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# area

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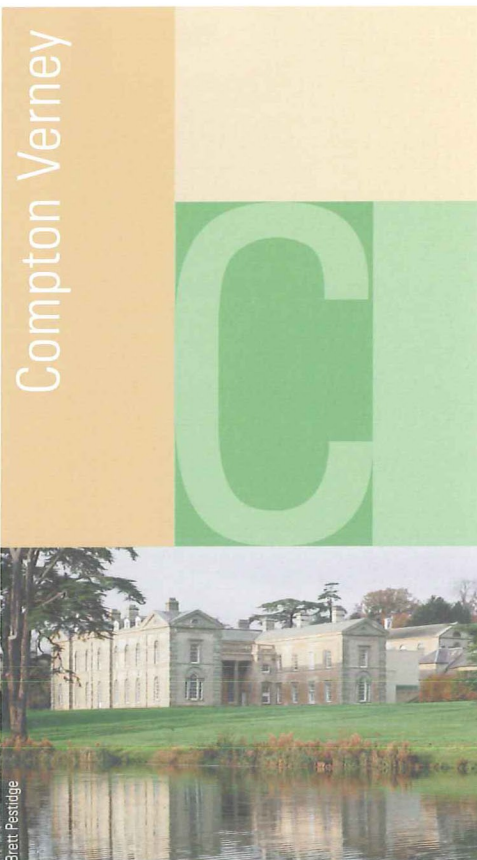
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## Art Gallery and Education Centre



Brett Pestidge



Peter Cook



Peter Cook

That the image of the traditional country house retains such potency in England is more a testament to its continued existence in the nation's collective memory than to its actual survival in reality. Once the focus of much rural and society life, the twentieth century was witness to the loss of thousands of these institutions. Despite the best efforts of John Gummer to inject some new vigour into the country house tradition, the English countryside today is more likely to be the setting for a mock-Tudor housing estate than a new Chatsworth or Castle Drogo. Many have been converted into hotels and retirement homes and stripped of their previous political and social significance, and yet their power as symbols deeply rooted to concepts of English identity still render them potent icons. It is to feed the English appetite for reminders of that hierarchical world of leisured masters and forlorn-tugging tenant farmers, that organisations such as the National Trust have obligingly preserved a few choice specimens, where apron-clad waitresses serve up cream teas to busloads of enchanted day-trippers. However, despite all this visiting and gift-shopping, these houses are to all intents and purposes, dead places - mostly uninhabited and unchanging. It is against this background of nostalgia and heritage tourism that the new art gallery and education centre at Compton Verney in Warwickshire represent a uniquely forward-looking reinvention of the country house - one conceived on entirely different terms from that imagined by John Gummer or the National Trust.

The house and estate of Compton Verney has its origins in the fifteenth century, when the Verney family originally acquired the land and built their first manor house there. It then developed over the following centuries through various re-stylings, until reaching what is essentially its current form under the direction of Robert Adam and Capability Brown. The result of their combined efforts was something approaching the quintessential English country house. Surrounded by lawns, mature trees and water, Compton Verney epitomises the privileged world of the eighteenth

century aristocracy. After being sold by the Verney family in the Twenties, the house passed through a number of hands and was even requisitioned by the army in the Forties. After the war, it remained empty and forlorn, occasionally used as a film set. Over the last ten years what had been a decaying ruin has been transformed into a new home for six permanent art collections, a constantly changing series of temporary exhibitions and performances and a centre for education. Funded principally through Peter Moores' eponymous Foundation, Compton Verney has a remit to "enrich the cultural experience and artistic experience of the widest possible audience". Where as the house once represented the height of social exclusivity, today its doors are being thrown open to everyone. This openness is also reflected in the range of the collections, which encompass seventeenth to nineteenth century Neapolitan painting, through Chinese Bronzes to the unique Marx-Lambert collection of popular art. Paintings, objects and artefacts appear in a variety of radically different spaces throughout the building. Appropriately, many of the artworks are displayed as they might be in a house - without labels - but with numbered leaflets available for those who want them.

The house is arranged around a horseshoe-shaped courtyard at its front, with views over the grounds on three sides. Visitors arrive over an Adam bridge, from which they gain a carefully composed view of the building in its idyllic setting. From this vantage point, it is difficult to believe that anything has altered since its heyday. It is only after walking up the gravel driveway that glimpses of a monolithic new rock sculpture and the elegant limestone side-extension give any suggestion of the changes that have been taking place over the past decade. Once inside, the tone shifts and it immediately becomes evident that this is not only a consummate piece of architectural restoration, but a dazzling new building stitched into and formed from the decaying body of the old. For, while Rodney Melville and Partners (RMP) have indeed done an impressive job on the historic fabric, it is the

exquisitely detailed new spaces that set this project apart. In-line with their reputation for sympathetic but uncompromisingly modern insertions in historic settings, Stanton Williams have created something that clearly feeds in the most satisfactory way off of the existing fabric. Abandoned and half-dilapidated when bought by the Compton Verney Trust in 1993, the house must have been a ghostlike and eerie reminder of times gone by. Thankfully the architects have retained many of those qualities, while avoiding any sense of melancholy, through the fascinating way in which old accommodates new.

The treatment of the interior spaces was determined to some extent by the state that they were found in. Where possible and appropriate, the original floors and plaster mouldings were retained. Elsewhere, 'rooms within rooms' have been inserted within the gutted shell of the building. High up in the attic, former servants quarters have been opened up and transformed into intimate domestic-scale spaces for the popular and folk-art collections. Wherever contemporary meets original, weathered and beaten stone is allowed to contrast organically with steel, etched glass and warm oak. The palette of materials, which includes handmade bricks and new stonework, enables the insertions to engage in conversation with the existing surfaces without being deferential or too precious. Just as the parties of school children who visit the education centre each day represent the appropriation of Compton Verney by new values and ideas, so the unapologetic nature of the new architecture's engagement with the old heralds a self-confident, mature relationship with our architectural heritage. Here is modern architecture that asserts its presence within an historic setting with a seriousness of intent and strong sense of its own worth. Far from detracting from what was there already, the confidence with which Stanton Williams have expressed their belief in the value of their contribution adds immeasurably to the excellent work of RMP and combines to create an exquisite whole. 

Ben Flatman

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RIBA Award Winner 2004

Compton Verney Art Gallery  
and Education Centre

Architects: Stanton Williams  
with Rodney Melville & Partners



Brett Pestidge