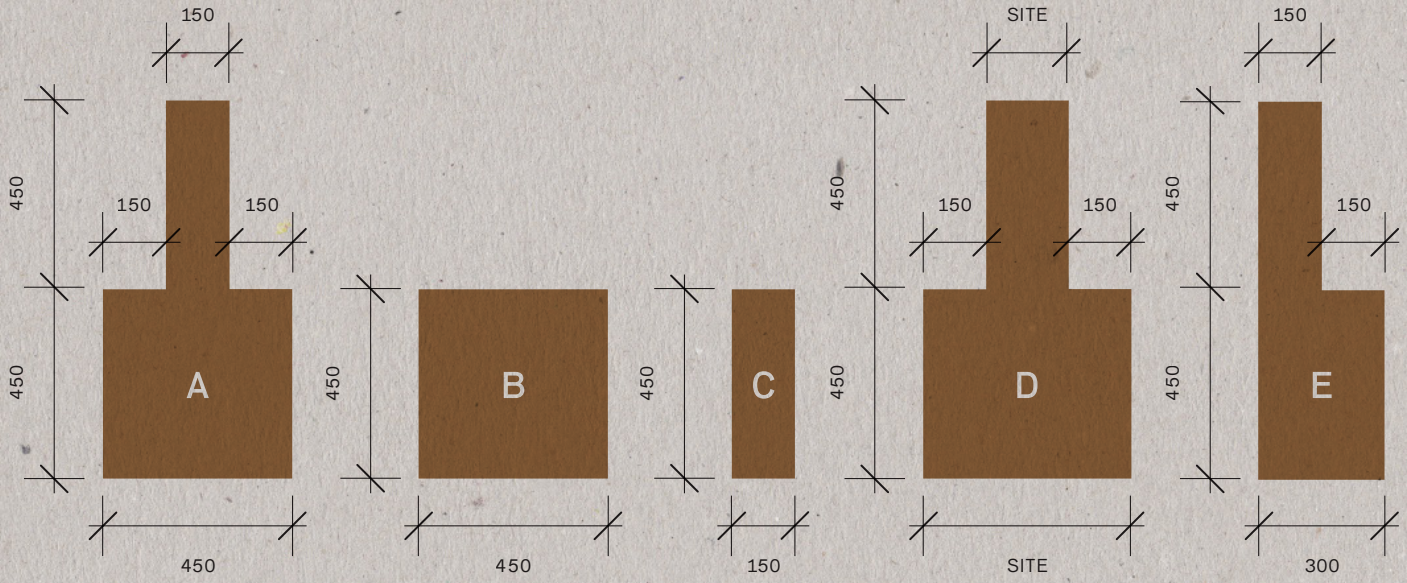
Building The Museum

Garden Museum Journal
No.34
Summer 2017



Building The Museum

Garden Museum Journal
No.34
Summer 2017

Foreword

Christopher Woodward
Director

This edition of the Museum's Journal explains the re-design of the Museum by Dow Jones Architects, as eighteen months of building work comes to an end.

We asked Ellis Woodman the writer and critic – and, since 2015, Director of the Architecture Foundation – to interview the architect, Alun Jones, who founded the practice with his wife Biba Dow in 2000. Ellis and Alun spent a day in their office, a former corner shop in a busy street a few minutes' walk from their home in Balham, piecing together the succession of models, sketches and materials samples illustrated in these pages.

We set ourselves the challenge of a major reconstruction project in 2011. The exhibitions and events which we'd begun in the spaces created by Dow Jones in a first phase of intervention in 2008 had created enough energy in the Museum to resolve to stay in its home, a redundant medieval and Victorian church in which John Tradescant, the gardener and collector, was buried in 1638.

There were three purposes to the project. We needed to fit into the church and churchyard the space to display the collection (with displays designed by GuM), set up the country's first archive of garden design, and be a place for schools, and other learning groups. Secondly, the church needed to be restored: aisles, Baptistery and Chancel were partitioned off as offices and stores – which have now been hoisted into a yard out of sight between the church and our neighbour, Lambeth Palace – and the windows were sealed with screens of corroded plastic. And modernised: there were was no heating, perfunctory lighting, just two loos – one, invariably 'Out of Order' – and limited access for people using wheelchairs. And, thirdly, we wished to open the building up to the city. The site is a haphazard triangle between the walls of Lambeth Palace, a river, and busy roads.

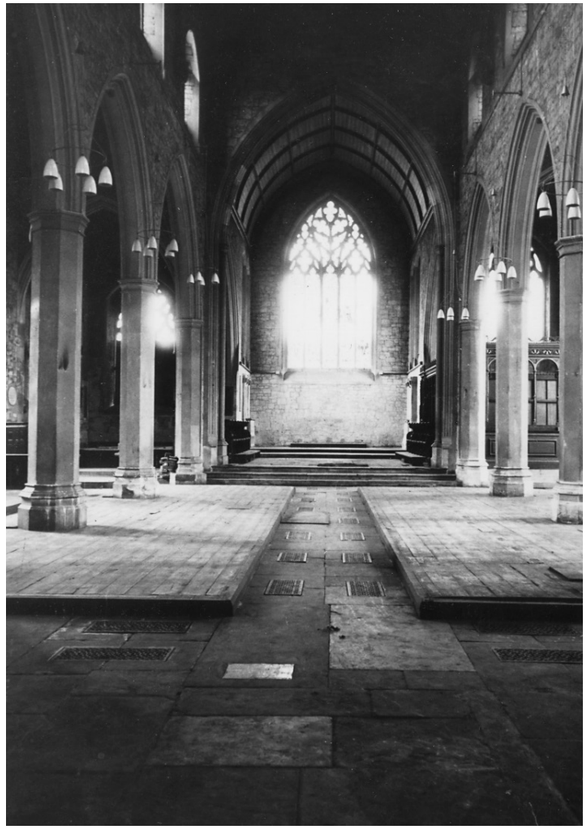
Alun's genuine interest in what the Museum does each day enabled him to sketch a way into the dialogue of how to prioritise the new spaces. What was most important: an archive study room, or a second gallery for temporary exhibitions? (Archive); a second learning space with a kitchen for community groups, or a lounge for Friends? (Learning). What is the minimum size for a café which will make a profit for a Museum which is an independent charity?

Making a building can sometimes seem like an endless succession of difficult choices. What should the extension be clad in? Stone (too heavy for a structure which must be built without piled foundations, to protect the burials – and too similar to the old). Brick? Too domestic. Wood? Fades too quickly. So, metal, but zinc, copper and bronze? Bronze, Alun argued, would age in a more variegated pattern, thus becoming part of the city. The bronze arrived from Sweden in gleaming spools but was cut and folded into tiles, its pattern echoing the fissured bark of the plane trees framed by the new windows.

So, choice making is broken by sudden leaps of the designer's imagination. Walking through the site as we are about to open what is striking is that not only does each new space carry its weight of purpose so elegantly but that the architects have found space without purpose: that is, space in which to just 'be', whether it is a ferny corner of the graveyard, a pause below a light well, or a bench on which to sit and watch the rain fall on the yellow leaves of new plants.

The extension as built has the form of a cloister, and visitors nod how apt this is. But that aptness was not our first intent, and one reason we have published this Journal is to record the twists and turns of the design process. We all judge what architects do, and a particular vice of architectural historians – of which I am one – is to speculate, in hindsight, on the causes of a design. We point to the blocked-up windows in a Georgian terrace and attribute this to Pitt's Window tax, but we do not, in fact, know what was once stood next door. Or I might tell you that the vaulted wing added to a country house in the early 19th century can be explained by a journey made by a young man to Italy, and the excavations in the Kingdom of Naples, after the Peace of 1815. But I cannot know, really, without eavesdropping on the conversations at the time.

I am grateful to Ellis, therefore, for giving up the time to give this insight into what we hope will be a happy and effective new Museum.



St Mary's Church at Lambeth, soon after de-consecration, being prepared for demolition, early 1970s

The Bronze Age

Alun Jones in conversation with Ellis Woodman

Ellis Woodman: For you and Biba, the project opening in May represents the culmination of a decade's engagement with this site. When you won the architectural competition to design a temporary exhibition space in the building back in 2008 the Museum had been operating for almost 40 years. In some ways, it was a very established institution but it would also be fair to say it was struggling on in less than ideal circumstances with extremely limited resources. What were your first impressions of the place?

Alun Jones: The first time we visited the building the exhibits were in cases on wheels that could be moved out of the nave in order that the museum could stage an event. It all looked rather Heath Robinson and insubstantial. The next time we went back we found five guys sitting in the café in jeans and leather jackets while a one day topiary class was taking place in the nave. The guys in the leather jackets turned out to be Kraftwerk on a photoshoot, and the coming together of these two things in this space, in

the heart of London, ostensibly under the banner of Garden Museum, seemed so exciting. So, even though the brief for the first competition asked for a 'pod' to put a temporary exhibition in, what we thought was far more important was the fact that there was a topiary class and Kraftwerk in the same space at the same time. The way we approached our initial design was to focus on the building's capacity to offer a public space in the middle of London that could accommodate this amazing variety of activities.

You described the original brief as asking for a 'pod', and one can think of many examples of recent interventions in historic structures that signal their autonomy from the surrounding structure, in pod-like terms. You have tried to make a more synthetic relationship between new and old.

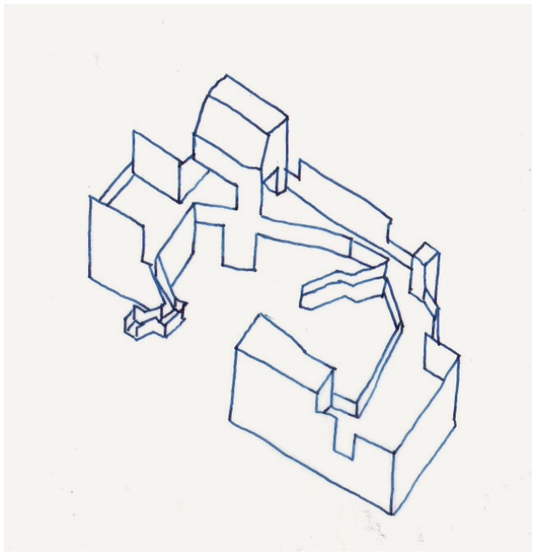
When we read the brief, our hearts sank when we encountered the word 'pod' in the third line. We thought, 'Oh, no, they're going to be looking for,' – what we describe as – 'a prawn on sticks.' But then we visited and met Christopher and saw all these activities going on and thought, 'Well, potentially they've used this word by mistake,' which turned out to be the case. Were you to literally introduce a pod into the nave you would have destroyed any capacity for the diverse public programme to take place, and you would have compromised their venue hire space, cutting off the museum's income.

Another fundamental decision which you took in 2008 and which has gone onto inform your subsequent interventions was the choice to build everything from cross-laminated timber (CLT). This material, which we might describe as a form of jumbo-scale plywood, had only recently become commercially available in the UK. What were its attractions?

Buried almost towards the end of the brief was a requirement that the temporary exhibition gallery had to meet the security and environmental criteria that would allow objects to be borrowed from other public institutions. We realised that in order to meet these criteria, whatever we built would need to be extremely robust, in fact so strong that you would be able to get on top of it. So suddenly we were able to gather up all of the permanent collection that was in the nave, and put it on top of this box. Thereby, we solved a number of problems in one go: we created the temporary gallery space, we opened up the nave for events, and we found a place to put the permanent collection. Also by allowing access to the top of the box, we created an experience that we thought of as like that offered by a belvedere within landscape design. By taking

Prefabrication: the installation of the cross-laminate timber structure for the first intervention, 2008

Building within a building: Antonello da Messina, *Saint Jerome In His Study*, 1475



Buildings within a building: sketch showing how the timber structure sits within the church, 2014

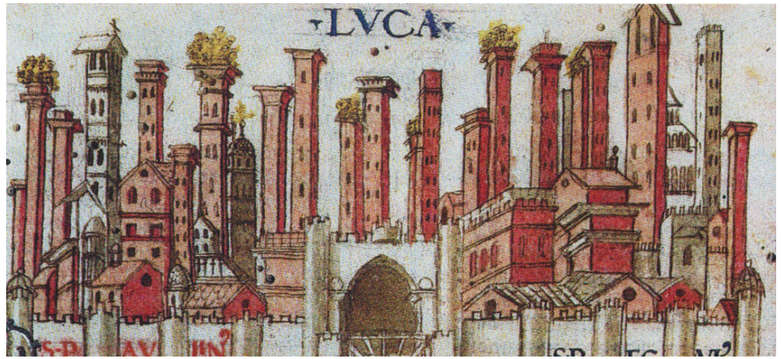
people upstairs, we brought them into contact with bits of the building they had never seen before – we introduced a new perspective onto the known landscape of this building.

The use of CLT also allowed you to almost entirely prefabricate the project. I think the budget for the first phase work was only £300,000 and you managed to build it in just 12 weeks. It's hard to imagine how you might have achieved all that with any other material.

Yes, I don't think you could have made it so quickly in another material. The high speed and low cost are both a product of prefabrication. We sent our computer drawings to the manufacturer who turned them into a cutting schedule. The panels all came on the lorry, numbered 1 to 276 and, starting in one corner, they proceeded to build it like a giant Lego structure.

Although you are using a material that is fundamentally mechanical in nature, the form of the intervention is actually very pliant. Rather than a formally perfect pod your structure accommodates itself to the rather wonky geometry of the existing building.

Exactly. We were thinking about Tuscan hill towns and the



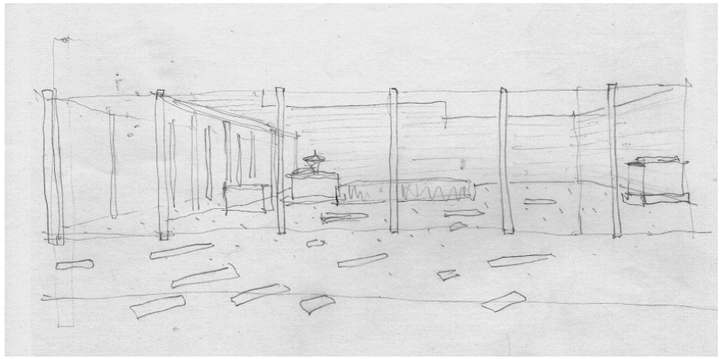
A city of towers within a wall: Lucca, mediaeval painting.

contingent nature of their architecture and public spaces. We were interested in making our building feel like it was contingent on what was there so that it set up a complex, consequential relationship between old and new. Had we placed a shiny patterned aluminium pod in the middle of the space there would be none of that ambiguity.

In your initial competition submission, you proposed a second phase of works which is of a remarkably similar form to what you have ended up building a decade later. Again, it is much harder to imagine how such a capacity for growth might have been left open if you had designed a pod.

With the first intervention we established a language that you could develop around the whole building and that is what we've gone on to do. We had an idea about the inside of the museum being like a city and that image has become more powerful in the completion of the interior. It has intensified the original position of thinking of the nave of the church as a public piazza and our building as the butchers and bakers that surround it.

As we have said, the work you have now realised in the church interior represents a fulfilment of the project you designed in 2008. However, the larger part of the project



Cloister garden and tombs: a sketch for the new garden space, 2015

takes the form of an extension ranged around a new garden designed by Dan Pearson. The lack of any external manifestation of its programme has always meant that the Garden Museum has been a somewhat secret institution. A key ambition in expanding must have been to provide it with a more public face.

Absolutely, it wasn't straightforward to find an architecture that would sit comfortably on an incredibly sensitive site and be sufficiently eye-catching so that when you go by on the bus you think: 'Wow, that's amazing. I've got to come back and have another look.'

Certainly, the contrast between the new and old architecture is more amplified in your extension than is the case with your work inside the church.

That is true, but the three linked pavilions that form the extension are really the product of the same compositional techniques that we use in inside. They are the brothers and sisters of the internal structure, but because they are outside we have covered them in the bronze tiles.

It is a very distinctive cladding treatment, with shades of some of Frank Gehry's early houses. Could you explain the

Metal scales: the sample panel of the different bronze and copper wall tiles, 2015

process by which you decided to opt for bronze?

It goes back to the need to find a material that would be sufficiently different to the adjacent stone, brickwork and trees to make the building stand out. We wanted something that was in the red end of the spectrum in order that it would be the opposite of the green of the trees. We looked at different sorts of patinated copper, and at brass and we finally selected bronze. When copper ages it goes to a dark chocolate colour and when brass ages it turns black/green, but when bronze ages it just looks like a duller version of what you see when it's new. At the moment it is shiny like a new two pence piece but eventually it will be the colour of a two pence piece that has been in your pocket for a couple of years. We like the idea that when the building opens it will make a big impact on the street, but then, as the institution beds down, the material will change, and it will all settle down together.

Initially we were looking at cladding the building in sheets that would successively narrow in width as they ascend the building. We thought of it as analogous to the plane trees; you have the trunk, branches, twigs, and leaves becoming more filigree. However, as we developed the design that approach started to seem clunky, so we changed to the taut skin of big tiles. There is still an idea that we are connecting to the plane trees although when you look at the bark of a plane tree it's made of different coloured plates that over-sail one another.

We've echoed that in the way we have pulled the tiles apart so you can see more of each tile. It looks more scaly and will give more variation in tonality.

Despite the introduction of the new pavilions, you have gone to a lot of effort to maintain an understanding that, the site remains a graveyard.

There are obvious sensitivities to do with making buildings within redundant churchyards, so from a very early stage our proposal to the planners and to English Heritage was that we would leave all of the ledger-stones exactly where they are, and very delicately put these three timber buildings on top. When you enter our buildings you will find that the exact same tombstones that were in the grass before are now sitting inside.

We achieved that by surveying, numbering and labelling every single tombstone. We lifted them all up, stored them carefully, made our building, and put them back exactly where they were, but incorporated them into the polished concrete floor. When you're in our building there's a very clear sense that the tombstones are drifting through the garden and they carry on drifting through our building.

One major sacrifice that the Museum had to reconcile itself to in proceeding with the project was the loss of the Knot Garden designed by Lady Salisbury. In your original plans, you proposed accommodating the extension in a two-storey structure, set against the road, which would have left the garden untouched. Could you explain why that scheme was abandoned?

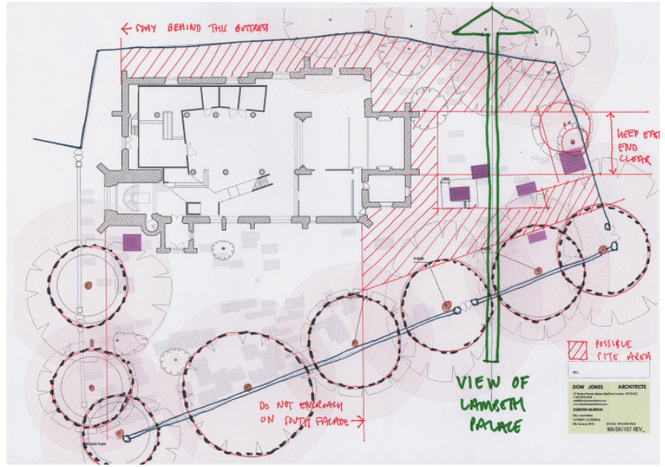
In the original two-storey scheme, the building was crowned by a long rooflight that aligned with the orientation of the church and sat amongst the canopy of the plane trees. The idea was to make a very visible demonstration

The two-storey pavilion in the garden: early montage of the initial concept, 2014

of the fact that something new goes on within this church. The building itself was going to be clad – as indeed it is now – in a shiny, bronzy, copper material. When we began consultation, it became clear that English Heritage, in particular, were uncomfortable with there being a two-storey building in this position, specifically because it would interrupt a view of Lambeth Palace. So in order to preserve this view we took the top storey off our building and put it in the garden. This obviously covered more of the garden but the statutory authorities were less concerned about this than the views of the buildings.

We made a series of drawings which drew out the parameters that were being imposed on us by English Heritage, by the planners and by the tree officer. We also faced constraints from English Heritage's Head of Human Remains because there are over 20,000 bodies on the site,

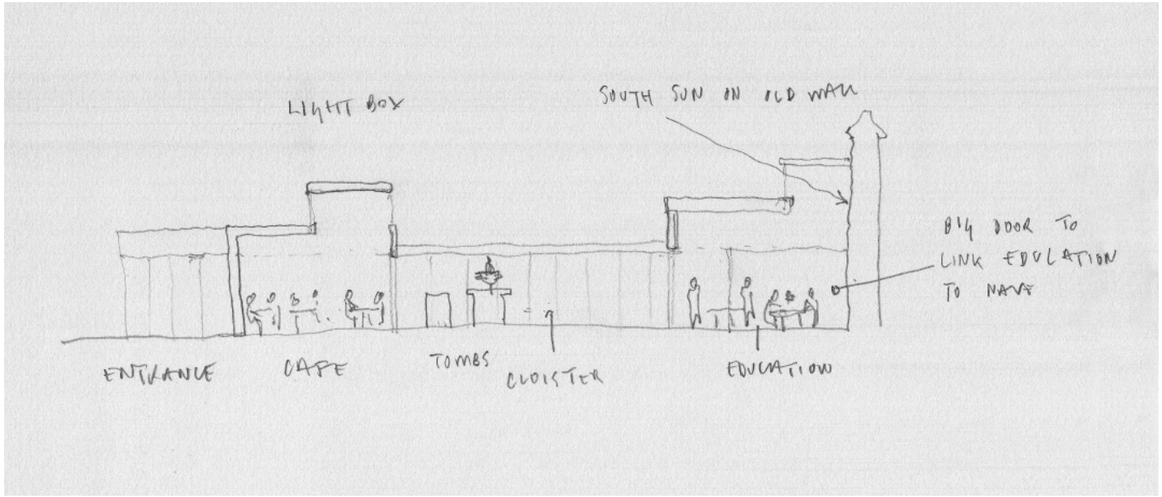
The constraints plan: diagram showing the possible areas of development within the churchyard, 2014



although fortunately, they start a metre below the ground.

So that gave us a three-dimensional matrix which extended below the surface of the earth, and was constrained in plan by the existing walls, tombs and trees. Cutting through it was a slice of space that maintained the view of Lambeth Palace. We drew this three-dimensional model and overlaid it with the programme and established where we could put things. Unfortunately, that meant it was necessary to build the education room on the site of the Knot Garden.

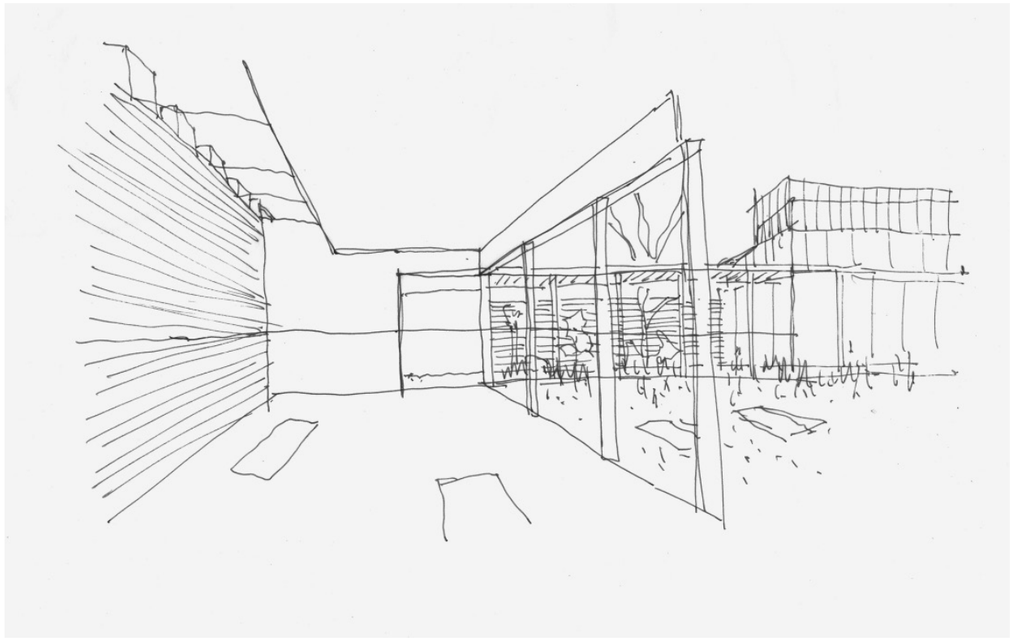
However, this has provided the opportunity for Dan Pearson to create a new garden on the site – an enclosed space that has been stocked with a selection of exotic plants and which your three pavilions effectively address. Could you explain how Dan has conceived of this space?



Form and light, sketch showing how the form of the pavilions could be used to bring light deep into the plan, 2014

Pavilions in a landscape: Vauxhall pleasure gardens, 1751

Connecting art and nature: Louisianna Art Gallery, Copenhagen, designed by Jørgen Bo and Wilhlem Wohlert in 1958



Education room: sketch showing how the fragments of the existing garden would be integrated into the new building, 2015

Study models: a 1:100 scale model to investigate form, a 1:20 scale model looking at detail, 2015

Computer-generated image by Forbes Massie, commissioned by the museum for publicity, looking at the garden space, 2015

Dan was asked to redesign the Knot Garden, but he came back with a more provocative approach based on the ethos of Tradescant and plant collecting. Tradescant was using plants no-one in Britain had seen before that he had collected from the four corners of the world. Dan's approach was to use niche varieties of more common plants that would encourage people to look more closely at the planting. I think it's a really good idea and a very powerful response to the loss of the Knot Garden because it is within the spirit of Tradescant.

A sense of the site as a patchwork of spaces is also supported by the quite different character of the area in front of the church.

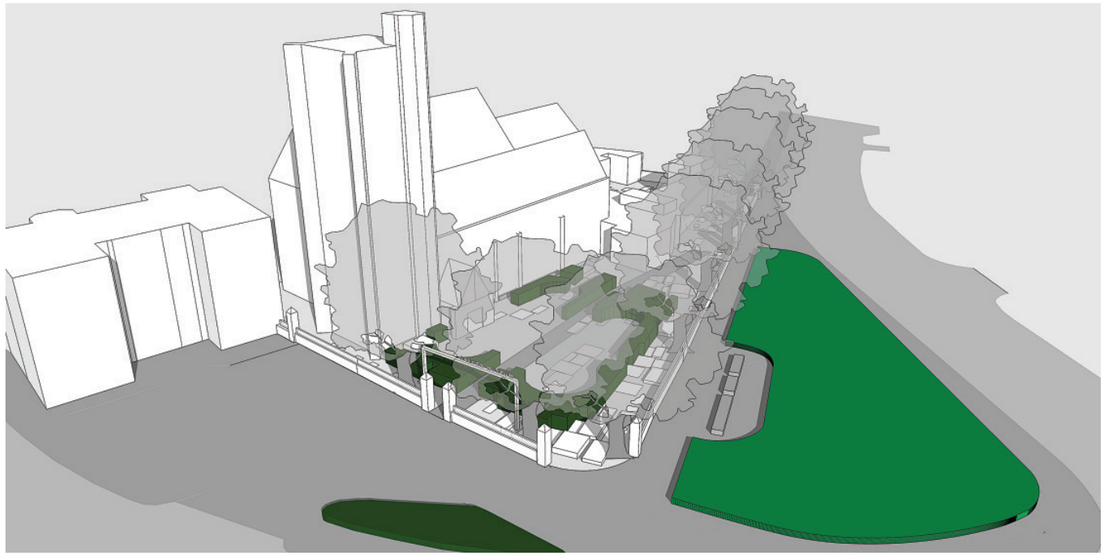
Yes, Christopher Bradley-Hole has designed the forecourt. He's making an intervention which is really a threshold between the city and the interior world of our project. Christopher's scheme is very much a transitional space — a rather Baroque space edged with yew hedges and with planting beyond. Dan's garden, by comparison, is more fecund.

Il think it's fair to say that had you been tasked with designing a Garden Museum from scratch there is no way you would have ended up with such an idiosyncratic arrangement of spaces. After ten years of working on the project, do you feel the challenge of making a Garden Museum in this most incongruous of locations has ultimately been a productive problem?

Oh absolutely. Of course, it doesn't make any sense that it's in the centre of London, that it's in an old church, that it's in a part of London which has no garden or green space. So, on so many levels it's a completely unlikely coming together of things. But I think that's what's so powerful about it. What we've been trying to do with the architecture is to make a place out of the improbability of it all and to make spaces where this wonderful idea of a Garden Museum can express itself. With the new exhibition spaces, the new education rooms, with Dan's garden, Christopher's garden, the café, the ark, the archive study room: all of these different things coalesces around a very powerful idea of the culture of gardens and garden design. It's the relationship between the improbability of the place and the potency of culture that is so amazing.

A cabinet of plants: sketch of the planting scheme for the cloister garden, Dan Pearson Studio, 2015

Cloister planting and construction works,
2017



Arrival space: concept drawing for the
forecourt landscape within the old churchyard,
Christopher Bradley-Hole, 2016

Afterword

Christopher Woodward

'I like it. But it needs a garden' said Dame Theresa Sackler, D.B.E., our pivotal supporter from the inception of the development project when we she saw the revised single-storey scheme. Alun and his project architect Joe Howland had parked the Transit van, carried the pieces of the huge model up the stairs, and assembled it on the carpet.

As Alun has explained to Ellis, this new configuration placed the Clore Learning Space on top of the knot garden. Trustees and designers debated relocating the knot garden to be the centrepiece of the new courtyard but it did not fit, and more deeply, we realised that it would become a mock-up of the garden it once was.

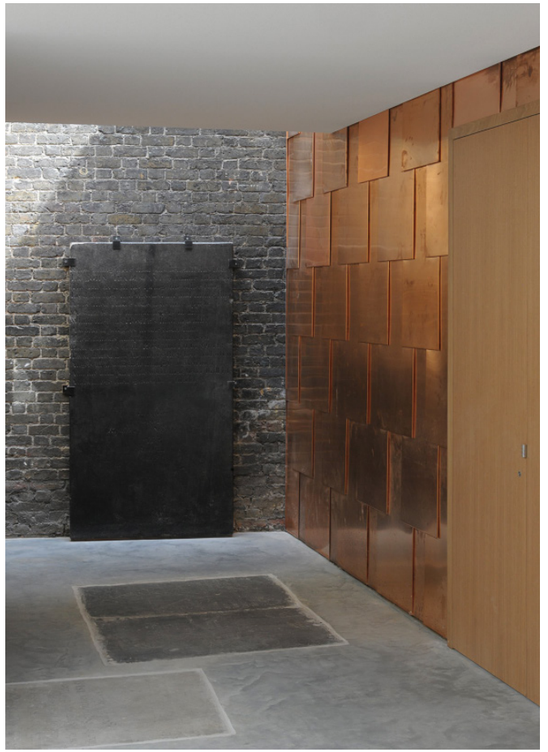
(The box hedges and plants have all been replanted in gardens and parks elsewhere, with the iconic spiral holly flourishing in a former volunteer's garden in Chesterfield).

Dan Pearson was commissioned to design the gardens to the extension, which is named The Sackler Garden. But The Sackler Garden is the garden and the buildings within it, as per Dow Jones's concept of construction within a wider landscape. It is planting design which takes centre stage. Climbers will grow up the columns, and the corridors will soon be succulent with pot plants.

Dan's concept is of a the glazed courtyard as a cabinet of rare plants, and for plants to be as unfamiliar, as 'curious', as the plants introduced to Londoners by the Tradescant 350 years ago. And how often do we just sit in silence, and look? What you have is a changing tapestry of leaves and stalks, woven together by one person's exceptional knowledge of how plants grow. As Georgia O'Keefe wrote, 'When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else. Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not'.

At the front of the site we have commissioned a very different garden: here, the challenge is the transition from the city to the Museum entrance, via the sloping, exposed forecourt of our neighbours Lambeth Palace. Christopher Bradley-Hole, in partnership with Brita von Schoenaich, has designed a sequence of yew hedges sculpted into a Baroque formality, with spaces between to sit, wait, and glance back at the city; the challenge is to change, in a few steps, that relationship with the noisy, fractious urban scene. This piazza formed by these shapes is a contrast to the first garden and thus, we hope, a talking point to visitors interested in garden design. (The yew is being planted right now but we are still fund-raising for the limestone paving).

The museum should be part of the city when you want to be part of the city, and an escape when you want to escape. Colin Ward, a hero of mine, was fond of quoting the architect W. R. Lethaby: 'It is a difficult world to be alive in! It makes one long for a sort of balcony to the world, so that one could go outside and get a breath of fresh air.'



Spaces structured by light: the Tradescant Ledger sits in a pool of daylight at the north end of the orangery, 2017

Lambeth Palace garden wall, the education room, the cloister and the garden make up this deeply layered space, 2017

Captain Bligh's tomb framed by the pavilions and the planting, 2017

Building within a building: the new and old structures intermingle, 2017

Gallery space at the first floor wraps around the nave, 2017

Building The Museum
Garden Museum Journal
No.34
Summer 2017

Editor: Elena Greer
Design: Ben Weaver Studio
Printed by Empress Litho

Images:
p8 courtesy National Gallery; pp9, 11, 13–16, 19–22, 27 © Dow Jones Architects; p24 © Dan Pearson Studio; p25 © Christopher Bradley-Hole; pp29–33 © David Grandorge

ISSN 1475–8431

Garden Museum
5 Lambeth Palace Road
London SE1 7LB
T 020 7401 8865
info@gardenmuseum.org.uk
gardenmuseum.org.uk

The Garden Museum is a Registered Charity No.1088221 and a Company Limited by Guarantee No.1413661. Registered in England and Wales. Registered Office: 5 Lambeth Palace Road, London SE1 7LB

The Garden Museum relies on the invaluable help of a large number of volunteers, and the Trustees are immensely grateful for all they do. For more information about becoming a volunteer, contact the museum at info@gardenmuseum.org.uk

Front and back cover: legend for the bronze tile cutting schedule that shows the standard tile (A), the corner tiles (F, G, H), edge infill pieces (B, C, E) and how site variance is accommodated (D)

GARDEN MUSEUM