

INSPIRATION: ADELPHI, LONDON

'The Adams had to persuade the avant-garde to colonise the working edge of the Thames... They risked everything on this crazy idea'

The Adelphi appeals to 5th Studio's **Tom Holbrook** as much for its entrepreneurialism as its architecture

Photos by Edward Tyler



The Adelphi's main terrace sat on an arcade of warehouses above the Thames.

Inspiration
The Adelphi
Architect
Adam brothers
Completed
1768-1772
Location
Embankment, London

London is a wonderful city to discover through walking, but it was Fred Scott, my tutor at Kingston University, who really inspired me to look harder as I explored, and to understand the invisible and lost as much as the evident. Steen Eiler Rasmussen's *London, The Unique City* (1937) and Ian Nairn's *Nairn's London* (1966) have helped me appreciate the

more fugitive qualities of the city — all those ghosts which give London its incredible richness. These perambulations included the site of the Adelphi off the Strand — a structure that has figured hugely in my development as an architect, but which is largely lost (aside from a few houses, the RSA and fragments of arches and underground roads). The Adelphi was bursting with ideas — perhaps more per square metre than anywhere in London. As a result, it is one of those projects I keep returning to in teaching, and in practice with 5th Studio. Returning with BD's photographer to attempt to capture evidence of the lost project was more challenging. The four Adam brothers (three architects and a banker) had built in Scotland and elsewhere, but

they were looking for a place in London to make their mark with an extraordinary project. Robert Adam had been particularly inspired by the ruined palace of Diocletian at Split, encountered and painted while on his Grand Tour. Somehow emerged this proposition of an antique palace, reinterpreted for the Thames riverbank as a place for London's commerce and emerging bourgeoisie. To build their Adelphi development, the brothers took a 99-year lease for a piece of land called Durham Yard off the Strand. It's a fitting location — as the artery connecting Westminster with the City of London, the Strand has been something of a crucible for generating ideas about cities. These urban innovations range from governance and the rule of



Tom Holbrook: The Adelphi was bursting with ideas.



ADELPHI TERRACE
This 1770s illustration by Malton Thomas shows how the riverside Adelphi development attracted a rich mix of avant-garde Londoners to the Strand area.

law in the Inns of Court and the Temple, through to an incredible number of new urban typologies and practical ideas on urban improvements. Among these Strandside innovations lies Bazalgette's great sewer, a stretch of the world's first underground metropolitan railway, and an early example of a relief road in the form of the Victoria Embankment. From the medieval period there were a whole series of palaces along the Strand: the powerful of Europe had to have representation here to be part of London's political milieu. By the middle of the 18th century these palaces had gone, and the Strand was considered "untidy and malodorous". Into this unpromising environment, the brothers laid out the Adelphi — a city block with twin aspects: a quay against the Thames (then the engine of London's economy) with a huge series of cave-like warehouses and internal roads; and an urbane series of streets built on a massive deck off the Strand, with four-storey houses, each having two storeys of cellars below to house service accommodation. The houses were finished and decorated by some of the finest artisans in Europe, and they were joined by coffee houses, a tavern, a hotel, accommodation for an emerging professional class and the then-youthful Society of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce (now RSA) on John Adam Street, which remains largely intact. The Adams' proposition took a

position between the river and the Strand and turned it into a social structure, with the working Thames below and the new artistic upper class in the houses above. I find the way you can get from rough landscape, right up to this incredibly fine articulation in the decoration of the interiors, tremendously engaging. The brothers Adam saw this whole gamut as part of their role as architects — from reclaiming land from the river and making spaces



Adelphi streets were named after the architects.

The Adams' proposition took a position between the river and the Strand and turned it into a social structure

for labour and commerce right up to rooms of refinement. The building was like an occupied hillside, using the slope to form this incredible section. It faces the busy Thames and then creates a street world that engages with the political and artistic milieu and houses that attracted a rich mix of people in society. This development was the first time the term "terrace" was used to describe the division of a palatial block into separate houses, perhaps inspired by what was literally a terrace, formed high above the river. That idea ricocheted around Europe; it was an incredibly important moment. Robert Adam's great rival, William Chambers, used the Adelphi as a model for Somerset House further down the Strand, and I think you can see similar ideas in Nash's Carlton House Terrace. Adam's incredibly spare neoclassicism had a great influence on the burgeoning development of Georgian London. A century later, Bazalgette's Embankment pushed the river over 100m southeast; the project was stranded, and visiting it these days it is very hard to imagine the Adelphi Terrace as part of the riverside. It's interesting to mark cultural change in terms of city-making: the Adelphi is a very urbane notion, while Bazalgette's Victorian problem-solving work is not — it is a wonderful piece of engineering, but it has resisted assimilation into the city. The Adams were very inter- ▶

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Tom Holbrook in the restored vaults at the RSA, one of the surviving buildings of the Adelphi.

ested in the idea of the picturesque that came through Vanbrugh and the "landskap painters" of the day. They were concerned with the emotional power of walking through the Adelphi, how you'd come down one of the new streets and emerge on to the terrace to encounter the river. There was the drama of the — occasionally exposed — sublime underworld below the raised

streets, or the way one occasionally comes across the ancient riverbank — as with the roadway that now runs through the RSA's basement lecture room, revealed like a bit of resurgent nature. The Adelphi draws its inspiration not from Diocletian's palace, but from the ruin of Diocletian's palace. The proposition of the Adelphi depended on the Adams persuading the avant-garde of London to

leave the fashionable West End to colonise the working edge of the Thames — then a logistical territory, perhaps equivalent to a major rail route or airport today. They risked everything on this crazy idea, an idea that looked doomed when the houses didn't sell and the government refused to lease the warehouses because they tended to flood at high tide. The Adelphi development is

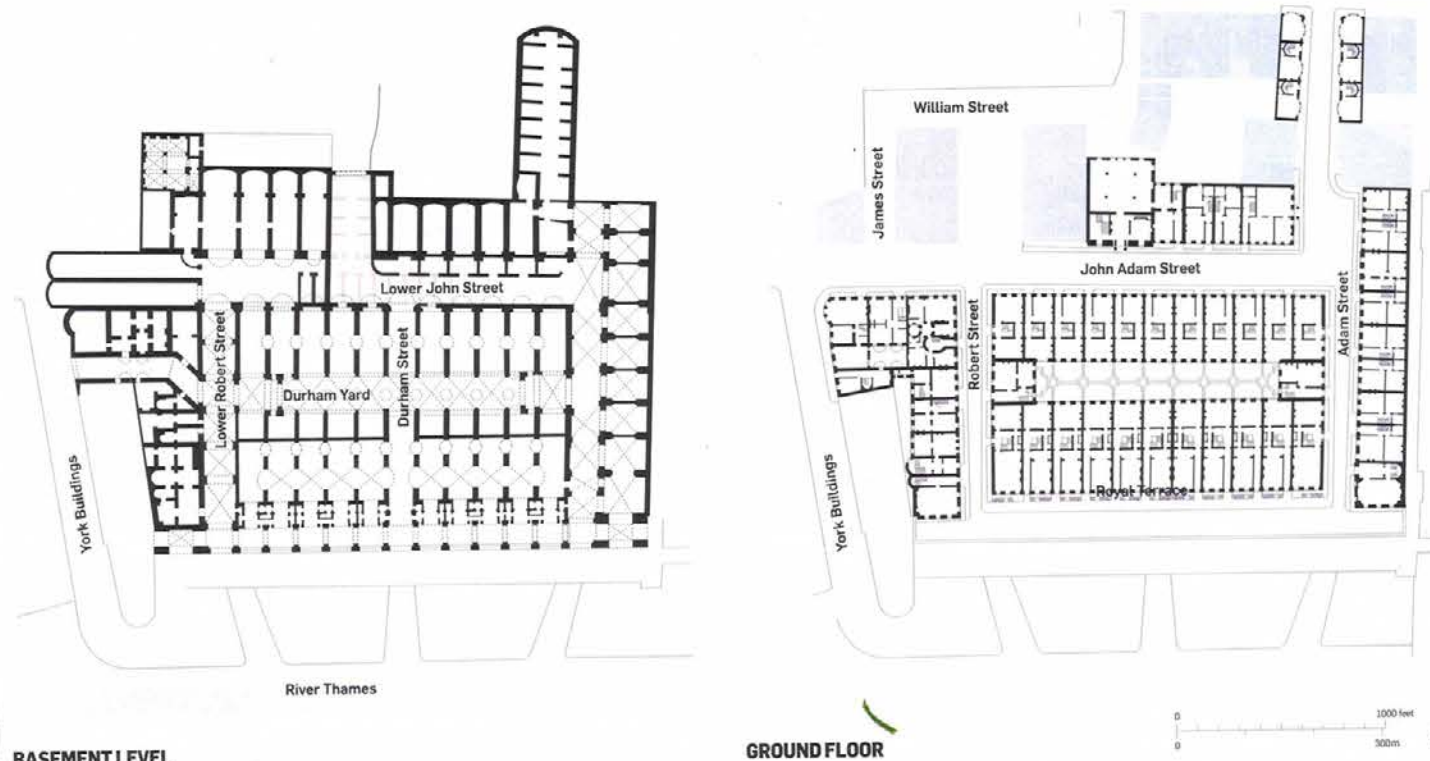
fundamentally a speculation. Steen Eiler Rasmussen puts it beautifully: "This is speculation in fictitious values... in the case of the Adelphi, the commercial idea is no less grand and full of imagination than is the artistic one... it was just as much a finance-fantasia over risk and profit: the financier was the artist and the artist a financier. This creative speculation is something very English,

and it is no less typical that when it turns out a failure, the enterprise is saved by a lottery." It's an intellectual idea that sparks the transformation — the value comes out of the idea, which the Adam brothers were willing to back with everything they owned. Speculation is, I feel, a greatly neglected dimension of the architect's role. In contemporary practice

it has become associated purely with money, and too much development is conceived of on an accountant's spreadsheet rather than as a spatial possibility. We have lost that connection with propositional invention as we wait for clients to call. Of course, there are some notable examples of architect-speculators like Roger Zogolovitch and Crispin Kelly. Someone once described 5th

ADELPHI PLANS

These plans of the Adelphi development were drawn by architectural historian Christopher Woodward for the Vaulting Ambition exhibition on the Adams brothers shown at the Soane Museum in 2008. They show the network of roads that criss-crossed the site and provided access to the terraces and the warehouses in the vaults.



BASEMENT LEVEL

Studio as entrepreneurial — a culture that I think resulted from us setting up in the middle of a recession, but still having a determination to work at a large scale. We're always pursuing projects, trying to make things happen by identifying landowners and potential end-users. We're interested in speculation but in a very practical and spatial way, which is a link with what the Adams were doing.

In Cambridge, we have generated an idea for a development that combines a polyclinic, configured for the particular needs of the university, with a whole series of spaces around it including a hotel and apartments for university staff [University Health]. It has a combination of specific and slack spaces, and we worked with Crispin Kelly on the development model.

We keep returning in our work to making spaces for that spectrum that spans from people physically making things through to more virtual creativity. In our building for start-up companies in St Neots [Creative Exchange] we have big practical spaces on the lower floors, then rooms for individual firms to hire further up, culminating in a working garden on the roof. We're in the process

GROUND FLOOR

of designing another building for innovative businesses in Cambridge [The Future Business Centre] which has big workshops against a yard, and more refined spaces as you go up the building, just like at the Adelphi. We are also involved in a number of landscape-scale projects which deal with the interrelationship of the strategic, infrastructure, landscape and architecture.

Increasingly, our role in the Lea valley in east London is like that of an impresario, hooking up landowners and occupiers with the right accommodation in order to achieve the strategic ambitions we have developed there [Lea River Park]. The real challenge of the Olympic legacy will be to create genuine city quarters that are a mix of manufacture, commerce and residential, with loose-fit

spaces for all sorts of things to happen in the future. We'd love to establish an equivalent of the Adelphi today — something genuinely "mixed-use", in say the King's Cross development. Now that really would be a design and an economic model to crack. Tom Holbrook was speaking to Pamela Buxton.



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The Adelphi through the ages



The RSA's headquarters on John Adam Street.

The Adelphi development between the Strand and the Embankment in London took its name from the Greek word, adelphoi, for brothers — appropriate as it was built by the four Adam brothers: John, Robert, James and William. It consisted of the Adelphi Terrace, a block of fine houses above wharves plus the surrounding streets including John Adam Street, home of the RSA.

The Adam brothers built the speculative scheme between 1768-1772, securing David Garrick as a high-profile resident in the centre of the terrace. But the brothers ran into financial difficulties during the build and their development was only saved after funds were raised by a special Adelphi lottery in 1774, which gave away unsold houses on the site as prizes.

At its peak, the Adelphi was the heart of 18th century café society and continued to attract well-known figures of

the day well into the 19th century, including Richard D'Oyly Carte and JM Barrie. But the building of the Victorian Embankment (1864-70) took away the Adelphi's direct relationship with the river while the Adelphi terrace was demolished in the 1930s and replaced with the art deco Adelphi Hotel.

Much of the surrounding Adelphi streets survive as well as remnants of some of the vaulted spaces and underground roads beneath the hotel. The RSA, which has expanded along the terrace from its original two houses, retains much of its original Adam interior including finely decorated ceilings and fireplaces. The street is used frequently for filming — one of the RSA's doors is a regular stand-in for 10 Downing Street.



Robert Adam's original elevation drawing of the RSA buildings.

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