

## Part 2: Designing the visitor centre

David Marks and his wife Julia Barfield run Marks Barfield Architects, one of the UK's best-known architectural practices. They originated the concept of the London Eye, and spent years campaigning for its creation on the South Bank before their radical vision was transformed into a stunning reality. Although it is undoubtedly the most high profile, the London Eye is just one of many MBA projects that reflect the company's own distinctive approach to design - based on intelligence, innovation and integrity. One project unveiled this year is the Brighton i360, a futuristic observation structure featuring an aerodynamically-shaped viewing pod, which slowly moves up and down a central spire. Here, David Marks introduces the thinking behind the i360, and suggests that it offers some useful pointers for a potential 2012 visitor centre.



People love a new experience, love landscape (and I include townscape in this definition), and love heritage. I will never forget the trip Julia and I made to Paris all those years ago to see IM Pei's stunning glass pyramid in the Louvre. It was still a building site and you couldn't get very close. But you could visit a raised portakabin, walk around a series of scale models and peer at the construction works. This visitor centre received more visitors in one year than the entire Louvre had received in any single year previously. What followed, as they say, is history.

Everyone loves a great view. It is often repeated these days that there seems to be a universal desire to see the earth and its cities from exceedingly high places – it is a pleasure to the eyes, and to the intellect, to seek out and find the reference points, the landmarks, to make the visual connections, and to see wider horizons.

The London Eye raises people to a great height, safely, comfortably and conveniently, before gently bringing them back down again, but with changed perceptions and a new perspective. What makes the experience different from static observation towers and viewpoints is the fact that your perspective is constantly changing as it unfolds and brings new things into view as you rise slowly upwards.

In Brighton, we are proposing a 'vertical pier' on the site of the West Pier, which, ravaged by storms and fire, seeks a new future. Like the London Eye, and the West Pier before it, the purpose of our proposal is simply to delight, to entertain, to inform, to excite and to inspire. It will provide a high quality, high profile visitor experience for people of all ages, offering spectacular and exhilarating views over Brighton and Hove, the South Downs, and the South Coast.

In urban design terms, the 'vertical pier' can be seen as a twenty-first century equivalent of an obelisk, which was used traditionally to stop, visually, and complete, a view or vista. Its form can be appreciated, physically and symbolically, as a beacon and landmark to be seen from the sea.

Its design has been informed by an appreciation of the site and surrounding areas. It consists of two interlinked elements: a heritage centre at the Lower Esplanade level; and on the central axis of Regency Square at Upper Esplanade level, an aerodynamically shaped observation pod, which slowly rises and descends on a slender steel spire.

The steel spire would have a constant external diameter of four metres (12 feet) and rise to a height of 183 metres (600 feet) above sea level. As the London Eye, tuned mass damping technology would stabilise the spire to ensure passenger comfort in windy conditions. Advanced technology wind turbines at the top of the spire would provide approximately 20% of the energy demands for movement and internal environmental engineering.

The observation pod would rise to a height of 146 metres (500 feet) above sea level, offering 360-degree panoramic views for approximately 100 people every 20 to 25 minutes. Like the capsules on the London Eye, the pod's external design would minimise wind load, and climate control on the interior would create a comfortable experience for passengers year-round.

We expect the Brighton i360 project to attract around 550,000 paying visitors every year, similar to the number of people that the West Pier attracted in its heyday. Its design provides a balance between conservation, historic integrity and heritage with an appropriate modern architecture, delivering economic and physical regeneration and a future legacy on this historically important site.

The possibility of a visitor centre being created for the London Olympics of 2012, during the construction of the Olympic site, would be very exciting. Such a development would need to reflect the deep public appeal and spirit of the Olympics, and give people a truly memorable experience. The role of the centre would be to ensure that visitors can appreciate and benefit from that location's heritage – even before it happens, as it were. Like the London Eye and the i360, it should help people appreciate the site in its historical – and future – context, and give them something to smile about.

As well as giving visitors the chance to experience amazing aerial views of the Olympic developments beneath them, the facility could attract great interest in its own right, being potentially the first landmark building within the Olympic Park. After the Games, it would sit comfortably alongside the cutting-edge buildings that will comprise the Olympic Park, and become a long-term attraction, allowing visitors to celebrate the heritage of 2012 and the new environment around them in equal measure.

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