

## Meet Canada's undercover starchitect, Jamie Fobert

The rise of Kingston-born designer Fobert, whose latest project is a £35-million overhaul of Britain's National Portrait Gallery, hints at a pendulum swing away from flashy starchitects and toward something more thoughtful, welcoming and even morally guided

**KATHERINE ASHENBURG**

LONDON

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED JUNE 9, 2019

UPDATED 20 HOURS AGO

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

1 COMMENT



Canadian architect Jamie Fobert has been commissioned to design the new entrance to the National Portrait Gallery in London.

JUSTIN GRIFFITHS-WILLIAMS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

It's been quite a year for the Canadian architect Jamie Fobert. In 2018, he triumphed over a short list that included the international superstars Rem Koolhaas and Sir David Adjaye to win the commission for the £35-million makeover of Britain's National Portrait Gallery. Early this May, with planning permission and £31.5-million of the Portrait Gallery's budget secured, he was named architect of the year by the weekly architectural newspaper, *Building Design*.

But rather than talk about that, Fobert wants to show me his current favourite in the Portrait Gallery. It's an anonymous, 16th-century painting of Ralph Symons, the first English man to be described as an architect. Symons has a weather-beaten face and a missing left hand, the result of a work accident. Enthusiastic and erudite, Fobert points out the mixed signals in the man's dress: his ruff suggests aristocratic aspirations, but his leather jerkin says he is an artisan, a working man.

There's something betwixt and between about Fobert too, although it's not about class. At first glance, the man whom I met half an hour earlier in the museum's lobby looked neither like a tourist nor a Londoner. He wears jeans, a loose cloth jacket and a neatly trimmed beard. His Canadian accent, with its liquid L's, has been mildly overlaid with crisp British consonants. Whisking me out of what he calls "the smallest lobby of any museum in the world," he begins explaining his redesign on the street.

Although the gallery's location could hardly be better, cheek-by-jowl with the National Gallery on Trafalgar Square, people often walk past without realizing it's there. Fobert's plan is to move the main entrance from St. Martin's Place around the corner to Charing Cross Road. This will make possible a forecourt and lobby more welcoming than the current one, which he likens to that of an exclusive gentlemen's club. "Welcoming" is one of Fobert's favourite words.



Fobert aims to make the gallery's new lobby more welcoming than the current one.

JAMIE FOBERT ARCHITECTS/HANDOUT

Back inside, he veers seamlessly from the smallest details to the largest questions of the gallery's identity. He leads the way to "a really bad painting" – the only group portrait of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë – to underline the building's hybrid nature, both a history museum and an art gallery. His ambitious redesign includes transforming the East Wing offices into galleries, freshening the existing galleries and making possible more thematic groupings of paintings, such as Empire, Race, Civil War. Faced with "endless pictures of dead white men," he wants the gallery to engage "people who aren't obsessed with English history, without losing it as a serious place."

Meanwhile, he watches the museum's visitors. "Look at that little girl fascinated by Zaha Hadid," he says happily, as the child bobs back and forth in front of Michael Craig-Martin's computer portrait of the Iraqi-British architect.

Fobert tries to enter the East Wing offices, but his access badge only works intermittently. When staff members arrive at the locked doors, he introduces himself the same way each time: "Hi, I'm Jamie-the-architect."

Jamie-the-architect was born 56 years ago in Kingston, and graduated with honours from the University of Toronto's architecture program in 1987. Although few Canadians outside architectural circles have heard of him, in the past decade and a half he's been trusted with the reimagining, revision and expansion of some of England's most resonant cultural treasures.

Aside from his work at the portrait gallery, his addition to the Tate St Ives gallery won him the Art Fund Museum of the Year award in 2018. His reshaping of Cambridge University's Kettle's Yard gallery is a critical and popular hit. At Charleston, the Sussex home of the Bloomsbury artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, Fobert married old barns with new buildings to create an ensemble of galleries and visitor services.

When Building Design awarded him the architect-of-the-year prize, the judges described his body of public projects as “a benchmark against which everything else has to compete.”

Andrew Nairne, the director of Kettle’s Yard, says: “It is Jamie’s moment.”

Once again, Fobert straddles two worlds. Although he’s at the zenith of the English architectural firmament, he’s utterly uninterested in the extroverted, look-at-me architecture typical of Hadid, Frank Gehry or many of the Pritzker Prize-winning architects of the past 20 years. His work is subtle, intent on the user and aimed at collaborating with the original architecture. Fobert’s rise hints that the pendulum is swinging away from starchitects and toward work that is less egocentric and more thoughtful.

That’s the context in which Oliver Wainwright, architecture critic at The Guardian, welcomes Fobert’s success: “Luckily, I think we’re in a period now that is turning away from architecture as an iconic statement and thinks about how we’re going to live in the long term with these buildings.”

Many of the words people use to describe Fobert’s buildings – generous, modest, gentle, hospitable – have moral connotations. I ask him if morality is part of architecture for him, and he says without any hesitation: “Absolutely. Architecture has a social responsibility that verges on moral. I find the way a lot of architects behave, creating sensational things that draw attention to themselves above how someone actually uses the space, can be classed as immoral. They’re creating things that have no value except as objects.”

Leaving the Portrait Gallery, Fobert and I travel to Shoreditch in the East End, where there’s a canteen in the same complex as his studio. Over pea and watercress soup and duck salad, we talk about food – he is a keen cook and baker – and the remote vacation house in Galicia, Spain, that he shares with his partner, Dominic Gagnon. Gagnon is an architect and director of a business based in India.

Fobert’s studio is a big white rectangle filled with 20 young architects bent over their screens. In the boardroom, the shelves are crammed with books about art and architecture, and Fobert keeps pulling them down. “You must see this!” he insists of Louis Kahn’s Unitarian Church in Rochester, N.Y.; of the house Ludwig Wittgenstein built for his sister in Vienna; or of the Swedish architect Sigurd Lewerentz’s brick churches.





For the new forecourt, Fobert's chosen the curving forms of predecessor Ewan Christian's elegant railings and the fan shapes of his mosaic floors as inspiration.

JAMIE FOBERT ARCHITECTS/HANDOUT

His architecture grows out of the art he loves, he says, and that art is always quiet. "If I could own any painting, it would be by Agnes Martin. What makes them so incredible is the care with the tiniest detail and in the quietest way. That makes it unbelievably emotive and powerful."

The restraint and neighbourliness of Fobert's work sound quintessentially Canadian, but he offers another source. His parents, Glenn and Norma Fobert, were evangelical Baptists with a gentle, lifelong commitment to their faith. Their son grew up with a sense that things should be modest and communities should be caring.

His father is a metallurgical engineer and his late mother worked as a bookkeeper and secretary. Jamie was the youngest of their four children. When his high-school art teacher, Ginny Stevens, assigned her students to repurpose a family house for student housing, he thought about stairs and circulation and drew plans. Of his project, the man now known for concrete floors and austere interiors says, "It was pretty terrible. I was picking carpets and wallpaper."

But Stevens suggested architecture might suit him – he was good at math and problem-solving, and he loved art.

For a boy from a suburban high school who had never heard of Le Corbusier or Frank Lloyd Wright, the first two university years were a struggle not to be intimidated by the "cognoscenti" in his class.

But from the start, there were rewarding moments. "The lessons we learned in first year," he says, "are still some of the most important lessons I've ever learned: that architecture should be unpretentious and it should be humane and it should be about the users and about improving their existence and their lives in ways that were beautiful."

Fobert found a mentor in the department chair, George Baird. At a time when postmodernism was all the rage, Baird introduced Fobert to the modernism of architects such as Alvar Aalto, Carlo Scarpa and Kahn that would define his career. "No one was teaching it," Fobert remembers, "except for George."

In his final year, he won \$1,000 for the best drawing in a graduate thesis. He spent \$500 on a ticket to England, and hoped to work there for a year or two, travel in Europe and then return to Canada.

He arrived in 1988 and got a job in the rising firm of David Chipperfield. Fobert says he never felt excluded in Britain. The great advantage of a Canadian accent, he adds, is that "you're not part of the class system. The thing that excludes English people more than anything is the way they speak."

He stayed with Chipperfield for eight years, absorbing his belief in projects that were loose enough to accommodate the client's wishes, and in the primacy of light.

In 1996, he established his own practice. What strikes Baird about the London houses Fobert designed in those years was the skill with which he negotiated severely constrained lots, and the contrast between the circumspect exterior and the light-filled interior.

“He wouldn’t mind if you failed to notice a house from the street,” Baird says, “but on the inside, there’s a dramatic spatial explosion.”

Wainwright points to Fobert’s work in luxury retail, where he perfected his gift for the unexpected, smashing detail. In the women’s fashion department of Selfridge’s store, for example, Wainwright cites “a marble wall that drapes and looks as if it would melt.” Both the contrast between inside and outside and the knowledge of how and when to pull out all the stops would serve Fobert well in his public projects.

Kettle’s Yard was the creation of Jim Ede, a collector who merged three cottages into a house in the 1950s, filled it with modern art and invited Cambridge students to see it every afternoon during term. Eventually, he donated the house and its contents to the university. Ede believed that great art cohabited easily with stones, shells and other mementoes, so that his house looks informal. But there were rules, including the permanent placement of a lemon on a pewter dish, which echoed the yellow oval in a Miro painting in the same room. (The lemon is changed every Friday.)

In 1970, the late Sir Leslie Martin and David Owers designed an extension to the house that Fobert considers “a masterpiece of late modern architecture,” as well as an adjacent building for galleries. Smaller additions by other hands followed, described by Fobert when he gave the annual George Baird lecture at the University of Toronto in 2016 as “a bit of a mess. So we’re just tidying it up and creating two new galleries.”

This is not only a monumental piece of modesty, but underplays Fobert’s profound connection to Kettle’s Yard. Unlike the stereotypical Master Builder, who buries his predecessors while he leaves his own mark, Fobert felt that with the Martin and Owers extension he was on sacred ground. Paying homage to them involved some bold moves – chiefly, demolishing all the post-1970 additions to make way for generous new galleries and an education wing.

Wanting a continuity with the house, he echoed its details in the newer building, with, for example, a chunky oak reception desk reminiscent of Ede’s furniture. He restored the original bench at the entrance, using bricks handmade in Cambridge, and uncovered the brick wall behind it that had been plastered over. The exposed wall is peppered with nail holes from posters advertising decades of exhibitions, and Fobert left them, a mute history of the gallery. A year after its 2018 opening, director Nairne says of the new Kettle’s Yard: “There is something genius in its generosity. It never loses its human intimacy.”

When Fobert won the competition to enlarge the Tate St Ives in 2005, the 1993 gallery was badly in need of more space.

Perched on a cliff overlooking the sea, it’s a vaguely postmodern building with a drum-shaped rotunda by David Shalev and Eldred Evans. Designed for 70,000



Paying homage to his predecessors involved some bold moves – chiefly, demolishing all the post-1970 additions to make way for generous new galleries and an education wing.

JAMIE FOBERT ARCHITECTS/HANDOUT

annual visitors, it was attracting 250,000. Unlike at Kettle’s Yard, Fobert drew “a line in the sand” between his extension and the original gallery.

“It is a much-loved building, but I felt it is quite incongruous with the town,” Fobert says. “The continuity that I was looking for in St Ives was with Cornwall and its landscape.”

Before he could get to the Cornish landscape, he had to bow to community resistance to his first design, which had involved losing some parking space. For his second plan, an underground gallery, he had to hollow out a cavity in the cliff. Nine hundred and seventy seven truckloads of blue elvan, the hardest rock in the British Isles, were jackhammered out, a job that took nine months. The resulting gallery, which at 500 square metres more than doubles the original space, is punctuated by deep concrete beams that nod to the timber joists in the local fishing cottages. The silvery, changeable Cornish daylight that drew artists to St Ives illuminates the gallery via six chambers in the ceiling, lighting the centre but not the sides, where the pictures hang.

Arriving at this untrammelled space from Shalev’s and Evans’s jam-packed, domestic-size galleries is so liberating it seems to lower your shoulders and expand your lungs. Outside, the light chambers, clad in local granite, sit in a meadow of Cornish wildflowers.

Fobert says he would love to work in Canada, but has been unsuccessful in the past with a few submissions. It seems likely any further applications would be treated very seriously, but meanwhile, he’s more than occupied with the Portrait Gallery.

Unsurprisingly, he finds himself in fruitful conversation with his predecessor, the little-known Ewan Christian, who designed the 1896 Portrait Gallery. For the new forecourt, he’s chosen the curving forms of Christian’s elegant railings and the fan shapes of his mosaic floors as inspiration.

“With those two things as companions, I can make a completely contemporary forecourt that feels like a 21st-century descendant of those ideas and not a bad copy,” he says. “It’s a difficult line to tread sometimes. It’s much easier to strike out against your context and plonk your bit down and be brazen and wilful, and that kind of architecture really winds me up.” He laughs, as if amused at his irritation, but the determination to make a different kind of work has fuelled him for 30 years. His recognition suggests the time has come for architecture that is both more complex and more sympathetic. And what Nairne calls “Jamie’s moment” promises to last for quite some time.

*Live your best. We have a daily Life & Arts newsletter, providing you with our latest stories on health, travel, food and culture. [Sign up today.](#)*

## More From The Globe and Mail

### OPINION

Without migration, there is no civilization 🔑

ALEKSANDER HEMON



Pop-up weddings provide an alternative to City Hall



Reggie Leach, a First Nations hockey star who left school after eight grade, to receive honorary degree



### OPINION

Canada is caught in the middle of a second Cold War

DAVID CURTIS WRIGHT



Ontario entrepreneur’s gluten-



TDSB considering proposal for



free pasta takes off with consumers



children to be able to enrol in French immersion as early as junior kindergarten

