



Three monuments

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Left

Sir Leslie Martin, Colin St J. Wilson, British Museum Library (now the British Library), design for original Bloomsbury site, view of model from the south east

Three much discussed buildings were completed in 1997: the British Library in London by Colin St J. Wilson & Partners, the Getty Center in Los Angeles by Richard Meier & Partners and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao by Frank O. Gehry & Associates to list them in the chronological order of their inception.

Colin St J. (Sandy) Wilson started to design a new British Museum Library in 1962 in conjunction with Sir Leslie Martin. The site was an area south of the British Museum in Bloomsbury and included Hawksmoor's St George's church of 1716–31. The plan and model show that there were to be large square buildings on either side of an extended forecourt. The new buildings were encircled by weighty piers somewhat reminiscent of Harvey Court in Cambridge, a residential building for Gonville & Caius College, also by Martin and Wilson dating from 1957–62. The architecture could be described as formal, making gestures towards the classical portico of Sir Robert Smirke's original British Museum. As at Nîmes, an existing monument exerted an influence.

Political machinations and a burgeoning heritage lobby, as well as an enlargement of the brief, produced a search for another site. This was found on a large disused plot of land west of St Pancras Station. Here a quite different design emerged, different not only because it was on a different site and the programme had somewhat changed but because of a shift in attitude. The powerful neighbour was now Sir George Gilbert Scott's St Pancras Hotel and Station block in an exuberant red brick secular Gothic of 1865–71. But there were probably other reasons at work as well.

While at the Architects' Department of the London County Council, Sandy Wilson was captured early in his career by the work of Le Corbusier. His housing was greatly influenced by the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles. Later enthusiasm encompassed both neo-classicism and the organic tradition and he has commented how these two kinds of architecture