

Re-Branding the Post-industrial City: James Stirling’s Adaptive Reuse at the Tate Liverpool

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In 2015, Detroit was named a UNESCO “City of Design” and Liverpool, a “City of Music.” For Liverpool, this award marked the third in a series of commendations from the UN’s cultural arm and the European community. In 2004, the city was inscribed on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites as a “Maritime Mercantile City” in recognition of its role in the development of a 19th century global trading network. In 2008, Liverpool was honored further as a “European Capital of Culture,” a rebranding that emphasized the city’s cultural pedigree over its industrial past. This paper examines the case study of the Tate Liverpool, an adaptive reuse project completed by the architect James Stirling in 1988. The Tate initiative, though small in scale, was one of a series of public-private investments in the 1970s and 1980s that galvanized the City of Liverpool into a reconsideration of its heritage structures and their potential as incubators for a new, diversified economy that emphasized culture. In terms of its architectural sensitivity, institutional dedication to cultural development, and the public-private initiatives that made it possible, the story of the Tate Liverpool provides a pertinent exemplar for revitalization strategies in Detroit and other post-industrial cities where the historic, physical identity of the city can and should be leveraged in its continued renewal.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Detroit was named a UNESCO “City of Design” and Liverpool, a “City of Music.” For Liverpool, this award marked the third in a series of commendations from the UN’s cultural arm and the European community.¹ In 2004, the city was inscribed on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites as a “Maritime Mercantile City” in recognition of its role in the development of a 19th century global trading network. In 2008, the city was honored as a “European Capital of Culture,” a rebranding



Figure 1: Liverpool map with docks (1895). Tate Archives.

that emphasized the city’s cultural pedigree over its industrial past. The “City of Music” moniker would further highlight culture as the city’s primary export. In short, in just over a decade, this northern English city saw its international profile adjusted and polished to both reinforce the importance of music to its 20th century history and to sanitize its industrial-commercial roots.

While Detroit has only recently been recognized on the international stage in an analogous fashion, comparisons between the two cities are productive. Featuring manufacturing economic engines in different centuries – Liverpool in the 19th and Detroit in the 20th – both cities saw a dramatic waning following shifts in global commercial practices and manufacturing processes. After decades of remarkable urban growth and wealth accumulation, Liverpool and Detroit confronted extended periods of precipitous deterioration marked by racial tensions, economic failure, and population decline. In the built environment, this decay is most notably felt in the vacancies that mark the cityscapes. Working to regenerate over the last many decades, the empty building stock has been seen as both a liability and an opportunity.

This paper examines the case study of the Tate Liverpool, an adaptive reuse project of dock warehouse completed by the architect James Stirling in 1988. The Tate initiative, though small in scale, was one of a series of public-private investments in the 1970s and 1980s that galvanized the City of Liverpool into a reconsideration of its heritage structures and their potential as incubators for a new, diversified economy that emphasized culture. Strong in the belief that places are not only contexts or backdrops, but are an integral part of identity, James Stirling's thoughtful design for the museum retained the vernacular and regional integrity of Liverpool's architectural character. In terms of its architectural sensitivity, institutional dedication to cultural development, and the public-private initiatives that made it possible, the story of the Tate Liverpool provides a pertinent exemplar for revitalization strategies in Detroit where the physical identity of the city can and should be leveraged in its continued renewal.

LIVERPOOL

*"When they saw the Albert Dock in Liverpool, they knew they had found the right place. Built by Jesse Hartley in 1841-48, it is one of the finest and grandest industrial buildings in England. It offers ample space and the possibility of conservation and conversion at reasonable cost. The Merseyside Development Corporation was keen to bring the Tate into what has become a mixed redevelopment on a grand scale. There is a political will to enrich a city which is undergoing a traumatic transformation...."*²

Walking from the Lime Street Station, Liverpool's gateway from destinations south, to Tate Liverpool offers a kaleidoscopic rendition of Liverpool's architectural history. Sharply juxtaposed are grand civic structures, successful urban ensembles, and the detritus of industrial decline (Figure 1). From Lime Street, down Hanover Street, across Canning Place to the Strand, the fabric of Liverpool appears to be in a constant state of almost incoherent renovation and reconstruction. Once on the Strand, with its six lanes running parallel to the Mersey River, Liverpool's famed Three Graces – the Royal Liver Building, Cunard Building and Port of Liverpool Building – are visible to the north on Pier Head (Figure 2). In the foreground is Mann Island now occupied by the new Museum of Liverpool Life which opened in 2010. After negotiating the traffic, ahead is the Salthouse Dock with houseboats lined up in picturesque fashion within its basin. The Albert Dock is visible beyond. Moving along the cobbled walks and over the Hartley footbridge, the Tate is reached on the north-west corner of the complex. In this area of Liverpool, the mercantile past has been renewed and decontaminated with new cultural programs and commercial ventures. The regular, handsome walls of the Albert Dock provide a consistent architectural skin for a myriad of activities.

The Tate Liverpool, which opened in May 1988, is located in Warehouse "C" of the Albert Dock. Named for the Prince Consort who opened it in 1846, the Albert Dock forms the largest group of Grade 1 listed buildings in Britain. Besides the Tate gallery, the dock also features the Merseyside Maritime Museum, a history attraction called the Beatles Story, a TV studio as well as shops, cafes, offices, a hotel, and condominium units. The

story of the museum's construction involves a remarkable convergence of personalities, historical incidents, and the prevailing belief of the Tate that their work as an institution could act in positive ways in ameliorating their cities through architecture and urban considerations.

The repurposing of a dock warehouse into an art museum was sponsored by the Merseyside Development Corporation who supported the Tate's vision of art as a catalyst for development and renewal. Seen as a homecoming for the architect who grew up in Liverpool, James Stirling's adaptive reuse design is remarkable for its restraint and intense focus on the interior of the structure. Due to its Grade 1 listing, the exterior of the building was upgraded without altering its original essence. The interior, however, was expertly reconsidered to create an exciting and novel art space. The galleries retain the columns and lower ceilings of the original warehouse which offers the consistent presence of the architecture in the enjoyment of the art works. Instead of distracting from the art, however, the architectural elements of the Albert Dock frame the works and focus the visitor's view.

THE ALBERT DOCK

An exquisite example of functionalist vernacular architecture, the Albert Dock was well regarded and Nikolaus Pevsner remarked that "For sheer punch there is little in the early commercial architecture of Europe to emulate it."³ With large glazed windows, modular brickwork, and refined angles, many of Liverpool's industrial buildings were remarkably modern in their detailing. The internal structure of these warehouses has a massive solidity: graceful brick vaults spring from substantial cast-iron beams, supported at intervals by iron columns. The heaviness of this structure contrasts with that of the roof, which has light, almost bow-profile wrought-iron trusses supporting a roof covering of iron sheets, the last galvanized to protect against corrosion. Given the economy of expression, it is not surprising that a photo of a Liverpoolian dock is found in Le Corbusier's 1923 classic *Towards a New Architecture*. The architectural world's fascination with the docks is also seen in *Architectural Review's* special edition on industrial architecture in 1957 where the Albert Dock was referred to as functional architecture and as a precursor to the modern tradition. Editor James Maude Richards followed the *Architectural Review* piece with a collaborative book featuring photography by Eric De Maré, *The Functional Tradition in Early Industrial Buildings*.⁴ With its beautiful black and white photography and pictorial tour of England, the book celebrated industrial buildings as being fundamentally modern in their detailing and functional, engineering aesthetic. The seminal text presented warehouses and mill buildings as inspiration to architects rebuilding postwar Britain. This same inspiration can be seen in current projects in Liverpool and Detroit where the vernacular building stock is providing lessons that motivate contemporary designers to fashion a future that builds on the past.

By the time Richards's book was published, the Albert Dock was largely derelict due to its inability to handle larger trade vessels. James Stirling recalled that after the Second World War the dock resembled a marine bone-yard where disused ship parts were stored – "funnels, bridges, propellers, etc."⁵ These images of industrial detritus recall Stirling's appreciation for Le Corbusier's oeuvre and his own interest in



Figure 2: The Albert Dock with Liverpool's "Three Graces" in the background. liverpoolecho.co.uk

context and texture. With layers of memory and meaning, the Albert Dock became a palimpsest where different layers were expressed and revealed through Stirling's intervention.

JAMES STIRLING: MEMORY & IDENTITY

The potent history of the site was tapped in some of Stirling's early sketches. One seems to depict aspects of Stirling's early memories of the site as a depository of old shipyard artifacts by presenting the entryway to the new Tate as composed of a ship's bridge and gangways inserting themselves into the north wall of the warehouse with a "tugboat"-esque element forming a type of entry pavilion (Figure 3). This drawing suggests a more dynamic intervention than the one that was ultimately made in significant part due to the conservationist desires of the Liverpool government. Despite the highly animated postmodern pastiche of these early elevations, the Tate Liverpool design would end up being one of Stirling's most discreet projects with a respectful stance to its container and contents.

Stirling's enduring interest in memory and vernacular forms can be seen in his early photography, projects and writings. In his seminal essay, 'Regionalism and Modern Architecture' (1957), Stirling calls for "a reassessment of indigenous and usually anonymous building and a reevaluation of the experience embodied in the use of traditional methods and materials."⁶ In his discussion of this new traditionalism, Stirling supported a reading of regionalism that truly examined the 'anonymous' British architecture and rejected a picturesque misuse of these same forms: "It should be noted that the outside appearance of [traditional British buildings] is an efficient expression of their specific function, whereas today they may be appreciated picturesquely and positively used arbitrarily." Considering these statements in light of his early photographs of warehouses and docks in Liverpool, Stirling's admiration for and use of vernacular types come into clearer focus. The photographs of the docks and warehouses, taken when he was a young architect in the 1950s and 1960s, feature the details, edges and connections of the industrial forms. These photographs and his own writings indicate that Stirling's interest was not merely superficial but was concerned with the tectonic and pragmatic. The Albert Docks intervention was not an architecture that was "trying to deal with a set of flavors – things

that look like things but that were not the things themselves;" rather, the context-sensitive design was true to the authentic character of its place.⁷

Further evidence of Stirling's desire for a nuanced approach to urban interventions can be seen in his writings at the time of his "Roma Interrotta" submission in the later 1970s. Stirling spoke out strongly against the post-war degradation of England's industrial nineteenth cities and Liverpool in particular. Rejecting the modern notion of "progress," which resulted in "a lethal combination of urban motorways and modern commercial architecture, what he called 'modern blocks': "Thus cities have lost their identity and townspeople are numbed with loss of memory while their children grow up in kitschplace and junkland."⁸

ADAPTIVE REUSE

Stirling's use of the term picturesque in considering the superficial application of vernacular motifs is echoed in Sharon Zukin's consideration of the conversion of manufacturing spaces to lofts in New York City in the same period. According to Zukin, the insertion of art into this industrial sphere resulted in a numerous effects, several of which are evident at the Albert Docks: first, there was a shift from an economy based on industry to one fixated on finance; secondly, "the immediacy of industrial society and its problems" are reduced; and finally, art becomes a viable means of capital accumulation.⁹ All three conclusions are applicable in Detroit's situation. Furthering Zukin's second point, Richard Williams's *The Anxious City* presents these re-use structures as emerging "from a humanistic desire to heal the urban wounds left by industry."¹⁰ Zukin goes on to argue that when a city's industrial base is decaying, "the urban-industrial infrastructure submits to the rules of the picturesque."¹¹ Prior to the conversion, and perhaps even after, the urban space of the Albert Dock with the romantic grey landscape of the sea as a backdrop, can be read as a picturesque ruin.

In his essay, 'Nostalgia for Ruins,' Andreas Huyssen analyzes the ongoing obsession with the material qualities of industrial remains: "...ruins and their representation in picture books, films, and exhibits are a sign of the nostalgia for the monuments of an industrial architecture of a past age that was tied to a public culture of industrial labour and its political organisation."¹² For Huyssen, this fascination is an effort to "claim a sense of time and memory."¹³ The adaptive reuse of industrial buildings, therefore, has philosophical implications beyond the references to the spaces of artistic production and the reappraisal of the vernacular as a compelling container. These structures appeal to the nostalgic desires of a "memorial culture" looking for authentic roots in a provocative past that holds promise for transformation in the future.¹⁵ Recent examples of adaptive reuse in Detroit, including the Detroit Dry Dock Company, Hudson's Warehouse at the Ford Field Complex, and The Russell Industrial Center speak to these desires.

What does it mean to repurpose a building? Phoebe Crisman's essay on four contemporary museums explores the issue of preservation and sanitization by asking which elements are preserved and which are cleansed. She concludes that in most industrial buildings converted to create art spaces, the "[a]ccumulated and unnecessary features are removed, surfaces are sanitised, and the stigmas of former economic or social disenfranchisement and neglect associated with particular

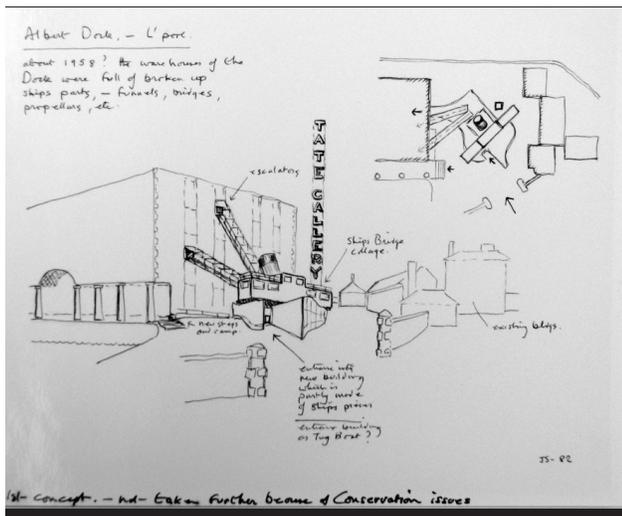


Figure 3: Early design sketch by James Stirling. Canadian Centre for Architecture.

buildings are purposefully forgotten.”¹⁵ At Tate Liverpool, the physical presence of the architecture remains along with the material traces of a lost way of life and economy. “If a building is adaptively reused and filled with contemporary art, however, architecture and art may combine to create a lens that magnifies our awareness of historical change and exposes the ideologies of progress embodied in buildings designed for optimal commodity production.”¹⁶ As spaces for contemporary art, manufacturing buildings have typically been sterilized and offered as a cleansed backdrop for the display of art.

In addition to the columns and retained industrial elements, the Tate Liverpool windows looking out over the Mersey provided a direct link to the urban context and economic history of Liverpool (Figure 4). The result is a richly layered, site specific exhibition experience. Seen in concert with the revitalization of the Albert Dock, the Tate Liverpool design reflects different notions of how a museum should operate in its urban context. It is in nuanced references that the museum speaks to its historical and architectural moment.

CONCLUSIONS

While it is tempting to see the “selling of the city” as a byproduct of recent globalization, the dockyards of Liverpool offered a form of spectacle from their inception as the primary gateways to the city. Considering the frequency with which they appeared in literary works, their raw beauty and strength was compelling as a backdrop to the story of industrialization and, later, of globalization.¹⁷ The desire to view and experience the space of the docks is made explicit in the overhead railroad advertisements which sold round trips to see “the finest docks in the world and the giant ocean liners.”¹⁸ The docks, then as now, “have been central to determining the physical image of the city.”¹⁹

Located along the Mersey’s shore, the dock warehouses are Liverpool’s most emblematic building type, for these structures handled the trade that brought prosperity to the region. Collectively, the surviving warehouses give a special, unique character to Liverpool. Deliberate reuse and conservation, based on thorough understanding, will ensure that Liverpool retains

this distinctiveness. As with the Tate gallery example, successful conversions in Liverpool, and other post-industrial cities like Detroit, will depend on continued collaborations between the public and private sectors and on promoting best practices in design.

Over the three centuries of the Port of Liverpool’s history, the spatial organization, architecture, and facilities would be constantly altered to meet the various needs of its constituents and services. Responding primarily to the changes in ship size and technologies (sail to steam, etc.) and cargo handling processes, the design of the docks offers a view of architectural responsiveness to changing conditions and needs. The latest chapter in the use of Liverpool docks and waterfront landscape represents just another stage in this evolution. While not a cure-all, James Stirling’s Albert Dock adaptive reuse marks an early moment of renewal that has catalyzed other pockets of improvement throughout the city, culminating in Liverpool’s selection and re-branding as the 2008 “European Capital of Culture” and, in 2015, a “City of Music.”

ENDNOTES

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4. James Maude Richards and Eric Samuel De Maré, *The Functional Tradition in Early Industrial Buildings* (London: Architectural Press, 1958).
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6. James Stirling / Michael Wilford fonds, “File 68: Tate in the North,” in AP140. S2.SS1.D68 (Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture © CCA 1982-1990).
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Figure 4: Interior gallery photograph showing the retained structural columns and exterior windows of the original dock building. tate.org.uk