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# London

Your critical guide to arts, culture and going out in the capital

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## 25 years at the Barbican

By Time Out editors

Posted: Tue Feb 6 2007

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It's the largest multi-arts centre in Europe, and has hosted some of the most ambitious cultural events the capital has ever seen – Time Out celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ever-controversial cultural icon



The Barbican's concert hall

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- Homes with history: The Barbican
- Graham Sheffield, director of the Barbican: interview
- Anniversary events at the Barbican
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### What the critics think of the Barbican

### Anniversary events at the Barbican

### Interview with Barbican artistic director Graham Sheffield

At first it wasn't even clear that the Barbican would be an arts centre. When debates first started about how to fill the 35-acre bomb site where it now stands, Sir Edward Howard, former Lord Mayor of London, thundered that 'Art makes less contribution to civilisation than the internal combustion engine.' Yet the discussions were taking place in an idealistic postwar world. Small wonder, then, that the rhetorical tide started to flow in favour of a design devoted to something more utopian than commerce, or, indeed, internal combustion engines.

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It's one of the many ironies in the Barbican's history that the architects, Chamberlin, Powell, and Bon, made one of the determining factors for their design the belief that within five years nobody would be using private cars any more in London. It wasn't their only miscalculation. Initial estimates said that the Barbican would cost somewhere between £6 and £8 million to build; the final bill came in at £156m. Strikes, legal cases, and the discovery of a plague pit all contributed to delays. When it finally opened in 1982, five years behind

..... schedule, the City was far from convinced that it was cause for celebration.

At the age of 25, however, the Barbican is looking in better shape than it was, not only at its opening, but in its troubled mid-teens. A £35m refurbishment has brought improvements to its two theatres, two art galleries and three cinemas, as well as enhancements to the acoustics in the Hall, and – at last – a proper entrance on Silk Street. Outgoing managing director John Tusa must feel triumphant at the state in which he – with the help of artistic director Graham Sheffield – is leaving the Barbican; certainly happier than its first director, Henry Wrong, who after his departure, called it 'the ugliest building in the world'.

Wrong's is just one voice in a debate that will probably never be resolved. Will Londoners ever truly take this concrete monolith to heart? What's certain is that auspices look good for its being around for another 25 years. As for the internal combustion engine – well, that's another debate entirely.

### What the critics think of the Barbican

Both lauded and loathed the Barbican still polarises opinion like no other institution. So with its twenty-fifth anniversary approaching, we invited our expert critics and other leading names to evaluate its contribution to the arts and debate the merits of a true London icon.

### Anniversary events at the Barbican

The twenty-fifth celebrations feature a bumper crop of cultural delights. See our full listings of upcoming events at the Barbican.



### Interview with Barbican artistic director Graham Sheffield

Graham Sheffield joined the Barbican in 1995 as director and he's no more immune to the building's quirks than anyone else. So who better to answer some choice questions from the Time Out critics about London's most intriguing and infuriating institution?

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Posted by **K KNIGHT** on 28 Sep 2007 01:52

I have been visiting London for 16 years now. The Barbican complex, to me, is as unique to London as St. Pauls. London is one of the most vibrant and unique cities in the world, and one reason for this is the fact that it contains this mammoth structure. This massive brick and concrete building is almost surreal, when you are walking around in it, you get the feeling that this place will easily last as long as any other "landmarks" in the area. It was surrounded for a while by very ugly quickly built buildings, (seeing as how this area was bombed out quite badly), but these have mostly been replaced by very modern, very imaginative buildings. One can't help but think that the Barbican influenced everything that has been built in the vicinity since. As for the theatre- I have had the pleasure of sitting in the audience for quite a few productions there, and have always enjoyed them tremendously. I try to schedule my visit near the end of my trip. The facility has it's fair share of tourists, but it also has a community feel to it. The people there seem to take great pride in what they have, as they should, and after a whirlwind 10 day trip of west end and off west end theatre, It is a welcome break. Always intelligent, superb productions.

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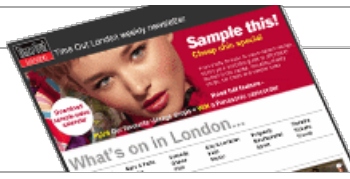
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