THE ROYAL FINE ART COMMISSION TRUST

BUILDING BEAUTY AWARDS 2026

PRESENTED BY VISCOUNT RIDLEY



GRAND WINNER / BUILDING WINNER

LIVERPOOL SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

O'DONNELL + TUOMEY ARCHITECTS FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

Three-storey, 32,000sq ft extension to Liverpool School of Architecture, built on a former car park and containing open-plan overlapping studios, virtual reality and digital design suites, collaborative workspaces, an exhibition area and workshops.

In the mid-nineties, three decades on from the Robbins Report and not long after John Major's expansionist education reforms, the Royal Fine Art Commission held a conference on design quality in university buildings. Lord Palumbo, then Chairman of the Arts Council and later our Chairman, quoted the reaction of Napoleon's troops on encountering Karnak: to a man they halted in awe, before breaking into applause and presenting arms.

That was the lofty ambition two centuries later: to use architecture to instil something of the same sense of wonder in students. A quixotic one, perhaps, but Schools of Architecture might at least be expected to lead by example. Too often they fail. Here at Liverpool, though, client and architect have understood the mission.

The extension is grafted onto the sober 1930s Leverhulme Building by Charles Reilly, which in turn links to the Georgian terrace of Abercromby Square: a fascinating linear sequence but a disparate one, with a scrappy and unresolved public realm. Courtesy of this building, and the new axial garden it borders, a certain logic is introduced to the flow of spaces. As if symbolising this, the stone cornice is conceived as a scarf, a unifying thread.

But the visual pyrotechnics really happen inside. This is the most strikingly Piranesian building in England since Westminster underground station by Michael Hopkins, as much about space and volume as mass and materiality. The materials are solid, heavy and big: smooth concrete and ribbed wooden trusses, monumental glulam beams fixed by steel ingots, flying staircases and balustrades in red oxide steel. All these are beautifully wrought and expertly marshalled to give a feeling of lightness, in spite of their weight. The play of light through the clerestories is almost ecclesiastical; so too is the uninterrrupted central space, in effect a nave from which the eye ascends to a richly-detailed roof. The haunch-headed columns around the perimeter are almost a stylised take on the Corinthian Order, with the wooden splays evoking the unfurled leaves of an acanthus. The effect is both modern and mediaeval, the product of machine and craftsman.

This virtuoso manipulation of space, soaring to a crescendo, comes close to the essence of architecture. Here it creates a series of compelling vantage points and gathering spaces, a feeling of perpetual motion and stillness, circulation and rest. The ground floor is a public forum; above it are galleries, balconies, cut-out floors, a connection through to the Reilly building, a glimpse of Lasdun's Sports Hall. And above all, perhaps, views across to Gibberd's Catholic Cathedral, setting up a dialogue between two numinous spaces.

PHOTO: NICK KANE

ENGINEERING WINNER



TRIANGLE BRIDGE, STRATFORD, LONDON E15

WILLIAM MATTHEWS ASSOCIATES (ARCHITECTS) AND EXPEDITION (STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS) FOR THE LONDON LEGACY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION / BALLYMORE

144ft single-span steel bridge spanning the Waterworks River on the edge of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, linking Pudding Mill with the Bridgewater Triangle development site.

Perfection is achieved not when nothing more can be added, but when nothing more can be taken away. So said Saint-Exupéry. It is a useful dictum to bear in mind. On balance, and contrary to received opinion, beauty is more likely to consist in simplicity than in the accretion of surface ornament.

This bridge, from the architects who won our inaugural Grand Prize in 2022 for their Tintagel bridge, illustrates the point. It does what it needs to do calmly, with a spare elegance. It is confident enough to avoid the meretricious. On one level it is a simple structure: a single-span weathering steel bridge with two triangular steel trusses, a composite steel-concrete deck and four high-strength steel hangers. But the details are nicely finessed. The trusses are positioned between the carriageway and the pedestrian side decks, which reduces the width and therefore the structure between the trusses. In turn that cuts material usage and embodied carbon, but it also adds drama and monumentality. And on a practical level, it clears the underside of the side decks for the carriage of district heating pipes and other services.

More particularly, the multiple use of the triangular form brings refined elegance. Within the main isosceles triangle - more or less a golden gnomon - there is another, formed by the steel hangers, that is acute enough to be close to a golden triangle. The two together form another pair of obtuse triangles. And then the upper chords, too, are pentagonal in section, with chamfered ends, a device that allows anti-social activity to be designed out without resort to ugly impedimenta such as bollards. It is a bridge, in other words, that repays attention without demanding it. And partly because of clever design choices that make it unnecessary, there is no intrusive signage to break the spell. Users are allowed to be intelligent.

It is a mature composition, made more so by the use of elegant bronze green: a uniform colour scheme that is tonally just right. In turn, it sets the tone for the planned new housing development, for the same client, on the six-acre Bridgewater Triangle site across the water. Here is a bridge that leads the way, both literally and figuratively.

PHOTO: HUFTON + CROW

PUBLIC SPACE WINNER



PHOTO: FRANCESCO RUSSO

NINE ELMS PARK AT THAMES CITY, LONDON SW8

GILLESPIES FOR EXCEL WINNER

2½ acre public park on former industrial land, the centrepiece of the new Thames City residential-led mixed-use development.

Anyone familiar with this area will know that it screamed post-industrial decline. It had its own *noirish* drama, perhaps even a grim appeal for those with a weakness for *nostalgie de la boue*. But its reclamation from a jumble of scrapyards and urban wasteland, heralded by this landscape project, has been a triumph.

It remains a work in progress – this is after all the largest regeneration zone in central London. But enough has been accomplished to call it a success. Our award celebrates the eastern section of what will be, when finished, a fourteen acre linear park stretching from Vauxhall to Battersea Power Station. The curtain-raiser at the Vauxhall end is the right mix of grandeur and intimacy: parkland trees in abundance, a great lawn sculpted as a natural amphitheatre, reed beds, a hanging garden, secluded corners for quiet reflection. This is no perfunctory delivery of planning gain but serious, robust work, with enough wildness and wetness to appeal to the romantic sensibility. We ourselves have left our imprint, in a small way. In collaboration with Ballymore, to mark the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, we planted nine elms nearby, allowing them to live once more in three dimensions, not just as an eponym.

The concept of an eco-corridor running through once-derelict, inaccessible land down to an old coal-fired power station is a compelling one. The traditional London green space is a self-contained, gated square; and although some of these (such as Grosvenor Square) are being shifted to less formal landscaping, they remain on the whole rigidly geometric. We tend to forget, though, how many of those formal spaces are informally linked by greenery: you can walk through green space all the way from Bayswater to Trafalgar Square. This snaking perambulation at Nine Elms is also a flowing route, one that carries echoes of the lost rivers that fed the Thames. There is already a maturity to it, and on completion it will give the west of London a version, albeit a smaller one, of the great landscaping interventions of the new century at Canary Wharf and Stratford.

LITTLE GEM WINNER



SHEEP FIELD BARN, HENRY MOORE STUDIOS & GARDENS, HERTFORDSHIRE

DSDHA FOR THE HENRY MOORE FOUNDATION

Remodelling and extension of an agricultural building used by Henry Moore for storage, to form a gallery, workshops and educational space.

Here again is a lesson that beauty lies not in showiness but in what Moore himself called ‘elegant frugality’. The architects have sensibly avoided a glitzy piece in favour of quiet rigour and a muted palette.

The result is a perfect foil for Moore’s powerful, muscular pieces. The building is rightly deferential. The roof pitch makes it seems almost to bow, and in profile gives something of the appearance of a grandstand. The effect is reinforced by the run of picture windows at ground floor level: these create a marked sense of transparency, of boundaries dissolved and landscape flowing through the building. From within, they offer expansive views of the pastoral setting, Moore’s static monoliths interspersed with the *tableau vivant* of grazing sheep.

The building wraps around an existing barn, doubling its footprint. But the result is still, happily, a barn - perhaps (to adapt Inigo Jones) the handsomest barn in Hertfordshire. With time it will meld further into the landscape. The wood cladding – silver spruce reclaimed from barns in Moore’s native Yorkshire – will patinate, as his massive bronzes do. There are echoes here of things worked and reworked, of sculpture as an iterative discipline and buildings as objects that are started but never finished.

In another conceptual sense, Sheep Field Barn offers an intriguing response to Moore, who experimented with pieces fitting together, the interlocking of similar units, one overlain on the other. David Sylvester, in his catalogue for Moore’s Tate exhibition in 1968, devotes a short essay to it, referencing pieces that suggest to him a coupling and intermingling, of separate pieces made inseparable. So it is here too: a lean-to cart shed tied to the steel frame of the host barn, done with a refinement and sense of style that Moore himself would surely have admired.

PHOTO: JIM STEPHENSON

PRESENTER

Viscount Ridley is an author and journalist specialising in science, the environment and economics. He worked for *The Economist* for nine years as science editor, Washington correspondent and American editor, and after inheriting his peerage sat on the House of Lords select committees for artificial intelligence and science & technology. Based in the North-East, he was founding chairman of the International Centre for Life in Newcastle, where he maintains a connection as Honorary President, and commissioned the Northumberlandia landform sculpture and country park at Cramlington. His publications include *The Origins of Virtue*, *Genome, The Evolution of Everything, How Innovation Works* and, most recently, *Birds, Sex and Beauty*. His TED talk *When Ideas have Sex* has been viewed nearly three million times.



PHOTO: GUY ACKERMANS

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 CBE 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.



Nargess Banks is a writer, editor and cultural strategist whose work spans contemporary art, design and visual culture. Trained in curatorial practice at the Royal College of Art, she is a senior contributor to Wallpaper*, writing on artists, designers, exhibitions and the ideas moving through contemporary art and design.



Albert Williamson-Taylor is a structural design engineer at AKT II, formerly Adams Kara Taylor. He has overseen projects in over fifty countries and has led the practice to over 400 design awards, including the Stirling Prize-winning Bloomberg European Headquarters in London and the demountable Seed Cathedral for Expo 2010 Shanghai.



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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