THE ROYAL FINE ART COMMISSION TRUST

BUILDING BEAUTY AWARDS 2025

PRESENTED BY

Lord Rees of Ludlow O.M., F.R.S.

PHOTO: CRAIG AUCKLAND, FOTOHAUS

GRAND WINNER + LITTLE GEM WINNER

THE STORY OF EMILY, ST IVE, CORNWALL

STONEWOOD DESIGN FOR THE EMILY ESTATE / THE NEWT IN SOMERSET

Privately-funded museum documenting the life and work of Emily Hobhouse, who campaigned against the use of concentration camps in the Boer War. Together with the Victorian rectory, where Emily lived as a child, the new museum is the twin focus of an estate restored and reinvented by the South African investor Koos Bekker.

This is really a *collection* of gems. To the established ones – a fourteenth century church and a rectory newly furnished, to the last authentic detail, in High Victorian style – the architects have added a zinc-clad exhibition space and a series of ancillary buildings faced in Cornish slate. The cumulative effect in this evocative landscape is one of deep harmony.

Everything bears scrutiny, in fact looks even better on close inspection. To achieve that is expensive, and indeed money has been splashed. But that is no guarantee of tasteful results. Far more important is that every penny has been well-spent, delivering a series of exquisitely-crafted buildings that easily avoid the trap of mere showiness. Sometimes there is even a hint of austerity, as in the windowless exhibition hall, its only opening a slice in the zinc as if a can has been peeled open. It is all beautifully controlled.

Which is not to say there are no exuberant touches, even extravagant ones. The structural glass wall in the restaurant, a single pane measuring sixty-five feet by ten, is astonishing for its sheer *chutzpah* but also for the technical skill involved. This is the largest piece of glass in the world, overtaking the pane in the lobby of the Taikang Financial Tower in Peking. Merely transporting it from Germany, where it was made, was a feat. The result is an unobstructed view of the reborn walled garden. The edges between inside and outside are blurred and the gardens, seen on a typically misty, dripping Cornish day, become as much dreamscape as landscape.

It is not just the big things here that are beautiful. Attention to detail is also evident in the scalloped oak joinery in the shop, the South African yellowwood in the restaurant, the greenhouses and stone outbuildings; in the smallest spaces, such as the loos, that are easily abandoned to mediocrity; and in the absence of collateral junk, such as bossy signage and the messy impedimenta of the health and safety industry, that so often kills illusion. It is all lightly but purposefully curated from the moment of arrival, and one leaves enriched by a powerful sensory experience.

PHOTO: DAVID VALINSKY

BUILDING WINNER

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR HERITAGE CRAFT SKILLS, YORK MINSTER

TONKIN LIU ARCHITECTS FOR THE CHAPTER OF YORK

Workshops, training facilities and accommodation for apprentice stonemasons, on a site within the Minster precinct and abutting the city walls.

The setting is one of England's most venerable: within York's city walls, next to the Deanery, in direct line of sight from the Minster. The architects have risen to the challenge with a timber horseshoe set around a quadrangle. The effect is collegiate, apprentices and master craftsmen working together in productive communion.

The fine touches are plentiful. To the south, the clerestory windows give the apprentices a view of the Minster and reflect its Central Tower. To the north, they turn the city wall into a viewing gallery with a shifting cast of spectators, providing a direct visual link between apprentices and townsfolk. The apprentices' accommodation, akin to monks' cells, has delightful stable doors opening onto a communal garden. The serpentine rainwater run-off channels are functional but playful. Grass grows haphazardly between the setts in the courtyard.

There is a gently cloistered feel but this is a place of industry, a place for making beautiful things, for carving the stone that adorns the Minster and refining the skills that preserve it. The flight of manufacturing has left most city centres bereft of such places, but they contribute greatly to true urban vitality. As a training space and workplace, this centre of excellence is uplifting and inspiring; not shut away but connected to light, life and the historic city.

We expect architects to be thoughtful. It is a basic requirement. But it is still easy to sense when thought has been applied to the point where the architect's brow has been corrugated with the effort. And that sense is palpable here. It is an exceptional achievement on a modest budget.

PUBLIC SPACE WINNER

V&A EAST STOREHOUSE, LONDON E20

DILLER, SCOFIDIO + RENFRO FOR THE VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM

Publicly-accessible depository for the V&A's collections in storage, set within the Here East building in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. The items on display are spread over four floors, with a central rectangle cut out to form a grand hall.

It may be eccentric, contrarian even, to give this award to something indoors. But to our mind this is a genuine public space. Other places have in recent years been called 'London's living room', usually as a marketing gimmick or a sop to planners; the one at the top of the old City Hall was never known to host a single spontaneous visit from any ordinary Londoner. The Storehouse might, we feel, grow organically into the role and actually come to earn the title.

This is not a conventional museum where people come to study objects, nor a foyer where they gather as a prelude to business. It is a social space, a milling ground, a place for wandering and meandering that offers the prospect of serendipity. The central space, the Weston Collections Hall, is really a piazza, enticingly surrounded by galleries, and reached, in the manner of *piazze*, though a narrow passage. The sudden contrast is compelling, a piece of street theatre.

The galleries are hung with variegated borders – façade panels from the Smithsons' Robin Hood Gardens, everyday items such as a Brompton bicycle, and behind them a cast of exotic imports ranging from the Kauffman Office by Frank Lloyd Wright to the Agra Colonnade and a vast stage cloth by Picasso. All in all it is a sort of *hortus conclusus*, an enclosed garden, planted for decorative impact.

The absence of labelling has a magical effect. Relieved of the need to be laden with meaning, the items become pure aesthetic forms. The whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. In this way it differs from most museums, which are vessels for precious objects, curated by theme and chronology. This one has more the feel of a high-end bazaar, where the total experience trumps the specifics. It is a place for surprising juxtapositions and chance encounters. If it resembles any museum, it is probably the Soane. With its striking oblique views cutting through floors, it has something of the same Piranesian enchantment.

PHOTO: HUFTON + CROW

ENGINEERING WINNER

RAFTER WALK, CANADA DOCK, LONDON SE16

WHITBY WOOD (ENGINEERS), ASIF KHAN STUDIO (ARCHITECTS) AND TOWNSHEND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS FOR BRITISH LAND IN JOINT VENTURE WITH AUSTRALIAN-SUPER

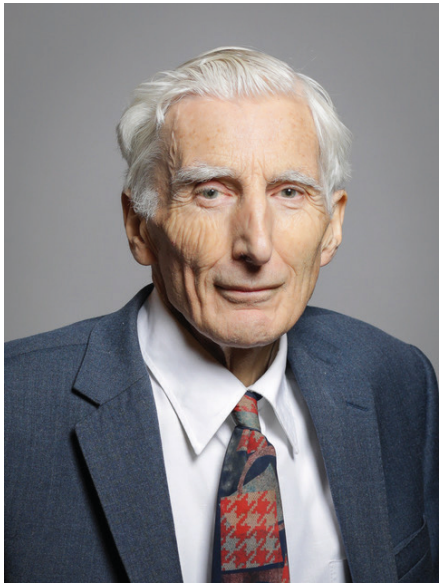
140ft hardwood and steel boardwalk skirting the western side of Canada Dock in Rotherhithe, with newly-formed wetlands filling the space between the bridge and the dock edge.

Our winner this year is not a leviathan in the manner of last year's HS2 railway viaduct. It is subtler but no less engaging. Its serpentine form calls to mind Hogarth's line of beauty, signifying liveliness and activity. It is, in fact, curved in section as well as plan. And the projecting transverse beams are also curved, giving a suggestion of the upturned eaves of a pagoda. As a composition, it is rewarding in multiple dimensions.

The bridge is cleverly designed but not over-engineered. It is mercifully free of the ostentation that sometimes mars such pieces. The simplicity allows the structure to speak for itself. Its drama comes from its elegant natural form, its striking Canada Red colour and from its historical allusions to the deal porters who used wooden gangways to bring timber ashore when Canada Dock was a centre of the London timber trade.

This is design as placemaker. The bridge is a bold opening step towards delivery of a decade-long dock masterplan intended to create two million square feet of mixed-use development across fifty acres. We are reminded not just of Hogarth but of Turner, who in 1832 added a dramatic splash of red to a seascape of his at the Royal Academy, prompting a put-out Constable to say: 'He has been here and fired a gun'. In a similar way, this dash of red at Canada Dock immediately gives a lift, providing a point of focus, interest and animation. But also, as Constable said, it is a marker laid down, a challenge, a catalyst, adding to the sense that something is happening with more to come.

PHOTO: LUKE HAYES



PRESENTER

Lord Rees of Ludlow O.M. F.R.S. is a cosmologist and astrophysicist who recently retired as Astronomer Royal after thirty years in post. He has also been President of the Royal Society and Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. Aside from his academic and research publications, he has written several books on the impact of science on the future of humanity, including *If Science is to Save Us*, *Our Final Hour* and *On the Future: Prospects for Humanity*. He co-founded the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk at the University of Cambridge.

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.

David Jenkins began his career as an architect before transferring his skills to writing and publishing, first at Phaidon and later at the Foster studio, where he set up an independent publishing unit. Most recently he founded Circa Press. He is a Trustee of the Norman Foster Foundation and a former Vice-President of the Architectural Association.

Emma Duncan writes a weekly column on economic and social policy at *The Times*, along with notebooks, essays and book reviews. She has previously been deputy editor of *The Economist,* where she edited its culture magazine *1843*, and a visiting fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford. She is the author of *Breaking the Curfew*, an examination of Pakistani politics and society.

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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