

Beside the seaside

Blackpool is famous for its tower, Southend for the largest big dipper, now the north Wales holiday resort of Rhyl has a £4.25 million Sun Centre which architects Gillinson Barnett & Partners are claiming is 'the twentieth century answer to the seaside pier'.

Opened on 28 June, the centre is the first phase of a new leisure and entertainments complex, purpose-designed to extend the sea-side town's short summer season by bringing the outdoors indoors and protecting holiday-makers and day-trippers against their traditional enemy, the weather.

On a cold windy day last week, the miles of good sandy beaches were deserted while hundreds of Merseyside sun-seekers were basking in subtropical temperatures on the shores of three leisure pools, including Europe's first indoor body surfing pool and a children's splash pool with an octopus and an elephant slide.

Under the 60 m span, glazed portal frame shed there is also an island café and licensed night club, extensive terraces with deck chairs, refreshment and souvenir kiosks, radio-controlled car circuits, palm trees and other exotic plants. At first floor balcony level there is a restaurant and bar, glazed to overlook the pool hall and with porthole windows giving distant views out to sea, a 200 m monorail and a nursery.

With the coming of the railway, Rhyl used to be one of Britain's leading resorts, and was the first seaside destination offered by Thomas Cook. Its pier was washed away in the 1940s and in 1973 the famous 1000 seat Pavilion Theatre was demolished when it was condemned as being structurally unsound.

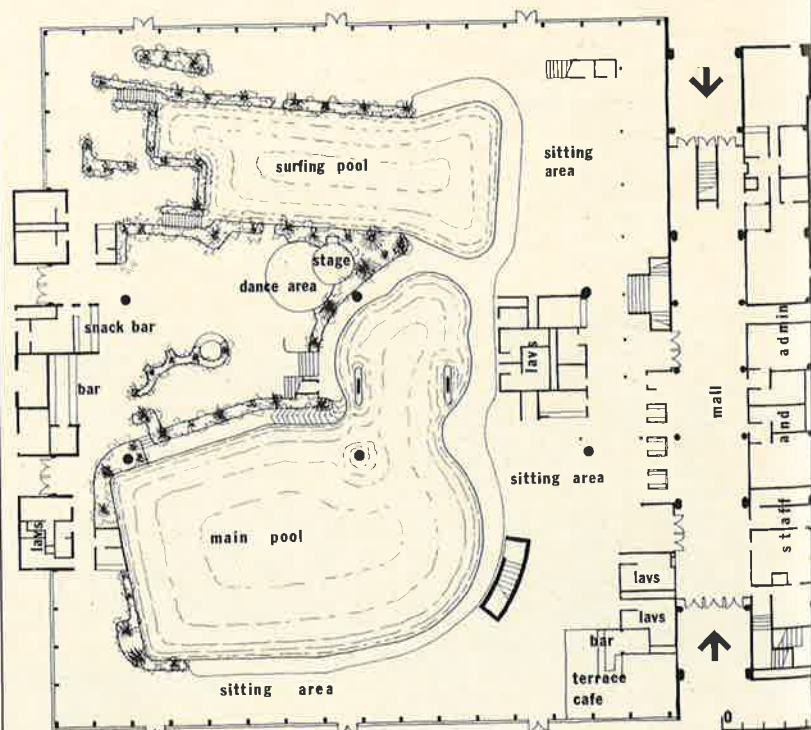
The Borough of Rhuddlan wanted to replace the theatre, but was also conscious of the need to provide attractions and profit-generating activities with which to subsidise it. After visiting one of Gillinson Barnett's earlier leisure pools, it commissioned the Leeds practice to prepare a feasibility study which was submitted in 1974.

Work started on Phase I, totalling 8600 m² on four floors, in January 1976 under a £2 million contract. Long delays due to industrial disputes, inflation, changes to the design and up-grading of finishes added two years to the completion date and another £2.25 million to the bill. Phase II, a 1000 seat theatre and conference centre, will be built to the east of the Sun Centre on the East Parade when the borough recovers its initial capital outlay, probably in two years' time.

The steel portal frame structure is glazed on three sides and has a bronze tinted corrugated PVC roof which wraps around the eaves to avoid the build up of wind-blown sand around the perimeter of the building. The restaurant, bar and administration areas are roofed and walled in corrugated aluminium, giving the centre an industrial aesthetic unsuited to its leisure role.

CHARLES KNEVITT

Client: The Borough of Rhuddlan
Architects: Gillinson Barnett & Partners
Partner in charge: Warwick Yates, in succession to Peter Sargent
Structural engineer partner: Randell Wynne-Jones
Interior design partner: Geoffrey Owen
Main contractor: Fairclough Building Ltd, North Western Division



Ground floor plan.