



Artist Barnaby Barford with his work, a Tower of Babel made of ceramic shops - from boarded up businesses at the bottom to galleries and auction houses at the top
Photograph: Jonathan Brady/PA Wire

Tower of London - where prices are spiralling

Mark Brown
Arts correspondent

"They are the wallpaper of our city," said artist Barnaby Barford, standing in front of the 6.5 metre tower he has made of London's shops. They spiral upwards, from tatty boarded-up off-licences, through chicken shops, nail bars, dry cleaners and corner mini-marts, via fancy delicatessens, boutiques and chocolatiers to top auction houses and expensive contemporary art galleries.

"They are all beautiful. They are all people's businesses, the flats above are people's homes and they are hopes and dreams and aspirations and characters," Barford said.

Barford cycled 1,000 miles, visiting every postcode in London, to photograph more than 6,000 shop fronts. Half were individually fired on to small fine bone china model buildings and have then been constructed, like a favela, into his version of the Tower of Babel.

"Each one has a story - whether that is the people who shop there or the shop owners - and they are all an integral part of the city," he said.

Yesterday the tower went on public display near the main entrance to the V&A, in the museum's medieval and Renaissance galleries, in part a love letter to London, but also interrogating its consumerist society. "I'm in love with London and it is a celebration of London as a city built on trade and commerce," Barford said. "In another way it is asking questions. We've ceased to be citizens and we are now consumers and the question is: how and why have we become complicit in that?"

On another level Barford's Tower of

Babel is just fun to look at, to spot the nearly-but-not-quite shop and takeaway names: Posh Noosh, for example, or Pound Line, Kebab Ye, Munchnizz and Tesca Fine Food & Wine.

Who wouldn't buy stuff from Shoe-be-do? Or Bertie Booster Fried Chicken? Or Al Pacino's local express? What do you buy in Boom City?

Barford said some of the shops were social history in themselves, such as the mobile phone shop proudly under the awning of Kingsland Butchers.

All of the models are for sale, something which was "conceptually integral to the piece," said Barford. Prices start at £95 for the mostly boarded-up shops at the foot of the tower, rising to £6,000 for Sotheby's and Christie's and galleries such as White Cube and Hauser & Wirth at the pinnacle.

Alun Graves, senior curator in ceramics at the V&A, said visitors had been seeking out shops they might recognise. "People are mesmerised by the level of detail in it - even just the sign writing on many of the shops is a delight in itself."

The hierarchy of the piece is important, said Barford, forcing visitors to work out where they fit in to the bigger picture. "What are the shops you know? The shops that you like? Or the shops you aspire to?"

In other words, do you buy your wine from Booze Spot in Harrow or Berry Bros & Rudd in St James's?

The work is based on and named after the biblical Tower of Babel, the attempt to reach heaven, and alludes to our attempts to find fulfilment through shopping.

Two years in the making, the tower has clearly taken a lot of effort and a lot



'We've ceased to be citizens and are now consumers. How and why have we become complicit?'
Barnaby Barford

of cycling. Some shop owners had also wondered what Barford was up to as he waited patiently to get a clear camera shot of each shop. Many worried he was from the council, he said.

Graves said it was a groundbreaking project for the V&A and had meant a close collaboration between the curatorial and commercial sides of the museum. "It was a brilliant opportunity for us - it is a document of London but also shows the amazing skills that still exist in Stoke-on-Trent," he said.

"We realised at an early stage that given the whole thing was about retail and commerce, one way to enliven it, to make it interactive, was to put the whole thing up for sale.

"We know we live in a city with a massive gap between rich and poor and in a way it is a critique of that, but it is also a celebration of London as a commercial centre."

The tower arrived at the museum in seven sections, and is more robust than it looks, with an armature holding it in place. "It has been very challenging but it has been a delight to work on," said Graves. "Wonderful to finally see it."

Barford said the decision on what shop to place where was based more than anything on what looked right. "There was talk about maybe doing some sort of algorithm linked to value, or size of font, but actually we make decisions immediately."

He is also well aware that some shop owners might take issue with their ranking. "It feels right, where they are ... but I'm not planning to hang around."

The Tower of Babel Until 1 November, V&A. Part of the London Design Festival

Artist's china shops offer opportunity to buy into capital's consumerism