

# Bury St Edmunds Multi-Purpose Hall "APEX" – a showcase for AMERICAN WHITE OAK

**Credits:**

*Text: From an article by Ruth Slavid*

*Architect: Hopkins Architects Partnership*

*Acoustics consultant: Threshold Acoustics*

*Seating design: Luke Hughes*

*Main contractor: Taylor Woodrow*

*Photography Credit: Morley von Sternberg*



**In this issue of Asian Timber the 'Timberfile' features American White Oak. This project demonstrates well the extent to which this species can be used for joinery, flooring and furniture.**

Bury St Edmunds, a town in the east of England, now has a splendid new multi-purpose hall "Apex" for concerts, fairs and weddings, designed by Hopkins Architects. Lined mainly with American White Oak, the hall's deliberately simple appearance conceals high levels of acoustic and mechanical sophistication.

Set among the shops and flats of the new "Arc" town-centre development, the "Apex" hall had to be acoustically isolated,

and also offer its visitors a good aural experience. In order to accommodate a range of events, it was necessary to have a floor that could be either flat or raked.

Structurally, it was necessary to make the enclosure very heavy, to prevent sound escaping and annoying nearby residents, particularly when the building is host to the 'Battle of the Bands' annual rock concert. It therefore has a structural brickwork diaphragm wall, with a heavy concrete roof.

There are two levels of balcony, made of precast concrete, which cantilever from beams concealed within the diaphragm wall, and are tied back with large steel rods, also contained within the

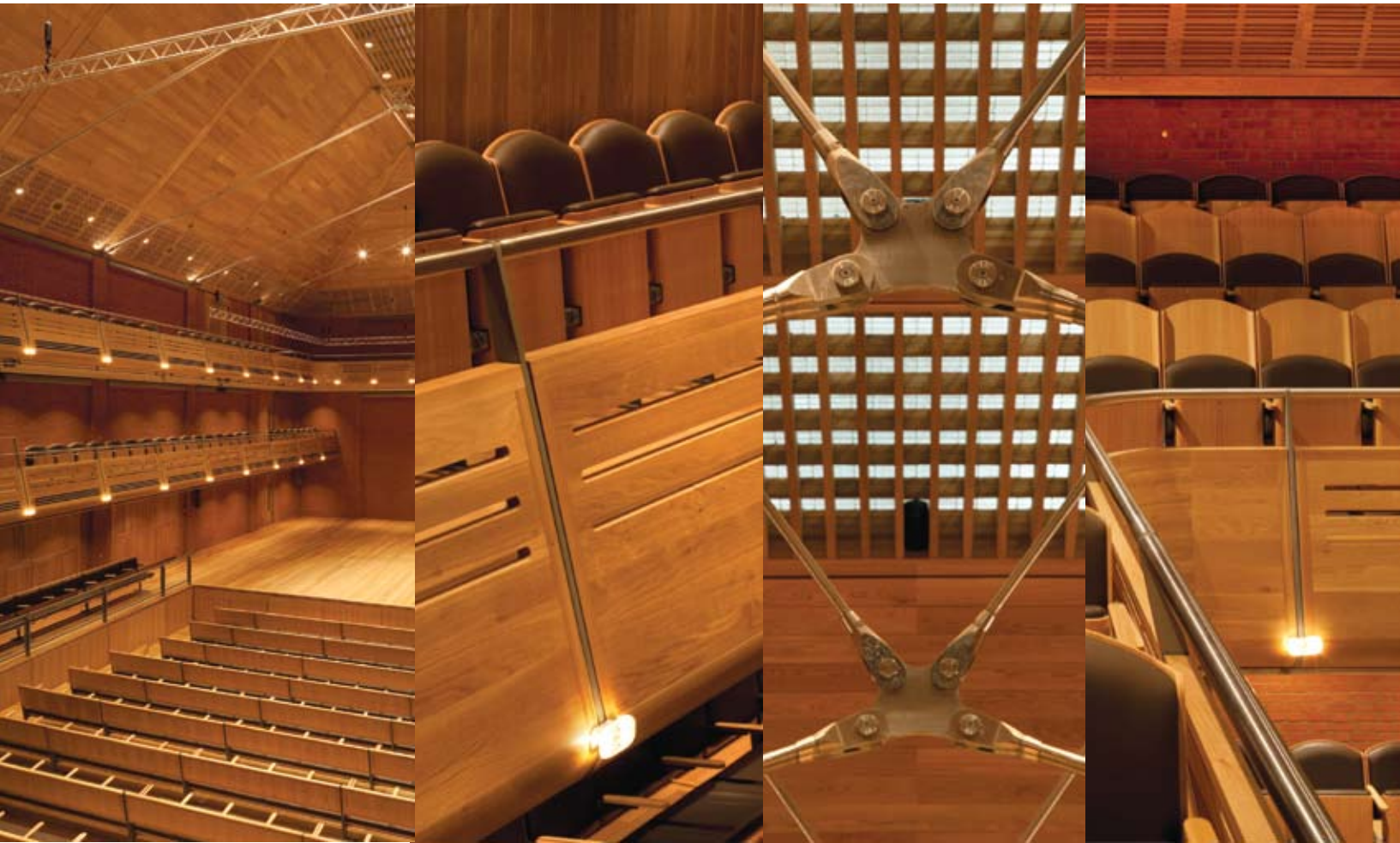
diaphragm wall. American White Oak lines the roof, and forms the floor and is also used on the fronts of the balconies and for the seating. *'I like it because it has a good colour and a good grain,'* said Jim Greaves, of Hopkins Architects. *'It's consistent and good to work with, and you get a beautiful effect.'*

On both the floors and the roof, 18mm thick Oak is fixed to plywood backing of the same thickness. The acousticians at Threshold Acoustics decreed that both should be fixed resiliently so that they can



absorb low frequency sound. The flat area at the top of the roof consists of a large roof-light, so that when the space is used for events such as weddings, daylight can penetrate. A blind is drawn across it for performances.

Openings in the balcony fronts allow sound to pass through and make them less reflective. Seating, designed by Luke



Hughes, is both elegant and supremely functional. The fact that the floor can be converted from flat to raked (sloping) means that the raised flooring all consists of ‘wagons’ – blocks with seating attached - which can be stored away beneath the flat floor.

Hughes designed the seats in a mix of solid American White Oak elements and veneer. *‘The great thing about American White Oak is that it is consistent in its colour and tone,’* said Luke Hughes, *‘and there is less waste than with European oak. More to the point in this instance is that it is consistent with the palette that the architect had chosen.’*

“Apex” opened in October 2010, replacing as a venue the old Corn Exchange, and is already almost fully booked for a wide range of events. Attendees are unlikely to appreciate the sophistication of the design, merely noting that the space looks good and works well – and that is exactly how the architect and other members of the professional team would want it to be.

