

A different slant on art

Nicholas Grimshaw's leading art gallery covers all angles, says HUGH PEARMAN

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Every architect wants to design an art gallery. You are not regarded as a serious contender on the international circuit until you do. Other building types may be more challenging, more lucrative, more directly useful, but the fact remains. So an architect's first art gallery is a rite of passage. And Nicholas Grimshaw's is more interesting than most.

You know Grimshaw for his ever-evolving Eden Project in Cornwall, for his Eurostar terminal at Waterloo station, London, for the weirdly protracted saga of his delayed Bath Spa project and for being the president of the Royal Academy of Arts. What you don't know him for yet is a new art gallery in La Coruna, northwest Spain. It's to be opened by the king and queen of Spain on Thursday.

Spain is enjoying an architectural renaissance. The Museum of Modern Art in New York is hosting a big exhibition of the country's rich crop of new work. Apart from the home teams, big international names have been signed up: from Frank Gehry, of the USA, to Jean Nouvel, of France, via Herzog & de Meuron, of Switzerland, they are all at work in Spain. Of the Brits, Richard Rogers and Norman Foster are building rival wineries in Rioja, while David Chipperfield is busy on the City of Justice legal quarter in Barcelona. Meanwhile, in La Coruna, Grimshaw has completed the Galicia Foundation gallery, the result of a competition he won nearly 10 years ago.

It is nothing like any conventional notion of what an art gallery should be. Grimshaw, mindful of the big Atlantic breakers crashing onto the beach a few streets away, likens it to a rolling wave. It's also a bit scaly, a bit reptilian, like a hooded serpent ready to strike. Whatever image you wish to conjure up, the point is that it leans forward, and most buildings do not do that because they do not want to fall over. Nobody could call it beautiful, but it has charm and poise - *a jolie laide*, rather like the city it sits in.

La Coruna is a densely packed place, a busy port where building plots were originally measured with oars. That made them narrow, so, as the city expanded, it mostly expanded upward. The inhabitants protected themselves from the Atlantic storms and stifling summer heat with glazed *galerias* - buffer zones between inside and outside. Grimshaw's client, a regional savings bank with a large collection of public art, found itself a tight site in the city's commercial district, in a row of such tall, glazed buildings. Not the ideal place in which to shoehorn a lot of gallery space, but Grimshaw decided to make things trickier still by running a public alleyway right through it, from front to back.

Nice move, in civic terms, but it did split what would have been a tall, narrow building into two tall, very narrow buildings, linked by a full-height atrium. The bank then decided it also wanted a 300-seat auditorium, and the only space for that was underground, beneath a planned basement gallery. The hole that was dug to fit it all in eventually got to be more than 80ft deep. The result is a leaning

tower rising from the depths of the earth, hanging there by the grace of the engineers, Arup.

The reason it leans is that it is pulling its feet in, so as to get daylight - down to the lower levels. To reinstate the street frontage line and to defer to the *galeria* context, a large holographic glass screen is suspended vertically on a steel frame over the pavement. It's a back-projection screen, with an array of 25 projectors stationed behind the facade. And it works: coupled with the rotating louvres of the frontage, in translucent marble and glass, this is getting some way toward the high-tech dream of a building that can adapt its skin like a chameleon.

The idea is that you make your way to upper levels first, then filter down. To help you, Grimshaw has slung two glass-sided lifts off the front. This is fun time: the moment your lift shoots up from behind the glass screen and feels as if it is about to rocket into space is pure Willy Wonka.

Most of the main galleries are at one side, and you descend from one to another via a staircase slung out over the atrium floor far below. These are good, fairly intimate spaces, fairly conventional, nothing to write home about or get curators annoyed. But it's in the circulation areas that Grimshaw has let rip, making the gallery a bit like a tasteful adventure playground. It's a good place to wander around, and on the granite paved ground floor, where you can stroll from front to back, there is a café, complete with giant TV for watching those vital Deportivo La Coruna football matches. The auditorium below, all warm timber and white leather seats, is set up for chamber music, and looks promising.

So, it is a more than a little unconventional, Nicholas Grimshaw's first art gallery. The president of the Royal Academy adopts no Establishment solution, takes no soft option. It was not easy to build. But Spain likes challenging architecture. How many British provincial cities would see such a thing through?

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