



↑ The hold on the SS Robin, which will become the gallery space. All photographs © Alexandra Murphy.

The good ship Robin

Later this year David and Nishani Kampfner hope to complete the conversion of an antique, rusting steamship into a gallery and education centre dedicated to photojournalism. **Alexandra Murphy** reports



THE SS Robin, the world's sole surviving merchant steam ship, is gradually being transformed into a floating gallery. This vision, of giving London a prominent venue to show great photojournalism, has now developed into a huge voluntary project. Spearheaded by two photographers David and Nishani Kampfner, the SS Robin Project is still alive and kicking after 20 months of hard slog.

'Balancing the conservation of an important ship with our practical needs for a gallery space has been the most difficult thing about this project,' explains project manager David Kampfner.

'Although we are not ship purists, we are trying to be sensitive to the fabric of the SS Robin. We've given the ship a new life by adapting her to carry new cargo.

'Now it's about education, media,

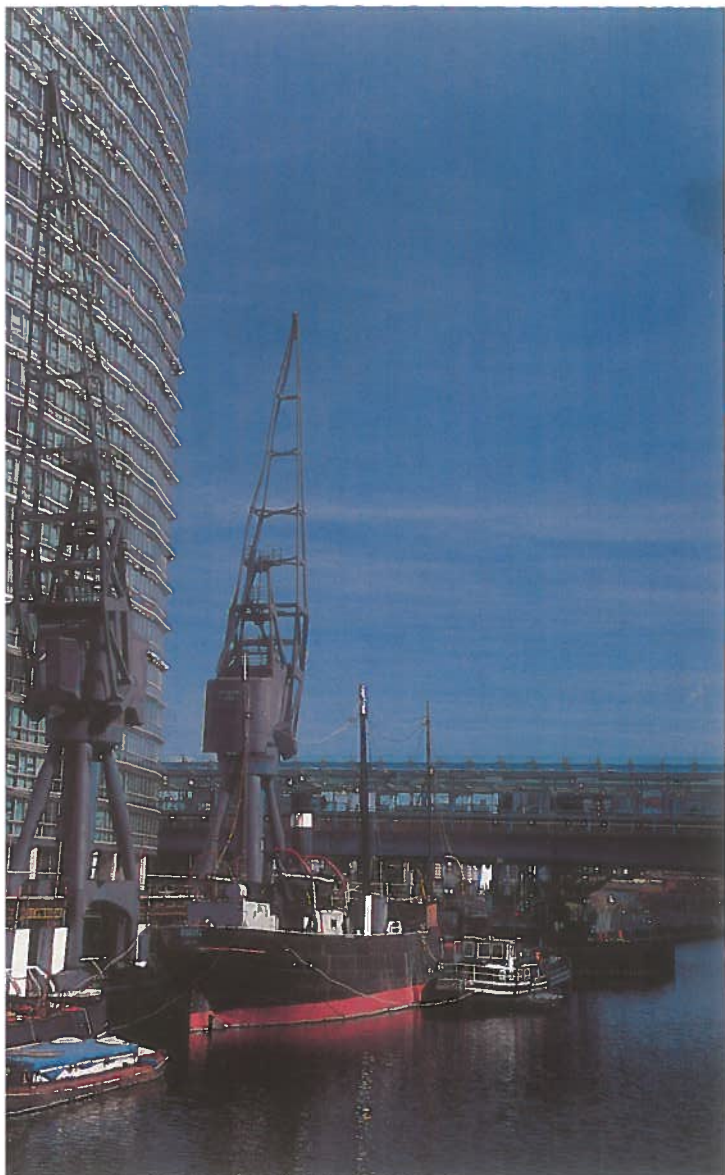
about 300 tons of coal.'

Visible progress in the Robin's restoration over the past year is obvious, but the stress of such an undertaking also shows.

'My job became that of a construction manager,' says Kampfner, 'and I lost sight of why I was doing this in the first place.'

Revitalised by a recent trip to the Visa Pour l'Image photo festival in Perpignan, Kampfner is focused once more on the essence of the SS Robin Project. 'We want the gallery to show great documentary and reportage images that teach us more about the world we're living in,' explains Kampfner.

'I don't want it to be just doom and gloom front-line images. There a machismo element in photojournalism that I want to challenge. Not all photojournalism out there is about ripped limbs or



SS Robin viewed from a Docklands footbridge with the DLR in the background.

million pound task

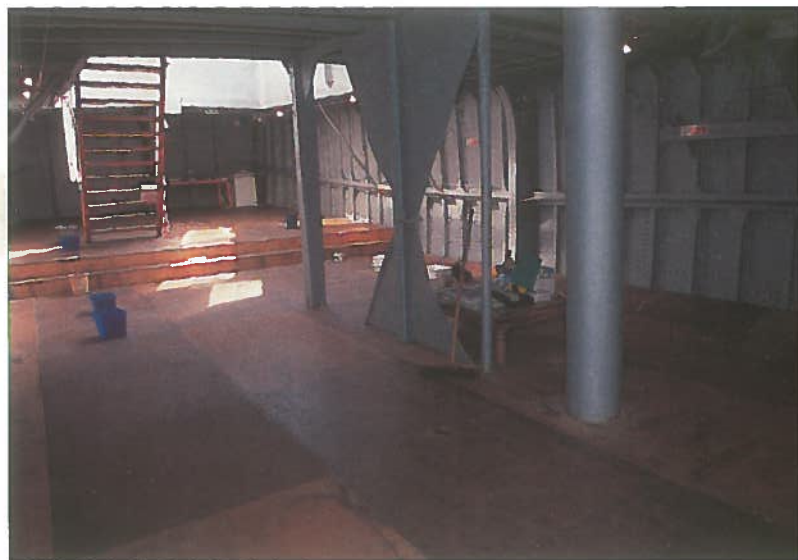
Robin was built in 1890 and was in operation for more than a century. It was eventually considered obsolete by a changing industry and abandoned in London's Docklands in 1991. A decade of neglect is obvious. It was therefore essential the Kampfners carry out the crucial tests on the ship to determine the project's credibility. 'I had to know whether this restoration project was a foolish furore or not,' says Kampfner. 'First, an underwater dive survey took place with ultra-sound equipment, testing the ship's hull for thickness and stability. Then, in April this year, the inside of the hold was pressure-blasted to remove years of rust and scale and to stop further corrosion. 'People were telling us we were mad. This was by far the most complicated procedure in terms of ship restoration,' says Kampfner. 'It isn't blasting below the water-line where the high pressure gun could be blown a hole in the side of the ship and sunk it.' The stress hasn't curbed

Kampfner's enthusiasm. He believes that the SS Robin has a guardian angel. 'This project seems to defy the laws of science,' Kampfner says. 'It's got energy and enthusiasm as things somehow get done, but it shouldn't be happening on the kind of money we've got. It's continually running on empty.'

The Kampfners have estimated this to be a million-pound project. Aside from a £10,000 donation from Credit Suisse, only around £250,000 has been raised in pro bono donations. 'We scrounge all the time,' says Kampfner.

'Being in the voluntary sector is a new experience for me and it's amazing how a small donation can help. We've had lots of equipment and contract work donated but there are some things the project needs that we just can't pay for such as insurance, phone bills and security.'

The ship will eventually have to go into dry dock and that will require big funding from either a lottery bid or a big champion like a shipping or imaging company.



The hold of the ship facing forward in mid-restoration.

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Visa for success

The Perpignan festival, although the source of inspiration for the SS Robin Project, also draws Kampfner's criticism. He feels Visa Pour l'Image and photo festivals like it have become too rutted and static. 'We want to move documentary photography on from prints in frames on walls,' says Kampfner. 'That purist argument about whether or not digital should be allowed is dead and no longer an issue,' he stresses. 'Great images can be shown in all sorts of different ways. Over the past decade the method of delivery has changed so much, to the point where screens, displays, projection and the web are omnipresent.'

Educational resource

Yet while Kampfner supports technological and software possibilities in image presentation, he also maintains that documentary photography should primarily be about content. 'I think it's interesting to hear about the human experience of photographers capturing images, what it taught them and what it is they think they're trying to say through the pictures. That's where we want to go with this gallery.'

The education programme aims to teach cross-platform skills to children as well as photographers, challenging the notions of what photography is. As a curriculum needs to be

developed, an education steering group has been organised, led by the SS Robin's patron and local MP Jim Fitzpatrick. 'We need to find out how the SS Robin Project can be relevant to schools,' explains David Kampfner. 'Apple calls it "21st Century literacy". It's not about words on a page, but about seeing and learning in a different way. It's about interpreting the world through pictures.'

Help needed

Sustaining the ship's restoration through gallery sales is highly unlikely, so the SS Robin Project reluctantly plans to ring-fence the gallery and education profile as a separate activity. 'Saving the ship is almost a separate project,' says Kampfner. 'We didn't set out to save the SS Robin. We wanted to find an interesting venue to show great work and the Robin had more history, atmosphere and magnetism than any other space we saw.'

Overall, the attitude is positive. The SS Robin hopes to open in spring/summer this year and kick off with a London photography festival. 'We're looking for partners and sponsors,' says Kampfner. 'We want to innovate some of the great ideas that are happening at Perpignan and bring them here to London.'

Strapped for cash, the project's chances of survival are slim. 'It still may not happen. The ship could still be scrapped and made into Coke cans,' admits Kampfner. 'We need help from a combination of people who know about ship conservation, photographers, image makers and teachers. The project will only happen if one or two people reading this story give us call. That's how it's happened all along. Have a look at the website. Come along and help us.' **BJP**

For further information on the project, including updates and details of the kind of assistance still needed, visit www.ssrobin.com or call 020 7538 0652.