

On the waterfront

As its pier crumbles, Brighton should look to Bexhill for a new approach to the sea, says **Jonathan Glancey**

PHOTOGRAPHS: ROGER BAMBER, CHRIS BRINK/VIEW (SOUTHPORT)

Not so very far from Brighton and its tumbledown West Pier is Bexhill-on-Sea, the front there adorned by the much-loved De La Warr Pavilion. This streamlined 1930s pleasure palace has now been joined by the finest new seaside building we have seen on Britain's coastline for many years: a brand new bandstand in the guise of an abstracted seagull wing, designed by Niall McLaughlin Architects and engineered by Price and Myers.

The new bandstand has about it an energy, a lightness of touch and a gentle, ice-cream humour. Made from what are now commonplace materials - fibreglass, plywood and steel - it is anything but ordinary. The whole kiss-me-quick caboodle

can be wheeled around the deck between pavilion and sea, and it provides a perfect foil to Mendelsohn and Chermayeff's pavilion.

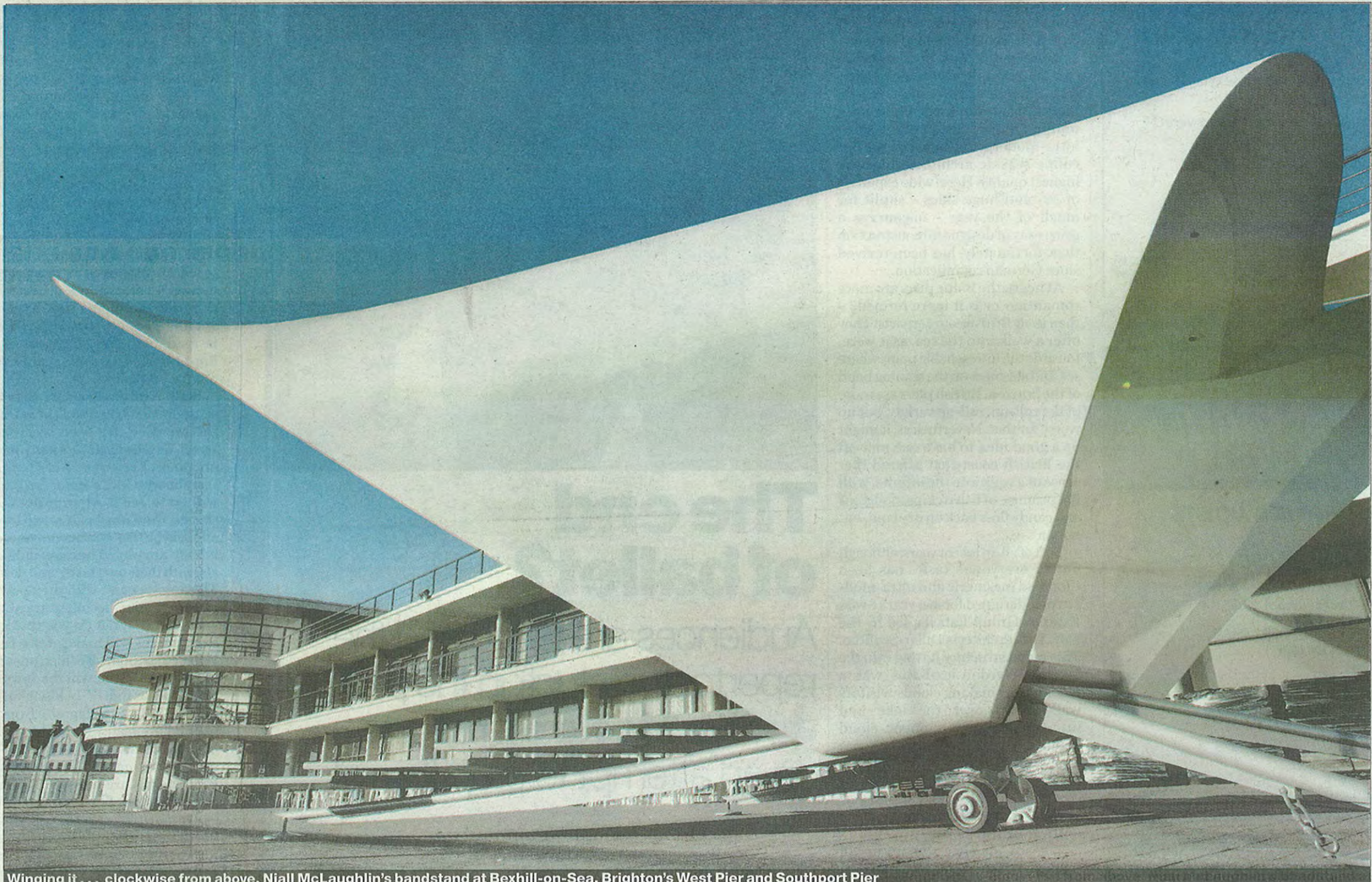
Precious few bandstands have been built since the first world war. Seaside architecture, at its best, is a reminder that one of architecture's key purposes is to delight. McLaughlin and the architects and engineers who have designed the Serpentine Gallery's innovative summer pavilions over the past few years - Daniel Libeskind, Toyo Ito, Cecil Balmond and Zaha Hadid among them - have shown that we still know how to shape an architecture of pure pleasure and joy, structures designed to lift us away from everyday cares.

But why stop at summer pavilions and bandstands? What about a fresh injection of cash, energy and architectural imagination into Britain's seaside towns? What about an ultra-modern pier? We can do it: on the Lancashire coast, the old Southport Pier has been brought happily back to life. The second longest pier in Britain, it was closed in 1998 and has now been restored by the Southport Pier Trust. Soon trams will be running its exaggerated length once more.

The collapse of Brighton's West Pier, however, is an invitation to think about brand new seaside design. There is little chance that what remains of the battered Victorian pier will go the way of Turner's Fighting Temeraire, or, for that matter, Clevedon Pier. Although the West Pier has been closed to the public since 1975, the West Pier Trust has already spent £1.5m strengthening its creaking structure in preparation for the £30m restoration work proper that was to have started this summer and to have been completed in 2005. The pier's concert hall, cut off from the esplanade, has been left dangling over the sea, although even this potential disaster has failed to dampen the enthusiasm of the West Pier Trust.

Geoff Lockwood, the trust's chief executive, says he has been bombarded with suggestions, many from Europe and North America, as to what to do with the pier. The vast majority, he says, want the pier restored exactly as it was, which effectively means as it was in full bloom in the 1920s. There are those who are concerned that the rebuilt pier can never recreate the atmosphere of its heyday, but Lockwood politely dismisses this. Seaside architecture, including that of the pier itself over its long life, has twisted and turned, morphed as it were with changing winds, fashions, and tides.

The trust, perhaps with an eye to the critically acclaimed new bandstand at Bexhill, is not against a brand new pier. "If a consortium comes up with a good design," says Lockwood, "and a sound funding package for such a new pier, this



Winging it... clockwise from above, Niall McLaughlin's bandstand at Bexhill-on-Sea, Brighton's West Pier and Southport Pier

would be welcome as an addition to the Brighton and Hove seafront. But the proposals and funding package we have negotiated over the past seven years are available only for the restoration of the West Pier as a heritage asset." In fact, the trust did investigate a number of modern designs by contemporary architects five years ago but, in consultation with English Heritage, decided that it was best to restore the pier.

The trust is probably doing the right thing by Eugenius Birch's finest pier. Birch was the prolific Victorian engineer who designed and built no fewer than 14 piers off the coasts of England and Wales between 1853 and 1884. He was the engineer of the Calcutta-Delhi Railway and the patentee of a cast-iron screw-pile that made the construction of his British piers possible. He was also a man with an inexhaustible sense of the fantastic. Birch knew, from his travels through exotic parts of **page 14**

