



Arts: Where patronage proves a point - Architecture

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If there was a Financial Times Patron's Prize for Architecture, patronage being a key factor in securing good new buildings, one of the first recipients would certainly be Stuart Lipton. His various development companies have done more to raise the standards of commercial architecture than any other group of property companies.

They have also done some daring things, like taking on the redevelopment of Liverpool Street Station with its supporting commercial development, or seizing the apparently unlikely opportunity of reclaiming a huge waste tip near Heathrow Airport and transforming it into Stockley Park. Now that the sensible decision has been taken to build the Channel Tunnel rail link through East London to King's Cross, the Lipton/Foster proposals for the redevelopment of the Kings Cross Railway Lands are likely to become a reality.

In the long short list for this year's FT Architecture at Work Award six of the twelve entries are products of Lipton's teams. Four of them are at Stockley Park, for the Stockley Park Consortium Limited. The site of this major business park is some 350 acres of former gravel workings and rubbish tips near Heathrow airport. A masterplan was prepared by Arup Associates creating a 250 acre landscaped park, an 18 hole golf course and 90 acres of commercial development.

At the centre of the development is a building called The Arena - a social and sports club with shops, restaurant and conference facilities, designed by Arup. Unlike the lightweight pavilions which house the commercial activities, the Arena is a blockwork bastion with a large rotunda - not uninfluenced by James Stirling's rotunda at the Staatsgalerie at Stuttgart. It lies long and low by its lake, with earth banking decreasing its apparent volume. Inside the 25 metre swimming pool has lovely long views of the landscape and terraces. The choice of masonry blockwork has given it a somewhat harsh and defensive appearance - something that the developers must also feel as creepers are being planted on the south wall to soften it.

For the business 'pavilions', the Consortium has selected a range of architects. The first of the three buildings visited by the FT jury, now tenanted by Apple Computers, was designed by the relatively young firm of Troughton McAslan Limited. This building broke the mould established by the early Arup pavilions, that looked faintly Japanese with their gently pitched roofs and submission to the landscaping. Troughton McAslan has erected an elegant prism with a curved barrel vault roof, and decorated the prism with 'sails' as sunshades and bright blue fire escape stairs. Internally, the double height circulation street works well and is well used by the client. Alas, the wall cladding selected for the outside undulates and waves about in a way that completely undermines the ideal of the perfect, flat, polished prism.

The building occupied by the UK operation of American toy company Hasbro Bradley demonstrates the success of the more traditional Arup formula. This building retains its almost Japanese profile and relates well to the watery landscape. Arup's buildings at Stockley, unlike some of the later ones, do not look as though the architect is just trying to improve the basic shed. They have a solidity and permanence. Hasbro Bradley has made the most of the interior of its premises, particularly with a fine collection of carefully chosen contemporary art.

In the FT jury's view, the most beautiful new building at Stockley Park is the one designed by Ian Ritchie - known only as 'B8.' The architect has designed a sealed glass cube behind a slender colonnade that supports a series of sunscreens. It is the harmony and elegance of its proportions that pleases, as well as the almost pin-striped neatness of the whole conception. Looking out from this building on to the artificial Arcadian landscape of the park is a 'romantic' experience. The world of Motopia that is in reality so near has been banished and the tenants of these pristine temples are sealed in air conditioned comfort in a temporary, somewhat unrealistic paradise.

In the City of London Lipton has also applied his ideological commitment to the heroic power of the Modern Movement. It is a certain belief that an entirely new world can be created. He chose to do so at Liverpool Street where he was faced with the relics of the 19th century - a crumbling railway infrastructure, the need for a new station and the opportunity for major commercial development. Broadgate occupies part of the site - some 8.8 acres developed according to another Arup masterplan. The four main office buildings surround a new square, the centre of which is occupied by an ice rink in winter and an arena in summer.

This is not the London equivalent of the Rockefeller Centre on New York's Fifth Avenue, because it is isolated from the City in its own enclosed world. The architecture with its repetitive external frames almost overdoses on atria, pink granite and grid patterns. Apart from the ice rink and the service shops it is an office world graced with trees and squares, but silent and empty after hours.

Broadgate is a very high standard urban business park - perfectly tailored, cool and planned. This new world still seems rather unreal.

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