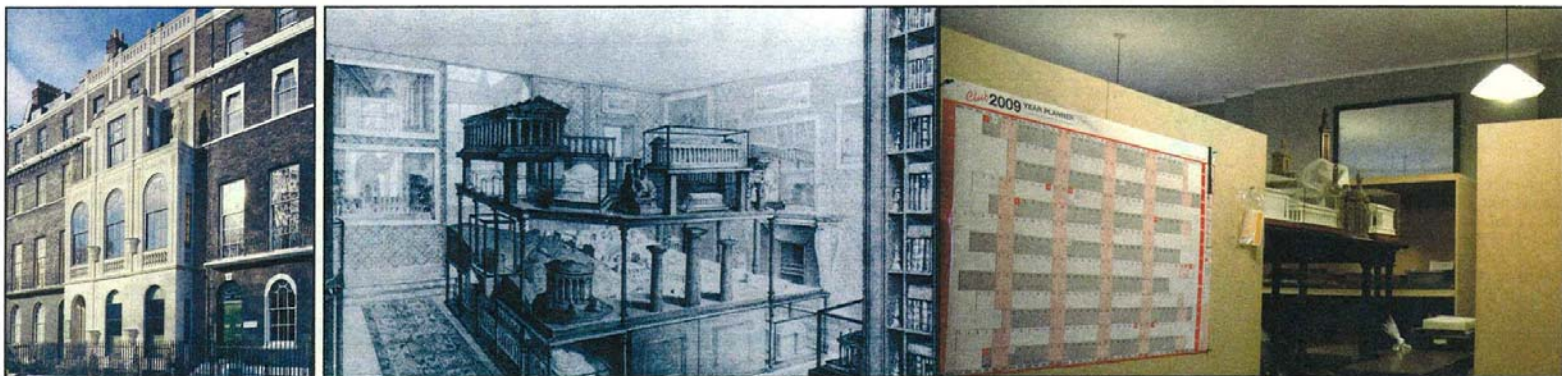


Conservation

Britain's "best kept secret" plans a revelation

The Sir John Soane's Museum is seeking to fund a £6.3m restoration, revealing historic rooms to the public for the first time



LONDON. Tim Knox, the director of the Sir John Soane's Museum, has announced the launch of "Opening Up the Soane", a public appeal for £6.3m (\$9.4m) to restore and open to the public for the first time several historic rooms, to improve public access and facilities for the museum's 93,000 annual visitors, and to create better administration offices, educational areas and conservation laboratories.

The museum consists, in fact, of three contiguous buildings: No. 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields, a late 18th-century terraced house in which the Georgian architect (1753-1837) lived while he created in 1812 his unique house next door at No. 13—now the museum that Dr Knox calls "the best house-museum in the world, and Britain's best kept secret"—and finally, No. 14, which the architect bought and

reordered as an investment. He used the small back gardens of all three houses to build the annexe that houses much of his sculpture and antiquities collection and the subterranean Gothic interior fantasy of the Monk's Parlour and Colonnade.

On his death, Soane stipulated that his house and collections be preserved in the state in which he left them, the house be open free of charge to the public and that it be an "academy" for the study of architecture and the allied arts of painting and sculpture.

Over the years, these criteria have been observed to an extent, but the exigencies of administration and finance had caused in the late 19th century some alterations to be made to some of the fabric and the relocation of items in the collections. One aim of the campaign is to restore to its

original condition as much of the museum as possible, as well as to make better provision for Soane's education aims.

The founder

John Soane was in many ways the most successful example of the bourgeoisie of British society in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The son of a bricklayer, he was taken up and trained by the architect George Dance the younger and he went on to work for Henry Holland. A King's Travelling Studentship (1778) enabled him to take the Grand Tour and introduced him to his first patron, the enormously rich and difficult Lord Frederick Augustus Hervey, Bishop of Derry and later Earl of Bristol. From this point his career began to grow and soon to flourish, leading to many commissions for improvements to country houses and public buildings, including the Dulwich Picture Gallery and Mausoleum (1811-14) and churches in Marylebone, Bethnal Green and Walworth, his masterpiece and greatest commission being the Bank of England and Stock Office (1792-93). He became in 1806 Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy where his lectures exerted an enormous influence in the raising of professional standards and the propagation of classicism. Although firmly rooted in the neo-classical style, Soane's own work is

unique: idiosyncratic, not to say eccentric, full of quirks and surprises, complex and intricate.

This personal and inimitable style finds its most complete and extant expression in No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields: bold colours (deep mauve and black; chrome yellow), top lighting using plain and coloured glass, the placement of plane and convex mirrors to make intriguing perplexities of space and light, folding walls, double-height spaces cutting through storeys, vaults, saucer-domed ceilings and the curious, often oblique, distribution of rooms.

His *horror vacui* aesthetic determined him to cram in his enormous collection of Egyptian (notably the sarcophagus of Seti I), Greek and Roman sculptures and reliefs, paintings (including Hogarth's series *The Rake's Progress* displayed in a custom-built picture room), and numerous *objets de vertu* and oddities (a case of mummified cats and a rat found during the demolition of a London house). With an unerring eye for detail and overall composition, the works are placed in eye-catching positions and at the same time the viewer cannot help being impressed by the dense abundance of the collections.

Opening to the public

The restoration will reveal to the public several rooms that have been lost to view, namely Soane's model room in which he displayed his collection of architectural models, his own and others, his bedroom (with his chintz-hung four-poster bed) and

The Sir John Soane's Museum complex, Nos. 12, 13 (the museum) and 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields, left; C.J. Richardson, *The Model Room*, 1825, centre; the Model Room today, right

bathroom (fitted with blue-and-white oriental porcelain and a mahogany-fronted bathtub), and his oratory, a shrine to his late wife, in which he raised an altarino on which the object of worship was a vase painted by Lady Soane. A top-lit book passage of mirrored library cupboards connects these rooms across the second floor.

Because there have been no deacquisitions from any part of Soane's collections, including the furniture and ornaments, the museum will be able to recreate these rooms with their original pieces.

Some structural changes will take place in the restoration and refurbishment, mainly involving the reconfiguration of No. 12. There will be a new entrance/exit lobby with a cloakroom and toilets, and a gift shop. Visitors will then return to No. 13 and tour the house from bottom to top, descending to the point where they began via a staircase in No. 12. A lift for disabled visitors is also to be installed. The new tourist route through the house will also allow the entrance lobby of the museum to be restored to its 1837 state. No. 12 will also house on the first floor a new changing exhibition gallery and, on the floor above, expanded conservation studios.

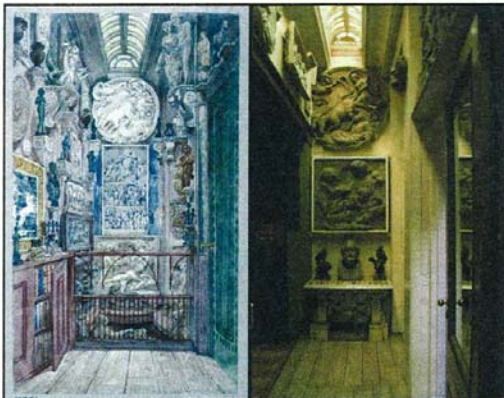
All the offices previously housed in No. 12 have been moved to No. 14, which the museum bought back in 1995 and which was restored in 2007-08. It also includes two floors for

an education centre (currently used by secondary schools for various projects and by Birkbeck College's art and architecture departments) and two floors for the museum's research library, which, in addition to the original bookcases in the museum, holds Soane's own books, as well as his drawings and manuscript collection, including 9,000 drawings by Robert Adam, his office and circle.

Finance

The museum has already raised £2m. An anonymous foundation has already agreed to underwrite £390,000, the cost of the new entrance, shop and cloakrooms in No. 12. The Monument Trust, funded by the late Simon Sainsbury, has agreed to give £1m, the J. Paul Getty Charitable Trust has voted a grant of £125,000 and the Leche Trust £100,000, leaving the museum to find about £4m of the total, which it hopes to achieve by 2010. An application for half the total cost made earlier this year, deemed by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) as "faultless" and "intelligent and high quality", failed only because the HLF's limited funds (£7m) could not stretch that far (13 projects were asking for £35m; only two got through).

Despite the current economic crisis, Tim Knox is adamant about the appeal: "It must happen. It will happen."
Donald Lee



C.J. Richardson, *The Ante Room*, 1825, left; the Ante Room today, right