



# When the Cows came to Clerkenwell

The London Architecture Biennale, June 2004

By Peter Murray

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**While sipping cocktails at the Venice Architecture Biennale two years ago, Peter Murray mused over why such an event shouldn't be hosted in London, home to so many leading international architectural practices. Here he charts how the idea became a reality, and why cattle came to be driven once more through the streets of London.**

I gazed across the Canale della Giudecca from the terrace of Harry's Dolci and sipped another Bellini as the world's architects gathered for supper: Lord Rogers, Lord Foster, David Chipperfield, Peter Eisenman, Will Alsop, Frank Gehry. They were in Venice for the Architecture Biennale, the biggest starfest in the architectural calendar. In 2002 the exhibitions in the Arsenale and Giardini were curated by The Observer's architectural correspondent Deyan Sudjic who pulled off one of the best shows in years. The work on display ranged from a new masterplan for the centre of Barnsley to blue sky projects on the design of skyscrapers. Exciting stuff, but what did it all mean, why here in Venice? The Commune di Venezia is keen on cultural events like the international festival of contemporary dance, the international film festival, the festival of theatre and the Art Biennale - they provide a great boost for La Serenissima's tourist industry.

The success of the Architecture Biennale in attracting

architects from America, South America, New Zealand and Japan reflects the growing globalisation of architecture where star architects jet around the world creating new iconic developments that will provide that lucky city with the 'Bilbao effect'. But once the parties are over, the stars have returned to their studios and the exhibits packed up and sent back home, Venice returns to normal, affected not a jot by the visiting designers or their works.

Surely, I thought, such an event should be more grounded in a particular place. Could not Clerkenwell, where Wordsearch is based, show Venice how it should be done? After all, Clerkenwell has the highest concentration of architects of anywhere in the world - nearly 2000 architects work in the area, almost ten per cent of the UK's profession. Not only that, Clerkenwell's architects include some of the best in the world. Zaha Hadid, whose office is in Bowling Green Lane, won the Pritzker Prize (architecture's Nobel), the UK office of one of the world's largest practices - SOM - is on City Road, and Europe's largest - BDP - has recently moved into a converted gin distillery off St John Street.

On returning to London the idea of a Biennale was received enthusiastically by the local architects; some offered seed funding to get the idea off the ground. The big breakthrough came when a reporter from the Architect's Journal rang up and asked about rumours she had heard of a Clerkenwell

Architecture Biennale. I reeled off all the ideas I had had for events and exhibitions and these duly appeared in a half page article in the next week's edition. After a barrage of supporting emails from AJ readers there was clearly no going back.

With help from the Architecture Foundation, a near neighbour, and a committee of local movers and shakers, we got underway. It was called The Clerkenwell Architecture Biennale as a piece of understated irony. Clerkenwell conjures up a very different vision than Venice and I liked the contrast. But irony does not travel well. I saw the event as something of at least national, if not international, significance. Others, like the London Development Agency, saw it as a village fête. The turning point came with an interview with CABESpace, the organisation set up by the Deputy Prime Minister to encourage green space in cities. Our request for support was turned down by the Director with the comment 'Sorry, it's far too local!' How on earth you deal with public space that is not inherently local I do not know, but from that day the name changed to the London Architecture Biennale in Clerkenwell.

To reinforce the idea that architecture is rooted in its place I invited Peter Ackroyd to be the Biennale President and to give the inaugural lecture. His book *London: the biography* is a hugely important work in providing an understanding of how London works, an understanding that informs architects and planners in the development of the metropolis. Although he has a natural fascination with the old, Ackroyd accepts the idea of change and renewal as a part of the life force of the place.

At the time we invited Ackroyd to be President he was working on his series of TV programmes on London. Luckily for us, the programmes were delayed and were shown just weeks before the Biennale, with the effect of increasing public interest in all the events he was involved with.

A central feature of the Biennale was the recreation of the cattle drive down St John Street to Smithfield which had taken place from the 12th to the 18th century. "What on earth have cows got to do with architecture?" some asked. The answer is this: the activities of the past affect the way Clerkenwell works today and provide some explanation as to why it has become a centre of architectural practices. There is a link through time, from the bookbinders who worked near the tanneries that were there because of Smithfield market, to typesetters and printers, to designers. The small industries that once filled the area provide the sort of open space that suits architects' studios. Situated outside the old City walls, Clerkenwell has always been an area of radicalism, creating an atmosphere that attracts the creative industries. The refurbished buildings sustain rents that are within the reach of design firms, yet they are well located to service clients in the City and West End.



However the Metropolitan Police had no such romantic ideas about the connections between Clerkenwell past and present. They were frightened of cows and while they agreed that there was no legal impediment to us taking a herd on the public highway, if we contravened Health and Safety Regulations then we could face a jail sentence if the cows ran amok. We had hoped to drive the cattle (five cows, four calves) from the north end of St John's Street, where there was an architect's office that had been converted from the original stable used in the 17th century, down to Smithfield half a mile to the south. Islington Council said there would have to be cattle grids installed at each junction. Transport for London said they would have to divert all their buses. The police threatened jail.

In the end we were allowed to take the cows 100 yards along a closed section of the road. Two weeks later, Michael Schumacher and his chums raced down Regent Street in 1000 horsepower racing cars which were illegally on the public highway at speeds of up to 70mph. It is perhaps understandable that the men from the Met are more at home with cars than cattle – but they came very close to sabotaging a very safe family-friendly event. However, the urbanites' lack of contact with cattle worked to our advantage when some 15,000 people turned out on the day curious to see the cows make their short walk.

We also wanted to show how public space in the area could be improved. We planned to turf over a part of St John Street where it leads to Smithfield Market and widens out to form a city square-size space that is currently split by two lanes of traffic, a motor scooter park and a vandalised tree.

Our landscape architect David Buck convinced In Turf, who are busy growing the turf for the new Wembley Stadium, to provide us with half an acre of grass. Once the turf was laid the street was transformed; people immediately sat down on what a few hours before had been a busy road.

The Biennale HQ was in the Farmiloe Building on St John Street, once used as a builders merchants but empty for the past decade. The interiors, great loading bays, large storage areas and a 19th century office layout that came straight out of Dickens, provided the venue for some of the Biennale events – the Urban Interventions and Mementoes exhibitions, the lectures, the bar and the parties. The Urban Interventions exhibition showed new work by local architects that dealt with the problems and the delights of building within an existing environment. The show comprised some 80 schemes that were all contemporary in style yet understanding of their environment. Another highlight was



Mementoes & Other Curiosities which brought together a group of contemporary artists to interpret and engage with the Dickensian office space.

The offices with their imposing dark wood frames and grubby glass provided an excellent arena in which to present the work. Walking around you could feel the echoes of the people who worked there over the decades. With discarded belongings and unwanted furniture scattered around the building, it had a feeling of calm disquiet. The exhibition – which attracted the interest of Charles Saatchi – blurred the line between historical documentation and the artists' work, creating a rich mix of dark, playful interventions and intriguing scenarios. Evocative objects and documents were found as the visitor explored the space. Sights of narrative

were woven through them, giving hints of events, characters and the stories that bind them.

Other events happened throughout the Clerkenwell area. There were exhibitions about the history of Clerkenwell, architects' offices opened their doors to the public and an





open air exhibition about the River Fleet, hidden for the past two centuries beneath the Farringdon Road, proved especially popular. The Guardian Newsroom hosted a series of events including three seminars on 'Gentrification', 'Cultural Hubs' and 'Who makes London?'

Highlights of the ten days included Zaha Hadid's Barbican lecture, which became the largest architecture lecture ever in the UK, selling out at 1,162 seats. The debate about Prince Charles' role in recent architecture was broadcast on Radio 4. And Robert Elms hosted his Radio London show live from the Farmiloes building. The Architecture Rocks party brought together bands made up of architects and Sir Stuart Lipton, who that week had resigned from the Chairmanship of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), was presented with the Biennale Award for the person who has done most for architecture in London.

In all, a total of 25,000 people attended events during the ten days of the Biennale.

The Biennale really struck a chord. The response to the whole event was much, much greater than we had expected and there was a marvellous atmosphere throughout the week. We are now planning for 2006; the huge response and positive feedback we have received means that the LAB is now a permanent fixture in the capital's calendar.

To assist us with our future plans Locum Destination Consulting agreed to undertake a survey of visitors to the Biennale. The research showed that overall, people were very positive about the inaugural festival, about the quality of the events, the venues and the calibre of the hosts and speakers. The use of the Farmiloes Building was regularly singled out as being particularly impressive and innovative.

Visitors were keen to know where the event will take place in 2006 with opinion divided between those who wanted to see Clerkenwell re-stage and those who wish to see it relocate. Research results suggested that good transport links, a high density of creative industries and a central London location were all considered to be very important in the consideration and organisation of future Biennale events.

The precise location and structure of the Second London Architecture Biennale is under intense discussion. It is probable it will spread beyond the boundaries of Clerkenwell but we are conscious that we must not dissipate the energy and goodwill that was evident in the inaugural event and is a product of the remarkable concentration of architects in this creative hub.

**Peter Murray is Director of the London Architecture Biennale and Chairman of Wordsearch, the specialist design and communications consultancy for architecture, property and the built environment. He was also Curator of the New City Architecture exhibition.**