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Ornament

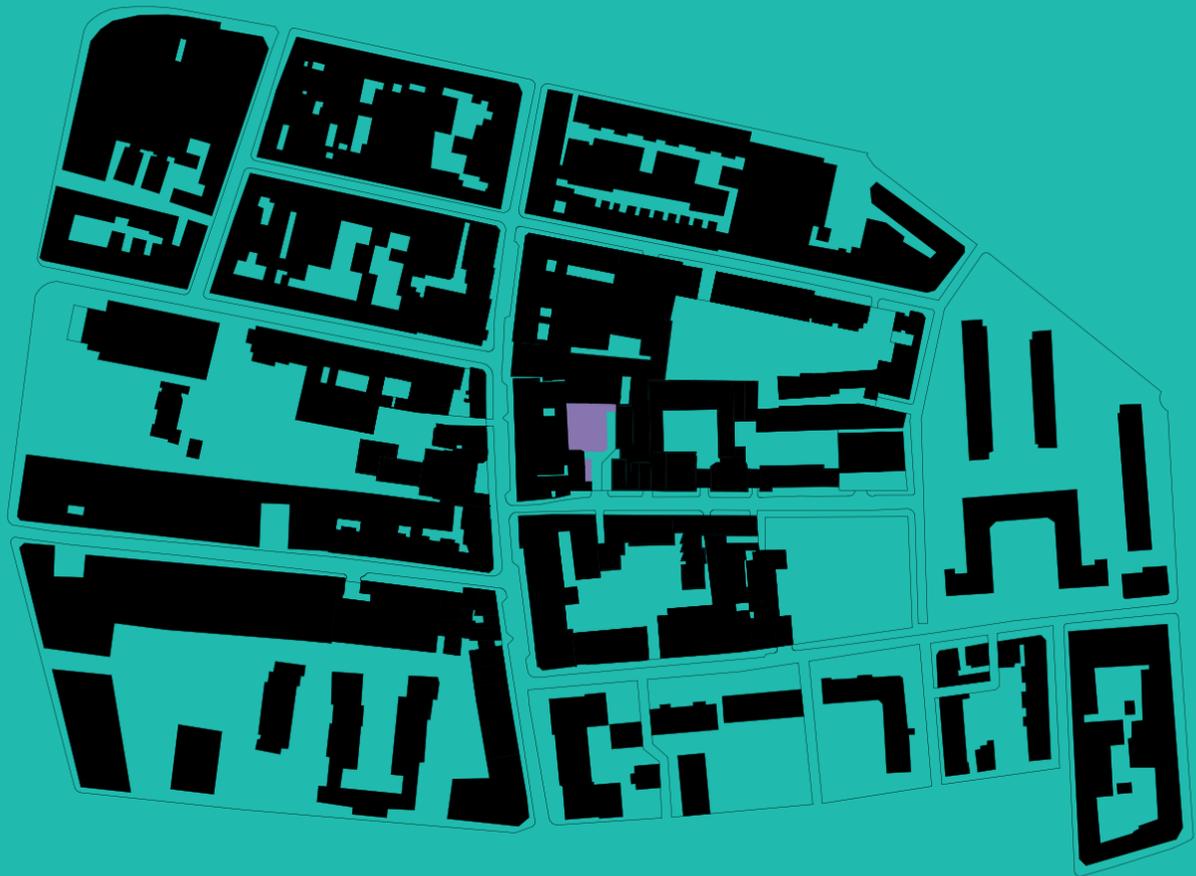




Building study

A SHRINE TO THEMSELVES

SIRS Architects has converted a former brewery off London's Brick Lane into the Gilbert & George Centre, dedicated to the work of the distinctive East End-based artists



SIRS Architects has converted a former industrial building in London's East End into the Gilbert & George Centre, breathing new life into the area's historic fabric and immersing visitors in the unique world of Gilbert & George. The former brewery site houses three exhibition spaces, a film room, reception, art storage and service areas as well as a caretaker's apartment. To create sufficient space for the transformation within a restricted site, a new basement level was created beneath the building's existing footprint and a new above-ground side extension was added.

Words Rob Wilson
Photography Prudence Cuming

It's difficult not to start with the entrance gates. You can't miss their florid green filigree as you approach down a side street from the messy drag of Brick Lane in Spitalfields. Fabricated in cast iron and painted in a punchy green with gilded accents, they mark the entrance to the new Gilbert & George Centre. The centre has been set up by the celebrated art couple – who have lived in the area for the last 50 years – as 'a place

in London ... for everyone to convene from across the world to see the art of Gilbert & George'.

Consisting of three galleries, an introductory film space and reception-cum-reading room, the centre is free to enter, and is described as 'the artist's gift to the community of London (which) underscores the artist's intention to ensure that "art is for all"'. It seems a generous and an egotistical gesture in equal parts – much like the gates themselves.

These have something of the look of the florid tangle of the Queen Mother's Gate in Hyde Park, widely ridiculed when revealed in 1993 and memorably compared to HRH's own cleavage. Here, the thicket of bolted cast iron forms a huge double G, although there's a small royal flourish too: a gold monogram of Charles III inserted in the centre – presumably substituted during the last stages of fabrication. A bit like their artwork, with its often boldly clashing colours, explicit imagery and repeated scatological motifs, it's unclear if the gates are meant totally seriously. Yet at the same time they are hard to ignore.

Certainly, beyond their ornamental filigree, the centre itself, which sits across a small

courtyard, acts as a contrastingly sober foil: a solid composition of interlocking blocks in yellow-brown brick, accented with red brick detailing and mustard window frames – a rich but soft colour palette reminiscent of the tones of the brown to dun-coloured matching suits that the artists perennially wear.

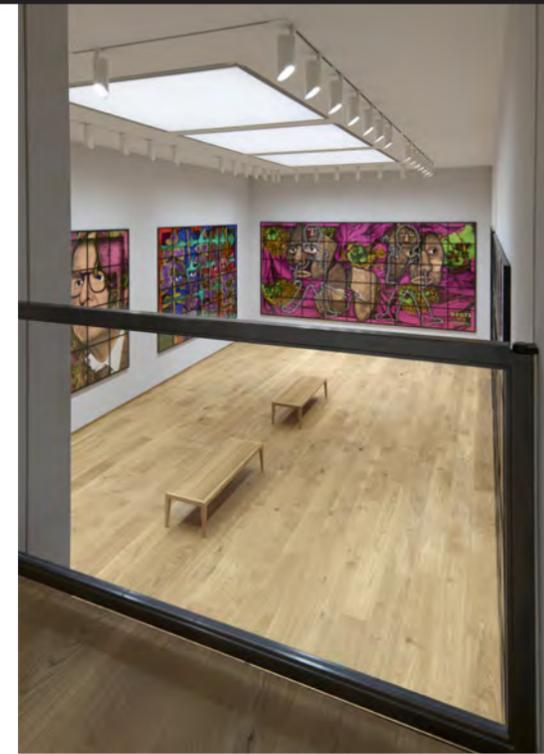
The site, which they purchased in 2015, was once occupied by a small brewery, one of several in the area which, like the larger Truman's Brewery across Brick Lane, crowded to the east of the City of London because the latter did not allow their construction within its bounds. Having passed through a number of uses, the remaining early 19th-century building was recently converted into a house and studio in the 1970s.

The site sits within the Brick Lane and Fournier Street Conservation Area and is tightly hemmed in on all sides. Indeed, a total of 37 party wall agreements were needed, in particular due to the construction of the centre's new basement, with building then delayed by the Covid pandemic.

The entrance courtyard feels like an oasis of calm as you enter off the bustle of Brick Lane, its surface permeably paved in SUDS-compliant cobbles. Facing you is the

Project data

Start on site June 2020 | **Completion** December 2022 | **Gross internal floor area** 602m² | **Gross internal + external floor area** 757m² | **Construction cost** Undisclosed | **Architect** SIRS Architects | **Client** The Gilbert & George Centre | **Structural engineer** Sweco | **M&E consultant** Bob Costello Associates | **Quantity surveyor** RSQS | **Principal designer** SIRS Architects | **CDM adviser** AGA | **Approved building inspector** Assent Building Control | **Contract administrator** CHPK | **Party wall consultant** Osprey Building Consulting | **Lighting consultant** Arup | **Fire engineer** The Fire Surgery | **Transport Consultant** Caneparo | **Main contractor** Westgreen



gable end of the original brewery building, fronted by a stumpier block punctured by two domestic-sized windows. To the left, stepped back, sits a new gallery block, its blank expanse of brickwork relieved by a simple diagonal weave of red bricks with large timber service doors occupying its base.

A main entrance to the centre is not immediately obvious. But as you enter, the wall you pass along to the left steps back with a cantilevered roof canopy oversailing a set of glazed doors. These lead into a space where introductory films to the centre and Gilbert & George's work can be viewed. This small, elongated space is simply arranged with a wide oak bench sitting opposite a screen, establishing an architectural language of chunky timber joinery set against white cube plasterboard walls – made from recycled gypsum – picked up again in the centre's main galleries.

The centre's entrance from here is diagonally across the main courtyard, off a cobbled mews-like space that extends down the side of the original building. It means the courtyard as a whole acts like a generous entrance lobby in what is otherwise a relatively constricted site.

The actual entrance door sits in the middle of a grid of the original brewery's windows, their new timber frames now zingily painted a mustard colour. The surrounding patched brickwork, showing the knocked-about history of the building, has all been meticulously repointed and restored. As too, has the small incongruous, Pomo-like bay-windowed extension to one side, dating from the building's 70s domestic iteration. Its ground floor now contains the entrance to a caretaker's flat. Overall, it's a charmingly off-key composition of parts, the

scale and detailing a mix of the domestic and the industrial.

The mustard colour continues in the panelled walls of the low front reception space. Its structure of beamed timber ceiling and cast-iron columns, dating from the original brewery, have been carefully restored and left exposed. It's furnished with robust built-in oak shelving and furniture, displaying a mix of catalogues, prints and other G&G-branded items, the aesthetic pitched somewhere between study space and shop.

The low-lighting, domestic scale and rich colouring were apparently designed in part to chime with that found in the rooms of the artists' own home, an 18th-century house in nearby Fournier Street. This will eventually open to the public as the other half of the centre, with this space acting as something of a transition space between the house and galleries.

Certainly, the sense of release is palpable as you enter the 6m-high ground-floor gallery, accessed past a small stairwell and art elevator. It's classic white-cube in aesthetic and feels a bit like a ship in a bottle in scale compared with the building as experienced up to that point. This is the largest of the three galleries, its size clearly required for hanging some of the artists' larger works, which often take the form of large multi-panelled grid assemblages.

This gallery occupies the top part of the new extension, with another lower ceilinged gallery sitting directly below in a new basement. A basement has also been excavated out from underneath the original building, allowing extra space for ancillary storage racking as well as plant and toilets.

A third smaller gallery, similarly rectangular if skinnier in footprint, sits on the first

Architect's view

Situated on a constrained site within a conservation area, the conversion and extension of the former brewery building required consultation and approval from a local heritage organisation in addition to statutory planning consents and 37 different party wall agreements – one of the largest party wall awards in the UK in 2020.

The building's design prioritises sustainable use of energy, water and material resources, taking into account socio-economic and life-cycle factors. Passive design principles included reducing the admittance of UV light and solar radiation into the building, incorporating high thermal mass into the building structure for stable internal conditions and using a high-performance, airtight building envelope to minimise energy demands for heating and cooling. Newly constructed building parts were entirely externally insulated, including retention walls and below ground level slabs, adding further complexity to a challenging structural scheme and construction methodology.

To reduce the carbon footprint, a range of active design principles was adopted, including a digital building management system with weather compensation, low-energy LED lighting with presence detection and automated control, an optimised recirculation ventilation system, silicate bound photocatalytic paints and the use of harvested rainwater for horticultural irrigation. We avoided petrochemically derived products for building components wherever possible.

Further environmentally conscious design features include permeable courtyard paving to support sustainable urban drainage, locally sourced and recycled materials, minimised demolition and the reuse of site material. We also collaborated with local companies and craftsmen and used in-house art storage facilities.

Manuel Irsara, co-founder, SIRS Architects





Engineer's view

The structural works necessitated a carefully executed construction sequence in a challenging confined site. The work involved constructing a basement under the full footprint of an 1820s two-storey brick building, which was originally a brewery. The excavation was approximately 4.75m deep and necessitated underpinning party walls to avoid undermining the 14 adjacent properties. Vibration and movement monitoring ensured the basement excavation and construction would not adversely affect these adjoining properties.

The overall construction approach involved a top-down methodology with mini-piles used to support the ground-floor slab until the basement slab and walls could be completed. This allowed construction work to proceed both above and below ground level simultaneously. The existing brick walls were supported on permanent steel stools that allowed the ground-floor slab to be formed around them without the need for temporary props and needles. The timber trussed roof of the brewery structure was also temporarily supported during construction, and strengthened with an internal steel frame which provided lateral support to the walls, with lateral restraints also installed at roof level to tie the walls to the timber trusses improving stability.

The basement was designed to be waterproof in accordance with type B (waterproof concrete) and type C (drained cavity) protection to BS 8102. A rigid insulation was used beneath the basement slab and between the underpinning and reinforced concrete liner wall to completely envelope the reinforced-concrete basement structure.
John Graham, structural engineer and technical director, Sweco

floor of the older building, distinguished by the exposed roof trusses of the original pitched roof.

There are few off notes in the detailing: the glass front to the first-floor balcony overlooking the largest gallery seems at odds with the solid, tactile materiality of timber used elsewhere, or the cast-iron railings to the stairs. But in general, these are impressively detailed and highly serviced art spaces, tailored skilfully into a relatively small building envelope. In terms of their servicing, they are extremely highly specified with an extraordinary amount of technical gubbins seamlessly packed into the thickness of the ceilings and hanging walls, integrating insulated plenums for ventilation, lighting, security shutters and fire curtains.

The design has many low carbon and low-energy features, including highly efficient plant managed by a digital building management system, a super-insulated envelope, low-energy LED lighting, recycled gypsum used for hanging walls, and grey water reuse. But overall, despite the major element of skilfully handled retrofit/restoration, the digging down of a new basement rather undermines the green message as does the exclusively artificial lighting for the three galleries, despite two having the potential for skylights to allow natural light. It's particularly perverse that the restored existing first-floor windows in the old brewery building sit blocked behind the hanging walls. While the need to maximise wall space is obviously important, the chance to play with and vary the character and atmosphere of the three different gallery spaces has been missed.

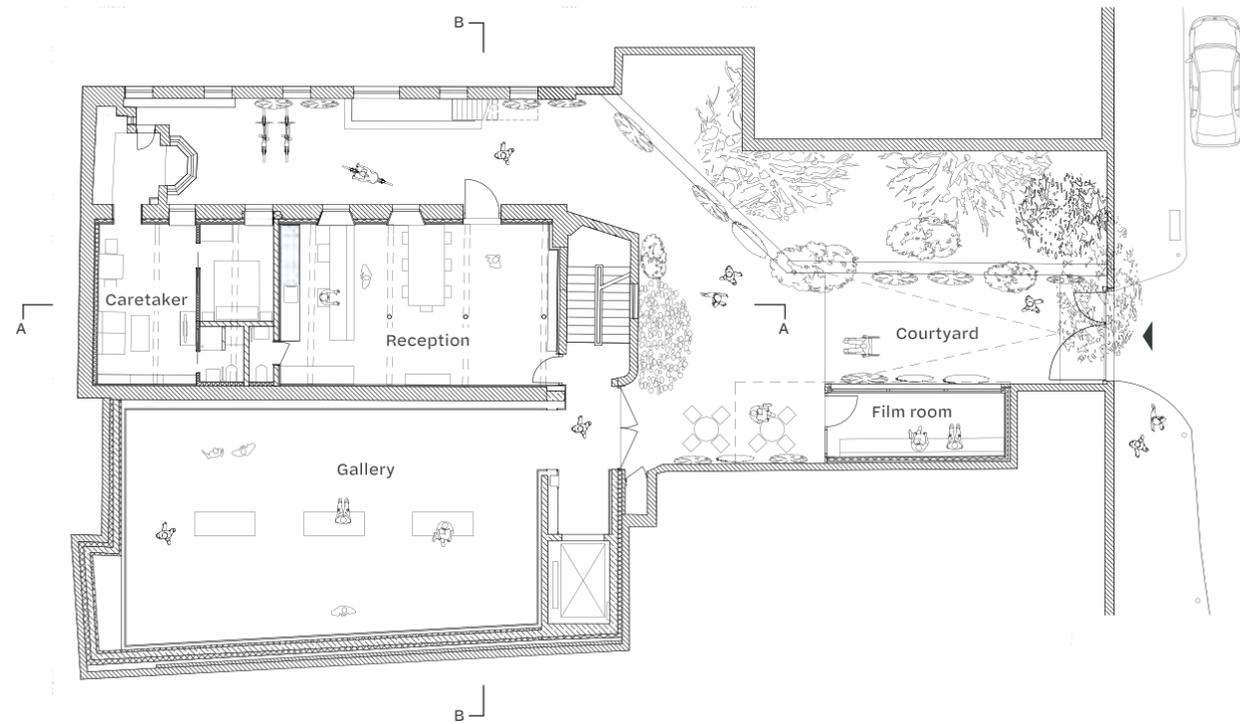
This no doubt came from the artists' original briefing as to the conditions in which they prefer their work to be viewed. It just seems a pity that three very similar, highly controlled, artificially lit environments are the only ones provided for the works to chime off. For all the immaculate retrofit, which is highly impressive technically and very well executed and detailed, there's a slight zombie sense here of a building animated to look like it has been restored to life but just a little dead atmospherically. Then again any shrine to self is always likely to feel somewhat claustrophobic.

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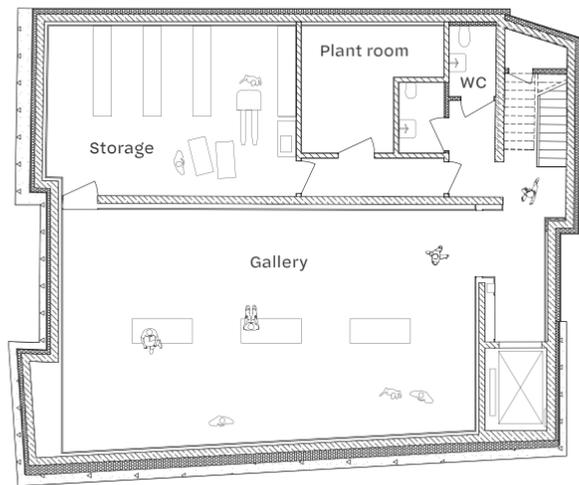
Performance data

Percentage of floor area with daylight factor >2% Not calculated | **Percentage of floor area with daylight factor >5%** Not calculated | **On-site energy generation** 0 | **Heating and hot water load** Not calculated | **Total energy load** Not calculated | **Primary energy use (regulated)** 113.75 kWh/m²/year (calculated according to Building Regulations 2022) | **Carbon emissions (all)** 16.27 kgCO₂/m²/yr | **Annual mains water consumption** Not calculated (gallery has no occupants, only visiting public) | **Airtightness at 50Pa** 3 m³/hr/m² | **Overall thermal bridging heat transfer coefficient (Y value)** Not calculated | **Average U-value** 0.2 W/m²/K | **Embodied/whole-life carbon** Not calculated | **Predicted design life in years** 60+ | **EPC rating** B 44

Ground floor plan



Basement floor plan



Client's view

We are proud to have 5A Heneage Street as the new home of the Gilbert & George Centre. It has been a rewarding collaboration layered with the additional challenge of a global pandemic.

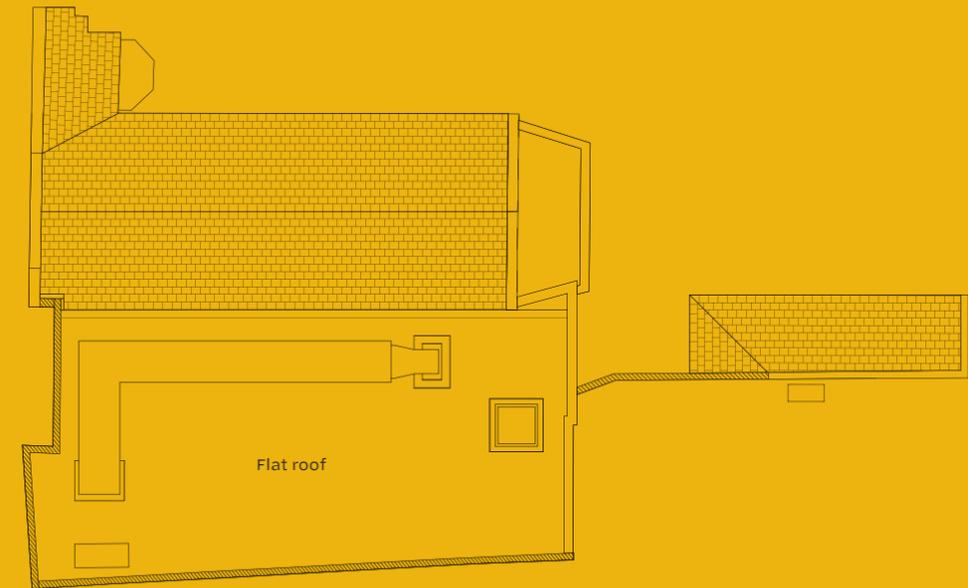
Our brief followed three key criteria. First, we wished to preserve the unique charm of a 19th-century brewery building with cobbled courtyard that was so evident in the neglected and much-altered structure. Second, we needed a modern gallery space of sufficient scale to display Gilbert & George's works while at the same time not stealing the visitor's attention away from the art on display. Finally, we wanted the structure and systems to use best design practices so the gallery was efficient to operate.

SIRS has achieved our objectives with a clean design that is exciting in its attention to detail and yet simple to behold with all the moving parts concealed from the visitor. The building has retained original features and materials where possible and used traditional materials when replacement has been necessary. The entrance retains all the charm of a 19th-century dwelling and only once inside do you realise the scale of the project and get your first glimpse of modernity.

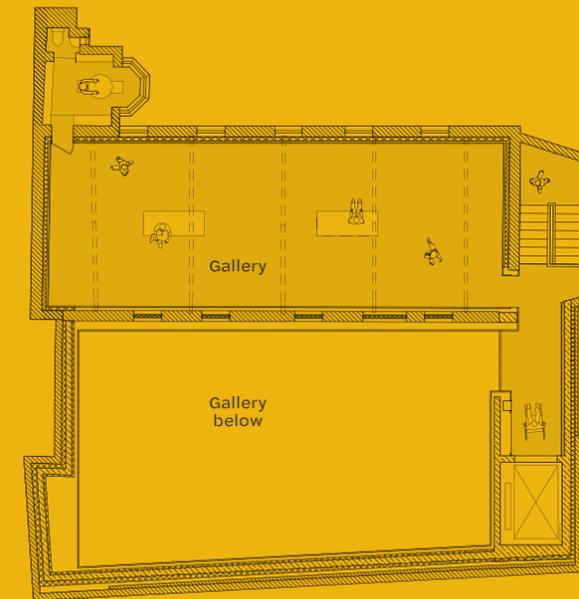
We look forward to opening our doors and hope that audiences will enjoy visiting the centre for many years to come.

Nigel J Fox, trustee, the Gilbert & George Centre

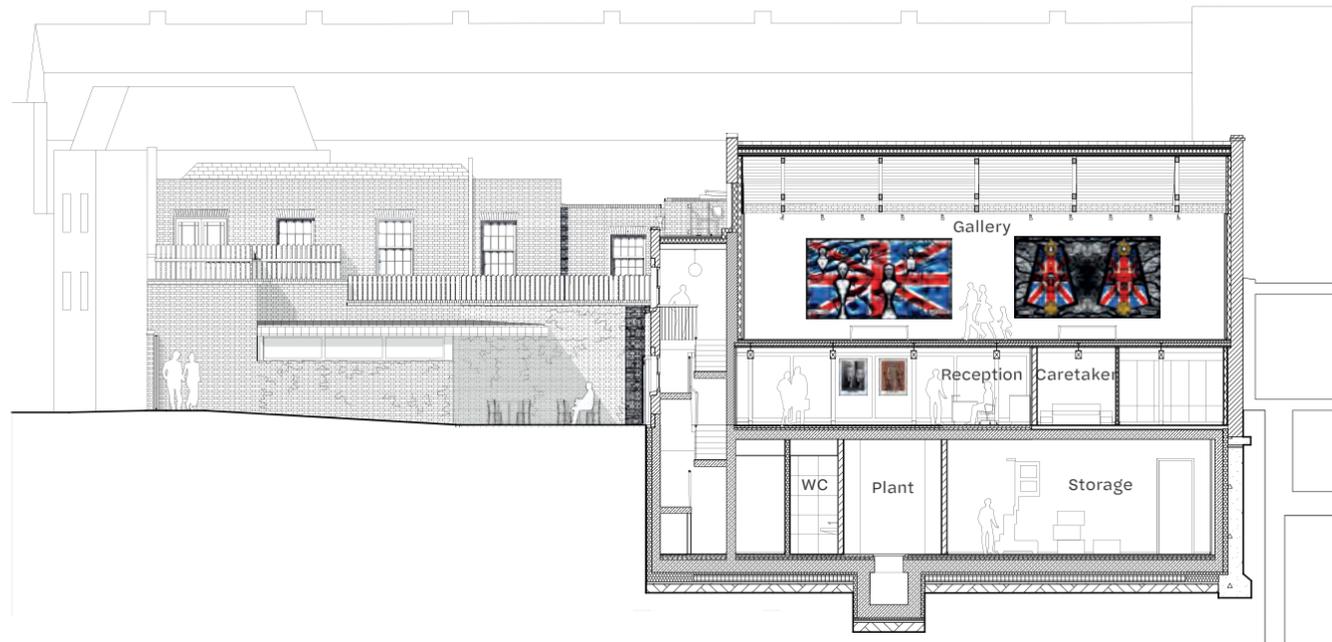
Roof plan



First floor plan

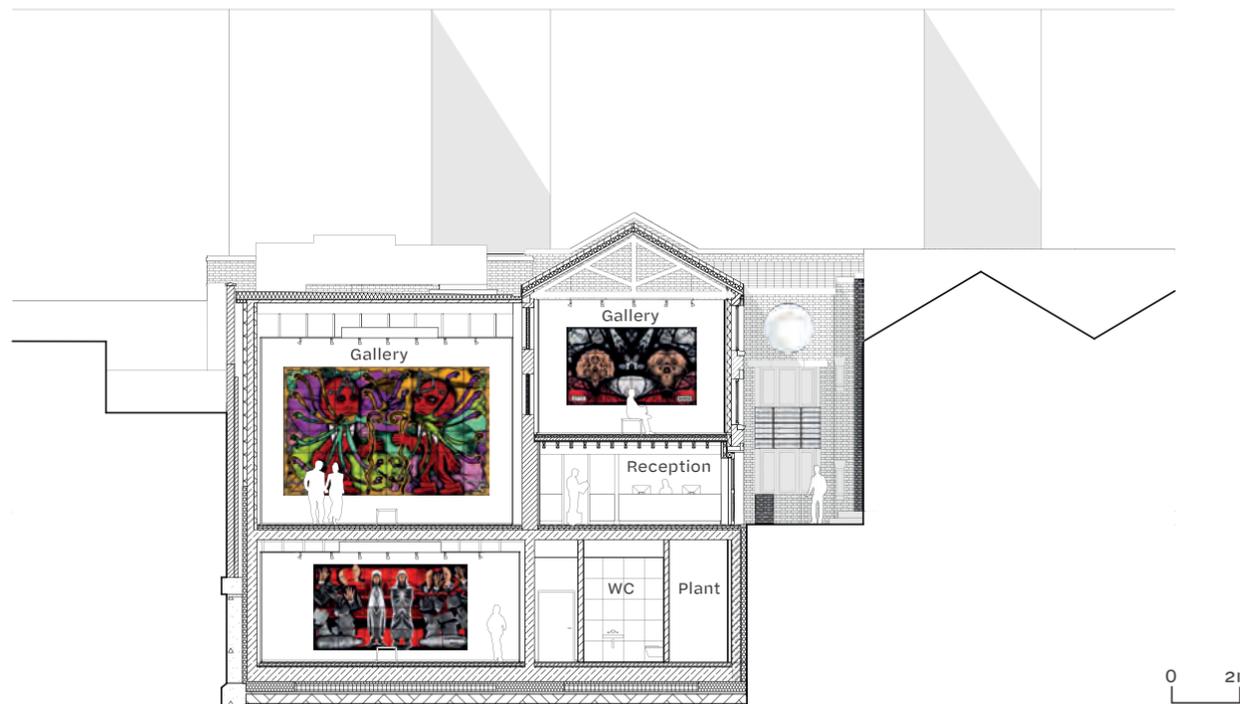


Section A-A



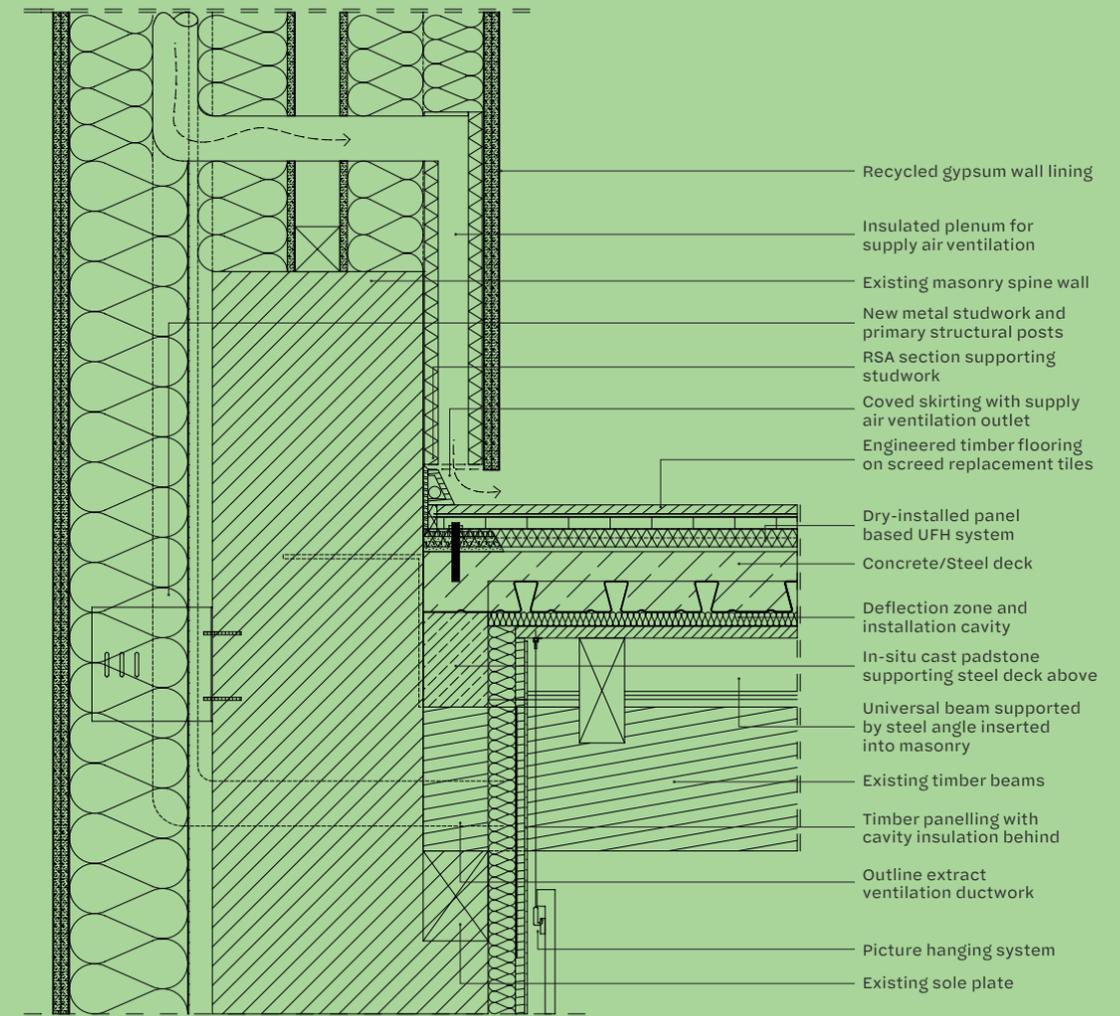
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Section B-B



0 2m

Floor to wall junction detail



0 2m

Working detail

One of the project's key objectives was to convert the former brewery building into contemporary exhibition spaces while retaining as much of the existing building structure and components as possible. Where new building components and services were required, these were concealed to enhance the visitor experience.

The existing internal masonry wall between the existing building and the new side

extension was adapted as a spine wall with new dry-lined stud walls on either side. This could conceal new primary structural elements, roof drainage and M&E services, while still being able to serve all levels of both the existing and new parts of the building.

To support modern gallery loads, a new steel/concrete deck was installed between ground and first floor levels, supported by new universal beams fixed via steel angles to the existing

spine wall. Engineered oak flooring planks were laid on screed replacement tiles and a dry-installed panel based underfloor heating system. The reception's historic timber beams, joists and ceiling boards were retained, with new services concealed behind the existing wall and ceiling linings.

The first-floor exhibition space, beneath the brewery's original vaulted ceiling, features new recycled plaster wall linings

with a floating appearance to differentiate the new linings from the existing building fabric.

All wall cavities were filled with mineral wool to improve acoustic and fire performance. Ventilation was concealed both in the recessed skirting of the new lining and through the open top of the studwork wall so as not to detract from the artwork displayed on the walls.

Manuel Irsara, co-founder, SIRS Architects