

Reflections on the 2015 Visionaries Gala benefitting Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation

by David Cobb Craig

You knew it was going to be a distinctive evening the moment you saw the unique invitation. For this 10th gala dinner, designer Robert Van Nutt dreamed up a folded card that presented a rendering of Sir John Soane's Bank of England. When you inserted a paper tab of classical columns, the invitation became multifaceted with the bowed columned portico.

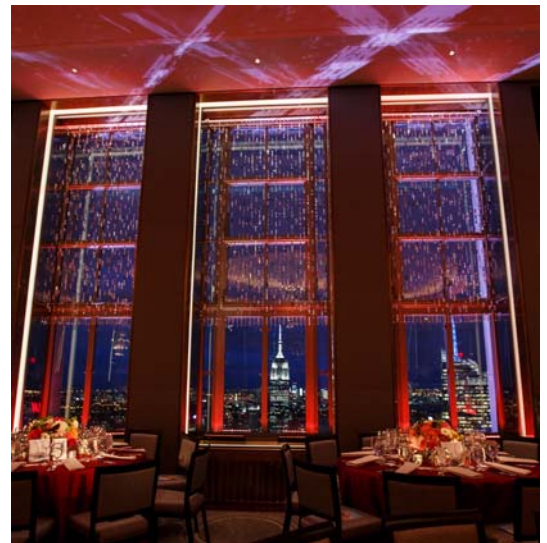
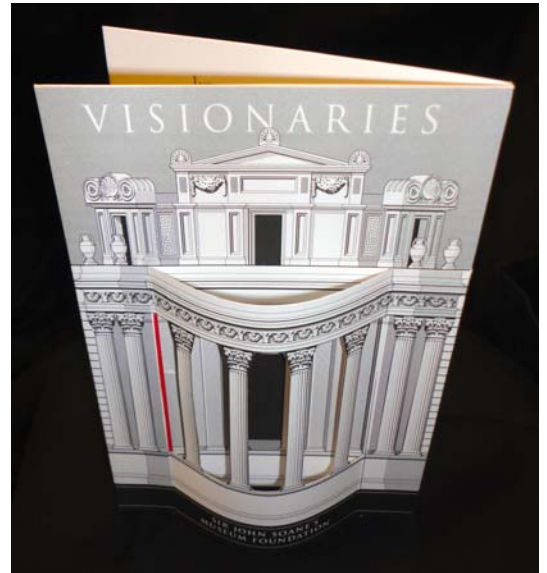
The Gala glinted and sparkled on September 30 in the empyrean aerie known as the Rainbow Room, 65 floors above Prometheus at the base of Rockefeller Center's Comcast Building. Against a breathtaking view of Manhattan skyscrapers, some 300 stellar architects, designers, real estate potentates and architecture aficionados crowded the bar area starting at 6:30 for sunset views, chitchat, cocktails and delicious passed hors d'oeuvres like miniature beef Wellington and tuna tartare.

Then the celebrants filled every seat at every table arranged around and on the Rainbow Room's glamorous dance floor for dinner at eight. "We not only sold out," noted Thomas A. Kligerman, President of Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation, "we had to turn people away." (And those people missed a meal that showcased a vintage Rainbow Room specialité from 1934, the year it opened—Filet Mignon "Marechale.")

In his opening remarks, made against a striking stage backdrop that reproduced a portion of Soane's Bank of England, Kligerman trumpeted the fact that the evening raised more money than ever before – \$415,000 in fact – allowing the Foundation to close out its capital campaign. Kligerman further informed the Soanians about "Project Soane," which is reconstructing one of the largest and most complicated building projects of its era, virtually using up-to-the-minute modeling computer technologies. By the end of next year, students, hobbyists, design professionals and anybody else will be able to experience a vivid virtual encounter with Soane's bank, considered his supreme masterpiece, and one of England's greatest architectural losses.

PICTURED from top:

- invitation card by Robert Van Nutt
- Rainbow Room aglow looking towards the Empire State Building
- Michael Imber chatting with Annabelle Selldorf
- Theresa Behrendt and David Borthwick taking a selfie with the skyline



Architect Peter Pennoyer, Chair of the Foundation's Fellowship Committee, then offer a toast to Soane, and the recipients of the Soane traveling Fellowship award, on this 20th Anniversary year. He noted that Soane's work continually generates "a bottomless well of inspiration to lovers and makers of architecture everywhere." Earlier in the evening, there had been a gathering of eight of the past recipients who received commemorative certificates - Sean Sawyer '95, Christopher Drew Armstrong '00, Bryan Boyer '05, Samuel Roche '06, Danielle Willkens '07, Nicholas Herman '10, Jennifer Bevan '12, Seth Baum '13. On stage to congratulate each were Helen Dorey, Acting Director of the Soane Museum, Soane Foundation Board Member Richard H. Driehaus, Peter Pennoyer and Tom Kligerman. Richard Driehaus has generously underwritten commemorative bronze medallions marking this anniversary, which all Fellows receive.

Katrin Henkel, Soane Museum Trustee (pictured right), art collector and dealer, and a childhood friend of Annabelle Selldorf, one of the evening's honorees, updated the gathering with news about the museum: "The private apartments and architectural model room are now open to the public for the first time in 170 years and the Museum's 30,000 drawings are digitized and available to anyone with a computer to look at and study thanks to underwriting support by the Leon Levy Foundation," she said. Henkel also announced the Museum's largest private gift ever at \$770,000 from the Deborah Loeb Brice Foundation, which was recently made through the Soane Foundation.

After the main course was served, next came presentations of the Soane Foundation Honors with bronze medallions inscribed: Architects | Collectors | Educators | Innovators | Scholars. These are presented annually to recognize people whose work demonstrates the same standing of excellence and influence that Sir John Soane is known for.

Architect and dean of the Yale School of Architecture Robert A. M. Stern awarded the evening's first medallion to Charles Jencks, the UK-based, American-born architecture theorist and critic, landscape architect and landscape architect. Touched that an American association of architecture enthusiasts expends so much effort to raise funds for Soane's famous house museum in the center of London, Jencks exclaimed, "Britain, follow suit!"

Brooke Hodge, deputy director of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, gave the next award to Thomas Heatherwick, the 45-year-old British designer, architect and innovator whose scheme for an imaginative floating park, known as Pier 55, is now under review by the city as part of Hudson River Park, and who is designing a monumental sculpture at the center of Hudson Yards.

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Shelby White, founding trustee of Leon Levy Foundation, beckoned architect Annabelle Selldorf for the third and last presentation. Said White: “Annabelle was born in Germany, came to the United States to study and never left—lucky us!” Selldorf, known for her design contributions to museums and cultural institutions (such as the Neue Galerie in New York, the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, and the new gallery building for David Zwirner 20th Street) said, “Thanks for celebrating architecture with a capital A,” and poignantly implored everyone to “Remember Palmyra!”

PICTURED from top:

- Robert Stern looks on as Charles Jencks makes remarks
- Brooke Hodge presents the award to Thomas Heatherwick
- Shelby White and Annabelle Selldorf
- President Tom Kligerman makes a toast to the honorees



Co-chairs for the Visionaries Gala were Margaret Russell of *Architectural Digest*, Michael and Elizabeth Sweeney of Steinway & Sons and Robert A. M. Stern. Among other attendees were Molly and David Borthwick, Richard H. Driehaus, Jay Cross, John Ike, Tom and Kristin Kligerman, Joel Barkley, Richard Bernstein, Stephanie and John Flower, Katrin Henkel, Chas Miller, Anne Kriken Mann, Suzanne and David Santry, Kathleen Springhorn, Nick and Courtney Stern, Chippy Irvine, Frank Sanchis, Rebecca Birdwell and Chris Lytle, Catherine Connolly, Steven Holl, Mariann and Michael Imber, Sean Johnson, Donald Albrecht, Wendy Lyon Moonan and Duncan Darrow, Suzanne Tucker, Joanna Bird, Gary Brewer, Paul Gunther, Maggie Carey and Gary Bergstrom, William Brockschmidt and Courtney Coleman, JJ and Jonathan Burden, Charlotte Bassadone, Walter and Mary Chatham, Tanya and Paul Chesney, Tammy Connor, John Danzer, Fred Canova, Frank de Biasi, Fred Bernstein, Graham Wyatt, Philae Dominick and Scott Cummings, Anne Edgar, Helen Dorey, John Edelman, Mark Ferguson and Natalie Jacobs, Stephanie Stokes, Eric Friedman, Anh Nguyen, Steven Gambrel, Andon George, Keith Granet, Shawn Henderson, Xanthe Arvanitakis, Jonathan Hogg and Daniel Perron, Nico Kienzl, Todd Klein, Judith Prause, Augusta Barone, Jim Friedlander and Liz Irwin, Sarah Magness, Hermes Mallea, Andrew Olgetree, Janice Parker, Pier Giorgetti, Rodman Paul, Peter Pennoyer, Foster Reeve, Charles Renfro, Linda Ruderman, Grant Marani, Alistair McCowan, Jack Ryder, Richard Sammons, Birch Coffey, Brian Sawyer, Suzanne Stephens, Adrian Taylor, Meg Touborg, Douglas Wright, Roy and Cristiane Zeluck, Brian Zepa.

PHOTOS: Matt Gillis, Annie Watt, David Cobb Craig (invite image)

