**UWTSD**

History and Theory 2 – Part 1

# The Royal Welsh Collage of Music & Art: is the modernist extension justified?

Fig. 1: The Royal Welsh Theatre of Music and Drama, North View (Nick Guttridge, 2011)

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As you enter Cardiff City Centre from the north, you will most likely travel down North Road, the A470. On this road you will pass the grade I listed Cathays Park, the Civic Centre of Cardiff, an array of neo-classical civic buildings. However, on the opposite side of this road stands a building that sits quite out of place, a starkly modernist structure with large continuous white plains, a sweeping cantilever roof and even a large twisting wooden clad structure. This building is the extension of the Royal Welsh Collage of Music and Drama designed by Francis and Laurence, and despite being wedged between the forested Bute Park and the busy Civic Centre, they have managed to place a distinctive contemporary structure that couldn't feel more appropriate. But was this the correct approach? The original collage building, now hidden behind its concrete panel façade, is completely unrecognisable. To understand why the architects took this approach we must look at the history of the collage, and the decisions and compromises they made to the design to accommodate the existing structure.

Fig. 2: Cardiff Collage of Music at Cardiff Castle (Buzz Magazine, n.d.)

The original Royal Welsh Collage of Music and Drama or RWCMD was founded in 1949 as the 'Cardiff Collage of Music' in Cardiff Castle after the Marquis of Bute donated the land to the City of Cardiff Education Committee (fig. 2) (Western Mail, 1949). After twenty five successful years at Cardiff Castle, producing many notable alumni such as Anthony Hopkins (Royal Welsh Collage of Music and Drama, 2025), the collage finally moved in 1974 to a dedicated building built on 1.9 acres on the edge of Bute Park and the Civic Centre of Cardiff, the Raymond Edwards Building, designed by Architect John Dryburgh (Newman, J., 2004, p.232).


Fig. 3: Raymond Edwards Building, Northeast Façade (Google Maps, 2009)

The concrete and masonry building was very typical of its time, a standard utilitarian institutional block with strong horizontal features such as the long ribbon windows and a large cantilever mass that dominates the West Facade (fig. 3). The East of the building backs onto the Bute Park and the Dock Feeder Canal where it continues its horizontal motifs before being interrupted by a large exposed concrete cuboid chimney that sits in contrast to its lush surroundings as seen in figure 4. While the majority of the frontage is in brown buff brickwork with some decorative banding, the cantilevered concrete floor slab is intentionally exposed where the planes separate, a feature that is still present in the modern renovation. This new building brought many new amenities to the collage, including a studio theatre, a dedicated concert hall, and a prop workshop, allowing them to greatly expand the courses they offered. In retrospect Meic Stephens (1999) describes the building as a ''splendid purpose-built premises'', however, other than the building's functionality, public sentiment on the building is wholly lacking, indicating that the building is architecturally unremarkable.

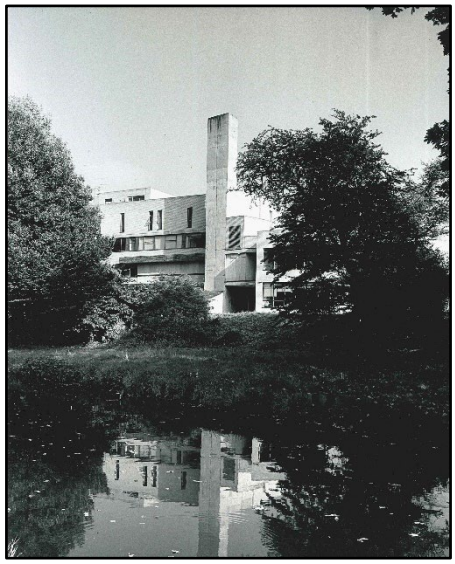


Fig. 4: Raymond Edwards Building, Southwest View (n.d.)

In 2007 an international competition was held for the extension and renovation of the Raymond Edwards building which according to Welch, A. (2012), required a new in-house concert hall, a courtyard theatre and contemporary teaching spaces. The winning design was done by Flanagan Lawrence, (2025) formally known as Bogle Flanagan Lawrence Silver, or BFLS, who earned the project, based on their design's interactions with its context and their "inside out" approach to designing the performance spaces, evidenced by one of their concept images showing their internal approach, figure 5. Flanagan Lawrence faced a difficult brief, according to Pritchard, O. (2012), the Collage and the City Council were working to a tight budget of £22.5 million, which also needed to cover the renovations to the existing building and the neighbouring Anthony Hopkins Centre; a grade II listed building. Additionally, Design Commission For Wales (2013), detailed that they could not afford to supply temporary classrooms and as such, the existing building needed to remain open throughout the construction.

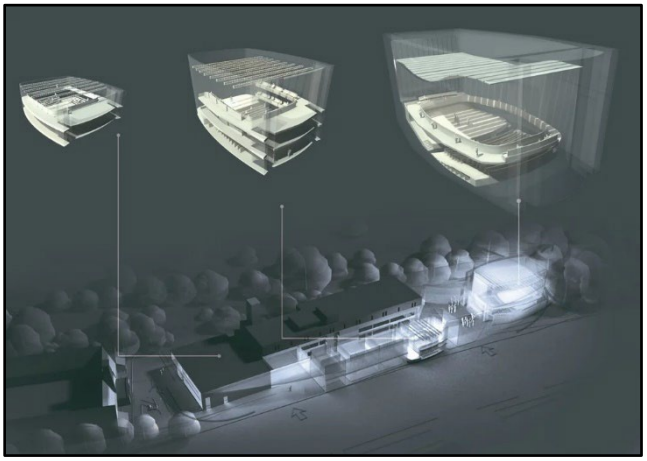


Fig. 5: Flanagan Lawrence Concept Image for the RWCMD (Flanagan Lawrence, 2007)

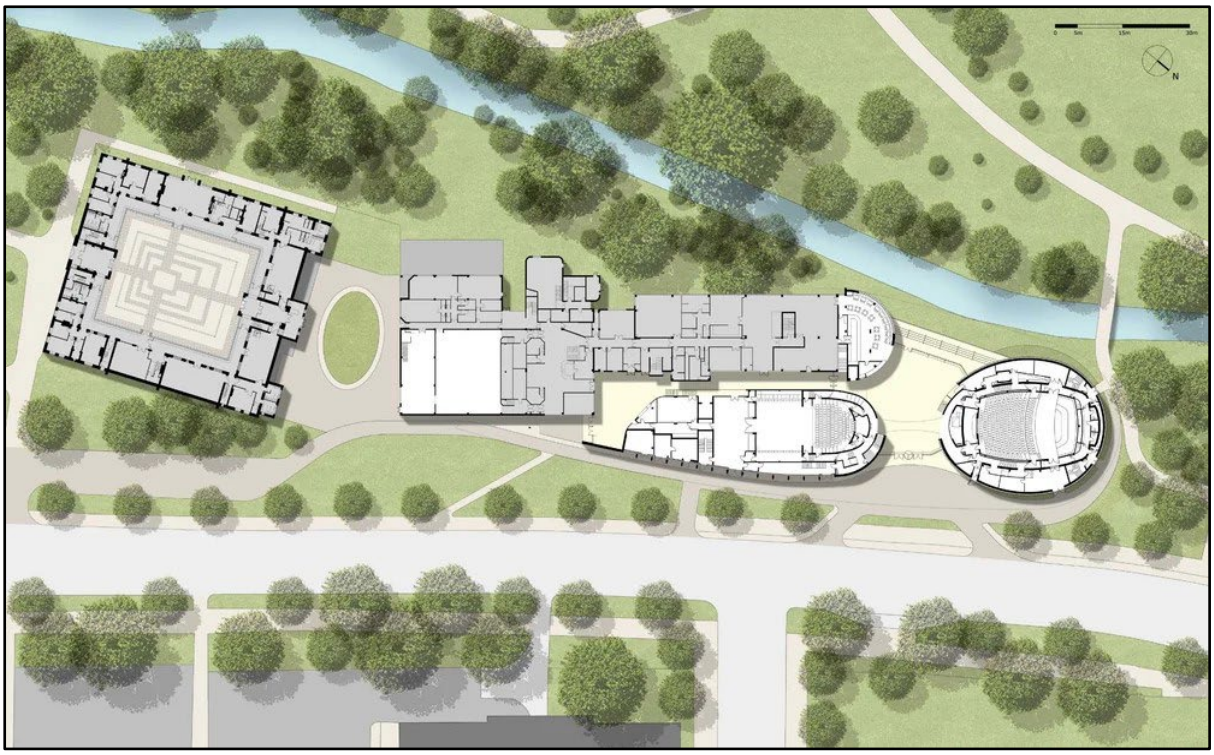


Fig. 6: Proposed Floorplan for the RWCMD Extension (Flanagan Lawrence, n.d.)

Their solution was to essentially construct two contemporary buildings and the enclose them and the existing building under one sweeping roof with large glazed curtain walls bridging the gap as seen in figure 6. In doing so they created two main atrium spaces connected by a valley between the existing and new construction. By using wall to wall glazing they created an internal courtyard within the footprint of the building which allowed for a seamless connection to the Bute park (fig. 7), where they have placed a cafe bar and hall which can act as both a breakout space for students, and an event space. Opposing this is another large curtain wall that reveals the busy North Road, one of the main entrances to Cardiff's city centre, from the inside of this atrium space they achieve a sharp incongruous juxtaposition between the hectic urban environment and the tranquil wooded park. From this atrium you can continue through a triple height yet narrow valley that separates the original facade of the 1974 building and the modern theatre block, on one side is the buff brick work which has now been painted white but retains its masonry texture, while opposing it is a clean white rendered wall that is used to display student work. The end of this corridor then suddenly opens up into the second atrium and the main student entrance, the painted brick wall continues

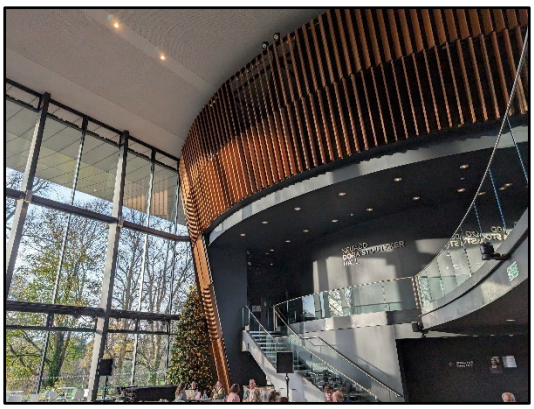


Fig. 7: Internal Courtyard (Author, 2024)

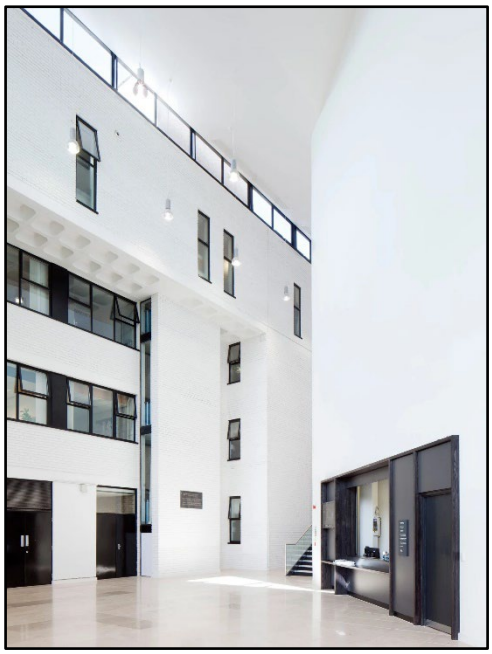


Fig. 8: Second Atrium
(Flanagan Lawrance, 2011)

along the line of the original structure meeting the original entrance way, while the white rendered wall angles out to create the volume of the space enclosing the original entrance (fig. 8). This second entrance acts as both a reception and a light well for the windows on the original facade of the building, with the majority of natural light in the space coming from the large yet narrow triple height glazed curtain window that connects the modern and original walls. In order to avoid overheating and maintain controlled lighting in the space, the large canopy roof sweeps out across the glazing, sheltering it from direct sunlight (fig. 9). The white painted brick continues down the exterior of the original building, while the contemporary front curves out matching the sweep of the roof. Across this modern facade stands large steel frame fins that filter and disperse the morning light in the east facing theatre circulation space and classrooms; they stand separate to the curved glazed curtain wall behind them and are designed to echo the neo-classical columns of the opposing grade I listed Cathays Park, the Civic Centre of Cardiff. The curved exterior finally converges to a nadir, intensified by the disconnected inverted frustum shaped music hall that explodes out in a busy rhythm of cedar wood slats that gradually change their pivot across five rows at varying phase differences as they swathe around the oval shaped auditorium. The wooden louvers continue from the road around to the wooded park, where it goes from being a distinctive warm structure in a cold asphalt, concrete and stone environment to an apt fixture of the verdant parkland (fig. 10), taking the cold edge off the 1970s masonry building.

Fig. 9: Royal College of Music and Drama, East View
(Flanagan Lawrance, 2011)

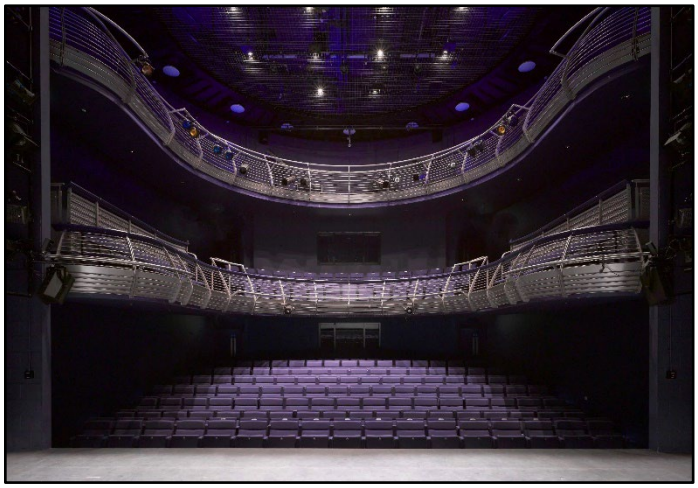
Fig. 10: Royal Collage of Music and Drama, West View
(Flanagan Lawrance, 2011)

Fig. 11: Dora Stoutzker Hall
(Flanagan Lawrance, 2011)

Mirroring its wooden cladding, the music hall, named the Dora Stoutzker Hall, heavily uses birch plywood panels in an array of concave bays, which according to Corwe and Knowles (2011), are designed to softly defuse sound around the 450-seat 'shoebox' chamber (figure 11). The hall is crafted to accommodate many different types of music media including recital, orchestras, quires, jazz and even spoken word poetry. Due to each of these requiring different accommodations Francis Lawrence with the help of ARUP Acoustics Consulting ensured that the music hall was fully adaptable including easily removable seats, and movably under-floor panels above the sound insulation that can change the reverberation within the space to suit the needs of the performance. Wrapping around the stage and main seating area is a sloping balcony with wrapping seating that brings the stage into the round making for a more intimate experience despite its large capacity. They also explain that before this was built, the Collage had only an 80-seat recital room and when in need of a larger venue would rent a local church or the nearby St David's hall, which has recently closed due to safety concerns in its structural integrity (BBC News, 2023). This makes their need for a new dedicated large music hall clear as they could not rely on these venues and were limited by their availability and rental fees.

According to Frearson (2011), the height of the extension was not dictated by the existing building, but instead by the minimum height of the fly-tower for the Richard Burton Theatre, the smaller 180-seat venue with a courtyard style auditorium with another two levels of horse-shoe seating (figure 12). This theatre takes the opposite approach to the concert hall, draping everything in a dark violet with an array of spotlights to create a focus on the performance. Contrary to most theatres, the Richard Burton theatre features a stage with a larger floor-space than the auditorium, freeing students to create without the restrictions of their previous venue.

Fig. 12: Richard Burton Theatre
(Flanagan Lawrance, 2011)



It is evident that the extension to the Collage goes further than just fitting the brief, the new facilities provide the School with not just new rooms, but a new presence and identity within Cardiff. In adding the extension, they brought more value to what was a building lacking in facilities, allowing the collage to continue operating from the location for decades to come. It can be argued, however, that they went too far in re-designing the facade, as without context of the existing building many people may completely miss it. They attempt to celebrate the building through its rejuvenated use and incorporation with the extension yet seemingly hide it behind a more modern front, even painting it as to hide its form. While the extension did add many new facilities, the original building is still an outdated 1970's civic building that only received limited retrofitting due to the scale of the extension taking the majority of the limited budget. Thomsen, Schultmann and Kohler (2011), discuss that in many cases demolition may be the more financial option when redeveloping a site, and while the deconstruction and then construction of an entirely contemporary Collage of Music and Drama may be vastly more expensive than the £22 million extension, in the long term it could actually pay off. According to Alexander and Beushausen (2019), the average expected life-span of concrete frame buildings is about 50-100 years depending on how it is cared for over its life time, if we assume that when the extension was constructed that there were renovations done to the structure of the existing building, we can expect that the structure of the 1970s portion of the collage will expire as soon as the 2050s and only up to 2073 at a maximum. Meanwhile the extension, a heavy steel frame building, is expected and designed to last at least 120 years up to 2131 (British Standards Institute, 2002), vastly outliving the masonry host it is built off. In the future, extensive structural refurbishment will need to take place for the building to operate past the existing buildings lifespan which may end up costing more than if they constructed a completely contemporary construction instead. On the other hand, when looking from an environmental perspective, retrofit and refurbishment is almost always the best approach, Appleby (2025), discusses this where he compares the carbon consumption impacts when building new versus retrofitting an existing structure, and even when considering the shorter life-span, he finds that retrofitting is always less impactful due to the large amounts of carbon produced from the construction process.

In retrospect the criticisms against this approach of extension are trivial to the actual value added to the Collage by this development. The only truly valid criticisms can distil down to two arguments; one is an argument of taste in how the existing building is treated and whether to hide it or clearly display it. The other argument is one of short-sited finance and a criticism of buildings in general being designed with shorter lifespans. Despite these arguments the Royal Welsh Collage of Music and Drama stands as a gold standard of large-scale extensions due to its light touch on the existing building while revolutionising the functionality and opportunities of the collage. In designing the aesthetics, they did not look to the existing building, but the context the building exists in, bringing a new perspective to the traditional approach of designing the extension to either mirror, complement or subvert the existing structure. This opportunity could only be granted through the unique circumstances of the site due to the original collage building being unvalued in its context. But then this does bring into question the potential of bringing this alternative ‘gentle scorched earth’ approach to other buildings, whether from a similar background or not. Suppose this cost-effective approach could be taken on dilapidated schools or other civic buildings from a similar era, allowing us to breath new life into disregarded buildings at a relatively cheap cost.

# Table of Figures

# List of References

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