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Festive fantastic: re-bonding design
Night lights: brilliance after sundown





A new national library for China, Ireland's first purpose built opera house and a vast cocoon housing 17 million insect specimens at the Natural History Museum in London are among projects intriguing **Steve Hill** as he journeys through the world of architecture.

IMAGE COURTESY/AUDREY MATLOCK ARCHITECT



1. ALMATY

RECREATION TIME

Construction work is underway on the Medeu Recreation Centre, which is situated on a plateau in the foothills of the Tian Shan Mountains on Kazakhstan's eastern border. Designed by New York-based firm Audrey Matlock Architect, the 2,000-square-metre facility will feature outdoor and indoor tennis courts, a children's gym, changing rooms, a Turkish-style hammam bath and dining pavilion. The architectural goal was to assimilate a large building into an untouched landscape, which is also affected by earthquakes and landslides, hence the efforts to minimise the centre's profile by depressing it into the ground. The roof is composed of 10 zinc-covered ribbons that reflect the jagged profile of the surrounding mountains.

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2. VOLGOGRAD

CENTRE OF ATTENTION

Due to be completed by the end of 2011 is Volgopark Centre, a massive 'shopping as museum and exhibition space' designed by Turkey-based Oncuoglu Architecture. The scheme for this southern Russian city is built around a promenade and features a plaza that will house five floors of offices, retail units and car parking in the basement as well as Volgopark Tower, which is the main residential building and is planned as a high-rise integration of two blocks. A sports centre has also been figured into the project which aims to make the most of its location at the intersection of the Volga River and Volgo-Don Canal.

3. BEIJING

TURNING THE PAGE

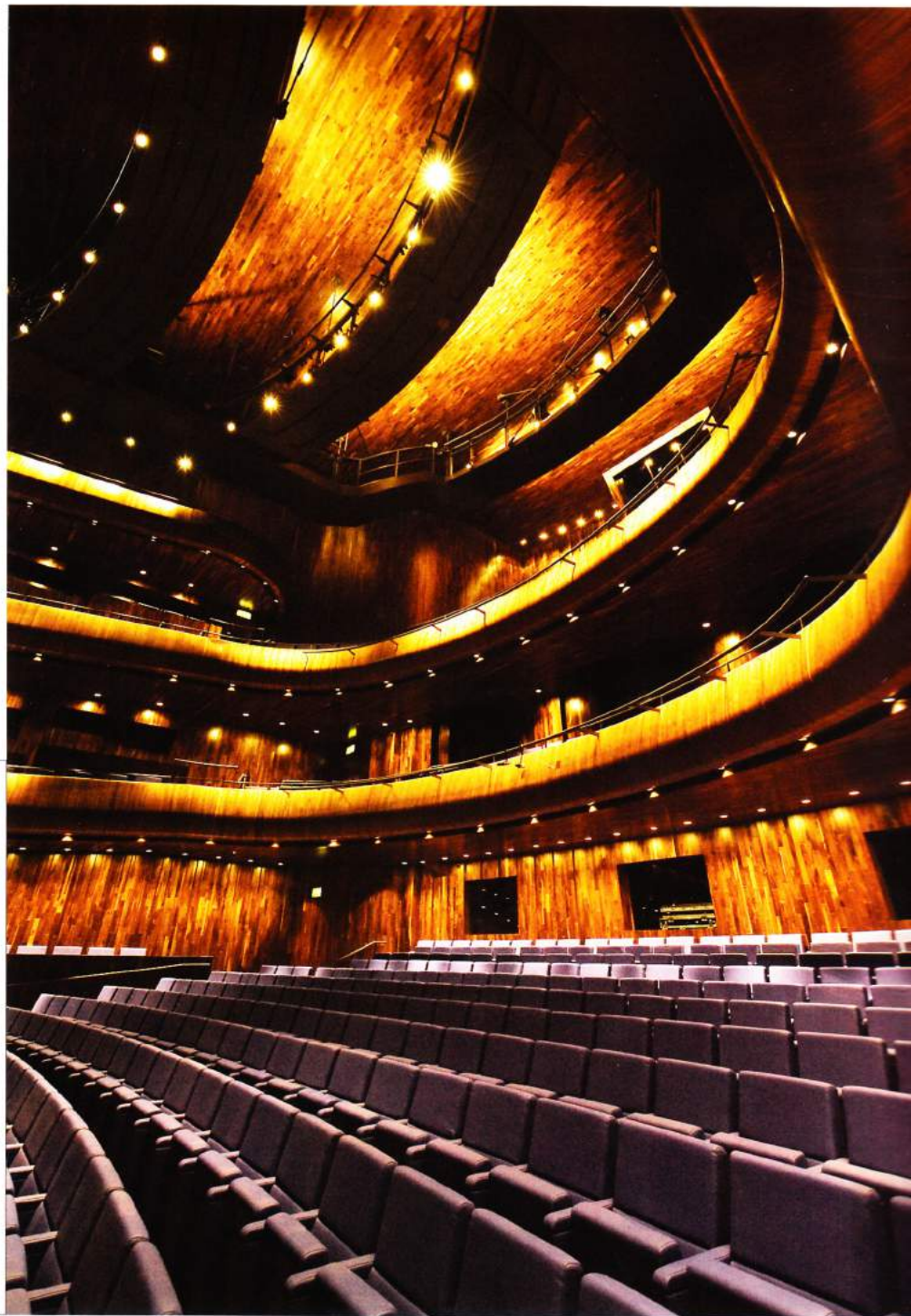
Around 12 million books can be housed in the new Chinese National Library which opened recently. KSP Engel und Zimmermann won an international competition to design the project, which features elements of traditional Chinese architecture in a contemporary setting. A reading room with 2,900 seats is one of the highlights of the library, which is expected to attract 8,000 visitors each day. The famed Si Ku Quan Shu scrolls are stored here while the wide-span steel roof accommodates a state-of-the-art digital library. Readers can return books at any time and sound control computers allow the visually impaired to also have access to digital resources.



8. WEXFORD

HIGH NOTE

The new Dhs153 million Wexford Opera House has been built on the site of the Theatre Royal, which dates back to 1832. The main auditorium has seating for up to 780 people for opera – 864 for events that do not utilise the orchestra pit – while a second flexible space seats 175. Designed by the Office of Public Works, Ireland's first purpose-built opera house is three times larger than the old theatre and also features a Green Room for relaxation. Around 3,500 square metres of dark walnut has been used in the auditorium, with stair rails wrapped in black leather.



7. JAKARTA

SIMPLY CAPITAL

HOK has designed the new British Embassy for the Indonesian capital, which is due to be completed in 2011. The 3,800-square-metre scheme is designed over three levels and is located on a 1.5-hectare site in the centre of the city. The design, expressed in a spiralling form, folds around a central protected courtyard and twists up and outwards to form the Embassy's public entrance, invoking a sense of calm assurance. All rain water falling on the structure will be collected, stored and used for irrigation and grey water purposes. To help eliminate solar gain, the Embassy is designed on an east-west axis.



4. MAKKAH AL-MUKARAMAH, SAUDI ARABIA

NEW GATEWAY

Toronto-based Moriyama & Teshima recently won a competition to design a new gateway for Jabal Omar, the mountain range located west of the Holy Mosque, Al-Masjid al-Haram, the cradle of Islam and the place towards which 1.5 billion Muslims face daily. Buildings on the project's two sites are composed of podiums, which feature up to five storeys, while the two Gateway Towers each accommodate 42 levels. There is also a third tower with 22 floors. The buildings combine public and private facilities including retail, restaurants, courtyards, terraces, parking, conference and banquet rooms, as well as 1,300 hotel rooms and both indoor and outdoor public prayer areas or *musallah*.



5. LONDON

NATURAL APPROACH

The second phase of the Darwin Centre, a Dhs 456 million landmark building, which is the most significant development at the Natural History Museum in more than 120 years, is due to open to the public in September next year. The architectural highlight of this state-of-the-art scientific research and collections facility designed by Scandinavian architects C F Møller is a 65-metre long and eight-storey high cocoon. It is the largest sprayed concrete, curved structure in Europe and will safeguard 17 million insect and three million plant specimens held inside 3.3kilometre of cabinets. Some 2,500 people a day will be able to take a self-guided journey through the collections and research areas.



6. MANCHESTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE

BACK TO THE FUTURE

The Currier Museum of Art, home to an internationally respected collection of European and American paintings, decorative arts and sculptures, now boasts a 3,000-square-metre addition designed by Ana Beha Architects of Boston. The modern structure takes its cues from the original 1929 building and pavilions added in 1982 with the Dhs 78 million expansion offering new galleries that display 50 per cent more of the museum's collections, including works by Picasso, Matisse, Monet and Warhol. One gallery has been dedicated to showcasing a variety of New Hampshire and New England artists, while a more spacious second gallery enables the museum to host larger national exhibitions.