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Fine Tuning

Nick Hayhurst admires Eric Parry Architects' new Music School at Brighton College



Words
Nick Hayhurst
Photos
Hélène Binet

As David Gilmour got stuck into the chorus of his classic Pink Floyd track 'Wish You Were Here' at the opening of Eric Parry Architects' new Music School at Brighton College, I imagine that those immortal words might have struck a chord with those lucky enough to be in the audience. With the windows of a distant terrace of Victorian houses forming a band of light under the asymmetric pitch of the double-height Recital Hall, the audience must have been treated to a rare and touching moment where musical and spatial delight met in equal measure.



The hall can operate in flat floor or raked seating mode.

The college's Eastern Road campus is set two blocks back from the seafront; its centrepiece is George Gilbert Scott's first school building, which runs east-west and traverses the approach to the site. Over the last 150 years, a diverse array of buildings (including two recent additions by Allies & Morrison and one by Hopkins Architects) have been built around the perimeter of the site to form a prospectus-perfect quadrangle to the front with a passageway to the west leading to the rear of the site and the cricket pitch, known as 'Home Ground'. Until now, the backlands behind Gilbert Scott's building have been architecturally less-blessed than the front quad, comprising a veritable jumble of post-war tat.



The Recital Hall is designed to provide variable acoustics, with adjustable absorption on the side and rear walls.

A 2010 masterplan by CZWG sought to unpick the labyrinth with a proud new axial link from the formal quad, through Gilbert Scott's Main School Building and out to Home Ground. Parry's intervention sits to the east of this axis. A forthcoming Drama School, also by EPA, is located to the west.

Conceived as a modern, asymmetric gable to complement the roof profiles of the nineteenth-century buildings behind, the glass-faced elevation to the Recital Hall sets up a striking new relationship between the seemingly incompatible activities of music performance and sports events. Though the College has deliberately chosen to celebrate performing arts by placing it at the centre of the site, the challenge for EPA was to make this relationship visible while dealing with the onslaught of sixes from the crease.

"This isn't a building of complex spatial arrangements but rather a building made up of carefully crafted individual spaces"

Soaking up a three-metre height difference from front to back, the spaces within the four-storey building are simply arranged in section. Plant is in the basement, with practice rooms, offices and a re-ordered dining hall on the lower-ground floor.

The Percussion Room and 195-seat, double-height Recital Hall are on the upper floors. The plan arrangement is equally unfussy, with an open stair core in the south-west corner linking each floor: this isn't a building of complex spatial arrangements but rather a building made up of carefully-crafted individual spaces.

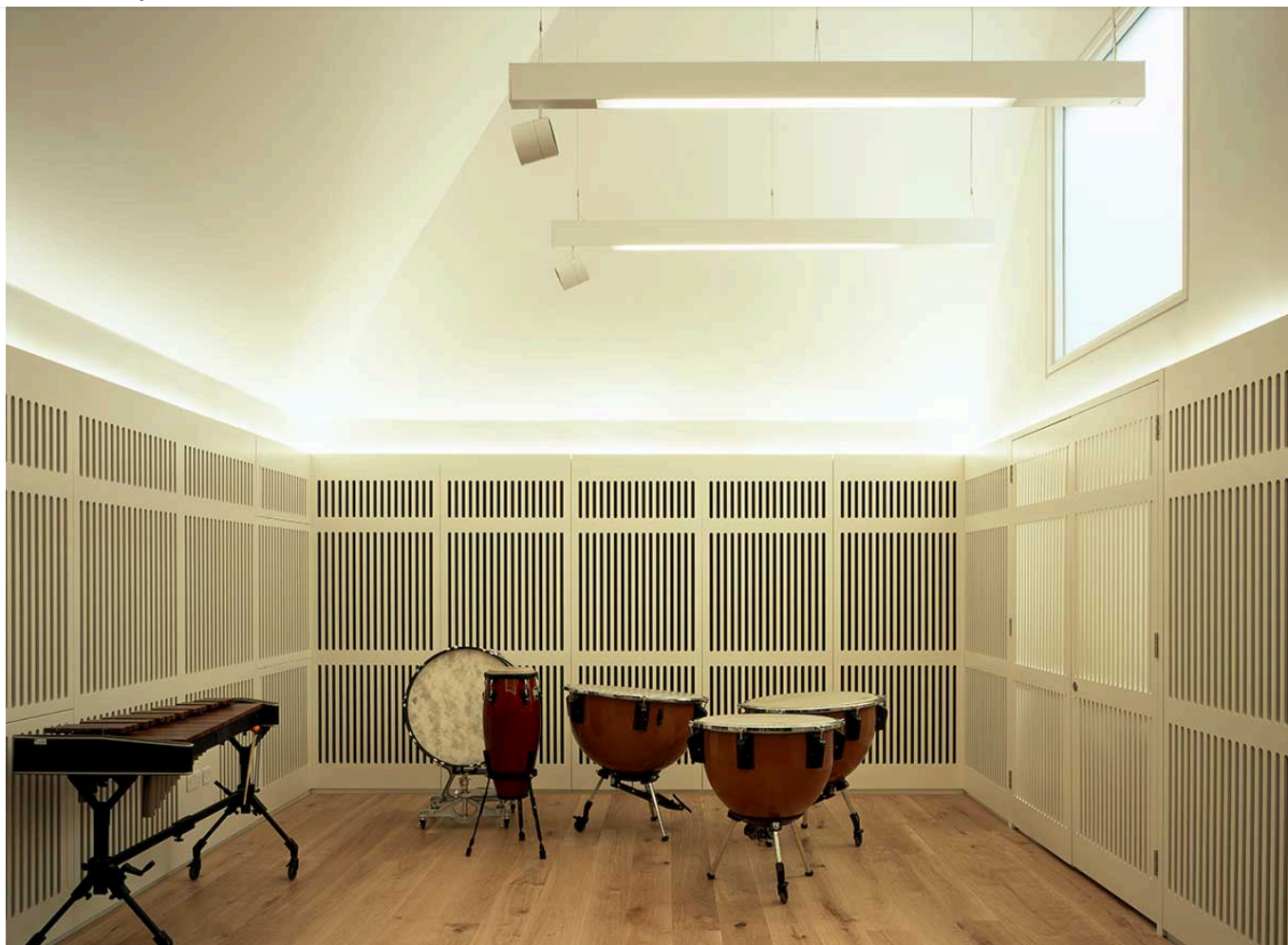
On a tour with EPA's project director Tim Lynch and Mark Maidment, director of services engineer Skelly & Couch, the building's considered synthesis of technical and architectural requirements becomes apparent. From the epic, submarine-style plant room, ventilation is supplied to the habitable rooms through neat grills in the 800mm-thick external walls. In the Recital Hall, exhaust air is extracted via a 800mm-deep duct, invisible behind the seating.



Stair with curved window giving a view onto the Giles Gilbert Scott Building.

Acoustics are equally well handled by both the architectural form and by a playful, Heath-Robinson arrangement of wall-mounted louvres on actuators and link-rods which, when open, expose absorbent linings to vary reverberation times. In combination these features give the back of the room something of the order and character of a church organ.

The drama continues towards the top of the building where two of the most delightful – if slightly serendipitous – moments are found. The ceiling over the stair core curves in plan and section and swoops round with a striking and fabulously-executed double-curved line as it leads to the top floor. To the rear of the building, a small Percussion Room adopts a different ceiling profile to the roof and in so doing creates an unexpected and intriguing space which exudes the character of a vault more than the rooftop space it actually is.



But here, I suppose, is the rub. While the sculptural quality of the ancillary spaces and the internal linings of the Recital Hall have developed into highly sophisticated and architecturally-mannered elements, formally and spatially the Recital Hall is little developed from Parry's original sketch. While the retention of an original vision can, on one level, be applauded, the envelope – delightful as it is – still feels diagrammatic and awaiting the level of playful design evolution that is evident elsewhere in the scheme.

In a similar vein, it is to be hoped that detail design work develops EPA's Drama School beyond the image presented in CGIs. When the ensemble of buildings fronting Home Ground comes together, it will need to cohere with a forthcoming Science and Sports Building, designed by OMA, that will run up the western side of Home Ground.

The Music Building is important for the college but also for Brighton, which has some claim to be Britain's greenest city – certainly in its voting habits. As Lynch and Maidment suggest on our walk-around, this will probably one of Brighton's most energy-efficient buildings, and the BREEAM Excellent project includes an open-loop ground-source heat pump that will also power the Drama School and OMA's Science and Sports Building, resulting in significant carbon savings. The College, and its projects director Steve Patten, should be commended for their foresight in investing in a long-term vision, sound energy planning, excellent architecture – and, of course, for the choice of performers to open new buildings.

Download Drawings

[EPA Brighton College music school drawings](#)

Credits

Arc hitect

Eric Parry Architects

Structural engineer

Momentum

M&E engineer

Skelly & Couch

Acoustics

Gillieron Scott

Roof tiles

Ceramica Cumella

Retractable seating

Hussey Seatway

Theatre supplies

National Stage Technology

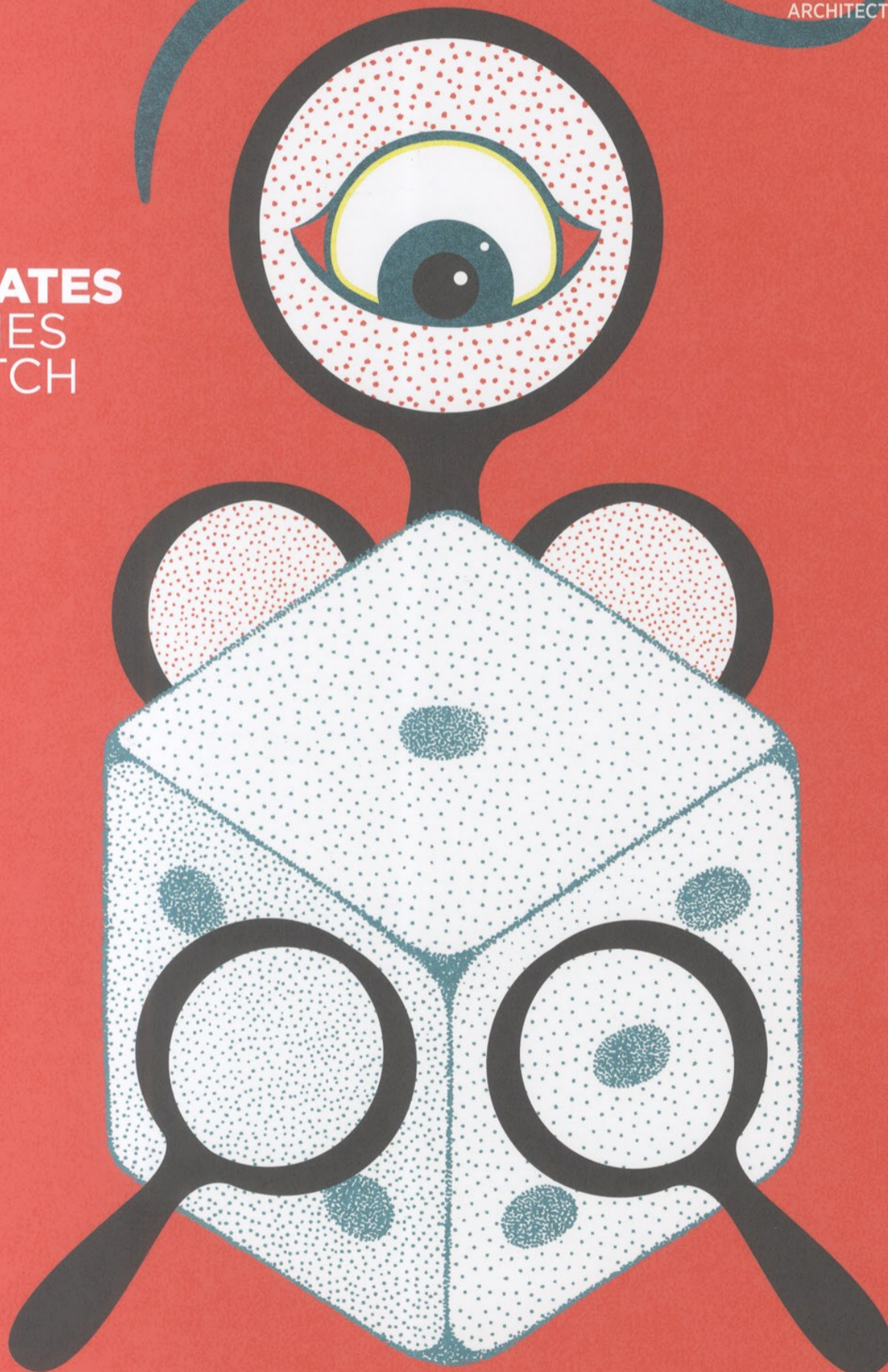
Green roof

Bauder

BLUEPRINT 348

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Publication: Blueprint
Date: September/October 2016

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PROJECT

Brighton College School of Music / Eric Parry Architects



Another new edifice, in a raft of new buildings for the 170-year-old Brighton College, has been unveiled — the music school by Eric Parry Architects, with a floating, pitched roof inspired by George Gilbert Scott's original school building. *Cate St Hill* visits



A stone's throw from **Brighton Pier** and neighbouring Kemptown, a chunk of the city is dedicated to **Brighton College**, an historic school campus comprising an imposing **George Gilbert Scott** building and various newer, ad-hoc, additions arranged in a traditional collegiate quadrangle. The latest building in its 170-year history is a new music school by London-based **Eric Parry Architects**. It is the first phase in creating a dedicated performing arts' hub and drama school that will replace an existing science block and open up the route through the previously disjointed campus, connecting the central quad to the vast, open playing field behind.

Inspired by Gilbert Scott's **flint gable** on the main school building, Eric Parry Architects' limestone-clad music school takes the form of a rectangular plan, with a 'floating' **pitched roof** 'hovering' above a grand, lofty, recital hall. The roof's composite steel and timber structure is finished with a pattern of red, glazed ceramic tiles that pick up on the russet-coloured roofs of the older buildings. 'I wanted to explore polychromy,' says Eric Parry. 'What I wanted was a very simple interior that was just about light, then the asymmetrical roof to do something that was responsive to the earth and sky. We worked on

an interlocking weave — it's almost like a textile design that runs across the roof.'

The music school is entered from a new courtyard that backs on to the Gilbert Scott building. A lower-ground level is dedicated to a series of acoustically isolated teaching and practice rooms, underneath which is another floor comprising storage and plant room with a **ground-source heat exchange system** that will serve not only the music school but other planned new buildings. 'It's [the building] sunk into the ground and is almost like an iceberg, you don't see all the complexity,' he says.

A sinuous staircase wrapped in bright-red steel leads to a percussion room and the centrepiece of the building: the 190-seat **Sarah Abraham recital hall**. It's full-height, north-facing glazed wall overlooks the **playing fields**, offering a green vista that almost makes you forget about the density of the city around you. Cream leather bleacher seats extend into the cathedral-like space while acoustic panels hidden in the walls open like gills to adjust the reverberation time, whether it's for a solo artist or a whole orchestra.

1 - Interior of the Sarah Abraham recital hall
2 - The staircase is wrapped in red steel
3 - The floating pitched roof is finished with a pattern of red, glazed ceramic tiles

'The thing that has always struck me about music spaces is that actually there is no real need to separate them from the environment. The playing field is a beautiful environment to engage with,' muses Parry. 'It's incredibly peaceful; whether it's in practice mode or recital mode, you're concentrating and listening but at the same time you're seeing birds pass and the weather change, and that's really special.'

Eric Parry's music school, and subsequent **drama school** (expected to complete in 2020) are not the only new additions to Brighton College — an ambitious 10-year redevelopment programme has already seen a **boarding house** (2013) and a building with staff facilities and common rooms (2012) by **Allies and Morrison**, while **Hopkins Architects**' five-storey academic building, with 22 new classrooms, is on site and due to complete next summer. **OMA** has also designed the new **Centre for Sports and Science**, a bold, dark-grey affair that will house a swimming pool, double-height sports hall and 18 state-of-the-art, university-standard science labs (due to start on site in 2017). It's a strategy that seems to be paying off well; in just 10 years, Brighton College has already leapfrogged from 147th to 6th place in **The Sunday Times** rankings. Now that's impressive.