Through the keyhole

Samantha Whitaker visits some of the capital's most interesting buildings to celebrate the Open House London weekend

Hurrying around as we do, living our busy lives, it is easy to forget to look up and take note of the buildings we pass every day. The Open House organisation aims to encourage people to open their eyes and re-examine their city, and its Open House London weekend gives us the opportunity to explore more than 650 of the city's exemplary buildings free of charge. The event, which has attracted worldwide interest and inspired similar programmes in New York and Dublin, is held annually every September. At many of the buildings, there is also a chance to meet the architects and people who live or work on the site. There is a wonderfully diverse selection of architecture, from the high-tech modernist Lloyds Building by Richard Rogers to the Victorian Turkish Baths in Bishopsgate.

For those who can't make it to the weekend event, many of the buildings offer tours throughout the year, including Kenwood House, Peckham Library, the Old Royal Naval College, the Unicorn Theatre and the Royal Courts of Justice. For something more unusual, the innovative collection of buildings known as 'Container City' at Trinity Buoy Wharf in the London Docklands is fascinating. Here, fully-functioning buildings have been created from re-used shipping containers that now house a variety of tenants, from architects to fashion designers.

The National Theatre runs backstage tours up to six times a day, Monday to Friday, and twice on Saturday. For just £6, a guide will take you to each of the three theatres in the complex: the grand Olivier, which resembles a Greek amphitheatre but with purple seating (Laurence Olivier's favourite colour); the Lyttelton, a modern proscenium arch; and the Cottesloe, an intimate studio space based loosely on an Elizabethan courtyard theatre.



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GRAND DESIGNS: Container City in London's Docklands is an architectural delight (above). The workshops at the National Theatre are one of the highlights of the backstage tour (below)

The tour continues backstage, where you can stand in the wings and on the stage, and wander through the scenic workshops where sets, props and costumes are created. A highlight is the Olivier Theatre's Drum Revolve, a unique piece of stage machinery that allows large pieces of scenery to be loaded from the workshops on ground level and raised to centre stage during a performance. During Open House, tours are shorter, concentrating on the features of the building that make it a veritable machine for theatrical production.

If you are content with seeing the outside of great buildings, Open House also conducts architectural tours covering 'The Square Mile', 'Edges of the City', 'Westminster' and 'The London Docklands' on Saturday mornings. The tour guides, who are architects and architectural writers or historians, are extremely knowledgeable and provide intelligent but accessible commentary. I took the three-hour Square Mile tour, which begins near Tottenham Court Road station, at The Building Centre. The guide began by pointing out key buildings on the centre's diorama of greater London, including some that are still in the planning stages.

We then took a coach to the Bank of England and the Royal Exchange, and the guide, who works for National Heritage, spoke about the history of the buildings and the challenge of balancing conservation with progress. We strolled around the City, where modern buildings such as Norman Foster's 30 St Mary Axe, better known as 'The Gherkin', punctuate the skyline, and medieval alleyways lead to miniature churchyards. We walked through Leadenhall Market, a restored Victorian covered market that still sells traditional game, poultry, fish and meat, to Broadgate Complex, Wood Street, the Barbican and Paternoster Square, where Temple Bar, which was originally built in 1672, has been painstakingly restored and re-erected.

Pick up a free copy of the Open House London programme for 20-21 September from any London library or download it from www.open house.org.uk. For further details, call 020 3006 7008; for tours, call 020 7383 2131. For National Theatre tours, call 020 7452 3400.