



View down The Cut showing the 1818 Old Vic theatre next door.



PROJECT TEAM Client National Theatre, Architect Haworth Tompkins, Structural engineer Price & Myers, Services engineer Max Fordham, Acoustic engineer Paul Gillieron Acoustic Design, Theatre consultant Charcoalblue, Access consultant All Clear Designs, QS Davis Langdon, Contractor Rise Contracts

Practice makes perfect

Painstaking refurbishment by Haworth Tompkins of a 1950s brutalist masterpiece ensures its future as the National Theatre's secret ideas laboratory, discovers **Ellis Woodman**

Pictures by Philip Vile



The Webber Street elevation showing the boardroom which bridges over the newly created education room.

With Robin Hood Gardens, Leicester University Engineering Department and Newport High School all under threat – not to mention Pimlico School, which has now been substantially reduced to rubble – these are clearly dangerous times for Britain's post-war architectural legacy. The years when a building has lost its patina of modernity but has yet to be recognised as part of our cultural heritage inevitably place it in a position of vulnerability.

Yet as Margaret Hodge's recent comments about concrete monstrosities attest, the perceived expendability of the monuments of post-war reconstruction is a product of more than mere apathy or a blind belief in progress. No, the zeal with which a whole era of architectural achievement is being consigned to the wrecking ball borders on the ideological.

Damned as embodiments of dreams we no longer believe in, the real offence of these buildings is perhaps the accusing finger they point at our present situation. The fall from the ambitions of half a century ago to the current glut of rainscreen-clad shoeboxes, fit-for-nothing schools and underfunded infrastructure represents an embarrassment no one wants to be reminded about.

The restoration of one of the best buildings of that period therefore presents cause for celebration. Lyons Israel & Ellis's annex to London's Old Vic theatre was completed in 1958, the same year as Colin St John Wilson's extension to Cambridge University's architecture department and Stirling & Gowan's Ham Common flats. All three buildings employed in-situ concrete frames interposed with brick infill walls revealed inside and out – a language heavily indebted to Le Corbusier's Maisons Jaoul of two years earlier.

To British eyes, the rugged primitivism presented by these buildings proved a revelation. Reyner Banham anointed them as harbingers of the new brutalism, although few of the architects con-

cerned welcomed having their work so described.

The Old Vic annex, which stands directly across the road from the 1818 theatre, was built to house back-of-house facilities, ranging in scale from costume- and wig-making to set construction and flat-painting, but the period in which the building served these functions was relatively brief. In the early sixties, the company was dissolved and the new National Theatre company was established in its place under the leadership of Laurence Olivier. When the NT moved in 1976 to its new Denys Lasdun-designed home half a kilometre to the north, the Old Vic reverted to life as a repertory theatre, a receiving house rather than an originator of productions.

As the National Theatre building incorporated all the back-of-house facilities its company needed, the Lyons Israel Ellis structure was effectively rendered

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surplus to requirements. However, the NT company retained it, putting it to use as rehearsal space.

Despite its technical shortcomings – principally acoustic and thermal – it was valued by the company, particularly for its detachment from the theatre. It came to be seen as a privileged environment where new work could be developed; a theatrical research centre.

Much of the work conducted in the building is undertaken with the sole aim of cultivating new talent rather than with any expectation that a production will emerge. Nevertheless, an impressive number of plays have begun life here, including such recent NT hits as *War Horse*, *Coram Boy*, ►

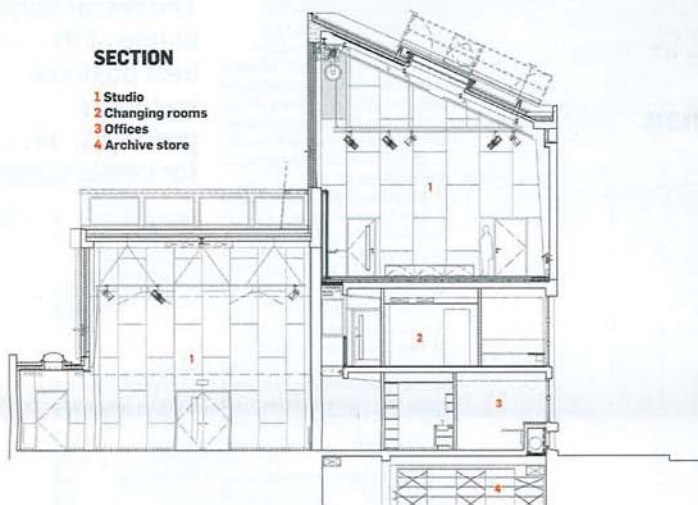
WORKS: HAWORTH TOMPKINS



Elevation to The Cut.

SECTION

- 1 Studio
- 2 Changing rooms
- 3 Offices
- 4 Archive store



A Matter of Life and Death, and His Dark Materials.

Haworth Tompkins' refurbishment of the building has served to consolidate that role while introducing a number of additional functions to support it — education facilities, a publicly accessible archive and rooms for writers.

However, the larger part of the £4.3 million budget was devoted to repairing the building's fabric. The structural frame was in a particularly poor state as a consequence of bad workmanship and poor compaction of the concrete.

A lack of cover over many of the rebars had resulted in widespread spalling. In the past decade, the frame had also been painted. Haworth Tompkins' first impulse was to return it to its naked state, but the condition of the concrete proved so awful as to make this impossible.

The painstaking and costly solution that was therefore adopted was to replace about 50% of the frame's surface area, meticulously matching the original board-marked finish, and to disguise the signs of intervention with a light concrete stain.

The fate of that building invites the thought that, as today we struggle to envisage the architecture of the Greeks in its original polychromy, so in future, anyone seeking out the few remaining relics of new brutalism may be faced with the inverse problem: how to deduce what was meant by the principle of using materials "as found" when all the buildings are mired in an ocean of magnolia gloop.

Back to the NT's building, a key characteristic of its two street facades is their top-heaviness: their upper half is almost entirely

The impulse to return it to its naked state was thwarted by the awful condition of the concrete

solid; their lower, largely glazed. New windows have been installed throughout. The eagle-eyed may spot that these have dispensed with the original design's opening vents, but the visual impact of the change isn't great.

The one really noticeable alteration to the exterior is to be found on the Webber Street elevation. By far the shorter of the street frontages, it is this facade that addresses the theatre. It is split into two contrasting bays, reflect-

ing the fact that the building is really two long blocks placed side by side: the smaller volumes being stacked along The Cut while the back half is one enormous workshop.

The bay that holds the corner accommodates the entrance and is treated in essentially the same manner as the long elevation. However, its more vertical proportion and the presence of a lift tower rising above its parapet invest it with an almost anthropomorphic character, ably communicating its special status. As originally designed, the adjoining bay was a much more volumetric proposition: the workshop's loading dock formed a double-height void at the lower level, while the theatre's boardroom bridged above.

The refurbishment has glazed in the void, creating a large education studio in its place. In the process, something of the building's original dynamism has been sacrificed, but the fact that the loading dock has stood redundant for the past 32 years offers persuasive justification.

Haworth Tompkins estimates that, as it stood before refurbishment, 60% of the building's floor area represented unusable space. Beside the loading dock, one of the principal causes was its extraordinary section.

A 450mm three-storey void extends down the centre of the plan for almost its entire length.



The paint-streaked wall that runs down the length of the slot.



Reception area.

This was introduced to allow theatrical flats to be painted without recourse to laying them down. Mounted on mechanical frames which could be raised and lowered within the void, they could then be worked on from the double-height painting studio that occupies the top of the section.

From both an acoustic and thermal perspective this slot was a major problem. It has therefore been blocked off at second floor level, enabling the painting studio to be transformed into a fully

enclosed rehearsal space. On the lower two storeys, the void remains and its original function can still be gleaned from the fantastic drizzle of paint that has been preserved on the wall running along it.

Along with the converted loading dock and painting studio, a remodelling of the set workshop provides a third large rehearsal space. Nick Hytner, the National Theatre's director, explains that the company has always relished developing work in environments other than custom-designed stud-

dios, so in upgrading the technical performance of the spaces, a primary risk was that something of their found quality would be lost. Haworth Tompkins has struck a fine balance, introducing sprung floors, lighting rigs, heating and ventilation systems and partition walls, while retaining a sense of the rawness of the original fabric and the contingency of the kit that has been fitted within it. Throughout the building, the new work that has been introduced feels very much of a piece with the old.



Rehearsal in progress on the first floor.

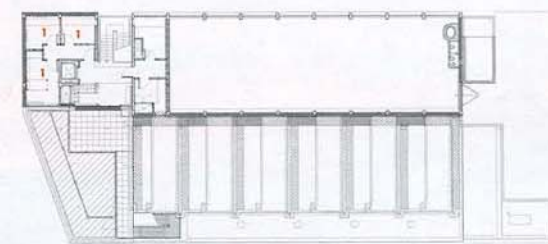
Indeed, wherever possible materials have been salvaged and reused, even to the point of making new furniture from old wall panelling. The approach recalls the emphasis on appropriation that was a hallmark of the new brutalist mind-set.

Haworth Tompkins is now set to design a commercial development on the building's car park, which will be undertaken as a means of providing the National Theatre with a stable revenue stream. Having completed the

remodelling of the Young Vic on the other side of The Cut and a pavement improvement project along its length, the practice's ongoing involvement in this formerly pretty tawdry patch of SE1 is steadily transforming it into one of the most attractive streets in London. The practice has also been commissioned to develop a conservation plan for the Lasdun building. Among its aims is to test the feasibility of Hytner's vision of introducing new openings on the back of the structure. These would

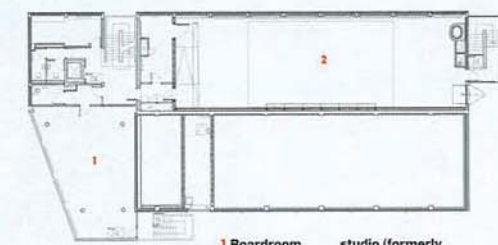
reveal some of the back-of-house spaces — rehearsal rooms included — to public view. The initiative is a key part of the theatre's wider ambition to make its operations more transparent. The incorporation of education and accessible archive facilities within the workshop building represents a first step in that direction. However, this exemplary project also acknowledges that, if it is to prove fruitful, a large part of the creative process will always have to be protected from public scrutiny.

THIRD FLOOR PLAN



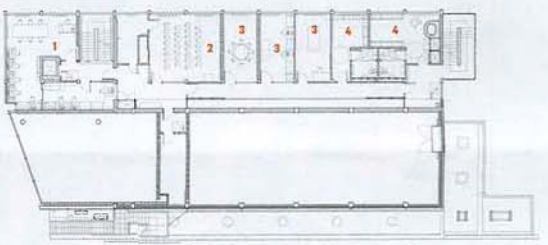
1 Writer's room

SECOND FLOOR PLAN



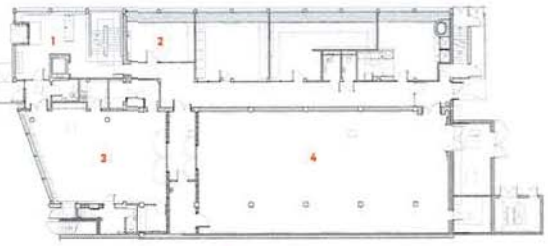
1 Boardroom studio (formerly painting room)
2 Rehearsal

FIRST FLOOR PLAN



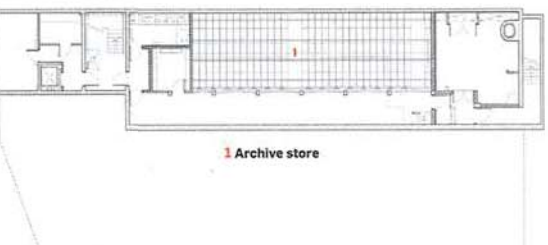
1 Public archive 2 Office
3 Seminar room 4 Changing room

GROUND FLOOR PLAN



1 Reception loading dock
2 Office 4 Rehearsal studio (formerly workshop)
3 Education space (formerly)

BASEMENT PLAN



1 Archive store