

The British Museum buildings are displayed as an interactive exhibit, showing off the chronology of various architectural types from eighteenth century Parisian to post-modernism. Since its conception in 1753, the facility has been growing constantly to house the vast wealth of treasures acquired in the last 250 years. With the additions and departures of several collections of artefacts and books, the museum has altered its function from the private collections of Sir Hans Sloane and others, to the prestigious reading rooms of the nineteenth century, to the multipurpose uses of today. Currently, the museum buildings of Russell Square in London house exhibits, research and educational facilities, eating areas, a grand reading room and, naturally, several bookshops. This varied space has been made possible by the alteration of the Great Court and Round Reading Room in the formerly undistinguished courtyard.

The chronological history of the museum emphasises how the building has evolved and taken on its massive shape. The first collections were housed in the Montagu house, formerly a private home. As will become the characteristic and exacerbating theme, several additions to the site were made, including the King's Library in 1831, before the Trustees allowed Robert Smirke to erect an adequately sized building. Because this building was gradually conceived and built between 1823 and 1846, due to the pace of financing, which was as slow as the pace of collecting was fast, more additions were added even before Robert Smirke's main building was complete. The next notable completion was the Round Reading Room by Sydney Smirke in 1857. The pace of additions slowed until the beginning of the twentieth century, when John James Burnet erected the Edward VII Galleries with privately donated funds in addition to a large grant from the Treasury. Finally, in 2000, the most recent of alterations took place with the remodelling of the under-utilised courtyard and the increasingly shabby Round Reading Room, by Lord Norman Foster (Caygill and Date, 1999, pp 11-74).

The British Museum-an Exhibit in Architectural History

The museum collection, and hence its building, has been growing ever since Sir Hans Sloane, Sir Robert Cotton and Robert Harley donated their collections in 1753. Though the building seems to be confusing at times due to the number of additions tacked on at various times, it actually makes the building and exhibit in itself-an interactive display of the changing ideas of public space.

Montagu House, as stated previously, was the first building to house the museum, and was a private house in Bloomsbury, London. While not designed for the museum, it was, perhaps, one of the

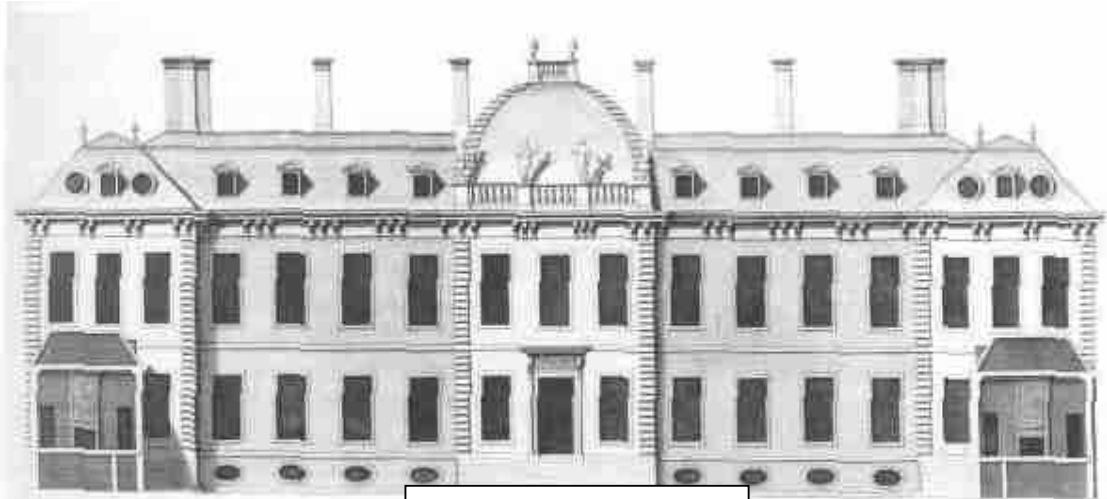


Figure 1-The Montagu House

finest examples of “Gallomania” architecture (Crook, 1972, p. 56), as it was designed and richly decorated in the French manner. Being built in 1686, it was considered antique by the 1800s, and visitors could admire its frescoes and paintings along with the actual collections (Crook, 1972, p. 60) (figure 1). However, this building was ultimately demolished, and this is not part of the continuing exhibit started by Sir Robert Smirke’s neo-classical structure of the early 1800s.

Neo-classicism and Greek Revival architectural styles became popular with the development of classical archaeology (Crook, 1972, p. 86). This fact makes the decision to design the museum in the Greek Revival style almost natural, as classical artefacts such as the Elgin marbles, were almost pouring into the museum (Crook, 1972, p. 71). Caught between historicism and rationalism, Smirke designed with simplicity and understatement, a style which ultimately caught on and created a plethora of similar classically designed buildings in England (Crook, 1972, p. 102). This means Smirke created a style that works and endures, and consequently, the British Museum can be considered an exhibit of this “new” architecture.

The basic style is considered Palladian (figure 2), with an Ionic order of columns derived from the Ionic temple of Athena Polias in Asia Minor (Crook, 1972, p. 120). The King’s Library is a grand example of Grecian detailed design as well (Crook, 1972, p. 130). The entrance front also

demonstrates Grecian architecture on a large scale (Crook, 1972, p. 139), which gives passers-by a taste of the antiquities inside. In this manner, one can also consider Smirke’s design an exhibit on



Figure 2-The New British Museum

ancient Greek architectural styles as well. The whole effect of the style actually serves as two exhibits: one of ancient Greek architecture and the other of early nineteenth century architecture that we now call the Greek Revival.

By the time Smirke's building was finished, Victorian architecture had become fashionable, and the Round Reading Room by Sydney Smirke became the museum's exhibit from that time period. Smirke used the typical cast iron structure (Crook, 1972, p. 186), though the structure was not a focal point of the architecture as in the Crystal Palace. However, this domed library was used as a model for library planning world-wide (Crook, 1972, p. 191).



Figure 3-The Natural History Museum

At this point in time, Gothic architecture, sprung from Victorian opulence, had become the new architectural type. While no addition to the British Museum was designed in this style, the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, London, a division of the British Museum, was decidedly Gothic (figure 3). The structure itself displays detailed carvings of plants and animals, hewn from British stone, which serves the dual purpose of showing off itself as embodying natural history as well as being a fine stylistic example of Gothic architecture. Consequently, the Natural History Museum is the British Museum's exhibit of the Gothic style (Crook, 1972, pp 200-208).

Due to the aforementioned lack of space, the removal of natural history collections proved to be an inadequate solution. Another large addition was completed in 1914 by Sir John Burnet. This addition as an exhibit of architecture is considered "Greek Re-Revival" (Crook, 1972, p. 211), and is characterised by strict attention to order and system above style (Crook, 1972, p. 216), which is a refinement of Smirke's Greek Revivalist minimalism (figure 4).



Figure 4-The Edward VII Galleries



Figure 5-The Great Court

The most recent exhibit in the ever-increasing collection of British Museum buildings is the transformation of the courtyard into a public space. This exhibit can be classified as a “marriage of functionality and form” (Anderson, 2000, p. 41), or post-modern, as it has just been completed. Somewhat different from the other exhibits, the “Great Court” is a redevelopment, instead of an entirely new building. Nevertheless, the Great Court exhibit, which will be discussed later on, shows off twenty-first century innovation and an integration of different architectural styles. In essence, it is

the conclusion, or summary of the dynamic display (figure 5).

In addition to the changing architectural styles of the museum, the function of the buildings has changed somewhat. According to J. Mordaunt Crook, the three functions of a museum are conservation, research, and education (1972, p. 207). This provided questions as to the distinction between public and private spaces, especially early on. The original museum could almost be categorised as a private space because, though open to the public, the process of obtaining an admission ticket discouraged the main populace, as did the awkward hours. The Trustees saw the goal and thus function of the building to be for furthering “the Science and the Arts” and not to satisfy the wayward stranger’s curiosity (Crook, 1972, p. 65). Admittance to the library was even more restricted to “men of letters and artists” (Crook, 1972, p. 152), or, as time went on, to those who held a reader’s ticket.

These scholarly functions of the museum have given way to the current main use of the museum, which is for a tourist attraction, as 5,000,000 people per year flock to see the treasures contained within. Special exhibits are now designed to attract more people and require the exhibition space to be flexible. Typical tourist needs of food and souvenirs must be on hand. Other, more scholarly functions still remain, however. Ever a popular destination for school field trips, the museum has felt the need to accommodate young scholars. As the museum has been historically seen as a scholarly institution (discussed above), academic conferences are now held there (Anderson, 2000, p.

12). All of these new uses have precipitated the development of a new public space for the British Museum.

The Great Court-Tying It All Together

Unexpectedly, the renovation of the courtyard was not precipitated primarily by the lack of exhibition space, as had been the stimulus before. Rather, it was the addition of space vacated by the newly formed British Library that gave the Trustees room to imagine. This gift of extra space, combined with the aforementioned changes in use of the museum led the Trustees to choose Foster and Partners as architects to create a “classic public space” (Dixon, Perry, Walker, Whalley, 2001, p. 24).

The renovation addressed virtually all the problems that the museum was experiencing due to the change in use of the archetypal museum towards a popular tourist venue. The main goal was “to provide much improved public circulation around the museum” (Anderson, 2000, pp. 35-36). Additionally, a general use library, education centre, lecture theatre and offices were envisioned (Anderson, 2000, p. 36). The circulation needs were met by simply opening up the courtyard for access from north to south (Dixon et al, 2001, p. 19), as well as a second floor bridge linking the north galleries with the restaurant level of the addition in the middle of the courtyard (Anderson, 2000, p. 88). The Round Reading Room was chosen, naturally, to house the new library of world culture, with access for the general public (Dixon et al, 2001, p. 16). The education centre, children’s centre and Sainsbury galleries are contained underground, underneath the Great Court. The main floor holds three new gift shops and a self service café area to complete the aspects of the desired public space (Anderson, 2000, pp. 78, 82-83).

According to a partner at Buro Happold, the project’s engineers, the single most significant aspect of the design was that the Great Court was created between Georgian main buildings and a “historic iron-framed dome” (Architect’s Journal, 2001) (obviously, this engineer was not an architectural scholar, as he miss-attributed Smirke’s porticoes as Georgian and merely categorised the Victorian Round Reading Room as historic). This aspect required the glass roof that covers the courtyard to be without visible supports. This engineering feat was accomplished by concrete filled, tubular steel columns hidden behind the reading room’s new Spanish limestone façade on one side and sliding bearings that spread out relevant loads on the respective main building facades (Architect’s Journal, 2001). Continuing the theme of old to new, “stone is used monolithically...the whole space-

feels as carved out of one huge stone block,” (Dixon et al, 2001, p. 28) a reference to the numerous sculptures of the museum.



Figure 6-The Reichstag

This theme of blending old and new can be more fully explored by looking at Foster’s previous projects of the same nature. Lord Foster has tackled the integration of past architecture with new architecture several times. The reconstruction of the Reichstag in

Berlin in 1999 is one example of integration (figure 6), with its all-glass dome above a classical colonnade and pediment (Anderson, 2000, p. 36). But the Carré d’Art in Nîmes, France was a more difficult project, as the “Mediatheque” was a separate building.

For this building, Foster chose to design with a “discreet classical presence” (Quantrill, 1999, p. 143). The building site was directly across from an ancient Roman temple, yet the external elements of Foster’s building do not simulate classical elements (Quantrill, 1999, p 144). Instead of reflecting the classical façade of the temple (the Maison Carreé), the Mediatheque represents a “new source of social energy” (Quantrill, 1999, p. 145), an example of self-finding architecture. This self-finding architecture chooses to ignore the external façade such that there is little distinction of being inside or outside (Quantrill, 1999, pp. 146-148). This is achieved with a glass façade and minimalist columns (Quantrill, 1999, p 144). The effect of this design is that the principal view of the this building in of the outside from within (Quantrill, 1999, p 150). Realising that a contemporary building could not compete with a first century Roman temple, Foster chose to display the Maison Carreé through the windows of the Mediatheque and thus mirror the dominating architectural presence (Quantrill, 1999, p



Figure 7-A dual view of the portico and reading room interior

150). This new building has also stimulated pedestrian traffic through the area and thus reactivated an under used public space, an aspect which Foster has also achieved in the Great Court.

Likewise, the Great Court is an area where one can look outwards and enjoy the Grecian style porticoes while sitting in a distinct space (figure 7). The very definition of a

courtyard-a space surrounded by building walls-lends itself to this outward-inward archetype demonstrated so well in the Mediatheque.

A museum thrives on innovation, as research and education are two of the main functions. The British Museum has demonstrated innovation through the architecture of its buildings, which has been precipitated by the increasing collections and need for space. The architecture has also changed with the alteration of function, from a scholarly institution to a popular tourist destination. As the most recent of architectural “exhibits,” the Great Court has successfully adapted the museum for these new functions and created a satisfying public space.

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“That Old Curiosity Shop”
The British Museum-An Architectural History
Exhibit



By Rebecca Rubert
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