

## Bloomberg and Mithras: becoming stewards of London's heritage

In 1954, a Roman temple to Mithras discovered in the heart of the financial centre of London became one of the most famous archaeological sites in the UK. The legacy of that discovery and the enormous public interest that was generated at the time meant that when the site came up for development again more than 60 years later, Bloomberg, intent on making the site their new European HQ, needed to embrace the opportunity of writing the next chapter in the story of the site.

The Foster and Partners-designed building, which opened in 2017, includes a new cultural attraction, the London Mithraeum Bloomberg SPACE.

This article explores how the project stands out as an example of how to generate value and legacy from engagements with archaeology in the development process. It is transcribed from an interview with **Jemma Read JR**, Bloomberg's Global Head of Corporate Philanthropy, conducted by ClfA's Policy Advisor, **Rob Lennox RL**.



**RL** Could you tell me about your role at Bloomberg and your involvement with the development of the European HQ, specifically with the archaeology project and the Mithraeum?

**JR** I oversee the company's philanthropy programme, which includes all our work with communities, partnerships and engagement – everything from education programmes and philanthropy initiatives to major sponsorships around the world.

I was involved with the Mithraeum project since the very early stages and have collaborated closely with the team from Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA). I'm fortunate to be responsible for overseeing an amazing team dedicated to ensuring that the unique history of this site is as accessible as possible to the public. It's one of the most surprising and rewarding elements of the job and we don't have another project quite like it anywhere in the world.

Bloomberg construction site during demolition (Photo: MOLA)



**RL** How would you summarise the vision for Bloomberg's HQ in London?

**JR** The key to all of this is the vision of Mike Bloomberg, founder of the company and former Mayor of New York, who passionately believes in respecting the communities in which we live and work around the world.

London, particularly, has always held a special place for Mike, and respect for the history of the neighbouring buildings, the community and for local culture lay at the heart of the office design. We also wanted to develop something exceptional for our employees, something which encouraged greater collaboration and set new standards for how a building works in terms of sustainability. This balance between respect for the surroundings and the investment in new technologies reflects the Bloomberg culture.

We did look at other sites, but at the end of the day it was this site which was most inspiring, both because of its location at the heart of the financial community but also because it afforded the opportunity to restore and care for the Temple of Mithras. This added a completely different dimension to how we approached the design and construction.

**RL** At what point did archaeology become a relevant factor in the design process?

**JR** Archaeology was there from the beginning. Bloomberg approached the archaeological importance of the site with a deep sense of responsibility and with a passion for bringing it to life and making it accessible to the public. We set out to create a legacy rather than simply to tick the boxes for the planning permission.

We worked with a team of some of the UK's top archaeologists and collaborated closely both with the City of London and the team from MOLA throughout the

process while engaging world experts and academics to ensure that the Mithraeum was designed with the utmost integrity.

As an archaeological project, it was an exceptional opportunity to learn from the site. As part of the construction project we created a new tube entrance for Bank and this led to us excavating down to a 12-metre depth. As a result, we uncovered some incredibly well-preserved archaeological remains and more than 14,000 Roman artefacts, all of which have been carefully conserved and archived.

We relocated the Temple of Mithras to as close to its original position as possible, and engaged a team of artists, technologists, historical and archaeological experts to create a museum that attempted to bring the experience of the Temple of Mithras to life.

The London Mithraeum is a three-storey cultural hub that is accessible to the public for free. On the ground floor, there is a display case highlighting around 600 of the most important artefacts including a collection of wax writing tablets, amulets, jewellery and leather shoes. There is also a contemporary art space where commissioned artists respond to the unique history of the site. As part of the display, we developed an accompanying interactive digital platform as a means for visitors to explore the artefacts in more detail.

On the mezzanine level we worked with digital designers and interpretation experts to create a series of interactive screens dedicated to key elements of the Mithraic cult as well as an audio guide to the project, including the voices of key expert contributors and actress Joanna Lumley. Then, of course, there is the actual Mithraeum which has been restored using as much of the original material as possible and very sensitive reconstruction methods where new material had to be incorporated.

As part of our commitment to making the Mithraeum and the collection as accessible as possible we have produced three publications and we run a dynamic events and education programme developed in partnership with the Museum of London.



*London Mithraeum uses light sculpture, haze and sound to bring the temple's remains to life. (Photo: James Newton)*



**RL** *It sounds as though where some developers might see archaeology as a constraint or obligation, for Bloomberg it was a key to unlock your contributions to community and satisfy your desire to develop a close connection to your place in the city.*

*The near complete reconstruction of the Temple of Mithras (Photo: PAYE Conservation)*

**JR** *Definitely. At Bloomberg, we are committed to culture, community and creativity. This project brought all these priorities together, giving us an opportunity to demonstrate the breadth of our commitment in an exciting and innovative way. While running a museum was not something that we would ever imagined we would be doing, the opportunity has been amazing and we have fully embraced it.*



Interactive kiosks invite visitors to learn more about the rituals and beliefs behind the cult of Mithras. (Photo: James Newton)

Six hundred of the 14,000 Roman artefacts uncovered on the Bloomberg site are displayed on the ground level of London Mithraeum Bloomberg SPACE. (Photo: James Newton)



To book your visit, go to [Londonmithraeum.com](http://Londonmithraeum.com).

**RL** *What about the project's legacy?*

**JR** We've invested in a permanent site which will have a long legacy and continue to attract visitors. We plan to maintain ongoing investment in digital engagement, education and the commission of contemporary artists to ensure we continue to animate the space and encourage people to return. We will continue our relationship with MOLA supporting the research into the Bloomberg collection, including more detailed research into the writing tablets found on the site.

One of my favourite parts of the project was the ability to capture the oral histories of around 70 participants who visited the site in the 1950s when the Temple was first discovered. We worked with a film maker to capture original memories of the archaeology but also of that time in London's past and what the Mithraeum has meant to people both then and now. And we've published a digital archive on our website adding moving personal stories to the rich legacy of the history of the site.

I don't think that any of us anticipated the level of enthusiasm that the Mithraeum has generated, and it doesn't seem to be slowing down. Visitors of all ages and backgrounds, all coming for different reasons, but all inspired by this story of London. We're definitely very passionate about that legacy.

**RL** *Bloomberg is closely associated with philanthropy in the environment, with arts, and health. Do you think this project has changed the way that Bloomberg thinks about archaeology in this same way?*

**JR** An interesting question. Well, alongside our support for many contemporary organisations we also fund cultural and heritage institutions, we believe strongly in the importance of culture for a city's identity, its role in strengthening communities, and its ability to generate economic impact. So, in terms of that core belief in the power culture, I'm not sure it has changed that, but I do think it has consolidated our respect for the connection of the past to the future and to the great importance of protecting and preserving that past.

In running this project ourselves, rather than simply supporting other institutions to do it, we have been given a new understanding of how complex, powerful, and rewarding archaeology can be, which I hope will feed into the way we continue to approach our support for culture moving forward.

**RL** *How is it working for the company?*

**JR** London Mithraeum Bloomberg Space has been extraordinarily well received. We have had over 160,000 visitors since we opened at the end of 2017 and we have won numerous awards. We were one of *TIME* magazine's top 100 places to visit in 2018 and our ongoing program of events and activities allows us to attract both locals and visitors who otherwise may not have heard of Bloomberg.

**RL** *What do the staff who work here think about the site?*

**JR** Everyone is fascinated by the history and stories of the Mithraeum. I hope that our employees feel proud to be part of this incredible piece of history. Our employees join tours, bring their friends and families and have access to a range of education and volunteering opportunities. I think it helps to consolidate our message about Bloomberg supporting culture and I know Mike is very proud of what has been achieved as he regularly talks about it.