

The
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'Like something from Pompeii' – Battersea Arts Centre's scorching resurrection

Architecture

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With its charred plaster walls and restored mosaic flooring, the £13m rescue of the cherished London theatre has kept thrilling traces of the 2015 fire. The result is a spatial spectacular – with a whopping 35 performance hotspots



'What would it mean for us to relinquish tyrannical control?' ... the restored grand hall of BAC, which had been burnt to the ground. Photograph: Fred Howarth

At Battersea Arts Centre it can be hard to tell where the audience stops and the acting begins. The rambling Victorian town hall in south London, home to experimental theatre since the 1970s, has long revelled in blurring the boundaries of stage and seat, mingling performers with guests and presenting plays on landings, in the bar and even in its offices. BAC has finally completed a 12-year, £13.3m restoration project by celebrated theatre architects [Haworth Tompkins](#) – and it's just as hard to tell where the original building ends and the new bits begin.

"We call it scratch architecture," says architect Steve Tompkins, referring to the [process of scratch theatre](#) pioneered at BAC, where ideas are tested out live in the early stages of development, with audience feedback used to evolve the performance. "It's not about a perfectly authored finished product, which is a difficult idea for architects to stomach," he adds. "But we wondered if we could do a parallel process by insinuating ourselves into the productions. What would it mean for us to relinquish tyrannical control over the project?"



'As if the staircase grew bored with being steps' ... the main staircase at Battersea Arts Centre. Photograph: Nicholas Hartwright

The answer is the creation of a magical place that surprises at every turn. In a phased process of keyhole surgery, the firm has opened up new routes through the building, carved out new performing spaces, inserted office accommodation and actors' bedrooms, and raised the number of rooms and areas in which to stage performances from four to 35. Just as all this was reaching completion in 2015, BAC's grand hall burned to the ground, leaving only two gable walls standing. But the fire-charred relic provided an additional opportunity: the hall has been carefully resurrected and added to, creating one of London's most spectacular interiors.

The unusual nature of the process makes more sense when you meet David Jubb, BAC's energetic artistic director since 2004. "I'd never done a capital project before," he says, describing his alarm at inheriting his predecessor's comprehensive £30m masterplan for the building. "I visited a lot of other recent theatre projects and all the artistic directors had this haunted expression in their eyes, as if they'd been scarred by the process. It seems that there's a general idea that a building is 'done to you', and you can't change it."



Goodbye dead pigeons ... BAC's revamped courtyard. Photograph: Philip Vile

Not a pair for following conventions, Jubb and Tompkins tore up the plans and embarked on a collaborative investigation of the building, looking for opportunities and testing out ideas. The seminal production of [The Masque of the Red Death](#) in 2007, by the immersive theatre company Punchdrunk, was a game-changer, infiltrating more parts of the complex than most people knew existed. The company opened up the building's 16 chimneys, tore down partitions and created new connections in a process that has continued over the years and been progressively formalised. Every part of the building is now kitted out with ceiling hanging points and electrical outlets, so any space can be converted into a theatre in a couple of hours.

Some of the most successful interventions are the cheapest: a line of high-backed restaurant-style bench seats and tables now climb up the ceremonial stairs in the main entrance, draped with folded stair carpet, as if the staircase grew bored with being steps and rose up to become dining booths. It is a brilliant moment of multi-levelled social theatre to be greeted with, matched only by the chaos of the new creche, where kids tumble across Teletubby mounds.



Aftermath ... what the architects were faced with after a fire in 2015 razed BAC's grand hall. Photograph: Haworth Tompkins

Similar spatial drama is found in an old courtyard in the centre of the building, previously cluttered with lean-to structures and dead pigeons. It has been converted into a compact outdoor theatre, with vertical steel gantries and removable seating, its proportions giving the feel of a bear-pit. With layers of spectators peering down from stacks of balconies, and even from a deck on the roof, it has the vertiginous intensity of a Shakespearean theatre. The new walls have been finished in white glazed brick, framing the original red-brick building like an archaeological imprint, the facades studded with windows where performers might appear at any minute, while a raised floor allows for more trap-door surprises.

One wing of the attic, meanwhile, has been converted into light and airy office accommodation for BAC's 65 staff, who seem relieved to finally have a permanent

home where they won't be displaced by itinerant performances (or not yet). Along the other wing, the architects have inserted eight twin bedrooms, a boon given that rent is one of the biggest barriers to staging work in London. The basement has also been transformed into the Scratch Hub, a place to incubate start-up business from the surrounding area, continuing the strong outreach programme with nearby council estates, a big part of Jubb's inclusive agenda over the past decade.



The main entrance of Battersea Arts Centre in south London.
Photograph: Morley von Sternberg

“This is not a place to come and experience the future of theatre,” he says. “It is for people to come and show us what the future of theatre might be. It’s about enabling people to shape it for themselves.” His vision is in keeping with the radical history of the building, a focal point for the trade union movement, the women’s suffrage campaign and the election of the first black mayor of a London borough – Battersea – in 1913. “It has always been a place where new ideas have been made.”

The sense of permissiveness and possibility is embodied in Haworth Tompkins’s approach. Details such as the new signage perched on a giant steel I-beam, or the exposed scarring in the wall, where an artist has highlighted the marks left by chasing the electrical wiring into the plaster, say that this is a building in flux even after the architects have left.

The climax of old and new comes in the restored grand hall, beginning with a prelude in the atmospheric corridors at the back of the building, where layers of scorched plaster and mosaic flooring have the air of something from Pompeii. They are illuminated by rows of cast silicone light fittings, which look like hand-blown gas lamps, but will survive being walloped by a ladder, while sturdy oak doors lead into the hall.

Where a barrel-vaulted ceiling encrusted with plaster mouldings once sprung, now hangs a diaphanous veil of plywood, perforated with the geometry of the original mouldings. The layers of bolted timber echo the depth of the original plaster, while

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the whole thing can be illuminated from the front or behind, like a theatrical gauze curtain, to reveal the hidden workings in the roof cavity. It is a startling sight, possessing the quality of fine lacework gently draped over the burnt-out carcass.

“After the fire, we were faced with the question of quite how much to restore,” says Tompkins. “We thought of the building as a kind of architectural tape recorder of everything that’s happened to it over the years – physically, politically, socially – so decided that putting it all back would have been ludicrous.”

It was the right decision. The scorched surface of exposed brick and plaster lends the room an atmospheric patina that it simply didn’t have in its previous state, while the new veiled ceiling allows all of the technical requirements to be incorporated above, as well as improving the acoustic with the additional volume. New triple-glazed windows will also allow BAC to put on amplified events here without annoying its neighbours. Like the rest of the rambling complex, it provides an inspiring stage for whatever the next generation of directors want to throw at it.