



PETER ST JOHN

Newport Street Gallery

LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY
THE SCHOOL OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

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Project details

Output author	Peter St John
Practice	Caruso St John Architects
Collaborators	Damien Hirst
Project title	<i>Newport Street Gallery</i>
Output type	L – Artefact (building)
Location	London, UK
Dates	2012 – 2016
Budget	Confidential

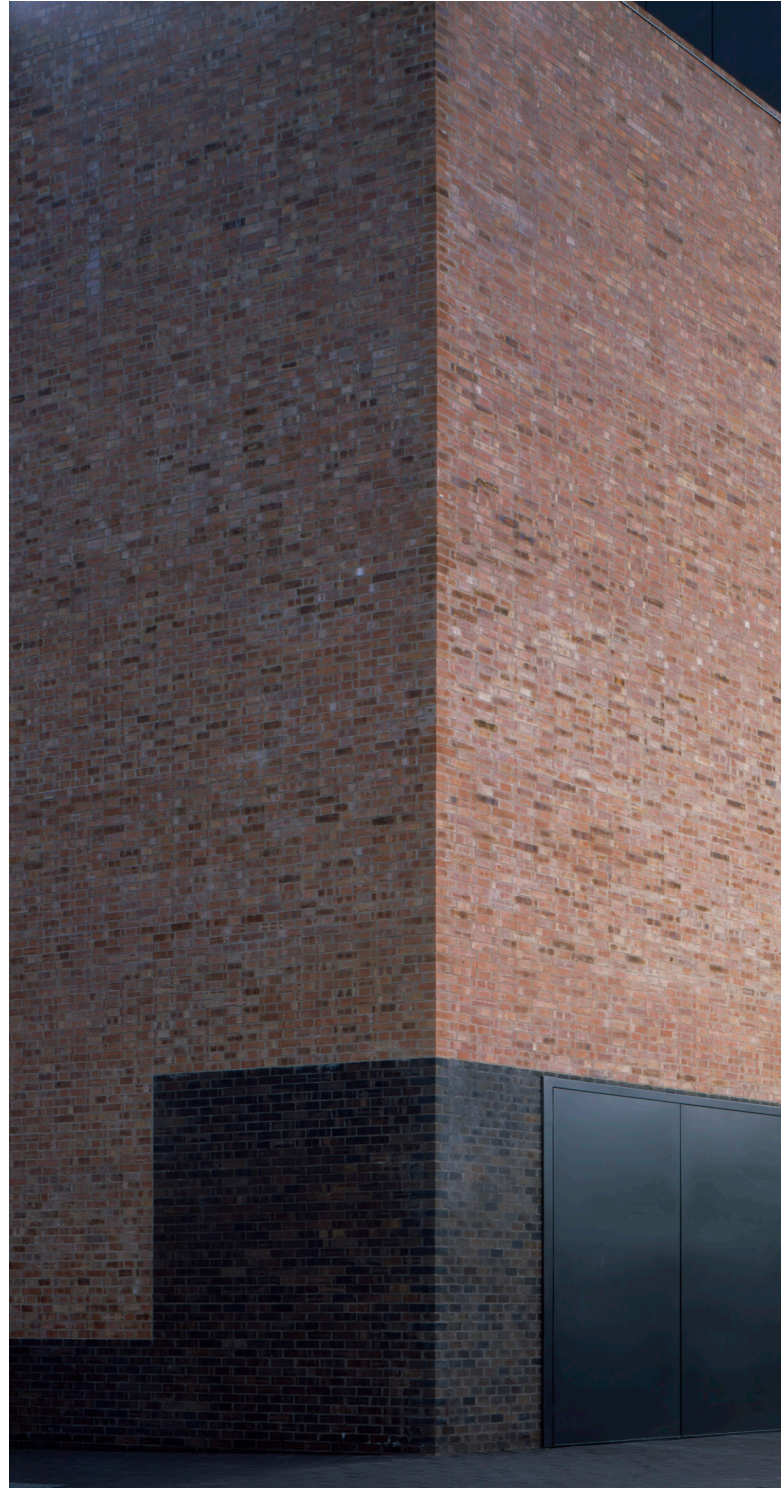




Figure 2. Newport Street Gallery. Image:
Helene Binet.

Research content and significance

DESCRIPTION

Commissioned by Damien Hirst, this project called for the design of a large, private gallery in South London to exhibit the artist's personal collection. Ranged alongside a railway viaduct, the design entailed the renovation of listed industrial buildings (formerly used for scenery storage) as well as construction of new buildings.

RESEARCH AIMS

- The technical and atmospheric requirements of spaces for the display of contemporary art;
- The balance between continuity and authenticity when making a large building out of new and old construction, in a manner that both preserves and extends the character of existing fabric.
- The complexity of new masonry construction when integrated into existing structures, giving rise to a new architectonic character;
- The contribution of practice-led debates to aesthetic and civic understanding of cultural buildings, reflecting upon their public purpose, context and programme.

METHODS

Two inter-related concerns steered the research: 1) how technical challenges in design provide for conditions associated with atmospheric qualities in architecture. Explored in both the design work and writings of the practice, atmosphere acquires special significance in the Newport Street Gallery; 2) how the project sheds new light on the way architecture creates laconic settings for the "chaotic-manifold of things" characteristic of much contemporary art.

DISSEMINATION

The gallery spaces provide exemplary settings for experiencing contemporary art, especially large-scale installations, sculpture and paintings. Since opening, it has successfully hosted up to four single artist or thematic shows a year.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Built on the practice's quarter century of design research for museums/galleries, the significance of the project lies in its demonstration of how appropriate design strategies for the exhibition of artwork can transform a neglected part of London into a vibrant cultural quarter with distinctive architectural and civic qualities.

Introduction

Newport Street Gallery was designed by Caruso St John, a British architectural practice based in London and Zurich, and is the result of 20 years of research into thinking about art space and how to install contemporary works of art. Commissioned by Damien Hirst, the project called for the design of a large, private gallery in Vauxhall, South London, to exhibit the artist's personal collection, making it accessible to the public, free of charge.

A series of existing buildings - a converted terrace of three listed buildings flanked by two new buildings - together form the suite of spaces, including six galleries, a shop, and a restaurant named Pharmacy2. This private gallery was the recipient of the RIBA Stirling Prize, 2016. Judges, Patrick Schumacher, Paul Monaghan, Roisin Heneghan, Michael Hussey, and Rachel Whiteread, considered a range of prize criteria including *“design vision; innovation and originality; capacity to stimulate, engage and delight occupants and visitors; accessibility and sustainability; how fit the building is for its purpose, and the level of client satisfaction”*.¹

The then RIBA president, Jane Duncan referred to this winning entry as a project that, *“exemplifies the best of UK architecture - a highly considered*

*and creative project that brings to life a previously-unloved pocket of the city”*², making the building relevant not only in regards to the experience of the gallery, by creating/regenerating spaces for exhibiting art, but also as a contribution to urban regeneration.

The sympatico relationship between art and architecture at the Newport Street Gallery is the product of careful design and consideration of technical and atmospheric requirements of spaces for the display of contemporary art. It required striking a balance between continuity and authenticity in the process of making a large building out of new and old construction, in a manner that both preserves and extends the character of existing fabric. The complexity of new masonry construction, when integrated into existing structures, gives rise to a distinct architectonic character. At the same time, the contribution of the practice's own concerns about aesthetic and civic understanding of cultural buildings was deeply engaged in questions of their public purpose, context and programme.

1. Artnet News. (2015).

2. BBC News. (2015)



Figure 3. Newport Street Gallery. Image: Helene Binet.





Figure 4. Pharmacie Interior. Image: Prudence Cuming.

Research context

The design strategies deployed in the project, to create an atmosphere conducive to viewing art, also aimed to instil a sense of architectural decorum, by bringing into dialogue the multifaceted features of the site and programme. The building's linear configuration extends along a large section of Newport St, visually connecting with passers-by. Various vantage points reveal the gallery's prominent position on the south side of the Thames, with social housing dotted around the outskirts. The frontage to the railway line provides an unexpected spectacle for commuters travelling into Waterloo, with close-up views of the artworks selected for exterior display, together with imagery presented on large LED screens.

The core of the complex of buildings, that together make up 37,000ft of the gallery, is the three Victorian buildings that were formerly studios for the production of scenery paintings supplying theatres in the West End in the 1920's. Originally built in 1913, one of the galleries was bombed during WW2 and was rebuilt for use as a barrow-making workshop for flower-sellers. Hirst has owned the building since 2003, when it was used as one of his studios. The high ceilings, well suited for art displays, offered a natural place to develop the gallery.

*"Caruso St John has fast become the builder of choice for Britains galleries"*³, having completed the renovations to London's Tate Britain and the Gagosian.

The design complexity is demonstrated through skilfully harnessing visual and spatial relationships between new and existing buildings; the first floors of the former theatre scenery warehouse were moved upwards, taking account of the connection with the adjacent windows that also facilitated a number of loft offices. The central galleries reach a height of eleven metres, while new roofs for the tallest building have been designed for the installation of large sculptures. The same proportions of the original building are carried through in the design of the two new buildings. The integration of new masonry construction with the existing structure gives rise to a new architectonic character. The resulting balance between continuity and authenticity, in the process of making a large building out of new and old construction, both preserves and extends the character of existing fabric.

"Works or objects of art that move us are multifaceted; they have numerous and perhaps endless layers of meaning that overlap and interweave, and that change as we change our angle of observation".⁴

Newport Street Gallery engages visitors through a layered experience, capturing the attention of passersby in its wider context, through architecture of the building itself with its interrelation of materials and texture, and through the varied display formats of artwork: on the exterior of the building, hints through windows of slightly obscured views of the exhibition, and the arrival at the spaces and circulation between them.

3. Financial Times, 2015.
4. Zumthor, P. (2010) p.30.

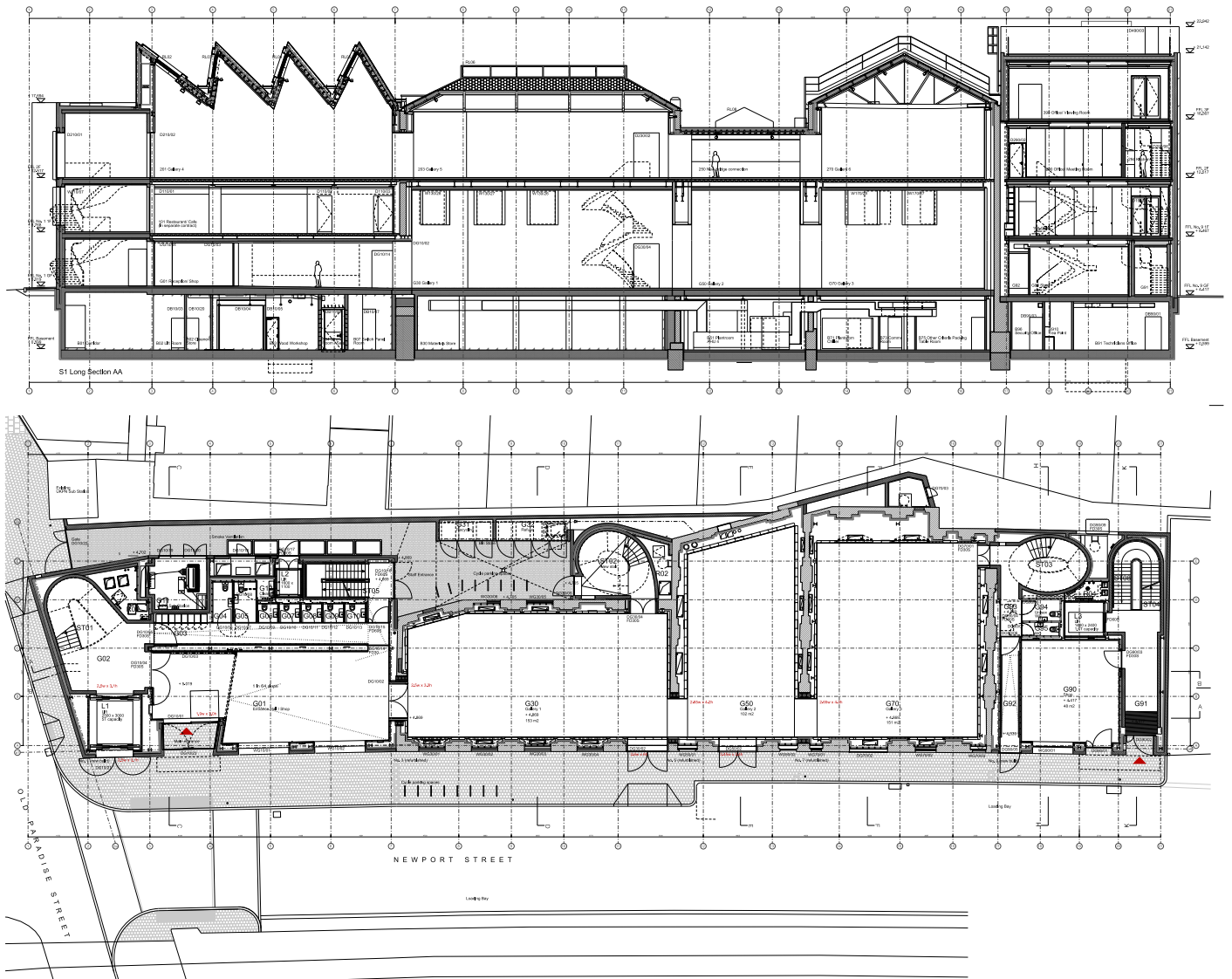


Figure 5. Section and Plans. Image: Caruso St John Architects.

Research process

Two inter-related concerns steered the research: 1) how technical challenges in design provide for conditions associated with atmospheric qualities in architecture. Explored in both the design work and writings of the practice, atmosphere acquires special significance in the Newport Street Gallery; 2) how the project sheds new light on the way architecture creates laconic settings for the display of the “chaotic-manifold of things”⁵, characteristic of much contemporary art. *“Atmosphere, understood in the broad sense of a psychosomatic climate, is the overall perceptual, sensory, and emotive impression of a space or a situation. Philosophers of atmosphere describe it as the affective power of feelings, the spatial bearer of mood. As an analytical concept, atmosphere gives some measure of objectivity to our grasp of feelings in our surroundings while avoiding a conception of moods as mere projections of private mental states.”*⁶

From these concerns, the combined dynamic and static qualities of the Gallery, expressed through the juxtaposed spiral/orthogonal volumes and jagged/smooth profiles of roof and walls, provide the sympatico conditions between art and architecture. The theme of atmosphere that arises from technical/environmental considerations, develops into a fundamental dimension

of the part. This draws upon different mimetic references that invoke aspects of 19th century architecture; from the refined curved staircases, redolent of Sir John Soane’s interiors, to the zig-zag roof profile with skylights, reminiscent of industrial buildings. *“We think that construction has a direct effect on the emotional character of spaces. Although discourses on construction often centre on issues of performance and technique, ultimately construction is about appearance, about choosing appropriate constructions in the production of space.”*⁷

An implicit strategy in this project was to develop an analogical approach to designing and representing the urban gallery. This involved a close dialogue between an understanding of the scale, setting and visibility of the building and its shared and unique material/tectonic qualities with respect to its local urban context. Newport Street Gallery design study models, show the developing form of the building, allowing a process of testing different gallery spaces with different types of art. Making models is one way of how Caruso St John develop the design for presentation and discussion with others.

5. Kraus, R. (1977).

6. Bressani, M. & Sprecher, A. (2019).

7. Caruso, A. (1999).



Figure 6-10. Movement depicted by stairways and railways. Images: Helene Binet.



Figure 11 and 12. Newport Street Gallery painting studios and the existing interior of building during construction.

Images: David Grandorge.

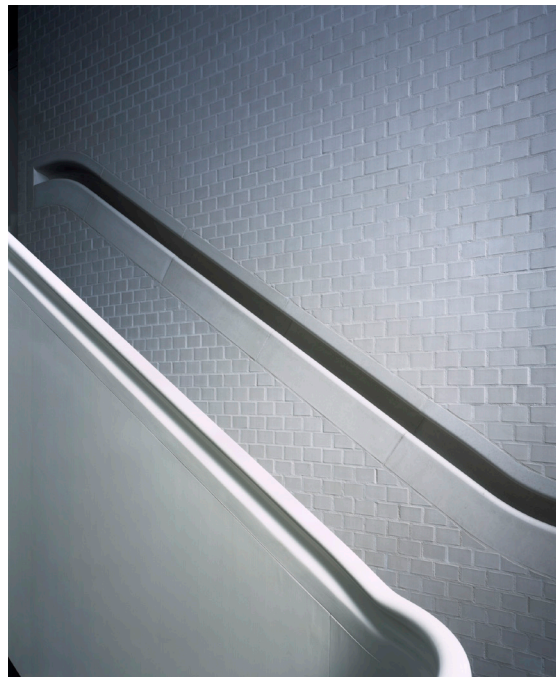


Figure 13 and 14. Stairway space under construction before timber stairs inserted. Image: Caruso St John.

Figure 15 and 16. Movement depicted by stairways and railways. Images: Helene Binet.



Figure 17 and 18. Gagosian Gallery Britannia Street Kings Cross completed 2005. Image: Helene Binet.

Figure 19 and 20. New art gallery in Walsall, completed 2000. Image: Helene Binet.

Research insights

The project offered new insights into the way the design and construction of art galleries, from partly existing buildings and topographical arrangements, can serve as a catalyst for urban and cultural renewal (*renovatio urbis*) in an otherwise neglected part of the city. This is not just in regard to the impact that contemporary art can have on altering public perceptions of a place, but also by the transformative effects of adapting/altering building fabric for the purpose of artistic display and experimentation. Such an impact carries with it an ethical responsibility on the part of the architect, to ensure that alteration or change brings with it both recognition of the new (demonstrated through the dynamic relationship between artwork and architectural intervention) and an acknowledgment of a prevailing or latent urban continuity.

A driving influence in articulating a relationship between artwork and building concerns what Rosalind Kraus calls the “Double Negative”⁸, which she uses in reference to the siting and experience of land sculpture; how our spatial and temporal relationships create a condition of “eccentricity of the position we occupy relative to our physical and psychological centers.”⁹ Kraus’ idea of the “invasion of a world into the closed space of form” provides a way of rethinking the notion

of architectural enclosure (especially when it is partly appropriated or salvaged from pre-existing structures) for the accommodation and experience of works of art.¹⁰ We recognised during the design of the Newport Street Gallery that this twofold ethical relationship requires a combination of imaginative responses to site and brief and a recollection of appropriate models and references from the past.

8. Kraus, R. (1977).

9. Kraus, R. (1977).

10. Kraus, R. (1977).



Figure 21. Movement depicted by stairways and railways. Image: Helene Binet.





Figure 22. Gallery Interior. Image: Prudence Cuming.

Dissemination

The gallery is seen by Hirst as his own Saatchi gallery, to showcase his collection of over 3000 artworks including works by the late Francis Bacon, Banksy, Tracey Emin, Richard Hamilton, Picasso, Jeff Koons and Richard Prince. The gallery has held solo exhibitions by former Young British Artists (YBA), as well as selections from his Murderme Collection, started in the late 1980s. Works by the late British artist, John Hoyland, were exhibited at the opening in an exhibition titled Powerstations. A selection of publications are listed below.

SELECTED PRESS

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Figure 23. Photograph of Koon's lobster.
Image: Prudence Cuming.



Figure 24. Photograph of Koon's dog.
Image: Prudence Cuming.



Figure 25. Gallery Interior. Image: Prudence Cuming.

Impact

As the Newport Street Gallery is seen to be a possible fresh start for Hirst¹¹, so the building contributes to the urban regeneration of the area, impacting the surrounding community. The audience is drawn into the atmosphere of space created inside by the captivating architecture that is in itself a permanent exhibition. As a rule, architects and designers move into a low-cost, dilapidated area, make it fashionable, and are followed by developers and estate agents. Vauxhall is a curious reversal of that. Stretching along the south side of the Thames there is already a torrent of construction.¹²

The gallery contributes to a wider art hub on the south side of the Thames, with a nearby commercial art gallery, Cabinet, backed by Charles Asprey, a London-based publisher and collector. In addition, there is the nearby Gasworks in Kennington - an active art space running since 1994 for local and international artists. *“Hirst, though, has form in capturing the zeitgeist. Now he is cutting out the middleman, taking his work straight to the streets. Hirst was once the future of art. Now the one-time future is in Vauxhall”*¹³

11. Artnet News (2015).

12. Financial Times, (28.08.2015).

13. Financial Times. (28.08.2015).



Figure 26. Newport Street Gallery from the railway line. Image: Helene Binet.

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