

Charge of the light brigade

The Institution of Electrical Engineers has been given a new lease of life by Lee/Fitzgerald Architects' sensitive refurbishment. by Volker Welter. Photographs by John Walsom.



Old meets new: although the Lancaster Room (previous page) is a new exhibition and members' area off the main entrance foyer (right), the architect has linked the two spaces by using materials, for example marble and mahogany, that refer to existing materials in the building.

IN EVERY CITY, BUILDINGS EXIST WHICH ARE part of the urban grain yet which never get paid particular architectural attention. In London, one such building is the Institution of Electrical Engineers (IEE) at Savoy Place, which contains a barely known but remarkable interior by Charles Holden and Percy Adams. Parts of this interior have just been restored and complemented with new function rooms by London practice Lee/Fitzgerald Architects, work remarkable for the ease with which modern architecture has been inserted into an old setting.

The four-storey building by Adams and Stephen Salters conveys institutional respectability, its red brick facades only slightly relieved by modest Neo-Classical stone dressing. When the IEE acquired the building around 1908, Adams and Holden adapted the structure for its new user. Most notable was the insertion of a lecture theatre at the centre of the ground floor, which included upper recessed balconies on two sides as in an actual theatre.

Panelled entirely in mahogany with stripped-down Italianate detailing, this venue is one of the most beautiful lecture halls in London. Adams and Holden also added a library on the first floor, complete with oak bookcases and a gallery with a simple but refined bronze balustrade. In the entrance hall they created a feast of white-ish Pentelikon marble, lining floors and walls, in contrast to the solid bronze friezes and details at the top and base of the columns.

Today, this interior evokes nostalgia for an epoch when architects could indulge themselves and their clients with a great wealth of materials and detailing. Yet when it was created, the interior was perceived as distinctly modern. The *Architectural Review*, March 1911, even speaks of 'the whole effect being one of force, almost barbaric in character'. What Adams's and Holden's adaptation achieved was a metropolitan architecture of the kind proposed by, for example, Otto Wagner of Vienna: a modern, but

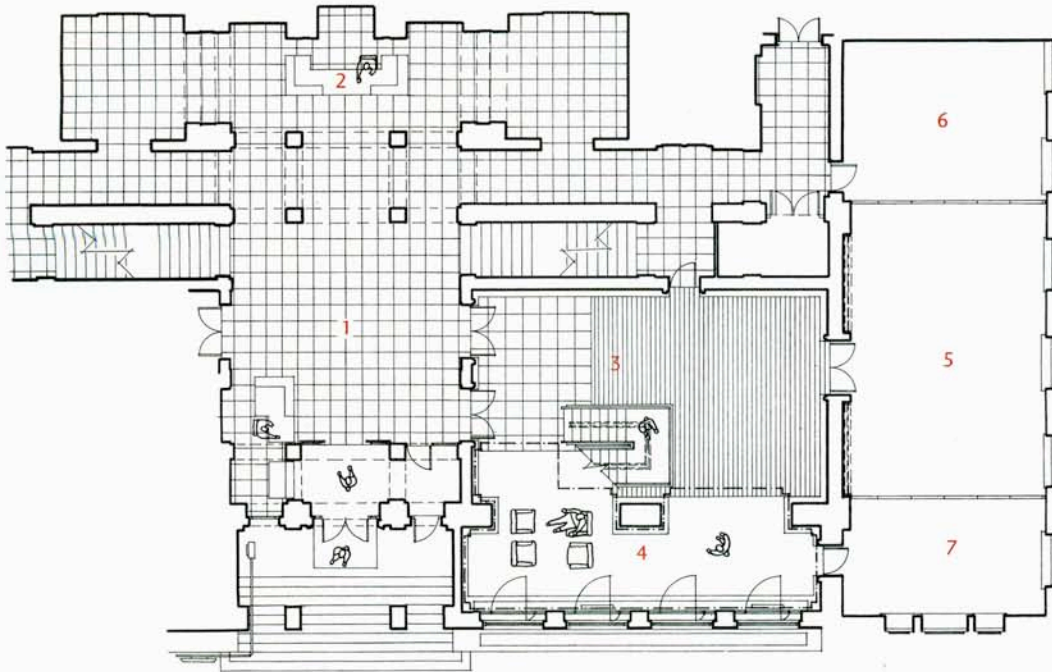
not Modernist, architecture which mixes traditional forms, exquisite materials, reduced detailing and new building components.

The most convincing strength of Lee/Fitzgerald Architects' refurbishment of the IEE lies in its sensitivity to the qualities of the existing interior. In the mid-1990s, the IEE upgraded the lecture theatre, a job on which Mike Fitzgerald worked for RHWL Partnership. Once the project was completed, it became obvious that the existing service spaces such as foyer, function rooms and toilets were not enough to cater for the needs of up to 440 guests, the spaces' maximum capacity.

The IEE asked the newly formed partnership of Lee/Fitzgerald Architects to upgrade the necessary 'break out' facilities. The initial commission comprised the entrance hall, the creation of a reception area for large events, a private room for the members of the IEE, meeting rooms – all on the ground floor – and new toilet facilities in the basement. The refurbishment of the first-floor library was added at a later stage.

The main entrance foyer required the least intervention. By pushing back the newly designed reception desk (English walnut and bronze) to the far end of the room, the beautifully proportioned space can now be fully experienced. Immediately to the right lies the new Lancaster Room, a reception area incorporating a private space for IEE members on a mezzanine. In this room, the architectural philosophy of the practice – a dialogue with the Adams and Holden interior – can best be appreciated. Dark Merbau hardwood flooring, bronze, steel (bronze painted or with a charcoal iron oxide finish) and differently graded marmerino plaster surfaces all combine to create a space of tremendous elegance which focuses on the purpose-designed, free-standing mezzanine staircase of steel, wood and bronze.

Attention to detail and finish make this room – indeed, the entire project – particularly enjoyable. In



Key to ground-floor plan

- 1 Entrance foyer
- 2 Reception
- 3 Lancaster Room
- 4 Mezzanine area
- 5 Maxwell Suite
- 6 Gilbert Room
- 7 Heavyside Room



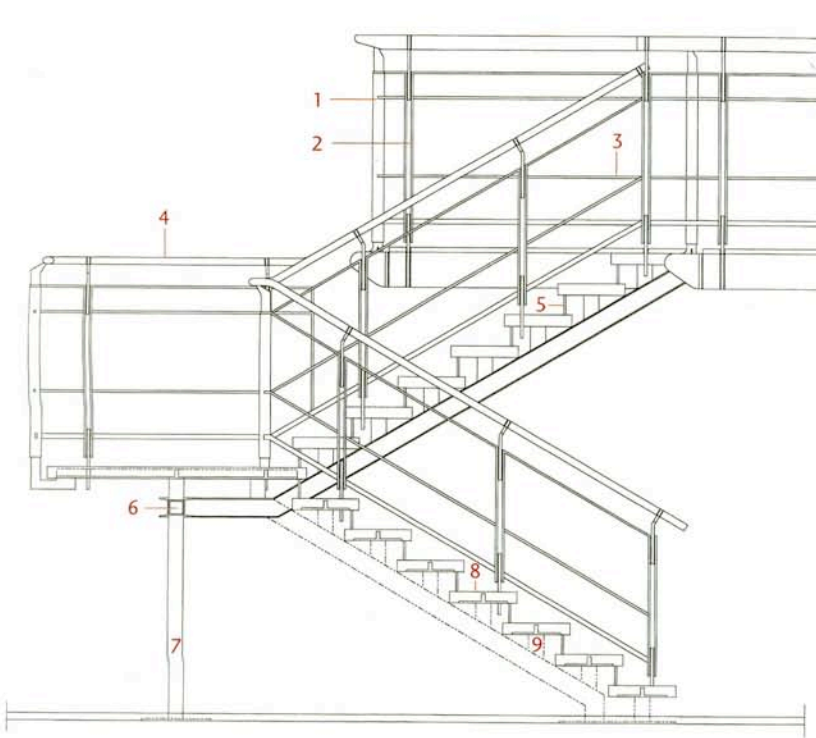
response to Adams's and Holden's square, positive detailing, such as the profiles of the panelling in the lecture hall, Lee/Fitzgerald Architects used square negative detailing – for example cutting a dado into the wall. Likewise, different materials or finish, such as the 5:1 Travertine mix for the lower wall and a highly polished plaster above, are carefully separated with thin lines of bronze-painted steel.

The architecture establishes a hierarchy, repeated by the mezzanine floating in the space in a respectful gap in the existing structure, from the grand foyer, through the elegant Lancaster Room, to the adjoining Maxwell Suite of three meeting rooms, each of which have plain interiors. The latter can be joined individually and used as overflow space for the Lancaster Room.

The work in the library was both restoration and refurbishment: the existing balustrade, the bronze railing and the oak bookcases were restored; the remainder required a complete overhaul to bring the technical facilities up-to-date. A new raised computer floor doubles up as a sealed plenum for the air-conditioning of the Lancaster Room below. The steel and glass kiosk which forms a new workspace for the librarian is ingenious, visibly connecting the library with the corridor and allowing books to be returned or renewed without having to enter the library.

One can only congratulate both the architect for such an elegant design, finished to a very high standard, and the IEE for being such an enlightened client.

The mezzanine exhibition area (far left, above) is detailed to float in space so as not to interrupt the perceived volume of the room, while a more traditional approach was taken for the library (above) which is both a refurbishment and restoration of the original Adams/Holden interior.



Key to section of staircase

- 1 12 x 18mm steel bar
- 2 60 x 10mm bright drawn steel flat with bronze finish
- 3 12 x 30 steel bar
- 4 60 38mm ellipse Merbau hand rail
- 5 10mm-dia tension rods to edge of stair treads
- 6 80 x 80mm MS box section with twinned 102 x 50mm channel sections forming structural spine
- 7 Twinned 80 x 80mm MS box section column
- 8 1100 x 355 x 50mm solid Merbau tread
- 9 80 x 80mm box section tread support

Cost specifications

Total floor area	1065m ²
Total cost	£1,396,353
Cost per m ²	£1,311

Costs	
Preliminaries etc	£49,861
Strip out/demolitions	£53,861
General building works	£187,017
Architectural metalwork	£70,498
Floor finishes	£49,551
Wall finishes	£48,441
Partitions and ceilings	£61,122
Joinery works	£156,112
Decorations	£61,122
Glazing works	£37,927
Fitments	£38,415
Mechanical services including sanitaryware	£241,293
Electrical installations	£231,641
Purpose-designed furniture	£79,000
General furniture	£30,000

Specifications
 Lancaster Room and Maxwell Suite
 Pentelikon marble on floor by Janatti (no 701), hardwood flooring by Gaskell Quartz (no 702), specially dyed Wilton carpet by Hugh McKay (no 703). Walls and ceiling by Peruchetti Associates (no 704). Architectural metalwork by John Desmond (no 705). Joinery by Cubitt (no 706). Suspended ceiling by Integra (no 707). Secondary glazing by Selectaglaze (no 708). Structural glazing by Compass Glass (no 709). Acoustic doors by Huppe Form (no 710). Motorised blinds by Soltech Systems (no 711). Ironmongery by Higrade Hardware (no 712). Lighting by Designed Architectural Lighting (no 713).

Library
 Lighting by Luscent Lighting (no 714), DAL (no 715), Best and Lloyd (no 716). Carpet by Interface (no 717). Oak flooring by Natural Wood Flooring Co (no 718). Purpose-made furniture by David Haddock (no 719). Kiosk by John Desmond (no 720). Furniture by Furniture File (no 721). Secondary glazing by Selecta Glaze (no 722).

Toilets
 Tiling by Langley Tiles (no 723), trim by Schluter Systems (no 724). Sanitary fixtures and fittings by Vola UK (no 725). Fixtures by F C Frost (no 726). Fittings by Armitage Shanks (no 727). Granite tops by Janatti (no 727). Veneered purpose-made toilet cubicles and doors by Graffe (no 728). Ceiling tiles by Burgess. Ironmongery Higrade Hardware (no 729).

Credits

- Client**
Institution of Electrical Engineers
- Architect**
Lee/Fitzgerald Architects
- Structural engineer**
Fenton Holloway
- Quantity surveyor**
Faithful and Gould
- M&E consultant**
Grensells Design
- Acoustic consultant**
Arup Acoustics
- Lighting consultant**
Lighting Design Partnership
- Main contractor**
Benson Interiors
- Electrical installation**
J Wesley
- Mechanical installation**
LAL

The balustrade of the staircase to the mezzanine in the Lancaster Room.

