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## Roderick Ham

(1925–2017)

The architect Roderick Ham, who died in January aged 91, was a leading figure in the building boom that transformed regional British theatre between the 1960s and the 1980s. His reputation was established by the Thorndike Theatre, Leatherhead (1969), which was quickly recognised as one of the best of the new regional theatres then springing up around Britain. Now known as the Leatherhead Theatre, it is listed at Grade II.

A student project at the AA in the late 1940s gave Ham the chance to explore his interest in theatre design. Having struck out on his own in the 1950s, early jobs included work at the Royal Court. The English Stage Company was based there, and its secretary, Breville Poke, was also chairman of the repertoire company at Leatherhead, which was planning to convert the town's Crescent Cinema into a theatre. When their architect's plans were found wanting, Ham secured the commission. The task was not straightforward: the site was hidden behind a block of offices and shops, and the theatre auditorium was to be created within the shell of the cinema. In such circumstances, Ham's achievement was all the more significant. The Thorndike's compact, single-tier auditorium was kept tightly focused. No aisles interrupt the seating rake, while warm colours and carefully chosen textures add interest without dominating. The layers are more dramatic, their theatricality being the product of controlled lighting and strong form rather than 'theatrical' details. Within the gap between the auditorium and

the street-facing office block, Ham conjured up an exciting three-dimensional landscape of galleries, balconies, and connecting staircases. Board-marked concrete and white-painted brick offer a foil to the colour and movement of the gathering audience. As in many new theatres of the 1960s and 1970s, a coffee bar and restaurant were included. These facilities had a practical function in generating income, but they also addressed the idea that a theatre should be a 'social centre', a view promoted by the theatre's energetic director, Hazel Vincent Wallace.

The Thorndike's amphitheatre-like auditorium reappeared at Derby Playhouse (1975), where it was coupled with dramatic, sinuous foyers originally lined in blue-brown brick. However, Ham was moving in new directions. The unbuilt Dove Theatre, High Wycombe (1971) featured a galleried auditorium, while an unexecuted design for a riverside site in Bedford in 1974 had an octagonal, galleried thrust-stage auditorium not unlike HKPA's Young Vic (1970). The Bedford theatre also demonstrated a more contextual style than Leatherhead or Derby, with pitched roofs and brick walls. It foundered in the economic crash of the mid-seventies, but similar ideas emerged in the Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich (1979). Once again, Ham secured this project when another architect's designs had been rejected. His design recalls Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Houses in its apparent domesticity; the theatre's intimate, galleried auditorium was realised

in collaboration with the theatre consultant Martin Carr. A proposed Arts Centre in Harrow was abandoned, and so the Wolsey was Ham's last major new theatre, although during the 1980s he tackled the restoration of Portsmouth's late-Victorian Theatre Royal.

The practice was never exclusively theatre-based, although it always remained small, with Ham only taking on projects that really interested him. He went into partnership with George Finch during the 1970s and by the end of that decade the office also included Will Alsop. Another colleague during the mid-1970s was Tim Foster, subsequently to become a noted theatre specialist in his own right.

An exacting designer, and a generous teacher and colleague known for his strongly held principles, Ham was an early and active member of the Association of British Theatre Technicians. Many schemes reviewed by its Theatre Planning Committee benefited from his advice. Indeed, several emerged from the process having taken on a flavour of the Thorndike. He also frequently shared his knowledge in print, not least in contributions to the *Architects' Journal*, while his 1972 book *Theatre Planning* (updated in 1987) became a standard reference. Its lucid text clearly set out Ham's view that the theatre designer's task is not simply to grasp the technical requirements of this complex building type; just as important is the creation of a humane, welcoming, even 'theatrical' environment in which to have a good night out.

• Alistair Fair



TRANSFORMING  
THEATRE:  
Upper foyer at  
the Thorndike  
Theatre Leatherhead  
(1969) with modular  
furniture and carpet  
designed by Ham