

Theatre for Migrants by Migrants



empowering through expression and belonging

PROJECT PURPOSE

Design a hybrid **theatre studio/community venue** that uses acting-based group classes (for non-actors) as a **practical wellbeing tool for new Londoners**, helping reduce isolation, build confidence, and support spoken English through playful, embodied collaboration. The space operates as a **consistent weekly “third place”**: not therapy, not school, not nightlife, but an **accessible, repeatable social routine built around theatre exercises**.

CORE USERS

Primary: new Londoners (0–5 years; often the first 24 months) including international students, early-career workers on visas, partners of workers/students, refugees/asylum seekers, and first-generation migrants in general. Common needs: consistency, belonging, low-pressure connection, and acceptance around accents and imperfect English.

Secondary: theatre audiences, volunteers, mentors.

KEY DESIGN CHALLENGE

Spatial intensity in a **compact heritage shell**: fit flexible theatre, welcoming social third place, and safeguarding spaces while **preserving character** and achieving accessibility, acoustics, storage, and clear zoning.

This project takes a position: access to community, creative expression, and belonging should not depend on income, status, or how long you’ve been here.

Welcome Area



Rehearsal Space



Tiered Seating



Private Booth



site

233 Shoreditch High Street, now The Light Bar & Dining, was built in 1893 as the Great Eastern Railway’s Electric Light Generating Station, a small local power station. Described by Hackney as the only remaining power station of its type in London, it retains its strong industrial identity through red brickwork and stone detailing.



Shoreditch has historically been a place of migrant settlement and cultural production. The site sits beside the excavated remains of the **Curtain Theatre, one of London’s earliest playhouses, opened in 1577.**

problem

For recent migrants without a social circle, the biggest risks tend to cluster around **isolation + instability** around housing/work + difficulty accessing services, which then show up as **worse mental and physical health** over time.

Recent migrants often **lose their familiar support structures overnight** (family, friends, language, routines). London research commissioned by the GLA highlights that **loneliness** is not evenly distributed and links strongly to **inequality and barriers to building meaningful relationships** (“Loneliness in London” - London City Hall).

A London migrant-focused report (“This is how it feels to be lonely” - Christodoulou and others) finds mentoring, volunteering, and **regular community-based activity are among the most effective practical ways to reduce loneliness and rebuild confidence** because they create repeated, low-pressure contact and trust.

I am the project user

I moved to the UK several years ago, and like many migrants, the transition brought with it more than I expected. Beneath the practicalities of adapting to a new country - language barrier, new systems, new routines - came a quieter weight: **social isolation, the grief of distance from family, friends and the places I grew up in**, and the particular emotional difficulty of **having left not towards something better, but away from something frightening**. With war affecting those closest to me back home, I carried the guilt of safety alongside the inability to return. My mental health suffered.

At some point in a long journey of my recovery, which I still keep going through, **I attended my first acting course for non-actors** - improvisation classes. Walking into that first session, I was terrified. When my turn came to introduce myself, my heart raced, my voice shook, and I couldn’t hold eye contact. Public speaking felt physically threatening.

By the end of that short course, I was singing and dancing in front of a room full of strangers - to my own surprise, **instead of falling apart, I felt exhilarated.**

Hackney/City migrant needs work notes that migrant health often deteriorates after arrival and highlights how wider determinants (housing/employment) + barriers to access drive inequality.

Healthwatch Hackney records **high levels of stress/anxiety** connected to status insecurity, charging fears, and discriminatory experiences.

There are multiple drama schools and classes available in the area, shown on the map. All of them, except for 1, are paid and the prices range from £10 to £200 and more per a class. The regular group sessions would mean a **significant expense for most of the migrants.**

During my work on this project, I attended a second course with the same organisers: a theatre script reading. For the first time, I played a lead role. I performed in front of an audience of fifty people, and my voice didn’t shake once. What those experiences gave me wasn’t just confidence on a stage - it was the feeling that my self-expression could matter; that **emotions I had locked away could be voiced** through characters; that **I was allowed to take up space.**

These courses helped me with self-doubt, with finding words for my experience, with the simple but significant ability to tell a story in a room full of people and feel heard. **This project grew directly from that experience. I wanted to ask: what if this kind of space - low-pressure, creative, community-based, and free - was genuinely accessible to migrants and newcomers, especially in those first, most vulnerable years?**

client

Projekt Europa is an international theatre company and registered charity that creates radical work for local and global audiences while actively **transforming narratives around migration and displacement**. Their core mission is to support, develop and produce **the work of migrants and migrant artists** in the UK, centring migrant voices in cultural dialogue, creativity, and decision-making - so migrant perspectives become **more visible, respected, and celebrated.**

Alongside producing public-facing performance projects, they run artist and community programmes that build access into the sector for emerging migrant artists with established migrant theatre makers as they begin UK careers.

They also deliver **Projekt Encounter**, a community engagement programme with **free drop-in theatre workshops for refugees, asylum seekers and first-generation migrants** with little or no previous theatre experience.



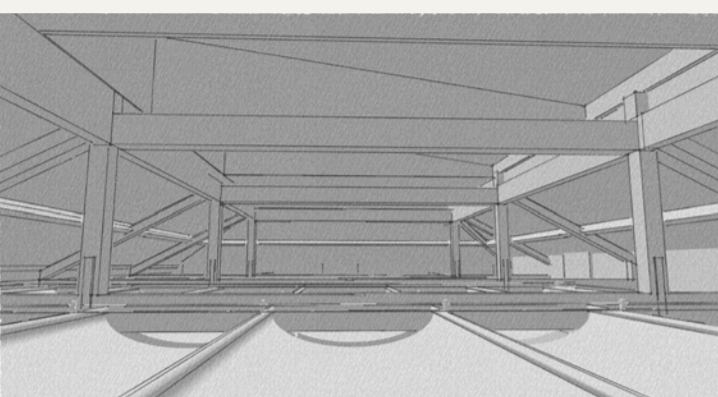
concept

Inspired by Projekt Europa's work with migrants, refugees, and first-generation newcomers, the design treats theatre not as a fixed stage for professional performers, but as a **framework for encounter, exchange, and becoming visible**. The space is shaped by the idea that confidence is built collectively: through rehearsal, witnessing, gathering, and the **gradual courage to speak and be seen**.

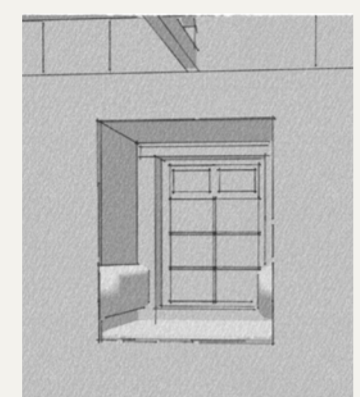
This project reimagines the **theatre as a community space** where performance is not separated from everyday life, but **woven into it**. At the heart of the ground floor is a borderless stage that everyone goes through, **removing the division between performer and passerby** and turning the space into a collective platform for **presence, expression, and belonging**.

In this space, **migrants** are not placed at the edges as observers of a new society, but **brought to the centre** as active participants with their voices. For newcomers who may feel isolated, unheard, or uncertain in a new environment, the centre offers not only a place to perform, but a **place to belong, communicate and gradually build confidence**.

The Shared Stage: Woven Voices



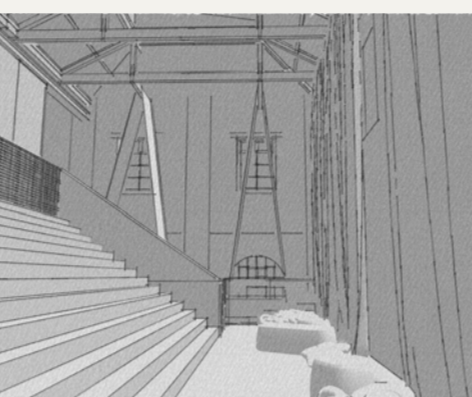
Ceiling structure with canopy shading under skylights



Window sill informal seating



Smaller group rehearsal separation



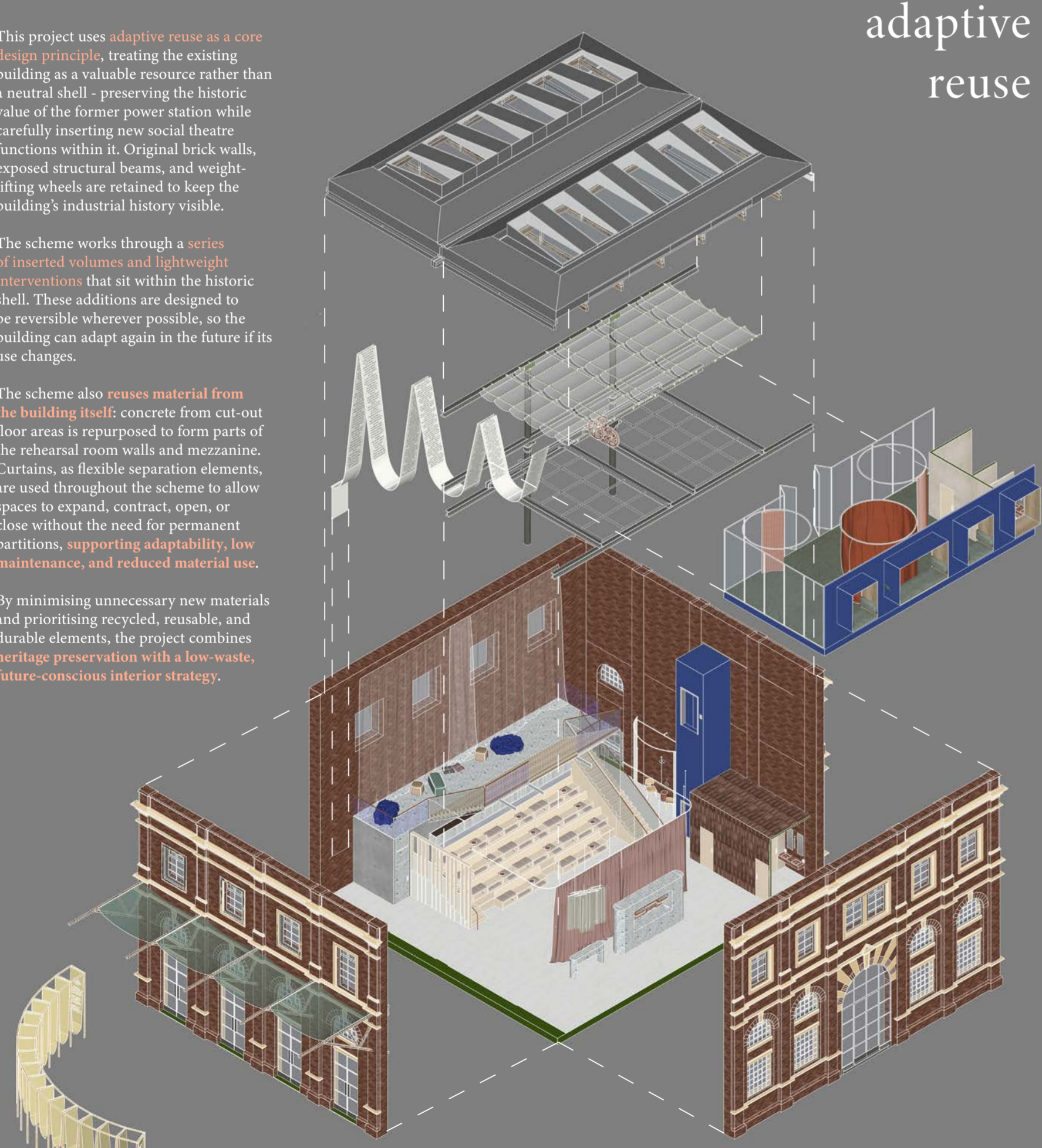
Chill mezzanine

This project uses **adaptive reuse** as a **core design principle**, treating the existing building as a valuable resource rather than a neutral shell - preserving the historic value of the former power station while carefully inserting new social theatre functions within it. Original brick walls, exposed structural beams, and weight-lifting wheels are retained to keep the building's industrial history visible.

The scheme works through a **series of inserted volumes and lightweight interventions** that sit within the historic shell. These additions are designed to be reversible wherever possible, so the building can adapt again in the future if its use changes.

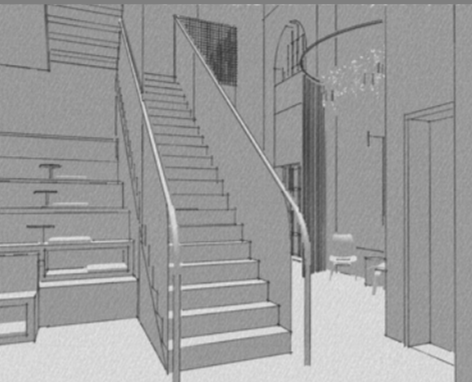
The scheme also **reuses material from the building itself**: concrete from cut-out floor areas is repurposed to form parts of the rehearsal room walls and mezzanine. Curtains, as flexible separation elements, are used throughout the scheme to allow spaces to expand, contract, open, or close without the need for permanent partitions, **supporting adaptability, low maintenance, and reduced material use**.

By minimising unnecessary new materials and prioritising recycled, reusable, and durable elements, the project combines **heritage preservation with a low-waste, future-conscious interior strategy**.

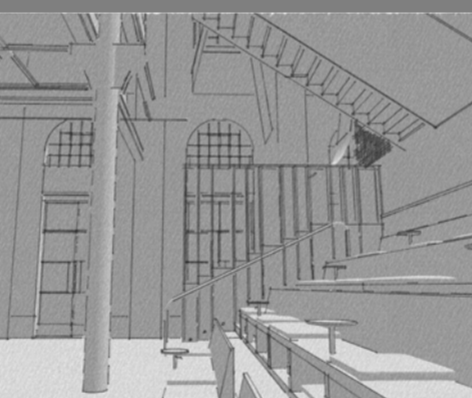


The act of preserving and reusing a historic building in this community mirrors the project's ethos of recognising and preserving people's histories and identities

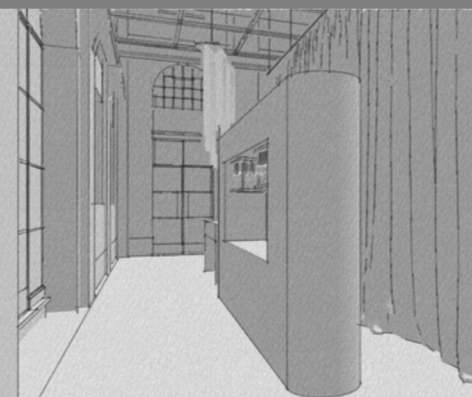
adaptive reuse



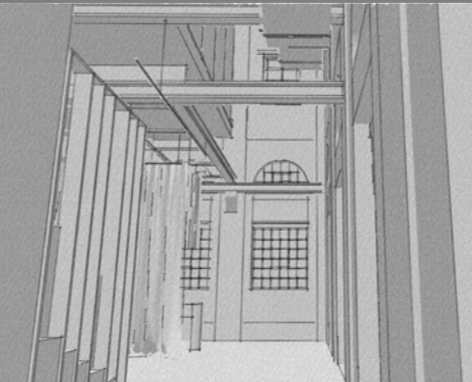
Private support nook behind the stairs



Tiered seating



Bar/ drinks kitchen



Entry threshold area

materiality

This palette combines the **retained industrial character of the existing building with softer, warmer materials** suited to a community-based theatre environment. Preserved brick, exposed steel, and historic industrial elements maintain the memory of the former power station, while oak, plywood, textiles, paint, and recycled finishes make the interior feel **calmer, more welcoming, and more human**.

Paint Baldwin Blue Every Day Amulsion Solvent free and water based

Recycled plastic Salmon Terra Polygood #PS2121 (coffee tables for seating area)

9mm Hardwood Plywood Birch panel

Solid European Oak Panels in rustic grade 20mm x 650mm

Recycled plastic Terrazzo Nuovo 2800 x 1400mm

The selection **responds to the emotional needs of migrants** who may feel uncertain, overwhelmed or out of place. The interior is designed to feel **simple, legible, and non-threatening**. Warm timber, soft fabrics, muted earthy tones, and filtered light help create a simple and emotionally reassuring atmosphere, while stronger accents such as blue and terracotta give the space **identity and energy**.

Recycled plastic, carpet and metal mesh, flexible curtain systems, timber-based elements, and low-VOC water-based paints support a lower-waste and healthier interior environment. **The overall goal is to achieve a material language that is durable, repairable, and adaptable over time, while expressing care, inclusivity, and environmental responsibility through the space experience.**

Matt Stone Effect Porcelain Bergen Rust 240x60x9mm

Paint Baldwin Beige Amulsion Solvent free and water based

Original preserved materials - brick walls, exposed steel beams, cast-iron industrial pulleys

Powder coated Recycled Aluminium Mesh for balustrades

Velvet curtain Dusty pink Soundproof (up to -12 dB) & blackout MC343 (moondream webstore)

Jura Beige Stone Effect Floor Tiles 600 x 1200mm

Sheer curtain white OEKO-TEX STANDARD 100 certified; polyester 95 gsm

Recycled Carpet Daintree Polyester + recycled felt backing

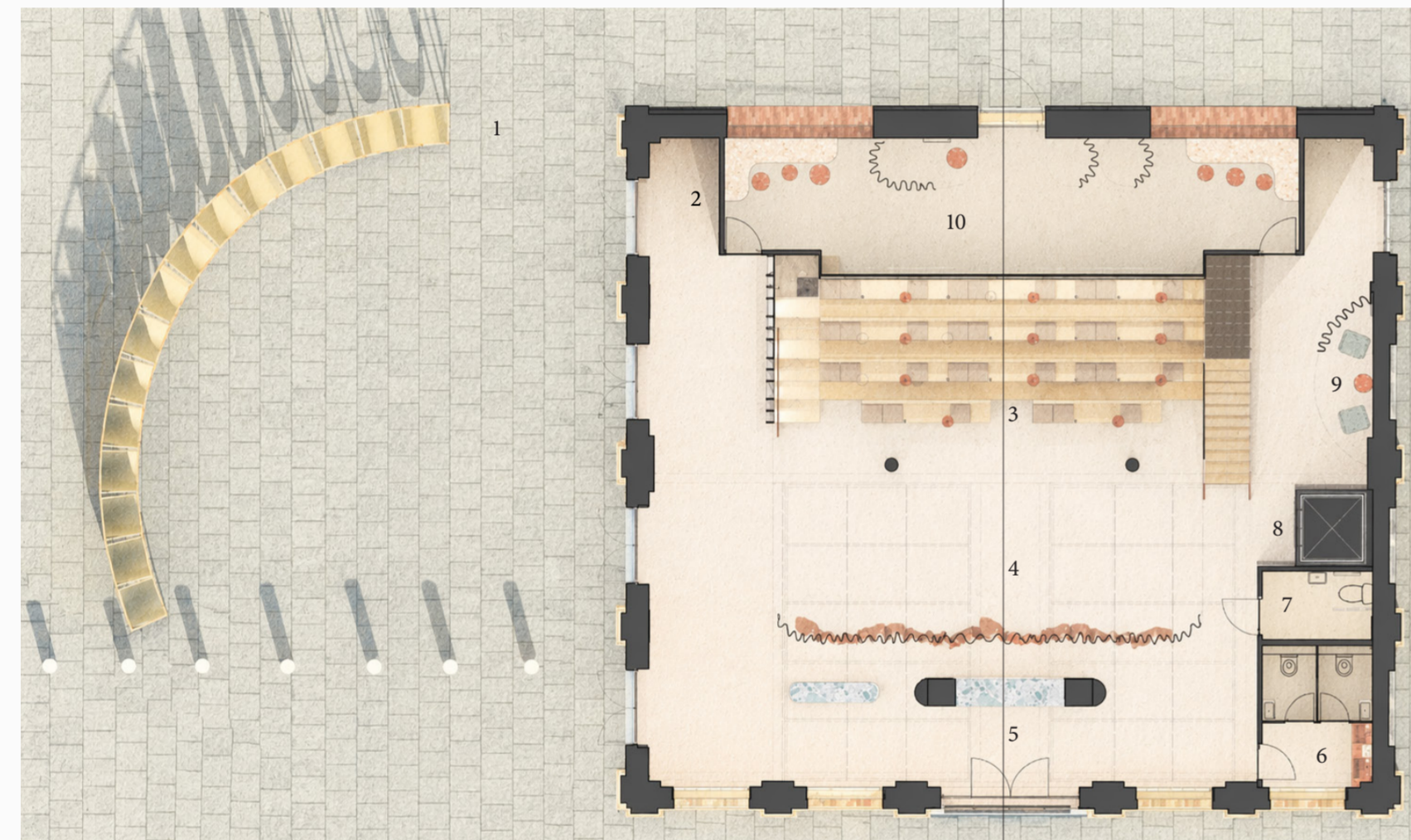
design scheme

The section illustrates the space as a **sequence of diagonally connected volumes**. At ground floor level, the main performance area is kept open and vertically generous. Above, the upper level is split between an open mezzanine zone to the left and an enclosed rehearsal room to the right, creating a clear gradient from public and social to more focused and private use. **This creates a layered journey from arrival, to gathering, to practice.** Behind the audience seating, the dressing room is located as a private enclosure for retreat and preparation.

The existing skylights bring generous natural light into the rehearsal studio, helping the retained **industrial shell feel bright and breathable**, while the integrated canopy shading allows it to be adjusted when required, softening glare and creating a more **controlled lighting condition for practice, rest, or focused group work**. They also illuminate the upper mezzanine level and the **entry threshold area open to the full height of the building.**



Section AA



Ground Floor Plan



1st Floor Plan

User Journey - Ground Floor:

- 1 - Outside seating pavilion**
Extending the project into the public realm and creating an **informal place for gathering, waiting, and social interaction for everyone.**
- 2 - Information point / threshold zone**
A welcoming threshold area with an information point positioned beside **four entrance doors**, strengthening connection with the outside square, making the space **open, welcoming, and easy to enter.**
- 3 - Social and audience seating**
Linear tiered seating designed for both performances and **informal everyday use**, allowing people to sit together, talk, listen, and gradually become part of a shared social atmosphere.
- 4 - Borderless stage with flexible curtain backdrop**
An open central performance area without a fixed front or edge, allowing the whole ground floor to feel like a **shared stage**. The **curtain backdrop** can be adjusted to either open the bar / drinks kitchen for self-use by members or enclose the performance area, including the side edges, to provide greater privacy and improved light control when required.



Borderless stage encourages shared presence, tiered seating works as social landscape in everyday use

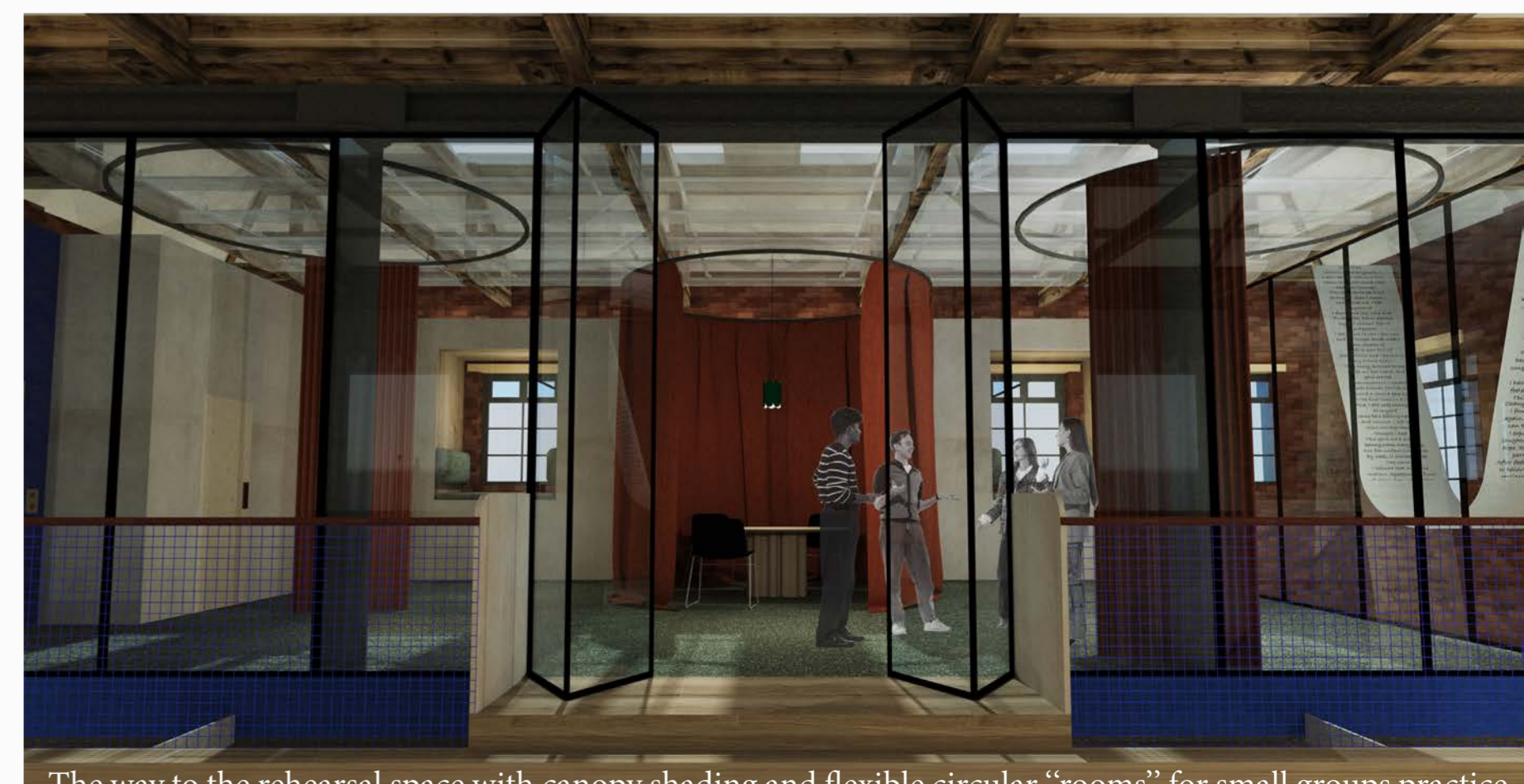
- 5 - Bar / drinks kitchen**
A compact social hub positioned directly beside the stage area, designed for drinks preparation, informal use by members, and post-class gathering. A standing table on the left supports quick social interaction and convenience of use.
- 6, 7 - Gender-neutral and accessible toilets**
- 8 - Lift (1700x1700mm)**
- 9 - Private conversation nook**
A small, partially hidden nook designed for **quiet one-to-one conversations, decompression, or private support chats** away from the main public activity.
- 10 - Large dressing room**
A generous dressing and preparation space equipped with dressing tables, mirrors, two small changing areas and a large one with accessible ramps, enclosed by round curtains. Storage for stage-set elements is integrated below the large seating structure. A door outside leading to an **adjacent garden area for performers to calm down.**



The mezzanine opened to the skylights - a place to rest

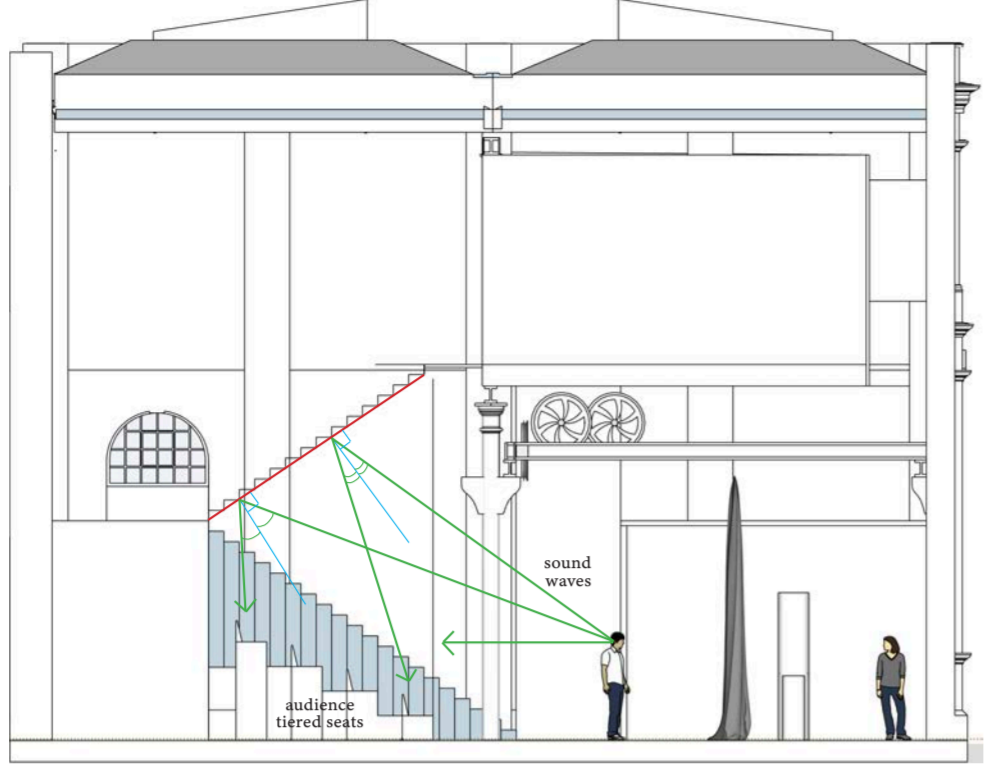
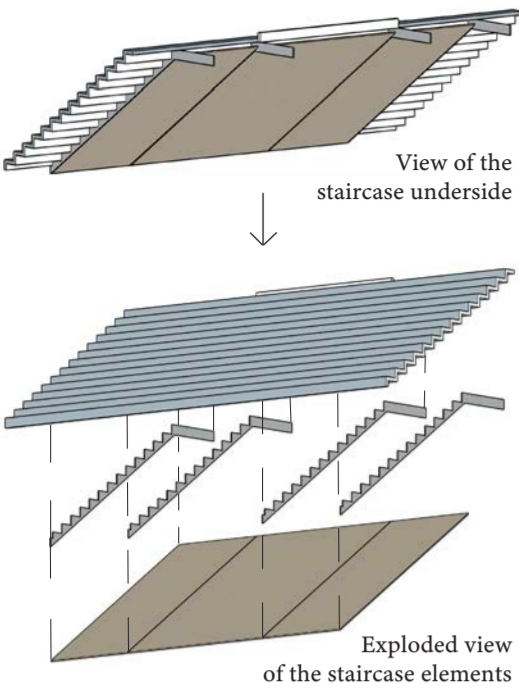
User Journey - 1st Floor:

- 1 - Chill mezzanine**
Open mezzanine seating beneath the skylights, creating a **calm social zone** on the way to the rehearsal space.
- 2 - Wide social stair**
Circulation between the mezzanine and rehearsal level, also used as an **informal landscape for sitting and gathering + acoustics.**
- 3 - Flexible rehearsal space**
Main rehearsal room designed for group **practice, movement, and workshops.**
- 4 - Curtained smaller practice zones**
Three circular curtain enclosures allowing **smaller groups to rehearse** more privately, each accommodating up to 8 people.
- 5 - Lift**
- 6, 7 - Gender-neutral and accessible toilets**
- 8 - Informal window seating**
Two smaller window sills and one wider central window seat for waiting, resting, or quiet conversation.
- 9 - Textile installation of shared voices**
A 43-metre-long suspended textile installation hangs through the space right above the entry threshold zone, carrying handwritten words of gratitude, reflection, and personal growth inspired by Projekt Europa participants' experiences in the charity's acting programmes. More than decoration, it makes participants' voices physically present in the building, turning lived stories into a soft spatial layer of memory, recognition, and belonging.

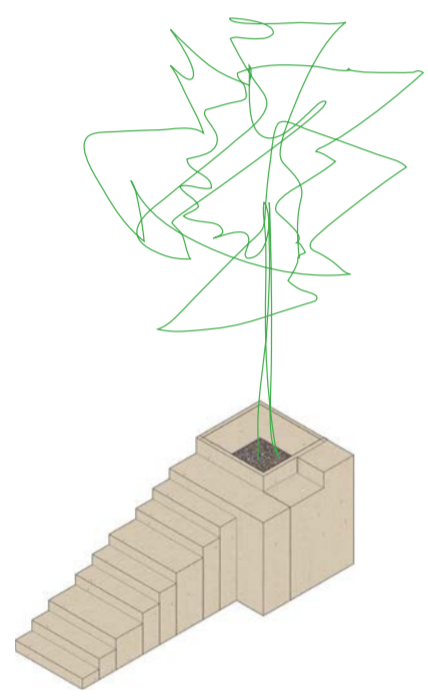


The way to the rehearsal space with canopy shading and flexible circular "rooms" for small groups practice

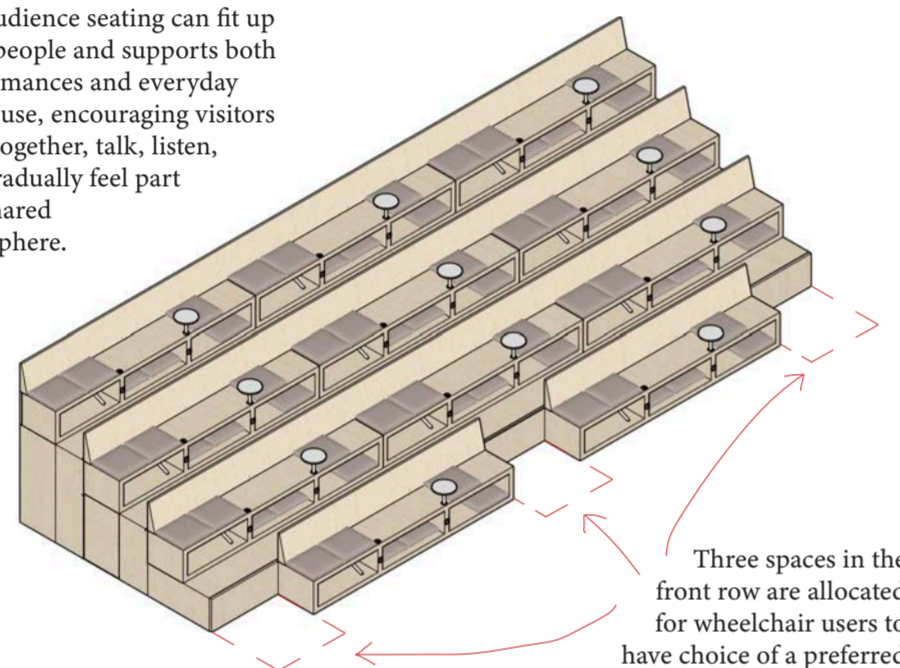
details



Sound of a performer's voice is reflected by the plywood panel which supports the staircase leading to the 1st floor. From the scheme it is clear that the soundwave successfully travels to the audience's seats location thanks to the panel's position angle and the material's properties to reflect sound.



The audience seating can fit up to 66 people and supports both performances and everyday social use, encouraging visitors to sit together, talk, listen, and gradually feel part of a shared atmosphere.

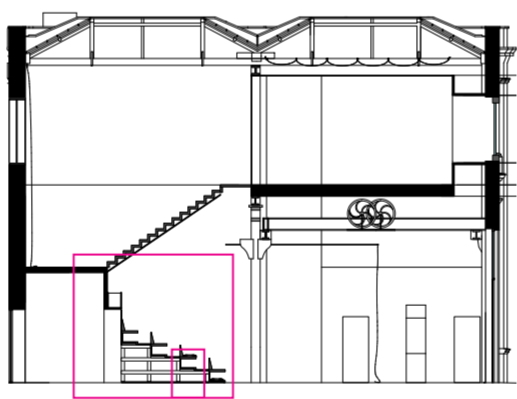
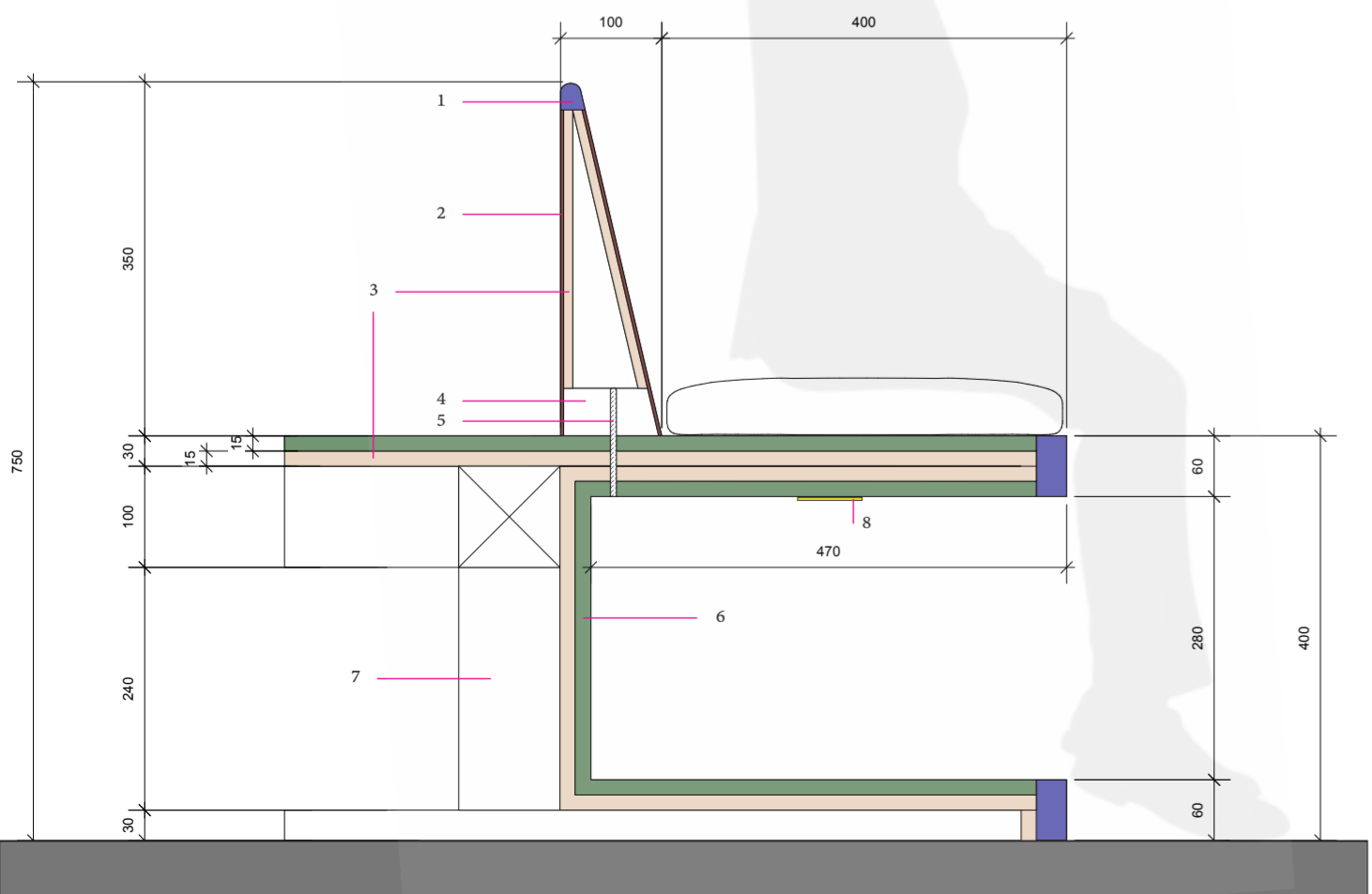


Three spaces in the front row are allocated for wheelchair users to have choice of a preferred view (940x930mm each)

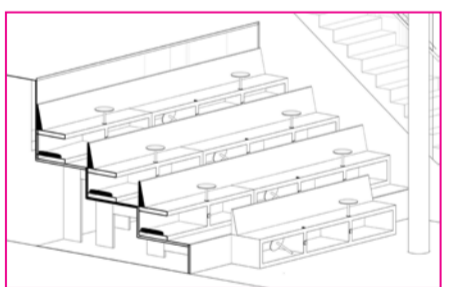
The stair to the upper seating levels ends as an integrated planter (1400x1350x1400 mm) with a live tree, creating a calmer and more restorative atmosphere and helping strengthen visitors' wellbeing through nature elements.

The removable backrest is screwed to the top of the main seat structure, allowing easier repair or replacement of seating surfaces over time without dismantling the full unit.

Its angled form improves ergonomic comfort, making the seating more suitable for lingering, socialising, and informal use. The integrated LED strip beneath the seat provides low-level lighting to improve visibility and movement across the rows.



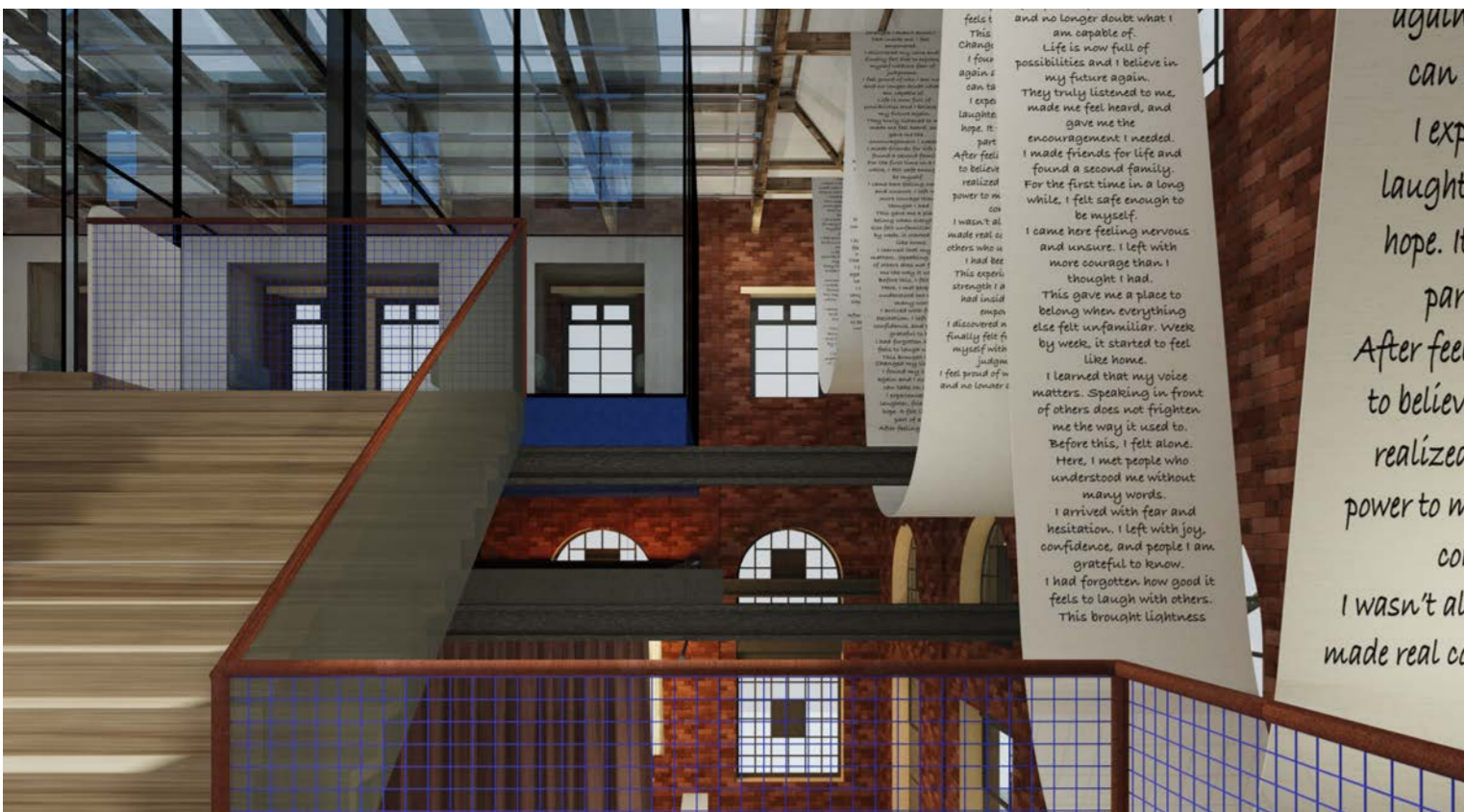
- 1 - cut-to-shape solid wood (top of the seat back rest)
- 2 - veneer oak (cover of the seat back rest) 3mm x 300mm x 2500mm
- 3 - 12mm Hardwood Plywood Sheet (the structural support of the seat back rest)
- 4 - cut-to-shape construction timber (base of the seat back rest)
- 5 - 100mm steel screw without head (fixes the back rest to the main seat structure) 6mm diameter
- 6 - 3-Layered Engineered Wood (European Oak) Havwoods, Alba Henley | HW3914 | FSC certified 14 mm x 200mm x 3000mm
- 7 - Sawn Treated Timber 47mm x 100mm x 2400
- 8 - LED Flexible Strip, 25W/m, 24V 60mm x 5000mm



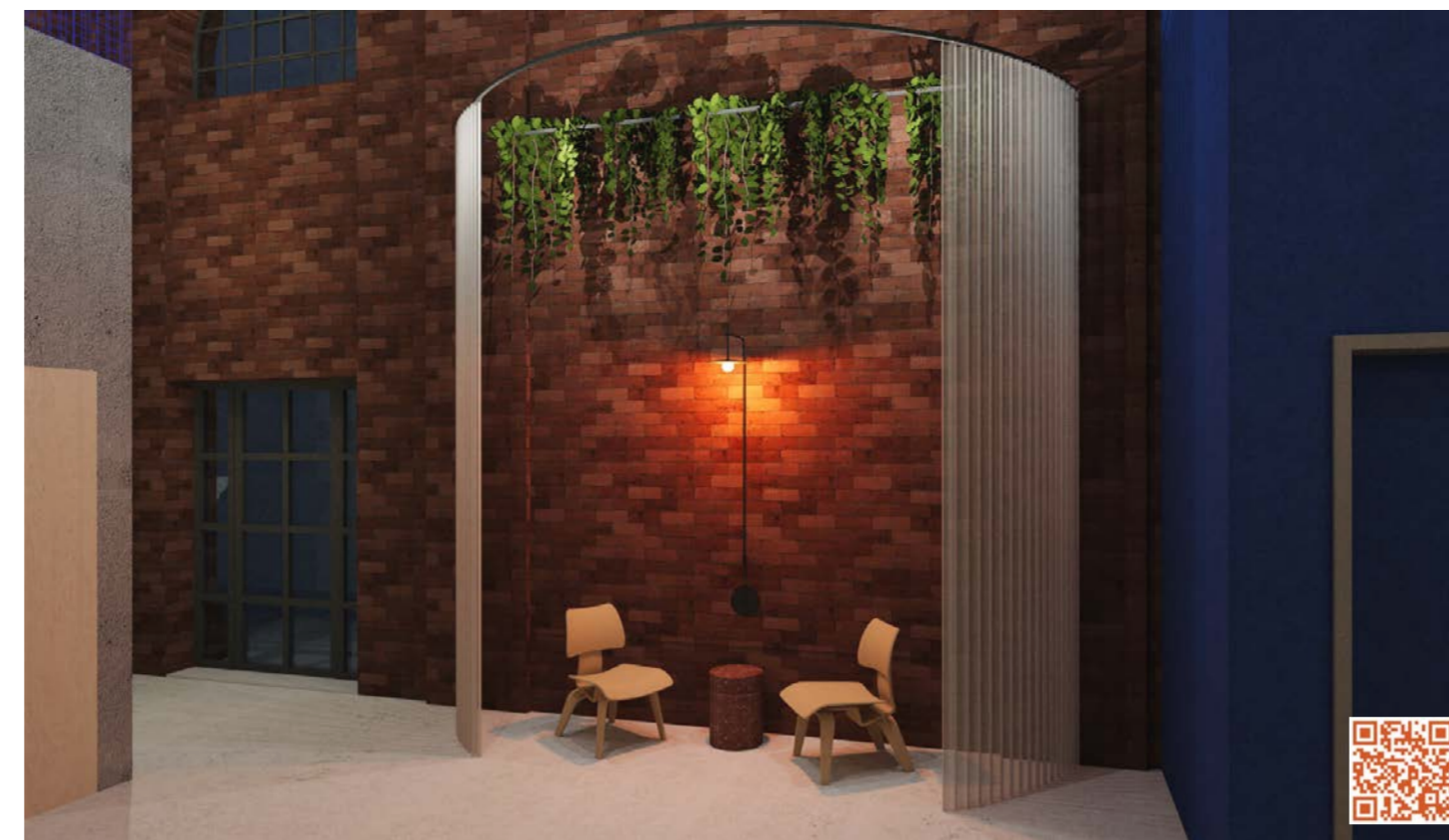
The audience seating is designed as four equal tiered levels positioned beneath the main staircase. Under-seat compartments allow cushions and removable small tables to be stored when not in use, supporting flexible use of the space.

A timber substructure supports the seating and, being accessible from the adjacent dressing room, also provides convenient storage for stage-set elements between the timber members. A one-way internal window above the top row allows performers in the dressing room to discreetly observe the performance space before going on stage.

The angled underside of the wide stair acts as a reflective acoustic plane, redirecting sound from the performer area back towards the audience. The glazed stair balustrade on the seating side helps contain sound laterally, improving acoustic focus while preserving visibility and openness.



Textile installation makes participants' voices visible



Private conversation nook for focused support



Rehearsal space with curtain "rooms" and informal window seating



Rejecting the closed and exclusive character of the traditional black box theatre, the space is opened to daylight, height, movement, and offers a variety of areas to be in. Tiered seating functions as a social landscape rather than a formal audience seating, encouraging gathering, conversation, and mutual support.

Around it, dressing, rehearsal, and retreat spaces allow users to move between privacy and visibility at their own pace, supporting emotional comfort before performance.

The bright dressing room with access to a small green outdoor area gives performers a place to breathe and regulate themselves before stepping forward. The one-way window allows them to observe before entering, reducing anxiety and offering a sense of control. Above, the rehearsal cube acts as a suspended place of preparation, adaptable through curtains into smaller rooms for intimate practice.

space experience

The idea of weaving voices appears both socially and physically throughout the interior. A textile installation stretches across the full-height entrance threshold, carrying handwritten words from Project Europa participants and connecting the public square to the life inside. Curtains around the stage and rehearsal spaces create soft, adaptable boundaries rather than hard divisions, allowing the environment to shift between openness and enclosure.

The result is a theatre that does not place migrants at the margins, but brings them to the centre - where their stories can be heard, witnessed, and woven into a collective cultural experience.

