

Light-hearted pavilion Alistair Fair on the renewal of York's Theatre Royal

In 1968, York Theatre Royal welcomed visitors to its newly refurbished building, re-worked and significantly extended by the architect Patrick Gwynne. Now, nearly fifty years later, the building has once again been transformed, reopening in April this year after a £6m restoration project. This time there has been no extension, but the scheme, overseen by De Matos Ryan Architects, has been no less fundamental in its aim to transform the appearance, functionality and experience of the theatre.

York Theatre Royal is a complex structure, a palimpsest of the city's post-Roman history. During the 18th century, a theatre was built on medieval foundations. The building was then enlarged in the late 19th century, gaining a robust Gothic brick façade in the process. The Gwynne extension in turn substantially expanded the public areas, adding the coffee bar and restaurant that were, by the late 1960s, *de rigueur* for new theatres in Britain, as well as a new box office and cloakrooms. Gwynne had been appointed in 1965 on the strength of his (now demolished) Serpentine Restaurant at Hyde Park, and he emulated its forms at York, locating the new foyers to the north of the older building within a transparent, vaulted structure. Two tiers of superimposed hexagonal concrete columns swell to form mushroom-like vaults on each level, with the upper vaults oversailing the lower level to allow the whole foyer to be enclosed by a crinkle-crankle wall of full-height glazing.

De Matos Ryan tackled the whole of the site and drew up a comprehensive masterplan. The auditorium has been re-seated, and two of its levels have been connected. The imbalance caused by the location of Gwynne's foyer to the north of the original building has been corrected by re-working the staircases on the south side of the auditorium, and by creating a new connecting foyer below the stalls seating.

Externally, the project was aided by the arrival of the York Conservation Trust, which acquired the theatre's freehold – and its backlog maintenance – from the city authorities for £1 in early 2015. More usually associated with the city's Georgian and Victorian heritage, the Trust has funded a programme of fabric repair to the tune of some £2m. Thus the Gwynne extension's flat roof – which had leaked for many years – has been renewed, while its domed



Patrick Gwynne's foyer at York Theatre Royal, seen in 1968, showing the hexagonal concrete columns

skylights, many of which had been covered over, have been re-opened and emphasised by LED lighting.

Within the foyers, changes have been subtle. The original mezzanine toilets have been removed and new floors inserted to line up with the foyers, improving accessibility. A new first-floor bar counter has replaced a post-1968 addition, its chamfered geometries a homage to Gwynne's architecture. Within the lower servery, panelling has been removed to reveal a shock of bright yellow tiles, their colour and smooth texture contrasting with the black slate of the rear foyer wall. The flooring has been renewed, while a bespoke lighting installation has been squeezed into the gaps between the mushroom vaults. It simultaneously throws a wash of light down onto the beautifully textured concrete columns while also picking out the pattern of the vaulting. What was previously a dark

and cluttered space is now light and calm, an attractive backdrop for all-day use.

These interventions respond well to the register and palette of Gwynne's work: his modernism was fundamentally stylish. His career had begun in the 1930s and continued post-war with a mix of private houses and commercial commissions

(including motorway service areas for Forte). He treated the Theatre Royal extension as the excuse for something playful, even theatrical, contrasting with the then recently completed Nottingham Playhouse, which he thought 'arid'. Gwynne's extension was dubbed a 'light-hearted pavilion', 'visually far-from-serious' by the *Architects' Journal* in 1968. Its climax comes in the form of the main stair, a sinuous, beautifully detailed swirl of tiled surfaces and chunky handrails.

Gwynne's spirit is especially evident in the backlit Corian of the new upper bar and in the new digital signage at the main entrance, a reworking of the stick-on letters of 1968. There is also a lightheartedness in the repeated use of hexagon motifs, with Gwynne's hexagonal columns and exterior paving slabs echoed in new hexagonal tiles in the toilets and a flurry of hexagons on the upper foyer's bespoke carpet. Now it just needs some 1960s-style Swiss cheese plants and, perhaps, some upgrades to the external terrace.

If De Matos Ryan have understood and run with Gwynne's modernism, then conceptually, too, the project revisits the same ideas that led the Theatre Royal to commission Gwynne in 1965. Then, supported by increasing subsidies from the Arts Council and local government, Britain's regional theatres were booming. Many were rehoused in new buildings with well-appointed auditoria and the latest technical kit. Their modern architecture distinguished them from the older theatres used by the commercial touring circuits: it suggested a new image of theatre. Then as now, the aim was to draw in new audiences, and for theatres to be 'more than playhouses'; they would offer space to meet and relax all day long. In this respect, De Matos Ryan's interventions have not only successfully clarified the architecture of this important theatre; they make a statement of the continued value of the principles that underscored the post-war Welfare State theatre boom, as well as the buildings that the boom generated. ●



The Gwynne foyers (above) are enclosed by a crinkle-crankle glass wall through which the columns – now skilfully illuminated – are visible. Below, Gwynne's main stair is a sinuous and tactile treat, also with improved lighting



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