

Fount of stories

An unusual Spitalfields property steeped in history is set to become the Museum of Immigration. Can its current romance be retained when it plays this new role?

By Andrew Meed

The Spitalfields area of East London became a *cause célèbre* for conservationists in the mid-1970s. So close to the City, its streets of neglected Georgian houses were all too visible to a developer's eye. With the formation of The Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust, and such media-friendly events as a squat in which Sir John Betjeman participated, its fortunes changed. The architectural richness of the area was recognised and preservation began.

The general perception is that Spitalfields has been skilfully transformed into a gentrified enclave for writers, historians and the like, although the threat of major redevelopment

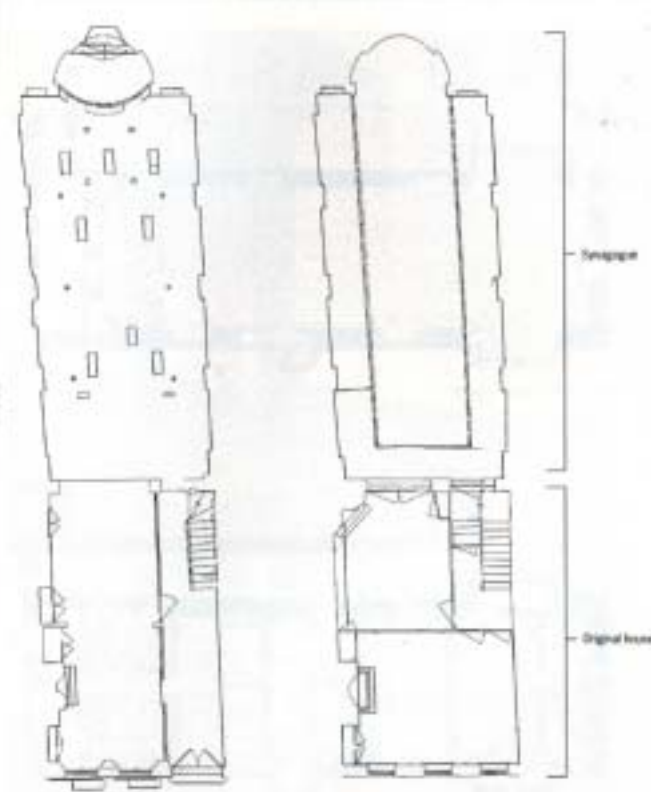
in its vicinity has never disappeared. But there has been as much publicity of late to the shops and street life of the Bangladeshi community around Brick Lane as to questions of conservation. It could seem that they are no longer a particular concern.

A visit to 19 Princelet Street shows how wrong that assumption is. Push open the double doors to enter and you are greeted instantly by a hefty steel prop in the hall, a temporary measure to counter deflection in the storeys above. This Grade II*-listed building is in serious disrepair – ironically, for it is one of the properties that has most drawn attention to the area.

It is an amalgam: a Huguenot weavers' house of 1719 (a speculation by Spitalfields' most prolific builder of the period, Samuel Worrall), part-adapted in 1869 when an Adhikarzi synagogue was built in its garden. Among the many tenants who have lived in the house over the years, one in particular has caught the media's eye – David Rodinsky, a mysterious figure who disappeared in the late-1960s but whose attic room was only opened in 1979. Images of the scene inside – a turmoil of books, papers, bottles and bedding, no doubt adjusted by the photographer to picturesque ends – gave the building an eerie appeal.



Top: 19 Princelet Street photographed in 1979, when conservation in the Spitalfields area was only just beginning. Above: a scene from one of the workshops for children that have already been held in the property. Opposite page: the apse of the synagogue and first-floor galleries



ground floor plan

first floor plan

Amid the mythologising of Rodinsky that ensued, attempts were made to establish the truth about his life and its strange end – for instance, by the artist Rachel Lichtenstein, whose book *Rodinsky's Room*, co-authored with Iain Sinclair, was published last year. But Rodinsky's is not the only story that 19 Princelet Street tells. Recognising this, a multicultural charity, the Spitalfields Centre, has long had ambitions to conserve the property and open it to the public as a museum of immigration. With the appointment of Susie Symes, formerly a senior Treasury official, as the charity's chair, the project has a new impetus, and Julian Harrap Architects has just completed the investigative first phase of a £2m scheme.

Symes recounts her first visit to the building with a distinguished historian of the area, Professor Bill Fishman: 'We walked through into the synagogue and there were pools of water on the floor. I thought – this isn't right, it shouldn't be in this condition. It wasn't simply the Jewishness that moved me but the sense that dispossessed people had come, with so little, from somewhere else and made this place. It was full of past lives.'

In considering a museum in which those past lives, from all periods of the house and

synagogue's history, could somehow be acknowledged and presented, Symes was clear about the fundamental nature of the undertaking. 'It's definitely conservation, not restoration,' she declares. 'It's to conserve "as is". We want to repair the house and make it safe to visit but at the same time we want to preserve the different layers, the pinnacles – as many traces of the past as we can.'

What Symes hopes to keep undisturbed is an atmospheric quality to the property that makes it so redolent of previous occupation and use. It is the quality that struck Lichtenstein when she first entered a decade or more ago: 'A single bulb was attempting to light up the dark green wood-paneled corridor in which I found myself. To the right, worn stone steps led up to another floor... The atmosphere still retained the openness of a religious space; it seemed natural to speak in whispers. I felt my way along the corridor and opened the door at the end. The peeling paintwork of the synagogue was lit by warm yellow candlelight. The wrought iron balcony was thick with dust and cobwebs. Various artefacts were strewn around the floor...'

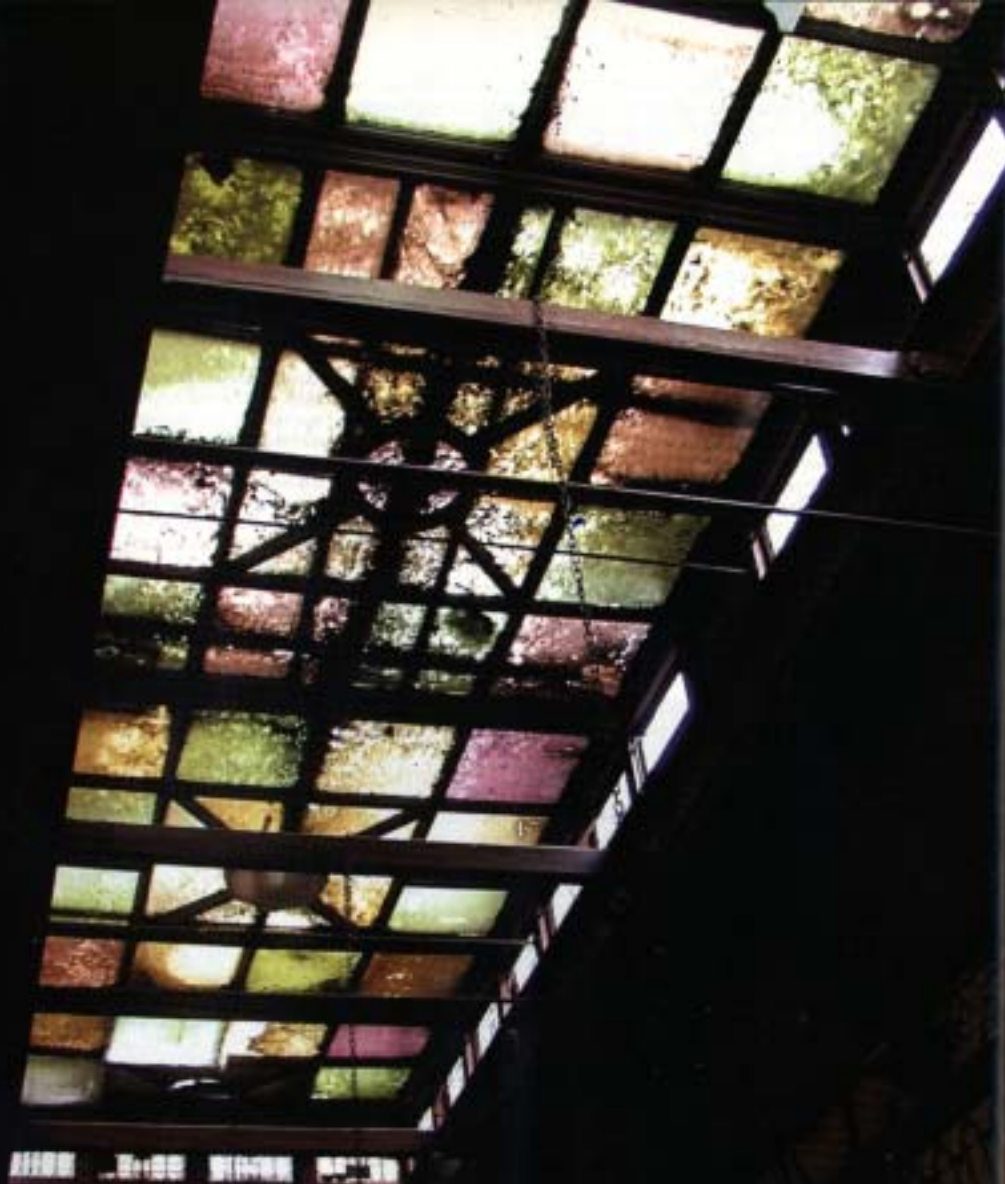
But as that 'warm yellow candlelight' might suggest, things aren't entirely what

they seem at 19 Princelet Street. Lichtenstein had arrived during the shooting of a film and both candles and cobwebs were for cinematic effect. This property has lent itself readily to such appropriation – with a little help from the set-dressers. So some plasterwork has been deliberately distressed; the dark panelling that runs down the sides of the synagogue looks original at a glance but turns out to be plywood. Ruin, or rather its intransience, is both actual and contrived.

This fusion of fact and fiction is an issue for the architects advising on the conservation of the property, Julian Harrap and Judy Allen. 'People come here and they fall in love with the film set, with the building in decay,' says Harrap. 'But beneath the fakery there are some serious problems – structural, for instance – which we will have to address. It's not easy to intervene without taking away some of the romance. But we can't simply maintain the building, by daily care, in a state of ruin. That option is possible sometimes, but not with the public access that is envisaged here.'

The pervasive structural problem, signalled by the hallway prop, is, says Harrap, 'a result of all the eighteenth-century "soft" construction gradually relaxing.' The point





The multi-coloured roof light over the body of the synagogue is grimy and its frame is unadorned



In some parts of the house, the structural distortion is conspicuous



Looking towards the synagogue from the staircase of 19 Princelet Street

where this is most apparent is on the first floor of the house where a partition wall is graphically bowed. Harrap seeks a discreet overall solution in which this element 'is stabilised in its distorted fashion' as lasting evidence of construction history. The synagogue, its side walls bowing, must also be addressed. 'It's a tall, narrow section,' explains Harrap, 'but there's no inherent stability in the way it has been constructed. We have to deal with the structure in such a way that it has a calculated stability, not just an empirical one.'

Standing in the body of the synagogue, Harrap points to the long rooflight above. Although its thin coloured panes of Victorian glass are very grimy, and the afternoon sun is pale, it is easy to imagine how distinctive the interior light must be here, accented by yellow, pink and green. 'But the frame has deteriorated so much that, at present, the glass is effectively stabilising the frame rather than the reverse,' says Harrap. 'Can we tackle this without affecting the appearance?'

The higher one climbs in the building – taking the staircase to the second floor and beyond to the former weavers' attic that became Rodinsky's home – the more conspicuous is its disrepair. Compacted layers of wallpaper hang loose from their support; a gash in the ceiling reveals the laths above; the walls of one small room are all at an angle, like a diagram of the distortion that the structure is suffering.

'It's at this upper level – which, given its Huguenot past as well as Rodinsky, is bound to be an attraction to people – that we really don't want too many visitors,' says Harrap. 'Full and free access would require far greater intervention in the fabric of the

building than we would willingly entertain.'

Which raises the question of how this vulnerable house-cum-synagogue can function as a museum. Can such issues as fire escape and prevention be handled unobtrusively? Can information, artefacts and the property itself be presented without compromising its character?

In *Rodinsky's Room*, Lichtenstein's co-author Iain Sinclair refers to 19 Princelet Street as 'a space that could soon be neutralised as a Museum of Immigration'.

Susie Symes, aware of this danger, doesn't want the place to be overrun with story boards and audio-visual displays: 'We can hold the building as it is and use technology to explore the stories of successive waves of incomers. I want us to use the best of modern technology, but inconspicuously. One idea, for instance, is that you might open drawers and find tiny screens that you can interact with. Miniaturisation could be the key.'

The intimacy and sense of personal engagement that such devices encourage might well be effective here. It's already clear – for instance, from workshops with local schoolchildren – that this building captures the imagination. The 'neutralisation' that Sinclair fears can be averted.

Harrap takes a long view of his responsibilities: 'We try to draw from clients their vision for the property, within the parameters of possibility that we advise them on. We've been involved here, on and off, for more than 10 years – we're used to periods of dynamism and quiescence. What we try to do, whether in times of enthusiasm or depression, is to hold the architectural thread – to hold the ethos of the building.'

But this time the momentum behind the project seems more than transitory. The first

phase, for which Symes raised £150,000, has included a full condition survey by Harrap's practice as a basis for remedial proposals. Meanwhile, Symes is optimistic about future funding, a likely mix of English Heritage, lottery, trust and individual donations. 'This is a financially sustainable project,' she insists. 'I started off with financial sustainability. And it's going to come in on time. That's my mantra.'

Back in 1989, as his contribution to a book, *The Saving of Spitalfields*, the historian Raphael Samuel wrote an essay called 'The Pathos of Conservation'.

He argued that conservation, if true to its precepts, 'ought to involve a respect for the entire life-cycle through which a building has passed. There is no reason, either in history or in aesthetics, for privileging one moment over another.' What Samuel saw around him in Spitalfields, however, was the mistaken attempt to return buildings to their original condition, a 'fetichising' of period. 'The hallmark of the "saved" or restored houses is that, by comparison with their neighbours, they are dead.'

It is just this lesson that Symes intends to heed. The Museum of Immigration will reflect the successive stages of Spitalfields' history – Huguenot, Jewish, Irish and Bangladeshi – since 19 Princelet Street was built, and in the process tell a larger story about the making of multicultural Britain. 'To me the real purpose of the museum is to give some understanding of the way that we shape our society and environment,' she says. 'You can only do that when all the different stages are left explicit – when the evidence isn't obscured. It's cultural diversity that has shaped our society. That's one message that visitors won't miss.'