LONDON: DESIGN CAPITAL

BUILDINGS / PLACES / CITIES
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By the time of the '90s economic crash, communications had only marginally improved for those wanting to work overseas. Plane travel was faster and affordable, but drawings were shared by fax and the World Wide Web had only just been invented. ‘We need to charge our politicians to ensure the measures are in place to retain our global workforce and our arts and educational institutions to foster greater accessibility.’

London is the world’s global capital for creative design and construction skills. Just as the City of London became the financial capital of the world, so London has benefited from its history, its location, its legal and education systems to create a hub of built environment skills that are in demand around the world. It is the first city to have so converted the exporting of professional skills into a truly global business.

The construction industry, from medieval masons on, have always been peripatetic – they go where the work is. But the means of managing that work has changed dramatically in the digital world.

Creative Capital

As a London based practice with offices based on three continents and a team of highly creative architects currently engaged in design and development opportunities around the globe, I welcome the NLA’s latest insight study and exhibition London: Design Capital for two reasons. Firstly, it is an amazing showcase of the degree and extent to which our capitals’ creatives are innovating, influencing and inspiring the built environment – a testimony and celebration of London’s status as a world leading creative metropolis. Secondly, the exhibition and study is a perfect platform for further discourse and discussion on how we as professionals can do better as an industry and for society in general.

London must, however, not sit on its laurels. There is still, and always will be, more to do and more to learn. We are living in an age of flux and change and if we want our city to retain its leading edge in creative intellect we also need to use our voices. It is also imperative that as an industry we need to fully support diversity that will nurture the rich and balanced knowledge so vital for the creation of exceptional design and finally as a society we need to continue to listen and learn from our global neighbours and communities.

This insight study looks into such issues and I, for one, look forward to the debate and the positive changes that will ensue with the key aim of strengthening London’s future creative heritage.

Sir David Adjaye

Global Business

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1.1 What makes London a global city?

‘London is a world by itself. We daily discover in it more new countries, and surprising singularities, than in all the universe besides. There are among the Londoners so many nations differing in manners, customs and religions, that the inhabitants themselves don’t know a quarter of them.’

Thomas Brown, 1702

London has a well-founded reputation as one of the world’s greatest creative and commercial urban centres, a result primarily of its rich and cosmopolitan mix of cultures, creative energy, diverse economy, spirit of entrepreneurialism, and world-class research and education facilities encouraging innovation in thinking and practice.

Yet it does not operate estranged from other world cities. London is the crossroads of the world. Not just today but throughout its history, as the quote above demonstrates, it has acted as an interchange of international networks and has attracted people from every corner of the globe to live and work here.

There are many different social, economic, geographical and other conditions that have made London one of the world’s truly global cities. Its population is one of the world’s most ethnically diverse, with 50 non-indigenous groups having populations of over 10,000 people. More than a third of the capital’s inhabitants were born outside the UK and – as widely reported during the run up to the 2012 Olympic Games – more than 300 community languages are spoken here, with Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, Cantonese and Mandarin most common alongside English. Alongside this, at a practical level, London benefits from being the origin of the Prime Meridian, at Greenwich, at the centre of world time zones; from having a stable government and legal system; and from being the home of the English language, the lingua franca of commerce, diplomacy, science, the arts and academia. London’s well-established international transport links, by air, rail and sea, make it one of the best-connected hubs in the world, a prerequisite for facilitating business – as Mike McNicholas, Managing Director, Infrastructure, at Atkins UK explains, simply put, ‘easy connectivity with our customers and colleagues internationally is hugely important’. A critical factor in the success of London’s creative industries (see below) is their co-location with some of the world’s most important financial companies and institutions, and the strength of London’s economy as a whole – the economic output per person of London is estimated to be more than double that of the rest of the UK.

However, as advocated in the Mayor’s #londonisopen campaign in wake of the Brexit referendum result – it is London’s spirit of openness and inclusivity, and the way in which its environment and ethos facilitate the exchange and evolution of ideas, knowledge and innovation, that have particularly been at the heart of the success of its built environment and design industries. This is partly due to the constant movement of people in and out of the city – ‘London relies on the fast-moving international influx that convenes in this great melting pot and then redistributes back out to all corners of the globe’, says design journalist Max Fraser.

It is also a result of the legacy of a reputation that views British culture and society (with London as a perfect microcosm) that is defined by flexibility, calculated risk-taking, and a certain willingness to bend the rules and to push against and test limits: an attitude characterised, according to Albert Williamson-Taylor of AKT II, as ‘lateral thinking and an eccentric nature that allows us to see other people’s point of view’. It is this outward-looking, open attitude to new influences and ways of thinking from all over the world that underpins London’s renowned status in built environment design.
1.2 What is the current contribution and profile of built environment industries to London’s economy?

The huge value of London’s built environment industries to London’s economic success has been revealed for the first time in new research published in 2017 by the Mayor of London’s GLA Economics unit in partnership with the London Festival of Architecture (LFA). It shows that London’s architecture sector alone produces £1.7 billion of value in services and is, in fact, 38 per cent larger than other creative industries in London, including product, graphic and fashion design. Most importantly, the architecture industry in London is growing by 7.6 per cent every year – overtaking the creative industries (3.9 per cent) and the London economy as a whole (3 per cent). In relation to other built environment disciplines, other studies by the GLA comparing London with other global cities have shown that the value of construction sector output, at £16.9 billion, is higher than that of Shanghai (£16.5 billion), Hong Kong (£11.9 billion) or Dubai (£7.7 billion). The value of London’s engineering exports has most recently been estimated at just over £1.7 billion. Net exports of architectural services are also increasing, and are worth £437 million more than two years ago.

The GLA/LFA research also shows that the architecture sector is a significant employer, with 22,800 staff. Most importantly, its international diversity and profile are a reflection of the rest of London – about one-third of these jobs are held by non-UK nationals. In some London practices that proportion is much higher: in KPF’s London office, for example, it is just over two thirds (67 per cent) – 95 out of 140 staff. Another distinctive feature is the vast range of languages spoken in individual offices: at KPF it is 18, and, at AKT II, 30; even at smaller practices, such as Ben Adams Architects, 27 languages are spoken by a staff of just 60. In the construction sector, recent research shows that of the 350,000 people who work in London’s construction sector, 27 per cent are from the EU, 3 per cent are from other European countries, and 14 per cent are from the rest of the world. Looking ahead, there is also a need in the region of an extra 13,000 new workers each year until 2021 in order to plug the skills gap and meet the additional demands on the industry to deliver new housing and growth.

1.3 How did London’s built environment industries become a global brand?

London built environment practices and companies have been responsible for innumerable buildings that have helped to define the shape and profile of cities around the world, across Asia, the Middle East and Australia in particular. In doing so, names have become internationally recognisable: architects Foster + Partners, Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners and multidisciplinary companies Arup and Atkins are among the best-known. The 19th century Victorian period – the great era of invention – saw the dissemination of pioneering approaches in architecture, construction and engineering across the then vast British Empire, encompassing about one quarter of the world’s population and area at its height. However, the association of London architecture with flair, creativity and originality is much more clearly seen from the postwar era, as the RIBA’s 2014 exhibition and TV series The Brits Who Built the Modern World demonstrated. Post-war British architects and engineers such as Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, Ove Arup, and Amyas Connell who had been at the vanguard of the Modern Movement in the 1930s were, alongside a younger generation, employed to create buildings that represented a progressive, outward-looking national identity, especially for newly independent countries of the former British Empire: ‘ambitious, self-determined – and keen to catch up – emerging states imported skills and expertise from across the world’.

Top: Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank, Hong Kong, Foster and Partners © Ian Lambot
Above: Abadan Airport, Iran, Brian Colquhoun & Partners © RIBA Collection
Top right: Max Fry, Jane Drew and Le Corbusier taking tea together © RIBA Collection
Above right: Staatsgalerie extension, Stuttgart, James Stirling Michael Wilford & Associates © Alastair Hunter / RIBA Collections