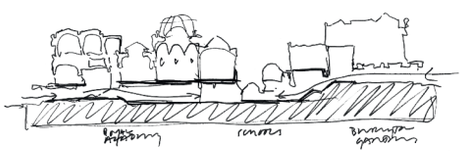
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Crossover Appeal

David Chipperfield Architects' expansion of the Royal Academy successfully redefines the country's oldest arts institution, finds Daniel Rosbottom

Photos
Simon Menges, Rory Mulvey





Above
Burlington Gardens facade (ph: RM); David Chipperfield's sketched south-north section showing new route through the existing Royal Academy, the Schools and Burlington Gardens.

Right
Anatomical models line a circulation route that passes through a vaulted basement formerly occupied by services.

David Chipperfield's transformation of 6 Burlington Gardens and its integration into an expanded campus for the Royal Academy of Arts has been, he says, as much about the unlocking of the relationships between people as it is about those between the two buildings.

The grade-two-listed neoclassical building is situated directly to the rear of Burlington House on London's Piccadilly, home to the Royal Academy since 1868. It occupies a site that was once part of the grounds of that house, and the two structures are tantalisingly close, separated only by a narrow court. Until now, though, they have remained functionally quite separate.

The Burlington Gardens building has played host to a variety of other institutions. Originally home to the University of London, then the Civil Service Commission, it was more recently occupied by the British Academy and the Museum of Mankind, until the RA seized the opportunity created by the latter's departure to purchase the building in 2001. Since then, however, it had taken on a rather forlorn aspect, operating as a seemingly unloved adjunct to the main building, and in great need of a renewed sense of purpose.

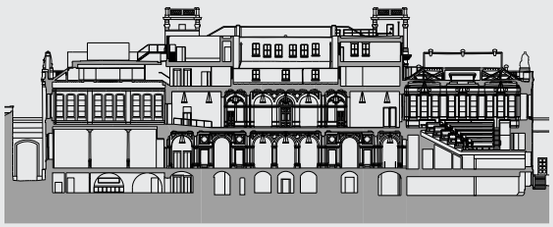
In physical terms, Chipperfield's interventions deliver this with an assuredly light touch, albeit through the use of heavy materials. Such discretion could be considered as the very positive consequence of employing a master architect, who has little to prove and who is able to speak with an easy authority. This has undoubtedly contributed to his success in convincing the complex array of interests, which are intrinsic to such a project, to allow the existing architecture to be what it has always had the potential to be; not a great work, but a fine building nonetheless, and one that in its revitalised form should significantly expand what the RA has to offer. While such aims might seem self-evident, they are all too often overtaken by the ambitions of either client, architect or both to impose their own mark. Consider the recent, rather overbearing impositions upon the Victoria & Albert Museum as a case in point.

Here, one might instead comment that there is reassuringly little to see. Indeed, the interior of Burlington Gardens offers the initial impression of having been little more than cleaned and pared back in order to reveal its innate qualities.

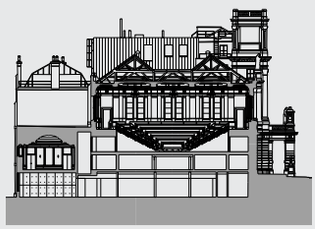


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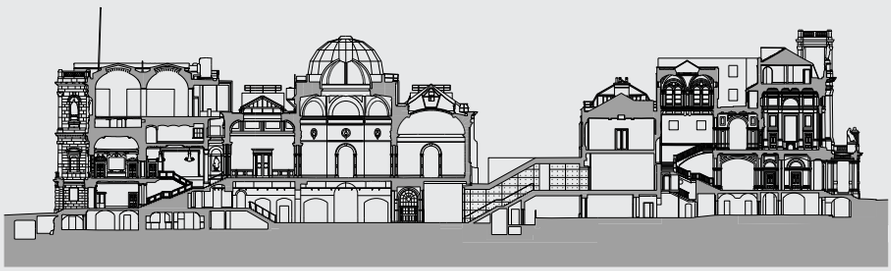
1 Burlington House entrance
2 The Vaults
3 RA Schools corridor
4 The Weston Bridge
5 The Lovelace Courtyard
6 Wolfson British Academy Room
7 Offices
8 Burlington Gardens entrance
9 Shop
10 Commercial gallery
11 Benjamin West Lecture Theatre
12 Clore Learning Centre
13 Gabrielle Jungels-Winckler Galleries
14 Collections Gallery
15 The Dorfman Senate Rooms
16 Architecture Studio



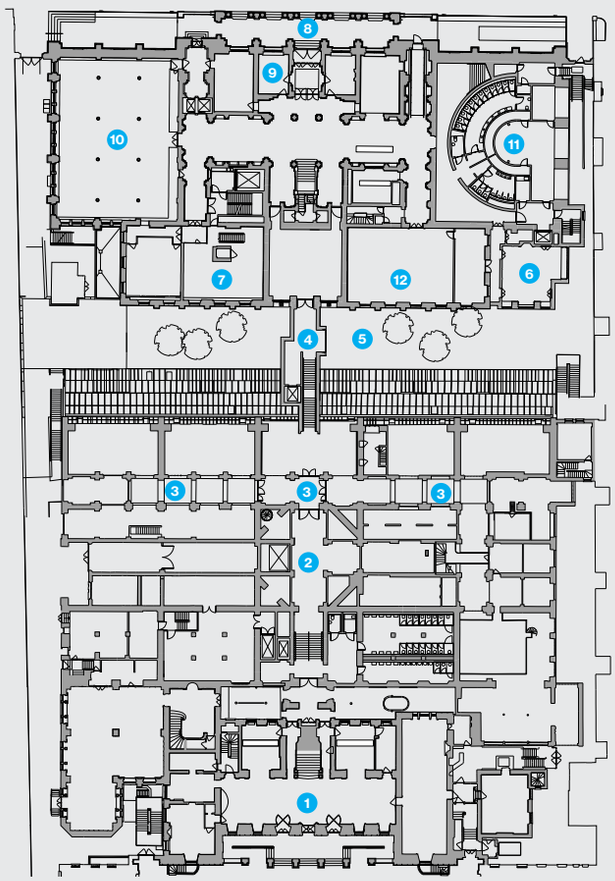
West-east section though 6 Burlington Gardens



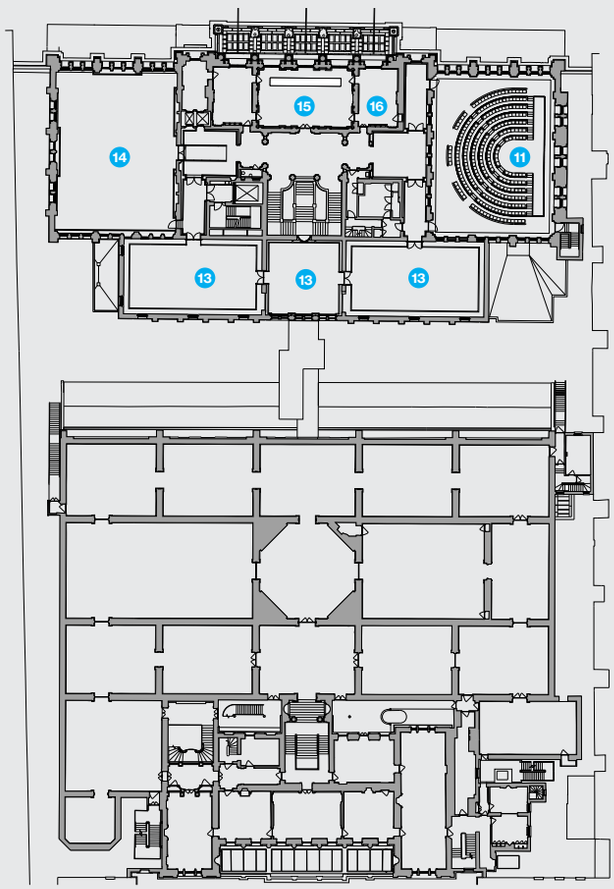
South-north section through 6 Burlington Gardens



North-south section through Burlington House, the Schools' courtyard and 6 Burlington Gardens



Ground floor plan



First floor plan

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The most immediately noticeable change is that the majority of the walls and their plaster mouldings have been repainted in tones of pale, off-white — a treatment that succeeds in both softening and emphasising the strong spatial modelling of the neoclassical architecture, at least compared with memories of the previous situation.

A newly created gallery for the permanent display of the RA's collection has been finished in richer, darker hues, setting off the Renaissance masterworks that grace the walls.

In the great piano nobile salon of the Senate Room, now home to a cafe and bar, conservation specialist Julian Harrap Architects, which also worked alongside DCA at Berlin's Neues Museum, has led the reinstatement of the original polychromatic colour scheme.

This room opens, in turn, into a wood-panelled interior that was once a committee room and is now known as the Architecture Studio — a space that will hopefully allow Kate Goodwin, the Drue Heinz Curator of Architecture, to increase the presence of the subject within the RA's programming.

These variations serve to animate what has otherwise been conceived of as a continuity: a recessive, calm and dignified background for both future exhibitions and day-to-day life of a venerable institution.

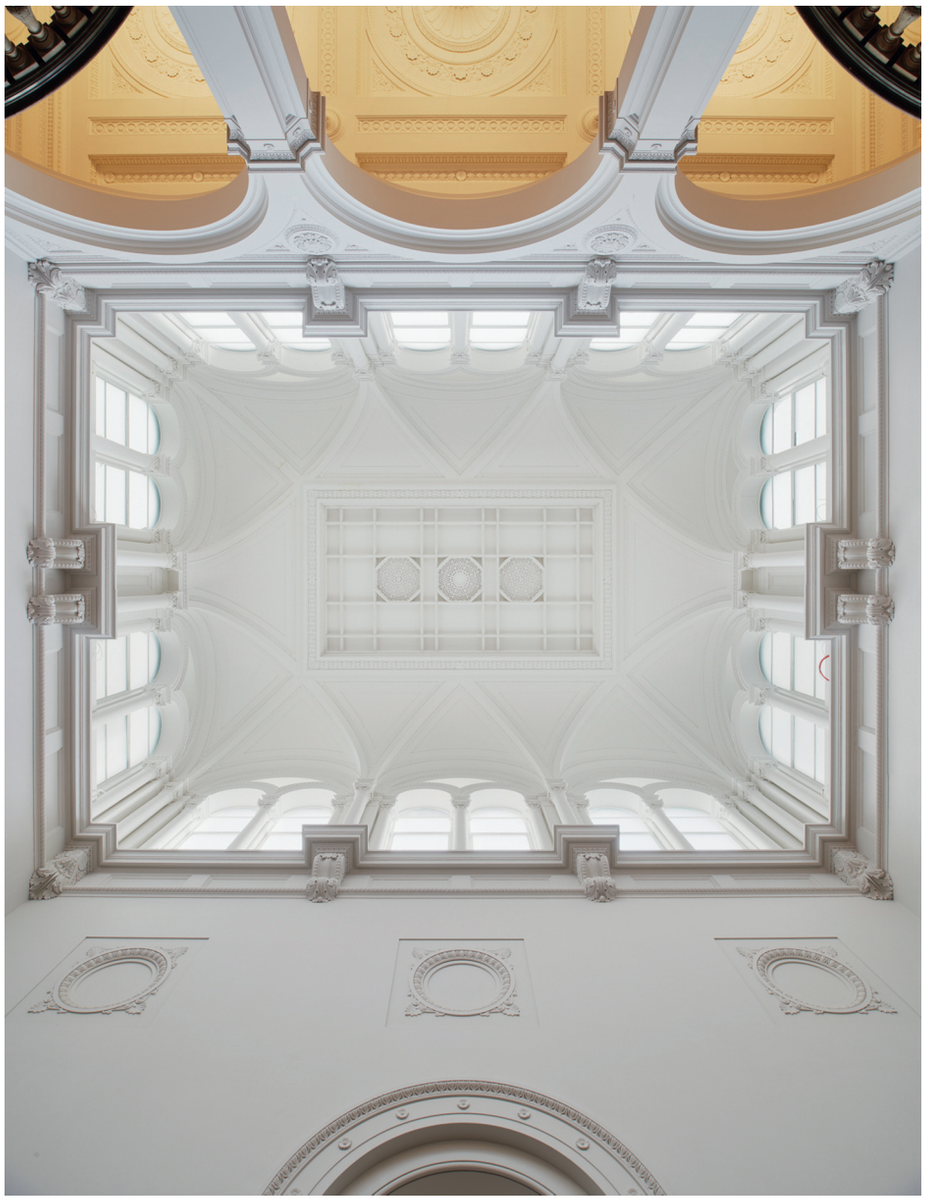
This is not to say that nothing has been done. In fact, the building has been substantially and artfully restructured, with the work starting even before one enters through the front, or perhaps more accurately now, the back door.

Here the base of the entire portico has been lowered to improve accessibility, with a band of new stonework inserted to heal the incision. Once inside, reordered routes and sequences of rooms have been reclaimed or created from what were previously back-of-house spaces, significantly opening up the building to the public and creating valuable new suites of top-lit and side-lit galleries. Yet in terms of the architectural character, it's often only at a second glance that one notices the distinctions between new and old. Rather than choosing to be didactic about the junctions where historic fabric meets contemporary intervention, surfaces and finishes have instead been allowed to continue, with new terrazzo floors being laid into stone surrounds for example, allowing them to run almost seamlessly on from the original inlaid paving.





Above, right
The Wohl Entrance Hall is the principal circulation space within 6 Burlington Gardens (phs: SM, RM, James Harris).



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Below
Anatomical models — formerly study aids for the Royal Academy Schools — are displayed in The Vaults (ph: JH).

Bottom
The Benjamin West Lecture Theatre is entered from the top, and the room's original clerestorey windows have been fully reinstated (ph: SM).



There are a few moments where the hand of the architect presents itself more explicitly. Perhaps the most overt is the lecture theatre, which has been inserted through two previously infilled floors at the eastern end of the building, dislodging a listed room, to which we shall return later.

Echoing a lecture theatre that originally occupied the same space, which must have raked even more steeply through the full triple-height volume, DCA's intervention references classical archetypes, taking a semicircular form that immediately suggests a different intention to the predominant screen-focused, technologically-determined contemporary condition. Indeed, as the arrangement would seem to make it quite hard to view slides from at least a quarter of the 250 seats, it is a space that demands a more active engagement. Its leather cushions and curving timber panels on blackened steel frames recall something of the imagery of an anatomy theatre, and one hopes that it will be programmed to engender debates that are similarly intense, if less gruesome.

Actual bodies are to be found lower down in the building's section, where visitors can find the mummified remains of James Legg, executed in 1801 after murdering a fellow Chelsea Pensioner, and arranged to depict a crucifixion. This is the most unsettling of the various human remains which are on public display for the first time and which, alongside the magnificent copies of Italian paintings upstairs, were once used for the edification of students on the Royal Academy Schools' traditional programme of drawing and sculpture.

They are presented in the aptly mausoleum-like space of a new connecting gallery, a monumental, cross vault of exposed brick construction that is part of the basement of Burlington House, and was once filled with its pipework. Lowered by about a metre to facilitate accessibility, and treated using a thinned paint wash technique developed at the Neues Museum, as a means to unify the patched and infilled brickwork, this newly ennobled room forms an unexpected spatial centrepiece for the project.



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Below
Pendant light fixtures hang above the first-floor landing of 6 Burlington Gardens (left), which leads to the new bar in the former Senate Room (right). Its original decor has been restored in collaboration with Julian Harrap Architects (phs: RM).

Bottom
Left to right: the interior of a listed historic room has been reconstructed within a purpose-built concrete pavilion as the Wolfson British Academy Room; Clore Learning Centre; plaster casts of Roman architectural features displayed within circulation routes on the first floor of 6 Burlington Gardens (phs: RM).

Negotiating the revised organisational and spatial relationships, which could effectively cater to the often competing perspectives, needs and aspirations of the various departments that were inevitably involved, was at least as complex as dealing with the physical interventions, says Chipperfield. One suspects that these acts of diplomacy could have an equally fundamental effect on the future culture of the institution.

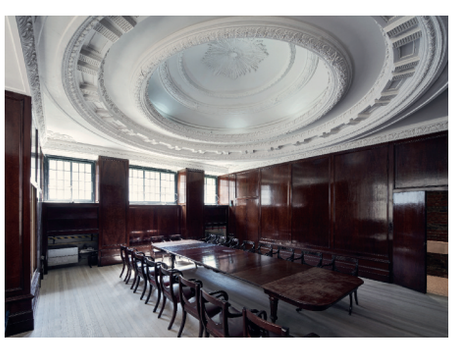
The bridge is one of two interventions that have been made in relation to the courtyard — the other being a new pavilion lodged into its north-east corner, which houses the reconstructed interior of the aforementioned listed British Academy Room. Small but signature Chipperfield elements, both new structures are cast in-situ from insulating concrete, with the pavilion apparently acting as the testing ground for the far more demanding task of forming the concrete enclosure of the bridge in mid-air.

Such complexity of construction might appear something of a conceit, given that the elegant, sculptural qualities of the resulting stepped form of the bridge will only ever be fully appreciated by staff and students using the court, but perhaps this only exemplifies the concern for those who spend their days in the building, rather than simply visiting it.

The alignment of the bridge takes up the slight shift necessary to align the two entrances. From the interior, a single panoramic window frames a view of the court before steps, or a lift, take visitors down to the lower level. Here the outcome of the negotiation between the needs of the public and the school is made explicit, at the moment where the new route crosses the corridor that students use to move their work around before entering the brick vaults and climbing back up to arrive on either side of the main exhibition stair.











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Below
A 393-square-metre enfilade suite of three daylit galleries on the upper floor of 6 Burlington Gardens has been created by realigning former university science laboratories, raising the floor level of the central space (ph: RM).

Bottom
A 254-square-metre first-floor gallery for works from the RA's permanent collection occupies a former library on the western side of the building. The space below is presently let to a commercial gallery, but the potential exists to combine them in the future (phs: RM).

While the cloakrooms, toilets and ticketing facilities have all been adjusted to facilitate the opening up of this last link in the sequence, it must be said that the resulting connections feel rather secondary when seen from the entrance lobby of Burlington House, somewhat undermining the aim of liberating the RA from the perception that much of its audience has of it: as a kind of Kunsthalle, only to be visited for grand, temporary exhibitions.

Nonetheless, in its 250th year, this £54m project does succeed in reflecting upon what the country's oldest art institution actually is. Not only does it significantly expand its floor area by 70 per cent, but with admirable understatement this new infrastructure offers something much more powerful, in expanding its perceived scope.

Far from feeling like compromises, the interactions resulting from the convolutions of the new public route allow it to become umbilical. They offer the potential for the RA to be more fully understood as an academy, which through its educational and lecture programmes is able to play a critical and proactive role in the future of fine art and architecture, rather than simply curating the outcomes.

While the architecture is innately conservative its agency could conceivably be radical, transforming the Royal Academy's current status as a bastion of the cultural establishment and opening it up as a place of dialogue, interaction and debate for a broad and engaged new audience. One can only hope the academicians fully recognise and grasp that opportunity.



Project team

Architect
David Chipperfield Architects
Conservation architect
Julian Harrap Architects
Landscape architect
Wirtz International
Structural engineer
Alan Baxter Architects
Services engineer, lighting
Arup
Theatre and acoustic consultant
Sound Space Vision
Quantity surveyor
Gardiner & Theobald
Project manager
Buro Four
Planning consultant
Gerald Eve
Signage
John Morgan Studio
Client
Royal Academy of Arts

Selected suppliers & subcontractors

Display cases
Goppion
Oak panels in lecture theatre
Atlantic
Leather seating
Bill Amberg Studio
Lighting
Viabizzuno, iGuzzini, Mike Stoane Lighting
Paint
Dulux
Terrazzo
Agglotech



