AGORA THEATRE, LELYSTAD

You can’t miss the new theatre in Lelystad, the Netherlands, designed by UN Studio. A faceted building, clad in the colours of the setting sun, it is a project that makes its presence felt despite its relatively low height. The excitement of the exterior is not diminished as you move inside, to a series of spaces of complex geometry and bright colours, culminating in the womb-like, multi-surfacied interior of the bright red theatre itself.

The appeal of the building is indisputable, but it raises two questions in the mind of the visitor. Firstly, why did the architect design it in that way? And secondly, how was the design realised?

Known as the Agora Theatre, it replaces a previous theatre that was built in 1974. The new building forms part of a masterplan for this area of the city by landscape architect West 8. For UN studio the challenge was to bring the excitement of the theatre not just to the audience but also to passersby, and to accommodate a number of formal requirements. First of these was that there are two theatres within the building, the major spaces, and for practical reasons they need to be as far apart as possible. This immediately moved the concept away from a single massive structure. And by further fracturing the volume, the architect was able to keep down the total height of the building, so reducing interference with the cityscape. Although this is a building intended to act as a landmark, it forms far less of a looming mass than a more rectilinear solution would have done. A cafe connects to the square, and the architect has made the building as open and transparent as possible. At the same time there is a permeability beneath the building, as the structure lifts up at one end, to follow the profile of the auditorium.

In fact, the walls are all vertical, and the real complexity is in the roof, for which the architect has produced a plan that is like a piece of multi-coloured origami. Some facets are in red; some in orange; and some in yellow, with others in a careful choice of intermediate hues. The cladding is prepainted aluminium, and the variety of colours is enhanced by the use of a number of different
panel shapes and patterns. Some of the metal is panelled, while other elements are punched with a regular series of circular holes, to create a kind of translucent veil. Of the solid sheets, some had a regular profile, while others were flat, with a squared pattern. Cladding elements meet at an odd variety of angles, so the contractor had to pay close attention to the jointing and fixing between the elements.

The cladding is made more complex by the fact that there are dramatic returns, moving back towards a giant window of laminated glass at the upper level, which offers views over the town. In places, in order to optimise the geometry, the cladding stands considerably proud of both the structure and the insulation.

The colour scheme within the building complements rather than mimics the one used externally. It passes through a range of reds and violets to a pale, almost white colour, culminating in the all red interior of the main theatre space.

In many theatre buildings, the fly tower is used as a solitary, and rather hackneyed symbol, of what is going on inside. At the Agora that symbol is missing, absorbed in the complex geometry of the envelope. Instead, the building portrays both a deliberate theatricality, and an expression, in both geometry and colour, of the excitement and the experience that will obtain inside. In this sense, it is serving both the theatre-going public and the general citizenry, while making a bold attempt to convert the latter into the former.