THE ROYAL FINE ART COMMISSION TRUST

BUILDING BEAUTY

AWARDS 2024

PRESENTED BY
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE DUKE OF GLOUCESTER K.G., G.C.V.O.

GRAND WINNER + BUILDING WINNER

FAITH MUSEUM AT AUCKLAND PALACE, BISHOP AUCKLAND, COUNTY DURHAM

NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN ARCHITECTS FOR THE AUCKLAND PROJECT

Museum in local Cop Crag sandstone standing at the entrance to Auckland Palace, until recently the see house of the Bishops of Durham. The roof is supported by a network of delicate steel trusses, fully expressed in the single volume upper gallery.

This was a tough assignment. The building is no tucked-away appendage but a full-frontal advertisement, the first thing you see on entering the palace precinct from the market square. To do its immediate job – introducing a palace that was raised as a seat of power in a lawless land – the building itself needs to be powerful and authoritative, masculine yet refined. It is all these things. In the tradition of some of the old Royal Fine Art Commission Building of the Year Award winners, such as Michael Hopkins's Queen's Building at Emmanuel College in Cambridge, it enhances a sensitive historic context through a clever mix of deference and self-assertion, not merely respecting but adding to the inheritance: a beautifully crafted piece that over time, as the textured stone weathers and patinates, will fit seamlessly into the fabric in the manner of James Wyatt's work before it.

Outwardly its form calls to mind a mediaeval reliquary, but its exquisiteness comes not from applied ornament but from assured proportions and detailing. To borrow a phrase of Robert Byron's, 'there is no ornament, and none is needed. The proportions are enough...such classic perfection, so lyrical and yet so strong'. Byron was speaking of a twelfth century tower in Persia that he found wasting its sweetness on the desert air, but his words might just as well apply here. And the Faith Museum might just rival Inigo Jones's St. Paul's Covent Garden for the title of handsomest barn in England.

Such a building should leave one feeling that the architect has spent hours on site, working out a solution that plants his beautifying imprint on a rich palimpsest. That is precisely the effect here. And more than that, it lifts the entire town. The prime mover behind this much-needed shot of energy is Jonathan Ruffer, a secular Prince-Bishop for our times who arrived to save the Zurbarán paintings and stayed to save the town. His enlightened investment and patronage merit great praise.

PHOTO: NICK KANE

LITTLE GEM WINNER

WESTMINSTER CORONER'S COURT EXTENSION, HORSEFERRY ROAD, LONDON SW1

LYNCH ARCHITECTS FOR THE CITY OF WESTMINSTER AND HIS MAJESTY'S CORONER FOR INNER WEST LONDON

Extension to G.R.W. Wheeler's 1893 coroner's court, an exuberant essay in the Arts & Crafts idiom. The new building, in stone with oak-panelled interiors, contains a vaulted courtroom and family room adorned with stained glass windows designed by Sir Brian Clarke.

The business of this building is sombre. This is where the Grenfell inquests were held, where grieving families come to transact the bureaucracy of death, often tragic death. To be enveloped in a place of beauty in those circumstances is a kind of comfort and a kind of reassurance. The client and architect have troubled themselves to think deeply and seriously about how the trauma of that experience can be assuaged. The result is a dignified, contemplative space. From the fusion of art and architecture to the finely crafted interiors, to the calmness of the space, to the solidity and durability that speak of something eternal: all that effort stands as a consolation to the afflicted.

Extending a beautiful building is a challenge. Architects sometimes meet it with self-effacement, simply aiming to limit the damage. Here we have a higher ambition: to add something of beauty that lifts the whole. There is, happily, no attempt to ape the host building. We have, instead, creative dialogue from which has emerged a delicate companion piece, crisply and finely detailed; and clearly dated not just to the present century but to the present decade, just as the host building is firmly of the 1890s. The secular use of stained glass adds a spiritual dimension; Sir Brian Clarke's designs are as striking as Piper's or Chagall's.

In its form the building calls to mind a dome-topped jewellery casket, in its crisp plainness one of Lutyens's moving headstones to the fallen of the Great War, which spoke of equality in death. It takes chutzpah to present a plain, solid wall to the street, but this deceptively simple device lends the building solemnity as well as an inclusive neutrality.

PHOTO: RORY GAYLOR

PUBLIC SPACE WINNER

THE GRAND COURTYARD AND PAVILION AT THE OWO, LONDON SW1

DAEWHA KANG DESIGN FOR THE HINDUJA GROUP

Remodelling of the courtyard of the Edwardian War Office building in Whitehall as part of its conversion to a luxury hotel. A circular restaurant pavilion with a roof in mirror-polished metal sits opposite a smaller sculptural fountain; the two are linked by cobbles laid to the same geometric pattern as the pavilion roof.

We have done well with our public spaces in London in the last quarter century, wresting them from the palsied grip of the civil servants who for decades used them to park their cars. The Somerset House Courtyard and Horse Guards have been gloriously rescued from that dismal fate and are now among the finest public spaces in Europe. This is a miniature version of that same reversal.

It calls to mind that couplet from Gray's Elegy:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear.

Well this was a dark and unfathomed place, off-limits and largely invisible, imprisoned behind the iron gates and imposing façades of the old War Office, part of the parade of Portland stone ministries marching from Trafalgar Square to Parliament Square. The War Office interiors are exuberant, opulent, a riot of Edwardian baroque, made for diplomatic intrigue. Magnificently, in this *omphalos* of empire, the Hindujas have invested in recovering all that faded grandeur and in doing so have transformed a forlorn courtyard into a place of repose and delight. Intelligently, and sensitively, the cobbles have been reinstated and repatterned to form a herringbone motif. Set among them are two delicate, complementary gems: a circular pavilion and its mirror image, a reflective pool. It all remains discreet, like the hidden courtyard of a Parisian *hôtel*, but its discovery is all the more rewarding for that.

PHOTO: KYUNGSUB SHIN

ENGINEERING WINNER

COLNE VALLEY VIADUCT, SOUTH BUCKS / HILLINGDON

ALIGN JV (BOUYGUES TRAVAUX PUBLICS, SIR ROBERT MCALPINE AND VOLKERFITZ-PATRICK) WITH INGÉROP AND JACOBS (ENGINEERS) AND GRIMSHAW (ARCHITECTS) FOR HS2 LTD

Elevated section of the new HS2 high speed railway line linking London and Birmingham. At just over two miles, the longest railway bridge in the United Kingdom, taking that distinction from the Victorian Tay Bridge at Dundee.

This is a *tour de force*, a project of such scale and ambition that it attracts superlatives. We have at last built a longer railway viaduct than the Victorians.

What might we have expected here? A forest of pilotis, a legion of identical stilts marching across the land? It might also easily have been surface level, with all the damage that entails. The Royal Fine Art Commission, which spent a vast amount of time in the mid twentieth century trying to improve bridge design, used to divide the larger specimens into (ponderous) elephants and (sprightly) greyhounds. This is certainly the latter. For such a massive object it treads lightly and moves delicately – even the expansion joints are elegant, and the decking is poised on bearings. The concrete is varied in form and treatment, with smooth surfaces set off by gentle corrugation; the acoustic wings attached to the sides of the bridge are, appropriately, light and airy. There is nothing gratuitous or pedestrian here, no applied ornament. The ornament is the structure itself.

The result is a breathtaking composition, its drama enhanced by its curving form as it crosses the lake, the curve of the whole picking up the curves of the individual arches, and then each curve reflected in the water. The composition is full of such delicately expressive moments. But is also muscular; it sees scale, strength and power as things to be celebrated, not mitigated or tamed.

We need work as fine as this. When the Department of Transport, in the late twentieth century, went through several rueful editions of *The Design and Appearance of Bridges*, it all came across as an exercise in exasperation: an exhortation to do better rather than a set of examples to emulate. There are, indeed, few examples of aesthetically powerful post-war transport projects outside London. The Severn and Forth Bridges, the split-level Wynhol Viaduct on the M5 at Bristol, now half a century old. At last, in this viaduct, we can say with confidence that we have another.

PHOTO: ROBERT BARGERY

TROPHY

The Building Beauty Awards trophy, awarded to the grand winner, has been specially commissioned from acclaimed jewellery and silverware designer Theo Fennell, who has fashioned the awards logo from Portland stone, English oak and rhodium-plated metal and mounted it on a bespoke brick plinth with a Sterling Silver inscription plate.

JUDGES

Stephen Bayley Hon FRIBA, Chairman of The Royal Fine Art Commission Trust, is the person for whom the term 'design guru' was coined. This he accepted with self-deprecating irony. He was plucked by Terence Conran from the tedium of provincial academe to create The V&A Boilerhouse Project, which became London's most successful design gallery of the eighties, before the two of them created London's influential Design Museum.

Paul Finch OBE HonFRIBA is programme director of the World Architecture Festival, deputy chairman of the Royal Fine Art Commission Trust and the Design Council and former editor of the *Architectural Review* and *Architect's Journal.* He chaired the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment 2009-2011, having been a commissioner and deputy chairman 1999-2005.

Dame Anya Hindmarch is a British accessories designer, design and arts advocate and sustainability campaigner. She founded the brand that bears her name in London in 1987 and is currently working as its Creative Director and Chief Executive Officer. In 2024, she received a damehood in recognition of her contribution to the British fashion industry.

Professor Gerry McGovern OBE is Chief Creative Officer at Jaguar Land Rover, responsible for all aspects of visual communications and developing the current portfolio of JLR vehicles. Earlier in his career he was Senior Designer for Peugeot and rejuvenated the Lincoln-Mercury brands for Ford. In 2014 he was appointed a Visiting Professor at the Royal College of Art.

Mike Stiff founded Stiff + Trevillion Architects in the early 1980s, later running the studio's Berlin office. He has overview of design across the studio and works primarily on central London commercial projects, including Pavilion Road off Sloane Square for the Cadogan Estate and the comprehensive retrofit of the Arding & Hobbs building in Clapham Junction.

THE ROYAL FINE ART COMMISSION TRUST

The Building Beauty Awards were conceived and founded by the Royal Fine Art Commission Trust (registered charity 298201). The Trust was set up in 1987 as a complement to the Royal Fine Art Commission, the Government's independent adviser on matters affecting public amenity and aesthetics in England and Wales. Over the past four decades, it has sought to promote visual awareness and public appreciation of high-quality design, for example through educational initiatives and its Building of the Year Award, which ran until 2005. Today it promotes design excellence in architecture and the built environment through commentary on design matters, by undertaking or commissioning relevant research and by partnering projects where its involvement can add value.

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