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April 2006

Baltic in Bloomsbury: Short & Associates at UCL

John Lyall on Sarah Wigglesworth's dance centre

Ascona finalists: Caruso St John, Zaha Hadid, Peter Märkli, Luigi Snozzi, Mansilla & Tuñón, Rafael Moneo, Mario Botta

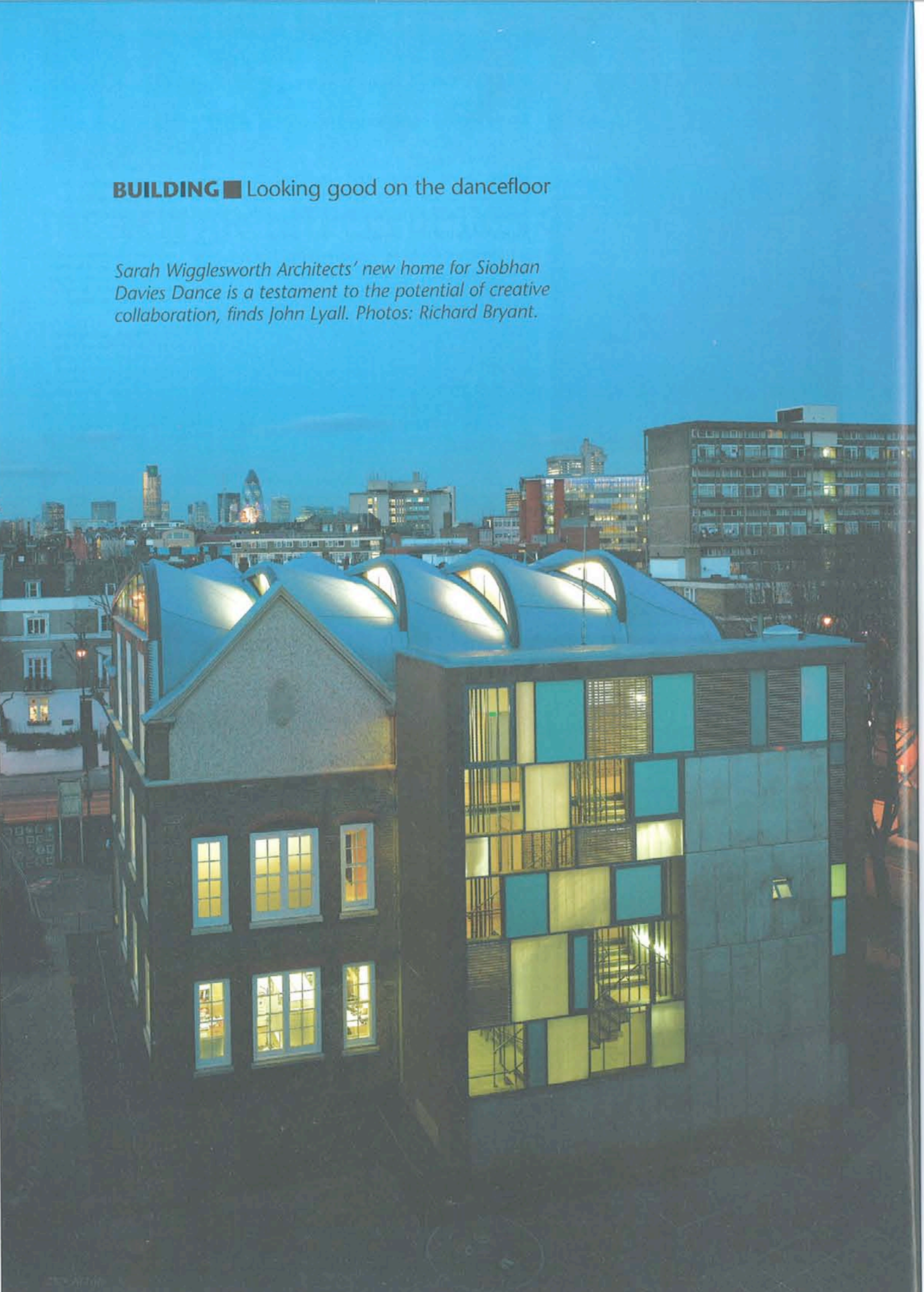
Live/work: Maccreanor Lavington and Inglis Badrashi

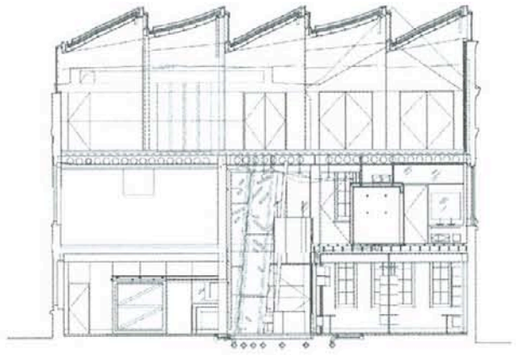
Bovine building – probably the best cowshed in the world

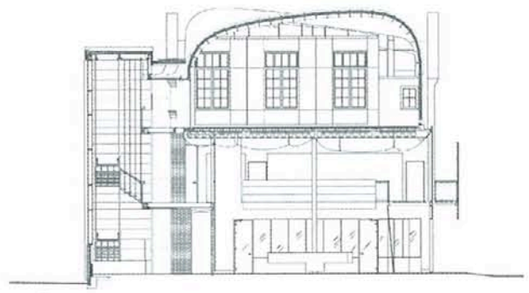
Refurbishment & renovation, Safety & security, Interbuild

BUILDING ■ Looking good on the dancefloor

Sarah Wigglesworth Architects' new home for Siobhan Davies Dance is a testament to the potential of creative collaboration, finds John Lyall. Photos: Richard Bryant.







Good architecture is not just the result of engaging a good and clever architect; it takes a good client too. A clear brief by a client who has imagination and is prepared to commit for the long haul is a rare commodity, but can result in a special building. Architects and clients who establish a strong creative relationship tend to stick to the task of achieving quality through thick and thin.

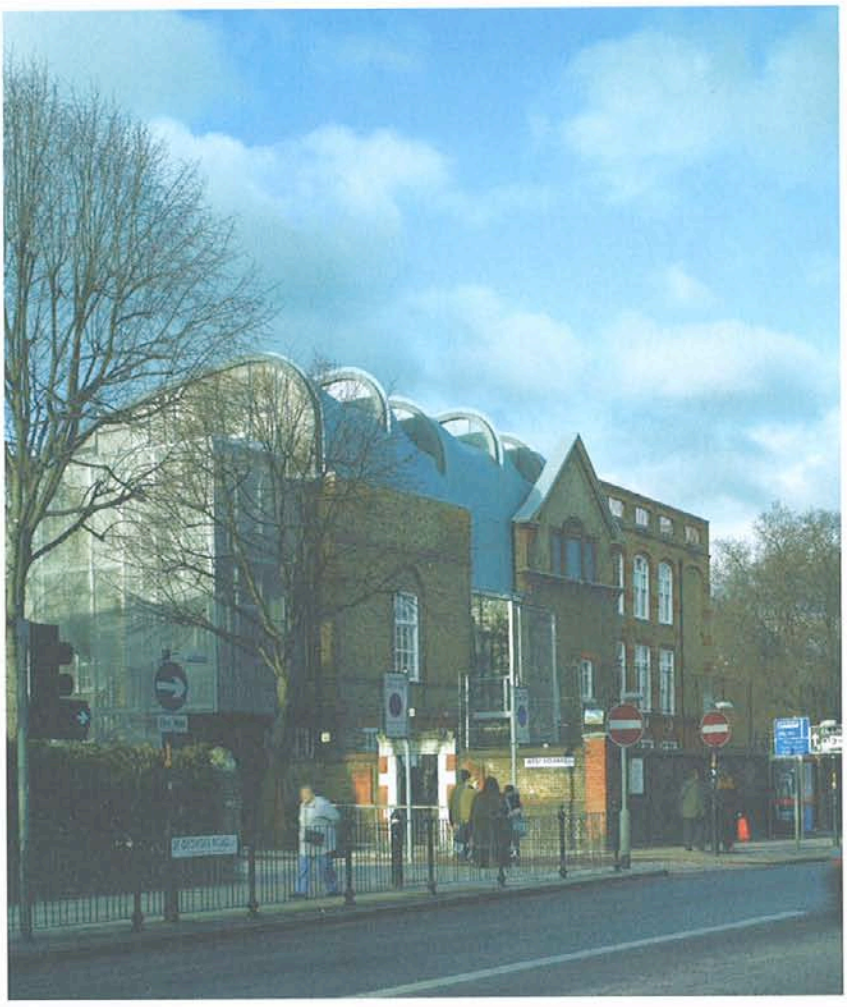
So it is with Sarah Wigglesworth and her client, Sue (Siobhan) Davies. I first encountered both of them discussing this project at a Dance UK/RIBA event at the Royal Festival Hall in 2002. It was a time when their ideas were moving from pipe-dream status to an early functional design for a site which was not yet secured. The joint creative enquiry was based on a shared interest in the body, movement, space and built form. Instead of providing generalised accommodation to enclose any type of dance, the centre and its architecture would derive from the dance of Davies and her company. In other words, the dance centre would not be anonymous – it would have a signature founded on the working relationship.

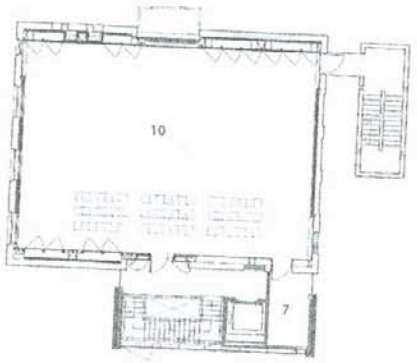
And so it has. Judging by the evidence of proud users and delighted visitors, I am delighted to report that after a ten year gestation, the building is a success. It is also very special facility which provides a base for the Siobhan Davies Dance Company but also opens its doors for wider community use.

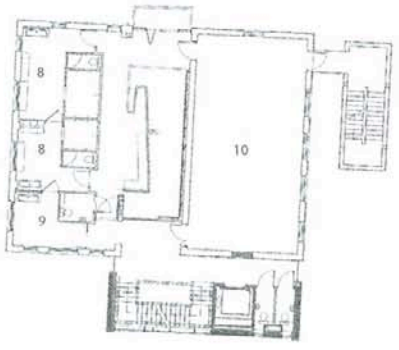
For far too long contemporary dance has been stuffed into converted old warehouses and school halls, with a low budget make-do-and-mend attitude by funding bodies. Thankfully, dance is finally being taken more seriously with some celebrated projects in recent years such as Herzog & de Meuron's Laban in Deptford (AT137), and excellent centres in Edinburgh, Newcastle and Birmingham. At last purpose-made dance studios can be planned properly, engineered and constructed along with adequate back-up facilities.

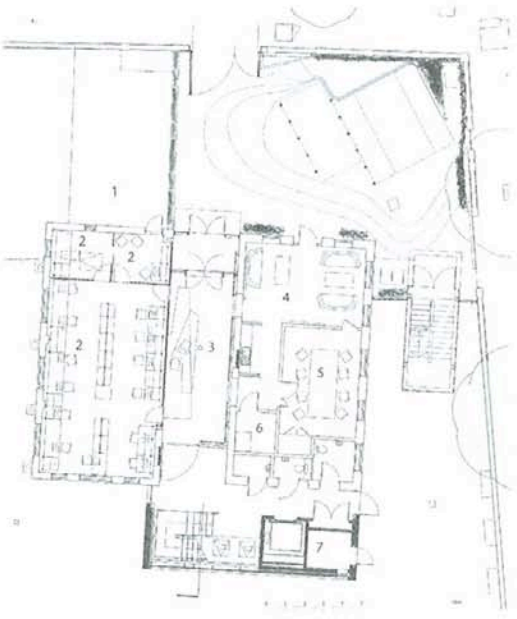
It is surprising then to discover this project sitting within what was a Victorian school annexe in south London. The footprint of the historic shell provided Davies with just the right clear-span dimensions for her main rehearsal studio, which is the size of a typical

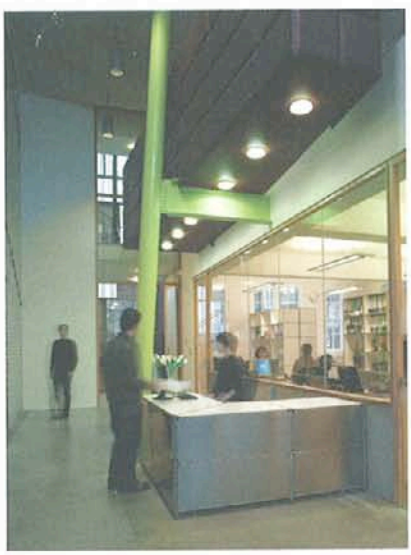
Facing page *View from the south; the extension housing the main stair provided the opportunity to create an elevation to be enjoyed by pupils in the adjacent playground.*
Sections *East-west (above) and south-north. The existing building had a rigid parti and robust construction formed by two masonry rectangular blocks separated by a narrow circulation slot that runs north-south. The central core was stripped out at the ground- and first-floor levels to create a double-height space. The west block was given over to office space on the ground floor and changing rooms on the first floor. The east wing accommodates entertaining and meeting spaces on the ground floor and the smaller rehearsal space on the first floor. The scheme works within the logic of the existing building, puncturing the inner walls with local openings to link the occupied spaces with the central circulation zone. This central void is the heart of the building, organising and linking the rooms, providing the space for functions to spill into.*
Above *The main dance studio.*

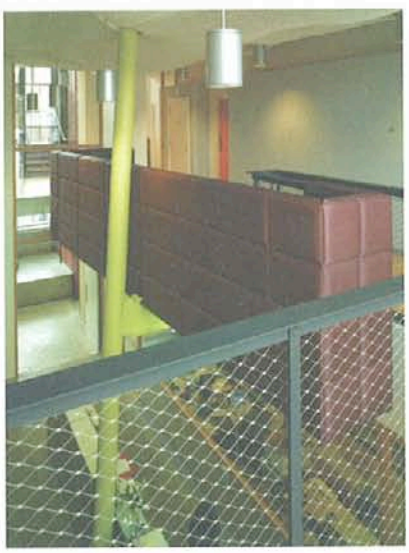












performance stage. The original, older Victorian school building is still in use for primary age-groups, with playgrounds of noisy children surrounding the dance centre on two sides. This appears to me a robust and happy relationship where a school and a dance company can independently get on with what they want to do, but can see each other and enjoy being neighbours. As a venue for performance it has a lot to contend with acoustically (there is also a busy road at the front), but the measures taken by acoustician Paul Gilleron are effective, without totally losing the sense of being in an urban environment.

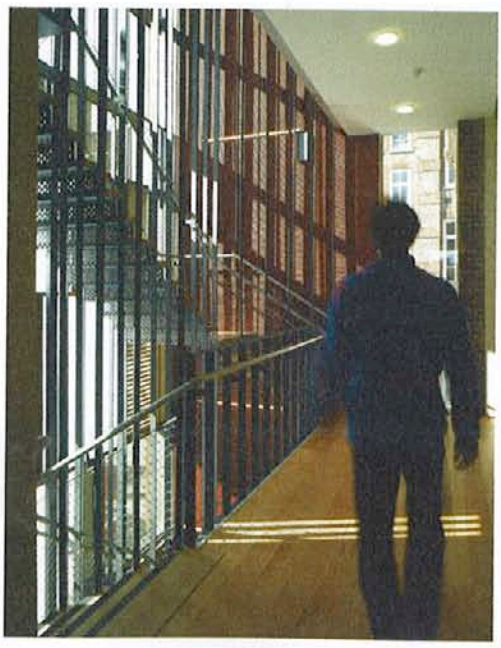
Top *View from the north-east.*
Above *The double-height reception space is the hub of the building. A tight space at the prow of the balcony allows dancers the rare opportunity to stand on their own in this busy centre.*
Plans *Ground, first and second floors: 1 Playground, 2 offices, 3 reception, 4 parlour, 5 meeting room, 6 server store, 7 plant, 8 changing, 9 treatment room, 10 studios. The main rehearsal studio is designed as a flexible space suitable for dance, music and spoken word performances. It can accommodate an audience of 70 people. The smaller studio acts as a research space for dance experimentation and warm-up exercise classes.*

The resulting architecture is a carefully crafted balance of old and new. Externally the new building forces itself out of the Victorian box at the top and some of the sides, but Wigglesworth is careful about the composition of the elevations to avoid a dominance of either historic or modern expression. As neither the 1898 annexe nor its later Edwardian extension have the detail and character of the original school next door, I questioned why the building was retained at all. Why not demolish and build a totally new building? Davies and Wigglesworth felt that the option was not available because the listed status of the

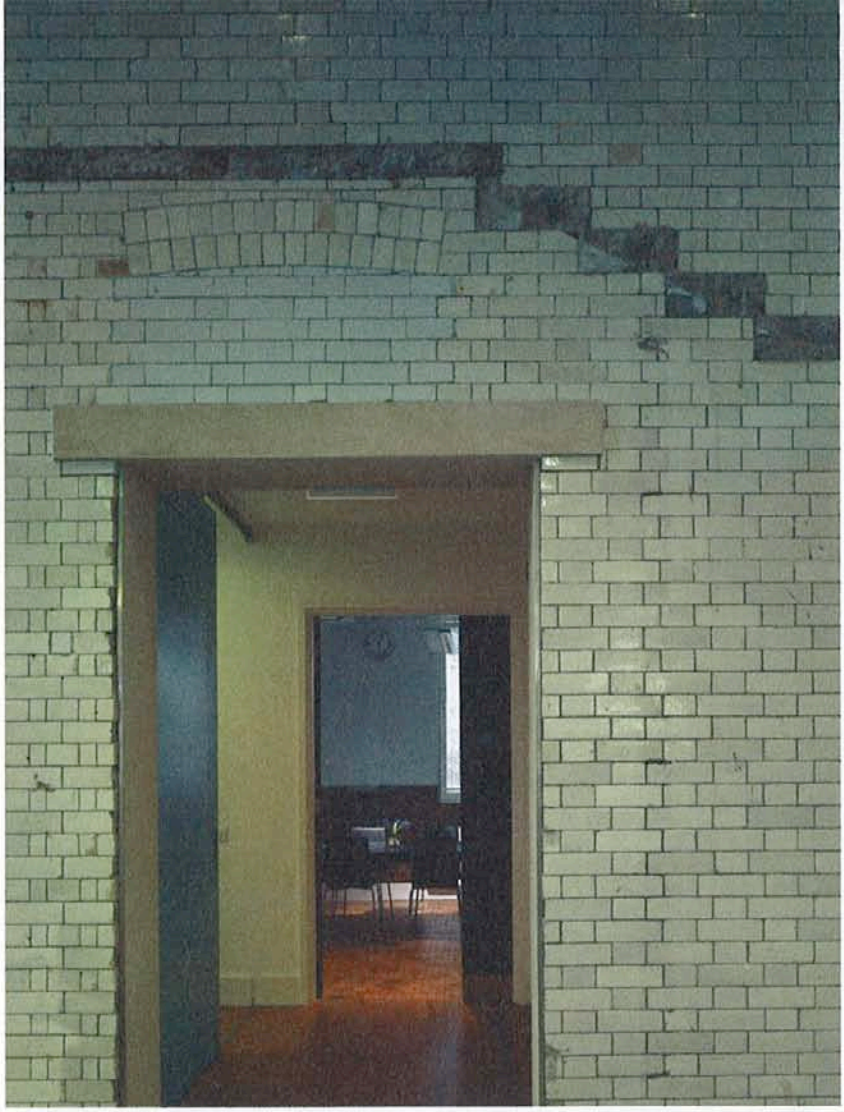
'mothership' would seriously affect any chances of removal of the annexe. And on a tight budget they thought it would be cheaper to adapt the school than to rebuild it.

But the brief and Wigglesworth's natural inventiveness have happily applied some clever surgery to the old building, while new structures have integrity of their own. The greatest among these is the large rehearsal studio at the top of the building, where curved strips of roof lined with birch ply criss-cross against each other to allow the penetration of just enough daylight. When you are in the space it does not seem ridiculous to think anthropomorphically of these roof elements as intertwining tendons and muscles. The Davies-Wigglesworth collaboration is based on the architectural inspiration of the human body. Outside the studio, and running down the whole height of the building, is a stair suspended by black-painted steel 'straps' which convey a sense of muscular tension themselves, with a pleasurably imperfect, crafted feel when you observe that some of them are slightly distorted by the loads they are carrying.

It is worth remarking that there are no mirrors or dance barres. Refreshingly, Davies believes that her work has no need for barres, and she feels that dancers should be able



Top *The first floor changing rooms.*
Above, left *Black painted steel straps support the stairs. As the existing footprint could not be eroded at the main studio level, all the vertical circulation was placed outside the existing footprint. The rear extension has been designed to create a lively elevation that separates and screens the dance company from the playground and vice versa. It is experienced as separate to the original building – a new structure that climbs the exterior of the annexe building to reach the main dance space. The new rooms, stair and lift core are separated from the existing building by a slot corridor terminated with windows at either end.*



Top left and right *Views from the reception space into the ground floor meeting room and the parlour, a comfortable room in which off duty dancers can relax. The history of the building is visible in the layers of material that Wigglesworth has opted to expose. Contemporary interventions are clearly discernable.*
Above *The secondary rehearsal studio in use. The absence of barres and mirrors reflects Siobhan Davies' views on the necessity for such equipment in devising and rehearsing dance.*

to feel their own line and balance in a space without having to study their reflection. Unfortunately, most other dance clients call for barres and mirrors in their studios, which can make all such spaces look the same.

Underneath the main studio, the building is split in two by a double-height lobby. On one side rises a cut-off wall which is a patchwork of the old school, with different types of brick and the memory of a sliced-off stone staircase. Facing this are the reception desk, glazed office and a lime-green painted steel element which outrageously supports a rather kitsch but opulent balcony for dancers, covered in dimpled burgundy leather. The lucky dancers have bright, fresh changing rooms in lime green and orange; the partition is open at the top so that boys and girls can still converse while changing. Downstairs is a comfortable 'parlour' with easy chairs and a small kitchen.

Going back to the outside, the intertwining studio roof is covered by sea-blue GRP shells. The two street elevations are animated by strategically placed panels of stainless steel mesh – to the dancers' balcony over the front entrance and to a dominant fire escape at the side. They produce a different magic when lit at night.

Davies is clearly ecstatic about her building which she says is a joy for her to work in. Above all, Wigglesworth's practice has created a 'safe' environment for the company. Safe because it is physically secure in a tough inner-London area, and safe emotionally because the company now has a long-term home, after years of temporary arrangements in inadequate lodgings.

Wigglesworth and Davies have produced a building which can teach us all a few lessons, not just about dance environments but also the re-use of listed Victorian school buildings (of which there are many). They even had a design and build contract 'imposed' on them for the construction – not really appropriate for such a unique building – but they came through that philosophical, cheerful and relatively unscathed. Davies says it's too early to say if the building will affect her choreography. I bet it does.

John Lyall is the founder of John Lyall Architects and a design enabler for CABE. Current projects include Cranfields Mill in Ipswich, comprising commercial space, 325 apartments and the DanceHaus for Dance East (AT157).

Sarah Wigglesworth writes:
The new studio designed for Siobhan Davies Dance, the company founded in 1987 by one of Britain's leading choreographers, comprises an extensive refurbishment and extension of a redundant Board School annexe (1898), located in the playground of the Charlotte Sharman Primary School in Southwark, south London. Given the sensitive position of the building, we have been careful to minimise the impact on the existing school. We looked at ways of improving the existing play spaces, regarding the south elevation of the annexe building as the backdrop to the playground, and explored ways of benefiting both occupants of the site through landscaping and shared facilities such as recycling zones.

The new centre is a resource for Independent Dance and small dance companies in the independent sector. As well as providing continuing professional development for the dancers in mid-career, the building will be used by the community and by children from the primary school.

The starting point for the design was to accommodate the most important and largest space first – the main dance rehearsal space. The footprint of the existing building (excluding a ground-floor extension to the south) matched the required size of the main dance rehearsal space in terms of area. As the ground and first floors did not have sufficient floor-to-ceiling heights for the studio space, the second floor roof structure was removed and a new structure inserted. The concept driving the design for this space is an experience of 'dancing on the roof' and 'within the ruins of the existing building'. Users of the building will be aware of the retained masonry, the line of the former roof and the sky as viewed through the end windows and rooflights.

The new roof consists of sensuous twisting shell ribbons that create opportunities for daylight to enter the space, articulating the billowing forms of the roof. Roof and walls form an insulated, stressed-skin construction.

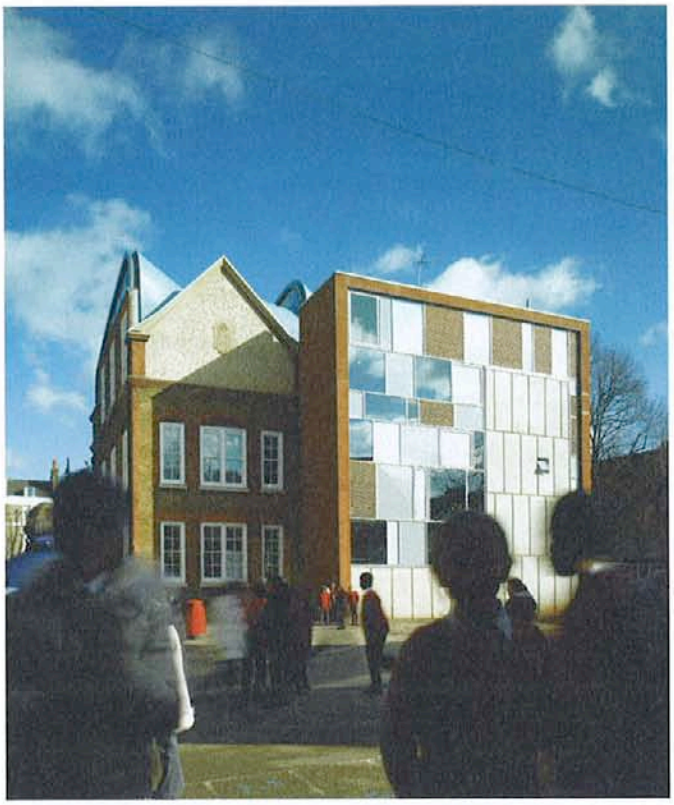
The studio has been designed as an inspiring environment in which to work, where calm, concentration and comfort unite to provide the best conditions available to create and rehearse original work. To support this, the studio has been isolated physically and acoustically from the bustle of the world outside, but it has carefully placed views out to the sky and surroundings so that the changing external world can be registered. It is well-lit both by daylight and artificial lighting. The materials used are predominantly natural and the colours are muted to retain focus on the bodies of the dancers. The main studio includes blackout facilities, lighting, equipment-fixing points and connects to a sound desk in the neighbouring storeroom.

The office wing is divided into a main open-plan area and a private offices. The east wing comprises a parlour, which is an informal meeting area to be used by the whole company, a meeting room, a kitchenette and ancillary rooms. The parlour, together with the central circulation zone, is a space for entertaining on more formal occasions.

The first floor is designed primarily as an area for the dancers, accommodating the changing areas, treatment room, an informal seating area and the smaller research dance space. Visitor toilets are also provided near the lift and stairs.

Given the diversity of spaces required, the engineers suggested a localised provision for heating and air handling, using domestic-type units positioned to deal with specific environmental requirements. The air handling units provide pre-tempered air without conditioning with efficient heat reclamation on the extracted air. Each room is locally controlled to allow the occupants to alter their environments as required. This servicing strategy has allowed the discreet accommodation of these relatively compact units in ceiling voids and small plant rooms. While the main studio is provided with mechanical ventilation for licensing, air quality and acoustic reasons, Siobhan Davies Dance was keen to have the option of naturally ventilating the studios, so exisiting windows were refurbished.

Sustainability was an important consideration. In addition to bringing an old structure back to life, we achieved u-values higher than the Building Regulations requirements (walls 0.2, windows 1.5, roof 0.2W/m²/°C). Secondary glazing contains the heat and enhances acoustic performance. Tempered fresh air is brought into the office space and parlour through earth tubes (the earth cools the air in the summer and warms it in winter). Measures taken to ensure environmental control include, for example, the installation of user-controlled mechanical air handling/ventilation units. The use of mineral or eco paints, low energy light fittings, self-finished concrete and renders all emphasise the new building's commitment to sustainability.



Project team
Architect: Sarah Wigglesworth Architects; design team: Jonathan Logsdon (project architect), Leo Care, George Legg, Renée Searle, Sarah Wigglesworth, Kim Winston; structural engineer: Price & Myers; qs: Boyden & Company; project manager: Jackson Coles; acoustician: Paul Gilleron Acoustic Design; m&e: Fulcrum Consulting; lighting: Charcoal Blue; contractor: Rooff; client: Siobhan Davies Dance.

Selected subcontractors and suppliers
Structural steelwork: Alpcart; groundworks and superstructure: Oliver Connell & Son; GRP roof, gutter and internal linings: Design & Display Systems; railings and gates: Gray Fabrications; windows: Passmore Joinery; Sarnafil flat roofing: Cambridge Polymer Roofing; flooring: Hardwood Flooring London, Luxcrete, Alma, Altro, Chemres Contracts, easifloor, Boxler, Junckers; lift installation: Kone; zinc works: Marshott Non-Ferrous Roofing; decoration works: Mulvey & Co; glazed partitioning: Planet Partitioning; frameless glass/structural cladding: Pro-Fix Services; raised access flooring: Kingspan; mansafe system: Vertical technology; polycarbonate roofing: Flame Patent Glazing; ceilings & through colour render: West & Sons; internal hanging slab: Wood Engineering (Metalworkers); mesh ceiling: Clycan Management; blinds: TF Sampson; mesh balustrade: Carl Stahl.

Elevations *Clockwise from top left: south, north, west and east.*