

Bank of England Architect's Eccentric Home Gets Gentle Revamp

Interview by Farah Nayeri



Tim Knox at the office with Tiger and Sponge

January 30, 2008 (Bloomberg) -- Travel two centuries back and step inside the home of a man who went fishing with Turner, built the Bank of England, and buried his wife's lap dog in the backyard.

The house of John Soane, a bricklayer's son who became the finest British architect of his day, is located at No. 13, Lincoln's Inn Fields in London's Holborn area. It is exactly as he left it in 1837, down to the last footstool.

The cult museum -- composed of the main house and two others on either side, all by Soane -- is undergoing a revamp. Once funded and complete, it will open Mr. and Mrs. Soane's bedrooms to the public and ease access for visitors who trickle in and out, 50 at a time, through the atmospherically dim 19th-century entrance.

"I don't intend our visitors to come back one day and find Soane's house turned into this gleaming chrome-and-glass visitor attraction," says Tim Knox, 45, the pinstripe-suited director whose crowded office is Mrs. Soane's old bedroom, complete with a stained-glass veranda. "That doesn't mean to say that the Soane Museum is this stuck-in-the-past place."

Knox, head curator of Britain's National Trust from 2002 to 2005, knows one or two things about heritage, and aims to keep the house "in its uncompromising, idiosyncratic eccentricity." He places teasels picked up in the country on chairs to stop visitors sitting down. He wants no museum café, as kitchen aromas would spoil the smell of the place.

Confident, friendly and in control, Knox has a pair of black dachshunds that come into the office once a week. They sit in their master's lap, licking his trouser leg and yelping each time the door opens.

'Monk's Yard'

Soane, too, liked dogs. A non-believer, he created a "Monk's Yard" in a rear courtyard for a fictional Padre Giovanni, filled it with fragments of medieval ruins, and paved it with the tops and bottoms of bottles. The imaginary monk's headstone contains the remains of Mrs. Soane's dog and is marked with the words, "Alas, poor Fanny!"

Architect of the original Bank of England building and of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, the Royal Academy architecture professor kept thousands of books, models and drawings. You can feel his presence as you file through his carpeted dining room, past the upholstered fauteuils on which he once sat.

His house -- a small maze of rooms with lunettes, concave mirrors and skylights -- has treasures worthy of the Louvre: the engraved sarcophagus of Egyptian Pharaoh Seti I, Hogarth's series of paintings, "A Rake's Progress," and Canalettos.

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Estranged Son

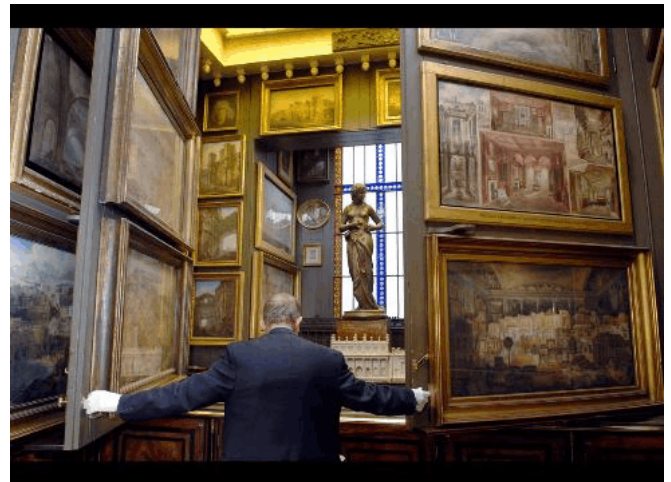
When Soane died a widower in 1837, estranged from his only surviving son, he ordered that his house be kept as it was and opened free of charge to visitors and researchers. Trustees have stuck to that mantra, using Soane's upstairs bedrooms and one adjacent house for offices, the library, the conservation room, staff rooms and galleries, where shows by architects Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind have been held.

Knox's aim now is to open more of the main house to the public, and move other activities next door to No. 14, a longtime law office bought by the museum for 700,000 pounds (\$1.4 million) a decade ago. Now restored, No. 14 by June will hold offices, the library and an education room for 3,000 schoolchildren a year.

By 2012, Knox seeks to raise 5 million to 6 million pounds from the Heritage Lottery Fund and benefactors, including the U.S.-based Soane Foundation, a circle of architects, artists and enthusiasts who have financed past refurbishments. The plan is to set up a coatroom, shop and revamped exhibition galleries; add an elevator for access by the disabled; and open the bedrooms, displaying Soane's cork models in his wife's room as he had done after her death. Ultimately, Knox expects a 25 percent increase in the museum's 92,000 annual visitors.

In recent years, Soane's museum has received some 1.25 million pounds in U.K. lottery money for other projects: buying No. 14, restoring the three courtyards. Another 29,800 pounds were given last August to help the museum draw up plans for the revamp.

What if the museum doesn't raise enough money? "We will, because it's such an irresistible project," comes the initial reply. Then Knox says, "If we don't get the money, it's highly likely we won't be able to do all the ambitious things we want to do -- or we may have to split them up into smaller stages."



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