

OPEN HOUSE

The Playhouse, sitting right beside (practically 'on') Londonderry's historic city walls at 5-7 Artillery Street, has acquired a certain fame through featuring as one of Northern Ireland's 'star turns' in the 2004 BBC 'Restoration' television series - it won the regional heat. Earlier this year a follow-up 'Restoration' programme revisited it among other featured projects, revealing the remarkable progress made on reviving and renewing it, making it at last fit for purpose. The Playhouse already had – and has – an international reputation for its strong multi-disciplinary, community-led arts and education programme of activities (for example, linking up with the US and, this year, Armenia, in post-conflict 'theatre of witness' work), built up by the dedicated Playhouse team including Director Pauline Ross who founded the organisation and rescued the buildings in the early 1990s.

The two buildings which make up the Playhouse were formerly St Mary's (the lower building on the street) and St Joseph's (the upper) schools attached to the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy, close to Ferryquay Gate. In 1986 they were threatened by a demolition order; however, DoE spot-listing gave them a reprieve and they were subsequently listed (B1). St Joseph's was designed by E.J. Toye who also designed other buildings in the city including the distinguished spire of St Eugene's Catholic Cathedral.

Through determination, vision and perseverance, Ross (with a grant of just £300) and others acquired the dilapidated city-centre buildings, seeing in them a catalyst for change in their community. They proved to be an appropriate site for arts practice and performance space – Artillery Street being the site of one of Derry's first theatres, Talbot's Theatre of 1774. A link with the convent was also continued, a room in the complex providing a home until very recently to the late Sister Aloysius' dedicated icon painting.

However, despite the apt connotations, the buildings were in reality inadequate for the current and projected nature and volume of the work and in need of major refurbishment and improvements. In 2009, after a 15-month project that started on site in October 2007, and some £4.5million of fundraising later – including the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (£1.2 million); the Heritage Lottery Fund (£1.1million), also its champion through the 'Restoration' TV programme; DCAL; ILEX; DETI; IFI; AdaptNI; UGV; NITB; EHS; the Honourable the Irish Society; the Weston Foundation and the Playhouse itself – it has re-opened its doors and the results fully deserve applause. Indeed the new Playhouse has already picked up the Royal Institute of Town Planning's Sustainability and Regeneration Award in March, a first for an arts centre.

London-based Andrzej Blonski Architects won the architectural competition to undertake a reconfiguration, refurbishment ▶

THE TEAM

Client / The Playhouse Derry

Architects / Andrzej Blonski Architects -
now LCE Andrzej Blonski Architects
Project Partner: Andrzej Blonski
Project Architect: Juliet Quintero
Site Representative: Frank Harkin

Structural / Taylor & Boyd

Services Engineer / Waterman Building Services

Quantity Surveyor / Davis Langdon LLP

Main Contractor / JPM Contracts

Photography / Niall McCaughan + Frank Harkin





► and extension of the Playhouse, employing Derry-based architect Frank Harkin to act as project architect on the ground. Clearly, the challenge started with the highly sensitive site: two distinct but adjoining listed buildings within the historic city walls and within Derry's Walled City Conservation Area. However, beyond this, the buildings were of course not originally intended to function as an arts centre, so there were inherent problems with the way the buildings worked.

The challenge was to overcome: a confusion regarding entrances; a lack of a reception/box office area; complicated circulation routes through the building for public and staff; a lack of a 'heart' or central space within the building; the proximity of existing rehearsal/workshop space to dedicated performance areas and sound/vibration transference between dance studio and theatre activities; shortage of

rehearsal/workshop space; shortage of storage space; and lack of disabled access.

Blonski have reconfigured the use of spaces within the existing buildings and have introduced a discreet but significant contemporary new build to the rear of the premises which has solved the major deficiencies and introduced a new gallery space, and a light and airy foyer hub, offices and workshops. Circulation problems have been resolved and the theatre, while still situated in the same place, now provides a variety of stage arrangements and increased seating capacities through the use of flexible retractable rostra.

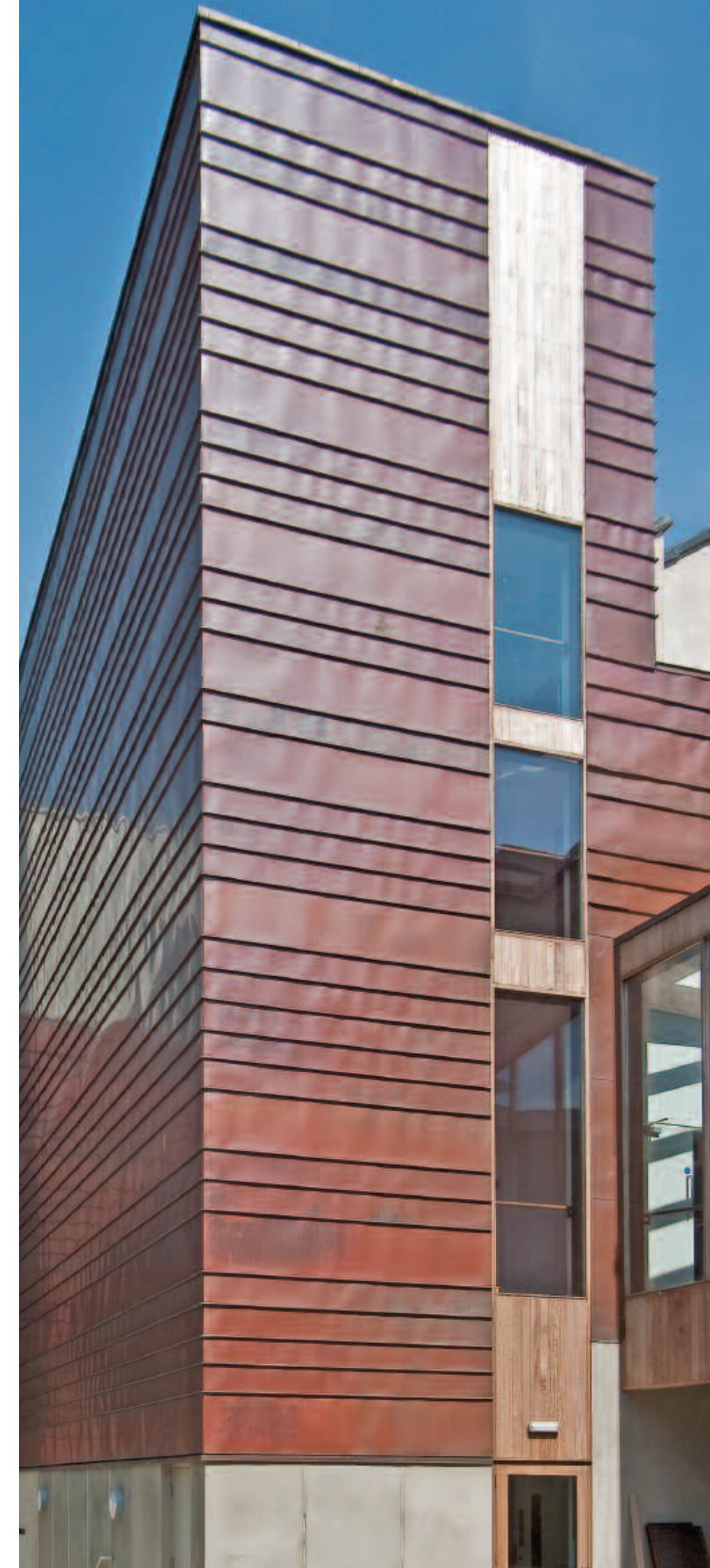
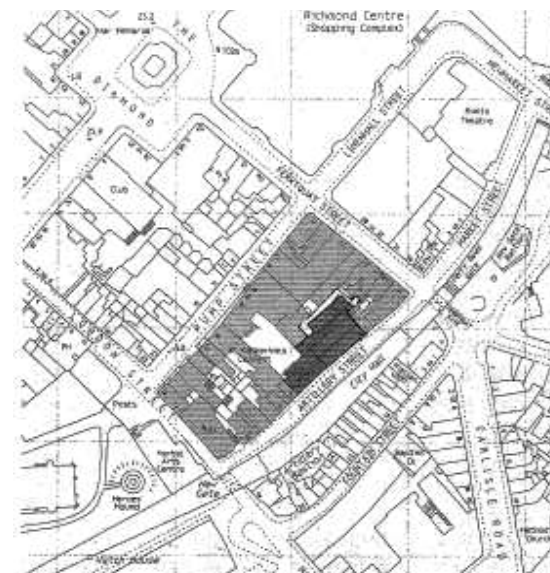
The overall impression of the completed project is of craftsmanship, light, warmth and openness. Strikingly, the existing historic buildings feel revived and renewed, keeping ►

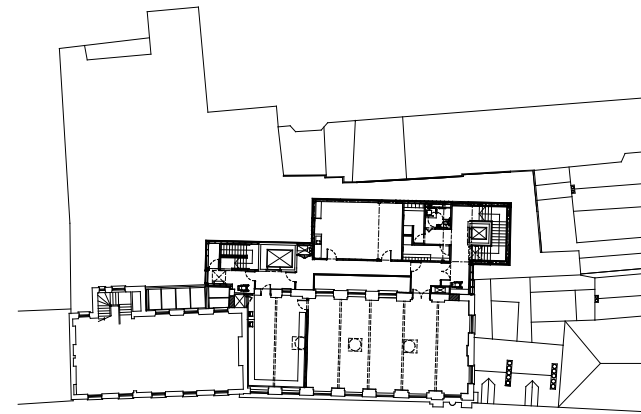


► a patina of age while clearly updated for present requirements, while the new build through a careful choice of materials and colours feels both contemporary and warm. Such a project could so easily have juxtaposed a jarringly stark contrast between old and new, but there is nothing clinical or cold about the new build and the transition is a successful one: each complements the other.

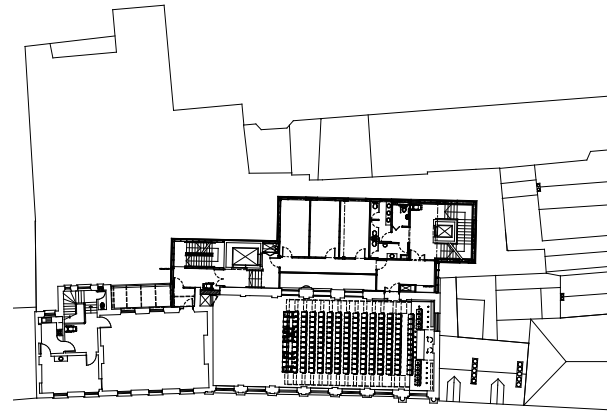
Outside, the façade has been repaired and re-rendered and the buildings re-roofed, with three copper lanterns on the roof of St Joseph's retained and refurbished. The windows have all been repaired and re-installed and highly unusual blind-like shutters with integrated rope-and-pulley mechanisms put back into working order.

The entrance from the street is distinctive, through big old wooden doors to the St Mary's building and up a unique inclined passageway of wooden cobbles (it is believed that the only other wooden cobbles in Ireland are at Trinity College, Dublin) to the main glass doors of the foyer. One side of the maroon-painted passageway is a wall of posters featuring what's on, while on the right-hand-wall is an intriguing newly commissioned piece of integrated architectural artwork: a frieze of 'girli concrete' by architect Ruth Morrow and textile designer Trish Belford. Tactile, colourful textiles woven into utilitarian hard, grey concrete, produce an effect that is innovative, unusual and attractive. The Playhouse is to be commended on taking the opportunity of integrating new contemporary applied art commissions in the programme of capital works, not least because this is an arts space after all, used by practising artists and inspiring new generations of artists, from the visual to the performing. Inside, the stairwell of the extension incorporates new site-specific glass by artist Paula Thompson which draws on old maps and photos of Derry. ►

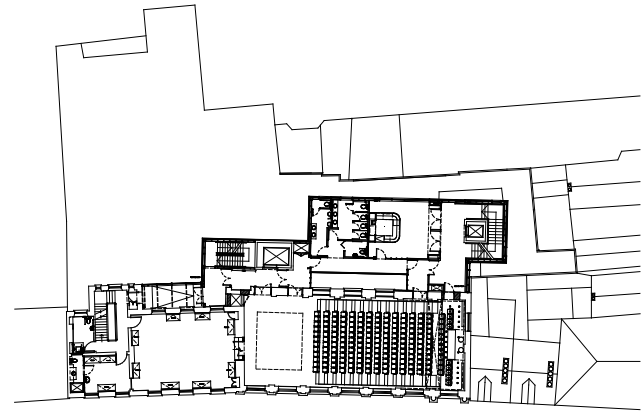




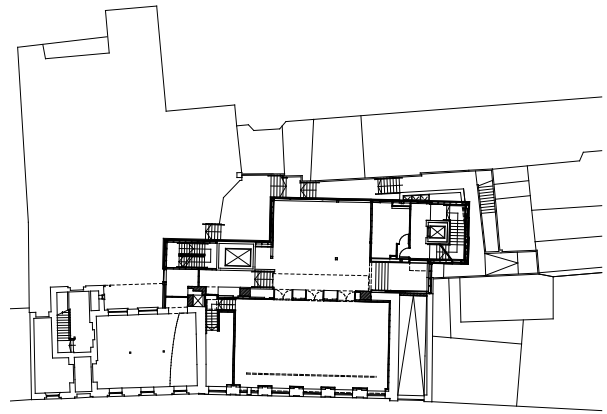
Above / Second floor plan



Above / Mezzanine Level 2



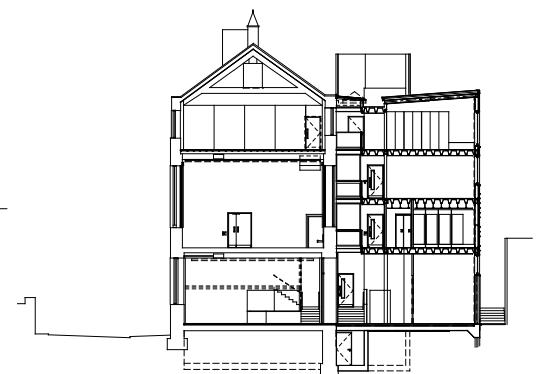
Above / First floor plan



Above / Mezzanine Level 1



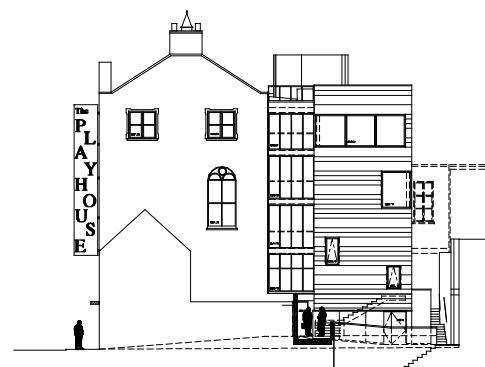
SECTION A



SECTION B



PROPOSED ELEVATION TO ARTILLERY STREET



PROPOSED SIDE GABLE ELEVATION



► The reception area with a small seating area and limestone tiled floor is cleverly bathed in light drawn in by roof skylights. Off it, the new stairwell of the extension winds its way up to the upper levels. Inside, it is denoted by the warm wood of the stairs which re-uses stained salvaged treads and in style slightly echoes in contemporary idiom the character of the original backstairs (to be described below). The exterior of the extension and a link passage across the back of the buildings is meanwhile formed of copper and zinc combined with timbers left unfinished above, with sand cement and block work below.

The light from the windows inside the stairwell is diffused through the use of obscured glass giving the impression of being within a light box. On the mezzanine floor above the reception area, Paula Thompson's glass is allowed to take pride of place.

Off the reception area to the left are four steps leading up to a large multi-purpose flexible space, remarkable for its sense of height and depth. What had been the original exterior back walls of the school are now re-rendered with lime render and form a feature wall for an atrium space, replete with a statue of the Sacred Heart in a niche high up and looking down surveying all, a reminder of the building's history. Behind this wall through original doorways is the Context Gallery, a large and flexible 'white box' arts space for exhibitions, with gallery service accommodation neatly tucked in on a mezzanine up a set of stairs at one end of the room. With an American Oak ►





► floor, it is an adaptable environment, although it almost seems a shame that its five large original bays will inevitably have to be covered up for certain types of show.

Beyond the gallery and into the St Joseph's building a room which has kept its original cast iron columns and original floor (re-sanded) forms a rather special café space. The one drawback is that the windows, while carefully repaired in situ, look over onto the old convent buildings behind which are in a sorry state of disrepair – it is only to be hoped that another phase of development for these buildings will follow before long: the potential is there now that the Playhouse has taken the lead.

Beyond this room is a Victorian-tiled passageway leading to toilets (which retain much original detailing for idiosyncratic effect) and a large back staircase, lit by unusual original windows featuring as sash and casement combination.

At first-floor level is the large 'green room' and a range of dressing room and showering facilities, with sanded floors and bespoke cabinetry in the 'green room'. A high level of craftsmanship is evident in the joinery, with nine tilt tables allowing performers to prepare in comfort.

Directly off the 'green room' (and above the Context Gallery) is the main theatre space, with seating for 192 patrons. Red walls and black backgrounds make this a warm and intimate space for performances, which take place all on a level rather than on a raised stage. New lighting ranks have been installed and the new seating can be pushed to the back of the theatre to open up the room if required.

A glazed balcony runs alongside the perimeter of the theatre, set off well with much use of wood, while a small glazed bar sits off the passageway for interval drinks.

Two more rooms deserve specific mention. On the upper floor of the St Joseph's building, a bright new dance studio maximises its potential. Here an original large classroom has been stripped out leaving tongue-and-groove panelling and a mirrored back wall, with the windows to the front giving excellent views across the city and allowing light to stream in. As if this were not enough for a dancer to enjoy, above is a fine trussed roof which incorporates the building's original ventilation system (although this has been closed as it was a direct route for sound). Beyond the mirrored wall is a useful art room and off the corridor leading to the dance studio a resource room.

Finally, in what was the old science room, the administrative staff of the Playhouse get to enjoy a bright, high-ceilinged open-plan office space. In a room which retains many of its original features, the floor has been strengthened with new timber beams between the joists, to provide what must be one of the most pleasant office spaces in the city.

The regeneration of the Playhouse is an exemplar project about the art of the possible: achieving a successful blend of old and new, of reviving the built heritage and valuing it for the huge cultural asset that it is, while trusting contemporary architects to use their skills and expertise to make buildings work for today's needs. This fine new architectural 'phoenix from the ashes' that is the 21st-century Playhouse will help the organisation achieve its Vision Statement for Culture: 'We strive to make Derry a living Gallery, an urban theatre, owned by the people and renowned on the European and worldwide stage' – they thoroughly deserve to. ●

Paul Harron

SITU: The Playhouse, 5-7 Artillery Street Londonderry, BT48 6RG

ARCHITECT'S ACCOUNT

Work on the Playhouse site began with demolitions in September 2007 and continued for 4 months. It was a frustrating start to the project. A restricted site meant that the only methodology available was to take down the old 1960's extension to the convent and the rear stairs brick by brick, stone by stone using jack hammers. The New Year brought no respite. Rock was expected but what was encountered gave cause for concern. The schist was laid down in layers at an angle of 45degrees and the engineers needed to amend their foundation details to secure the old buildings. Then after an interval of a few weeks while the under buildings were completed the job took off. Site foreman Laurence McManus was focused on only one thing - recovering lost time. And he went at it like a man promised the top prize in the lottery if he finished on schedule.

What we had was in fact two jobs in one - the adaptation and refurbishment of a listed building – in fact two buildings in a terrace – and a modern extension at the rear. The latter all steel frame and concrete with copper cladding and the former all lime plaster and delicate joinery repairs. JPM had an excellent squad of tradesmen - joiners who relished working on the repair of the old windows and timber panelling, plasters who used lime plaster as if they had never used anything else and a particularly talented pair of men who carried out all the repairs to the front façade - cornices, window architraves and mouldings.

At all times Laurence was supported by contracts manager Brendan McNicholl, an autodidact with an extensive knowledge of building techniques, old and new, and a creative instinct for problem solving. Sadly Brendan died suddenly midway through the contract at the early age of 49.



He was badly missed for the rest of the contract but life and the work went on. There were problems of course. But Andrzej Blonski (ably assisted by Juliet Quintero) brought a calm, reasoned approach to each difficulty; and there were many. One of the more complex was the floor between the Dance Studio and the Theatre space where problems of strength and acoustic separation had to be resolved. But they were dealt with and the job kept moving.

Partial possession was granted to The Playhouse in February 2009 and they moved into most of the building. Getting the remainder of the contract finished while the Playhouse settled back in to a much changed building required a malleable approach from everyone - but it was forthcoming on all sides and things are now in full swing.

An essential community resource and an important listed building had been reinvigorated - and the people and the built environment of Derry the better for it.

Frank Harkin, site representative for Andrzej Blonski Architects

