

a dazzling new array of modern buildings and attractions is appearing in London, giving the beloved city a fresh look and reinvigorating its sense of history

BY STEVEN BESCHLOSS



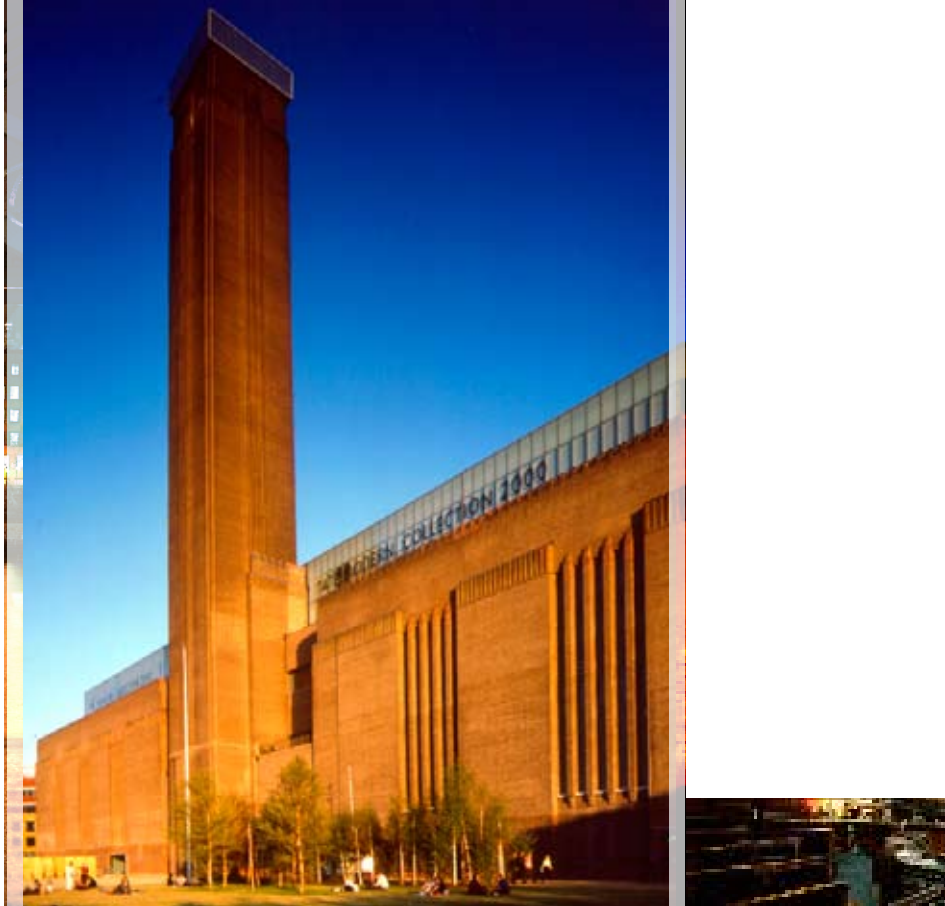
I've always been an easy mark for London. I love drinking bitter in a pub that's been serving pints since the 17th century. I love seeing The Old Curiosity Shop (circa 1567) as I walk the same streets where Dickens walked, all through the night, looking for mid-novel inspiration. I love strolling the aristocratically eccentric streets of Mayfair, lined with bespoke shirt-makers, cigar and pipe purveyors, the Royal family's preferred cheesemonger and a haberdasher selling shaving brushes of the finest horsehair and other odd paraphernalia for gentlemen. I love the clichés, too—double-decker buses and Big Ben, tea and scones, Beatles and Beefeaters. And, yes, I love the accents, always reminding me how beautiful the English language can sound (and, oh, how quickly I can slip into that without even noticing).

But most of all, I love the way this great city transports you back in time. Without really trying, around nearly every corner, London entices with fascinating details and beautiful old buildings and monuments that remind you that this was once the world's cultural and financial capital, and that Britain commanded an empire upon which the sun would never set. It's the little things—gold-tipped wrought-iron fences, Victorian clocks, ornate lampposts, plaques commemorating the homes of fabled residents—and it's the grand achievements: the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London, the British Museum, Buckingham Palace. Grow up in America as I have, a nation that often still feels like it was born yesterday, and how can you resist these magnificent seductions?

There is another side to this, of course. One man's blast from the past is another man's dirt and decay. Like me, you may be enchanted by history's artifacts, while others are frustrated by the dead or outdated. This is a debate long under way in London, as tradition-minded preservationists (including Prince Charles) have slowed the city's evolution while modern architects and forward-thinking developers have sought daring new construction. The good news? Like a burgeoning glass menagerie, a dazzling new array of modern buildings

Ceiling for the world: The breathtaking Elizabeth II Great Court opens up the British Museum, left. Inset: Two views of the main reading room's glorious rotunda.

Not your daddy's London (from left to right): The Millennium Bridge and St. Paul's Cathedral; the Tate Modern; the British Museum's main Reading Room; the Museum of Natural History's Darwin Centre; and a model of the upcoming London Bridge Tower, also known as the Glass Shard.



and attractions is appearing, giving the city a fresh look and—by not bulldozing what makes the city great—invigorating its history by their contrast. The effect—indeed, the improvement—is breathtaking.

AN OLD MUSEUM BREATHES AGAIN

Twenty years ago, I took my chance to live and work in London. Armed with a precious year-long research pass to the British Library, I visited its main Reading Room, housed inside the British Museum, nearly every day. This was heaven for a writer: I would enter the Reading Room's massive, high-domed circular space lined with books, hear the hushed sounds of movement, breathe in the sweet and musty smells of the room's long-stored tomes, and let a magnificent rush of history wash over me. This was, after all, not just a repository of collected objects; this was—and still is—the actual space where many of the fathers of the modern world sat, worked, thought: Karl Marx, George Orwell, Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett and Mahatma Gandhi all formed their stories here.

But as moving as the room itself can be, the process of getting there was often dreary and confusing. I would work my way down a dim and dingy hallway past the human-headed winged lions from Egypt, arrive at the Rosetta Stone (sitting out in the open and very touchable), then hesitantly wend my way to the reading room.

How that experienced has changed. Enter the museum today, originally established in 1752 and offering one of the world's most wide-ranging collections, and soon you come upon the Queen Elizabeth II Great Court. Where once stood decaying bookstacks housing the British Library's voluminous collection of much of the world's most important literature is now a magnificently modern open space with a

vaulted glass ceiling of 3,312 triangular glass panels that link four original outer walls of the museum—creating the largest enclosed courtyard in Europe.

The feeling, especially for one who remembers those dusty old days, is awe inspiring. The world's oldest public museum has a new heart, complete with revitalized shops and cafés and a central meeting area that provides visitors an inspiring focal point to begin their exploration. The majestic Reading Room, with a new limestone exterior and entrance, is still at the center, but now is open to the public and proffers 25,000 volumes tied to the museum's collection.

Designed by the renowned architect Sir Norman Foster—and one of several important new structures in London created by his firm—it's hard to understate the Great Court's impact. I visited it on a gray and rainy day, in a city that has many such days, but when I entered this space, the light grew brighter, even cheery. Visited by an estimated 4.5 million people a year and open Thursday through Saturday until 11 p.m., the Great Court has become a meeting place in its own right for tourists and Londoners alike. Last June, during a special Michelangelo exhibition, the museum stayed open until midnight, a British Museum spokeswoman told me, “so that people could come after theatre or dinner.” Many visitors may still head straight to the vast mummy collection on the second floor, study the hieroglyphics on the Rosetta Stone (now in a glass box), look at the cabinet of curiosities in the newly refurbished King's Enlightenment Gallery or linger inside the glorious Reading Room, but they all will inevitably gaze upward at the spectacular glass ceiling that has breathed new life into one of the world's great museums.

Outside the museum, the adjacent Great Russell Street remains a lively and utterly British row of Scottish wool stores, antiquarian booksellers, print dealers and sandwich shops (plus the inevitable Starbucks on the corner). But there are also signs of change in the surrounding Bloomsbury area—the heart of literary

London made famous by the Bloomsbury Group and the authorial lights who lived or worked here (Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and E.M. Forster, to name a few). In nearby Russell Square, one of London's largest squares, the low-slung outdoor café has been spruced up with a new glass façade, and the square itself has been refurbished with fresh plantings, fencing and fountains. “Yeah, our little café was an old wooden structure—quite cozy, really,” recalls the cashier, Maria. “But now we have a new open place with big glass windows and a view, thankfully. It's really nice.”

TRANSFORMED BY ART

Standing on Waterloo Bridge overlooking the River Thames, it's always been something of a disappointment to gaze at the drab, albeit culturally important, buildings on the South Bank: the Royal National Theatre, the Royal Festival Hall, the National Film Theatre, the Hayward Gallery. That area has been significantly spruced up by the arrival of the British Airways London Eye, the largest observation wheel in the world, with 32 glass capsules (each holds 25 people) mounted on the outside of a steel wheel. On clear days, the 443-foot structure, which looks more like a giant bicycle wheel than a ferris wheel, provides unobstructed views of up to 25 miles during its gently turning 30-minute trip. Its shiny circularity, in such clear contrast to the surrounding block-shaped buildings, has helped make it a city landmark ever since it was built for the 2000 millennium celebration.

Looking downriver to the east, I was like plenty of visitors and Londoners who paid little attention to that bankside view. The only sight that caught my eye: the massive—and massively forbid-

Next in Londontown

What makes a city great? Modern cities, built with automobiles in mind, are often disappointing exactly because of their mind-numbingly symmetrical grid structure. Where are the surprises for pedestrians when streets don't bend in all kinds of odd directions? Is there anything better than getting lost in a great city and finding your way out?

Next year work begins on London Bridge Tower, perhaps better known already as the Glass Shard. Designed by Renzo Piano to create a sharp and light presence, this multi-use building will further transform its neighborhood of Southwark and, as the tallest building in London by half, the city itself. Much like the Great Court, the London Eye, the Millennium Bridge and the Tate Modern, the Glass Shard is likely to become a landmark that will provide visitors with a fresh perspective on a magnificent old city. In fact, the tower will offer visitors the tallest viewing gallery in Europe.

This sharp landmark will make it harder to get lost. But it will provide yet another jewel in London's crown—and another fresh reason to count on this city as a gate to the future as well as the past.



The Ritz at 100: A Well-Polished Gem

A century ago, in 1906, Cesar Ritz opened the doors to his opulent new London hotel on 150 Piccadilly. Built in the French château style with Louis XVI interiors, this palace-like setting quickly became a glamorous magnet for many of the world's leading figures. King Edward VII was an early patron. King Alfonso of Spain and Queen Amelie of Portugal met there. The Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova danced there. Noel Coward wrote songs there. Tallulah Bankhead drank champagne from a slipper there. And Charlie Chaplin enjoyed a good night's sleep and a cup of tea there—this after an escort of 40 policemen and a triumphant 1921 return to England from Hollywood. Remarkably, this world-renowned gem contains only 133 guest rooms—a boutique hotel by today's standards. Yet its intimate size only underscores how its qualities of grand luxury and personal service, sophistication and elegant beauty have sustained its international reputation and historical significance. It is the only hotel in the world to earn a Royal Warrant, which in this case means that the Ritz periodically provides banqueting and catering services for royal occasions. Among the finely attended galas: a private party to celebrate the anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's Jubilee year.



Clockwise, from top left: The brand-new Ritz, circa 1906; Cesar Ritz and builders Charles Mewes and Arthur Davis; the Green Park Lobby; the Rivoli Bar; and the Great Room in the William Kent House.



During the last decade, after a period when it had by most accounts become a rather dowdy duckling, the legendary hotel has been restored by its new owners to its original grandeur—gilders applied new gold leaf, original fireplaces and antiques were refurbished and replaced, new carpets were laid, clouds on the ceiling in the transcendent Ritz restaurant were freshly painted. The Ritz also has received such up-to-date touches as plasma TVs and fiber-optic Internet access in every room.

In addition to this approximately \$100 million refurbishment, the Ritz just finished the restoration of the William Kent House, a glorious 18th-century home named for its architect (best known for inventing the English naturalistic style in landscape gardens) rather than its original owner, Lord Henry Pelham. Adjacent to the Ritz, this grand property provides the hotel the additional banquet and meeting rooms that it has long coveted. Before Cesar Ritz completed his intimate London hotel, a Ritz director asked then-owner Lord Wimborne if he would consider selling his home to make way for an extended Ritz. Lord Wimborne's reply: "I am thinking of enlarging my garden. How much will you take for the Ritz?"

It took several changes in ownership and a century before the acquisition happened, but now the Ritz—while mindful of its traditions and treasured history—is in an expansive mood. "This is an exciting and challenging time for us all at the Ritz," says Stephen Boxall, general manager. "As we celebrate our first 100 years, we continue to invest in the restoration and traditions of this legendary hotel and look forward to many more years of putting on the Ritz." ■ BY STEVEN BESCHLOSS

past residents



At the Ritz (from top): Ballerina Madame Pavlova, Charles Chaplin, Tallulah Bankhead, Rita Hayworth and Sophia Loren.

ding—red-brick Battersea Power Station that marked a down-on-its-heels area known for its brothels and taverns and street fights. To say the least, London's Southwark area was not much of a tourist magnet.

Not anymore: The year 2000 ushered in the Tate Modern and the blade-like Millennium Bridge. This one-two punch has been central to the revival of a now dramatically thriving Southwark, almost single-handedly turning the borough into one of London's most engaging destinations.

The pedestrian bridge, a 1,155-foot ribbon of steel which spans the Thames from the City of London and St. Paul's Cathedral to virtually the door of the Tate Modern, is another jewel designed by Foster. It is the first new bridge to cross the Thames since the Tower Bridge in 1894—and it faced near calamity from the start. Some 150,000 walkers crossed the bridge during its first weekend, causing a serious wobble in the structure. The more the walkers compensated for the wobble, the more the sway increased; the bridge closed almost as soon as it opened. Its engineers figured out that the span was suffering from "synchronous lateral excitation" caused by all the footsteps. Eighteen months later, fitted with dampers that act like shock absorbers, the now-steady bridge reopened to the acclaim it deserved.

Oh, how it's been needed. Some 4 million visitors per year now flock to the Tate Modern, more than any other modern art museum in the world by the museum's reckoning—more than double the original expectations—and a majority of those millions are under 35. Combining works from the three other Tate museums, the Tate Modern contains one of the world's great collections of modern and contemporary art since 1900. Presenting the art by theme rather than chronology ("Poetry and Dream," "State of Flux"), the high-ceilinged exhibition spaces provide wonderfully open venues to see the works—such a sharp contrast from so many new modern art buildings that may be fantastic works of architecture but often lack the needed wall space to enhance viewing.

Originally designed in 1947 by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott (also the architect of Waterloo Bridge and the designer of Great Britain's famous red telephone booths), the power station was renovated by internationally renowned Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, both Pritzker Prize laureates. They converted the Turbine Hall into a dramatic entrance area of dark and light, turned the boiler house into galleries and designed a two-story glass box on top of the brick structure, which floods the upper galleries with light. From the members' restaurant on the sixth floor and the café and sleekly stylish public restaurant on the seventh floor (pop-art murals on the walls, floors of dark hardwood, black designer furniture), expansive windows offers sensational views of the Thames, St. Paul's and the city beyond, views that were virtually inaccessible six years ago. And while you gaze outside or at the delightfully diverse group of international visitors within, you can enjoy a menu that is fresh, eclectic and tasty.

As absorbing as the museum is now, it will be even



Glowing attractions (from left): The London Eye, the Roast restaurant next door to the Borough Market and a night view of Swiss Re Tower, known as the gherkin for its unusual shape.

more so when Herzog and de Meuron complete the recently announced \$400 million 11-floor annex, which will resemble glass boxes stacked arbitrarily to form a modern pyramid and intended to accommodate video, film, performance and other art installations. Expected in time for the 2012 London Olympics, this dramatic extension will take advantage of space vacated by the current power company's substation.

SOUTHWARK'S UNEXPECTED PLEASURES

The museum itself can easily absorb your day, but the nearby streets close to the river are dotted with surprises, too. The Globe Theatre, a faithful recreation of Shakespeare's Elizabethan open-air playhouse on its original site, is practically next door. Vinopolis offers wine tastings, a tour of the history of winemaking, and several shops, bars and eateries underneath Victorian railway arches. The Clink, tucked into a cobblestone alleyway, is a macabre museum complete with instruments of torture on the original site of the actual "Clink" prison that closed in 1780. The Southwark Cathedral, parts of which date to the 12th century, is the place where John Harvard, founder of Harvard University, was baptized, and where Edmund Shakespeare, William's brother, was buried in 1607.

Then there's the food.

Wandering another cobblestoned back street away from the river, I came upon Borough Market, which dates back to at least the 11th century, when it drew traders from all over Europe. In its current Victorian incarnation underneath the railroad tracks, it just celebrated its 250th birthday (Prince Charles and Lady Camilla have shopped there). The oldest operating fruit and vegetable market in central London, the Borough has been voted the best in London by several periodicals and city tastemakers and has become a trendy haven for serious foodies. Among its stalls: Lee Brothers Potato Merchants, established 1875; Mrs. King's Pies (that's pork, served cold), since 1853; and The Ginger Pig, which promises "full

trace identity" for its free-range-practicing farmers and butchers. It turns out this market has been a film location for *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Howard's End* and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*—and locals swear they've seen Keira Knightley and Helen Mirren perusing the goods there.

And for those who want to sit down and eat and enjoy the exciting juxtaposition of modern design and one of London's most ancient places? Roast takes advantage of the second floor of the market's South Portico, which was relocated in 2004 from Covent Garden's dismantled Floral Hall. It's a sleekly stylish restaurant with large windows overlooking the market and serves gourmet British cuisine (yes, there is such a thing now in London). Another new choice: Fish!, which is housed in a ground-floor glass-and-steel pavilion tucked between the Borough Market and the Southwark Cathedral, serving fresh fish of nearly every variety, daily.

A REAWAKENED LONDON

Throughout the city, the old and the new are increasingly sharing the space. The masterful, cathedral-like National History Museum contains some marvelous modern touches, and its adjacent, newly built Darwin Centre offers an unexpected contrast in glass.

Perhaps the most startling new glass structure on the London horizon is the Swiss Re Tower at 30 St. Mary Axe, a 40-story skyscraper that's been nicknamed the "erotic gherkin" because it looks like, well, a very firm pickle. Another exciting work from Foster, the building sticks straight up, towering over the historic City of London. The top two floors of this commercial office building, which has been honored for its environmentally friendly technology, include a restaurant for the building's staff as well as a bar and restaurant for corporate events on the top floor. Even on a quiet Sunday, I was among several dozen visitors near its front door, gazing up at this new addition to the London skyline.

Just like my day at the Great Court, it was one of the few moments during my visit that I stopped and stared. For me, the visceral pleasure of London is a motion picture—I love to experience the city while moving through the streets, taking in its ground-level delights. That will never change: I love to walk here. But as the city's skyline keeps changing, the London experience—just like the city's future—will be looking up. ●