

# WORKS: NIALL MCLAUGHLIN

**PROJECT TEAM** Client Dover District Council, Architect Niall McLaughlin Architects, Main contractor Barwick Construction, Structural engineer Price & Myers, Services engineer XCO2, Quantity surveyor Sworn King Partnership, Joinery subcontractor Canterbury Joinery

In December, a high-speed train service will begin operating between London St Pancras and the Kent coast, promising to knock as much as 40 minutes off journey times. For the sometimes pretty but universally run-down parade of seaside towns that extends between Margate and Folkestone, it can't arrive soon enough.

After witnessing the entropy over the past four decades of their tourist economies, local authorities are now touting the possibility of a revival. Those expectations can only be buoyed by the current state of the economy — it is a safe bet to say that in the next couple of years an increasing number of British families will take their holidays within the UK.

The area has recently witnessed a flurry of cultural activity as various towns try to position themselves in order to best exploit the anticipated wave of regeneration. Last year, Folkestone staged its first contemporary art triennial, and will follow through with next month's opening of a performing arts centre designed by Alison Brooks. In 2010, Margate will respond with David Chipperfield's Turner Contemporary.

Midway between them lies the resort town of Deal. Seven hundred years ago this was the busiest port in England, but you would struggle to guess as much from the

## The flurry of cultural activity anticipates a coming wave of regeneration

preponderance of charity shops and poundstretchers that make up much of its present day retail offer.

The town's economy underwent two particular blows in the nineties from which it has never properly recovered. The opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994 marked the beginning of a sharp decline in the prospects of the cross-channel ferry services that employed a large number of Deal's citizens; and two years later, the town's long history as a hub of military activity came to an end when the local Royal Marines barracks closed down after more than a century of operation.

The town therefore has a lot riding on its hopes of developing an expanded tourist economy. What it has in its favour is a nice beach, a well preserved Victorian and Georgian esplanade, and a really spectacular artillery fort, built in the reign of Henry VIII.

There is also a pier built to a design by engineer William Halcrow & Partners in 1957. It is the third structure to have stood on the site, and while it can claim little of the exuberance of its 19th century forebears, this bare bones essay in in-situ concrete forms a powerfully elemental focus to the urban scene.

At the end of its 296m-long stem lie three platforms located at different levels. This arrangement has not proved, it must be said, a work of design genius. The lowest platform was intended to allow small boats to dock — but due to a miscalculation of the tides, it remains almost permanently below water. The middle one was meant for use by pleasure cruisers, but by the time the pier was completed the demand for such a facil-

ity had all but disappeared. Finally, on the highest platform stood a café and toilet block, a structure that, optimistically given the nature of the saline environment, made extensive use of steel-framed windows.

After half a century of exposure to the elements, the building's fabric had suffered a marked deterioration, prompting Dover District Council to stage an RIBA competition in 2006 to find a design for its replacement. Niall McLaughlin Architects' proposal was awarded first prize and — after a prolonged delay while the £1.13 million budget was settled — was finally realised in November last year.

A principal motivation behind the design was the desire to avoid using any material that might suffer the kind of deterioration that had beset the previous structure. Ferrous components were ruled out, as were any that would require painting or lacquering.

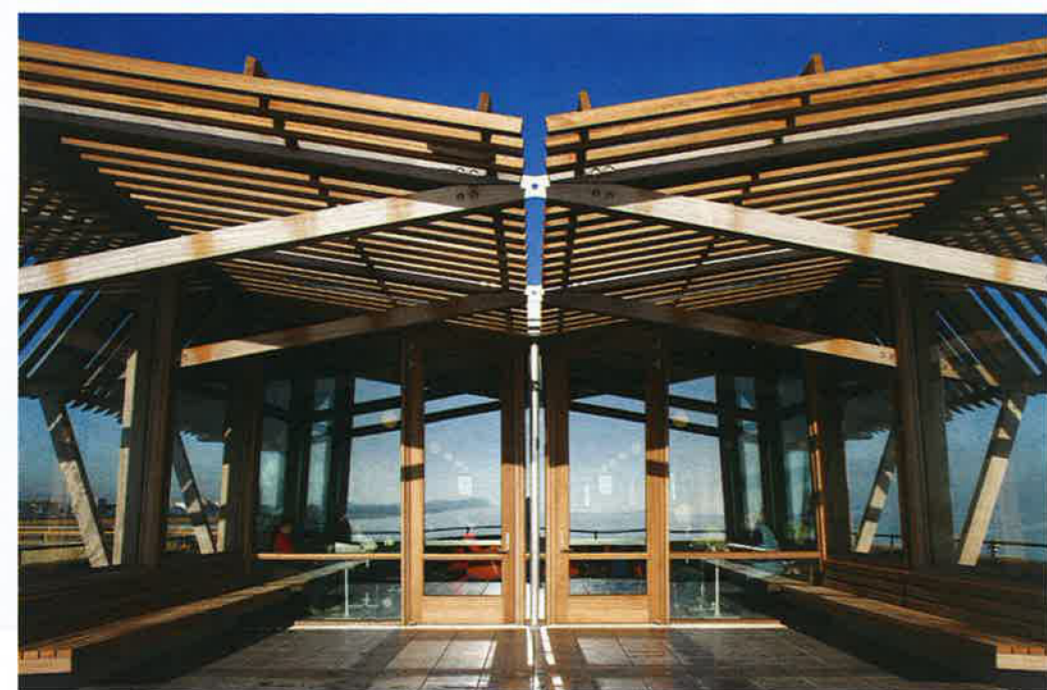
From observations of the old benches that lined the seafront, it was clear that unfinished hardwood could survive in these conditions. In fact, it was notable that the salty air had prevented the growth of the kind of fungal deposits that quickly accrue to timber structures in inland locations. A design was developed employing a structure built entirely in unfinished iroko. Given the challenging nature of the site, the fact that this strategy enabled a high level of prefabrication was also a major advantage.

The platform on which the building stands forms a 43m-long bar set transversely to the stem of the pier. A total of 17 identical iroko portal frames have been deployed along its length at 2m intervals, establishing a single-storey structure ringed by a narrow external circulation zone on all sides.

The laconic siting — the architect resisted the council's request that the café and toilets be accommodated in separate structures — gives the building a very direct relationship to its host structure: it feels of the pier rather than an addition to it. That impression is consolidated by the shared elemental nature of their construction and should be strengthened still further once the timber has greyed to a hue close to that of the concrete.

The toilets and kitchen have been shunted to the north end of the building, while the café has been allocated the south. Externally, this division is legible by virtue of the fact that the service spaces are enclosed in iroko boarding while the café is glazed. Critically, the meeting of these parts is offset slightly from the pier's principal axis, with the effect that as we approach the building we can see right the way through it and out to sea. The simple plan is counterpoised with a cross-section of real refinement. Each portal provides a scissor of flitched iroko spars onto which a butterfly roof has been laid. The wings of the roof terminate in an array of cantilevered iroko fins, a device that provides a small degree of shading but, by the architect's admission, is principally "heraldic" in function.

A key ambition was to avoid the need for visually intrusive haunches at the intersection of the spars and the vertical posts. This has necessitated fitting each portal with triangulated iroko braces that project out from the building like arms set akimbo. The result-



The butterfly roof fixes with triangulated iroko braces, reducing visual intrusion to a minimum.

ant assembly is completed by a second bank of fins which rest on the upper member of the triangulated bracing. These provide a significant amount of shading along the café's glazed elevations, but the fact that they also extend along the

windowless lengths of elevation suggests again that their purpose is rather more than functional.

A continuous bench has been built into each of the building's long elevations and the internal floor elevated so that diners can

look out over the head of anyone sat outside. The level change is accommodated by a ramp that holds to the westerly frontage. As we take it, the view of the sea is momentarily denied us, the payoff being that the moment of

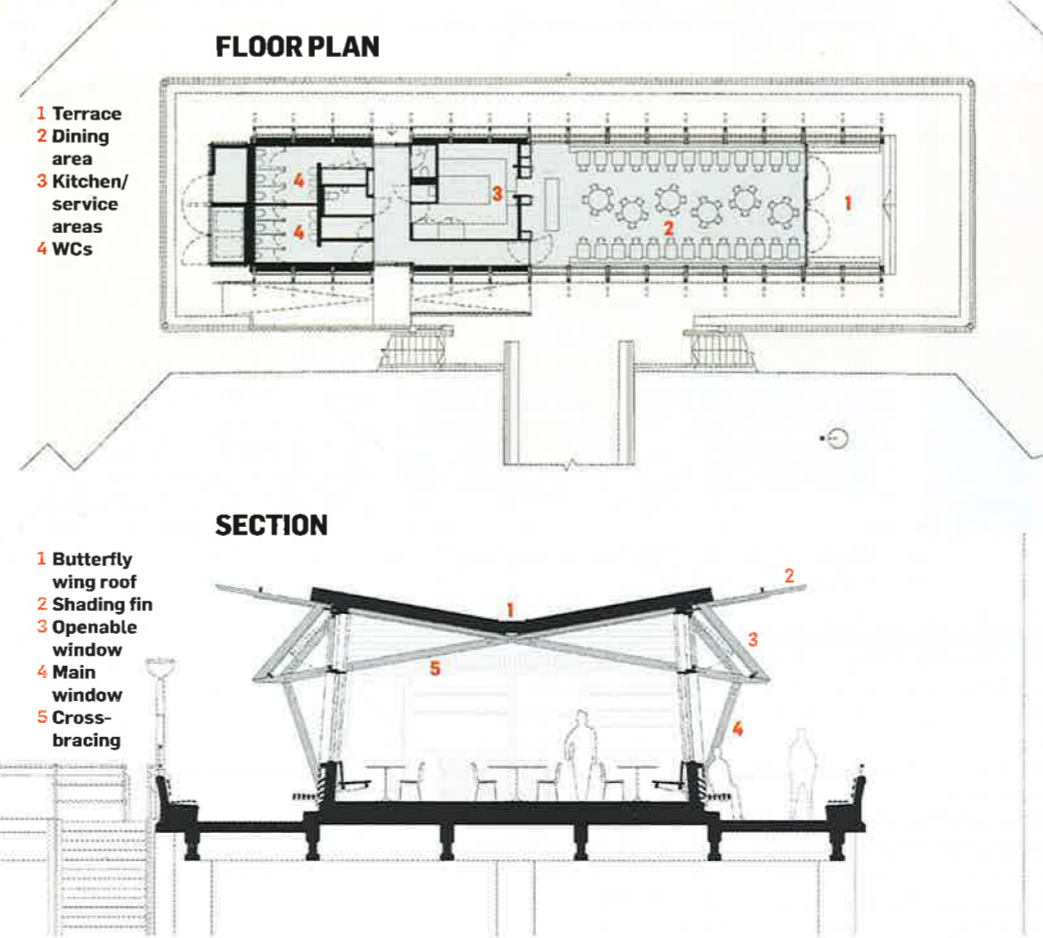
# Deal's choice

As British seaside towns scramble to secure much needed regeneration cash, Niall McLaughlin Architects' refit of the pier at Deal sets down a marker, reports Ellis Woodman

Pictures by Gavin Jackson/Arcaid



The glazed elevations permit views right the way through the café and out to sea.



In the café fitout, Louis Poulsen pendant lamps offer a hint of nautical chic.