



BUILDING

John Lyall admires Hudson Architects' tin tabernacle for the Salvation Army in Chelmsford. Photos: Keith Collie.

Talented architects can transform even the most unpromising urban context in clever and ingenious ways. Hudson Architects has demonstrated how it can create something simple, beautiful and eminently practical on a site which was compromised by traffic planners some 40 years earlier.

Like many British towns, Chelmsford was carved up by a dual carriageway ring road, complete with roundabouts and pedestrian underpasses, back in the 1960s. Since 1974 the Salvation Army has occupied a strange fragment of a site, at the back end of a lobotomised High Street, and facing a freeway full of traffic. It is here that Hudson Architects, always inventive and adaptable, has produced a new building for the missionary movement which makes a strong, assertive contribution to the fast-moving Parkway and the roundabout, and yet on the other side completes the scale and urban grain of Baddow Road, which is smaller and quieter.

The scheme responds to a challenging and demanding brief for an array of multi-purpose spaces which have to be open, flexible, cheerful, musical and reverential at the same



time. It works, and the Salvation Army is delighted with its building. It works largely because of the creation of distinctive architectural spaces using a simple structural solution of cross-laminated timber for both walls and roof. With a limited budget of £2 million for the 900 square metre building, speed of construction was important and the timber system allowed the structural shell to go up in just 24 days.

At the level of basic architectural analysis it is like a big model (or pack of cards) in its directness, and nicely so. It is timber on the



Above The entrance canopy on the north elevation is integral to the solid timber structure.
Location plan 1 Baddow Road, 2 Goldlay Road, 3 Parkway.
Opposite The 13 metre tall tower, made from the longest cross-laminated timber panel available, is clad in radiant film reflecting a spectrum of colour.



inside, and metal on the outside – a nice combination reminiscent of a silver Faber-Castell tin enclosing a set of smooth cedar pencils.

These gigantic planes of timber are largely left exposed internally, and are made to do heroic things, like span the worship hall with the minimum of bracing, and form a tall beacon tower with a cut-out cross. I like the way the deep cut edge of the timber panels is often left exposed and unlined – for example doorways with no architraves – to further convey the honest material expression.

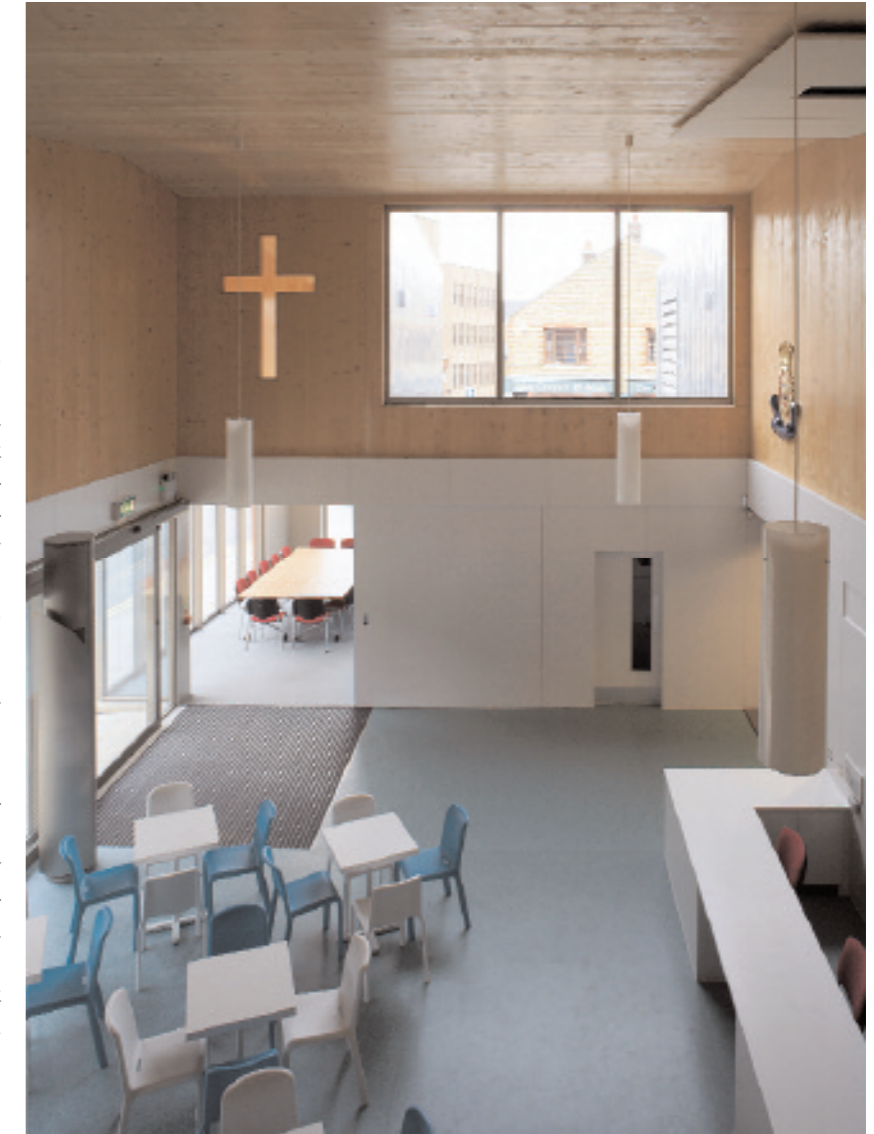
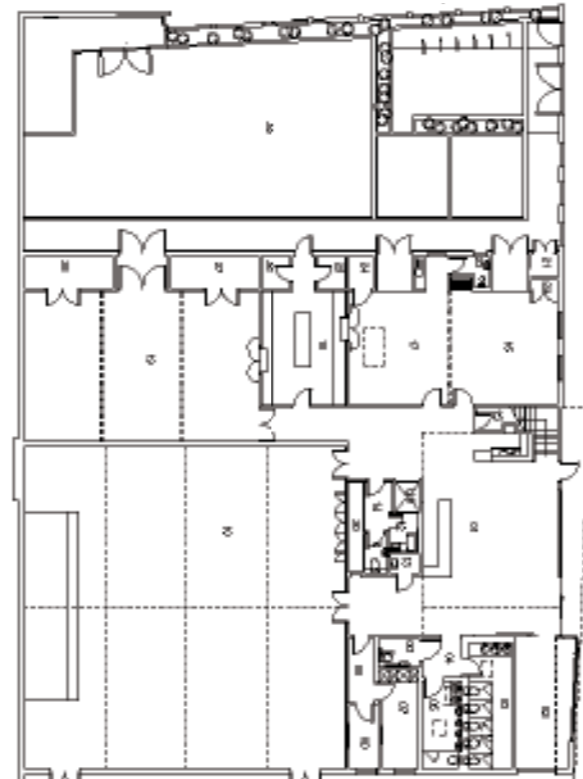
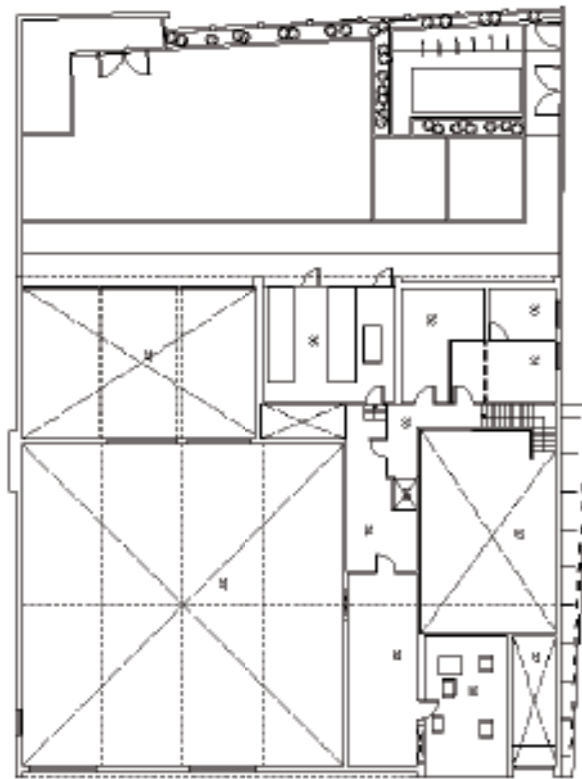
Painted mdf panels and felt-lined acoustic panels are used sparingly and add highlights of strong colour to all key areas, without swamping the timber barn-like feel.

As a community facility the building does so much – catering, assembly, kids' creative areas, a hall for sports and meetings, a hall for worship and singing, fabulous store rooms upstairs full of tubas and trumpets for the band, along with museum-like sliding archives for all its printed music. The Sally Army band can now practice without drowning out another activity next door. The children also make good use of an enclosed, protected external yard with simple, effective landscaping.

This is a building that you can walk right round and appreciate different viewpoints

Left Rheinznk metal cladding and composite board cladding etched with Bible quotations on the east-facing gable end.

Plans Ground and first floors: 1 foyer, 2 multi-purpose room, 3 wcs, 4 centre manager, 5 lobby, 6 drop-in space, 7 worship hall, 8 baby change, 9 store, 10 lounge, 11 hall two, 12 kitchen, 13 hall one, 14 bin store, 15 courtyard, 16 commanding officer's room, 17 office, 18 instrument store, 19 plant room, 20 void.



which offer surprising changes of scale, form and colour. The principal cladding is made up of site-fixed sheets of untreated zinc. As a 'natural' unpainted material, zinc is robust and forgiving. After an initial slight disappointment about the material in this context, I began to enjoy the patina of water stains and sweaty finger marks that have already built up on the panels – these will mature over time giving the elevations even more of a crafted appearance.

The main entrance canopy along Baddow Street is rather like a cinema entrance with 'The Salvation Army' picked out in Hollywood-style stand-up letters – appropriate somehow in the sub-High Street context.

The 'blank' gable end facing east is very special and clad with the bright red composite board which is precisely etched over a large area with selected quotations from the Bible and threaded with tree-like branches. It is actually reassuringly subtle and should weather well.

Top/above/right 320-seat worship hall with acoustic panelling; Hall One; double-height foyer.



The pièce de résistance of the composition has to be the tower facing Parkway which forces its way up from the zinc cladding of the ziggurat elevation to show off a vertical plane of special film-coated glass, which appears to change colour according to the light and viewpoint. The cut-out silhouette of the cross is evanescent, but just visible through the coloured glass at the top. It is dramatic in terms of strong colour on a prominent elevation, but subtle in terms of visual symbolism.

Anthony Hudson, working with a regular collaborator, structural engineer Matthew Wells of Techniker, has combined innovative timber engineering with the sculpting of delightful spaces which must have given the Salvation Army more than it had hoped for.



For Chelmsford, while this unusual and startling building may not set a precedent to imitate for the future, it does show how the town's rather unfortunate and prominent left-over sites can be transformed by high-quality architecture which, at the same time, can knit the urban centre together again.

John Lyall is principal of John Lyall Architects, whose current projects include a business innovation centre in Chelmsford.

Project team

Architect: Hudson Architects; design team: Anthony Hudson, Rahesh Ram (project architect, feasibility), Natalia Guerra, Holly Lewis, Sarah Bromley, Gareth Puttock (project architect); structural engineer: Curtins Consulting Engineers, Techniker (timber); services engineer: EP Consulting; project manager, cost consultant: Arcadis AYH; acoustic engineer: Cole Jarman; client: The Salvation Army.

Selected suppliers and subcontractors

Timber structure: KLH UK; zinc cladding: Rheinzink; radiant light film: 3M; coloured cladding board: Rockpanel; acoustic panel: Hodgson & Hodgson; linoleum flooring: Forbo; carpet: Tetragon; windows: Reynaers; tiles: Grestec.