

INSPIRED  
DESIGN  
M

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FFECT



CREATIVE ISLAND II JOHN SORRELL





*Dancer Siobhan Davies thought that her dance company deserved state-of-the-art facilities. So she turned to Sarah Wigglesworth to create a studio that was both practical and inspiring.*



**Sarah Wigglesworth:**

One of the special things about this project was that, by the

time it was finished, we'd been working with the clients for nearly ten years, so we got to know them very well; you don't usually get that luxury. We designed three different buildings over that time. Siobhan was fed up with asking people at the top of their profession to rehearse in dreadful conditions, in unheated studios, on unsprung floors... So she applied to the Arts Council and they agreed to fund a new facility provided that she shared the studios with other dance companies.

The basic brief was to provide a warm, comfortable, inspiring space for her company and other small dance companies, a place that would be good for work and relaxation, and a space where dancers could get treatment for their aches and sprains. In the early days they were looking at something much more ambitious so we drew plans for a building including two large studios. But it became clear that the company was going to struggle to run it. They tried joining with another arts organisation but ultimately decided they needed more autonomy.

The proposed site was a constrained, robust, brick structure in London's Elephant and Castle, made up of two wings with a smaller section sandwiched in the middle. Our approach was to use the robustness of the old building as a "ground" for making quite radical changes and adding new elements that

were a complete contrast. We used the curves and tensions of a dancer's body as a theme.

We opened up the central section to create a large foyer space and we put the dance studio over both the wings. As you come into the foyer you see the stairs up to the studio ahead of you. The wall on the right has been removed to give you clear views to the offices, so you know where to go straight away; all the public functions are at ground level. Overlooking the foyer at the first-floor level are the changing rooms – it's where the dancers come out after changing as they go up to the studio, so you can glimpse them in their dancewear. The first floor is a good social space for the dancers, where they can gather and chat about their day.

Siobhan was very clear about what she wanted in the studio. It had to be warm, day-lit, with a sprung floor and a 5-metre high ceiling. We presented ten different options – we knew the ribbon idea was the one she'd want. She chose it, even though financially it was a challenge. And it didn't half give us a headache! We created a billowing roof, with a view out of either end of London's skyline. It means the dancers are aware of what the weather's doing and what time it is; it's uplifting without being distracting. The studio is made out of five identical ribbons that arch over the room. At cornice height they break out and separate, twisting in three dimensions to create the billow. The underside is a curve, and, in order to get a smooth surface, we had to make the plywood panels wedge-shaped to fit the curves. They vary all across the roof. There are no sharp corners or sharp shadow and the light is spread evenly on the floor. Because Siobhan wanted to speak to the dancers without having to shout all day we had to ensure the acoustics were good, and the shape of the roof really helped with this. The whole studio was wired for sound, audiovisual screens and theatre lighting.

The rear of the building is actually in a primary school playground, so we built it as a light wall, providing something lively and stimulating for the pupils to look at. It's quite an animated façade, a patchwork of panels that control the amount of light entering the building. The staircase hangs in this space on tensioned cables. It has a sinewy feel, like a dancer holding a pose.

