Building Study: Tintagel Bridge, Cornwall, by William Matthews Associates

By Ike Ijeh | 8 August 2019

The two halves of the severed castle have been reconnected by thrusting cantilevers that don't quite meet in the middle. Ike Ijeh asks if Merlin was involved

Source: Jim Holden

Tintagel Bridge by William Matthews Associates

If there's anywhere in England where legend meets reality it's Tintagel. The ruined Cornish castle is said to be the birthplace of legendary King Arthur and today hosts hundreds of thousands of visitors from around the world all seeking to partake of their own little piece of Arthurian legend. The castle's spectacular setting certainly helps enshrine its mythical status. Perched solemnly high on a cliff-edge

on what appears to be an island, what's left of the castle is surrounded by the dramatic rocks and haunting Atlantic mists of the North Cornwall coastline, easily summoning the spirit of mystic romanticism that has helped sustain the legend of Camelot, Merlin, Arthur, his knights and their round table for possibly more than a thousand years.

But now this most ancient of sites has a new addition. On Sunday the long-awaited Tintagel Bridge opens, the new footbridge spanning the dramatic gorge that separates much of Tintagel Castle from the mainland. The bridge has been designed by architects William Matthews Associates and Belgian engineering firm Ney and Partners with half of its £5m budget being famously donated by Tetra Pak packaging heir Hans Rausing, once Britain's richest man.

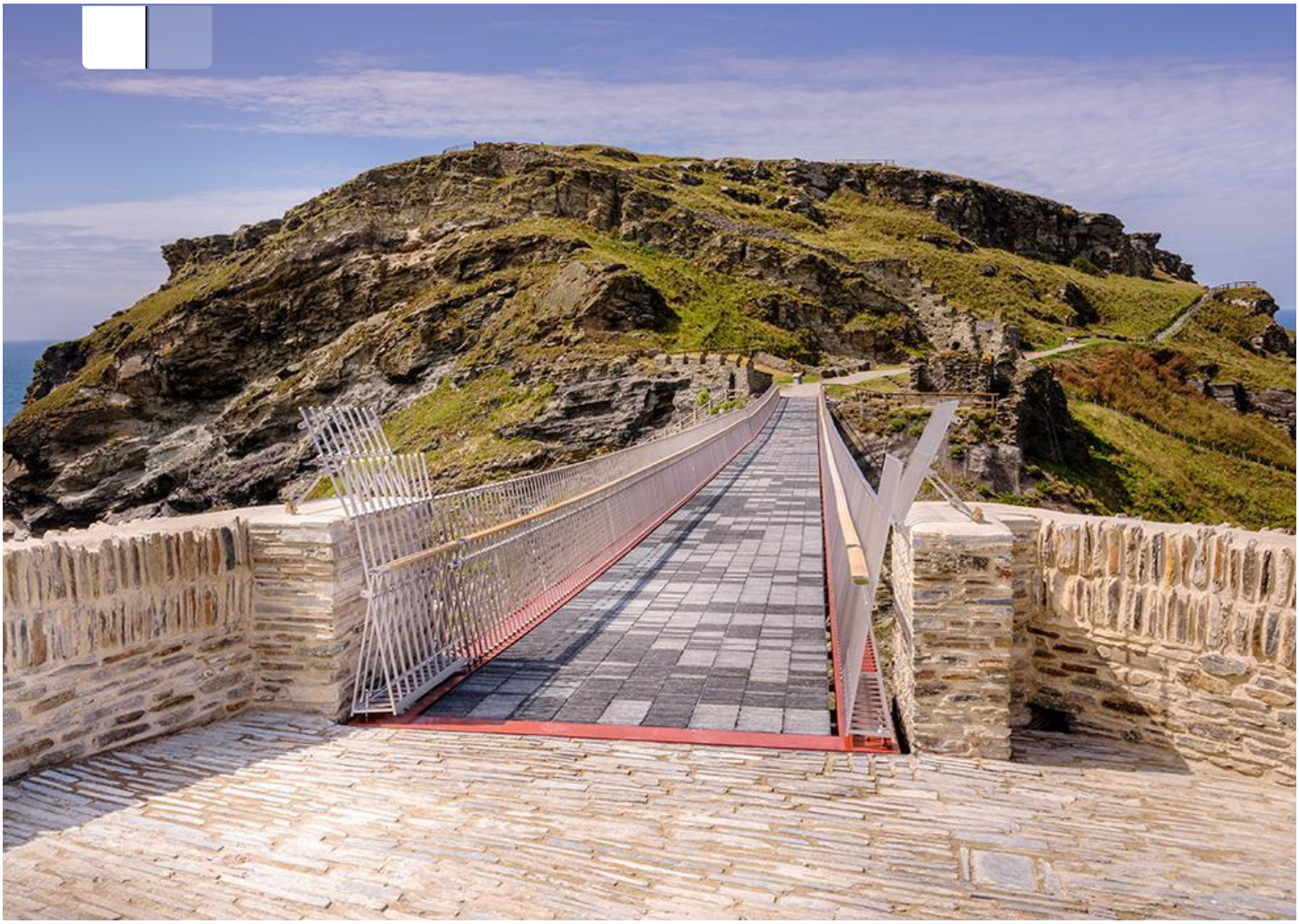
Initially scheduled to open earlier this year, the opening was delayed by what was officially referred to as "fabrication and testing" issues, much to the ire of the adjacent Tintagel village which relies heavily on visitors to the castle – which itself has been closed since October – for trade.

The fact that Tintagel Castle has been such a lynchpin for trade and tourism for at least 150 years prior to the construction of the new bridge does beg the question of why the structure was necessary in the first place. One can even ponder on the core conundrum of why an island needs a bridge at all. There are several answers to these questions and each one sheds light on the fascinating history and setting of Tintagel and how the design seeks to find a poetic yet contemporary response to these conditions.

Mysterious settlement

While the legend of King Arthur has in all likelihood existed for over a millennium, the present castle itself dates from the early 13th century and was the work of Richard, Earl of Cornwall and younger

brother of King Henry III. It is still a source of some doubt as to why Richard chose to build a castle on an isolated, rocky outcrop of Cornish headland battered for most of the year by harsh Atlantic winds and rain. But it is now known that in the 5th century a mysterious settlement had existed in Tintagel which 20th century excavations discovered was rich in amphorae.



Source: Jim Holden

The walkway is set with 40,000 vertically stacked Cornish slate tiles mined from the nearby Delabole quarry

Amphorae are expensive jars for the storage of luxury goods such as wine and olives and they were a key determinant of wealth and status in the Neolithic period. Incredibly, more amphorae have been discovered at Tintagel than in the rest of the entire British Isles put together and nobody is quite sure why. But it does appear to suggest that at some point shortly after the collapse of the Roman Empire in Britain (or Brexit 410 as local historians mischievously describe it) there was some sort of important, liberating, royal presence at Tintagel. Thus began the legend of King Arthur.

Some 800 years later Richard of Cornwall was doubtless aware of this illustrious provenance when he chose Tintagel as the site to build his castle. It was constructed in the traditional mediaeval “figure of eight” configuration with one loop comprising an outer bailey built on the mainland and the other an inner ward built on an a rocky outcrop akin to a peninsula. A drawbridge linked the two.

However, barely a century after completion, coastal erosion was ensuring that bits of the castle were quite literally tumbling into the sea and by 1600 the site was entirely abandoned. Both dereliction and coastal erosion then accelerated rapidly so that by the 20th century the rocky outcrop on which the inner ward stood was now effectively an island almost entirely separated by several hundred feet of rocky ravine from the skeletal remnants of the outer bailey marooned on mainland cliffs.

The two parts of the castle have been reconnected for the first time since the site was torn apart by erosion - by a bridge that doesn't quite meet in the middle

Accessibility issues

Prior to the new bridge, the island and inner ward were reached by a series of precipitous cliff-edge walkways scaling down the edges of the cliff and linked by a modest wooden footbridge near the bottom of the ravine. But as Georgia Butters, English Heritage's head of historic properties in Cornwall, explains this came with a host of practical and symbolic problems.

"There were obvious accessibility issues as the walkway is extremely steep and narrow and couldn't really accommodate people passing each other in different directions. This was particularly prohibitive for people with prams or limited mobility or who were just simply afraid of heights!

“But it also gave us problems of perception too. Many people would take the journey to the island to see the ruins of the inner keep. But because it was so physically severed from the rest of the castle on the mainland, they never visited and often didn’t even know about the outer keep on the other side. They were literally only experiencing half of the castle.”

And this is where the idea for a new bridge that links the two severed parts of castle at the same level was born. The newly formed English Heritage ran a competition to find a bridge design in 2015 and it was one of the charity’s first commissions after the former quango was split to form English Heritage and Historic England. Historic England continues work as the government’s heritage body and is in charge of listing and advisory heritage government frameworks. The new English Heritage therefore remains as a charity dedicated to the care and upkeep of hundreds of historic properties across the country, from Stonehenge to Wellington Arch.

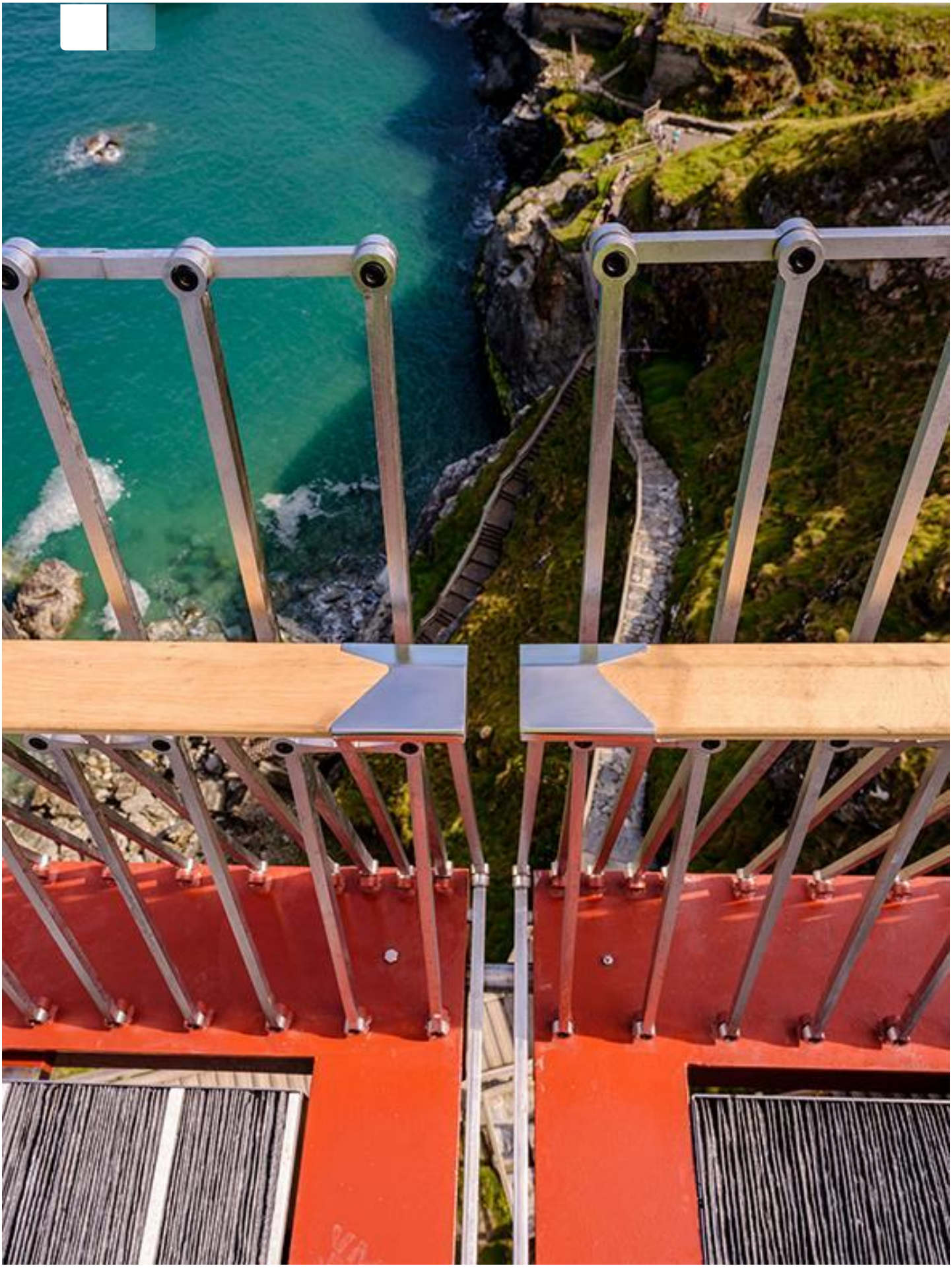
The two bridges aren’t quite touching and that gap represents the transition between the mainland and the island, here and there, the present and the past, the known and the unknown, reality and legend: all the things that make Tintagel so special and fascinating

As Nichola Tasker, head of national projects at English Heritage, explains the organisational split was crucial to the commissioning of the winning design. “After the separation we had much more scope to commission contemporary designs from young, up-and-coming practices such as William Matthews Associates,” she says. “This would have been much more difficult to do previously when we were effectively constrained by government heritage frameworks. Our new focus has been immensely liberating and has enabled us to reinterpret the story of Tintagel in a bold, contemporary design.”

That design involves a slender, 67m long bridge set a precipitous 57m above sea level and with a walkway that is 2.5m wide. The walkway is ingeniously set with 40,000 vertically stacked Cornish slate tiles mined from the nearby Delabole quarry. The bridge itself is actually two 33m cantilever bridges set on springing twin box girders of weathered steel. The girders are then enclosed by an elegant cage of diagonal bead blasted stainless steel ribs, whose pattern is then matched by the splayed setting of the stainless steel railings above. Stainless steel was generally seen as preferable to the corten initially considered due to its weathering capabilities in the harsh Atlantic climate and the requirement for corten to dry out fully, impossible with the moisture in the salty ocean air.

Slender profile

The bridge occupies an impressively slender profile, essential to ensure that it does not overly intrude on the spectacular natural scenery of its dramatic setting. But its lightness belies some onerous constructional challenges that involved building the bridge over winter in some appalling Atlantic weather conditions. The bridge was built in twelve, 5m, 4.5-tonne sections which were hoisted and



Source: Jim Holden

The two cantilever bridges are separated by a gap which, depending on temperature, varies from approximately 4cm to 10cm

bolted into position using an innovative cable crane assembly that straddled the full width of the ravine and is similar to that used for cable cars in the Swiss Alps.

In order to secure the bridge into its cliff footings, its abutments on either side are rammed 16m into the cliffs and the cliff-edges themselves, whose historic propensity for erosion is oddly the whole point of the new bridge, has been stabilised with 32 thick steel stabilisation rods.

The decision to build a cantilever bridge was made after analysing a whole array of bridge types. But as Ney and Partners co-founder Laurent Ney explains, the cantilever option satisfied the widest array of engineering requirements. “We looked at a number of options; a suspension bridge was seen as too visually obstructive, a fish belly bridge here would be too susceptible to buckling and compression. But a cantilever offers a lean visual appearance and unlike an arch bridge which only gains its strength when the final middle keystone is inserted, each successive section of a cantilever bridge is as strong as the final finished configuration.”

The gap

There was another highly symbolic reason why a cantilever bridge was chosen. Enticingly, the two cantilever bridges are separated by a gap which, depending on temperature, varies from approximately 4cm to 10cm. The narrow gap is crucial to the bridge’s interpretation of the site, as William Matthews explains.

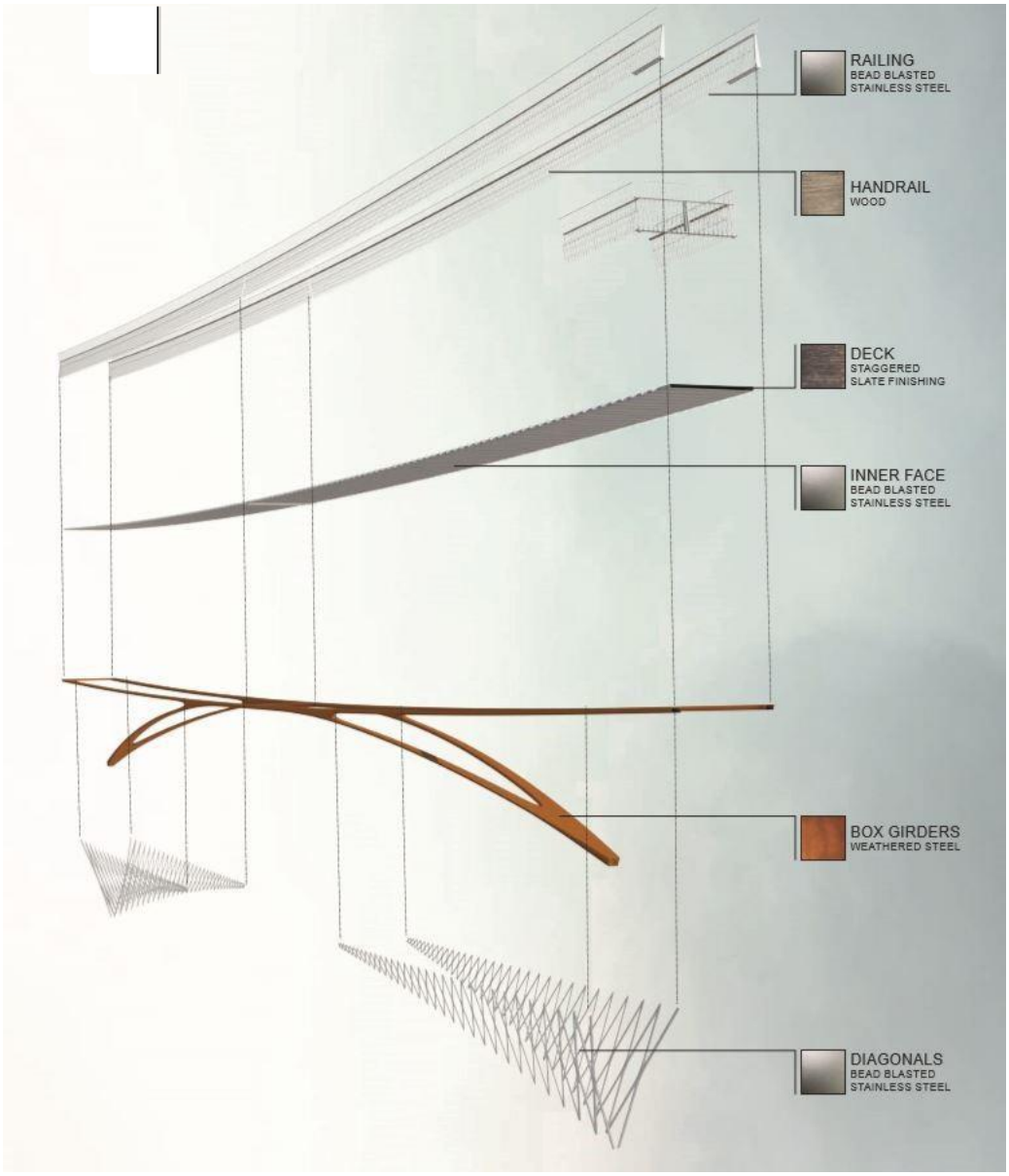
“The two bridges aren’t quite touching and that gap represents the transition between the mainland and the island, here and there, the present and the past, the known and the unknown, reality and legend: all the things that make Tintagel so special and fascinating,” he says.

Source: Jim Holden

The slender, 2.5m-wide walkway stretches for 67m across the chasm, 57m above sea level

While its justification labours on symbolism somewhat, the gap is marvellously subtle conceit, a clever nod to the quizzical mythology of Tintagel given life by extraordinary engineering prowess. Its slightness and fragility is also poetically indicative of a bridge of astonishing sculptural grace and elegance, as if Merlin himself had spun a magical yarn of steel across the gaping void between what is left of his folkloric sovereign's birthplace. So much so that it appears that that bridge has always been there, springing gently from the cliff edges like falling rocks that, over time, have crept into a sly horizontal trajectory that now delicately spans the craggy ravine below.

But the most haunting and impressive aspect of Tintagel's new bridge is the manner in which both its structure and its gap uses slender engineering to hauntingly highlight the most painful ingredient of all historic sites: absence. Most of the castle is gone. The drawbridge has gone. The Dark Ages settlement with its rich amphorae deposits has gone. And most elegiacally of all, Arthur and his knights have gone. But the fundamental practical and symbolic function of a bridge is to provide a connection. And here we see a connection to the past come to life with slate and steel fashioned into the most elegant and sculptural eulogy possible.



Source: William Matthews Associates

Client: English Heritage

Architect: William Matthews Associates

Main contractor: American Bridge UK

Structural engineer: Ney and Partners

Building Study: Coal Drops Yard, London, by Heatherwick Studio

By Ike Ijeh | 29 October 2018

The retail hub revels in the idiosyncrasies of its original Victorian warehouse architecture and uses them in a brazenly theatrical way to upstage the rest of King's Cross

Source: Hufton + Crow

The centrepiece of Coal Drops Yard is a dramatic 20,000ft² new attic whose use has yet to be determined

With the possible exception of Frank Gehry, there aren't many names in architecture who would be brave or populist enough to make an analogy between their building and a cartoon, but Thomas Heatherwick is one of them. When describing his new Coal Drops Yard at its opening last week, Heatherwick breathlessly described it thus: "It's like that moment in a cartoon when the two characters slam into each other and all the sparks fly and the energy reverberates around them in

shooting, shuddering stars." The two characters in question here are the two almost-parallel longitudinal Victorian warehouse blocks that form the Coal Drops Yard retail development in London's King's Cross. And the moment of impact is captured in three-dimensional form by the extraordinary roof that joins them like a suspended pool of lava pouring down from an invisible upturned crater above.

Coal Drops Yard is arguably Heatherwick's most visceral and provocative work to date. Setting aside the controversy of the ill-fated Garden Bridge (whose malignancy was barely design-related in any case), Heatherwick is famed for crafting highly expressive, sculpturally porous objects that often challenge perceived conventions but do so in a manner that combines rational legibility with almost theatrical flamboyance. He has replicated his signature formula once again at Coal Drops Yard, where his cartoon analogy perfectly captures the zany spirit of energy, movement and idiosyncrasy in which his latest scheme revels.

Source: Hufton + Crow

The development provides 60 retail units and a dynamic new roof to two disused Victorian brick warehouses that were once used to offload coal transported from northern England by rail

Two fingers

Coal Drops Yard began life in 1851 as a warehouse that received coal transported to London by rail from northern England. Of the two warehouse wings, which Heatherwick also euphemistically refers

to as “KitKat fingers”, the eastern one came first, with the western twin following nine years later in 1860. The warehouses were built beside each other but slightly askew: the gap at the northern end measures 26m but widens to 39m at the southern end. This asymmetry was to become an important conceptual driver in Heatherwick’s design.

As with most Victorian infrastructure, particularly that concentrated in King’s Cross, the warehouses were a work of engineering ingenuity. The buildings were two storeys high, with the lower storey essentially a basement scooped into a sunken yard. Trains would run inside the ground floor of the warehouses and their coal would be “dropped” through retractable wagon bases directly into hopper cars below. Waiting horses and carts below the hoppers would then distribute the coal throughout London.

Source: Hufton + Crow

Coal Drops Yard now provides the main retail hub for the wider King’s Cross Central masterplan

In its heyday, Coal Drops Yard handled about 8 million tonnes of coal per year, effectively powering Victorian London. But its heyday was relatively short-lived: by the 1880s, newer energy sources reduced the city’s reliance on coal and consigned Coal Drops Yard to a century of typical London backstreet storage and light industrial uses. This included a sporadically nefarious mix of car garages, criminality and nightclubs – the latter spawning the infamous Bagley’s of 1980s and 1990s fame.

By the 2000s the site had been subsumed within Argent's ambitious King's Cross Central masterplan and had been identified as the development's retail hub. Heatherwick was eventually appointed and, armed with his experience on the Pacific Place shopping centre in Hong Kong, immediately sought to create a new kind of retail destination.

"So many new shopping centres are sterile environments that kill user experience. Additionally, they are normally enclosed spaces with limited entrances. We wanted to do something very porous and with lots of entrances that prioritised social interaction and experience. In the digital age, that's more important than ever," he says.

Source: Hufton + Crow

A steel, glass and aluminium structure forms the new rooftop "bridge" that now links the two warehouses

Social chemistry

But while Argent took the wise decision to retain the Coal Drops Yard buildings, Heatherwick immediately spotted challenges in their conversion. “Shopping centres rely on social chemistry – the distance between shopfronts is normally only around 10m to 12m, which is a comfortable social distance for people to navigate. The problem here was that the gaps between the two blocks, 26m to 39m, were simply too big to generate that kind of intimacy.”

So the decision was taken to add some sort of link structure between the two wings. This, according to Heatherwick, would generate the “centrality and heart” that would be essential in “gluing the scheme together”. But as he goes on to explain, this too presented its own set of problems. “There’s a strong linearity to the blocks; they’re almost like skis. But the rectangular bridges initially planned would have fought with this directionality and imposed something alien.”

So rather than bridging the gap between the wings with some kind of rectangular link box, the design team set its sights higher, both figuratively and literally. A fire in the 1980s had destroyed a large section of the slate pitched roof on the eastern block, which was to be replaced as part of the redevelopment. It then occurred to the team that rather than rebuilding a section of the roof, they could rebuild the entire roof and use it, in Heatherwick’s words, to unify the whole scheme.

“Instead of sticking in a new form, we stitched the scheme together by allowing the two roof ‘fingers’ to grow towards each other,” he explains. “Not only does this create a new covered central space that forms the heart of the scheme, but it also develops a new language for the entire site.”

The result of this “growth” is indeed the enigmatic and virtuoso centrepiece of the scheme. At the four gable ends of the two blocks the roofs begin in conventional form, their glistening new Welsh slates procured from exactly the same quarry as the original roof slates were 150 years ago – and therefore virtually indistinguishable replicas. While the slate has been universally replaced, original roof trusses have been retained where possible.

Source: Hufton + Crow

Colours and detailing are inspired by heritage elements in the original building

Rising and bulging

But as the roofs progress along the building, they begin to rise and bulge outwards, as if helplessly deformed by the ripple of a gathering wave underneath. As they tear away from the brickwork below, the rising gap is filled by vertical glass panels laid in a sawtooth pattern, their staggered footprint a cheaper alternative to curved glazing but also a gentle and fitting reminder of the angular geometry of their warehouse hosts.

Eventually, the curved roofs on either side join in the middle, curled upwards like a skirt raised to reveal a suspended glass attic flashing saucily below. The attic is in fact held up by some extraordinary structural gymnastics largely hidden from the eye. Two large sloping steel frames rise up from either warehouse, forming a triangular ladder tucked underneath each hood of the upturned roofs.

A hundred and four slender black columns then descend from this ladder and support the attic floor below, intricately threading their way through the historic structure within the warehouse and down to new foundations that bear their full load. Internally the result is a voluptuous attic chamber, a charged, contortionist knot trimmed with timber and glass, pulsating with all the illusory spatial

distortion of a fairground hall of mirrors rammed into the upturned hull of a boat. Incredibly, no function has yet been devised for this space, but it is not difficult to envisage its dynamic form inspiring all manner of curatorial experimentation.

The scheme offers contemporary versions of Victorian idiosyncrasy, including a collection of sculpturally framed lift buttons

Externally too, the twin curving roof gesture offers a curious, improbable yet utterly thrilling visual spectacle quite unlike what one would expect from a scheme that elsewhere takes great pains to exhibit such heritage sensitivity. That sensitivity is evident from the new glass fronts carefully placed within cleaned brick arches to form retail units to the six new cores subtly inserted into selected bays.

It is also evident in the new ground-floor shopping street that runs through the scheme linked to a broad upper terrace by a series of stairs. “We took a hotchpotch of levels and rationalised them to aid the flow and movement of people,” explains Heatherwick, “but we didn’t rationalise them too much; it was all about using as much of the existing fabric of the building as possible to solve problems and meet challenges.”

As it happens, despite being built for an entirely different purpose, much of that fabric proved surprisingly adaptable for retail. Retail units range from just 15m² to the four 2,000m² anchor units at each end of the warehouse. But the size of many of the units in between was determined by the various sizes of arches cut into the original brickwork facades. “Victorian industrial architecture is

incredibly flexible and reusable," says Heatherwick. "In many ways they were the Ikeas of their day. They offer a huge amount of variety and idiosyncrasy."

And that idiosyncrasy forms the final crucial element of the new and old Coal Drops Yard. There are sustained patterns of asymmetry, illogicality and sheer oddness in the original buildings, ranging from the multiplicity of arch sizes and openings to the fact that the eastern block is significantly longer than its twin. But idiosyncrasy is an area Heatherwick traditionally revels in and he grasps it here with unbridled enthusiasm to stimulate conceptual affinity with the building's past. For instance, lift call buttons are encased in a variety of decoratively ergonomic necklaces that range from bulging brass bowls to peeling concrete straws.

The scheme offers contemporary versions of Victorian idiosyncrasy, including a collection of sculpturally framed lift buttons

Catalogue of curios

But of course, chief among this catalogue of curios is the thrusting twin attic itself. Despite its improbable and perhaps even implausible gait, it forms a brilliantly inventive and irrepressibly theatrical way to insert a contemporary component into a heritage building through manipulation of the very heritage assets – in this case its roof and its idiosyncrasy – that form that building's core identity. And in doing so it provides the kind of operatic spectacle that enlivens the conventional shopping experience.

“This country is blessed with such an incredible wealth of heritage”, argues Heatherwick, “that we can’t use the same formula for all of them. We have to find new ways to respect, care for and love them.”

And find it he has. Do not be misled by those who will inevitably decry Coal Drops Yard as a conceited and inauthentic gimmick that mauls a historic building for crass consumerist gain. For in its soulful human empathy, in its irrepressible reinterpretation of the building’s innate oddities and most of all in its scintillating, edge-of-your-seat rooftop cliffhanger, Heatherwick has once again proved himself to be a master architectural storyteller in the colourfully eccentric manner of a Baz Luhrmann or Roald Dahl.

Project Team

Architect: Heatherwick Studio
Client: Argent
Main contractor: Bam
Structural engineer: Arup
Services engineer: Hoare Lea
Cost consultant: Gardiner & Theobald

Ageing gracefully: Restorations which retain historical decay

By Ike Ijeh | 16 January 2019

Ike Ijeh on projects that have preserved and celebrated the damage caused to buildings by fires, damp, squatters and the passage of time

Decay is rarely a condition sought when restoring old buildings. The very idea of preserving decay as part of a renewal process seems to verge on the absurd, as since the conservation movement began in earnest around 50 years now its entire purpose has been to eradicate decay rather than keep it. Walk around Windsor Castle today and all trace of its devastating 1992 fire has been obliterated, and it would have been a foolhardy architect indeed to suggest otherwise when reconstruction proposals were sought in the disaster's aftermath.

But while a hypothetical fire at Windsor today would probably receive similar restorative treatment, elsewhere attitudes towards decay and conservation have changed. The hipster movement's reclamation of disused buildings in the likes of Shoreditch and Brooklyn from the 1990s onwards had much to do with this, with a new generation of bars, studios and boutique hotels choosing to expose the decrepitude of their once-abandoned premises rather than conceal it.

While undeniably trendy, this kind of generic "shabby chic" approach remains both cosmetic and carefully contrived. But in recent years a new and more authentic generation of refurbishment projects has arrived, which encompass a much broader cross-section of building types and ambitiously experiment with the principle of incorporating decay into both the fabric and the character of restored historic buildings.

In so doing, these projects explore a fascinating array of technological challenges and solutions that tread a fine line between meeting modern safety, fire and structural standards and achieving historic authenticity in its most literal form – warts and all.

The reopening of Alexandra Palace Theatre last month provides arguably the most recent example of this trend. In the following pages this scheme, and three others that have sought to dramatise decay rather than discard it, are explored.

Alexandra Palace Theatre

London, 2018
Architect: **Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios**
Contractor: **Wilmott Dixon**

"The general concept for the walls was to remove anything loose but beyond this to touch as little as possible"

Tony Dowling, Willmott Dixon

While the walls and ceiling of the Alexandra Palace Theatre have been made structurally sound, signs of wear and dereliction have been retained

Also read: Technical Study - Alexandra Palace Theatre, London

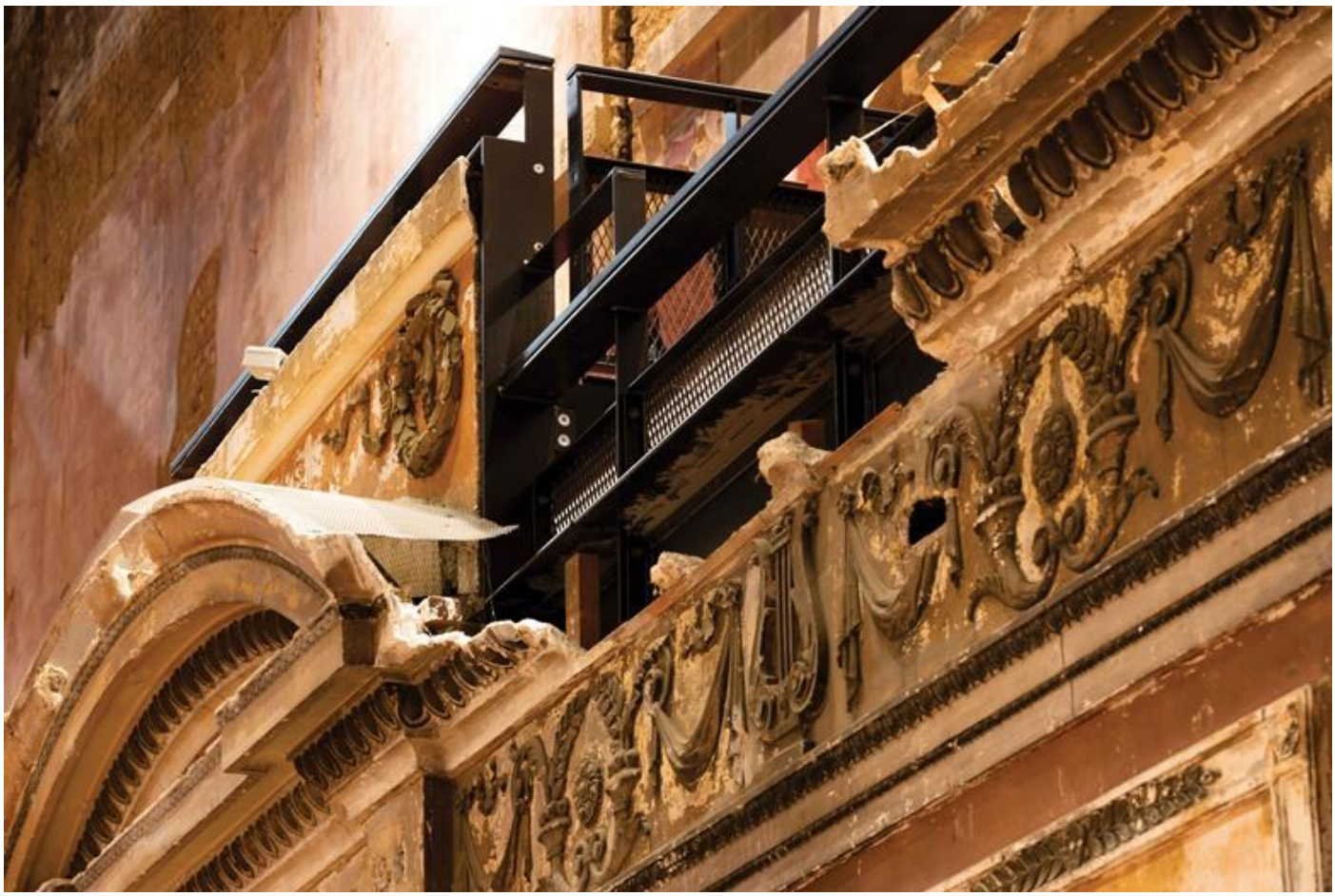
Historic buildings don't come much unluckier than Alexandra Palace. Completely burnt down just a fortnight after opening in 1873, a second devastating fire in 1980 again destroyed much of the complex. The famous north London public recreation, entertainment and exhibition centre was largely rebuilt after both tragedies but a stubborn pattern of piecemeal occupation and reconstruction

ever since it was built means that few historic buildings have as much evidence of the gradual decay and catastrophic events that can affect even the most loved of landmarks.

Which is why the reopening of Alexandra Palace Theatre just before Christmas makes for such a fascinating case study in the "arrested decay" concept. The term was coined by the design team there and they devised it to describe an approach that sought to make the building fit for modern habitation standards but one that also proudly bore the scars of its unfortunate history.

Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios associate Matt Somerville summarises the thinking that lies behind the entire decay concept, saying: "If we restore the theatre to a pristine condition, we will destroy the very quality of the space that makes it so intriguing and unique. The challenge faced by our team is to preserve the special character of the space while making it safe for public access, and addressing its inherent design defects."

The result is essentially a gloriously atmospheric evocation of a working Victorian ruin in a section of the building that has remained disused and unoccupied for an astonishing 80 years. Crumbling plasterwork has been maintained on both walls and ceilings, but hidden behind these lies an ingenious array of discreet structural stabilisation methods. For the walls, Willmott Dixon construction manager Tony Dowling reveals that "we repaired any structural cracks in the brickwork but all cosmetic ones were retained and closed with a lime plaster sealant. The general concept for the walls was to remove anything loose but beyond this to touch as little as possible."



And on the riotously ornate auditorium ceiling, bowed and pockmarked after years of water erosion and disrepair, rigidity is achieved by the clever application of a steelwork grille on its upper surface that is fused together with the ceiling below by a lime mortar mix. Other challenges included the insertion of a new auditorium floor and the reinforcement of timber roof joints dampened by rainwater. While the contractor is reluctant to compare costs between the intricate strategies employed here and a conventional restoration, the project proves without question that it is far more challenging to repair rather than replace a ruin.

Middleport Pottery

Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, 2014
Architect: **Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios**
Contractor: **William Anelay**

"Sometimes there's a lot to be said for maintaining beautiful scruffiness and doing as little as you can"

Tim Greensmith, Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios

A series of 'conservation primers' guided refurbishment of external and internal fabric

Middleport Pottery has huge historic significance as it is one of the last working Victorian potteries in the UK. The grade II*-listed building was built in 1888 but while it has enjoyed continuous usage since that time, many of its key historic and industrial features have been demolished, including six of its extraordinary oast house-like bottle ovens. These tapering brick kilns are central to the heritage of the surrounding Staffordshire industrial landscape. The pottery was placed on the Heritage at Risk register in 2010 and only restored after the intervention of the Prince of Wales, whose Prince's Trust initiated its recent restoration. The restoration retains much of the building's worn and faded features, with the highlight arguably being the memorable transformation of its remaining bottle oven into a somewhat surreal meeting room.

For Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios associate Tim Greensmith, the philosophy of the refurbishment was more about repair than restoration. "Decay tells part of the story; it allows us to sympathise and empathise with the experiences of the building and its workers. There's more character in decay and it invites people to make up their own minds about the past, present and future. Dirt and decay give a sense of texture and history: wipe that away and there's a risk people are alienated."

The remaining bottle kiln at Middleport Pottery has been converted into a meeting room

But while this ambition seems highly conceptual, Greensmith says it was also grounded in hard engineering reality. “Engineers were central to this process; we were constantly asking questions about what we could keep, why we should keep it and how. It was a very pragmatic and academic process and it was guided by what we called “conservation primers”. These were condensed philosophical statements that identified the building’s USP or key heritage characteristics then constantly reinforced them throughout the project.”

As Greensmith explains, these primers also helped the project stay focused and kept to a tight budget. “For us it was actually cheaper to preserve elements of decay where we could: if you start painting, where do you stop? Also this approach helped establish a more realistic maintenance plan where refurbishment is an ongoing process and you’re not limited by a comprehensive ‘renew and restore’ overhaul cycle every 10 years. Sometimes there’s a lot to be said for maintaining beautiful scruffiness and doing as little as you can.”

The Department Store

Brixton, London, 2017
Architect: **Squire and Partners**
Contractor: **Stoneforce**

"We wanted the refurbished building to be read like an open book that reveals all these raw and hidden layers of history"

Tim Gledstone, Squire and Partners

Despite boasting a grand facade, internally the Department Store has been stripped back to its faded core (see below)

While Brixton's recent gentrification has ushered in a wave of rising prosperity and improvement for the south London neighbourhood, it is still difficult to imagine the bourgeois respectability it enjoyed in the late 19th century as one of the capital's plusher suburbs. So much so that one of London's first purpose-built department stores opened here, in 1876, in this instance named and modelled after the

Parisian Bon Marché original. However, such elevated origins were not enough to withstand Brixton's cycle of post-war decline and the emporium closed in 1975.

The department store's ornate but long-disused 1905 furniture annexe reopened two years ago as a result of an extraordinary renovation scheme where decay took centre stage. Squire and Partners' ambitious reworking saw the practice acting as owner, architect and developer and the refurbished building now houses its head office. And while the monumental Edwardian exterior has been maintained, so too has all the visual evidence of historic wear and tear within the building, including peeling paintwork, chipped plasterwork and even colourful graffiti from the building's extended tenure as a squat.

"We deliberately left things in an imperfect state and had no intention of reinstating perfection," explains Squires partner Tim Gledstone. "We wanted the refurbished building to read like an open book that reveals all these raw and hidden layers of Brixton history; it's a romantic and almost emotional decision. We'd also taken an office trip to Havana and were all struck by the ruined beauty of the dilapidated buildings. Brixton's Caribbean heritage made this choice all the more appropriate."

So how did the team arrive at a balance about what to keep and what not to? “If it was loose or dangerous or if it peeled off, we’d take it off. If it wasn’t, we wouldn’t – it was as simple as that.” The process, however, did not come without its challenges, central to which Gledstone describes as the need to “understand the building thoroughly and then decide where you can spend and save”. To achieve this, the team employed a series of live samples, prototypes and models on which remedial work would first be tested before being applied across the building.

But for Gledstone, there is no question the process was worth it. “Yes, it would have been much easier and cheaper to do a complete ‘white wall’ refurbishment with no need for our sampling process. But that wouldn’t have delivered the ‘decayed decadence’ I think we’ve achieved. And I think people like seeing great buildings that aren’t perfect, we like ‘warts and all’”.

Wilton’s Music Hall

London, 2015
Architect: **Tim Ronalds Architects**
Contractor: **Fullers Builders / William Anelay**

“Water erosion, crumbling plaster, flimsy structure and to top it all the entire builDing was in a highly flammable state”

Tim Ronalds, Tim Ronalds Architects

The addition of new signage is the only external clue to Wilton's renovation...

Wilton's Music Hall may be a far cry from the glittering theatres and opera houses of London's West End but it enjoys the historic accolade of being the only surviving mid-Victorian music hall in the

entire country. Music halls were the entertainment hubs of Victorian working-class society, and if there was any one part of the country where they positively thrived it was London's impoverished East End. The current version of the hall was completed in 1859 but after a typically diverse East End back catalogue of fires, storage and religious uses, it was earmarked for demolition in the 1960s before being saved and elevated to grade II*-listed status in 1971. An uncertain period of sustained dereliction ensued, before the concert hall reopened in 1997 and saw its painstaking restoration completed 18 years later.

So rich was the theatre's cycle of destruction, dilapidation and adaptation that for architect Tim Ronalds there was no question of not keeping some trace of it in the rejuvenated scheme. He says: "So many old buildings endure restorations which lose all sense of their age and time. Here we were determined not to spoil this very special atmosphere where you have the thrill of discovering what appears to have been retained in an untouched and derelict state."

...but inside its 'ruined' Victorian atmosphere has been carefully maintained

Accordingly, Wilton's Music Hall appears to have been left in a battered and worn condition, where bannisters and doors are left unsanded and unpainted and brickwork and plasterwork have visibly

chipped away. But in so doing it leaves one of the most charmed and haunting evocations of time-capsule Victoriana visitors are ever likely to come across. To achieve this, Ronalds explains, the team evolved a philosophy of “doing as little as possible but making the premises safe and viable”.

But of course in technical if not in cosmetic terms, an architectural makeover is exactly what the theatre has received. And as Ronalds explains, it came with significant challenges. “There were a host of problems. Water erosion, crumbling plaster, flimsy structure incapable of taking additional loading and to top it all the entire building was in a highly flammable state. It took a lot of good engineering solutions to solve these problems in a way the public don’t notice.

“For instance, new plasterwork is doing a huge amount of work in concealing masses of new servicing, often removable behind a historic material that is in line with the building’s heritage. By adopting new fireproofing and alarm systems we were also able to avoid having to partition spaces with fire doors, which would have challenged historic authenticity. It may look as if not much has been done but I can assure you the opposite is the case.”