

Gwyn Hall

WINNER OF THE CONSORTIUM OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN WALES
BUILDING OF THE YEAR 2013 AWARDS

Client: Neath Port Talbot Borough Council

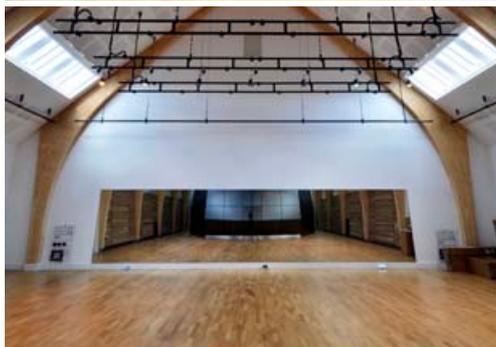
Location: Neath, Wales

Project Value: £8m

Breathing new life into a historic building

Constructed in 1887 on land donated by Howell Gwyn, the Gwyn Hall served the town of Neath as a venue initially for civic and community uses, before acquiring its use as a performance hall. During its planned refurbishment in 2005/2006 the original Grade II listed building was destroyed in a tragic fire which gutted the building, leaving only the four external walls and the two front helical staircases and its listed status in question.

It was following this fire that Holder Mathias were asked initially to come up with a series of options to re-use the remains of the building in 2007. This wide ranging exercise presented options which ranged from faithfully restoring the building, to a no-holds barred re-imagining of what the building could become.



Having successfully inspired the client to the opportunity that now presented them, despite the recent emotional history of the Hall, they responded by confirming the following exciting and ambitious brief:-

- 400 seat (approx.) multi-purpose auditorium, with capability for flat-floor use
- 8x8m stage area, with provision for an orchestra pit
- Associated backstage areas containing dressing rooms, storage areas and the like
- 120 seat (approx.) multi-purpose studio space with sprung dance floor
- 70 seat cinema – Neath's first in recent times
- A public cafe and other front-of-house areas

Design

From the outset it was important to bring the main performance space down to the ground floor for the first time, to aid circulation and access issues. Due to the constraints of the existing building shell and the tiny site on which it sat, the only way the three performance spaces could be provided was by stacking them on top of each other. Apart from the resultant acoustic and circulation challenges, inherent to this approach was the requirement of dealing with the clashes with the existing architecture – in particular the window openings, which were not laid out to accommodate such a vertical arrangement of internal space.

In order to overcome this, to provide the required clear head-rooms whilst respecting the original building, the floor to the upper spaces has been pulled back from the grand arched windows and supported on an independent structure. In this way the upper floor windows can be appreciated from within the main auditorium. This is in response to the 'multi-function' aspect of the brief, as it was felt that it should be possible to expose the windows to admit daylight to the space when not in use as an auditorium (e.g. for craft fairs, receptions, seminars etc.), or perhaps even lunchtime summer concerts, where it was thought to be pleasant to maintain the connection to the weather outside. This was achieved by a system of independent black out and acoustic blinds prove for fully flexible natural lighting and reverberation times.

The newly created enlarged roof space still needed to accommodate the cinema and the dance studio. Rather than simply splitting the large room into two, and obliterating the impressive volume, the cinema was conceived as an independent 'pod' structure, which was placed in one end of the space. In this way, with the cinema housed in a small cocoon-like room, the dance studio retained the sense of airiness of the loft-like roof space.

The same approach to flexibility in use as in the auditorium was envisaged for the dance studio, and light was let into the space via rows of conservation rooflights into the re-built roof. As in the main auditorium below, the rooflights were provided with black-out blinds so that the space could be used as a small studio theatre, for dance classes and even as a small gallery.

Outcome

The team was formally appointed in 2008 with construction starting in late 2009 and the building was completed early in 2012, with the first performances in March of that year.

With an extremely modest initial budget of £8m, partly council and grant funded, and partly funded by insurance money from the fire, the building has been transformed into a state-of-the-art community venue which preserves the historic context and fabric of the former Hall. Since its opening, it has already proved exceptionally popular, hosting a wide range of events, and has become once again a hub for the town's cultural activities.