



THEATRE, LONDON
ARCHITECT
HAWORTH TOMPKINS

By choosing the Young Vic as the capital's inaugural Building of the Year, and by giving it one of 14 National Awards, the RIBA's Awards group and its London region have sent a powerful message about what constitutes excellence. In a culture where icons abound, this recognition rightly gives value to a building where its symbolism has a consistency and integrity with users and context, rather than its author's 'trademark'; it is a project in which the architect has shown an intimate understanding of a client's ambitions and needs. Or to put it another way, has understood the client's secret fear: that which it is difficult to define by words in a brief.

The Young Vic has become emblematic of a very particular theatre company. A company that has gained an international reputation for constant re-invention, in a building that had attained what Steve Tompkins refers to as an attuned state of the ordinary. Since its construction in 1970, Bill Howell's temporary building (originally intended to last just five years) had, despite its stripped down essential qualities, survived as one of the most flexible, durable and robust auditoria of its kind. In considering the need to adapt, expand and rationalise, theatre director David Lan's secret fear was that this project could potentially lose the spirit of the existing. 'New theatres are generally horrible', he says, even while recognising that he could not afford to stunt the project's potential by allowing nostalgia to lead the process. The architects understood this and empathised with his dilemma, recalling how they began the process with confidence and trepidation: confidence that their client had a clear identity and values, and trepidation about how to improve a delicate ecosystem without simply extrapolating that which already existed. Their experience on other significant theatre projects such as the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square (AR June 2000) stood them in good stead. From the outset the architect was fully engaged, and there was an intimacy of relationship with the theatre company that gave the client confidence to be able to 'just trust him' when intuitive decisions did not necessarily make clear sense. This hands on approach was most effective when it came to issues of cost and value, with architect and client

- 1 From left to right the assembled masses of the Young Vic: the rehearsal block in wavy brick; the steel and timber foyer; the retained old butcher's shop; and the adapted auditorium, featuring the work of artist Clem Crosby.
- 2 The wavy brick changes dramatically with light and shade.
- 3 Inside the old butcher's shop, existing surfaces have been retained.



2

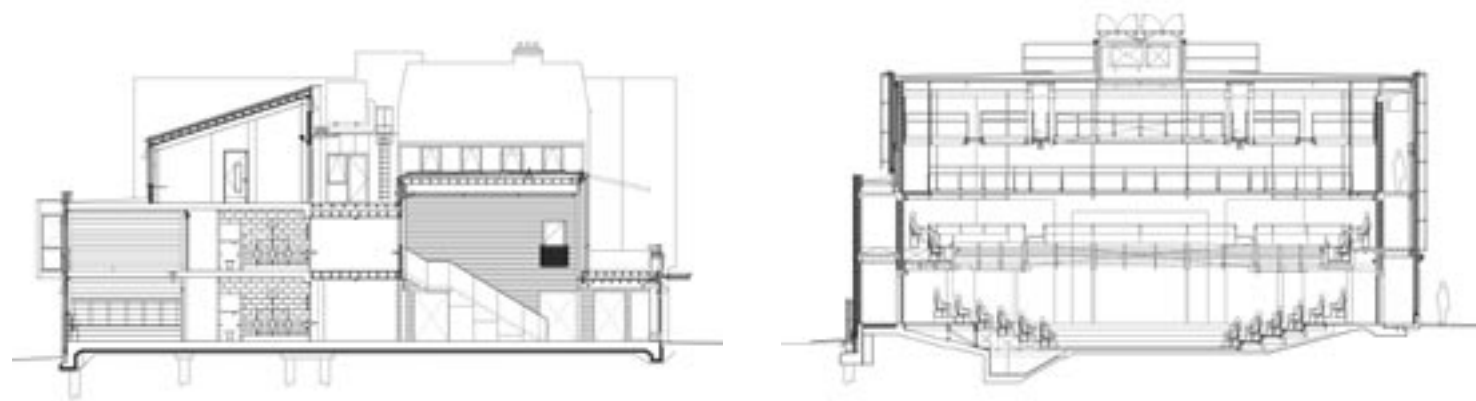
YOUNG AT HEART

One of London's groundbreaking landmarks of modern theatre has been inventively reborn.



3

1



section through changing rooms, workshop, office and foyer

section through auditorium (rebuilt above gallery level, with new perimeter circulation)

THEATRE, LONDON
 ARCHITECT
HAWORTH TOMPKINS

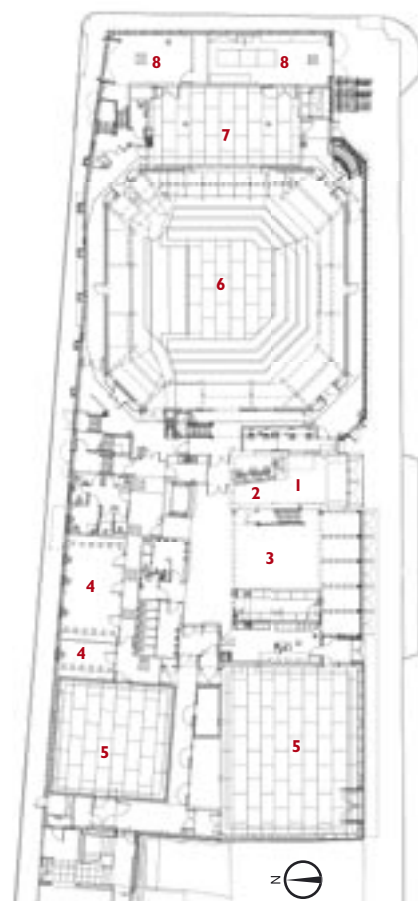
- 1 entrance
- 2 tickets
- 3 foyer/bar
- 4 dressing rooms
- 5 rehearsal studios
- 6 auditorium
- 7 workshop
- 8 loading bay
- 9 mezzanine
- 10 external terrace (public)
- 11 event room
- 12 green room
- 13 wardrobe
- 14 offices
- 15 external terrace (private)



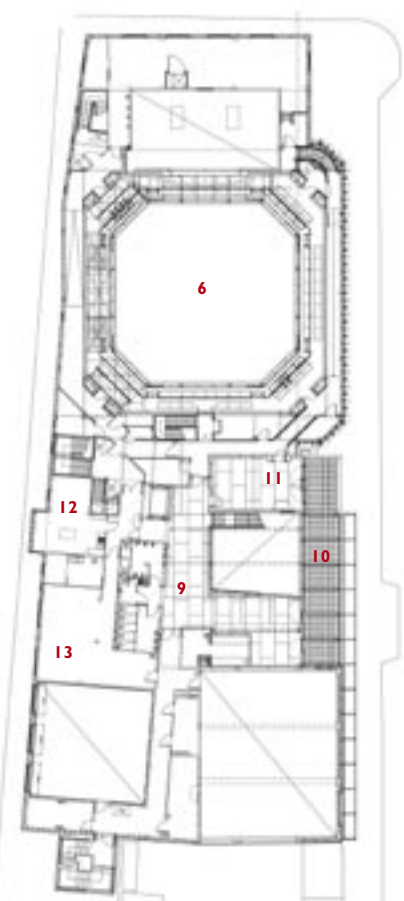
existing long section, showing Bill Howell's 1970 design



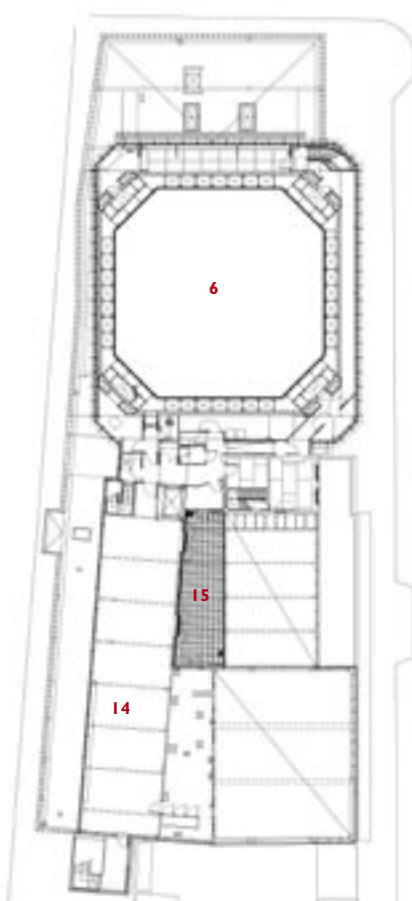
long section today



ground floor plan (scale approx 1:750)



first floor plan



second floor plan



4 Looking from the butcher's shop, the double height foyer becomes the hub of the theatre.



5



6

THEATRE, LONDON
ARCHITECT
HAWORTH TOMPKINS

pursuing a cost neutral design where the why was more important than the what. By exploiting the venue's as found value, limited funds were deployed to maximum effect, maintaining the characteristic leanness and innocence of the original that people clearly valued. The old butcher's shop, for example, survived again, having been originally retained by Howell. Today, as the grit in the oyster, its shop-front interior forms the fulcrum in plan, and its fabric provides a painterly patina that beautifully gives continuity to the theatre's history.

Understanding the whole building to be a resource, the conglomerate manner in which parts were re-assembled was key. The architects did not want to create an iconic singular monolith; it now has two anchors – a brick rehearsal block and an upgraded and expanded auditorium (the old one wrapped by a new layer of circulation and increased in height). A new foyer stitches fragments together, forming a place of public congregation in which up to 800 people can be brought together. Through the form and closeness of elements, adjacencies in plan work extremely hard to produce an intensity of activity that extends the original theatre's essential character. Instead of rationalising the conflicts and clashes of programme that past visitors may recall from the original, where front and back of house were compressed into a skinny plan, Lan made it explicit that these uncomfortable pressures were part of the Young Vic's essential character. There is still no stage door, and despite there being nine potential points of entry, all users pass through the butcher's shop.

As public buildings, theatres need to state their specific place in the city; in this instance both architect and client recognised that the context of the Young Vic had matured from back street to high street. This did not mean that the theatre had to adopt a new brand to respond to new neighbours, but rather that it should respond appropriately to the context of the place. As Tompkins speculates, 'In consideration of the Royal Court and the Young Vic, if you were to transpose them by the short distance that separates them from Chelsea to Lambeth, both would lose something. Just as you may feel insincere going into a direct, basic structure such as the Young Vic in Chelsea, so too would the Royal Court seem too urbane and polished in Lambeth.' This notion says so much about the architect's sophisticated reading of theatre and the city.

If the popularisation of architecture has, as some fear, resulted in a dumbing down of architectural commentary, where all that matters is a diagram or a simile – a gherkin, a testicle, a walkie-talkie – this building is a welcome antidote; subtle, specific and sophisticated; physically and essentially grounded. So if, as is hoped, the Young Vic does proceed to the Stirling Prize shortlist, Channel Four's television producers will have to decide precisely how to communicate the essential qualities of this place with viewers at home. Then again, former TV producer David Lan may well be prepared to offer some advice. **ROB GREGORY**



7



8

Architect
Haworth Tompkins, London
Project architects
Steve Tompkins, Roger Watts,
Matt Watts, Katy Marks
Structural engineer
Jane Wernick Associates
Services engineer
Max Fordham LLP
Theatre consultant
Studio Todd Lecat & Charcoalblue
for Theatre Projects
Photographs
Richard Bryant/arcaid, 1, 3, 4, 6, 9
Philip Vile, 2, 5, 7, 8



5
New elements have their own robust beauty. Nothing here is ad-hoc or haphazard.
6
Care and attention to detail extends throughout rehearsal spaces where precise and considered details help create the right ambiance for focused exercises and performance.

7
At first floor level, foyer extends out onto streetside terrace.
8
The auditorium has more height and extensive new technical provision.
9
New and old combine effortlessly, thanks to the tireless work of the design team.

9