

Choreographer Siobhan Davies runs an internationally renowned dance company which regularly performs at top London venues and breaks new ground in the art of dance. As with many such ventures, the company began on a shoestring and was obliged to make use of various insalubrious and even unsafe premises for the daily work of developing and practising dance pieces. Then a National Lottery grant provided the opportunity to give the company a permanent home. This secured, Sarah Wigglesworth was selected as architect on the basis of a competitive interview, and, in consultation with the company, developed two earlier designs for other sites before the final version at Elephant and Castle went ahead.

Consequently, there was plenty of time for client and architect to get to know each other in order to negotiate the needs and wishes of the company. They required offices and reception spaces, showers and changing rooms, but above all they needed a couple of large well-lit and sprung-floored dance studios. The decision to convert a redundant school annexe in south London dating from 1898 came about because the building stood next to an older listed board school which is still in use, the two buildings sharing a wall and playground. The annexe was considered less architecturally valuable in its own right than as part of the curtilage of the listed school. Its use had been restricted by the planners to education, which precluded displacement by more lucrative commercial development.

The red and buff brick school annexe consisted of an unequal pair of blocks divided by a main stair and services. In typical late Arts and Crafts manner it enjoyed its asymmetry, with separate northern entrances, one wing hipped and the other gabled, and fenestration which consistently articulated the interior organisation: there were large rhythmic windows for classrooms, stepped windows for the north stairs. The main stair, with big Georgian sashes, had once disgorged straight into the south-facing playground, but this clarity was lost when flat-roofed lavatories were tacked-on, and the whole circulation had become somewhat compromised.

Wigglesworth saw the potential of opening up the central gap as the communications space, making a new central entrance on the north between the two blocks, and reassigning the sets of rooms in the two wings. But the proposed main dance studio needed an area equivalent to the footprint of the whole building, so the only course of action was to put it on the roof, clearing away the existing attic classrooms and roof structure.

1
The new vaulted roof ripples and billows over the original Victorian structure.

2
The gritty south London milieu.

3
Detail of vaults.

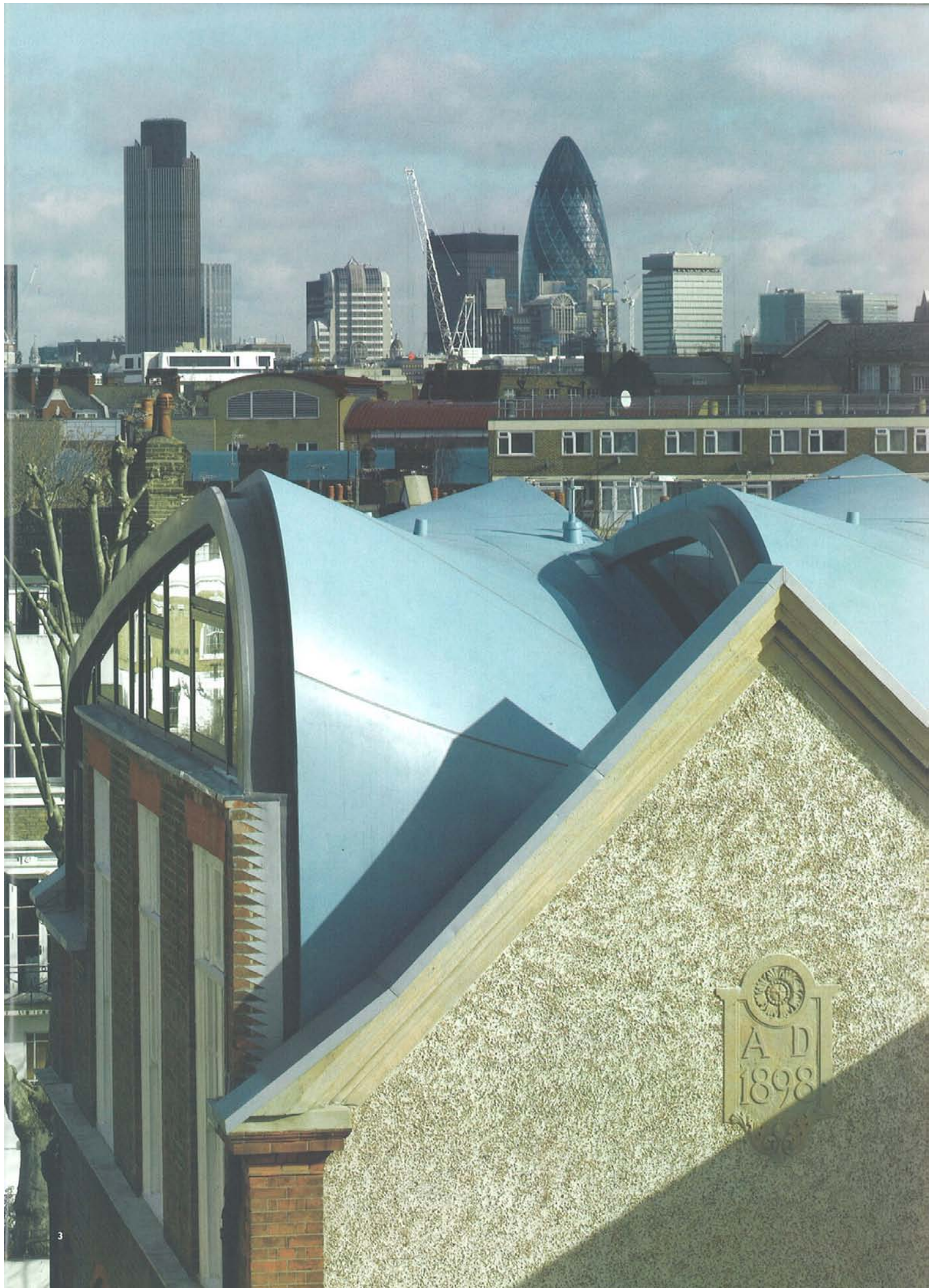


2

VAULTING AMBITION

An old Victorian school is inventively transformed into a centre for dance.

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ARCHITECT
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To provide access without subtracting space for stairs, a new service tower had to be added on to the south side comprising stair, lift for disabled access, and lavatories. An additional fire-stair also had to be added to the east. With the new stair on the back, the original one could be removed from the central spine, clearing the way for a new double-height entrance hall which gives the building its sense of welcome and its spatial continuity. Rooms on the east side of the ground floor became recreation and meeting rooms, those to the west, offices. At first floor, the eastern rooms were combined to make a dance studio running the full length of the building, while the western ones became changing rooms, showers, and a treatment room. With a clear passage through from entrance to stair, all the spaces fall into a logical and legible arrangement.

The nature of the conversion is neither a shoe-horning job nor a pussy-footing conservationist's attempt to pretend that nothing has changed. Considerable violence has been perpetrated on the original building in many places, and the wounds are left unconcealed. The most dramatic display of the building's history is the left flank wall of the central hall, partly clad in Victorian white-glazed brick, with arches from blocked openings showing, and the broken ends of stair treads left in the wall. To this collage have been added new openings defined with new fields of render in contrasting mixes. In contrast, the previous load-bearing wall on the right side of the hall has been almost completely removed, making the space visually continuous with open-plan offices, but here the violence of remaking has been softened by boxing-in and plastering the new steel floor structure.

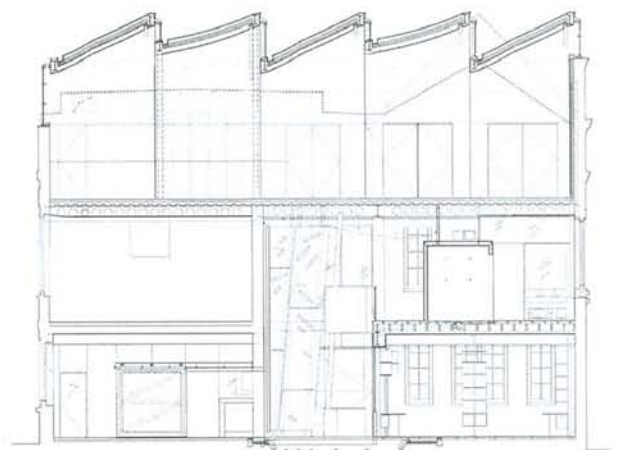
The change is witnessed dramatically by a central steel column striking through on the slant, its fire-resistant paint finish in lime green contrasting with the maroon cloth of the built-in sofa above. The column continues to vanish through a hole in the suspended cloth ceiling, a kind of softening cloud which conceals the services. In many places attempts were made to preserve the patina of the building's history by resisting the temptation to cover up or fill in blemishes or to replace cracked bricks and tiles. You are reminded not only of the building's former life, but also of the sheer durability and inventiveness of late Victorian terracotta, as manifest by the hand-formed brick specials and tiles with their sophisticated glazes. There is no equivalent to this technology today, and original examples are fast disappearing.

The main glory of the building, its architectural and spiritual climax, is rightly the top-floor dance studio. On plan this is just a large conventionally rectangular space with a specially sprung beech floor, but in section it comes to life. The original roofs had to be abandoned, both as too low and as too cluttered with ties, so they were replaced with a series of rounded asymmetrical vaults. These were first designed as stressed skins in timber, but eventually built as joists spanning between curved RSJs. Alternating peaks and troughs open up eyebrow-like east- and west-facing clerestories which admit a gentle light to bounce off the warm plywood surfaces.

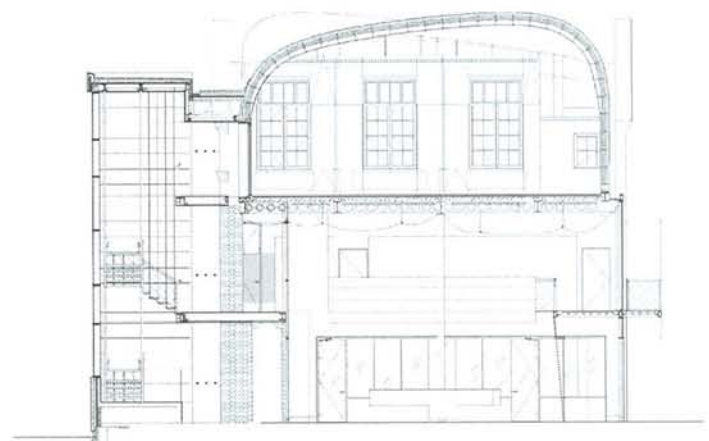
The roundedness of the roof, its side wall blending into ceiling, gives a strong sense of centre and embrace to the dancers, following the pattern of their movements, echoing the upward sweep of an arm. Not only does this containedness provide a sense of place that would be denied by the neutral expanse of a flat ceiling: it also produces a strong contrast in character between north-south and east-west axes, helping dancers orientate themselves. The rhythmic pattern of vaults measures out the space from east to west,



4



long section



cross section

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4
At night the gently
glowing building reveals
its internal life.

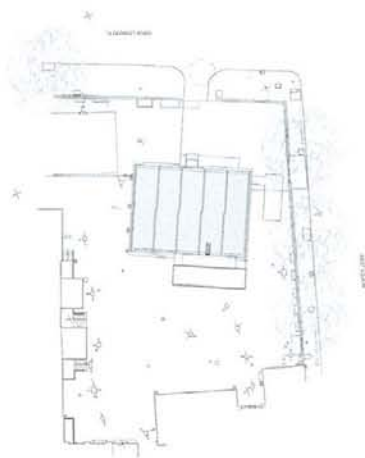
5
Detail of the chequered,
collage-like wall that
encloses the new vertical
circulation tower.



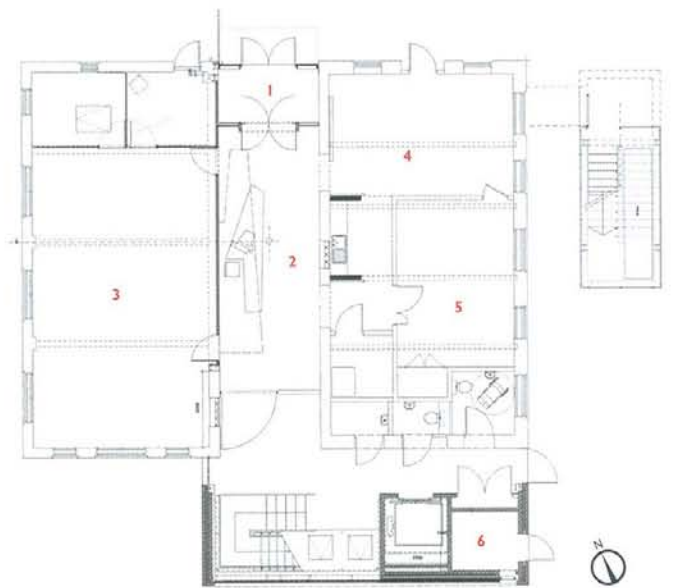


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- 1 entrance lobby
- 2 reception
- 3 offices
- 4 parlour
- 5 meeting room
- 6 plant
- 7 changing rooms
- 8 showers and WCs
- 9 treatment
- 10 studio
- 11 main studio



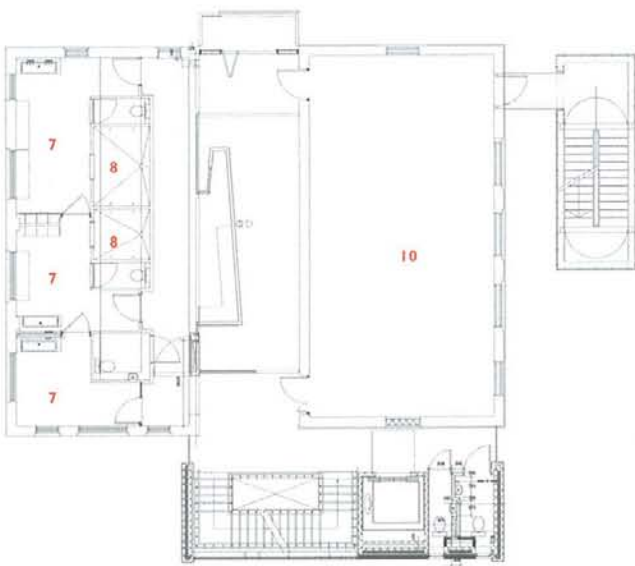


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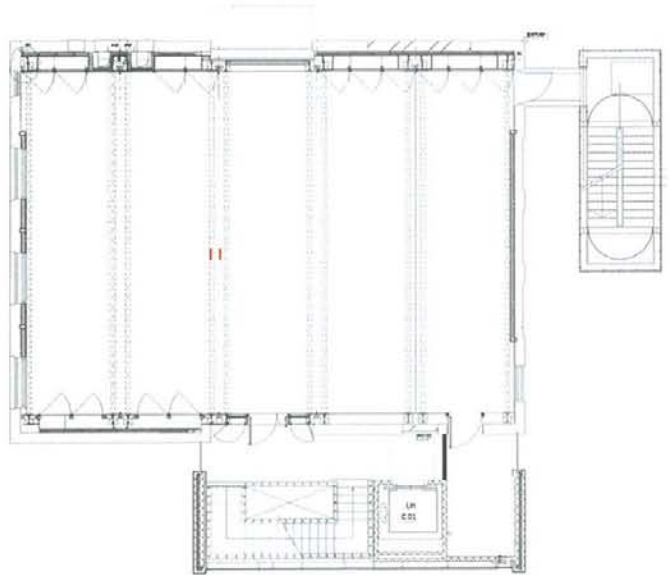
6
Entrance hall.
7
Interiors are
characterised
by an engaging
bricolage of
materials,
textures and
colours.
8
New and
existing
elements
have a robust
rapport.
9
Detail of new
staircase.



9



first floor



second floor

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