

Fulcrum

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form and fiscal function.

j.duroy

The fundamental question we have to ask when we look at a piece of architecture is: who is this for? Where did it come from? Why is it here?

What forces have conspired to create this structure, and how sceptical should we be of its motives?

When it comes to the Serpentine pavilions in London's Hyde Park the answers to these questions are not at all self-evident. The conditions that permit the Serpentine pavilion, the *rules* of its being, if you like, are that the architect must never have had a building built in the UK — and be a super-famous star, *bien sur*.

It is almost as if, from the beginning, the main radical aspect of the pavilions is intended to be their shock factor against a preconceived assumption. They are designed to highlight, or underline perhaps, the fact that already it is a shameful thing [*la honte*] that these architects have never built in Britain. "Oh" we must say "Rem Koolhaas has never conquered this territory? How unnatural indeed! Quick! Commission him!"

So here we have our starting point. What is so unnatural about this state of affairs? What makes that criterion for construction more important than any other? We could just as easily say — to Julia Peyton-Jones or Hans Ulrich Obrist, who curate and commission these things — why not give it always to a young architect? Why not give it to promote a British architect, or always an architect from the developing world? Or, even, why not give it to any architect who has never built a pavilion before: the juggernauts of contemporary history and theory, people like Pier Vittorio Aureli, Mario Carpo, Eyal Weizman, and others?

There are a million preconditions that have been passed over, and a million social actions not pursued. So here we have our first hints as to the purpose of the pavilions.

But in a way, it is perhaps better to suddenly turn this problem and reverse engineer based on the formal results. What is produced? What is the historical, material fabric of the Serpentine pavilions?

Given the small site, and the context of an art gallery, it is no surprise that these structures are all object-like — more like large sculpture than really miniature buildings. This collapse of scales makes you wonder why have architects at all? Is there not more success in Anish Kapoor's 100m high red monstrosity at Stratford than Frank Gehry's wooden stadium?

Who visits these buildings? A cursory regard on Flickr or Google tells us it is mostly the bourgeois — *disons*, "the upper-middle class", the art collecting parts of society. Because of course these objects have a life afterwards, they are sold, and sometimes even re-sold, to international collectors.

The pavilions exist first as an image,

The symbolism of the Serpentine pavilions is that they are like architectural-sized baseball cards, in a limited set. Collect them all!

a press photograph, an easily imaginable form that can be disseminated and recognised (in order to promote the architect, but really the gallery); then they exist as a commodity.

It is poignant that Toyo Ito's pavilion (2002) sits as an abandoned ruin on the macadam skirt before Battersea Power Station — a site in London notorious for failed property developments. A graveyard of financial black holes, and depreciating assets. There is nothing immoral about this process. Still and all, the splendid metamorphosis of the gallery under Peyton-Jones has now placed it firmly in the public sphere (and not only because it is funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain). It therefore has a moral responsibility to provide a public service. It does this through its free entry, its numerous art events (cinema showings, lectures and performances). The elitism of the pavilions as vendable, and locations of consumption, sits as an uncomfortable contradiction to this aspiration. I call on the Serpentine to commission a worthless pavilion, and resist the temptations of the art market.

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red is not a concept.

j.self

Jean Nouvel's 2010 Serpentine pavilion, the tenth annual structure built by the gallery, inspired in critics what can only be described as a vicious irritability — the few authors that bothered to deviate from quoting the press release invariably did so in order to spout insults.

Further, these writers really explored the full spectrum of insults at their disposal — ranging from professional disdain to theoretical belittling, most ultimately indulging in some sort of physical ridicule: "I smell Jean Nouvel before I see him," wrote Tom Dyckhoff (The Times), "At 64, he resembles an ageing bouncer, a mean old baddie from a Luc Besson thriller or a long-retired prop from the French rugby team." Edwin Heathcote (FT) chipped in "When asked what it is all about, Nouvel is vague. He mumbles about red being complementary to the green of the park, about creating a ludic space, about simulacra and simulation — but frankly, he doesn't sound too convinced," Ellis Woodman (then of the Telegraph) was perfunctory in his dismissal: "A one idea building by a once extraordinary architect. Rating: **" Ouch.

The truth is, I completely disagree with the mainstream press on this one, and without appearing an apologist for Nouvel I would argue that this has been the most successful pavilion yet. This decision is based on two criteria:

Firstly, let's ignore all this guff about the red being inspired by the reds of London — its telephone cabins, buses, royal guards, etc. I overheard a prominent architectural editor at the opening surmise: "I'm sorry, but red just isn't a concept." Agreed.

The press picked up on the obvious nod to Tschumi — I would remind the reader that Nouvel's Paris Philharmonie at the Parc de la Villette is currently under construction and I sincerely wonder whether he didn't make some proposal for another folie at one point, and subsequently decided to recycle the scheme (or at least the concept) for London.

I've seen every Serpentine pavilion, and this was the only one so far that actually made any sincere attempt at the provision of public amenities (aside from the ubiquitous coffee bar and hackneyed "multipurpose stage"). Further, Nouvel was quite generous: there were red ping-pong tables, red chess boards, red frisbees and red kites. Say what you will, the opportunities to fly kites for free in central London are limited.

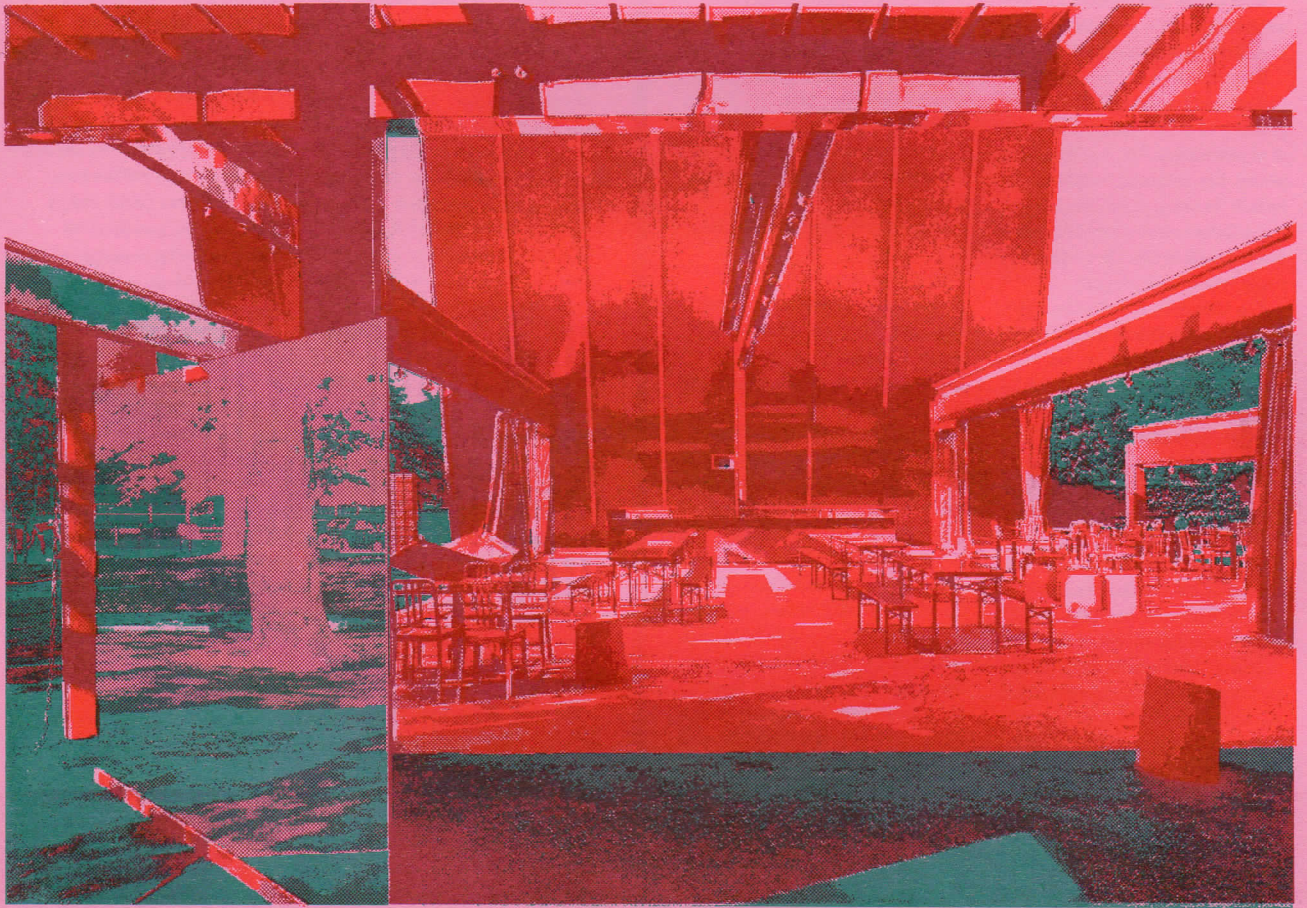
Most importantly, in a world where public space is increasingly thought of only in consumerist terms, Nouvel's red reflection was the first (and only) Serpentine pavilion to meaningfully engage with the project as a place for non-commercial activity.

The first point I've made is that, at a functional level, the pavilion's ambition was unique. The second significant thing to say regards form; or rather, its *formlessness*. This property proved deeply problematic for the press at the time — it was described as amorphous, incomplete, downright ugly. Rather than an elegant object-building, a type of temporarily inhabitable sculpture like the other pavilions, Nouvel's structure was difficult to describe.

Even then, as a student of the AA, I was tired of being presented with meaningless swirls, curves and triangulated surfaces. There was something delicately simple about the roller canopy system that stood in for a real roof (when the canopies were retracted the pavilion became basically a series of red arches). From every angle it appeared different, to the extent that it became near impossible to accurately get a handle on its shape or style. The only thing grouping the fragmentary components together as a coherent structure was the most brilliant red I ever saw, which saturated everything beneath it.

Red may not be a concept, but its overwhelming power to dissimulate an object in a landscape while letting kids fly kites was a powerful statement against the status-quo.

Jack Self edits Fulcrum.



Jean Nouvel's Serpentine Pavilion, 2010. An ambiguous play of form, colour, and reflection.