

Subject: Wolverhampton Art Gallery [exhibition review]
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Source: *Museums Journal*, vol. 107, no. 6, 2007, pp. 38-39
Note: This is the pre-print version prior to being edited by the journal

Arguably the two most important aspects of any museum are the quality of its collection and the calibre of its staff. Wolverhampton Art Gallery (hereafter WAG) are fortunate enough to be well served in both areas. Take, for example, their excellent array of 18th century art, inventively hung in the Georgian Gallery. This is one of the best examples of Fine Art interpretation I have seen. The layered information is accessible to a wide audience whilst the five innovatively designed interactives mean that the hang caters for both families and connoisseurs alike. There are plans to redisplay the Victorian Gallery along similar lines. Even now its wonderfully rich wallpaper contextualises the works and ensures that a visit to WAG is a truly aesthetic experience. This is to the credit of the curatorial staff, whose talents are matched by the warm, friendly enthusiasm of the front of house team.

So it is satisfying to report that WAG has recently acquired 376m² of new space thanks to a £6.7m extension. This is the latest chapter in a story that began in 1884, the year in which the museum opened thanks to the generosity of local industrialist Philip Horsman. The adjacent School of Art was incorporated into the museum to mark its centenary. And it is the space in between these two buildings that has now been filled. Instead of an undignified 'back yard' there is now an arrestingly modern structure plus a neat courtyard linking the museum to the Makers Dozen Studios. The view from Wulfruna Street is an impressive one: the angular mix of terracotta, glass and steel manages to both differ from, and harmonise with, the attractive red brick of the old arts school. This testifies to the fact that the designer of the new building – Bristol-based Niall Phillips Architects – specialise in producing solutions for historically sensitive areas (another example being the new Museum of English Rural Life).

WAG's extension increases the provision for education, adds function and meeting rooms and, most importantly, provides additional gallery space. This will house not only touring exhibitions but also WAG's outstanding collection of Pop art – a legacy of the farsightedness of its first curator, David Rogers. This, plus the unique 'Northern Ireland Collection', means that WAG's holdings, whilst eclectic, are coherent and have strength in depth. This promises to continue: the Northern Ireland Collection, begun in the 1980s, has recently been supplemented to include powerful works such as Rita Duffy's *Veil* (2002), formed out of six cell doors from an abandoned women's prison in Armagh. Both it and other works on a similar theme are on display in the old part of the building (ends 1 January 2008).

Meanwhile, on the ground floor of the new extension can be seen *Pin Up: Pop Art and Popular Culture* (until August 2007). The museum's excellent collection, enhanced by loans, looks striking in the icy blue, music-filled gallery. London design group Airside were commissioned to provide the seating and arrange the computer interactives. The latter builds on an oral history project conducted in 2005 in collaboration with the University of Wolverhampton. This very sensibly gives the exhibition a local flavour and relevance. My visit to the gallery coincided

with a fieldtrip by pupils of Wolverhampton Grammar School; they seemed to thoroughly enjoy both the art and the interactives, including the chance to try on 1960s style clothes.

Pin Up is the first of four themed hangs to be organised over the next two years. These aim to give a more nuanced account of Pop instead of the standard 'whole story' approach. WAG curator, Jane Bigham told me with a smile that, after struggling with the first display, she now understands why previous curators have opted for an overview. Another challenge she faced was the awkward shape of the gallery, which the museum itself concedes is 'unusual'. The triangular gallery, as the name suggests, is just that. This is partly a consequence of the restricted plot – and partly because, rather than an unremarkable extension, the museum opted instead for a 'landmark' building. This clearly took precedence over curatorial considerations. Spectacular though it is, the angular space is far from ideal from a curator's point of view. It will surely suit some exhibitions more than others: Korean artist Choi Jeong Hwa's site-specific Pop-inspired show (23 June – 1 September 2007) is likely to look fantastic, not least when the lighting underneath the atrium's suspended walkway is illuminated, bathing the main foyer in changing colours.

Until then, however, the museum needs to think hard how to make best use of the space. One thing that can obviously be improved is signage. The sort of pared-down minimalism suitable for an architectural journal seldom meets the needs of a museum visitor struggling to navigate a building. Another thing that warrants attention is the linkage between the old and new parts of the museum. From my observations it would appear that the dark wooden doors on the ground floor form a barrier, confusing visitors as to where they should and should not go.

Entrances are clearly problematic. In places the doors appear too heavy for their hinges, with signs asking visitors to 'open doors gently'. There is a more serious predicament at the new entrance. At night this is closed off by a large, folding metal screen. Unfortunately, faulty construction has prevented this from opening fully, leaving just a narrow, unappealing gap to slip through. It is strangely reminiscent of Rita Duffy's *Veil* and is far from the bold welcome envisaged by the museum. Even when this is rectified there will still be a problem. The large window wall of the new façade has had to be screened off to allow more room to hang the Pop art collection. This is a far cry from the airy, open structure implied by the architectural model on display in the museum. It threatens to turn the extension into an underused back entrance rather than its much vaunted '21st century face'. Another criticism is the flight of steps leading to the concealed doorway. This was a missed opportunity to provide a fully accessible entrance – meaning less able visitors must continue to use the side door off St Peter's Gardens.

The overriding objective for the new façade is to connect the museum with the institution situated directly across the road. The triangular gallery literally points to the main building of Wolverhampton University. WAG will need to convert these students into repeat visitors given that its target number for 2007-08 is 190,000 – an increase of some 32% on 2004. It deserves to achieve or better this goal. Corinne Miller, head of Wolverhampton Arts + Museums, is on record as saying that WAG sustains 'the original vision of the [museum's] founding fathers who believed that art can change peoples' lives'. Given the quality of both its staff and

collections this seems justified, even if she really ought to have gone on to point out that this transformation in our lives can only take place from Monday to Saturday. For some inexplicable reason the whole place is shut on Sundays.

Facts

Wolverhampton Art Gallery triangular gallery extension

Inaugurated: 31 March 2007

Cost: £6.7 million

Area: 376m²

Architect: Niall Phillips Architects Ltd

Building contractor: William Sapcote & Sons

Funding: Heritage Lottery Fund (£4.95m); Advantage West Midlands and Wolverhampton City Council (£1.7m).