

In creating **The Novium**, Chichester's new museum, **Keith Williams** has successfully inserted a 21st-century building into a Georgian city with a Roman past. And he's future-proofed it, reports *Herbert Wright*

Right: The Novium's pale cast stone is in keeping with the city's main buildings but is clearly contemporary and marks it out as a public building at the very edge of historic Chichester.

Below: The Novium is built over the hypocaust of a Flavian period Roman bath, now a permanent exhibit.

Bottom right: The Cathedral Window affords views over the city, including Gilbert Scott's spire, as a 'reward'.

The ancient circular walls of Chichester are crammed so solidly with historical buildings that anything new could easily be an intrusion. Not so The Novium, designed by Keith Williams Architects following a RIBA competition win, and since July the new home of the Chichester Museum. Just a stone's throw from the Cathedral, the 1,100 sq m building is the soul of discretion, even with a 15m-high signature tower, or 'turret', that rises above the city's steady roofscape. Costing just £7m, it is calm yet immediately contemporary, and an example of the contextual minimalism that characterises Williams' work, such as the Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury (Blueprint December 2011).

The site on Tower Street had been a car park, underneath which the remains of a first-century Roman baths were found. Preserving those meant building on piles around it. What has emerged has a clean facade, proportioned as a golden section extended by a square, between Georgian houses and planned housing, also designed by Williams. Glass street frontage is set slightly back from the

solid volume above, which is clad in plain panels of recast stone, marking it out as a public building. A parapet extends the roofline of the houses next door, and a first storey window-strip is recessed beneath the turret; there is a hint of stack architecture to the composition, despite the few surfaces.

The signage mounted on the facade doesn't so much proclaim 'The Novium' as say it quietly and sensibly in the font MetaPlus, which lets the building do the speaking, and as Williams observes, is 'softer than the classic Gills Sans or Helvetica'.

Past the reception and shop, the roomy, uncluttered ground floor showcases the Roman bath remains, of which more later. It is defined by concrete and, as in the galleries on the two floors above, wooden flooring that is raised to carry services beneath it. The brushed concrete carries crushed silver granite aggregate that makes the clean, neutral surfaces sparkle subtly. It's the sort of touch that brings to mind the more thoughtful Brutalists who explored concrete's textural and visual possibilities.

Behind the bath ruins, stepped diagonals break the plane of the wall, indicating a staircase, and parallel with it, a shaft of natural light falls from a gap that runs the height of the main volume. This is a nod to the Romans. As Williams notes: 'What did the Romans ever do for us? They brought us top-lighting.'

That natural light shines through vertical slits like soft vertical neons beside the stairs, which perhaps are a little too narrow. They lead to windowless galleries on the first and second floors, and then to the visual highlight, the interior of the turret. Suddenly, you are floating above the city as you stand inside a wide window box cut into the tower, with a city-wide vista dominated by the Cathedral's 82m-high spire (rebuilt by George Gilbert Scott after the original medieval one collapsed). Williams describes the Cathedral Window as 'a device' that offers 'reward' and opens the museum out into the city.

Event Communications, who designed the displays, also deserve credit. They animate the Flavian-



SUDDENLY, YOU ARE FLOATING ABOVE THE CITY IN A WINDOW BOX CUT INTO THE TOWER WITH A VISTA DOMINATED BY THE CATHEDRAL SPIRE

period bath remains with projections of Roman life on the wall below the staircase protrusion. In the upper galleries, a steady course is steered between the cacophony of the museum's 150,000 local items from all ages (two-thirds in storage) and the simplicity of Williams' host spaces. The usual chronological sequencing of historical exhibitions is abandoned in favour of a thematic approach. The first-floor gallery is

almost bare but for a central glass cube stuffed with objects, while on the second floor, it is the periphery that draws attention, with items in boxes stacked in vast vitrines around the walls. The results are crisp, serendipitous, and offer flexibility.

The best modernist building in the city is probably the circular Chichester Library, an accomplished 1960s design by county architect FR Steele, which happens to be just across the road. Williams has delivered a twenty-first century addition to the city at least as worthy, with a bigger presence and without resort to any context-oblivious Bilbao-effect architectural fireworks. Those things may be the passing fancies of our age, but The Novium's solid geometry and understated drama offer a more appropriate and future-proofed home for Chichester's history.

