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Words: David Reat

This visitor building for a Scottish sawmill complex is testament to the architect's strong roots in craftsmanship, writes David Reat

Before the Covid pandemic, James Jones & Sons, the largest, single-site sawmill complex in the UK, was becoming overwhelmed by the volume of visitors. The idea for a new building was devised by its former marketing manager Jon Stevenson, who recognised the need to provide better facilities. Following a competition, Konishi Gaffney Architects was appointed to develop the design brief which comprised: reception; offices and meeting room for 10 staff; support spaces; and, most importantly, a large multi-purpose room capable of accommodating 30 people with a view over the entire processing site.

In the corner of the showcase facility, three miles north of Lockerbie in south-west Scotland, is the result – composed of two staggered pieces umbilically attached to a previous structure, forming a trio of elements. The oblique approach reveals the new building's cloven diagram, a response to site constraints, allowing the lower section to protrude beyond the taller one and announce the entrance in a discreet but effective manner. This level of delicacy and restraint pervades throughout; the

result of discussions between the architect and the client that the building, while being distinctive, should never be ostentatious.

The footprint, on a north-east/south-west axis, logically presents pitched gables to the prevailing Galloway wind and, appositely, to the sawmill complex on the leeward side. The robust form and massing lets the structure sit among larger neighbours of industrial sheds and kilns without being overwhelmed. The company's attention to waste mitigation and environmental responsibility – such as using expelled heating water from the Steven's Croft power station nearby – is demonstrated throughout its construction. The new building makes extensive use of timber while using an air-source heat pump to provide renewable heating or cooling, depending on the time of year.

The envelope, constructed with thick walls clad in Scottish larch, exploits deep window reveals to mitigate inclement weather. The ground floor is a plinth of black-stained vertical timber strips, crowned by a continuous flashing detail established by the eaves line of the lower buildings' zinc roofs. The first floor, by contrast, is clad horizontally and is more natural in colour – the result of preservation treatment to ensure balanced weathering. This distinction is most obvious on the south elevation, which discreetly incorporates exits and services within its binary composition; however, the upper-volume gables are where the story of the building is most explicit. The western picture window, monitoring the entrance, is complemented on its opposing side by a panoramic glazed screen, housed within a large corner aperture. This opening is constructed with concealed cantilevered steelwork and is the only concession to a built manifesto of the company's timber products. Kieran Gaffney, the lead architect, initially favoured a fillet geometry honed from a previous idea, while the client wanted to divert the money elsewhere, in particular towards the roofing materials. A different corner form was subsequently devised and all agreed the £800,000 project did not suffer as a consequence.





A stripped trunk feature column delineates the circulation to the upper floor. Credit: Dapple Photography

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On entering, the building's organisation is clear. The reception desk, facing on to a monochromatic bank of full-height proprietary-glazed offices, guards a sequence of secondary spaces camouflaged behind a striated wall of colourful Douglas fir. In a clue of what is to come, the space is structured by the glass corner of the staff meeting room, from where the adjacent biomass plant can be viewed, establishing a visual dialogue. The functional design is not lost on manager Emma Loftus, who acknowledges that the centre has been considered as much for the staff using it as for the people visiting.

The building continually unfolds spatially, belying its compact dimensions, in particular on ascent to the floor above. A top-lit staircase arrives at a lectern-like balcony from where you can see both the building entrance and the primary space. This room, ecclesiastical-in-character, is a perfectly proportioned two-square on plan, enclosed by white plastered walls, sandwiched between oak flooring and a cathedral ceiling composed with closely centred rafters. The elegance of the structure's timber fins recalls the ribcage qualities of the architects' Bowhouse food production hub in Fife, as their rhythm directs you to the climax of the building's narrative: that view over the entire 14ha sawmill from its magnificent east window.

The centre, while won in competition, was not the first time the architect and client have worked together. Konishi Gaffney's pavilion for the Edinburgh Expo (2016) established a working relationship that has now resulted in a successful addition to the client's workplace, and to the architects' expanding list of fine projects. It is testament to the practice's strong roots in craftsmanship and its proven ability to communicate with its client that this is a chance for it to open up further, to more expansive work, and to explore what is around the next corner.

David Reat is a teaching fellow at the University of Strathclyde

Credits

Client James Jones & Sons

Architect Konishi Gaffney Architects

Structural engineer Entuitive

M&E Irons Foulner

Project manager Asher Associates

QS McGowan Miller

Contractor David Hardie Engineering

Timber supply James Jones & Sons

Flooring/cladding Russwood Glazing

Gray & Dick, Velfac, Glazing Vision

Internal partitions Scottish Window

Solutions

Region: [Scotland](#)

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