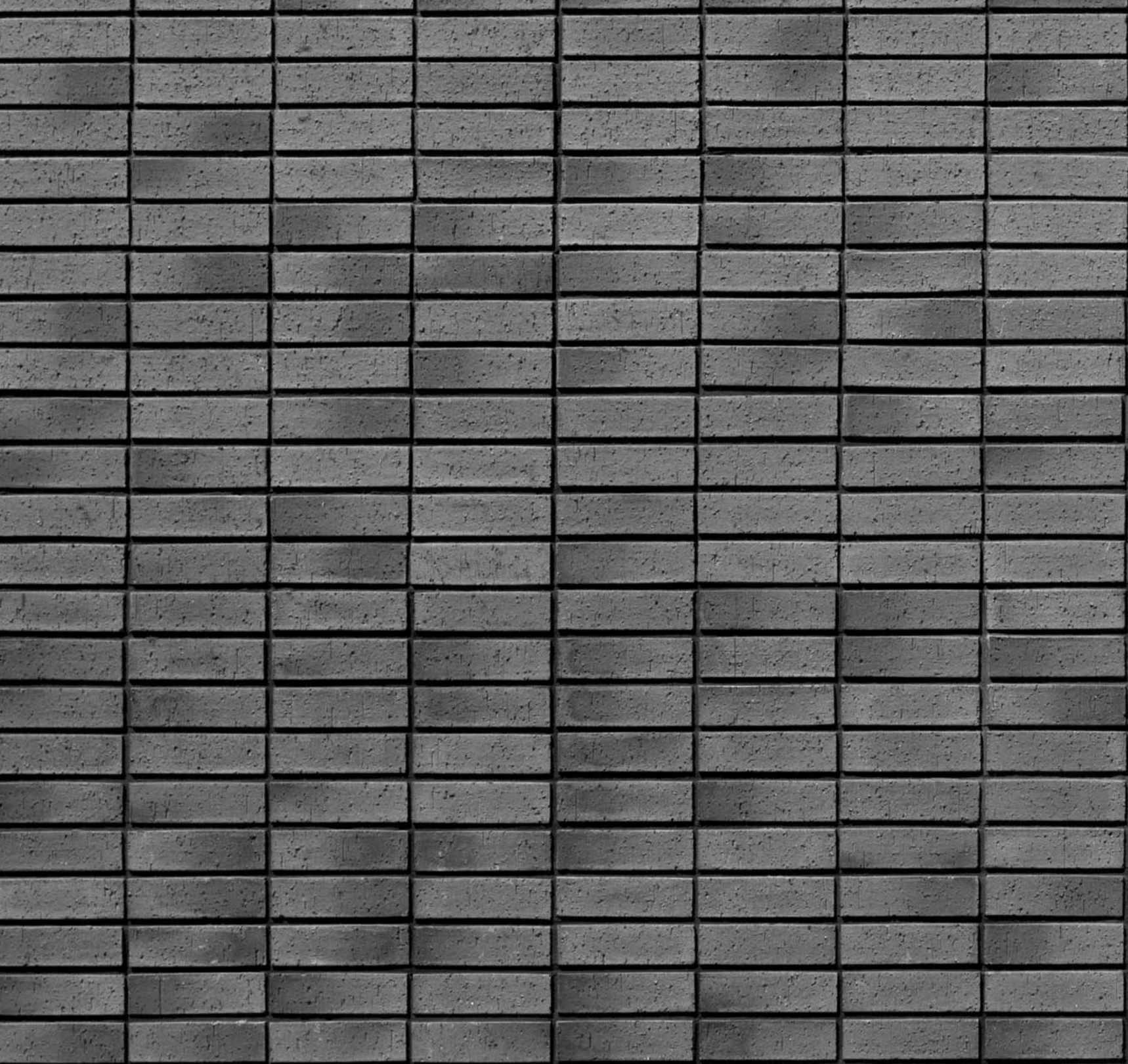
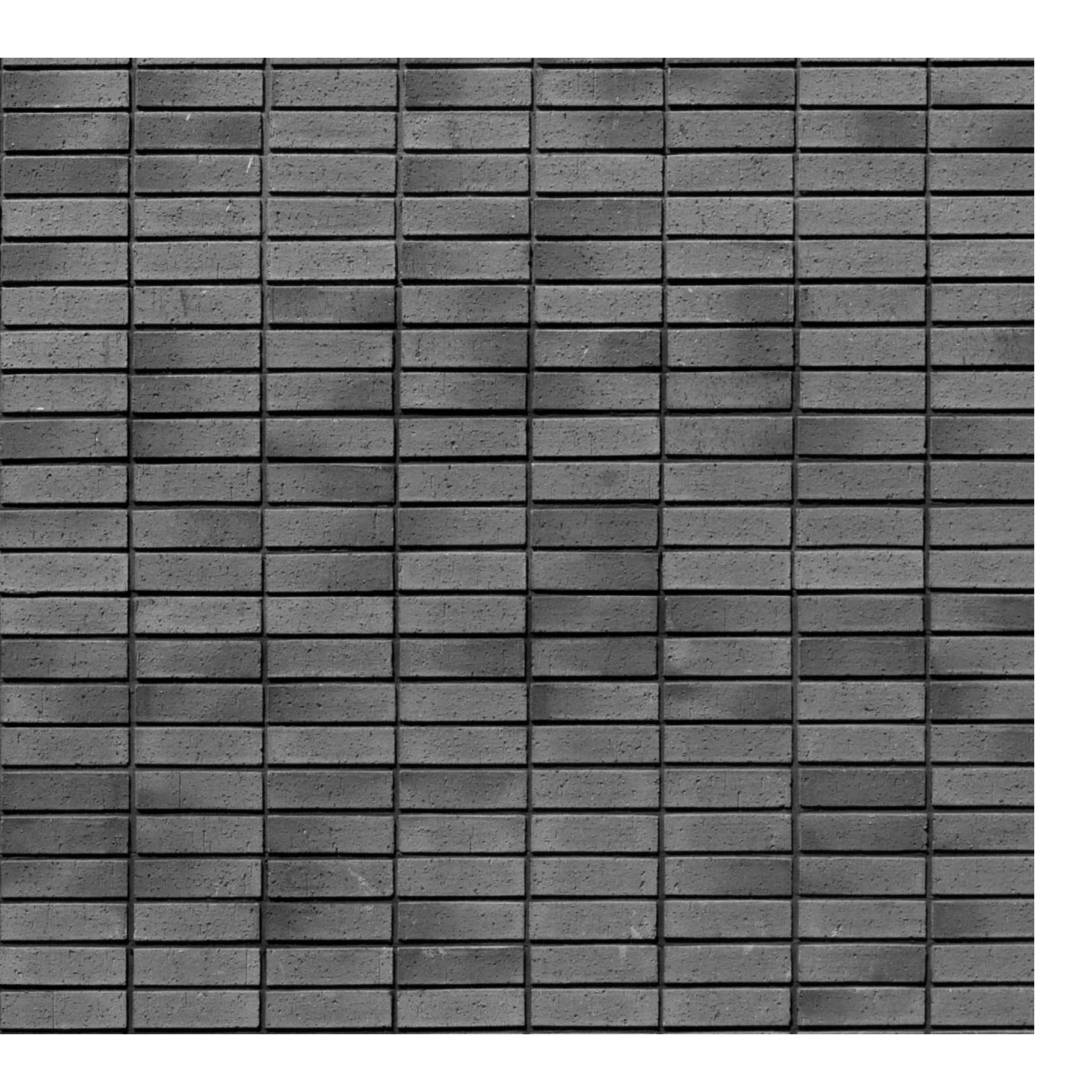


The Bluecoat

LIVERPOOL

Hans van der Heijden Architect





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The Bluecoat
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History

Tim Abrahams

Bluecoat Chambers is the oldest building in Liverpool's city centre and one of those remarkable buildings that stories cling to. It was built as a school for orphans through the largesse of one Bryan Blundell, a master mariner, who settled in Liverpool in 1708 to trade. According to the writer Henry Bourne, 'It was certainly a happy thought that led honest Bryan Blundell to abandon the sea... He was mayor in 1721 and again in 1728. He had stately ships of his own trading with Africa with North Carolina, Jamaica and Nevis as well as other parts of North America and the West Indies. But he never forgot his charity school.'

The triangular relationship between the city, Africa and America means that Blundell, like many Liverpudlians at the time, was involved in the slave trade. This beautiful oasis built in 1717 in the Queen Anne style,

was founded on the profits of slavery in order to save others from poverty. The Bluecoat Chambers simultaneously stands apart and remains entwined with the commercial traffic of the city. As the trade of Liverpool expanded throughout the 19th century, the city surrounded the old school. The school's pupils with their long dark coats belted at the waist, with white neck decoration, would struggle to school through the throng at the heart of the second city of the Empire.

In 1906 the school institution left for the suburbs of Wavertree, and the building was saved again by a wealthy philanthropist. It was bought by William Lever, later Viscount Leverhulme, who founded the soap manufacturer Lever Brothers (now part of Unilever). He built the model worker's settlement, Port Sunlight on the opposite bank of the Mersey. He bought the Isle of Lewis in Scotland and then gave it to its inhabitants. Lever had the intention of turning Bluecoat Chambers into an art gallery but was prevented from doing so by the First World War. Although a progressive employer and advocate of the old-age pension during his term as a Liberal MP, Lever Brothers was using forced labour on their palm plantations in the Belgian Congo. In 1923 he gave the building to a Trust. In 1941 it was hit by one of the 2,315 high-explosive bombs dropped on the city in the May Blitz.

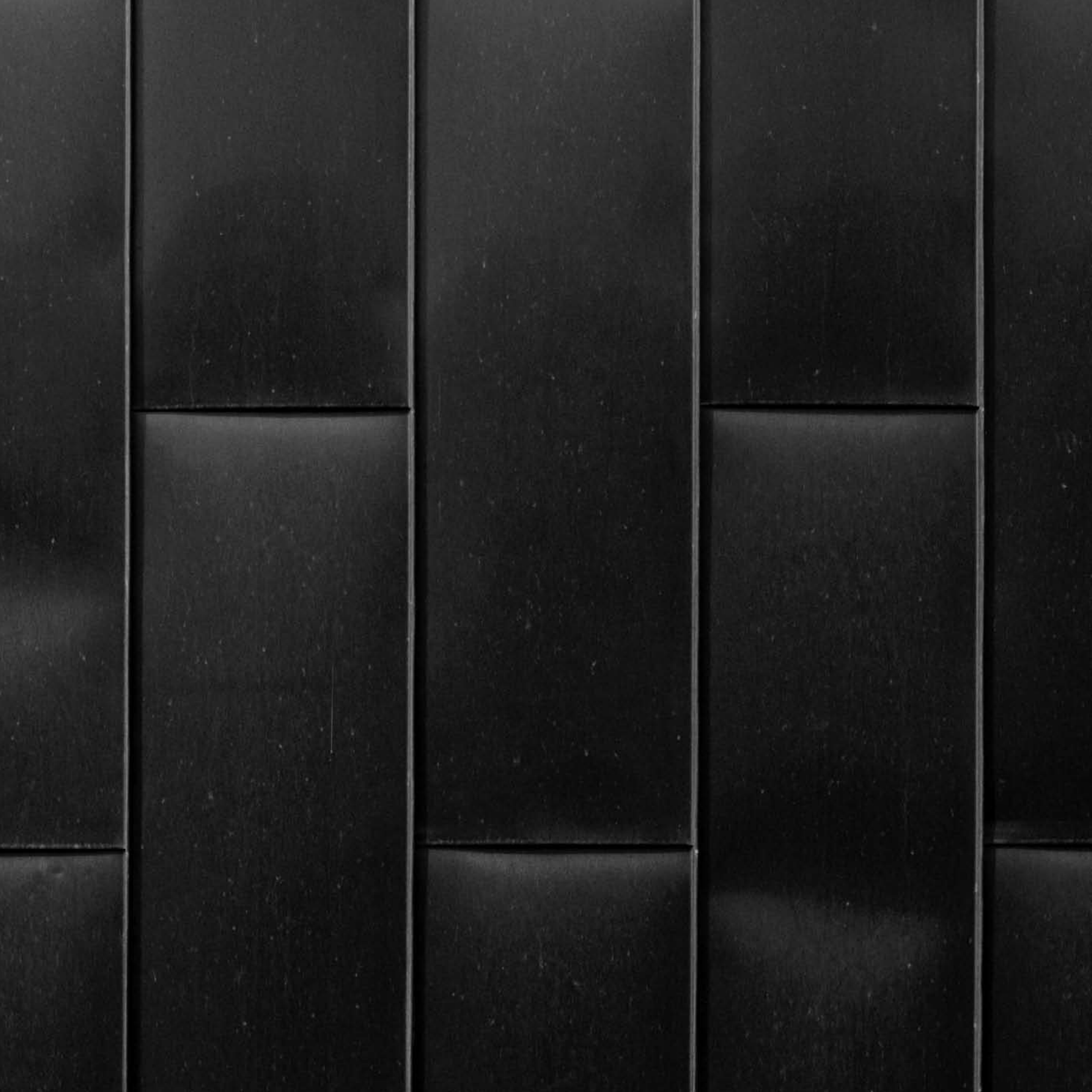
During the 20th century, though, Bluecoat Chambers has been a home for artists. Although it housed the first major post-Impressionist exhibition outside

London, including works by Picasso, Cezanne, Matisse and Van Gogh, it has thrived not as a receiving house but as an art-space run by artists for artists, finding a real sense of purpose in the 1960s. Yoko Ono, sponsored by the Destruction In Art Symposium performed her Fog Piece there in 1967, in which she asked the audience to wrap her from head to foot in gauze. The director of the gallery approached Captain Beefheart, a pioneer of the musical avant-garde, to exhibit his visual art at the Bluecoat for the first time ever in April 1972. He produced 30 small canvases in three days, especially. There was a patina of bohemia to the place.

Indeed, Bluecoat Chambers is one of the main reasons why you can still catch the flavours of the Sixties counterculture in the music and writings that has emerged in the city since then. It is there in the music of Shack and The La's or the poetry of Adrian Henri. It has provided a discrete space from which to imagine new links with northern England and the rest of the world. The new studios that biq has so ingeniously carved from the old building are the ideal places for this kind of thinking to continue, even if at more than 300 years old, the building is finally finding itself a note of middle-aged respectability thanks to the £12.5m redevelopment, funded by the Lottery and regeneration money from London and Brussels. Those who remember it fondly from a few years ago, especially the artists who created work there, may miss the tangible evidence of the

progressive work that engrained itself into the place, but as Alastair Upton points out – through creating new work the memories will return to the building, perhaps changed but still there.

It has been a rich and memorable experience learning the history of the building and meeting those who have given it new life. This book was published two months after the London architectural establishment gathered at the Kings Waterfront in Liverpool for the 2008 RIBA Stirling Prize. It seems strangely apposite that the Bluecoat Chambers was overlooked. It sits right in the middle of an economic re-ordering of the city but still is detached. Yet, if Liverpool has made a significant contribution to world architecture during the Capital of Culture, then it is the one which David Dunster has described so well in the following essay.

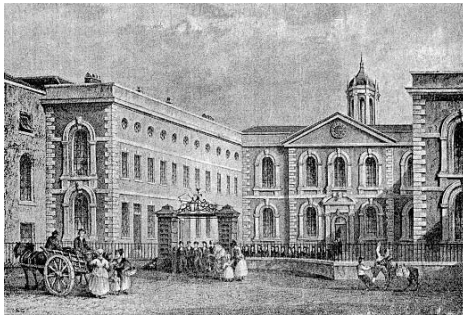


Context

Context

David Dunster

14



Bluecoat Chambers was built in brick and stone. It was completed in 1717.

Liverpool, by which I mean its inhabitants, identify their city through symbols of Liverpool's imperial past. Of these the most used, and never abused, are the twin Liver birds that sit on top of the Liver Building, headquarters to the Royal Liverpool Assurance group. This 20th-century building takes the twins from a medallion at the Bluecoat Chambers in the city centre which was constructed in 1717, possibly the first representation of the mythical birds at a time when the city was seeking to appear cultured. In the past 100 years, coincident with the city's most obvious economic and political decline, Liverpool has not produced much architecture that matches that built during the previous hundred. Twentieth-century architecture has passed Liverpool by. There are notable exceptions – experimental schools from the 1950s, a few very well-considered private houses tucked away in semi-private parks, the Electrical Engineering Building at the University – but they are incidents rather than statements. Had Colin St John Wilson's Civic Centre been constructed, and James Stirling been given something more serious than a conversion there could have been an inheritance of British modern architecture such as can be found in Sheffield or in Leeds. Instead, the current vogues now wreak their revenge. What this means is that despite a history of important planning tactics – the docks, the two tunnels under the Mersey, and the building of a major ring road in the 1930s – the city lacks a clear plan and has done since the 1970s.

Is Liverpool unusual in this? Perhaps not, but most Western European urban history proves that capitalism

in whatever colour and at whatever stage cannot operate satisfactorily without clear urban planning. Limits, pace Engels, always establish the truth of freedom. Liverpool's decline is certainly not solely caused by laissez-faire principles. For most of the century there was precious little capitalist enterprise to make such demands. Consequently, the city is a mess in architectural terms once anyone steps outside the Victorian chaos so beloved by those who designated the central business district a World Heritage site. There still persists an obedience to development pressures, but once a building is listed in the historical categories then it is absolutely sacrosanct. Preservation on tick-box principles privileges individual buildings over fabric. What is preserved gets squashed between new developments and establishes a weak context, so new buildings try to mimic the skyline, or ski down in curious triangular forms to kneel before the past.

This is a reading of context never envisaged by those who argued for context in the post-modernist 1970s – a view which sees the development of a city as a result of pick-and-mix styling. A deeper reading of context requires the kind of analysis that is not based on taste or historical preferences but on what can be seen and a humble attitude. If we were to seek examples of it then we need to go back to the Ticino school that operated in Switzerland in the 1970s; to the work of the Swiss architects Luigi Snozzi or Aurelio Galfetti rather than their fellow traveller Mario Botta. For a more recent example, we could look to the teaching of Miroslav Šik at the ETH (Swiss Federal

Institute of Technology) in Zurich. Liverpool has particularly lacked such proponents, preferring instead the pop-shot of icon.

None of this, however, is to say that the city lacks a strong survival instinct. National figure of fun at one level, home to a great football team at another; parodied for its accent and attitude yet also home to two Cathedrals and two universities; a tragic and continuous rate of unemployment and at the same time the birthplace of major cultural, political and entrepreneurial figures. Like most cities, Liverpool is impossible to sum up without paradoxes, though few glory in them as much. Yes, there is a self image glimpsed in a distorting mirror, but there is also a sense of civic pride which has yet to find a focus outside sport. The securities are outweighed by the insecurities, however, and these have dominated so that risks in forming the city have rarely been taken and the potential of architecture to foster civic pride has not been grasped. The artistic community of the city has, however, always been strong – supporting two major art galleries, one good symphony orchestra and a culture of poetry and comedy which was stronger in the past than it is today.

The Bluecoat Chambers was always the nexus of the city's more bohemian activities, strangely detached from the commercial activity around it. It was inhabited by artists from the beginning of the 20th century who adapted and added to the structure as they saw fit. By the turn of this century, the building was in poor shape and unable to meet the demands of artists



The convent in the village of Monte Carasso in Switzerland, restored by Luigi Snozzi

who wanted bigger spaces and new audiences, often unaware of this strange beauty in their midst. Because no rationalist principles have been applied, it was a risk in consequence to select an architectural practice for the Bluecoat Chambers' extension whose sympathies lie on that side of the architectural possibilities. Others were considered, but the growing suspicion that Liverpool One, a retail-led redevelopment of about 170,000sq m which surrounds the Bluecoat Chambers, would become the dominant model, did strongly suggest that architecture of calm ought to prevail. The extension to this very old institution has been blessed with such.

To be contextual is sometimes radical

Imagine a city where all buildings were designed by Frank Gehry or Daniel Libeskind. One suspects that even the present crop of star architects know that they could never extend their architectural ideas from single buildings (so obviously signed that we can easily name them), into a fragment of a city, let alone an entire one. I say suspects, because it is unlikely that any of the cities which have sought to present themselves again have enough available land to allow such an extravaganza. On the other hand, those architects' ideas depend on a simple differentiation from the norm to be recognised as the handmaidens of branding. The quotidian world that most people inhabit is played out among and inside buildings which have little or no architectural quality in that instantly publishable, closed world of architectural production. And just as architects and architectural schools have left behind the difficulties of architectural theory, so has

the reconstruction of cities through the processes of regeneration left the problems of urban theory to the architectural jet-set. The world is as it is and all that happens in it. Architecture can change little.

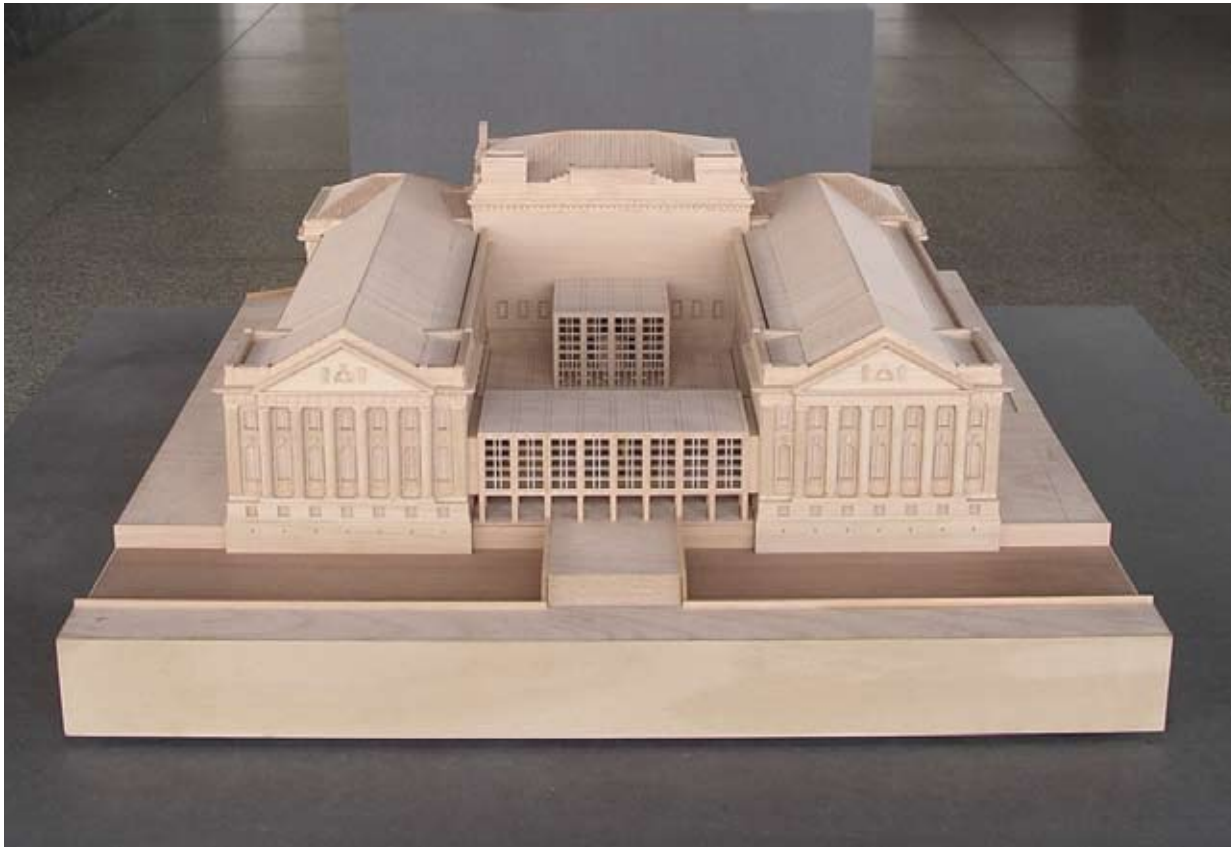
Two positions counter this: the first is to analyse cities as aggregations of forms without regard to function, economics or politics; the second which received its most powerful manifestation in Berlin in the Eighties, is the idea that new buildings in old cities can repair that city, and that this act is a homage to the historical past, not just an opportunity for personal idiosyncrasy. These positions can be traced back to the teachings, writings, and practices of Aldo Rossi and OM Ungers. Without entering into polemics, we might think of these architects as primarily urban, using simple geometry that generally eschews the showy effects of too much time wasted at the computer; uninterested by the unexpected uses of new materials, and able to manipulate the programme to the site. Above all, their analysis of site, of the wider urban terroir, of the importance of height and volume in continuity with what surrounds the project, distinguishes their work from a puerile contextualism. Biq belongs to this party.

My part here is both partisan and professional. My generation remembers how Peter Smithson characterised our heroes – Mies is great but Corb communicates. The weaknesses of their imitators were most apparent in terms of the urban buildings, though now we might see more clearly how the positioning and compositional aspects of Mies were the more promising. Could developing architectural theories



DANIELLE TINERO / RIBA LIBRARY

A colonnade within Aldo Rossi's extension to the Cemetery of San Cataldo in Modena, Italy



A model of OM Ungers' proposal
for the Pergamon Museum on
show in the Neue Nationalgalerie

improve the position? Couldn't architects strive for more quotidian solutions without appearing to always be giving the word, forming the dream of a new metropolis? In my case, all these dilemmas presented themselves in pretending to teach undergraduates architecture and publishing work in magazines. And it was through teaching that I first met biq. They had come to Liverpool because they had won a European prize located in Merseyside in 1996, only to be dumped in 2003 after several designs and feasibility studies had been commissioned. By that time, biq had won the Bluecoat competition as well as a competition to do some housing in Tranmere. In addition, Rick Wessels and Hans van der Heijden had come to the school in 1999, interested in the possibility of teaching here. In particular they wanted to teach graduates. And so for a few years they came to the university and set what appeared to be simple programmes to complete housing estates in the flatland of Holland.

The Dutchmen come to Liverpool

The conventional and functionalist view of an architect's site is that it is the land owned by the client. Increasingly, government controls heights, materials, and even form, but only by reference to what is already there. If what is already there is changing in a big way, what stimulates the design? At Bluecoat Chambers, the site changed when the Paradise Project morphed into Liverpool One. Three of Bluecoat Chambers' immediate neighbours are now new buildings, totally different in every aspect from what was there when this project began. The new studios for BBC Radio Merseyside, the Haworth Tompkins

mixed-use building, and the connecting arcade from the old major shopping street were all in the design stage as Bluecoat progressed. Liverpool One has since grown in area, mass and cost. Covering 17ha and probably costing more than £1bn, Liverpool One used many different architects who worked under the umbrella organisation headed by Rod Holmes of Grosvenor. Whether the architecture is good, bad or indifferent, the development is an extraordinary act of collaboration with no architectural linking, visual theme or thread – see if you can spot the big oval that Grosvenor owes to Cesar Pelli? For biq, working within this context presented unusual problems, not the least of which was the overall control.

The Bluecoat arts centre is the latest re-use of the premises. It shelters fledgling organisations and individual artists. It has the best private garden open to the public. It hosts art exhibitions, performances, film, and various festivals for the city's ethnic communities. When I came to Liverpool you could go to the Bluecoat for PR, for art materials, second-hand books, picture-framing, a decent sample of crafts, and a spin-off of the well-known and strangely unchanging Everyman cafe. The building was a maze, some toilets were known for cottaging, while the artistic direction encouraged younger artists in all manner of presentations. But the building was incomprehensible, acting as a passage between School and College Lanes, as well as a full stop on its axial alignment with Church Street, then the main shopping street. The programme of activities was fresh, sometimes difficult, but always imaginative in ways which other cultural

institutions in the city had forgotten how to be. A loyal audience of mixed ages and incomes were brought together in the building. The imaginative and innovative director Bryan Biggs, adapted and made-do with a small collection of oddly-shaped rooms. It was both village hall and avant-garde gallery. As a result, the brief that could be offered to an architect was as much a question as a demand. This is what we do, what else could we do and can you help?

The building itself consisted of a u-shaped courtyard that fronted on to a small street. Behind this facade, a series of extensions, repairs to bomb damage and whack-o Gerry-building, mirrored this plan and produced a second courtyard. The public made more use of this back courtyard than the front. Within the complex of additions and secretions, the appointed architects found 29 different levels within a three-storey structure. Rather like the complexity of the building, fund raising was intricate, involving government, local, and charity funding, as well as private donations. As a result of the institutional funding a competition was held, as required by the European Union. From open tender a short-list of potential architects was drawn up. Apart from one name, all the potentials were British. Each was interviewed and members of the selection panel visited work by the architects. This was also an opportunity to become more familiar with the approach of each professional and when big was finally selected, it was as much for their ability to listen and understand as for their actual achievement as architects at that time. Unlike the developers of

Liverpool One, Bluecoat took a chance.

With a complex site and brief, a clear architectural strategy was the only way anything coherent could be created. The part of the Bluecoat Chambers which could actually be rebuilt was one wing of the garden courtyard, but the overall design involved the near-total restructuring within the existing framework. As years of adaptations were peeled away, spaces which no-one had expected to exist were revealed. By this time, a strategy had emerged which connected primarily to circulation in the building. This term 'circulation' is architectural jargon, referring to those diagrammatic drawings that trace the path of the knowing visitor into, through, and out of a building. They work best when the diagram reaches some kind of apotheosis, an altar, a cherished view, in other words an other-worldly experience reminding that visitor of the transitoriness of life. In addition, the public circulation from the entrance to the galleries and theatre is now clearer. It was a three-way joint, like those in the Rietveld chair, connected but independently flexed.

Reminding us what context really is

I want now to return to the vexed question: how can any architect deal with the notion of context? For Robert Venturi, context was three-fold, urban, historical and quotidian. While Rossi believed, context was nothing and everything, the perplexing ambiguity of near-total formlessness manifested in the most formal of compositions. In the UK context became the spike of heritage on which schemes that, in every other respect, had a logic and sense about

Peter's Lane Arcade by Dixon Jones, part of the Liverpool One retail development





A 1960s reproduction of the Red and Blue Chair by Gerrit Thomas Rietveld, designed in 1917

them would be curtailed, restrained and made to kneel before the English, not Liverpudlian, nostalgia for an 18th century without sexually transmitted diseases. Context was not just imitating the past. The most famous scheme was the completion of Trafalgar Square by knocking down a building and then totally rebuilding an almost identical facade but with 'modern' office floors behind. This kind of insanity did a lot for royal approval but nothing for reason. Modernism with all its anti-historicism could only stand by and gasp in horror. Context then became a planning tool and in the hands of the worst planners it became an obstacle. This meant that serious consideration of context became almost impossible and had the unlikely effect of privileging so-called High-tech buildings which could not be made contextual since they were presented as over-determined engineering.

In the hands of architects who were not victims of this diminished responsibility, context can be read as a set of approximations rather than rules. Primarily visual in nature, such approximations depended upon the precise quality that architects brought to a job – their perception. Context comprises a series of layers. The corny view is that it is described by what surrounds the proposed building – in which case a site surrounded by bad buildings requires another bad building. The preservationist layer is no great help either. There are also a number of more important layers: functional, typological and urbanistic. However these are all subordinate to the view of the architect. If the architect is good, he or she can deliver a

building which is determined by the sense that there can be nothing more to add. It took an architect from overseas to see Liverpool as having images which are particular.

The particulars are clearest on the outside of the Bluecoat Chambers' extension. The gable end which stops the wing is cut to reveal what looks like marble but is in fact brown granite inscribed in Latin. The gable end, so common in the close-packed, small back yard-terraced housing that characterises Liverpool and many other port cities of the UK, is presented as the logical stop, the chimney transformed into roof lighting for the gallery behind. Its wall is however totally unlike any Liverpoolian gable. The bricks are in a stack bond arrangement and look as if they are waiting to be assembled into the typical nine-inch solid brick wall built in stretcher bond. Its windows follow a similar logic – windows rationalised so that they behave both as deep bat windows and as vitrines to display the gallery's contents. Below these windows at first floor level is a hint too of the arcade which forms such an important binding element within the plan.

This elevation provides a new street frontage to the south of the Bluecoat Chambers. Behind this point of entry stands a small gallery that also has the feel of an entrance hall. The complex space is both itself an arcade, a separating space between the large gallery and the new garden, and the visual link connecting the upper middle-sized gallery and the entrance to the new performance space. The complexity of the arcade is never visually revealed. Entering the

Bluecoat Chambers from the front courtyard, the confused layout of the previous incarnation is clarified by a direct entry into the bow-fronted room, the balcony of which looks over the garden. A sharp turn to the left brings the visitor to the node of the composition where the new full-height light shaft borders stairs and lifts to the upstairs restaurant. A swift turn to the right brings the visitor to the threshold of the arcade, terminated by a flight of stairs. Through these adjoining simple rectangular volumes, the architect has established the new public spaces and made each accessible and obvious. So obvious in fact that their subtlety and careful composition should not be felt as anything other than proper and magnificent.

Always connect

Some buildings contain ideas which are architectural and not oppressive. They are the result of a very clever game played by the designers. In the experience of Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola's Villa Caprarola, the un-architectural visitor would most likely be impressed by the sequence of magnificent spaces and the ease with which they segue into one another. One look at the plan and the architecturally-informed visitor can see how spectacularly clever it is. Within a pentagon is inscribed a cylindrical courtyard off which, on the piano nobile, completely rectangular rooms are arranged enfilade. The Bluecoat Chambers is not a roman country palace, nor is big Vignola. But the sequence of hall, arcade and vertical space interconnect, segue, and relate to one another in a way that the public need not understand but

only use. The architect wanting to understand and interpret these devices may well recognise here a series of nodal joints between simple, geometric spaces. Further, the knowing visitor might have seen something like this before and if a Dutch reference is called to mind, perhaps it is one of the last layers of context which this building offers.

A model of the Bluecoat Chambers with the new wing

The example in this architect's mind is Gerrit Thomas Rietveld's famous Red and Blue chair, and in particular the joints where three elements of the frame intersect and join by passing each other, making the structure for the red back and the blue seat. In Rietveld's case there is little structural logic in this point. The material is made to perform its task without the typical skill of the craftsman. Displaying that skill is not the point; the references are many and mostly metaphysical. Bluecoat Chambers may not mark an era as Rietveld's furniture did, but the connection is there.

So at the Bluecoat Chambers we have an exterior generated with a sensibility to the everyday of Liverpool, its working-class terraces and their still-poignant forms. Within, there is a sense of proportion, which unifies the public parts present in the dramatic stairwell, the elongated arcade and the bow-fronted room. Each separate room that these passages connect is different in height, plan and lighting. They do not impose. Detailing is by and large discrete. Apart from the external brickwork, there is little display of the builder's craft. This is a design that can handle hard knocks even in construction.





Photography

The facade of the new extension that addresses the recent commercial development in Liverpool One





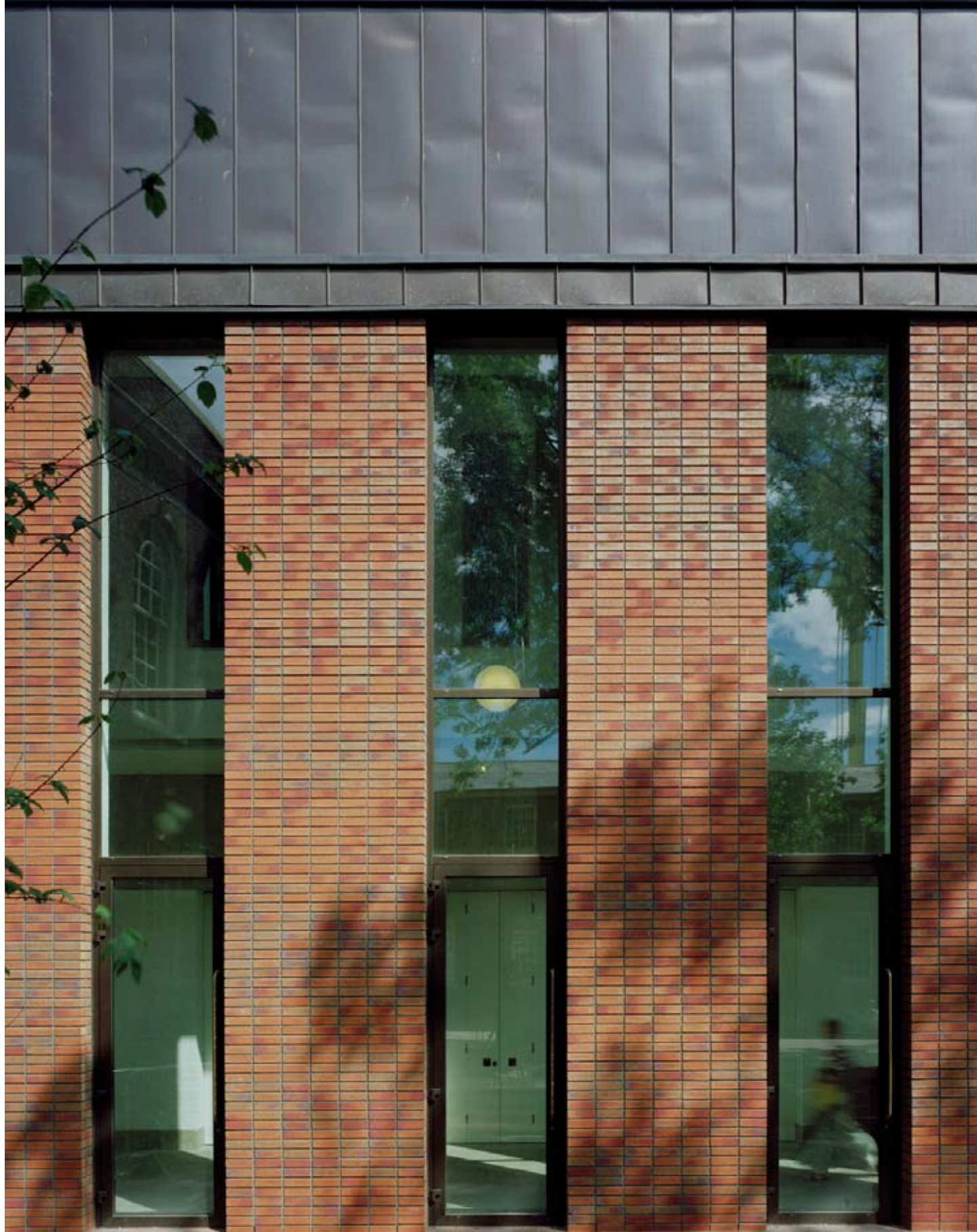




Left: The new block replaces the east wing on the south side of Bluecoat Chambers, originally designed in an H-form

Below: The new wing addresses the curved frontage of Page and Park's BBC Radio Merseyside office, hidden on the left







Far left: Openness isn't simply about allowing light in. New doorways sit beneath full-height glazing between the brick piers

Left: The colonnade begins with a revealed section of brickwork, damaged by bombs. Seven new bays have been created

Left: Brick columns pick up the rhythm of those on the exterior. They are interrupted by sliding panel doors, giving the space flexibility

Right: The clean, rigid aesthetic of the stack bonded, over-fired bricks is mediated by sunlight through the trees in a well-loved garden







Left: The uppermost part of the main circulation core stands at the northern end of the new extension

Right: The lower section of this part of the building also operates as an exhibition space









Previous page:
Looking down
into the Vied. Light
plays on the walls
of the exhibition
space from
a clerestory above

Left: The first floor performance space. The Bluecoats has a long tradition of hosting music and spoken word performance

Below: The gallery above the first floor performance space, providing access even when the auditorim is in use







Far left: A clerestory runs the length of Bluecoat Chambers' new wing. Here, it traverses the auditorium space

Left: Biq has reconciled the 29 different floor levels which the building formerly possessed



Left: The south-east facade is punctured by windows with copper reveals. The clerestory ends in a chimney-like upstand

Right: In the first floor gallery, light falls into the space from the clerestory hidden behind the upstand



Right and below:
Renovation of
the north-eastern
wing, facing
School Lane, has
created robust
studio spaces



Right: Refurbishment
of the central wing
opened-up a previously
cramped and divided
foyer space







Left: Brick piers alternate glazing with the same rhythm of window and wall presented on the opposite elevation

Below: The brick piers of the new wing, glimpsed through windows on the curved wall at the rear of the old section



Below: Playing with symmetry. The conjunction of new wire-cut brick, patinated copper paneling and the existing brickwork

Right: Looking south from the School Lane entrance at the Grade I-listed facade. Liver birds stand over the front door





S A G V L V

Response

Response

Alastair Upton

Alastair Upton has been the chief executive of the Bluecoat arts centre since March 2006. The decision to commission biq to create the building predates him, but from that point on Alastair was the head of the client organisation. Here, he gives his views on the key decisions behind the rebuilding of Bluecoat Chambers.

How does the institution relate to other galleries or visual arts organisations in the city?

As far as Bluecoat is concerned, the new organisations are johnny-come-latelies. The Walker Gallery has been around for a long time, but it never was a space engaged with the artists.

What was the prompt to extend and develop the Bluecoat Chambers?

Access issues drove a lot of what happened. The building was deeply inaccessible with 23 or 35 different levels throughout it, depending on whom you are talking to. A huge amount of the building was inaccessible to a whole range of different users, which really didn't fit with the ethos of the building. That was a motivating factor. Having said that, the curators understood the inappropriateness of the space for the display of contemporary visual art. Essentially the gallery was a found gallery space in the building and we needed to have something that was appropriate. That could only come from a new wing. It has to be said that I wasn't here prior to the competition but I've inherited that and I understand the history as best as one can.

Was that the only reason?

No. The Bluecoat grew up through artists inhabiting it, and then doing performances. The people who occupied it were never wealthy and the building was neglected for 100 years. They may sound like two rather negative drivers, but that's the way the building was. By the beginning of this century it was shoddy and inaccessible. It needed to be appropriate. Also, we realise that now is the time. In the past, there had been plans mooted to extend into the next building, but nothing came of that. Then just after we began the process most recently, the Capital of Culture was announced, which helped carry things along. At one particularly difficult stage, the Capital of Culture ensured the work would go ahead.

How would you best express the role the gallery has played in the cultural life of the city?

It's slightly set apart and not been engaged with the city. Some people didn't know where it was. It must've been amazing. There weren't any buildings of any scale around it. The city grew around it. It was a school for 200 years. By the time it was an art space, the last part of the expansion of the city had finished. It became a space primarily for artists to inhabit. It engaged with the artist alone. I've read some wonderful reminiscences from the late George Melly. His parents brought him here to fancy dress parties, and he has described the building as a wonderful, bohemian arty space. It developed from there. The importance of the building is that a series of artists developed it as a performance space,

rather than as a gallery. That fact creates a different atmosphere. It might be less engaged because it wasn't initially established as a viewing space.

Why do you think biq got the commission?

Obviously they were known in the city because they were teaching at Liverpool University. Compared to many architects, biq had a much wider perspective on architecture and a greater vision. That was apparent to us and those who had been taught by them. It's also very appropriate to the history of Bluecoat, because of our tradition of supporting and nurturing talent. It's important that we commission someone at that phase in his or her career. They were up against architects with much greater reputations. Of course the fact that they were known in the city and known to be serious, wasn't enough to get them the job. They understood the institution and the building very well. Hans understood the openness and common ownership of the place, but also that it is a place where artists work still. It's not a defined institution. It changes. He understood that. And therefore could design it.

How do you ensure the spirit of a building like Bluecoat Chambers is preserved in a renovation and extension?

Hans is very respectful of the historic nature of the building. He's put back something that was blown up in the war. He's worked off the grid, the planes and the height. It's a very thoughtful piece of architecture. Yet it hasn't any pastiches in it. In many ways the spirit has been changed. There were

no large spaces in Bluecoat Chambers and now there are. It's more open and openness has a different feel to it than a closed space. To think you could retain the entire atmosphere of the old building, it isn't possible or right, although I think it's still a very calm place, it doesn't overwhelm.

Do you see much of Hans' personality in the building?

That's a difficult one. He did refer to the building as his 'boy' once, when he felt his idea wasn't being fully understood. It was a male child and he was a proud father. We pictured him as very serious and thoughtful, but he was also very emotional. Although, one of the things that I like about working with him is that he didn't get upset about the little stuff.

What was the most difficult part of the build?

It was probably the points at which we joined the new and the old. Technically, that's where we ran into problems. That's where we discovered how amazing it was that the building even stood. There were no foundations in some places, and elsewhere there was evidence of war damage.

Is an art gallery just a house for art?

Sometimes it is. It isn't here. This is a space in which art is made as well as viewed. We have studios, theatre spaces, and artists' shops. I remember that we were getting uptight about the finishes on the floors, and Hans came in and said, 'this floor is like a butcher's shop floor, this

is to look tough and round and ready. This is to be used.'

Did you take into account the changes that would occur to the area around Bluecoat Chambers when you set the brief and assessed the entries?

It stands on its own, the building works for itself. The BBC building next door would have liked us to build out towards it. We didn't. They finished it before we did, but we'd completed our design before they had. We don't really know what's going to be at the back of the building. We didn't build to go into Liverpool One.

So you didn't consciously react to Liverpool One?

I don't think we reacted that much to it but we will see more people visiting from what used to be the back of the building. The gallery actually has a shopfront and I think the curators will hang differently. One of the audiences is the people walking down the street but we don't really know how that will affect us yet.

What did Yoko Ono do at her inaugural performance?

Well, you can't say she doesn't mean it... She got wrapped up in bandages, got the audience to unwrap her and then put a video on and did some knitting. Then she put on some little lights, and said, 'I love you,' and got everyone else to say, 'I love you' and everyone started dancing on stage to Give Peace a Chance. It was better than it sounds.

What do people miss about the old building?

The memories. When you change a building you create a lack of continuity. The scale of change cannot help but break the continuity. Once you've done that, there's no route to the past. It means you've moved on. You've aged. The building can't quite be what it was before.

Does that mean you are forever parted with the past?

It'll take a bit of time to reconnect with the story again. When you are doing a new job, you see it as new and different, and only when someone comes along you realise that there is a narrative. It's only later that you realise that there hasn't been a rupture. It's being built on its past. And it's adapting to a new time. All organisations do it, some smoothly, some in jerks.

Do you have a favourite part of the building?

I like the central shaft. It's called the Vied as a nod to our Dutch architect. You have to name everything, and as the galleries are called 1,2 and 3, we thought we should go for a Europeanism. If you look at the building from the outside and then walk inside, the scale absolutely matches what you've seen. Then you walk further in and this big space has been found by the architect.

Are you disappointed that the building hasn't received more plaudits nationally?

I don't think it's a prize-winning building. It isn't a bauble on a Christmas tree. It has been critically acclaimed. Architectural journalists and writers have

appreciated it. You can't wave a photograph of it about and say look at its angles. It's very subtle and clever.

How does the building accommodate the literary focus of Bluecoat?

It's a much bigger part now. We decided to make it a central plank of what we are doing. The building lends itself perfectly. We've got a performance space for 200 and then a smaller space, but we've also got a whole multiplicity of spaces that can be used in different ways. You can mix things up.

How has 2008 been for Liverpool and for you personally?

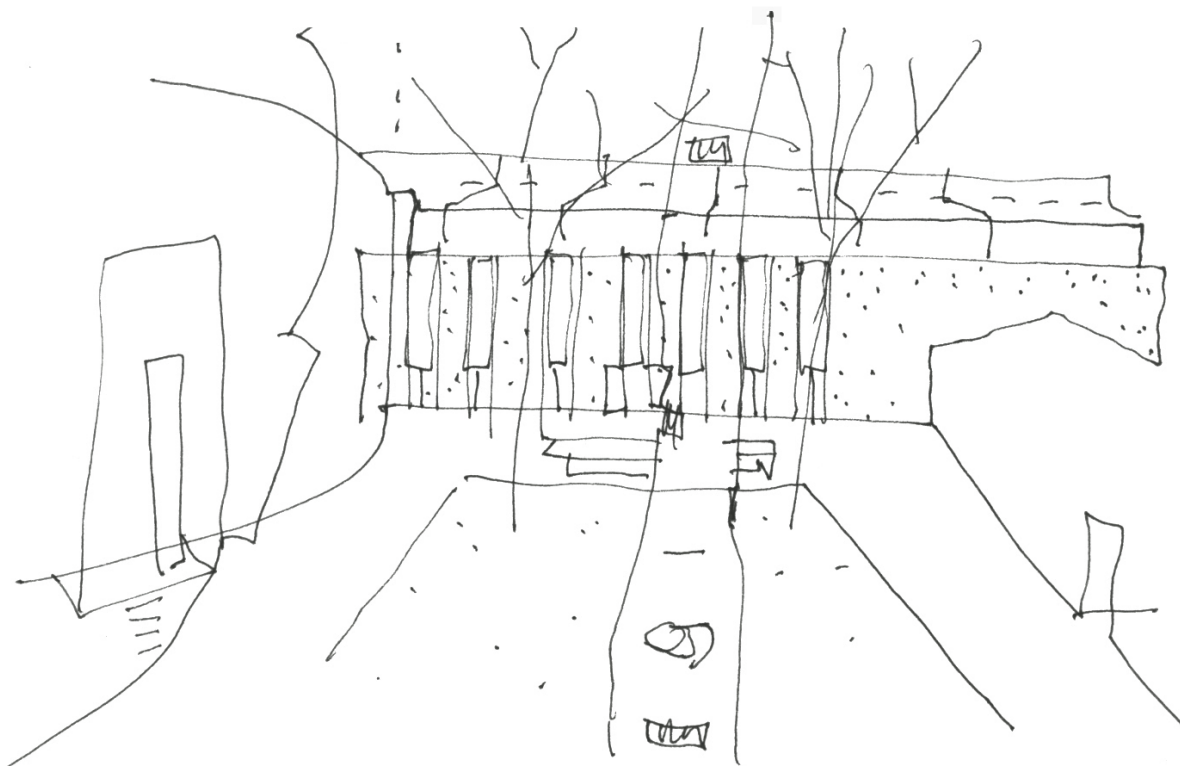
We've had a huge number of visitors, so it's worked very well. We wouldn't have got here without the Capital of Culture. It got us here at some very key moments.



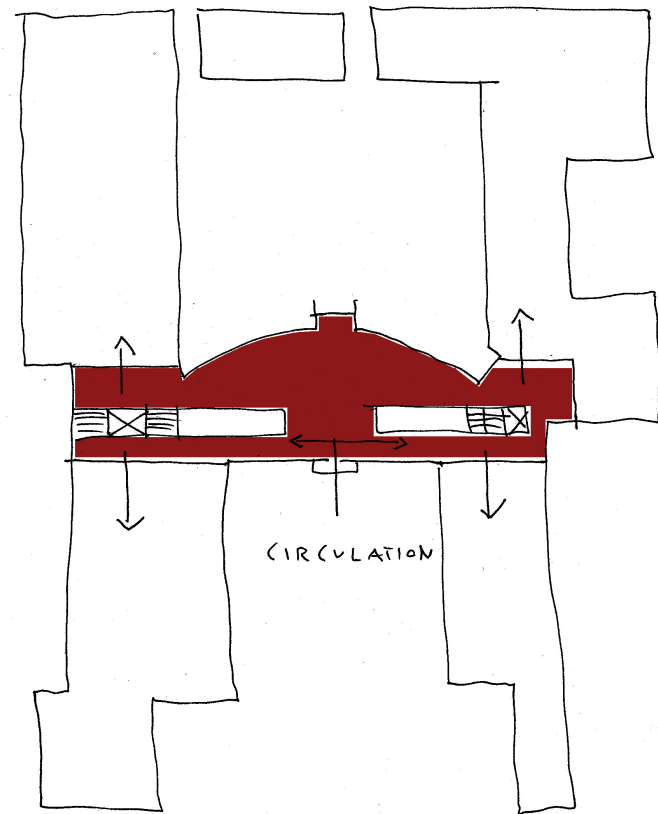
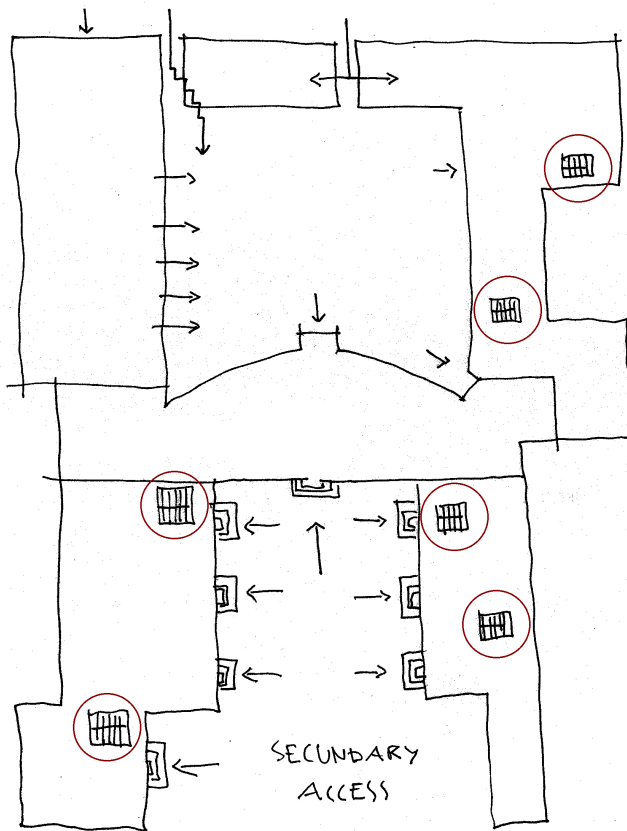
Drawings

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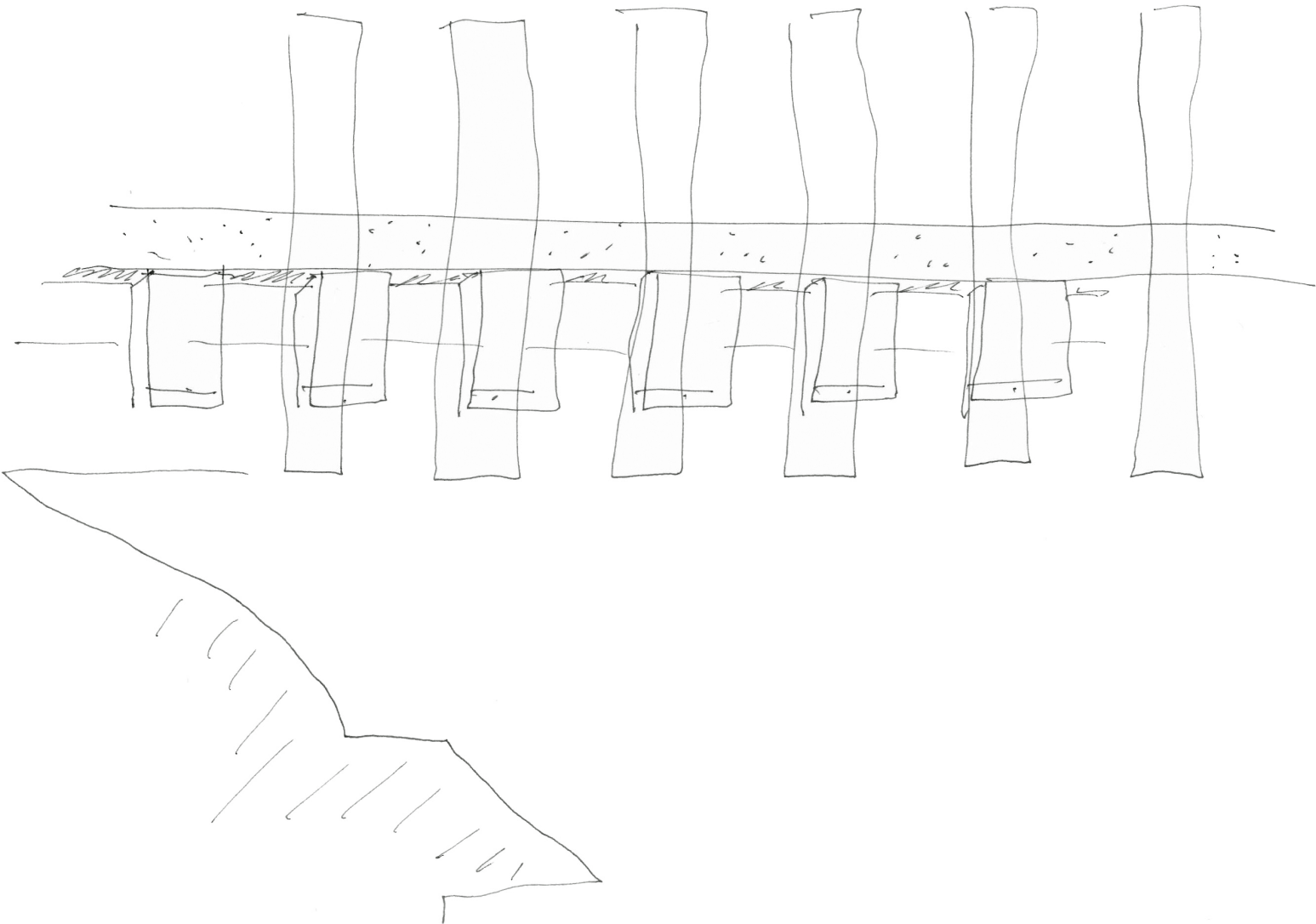
Right: An early sketch in which the rhythm of the brick and glazing on the west-facing facade of the new wing is explored



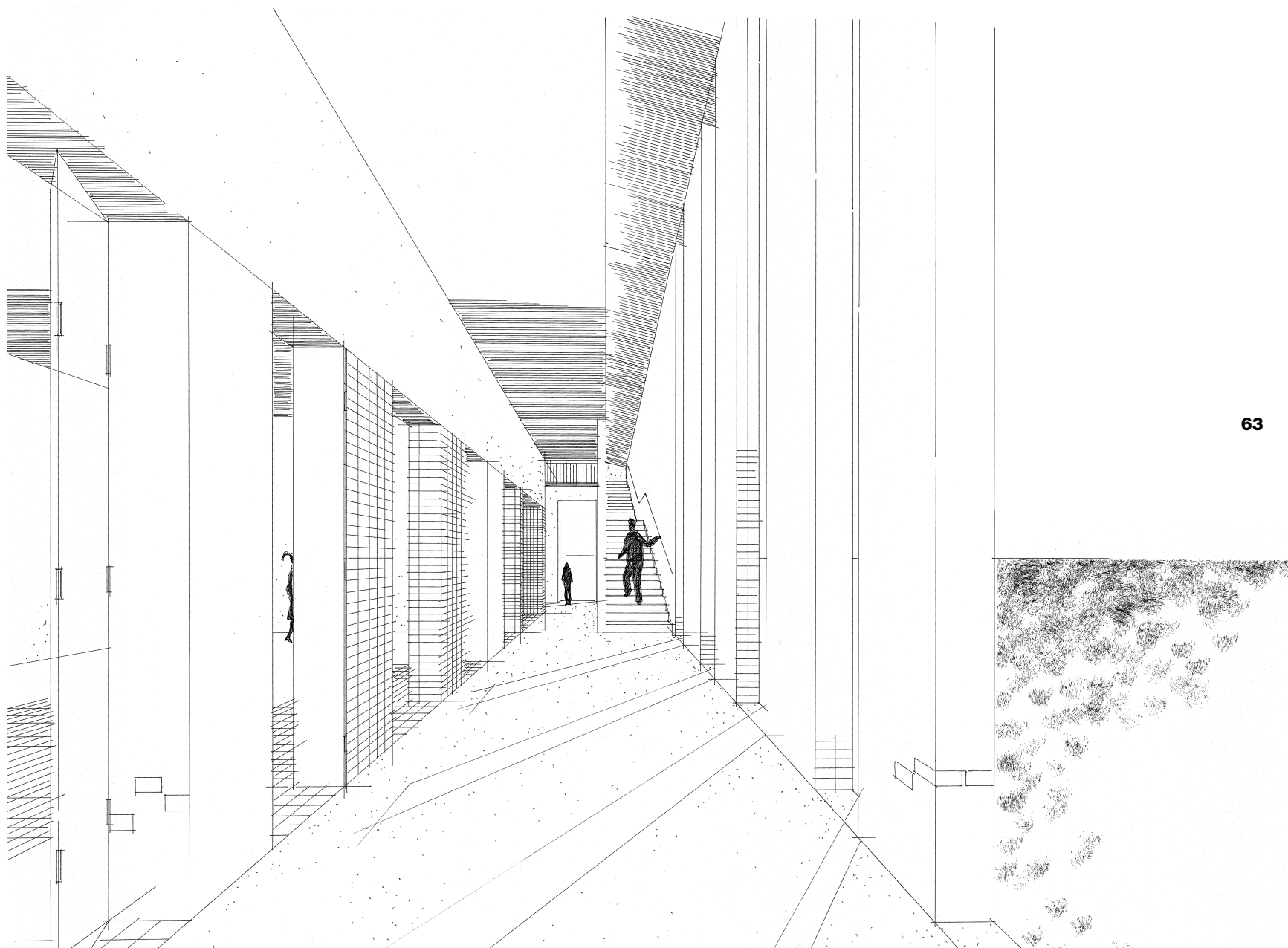
Below: The creation of a new wing to the building gave big an opportunity to increase the permeability of the new building

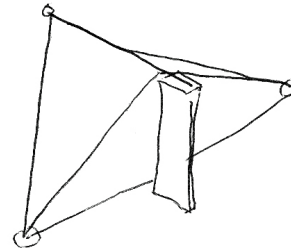
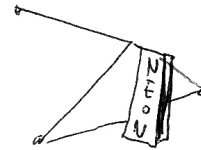
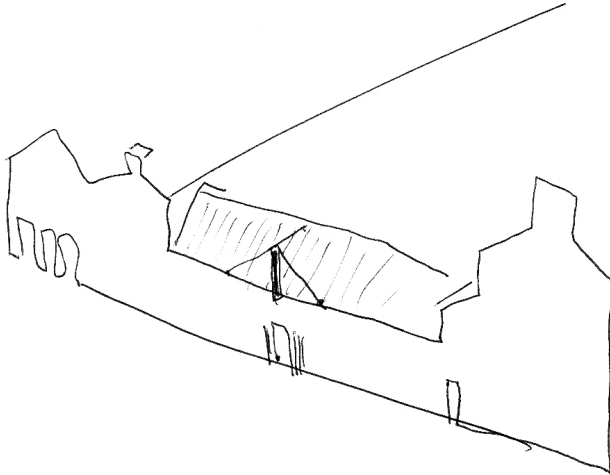
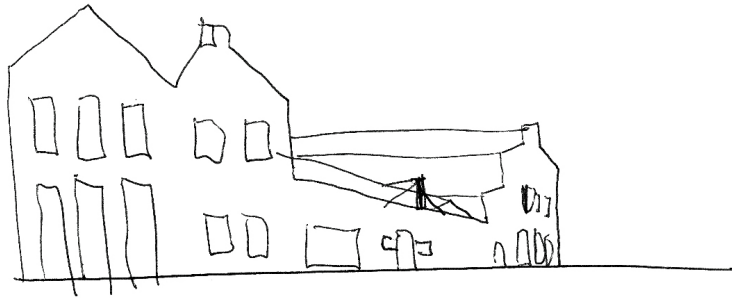


Below: These sketches show the evolution of how the colonnade would work in conjunction with the gallery space



Below: Although
this prominent
pier of bricks was
replaced, here we
see how important
the brick module
is in the space



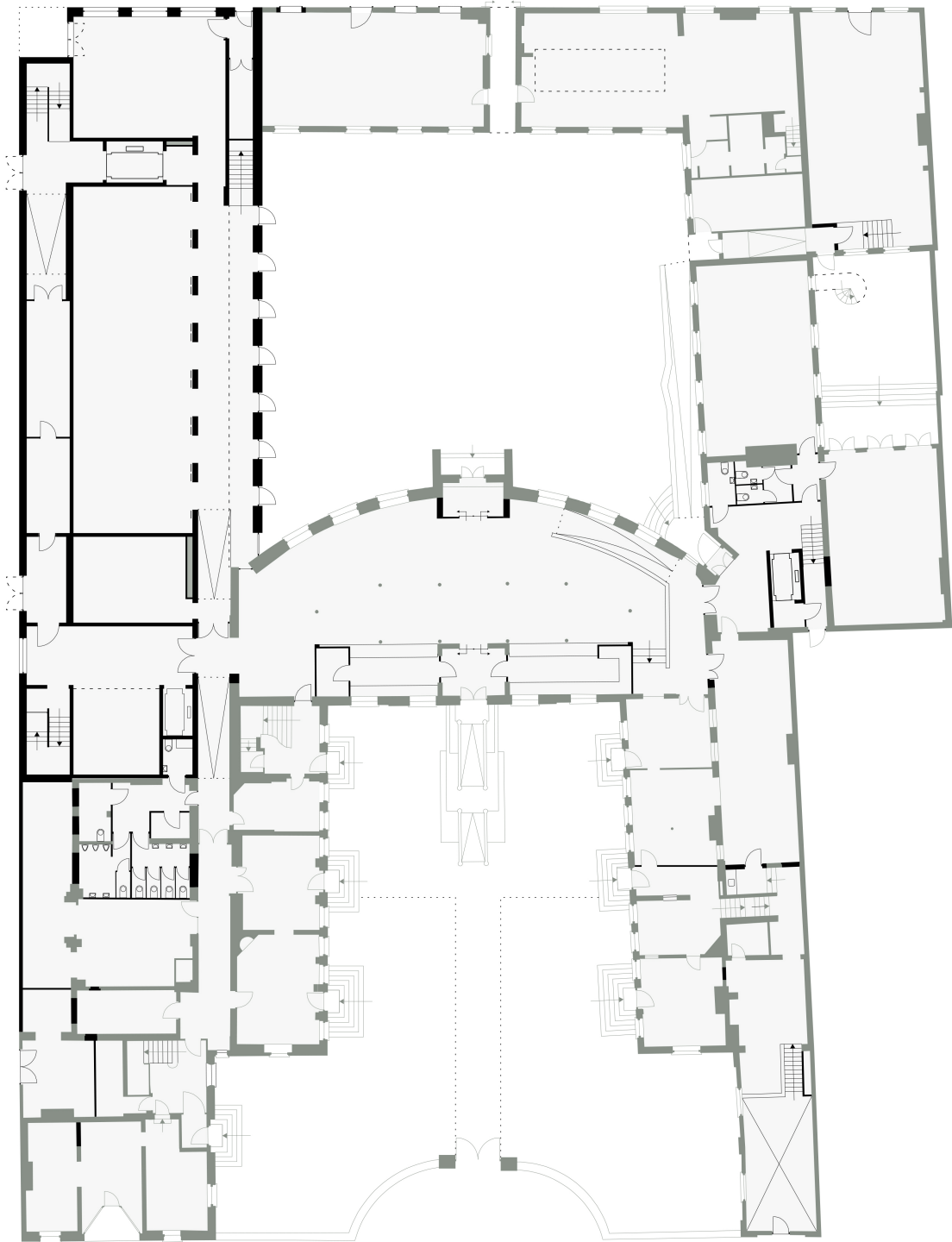


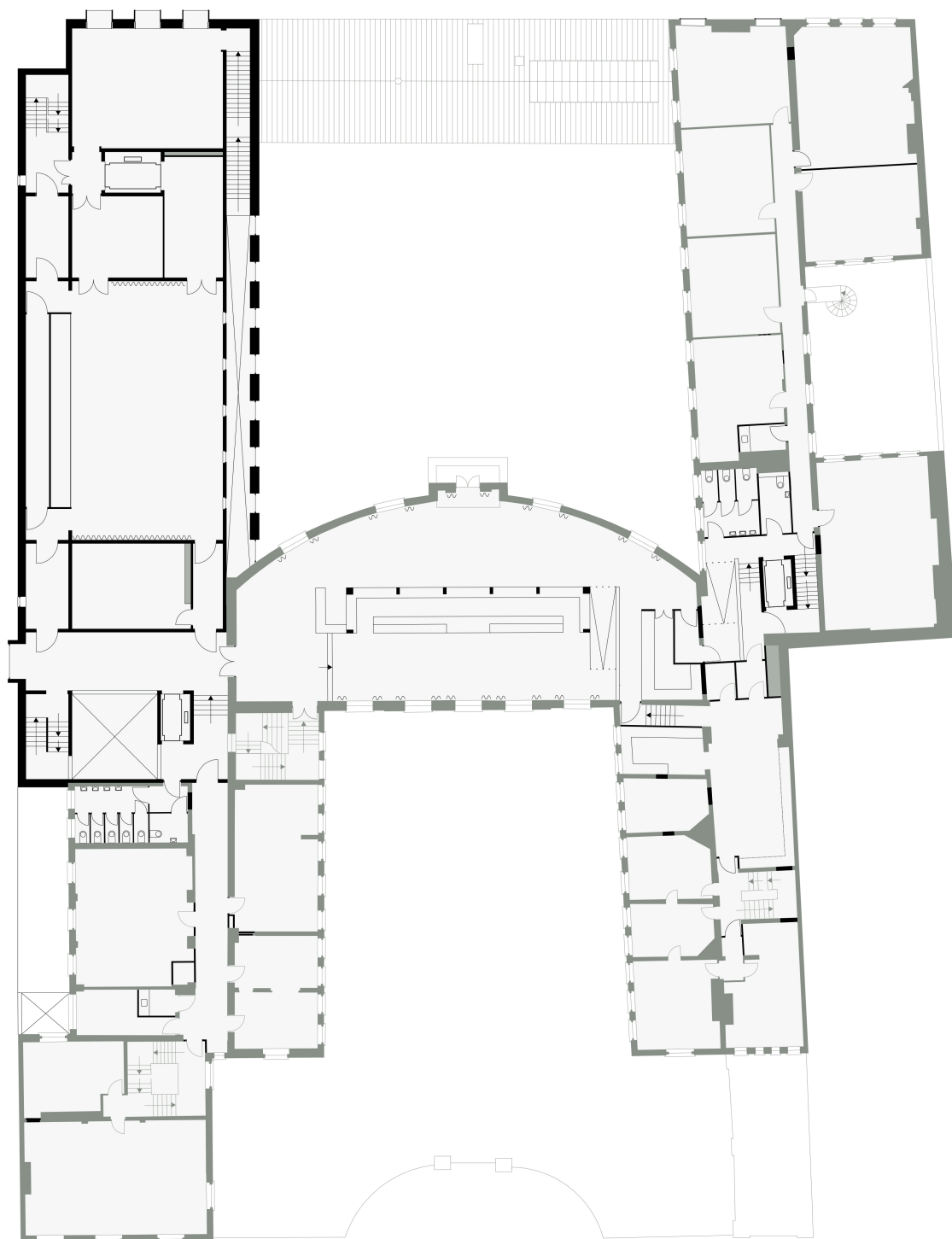
Left: An early sketch imagining a direct entrance to the southern gardens, and how a neon sign would address the street

Below: Here we see development of a more refined solution: an inscription in Latin on a recess in the facade



Right: plan of the
ground floor







A long section
of the refurbished
Bluecoat Chambers
looking east





