

Going with the Grain

Nissen Richards' considered interventions at the National Waterways Museum Gloucester

Photos
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The National Waterways Museum Gloucester is housed in the grade-2-listed Llanthony Warehouse at Gloucester Docks. After decades of deterioration and piecemeal interventions, the building's heritage had become lost behind domestic-scale additions and alterations. Nissen Richards Studio worked closely with the Canal & River Trust to develop a brief to open up the museum, both physically, to the adjacent public realm of the docks, and intellectually, through the use of engaging interpretive methods.

The brief has been delivered through both a dramatic welcome space and new permanent galleries. From the bright, daylight, reconfigured entrance there is a clear vista through the museum. The mix of previous interventions have been stripped away to reveal and celebrate the original former grain store. The practice designed a crafted frame system to display objects and interpretation while allowing long views through the building, and letting the rich materials of brick, timber and metal act as a backdrop.

The warehouse is prominently sited on the docks within a large central square. The new entrance provides a visual beacon, evoking the towering gates of the canal locks, while the zinc skin, which will weather in time, complements the industrial heritage. Original window openings and frames were retained, but now they reveal the collections and activities beyond, bringing the exhibition to the fore.



Double-height spaces

At the time of its construction the Llanthony Warehouse would have seemed monumental in its context, and the practice sought ways to enhance the building's verticality. The new double-height entrance establishes a strong relationship with the scale of the warehouse. Additionally a 6.7-metre-long sculpture of a Severn Trow boat, made out of rope, was commissioned to hang in a void left where there was once a staircase. The boat was produced in collaboration with custom prop specialist Cod Steaks, and serves to unite the two storeys of the exhibition (ph: MC).

Graphics

To complement the rugged industrial qualities of the building, graphic displays were treated with textures that enhance and frame the building's historic fabric. Colour palettes were used to define different sections of the exhibition and large backdrop images were used to create zones within the narrative journey. The use of true scale imagery of grain sacks (far right) evokes the building's original use, while patterns created from objects and content give a contemporary approach to the historic objects. A low-level family trail, indicated by colour, with illustrations and images that might appeal to children, has also been incorporated (ph: MC).



Steel-frame display system

A dark, powder-coated steel framework displays and unifies an eclectic mix of exhibits, from paperwork to boats, and establishes a system to hold historic artefacts, graphic displays, audio-visual equipment and lighting. The displays can be brought together in clear narrative groups while protecting the original fabric of the building, and the framework permits views through. The frame language echoes the industrial aesthetic and is repeated in the feel and colour of the balustrades (ph: MC).





Lighting

The original building had a large number of small, regularly-spaced windows intended for ventilation rather than to introduce daylight. For the building's contemporary use, lighting needed to be carefully controlled, limiting lux levels for object conservation, while creating bright welcoming spaces, in the new cafe for example. Working with DHA Designs, the practice exploited the darkness of the historic interior for object display while specifying a Kawneer slim-line aluminium curtain walling system for the new, projecting entrance. Daylight floods the cafe but is prevented from penetrating the exhibition space by the brickwork of the original facade, retained as an interior wall. The transparent entrance is intended to flag the museum's presence in the docks, glowing enticingly in the late afternoon (ph: GG).



Historic fabric

The perceived poetry of the original building, a former grain warehouse, was critical to the practice's approach. When built, the Llanthony Warehouse's loadbearing masonry construction was state-of-the-art. The treatment of the historic fabric preserves and enhances its character. The facade brickwork, long hidden behind late twentieth-century interventions, has been restored and now forms the inner wall of the new cafe. The original stone cills and lintels frame views through to the museum. The vertical slots once used for loading grain have been opened up again, re-establishing lost vistas through the building (ph: GG).



Zinc cladding

The new entrance, opening onto the public realm of the Gloucester docks, is articulated as a robust and heavy surround to a transparent opening. VM Anthra-Zinc standing seam provides a contemporary counterpoint to the historic brickwork while offering an industrial aesthetic that refers to the visual language of the docks. The zinc-clad addition forms a gateway to the interior, dividing the new facade into two sections: entrance and cafe. The standing seam frames the facade and an expressed joint detail elevates the zinc to offset the Victorian brickwork (ph:GG).

