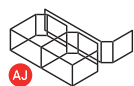


Well lit, well read

Barbara Weiss has created a fitting home for Wiener Library, an archive for the study of the Holocaust and genocide, writes *Felix Mara*

Libraries have a fascinating history, illuminated by the ambitious Ancient Library of Alexandria, medieval study carrels and chained libraries and the informal creations of Alvar Aalto. Grandeur can be counter-productive, especially if this entails high reverberation times and sound-reflectance: devoted readers spend all their waking hours sweating over books, so comfort and good acoustics are essential. But decorum may also be called for, as at the Wiener Library, one of the world's most extensive archives of the Holocaust and Nazi era, which has moved to new premises in a Victorian terrace in London's Russell Square, designed by Barbara Weiss Architects and opened last September.

Alfred Wiener founded the library in Berlin in 1933 to collect and disseminate information about events happening in Nazi Germany. Having moved to London in 1939, it was crucial to the British war effort and, after the war, to the UN War



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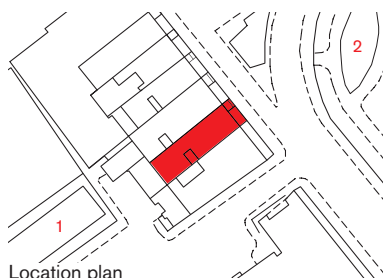


Main picture The first floor reading room with library beyond
Below right Russell Square facade.

Though not part of London University, the Wiener Library has a 90-year lease in a building owned by Birkbeck College

Legend

1. Senate House
2. Russell Square



Location plan

Crimes Commission. It now aims to promote study and awareness of the Holocaust, antisemitism and comparative genocide, working in conjunction with institutions such as the Beth Shalom Holocaust memorial centre in Nottinghamshire and the Imperial War Museum. The collection of books, manuscripts and other documents, including a magazine for SS veterans which is still published, plans of Auschwitz and Berlin telephone books is open to the general public and is located on five floors, with rolling stacks and sophisticated environmental control in the basement, multipurpose accommodation, subdivided by a folding acoustic partition on the ground floor and >>



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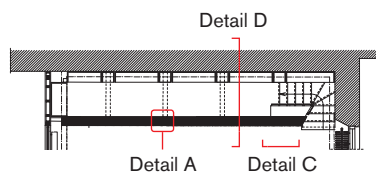




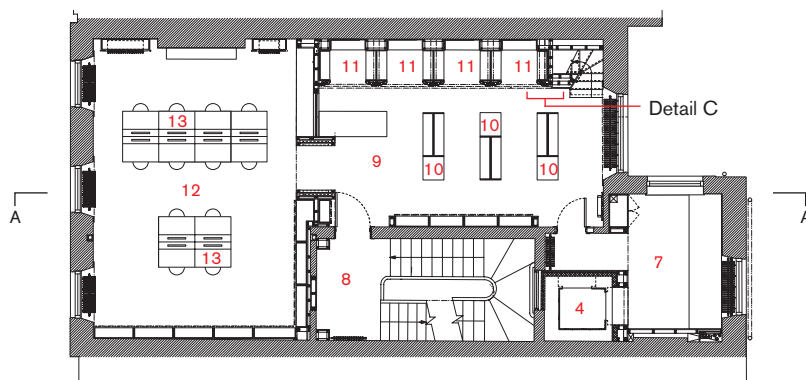
Legend

1. Entrance hall
2. Reception
3. Meeting room
4. Lift
5. Cloaks/lift lobby
6. Rear roof
7. Microfilm room
8. Stair and lobby
9. Library
10. Catalogue desk
11. Bookshelf alcove
12. Reading room
13. Reading desk
14. Russell Square
15. Document store
16. Photographic store
17. Book store
18. WCs
19. Office

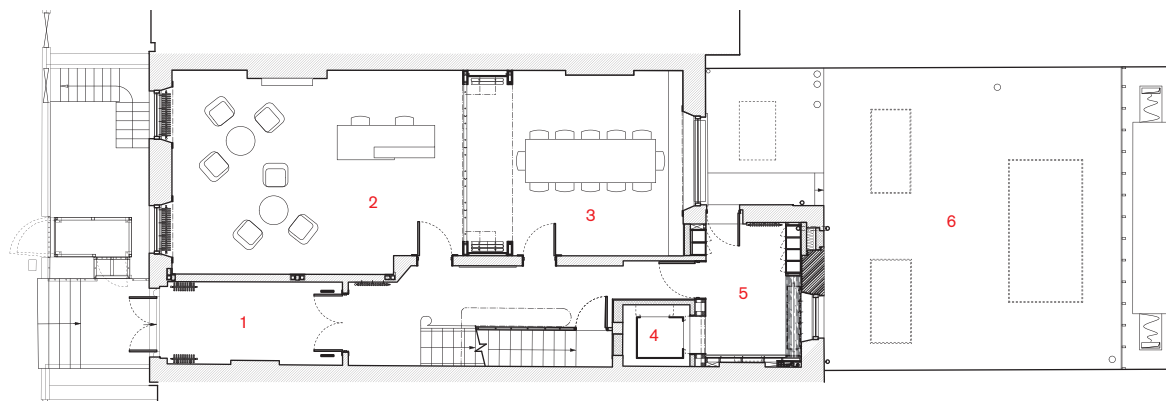
Mezzanine level



First floor plan



Ground floor plan





reading rooms and offices above.

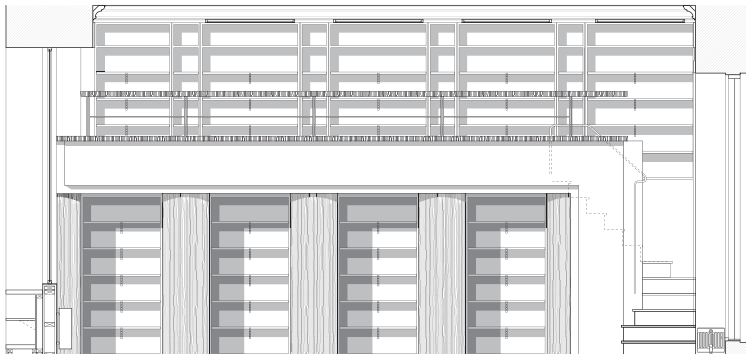
The highlight is the main first floor library, which is lofty enough for a mezzanine and looks onto the reading room to the east through a screen of books and glass, with an elegantly proportioned opening framed by floor-to-ceiling fins.

Barbara Weiss Architects designed and drew everything, down to the finest detail, exercising a high degree of restraint. Doubled-up shelves support the ladders needed for access to high-level books. The books are part of the architecture. 'I love the RIBA library,' says practice director Barabara Weiss. There is an element of formality in her work and her approach fitted the Wiener commission.

Situated in the former home of London University's Institute of Germanic Studies, the Wiener is intelligently planned, with flexibility where needed and a more tailored approach elsewhere. The lift, an essential addition, is carefully sited.

The key to the success of the project was the lighting. 'We wanted lighting which felt domestic in its warmth of colour, was highly controllable to accommodate diurnal and seasonal variation, and appropriate to the rooms' scale – but with a WOW factor,' says Weiss. Different levels and sources were required for general lighting, bookshelves and display, task and emergency lighting.

'Given the collection's sombre nature, we wanted the reading room and library to feel welcoming, comfortable and non-institutional, >>



Above Winding steps from first floor library to mezzanine
Right Ground floor reception



reflecting the building's origin as a grand, elegant house,' says Weiss.

Warm colour temperatures are specified throughout and fittings at multiple points provide general lighting, casting few shadows. Weiss specified large, sculptural pendants designed by Álvaro Siza and the various lighting circuits ensure easy control of ambience and moods. Bookshelves are lit from above by thin, linear fluorescents and the lighting in the alcoves below the mezzanine helps the structure feel light. Recessed ceiling spotlights and strip lights built into the joinery illuminate books and prevent searching readers casting shadows onto them. Task lighting is controlled from each desk, creating individual work zones and adding to a sense of intimacy. Ceiling-recessed stand-alone LED downlights provide emergency lighting.

In a world where memories can seem short and at a time when fewer of those who remember the Nazi era are alive, this is a fitting home for this essential institution and one which will encourage scholars and the public to enter its doors. ■

Project data

START ON SITE

August 2010

DATE OF COMPLETION

August 2011

GROSS INTERNAL AREA

745m²

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER

Barton Engineers

SERVICES ENGINEER

Peter Deer and Associates

QUANTITY SURVEYOR

Cluttons

PLANNING SUPERVISOR

Gerald Eve

MAIN CONTRACTOR

BW Interiors

FREESTANDING JOINERY

Fiske Interiors

PROJECT MANAGER

Cluttons

CONSERVATION CONSULTANT

Anthony Walker DLG Architects

LISTING STATUS OF ORIGINAL BUILDING

Grade II

OVERALL AREA-WEIGHTED U-VALUE

1.24W/m²K



Entrance hall

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