Horniman Museum; Bauhaus Live – review

A Victorian tea trader's eccentric collection is given space to breathe. And the principles of the Bauhaus are alive and well

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'An instrument for making all the strangeness apparent': the Horniman's garden pavilion by Walters and Cohen, with shades of Mies van der Rohe. Photograph: Michael Harding

On a high hill in the southern suburbs of London, where the forms and rules of the city unravel, stands one of the country's most extraordinary museums. It was the creation of Frederick Horniman, Victorian tea trader and voracious collector of almost anything, who eventually put it into a purpose-built structure and donated the museum, plus its contents and an adjoining garden, to the public, on condition it would be free to enter.

The building was designed by the briefly flowering Charles Harrison Townsend, the nearest England came to an art nouveau architect, whose fame rests mostly on three facades of blazing originality, for the Whitechapel Gallery, the Bishopsgate Institute and – his best – the **Horniman**. Its contents run from an ophicleide and a tárogató (musical instruments, since you ask) to Uzbek wedding robes, an over-stuffed walrus, an apostle clock, living frogs and fish, and a statue of Kali dancing on Shiva, made to float on the Ganges. Most museums aim to divide things into categories; here everything comes promiscuously together, human and natural, living and dead.

Over the past 15 years the museum has been enlarging itself, doing the things necessary for access, education, enhanced exhibition space and retail revenue, with architecture that tries to match Townsend's seriousness but not his ebullience. This process is now essentially complete, with the renovation of the gardens by Land Use Consultants and the building of a pavilion for performances, events and school groups by the architects Walters and Cohen.

The aim is to fulfil Horniman's idea that museum and garden together should be for both pleasure and education. There are areas of plants used to make dye, textiles and medicines, and of different food crops from all over the world. Connections are made with exhibits inside the museum – the reeds in clarinets or the plants used to colour tribal dress. There will be enclosures of animals such as alpacas and llamas and there is a sound garden – not, it must be said, a thing of visual beauty – where you can play large outdoor musical instruments such as a xylophone wall and pipes played with bats.

There is no question of returning the garden to some ideal original state, as it is made up of several additions over the past century, together with a knotted 300-year-old tree left over from when this was farmland. Rather, the idea is to keep the many layers and enhance them and their structures; a rustic Dutch barn imported to the site by Horniman and a Townsend-designed bandstand have been restored.

There is also a view. From here the shards and gherkins of central London look, in the hazy light, as exotic as the totems and ophicleides on show inside the museum. On a closer summit is a twin-peaked stack of 1960s flats known as the castle or the battleship, or (officially) as Dawson Heights, which for some reason is not as famous as its outright remarkable form deserves. The combination of museum and view is fantastical. If city air makes you free, as they said in medieval Germany, here suburban air makes you lightheaded.

Walters and Cohen's pavilion, a well-proportioned, timber-framed glass box, its structure black-clad on the outside, is an instrument for making all this strangeness apparent. It's a considerably more modest version of Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat House, perched like that work above a city view. At one end, alpacas will come up to the glass; at the other, a balcony opens to the panorama. The pavilion, light-filled and made rhythmic by its repeating beams and pillars, is a foil.

The progressive additions to the Horniman have involved a certain levelling or smoothing over of the outright, undiluted bizarreness of the original building and contents. Townsend's entrance, a ritual ascent up stairs, past a mosaic and through a tower, as if on a route of initiation into a shrine, is no longer in use.

But what is there now is a place of which the various communities who live around it can and do readily take possession, which also offers revelation and insight into the extraordinariness of the works of nature and humanity. The latest works cost £2.3m, which would be the tiniest scraping in the giant Marmite jar of, for example, Olympic funding, but which has a more obvious and immediate local benefit.