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Seven vie for country landmark

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Beamish open air museum is a collection of 19th and 20th century buildings rescued from across north-east England and reconstructed in the County Durham countryside. Now, a competition for a £6 million visitors centre, will add a contemporary building to the mix. Seven shortlisted practices are battling it out to build the new museum gateway to pull in the crowds and establish Beamish as an international attraction

Benson & Forsyth

Benson & Forsyth's building is two simple blocks framing a central galleria. These three "fingers" of space are held below an umbrella-like roof which protects and oversails the spaces below. This roof, supported by a basic frame, admits light (and warmth) from the south, ventilates the central hall, and reflects the building's spatial and functional organisation, while aiming to accommodate the maximum flow of visitors.



The scheme attempts to correct what partner Gordon Benson sees as Beamish's incomplete narrative: "The pragmatics of arrival and informing visitors are accommodated within a poetic building, which acts as a transition between the present and this landscape of memory," he says.

Niall McLaughlin

As much about making a landscape as a building, Niall McLaughlin's scheme positions the visitor centre at the transition point where the visitor is about to be immersed in the world of the Beamish valley. To make the building visible everywhere, but not dominant, it is conceived as like a belvedere or a pavilion. The design is in the tradition of the European landscape gardens. The lawn is actually a podium, with the bulk of the visitor centre situated beneath it.



De Matos Storey Ryan

De Matos Storey Ryan conceives the scheme as a landscape path preparing the visitor for "time travel". This approach to Beamish begins miles from the site itself with the sound of Radio Beamish, transmitting the industrial archive beyond the site boundaries.



From the car park, a zigzag path cuts between mounds of spoil, leading to a hard landscape plate where a group of lightweight structures are laid out. These borrow and adapt typologies of the industrial past: the saw-tooth depot shelters a "mined" exhibition landscape and leads to the tram stop.

The gentle sloping path echoes the roads around Beamish and describes the places that occupy the open-air museum beyond.

Hodder Associates

Hodder's design aims to optimise the site's topography. A concourse "contours" the hillside, and manages the pedestrian flow to the tram stop. Other activities are contained within a village of pavilions nestled on the hillside. The whole ensemble presents a fragmented form, serving to orientate the visitor to the museum's constituent parts.



Kengo Kuma

The key priority for Kengo Kuma is to preserve and take advantage of Beamish's rich natural setting and beautiful views.

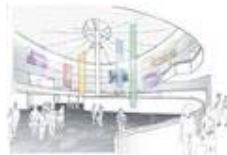


The scheme aims to harmonise the surrounding scenery and nature, and to form a blend of architectural and geographical features.

The height of the visitor centre is kept low, and flowers and trees are planted to connect the centre with the wider landscape. Visitors will see the centre as they pass the gateway, set within the surrounding landscape with the museum in the background.

MacCormac Jamieson Prichard

MJP's scheme features a drum, large enough to be a visible point of orientation for the visitor. It is a single architectural expression of Beamish's confidence, growing out of the flat grassed plateau that punctuates part of the escarpment slope. This configuration creates a ventilation undercroft, a high thermal mass and a stack for natural ventilation.



The key objective is to incorporate level changes into the visitor experience. MJP says the moment of entering the drum should be an exhilarating moment for visitors who, seemingly standing at the level of the grassed plateau, will find that the floor of the cylindrical volume within is 5m down and reached by a very gradual (1:20) comfortable curving ramp. The ramp, with a wide range of visitor information, creates an informative journey and a kind of theatre in which visitors all become participants and actors.

The cylindrical foyer is the hub of the building, creating an internal focus equivalent to that which it creates in the landscape. All facilities are visibly accessible to visitors arriving at the bottom of the ramp.

Edward Cullinan Architects

Edward Cullinan Architects' proposal for the visitor centre's landscape enhances the spatial theatre promised by the formidable presence of the giant steam hammer straddling the entrance road. It composes a sequence of spaces leading into the heart of the museum, so that the visitor is gradually orientated into the museum's physical and historical narrative.



Within the existing rows of parking bays, a series of openings are cut to form gateways radiating from the visitor centre. These human-scaled gateways connect the visitor to the formal entrance piazza, composed as a belvedere offering first sightings of the open air museum, with views over the tramlines, the colliery and the town beyond.

A large-scale relief model of the museum is cast into the centre of the piazza, as an introduction to possible routes through the museum.

The way in to the museum flows from the piazza, down through the visitor centre, and via a day-lit pathway to the museum tram stop, 6m below.

Seen from the vicinity of the tram stop and elsewhere around the museum, the new building is carefully integrated into the hillside landscape.