



Lee, Gini (2007) Concerning the house museum and the picturesque landscape in the work of Sir John Soane: with raw hints for post-heritage museum space. In: Panorama to Paradise - XXIVth International Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand, 21 - 24 September 2007, Australia, South Australia, Adelaide.

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Concerning the House Museum and the picturesque landscape in the work of Sir John Soane: with raw hints for post-heritage museum space

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Abstract

The picturesque aesthetic in the work of Sir John Soane, architect and collector, resonates in the major work of his very personal practice – the development of his house museum, now the Soane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields in London. Soane was actively involved with the debates, practices and proponents of picturesque and classical practices in architecture and landscape and his lectures reveal these influences in the making of The Soane, which was built to contain and present diverse collections of classical and contemporary art and architecture alongside scavenged curiosities. The Soane Museum has been described as a picturesque landscape, where a pictorial style, together with a carefully defined itinerary, has resulted in the 'apotheosis of the Picturesque interior'. Soane also experimented with making mock ruinscapes within gardens, which led him to construct faux architectures alluding to archaeological practices based upon the ruin and the fragment. These ideas framed the making of interior landscapes expressed through spatial juxtapositions of room and corridor furnished with the collected object that characterise The Soane Museum.

This paper is a personal journey through the Museum which describes and then reviews aspects of Soane's work in the context of contemporary theories on 'new' museology. It describes the underpinning picturesque practices that Soane employed to exceed the boundaries between interior and exterior landscapes and the collection. It then applies particular picturesque principles drawn from visiting the Soane to a speculative project for a house/landscape museum for the Oratunga historic property in outback South Australia, where the often, normalising effects of conservation practices are reviewed through minimal architectural intervention through a celebration of ruinous states.

The picturesque ruinscape of the collector's house museum

Work commenced on Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1792 and was completed by the 1820s, although Soane continued to tinker with the internal workings of the building and rearrange his collection until his death in 1837.¹ The Soane is a series of buildings that were transformed into a house museum during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with its interior spaces redesigned around the vagaries of the architect's eccentric collection. The existing fabric nestles into its streetscape, the purpose-built has been eschewed, and no grand gesture in the façade (which has variously been described as unremarkable, indistinguishable) is evident; beyond a visual and spatial shift through the extension of the classically decorated two storey loggia. This subtle movement however causes a pause upon noticing this difference within the tableaux of the street.²

The interior was designed around Soane's collection of antiquities, representations and copies of antiquities, alongside contemporary art and fragments of architecture. In his house, Soane built and remodelled and manipulated everyday domestic spaces to become the repositories for his personal collection, which he considered would be his legacy to future generations of architects and collectors. The curatorial framing of the interpretative narrative of The Soane now resides in the insight he has provided into the late eighteenth century connoisseur; visitors are invited to immerse themselves in spatial and material juxtapositions of objects and architectures, and no qualifying text or audiovisual is provided to aid in interpretation.

Helen Furjan writes on the museum:

In a surprisingly small space, Soane managed to elaborate multiple narratives of display and collecting, exhibiting his interests as an antiquarian, an architect, and a man of taste in collecting and storing inscriptions of culture and history. The objects that bore such inscriptions encompassed not only the fragments and collectibles of high culture and antiquity, but also the very domestic environment in which they were located. As a house-museum, in which the collections cannot be distinguished from the domestic objects, the furniture and furnishings, of the house itself, Lincoln's Inn Fields not only incorporated the collection into the house, but significantly, incorporated the house into the collection.³

The dual purpose of house and collection during Soane and his family's occupation is now, nearly two hundred years later, transformed into a multiplicity of associations that continue to build upon the presence of the original; collections that framed the re-development of the house, in turn, framing the itineraries we now employ in touring the house and its contents.

I travelled to The Soane in 2003 and a year later in 2004 to experience what had been described as sublime museum space and to research whether, and where, Soane had considered the design and symbology of the garden in his work. I spent some days in the winter gloom of the Library, and with the assistance of the librarians spent many hours on the first floor of No. 12, in the quiet space of books, seated at the big table, immersed initially in garden research that seemed disconnected with the display and touring going on outside; and, yes, there is a ticking clock too. I became familiar with Soane's interest in picturesque ruination and his plans for the artificial ruins and landscapes of his country house, Pitshanger Manor, Ealing, and for the Monk's Yard and the courtyards of the Lincoln's Inn Fields house.⁴ I also read his *Crude Hints Towards a History of my House* (1812), which Helen Dorey describes as 'one of the strangest and most perplexing documents in the history of English architecture... where he imagines his home as a future ruin inspected by visitors speculating on its origins and functions.'⁵ Soane's imagining of his house through a succession of allegorical tableaux of past architectural, cultural and political conditions, brought to life through the objects in his collection, is a remarkably contemporary approach that reads museum space as a discourse that moves beyond the repository. And his predictive sense of this future space as ruin space provokes other thinking on the nature of the museum – where such furnished spaces exist simultaneously as ruin and non-ruin.

I sat in the house maybe in the same space where he sat to write up his musings, reading his notes that were scribed in a speculative manner enabling simultaneous writing. Soane's text is ordered in columns; the first iteration of primary thoughts beside the second column that explains the starred words in the first, like explanatory footnotes, but here given equal hierarchy, and an occasional column used for brief notes and definitions. Realising that Soane wrote his *Crude Hints* as a visually structural work that enables multiple readings suggests an approach to collection and recollection pertinent to speculative contemporary projects: one where visual and textual narratives that

undergo successive overwriting and over drawing are reproduced through unedited and multi-layered documentation of passing events.

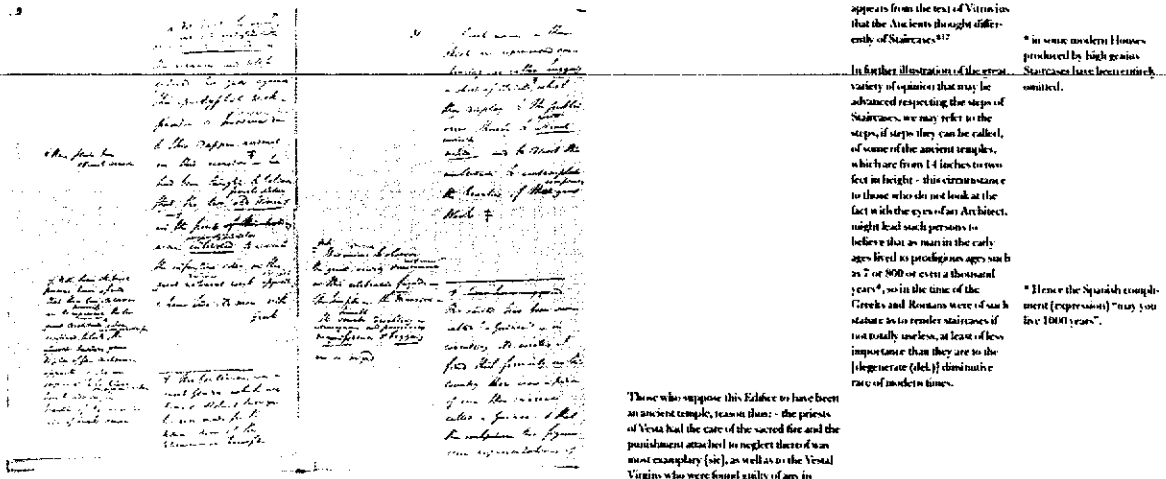


Fig 1: Fragments from *Crude Hints*
 The Soane Gallery, Pages from the *Crude Hints towards an History of my House in L[incoln's] I[nn] Fields MS.* (ff.30-31), p.60, 64

Reading Soane's musings while present in his space is an experience of the moment that reflects the life of his Museum beyond that of the everyday visitor, and I acknowledge that mine is a rarefied experience. But the physical spaces and temporal opportunities are the generators that produce unexpected and coincidental outcomes; I did not fully realise before reading his *Crude Hints* the nature of Soane's gardener's spirit, albeit a theoretical and poetic one, and I was prompted to walk downstairs to witness ruination in the implied 'garden' of the Monk's Yard, if it was open.

To enter the Library it is necessary to be formally let in through the yellow panel in the wall where the hidden door is barely obvious but for a small brass knob. When one returns to the public space it is as though an alternative realm unfolds. The plans of Lincoln's Inn Fields reproduced below, which also convey reflected ceiling plans, indicate the density and intricacy of the routes to be followed when moving from room to room. Yet even a detailed review of these plans cannot begin to describe the complexity of the vertical labyrinth that moves between floors, through windows and the collection.

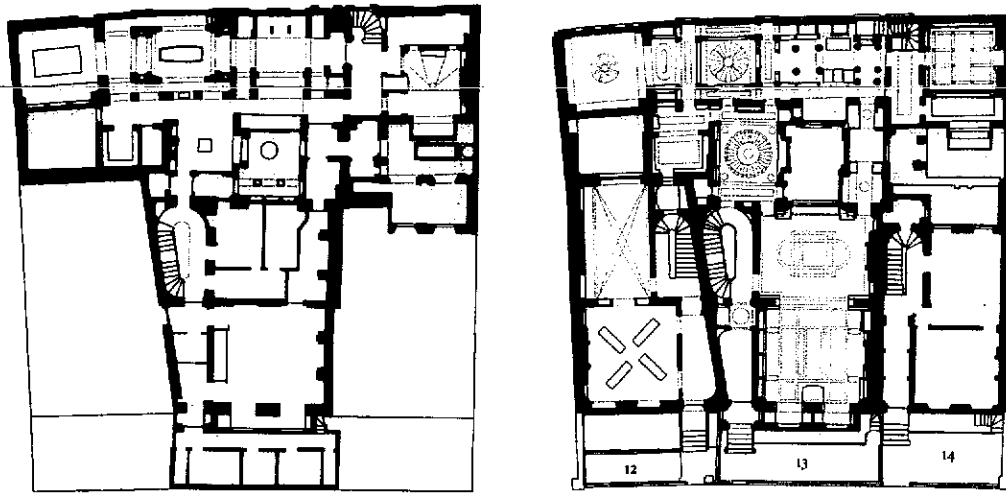
appears from the text of Vitruvius that the Ancients thought differently of Staircases.¹⁷

In further illustration of the great variety of opinion that may be advanced respecting the steps of Staircases, we may refer to the steps, if steps they can be called, of some of the ancient temples, which are from 14 inches to two feet in height - this circumstance to those who do not look at the fact in the eyes of an Architect, might lead such persons to believe that as man in the early ages lived to prodigious ages such as 7 or 900 or even a thousand years¹⁸, so in the time of the Greeks and Romans were of such stature as to render staircases if not totally useless, at least of less importance than they are to the [degenerate (del.)] diminutive race of modern times.

¹⁷ In some modern Houses produced by high genius Staircases have been entirely omitted.

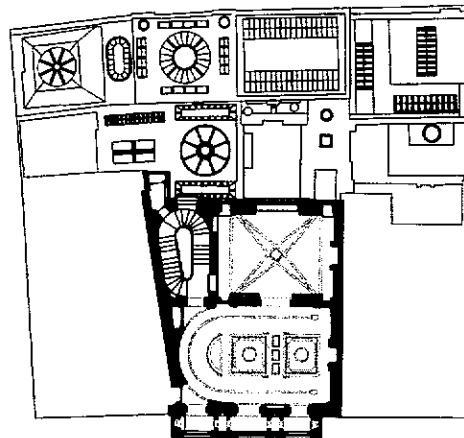
¹⁸ Hence the Spanish compliment (expressed) "may you live 1000 years".

Those who suppose this Edifice to have been an ancient temple, reason thus - the priests of Vesta had the care of the sacred fire and the punishment attached to neglect thereof was most exemplary (sic), as well as to the Vestal Virgins who were found guilty of any in



Basement

Fig 2: House Museum Floor Plans:
Ground Nos. 12, 13 and 14



First

Plans reproduced from
The Sir John Soane Museum Guide for Visitors

The Soane is universally regarded as a 'high' museum, a place where the connoisseur has arranged his collection, yet this place has a touch of the 'low' about it; a quality that adds to its curiosity value for tourists and also allows room for other(s)' interventions. It is simultaneously a factual and a fictional realm in which the tourist is asked to expand their imagining of what is going on. And to do this it is necessary to tour through labyrinthine space, to backtrack spatially and visually, to become lost, and never to take the same path and draw the same conclusions. I tour The Soane as a picturesque interior landscape; one of the performative *mise-en-scene*, where journeys are three

dimensional matrices that can be read sequentially, but are interrupted spatially by views across, through, up and down intricate spaces of rooms, passageways and voids. Objects are displayed seemingly without hierarchy and without supporting text and visitors are invited into the private domain of the auteur/collector to be left to it. There are guidebooks and assisted tours on offer, but The Soane is best addressed in the way you would walk about someone else's house; poking in corners, following your nose and uncovering what was in the mind and habits of the occupant(s) through musing on the wonder of rare and exquisite objects, juxtaposed with the just plain ordinary.

Interstitial museology: the scenography and performativity of collections

A reading of The Soane through the discourses of 'new' museology positioned alongside the spatial and montage tactics of scenographic practices in theatre works provides grounding for the spatial and temporal perspectives of (what I term) an 'interstitial' museology; an operation which seeks a path between the 'old' and the 'new' museology. The Soane is frequently written about and cited within 'new' museology discourse. Mieke Bal explains that in 'new' museology, the 'old' idea of the museum as the sum of its object collection is superceded by discourses of experience written around the culture and politics of the museum.⁶

What differentiates the 'new' museology from the 'old' is the idea that a museum installation is a discourse. The utterance consists neither of words nor images alone, nor the frame nor frame-up of the installation, but of the productive tension between images, caption (words), and installation (sequence, height, light, combinations).⁷

Citing Foucault's theories on order and archaeology,⁸ she asks us to re-consider a museology based upon an allegorical perspective; 'the things that happen in cultural practices cannot be fully mastered, predicted and programmed'.⁹ Bal suggests that curatorial practices based upon education and explication of the 'real' continue to rob museums of their capacity to encourage imagination and engagement through presenting risky unfamiliar concepts, which may not be immediately comprehensible or acceptable to a general audience.

Conversely, Randolph Starn desires a return from what he sees as overly abstract discourse to a museology that prioritises the object when he discusses the effects of material memory as a 'form of re-collection that resides in alterations or patterns of wear

in the materials that people make and use over time.' He complains that 'experience is a priority of the up to date museum ... artefacts give way to performance, display cases to interactive engagement, memorabilia to montage.'¹⁰ The Soane exhibits the qualities of both the 'old' and the 'new' museology, and in so doing transcends such dialectical concerns through a curatorial perspective that is an interstitial museology where artefacts and discourses coincide; with the consequence that the audience is encouraged to imagine and move beyond that which is in front of them.

Although museums have moved beyond cabinets of curiosity into institutions of education and research, the idea of the museum as a performative studio, operating somewhere between theatre and a working space for creative endeavour is worth further examination. The museum as performative studio moves conceptually beyond the confining nature of the edifice and container of collected works into more temporal and virtual realms. Andre Malraux's *Museum without Walls*¹¹ exists in theoretical discourse as collections of photographs of complete and/or fragmentary works of art that are then employed to conceptualise an inclusive and generative museum; one that could be reproducible for many audiences. A museum where the collector's method, based upon accumulation and juxtaposition of images, facilitates curation concerned with (re)arrangements that transform traditional methods of classification of the *subject* of the work (of art) into the *moments* of the work.¹² The relative value or fame of the original work of art was less important to Malraux than the juxtapositions that he effected in his image compositions. His was the virtual hand of the auteur/curator in making an archive of selected *moments* that could be re-situated in limitless and context-free space outside the museum's physical presence.

Scenographic, performative and archival methods act to dissolve the boundaries between established art, architecture and design approaches and predetermined solutions to museum design. And multidisciplinary perspectives and tactics are required to embrace the curatorial/design opportunities afforded by ephemeral and temporal conditions. I was challenged to write and make images to convey the multiple itineraries available for exploration in The Soane as tours to be re-presented to capture personal experiences, in order to devise possible tours through museum spaces that could take *three hours or three days*, depending.¹³ In response I recorded itineraries where I sought

to post-curate the already curated, and in doing so provoke an exchange with the Soane that offers new audiences to experience its myriad qualities, transposed to other places.

On dissolving space, picturesque ruinscape, works that happen around and in

I made a photographic archive of one journey through The Soane in an attempt to record what was noticed while wandering without intent. I documented what caught my eye, and reproduce it in part here. In order to convey the density of the itinerary I present the imagery in a composition where what is captured by the camera lens (the eye's device) is arranged to enable spatial itineraries to appear. For me, this representation is close to my experience of being there and of making a route through The Soane. Time and space dissolve through this explorative chorography. Knowing that one place starts and the other stops is blurred knowing; moving through three levels and numerous rooms is both a singular and a simultaneous experience occasioned through windows, mirrors, openings, light and shade.

Below, I offer this graphic method as a spatial montage for The Soane to convey an immersive condition characterised by noticing points of intensity and repetition and seeing what catches the eye over and over again.

Beyond the itinerary, this quality of **dissolving space** through the architecture and interior detailing of the Museum is instructive to an understanding of how a scenographic perspective is pertinent to architectural practice. Leon van Schaik's detailed analysis of the architectural devices Soane employed in his search for 'ideal' spaces in which to house his treasures and instruct his students illuminates the hidden structural devices adopted throughout. Soane manipulated the spatial qualities of basic building fabric through tactics such as insertions that turn rooms and courtyards inside out and outside in, layering of furnishing zones around wall perimeters to house his collection and also to confound spatial relationships through dissolving walls; a device improved through the judicious placement of mirrors and compositions of natural and artificial lighting.¹⁴



Figure 3: Touring the Soane; one approach to making a chorographic itinerary

The use of mirrors, both flat and convex, lightwells and coloured glass to effect particular lighting moods and openings in vertical and horizontal planes and labyrinth-like pathways to effect long views through space resonates as a theatrical approach where
