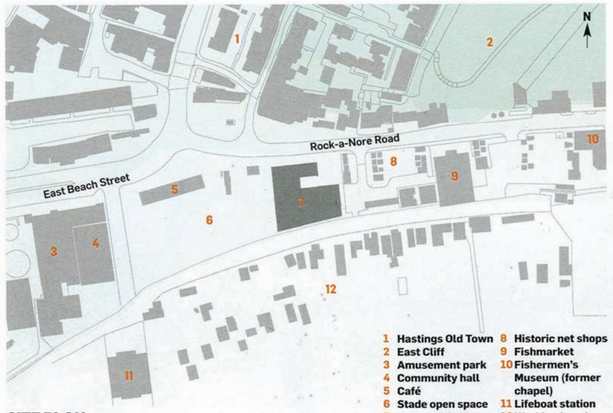
# FISHERMAN'S FRIEND

Despite a long and controversial journey to completion, Hat Projects' understated Jerwood Gallery is finally settling in with its Hastings seafront neighbours

Text by Oliver Wainwright / Pictures by Ioana Marinescu


The Jerwood Gallery nestles into the surrounding grain of net shops and winch sheds. Tim Ronalds' public space, Stade Hall and café buildings lie beyond to the west.




1 Hastings Old Town
2 East Cliff
3 Amusement park
4 Community hall
5 Café
6 Stade open space
7 Jerwood Gallery
8 Historic net shops
9 Fishmarket
10 Fishermen's Museum (former chapel)
11 Lifeboat station
12 Working beach

**SITE PLAN**

The gallery is clad in pewter-glazed tiles that shimmer with an oily iridescence.


In 2008 the Jerwood Gallery was burned to the ground. As flames licked around its doric columns and clouds of smoke billowed above its pediment, crowds of local onlookers cheered and munched their toffee-apples with glee. It was just another bonfire night in Hastings, a town that has a long history of burning things it doesn't agree with.

The effigy of the gallery joined the illustrious company of the Pope and Gaddafi, who had both graced the pyre in previous years, as well as a papier-mache hamburger in response to foot and mouth, and a gigantic model of a wheelie bin — set ablaze in opposition to a new council waste management system.

"The people of Hastings have a fantastic track record of stopping projects they don't like," says Hana Loftus of Hat Projects, the architect of the controversial new gallery that opened this month. "The community here really is incredible — they care so passionately about the place."

So passionately, in fact, that a vociferous minority tried everything in their powers to entirely halt the development — an £8 million masterplan for a new public space, community hall, café and public toilets, of which the £4 million, privately funded Jerwood Gallery was the driving force.

The site in question was a 150m-long stretch of land on the northern edge of the Stade, the shingle beach that has been a fishermen's landing place for the last thousand years, and continues to be home to the largest fleet of beach-launched boats in Europe. The site had been a coach and lorry park for generations, a gap in the lively seafront sequence of crazy golf, trampolines and funfairs, and a seasonal site of bacchanalian revelry — from wine festivals to the surreal May Day pageantry of Jack-in-the-green. Meantime it lay empty as a useful buffer between the lurid landscape of fibreglass to the west and the working beach of boats to the east, with their picturesque clusters of ancient tar-stained timber net shops.

A glazed lobby at the entrance gives views into the building.

"There had been a number of contested proposals for the site, so we took the consultation process very seriously," says Loftus, whose background in planning and engagement at General Public Agency was clearly crucial to the success of the project. She is too diplomatic to mention Ushida Findlay's 2002 visitor centre scheme — a bulbous golden worm that would have writhed across the Stade in a bloated coil — which understandably left a lasting legacy of suspicion of architects.

Visiting Hastings today, it is hard to see how the new Jerwood Gallery could be any more sensitive to its surroundings, any more deftly inserted into its context, than the building Hat has crafted. Nestled into the dense grain of sheds, it has a clustered bulk, a series of boxy forms aggregated into a composition that echoes the pragmatic, cut-and-shut vernacular of its neighbours. The massing has been cleverly sculpted to continue the changing rhythm of the tall net shops and the lower single-storey breeze-block winch sheds, a jumble of shacks that frame informal courtyards and alleys on a shifting ground of concrete and shingle.

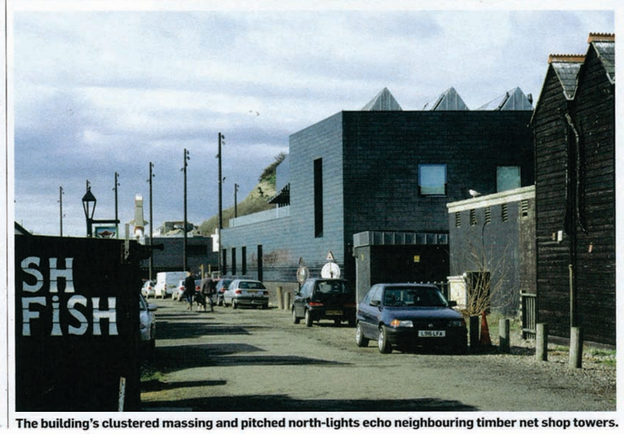
**It is hard to see how the Jerwood Gallery could be any more deftly inserted into its context**

"The idea was to place something solid and proud and civic amongst these transient objects," says Tom Grieve, Loftus' partner and design lead at Hat. He points out the 19th century chapel, now a museum, uncompromisingly wedged into the rows of net shops, as a precedent.

The gallery presents a relatively sheer elevation to the south, past which a model railway trundles, before stepping down towards its northern street frontage, where it breathes in at the corner to define a little yard off the pavement. The whole thing is wrapped in a skin of pewter-glazed tiles that shimmer with an oily iridescence — a glam version of the neighbouring black-painted blockwork cabins, and a nod to the house across the street with its facade of black mathematical tiles.

There is often something uncomfortable about buildings that riff off the informal qualities of their surroundings, and there is no escaping the tension that remains around the arrival of this project — evident in the number of "No to Jerwood" signs that persist. The backland of yards, strewn with nets and fish heads and patrolled by roaming dogs, is a world away from the crisp artistry of the gallery's courtyard — complete with its own sanitised fishing paraphernalia in the form of Benedict Carpenter's orange lobster pot.

"It is terrible. It's just a shoebox," says Arthur, a 70-year-old fisherman, from his distinctly shoebox shaped shed, which stands immediately next door to the gallery. He points to a luxury hotel and apartment complex nearby, a ludicrous concoction of seven-storey towers shaped like four gigantic net shops, as an example of how new buildings should "blend in". But the fishermen's real concerns are not aesthetic but economic: "We had ready trade with all the




The building's clustered massing and pitched north-lights echo neighbouring timber net shop towers.

## A SHARED LANGUAGE: RONALDS' CAFÉ AND HALL

In 2008 Hastings Council commissioned Hat Projects to produce a masterplan for the rest of the Stade, with a new community hall and café framing a public space.

Tim Ronalds Architects was selected to design these elements, which follow a similar formal language to the Jerwood, dark brick forms with simple stepped massing and protruding north-lights.

"We were concerned with what you do in relation to the net shops as the iconic things of Hastings," says Ronalds. "We became fixated with the winch sheds, those low-rise breeze block and tar-painted boxes."

The larger of the two buildings combines a community hall, fish cookery school and public toilets in a block to the west, which acts as a bookend to the amusement arcades, with a terrace overlooking the square. The café, to the north, is a long, low form, glazed on both sides to retain views from town to sea.

Ronalds describes the public space as "the surface of the beach coming up to the town and being made civic", a hard-wearing grouted tarmac with shingle aggregate. Ground-out circles refer to the brick circles that stood on the beach, around which horses trudged to winch up the trawlers.

A row of lighting masts on the southern edge will emit spoken stories of the sea — a collaboration with artist David Ward — while high-backed benches sit like upturned boats, providing shelter.

Intriguingly, there were no design meetings between Ronalds and Hat, and it seems a bit of a missed opportunity that the buildings are so similar. The inevitable result is that the hall and café look like the Jerwood's cheaper cousins — exchanging handmade tiles for off-the-peg bricks.

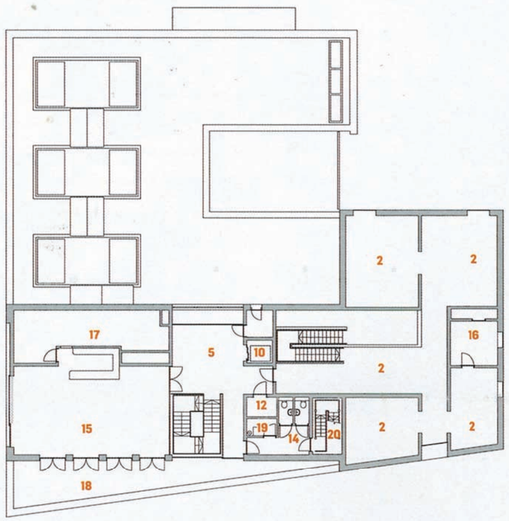
Nonetheless, for an impressive total construction cost of only £2.7 million, these buildings provide thoughtfully designed, much-needed facilities which have been enthusiastically embraced by the community.

Café building by Tim Ronalds from the Stade open space.

PHOTO: PAMELA SELF

**SECTION THROUGH COLLECTION GALLERIES**

**FIRST FLOOR**




**GROUND FLOOR**


1 Foreshore Gallery
2 Collection Gallery
3 Reception
4 Shop
5 Foyer
6 External courtyard
7 Education space
8 Friends' room
9 Office
10 Lift
11 Art store
12 Store
13 Plant
14 WCs
15 Café
16 Research room
17 Kitchen
18 Terrace
19 Baby change
20 Roof access stair
21 Sculpture by Benedict Carpenter

**The courtyard features a giant lobster pot sculpture by Benedict Carpenter.**

**The first floor galleries are lit by a combination of north-lights and side windows.**

**The naturally ventilated temporary exhibition gallery is lit by timber-lined lightwells.**

coaches parked here," he says. "Now there's just a blank wall." The Jerwood's relative blankness at ground level breaks at the entrance, where a glazed lobby provides views deep into the building and its central open courtyard, lined in buttery brick, as well as glimpses into the temporary exhibition gallery.

"It was important that there was artwork visible in every space off the entrance," says Loftus, as we walk past bright Caulfield prints hanging in the foyer, Carpenter's fluorescent cage in the yard, and through tall, ash-framed doors into the airy gallery filled with Rose Wylie's cheerful canvases. The exposed concrete ceiling — "standard house-builders' planks," says Grieve — is punctuated by six white timber-clad lightwells, which house blackout and diffuser blinds, as well as concealing air vents for this passively controlled space. Air circulates behind the plasterboard and OSB walls, while the exposed concrete floor and ceiling provide ample thermal mass. "It's just Roman technology," they both grin.

This partitionable space will see a series of rotating exhibitions, changing four to six times a year, whereas the rest of the building is purpose-designed for the permanent collection — around 200 oil paintings from the 20th century, of which there is space to show a third at any one time. From the lobby, a set of smaller dark oak doors marks the shift into this series of environmentally controlled galleries, a group of seven rooms paced over two floors, conceived as a more domestic sequence.

"The paintings were originally produced for houses and salons," says Loftus, "so we wanted to make a series of homely rooms — spaces that were comfortable and didn't feel like an intimidating art warehouse."

The architects cite Cambridge's Kettle's Yard and the Peggy Guggenheim museum in Venice as key precedents, and they have managed to distil the essence of both of these into their own house-like arrangement. The warm pinkish terrazzo of the ground floor gives way, via a sheer precast concrete stairwell, to oak floorboards on the upper level. Deep oak reveals frame views between rooms, and the shadow gap of the temporary gallery is replaced here by a continuous skirting board.

The rooms are given different characters by their light qualities,

**Big picture windows frame views out across the beach.**

variously lit by a combination of north-lights and picture windows which provide spectacular views out over the jumbled rooftops and back to the dramatic cliffs. "We wanted the spaces to be individually interesting, without distracting from the work," says Grieve. It is an open, fluid sequence that encourages drifting from room to room, unconstrained by a linear logic.

Across a second landing, a café spills on to a south-facing terrace, with a big sliding window that looks out to the public space — the perfect place to watch an effigy of the latest villain being burned. Here, the building has a dignified, civic relationship with the public carpet below, like the piano nobile of a palazzo surveying its piazza, framed on its other two sides by Tim Ronalds' Stade Hall and café buildings (see box). It is a shame that the space itself is a sea of beige tarmac, but the council's limited budget allowed for little else.

A concrete dogleg stair leads back down to the ground floor, where an education room and staff offices are located, both finished with the same careful joinery and attention to detail as the public gallery spaces. Throughout the building, it is this bespoke, crafted quality that makes the £4 million construction cost seem nothing short of miraculous. From the terrazzo treads inlaid into the concrete steps, to the pre-rusted and waxed steel balusters around the stairwell, to the friends' room's tailored furniture, to the low plinth of glazed bricks on which the handmade tile facade sits, this focus on material detail elevates the project beyond its price tag and shows what value small, obsessive practices can bring.

Grieve was formerly an associate at Haworth Tompkins, but this is the first built project for Hat — an extraordinary coup, partially explained by the fact that his father, Alan Grieve, is the chairman of the Jerwood Foundation. What the 84-year-old philanthropist describes as "enlightened nepotism" (he also made his daughter the foundation's director) might not be seen so favourably by the rest of the profession; but, seeing the result, there can be little doubt he chose the right practice for the job.

As the latest, and probably last, of the south-east coast's cultural "string of pearls" — joining the £8 million refurbishment of the De La Warr pavilion in Bexhill, Rick Mather's £8.5 million Towner Gallery in Eastbourne and David Chipperfield's £17 million Turner Contemporary in Margate — the Jerwood Gallery is a refreshing reminder of how an art gallery does its job best when it doesn't try to shout so loud.

**PROJECT TEAM**

**Architect / masterplanner** Hat Projects
**Structural engineer** Momentum
**Services engineer** Skelly & Couch
**Quantity surveyor** Pierce Hill
**Main contractor** Coniston