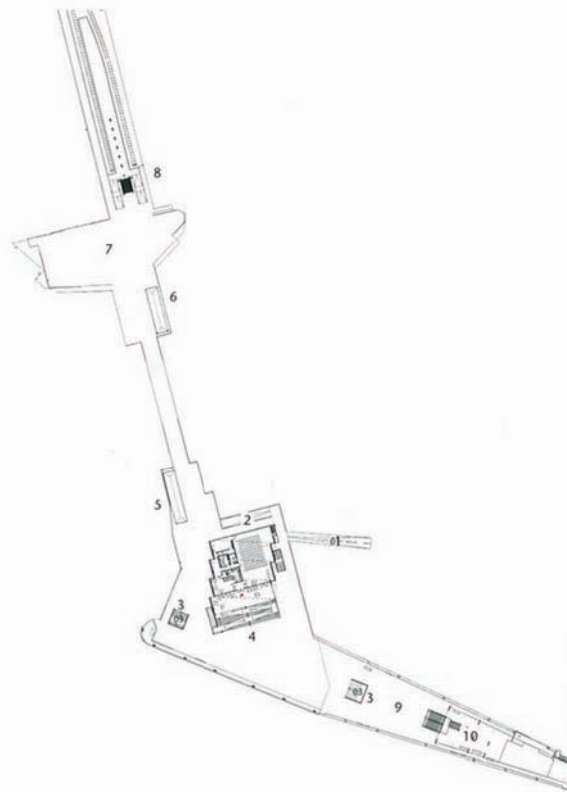


BUILDING ■ Sea life: Southend Pier Cultural Centre by White Arkitekter

Hana Loftus explores a wave-shaped arts building installed a mile from shore. Photos: Luke Hayes.

The spindly boardwalk of Southend pier, the longest in the world, stretches over a mile into the shallow Thames estuary. Looking back landward, Southend's seafront exhibits equally extreme length: a seven-mile promenade of fish-and-chip shops, amusement arcades and fairground rides. Like most British resorts, out of season the attractions are closed up. While the bleak drama of the landscape charms psychogeographers and photographers, when you're a councillor faded romance isn't enough: you worry about jobs and marketing, and you chase funding pots wherever they appear.

The new pavilion at the end of the pier is one of the latest schemes from a local authority seemingly addicted to capital projects – it has littered the town with a panoply of ill-conceived splashy statements in recent years. The length of the pier has been a challenge to its viability almost since it was built, and after a series of fires, rebuildings and at least one implausible proposal by a local entrepreneur for a £50m rollercoaster, in 2009 Southend saw the CABE-administered, and culture-focused, Sea Change fund as a possible cash cow. An international competition for ideas to revitalise the pierhead was announced alongside a £5m bid. Attempting



to hit a bid-writers' sweet spot, the brief contained plenty of aspiration (a 'must-see destination' but only the vaguest idea of function: 'some form of exhibition, gallery and/or performance space which may individually or collectively sit alongside other activities... that will support the delivery of a strong yet flexible all-year cultural programme'. In reality the only brief was to entice as many people as possible to pay the £2 (for walkers) or £3.60 (if you take the miniature train) that it costs to go down the pier.

Above Site plan: 1 eastern slip, 2 northern slip, 3 stairs to lower deck, 4 culture centre, 5 substation, 6 existing cafe, 7 old pier head, 8 train station, 9 concrete pier, 10 lifeboat station. **Left, right** The 376 square metre, 170-tonne building was constructed off-site at Tilbury, and towed to the pier on a barge from which it was hoisted onto the pier head at high tide using a 400-tonne marine sheer leg crane. On-site pile testing was undertaken to ensure that the pier will withstand the weight of the new building.

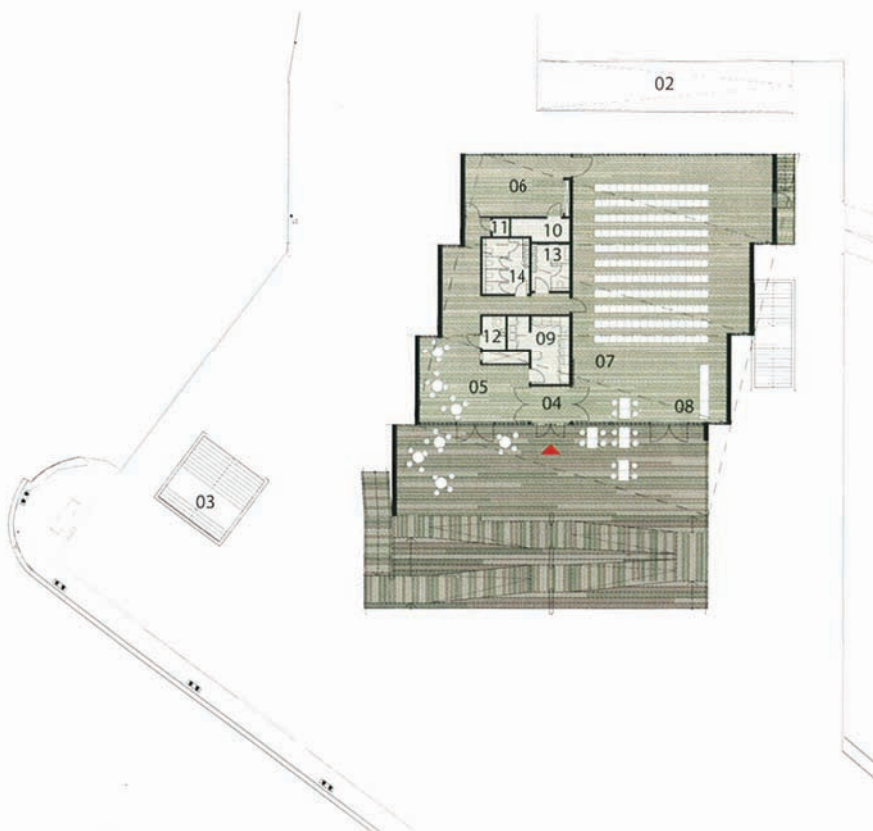




The winning scheme, by the Swedish firm White Arkitekter, proposed a grouping of three structures around the pierhead, but after the Sea Change bid was rejected and the budget halved, the client instructed that the project should 'shrink to fit'. The three buildings were reduced to two, and then to one (a stepped seating platform is currently on hold, and only a yellow chalk line on the wooden deck marks out its location).

Right The competition attracted 74 entries. White Arkitekter won with a proposal for an 'events thoroughfare' which starts as an extension to the town's high street and ends in a open-air theatre, restaurant and cultural centre on the pier.

Below Plan: 1 eastern slip, 2 northern slip, 3 stairs to lower deck, 4 airlock, 5 lobby, 6 artist's studio, 7 multi-purpose space, 8 flexible cafe service area, 9 kitchen, 10 storage, 11 cleaning, 12 disabled wc, 13 men's wc, 14 women's wc.



The remaining building houses a reduced version of the proposed programme: a 150-seat multi-purpose hall, a single artist's studio and a small cafe.

In a town teeming with cultural activity, from the energetic live music scene to 'artistic laboratory' Metal, headed by Southbank Centre artistic director Jude Kelly, the architect was not asked to work with any potential users for the building, says project architect Fredrik Pettersson. It seems that, for the client, creating as much enticing architecture as they could for the money trumped any discussion of function.

If function is largely irrelevant, as at the annual temporary Serpentine Gallery Pavilions in Kensington Gardens, London, the form-making has to be very special to attract and delight visitors. The soft-focus renderings of the competition scheme, entitled 'Sculpted by Wind and Wave', showed ballet dancers performing between a series of folded, sliced Corten sheets, and a cantilevered seating platform. 'We didn't find much in Southend seafront that we thought we could build on, but we thought the original idea of

coming here, in the nineteenth century, must have been the experience of the sea', explains Pettersson. 'So our aesthetic was these wave shapes, this volume that was affected by the wind, just as the waves are created on the water's surface.'

He is proud of retaining the formal concepts from the competition, but practical challenges have compromised many aspects of the design, which has been delivered in collaboration with executive architect Sprunt. Corten is inappropriate in a marine environment; flood analysis resulted in the floor level being raised 1.6 metres above the boardwalk; Natural England expressed concerns about rare gulls crashing into the extensive glazing. Given such obstacles, it is perhaps surprising that the architect didn't rethink the formal concepts at all. Instead, the competition scheme has been adapted, and in the process diminished.

To solve the flooding issue, the pavilion now sits on a plinth clad in new and reclaimed boards, so the horizontality of the boardwalk is disrupted. A small mountain of decking has been shaped into steps across the full width of the building's frontage, criss-crossed by the inevitably awkward ramp, which wraps around the side of the building like an afterthought. The glass had its tint deepened almost to turquoise, in a distracting contrast with the silver-anodised glazing bars, which appeared almost invisible in the renderings. The idea that glass walls can be transparent is a wishful fallacy at the best of times, but here the concept of framing an estuary view is further thwarted by the revised positioning of the building: when approaching down the pier, the side wall of the hall partly shuts off the vista. The Corten has been replaced with an undyed GRP and this is a genuinely lovely material, a pale, green-tinted



sheet whose fibres give it an intriguing and delicate texture.

Inside, the suspended plank ceiling follows the shape of the complex structure but in its texture and detailing, peppered with services and fittings following no ordered arrangement, it loses much of its drama. The replacement of the temporary carpet with oak flooring throughout will improve the

Above Flooding concerns required that the internal floor level should be raised 1.6m above the boardwalk, necessitating the addition of a ramp.

Below Angular cuts in the facade provide views down the pier. The complex modular arrangement of triangular frames makes efficient use of material. A system of supporting trusses gives the building the stiffness it needs to spread its load over the pier's 100-year-old piles.





space, but the client's lack of vision is evident in the cheap conference chairs filling the space, and the unconsidered design of the cafe fittings – all lacquered softwood and ill-arranged fridges – draws sighs from the architect.

It is perhaps unsurprising, given the secondary importance of programme in the brief, that the spaces seem ill-suited to their purposes. The multi-purpose hall has no blackout or lighting rig for performances, and while Pettersson mentions corporate hires and wedding ceremonies as possible uses, they will have to be happy with day-trippers peering in (draw the blinds and you lose the view, of course). Likewise, anyone occupying the artist's studio will have to accept being on show while at work. The cafe seats only 15 inside but spills out onto an extensive terrace: on an August Monday it was struggling to cope with demand, but may be less appealing on a windswept winter day. When I suggest that inhabiting the building will have to be like using a 'found space', Pettersson agrees.

Across the North Sea, White Arkitekter has completed substantially better projects – a sea-bathing pool Pettersson designed in Denmark is a delightful curving form in timber. Given the compromises at Southend, it's surprising that the architect doesn't point the finger at the executive architect, the client or the Design and Build contract, but Pettersson has few reservations about the delivered project. Apart from the furniture, he points only to the omission of overhead glazing panels for internal doors, and some external ramp detailing, as areas that might have been improved. His satisfaction appears to be shared by Southend Council. But for the huge amount of effort expended (the pavilion was built off-site and transported to the site on a barge to be craned on in one piece), and the uniquely romantic site, it seems an opportunity sadly missed.

Hana Loftus co-director of Colchester-based HAT Projects, whose work includes the Jerwood Gallery on the Stade at Hastings and proposed artists' studios at Purfleet, Essex.

Below The big lift (ph: Tim Lucas/Price & Myers).

White Arkitekter

Founded by Sid White and PA Ekholm in Gothenburg in 1951, White Arkitekter now has offices in 12 Scandinavian cities and in London, and a staff of 680. Recent projects include the acclaimed Hammarby Sjöstad housing development in Stockholm and the Kastrup Sea Bath in Copenhagen.

Project team

Architect: White Arkitekter; design team: Fredrik Pettersson (right), Niels de Bruin, (project architects), Mikkel Olsen, Sam Keshavarz, Martin Münster, Mette Boye, Niels Majgaard, Katarina Hennig; executive architect: Sprunt; design team: Tony Henson, Josef Kolar, Emma Wemyss; structural engineer: Price & Myers; services: Atelier Ten, DGR Mechanical Services; building contractor: KIER Construction; qs: Sweett Group; client: Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Selected suppliers and subcontractors

Cladding: Fibreline Composites; waterproof membrane: Prokol Rocathaan Hotspray; curtain walling: Kawneer; suspended ceilings: Armstrong, CEP Ceilings; wc cubicles: Venesta Washroom Systems; vinyl flooring: Altro; aluminium cladding: AMS; cladding support system: Nvelope Rainscreen Systems; door automation: Geze; EPDM: Arbo; glazing: Pilkington (outer leaf), Saint-Gobain (inner leaf).

