

Norman Foster Foundation

# Superstructures Exhibition

24 March - 2 September 2018

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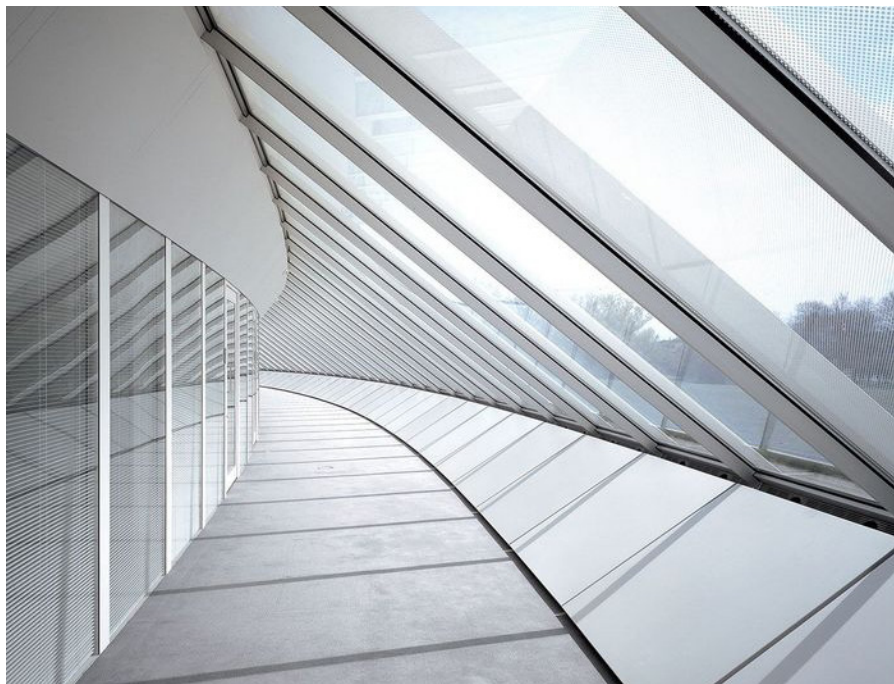


Culture  
Review

## Superstructures: Where it all began



The biggest exhibit in this celebration of high-tech at the Sainsbury Centre in Norwich is the building itself, but there are more delights for architects



East Anglia does not immediately spring to mind as a place that gave birth to one of the only architectural movements that ever started in Britain. But add the Willis Building, completed in 1975 in Ipswich, to Norwich's 1978 Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (both by Foster & Partners), and you could say that the 'high-tech' architecture of the 1960s to 1990s had East Anglian beginnings.

It's appropriate then that, 40 years after the Sainsbury Centre was opened, the building and the achievements of its architectural milieu are being celebrated in a new exhibition which renames the genre 'Superstructures', and tells the story of architecture's post-war fascination with technology, lightweight structures and engineering.

The building itself is the largest object in the show. The fantastic, vast hangar-like space still makes you gasp and feels every bit as modern today, so it's disappointing to discover that its anniversary exhibition has been poked into four windowless spaces in the basement; fake plastic girders strung up to the ceiling. No matter how gripped you are by what's on show, it's impossible to shake the thought that it would be better to be upstairs, absorbing the atmosphere and mega architecture of the real thing.

However, once you've got over these spatial issues, what of the exhibition?



Sainsbury Centre construction 1975-1978 Credit:  
The Art History Photographic Collection, University of  
East Anglia, Michael Brandon-Jones



Curated by head of the School of Critical Studies and Creative Industries at Kingston University, Jane Pavitt (also of the V&A's Postmodernism exhibition), and Renwick Gallery curator in charge Abraham Thomas, the show begins with a new 3m-long model of Sainsbury Centre itself and a two-part series of delightful ink and marker Birkin Haward perspective drawings of the centre as it was conceived. The curators wanted the show to 'unpack the term high-tech to develop a more nuanced definition away from style' and towards seeing it as an attitude, process or movement.

From here follows a long corridor charting a linear process of how high-tech developed, rooting it very firmly in the trajectory of history from British Victorian engineering. The interpretation begins with the metal roof of the now-demolished Hungerford Fish Market (1830), the Crystal Palace (1850), and Fowler and Baker's Forth Bridge (1882-1889), moving very quickly to Buckminster Fuller's 1937 Dymaxion Car and 1965 Geodesic Dome, the Japanese Metabolists and the influence of the Festival of Britain and Archigram, mixing in Superstructure projects such as Ian Ritchie and Volkmar Marg's 1993 Messe-Leipzig Garden Hall in a large model along the way. It identifies the 'kit of parts' approach of high-tech as emerging from Jean Prouvé, sourcing original panels that demonstrate using off the shelf extruded aluminium and steel sheeting to create architecture. In the background lurks the 'white heat' of technological revolution, and anxieties and challenges of the Cold War.

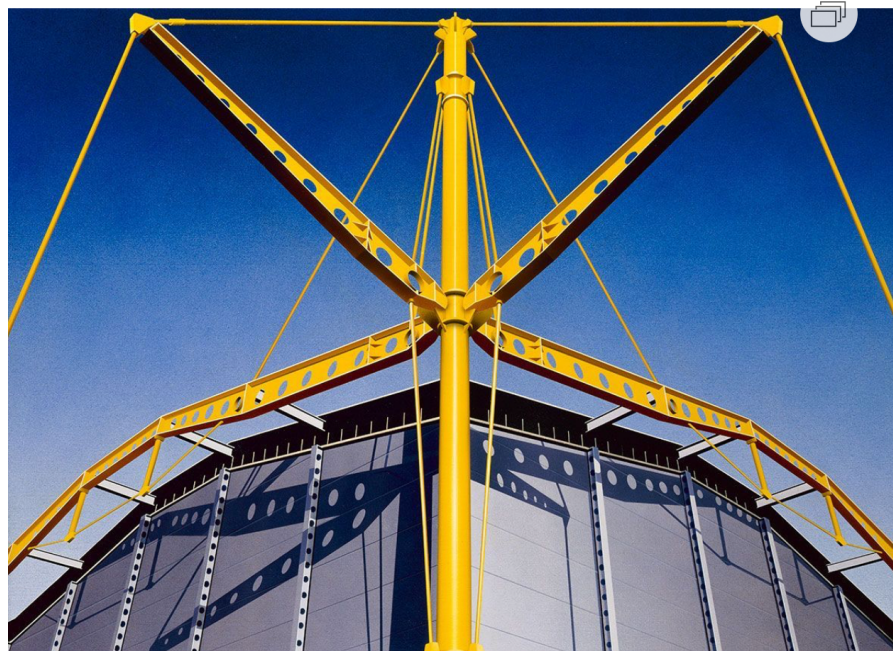


Hongkong & Shanghai Bank Credit: Foster + Partners, Ian Lambot



After this point the exhibition is arranged over two large galleries according to building type: factories, transport and infrastructure, corporate campus, private homes and retail. Each section is brought to life by a mix of technical drawings, photographs, prototype building parts and models, which tend to be vast – several square metres – in size. While many of the drawings are recognisable from books and other exhibitions, the collection of models that has been brought together is outstanding. On display are contemporary models of Cedric Price's work, Team 4's Reliance Controls Factory (1965), Foster's Stansted Airport (also East Anglia, 1991), Grimshaw's Waterloo (1990) and Jean Nouvel's Fondation Cartier (1991), on loan from organisations all over the world as well as architecture studios. Many of these models are as old as the Sainsbury Centre itself, yet are presented immaculately.

There are some holes in the exhibition though. Most obviously, it neglects to explain the profiles of the architects involved and how they are interconnected. There is only a handful of firms presented in the exhibition, but it deals firmly with built or proposed buildings only. While architect visitors might not notice, so distracted by the incredible models, representation of the architects and their backgrounds would have provided an additional tempo to the show that is missing.



Ben Johnson, East Mast with Gridline Beam and Outriggers, 1986 Acrylic on canvas Credit: Ben Johnson

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In this same way, it is unclear where the contextual references for high-tech exhibits at the beginning are collected from; whether they are the interpretation of the curators, researched from quotes and secondary sources, or through conversations with the architects. Whichever is the case, the way the story of high-tech adamantly begins in the 1830s but completely skips modernism feels deliberately provocative, especially as the overarching narrative on display – machines for living, kit of parts architecture, industry-inspired and clean construction buildings – reads very much as a continuation of the principles of modernism, perhaps more accurately realised than the early modernist projects. Also, until you open the catalogue there's no discussion of the fact that this architectural approach shares the same timescale as postmodernism – how they co-existed and what was going on culturally that enabled them both. Indeed, the same goes for the commercialisation of architecture – note that, in contrast to the previous period of brutalist architecture, there are no welfare state projects here.

This brings up the final point that, since all these architects are still alive and working, the exhibition could have included video interviews with them speaking today. This would have added diversity to the display and been an excellent research resource into the future.

In all, if you haven't been to the Sainsbury Centre, and if you like models and technical drawings, it's definitely worth the trip, and there is Denys Lasdun's 1960s ziggurat student housing and Architype's thatched Enterprise Centre (2015) just metres away to see too.

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**Superstructures: The new architecture 1960-1990. Sainsbury Centre of Visual Arts, Norwich, until 2 September 2018. £12, £10.50 concessions**

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## Sainsbury Centre celebrates anniversary with show on tech-inspired architecture

ARCHITECTURE / 23 MAR 2018 / BY ELLIE STATHAKI



The Sainsbury Centre's latest exhibition focuses on architecture's fascination with technology and industrial production, as well as celebrating the venue's 40th anniversary

For the architecture buffs among us, the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich is pretty iconic. This was the first ever public building designed by Norman Foster, and one of the key architecture landmarks of the second half of the 20th century that heralded the era of the 'High Tech' movement. A new wave of British architects experimenting with new technologies, materials, forms and structures soon followed.

Marking its 40th anniversary, the Centre is now launching its celebratory show *SUPERSTRUCTURES: The New Architecture 1960-90*, raising the glass to the genre and exploring 'architecture's fascination with technology in the post-war decades'. The exhibition will showcase the architects who challenged conventions with their experimentation and interest in engineering and industrial production.

Visitors can browse through drawings, sketches, furniture, film, photography and models of relevant buildings, such as the Reliance Controls Factory by Team 4 (Norman Foster, Wendy Cheesman, Georgie Wolton and Richard Rogers), the Pompidou Centre by Rogers and Renzo Piano, Rogers' Lloyd's of London Building, Waterloo International Rail Station by Nicholas Grimshaw and the Hopkins House by Michael and Patty Hopkins. These sit side-by-side with a



brand new three-metre-long model of the Sainsbury Centre itself, to be explored and admired.

Theory and unbuilt experimentation surrounding the era is not ignored. 'The exhibition will explore the seminal influence of figures such as Buckminster Fuller, Jean Prouvé, Charles and Ray Eames and Cedric Price', explain the organisers, adding that the show also delves into how techniques were adapted from the automotive, nautical, aerospace and information industries and introduced into the world of building and architecture.

The exhibition is accompanied by a specially published book, which is available on site.



The Century Tower in Japan by Foster + Partners. Photography: Foster + Partners, Satoru Mishima

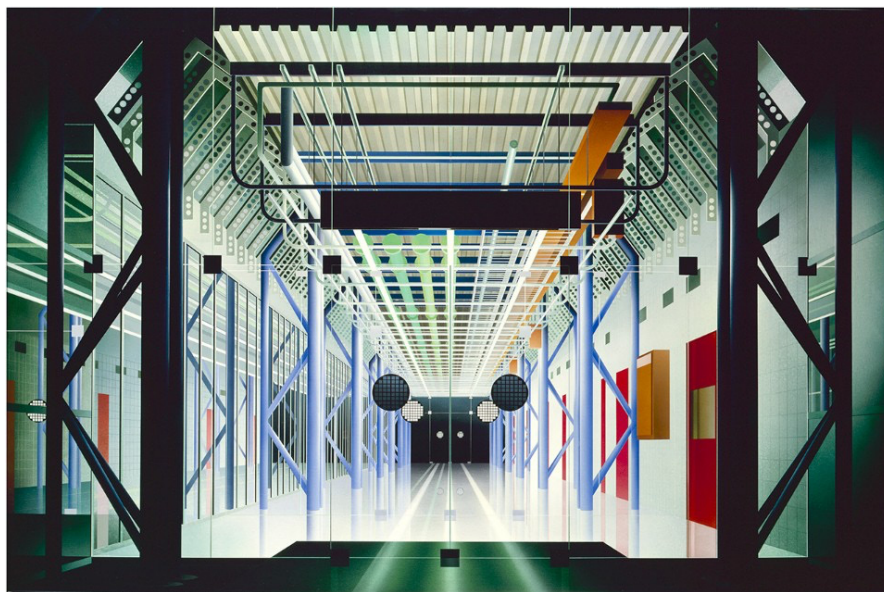
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## Four decades of architectural innovation on show in Norwich

Norman Foster's Sainsbury Centre celebrates its 40th birthday with a retrospective on High-tech architecture.



The era of cutting-edge structural engineering, also referred to as High-tech architecture – although the term remains controversial – celebrates a new birthday. 2018 marks, in fact, the 40th anniversary of the completion of [Norman Foster](#)'s first public building, the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich, England (1978). Embracing the occasion, the Sainsbury Centre presents "Superstructures, The New Architecture 1960-1990", an overview of 40 years of architectural innovation and technological experimentation. Curated by Jane Pavitt and Abraham Thomas – both ex-curators at the V&A London – the exposition will remain on show until September 2nd.

While underlining the fact that the High-tech "label" is more about eclecticism than unity in style, the exhibition reflects on the pioneering principles shared by most of today's architects. For the occasion, big names such as Norman Foster, [Richard Rogers](#), [Renzo Piano](#) and Nicholas Grimshaw were brought together, and the house of Michael & Patty Hopkins was partially reconstructed as part of the scenography.

Taking the Sainsbury's architecture as a starting point to explain the High-tech philosophy, "Superstructures, The New Architecture 1960-1990" also goes back to the pioneering research of Joseph Paxton, Jean Prouvé and [Buckminster Fuller](#), who were among the first ones to look at architecture through a structural point of view.

The exhibits – that range from furniture to product design, drawings, paintings, film and photographs – provide insights about four sparkling decades. Years of great experimentation that witnessed, among the others, the construction of the Centre Pompidou, in Paris, and the International Terminal Waterloo, in London.

If, on the one hand, the exhibition pays tribute to the High-tech approach underlining its prolific aspect and its importance in drastically changing the skyline of cities such as London, Dubai and Hong Kong, on the other hand, it also makes room to the hypothetical. It presents, in fact, a series of unbuilt projects, among which figure the Tomigaya building in Tokyo by Richard Rogers. Designed to make the best of a narrow and awkward shaped building site, during the boom of the Japanese property market in the 1980s, the transparent crane-like construction never saw the light.

With its rich, but non-exhaustive, overview, “Superstructures, The New Architecture 1960-1990” proposes a maybe-precocious retrospective of a plural vision that is still moving forward.

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**Title:** Superstructures, The New Architecture 1960-1990 **Opening dates:** until 2 September 2018 **Curated by:** Jane Pavitt and Abraham Thomas **Location:** Sainsbury Center for Visual Arts **Address:** University of East Anglia, Norfolk Road, Norwich



# METALOCUS

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## **The Sainsbury Centre For Visual Arts celebrates its 40th anniversary, 'SUPERSTRUCTURES: The New Architecture 1960-90'**

Opened in 1978, the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich was the first ever public building designed by Norman Foster, and one of the key architecture landmarks of the second half of the 20th century that heralded the era of the 'High Tech' movement. A new wave of architects experimenting with new technologies, materials, forms and structures.

The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia, by architect Norman Foster was a project that challenged several existing pre-conceptions about museums, breaking the traditional mould with a 'museum without walls', following other projects as the São Paulo Museum of Art - MASP by Lina Bo Bardi. The immense influence of its radical approach – the all-encompassing building envelope, its relationship with the surrounding landscape, and the pioneering principles of social integration – can still be seen in some of the practice's most recent projects.

As architect Norman Foster now says, based on "an optimistic view of the future". The era's mood of malaise and decay could only bounce off its aluminium hide, would say some.

This week, the building celebrates its 40th birthday by housing Superstructures: the New Architecture 1960-1990, an exhibition on what came to be called "hi-tech". But, oversimplifying and sometimes misleading though it is, it serves a purpose in identifying what, then and now, was a distinct set of ideas pursued by a distinct set of architects.

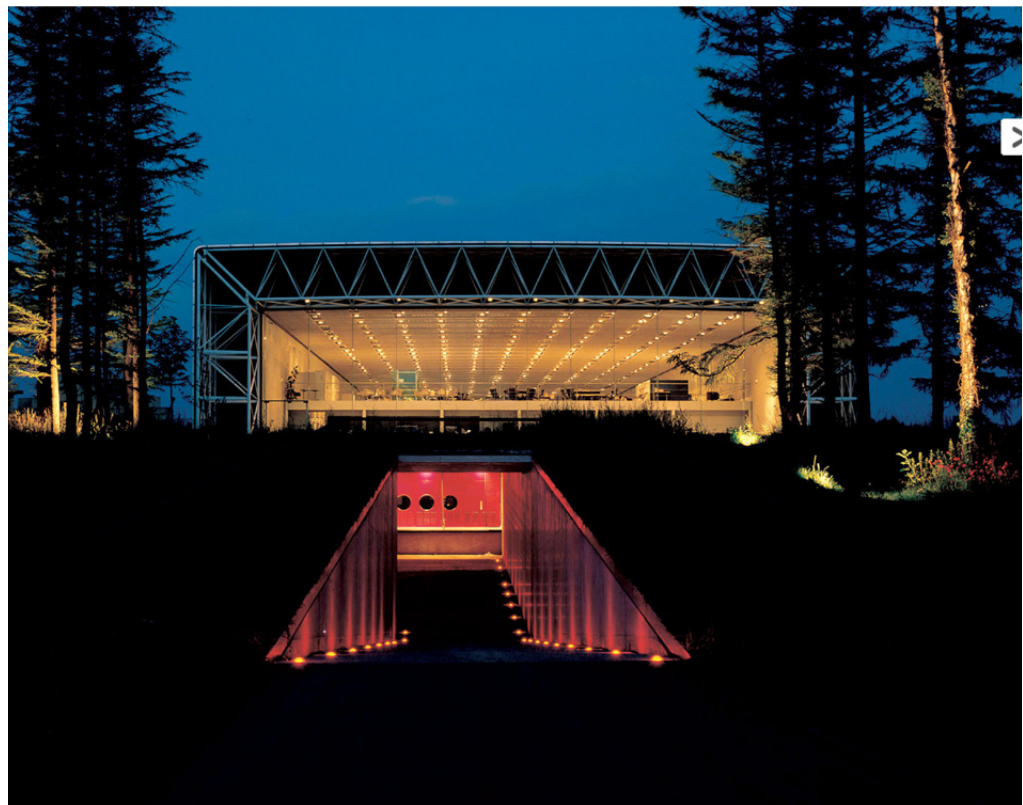
### **Description of project by Foster + Partners**

With the donation in 1973 of their collection of ethnographic and twentieth-century art to the University of East Anglia, together with an endowment for a new building, Sir Robert and Lady Sainsbury sought to establish the Sainsbury Centre as an academic and social focus within the campus. The Sainsburys shared a belief that the study of art should be an informal, pleasurable experience, not bound by the traditional enclosure of object and viewer. As a result, the Sainsbury Centre is much more than a conven-

tional gallery, where the emphasis is on art in isolation. Instead, it integrates a number of related activities within a single, light-filled space.

The building brought a new level of refinement to the practice's early explorations into lightweight, flexible enclosures. Structural and service elements are contained within the double-layer walls and roof. Within this shell is a sequence of spaces that incorporates galleries, a reception area, the Faculty of Fine Art, senior common room and a restaurant. Full-height windows at each end open the space up to the surrounding landscape, while louvres line the interior to provide a highly flexible system for the control of natural and artificial light. Large enough to display the Sainsburys' extraordinary collection, yet designed to be intimate and inviting, the main gallery – or 'living area' – evokes the spirit of the collection's originally domestic setting.

A new gift from the Sainsburys in 1988 allowed the building to be extended to provide space for the display of the reserve collection, together with curatorial and conservation facilities and a space for exhibitions and conferences, giving the centre greater flexibility in its programming. The new wing extends the building below ground level, exploiting the contours of the site to emerge in the form of a glazed crescent incised in the landscape. In 2006 a further programme of improvements was completed, which provides an internal link between the main and Crescent Wing galleries, a new education centre, additional display space, and improved shop, café and other visitor amenities.



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### **The new exhibition at the University of East Anglia's gallery will showcase stunning examples of high-tech architecture from 1960–1990**

In a decade that saw exponential growth in technology and computing, the 1970s ushered in an optimistic and forward-thinking outlook that permeated across a wide range of sectors. Perhaps one of the most permanent marks left on our landscape is the resulting high-tech architecture, which was born from disillusionment with the standardised buildings of the time combined with a drive to apply new techniques, developments and materials adopted from engineering and other fields.

Among the most important examples is the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, opened on the University of East Anglia's Norwich campus in 1978, then one of the first major public buildings designed by Norman Foster. It would come to exemplify many of the hallmarks of the genre, cutting a futuristic figure with its exposed steel framework, expanse of glass and flexible use of space.

The gallery is celebrating its 40th year with a new exhibition delving into its design and creation, as well as that of other landmark projects associated with high-tech architecture. As part of *Superstructures: The New Architecture 1960–90*, a new three-metre-long model of the Sainsbury Centre will be joined by models on loan from international collections, and counted among them will be the Reliance Controls Factory by Team 4 (Su Brumwell, Wendy Cheesman, Norman Foster and Richard Rogers), Nicholas Grimshaw's Waterloo International Rail Station and the Pompidou Centre by Rogers and Renzo Piano. The latter is perhaps the most famous example of 'Bowellism' – bringing the inside out – with its brightly coloured exterior network of exposed plumbing and electricals maximising interior space.

The exhibition will also explore the work of those figures that influenced the protagonists of high-tech, including Buckminster Fuller, Jean Prouve, Charles and Ray Eames and Cedric Price, bringing together a diverse display spanning furniture and product design to film, photography, drawings and paintings.

*Superstructures: The New Architecture 1960–90 is at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts from 24 March to 2 September; [scva.ac.uk](http://scva.ac.uk)*



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## SUPERSTRUCTURES: The New Architecture 1960-1990

Forty years after it opened, the Sainsbury Centre plays host to an exhibition looking at the pioneering designs of architects such as Norman Foster and Richard Rogers in the latter half of the last century



Sainsbury's Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia,  
Norwich

24 March – 2 September 2018

by VERONICA SIMPSON

An unusual quality of light and weightlessness characterises the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia. Standing inside this vast, 1978, steel-frame, prefabricated shed, it feels like being enveloped in a soft, cuboid cloud: a silvery sort of daylight filters around the shuttering pinned to the porous metal frame, while bigger slabs of light penetrate deep into the building from huge glazed walls at either end; its distinctive, cloud-like sensibility is intensified by the thick, grey, wall-to-wall carpeting that mutes all sound – even conversation – to a soft, dreamlike murmur.

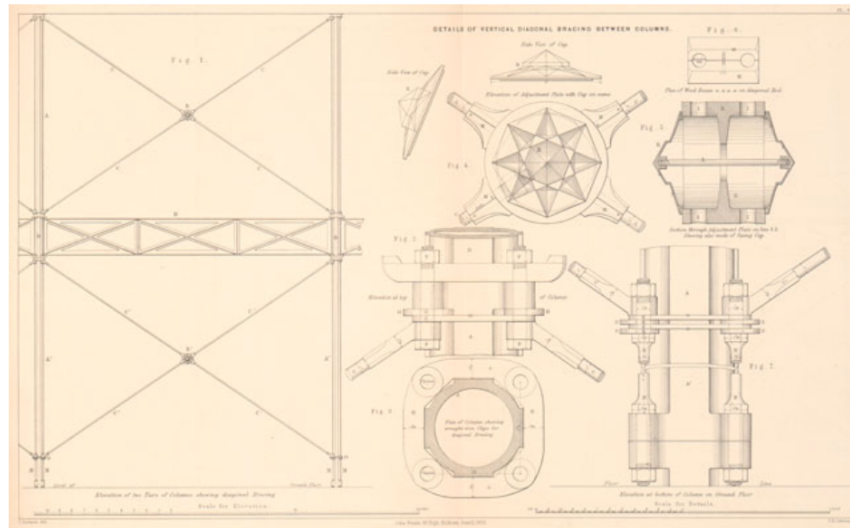
Designed by Sir Norman Foster and his wife Wendy (née Cheesman), soon after they had set up Foster Associates, in spirit, this structure is light years away from the slick, commercial, steel and glass skyscrapers and temples to technology churned out by the now global practice – the UK's largest - of Foster + Partners.



*Installation view, Superstructures: The New Architecture 1960–1990 at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, 24 March – 2 September 2018. Photograph: Andy Crouch.*

Hospitable, flexible, playful, pragmatic, this building lands light on its feet and in the landscape: a testament to the spirit of experimentation in which this, and other key buildings of the era, were created. And it is those experiments in prefabrication, in shaking up the concrete solidities and spatial certainties of modernism in favour of a new kind of architecture that embraced replicable, rapid-assembly, modular construction and flexible usage that this Superstructures exhibition celebrates. Although the movement was dubbed “high tech”, that title has been rejected by the leading practitioners, especially Foster and Richard Rogers (who had set up in practice together, even before qualifying, as Team 4, along with Cheesman and Roger's wife Su, née Brumwell). As Rogers says in his book *A Place for All People* (2017): “Norman and I were modernists, but were inspired by the amazing heritage of early industrial buildings, from the world's first cast-iron bridge at Coalbrookdale in Shropshire, to the incredible lightness of [Isambard Kingdom] Brunel and [Joseph] Paxton, who used iron,

steel and glass – the hi-tech materials of their day – to create great station sheds, bridges, glass houses and crystal palaces.”



*Crystal Palace: details of bracing between columns. Photograph: © Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851.*

The exhibition may start with a model of the Sainsbury Centre – so that we can enjoy the frisson of standing in the real thing while looking at its first, conceptual incarnation – but the narrative here really begins with that era of Brunel and Paxton, with some elegant lithographs of Paxton’s Crystal Palace. Constructed in Kensington in 1851, it was dismantled in 1854 to be reassembled in south London (although, sadly, it was destroyed by fire in 1936). Thanks to co-curator Abraham Thomas’s past experience as director of architecture at the V&A – and his knowledge of what wonders lie in its and other people’s archives - there are many fascinating drawings, lithographs and photographs here. One gem is a framed grouping of pencil, pen and ink and watercolour renditions of one of Paxton’s unbuilt structures, from 1855. The Great Victorian Way is a 10-mile stretch of covered city that sealed houses, streets, railways and shops under its continuous glass and steel frame.

Other gems from the golden age of Victorian engineering include pen and ink drawings by architect Charles Fowler (1792-1867) of his Hungerford Market scheme (completed in 1830, demolished in 1862), and a dense cyanotype of the Queensferry viaduct for John Fowler’s Forth Bridge (constructed in 1882-89) – the first major UK structure to be made of steel.



But, pretty quickly, we move on 100 years to the optimistic, science-centric, space-race spirit of the 1950s and 60s, an era when cutting-edge practitioners were scheming how to integrate technology into architecture in ways that would make buildings more adaptable, expedient, extendable, flexible and disposable. Jean Prouvé, with his pioneering, “dismountable” modular structures, is a key player. So is R Buckminster Fuller, who is represented here with two patented designs, for the Dymaxion Car (1937) and the Laminar Geodesic Dome (1965), and a chatty letter from Foster, addressing him as “Bucky”. There is also a mesmerising clip of film from Frei Otto – Modelling with Soap (1960s) – generated as part of his research into tensile structures, and eerily prescient of the undulating acrylic canopies that he draped from steel cables at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

Although the key British protagonists – Foster, Rogers and Nicholas Grimshaw – dominate the exhibition, Thomas and his guest co-curator Jane Pavitt, head of the school of critical studies and creative industries at Kingston University, wanted to present this movement in its “broad international context and influences”.

One of the most significant groups at this time - somewhat underplayed here - is Japan’s metabolists. With radical ideas about urban design as well as mass housing, there are just four drawings here, by Arata Isozaki, including his Clusters in the Air project, which allowed housing pods to be attached to tall structures, like leaves on a tree, with the idea that these could be multiplied to create an urban “forest”.

The early part of the exhibition relies heavily on paper exhibits, although there are some striking models, including one of the Messe-Leipzig Glass Hall, (1995) by architects Ian Ritchie and Volkwin Marg. This winter garden exhibition space, still standing, is the largest glass hall in the world. Glass panels are attached to its steel exoskeleton to create an uninterrupted interior of 350,000 cubic metres.

There is, of course, a large plan and model for Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood's legendary Fun Palace, a hugely influential proposal for an interactive complex where educational, culture and leisure activities could cross-fertilise. Price's proposal for a Potteries Thinkbelt (1963-67) is also featured, suggesting that England's neglected ceramic factories could become a hub for engineering and technology (how very ahead of its time), with train cars repurposed as mobile lecture rooms, gantry cranes as temporary enclosures and industrial containers as housing pods.

For Thomas, the two anchor architectural projects are the Sainsbury Centre and Renzo Piano and Richard and Su Rogers' Centre Georges Pompidou, completed in 1977. They both channel a huge dose of Littlewood and Price's Fun Palace sensibility, in their notion of cultural hub as adaptable, permeable, social space. One of the delights of having the real artefact around us (albeit upstairs from the exhibition) is seeing how well the open gallery area in the Sainsbury Centre works – sculptures and paintings are placed in clusters, together with seating and desks, inviting groups to inhabit this free-flowing space as they see fit.

But flexible, permeable cultural buildings that looked more like sheds were not always fashionable; in 1996, the Independent newspaper dubbed Foster "the architect the tabloids most love to hate". There are many proposals of this era that didn't get built, for example, Rogers' proposed extension to the National Gallery – a 1981 competition entry that failed to win over either client or public, and which looks uncannily like the Lloyd's Building (1986) that he designed subsequently. Shown here in diagram form, it is suddenly, wonderfully clear that the domed glass roof at the centre of Rogers' Lloyd's Building has been inspired by Crystal Palace – in fact, it was described in the Guardian by [Jonathan Glancey](#) as "[Paxton's Crystal Palace, crossed with a North Sea oil-rig](#)". Times and tastes change, thankfully, and in 2011, it was given a Grade I listing.

While one of the fascinating aspects of this show is seeing the buildings that didn't get built, another is being introduced to buildings that didn't last more than 20 years, such as Foster's Fred Olsen amenity building: the first British building to be wrapped in a glass skin, it was slotted between two warehouses, with a roof that spanned a single, column-free space. Completed in 1970, it had been demolished by 1988. But expendability was part of the point – buildings that are easy and cheap to assemble, in theory, can be disassembled like a giant kit of parts, as and when taste and necessity dictates.



*Ben Johnson. East Mast with Gridline Beam and Outriggers, 1986. Acrylic on canvas © Ben Johnson.*

But most of the structures represented from the 80s onwards are still with us. The factories, for example: Rogers' Fleetguard factory in Quimper, France (completed in 1981), and his Inmos Microprocessor Factory in Newport (completed in 1987); or Foster's Renault Distribution Centre in Swindon. Constructed in 1982, the yellow skeleton of this car warehouse and showroom became part of the corporate brand. As a welcome break from the plans, drawings and models, both the Renault factory and Inmos are lovingly rendered here in oils, by Ben Johnson.



While factories may have been an obvious fit, when it comes to large transport hubs, these Superstructures also had their moments: Foster's Stansted airport is represented, with a large, sprawling model – although the transparency and clarity of the original is now cluttered with security barriers, endless duty-free shops and purveyors of fast food. There is also a model of Grimshaw's wonderful Eurostar terminal at Waterloo, its pioneering frame nestling into the track curve, but now sadly decommissioned; nearby, there is a group of large painted wooden and metal moulds for the joints that made this building possible.

Strangely, it is towards the end of the exhibition that Foster's Willis Faber & Dumas building in Ipswich is displayed. Probably the job that won Foster the Sainsbury Centre commission, it was the UK's most innovative corporate space of the 70s, with its own swimming pool in the basement and a rooftop restaurant. It was, as the blurb tells us, "intended as a democratic environment fostering a sense of community" – but the swimming pool has long been covered over to cram in more desks and chairs. It takes the stewardship of a good client to give these buildings longevity, preserving the spirit in which they were made, even after the architects' priorities may have shifted.

And the Sainsbury Centre proves just how well these buildings can last, with the right amount of care and attention. Its exterior skin was completely replaced in the 80s, which may be one of the reasons why it is still looking so good. It has also been substantially expanded: the Crescent Wing, partially underground, opened in 1991 (with new office and storage space, technical workshops, a temporary exhibition area and conservation facilities); another extension opened in May 2006, linking the two sections internally and providing additional gallery and education spaces. Foster, famously, demanded that no other practice be allowed to tinker with his building. And to its credit, the Sainsbury family has complied. Which means that we start and end the exhibition in the best possible environment – a thriving, living, architectural artefact.