

LESSONS FROM ABROAD - WHAT THE UK CAN LEARN FROM INTERNATIONAL MASS TIMBER PROJECTS

In the second of three NLA articles, Tom Gibson, Associate Director at Haworth Tompkins, reflects on the practice's international mass timber projects and the lessons they offer for timber construction in the UK.



Building on our experience of mass timber projects in the UK, Haworth Tompkins is now delivering two large-scale international projects: Theater im Prater in Vienna and the American Repertory Theater at Harvard University. These projects have provided an opportunity not only to deepen our technical knowledge, but also to reflect on how differing material traditions, supply chains and industry cultures can enable the wider adoption of mass timber - something that remains more constrained in the UK.



At Theater im Prater in Vienna, a spruce glulam front-of-house structure that fans out to welcome visitors responds directly to the vibrant character of the historic amusement park setting. Working with local partners Dietrich Untertrifaller, and within Austria's well-established mass timber industry, has provided valuable learning opportunities in timber detailing, weather protection and contractor-led material selection.



At Harvard University's new American Repertory Theater, the entire above-ground structure is formed from glulam and CLT. Main Contractor Shawmut Design and Construction engaged Nordic Structures early in the design process through a design-assist appointment, enabling the team to refine structural geometry, connection design and acoustic isolation strategies prior to tender. An extended coordination and engineering process then ensured services integration, structural integrity and a clean visual appearance for the exposed timber frame.



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Back on site in Allston, a specialist carpentry subcontractor was engaged to erect the mass timber frame, working to a complex logistics build plan comprising six building sectors and more than 2,000 crane picks. It is incredibly exciting to see the mass timber frame now complete, demonstrating what can be achieved through early collaboration, detailed coordination and specialist expertise across the project team, with further lessons expected to emerge as the project moves towards completion later in 2026.



These international experiences highlight several key lessons for the UK: the value of early contractor and manufacturer engagement, the benefits of an integrated and well-established timber supply chain, and the importance of specialist material knowledge within the consultant team to support innovation. While the UK has made important strides in the use of mass timber, further alignment between legislation, insurance and industry practice will be critical to unlock its full potential at scale.

