Critics

Design

Why a cycle hub is more sustainable than 400 trees

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London Design Biennale
Somerset House, London
Kingston Cycle Hub
Kingston upon Thames

The lofty ideas on sustainability espoused by global designers in London are given more concrete form in a cyclists' utopia further up the River Thames

LEFT The centrepiece of London Design Biennale is Es Devlin's Forest for Change, for which 400 trees were installed in the courtyard of Somerset House in London. Ed Reeve

ABOVE/RIGHT Interior and exterior views of Kingston Cycle Hub, by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects and the engineers Buro Happold.

ABOVE The African Diaspora pavilion, also part of the Design Biennale at Somerset House. Ed Reeve

First, let me defend a dead white man. The 18th-century architect William Chambers was not, as the designer Es Devlin suggests, a tree-hater. He designed Kew Gardens, wrote treatises on gardening and said that "gardeners, like poets, should give a loose to their imagination and even fly beyond the bounds of truth". He may or may not have been reprehensible in other ways, for example when he was an employee of the Swedish East India Company, but on the charge of arboriphobia he is innocent.

It's true that he didn't want any trees in the imposing classical courtyard of Somerset House in London, which he designed, a fact that has provoked Devlin to install a temporary Forest for Change, the centrepiece of the London Design Biennale. Four hundred trees have been installed, which will later be permanently planted in London boroughs. Here, you can wander its winding paths and hear birdsong from round the world, part of a soundtrack by Brian Eno. The project has been realised with the support of the film-maker Richard Curtis and has some of the feelgood vibe of *Love Actually* and *Notting Hill*.

In a clearing at one end, 17 pillars stand, telling you about the United Nations-backed global goals for sustainable development. Millennial-sounding voices play through speakers, playbacks of comments invited from visitors. They say things such as: "I want to live in a world where sustainable fashion is the norm" and: "I want to live in a world where big businesses act responsibly and care for their employees."

In the blocks around the court, a series of installations, some of them representing individual countries, expands on themes of sustainability. Poland offers an exhibit on the use of fabrics to keep homes warm or cool and Chile an array of musical instruments carved out of stone. The latter is seeking to make a point about the uses and abuses of minerals. The Latvians have built a box-like structure to which you can address questions, which dispenses cryptic answers in the form of lines from the nation's folk tales. It's a sort of low-tech, emotionally aware Siri, which turns out to contain (spoiler alert!) an actual human being. It's engaging, if a little obscure in its purpose.

Out on the riverside terrace of Somerset House there's a Pavilion of the African Diaspora, a conch-shaped events space by the luxury product designer Ini Archibong, described as "a sanctuary to tell stories and create a reality where voices are recognised and respected for the diversity of their timbre". Germany brings us a room called Spoon Archaeology, a meditation on disposable plastic cutlery, which is more interesting than it sounds. There are text-heavy displays such as Kingston University's room on Designing for Time. The aims of these installations are to "foster international dialogue towards seeking solutions to the world's biggest global challenges".

This is all well and good. Devlin's grove is as charming as can be, framing Chambers's straight lines in intriguing ways. As an example of the desirability of trees in cities, it works. A tree in temporary, shallow soil, it must be said, can never be as happy and rewarding as one in actual ground. Some look a bit droopy. You're instructed not to touch them and they're too small to sit under. And, in the clearing, instead of the lecturing totems – there must be another way to convey their messages – it would be really nice to have some benches. The forest's extent is circumscribed by the need to maintain access for ambulances round the outside. (which, as I was once taken by one from this very courtyard following an ice-skating accident, I can appreciate). That all said, the first reaction to the sudden boskiness of this hard space is one of delight.

But you also feel that, since we're living in a climate emergency, something more urgent is needed than the indirect messaging of the Biennale. We are surely past the stage of "fostering dialogue" and raising awareness – how about some clear, strong, large-scale ideas as to what can actually be done? A small treat in the German spoon exhibit is a minor film by the great 20th-century designers Ray and Charles Eames, about eating with banana leaves as implements. They were also geniuses at conveying messages through impactful multimedia displays and it would be wonderful if similar genius could be found now.

Some tough questions could usefully be addressed. Apparently, all world leaders have signed up to the global goals, which presumably includes the likes of presidents Lukashenko of Belarus and Bolsonaro of Brazil. Doesn't this ring some alarm bells? If people like them claim to support "peace, justice and strong institutions" (goal 16) and "sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems" (goal 15), doesn't it suggest that the really hard work is not in mouthing the words, but in making them happen?

The tone of the Biennale would not be much clearer if the words VIRTUE SIGNAL were written in topiary. In which context, Devlin's misreading of Chambers is telling: as a prompt to creative action it's fine, but it's also glib. It's easy to portray the European Enlightenment as a period of white male arrogance – it was – but harder to acknowledge that it included a fascination with, and sometimes love for, nature to which the contemporary world is indebted. If Chambers, as Devlin claims, embodied his epoch's "attitude of human dominance over nature", in what way is her deployment of arboreal mascots different?

All of which makes welcome a new three-storey cycle hub in Kingston upon Thames, by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects and the engineers Buro Happold, a practical step to address issues of sustainability. It's a British version of the bike storage facilities common in the Netherlands that, aiming to be more than a piece of equipment, seeks to raise the quality of its urban setting. It has space for a cafe and a repair shop as well as storage racks for 450 bicycles. Like the stations of the Victorian railways and the London underground of the 1930s, it's about bringing dignity to transport infrastructure. "Usually," says Wigglesworth, such places are "really dire, an afterthought, second class". Her design is about "raising the status of cycling. It is eye-catching and aesthetic, which gives it a sense of importance."

The hub is part of a "mini Holland", one of the better concepts to come out of Boris Johnson's mayoralty of London, which means that outer London boroughs, in this case Kingston, can access funding for Dutch-style cycling infrastructure. The new building stands next to Kingston station, connecting a new network of cycling routes with the railways.

The setting is a strange hybrid. It's a historic Surrey market town gobbled by a London suburb, one where seven Saxon kings were crowned, with pleasant, irregular streets and squares made up of variegated buildings accumulated over time. It is shaped by its location on a major route into London – until the 18th century, Kingston Bridge was the last one over the Thames before London Bridge, many miles downriver. Volumes of traffic still funnel through, handled by a brutal 1980s multi-lane road system. The 1980s also brought big retail – a shopping mall, a John Lewis – grafted awkwardly on to the town's quainter and more intimate fabric.

> *We are surely past the stage of 'fostering dialogue'... how about some clear, strong, large-scale ideas?*

The new project includes, as well as the storage building, some taming of the traffic, a new pedestrian bridge over one of those roads and gardens linking the hub and the bridge, designed by the Dutch landscape architects Okra. Taken together, these projects bring a little calm and refuge to what Wigglesworth calls a "very hostile environment". They ease and encourage connections to the nearby River Thames, of whose presence, on arrival at the station, you previously got no clue.

Both bridge and storage building are animated by crisscrossing steel struts at different scales, a simple enough device that uses their engineering to bring character and presence. Wigglesworth says that their repeating V-shapes refer to the crowns of those Saxon kings. She also claims inspiration from the Kingston-born photographer Eadweard Muybridge: the bridge and the hub are meant to frame movement in the same way that his images subdivided the actions of people and animals.

You wouldn't get these references if you weren't told, but their justification is in the outcome. The new work doesn't wholly succeed in the almost impossible task of standing up to the roads, but it makes its setting much more civilised. "Older women like myself," says Wigglesworth, "are scared, not confident, about cycling." Her work, and the network of which it is part, promises to engender less fear and more pride.