

Niall McLaughlin Architects' symbolically rich, culturally ambitious Hull Architecture Centre is an expression of faith in the resurgence of a once-great city. **By Jan-Carlos Kucharek. Photographs: Nick Kane**

# Sunny side up

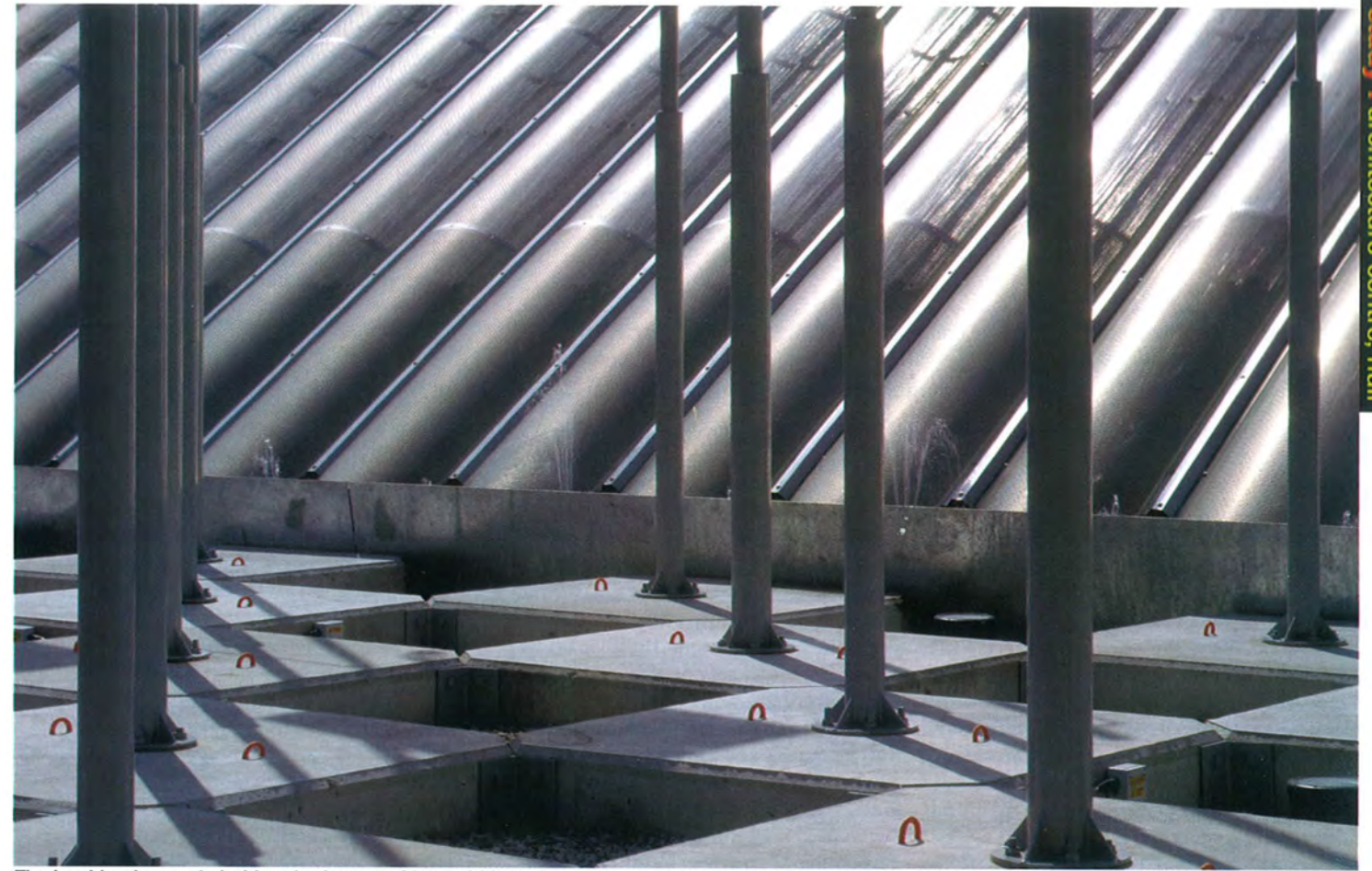


Client	ARC
Architect	Niall McLaughlin
Structural engineer	Price and Myers
Main contractor	Wright Construction
Quantity surveyor	EC Harris





Hull is home to a big caravan manufacturer, a fact alluded to by the wheels and tow bars and the bulbous plastic windows in the sides of the pods.

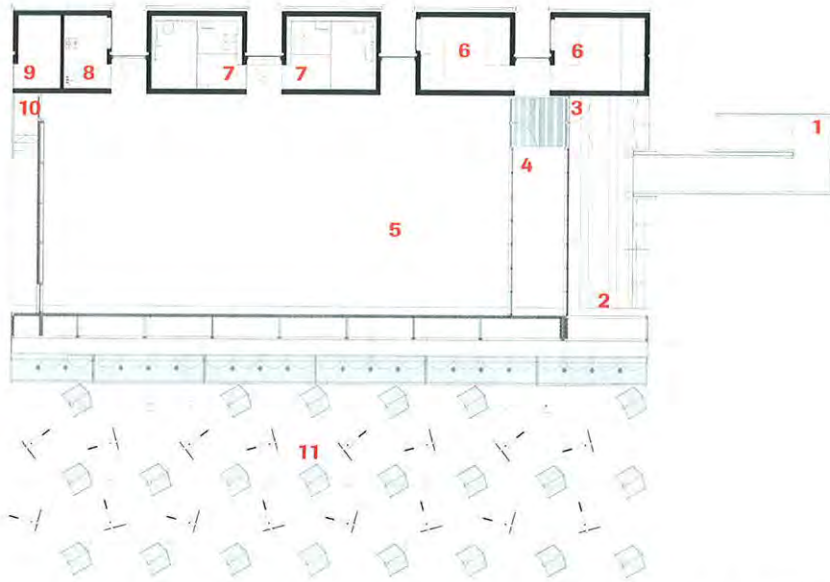


The hard landscape is bold and robust, and it would have been good to see the principle applied to the soft landscape – if the project had any.



The interior is a simple, stark space which nonetheless maintains a sense of domestic scale. Underfloor heating allows it to remain uncluttered.





**Plan**

- 1 Ramp
- 2 External deck
- 3 Entrance
- 4 Lobby
- 5 Exhibition/education space
- 6 Office
- 7 WCs
- 8 Kitchen
- 9 Plant room
- 10 Fire escape stairs
- 11 Renewable energy thicket of PV panels and wind turbines

**Costs**

Total costs	£551,000
Area (exc thicket)	284m <sup>2</sup>
Costs/m <sup>2</sup>	£1873

**Breakdown**

Preliminaries	£84,209
Padstones/floor	£45,350
Caravan modules	£69,470
Roof	£101,757
Ext glazing	£49,413
Finishes/fixtures	£22,304
Services	£122,153
Ext works	£26,276
Contingency	£11,000
(Thicket)	£19,068

The fact that Arc, Hull's new architecture centre, is there at all is a surprise to everyone, not least the client. Architect Niall McLaughlin recalls how during initial discussions with Hull Highways Agency, the scheme was nearly scuppered because it felt the building would prove too much of a distraction for the articulated trucks rumbling along the A63 en route to the Humber Bridge. The firm found itself having to conduct a bizarre risk assessment in which it argued that the centre was no more a distraction than advertising hoardings.

If you're approaching over the cusp of Castle street overpass, you can see the agency's point. Arc (Architecture Regeneration Communities) is a very difficult building to ignore. That is as it should be, and certainly how its facilitator and champion Susie Hay likes it. The centre represents years of effort by Hay, who chairs Arc, and her executive committee to invigorate the cultural and urban debate for the city, which since the 1970s has suffered massive economic decline.

Hay's original agenda was to kick-start an outreach programme highlighting design issues through seminars and workshops in the local schools. With financial support from Yorkshire Forward and City Ventures, along with three other funders, the idea of a building began to gain credibility.

Of the six architects it approached, the committee was impressed by McLaughlin's Bexhill bandstand and sympathetic to his talk of drawing the design out of the everyday experiences and histories of the city's residents. With the prospect of no permanent site, the building was to be mobile; its language expressing this sense of temporality.

The practice paid numerous visits to local schools and community groups and tried to get under the skin of Hull and its residents. They

listened to stories of the docks, and the trawlers stationed permanently out at sea. They heard about the opening of the Humber bridge and how the old ferry service went out of business almost overnight, and how this was just another symptom of the city losing the connection with its estuary and the sea beyond.

The result is what Susie Hay calls 'a lean-to to learn from'. The concept is extremely simple, as is the resulting space, but the formal moves have been driven by ideas that came out of those initial conversations. A stone's throw from here is the old heart of Hull, but standing at the door of the centre you're unaware of this; the overriding sense is of being on the periphery. Shut your eyes, though, and you can hear the building hum as its garden of mini wind turbines and 'open books' of photovoltaics turn to the wind and sun (technology subsidised by sponsors). Together with the perforated steel sheets that angle up from the ground to form the roof and frame them, these are the main signifiers of the building.

Inside, you're occupying a single triangular volume, the roof reaching up to bear on five blue timber 'caravans' (Hull is the home of Swift Caravans), which after being towed to site on their own wheels, were placed in line and merely upended to house the boiler, kitchenette, toilets, office spaces and storage.

The building sits on concrete pad founda-

tions, the loads taken on small section steel beams – another local echo: floating foundations were typical for the locality, houses on friction piles driven into the mud of the Humber estuary. The roof, sponsored by a local steel company, comprises a polycarbonate sheet cavity overlaid by curved perforated stainless steel directing a cool air flow over its surface and providing a degree of solar shading. At the foot of the roof a trough becomes an active water feature, enlivened by plastic sprinklers that condition the air as it passes over the polycarbonate cavity.

It would have been nice to have used real caravans or at least a more formal reference to them; and while the lack of landscaping is a consequence of the building's mobility, we are left wondering what a natural landscape would be like if it, too, had to move.

But the symbolism of the building and the aspirations it embodies eclipses these points. For McLaughlin the project is a work in progress, which will modify and change as it is resited. Hull's Arc is a modern day folly, full of faith and foibles, the strength of its voice belying its modest proportions.

The most ambitious aspect of the design has yet to be carried out. It involves videoing the water by day from Spurn Point, a famous local landmark, and projecting the video by night onto the steel roof – a literal but dream-like reconnection with the sea. Subliminal advertising channelled noiselessly into the low rumble of Hull's arterial roads. ■

**Elevation**

- 1 Steel mesh roof with scalloped edge
- 2 Caravan structure
- 3 Entrance door
- 4 Chimney
- 5 Entrance ramp
- 6 Glazed end wall
- 7 Rainwater gutter and fountain
- 8 Projector
- 9 PV panel
- 10 Wind turbine
- 12 Precast concrete renewable base
- 13 Precast concrete pad foundation



**Specification** glazing by Glass & Framing Solutions (no 600), roof panels by Eltherington Aluminium (601), cladding by RSR (602), solar panels by Solar Century (603), wind turbines by Winsund (604), paint by Holiday Pigments (605). For more information on these products, visit [www.riba-journal.co.uk/enquiries](http://www.riba-journal.co.uk/enquiries)