



IMG. 5.30 — Museum of London, United Kingdom. Children looking at cases in the World City Gallery, within the new Galleries of Modern London. © Museum of London.

## Galleries of Modern London, Museum of London

London, United Kingdom

The Museum of London was funded in the 1960s by merging two earlier museums, the Guildhall Museum (1826) and the London Museum (1912). The new Museum of London opened in 1976 and since then has operated as a social and urban history museum.

From 2000 onwards the museum has carried out several major renovation projects both from a programmatic and architectural point of view, which have led the museum to rethink its mission, practices, narratives and communication strategies; widen its activities; refocus its objectives and reorganise and enlarge its collections and spaces. The museum currently comprises two venues—the Museum of London and the Museum of London Docklands, as well as a commercial archeological service, the MOLA, Museum of London Archaeology. Overall, the museum attracts over 400,000 visitors per year and holds the largest archeological archive in Europe with the mission to “inspire a passion for London [...] through increasing public awareness, appreciation and understanding of London’s cultural heritage, its people and its stories.”

Within this renovation project in 2003 a new museum venue, the Museum of London Docklands, was inaugurated. It is housed in a listed early-19th-century sugar warehouse at Canary Wharf, and displays the stories of the port, the River Thames and the local communities of the East London riverside. It also develops educational programmes, activities, exhibitions and workshops aimed at exploring and representing London’s East End, one of the most multicultural and multilayered areas of the city. Among its 11 permanent galleries, the “London, Sugar & Slavery Gallery” is one of the most noteworthy. Through historical objects and documents, as well as personal histories, works of art, music, videos and short movies created for the gallery,

it examines London’s involvement in transatlantic slavery with interesting references to new types of slavery in the contemporary city, racism and the contribution of Africans and other communities to London’s culture and wealth. In this sense, the museum building itself is part of the collection; the West India Dock and the warehouse complex which has been renovated to host the museum are, in fact, a physical manifestation of London’s corner of the so-called “trade triangle.”

In these years, the museum’s contents, exhibition design and spaces have been reviewed and rethought in detail; as a final step, in 2010, the Museum of London was re-launched with the opening of the new Galleries of Modern London.

### → OPENNESS AS A WAY OF WORKING

The Museum of London opened in 1976 in a new building at London Wall within the Barbican Estate. The museum was designed by Philip Powell, Hidalgo Moya and Partners, who also conceived part of the exhibition design with Higgins, Ney & Partners.

When the Museum of London was inaugurated it was the subject of much debate and criticism. Critics agreed that the difficulty in actually finding and getting to the museum was one of the major issues, a problem that earned it the title of “the most retiring public building in London.” In fact, the problem was mostly due to the urban features of the site, which is characterised by a system of high walkways created in the 1960s and ‘70s by the City of London with the aim of separating pedestrians and cars, supposedly for mutual benefit. Other common criticisms were related to the exhibition design and display, thought to be overburdened with objects and information, and conceived without a hierarchical rationale.



The building characterised by concrete structures and a white ceramic tile façade, interrupted by a window facing onto the remains of the Roman and Medieval wall—unfortunately overwhelmed by the museum and the walkway design. The exhibition developed around the inner courtyard, arranged along a spiral route on two levels connected by a ramp; it was organised chronologically and divided into ten sections corresponding to specific historical periods. The exhibits were mainly four-square brick showcases, with a base containing the technical equipment, and a movable glass cabinet. The overall exhibition design, the exhibit system and the architectural project, with its open-plan layout and free-standing columns, were conceived to guarantee a flexibility of the interior arrangements and the possibility to easily amend them.

The four-year renovation project carried out by the museum, resulting in its re-launch in 2010, needed to address this issue of context. The re-launch was the final step in a long and complex process of rethinking the museum's narratives and approaches, which lasted more than ten years and led to the redesign of the museum's spaces and the transformation of the lower floor galleries.

Wilkinson Eyre Architects were entrusted with the overall architectural renovation project,



while the design of the new galleries was developed by an in-house team with an intimate knowledge of the museum's collections. The design team consisted of Leigh Cain (Head of Design and Exhibitions), Gail Symington (Head Designer) and was led by the museum director himself, Jack Lohman, who studied architecture and is a professor of Museum Design and Communication at Bergen National Academy of the Arts in Norway.

A previous project by Wilkinson Eyre to roof over the internal courtyard was dropped by Lohman when he took on the position of Museum Director in 2002, in favour of a less iconic and eye-catching but more practical project. The final design respects and understands the original building and, at the same time, is aimed at enhancing it, reconfiguring and expanding its spaces, and increasing the museum's connection with the city. Wilkinson Eyre scheduled the reorganisation of vertical and horizontal circulation flow around and within the museum, including a new staircase tower and the design of the new museum entrance, whose canopy, which projects over the existing city highway, is designed to improve the visibility of the entrance, and so raises the profile of the museum.

The project also provided additional space for shops, exhibitions and other facilities, including the new City Gallery. The City Gallery is a glass-wall extension added to the museum's

north wing, which contains the Lord Mayor's Coach, and is devoted to the contemporary city. This is a space conceived of as a kind of "museum shop window," facing the London Wall, bringing the museum down to the street and symbolically opening it up to the city. This architectural solution can be seen not only as a gimmick to signal the presence of the museum—the entrance to which is still hardly visible—but also as an architectural metaphor for the idea of openness characterising the new museum approach and its desire to establish a straightforward relationship with the city and its citizens.

In addition, the Wilkinson Eyre project also redesigned the Museum's Weston Theatre as a multipurpose location for cinema, performances and talks, and connected it via a hanging glazed staircase to the Clore Learning Centre, a new space completed in 2009 in accordance with the museum's mission to further develop its educational outreach programmes and work closely with schools.

The design of the new Galleries of Modern London is an important part of the major renovation project which the Museum underwent and that has affected not only the museum's spaces and its exhibition design, but also entailed a deep rethinking of the museum's narratives. The Galleries of Modern London are the result of a long process of reflection on issues related to diversity, migrations, and the identity and history of the city of London, carried out by the museum since the 1990s and marked by several major milestones, starting with the "Peopling of London" project.

As Nick Merriman pointed out, the "Peopling of London" project was aimed at "highlighting the neglected history of London's diverse populations by placing contemporary communities in a long-term historical context" and demonstrating that London "has always had a culturally diverse population from various parts of the globe." The project, which led to an exhibition run from November 1993 to May 1994, ignited much debate and was a new departure for the

Museum of London substantially informing its subsequent work.

The new Galleries of Modern London depict the history of London from 1666 (the year of the Great Fire) to present days. They are organised into three chronological sections—the "Expanding City" (1666-1850s); the "People's City" (1850s-1940s) and the "World City" (1950s-today)—ending in the new "City Gallery" and then flowing into the "Sackler Hall"

The vision at the ground of the new galleries is well represented in their entrance panel where visitors can read:

"Two themes run through our story: London and the world—For the past 300 years, London's fortunes have been tied up with people, goods and ideas from overseas. This story is about London's relationship with the rest of the world. People and change— People are at the centre of the story. Through London's past people have shaped the city's fortunes and in turn have been changed themselves. Like any great city, London never stands still. Its buildings rise and fall. Its character evolves. The choices Londoners made in the past affect us all today—just as our choices will help shape London's future."

Such an introduction declares that what the museum displays is not *the Story* of London but *one possible interpretation* of London's history, in the light of the contemporary city and looking towards its future. The museum stands on what story it *chooses* to tell. Migration is a central topic of this story and it is embedded—sometimes explicitly, other times deductively—into the entire narration, promoting the idea that this is something London should be proud of, rather than a "problem." London's contemporary multifarious identity and its distinctive features are described as being the result of different cultures, life styles, religions, sexual habits, languages and fashions, resulting from the migration of people to and within London, throughout history as well as today.

PREVIOUS PAGE IMG 5.31, 5.32— Views of the Museum of London from the street and from the upper walkway. Photos by Francesca Lanz.

IMG. 5.33 — The new staircase to the Clore Learning Centre. © Edmund Sumner, courtesy of WilkinsonEyre Architects.

IMG. 5.34 — Display of the coach of the Lord Mayor before the recent renovation project. December 2005. Photo by Justinc.

IMG. 5.35 — Exterior of the City Gallery. © Museum of London.



Considerable effort has been made to avoid grouping together or categorising London's inhabitants according to ethnic groups, revisiting the idea of migration as a widespread movement of people, which thus enlarges the borders of London's "imagined community" to all those who live in the city and contribute to its development, regardless of whether they are foreign-born, temporary residents or the long-term settled. The Galleries present cultural diversity as part of the city's wealth, enriching its cultural, social and economic life, and ultimately promote, with clear political implications, a positive view of migrants and migration.

The exhibition design of the galleries has been developed by the museum's team in accordance with this vision and with the aim of ensuring the best integration between the message, the collection and the exhibition design itself. As Jack Lohman declared "the design and architecture of the museum should be as varied and surprising as the locations in which they stand. Our new Galleries of Modern London have given us a wonderful opportunity to showcase how creative design can bring a new diversity of content and experience into the heart of the museum (...) London speaks through these galleries and (...) space has been created to make the city's many voices heard."

While previously the displays hardly reached recent times, with the opening of the Galleries the whole ground floor of the museum is today completely dedicated to the story of modern and contemporary London and its inhabitants, from the Great Fire in 1666 to the present. Innovative lighting systems and the latest conservation technology, as well as multimedia installations, interactive devices and new technologies have been used in the new exhibition design to enhance and virtually expand the objects displayed, which, after careful selection, constitute the key element of the new exhibition.

The museum's collections are in fact extremely heterogeneous and diverse, as were the collection strategies of the two previous institutions which formed the foundation for the creation of this Museum. The museum today owns more

than two million objects, and its curatorial practices now seek to make collecting a more collaborative process. Several programmes have been implemented to collect recent history and build an oral historical archive with the contribution of many Londoners. Contemporary collecting projects have also been developed, and new criteria regarding the acquisition of items donated to the Museum have been defined. In the Galleries, more than 7,000 objects are on display—a selection from the museum's collection, enriched by new objects, as well as music, audio and video materials. The collection is supported by multimedia contents to provide additional information for an in-depth visit, and to allow visitors to explore exhibits in detail and follow their own interests. Original objects are displayed whenever possible, with an interesting integration among historical documents, reproductions, reconstructions and technological devices. One example is the small room devoted to Charles Booth's map of London poverty of 1888-89, where original pages are on display and a reproduction of the map is used to cover the floor and walls of the room, which includes an embedded touch screen allowing visitors to explore a digital version of the map.

The Galleries' three sections develop chronologically around the central Garden Court. Some exhibits have been conserved as they were—this is the case of the Victorian Walk, a historical reconstruction of an old London street with original shops façades and interiors—while other rooms and cases have been redesigned. Immersive spaces and historical reconstructions abound; some of which are more evocative, some others very much literal, leaving little place to imagination and reminding us of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of "period rooms." Visitors can listen to witnesses from the Second World War in a suggestive space with a suspended bomb, step inside a real 18th century prison, or walk in a reproduction of an Georgian pleasure garden featuring original dresses, illuminated by a sophisticated lighting system that simulates the flow of time, furnished with several original objects, and animated by a fifteen-minute film of a theatrical performance.

IMG. 5.36 — Museum of London, project by Philip Powell, Hidalgo Moya and Partners, 1976.

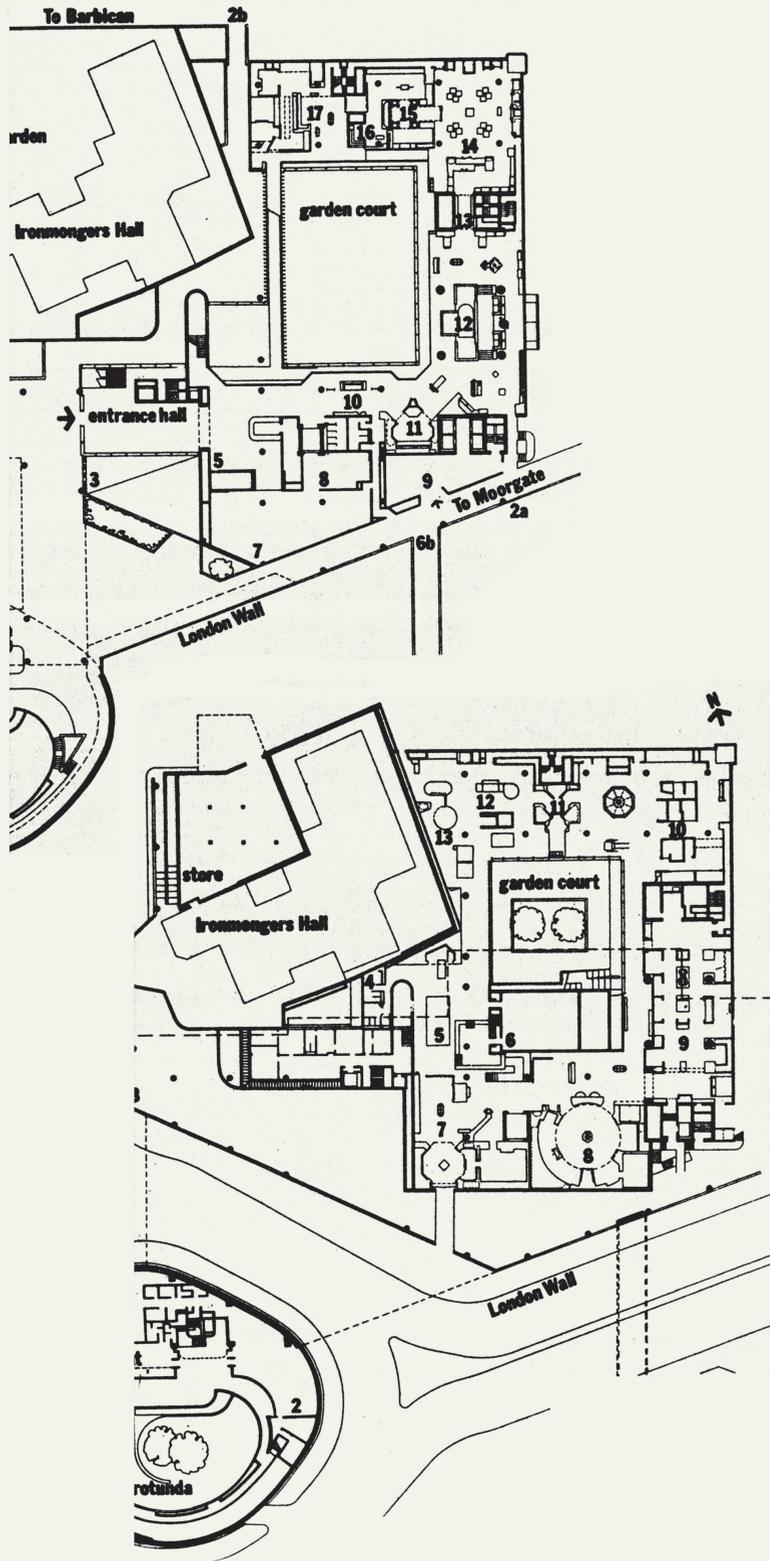
Source: *Architectural Review*, Vol. CLXII, no. 695, 1977, p. 27.

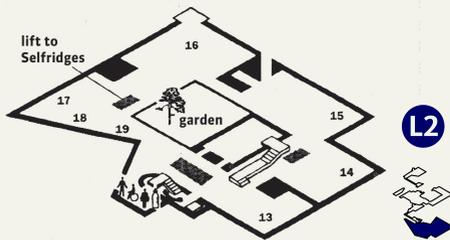
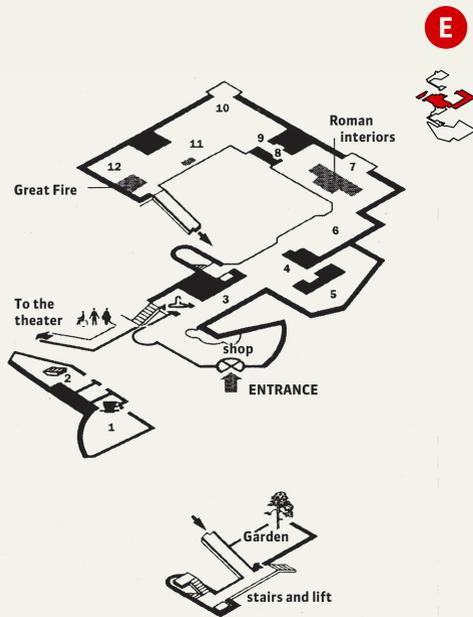
Plan at level 5, entrance.

1. Cinema / lecture hall
- 2a. High level walkway
- 2b. Future high level walkway
3. Void
4. Entrance concourse
5. Sales area
- 6a. Pedestrian bridge
- 6b. Proposed pedestrian bridge
7. Temporary exhibition
8. Temporary exhibition store
9. Entrance hall to office block Bastion House
10. Introductory area
11. Prehistory
12. Roman gallery
13. Dark gallery
14. Medieval London
15. Reformation
16. Late Tudor
17. Early Stuart

Plan at the lower exhibition, mezzanine level.

1. Kitchen
2. Cafeteria
3. Void
4. Public wc
5. Lord Mayor's coach
6. Treasury
7. Late Stuart
8. Eighteenth-century
9. Nineteenth-century
10. First World War
11. Twentieth-century London
12. Second World War

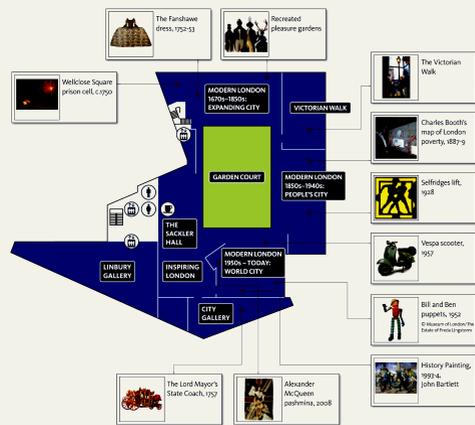
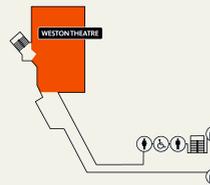
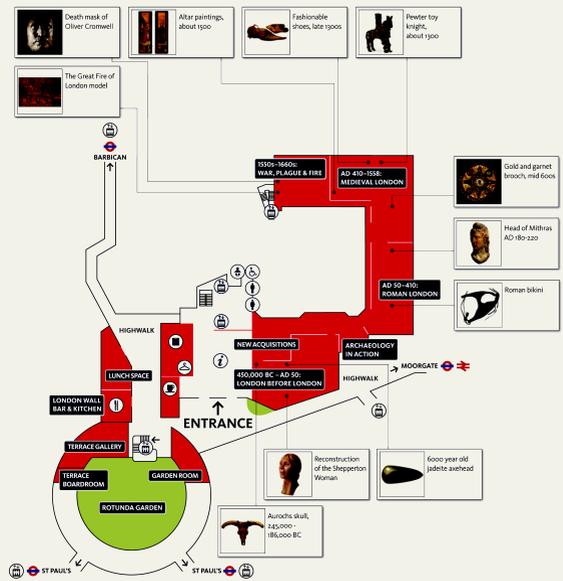




IMG 5. 37 — Exhibition layout, drafted from the informative material distributed at the museum, 2001.

Source: Bertuglia, Cristoforo Sergio and Montaldo, Chiara. 2003. "Il Museum of London." In *Il Museo della Città*, 54-62. Milan: Franco Angeli

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|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Cafeteria                 | 12. Early Stuart                |
| 2. Families and schools area | 13. Stuart Period               |
| 3. Foyer                     | 14. Eighteenth-century London   |
| 4. Temporary exhibitions     | 15. Nineteenth-century London   |
| 5. Temporary exhibitions     | 16. The Empire's capital        |
| 6. Prehistory                | 17. Early twenty-century London |
| 7. Roman gallery             | 18. Second World War            |
| 8. Late-Roman period         | 19. London Today                |
| 9. Saxon Period              |                                 |
| 10. Medieval London          |                                 |
| 11. Tudor London             |                                 |



IMG 5. 38 — Exhibition layout, drafted from the informative material distributed at the museum, 2012.

Some original cases, where possible, have been updated, implemented and reused, while others have been redesigned with innovative materials and display concepts—timber panels with images digitally printed directly on them, resin flooring embedding images and including walkable cases, walls made of glass reinforced concrete for the 20th century gallery and solid acrylic surface material for the new cases. These are designed to be integrated apparatus which hold objects, bear labels—sometimes carved into them—, act as highly tactile touchscreens using projectors instead of traditional monitors, and at the same time organise the space—an the contents—without dividing or fragmenting it.

In the last section “World City” the narration is structured around several main topics which can be read as the cornerstones of the city’s identity, and which are used to recount London’s more recent history, represent its current distinctions and challenges, and stimulate debate about its future.

The exhibition ends in the new City Gallery and in the Sackler Hall.

This space is where Powell and Moya previously displayed the Lord Mayor’s State Coach. It is a central space, visible from different points along the exhibition path, and intended to be a visual fulcrum of the space and a spatial and metaphorical point of orientation within the exhibition. Despite its cardinal position along the museum’s visit flow, due to the architectural layout, this was a fairly dark space. Wilkinson Eyre removed the ramp connecting the museum’s two levels, replaced it with a step in the north-west corner, and redesigned the façade to the inner garden, bringing light inside and opening up new views onto the surrounding buildings, and thus transforming this space into the core of the museum. The Sackler Hall is the only interior space designed by an external studio, Furneaux Stewart Design & Communication.

The Sackler Hall is the physical fulcrum of the whole exhibition area and its functional destination is somehow representative of the shift carried out by the Museum of London in its approach and understanding of its role. It is

defined as a contemporary “information hub” and a café, but actually it can be described as a hybrid multifunctional space. At one side of the hall, a bank of computer pods offers more information about the objects on display and in the stores, and so widening access to the museum’s knowledge, and allowing personal and individual browsing and data gathering. The space is also equipped with relaxing booths, a cafeteria, an area hosting changing temporary exhibitions on London creativity and a 45-metre LED screen loop displaying information and video art work commissioned every two years by the museum in partnership with Film London. The Sackler Hall with its highly adaptive character, its leaning towards being seen and used as an actual public city place, is a museum’s space able to reflect the ever changing and questioning approach of the museum itself supporting and even nurturing the activities which may take place here.

In the renovation of the Museum of London, the architectural project increased the space by 25 percent to include the new function and facilities required in a new contemporary museum and, at the same time, supported the new exhibition master plan, which was fashioned according to a new vision of the museum’s role. Here, the architecture, the exhibition design and the museum narrative reflect the idea that, as Jack Lohman recently said at the 2012 CAMOC Conference, “a [city] museum should not only [be] taking energy from the city in which it is, but also creating new energies and synergies with other cities in the world,” and, first and foremost, it should “not only provide access but genuine openness to all voices, adopting openness as a way of working.”

Francesca Lanz



IMG. 5.39 — General view of the section “Expanding City.” © Museum of London.



IMG. 5.40 — View of the section “People’s City”: the Lyon’s tea house corner. © Museum of London.



IMG. 5.41 — View of the section “World City.” © Museum of London.

**IMG. 5.42** — View of the section “World City”: the river of ideas. © Museum of London.

From the panel: “Capital concerns. 7.5 millions Londoners and raising ...! 50 resident communities of over 10.000 people from 33 different nations. 300 languages spoken. 14 major faith practised.”

The central touch screen allows visitors to express their opinion on some current city’s issues.

On the background: John Bartlett’s depicting the Poll Tax riots in Trafalgar Square on 31 March 1990



**IMG. 5.43** — The Charles Booth’s Map of Poverty, 1887–89 in the section “People’s City” section. © Museum of London.



**IMG. 5.44** — The Oral history war room in the “People’s City” section. © Museum of London.



## → REFERENCES

The bibliography on the Museum of London is very wide and extensive; here below have been listed only the main references with regard to the issues mentioned in this descriptive sheet.

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