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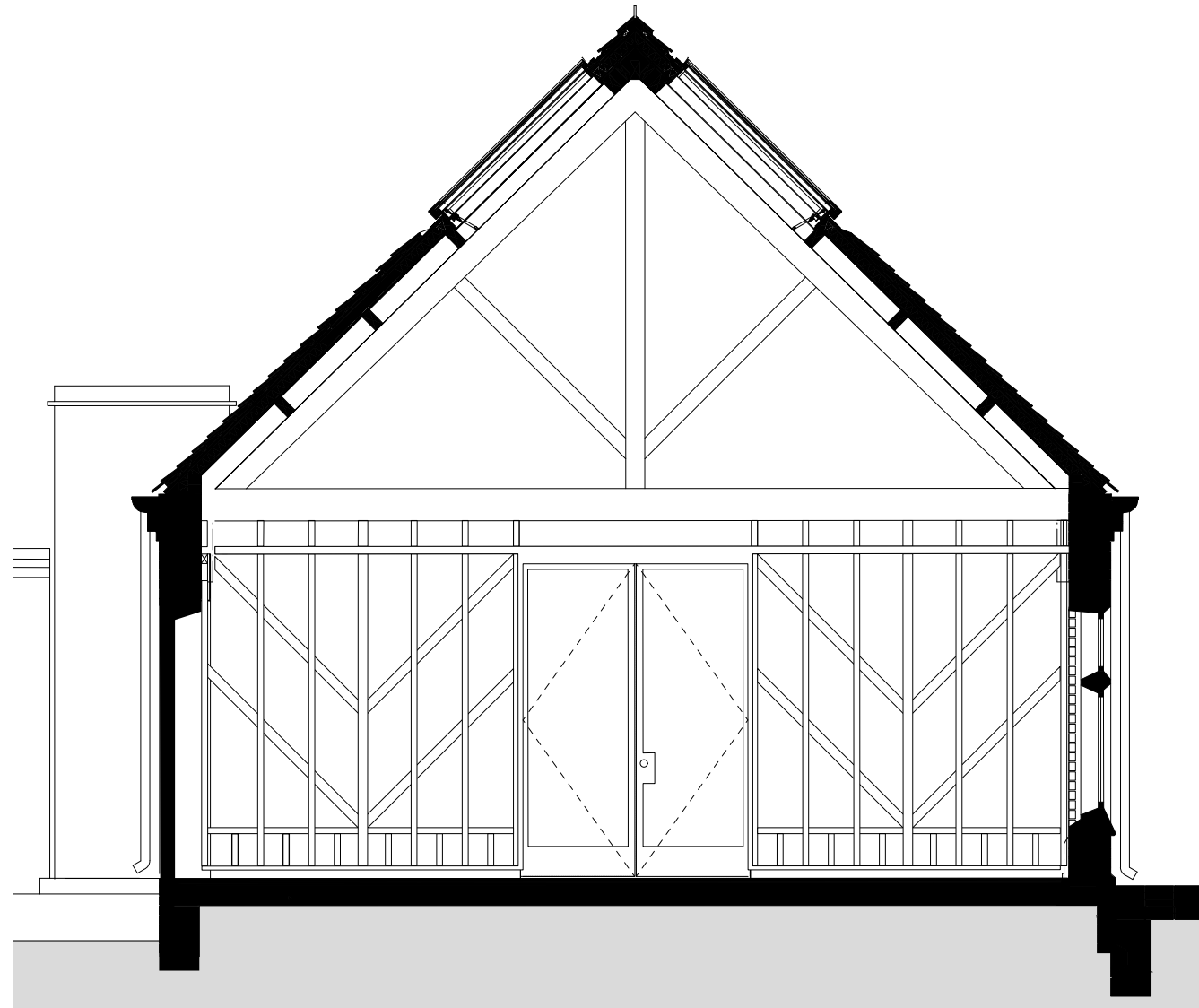


Moira Gemmill Prize shortlist

Cristina Monteiro

The DK-CM co-founder argues that creating better environments involves more than just designing new buildings, writes *Ruth Lang*

section AA



There's a subtlety to the architecture of Harrow Arts Centre's three lovingly rejuvenated and repurposed listed ancillary buildings, complemented by the delicate insertion of lightweight polycarbonate screens that throw the existing structure's character into stark relief, the exposed structure within demonstrating how every last detail has been considered. But to become absorbed by aesthetics alone belies the rigour and complexity of the economic, logistical, environmental and programmatic restructuring that has enabled and underpinned its reuse. Architect Cristina Monteiro's deep-seated entanglement with the profession's environmental duties and her nurturing approach to the cultural, social and physical values of architectural heritage, and the dialogue between existing, repaired and inserted structures, continues to facilitate the reimagining of this popular, well-loved site to create a re-energised and

growing space for the arts community.

The project started in 2017, and in adopting a process that was as much a business plan and an exercise in forensic accounting as an urban strategy, DK-CM were able to demonstrate the potential of the existing historic buildings without having to compromise on quality or quantity of space. With so much focus on the end image, the singular voice and signature design, such options are often overlooked. One of Monteiro's touchstones is Cedric Price, and like him she sees the choice not to build anew – here, to refurbish – as bolder, more complex and increasingly pertinent, with all the inherent environmental impact that entails. This ongoing project seeks to enhance energy efficiency and reduce the campus's carbon consumption.

Monteiro believes in the establishment of discourse – between architect and building, between requirements of the brief and needs of the site – rather than adopting

a singular dominant perspective. As a fan of William Morris, there was a careful balancing act between what should be retained, refurbished or reused, what must be removed and what might be expressed as a new addition. In these terms, making a building is more akin to surgery than 'construction'. The resulting values are not just monetary but also emotional, enabling the idiosyncratic character of the centre's piecemeal development to be retained while offering a new dance school, an events space in a previously redundant boiler room, and workshops for four artists.

Such a strategy embraces a non-linear, long-term developmental process, accepting the architect's contribution as part of a continuing cycle of influence. The current scheme is the first stage of an incremental urban masterplan, to be delivered over six years and four phases, which affords opportunities to pause, reflect and revise as part of a process of responsive growth – one



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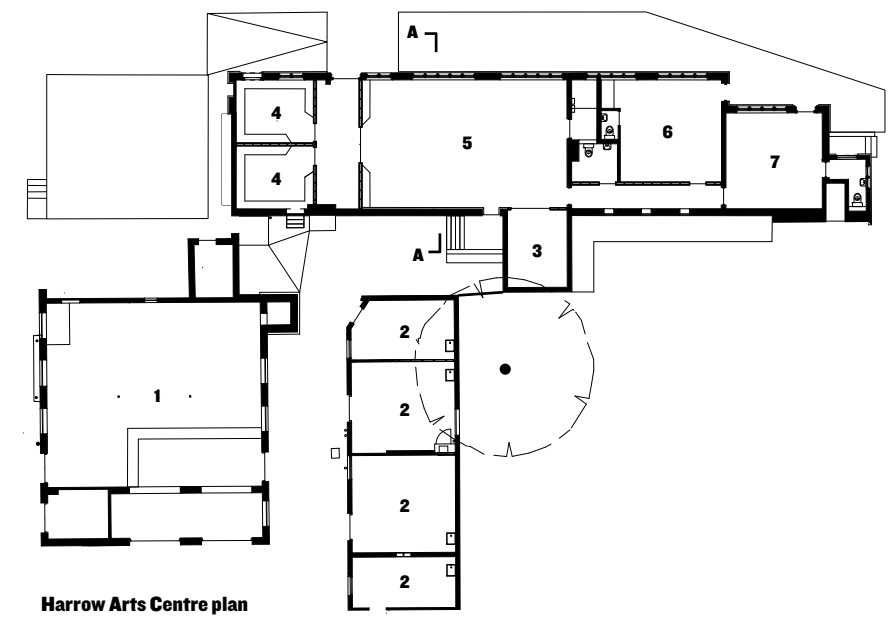
'Operating across different languages and scales, Monteiro's work is diverse and pluralistic in an industry still preoccupied with linear forms of practice'

Harrow Arts Centre is part of the first phase of DK-CM's masterplan (2018-present), bringing a number of redundant or underused buildings back into use, providing bookable space and front-of-house facilities

- 1 Boiler House events space
 - 2 workshop
 - 3 store
 - 4 changing room
 - 5 dance studio
 - 6 office
 - 7 classroom
- 0 3m

which is open to other outcomes from those first expected. It is a process that actively welcomes contradiction and conflict, negotiating these tensions and innovating where there is no singular 'correct' solution. In the immediate term, this is being explored through prototyping new forms of public space in the work yards, which will test out ways to retain and enhance the mix of uses, providing a platform through which to introduce new activities and events.

Reimagining and repurposing is common in Monteiro's practice, also evident in her earlier work at Wroughton Academies, where an unoccupied gap between buildings was transformed into a generous new flexible public entrance for the schools. Working with existing structures at the Harrow Arts Centre and the Wroughton Academies is demonstrative of Monteiro's long-term care for built heritage, initiated by heartbreak at the loss of much-loved historic buildings in her childhood home of Porto.



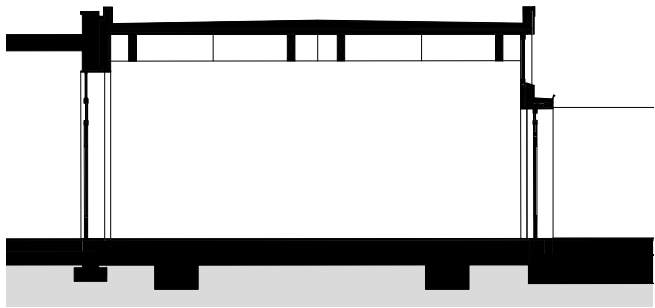
Harrow Arts Centre plan



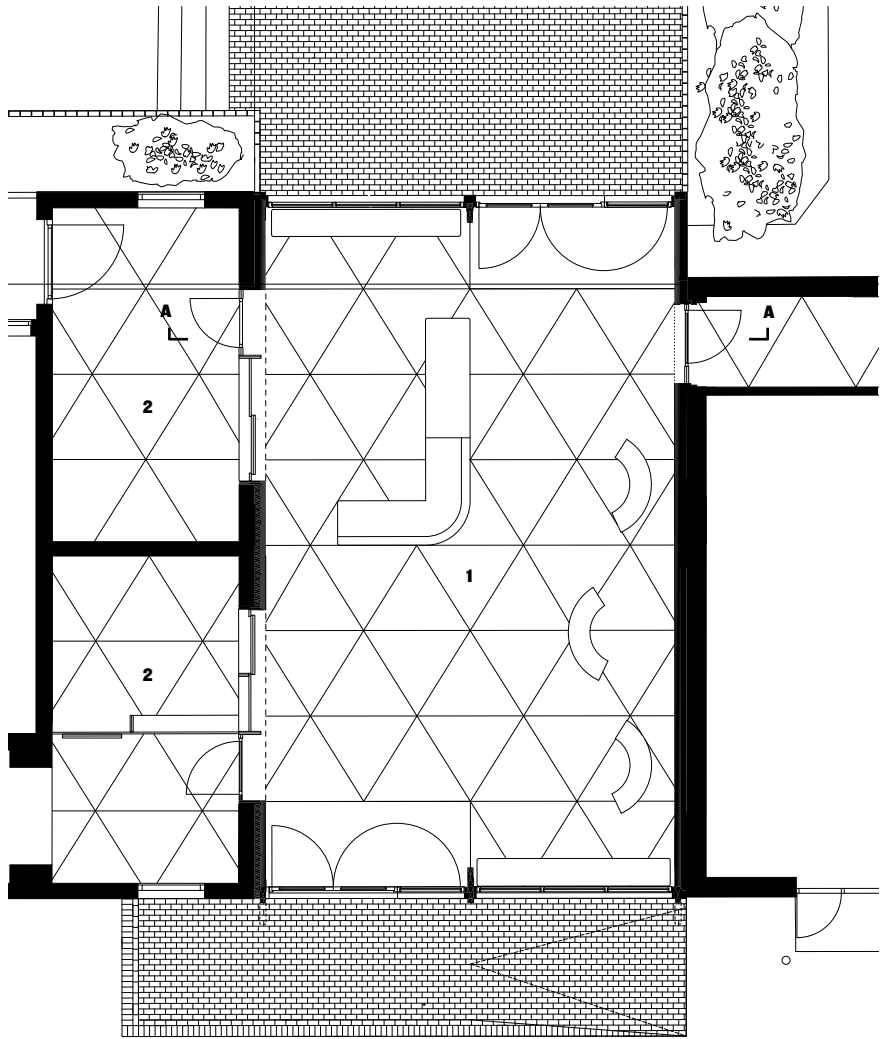
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DK-CM's entrance pavilion for Wroughton Academies in Gorleston, Norfolk, completed in 2019, joins infant and junior schools, and channels the spirit of the original 1950 'open-air school' ethos

1 entrance pavilion
2 office
0 1m



section AA



Wroughton Academies plan

‘Monteiro uses her position to contribute to culture in more ways than by holding the pen’



She didn't plan to become an architect, rather to pursue a love of the stories buildings tell us, and she is still fascinated by the way conservation architects read buildings, following clues like protagonists in detective stories. She values the importance of understanding and diagnosing a building's true fabric in a manner that respects spatial complexity and constructional heritage: the smell, touch and bodily experience of space. These values have recently been intensified through training in conservation architecture, as a SPAB member and RIBA Conservation Registrant. Most importantly, she enjoys the inversion of the architect's role, to become a story-listener rather than a story-teller. Story-telling still plays a role: frustrated by the perilous state of the city and an incapacity for nurturing civic value under the threat of demolition, Monteiro produced the first edition of the *Wallpaper City Guide Porto* in 2011 with long-term collaborator –

now husband – David Knight. Publication enabled them to highlight the value of historic structures about to be lost, and force the authorities to reconsider. Within the scope of architectural practice, commercial publication might feel like a small gesture but, used judiciously, engagement with this medium has the potential for larger and more immediate impact than more commonplace routes to conservation and preservation. The guide was the first of many publications by the practice, using physical and digital media – in the form of apps, maps, websites and journals. Monteiro sees writing as just one of design's many forms, a 'Trojan horse' with which to launch new dialogues and debates, and to facilitate developmental change – an active constituent of architectural practice. Monteiro has always worked for practices that seek to establish meaningful, long-term relationships instigating exchange and dialogue between project client, site users

and neighbours, which stretch beyond the lifespan of the built project – a strategy she also exercises in her teaching at Central Saint Martins and Kingston University. DK-CM have found that small capital projects are able to help unlock the imagination – as much for the clients and planners as for the users. By providing a medium through which to explore and realise novel programmes and activities, these bring together different facets of a divergent community to collectively define the drier policy aspects for the area, in a manner which 'can then be designed to make them opportunities'. Constructing a platform for under-represented voices has extended to the creation of an app to support high street shops during the coronavirus lockdown. Monteiro recognised how pre-existing need for community support was exacerbated in the current context, especially for those without the infrastructure or digital skills to



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get online. The app conceived by DK-CM seeks to heal the ‘digital rift between communities who want to support local businesses and the effective means for them to do so’, by providing a local, easily accessed alternative to the multinational, monolithic online retailers, establishing a circular economy of economic and emotional investment.

Exploring potential new futures for high streets through more conventionally architectural means, Monteiro has been working with Westminster Council on developing the Rebel Academy, a civic institution aiming to open up entrepreneurship to a more diverse demographic. The site is an archetypal British shopfront building, and has stories of huge social and community value woven into its structure, as the location of the first gay women’s nightclub in the early 1960s and then a council-owned rehabilitation centre in the 1990s. Stripping back the structure

to reveal this history creates space for new stories to unfold. At the scheme’s heart is a lecture theatre both visually and physically porous, making the space more welcoming, and enabling those on the high street to imagine themselves inside. It demonstrates how a previously staid typology can evolve to make a positive impact in the future – and suggests that its users can too.

For all this investment of care, Monteiro accepts that no project is permanent and that an architect’s role is fleetingly fragile – but in doing so she embraces the potential of a legacy of positive traces. The Rebel Academy is setting a bar for high street redevelopment in terms of models, quality of construction and environmental standards. This is achieved through conventional application of air source heat pumps, disconnection from gas and strategic development of passive ventilation (which will later be BMS controlled), and also by using projects as opportunities for

collaborative upskilling on low-carbon construction with contractors. By vaulting the lack of knowledge and hands-on experience that currently inhibits implementation of such strategies in the industry, these skills will later be applied through other works beyond the influence of the client, council or of Monteiro herself.

Monteiro’s work questions what we talk about when we talk about architecture. Her practice is not only about building or writing or teaching or researching or listening, but all of these. Much of the rigour and intricacy of this work goes unseen, eclipsed by the architectural beauty of the schemes she develops. Her aim is to create a better environment – not just in aesthetic terms. She nurtures and empowers community-led initiatives, facilitating cross-pollination, collaboration and long-term growth of new networks of support. Her contribution is subtle, covert, yet radical in its effect: much like the architecture she produces.

DK-CM’s reception space for Wroughton Academies was designed to form a new front and heart to the school, providing an informal entrance space as well as offices, and to create a secure covered link between the two existing campuses

