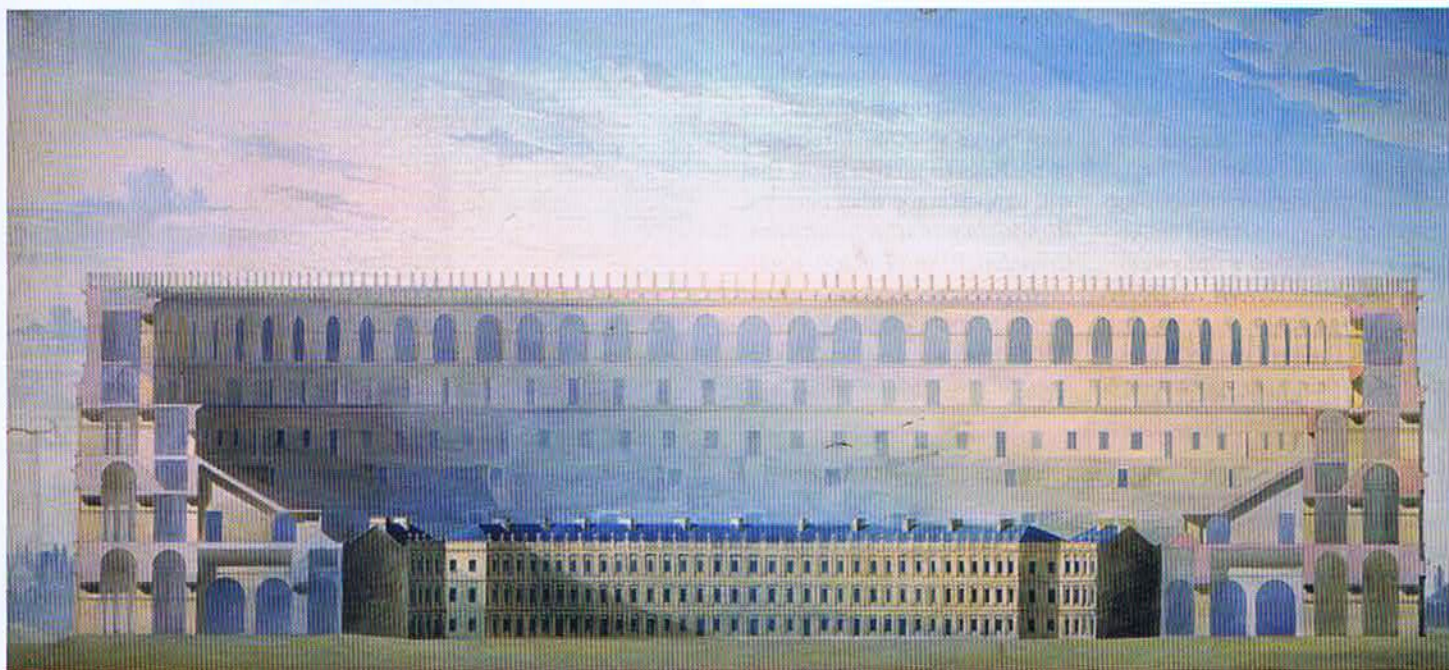


Temples to sport

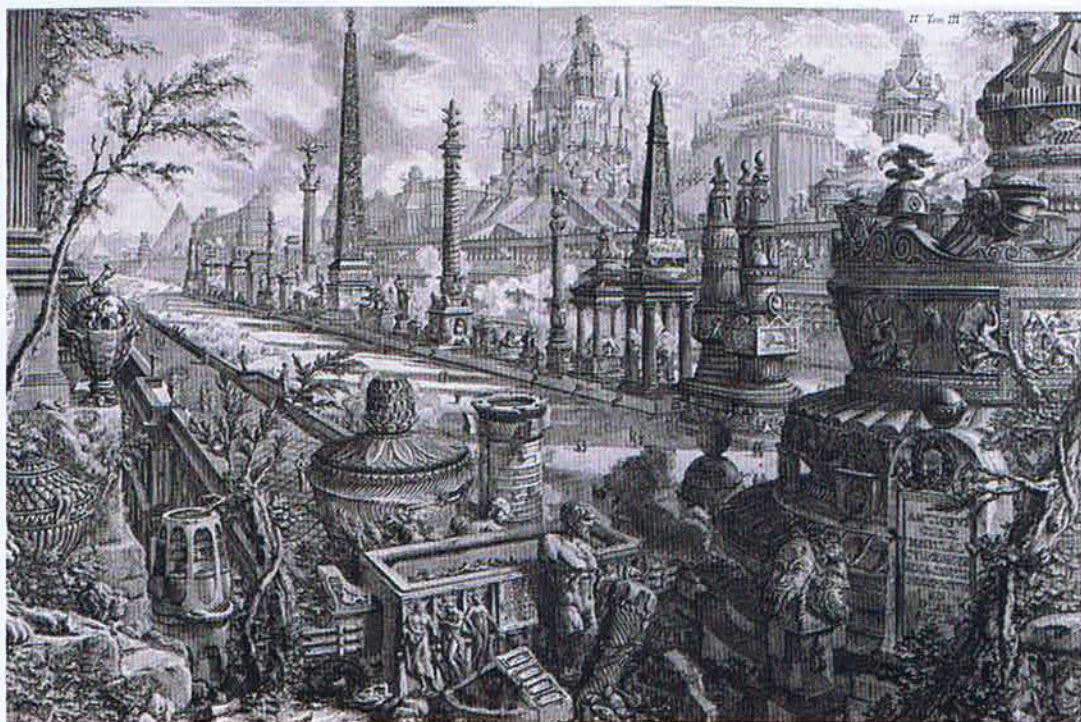
Jeremy Musson enjoys a topical exhibition devoted to the sporting architecture of the ancient and modern worlds



Above Soane's drawing of the Colosseum, dwarfing Wood's circus in Bath. Below Piranesi's Frontispiece to *Le Antichità Romane*

THE huge new Olympic stadia in Stratford will provide an essential part of the spectacle and drama of the coming sporting events. Their scale and role as public buildings of competition and entertainment makes them the true descendants of the great sporting buildings of Antiquity. This complex cultural inheritance is the inspiration for an elegant exhibition at the newly unveiled Soane Gallery in Sir John Soane's Museum.

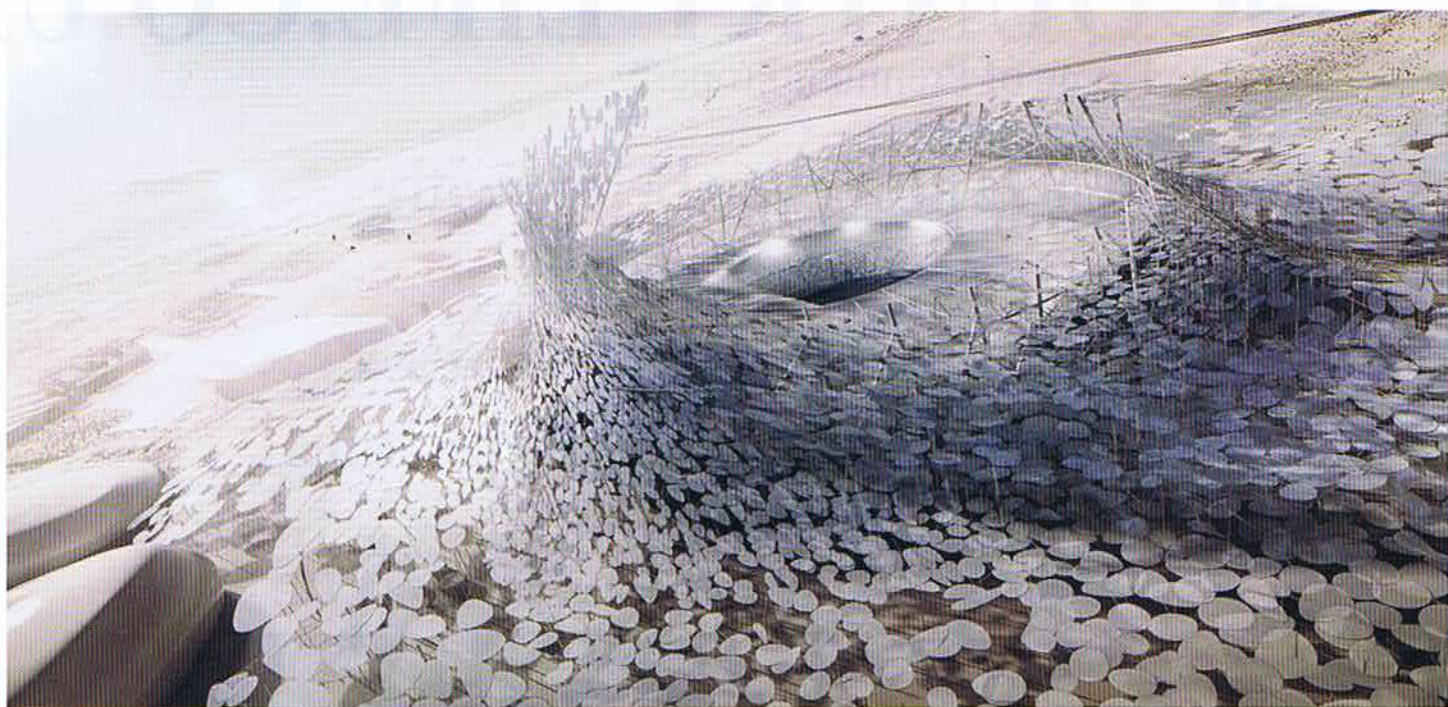
The show, deftly curated by Dr Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski, embraces antique and modern with equal confidence, both in the display and in the catalogue essays. The modern Olympic Games, begun in the 1890s, were modelled on and inspired by the Ancient Greek Olympic Games, which started in 776BC and were held every four years until AD394. Athletes from across the Greek-speaking world came to Olympia to compete; there were places to train and a stadium seating some 24,000 spectators for footraces



and athletic competitions, as well as a hippodrome for horse and chariot races—all bound together in a religious landscape of temples and altars. The best-preserved remains of an ancient Greek stadium are found at

Nemea (the Nemean Games were also held every four years), where evidence of the embanked spectators' stands that seated some 40,000 people can still be seen, together with the barrel-vaulted stone entrance for the competitors.

As with so many things, the Romans adapted the Greek sporting traditions. One of the famous hippodromes of ancient Rome is the Circus of Maxentius, which was built over a long period and completed in the reign of Trajan;

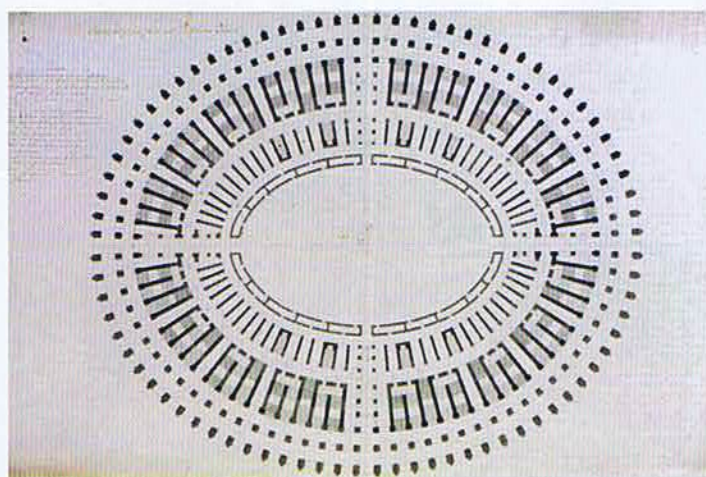


Above *Stadium in a desert climate* by Populous, designer of the London Olympic stadium. Below Soane's plan drawing of the Colosseum

it is captured in this exhibition in a handsome 18th-century reconstruction drawing by Vincenzo Brenna. The greatest survival of an ancient sporting building, however, must be the Colosseum in Rome, which, by contrast, was built in only a few years and to one plan. Begun in about AD69, it was inaugurated under Emperor Titus in AD80. This haunting, part-ruined survivor of the Ancient Roman world had an immense influence on later architecture.

Soane himself made on-site studies of the Colosseum, which originally seated up to 80,000. He later had more paintings of it executed to illustrate his Royal Academy lectures. One of the most memorable of these showed the modern 'Circus' designed by John Wood in Bath, dwarfed by the phenomenal presence of the ancient Colosseum in a brilliant visual snapshot that contrasts the toy-like Classicism of the 18th century

4th-century bronze goose from the Hippodrome in Constantinople



with the majestic scale of the Orders of the Ancient World. Also from the Soane's own collection is Piranesi's vivid depiction of the Circus of Mars in Rome, a splendid architectural part-fantasy with his characteristic heavy mood and exaggeration of scale.

Etienne-Louis Boullée's design for a vast amphitheatre intended to host utopian national celebrations for the citizens of Revolutionary France shows the influence of the Colosseum. Equally striking—and equally flawed in political association—is a design created under the influence of mid-20th-century Fascist ideologies. An ariel view of the unbuilt Foro Imperiale Germanico by the Italian Armando Brasini

‘The Circus in Bath is dwarfed by the ancient Colosseum’

echoes the work of Albert Speer.

As well as the architectural drawings, there is a number of three-dimensional objects, such as pieces of ancient Attic pottery from the British Museum. One amphora from 336–335BC carries a depiction of a Shield Race; it was originally filled with a favoured oil and given as a prize to a victorious athlete in the Panathenaic Games. At the modern end of the spectrum are

sectional models of the London 2012 Olympics stadium by Populous, which reveal the brilliant engineering of our own time.

Among the contemporary architectural drawings is Populous's mesmerising proposal for an (unbuilt) sports stadium in a desert location, with an amphitheatre form at its core and endless petal-like discs providing protection from the sun. Also on display are the loosely drawn designs for the famous bird's-nest arena at the Beijing Games by Jacques Herzog, working on an idea from Ai Weiwei sketched on the back of a restaurant menu. Shown beneath a detailed 16th-century pen-and-ink drawing of the Colosseum prepared for engraving, it provides one of the deliberate contrasts of this exhibition, which draw the visitor into an interesting dialogue between the sporting stadia of different centuries, as interesting for the architectural historian as for the sports fanatic.

'Stadia: Sport and Vision in Architecture' is at Sir John Soane's Museum, 13, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2, until September 22 (020-7405 2107; www.soane.org)

Next week Han Dynasty tomb treasures at the Fitzwilliam

COUNTRY LIFE®

JULY 25, 2012

EVERY WEEK

Discover
Britain's
rural idylls



Exclusive: glorious pictures
of the Olympic Park's gardens
Plus choughs, slugs and Notting Hill

