

## Hans van der Heijden Architect

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Articles

## Within you without you

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Dutch practice Biq effortlessly marries masonry and modernism in its Bluecoat centre extension. Oh, the relief from all that steel and glass.

By Hugh Pearman

My god, but this is good. In a city being reinvented in steel and glass, with great lumps of new structures being dropped into what look like bomb sites, here is a building that is small-scale, solid masonry, taking its cue from history but managing to be effortlessly modern. It's the kind of trick British architects have trouble pulling off, so it's no surprise to find that British architects are not involved. The Bluecoat arts centre turned to the Dutch for its £12.5m extension.

Rotterdam-based practice Biq may not be as well known as some of its compatriots, but after this little effort, let's hope it finds a way to construct a bridgehead into the United Kingdom. The task was to add an extension to the historic Bluecoat School, the oldest building in Liverpool city centre and long a famous incubator of new art across the spectrum, as part of an overall renovation of the arts complex. Which invited one of three responses.

The commonest British modernist solution would have been to set a lightweight foil against the elegant old hulk, making it glaringly clear what was new and what was old. So terrified are we of the charge of historicist pastiche that we can usually conceive of only one other way to proceed: an out-and-out neoclassical or at any rate traditionalist new wing. But there is a third way. Biq has that in-the-bones Dutch modernism which has always been happy to work with traditional materials. The old building is of brick, with punched windows. So Biq did likewise. It opted for brick, brick, and more brick. Stack-bonded brick, laid with an obsessive eye for detail, and unidirectionally. Cross-walls, and the rear gable end of the building, are expressed as stacks of headers rather than stretchers. It's as if the brick is flowing through the building.

There are other materials, all redolent of solidity and longevity. Oversized slabs of marble cladding in the south-east external corner cut-out, for instance (with gilded Latin inscription), and a copper attic storey above the brick piers of the garden elevation. There is glass too, used selectively to bring light in from above or occasionally the side: but this is subservient to the overall sense of mass. The extension is anyway just part of the job, for Biq is reordering the whole of the old building with its many different periods and level changes.

A This kind of architecture is an object lesson in the difference between size and scale. A bit like Jim Stirling's Clore Gallery at the original Tate, it is small, but it is monumental. Unlike the Stirling precedent it is also modest. How can this be? The clue lies, perhaps, in the name of the architects. Biq is a reference to the Bic ballpoint, that understated design classic. The idea is to achieve good everyday architecture rather than high-flown, iconic stuff. 'Our buildings fit into a western European architectural culture, they are perhaps nostalgic but never easily historical,' the practice manifesto has it, adding that completion of the building is only the start of a continuing process of intervention by others.

As I walk round the site with Biq's enthusiastic director Hans van der Heijden, it becomes clear that he sees Bluecoat as being a linchpin of solidity in a sea of ephemeral modishness. Nowhere is this more apparent than the point at which the new building engages with Page and Park's BBC regional centre behind, an essay in steel and glass that responds to the Bluecoat's presence by means of a curving rear elevation. Er, there is no engagement. The Bluecoat presents a largely blank, if impeccably detailed, wall. Accessible though it will be when it reopens next spring, this is a building that maintains an almost hermetic aloofness from the outside world. With its secret garden courtyard and its new cloister-like ambulatory overlooking it, this is an arts building that sees itself not so much as a former school, but an enclosed order.

'We liked the diagrammatic qualities of the existing building, and simply extruded its lines,' says van der Heijden. 'We did not want to have a bolt-on addition that

## Hans van der Heijden Architect

expressed its newness. The whole of Liverpool all around is like that. Instead, we wanted the building to have a Sphinx-like quality. That's why we stuck to brick, though perhaps we use it in what might seem to be a strange way.

'The philosophy of the building is to be very diverse in performing as well as visual arts,' he adds. 'When we arrived we found a lot of retail plus an excellent bookshop and musicians performing. It's the kind of mix architecture students like to come up with but which hardly ever happens in real life.'

The brief was to provide larger spaces than were possible in the old building, so while Biq does indeed extrude the plan, it is widened considerably. Biq also provides a variety of gallery spaces that can be used for any kind of artistic expression, plus studios for resident artists. And it makes allowances for the use of daylight, something traditional gallery curators can come to terms with but which performance specialists resist. Although the various spaces are given broad functions – performances that can accommodate up to 200 people is the brief for the largest – with artists it does not do to be too prescriptive in advance.

So there is a gallery overlooking the main performance space which can be used for audience seating or as an art space in its own right. Alastair Upton, Bluecoat's chief executive, already has his eye on ancillary nooks and corners, such as projecting window bays, for display purposes. Meanwhile, the issue of access is dealt with by two new lift shafts and stairwells, one each side of the complex, which resolve what were 32 different levels. Formerly partitioned spaces at the centre of the plan, where a bowed elevation faces the courtyard garden, are opened up to provide a large cafe. As this used to be the refectory for the Bluecoat boys, it makes perfect sense.

From the outside, the extruded quality of the design is very clear. The gable end of the old west wing, for instance, is terminated with a chimney stack. The new east wing gable end takes this detail, expresses it in abstract form, but does not leave it as a fake stack: it continues the form along its length of the new wing as a glazed lightscoop. Similarly the window openings in the west gable are echoed in the east one but this time they protrude into rectangular bays. There is a deliberately cartoonish quality to this kind of contextualism, but it is cleverer than it seems, subtler than would have been the case in the postmodern era. 'It's a reciprocal approach between the old and the new,' says van der Heijden.

It is, of course, too early to make definitive judgements about the new Bluecoat, which will resume its position at the centre of Liverpool cultural life with a renewed importance. It was still a building site when I visited. But the great thing about masonry architecture of this kind – particularly when it has such a clear plan – is that the intentions of the architect are fully apparent even at the shell stage. This is a spatial sequence of a high order. At the risk of alienating large swathes of the readership who remain committed to the glass wall and the silicone gasket, it is a huge relief to encounter a building that draws on – and slyly subverts – an older tradition. You could call it real architecture.

◀ Back to story

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Top ▲

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