

Target market

With museums across the country closing monthly under continuing austerity regimes, the Museum of London has a vanishingly rare opportunity to create a new, innovative, almost unimaginable facility in the heart of the capital. Becky Wallower has been investigating where the competition-winning designs will take us.

After receiving 500 expressions of interest, then whittling down the 80 entrants to a shortlist of six, the jury of the Museum of London (MOL) architectural competition announced the winning design in July. The team behind the new museum in West Smithfield will be Stirling Prize-winning architectural practice Stanton Williams, partnered with Asif Khan, whose Serpentine Summerhouse graced Hyde Park over the summer, and joined by conservation architect Julian Harrap and landscape architects J&L Gibbons. So now we know a bit better where MOL is heading.

According to the announcement, 'The vision for the new Museum of London balances a crisp and contemporary design with a strong recognition of the physicality and power of the existing spaces of the West Smithfield site.' The predictably design-focused architectural press felt it was a safe, if not especially inspiring, choice (Rowan Moore in the *Observer*, 31 July 2016, said that generic details shown 'would make it resemble a well-mannered shopping mall'), but acknowledged that it's early days yet, with only the concepts and a few drawings on parade.

There are clues about how the architects will approach the project. That word 'physicality' for a start is a recurring motif. It chimes with the stated desire of MOL director Sharon Ament that the museum should reflect the gritty nature of the site. The four blocks that need to be brought together broadcast their former incarnations as dynamic, powerful working spaces.

They comprise:

- the General Market, with basements that are currently used for Crossrail works and salt storage, and adjoin the very much operative tracks of Thameslink trains
- the basement of the Poultry Hall, which will continue as a market at ground level



- the Fish Market / Red House / Iron Mountain complex to the south, vacant since 1986
- the Engine House, a small island building which was converted to public toilets and the roof of which is currently laden with plastic bottles of urine, heaved aloft by the lorry drivers arriving at Smithfield.

At a packed talk in August, the design team elaborated on their inspiration and concept. Jo Gibbons of the landscape architects explained that the hydrology and geology that had preserved so much archaeology in London, down to 7m depths in the City, became part of their thinking, enabling them to look back and forward. Paul Williams spoke of the museum complex as marking a new centre for London, evolving with the urban environment, connected east-west and north-south.

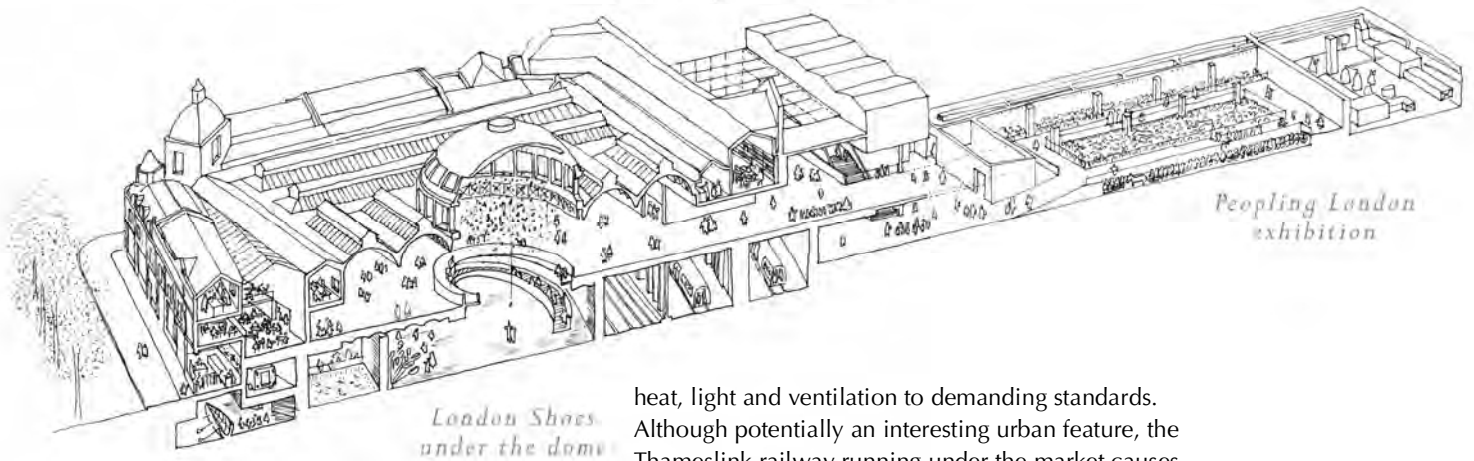
The scale of the buildings has clearly stimulated the designers' imagination: the central area is twice the size of the Natural History Museum's entry hall and equal to Oxford Circus. Conceptually and physically, Williams sees the museum existing as a core surrounded by 'crusts', which he has called

- *public house* – though rather more a central zone of interaction than a bar
- *incubator* – where he envisages other institutions such as the LSE, Victorian Society and the RCA having showcases for ideas and research, creating a 17th-century coffee house atmosphere, and
- *retail* – a transition to the surrounding area, and, of course, where money will be made.

Alongside the stated physicality and grit of the designs, are more glitzy, innovative touches, such as spiral escalators linking spaces in the General Market, and its hallmark dome, lifted to create more presence and light. A sunken garden and green spaces feature in the Fish Market complex, which incorporates flexible

ABOVE concept for central area of General Market with raised dome, surrounding 'crusts' and spiral escalators leading down to permanent galleries

All images © Stanton Williams / Museum of London

Easy access from Crossrail

areas for conferences, learning, meetings and events. West Smithfield will be designed for environmental efficiency, of course, and incorporate a green roof. Even the Fleet River may be brought into play.

The conceptual design currently places all the permanent exhibition space underground into the 7m-high basements of the General Market and extending into the space beneath the Fish Market complex. This feature is meant to reflect the archaeological nature of the museum's collections as well as providing scope for galleries that are seen as non-linear, ie with no specified route through. Visually, the basement area with huge metal doors and brick vaulting will be very much part of the ultimate design.

Museum staff are pleased to have a more concrete path defined at last, and are fast moving into a seriously busy few years. We talked to Roy Stephenson, Head of Archaeological Collections, who had been impressed by coming across Stanton Williams principals immersing themselves in the Smithfield area during the competition period. He's very much aware that this is just the beginning of a massive, complex project, and is actively recruiting new curatorial and other staff to make sure that the resources are available to provide input for the more detailed design, planning and logistics phases, and to keep the museum running well at the same time.

The actual functionality in the new museum – the permanent and temporary galleries, the vast amounts of storage required, the infrastructure for conservation and research – is still very much in the works. Museum designers and other consultants will be appointed soon, but discussions will continue for some time on emotive issues such as whether to take a thematic or chronological approach, installation styles, delineation of space and interactivity.

Some of the challenges and risks ahead are non-trivial. The winning entry was praised for integration of site and surrounding area, but how will the four disconnected islands become a unified entity if connection is mainly underground? How will the museum interact with Smithfield's lively, changing, 24-hour community? In these complex buildings, some derelict for up to 30 years, removal of asbestos and structural matters are likely to be issues, as are providing

heat, light and ventilation to demanding standards. Although potentially an interesting urban feature, the Thameslink railway running under the market causes palpable vibrations, a difficult engineering hurdle to overcome for displays. And just moving the collections will entail some Herculean project management.

The task may be daunting, but Roy is hugely enthusiastic about the area, particularly from an archaeological point of view. Smithfield is a proper palimpsest of the complex history of the area, less homogenous than much of the City, with evidence ranging from a Bronze Age spearhead and pottery to the Roman and plague cemeteries, the still-existing medieval monastic infrastructure at Charterhouse and St Bartholomew's, and the Victorian market itself. Roy concurs that landscape and geology too will be part of the museum site, as the banks of the Fleet slope through the buildings' basements.

Once specialist consultants are appointed to the design team, and a Heritage Lottery Fund grant application submitted, the team will be working towards planning consent, scheduled for 2018. It is hoped that this will be manageable: the heritage societies, who were successful in opposing commercial redevelopment of West Smithfield, should be largely on board, and the City is a major funder who will be involved throughout.

The need for a new museum is still questioned in some quarters, and doubters suspect the move is a ploy

ABOVE schematic of General Market (left), intended for permanent collections, and basement of Poultry Market (right), for temporary exhibitions, with main entrance area in between
BELOW view north towards main entrance and principal exhibition buildings in General Market from Fish Market / Engine House complex, to be linked by green space





ABOVE concept for underground permanent exhibition areas of General Market showing use of existing concrete, brick and metal infrastructure

to free up the London Wall site for a new concert hall for Simon Rattle's LSO. However, staff at MOL and in the museum world understand the imperative. Even after redesigns and additions over 40 years, the space at London Wall is insufficiently adaptable for increasing visitor numbers, and for new displays and temporary exhibitions, and storage is overflowing. It's disconnected from its surroundings by virtue of Powell & Moya's Barbican high walk concept, with no direct street-level entry. Within the building, its age shows in leaks and maintenance issues; departments and collections are widely separated; conference / meeting /

education / research space is limited and awkward to access and use (ceilings are too low for adequate projection for larger meetings, for instance).

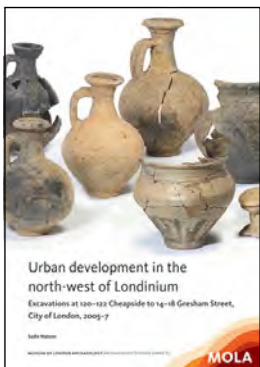
But what about archaeology in the next incarnation? Storing and displaying it was a key *raison d'être* for the old Guildhall Museum, and since Guildhall merged with London Museum in Kensington to form MOL, archaeology has continued to be central to telling the story of London. The archaeological archive (which will remain in Hackney) is the world's largest and, despite some limitations of space and accessibility, adds substantially to making exhibitions such as the Cheapside Hoard and *Fire! Fire!* popular successes. Education and outreach programmes use archaeology extensively, capitalising on both its appeal to the imagination, and its ability to add tangible evidence to historical narration.

Clearly there's an opportunity to tell the story of the surrounding area and its occupants through archaeology, and the museum should also be able to add real substance to future installations – however they may be displayed – with archaeology revealing London in its whole extent, across millennia, landscapes and populations. To their credit, the design team has taken archaeology into the essence of their concept. But the challenges are formidable, and many stages remain in the works.

As we said in July, we'll watch this space, carefully, and we'll be reporting on developments until the grand opening in West Smithfield, now re-scheduled for 2022.

Urban development in the north-west of Londinium

Excavations at 120–122 Cheapside to 14–18 Gresham Street, City of London, 2005–7



Sadie Watson

MOLA Archaeological Studies Series 32

2015

121 pages, paperback
Numerous illustrations and tables, index

£15

Reviewed by Becky Wallower

Separate excavations of two adjoining, complex, bitty, multi-period sites are chronicled here: Sadie Watson and the specialist contributors have done well to make a coherent whole of them.

Lying between Wood Street and Milk Street, the northerly site faces onto Gresham Street, near both the Roman amphitheatre and fort, and the southerly one faces onto Cheapside, the main Roman east-west Via Decumana, and near the site of excavations

at Number One Poultry. The Cheapside bathhouse complex was located just to the east.

Multiple phases of Roman activity are in evidence, including, from the 1st century, possible Boudican fire destruction, a dwelling with mosaic floor, large high-status masonry town houses, industry, wells and other structures, some apparent military influence, and a road across the site contemporary with the first amphitheatre. The 2nd century brought clay and timber buildings more typical of the developing city, before dumping and finally dark earth marked the end of Roman occupation.

Saxon evidence was limited, although a stunning lead mystery object was recovered. With interweaving animalistic decoration, this has been interpreted as possibly a model for a clay mould for bronze replicas. The medieval remains reflect densely populated areas developing in wealth and stability from the 12th century. Several substantial cellars remain, one with steps up to the predecessor of Gresham Street. Along Milk Street were probably smaller commercial/residential properties, and along Cheapside more prestigious dwellings. Dumping has yielded quantities of pottery and some rare fragments of medieval window glass, possibly from an early manifestation of St Alban Wood Street.

As is now standard with MOLA, the – here very considerable – finds evidence is interwoven with the stratigraphic narrative, and more detailed summaries and tables included at the back.

The nature of the largely keyhole excavations means that conclusions are qualified, but do reinforce similar findings from nearby sites. Well-illustrated and coherent, this is a useful piece in the puzzle of an increasingly better understood area.