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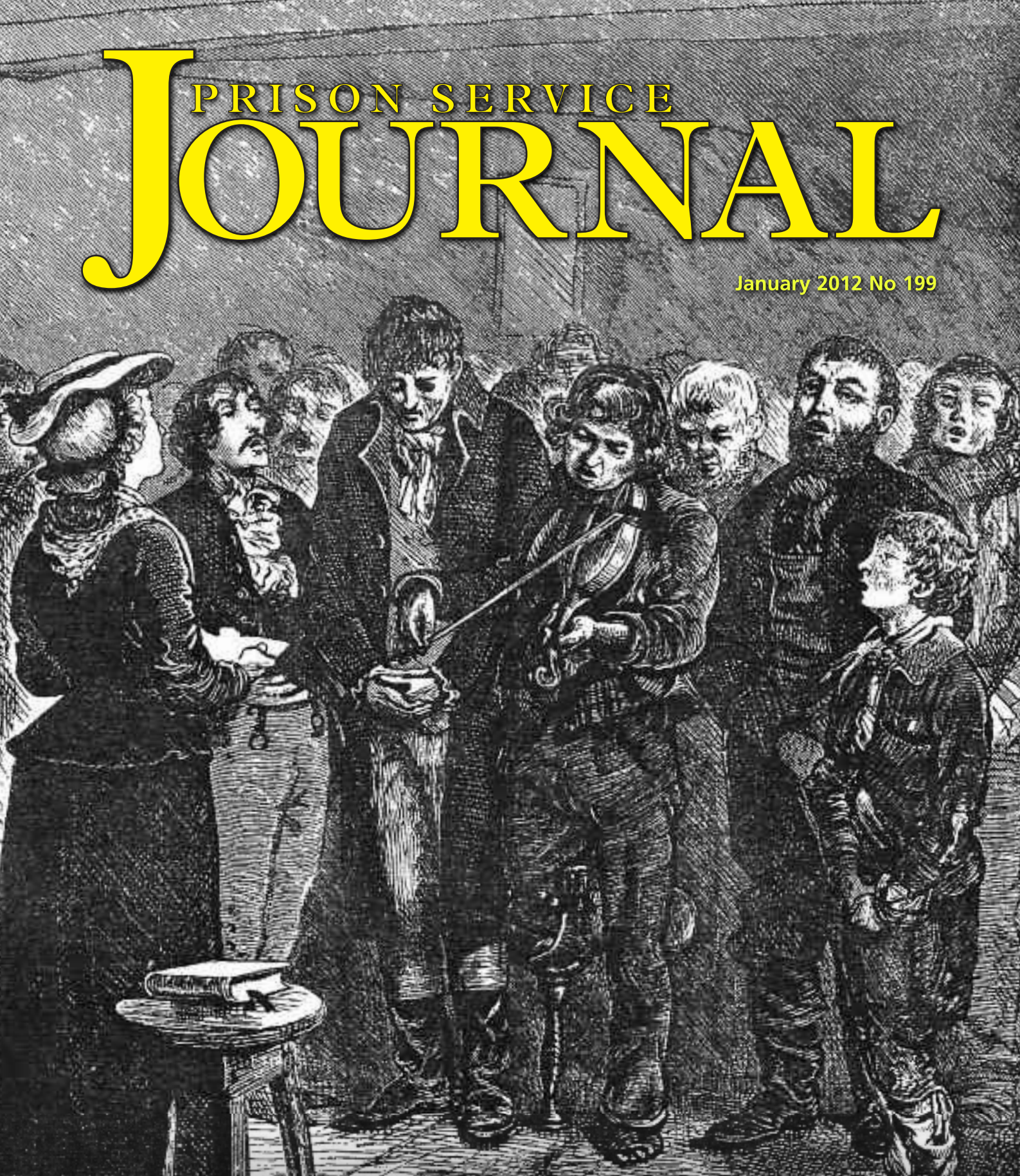

Special Edition

Alternative Representations of Imprisonment

Interview: Catherine Yeatman

Catherine Yeatman *is an architect working for ADP in Oxford. She was the project architect for a large part of the Oxford Castle development which includes the former prison buildings now occupied by Mal Maison. She is interviewed by* ***Michael Fiddler*** *— a Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Greenwich.*

MF: Can you take me through your role on the project?

CY: I work for ADP who are an architectural practice with offices around the country including Oxford where I am based. The practice got involved with the project in about 1995 when the prison was closed and the County Council took it over from the Home Office. There was a period of time, of about 4 or 5 years, when opportunities for the site were explored and people were invited to put together ideas of what it could become. Various uses were explored: it was thought it could be used for student housing or for all sorts of things such as an arts centre, museum, etc.. In the end a hotel was seen as the best solution for it. Trevor Osborne, a developer, put together the best case for the County Council, and a joint agreement was reached between them to develop the site. Our practice was involved from very early days with the Osborne Group looking at sketch feasibility options for the site and buildings. Once the joint agreement with the County Council was confirmed, we tendered for the architectural work with the Osborne Group and were successful in being appointed as architects and lead designers for a large part of the site.

My role was as the project architect from summer 2000 onwards. The part of the site we were responsible for included most of the old prison buildings and the construction of new apartments along the eastern wall on the site of the old women's block. That has been demolished in the 1970s when the new County Hall was built. Dixon Jones were the architects for the new building in front of the mound, which has restaurants on the ground floor and new hotel bedrooms with a link to the Victorian governor's house on the first floor. Their building was very controversial in the early days as there was a strong local opinion that this part of the site should be as open to the public as possible, as well as views of the mound. There were a number of quite spirited debates at public meetings about how to handle this space and all this took some of the focus off the work we were doing on the rest of the site. One of the things about Oxford is that it is a city that is all about places that you discover or places that are hidden or that places that you find by going through a door or through an archway. We felt really strongly that although an important part of the development of the site was unlocking this large chunk of land right in the middle of the City that had been locked away from the public for over 1000 years, it suited the urban form of Oxford to do this in a way with smallish gateways and openings that lead you into a series of places that you can discover behind them.

We submitted planning and listed building consent early in 2001. Until the consents were granted it was difficult for the developers to get hotel users and tenants for the various retail and restaurant units to commit. The set of permissions for the site were made even more complex by the fact that the mound is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM). The whole site within the castle/prison walls comes under the cartilage of the SAM. In theory this means that you need consent from central government to do anything under the ground including lift manholes and carry out soil investigations. The logistics of monitoring and ensuring we were complying with all the various statutory consents were very complex, and were managed largely by a series of regular meetings with all parties (archaeologists, conservation officers, English Heritage etc.) present to report on current progress and agree short-term future working programmes to meet everyone's criteria.

After receiving planning consent there was a period of about two years before the project was ready to start on site. The developer was securing deals with tenants, the County Council had to sign off plans and designs, conditions of the various consents had to be agreed and the designs had to be developed. We started on site in 2002/3. I was the key person in our team, designing, drawing, organising and co-ordinating with other members of the design team. Everyone thinks that architects just do drawings, but our role is much more of a facilitator and you need to have a good understanding of where everyone else in the team is coming from to be able to lead the design team to produce a co-ordinated end product. The drawing is a really small part of it actually.

MF: At that initial stage, what were the key aims for the project?

CY: One of the things about this site is that it is actually the external spaces that make it what it is, and the strong relationship of the buildings to these external spaces is key to making the overall site what it is. Our initial aims were to strip back a lot of the ephemera and let the main form of the buildings speak for themselves with minimal intervention. We had a pretty good brief from English Heritage that, on the

whole, modern interventions could be unashamedly modern and didn't have to be pastiche.

MF: Is that unusual?

CY: No, it's quite usual now, but 20 years ago it would have been more unusual. It's about preserving stuff of its time so that when you build new, you build what is of its time *now*: so there is an unfolding story of the history of the building or the history of the site. But there is an English tweeness that wants old things to look old. There's this very strong intellectual argument for modern interventions and English Heritage backed that up in documentation about the site and how they felt the development should proceed.

We put together quite early on a very short bullet-point list of development principles. Things like 'only alter where you have to alter', 'use materials that are in harmony or in sympathy with existing materials, but be modern where you need to be modern.' It was about letting the existing buildings do their stuff as much as possible.

MF: What are the challenges in reconfiguring a space like this?

CY: Fire. It was one of the biggest challenges. To design a building to get people out which is designed to keep them in is a big challenge. To do that we put two new staircases in. We took out a row of cells, a vertical stack of cells at each end of the building. They just take you down and out at each end. In each corner of the main wing there's a staircase that runs all the way down.

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MF: I didn't notice that all.

CY: No, you wouldn't. It just looks like another room door or laundry cupboard at the end of each row. So you just go through a cell door. The other thing was fire escapes and the spread of fire because we had this atrium space with all of the doors opening onto it. The whole thing is operated by a fire-engineered solution for an atrium. There were existing roof lights in the roof and they've been converted to operate with a fire alarm as smoke vents. Luckily they were pretty much exactly the right area that we needed. So, technically, fire was the most difficult thing.

We also wanted to keep all the existing prison doors. They were there! Why not keep them? They were built to be solid. They were good for noise, good for privacy, good for lots of reasons. The main change was to switch the spy holes round so that you could look out and not in. But we didn't want to fit closers on them because they're arched and they're very small and very low. If you fitted an overhead closer onto them people would have clonked their heads on them. So, again, that was part of the fire engineered solution. Normally fire doors close so that if there's a fire somewhere and you escape from the room, the door closes automatically and seals the fire in the room. So the whole fire strategy had to be based on the fact that if there was a fire in a room, someone would run out of their room and their door would not necessarily completely close and that the fire could break into the atrium. The fire officer would really liked to have had a lobby on the staircases at the end. However, there was no space to do that without either taking out a whole cell to the side or building a lobby into the atrium space that was not possible. So we had to negotiate that they didn't have lobbies on them.

There was a stipulation that there was an hour fire-rating between the ground floor of the atrium and the basement[1]. That caused a bit of a problem because there are two staircases that went down to the basement. At one end, we could box in the stair on the lower level with a lobby at the bottom, as there was space to do this in the bedroom corridor. On the other side, the stair came down into the middle of bar and restaurant area, and an enclosure and lobby would have eaten significantly into the bar and restaurant space, which was already limited for covers and layout by the cellular construction.

Throughout the whole building the numbers of rooms we were providing were at the bottom limit of what we were told was viable for a hotel to function efficiently. This was the same with the restaurant space where we were trying to squeeze the maximum number of seats into a very constrained space. There was an opinion that retaining the stair, which was not needed for circulation, was not the best option for operational reasons, but the conservation officer was insistent the stair should remain *in situ* as a visual part of the building fabric. The historic significance of A-wing is largely based on the fact that, of the gaols of this period, it is one of the few still left with many of its original internal features still intact. The original circulation and sightlines for surveillance were a key part of the building's design and he felt that the stair should stay, while the fire officer and building control stipulated that we must ensure the fire separation

1. A one hour fire-rating means that if a fire of average intensity were to break out, it should take in excess of one hour to spread from the basement to the ground-floor and vice-versa.

between the two levels, and the hotel needed a restaurant space that would function. Eventually a solution was agreed that met everyone's requirements: a fire-rated floor was put in at the level of the main atrium and the balustrade and handrails for the stair at this level were left in place. So it is clear to see that there was once a stair going down from here. The stair itself is left as a feature in the basement by the bar rising up and appearing to disappear through the ceiling. This is a good example of the types of problems that the scheme had to overcome, and generally everyone involved understood that, while they needed to represent their own view point, they needed to work with everyone else's requirements as well to reach mutually agreeable ways of moving forward. Without this overriding understanding to make the project happen it would have been easy for it to fall at the first hurdle.

One of the other technical areas that had to be dealt with was the main atrium space itself. The handrails in the atrium were too low and the gaps were too big and they weren't strong enough to meet modern regulations. We all felt it was important to keep the original ones though because they're very much of the defining visual aesthetic of that space. We put in a glass balustrade that sits on a completely different structure that is bolted back to the wall. You've still got the 'X' shape with the big circle in it. You still read the existing line of the handrail quite clearly, and there is a very clear definition between modern and original.

In the bedrooms, the biggest technical challenge was fitting air-conditioning. The hotel said they could not get their star rating without being able to say that their rooms were air-conditioned. There was an argument to say that they possibly don't need air-conditioning — they've got three-foot thick walls and small openings. The building is incredibly thermally stable and, in fact, we had a heatwave during one of the summers we were on-site and it took — and this was when there weren't doors or windows in it generally because they'd been taken out for repair, so it was open to the outside air all the time — the best part of a week for it to heat up internally to a temperature that might have been considered uncomfortable. Conventional air-conditioning needs a large amount of ductwork and a flat ceiling. We didn't want to do that in these rooms with an arched ceiling. Each bedroom is made up out of two former cells knocked together with a pair of steel beams supporting the barrel vault to the ceilings where the wall has been removed. This geometry made it impossible to fit a conventional type of air-conditioning system. The end solution was to use chilled panels that were purpose made to fit the curve of the ceilings. They are basically back-to-front radiators. You run very cold water through them and they radiate cold.

One of the things we built very early on was a sample room, which was a planning and listed building condition, but also a condition to sign off for Mal Maison. We used it as a test model to see how easy it was going to be to knock the walls down, what we'd find behind the plaster and what the floor was made out of, etc. and also to look at fittings so that they could be approved and manufacture off-site could be started. It meant that when we did come to do the main construction the principle for the construction methods and also the finishes were already signed off and approved which meant we could proceed quite quickly.

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The cold in the building was a real problem at handover because of this very big thermal mass. It took a long time. We handed over at Christmas and it took around a month to warm up properly and for it not to feel like a kind of cold, damp building when you walked into it. Once it had warmed up it was fine.

Originally the furnaces were in the roof and the whole building is built with this network of flues inside the walls that bring fresh air into every single room. In its original use in the eighteenth century there was a whole thing about not being able to communicate between cells and this network of ducts did this. They weren't interested in keeping people warm basically. In the early days it was a kind of hierarchical thing so that it you were privileged you ended up on the top floor. It was warmer because you were nearer the furnaces. Then, once they'd cracked a lot of health and hygiene issues, they moved all of the boilers downstairs and used the same ducts to put hot air through the roof. So, by lighting a fire in the roof they were pulling cold air through to give everyone fresh air. Then they moved all of the boilers downstairs

and pushed all the hot air through the same network of ducts. Now we're using the same network of ducts to do the extraction of all the bedrooms and from all the bathrooms. They all have to be separate and not interconnected otherwise you get sound problems between bedrooms. So, the whole original network of ducts to do with air circulation is still being used. It was quite complicated. We had to do a radar survey of the building to find out where they were because there were no records of them. They may have been locked in some prison archive. I think they just built it. Nobody kept records in those days in the same way that we're paranoid about.

The other thing is all the other ancillary bits and pieces. A-wing is the most interesting bit of the building because it's the bit that is most complete in terms of its 'prisonness' (see figure 1).

MF: What do you mean by 'prisonness'?

CY: It's the bit where you walk into it and you can see that it was once a prison. But, actually, everything else about it was to do with being a prison as well: the former offices at the front, all the rubbish in the gardens, the whole thing. Now, A-wing is the bit that is most fascinating, most obvious. It's easier to forget about the rest because it's not as sexy. There are all sorts of things, the building that is now the site manager's office down at the far end, the members of the local community were terribly interested in because apparently it once had a treadwheel in it. There's mixed evidence as to whether it did or didn't. It was called the treadwheel building at one point, but then it got its name changed because everyone thought that it was kind of too emotive. They were all for rebuilding a treadwheel and using it as an educational opportunity. Perhaps with an eco-thing you could generate your own electricity!

Quite a lot of architecture journalists have been round at various stages and the one thing that everyone wanted to know was where was the hanging cell. In fact we destroyed the hanging cell by installing the staircase that goes down to the new kitchen. I feel that it is appropriate that it's not made a monument or memorial to it. From the start we wanted to say that 'yes, this building was a prison', but not to dwell on that. I mean there were a lot of jokes at the beginning about how everybody would be given striped pyjamas and a ball on a chain when they were 'locked in' on the first night. I think it was felt from really early on that the former use of the building is a part of its past — and you can't deny that — but not to turn it into a theme prison. If you turn it into a theme prison then people come for one night only. It's not Disney World. Actually it's about saying this is about reusing part of the built environment and finding a use for that in a modern context in a modern use. Acknowledging that it was a prison, but not celebrating that in a way.

MF: There's a risk of it being ghoulish.

CY: Having said that, Mal Maison's publicity for the opening was very S&M based.

There are an awful lot of similarities between a hotel and a prison in some ways. The main difference is about choice: in a hotel you chose to be there, in a prison you don't. But at the end of the day, it's a room that you shut a door on the rest of the world. You want privacy. You want acoustic separation. The reasons are completely different. It comes down to the fact that there are carpets, spyholes the other way round and you have your own key.

It was accepted from very early days that if it was going to be a hotel then the prison bars would come off the windows but a lot of the bars were bedded into the stone and would have cost a lot of money with stone repairs. So we just cut them. There are little stubs of bars everywhere, which we felt was quite nice because it still had that memory of bars without you being in a room with bars on the windows.

MF: Are there examples of former prison buildings being used in new ways that you looked at?

CY: There are more examples of former mental homes and mental institutions. There are more examples of hospitals. They've generally been turned

Fig 1. A-wing

into residential developments. I think this was unique in all sorts of ways because of its location and because of the other kind of buildings around it. As well as it being a very good example of a site that has got this sort of layering of use and being located right in the city centre.

We didn't really look at prison buildings terribly hard. The County Council let it out as a film set. All sorts of things were filmed here. Most notably *Bad Girls* was pretty much filmed here. Every time we came in to do surveys or look at something, to take photographs, the inside was painted a different shade of grey because every prison set designer seemed to think they needed to paint it in their own particular shade of grey. Which was quite funny because when it was taken over as a building site, English Heritage got frightfully excited about the paint analysis on the atrium walls. I knew in the previous six months, let alone the previous 5 years, it had been completely repainted three or four times with no one applying to English Heritage for the right kind of paint licence.

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The biggest stage set was for *Spy Game*, a film with Brad Pitt in it. They decorated the whole thing out as a Chinese jail and wrote Chinese graffiti over all the walls, hung Chinese laundry out of all the windows. It was reasonably convincing actually. It has cameos in all sorts of TV programmes.

MF: It reiterates that sense of 'prisonness' that does not really resemble prisons as they are.

CY: I don't know. One of the things that always struck me about it, and in fact was a feature of it until the very last week before it opened as a hotel, was that it sounded like the beginning of *Porridge*. That sequence at the beginning of Porridge when the doors slam is actually incredibly evocative. It is built into lots of people's consciousness about what prison is about, but also is evocative of what it really did sound like. It was clanky and echoey. Then they laid the carpets and suddenly it changed. That was the single thing that made the biggest difference. Those walkways clanked when people walked along them, particularly because people were walking along them in heavy site boots. They clanked and the doors clanked. Everything sounded like that opening sequence from *Porridge* and then suddenly they put the carpets down and that changed. And they didn't put the carpets down in the public areas until the very last week.

MF: Were you hoping that it would have that effect?

CY: No, I think by that stage we'd forgotten. I think you become so used to the sound of it that you had kind of taken it for granted. I think we knew that the carpets would soften the sound in there, but because you were always going with really specific things to look for or to listen to, you kind of took for granted being in that space — and what it sounded like — and you weren't aware of it. I remember the first day I went in after the carpets had been laid and I thought 'oh my god, it's changed'.

MF: What kind of feedback have you had over the years? Have people used the space in ways that you hadn't anticipated?

CY: Not really, no. They're quite limited by how they can use that space, particularly on the upper levels because of the fire restrictions. They've used it for parties and stuff like that. I think it would be ideal for all sorts of art installations, whether that's live art or static art or whatever.

It was a very hard project. I basically lived these buildings for about five years. Then suddenly I wasn't part of it anymore and the life of the buildings had moved on. I had a mixed relationship with them for a bit and I kind of feel more detached from the emotional highs and lows of that process now, but still incredibly pleased and proud of this place that I had a large hand in making what it is today.