

## arts

# Inside OUT

The Orangery café, Great Ormond Street Hospital's new extension, blurs the boundary between interior and exterior. **Jay Merrick** is impressed

What goes around, comes around. Or, in the case of The Orangery at London's Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, ripples around. But is this charming little pavilion architecture or art? Are we in the realms of (take a big breath and assume serious look) multi-planar vectoral plasticity, or is this just sculpture with windows?

The building's architects, SpacelabUK, say that The Orangery transcends the boundary between internal and external space, and that their "understanding of space has allowed [them] to push the boundaries of function and activity through space, forms, materials and aesthetics". As in, "Hey, what's that?", followed seconds later by, "Hey, it's a café!". As for the internal-external thing, anyone who has sat on a wide veranda might think that all this chatter about "transitional conditions" was a lot of fuss about nothing.

It's the initial reaction to The Orangery that's interesting: the momentary incomprehension, the apparent anti-formality of the unclassifiable thing, which turns out to have a distinct purpose after all. The Orangery's architects are thoroughly modern space cadets, but their design recalls an outbreak of architectural surreality, more than three decades ago, which was fuelled by a loathing for the glass-and-steel, form-is-function buildings, whose most brilliantly reductive exponent was Mies van der Rohe.

The objectors in question were part of a New York architecture and environmental art collective called Site (Sculpture in the Environment). From the start, according to its founder member James Wines, the idea was to ferment art, architecture and site in such a way that the identity of the amalgam was ambiguous.

"The group's philosophical foundations," says Wines in a new book, *Site: Identity in Density*, "grew out of a belief that buildings, art works and public spaces should not be conceived as objects sitting in the environment; instead, they should be seen as a fusion of inside and outside elements interpreted as the environment." The Orangery,



though not directly attached to Site's 1970s agitprop intent, is in the same ballpark in terms of the nature of its presence.

We'll return to Wines once we've considered how SpacelabUK approached this fusion of conditions, this contiguous inside-outness, at Great Ormond Street Hospital. The first thing to say is that it's no surprise that this £390,000 structure was longlisted for the Royal Institute of British Architects 2005 Stirling Prize. The Orangery would be notable architecture if it were encountered standing, quite alone, in a pleasant public place - in St. James's Park, say, with the scent of roasted coffee emanating from it. But it isn't in WI. It's wedged between two of the hospital's 1930s modernist buildings, whose raking lines have been denuded by time and grime. And it sits on top of a boilerhouse riddled with steaming, tar-coated pipes and ducts.

The Orangery might seem an implausible and overwrought form for such a site, but it fits in concisely. It seems commodious. Its architectural details are satisfyingly crisp. It may be an architectural stranger, but it's quite at home here because it conveys two things: a practically considered solution to a series of site problems; yet also something that exists beyond practicality. It asks our imagination if it would like to go walkies.

Andrew Budgen, one of SpacelabUK's principals, said: "We wanted to do something sculptural, but relaxing. We didn't want to define it. We wanted to concentrate the viewer on the micro-scale." Which is a tidy way of saying that there's not much else to look at that isn't rather grim - the gleaming chimneys of the boilerhouse shooting upwards, the back of UCL's ugly Neurology Institute building to the west, the Titan Portakabins suspended off the side of the nurses' residence.

"We wanted things to flow, to feel atmospheric," says Budgen. "But it does start from looking at space, and the form arriving around it - a space that doesn't get much light, and which leads the eye away from the Portakabins." The Orangery - there are no oranges, obviously - is thus both a salubrious place for staff and parents to eat light meals, and a refreshing cleft in the clinical atmosphere.

It's form is dominated by the five wavy blades of the roof, which rear up like sheared-off tentacles, or chunky lengths of tagliatelle. The three central blades have varying geometries, which produce glazed filets where they swoop past each other. The engineering - by Mervyn Rodrigues of Rodrigues Associates - is noteworthy: the roof assembly rests on a cambered steel beam that also carries the glazing of the façade. This is elegant,

precision stuff, and it looks as sharp as a tack.

There are only two other materials to consider: the glass that forms the simply boxed accommodation, and the timber - ash, oak and the Guyanese and Brazilian hardwood tatajuba - veneered to the undersides of the zinc-clad blades and carried forward in bands on the decking.

But where did the idea for the form come from? "We're becoming playful," admits Budgen. "I'll carry an architectural brief around with me for weeks, and then something will trigger an idea. The Orangery is really about the feeling of a space - the escape from a clinical environment, a place of contemplation. At night, it has a whole different atmosphere. It's very tranquil."

Budgen's admittance of sculpture, space and playfulness to the architectural process brings us neatly back to Site, and James Wines. In his introduction to *Identity in Density*, the novelist Tom Wolfe cherishes Wines' now famous 1977 vitriol: "I don't mind if they keep building those boring glass boxes, but why do they always deposit that little turd in the plaza when they leave?" But what if the turd was not a lonely object in an anally retentive plaza that had already paved away any idea of context or environment from the architectural equation? What if the turd were the architecture, and

the place, itself? And what if it seemed to fly, or collapse, or - like the Orangery's roof - peel? Wines and his crew reacted to sterile dislocations of place, buildings and art like the architectural equivalent of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, or Pop artist such as Oyvind Fahlstrom.

They made it all one entity, in both theory and practice. There was no specific inside or outside entry or exit. They designed buildings and public spaces so that it was hard to label them as either architecture or art. The Orangery is a peeled object, too, though not as brilliantly ambitious as the curled-back brick façade of the Best Products In "Peeling Project" building in Richmond, Virginia. But SpacelabUK's shredded ripple-effect has, coincidentally, been Site default form for more than a decade. "If architecture does not transcend practical functionalities, it overlooks the most important function of all," says Wines, "offering a stage where participants can act out the sublimated scripts." The architect Michael McDonough (whose own Grid House in Boston is right up there on the freak-out scale) says that Site's work addresses the possibility of "city as festival as open-air museum, as walkable cultural and culinary celebration". It sought to create "frozen phenomena" with Dadaesque aesthetics and the legacy of Duchamp - which, today, has become institutionalised, pseud avant-garde architectural move that too often treat the dynamics of both creation and entropy as ironic, rather than as source of vitality.

But not at Great Ormond Street Hospital. The architect and the hospital's project manager Mark Ward have conjured up that potentially hateful thing - a small plaza. This one is neither sterile nor turdish. The layers of reflections in The Orangery's glass façade, the petrified flail of its roof-tongue - these are the flickers and murmurs of an architectural language that may remind those who use the building not of clinical hazards, but of something livelier and less urgently defined





Reflected glory: The Orangery, with its 'roof-tongues', at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children (above); the notched façade of Site's Best Products Inc building in Sacramento, California (opposite)