

Take the current when it serves

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The most extraordinary plans are being completed on a drawing board at Riverside Studios, whose importance to the arts world can scarcely be credited, they are so simple and ingenious in their scope. Yet the formula could work anywhere in the country.

In outline, they promise to remove for ever the Riverside nightmare of a drastic cut or even complete withdrawal of subsidy from Hammersmith Council, which for years has hung over their heads like the Sword of Damocles. The threat, which has been financially and not politically occasioned, has been removed at a stroke, and in its place is the prospect of a novel £1.5 million improvement and re-development scheme, carried out with a style and confidence unthinkable before.

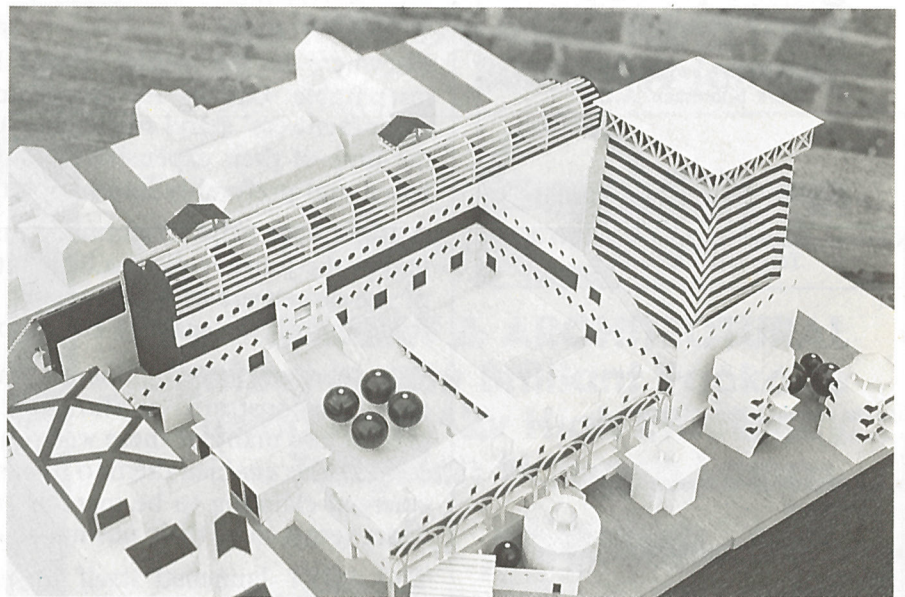
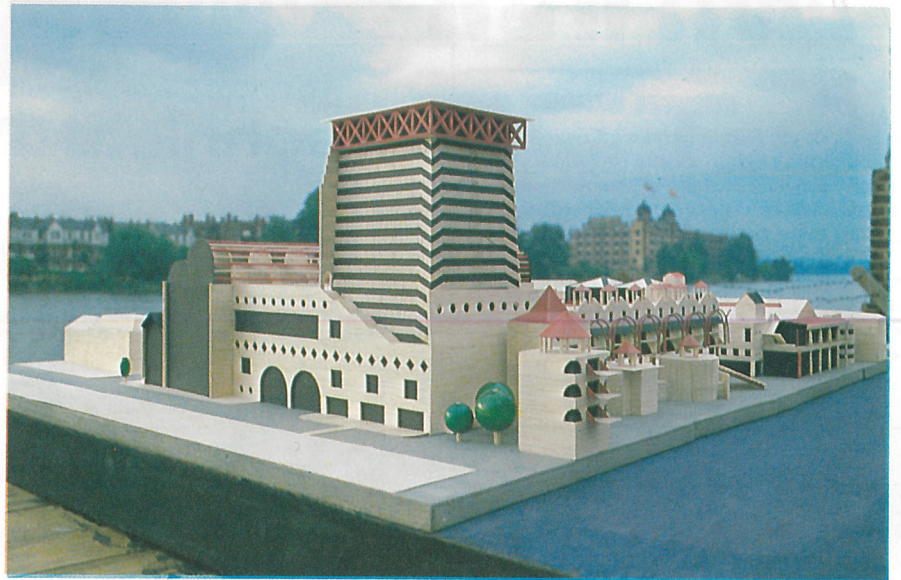
Instead of piecemeal additions whenever a few thousand pounds became available (as was the practice in the past—for instance, with the bookshop and gallery), Riverside now envisages a complete overhaul of its facilities, as part of an ambitious new office and rehearsal redevelopment programme, lasting about two and a half years. Overall cost: £18 million; scheduled start of work on site: July 1982.

The most original ideas are often accidental, and so it was with Riverside. Perhaps it was the perennial shortage of cash that fuelled their natural ingenuity, but whatever the reason, the result will be the transformation of their immediate neighbourhood.

The story starts a few years ago, with an invitation from Sir Hugh Willat and administrator David Gottard on behalf of the Hammersmith Riverside Arts Trust to two young architects called Will Alsop and John Lyall, inviting them to take part in an event called The Client Show. They accepted and soon joined a pool of 12 architects who designed tailor-made houses for the public as they came in to Riverside Studios. It was like 'kinetic architecture', you might say. Thus Alsop and Lyall became involved for the first time with Riverside. "I've never worked so hard in all my life!" he recalls. "People were peering over my shoulder as I sat drawing in the main foyer. You just had to learn to live without privacy—like a pavement artist".

Subsequently as a little extra cash became available, they were asked to design Riverside's new bookshop, which now stands at the front entrance in Crisp Road, a clean cage-like structure in glass and red-painted steel. And later still, the gallery next door followed.

By now it was becoming apparent that such piecemeal additions could not hope to achieve any unity of design or even provide an economical solution to Riverside's long-term needs. But the long-term needs were in fact the immediate needs, only the cash wasn't there. They put their heads together with Sir Hugh Willat, a tireless champion of the Riverside cause, who came up with a



colleague and chartered surveyor, Raymond Doyle, before looking more closely at the site next door. In addition to exploring Riverside's expansion, they became interested in the possibilities of financing the Riverside scheme. Around September last year, they became convinced that their self-financing idea could work. And this is how it went.

If enough income could be derived from rental of new offices and selling long leaseholds on desirable flats, then it could be worth building them. If they could be pre-sold, even before building began, there would be less capital to raise. Add to this a series of local amenities like shops, open spaces, creation of a river walkway (linking up with the Chiswick Mall) and a new, improved Riverside Studios for the benefit

of local ratepayers, and the development could even begin to look attractive to the local planning boys, who wouldn't have to pay a penny to see a prime Thames-side area developed into a new neighbourhood which in turn might encourage further private development, especially of the right sort. It only remained to finance the project. With the right connections in the pension funds and murmurs of approval from the right establishment architects like Denys Lasdun, the scheme finally had credibility—that most elusive of commodities, without which the very best ideas are as as nothing.

The surprising thing is that such an unusual idea, with such conspicuously innovative architecture could get off the ground. Particularly coming from a young