



Leaping beauty

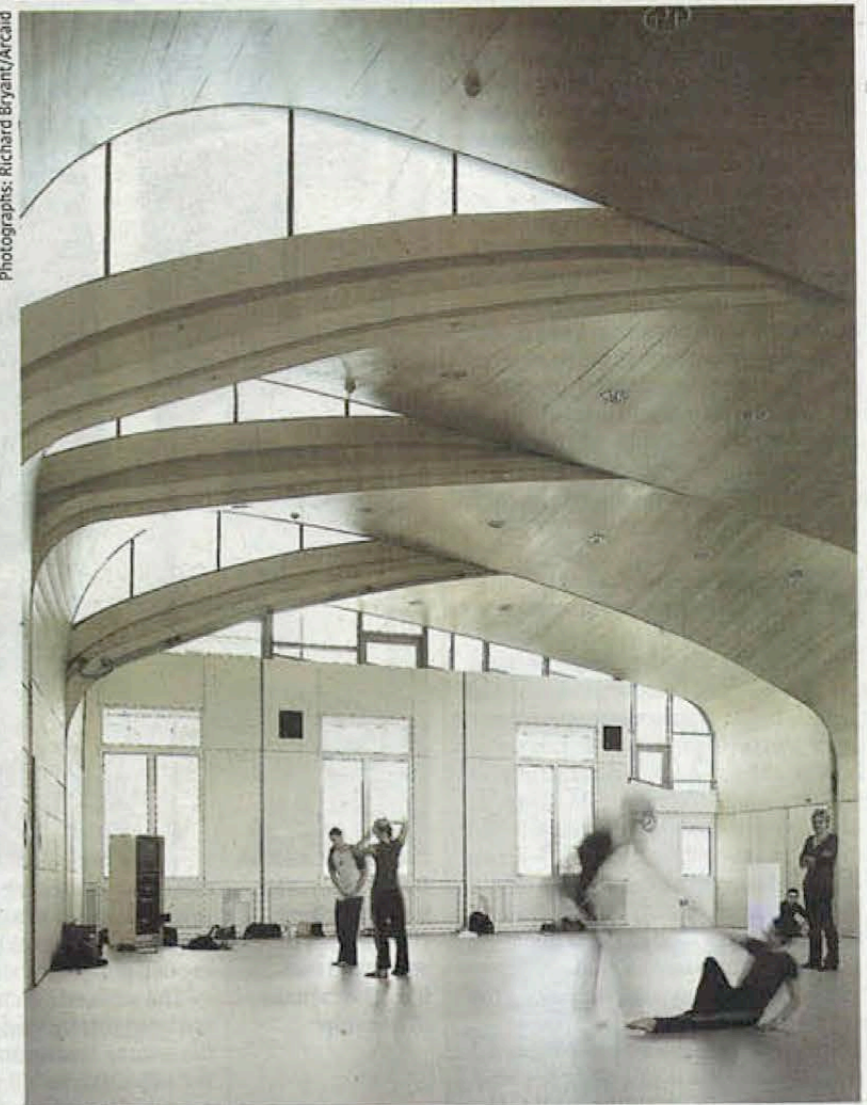
From the distressed walls to the lack of mirrors, there's nothing conventional about Siobhan Davies's new dance studio, says **Jonathan Glancey**

Sarah Wigglesworth looks a bit shocked. I've just told the architect that her latest building, the Siobhan Davies Studios, reminds me of a bus garage in south London. Wigglesworth says it's more like a loaf of bread rising from a baking tin. But are we really so at odds? I'm thinking about the way light pours through the arches of the undulating roof of the building's superb top floor studio; Wigglesworth is thinking of the view of the same roof as seen from surrounding London streets. We're both right: the voluptuous grey-blue glass, reinforced plastic roof of the studio is indeed rather like a loaf of bread hot from the oven, while its underside, a sequence of beautifully resolved birch-ply arches, has something of the baroque adventure and finesse of the listed Stockwell bus garage, built in 1952 to the adventurous designs of Adie, Button and Partners.

The underside of the studio's roof matters a lot to the trained dancers poised beneath it. They look at it much of the day, and especially when they first come in for rehearsals. Siobhan Davies's style is for dancers to limber up while lying on the floor. In this studio there are no bars on the wall, as there are in classical dance studios. No mirrors, either. These, says Davies, hinder and distort natural movement. Some dancers work on the floor for up to an hour and a half at a



Photographs: Richard Bryant/Arcaid



Underneath the arches . . . dancers in the main studio; (left) the facade seen from the playground; (far left) the roof

time: they are all too aware of the modern baroque roof above their stretched bodies. This, in part, is why Wigglesworth has designed it this way. Daylight filters through the eye-like rooflights set into the sides of the arches, so that the feel of this lofty, 5m high studio changes continually. Daylight is controlled, so it never dazzles, nor does it play dramatic games by casting deep shadows across the floor or walls. A joy in another building, these would distract dancers, throwing them literally as well as metaphorically off balance.

It has taken Davies 10 years to find the right location for what is the first permanent home, in 24 years, for her celebrated dance company. Throughout that time she has stuck by her architect. This is, in fact, the third scheme in London Wigglesworth has designed for Davies. First, the Studios were to be in King's Cross, then in Whitechapel and now in a 100-year-old school building in Southwark. This is an area where it is still relatively cheap to buy, rent or build; surrounding the Studios – originally a school – are a rag-bag of late-Georgian terraces, several unresolved experiments in postwar housing, the Imperial War Museum and the towerless St

George's Cathedral, an accidental home to down-and-outs asleep in its pews.

Both client and architect liked this extreme city patchwork, and enjoyed working with rather than against it. So, rather unexpectedly, Davies's headquarters is reached through a bit of old school playground. Here, Wigglesworth has knitted together, in big bold clicks of her architectural needles, three well-worn buildings dating from 1898, 1908 and the early 1930s. These had all been bashed about by generations of schoolchildren and by makeshift additions and repairs. Wigglesworth has left these marks of previous occupation. So a handsome and serenely calm waiting room, or "parlour" as Davies likes to call it, leading off a welcoming triple-height lobby, is a cosy marriage of walls lined with crazed and slightly foxed tiles, plush new leather sofas, soundless timber floors, smoothly sliding doors and gently fashionable lamps.

Back in the lobby, walls stretch up to the underside of the rooftop studio, baring every last scratch, lesion and indentation made by what were once stairs, chimney breasts and floors, all of which had to go to make way for Davies's dancers. The result is an intriguing patchwork of materials, patterns and shadows, quite the opposite of the typically gleaming new city academy or arts venue, all pristine white walls and blond wood floors. ▶

◀ Wigglesworth, whose best-known work, with Jeremy Till, is the unlikely and delightful Straw House north of King's Cross – parts of which really are made of straw, and mud – is a mistress of unexpected materials, positively enjoying the sorts of mottled and curious surfaces most architects are at pains to hide. This pronounced characteristic of her work has the unusual effect of making the new spaces at Southwark seem somehow lived in and welcoming, even though brand new. In practice, it also means that dancers use the school in ways that a prim architect might well consider to be promiscuous. They exercise anywhere they can find a convenient space. The building is alive with the spirit of dance.

The tautly poised, suspended steel and wire-trussed staircase that rises from the back of the lobby to a rehearsal room, treatment rooms and a playful exercise balcony overlooking the entrance, is delightfully odd, and very effective. It takes up little room. It absorbs little light. It makes a cats-cradle play of wires across the rear-facing glass facade, cleverly breaking up views into the building from the playground of the school. And dancers use it to stretch.

The balcony reached halfway up the stair is a curious bolt-hole. Lined in plump red leather, it's a place to meet, rest, exercise and lean over to see who is coming into the building. It ends in a sudden prow in which just one person



Bolt-hole... the balcony where Davies likes to stand and feel like 'the captain of her ship'

can strike an attitude, or gaze out across the main road. Davies likes to stand here; it makes her feel like the captain of her own ship.

The walls and arches of the studio are lined throughout in birch-ply and the sprung timber floors in linoleum. For years, Davies's dancers have practised in makeshift accommodation, jarring their joints against concrete

floors in rooms better suited for car maintenance than dance. This, in comparison, is a dancer's paradise. It is at once a calm and exhilarating space, rather like the interiors of the best baroque churches. These, too, play a deft game in which a sense of the highly theatrical is reconciled within the spirit of the numinous.

It is a difficult trick for architects of any generation to pull off, yet Wigglesworth has done it here. She takes particular pleasure in the 17th-century Italian churches of Borromini, Brunelleschi and Guarini, and shows how it is possible to imbue a new building with the spirit of old architectural styles without aping the forms of the past. Wigglesworth's budget in Southwark of £2.4m was not exactly the financial foundation of the grandeur of Counter-Reformation Rome. Still, she has achieved a design ambition here: she wanted a place where it might seem as if performers and architecture were dancing together into the sky.

Dance, as both architect and client say, is about applying narratives, told by the human body, to space. While it is possible to build neutral or featureless performance spaces for dancers, architecture can offer inspiration and even provocation. In the world of classical dance, outside the training and rehearsal studio, this has traditionally meant voluptuous wedding cake design. With the Siobhan Davies Studios Wigglesworth offers what feels like just the right balance between raising the spirits through architecture, and an architecture that does not determine or define the nature and style of the creative process it protects ●

In Plain Clothes is at the Siobhan Davies Studios, London SE1, May 2-17. Details: 0870 730 1414.

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