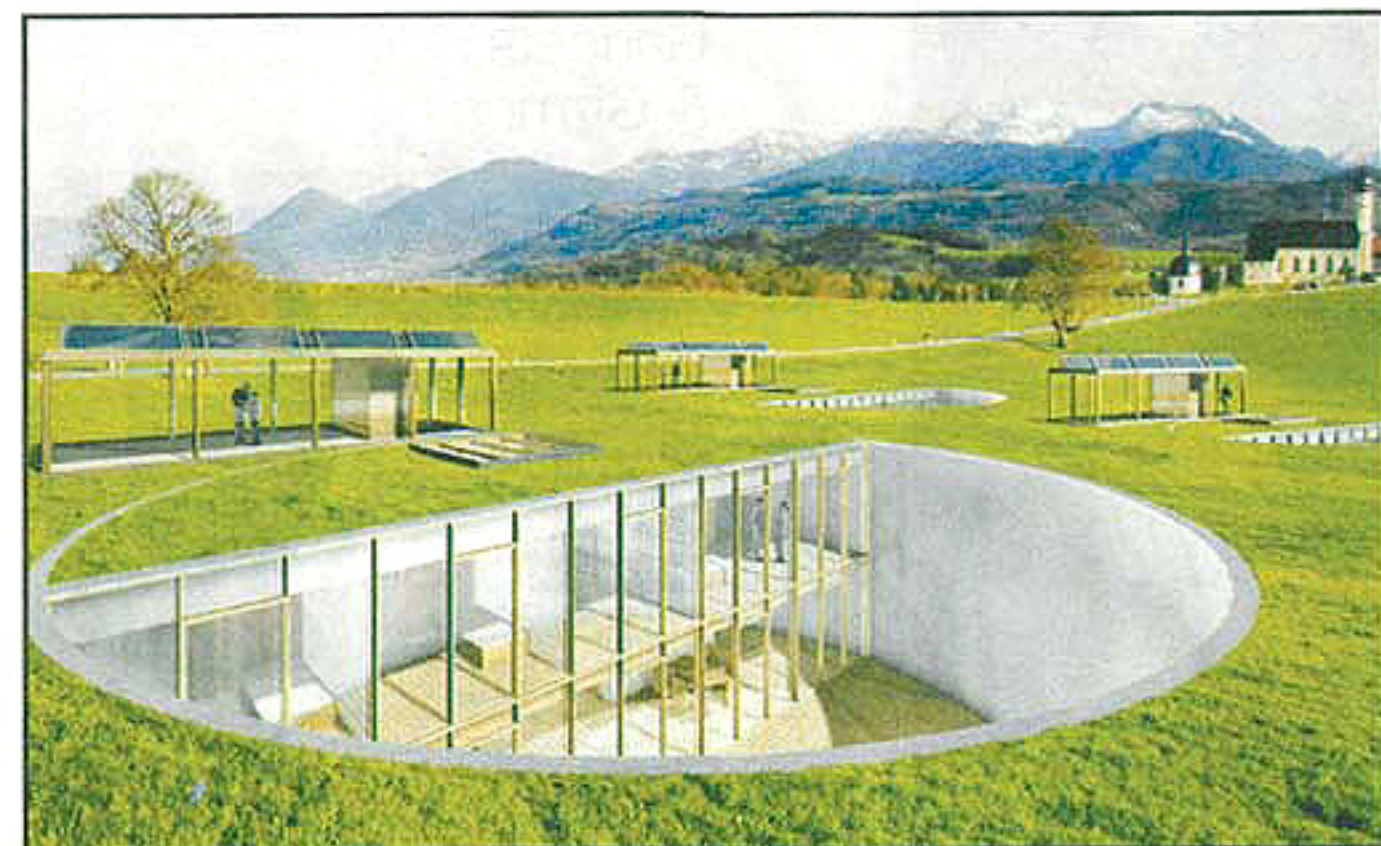


Architecture



International land rescue

In the German pavilion of the architectural exhibition for this year's Venice Biennale, **Jay Merrick** discovers a vision of the future that seeks to reclaim even the most marginal sliver of land

The heavy doors of the Arsenale in Venice opened this week to reveal the cornucopia that is the city's 9th International Architecture Exhibition, part of the Biennale. The great, the good, and the pathologically ironic thronged through the vast edifice to discover the post-millennial nub of architecture, as seen by the show's curator, Kurt Forster, an academic with the voice and bearing of a parade ground drill sergeant. But what, I wondered, under cerulean skies, did all this have to do with Thurrock, or the O House in Pfaffing, Germany?

In the Arsenale, the future of architecture comes in model form, perfectly fashioned, stylishly presented on white gondola-shaped display units. Tall buildings, goopy buildings, jagged buildings – dazzling ingots and icons designed by a Rolodex-full of the world's greatest architects.

Much of the work is aesthetically dramatic; and some of it certainly sets up engrossing resonances. There is a singularity to the atmosphere, though, a nagging aura of exclusivity. Not even the engagingly fractious British pavilion, curated by Peter Cook and sponsored by the British Council, could quite remove this ennui.

Cook's tour makes this the most interesting British *plat du jour* in six years. He presents the work of nine architects, whose projects differ sharply. The deliberately eccentric roster includes John Pawson,

Kathryn Findlay and the rivetingly unclassifiable architectural satirist CJ Lim.

And, tucked away in the Italian pavilion, Chris Wilkinson has conspired with the quizzical water-sculpturist William Pye to deliver a reflected postcard of works that – mercifully, in view of the convoluted verbal tosh that defaces so much work in the Giardini's pavilions – carry no explanations.

It was in the German pavilion that I found the sharp flock of grit in the biennale's glibby shell that may help to produce the successful pearl of an event that Forster has striven for with such thoroughness. The pavilion has been curated by a Brit, Francesca Ferguson, who is centrally involved in the German Urban Drift project. The content of the pavilion seems simple enough: a curving visual strip of marginal architecture on marginal sites.

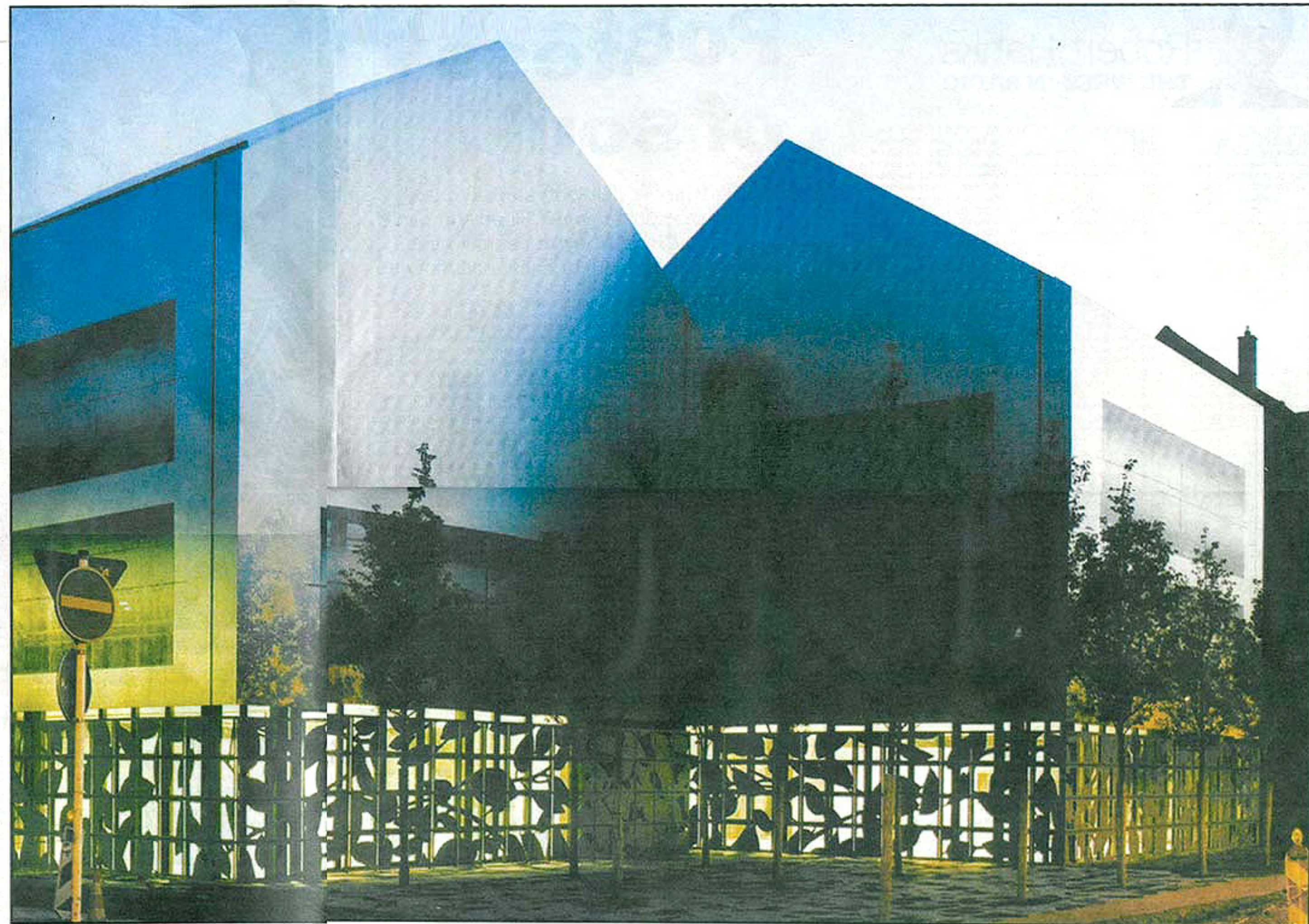
Sounds familiar enough, doesn't it? After all, the development of brownfield sites in Britain continues apace. But these sites are often quite large, and suitable for mainstream developers who deliver anodyne buildings that are properties rather than architecture. Even developers with a genuine interest in promoting unusual architecture tend to be hobbled by the edgy imperatives of interest rates, and sale or rental values.

Ferguson has rejected macro in favour of micro and highlighted a movement in Germany towards the innovative architectural exploitation of relatively tight slivers

of urban land on which single buildings have been designed by young architects specifically interested in rupturing vernacular, or witlessly postmodern, architectural wallpaper. But the ruptures are not outbreaks of casual anarchy. They're question marks, meditations on what might make architectural sense in the future. They break patterns and remind us that urban change cannot always be incremental or comfortably familiar.

It's unlikely. A designer shirt is an obviously transient item, and architecture may seem in some way frozen in time; permanent, solid, and therefore – at any given moment – apparently coherent. Odd, isn't it, how time seems to be excluded from the perception of architecture? A building goes up and, on its footprint, time stops; it fails to be seen as a cultural signifier, or as part of a dynamic condition. What happened to Piranesi's ugly-beautiful dramas of architectural creation and decay? What thready pulse is left in the collective British psyche concerning the ferocious social and architectural change that overwhelmed, say, Manchester in the early 19th century?

The evidence assembled in the German pavilion relates mostly to brand new buildings, but these architectural aliens – in effect, urban critiques composed of brick, stucco, glass and metal cladding – are also stark reminders that the “known” townscapes in which they are embedded must



evolve ever more fluidly to meet economic and cultural shifts. In Germany, it seems that many of the key futurist architectural experiments are small and strange, rather than grandly virtuous.

Kurt Forster's title for the exhibition is “Metamorph”. The German pavilion's message fits the bill. As do certain goings-on in Thurrock, Essex – which we might see as a peculiarly British riff on German marginal architecture. Thurrock has no gracious canals flowing with tides like chipped jade; it has marshland and ditches. Instead of sublime piazzas, there are tyre-dumps, for Per Rialto and the fishmarket, insert flyovers and the Lakeside shopping-centre.

Yet it is here, by the Thames, that the agitprop group General Public Agency (GPA) is pursuing another kind of

architectural metamorphosis. Supported by, among other bodies, Thurrock council and the Government's Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, it is pursuing its project Thurrock: A Visionary Brief in the Thames Gateway.

GPA's directors, Clare Cumberledge and Lucy Musgrave, are inverting the methods of the German architectural wake-up calls. They want new architecture and infrastructure in Thurrock to be grounded, precisely, in the values, creativity and aspiration of local people and their environment. The key to this hot-wiring of characteristics is not sentiment, but the idea of change as a locally shared challenge, a process that may occasionally be startling, but certainly not mysterious.

Some challenge. The wonderful photo-

graphs of Jason Orton, unforced and simply framed, catch the atmosphere of Thurrock, and Purfleet in particular. Commissioned by GPA, they suggest a backwater smelling of refined oil and cement dust, a bare, sodden place where compass needles might skew alarmingly – a vision torn from the dystopic narrative of an Iain Sinclair novel. But the images also strongly radiate life, endeavour, obduracy and change.

Which of the architectural metamorphoses in the Arsenale might be usefully beamed down on to the alluvial silts, gravels and seams of chalk that Joseph Conrad described in *Heart of Darkness* as “one of the dark places of the earth”? None, of course. And yet physical and architectural change is vital to the future of Purfleet and the other conurbations in Thurrock.

Blurring the boundaries of the real and the imagined: Allmann Sattler Wappner's Südwestmetall office building, in Reutlingen; the O House plan, by Edithäuser

The complexities, notes the Essex boy and Demos think-tanker Ken Worple, are legion. Any cultural or architectural strategy to renew the Thurrock area, he notes, has to address “this unusual ‘back-story’; one of defensiveness, nonconformist experimentation, industrial idealism, and a strong streak of agrarian self-sufficiency.” These forces will inform planning processes in Thurrock, and therefore a great deal of its new or recycled architecture. Most of it will be perfectly ordinary – but some will be quite radical.

Environmentally creative building solutions are also being addressed, not least by a group of artists and designers pattering around the manor in an “affirmative action attack vehicle” also referred to as the *Obsolences and Entropy Mobile Re-*

search and Investigation Field Vehicle (Jogo: a clenched fist rising out of a cabbage).

The 9th International Architecture Exhibition is a hell of a show, all right. One waited in vain for a hover-version of Thurrock's affirmative action attack vehicle, powered by a Puy lentil reactor core, to flubber ashore at the Giardini and into this Venetian wonderland of architectural imagination. And the sight – my informant is notably sensible – of Brad Pitt (now studying with Frank Gehry) in the Giardini, his hair suitably metamorphosed into disguising shades of dark brown.

The 9th International Architecture Exhibition, the Arsenale and the Giardini, Venice (+39 04 15 21 87 12; www.labiennale.org) to 7 November