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Technical Study: Science Museum supporters' centre, by Hat Projects

By [Elizabeth Hopkirk](#) | 30 September 2019

The conversion of a former Royal Mail sorting office into the £3.5m Smith Centre required the unravelling of a knot of unrelated buildings – and the requisition of Pigeon Alley



Source: Philip Vile

Looking down the salon (former sorting office) from the top of the steps towards the Imperial College end. The old delivery yard and the courtyard room are on the left.

We're standing in a small, bright lobby on the other side of a pair of heavy timber and glass doors which lead off the Science Museum's main entrance hall. Had we not paused to give our names to an

attendant at a desk on the left we would have barely noticed this liminal space as we carried straight on up the steps into the museum's large new supporters' "salon".

The route to this spectacular space is visually simple and intuitive but that is only thanks to months of patient design development by the architects, Hat Projects, and their team. The parquet floor and white walls of the 8x8m lobby bely the fact that where we are standing was previously a forgotten bit of undercroft encrusted with bird droppings. It took careful interrogation of the brief and the construction of numerous models before they worked out how this dead end between two buildings could provide a seamless link to the new Smith Centre.

The situation was complicated by multiple level changes and by the fact that parts of the site were owned by Imperial College. By the time Hat was appointed through a competition, lengthy negotiations had resulted in a land swap. The university got an Edwardian Royal Mail office (where the Smith Centre was previously located) while the museum got the sorting office behind – or most of it: one bay was retained by Imperial, along with a chunk of the basement.

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Hat's task was to integrate this partial building of a different era, style and purpose into the museum's narrow main campus which stretches off to the west for more than 300m. In plan, the Smith Centre is the handle to the museum's walking stick.



Source: Philip Vile

Looking from the Science Museum concourse right through the Smith Centre lobby and up into the salon. The doors to the courtyard room are visible in the distance

The original brief envisaged the sorting office as a room for schools and proposed moving the groups entrance from the back to the front door. The other finalists' entries focused on the front-of-house spaces but Hat concluded, after quite a bit of work, that adding half a million schoolchildren to the crowds who pour in from Exhibition Road every year would cause chaos and they convinced the museum to change the brief. The sorting office would instead become a patrons' centre, with school parties munching their sandwiches in a more functional space beyond.

"There was a realisation about people flow, the nature of the spaces and working with the building rather than against it which meant the organisation had to be quite brave and revisit a brief which everyone had signed off," says Hat director Tom Grieve. "They made absolutely the right decision."

The next challenge was how to link the museum to what Grieve calls its new asset. Pigeon Alley, as it became known, was the obvious answer but the level changes were a problem, as well as the fact that it contained part of the museum's intake vent. Plus there were brick walls where the two entrances now sit, so there was also a need to help the client conceptualise something that didn't exist.



Source: Philip Vile

Looking up the steps from the entrance lobby to the salon

Hat built a 1:50 model to understand the complexity of the levels and then built several more over the next six months to explore and explain the different sequencing options. One featured a ramp to demonstrate how much space the ideal of step-free access would require, which helped the client accept the inevitability of stairs. There are just seven steps, not counting a separate, dog-leg flight down to the toilets and back-of-house areas in the basement, where the levels also needed taming. The ventilation issue means voids had to be hidden above, below and to one side of the lobby, large enough to stop the air whistling through audibly.



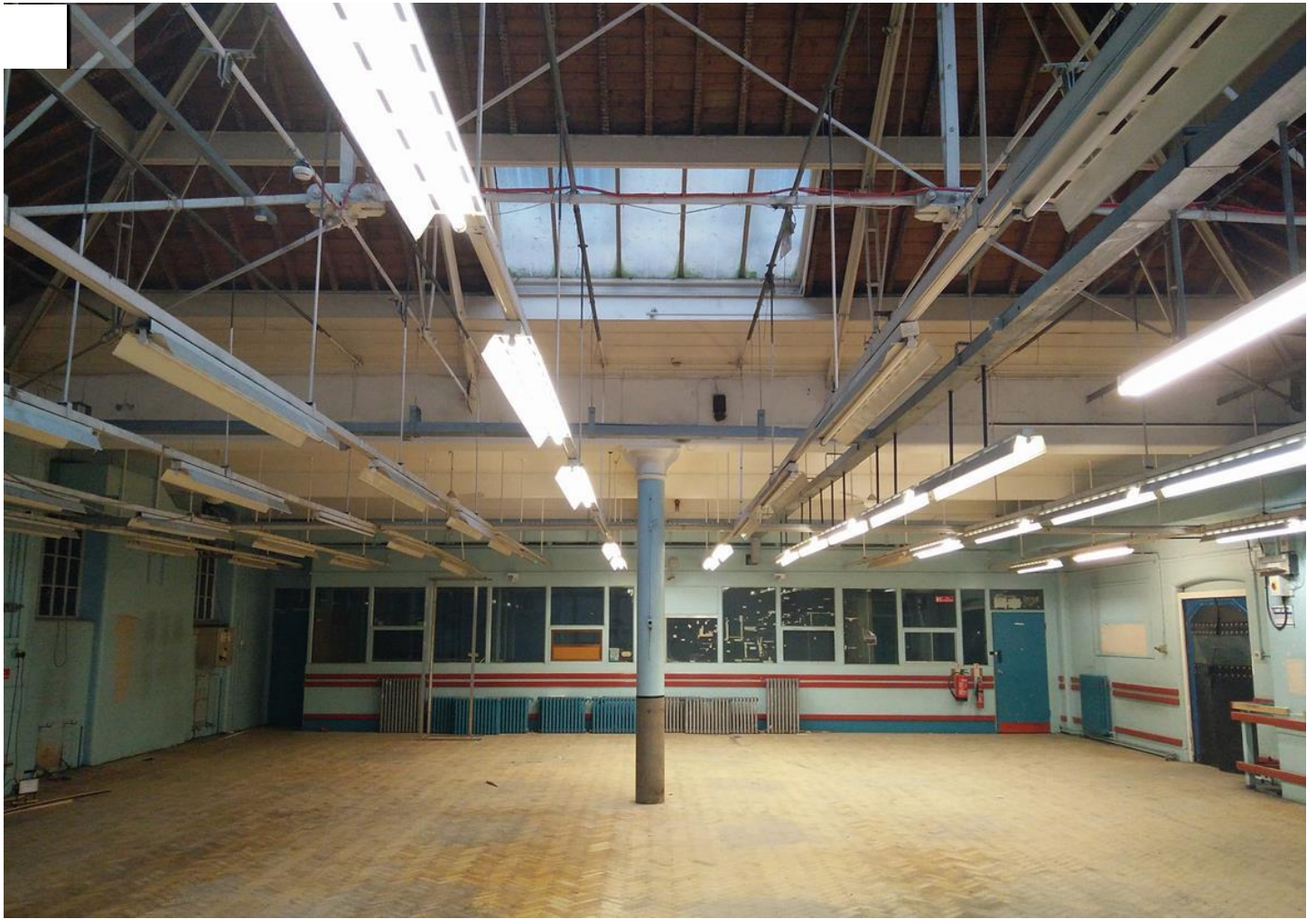
Source: Philip Vile

Looking down the salon (former sorting office) from the Imperial College end, with the old delivery yard on the right

Part of Hat's thinking in giving the sorting office to patrons rather than children was based on an instinct that concealed behind the false ceilings, strip-lighting and blue paint was something rather special.

"It was built in the late Edwardian period, before the museum, when people were proud to work for the civil service," says Grieve. "It was overly grand for what it was and over the years the practicalities of heating it and using it meant they'd done their level best to turn it into a Portacabin."

He praises the museum for backing their hunch. "We had some old drawings and could peer in but it was hard to see the building beyond," he recalls.



Source: Hat Projects

Looking in the same direction as the image above. The sorting office before work began to convert it into the Smith Centre. Note the solid wall to the left where the steps now arrive from the lobby that was Pigeon Alley

The client wasn't prepared to pay for enabling works to strip everything out at this early stage of design development so the architects had to go on intuition and a bit of paint scraping. You can imagine their delight when, months later, beautiful glazed tiles emerged from under the blue paint and handsome windows and a vaulted roof were revealed.

"Every time the contractor demolished something we'd go, 'Great, it's working,'" smiles Grieve.

They also removed redundant stairs and a ramp to turn the dingy delivery yard into a York-paved terrace where guests can spill out from the salon. There were a few dilemmas – such as whether to repair or celebrate as the "patina of life" tiles that had been badly scarred by post trolleys, as well as how to conceal services without damaging the historic ceiling or parquet floor.



Source: Hat Projects

The sorting office before work began to convert it into the Smith Centre. The windows overlook Pigeon Alley

Oddly, the museum doesn't have any other spaces with such an industrial feel, says Grieve, so it felt right to retain and display as much as possible of the uncovered fabric and original proportions.

The heating and cabling are concealed by carefully designed joinery panels wrapping round the walls, with sockets and controls left exposed for practicality. The architects annotated photographs of the sorting office, itemising which pipes, boxes and ductwork should be removed.

"There's not a big bang idea that solves everything," says Grieve. "It's just about hard work and careful coordination at the design stage."



Source: Philip Vile

Looking through the salon into the courtyard room

Without a BIM model of the museum there were plenty of surprises, such as discovering the primary electrical riser went up the wall of Pigeon Alley when they removed a lightbox screen from the entrance.

“Re-routing it would have cost almost the entire budget. The electrical engineer said, ‘Just don’t,’” says Grieve. “It’s not a clean slate when you work on a building like this. There’s a pleasure in that, as long as everyone is working in the same direction. It’s important to stress it’s a team job: these ideas evolved through collaboration with the client and design team – it wasn’t just the architect coming up with them.”

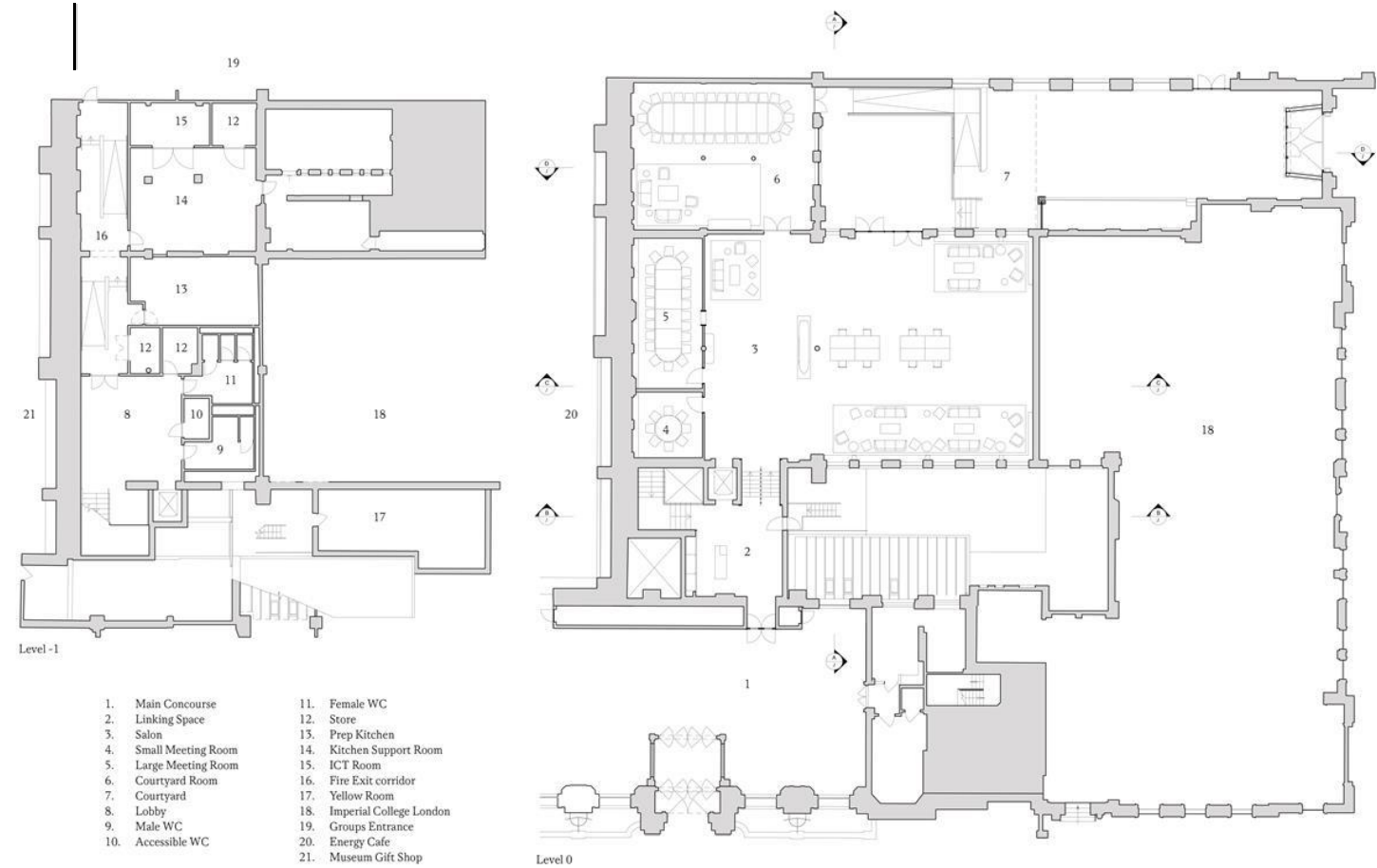
No one can be sure how the new spaces, which include smaller rooms around the main salon, will be used. But the client’s mantra throughout was “maintain opportunities”, which Hat interpreted as opening things up and creating links – essentially giving the museum options as users’ and donors’ demands change.



Source: Philip Vile

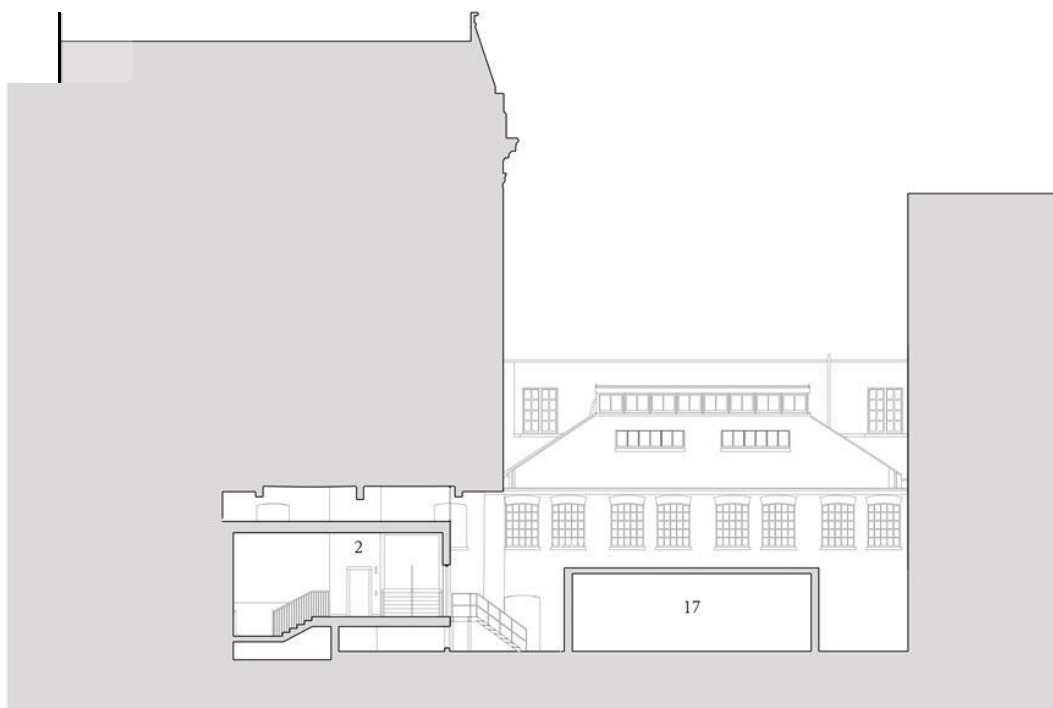
Looking from the salon back out through the lobby towards the Smith Centre's main doors. The Science Museum's main concourse is beyond

As we are about to head back down the steps Grieve points out two shallow alcoves in front of us and describes another dilemma. A timber arch which tidily brackets the stairs and lift has been inserted across the arches with apparent disregard for symmetry. The architect could have made the stairs and lift arrive through them but that would have created a very constricted entrance. It was a moment that required boldness, says Grieve, and they punched the entrance where it made most spatial sense. The result is that clear axial view back out to the museum's main concourse.



Source: Hat Projects

Plans of the Smith Centre, right, and the basement level, left



Section BB

- 2. Linking Space
- 17. Yellow Room

Source: Hat Projects

Section BB through the Smith Centre's lobby showing some of the complexity of levels and ventilation. The yellow room contains plant and distribution boards



Section DD

- 6. Courtyard Room
- 7. Courtyard
- 14. Kitchen Support Room
- 16. Fire Exit corridor

Source: Hat Projects

Section DD through the courtyard, with the sorting office's lantern-topped roof visible in the centre

Project team

Architecture and interior design: Hat Projects

Structure, mechanical and electrical services: Arup

Lighting design: Sutton Vane

Acoustic consultant: Sandy Brown

QS: G&T

Project management: Lendlease

Contractor: CBRE