

Owen Pritchard visits the latest in seaside art offers, this time a **Jerwood Gallery** designed by **Hat Projects** for Hastings, that adds to the town's unique attractions

Right: The Jerwood Gallery in Hastings sits among the unique net shops, seen far left, and references them in its dark tile cladding and steeply pitched light wells

Below: The top-lit principal gallery can be divided and modified as per the requirements of the curators

Below right: The interior is made warm and sober by the materials used, including oak for flooring and hand rails

Hastings is eclectic. Topographically and architecturally it is an absurd and bewildering amalgamation of faded seaside grandeur, tired boatyards, crumbling, eccentric modes of transport and, what now seems to be the norm in British seaside towns, the carcass of a burned-out pier. This month sees the opening of the new Jerwood Gallery, by architecture practice Hat Projects, on the shoreline of a historically important working beach known as the Stade. It is also the site of the 50 so-called net shops – tall, black, timber-clad storage sheds with pitched roofs that are unique to this East Sussex town.

The £3.3m Jerwood Gallery is the latest in a string of arts institutions that have arrived on the south coast since 2006 that includes the Turner Contemporary in Margate, The Towner in Eastbourne, the refurbished De la Warr Pavilion at Bexhill, and Pallant House in Chichester. It is the first major new build for Colchester-based Hat Projects, founded by Hana Loftus and Tom Grieve, and it deserves attention for all the right reasons.

Nestled in among the net shops, from the outside it is decidedly assured in its composition and massing, but deferential to the materials and urban grain that define the character of the area. The facade is clad in more than 8,000 hand-glazed ceramic tiles that are a nod to the black-painted boards of the net shops, without being a pastiche. 'It's a material that has a tonal

relationship with its context but not a copy of the materials found around,' says Loftus. 'It is your standard rainscreen cladding that is found on every B&Q but finished with a hand glaze. The tiles have a richness up close and from afar – the way they refract the light makes the mass of the building to appear dematerialised. It is also very hardwearing and easy to wash down.'

From the street, the building is announced modestly with a simple canopy jutting out over the entrance. The gallery is a single storey on the streetscape which then steps up to the south of the building facing the sea. There is further nod to the net shops' pitched roofs in the shape of light wells that provide articulation to the building's silhouette, these devices softening what could have been a muscular and lateral presence.

Entering the gallery past a very modest bookshop, visitors encounter a courtyard that allows light to flood the circulation space kinking around it and providing a nodal reference point for navigation. Adjacent to this is the principal gallery for contemporary art. It is ample in size and is primed for

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flexibility, allowing it to be divided and modified as curators deem fit. The space is a large, top-lit box with white walls and a concrete floor and ceiling, punctured by light wells. 'The roof lanterns are architectural devices. They take blinds, power data, the lighting track and assist with the air circulation, as well as allowing natural light into the gallery,' says Loftus.

The gallery for the permanent collection also begins on the ground floor and leads the visitor upstairs to a cluster of small rooms and the cafe. The scale is domestic, there is an intimacy to each space and the material palette of pink terrazzo, oak flooring and hand rails, concrete and rusted steel create a warm and sober atmosphere. 'The works in the collection are of a smaller scale, painted for houses, and they need an intimate viewing experience,' says Loftus. 'We as architects love galleries that have an intimacy, like Kettles Yard in Cambridge. Where there is a certain surprise when you move around. Or maybe a view you come to, and you've never had that view before.'

The gallery offers great views out across the Stade and the town, each window frames elements of irregular pattern of the surrounding area – reiterating the relationship the building has with its locale at carefully orchestrated moments.

The final destination is a cafe that

faces out towards the sea, with a small terrace and a large sliding glass door that will open up the room when the weather allows. It is an undeniably pleasant space, and one that will not struggle to be filled.

The Jerwood Gallery has been lovingly crafted by Hat Projects to accommodate a collection of British paintings that were without a permanent home, and it is a building that has been expertly designed to respect and embrace its tricky and historically important context, without resorting to pastiche.

There are a couple of moments within the building where the circulation and gallery spaces overlap and congestion could be a problem, and the main doglegged stairway to the cafe at the back of the building lacks a little grace, but these are minor gripes – Hastings now has an excellent art gallery in a prime location.

The Jerwood Foundation was founded in 1977 and has donated nearly £80m to the arts since then, amassing a collection of British art from the 20th and 21st centuries. The Jerwood space in Southwark and the foundation's prizes for drawing, sculpture and painting have provided many artists with a much-needed fillip. As ever, the institution will be judged not on its performance as a container for art, but on its ability to help drive redevelopment in its area.

One wonders if the name Jerwood is well known enough to draw the interest of the public, despite its reknown in the art world. Our fear of allowing culture for culture's sake will taint this gallery if the area doesn't appear to reap some wider benefits, and that really isn't right or fair, because as buildings go, this is a good one.



ALL IMAGES (OAKA MARTINECU)

