



Conversations and Actions Whitechapel Gallery

**Robbrecht and Daem:
Pacing through Architecture**

Conversations and Actions

This booklet has been written to help you explore the Whitechapel Gallery focusing on the architecture of the building. It also refers to the exhibition *Robbrecht and Daem: Pacing through Architecture* showing in the gallery 24 April - 20 June 2010.

It begins with a conversation between two artists, **Rebecca Greathead** and **Daniel Wallis**. Their conversation outlines key information about the Whitechapel Gallery and its new expansion, which opened in 2009. This booklet aims to support your exploration of the building and gives you ideas to share with others, in your group, be it with children or adults. There is a map of the Gallery at the back.

Throughout the booklet are *Actions* (these appear in the boxes with the wavy lined edge) that you can do in the Gallery designed to help you consider the architects ideas, working processes or the link between the building and art on display. They offer guidelines that are easily adaptable to suit a wide-range of visitors and can be carried out individually or in groups.

Also within the booklet are *Actions* that can be used beyond the Gallery (these appear in the boxes with the diamond patterned edge) They are often more involved and may need materials, but can easily adaptable to suit your needs.

Spread throughout are images that you can use to act as prompts.

Have fun!



Uncovering the Whitechapel Gallery

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Daniel The Whitechapel Gallery is a really interesting building. Originally built in 1901 and expanded in 1980, more recently it has been extended to fill the whole of a Victorian library next door.

Rebecca The fronts of the two buildings have been left as they were. Why wasn't the Gallery re-designed to be more contemporary and eye-catching?

Daniel The architects Robbrecht and Daem wanted to try and merge the buildings in a sympathetic way. The Library, like the Gallery was socially important to the area; it is part of the history of Whitechapel Road. Both buildings are Grade II* listed, meaning they are 'particularly important buildings of more than special interest.'

Rebecca The architects are Belgian, why were they chosen?

Daniel A group of leading architects were invited to submit proposals. A building committee along with the Gallery Director, Iwona Blazwick, chose the design they thought would suit the needs and ideology of the Whitechapel Gallery.

Rebecca Weren't artists Rachel Whiteread and Cornelia Parker part of the building committee?

Daniel Yes, they were keen to use Robbrecht and Daem because the architects have a history of sensitive collaborations with artists. It was felt they understood how to make architecture work hand-in-hand with the artwork rather than overpower it.

Rebecca So the selection team didn't want a big showy statement from the architecture, but a place that would welcome people in and allow the artwork to be the most important thing.

Daniel Iwona Blazwick also wanted the Gallery to be like a sanctuary from the busy noisy street where you go through the big doors and enter a quiet contemplative space.

Rebecca I find it difficult to tell where one building ends and the other begins.

Daniel There are clues to help you. Many features of the old library building have been restored and are visible, for example windows, banisters and roof supports.

Rebecca The main and restaurant entrances are good places to start.

Daniel I like the way you emerge from the underground station in between the two parts of the building.



Robbrecht en Daem Whitechapel Gallery 2009. Illustration. Spin



Robbrecht en Daem Whitechapel Gallery 2009. Photograph. Gavin Jackson

Street to Rooftop

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Daniel The style of the original Gallery is Arts and Crafts, the front entrance is very distinctive with a beautiful decorative tree carved in the stone.

Rebecca What exactly is Arts and Crafts, it's not just a style is it?

Daniel No, it was a movement based on socialist beliefs. It sought to preserve the tradition of craft labour being destroyed by industrialisation.

Rebecca So sharing the art with everyone was important.

Daniel The entrance was deliberately designed without steps in from the street, so people could walk straight into the Gallery.

Rebecca And when you enter and proceed through the galleries there is no designated or prescribed route. You could wander a different way each time you come.

Daniel The new education spaces are reached by stairs that take you directly to the top of the building, where you can look down over the surrounding city.

Rebecca You feel important from up here!

Activity in the Gallery

If your group are using the Creative Studio at the top of the Education Tower, look out of the big sliding window. What buildings can you see?

Looking downwards, can you work out which buildings belong to the Whitechapel Gallery?

Can you see into other parts of the Gallery through any windows and sky-lights?

Get into teams of four.

Using a roll or large piece of paper attached to the window, make a group drawing of the sky-line.

If you are a large group, you may need to take turns.

Use other windows or try to draw from memory.

Variations: Make additions to the skyline. Remove some buildings. Join buildings up. Draw them all as if they are built in the same style – all glass, all brick...

How does this change the character of the buildings?

Research artists who are inspired by skylines such as John Virtue or David Hockney.

Second activity in the Gallery

The artist Walter Crane designed a frieze for the front of the Whitechapel Gallery. This was never actually completed as the funder, Passmore Edwards, withdrew money when he discovered the Gallery was not going to be named after him. The previous page shows the front of the Gallery, the space for the frieze is still there.

Look for this space on the front of the building:

How visible is this space from the street?

Can you see it as you walk along the road or on a bus, in a car?

What other signs can you see around the Whitechapel Gallery area?

Passmore Edwards paid for the Library too, how can we tell?

What do you think the purpose of a frieze is? Decoration, a space for art, advertising? A sign post for the Gallery? Connecting the local community with the Gallery?

Activity outside the Gallery

Design a Whitechapel frieze to go on display now.

Research the Arts & Crafts movement and the history of the Gallery. The Gallery archivist might be able to help you with any questions you might have.

A good source of information about the history of the Gallery and the local community is:

<http://www.whitechapel.org/archiveadventures/timeline.php>

Create a city sky-line by putting together one drawing or model made by each member of the group.

Choose one material and design a group of buildings all made from the same thing. It could be a material you might find in the city around you or something fantastical like chocolate or crystal.



Robbrecht en Daem Whitechapel Gallery 2009. Photographs: Patrick Leers

Bricks and Mortar

Daniel By knocking down walls and floors, moving doors and creating new spaces the architects have really made two buildings function and feel like one.

Rebecca Yes, but as you move into Gallery 4 and the Foyle Reading Room you can really get a sense of the old library building from the doors and windows, even the tables originally belong to the Library. The stair-rail changes on the way up from the old to the new, and the plaques on the wall are like clues into the past life of the building. Iwona Blazwick describes it as sedimentation of previous uses.

Daniel Like the layers an archaeologist digs through, finding fossils from different periods. Some of the decisions about the building were made during its construction. Iwona describes how she was walking through Gallery 2 with Paul Robbrecht while it was being converted from the old Library's Reading Room. They saw that some plaster had fallen off the wall revealing the brickwork underneath.

Rebecca They must have liked it so much that they had all the plaster removed. If you look carefully in there, you can find evidence of a doorway that doesn't exist anymore.

Activity in the Gallery

Can you find clues to the building's past uses?

Look for clues to things that have been revealed or concealed, added or removed.

Mark them on the map at the back of this pack.

Coming in through the main entrance, the old Library was to the right – older features are easier to make out here. Continue up the staircase noticing the wall plaques.

The interior of the original Gallery hasn't changed that much in the redevelopment. Why might that be?

Find Gallery 4. This gallery shows work belonging to the Whitechapel Gallery or other archives.

Next to this gallery is the Foyle Reading Room where you can find the archivist. His job is to look after the extensive material relating to the Gallery's history.

Activity beyond the Gallery

What makes a successful space to show artwork?

Sketch and doodle some ideas. Think about:

Size

Arrangement – open space or walls

Colour

Decoration

Lighting

Noise

Space for visitors

Think about a room in your home, or a space you know well.

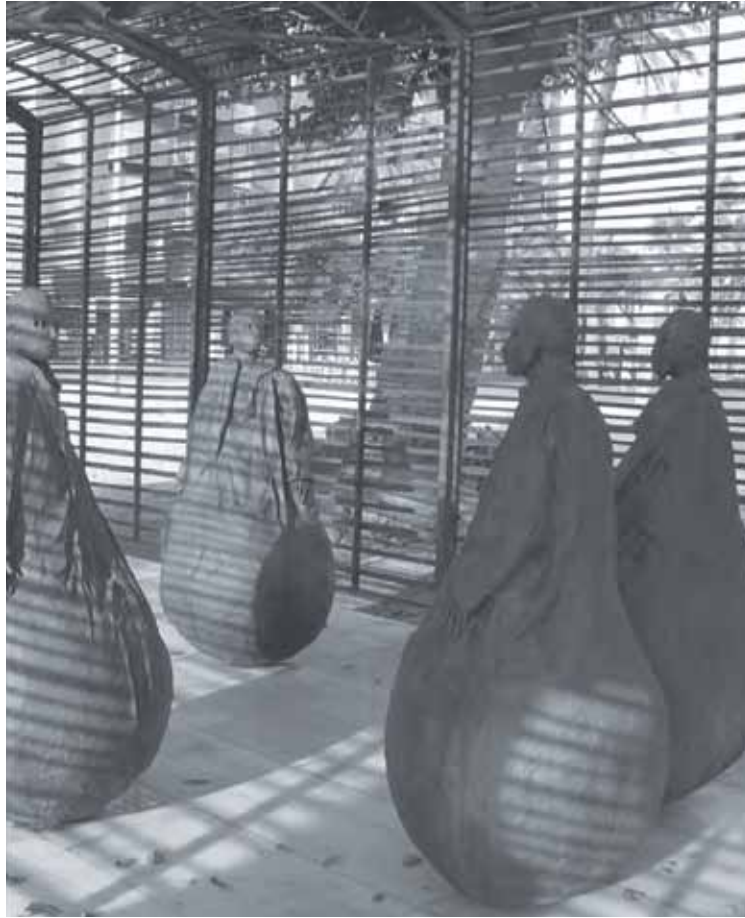
How would you transform this space into a gallery?

What elements would you keep?

What type of work would you show?

Film, photography, sculpture, painting, performance or a mixture?

Make a plan, model or drawing to explain your ideas.



*Robbrecht and Daem Collaboration with Juan Muñoz.
The House Where It Always Rains. Barcelona, Spain, 1992*

A Home for an Artwork

Daniel Robbrecht and Daem seem to work a lot with artists right from the conception of their designs. There must be certain amount of trust in order to collaborate in this way. The architect would need to feel that the artist would not compromise their work and vice-versa.

Rebecca Yes, Iwona said she always used to see them early in their career visiting art galleries, and talking to artists. The firm first came to prominence with its Pavilion Gallery for the German Documenta art festival in 1992. It has collaborated with artists ever since.

Daniel Sometimes when Robbrecht and Daem collaborate with artists the outcomes seem like artworks in themselves. For example, their collaboration with Juan Muñoz, *The House Where It Always Rains*.

Action in the Gallery

Find an artwork in the Gallery that you find interesting.

Think about what draws you to it.

Sketch the work.

Annotate your sketch to reveal what interests you in the work.

Create a list of words including materials it is made from, emotions it stirs, the questions it provokes.

How does the Gallery effect your perception of the artwork?

Where else might provide a home for this type of artwork?

Look at the image of *The House Where it Always Rains* on the previous page.

Pick one of the Muñoz sculptures housed within it.

Sketch it. Use your imagination to picture yourself in that space.

Annotate it in a similar way to the work you selected from the Gallery.

Can you use any of these words to describe the building Robbrecht and Daem have made around Muñoz's work?

Action beyond the Gallery

Have a look at Robbrecht and Daem's website www.robbrechtendaem.com

You can find images of their buildings as well as furniture they have designed and artists with whom they have collaborated.

Design a structure or building to house the artwork you have picked from the Gallery.

Think about size, scale, location, materials.

Collaborate: Work with a friend to design a 'home' for a piece of their artwork.

Commission them to do the same for a piece of yours.

Make the structure of the house reflect, complement or extend the artwork it is housing.

Create a small 3D version.



Robbrecht en Daem Concert Hall, Bruges, Belgium, 2002. Photograph: Jan Termont.



Robbrecht en Daem Woodland Cabin, Southern Flanders, Belgium, 2003. Photograph: Kristien Daem.

Future Construction

Daniel The element I most like about the Whitechapel Gallery is the way the architects managed to maintain the character of the library when they expanded the Gallery.

Rebecca It could have run the risk of distracting you from the artwork. The space in which you see art is really important in helping you explore and understand it. Gallery 2 with its brick walls, pillars and generous size must be an exciting space for the artists who are asked to create a new work especially for there.

Daniel It seems to me that architects who are so involved with artists and the art world, are the ideal people to design a gallery, because they have such a good understanding of what is needed for displaying artwork.

Rebecca Iwona said that Robbrecht and Daem like rot, open fires, getting dogs in their spaces – all the things you'd imagine architects don't want! People find their designs welcoming.

Daniel The Gallery is obviously attractive to many people – it had nearly half a million visitors in the first year after it had expanded, and it has already won a RIBA architecture prize.

Rebecca The most exciting thing for me is that although the building won't be changing anytime soon, the exhibitions constantly do. The building will seem different each time this happens.

To book your free group visit and use our Education Space (bookable Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday during term time) please call Education on **020 7522 7888** or email: education@whitechapelgallery.org


If you have enjoyed this resource or have any other feedback please do contact us. For more *Conversations and Actions* visit whitechapelgallery.org/education/schools/teachers

Robbrecht and Daem: Pacing Through Architecture has been organised by the Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels and curated by Stefan Devoldere and Iwan Strauven, in collaboration with the Whitechapel Gallery, London.

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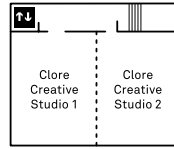


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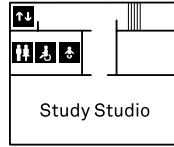


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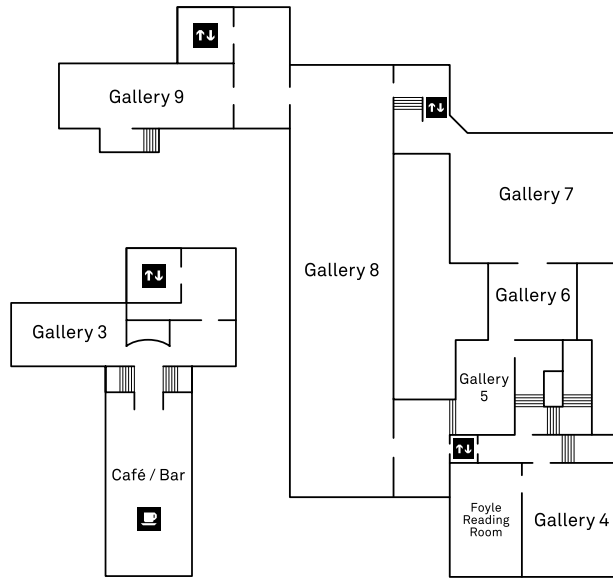


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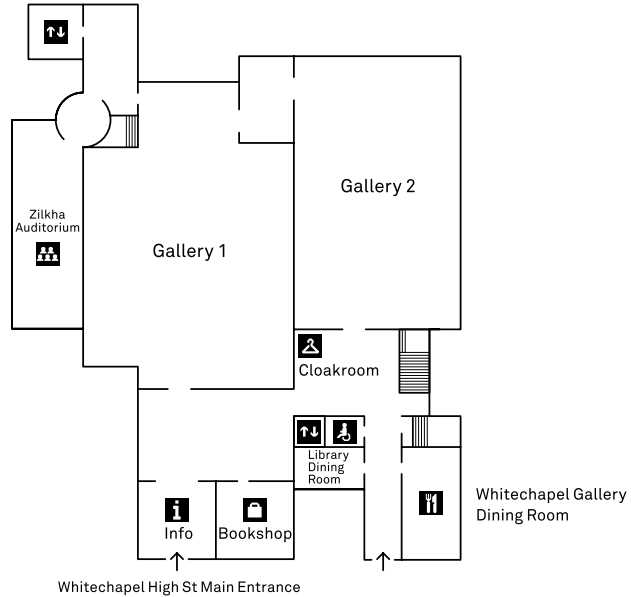


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