

Back to the wall at The Weston gallery

18 April 2019 Words: Jan-Carlos Kucharek

Dividing line, noise mitigator, deferential newcomer – Feilden Fowles' new gallery at Yorkshire Sculpture Park has its work cut out



The Weston's east wall, separating park from car park and motorway. Credit: Peter Cook

Executive director of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park Peter Murray might describe the wall of its new Weston gallery and café as the psychogeographic dividing line between a modern landscape and the Picturesque nature of the park, but if truth be told things are a little more complicated than that.

It's true, the M1 motorway does drive itself determinedly through the rural landscape to the east, but once you've passed through the single hole in architect Feilden Fowles' thick, iron-oxide-stained, earthy millstone grit wall, the first sculpture I clocked peeping its head above the treetops to the west – part of the 'big reveal' – was the Emley Moor mast. Taller than the Shard, it stands defiantly showing the finger to the Picturesque landscape created here by Capability Brown contemporary Richard Woods – but then I'm probably talking out of turn. Were he alive, 18th century Picturesque proponent Uvedale Price would probably consider its death ray transmitting potential as embodying the very principles of the Sublime that he espoused; his all-important 'Et in Arcadia Ego' factor.

Either way it proves nothing is quite black and white; not least in the YSP's 500 acres of rolling green fields and contemporary art. Remember, the English 'Romantic' landscape was merely, as artist Richard Wentworth points out in an essay marking the building's opening, just another way of seeing; a form of artifice contrived as a

re-evocation of the natural one that a succession of Enclosure Acts and creeping industrialisation had destroyed. Murray remarks on the motorway background noise that the crafted wall is partly designed to arrest; but this is what it sounds like when an ancient, disappeared landscape hires the 20th century to rough-up the 18th century pretender. This, my friends, is payback.



So, in all, I'm bemused by the deference that Feilden Fowles has afforded, on both sides of its wall, to a location that's been interfered with so significantly in the past; not least in the fact that this fine new gallery, café and shop grows out of a bund and expands out into a depression, both formed when the site itself was an open quarry a century ago. I'm happier with the architect's more practical notion that the building forms the third element of a triptych of gallery spaces defining the north, south and now eastern perimeter of the YSP site; and that in a sense the symbolic language it employs stands in counterpoint to the other two buildings there. Feilden Clegg Bradley's YSP visitor centre might look fussy and dated, but the structural simplicity of the practice's adjacent 2006 Underground Gallery holds its own and Tony Fretton's 2003 Longside Gallery, reifying the modern agricultural aesthetic, still works well. Here at The Weston, meanwhile, everything rests on the symbolism of the dividing wall.

But being rested on, as it turns out, was part of the problem. The wall was originally intended to be rammed earth, but the fact that it was emerging out of the bund and therefore had to retain earth made this proposition unviable from the outset. Which led Feilden Fowles to consider casting it in concrete using stone from local quarries as aggregate in the mix. The result brings a satisfying grain and texture to the wall, layered in its strata, not only evidencing the incremental two months it took to cast, but the iterative process of experimentation with aggregate size and blend.

It seems clear that this was a fraught journey for both parties: the architect had never built using a technique that involved so many variables of composition,

pigment, curing time and post-casting jet-washing methods. The client too, having selected a young, ostensibly untested firm to build the gallery, was understandably concerned when it first set eyes on the lack of finesse of the life-size control samples of the wall produced by a concrete contractor, who initially must have been painfully unclear of the design intent. In addition the architect, looking for some sustainable innovation from its engineer, plumped on a novel labyrinth of unfired clay bricks arranged in the void of the wall's west return as a means of naturally conditioning the gallery air. Announcing proudly at the press view that this is the first example of this technology being used in a UK gallery, the YSP director of programmes pipes up 'So it had better work!' You get the sense, even now, that The Weston was all about walls, damn walls and logistics.

So, given the pivotal role of the wall as a demarcator of the 'profane' landscape from the 'sacred', you'd imagine that, once you pass through it, it's all sweetness and light; and you'd be right. Feilden Fowles has created a tall, curved elevation of glass and timber facing west, embracing the expanse of the YSP site, allowing light to flood into the reception and café area. Materials are simple: cast terrazzo floors and Douglas Fir columns and roof structure, with the facing wall of the loo and kitchen area all finished in hydrosopic lime wash plaster with a pleasing 'hand-made' feel when seen in the sunlight. Spatially, it has the naturalistic, contemplative feel of a Japanese tea house – there's even a hearth in the middle of the room to warm your pot on.

This 'quick win' aside, greater experimentation went on in the gallery space nestled into the bund to the north, where white display walls hiding low level air feed and high level extracts are layered onto another concrete wall supporting the north facing rooflight glazing. With an elegant bullnose, courtesy of the choice of narrow timber slat shuttering (matching the recessed track lighting width), it has a satisfying, resolved brutalist quality. When first cast that expression was as satisfactory externally – raw, confrontational perhaps; but the section detailing required to insulate and waterproof it, partner Fergus Feilden explains, compromised its final iteration. Better surely then to cover the whole caboodle in scalloped GRP panels, that, agreed, subtly insinuate the presence of the rooflights behind when viewed in the right light.

But this subtlety, as exemplified by those washboard scallops, ultimately grates. The Weston is a perfectly fine building, but perhaps the firm has not been true to the visionary precedents it looked to as its inspiration. American land artists Michael Heizer and Robert Morris chose to work at huge scale, boldly making marks with their man-made forms on an ostensibly wild American landscape. By contrast, the wall here seems somehow emasculated, diminutive; aiming to make some differentiation between two landscapes, both sides of which in their own ways carry the historic imprint of power. But why should the building defer to the landscape on principle? Why should it to the sculpture? Are these assumptions set in stone? In the end, the architect conceded that they were, and we got gifted cast pebbles instead of menhirs.

SKELLY & COUCH



In numbers

Project cost: £3.6m

GIA: 673m²

Forming outer wall: 2 months