

Something old, something new: the Civic (left) includes new office space (the light blue part of the building) for creative firms above a new gallery, as well as a performance space (far right) in the original building. The arts centre overlooks the new Mandela Park (right) with its contoured lawn



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Barnsley is a place that dares to dream. The South Yorkshire town hit the headlines in 2002 when the council hired architect Will Alsop to produce a masterplan for its future development. The resulting vision was one of a Tuscan hill town topped by a halo of light.

Alsop's plan may have been deemed fanciful by some, but Barnsley's ambitions are real enough. The council sees developing the town's creative industries as key to its future. Last month saw the reopening of Barnsley's historic Civic Theatre, a listed building constructed in 1877, as a cultural centre and space for creative industries.

The Civic arts centre comprises a performance space in the original building, together with a new gallery and new office space for creative companies added on. Its backers hope that, as the economy improves, they will be able to fill a further three floors of the original building with retailers. The centre overlooks Mandela Gardens, a new outdoor performance and leisure space with a stepped lawn and a water feature made of sheet metal.

The project was funded by public bodies including Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, regional development agency Yorkshire Forward and the European Commission. The council is transferring ownership of the scheme to a charitable trust.

Regeneration & Renewal met up with Piers Jackson, director of arts development consultancy Jackson Quigg Associates, to take a first-hand look at the project.

What do you think of the Civic as a restoration project?

It's an imaginative reworking of the building. I think that the opportunity to mix the old with the new is one that should be grasped by as many organisations as possible. In this case, Barnsley could well be on to a winner. It's a good combination of the traditional and the contemporary. They've worked closely with English Heritage and kept a lot of the old building, which they had to do of course. But they've also created, particularly through the creative industries' work units and gallery space, something that is forward thinking. It's not always easy to get it right, and it will be interesting to see the scheme once they've filled the retail space, which at the moment they're waiting on because of the current economic climate.

It's a lot of retail space. Do you think that it will take a long time to fill?

It's bound to take time, but once again Barnsley Council is fully behind the project, which is vital if the team running it is to achieve its ambition of establishing an independent trust to take the project forward. The project needs that support from its local authority because that then draws in support from the likes of Yorkshire Forward and the Arts Council. I don't know how long it will take for them to fill the retail space, but, at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter at this stage because the rest of the building is dynamic on its own. It's amazing

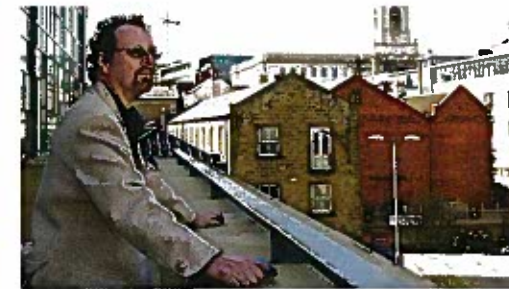


On view: a mini event area (above) outside the performance space; reviewer Piers Jackson (upper right); and a map showing Barnsley's location in South Yorkshire (lower right)

the way it looks out over Mandela Gardens and the way in which they're thinking about the sight lines, the relaxation spaces and using public art to put across the fact that Barnsley is an up-and-coming town. And it's not just doing this in isolation: it's part of a range of projects and development thinking that is looking 25 to 30 years into the future.

Is there sufficient interest in and around Barnsley to sustain what is a pretty major performance venue?

I don't know the town's demographics well enough to give a definitive answer, but based on my knowledge of other similar schemes around the country then, yes, I think it has a good future. It's not a very big theatre: it can seat up to about 350 in total, but you can bring that right down. That means that it



has the flexibility to handle a whole range of different events, not just arts ones. It's a flexible space, it's got fantastic lighting and sound – they've thought that through carefully. It's not just going to be a single use space.

You're saying that they can put on much more than just theatre?

Absolutely. They've got a semi-sprung dance floor, for example, so they can host dance performances or workshops in really great conditions. It's hard to find great spaces in which to do that sort of work.

They've only opened the event space and creative workshops so far. Do you think they were right to open in a staggered way, or do you think they should

have had a grand opening that presented the entire building to the public in one fell swoop?

Phasing is a very realistic option nowadays. There are few projects that can just go out and say: 'Hello, here we are!' The economic climate is difficult, but that doesn't mean that you can't take projects forward. If phasing is the only way to finish a project, then people should always consider that as a way to complete what they're meant to be doing.

What do you think of the quality of the build?

Aesthetically, the architects have done a great job: it's not easy to mix the old with the new, but when it's done properly it works really well. I like the way they've done it. They've retained wonderful features such as the metal columns and brick walls. You've got a magnificent sense of space. I think that the gallery is an effective area. Again, it can be used for different art activities – I think it's sufficiently flexible for people to use for other events. I also like the entrance. The reception and box office spaces initially seem a little bit small and narrow, but when you look at the stairs up to the event space it's magnificent. You get a wonderful sense of scale and of the height of the building. That's extremely effective. The terraces on two of the floors are also very effective: you can step outside, look over the gardens and see the water feature. I think the way in which they've tried to represent different aspects of South Yorkshire's heritage through the landscaping of the garden – [the contoured ground representing its rolling hills and carved local stone representing the crags of the Dales] – is very effective and shows clear thinking. It matches people's aspirations. I think that people who live and work in the town are very proud of their heritage.