

Modern Theatres: The Lowry

In the latest in the Modern Theatres series, Dr Alistair Fair, Chancellor's Fellow and Lecturer in Architectural History at University of Edinburgh, reviews The Lowry, one of the great successes of the National Lottery building period

The Lowry is a major centre for the visual and performing arts in Salford.¹ Opened in 2000 at a cost of some £58 million and designed by Michael Wilford and Partners, it was one of the UK's flagship 'Millennium Projects', supported by funding from the proceeds of the National Lottery. Its significance relates not only to the scale and ambition of the building, and the prominence of the architectural practice that designed it, but also the intention that a major centre for the arts might catalyse the regeneration of a run-down inner-city area – an aim which has been successful.

Salford Docks were originally built in the late 19th century as part of the Manchester Ship Canal, a purpose-built waterway that connected the city with the River Mersey and the Irish Sea. Changes in shipping patterns after the Second World War eventually prompted the closure of the docks in 1982, and a year later Salford City Council acquired a large part of the site.

A Development Plan followed, and by the end of the 1980s the idea of a 'Centre for the Performing Arts' had emerged – along with a drawing showing London's Royal Albert Hall transposed to one of the dock piers as

¹ This text summarises the fully illustrated account in C. Alan Short, Peter Barrett, and Alistair Fair, *Geometry and Atmosphere: Theatre Buildings from Vision to Reality* (Farnham, 2011), pp. 21-50.



Photo: Alistair Fair

a demonstration of the sheer scale of the site. The proposal, the work of the architect Peter Hunter, enthused local politicians. The 'vision' – inspired by waterfront projects in such places as Bilbao and Baltimore – was that the construction of a major centre for the arts might stimulate further investment. At that time, Salford was one of the most disadvantaged communities in Britain in economic and social terms: the regeneration of the docks was, it was hoped, a way to change its fortunes.

A competition was held to find a masterplanner for the 'Pier 8', on which the nascent 'Centre for the Performing Arts' might be located, and to produce an outline feasibility study for the centre itself. By early 1992 the firm of James Stirling Michael Wilford and Partners had been selected.

The aim of the competition had been to secure a designer of some repute to produce the masterplan, in part to add some 'prestige' to the project. In this respect, James Stirling had been a prominent figure within the British architectural scene since the mid-1950s: his practice, initially with James Gowan and later with Michael Wilford, had been responsible for major buildings in Britain and internationally, including several significant cultural projects.

By April 1992, they had produced an outline design in which the new Arts Centre would be located at the tip of Pier 8, facing a new public



Photo: The Lowry

square and various other new buildings.

By June, an outline design for the building had also been produced. It included three auditoria, one of which was located outdoors, perhaps optimistically in view of the frequently wet Mancunian climate. Centred on a 1,200-seat, horseshoe-shaped auditorium, the various parts of the centre were gathered together in a typical example of the 'collage' that characterised Stirling's design method. In other words, each element of the scheme was treated as a discrete 'object', its design potentially informed by historical resonances, and the complex as a whole was formed by gathering these objects together.

Drawings from this time suggest a nautical theme with porthole windows and suggestions of funnels, as well as banded stonework of the kind that Stirling had previously used elsewhere. While numerous refinements were subsequently made to the design, both in terms of plan and appearance, the basic parameters had been set.

Stirling died suddenly in June 1992; Wilford and his colleagues continued to work on the project. Over the course of the next three years

the design was developed while the 'vision' for the centre itself was refined. The question of exactly how the auditoria would be used had initially been loosely defined: members of Theatre Projects Consultants, appointed in 1993, later recalled that, 'there was no brief', with the main auditorium, 'varying wildly in size'. It was, after all, being promoted by the local authority, not by an existing arts organisation.

There were several options. Should it be used by commercial touring productions, or by local arts groups, or as a 'producing' theatre that originated its own shows (and which would require substantial backstage facilities to support those productions)? There were rumours of an 'opera house', and in fact some of the early Stirling/Wilford auditorium designs suggested this use by evoking the forms of traditional opera venues.

An experienced theatre manager, Stephen Hetherington, was appointed to develop the brief while an influential project Steering Group was also set up, chaired by an experienced BBC broadcaster, Felicity Goodey. With several 'producing' theatres already in Manchester, it was decided that

The Lyric auditorium:
Photo: Giorgos Artopoulos



The Lowry would be a 'receiving' venue for touring shows – despite nearby Manchester already having several theatres of this type. The argument was made that Salford would appeal to a regional catchment, drawing audiences from across North West England.

The theatre consultants thus became 'guardians' of the artistic vision in the absence of an 'artistic' client organisation; they were responsible for making sure that the design would work in a practical sense for the kinds of groups who would be likely to perform there. In parallel, it was decided to bring Salford's collection of paintings by the noted artist L.S. Lowry to the centre, giving it its name. Lowry's work was well known and popular, but not always critically well regarded, and the move of the collection to the centre ultimately contributed to a broader critical reappraisal of his work.

The launch of the UK's National Lottery in 1994 supplied the project with additional impetus. The Lottery was conceived with the intention that some of its proceeds would be spent on 'good causes'. Ultimately, The Lowry received funding from the Lottery's Arts, Heritage, and Millennium Project funds, with the award being announced in February 1996. Further funding was received from other sources including the European Regional Development Fund (in view of the potential regenerative role of the building) as well as the local authority. This mixture of funding is typical of the major arts buildings constructed in the

UK since the 1990s. It can be challenging to manage in practice: each funder may have their own requirements in terms of, for example, reporting and monitoring, and the result can be significant work for the design and client teams in providing funders with information.

The original 'vision' was pared back at various points in the name of 'value engineering', but, as realised, The Lowry delivered most of the facilities originally envisaged. It includes two auditoria (one seating 1,766, the other 466), a drama studio, galleries for the L.S. Lowry paintings as well as visiting exhibitions, and extensive foyers (with extensive toilet provision, a feature insisted upon by Felicity Goodey as something that was integral to ensuring a good visitor experience).

Clad in stainless steel panels and complex in its massing, the building presents a striking appearance. The impression is of a series of discrete but related volumes, suggesting the multiplicity of functions within. The exhibition spaces and foyers wrap around the two auditoria, which are placed stage-to-stage at the core of the building. To the front, a large 'portico' has a suitably civic quality. (Sadly, the buildings that Wilford had proposed for the site opposite The Lowry were not built, with a commercial retail development taking their place and offering a less architecturally satisfactory approach to The Lowry.) Internally, the colour scheme is dynamic, even extrovert. As is the case in many other Wilford projects

The Quays auditorium:
Photo: Giorgos Artopoulos



of the 1990s, bright colours abound, with the foyers, for example, featuring yellow, red, purple, and orange.

Both auditoria, realised with significant input from Theatre Projects Consultants and Sandy Brown Acoustics, possess a certain theatrical intensity. The larger of the two, the Lyric Theatre, has three tiers, namely stalls and two curved balconies, and a proscenium-arch stage. It accommodates large-scale opera, dance, theatre and musicals. Although relatively subdued in its finishes, the richness of its purple colour scheme together with dramatic lighting suggests a certain theatrical glamour.

Meanwhile the smaller Quays Theatre reprises the galleried 'courtyard' form with which Theatre Projects Consultants has been associated since the mid-1970s, when Iain Mackintosh originated the principles of the Cottesloe (now Dorfman) auditorium within London's National Theatre complex. Narrow balconies – hung from the roof to avoid the use of columns – are wrapped around a flexible area at stalls level, while the stage can be used in proscenium arch, thrust and in-the-round formats.

How should we assess The Lowry, nearly two decades after its completion? We might conclude that, in some ways, it was hardly an innovative type of building. It can be situated within a long tradition of civic 'boosterism' in which the construction of major public buildings demonstrated a municipality's

ambition and vision. In this respect, it is perhaps a contemporary reinterpretation of the same spirit that inspired the grand 19th century architecture of Salford and Manchester.

Similarly, we might also understand it as an enlarged version of the new regional theatres that sprang up around Britain between the late 1950s and early 1980s.² During those decades, the introduction of Arts Council and local authority funding for the practice of the arts, and for arts building projects, encouraged new 'civic' conceptions of theatre and the construction of new theatres, typically for resident repertory companies.

Theatre was re-cast as a kind of public service – even a cultural element of the Welfare State – and its buildings were on occasion conceived as prominent structures within the urban landscape. Many offered generous public spaces, and, in contrast to their older, commercial counterparts, were open all day, with refreshments and exhibitions on offer in a manner not unlike The Lowry.

The Lowry can nonetheless be distinguished from the cultural projects of the 1960s and 1970s in the intention that it might not only embody (and prompt) civic pride but also stimulate urban regeneration. This line of thinking had emerged during the 1980s, when arguments were routinely constructed about

² For more on these theatres, see Alistair Fair, *Modern Playhouses: an architectural history of Britain's new theatres, 1945-1985* (Oxford, 2018).

the economic and regenerative value of the arts, partly in response to increasingly market-oriented government policies and squeezes in the Arts Council's budget. In the case of The Lowry, these hopes seem to have been borne out.³

Salford Quays has now attracted more than £1.4 billion of investment since the late 1990s, with developments including a large shopping mall as well as the Imperial War Museum North and, more recently, television studios for the BBC and ITV.

The Lowry itself draws a significant number of people to the area, attracting more than 820,000 visitors per annum – a figure which makes it one of the most-visited cultural attractions in the north of England. It supports the equivalent of more than 500 full-time jobs and contributes more than £26 million annually to the local economy. Discounted tickets are made available to the local community, and The Lowry is involved in initiatives including a University Technical College.

Although some actors have reportedly quibbled with aspects of the design,⁴ the building itself has received several architectural awards, as well as a generally positive reception from the architectural press. The *Architectural Review* concluded

3 For the following information on The Lowry's impact, see [Manchester's Commission on the New Economy], 'Beyond the Arts: Economic and wider impacts of The Lowry and its programmes', 2013 report, online at http://www.thelowry.com/Downloads/reports/The_Lowry_Beyond_the_Arts.pdf (accessed on 9 January 2017).

4 Steve Rose, 'But does it work?', *Guardian*, 21 July 2007, online at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2007/jul/21/architecture> (accessed 6 January 2017).

that the exterior possessed a certain civic bravado, appropriate to its function (although it wondered if the design was 'too much an assembly of pieces', and it criticised the abandonment of the original Wilford masterplan for the surrounding spaces).⁵ It also praised the interiors, especially the foyers and the exhibition galleries.

Writing in the *Architects' Journal*, critic Kenneth Powell was similarly positive, suggesting that the use of colour imbued The Lowry with a welcoming and theatrical atmosphere, and praising the energy of the design.⁶ Powell noted the persistence of certain themes from Stirling's earlier work, notably the formal 'architectural promenade' (or sequence) which structures the internal spaces, but also considered that the building revealed that Wilford was developing Stirling's ideas in new directions.

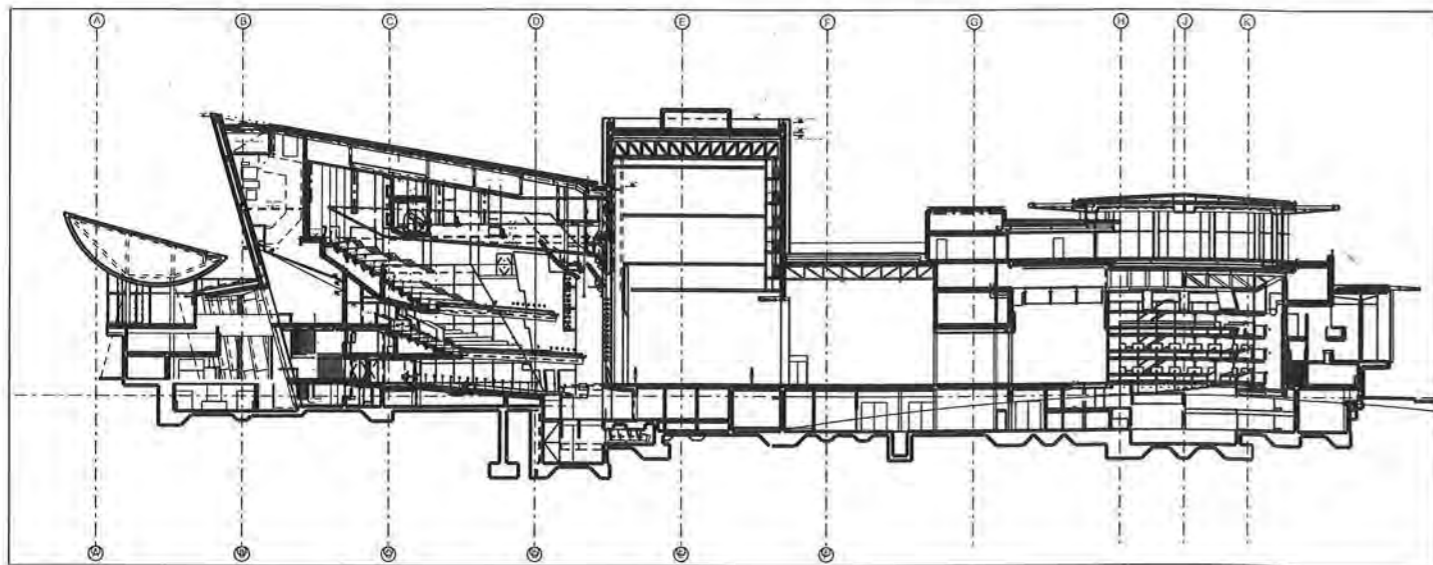
Ultimately, The Lowry demonstrates that 'landmark' architecture need not be incompatible with a functional, successful theatre. It is now an established fixture on Greater Manchester's cultural scene, presenting a varied programme to an audience drawn from across the region.⁷

The steady increases in audience numbers achieved during the last decade under Chief Executive Julia Fawcett mean that The Lowry now operates with a low level of subsidy, some 10% of income in 2015. Its success contrasts with the high-profile failure of several

5 'Lowry Centre, Salford, England', *Architectural Review* 208/1242 (August 2000), pp. 56-60 (p. 60).

6 Kenneth Powell, 'Affairs of the Art', *Architects' Journal* 212/1 (6 July 2000), pp. 28-36.

7 The Audience Agency, 'Understanding the potential impact of The Factory on public engagement', report of 2016, online at <http://bit.ly/2neVgL3>



contemporaneous 'Millennium Projects', their 'landmark', 'iconic' architecture failing to compensate for over-egged business cases or a lack of content. Indeed, The Lowry's architecture – in its colourful complexity the opposite of cool minimalism – seems to be part of the reason for its success. One visitor in 2007, interviewed by the *Guardian*, thought it 'odd in design, a carbuncle', but noted that 'it

grows on you', being 'comfortable and child-friendly'.⁸

Such a conclusion would no doubt have pleased Wilford, who, the same article reported, 'wanted to make this place joyful, light, bright, playful, to show people the future, not the past'

8 Rose, 'But does it work?'

