The floor plan and the section of the museum contain distinct echos that are reminiscent of the discipline and order of Louis Kahn’s Kimbell Museum in Texas. The upper level plan of the main building is structurally characterized by Kahnian zones of served and service spaces related to the structure and to the provision of deep-wells for services and exhibits which line the main boat-halls.

Similarly, the section with its shaped extruded cone form and natural light reflector at the apex, recall the principle, if not the profile, of Kahn’s cyclonic vaults. The roofs, in this case, are also finished in metal – a taut sheeting of tanned stainless steel. Boat-hall one, on the north face, is dramatically sliced open at the eastern end, a special event window, giving wonderful views towards the river through the willow trees. The deep wall zones incorporate services, as does the raised floor, and a fit-out zone is clearly determined by this deep section of the boat-hall walls. The discipline of the central ‘service’ zone is momentarily broken by the secure in-board picture gallery, but the main staircase and lift, with natural top-light, are also appropriately housed in this central spine.

The spine is continued westwards in the form of a dramatic glass and GRP bridge link which leads to a third boat-hall, a second phase of development, with ancillary accommodation and caretaker’s flat below. This hall is cubic, with a shallow metal roof and side daylighting, in contrast to the main buildings. Its north wall is a magnificent plane of oak cladding, sliced by a continuous band of glass clerestories.

The green oak cladding was carefully selected for economy and long-life. The silver-grey weathered layer which forms eventually protects the oak board from the loss of its natural timber protection. The oak cladding is essentially a rain screen, open jointed to allow air-flow and to avoid capillary action in rain. The fixing of the oak boards is at close centres, to a sub-frame of Colombian pine. The stainless-steel screws and slotted washers are each precisely located in a circular sinking. The washers, with the slots aligned vertically, allow downward and upward shrinkage of the 160 x 20 boards to be naturally accommodated (shrinkage does not occur in the long dimension). The Colombian pine sub-frame in turn is attached to a softwood stud substructure which is secured to a lattice metal portal frame, which occurs at 3.9m centres and is finished within by plastered dry lining. The whole structure is heavily insulated. The transparent glass walls are held in stainless-steel trims with retractable fabric sun-shades on the southern entrance face.

The transparent quality of the raised-ground floor, with naturally ventilated entrance, the restaurant, library and committee room, is simple and stunning in its immediacy. This is enhanced by the natural finishes of the exposed concrete structure, white plastered lintol and oak floors. Detailing of elements such as toughened glass balustrades in stainless-steel frames is all of the finest quality. But the overall range of materials is almost Spartan in its strictness and this limitation heightens and sharpens the overall forms and the absolute clarity of their programmatic expression.

The functional tradition of boatyards and buildings has also been captured – each boat-hall has direct external access doors at first floor to allow the superb hulls of the eight to be brought in.

The museum is a major addition to the legacy of Henley, and the Trustees of the foundation that has sponsored the project have given a vital opportunity to an emergent British architect who has discharged his task with a precise and beautifully crafted response. Time and weather will only add further to this work in the process of its ageing – a quality embedded in the nature of its principal material – English oak.

River and rowing museum, Henley, England
Architect
David Chipperfield
Architects