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PROJECT TYPE
CIVIC

People's theatre

De Matos Ryan's thoughtful reworking brings a new interior drama and user-friendliness to York's historic Theatre Royal



Glazing gives the Victorian colonnade a street presence

Dress circle, stalls and gallery seats were renewed

De Matos Ryan has proved that you really can teach an old dog new tricks. The firm has built a strong reputation in creating contemporary spaces within historic and culturally sensitive contexts; its latest project, York Theatre Royal, sets out a bold new future for the Grade-II listed building as well as an evolution of its visitor experience.

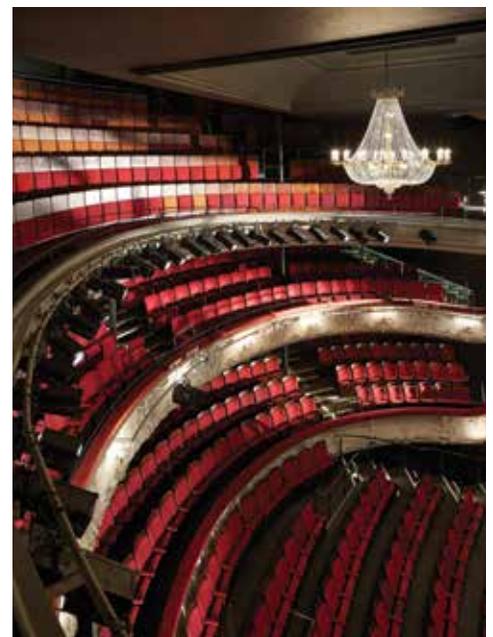
Consultation with key stakeholders laid the foundation for the practice's plans to improve user experience, sustainability and the venue's ability to house a variety of creative arts. In March 2015, the theatre closed its doors for the £4.1m redevelopment.

A theatre has been on the site since 1744, making York's the oldest UK theatre outside London. Its complex site has sparked the imagination

of many an architect. "Every 50-70 years, every generation, has done something different to the building," explains Angus Morrogh-Ryan, partner at De Matos Ryan.

"Our brief was to resolve all of those incremental changes and make the building work for the next 50-70 years," he continues. "Getting the theatre ready for its future, making sure that it could move forward sustainably and with financial resilience."

Two new lobbied entrances were created, a foyer was added below the dress circle and architect Patrick Gwynne's 1967 extension was connected to the Georgian staircase and Keregan Room for the first time. A street-facing cafe is now clearly visible from the outside and the original Victorian colonnade has been glazed to create a "storefront". The new





↕ The stalls were re-raked to connect with the dress circle

front-of-house spaces have improved welcome and orientation and “pulled the more commercial parts of the building to the front of the building” – putting on show what the building does in terms of hospitality.

De Matos Ryan’s changes connect a rich past to an exciting future. A terrazzo floor incorporates a patterned inlay to highlight the geometry of medieval vaults, and an original doorway has been exposed within the colonnade wall linings.

Imaginative interventions and changing tones recur throughout. The foyer is decorated with lengths of colour-changing Corian counters. This upholds theatre’s tradition of theming the front of house in correlation with the theatrical programme, so that “when you arrive, it’s a really enchanting, exciting moment”.

De Matos Ryan pored over Theatre Royal and RIBA records to discover elements of previous designs that were never realised or replaced in the theatre. The firm lovingly refurbished Gwynne’s extension to reinstate his original design intent. Floor coverings and furniture were improved,

lighting was upgraded and roof lights were replaced in order to highlight the extension’s cultural and architectural heritage, while giving the design a coherence it had never before enjoyed.

Moving the cafe, bar and box office to new space created under the dress circle fulfilled Gwynne’s hopes of housing a restaurant on the ground floor and a theatre bar on the first. The bar features a backlit Corian counter, following evidence of Gwynne’s previous attempt to backlight through Bakelite.

Angus describes Gwynne as an “extraordinary architect” and an innovator. “This is one of his classic buildings so the opportunity to bring it back to life and to reinstate some of the original design ideas was quite a privilege,” he admits.

Elsewhere, both audience and performers have benefited from much-needed upgrades to the main auditorium. New seating was installed in the stalls, dress circle and gallery and the rake of the stalls has been increased to connect the audience with the dress circle and enjoy a more unified experience. The gallery has been re-raked to improve sightlines and offer greater price options across the house, with the hopes of encouraging access to a more diverse audience on all levels.

In its previous form, the theatre’s raked stage meant many theatre companies put York at the end ↻



↑ Lighting was upgraded in Patrick Gwynne’s extension



↻ Gwynne’s plans for a ground-floor restaurant were met



📍 The revamped Gwynne extension offers visual drama

📍 Circulation changes open up the theatre interior

of their tours due to the limitations of a sloping surface and the need to cut sets to fit the stage. The new flat modular stage now enables a wider artistic programme, including dance. Not only this, but new sound lobbies

and insulation have allowed spaces on all levels for informal performances of music and poetry. Sound insulation enables the cafe, restaurant and bars to run during performances.

These changes have resulted in an environment where “more can happen in the building, more easily”, explains Morrogh-Ryan. The redevelopment has essentially turned the theatre into a civic space that gives each visitor multiple ways to use the site.

Morrogh-Ryan suggests that “too often architecture gets talked about in terms of stylistic approach”. Regardless of De Matos Ryan’s clever aesthetic and historical approach to the redevelopment, he says: “This is a project that belongs to the people.”

“People come into the building for other reasons than just theatre now and that’s why it’s been so successful,” he says. “Now we can step back and it’s over to the people of York and the Theatre Royal... They were held back by their building previously, now it allows them to [move] forward properly without interruption or hindrance.” 📍



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In the next issue

OnOffice takes a peek around the new CitizenM hotel at the Tower of London