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Dockland Transformation

Adaptive Reuse of the Free Trade Wharf, River Thames, London

Gordon Ashworth

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Introduction

This project is an entry for an ideas competition for the adaptive reuse of a warehouse as a community recreation center in London's Docklands. This massive building, which is on the National List of Historic Buildings, was built in 1795 for the East India Trading Company on a fine riverside site and is typical of the many warehouses lining the river. Once a hive of industry, they now stand empty waiting for new uses, or in many cases, demolition. The competition was very appropriate, therefore, in indicating how such buildings could be used to meet the needs of the local community.

Background

The movement away from the cities, encouraged by government policies of relocating industry and commerce was a feature of the post-war years in Britain. The effects of this movement became increasingly apparent, particularly in the urban

areas between the prosperous city centers and the newly developing suburbs. With the loss of a locally supported tax base, amenities were less able to be sustained. Many of the younger families, particularly those with skilled workers, moved with the industry. The vacated housing was occupied by an increasing proportion of poorer families. Low expenditure on building maintenance, together with increased vandalism, created a blighted environment. The process was the familiar vicious spiral, needing positive action to halt its downward path. In recent years, the problem of these urban areas has been recognized. Succeeding governments have started to initiate new policies to encourage the regeneration of these areas and to halt the outward growth of the development of the cities. There has also been a return to a more humane approach to urban development, with conservation and incremental development

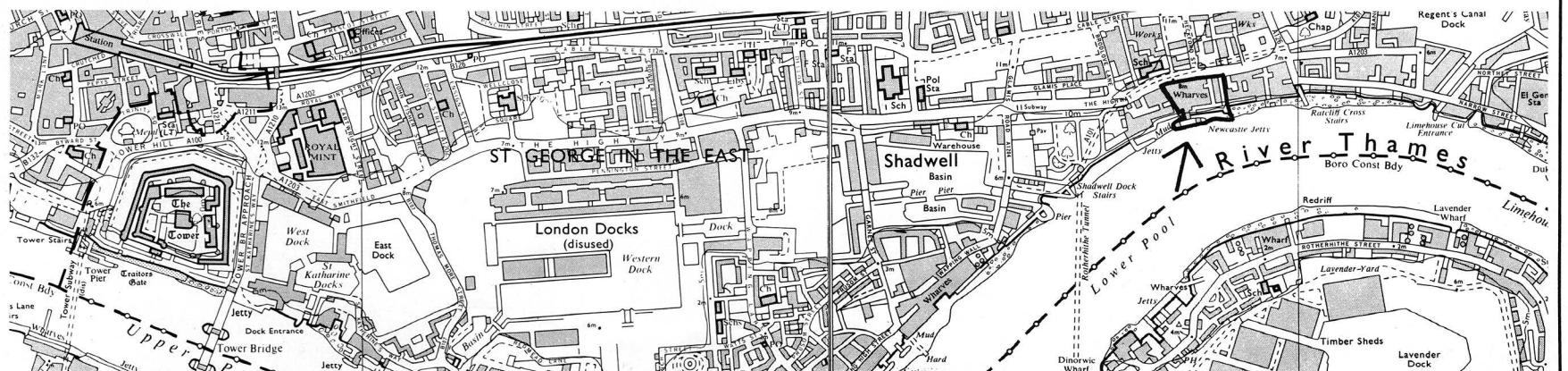
replacing the comprehensive renewal programs of the post-war era. The consolidation and improvement of the existing infrastructure is an essential part of this policy, as is the retention and re-use of many existing buildings. These methods offer a promising new way of stitching the city fabric back together and giving communities back their identity.

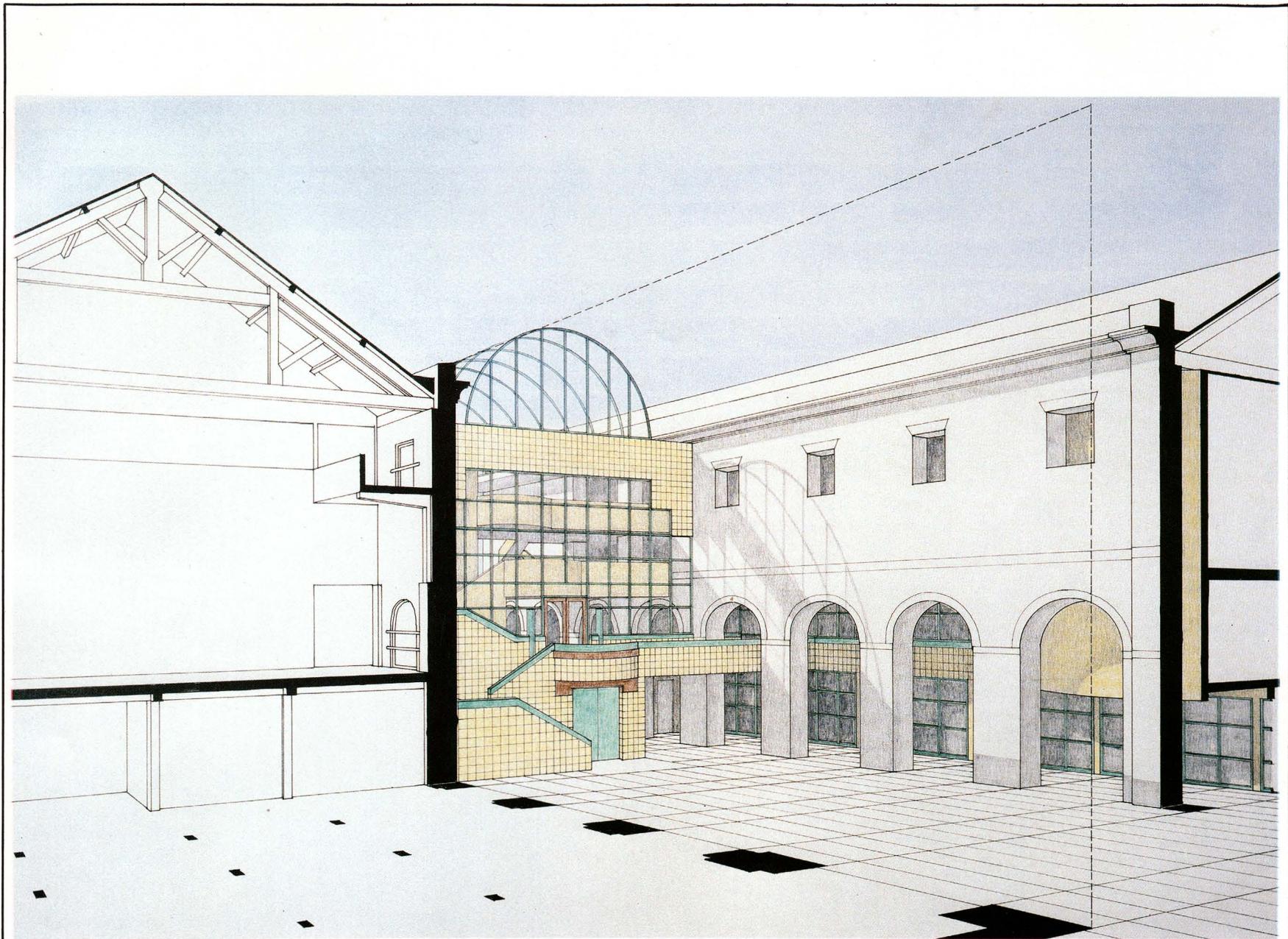
An area which typifies this general situation and which represents one of the more intransigent problems is the economic and physical replanning of London's docklands. Many of the docks closest to the city's center are closed; others face partial or complete closure as the port industry is rationalized and moves further downstream. Mechanization of the docks has reduced the need for a skilled workforce and, consequently, unemployment is high. Huge areas of buildings are unused and derelict as the local population moves with the employment center.

The Docklands Joint Committee, representing the Greater London Council and the five London Boroughs which contain the docks, has produced a strategic plan covering 8½ square miles of disused dockland. Part of this strategic plan concerning Wapping forms the backcloth of the subject for the ideas competition. Currently, the area consists of a modest amount of reasonable housing and a riverside largely occupied by derelict warehouses. The major land-use, the disused docks and basins, are being filled in. The area has a run-down appearance and little sense of community or activity.

The strategic plan for the area envisages residential use with new employment opportunities. The proximity of the area to the river will be exploited with access and vistas. Thus, a constant reminder of the traditional dependence of the area on London's waterway will be re-established.

Area Plan





Street Entry

The Site

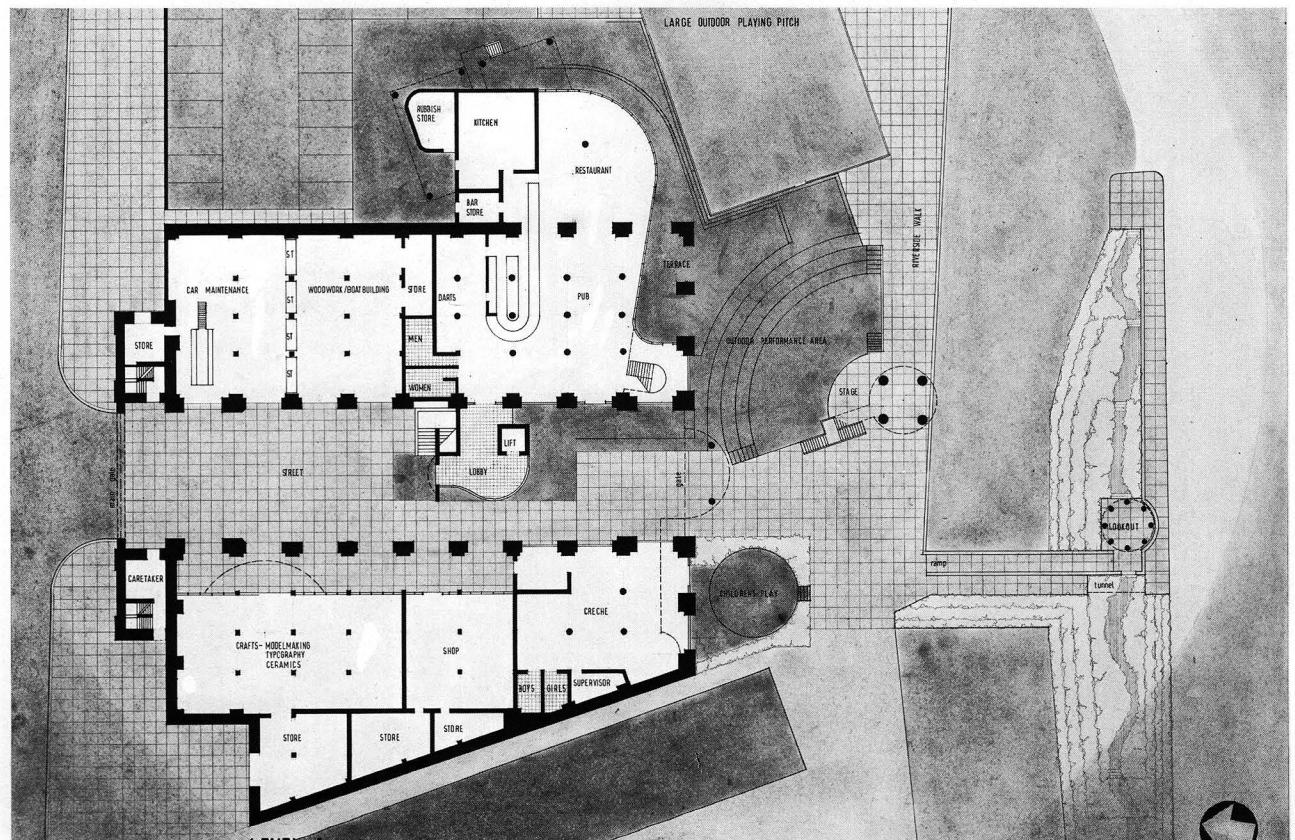
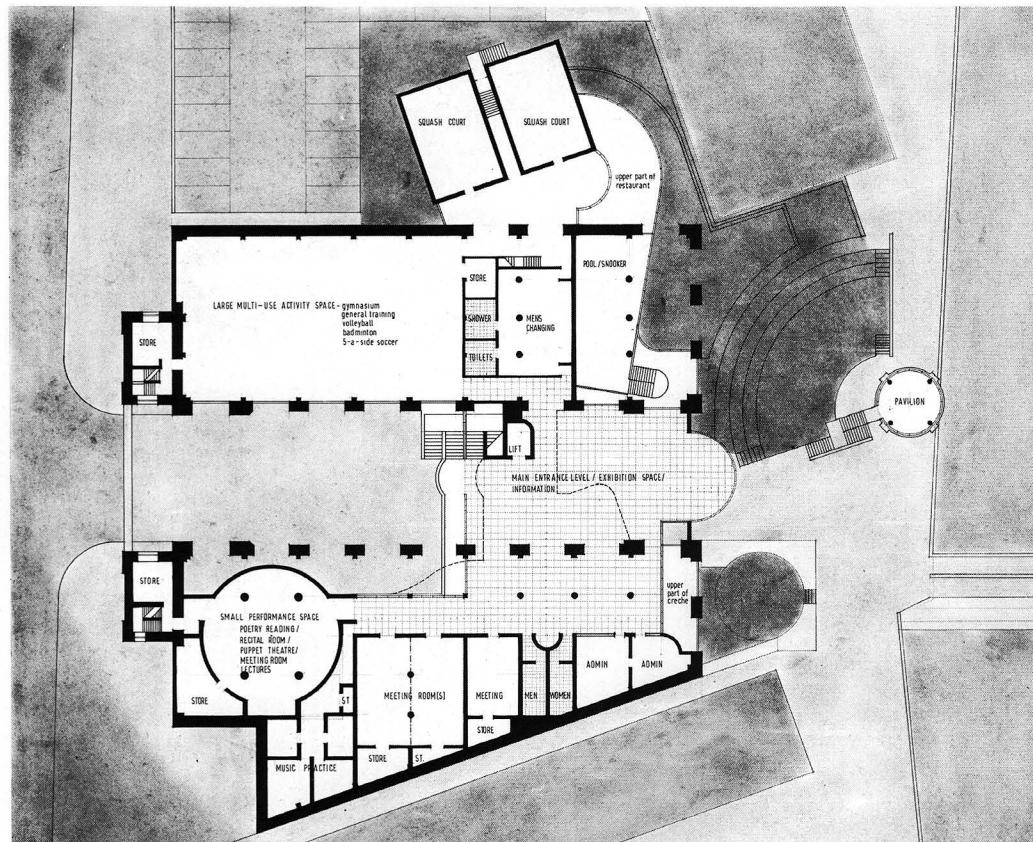
The irregularly shaped site consists of a riverside frontage of approximately 87 metres and a highway frontage of 111 metres. Both the highway and river are major circulation corridors. The site is approximately 73 metres in depth, with a gentle slope to the river. It is bounded on the east by a narrow passage and a stone stairway down to the river which is of architectural and historic interest. Newcastle Jetty projects into the river at the edge of the site and is in good enough condition to be retained and incorporated. The Free Trade Wharf building is on the western part of the site, with a 3 metre space between it and the western boundary.

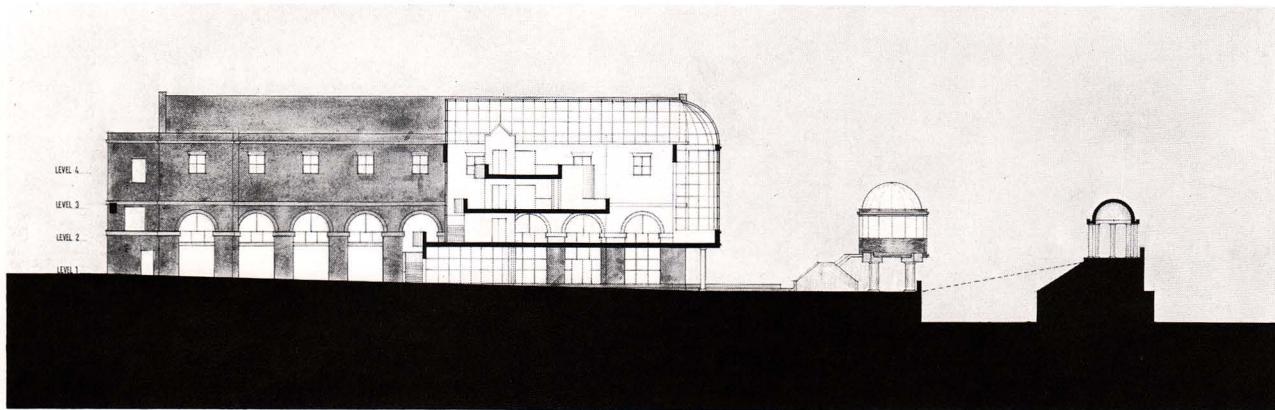
The Existing Building

The Free Trade Wharf building consists of two separate wings with a central open spine for loading. The walls are red brick, in a classical style, with structural piers supporting semi-circular open arches for the lower half of the building. A stone string course divides the building horizontally and above this, windows with small panes are spaced equally along the facade. The same theme is used for both of the walls facing the spine, with the exterior walls facing east and west featureless and windowless.

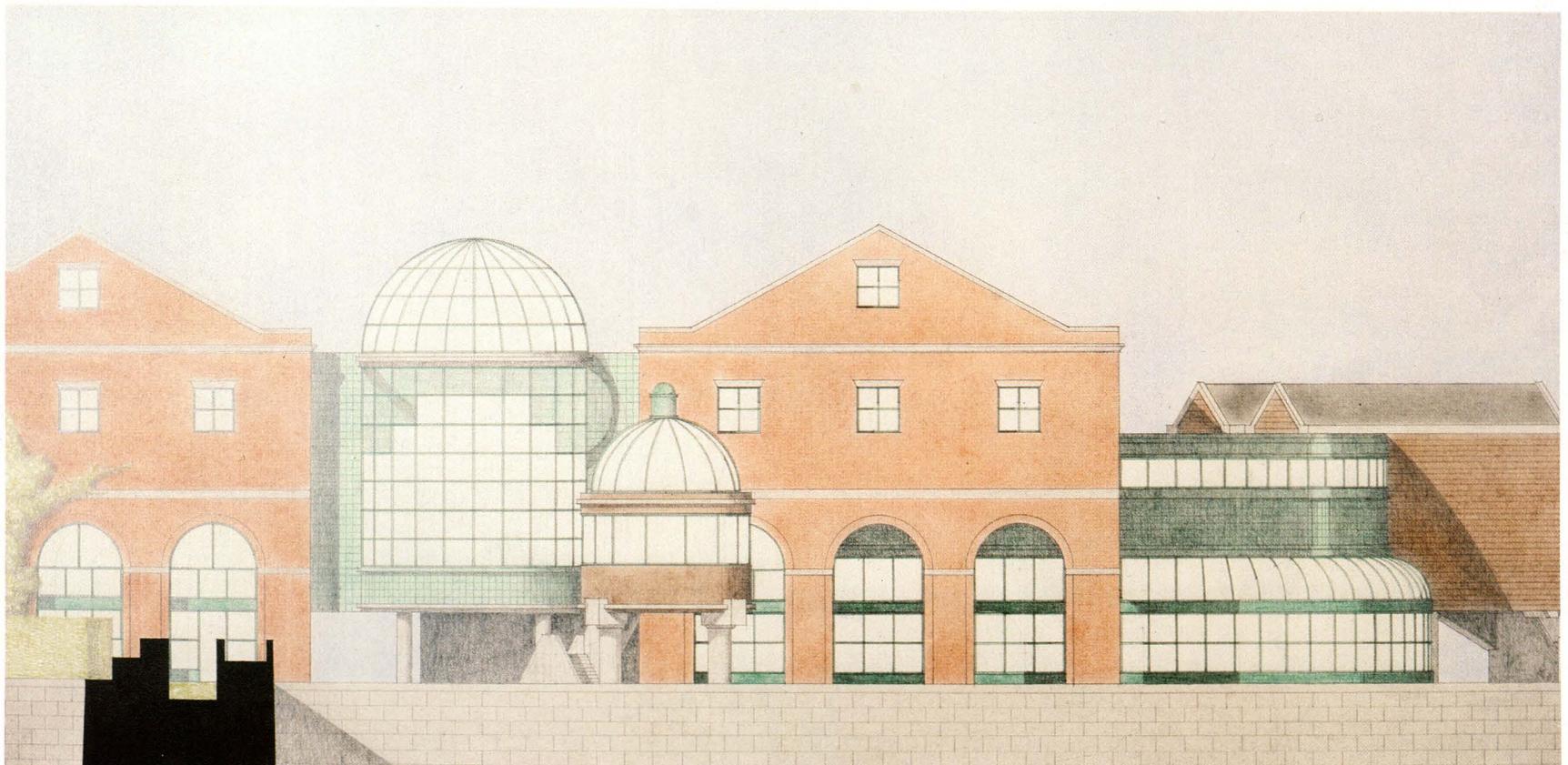
Over the years, the existing wings have been gutted internally and new steel and concrete columns, beams and floors inserted on three levels. The central spine has also been altered to provide extra floor space, with the arches and windows bricked up to allow the new floors to cut across the openings.

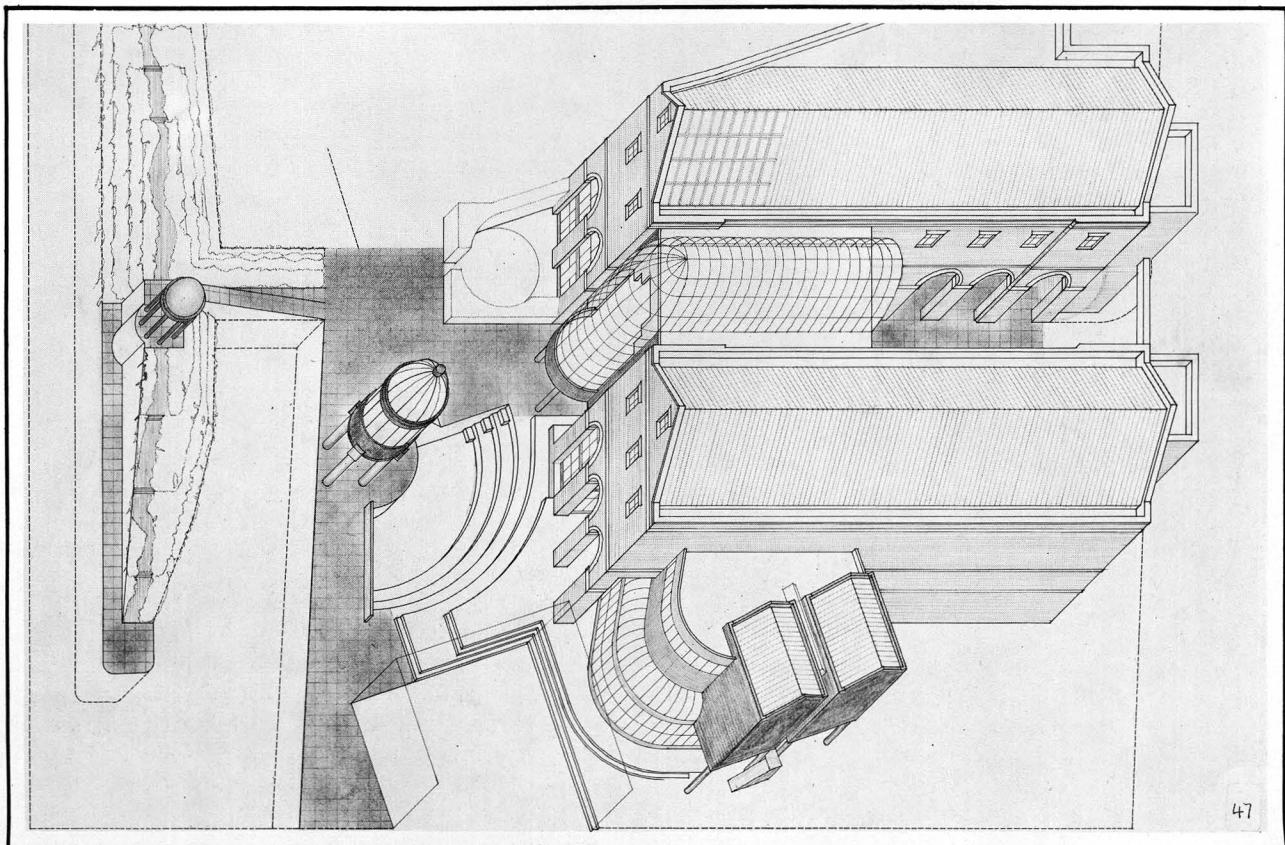
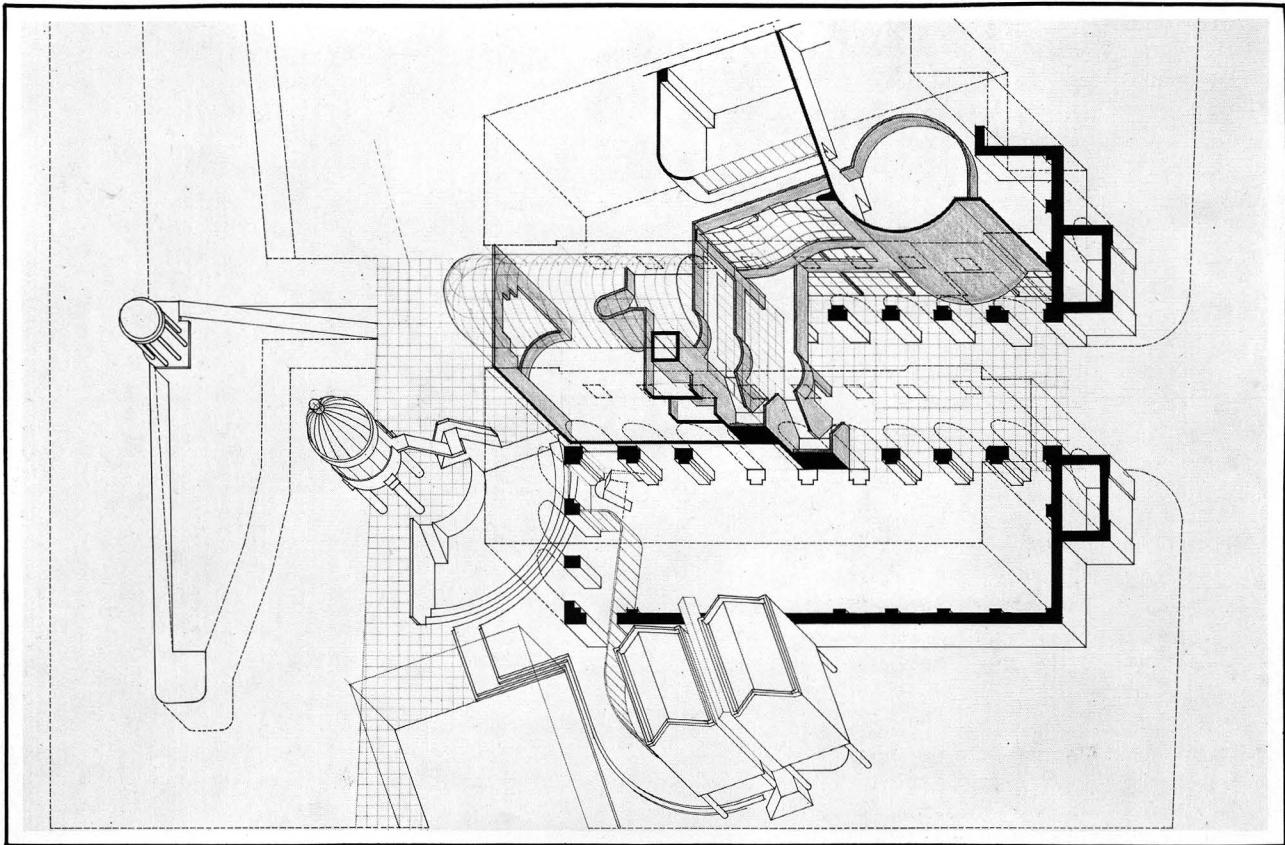
The original roofs over the two wings remain. They are of timber construction, with a king-post supported on a straining beam strutting between two queen-posts. The rules of the ideas competition stated that they may not be removed or altered since they form an important part of the architectural quality of the building.





Section looking northeast through circulation street.
Riverfront elevation.





At the ground level, loading platforms exist on either side of a central access way running through the central spine. These platforms are carried through into part of the ground floors of the original buildings on each side. The competition rules stated that these platforms may be removed, as may the later building work and certain parts of the floors within the original wings.

The Program

The competition program called for the consideration of a variety of activities and facilities, some of which were mandatory and some which should be provided at the discretion of the individual competitors.

The resources requested in the program covers arts and sports; however, it was hoped by the organizers that the usual stereotypical solutions will be avoided and that new solutions would be suggested. These solutions should bring together, with the maximum flexibility and integration, the needs of people whose interests may well bridge both intellectual and physical leisure requirements. It was also suggested that bar and restaurant facilities should be included.

Externally, in addition to outdoor activity areas, the program asked for parking for approximately 75 cars. Also, a riverside bank was to be included as part of the overall strategic plan for the area and this was to be incorporated into the overall plan.

The Proposal

The major ideas behind the development of the competition entry are as follows: to restore the building to its original form and shape to retain as much of the character of the building as possible, and to carefully thread new elements into the old fabric so that they consolidate and complement the existing structure. Formally, the spaces are arranged so that the powerful central space between the two blocks is maintained as the major circulation

spine. Pedestrians enter the building through this space and vehicles service the workshops and craft areas from it. In special circumstances, vehicles can pass right through onto the river front; (i.e., access for the elderly, handicapped people and children). A gate at each end provides security for the whole building.

The concrete structure is removed from the central space and replaced with a glass arcade which acts as an entrance lobby and an exhibition area as well as horizontal and vertical circulation to all parts of the building. The entrance to the arcade is set back from the highway to maintain the integrity of the original street frontage.

The east block contains the noisy activities (workshops and indoor sports), while the west block contains quieter activities, such as arts and crafts, rhythmic movement, poetry reading and performance spaces.

The building is also zoned in a north-south direction from the highway to the river, so that activities with a high social interaction are nearest the river, i.e., the pub and restaurant and the child care facilities. These areas have private access, so that they can be operated separately from the main building.

The riverside walk is further enhanced by the provision of an outdoor performance space, terraced seating and a small glazed viewing pavilion. The Newcastle Jetty has been transformed into an overgrown island with a lookout tower on top, approached by a ramp and a tunnel.

The main performance space is contained in a circular drum at the widest part of the west block and is connected to the main geometry of the building by a curved gallery. This performance space provides a second node to balance the major node around the pub and the outdoor arena.

Apart from the glazed arcade the only other new buildings are two squash courts, placed at 20 degrees to the main buildings, in the same line as the skewed west wall. The interstitial space provides a large area for the restaurant, which is bounded by a curvilinear glass wall providing good views of the river. The glass wall also defines the edge of the pub as it threads its way through the building to connect to the glass arcade.

Externally, new materials are glass and tile, except for the squash courts which are built in concrete blocks. Internally, new walls are either glazed screens, block partitions, or plasterboard and skim. There are no new structural walls internally and the existing structure is unaltered, except where it has been removed to provide large spaces.

The Competition Concept

Under the strategic plan for Wapping, part of the revitalization requires that leisure facilities be provided. It is also desirable to maintain and improve the architectural ambience of the area; hence finding new uses for the existing buildings and open spaces. It is vital that any new development in the area show a concern for the robust dockland context and for the special problems involved in re-using or adding to existing buildings which have important historic associations. The character and traditions of the Wapping community stem from the docks, the work, and the lifestyle that they created. These are deeply rooted factors which must be taken into account by any new proposals. Architecture is a social profession as well as an art. The objectives of architecture should be the understanding and providing for the physical, psychological and aesthetic needs of the community, by providing buildings that are appropriate to their needs. The ideas competition attempts to bring many of these separate threads together by providing a community center within the framework of an old and familiar context.

The drawings were executed in ink and pencil, with pastel and graphite washes. They were exhibited, along with twenty selected entries, at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London, during October 1980.