



FROM
ANOTHER
PERSPECTIVE

A Word from
Δ Editor Neil Spiller

Old Buildings, New Architecture

Richard Griffiths Architects



Richard Griffiths Architects,
Lambeth Palace,
London,
1999

The careful juxtaposition of new forms and materials enlivens and rejuvenates this courtyard within the official London residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In all of its work, Richard Griffiths Architects remains true to the creation of a timeless architecture, in which style derives from materials, use and construction rather than from the whims of fashion.

— Richard Griffiths Architects¹

Old buildings are a fecund breeding ground for new architectural possibilities, an opportunity for contemporary architects to make another useful layer on the palimpsests of their history. London architect Richard Griffiths has spent most of his architectural career modifying, maintaining and rejuvenating them for the modern world. He sees such buildings as great living assets to the city, not simply something to be preserved in aspic as the world passes by: 'Old buildings also embody the attributes of age and of memory, and the architect who works with old buildings has the challenge of understanding their history and significance, of engaging with all the historic layers that are already present and of adding a new architectural layer.'²

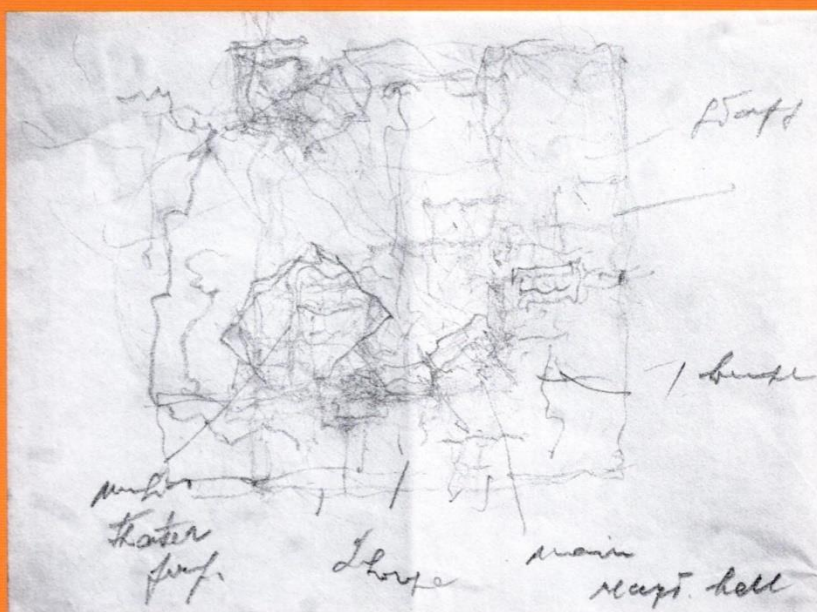
Cambridge and London Epiphany

Griffiths went up to Cambridge originally to study engineering, but in 1974 switched to architecture, 'always with the view that I wanted to work at the interface between old and new'.³ His great revelation came during a tutorial with the inspiring Dalibor Vesely about a mixed-use site in London's Kentish

Town. One of Griffiths's most treasured possessions is Vesely's sketch from that day: 'His pencil never stopped moving, and its faint traces conjured up infinite possibilities in defiance of the determinism of the Modern Movement.'⁴

After graduation, Griffiths worked in Cambridge and London for various firms until in 1986 he finally arrived at Julian Harrap's practice where his enduring love of East London and its often derelict architectural treasures was nurtured: 'Having cut his teeth on rebuilding the houses in Spitalfields saved by Dan Cruickshank and Mark Girouard and others following the battle of Elder Street, Julian had become the pre-eminent architect working on historic buildings in East London.'⁵ It is also at this point that Griffiths became involved in local societies and preservation trusts, not just using his architectural skills, but also being proactive in securing the protection of old buildings.

Griffiths and his firm, Richard Griffiths Architects (established in 1993), have a long history of this architectural palimpsestual overwriting. Their work includes such prestigious commissions as the repairs, refurbishments and upgrades to Southwark Cathedral (1997–2014), the Archbishop of Canterbury's residence Lambeth Palace (1999) and the Garrick Club (2004) in London, and Exeter College, Oxford (2013) to name but a few examples of their extensive experience. They have worked on historic houses, churches and cathedrals, and barn typologies, created newbuilds in historic contexts, developed new programmes for old buildings and designed historic gardens and landscapes; in short, they have worked on all aspects of the conservation and regeneration of old buildings being renewed for our time.



Dalibor Vesely,
Sketch,
concert hall, apartments,
a genetic research
laboratory and a monastery,
Kentish Town, London,
1979

A sketch drawn by Vesely while tutoring a young Richard Griffiths, evoking possibilities for urban development around a communal garden at the centre of each urban block.

Mending Broken Buildings

Since 2017, Richard Griffiths Architects have been collaborating with AHMM on the former Royal London Hospital on Whitechapel Road in the city's East End, augmenting and converting it into a new Civic Centre for the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The hospital was founded in 1751 and has undergone much alteration as it attempted to keep pace with medical technology and innovation over the centuries. It has now been superseded by a newbuild, adjacent hospital. Working in any part of Central London is difficult at the best of times; the hospital, for example, was Grade II listed in 1973, and it has therefore been necessary to adhere to many development frameworks, and at the same time respecting the hospital's central position within one of the borough's conservation areas.

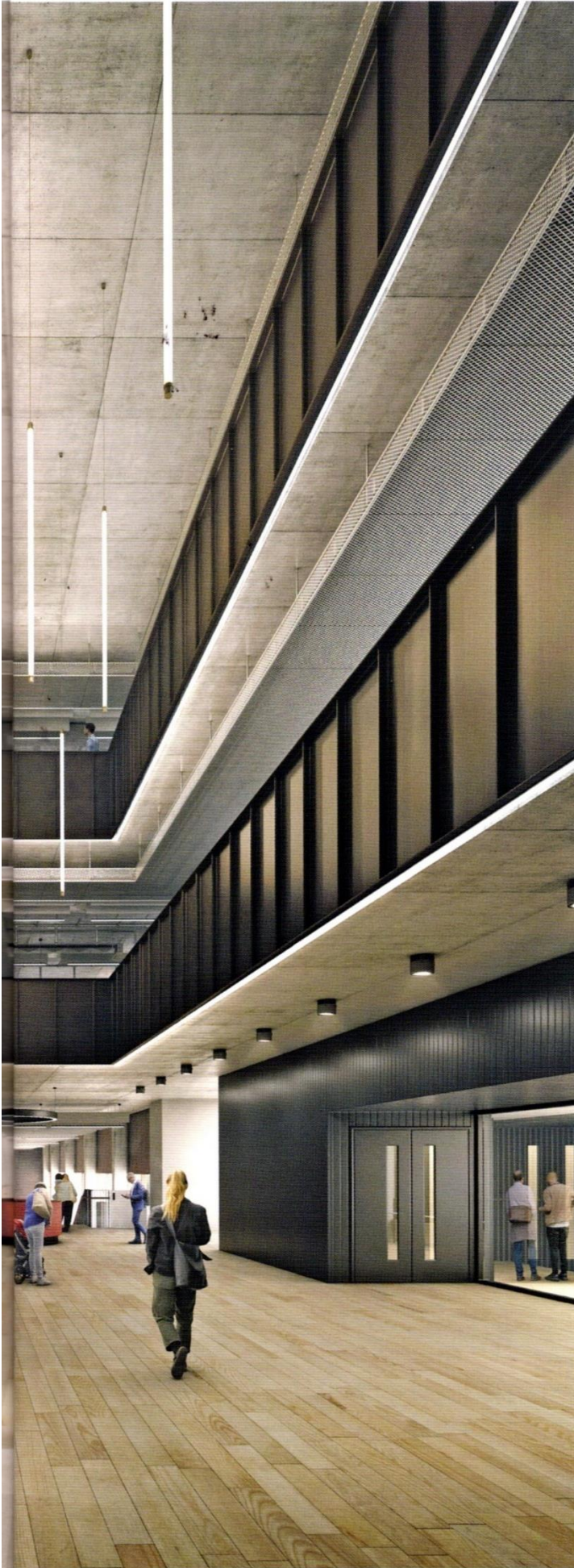
The objectives for the development were very clear. It should provide an ideal new public use for the building, contribute to the urban regeneration of Whitechapel and Tower Hamlets, restore and enhance the architecturally significant parts of the site, and be a unique combination of the best of the old and new. It also needed to contribute to the legibility of its immediate urban fabric, facilitating connecting vistas, aiding wayfinding and enhancing the public realm. Above all the building was to be an architectural catalyst to create a sustainable future for the area in terms of economic, social and environmental factors.

AHMM,
Tower Hamlets Civic Centre,
London,
2021

below: As with the interior, the new additions complement the existing and refurbished. Modern and traditional materials work in sympathetic harmony. The new complex of buildings consolidates wayfinding with urban vistas and will bring a vitality and commercial opportunities to the area.



A full-height atrium links the former hospital with the new buildings, the contrast between old and new creating a pleasing juxtaposition. Richard Griffiths Architects' involvement was in compiling the Heritage Impact Assessment document.

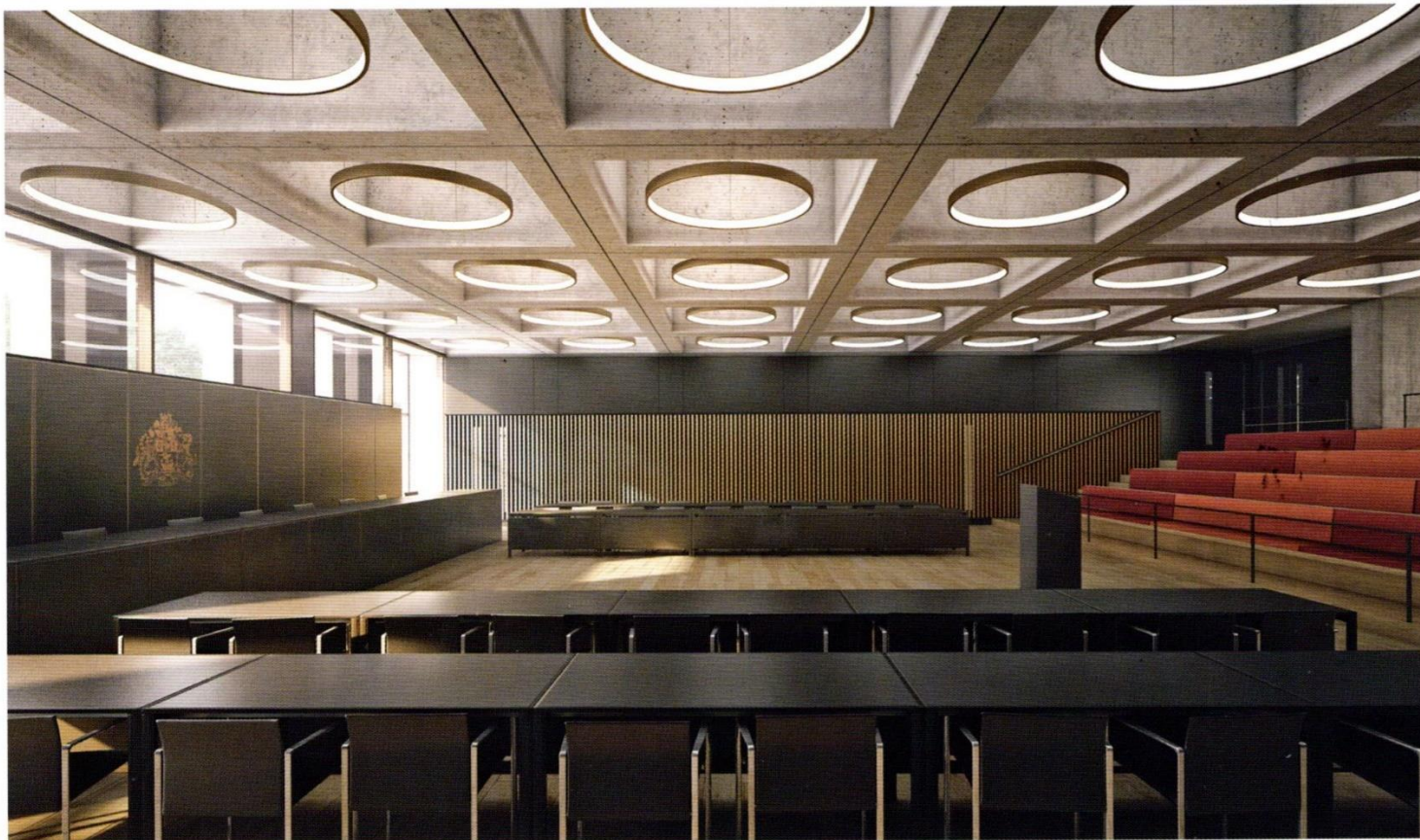
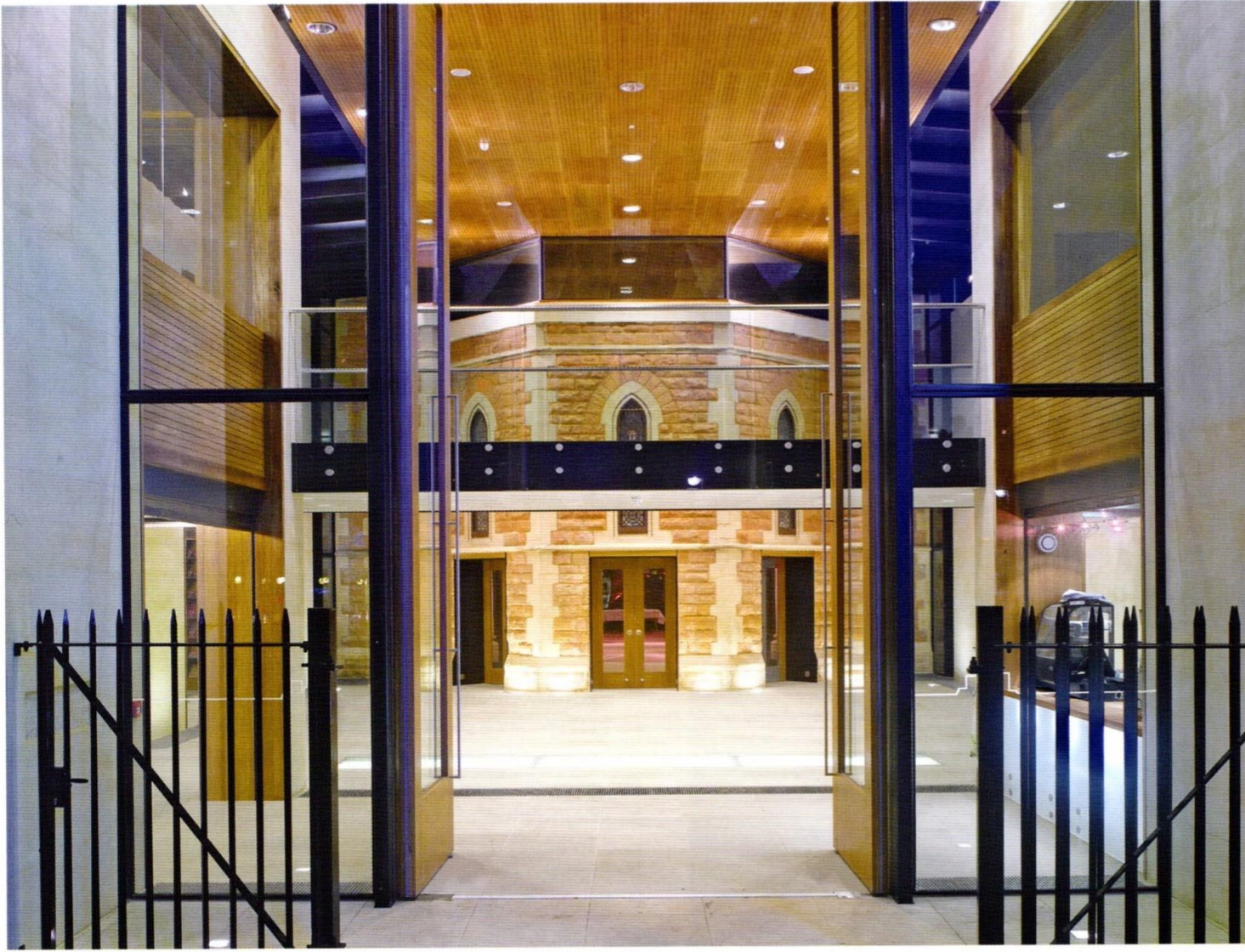


The entrance is cut and defined by lowering the approach so that one can slip into the building underneath the historic façade.

At an initial visit to the site with AHMM, and to his joy and surprise, Griffiths discovered that the original 23-bay Georgian hospital building of the 1750s still mostly survived, hidden under all manner of subsequent architectural additions. The borough had commissioned a feasibility study that advocated the demolition of the rear half of the Georgian building. To avoid destroying it, writes Griffiths, 'We therefore helped to devise an alternative approach ... [the Georgian Hospital] separated from a new Z-shaped new building by a full-height glazed atrium revealing the repaired original rear elevation.'⁶ Using this idea, the team was able to maintain the Georgian building, utilising its cellular planning, repairing it and creating meeting and conference rooms.

So a design concept was hatched that architecturally honoured and responded to the varying architectural characters of some of the historical additions and alterations spanning 1757 to 1906; for example, the Arts and Crafts double-height operating theatres will be reused to contribute varied spatial opportunities to foster different uses as well as create a changing choreography of spatial experiences as one travels through the building. Combined with the newbuild aspects of the proposal, this will provide the Civic Centre with all manner of modern and historical interiors that can host contemporary functions.

The architectural definition of the new Civic Centre's entrance presented a particular challenge. Cutting a hole in the historical wing, out of scale with the Victorian space and façade rhythms, was architecturally problematic. The solution is maverick, yet sensitively successful. 'The external ground is lowered, instead, and a new wide glazed entrance made below. This gives access to the whole of the ground floor via steps and gentle ramps,'⁷ writes Griffiths.



Continuity over Time

A lengthy career working on buildings of a variety of periods and styles has given Griffiths a detailed understanding of the UK's unique and long architectural history – there are always new things to learn, in terms of both construction and theory. His path has intersected with many architects and master-craftsmen often lost in the mists of time, and others fading into the dusk as contemporary architects and students continue on their solipsistic way, sometimes with a poor understanding and respect for architectural history before the 20th century. Griffiths's journey has been different, and has brought him into visceral architectural contact with many from the past: in London, greats such as Nicholas Hawksmoor and Albert Richardson (St Alfege Church, Greenwich), George Gilbert Scott (St Pancras Renaissance Hotel) and Charles Barry (Royal London Hospital, Whitechapel), as well as landscape designer Capability Brown, but equally those who deserve to be remembered, such as Victorians TG Jackson (Brighton College, East Sussex) and Elijah Hoole (Toynbee Hall, Whitechapel), and Edwardians Lanchester & Rickards (Methodist Central Hall, Westminster).

Richard Griffiths Architects, Extension of St Paul's Church, Hammersmith, London, 2005

opposite top: A highly sensitive addition to the neo-Gothic church rationalising its accommodation for a new century. The interior of the atrium, which conjoins the old and new, opens to the former baptistery of the church through three sets of glazed oak doors.

AHMM, Tower Hamlets Civic Centre, London, 2021

opposite bottom: The Council Chamber is unashamedly modern, but has a quiet, calming interior at once honorific yet also democratic.

He rejoices in the opportunities that designing with old buildings gives him to work with beautiful natural materials – stone, brick, oak, lead, wrought iron, brass and gold leaf. The combination of strict listed-building consents and the financial possibilities that successful bidding for historic building grants, often mean designing with quality raw materials and time-intensive quality craftsmanship. Such architecture can also escape the more severe quotidian cutbacks of contemporary 'value engineering' so prevalent in newbuild schemes.

Griffiths thinks and designs with a conception of the simultaneity of past, present and future. Firstly, designing new layers of old buildings raises his chances of having worked on a building that may still be existent in 500 years' time. The thought of this possibility gives him a heady sense

of wellbeing. Also, most of his practice's work is on buildings in public ownership, and he gleans immense pleasure from watching people use and appreciate them: 'This is the richest reward for our work, whether attending evensong at Southwark or at St Albans Abbey, helping others to discover the fascination of Sutton House, or watching the crowds at Clissold House on a sunny weekend.'⁸

For Griffiths, his work is one of a continuum, a spectrum of preservation, rehabilitation and restoration, and he does not flinch from facsimile reconstruction. His experience has given him a thoughtful and realistic approach to the deeply worrying moral question raised when a great building is destroyed, for example by fire, as at the Mackintosh Building at the Glasgow School of Art in Scotland (2018), or Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris (2019). Most Modernist architects get themselves into contortions of logic when asked whether we should rebuild as was, or design something contemporary instead, as the original architects had done in their time. Griffiths's ideas in such cases are simply liberating: 'What is the essence of a building? Is it in its substance and physical fabric, or in its design and form? ... Both the substance and the essence of a building is in its design, in its construction, and in its age, ... Morality has no bearing.'⁹ In a comment piece for the *Architects' Journal* in 2018, he advocated the complete rebuilding of the Mackintosh Building exactly as it was before: 'Mackintosh's masterpiece is one of the great buildings of this country and must be rebuilt. Warsaw, Berlin, Dresden, St Petersburg demonstrate what can be done to rebuild great architecture catastrophically destroyed. The same can, and must, be done at the Mac.'¹⁰

The longevity and amazing diversity of work that Richard Griffiths Architects have produced, and the aged buildings they have rejuvenated, are testament to the respect in which they are held. Their deep knowledge of architectural history made them the ideal consultant to compile the Historic Impact Assessment for AHMM on the Tower Hamlets Civic Centre. ▴

Notes

1. Richard Griffiths, *Old Buildings New Architecture*, Richard Griffiths Architects (London), 2019, p 105.

2. *Ibid*, p 9.

3. *Ibid*, p 11.

4. *Ibid*.

5. *Ibid*, p 13.

6. *Ibid*, p 87.

7. *Ibid*.

8. *Ibid*, p 167.

9. Richard White, 'Mac May Have to Be Pulled Down, Warn Experts', *Architects' Journal*, 18 June 2018: www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/mac-may-have-to-be-pulled-down-warn-experts.

10. *Ibid*.