REPORT

FEASIBILITY STUDY

16021 - THE HARLINGTON, FLEET

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CHARCOALBLUE
THEATRICAL INNOVATION | ESTD 2004

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study is the result of work completed by Charcoalblue during a feasibility period from mid-April through to mid-June 2016.

The study is an investigation into the ability of the existing building to accommodate the auditorium requirements set out by the Harlington Team, with a proposed design approach. The new proposal aims to refurbish and rework The Harlington.
The refurbishment would also develop the ancillary spaces of the existing building to work with the new auditorium.

In addition, this report examines the potential footprint for a new building, with possible locations for this identified. The new build would accommodate all of the briefing requirements of the Harlington Team detailed herein, including a 400-seat auditorium complete with technical level, all necessary supporting spaces, together with a dance studio and large second performance space.

Outline budget costs for both the refurbishment and new building are provided, based on similar construction projects.

A headline analysis of the room acoustic requirements, along with an initial approach to the design of the theatre technical systems is included, together with outline budget cost allowances for the technical systems – for refurbishment and new build.

At the end of the report ‘next steps’ highlight the key activities required to progress the proposed works into the next phase of design.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Harlington opened as a civic complex in 1972, comprising ‘Civic Hall/Assembly Room’, library, offices and meeting rooms.
A major fire in 1991 destroyed the hall, which was rebuilt with improved facilities, reopening in 1994 as The Harlington.
In 2005 the building had some minor DDA modifications, with the addition of a lift in the northwest of the building leading to all floors.

The building is a multi-purpose arts and entertainment venue in the heart of Fleet town centre, Hampshire. The Harlington is operated by Fleet Town Council and is also currently home to WRVS and The Point – charitable and voluntary organisations.

The current Harlington frontage

2 THE BRIEF

Following a previous exercise undertaken to investigate the potential for a new combined library and community facility, subsequently quashed for financial reasons, Fleet Town Council (FTC) approached Charcoalblue to explore the viability of developing a “modern, functional theatre facility”, either by means of a new building or through the redevelopment of the existing Harlington site.

2.1 CURRENT ARTS ACTIVITIES

The Harlington currently mostly undertakes one-night events, typically:

- Cabaret
- Tribute acts
- Stand-up comedy
- Beer festival
- Exhibitions
- Magic shows
- Wrestling events
- Male variety shows
- ‘An evening with…’ with Q&A

This programme is supplemented with day and evening hires for:

- Music classes
- Rock Choir
- Youth theatre
- Roller discos
- Weekly fitness classes (aerobics, yoga, Ceroc, dance, etc.)

The aim is to maintain the current programme of events but to expand with larger scale visiting shows and simultaneous activities in supporting spaces.

2.2 OUTLINE ASPIRATIONS

At its simplest, the venue has outgrown its current facilities and needs new facilities for both the present and to grow into. But in all the areas described below, it is not simply a matter of providing better facilities for the same output, but of providing a venue to increase and improve the output.

The key requirements of the brief, as identified through our meetings with the client team and the briefing document issued by the General Manager, Alex Robins, are as follows:

MAIN HOUSE

- Programme: Tribute shows, comedians, plays, amateur shows, dance school performances, pantomime, larger children/family shows, named artists & performances where a larger capacity is required, conferences & large meetings, exhibitions, large party nights with live entertainment, cinema (not new releases)
- Capacity: 350-400 theatre / 320-350 cabaret (chairs & tables)
- Ability to do flat floor, all-standing gigs
- Ability to do front half standing, rear half cabaret seating
- Integral bar (which can cater for up to 500ish standing)
- Capacity to include balcony with minimum 100 fixed seats (can be removed for sound / followspot positions); to include side balcony on both sides
- Balcony to be accessed from first floor to avoid losing space downstairs when in cabaret format
- Theatre bar on first floor with higher quality toilets etc.; can be closed off at bottom of stairs at ground level when not sold.

BACKSTAGE

- Dance Studio
- Dressing rooms: 3 separate, plus one large space for larger panto, dance school, amateur casts; should be able to use as one open room or cut in half to split boys/girls where necessary
- Green room
- Crew room
- Laundry room
- Workshop
- Kitchen
- Dock / storage (which would include level access loading bay and parking for up to 2 Luton vans, plus additional cars if possible).

FOYER

- Possibly all open plan with current café (which could become café/bar and theatre bar) and box office area.
- Toilets.

LIVE ROOM (OR SECOND PERFORMANCE SPACE)

- Programme: Live music (jazz, blues & folk clubs, original breaking artists, up and coming artists, comedy club, experimental theatre, rehearsals, private party hires etc. where capacity requirements are lower)
- Black box space with flat floor (must replicate main house stage size so rehearsals could take place in here)
- Capacity: 200 standing with cabaret option.
- Stage height: 0.9m-1.2m
- Facilities: Own bar, toilets, LX & sound
- Ideally self-contained so audience can enter the venue from the street and don’t mix with the theatre audience in the main house. There should be an option of entering from the main building, but able to be locked off from it so it can operate independently whilst the rest of the building is closed.

OUTDOOR EATING / DRINKING AREA

- Accessed through café/bar

The intention of this report is to therefore clarify what, from the above list, could be accommodated within the existing building as part of a refurbishment project, and to identify what could only be possible as part of a new build construction.

3 THE CURRENT FACILITIES

3.1 THE AUDITORIUM

The Chernocke Hall is a flat-floored room, with an end-on stage 18m x 6.5m, with treads up either side as the only access from auditorium to stage. Wing space is limited by an existing stair to the basement on stage right and the current technical provisions housed on stage left.
The space no longer meets the visiting company requirements or the desired programming for the future business model.

Existing Chernocke Hall

The overall look and feel of the auditorium is dated and tired, and the wide, spread-out nature of the space makes it more difficult for the performers to create an atmosphere of excitement and intimacy for focused performance. At present the auditorium does not meet modern expectations for both access and facilities.

3.2 FRONT OF HOUSE SPACES

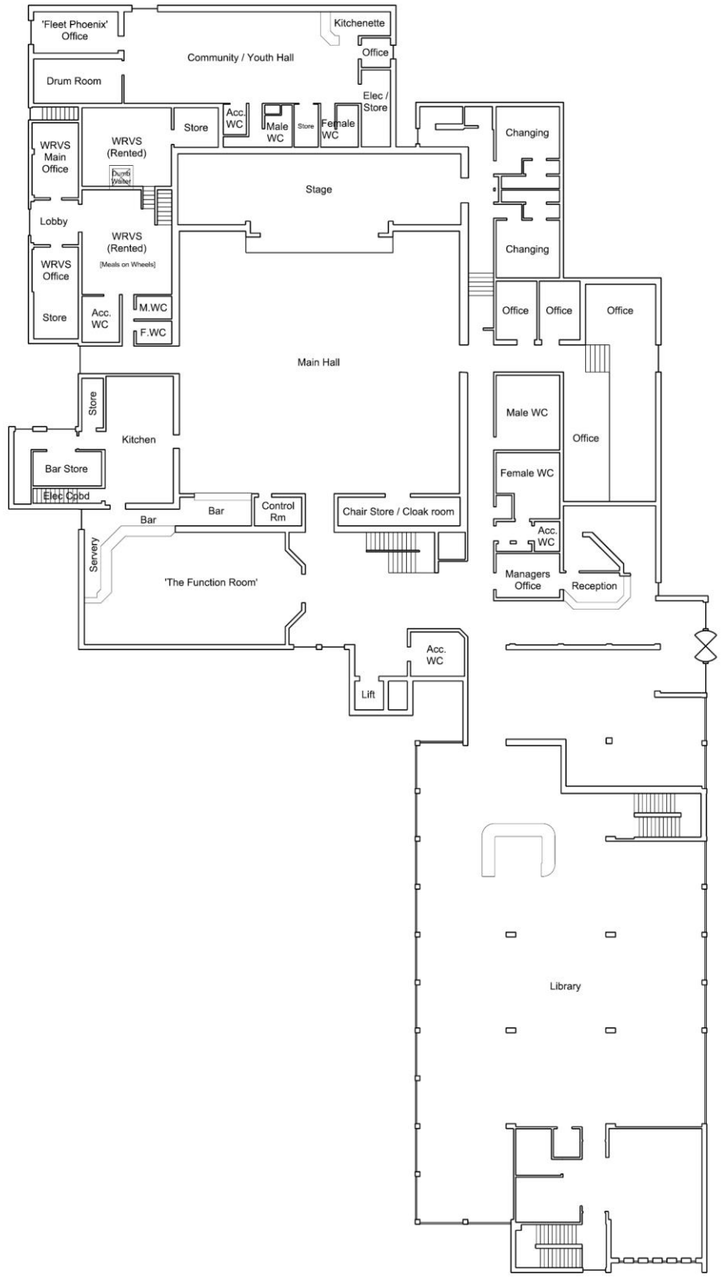
The Harlington's public-facing amenities are severely limited: upon entering the building one is immediately faced with a partition wall which naturally creates a division in the 'meet and greet' space. There is a café/coffee shop area to one side, which serves as the only foyer area with no real space to resolve any ticketing issues that may arise and is not geared towards creating an evening performance atmosphere. Sanitary facilities are off to the opposite side, and are in serious need of attention both in décor and updating of the mechanical services.
The Function Room is situated directly through to the back of the building and serves as an overflow to the foyer facility in times of larger audience capacities. The room has a small hatch to serve refreshments from prior to and during the show – this often magnifies the current noise separation issues during the performance when staff need to restock the bar ready for the interval as it is currently linked directly through to the main auditorium volume.
Neither the café/coffee shop or The Function Room are spaces that are suitable to create anticipation for an evening's entertainment.
Indeed, from the main approach on Fleet Road and through Gurkha Square, one could be forgiven for thinking that The Harlington is solely a library facility, as is its neighbouring building.

At the next stage of design, once a design team has been appointed, it would be fundamental to interrogate this front of house area, along with the façade to create a more engaging and exciting entrance facility for the venue.

3.3 BACKSTAGE SPACES

There are no counterweight or electrically flown bars over the stage, and any cloths, set, sound, AV or lighting required in this area is rigged by ladder, or pulled up manually by the technicians using direct-haul hemp lines to the overhead bars. The bars are in fixed positions and the lighting rig is also fixed to reduce turnaround times and staff costs, which does not allow the flexibility required for visiting companies – any departure from the fixed rig is at a cost to the incoming production.
Power to the stage area is insufficient for the desired productions. The control room is too small as well as having poor sightlines to the stage for sound and projection and access to the room is via a set of wooden steps within a small enclosure at the rear of the auditorium, i.e. this room is not accessible to wheelchair users.
The auditorium is equipped with one fixed advance bar, with the only access to this position through the use of a ladder, which means the seats have to be moved to allow a clear route along the full length of the bar, which again adds time and cost if alterations to the rig need to be accommodated.

There are significant sound separation issues throughout the building, which cause problems during classes and productions alike. The supporting spaces and dressing rooms are too few and too small. The load-in is small and sits on the floor c.1350mm below stage level, meaning difficult and time-consuming get-ins for performances.



Existing ground floor plan

4 KEY PRECEDENTS

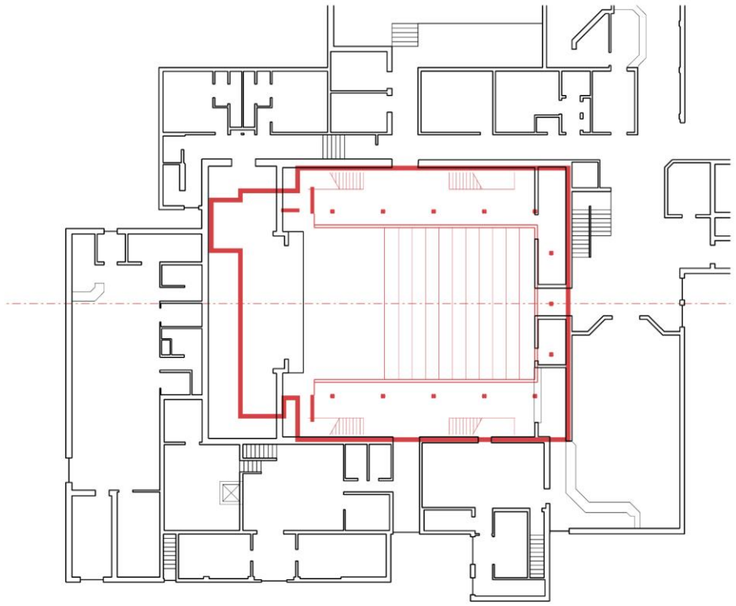
The spaces described below have been key in understanding the ambitions and desires of The Harlington, and have played a useful role in the development of the plans for refurbishment of the main auditorium. The review of built examples as comparatives has helped to evolve the scheme and test the spatial characteristics.

The National Theatre's Dorfman Theatre and the Royal Opera Houses' Linbury Theatre, both in London, along with the Great Hall at The Leys School in Cambridge have been particularly informative. The principles of these spaces aligning closely with the proposals for the existing hall.

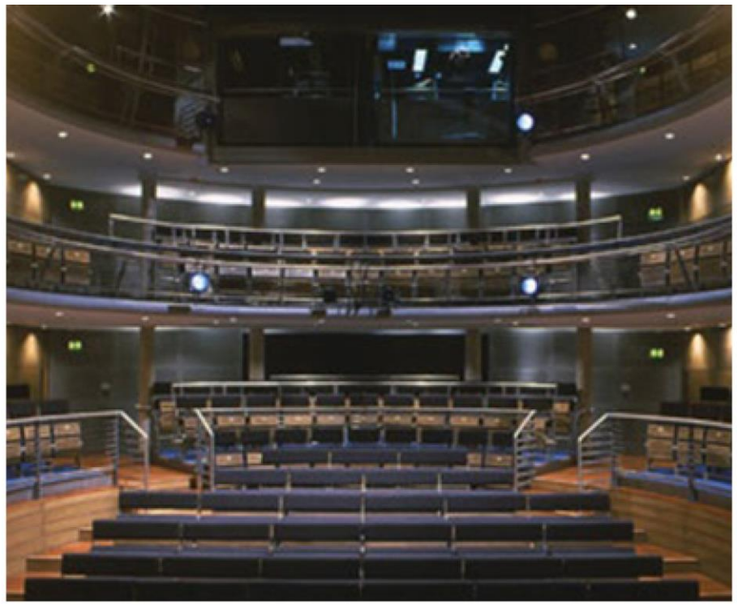
The key precedent spaces are shown on the following pages, with the outline of the existing performance venue overlaid in red within The Harlington.

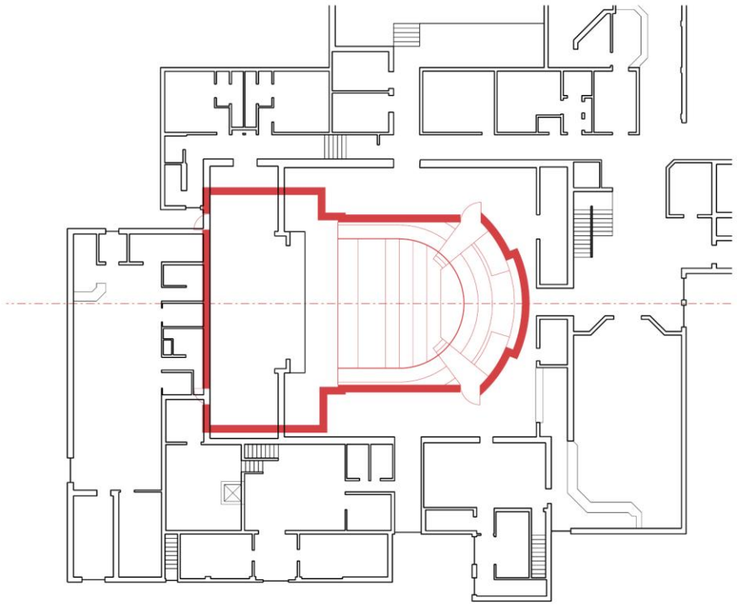
The key precedents include:

- Dorfman Theatre, National Theatre, London
- Vanbrugh Theatre, RADA, London
- Performing Arts Centre, Folkestone
- Parabola Arts Centre, Cheltenham Ladies' College
- Great Hall, Leys School, Cambridge
- Linbury Theatre, Royal Opera House, London

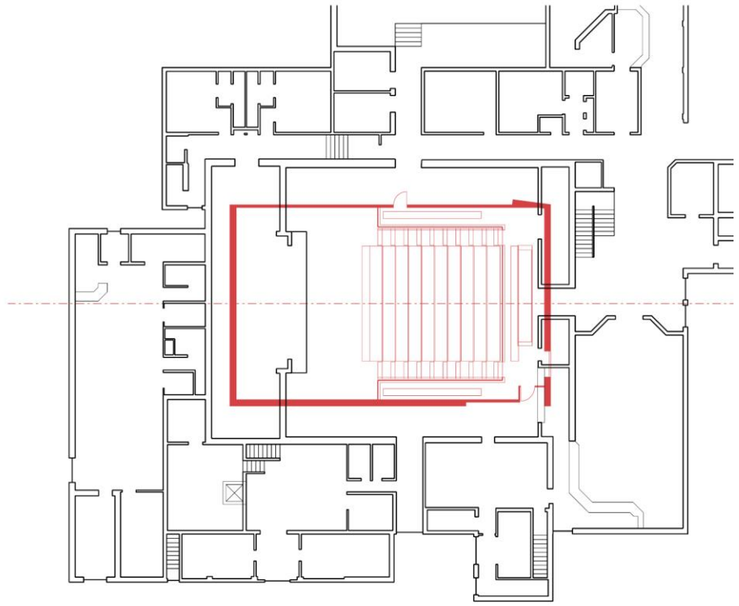


Dorfman Theatre, National Theatre, London

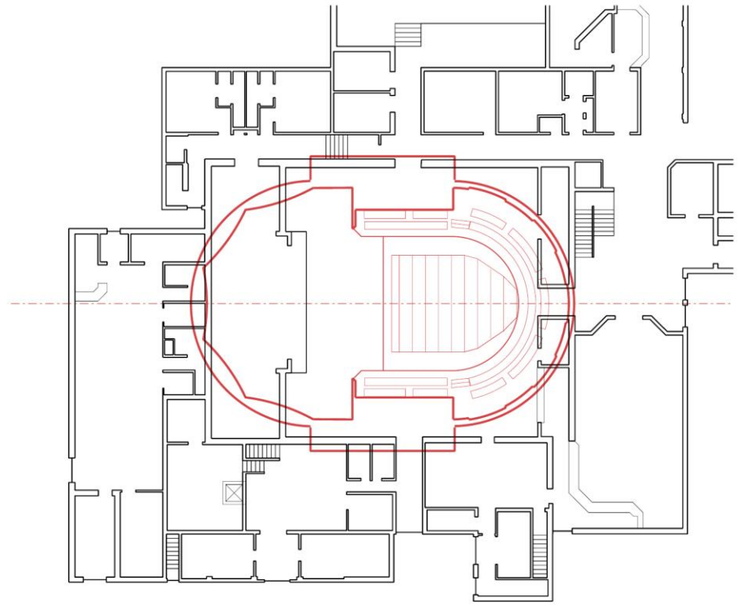




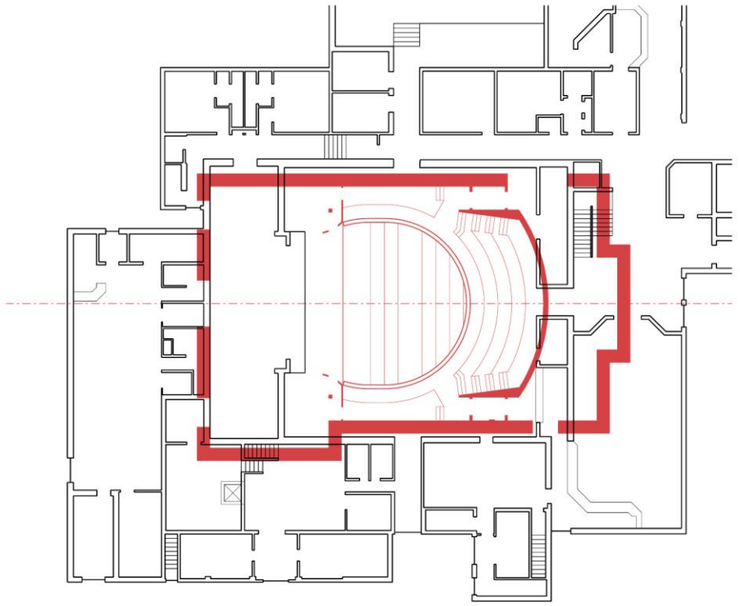
Vanbrugh Theatre, RADA, London



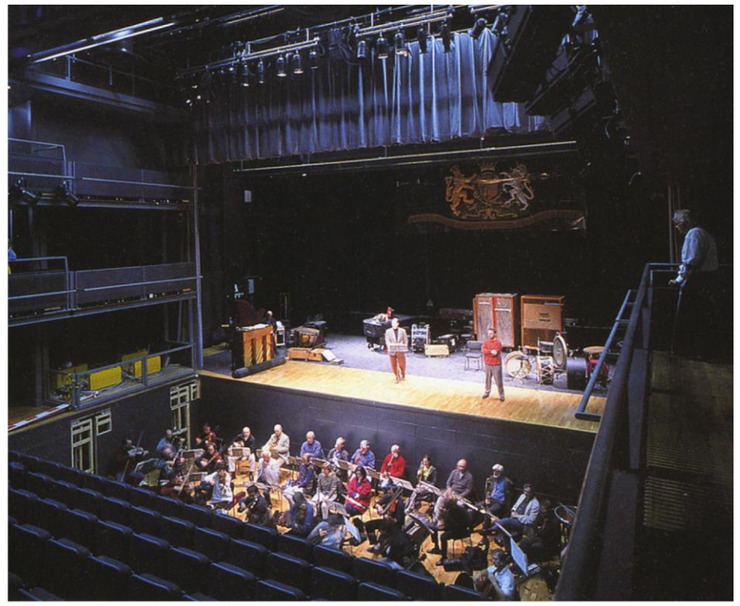
Performing Arts Centre, Folkestone

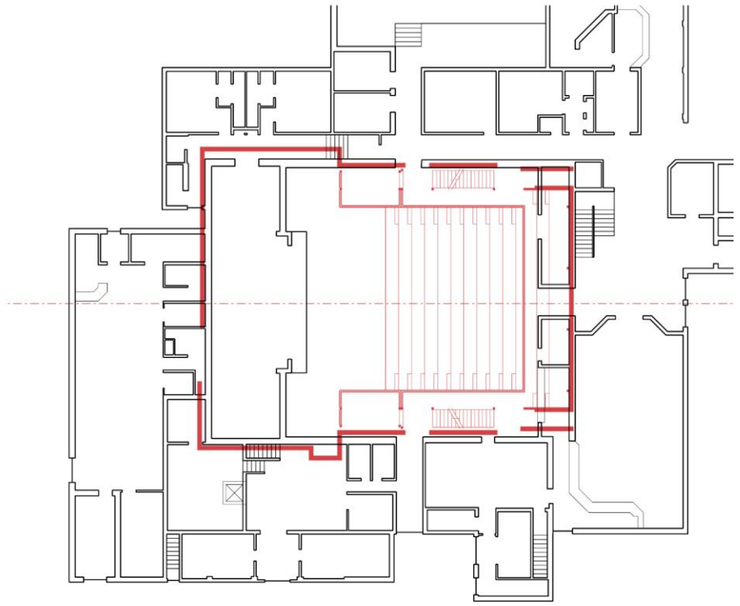


Parabola Arts Centre, Cheltenham Ladies' College



Great Hall, Leys School, Cambridge





Linbury Theatre, Royal Opera House, London

5 AUDITORIUM PLANNING

The proposal for The Harlington has been broken down into two sections, the first being to address a refurbishment of the existing room by inserting a new venue within the structural envelope of The Chernocke Hall. This proposal is intended to be the most economic development of the site, to ensure the existing venue is enhanced to meet both the current program and that the space will meet the future requirements and aspirations.
The second option outlines the requirements on the site to develop a new, purpose-built venue; identifying the key areas and proposing possible locations for a venue that will not only allow for the future programming of The Harlington, but create a performance venue that will build upon and enhance the design proposal of the refurbishment, refining the main space to perform as required and allow further development in line with the wider business model of a new building.

5.1 REFURBISHMENT

The key principles in our proposals for the Harlington Theatre are the rationalisation of the rooms' proportions, transforming the space from a performance hall to a courtyard theatre, reflecting the development of the venue and the aspirations for future use; being used for music, theatre, dance, comedy and standing gigs, as well as being the main space for community use.

The main drive behind changing the theatre from its current arrangement is to allow for a larger stage required by many of the visiting acts and to create an auditorium that enhances the actor-audience relationship, creating a more intimate experience by enclosing the body of patrons.
We propose to achieve this by the full removal of the existing core of the space, together with lifting the current ceiling level to maximise the usable volume of the room. The large flat floor area currently used for audience will be replaced with a bank of raked seating that extends up to meet a courtyard balcony. As well as pulling the audience into the extended volume of the space this also helps to create a wall of faces to each side of the room, which connects both the audience to the performance and audience to audience, thus enhancing the experience for both actor and patron whilst maximising the seating capacity, all the while sustaining an intimate playing space.

At this stage, we are proposing two options for the stalls rake, both of which achieve the principle of a courtyard space, but with differing levels of flexibility that will be explored at the next stage of design.
These options are both based on a retractable seating unit, creating the bulk of the seating rake:

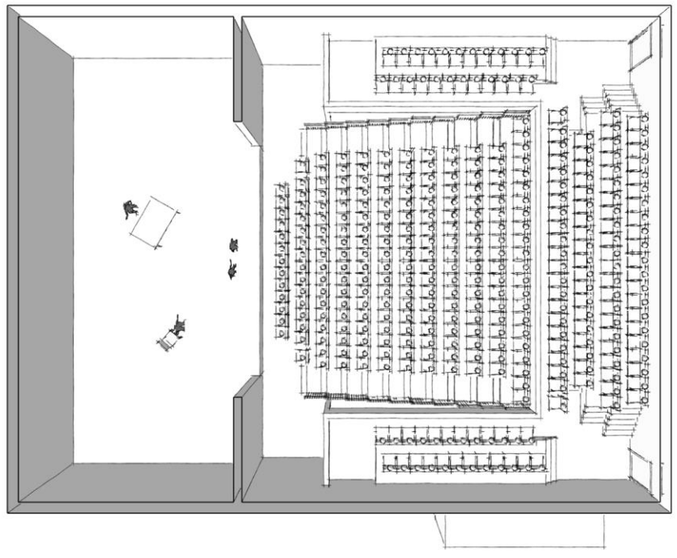
- Option 1 uses just the retractable seating - a stalls audience that climbs from the stage edge at grade, in a single unit.
- Option 2 adds to a slightly reduced retractable unit with a small seating pit to sit directly in front of the stage. This pit is used to allow stage height flexibility whilst the rest of the stalls area can still be configured using the retractable unit, or tables and chairs for alternative functions.

  The seating pit will consist of removable seats and a mechanically-assisted rostra system, described elsewhere in this report.

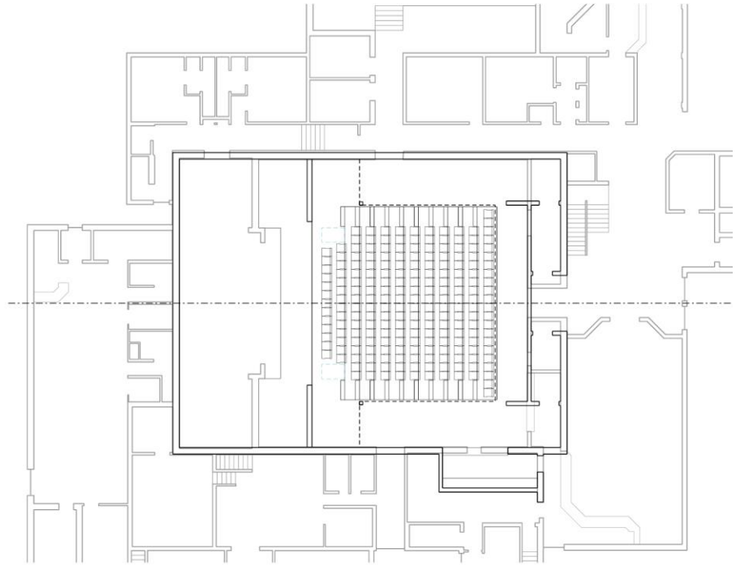
5.1.1 OPTION 1

As described above, option 1 creates a stalls rake from a retractable seating unit, providing 211 seats over 12 rows, with 2 accessible spaces to the front.
To the rear of the retractable unit sit a further four rows with 82 seats and 2 accessible spaces, located on a permanently installed balcony. The balcony wraps around the sides of the retractable, forming a traditional courtyard room and providing an additional 24 seats per side, totalling 132 places at balcony level.
Total capacity for end stage configuration, 345 seats.

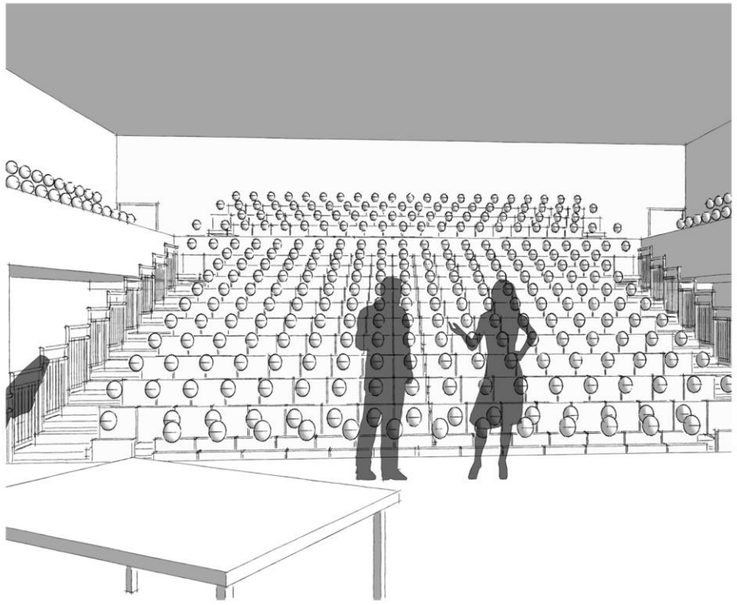
For flat-floor events, an area of 225m^2 is cleared by the retractable unit footprint.
Standing events based on 0.75m^2 per person to allow for circulation and bar access, gives an estimated figure of 300 standing audience with the additional 132 balcony positions still available.
When in cabaret, this same footprint at stalls level will accommodate 41 tables seating 4 persons per table, giving a total capacity of 164 seats. This, together with the available 132 balcony seats, gives us a total occupancy of 296.



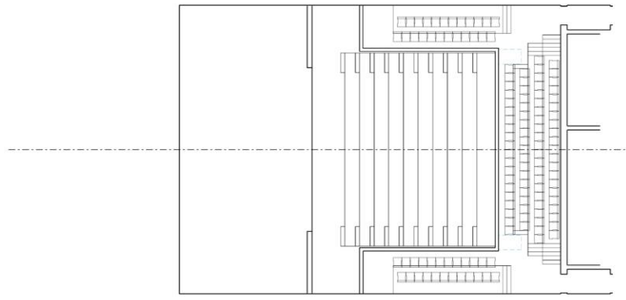
Plan view



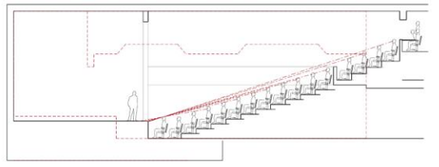
Stalls plan end stage format



View from stage



Balcony plan end stage format



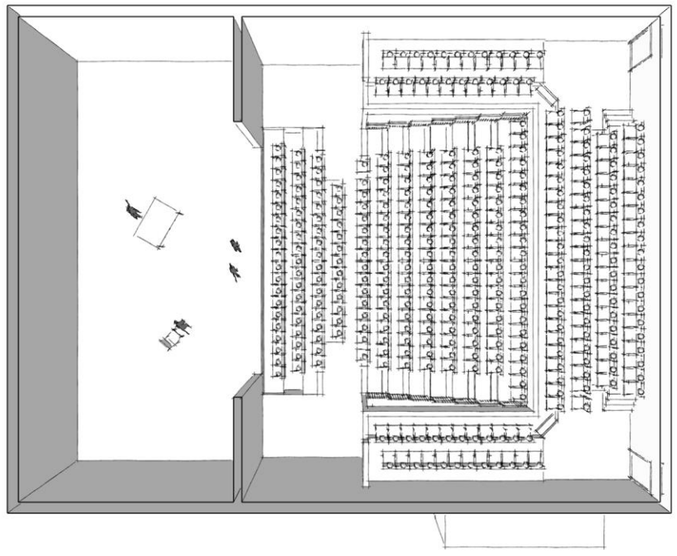
Section end stage format

5.1.2 OPTION 2

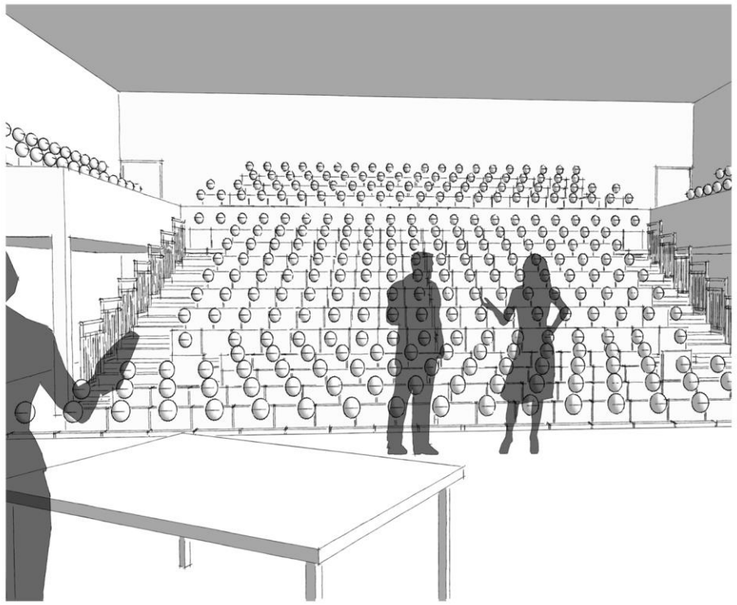
Option 2 expands on the retractable system described above, by adding a seating pit in front of the retractable unit. This provides 144 seats over 8 rows with 2 accessible spaces in the centre of the seating bank. The seating pit drops into the floor directly in front of this unit, with an additional 70 seats over four rows that descend down to the stage edge.
As with option 1, to the rear of the retractable unit sit a further four rows with 82 seats and 2 accessible spaces located on a permanently installed balcony. Again, providing an additional 24 seats per side, giving 132 places at balcony level.
Total capacity for end stage configuration, 348 places.

For flat-floor events, the same area of 225m^2 is available for an estimated 300 standing audience, again using the balcony as seated positions.
This space accessible at stalls level is created by retracting the seating unit and levelling the seating pit.
Without the retractable unit, 70 seats in front of the stage within the pit, with cabaret format seating behind, accommodates 31 tables seating 4 persons per table giving 124 places, with a total capacity of 194 seats. This, added together with the balcony fully occupied, totals an audience capacity of 326.

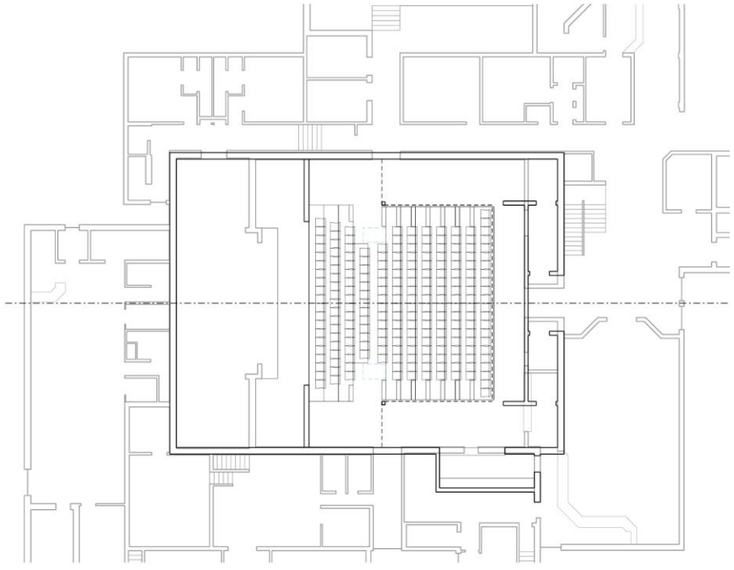
At this stage of the design we have developed both sets of plans using a nominal 520mm-wide seat place measured from centre to centre, while the back-to-back dimension of the rows is 900mm. These dimensions allow for appropriately generous seats, and guarantee that the comfort of the audience is maximised, as well as ensuring that adequate seatways are maintained on the longest rows.



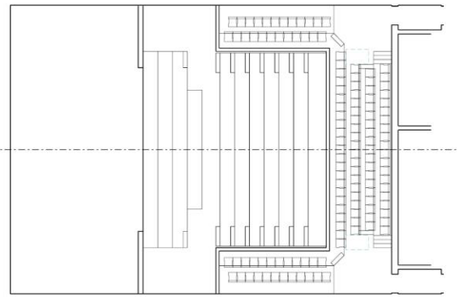
Plan view



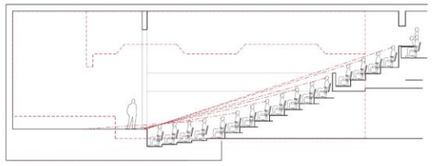
View from stage



Stalls plan end stage format



Balcony plan end stage format



Section end stage format

5.1.3 FLEXIBILITY

The majority of the flexibility provided within both schemes comes through the use of a retractable seating unit on which the seats sit, they are fixed to a series of horizontal platforms which telescope into themselves.

In both options the unit is fixed to the rear wall of the stalls floor, it tracks forward from this position to where they are used in the theatrical formats. Each platform deploys from its stored position beneath the row behind, with the seats mounted either on the deck floor or the riser of the row behind.

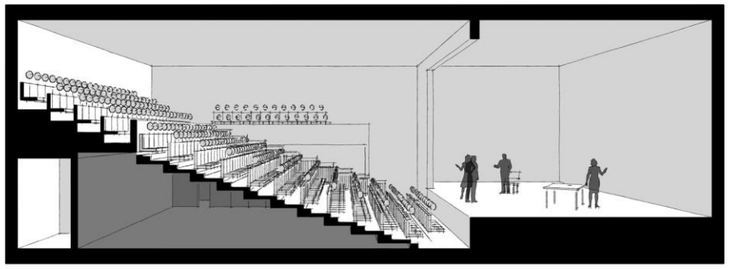
Retractable units are available with 3 different drive methods; manual, semi-powered and fully powered.

- A manual system requires the user to manually fold down the seats and physically push back a deployed seating rake.
- Semi-powered systems require users to fold the seats down manually, but the platforms are driven by an electric motor.
- A fully powered system folds the seats down automatically, as well as deploying the platforms.

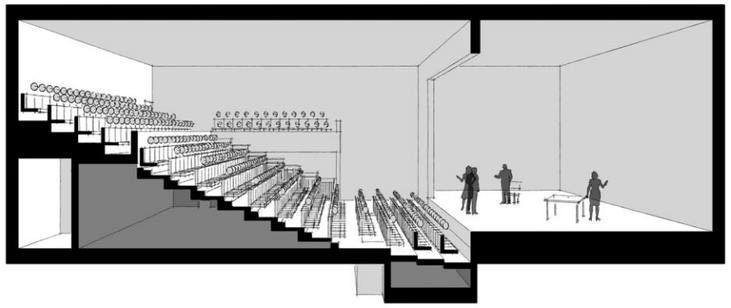
We are proposing a semi-powered system within this project to allow for the ease of flexibility within the constraints of the project budget.

The retractable mechanism is power operated, the handrails and side fascia panels still have to be manually folded down, or removed.
Control will be from a handheld operated pendant, which plugs into the front of the unit. The drive units are located within the under-structure and require no supervision or maintenance apart from a greasing of the drive chains and bearings and a checking of chain tension during the routine annual maintenance contract.

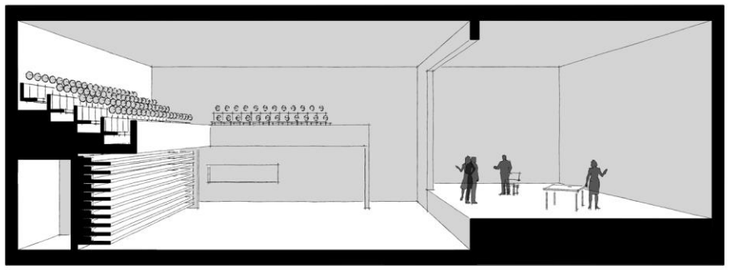
Option 2 has the additional seating pit that will be built from modular rostra, which will allow for flexibility of the pit area - to be raised to create a flat floor for the auditorium, lowered to provide a seating pit when stepped for a seated audience, lowered level to provide a recessed standing area whilst allowing for cabaret spaces behind in gig mode. Standard, steel theatre rostra are heavy and cumbersome to move and with the quantity required will increase time and cost to re-configure the auditorium. So, two alternative options using combinations of lighter weight, low profile aluminium rostra or mechanically-assisted rostra can be considered.



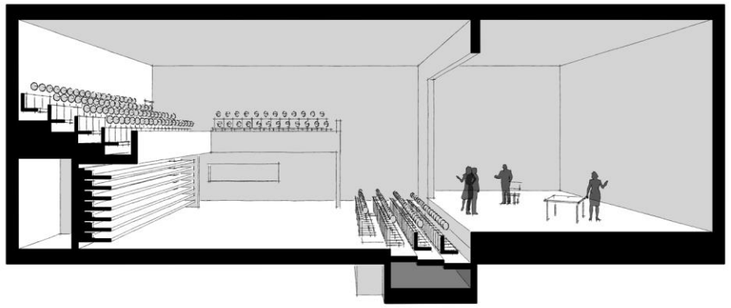
Option 1 end stage format, retractable deployed



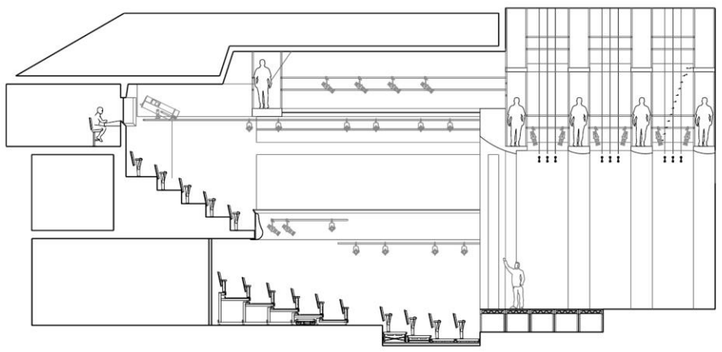
Option 2 end stage format, retractable deployed and seating pit in use



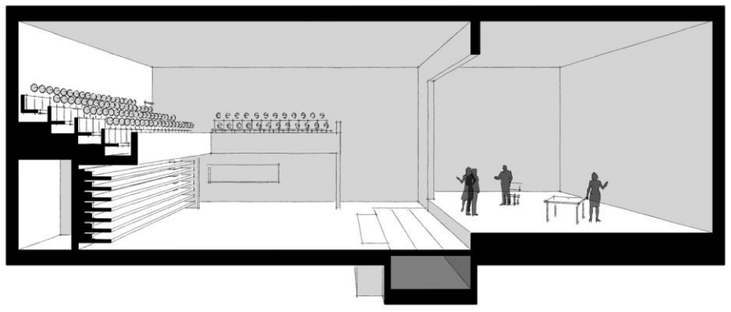
Option 1 flat floor format, retractable stowed



Option 2 intermediate format, retractable stowed and seating pit in use



The Great Hall, Ley's School. An example of retractable unit installation with a seating pit extension.



Option 2 flat floor format, retractable stowed and seating pit infilled

5.1.4 SUPPORTING SPACES

FRONT OF HOUSE

The entrance, foyers, concessions, and public toilets are the ‘welcome’ to all patrons arriving at any theatre. In addition to the necessary functionality, the elements provide an opportunity to express the fundamentals that make up The Harlington and share them with the outside world.
A delicate balance must be found between artistic expression and staid usability. A café can help keep the public spaces alive throughout the day and provide opportunity to break down the barrier between staff and their patrons. The service and environment of the café should be an attraction in itself, whilst sharing an identity and feeling of hospitality akin with the theatre. It should be a place patrons and neighbours frequent at any time of day, not just before or after a performance.
It is our intention to keep the current location for the front-of-house spaces, updating the tired decor of the building and creating a space which reflects the improvements made inside the auditorium.
The development of these spaces will form a major part of the next design phase for both the client and design team, to ensure that both the aspirations and functionality are united alongside the project goals, both in budgetary and aesthetic considerations.

ADDITIONAL PERFORMANCE SPACES

The client team’s aspirations for a second performance space and a large dance studio are the elements that have the greatest limitations within the refurbishment plan. Our proposal for the renovation works to the main auditorium requires the relocation of the dance studio.
We propose to update the current Function Room to serve as the second performance space, with full access to the existing bar facilities. A new dance studio will be located in place of the current offices, creating the largest area available in the existing footprint.
Both of these spaces are located at ground floor level, directly off the foyer to ensure access and ease of use.

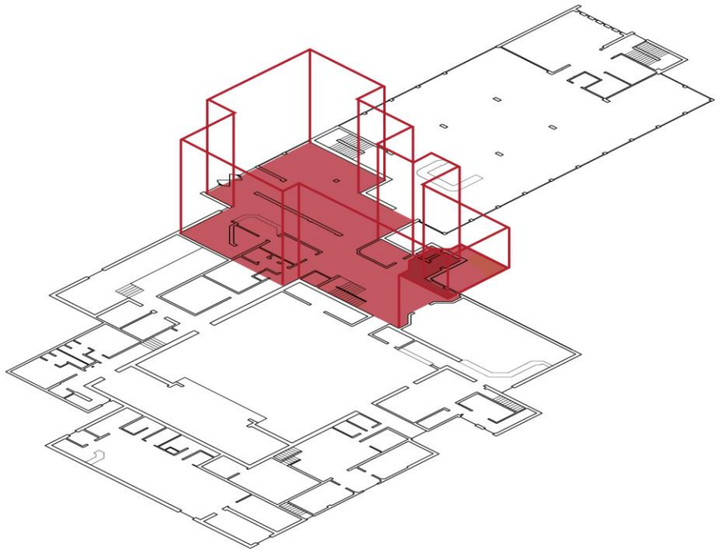
BACKSTAGE AREAS

Backstage spaces are usually separated from public spaces to keep backstage areas secure and to protect public safety.
The orientation of the auditorium within the existing building has directed us towards using The Point as a location for the support facilities for the venue; its position to the rear of the stage makes it a prime location for both dressing rooms and technical facilities to service the main space.
Its location to the rear of the site also allows for staff and visiting artists to enter through The Point, providing a traditional stage door.

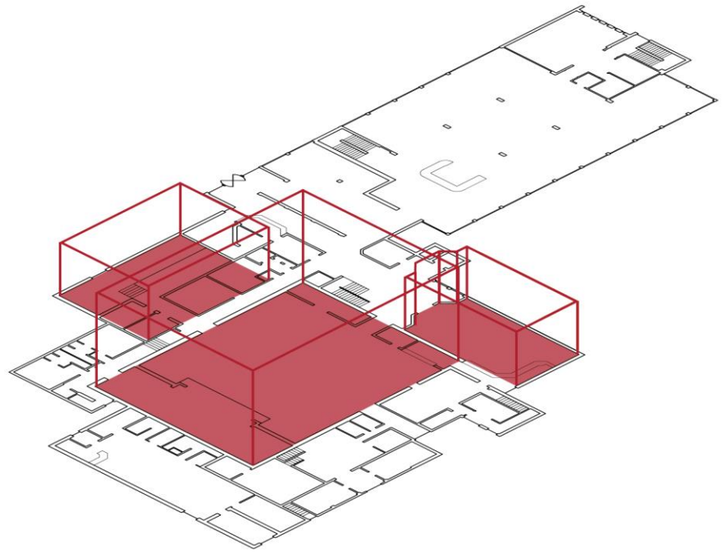
Technical and performer spaces should be tightly sited and joined via shared corridors to maintain the collaborative connection across The Harlington team.
Dedicated performer dressing rooms shall be provided to accommodate performers and, as with all arts venues, all spaces in this area should be flexible/adaptable to allow for multiple use of all supporting spaces, to ensure the holistic adaptability of the venue. Dressing rooms shall be located at stage level, along with the other backstage facilities, to provide ease of access for theatre technical equipment and to be fully accessible for all performers.
Technical spaces should be provided to include, but not be limited to, dedicated space for the workshop, lighting, audio, props and wardrobe. This will be detailed alongside the client team to ensure the building meets the objectives.

OFFICES

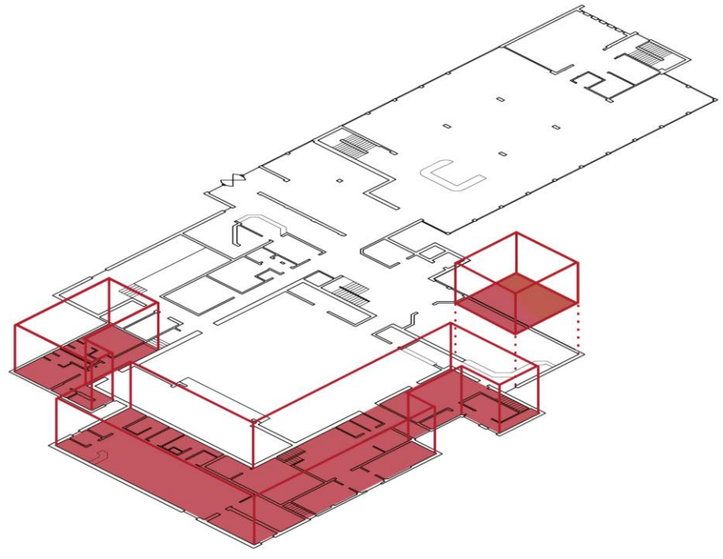
As with the front-of-house areas, the office accommodation reflects the client's brief, installing modernised facilities on two newly proposed sites; front of house offices being situated at first floor level, where the existing dance studio currently resides. Back of house offices will be where the existing dressing rooms are situated.
This area will require further development at the next stage to ensure that all administration requirements are captured.



Front of house refurbished over 2 floors



Redevelopment of existing auditorium, Function Room as second space and new dance studio



Backstage located in existing ‘The Point’ and ancillary spaces, together with front and back of house office locations