

Cinema's Return to Depot

DAVID TREVOR-JONES reports on a new cinema of notable architectural quality in Lewes



The west wing with entrance aedicule in the centre, café bar to the right and terrace with lounge behind to the left. (Burrell Foley Fischer ©Hufton+Crow.)

The East Sussex town of Lewes was served by three successive cinemas between 1910, when the County Theatre opened, and 1971, when the Odeon closed. Since then films have been shown intermittently at All Saints' church, de-consecrated and adapted over a long period into an arts centre, but the town has had no dedicated, full-time cinema. That changed in 2017. The opening in May of Depot (strictly without the definite article) not only brought cinema back to Lewes but also endowed the town with an award-winning new building of significant architectural quality.

The author draws on interviews with Robert Senior, Chairman of the trustees of Lewes Community Screen, the commissioning owners of the building, and Carmen Slijpen, Director and Programmer of Depot; and with Stefanie Fischer and John Burrell, partners in Burrell Foley Fischer (BFF), the building's architects.

Origins

The economics of town centre development and of cinema exhibition have led to indistinct multiplexes or small boutique screens built into undistinguished retail mega-structures accommodating shopping, eating and entertainment in a mix of more or less interchangeable leisure uses. Very few purpose-built, stand-alone cinema buildings have appeared on Britain's high streets in the 21st century.

Maybe it was ever thus that 'commercial architecture' has been seen, not least by its practitioners, as an exercise in cost minimisation

and revenue maximisation. Michael Egan, of the now celebrated design practice Mollo and Egan, told Allen Eyles in a conversation in 1998 that even in the 1930s heyday of cinema construction the architects' role was little more than to adorn the shell of a building that otherwise pretty well designed itself. Safety legislation and the simple matters of taking patrons' money and providing them with access to seats with reasonable sightlines to the screen determined the layout and hard design. In the pre-1939 cinema building boom there was an incentive to make the buildings distinctive and to decorate and furnish them lavishly. In the twenty-first century the relentless march of rationalised and optimised modular construction along with ruthless value engineering and commercial leasing have led to a litter of identikit, brand-led centres in which one or another of a small pool of national or multinational multiplex operators takes the cinema concession. Even the adornment of the developer's shell has largely been commodified. What a joy it is, then, to witness the birth of a new purpose-built cinema designed outside the repressive constraints of commerce.

Although Lewes probably ticks a number of boxes in the present-day exhibitor's viability matrix - it is a prosperous town with probably a higher-than-average education and income profile - it has not attracted a mainstream multiplex. It might have ended up with a developer's shell scheme had it not been for the South Downs National Park and extraordinary good fortune. The story of how Depot came about instead starts with the Lewes Film Club.

The Lewes Film Society, later Club, started showing films at All Saints' in 1987. From 2002 a commercial mobile cinema operator shared the facilities, giving way to the Town Council to show the first run films in 2012. The Lewes Junior Film Club began in 2009 as an offshoot from the main Club and was organised by the latter's projectionist, Carmen Slijpen. It was through the Junior Club, for which Slijpen programmed a tremendously varied programme with associated events and activities, that she and Robert Senior met. Senior, a successful businessman and serious film enthusiast, admired her imaginative approach. They started to discuss opening a proper, full-time cinema.



The well-known Lewes brewer, Harvey's, had entered into an agreement with a developer to redevelop its surplus depot site adjacent to the railway station. The Brewery was itself keen to include a cinema in a commercial scheme along with retail and residential or hotel uses. Slijpen approached the developer determined to bid to operate the cinema but the scheme failed to gain planning approval, essentially because as proposed it was a gross over-development of the site. With the planning position deadlocked, Senior proposed going it alone. Lewes Community Screen, a charitable trust founded to build and own the cinema, acquired the site in 2013 with funding from the Chalk Cliff Trust of which Robert Senior is a principal trustee.

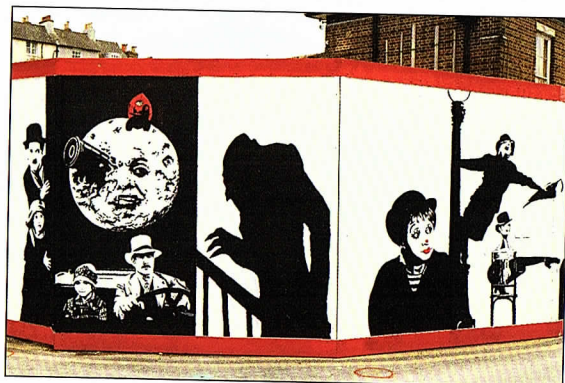
The development of the cinema began with consultations both formal and informal. The views of both the Town and County Councils and of residential neighbours were hostile. But it emerged through the fog of negativity and consequent despondency on the part of the Community Screen trustees that in fact the majority of town residents

did want the cinema. There was a corresponding desire to see retained the 1937 depot, a handsome neo-Georgian landmark built for the Post Office before Harvey's use of it as a depot. Lewes Community Screen sought planning advice from the South Downs National Park, since 2012 the planning authority for Lewes and supportive of the proposition, and eventually invited submissions from six architects recommended to them by the Park authority.

The building

Robert Senior comments that BFF won the job on the basis of experience and realism. They recognised the constraints of the site as well as the practical needs of a modern cinema building and responded to the rather unusual ambitions of the client. Senior expressly did not want the cinema to look like a cinema. His vision for the appearance and feel of the building was more akin to that of a modern art gallery or museum. He wanted lightness and air, horizontality rather than verticality, and, above all, quality. The brief became to make a

Top: The retained 1937 Post Office building behind Depot's south terrace and café bar. (BFF ©Hufton+Crow.) Left: Depot's plaque carved by Neil Turner from Portland stone and blue slate joins one from 1937 on the south façade. Above right: Depot through Station Street, roof truss pergola in the foreground on Pinwell Road corner. (Both by David Trevor-Jones.)



Coming soon! Classic cinematic images herald Depot as it rises behind the site hoardings. (Carlotta Luke.)

Right: Harvey's original wrought iron sign over the new entrance punched through the retained boundary wall. Below left: The pergola formed from reclaimed roof trusses in the south west quadrant of the garden and Depot beyond. Below right: Level access from the station, fruit trees in the south west quadrant of the garden to the left with the terrace and north wing beyond. (All by David Trevor-Jones.)



building of high quality and craftsmanship. That would be reflected in the materials and finishes, in the equipment and the fit-out, in the service and all the way to such detail as that drinks would be served in glasses, not plastic: the patrons would be treated as adults. Carmen Slijpen adds that BFF had so thoroughly understood the prospective client's brief that the building as it now stands is almost exactly the one that they initially submitted; this is remarkable because commonly an initial design pitched in an architectural competition is substantially modified during development into the built scheme.

The form of the building was determined both by the decision to retain the 1937 neo-Georgian element and to build within the structure of the former Post Office/brewery depot shed behind it, and by the Trustees' vision that it would be a hub

for the community, for education and creativity as well as for entertainment. These uses led to a semi-quadrangle plan, two new single-storey wings added to the existing building enclosing a partly paved courtyard and garden. The retained depot building has been radically re-structured to accommodate the three auditoria.

The Trustees decided not to provide car parking in conformance with the Trust's strong sustainability ethic, not because the objections at planning stage had focused on traffic generation, among other matters. The railway station is immediately adjacent and the intention is to serve a local, public transport-using, walking and cycling constituency. Two dedicated disabled bays are provided but otherwise there is parking available elsewhere, including a small council-owned car park immediately behind the cinema and the larger



station car park itself. So instead of tarmac and cars the cinema opens onto a paved terrace and a green garden of lawns and borders, one quadrant of which is set under a giant steelwork pergola made up from roof trusses salvaged from the original depot building.

Depot is entered through the garden, either on a wheelchair-friendly level from the railway station car park to the south or, more formally, from the rising slope of Pinwell Road to the west. A funnelled entrance of reclaimed brick inserted into the retained brewery depot boundary wall is the first example of building craft to delight the observant visitor. Harvey's elaborate wrought iron sign is remounted over it. The path slopes from the road gently down to the cinema entrance passing a bicycle shed to the left and the sunken pergola garden to the right. Beyond these the lawns to left and right complete a two by two square evoking the plan of the orchard that historically occupied the site. Fruit trees have been planted in the south-east quadrant of the garden.

The partly paved courtyard is enclosed on its east and north sides by BFF's chic new café/lounge and education/gallery wings respectively, and embraced

to the west by the rising ground and boundary wall to Pinwell Road. The main terrace is furnished with substantial, teak patio tables and chairs from which parents can keep an eye on their children playing on the large lawn. Even the bike shed is integrated into the design, just inside the entrance in an open-sided timber pavilion. In another developer's hands the courtyard garden would have been a car park. Instead it is an inviting, tranquil, hugely enjoyable extension to the café-bar lounge and gallery. Indeed, so extensive and inviting are these spaces that one might be forgiven for forgetting that the main purpose of the building is cinema and that a larger area is occupied by the three auditoria.

Ahead, the main entrance into the building is powerfully signalled by the aedicule, Stefanie Fischer's term for the exquisite, knapped flint square tunnel framed in glass that penetrates through the façade. Flint is one of the characteristic vernacular building materials of the South Downs, seen used structurally in historic buildings but often more recently as a token decorative gesture to win planning points. Here it is used with real conviction. The aedicule is a work of art as well as of functional building design but flint features

Top: To the right of the aedicule, the café bar with shutters and windows wide open. Below: With the west terrace to the right, the north wing beyond with the gallery in its flint box to the left. (Both BFF ©Hufton+Crow.)

elsewhere in unexpected ways. The courtyard elevation of the gallery at the end of the range to the left of the entrance is of knapped flint but from a viewpoint across the roofscape of Depot at the top of Pinwell Road flint can be seen as the roofing material too, articulated as a nest of concentric rectangles alternating in knapped and field flints over the gallery. All of the flint work and the idea for that roof came from local flint worker, David Smith, 'The Flintman' whose Sussex Heritage Trust award for his craftsmanship at Depot is one of several gathered by the building.

Interiors

Entering the building through the aedicule, the box office ahead is simply a large white desk behind which a matrix of screens shows not only programme information and clips but also train departure times, a sustainability point intended to encourage use of public transport. Behind the desk to the right an open stairway rises to the offices that occupy the first floor of the former Post Office building. Its ground floor is the kitchen serving the large café/bar that occupies the whole of BFF's newly built space to the south of the aedicule. High, light and bright, the room is lit by floor-to-ceiling windows that are equipped with hinged, folding brise-soleil shutters in chestnut. These are designed to provide light and temperature control inside the building, with clear panels deliberately at table-height so as not to obstruct the view out when closed, but which can also be arranged outside to form sheltered external bays. To the south yet another outdoor space looking across to the station will lose its view of the unsightly car park and wire

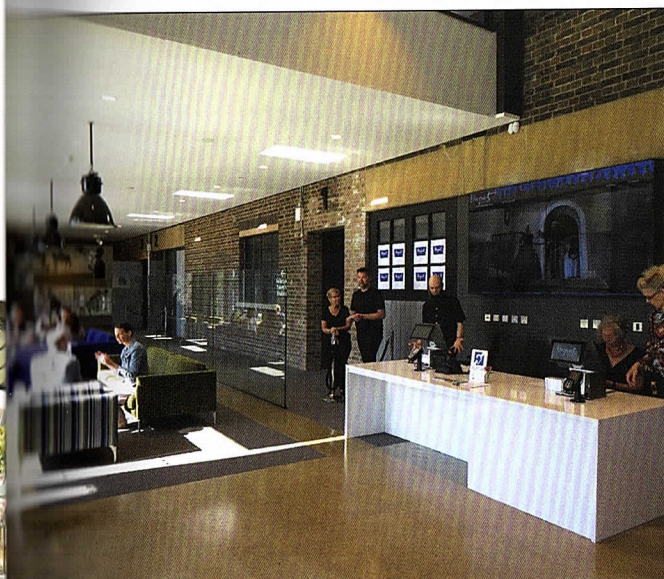
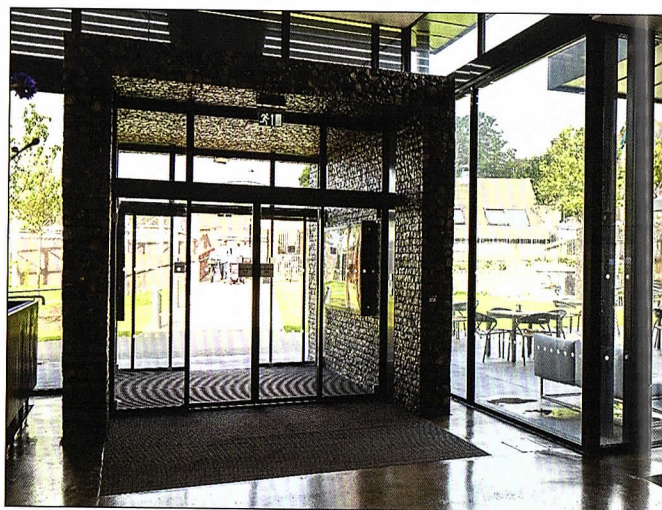
fencing in between as an edible hedge of herb and fruit bushes grows and matures along its southern boundary.

From this terrace it becomes apparent that the building is set at a height above the surrounding ground level. The fortuitous elevation of the entire floor slab on 900mm sleeper walls is a flood defence measure required by the Environment Agency that helped in another quite separate, unrelated way by reducing the slope of the entrance path to just within the limit that would otherwise have required railings and landings, thus preserving the uncluttered openness of the garden.

The café bar counter is white, matching the reception desk, and lit with bright white light from a line of slim pendants. The tables are lit, in contrast, by huge, black-enamelled industrial lamps. The seat fabrics are plain blue, purple or mustard and the whole area is defined by two pairs of over-sized, birch-backed benches facing into large family or communal tables at either end with more intimate tables for two set out in the space between them. The menus are ambitious, a far cry from catering contractor cook-chill, offering restaurant quality food at modest prices. "Depot has to work against the concept that cinema means popcorn and hotdogs" just as it intends to work against artificial divisions between mainstream and art house or between teenage and adult films, in Senior's concept for its mission. The catering, entirely managed and provided in-house, is a key component in the economic model for the whole enterprise.

To the left of the ticket desk a long, light-filled lounge completes the west wing. Its openable floor-to-ceiling glazed façade is set back from the

Below: The Flintman's knapped flint entrance aedicule. (David Trevor-Jones.) Right: The flint aedicule punches through the glass. (Carlotta Luke.) Bottom: The box office is a large white desk. Behind it the original brewery depot wall has been retained and train departure times are displayed along with screening information. (David Trevor-Jones.)



building line of the café bar behind a minimalist colonnade, the roof overhang providing some shade to the paved terrace outside and also, up to a point, to the inside. A head-high glass barrier separates the lounge from the entrances to the three screens. The intention is that a single ticket-checker can control entry to all three from the box office (or desk) end, while the slight opacity of the glass helps to moderate the contrast between the dark auditoria and the bright lounge. The downside to the arrangement is that patrons nipping out of screen 3 can see the toilets immediately ahead of them but have to negotiate the whole length of the barrier, both ways, to reach them. Their inconvenience might be amplified as, uniquely, screen 3 has its own small adjacent bar.

The lounge is furnished with sofas and armchairs in bright striped, chequered and plain fabrics that differentiate it from the more subdued café bar. At the furthest end of the lounge from the entrance and reception desk, a right-angle turn to the left leads to the single-storey north range facing onto the paved terrace and garden. The long, high education room with openable floor to ceiling glazing matching that in the lounge is furnished

with café-style tables and chairs that can be used as ad hoc work stations and as overflow from the café, or the room can be partitioned from the lounge for a talk or educational event or for a private gathering.

Beyond it, differentiated externally as it occupies the flint box appended to the glazed north wing, the exhibition gallery is accessed by a door from the education room. This can be completely blacked out and used as an informal additional screening space.

The ancillary accommodation is completed with a room running parallel with the education space, sandwiched between it and the cliff face that defines the rear, northern boundary of the site outside, that is dedicated to facilities for local filmmakers. These include an editing suite equipped with Mac computers and software.

The internal, unglazed walls of the education room continuing through to the end wall of the lounge and segregated corridor serving the cinema screens provide a backdrop for a huge, mural-like artwork by Stephen Chambers called 'Big Country'. Although not commissioned for the building, this work so perfectly occupies the space that it certainly could have been. It consists of seventy-

Top: The café bar opens out through sliding windows and shutters to terraces on two sides. (BFF ©Hufton+Crow.) Above left: The three screens accessed from a glass-partitioned corridor lie behind the retained original brewery depot wall backing BFF's new lounge. (David Trevor-Jones.) Above right: The lounge opens out through floor-to-ceiling sliding glass windows to the paved west terrace. Glass partition to left. (BFF ©Hufton+Crow.)

The glazed elevation to the education room opens out to the paved west terrace with part of Stephen Chambers' 'Big Country' installation at right. (BFF ©Hufton+Crow.)



eight screen-prints depicting figures, landscapes and place names with themes of travel and the colonisation of the American West. The work takes its name from the 1958 Western directed by William Wyler. BFF worked with the artist in installing it.

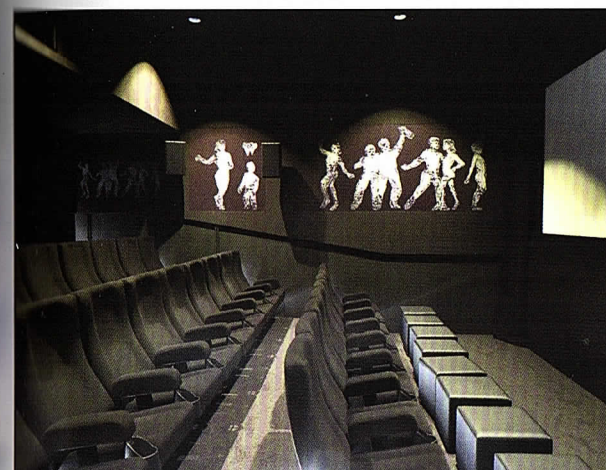
The auditoria occupy the footprint of the Post Office, later brewery depot building itself and its original external west façade wall is now internal, preserved as the structural separation between BFF's entirely new west wing extension to it and the three screens. The other original external walls were also retained, simplifying the construction by avoiding any need for party wall agreements and also the potential disturbance to neighbours from demolition. However, the available height was determined by the flood defence requirement to raise the floor level throughout the building and by the client's accessibility requirement for level access, while above, the roof could not rise above the elevation of the adjacent garden boundaries to the terrace of houses to the north. The height limit thus defined required the removal of the industrial steel trusses, some of which were retained and re-used as the pergola outside. The available height inside beneath the entirely new roof structure was only viable because these are entirely post-celluloid, dedicatedly digital screens.

Left: Julian Bell's birthday party mural seen in situ on the original brewery depot north and east walls with the roof trusses above. (Carlotta Luke.) Right: the dancers transferred onto the east wall of screen 1. (David Trevor-Jones.)



stepped to afford clear sightlines but the ceilings are relatively low and the digital projectors are thrust out over the seats in inverted tunnels. The design of the projector pods had very carefully to be thought through. Cinemas designed specifically for all-digital projection are still relatively new and the technology is still evolving. Stefanie Fischer explained that there has been no change in the licensing regulations that since the 1909 Cinematograph Act have required the projector to be separated from the audience in a fire-proof enclosure. The evolutionary change has been in the interpretation of the rules. The first generation, pre-laser projectors do get hot, digital projectors do generate noise and they are heavy. The tunnel pods therefore demanded exacting engineering, ventilation and acoustic design solutions.

A vital part of the building's history is conserved behind the internal wall lining to screen 2, though not accessible. Whilst still owned by Harvey's, the depot was occupied as a studio by the artist Julian Bell. In 2012 he painted a mural of dancing figures on its east and north walls for his sixtieth birthday party. He did not mean it to be a permanent work, but the dancers live on as a visual theme linking the auditoria that now occupy the footprint of the space. Photographs were taken of the dancing figures and reproduced on the fabric linings for acoustically absorptive panels. In each colour-coded



auditorium they cavort across the back and down the side walls, on a blue ground in Screen 1 (142 seats), on charcoal grey in Screen 2 (128 seats) and on purple in Screen 3 (38 seats). The effect echoes that of the embroidered mural under a dark 'sky' in the Skandia cinema in Stockholm, an unconscious point of reference. John Burrell, interviewed alongside Stefanie Fischer, remarked that the figures evoked the queue, an echo of a small sculpture by Eric Gill called 'The Cinema Queue' that was installed in one of the practice's first cinema projects, the Metro (since demolished).

The auditoria are illuminated from above by bright white downlighters set into the dark ceilings and from below by uplighters concealed beneath the backs of the seating steps. The murals are lit when the house lights are up by spotlights set into the ceilings. Screen 1 has 4K projection with Dolby Atmos, a stage and screen tabs. Screen 2 is equipped for 3D. There are no sofas or drinks tables, just exceptionally comfortable, high-end cinema seats in straight rows with generous legroom and good sightlines. These are cinemas designed for cineastes.

Back outside, beyond the flint roof over the gallery, foliage can be glimpsed growing on the cinema auditoria green roofs: not the usual sedum but a mix of chalk downland species native to the area. The green roofs are heavy and their mass enhances sound insulation, completely allaying the fear of noise transmission expressed by objecting neighbours during the planning phase. The north half of the garden, including the paved terrace, is

Above: Screen 1 has 142 seats, screen tabs and a small stage, and is equipped for Dolby Atmos. Left: Screen 2 has 128 seats. Below: Screen 3 has 38 seats and its own adjacent snug bar (see overleaf). (All by David Trevor-Jones.)



The bar adjacent to Screen 3 is used for post-screening Q&A and discussions, and for private events. (Carlotta Luke.)

designed and equipped to accommodate outdoor screenings. Permanent fixtures for a demountable screen, sound system hub and projector are provided. Sound will be delivered by headphones so no more noise will be generated externally than that of the convivial hum of conversation from the terrace. Potentially, then, Depot could operate in summer as a five-screen cinema with the outdoor and gallery spaces activated to supplement the three permanent screens.

Depot is not only rooted in the ground of the South Downs in its design, it is heated by it too. Space heating comes from a ground source heat pump and balanced with passive, natural ventilation. There are solar panels on the auditorium roofs. The low energy input contributes to the building's low carbon footprint. Sustainability is a key ethos in the design and management of Depot along with accessibility in all of its senses. Disability access is comprehensive and detailed, from level access to all areas to braille signage, audio description of the building and its consciously simple, open layout, to open captioning every Monday of all films for which it is available. The sustainability agenda includes vegan options in the café (responding to the carbon footprint of farming animals), low energy lighting and complete elimination of plastic drinks bottles.

The flint box in the foreground accommodates the gallery while in the background a haze of green marks the downland planted roof over the screens. (David Trevor-Jones.)



Programming

Prime among the many characteristics that mark Depot out as remarkable is its programming. The ethos of the whole project is that film is taken seriously as an art form. Senior and Slijpen are rooted in film history. They are consciously kicking against an alarming trend that presents cinema simply as a dumbed down retail entertainment spectacle. Senior insists that Depot is not 'art house' in the sense that those of an older generation remember and revere. He is a true film buff and sees it as important to maintain a canon of classics, enhancing their attraction with themed seasons, introductory talks and Q&A sessions, but to present mainstream first run programmes too. He points out the strange dichotomy that the Lewes audience includes many people who might happily attend opera at Glyndebourne or serious theatre yet are reluctant to try out anything but new release, mass-market films. Why so? It is part of the mission at Depot to square that circle.

Senior and Slijpen are actively exploring theming, education and working with other community groups to add value. Programmes linked with other community group initiatives have explored areas such as Arabic films, with middle-eastern food on the café menu, and a season of classic German silents tied in with a local adult-education course on Weimar. Depot's Film Education Department targets both young and adult audiences. It is concerned with film-making as well as film-viewing and films made by local people, perhaps using the facilities provided in the education centre have been and will be screened.

The governing criterion is that Depot exists to screen well-made film from all directions. This includes a particular commitment to documentary and to the best of world cinema. Depot is not afraid of subtitles but nor does it eschew *Star Wars*. A typical week's programming across the three screens might include up to ten film titles together with live transmissions (National Theatre, Royal Opera House, Glyndebourne and one-offs) and events in the education room and gallery. 'Sunday Brunch Live' music sessions are every Sunday from 11am to 1pm featuring local Americana, jazz, Latin, classical or whatever else might fit Depot's vibe, with food served from opening at 10am until 4pm.

Every film is shown at least once on screen 1 or 2. No adverts are shown but plenty of trailers are, the aim being to draw people in with mainstream first runs but to present them with the whole range of the programme. Some screenings of classics are introduced with talks, many by Senior himself (his genres cover classic westerns, noir and horror). The bar attached to screen 3 is used for post-film discussions after classic film screenings and the policy of keeping the main café bar open until 11.30pm on Fridays and Saturdays and 11pm every other night further encourages patrons to linger and provides space for them to discuss the film they've just seen. The building is open from 9am on weekdays and 10am at weekends with the café bar providing refreshment and space to rail travellers, home workers, people meeting socially or professionally, people attending courses or using the film production facilities and people just wanting somewhere exceptionally pleasant to while away time. Film screenings generally start at around 3pm on weekdays, earlier during school holidays and at weekends.

Cinema admission prices are pitched to encourage repeat bookings and adventurous film-

going. Tickets for under-25s are fixed at £4 and a family ticket for four is priced at £20. The aim is to capture the attention of the Netflix generation and to keep them engaged 'from cradle to grave'. The top price for an adult is £9 during the Friday evening and Saturday peak periods. Outside those times, it falls in steps to a minimum of £6 before 5pm on weekdays. Discounts are available through a membership scheme but the only concessions are to those on unemployment or disability benefits (solely to provide a context for future readers, the equivalent prices at Depot's closest competitor in Brighton at the time of writing were £12.20 per non-member adult, peak, and £10.40 off peak). The pricing represents the cinema's accessibility agenda and also, consciously, encourages young people to experience film that they might not see elsewhere. The business is run by an operating company solely owned by the Trust as an integrated whole. As a charity, Lewes Community Screen aims to break even, not to generate profit. It does so entirely without subsidy.

The future

John Burrell and Stefanie Fischer see the role of a facility like Depot critically as that of a community hub. Does that mean that cinema itself is downgraded? Is Depot a rather nice place to hang out, plug in the laptop, meet friends or clients and have lunch, with a few cinema screens attached? Absolutely not! The architects and Slijpen speak with one voice. Fischer argues that the architecture provides both the facilities for the community and the means to manage them. Slijpen sees every person using Depot's garden for a few minutes' relaxation as potentially a customer and then a filmgoer. None sees management of the transient, non-film going audience as a problem. To Slijpen it is positively an opportunity.

The model certainly seems to be working. Visiting the cinema just a few days after its opening to the public on 27 May 2017 (the actor Martin Freeman having conducted the formalities to an invited

audience the day before) the author found it positively buzzing with activity. On a lovely summer's day the terrace was well-used through into the evening, the café was busy from mid-morning, a local history group Reel Lewes was launching its new book *Screen Stories: Lewes goes to the pictures* in the education room and an associated, locally made film - *Big Screen Memories* - was shown on screen 1; it was hard to imagine that this was a brand new, unprecedented resource. The cinemas are already "very, very busy" according to Slijpen and social media show that its reputation has already spread to the extent that on telling people across the country that he is from Lewes, Senior says they respond with the question: "Do you know the Depot Cinema?"

Could this model work elsewhere? Burrell and Fischer are absolutely committed to just that. They see the cinema as a community hub, open all day and providing amenity space to all as the best model for the future. The obvious problem is that of raising the start-up money without compromising the mission. Lewes has been incredibly fortunate in having a private donor ready to put in up to £8 million without any commercial tie. The project could have been achieved more cheaply. Senior comments that there was no budget limit because the intent was a building of generosity and quality. In effect no expense was spared. The hint is that it might have been achieved with compromises for £2-3 million. Lewes, though, has Depot without compromise. Lucky Lewes!

The author acknowledges the assistance of the architects and the trustees of Lewes Community Screen. Interviews were conducted with Stefanie Fischer and John Burrell at their office in London on 30 August 2017 and with Robert Senior and Carmen Slijpen at Depot on 26 October 2017. Carlotta Luke was commissioned to document the construction of Depot and her photographs can be seen at www.carlottaluke.com/architecture-and-construction/architecture-and-restoration/the-depot-cinema-lewes

Gallery flint box and north wing to the left, overlooking the paved terrace and lawn. (BFF ©Hufton+Crow.)

