

Dark arts on the beach

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The new Jerwood Gallery in Hastings, which opens on Saturday [March 17th] would be hated by Peter Cook, whose legendary Archigram design collective startled the architectural world in the 1970s with proposals for cities that walked. He still hates polite modernist architecture. And seen from Plato's Cafe and Takeaway on Marine Parade, the architecture of the Jerwood is the epitome of politeness.

Its form – a dark podium facing Rock-a-Nore Road, from which an oblong first storey rises on the beach side – doesn't signal the building's purpose. It could be a rather desirable house, or offices, or the headquarters of a desperately cool design collective who think Archigram are just so very Terry Gilliam.

The hand-glazed black tiles that cover the gallery are polite, too. They were chosen by the Jerwood's architects, Hana Loftus and Tom Grieve, as a response to the glazed black 19th century "mathematical" tiles on the Grade II listed Lavender House, just across Rock-a-Nore Road. The Jerwood also defers to the run of black, clinker-boarding on the tall, slim 150-year-old net sheds that begin 20m east of the gallery.

On the hut nearest the gallery is a red and yellow poster which announces: No Jerwood on the Stade – the Stade being the local name for the beach just behind the gallery where the inshore fishing boats land their catches. The Save Our Stade committee claimed the majority of fishermen and residents of Hastings Old Town were perfectly happy with the car and coach park that was on the Jerwood's site.

The council counter-claimed that the Jerwood could generate 100 jobs and millions in local earnings. The SOS committee said the Jerwood Foundation, which got the site for free, wanted a low-cost bunker in which to store its collection. One local resident feared the arrival of artworks by Johnny Foreigner. This back-story that reminds us, yet again, about the quaint public schizophrenia that tends to engulf arts projects induce in Britain. The recently completed galleries in Margate, Wakefield and Colchester produced familiar furores of both longing and fear and loathing.

The low-key design of the Jerwood was influenced by the delicate state of local opinions. A car and coach park at the foot of the Old Town may have offended those of refined sensibilities, but it did guarantee regular income for the string of nearby cafes and fish and chip shops from day-trippers, and about £100,000 in rates for the council.

Hana Loftus and Tom Grieve, and their practice HAT Projects, are eminently civil young architects. Loftus has a right-on CV, which includes stints with the General Public Agency, and Rural Studio, which builds remarkable houses out of junk materials in the American southwest. Grieve previously worked at Haworth Tompkins, whose theatre architecture manages to be both

edgy and toughly functional. He also spent time in the studio of Tony Fretton, architecture's Mr Zen Restraint.

The Jerwood project was clearly a hot potato, and Loftus and Grieve duly staged repeated consultations with local businesses, fishermen, educators and community organisations. "What impressed us was the site, which is extraordinary," says Loftus. "And the community, which is one of the most deprived in the country. It was also important that the gallery could plug into any existing artistic networks. The Jerwood won't save the world. It's not salvation. But it can become part of the puzzle of change."

And the puzzle of design. "On an architectural level, it's an absolutely terrifying site, because of what was already here," says Loftus. "Architecture is as much instinct as science. There was also the question of the character of the art in the building, and the local environment they would be in."

She's right about instinct, but wrong about terrifying. The site is essentially simple, and the cultural and urban signifiers around it are clear-cut. The decision to produce a building that is black, low-slung and simple in outline and massing is an obvious option.

Loftus says the front-to-back outline of the building – in effect, a capital L lying on its back – took its cue from the way Webbe's Rock-a-Nore Restaurant ("Stylish contemporary eatery with outdoor terrace") protrudes from the base of the 19th century building opposite. This is predictable architectural box-ticking, and we are left with a much more important question: as a form on the beach, lying between the net sheds and a new, equally black cafe 50m to the west, does the architecture of the Jerwood have a dynamically "critical" relationship with the spaces and buildings around it?

Is the Jerwood lying low, so to speak? Is it characterfully modern, or just a safe little architectural object? It's the latter. But, then, what you see is not necessarily what you get, in the fullest sense. The glimmering darkness of the building's facades may give it a faintly disappointing air of mute architectural stealth, but the inside story is something else entirely.

Loftus and Grieve have delivered a series of outstanding small-scale art spaces that will house a permanent exhibition culled from the Jerwood Foundation's collections of artworks, about 200 of which have been trapped in storage. The galleries' narratives of space, light, and outlooks might almost be a mini-me homage to David Chipperfield's exquisitely arranged galleries at The Hepworth, Wakefield.

The proportions of the seven galleries, and their qualities of light, are extremely satisfying, and the way the architects have used gradations of light in framing glimpses ahead into further spaces makes recall the dictum of the great American architect, Louis Kahn: architecture is about light, and the treasury of shadows.

Exhibit A, in this respect, is the Jerwood's double-height second gallery, and its beautifully composed concrete and terrazzo staircase, which rises and turns into the soft radiance falling from two angular roof lights. Even in the Jerwood's big, tough temporary exhibitions gallery – the opening show features Rose Wylie – the light quality and spatial ambience is excellent; so, too, is

the unseen passive ventilation and heating system, which uses solar panels and 120m deep ground-source piles.

The Jerwood's interiors feel domestic, and acutely localised. What a cosy pleasure to encounter Anne Redpath's 1957 still life, *Mainly Grey & White*, and see through the window next to it the No Jerwood on the Stade poster, the Fish Hut, the Rock-a-Nore Fisheries, and the hugger-mugger of old houses clamped to the steep hillside opposite the beach. The views from the first floor cafe – the architects call it a *piano nobile*, which it isn't because the top floor is not more important than the ground floor – take in the beached fishing fleet and a westward view of Hastings.

The architectural details of these spaces – slim oak handrails, skinny metal balusters that are deliberately rusted and waxed – have a pleasantly studied touch of modernised Arts & Crafts. The Jerwood is certainly not an art bunker and, at an all-up cost of £4m, it represents extraordinary value for money.

But what if Plato were teleported from the 4th century BC and found himself standing outside Plato's Cafe? How might he judge the Jerwood Gallery's architecture? Perhaps he would recycle this one-liner: there must always remain something that is antagonistic to good. The Jerwood has given Hastings a superb set of galleries, yet there is something lacking and overly seamless in its external qualities; the heft of its presence is oddly disappointing. Nevertheless, this is an auspicious first major building for Hana Loftus and Tom Grieve.