

**University of the Built Environment
Institutional Research Repository**

Title	'Three Mills Studios'
Author(s)	Ruth Lang
ORCID	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6396-3080
Type	Article
Publication title	Architectural Review
Publisher	Emap
ISSN/ISBN	0003-861X
Date	3 March 2024
Version	
DOI	
Repository link	https://ube.repository.guildhe.ac.uk/id/eprint/215/
Link to publication	https://www.architectural-review.com/w-awards/thre...
Notes	This publication version may differ from the final version

Copyright:

The University aims to make research outputs available to a broader audience via its digital [Repository](#). Where copyright permits, full text material held in the Repository is made freely available. URLs from GuildHE Research Repositories may be freely distributed and linked to. Please refer to each manuscript for any further copyright restrictions.

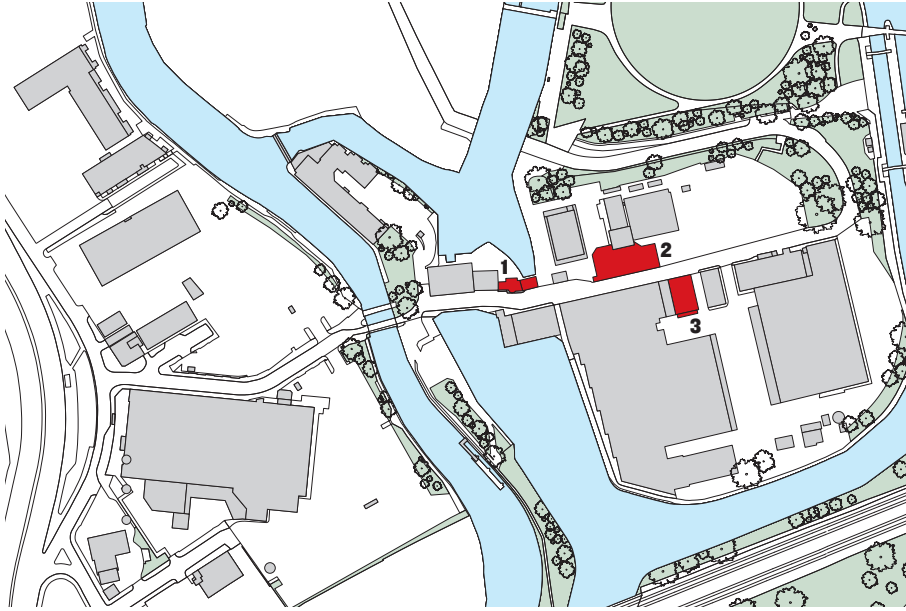
Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page, and the content is not changed in any way.



Three Mills Studios

Gort Scott's new workspaces for the film and television industry in east London show dexterous deployment of resources, writes *Ruth Lang*

MJ Long Prize shortlist
Sela Jaymes-Taylor



- 1 Custom House
- 2 Rush House
- 3 Gin Still

London's oldest surviving industrial centre, Three Mills, has changed from a site of production in the 1930s (right) to become a growing hub for the film and television industry. Its Grade I-listed Three Mills Lane (below), effectively a bridge, still leads to the mills and clock tower (opposite). The latest chapter in the site's transformation is new workspaces added by Gort Scott, including in the old gin store (opening spread)



HISTORIC ENGLAND



At the heart of the ongoing redevelopment of the area surrounding London's Olympic Park, Three Mills Island has a rich and under-appreciated role in the city's history. It has long been a site of production, with its tidal mills noted in the *Domesday Book*. From the 17th century, the spaces where grain supplies were once brought to make bread were reappropriated for making gin and used as a bottling plant through to the 1990s, before falling into redundancy.

The vast spaces left behind were well suited to the film industry and became home to Three Mills Studios – one of only six remaining film-recording studios in greater London – serving as backdrop for everything from 18th-century Russia to the *MasterChef* kitchens. A mix of old and new spaces in and around these studios was earmarked for redevelopment as part of the 2019 Greater London Authority (GLA) Architecture and Urbanism Framework to support the growth of creative industries. Given a broad brief to create workspaces, Gort Scott identified, with the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC), three strategic points of intervention that involve adaptive reuse of historical structures: Custom House, Rush House, and the old gin store.

The rehabilitation of existing buildings often implies restrictions on development, and causes friction between the heritage that must be preserved and the new programme which it must accommodate to survive. But project architect Sela-Jaymes Taylor's position as both an RIBA-registered conservation architect and an associate at Gort Scott enabled the Three Mills scheme to foster continuity. The project sensitively reveals the evolution of the site throughout its lifetime, while boldly celebrating the new opportunities brought to the area.

Taylor's first intervention was to preserve the site's heritage value. The Grade II-listed Custom House urgently had to be protected against the water that rose systematically through the cobbled streets from the adjacent Bow Creek. To lengthen the structure's lifespan, Taylor took heed of Carlo Scarpa's work in Venice and created an impermeable datum of polished plaster in the lower floor, up to which the building can flood. Power and lighting are provided from rafts suspended from the ceiling so they can remain unaffected, while minimising disruption to the historic fabric.

The second intervention, for the Rush House screening room, was undertaken in collaboration with Freehaus, as part of the GLA's strategy to partner practices led by architects from underrepresented groups with those who can help nurture their development in taking on larger schemes. The process by which the building has been reconfigured and opened to the public was truly integrated rather than merely



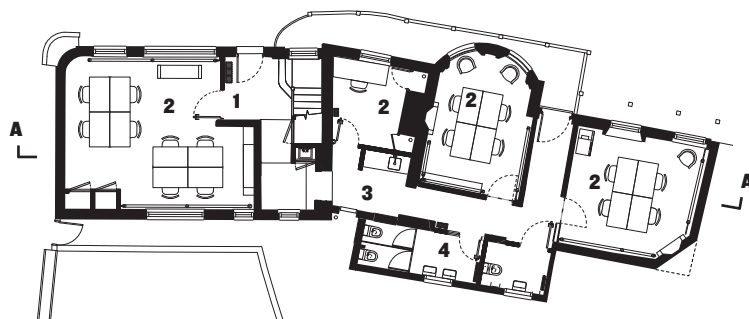


The Grade II-listed Custom House (above), which dates from 1820 and stands opposite the clock tower, has been refurbished. Thanks to waterproof plaster surfaces on its ground floor (below right), the building can cope with flooding – an approach reminiscent of Scarpa's Querini Stampalia. Upstairs, original features have been sensitively restored (above right)

- 1 entrance hall
 - 2 workspaces
 - 3 kitchenette
 - 4 toilets
- 0 2m



section AA



Custom House ground floor plan

THIS SPREAD: LORENZO ZANDRI



‘Taylor took heed of Carlo Scarpa’s work in Venice and created an impermeable datum of polished plaster’

tokenistic – much like Taylor’s approach to heritage. From concept to completion, the two practices shared ideas, placement staff and studio space, with a sense of mutually nurturing fluidity.

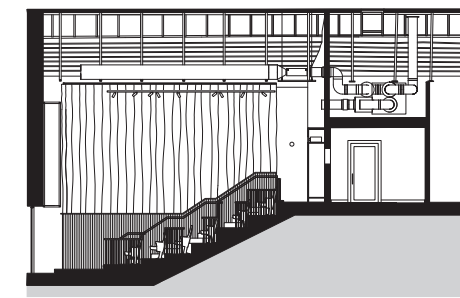
The third and most significant intervention is the rehabilitation of what is now known as the Gin Still. Although the building holds what might be considered back-of-house activities – administration rooms, costume stores, make-up and rigging – the care with which the needs of the users have been thought through and the flexibility the design offers for its inhabitation have made these some of the site’s most in-demand spaces. The initially open triple-height volume has been divided into three self-contained floors, each of which can be used for a larger-scale production or subdivided into two units per floor to serve different groups independently.

The ongoing use of the site as a live studio environment during construction, coupled with the imperative to preserve the existing structure, demanded a nimble deployment; new construction elements had to be easily brought within existing openings and assembled *in situ*. Beyond these tight structural parameters, the GLA also imposed limitations on budgets and timescales, as the scheme needed to be completed to schedule to release funding. Taylor believes that Gort Scott won the competition – against a fiercely competitive cohort including 6a Architects, Carmody Groarke, Feilden Fowles, HAT Projects and Haworth Tompkins – because of their deft navigation of these parameters.

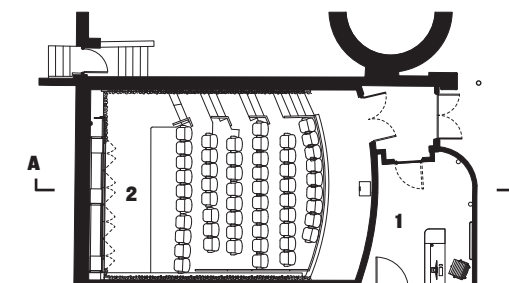
In order to ‘build a huge thing within a delicate container, like a ship in a bottle’, she called upon her experience in designing and constructing 1:1 tests of deployable frame structures for use in a sensitive archaeological context at Nea Paphos in Cyprus. Using off-the-shelf components, she was determined to prove that a different form of creativity and inventiveness can arise from constraints of budget and time frame. Taylor augmented a robust kit of readily available proprietary construction elements with bespoke profiles and detailing to minimise the impact on lead times and budget. The intention was to do more with less; every new structural element works twice as hard, while appearing effortless. The punchily coloured industrial aesthetic enables the newly inserted elements to pop out, both treating the existing fabric with deference and establishing a dialogue with the greater industrial surroundings.

The result is a building which lends itself to future disassembly and reuse, as well as more efficient maintenance in its intended 100-year lifespan. Insertions are carefully detailed to express their tectonic role through a series of architectural games that Taylor holds dear. Delicate corbels made with shaped cement blocks support a truss that also forms the balustrade to studios at first-floor level. The truss itself was reduced in size by the

As well as studios, the Rush House comprises a screening room to preview footage – or ‘rushes’. Freehaus worked with Gort Scott on a new entrance (right), a reception area and the 60-seat screening room (below), so that the building can now also be used for public events



section AA



Rush House screening room ground floor plan

- 1 lobby
 - 2 auditorium
- 0 2m

Dating from 1850, the site's main distillery has been renamed the Gin Still (right). A new structure was carefully inserted into the historical envelope to create a building within a building; its bolted steel components preserve the building's industrial character (below), but punchy colours add a touch of joy. Services, enclosed in blockwork, separate workspaces from the bright yellow stairs (opposite bottom)

THIS SPREAD: LORENZO ZANDRI



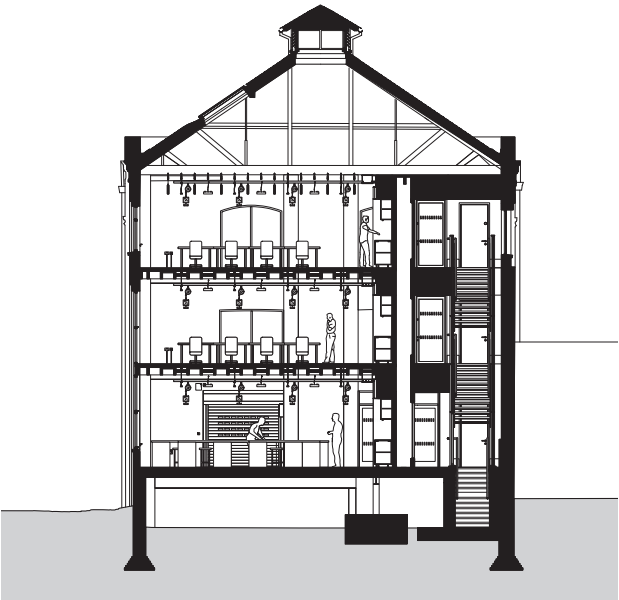
introduction of a structural spine wall, which contains services (risers, toilets and kitchenettes) and provides a neat example of modernist separation between 'servant and served' spaces, affording great spatial and tectonic efficiency. Yet efficiency is not the Gin Still's primary quality; what prevails is a sense of joy and empathy – with the needs of both users and building.

This is an elegant continuation of what Colin St John Wilson termed 'the other tradition of modern architecture', which seeks to continually learn from and build upon the history of a site, 'respect[ing] the material content that it starts with' and adopting a more humane perspective than the 'mechanistic' international style. Such an approach stems from Taylor's background, having studied under Colin Stansfield Smith in Portsmouth, under Isi Metzstein and Andy MacMillan in Glasgow, and worked for a short but intense period at Long & Kentish on the development of the British Library Centre for Conservation, the Art Workers' Guild and the Marlborough Fine Art gallery. Registering as a conservation architect at Wright & Wright opened Taylor to other ideas and ways of working, which she applied to more restricted sites and budgets when joining Gort Scott. Her contribution, alongside fellow associate Joe Mac Mahon, has enabled Gort Scott to work on a wider range of complex heritage and retrofit projects, including the Royal Arsenal Gatehouse and the conversion of Woolwich Old Town Hall into artists' studios.

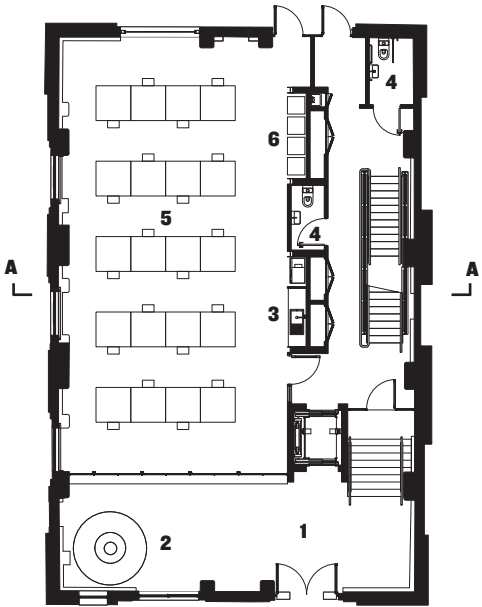
Going beyond mere conservation, Taylor wants historical sites to more ably confront the climate emergency. Preserving the full-height void at the front of the gin store enables natural ventilation to reach all floors before it escapes through the old ridge vents, and minimal peak-lop mechanical ventilation facilitates efficiencies in use. Despite the building's heritage status, she persuaded the conservation officer to allow more light into the disproportionately deep plan. Windows were introduced on the side of the building, with bespoke mullion profiles lessening the visual effect of their off-the-shelf frames. At roof level, the ceiling boards that were added by previous users, concealing the historical timber frame, have been stripped out, yet their traces remain visible above the suspended acoustic panels; all layers of the building's history are read and celebrated.

Despite the complexities of negotiating spatial, material, heritage and operational considerations, Three Mills is afforded a sense of unity thanks to Taylor's constant concern for its impact at different scales, from microscopic to macrocosmic, from experiential to administrative. This capacity to realise potential in that which might otherwise be neglected or overlooked defines her working process, generating more meaningful long-term impact as a result.

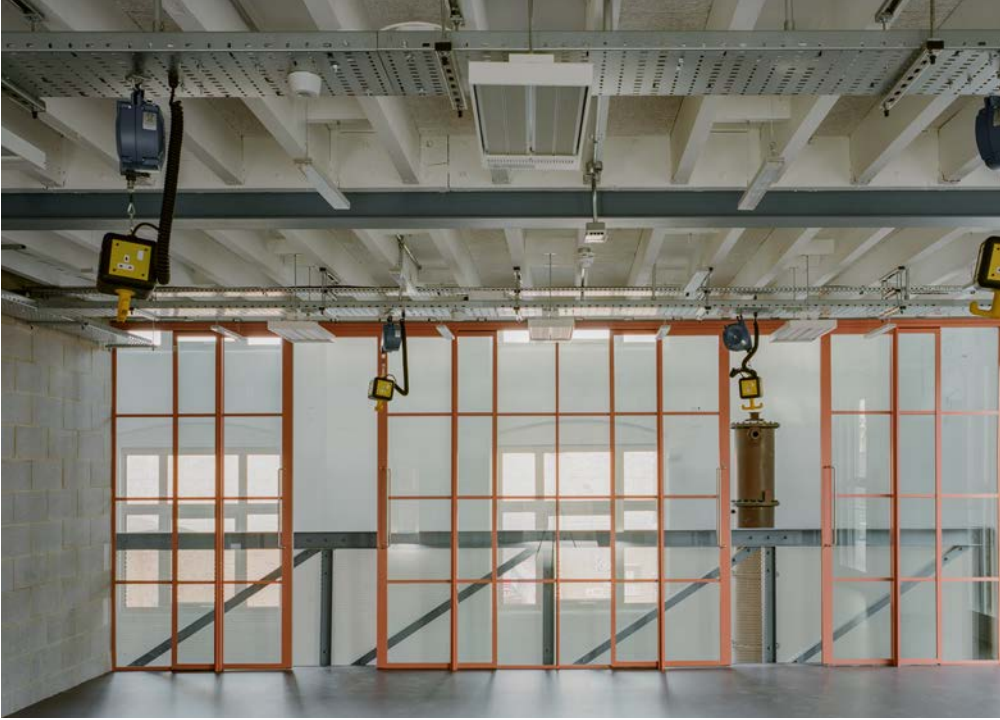
- 1 entrance atrium
- 2 historic gin still
- 3 kitchenette
- 4 toilet
- 5 workspace
- 6 laundry



section AA



Gin Still ground floor plan



The building supports the film studios by offering spaces for costume and puppet making, make-up and rigging, while providing flexible workspace for production teams on the upper floors (top). Each floor can be divided into two distinct spaces, equipped with a kitchenette (above)



LORENZO ZANDRI

The 10metre-high copper gin still sits at the front of the building, where the triple-height volume has been preserved. At upper levels, the truss doubles as a balustrade, and workspaces overlook the foyer

‘The result is a building which lends itself to future disassembly and reuse’

