West Bromwich, United Kingdom
Alsop Architects; Flannery & de la Pole

The Public represents a new kind of arts building, a new way of experiencing art and a radical step forward in community architecture, born from the conviction that architecture can be a catalyst for regeneration and renewal.

The completed building stands at the gateway, geographically and in timing, of the complete regeneration of West Bromwich Town Centre, in central England, over the next four years, and as a signal of this change and a symbol of the new ambition and commitment to quality that marks the regeneration campaign, has fulfilled its first dramatic function for the town and for the Black Country more widely.

The building was rooted in many years of ground-breaking community arts and development work, by Jubilee Arts and its successors. A dynamic consultation process engendered a sense of ownership and involvement, bringing with it a tangible hope of economic and social regeneration. This process is reflected in the completed building – meeting community needs and aspirations and with the potential to inspire and transform people’s lives. The original Client, Jubilee Arts had long being a champion of the cause – using arts as a source of community renewal and social and economic regeneration. The Public, drawing on Lottery, EU and other regeneration funding brings all these themes together in one of the boldest cultural projects of the millennium.

The building has been designed to accommodate an array of artistic, educational and community projects, as well as exhibitions, displays, facilities, events and commercial activities. The approach throughout has been to combine dramatic and intense experiences for visitors, fitness for purpose and the flexibility to continue to respond to changing needs and developing cultures.

**Function**

The building stands at the heart of the new town centre for West Bromwich and is an accessible and inspirational building for all. The open and vibrant ground floor of the building with its large doors and through-routes is an extension of the new public town square and welcomes people to its large and airy café bar – run by Couture, national specialists in the catering of distinctive buildings.

The Public hosts exhibitions of local and international interest, exploring new kinds of visual art, by new kinds of artists, for
diverse audiences. At its heart is Public Gallery an interactive gallery showcasing art from local, national and international artists – uniquely, it will provide a rich spectrum of creative experiences that evolve with each individual visitor.

The building is a centre 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.

It will include inspirational new learning environments for formal and informal learning across generations, focusing on the skills local people need to build confidence and transform lives culturally and economically.

This theme of commitment to the transformation of economic as well as cultural fortunes runs through everything we do. Across the building, a programme of incubation of creative businesses and ideas will foster new activity and help to attract and retain talented people in the Black Country. This will culminate in some of the most distinctive spaces – the Lilypads at the top of the building – in an environment where creativity and business will come together to bring new energy to the regeneration of the borough.

There will be events, performances, films, art, gigs and concerts, dance and drama workshops, conferences, seminars and meetings, with spaces specially designed to accommodate them. At the focus of this is the first purpose built theatre in West Bromwich since the Plaza Theatre closed its doors more than forty years ago– meeting a long held ambition to create a space at the civic heart of the town and the community.

Across the building, these themes of participation, inspiration, learning and celebration are threaded together to enable people to follow their interests but also to chance across new things to do. As an example, the building has a fully professional recording studio run by local music business Major Key Studios. The studio will host foundation degrees in music industry management and technology, but also be a resource for local people – including enabling them to record live from the theatre and feature in outside broadcasts from the site.

The Public really is a new kind of civic and cultural building, a place that you visit for one purpose and, once you are there, explore for many other reasons. In everything it does, though, one thing remains constant – visitors define their experience of the building – interacting with the exhibits, developing and expressing their own creativity – summed up in Public Gallery’s term “The Public – You Make It Amazing”

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

The 113m x 21m x 22m box envelope of the building is punctured by a scattering of ‘jellybean’ shaped windows that pierce the sides of the aluminium cladding.

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 coloured 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 façade 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 light-weight 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.

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 rooflight around the perimeter of the roof level.

Visitor Experience

Ground Floor

At ground level, the building opens up via large sliding pink steel doors to provide a public route through from a soon to be renovated Queen’s square shopping centre, to new public spaces along both long elevations of the building designed by Landscape Architects Camlin Lonsdale. In this way the ground floor of the building itself was conceived as an extension of the New Town Square. The centre of the space is 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 café 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 Gallery experience. To the left is the Gallery Café 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 spaces.
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.

The Ramp
The Ramp descends through the main building volume at a constant gradient of 1 in 20, spiralling twice around the Sock, flying across the entrance hall and pirouetting around an ‘H’ frame column before coming to rest in the centre of the ground floor. It is supported asymmetrically by ribs cantilevered from a large tubular spine beam, which is bracketed off the main ‘H’ frame structure. One of the major challenges of ‘inhabiting’ the Gallery spaces was to create surfaces for the artworks in sympathy with the architecture. Ben Kelly responded by designing a complex mesh balustrade system to one side of the Ramp to accommodate artworks with a variety of panels, drawers, speakers and displays. The other side of the Ramp has an elegant vertical oak plank balustrade. Artworks along the Ramp also include the ten metre high ‘Waterfall’ and the ‘Sound Corridor’.

Other Levels
At Level 1 is a magenta box, suspended right at the heart of the building, and peppered by a sprinkling of small circular windows, scribble lighting and zig-zag lighting. This contains the administrative offices for the building and the Gallery, and is connected to the acoustically discreet ‘Production Suite’ which includes recording studios and is located over the Event Space. Level 4 divides into three areas, a conventional open plan space to the South West, the top of the Sock to the North East and the Lily Pads between. There are fifteen lily pads in two sizes, suspended by circular hangers from the roof structure above. Clad in glossy GRP, white on the outside, vibrantly coloured inside, the lily pads are connected by a network of lightweight bridges, some in yellow GRP, others in steel and glass. The floor will be focus of the most practical commitment of the building to be a catalyst for the economic regeneration of West Bromwich – bringing together business, creativity and talent to generate jobs and prosperity.

Level 2 consists of an open plan area, sitting directly above the Event Space box, and an enclosed rectangular volume at the centre of the building. This floor is the focus of the final phase of the completion of the building – responding to the original intent that the building should be at the heart of new ways of learning in the borough. Plans are well advanced for the development of a set of spaces here that offer inspirational and innovative learning environments for all – from school children visiting the gallery to training in key skills for adults seeking and developing their capabilities in employment.

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Rating: 4.5/10