

# FX 324

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## PROFILE

## Pippa Nissen

The co-founder of award-winning architecture studio Nissen Richards talks about the long journey that led her to pursue a career in exhibition design, combining her passion for theatre and architecture

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**'IT TOOK ME UNTIL I WAS 40,'** says Nissen Richards co-founder Pippa Nissen of her realisation that exhibition design was the right discipline for her.

'Exhibition design sits straight down the middle between theatre and architecture, and uses all my skills,' she said, recalling the eureka moment when the V&A asked her to design the 'Telling Tales' exhibition in 2009. 'It was amazing, I felt this was something I could do forever.'

Since then, she hasn't looked back. Nissen Richards has developed an impressive client list including the Fitzwilliam Museum, Wordsworth Grasmere Museum, National Portrait Gallery and Courtauld Gallery, designing both temporary and permanent exhibitions and gallery spaces. The practice works globally – it currently has projects in Norway, Russia, China and Sarawak. She combines this with teaching, and is currently one of a team of four from the practice that lead a postgraduate unit at London Metropolitan University.

Visiting her at the practice's north London studio, Nissen is an enthusiastic presence as she looks back fondly on the long journey that led her to her favoured territory of exhibition design. Unsure of her best direction after leaving school, she recalls how she tried several, studying first for a music diploma before completing a Part 1 in architecture at Cambridge University. Rather than heading into postgraduate architectural study, she opted for an art foundation at Central St Martins, a fun experience that taught her that she's 'not an artist, [she's] a designer... I really like to have a problem to solve.'

**Left** The sheet steel model of Sutton Hoo ship ribs at the Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxon burial grounds in Suffolk

**Above** Nissen Richards co-founder Pippa Nissen



**Right and far right** The Viewing Tower at Sutton Hoo

**Below** The High Hall at Sutton Hoo burial ground



She then became interested in theatre, completing an MA in theatre design at the Slade in London while working for renowned theatre designer Hildegard Bechtler – clearly a formative experience. Throughout her 20s she worked as a waitress, something that helped her understand how to respond to clients, which has stood Nissen in good stead ever since. ‘I really enjoyed the theatrics. I don’t think I am extrovert but I understand the transaction of someone coming in to have a good time, and making sure that they do.’

After her MA she finally returned to architectural studies to complete her Part 2, and subsequently qualified as an architect.

When asked what designers have inspired her, perhaps it’s not so surprising that Nissen chose the celebrated Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, whose work has a huge range across the disciplines.

For a long time, Nissen combined architectural and theatre design work, working for major practices such as RHWL before collaborating with fellow architect Nicholas Adams for eight years as Nissen Adams.

After initially branching out on her own and embracing exhibition design, she formed Nissen Richards in 2010 with her husband Jim Richards, who heads up the more ‘straight’ architectural work while she leads on the exhibition side. It’s generally a roughly 50-50 split between the two – although often, to their delight, projects span both sides, most notably in their work for the National Trust at the Anglo-Saxon burial ground of Sutton Hoo. Here the practice’s reinvention of the visitor experience encompassed exhibition design, interpretation, wayfinding and architecture, including a 17m viewing tower over the archaeological landscape.

With just over 20 staff contributing diverse skills from graphic design and interpretation through to architecture, the practice is the ideal size, Nissen says – sufficient enough to tackle substantial projects but not too big.

Exhibition design is clearly the perfect fit for Nissen’s skills and interests. She particularly

enjoys working with artworks and objects to open up people’s imaginations and bring things to life.

‘I really love this idea that as a visitor you’re taken on a journey, and that this journey is really carefully calibrated, and is both emotional and intellectual at the same time,’ she says.

The key to each project is, she says, really understanding the essence of what the client is trying to do.

‘Then we have to safeguard that essence and find different ways of accessing it,’ she

adds. This can’t be done in a vacuum but requires ‘real commitment from the client team’ to get an experience that works. ‘You can’t do it on your own. The worst projects are where the client asks you to do your thing... it needs to be a collaborative process.’

Nissen Richards like to map out each exhibition, first creating a structure and then working out how to ‘capture’ the ideas and give them a shape. They end up with a chart mapping out how long visitors are expected to spend in each area, including bigger moments







and pauses, and indicating the different techniques used such as digital and lighting. Throughout, they are conscious of the different ways that people take in information – some are more sensory, Nissen says, while others are looking for something more active.

‘You have to layer on these experiences so everyone ultimately can access the same information but in different ways,’ she says.

Since Covid-19, Nissen has been thinking a great deal about how the pandemic might impact exhibition design, authoring a chapter on the subject in RIBA’s *RETHINK Design Guide: Architecture For A Post-Pandemic World*.

Some of this thinking is explored further in *A Museum for Now*, a research website created

by the practice following work on the subject by its students.

Nissen thinks Covid-19 will accelerate several things that were taking their time to happen. These include ensuring that museums make spaces for everyone, as well as a rise in utilising digital techniques. The practice is currently designing its first exhibition in China with no labels at all – instead, all information is accessed via QR codes.

Tackling wastefulness is also moving higher up the global architectural agenda. In a recent project for the Wallace Collection, the practice created a few different exhibitions out of the same base components, requiring them to think creatively about how they can be reused.

Lighting and digital techniques in particular can help transform spaces that otherwise remain the same.

‘It does feel good not to be wasteful. If you have some constraints, sometimes you can be more creative than if everything’s open,’ Nissen adds.

Along with less use of plastic, she is noticing and pushing for more acceptance of materials that have a crafted, textured quality. The practice recently created a feature out of paper for an exhibition on the history of bookmaking in Norway – at the end, the entire thing could be completely recycled.

Looking ahead, Nissen would like to see more overlap between the architecture and exhibition sides of the business.

‘We love projects where the various teams within the office work together more. Ideally, we’d want to build on our cultural architectural work and build the museums that we now fill,’ she says.

Nissen is delighted with the practice’s current spread of work, with plenty to look forward to after the recent completion of the long-haul Sutton Hoo project and the Wordsworth Grasmere Museum.

At the time of writing, the Courtauld Gallery at Somerset House in London was about to reopen. Nissen Richards’ work there as gallery exhibition designer included a reimagining of the famous Great Room, for which they tested out new display walls with 1:1 in-situ models.

The practice will have to wait until 2023 for the reopening of the National Portrait Gallery, where it has been hired as interpretation designer alongside redevelopment architects Jamie Fobert Architects and Purcell.

After more than a decade of exhibition design work for top cultural clients, Nissen is confident that she is now on the right path – fusing together architecture and theatrical design in a way that marries her various skills and ideas. The result is a passion and investment in her work, knowing that each project provides an opportunity to create a space that people enjoy. ‘Making sense of something very complicated and giving it a structure and flair that people can really enjoy and emotionally connect with – that’s the bit I really enjoy.’ **FX**



**Above** The interior of the Wordsworth Grasmere Museum

**Left** The National Library of Norway showcasing Norwegian book history

**Right** Tove Jansson paintings at Dulwich Picture Gallery

