

Re-Build the Skylon! www.rebuildtheskylon.com

Stories.

Sam Webb, UK Architect (Written June 2008)

In 1949/50 the site of the Festival of Britain on the South Bank was cleared prior to erecting these amazing new buildings. I was 12 and in the first year at Christs College Finchley. It was all very exciting. Apart from the festival there was also Battersea Park funfair with its tree walk just like Kew and the Eagle comic started in April 1950. This had a comic strip on the festival including the Skylon.

On Saturday mornings a friend and I would get the tube from East Finchley Station to Archway and the walk up Highgate Hill and get a tram to the embankment. We sat in the front seats and the tram trundled through London to Holborn Kingsway and then, mysteriously to us, went down a ramp into a tunnel which came out underneath Waterloo Bridge. If you were lucky the tram turned right as it came out and stopped. This gave a grandstand view of the building work. If it turned left you had to get off because all the real excitement was on the west side of Hungerford Bridge.

Standing on tip toe for hours peering over the embankment parapets was hard on 12 year old feet! We did this most Saturdays. There were usually tramps on the seats and they didn't want to give these up. The tramps also did chalk drawings on the pavements to collect money and so you had to be very careful where you stood.

It is hard to imagine how drab, gray and poor London and Londoners were 58 years ago. The war had been long and hard. The bomb damage was considerable and lasted for years. Contrary to what people may say it was a scary time and I sometimes wonder how my mother coped with a shop to run on her own and me to bring up when my dad was in the army.

No one in my family had been an architect. My dad's family came from the Isle of Man after the Great War and opened a pub in Norton Folgate opposite Liverpool Street Station. We lived in an off licence/grocers in a very old part East Finchley on the edge of Hampstead Garden Suburb. My parents moved there in 1935 three days after they married in the depths of the depression. My dad was a brilliant artist and destined for better things but in those days there there was no choice. He used to take me to see buildings like Highpoint and art galleries.

Before the Festival there were lots of exhibitions in London. I remember being taken to see planes in Trafalgar Square and the John Lewis site in Oxford Street which had been bombed and cleared had a huge exhibition of planes jutting out over the Oxford Street during the war. The Tate had a big exhibition of prefab housing and I can remember being taken to see them. These were built outside on a bombed site. I was very impressed. After the war there were exhibitions like "Britain can Make it." by DRU.

These were all trial runs for the 1951 exhibition.

The two key figures were Hugh Casson and Misha Black both architects teaching at the Royal College. Misha founded DRU or Design Research Unit. I worked for Misha in the 1960s. They were given the task of masterminding the layout. DRU was a multi discipline design office with architects, graphic designers, interior designers, industrial designers, fabric designers etc. After i left in 1967 Richard Rogers joined with Sue and John Young.

The site was divided by Hungerford Bridge with the Dome of Discovery and Skylon on the West side and the Festival Hall on the other. The Skylon was sited near the tallest flagpole which came from Canada. Lots of things were biggest. One exhibit had the largest sheet of glass ever made. A bit boring really.

The Skylon was incredibly delicate and seen from the embankment sometimes didn't appear to have any visible means of support. It defied gravity. It had lights inside. These came on when it was dark and the pavements around the site also had lights in them. These came on at dusk. Some of them were still there until recently in the NCP site in front of the Shell building.

The designers were all very young, many from the AA. There were Powell and Moya (Skylon and Churchill Gardens), Leonard Mannassa who designed the public toilets - these had huge ducts to get at the pipework I remember him once telling me - and Alex Gibson who designed the Riverside Restaurant (DRU). Alec's son Richard Gibson lives in Lerwick in Shetland and is an old friend. You should talk to him and also Leonard who still lives in a house he designed in Highgate Village. The engineer for a lot of these buildings was Felix Samuely who taught construction at the AA with the architect George Fairweather. GF was a good friend and someone I worked with. He designed the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club when Emberton went on holiday. It was exhibited at MOMA in NY in the 1930s in a big exhibition organised "The International Style" by Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock. Corb also exhibited plus Mies and FLW. George never really got any credit for designing that building. He told me after he left his name taken off the drawings. Emberton got a special silver medal.

The Festival inspired me to become an architect. I was very good at art and drawing but attempts to say that I wanted to go to art school were met with comments that I would have to get a proper job. So, fired up with the Festival and clambering around in the Dome of St Pauls as a child, when I was 16 and old enough I left school and applied to study architecture.