

# Modern Theatres – National Opera House, Wexford, Ireland

By David Staples

The United Kingdom and Ireland have many issues that divide the two countries but also much in common. One of the common features is a tendency to create opera festivals and opera houses in unusual locations and settings, sometimes in someone's back garden or in an extremely small town. The Irish as a race have a reputation for doing things differently and the creation of their National Opera House is possibly a prime example of doing things differently.

Wexford is a port and small town of 20,000 people in the South East corner of Ireland. In 1950 Sir Compton Mackenzie, the founder of Gramophone, a monthly magazine devoted to classical music, was invited to give a lecture to the Wexford Opera Study Circle. This group listened to operas on gramophone records and Mackenzie suggested an opera should be staged in the existing Theatre Royal. Dr Tom Walsh led a group who planned "A Festival of Music and the Arts" which was held at the end of November 1951, from this the Wexford Festival Opera grew. In the inaugural season a little known Irish opera was presented and the performances of little known and 'lost' works has always been an important part of the festival's programmes. Tom Walsh became the Festival's first artistic director and subsequent years saw more high quality productions of rare or forgotten operas.

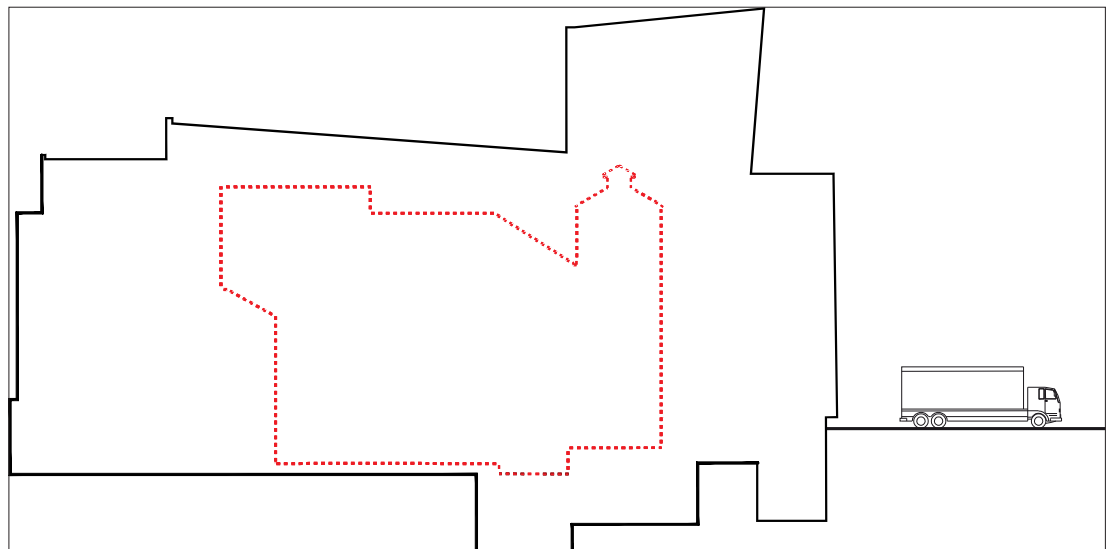
The Theatre Royal originally opened in 1832 and was located in the heart of the town surrounded by small scale buildings and roads. The theatre had a chequered career including a spell as a cinema in the 1940's before being purchased by the Festival Trust. Although the Theatre Royal served the Festival well as a venue for many years its limited size and lack of facilities led to



*photo right: National Opera House Wexford from the west along High Street*

plans being developed at the beginning of this century for a new purpose design opera house.

The Irish Government's Office of Public Works (OPW) undertook initial studies reviewing alternate sites including the possibility of a standalone building on Ferrybank, a location that might have allowed the creation of an iconic waterfront opera house similar to Sydney. It would however have cut the festival's close links with the medieval heart of the town (and exposed audiences to the frequently wild Irish weather). The project reverted to the Theatre Royal site which was doubled in size by the



*Overlay section of the old and new theatres*

acquisition of the neighbouring People's Newspaper premises.

The brief was written by theatre consultants Carr and Angier working with OPW and Arup Acoustics. OPW prepared an outline design and obtained planning permission to test the opportunity and potential to fund the project. Architects were selected through an open interview and credentials review process resulting in the appointment of Keith Williams Architects.

Even with a larger site it was a logistical challenge to fit all the spaces required in a logical, effective manner while creating interesting public spaces around a high-quality auditorium. The overlay drawings, alongside, by Keith Williams Architects show both the old and new theatres in plan and section.

Externally the theatre has virtually no elevations being entirely ringed by small scale houses and retail units. It is astonishingly well integrated into the townscape and has possibly the most modest front entrance to be found. With many opera houses being designed to make a statement or as signature buildings (Sydney, Oslo, Copenhagen, Dallas, etc.) Wexford has a delightfully small scale. Occasionally if you can step back far enough or from the outer parts of the town it is possible to view the fly tower and upper parts of the building.

The public spaces/foyers are stacked with an elegant staircase encouraging audiences to rise to higher levels. The scheme also manages to fit hospitality areas into the limited space available.

The heart of the building is the John and Aileen O'Reilly Theatre which seats 771 when the orchestra pit is in use in "opera mode". While the Festival is a major user they only present opera on twelve nights a year so while the auditorium and stage are optimised for operatic use the theatre must be able to present other types of performance including comedy, concerts (of all music genres), dance, musicals, drama and family programmes. At the front of the auditorium a large elevator lowers to create the orchestra pit. When no pit is needed this can be raised to auditorium floor level and additional seating brought in to increase the capacity to 855 seats. The elevator can be raised further to stage level to create a forestage and extend the stage into the auditorium. Architect Keith Williams tells of consultant Peter Angier creating a full size mock up of the orchestra pit in a freezing garage in Dublin allowing



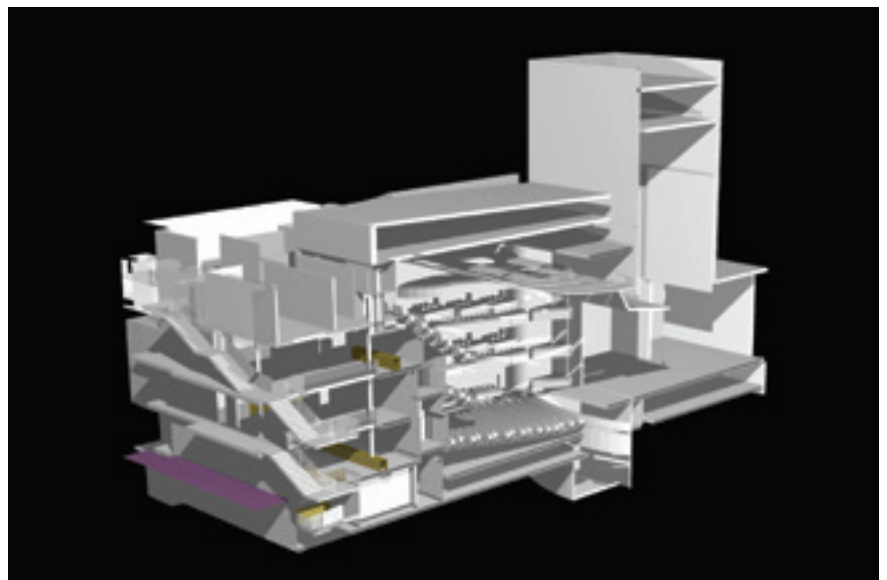
*National Opera House  
Wexford in context from the  
harbour*

artistic director David Agier to stand on a box (representing the conductor's podium) and wielding an unused welding rod as a baton to gauge the size and shape of the proposed pit.

The design of the room was influenced by many earlier opera houses with an underlying "horseshoe" form coupled as architect Keith William notes to the form of a cello. Audience seating is on a main floor with a single row of raised seating down either side. The founders circle above has three rows of seats at the rear, a single row of seats and three six-person boxes on either side. The upper circle repeats the side wall arrangement but has eight rows at the rear. Audience seats are considerably larger and more comfortable than those in the previous theatre.

The room is panelled in North American black walnut which coupled with seating in pale purple leather gives a warm, rich ambience and the room has a reverberation time of 1.25 seconds.

*Cutaway Section*







*O'Reilly Theatre towards  
main stage*



*O'Reilly Theatre from  
main stage*



*Jerome Hynes Theatre*

The main theatre has a very practical stage with 40 overhead fly bars (reputedly more than any other theatre in Ireland). Backstage can be found rehearsal rooms, dressing rooms and other support spaces.

The Jerome Hynes Theatre has 176 seats and is a small flexible space that can be used for theatre, concerts, comedy, etc. All the seating can be removed to create a flat floor space for rehearsals or other events.

A key requirement was to minimise the closed time to avoid too much disruption to the Festival. Despite the tight site and limited access this was achieved with the theatre closing immediately after the last performance of the 2005 festival in the Theatre Royal. The new house opened two years later in time for the 2008 Festival.

Wexford is a small harbour town of 20,000 people the 22nd biggest urban area in Ireland. Dublin the capital has a population approaching 1.2 million. But Wexford has an opera house and Dublin doesn't.

When constructed this theatre was called

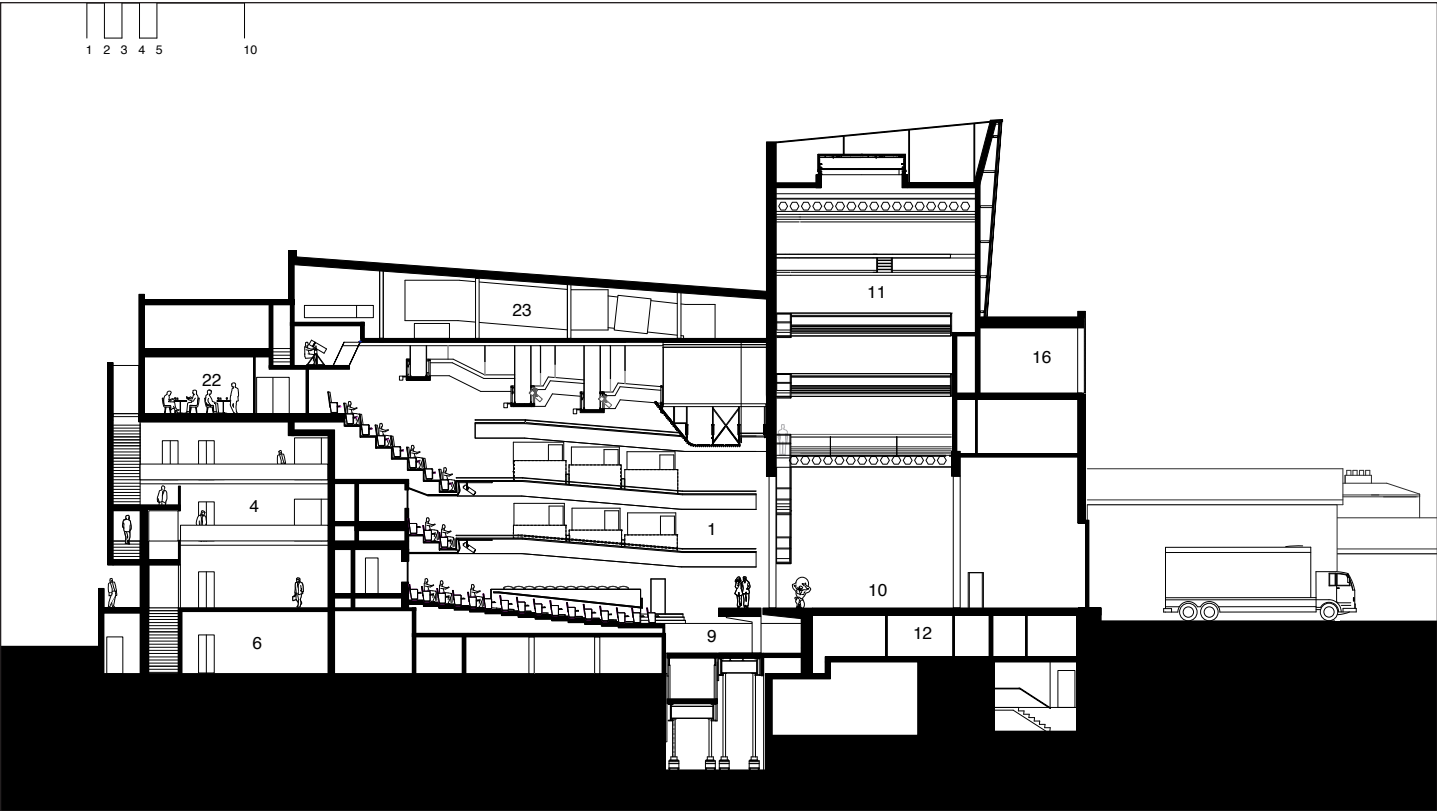
the Wexford Opera House. In 2008 at the official opening of the 63rd Festival the Irish Government's Department of the Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht announced the renaming of the Wexford Opera House as Ireland's National Opera House. At a stroke Ireland acquired a National Opera House.

The Wexford Opera Festival is a success story. It stands out among many larger festivals for its presentation over decades of high-quality productions of lost or rare operas in southeast Ireland.

It combines high quality professional leadership with a core of volunteers. It exists and thrives in a small harbour town and over 40% of festival visitors are from overseas.

The Wexford (or National) Opera House is also a success story. Carefully integrated into the urban grain of a small town the auditorium is a warm, elegant interpretation of the traditional opera house.





Wexford Opera House - comparative section

Plan Level 0

