

# GARDEN MUSEUM



# DIVINE INTERVENTION

TEXT: GRETCHEN FERRAO

PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVID GRANDORGE; COURTESY DOW JONES ARCHITECTS

Dow Jones Architects slip a modern-day timber structure into a 14th-century heritage church to create additional exhibition space for The Garden Museum in London.



A Biba Dow



A Alan Jones

The unspoken brief for any restoration project is that the structure/artwork is sacrosanct. Any work done thereon should ideally be minimal, unobtrusive, reversible for the benefit of future technological advances, and with today's eco-cautious outlook, sustainable too. That being said, how does one retrofit a 14th-century church to create space where there is none, on a judicious budget at that? The Garden Museum on the Thames at Lambeth in South London, posed this very predicament.

Formerly known as The Museum of Garden History, the museum is housed in the deconsecrated church of St Mary's, and is a tribute to 17th-century royal gardeners and plant hunters, John Tradescant (father and son), whose tombs were discovered in the churchyard. As the story goes, John and Rosemary Nicholson took over the partially dilapidated church and restored it under the name of the Tradescant Trust. The Museum of Garden History was consequently founded in 1977. Other than basic studwork partitions to section off office and storage spaces, the interiors were left untouched.

As time wore on, the museum acquired a sizeable collection of tools, garden-related publications and paintings. With this, came a series of events and education programmes that necessitated space. So the permanent exhibits were encased in vitrines that could be wheeled out of the nave whenever necessary. However, this restricted the display to only those pieces that were sturdy enough to be moved around frequently. It also left the more precious, often more interesting, exhibits hidden away in storage. Another pressing issue was the need for an environmentally-controlled gallery space, without which mounting temporary exhibits was a rather tedious process. Thus limiting new audiences. So much like a disoriented time traveller in a future realm, this medieval-origin, Victorian-remodelled church struggled with the growing demands of its new role as a modern museum.

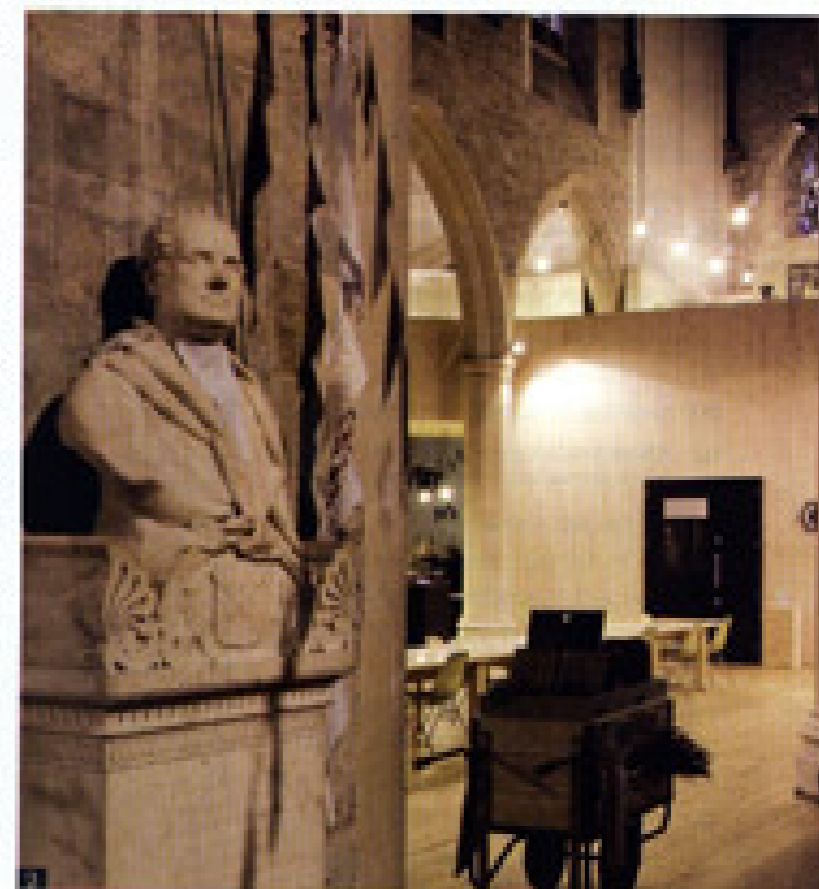
In 2006, the museum addressed the issue via an invited competition. Design firms were asked to create a gallery space where temporary exhibitions could be curated within secure and environmentally-controlled conditions. London-based Dow Jones Architects held rank over other participants for their ingenious modular design that made use of Swiss-engineered timber Eurlan. "There was a danger that the temporary gallery could disrupt the events space. So it was most important to make something that would add to the building, rather than take away from the rich dynamics that existed previously," explains architect Alan Jones. The team laid equal emphasis on creating a dedicated place for the museum's permanent collection to eliminate its cumbersome reshuffling.

As they strategized concepts that addressed both issues, the need for a two-storey structure soon became evident. One that was robust enough to hold the permanent collection on top of it. They drew inspiration from the belvedere, a landscape gardening device popularly seen in Italian gardens

> showplace

[1] The reception desk as seen from the entrance along the south-east corner. The backdrop displays the name of the museum that was painted onto the raw timber. To the right, are the doors to the storeroom. In the far corner above are the windows to the education room

[2] A view from the cafe looking south-west towards the temporary exhibition space entrance





- (E) Standing on the former chancel looking west. On the left, is the staircase leading to the permanent exhibition space. Underneath it, is the reception with the door to the temporary exhibition space on the right. The nave has been left free for events.
- (K) Inside the temporary gallery space.
- (X) A broad, rather dramatic, stairway leads up to the permanent exhibition space.

from the Renaissance. “Belvedere is Italian for beautiful view. It is essentially a raised platform that offers you a fresh perspective of a known landscape. The concept, therefore, has a quick connect with patrons,” enthuses Alan. The design smartly accommodated

[conceptmaterials]

>CONCEPT

The competition brief asked for a new gallery space where temporary exhibitions could be housed in secure and environmentally-controlled conditions.

>MATERIALS

Structure	Eurban (engineered timber)
Flooring	Black Inotium
Lighting	Gallery track lighting system and light bulbs

the temporary exhibition underneath it with the permanent collection on top. Thereby leaving the nave of the church free for events — a response to the role of the museum as a cultural institution.

The brilliant aspect about the concept is that it's a freestanding structure that simply sits on the five-year-old oak floor of the existing grade II listed building. Its asymmetrical shape stands at a 200-mm-gap from the periphery along the west end of the church. What's more, it is entirely reversible! “In 20 years time, they can take this structure apart and there'll be no evidence in the building that we were ever there!” quips Alan.

Now if you think that's impressive, wait till you hear about the construction time. “We



It is a fine example of how contemporary architecture can successfully meld with historically-sensitive buildings

wanted to keep the set-up time down to a minimum and avoid disrupting the museum's activities and income flow. So we chose the prefabricated route,” offers Alan. Renderings of the plan were sent to Swiss company Eurban where the modular structure was manufactured and transported to London. Although the team was onsite for a whole three months, the actual building of the timber structure took all of three weeks.

A short set-up time wasn't the only reason why Eurban was the material of choice. The planks are extremely durable, relatively light and require no special maintenance. Comprising farm softwood, it is eco-friendly with a lower energy consumption than other building materials. Prior applications include spaces such as houses and school buildings wherein the material is clad. In this case though, the architects decided to leave it in its raw form — a first for Eurban — with



- [6] The entrance to the permanent exhibition area. The display cabinets here were designed by Dow Jones Architects
- [7] The elevator shaft as seen from the education room. Next to it, on the ground floor, you catch a glimpse of the front door

the exception of the flooring which, for all practical purposes, features old-fashioned, black linoleum. "We were keen that the tone of the wood be similar to that of the stone. It's amazing how the two blend. This also saved substantial costs that would have otherwise gone into decorating the wood to suit the original structure," elaborates Alan.

What's truly fascinating though, are the reactions of patrons who feel that the stonework has been cleaned up since the installation. "The funny thing is that we haven't touched the original structure. The clarity and precision of the timber building

make the old structure look clean and new. It's really extraordinary," he exclaims. Ironically, the new structure makes the existing space look larger.

The brief for the lighting design was basic. The temporary exhibition area was kept void of all natural light. Here, a standard gallery track-lighting system can be customized to suit the type of exhibition that's running. The permanent space uses whatever natural light that seeps through the windows. This section was deliberately located at the west end of the church which received minimal sunlight, to protect the pieces from harsh UV rays. "The paintings have been displayed in the darkest corner. In the lighter section, we put the three-dimensional objects that are not affected by UV rays," says Alan. In the permanent exhibition space, light bulbs hang on a 1.5-meter grid. This grid is perpendicular to the church and offsets the otherwise irregular-shaped timber structure, which wraps itself along the circumference of the building.

The newly refurbished Garden Museum opened to the public in November 2008 and since, has only received bemused responses. As its supporters, Lambeth planners and English Heritage, rightly exult... it is a fine example of how contemporary architecture can successfully meld with historically-sensitive buildings. ●

## [factfile]

<b>Project</b>	Lambeth, South London
<b>Design team</b>	Eliza Dow, Alan Jones, James Grayley and Matt Wickham
<b>Structure</b>	Momentum Engineering (Richard Heath)
<b>Engineering consultants</b>	Buro Happold (Stephen Jolly)
<b>Quantity surveying practice</b>	Percot Hill (Malcolm Hill and Fred Brien)
<b>Lighting</b>	Mindover (Douglas James)
<b>Project duration</b>	13 months (competition to completion); 3 weeks (construction)
<b>Month of completion</b>	November 2008