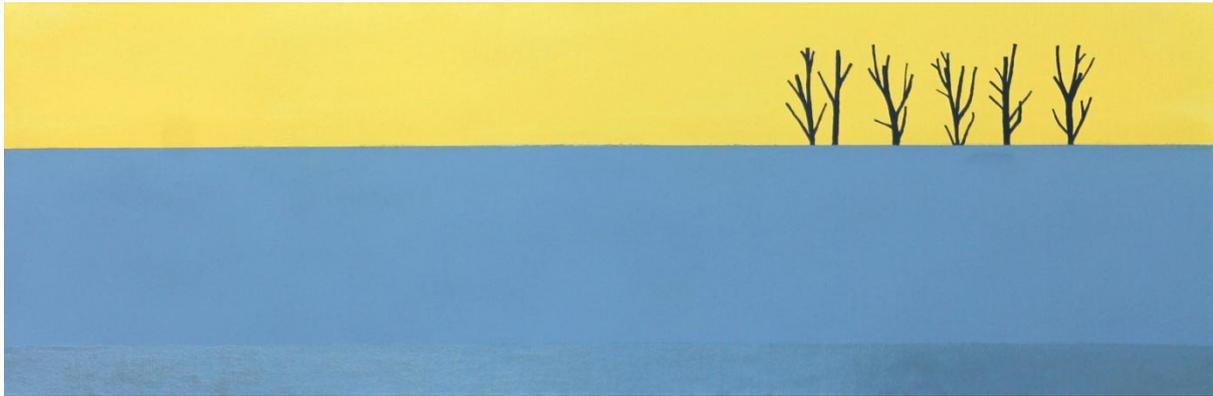


Grey Wall



Grey Wall, 2018

Background: The Light

The joy of Stockport remains its changes of level, a consequence of which is the views, out to surrounding landscapes and into the town centre from the high ground around. Merseyway and Princes Street are now walled-in to the North by Redrock, aka The Light, multi storey car park, restaurants and cinema. Someone has designed this.

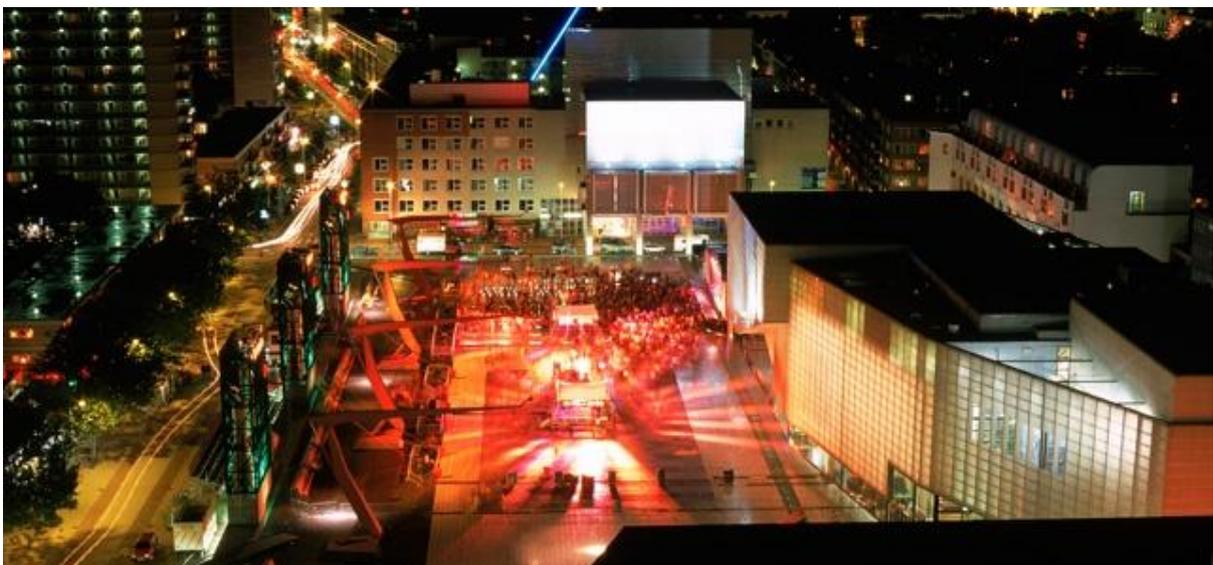
Redrock is the work of BDP, Building Design Partnership, following their masterplan of 2008. For BDP think Preston Bus Station and Halifax HQ, inventive architecture, solidly built. Redrock by contrast is expedient architecture; there appears to be no strong idea which looks to have sustained itself through the realities of building, other than it being a container for cars and people. As a building it appears to be feeble and temporary, a box clad in lightweight grey panels and 'suicide mesh'. Not built to last. And those absurd Lego pyramids facing the M60, are they red rocks by any chance?

Redrock muscled-in to views of and from Heaton Norris Park, its bank of trees formerly visible from the town centre. It turns its back on this park and the motorway - and ironically the red sandstone rocks of the former Tiviot Dale railway cutting which the M60 now occupies - in a manner which affirms Great Egerton Street as a human being 'no go' zone of service yards and highways. Thirteen lanes between Redrock and red rock. The canted wall shapes are unrelated to any internal or external space and do little to stir excitement in the design. Its mean profile otherwise runs straight from roof to ground offering no shelter to those passing or approaching along Bridgefield Street. This clumsy out of scale bulk is entirely alien to a part of town which is otherwise home to a medley of two and three storey brick and terracotta shop buildings. Access to Mouchel's 1979-82 concrete bridge spanning the M60 from Great Egerton Street to Heaton Norris is awkwardly hidden around the service yard back and not passively overlooked from anywhere, further increasing the risk of crime on this route. The bridge seems an unwanted relic of a once connected town which no longer values its un-motorised citizens.



Redrock, Stockport, 2018

Perhaps at some stage something like the Schouwburgplein Megacinema in Rotterdam (by Koen Van Velsen and West8, 1992-96, see below) was in an architect's head, and by degree every interesting part of it has been value engineered. You can imagine the conversation: Open forum over the ground floor? - *We need to maximise potential retail space.* Articulated interior volumes to express individual theatres? - *Cheaper if we join them together, one wall instead of two.* Projecting upper floors sheltering an outdoor threshold space? - *Cantilevers are expensive structures.* Discrete cinema with a strong identity? - *We need a 350-place car park.* Large public events piazza over underground car park? - *No thanks.* Translucent walls that glow at night? - *You must be joking.*



Schouwburgplein, Rotterdam, 1992-6

So the hierarchy at BDP will have passed this one down the line long ago realising it was never going to make their next monograph. A similar process looks to have happened at Exchange Car Park; in the designers head were "beton brut" concrete stair towers and Corten pre-rusted steel perforated panels - the contractor took one look at this materiality and thought pah, grey cladding and brown mesh, how cheap can I get these?

Climate Changer

Should designers working in towns where the rot has set in know better? Its not their fault, the council will have egged them on to meet their latest desperate *strategic vision for a landmark development*, whilst appointing ahead of them a contractor "partner" with the express instruction to keep a lid on a budget not matching this ambition. The future of the town squeezed in between unrealistic goals and cost management.

The council describes this building as "a game changer for Stockport". (Kate Butler, Manchester Evening News, 24 November 2017). With its short lifespan high embodied energy materiality and unthinking acceptance that users will all drive there, it is more a climate changer. We should rethink our strategies for shrinking towns away from puerile landmarks to more humble urban stitching with housing and mixed use; gradual rather than cataclysmic investment.



Heaton Norris Park, 2018

Gallery Painting No1

3'x1' canvas exhibited at Stockport Art Gallery in 2018.

My painting is a reflection on this condition using appropriate materials. A south elevation of Redrock. Despite the odd highlight, this building is grey, very grey, represented with car primer spray paint. Matt. 3 coats. The varnished part represents the ground floor, a temporary gloss of rent free period occupation pending the long term vacancy which has afflicted the rest of Stockport for decades. 2 coats which will eventually fade and revert to matt. Above the roof line, the crudely lopped trees of Heaton Norris park are just visible, weary but defiant. Painted in brown acrylic. These stumps are silhouetted against a light-polluted yellow M60 sky, illuminated by halogen, argon, xenon, sodium, metal halides, mercury, and neon; the elements of highway lighting, executed in No Nonsense yellow line marking paint. 1 coat.

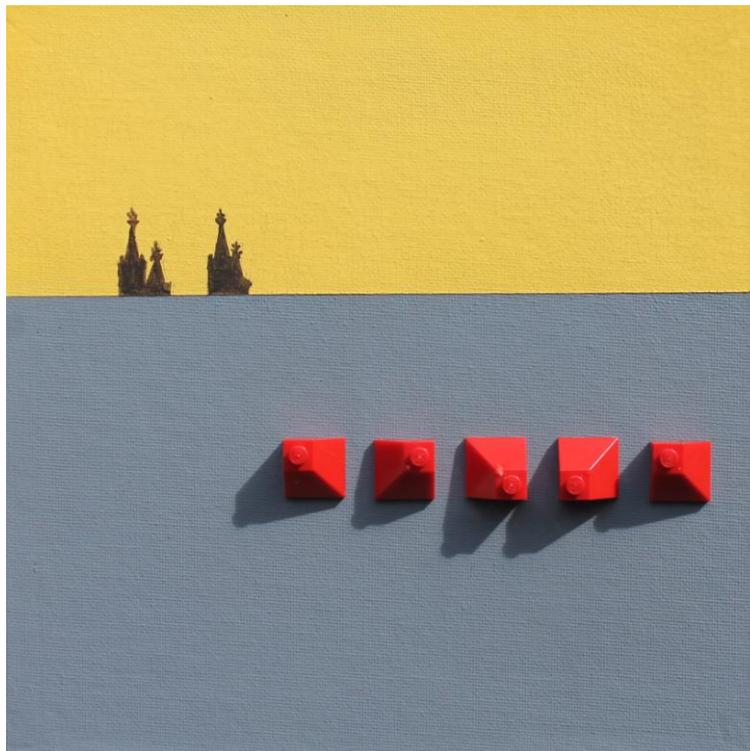
The critical viewer will note the “golden ratio” proportion of grey to yellow, 1.618 to 1.

The end result even looks oddly like a piece of highway. No parking, except at NCP.

Gallery Painting No2

8”x8” canvas exhibited at Stockport Art Gallery in 2018.

A ‘mini-me’ executed in the same materials, this time a north elevation complete with red Lego pyramids – the red rocks facing red rocks (ugh). Just visible above the roofline in this view is a vestige of real architecture, the pinnacles of St Marys parish church tower, designed in 1813-17 by Lewis Wyatt.



Carbuncle

In September 2018, Redrock was voted winner of the “Carbuncle Cup”, an award given by the architecture magazine Building Design for “the ugliest building in the United Kingdom completed in the last 12 months”. This announcement echoed round the world (New York Times, 6th September), but to my knowledge is yet to appear on the website of Marketing Stockport: no advertising is bad advertising, surely?

James Dyson, September 2018

James Dyson is an architect with over 30 years experience in public and commercial practice, with a passion for architecture, urbanism and all things design. “Grey Wall” exposes the impoverishment of contemporary planning in the town.