

## The dancing building: Siobhan Davies Dance gets its London base.

Text and photos © Hugh Pearman. First published in The Sunday Times, London, 12th March 2006.



**Can you make a building dance? According to contemporary choreographer Siobhan Davies, yes you can. After 17 years of peripatetic existence, the Siobhan Davies company has finally come to earth in a purpose-built base. Except that it is anything but down to earth. Go there, and you find them dancing in the sky.**

This is a fine piece of architecture because it is the result of an extraordinarily fruitful collaboration between Davies and her architect Sarah Wigglesworth. There is no arbitrary imposed solution here, and no conventional wisdom either. The stairs are as important to the dancers as their two big studio spaces. Even the meeting rooms have sprung floors. While in the main rooftop studio, lined in pale wood and drenched in natural light, Davies has banned the two staples of dance studios everywhere: the mirrored wall and the barre. They only hinder or distort natural movement, she believes.



It is hard to describe what is so good about this building except to say that it is fully alive. Despite being built on a small budget, it goes far beyond the merely necessary. This is one art form responding to

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another with wit and panache, from the leaning acid-yellow steel column in the foyer to the twisting ribbons of the roof. It is a completely physical, tactile building, right down to a squishy buttoned-fabric balcony and hairy walls (really: there are goat hairs in the plaster). But you can look at the place differently if you like. You can call it a converted school.



That's all it is, but a conventional conversion it is not. Wigglesworth took a derelict but very solid little 1898 school building close to the Imperial War Museum in Southwark, kept much of its bashed-about, glazed-tile character, moved the staircases to the outside to maximise space inside, and finally popped that dance studio - big enough for public performances - up on the roof. These are all straightforward, diagrammatic moves. Plenty of architects would have opted for the standard bolt-on white-box solution and sanitised the existing building.

Wigglesworth's architecture, however, is not like that. She did bolt a box on the back, but it's a tall, narrow box that ends up looking more like a Mondrian. Most of the rough old knocked-about walls inside the old building, complete with hacked-out bits and revealed patches of old paint, are left just like that, virtual archaeology. As for the rooftop studio, clad in sky-blue glass-reinforced plastic, it's like some writhing organism.

Siobhan Davies appears to be lost in admiration for her architect's response. "She loves the idea of balancing from a dancer's perspective - not being rigid, not being upright, but being sinuous," she says as she takes a break from a morning's teaching. "I was certainly conscious that I wanted enough focus to concentrate, but with a sense of place. We were always talking about movement in the body. Sarah came up with this image that it should be about dancing in the sky. If the foundations



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were Victorian, then the top should be 21st century".

Wigglesworth herself - an architect becoming known for a very distinctive brand of architecture she once characterised as "the slick and the hairy" partly because of the way it juxtaposes manufactured and hand-crafted elements - has another analogy. For her, the old school building is like a battered cake-tin and the big studio is like the cake rising out of the top. So: it's a building with many levels of meaning, all of them sensuous going on sensual. There are buildings you feel as much as see, and this is one of them. I'm not usually one to assign gender to architecture, but for heaven's sake - if this isn't an entirely, benignly female building, then I need my hormones seeing to.



As Davies says: "It's just clever, and warm. And it's witty with it." Now then: wit in architecture is a difficult trick to pull off. Too many postmodern architects of the 1980s confused wit with leaden humour, but here it exists in abundance and is provided without a trace of irony. That leaning column in the foyer is doing a dance move. The ceilings are soft, billowing fabric like clouds. The rich paint colours of the new insertions - concocted by collaborating artist Jonathan Logsdon - are derived from the existing colours found in the old school building.

The stairs at the back are hung from a dense thicket of steel rods that gives it something of the appearance of a New York fire escape out of West Side Story: no wonder you find dancers doing their stretches as they descend the staircase, or pausing to stare out at the endlessly fascinating free-form movement display provided by the playground out the back, still in use by the neighbouring school. In fact, the whole building is for, and about, dance and movement. Without the element of wit, the foursquare old school could have come across as a bit of a hippo in a tutu. Instead of which, it has taken on a glamorous sophistication.

The cross-cultural thing is continuing. As a celebration of her new HQ, Siobhan Davies has developed a touring show for 2006, called In Plain Clothes, which she has developed from conversations with professionals outside dance - a heart surgeon, a landscape designer, a linguist and an architect - that architect being Sarah Wigglesworth. It starts in the new building in May, after a preview week in April. So you'll be able to experience the architecture/dance collaboration at source.

Throwing money at a building is not always the way to get the best results. Lazy architecture can result. It's different here, proof that the best contemporary artists thrive on improvisation. Money was tight, but it's seldom that I've seen it better, or more joyfully, spent.

Siobhan Davies Dance: [www.siobhandavies.com](http://www.siobhandavies.com)

Sarah Wigglesworth Architects: [www.swarch.co.uk](http://www.swarch.co.uk)

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