

# BUILDING STUDY: CHICHESTER FESTIVAL THEATRE

Haworth Tomkins has subtly remodelled Chichester Festival Theatre, a 1960s classic that has regained its original vision while also achieving modern performance and efficiency standards, writes **Ike Ijeh**

**D**espite aberrations like the Museum of London and the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, Powell and Moya, founded by fellow AA students Philip Powell and Hidalgo Moya in 1946, went on to become one of the defining British architectural practices of the Modern post-war era. Their best work was always marked by a profound public and civic consciousness grounded in a strict rationalist rigour, as exemplified by their collegiate waterside buildings at St John's College Cambridge and their iconic, now demolished Skylon for the 1951 Festival of Britain.

Chichester Festival Theatre is one of their most celebrated works and it provides a perfect demonstration of their signature architectural style. Conceived as a "pavilion in the park", its rich natural setting evokes their passionately held belief that architecture should be an active agent of social improvement.

And in its cantilevered, hexagonal concrete form, lightweight cable-tied roof and its thrust stage performance space - the first of its kind in the UK and one whose company-based productions would eventually evolve into London's National Theatre - the technical and aesthetic prowess the practice often lavished on its work is clearly brought into focus.

## Faded grandeur

But since the grade II listed theatre's completion in 1962, its fabric has deteriorated in a manner familiar to many similar buildings from the same period. Piecemeal extensions had damaged the original sculptural, geometric clarity of the original building form. (Ironically some of these later additions were completed by Powell and Moya themselves.)

Foyer spaces originally conceived as porous visual conduits linking park and theatre had become cluttered and illegible. Back of house areas, deliberately under-prioritised by both Powell and Moya and inaugural artistic director Sir Lawrence Olivier in order to emphasise the importance of public engagement, had also become overly cramped and unusable.

As with many concrete 1960s buildings, thermal performance was poor, with single glazing and insufficient or non-existent insulation resulting in poor energy efficiency. And perhaps most important of all, the auditorium presented a catalogue of problems, ranging from poor acoustics





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Above: A new extension features CorTen steel

Right: New cafe space has been integrated into the foyer

Opposite page: The staircase enclosures have been removed to integrate the stairs into the foyer for the first time



> to inefficient circulation, all of which severed the link between performer and audience that both Olivier and Powell and Moya considered sacrosanct.

### The modern upgrade

Haworth Tomkins, no strangers to the often convoluted intricacies of refurbishment, were charged with restoring and improving the theatre and their work is now visible in the newly reopened venue. Their intervention is characterised by careful, subtle remodelling that seeks to re-establish the strength and clarity of Powell and Moya's original concept while upgrading the building to modern environmental and performance standards.

Externally the theatre is virtually unchanged, apart from some subtle differences. Some of the most graceful visual features of the original building were the timber boxes that hung like cages from the cantilevering soffit of the auditorium above. These contain stairs that lead from the foyer up to the auditorium and externally they provide a delicate, perforated counterfoil to the ribbed solidity of the surrounding concrete.

Previously these timber structures were solid, but slender strips of glazing have now been integrated into them transforming them into elegant, hanging wooden lanterns. These provide direct views out to the park from the staircases for the first time and thereby increase visual connectivity between park and theatre, a vital component of the agenda of both the original and refurbishing architects.

The vertical proportions of these newly perforated boxes are inspired by the composition of the original curtain-walling around the foyer entrance, although they undergo another contemporary permutation when they re-appear on the only new external addition to the theatre.

To the rear of the theatre a new block has been constructed that contains upgraded back-of-house facilities, which include new offices and dressing rooms.

This extension has been clad in CorTen weathering steel and again apes vertical proportions elsewhere by being wrapped in sliced, slender fins. These add a look of dynamic, sculpted refinement to the building that is perfectly in keeping with the powerful, streamlined geometries originally established by Powell and Moya.

Haworth Tomkins' co-founder, Steve Tomkins, explains this choice of >



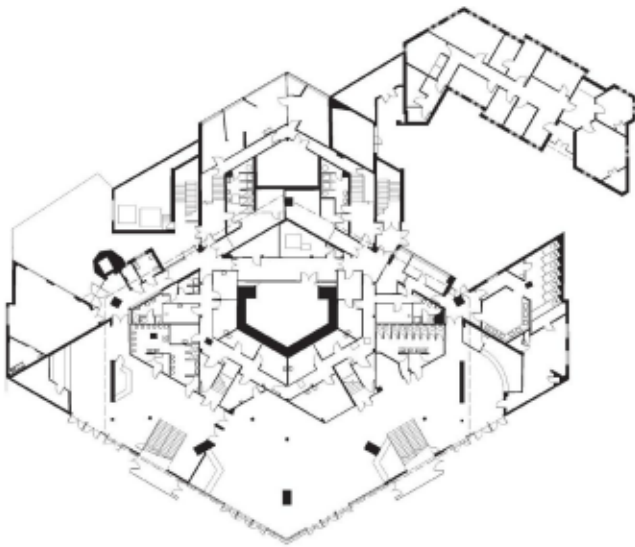
To the rear of the theatre a new block has been constructed that contains upgraded back-of-house facilities





"We used CorTen here because we wanted to differentiate from the original concrete with a tough, polished and muscular new material that would weather over time"

GROUND FLOOR PLAN - BEFORE



» material. "We used CorTen here because we wanted to differentiate from the original concrete with a tough, polished and muscular new material that would weather over time," he says.

"It's almost a shadow version of the original. In fact, there used to be a copse of trees at this location whose strong vertical alignment was virtually doing the same thing."

**Reorganising the interior**

Internally the foyer has been subtly reorganised with a new cafe and the opening up of the former staircase enclosures adding a palpable sense of openness and spaciousness and flooding the area with space with natural light.

Critically these measures also constantly accentuate the all-important visual connections to the park.

Changes have also taken place within the main auditorium to improve sightlines and increase the theatricality of the performance experience. The seating rake has been steepened to increase the connection between the audience and performers and previously redundant side galleries have been brought back into use. Cleverly, in order to avoid adding additional loading onto the lightweight roof, an independent structure has been designed to carry the new stage, lighting and engineering equipment required to upgrade performances to modern technical standards.

**What's new?**

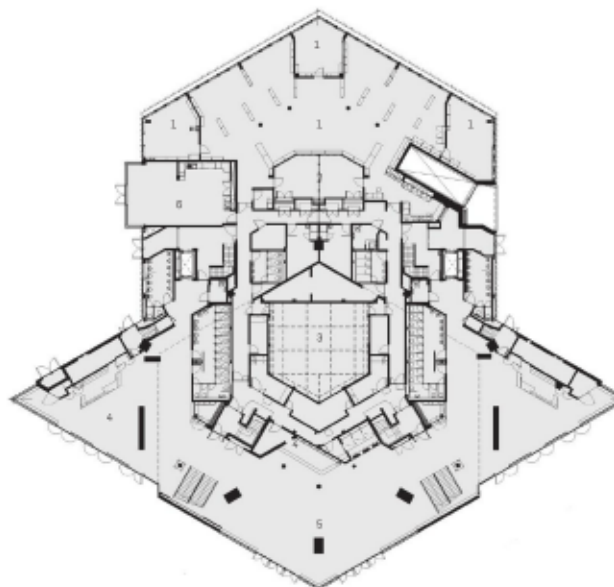
The irony of the new Chichester Festival Theatre is that in certain moments, it almost appears as if not a great deal has changed. As far as Tomkins is concerned,



An independent structure has been designed to carry the new stage, lighting and engineering equipment



GROUND FLOOR PLAN - AFTER



Left: The new auditorium seats 1,300

Opposite page: Original concrete surfaces have been left exposed

1 Offices  
2 Meeting rooms  
3 Trap room  
4 Bar area  
5 Foyer  
6 Green room

this is a vindication of their design strategy that seeks to re-establish the original clarity and concept of Powell and Moya's work.

That design strategy is also one that offers an interesting perspective on the nature of conservation projects generally and on Haworth Tomkins' particular approach to them. "As a practice we don't differentiate between conservation and newbuild projects," explains Tomkins. "For us architecture is about understanding context. Architects cannot abdicate this understanding of context because that is what provides a narrative for the changes you are going to make and it also enables you to extrapolate those changes from a much deeper understanding of what already exists."

This should be music to the ears of anyone concerned with how new and

old architecture can relate, regardless of whether the brief presents a new-build, refurbishment or even public realm scenario. Haworth Tomkins' intervention at Chichester, heavily informed by a conservation strategy document produced at the start of the project, has grown from a forensic analysis of existing conditions. This in turn led to an intrinsic understanding of the nature and character of the existing site.

Such consideration does not constrain their new design, rather it liberates it by ensuring that it is grounded by and can appropriately respond to a richer understanding of context. To understand is to design. It is a simple tenet and one which, as Chichester's evolution and not reinvention shows, Haworth Tomkins clearly subscribes to. One wishes that more architects would do the same.

#### PROJECT TEAM

Architect: **Powell & Moya**  
Client: **Chichester Festival Theatre**  
Main contractor: **Osborne**  
Structural/M&E engineer: **Price & Myers**  
Service engineer: **Skelly & Couch**  
Project manager: **Deloitte**  
Theatre consultant: **Charcoalblue**