The Public by Alsop Architects
images: Mark Enstone

The Public by Alsop Architects is a new kind of arts building in West Bromwich Town Centre, Central England. It's designed for artistic, educational and community projects, as well as exhibitions, displays, facilities, events and commercial activities. The approach is to combine dramatic and intense experiences for visitors. It is a center for people in the community to take part in art projects, and to engage in lifelong learning in a wide range of skills and subjects, with IT and digital arts given special prominence at a time when these subjects are changing lives and driving economies across the world.

Here are the details, given to us by Alsop Architects:

Architectural Concept
The building, designed by Alsop Architects, sets out to inspire and encourage creativity from its users. Contained within a simple rectilinear form, The Public was conceived as a ‘Box of Delights’ offering a wide variety of spaces, forms, angles, curves, surfaces, vistas and atmospheres. A series of enclosed or semi-enclosed structures – organically shaped and described in terms such as ‘Pod’, ‘Rock’, ‘Pebble’, ‘Lily-Pad’ and ‘Sock’ – exist within the building as discrete entities, their external walls fully defined and detached from the box that contains them. In places, these structures break through the external shell of the building.

Form
A scattering of ‘jellybean’ shaped windows that pierce the sides of the aluminium cladding punctures the 113m x 21m x 22m box envelope of the building. Those approaching the building are able to glimpse...
its interior through these openings and through a glazed ‘skirt’ at ground level on which the rectangular form sits. Inside, simplicity of form gives way to complexity, with rugged, multi-faceted or curved forms appearing to balloon into the space, sitting on, or suspended from a table structure, with lifts cutting past them and a wandering, large-scale ramp linking the spaces.

These forms are containers for the many different functions in the building. There are, for example, ‘Pods’ for displaying art, as well as a huge ‘Sock’ containing two large galleries, a ‘Ramp’ that will contain a major proportion of the displays, an Events Space ‘Rock’ – and a WC ‘Pebble’. At the top of the building, suspended from the roof, a series of ‘Lily-Pads’ – dish-shaped floors with brightly colored interiors – will house creative workspaces.

The interiors of the enclosures are, in many cases, hidden, allowing for multiple atmospheres and changes in configuration, use and display. Often in the building, balustrades and openings allow vertical and horizontal views through the voids between the internal elements. Sometimes the shape of a ceiling will be defined by the underside of a ‘Pod’ that sits above it.

**Structure**

13 pairs of concrete-filled steel columns run through the centre of the building. Angled and tapering, their primary function is to support the main floor of arrival for visitors, which is Level 3. From this ‘table-top’, steel members cantilever out to support the roof. All the main floors are supported from this core steel structure. The fa?ade is a self-supporting secondary structure, free of the main structure.

It is from this basic structural concept that the character of the building derives, with its high degree of architectural fluidity and dialogue between different forms and spaces. Structurally, it can be described as a lightweight box that covers a series of sculptural forms. These are wrapped around floor plates that are, in turn, supported by the primary skeleton of steel columns.

animated by a projection artwork, the first of the many permanent Gallery installations.

The main entrances lead to a central atrium space that allows visitors tantalizing views of the whole length and height of the building, giving glimpses of the activities on offer. The caf? bar at ground to the North East of the building will be open to all with adjacent flexible spaces to be used for functions and informal events. From there the ground floor slopes gently down past the main reception desk towards the Gallery lifts and the Theatre contained within the Rock at the South West of the building.
The Pebble
Between the main public entrance and the Lifts lies the bulbous form of the Pebble, clad internally in the same Stainless Steel cladding used externally. Within the Pebble are concealed the main public toilets on two levels, plant rooms and stores.

Theatre
Directly ahead of the Lift Lobby at Level 0 is the Theatre. With a capacity of 250 people seated or 450 people standing the space is designed to serve the local community by accommodating a wide variety of functions including performances, gigs and concerts, films, conferences, seminars, presentations, banqueting and civic events. The internal form of the space has been modelled to create visual and acoustic intimacy. A box within box construction is used to ensure a high level of acoustic separation, and an acoustic screen allows the space to be divided into two independent rooms.

Level 3 - The Gallery
Gallery visitors arrive at level 3 at the edge of an informal cluster of tubular steel trees which provide an introduction to the delights of the Galley experience. To the left is the Gallery Caf? and an open plan flexible space, used during the day for welcoming visitors, informal workshops and participative activity and schools parties and lunches, and in the evening as a function space. Directly ahead is the soft form of a cantilevered yellow ‘Toilet Stem’ which serves all the upper levels, and to the right the trees lead to the entrance to the Gallery.

The trees are designed by Ben Kelly Design and incorporate a mass of displays, lights, projectors, input terminals and decorative panels. Visitors carry a ‘Radio Frequency Identification Tag’ which enables the Gallery exhibits, starting with the trees, to recognize and respond to each individual as they pass along their journey.

The Sock
After passing through the trees visitors arrive at the Sock, a brooding, black sculptural form rising through three stories and dominating the North East end of the building. This accommodates the two temporary exhibition galleries - a white single storey room at Level 3 and black two storey room at Level 1. These sculptural spaces are not intended to conform to normal conventions of gallery design; there are few rectangular vertical walls and only limited separation from adjacent areas – instead they offer a dramatic environment to which artists and curators will respond in the planning of installations often of light, sound and projection.
The Cave
Returning from the Level 3 temporary gallery towards the centre of the building the visitor is drawn into the Cave, a darkened space at the top of the Ramp, containing a projection artwork. A black fabric roof is tensioned across a slender tubular steel frame spanning onto a sinuously curved ring beam. The Cave forms the entrance to the Ramp.

Environmental Strategy
The overall interior of The Public was designed as a ‘bioclimatic’ space. The ‘Pod’ structures make it possible to target energy into spaces where people gather, thus allowing a high degree of energy-efficiency. Natural ventilation is used where possible. This would be especially noticeable on warm days when the large openings at ground level will be kept open, drawing air up through the building and out through a continuous strip of openable roof light around the perimeter of the roof level.