

The late American sculptor Donald Judd used to claim that the essential aspects of art are invisible. Naturally everyone can see the business around art and its material aspects, he would say, but in an age where we only appreciate objects that are picked up and sold, we don't see the qualities that make it art. Qualities such as surface, colour, form, space.

If Judd were alive today he would probably be quietly amused to learn that among four recently completed projects to receive funding from the RSA's Art for Architecture scheme, there is a building called Faith House. Designed by architect Tony Fretton, it is located in Holton Lee, Dorset and is considered by most architecture critics to have been among the best new British buildings of 2002. And it only cost £150,000. Given his views on society's blind materialism, Judd would probably have liked that too.

RSA Art for Architecture encourages collaborative ventures between artists and architects. Working on projects that the public can access, the Society offers grants of between £2,000 and £15,000. The money can only be used to cover the artist's fees (not materials), consequently the emphasis is on the process of collaboration rather than the final product, the aim being to improve the quality of the urban and rural environment.

#### **Faith House, Dorset**

Commissioned by a charitable trust, the building is a perfect blend of beauty and utility. It is dedicated to providing people (particularly those with disabilities) with a space where they can develop their spiritual and artistic potential. Fretton was asked to design something suitable

for holding meetings and exhibitions, with an additional space for quiet contemplation. And that, pretty much, is exactly what he gave them — two main rooms housed in a simple, yet elegant timber-framed structure.

While Faith House is a straightforward fulfilment of the charity's functional requirements, the building is also a response to its remote 350-acre setting and a symbolic articulation of the organisation's aims. Take, for example, the meditation space or "quiet room" as Fretton calls it. It is square-shaped and features a tower of cut tree trunks that stretches from floor to ceiling, serving both to confuse and contrast the differences between the natural world of the Dorset countryside and the man-made world of Fretton's architecture. The clever play of light blurs the line between the two areas even further, and standing outside some of the windows you can see straight through the building. Indeed, Faith House suggests that there are some people for whom the walls and floors of the building might as well not exist. It's a neat little representation of the state one might hope to reach after a process of meditation. If this is all starting to sound more like a work of art than a building, then Fretton points out that this is partly due to his collaboration with artist Diego Ferrari. "The scheme of the building had been established for a long time," he says, "but Diego made us have a greater sensitivity to how it would be emotionally affecting in the way that artworks are."

Ferrari's own art, often realised in the context of a specific architectural setting, focuses on his interest in space and the way in which people inhabit it. He works by exploring space, representing it and giving meaning to it.

# Leap of faith

the art of  
collaboration

New qualities of architecture and public space were brought to light as a result of artists' involvement in four building projects, supported by the RSA's Art for Architecture scheme

Words by Mark Rappolt

## Faith House

**Faith House in Holton Lee, Dorset is designed to give disabled people a space in which to develop their spiritual and artistic potential. Architect Tony Fretton collaborated with artist Diego Ferrari on the design of the building**



“The culmination of my installations, which are no more than spatial studies,” he explains, “is the physical and metaphoric effect of a view of the world beyond the immediately inhabited one.” These days Ferrari works mainly with photography, but it is easy to see why Fretton should have invited him to collaborate on Faith House.

Their partnership began as a series of discussions about the concept and use of the building. In terms of the finished structure, of course, this is an invisible process that is hard to quantify. The pair describe how they viewed the same material (the building and its relation to people, nature and the man-made world) with complementary sensibilities, but distinct and individual ways of working. The installation at Faith House seems to mirror that mix of unity and individuality completely. While Fretton’s architecture concentrates on the horizontal qualities of the site, Ferrari eventually focused on the vertical, producing a large-scale photograph featuring a view of the sky through a canopy of trees that is to be printed on Formica, and will shortly be attached to the ceiling. It’s a perfect match for the immaterial impact of Fretton’s architecture.

If working with an artist made Fretton become more conscious of the emotional impact of his buildings, then Ferrari relates how cooperating in the highly-organised and collaborative environment of an architect’s office changed his perceptions of how far the final form of an artwork might evolve from its initial idea. It also allowed him to produce a public work for an audience outside his normal circle of private collectors. Ultimately, to those who use it, Faith House hovers in an engaging territory acting as both medium and message. In architectural terms it’s totally scientific, but there’s a little superstition mixed in too.

HELEN BINET  
Ferrari and Fretton first met in 1993, when the artist was completing an MA and the architect was one of his external examiners. As a result of their mutual interests (mainly, according to Ferrari, the influence of “ideas of space

developed by minimal and conceptual artists”), they have stayed in touch ever since.

### **Museum of Childhood, east London**

On the other hand, when architects Adam Caruso and Peter St John decided that they needed an artist to help them on a project to refurbish the Museum of Childhood in London’s East End, they went out and looked for one. Having sought the advice of a number of people in the art world, they were introduced to Simon Moretti. “His personality, his work as an artist and as a curator and finally his involvement in education at the Whitechapel Gallery, convinced us that he was worth a try,” says Caruso. “I didn’t know much about them at the time,” Moretti confesses. It seems like a rather tentative beginning, but collaborations are about faith on all sorts of levels.

The Museum of Childhood is housed in what can only be described as a Frankenstein of a building. Its brick shell was newly constructed (though never fully completed) when the building opened in 1872, but the main prefabricated iron structure was a second-hand cast-off that had been custom-made in 1857 for a temporary building that incorporated an early version of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). These ragtag beginnings set the tone for the building’s use, and over the course of the next century it contained various bits of the V&A’s holdings, as well as an assortment of loans from private collections. It officially became the Museum of Childhood (a department of the V&A) in the mid-1970s. But by the end of the 20th century, it was plain to see that the building design was very ill-suited to its use. London-based Anglo-Canadian firm, Caruso St John Architects, who had won numerous architecture awards for The New Art Gallery Walsall near Birmingham, were asked to rethink the space of the Museum and its displays as the first stage of the larger refurbishment programme.

Beneath the heavy iron structure, of the kind that is more familiar in Victorian railway stations, you will find a vast space. And although it had featured a white interior since the early 1970s, the Museum would originally have had a polychrome colour scheme. According to Caruso, this would have worked with the space “so that there was a real intensity up close, but everything blended into a neutral tone at a distance”. It was an effect of intimacy and grandeur that he and St John wished to recreate.

Stripping off the top layer of paint, workers stumbled upon a previous colour scheme of bright orange and purple. Still, the architects must have been somewhat surprised when Moretti proposed that they paint the Museum various shades of pink — a colour he had first encountered while visiting royal palaces in Thailand. The results however are startling — in a good way. Standing by the entrance, you hardly notice the subtle grading of colour, instead you marvel at the intensified perspective of the building’s arched roof, now the perfect match to the Victorian patterned mosaic on the huge main floor. As you get close to the walls on the Museum’s top floor, you find that bands in various shades of pink break up the vast interior and allow for an intimate engagement with the objects on display. It seems to have come off just as the architects imagined, with the collaboration blending the contributions of art and architecture into a seamless whole.

Even though many of the exhibits are housed in Victorian glass cases, the Museum’s atmosphere remains open and engaging. The neat row of cabinets is broken up by areas marked out by brightly coloured carpet and soft furnishings (something that Moretti had previously experimented with for an installation at Tate Modern). Despite being aimed largely at children, the Museum of Childhood’s guidebook (a rather old-fashioned affair) boasts that it is “every inch a museum, not a funfair”. Moretti and Caruso St John’s collaboration seems to have found an unobtrusive path between seriousness and enjoyment that can allow the refurbished Museum (which re-opened earlier this year) to be a bit of both.

### Laban, south-east London

Colour was also a central concern for the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron when they set about designing a new home for the Laban dance school on a two-acre site in Deptford Creek. As was the case at the Museum of Childhood, the results of their collaboration see art and architecture blended into a seamlessly integrated whole. The Pritzker-Prize-winning architects are best known for transforming the Bankside Power Station into Tate Modern, but Laban (which opened earlier this year) is their first new building in London. Built at a cost of £22m, it is on a rather different scale to the other projects, but the collaboration funded by the RSA worked in similar ways.

In essence, the building is a huge shed (7,800 m<sup>2</sup> to be precise). But beneath its curving polycarbonate skin, it houses a network of 13 studios, a lecture hall, library, cafeteria and various other spaces clustered round a 300-seat dance theatre. The architects describe the arrangement as being like a miniature city, with streets, courtyards, squares and superb views. A combination of city and shed sounds a rather unpromising one initially, but in the building the two elements are dramatically united by the use of colour.



Herzog & de Meuron have collaborated with several artists during the course of their career, and for Laban they wanted to work with Michael Craig-Martin — a British-based artist with a very distinctive sense of colour. The architects had encountered him at Tate Modern, working with him to create the polycarbonate box that illuminates the top of the building’s chimney.

Like Judd, Craig-Martin has at times dealt with the invisibles of art. His 1973 work, *An Oak Tree*, consisted of a glass of water on a shelf that he claimed to have transformed into the tree of the title — you can’t get closer to superstition than that. More recently he has built an international reputation for his colourful paintings and drawings of everyday objects, a number of which were created for specific architectural settings. But when he talks about Laban, the artist is quick to point out that despite his renown, there was never an intention that he should produce a specific artwork for the building. Rather, he would use his experience of working with colour on an architectural scale to help Herzog & de Meuron achieve their goal. Although a giant Craig-Martin wall drawing now stretches around two walls of Laban’s theatre, generally speaking the finished building reflects those initial aims. The interior is dominated by three tapering corridors, each painted in one of his signature colours — magenta, bright green and turquoise. In the context of the urban interior, they work as a form of chromatic street signage, helping you to orient your way around the building.

The three colours also appear on the translucent polycarbonate façade (which allows glimpses of the centre’s internal activities) in tones that are more or less obvious



## Museum of Childhood

**Architects Adam Caruso and Peter St John chose to collaborate with the artist Simon Moretti in the refurbishment of the Museum of Childhood in London’s East End**

‘The architects must have been surprised when Moretti proposed that the Museum be painted various shades of pink’

## Laban

(Far right)  
The new home for the Laban dance school in Deptford, designed by Herzog & de Meuron

## Folkestone Library

(Right)  
Architect David Adjaye and Turner-Prize-winning artist Chris Ofili worked together on the refurbishment of the Folkestone Library in Kent



according to the light conditions. As a result, a trace of the building's interior is physically present outside. But while colour articulates a sense of movement and place within the fabric of the building, it also serves to communicate some of the less visible aspects of Laban's mission.

Unemployment in Deptford is twice the London average and Grinling Gibbons Ward, where the building is located, is in the bottom 10% of the most deprived wards in Britain. So, as is the case with almost every new arts development these days, Laban management and Lewisham Council are each hoping that the building will have a culture-led regenerative impact on the area, similar to that created by the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

During the day, the outer panelling allows natural light to flood through, bringing colour into the building. By night, the lighting in the active parts of the building projects that colour outward. In this way, the building and its surroundings seem to "breathe" together, following the movement of the sun and rotation of night and day, all of which, in terms of scale and physical presence, makes Laban one of Art for Architecture's biggest successes.

### The Folkestone Library, Kent

In some ways, the smallest of these recent projects has had the most intriguing long-term effect. The Folkestone Library is part of a purpose-built Victorian building, refurbished in 2002 by David Adjaye, the rising star of British architecture and Chris Ofili, a Turner-Prize-winning artist best known for the controversial use of elephant dung in his highly patterned paintings. Their renovation of the Library focused on a transformation of the entrance hall to create a more inviting and accessible public space. Unlike the other projects, the Library renovation was specified by the client as being a collaboration of art and architecture. Consequently, Adjaye and Ofili began their work together with a series of workshops to discuss how art and the

redesigned space might produce a more harmonious and welcoming environment. Adjaye talks about his total admiration for the extent to which Ofili is articulate about the visual world. Having originally been invited to work on a floor design, the artist drove the project towards a more dynamic approach. And this energy is certainly noticeable when you enter the building. Pass through the entrance of the Victorian façade and you are immediately confronted by a translucent glass screen, painted with one of Ofili's characteristic swirling motifs. The screen blocks off the lobby area and guides visitors either left to the reception area or right to the cafe. Inside, the building has been stripped down and fitted with a raw wood panelling that creates a sensual and vibrant modern feel that, nevertheless, is not out of keeping with the Library's historic nature.

As the Folkestone Library neared completion, the pair also took their collaboration into an art gallery. Adjaye constructed a chapel-like space to accommodate 13 Ofili paintings — a version of *The Last Supper* populated by monkeys — for a critically acclaimed exhibition at the Victoria Miro Gallery in London, entitled *Freedom One Day*. This June the pair teamed up once again, with Adjaye designing the installation of Ofili's work for the British Pavilion at the *Venice Biennale 2003*, demonstrating that the potential for art and architecture collaborations is not limited to the space of single architectural projects.

What all the collaborations have in common is that they help to break down some of art's superstitious mystique. Some time ago, Tony Fretton introduced a catalogue of his works by stating his belief that "buildings are one great area where the mutuality and interdependence which exist at the root of society can be made visible". In many ways, that's what Art for Architecture is all about. ■

*Mark Rappolt is editor of AA Files and contributing editor to Tate Magazine*