Thinking through drawing
Chris Wilkinson RA

Tennant Gallery
& Richard Sharp Council Room

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Tennant Gallery and Council Room

Thinking through drawing: Chris Wilkinson RA
3 September 2015 – 14 February 2016

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Chris Wilkinson RA

Drawing for an architect is primarily a tool within the creative process rather than an end in itself. For Chris Wilkinson, the physical, expressive act of putting marks on paper brings enjoyment in capturing the world around him but is also integral to developing his architectural ideas.

He draws throughout the design process, from concept diagrams in response to a brief and site, to working out forms, structures, materials and final detailing.

Wilkinson’s drawings unite technical thinking with a poetic, artistic response. He was part of a generation of architects associated with the “high tech” movement, but when he set up Chris Wilkinson Architects in 1983 – which later became WilkinsonEyre Architects with Jim Eyre – he was keen to go beyond the technical to create inviting spaces and places for people.
The works of the 200-person practice are located across the globe and include education and cultural buildings as well as skyscrapers and bridges.

Since 1991 Wilkinson has kept numbered sketchbooks.

These reveal that for him the act of drawing has two primary functions: forming part of his design thinking, pursued either alone or in meetings with colleagues and consultants, and acting as a tool to communicate a narrative or concept to his team or client. Watercolours, used to express the qualities and intentions of his projects, have become increasingly important over the past decade. The opened pages of the sketchbooks show both realised and unrealised projects that Wilkinson has worked on closely within the practice.
Showcase 1
Book 0

February 1991 – October 1991
Stratford Market Depot
London, UK (1996)

Wilkinson initially kept sketches and notes in the same book, before keeping notes on their own in A5 books.

On the left he is preparing for a lecture on responsive architecture; on the right are drawings from a meeting with Jim Eyre and the engineer developing the structure of the Stratford Market Depot, informed by Wilkinson’s book ‘Supersheds’.
Following their work at the London Science Museum, WilkinsonEyre Architects won this major Millennium Project for the conversion of a former train shed into an Exploratory Science Centre.

Early drawings look at the layout and concept principles and demonstrate the layers of thinking, from the operational to the experiential.
Wilkinson imagines sophisticated forms, which he develops through the act of drawing. Here he explores a possible form incorporating advanced technology for a Carphone Warehouse showroom marking an entrance to the Merry Hill Shopping Centre.
Drawings created during a design session with engineer Tony Hunt explore ways of creating an exciting structure for the canopy over the main entrance to the Dyson Headquarters, which was under construction at the time.
Showcase 2  
Book 3  
August 1998 – October 1999  
Magna  
Rotherham, UK (2000)  

Drawings exploring ways of establishing a visible identity for the main entrance to the Magna Science Adventure Centre, a Millennium Project located in a redundant steelworks.
The design concept involved the creation of four pavilions on the themes of Air, Fire, Earth and Water within the huge industrial shed.

These drawings explore the form of the Air Pavilion, envisaged as an airship hanging from the main structure, and the Fire Pavilion, a black box that comes alive with flames.
Book 4

November 1999 – April 2001

Istanbul Science Centre

Istanbul, Turkey (competition 2000)

Following a commission to design a new Science Museum in Istanbul using sustainable principles, these drawings interpret the programme for the site in plan and 3D, including a cross-section demonstrating the environmental concepts.
Unnumbered book

Bridge over Holloway Road
London, UK (competition 1999)

The concept for a footbridge across Holloway Road for the University of North London proposed a steel fuselage bridge structure enclosed in perforated mesh.
Conceptual ideas for the Wolfsburg Science Centre competition in a travelling sketchbook of a different format. Here the museum roof is seen as an inhabitable landscape responding to the building’s location at the bottom of a steep hill.
WilkinsonEyre Architects was first approached to think about repurposing the King’s Cross Gasholders in 2002.

These drawings visualise the existing structures and explore possibilities for their use and form, showing the emergence of the idea of the clock mechanism that was later to inspire what was to happen inside.
Book 6
March 2002 – March 2003
National Waterfront Museum
Swansea, UK (2005)

Following a competition win, these sketches define the architectural concept that was being developed in terms of the planning and function of the spaces and the material expression of the façades.

Book 7
Royal Botanic Gardens
Edinburgh, UK (competition entry 2003)

On the left are notes and loose sketches used to identify the key concepts informing the initial design ideas for a visitor centre for the Royal Botanic Gardens (on the right).
Showcase 4
Book 8
April 2003 – July 2004
Crystal Palace
London, UK (concept design 2003)

Drawings articulating the design concept for a commission to create a Sculpture Gallery on the site of the original Crystal Palace, in the space previously occupied by the main transept aisle.

Construction details on the right indicate an innovative concept for a laminated glass structure being worked out with Arup Advanced Structures Group.
Notes, along with a plan, elevation, section and perspective drawings, explore how the project to house the remains of Henry VIII’s favourite warship comes together in mass, form and construction.

Watercolour is used to convey material and spatial characteristics.
**Book 10**  
December 2005 – April 2006  
Liverpool Arena & Convention Centre, UK (2008)  
Guangzhou International Finance Center, China (2011)  

Sketches of Liverpool’s Kings Waterfront and the Guangzhou Tower, created to explore cladding construction details during design meetings. Colour is used to define the different elements.

**Book 10 (facsimile)**  
December 2005 – April 2006  
Maggie’s Centre  
Oxford, UK (2014)  

Some of the first sketches made during early project discussions in the office, considering options for the site location of the cancer-care drop-in centre and identifying the “tree house” concept.
These drawings and explanatory notes define the concept for the Jeddah project.

Watercolour enhances the legibility of the ideas and the small section shows the potential massing of accommodation on the island site (in yellow).
Drawing made during a collegiate design session to help resolve the meeting of the “narrative wall” and front façade. Material characteristics and qualities are expressed and the drawing explores the problem in both elevation and perspective.
Working up ideas for a tensegrity glass roof and adjacent footbridge for an urban redevelopment of the market district of St Petersburg. The scheme knits together the site, connecting old and new buildings.
Diagrammatic drawing created during an internal design workshop at competition stage, with colour added afterwards to clarify the essence of the project.

The drawing illustrates the site configuration and the strategy of using a grid shell roof to connect the spaces.
Early concept drawings made at competition stage for an extruded building linking the street to the beach. The section on the bottom right was drawn at a later stage.
Drawing created after the competition win in preparation for a presentation to the client, bringing together concept, form and narrative. Colour is used to evoke materiality and the faceted angular geometry, which catches the light.
Book 17 (facsimile)

January 2011 – November 2011

Carlsberg Brewhouse Visitor Centre
Copenhagen, Denmark (due for completion 2017)

Drawing made during a design session for part of a project led by a fellow partner, exploring how conceptual ideas could find form, with the spaces themselves becoming performative.
Sketches for a meeting with 2012 Summer Exhibition coordinator Tess Jaray RA illustrating proposals for an installation in the Annenberg Courtyard.

The “twist” design was selected to be worked up and realised.
Showcase 7
Book 18
November 2011 – February 2013
Crown Hotel
Sydney, Australia (estimated completion 2019)

Early sketches for the development of the concept at competition stage. The drawings express the narrative of twisted “petals”, which work with the programme in plan and elevation to create a sculptural form.

Colour is used to help articulate the form’s complexity.
In response to a client request for a podium of luxurious materials, Wilkinson sent a copy of the drawing on the right showing a veil of Carrara marble, having worked up the ideas on the left-hand page.
Book 19 (facsimile)
March 2013 – January 2014
King’s Cross Gasholders
London, UK (estimated completion 2016)

Drawing to unify the concept and appearance at the request of the client, showing an industrial aesthetic on the outside with the inside inspired by watch-making.

Watercolour evokes the materiality and character of the proposed building, which is evident in the sample perforated screen on display.
Sketch created in response to a meeting with the City Planners.

This new proposal for a tower in Leadenhall Street consists of a series of stacked boxes which decrease in width as they step up, in order to keep within the angle set by the profile of the “Cheesegrater”, as seen from a prescribed viewpoint in Fleet Street.

The drawing explores the proposed massing from different angles.
Contribution to an early design session to establish the key conceptual ideas for a mixed-use tower in Melbourne.

The drawing considers the requirements of brief and site and explores sculptural intentions.
Unnumbered
January 2015
Supertall Tower
New York, US (invited competition 2015)

Completed on a flight between London and Australia, this drawing develops the spatial, structural and aesthetic qualities of the design, which had been discussed in a meeting earlier in the day.

It evocatively explains how the building will look and operate.
Unnumbered (facsimile)
January 2015
Tower in Melbourne
Australia (invited competition 2015)

Completed on a return flight from Australia, this drawing explores concepts for the tower, including a “Skygarden” at the top for public use.

Watercolour captures the three-dimensional sculptural qualities.

Book 19 (facsimile)
March 2013 – January 2014

Drawing created to explain the DNA of WilkinsonEyre Architects for discussion at a directors’ awayday. The sketches show the evolution of the practice’s work.
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Prototype for a shutter for the King’s Cross Gasholders, London, UK
Laser-cut PPC and anodised aluminium sheets on an aluminium frame
2015

King’s Cross is the largest urban redevelopment scheme in Europe. In 2005 WilkinsonEyre Architects won a competition with a concept for three residential buildings to be housed in the heritage-listed conjoined triplet of gasholder guide frames, constructed in 1867.

As expressed in Wilkinson’s sketch in Book 19 (Showcase 7), the new façades derive from an industrial aesthetic, gesturing towards the heritage of the telescopic gasometer bell and its movements.
This prototype produced by Frener Reifer is for a four-leaf external sliding and folding concertina shutter that forms part of a dynamic façade system.

The shutters are designed to respond to both the environment and the inhabitants, opening and closing to varying degrees, controlled by the touch of an iPhone.

**King’s Cross Gasholders Concept**

2015  
Pencil and watercolour  
Private collection

**Film by Candida Richardson**

2015  
16mm film  
7 minutes 50 seconds  
Editor: Vinca Brown  
Colourist: Belgin Kaplan
Selection of projects by WilkinsonEyre Architects

Top Row (left to right)

Maggie’s Centre, Oxford, UK (2014)
Photo © Ben Bisek

Liverpool Arena and Convention Centre,
Liverpool, UK (2008)
Photo © English Partnerships / Mills Media / Ian Lawson

Photo © James Morris

Photo © Hufton + Crow

Photo © Ben Bisek
Middle Row (left to right)

Media City Footbridge, Salford, UK (2011)
Photo © Daniel Hopkinson

Splashpoint Leisure Centre, Worthing, UK (2013)
Photo © Julian Abrams

From Landscape to Portrait, London, UK (2012)
Photo © Ben Bisek

Guangzhou International Finance Center, Guangzhou, China (2011)
Photo © Christian Richters

University of Oxford: Earth Sciences Department, Oxford, UK (2011)
Photo © Edmund Sumner
Bottom Row (left to right)

Magna, Rotherham, UK (2000)
Photo © Ben Luxmoore

Photo © Edmund Sumner

Dyson Headquarters, Malmesbury, UK (1999)
Photo © Morley von Sternberg

Explore@Bristol, Bristol, UK (2000)
Photo © Dennis Gilbert

Mary Rose Museum Portsmouth, UK (2013)
Photo © Hufton + Crow
Design model of the Mary Rose Museum, Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, Hampshire, UK

Acrylic and photopolymer resin; figures; polystyrene
2006

Chris Wilkinson’s Diploma work (a representative piece traditionally presented to the Royal Academy by a new Academician) showcases his design for the new Mary Rose Museum, created to house the remains of the Tudor warship.

On 19 July 1545, during the Battle of the Solent, the ‘Mary Rose’ sank while in combat with the French fleet. It remained marooned in the mud of Portsmouth Harbour until its recovery in 1982.
The ship and a selection of its contents were put on display in a temporary structure until WilkinsonEyre Architects were commissioned to design a permanent museum to house them.

This model was shown to the Prince of Wales, president of the trustees, at a fundraising dinner at the time of Wilkinson’s election to the Royal Academy. Rather than demonstrating the final specific details of a design, the model is an abstraction of the architectural concept.

In two segments, it shows the surviving starboard hull of the ship on one side, while the other side depicts the “virtual hull”, the missing port side from which visitors view the existing wreckage and exhibition displays. Wilkinson described the design as “like an oyster enclosing the pearl”.
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Molly Bretton, Access Officer

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Way In
and Out

Film

Showcase
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Chris Wilkinson RA

Wilkinson draws what he sees around him, taking time to observe and capture his environment.

The scenes he selects often feature buildings within the natural or urban landscape, evoking the atmosphere of a place. As well as his sketchbooks, he carries a square sketchpad on both work and leisure trips, generally limiting himself to an hour for each drawing.

Though often done on holidays, these sketches show him still thinking as an architect – conveying a building’s materiality by assessing its proportions and massing, the attenuation of its façade and the play of light and shade.

Wilkinson’s watercolours form an important part of the design process as he seeks to understand and communicate the essence of a site and its context in order to inform his architectural response.
This can be seen most clearly in the sketches he produced over numerous visits to Sydney and the waterside site of Barangaroo.

Both sketching and painting are a source of enjoyment, but it is in creating abstract paintings that Wilkinson can truly break free from his thinking as an architect, experimenting with building layers of paint on the canvas until he is happy with the outcome.

This creative freedom in turn feeds his architectural imagination.
Visits to Sydney
Pencil and watercolour on paper

Having arrived on an early-morning flight into Sydney for a project meeting for the new Crown Hotel, Wilkinson found a position overlooking the site and sketched the scene in front of him (top left).

The Sydney Crown Hotel will form part of a 22-hectare site at Barangaroo, previously a container port at a key foreshore location on the western edge of the city.

Wilkinson has continued to capture the site as it has developed over subsequent visits. He has also drawn the surrounding area, including details that caught his interest such as the industrial wharf buildings and the engineering details of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.
Design concepts for the Sydney Crown Hotel

Watercolour on paper

WilkinsonEyre Architects won an international competition for the Sydney Crown Hotel in 2013.

The brief demanded a landmark design of the highest quality to address the coveted Sydney Harbour site and create a new waterfront destination. Inspired by nature, the concept is composed of petals that twist in an elegant, curved geometry.

It recalls an unrealised proposal for a large sculpture designed for Charles Jencks to stand on the border between England and Scotland.

It was through drawing that Wilkinson discovered that by twisting the three petals through 70 storeys, a space could be created at the centre that maximised the potential accommodation. These watercolours were created to communicate the concept.
Film by Candida Richardson, 2015

6 minutes 20 seconds
Editor: Vinca Brown
Colourist: Belgin Kaplan
Thanks to: Maggie’s Centre, Oxford; Mary Rose Museum, Portsmouth; Science Museum, London

New York skyline

Pencil and watercolour on paper

On two recent trips to New York for potential projects Wilkinson was captivated by the density and intensity of Manhattan.

He chose views from his hotel of the World Trade Center site (top) and of mid-town (bottom), with less distinctive architecture that nonetheless forms interesting compositions.
Watercolours locally and further afield

Pencil and watercolour on paper

While on his travels Wilkinson enjoys capturing local scenes, such as the picturesque view of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, created during a snatched hour before lunch; a colonial building, now a hotel, visited in Antigua; and the Chiostro del Bramante, seen from his hotel room in Rome. Sketching is also an important part of understanding the sites of architectural projects, as with the sketch of Battersea Power Station, begun during an initial brief scoping visit and completed afterwards.
Sketching in Lucca, Italy
Pencil and watercolour on paper

Wilkinson regularly visits Lucca, a medieval walled city in central Italy. He carries his square watercolour sketchpad with him and enjoys capturing local scenes and the town’s elegant architecture, often returning at different times of the day and year.

The sketches of the cathedral, San Martino, were completed this summer.

Italian sketches
Pencil on paper

Wilkinson uses small square sketchpads to capture the scenes in Italian towns, particularly those around Lucca, where he spends considerable time.

Each drawing is carefully composed on the page, whether focusing on a single building or looking down the narrow streets.
Scale and Materials

2014
Acrylic on canvas

Showcase 9
Sketch of Middlethorpe Hall, Yorkshire, UK, 1985

While visiting Yorkshire, Wilkinson stayed at Middlethorpe Hall (c. 1699–1701), a Queen Anne-style country house that is now a hotel. The sketch, done on hotel stationery, shows his particular attention to the articulation of the façade.
Sketch of the Banca Popolare, Verona, Italy

Sketch of Villa Emo, Veneto, Italy, 1986
Drawing made during an office tour of the Palladian villas in the Veneto.
Wilkinson notes the slope of the great ramp leading to the entrance, which provides a comfortable and welcoming approach to the rural villa, with ease of access for rolling barrels and dragging sacks. It was possibly also used for threshing grain.
Wilkinson has returned to the area on a number of occasions to visit and sketch Palladian buildings.
Sketch of the Barcelona Pavilion, Spain, 1992
On a tour to Barcelona with the Camberwell School of Art, Wilkinson sketched one of his favourite buildings, Mies van der Rohe’s German Pavilion for the Barcelona International Exhibition of 1929.
Wilkinson captures the planar forms – allowing for free movement between inside and outside – which so intrigue him.

Sketch on a programme made during a music concert at Dulwich Picture Gallery, designed by John Soane in 1817.
Sketch of Kom Ombo Temple, Egypt, 2011

On a visit to Egypt, Wilkinson sketched the interior passage of the Kom Ombo Temple. He was struck by the grand proportions and the hieroglyphics sculpted on all the surfaces and his sketch conveys the dramatic atmosphere of the space.
Acknowledgements
Curator: Kate Goodwin
Exhibition Design: WilkinsonEyre Architects
Exhibition Graphics: Niten Patel
Exhibition Manager: Morgan Feely
With thanks to WilkinsonEyre Architects, Frener Reifer, Argent, Ben Bisek, Michelle Lewis, Linda Lenthall, Rita Vekaria, and Vicky Wilson.

Events
Curator’s Tour with Kate Goodwin
Saturday 19 and Tuesday 22 September

Dialogue on Drawing: Chris Wilkinson RA and Humphrey Ocean RA
Friday 16 October

‘The Sketchbooks of Chris Wilkinson’
The new book, published by the Royal Academy of Arts, is available online at shop.royalacademy.org.uk and from the RA Shop in hardcover priced at £16.99 (£15 to readers of ‘RA Magazine’).
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