

GCP CHARTERED ARCHITECTS

Established in 1986, gcp chartered architects now employ 15 staff and serve public and private sector clients as well as community and not-for-profit organisations throughout the UK. Clients vary from Bristol City Council to David Lloyd Leisure



(Top right) St Paul's Community Sports Academy, Bristol; (bottom right) The new racquets, health and fitness club, David Lloyd, Sidcup

JONATHAN PLATT DIRECTOR

Where do you feel has been designed with a specific leisure use in mind?

Perhaps controversially, I'm going to say the Millennium Dome in London, designed by Richard Rogers Partnership.

What is its use?

The structure itself was uniquely designed as a vast exhibition hall.

How does the design complement the use?

The design provided an icon for the functions it was designed to house, with an elegantly simple - yet distinctive - structure and an instantly recognisable silhouette.

Why does the design work?

The design succeeded in protecting a huge area from the outside elements in a single unified design. It dismissed complicated structure to allow natural light to penetrate in.

The steel pylons supporting the tent structure also provided an organisational structure inside, demarcating a central performance

space and a ring of exhibition areas. The structure divided this ring into bite-sized segments, which were each allocated for use as individual 'zones'.

The simplicity of the initial concept allowed a freedom in the organisation of the internal space, while introducing just enough structure to prevent the main area from becoming a featureless and vacuous space.

Its position on the Thames allowed views of it from all sides.

How could it be even better?

Politicians aren't designers or good businessmen. They should have kept their distance from the design and concept of the structure. Less back-biting by the popular press would have helped too.

What leisure building looks amazing but has function secondary to design?

Wildwalk (formerly Wildscreen world), on Bristol's Harbourside.

Why doesn't it work?

The building attempts to be an iconic structure, but is developed from an uncertain and

muddled brief, which lacks connection, both physically and in terms of the building's function. This seems to have manifested itself in the appearance of the building.

The entrance to the main attraction, Wildwalk, was, until a recent re-ordering, virtually invisible - a small domestic-scaled door obscured in an entrance hall which swept straight past it.

The exhibition gallery seems to have been designed with no consultation, and with no connection to the exhibits and displays it contains. The conservatory, the most stimulating visual element both inside and out, lacks relationship with the exhibition galleries.

It is a collection of disparate elements colliding, by coincidence, in a single structure. It focused too heavily on attempting to be an iconic building without concentrating on the function of the attractions it housed.

What design would have worked?

A building which integrated better with the urban fabric at ground level, and was more open and inviting, with clear indications of entrances and routes within the building. A careful consultation between architect, client,



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“As energy costs rise, operators of all types of leisure buildings will be forced to focus on reducing energy consumption to ensure operating profits are maintained”

(Main pic) David Lloyd, Bristol; (top right) gcp designed a 'jungle play dome' as part of the regeneration of Hengrove Park, Bristol

and exhibition designer was needed to provide gallery spaces more in unity with the exhibits contained in them.

The Imax cinema and separate elements of the Wildwalk should be self-contained attractions with a distinct separate identity. It needs a good restaurant on the existing roof terrace that opens until late in the evening, to take advantage of the stunning views over the Harbourside.

How do you make leisure projects work?

gcp chartered architects have been involved with a wide range of leisure projects requiring a different approach to achieving operational success. We try to establish a strategic brief for a project. This sets the key parameters, including things like, who's going to manage the project? Will it be an owner occupier, out-sourced operator or a community trust? What are the key funding and financing objectives? Is this primarily a commercial operation required to make a profit? Is it a revenue-supported local authority scheme designed to deliver leisure opportunities to the local community? Or is it going to be run by a community based charity, whose primary objective is

to serve local people, but must run a very efficient operation? If this is the case, reducing running costs for heating, lighting and staffing will be vital.

Having established the strategic brief, we try to agree a design brief for the project that gives more detail for the various operational and functional requirements. To get these two documents signed off is never easy.

What are you currently working on?

At Beeches Hotel, Bristol, we're designing a 45-bed extension and conference rooms for a beautiful country house set in a Grade Two star listed historic landscape.

We're investigating the design of a 50-station gym and reception area refurbishment at Keynsham Leisure Centre, Bristol. Writhlington School, Radstock is on its fourth phase of redevelopment - a NOF PE & Sport funded project - for new changing rooms. We're also looking at two other four to five-star hotel projects in the south west for private clients.

What do you wish you'd designed?

Whatley Manor Hotel in Easton Grey near Malmesbury in Wiltshire. We got down to the

last two consultancies bidding for the £20m redevelopment of an existing hotel to create a five-star plus hotel for a private Swiss client.

This was the best job we've ever had the chance of securing. It was for a passionate private client who wanted to create something truly special in a beautiful part of the country. Such opportunities don't come around often.

What's the future for leisure architecture?

On the public leisure side, if we get shortlisted for the 2012 Olympic games then I think there's a really great prospect for public leisure architecture. The effect of being shortlisted will ripple out from the new Wembley to all parts of the country. Let's hope for success.

Commercial leisure architecture should also benefit but, irrespective of the bid success, commercial projects will continue to focus on brown field developments and the re-fitting and refurbishment of existing buildings.

Lastly, as energy costs rise, operators of all types of leisure buildings will be forced to focus on reducing energy consumption to ensure the operating profits are maintained. I see great opportunities for consultants to sell their services to the whole leisure market. ●