

### *The new Hope Street Centre*



### **The new Hope Street Centre, Sheerness – 04/04/07**

The new Hope Street Centre in Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey which opened on Monday 19 March creates a highly successful blueprint for community centres which has already generated significant interest from social welfare and church groups both in the UK and abroad.

The Grade II Hope Street United Reformed Church has been serving the local community for over 175 years. Four years ago the church Elders faced a do or die situation with a dwindling congregation and dilapidated church buildings. Recognising that the church and its adjacent hall were a valuable resource, that could with development provide a wider service to the local secular community, they set up The Hope Street Centre Project Management Committee with a vision of a new Hope Street community centre.

Lee Evans Partnership, were appointed as architects in October 2003. A series of consultations with local groups and the public followed which identified the facilities required and also community partners who were keen to base themselves at the centre. The final brief called for a building that could bring together various community groups under one roof to share facilities and work together to enhance the lives of people in the local area. To meet this brief the existing buildings have required major restoration, rebuilding, refurbishment as well as sensitive extension.

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A key feature of the scheme is the new extension's striking translucent façade onto nearby Rose Street and its busy market square which provides the new public entrance to the building. As dusk falls this glass brick façade, carefully lit from within, is intended to glow as an inviting beacon to the local community. A new foyer/café drop-in area on the ground provides a dynamic and exciting space for community interaction as well as an important advice and display point directing visitors to other services in the centre, which include a Citizens Advice Bureau and UK On-line Centre. Other new facilities include a new church hall, two smaller meeting rooms, a semi-commercial kitchen for both general use and training purposes, and large meeting hall on the newly constructed first floor.

As Kathy Gambell, Chairperson of the Project Management Committee, explains this challenging project has been very much a leap of faith and not without its ups and downs, 'I suppose that I would not be telling the truth if I said that I never had concerns as whether we had made the right decision. Funding issues, local authority and listed building approvals, unforeseen problems with the major structure of the building discovered one week before Christmas 2005, rising costs and delays have all had to be dealt with. However this project has been about teamwork and having that faith that we are building something of value for the community and for the continuing presence of the Church here, in the centre of Sheerness.'

With the third phase of this pioneering community project completed the contract value now stands at £1.3m. The Hope Street Centre Management Committee is currently seeking funding for the final phase which will transform the existing worship space into a far more flexible area which can also be used during the week for group activities such as concerts, meetings and talks.



Photography by Robert Greshoff

