

Foster Wilson Size unveils newly refurbished Polka Theatre for children

13 SEPTEMBER 2021 BY ROB WILSON AJ PHOTOGRAPHY BY HUFTON+CROW

Source: Foster Wilson Size



The renovation of this dedicated children's theatre in Wimbledon includes a new early year's theatre, rehearsal and development studio and a creative learning studio for children with sensory needs

Polka Theatre is just one of a handful of dedicated children's venues in the UK, and central to the design approach was the aspiration to create a more welcoming and stimulating destination for children and their guardians.

The main building has been opened and extended by expanding sideways into an adjoining former retail unit. A new glazed entrance transforms visibility

from the street and welcomes visitors into a central spine corridor, leading into a new box office and shop on one side and a café on the other. With all public areas at the front of the site, the latter can operate independently when the main building is closed and there is also a venue space for private hire generating further revenue for the theatre.



Foster Wilson Size, working in collaboration with stage designer Laura McEwan, has revitalised the interiors with designs intended to unlock children's imaginations. The existing main foyer features a large indoor play den with a river-inspired carpet designed by McEwan.

The outdoor area has a sensory garden created by award-winning gardener Patrick Collins, as well as a play area, including a purpose-built treehouse climbing frame. Distinctive external fretwork made of perforated aluminium

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screen depicts a jungle scene and provides solar shading to the south and east-facing windows.

A new purpose-built creative Clore Learning Studio sits behind the main foyer, providing interactive, sensory activities for use by children with sensory or special educational needs. Accessibility has been significantly improved throughout and, for the first time, level access to the main theatre is provided for visitors and performers.

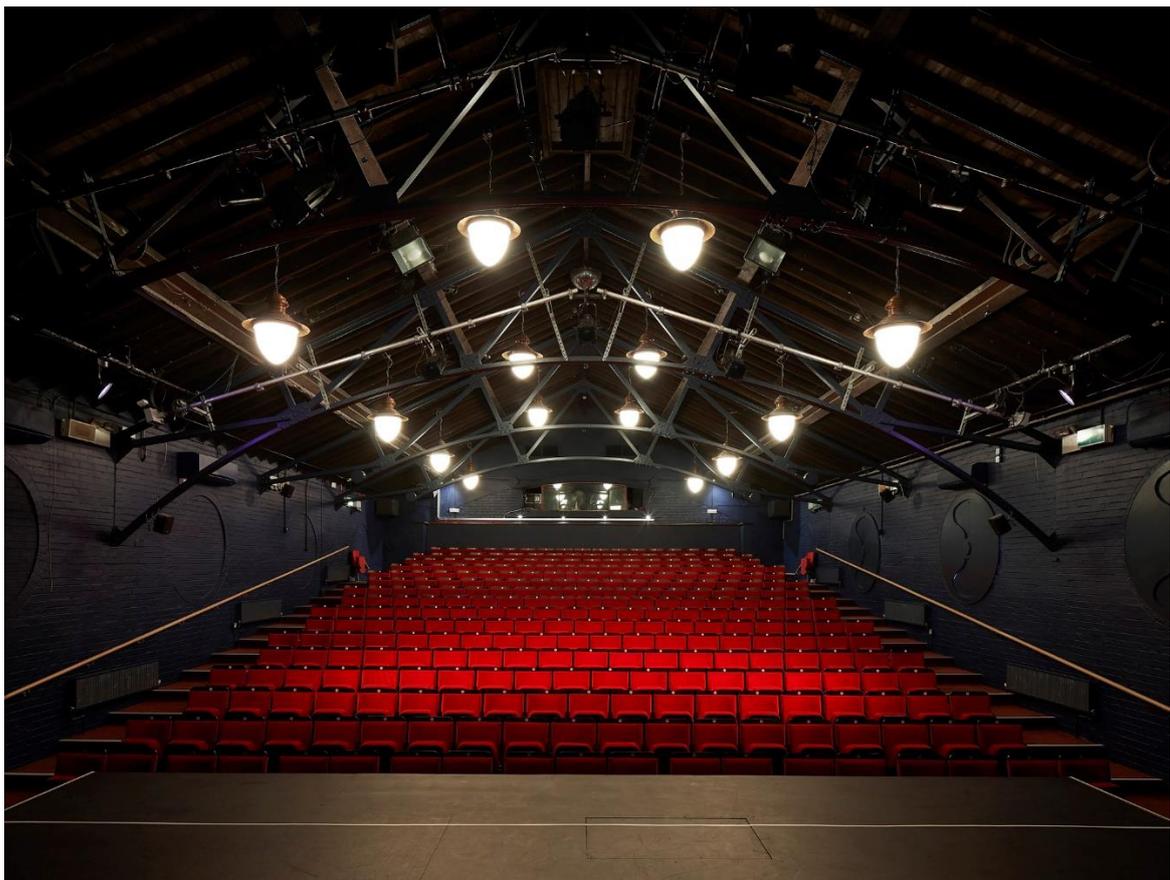


The main theatre has been retained and refurbished with new seating while a new 100-seat Adventure Theatre, the first purpose-built UK theatre for under sixes, is located in a new building to the rear. There is also a new rehearsal and development studio, equipped with storage and catering facilities, located

directly above the Adventure Theatre, though separated by a double acoustic floor.

The focus on minimising environmental impact has led to the implementation of a building management system to control temperature and CO₂ levels while improving air flow, as well as the addition of PV panels on the roof, improved thermal efficiency and the use of LED lights throughout.

Polka's renewal was possible through a wide range of funders, from businesses to the public, as well as £2.5 million National Lottery funding and a £70 million regeneration programme supporting growth and community development in London, delivered through the London Economic Action Partnership (LEAP). The project also received support from the Cultural Capital Kickstart Fund.



Architect's view

We were first appointed to work on the Polka project in 2009 and it is a real pleasure to see it finally completed in 2021. The design has been through

many iterations over that period, and we're delighted to see it open at a time when access to the arts for young people is so important.

Tim Foster, consultant architect, Foster Wilson Size



Client's view

This redevelopment has been over 15 years in the planning, and it is extraordinary to finally be open at a time when people, particularly children, need creative outlets more than ever. Alongside two significantly improved

theatre spaces, the new facilities for our audiences – free open-access indoor and outdoor play areas, larger café, hireable spaces, and spaces for school use – will ensure Polka continues as a vital community hub. We want to thank all our supporters and funders from the bottom of our hearts because without their commitment and faith in this project we would not have got to this point.

Lynette Shanbury, executive director and joint chief executive, Polka



Project data

Start on site April 2019

Completion date August 2021

Gross internal floor area 1,693 m²

Gross (internal + external) floor area 1,935 m²

Form of contract or procurement route JCT standard building contract without quantities, traditional procurement.

Construction cost Not available

Architect Foster Wilson Size

Client Polka Theatre

Structural engineer Price & Myers

M&E consultant Skelly & Couch

Quantity surveyor Beadmans
Landscape consultant Patrick Collins Design
Acoustic consultant Arup
Lighting consultant 18 Degrees
Theatre consultant Charcoalblue
Outdoor play frame The Space to Play
Bespoke carpet Ege Carpets
External Signage and Fretwork Newman Displays
Interior design (public spaces) Laura McEwen
Seating providers (main theatre) Evertaut
Project manager Cragg Management
Principal designer Beadmans
Approved building inspector Butler & Young
Main contractor ITC Concepts
CAD software used Vectorworks