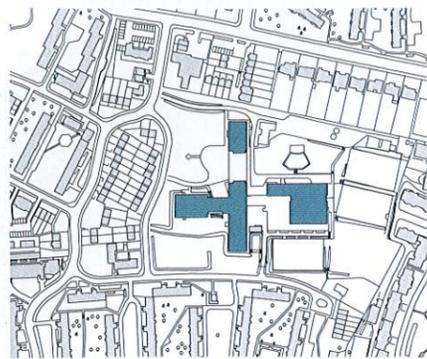


Building study

Hawkins\Brown Ark Putney Academy





Hawkins\Brown was appointed by Wandsworth Council to work with Lend Lease to redevelop the former Elliott School into a new academy which would meet the requirements of 21st century teaching. Originally opened in 1956, the flagship comprehensive designed by London County Council Architect's Department had fallen into a state of disrepair, no longer servicing the needs of its occupants. The reimagined academy delivers the functionality of a new school, while retaining and celebrating the building's historic identity.

Appraisal Merlin Fulcher
Photography Tim Crocker

Elliott wasn't my first choice of secondary school. And as a 12-year-old pupil on my first day in 1998 the building failed to make a positive impression. I thought it looked like a giant factory.

But gradually the building (which had been Grade II-listed in 1993) and its generous landscaped surroundings grew on me, stirring an appreciation of architecture. Simultaneously monumental, elegant and expansive, it was inspired by Scandinavian welfare state design as a prototype for post-war Britain's egalitarian education system. Designed by London County Council architects, the purpose-built comprehensive was among a wave of large Modernist schools built in the capital to cater for the educational needs of the post-war baby boomers. The futuristic campus provided for 2,210 students and 100 staff. Completed in 1956, it featured traditional classrooms, a large assembly hall, drama theatre, amphitheatre and a wide range of technology studios.

Vocational oddities, arising from the non-selective and progressive pedagogical model, also included a greenhouse, motor workshop and even three mock apartments where pupils practised home economics. As a brave riposte to the class separation of the 11+ Tripartite System, the architecture was unashamedly socialist and ambitious. Looking back from our present era of austerity, however, its vision appears tragically optimistic.

When I arrived, Elliott had about 1,800 pupils, drawn from an uneven mixture of local working-class and middle-class families. The vocational facilities had fizzled away but the building and its hilltop site amid

Putney's affluent suburban streets and leafy council estates was largely as built. It was a boisterous place where students with musical abilities – myself included – frequently barricaded themselves into practice rooms for safety during lunch. From these rehearsal studios headlining bands such as Four Tet, Hot Chip, Burial, The Maccabees and Mercury Prize-winning The XX all eventually emerged.

In the sixth form block the debates which followed guest lectures by MPs, campaigners, ambassadors and QCs sewed seeds of political awareness and intellectual curiosity. My career path began when a school governor who was managing editor of Channel 4 News provided me with work experience, which inspired me to become a journalist. Leaving Elliott aged 18 I realised my first impressions of seven years earlier had been wrong. Rather than a factory, the school had shown itself to be a modern-day Bauhaus and a place where, I believed, the compassionate and multi-disciplinary leaders needed for a better world would continue to be formed.

Unfortunately, the school's bold vision, its built fabric, and the intellectual and creative ebullience I witnessed there failed to be maintained by its long-term owners and stewards – Conservative-led Wandsworth Council. By 2009, declining standards, falling pupil numbers and deteriorating conditions saw Elliott placed in special measures, and emergency hoardings had been erected around its crumbling curtain walls.

A much-needed £40 million restoration was shelved when Conservative education secretary Michael Gove axed Labour's £55 billion Building Schools for the Future programme six years ago. Controversial plans were then announced shortly before the London 2012 Olympic Games to transform the school into an academy and sell 40 per cent of its site – including the tennis courts, garden and playing fields – for housing. Intended to raise funds for a £22 million restoration, the proposal was robustly opposed by The Twentieth Century Society, Docomomo, RIBA president Angela Brady and Janet Bancroft, whose late husband John Bancroft was on the school's original architectural team.

But despite their criticism, numerous protests by staff and former students, a 55,000-strong petition and opposition from Gove's own school playing fields advisory panel, the project was approved. Within months Elliott was replaced with a new and rebranded entity – the Ark Putney Academy.

With every counter-argument rejected, the disposal and restoration project – drawn up by Hawkins\Brown and the council's strategic partner Lend Lease – saved the building from the de-listing and demolition option preferred by some Wandsworth councillors. The council's willingness to simultaneously spend £13.5 million of its own cash transforming the Edwardian Bolingbroke Hospital into a free school serving the country's most debt-fuelled property hotspot gives insight into its priorities at the time.

Notwithstanding this regrettable

Client's view

I am delighted with the considered approach of the architects to the project. Speaking as a history teacher as well as the school principal, the Grade II-listed school building is significant as an example of a purpose-built comprehensive school promoting social mobility in the 1950s and '60s. The modern design of the school allowed for a wealth of subjects to be taught to a wide range of students from different backgrounds, whether it was traditional academic subjects, design and technology, the arts, or sport. I am so pleased that the architects were sympathetic to historical features such as the stairwells, the glass facade, the 'elephant' playground and the amphitheatre. The new art studios with their stunning views over London and the restored wavy roof are much-admired features of the building. The reconfigured corridors and classrooms that are fit for the requirements of a 21st century school bring an amazing sense of space and light that makes it feel like we are working in a new building. Overall I firmly believe that the work of Hawkins\Brown has allowed us to build on the legacy of the school and provide students of varying backgrounds and abilities an opportunity to study in an amazing building once again.

Alison Downey, principal, Ark Putney Academy

Project data

Start on site August 2013
Completion September 2015
Gross internal floor area 10,653m²
Form of contract Bespoke Design and Build
Architect Hawkins\Brown
Client Lend Lease for Wandsworth Council
Structural engineer Curtins Consulting
M&E consultant Skelly & Couch
Landscape architect Plincke
Quantity surveyor Lend Lease
Project manager Lend Lease
Main contractor Lend Lease
Landscape architect Plincke
CDM co-ordinator Lend Lease
Approved building inspector Butler & Young
CAD software used Vectorworks



The sensitive restoration of the school's original colour palette gives a vivid eye-catching appearance to an eastern elevation which had faded

backstory, my first impression on visiting the rebuilt school is that the exterior of the main teaching block and assembly hall have never looked better. The architects' sensitive replacement curtain walling and restoration of the school's original colour palette gives a vivid eye-catching appearance to an eastern elevation which had faded. With every state school in the country now destined to become an academy – for better or worse requiring them all to compete against each other for funding – the first impressions of parents, children and prospective employees will be ever-more important. Thanks to such impressions the academy received 150 first and second-preference applications for the 120 places in its 2017 intake – an impressive testimonial in a borough with 300 surplus school places.

But equally important is the deeper experience of pupils and staff, which testifies to the real quality of any building's educational environment over time. This is harder to gauge, as the academy has only occupied the building since September and currently has just 472 pupils and 43 teachers.

The interior of the building – designed for 1,050 pupils but with several decommissioned areas which can be fitted out for later expansion – feels uncharacteristically placid and faintly like a Scandinavian care home. The fittings and finishes are also noticeably less exciting than at Allford Hall Monaghan Morris's Burntwood School – a single-sex, 2,200-capacity showstopper by the same contractor and for the same client – which very deservedly won last year's Stirling Prize.

But on closer inspection something rather interesting is going on. Within the school's light-filled lobbies and circulation spaces – which are, thanks to Hawkins\Brown's restoration, far larger than any new-build replacement would have allowed – are prominently displayed an old brass plaque and a war memorial featuring Elliott's heraldry. The school's former emblem – the elephant – has also made its way into the new logo by way of a pupil design contest. School principal Alison Downey reveals she is petitioning Ark's chief executive Lucy Heller to rename the building Elliott Ark Putney Academy, but so far to little avail.

The acclaimed music department – now with sound-proof recording studios and a huge Apple Macintosh production suite – is once again the creative hub of the community. Another great asset is the new art department – relocated to the distinctive rooftop waveform pavilion with stunning views of the capital. Pupils flock to these

prized facilities during break times while art projects spill out into the science labs nearby. It is, thankfully, once again a Bauhaus, not a factory for education.

Hawkins\Brown's well thought-out internal reconfiguration of the main teaching block – which includes a much-needed ground-floor dining area – illustrates the flexibility of the existing reinforced concrete structure, which will continue to adapt over time.

Less compelling is the adapted technology block and new gym, built as a replacement for the original sports halls, which had been deemed structurally compromised and below current standards. While retaining the school's original cruciform plan and respecting its artful massing and composition, this element includes an uncharacteristically inelegant open-air connection to the main teaching block. Replacing a former corridor, this new colonnaded social space sits uncomfortably next to a car park and has been fussily adorned with outdoor sports equipment. It leaves one feeling something has been compromised and guides you to the realisation that table tennis and table football have supplanted the lost full-sized tennis courts and football pitches.

A further visual compensation can be perceived in the new housing – designed by CJCT Studios for Barratt – which replicates the technology block's gable-end brickwork detailing with nauseating frequency. This pastiche is particularly galling because the nostalgia next door looks out not to a static visual past, but to the past's yearning for a technologically enabled emancipatory future which is still within our grasp.

With the country's entire educational estate now set to be privatised through the academies programme, this project will stand as a useful case study for how existing structures can be adapted. Ark Putney Academy is once again a prototype, not now for a utopian future but for the scaled-down ambitions of our pragmatic age.

Environmental data

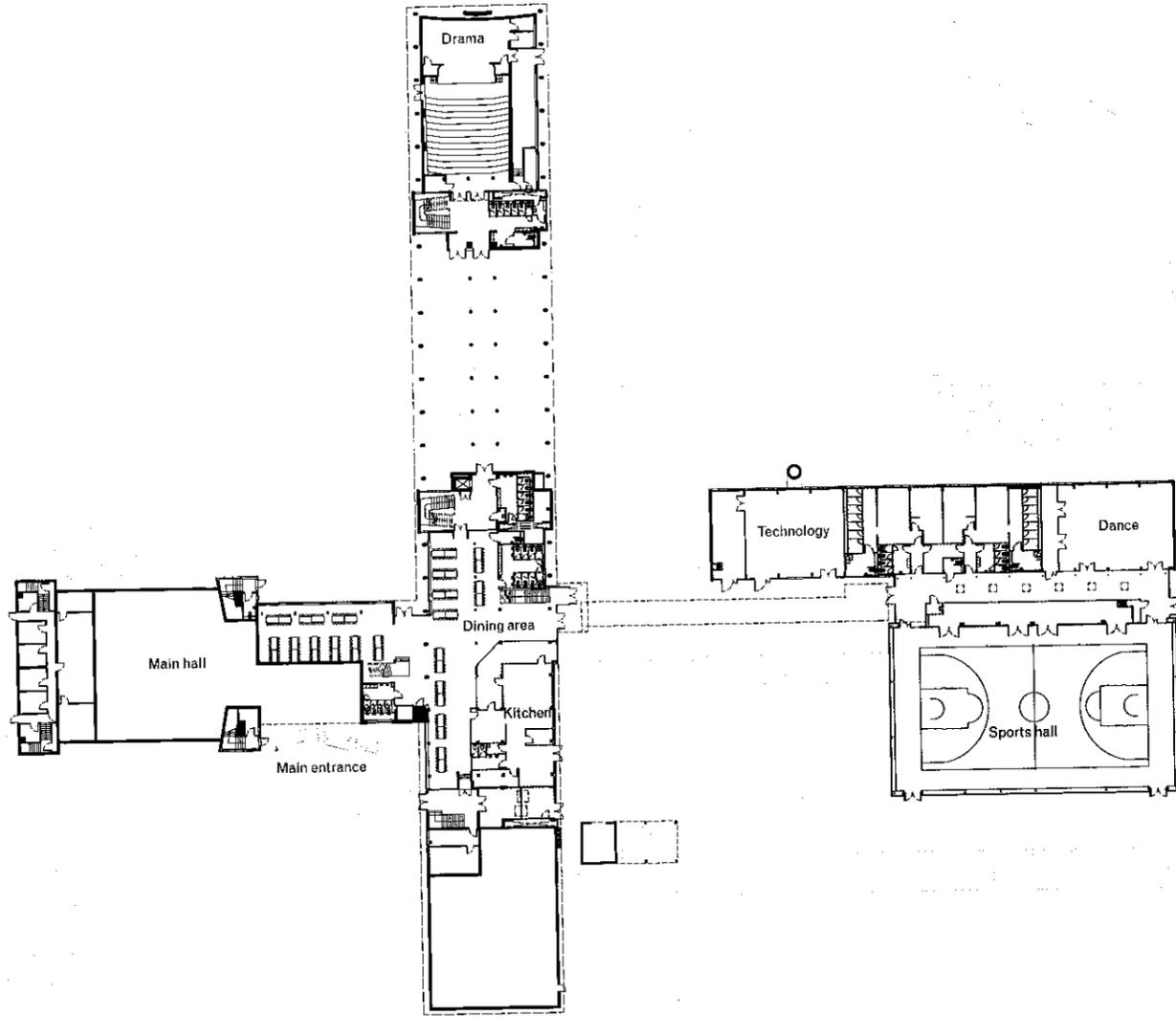
Floor area with daylight factor >2% 87.85 per cent
Floor area with daylight factor >5% 84 per cent
On-site energy generation None
Annual mains water consumption (m³/occupant)
4.13 (main building), 4.89 (sports hall)
Airtightness at 50pa 3.97m³/h.m² (sports hall)
Heating and hot water load 49.74kWh/m²/yr
Overall area-weighted U-value 0.84W/m²K
Annual CO₂ emissions 14.3 kg/m²



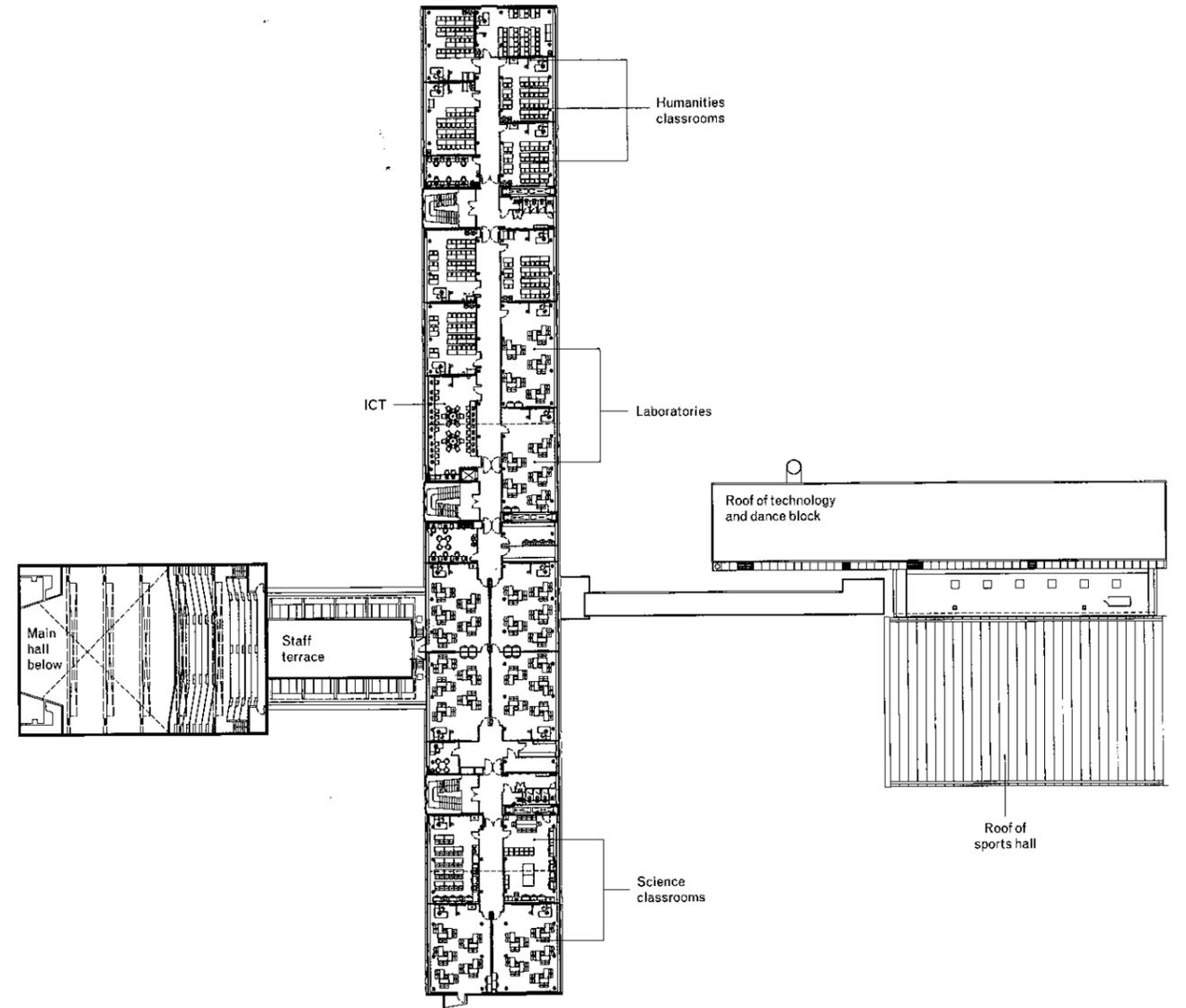


Above, opposite and below right Historical features such as stairwells have been sympathetically treated Below left Top-floor classroom ceilings reflect the school's 'wavy' roof form

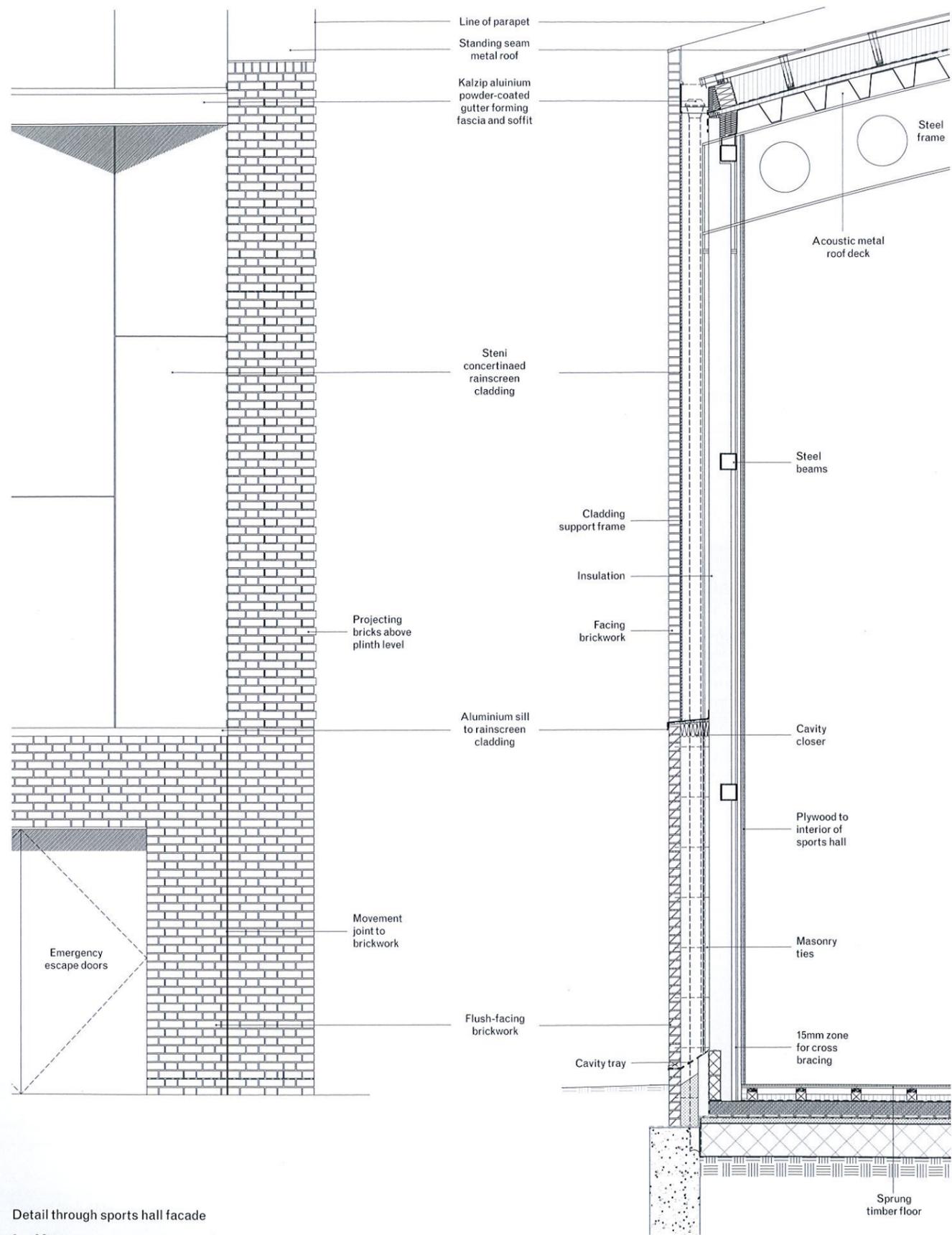




Ground floor plan

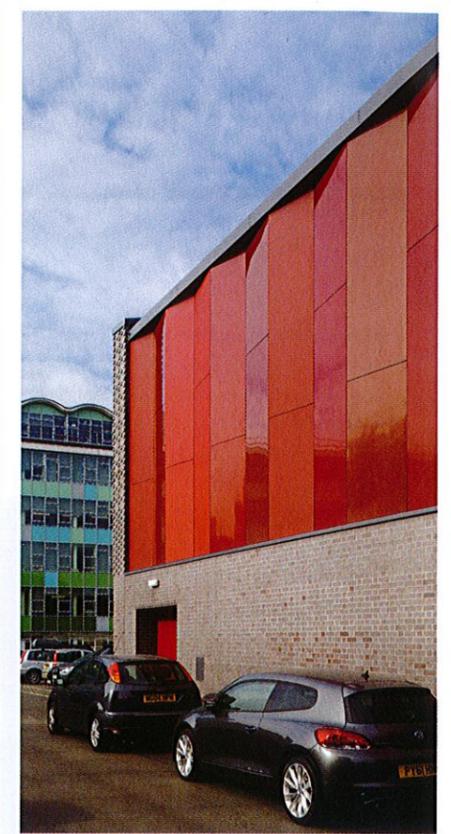


Typical floor plan



Detail through sports hall facade

0 0.2m



Detail

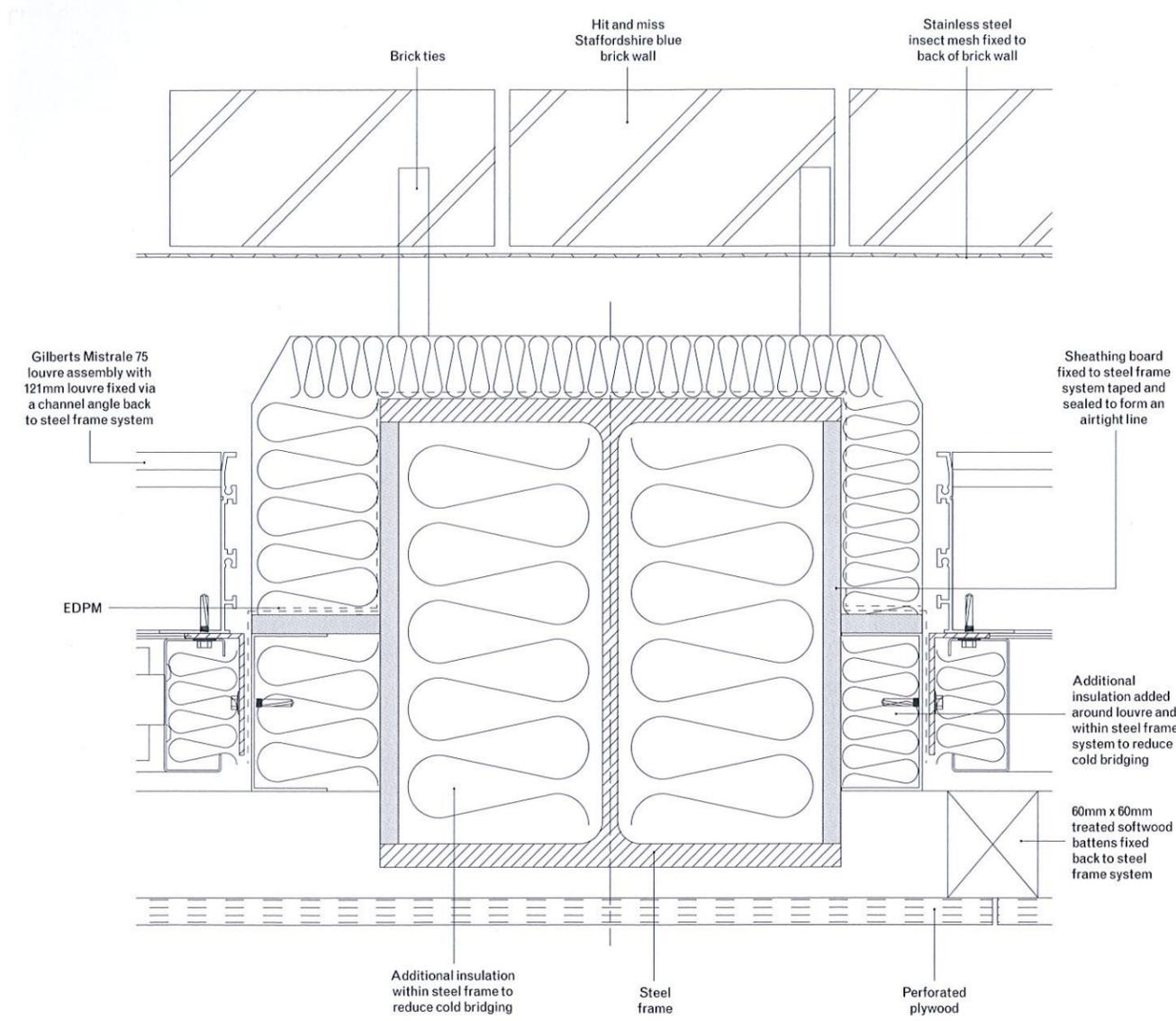
The new sports hall is a steel frame building with an infill steel frame system, which supports both the external Steni rainscreen cladding and the internal birch-faced plywood lining.

The hall is naturally ventilated through a zone of hit-and-miss brickwork at the east and west elevations. This air path is attenuated through the use of motorised dampers. These sit within the metal framing zone and are accessed internally by removing plywood panels.

The two-storey brickwork facade is restrained back to the frame and the section of brickwork above the brickwork is fully supported by an Ancon channel fixed to the primary structure. The challenge was to conceal the mechanical damper and louvre within the wall so that it was not visible from inside or out, while not compromising the building's insulated line. The brickwork cavity is closed off around the damper to prevent free air movement within the cavity. The dampers are connected to a CO₂ and temperature sensor, which activates when the internal environment requires ventilation.

The birch-faced plywood is a neat solution to the internal lining. It is robust, yet the natural finish is warm, with subtle variations which help to break up the large volume. The perforated zone also contributes to the acoustic attenuation of the space by reducing reverberation. By thinking about the mechanical integration early on, we were able to fully conceal the service runs within the wall build-up, leaving a clean internal space.

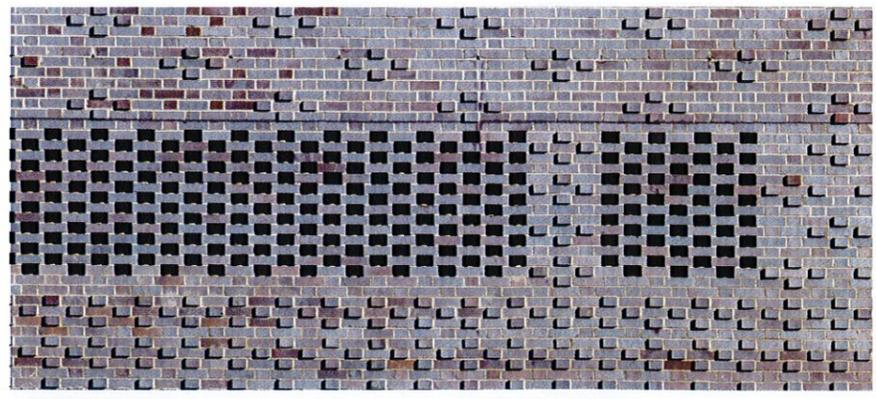
John Jeffery, project architect, Hawkins/Brown



Sports hall louvre detail plan
0 25mm

Specification

- Thermally broken curtain wall to main building and sports hall Schüco FW50+
- Rainscreen cladding to sports hall Steni
- Brickwork to sports hall Staffordshire blue brick
- Internal dry lining and ceilings Knauf
- Coloured acoustic wall panels to stair cores Topakustik
- Vinyl flooring Tarkett
- Laminates in washrooms Delta
- Doors and screens Cotswold
- Carpet to main foyer Ege
- Sport hall shower tiles Jonson Tiles
- Acoustic metal ceilings to foyer SAS



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