

WORKS: DOW JONES ARCHITECTS



PROJECT TEAM Architect: Dow Jones Architects; Structural engineer: Mowlem; Services engineer: Barr Haggitt; Quantity surveyor: Piers Hill; CDM Coordinator: Piers Hill; Graphic designers: Saville Bink and Ben Shaver; Building control: Ascent; Contractor: Redwing Construction

Cultivated aesthetic

The temporary exhibition gallery at the Garden Museum on the Thames at Lambeth is a triumph of architectural imagination over budgetary constraint, says Ellis Woodman

Pictures by David Greengrass

The talents of Elizabethan polymath John Tradescant extended to engineering and garden design, but he is remembered principally as the founder of Britain's first museum. Tradescant assembled a collection of natural and ethnographic curiosities sourced on his travels to corners of the world as far flung as Russia, the Levant and Egypt, and displayed them at the Ark, a large house at Lambeth in south London. Exotic plant specimens constituted a significant part of the museum's holdings — Tradescant maintained a botanical garden near the house — and many of the species he introduced to these shores are now common features of British gardens.

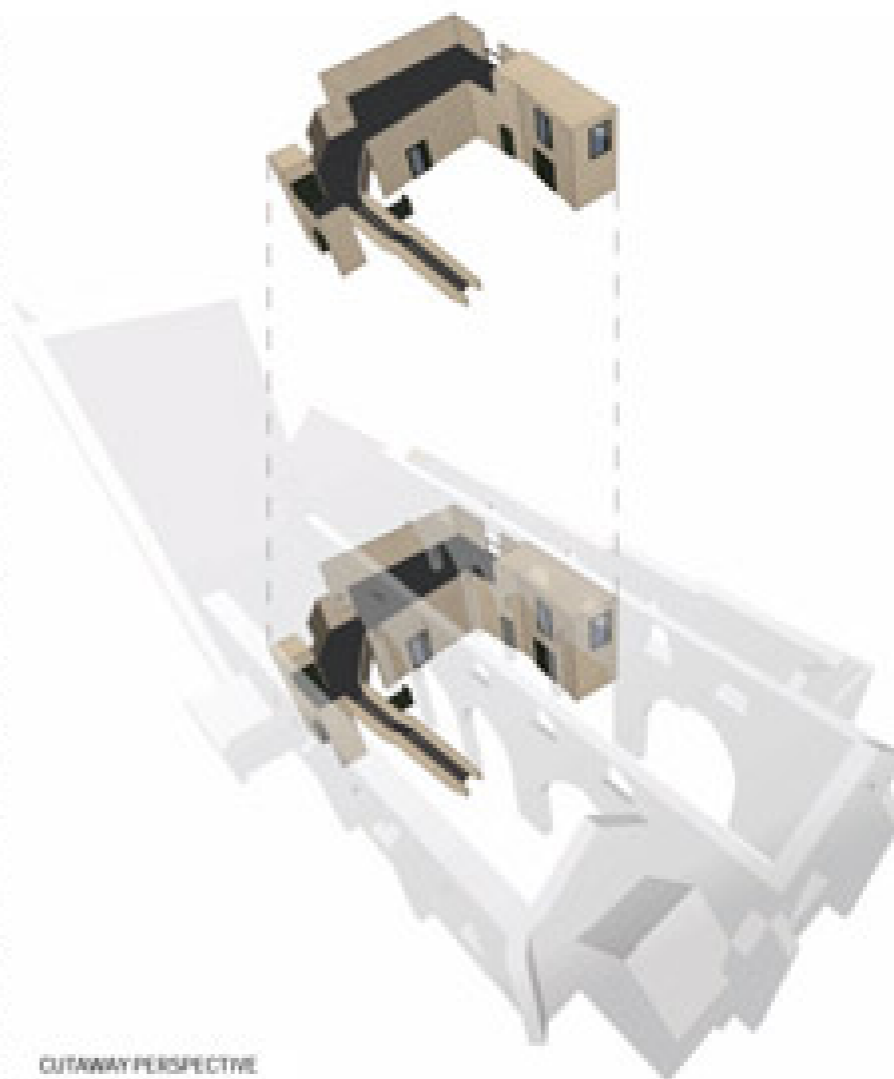
Following his death, the collection was inherited by his son and subsequently by Elias Ashmole, who bequeathed it to Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, where it remains today. The Ark has long been demolished, but about the only trace of this extraordinary story that can be found in modern-day Lambeth is the Tradescant tomb, his wife's, father and son, all buried in the graveyard of St Mary's, a former parish church which stands at the gates of Lambeth Palace.

St Mary's dates from the 14th century, but its structure today is very largely the product of a 19th-century remodeling. It is actually a wonder anything survives at all. In the 1970s, the building was decreed derelict and scheduled to be replaced by a coach park serving nearby Waterloo Station.

It escaped that fate only through the heroic efforts of John and Rosemary Nicholson, garden enthusiasts who had bought out the Tradescant tomb in the overgrown graveyard. They hatched the idea of converting the building into the world's first Museum of Garden History — a fitting memorial to the Tradescants' work — and managed to get the necessary backing just five days before the demolition date.

The Nicholsons formed a charitable trust, and after four years of fundraising and repair to the severely dilapidated structure, opened its doors to the public in 1981. Over the course of the subsequent quarter century, the museum built up a substantial archive of tools, garden-related publications, paintings and ephemera, and also established an energetic events and education programme. These activities were conducted on a shoestring budget which certainly didn't extend to major building works. Student parkrunners closed off space for offices and stores, otherwise, the interior was essentially as found.

It was a charming set-up, but from a curatorial perspective, a highly constrained one. The permanent exhibits had to be mounted in vitrines that could be



CUTAWAY PERSPECTIVE

shelved out of the way whenever it was needed for a lecture, concert or private party (one of the museum's key revenues of income). More problematic still was the absence of an environmentally controlled gallery space. Without it, the museum's delicate botanical artifacts was severely restricted, with the consequence that it struggled to mount the kind of temporary exhibitions that would bring in new audiences.

In 2006, Christopher Woodward took over as director and set about tackling these fundamental issues. The funds available for any building project were extremely tight, but Woodward has a keen interest in architecture — in his previous position as director of Bath's Holburne Museum, much of his energy had been taken up by the proposal to build it in Pains's

exterior — and had high ambitions for what might be achieved. He asked BO and the Architecture Foundation to help run a competition for a temporary exhibition gallery. His initial idea was that this would be a short-term intervention, a stop-gap measure until funding was found for a more comprehensive transformation of the building.

Given that expectation, to see the opportunity for the museum to be held in its choice of architect. A shortlist was drawn up of six young practices, each of which had yet to complete a public project. Their submissions (over November 30, 2007) broadly divided into two camps: free-standing interventions, whether new, or structures that hugged the perimeter walls, leaving the centre of the church empty.

The winning entry by Dow Jones Architects, belonged to the latter group. It focused the temporary gallery in a single-story structure that filled the west end of the church, and extended this volume down the length of the north aisle to accommodate storage space. What singled the proposal out was that it allowed the permanent collection to be removed from the nave and displayed on top of the new block.

Although this necessitated the construction of a stair and lift, it allowed the museum's holdings to be presented in a much more convincing manner. Free of the need to wheel them around the building three or four times a week. Key to achieving all this within the budget was Dow Jones' proposal to construct the scheme using the Crosslam timber joint system manufactured by the Swiss company Carbon. These enormous glued spruce panels, functioning as both wall and floor elements, opened up the possibility that the primary structure could be entirely prefabricated off site, while the secondary trades could be kept to a minimum.

A year on, St Mary's has reopened under the new name of the Garden Museum. The wisdom of Dow Jones' strategy has

been borne out by the startlingly modest final build cost — around £200,000, of which £15,000 was the cost of the Crosslam — and by the fact that the whole project was completed in just 12 weeks.

From an architectural viewpoint, it also proves to have been a sound decision. In terms of its dimensions, scale and colour, the structure strikes a surprisingly close relationship to the stone construction of the surrounding street. Indeed, although Dow Jones has been scrupulous about leaving a 200mm gap between its work and the original fabric, the two feel very much of a piece.

When the new work is distinguished from the old is in its looser geometry. Both the wing that occupies the north aisle and the enormous stone reggia stair that announces it on the far side of the nave buckle slightly to the right. In fact, scrutiny of the plan reveals that the original architecture is far less precise than it at first appears — the columns on either side of the nave are wildly mismatched — and the workiness of the new work is an arguably necessary accommodation of this. However, Dow Jones has compounded such moments of fudging with a number of instances where the structure departs from an orthogonal geometry for purely expressive reasons. The effect is rather as if the new work has wriggled into position around the old, a fit, but a loose fit.

Heightened impact

The principal entrance remains at the south east corner of the plan, immediately adjacent to the town. Passing through the porch, we find the view ahead has been closed by the reception desk and the one to our immediate right by the lift. The view between these obstructions — the long diagonal one that cuts to the opposing corner of the church — is then privileged and in fact endorsed by the massive stair that extends out in front of us in the same orientation.

The view may be a flawed one, but in framing it, Dow Jones has greatly heightened its impact. It was reminded of the focus that the practice completed in Waterloo last year (ENR April 20, 2007), where it was also much concerned with wriggling corners to corner views across the plan's dominant geometry.

The temporary gallery space is a little more involved than one might tolerate were this a new building. There is a column dropping down in the middle of it, steps, and a ramp accommodate an unusual level change, and the museum's requirement for 60-litre metres of wall space has pushed the plan into an L-shape. That said, this was never conceived as a prime picture gallery and shouldn't be judged as such.

The current exhibition devoted to the gardens of Bath Chantry. ■



Temporary exhibition space has been built at the west end of the church, supporting the permanent gallery's roof.

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STAIRS



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A new lift and stair tube modernises up to a first-floor permanent gallery.



Part of the first-floor permanent collection.

contains the odd painting but largely comprises letters, books and other small artefacts that the space accommodates perfectly well. Its walls have largely been lined in plasterboard, but happily, the timber structure has been left exposed across the ceiling and as a narrow band at the top of each wall, a zone in which the air vents have been sited. These are fed by a modern mechanical ventilation kit that has been fitted on the gallery's rear face. Being located close to the perimeter wall and at high level, it draws in air that is both cool and relatively dust-free.

While the creation of the temporary gallery may have been the project's principal driver, the upper level packs the greater spatial punch. One for the little education room that lies at the end of the visitor's route, it is open to the roof. An exhibition devoted to Dow

Jones and graphic designer Sarahie Bondi elegantly showcases a range of objects ranging from Cornish skylit desk to a grotesque chair that was once thought to be part vegetable, part tent.

Rich chapelness
At the competition stage, the architect described the project in terms of a balance, the implication being that the elevated zone would invite a reading of the church's interior as a quasi-landscape. The decision to occupy the nave very lightly — a Dow Jones-designed art cart and a few tables carrying reading material are ordinarily all that is provided — supports that ambition. However, the chancel and side chapel that lie at the end of the south aisle are still partitioned off, so the idea doesn't yet ring as clearly as it surely will. The practice has produced a

second phase of work which would see the chancel become an additional exhibition area and the side-chapel occupied by a Christian administration room, the first floor of which would be linked back to phase one by a bridge. That is a really captivating prospect, promising to extend the already varied morphology of phase one into something very rich indeed, while consolidating the rather theatrical sense of enclosure with which it has changed the nave's view.

All this, of course, dependent on funding, but the fact that work is being considered is a testament to what has been built, is remarkable in itself. Through Dow Jones' initiative, a project originally conceived as standing for between five and 10 years has become the first phase of a long-term master plan for the museum's transformation.



The temporary space currently houses an exhibition devoted to the gardens of Bath Church.