

'Nautical dream in glass and steel'
by Giles Worsley

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The regatta at Cowes next week will see an ingenious new building for the Royal Yacht Squadron come into its own, says Giles Worsley

TRANSPARENCY was one of the great dreams of 20th-century architects, the desire to design buildings in which walls just melted away. Steel and glass made the dream possible. Steel meant that heavy structures could be supported on thin columns, not solid load-bearing walls, and with glass the intervening spaces could be rendered translucent.

But the ideal proved hard to translate into reality since transparency is seldom compatible with a building's function. Mies van der Rohe, the architect most associated with the movement, dramatically revealed its constraints with one of his last, most ambitious buildings, the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. This vast glass-walled pavilion was of such breath-taking impracticality that all the pictures had to be housed in a basement hidden out of sight down below. In this case the transparent glass box was no more than an architect's conceit, an almost unusable space that has been struggling to find a role ever since.

Tom Croft succeeds where Mies failed, and with the most unlikely of clients. His design was not for an indulgent board of modern art museum trustees anxious to be at the cutting edge, but for the nation's leading yachting club, the Royal Yacht Squadron at Cowes, as unashamedly traditional and conservative a body as could be found.

Transparency is, as it happens, fundamental to the purpose of his new pavilion for the squadron's headquarters in Cowes, on the Isle of Wight, but Croft's success is rooted in his ability to marry his own modernist architectural agenda with a design that entertains rather than threatens the squadron.

This is not as easy as it might seem. An earlier architectural competition, with such luminaries as Sir William Whitfield and Sir Michael Hopkins participating, failed to produce a design with which the squadron could feel happy. Croft's philosophy was pragmatic: "It was all about designing something that looked as if it had always been there for the members, but still felt new to me. What I've had to work hardest at is not to make it look Victorian." He cites the great early 19th-century Prussian architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel (an important influence on Mies van der Rohe) as one of the inspirations behind the design, particularly the idea of a severe, ordered building placed in what is essentially a landscape setting. He also talks frequently of the 20th-century American architect Louis Kahn.

It is unlikely that either reference would have meant much to members of the Royal Yacht Squadron. However, Croft (who had never been to the Isle of Wight before and does not sail) found it was possible to make links with the members. "Making the details look as simple as possible was something the Royal Yacht Squadron appreciated. The squadron is conservative, but they race high-tech boats. They appreciate high-quality engineering."

The Royal Yacht Squadron occupies what was once one of Henry VIII's forts defending the Solent. The original half-moon-shaped battery is still there, though armed with nothing more substantial than a starting gun, but the Castle, as it is known, has grown into a rambling, mainly Victorian building, with much charm, but masculine and heavy-looking. As the Cowes Week regatta has grown in size and ambition, it has also come under increasing pressure from numbers. Croft's new pavilion, set in a large, previously rather forlorn garden, has been designed to relieve that pressure. It is essentially a festive structure that will come into its own during Cowes Week, which begins on Saturday, when it will be thronged with members of the squadron and their families watching the races, which start and finish in front of the Castle. In good weather, all the glazed doors of the large club-room, which faces the sea, will be thrown open and the pavilion will become like a giant tent, open to the elements.

To allow this, Croft has reduced the structure of the building to its bare essentials, a regular grid of steel columns, with the glazed wall set slightly back behind it. He prevents this essentially Miesian structure from being too earnest by capping it with a sweeping copper roof, which rises to hold a central roof-light running the length of the building. "The roof shape was something the Royal Yacht Squadron liked a lot," recalls Croft. "It reminded them of the marquees they used to have on the site. It's an appropriately jovial, light-hearted feel for the summer."

From the outside, the shape of the roof suggests 18th-century princely garden pavilions. Within, the billowing shape gives the impression of the draped fabric of a tent – or, if you want to find a metaphor closer to home, recalls the feeling of walking between the hulls of a pair of yachts drawn up out of the water for the winter.

Part of Croft's skill has been in breaking down what is in fact quite a substantial building so that it appears no more than a garden pavilion. Behind the club-room, largely hidden from view, is a large, covered, enclosed room, but its barrel-vaulted fabric roof can be slid back and glazed doors can be thrown open to make a sheltered but open courtyard. The size of the complex has been further disguised by building kitchens, lavatories and changing-rooms into the hillside behind. The result is a building of surprising flexibility that is as comfortable for serving drinks for two as a dinner for several hundred, and at the same time skillfully disguises its bulk so as to produce a building of deceptive simplicity. It is an admirable marriage of modernist ideals and conservative values to create a practical building that will give great pleasure.

The late Dr Giles Worsley was an architectural historian, the Daily Telegraph's architectural critic & a Trustee of The Georgian Group

