

Inside a blue heaven

Put a giant whoopee cushion on top of a Victorian school, and you get London's jazziest dance space. By **Jay Merrick**

The key space in the new Siobhan Davies Dance Centre rises like a huge blue whoopee cushion from the brickly embrace of naked Victorian gable-ends overlooking St George's Road in Southwark, south London. Davies, the great British modern-dance choreographer, describes it as "like heaven above". The centre's architect, Sarah Wigglesworth, thinks not of heaven, but of hermeneutics. What's going on?

An unspoken, abstracted stand-off. The architecture of this £2.4m addition to Southwark's cultural content is literally uplifting in its new physique. Yet it is also grounded in the language, materials and history that makes up the mulch of hermeneutic speculation that informs so much of today's contextually attuned architecture.

The studio is a series of connections between past and present. The headline moment is a folded soufflé of glass-reinforced plastic – and the superb dance space it contains. However, the story of the building lies in the obdurate presence not only of the Victorian past, but its visual attachments to the neighbourhood – not least the kids racketing around the playground of the Charlotte Sharman primary school, which abuts the studio.

The Modernist forms within the studio seem estranged from the antecedents of the two school buildings – one from 1898, the other possibly late Edwardian – that clasp Wigglesworth's additions. So the question that hangs over her design relates to the relationship between her insertions and the collage of older materials and typologies that she has worked with.

The architect has eschewed subtle shifts of atmosphere in favour of contrasts between one space and another; if not one wall and another. Wigglesworth has met her functional brief, but it is the way time and materials jump from one condition to another that matters.

It's what she does. In a Radio 4 programme, *Shaping Our Spaces*, she argued, with her partner Jeremy Till, that "designers should exist in a state of movement between retreat and engagement: designers need to intellectualise, but it is equal-

ly important to have empathy with, the real, fluid conditions which exist."

Wigglesworth has emphasised the humble, sometimes beautiful, original architecture. And, like the Modernist she is, she cannot resist lifting things up. It shows most in the way she has set the base of the suspended stairs at the back of the entrance hall on a deep plinth, which doubles as a horizon line to carry the gaze to the base of the end wall's glazing.

It's revealed, too, in the way the plush, theatre-signifying balconette overlooking the hall has been tied to a skewed yellow post – a wonky Modernist *piloti*, if you like – that rises to the big cross-beams that support the main dance-space. And there will soon be a dense "cloud" of netting suspended from the cross-beams, though this attempt to shield the structural and soundproofing gubbins is at odds with the rest of the building's assiduous exposures of material.

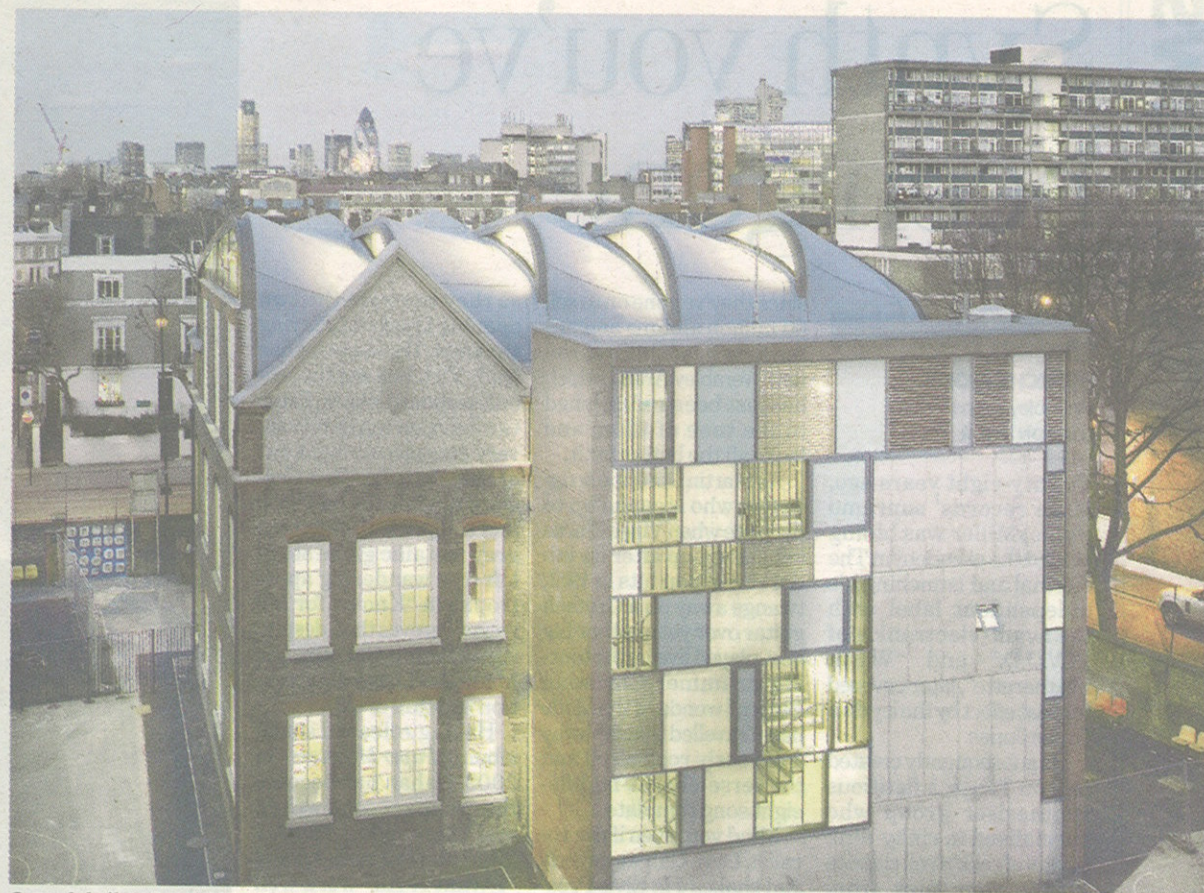
Wigglesworth admits that new architecture "has a lot of conundrums". "Our architecture is propelled by ideas," she says. "It's a term that's undervalued in architecture. In Britain, you either do it or shut up. Ideas are seen as poncey. Here, it meant we had to defend everything, and have reasons for everything."

Wigglesworth describes herself as an old-fashioned phenomenologist, but emphasises that architecture is also defined by its users. "We just add another layer of history, making a reading of it that makes some sense – it's a hermeneutic exercise."

But if we put that slippery four-syllable word back in its box, what do we find? Body-architecture, apparently. "You take that body, and you pierce it, scrape it, depilate it, reclad it in things. It's a very muscular building. What we're adding is a conversation."

The studio recalls those biology-lab mannequins, portions of which come away to reveal different layers of flesh. A strange museum-like atmosphere pervades the hall, meeting room and stairwell. Wherever you look, you see and touch exposures of the original fabric: different types of Victorian brick-coursing, embellishments, the outline of stair-treads.

Wigglesworth's Modernist insertions offer the provocation she seeks – "to make you think". But it's the



Graceful vibe: Sarah Wigglesworth's Siobhan Davies Dance Centre in Southwark RICHARD BRYANT/ARCAID.CO.UK

palimpsests of the Victorian board school that radiate the key inflections of presence. And they are ultimately fragile and poetic, not intellectual grist. From the glazed stairwell, one sees the school building next door, with its banded brickwork, St Jude's across the street and St George's – stolid essays in red brick. From the balcony above the entrance, brutish segments of the Sixties Modernist blocks at the Elephant and Castle can be assessed through narrowed eyes.

It's a layering effect, starting with micro-contexts within the studio, rising through children's voices and the geometry of their play, into the macro-urban context. The materiality of the original buildings has an extra power. Outside, cars and buses trundle past. Inside, buttonholed by one stop-frame of original material after another, time and place, solid and void, fragment into a shuffled narrative.

Wigglesworth's eclectic Modernism is just as fragmentary, and we are made to see the joins. She's determined that her bits might seem just as "ordinary" as the fabric and remnant spaces of the original buildings. They are a shade too finely wrought; their textures – the lime and goat-hair plaster in the stair well, and red leather flooring in the balconette – are almost too satisfying. These touches meet her requirement for intellectual and visceral provocation, but sit less comfortably with the bigger idea of oscillation between retreat and engagement. There are strong engagements going on in the Siobhan Davies Studio, but less in the way of retreat.

Upstairs, in the whoopee cushion, the debate seems academic. What a space, and what an escape from time and place! The soft, ply-clad geometry, the light, Davies's conversations with her dancers – heaven, rather than hermeneutics, is the overwhelmingly graceful vibe here, after all. And through a window, we see an inscribed panel set into the wall of the primary school. It reads: "Lux Mihi Laus" ("praise illuminates me").

But then, one has already been illuminated, by the bricks and mouldings of these once forgotten buildings. Something of that delicate radiance will light Siobhan Davies's new dance piece, which premieres in May. It's called *In Plain Clothes*.

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