



Contextual healing

MacCormac Jamieson Prichard's Durham Millennium City Project creates successful new public space and a modest collection of buildings, which have proved critical in reuniting a once disjointed area back into the fabric of the city, writes Edwin Heathcote. Photos by Peter Durant



Left: Gala theatre entrance with attendant bars and restaurants, tourist information and other offices.

Right: Gala theatre view along balcony.

Bottom right: Theatre restaurant balcony, detail.



The cityscape of Durham, designated a World Heritage Site by Unesco, is dominated by two Norman structures, the extraordinary cathedral and the solid-looking castle. This pair of buildings succinctly illustrate the nature of a city which was allowed to maintain a remarkable degree of independence from London and where the Prince Bishops ruled over both secular and sacred matters. In fact the city's peculiar judicial arrangements and its palatine court were only fully integrated into the English courts about 30 years ago.

Roughly halfway between those two pivotal urban monuments, a university followed a few hundred years later, creating a spine of imposing public buildings running along the centre of the narrow peninsular which defines the boundaries of the old city. That spine has just been extended northwards.

MacCormac Jamieson Prichard's Durham Millennium City Project encompasses the 500-seat Gala Theatre, a civic library and offices for local community groups positioned around a new public space. From an urban point of

view, the project begins to address the mutilation that was caused to the city by the building of the 1970s road, which sawed through the historic approach to the city. The scheme creates a new public space on one of Durham's last remaining prominent parcels of land, formerly a car park.

The importance of the site can best be judged on approaching the city by train. The cathedral and castle loom above the skyline while the hood of red emerging from the roof and broad terraces of the Millennium Centre has become a highly visible urban marker set into the side of the hill. The choice of MacCormac Jamieson Prichard as architect was obviously informed by its broad background of interventions into sensitive historical settings (including colleges in Oxford and Cambridge), but also by its ability to masterplan a prominent and complex urban site.

That flash of red, so visible from the train, signals the bulk of the auditorium poking out of the stone and glass volume of the centre. The complex is arranged in two parts, one containing the theatre and its attendant bars and

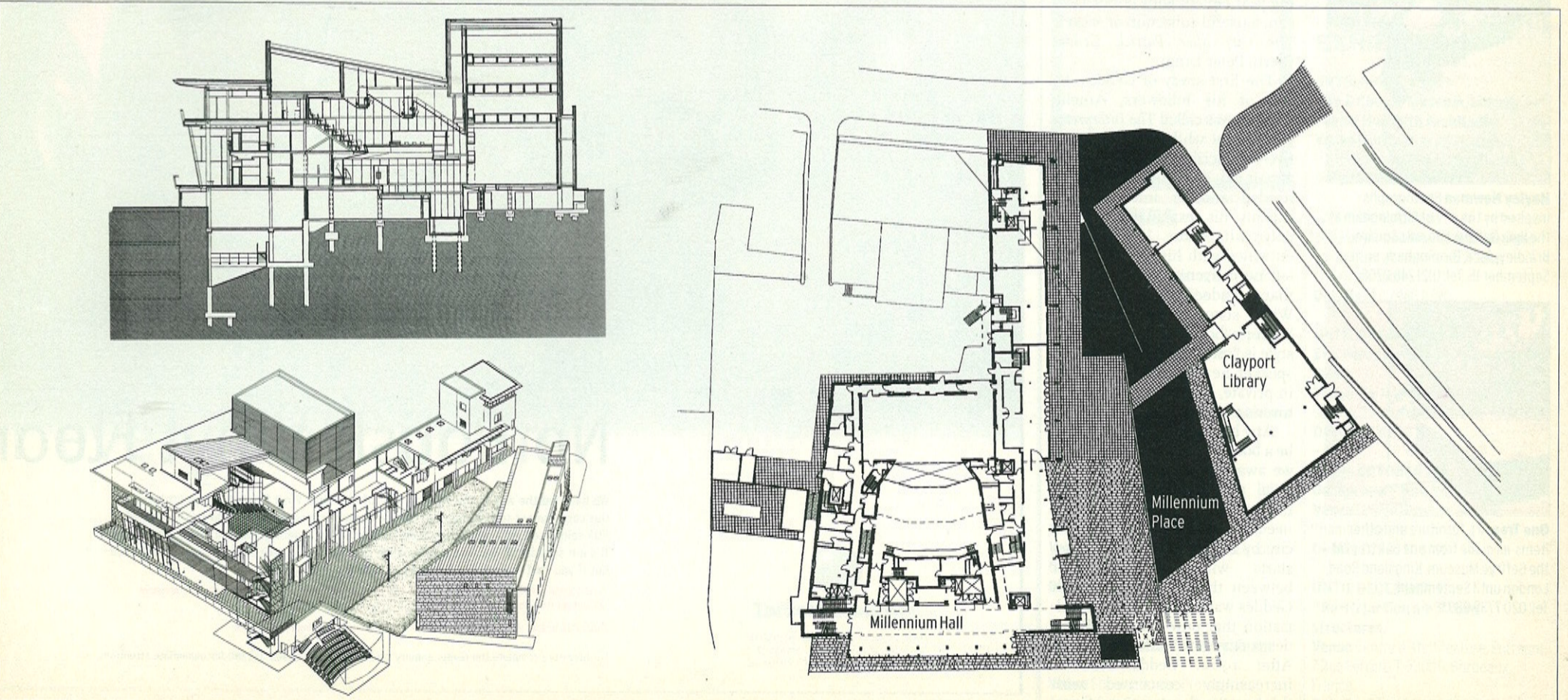


Opposite page:
The library, which is entered from Millennium Place.

Inset, left: Principal approach to the Durham Millennium City Project. Right: View towards the project.

This page, far left: Gala theatre auditorium balcony. Middle: Theatre lounge and bar area. Near left: Theatre entrance foyer. Centre: Theatre's upper bar.

Plans:
Left, top: Long section. Bottom: Axonometric. Right: Site plan.





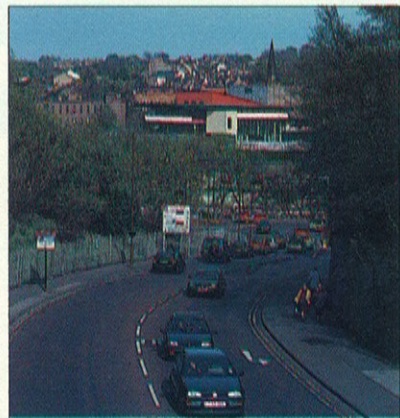
restaurants, tourist information and other offices (as well as a constituency office for the local MP) and a careers centre. The other, smaller block houses a civic library, more offices and a modest terrace of shops. The architectural language throughout is restrained modern.

There is, perhaps, a hint of Dutch modernism about the tower and parade of shops which turns the pedestrian from a bridge over the ugly road that amputates this section of the city from its historic core. The overhanging eaves, the horizontality and the ribbon windows (interrupted by small glass bays, inspired, David Prichard tells me, by those in local terraced housing) recall the kind of considered, socially conscious urban schemes in the Holland of the late 1920s – one of the better paradigms of municipal architecture.

The tower acts as a marker for the scheme, drawing the public into the complex, but also wraps itself around an existing dour piece of sixties/seventies tat, and creates a kind of gateway to a new public space, Millennium Place, which flares out towards a terrace with a glorious view of... a car park. This vacant lot represents the next phase of the scheme, a big commercial development which, it is hoped will include not only the usual cinema, perhaps a hotel, and the rest, but a northern outpost of the National Portrait Gallery.

Although the theatre is entered from

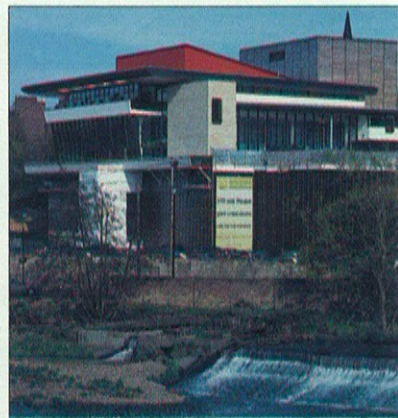
Millennium Place, the building's principal elevation is an angled glazed wall that affords a view across a valley and out to the countryside beyond, but still remarkably close to the city. A double-height space houses the foyer and is overlooked by a mezzanine circle bar.



Above these, a function room and restaurant open out onto a terrace running almost the entire length of the elevation. The vertical circulation is contained in solid stone volumes at either end. The night-time effect seen from the railway, perhaps not accidentally, hints at a proscenium arrangement with the public as actors milling around on a wider urban stage.

If there is an echo of Dutch social

housing in the scale and expression of some parts of the building, the inspiration here is clear, and David Prichard is open in admitting the influence of the Festival Hall, an arrangement which he refers to as "egg in a box". The egg, or auditorium, is expressed throughout in



red, its walls colour-coded to aid orientation. It is a simple device which works here, if less sexily than Haworth Tompkins' use of the same motif at the Royal Court in London. The auditorium itself is that thing most feared in theatre circles, a multi-use space. The design of these spaces is always haunted by the prospect of not fully satisfying the criteria of any of its permutations. But this is a thoughtful and considered space,

which is both a remarkably versatile and intimate auditorium.

Set in a conventional proscenium arrangement, the theatre seats 500 and has a balcony and an orchestra pit. The pit comes into use when the rake is taken out of the floor to accommodate functions, exhibitions, dances or cabaret situations, where banked rows are floated on air to be hydraulically lowered to beneath the stage and packed away. In these situations, hangings are brought down to create a level ceiling, blocking out the balcony, the angled, slatted-oak acoustic panels and fly-tower and allowing the space to read as a single volume. It is a pleasing space, intimate if, perhaps inevitably, a little neutral.

The architectural expression of the fly-tower often presents problems. In this sensitive, super-heritage setting, the problem is multiplied. To have clad it in the same stone as the elevations would have given it too much importance within the composition – too grand. The architect solved the problem by cladding it in cedar slats, which have faded to that characteristic silvery grey allowing the tower to fade into both its background and the building's pale stone surfaces. The flash of red at roof level is provided by the prosaic emergence of the housing for the theatre's plant and exhaust.

Beneath Millennium Place is a visitors' centre, which includes a 120-seat wide-screen cinema. At the moment,

this space is entered via the foyer, but its own entrance is already in place, hanging in mid-air above the car park awaiting the completion of the second phase.

The block housing the library is more monolithic although it too is opened out to the square by a large expanse of glazing peering at theatre foyer opposite. Other openings are kept as slots affording glimpses to the outside while light is also brought into the spacious interior via concealed ceiling openings. The exceptions are a skewed cedar-clad box illuminating the staff room and a tall glass bay to the stairwell.

Costing around £20 million (part-funded by the Millennium Commission), and with construction brought in on budget and on time, this complex looks like good value and those figures should help tempt the National Portrait Gallery onto the site – its presence would make this a complex of national importance. As it is, the buildings work well, remain self-effacing and modest and the creation of a fine new public space has proved critical in knitting this disjointed area back into the fabric of the city.

Project team
Architect MacCormac Jamieson Prichard.
Client City of Durham.
Project manager/quantity surveyor Turner Townsend Group.
Structural engineer Mott MacDonald.