

May 2010

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY IN THE MAKING

Since the Turner Contemporary gallery is now over half way to completion it seems an appropriate moment to revisit the vision, design concept and execution, and to look forward as the gallery heads towards opening in 2011. We asked cultural heritage specialist Jason Wood to cast an independent eye on the history of the project since 2006.

From the first-floor windows of a grade II listed former casino there is an impressive panoramic view of Margate's seafront and coastline. The building, empty for eight years, is now completely refurbished and renamed Marine Studios. Rick Houghton and Kate Kneale, co-founders of HKD, an international award-winning museum design consultancy, relocated their business here, from north London, in November 2009. Importantly, Marine Studios is not just work space for a commercial operation but also a gallery and meeting room where people can come together to exchange ideas. From this prominent location, Marine Studios is ideally placed both geographically and conceptually between Margate's two flagship regeneration projects, Turner Contemporary and the proposed Dreamland heritage amusement park. Rick and Kate readily admit that they would not have moved to Margate but for Turner Contemporary and the cumulative opportunities to connect with the town's cultural heritage and future regeneration. 'We were attracted by the sense that something was being achieved,' explains Rick. 'It was apparent that there was a serious commitment to use culture as a driver in partnership with local people, which chimed perfectly with HKD's ethos as a professional company and with Kate and me personally.'

Such a strong affirmation will be justifiable music to the ears of those who have championed the prospect of Turner Contemporary becoming a catalyst for cultural and economic regeneration, attracting new investments, businesses and residents to the area, and putting Margate on the 'arts map' as a compelling destination and beguiling visitor experience. But vindication has been a long time coming. The idea of an art gallery celebrating the association between Margate and the artist J M W Turner was mooted as early as 1994 but has been fraught with difficulties and controversy ever since. The prestigious design competition was originally won by the architects Snøhetta + Spence but their ultimately unrealistic proposal had to be abandoned in February 2006 due to technical problems and escalating costs. The gallery presently being built, designed by the RIBA Stirling Prize-winning architect David Chipperfield, will open in 2011 for a total cost of £17.4 million, with funding from Kent County Council, Arts Council England, the South East England Development Agency and private donations. David Chipperfield Architects (DCA) was appointed in July 2006 and building work began on site in December 2008. Yet the previous scheme has tended to dominate media and other commentary and consequently overshadowed what has been achieved in the last four years in successfully realising the second iteration of the gallery.

It is March 2010 and the building is now a concrete shell. Already it is possible to appreciate from its simple layout with vast windows to the sea that the gallery is going to be stunningly beautiful. A beautiful building is what Victoria Pomery, Turner Contemporary Director since January 2002, wanted; but also, as she goes on to say, 'a welcoming, accessible and spacious building, both functional and efficient for a small arts organisation to run and a building that our visitors and our artists will enjoy being in.' The brief for the gallery called for inspiring architectural design that took maximum advantage of the outstanding seafront location especially the uninterrupted views out to sea and spectacular sunsets across the harbour and bay. Such a prominent and exposed position meant that the building would have to endure extensive physical conditions caused by high winds and high seas. The building would also have to be sensitive to the setting of two listed buildings – John Rennie and William Jessup's harbour arm of 1815 and Droit House, originally a customs building of 1812 but now converted as Turner Contemporary's short-term visitor centre and exhibition venue. The harbour arm and Droit House were both prominent features of the urban landscape in Turner's time, and the gallery itself occupies the same location as the lodging house in which Turner stayed whilst in Margate. The size and shape of the new building was another important consideration as the brief required a design that would help restore and strengthen the historical and physical relationship between the old town and the waterfront. There were site restrictions too in that continued operation of the adjacent RNLI lifeboat station had to be maintained. But as Victoria reiterates, 'it had to be a building that balanced architectural merit with function and flexibility as an exhibition space, and one that ideally made use of the legendary natural light.'

Selection of the new architect was to be made principally on track record and reputation. Mike Hill, Kent County Council Cabinet Member for Communities and chairman of the interview panel, is clear they were selecting a practice rather than a design. 'We asked for design concepts, not a worked-up proposal. We wanted to develop a design with the architect and involve local people, not get stuck with a fixed design we couldn't influence.' The selection process resulted in six practices being shortlisted with Victoria Pomery and two county council senior officers visiting all six before formal interviews in July 2006. The eventual decision to award the project to DCA was unanimous.

David Chipperfield's work has been described as a kind of refined austerity; an understated, thoughtful brand of modernism. His whole design career has been characterised by careful, sophisticated simplicity and an exercise in restraint. But there is nothing restrained about the way his buildings have been received as the practice continues to win plaudits and awards across Europe and beyond. A major Design Museum exhibition and a recent knighthood behind him, David Chipperfield is now regarded as one of the most influential architects of his generation. Established 25 years ago, with completed or current projects in Asia, North America, mainland Europe, Africa and increasingly in Britain, the practice has developed a strong international reputation for innovative museum and gallery designs. As an architect he is comfortable with both innovation and history. Refreshingly, he does not reject the importance of history and context as do some of his contemporaries. He

believes in rooting his work in place, memory and material qualities, responding to history and context and avoiding novelty and formulaic solutions. This is dramatically illustrated at the Neues Museum in Berlin, completed in 2009, where the juxtaposition of old and new has been described as a 'modern building inhabiting the ghost of an old one.' Importantly, in the case of Turner Contemporary, the practice is also renowned for buildings that occupy the 'frayed edge between land and sea', such as the America's Cup Building, Veles e Vents, in Valencia completed in 2006.

At the interview DCA stood out from the other five practices. The personal commitment David Chipperfield showed by attending the interview himself, his design ethos and the focused way he talked about the site, the land, the sea, the light and his general approach to buildings in waterfront locations gave the interview panel immediate confidence and made the decision a comparatively easy one. Tate Director Sir Nicholas Serota, a member of the panel, recalls the general approval of DCA's very simple and logical response to the brief. 'This was perhaps inevitable,' he thinks, 'given the failure of the complicated and illogical earlier scheme. This was something we felt was capable of being built, and capable of being built at a reasonable price. One could see immediately how the building would sit in that location and fit into the townscape.' Sir Nicholas was also impressed by David Chipperfield's close association with art and his ability to produce elegant gallery spaces. Victoria Pomery admits to it being a charismatic performance. 'With no design in mind David simply sketched out his initial ideas in front of the panel and invited an iterative design dialogue, which is just what we wanted.' Looking back on it, Mike Hill is certain they made the right choice. 'He maximised the virtues of the site and minimised the problems. And when he subsequently won the Stirling Prize in 2007, politically it couldn't have been better.'

But what attracted the practice to Turner Contemporary in the first place? Nick Hill, Associate Director at DCA, and Holger Mattes, Design Team Leader and Project Architect, explain. 'We bid principally because we were excited by the combination of the programme and the site, which we saw immediately to have enormous potential.' Having won the commission, the fundamentals of the site, the choices it implied, and the core design priorities and challenges were established relatively quickly. 'Our point of departure was trying to capture and celebrate the light and spectacular views. The emphasis on large, seaward-facing windows was there from the start, as was the ambition to work with the history of the site, recreating Turner's view from his original lodgings by modern means.' Poised as it is between land and sea, the threat of flooding was always going to be a particular challenge. In Margate, overtopping currently occurs an average of seven times per year. The next decade will be one of high-level tidal predictions and if these coincide with equinoctial gales the results may be devastating. So, very early on in the design process, it was recognised that the building would need to sit on a raised plinth. (The practice had been faced with similar flooding problems when designing the Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa, completed in 2005.) Dealing with public realm issues was also tricky to accommodate, especially the operational needs of the lifeboat station, which restricted the plan of the

building, and the need to integrate the old town character with the modernity of the new gallery.

Of course the simplicity of the final design belies a long and complicated process of both internal debate within the practice and discussions with the client group and local community. The architects produced a series of massing studies to help visualise the three-dimensional form of the building and importantly to get the balance right between a smaller footprint and a greater number of storeys or a larger footprint and a reduced height. There were experiments also with different access arrangements via ramps and stairs. At first this resulted in options of two, three and even five storeys; the taller block being swiftly rejected from a functional point of view. Although close contact was maintained between the architect and client group at a series of user workshops, the constant evolution and fluidity of the design initially made for slow progress. Mike Hill believes this was largely down to David Chipperfield's perfectionism. 'He's fiercely critical of his own work and needs to feel it's absolutely right.'

Despite these concerns, and some changes in the practice team, the design did move quickly through 2007. The early design ideas were first made public in February (RIBA Stage B) and dealt generally with massing, height and location issues. These were progressed to intermediate design (RIBA Stage C) in June when the location and essentials of the scheme were fixed and debate began to be focused on the height of the structure and nature of its roof. The proposed building at this time was three storeys high with a flat roof and balconies. It is fair to say this did not win universal approval. In particular, there was a general sense of unease among local people who were not happy with the roof design or the lighting arrangements. At the public meeting a voice in the audience shouted, 'What's this design got to do with Margate?' David Chipperfield took note and re-inspired by these comments went back to first principles and the reasons why Turner had come to Margate – namely his fascination with the natural light. As a result, massing and lighting arrangements were re-tested in a series of design exploration models to help visualise and optimise the organisation of public spaces in the building and the articulation of views and lighting. Another key factor at this juncture was the decision to de-dual Fort Hill, the carriageway separating the site from the old town. This ultimately had enormous benefits for the final design in determining the location and footprint of the building. It freed up land allowing the construction to be set back further into the cliff and stretched out along the site. And it created opportunities for better public realm works between the gallery and the town. The design finally fell into place at a public meeting in October (RIBA Stage D), with a revised two-storey and pitched roof solution maximising the use of natural light. David Chipperfield's closing words, 'Our building will look out to the sea, connect itself to the town and capture the same unique light that inspired Turner,' won him a standing ovation. The planning application was lodged in November, approved in February 2008, and the process moved smoothly to tender package. As well as the public meetings, a number of exhibitions and touring displays were mounted, and an innovative project involving a group of local young people helped to develop

elements of the design. In total over 8000 people were engaged in the consultation process.

The building, positioned on its plinth and laid out over two floors, comprises a cluster of six identical, interlocking, north-facing rectangular blocks with their repeating, monopitch roofs inclined inland. That much is clear from the form of the concrete walls and steel roof framework already in place. The architects' prospectus claims that, 'From the spacious naturally lit galleries to its opaque glass exterior, the building will absorb and reflect light to create a distinctive and inspirational building'. More detail is provided in the planning documentation. The suite of first-floor galleries will be lit by natural 'maritime light' from north-facing rooflights and smaller skylights in the sloping roofs. Supplementary electric lighting will be incorporated in the skylights. The daylight will provide more variation in colour, particularly at the beginning and end of each day, emphasising the link with the works of Turner. The electric lighting will be brought on gradually using a dimmer system. Large north-facing windows in the double-height entrance hall, ground-floor multifunctional space and first-floor learning studio will offer unrivalled views across the harbour and out to sea, capturing the ever-changing lighting conditions. The 'urban window' of the reception area, café and shop will provide visual integration with the town. The façade of inch-thick sheets of glass will give the building a texture and milky white appearance, and also emphasise the changing and dramatic light of the place. The threat of overtopping and potential additional load on the building narrowed the options for the choice of façade material and weight. After several tests a suitable glass and cladding system were selected, robust enough to resist storm and wind damage, deal with the different lighting conditions and remain unaffected by humidity and saline intrusion. Public realm works on the seaward side will be in keeping with the semi-industrial character of the harbour with basalt setts being chosen to harmonise with the existing hard landscaping of the harbour arm and Droit House areas. On the town side, simple tree planting will soften the area between the remaining single carriageway and the building.

The Kent firm R Durtnell and Sons won the build contract after a competitive tender which saw all tender returns from the shortlisted contractors come within budget. As well as being local, Durtnells' has a good track record of construction of this type and, according to Chris Gabriel, Senior Client Project Manager, who is overseeing the build process on behalf of the county council, the interface between the architect and contractor is working well. 'The contractor is a good communicator and is very committed and cooperative,' he says. 'They also credit the architect with having produced the best detailed drawings and specifications they have ever worked with.' Chris is reassured that Durtnell's have the capacity to meet the challenges ahead, even if it is a big project for them, especially in relation to the façade and the high-spec mechanical and electrical services engineering necessary to create the optimum environmental conditions. And, although the build is running a few weeks late due to bad weather, Chris is confident that all will be completed on time and on budget, and to the requisite quality and standards.

Turner Contemporary is seen as pivotal in the regeneration of Margate and symbolic of the change and progress being made in the resort. Given these ambitions, it is curious that little or no budget seems to have been set aside for vital masterplanning work to be undertaken at the time when the gallery was being designed. Turner Contemporary logically will help to reanimate a significant section of Margate's seafront whilst connecting the bay and the old town to regeneration sites stretching up Fort Hill to the Winter Gardens, Lido and beyond. Sir Nicholas Serota sees this as a missed opportunity and believed right from the start that DCA ought to have been commissioned to develop an innovative, holistic masterplan of the whole area. In the event the only masterplan produced was for the so-called Rendezvous Site, the area of flat land immediately adjacent to the gallery stretching east. This resulted in a mixed-use scheme comprising a 120-bed four-star hotel, 150 apartments and some commercial development that many considered added nothing to the visitor experience and, arguably, detracted from it by literally casting a shadow over the gallery. The original developer, Gleeson's, subsequently withdrew due to the economic downturn and work has now started on a revised masterplan with a wider remit. John Kampfner, Chair of the new Turner Contemporary Trust and renowned broadcaster, journalist and writer, is hopeful that this time any proposed development will be more in sympathy with the gallery. 'The Trust is extremely supportive and enthusiastic in principle about a build on the Rendezvous Site,' he explains. 'We always recognised that it would be developed to provide a revenue stream for the county council to recoup its investment in the gallery. What we are seeking to ensure is that the final plans will go some way to matching the beauty of the new building and add to the vista of Margate.'

The operating and marketing of Turner Contemporary passed on 1 April 2010 to John Kampfner's new Trust. It is an exciting new era for Victoria Pomeroy and her staff. 'There have been massive advantages of being in local government but it is now right and proper to be going into trust,' she says. 'It will allow us to become more entrepreneurial and to start building the necessary cultural infrastructure.' It fell to Project Manager Richard Morsley to set up the new organisation and transfer the local government responsibilities to the charitable trust and its associated trading arm. John Kampfner was appointed Chair after a rigorous selection process in 2008. John and Victoria's first task was to create a board from scratch; half being hand-picked, half appointed through interview. Its subsequent profile is a blend of international, national, regional and local experience. Plans are now underway to develop a much more proactive multi-media and marketing strategy well in advance of the gallery's opening. Margate continues to attract adverse criticism, ridicule and sometimes hostile prejudice in certain media circles. It will be a case, as John explains, 'of toning down the negative perspective and general atmospherics.'

Having said that, Turner Contemporary maintains a strong public face and relatively good media relations. This is largely because, for a number of years, it has been successfully developing an audience for visual arts in Margate and East Kent and, importantly, demonstrating an active commitment to engaging and working with the local community. The vision was always one of learning

and participation, reaching out to the community to reinvigorate a sense of local pride and identity and to enrich people's lives. Turner Contemporary was never intended to stand alone to live an entirely separate existence from the town. The gallery will be a learning space for everyone, encouraging, challenging and inspiring as wide an audience as possible. Since as early as 2001, Karen Eslea, Turner Contemporary Head of Learning, has been delivering a varied creative programme that has already nurtured an artistic community in Margate with its growing number of artist-led studio spaces. She has worked especially with teachers and artists in Kent to enhance the art curriculum for school children, while also engaging with adult learners and diverse groups of people including migrant communities. A particular target has been those people living in the most socially and economically deprived areas of Thanet who traditionally feel excluded from or indifferent to art and art galleries. For example, the Cultural Ambassadors project provides opportunities for people to find out more about the arts and benefit from and participate in the regeneration of their area. A five-year collaboration with the University for the Creative Arts at Canterbury has helped provide educational opportunities for young students, many of whom have been the first generation in their families to experience further and higher education. It is a programme that offers a model of good practice, spawning other partnerships and collaborations. Another aim has been to introduce art to older people. For some it has been an enabling, even life changing, experience encouraging them to go back to formal education. The *Time of Our Lives* project is a current example. This artist-led intergenerational programme will enable local people, young and old, to explore themes arising from their experiences of being a teenager, both now and in the past. It will result in a major exhibition entitled *Teenage* to be held in the new gallery in its opening year.

A precursor exhibition programme, comprising new commissions, artists in residence and other events linked to the audience development work, has necessarily had to find outlets elsewhere in the town. Droit House has provided a temporary venue and, until September 2009, a former Marks and Spencer building on the High Street, renamed Turner Contemporary Project Space, offered a different context in which to think about exhibition making. The programme for the new gallery is now taking shape with the first 18 months already planned. As the gallery will not have a permanent collection, the programme will comprise a series of three or four temporary exhibitions per year revolving around three core interlocking strands – loaned works by Turner; historic art (post 1750) to provide a context for the Turners; and contemporary work. 'There will always be a Turner presence,' insists Victoria Pomery. (With more than 100 of his works, including 30 large canvases, inspired by the Kentish coast, there are plenty to choose from.) 'But the emphasis, as it has been in recent years, will be on a strong contemporary programme.' She goes on, 'The trick will be to stretch the boundaries of current visual arts practice, to make the exhibitions sufficiently varied and to bridge the gap between the historical and contemporary.' Victoria is also keen to celebrate other artistic links with Margate and Kent and to develop partnerships around the UK and abroad, 'to bring the best here for dedicated local, national and international visitors'. John Kampfner is especially eager to exploit Margate's proximity to northern Europe and explore links with

collections of modern art in France and Germany for example. Sir Nicholas Serota agrees there is a great opportunity principally to champion contemporary and modern art. 'Turner Contemporary,' he says, 'promises to become an exciting new voice in Margate and the country's broader cultural landscape. Its programme will appeal to diverse audiences and will explore relationships between the art of the past and that of today.' Sir Nicholas is not just supportive of the project in a rhetorical way. He has been very hands on and very happy to facilitate behind the scenes as appropriate, and not only as regards being the prime source for loans from the Tate's Turner Bequest and contemporary collections. His new strategic partnership, Tate Connects, is a case in point. This initiative operates on two levels: the first being a cultural leadership programme; the second, still emerging, focuses on reciprocating research and curatorial knowledge. Victoria Pomery believes Tate Connects will make a real difference. Already well connected herself, having been previously Senior Curator at Tate Liverpool, she has been an early beneficiary of the initiative, calling on the Tate's technical and curatorial team for advice on various matters. Using Tate Connects, Sir Nicholas 'hopes to support and sustain many more galleries like Turner Contemporary, not through transplanting satellite galleries as in St Ives and Liverpool but through lending weight and expertise and harnessing local interest.'

Turner Contemporary is well on the way to becoming a major new facility for the visual arts in the south east. John Kampfner is of the opinion that there are three ingredients to guaranteeing this success. The first and second are under his control: the gallery will be a pleasurable building, and it will offer varied and exciting content. The third ingredient, ensuring the gallery contributes to the wider visitor experience, will require Turner Contemporary to develop an enticing tourism package. This, of course, will require sustained work, under the auspices of Visit Kent, and in partnership with others, notably the new Dreamland Trust and its complementary heritage attraction. The visitor experience in Margate still leaves a lot to be desired but for all the resort's economic and demographic problems, accentuated by the credit crunch, John remains resolutely upbeat about the project. 'Margate,' he enthusiastically claims, 'simply offers an astonishing location. It's what attracted Turner here in the first place. The problems of the past are over. There's a real sense of eager anticipation. All parts of the jigsaw are now in place.' Negative history and impressions may linger on the internet but there is now unequivocally a genuine feeling, as Rick Houghton described earlier, that something is indeed happening. Turner Contemporary's grey concrete walls will soon disappear behind a milky white glass façade. It will be another physical reminder of what is being achieved. It is this sense of achievement that is attracting organisations like HKD to Margate. And it is what continues to attract Victoria Pomery to simply stand and stare in amazement – even on her days off.

About the Author

An archaeologist and heritage consultant for over 30 years, Jason Wood has been Director of Heritage Consultancy Services since 1998. His previous posts have included Professor of Cultural Heritage at Leeds Metropolitan

University, Head of Heritage at WS Atkins Consultants Limited and Assistant Director of Lancaster University Archaeological Unit.

Jason has a special interest in the emerging fields of public history and heritage of sport and leisure, and the regeneration of seaside resorts in particular. His current projects include providing consultancy support to the Dreamland Heritage Amusement Park project in Margate and advising on the formative bid to achieve World Heritage Site status for Blackpool.

He currently serves on the executive committee of the British Society of Sports History and the international advisory board of the *Journal of Tourism History*.

Jason Wood

jwhcs@yahoo.co.uk