

Crystal Palace was a colourful, controversial, virtual world before computers

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(Phys.org)—Research by University of Southampton archaeologist Professor Stephanie Moser has revealed the 1854 Crystal Palace exhibition in London was controversial and changed the way we view architecture of the ancient world.

The Crystal Palace was a vast glass and iron structure, originally erected in Hyde Park for the 1851 Great Exhibition, but was later moved to Sydenham and enlarged to around twice the size of St Paul's Cathedral.

The Palace and its park is widely regarded as the world's first theme park which housed many exhibitions, including a series of 'courts' containing giant scale models of famous ancient monuments from antiquity. These were created by designer and architect Owen Jones and charted the global history of art. This included the Egyptian, Greek, Byzantine and Medieval periods.

Owen Jones used strong, brilliant colours in the patterns and art work painted on his recreations. This was a bold and new interpretation of the designs of the ancient world and Professor Moser's research has found that this use of vibrant colours proved to be controversial and highly criticised.

She comments: "The exhibits featured hieroglyphics, design patterns and reliefs decorated with vibrant colour schemes and this upset a lot of his contemporary scholars. Jones endured harsh criticism for what they perceived as a lack of restraint which pandered to middle-class public

appeal. Many critics referred to his designs as vulgar, gaudy and irritating.

"However, archaeologists of the time were increasingly finding evidence that the use of polychromatic or multi-coloured designs was key to [ancient architecture](#) – particularly Egyptian. In fact, Jones was bravely breaking new ground with his use of colour in a very public arena and reflecting, for the first time, theories which are now universally accepted."

The 'courts' of the Sydenham Crystal Palace housed scaled down, but still huge, reconstructions of some of the ancient world's most significant monuments and buildings, for example the Great Sphinx of Giza, the Temple of Abu Simbel and the Alhambra Palace. The 'courts' also recreated architecture, paintings and sculpture from ancient Greece to the 17th century. They were designed to engage, educate and recreate artefacts, based on accurate archaeological and historical data – something which is still being done 150-years on, but now in the virtual world.

Professor Moser says, "In a way, Owen Jones was ahead of his time. He wanted to bring together the latest historical and archaeological research and make it visual, accessible and interactive. This is something archaeologists are doing today with computers."

Dr Graeme Earl from the Archaeological Computing Research Group at the University of Southampton adds: "Owen Jones was visualising history using bricks, mortar and paint, but if he were alive now, he might have complimented this with the kind of computer modelling we do, to represent his ideas and share research data.

"Experts like Jones addressed centuries ago the theoretical issues we face in computing now. A physical environment is sometimes needed to

think clearly about archaeological spaces, so we like to blend the real and the virtual in the work we do at Southampton."

More information: [yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/bo ...
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Provided by University of Southampton

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