

You'd be forgiven for having high expectations of Lightbox's interior. The outside of Woking's architectural newcomer alone is enough to stir any art-phile into heady anticipation.

As they pass through the gates, gallery-goers' hopes are teased by a sprouting of copper garden sculptures and crafted benches. Once they're inside, they see further signs of creativity in the full-height central atrium, which offers an expansive and seamless backdrop to a series of permanent installations. These fixtures have been specially commissioned and sewn into the internal fabric of the building. They are the work of names of varying clout and kudos; artists, designers and locals have colluded in a collection of work that aims to reach as wide an audience as possible.

The first we meet is light artist Peter Freeman, whose work provides a sparkling welcome, Freeman's Radiance installation spans a 34m lateral stepladder of high-powered LEDs embedded in aluminium strips.

#1 Danny Greany and Malcolm Taylor's Wave installation above the staircase collates 10,000 handprints gathered from Woking's wider community

PETER COOK

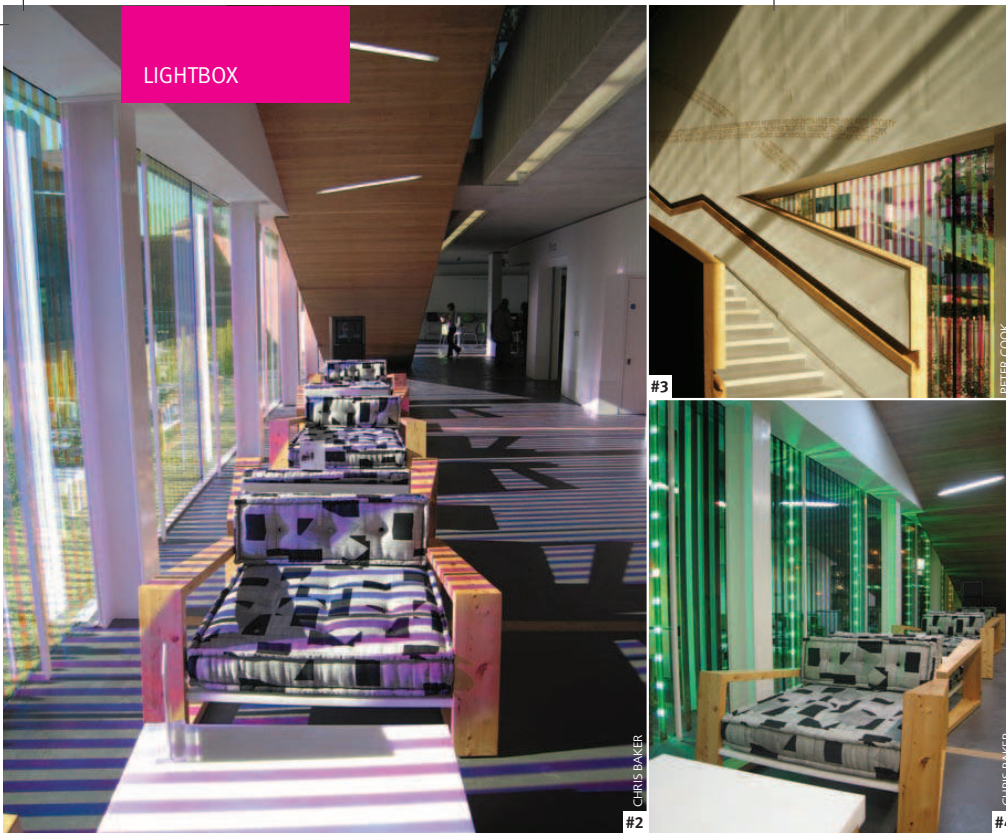
#1

What's in the box?

MARKS BARFIELD'S LATEST CREATION IS IMPRESSIVE FROM THE OUTSIDE, BUT IT'S WHAT'S INSIDE THAT REALLY COUNTS

> WORDS: JENNIFER CAWLEY

LIGHTBOX



Positioned at various heights, the strips work their way over the ground floor, on to the south-facing window, along the underside of the staircase and up to a keyhole window on the first floor.

Each of the 720 LEDs is programmed to respond to footfall, with every visitor triggering a glowing pulse that runs from the entrance to the window above. Interactivity between the installation and the visitors was a part of the brief that Freeman was keen to follow: 'The architects describe the gallery as a jewellery box – for me, people are the jewels inside that box'.

Like the general public, the architects also played a part in Freeman's design. Project architect Gemma Collins' suggestion to use strips of dichroic film on the windows creates a startling two-way filter system that allows the light to project outside while also reflecting internally. As Freeman puts it: 'The building offsets the lighting and the lighting offsets the building.' The result feels like a sort of structural symbiosis.

The designer of the exterior gates and railings, Clare Robertson also drew her influences from Marks Barfield and the people of Woking. Following the council's brief to reference the local community and the canal, Robertson created a fine leaf motif on mid-steel panels. Although the design was originally conceived using traditional blacksmiths, it fell under the influence

“Some of these installations exist as people-pleasing footnotes – they might make certain councillors happy today, but they could be easily dispensed with tomorrow”

of the Lightbox's contemporary aesthetic and Robertson was persuaded to swap hot-forging for laser-cutting, a neater but less personal alternative.

Danny Greaney and Malcolm Taylor's Wave also strives to place the Lightbox in context. Their brief was to design a display for 10,000 handprints collected from the community – from day centres to scout troupes – for under £3,000. The result is a simmering mass of colour swaying above the staircase. Again, the architects had a hand in its creation, as Julia Barfield explains: 'I pestered gallery director Marilyn Scott to put something in the space above the staircase, that moved.' The pestering paid off and Wave wins Scott's praise as 'a reflection of the wider community that the gallery is here to serve'.

Philip Surey also wooed locals with his Lightbox DNA mural, which snakes along the staircase wall in a chromosomal helix inscribed with sponsors' names. Although the mural

#2 Alessandro Esteri's Wood and Block chairs feature upholstery by Riccardo Bruni for Lyria
#3 Lightbox DNA, by Philip Surey, snakes along the wall in a chromosomal helix of sponsors' names
#4 Peter Freeman's Radiance installation of 720 LEDs responds to visitor footfall

was originally planned in orange and red, Marks Barfield steered Surey towards subtler shades in sympathy with the palette of warm metallics. While the colours were tempered, the title of the installation remains a blatant reference to the financial heritage of the gallery – a clumsy thumbs-up to investors and an overstated attempt to forge a people-friendly feel.

The furniture hasn't been neglected either. Italian designer Alessandro Esteri provides visitors with a stylish place to slump after a hard day's gallery-gazing. A set of oversized chairs and tables, the Wood and Block series features wide slabs of latex foam nesting in angular wooden frames. Each chair is finished with upholstery by Riccardo Bruni for Lyria, and visitors can commission replicas if they like. Alun Heslop of Chair Creative has also crafted some inviting-looking benches that line the corridor and the garden area. They were shortlisted for this year's Wood Awards.

There's plenty of room for all of these creative endeavours. Gemma Collins has created a central circulation space where installations can be displayed and visitors can orientate themselves with what Julia Barfield calls 'relaxed leisurability'. This has been achieved by positioning the staircase at the spine of the building as a navigational reference point.

The materials used are enough to create the friendly feel that the installations affect, representing a move away from the more clinical exhibition spaces of the 20th century. Concrete, for example, has been brushed with a woodgrain effect complementing the timber staircase, while bronze, rather than steel, is used on the door handles.

Indeed, there is the overriding impression that some of these installations exist as people-pleasing footnotes in the Lightbox's architectural blueprint – they might make certain councillors happy today, but they could be easily dispensed with tomorrow. Yet rather than overshadow these works, the gallery plays the part of supporting role with credible aplomb. And for those visitors who don't have an eye for concrete or architectural ironmongery, there is plenty to keep them happy too.

The true art lies in the versatility of the space ■