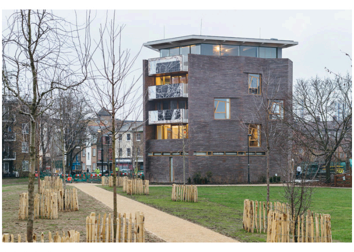
Vauxhall Viva

Deborah Saunt explores an idiosyncratic south London art gallery designed by Trevor Horne Architects

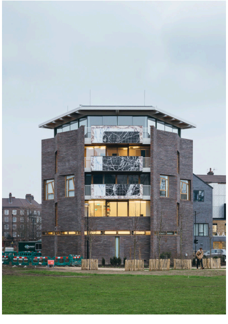


Words
Deborah Saunt
Photos
Tim Crocker

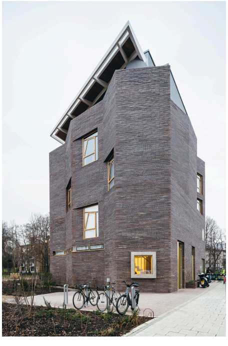
Vauxhall has long been a test-bed for new ideas. A stone's throw from Westminster, next to the Thames, but somehow hidden and on the 'wrong side of the tracks', it is a place where outsiders have shaped a covert piece of city, often in a spectacular collision of necessity and desire.

In the recent past it has been the place where both NGOs and MI6 have settled – close enough to the centre of institutional power yet sufficiently secluded to avoid assimilation. Distinct subcultures have also made use of its freedoms: the gay scene, the tranquil ex-squatted haven of Bonnington Square, raves in railway arches, and even London's biggest and busiest Sunday market, which takes place out of sight, evidenced only by the vast river of people disappearing through a wall encircling the out-of-hours New Covent Garden Market.

Vauxhall is best known for the pleasure garden, an exotic, privately-owned outdoor attraction that entertained visitors for 200 years until a Victorian railway viaduct imposed itself on the landscape. In place of urban conviviality came dirty industry and terraced housing. After the second world war, modernist planning swept away these streets, adding a vortex-like gyratory road system beneath the viaduct and – in a nod to the past – a bleak public open space called Spring Gardens, which boasted little activity except a ramshackle city farm, a brothel and the backsides of nightclubs facing onto Albert Embankment. For the next 50 years, little was built and Vauxhall's subcultures were left to thrive undisturbed.



How times have changed: tacky towers and the US embassy are rising in neighbouring Nine Elms; the unloved Spring Gardens has been renamed Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, and is now adorned with picnicking families rather than discarded needles; and a different type of creative community has moved into the area. Damien Hirst's private-yet-open-to-the-public Newport Street Gallery recently joined Vauxhall's 'cultural quarter' of non-profit grassroots galleries – such as Beaconsfield and Gasworks – occupying former industrial buildings and slowly reactivating the streets.

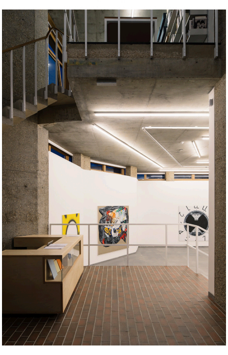


The latest addition to this growing scene is the off-beat Cabinet Gallery. It occupies a five-storey mixed-use new-build 'art silo' that stands alone in a corner of the Pleasure Gardens on the site of an old pub.

I meet the gallery's engaging architect, Trevor Horne, on a grey south London day, and his optimism is infectious. He has an enviable track-record of unshowy art spaces, working with artists and other extraordinary clients, often practising under the radar, both in terms of aesthetics and press coverage. Cabinet, however, has taken him into new territory, and a higher visibility that is well deserved.

Appointed by Charles Asprey, who funded the project and led it with the assistance of Cabinet founders Andrew Wheatley and Martin McGeown, Horne was given a rich brief to design a new home for the world-renowned gallery. Exhibition spaces are in the ground floor and basement, with three storeys of apartments above, topped with a panoramic events space for the client's use.

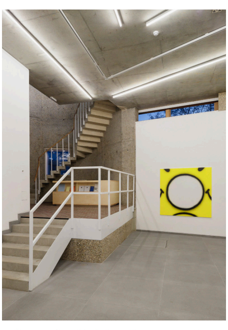
Cabinet is known for resisting the art scene's strict code of placing artworks in pure white boxes, and Asprey's brief also required the integration of work by three artists from the gallery's stable into the architecture.



The result is crystalised as a 12-sided dark brick form – irregular in a good way – capped with a bright white roof structure and contoured by an set of skewed oak windows dancing around each elevation. The building combines the rigour of a Peter Zumthor-esque brick form and the dynamic elevations of Enric Miralles' architecture.

It is set within a new planted garden by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, visible in the round. The gallery entrance is low-key, and sits anonymously next to the service doors and the residential entrance, which is identifiable as such from its array of mailboxes.

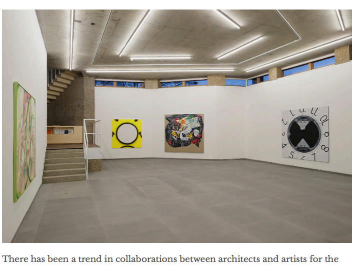
Asprey describes his original ambition to bring "layers of meaning" to the project, to make something that wasn't just a building, but a place where artists would be able to "put their personal mark" on the structure. He is clearly happy with the result. In what sounds like a potentially traumatic process, with "hundreds of meetings" to bring together such a broad range of ideas, Asprey says Horne triumphed to "rein in our ideas and make sense of it".



Artist Marc Camille Chaimowicz was selected to work on the windows, and their irregularity lends the character of a house in a Hans Christian Andersen fairytale – and refreshingly avoids the monotony that often results from stacking identical units in residential buildings.

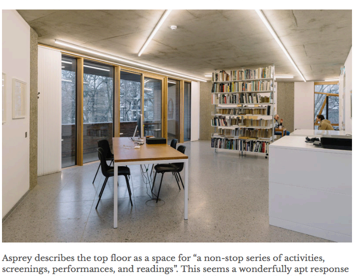
Lucy McKenzie's marble-effect trompe-l'oeil balconies create a distinctive billboard elevation towards the park, and present an interesting veil between the public and private space, reflecting the unusual condition of living above a park and being part of an art gallery.

A 'slot' carved into the wall of the gallery by conceptual artist John Knight is the third integrated artwork, but unless it had been pointed out, I wouldn't have recognised it as anything other than a slim vertical window, designed as part of the building's overall architectural composition.



There has been a trend in collaborations between architects and artists for the artwork to be completely integrated with the architecture, whereas here each of the interventions appears with a strong individual purpose, and is in some way disconnected from the assemblage of the building as a whole. My lasting impression is of a rather joyful curated conversation between different cultural interests.

Inside, the exhibition area is slightly submerged into the ground, irregularly-shaped and delights in breaking the rules followed by generic 'white cube' art spaces. In the circulation spaces, brutalised and beaten-up concrete walls have a bold roughness that is not aestheticised, but nevertheless has a dramatic effect. Asprey cites Denys Lasdun, Carlo Scarpa and the concrete of the Barbican as being among his influences, and here the building really comes alive.

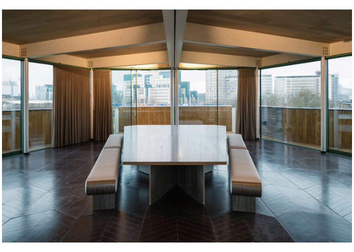


Asprey describes the top floor as a space for "a non-stop series of activities, screenings, performances, and readings". This seems a wonderfully apt response to a building based on the elaborate bandstands that once stood in the pleasure gardens, which were gaudy, provocative and sensual, mixing high and low culture.

In one important respect, however, the Cabinet Gallery will not continue this tradition: while the elevations to the park make an eye-catching contribution to the public realm, the gallery is only open to the public for relatively limited periods.

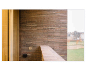
At other times, only the smallest of glimpses inside are allowed by John Knight's slot and a small aperture next to the door, and this represents a conundrum.

The building owes its prominent position to extensive negotiations between Asprey and the local planning authority over a swap of private and public land in order to carve out a more appropriate site for the gallery, which was originally relegated to a thin strip at the edge of the park. I can't help but wonder to what extent the transaction benefits the public, beyond helping to fund the new Cherry Tree Walk in the gardens. Perhaps the designation 'art gallery' – with its civic associations – prompted an assumption of greater public-ness.



Anecdotally, the quirky new building has charmed locals with its eccentric form and promiscuous mix of materials, yet it is also the cause of some confusion, as neighbours feel it might enable more access to new forms of art and culture. It would have been better if the building had been made more porous – both in terms of programme and architecture – as well as being extraordinary to look at.

Additional Images



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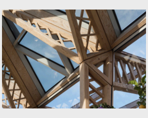
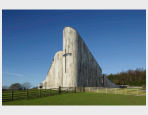


Maggie's at the Robert Parfett Building, Arnold Laver Gold Award 2016



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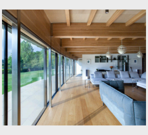

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