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BUILDING REVIEW

Building review: Witherford Watson Mann's 'soft' rework of the Courtauld Gallery

10 JANUARY 2022 . BY ROB WILSON



1/48

Source: Gareth Gardner

After a three-year closure London's Courtauld Gallery has reopened. *Rob Wilson* visited and found a finely wrought retrofit sensitive to the spirit of the original building

'What we were aiming for was a gentle legibility between old and new,' says Steve Witherford, director at Witherford Watson Mann, of the practice's major rework of the Courtauld Gallery, which reopened at the end of last year after a three-year closure.

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It's a restatement of an attitude to working with old buildings that the practice has been perfecting since its **Astley Castle scheme** won the Stirling Prize in 2013 – taking retrofit beyond the once binary options of either slavish restoration and pastiche or deliberately contrasting 'contemporary' insertion – as once epitomised by Foster's (then radical) 1991 Sackler Gallery at the Royal Academy. 'It should always be more of a conversation rather than an argument,' says Witherford.

The results in the revived gallery, which occupies the central section of the 18th-century Somerset House facing onto the Strand, are gently spectacular, too. The whole collection has been limpidly rehung. There's a sense, even with the big-ticket numbers of the Courtauld's exceptional Impressionist holdings – such as Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* – of seeing the familiar with fresh eyes. This clarity to the spaces and presentation of works is brought out further through deft gallery and exhibition design – as well as the wayfinding and signage – by Nissen Richards Studio and lighting design worked on by a combination of Max Fordham, Studio ZNA and Arup.



The LMVH Great Room with interior hanging wall and gallery design by Nissen Richards Studio
Source: Gareth Gardner

The cherry on the top is the Great Room perched high above the entrance – London's oldest purpose-built exhibition space and once the venue of the Royal Academy's stack-em-high Salon-hang exhibitions, which has been re-revealed in its full volume after years of being divided up. This is where the prime of the Courtauld's Impressionist collection now hangs, with a scenography through the space set up by staggered walls, designed by Nissen Richards, which also allow for extra hanging space.

Below this, the suite of so-called Fine Rooms have also been restored and indeed revealed somehow – it's as though their fine spatial bones were previously hiding in plain sight. The Renaissance works in particular hung in them – like a Botticelli altarpiece I had somehow never noticed before – fairly ping with new energy. But in addition there have been significant new additions. A new Medieval and Early Renaissance gallery has been created on the first floor, two new temporary exhibition galleries added on the top floor, and a new project space carved out from existing rooms. 'We looked to work within the fissures of the building at times,' says

The Renaissance works fairly ping with new energy

The centrepiece suite of rooms that the Courtauld occupies was originally conceived by Sir William Chambers in the 1770s as the home not only to the Royal Academy but to a clutch of other institutions fitted like a puzzle into the seemingly calm, symmetrical faux Palace-like symmetry of its façades. Aside from these, the vast majority of the interiors were repetitive cell-like government office spaces – ‘like pasta’ says Witherford – which indeed were occupied up until the 1980s by the Inland Revenue and Public Records Office.



The Blavatnik Fine Rooms with showcases and benches designed by Nissen Richards Studio

In 1989 when the Courtauld Gallery moved into the building it appeared an inspired reawakening of the RA's old rooms – but their conversion by Christopher Firmstone and Company was one always beset by issues, which were picked up by Dan Cruikshank and Peter Wilson in the AJ's review at the time (AJ 31.10.90).

One of the problems was environmental, with compromises made due to the Grade I listing of the building fabric, meaning the air-handling, humidity and lighting were not fully integrated – there were standalone humidifiers, for example – and could never be optimised to get the balance between stability for the artworks and comfort for visitors.

The need to accommodate both the public gallery and the teaching and research arm of the Courtauld had also seen the logical but problematic decision to close off one of the two main staircases either side of the Fine Rooms to the public, dedicating it solely for use by students and teaching staff. Indeed the conversion of this part of the Courtauld was entrusted to a separate designer, Green Lloyd Architects, as a completely separate project.

‘It was like a cul-de-sac,’ says Witherford, ‘with a single stair trek up to the galleries at the top and then down again. Sorting out the connectivity was key.’



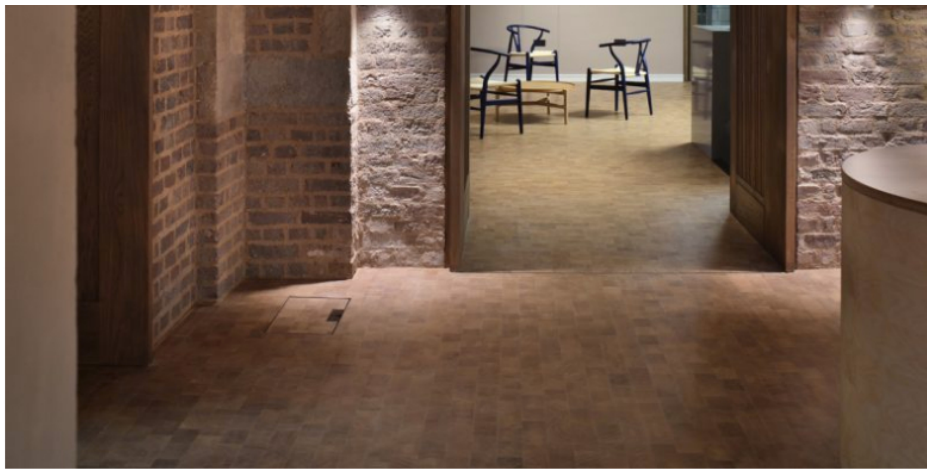


New cantilevered stone stair

Indeed behind the fireworks of the newly created or restored set-piece rooms, it's WWM's sorting-out of this 'connectivity' that has had as much effect on the step-change in how one now perceives the experience of the gallery. The big-ticket moves have been the insertion of a new lift, enabling step-free access to all the galleries for the first time, the creation of a new stair to the basement and the excavation and breaking through of the tunnel-like vaults below the entrance arch, creating a vaulted space now occupied by the shop. This has completed the circuit around the main Somerset House entrance arch into its inner courtyard, around which the Courtauld is wrapped. It now feels that all its elements are related, working much more all-of-a-piece, better integrated with the architecture.

As well as these major structural interventions, innumerable smaller tweaks have been made throughout the fabric, too. Supplementing the step-free entrance access, accessibility has also been improved by widened doors, standardising floor levels between rooms, and upgrading the fire-rating of all door thresholds – replacing the need for clunky glazed fire doors in places and which can now be left open on an integrated fire, access and security system which close automatically if this is triggered. More available stairs allow more means of escape as well. 'In many ways the fire strategy rather led the project,' laughs Witherford. In the new galleries, doors have been placed, where possible, towards the corner of rooms. Witherford points to Mies's Krefeld villas as inspiration. It brings a balance of formality and fluidity in the succession of spaces. Taken as a whole, the galleries now breathe and flow much better together.





Newly opened-up vaulted basement spaces
Source: Philip Vile

Environmentally, too, there has been a massive overhaul, with almost forensic insertions of ducts into the depths of walls behind decorative panelling – the intakes integrated in grills in the floor or skirtings and outtakes tucked behind ceiling covings.

The removal of elements such as the glazed doors has also allowed features of the original architecture to be revealed, such as the Corinthian column-flanked portal restored as an appropriately grand entrance to the Fine Rooms off the main stairs. Indeed everywhere, Witherford says, the attempt has been to get back to or to restore the 'real' surfaces – removing any unnecessary boxing-in and, where possible, maintaining the original patina. 'We did as little cleaning as necessary' – so old flags and stone steps remain untouched and discoloured. Where new hanging panels were needed, Witherford points to how the edges of these have been softened with beads. 'Modernism is so hard,' he remarks. Indeed 'softness' comes up a lot in how he describes the work, from the distemper paint now used in the Fine Rooms to the quality of the lighting.

Similarly this 'softness' and sensitivity to materials extends to WWM's major interventions with the materials used being either natural or left in a relatively unfinished 'real' state: 'leaving the mark of their making on them', as Witherford puts it.

This is even visible in the most brute massive elements. The new cast-concrete basement vaults – incredible pieces of engineering cast on site in one piece – have impressively honed surfaces considering, yet ones that are blemished enough to lend them character and an echo of their 'making'. Elsewhere, where new floors have been laid, the nails have been left expressed, while the handrail of the new cantilevered stone stairs (a whole project in itself) that connect a new ground floor cafe to the basement shop clearly express their craftsmanship and honing under the hand.

Everywhere the attempt has been to get back to or to restore the 'real' surfaces

Witherford is particularly proud of the 'knuckle' of diagonally connective openings, two doors and an internal window, which link the drawings gallery and newly created Early Medieval gallery with the main stairs in a corner of the first floor landing. Warmly timber-lined and spatially riffing off Chambers' Classicism, with no doubt a nod to the Krefeld villas and much more, it exemplifies the impressive sensitivity of touch materially and spatially of this project as a 'conversation' between old and new.





Wood-lined 'knuckle' of space between the Medieval and Early Renaissance gallery, drawings gallery and main stair
Source: Philip Vile

While the language shifts, the emphasis on simply-finished, finely wrought materials continues with Nissen Richards Studio's gallery and exhibition design, with finely-framed steel and glass display cases and tooled steel and timber benches that sit distinctly but lightly in the spaces, with the display of exhibits gently heightened a notch with simultaneously crisp but soft lighting by Studio ZNA.

Everywhere now there are astonishing exhibits – including the long-unseen Kokoschka triptych in its own top-floor gallery and a huge new curved Cecily Brown commissioned painting in the stairwell, that in its clot of figures seems to riff off the spirit of the Kokoschka too.



Bloomsbury collection gallery with gallery design by Nissen Richards Studio, including a bespoke rug

None of this has come cheap and the project was paid for by £11 million from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, £10 million from philanthropists Sir Leonard and Lady Blavatnik, and the Blavatnik Family Foundation, and numerous donations from other foundations and individuals – as is witnessed by all major galleries now having awkwardly unwieldy names in recognition.

This project, from the practice which altered the language of retrofit with Astley Castle, is a significant achievement as much for its well-judged and measured restraint as its structural gymnastics, despite the deep-tissue structural and environmental work that went on to achieve this. It again shows the creativity possible in the crafted melding of old and new, adding to but remaining sensitive to the spirit of an existing building.



New temporary exhibition spaces
Source: Philip Vile

Architect's view

This ambitious transformation project re-imagines Sir William Chambers' masterpiece to make it a public building fit for the 21st century. Through a careful balance of studious conservation and bold intervention we wanted to reveal the layers of the building's evolution. Opening up spaces and transforming the layout of the building will provide a more versatile infrastructure for exhibition and exchange in a way that resonates with the distinctive characteristics of Chambers' original design.

Stephen Witherford, co-director, Witherford Watson Mann Architects



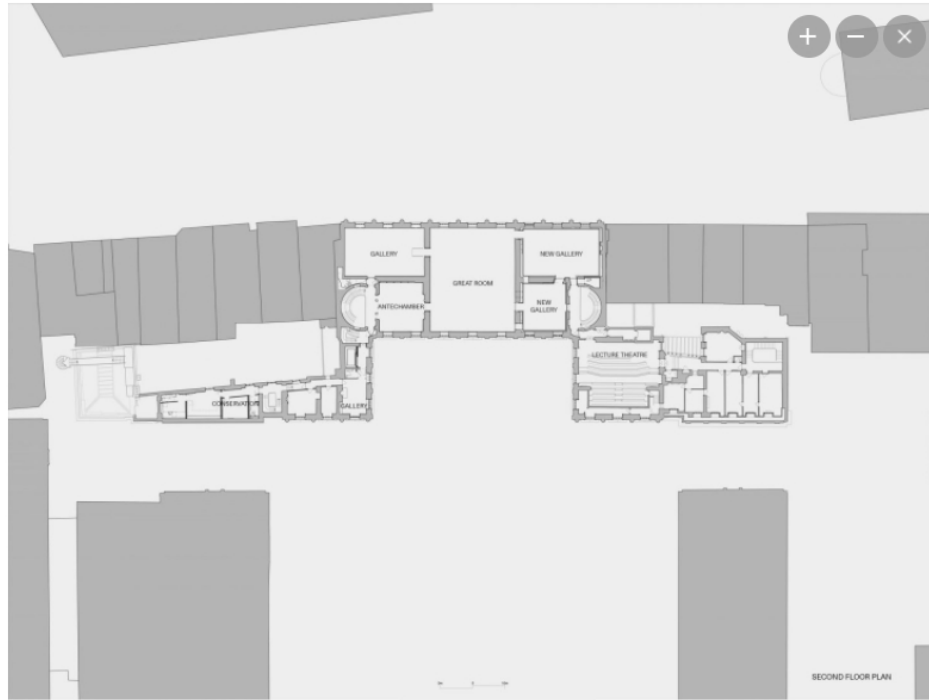
Gallery designer's view

Our overall approach was to introduce elements that worked with the Grade I-listed building in a subtle yet contemporary way. We used materials that would complement and highlight the beauty and character of the building. Our gallery designs sought above all to showcase The Courtauld Gallery's superlative collection, as well as the classical architecture and sheer scale of the rooms at Somerset House, whilst at the same time ensuring visitors enjoyed a sense of intimacy with the works.

The wayfinding and interpretation for the redesign was created in layers. We used an artisan process to create beautiful and bespoke etched panels that deliver the text in a way that feels seamless with the building and the atmosphere of the rooms.

Working closely with the project team and curators, we have created an engaging environment with elegant displays, enhanced within the historic setting. Everything supports the Gallery's ethos of enabling unhurried and personal enjoyment of great masterpieces within a distinctive environment, whilst encouraging the public to foster deep encounters with the breadth of the collection and the history of Somerset House. We very much look forward to seeing visitors enjoy the galleries and the artworks for themselves.

Pippa Nissen, director, Nissen Richards Studio



Second floor plan with 'Great Room'

Project data

Start on site Feb 2019 (strip-out); May 2019 (main works)

Completion June 2021

Gross internal floor area 5,310m²

Gross (internal + external) floor area 5,610m²

Form of contract Construction management

Construction cost £26.5 million

Construction cost per m² £4,725

Architect Witherford Watson Mann Architects

Client The Courtauld Institute of Art

Structural engineer Price & Myers

Gallery and exhibition design Nissen Richards Studio

M&E consultant Max Fordham

QS AECOM

Acoustic consultant Max Fordham

Lighting design Studio ZNA, Arup Lighting

Access consultants David Bonnett Associates (build); Jane Samuels (fit out and interpretation)

Historic building assessments Alan Baxter

Planning consultants The Planning Lab

Security consultants Ian Johnson Associates

Fire consultants BB7 Fire

Showcase design florea d.sign

Setworks design Factory Settings

Interpretation Ralph Appelbaum Associates, Narrative Threads

Graphics contractor Displayways

Signage and wayfinding Nissen Richards Studio

Fit-out and signage contractor Factory Settings

Bespoke paint colours Little Greene, Bauwerk

Project manager Gardiner & Theobald

Principal designer Currie & Brown

Approved building inspector Approved Inspector Services

Construction manager Sir Robert McAlpine Special Projects

CAD software used AutoCAD

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One comment

Chris Rogers

10 January 2022 at 1:28 pm Edit

Hmm perhaps it was the gallery's management rather than the architectural changes but I didn't detect much of this when I visited late last year. Certainly there was still only one stair up and down – the same one as there always was. The auto-opening door in the basement didn't work. As for the Great Room it is still divided up albeit by standing walls and the art seems lost – there isn't much of it either.

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