

# Down deep in Deptford

Dow Jones Architects' renovation and reconfiguration of No 25 Tanners Hill into a house and gallery has involved carefully peeling back the layers of Deptford's history.

By Jay Merrick. Photography by David Grandorge

By 1700, Deptford in south-east London had 'become neare as big as Bristol,' according to a local diarist. It was London's largest satellite town, with a population of more than 10,000 people, many of whom were skilled craftsmen and shipwrights. Thirty-three years earlier, in Holland, the Dutch artist Pieter de Hooch produced a painting called *Couple with Parrot*. This lusciously still interior was the touchstone for Dow Jones Architects' £211,000 reworking of No 25 Tanners Hill, Deptford, into a dual art gallery and home for Peter Von Kant.

The scheme's exposure of historic fabric is exemplary, the faintly surreal material and spatial qualities of its groundplane an engrossing temporal puzzle. The building is part of a higgledy-piggledy terrace of small two and three-floor houses, most built at the beginning of the 18th century and, in the case of No 25, rebuilt or recast circa 1750. This small fillet of Deptford still radiates a strong sense of that distant past.

Most recently, No 25 Tanners Hill had been a bicycle repair shop with a long single-storey asbestos roofed extension at the back. When the architects hacked, investigatively, through the mouldering layers of centuries-old distemper, lime plaster, and detritus on the inside of the western ground floor wall, they were effectively stripping back the final

**Left** Living room looking onto courtyard with gallery beyond  
**Right** *Couple with Parrot*, by Pieter de Hooch



18th century dividing line between Deptford and the rural wilds of Kent.

'Almost everything we touched turned to dust,' recalls Alun Jones. 'It was shocking. We came here with a group from the English Heritage conservation office and started taking things apart to see what the fabric was like so we could develop a strategy. And, of course, there was the *axis mundi* stair space, and this absolutely incredible wall. We then made a 1:20 model, to find out how to get light into the middle of the site.'

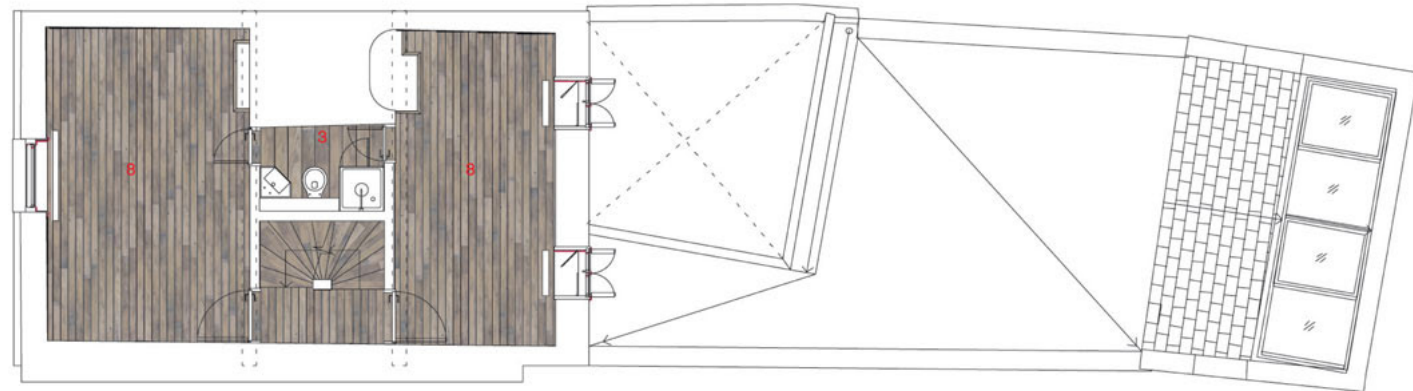
You encounter this beamed, flakily multicoloured wall (now stabilised) the moment you enter the building. The brick and old ships' timbers rise from the polished concrete floor of the reception and gallery space with the vivacity of an abstract expressionist artwork or one of William Monk's hallucinatory landscape paintings. And from here, the ground floor stretches away southwards through very different spaces in an enfilade tableau, with Pieter de Hooch painted all over it, as it were. On the ground floor of No 25 Tanners Hill, we are in a realm of brusque material and spatial counterpoints.

The architects Biba Dow and Alun Jones were dealing with a profoundly dilapidated building whose original plan had been derived from an early 18th-century standard London housing design for the 'lower orders', taken from Joseph Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises: Or The Doctrine of Handy- >>*

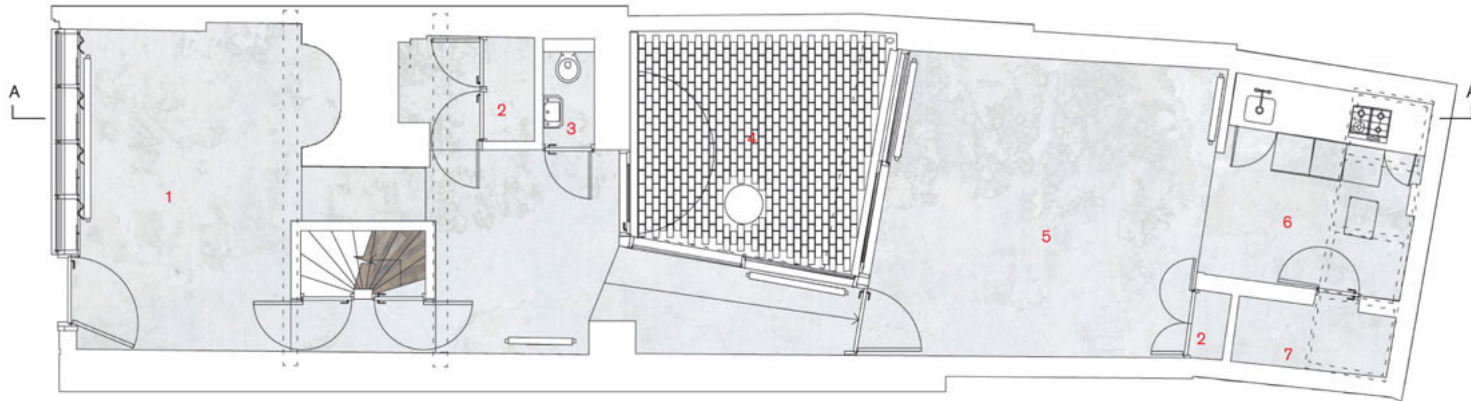


Site-plan





First floor plan



Ground floor plan

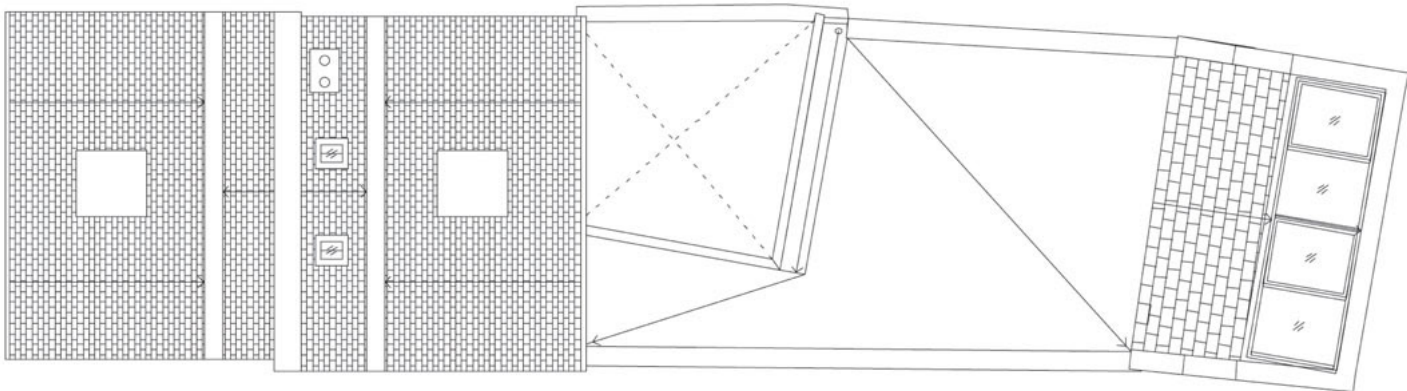
*Works, Applied to the Arts of Smithing, Joinery, Carpentry, Turning [and] Bricklayery.* Moxon's typical ground-floor plan shows a corridor running the full length of one party wall, with winder stairs tied to a more-or-less central chimney stack, closets between the stack and the other party wall, and pairs of windows, front and back. The difference at No 25 is that there was no front-to-back corridor and the relatively massive chimney stack passed through the party wall into No 23.

Crucially, there is a gap between the chimney stack and the winder stair: this inspired the front-to-back enfilade, which progresses through five spaces. From the gallery reception area, one can see the small room just beyond the chimney stack, a glazed open courtyard, the corridor that

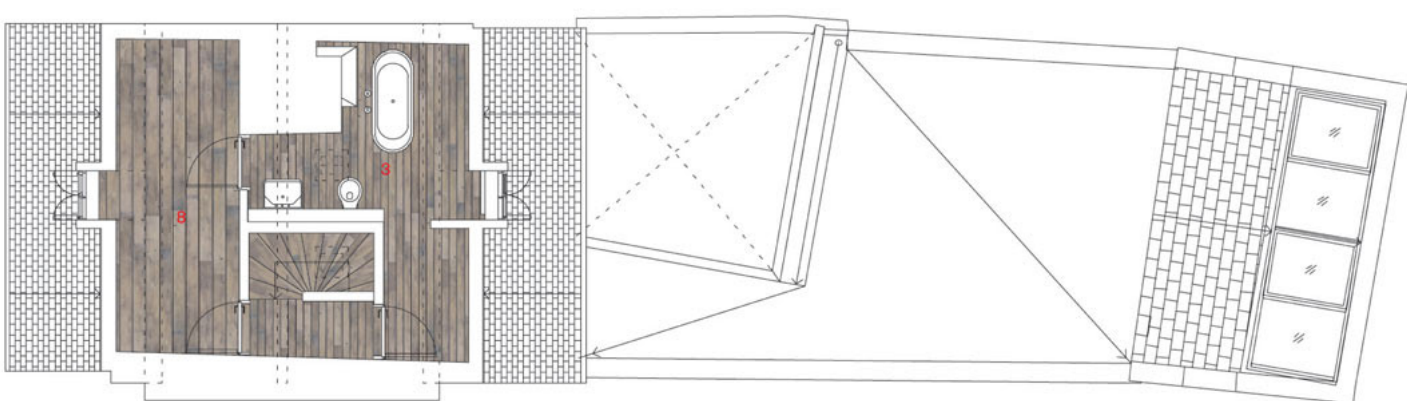
connects it with the dining and sitting room and, finally, the kitchen at the far end in what used to be a small, physically separated – and now toplit – Victorian stable.

Alun Jones chose *Couple with Parrot* as his conceptual touchpaper because he's always been fascinated by de Hooch's juxtapositions of interior and exterior conditions. The most distinctive thing about de Hooch's views is that they morph, without obvious logic, from the three-dimensional to the two-dimensional. 'His paintings are about the everyday world of praxis: a table, a window, a soffit – what Dalibor Veseley calls a "typical situation",' says Jones. 'What's also interesting is the way de Hooch structures light and projects depth.'

Strong, very deliberate material



Roof plan



Second floor plan



juxtapositions are everywhere and can be summarised by a top-to-bottom reading of the exposed surface of the kitchen's south wall: plasterboard; roughly edged Victorian stone coping; a ribbon of slim, orange tiles; darkly charred bricks; a black, iron beam; more sooty bricks, partly encased with a rough, variably textured concrete render and, finally, the polished concrete of the floor. In other words, a 4m transit through at least two centuries.

The view from the kitchen, back through the enfilade is dominated by the inside-outside effect of the courtyard, which is glazed on three sides. The angle of the glass wall on its corridor side was deliberately made to match the skew of the former stable walls of what is now the kitchen. >>

Legend

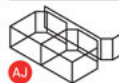
- 1. Gallery
- 2. Store
- 3. WC
- 4. External courtyard
- 5. Living room
- 6. Kitchen
- 7. Larder
- 8. Bedroom/studio

Left Sketch of No 25 Tanners Hill by John Roberts from 1926, when the property was a butcher's shop

Right No 25 Tanners Hill: street elevation today

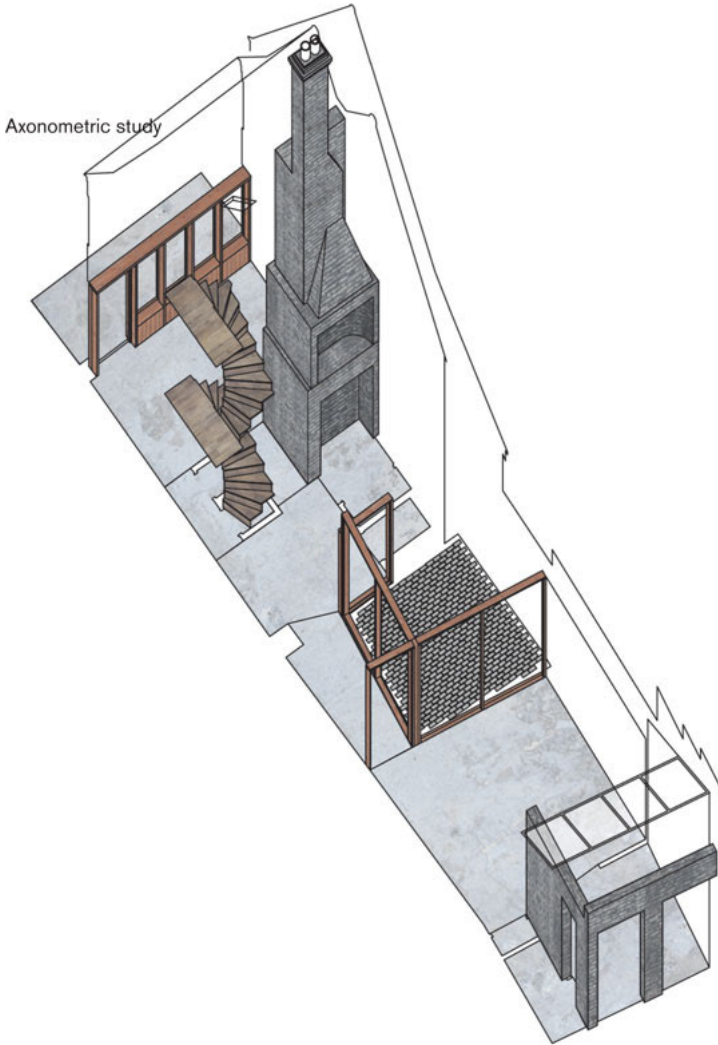


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Upstairs, Dow Jones' has left 17th century Holland behind and delivered a simple reconfiguration of spaces to create a bedroom, study and bathroom on the first floor, and a bedroom, bathroom and open cupboard space in the garret. Salvaged timber was used for the repaired stairs and for much of the flooring. Despite the use of 21st century fittings, the rigour of Joseph Moxon's pragmatic 18th century doctrine remains strongly evident.

There are some pleasing details. The street-facing window reveals are deep, encased in sapele and double-glazed with toughened glass. There are also four large public/private vitrines and courtyard joinery frames, which are minimally detailed but visually satisfying – as is the way the metal roof covering folds down into the

courtyard and the way the underside of the turning staircase meets, with a delicate grace, the single structural timber column that rises through the full height of the building.

Pieter de Hooch is not the only juxtaposer that could have been cited in this project. There is a scene in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1972 film, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, which shows the sadomasochistic heroine sitting in a room with her 'slave' who is typing. The slave seems to be in a darker annexe. We glimpse a bedroom, as if it were at the end of a corridor. Dow Jones' reinvention of his building may lack a couple with a parrot, but its perspectives – blocked out as they are with starkly different surfaces, qualities of light and perspective – possess aspects of the

Long section



Legend

1. Gallery
2. External courtyard
3. Living room
4. Kitchen
5. Bedroom/studio
6. Bedroom
7. WC

0 0.5m

**Right** The gallery opens directly onto the street

**Far right** Shuttered street-side glazing in the gallery



spatial surrealities of both de Hooch and Fassbinder, but without the latter's lurches into portentous overstatement.

There is surely a final ghost in Dow Jones' praxis machine. A key point about its work here is that the material and spatial distinctions are polemically ambiguous. This scheme is about both the revelation of history, and the selective representation of the idea of history; as such, something more fugitive than 'typical situations' is involved.

'Yet history does intrude on every word,' wrote the cultural theorist, Theodore Adorno, 'and withholds each word from the recovery of some alleged original meaning, that meaning which the jargon is always trying to track down.' A 300-year-old wall is a damnably tricky thing. ■

Project data

START ON SITE February 2011  
COMPLETION August 2011  
GROSS INTERNAL FLOOR AREA 180m<sup>2</sup>  
COST PER SQUARE METRE £1,300  
TOTAL COST £242,000  
CLIENT Private  
ARCHITECT Dow Jones Architects  
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER Momentum  
QUANTITY SURVEYOR Caxtons Chartered Surveyors  
MAIN CONTRACTOR Fullers Builders  
BUILDING INSPECTOR Assent Building Control  
CAD SOFTWARE USED Vectorworks 2011  
CONTRACT TYPE/PROCUREMENT ROUTE  
JCT ICD Intermediate Building Contract with contractor's design 2011





## Working detail



### No.25 Tanners Hill, Deptford

Dow Jones Architects

#### Window detail

The 100mm-deep timber studwork frame inside the original lath, plaster and timber frame walls of the house allows the preservation of the listed fabric behind the stud and provide further insulation. This inner frame is plasterboarded to form the walls of the rooms. The depth (450mm) of the walls is revealed at the openings.

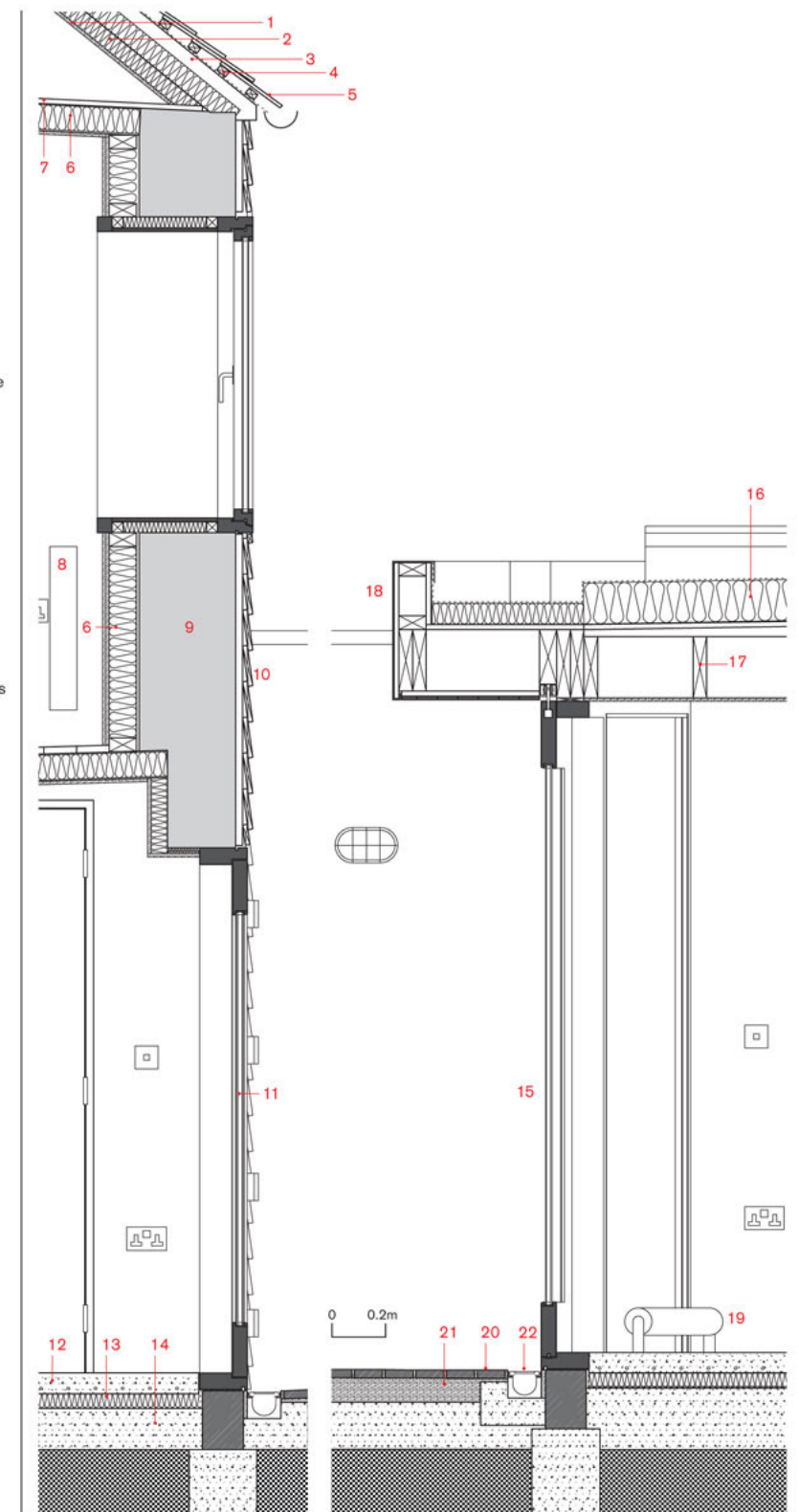
Oiled sapele forms the windows and doors that wrap around the courtyard. These bring fresh air and light deep into the plan, while resolving the complex geometry of the site. Doors hang on parliament hinges or sliding door gear, allowing the courtyard to open into the different areas of the ground floor at different times of day.

Black granite uncut setts form the courtyard flooring; their orientation emphasises what is new and old. A poured polished concrete floor unifies the internal ground floor.

The highly uneven upper level floorboards reveal the structure's idiosyncrasies. The upper timber casement and sash windows match the existing, but are double-glazed. The casement windows are now flush with the new dark brown-stained shiplap on the rear elevation. *Alun Jones*

#### Legend

1. 62.5mm insulation-backed plasterboard
2. 75mm insulation within rafter
3. 50mm void
4. 25x50mm battens
5. Existing clay roof tiles
6. 100mm insulation
7. 20mm reclaimed floorboards
8. Radiator
9. 300mm existing building fabric
10. 20mm shiplap
11. Argon-filled double glazing
12. 75mm powerfloated polished concrete floor
13. 50mm insulation
14. Concrete slab
15. Double-glazed sliding door
16. 150mm insulation
17. 225x50mm joists
18. VM anthra zinc
19. Gunning gilled tube radiator
20. 30mm granite setts
21. mortar bed to fall
22. ACO rain drain



Left Kitchen, at the rear of the plan