

Soane and Modernism: Make It New

12 February – 18 May 2025



Sir John Soane's Museum presents *Soane and Modernism: Make it New*, the first exhibition to investigate Soane as a forerunner of architectural modernism.

This exhibition brings together drawings from Soane's collection, some on display for the first time, in dialogue with works by celebrated modernists including Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos and Ernő Goldfinger.

Sir John Soane has often been referred to as one of the first modernist architects due to his emphasis on light, open space and abstract forms. Soane rethought the traditions of the early nineteenth century, choosing a pared-back, minimalist aesthetic of ornamentation; formal arrangements of spaces were replaced by innovatively interconnected or open-plan spaces. By the turn of the twentieth century, prominent architectural historians recognised the radicalism of Soane's work as architects took up new materials and ideas, embracing the principle that form should follow function.

Structured around core modernist architectural ideals, such as light and space and modularity, *Soane and Modernism* draws attention to the characteristics shared by Soane and the architects that came after him. Le Corbusier deployed inventive lighting systems for his museum at Chandigarh, which innovatively used daylight to illuminate works of art, as Soane did at Dulwich Picture Gallery. At Pitzhanger Manor, Soane's use of juxtaposed materials and textures to create the gated entrance draws similarities to the way Frank Lloyd Wright combined and used natural materials. As such, Soane's designs can be considered a forerunner for many of the architectural principles that were adopted in the twentieth century.

Soane's designs not only foreshadowed some of twentieth century's most iconic buildings. In 1816, Soane designed a tomb for his wife, Eliza, who died in November 1815: an upright double cube, surrounded by four piers and topped with a shallow dome. More than a century later, Giles Gilbert Scott, a Trustee of the Soane Museum, proposed a design for a telephone box that would be placed on the streets throughout Britain, reflecting many of the elements of Soane's original design. A drawing of the 1935 'Jubilee kiosk' in the exhibition recalls Soane's pared-down form of classicism, with a box structure topped with Soane's characteristic 'canopy'.

The exhibition also investigates two more recent case studies which share affinities with Soane's work: Álvaro Siza's Bouça Social Housing in Porto, Portugal, and Tony Fretton's Lisson Gallery in London. Fretton turned to Soane for inspiration in overcoming the challenge of adapting adjoining domestic buildings and ensuring that light was able to

penetrate throughout. Soane and Siza arrived independently at a solution of using the corner of the Bank of England and the Bouça housing development, respectively, as an urban focal point. Later, when visiting the Soane Museum, Siza celebrated Soane's drawings of the Tivoli Corner at the Bank of England. These case studies reveal how drawings help architects to resolve issues in order to arrive at solutions that are at the forefront of architectural thinking.

All modernist drawings have been borrowed from Drawing Matter's important and extensive holdings, selected in collaboration with the team at Drawing Matter Trust. This exhibition would not have been possible without the support of this unique collection, the only one of its kind outside of North America.

Dr Erin McKellar, Assistant Curator of Exhibitions at Sir John Soane's Museum, said: *'Make it new', a slogan widely attributed to American poet Ezra Pound, became the rallying cry of modernists, as they sought to create art and architecture that were appropriate to a changing world. This exhibition uses 'make it new' as a lens through which to examine how Soane's own designs were visionary when they were made. The show invites visitors to learn about Soane anew and notice the most innovative aspects of his architecture.'*

Will Gompertz, Deborah Loeb Brice Director of Sir John Soane's Museum, said: *When Soane was working in the early nineteenth century his approach to light, space and ornament were strikingly new. Some considered him controversial, for others he was a visionary. What is universally agreed is his lasting influence on architecture and architects, a legacy so vividly captured in Soane and Modernism.'*

Niall Hobhouse, Founder of Drawing Matter, said: *It is very exciting for us to see our drawings by great 20th-century masters transposed to a very different (and surprising!) cultural context. Uniquely, the exhibition will allow visitors to compare them directly with the drawing production of Sir John and his office. The drawings from our collection and Soane's reveal what the buildings themselves often cannot - about the architect's process of design, the constraints of the site, the influences and ideas they have absorbed before the commission or the way the project might be understood by future generations.'*

NOTES TO EDITORS

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- Joseph Michael Gandy for John Soane, Pitzhanger Manor, design for the lawn front and conservatory; August 1810, Pen and coloured washes on wove paper, SM Volume 60/69. Photo: Geremy Butler; Aldo Rossi,
- *Urban Scene: Scena Per il Teatrino*, 1978. Drawing Matter © The Aldo Rossi Estate, 2024.

About Sir John Soane's Museum

Sir John Soane's house and collection at No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields has been a national museum since the early nineteenth century. Designed by renowned architect Sir John Soane and filled with his world-class collection of paintings, sculpture, artefacts and models, the Museum retains the same fabric and design as at the time of Soane's death in 1837. Today, the Museum encourages access to Soane's legacy in its broadest sense: architecture and design, creative originality, a commitment to learning and enquiry, and the connections between past and present that the Museum and its collections reveal. The Museum is open Wednesdays to Sundays, 10am to 5pm. Entry is free. There is no need to pre-book – you can walk in on the day. Sir John Soane's Museum, 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3BP. More at www.soane.org, #SoaneMuseum | @soanemuseum

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO ARRANGE INTERVIEWS

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