

Manalo & White transforms historic Bangor church into youth arts centre

Sensitive renovation gives listed building new life as home of Frân Wen theatre company



Image by Morgan O'Donovan, courtesy of Manalo & White.

- Grade-II-listed St Mary's Church has become Nyth (meaning 'Nest') – a rehearsal centre for Welsh-language youth theatre company Frân Wen ('White Raven')
- Thoughtful restoration significantly improves accessibility while preserving and celebrating the building's Victorian character
- New layout permits natural ventilation while optimising acoustic performance
- The new centre will serve as a hub for the whole Bangor community

"Imagine the perfect theatre, with a main stage and smaller studio spaces, with rehearsal rooms, cafes and lots of other creative spaces both inside and out. And it's beautiful, an old converted church nestled in its community, well-used and popular. Now imagine that it's fully accessible, open to all and able to be used by everyone, that the needs and aspirations of young people are met,

Manalo & White

artists and the community are at the heart of the design and throughout the process.”

– Mandy Redvers Rowe, disability access consultant

With a focus on supporting young people from low-income backgrounds to take part in the arts, Frân Wen works to create exciting, challenging and inspiring Welsh-language theatre. Having outgrown its previous building in Bangor, the company sought a new home that would reflect its ambition to promote Welsh-language culture as relevant, exciting and contemporary – deserving of investment to thrive. The new location represents a major upgrade for the group, giving the young people it supports a dedicated state-of-the-art rehearsal space in which to hone their skills in performance, scriptwriting and technical disciplines.



Image by Morgan O'Donovan, courtesy of Manalo & White.

Funded by Arts Council Wales, the Welsh Government, the Heritage Lottery Fund and others, the conversion of St Mary's church in Bangor into the arts hub Nyth ('nest' in Welsh) was led by London-based architects Manalo & White. The practice won an international competition for the project on the basis of its innovative approach, willingness to question assumptions, and ideas to optimise the church's undercroft and minimise destructive compartmentation of its main space.

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Manalo & White's approach respected the architecture of the Grade II-listed Victorian building, introducing vital conservation work and essential repairs to meet the needs of future users, and opened up the space to the surrounding landscape, creating numerous plant beds to nurture a positive ecosystem with local flowers and trees.

Manalo & White's conversion brought considerable change to the former church's nave and undercroft, significantly expanding the capabilities of the site. Nyth now provides three main artistic spaces, with the biggest accommodating up to 80 guests and smallest suitable for breakout sessions.



Image by Morgan O'Donovan, courtesy of Manalo & White.

Technical facilities include sound and lighting equipment, costumes and props, workshop tools and screens for presentations. The young company now has access to a green room, and there are dedicated offices and meeting rooms for Frân Wen's admin team. The extensive outdoor area can be used for open-air rehearsals and community events.

"We are delighted with Nyth. The project has been extremely enjoyable and inspiring and proved similar in many ways to the creative process of developing and realising a theatre production. We have been impressed by the way that Manalo & White have embraced our values and placed the needs and

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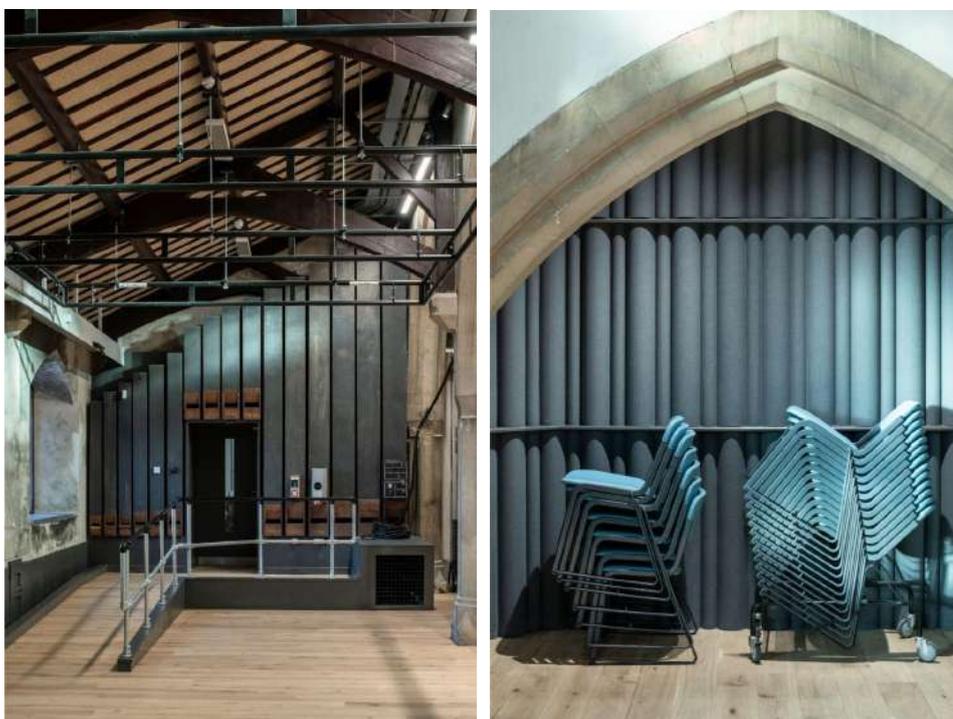
aspirations of young people, artists and the community at the heart of the design and throughout the process.”

– Nia Jones, Executive Director, Frân Wen

Aesthetic approach

Manalo & White’s approach was informed through an initial series of workshops with young people at the beginning of the project. These consultations established a number of priorities that have shaped its ultimate design – namely that it should:

- be inclusive – a safe space for all ages and backgrounds;
- feel welcoming and lived in, and acquire character with age;
- respect the building’s heritage, balancing old and new;
- be inspired by the local nature and climate;
- be robust, non-precious and tactile so users can feel comfortable creatively;
- be both calming and elegant as well as exciting and cheerful.



Images by Morgan O'Donovan, courtesy of Manalo & White.

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Manalo & White took additional inspiration from the names of both Frân Wen ('White Raven' and Nyth ('Nest'), recycling as many materials from the site as possible, in the same way that a bird sources fallen twigs and branches to assemble its nest. Pipes from the organ, ceramic tiles, and stone from demolished walls have all been reclaimed and repurposed, and 90% of the church's existing wooden pews have been reinvented as wall panelling, doors and joinery.

"Nyth belongs to young people. We learned from them that spaces typically designed for 'kids' can be off-putting, and what they really wanted was a humble setting for creative exploration. We drew inspiration from honest conversations - challenging them and being challenged. The result of our collaboration is a robust building with a natural material palette, where they can freely mess around and stretch their imagination."

– Takuya Oura, associate, Manalo & White

The material palette is raw and honest, comprising natural stone, sanded lime plaster, concrete and galvanised metal, with painting kept to a minimum. This results in a naturally calming aesthetic that retains a sense of place and history, constructed from materials that will patinate over time, acquiring character as they age.

Welcoming entrance and central gathering point



Image by Morgan O'Donovan, courtesy of Manalo & White.

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Crucial to unlocking the potential of the site was improving access. As a church, St Mary's offered no step-free entrances, and updating the Victorian architecture to allow equity of access posed a significant challenge. Manalo & White resolved this by utilising the overlooked undercroft below the raised main floor and creating a new, level entrance, further eliminating a stigma attached to wheelchair ramps.

"Working with Manalo & White, we found that they had fluid, well-informed approaches to inclusive architecture. This meant that our way of working complemented the process, starting from looking at 'difference' as a key component and not as an add-on (accessibility is often 'bolted on'). The combination of power (not pity) and ingenuity (not gimmick) for changing people's lives is critical to both of our work."

– Zoe Partington, co-founder, The DisOrdinary Architecture Project

From this main point of entry, people can head towards the cellar studio and public toilets, or take the stairs or elevator up to the second floor where the main rehearsal room and office are located. Warm lighting and soft acoustics create a relaxing ambience, while low-height furniture invites people to rest and make the space their own. A dark ceiling, bright walls and the existing stone and columns create contrasting textures, giving the space an appealing tactility.



Image by Morgan O'Donovan, courtesy of Manalo & White.

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Manalo & White's work makes the church's undercroft usable by excavating the first three bays to the base of the existing foundation, and the creation of a mezzanine with steel frame and metal deck with raw concrete floor opens up the main hall and lends further acoustic separation.

Sustainability, natural ventilation and acoustic chambers

Reflecting a shared commitment to sustainability, Manalo & White and Frân Wen set out to achieve BREEAM's 'Very Good' rating, which represents only the top 25% of the UK's new non-domestic buildings.

The Manalo & White team recognised the natural benefits of the pre-existing church structure, and were therefore keen to retain as much and minimise 'active' interventions, such as installing a mechanical cooling system. Relying on natural ventilation makes a major contribution to the sustainability of the project, while dramatically reducing its impact on the existing architecture.



Image by Morgan O'Donovan, courtesy of Manalo & White.

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Because the site is within a residential area, it was essential that any natural ventilation didn't result in noise pollution. The large openings required to allow airflow in and out work against good sound insulation, which demands a sealed building envelope. Manalo & White squared this circle by designing a series of acoustic chambers, each of which are lined with sound-absorbing material, to enable performances to let it go, volume-wise, without disturbing the neighbours.

The practice was also committed to repurposing and recycling materials – old wooden pews for doors were repurposed and demolished stone walls were rebuilt. Use of natural materials, such as lime plaster and wood wool insulation, as well as the decision to leave walls unpainted, facilitate natural ventilation.

Energy is sustainably provided from air source heat pumps. All the theatre equipment, control and LED lighting are energy efficient. Renovation work was completed using locally sourced materials and FSC-certified timber. Significant enhancements to the landscape, designed to optimise habitats for native plant and wildlife species, were made under the guidance of an ecologist and the North Wales Wildlife Trust, based nearby.

Artists embedded within design process

With support of the Arts Council of Wales, Frân Wen appointed artist Robin Edward to creatively explore design elements in Nyth, and address aspects of the wayfinding, acoustic character, ambience and lighting, while also engaging the building's rich heritage.

Robin Edward's ongoing project, Tylynyth, will be an installation that uses historic harmonium and organ pipes to playfully introduce echolocation as a wayfinding mechanism. Visitors can pull coloured string labelled for each of Nyth's rooms (eg 'Studio') which sends compressed air to travel along translucent pipes to the destination, triggering visual and auditory navigational cues.



Image by Morgan O'Donovan, courtesy of Manalo & White.

A welcoming woodland for the community

Continuing the light-touch design approach, Manalo & White reinstated the site's previously closed main entrance on Garth Road for both pedestrian and vehicular access, and introduced a beautiful meandering path to the main building through the reinvigorated woodland.

Having been disused for a number of years, the site required extensive landscaping work. Overgrown trees were pruned, while newer native species have been carefully selected to complement the preexisting yew and lime trees, with bird and bat boxes added to enhance the biodiversity and ecology of the area. A community orchard incorporating Welsh species has been installed, along with numerous beds with local plantlife dotted across the garden.

Parking spaces are strategically positioned around the site to minimise the travel distance to the nearest accessible entrances while avoiding the usual repeated row-of-cars layout, which would be detrimental to the character of the setting.

Historic context

In 1864, architect HP Horner was commissioned to design and build a parish church on a small parcel of land. Officially recognised as a Grade II-listed building in 1951, St Mary's closed as a church in 2014 after 150 years of use. The building was an impressive example of a mid-Victorian church, built in the Gothic style by craftsmen using distinctive local materials.

The exterior is defined by a striking octagonal spire and original stained glass, with walls featuring rubble stone with freestone dressings, including crucifix finials, plinth bands, quoins, stepped square and diagonal buttresses adding a decorative flair to the interior.

A central location in Wales' oldest city



Image of Bangor, courtesy of Manalo & White.

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Situated in the commercial heart of Bangor, Wales' oldest town, Nyth occupies a highly accessible site just across the river from Frân Wen's former location, within walking distance of the university and closely connected to public transport. The development of the site brings much-needed investment to what has previously been a neglected area of the city centre. In line with the aspirations of Bangor's Regeneration Plan, the new facilities create employment opportunities and their function will contribute to the vitality of the area.

"Nyth goes beyond our expectations and will be a catalyst for greater things for Frân Wen and the artistic community of North Wales."

– Nia Jones, executive director of Frân Wen

After 20 months of work on site, Nyth opened its doors to the people of Bangor in October 2023.

Notes to editors

For more information and high-res photography, please contact Sabine Zetteler at manaloandwhite@zetteler.co.uk.

Project data

Start on site November 2021

Completion May 2023

Gross internal floor area 705 m²

Construction cost £2.97M

Construction cost per m² £4,212

Architect Manalo & White Architects / Takuya Oura, Project Architect

Client Frân Wen / Nia Jones, Executive Director

Theatre consultant Plann

Structural engineer engineersHRW

M&E Collaborate + Create

QS Pulse Consult

Project manager SP Projects

Main contractors Grosvenor Construction

Fire engineer Allwedd

Access consultant Access Included

Landscape consultant Tirlun Barr

Manalo & White

Art & Inclusivity Coordinator The DisOrdinary Architecture Project

Artist Robin Edward

Manalo & White

Founded by Brian Greathead in 1999, Manalo & White is an architecture and interiors studio that weaves together pragmatism with playfulness. With an emphasis on user needs over spectacle and showmanship, the practice is known for its cross-sector versatility. One of the most experienced designers of student housing and amenities in the UK, Manalo & White has also developed an especially strong portfolio in the arts and culture sectors. Notable projects include the new Matt's Gallery in Nine Elms; the design of the East End Women's Museum; a new classroom building for Heathlands School for Deaf Children; refurbishment of Towner Eastbourne in time for its centenary anniversary; and reinventing a Fitzrovia office building into the Mandrake boutique hotel.

manaloandwhite.co.uk / @manaloandwhite

Frân Wen

Frân Wen is a Welsh-language theatre company for young people based in North West Wales. It aims to ignite Wales' innovative, rebellious and curious nature in order to imagine the unimaginable ways empathy, diversity and creativity can make today a bit brighter and tomorrow even better.

franwen.com