

# FROM THE ASHES

We take an in-depth look at the Battersea Arts Centre, this year's overall winner in the New London Awards, for its Haworth Tompkins-designed dramatic rebirth from the low point of a major fire

Architect: **Haworth Tompkins**  
Structural engineer: **Heyne Tillett Steel**  
Environment and services engineer: **Skelly & Couch**  
Artist: **Jake Tilson**



## THE ARCHITECT'S ACCOUNT

**Martin Lydon**

Associate, Haworth Tompkins

We have been collaborating with Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) since 2006. Beginning with a modest role in advising ways to theatrically transform the building for Punchdrunk's immersive *Masque of the Red Death* show, we then envisioned a process with BAC called 'Fuzzy Logic' that would transform the entire building into a vivid, adaptive performance environment and a welcoming centre of community life.

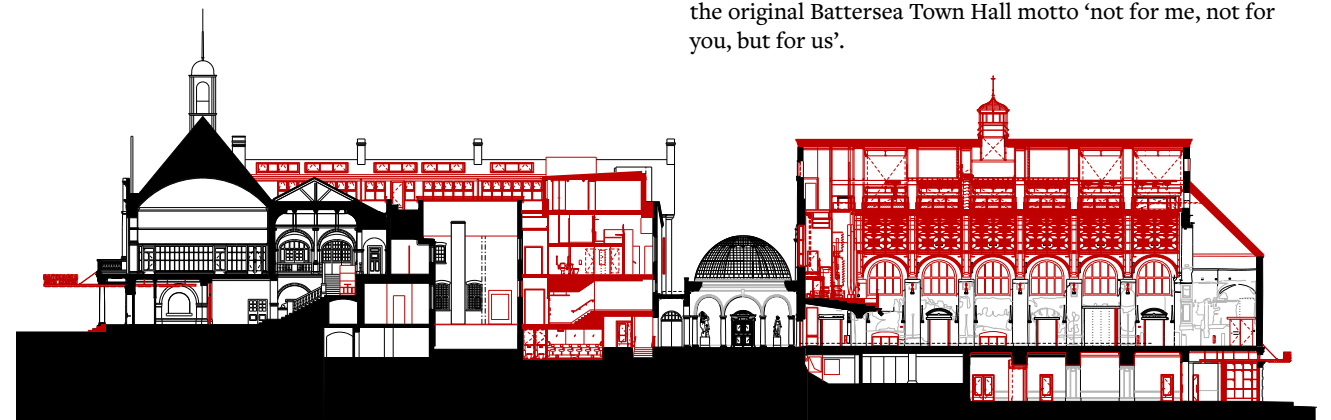
Instead of a following a fixed masterplan for change, requiring years of design and fundraising before anything could happen, our early building projects were quick, playful and experimental—carpeted stair chairs, bedrooms for artists, a play space for children, scraping back layers of black paint in the council chamber to reveal the memories of its town hall past. Known as 'Scratch' projects, these seeded new possibilities for the future and sparked a renewed sense of purpose for the Grade II\*-listed town hall. Budgets were tight, so we had to be tactical about what we should design in detail and what we should leave to be decided by makers and users. Construction was seen as part of the creative process, something to be celebrated within the daily life of the building, not something to seal away from public view. We shaped our design proposals using card models and whiteboard scribbles in conversation with artists, producers and audiences. Visitors could feel that the building was alive and see the changes taking place, both physically to the building and in terms of BAC's own evolving mission to become a truly inclusive cultural organisation welcoming the creative spirit in everyone.

Phases of work gradually grew in scale, requiring design rigour and careful heritage analysis. We opened up the central courtyard and flanking corridors to their original plan form and stitched in new white glazed brick facades to form an intimate outdoor performance space at the heart of the building, framed with a new rooftop terrace, staff office accommodation and bedrooms for visiting artists in the existing attics. Performances can now take place in spaces all over the building supported by 'plug and play' sound and lighting infrastructure and new workshop and dressing room spaces.

Then, in March 2015 we watched in horror as the flames licked up the roof of the BAC's Grand Hall. In the weeks that followed, we met with building insurers, salvage experts, temporary roof scaffolders and most importantly, a community mourning the loss of a loved space. Our responsibility was to bring this space back to life. Struck by the raw beauty of the masonry shell that survived the fire, we have conserved the scarred wall surfaces 'as-found' to retain their character and a sense of history. We have reconstructed the roof envelope to support a new plywood lattice ceiling, inspired by the pattern of the original decorative fibrous plaster barrel vault lost in the fire. This maintains the original feel of the Grand Hall, but brings a new aesthetic and capability to the space. Air is drawn through the lattice and out through the reconstructed turret naturally using the stack ventilation effect, theatre rigging systems are coordinated with the lattice apertures and acoustic banners are concealed above to suit a range of events such as spoken word, drama, festivals, weddings, gigs and orchestral recitals.

## 'Today, BAC is a resilient 21st century arts organisation, rooted in its community'

Today, BAC is a resilient 21st century arts organisation, rooted in its community. COVID-19 is testing this resilience to the core. Cultural buildings are fundamentally centred around people and their activities, which bring significance, value and a collection of memories that endure beyond physical bricks and mortar, as witnessed by the Grand Hall. The past months have seen a shuttered building and difficult decisions for BAC as an organisation. Flickerings of activity are taking hold once more through livestream online events and socially distanced performances in the open-air courtyard. Our latest project, turning Town Hall Road into a shared community garden, launched in the summer and is already proving popular with local residents. We hope that BAC's resourceful can-do spirit and powers of creativity will ensure that its work endures to shape our collective future and remain a place true to the original Battersea Town Hall motto 'not for me, not for you, but for us'.



Long section — the architects conserved the raw beauty of the masonry shell that survived the fire



Assessing the ruins — the aftermath of the Grand Hall Fire

**THE STRUCTURAL ENGINEER'S ACCOUNT****Ella Warren**

Project engineer, Heyne Tillet Steel

The Grade II\*-listed Battersea Arts Centre has undergone a rolling series of refurbishments over the past 10 years, with HTS and Haworth Tompkins collaborating since 2012 on the redevelopment and extension of the building, most notably the rebuild of the Grand Hall after the fire.

When the fire broke out in March 2015, HTS attended the site while the building was still ablaze and assisted the fire fighters with assessing the structural integrity of the gable walls. The roof structure over the main performance space was destroyed, collapsing in on itself and dragging in the tops of the supporting buttresses, severely damaging the supporting masonry walls. While an initial loss to the site's architectural heritage, the fire provided a unique opportunity to design a functional and flexible structure in keeping with the character of the listed building.

Early interventions were key to the retention of much of the listed building fabric and design features. The large brickwork gable walls were now freestanding and would not survive in high winds. We designed temporary steel frames, clamping the walls in place to laterally restrain them. Brickwork testing and local repairs enabled the remaining structure to be safely retained. Extensive propping was installed in the basement to support the Grand Hall slab which was carrying large amounts of debris from the roof.

As the largest of the building's performance halls, a number of upgrades were designed for the Grand Hall to create a highly functional and contemporary theatre space. Two demountable side galleries were built using slender steel beams hidden within

the new acoustic floor build up, the balcony was modified to support an organ, and new dressing rooms were installed to the side of the stage. At the heart of the redevelopment, a new adaptable roof was designed to provide a host of technical improvements, such as support for a flexible rigging system, lighting and theatre equipment, attenuators for ventilation and a new walkway and back-of-house requirements, all contained within the original envelope of the of the roof void.

The new structure consisted of six new steel trusses spanning 17.5m on to the original buttresses. Rebuilding the roof posed a number of structural challenges, including the increased loading requirements, the reduced depth due to the new acoustic and thermal insulation, and the reuse of the original masonry buttresses.

The original trusses had curved lower chords and plated haunches which were built into brickwork buttresses. These are two storeys high and incorporate brickwork arches over the hall's side corridors. During design development it was established that the thrust imposed from the new roof, which pushed out onto the buttress, could not be justified for modern codes. To overcome this, elastomeric bearing pads, typically used on bridges, allowed one of the truss supports to slide sideways. This movement was monitored during construction as the roof build up was constructed then locked in place once 50 per cent of the load was installed. Any further thrust from the remaining roof build up and imposed load could then be justified, avoiding the need to strengthen the original buttresses and allowing the original fabric to be retained.

To complete the new performance space, a lightweight ply timber lattice ceiling was hung from the underside of the truss on a slender steel grid, allowing glimpses of the new truss and technical gallery from below.



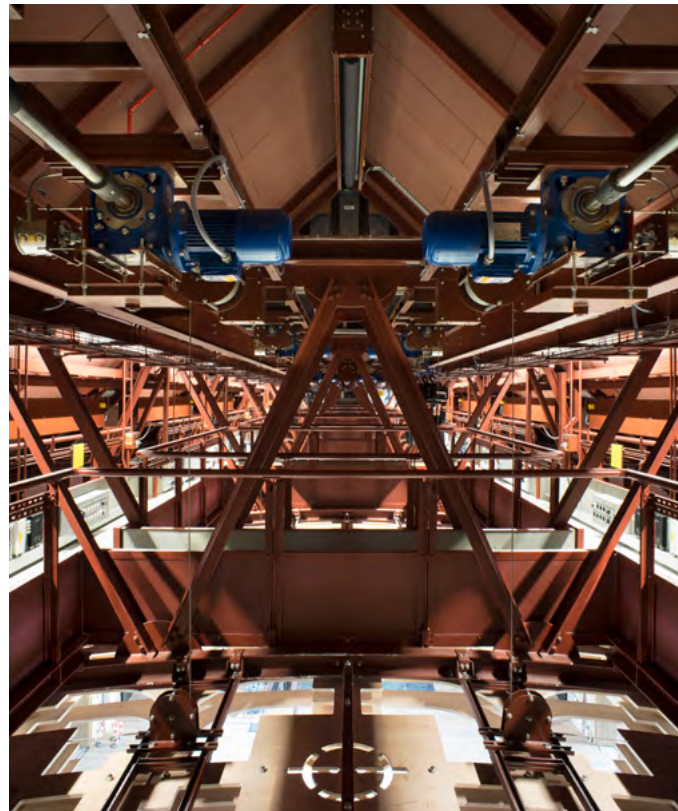
Facing the community — Battersea Arts Centre's front exterior



Playing a new tune — BAC's Grand Hall showing its restored organ



BAC's courtyard and offices



Plant life — the Grand Hall technical gallery



### THE ENVIRONMENT AND SERVICES ENGINEER'S ACCOUNT

**Julian Cottrill**

Associate, Skelly & Couch

Battersea Arts Centre holds a special significance for Skelly & Couch. Since our practice was founded in 2007, we have had a strong working relationship with the iconic arts hub and been involved in multiple phases throughout the lifetime of the building refurbishment.

For more than 120 years, Battersea Town Hall has played a major role in the community, both as a municipal centre and as a showcase for cutting-edge performances by radical artists. So it is no surprise that during that time services, and the building fabric itself, have been repeatedly cut, altered and added to.

The challenge of the pre-fire phased refurbishment was one of consolidating the existing services of varying age and condition (the initial electrical survey flagged up a few concerns, to put it mildly); simplifying a mishmash of utility and water supplies; and providing flexible, usable spaces with as little environmental impact as possible. Untangling a mass of old 'pyro' cables, lead water pipes, mismatched heating circuits and numerous unidentified redundant services embedded in concrete was a continuing theme throughout.

Not afraid of trying new things, and in line with BAC's pioneering 'Scratch' process, our starting point was always 'what have we got, what can we keep, and what do we need to make it work?'. Going back to first principles, we looked at the potential conditions in each space, either with minimal or no modification, or with fabric upgrades for thermal and acoustic purposes, and in collaboration with the client, estimated how comfortable audiences would be. A key theme in our discussions was avoiding the installation of excessive plant to help reduce energy use, which involved assessing whether visitors could be encouraged to wear extra layers or be offered blankets.

Once the brief had been set, the task of fitting the required plant within the confines of the existing (Grade II\*) listed building fabric was carried out in close collaboration with Haworth Tompkins, and the success of the strategy can be seen in the stunning architecture.

In March 2015, halfway through the second phase of refurbishment, it was a great shock to hear that a fire in the roof of the Grand Hall, previously updated in phase one, had burned it to a shell. This terrible event brought home the critical importance of fire safety.

Construction on hold, an opportunity now arose to rebuild and improve the Grand Hall to provide the flexibility and infrastructure for the magnificent performance space the arts centre so greatly deserved.

The project is a shining example of what can be done with existing, listed buildings through the use of thoughtful and justified intervention, creating a collection of incredible, flexible spaces meeting users' requirements and achieving the highest environmental performance.



Back to work — a courtyard performance by Little Bulb Theatre



Spirit of the building — the Grand Hall bar cum large art installation

**THE ARTIST'S ACCOUNT****Jake Tilson**

How did I find myself at Battersea Arts Centre in 2015 ... 'like a resident coalminer in the weeks after the fire, salvaging thousands of precious pieces of Grand Hall history'? (David Jubb, artistic director and chief executive, BAC, 2004–2019).

I first went to Battersea Arts Centre as a student in the 1970s. I lived nearby, and it soon became one of many buildings on my personal map of London. So, in 2011 when recommended by Steve Tompkins to work there on a scratch signage project I already felt at home.

My preferred approach to design is hands-on and non-verbal, which requires a great deal of trust both ways, rather like being in an improvisational jazz group, where you all know the underlying tune and respect your colleagues. It's creative trust. Occasionally when you work with an organisation there's a real fit, which I felt with BAC immediately. This synergy means that BAC and HTA are part of a small handful of clients to have made complete use of my skill set as both an artist and a designer.

Over the eight years from 2011 I worked on a wide array of projects and development ideas which included complete re-branding, a mobile box office, TV title sequences, typeface design, photographic resources, installation art, books and narrative place naming.

Rather than apply a standardised signage system throughout I chose to treat the signs as extensions of the varying building styles. The door signs, for example, I aimed to be almost invisible, merging with the various architectures, as if extending a narrative from the building's past.

It's dangerous to fall in love with a city, building or organisation: they tend to shift and change through gentrification, neglect or worse — by fire. So in March 2015 when I saw on Twitter that Battersea Arts Centre was ablaze, like everyone else involved I felt compelled to go straight there and see if I could help. Part of my practice as an artist involves urban foraging for objects and images from which I make narrative collages, books and sculpture, all aimed at creating a sense of place. My automatic response to the fire was to offer my art foraging expertise amid the ruins — without a brief in mind beyond the need to capture the moment.

I was allowed access fairly early on, when it was no longer a potential crime scene but before structural supports were put up. Once completely safe I made regular visits during the spring and summer. I picked my way through the wreckage, armed with a small spade and a camera encased in cling film for protection against the fine ash.

The grand hall was now open to the sky — full of twisted steel, burnt wood, cracked roof tiles and ash compacted by the rain. To help me explore this new space I took thousands of photographs, started digging up objects from the deep piles of ash and debris, made video and audio recordings, all with no real goal in mind apart from searching for objects that seemed potent. The intensity of the fire had aged everything — it felt like archaeology. I found myself drawn to objects that had a human connection such as tools, lighting gear, microphones or music stands.

The adjoining corridor to the hall resembled a scene from a science fiction film — large empty pods lay dotted on the blue mosaic floors like giant washed up shark or ray egg-cases found on beaches. They turned out to be globe ceiling lights morphed beyond recognition by the intensity of the fire. I photographed the collected items on site, and measured, wrapped and put them into storage, not really knowing what they might be used for — I just didn't want to lose them.

To help raise awareness and money for the Phoenix Fund I made a large photo book called *The Lavender Hill Phoenix*, which documented the various spaces and what I'd dug up.

In the meantime, the objects were labelled 'Jake's Stuff' and placed in storage for the next three years in various rooms around the building while we tried to think of a suitable place to display them. Occasionally I visited the storage areas to weed out materials such as scaffold poles, ladders and extra-large burnt timber. Eventually the bar of the grand hall emerged as a perfect location to display what was becoming a large art installation.

As with a lot of projects at Battersea the Grand Hall Bar became collaborative, working alongside Haworth Tompkins and BAC to realise the final installation. Images from the book are used as 70 backlit panels, in front of which the objects are placed. The final location seems apt, with the work becoming a semi-decorative display with a utilitarian edge placed behind the bar, with the lower shelves used for bottles. There are no public artworks in the building, so I feel this fits in perfectly. ●

Fred Howarth; Haworth Tompkins; Morley von Sternberg; Philip Vile; Alex Brenner

The Lavender Hill Phoenix —  
Tilson's fundraiser  
photo book

