

The Tanks: taking the Tate underground

A couple of weeks before the Olympic crescendo reached its Stratford-based climax, Tate Modern opened what is being hailed as a new chapter for contemporary art in Britain. *The Leisure Review's* art critic sharpened his editorial pencil and went along.

The opening of the Tanks to the public represents the completion of the first part of the second phase of development at Tate Modern. Already the most visited modern art gallery in the world with some 4.7 million visitors a year, Tate Modern has embarked on an ambitious and controversial project to extend its gallery space by 70%. While the subterranean location of the Tanks renders them largely immune from the architectural controversy that other aspects of the development plan have provoked, the focus on performance and installation art is set to offer a significant challenge to the artistic sensibilities of the gallery-going public. Already described by the Tate director, Sir Nicholas Serota as a "hugely significant" step for Tate Modern, the Tanks also represent something of a step in the dark for a gallery that has made a habit of spectacular success.

Widely recognised as one of the world's most inspired and inspiring gallery projects, Tate Modern's story is well known but still remarkable. Looking for a large-scale venue into which it could expand, the Tate Gallery happened upon the Bankside Power Station, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's modernist masterpiece that sat across the river from Sir Christopher Wren's St Paul's Cathedral, the building that Gilbert Scott had precisely echoed in the dimensions of his own. Had Battersea Power Station, Gilbert Scott's other cathedral to power a little further upstream, been considered at all, its state of dilapidation would have counted against it and, in 1994, the trustees of the Tate committed themselves to Bankside and the vision of Serota, the man who conceived and drove the project to completion. Supported by lottery money, a host of benefactors and some highly focused fund-raising, the Tate announced an architectural competition to convert Bankside and work began on site in June 1995. In January 2000 Tate Modern opened as one of the largest National Lottery Millennium projects, drawing critical acclaim from within the art world and visitor numbers that exceeded the Tate's most wildly optimistic expectations.

The part of the site into which Tate Modern is to expand in this new phase of its development had always been part of the long-term plan and, speaking to the BBC at the opening of the Tanks to the public, Serota explained that these vast steel vessels which had once held five million litres of fuel oil had captured his imagination when he had first seen them 15 years ago. In their new role these tanks create two distinct areas: one a huge circular space with vertiginous height that has been dedicated to performance and live art, the other a series of smaller spaces that will house film and installation pieces.

From the visitor's perspective, the Tanks represent a new direction for Tate Modern both literally and figuratively. Entering the main building from its eastern side, one is used to descending into the Turbine Hall and moving towards the galleries to the left but now visitors can also choose to turn to the right to enter the Tanks. The industrial heritage of the original tanks has been retained and while Tate Modern's industrial origins have always been central to the building's character these new galleries are markedly different, both in the nature of the materials – cast concrete giving way to bolted steel – and the shapes of the spaces – the rectilinear order of the Turbine Hall giving way to the slopes and angles, columns and circles of the new galleries.

The fingerprints of Tate Modern's architects Hertzog and de Meuron, who have returned to London to oversee the scheme, may be all over the Tanks but these new spaces, by virtue of their origins, are also distinct. It is a challenge and a contradiction that Serota acknowledges. "It is a difficult thing to do, not to tame it," he said of the new space. "I think the architects have achieved it."

Serota has also acknowledged that the Tanks' programme of installation and

"From the visitor's perspective, the Tanks represent a new direction for Tate Modern both literally and figuratively."

The Leisure Review is supported by:



The Leisure Review is written, designed and published by:

tlr.comms
TLR Communications Limited

performance art represents a radical departure from Tate Modern's more traditional offering of displayed works and exhibitions. However, he remains undaunted, describing the Tanks as a new chapter for contemporary art in Britain and a project as significant for art in the UK as when the Turbine Hall first opened. The aim, he explained, is to bring art forms traditionally seen as marginal into "something central to art". If he is aware of the scale of the challenge, he is also well aware of the opportunities. "We know there's a big audience," he said, "and we know that we can do things here that no other museum can do. For Tate Modern that's a very exciting prospect."

The original project plan for Tate Modern's second development phase had envisaged opening the whole extension scheme, which comprises the Tanks, a ten-storey tower and 'the Western Block', in time for the London Olympics but the economic realities of fund-raising in the midst of a global recession have seen the remaining elements of the scheme delayed until 2016. The completed scheme has a total budget of £215 million and completion of the Tanks has accounted for some £90 million so far.

The plans for the tower and the Western Block have provoked some criticism within architectural circles, mainly on the grounds that the extensions represent a compromise too far for the graceful lines of Gilbert Scott's original building. Certainly Gilbert Scott's vision of Bankside as the contemporary companion to St Paul's will be lost. Many see it as highly regrettable that the integrity of the building's outline, particularly when seen from the approach across the Millennium Bridge, has already been lost; the result of some ignoble residential development around the site. The Tate Modern tower will exacerbate this loss in the interests of further space for the gallery.

If the question of whether the Tanks represent a new chapter for British art can only be judged with the perspective of history, one could suggest with rather more certainty that the Tanks represent a new chapter for Tate Modern. In their rejection of the 'white cube' tradition of gallery display the Tanks offer a stark contrast to the original Tate Modern but in their celebration of a modern industrial heritage they continue and extend the ethos of the building and the collection. Whether performance and installation will capture the hearts of a new audience remains to be seen.

The Leisure Review, September 2012

© Copyright of all material on this site is retained by *The Leisure Review* or the individual contributors where stated. Contact *The Leisure Review* for details.