

# Riverside Museum, Glasgow

Glasgow

Zaha Hadid Architects  
and Gross Max  
Landscape Architects

Glasgow's new Transport Museum designed by Zaha Hadid Architects (ZHA) is the latest in a series of buildings intended to form key parts of the regeneration of the River Clyde corridor. For many exhibits this will be their fourth home in 50 years but this latest and presumably permanent location affords the opportunity to display far more of the collection than previous venues. The location provides an appropriate transport and movement context in abundance. There are railways, ferries and the seaplane terminal, the buzzing of helicopters, the noise from BAE Systems downstream, building Westminster's warships, and the constant background noise of the Expressway. Despite all this movement, the museum's context is dereliction: the current recession may ensure that it will stay that way for years.



Approaching the building is a disappointing experience. The latest modifications to the Clydeside Expressway ensure that the Riverside Museum has few connections with surrounding areas. The access road smacks of a motorway off-ramp to a retail park. With bitmac footpaths and pin kerbing in abundance around the rudimentary car park, this is a value-engineered environment. Buses roar backwards and forwards from the city centre carrying two or three people in each, while the car park (pay and display) overflows with visitors. Clearly innovation has stopped at the outside wall of the new building.

Gross Max, one of Scotland's brightest and most accomplished landscape architects, have produced a sequence of spaces around the curves of the building with token misters for kids and green mounds with silver birch trees integrated into a simple paving treatment. Here it is possible to see a nod towards the aesthetic of spontaneous landscape that is common to the post-industrial riverside. Is it the intention that the maturing of this landscape would see ZHA's building in a glade of scrubby silver birch? Who knows – it is hard to find any sense of landscape in the various visualisations of the building. One thing is certain: Gross Max did not anticipate the vast consumption of junk food from three outlets around the building, the overflowing rubbish bins and tomato ketchup staining.

The building is another of the metal clad family common to the Clyde, photogenic and already part of the family of recent buildings that have become the postcard face of the city. Like the Science Centre

and Armadillo, it is flattered by blue sky and vacant surroundings that help to point up its other-worldliness. Purely by being interesting enough to be photographed, the building becomes a location worth visiting and a significant place on the river – even if disconnected from anything else. And we may be seeing it at its best: once the

property market recovers and starts to roll out more junk developments, the setting of the building will be altered for the worse.

There are few clues externally about what to expect from the interior. A crisp exterior of zinc, dark glass and signature roofline creates a memorable if severe aesthetic. From Govan, the presence of the SS Glenlee berthed alongside the Museum presents a slightly uncomfortable visual moment which flatters neither object – the effect may be similar to your granny turning up at your graduation wearing a Crimplene dressing gown.

Internally, the atmosphere is chaotic and redolent of a 1950s toy garage. It's a happy place though, with much smiling, patient helpful staff and reminiscing. Almost everything seems familiar yet special too and the curation is crowded but effective. The architecture often just recedes.

Although possibly a minor work in terms of ZHA buildings, this will surely be an excellent investment for the City Council, popular and positive for marketing. However, despite its merits, the building cannot escape its surroundings and disconnection with the city. It would be unfortunate if euphoria surrounding the Riverside obscured the fact that this uncrowded stretch of 'world class waterfront' is actually a world class failure in terms of the production of contemporary city. If landscape articulates a politics as well as an aesthetic then this waterfront is a consummate neo-liberal landscape of public waste, private greed, risk aversion and an environment for 'customers' in which communities, their economies and potential are completely ignored. It's not that the individual public sector funded developments have not succeeded – they are mostly highly successful in their own terms – but the external environment of each development is a failure and after adding in the sterile private sector developments, the cumulative effect is nothing more than junkspace – the Clyde Corridor's default urbanism.

Hopefully ZHA's building will be the final moment of iconicism. For the creators of this waterfront, the first steps towards change - involving recognition that there is a problem - will be difficult and painful. For the private sector, to own so much land yet achieve so little and to be unable to string together any sort of cohesive urbanism, whether traditional, Modern, contemporary or parametric, is a profound failure and would make anyone wonder about the skills at play or what those involved were actually trying to achieve.

Now there has to be an acknowledgement that a different approach is required: that doing small things better might be more constructive than more mega-million stones on the shiny metal necklace. That joining things up with decent infrastructure and good public transport might start to create a riverside of higher value. That growing existing communities to the river might also work - as a contra-notion to developing laterally along the river. And that constructive employment and providing the circumstances in which economies and innovation might thrive and in which communities can be involved are more valuable aims than private greed and shareholder satisfaction and that all these things are more important than design as shape-making and object creation.

Reviewed by: **Willie Miller**