

# Pavilions of splendour

Assessments of Cardiff's Senedd and Swansea's National Waterfront Museum



▲ National Assembly exterior, night (2006 Redshift Photography)

## Cardiff

OCCUPYING A DRAMATIC location at the heart of Cardiff's waterfront, the *Senedd*, which houses the National Assembly's new debating chamber, was opened by the Queen on St David's Day this year.

Sited alongside the acclaimed Millennium Centre, close to the nineteenth-century Pierhead Building, and to the attractions of Mermaid Quay, the *Senedd* occupies one of the most prominent waterfront sites in Cardiff Bay.

Designed by the Richard Rogers Partnership, the building reworks the notion of a classical (and Miesian-inspired) pavilion with an over-sailing roof, glazed walls and minimal structure, surmounting a relatively unencumbered public space.

With views over the Bay, the original design concept was a simple and elegant solution to

the original competition brief. This stipulated that the building should not be "openly adversarial in shape or argument".

The architect's solution was illustrated by a series of evocative sections and proposed a distinctive undulating roof that embraced both the internal and external public spaces and the new debating chamber.

This roof was supported on thin circular steel columns, and hovered alluringly above the spaces beneath, extending over the grand entrance stairway from the quayside walkway.

Glazed walls increased the feeling of transparency and openness implicit in modern democratic debate.

Rogers' design statement promised a building that would become a visible symbol for Wales, an icon recognised worldwide. At the opening ceremony, he spoke of a building that celebrates a newly empowered nation.

It's well known that the construction of the *Senedd* was delayed by arguments between architect and client, by cost checks, redesigns and a change in procurement route. In the meantime, the Rogers Partnership completed a number of other buildings, including Barajas airport in Madrid (a 1996 competition-winner). There, a clear progression of spaces, surmounted by a timber-clad "wave-form" overhanging roof with transparent walls, illustrated how such a simple concept can create a clearly understood series of linked spaces. This was designed at roughly the same time as the *Senedd*, albeit for different purposes. The core design philosophy apparent in both buildings was clearly illustrated in the submissions for each competition.

In contrast to Barajas, the *Senedd* is a relatively small building, arranged on three levels, two of which are open to the public.



▲ National Assembly  
top reception area with debating chamber behind (Redshift Photography)  
centre debating chamber from viewing gallery (Redshift Photography)  
bottom entry from waterside (Paul Vanner)

The lower ground floor contains committee rooms, members' tea rooms, and the floor of the debating chamber. Two canyons running the full length of the building allow daylight into the offices and committee rooms.

A main stair with glass



▲ Madrid, Barajas Airport canyon and baggage reclaim (Manuel Renau)

balustrades leads to an upper foyer with views down into the debating chamber or out across the Bay.

The most impressive element of the building is its roof. This incorporates a funnel-like structure that creates a cylindrical enclosure over the debating chamber, and emerges as a lantern that supports a six-metre tall rotating wind cowl and provides a visible sign of Welsh government's commitment to sustainability in energy management and use.

How does the reality match up to Rogers' original vision?

The initial concept was for the building to seem to rise out of the water, with a grand processional entrance in which the slate plinth became part of the dock side with the undulating roof floating above. This would give a sense of place and arrival to the principal pedestrian entrance.

This powerful concept has been retained throughout the debate between client and architect. However, as one approaches the building and ascends the quayside steps, the dream is destroyed. What should be a powerful and symbolic piece of public realm is spoilt as the visitor confronts a cacophony of visual confusion punctuated by steel handrails and ramps deemed necessary to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act. People are

"If democracy fails, we will have the most dramatic café in Cardiff"



frequently seen trying to work out what are steps and what are actually changes in level. Nonetheless, the ramps and level changes have been rapidly colonised by skateboarders – at least these bring a bit of life to the setting.

There are other disappointments. Instead of an unambiguous entrance, security has necessitated the installation of a single-storey checkpoint at the southern corner. This creates an entrance that completely belies the concept of movement through a series of clearly defined public spaces from water's edge to the heart of the building. The main entrance approach terminates at a glazed wall of little architectural distinction, containing a pair of domestic-scale fire escape doors. The route conflicts with the linearity of the building and its logical series of spaces. The experience thus becomes no better than that of a security checkpoint at a regional airport.

This failure to address the entrance effectively contrasts with the wonderful visual link from within towards the sheltered external spaces and the Bay beyond.

The missed opportunity from the outside is more than made up for by views from within, where the original vision in terms of transparency and democratic openness is clearly achieved. ▶

◀ Is the building a genuine Welsh cultural icon? The long queues to get in suggest that it really has won over the public. This seems true despite the fact that parts of the design are not so successful. On the other hand, there are other aspects that deserves the highest design accolade. These include the wonderful red cedar-clad roof, the simple but dignified stair from the lower to the upper public foyer; and the exemplary debating chamber.

The flaws seem mainly to have arisen from security requirements – for instance, the diagonal steel bracing and associated balustrades that serve to protect people in the public area. Additional security measures to the glazed walls affect the sense of transparency. However, these late alterations to the brief have not jeopardised the fundamental design concept.

The lack of a grand entrance, and the mish-mash of levels, steps and ramps, should be compared with the entrance that has been created by Rogers at the new Antwerp Court-house. Given the common nature of European legislation one has to question how the *Senedd* has been let down by its illegible entrance.

The standard of building, however, is exceptionally high, witness the timber and concrete finishes and the slate flooring throughout the building. The selection of furniture combines local designs with classics such as Jacobsen's Swan chairs, and although the catering facilities feel like a station concourse, the visitor gets awesome views through the upper foyer that make up for this. If democracy fails we will have the most dramatic café in Cardiff.

Compared with the over-worked mannerism of the Scottish Parliament building in Edinburgh the *Senedd*, with its limited palette of glass, steel, concrete and timber, is a

truly modern building that is free from contrived political correctness, with not a pitched roof or area of render in sight.

The building demonstrates the National Assembly's commitment to modern design solutions that incorporate a high degree of sustainability. It has rapidly become a major tourist attraction, with the potential to become a genuine symbol of a new and progressive nation.

Now it's up to the politicians to make the building a genuine window on democracy.

*Paul Vanner*



## Swansea

**S**WANSEA, SO LONG overshadowed by Cardiff, is becoming a very exciting city. After years of urban slump following the decline of traditional industry, it is now attracting considerable investment. It is sometimes forgotten that Swansea was in the van of dockland regeneration in Wales, with the imaginative leap taken by the city council to redevelop South Dock as a marina in the early 1980s now bearing heavy fruit. The neighbouring SA1 development, another dockland project which is likely soon to be the home of Wales' tallest building, is a dramatic example of this, as is the city's new stadium.

And if Cardiff's waterfront has a landmark building in the new *Senedd*, Swansea has a very different, but equally distinguished newcomer in the National Waterfront Museum.

Designed by Wilkinson Eyre, who were also responsible for Swansea's dramatic Sail Bridge,

the museum, a partnership between the National Museum of Wales and the City Council, which attracted £11M in funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, opened its doors in October 2005. In under six months, it has already attracted 85,000 visitors.

In between times, it was one of just twenty-two Civic Trust award winners in the UK this year, and the only successful Welsh nomination. The judges were impressed by its elegant and functional character, describing it as "a modern gem" in slate, steel and glass, with historic reflections in its form and design, and a strong sense of purpose.

Civic Trust awards focus not simply on intrinsic architectural quality but on the environmental impact and urban design qualities of a project. One of the main issues for Swansea's regeneration, as for Cardiff, is the extent of the integration between the older city and the reviving maritime quarter. There has been criti-

**"Externally, it talks to the city. Each elevation has something interesting to say and the whole building speaks directly to the city centre – and to the marina."**



◀ **National Waterfront Museum**  
left landscape, new galleries and entrance  
top external balcony to waterfront  
bottom galleries in refurbished building  
(Wilkinson Eyre)

cism that new investment has been mistakenly redirected away from the historic core to a fringe zone where the speculator can have free rein. One of the tests in the assessment of such an important structure as the Museum is the extent to which it relates to old and new, to city and waterfront.

The project required the renovation of the grade II warehouses that were the home of Swansea's Maritime and Industrial Museum, and the creation of new galleries which could be a replacement for the former Industrial and Maritime Museum in Cardiff, a decent modern building with popular displays swept away for a mediocre assemblage of bars and bistros. In addition, it was intended to house new commercial units within the original building, the

attractor being better linkages with the city centre. The new museum was to be a major driver of economic development, a "signature" building for waterfront and city.

The site is on the northern fringe of the Maritime Quarter, and close to the city's Leisure Centre – a popular destination that had to be shut following serious structural deterioration. Integration with the landscape of the marina is provided by the museum's jetty, board walk, and ship collection.

The design of the new galleries, and the renewal of the original warehouses reflects both the history of the site and the opportunity to strengthen linkages with the city centre.

The built form of the galleries follows the line of the revetment that carried railway

track through the dock side, while original track discovered within the warehouses has been retained. This design approach is followed through into a car park layout that mirrors the curve of the tracks, while, for the architects, the buildings "interlock like the carriages of a train".

This metaphor clearly impressed the Civic Trust's assessors, who admired the way built form follows the impress of industrial railways on the landscape. Meanwhile, a strong pedestrian route leads through the "museum garden" towards Oystermouth Road and the city centre; the landscaping of this route will include the redeveloped Leisure Centre. Thus the design has been shaped to entice visitors towards the waterfront and the museum; ▶

► **National Waterfront Museum** new galleries with exhibition installed (Wilkinson Eyre)



secondary linkages, for instance in the direction of the Royal Institute, should also encourage access.

The listed warehouses that housed the Maritime and Industrial Museum look out onto the waterfront; the new galleries face the city, connected to the older structure by a glazed link designed to reinforce the axis across the site.

The Chair of Swansea's Civic Society, architect and urban designer Gordon Gibson, has no doubts that the master planning of the project has been both imaginative and successful. He argues that the museum has much to teach us about the role that buildings can play in the urban environment. "Externally," he says, "it talks to the city."

For Gibson, each elevation has something interesting to say while "the whole building speaks directly to the city centre – and to the marina." The public space out front provides an excellent focal welcome to the key axis to the city centre – an opportunity he suggests is being spurned by the City

Council in their refurbishment proposals for the Leisure Centre. (They plan to address this space with a service area!). Internally, the spatial composition offers both glimpses of adjoining buildings and a proud full-on vista towards the city centre. "For these reasons alone – and this is not to undervalue its other architectural qualities – this is a gem of a building."

If the Museum is successful in urban design terms, what about its intrinsic qualities? And how far is it fit for purpose?

There is no doubt about the originality and the humane qualities of the new galleries. The architects conceived of them as four interlocking, double-height spaces, alongside and arcing away from the warehouse and the dock side. Each of these rhomboidal spaces "expands and rotates in a constant proportion of 1:1:2 in relation to the next." Three enclose a double-height space and all are connected by a mezzanine level. The overhanging roof planes are at varying heights, located

above clerestory glazing which caps the northern and eastern sides of the structure.

The design creates four principal internal spaces, together with a large foyer which extends through the original warehouse into a new glazed entrance that faces the dock; a colonnade gallery faces the new building on the north of the warehouse.

The overall, external impression is elegant and simple, the presence of slate bands (on the solid-walled south elevation) alongside glass and steel is claimed to have a Welsh resonance, and materials have been sourced in Wales.

The predominant interior impression is of transparency, lightness and airiness, assisted by the way the foyer reaches to the roof-space, by structural glazing and by the observation platform on the south façade.

These attributes make the building intriguing, impressive and delightful, while providing spaces that are thoroughly appropriate to the innovative means of exploration and dis-



▲ **Swansea's Sail Bridge**, designed by Wilkinson Eyre, was a Civic Trust Regeneration Award winner in 2004. It links the marina at South Dock with the new SA1 development across the Tawe (Wilkinson Eyre)

play adopted by the Museum's curators and designers.

The project leader Dr Richard Bevins says, "From the very beginning we wanted to build a museum for people who don't do museums."

"We wanted to look at the impact industrialisation had on the people of Wales. We are trying to break the mould and tell stories right up to the present day."

This is no traditional, glass-cased, fixed-exhibit sort of place. Interactive multimedia displays bring the industrial past to life for visitors of all ages. Sensory technology offers visitors different ways to enjoy and learn from the diverse range of exhibits, and all interactive displays are British Sign Language captioned.

Among the innovative technologies are projections, which respond to gestures, and table tops with touch sensors where visitors can interact with the displays. In addition, older technology is also used in new ways; three huge pater-noster lifts rotate slowly bringing changing exhibits illustrating the uses of Welsh-smelted metals to the visitor. As each display case descends it triggers the appropriate caption on the adjoining screen; instead of the visitor going to the showcase, the exhibit comes to them.

All told there are fifteen themed exhibition areas (sea, people, landscape, communities, etc) and more than a hundred audio-visual exhibits, including thirty-six interactive displays. Large technologically



▲ **National Waterfront Museum** detail of slate wall (Wilkinson Eyre)

obsolete objects on show include a 28-tonne rolling steel mill from Corus, the world's first steam locomotive, a brick press, and one of the very few surviving coal wagons. Small items include a Welsh gold cup and even Gareth Edwards' rugby shirt.

The Heritage Lottery Fund gave the Museum an £11M grant, its biggest contribution to a Welsh project. Jennifer Stewart, manager in Wales, praises the fact that many of the collections will be brought into the public domain for the first time. "To have this facility so close to the geological sources in Swansea which powered new industry will bring heritage alive for many people in Wales as well as forming part of the docks regeneration project in the city."

As Project Manager, Dr Bevins welcomes the Civic Trust Award as a clear endorsement of the scheme's impact on the marina area, and of the quality of architecture and landscaping that has been achieved." The Museum is now confidently bidding for the Gulkbenkian Prize for Museum of the Year, an award that its combination of imaginative design, fitness for purpose, innovative interpretation and potential as a catalyst of regeneration would surely justify.

*Matthew Griffiths*

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#### Info

Full details of the National Assembly's Senedd and of the Barajas Airport terminal project can be found on the web site of the Richard Rogers web site at [www.rrp.co.uk](http://www.rrp.co.uk). The Wilkinson Eyre web site carries extensive information on their Swansea projects: [www.wilkinsoneyre.com](http://www.wilkinsoneyre.com). The Trust is grateful for the assistance of both practices in providing information and illustrations for this feature.