

Fine Tuning

Nick Hayhurst admires Eric Parry Architects' new Music School at Brighton College

Photos
Hélène Binet



Above, right
The 190-seat Recital Hall overlooks the school's playing fields, Home Ground. Its roof, formed from 295 prefabricated GRC panels, is covered with hand-set glazed terracotta tiles in six colours.

As David Gilmour got stuck into the chorus of his classic Pink Floyd track 'Wish You Were Here' at the opening of Eric Parry Architects' new Music School at Brighton College, I imagine that those immortal words might have struck a chord with those lucky enough to be in the audience. With the windows of a distant terrace of Victorian houses forming a band of light under the asymmetric pitch of the double-height Recital Hall, the audience must have been treated to a rare and touching moment where musical and spatial delight met in equal measure.

Beyond the fanfare of opening nights, however, lies a carefully conceived practice and performance facility, itself part of an impressive wider building programme at the independent secondary school.

The college's Eastern Road campus is set two blocks back from the seafront; its centrepiece is George Gilbert Scott's first school building, which runs east-west and traverses the approach to the site. Over the last 150 years, a diverse array of buildings (including two recent additions by Allies & Morrison and one by Hopkins Architects) have been built around the perimeter of the site to form a prospectus-perfect quadrangle to the front with a passageway to the west leading to the rear of the site and the cricket pitch, known as 'Home Ground'. Until now, the backlands behind Gilbert Scott's building have been architecturally less-blessed than the front quad, comprising a veritable jumble of post-war tat.

A 2010 masterplan by CZWG sought to unpick the labyrinth with a proud new axial link from the formal quad, through Gilbert Scott's Main School Building and out to Home Ground. Parry's intervention sits to the east of this axis. A forthcoming Drama School, also by EPA, is located to the west.

Conceived as a modern, asymmetric gable to complement the roof profiles of the nineteenth-century buildings behind, the glass-faced elevation to the Recital Hall sets up a striking new relationship between the seemingly incompatible activities of music performance and sports events. Though the College has deliberately chosen to celebrate performing arts by placing it at the centre of the site, the challenge for EPA was to make this relationship visible while dealing with the onslaught of sixes from the crease.



Right

Site plan. The campus lies within a dense urban area slightly to the west of the centre of Brighton.

Below

Recent projects at the college include Richard Griffiths Architects' completion of Cairns Tower, first planned by Victorian architect Thomas Graham Jackson (left), and a boarding house by Allies & Morrison (centre) which has also built a health centre and offices. A teaching block by Hopkins Architects is currently under construction (right).

Bottom left

Construction will begin next year on a sports and science building designed by OMA, which was appointed in 2015 following an invited competition.

Bottom right

Visualisation of the Music School and forthcoming Drama Building, also by Eric Parry Architects, viewed across Home Ground.

Key

- 1 Music School and Lin Room
- 2 Science/future Drama Building
- 3 Sports hall
- 4 Aldrich House, Skidelsky Building
- 5 Dining Hall
- 6 Chapel
- 7 New Academic Building (ongoing)
- 8 Great Hall
- 9 Simon Smith Building
- 10 Cairns Tower
- 11 Boarding house
- 12 Gilbert Scott Building



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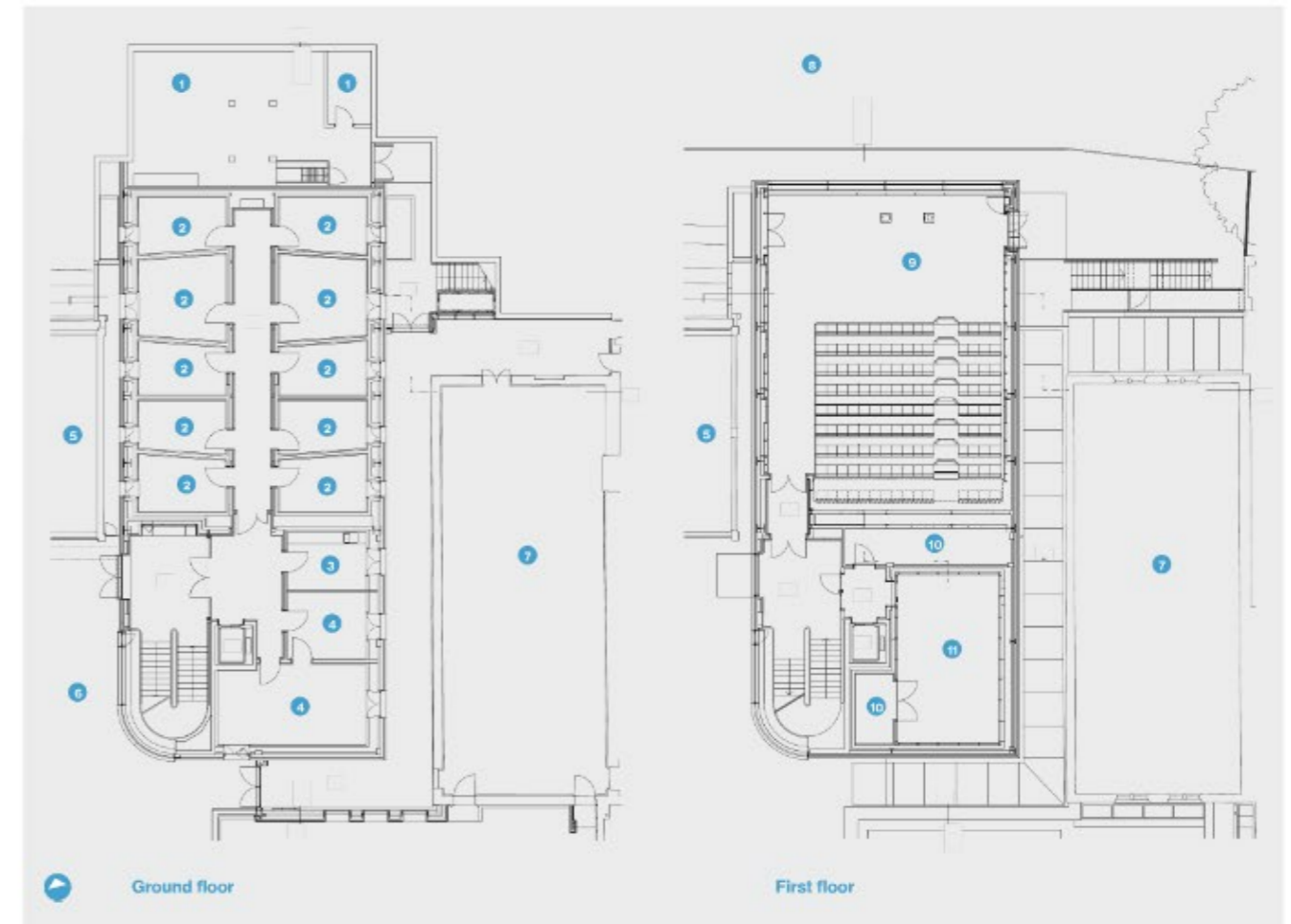
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Right
South-north (longitudinal) section;
east-west (cross) section.

Below
Ground- and first-floor plans.

Key

- 1 Plant
- 2 Practice rooms
- 3 Küchen
- 4 Office
- 5 Existing science building
- 6 New courtyard
- 7 Liu dining hall
- 8 Home Ground
- 9 Rectal Hall
- 10 Store
- 11 Percussion Room
- 12 Giles Gilbert Scott Building
- 13 Toilets



Below
Stair with curved window giving a view onto the Giles Gilbert Scott Building.

Right
The Recital Hall is designed to provide variable acoustics, with adjustable absorption on the side and rear walls allowing for orchestral music, speech and amplified music performances. Movable panels are reflective when closed and highly absorbent when open, when they give an occupied reverberation time of 1.1 seconds.

The envelope is highly insulated to provide low levels of sound break-in and break-out. Mechanical services were designed to NR15, close to the threshold of hearing.

The hall can operate in flat floor or raked seating mode.



Soaking up a three-metre height difference from front to back, the spaces within the four-storey building are simply arranged in section. Plant is in the basement, with practice rooms, offices and a re-ordered dining hall on the lower-ground floor. The Percussion Room and 195-seat, double-height Recital Hall are on the upper floors. The plan arrangement is equally unfussy, with an open stair core in the south-west corner linking each floor: this isn't a building of complex spatial arrangements but rather a building made up of carefully-crafted individual spaces.

On a tour with EPA's project director Tim Lynch and Mark Maidment, director of services engineer Skelly & Couch, the building's considered synthesis of technical and architectural requirements becomes apparent. From the epic, submarine-style plant room, ventilation is supplied to the habitable rooms through neat grills in the 800mm-thick external walls. In the Recital Hall, exhaust air is extracted via a 800mm-deep duct, invisible behind the seating.

Acoustics are equally well handled by both the architectural form and by a playful, Heath-Robinson arrangement of wall-mounted louvres on actuators and link-rods which, when open, expose absorbent linings to vary reverberation times. In combination these features give the back of the room something of the order and character of a church organ.

The drama continues towards the top of the building where two of the most delightful – if slightly serendipitous – moments are found. The ceiling over the stair core curves in plan and section and swoops round with a striking and fabulously-executed double-curved line as it leads to the top floor. To the rear of the building, a small Percussion Room adopts a different ceiling profile to the roof and in so doing creates an unexpected and intriguing space which exudes the character of a vault more than the rooftop space it actually is.

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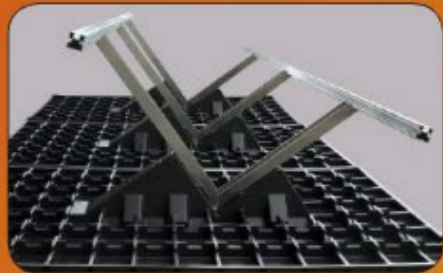
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But here, I suppose, is the rub. While the sculptural quality of the ancillary spaces and the internal linings of the Recital Hall have developed into highly sophisticated and architecturally-mannered elements, formally and spatially the Recital Hall is little developed from Parry's original sketch. While the retention of an original vision can, on one level, be applauded, the envelope – delightful as it is – still feels diagrammatic and awaiting the level of playful design evolution that is evident elsewhere in the scheme.

In a similar vein, it is to be hoped that detail design work develops EPA's Drama School beyond the image presented in CGIs. When the ensemble of buildings fronting Home Ground comes together, it will need to cohere with a forthcoming Science and Sports Building, designed by OMA, that will run up the western side of Home Ground.

The Music Building is important for the college but also for Brighton, which has some claim to be Britain's greenest city – certainly in its voting habits. As Lynch and Maidment suggest on our walk-around, this will probably be one of Brighton's most energy-efficient buildings, and the BREEM Excellent project includes an open-loop ground-source heat pump that will also power the Drama School and OMA's Science and Sports Building, resulting in significant carbon savings. The College, and its projects director Steve Patten, should be commended for their foresight in investing in a long-term vision, sound energy planning, excellent architecture – and, of course, for the choice of performers to open new buildings. **A**

Project team

Architect
Eric Parry Architects
Design team
Eric Parry, Damien Lee, Tim Lynch, Christopher Daniel, James McNeill, Joshua King, Christine Humphreys, Ian Van
Structural engineer
Momentum
M&E engineer
Skelly & Couch
Acoustics
Gillieron Scott
Theatre consultant
Charcoalblue
Quantity surveyor
Academy Consulting
Main contractor
R Durnell & Sons
Client
Brighton College

Selected suppliers & subcontractors

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GRC roof panels
Telling Architectural
Flint walling
The Flint Wall Company
Carpentry
Laslett & Hill
Retractable seating
Hussey Seatway
Theatre supplies
National Stage Technology
Green roof
Bauder
Steel-framed glazing
Schuco Jansen
Acoustic floating floors
Christie & Grey
Glazing
Guardian Glass
Carpet
Forbo Tessera

