

CULTURE

It's hammer time

This year's Studio in the Woods upheld its yearly outdoor tradition of enacting intellectual debate with chainsaws, reports **James R Payne**

WORKSHOP

STUDIO IN THE WOODS 2010
Isle of Wight
July 8-11
★★★★★

Over a scorching long weekend, the architectural utopia of Studio in the Woods existed fleetingly and safely at one remove from reality in the hills and valleys of the Isle of Wight. Organised this year for the first time by the new Isle of Wight Architecture Centre (IOWAC), the event continues the format started by Bath-based Mitchell Taylor Workshop in 2006. A family farm of several hundred acres provided the setting, a strip of land meandering up through a sheltered valley flanked by ancient woodland to wide grassy uplands of rolling hills with panoramic views over most of the island.

All the refinements of latter-day festivals supported the efforts of some 70 students and tutors organised into five teams. Working up through the valley section, two barns were used for lectures, presentations and (surprisingly fine) dining. A "loo-city" of pre-fabricated shower and compost WC towers designed by Matthew Dalziel and Neil Evensen provided "glamping" class facilities. The busy mobile saw-mill converted island-grown Corsican pine trunks into construction materials and a thick carpet of sawdust.

This exemplifies the ambition of IOWAC to encourage a stronger local culture of architecture using the resources at hand as an alternative to importing materials from the mainland. The timber was sourced by Natural Enterprises, an organisation set up to foster productive links between environmental and economic initiatives on the island.

As such collaborations suggest, this was far from being just a bunch of hippies waving chainsaws in the woods, the event



Students visiting Studio Weave's finished Fire Folly beacon.

proved to be a concentrated learning experience in debating and evolving ideas and of collectively hammering together the results. It was impressive to see how much can be achieved in little more than two days by teams of a dozen people with no bureaucracy or paperwork involved – apart from the obligatory health and safety lecture.

Two evenings of lectures broadened the frame of reference beyond the folksy and included a presentation by AA tutor Shin Egashira, who made compelling use of film to describe his constructions.

According to effusive visiting critic and speaker Ted Cullinan, projects were graded on the "testosterone scale" of tonnage of wood shifted. Piers Taylor and Meredith Bowles scored highly with their enclosed box truss can-

tilevering impressively from a supporting tree to lift visitors into the space below the forest canopy. Newcomers Studio Weave erected a hill-top fire beacon on the axis of the valley that perfectly smoked all those who helped to build it.

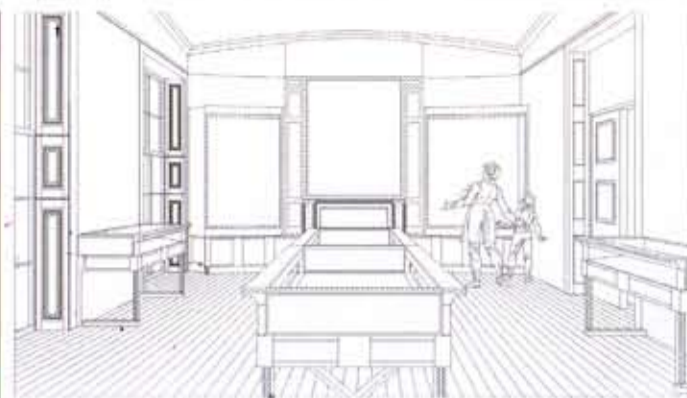
The landscape held all of these projects, apart from the tree-house, within sight of each other in the same way as the fantasy rural idyll of 18th century landscape garden Stourhead. Familiar themes of environmental and land-art informed Toby Lewis's

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finely detailed land pier, built as a measure of the landscape and an individual's perception of it. Erect Architecture exploited the material character of thinly sliced green timber with a hill-side construction curled up like a giant wood shaving. The team, headed up by Gianni Botsford and Kate Darby, used mirrors to reflect spots of light on a nearby chalk escarpment at specific times of the day, the perfect alibi for some dynamic and elegant form-making.

A one-day children's workshop was held in parallel to investigate the mythical origins of architecture, fairy houses and woodland dens. At this point it was time to return to the city and resist the urge to move in permanently to become a rambling picturesque hermit.

James Payne is a unit master at London Metropolitan University



Caruso St John's exhibition designs show fitted wooden cabinets.

Soane arrangers

A new exhibition shows the latest attempt to renew Sir John Soane's Museum, says **Tony McIntyre**

EXHIBITION

PERMANENTLY MAGICAL
Sir John Soane's Museum,
13 Lincoln's Inn Fields,
London, WC2. www.soane.org
Until September 4
★★★★★

I have never come across a more intelligent and intriguing museum than the Soane, and part of its "permanent magic" (the phrase is Isaac D'Israeli's description of the house in a letter to Sir John Soane) is its ability to evolve as a building and a collection. One wouldn't have thought that possible.

The Act of Parliament drawn up to formalise the house as a national collection was quite specific in prohibiting alteration of the arrangements of the building and the objects it contained. But the little clause that said "except in cases of absolute necessity" became a licence for major rearrangement and alteration, especially under the curatorship of James Wild (1878-92), who tore down, rebuilt and reorganised at a prodigious rate.

A significant change in direction came with the appointment of the first non-architect, Peter Thornton, in 1984. Suddenly the archives became a subject of interest, with cataloguing the collection and restoration of Soane's house to its 1837 state becoming the goals. Margaret Richardson took over and began the fundraising and education programmes that happily coincided with a growing interest in Soane as a great English architect. On my many visits during the seventies I was generally the only one there. Now, with Tim Knox as museum director, there is a hefty queue for entry at all times of day.

The current exhibition previews the last phase – Opening Up the Soane – of a 25-year series of projects, involving a wide team of architects and craftsmen in a £7 million undertaking. As in past works, Julian Harrap Architects is handling the restoration of the historic fabric and decorative finishes, reinstating much of Soane's private quarters in No 13 that were never intended for public view: his bathroom, bedroom and even the little "oratory", in effect a little shrine to his wife, who had died in 1815. Discovery of large sections

of original hand-painted wallpaper promise to make this a particularly rich set of rooms.

This exhibition takes place in the little space fitted out by Eva Jiricna in the mid-nineties. Her glass cabinets are to be sold and new exhibition spaces provided in No 12 by architect Caruso St John. These will house temporary exhibitions as well as objects Soane collected but kept out of his main collection.

It seems the days of steel and glass as a contrast in historic spaces are over. Caruso St John's designs show fitted wooden cabinets and furniture with a period feel, to "provide a seamless mediation between drawings, objects, interpretation... and the room [they are in]". It is always hard to judge furniture from drawings as so much of its character derives from execution. The designs look very right for the rooms – can their construction be kept delicate enough?

Mrs Soane's bonnet

Other works include the recreation, by Barley Studios, of a large stained glass window destroyed in the second world war, and of the cork model of Pompeii, half of which was destroyed in the 19th century. This work is being undertaken in medieval secrecy by German artisans, using "cork, plaster and heated metal implements".

The exhibition contains not only drawings but also many wonderful objects, never before displayed, that will find a permanent home when the job is completed in the next two years. No doubt part of the purpose of the exhibition is to help bridge the gap in funding, which in spite of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant still stands at a little over £1 million. And what a pity suppliers are not as patient as in the early 19th century. On display is a bill, dated 14 July 1814, for one of Mrs Soane's bonnets, for £1-11-6, and a note: "delivered last Xmas".

No doubt the funding will come and the astonishing Soane Museum be returned as close to former glory as is possible to make it, and all its treasures on display at last in their correct order. Permanently magical – I can't wait. Will this condition of stasis mean the end of the line for curators, the museum fixed forever? I suspect the institution's ability to go on surprising will remain undiminished.

BUILDING A LIBRARY: 22

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES

By Jane Jacobs, 1961.

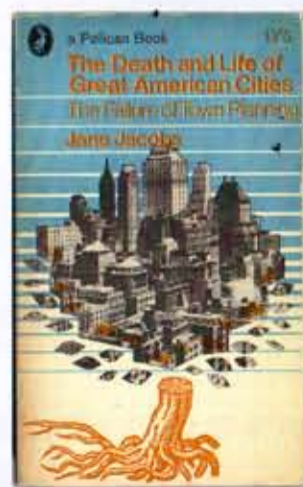
This influential book about what makes safe and livable cities is a homemade product, the work of an autodidact who disbelieves most of what she's told and decides to find out for herself.

Her method is close observation of the large American city. She begins with one city, even one street, her own in the West Village.

From the start the bigger reality of New York is broken into units one can experience immediately, on foot. The metropolis shrinks to the neighbourhood, best embodied in the street, and is then focused further on to the sidewalk. The book actually contains three separate chapters on "uses of sidewalks". Her investigation of how people use this humble form of public space is the heart of Jane Jacobs' feisty book.

The famous catalogue of one day's events on one block, "the ballet of Hudson Street", is a counterargument to all the publications of theorists and planners. She also takes the battle to the territory laid waste by idealists, whose intended amenities become no-go areas.

Her anger is wonderful to



witness, yet sometimes leads her astray. She comes to see open space, beloved of planners, as an enemy of the vitality of the street. She quotes project-

dwellers who hate lawns the planners have awarded them, and claims that large parks increase air pollution because people use cars to get there.

Jacobs can be memorable on the attack: Le Corbusier's city "says everything in a flash like a good advertisement". She can also empathise with her opponents: for Robert Moses' generation the Radiant City holds the allure of a whole new world of modernity.

Her demolitions are bracing and have been effective. But occasionally she creates her own sacred cows, like Manhattan's long block as the cause of countless urban ills, or elevator attendants as a cure for vandalism.

Robert Harbison