

If that's art, I'm a Dutchman: Erick van Egeraat's first UK building and its sisterhood of regional art centres.

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We Brits like to give famous overseas architects a baptism of fire when they come to the UK. Rafael Vinoly was lost for a while in what was then the black hole of the South Bank Centre redevelopment; Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown were roughed up by the Establishment over the National Gallery extension and never worked here again; Frank Gehry's happy experience at his Dundee Maggie's Centre was no preparation for the flak he received over his Hove redevelopment. And Erick van Egeraat, one-time co-founder of the Mecanoo practice, found himself with prestigious projects for London's Photographer's Gallery and the RSC campus in Stratford - only to have both schemes axed. This is why you find van Egeraat's first completed UK project in the somewhat unexpected setting of Middlesbrough, in the post-industrial north-east.

He won the competition in 2002, beating a stellar shortlist: Iceland's Studio Granda; Denmark's Schmidt Hammer Lassen in association with Brookes Stacey Randall; Spence Associates with Snohetta of Oslo; Fielden Clegg Bradley; and Jeremy Dixon Edward Jones. So expectations are high. Too high.

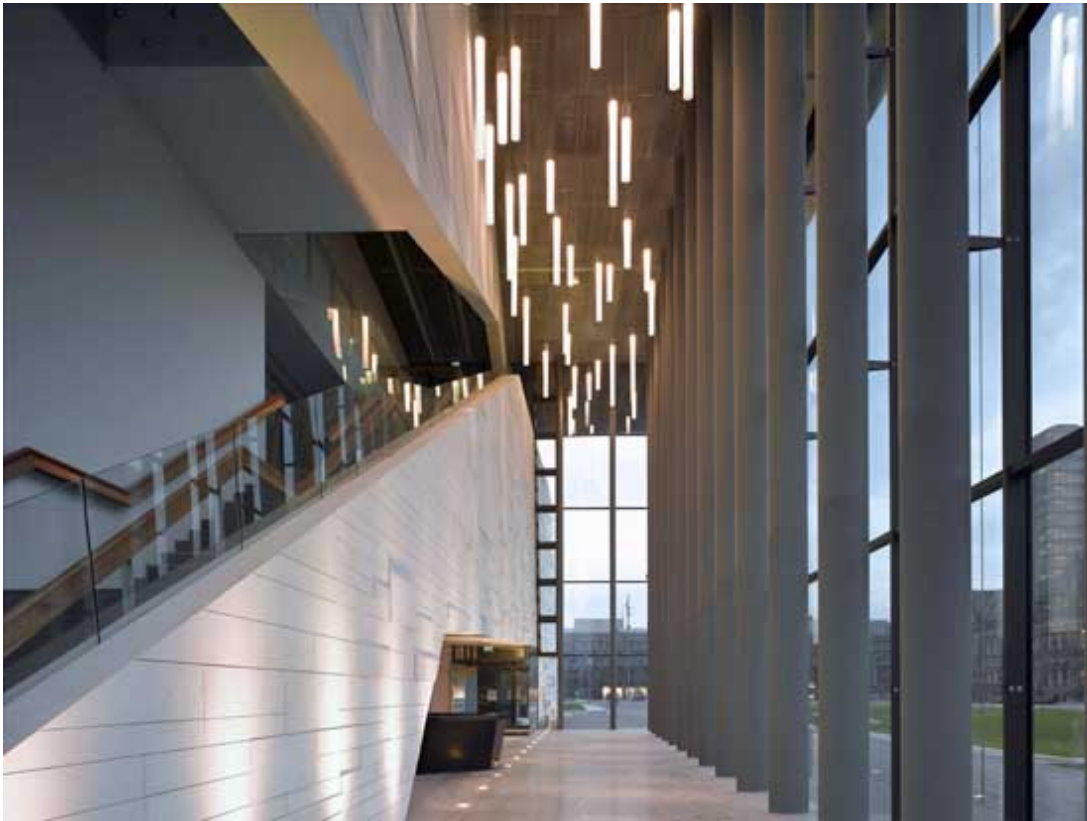
MIMA - the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art - is a regional art gallery with urban plan attached. Working with landscape architects West 8, van Egeraat has defined a large civic space at the heart of

the town which is anchored at one corner by the new gallery building. Civic buildings old and new surround the space, which has plenty of gaps intended to be filled in by new development. At one end of the square is one of the UK's more monumental pre-existing pieces of public art, the white-painted steel filigree of "Bottle of Notes" by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. At the other are programmed fountains. In between are weaving paths of oxidised steel and sumptuous public seating. The intention is clear: to put the heart back into postindustrial Middlesbrough. The town is doing what northern towns always used to do: show a bit of civic pride.

In theory all that is fine. It is a monumental space, yet this agora will certainly not appeal to agoraphobics, so wide open is it. For me it just feels too large but that might be because it is yet to be fully built up, its specimen trees have yet to fill out, and anyway a wet, windy winter's day on Teesside is not the best time to appreciate a new park of any description. It looks nice from a vantage-point high up in the new gallery, however. Building and landscape together came to a shade under £20m.



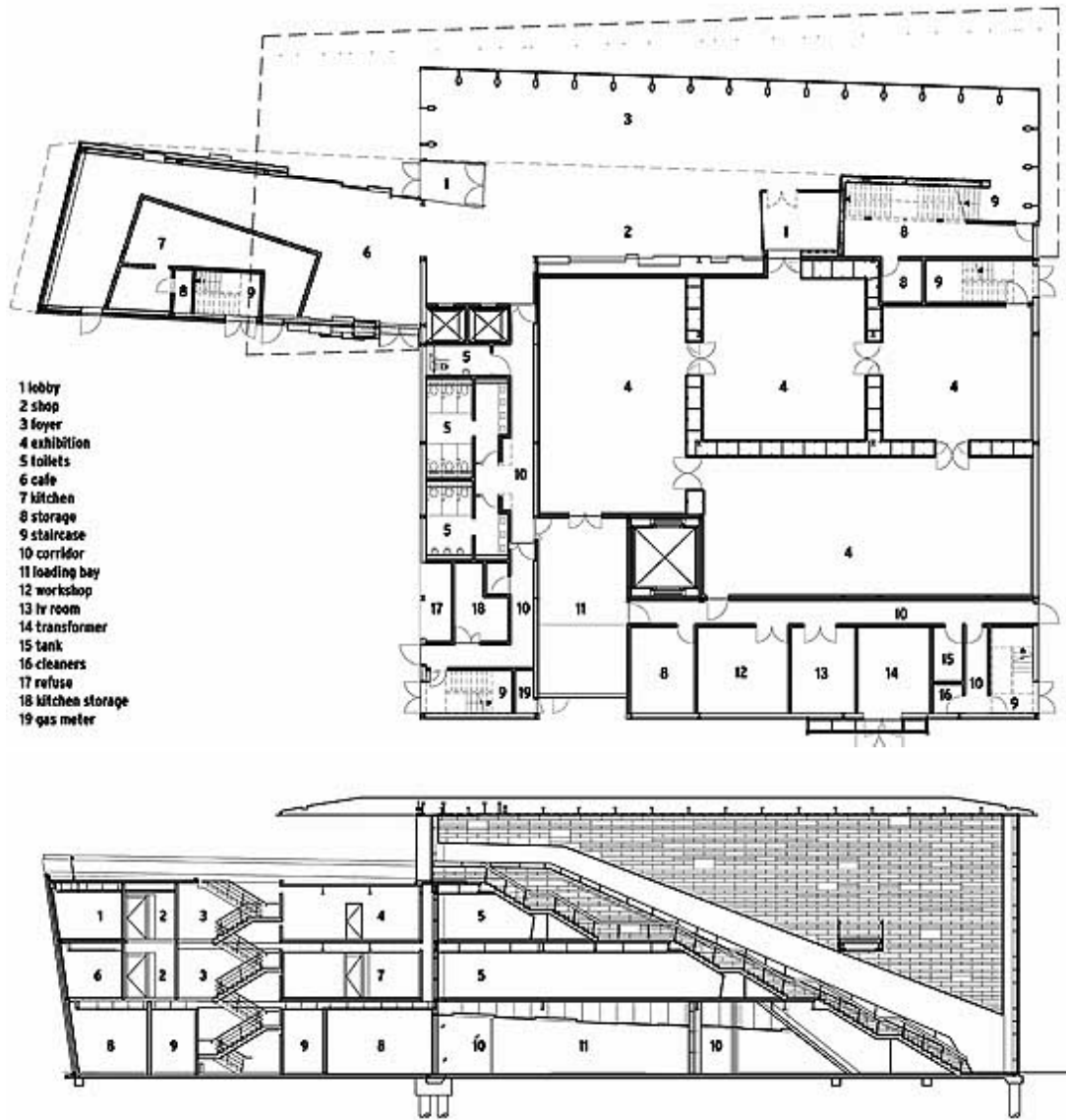
The MIMA is odd. Not acrobatically iconic, more defiantly strange. It is a box that shoots out an arm towards the city centre. That arm is angled slightly so as to embrace the public realm and to be seen more clearly from end-on. The other big architectural moves are an oversailing roof held down with tension wires, and a glass-box façade sliced through with a subsidiary rusticated stone elevation, emerging from interior to exterior where it clads the outflung arm of the side extension. In the main building you find, between the glass and the stone, a full height - three-storey - public lobby. A staircase climbs through the levels, cutting a gash through the stonework. Which is expressed in all its thinness as an element which hangs from the ceiling. It is unsettling: you do not expect a stone wall to dangle.



So much of the budget obviously went on the grand gesture of the principal facades and lobby that there appears to have been nothing left for the rest of the exterior, which is done in utilitarian render incised with a pattern of angled metal strips. From the rear, MIMA is austere indeed. True, you could say the same of the Carnegie library close by, another building that is all front. The difference is that, when the library was built, this part of town was a dense mass of housing terraces. Its raw backside has been subsequently revealed by demolition. At MIMA, the turned back was always going to be shockingly prominent from the surrounding streets.

Van Egeraat's response to this is that civic pride demands grand public spaces, and that MIMA's internal spaces are focused logically enough on the new square. He also relates - and how true this sounds - that getting planning permission for the building was a relative doddle compared with the years of agonising that went on over the square, which the designers made considerably larger than the original brief, moving the proposed site of the gallery building in the process. And just you try persuading local councillors of the merits of steel paving. In fact the big rusted shards - redolent of the former industry of the area - work surprisingly well, set flush with the greensward.

Inside, the tricksiness falls away as you enter the 4,000 sq m sequence of galleries, which are calm, neutral spaces. There is the oddity of one double-height room, which you can see into at high level from a staircase landing outside, but otherwise we are in the familiar world of the white cube. Publicly-accessible archive rooms for the town's permanent collection, plus a well-appointed conservation studio, complete the mix.



There is a café, restaurant, administration offices and education room in the building's three-storey extension, which also sports a glass-balustraded rooftop pool deck. The education room is particularly well sited overlooking the square through the angled glass end wall at the town-centre end. The ambience of the place is helped by the purpose-designed furniture and fittings in the café and shop, by Gijs Bakker and Michael Rowe respectively.

Such smaller regional galleries, following the model of Caruso St. John's New Art Gallery in Walsall of 2000, can expect a minimum of 100,000 visitors a year (Middlesbrough's target is 110,000). For the town, the aim was for the building to fit in with its strategy of "economic success and cultural diversity". Van Egeraat's philosophy, meanwhile, comes close to a manifesto for narrative architecture. "The aim is not to state but to relate: not to consider but to seduce; not to irritate but to persuade and surprise."



Some buildings - Walsall is an example, and the Boston ICA in this issue - have an enigmatic quality, a sense of slight mystery and revelation. They lift the spirits the moment you walk in. MIMA did not have that effect on me. What you see at first glance is pretty much what you get. I was not persuaded and surprised, let alone seduced: I was irritated, particularly by that hanging stone wall. And urbanistically? Let's see what else gets dropped into the Middlesbrough mix.

Whatever your view, Middlesbrough is just the beginning. We'll be seeing more of van Egeraat, who has other UK projects on the go: an urban masterplan for Canning Town, commercial development at Stratford (London, not on Avon). After all this time, finally, he's arrived here.

A companion piece to this, from The Sunday Times, London, Published 14th January 2007, titled "You don't have to have a Gehry to change a town". © Hugh Pearman.

When towns and cities around the world looked at what Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim did for what had previously been a nondescript industrial port in Northern Spain, they famously rushed to try to replicate it. There are Guggenheim wannabes all over the world, and particularly in cities people tend not to visit much in the United States. Denver has its Daniel Libeskind art museum. Minneapolis has its Walker Art Center by Herzog and de Meuron, famous over here for Tate Modern. Cincinnati has its Zaha Hadid. Milwaukee has its Calatrava. All well and good. But can this exciting-art-museum thing work in Middlesbrough?



The cheekily-named MIMA (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art) opens on January 27. It is a £19.2m building, the first in the UK by another international big name, Erick van Egeraat of the Netherlands - including a new organically-sculpted town square outside by another Dutch star outfit, landscapers West 8. Cheeky because it sounds a bit like MoMA, New York's immense Museum of Modern Art. Well, a cat may look at a king. Nobody is



pretending that Middlesbrough's 3,000-strong collection of contemporary art and sculpture is going to worry Manhattan too

much, though the opening temporary show, "Draw" pulls together some big names, pairing up Damien Hirst with Francis Bacon, Chris Ofili with Matisse, Warhol with Gavin Turk and so on.

Just getting to the opening date these days is quite some achievement, away from the tourist trail. The cautionary tale there is the black-and-pink contemporary art centre in West Bromwich known as The Public, by architect Will Alsop. Alsop duly built his building but when costs hit £52m last year, the organisation behind it went into administration. The Public did not open. It seemed that community arts projects (this was meant to be something rather more than, or different from, a traditional gallery) just could not be bigged up to that level. It was never especially clear what was meant to happen inside it. There was certainly nothing so conventional as a collection for people to go and see. A successor organisation, Multistory, now answers the phone and tells you it has nothing to do with the building. The council has invited bids for "facilities managers" to run the place. When you contact the council, they sound more than a little vague as to what these facilities managers are expected to do.

But that is a rare exception: on the whole, the new regional galleries, though prone to financial wobbles, are doing alright. The New Art Gallery in Walsall, opened in 2000, hoped for 100,000 visitors a year, got 250,000 in its publicity-rich first year, and has settled down to a comfortable 120-125,000. Its director Stephen Snoddy, who has also been director at the little Milton Keynes Gallery and the mighty Baltic in Gateshead, says the pattern is always the same: the first year, assuming the publicity is right, will get double the numbers that come in after around 18 months. He thinks Middlesbrough might hit 200,000 in 2007, so would be wise to aim for 100,000 thereafter (the official projection is 110,000).

Who knows? Walsall benefits from having the very strong Garman Ryan collection at its heart, on permanent display, while Middlesbrough's 3,000-piece collection is more diffuse, including ceramics and jewellery. There will be a "collection show" once a year, with the pieces kept in publicly-accessible archives the rest of the time. Walsall is also close to Birmingham and has the vast catchment area of the West Midlands. Middlesbrough, is, well, Middlesbrough. rather more out on a limb. Well, would you go there? Obviously location is important: The Baltic in Gateshead, an enormous art space in a former flour mill with no permanent collection which has suffered from a succession of directors and a patchy programme since opening, has seen its visitor numbers fall from nearly a million to close to 400,000, which is still respectable. But then it is in pole position on the city's bustling quayside, right next to the Stirling Prize-winning bridge linking it to even more bustling Newcastle. It is also close to the new Foster-designed Sage concert hall.

Although the smaller galleries would kill for Baltic's location and footfall, there is a growing feeling that this big bruiser of the regional arts scene is in trouble unless it gets its act together under its latest director, Peter Doroschenko. As an "arts factory" devoted to cutting-edge contemporary art (it does not go in for visitor-friendly blockbusters) Baltic needs continuous heavy funding, and so will always be vulnerable. But despite that, it tells you plenty about how to go about the tricky business of cultural regeneration. Rule number one: a building is not much use in isolation. You need to build a critical mass. West Bromwich, take note. The new Pallant House gallery in Chichester, which opened last year, exemplifies Rule Number Two: have a decent collection. In Pallant House's case, it's a decent collection of modern British art, conventionally hung, always there.

But, seven years after the Millennium and all the Lottery riches that brought most of these art buildings into existence, there seems to be no slowing-down in the rate at which they are arriving. After MIMA, we will have the £16.5m FirstSite Gallery in Colchester, a smaller but still ambitious banana-shaped affair, designed by American superstar Rafael Vinoly. In Margate, over-ambitious plans for the new Turner Centre were axed before they got to the West Bromwich stage of overspending (£48m was when the council baled out) , but the town is still going ahead with a smaller £15m scheme, designed by David Chipperfield. There's still plenty of hope out there.

I expect you want to know if Erick van Egeraat's MIMA is any good. It is his first completed building in the UK, after all,



following his disappointment in having his plan to rebuild the RSC in Stratford-upon-Avon axed. It looks as if the RSC had a lucky escape. No doubt he had to wrestle with a smaller budget, but this is not nearly as good as Walsall. Where Caruso St. John's new art gallery there was an exercise in refinement and restraint, MIMA is all about flash. All the money appears to have been spent on the main façade facing the square, which is a strange mixture of glassy tension-wire high-tech and postmodern random stonework. Inside the main full-height foyer, a great staircase links the levels through a gash cut in a roughcut stone wall that is, get this, hanging from the ceiling.



It's impressive in a way, but you rather wonder what the point of it all is. The rest of the building behind that wall is a simple rendered box. The gallery spaces are white, neutral, perfectly OK. There is one very tall one. The landscaped square outside by West 8 is nice if unexceptional - an affair of grass and weaving paths - and boasts some very fine public benches.

All together, it is a building that is hard either to love or admire, because, while it does the job, and helps to stitch the city centre together, it is more than a little silly. Buildings that try a bit too hard to be icons are always suspect. While I have returned to Walsall at intervals since its opening, I would need more than this to get me back to Middlesbrough. This wants to be a Teesside Guggenheim very badly, but Teesside has not found its European Frank Gehry, nor does it have the power of the Guggenheim brand name. Perhaps it will make up for all this by putting on fantastically good shows. You can always hope.

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