

SOLUTIONS

Project

New Forest public toilets

Architect

John Pardey Architects

Location

New Forest, Hampshire

By Amanda Birch

These days if you can avoid using a public loo, you will. In most English towns they are forbidding, smelly and frequently lack such essentials as soap and paper.

But maybe this ingrained image of the much neglected public convenience is set to change. Earlier this year, the Department of Communities and Local Government published a guide aimed at encouraging councils to do more to halt the decline of the great British public loo, and to look at ways to provide better access and better quality toilets.

New Forest District Council is one local authority that foresaw an urgent need to overhaul its existing public loos before the guide's publication. In 2002, from a short-list of four local practices, it selected John Pardey Architects, a 15-strong firm based in Lymington, Hampshire, to design 10 replacement public toilets.

Grand gesture

Responding to the council's brief, director John Pardey wanted to raise the image of the public loo to create a "more precious" public building.

He believes that if a conventional design approach is taken, it lends itself to being vandalised, or as Pardey puts it: "If you build it like a brick shit-house, then people will kick it and vandalise it".

Taking his inspiration from the French-style open-air pissoir, Pardey has come up with a deceptively simple but clever solution that could revolutionise the future design of the public convenience.

The single-storey structure is raised at slab level, creating a 100mm-high air gap, while at roof level, air gaps are also provided at varying dimensions, ranging from

Pardey injected humour with features from some favourite buildings

200mm to 975mm. These openings provide fresh air and are a natural and cheap way to ventilate the building and reduce smells. Raising it at floor level also avoids having to clean at skirting level, which is one of the most difficult cleaning points in public toilets.

For the structure of the toilets, Pardey collaborated with Barton Engineers to develop and refine a "kit of parts" that can be endlessly repeated, resulting in a standard 13m x 7m floor plan. This comprises a hot-dipped galvanised light steel frame, set into pad foundations and infilled with 150mm-thick aerated concrete blockwork.

Similarly, the palette of internal finishes — tiled walls and paving stone floors — and fittings are generally the same, with slight colour variations.

However, each structure takes on its own unique appearance through the use of different cladding materials and different roofs that respond to individual contexts.

In quite a grand gesture for such a minor public building type, Pardey has also injected some humour into his loos by incorporating distinctive design features from some of his favourite buildings by architects including Louis Kahn and Glenn Murcutt.

Welcoming space

To date, loos have been built at six Hampshire sites: Brockenhurst, Milford on Sea, Calshot Spit, Totton and Lymington, and there are plans for another in Fordingham. At £200,000 each, the completed loos feature an automatic locking mechanism, which allows them to self-lock at night to prevent vandalism.

The buildings require little maintenance and have been built with an 80-year design life.

Using these loos is a real pleasure. When I visited, they were clean, uplifting and well lit spaces that provided the basic essentials. Pardey has elevated the stature of this building type to another level, creating a contemporary, light, welcoming space that is well used by all ages and abilities.

BROCKENHURST, BROOKLEY ROAD

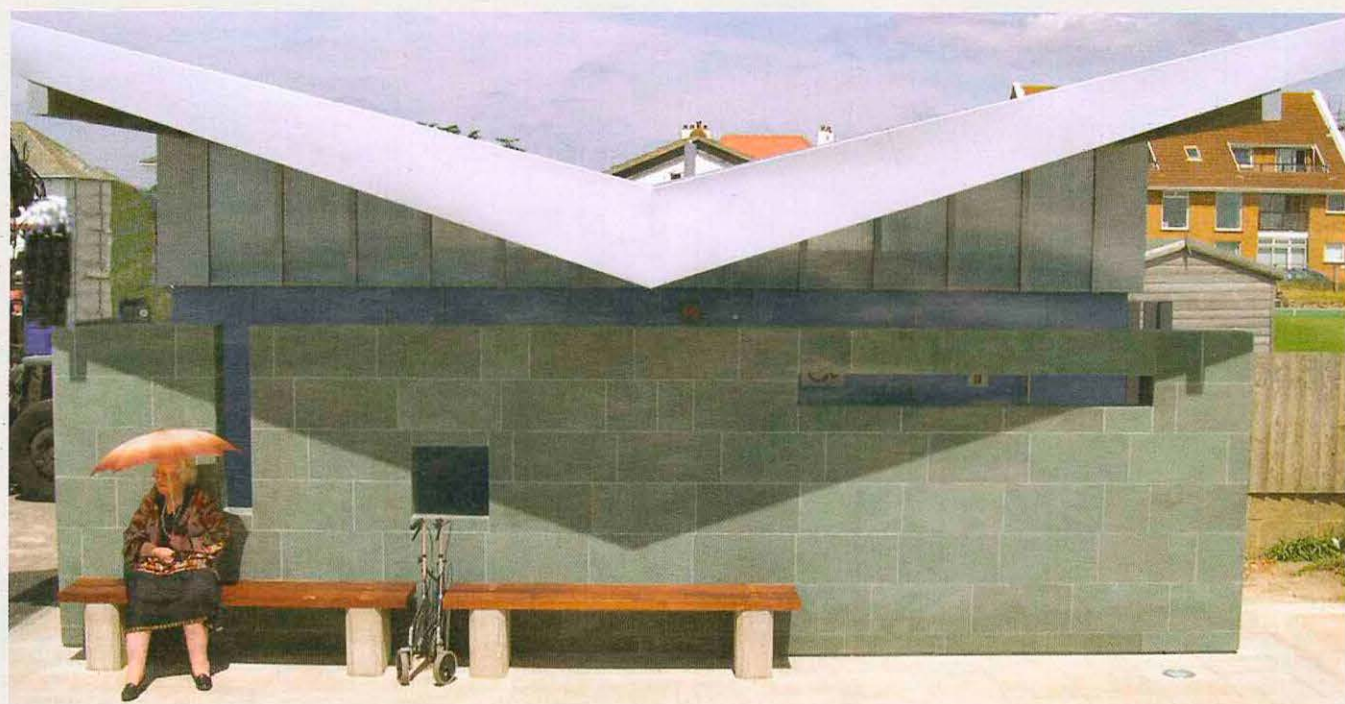
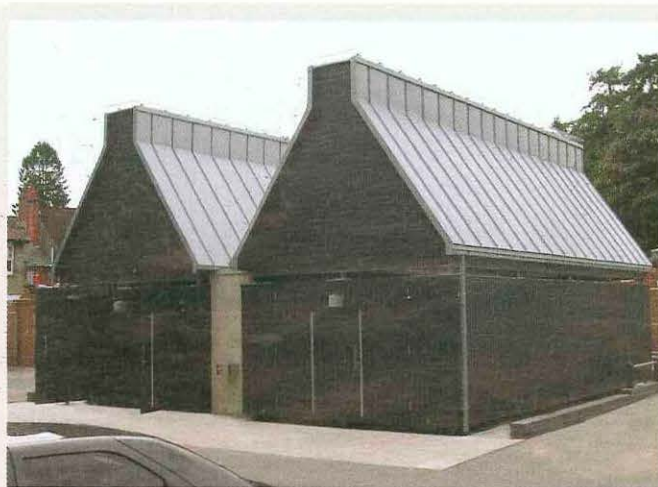
Sited within a public car park, the second of the public loos (2003), has been located to form a type of gatehouse to the car park. Pardey has made an oblique reference to Louis Kahn's Hurva synagogue by the way natural light floods the interior through its two steeply pitched roofs.

Conceived as two equal halves — male and female — around a central service core, two zinc-clad roofs are

riven by a continuous strip of glazing at the apex.

Externally, the walls are clad in timber-stained dark grey, while internally, deep blue mosaics clad the walls.

When describing the building form, Pardey says: "It is slightly reminiscent of an agricultural barn and simultaneously of an ecclesiastic form — perhaps well placed between the sacred and the profane."



MILFORD-ON-SEA, SEA ROAD

Set in a stunning location facing the promenade and the sea, the third (2005) of the loos had to address its unique seafront site, and the entrance doors therefore open from the seafront. But as the front is exposed to prevailing winds — a storm with 100-mile an hour winds was reported last year

— and rain for most of the year, it also has a covered entrance portico and protective wall which is faced in blue-green slate. The area to the front of the wall has public benches, so users can sit and enjoy the views across the sea to the Isle of Wight and the Needles.

Pardey says of its distinctive aluminium gull-wing roof, with its 3m cantilever, that it "remembers some of Le Corbusier's modest houses". Polycarbonate was used on the section beneath the roof to allow in obscured natural light.

Pardey says he would have used glass in this area, but it

would have been at risk from the frequent high winds that fling up pebbles from the nearby beach, which could break the glass.

Vandalproof uplighters are integrated into the floor, and this was the first public loo where covered lighting was introduced to each cubicle.



LYMINGTON, POWLETT ROAD

Built last year, this is Pardey's favourite of his loos, and the most evolved. The large horizontal expanse of the car park it sits in was, says Pardey, the starting point for its strong horizontal roof plane clad in western red cedar.

"The roof extends out to form a canopy," he says, "complete with a glazed circular aperture, a joie d'esprit, over the entrance which shelters the car park

ticket machines and the new benches."

Here, Pardey has seized the opportunity to use clear glass panels for the clerestory, which is held on metal clips with open joints that overlap the walls to maintain high-level ventilation.

The benches, also designed by Pardey, feature stainless steel sections fixed to the middle of the iroko wood seat tops to deter skateboarders.

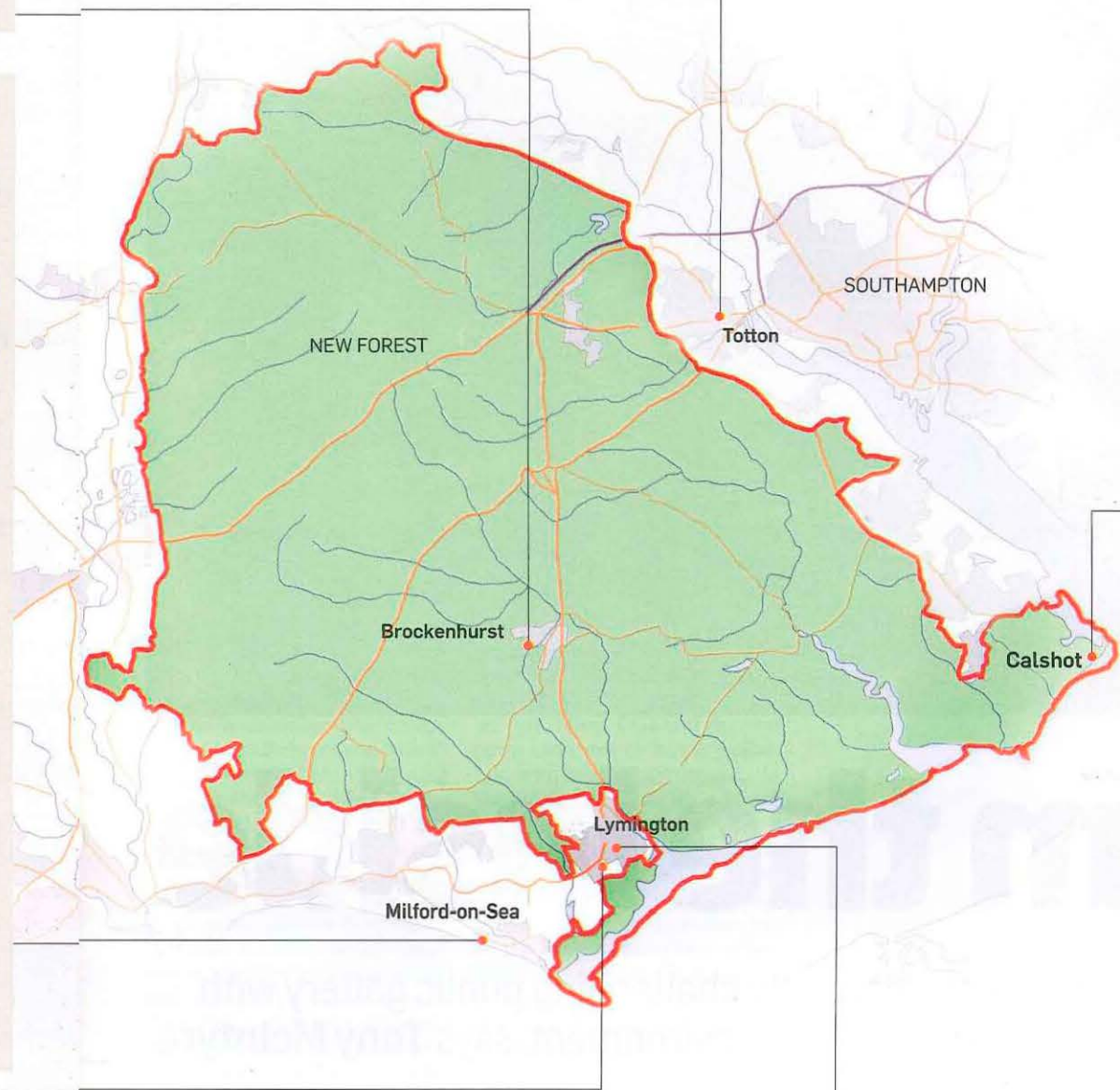
TOTTON, LIBRARY ROAD

Completed this year, Totton public loo is positioned in an awkward corner site bounded by roads and a car park.

"The dark green render," says Pardey, "addresses both the street corner with a new modest public space, and also salutes the police station [located opposite] by

means of two tilted roof planes that lift to gather north light."

The roof is clad externally in black zinc formed from 850mm-thick plywood sheets, creating elegant planes that float above the clerestory glazing. Internally, timber lines the roof.



CALSHOT SPIT

"Nearby beach huts were the catalyst for the sharp and defining roof form, together with the inspiration of the Australian architect Glenn Murcutt," says Pardey.

Positioned in a small public car park just behind the shingle beach of the Spit, the fourth of the public loos (2005) uses a galvanised crinkly metal roofing, while the base is clad in a light grey timber to echo the humble materials of the beach huts.

The fully glazed gables draw natural light into the mostly white interior, which is clad in white mosaics.



LYMINGTON, NEW STREET

The New Street public loo was the first to be built (2002), and as a result is the least evolved of the six.

But it did allow Pardey his first attempt at playfully referencing Louis Kahn's work — in this case, Trenton Bath House — in the use of two pyramidal roofs clad in metal standing seam, with natural light gained from lanterns at their apex. A loggia was incorporated to the front of the building to provide a small sheltered space visible from the

main street. The exterior walls are rendered and were painted a rich terracotta colour to pick up on the orange brick of the neighbouring Victorian building.

However, the council has since painted the building an insipid powder blue, as it has a number of the built public loos.

A drinking fountain of Bath sandstone has been integrated into the middle of the facade. Inside, blue mosaic tiles are used for the walls, while the internal surface of the roof is clad in a warm timber.