

# The Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich

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The Ipswich Theatre Company worked for many years in the old Mechanics Institute under very trying conditions. The public found there quite a pleasant auditorium with, despite less than perfect sight lines, a theatrical atmosphere which made a contribution to their enjoyment of the productions. This was the one asset the old building could claim. In all other departments it was woefully inadequate. The stage was tiny and inconvenient, the foyer practically non-existent, and the staff had to work in the attic in Dickensian conditions.

The new site on Civic Drive has long been reserved for a theatre. It was part of the grand Civic Centre layout and by its prominent position seemed to demand a building with some monumental pretensions. But opinions had changed and the funds available had diminished in value when we were appointed as architects. A more modern approach to theatre design was appropriate and funds dictated it. The site still implied a certain formality of approach and our problem has been to reconcile civic aspirations with the character of a repertory theatre and a limited budget. We have developed an idiom in contrast to the rest of the civic buildings which has more in common with the older buildings in the town.

We decided to have pitched roofs for various reasons, both practical and visual. They are more efficient than flat roofs which are notoriously liable to leak and expensive to maintain. But the main reasons were architectural. Theatres being a collection of large volumes and small cells are difficult to resolve into a satisfactory external shape. The Wolsey Theatre is sited so that it can be looked on from above and an untidy collection of flat roofs would have been unacceptable. Pitched roofs imply a geometrical discipline which we accepted and made a feature of the design. We also wanted a strong low eaves line to reduce the apparent height of the building and give it a human scale.

Our only real regret is that circumstances have prevented us from constructing the two walled gardens in our design. The one at the north end would have given the actors and staff some privacy and a small outdoor protected area to relax in. The Theatre Trust have been unable to find the money for this. The other walled garden was to be a public one separating the theatre from the busy traffic on Civic Drive. This would have had many advantages over unprotected landscaping which soon fills with waste paper and wind-blown rubbish. With a wall to protect them shrubs, trees and flowers flourish and people would be attracted to come and have lunch there where they would inevitably be influenced by the theatre publicity. The



serpentine wall would have helped to link the building to its surroundings in an interesting and unpretentious way. However, this area does not lie within the site allocated to the theatre and the council does not favour the idea of a walled garden.

The main lines of the auditorium and the stage were decided by Martin Carr of Carr and Angier, the theatre consultants, before we were appointed as architects. It was a concept with which, from our own experience of theatre design, we were very

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