

Absorbing Ideas

Studying and working in Glasgow and London have fed a magpie appetite, says Chris Dyson

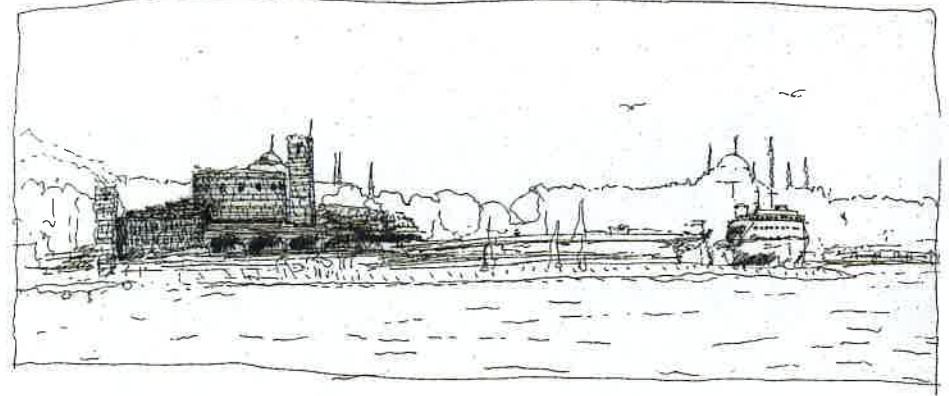


Left

Braun Melsungen headquarters, Germany, by James Stirling, Michael Wilford & Associates.

Below

Chris Dyson's sketch for his student thesis project at Glasgow School of Art for a World University at Istanbul.



I trained as an architect at Oxford Brookes and Glasgow School of Art — first came craft, and second came experimentation. In Glasgow I studied under Andy Macmillan and Isi Metzstein and their wonderful crew of tutors. My GSA thesis was the most formative experience of my education. Metzstein, Macmillan and tutor Ulla Wilke — who was Stirling Wilford's project architect for the Stuttgart Staatsgalerie, and who later led to me to work at the practice — were keen that our projects should be rooted in the local urban context of Glasgow, a city that they deeply understood and cared for. Most students sensibly sited their projects there.

However, I took the unusual decision to opt for Istanbul, believing that if historical context is what they want, then I'm going for the most multi-layered place on earth. In Istanbul — an urban palimpsest that stretches across the centuries from early Christian times to capital of the Ottoman Empire — I could absorb inspiration from the fabric of the city, with its fortified walls, its palaces, grand mosques, souks and bazaars, and draw on both Christian and Islamic influences for my project. I had landed in my spiritual home, and decided to design a World University as a place for cross-cultural understanding.

As a student I also travelled extensively through India, voraciously documenting the breathtakingly beautiful and sometimes turbid surroundings in my sketchbooks. Dog-eared on the outside, they contain a treasure trove of vibrant watercolours, and are crammed full of sketches of buildings, market places, even plants and flowers — capturing my 'as-seen' India in all its chaotic and intense splendour.

In London, at James Stirling, Michael Wilford & Associates, I found a whole new world of international projects. I formed a great friendship with Manuel Schupp from whom I learned many a practical thing about the process of bringing forward a 1:200 scale design into technical and built reality. David Turnbull (now at New York's Cooper Union) and Charlie Sutherland (founder of Sutherland Hussey) reinforced the importance of the diagram and the power of the plan and the clarity of thought required to achieve this.

I am a magpie, gathering unrelated odds and ends that seem unremarkable at first glance. I enjoy the extraordinary beauty in the ordinary. Old rusty bed springs found on a weekend trip to the seaside in Scotland look stunning and remarkably abstract on my study wall. Such randomly-sourced objects continually inform the building projects and design ideas of my own practice (established in 2004), in a multi-layered approach that seems to work on different types and scales.

Working and living in three different buildings in Spitalfields I have learned a lot about the practical side of building and construction, and as a practice we mediate between the beautiful and the practical. Sitting now beneath the wonky rooflight at the top of our new Spitalfields studio, the table is a chunky heavy beast of a thing made from the remains of burnt timber trusses from my home studio in Princelet Street. Recycled and repurposed is a mantra in our work.

Spitalfields provides a home, workplace, projects and a community. Unlike some of our neighbours, however, we eschew an eighteenth-century lifestyle and live in a contemporary manner. Beauty is all, but buildings are also for living in: for eating, drinking, loving and sleeping — slavish conservation is not for me.

Our vocabulary is enriched by historical enquiry, be it the research into uses of the Topkapi Palace in student days or learning the correct brickwork and distempers to deploy in eighteenth-century housing. We seek to fuse Modern Movement ideals of functionality, clarity, integrity and economy with the traditional qualities of form and space to convey a sense of historic continuity. **▲**