

CONVERSATION, Philip Jodidio

REIMAGINING THE WESTERN RANGE OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Lina Ghotmeh

After an open competition, the British Museum announced in February 2025 that Lina Ghotmeh had been chosen to redesign the range of galleries located to the west of the Great Court, which Norman Foster created in 2000. The Western Range displays ancient works from Egypt, Greece, Rome, Assyria and the Middle East. The galleries and technical spaces concerned have an area of 15,650 sq. m.

Lina Ghotmeh, born in Beirut in 1980, studied at the American University in that city, where she considered specializing in archeology. Instead, she went to Paris, where she earned a degree of the Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture in 2003, going on to become an associate professor there between 2008 and 2015 even as she studied to obtain her Master's degree. Between 2001 and 2005 she worked in the offices of Jean Nouvel in Paris and Foster + Partners in London. In 2006, she joined architects Dan Dorell and Suiyeh Tane to form the Dorell Ghotmeh Tane office, which won the competition to design the Estonian National Museum in Tartu, completed in 2016. The same year, she created her own studio in Paris. Since that time, Ghotmeh completed the residential Stone Garden building (Beirut, Lebanon, 2020), the Serpentine Pavilion in Kensington Gardens (London, 2023) and the Maroquinerie Hermès production facility (Louviers, France, 2025). More recently, she completed the Bahrain Pavilion of Osaka 2025 and has been selected to build a new

avilion for Qatar in the Giardini, where the Biennale is held in Venice. She has served as the Louis I. Kahn Visiting Professor at the Yale School of Architecture in 2021 and held the Gehry Chair at the University of Toronto's John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design in 2021-2022. She co-creates the French Ministry of Culture's AOC-DES scientific network for architecture in extreme climates and was a member of the 2022 Aga Khan Award for Architecture jury. Perhaps influenced by her Lebanese heritage, Lina Ghotmeh has developed a very particular and contemporary approach to architecture, designing for specific sites with a focus on environmental concerns and durable materials. In her office, for each project, she creates accumulations of objects, materials and references that nourish her thought process – although these references are numerous, her selections are always revealing and informative. She explains that her interest in sustainability is not specifically influenced by very recent concerns about the impact of building on the climate but is instead a natural outgrowth of her holistic approach. Although such projects as the Serpentine Pavilion brought her a higher degree of international recognition, Lina Ghotmeh's selection for the renovation of one-third of the British Museum's gallery spaces has confirmed her rise as one of the emerging stars of contemporary architecture. She discusses her ideas for the British Museum, a project due to last a decade.



1,2. Estonian National Museum, Lina Ghotmeh with Dorell Ghotmeh Tane, Tartu, 2016 © Takuji Shimamura
3. Stone Garden, mixed-use building, Beirut, Lebanon, 2020 © Ivan Boon
4,5. Serpentine Pavilion, London, UK, 2023 © Ivan Boon, courtesy of Serpentine
6. "Anatomy of a Drive", Bahrain Pavilion, Expo 2025 Osaka, Japan © Ivan Boon
7,8. Maroquinerie Hermès, production facility, Louviers, France, 2025
9. Bahrain Pavilion | © Hermès, 2023
10. Winning proposal for the Future Qatar's Permanent Pavilion, Venice, Italy
11. Play Earth Observatory, Norfolk City, Japan © Lina Ghotmeh — Architecture

Philip Jodidio (PJ): How and why did you become involved in the competition for the Western Range Galleries of the British Museum?

Lina Ghotmeh (LG): I call for the competition. We put together a team for the project originally started in practice in London, so I had a few friends there, and it was exciting to work together again and try to submit for this competition, mainly with Anup. We submitted a thick piece for the project and were selected as one of the five competitors for the final phase.

PJ: Does the subject of the British Museum have a particular appeal to you?

LG: Of course, I am interested in the subject of museum typology, because architecture has an important role in bringing people together. It's a common language that we speak of humanity. I liked the fact that the competition was about reimagining the British Museum but also responding to the question of what the 21st century museum would be. The British Museum is about the history of the world. I grew up in Beirut, which is a place that proves that our civilization is multiple, so I can say that the British Museum echoes what I grew up with.

PJ: Dealing with a museum that has been established for so long, which also had been partially redone in the recent past, did that make the task harder?

LG: Of course, it is one of the most visited museums in the world after the Louvre, with 6 million visitors every year. I have constantly been involved with subjects that hold a certain gravitas. The Estonian National Museum was a project that dealt with a context that has seen a great deal of instability, and which posed the question of how one can build a national museum. The British Museum poses the question of what role architecture can play in a complex context.

PJ: You mentioned your Lebanese background. Did having French and Lebanese roots have something to do with the reasons for which you won the competition, in your opinion?

LG: I think I asked a question to ask to the jury. We put our passion and energies into understanding the British Museum and understanding the objects that we had to deal with. We engaged with the curators when we had workshops, and we had a passionate approach to that project. I like to put of our energy into every project we develop. I believe that the jury felt that in the complexity in our response even as we were seeking to design a space.

PJ: Working within a very large old building, certainly limits your range of possibilities, does it not? You refer to sustainability, but how can you approach that issue in this kind of context?

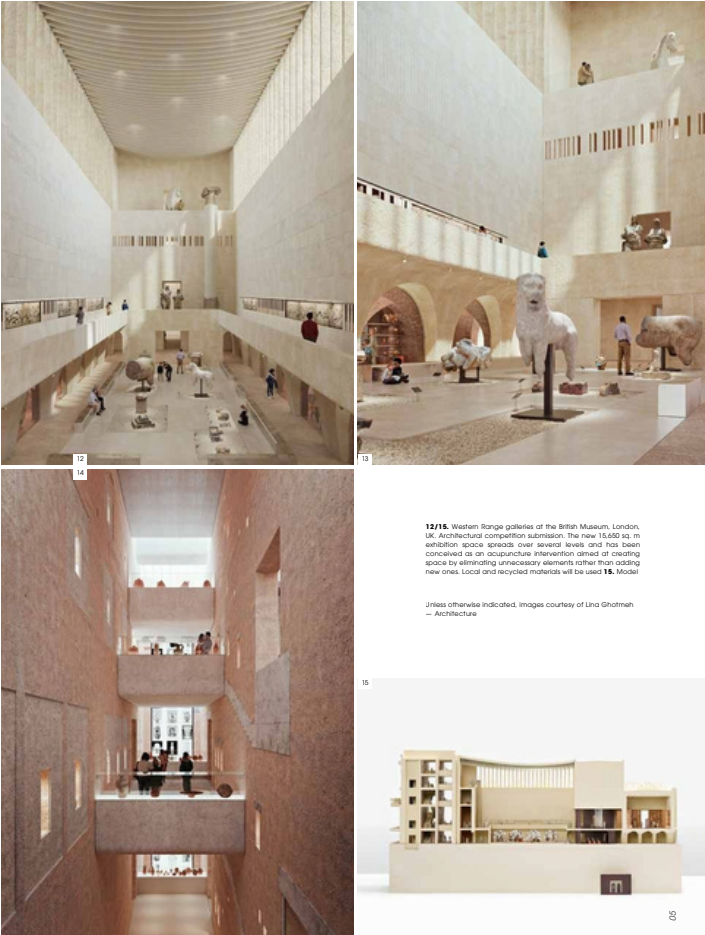
LG: We were working with heritage consultants, and we looked at the history of how the building evolved and of the different sectors and periods when the building started to grow. Especially in the Western Range, we see that with time, there was additive work that was done. Some of the original elements of the building such as courtyards had been filled in for example. Over time, we saw that the building had suffocated. Spaces that were originally generous, that were more open, became enclosed, while sources of natural light diminished over time.

PJ: How did you approach the issue that you identified in this first phase?

LG: First work was really like acupuncture. How do you generate space, taking out elements instead of adding more, all the while respecting the heritage plan. It's a matter of conserving and respecting what exists while removing what is unnecessary. That removal will generate waste, and we decided that it is very important that we reupstate the demolition material that we will generate. The new multi-tiered gallery space is an attempt to reuse this material. Stone from the UK will be used, but since 40% of stone is typically wasted in quarries, we have decided to reuse that stone in the museum. In creating new openings, we have also been attentive to potential energy waste for future climaticization. Measuring all those elements is a kind of very delicate embroidery work that must, in the end, generate an extraordinary space.

PJ: Norman Foster also referred to wasted space in the British Museum when he undertook his work there 25 years ago. He created the Great Court in a volume surrounding the Round Reading Room that had been abandoned. How do you relate to this presence near the new Western Range galleries?

LG: Working on the Western Range, it is necessary to recall how people enter the museum. People go directly into the Great Court before they go into any other space. So the question for me is how do you then enter the Western Range? At present, when you go into the galleries from the Great Court, the feeling of openness, light and grandeur disappears. I think we should somehow again find those moments of enchantment of scale, and that is one of the approaches that we have imagined, recreating a double volume, to bring stone back into that space. Generating another space of enchantment will continue the magical experience that one has entering that Great Court. In our practice we always look at context and create a dialogue with what exists where we are intervening.



12/15. Western Range galleries of the British Museum, London, UK. Architectural competition submission. The new 15,650 sq. m exhibition space respects main structural levels and has been conceived as an acupuncture intervention aimed at creating space by eliminating unnecessary elements rather than adding new ones. Local and recycled materials will be used 15. Model

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