected configurations. Some situations would make you want to laugh out loud, not in disdain, but in solidarity with the breath-taking unexpectedness and originality of situations which are nonetheless, in their circumstances, completely ordinary. Such encounters upset expectations, as established in the polite centres of conurbations and architectural education where every use has its correct place and a hierarchy is unquestioningly perpetuated. If London could dream, downriver places would represent a fulfilment of all its repressed wishes.

### Back to the Future

If the singular vision of One Canada Square represents one ending of Postmodernism, might the marshlands of the East Thames Corridor connect to the doctrine's more complex, earlier incarnations? Looking at Denise Scott Brown's early work, one of her chief interests is in

landscape's inherent capacity to sustain heterogeneity. In recent years, Scott Brown has exhibited photographs she took on her travels and as part of her research and activism before she met her future husband and collaborator Robert Venturi. These cover the townships around Johannesburg, the city where she spent her childhood, American road trips and neighbourhoods of Philadelphia where she supported a local initiative to replan the predominantly African-American suburb to avoid destruction by a new motorway.

Scott Brown's photographs have a consistent sensibility that foregrounds the accidental in landscapes, such as signs, fragments of vernacular architecture and casual street life. In a 2013 interview she recounts how a childhood teacher left a deep impression on her by asking, 'How can you be creative if you ignore what's around you?'<sup>14</sup> She discusses the racial segregation in 1940s South Africa and how this made her all the more determined to document the stark differences she witnessed in Johannesburg. She acknowledges, 'My country was very bad, and I still love it for what it is and what it can be.'<sup>15</sup> This interest in the reality of everyday situations eventually led to *Learning from Las Vegas*, her seminal collaboration with Venturi and Izenour that brought the strip into mainstream architectural discourse. Many of the same qualities that Scott Brown sought out in landscapes during her early travels can still be found in the Lower Thames Valley with the potential to inspire new ideas about places.

### Against Hubris

The issues that Caryl Phillips raised whilst staying aboard the *Roi des Belges* are no less pressing today than in 2012. The Windrush scandal, Brexit and the disproportionate impact the Coronavirus pandemic is having on BAME and poorer communities tell a story of

David Kohn  
Architects,  
*Five Figures  
for a Masque*,  
2019

Model made for the exhibition 'Alternative Histories' curated by Marius Grootveld and Jantje Engels at 6 Cork Street temporary gallery, Mayfair, London. Inspired by John Hejduk's *Aerial View of Wall House* (1972), the model recombines fragments of DKA's projects to make five architectonic figures.



Denise Scott Brown,  
Philadelphia,  
1961

Denise Scott Brown was an avid photographer and used the results to illustrate her research and teaching. Her photography of everyday urban life in Philadelphia anticipated her research into the Las Vegas Strip which she carried out with Robert Venturi and Steven Izenour.



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continued inequalities and pose difficult questions over national identity. Phillips's recognition that architecture has a part to play in allowing all Londoners the possibility of identifying with their city remains pressing. A Room for London provided a lens through which to see London with a certain clarity. Phillips's subsequent journey downriver revealed that other Londons are not so exclusive and that, within this heterogeneity, there is the hope of other forms of architecture and citymaking.

Looking directly across the river to the Savoy Hotel, it was not the building's Art Deco style that irked Phillips but its 'unselfreflective confidence'.<sup>16</sup> Denise Scott Brown held a similar view, although presented in its opposite form: 'I love monumental buildings that laugh at themselves a little.'<sup>17</sup> While coming from very different perspectives, both Phillips and Scott Brown are not preoccupied by style, but rather allowing buildings to acknowledge the limits of their ideological underpinnings. This is both a design question but also one of patronage and asking those in power to moderate any drive to monumentalise, thus avoiding the hubris that results. In periods of national and institutional doubt, the very possibility of grand gestures achieving any kind of popular recognition tips from hubris to madness and numbs those parts of architecture once able to reach any audience.

No building can address issues as complex as race and identity in contemporary Britain. However, architecture's twin potential to combine many different cultural references in a synthetic whole, as well as sustaining multiple interpretations by different users, is nonetheless a cause for optimism. Alongside better representation of minorities within the building professions and a willingness to engage with a wider set of precedents, not only architectural but from all creative disciplines and from the immediate changing world around us, there are routes to richer, more complex and more nourishing contexts that reflect the complexities of contemporary society. ▽

#### Notes

1. Caryl Phillips, 'A Bend in the River', in *A London Address*, Granta (London), 2013, p 45.
2. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, The MIT Press (Boston, MA), 1972, p 3.
3. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin Classics (London), 2007 (first published as a serial in 1899, and as a book in 1902).
4. Phillips, *op cit*, p 43.
5. *Ibid*, p 41.
6. *Ibid*, p 41.
7. *Ibid*, p 45.
8. *Ibid*, 44.
9. *Ibid*.
10. *Ibid*, p 45.
11. *Ibid*.
12. *Ibid*, p 44.
13. *Ibid*.
14. 'Denise Scott Brown: An African Perspective - Interviewed by Jochen Becker', *metroZones*, 2013: <https://vimeo.com/312749292>.
15. *Ibid*.
16. Phillips, *op cit*, p 44.
17. Andres Ramirez, 'Beside the Point: The Architectures of Denise Scott Brown', in Lukas Feireiss (ed), *Legacy: Generations of Creatives in Dialogue*, Frame Publishers (Amsterdam), 2018, pp 162-9.

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