The museum at Henley is David Chipperfield's first major building to be realised in his home country. The design itself, in its clarity and simplicity, carries within it the matured experience of the first 10 years of Chipperfield's otherwise international practice. It also exemplifies his beliefs concerning both the design process and the materiality of architecture. In these issues of principle, Chipperfield has said: 'In our work we try to ensure that decisions about material are given priority in the conception of the project ... our development of design ideas relies on continuous interaction between programme, space, plan and material, a process which is not a linear one but allows even material decisions to inform or put into question aspects of the plan'.

In the design of the Henley Museum, these principles are very clearly expressed, especially in the section and the external expression of the programme in the elevated oak-clad boat-halls.

The museum buildings are sited in the water meadows on the south bank of the Thames, close to Henley town centre. The museum will contain a significant collection of rowing boats, long cigar-shaped forms of various types, together with a catalogue of exhibits that convey the history of the sport and of the river itself.

Three decisive factors have influenced the design: the reinterpretation of traditional building forms, the elevation of the ground plane, and the floating wooden boat-halls over a transparent base of glass. First, the architecture is established in the choice of traditional pitched-roof forms that recall the wooden barns of Oxfordshire, the riverside boat houses at Henley, and the temporary tents, erected annually, to house the boats and spectators at the Henley Regatta. This formal decision also proved to be successful in helping the design to fit into the planning constraints of a sensitive, conservative and historic town. Chipperfield considered that 'the architectural strategy could be described as one of adopting a traditional form in principle and re-describing this form in detail. Through the choice of materials and the composition of details the building is given another reading'.

Next, the process of reinterpretation is confirmed by raising the ground plane and constructing this anew as an elevated concrete slab on exposed concrete piles, in this case resembling sunken pilotis. Over this, the first floor is lifted up on both circular and slab-form concrete columns.

Finally these upper level boat-halls are expressed as floating, naturally top-lit linear gable forms clad in immaculately detailed green-oak boards, with a transparent glass skin to the raised ground floor public spaces beneath. So the boat-halls are essentially introverted '.. spaces of isolation and concentration in contrast to the open and transparent spaces of the ground floor'.

The generous raised ground floor public terraces associated with the main entrance and shop, restaurant and meeting room, are reached by both ramp and stairs, and are all finished with oak decking, which imparts a nautical character to these areas. Chipperfield has also described this as a 'ground plane [that] extends outside the building, forming a raised timber platform rather like those found in Japanese temples'.

A new use of an ancient material, oak, acting as an appropriate, evocative screen to halls for rowing shells, some of the most beautiful wooden artefacts ever made.