



FRED HOWARTH

*From the editor*

## The finest heritage projects look at the meaning of a building in the round

The emotional pull of a building is beautifully described by AJ competitions editor Merlin Fulcher in his appraisal of Haworth Tompkins' work with Battersea Arts Centre (see page 44). Merlin's memories of the centre – going to birthday parties there as a child, working behind the scenes at Punchdrunk's atmospheric production of *The Masque of the Red Death* – underline the power that buildings have in forming our impressions of the world.

The sensitive renovation achieved by Haworth Tompkins – after this Victorian gem was gutted in a devastating fire in 2015 – has been arrived at through a productive relationship with a forward-thinking client and an understanding of the role of much-loved buildings at an individual and community level.

The best architects know that they mess with the 'story' of buildings and places at their peril. They understand the importance of the layers of meaning and memory. They know that exceptional retrofit, renovation and heritage

projects are not merely about additions of new bits or replicas of old bits; these stand-out projects address buildings and their meaning in the round.

It's why so many architects rail at the 'style wars' (see *Letters*, page 62). It's why it is so very difficult to successfully masterplan and build an entirely new town. It's why rebuilding exact replicas after fire damage is so fraught. The superficial, borrowed certainty of Classical detailing often cannot impart a history that isn't there to begin with. Buildings grow as people interact with them; they become part of a community experience and a community understanding. This takes time and it takes integrity.

At one point, when Merlin saw the plume of smoke rising from the Battersea Arts Centre, it seemed that memories would be all that remained of the charred building. But the triumph of this architectural project is that many new memories can now be created – ones that include the old story of this building, and delight in its rebirth.



*Building study*

## Immersive architecture

Haworth Tompkins' restoration of London's Battersea Arts Centre was nearly complete when a devastating fire destroyed its Grand Hall. But the subsequent rebuild has created a beautiful and beguiling space





Haworth Tompkins has been working alongside the client, local community and theatre artists, on a series of ongoing experimental projects that have gradually transformed this former Battersea Town Hall. When the project started in 2006, Battersea Arts Centre was interested in expanding its creative and civic capacity. The practice undertook incremental works from this time until 2015 when a fire partially destroyed the Grand Hall. The rebuilding of the hall was assimilated into the project as another moment of evolution and change.

Words Merlin Fulcher  
Photography Fred Haworth

When some place dear to you is destroyed, it's tempting to console oneself with the thought that, while buildings might fall and be rebuilt, memories are irreplaceable. But if a destroyed building's most majestic and evocative elements can somehow be recovered – no easy feat in our constrained and austere times – there is a chance its former glory can be experienced by others.

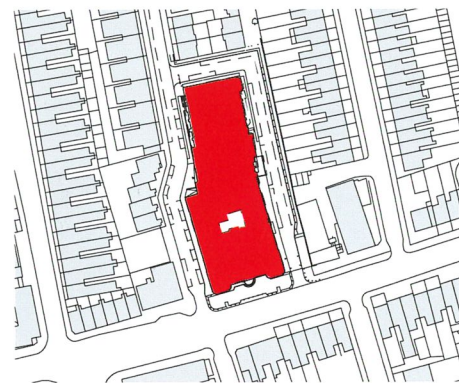
My childhood home is next to the Battersea Arts Centre and some of my earliest memories are of birthday parties at its cinema. Built as a town hall to contest-winning designs by Edward William Mountford, it was a grand but friendly neighbour which delighted us with its marble stairs, mosaic floors depicting preindustrial Lavender Hill's bees, and dreamy rooftop cupolas.

Our primary school hosted its summer productions in the Grand Hall, which meant an eternity of singing rehearsals spent gazing at the enormous plasterwork barrel-vaulted roof and pipe organ. Later I was an assistant

to the set designers for Punchdrunk's *Masque of the Red Death* promenade performance, which saw every corner of the enormous 1893 complex transformed into an Edgar Allen Poe wonderland. It seemed like this theatre, which took over the former town hall in 1974, would always be part of my life, and that of its local and artistic community, despite the often-precarious outlook for civic spaces.

For this reason it was devastating to witness a suspiciously large plume of white smoke on the horizon as I walked across Clapham Common to Battersea one March afternoon three years ago. Rushing over, I found neighbours, actors, staff and passers-by in shock and tears, as firefighters battled the nightmarish blaze. Moments later the epic roof of the Grand Hall collapsed and it seemed as though an extraordinary century of history and culture had been obliterated in an explosion of embers.

For the Battersea Arts Centre, the fire – which destroyed the Grand Hall but nothing else – was particularly perilous because its Grade II-listed home had been nearing the intended completion of a



£13.3 million restoration, masterplanned by Haworth Tompkins. Since 2008, the arts centre and architect had worked together on an incremental masterplan based on the theatre's pioneering 'scratch' process, whereby new ideas are developed in answer to audience feedback.

Responding to the idiosyncrasies of the historic building as much as to the dreams of its leadership, audience and creative users, the iterative 'fuzzy logic' process set out to create an infinitely flexible theatre venue where performances could take place in any corner, just as they had for Punchdrunk years earlier. Gone are the cinema and formal black-box performance spaces of my youth, and in their place is a new building-wide habitat of lighting rigs and demountable seating.

To free up more space for performances, unused roof voids have been transformed into a cosy office space for staff, with a rooftop terrace and stunning views over London's West End. From these cupola-ed heights, staff look down on to a new courtyard theatre created by inserting a prefabricated steel viewing gallery and delivering new lateral and elevator connections through the building.

These simple but bold interventions – mostly invisible from the exterior – were dreamt up after project architect Imogen Long and project manager Scott MacColl intrepidly hacked their way through the former town hall's attics. Solutions emerged through the exploratory masterplanning process rather than at its outset, and their uses – just like the distressed surface finishes throughout the building – remain open-ended. Elsewhere a stylish suite of artists' bedrooms was cunningly created to combat rising living costs, which rose steeply







NICHOLAS HARTWRIGHT

during the project. But could this flexible approach deliver an environment resilient enough to bounce back from a major fire?

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The Grand Hall had just received a light-touch refurbishment and was due to host a busy summer schedule of revenue-generating events when the disaster struck. The expected cash flow vaporised and, in the initial days following the blaze, the structure's future appeared uncertain. Would the land be sold for unaffordable apartments or be comprehensively redeveloped, as had been proposed in the late 1960s? Thankfully, a host of donations towards running costs came forward – including £1 million from the pro-austerity government – and, although the exact causes of the fire have never been discovered, the building's insurers agreed to fund its entire reconstruction.

Within weeks, emergency steel bracing propped up the hall's enormous gables – ending fears they might collapse on the windy hilltop site – and surveys quickly established that the brickwork remained structurally sound. The building manager's death-defying decision to retrieve the Grand Hall's architectural plans after the evacuation also meant the fire brigade was able to save the building's canopy, grand foyer and its unique octagonal stained-glass roof. A stroke of luck meant that crucial parts of the 1901 pipe organ were being repaired off-site at the time of the fire.

The outcome of these godsend for the Grand Hall has been a sumptuous near-total reconstruction, allowing a host of technical improvements including triple glazing and soundproofing for concerts. Rather than a faithful reproduction of the interior, Haworth Tompkins has created a beautiful and

beguiling space in which the impression of the original barrel-vaulted roof is echoed in modular timber panels, while the memory of the blaze is frozen in the walls' fire-cooked patina. The stage has been lowered to bring the audience into the action, while the imposing pipe organ is to be reassembled at the back.

Externally, the new Grand Hall replicates its original, even incorporating a Victorian spire rescued from the ashes. It deviates with the addition of enormous typography to the northern elevation, signposting the destination to the railway passengers below, and an elegant stone entrance ramp sculpted around its historic arched-steel entrance canopy. Elsewhere, the architect has introduced a huge cantilevered steel column as a monumental balustrade for the ramp entrance to the bar, and another, more slender column with jazzy lettering.

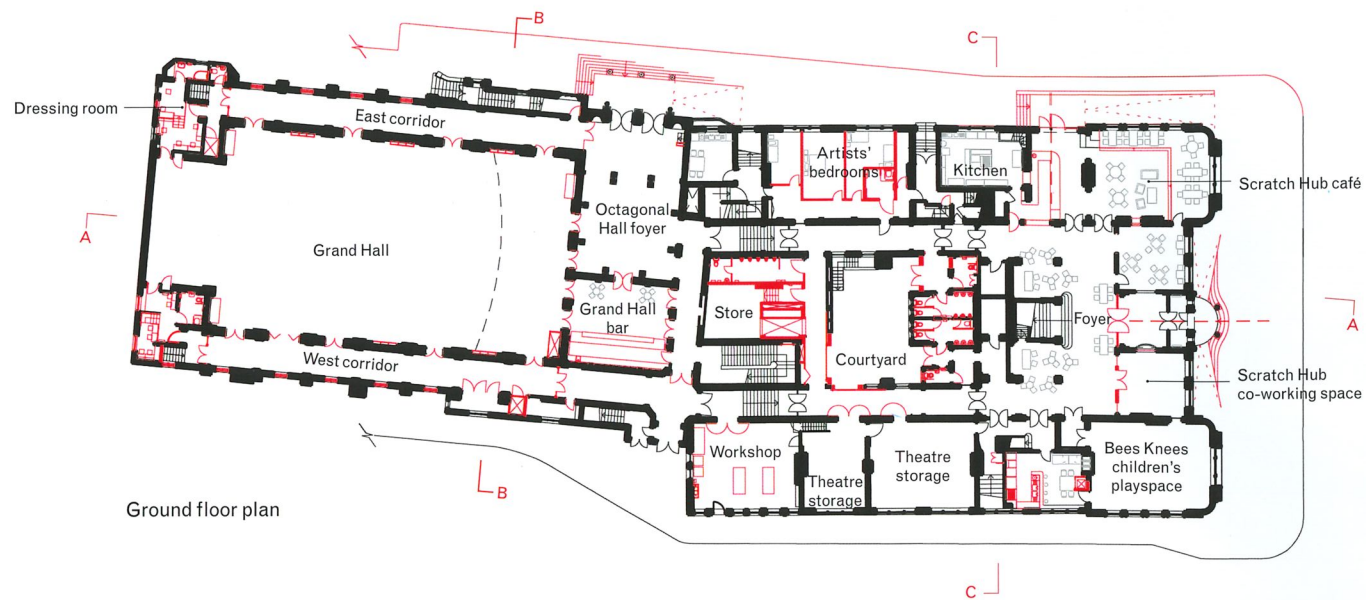
The finished product – if by its own 'fuzzy logic' it ever will be finished – is a far more inviting, stylish and, paradoxically, stable venue. It feels like a school where the teachers have run away and anything is possible but everyone has consensually agreed to respect the historic building and its trendy contemporary light fittings.

Art centre director David Jubb conceived the project with practice director Steve Tompkins as an alternative to earlier capital-intensive proposals, and it provides a solid base for him to announce his moving on, opening up the opportunity for a new young talent to take over. It is also a place where future generations will delight in its mosaic floors and daydream while staring at the cupolas and vaulted roofs. The memories will live on.



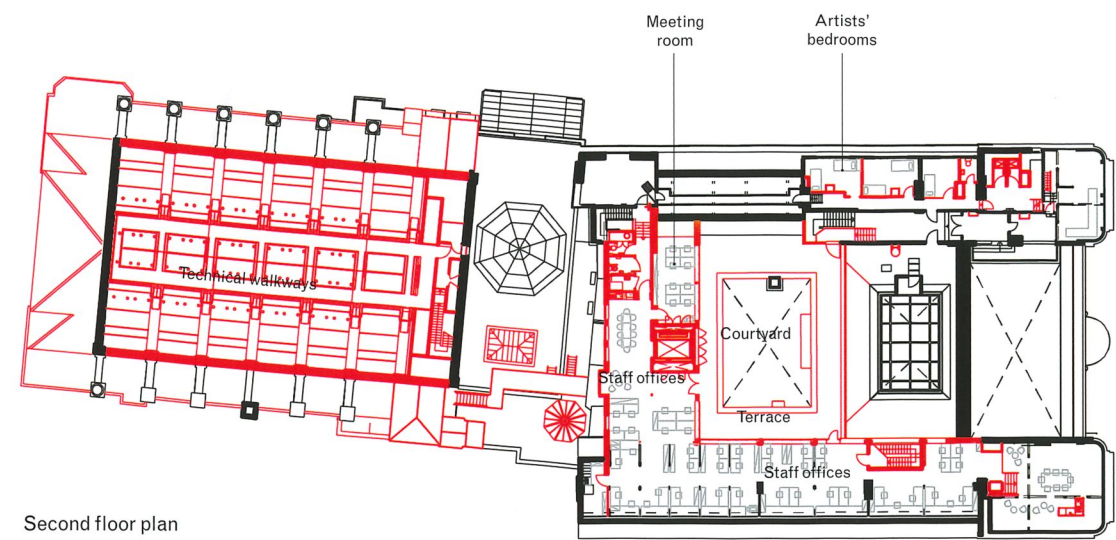
ALEX BRENNER



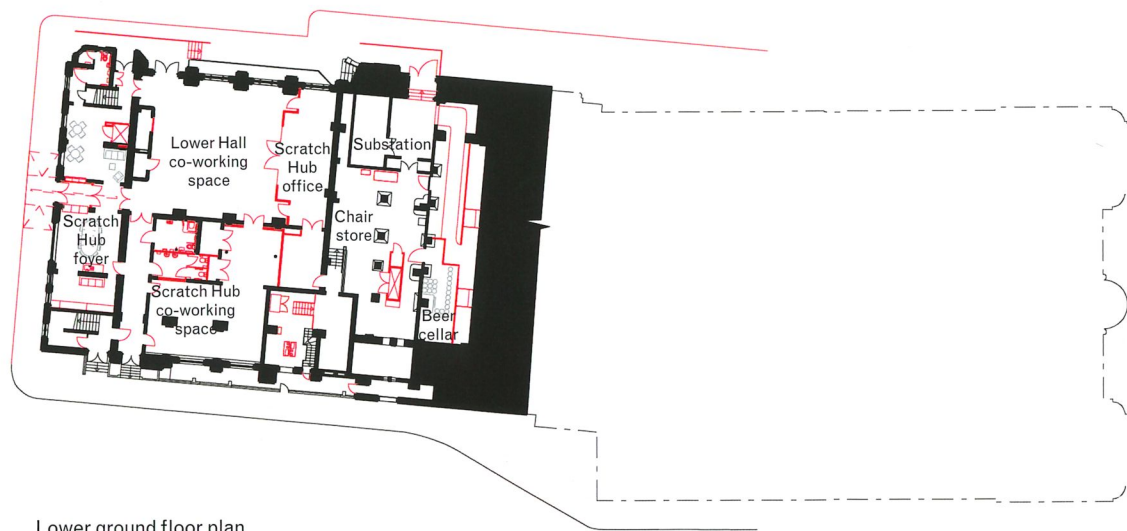


Ground floor plan

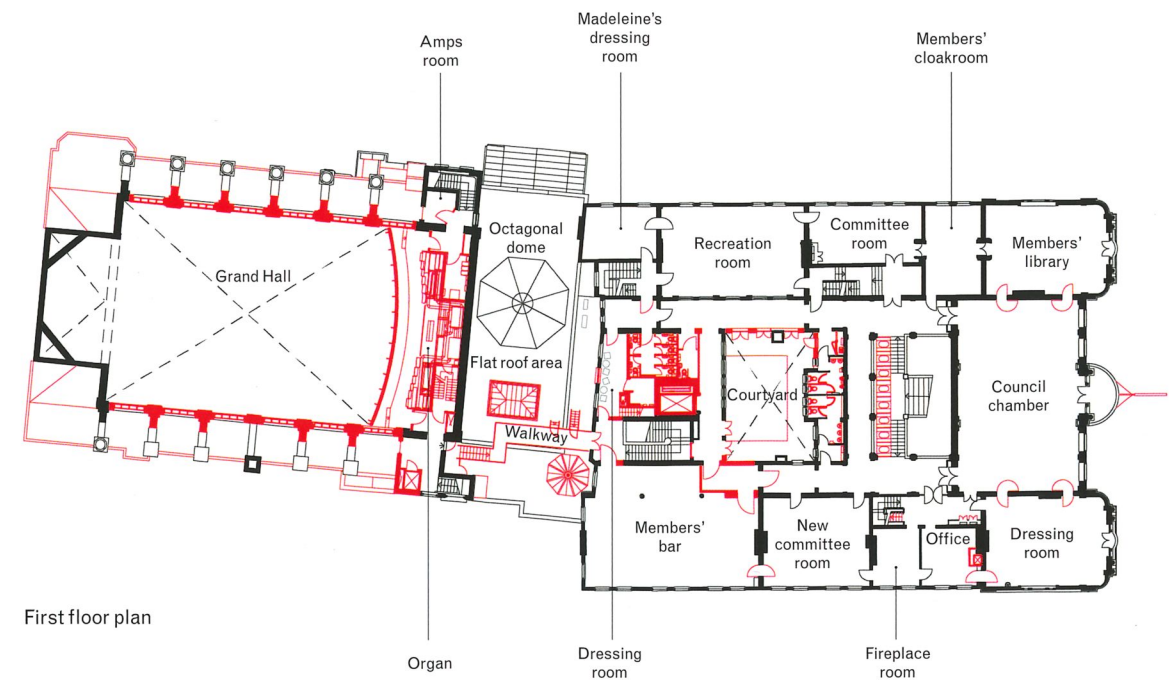
Store



Second floor plan

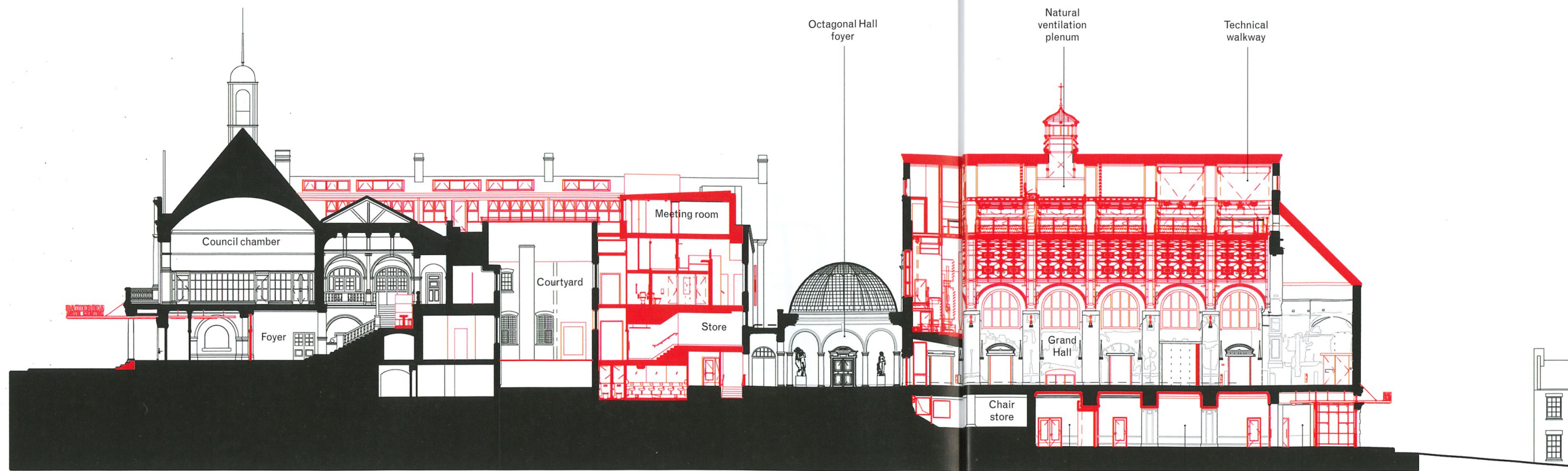


Lower ground floor plan



First floor plan





Section A-A

### Project data

**Start on site** Main project: March 2009 and in multiple phases till August 2016; Grand Hall rebuild: December 2016

**Completion** Main project: August 2016; Grand Hall rebuild: July 2018

**Gross internal floor area** Municipal building: 3,229m<sup>2</sup>; Grand Hall building: 2,396m<sup>2</sup>

**Construction cost** Main project: £8.2 million; Grand Hall rebuild: £11 million

**Construction cost per m<sup>2</sup>** Main project: £2,539; Grand Hall rebuild: £4,590

**Architect** Haworth Tompkins

**Structural engineers** Price & Myers 2006-2011; Heyne Tillett Steel 2012-2018

**Acoustic consultants** SoundSpaceDesign, Gillieron Scott Acoustic Design

**Theatre consultants** Charcoalblue; TheatrePlan (Grand Hall rebuild)

**Contract administrator** TGA Building Consultancy (Grand Hall rebuild)

**Signage and Grand Hall bar artwork** Jake Tilson

**Services engineers** Skelly & Couch; XCO2

**Quantity surveyor** Bristow Johnson

**Project manager** BAC in-house

**Principal designer** Haworth Tompkins

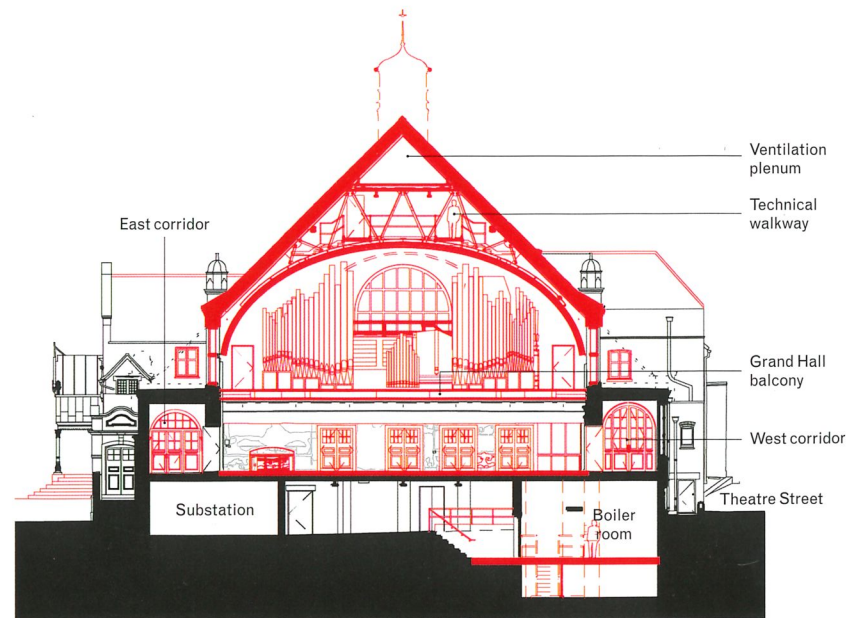
**CDM adviser** PFB Construction Management Services

**Approved building inspector** Main project: Approved Inspector Services; Grand Hall rebuild: Wandsworth Council

**Main contractors** Main project (phased): 8Build, Ashe, Gilbert Ash; Grand Hall rebuild: 8Build

**CAD software used** Bentley MicroStation, SketchUp, Autodesk Revit (for structure only)

**Annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions** 35kg/m<sup>2</sup> (estimated)



Section B-B



Section C-C

### Engineer's view

I saw the fire on the news when I was at work and went straight there to see it for myself. The roof was gone, and the intense heat was causing the brickwork gable walls to visibly lean outwards. We agreed that once the worst of the fire was extinguished, the walls would correct themselves, so could be saved. Brickwork and mortar testing would subsequently confirm the remaining structure could be reused.

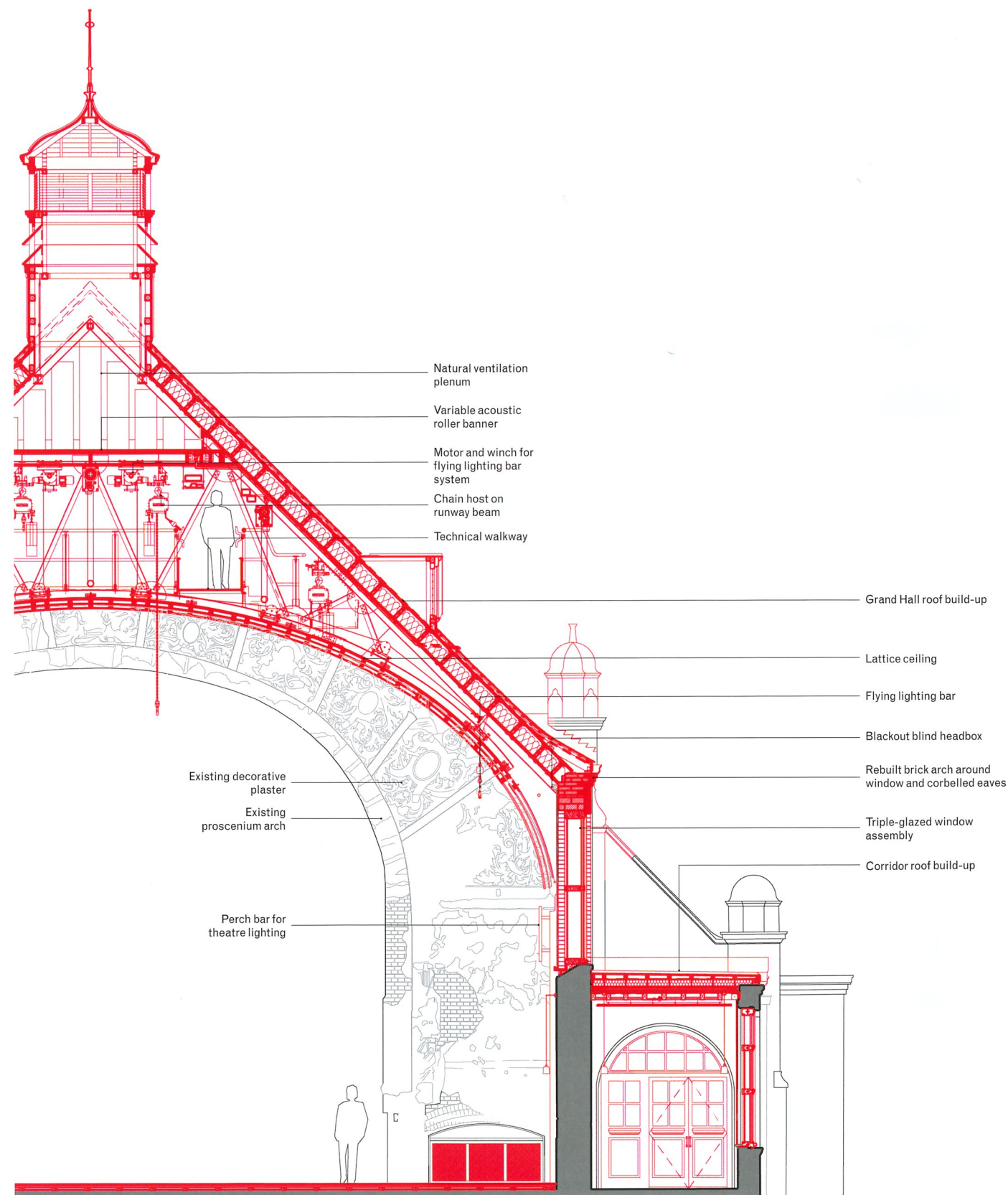
We estimated the wind speed that would cause the gable walls to lose stability, and designed temporary steel frames to laterally restrain them. Propping was also applied to some other precarious-looking walls and below the Grand Hall slab, which was supporting a large amount of rubble from the roof.

The original roof trusses had curved lower chords and deep, plated haunches which were built into brickwork buttresses. The buttresses themselves are two storeys high and incorporate brickwork arches over the hall's side corridors. The original thrust imposed on the buttresses from the roof could not be justified to modern codes.

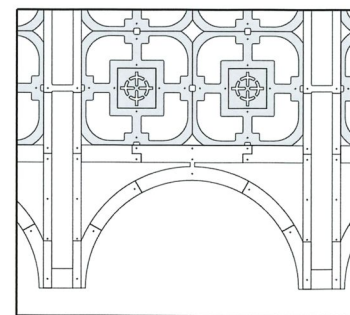
The proposed design required a significant increase in roof build-up and weight for acoustics and modern theatre rigging, with a subsequent decrease in depth and stiffness of the truss haunches. Elastomeric bearing pads were used to limit the thrust on the buttresses. These were monitored during construction and locked in place once 50 per cent of the roof build-up was installed. This ensured the thrust on the buttresses would not exceed the existing case while minimising live-load deflections. No strengthening was required to the original structure.

*Tom Watson, director, Heyne Tillett Steel*

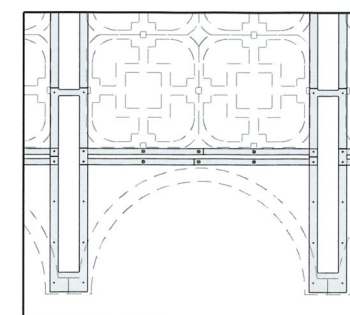




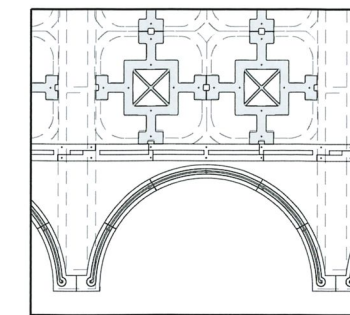
Grand Hall detail section



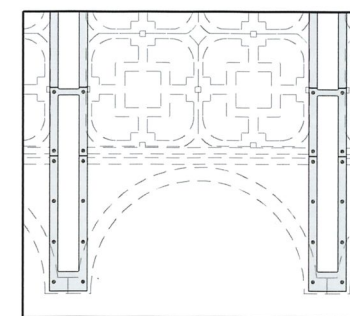
RCP layer 1 (top)



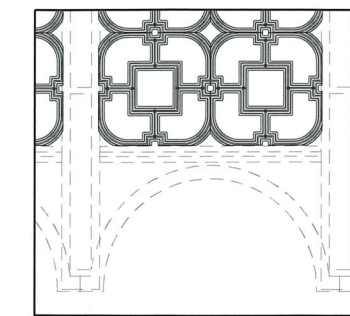
RCP layer 4



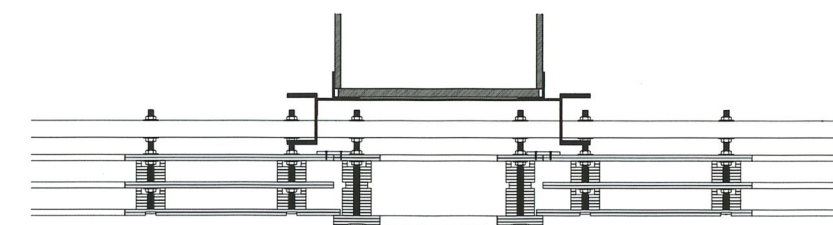
RCP layer 2



RCP layer 5 (bottom)



RCP layer 3 (bottom)



Detail section



### Working detail

The new ceiling is based on the elliptical profile and pattern of the original, with the widths of the original plaster moldings approximated from photographs as no original drawings of the ceiling were found. But it is constructed as a lattice, open to the roof void above and acoustically transparent.

This enables rigging and lighting through the lattice in a vastly increased number of locations, accessed from a dedicated technical walkways grid integrated in the roofspace above. Retractable drapes can be deployed out of sight above the ceiling

to vary the hall acoustic to suit a range of events such as spoken word, drama, gigs and orchestral recitals.

A stack effect natural ventilation system draws warm air through the lattice and exhausts through the roof turret via an attenuated plenum below the roof apex. Similarly, an aspirating smoke-detection system is concealed in the roof space.

The relief surface of the original plaster mouldings resonates in the new lattice design. Different elements of the relief pattern are offset across three plywood layers, spaced apart, with routed grooves

in the face layer expressing finer detail. Each layer is made of 18mm-thick birch-faced plywood, cut to shape using CNC technology and vacuum-pressed into curved panels. The plywood is finished with a woodstain that shares the same hue as the natural tones of the scarred plaster walls. Decorative brass bolt fixings secure the panels to the steel roof structure above. The lattice comprises six bays formed of 18 fretwork panels spaced apart by arched ladder segments, with six arched window heads along each long side.

*Steve Tompkins, director, Haworth Tompkins*



## Architect's view

In 2006, artistic director David Jubb invited us to help expand the creative and civic capacity of Battersea Art Centre, an important incubator of theatre and performance work.

Our shared vision was to open up and reframe the whole of the organisation's home in the former Battersea Town Hall – grand municipal rooms, attics, corridors, storerooms, lightwells, rooftops and staircases – as a loose fit, technically networked jigsaw of multi-use spaces. We adopted the centre's improvisational 'scratch' methodology to test physical changes over a three-year initial process of consultation, debate and feedback from audiences, local residents, conservation groups, statutory officers, artists and producers.

To test ideas, we worked directly with artists, production crews and contractors on a series of discrete small works contracts, developing consensus and refining the brief as a performative process before embarking on a more comprehensive programme of works, done in several phases with a main contractor over the following six years while the building remained open. Improvisational projects by artists and production designers will continue to evolve the building.

In 2015, as the project neared completion, a fire destroyed the roof of the Grand Hall. In line with the underpinning narrative of the whole project, rather than replicate a lost interior we chose to leave the space essentially 'as found' but with far greater technical capacity and creative possibility.

Working alongside Battersea Arts Centre for 12 years has taught us to listen harder, to care less about sole authorship or frozen architectural perfection and more about open communication, creative risk-taking and social engagement.

*Steve Tompkins, director, Haworth Tompkins*



PHILIP VILE

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## Client's view

When we began to explore the potential to develop our building through a conventional architectural process, I quickly got scared. The process was to dream up ideas through consultation, and then commit, design and build them. But what if those ideas were horribly wrong?!

Then I met Steve Tompkins and the team from Haworth Tompkins. We made an instant connection between the practice's improvised approach to the development of theatre spaces and Battersea Arts Centre's 'scratch' process, which invites people to feed back on new ideas. We committed to

making architectural discoveries through practical experimentation, gradually making both the building and the organisation more open, porous, permissive and playful.

Haworth Tompkins did not just offer architectural 'solutions'; they became part of our programming team, helping us to think about the future for Battersea Arts Centre. In turn, our community of staff, artists and local residents became part of the design team.

Back in 2005, it would, I think, have been impossible to imagine what we now have in 2018 because the organisation has changed in tandem with the capital project. We now

have children's play spaces, artist bedrooms, a promenade performance environment, an open-air theatre, a garden for our local community (arriving next spring), a hub for social entrepreneurs and so on.

Alongside all this physical change, our organisation is transformed too. Even our core purpose has evolved 'to inspire people to take creative risks to shape the future'. We owe a debt of gratitude to an architectural practice that doesn't just do design, it also does cultural change.

*David Jubb, artistic director and chief executive, Battersea Arts Centre*