

CULTURE

Voyage of discovery

David Kohn and Fiona Banner's nautically inspired hotel room perched above the Hayward Gallery is open for business, writes **Ellis Woodman**

"We got more than 500 entries but there were a lot of pods," Alain de Botton tells me as we stand on the deck of the newly completed winner of last year's A Room for London competition. It's not hard to see why. We are, after all, perched on a concrete crag of the Hayward Gallery, whose designers included future Archigram members Ron Herron, Warren Chalk and Dennis Crompton.

De Botton's dream of a one room hotel, hosting a different group of guests for every night of the Olympic year, carries a strong whiff of sixties radicalism — a plug-in, in all but name. And yet the winning proposal in the competition run by de Botton's charity, Living Architecture, in collaboration with Artangel, could hardly be further in spirit from Archigram's pop-futurism.

Designed by David Kohn Architects and the artist Fiona Banner it is modelled closely on the boat in which Joseph Conrad travelled up the River Congo, a journey that famously inspired his novella *Heart of Darkness*. This association is teased out in the internal fittings, which include wall-mounted maps describing the river's course, books on Leopold II's imperial adventures and even a portrait of the old monster, which can thankfully be hidden



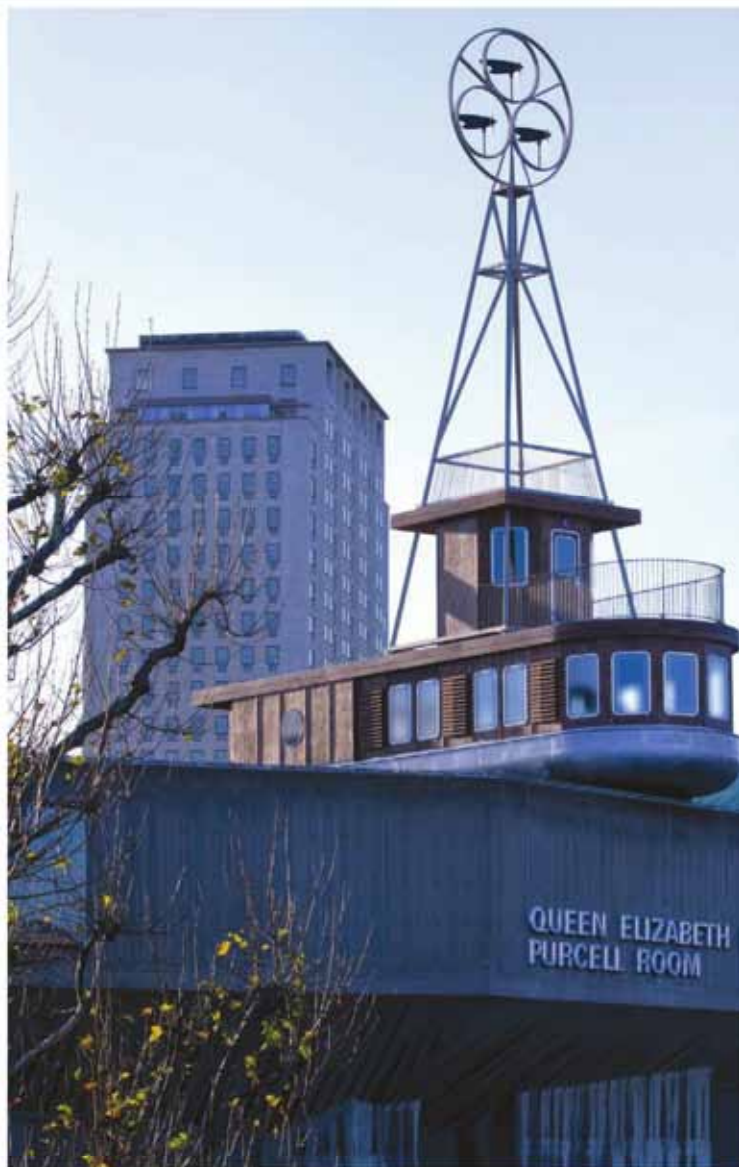
Circular window and seating at one end of the structure.

Suss out the assorted hatches, folding desks and ladders, and you can look out from an observation deck under the wind turbine

from view behind folding panels.

In a year in which the world descends on London in a celebration of Olympic ideals, we find ourselves isolated, in another time and place, bound for the horizon with no healthy purpose in mind.

If all that makes it sound like guests will be unlikely to get a good night's sleep, the space does at least offer opportunities for distraction from its sinister premise. The view, for one thing, is mesmerising. If you prove capable of sussing out the assorted hatches, folding desks and ladders you will need to operate, you can look out not only from the hull and main



Diplomatic service

This thorough and fascinating book explores the history of Britain's embassies and missions, says **Kay Hughes**

BOOK

ROOM FOR DIPLOMACY: BRITAIN'S DIPLOMATIC BUILDINGS OVERSEAS 1800-2000

By **Mark Bertram**
Spire Books, 480pp, HB, £45

★★★★☆

Written by a former head of the Foreign Office's estate department, this book charts the story of the past and present outposts of the UK and its diplomatic missions.

Mark Bertram uses original correspondence to explore how sites, designs and buildings were

procured, and reflects on the role of the estate as a medium for promoting British interests overseas. Considerations of status, global presence and national aspiration are always to the fore.

This is a book for any architect wanting to understand how the balance of design and funding is played out through government and its representatives. Examples such as the Brasilia Embassy, which the Smithsons revised five times before it was shelved, bring to life the complexity of project approvals.

Bertram takes the reader on a journey from the first commissions and acquisitions where the

Treasury sought advice from a coterie of high-profile architects from the Office of Works such as Robert Smirke and Charles Barry to the later works by the Property Services Agency (PSA) with its large departmental hold on all public sector commissions through its in-house design teams.

What becomes clear is that developer deals (for example Manila 1938), land swaps, security issues (Tokyo 1838 and Shanghai 1900), and disagreements between occupants and funders are far from new. Along the way the author describes a strikingly diverse range of building solutions from early modular



Michael Wilford's British Embassy in Berlin.

and pre-fabricated bungalows, to formal colonial style buildings (Tehran 1865), to schemes that employ indigenous building tech-

niques. Fascinatingly, it seems the more remote and difficult outposts were often seized on as opportunities to trial new approaches to

construction and procurement. As new nations have emerged and political barriers risen, the estate has grown. Both the

The design is based on the boat that inspired Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

deck but also from a pocket-handkerchief observation deck lodged within the frame of the wind turbine, which gives the project its commanding profile.

The large porthole of the WC is also a treat, its circular form echoed both in the view of the London Eye that it frames and in the shaving mirror it illuminates.

Kohn cites the Soane museum as a secondary reference — like the boat that Conrad's Marlow occupies, it is another refuge from the world, where obsession has run wild. The influence is discernible in the blood-red walls and liberal provision of mirrors, but most of all in the ingenious transformative furniture. After their initial encounter with chastely separated single beds, guests will be particularly relieved to discover that they



The toilet window frames the London Eye.

can be neatly drawn together to occupy the centre of the room.

Bookings for the first six months sold out in 12 minutes, and the remainder of the year was set to go on sale yesterday. Those who didn't manage to secure a night's stay will have to make do with the year-long programme of concerts, readings and sound-works being broadcast from the structure, which promises to further explore the themes of displacement and empire that Banner and Kohn have framed.

After that, their boat's destination remains unknown. There is talk of it travelling around outer London but there has also been an appeal for it to journey to Hong Kong. Wherever it ends up, it is hard to imagine it resonating quite as suggestively as it does in its present situation. As the world's eyes turn to London, they will find, at its centre, a vessel carrying some very strange cargo indeed.

increased number of buildings and the widened range of attitudes to openness, security and architectural identity have made the Foreign Office's mission ever more complex.

The final chapters cover some of the recent high-profile projects such as Terry Farrell's consulate in Hong Kong and the embassies in Berlin (Michael Wilford & Partners) and Moscow (ABK), undertaken when Bertram was in post.

The author is exceptionally modest about his own achievements, but he cultured a highly effective department and team of estate professionals while managing resources efficiently. Part of that success lay in the fact that he recognised the role of design, good client briefing and creativity in resolving competing requirements. His legacy is to be found not only in a roster of distinguished buildings, but in the experienced team he fostered.

Bertram's successor Stephen Whittle also proved a highly effective design champion steering such embassy projects as those in

Dar es Salaam (Manser Practice), Warsaw (Tony Fretton Architects) and Colombo (Richard Murphy Architects) to happy conclusions.

It is sad therefore to see that the Foreign Office has now appointed a framework panel of architects

The more remote outposts were seized on as opportunities to trial new approaches

that scarcely reflects the best of British talent, sacrificing the ability to reflect the UK's unique identity to a global audience. Let's hope that this faltering confidence is short lived. Bertram's book suggests the extent of what is at stake. *Kay Hughes was formerly senior project sponsor at the Foreign Office. She is now principal design adviser at the Olympic Delivery Authority.*

SLOGANS & BATTLE CRIES

'The Ape of Nature'

Architectural aphorisms explored by Paul Shephard

In one corner of the faceplate of Alberti's books on building there is a picture of an ape, a poor creature stuck somewhere on the great chain of being. Alberti calls it the Ape of Nature, and he's there to show that buildings are analogous to nature as apes are to humans: nature being God's work and our buildings being an approximate but inferior copy.

We have come so far from this kind of thinking that it can only be called progress, though were anyone now to

produce a building as interesting as the Tempietto Del Santo Sepolcro sitting inside the church of San Pancrazio like Noah's ark at rest after the flood, I would cross an ocean to see it.

But now here's Billie at the door wearing her hiking boots and all set to go and visit the wonders of Wiltshire; to see some seriously mimetic architecture. Stonehenge is an imitation of heavenly orbits, a stone cartwheel of mathematical computation derived from the moon's

metonic cycle as sophisticated, Billie says, as the Large Hadron Collider buried under Geneva that shares Stonehenge's form and purpose.

Down the road is the East Kennet Long Barrow (a simulacrum of the landscape's buried spirits) and Silbury Hill



Silbury Hill: as good as nature?

(a human-made hill made of chalk and faced with turf). There is nothing warty inferior about these works, she says; they are made of human nature, a force as powerful and profound as all the other natures.

She shows me a twitpic just in from Ben in Pudong, showing the city powering into the sky in imitation of New York's own imitation of land values, which themselves are an imitation of the human pecking order. "See that?" she says. "It's the force of human nature."



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