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Bridge Building

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Timber, felt and metals provide a subtle but rich palette for architect Haworth Tompkins' Bridge Theatre

Photos
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Based on the premise that London can support large-scale, non-subsidised theatre outside the traditional heartland of the West End, the Bridge is the first venue for the London Theatre Company, set up by the Nicholas Hytner and Nicholas Starr after their successful tenure leading the National Theatre. Their chosen site faces Potters Field Park in Southwark, between City Hall and Tower Bridge, occupying part of the ground floor and basement of Berkeley Homes' recently completed residential development, set aside for cultural use as part of the planning agreement.

Working with the found space of the building shell, Haworth Tompkins designed the public foyer of the theatre as a simple, generous room, centred around a wide staircase down to the auditorium stalls and flanked by a long bar and interval drinks pigeonholes. The room is funnel-shaped, opening up to a tall, fully-glazed facade that allows panoramic views across the Thames to the Tower of London, while an existing glazed roof section brings daylight deep into the tapering plan. In section, the foyer subtly reduces in height as the room

narrows towards the auditorium entrances, with a corresponding increase in acoustic absorbency. Along with the carefully modulated acoustics, the choice of lining materials – plywood, pale and dark sawn oak – sets up a relaxed, convivial, atmosphere intended to attract both traditional and new audiences. A game of pleating, folding, rolling and draping brings texture and movement to the secondary sheet materials of felt, canvas, zinc and copper mesh.

The heart of the scheme is an intimate 900 to 1100 seat auditorium capable of streamlined transformation between formats to support a programme of new commissions and classics. To meet a fast programme and fit the structure into a tight space envelope, Haworth Tompkins developed an experimental, prefabricated modular auditorium in collaboration with the client's technical team and specialist stage engineers Tait. The auditorium was designed with 3D

engineering software and delivered in containerised, fully finished and coordinated components, complete with wiring and air supply routes, that had been fabricated and test-erected off site. Using an innovative decking system for the stalls and stage areas, along with rotatable seating, the space can be easily reconfigured to end-on, thrust, in-the-round, promenade or traverse formats. The sense of intimacy and density in the space is notable. Though larger in capacity than the National Theatre's Lyttelton auditorium, the Bridge feels more like the much smaller Young Vic (in fact the distance between gallery fronts is the same).

Light fittings: Working with specialist manufacturer Static, Haworth Tompkins conceived the foyer lighting as a single, conglomerate installation formed of 500 dimmable LED lamps encased in rolled copper mesh to diffuse and warm the light. Each individual light is made of two copper mesh sheets, bound by thick copper wire and suspended from high-level tracks.

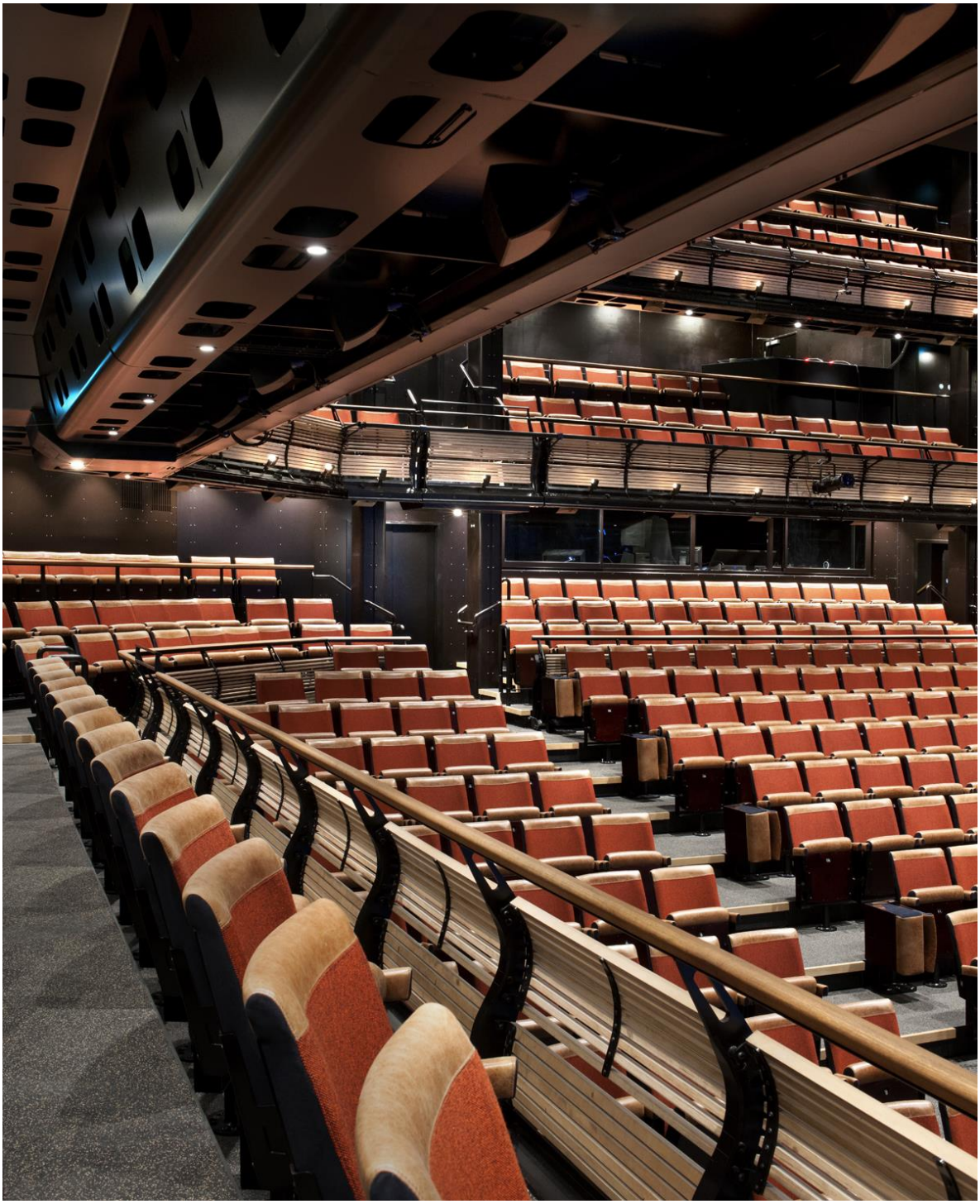
Designed to bring visual complexity to the simple geometry of the space, the form of the constellation was plotted digitally, and each fitting given individual coordinates for site installation. The lights drop in height over the main staircase, signifying the auditorium entrance from the street.

Timber joinery: A simple contrast of pale and dark warm tones is used throughout the interior to differentiate elements and modulate the proportion of the found space. The base material is timber: natural Douglas fir plywood for the upper wall linings; stained Douglas fir plywood for the drinks shelves and doors; pale sawn-oak floors; and dark-stained sawn oak for bar fronts, stair enclosure and lower wall linings. Visible filling marks were left on the high-level plywood to give additional texture, whereas the detailing of the tactile, lower elements is more refined. The texture of the oak floor is designed to patinate and darken over time.

Felt ceilings: The foyer was conceived as a found space modulated by a number of two-dimensional linings. Strips of warm dark-grey felt were selected for the main ceilings, threaded onto conduit-like shallow curtains. The acoustic characteristics of the foyer were designed in the same detail as the auditorium, allowing excellent intelligibility even with a full audience. A decreasing reverberation time across the space from street entrance to the auditorium doors, achieved by a denser felt ceiling texture, subliminally quietens the audience as it enters the auditorium.

Modular galleries: The auditorium is composed of two primary modular steel elements, a corner and a straight row, each one with a half column at either end and each forming a single tier of seating. The surrounding enclosure is a modular steel diaphragm incorporating acoustic doors along with calibrated air-supply routes and grilles. Fabricated off site and test erected before being assembled sequentially, the modules combine to form a complete, independent auditorium structure, pre-wired and requiring no further ductwork or second fixing on site.

Seating: The seats, designed in collaboration with Kirwin & Simpson, are capable of swivelling through a number of positions to address different staging configurations. A palettte of pale tan leather for arms and edges and a burnt orange wool cloth for seat backs was selected for warmth and informality, using a deeper-toned wool for the seat pan. Black suede was used to infill side panels and arm ends, continuing the visual language of folded, two-dimensional planes of material.



Flooring: The floor of the seating tiers and circulation spaces is a resilient sheet material made of recycled rubber, normally used as an acoustic underlay.

It gives excellent impact absorption and complements the spare, unmediated language of the dark painted steel structure within the auditorium, allowing the seats to generate the visual richness of the room under house lighting.