

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE FUTURE GETS OLD

A modernist icon, London's Barbican Conservatory is in need of renovation. Can concrete be sustainable?

By John Grindrod
Photography by Peter Bloomfield

to remind myself Grace Jones is 78. Plans for the Barbican go back more than seven decades too. It was the City of London's postwar experiment in creating a swanky new residential and cultural district on London's biggest bomb site. Even as the place grows visibly older, it still feels shockingly new. Though these days, the tone of some of the spaces has gone from "luxe glamour" to "cranky starship".

This is particularly true of the Conservatory. "Cinematic and epic" are the words Charlotte Harris uses for it. Her landscape design practice Harris Bugg will be the ones reworking the planting for the refurb. "It's the combination of form and texture," Harris explains, "different colours of green, it's very powerful, it's theatrical, it's unapologetically dramatic." There certainly is something cinematic about the place - part Kubrick tracking shot, part ruined jungle citadel in an Indiana Jones movie. Above all, it reminds me of 1972 sci-fi classic *Silent Running*, in which the fragile spacecraft biodome is under constant threat of destruction. The Barbican could easily be floating in space - it might enjoy it, in fact.

Harris thinks the Conservatory is hidden in plain sight, a secret indoor jungle in a brutalist megastructure. "This is as curated as anything else here," she suggests. "It's the Barbican's only permanent collection. And it's an art form, right?" Even brutes need some TLC, though. The Barbican renewal will involve large sections of the Grade II-listed arts centre being closed from next year until 2030, as teams of architects from Allies and Morrison and Asif Khan, engineers from Buro Happold, and numerous other partners get to grips with this concrete giant and its ageing futurism.

The Conservatory is one of their most urgent jobs. The roof is covered in scaffolding and netting because the glass is unsafe. When they water the plants, it leaks into the offices below. The ventilation louvres no longer work. A small arid house within the Conservatory is now so dangerous, thanks to failing glazing, that it can only be accessed if you're wearing a hard hat. As well as towering tree ferns and glossy-leafed monstera, there are numerous *Ficus benjamina*, a familiar houseplant, which Harris tells me long ago broke free of their pots, and whose roots now snake into the building's concrete structure. The Barbican is alive! From an engineering point of view, that's not so good, apparently. And the structured planting has been rather more improvised than it seems. Once, people would just donate plants, and pests

A few weeks ago I got a message from my niece. "Just seen that you can adopt a plant from the Barbican Conservatory!" she wrote. "They are giving away cuttings from the plants while they close for a refurb." It sounded magical, a chance to explore one of London's most tantalising curiosities, the great brutalist glasshouse. It also felt a little plaintive, the cuttings bestowed like a locket of hair from an ailing loved one.

The Barbican Conservatory is built around the fly tower of the theatre below, the craggy concrete creating a spectacular backdrop for a riot of showy architectural plants. I recently saw Grace Jones in concert, and she gave off a similar vibe: uncompromising, edgy and full of attitude. As she humped the railings in a remarkable hat, I had

Right: View of the Lakeside Terrace outside the newly opened Barbican Centre in 1982. Photographer Peter Bloomfield documented the centre's early years

and diseases have been introduced from them, as well as from the bouquets from weddings and events hosted there.

The Barbican Conservatory is one of two eco-brutalist glasshouses of global significance, the other being the majestic concrete vaulting of the Boettcher Memorial Tropical Conservatory in Denver, Colorado. These environments are rare and precious: they can't offset the emissions of their decades-old construction – the construction of brutalism was hugely costly in terms of carbon emissions – but they can help bring nature and the built environment closer together without yet more blank-slate reconstruction. They are also historically important moments in a continuum that links ancient hanging gardens to modern environmental concerns. Harris, who sees eco-brutalism as a movement treating architecture and landscape as an integrated language, aims to create an indoor garden that is both more sustainable and powerfully at one with all that stark rough concrete.

The Barbican recently hosted 500 people at the first wildly popular plant adoption event, full of enthusiasts for both the plants and the place. "I think the Conservatory is the best bit," says Harris. "But I am biased."

AS I WANDER FROM ARTS CENTRE TO residential estate, it's amazing how many young people I see, filming themselves or just hanging out in this relatively safe environment. "We spend half our life helping to direct people," Barbican resident Shelagh Wright tells me. "People recreating the Harry Styles leap," her partner Peter Jenkinson adds, referring to the acrobatic video for the pop star's 2022 single "As It Was". Wright and Jenkinson are the kind of engaged culture lovers the Barbican Centre relies on. As we lounge in their enviably stylish midcentury-modern flat, they tell me about the billion-pound investment in the area, from the Centre to the new London Museum at nearby Smithfield (which architect Asif Khan is also working on). But before then the arts centre needs to face up to some pretty basic problems.

On recent trips I've noticed maintenance closures have become more common: some of its famously labyrinthine routes closed, sets of doors locked, the Conservatory almost impossible to find open. When the loos failed in the arts centre a suite of pop-up toilets appeared in the foyer, a plywood installation that made you feel like you were the art – and not caught at your best. A previous senior manager told Wright and Jenkinson that their staff were always having to stick gaffer tape over problem areas.

Wright and Jenkinson have been excited by what they've seen from the plans put forward. But they don't envy Philippa Simpson, the centre's chief operating officer, whose job it is to mastermind this transformation. Wright's dad worked with Basil Spence at Coventry Cathedral. "Spence had this line," she tells me, "which is 'the building



'It's really hard to unknit – everything is completely integrated and embedded and impossible to get to'

always wins'. Like, it dictates how everything happens. And I don't know whether the arts centre has just given in to that."

A few days later I meet with Simpson, who gives me a tour of the proposed works. "I'm Philippa," she says, shaking my hand. "Pip." Energised and fluent, she seems quite unflappable; if the Barbican ever does end up floating in space, I reckon she'd be pretty unfazed. Simpson joined two years ago from the V&A, with the mission of renewing the brutalist behemoth. There's lots to resolve. Most urgently, how to stop all those hidden electricity ducts and water pipes seizing up and failing. Water leaks through the concrete, and heat leaks from the windows; the ambitious concept drawings of the 1950s and '60s didn't anticipate the many complex technical issues of keeping a brutalist megastructure going, or imagine our actual future, where the climate crisis affects us all.

"It's an enormous statement," she enthuses. "A gift of the city." We're standing on the Barbican's quiet terrace by the lake, surrounded on all sides by this vast structure, a world within a world. It brings together so much. This is also the problem, she explains, "because it's really hard to unknit". She describes the plant room beneath our feet, roughly a third of the size of Wembley Stadium, as just one part of an ageing, invisible infrastructure. "Everything is completely integrated and embedded and impossible to get to."

Because it was built and opened within living memory, Simpson feels the Centre's leadership had been hesitant to embrace change. Older buildings, like the V&A, are more used to a lack of precious-

ness about interventions, she thinks, because no one remembers what they were like originally. People mind about the Barbican. "We're trying to establish it as an icon, at exactly the same moment as we're trying to pick it apart and totally change it."

In her first few weeks in the job, Simpson took up the Centre's proposed renewal masterplan, and had to make decisions about what was going to happen in the first five years, in time for 2032, its 50th year. She's decided to focus on the bits you don't have to pay to get into: the foyers, the Conservatory, and the sculpture court (in reality a curiously unresolved space above the concert hall that sits in the arms of Frobisher Crescent, a handsome semicircle of residential flats). Then there's what's known as "wayfinding" – creating simpler routes to the lakeside terrace for people visiting the arts centre. "When I joined," says Simpson, "I said if I could have one thing on my headstone, it would say 'She solved wayfinding at the Barbican'."

What she's not going to do is change its character. "Don't overclean it," she says. "Let the concrete be old concrete. It's OK." Some have nagged her to soften it. "That's exactly what I don't want," she says, indignantly. "You've got plenty of soft places. That's not what we're about at all." Yet one soft aspect of the Centre has gained approval from a surprising quarter. They asked a group of 16-25-year-olds what to do in the foyers, imagining they'd want something cool and clean. "But they were like, 'keep the carpet!'" This hint of domestic comfort helped them feel safe to cross the threshold.



Left and opening page: The initial planting phase of the Conservatory in March 1980. The Barbican's first director, Henry Wrong, commissioned these pictures

'We're trying to establish the Barbican as an icon at exactly the same moment that we're trying to pick it apart and totally change it'

THE BARBICAN IS NOT THE ONLY BRUTALIST complex whose futuristic dreams are colliding with the realities of ageing. Chris Allen, architect at Fielden Clegg Bradley Studios, led the team renovating the Southbank Centre almost a decade ago. He calls both the Southbank and the Barbican "exceptionally magical places for their external character and the way that you can walk around them and experience them". He loves how, for both, there are unified design attitudes that go all the way from door-handle to building.

"It's really interesting working on historic projects," he explains. "You have to do a lot of interpretation. What were they thinking at the time? What is the social context in which they were working?" The Southbank was intended as an open, accessible public space. The Barbican was always a little more exclusive, to cater to its upscale residents.

A lot of work was done to replace ageing tech with more sustainable solutions, particularly the air cooling system, which was entirely rethought, and to strip out decades of obsolete clutter that had built up, obscuring the space-age magnificence of its original form. The balance at the Southbank Centre, which he suspects the Barbican's architects will also encounter, was to find ways to embrace both the heritage of the place and its futuristic modernity, looking both ways at once. For instance, the pyramid rooflights at the Hayward Gallery, which were broken and not

fit for purpose, have been redesigned to provide solar shading instead, so that no direct light falls on the artworks. At the Barbican Conservatory, new glazing and shades will have to cope with our warming climate, to protect the plants not just from winter cold, as the original did, but from the summer heat. "It never appeases everyone," Allen says of renewing beloved structures. But he was thankful the work was received positively.

The Barbican arts centre we have today emerged quite late on: much of the housing was already finished and some occupied when new functions were still being added to an already complex design: theatre, concert hall, cinemas, gallery, library, restaurants and glasshouse. That design evolved right up until it opened. After that, the Centre's management reacted to the way people were approaching it: not on the high walks from Barbican tube as predicted, but via the submerged road, Beech Street. Various internal slopes and bridges were inserted later to make this alternative entrance more navigable. And so the central atrium is currently bisected by a bridge, blocking out light from above. Simpson aims to put this back to how it was, by making it easier to enter from the lakeside. She sees it as an evolving entity, in the same spirit that architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon had for a place that was begun in the 1950s and not finished until the 1980s.

But that's not the biggest bit of reconstruction. We're in the Conservatory, keeping an eye

out for signs of Gary Oldman, who's been filming here that morning. The platform we're standing on looks down on the lush planting and up at the scaffolding holding the roof together. They have events here, but it's leaky in terms of sound. And heat. Oh, and water, of course. If Simpson hadn't acted, the whole space might have soon had to close for good.

Instead, she wants the new Conservatory to be open every day to the public. Currently only 30 per cent is accessible, so there will be new lifts to the walkway that wraps around the fly tower, and widened pathways around the beds below to allow access for all. A never-realised water feature from the original drawings will be installed. Some of the new planting will take a while to bed in and grow to the sizes they have now, she admits, but she thinks this will help futureproof it. And there's an effort to revive construction and maintenance skills that could easily pass into history, learning from north London's Alexandra Palace, whose Victorian Theatre was reopened in 2018 after 80 years.

For those who don't know, the Conservatory is happening all the way up on the third floor. It's like flying the Crystal Palace on an airship. Indeed, the grisly fate of Joseph Paxton's south London monolith, which burnt down in 1936, is a reminder that spectacular feats of architecture and engineering don't just keep standing by themselves. While the renewal represents an opportunity to attract those intimidated by the Barbican's aloofness and complexity, it's also an urgent intervention allowing it to live a long and happy life without the accumulated baggage of bad habits.

"I do believe this in buildings," Simpson declares, as we look up at the craggy apartments towering above the Centre. "The spirit in which they're built is the spirit in which you receive them forever. They very rarely change their identity."

The future the Barbican represents may be growing old here but it has not become obsolete. Far from it. The kind of multi-level, multi-use environment they built 70 years ago feels more inspiring than ever today. Creating a green space in the city, bringing together the disciplines of architecture and horticulture, beside all of those other cultural amenities, schools and housing types. "It still feels really radical," enthuses landscape designer Charlotte Harris. "It is a really intact, significant expression of an ambitious moment in postwar British design thinking about nature in the city, isn't it?"

The Barbican is full of contradictions. It feels both ancient and modern, heavy and light, open and enclosed. The wonder and the strangeness of it is, says an approving Harris, "why you fall in love with it". Here's hoping the renewal project helps bring that experience to new generations, sharing it like a precious cutting from the Conservatory. **FT**