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Another corner: a new Tate Modern

The opening of a new extension heralds a "new Tate Modern", according to Tate Modern. Having been a regular visitor to Bankside long before it became a gallery, Jonathan Ives reports on what a new era for modern art might look like and whether Serota's palace of glittering delights can live up to the promise of the press release.

Bold claims are the stock in trade of the public relations process. They are part of the game of lure and chase played between organisations hoping to persuade journalists to give time and space to a particular project and the journalists determined not to miss a story of genuine interest. Hyperbole is a common tactic, not least in the art world, where the New Thing is always the Next Big Thing and there is always a suggestion, an inference at most, that not everyone who may be interested is necessarily on the list; or at least the right list.

It can be a tiring and tiresome game but when it comes to Tate Modern even the most PR-averse of correspondents is prepared to allow some leeway when it comes to capped-up claims of greatness. The promise was "a new Tate Modern… a new museum for the twenty-first century" and, in light of the Tate track record in delivering some genuine 'wow' moments, we are prepared to suspend professional disbelief and see what this might entail.

"In the new Tate Modern, with its huge variety of spaces, we are able to tell a story of modern art which is more international, more diverse and even more engaging. The opening signals a new era for modern and contemporary art in the UK."

Serota's cultural behemoth has earned this much at least. The Leisure Review's relationship with Tate Modern goes back to 1996 when the press were first invited to view what was then still a decommissioned power station that had only recent had the machinery that generated the power removed. Here, with hard hats and appropriate footwear, we were taken on a tour of the vast space that had been created. This, we were told, would become one of the great galleries of the world, a new home and a new focal point for contemporary art in the UK, a place into which the Tate could expand from its Millbank home to put so much more of its collection on display.

It was easy to see the allure. A huge, cathedral-like space (literally, given that Sir Giles Gilbert Scott had made his modernist brick-built masterpiece the same dimensions as Wren's St Paul's Cathedral just across the river) in the centre of the city with river frontage and the potential to create a new gallery with few constraints imposed by the building itself.

Yet how often had the promises of lottery-financed grand projets ended in ignominy, failing to get off the drawing board or failing to survive very far beyond the highly optimistic visitor and income figures contained towards the bottom of the business plan. Back then the UK national lottery was still only a couple of years old and the assembled press pack went straight from the press visit to write up their reports (in your correspondent's case for The Leisure Manager, in-house magazine of the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management) and many plotted a careful path between the promise of a grand plan and the potential for failure on a grand scale.

Twenty years on many of us are back to see not whether Tate Modern is a success (as the world's most popular museum of modern and contemporary art, it undoubtedly is) but whether the addition of a new extension – the Switch House – justifies the claim of the creation of a

“new Tate Modern”.

It is a bold claim for what has become one of London’s most recognisable landmarks and most popular visitor destinations. From the outside the Switch House adds a wonky ziggurat of honeycombed brickwork to the south-west corner of Gilbert Scott’s repurposed but still revered rectilinear structure. Inside it builds upon the subterranean concrete curves of the Tanks (opened in 2012 as a venue for performance art) extending the original Tate Modern by 60% and creating new spaces for the collection, for education and for artists to create art.

The Switch House comprises 11 floors, including the Tanks at level 0 (the level of the floor of the Turbine Hall), three floors of galleries, two floors of restaurants, bar and shop, a members room, a staff room, a floor for learning and events, and a floor for Tate Exchange, which is a space that some 50 organisations have been invited to use for events and projects important to them. Floor 10, the top floor, is the viewing gallery, offering a 360-degree view of the city, a space that is sure to become one of the most popular destinations within the building and perhaps the city.

As the new diagrammatic representation of the Tate Modern layout demonstrates, the Switch House has effectively added another wing to the building. The Turbine Hall – still a startlingly huge space – is now at the centre of Tate Modern, with bridges (the original at level one and a new one at level four) spanning the reach between the Switch House and the original galleries in what is now referred to as the Boiler House.

So far, so architectural, but the claim of a new Tate Modern goes beyond new buildings and new spaces. As Frances Morris, director of Tate Modern, explained, the new Tate Modern includes a new approach to the collection.

“Over recent years we have been working hard to transform the international collection at Tate to reflect that great art is made all over the world,” she said. “We are broadening the international remit both in contemporary and modern art; collecting and plotting the history of live art, film and new media; and very importantly buying and showing more work by women artists. I am delighted to now have the space to show this broader story of modern and contemporary art to the public for free.”

The rehanging of the collection has resulted in 800 works by more than 300 artists from more than 50 countries. Some 75% of work on show has been acquired since Tate Modern opened and half the solo displays are dedicated to women artists. The result, Tate suggests, is a Tate Modern collection transformed, showing art from around the world and offering many different formats, approaches and understandings of what art is and can be.

Nicholas Serota, who has done so much to bring Tate Modern into being and to make Tate such an internationally recognised brand in the world of art and culture, was sure that the new building represented a very important point in the story of Tate Modern.

“This is a landmark moment, not only for Tate and London but also for the UK as a whole,” he said. “When Tate Modern opened we never imagined the overwhelming response that it would generate from audiences. The need to grow swiftly moved from a desire to an imperative. In the new Tate Modern, with its huge variety of spaces, we are able to tell a story of modern art which is more international, more diverse and even more engaging. The opening signals a new era for modern and contemporary art in the UK.”

New era or not, Serota has earned our indulgence. Tate Modern is a

remarkable achievement, not least in its repurposing of an industrial building from another era to create a piece of contemporary architecture. The Turbine Hall is still a breathtaking destination, echoing New York's Grand Central Terminus in its willingness to give over valuable city-centre space to the service of grandeur and inspiration. Although it offers unprecedented opportunities and challenges to artists invited to display or create works within it, the Turbine Hall is itself a statement on behalf of art: that art is worthy of such a space, worth the investment of scale and volume within a crowded city in which every square foot of space is a commodity. Here, it seems to say, is a cathedral of art that is open to all who want to browse, study, gawp, click or engage at whatever level they see fit or can fit into their visit or their lives.

The new spaces offer balance and contrast. It is intriguing after all this time to be able to walk down the slope into the Turbine Hall and turn right. The underground underworld of the Tanks throws the gallery conventions of the Boiler House into stark relief. While the Boiler House offers the traditional 'white cube' approach to display, the Tanks are all dark walls and dark spaces, a cold concrete warren of industrial curves and corners to be explored. Here there are no expectations of comfort and convention

Above the Tanks the Switch House offers some of the white cube aesthetic but, more memorably, the curves and circular lines continue, creating surprising spaces and opportunities to sit, talk and read. The shape of the building as it rises also creates interesting angles, all supplemented by the mosaics of light created by the perforations of the exterior brickwork.

The spaces and stairwells get tighter as the visitor climbs the pyramid but at the top the space expands to encompass the whole city. On level 10 the viewing gallery provides a 360-degree view of London and is certain to become one of the most visited parts of Tate Modern and a mainstay of the London visitor itinerary. Expect the queues for the dedicated lift to become a social media phenomenon in the near future.

This popularity of Tate Modern has brought some well-documented challenges. Initial predictions of annual visitor numbers were around the 2.5 million mark but few expected a gallery dedicated to modern art to reach such levels consistently after the initial enthusiasm of opening. In 2015 4.7 million people visited Tate Modern and Tate is preparing for this number to reach upwards of six million over the next couple of years. If the reaction of the opening weekend is any guide, when Tate Modern saw a record of 54,000 visitors on the first Saturday, this too may prove to be a conservative estimate.

It is undeniable that Tate Modern has had a profound impact upon how art is presented and seen in London; nor is it hyperbole to suggest that the project has had a profound impact upon the city itself, facilitating the transformation of its south London locale and, via the Millennium Bridge that connects it to the north bank, bringing light and footfall to the mysterious streets between St Paul's and the river.

However, the new Tate Modern does pose some questions for those who have watched it grow. Did the new building really have to compromise the silhouette of the original structure so completely? It seems to sever the respectful connection with St Paul's and spoil the impact of the building as you walk across the river. Does the height and the space it provides justify this intrusion? The internal space shrinks as the building rises and of the ten floors of the extension, five, if we include the Tate Exchange space and the Tanks, are gallery space; the rest may be essential to the running of a modern gallery but they are not expanding the collection seen by the public. Can Tate Modern continue to survive its own popularity? If any organisation seems to have the experience and knowledge to meet the challenge it must be Tate but

does London really need another viewing gallery, another ‘destination restaurant’ or even another Tate Members’ room? And, of course, what will become of Tate Modern in a post-Brexit Britain?

In light of the long-term success of Tate Modern and the impact of the new galleries such questions might seem impertinent but they might also touch on the nature of the modern gallery and the role of Tate Modern as an influence on the city in which it sits and as an international exemplar of cultural achievement.

We can consider and debate these issues at length but for now we can pause to reflect on the creation, growth and rejuvenation of Tate Modern: from redundant power station to world-leading gallery to New Tate Modern, a cultural powerhouse that draws millions of people from all over the world to engage with art and performance, thought and beauty. It is a remarkable achievement in a remarkable new home.

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