

Below
The gallery
overlooks a
working beach
and the sea

WORDS:
Will Wiles

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NEW

Jerwood Gallery, Hastings

The oily black tiles of HAT Projects' seaside structure in East Sussex lure in passers-by without conflicting with a working beach

In a way, Hastings' Jerwood Gallery could have been almost anywhere – or, rather, it need not have been in Hastings. The Jerwood Foundation, a philanthropic arts organisation, wanted to build a home for its first-rate collection of British paintings. It drew up a list of candidate locations, from which the East Sussex seaside town of Hastings was ultimately chosen. It is an unusual process, and one that feels like the inverse of the usual, star-encrusted architectural competition – a gallery looking for a home; not a place seeking a new attraction.

But HAT Projects' building is precisely keyed to the town in which it has found itself. The gallery is among some truly unique human artefacts. Beside it are the locally famous "net shops", tar-black wooden towers used for drying fishing nets. And behind it is the reason for the net shops: a working beach. Hastings is home to the country's largest beach-launched fishing fleet, and the shore is effectively an industrial area – one of surprising unconventional beauty. The rest of the area is the usual bright and tatty honky-tonk of a down-at-heel English resort.

This unusual milieu was a challenge to HAT. "I was absolutely terrified," says Tom Grieve, a principal at the practice with Hana Loftus. "It's an amazing site. At the same time, as architects we have a responsibility associated with taking on this historical setting, but staying true to one's principles rather than [indulging in] pastiche."

The gallery's signature feature – its answer to its setting – is the cladding: black, glazed tiles that glow with a rainbow sheen like petrol on water from close up. They are a magnetic material, drawing the passer-by towards the wall and inviting the hand, and make for a far more interesting response to the net shops than stained timber ever would. "We always >



Left
The skylit main gallery has, unusually, a large window

Below
The black, glazed tiles glow like petrol on water

thought there should be a monolithic, kind of seamless cladding to the building," Loftus says. "Something that shimmered, that had light, that engaged with this light that is always changing."

But the structure itself is not monolithic – rather, its profile on the skyline suggests a collection of buildings, a reasonable concession to its heterogeneous surroundings. This reflects its interior. The gallery is arranged around a central courtyard that contains an eye-catching orange sculpture by Benedict Carpenter, but otherwise it lacks a grand entrance, axis or unifying feature. The main exhibition space – a pleasant skylit area with, unusually for a gallery, a large picture window overlooking the street – opens directly onto a modest entrance space with little fanfare. The rest of the gallery is arranged in a meandering loop, up to the first floor and down again.

"You actually explore the building, rather than the building presenting itself, and you only making very simple decisions about going left or right," Grieve says. "It makes for a very romantic way of how one comes across the art."

And this approach mostly works very well – the building becomes a series of pleasant surprises, from a dignified, geometric staircase to a first-floor window overlooking the working beach and the sea beyond. The overall effect is of a building worth far more than its modest £4 million budget. **I**

