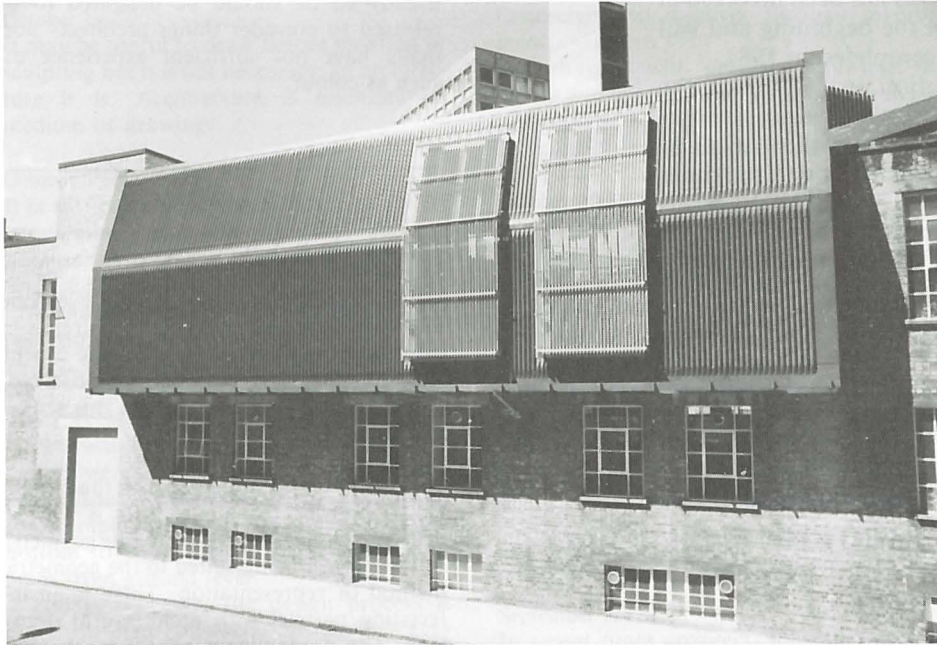




*The Place will be one of the best-equipped dance centres in Europe when completed.*



next could be embarked upon.

The seven phases (including one that was scrapped, owing to structural problems) varied in cost from £15,000 to £580,000, each. The MacAlpine construction group took over responsibility for most on-site work, thanks to the timely involvement of Alastair MacAlpine, who was 'known to us', as well as being a sympathetic supporter of the arts. Work was carried out on an at-cost basis. 'Indeed', explains Norton, 'no papers were signed at any stage – or will be. Quantity surveyors' reports and so forth were never finalised with anything more than a handshake'. But owing to good working relations with a sensible foreman, and the like, they cut all possible corners in order to save money. 'We took down existing doors and used them again' says Norton, beaming like a Boy Scout.

Where did the money come from? Coutts, their bankers, didn't rebuff them, exactly, but the deal they suggested wasn't quite right. So Norton approached the ICFC (Industrial and Commercial Finance and Credit), set up for small businesses by the clearing banks. Total property value, given its present usage, is worth in the region of three-quarters of a million

pounds, or a bit more, Norton estimates. This managed to underpin the cost of redevelopment. 'If we had to sell up today everything we own, touring lightboard, equipment, everything . . .' he calculates, 'I tell my bank we'd pay our bills and be left with around half a million in hand, tomorrow'.

Parenthetically, Jack Norton tells a delightful story about how they came to receive a £105,000 grant under the Urban Aid programme from the Department of the Environment. After applying earlier for a grant to Camden, the local council, they struck lucky third time around. Paring the grant request right down to basics, to improve the chances of acceptance (these are harsh financial times, he said to himself), he put in for £85,000. One of his board of trustees, who sits on Camden Council, was permitted to squeeze this request on to the year's DOE Urban Aid suggestion list, numbered in order of importance, from one to ten. Norton's number was 11 – out of ten. It was therefore, a non-recommendation, in effect: but it was the best they could wangle. Imagine Norton's amazement when he got a note saying he'd been allowed not £85,000, but £105,000!

Someone, somewhere, hadn't gone along with Camden's order of priorities (to put it politely) on the vital list of 'worthwhile' projects locally, deserving Whitehall support. Or could it have been a deliberate snub? Camden, at the time, were suing Michael Heseltine's department (DOE) over another matter: could this have been wilful bureaucratic tit-for-tat, as large as life? Well, Norton didn't stop to argue: he spent the money instead. In exchange for improving his cultural facilities for the benefit of the neighbourhood, Camden will be offered more participation and local involvement in the finished building than was possible before. So everyone's quits. The Place will serve to complement the nearby Shaw Theatre, which plays host to various visiting companies and performers, in a more traditional proscenium arch setting.

The Place will continue to offer 250 seat-capacity, but with variegated seating arrangements: horseshoe shaped, for thrust stage, and 'U' shaped. Acoustics will permit music as well as speech, for drama. The 50ft x 30ft performing space, with its sprung oak floor, will not be altered. A computer board for lighting and improved sound facilities will be added, though, by the time the theatre opens next September. Seating could be upgraded by a firm offering to supply and install in exchange for permanent crediting of the company name (they're open to bartering: it is a very noticeable item – unlike say, improved plumbing, which is where so much of improvement grants must first go, to meet regulations.)

So the finished theatre will serve as a full-time commercial, small-scale experimental venue all year round, save for the few weeks of periodic workshops and school performances. Even with Ballet Rambert using some of the Trust's studio space, as at present, the students who formerly used the theatre, now use the studio-space for their work. The programme for an average year could look like this:

London Contemporary Dance Theatre performing on the road for at least 20 weeks a year, perhaps 24. Plus 4 weeks at Sadler's Wells; and another 4 weeks at The Place, with smaller productions. The remainder of the company's year will be taken up with rehearsals and holidays.

As for the theatre itself, it will be in use for some 35 weeks; the rest will be outside lets, at individually agreed rates. Profitable lets are clearly preferable, but preference could be given to hirers for music, in order to foster links that may contribute to their dance programme.

By the time Jack Norton comes to select a franchise applicant for the catering – wine bar, restaurant, or whatever they decide – The Place could begin to revolutionise its corner of the theatre market in London. Names such as Twyla Tharp and others, who started out at The Place, before going on to the Wells and elsewhere, have already benefitted. The pioneering role can only be strengthened in future, and built upon. There can be little doubt that they've got what it takes.

*Autolycus columns contributed by Anthony Pugh and Anthony McCall*