

A DEFIANT STANDARD BEARER

HAT Projects' refurbishment of run-down exhibition spaces and studios at the Oval sustains artistic endeavour against the grain of sterile gentrification in Kennington, says *Catherine Slessor*



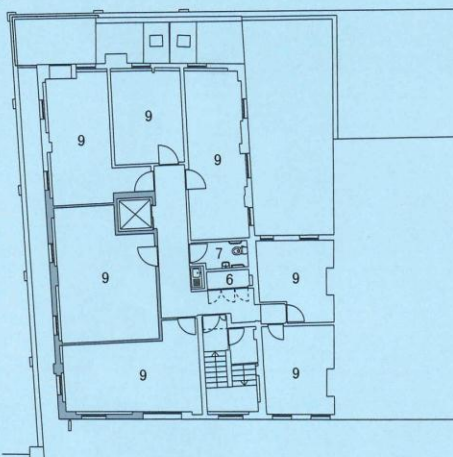


By Catherine Slessor
Photography by Ioana Marinescu

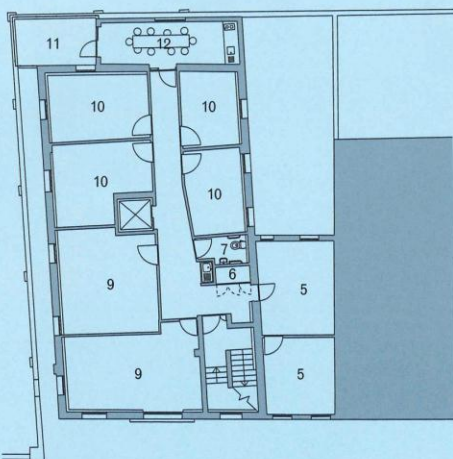
One of the more dismaying side-effects of London's petrifying tide of gentrification has been the progressive squeezing-out and marginalisation of artists. Studio space is becoming harder to find as rents soar and property is gobbled up by developers intent on getting more bang for their buck. Yet artists are essential to the life of the city. As imaginative outliers, they fertilise and animate disregarded neighbourhoods by adapting, colonising and transforming. But, having catalysed that crucial regenerative impetus, they are invariably swept aside when the commercial winds start to blow. It's chastening to think that Bankside, now forever associated with NEO Bankside and its looming, cross-gartered silos of vacuous luxury living, was originally a rich terrain of abandoned warehouses inhabited and subverted by a colony of artists that included Derek Jarman.

Yet amid this perpetual cycle of artistic colonisation and diaspora there is the odd stubborn barnacle of resistance. For 20 years, Gasworks in Kennington has been a defiant standard bearer for artistic production and activity, combining exhibition spaces and studios on a low-key site behind the Oval Cricket Ground. Newly remodelled by HAT Projects, it occupies a modest three-storey building that was originally a storage depot and house for the manager

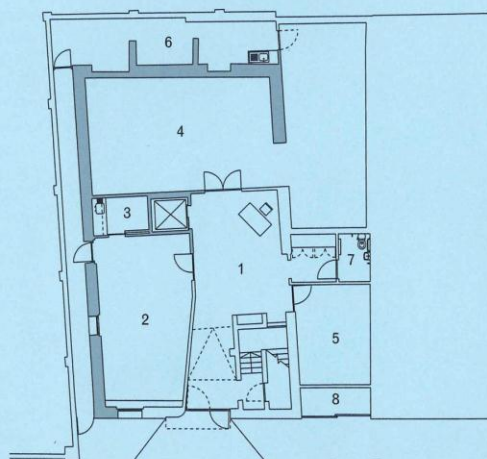
- 1. Foyer
- 2. Participation and events space
- 3. Store
- 4. Gallery
- 5. Office
- 6. Stores/plant
- 7. WC
- 8. Bin store
- 9. Tenanted studio
- 10. Residency studio
- 11. Terrace
- 12. Kitchen



Second-floor plan



First-floor plan



- 3. Ground floor foyer
- 4. First floor circulation looking towards kitchen

Ground-floor plan



The building is consciously functional, capable of being mucked about a bit

of the neighbouring Oval Gasworks. Now decommissioned, the assemblage of heroic Victorian gas holders is a south London landmark but, in a familiar pattern, the site has been sundered from its industrial origins and is currently awaiting redevelopment by Berkeley Homes. At present, however, the area is still dominated by the curiously delicate structure of the gas holders and the considerably less delicate cricket ground, which consumes the skyline like a huge vessel in dry dock, looming over the surrounding brick housing estates.

Gasworks was able to cling on to its historic locale by the expediency of buying the building freehold, assisted by a grant from the Arts Council and a vigorous campaign of fundraising. But, having secured its existence, the building was found to be in a fairly parlous physical state with a leaking roof, incoherent circulation and little street presence. HAT Projects, founded in 2007 by Hana Loftus and Tom Grieve, prevailed in a limited competition for its renewal and reconfiguration.

The essence of the project is a quiet but creative rationalisation through small but significant moves that conceive the building as a rigorously functional setting for artists and art. On the street frontage, the white-painted brick is spruced up and the gallery's graphically monochrome palette amplified by elegantly minimal signage in the form of vertical and horizontal lightboxes. This small but precise move instantly gives it a sharper and more legible public presence. A language of cannily improvised detailing adds honorific touches, such as the curved wall clad in mosaic-like hexagonal tiles ('just ordinary bath tiles', says Loftus) that beckons you into the building.

In the reorganised plan, ground floor functions radiate from a central hub,

connecting the two exhibition galleries, an enlarged participation space, offices and a staircase to the studios above. A section of the stair tower is removed to expose the staircase, signposting circulation more explicitly. Permeability and clarity are important. 'It's about making visible and distinguishing the various elements in a logical and intuitive way,' says Loftus.

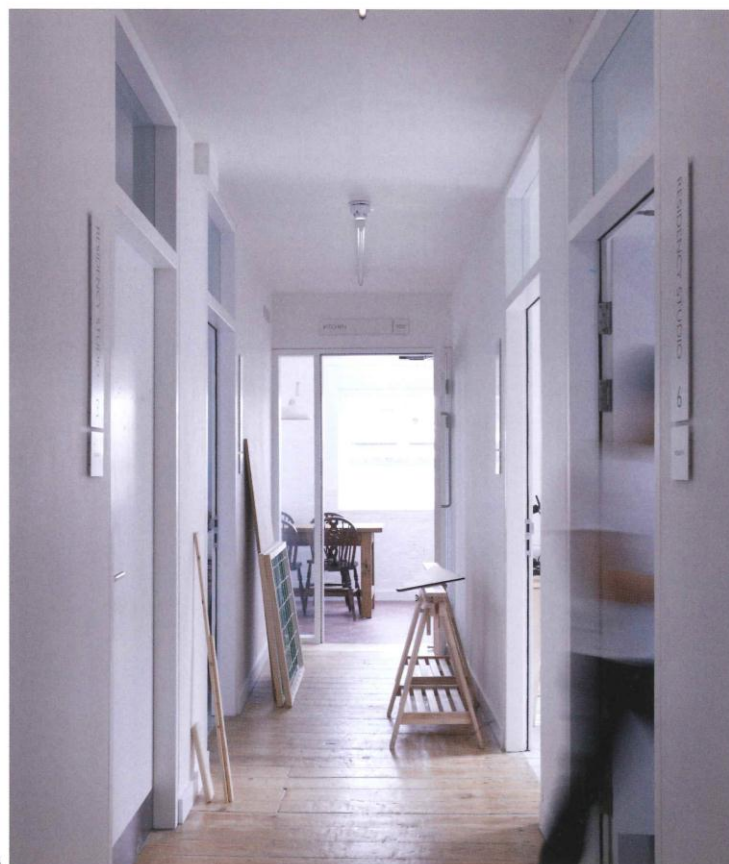
The gallery spaces are of a decent size but not naturally lit, as Gasworks frequently shows video and installation art. The current exhibition, 'God's Reptilian Finger', by Guatemalan artist Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa, perfectly exemplifies this, with a deliciously unnerving installation of multicoloured polystyrene blocks suspended in space and illuminated by ultraviolet light.

First and second floors are devoted to studios. Gasworks combines studios for rent by London-based artists and a residency programme aimed at African and Asian artists, which enables them to live and work in London for three-month stints. Like the

galleries, studios are simple, white-walled spaces to be colonised at will by their occupants. Art practice can be a solitary, even hermetic activity, so a collective kitchen and dining space aims to inculcate a measure of social interaction. Here the monochrome palette gives way to a flash of blood-red encaustic tiles. There's even a smoking terrace, overlooking the industrial panorama of the gas holders. Upper floor studios are more dramatically proportioned, with the original timber trusses slicing through partition walls in odd and accidental ways. New conjoins with old through processes of grafting, enhanced by a subtle dialogue between materials and textures. The building is consciously raw-boned and functional, capable of being mucked about a bit, but always subsumed to the greater task of being a crucible for art and providing a generous and sustaining environment for artists. There should be more like it. 'Fundamentally, it's an armature for creativity', says Loftus 'and within that it's about eking out the moments that matter.'

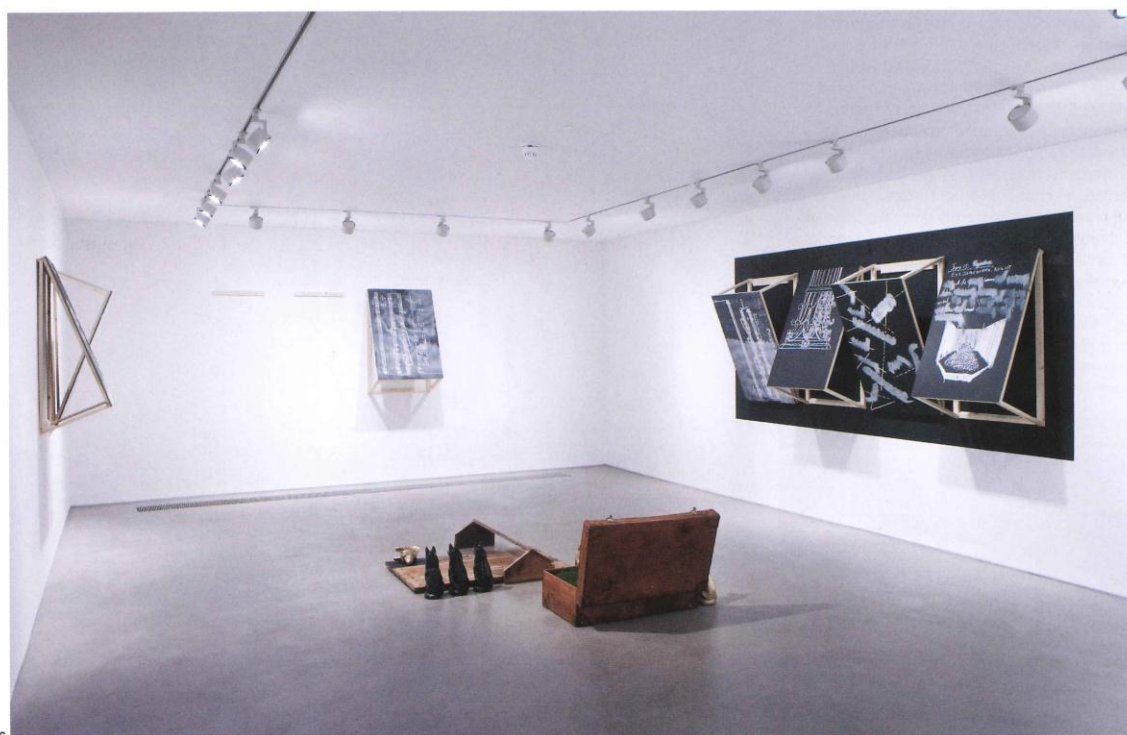


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5. Second floor studio space, with exposed original timber trusses
6. Gasworks reopened with an exhibition of works by South African artist Kemang Wa Lehulere
7. (opposite) View to the street frontage





33

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