

Shore winner

The National Maritime Museum Cornwall by Long & Kentish provides a dynamic setting for its collection that avoids boating clichés, writes Catherine Croft. Photos by Morley von Sternberg

The new National Maritime Museum Cornwall, which opens on December 4 in Falmouth, has its feet in the sea. In summer the green oak louvres and shutters of the seaward facade will open up to a tidal pool and pontoons, and an all year round "park and float" service means you will even be able to arrive by water.

But the sea and sailing motifs were not the direct inspiration for the design. MJ Long, of architect Long & Kentish, explains that the cue for the building was the 19th century photographs of the site covered with "industrial vernacular sheds" – prosaic structures with pitched roofs and weatherboarding. She wanted the museum to look like "the next logical step" for Falmouth. It was acceptable for it to be "slightly astonishing" (which it definitely is), but she was unhappy with any suggestion that what was needed was a Bilbao type landmark building, fearing this would set up expectations for "something that looked as if it had landed from Mars" – not her idea of what was needed at all.

She was also adamant that the building "should not try and compete with, or mimic the technology of boats". Steel masts and clever hi-tech fixing systems would have been a cliché, and would have ignored the collection's historical and ethnographical diversity. The finished scheme reflects this, being closer in spirit to the stretched seal skin of the Eskimo kayak and the tough, flat bottomed fenland punt on show, than to the high-speed catamarans or the display unravelling who invented windsurfing (a 12-year-old Brit in 1958).

Long & Kentish was selected for the project by competitive interview in 1996 when 72 practices responded to an *Ojecz* advertisement. This was only two years

after the firm had been set up, although Long and Rolfe Kentish had both worked on the British Library for Colin St John Wilson, (to whom Long is married). Seventy-five percent of the funding came from the Heritage Lottery Fund, which originally received two separate bids for maritime museums in Falmouth. One was to rehouse a local collection (focused on the history of the Cornish Packet ships which carried mail to the colonies), and another was to bring the National Collection of Small Boats to Falmouth, from a warehouse on London's Old Kent Road. Sensibly, the two projects were asked to amalgamate.

Long was excited about the site from the start, noting its potential to "knit together" the shift in scale between the old custom house quay, the docks and the Victorian beach front on the bay to the south. In the late 1980s Sailor and property developer Peter de Savary had built a sea wall and back filled what had been a submarine base and lumber yards. His hacienda-style luxury housing, around a marina and club house, was planned to cover the whole of the site, but then the recession hit, putting paid to that plan. The remaining land was bought by a local consortium, the Port Pendennis Partnership, in conjunction with English Partnerships, with the aim of regenerating the immediate and wider area.

Long's New England origins made her all too aware of how the seaside switch to tourism can lead to tack development and she admires how Falmouth "you can still see the bones, it's not all buttered over with junk".

In part, the building's long gestation is down to the site conditions. The de Savary sea wall only had a 25-year life so it has been replaced with a much







more substantial piece of engineering designed to survive at least a hundred years. Because of the infill, the building had to be piled right to the underlying rock. The tidal gallery in the base of the tower, with multi-layered laminated windows which are submerged as the water rises, was complex and expensive to construct. It sounds like a gimmick, but descending from the open views at the top to this slightly threatening space is impressive, and the translucent shrimps which nestle up against the glass, and the shoals of tiny shiny fish are mesmerising; it is an encounter with real sea.

On the ground floor, the tower houses the marina office. There was a requirement to provide a pedestrian walkway all around the building's perimeter. This, together with the prominence of the events square in front (designed to host, among other festivities, celebrations at the end of Atlantic races), means that the museum is not set apart from the activity around it. This will be even more the case when the site's remaining commercial elements are completed. One mixed-use building (designed up to planning permission by Long & Kentish) is nearing completion. There is another block to come, and a multiplex cinema.

However, the real success of the building is the extent to which it resists the temptation to open itself up completely to the landscape. It must have been tempting to concentrate on framing views, but a museum is not just an



Overleaf, main pic:
The Maritime
Museum's east
facade.
Bottom right:
North-west facade.

Top left: West
facade.
Below far left:
Timber cladding
detail above
entrance.
Below left: Lights on
south facade.

Top right: Ceiling
detail in main
gallery.
Bottom right: View
from westside of
gallery.



ideal lookout point: it is a place to focus on exhibits and the stories they tell. At times this means turning your back on the view, which makes the specific glimpses you are allowed – the opening up at the café and the hands-on gallery – all the more special.

Museums nowadays want to be able to use video projection and computer-based interactives that require light to be excluded. This can lead to a conflict between architects and exhibit designers, but on this scheme both seem to have found the relationship entirely satisfactory. "The architect listened to our needs," says Peter Higgins of Land Design Studio, which was appointed immediately after the architect and interviewed by it. The basic strategy of dividing the building laterally with a curving spine wall, like the prow of a vast ship, creates a dark first gallery behind: here individual boats are spotlighted as their stories are told. Higgins describes the technique of mixing video, slide and narrative as "abstract not didactic. The show concentrates on the lives of the people who used the boats for pleasure, work, or sport (canoeing down Everest, for example, or paddling up the Thames with a hamper), and climaxes with a rendition of a storm at sea, all thunderclaps and billowing clouds.

Long credits Land's input for giving her firm the confidence to not go for too "neutral, more flexible or equivocal" gallery spaces, but to create a series of very varied, interlaced galleries with ▶

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Left, from top to bottom: View across the sea from the observation deck; View from café looking up and taking in Long & Kentish's purpose-designed lamps; Spiral staircase that runs from the basement to the top of the tower.

Top right: View across main gallery looking westwards;

Inset: Café offering glimpses across the water.



specific characters. The most impressive is the main gallery with north light washing down the spine wall. She explains that this wall results from the site's basic geometry, and its ship-like form is only incidental. Its abstractness is, in fact, deliberately increased by its sheathing with angled plywood panels, which were inspired by a visit to the conference hall at Corbusier's Millowners building in Alamabad. A narrow reservoir on the roof means that sunlight reflected off water can bounce into the interior and create a rippling effect on the ceiling. Both here and in the dark gallery all the boats are mounted as if hurrying along in the same direction, with sails up and leaning into the wind. Higgins was keen to avoid the "cars show room look", all fanning out, and the selection will be rehung on a



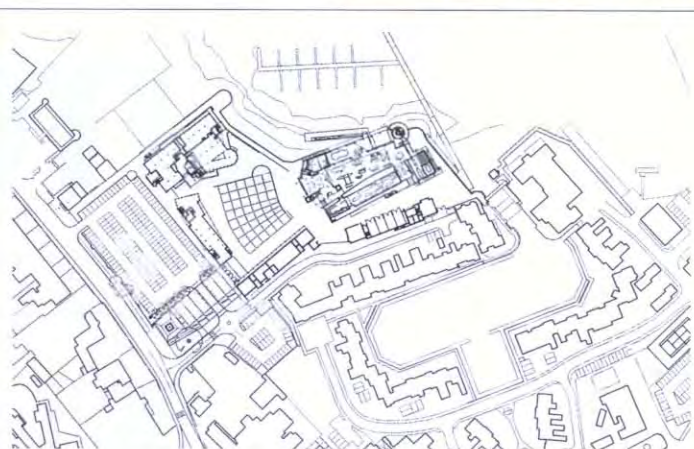
regular basis, which meant that the building had to be designed to accommodate change.



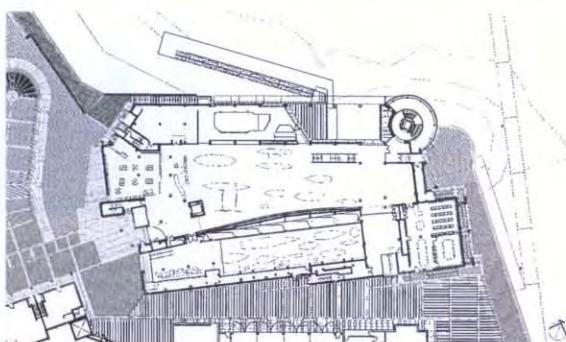
So what will be the legacy of the Falmouth Maritime Museum? For the architects themselves, the effects are already evident. Long was already a more than competent sailor before she began work on the scheme, but now Kentish is also hooked on matters nautical having recently restored a plywood Wayfarer dinghy found rotting in a field, and started work on a £70,000 prefabricated club house for Slaughden Sailing Club. And both partners are clearly smitten with Cornwall – where the combined effect of Tate St Ives, the Eden Project, the granting of Objective 1 status and now the museum has led to soaring property prices. They hope to keep working there. It seems likely that the building will both please locals (although some I spoke to wish they'd paint the tower with red and white stripes "like a

proper lighthouse") and draw in visitors. For the client, of course, success will mean attracting non-boaty types, people who think boats are generally pretty boring. The museum seems set to do this as well as provide a backdrop of which the owners of Our Rachel, Peggy Sue, A La Mode and Katy-Lu (all moored outside) can be proud.

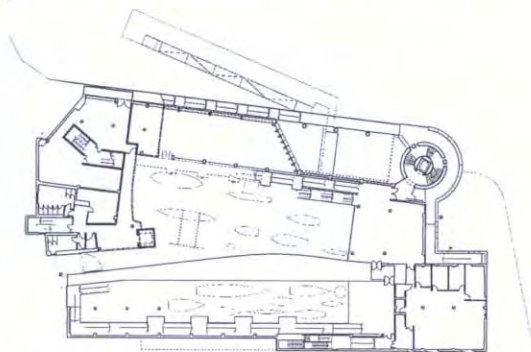
Project team
Architect Long & Kentish Architects.
Engineer Ove Arup & Partners.
Quantity Surveyor Davis Langdon Everest.
Exhibition Design Land Design Studio.
Contractors: substructure and seawall Alfred McAlpine Construction.
Superstructure Interserve.
Exhibition Scena.
Client South West of England Regional Development Authority.



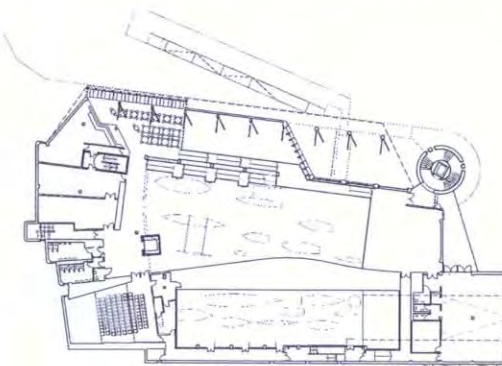
Site plan



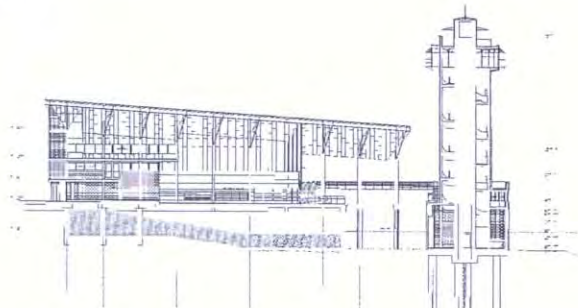
Ground floor



First floor



Second floor



Long section through waterfront gallery, tidal pool, tidal gallery and tower (west-east)