



## Belgrade Theatre extension

**location:**  
**Coventry**

A landmark seven-storey extension to the listed Belgrade Theatre houses a flexible second auditorium as well as enhanced public and backstage areas. Designed by Stanton Williams.

The new facilities are housed in a seven-storey extension by architects Stanton Williams at what was previously the rear of the theatre, with work taking place between 2004 and 2007.



The scheme finds a wider context in the continuing regeneration of Coventry city centre. The extended and refurbished theatre is adjacent to a major new mixed-use development, Belgrade Plaza, and the theatre's extensions link it with this area. The theatre and plaza schemes together are expected to bring significant new life to a previously run-down part of the central area.

Belgrade II has received an enthusiastic response, recalling the acclaim given to the original Belgrade Theatre in 1958. After many years of planning and fundraising, the Belgrade's physical premises will now aid its objective to once again be a theatre of national and even international significance in an environment that is accessible, stimulating and uplifting for performers, staff and audiences alike.

### Introduction

Stanton Williams's landmark extension to the Belgrade Theatre adds considerably to its facilities, forming a physical bridge between the original 1958 building and new developments to the west of the theatre. Conceptually, the seven-storey addition comprises a series of interlocking cubic volumes of black and grey render, red panels, glass, and translucent polycarbonate. They soar above the earlier building, functioning as a signpost of the theatre's presence from the nearby elevated ring road and car park.



The relationship between the new additions and their surroundings is crucial to the scheme's conception. The original Belgrade Theatre faces a small public square at the junction of Upper Well Street and Corporation Street. However, in recent years most patrons have arrived by car, using a nearby multi-storey car park and then entering the theatre by what was originally intended as a secondary entrance at its rear. The Stanton Williams extension expands the theatre in this direction, with a new glazed elevation forming a more inviting entrance than the dingy vestibule of the previous rear door. This

new elevation will form one side of a semi-circular public space (including a hotel, cafés and restaurants) when the adjoining Belgrade Plaza project is completed in 2009. Patrons arriving at this point enter into a new double-height, galleried space with a relocated and expanded box office to one side and the theatre bar and toilets to the other. The new second auditorium and backstage areas lead off to the right. Straight ahead, there are views into the 1958 foyers, which have been sympathetically restored in the spirit of their original post-war Modernism, yet with finishes and furnishings which link them to the new public spaces. In these new spaces, the external colour palette of grey, white and bright red is deployed to great effect and there are interesting views between the different levels.

The new second auditorium offers 250-330 seats in a space whose utilitarian aesthetic suits the flexibility of its possible arrangements. A completely clear ground floor, narrow upper galleries and three technical 'bridges' at ceiling level which can move both horizontally and vertically (providing positions for lights and props) all allow the space to be used in various ways: end stage, in-the-round, or courtyard theatre.

Backstage, the accommodation for performers has been significantly improved and expanded. Especially noteworthy is the location of a new rehearsal room above the second auditorium, which complements the existing room, a large hall in an adjacent office building.

## Design process

A second auditorium and expanded facilities had long been a goal of the Belgrade Theatre. Although it retained a loyal audience, the building was increasingly thought functionally problematic by the late 1990s.

It was listed at Grade II in 1998 for the intrinsic interest of its architecture, its almost intact late-1950s auditorium and its status as the first all-new professional theatre to be built in Britain after the Second World War. However, its public foyer areas had been subjected to unsympathetic cosmetic alterations in the 1980s and early 1990s which had obscured their original airy lightness. Furthermore, the foyers and the external elevations were increasingly shabby in appearance. Rehearsal space was cramped and often makeshift, while the dressing rooms and technical areas were of poor quality. Throughout, there was inadequate provision for disabled users. A capital development strategy was therefore drafted internally in 1999 and a feasibility study carried out in 2001 by ABL Consulting and Levitt Bernstein Architects.



The project was led internally by an experienced member of the theatre management, David Beidas, who undertook the role of capital projects director (later in a freelance capacity). By the end of 2002, with the basis of the funding package and a procurement strategy in place, an external project manager was appointed and a design team led by Stanton Williams Architects was selected after competitive interview (following OJEC/OJEU procedures due to the scale of the project). A CABE enabler provided valuable advice to the client in making the design team appointment and navigating the complex OJEC procedures. The new auditorium was developed with input from Theatreplan, the specialist theatre consultant. There was also strong artistic guidance from the theatre's artistic director, Hamish Glen, who took up his post shortly before Stanton Williams was appointed.

The design was published in June 2003. However, it was some time before work commenced, as the theatre juggled a complex funding package (with contributions from a variety of local, national, and international sources) with escalating costs and their own evolving ideas for the internal configuration and programming policy of the new auditorium. The same rising costs, the difficulties of joining old and new buildings and the need to balance the requirements of different funding bodies all prolonged the construction and refurbishment works, which were carried out in the main between 2005 and 2007. The theatre was closed for approximately 18 months.

The exterior and public areas of the Stanton Williams extension followed traditional procurement lines. To minimise costs, it was decided once construction had begun that the new auditorium should be fitted out as a separate design and build contract, let in 2006.

Refurbishment of the original 1958 building was also undertaken as a separate contract. The approach taken recognised the architectural value of the elevations, foyers and auditorium. It was informed by a conservation management plan, commissioned by the theatre from Short and Associates with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This document provides an architectural and historical overview of the significant parts of the building and gives a framework within which appropriate development and maintenance policies can be formulated. Having commissioned this plan, the theatre was able to secure further funding from the Heritage Lottery for the refurbishment works and the provision of an exhibition gallery and education space.

## Evaluation

The architecture of the extended and refurbished Belgrade is testament to the dedication of the project team over almost ten years. Locally, it has been well received. Nationally, too, the Belgrade has attracted attention. The contemporary nature of the new extension and the stripping away of unsympathetic accretions in the original building have both been a major factor in altering perceptions of the theatre. The Guardian reported on the theatre's ambition to recapture the pioneering spirit and artistic innovation for which it was famous in the early 1960s but which had become obscured in subsequent years, asking 'is Coventry's newly-reopened Belgrade about to become Britain's most daring theatre?'



In practical terms, the expanded Belgrade's facilities address what would otherwise have become significant hurdles to the theatre's ongoing existence. The whole building is now accessible, and complies with current health and safety requirements. Essential maintenance works to the original building have been carried out as well as sympathetic restoration, considerably improving the external appearance of the theatre and its foyer environment.

The new additions will allow better management of the premises. The location of the new box office at the opposite end of the building from the existing café not only responds to the way in which patrons now typically approach the theatre from the nearby car park but also means that the whole building can be more effectively supervised and secured.

The second auditorium will allow the theatre to diversify its range of presentations and to pitch itself once more as a major producing venue as well as a receiving house for visiting shows. It can be used by the Belgrade for in-house plays or touring shows that are not suited to the size or format of the original 850-seat proscenium-arch auditorium.

Visually, Stanton Williams's cubic composition successfully reconciles its sculptural conception with the architectural idiom of the earlier building. Though considerably taller than the original theatre, it does not feel out of scale and will in fact form a useful bridge between the 1958 building and the yet taller buildings now being constructed on the adjacent Plaza site. The coloured renders and the use of window 'slots' successfully break up what would otherwise be the large, unrelieved surface necessitated by the window-less auditorium within.

Internally, the refurbished original foyers and the new areas offer a significantly larger, more stylish and inviting public space for patrons. Despite the separation of contracts for the new and refurbished areas, an integrated aesthetic is apparent, and the building flows as a single space. The setting is suitably theatrical in its finishes, colours and lighting, and in the way that its open, galleried spatial arrangement both accommodates and emphasises the movement of the gathering audience. There are also some witty touches, such as bright orange panels in the toilets.

At the same time, the success of (and the amount of money spent on) the refurbished and extended foyers perhaps also serves to highlight the more limited approach taken in the 1958 auditorium, whose perceived architectural merit precluded significant interventions or alteration. The main change has been the installation of a much-needed new ventilation system. The décor and seating remain much as before, and so, for audiences, this space appears little-changed. This tension is significant, given that the auditorium is the part of the building in which audiences spend most of their time.

Furthermore, the stage facilities remain slightly compromised by a low scenic flytower and the absence of much wing space to one side. That this is the case perhaps reflects a decision to concentrate the theatre's limited budget on other, more pressing issues. For example, any expansion of the original stage would have involved significant and costly rearrangement of the backstage areas.

The procurement of the scheme also proved difficult at times as the logistical issues of constructing a landmark arts building and linking it to a piece of existing architecture became fully clear, both in terms of finance and the length of time required to complete the project. There were some delays and cost increases. The delegation of the capital project director role to an experienced member of the theatre staff at an early stage was an advantage in managing the work through to its completion, providing a clear practical leader to complement the vision of the artistic director and chief executive.

On the whole, this project has met the theatre's original requirements for improved public and backstage accommodation and for a landmark extension to the 1958 building. Its significance was recognised when the adjacent Plaza scheme was formulated in 2003. The presence of a major theatre development project on a neighbouring site was a major draw for the Plaza developers in their vision of a mixed-use scheme encompassing residential, office and leisure facilities.

## **Key design features to look out for**

- Accessibility, health and safety requirements.
- Relationship between the new additions and their surroundings.
- Cubic composition that successfully reconciles its sculptural conception with the architectural idiom of the earlier building.

## **Link and downloads**

- <http://www.belgrade.co.uk/>

## **Contact for further information**

### Project team

Client: Belgrade Theatre Trust  
Main works contractor: ISG Interior Exterior plc  
Architect: Stanton Williams  
Structural engineer: Flint and Neil partnership  
Services engineer: Rybka Konsult  
Acoustician: Arup Acoustics  
Theatre consultant: Theatreplan  
Access: All Clear Designs  
Fire Engineer: Faber Maunsell  
Project manager: Buro four project services  
Cost Consultant: Davis Langdon  
Planning supervisor: Quoin Consultancy  
Building control: Approved Inspectors

### Project summary

Location: Coventry  
Completed: 2007  
Client: Belgrade Theatre Trust (Coventry) Ltd  
Planning authority: Coventry City Council  
Funding body: Arts Council England, European Regional Development Fund, Advantage West Midlands, Coventry City Council, Heritage Lottery Fund, private donations.  
Contract value: £14 million  
Researched by: Alistair Fair