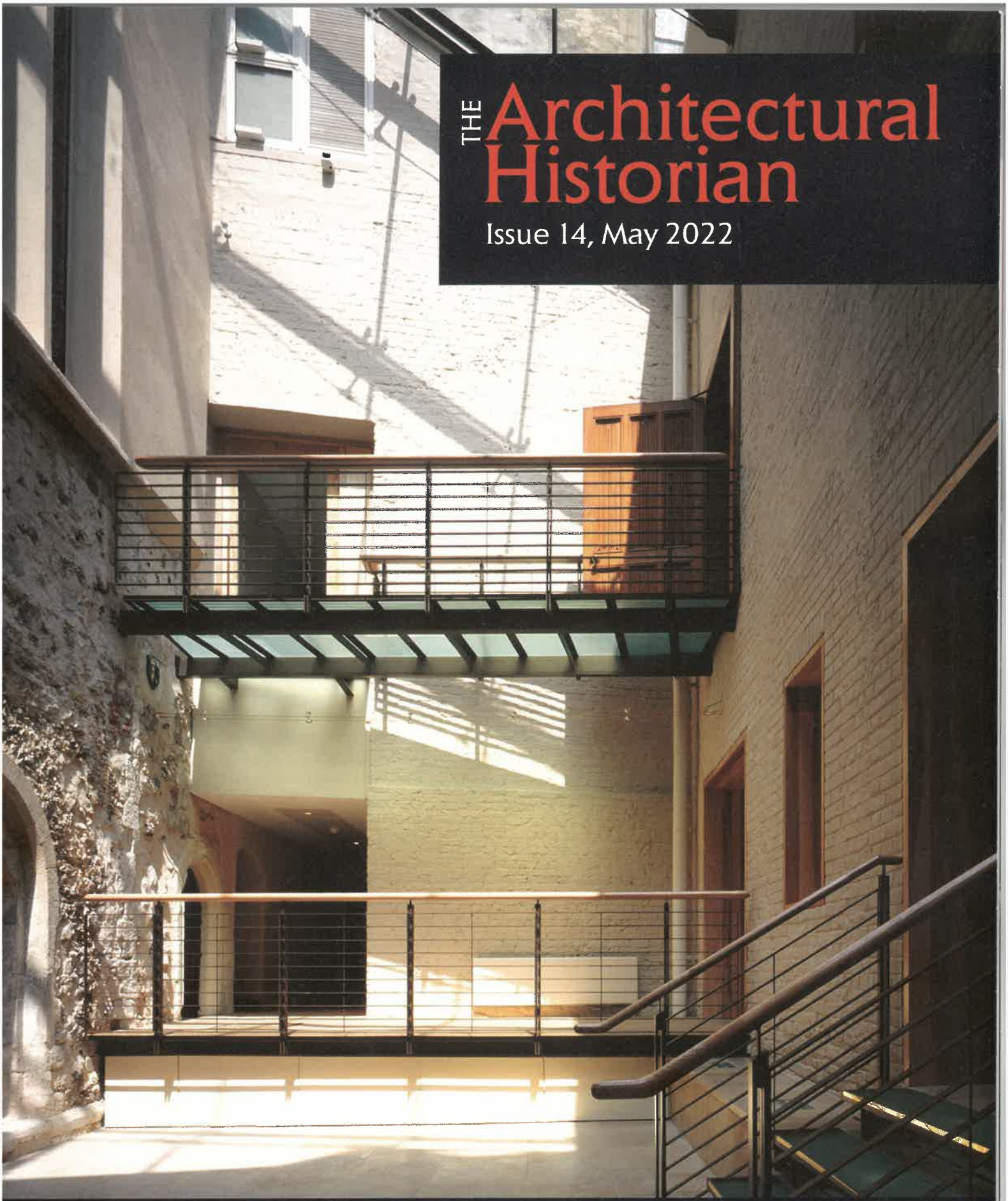

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Opinion

Architecture, conservation and the uses of history

Richard Griffiths argues that we should reject an outdated fabric-orientated approach to conservation and replace it with an integrated, design-led philosophy

A few years ago I sat down to write *Old Buildings, New Architecture,* a book about the work of Richard Griffiths Architects. It started life as a monograph, but metamorphosed into an account of how architecture for old buildings differs from architecture for new buildings, offering additional layers of richness and complexity. The architect working with old buildings engages intimately with issues of memory, history, archaeology, historic materials and techniques, and the texture of age. The reuse of existing buildings is now seen as a key aspect of sustainability in the built environment, and the best contemporary architects are doing some of their finest work with existing buildings, for example: David Chipperfield and Julian Harrap at the Neues Museum; Howarth Tompkins at the Royal Court Theatre; Witherford Watson Mann at Nevill Holt Opera.

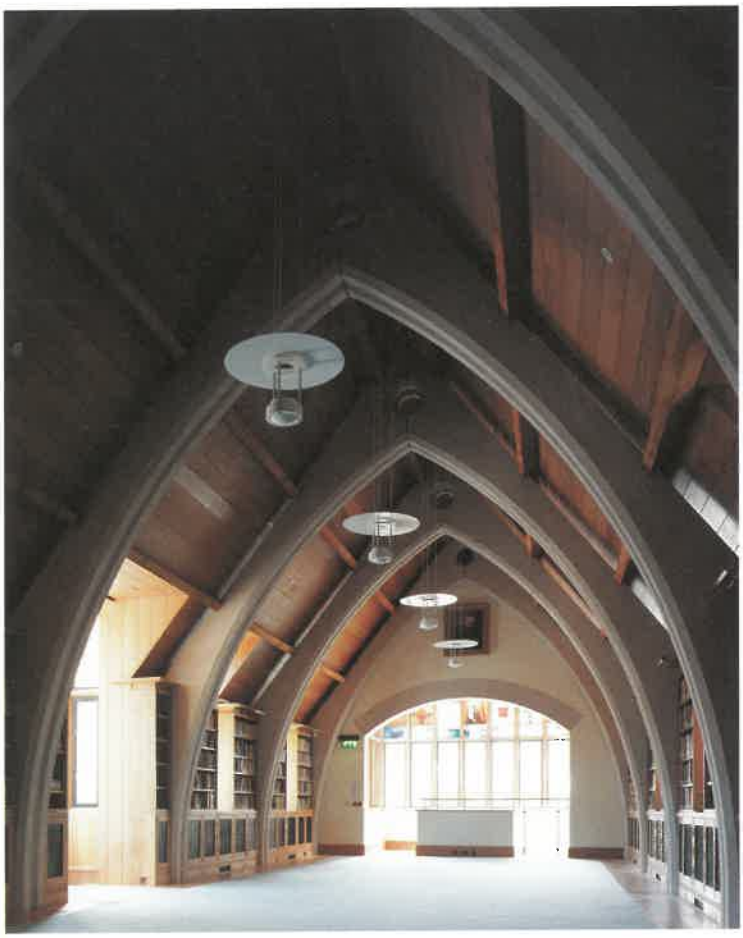
Those who specialise in working with old buildings are increasingly required to become Accredited Conservation Architects with the RIBA or the AABC (Architects Accredited in Building Conservation). I think this is unfortunate, because conservation is seen by both bodies, in excessively narrow technical terms, as concerning the techniques of repair and what they insist on calling the philosophy of repair, with nothing about the wider issues of architecture as a practical and aesthetic discipline; Vitruvius' *Firmitas*, without *Utilitas* or *Venustas*.

This country has been notably short on conservation philosophy, until recently, other than that of Ruskin, Morris and the SPAB. The SPAB, like the AABC, sees buildings primarily as building fabric rather than as architecture; indeed the leading architects of the day were notable by their absence in the early years, put off by Ruskin's diatribe against restoration, 'A lie from start to finish', and Morris' extreme view of historic buildings, 'They are not ours to touch'. I have never been able to agree that restoration could be dismissed so easily. It is thanks to a conversation with Alan Powers about the metaphysical distinction between substance and essence in ancient philosophy that I now distinguish between the substance of architecture as being in its fabric, and the essence of architecture as being in its design. If we had been bombed as German cities were bombed in WWII, we would feel differently about the relative merits of substance and essence, fabric and design.

Of course, the architects who were early members of the SPAB, Philip Webb and the young architects of the LCC who attended meetings of the SPAB – 'a school of practical building', as Lethaby called it - went on to produce such lovely Arts and Crafts buildings as the Euston Road Fire Station. Yet the whole approach to repair in the early years was obsessed with avoiding fakery, the idea that a material should be repaired with a different material in order to avoid deceiving the viewer, the most extreme example being the tile and mortar repair of stone masonry promoted in AR Powys' *Repair of Ancient Buildings*. With time the differential decay of tiles and mortar led to the opposite mantra of like-for-like repairs, but the reaction to any proposal for restoration is still poisoned by arguments of fakery, even in such compelling cases as the reconstruction of Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art, now the victim of two terrible conflagrations. At least the Historic English Conservation Principles now address the criteria for repair and restoration, and the NPPF addresses the criteria for sustainable development in making central the three Brundtland pillars of economic growth, social equality and environmental protection.

I now offer some examples of the uses of history in my own work. These fall into three categories: understanding how buildings were designed and altered over

Image Sutton House, Hackney. The Victorian Parlour with 200-year old cobwebs carefully preserved in the Tudor privy that was blocked up in the eighteenth century.



Left Southwark Cathedral Library with paired ribs of pre-cast concrete to support the oak roof.

history; their context, their owners and their stories; understanding the significance of the different historic layers both in relation to the circumstances in which they were created and to today's circumstances; and having an understanding and appreciation of the whole history of architecture through the ages, from the Agrigento to Zumthor and beyond. However, in the final analysis, for me the use of history is to provide an understanding of the past, so that I can give new life to old buildings and improve the quality of everyone's lives, in the present and into the future.

Sutton House, Hackney.

Other than cathedrals I can think of no building with more historic layers than Sutton House in Hackney. I had the great good fortune to become the architect for the community group who saved the house from being converted to private flats, and for the National Trust, who took on the innovative project of working with the local community in the inner city. This was a house that James Lees Milne had dismissed as being 'of no architectural interest, we should never have taken it on'. We now know that it was built in 1535 by Ralph Sadleir, of Wolf Hall fame, and known as the Bryck Place. It survives remarkably intact, albeit much hidden behind later historical layers. The east staircase was rebuilt in the 17th century with fictive Jacobean balustrade wall paintings; the front elevation and some of the main rooms were panelled in the 18th century; the west wing was remodelled in the mid-19th century; Wenlock Barn was added in the early 20th century; and the house was squatted, vandalised and became derelict in the late 20th century. I kept the best of the historic layers, including the backfilled cesspit and examples of squatters' graffiti, and made the earlier layers visible by means of hinged panels, 53 in all. My favourite is the jib door in the Victorian study opening into the reopened Tudor closet where I carefully preserved the cobwebs that had been growing for 200 years. My new contemporary layer was expressed in a sympathetic yet contrasting manner, and whereas the Tudor house was of oak and iron and the Georgian house of painted softwood and brass, my new layer was of ash and bronze.

Southwark Cathedral

Southwark Cathedral offered the opportunity to use an understanding of the history of the site as a stimulus to new design. The cathedral started life as the Priory church of St Mary Overie, at the southern bridgehead of London Bridge, then the only bridge over the Thames. At the Dissolution it was taken on as the Parish Church of St Saviour's, and it was elevated as the new Cathedral of south London in 1905, following the rebuilding of the nave. I was appointed as Cathedral architect in 1997, just as the plans for new buildings to the north of the cathedral were longlisted by the Millennium Commission, and was asked to take on the design. A rapid historic survey of the site and its context proved fundamental to the new design. The eastern arm of the priory cloister survived long enough into the 19th century to be recorded by Dolman in his great work on the church. We recreated the sense of the cloister as a new entrance and courtyard giving access to the cathedral via

Above St Paul's Hammersmith, Western Atrium with the new great west doors.

a new entrance from the Thames, flanked by a new building, of the scale of its monastic predecessor, containing the refectory and library. On the site of the medieval alleyway to the north of the church we provided the main public circulation link leading from the new entrance, via a gentle ramp, to the north entrance to the cathedral; this was just as well, because there proved to be many layers of surviving archaeology below the ground, from Roman road to 17th century Delftware kiln, all of which could be revealed in an archaeological pit in the link. The functions of a contemporary visitor centre replicate surprisingly closely those of its medieval priory, with its refectory, library, parlours and lavatorium. As for the architecture of the new buildings, this reflects historic precedent, with its walls of stone and knapped flint, its floors of Purbeck marble and its tiled Roman arches, while the design of the library, with its arched ribs and oak joinery, is a homage to ES Prior's great church of St Andrew's, Roker.

St Paul's Hammersmith

St Paul's Hammersmith is the large neo-Gothic church of pink sandstone on the Hammersmith gyratory. The new evangelical congregation had grown at a phenomenal rate, and, with 16 people working full-time in the church, it was getting a bit crowded. Two architects had already tried and failed to provide sufficient accommodation, the first in the narrow gap between the church and the flyover, and the other in a gallery at the west end of the church. I was appointed on the strength of my assurance that I could gain consent for an extension in the churchyard to the west of the church. In reading KJ Conant on Romanesque architecture many years earlier I had come across the extraordinary German Romanesque churches with western atria, of which Maria Laach is the best example, and in the course of subsequent reading became aware of the tradition of western atria that goes back to the origins of the early Christian church, notably at old St Peter's in Rome. Our extension began life as a series of meeting rooms around a planted atrium, but owing to the need for extra space it became a covered atrium and assembly hall surrounded by meeting rooms, a café and bookshop, with further meeting rooms in the excavated basement. The planners, who had objected previously, were won round by the historic precedent of a western atrium, but still insisted on the retention of the listed churchyard wall. Our first scheme therefore had the first floor cantilevered over the wall, as in the Villa Savoye. It was this aspect of the design that the planners could not approve, so our building, dare I say it, is now more Louis Kahn than Le Corbusier.

Richard Griffiths' book, *Old Buildings New Architecture*, can be obtained via the practice website www.rgarchitects.com for the reduced price of £20 by entering the code RGA20.

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