THE SPIRAL: EXTENSION TO THE VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

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The Spiral Extension to the Victoria & Albert Museum shares in the spirit of the twin inscriptions carved on Cromwell Tower Entrance, "Inspiration" and "Knowledge", and carries that message into the concrete space and content of the new extension. The building goes beyond the habitual division between programme and history, form and function, architecture and engineering, by offering new possibilities within the horizon of an evolving cultural and educational resource. The Spiral is not just another box filling an empty lot, but a celebration of public activities in a unique historical setting. The building represents a new awareness of the central role of contemporary museology, technology, arts and crafts, in sustaining tradition and education in a spectacular cultural setting, central not only to London, but to Europe as a whole.

VISION AND FORM

The Spiral Extension is an encounter of the enormous cultural legacy represented by the Museum, it is my belief that history is not something which has passed away, but is an ever-evolving and dynamic process, inscribing the present simultaneously into the future and the past. The trajectory of History, however, is not a straight line to be projected by technocrats without spirit, or sensualists without heart, but is a subtle, imaginative and contemporary trace embodying the fullness of a poetic heritage.

The Spiral Extension is not conceived as

an a priori form or a "ready-made" artefact imposed upon the site. It is not an architecture which imitates what already exists. The specific proportions, materials and spaces of the Spiral are the visible forms resonating and condensing the special quality and specific originality of the Victoria & Albert Museum. Some of the most innovative and far-seeing experiments in architecture, technology and craft were first applied and tested by the illustrious architects associated with the construction of the Museum. The Victoria & Albert was not conceived as a repository for objects or a container for passivity and nostalgia. It was conceived as a set of exemplary spaces and inspi-

V&A Museum model – main entrance and spiral. Model made 2002. Photograph: Andrew Putter 2002.

ring experiences involving the public through participation in the ever-evolving drama of art, education and their mutual significance for society and the future. These explicit cultural themes, expressed in the heterogeneous and endless variety of architecture, decoration and structure have been taken up in the Spiral and extended for the enjoyment of people of all ages and knowledge: a rapidly growing museum public. The present and future visitors will experience the contribution of this generation in the new millennium.

ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT

The Spiral opens an important public entrance on Exhibition Road by relieving the tight Victorian belt-perimeter giving access to a larger public. The Webb Screen, once a barrier to the old Boilerhouse site, is now repositioned. The Spiral integrates itself into the overall composition of the "city of towers unique in Europe" described by Henry Cole. By closely relating itself to the urban landscape and roofscape of Exhibition Road, the new Extension engages the public eye – not only with its shimmering, multifaceted exterior,

but through glimpses into the inner activities created by the modulation of its forms. The Spiral will have an important and memorable relation to the icons of the past dotting the vast Exhibition and Cromwell Road area.

Configured in terms of scale and history of the site, the Spiral maintains an intimate dialogue with the surrounding eaves and ridge lines, being accurately proportioned to the primary and secondary elements of the rich street and roofscape. The Spiral constitutes only 4% of the entire building mass of the V&A, an urban structure akin to a city containing more than seven miles of galleries and diverse buildings built across a century by different architects representing a plurality of architectural and cultural ideas.

Through a series of important, yet subtle, openings onto Exhibition Road the activity of the Museum will be made visible to the public on the street. The soffits and sky lights expose the geometry of the Spiral becoming the vitrines opening onto Exhibition Road, revealing spaces, objects and people. These openings and the discreetly shaped windows which provide glimpses of the surrounding historical context orient the public in space and time. Views from

Aerial View of V&A Museum model including Spiral. Model made 2002. Photograph: Andrew Putter 2002.

the Observatory and from the links offer spectacular panoramas over the immediate V&A roofscape, as well as distant and dramatic vistas over the city of London as a whole.

INTERNAL ORGANIZATION

The Spiral is a unique response to an innovative and important building programme of the V&A. The brief does not call for more traditional galleries, but rather for the construction of wholly new spaces for the twenty-first century. These activities, inspired by new technological, programmatic, spatial and functional requirements, will forge links be-

tween the Museum's creative and educational mission, engendering new levels of public understanding and participation. The shape and character of the Spiral is a synergistic linking of the internal requirements of the programme and the external iconography of the Exhibition Road area, offering new readings of the whole and of the part.

A simple and open structure of organisation permits the Spiral to be used in a flexible and independent manner vis-à-vis the galleries of the existing Museum. Lobbies, cafes, shops, restaurant, educational studios, resource centre and galleries, can function independently, day or evening, and together with the

76 Observatory at the very apex of the Spiral, constitute the celebration of the public in the building. Various innovative configurations of use can be planned outside of the normal museum hours. Fashion shows, school events, showcases for the design production industries, educational festivities, and programming possibilities unique to the Spiral constitute the intensive and imaginative heart of the new Extension.

Five centrifugally-distributed links emanate from the Spiral and connect it to the buildings adjacent to the extension. These links mediate between the different levels of the Henry Cole Wing, Webb Wing and Western Range bringing them to a common level and making them accessible from the Spiral. These connections give an entirely new array of routes through the whole of the V&A, multiple access to collections, and for the first time allow elderly and physically challenged visitors full access to existing galleries of the V&A. Thus visitors will have access to galleries which were not reachable before. Delicate bridges connect the Spiral to the old fabric offering a new appreciation of the historical facades by bringing the visitors close to the terracottas on the Henry Cole or next to the pilasters of the Webb Wing.

MATERIAL AND STRUCTURE

The Spiral is a unique structure. It is not a traditional spiral with a single centre and axis, but a contemporary spiral which opens a plurality of directions along many different trajectories, providing multiple routes, spaces and ambience for the visitors. The building utilises a simple, continuous, interlocking wall system to create and articulate functions, while offering an efficient and flexible struc-

ture requiring no supporting elements. The fluid spaces of the Spiral offer differing qualities, character and scale for the Museum's varied activities. The core of the building provides large uninterrupted spaces, while the periphery creates smaller demonstration theatres which communicate with the galleries and are washed by natural light. The wall geometries extend the floor plates into a fully three-dimensional experience, an entirely new set of possibilities for contemporary media presentations.

The external material of the wall is ceramic tile whose geometry forms a contemporary fractal pattern related to the Golden Section in dialogue with a grammar of ornament (Owen Jones). The pattern is integral to the wall structure, carrying within itself the structural logic of modulating scale and proportion within an endlessly fascinating surface. The off-white tone of the tiles lies mid-way between the cold greys of the Portland stone and the warm ivories on the Natural History Museum. The tiles are subtly graded and textured, giving the facade a shimmering life of its own and thematising the light through the contexts of the composition.

In its spatial form and handcrafted quality, the Spiral embodies the tradition and contemporaneity of the Victoria & Albert Museum. It carries the message of Inspiration and Knowledge into the everyday experience of the visitor. The construction of the Spiral will not only revitalise the V&A as a whole, but will create an exciting place in London: an emblem for communicating and connecting arts, crafts and architecture to the twenty-first century.

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