

FUTURE
ARCHIVE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAUL THOMPSON	Foreword	6
RUT BLEES LUXEMBURG	Future Archive	8
I — M E M O R Y		
SHIJING SHENG	Billboard I	17
WORKS		20
ARIADNE PROJECT	Exhibition I	57
ELLIOTT MICKLEBURGH	Strata	64
HERZOG & DE MEURON	How Does One Anticipate the Future?	70
I I — C O N S T R U C T I O N		
ADAM HINES GREEN	Billboard II	81
WORKS		84
FUTURE ARCHIVE	Exhibition II	113
RICHARD SENNETT	“What Artists Can Do...”	120
AGATA KIK	Future Archive as Hands-on Curating	122
I I I — P R O P O S A L		
WORKS		129
SARAH STATON	Bricks, Steel and Concrete	161
N O T E S		
LIST OF WORKS		168
COLOPHON		174

H
DOES
ANTICIPATE

O

THE

W

ONE
FUTURE?

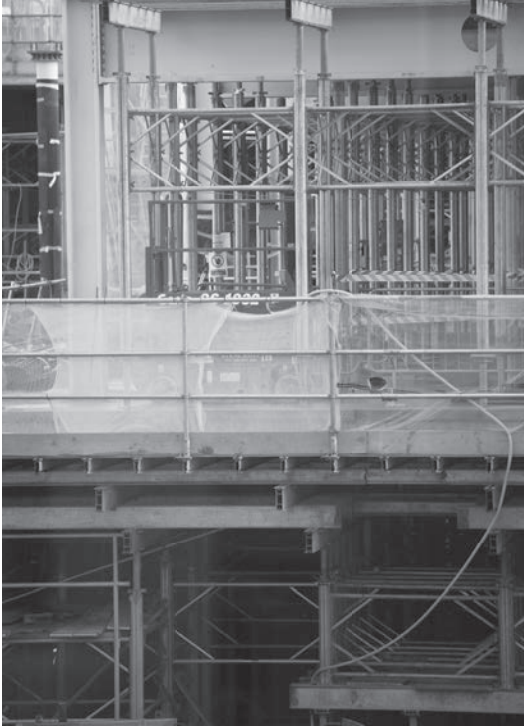


This conversation took place in July 2021 at RCA Battersea between the Future Archive and John O'Mara and Ascan Mergenthaler, architects for Battersea South, Herzog & de Meuron. It was the first time since COVID-19 struck in late 2019 that the Future Archive assembly of students and alumni could meet together in a physical space. Ascan Mergenthaler joined us via Zoom from Basel.

- RBL Rut Blee Luxembourg,
Reader in Urban Aesthetics
SC Sam Creasey, Painting 2020
EH Eleni Han, Architecture PhD student
LL Lijun Li, Photography 2021
DL David Lisbon, Curating Contemporary Art 2021
EM Elliott Mickleburgh, Photography 2020
VV Veronica Viacava, Photography 2021
JOM John O'Mara, Herzog & de Meuron
AM Ascan Mergenthaler, Herzog & de Meuron

THE HANGAR

SC The main brick-clad section under the research tower of the new RCA campus is described by Herzog & de Meuron as a kind of micro city within the confines of the surrounding parent city of London. The hangar and ground floor studios are thought of as houses that are interconnected by inner streets. Open spaces shall have park benches. What is the thinking behind the university campus experience, and how is it similar to broader city forms such as streets and houses?



RBL How do you envision your design to benefit students and researchers in their pursuit for creativity and collaboration?

AM We've been very lucky with our studio in Basel. It feels like a campus, with different houses from different times, outdoor alleys, squares, and pocket courtyards. We always felt this to be a quality, to have the possibility to be passing through different buildings when you bump into people for informal exchange and meetings. Even when you are going from meeting A to meeting B, you probably have to go through an outdoor space, so it is a kind of open organism.

When we first visited the Battersea South Campus and the existing buildings, we felt they were very classical. There is a front door through which you enter and then you are inside and that's it. You are

almost confined in this building with its different spaces and different qualities. You feel as if you are in a machine. We wanted to make something more porous, more engaged with the city and the immediate context. Students and people working in this building would have a constant exchange with very different spaces, not only in terms of proportion and scale and the way light enters, but also in terms of where they are, be it on the ground floor, upper floor, balcony, or outdoor area. So there are endless ways of walking through and experiencing the building and meeting people and engaging with work. That was extremely important to us, especially for the ground floor. We fought hard to make it as porous as possible, to knit the building into the urban grid by connecting existing streets while introducing new ones through the design of the building.

To not only knit the new building with the immediate context, but also with buildings on the other side so that the Battersea Campus becomes one total campus, and the existing RCA buildings are a part of this extension.

I think that is something you will be able to feel, it will feel very natural for the new building to sit in this context and connect to all existing buildings. Some of these brick blocks pick up the scale of the small, neighbouring historic buildings. So for our structure it was very important to break down the scale of things.

RBL Does that mean that the general public can access the building?

AM Yes, we hope it will be possible. We have introduced gates which can be closed, but you can leave it quite open and literally engage with the neighbourhood. Then you can also make it more enclosed but still visually open. John might have more details on this, but the idea is that we build in a certain flexibility in terms of security and can engage with the community.

JOM The planning includes the requirement that you can filter through the spaces, go between workshops



and through the hangar. The hangar can be closed down regularly, but there are expectations that it can be passed through for one to see what is going on in the workshops.



SC That's definitely the gist I got. I've been drawn to the hangar space since I saw the plans and made early site visits. On a recent site visit, the hangar reminded me of Covent Garden, the sense of walking through the upper part and looking down onto the street and seeing people performing amongst the cafes, and that's perhaps the vibe that the practice is going for in that part of the design.

AM The hangar is one of the few spaces that survived from our early competition scheme, a conceptual space frame that you would then fill up with individual design studios, outdoor spaces, and more. The hangar was always key in the design because of the road, creating an indoor/outdoor space which can be used in so many different ways. It becomes an active place for creating and testing big-scale projects but also for showing work, for end of the year shows, in-between events, or even just a party. The hangar becomes the central space of the entire building that enables publicness.

TECHNOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCELERATIONS...

EM A high-caliber art school will be one composed of spaces that cater to experimentation with technologies and techne on the bleeding edge of the contemporary. But as described by axioms such as Moore's Law and its numerous derivatives, these materials, machines, and the bodies of knowledge that interface with them will change and multiply at exponential rates. In light of these technological and epistemological accelerations, can the art of designing space anticipate and nurture a future state of media and thought that has not arrived yet in the present?

JOM There's a lot in that question, and I can speak to part of it. I think Battersea South is fundamentally a container with generous flexible spaces for the workshops and for a multitude of practices. The studios in their variety, together with the building, create the territory of Howie Street so that this whole zone becomes infused with the Royal College of Art.

The technology you refer to is effectively a STEAM model from the early stages of post-war industry in the UK when STEAM was harnessed to democratise the process of education. The model of the polytechnic disappeared in 1992, when the education bill moved it to the university. I studied at a polytechnic, and they were not organised around the humanities but were vocational. Engineering was one of the key drivers of progress and then it fell out of fashion for a while and it was all about media studies. Now it's coming back again, as a generative and innovative force. I was looking at the building a while back and thinking that it does look almost like a polytechnic building that's been updated over time. It's very direct and volumetric and, I think, civic and democratic with its access to the exterior. I like this relationship with the UK tradition of polytechnic buildings, which were hugely flexible forms.



AM In the building, we have highly specific spaces from the very analogue workshops for production to the robotics hangar to VR photo studios, all highly specific rooms designed for housing the means and methods which are available right now for a school like this one.

The other areas are knitted together by pure infrastructure. John called it a container, a set of platforms of different sizes: very large in the studio building, slightly smaller for the research tower. By keeping them open, flexible, and not pre-conceived, we hope that the building can adapt in many different ways because nobody knows what the future will bring. I think it is designed for today, but because it's so raw and direct, its main aspects can evolve in different directions. And who knows whether everything is going to stay digital? Or shall we go back to something much more analogue? Or will there always be both? We ask ourselves these questions all the time in our projects, constantly going back and forth between analogue and digital worlds, and we are fascinated by both and how we can bring them together. The building expresses this in a nice and direct way and will cater for both needs.

MEHRWERT— THE EXTRA VALUE

LL What is your understanding of different art spaces in different cultural contexts such as the recent one you designed in Hong Kong? Do you see an overlap between educational spaces and art spaces in relation to different cultural contexts?

AM An educational project is very different from a cultural project. There may be overlaps or similarities, but in principle, an educational facility is still different. Take for example the Tai Kwun Arts Centre in Hong Kong or the Tate Modern in contrast to the RCA. I think the only aspect you can compare is the need for flexibility in the future. Whether it's an educational building or an art or cultural building, you need the possibility for adaptation and change over time. That's why some of these projects have a very civic character. They are robust structures and infrastructures that connect change to the immediate context and how people are invited in. An educational building has to cater for different things than a cultural building. Some aspects of the cultural building will cater for education: large museums also have learning spaces as well as a workshop or classroom-like space, which is not dissimilar to what you have at a university, but its task is fundamentally different. The similarity has more to do with our interest in developing buildings that are time-less, open for change, and that engage with the public or community. Does this add the *Mehrwert*, the extra value, to a building? What can we give the building beyond ticking all the boxes and fulfilling the program brief?

JOM In the Tate Modern, the most successful spaces are those that were already there, like the Turbine Hall or the old tanks. These became the DNA or the nucleus for the extension. Some of the principal spaces of the RCA, such as the ground floor, the pattern of the streets, and the hangar, were already present as projections from

the existing prevalent form and the neighbourhood block. We found them, we didn't design them; we opened them and decided not to design how you're going to use them. Sometimes these spaces are the most fulfilling in whichever context, be that art school, educational building, or museum.

LL As students, when we were watching the new building grow daily, we thought it looked very similar to Tate Modern. Are you imitating the procedure of an anti-factory? Will our art space change, or do you see it as a container?



JOM Museums are less static these days, they are more inclusive and about process and performance. I think people are interested in where art begins, where it's generated, and the happenstance of art emerging. It's in the moment: not necessarily on the wall, but in performance. As with the old tanks in the Tate Modern, there is a public dimension that informs, and this is similar to educational buildings. There is a fascination with spaces where art is generated. When we were discussing the project with the planners, they said, "This building needs to be really open on the front, you've got to see every nook and cranny at ground level, it's got to be a glazed facade so everyone understands that this is an educational building, it's got to be very welcoming,"



and we pushed against that and said, “No that shouldn’t be the case because the greatest glimpses of the process are punctuated and occasional, hence these large windows rather than a universal glass façade that puts up barriers in some respects.” You open up where appropriate. There’s a certain dynamic of movement through the spaces and an exciting parade of activity. And that’s maybe one of the lessons we’ve learned: the art school doesn’t reveal itself entirely and immediately.

LL Tate Education just changed its name to Tate Learning and so now we are learning together, especially in the campus, which is growing with staff and students into a relationship that is not formed by a hierarchy. You mention transparency, but many students are comfortable with creating in a personal, private studio. Will this be possible?

JOM The whole building is set on a grid of unit space, so you can still nestle in a specific studio. You won’t have passersby in the upper regions of the building, but you may have your friends and colleagues walking past, and that’s an important aspect of the building as well. We related it back to the Darwin Building in Kensington, because that is a very broad space and the circulation design forces people from different disciplines to cross paths. This came from the previous space that the RCA occupied at the Courtauld where everyone shared, and this is the genesis of the RCA and its innovative aspects.

... SPACES FOR FAILURE

DL Is there a space in the building for grieving within the artistic process when work fails? How are you going to unpack failure as an artist within the space? Are you going to move down the staircase and through the space until you breathe easier and can go back to the studio?

JOM I think balconies are an access to the outside and can offer a space for that process. I think there are spaces that relieve that studio environment.

DL Are you worried that people will make their own transit between the studio balconies?

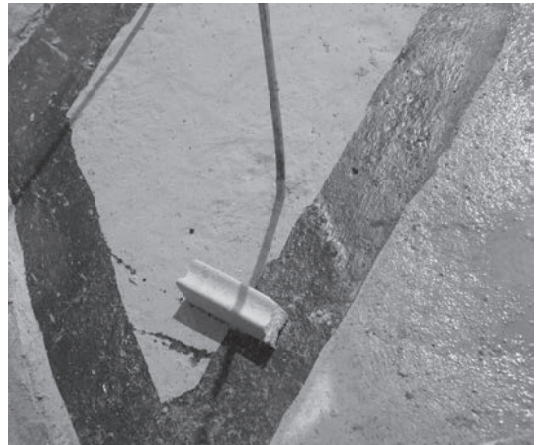
AM I think it is special to have these balconies all the way around; you could potentially work outside, and hopefully this will happen. Rather than an inward building this is really an outward-looking building. I think that makes a big difference.

Maybe one more comment about ‘role models’. There was one role model on the site, the Sculpture Studio building; a grey painted, simple, squarish, open-plan structure with amazing top light. It was a very inspiring place to us. We saw it later when the structures were partially dismantled and it was interesting to see how these partition walls and the in-between became a display or storage space. One could feel the energy of creating your own space within the space. We were very inspired by this and want to make this experience possible on many levels.

VISUALISATIONS

EH How important is the visual element of architecture in relation to the design process of a building? In what ways have images of the existing site and the previous building, as well as conceptual visualisations by Herzog & de Meuron, affected the development of the proposal and the subsequent building project?

AM We are architects that look closely to what is there and how we can make the positives and also some of the negatives of found situations on site into something strong and powerful. So sometimes things that look like defects or a problem can trigger thoughts and inspiring ideas. I think that was the case here, too. It was a heterogeneous situation with the existing gas station, the little alley road, and the sculpture studio in one corner. The existing RCA Battersea played a role here, too. The shed light structures for example, we liked



BRICK VERNACULAR

them a lot and that is why we brought them back into our building on a much larger scale, almost as a caricature. This way they became a family of buildings with all the shed lights or sawtooth structures on the roof. This is similar to the alleys and the connection with the entrance of the Woo Building, which had become the social hotspot of the whole campus and a place where people love to hang out. We extended that across the road and made it into a topic for the entire design.

SC I am curious how you can pre-conceive things that you can't necessarily do through computation because they are hard to quantify, like the overall aura of a building or physical spatial awareness.

AM I think there is a limit. That is a challenge we have in the studio, but that's not necessarily applicable to the design process of the RCA project. Digital rendering tools have become so powerful. We find ourselves in front of images on a screen, and we make design decisions based on that image, and that is very dangerous because that image is just one point of view. And you might decide on something based on that image that has an impact on something you can't see in the image. To be able to think 360° is great, but there was something nice about simple physical models because you always looked at everything. Similarly, there was something great about having plans on a table: you could draw on them and see the entire plan in its completeness while you were working on a detail. With digital drafting tools you zoom in so much that you often lose the context. This makes it ultimately more challenging to come up with a holistic and thought-through solution.

Often we use virtual reality goggles. It's an unpleasant experience to use goggles in a group design meeting, but a powerful tool because suddenly you are physically in a model, you can visit a building design and experience the space. It feels like reality and we will have to use this in the future. But we have to come back to the analogue world, and ultimately this is what drives us, the sense of touching materials, the reality of architecture. When we use bricks we want to feel the rawness of a brick in our hands. Then we discover that the back of the brick, which is not intended to be used, is really beautiful, that it has these marks of making and process and we think, why don't we show that on the outside, which is what has happened with the RCA building. We put the back of the brick to the front and created this lively and textured surface. So the physical aspect of architecture is very important to us. Maybe in the future there will be purely digital architecture projects. It is already happening in the gaming world. In the future we shall need to sense different types of perception, but for us it's always about keeping these two worlds together and in balance, the analogue and the digital, so as not to get carried away by one or the other.

VV The textured brickwork is one of the key elements of the new building. What influenced you to choose bricks as the main material throughout the Battersea South campus?

AM The reason why we used bricks was very simple. It is about being contextual within the immediate neighbourhood. We steer away from metal or composite cladding or even glass in order to have something rooted in the local context. When you go around the neighbourhood and look closely at the existing brick buildings, you notice that they have really beautiful textures and surfaces, and we wanted to respond to that. There is a brick tradition in the UK. It is one of the few places left where you still find brick manufacturers with huge outdoor kilns.



LL This links to the cultural context as well. The RCA has many international students, so it's interesting to hear how brick becomes such an important factor. How do you understand the space within other cultural contexts? More than half of the students in my programme are international.

AM The idea to explore the possibilities of brick came to us while we were working in China around 2004–2008, just before the Olympics. We had many commissions throughout China, and were looking for

what was mainly locally produced, and that was brick in different forms. We looked into breaking the brick open to reveal the coal burn inside it, or we played with different bonding techniques to enhance brick and steer away from a more traditional brick wall to something more contemporary, with a different feel and look.

We like brick as a material because of its physical qualities. By re-working it, you can change the appearance of a building. A solid mineral wall suddenly has a textile-like, soft quality that changes and becomes animated with the light and time of the day. In general, brick is a vernacular, traditional, and simple building material in the UK, but it also plays an important role in different cultures all over the world and always has.

HORIZONTALITY MEETS BATTERY

RBL When Hisham Matar writes about the public squares of Renaissance Italy, he reminds us that we are affected by architecture, that we change in subtle ways when walking into certain spaces or rooms. For him, architecture is underestimated if its utility is overemphasised. Now that the building is almost finished, have you, as architects, incorporated — beyond potential changes in design, art, or teaching — changes that also might emerge from the ways we shall live in the future?

JOM Unwittingly it's quite COVID-friendly. We introduced terraces and balconies and natural ventilation panels and doors at every bay and behind the brick screens. We wanted it to be a breezy natural environment and to be well lit.



AM Also from a daylight point of view, we have natural overhangs and louvers on the studio building and the research building. They become the expression of the facade and control the light that comes into the building. This is an increasingly important question, as ultimately it will get warmer. How does the building respond to that? By protecting itself from harsh sunlight but at the same time allowing diffused light in to create a beautiful ambient light situation.



In terms of change we have created a civic building, an infrastructure, a platform to allow for future adaption. This is something we learned from abandoned industrial buildings: they are so infrastructural in essence, so robust and simple that they can be converted if needed.

RBL The visual aspect of the building suggests a horizontality that echoes what Lijuan was saying about experiencing teaching at the RCA as a non-hierarchical, non-vertical structure.

AM Horizontality was important for the studio building and it took us a while to figure that out. The separation of the research tower and the studio building creates two different building typologies. We understood that the studio should have bigger floor plates stacked on top of each other, whereas the research building needed a more concise floor plate, something a bit separate and more about verticality. For a long time we tried to bring this all under one roof but we realised that separation is absolutely crucial.

RBL We increasingly understand the limitations that knowledge silos have on our learning and our lives. How is the research tower connected to the studio space?

JOM I think it adds to the overall arrangement in that you perceive the research building as separate, discreet, and private in some respects. I quite like that if you are working here and interfacing with certain aspects of research, there is an inaccessible dimension to the arrangement. The research tower has a sort of a battery element to it and, if you're sensible, you don't break open batteries.

EDITOR
Rut Brees Luxemburg

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS
Elliott Mickleburgh
James Wilde

DESIGNER
Emily Schofield

Folium Publishing London

© 2021 Future Archive

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the editor and publisher.



Royal College of Art

**FUTURE
ARCHIVE**