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The People's History Museum re-opens after £12.5 million re-development

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Closed since October 2007, the official re-opening of the People's History Museum in Manchester on 5th March 2010 is the culmination of a £12.5 million re-design, led by award winning, international design practice Austin-Smith: Lord.

What now stands is a dramatic, 'object' building, with a strong massing and bold form which results naturally from a clear expression of the organisation of the new extension.

The People's History Museum focuses on an internationally important collection which includes the Labour Party archive, along with collections of the Trades Union Congress, Communist Party of Great Britain, Suffragists and Suffragettes and the co-operative movement. These items from the last 200 years of the organised labour movement in Britain represent the social history of working people.



The People's History Museum is the only national museum in Manchester and is the first public building in Britain to be built with an extraordinary Cor-Ten metal shell which is also known as "weathering steel".

In January 2004 Austin-Smith: Lord were appointed to lead a multi-disciplinary design team to explore the possibilities for consolidating the People's History Museum's two operational sites in Manchester into one location through an expansion of the existing Pump House Museum.

The Pump House is situated to the north west of the city centre bordered by the River Irwell, Bridge Street and the new multi-storey Civil Justice Centre on Gartside Street, the site forms the northern tip of an extensive redevelopment area in the city known as 'Spinningfields'.

The new extension takes the form of a five-storey building, built into the site's sloping, riverbank location. The fully glazed ground floor concourse is welcoming and provides a generous space for new café, bar and dining facilities along with a new shop, reception and toilet facilities and most importantly encourages access along the concourse towards the original Pump House building.

Two levels of climate-controlled, permanent galleries are provided at high level, accessed by a new lift and stair tower that celebrates the museum's waterside setting. The top floor provides a large Conservation Studio for the preservation of banners and textiles which allows visitors to see 'behind the scenes'.

In developing a masterplan for the expanded museum the successful balance of use between new and old buildings was a key aim. Providing the majority of close-conditioned space and visitor facilities in the new extension has allowed the sensitive restoration of the key spaces within the historic building.

The Engine Hall has been stripped of its original shop and café intrusions to recover its dramatic volume and will now provide a multi-purpose space for daylight tolerant exhibitions, education and conference events.

A new, expanded, changing exhibition gallery has been provided at ground floor level, which can be linked flexibly with the Engine Hall and this has allowed the original form of the first floor 'coal store' to be recovered and used as a conference facility.

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The basement of the Pump House has been converted from gallery use to provide offices and the big windows to the river have been opened up to flood this space with daylight again.

The need for close-controlled, light-proof galleries has been exploited visually to mark the refurbished museum's presence through strong sculptural form-making.

The extension is unmistakably a new building yet it establishes a sympathetic relationship with the maturity of the Pump House through the tonality of the Cor-ten rainscreen cladding and the simple 'tank-like' massing.

The design has achieved prominence without overbearing the original Pump House building, the transparency and 'connectivity' of the new entrance sequence ensures that the existing building is not marginalised, a dramatic, high-level bridge within the linking section of the building encourages a 'promenade' between new and old.

Project Team

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