

Design Review:
**Mary Rose
Museum**

Designed by Wilkinson Eyre

Portsmouth

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Amidst the rich setting of the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, this building to house the Mary Rose and all her precious artefacts will have an eminent position. We are very pleased that this scheme has the makings of an exciting and informative museum environment and will be a successful addition to the Dockyard. It presents an intelligent response to the many constraints of the site, and we welcome the proposed design as a fine piece of architecture. The elliptical form with the two pavilions strikes us as an accomplished design idea and provides a compelling enclosure for the Mary Rose. We have a few comments to make on the treatment of the public space around the building, and on the way the ellipse and the two pavilions come together. We also think that the interior design of the exhibition space needs some clarification in order to make the most of the Mary Rose experience.

Public space

Within the wider Historic Dockland, the Mary Rose Museum will be one of many attractions, and therefore needs to be considered within the context of pedestrian flows across the site. This will be particularly important if the Block Mills to the north become part of the publicly accessible area. We think that the movements of visitors around HMS Victory and the Mary Rose Museum, particularly the flows towards the entrance, should be explored in more detail to avoid bottlenecks. For example, the seating deck adjacent to the café protrudes into the circulation space and further reduces the distance between the museum building and the Victory escape stair. The open space between HMS Victory, the fenced off Ministry of Defence land and the proposed museum building requires careful design to create a convincing space in Victory Plaza. We think that this area has not yet reached the quality of the museum. It is not fully clear how visitors will use this square and where they could sit and relax. In our opinion, Victory Plaza could make more of the adjacency to the harbour basin in order to enhance the maritime experience. At present, the entrance and café pavilion blocks most of the view from the square to the waterfront. We wonder whether a different position of the pavilion would help to improve the quality of the square. Locating the entrance pavilion further east would widen the space between HMS Victory and the museum and allow better visual connections to ships moored in the harbour. The symmetry of the plan, which will not be read from outside, appears to us perhaps less important than the optimum placing of the pavilions to define the external spaces.

Building

While we welcome the proposed pavilions as an intelligent solution to provide auxiliary museum facilities outside the exhibition hall, we think that these are less confident and convincing than the main building. Their architectural detailing perhaps lacks the architectural strength of the elliptical hall. To support the ellipse rather than to compete with it, the pavilions should be distinctively separated from the main building, but need to have very careful design considerations at the point at which they connect. As showcases to the Mary Rose world, they must both create the entrance points and demonstrate engagement with the Dockland. We should encourage the clients and team to take a view on the 'design life' of the proposal so that a longer life is considered and to ensure as a consequence that the use of metal skin on the roof and the timber of the walls are specified accordingly.

Interior

We welcome the idea of creating a "virtual" hull which will contain the artefacts. We think that the rationale leading from this initial concept to the final building design is intriguing, particularly bearing in mind the abundance of constraints in terms of the conservation process and the historic dry dock. However, we are not fully convinced by the current proposal for the 'virtual' hull from concrete or Glassfibre Reinforced Concrete. This element made a strong statement as a glass structure at competition stage. Now, the proposed replica appears to be a less confident proposition, caught between being a contemporary construction and trying to blend in with the historic artefacts. This key issue of how to design the non-authentic shell which will contain the authentic artefacts needs to be further articulated. We are not convinced that the concrete replica would really demonstrate the new, if parallel, world in which they are now displayed.

Conclusion

The new museum for the Mary Rose will offer a unique experience for visitors of the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. We applaud its strong, simple form. It works well within the sensitive context of the Dockyard and provides a high quality environment for the ship and her visitors. In our view, the points about the outdoor spaces, the design of the pavilions and the "virtual" hull do not diminish the overall quality of the scheme, but should be addressed in order to achieve a building that lives up to the significance of the objects it contains.

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