

# Architecture

## All the right moves

Built in Italian red brick by acclaimed Irish practice O'Donnell + Tuomey, Sadler's Wells's vibrant new sister theatre, which opens next month, provides six dance studios, elegant auditorium – and a big welcome to all

Sadler's Wells East  
East Bank,  
Stratford,  
London E20

Rowan Moore

There's an idea among some architects that a building should somehow resemble the purposes it serves: that an airport should evoke flight; a democratic building should be transparent; an art museum should look like a piece of sculpture. It doesn't take long to see the limits of this notion. It may be droll, for example, to taste strawberries on strawberry-shaped dishes, but they don't taste better for it. Monet's *Water Lilies* wouldn't be improved by showing them against blocky wallpaper in bright impressionist colours. You may similarly want architecture to complement rather than compete.

And so it is with ballet. The last thing choreographers and dancers want, I'm told by people who know, are spaces that swoop and curve in imitation of human movement. They want right angles, straight lines, fixed points and level horizons against which to gauge their actions. Which is why the Dublin-based architects O'Donnell + Tuomey, who in buildings such as their Sweeney Hick Student Centre for the London School of Economics were not averse to some eccentric shapes, have designed the new Sadler's Wells East

A powerhouse for dance? Sadler's Wells East, described by its architects, Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey, as a three-dimensional brick experience. Photograph by Peter Cook

as "a powerhouse for dance," it calls itself – as a series of piled-up and interlocking rectangular boxes. The building is the latest instalment of East Bank, known as Olymposopolis, the ambitious plan to build a series of cultural institutions in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in Stratford, east London. The London College of Fashion, designed by the architects Albes and Morrison, opened in 2023. A block of BBC Music Studio by the same architects is due for completion later this year. The V&A East Museum, another O'Donnell + Tuomey work, will open in 2026, in a different part of the park, within the media centre built for the 2012 games. The V&A East Storehouse is a nearby disused.

Sadler's Wells East is a place for performance, learning and production – an expansion of the facilities of the famous dance theatre in bilington, north London.

**“Dances like each studio wall to be different, so they can orient themselves in the midst of their spins**



choreographers, audience, students, children coming to dances, passively. It has to be, says Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey, both "welcoming" and "workmanlike," to meet fierce technical requirements and to feel open to the communities who live round about. These architects, while confident that they practice a form of art, also pride themselves on their attention to practicalities.

Sadler's Wells East's reddish-brick exterior speaks of creation and work as much as of spectacle. Big saw-tooth roofs, like those on old factories, alluding to the industrial history of this part of London, enable the north-facing rooflights that illuminate the top floor studios. The fly tower – windowless as such things need to be – presents a masonry elevation. The structure is, among other things, a counter to the brittle, glassy insubstantiality – "stracchino," say O'Donnell and Tuomey – of

the Westfield shopping centre, through which many visitors will pass to get here. Behind this, a sign says: YOU ARE WELCOME nevertheless, and the building's prevailing rectangularity here relaxed to allow curved and busier spaces, this being a day and night space with varying levels of activity. There are two bars, one in each arm of the L, and performance areas inside and outside the foyer, such that dance can take place among the milling audiences. The materials – more brick, on oak floor, the rhythmic and deep concrete beams that support the studios above – belong to the outdoors as much as in, albeit coloured and animated by insulating ceramic panels on the bars (also from the Sant Anselmo works), a big, specially commissioned tapestry by the artist Elva Rothchild, and the work of lighting designer Andrew Malone.

It's a place of connection around which the hard-working rest of the building revolves. The auditorium is a plain space, given a little character by acoustically soffit dark timber panelling, designed to focus attention on the dancers, the seating steeply raked so as to allow their feet to be visible to all, the rows slightly

which helps give cohesion, within which a multiplicity of treatments can flourish.

The front door is possibly a bit too blunt, a sign saying YOU ARE WELCOME notwithstanding, but the horizontal openings in the solid exterior suggest an inner life. Behind them is an L-shaped foyer designed to bring the multiple activities and users of the building – performers and general public – together. It lends, on the same level, to the entry to the auditorium and round to a long glass wall opening on to terraces that descend towards the portically named Waterside River, part of the web of waterways that weave through the park. A long canopy provides shelter. Before you is the astonishing panorama of cultural and commercial investment that came with and after the Olympic project – the stadium, now home to West Ham United; Zaha Hadid's Stratatank



curved to heighten spectators' awareness of one another. Much of the seating can also slide away to create a flat stage in the centre – in the opening performance this will be done during the interval, with now seatless members of the audience relocated in the middle of the building. Below the foyer, are ample facilities for getting seats and equipment in and out, unseen but all-important.

Sadler's Wells East is an essay on the uses of clay – a "three-dimensional brick experience", the architects call it – containing a love of artistic work. Both they and the leaders of Sadler's Wells say that it comes from close collaboration and attention to the needs of the users. It is, in a way, simple. But "under no circumstances," say O'Donnell and Tuomey, "are we trying to make a brand of a neutral building", and they have not.

FROM TOP  
One of the venue's studios; the auditorium, 'steeply raked so as to allow dancers' feet to be visible to all'; the foyer, below, all masonry in brick, oak and concrete. Photographs by Peter Cook

The first show at Sadler's Wells East will be Vicki (Sharon-Crozier's *Our Mighty Grown*), 6-9 February

can plot that meets or exceeds the physical or get for the level. Fall to meet this far get and it's game over. Meet the challenge and the next target increases exponentially. Soon you won't be making tens of thousands of virtual dollars per ball, entirely through the strategic arrangement of bumpers and the luck of the bounce. What starts off as a rather pedestrian, bagatelle-style board game soon becomes a carnival of psychological effects as a floor of cars and balls cascade down the run causing dazzling chain reactions.

## Games

Ballonairé

Nonobscure, Rara Parry, PC

From preball to pachinko, human beings have spent billions of hours fascinated by the capricious effects of physics on a metallic ball. It's a pastime that, in Ballonairé, has perhaps reached its zenith. The premise is chivalrously simple: drop a ball into a pyramid-shaped run, then watch, helplessly, as it tinkles toward the gutter at the bottom. On its way, the ball will ricochet off any pins and bumpers it meets in its path, triggering their special effects and gradually accumulating dot-based points along its winding journey.

Some of the bumper's, which are colourfully rendered as anthropomorphic characters, have straightforward qualities. They might add a little cash to the pot, or spawn a second ball. Others are more complicated, reversing gravity, or telescoping the ball to another spot. At first the board is mostly empty, but after each roll you have the chance to strategically add one of three new bumpers to the layout, thereby increasing the amount of points you can score on your next run. Replenish the challenge: you have five attempts to build up a

Obstacle-former? The pachinko-inspired Ballonairé.

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There is a simple joy in watching your score accumulate via outlandish physics. But even so, the physical aspect of the game is entirely passive; there is a world of strategy to be explored in figuring out the most beneficial arrangement of bumpers to the 55 spaces on the board. A deceptively simple, obsession-forming challenge. Then, to start the year.

Simon Parkin