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Ellis Woodman

We might have had a bleak end to 2008, but it was actually a good year for splendid buildings and inspiring architectural exhibitions, says Ellis Woodman. We also asked 18 major players in the business to pick out their highlights

The Year in Review: Designs to beat the architecture downturn blues

19 December 2008 | By [Ellis Woodman](#)

With news of further redundancies, cancelled schemes and closed offices arriving by the day, it would be remiss to suggest 2008 has been anything but a bloody awful year for many of BD's readers. With precious little light visible at the end of the tunnel, it is still impossible to fathom the scale of the crisis. That uncertainty is made particularly cruel by the fact that the past 12 months have thrown up some really tremendous buildings. It may be many years before we see such a vintage crop again.

After a year in which the Stirling Prize was finally awarded to a housing scheme, I would like to think Riches Hawley Mikhail's Clay Field development in Suffolk or Sergison Bates' Finsbury Park scheme might find a place on the 2009 shortlist. Both are exemplary affordable housing projects — something that, for all its considerable merits, Accordia cannot claim to be. Sergison Bates should also be in contention with its Ruthin Craft Centre, which has allowed the practice to move beyond the tectonic concerns of its housing projects and explore an architecture of palpable solidity and weight.

A similar pleasure was offered by the extension of the Bluecoat arts centre in Liverpool, a project by another architect — the Dutch practice Biq — whose past work has largely focused on the housing sector. Blessedly free of the glass links and frank juxtapositions by which modernist architects all too often distinguish their work from adjoining historic structures, the new wing forms a potent conglomerate with the 18th century school it extends.

Later in the year, Eric Parry's fantastically intricate underground extension of St Martin in the Fields and Dow Jones' ingenious remodelling of the Garden Museum conveyed a related mindset. With Chipperfield's refurbishment of Berlin's Neues Museum set to complete early next year, there are signs British modernism is at last developing a mature sense of its relationship to the past.

The relationship that Porphyrios Associates' Meg Whitman College struck with history was of a different order entirely. A straight-faced revival of the collegiate gothic style which characterised Princeton's campus until the second world war, it is a building many will dismiss as pastiche. Nonetheless, the conviction (and expense) with which it is built left pretty much everything else I saw this year looking thin.

It would also be churlish to deny the exceptional compositional skill with which Porphyrios invested a very repetitive building type with a compelling sense of rhythm and hierarchy. While I am sorely tempted to choose it as my building of the year, I fear I might never be able to drink safely in the AA bar again, so I

will split the accolade with a building rather more emphatically grounded in the real world. In the commission for the Fuglsang Museum, Tony Fretton at last won a major public project and responded with a building as assured and enigmatic as any in his portfolio.

The architect's singular voice may have been shaped by the rigours of making work in London's chaotic urban context, but he proved himself equally at home in the wilds of rural Denmark. Indeed, his building's strength lies in the deftness with which it directs the visitor's attention to the world around it. In doing so, it subtly reframes a site constructed for agricultural use as a place of cultural activity. Next year, Fretton is set to complete the new British Embassy in Warsaw and a major housing scheme in the Netherlands. His talents have finally found the stage they deserve.

Neil Gillespie: Reiach & Hall



Credit: Jonty Wilde

It has been a quiet year for me in terms of memorable new buildings, but two exhibitions filled the void. Isamu Noguchi at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park was something of a pilgrimage. Feilden Clegg Bradley's simple and effective gallery spaces hosted a body of work revealing the breadth and quality of Noguchi's practice. Beyond the fecundity, what stayed with me was the silence created by Noguchi's sublime mastery of hand and eye.

The Lighthouse's exhibition, *Building Biographies*, curated by Morag Bain and Oliver Lowenstein, was memorable, not because we feature in it but because again there is a sense of profound stillness that comes through acts of making. Modest Scottish projects sit next to mature works from Norway, Austria and Switzerland. Surprisingly, the Scottish work is not eclipsed by established masters. Indeed, the Lotte Glob Studio by Gokay Devici sited in the high north gently glows with embarrassed recognition.

My resolution for next year is to get out more!

Cathy Hawley: Riches Hawley Mikhail Architects



Credit: Tim Herrick

A visit to Sheffield, where I first studied architecture, inspired my choice of projects for 2008.

First is the sheer wall of Park Hill in Sheffield, by Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith, which has dominated the entry to the city since the late 1950s. With the surrounding spaces cleared during the restoration which began this year, the heroic scale of these flats inspires both awe and consternation. Perhaps our climate — economic and actual — adds further weight to calls for VAT off refurbishment and a revaluation of mid-century housing stock.

While one landmark is reinvented, another is erased. The demolition in August of two cooling towers standing tightly against the M1 has fundamentally altered the landscape of the city.

David Kohn: David Kohn Architects



Credit: David Kohn

Having long wanted to see the Registan in Samarkand, this September we travelled to Uzbekistan to visit the Silk Road cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. Of all three, I found Bukhara the most rewarding, a dazzling old city of mosques, madrassahs and minarets going about its daily business as though nothing had changed for centuries. Bukhara's Chasma Ayub, the mausoleum honouring Job, consists of four domed chambers, each built during a different period. The largest and oldest cupola was erected by Tamerlane in 1380, and subsequent domes were added up until the 16th century. Due in part to their consistent material, the additions appear more like growths, as though the building was maturing over centuries into the adult animal we see today — part Sphinx, part Cyclops, part camel.

Silvia Ullmayer: Ullmayer Sylvester Architects



Credit: Edmund Sumner/View

Cycling through the robust, timeless and generous summer streetscape of Berlin Mitte with my daughter in the back and seeing how a European city is transforming into a bustling metropolis was definitely the most enjoyable experience this year.

It seems the down-to-earth, deadpan Berliners just let it happen without paying too much attention to it. The porcelain collection reassembled in the Dresden Zwinger was fascinating. Its current layouts are inspired by the original presentations by Zacharias Longuelune (1735), and lavishly celebrate a collector's joy in sheer opulence and beauty that — despite of being out-of-date — was utterly infectious.

The most enjoyable new-build I read about was the Tokyo nursery by Tezuka Architects, as it created an inventive environment by making nature and the elements part of a kindergarden.

In this thing that is neither quite building nor landscape, little people can explore the world around with a degree of freedom and risk.

Christopher Platt: studio Kap



Credit: Helene Binet

My two highlights of 2008 came when I returned to Eichstaett (for the sixth time). I spent an hour alone with Karljosef Schattner at his home talking to him about how he designed, and also visited Peter Zumthor's Kolumba Museum in Cologne. As well as creating a series of exquisite galleries, Zumthor has fashioned an extraordinary space of transcendental quality above the archaeological ruins. It is a world-class scheme that revels in the juxtaposition of brick texture and magical light. It is such a tonic to the inevitable frame and cladding that litters the world at present, and reminded me why I want to build buildings.

Jonathan Sergison: Sergison Bates Architects



Credit: Gaston Bergeret

I am always thankful for a life that affords me the opportunity to travel so frequently. In the summer I visited Shanghai for the first time, and was both exhilarated and frightened because almost no part of the city fabric was more than 20 years old. It reminded me that I am thoroughly European and that my understanding of the world is intrinsically bound up with my familiarity with urbanity from a western perspective.

In March I saw Diener & Diener's apartment building in Rue de la Roquette in Paris. It demonstrated a clear understanding of the role decorum, type and continuity might play in the rebuilding of a historic city. A book on the work of the Swiss practice Meili Peter published in October brilliantly presents a rare architectural intelligence and the role of construction as research.

Sean Griffiths: FAT



Credit: Iwan Baan

The most amazing thing finished this year is the Olympic stadium in Beijing, which I've not seen in the flesh but saw presented at Tate Modern by Jacques Herzog. I don't know how they did it.

I also enjoyed H & de M's Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, which I visited in March. Its exterior cladding looks like stone, solid metal or transparent mesh depending on the light, and uses a clever mathematical system to create variety with repeating patterns.

The best thing I saw in the flesh was Asplund's Stockholm Library. Not exactly 2008, but in the days of Ideas Stores and such like, it was good to see what a proper library is like.

The best book I read was (neither published in 2008) was either Pynchon's mad, bad Mason & Dixon or John Gray's Straw Dogs, which I recommend to all architects for whom morality is more important than aesthetics.

Alex de Rijke: de Rijke Marsh Morgan



Credit: Ed Reeve

Six of my best things of 2008 (I didn't see any new buildings):

The best thing I saw was the Slave City exhibition by Rotterdam artist Joep van Lieshout/AVL (Family Lamp) at the Albion gallery in Battersea.

The best thing I heard was Losing my Edge by LCD Soundsystem.

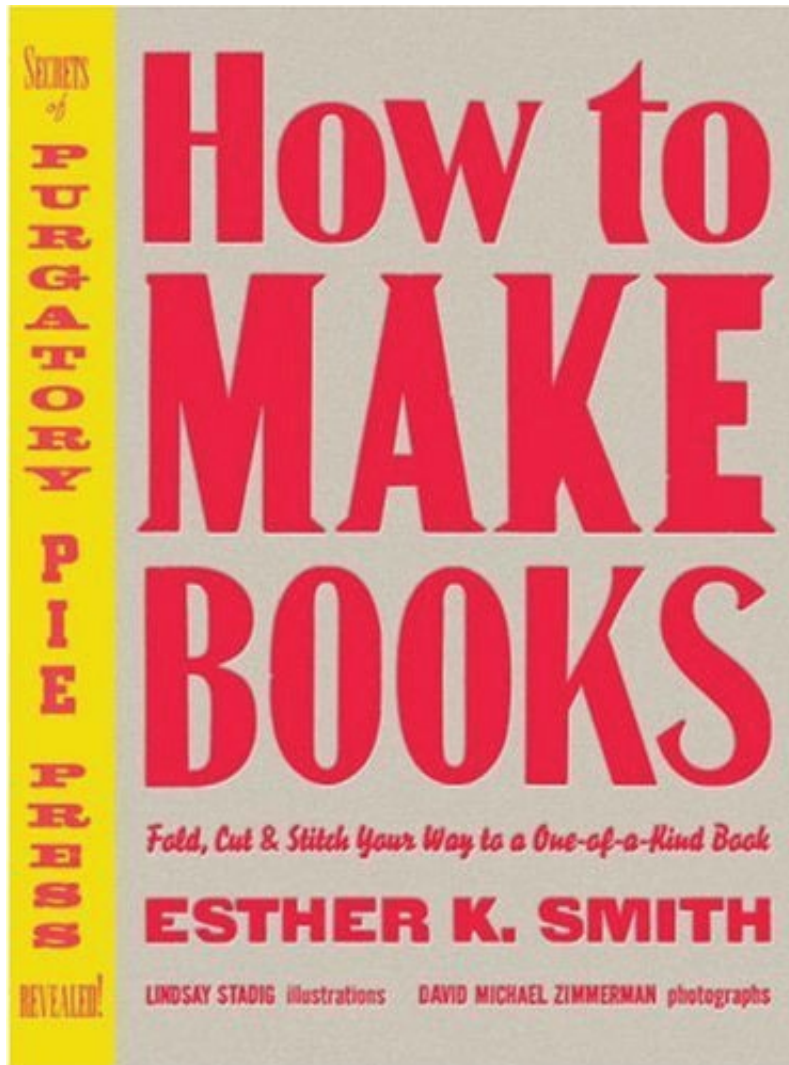
The best thing I ate was a meal of many tiny seafood dishes at Venice restaurant Corta Sconta, organised by the British Council at the Architecture Biennale.

The best think I drank was the precise blend of finest Arabica and Robusta coffee made daily on dRMM's Gaggia.

The best thing I visited was Brunel's underground shaft to the Thames Tunnel, soon to be accessible after over 140 years of being hidden.

The best thing I read was Kingdom Come by JG Ballard.

Biba Dow: Dow Jones Architects



I've spent my spare time this year reading and being inspired by *How to Make Books* and *Magic Books & Paper Toys*, both by Esther K Smith of Purgatory Pie Press — so not buildings, but certainly paper engineering.

How to Make Books is beautifully designed, and full of ideas and explanations about binding and constructing books and pamphlets, which are applicable to the documents we produce in the office as well as to much else.

Thinking about how things are made is so much part of our work, and this book explains very clearly the practical side of the craft, as well as inspiring ideas for making things.

Sarah Ichioka: director, the Architecture Foundation



Credit: Charlie Koohaus

Two of the cultural stand-outs of the year were the products of slightly mad visionaries — individuals creating worlds at the edges and the in-between of standard practice.

To start the year, the Architectural Association's exhibition of Madelon Vriesendorp's paintings, animations and accumulated treasures brought long overdue recognition to the breadth and diversity of her oeuvre, infusing the galleries with a welcome playfulness and personality.

A lecture by Michael Pawlyn at Grimshaw Architects during the London Festival of Architecture energised the audience with case studies demonstrating the radical potential of a generative, rather than a restrictive, approach to design that surpasses "sustainability". Like Braungart and McDonough, Pawlyn's work embraces change and growth.

Andrew Higgott: Acting head of Architecture, East London University



A visit to La Tourette proved the unexpected highlight of the year. Le Corbusier's monastery provided a rich experience and much food for thought about how the building was a formative influence on its own generation of British architects, who nevertheless struggled with what it manifested. The building's full-blooded quality and lack of restraint provide a contrast to the carefulness of recent British architecture with related concerns about materiality and rhetoric. But perhaps it also provides evidence that there is, after all, such a thing as great architecture.

Sarah Gaventa: director, cabc space



Credit: Mike Pinches

The highlights of Liverpool's year of culture were Turning The Place Over (pictured) by Richard Wilson, the

most jaw-droppingly fabulous installation and the best piece of public art I have ever seen.

The London Festival of Architecture transformed Bloomsbury, while the Folkestone Biennale filled this seaside town with the work of Tracey Emin, Mark Wallinger and Nathan Coley.

The Corb show was a must-see in a great venue, the Luytens crypt of the Catholic cathedral; and the other must-see was Liverpool itself — great for such an amazing city to share the limelight.

I also thought Muf's Barking Town Square was truly inspirational — as did the rest of Europe, given it became the first British winner of the European Prize for Urban Public Space.

A massive low light for me was seeing Live Sites big TV screens popping up across the country in our historic civic squares, offering quality cultural programming like Keeping Up Appearances 24/7, and provoking a riot in Manchester when the big screen broke down during a televised football match.

A personal low was witnessing the demolition of Chamberlin Powell & Bon's Milton Court, the first block of the Barbican complex. RIP.

Tom Holbrook: 5th Studio



The best new place for me this year has to be St Pancras Station. To see what has been such a dead urban block transformed into something so powerful is transformative.

For as long as I can remember, the station and its undercroft has been a huge, soot-encrusted blockage, a candidate for demolition. Suddenly, there are queues of skiers to negotiate on St Pancras Road, waiting for the snow train, and we have one of the great European terminuses: who would have thought that this would happen here?

I'm interested in the length of time it takes for a city to repair itself around major infrastructure projects. At St Pancras, it's as though it has taken 120 years to realise its potential. Perhaps, beyond the technology and the feat of grand projects, that's what we should expect.

And despite its hard, commercial heart and lousy statuary, the romance of the train shed is laid bare, and the clutter that will inevitably overtake it is only just becoming evident.

Now is the time to leave north London for the mountains!

Hans van der Heijden: partner, BIQ Architecten



Credit: Ben Johnson

I am hesitating between the Mark Rothko show at Tate Modern and Ben Johnson's exhibition of city and architecture paintings in Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery.

Rothko's show brilliantly illustrates the value of art in the periphery of architecture: his series of paintings must have been a very special addition to Mies's architecture in New York. Rothko probably understood Mies's metaphysics better than the master himself.

Ben Johnson focuses very much on the core values of architecture: his work is a careful registration of type, space, material, geometry. I was extremely impressed with Johnson's emotionless, distant view on architecture. After all, architecture is not completely metaphysics and otherness.

Patrick Lynch: Lynch Architects



Credit: Denis Gilbert

The best thing I saw published this year was the kindergarten by Tezuka Architects in Tokyo, which seems to have the freshness of a really good idea unencumbered by too much design or overfussy detailing.

Problems with the geometry and site were laconically dealt with along the way, it seems.

I also liked the black bronze cone of Allies & Morrison's observatory at Greenwich.

Tom de Paor's amazingly agile and lucid ceiling at Irish Aid in Dublin is similarly a surprisingly simple idea followed through with total dedication and determination.

Simon Henley: Buschow Henley Architects



In February I took my students to Chicago. We landed at O'Hare in a blizzard. When we visited Illinois Institute of Technology, it was covered in a layer of snow. It was then that I realised all architects should see Mies's work against a white backdrop.

We met somebody who had lived in Bertrand Goldberg's "corncob" Marina City towers, and on a sunny morning we took a trip to the roof. There, 60 floors above the Chicago River we experienced better views than you get from the Hancock or Sears.

In the summer we went to Chillida's Museum outside San Sebastian which, like Moore's at Perry Green, was his studio. Now, colossal pieces of steel, concrete and stone stand in lawns and woodland.

Adam Caruso: Caruso St John



In a year when so many new office buildings were designed and completed, what is remarkable is how few

stay in my mind for the right reasons.

One that does and which I pass several times each week is 1 Coleman Street by David Walker Architects. It is a stylish combination of 1960s retro and a more contemporary, folding formalism.

It is beautifully made, in storey-height panels of polished white, precast concrete, with window frames and a penthouse crown in mirrored chrome.

It is the correct scale for its site and is energetic at the same time as attending to a tricky corner of the urban fabric — things that are all too rare in contemporary city office buildings.

It is a third successful office building for David Walker after his designs for Deutsche Bank and Merrill Lynch.

Also memorable this year were the boating lake at the Hayward's Psycho Buildings, and Thomas Demand's Oval Office at Spruth Magers.

Louisa Hutton: Sauerbruch Hutton



Credit: Hamburger Stiftung zur Förderung von Wissenschaft und Kultur

The Notations, Calculation & Form in the Arts exhibition held at the Academy of Arts in Berlin brought together work from over 100 artists across many disciplines to highlight the range of artistic processes that take place between concept and work.

The exhibition, created by image-theorist Hubertus von Amelunxen, artist Dieter Appelt and media artist Peter Weibel, featured over 450 works from the fields of literature, painting, architecture, music, photography, choreography and film, which were juxtaposed to reveal the links between scientific calculation and artistic form.

My favourites included drawings by Paul Klee, manuscripts by Marcel Proust, choreographic notations by Merce Cunningham, sketches by Bridget Riley, drawings and models by Iannis Xenakis, notational drawings by Walter Benjamin. The list goes on...

Jeremy Dixon: Dixon Jones Architects



Credit: Lorenz Kienzle

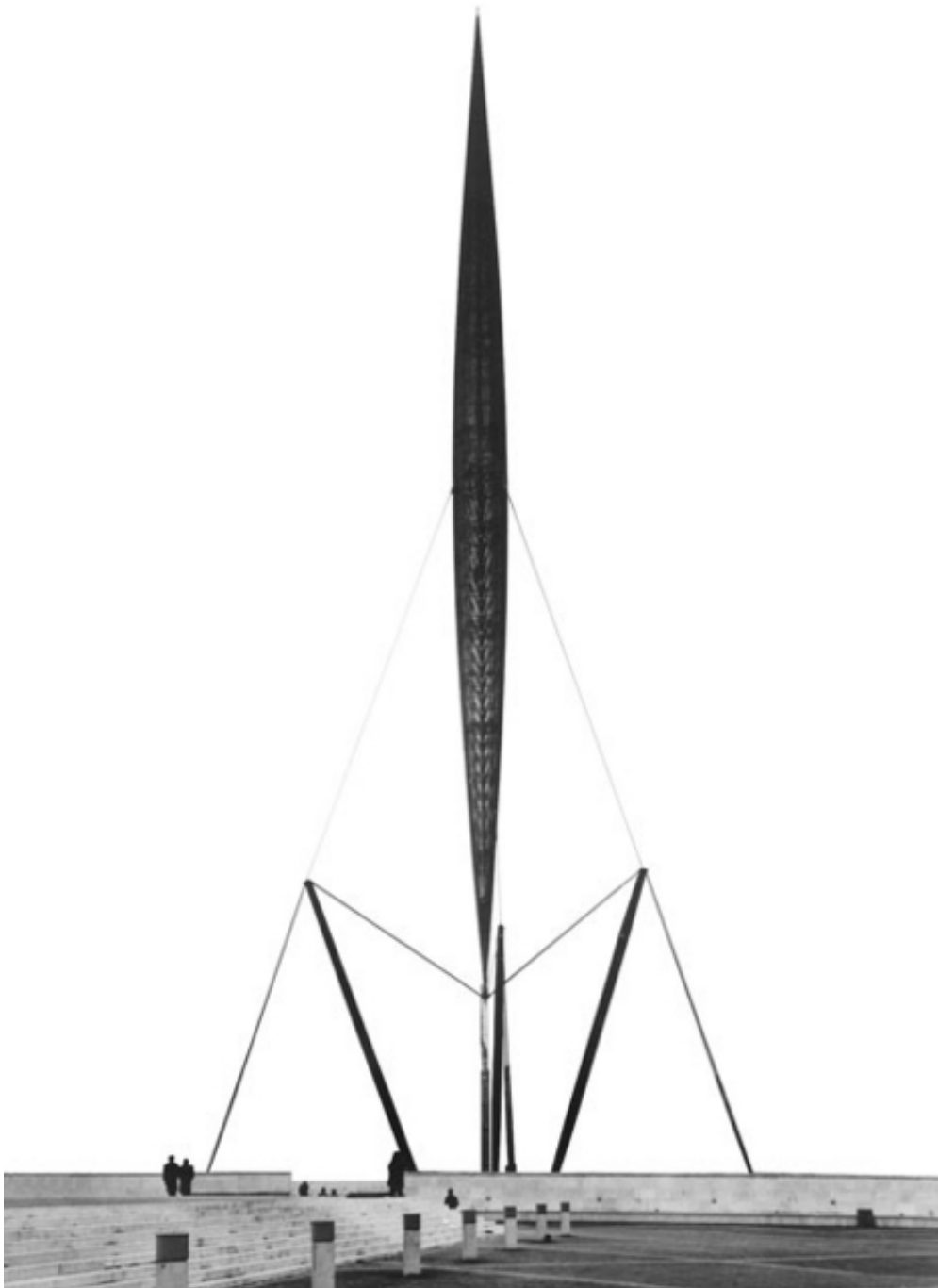
My most startlingly memorable architectural experience this year involves sculpture in a gallery. At Caruso

St John's Gagosian Gallery is a group of giant Richard Serra sculptures that provide a scale shock between object and minimalist space.

The works create continuous, curved enclosures that vary in character from the serene to the worryingly claustrophobic. As with all Serra work, quality of material and surface are everything.

They fill the whole space. How in the hell did they get them in? Apparently, complete walls of the building were demolished, with the massive pieces moved across temporary zinc floors on air pads.

I like the complexity of the curved surfaces, the ability to arouse subtle emotions through the manipulation of space, and the mystery of their very presence. Almost impossible to convey in photographs, they are something to wonder at.



Original print headline – Designs to beat the downturn blues

Culture quiz

1 Who was too heavy to handle?

- A Pevsner's London, Volumes 1 to 6
- B The Phaidon Atlas of World Architecture
- C Jean Nouvel by Jean Nouvel
- D Le Corbusier Le Grand

2 What might go bust for a second time?

- A Lehman Brothers
- B Woolworths
- C The Public
- D Will Alsop

3 Who blamed its funding crisis on the credit crunch?

- A The Public
- B The Architecture Foundation
- C The Lighthouse
- D The Museum of Liverpool

4 What failed to engage with the public and was axed?

- A Open House
- B London Festival of Architecture
- C Architecture Week
- D Grand Designs

5 Who wants to rebuild Skylon? (Above)

- A Norman Foster
- B Jack Pringle
- C Boris Johnson
- D Peter Mandelson

6 Who said: "If there will be no building, I will be sad, but morally I have won?"

- A Zaha Hadid
- B Jan Kaplicky
- C Jørn Utzon
- D Jacques Herzog
- A Rabbits
- B Horses
- C Elephants

D Porcupines

Quiz answers

1 Who was too heavy to handle?

D Le Corbusier Le Grand

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B Jan Kaplicky

7 Which animals have a new "des res"?

C Elephants

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Readers' comments (2)

muhammad/anonymouse | 19 December 2008 5:53 pm

What a shame that you did not have the courage to give 'building of the year' to the project that you really felt deserved it. This is the kind of ammunition the traditionalists love getting from journalists and commentators. It gives them the opportunity to play the victim (and the credibility also). Isn't it the duty of journalists to be honest?