

Heritage Through Contemporary Vision:

How Can Contemporary Architecture Reference Gothic Organicism in an Elegant Yet Respectful Fashion?

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Module Code: ACAA5003
Word Count: 1,539
Date: 13/12/2024

Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, a fundamental part of North Wales' history that luckily, has been preserved in a superb fashion. But all good things can be improved, the original conservatory extension built in 1993 was not quite the celebration Elizabeth Jones Parry would have been looking for, alas, further consideration for the materiality coinciding with longevity would have been more appropriate. Plas Glyn-y-Weddw has always been community orientated, it is inarguable that this persists in the most respectful and traditional way possible.

It was originally built as a dower house in 1856 by Henry Kennedy. It was mostly used to display the family's artwork forming it into a focal point for the North Walian Victorian high society, reflecting the tastes and lifestyle of the gentry from the period. Once purchased by a Cardiff businessman 40 years later, it began to solidify its cultural importance in the Llŷn Peninsula. The femininity of the building itself, from the purpose it was initially built for along with its natural progression for art and creatives, focusing on aesthetics and comfort, softness even, rather than that of fortification as an alternative Victorian gothic ensemble would have been, whilst still encapsulating the grandeur of the time.



Figure 1: (Roberts, n.d.)

The rich history of this organisation solidifies the duty within the regeneration of the satisfactory conservatory that was added to the house. This needed to embody the original needs of the cafe and founded organisation whilst showing development, femininity and homage to the house

itself. Matthew Sanderson, (Voelcker, 2023), stumbled into this as he was visiting the overtly wintry cold tea room. Just after the recent disappointing meeting on what could be in store for the art centre in replacement of the cafe space. He eagerly offered to help spread the weight of this responsibility and unearthed organic philosophy to underpin the cafe design, the idea of a sea urchin washed up, literally.

The cafe was redesigned because the current one built in the 90s was far too hot in the summer and vice versa in the winter. Mainly because of its prevalence of glass with not enough detailing to sustain an ambient temperature for its intended use. The kitchen was inadequate and the maximum seating capacity was about thirty, also lacking in consideration for accessibility for all.

After completion by Mark Wray Architects (2022), the construction of the organic form was finished in October 2022 and the cafe was officially opened on the 18th of March 2023. Regional Awards Jury (2024), discussed a £1,165m final contract value on a 225m² site, giving Mark Wray Architects and Matthew Sanderson enough space to manipulate the interplay of modern architecture and the Victorian Gothic structure.

A multi-symmetrical form is challenging enough to construct, let alone when incorporating it into an existing building of heritage, this is where the design could be falling short. The junction between phase 1 and phase 2, the back offices and toilets travelling to the rear entrance to the cafe, could have been considered further as simple wooden cladding with standardised steel pilotti holding up a very boxy, clinical exterior is like a thorn between the roses.

Initially, the designers would have been in a different position but since construction, it is apparent that this junction could have been given more stylistic interest, or cohesion with either the original gothic building or with the organic urchin cafe. Creating a larger kitchen and having more space for fluidity within the building was imperative. But more organic shapes and structures could have been implemented whilst still keeping the budget low but creating a 360 degree intrigue, the flat sailing roofline on the rear, is honest, as it sails between the urchin and the original older building and is a clear connection, whether this is a positive or not is up to the masses.



Figure 2: (Mark Wray Architects, 2022a)

Connections similar to this are one of the most overlooked elements in the designing process when it should be the most important, when the masses try to interpret something that one curated no context for, the masses ignore. When compared to the sheer level of detail that has been thought through, what feels like the frontal lobe of mother nature, sitting next to what she initially could have hoped humanity would erect. The anchoring extruded quatrefoil steel frame partnered with the internal subtle arches peppering the surroundings of the tearoom, one feels like they could be in a beautifully engulfing and soft curation of a gothic building, perfectly harmonising with the real sensation beside it.

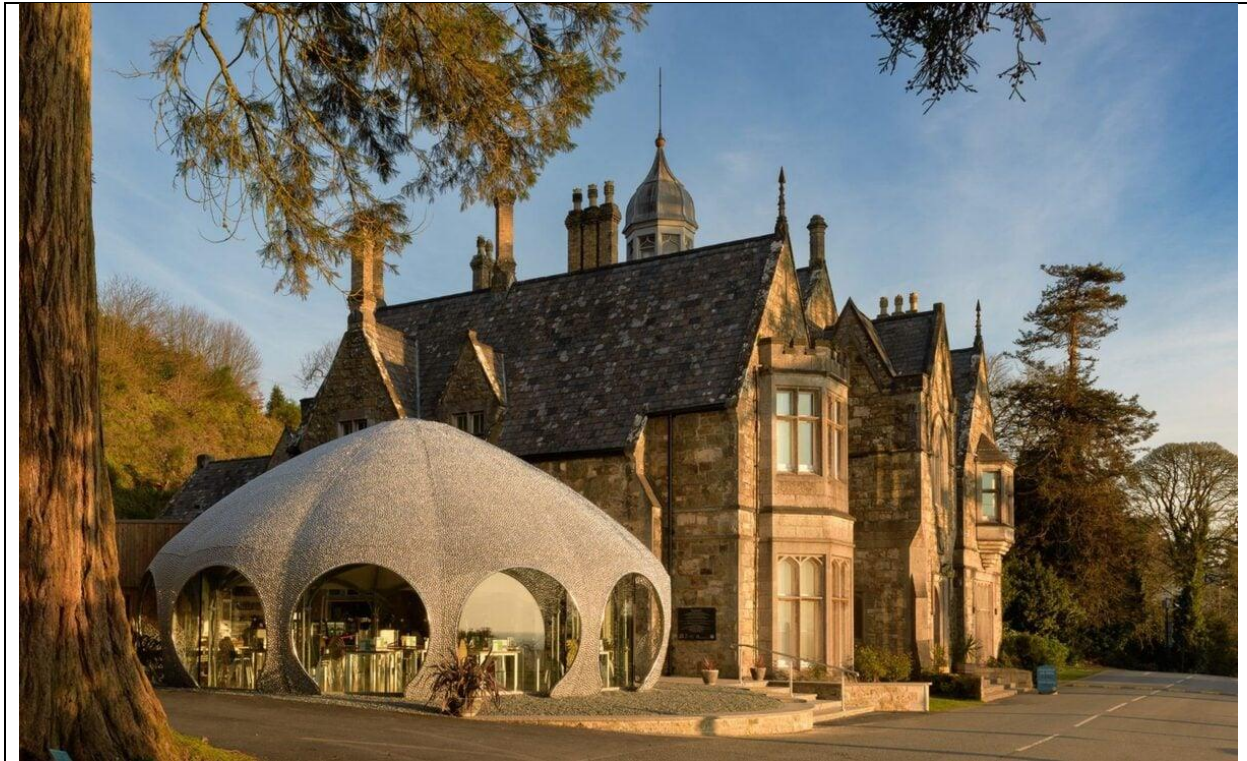


Figure 3: (IQ Glass, 2024)

As for the general aesthetics of the cafe, one can't help but feel it is very well done. It does feel like you're in a canopy of nature when you enter. The circular windows have quatrefoil steel arches surrounding them and travelling up to the oculus. The structure itself during the building process was formed in suspension, this seems to be a prominent way to test and triumph with organic architecture for its structural stability, similar to Guadi, hanging chains upside down to see natural forms and physics. This process of design and construction gives the building a lightweight, bubbly feel.



Figure 4: (Regional Awards Jury, 2024)

This architectural detail of the steel arches and frameless windows gives a harmonious visual between the gothic building and the new tearoom, portraying an affiliation with modernity. The fairly minimalist design on the interior is brought back just enough to pay homage to the gothic structure, on the other hand, the exterior of the tearoom is covered in eighty thousand individually welded barnacles. Some would perceive this as being too much or shiny, but from after it morphs into one like pointillism curating a whole image as one next to the Dower House.

The tearoom from the front sits so joyfully next to the dower house, and yet you would never know it was there from the rear entrance. Simply looking at the image of the rear shows you nothing of where it is and what it is showing, it could be the relieving sight of a cardiac care unit. For members of public alone, people they want to attract for economic reasons, this mediocre entrance is only used for one thing, disabled access. Is this fair? Why should that be? The front and side of the tearoom is full of life and happiness, uplifting to all who enter. Yet does that mean that certain demographics of fellow people do not get to experience this, ever. Why should they park next to a boiler cupboard when others don't even know the cupboard is there? Why should one feel that they are entering from the side wing of a great play, when they should be centre stage, with the rest of society?

Although the rear of the building doesn't aesthetically flow with the opposing two structures, it does provide access for all who may or may not need it. It could have been improved by curating a fully thought through flow for these visitors too. Adding a symbiotic sense to the already organic structure.

Using 85% recycled steel, (plasglynywedd1, 2023), the steel frame that the whole tearoom is constructed from is extremely strong and hard wearing. Through this, you can see the large windows surrounding the urchin and from the top. Giving a natural light source throughout most of the day, also capturing the beautiful raw scenery in every direction you look. With new and improved recycling systems for the cafe, it prioritises minimal disruption to the ecosystem it resides in. The overall design of the urchin has focused on permanence for the future, reducing the need for frequent renovations again, this can be seen through access to services, the frame construction and window detailing.



Figure 5: (Mark Wray Architects, 2022b)

When taking a solid step back from the structure and design, looking at the duality of both buildings and how they connect, literally but also metaphorically one cannot help but feel that the spaces above the windows where already a steel arch has been placed, the design team could have sculpted an arch rising to the top of the oculus, still giving an organic essence but also

linking back to the natural inspiration from gothic architecture that was referenced by Sir John Soane in his drawing of tree canopies relating to the organic structure.



Figure 6: (Soane, 1820a)

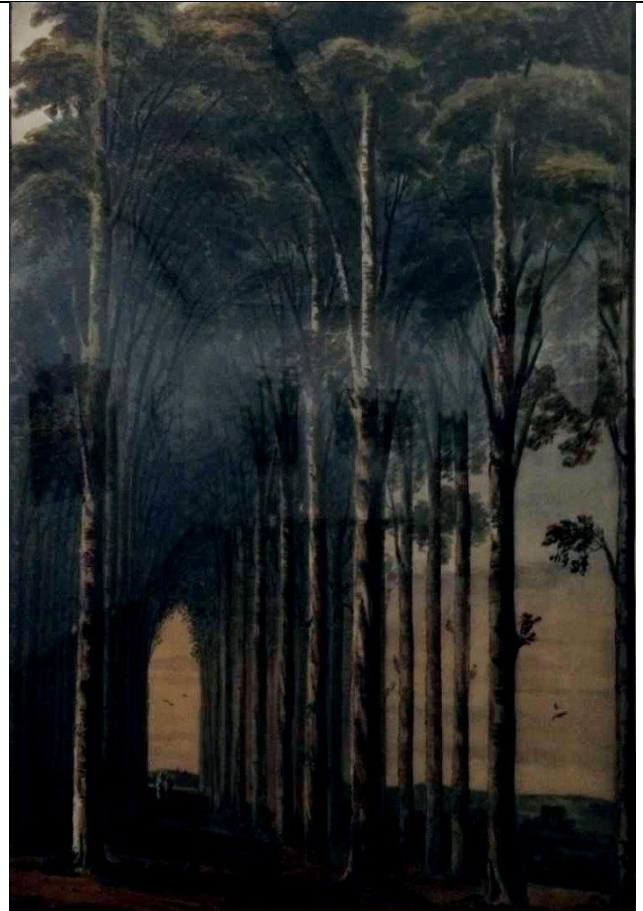


Figure 7: (Soane, 1820b)

Plas Glyn-y-Weddw's transformation has successfully blended its historical significance with modern architectural innovation. The design demonstrates a thoughtful interplay between Victorian Gothic architecture and a stylistic organic form. While the front and interior of the tearoom excel in harmonising nature and heritage, delivering a feeling of joy and continuity, the rear entrance and junction between the structures fall short of these ideals. These areas could have benefitted from more cohesive integration to honour the legacy and inclusivity of the space.

Despite these minor oversights, the tearoom is a testament to the vision of blending sustainability, functionality, and beauty. Using recycled materials and innovative techniques, the urchin ensures a lasting legacy for future generations while still respecting the past. Allowing Plas Glyn-y-Weddw can continue to grow as a beloved cultural landmark, harmonising community, art, and architecture.

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