REVIEW

AHMM’s Rome exhibition shows a practice attempting to carve its place in architectural history

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An exhibition looking at six projects by Allford Hall Monaghan Morris at the British School at Rome maps a path for the practice’s direction of travel, writes Rob Wilson

Architecture and the Art of the Extra-Ordinary presents a tightly curated cut through AHMM’s recent practice, showing just six projects: four completed – the American Energy Partners Campus and Fitness Center / Oklahoma City Ballet, Burntwood School, Chobham Academy and New Scotland Yard; one due to complete this autumn – the University of Amsterdam Roeterseiland Campus; and one major future project – a campus headquarters in India, for an undisclosed client and location.

AHMM is the latest architect to exhibit at the British School at Rome (BSR) as part of its ongoing architecture programme ‘Meeting Architecture’ curated by Marina Engel, who seems to have the freedom, not often seen in the UK, to flex her curatorial muscles in thoughtful programmes that don’t just play to the crowd. Over the past two years, the theme of the programme has been ‘fragments’ and has focused primarily on lectures and talks, with speakers including Eyal Weizman, Joseph Rykwert, Jen-Louis Cohen and Rob Bevan. There has also been a series of exhibitions made by some of the key architectural practitioners to emerge over the last 30 years in the UK, but concentrating particularly on their creative collaborations with artists. Installations have included one by Adam Caruso working with Thomas Demand and also by Eric Parry working with Richard Deacon.
Rome Exhibition TS 5

Source: Tim Soar
These take place in the small gallery that sits in the depths of the BSR building near the Borghese Gardens: a slightly monastic-feeling courtyard building that is fronted by a grandiose but unusually humourless Classical façade by Lutyens.

The AHMM exhibition loosely takes its cue from the theme of ‘fragments’, with an installation that groups diverse elements relating to each of the building projects, with 3D work arranged on display stands and 2D work on adjacent walls, ranging from material samples and historical references to sketchbooks, newspaper articles, drawings and in particular models: 3D-printed massing maquettes, detailed façade studies and final presentation set-pieces. These tell the story and process of each project in an associative, spare way with little labelling. Eschewing an easy cut to the glossy money shot that so much architecture is represented by these days, what AHMM presents is more an idea of the ongoing ‘process’ of the building; not the specifics of a collaboration but the holistic sense of its origins and ongoing life, outside the commission and design. ‘You never design in a tabula rasa,’ says Simon Allford, the AHMM partner who led on the exhibition. This is true of course not just of the physical context of each building, but also of its positioning in AHMM’s oeuvre, and in what the exhibition’s introduction states slightly cryptically as: ‘the development of their theory on essential architecture of the Universal Building’, an idea that references Mies’ ‘universal space’, and which the exhibition traces back to the origins of the firm.

It was at the Bartlett in 1986 that the four founding partners of AHMM, Allford, Jonathan Hall, Paul Monaghan and Peter Morris, first collaborated on a thesis called ‘The Fifth Man’, its premise being ‘function alone is not sufficient means to generate architecture; and that it is in the field of everyday buildings that architecture has failed the city’. ‘We saw one of the key issues in architecture being a lack of interest in the everyday,’ says Allford. ‘We believe that architecture essentially should be a backdrop to life.’

This premise, putting the emphasis not on a building’s generation by the internal logic of its functional brief but on its need to function as part of the wider city, is nicely referenced back to the celebrated 18th-century plan of Rome by Giambattista Nolli, which shows the interiors of the city’s public buildings as extensions to the street. ‘After all, the street will last beyond the functional programme,’ says Allford.
Rome Exhibition TS 36

Source: Tim Soar

zoom inzoom out

This is clearly illustrated by four of the projects shown being either reworkings, extensions or retrofits of existing buildings, exemplifying this engagement with actual context. The massive arched roof of the American Energy Partners Campus and Fitness Center / Oklahoma City Ballet sits on the foundations of an unfinished wine store, the hangar-like space it encloses illustrative very much of a ‘universal’ space, its form flexible enough to accommodate and be ‘designed for a for a life that we don’t yet know’, as Allford puts it. Meanwhile New Scotland Yard returns a 1930s building to its original use as a police headquarters, but one completely reworked for the 21st century.

The other two projects are ‘re-imaginings’ that reference their historical – and specifically Modernist – context, as well as reconnecting pre-existing buildings to their site, context and public life: the Stirling Prize-winning Burntwood School, extending a Leslie Martin design and riffing off the legacy of Gropius, and the just completing University of Amsterdam Roeterseiland Campus, which reworks and opens up two 1960s Norbert Gawronski buildings.

Meanwhile, the two new-build projects shown, Chobham Academy and the campus in India, interestingly both utilise the form of the circle – indeed the utopian architecture of Ledoux is referenced in relation to Chobham – as being the strong form necessary to anchor a new part of city, and be a backdrop to it. And as Allford also explains: ‘It’s from street that 95 per cent of people will experience a building.’
Overall the buildings in the exhibition are not presented as resolved end points to a perfectly answered brief, but as part of an ongoing process of changing occupation – from the genesis of and influences on their design, to their present status or occupation, which is contingent on circumstances that might change. This loose-fit-to-function of the spaces they make is what AHMM terms the ‘specific generic’ of the spaces they make: 'We design buildings that have an idea robust enough to last change of function,' says Allford.

Still for all the theory wrapped around these projects, they always remain unmistakably AHMM buildings, with the complete surety of execution and detail that the practice is known for but also the slight lack of poetry that even their finest buildings seem to miss.
Rome Exhibition TS 9

Source: Tim Soar
The presentation is very thoroughly resolved graphically, a hallmark of the depth with which AHMM does things – there is even an accompanying book from its publishing arm, also called *The Fifth Man*. But this does not completely cover the fact that ultimately some of the theorising feels a bit woolly. After all ‘specific generic’ can mean all or nothing: there’s a flexibility here not just to function in the buildings, but also to the narrative to explain them.

Indeed, despite the statement about function alone not being sufficient to generate architecture, conversely AHMM could be seen as a practice obsessed by function – not the prescriptive, typological pre-determined type, but the endlessly messy functioning that buildings need to accommodate or provide the backdrop to the everyday life that flows through them.

This exhibition nonetheless builds an interesting and coherent picture of its practice – and in a city loaded with architectural history, it gives shape to an idea about AHMM’s genesis and direction of travel that can be seen as its own attempt to carve out AHMM’s place in architectural history.

But there remains a nice humour and groundedness to the show – AHMM describes its references to Marcel Breuer, Leslie Martin, Ledoux as ‘scrambling on to the shoulders of giants’. But overall the exhibition does serve to show its considerable achievement as a practice in terms of built work. In particular it spotlights how AHMM is beginning to flex its muscles abroad, with its Oklahoma office, the completion of phase two of the Amsterdam university scheme and a major project in India on the horizon.

And what you mostly take away from this exhibition is that this is a practice that still has an appetite for and excitement at the possibility of architecture.

*Architecture and the Art of the Extra-Ordinary is on show at the British School at Rome until 21 July*