

Inside the big tent David Adjaye's massive structure is the biggest in London—but for two weeks only

Two weeks ago, the space now occupied by the Frieze Art Fair's tent was a verdant stretch of lawn. Today, it holds a structure with a 200,000-square-foot "footprint" that makes it one of the biggest buildings in all of London—albeit temporarily. Two weeks from now, it will be gone again, leaving behind only reseeded grass.

Making this appearing-and-disappearing act work is a logistics challenge that involves precision timing and several hundred contractors. Once the tent itself becomes a reality, teams of electricians, light riggers, carpenters and carpet-layers sweep in around the clock, chasing behind each other to build the fair's environs. "The challenge here is to create a totally artificial environment in the middle of a park," says Steve Cunningham, the project manager for 20-20 Events, which oversees the whole operation. "And we're not just trying to create a dry space; in the exhibitions industry you never see booths of this quality, with such high walls. Plus, we have to create the entire infrastructure. In an ordinary exhibition hall you would have electricity, lighting, water, kitchens and so forth."



Building sights: what the visitors don't see

Compared with a conventional facility of the same size, the tent costs the organisers 20% to 30% more, not to mention the extra stress. "When we're putting up the tent, we use cranes which cannot operate in winds over 30 miles per hour," says fair co-founder Amanda Sharp, who spends much of her time onsite during the installation. "That's not actually a very high wind. If we lose a morning to it that's a problem, but losing a whole day could be disastrous. So now I find myself having sleepless nights over wind speeds." Nonetheless, Sharp says the tent has proved worth the extra effort. "We wanted a

central location in London, but we did not want a convention centre, because that didn't allow us the level of control that we expected over issues such as design and catering," she recalls. "We looked at quite a few sites before realising a temporary structure was the right solution."

The fair hired star London architect David Adjaye to design the tent, which is recomposed each year from modular components supplied by a commercial events company. Still, much of what's inside is custom-built, such as the muslin "double ceiling" which diffuses the natural light and the artificial rays emanating from the thousand 400-watt

light bulbs suspended overhead. That light has become a favourite Frieze feature among exhibitors, because it creates a continuity to the space. But the first year it did not go so smoothly. "We spent a huge time developing the light grid, but when we finally turned it on, there was a mix of bluish and greenish casts to the light," Adjaye recalls. "There was a mix of new and used bulbs, which is not something one would notice normally, but in a huge space it was dramatic."

That said, the biggest shock during the first year was the sloping downwards of the site, which makes the south-eastern corner of the tent 2.5 metres lower than its highest point; in some places the ground beneath a single booth twists in three different directions. Adjusting to that idiosyncrasy has taken tons of work. "We knew the drop from the Queen Mary's Gardens toward the edge of the park was going to be a problem, but we had underestimated the grade," admits Adjaye, laughing in retrospect. "So we had some horrid stepping along the tops of the walls. Now we've learned to 'tolerate' the booths much better."

Nonetheless, for exhibitors the walls pose an

eternal dilemma: do you hang the works parallel to the floor, to the top of the wall, or level? Because these are not the same thing—often to a drastic degree. Standing before Anton Henning's *Portrait number 5* on Wednesday afternoon/Zurich dealer Bob van Orsouw says: "We hung it level, but now if you look at it, it's not perfect. So now we have to give it a little twist until it looks right."

Besides the walls, the flooring also reflects the undulations of the parkland beneath the fair tent. To create it, a system of steel girders is erected and paneling suspended upon them, sometimes as much as two feet above ground level. Underfoot, the effect can be somewhat like walking inside a boxing ring. "At first the bouncing feeling was alarming," says Adjaye. "One has a strange sense of buoyancy. But once I got used to that, I think it gives it a festive feeling, like being afloat on a cruiseship."

As the fair has grown in size every year, by 10%-15%, the parkland around it continues to shape the tent itself. Already last year, the tent had a tree inside the VIP room; this year that tree joins the general public on the fair floor, between Art + Public (B20 on the floor

plan) and the adjoining café. "We're trying to look after it well," says Sharp, sounding vaguely maternal. "The shape of the fair is built around the trees of Regent's Park, which creates a lot of quirks in the floorplan."

Even now, in the fair's third year, there are still unexpected surprises, both large and extraordinarily small, like the daddy longlegs that have taken up residence in the tent this year, for reasons undetermined. Unfazed, Sharp seems to take a philosophical view on the insects, quipping: "Maybe it's a karmic revenge against us for using animals in the advertising this year."

Marc Spiegel



Outside inside: the Frieze tree

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Josiah McElheny, *Modernity circa 1952, Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely*, 2004 (detail), courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

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