

Garden Museum review - hallowed ground for the green-fingered

In the former church where John Tradescant and son are buried, London's Garden Museum has grown into a distinctive new space



The Garden Museum courtyard has been reworked by landscape designers Christopher Bradley-Hole and Dan Pearson, with the tombs of John Tradescant the younger and elder in the centre. Photograph: Sin Bozkurt for The Garden Museum

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John Tradescant and his son John, the 17th-century naturalists, gardeners and travellers who among other things helped to introduce pineapples, Virginia creeper and plane trees to Britain, liked the un-alike. Their baroque version of science was not the white-coated subdivision and separation of everything from everything else. In the Ark, the cabinet of curiosities that they created by their home in Lambeth, south London - and which became the basis of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford - they brought together the natural, the artificial and the supernatural: carvings on cherry stones, seashells, the cradle of Henry VI, a stuffed crocodile, religious objects, talismans. This was more than whimsical mixology: it was a view of the world based on the connectedness of things.

They might then have appreciated the promiscuous fusions of the Garden Museum, which has grown up in the church and churchyard of St Mary-at-Lambeth, where they are both buried. Here the tombs of the dead mix with spaces for the living, vegetation with construction, Victorian-medieval stone gothic with the cross-laminated timber of contemporary exhibition spaces. It is layered vertically and horizontally, from the five archbishops found buried underneath to the reopened roof of the church tower, and from a noisy road through a quiet glazed cloister to the venerable boundary wall of its neighbour Lambeth Palace.



Dow Jones's work in the Garden Museum's main space. Photograph: David Grandorge

The Garden Museum owes its existence to Rosemary and John Nicholson, a determined couple of garden lovers and Tradescant fans who, discovering that the church was scheduled for demolition in the 1970s, campaigned for its rescue and conversion into a museum. Use and building made an odd couple, however - the current director, Christopher Woodward, recalls that everyone had to go home when it got too cold. Only now, with the completion of a 10-year project by the architects Alun Jones and Biba Dow, does it have the bespoke exhibition, education and event spaces, the cafe and well-appointed toilets needed not only for a modern museum to do its job, but to host the weddings and functions essential, in the absence of public funding, to pay for its running costs.

Dow Jones's work divides into two main parts: a timber construction that works its way into the aisles and end spaces of the church interior, while leaving the nave mostly open for public events; and the cloistered extension to its east end, in glass and large bronze tiles. Then, since there clearly needs to be some gardening in a Garden Museum, the landscape designers Dan Pearson and Christopher Bradley-Hole have been brought in. Pearson has planted the middle of the courtyard with unusual versions of familiar species, gathered with Tradescantian curiosity from round the world. Bradley-Hole has designed an entrance area in clipped yew, which is not yet complete.

Together, the architects and gardeners are creating a new tissue that inveigles itself between the stone tombs and existing planting, including nine protected plane trees. The simple diagram of church plus churchyard becomes a field where inside and outside and new and ancient overlap. Ledger stones – those flat graves covered in inscription – are interspersed with new and reclaimed paving. The Tradescants' own tomb, fabulous (in the true meaning of the word) with exotic and mythical scenes, pops up amid the Pearson planting, near to that, as it happens, of Captain Bligh, the one whose Bounty mutinied.

The elements act in sympathy, but keep their identity. The plain timber construction inside the church, which carries most of the exhibits on its (slightly crowded) upper deck, is, as Jones puts it, "robust enough to stand up to the church without having an argument with it". The external construction – forbidden from digging deep to avoid disturbing the dead or from going high so as not to block views of the palace – is palpably light. Its bronze cladding is intended to echo, subtly, the flaking trunks of the plane trees.



The cloistered extension to the museum's east end. Photograph: David Grandorge

It's a striking feature of the Garden Museum that, as Woodward says, it's "in the middle of more non-gardens than anywhere else"; that is to say, it's in an area of central London where a lot of people live in flats. A more obvious and easier location would have been an underused wing of some country house, or possibly a suburban park, both of which were considered before the renovation of the church started. It means that there's not much room to show actual gardens in addition to the engaging but not huge displays of such things as Britain's first watering can, packets of slug pellets, plans by great designers and, thanks to a generous loan from the Ashmolean, a reconstructed fragment of the Ark.

But Woodward wants the museum to do more than preach to already converted garden enthusiasts, and to be open to children who may never have seen an earthworm. He wants it to be a place of debate about the public spaces of the city, which makes the events space in the middle of the church important. He'd like to put ideas into practice by contributing to local parks, whose budgets have been hit by local authority spending cuts. The museum's building and gardens, nuanced, open, distinctive and responsive to its unusual setting, are a good start.

The Garden Museum, Lambeth Palace Road, London SE1

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