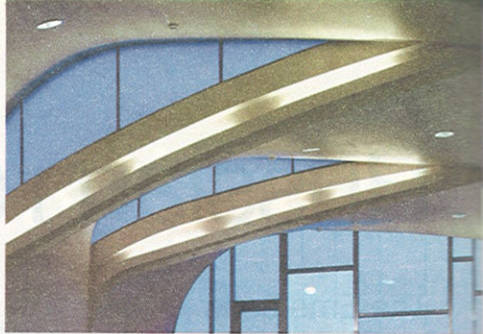


# Step inside Siobhan Davies's new HQ and you'll believe a building can dance, says Hugh Pearman



**C**an you make a building dance? According to the contemporary choreographer Siobhan Davies, you can. After 17 years of a peripatetic existence, the Siobhan Davies Dance Company has finally come to earth in a £4.2m purpose-built base. Except it's anything but down to earth. Go there and you find them dancing in the sky.

This is a fine piece of architecture because it is the result of an extraordinarily fruitful collaboration between Davies and her architect, Sarah Wigglesworth. There is no arbitrary, imposed solution here, and no conventional wisdom, either. The stairs are as important to the dancers as their two big

studio spaces. Even the meeting rooms have sprung floors. In the main rooftop studio, lined with pale wood and drenched in natural light, Davies has banned the two staples of dance studios everywhere: the mirrored wall and the barre. They only hinder or distort natural movement, she believes.

It is hard to describe what is so good about this building, except to say that it is fully alive. Despite its small budget, it goes far beyond the merely necessary. This is one art form responding to another with wit and panache, from the leaning, acid-yellow steel column in the foyer to the twisting ribbons of the roof. It's a physical, tactile building, right down to a squishy, buttoned-fabric

balcony and hairy walls (really: there are goat hairs in the plaster).

You can look at the place differently if you like. You can call it a converted school. But a conventional conversion it is not. Wigglesworth took a derelict but solid little 1898 school building, near the Imperial War Museum, in Southwark, kept much of its bashed-about, glazed-tile character, moved the staircases to the outside to maximise space inside, and popped that studio, big enough for public performances, up on the roof. These are all straightforward moves. Plenty of architects would have opted for the standard, bolt-on, white-box solution and sanitised the existing building.

Wigglesworth's architecture, however, is not like that. She did bolt a box on the back — more like a Mondrian — but most of the rough, old, knocked-about walls inside, complete with hacked-out bits and revealed patches of old paint, have been left just like that, virtual archeology. As for the rooftop studio, clad in sky-blue, glass-reinforced plastic, it's like some writhing organism.

Davies appears to be lost in admiration for her architect's response. "She loves the idea of balancing from a dancer's perspective — not being rigid, not being upright, but being sinuous," she says as she takes a break from a morning's teaching. "I was certainly conscious I wanted enough focus to



concentrate, but with a sense of place. We were always talking about movement in the body. Sarah came up with this image that it should be about dancing in the sky. If the foundations were Victorian, then the top should be 21st-century."

For Wigglesworth herself — an architect becoming known for a distinctive brand of architecture that she once characterised as "the slick and the hairy", partly because of the way it juxtaposes manufactured and handcrafted elements — the old building is like a battered cake tin and the big studio is like the cake rising out of the top. So: it's a building with many levels of meaning, all of them sensuous going on sensual. There are buildings you feel as much as see, and this is one of them. I'm not usually one to assign gender to architecture, but if this isn't an entirely, benignly female building, then I need my hormones seeing to.

As Davies says: "It's just clever, and warm. And it's witty with it." Wit in architecture is a difficult trick to pull off. Too many postmodern architects of the 1980s confused wit with leaden humour, but here it exists in abundance and is deployed without a trace of irony. That leaning column in the foyer is doing a dance move. The ceilings are soft, billowing fabric, like clouds. The rich paint colours of the new insertions, concocted by the collaborating artist Jonathan

Logsdon, are derived from the existing colours found in the old school building.

The stairs at the back are hung from a dense thicket of steel rods that gives it something of the appearance of a fire escape out of West Side Story: no wonder you find dancers doing stretches as they descend the staircase, or pausing to stare at the endlessly fascinating free-form movement display provided by the playground out the back, still in use by the neighbouring school. The whole building is for, and about, dance and movement. Without the wit, it could have come across as a hippo in a tutu. Instead, it's taken on a glamorous sophistication.

As a celebration of her new HQ, Davies has developed a touring show for 2006, called *In Plain Clothes*, which she has developed from conversations with professionals outside dance — a heart surgeon, a landscape designer, a linguist, an architect (Wigglesworth). It starts in the new building in May, after a preview week in April. So you'll be able to experience the architecture/dance collaboration at source.

Throwing money at a building is not always the way to get the best results. Lazy architecture can result. It's different here, proof that the best contemporary artists thrive on improvisation. Money was tight, but it's seldom I've seen it better, or more joyfully, spent. □

RICHARD BRYANT



**Built like a dancer: the architecture is not rigid but physical, tactile and sinuous**