

## **Meeting the Sainsburys**

*The following speech was given by Norman Foster on the occasion of the presentation to Sir Robert and Lady Sainsbury of the Freedom of the City of Norwich, on 23 June 1999.*

It was the morning of New Year's Day 1974 and I was standing in front of the door of number 5 Smith Square, for what I was told would be a brief meeting with Sir Robert Sainsbury about a possible museum project.

Before ringing the bell I remember feeling apprehensive, nervous. I was not to know the extent to which that meeting would influence my future as an architect and also my personal life. As it turned out the 'brief meeting' with Sir Robert carried on through lunch, when I met Lady Sainsbury, and continued until the end of the day.

Although it was more than 25 years ago I can remember it as if it were yesterday. I remember leaving with three impressions. Firstly, their home — surprisingly modest, intimate and discreet. Certainly the architecture was not spectacular, *but* every space was married with extraordinary works of art — paintings and sculptures. It was a combination of exquisite taste and restraint.

The second impression was the contrast between this very elegant couple and the radical nature of their works of art — especially when I heard how they had discovered them.

For example there was a portrait of Lady Sainsbury by Francis Bacon hanging over the fireplace, which was very powerful — almost shocking. Bacon, like Henry Moore and Giacometti were unknown artists at the time that the Sainsburys became their patrons.

Then there was Sir Robert's study, beautifully designed by the young Indonesian architect Kho Liang Ie. Here there were works by anonymous artists — tiny Eskimo carvings for example: objects, which at the time of their acquisition, were not even recognised as works of art in the traditional sense. I think Sir Robert playfully referred to them as his 'toys'.

The third impression was how those first conversations ranged so far and wide — I was getting early clues about their way of looking at things and I do not mean visually: it was as radical as those progressive artists they had encouraged. For me it was a mixture of independence, openness and conviction.

I was later to describe them both as the toughest clients that I had worked for — and I hasten to add that as an architect that was the highest compliment I could pay. Nothing came easily because everything was worked at hard. They made extraordinary efforts to research, to challenge and to support.

I say all this because frankly a building is only as good as the client and the architecture of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts is inseparable from the enlightenment and the driving force of the patrons behind it. It is not surprising then that the resulting building would challenge preconceptions about museums.

For example, we selected a location which at that time was almost in the wilderness of the campus — away from the other arts and next to science — to encourage cross-fertilisation. And as a building it put all the varied functions and user groups — galleries and teaching spaces, students, academics and the public — together in a single space, under a single roof.

It was a gallery without walls in the conventional sense.

It was also an early example of a low-energy, 'green' architecture. These are fashionable buzz words today, but at the time the concept of sustainable ecological buildings was unheard of outside a fringe of society, which was mostly occupied by hippies and drop-outs.

I was recently in conversation with the critic, Peter Buchanan, who has identified a concept in our work, which he refers to as the 'urban room'. He explains this as a space that is egalitarian, accessible not just to the public but also to other specialist groups — 'urban' because it suggests a 'city microcosm' with all the varied patterns of usage that implies. It is also about the relationship with nature — the movement of air, light and carefully considered views.

When Peter Buchanan made this observation I could see clearly that the Sainsbury Centre was not just our first public building but it was the first of many 'urban rooms' that our studio has since created. But its influence on our work, and indirectly on the work of others, has also been far reaching in different ways.

For example, if you look up from inside the Sainsbury Centre you will see a structure that gently filters natural light. That is because all the pipes, ducts and machinery, which normally occupy the roof, have been discreetly location elsewhere, in the walls and below the floor.

This idea was further developed for Stansted Airport where we literally turned the traditional airport upside down. It has an undercroft, or basement, for all the machinery that drives the building, transparent walls to open up views; and a roof that lets in natural light. It is humanistic and ecological.

Stansted has since proved to be a model for a new generation of terminals worldwide, including our own new Hong Kong Airport. In that sense, as well as in other ways, the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts was a turning point.

Not too long after that first meeting at Smith Square there was an introductory design session with the Sainsburys and the late Kho Liang le. I knew his work and although we were almost contemporaries he was one of my design heroes. I took him to one side before the meeting and asked him how I should address Sir Robert and Lady Sainsbury. He laughed and said, 'but of course you must call them Bob and Lisa' — which I did there and then.

It was only afterwards that I realised how over-familiar that must have seemed, because Kho Liang le had built his relationship with them over many years. But I think they accepted my rashness with grace, because in all the ways that I hope mattered, it must have been obvious that I held them in the deepest respect.

That respect has grown over time and the relationship has merged from client to parent figures. And so this is a very privileged occasion on which to say 'thank you Bob and Lisa' and congratulations.

**Norman Foster**

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