

The Monument Man

Sir David Chipperfield by Charles Saumarez Smith

13 museums, 11 in progress. Highlights: Figge Art Museum, Iowa (2005); Neues Museum, Berlin (2009); Museo Jumex, Mexico City (2013)

I first met David Chipperfield some time in the early 1990s when he had been asked to design new desks and a shop for the Natural History Museum. We talked about an issue recurrent in all aspects of museum design: the tension between pure aesthetics and the needs and demands of the ordinary visitor. He had designed beautiful desks. They had not lasted long because the staff thought they were beautiful, but not practical. In the tension between use and beauty, David has always erred on the side of beauty. The next time I met him was about 10 years later when we had a conversation about the need for works of art to be seen in natural daylight. More than any other architect I know, he is interested in how objects look within buildings. His interest in display was one of many reasons why I was so delighted that he won the competition in May 2008 to re-shape James Pennethorne's monumental building in Burlington Gardens for the Royal Academy of Arts. Since then, I have worked very closely with David and his team and I have learned to appreciate his extraordinary qualities as an architect. He is exceptionally knowledgeable about, and attentive to, the historical character of buildings, paying close attention at the Neues Museum to the rough elements of what survived from the 1841-1859 original (to the initial fury of the German authorities) and, at the Royal Academy, to its original use. He is meticulous about details and the quality of materials. He is also unexpectedly modest. He designs monumental buildings. But they are not intended as monuments to him.

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