

Auditoria



May 2007

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London's Roundhouse reopened and reborn

House of fun

After a £30million refurbishment, the Roundhouse is back in business as one of London's most exciting spaces for unrestricted creativity and youthful experimentation

Home to The Doors' only ever indoor UK concert, as well as similarly mind-expanding gigs from the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd and Jimi Hendrix, most Londoners of a certain age have fond memories of the Roundhouse, albeit a little hazy. Not only a rock venue, the Roundhouse also staged a series of often bizarre and controversial plays and musicals throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including the infamous 'Oh! Calcutta', which featured a nude cast and plenty of lewd language. Its reputation as a venue prepared to push the boundaries and provide a platform for new and exciting acts was renewed in the late 1990s with the staging of the flamboyant, Argentinian physical theatre extravaganza, *De La Guardia*, described by one critic as "an acid trip without the acid!"

Should anyone who tuned in and dropped out in the 1960s pitch up at the Roundhouse today, they would be greeted by a gleaming glass extension housing a smart new café – a far cry from the dilapidated, draughty, incense-filled venue of yesteryear. However, a brief glance at the entertainment programme reveals a continuing love affair with the individual, the unexpected and the anarchic: circus acts jostle with rock stars, as well as less well-known musical pioneers, dandies and transvestites.

Today's visitors will also discover the Roundhouse Studios, a brand new space to create for young people, directly beneath the main

performance area, spanning over 1,300m² and featuring music and media studios where local youths can cultivate their creative talents and learn from visiting acts and professionals.

Full steam ahead

Designed by Robert Dockray, the Roundhouse started life as a railway shed, built in 1846 by George Stephenson for the London and North Western Railway to turn and service locomotives. It became redundant after only eight years as the new longer engines required more space. During the following 50 years, the Roundhouse was turned into a gin warehouse for Gilbey's Gin, after which the building was once again redundant until the 1960s when it started its life as an alternative venue for rock concerts and experimental theatre. In 1983, the Roundhouse closed due to insufficient funding and remained so for 10 years, during which various proposals were considered for it, including a scheme to house the Royal Institute of British Architecture's (RIBA) drawing collection.

In 1996, the redundant building was purchased by the Norman Trust, led by philanthropist, Torquil Norman. His son, Casper Norman, is a founding director of the Roundhouse Trust, as well as its former events director. "My family made a little bit of money with a toy firm [Bluebird], and my father [Torquil Norman] started a charity, which became quite successful, and when we got out of the toy industry, the charity was worth quite a bit

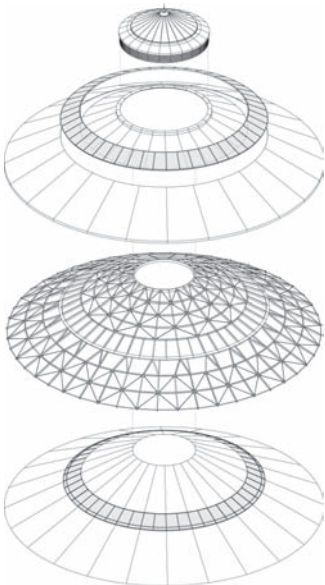




The main auditorium features a new circle level to increase capacity, and a new steel structure to support the roof and technical grid

Opposite: **The café delivers a steady stream of vital revenue**

Below: **Axometric drawing of the Roundhouse's new roof**



of money,” Norman explains. “Since its money originally stemmed from toys, the charity’s remit was always young people. In an age where playing fields have been sold off and musical instruments are too expensive for most schools, we had this idea of establishing a creative centre for young people in association with a professional space – and we had the opportunity in a 48-hour window to buy the Roundhouse!”

The trust’s intention was to transform the building into a performance and creative centre, and in late 1997 John McAslan + Partners (JMP) was selected from a competitive interview to develop architectural proposals for the building’s complete regeneration.

Pick and mix

The scheme, which began on site in 2004, comprised the refurbishment of the former engine hall, which has been transformed into a fully equipped performance space suitable for a diverse range of theatrical and musical events. In addition to this, the remodelling has reinvented

the vaulted undercrofts into a creative centre for young people (Roundhouse Studios), while the construction of a new curved wing provides a range of catering, hospitality and support facilities, as well as a studio theatre connected to the original building by a three-storey glazed gallery space.

“It was a very challenging brief,” admits Mark Cannata, who heads up the Historic Buildings Unit at John McAslan + Partners. “Not only did we have to deliver a multipurpose performance space, we also had to do so within a Grade II-listed building, with all the constraints presented by the historic fabric of the venue, as well as the statutory limitations in terms of what you can do in a listed building.”

To ensure he was able to meet the brief, Cannata took a strategic decision at the very start to preserve, as much as possible, the volume of the main auditorium space: “That implied that all the support spaces and other elements that a modern venue needs to perform had to be taken out of the main space – hence the new extension.”

The architect also ensured all the seating could be removed from the main auditorium, and that it could be reinstalled in just three days. The new design provides access to the main auditorium directly from the service yard, via acoustic lobbies, as well as substantial on-site storage space for seating. “Good access and plenty of storage space increases the opportunities of how you use the building,” notes Cannata.

JMP also strived to ensure that any necessary changes delivered the optimum return. “We had to upgrade the roof for acoustic reasons, so we also took the opportunity to upgrade the roof structure to ensure it could support all the necessary gantries, theatre equipment and lighting, rather than hanging these from the original Victorian structure, which wasn’t designed for such loads,” continues Cannata.

Despite its listed status, the architect says the authorities were quite flexible in their approach: “English Heritage recognised right from the start that the building had to change to survive,” says Cannata. “Certain interventions, even audacious interventions, had to take place, but these were necessary to ensure the building would survive in the long term.”

Raise the roof!

A significant upgrade of the Roundhouse roof’s acoustic and structural properties was necessary to provide the highly technical and adaptable performance space that the venue required. The entire covering of the roof was renewed in the 1970s, and substantial repairs and replacements were carried out to the wall plate under the boarding. The condition of the box gutter, lead flashing and lowest sections of the roof required a moderate degree of repair. However, to provide a venue capable of isolating noise of up to 108db, the roof required adaptation. The consultant acousticians (Paul Gillieron Acoustic Design) performed a series of tests on a variety of roof specifications to find a solution that best met the criteria. They found that by increasing the mass of the roof and incorporating a system of springs, the limited levels of noise breakout required could be achieved.

The roof required a new steel structure to support the added acoustic mass, as well as a potential 20-tonne load from the technical grid, which is suspended from this structure. The grid supports lighting, cables and other technical apparatus, as well as providing a safe access. The grid has greatly improved the adaptability of the space. The new structure sits above and works independently of the existing structure. Both the acoustic and structural build up is sandwiched between the existing rafters and boarding – which remain in their current position – and the roof slates, which were removed and then replaced above the new structure. The grid is reached via a circular CableNet tension wire grid system – only the third circular one in the UK – supplied by Slingco.

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