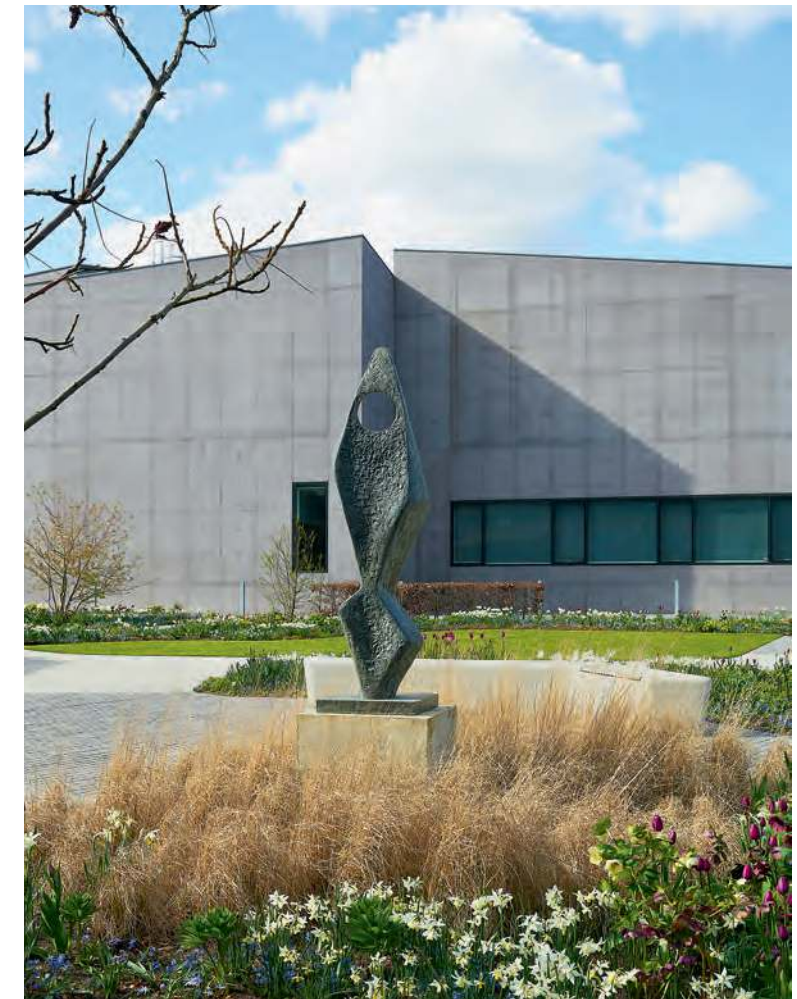




Left: a child in the Hepworth Wakefield Garden; right: the Hepworth Wakefield and its garden, showing Barbara Hepworth's sculpture, *Ascending Form (Gloria)*, 1958



Museums going wild

Two museum projects creating new garden spaces in urban areas are examples of how integrating nature and culture benefits every species, especially humans, says *Anna McNay*. Photographs of the Hepworth Wakefield and its garden by *Suki Dhanda*

As well as vastly improving the biodiversity of the site, the garden also brings the museum outdoors

More than 80 per cent of the UK population lives in an urban area, a number that is projected to rise, and, in some of these urban areas, almost half of the people have no access to either a private or shared garden. That doesn't mean, however, that they have no access to nature. As Lauren Hyams, head of Urban Nature Project Activities at the Natural History Museum, London, explains: 'Urban nature is all around us. Biodiversity thrives in an urban setting. London is one of the greenest cities, with a huge number of species, from the micro-organisms in the soil, to the pigeons in the plane trees, the plants in the cracks in the pavement, and the trees you can see from your window.' The experiences of the pandemic have driven home the importance of being able to enjoy nature in the city. Some inner-city parks experienced up to a 300 per cent increase in visits last spring, and a report commissioned by the National Trust showed that more than two-thirds of people said that noticing the nature around them had made them feel happy during lockdown. Further research suggests that spending time in nature can be as beneficial as talking therapy or antidepressants. Two museums that have already recognised this, responding with ambitious projects aimed at providing oases of nature in busy cities, are the Hepworth Wakefield and the Natural History Museum in London.

The Hepworth Wakefield's project began in earnest in January 2019, with the construction of the central area of a new garden, created on



an unused grassy space alongside the gallery. Landscape architect and garden designer Tom Stuart-Smith, whose proposal was selected after public consultation, worked hard to draw inspiration from both the 19th-century, red-brick mills to one side of the space, and the 21st-century, David Chipperfield-designed art gallery to the other. He also wanted to capture something of the gallery's namesake Barbara Hepworth's connection to the landscape. The central garden opened in summer 2019, and the second phase, the construction of a wall and 'woodland edge', to shield the garden from the six-lane Doncaster Road, began in February 2020.

To create the garden, which is free and open 24 hours a day, the gallery has raised more than £1.5 million, with half of its prize money from winning Art Fund Museum of the Year 2017 helping to generate support from other foundations. 'It was built just at the right moment for the pandemic,' says the gallery's cultural gardener, Katy Merrington, who took up her post halfway through the building process and is now on site daily. 'What a gift to give to the people at Wakefield!'

The garden appeals to myriad visitors for multiple reasons, she says. 'Some come to sit or to exercise. Two ladies, who live in a tower block with no garden, five minutes up the road, have come every day throughout the winter. Then there are the people walking to Sainsbury's who say it's a nicer route.' Merrington also tells

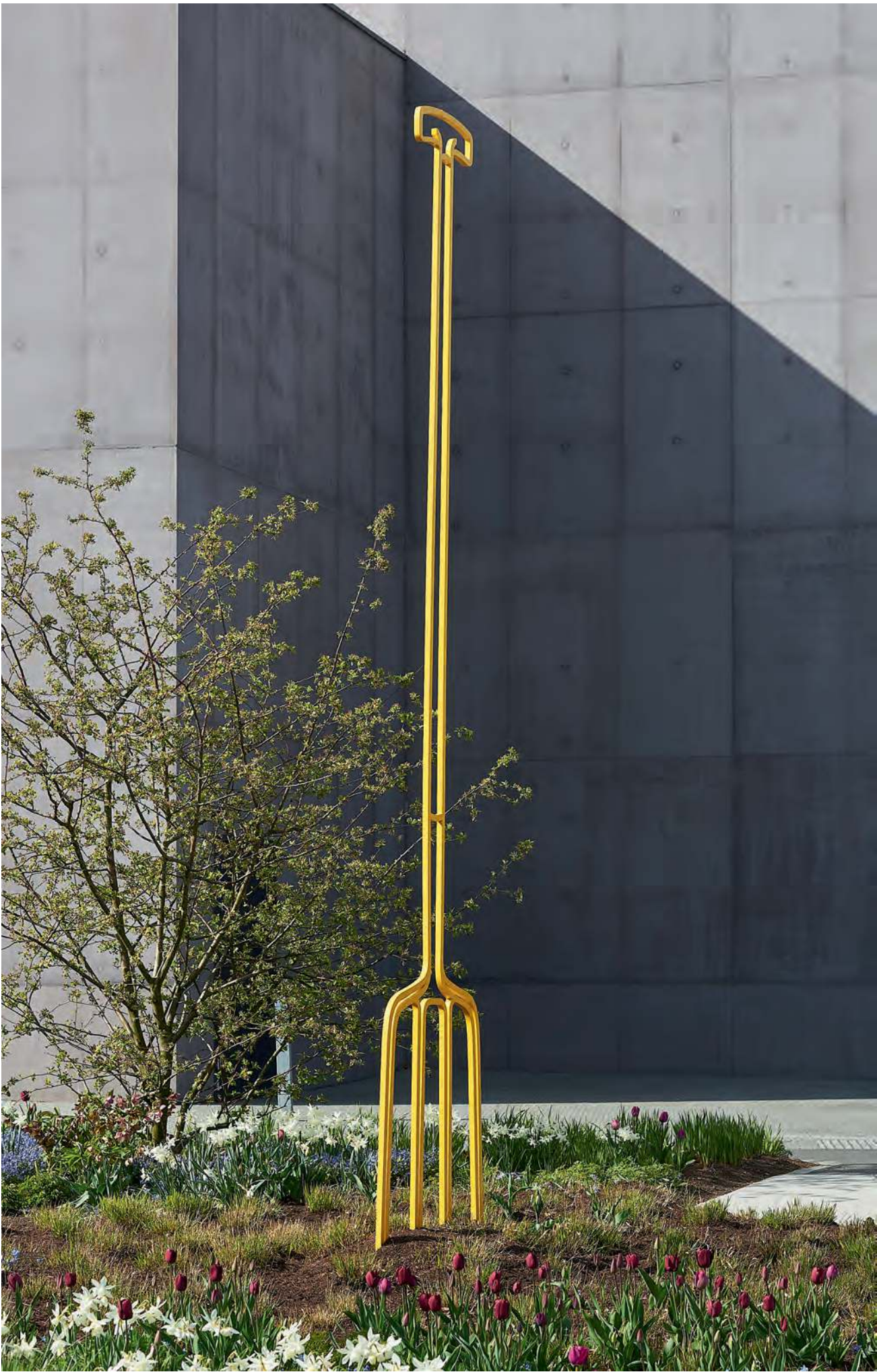
how families bring their children on the way to school, and some, particularly the families of key workers, stop off on the way home from school to have a half-hour run-around and let off steam. Some couples with mobility challenges come and park in a disabled bay and then walk very slowly, with their sticks, for five minutes every day. 'And visitors start talking to one another,' she says. 'Or they talk to me – a lot. Conversation reinforces a sense of shared observation. Very soon after we opened and had taken down the builders' fences, a lady was walking in the garden, and she called me over. She just said: "Listen," and we stood and listened. There were some goldfinches in the trees, and she said: "I've walked through here every day on the way to work for 10 years, and I never heard a bird."'

The garden is split into three main areas in terms of its design, although the boundaries are imperceptible to the layperson. These comprise the 'woodland edge', bookending the gardens with approximately 50 trees and shrubs, and 120 metres of beech hedging, which will, in time, be cut back and acquire its own 'sculptural presence'. In the middle, there is the 'complex meadow' and, finally, there's the area around the café, known as the 'gold entrance', which is designed more structurally with around 14,000 herbaceous perennials.

One of the main points of the brief was that the garden should have year-round interest, and it has certainly achieved this already. In spring, for example, there was a lot of excitement around



Left: the Hepworth Wakefield's cultural gardener, Katy Merrington; above: visitors rest a moment in the garden



The Hepworth Wakefield and its garden, showing Michael Craig-Martin's *Pitchfork (Yellow)*, 2013

the tulips, with some visitors coming back daily to see if they'd come out. 'People were watching all this horrible stuff on the news,' says Merrington, 'but to walk round the corner and see colour and hope, and this sense of beauty and life, really meant something.'

As well as vastly improving the biodiversity of the site, offering food sources for a variety of insects, and places for birds and insects to shelter and reproduce, the garden also brings something of the museum outdoors. Four sculptures have been integrated into its design. 'Putting sculpture into gardens was something that Hepworth herself was really passionate about,' says curator Eleanor Clayton. Indeed, the artist said: 'I prefer my work to be shown outside. I think sculpture grows in the open light and with the movement of the sun its aspect is always changing.' Michael Craig-Martin's 3.35m-tall, yellow pitchfork – one of the first of four sculptures to be installed – certainly resonates, with children pretending to hold its looming shadow at certain times of day. As part of the gallery's 10th-anniversary celebrations this year, at the time of writing, there are plans to swap some of these works to include more by Hepworth, to augment the retrospective exhibition of her work indoors.

With education so central to the ethos of the Hepworth Wakefield, there are great plans afoot for the post-Covid learning programme, using the garden as an extension of the indoor space. There will also be creative activities for families. For example, Merrington says: 'Children really like ladybirds because they're so graphic. They are always looking for them. So we might show them their other life phases, including the larvae and the old papery cases where they metamorphosed.' There is also a programme for young people not in employment, education or training, who have a weekly session with a local artist. This used to be in the gallery, and so the garden became a lifeline during the pandemic. 'It's a unique job,' says Merrington. 'I talk to everyone, from the person who sleeps rough down the road and comes to say hello every day, to people who are very knowledgeable about plants and want to know how to care for specific ones. I feel humbled and privileged to have that daily interaction and to really see what a garden can do.'

'It's like an artwork,' said one visitor during lockdown. 'And because the gallery's not open, this is a fantastic substitute.' In post-lockdown times, Merrington concludes: 'I think there's a lot the garden can provide, in the sense of being a different place for looking at art that links to what you then see within the gallery walls'.

The gardens of the Natural History Museum are even more a case in point for bringing a



museum outdoors. The current wildlife garden has been there for 25 years, but even Hyams admits that many people are unaware of it. Around 3,400 species have been recorded in the existing garden, but this is apparently not unusual for a green space in London. 'The unusual thing is that not every local park has 300 scientists in the building next door to monitor it,' laughs Hyams. 'We've got lots of earthworms, lots of species in the pond, including water beetles and dragonflies, and our London plane trees are amazing 140-year-old specimens, planted in Victorian times.' There are also two Greyface Dartmoor sheep, 'our colleagues, Ivy and Bracken, who come over every autumn from the London Wetland Centre in Barnes, and who look after the meadows for us, because that's the most sustainable way. They're the charismatic superstars of the garden.'

Work to redevelop the existing five-acre gardens, the ambitious Urban Nature Project, will start later this year, and the transformed gardens are due to open in 2023. In terms of design, there are two main spaces. The east gardens, in which visitors will arrive, step-free, from the South Kensington tube tunnel, and where they will be able to explore the diversity of life as it evolved on Earth. A bronze cast of the museum's much-loved Dippy (the diplodocus) will be installed here. 'You'll step into the explosion of life in the Cambrian Sea 500 million years ago,' Hyams says, 'and see dinosaurs grazing among the tree ferns and cycads.'

Then, as you walk through to the museum entrance, the landscape gradually fills with plants and trees, reptiles, birds and mammals, and then humans, so you really have an immersive experience.' The west lawn is where the wildlife garden is housed, and, says Hyams, 'this is really our chance to look forwards, explore and connect with nature, and find out about the extraordinary wildlife that lives in our city right now'. The existing wildlife garden will be doubled in size, with a sunken walkway between the ponds and new areas of urban grassland to increase biodiversity.

A lot is happening already, however, with the launch this summer of an Urban Nature Movement across the UK, creating opportunities for young people, families and schools, together with the museum's 10 Real World Science partners – which include Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow, National Museum Cardiff, Birmingham Museums Trust and National Museum Northern Ireland. The hope is to expand the museum's own outdoor learning programmes by 66 per cent, reaching 6,000 students a year. The wildlife garden is also home to the 'living lab', where scientists are studying and developing new tools and methodologies to monitor urban biodiversity. Hyams explains: 'One innovative technique is eDNA, where you take a sample of water or soil and sequence it through our labs to find out all the species present. We're getting some really interesting results from that. Another less complex

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Right: one of two Greyface Dartmoor sheep that graze the garden of the Natural History Museum; above: schoolchildren pond dipping prior to the pandemic; facing page: reflection of one of the museum's towers in the wildlife-garden pond



POND DIPPING AND REFLECTION: JOE BLOSSOM/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

technique is acoustic monitoring, where, for example, you listen to earthworms to check the health of soil. We hope to share this across the sector, and to make it accessible through toolkits and guides on our website, so that schools can take part themselves.'

The Urban Nature Project is also, with partner organisations, running a pilot youth panel comprising 12 young people from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds, tasked with looking at the causes and consequences of the inequality in access to nature for people their own age. There will also be a family programme, an expanded volunteering programme, week-long work-experience placements for the local community and two horticulture apprenticeships. A further summer volunteering programme will give 35 young people the chance to explore a career in science and nature.

Another key feature of the redesigned gardens – a collaboration between architects Feilden Fowles and landscape architecture studio J&L Gibbons – will be their sustainability. The project will remove more carbon from the atmosphere than it contributes, use 100 per cent certified sustainable materials and 100 per cent renewable energy, as well as being zero waste.

'I think if anything has come out of the experience of the pandemic,' says Hyams, 'it's understanding that spending time in green space increases our wellbeing, and so we need to provide access for more people who don't have it.'

For many city dwellers, urban parks and communal gardens provide the main opportunity to have contact with nature. In recognition of this, the National Trust, over the next five years, intends to help plant circles of blossom trees in cities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, beginning in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London. Thirty-three trees are being planted to represent the city's 32 boroughs and the City of London. Local communities have been involved in the creation of the site, which will commemorate the lives lost to coronavirus and honour key workers. Blossom became a symbol of hope during the first lockdown, when many took part in #BlossomWatch, sharing images of the spring blooms. Blossom circles will soon also be created in Newcastle, Nottingham and Plymouth.

As naturalist and ecophilosopher Lyanda Lynn Haupt says of urban nature: 'Without the overtly magnificent to stop us in our tracks, we must seek out the more subversively magnificent. Our sense of what constitutes wildness is expanded, and our sense of wonder along with it.' Therefore, with urban life increasingly the norm, seeking out – and creating – these city oases is a prescription for us all.

● The Hepworth Wakefield Garden, open daily. hepworthwakefield.org, free to all. Gallery, 50% off exhibitions and 10% off in shop with National Art Pass.
● The Natural History Museum, London. nhm.ac.uk, 50% off exhibitions with National Art Pass. Please check websites for the latest information on dates and booking details