

## Thoughts on the Courts

**Hello and welcome to this podcast series, in which different people from the design world give their perspectives on galleries at the V&A.**

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**Imagine you're an aspiring artist or designer in the nineteenth century. You're desperate to see great works of sculpture and architecture, but have no money to travel. What would you do? One option might be to visit the V&A's Cast Courts. First opened in 1873, these two huge rooms are full of plaster casts of works from northern Europe, Spain and Italy. Here copies of Renaissance sculptures rub shoulders with casts of Norwegian doorways and of effigies from thirteenth century Europe.**

**But what relevance do the Cast Courts have to us today? Founded as they are on the belief that one should copy great works of the past in order to learn, can they still speak to an age which favours originality as a central aim of good art and design? Here we listen to three people with particular interests in the Cast Courts: Catherine Duncumb, V&A + RIBA Architecture Education Officer; Jos Boys, Architecture tutor at the University of Brighton; and Madelyn Fleming, graduate from the Interior Architecture BA at the University of Brighton, who explains a design she developed for the Courts.**

**First we hear from V&A + RIBA Architecture Education Officer Catherine Duncumb, who starts by describing what happens when groups visit the Courts:**

I often take groups in there and it's very satisfying to see their reaction when they walk in and they say 'wow'. And I think for everybody it's a very instant, physical, emotional response.

First and foremost, the scale of the objects, which are unlike others in the Museum, but also the magnificence of the numbers of these objects populating the space. A sort of jumble collection which you can't quite work out what it is, what they are, how come they got there, and all sorts of questions pop into your head that you can't wait to answer, but meanwhile perhaps one's itching to get in there and have a look around.

It's quite a different space, the way the objects are curated, you can rummage around, it's a bit like going into the attic and seeing what you can find – sometimes your vision is blocked by objects and you want to move around and look behind it – there's a sense of, I don't know – surprise, discovery. You can meander more, much less controlled than, perhaps, other places in the Museum.

One of the first things I find people want to know is – where did these things come from, and how did they get here. I think first and foremost people generally think that objects were stolen or looted, but of course they weren't, and the history of the Cast Courts is interesting in that they were founded out of a purely educational ethos so

that people could understand, enjoy and appreciate the objects. There was a time when people turned their nose up at something that's fake, but here fakeness has a value in preserving things – providing access to objects which otherwise are not easy to look at. A time long ago when people didn't have the funds to travel, this is what they could come to and see – and nowadays of course we don't have that distinction – we're more familiar with seeing things either through the internet, television... and also sometimes because the originals have been damaged and may not exist any more – and that's where people really start to get interested, because it's what you can't tell from looking at them.

If you look up, there's also more to see in terms of details and the names of places of architectural interest running round the top of the room. And also the fragments that if you go to one end of the space, you can see still with their tags on. Again, how did these things get there? Can you find that out?'

Perhaps it's also worth wondering what types of buildings these fragments are from. Are they of one type, or many different types? Once you start looking more closely, you start to notice that they are associated with spaces of worship, places of worship, largely a church, so one gets a feeling of the power and domination of the church. It doesn't give you a sense of other cultures, or where these objects are from, these fragments, they're symbols of worship and reverence. It's a bit like collecting souvenirs – they're not necessarily sympathetic to the place of origin – it almost has a sense of empire.

I've actually seen the Portico in Santiago di Compostela. You respond to things differently when you're there on site, in context, and when you see them as a fragment in a museum. They're quite divorced from reality, and because of the nature of pulling all these pieces together they almost have a unity in that space which they would never have in their actual context, where you'd have different noises, hustle and bustle round, smells, temperature – quite, quite different.

But it does mean you are forced to look at details perhaps more closely than when you're actually there seeing them in the context.

### **Next I talked to Architecture tutor Jos Boys, who reflects on the history and structure of the Courts.**

I think what I really like about the Cast Courts is that it's like a little city, there are kind of random assemblies of objects, like lots of buildings put together completely cheek by jowl without any underlying logic, quite randomly, and that means you get this really unexpected relationship between the objects. You get changes in scale, types of surface, material, and it just means you see more than just the individual objects. The other thing I like about it is that it is in daylight, it's naturally lit. I think that also helps make it feel like it's a place or a small town. And the way the light comes from above gives just that fantastic quality of being in a very different sort of space to many museums.

### **And can you tell us a bit about why the collections were put together?**

The collections are put together for a very deliberate reason. They were examples of the very best types of noble architectural features and sculptures from different

periods and places, and they were there for architects and for stone carvers and others to draw, to copy. It's a very different notion of education, particularly architectural education, which is that you copy from the past rather than that you ignore it.

**And could you say a bit about the architecture of the Cast Courts?**

This building was designed in the 1870s as really meant to be two quite simple and bold sheds designed by General Henry Scott. And what's quite hard for us to see, I think, is that the whole building was using iron construction in a very innovative way. Although it's clad with more traditional materials, most of the structure is held up through an iron frame, which was very new at the time. Then in terms of the Cast Courts themselves, you get the two big spaces, and then between them there's this narrow gallery formed by a high level corridor, and that's actually very decorative. The whole place is meant to be impressive in its simplicity, the way that the colours that are chosen, the kind of plainness of finishes, it's meant to be sombre. But you also get these mosaic floors, which were laid by women inmates of Woking Prison.

The other thing that's different to the way that architecture is designed today, and again quite hard to get hold of, is that division between the frame that's holding everything up, and then the decoration that takes place on top of it. Richard Redgrave, who worked with the V&A founder, Henry Cole, to reform industrial art education, the way that he stated that was 'our object is to fit a building for use, and then to decorate it afterwards'. Well by the time I was trained in architecture in the 1970s, that division was considered to be unacceptable, buildings had to look like what they contained, so it was a very different notion.

**And as you say, we're now living in a time which emphasises innovation and originality more. How would you as a design tutor use the Cast Courts now in teaching?**

I would really enjoy ways of drawing that so changed the scale that you could imagine that a very small part of one piece was the size of a whole building, or that if you drew two next to each other you were actually exploring the kind of ambiguities and differences between different approaches, particularly say between western architecture and eastern examples.

I think the thing that's different, is that when those examples were put together they would have been seen as having a really clear hierarchy of which were the best, which were least good, or which were enjoyable and interesting because they were exotic, i.e. non-western. And now I think we're much more interested in seeing everything, that there isn't a special kind of good example and then other things that are less interesting. So I wouldn't want to pick out a particular bit of the Cast Court, or if I did I'd probably pick out something very seemingly banal, because it's from that that you might be able to think quite laterally and creatively rather than from some of the great masters.

**Madelyn Fleming was given a brief to develop a design for one of the Cast Courts in her final year on the University of Brighton's Interior Architecture BA. She had to design a temporary construction for the Cast Courts which**

**would communicate to others how she saw the space. I talked to her about her design.**

**What was your first response to the Cast Courts space?**

I felt intimidated by the scale of the space. I immediately looked upwards towards the skylights before I even looked at what was in the room, including the two columns in the centre. Walking round the space I felt claustrophobic, due to the dense content of the space. It felt like a mini city with two skyscrapers in the centre. When I drew a section through the space I divided it into three sections – the floor level with a claustrophobic feel, the middle section with the unused, negative space and the roof which seemed to act as a cage because of the grid of the skylight.

**So what we've got in the design is a kind of skin which you've put along one side of the Cast Courts, the side with the side entrances....and the skin forms three tunnels going into the Cast Courts, which a person would go along, and one tunnel is straight and leads up to an object, another tunnel curves round an object, and another tunnel, a bit of a longer one, slants up to Trajan's column. Is that right?**

Yeah, basically, it wraps around all the entrances like a skin and goes into the Cast Court and out again, and in and out again, so visitors find themselves in the Cast Court but not being able to see it, apart from the roof.

**And what's this skin made of?**

It's made of sheet steel, which is 6 metres high, bolted together, and latex is bolted to it, at intervals.

**So how did you want to alter the Cast Court space?**

I didn't want to alter the Cast Court itself; I wanted to change the entrance. What interested me was to translate my initial reaction to the space in the installation, in order to make others react the same way, making them feel claustrophobic before they even entered the space. I also wanted to create a sense of frustration in the visitors by denying access to the Cast Courts until the very end of the archway. As well as denying access I wanted to deny any views into the Cast Court apart from the ceiling, therefore making them look upwards first.

The latex on the sides of the installation would allow people to touch it on either side, creating shapes recalling a baby in a womb, which would emphasize a sense of enclosure. This sense of restriction would increase the visitor's curiosity about the space.

**And you said as well you wanted to show the scary side, or negative side of the Cast Courts. Can you say a bit more about that?**

I thought I had quite a weird reaction to the Cast Courts and I wanted people to see that, because not many people I think would react that way.

**Did you feel differently towards the Courts by the end of the project?**

I definitely felt more comfortable towards the end, especially as I sat down in the middle and drew it...at various times I felt more secure within it.

**You've come to the end of this podcast; thanks very much for listening. Other podcasts in this series look at the Silver Galleries, the Jewellery Gallery and the British Galleries.**