

Arty Bunker — Fresh from success at the newly relocated Design Museum in Kensington High Street, **John Pawson** has gone underground, deep underground, to create a new space for the **Feuerle art collection** in a Second World War bunker in the heart of **Berlin**... Interview with John Pawson by *Herbert Wright*. Photography by *Paul Raftery*





Following rehabilitation by Design Museum refurbishment architect John Pawson, a bunker in the heart of Berlin is now the home of The Feuerle Collection. Situated south of Potsdamer Platz on the Landwehr canal, the 6,350 sq m space built during the Second World War as a telecommunications centre now houses a unique collection that juxtaposes antique Asian works with contemporary art. Among Chinese furniture from the second century BC (Han Dynasty) to the 18th century (Qing Dynasty) and Khmer sculptures from the seventh to the 13th centuries, collector Désiré Feuerle places contemporary artworks, from artists such as Anish Kapoor, Zeng Fanzhi, Cristina Iglesias and photographer Nobuyoshi Araki. The atmosphere of the collection is Zen-like and meditative. Visitors experience it after first clearing their minds by listening to John Cage's Music for Piano no.20 (1953) in a black space. Pawson talked to Blueprint about the project.

1 (previous page) New lettering on the bunker's exterior, made of concrete shuttered in situ

2 Reflecting water beyond the statues enhances the tranquillity of the space

3 Physical intervention in the space is minimal, and light highlights exhibits

5 Heavy concrete structures on the roof protect ventilation outlets. The entrance (left) is discrete

How would you describe the bunker space you worked with?

It's a single storey above ground, a very large geometric concrete bunker; a series of spaces protected against bombs. It has a couple of basements below, one of which we used. It's so beautifully done, it's top-grade concrete: on the ceiling it's 3.8m thick, supported by columns which are 1.7 x 0.7m thick, and the walls are 2m thick. It's like being in the pyramids, but drawn by [artist Donald] Judd, it's got this very Judd-like progression. The floors and the walls, the ceiling and the staircase are all this beautiful military-grade concrete, designed and drawn by engineers. It's very pleasing. We cleaned it up and dehumidified it and lit it and made it comfortable, for this extraordinary collection...

Does it have any windows?

Funnily enough, it does, very deep squares. He [Feuerle] didn't want any natural light, so we used them for the ventilation and smoke exhalation, things like that. One part of the lower basement was flooded, because it's next to the canal, so we glassed that off and illuminated it. It looks like the cisterns in Istanbul. The columns are reflected.

You kept the canal water?

What we did was pump it out, sealed it, and put the water back. It's used as a reservoir for [use in case of] fire.

That water feature is part of the space's meditative quality — the Feuerle Collection wasn't a case of squeezing the maximum out of the square metres available?

I think you can get more value out of something that isn't as crowded.

Compared to the Design Museum, where is the balance here between the past and the contemporary?

At the Feuerle Collection, it's much more left as it was.

You couldn't mess with it?

(Laughing): Yeah, physically! At great expense and time, we made a couple of openings — one we had to, as a means of escape. When you cut through 2m [of concrete], it's rather beautiful actually, because you can see the saw marks and what's inside the wall, all the reinforcement.

Your minimalist approach to interiors is legendary. Is it informed by your time in Japan and visiting designer Shiro Kuramata?

Obviously, spending time in Japan has influenced me, just like any extended period, like America or Halifax [Pawson's hometown]. I'd seen an article in Domus about Kuramata in the late Sixties, then I was in a bookshop in Tokyo and I found his monograph. In fact I hadn't remembered his name. I rang him up out of the blue and bizarrely he agreed to see me. He brought along Masi Kurokawa, the brother of [great metabolist] Kisho, who was also an architect and spoke English. I used to hang around his office and eventually he got fed up and said you should go.

How has The Feuerle Collection added to your experience of working in Germany?

We did that little church in Augsburg (the Moritzkirche, 2013), and we worked with Dornbracht, the kitchen people. It's been a very nice relationship with Germany. ■

6 Pawson describes the 'Judd-like progression' of the space, seen here manifested in its 1.6m-wide support columns

7 The Feuerle Collection includes Chinese imperial furniture whose texture and delicacy contrast with the robust, solid concrete

8 Light and shadow accentuate the spatial narrative as well as revealing exhibits

