Building study

On with the motley

With the David Brownlow Theatre Jonathan Tuckey has employed a studied miscellany of materials and styles to add performance spaces and a new civic presence to a Hampshire prep school

Horris Hill is a day and boarding preparatory school for boys aged four to 13 set within a rural campus in Hampshire. A relatively small school of about 130 pupils, it maintains a whole-school community ethos, gathering together for daily chapel, meals, weekly assemblies, lectures and concerts. In 2016 the school initiated an invited competition for a new theatre. The aspiration was for a good-value building that would enhance the school grounds as well as the arts and drama curriculum, and be multifunctional, providing an assembly hall and classroom as well as a performance stage: an embodiment of collaboration and creative aspiration.

Words Jay Merrick
Photography Jim Stephenson, Nick Dearden

The architectural skin and bones of the David Brownlow Theatre at Horris Hill prep school present a conundrum. Everything about the building's form, elevations and interiors are extremely distinct; and yet, encountered as an object in an 85-acre setting that is part hamlet, part landscape, the building ushers the mind and senses into a pleasing state of puzzlement. Despite the clarity of Jonathan Tuckey Design's scheme, it's impossible to give the architecture a cast-iron typological label.

In one sense, this is fitting: the theatre stands on the southern edge of the school's architectural macaroni of buildings, including the 1888 brick and tile-hung main building, which has a peculiar faux-Classical PoMo portico, a barn-like gym, a main academic block that resembles a generic suburban rest home, and a stableyard-like building crowned with a bumptious pop-up structure which PG Wodehouse might have described as 'Bally Well Baroque'.

The headmaster, Giles Tollit, is a classicist and thinks of the school as a small town; the David Brownlow Theatre is therefore Horris Hill's Epidaurus – well, the back of it, anyway, where the architects have fashioned a very simple stepped grassy auditorium next to the rear façade. 'The theatre is not just for us,' explains Tollit. 'It's for sharing with the wider community. I want this to be a living, breathing theatre with a civic feel and a life outside the school.'

Jonathan Tuckey was selected for the project from a shortlist which included Britain's current *victor ludorum* of theatre architecture, Haworth Tompkins, and for at least two reasons: he and his small team managed to present an unusually detailed schematic proposal within the one-week period given by the school; and they were particularly intent on *civitas*, developing their design after interviewing a wide range of Horris Hill's 'villagers'.

The theatre is essentially composed of four materials: a concrete plinth which steps up once at the north end of the sloping site and extrudes handsomely formed external benches; a larch cross-laminated timber main structure; beech details; and Viroc particle board rainscreen panels and internal flooring – a pinky-terracotta shade for the former, slate-grey tessellations for the latter.

In section, the structure, with a very shallow dual-pitch roof, suggests an archaic barn, and only two features contradict this: a two-storey, de Chirico-ish timber banner frame-cum-campanile with a nominal public square in front of it; and the clean-lined ground floor reception volume and covered colonnade, which project from the north and east façades respectively. The shell of the building and its interior are quite different in manner, most notably in the way the elements of structure and surface are expressed. The elevations have a precisely finished look; the interior has an unfinished quality and is dominated by the faintly medieval heft of the exposed CLT structure, the simple secondary

carpentry of the battening, and wooden bench seating. The latter was inspired by the curved feet of Mackintosh's auditorium seating at the Glasgow School of Art, and built for around £12,000 via a Tuckey-devised cutting and fabrication system based on foamboard and MDF mock-ups. The design process as a whole involved the production of 1:200 site and volumetric models, 1:25 models of the building's envelope, interior, and sizeable portions of the façades, and 1:10 fragments, some produced by A-level intern students.

Internally, a wooden balustraded minstrels' gallery extends the main entrance sequence from the beech-battened foyer into and along the east side of the auditorium, which has a relatively outsized stage area. The walls are composed of CLT panels, ordered by strongly protruding horizontal bands of wood and spaced battens that are set back slightly. The occoya-framed windows are oversized; there are doors on the east and west sides of the auditorium; and a lolling, flexiply acoustic 'tent' overhead.

Some of the wall panels are perforated for ventilation, others are padded – Charcoalblue was Tuckey's adviser on theatre technics – and, in a departure from typical theatre ordering, the seats rise in four asymmetrically set-out blocks of benches, with a dog-legged central aisle. The technical space at the back of the auditorium is set to one side, and the overall effect of these asymmetries is beneficial: the sense of the volume as a potentially mundane space is artfully traduced, and the differently sized seating blocks suit smaller-scale events that need more specific audience positions. The strong character and atmosphere of the auditorium are a creatively 'annoyed' (Tuckey's word) critique of the usual deployments of CLT, which produce, he says, 'flat, lazy buildings'.

The protean character and *radiated* atmosphere of the theatre's external elevations raises other questions. For a second or two, one absorbs the precisely outlined

Architect's view

Designed to host assemblies, music recitals and drama productions, the development comprises three unique spaces – a 160-seat auditorium, an outdoor amphitheatre and a congregating space at the entrance portico – creating a building which is animated on all sides.

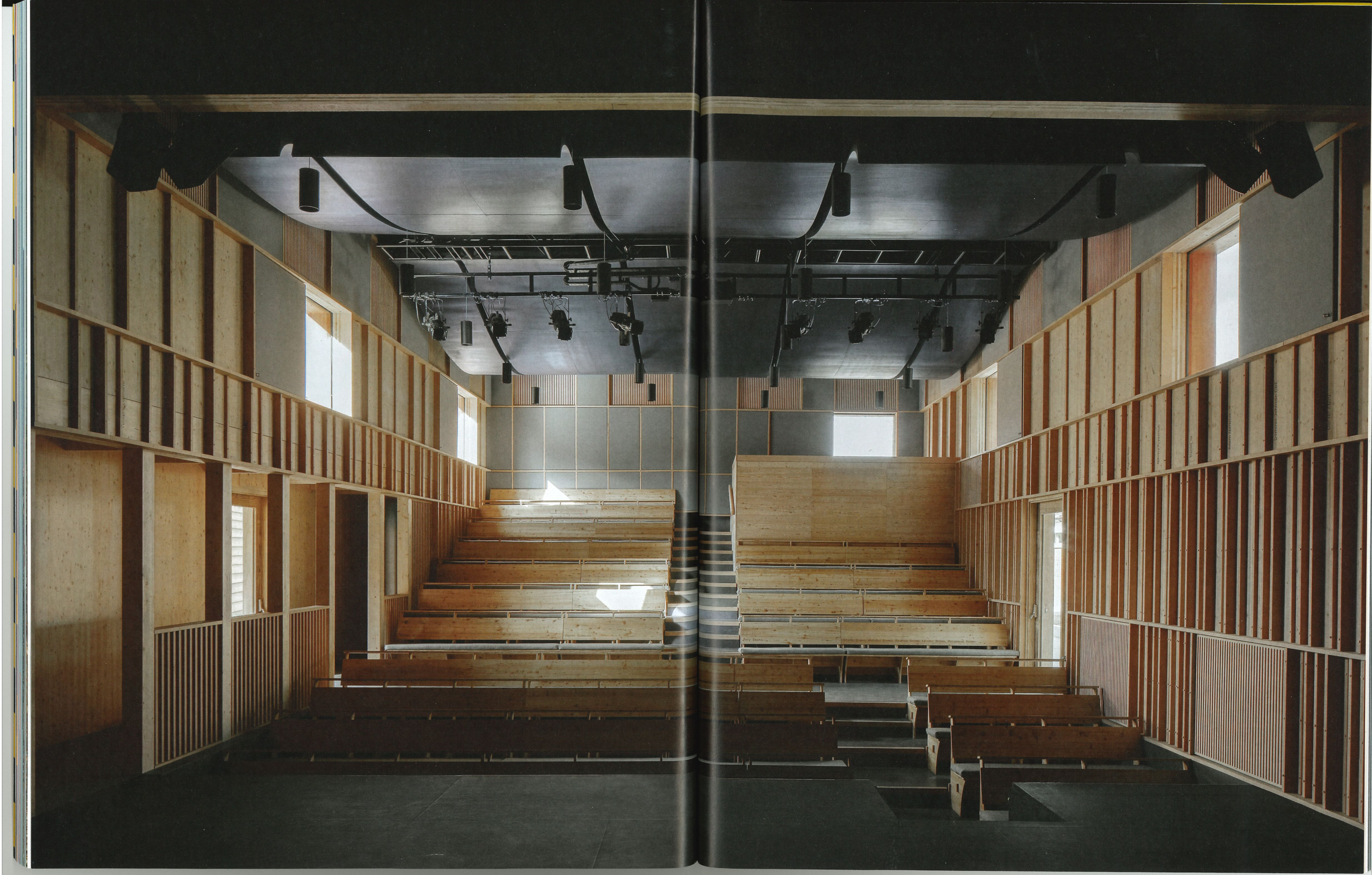
The new building is orientated to embrace the latent urbanity of the adjacent school campus, creating a civic square in conjunction with the existing collection of buildings.

The theatre responds to its surroundings not through replication of a local vernacular, but by being consciously distinct in materiality and structure. However, the warm red hue of the Viroc elevations roots the theatre among the earthy brick of the neighbouring Victorian buildings and more recent additions.

We have employed natural materials to create a passively ventilated theatre which sits harmoniously within the wooded setting. It is constructed of cross-laminated timber and clad with wood fibre panelling, which was machine cut offsite from sheets to reduce waste, and pieced together by hand almost as a single piece of joinery would be. The CLT frame was chosen for its cost effectiveness and to reduce time on site; its specification has ensured a saving of 40 tonnes of CO_2 compared with traditional blockwork construction.

Jonathan Tuckey, director, Jonathan Tuckey Design

NICK DEARDEN



flat and raised surfaces: the mottled blush of the Viroc panels, the protruding, brusquely functional ventilation louvres and angled door cowls, the sheen of the oversized metal downpipes and the quirky radiuses of the gutter supports, the out-thrust battens and window frames, the large, deliberately proud screw-plugs on the panels. 'I want people to see how this building was made,' says Tuckey. Ergo, all this must surely be evidence of a distinct architectural identity. Not quite. Instead, a Rolodex of architectural type-cards begins to spin – barn, Brutalist drying shed, Peter Behrens' 1909 AEG turbine factory, anything but the medieval, and so on. The ambiguity of the elevations is engrossing. Tuckey wanted to produce something 'with the rawness of Palladian buildings', and he thinks of the battening and panel framing as time-warped rustications and orderings transmuted from buildings such as Alberti's Palazzo Rucellai and Brunelleschi's Basilica of San Lorenzo, and the incised rustications of Hawksmoor's St Mary Woolnoth Church.

Yet these references are folded into his insistence that a fundamental aim of architects should be to produce backgrounds, rather than foregrounds. Cue Ian Nairn on St Mary Woolnoth: 'You don't remember until afterwards how strange the building is ... it transcends originality.' But you do notice immediately how architecturally strange and original the Brownlow Theatre is – and that it is a foreground rather than a background object. And this makes the building substantially more than the decorated drama shed that Jonathan Tuckey intended – and it is a moreness that remains satisfyingly mysterious.

Project data

Start on site August 2019
Completion September 2020
Gross internal floor area 528m²
(theatre: 320m²)
Construction cost £1,742,790
Construction cost per m² £3,300
Architect Jonathan Tuckey Design
Client Horris Hill School
Structural engineer Webb Yates Engineers
M&E consultant Skelly And Couch
Quantity surveyor Marstan BDB
CDM co-ordinator Marstan BDB
Theatre consultant Charcoalblue
Approved building inspector
Shore Engineering
Main contractor Vale Southern
CAD software used Vectorworks

Sustainability data

Total energy load 257.4 kWh/m²/yr
Carbon emissions 44.9 $kgCO_2/m^2$
Airtightness at 50Pa 3 $m^3/hr/m^2$
Area-weighted U-value 0.26 W/m^2K