



RICHARD BRYANT

Alice Rawsthorn, Paul Robbrecht and Rachel Whiteread discuss the latest phase in the evolution of the Whitechapel Gallery, its landmark status and the process of the Gallery's expansion.

**PAUL ROBBRECHT**

from the Chent-based practice, Robbrecht en Daem Architecten was selected from a shortlist of architects to lead the design team.

**ALICE RAWSTHORN**

Chair of the building committee and a Trustee throughout the project, chaired the selection panel that chose Robbrecht en Daem Architecten.

**RACHEL WHITEREAD**

Member of the selection panel and former Trustee, worked as artist advisor on the redevelopment project.



# in conversation

HANNAH VAUGHAN What do you each see as the main parameters defining the Whitechapel Gallery redevelopment?

**RACHEL WHITEREAD** I live in the East End, have for decades, and so have always seen the Whitechapel Gallery as a fantastic resource. It is especially interesting to be involved in an advisory role in the gallery's expansion, because of my interest in contemporary architecture and awareness of the potential pitfalls when architects design contemporary art spaces. I am thinking of strange angular walls and things that might be fantastic sculpturally, but which don't necessarily aid the viewing of art. A more positive example is Tate Modern, where they consulted a number of artist advisors and it became clear that, in general, artists didn't want brand new buildings. They'd rather work within a converted site and try and find a way of maximizing a space ... somewhere with lots of light and room for the artist to express themselves, not the architect.

**PAUL ROBBRECHT** I also have a long relationship with the Whitechapel Gallery. Long before I took part in this competition, I was a regular visitor. For me, it is an important place of reference for contemporary art and so I visited often. In 1996 I designed an exhibition at the Gallery: 'Inside the Visible', 1996, for the former Director [Catherine Lampert], so I already had a relationship with the very particular, beautiful spaces that Whitechapel has — its long galleries, one on top of the other. In the first stages of the competition, I was particularly excited about visiting the library. It was inspiring to see the place still in operation and that very first visit already directed our thoughts. Looking at the people who were using the library, they had a very different way of being — it wasn't like in a museum or an art space where your movements are directed. This observation would lead to the discovery of a scheme to unite the original Whitechapel Gallery with this older building.

**ALICE RAWSTHORN** Like Rachel, I've lived in East London for many years and have had a very close relationship with the Whitechapel Gallery. When I came to London as an art history graduate in 1980, the exhibitions staged there under the directorship of Nicholas Serota were intellectually very influential and helped to form my sensibility. So this was a fascinating project — to build on the Whitechapel Gallery's extraordinary history and its particular reputation. Iwona Blazwick [Director of Whitechapel Gallery] had very clear functional requirements for the new gallery, which to some degree defined the parameters. Iwona wanted to develop a more experimental, improvisational approach to showing collections, and to expand the Gallery's potential for commissions and exhibitions. The gallery's dynamic community and education programmes were operating from a postage stamp-sized space and the poetry and music programmes also needed more physical space.

If I had to distil the character of the Whitechapel Gallery and the qualities that make it special, I would say it's all to do with intellectual romance. That applies to the library as well as to the gallery, and I think that given that they are neighbouring buildings, which are otherwise physically divorced from each other in every possible way, the architectural challenge of melding them together was a fascinating one. I felt passionately that it should be an extraordinary architectural solution. I absolutely cannot see the point of beginning a project like this unless the results are going to be remarkable. This was all the more essential for an institution like the Whitechapel Gallery, which has such a particular, special history that is linked to its location and curatorial heritage.

**RACHEL WHITEREAD** There really needs to be a sympathetic melding when you have two such different buildings. It has to work like that or you might as well just make two separate spaces.

**ALICE RAWSTHORN** We also have to remember that these are not buildings of great architectural distinction and it would be silly to be overly pompous and precious about that. They are, however, buildings of great architectural character. The Gallery certainly has an imposing façade, and the exhibition spaces, I think, are among the most beautiful in the world, they're very graceful. As for the Library, it wasn't particularly innovative, technically or aesthetically. Townsend was not an extraordinary architect, but it's a gutsy, characterful part of a very special area of London.

**KATRINA SCHWARZ** You all seem to view the Whitechapel Gallery with a degree of romantic attachment. Did the fact that people have such a strong, almost nostalgic, connection to the Gallery cause any trepidation when it came to redesigning the space?

**RACHEL WHITEREAD** We still need to see what happens at the Whitechapel Gallery. I've got every faith Iwona will do a great job — but a lot of people said to me 'why does the Whitechapel need to be bigger? Why do we need more lottery money put into yet another space?' All over the country there are spaces, drawing upon vast amounts of money and effort, which have, quite frankly, failed. But the Gallery has such a strong history and its in a very particular place in London, a place that is really the heartbeat of the art world, with thousands of artists, hundreds of interesting galleries, and I think that will be reflected in Iwona's programme.

**ALICE RAWSTHORN** Iwona has always had a crystal clear, very inspiring, vision for the Whitechapel Gallery and that is the single most important thing. She could deliver that vision from a barn in Suffolk, or a shack on Brick Lane, and it would be fine. I find the spirit of the Gallery and Library incredibly romantic: the wonderful stories of David Bomberg's poetry readings, the relationship to the Toynbee development, its broader links to the Unitarian movement and the socialist strands of the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain, I find very evocative and inspiring. I felt it was essential to reflect that physically and architecturally in the Gallery. There has been a very interesting volte face in the heritage movement in Britain. A decade, two decades ago, heritage was seen as restoration of the sumptuous, the precious, the special. The heritage bodies have done an excellent job of reclaiming vernacular heritage, which is much more relevant to the family histories of the vast majority of people in the country. So whilst the Whitechapel Library is not a distinguished building, it is a characterful building and every element of it, even the dodgy chimney breasts, tells us something about the social history of Britain. They don't tell us very much about the architectural and aesthetic history of Britain, but that social history really is worth preserving.

I think in a way Paul has reinvented those spaces in a rather dreamlike spirit. It is not what people conventionally think of as the intervention of a contemporary architect into a historical space. You don't suddenly see a dazzling new structure with shiny glass and gleaming metal. Almost all the interventions are subtle, in some cases physically, so that you actually have to crane your neck to see them, but they do affect the experience of being in the space. They have a very strong emotional impact. As construction has continued, this has become more and more apparent. I think it is also important to remember that the Whitechapel Gallery is a gallery that has been reinvented with every exhibition. If you look at the incredible footage of shows from the 1960s, when Bryan Robertson was Director, they were building the temporary walls from breeze blocks and the curators were painting them themselves! You know, back in the bad old days ...

**RACHEL WHITEREAD** ( *laughing* ) Maybe we can go back to that again ...

**ALICE RAWSTHORN** To return to the question, every visitor does have a very particular response to the Whitechapel Gallery, but repeat visitors will have had myriad responses, partially shaped by the elemental conditions of the building, and partly by the spatial reconfiguration of each show. I think for an architect, that is a particularly invigorating experience. I think it's also worth pointing out that in the competition, not one team of architects proposed changing the existing galleries in any way. They were seen as special, beautiful and sacrosanct. And also perfectly functional.

HANNAH VAUGHAN I'd like to pick up on that point and direct the conversation towards Paul

PAUL ROBBRECHT The first thing is understanding the place. What we found interesting was the polarity between the two buildings. The original Whitechapel Gallery had a longitudinal typology while the library, the new main gallery, and the gallery on top are of a more central scheme. Different possibilities, different dimensions and different energies. That lower gallery in the old Whitechapel has four corners. Gallery 2 also has four corners but they're completely different — like a square and a Greek cross. Those two polarities were of tremendous influence to what happened next. We had to connect them, so we had to find spaces in between. We created spaces for art — they're quite small spaces, but small spaces can also be strong. Before, the Whitechapel had the lower gallery, with its big long staircase, and the upper gallery. Now there will be a sense of passing through space, from the huge wide galleries with natural light, through the between spaces. We created a slower relationship between ground and upper floors. When exhibitions are curated, these two different spaces will create a challenge. Some kind of dialogue will exist, maybe opposite things can be happening at the same time ...

HANNAH VAUGHAN Alice touched upon the fact that these were not grand, sumptuous buildings. Was the idea of the domestic important to you?

PAUL ROBBRECHT Very much. That is an important element in the education rooms — they are smaller and high above street level. The higher you go, the more house-like the spaces become, the more domestic. We changed the roof completely and introduced wooden planks to the ceiling so that everything is not the abstract white cube. We used materials that you could imagine in a house. Also with regard to dimensions and proportions — you can almost touch the ceiling. When you take the long walk up to the higher space, it's like a tent. Everything feels very close to you, but at the same time it's the place in the gallery where you can actually see the city, all of the city, fragmentally. You're looking over the whole area and onto Whitechapel High Street. From the back you have a really panoramic view — you see the Hawksmoor, you see the Gherkin. You look back to the roofs of Whitechapel as well. It's like you're in the air. On the one hand architecture is this thing that you have to protect you, and on the other — and for me this is an essential element — it is also a tool to understand the world, to situate yourself towards something bigger and that's actually happening upstairs in the Whitechapel Gallery.

ALICE RAWSTHORN I think this picks up on two very important strands in current thinking about the spatial configuration of museums and galleries. One is that traditionally, the education spaces have been the least glamorous, the least salubrious, the least exciting, and Ivona and the team were absolutely adamant that going there had to be a hugely exhilarating experience for those kids, many of whom will come from communities local to the Gallery, so often from very deprived backgrounds. Visiting the Whitechapel Gallery should be an adventure for them, something that really opens their imaginations to the possibilities of architecture and the urban experience. And so it was essential that visiting the education spaces was every bit as thrilling as walking into the very graceful, imposing galleries. The second point is that for much of the twentieth century, museums and galleries were designed to guide the visitor efficiently through those spaces in a prescribed route ...

RACHEL WHITEREAD to the shop ( laughs )

ALICE RAWSTHORN Exactly. That was postmodernism. (laughter) There was a collusion between the administration of the museum or gallery and the architect to really define and dictate the experience of the visitor. This has changed completely because for all sorts of cultural reasons, people are no longer willing to have their experiences dictated to them. You only have to think about the way we use the internet as our primary source of information. We're sort of meandering around, steering our own course, foraging for bits of information here and there. So it's absolutely essential that we give people many, many

different choices in other contexts, including visits to cultural spaces. It will be very interesting to see where people twist and turn, which parts of the building they visit first and how they develop their relationship to it ...

RACHEL WHITEREAD But also using it as a resource of a different kind. Not just going to an exhibition any more, but looking at an archive, a specific collection, the education rooms ... It's one of the things that I'm looking forward to — using the Gallery and not having to go and submerge yourself in an exhibition. You can just go and do one thing, have a coffee and leave. I think that's quite special.

ALICE RAWSTHORN Yes, it becomes a much more interactive space rather than a passive predetermined one.

HANNAH VAUGHAN The Whitechapel Gallery is often referred to as the 'artists' gallery'. How do you think the redevelopment will effect this claim?

RACHEL WHITEREAD There will be eight great galleries to see stuff in and different exhibitions in those galleries, which will be great. That's only going to expand the experience. Places need to settle into themselves. It's going to have a lead in period but I'm sure people will greatly appreciate it.

KATRINA SCHWARZ And how will the commissions programme alter the way artists and visitors relate to the Gallery?

PAUL ROBBRECHT It will be a long-term, evolutionary process, with the audience able to experience the growing of certain works over time. In the other spaces there will be monthly or bimonthly changes, but with the commissions, there will be this continuous existence of a work of art by a specific artist.

ALICE RAWSTHORN It offers opportunities for reflection but also for revision. One of the wonderful things about London over the last two decades has been this explosion of activity in the visual arts. We're now spoilt and pampered because we're deluged with things to see. I think this creates cultural consumers, people who behave quite voraciously. They run around grazing the art scene, never really staying with anything for that long. Within the course of a year, you would expect to go back to the big new exhibitions at the Whitechapel Gallery, and while there, you would probably pop back in to see the year-long commission, so your thoughts and response to it might change which I think will make it a much deeper, richer experience.

RACHEL WHITEREAD I think that's one of the really exciting things, for me as an artist, to have a place to go back to and see something. The only place that really does that is the Turbine Hall [at Tate Modern] ...

ALICE RAWSTHORN ... and people have responded so positively and enthusiastically to that. I think it has been a really encouraging benchmark.

RACHEL WHITEREAD (to Alice) You were saying that people 'graze' around London, which they do, but there is also a tendency to have a village that you live and work in, and my village is definitely the East End, so it's great to have this extra resource being put in there.

KATRINA SCHWARZ How do you envisage the relationship between Whitechapel Gallery and the East End?

ALICE RAWSTHORN The Whitechapel Gallery's relationship to its locality is one of its most important, defining qualities. There are other institutions you can think of internationally, and locally in London, that have a similar sort of rapport. I mean it's impossible to think of the Camden Arts Centre anywhere but in Shrinkville, North West London, whereas ...

( much laughter )

RACHEL WHITEREAD And this is an East Ender speaking!

ALICE RAWSTHORN ... and part of the thing that makes the Camden Arts Centre so special is that it's rooted in that local community. The Whitechapel Gallery has a tremendously complicated and diverse local community. It has an important social responsibility to the broader community, as well as a very special relationship to the artists within that community. Charles Booth's poverty maps [of the late nineteenth century] focused on Whitechapel because the social polarities, between wealthy merchants and bankers, and the poor weavers and seamstresses, were so extreme. The contemporary East End is exactly like that. You have extremes of wealth and poverty, and Whitechapel Gallery is one of the rare beacons that tries to meld those worlds — which is an important responsibility.

HANNAH VAUGHAN Architecturally, how did you address those concerns?

PAUL ROBBRECHT One of the important things is the way the street and interior will be related. There are three thresholds in this facility: the original gallery entrance, the entrance to the library, and the entrance to the subway. There aren't so many art spaces that have this direct relation to the street. Thinking of the High Street in relation to the quietness of an art space in which it is necessary to concentrate, we decided to make a foyer space — again like an in-between space or an incubator. This relation to the street, it's very special — and all the things that happen on Whitechapel High Street — you cannot imagine!

ALICE RAWSTHORN Interestingly, in our research amongst the local community, people did not want the new Gallery to have too direct a relationship to the street, because one of the things they valued most about the gallery was that it offered a kind of sanctuary. These are not cultural tourists zipping in and being exhilarated by the eclectic, scuzzy, grungy neighbourhood, they deal with the reality of it everyday and they realize how tough and stressful it can be and so want something different from the Gallery. Whereas the Library, when it was open, I always found a very inspiring place because ...

RACHEL WHITEREAD It was a bit like a Tardis, wasn't it? You opened these big cranky doors and then you were in ...

ALICE RAWSTHORN ... One of the long term directions for visual arts institutions like the Whitechapel Gallery is to become much more rooted in their local communities. If you look at the way institutions like the Tate, even the V&A, have taken on talks, debates, symposium, gigs, performances, dance — that's a much more dynamic strand of their programming now. The Whitechapel Gallery was a pioneer of that, which creates a very different relationship with the local and broader community, rather than the very specific relationship of people going there to look at exhibitions. So if you talk to say, avant-garde poets buffs in London, they don't think the Whitechapel is the 'artist's gallery' at all. They think it's theirs. And there's a whole alternative community of young unsigned bands who again feel that sense of total possession. And that's exactly as it should be. They should all co-exist quite comfortably.

HANNAH VAUGHAN In researching Harrison Townsend's original plans and the obstacles he faced, we were interested to note that so many architectural details presumed integral to his original designs were really the result of budget restraints. What comparable encounters have informed your designs, Paul?

PAUL ROBBRECHT More money would always be OK. I'm used to working on the continent, and I can only do half with the money here, it's so expensive! That was maybe a bit of a shock to us. But of course, the building is the building and we explored it completely. We're using every corner of it ...

RACHEL WHITEREAD Could I just interrupt, because I worked with Paul on this and I think he did an amazing job before anything even started in actually visualizing, and it's quite rare in my experience as an artist, to be able to actually visualize space and try and work out, looking through that wall, and that wall, and that wall, what you can do with it. And I really think he was able to make that concrete before he even put pen to paper. So you didn't have any shocks, and it was very sensitively done.

HANNAH VAUGHAN How do you think the 1980s redevelopment sits alongside this more recent work?

ALICE RAWSTHORN I think that again that's part of the story because that was an enormously important period in the Whitechapel Gallery's development. Its curatorial reputation had been augmented by Nick Serota during the 80s and at a time when there was no lottery funding for capital projects in Britain, it was very, very unusual to get any money to build anything in the arts sector, somehow, miraculously, he and the board managed to raise money to expand the Gallery. That obviously then defined the Whitechapel Gallery through the 1990s and in the early years of this century. And as Paul says, the key architectural features of that development — the Colquhoun + Miller development — were the staircases. I mean you look at them and you can date them to the mid-1980s instantly. Its sort of subtle postmodernism. Now Paul demolished one of those staircases but the other will be part of the redevelopment and I think that is an example of the honesty of the restoration. If you had a vision of a purist early-twentieth century building, you would have undoubtedly removed that staircase from the equation, but it is symbolic of that important part of the Gallery's history ...

RACHEL WHITEREAD But also, if it ain't broke don't fix it, you know, because the galleries have beautiful proportions, they're classic, great art galleries so why change that? And I think that's what everybody realized.

ALICE RAWSTHORN One thing that will surprise and hopefully delight people about the solution is that it's not a new building or a contemporary architectural project in the conventional sense. They won't go in and see dazzling contemporary structures. Paul's approach to architecture involves choreographing the sensory experience of being in different spaces and the experiential nature of those spaces changing. So your relationship with them evolves. His interventions are physically very subtle. They're very intelligently, elegantly and quietly done ... I think there is such disillusion now with one-shot iconic architecture and not only within the architectural community but among the broader public, and mercifully the new Whitechapel Gallery will fit very neatly into that.

RACHEL WHITEREAD It needs to be comfortable ...

ALICE RAWSTHORN Exactly. It's subtle, it's substantial and there's nothing showy, shallow, sparkly or superficial about it. I think people will feel much more empathetic towards it than they would a more sparkly, spangly, glittery, iconic architectural statement. I think that would seem very inappropriate right now and that's not what they're going to get.