

THE WILDE

Back in June last year our worthy contributor, Francis Reid, wrote an appreciation of the Wilde Theatre Bracknell which was published in the Architects Journal.

I thought it would be interesting for Tabs readers to get the Theatre Consultant for the project, Iain Mackintosh, to let us have his own comments.

To set the scene, a few quotes from Francis Reid's article.

"The overriding strength of the Wilde Theatre is that, whatever form is in use, the shallow balconies link with the main seating to ensure that the audience is always more than just the sum of its parts. An individual will always be aware of the rest of the audience."

"The lighting bridges in the auditorium ceiling are one of the best compromises yet devised between visual design and technological requirements."

"This theatre is a pointer to the twenty-first century. To approach it, to proceed through its welcoming foyers, to refresh at its pastoral bar and then to enjoy the complete experience of joining its audience and performers is a rich evening indeed. With its orchestra pit raised by 1 m or so, the Wilde will become England's ideal home for Handel Opera. That it will also serve jazz, rock and every style of dance and drama makes it a space the like of which we have not seen since the Georgian era."

By the summer of 1979 South Hill Park had already become one of Britain's most active and distinguished art centres although it had been open only six years. Peter Stark was the founding director and it was he who decided against the building of a new theatre at the outset rather than throwing what resources there were into converting the existing house of South Hill Park into a participatory arts centre.

In the attics of the old country house there are studios and visual arts. The four largest rooms in the house are used for a studio theatre, a secure art gallery, a recital room and a fully equipped cinema. The cellar is a jazz or country and rock venue. There is a shop. Probably the key room in the whole building is the bar overlooking the terrace which stocks a bewildering range of real ale. In June of each year a practice grew up pitching a tent for 2,000 in the garden

of the house. On three consecutive weekends festivals were held, first for English contemporary music and second for jazz and third, when the lawns had got a bit trampled, for country and western. It was and is a most invigorating place to visit.

In 1979 the third Director took office. This was Gavin Henderson, who has now left Bracknell to be both Director of the Brighton Festival and Director of the Dartington Summer School for Music. One of his first actions at Bracknell was to set up a Working Party to study the need for and feasibility of providing a performance space to serve Bracknell's new town and surrounding district. In October 1979 the working party reported recommending that a medium sized performance space holding between 350 and 400 should be built and that it should be built at South Hill Park adjacent to the house.

In early summer of 1980 interviews were held for the appointment of architects and of a theatre consultant. The outcome was the appointment of Levitt Bernstein Associates (partners concerned being David Levitt and Axel Burrough) and Theatre Projects Consultants represented by myself. Our joint task was to finalise the brief and then move on to providing a sketch design for the new building. Gavin was quite clear on our respective roles. He had admired the Royal Exchange Manchester and was therefore pleased that Levitt Bernstein Associates were appointed architects to lead the design team. He had also admired the Cottesloe Theatre (except possibly the colour) and was therefore pleased that I was appointed with the specific brief to prepare sketch designs of the stage and auditorium space. Although the respective practices had worked together on the Royal Exchange I myself did not know either David Levitt or Axel Burrough at all. But it was and is typical of Gavin that he casts his shows well and within a matter of a very few weeks we seemed to feel we had known each other a very long time.

Matters moved fast. By February 1981 a set of fully costed outline proposals were presented. The design of the stage and auditorium was in the first instance a collaboration between Paul Jenkins and myself at Theatre Projects Consultants. In the early stages the architects gave us a loose reign, allowing valuable time for a series of experiments to take place playing with squares, octagons and Palladian ellipses any one of which would be 'loose fitted' into the concept that the architects were working on.

Francis Reid looked at the courtyard form from the perspective of a man of the theatre in the second half of the twentieth century. At the moment of design our horizon was

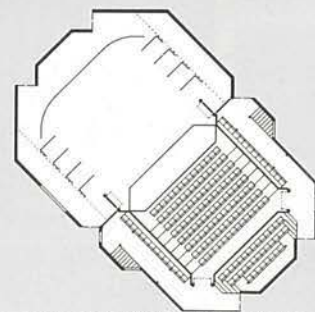
rather more limited: the needs of our client. How we assessed these needs is perhaps best summed up in the 'Brief for the Theatre' of February 1981. It will be noted by architects and theatre consultants that in this brief there is no schedule of accommodation. There was a good reason for this. Our client was, in a sense, a many headed one with many different requirements. Early on we wrote these all down and calculated that to meet what everybody perceived as minimal requirements would cost approximately £2.5 million at the time when the budget was well under £1 million.

After discussion with Gavin, senior head and very much heart of our Hydra, we decided to omit any schedule of accommodation from the report and try and unite all parties behind a single concept (there was a safety net in that if any party got too little of what they asked for the answer was that the building was designed for future expansion).

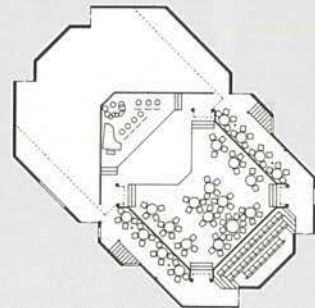
That concept was described in the February 1981 study as follows:

"From the outset it was stressed by the Working Party that, if possible, their "theatre" should be capable of being used in a number of ways. Not only was almost every conceivable type of theatrical activity envisaged – opera, dance, concert, drama – but also a wide range of atmospheres, from formal or conventional for the operatic societies or for proscenium arch naturalistic plays to the more informal occasion of locally produced cabaret, jazz sessions, or performances by the smaller touring free-form professional companies. A further requirement was that the theatre should be available for non-theatrical occasions – exhibitions, fairs, dances etc.

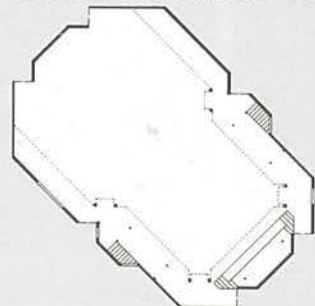
The design response to this brief has been to propose that Bracknell should have a courtyard theatre. The courtyard form is best known in Britain as the result of the success of two recent new theatres, the Cottesloe at the national in London and Christ's Hospital School Theatre at Horsham. It is also recognised as being a twentieth century expression of older theatre forms such as the Elizabethan or Georgian playhouse which pre-date the nineteenth



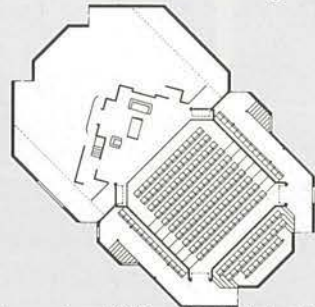
'Opera/dance': 300 seated, 70 standing.



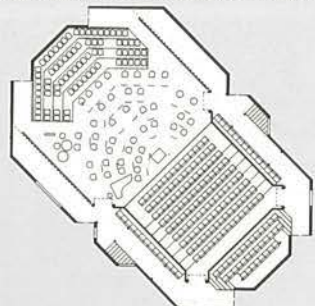
'Cabaret': 235 seated, 50 standing.



'Promenade': 400 standing.



'Proscenium' 330 seated, 70 standing.



'Orchestra and chorus': 315 seated, 70 standing.
Five possible formats

Section through auditorium.

