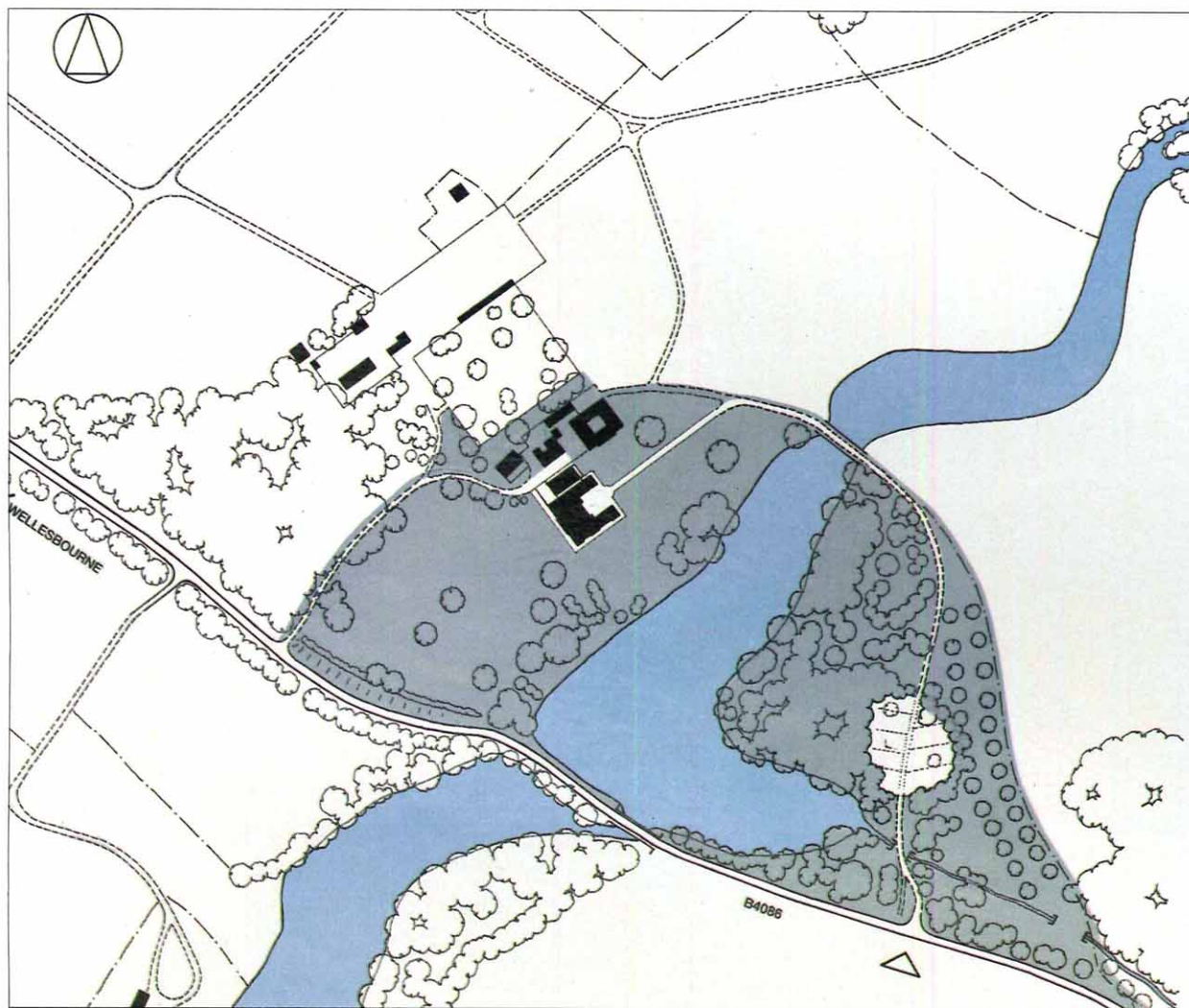




Top left: The new extension fills a gap in a landscape in the neo-classical picturesque tradition. Centre left: The new-build element is set into the hill. Bottom left: Site plan. The house is surrounded by 40 acres (16ha) of Capability Brown park. Right: The two wings extending forward are part of Adam's late 18th-century addition. All photos: Brett Prestidge.



Sense and sensibility

At Compton Verney Stanton Williams has eschewed model railways and wild animals in favour of a sober approach which responds to the English country house tradition, says Robert Bevan

From the opening of Longleat House onwards, visiting country houses has steadily become an obstacle course around a range of knick-knackery masquerading as facilities: children's play areas, model railways, wild animals and rare breeds, plant nurseries, the odd lion or two.

Even when you eventually reach your goal, ticketing, interpretation displays, gift shops, cloakrooms and cafés mean that any chance of meaningfully experiencing the architecture you have come to see is lost. Front-of-house can become instead-of-house facilities.

At Compton Verney in Warwickshire, however, a sober approach to these issues by Stanton Williams has resulted in the exemplary restoration of a grade I listed house to public art gallery use. And by way of achieving this, there is, in addition to the attributed charms of Vanbrugh and Robert Adam's architecture, now the singularly handsome work of Stanton Williams to admire.

Compton Verney was originally built in 1440 and lived in for centuries by the Lords Willoughby de Broke before, in a fit of modernisation, it was remodelled with a 1714 design attributed to Vanbrugh. A new west front was added, facing formal baroque gardens, and a canal was laid out.

Only decades later – in 1760 and 1780 – Robert Adam remodelled the house again. Two new wings with their distinctive corner pavilions were added on the east front. Between them was placed a typically-Adam screen of columns, as used to great effect at

Osterley and Kedleston.

Over the next century the family's fortunes changed and in the 1920s the house was sold, then requisitioned and vandalised by the military in World War II, before being finally left to slide into dereliction.

In 1993 the house and 16ha of Capability Brown landscaping were bought by Peter Moores who established the Compton Verney House Trust to ensure its survival – and to display his own collection of art.

Issues of arrival, and a desire to restore intact the great sequence of rooms free of encroaching tourist facilities, were essential to the strategy. But it was through examining the mansion's past that Stanton Williams found a solution to its future.

In John Soane's Museum, partner in charge Paul Williams found an Adam drawing that clearly showed the house had once had a service wing attached to its north face, where other subordinate buildings still exist: the stables, brew-house and butler's house, and a severe chapel (one of Capability Brown's few architectural projects) are clustered in the picturesque tradition on the slope of the hill. Substantial planting, now lost, once partly screened this "village" and embraced the house, locking it into the landscape.

In Paul Williams' view, the new extension – a contemporary foil to the existing house – restores this relationship by occupying an unsightly gap: "It was almost as if a tooth was missing," he says. Landscape restoration will further

reinforce the composition.

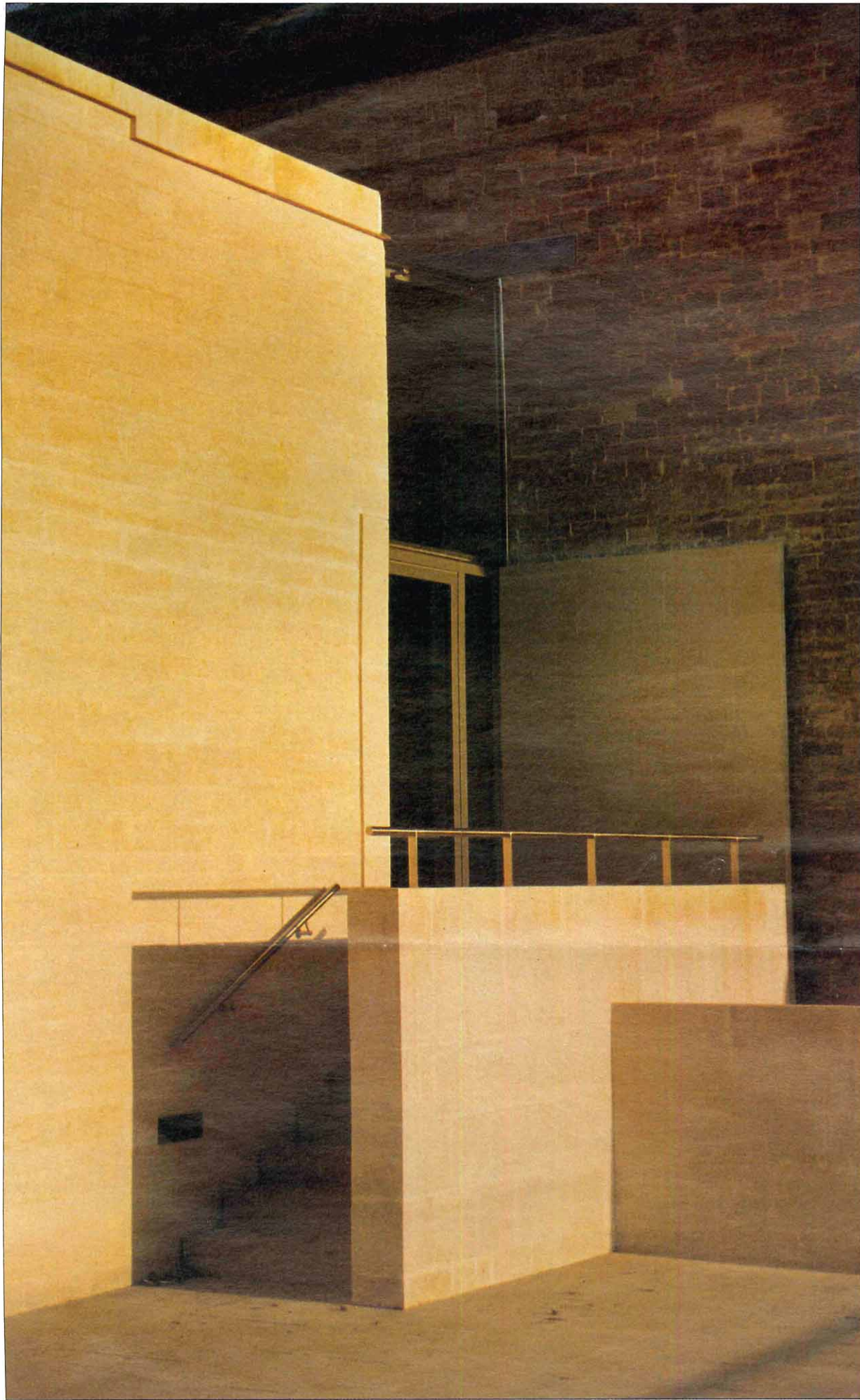
The new building holds a bookshop, public cloakroom, staff changing-rooms, staff catering, goods hoist, kitchen and café, beneath a fully environmentally-controlled temporary exhibitions gallery at first-floor level. The rooms in the mansion proper retain their original proportions without interruption.

The shaping of the visitor's experience begins at the park gates, however. The house is reached on foot from a car park in woods on the far side of the lake, with the house itself gradually revealed in a sequence of oblique views before and after the decorative stone-bridge which winds towards the formal perpendicular approach to the east front.

Visitors enter a door in the north wing rather than through the central main portal. This was a difficult decision to take, given the way that it skews the circulation, but it has meant that the ancillary facilities can be reached directly, without having to traverse the gallery spaces proper.

It also has the direct benefit of keeping an equable curatorial environment which has reduced the need for artificial humidity controls. The thermal mass of the mansion and heat exchangers using lake water have also been employed to optimise performance while minimising intervention.

Once inside the north wing, visitors can move straight through a doorway (created by a dropped window opening) into the glazed-link to the new-build element. Alternatively, they can move directly west into the next gallery ►



Clockwise from bottom left: Section; detail of staircase down to sculpture terrace; the landscape of the slope needs replanting to once again embrace the house; first floor plan; ground floor plan.

room in the sequence.

At present, only phase one of the works is complete and after this summer's preview season the gallery will be closing again to complete the works. Phase one has consisted of the restoration of the house – starting with reroofing the building – and repairs to its fabric carried out in conjunction with conservation architect Rodney Melville & Partners. Cornices have been rerun, windows remade and gib doors created over the existing openings to allow the passage of large artworks.

The floors throughout have been strengthened to take public-gallery loadings with the original floorboards relaid

at ground floor. Rather than attempt a re-creation of an Adam colour-scheme, the whole interior of the mansion has been painted off-white, which, as well as emphasising the airy proportions of the rooms, does not compete with the art. The deep-sashed windows provide a strong side-light to the galleries.

In addition, the first phase has involved the creation of a range of rooms for an exhibition of folk art on the first floor of the north wing and, crucially, the creation of a new vertical circulation core that integrates the new building with the existing one.

Phase two will involve the restoration of the upper floors of the mansion to

gallery use, plugging in services and replacing a Victorian staircase, where the south wing meets the main hall, with a glass and steel insertion reflecting the vocabulary of the rest of the new work and interlocking the old and new work even more thoroughly.

The massing and form of the extension has been worked through meticulously by, according to Williams, a combination of rational problem-solving and an intuitive feeling for what goes with the grain of the building.

The extension is consciously subservient to the four-square main house which is its constant reference point. The new-build element is set back from

the corner pavilions and lowered into the hill. The glazed link articulates the 1m drop in level between them.

Overall, the height of the extension lines up with the principal entablature of the mansion, and the lower elements following through string courses. Further degrees of subtlety follow.

This is especially evident on the west, garden frontage where the historical and the new engage without pressing their attentions on each other. A glass strip articulates the changing relationship.

Here the extension incorporates fragments of an earlier garden wall in its fabric below a new sculpture terrace. Where the wall once ran into the quoins it has

now been reined back; the remaining scars are worn as medals.

Every move in the geometry is marked. For instance, the end of the vertical blade of stone concealing steps down to the sculpture terrace is reflected in a thickening of the parapet string above. And at an even greater magnification, the finish of the sun-catching white lias stone also registers changes in direction, with tooled ashlar giving way to unworked stone.

It is all about creating a new order that, in its own terms, responds to the classical order of the mansion, articulating hierarchy and, as Williams says, "allowing the building to get down to the

ground".

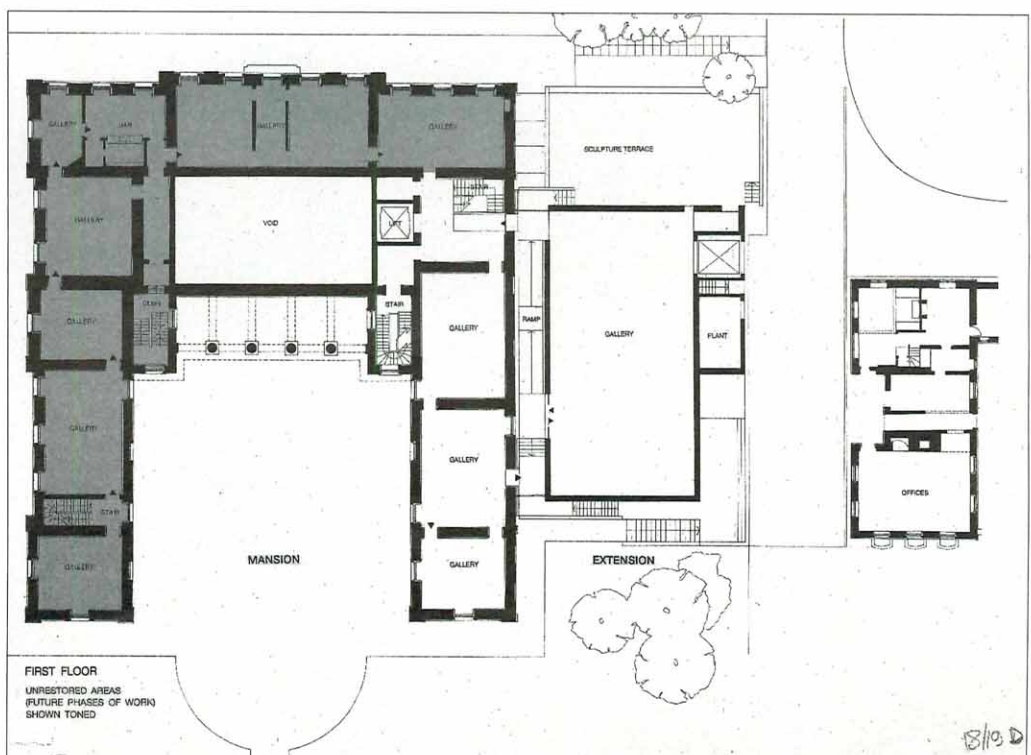
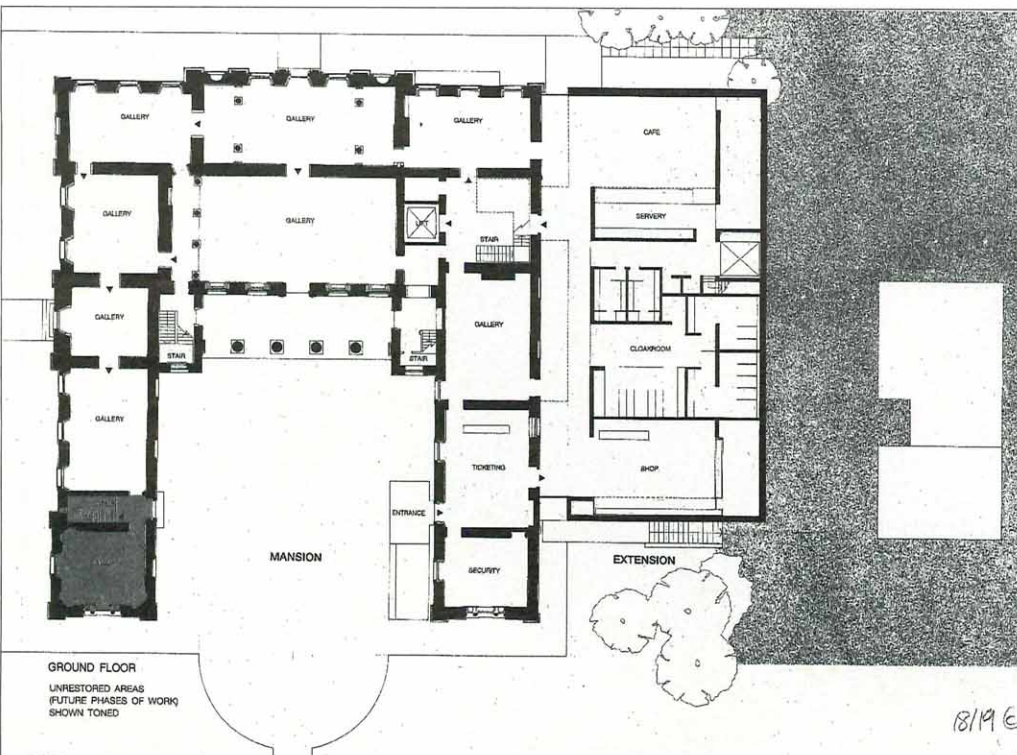
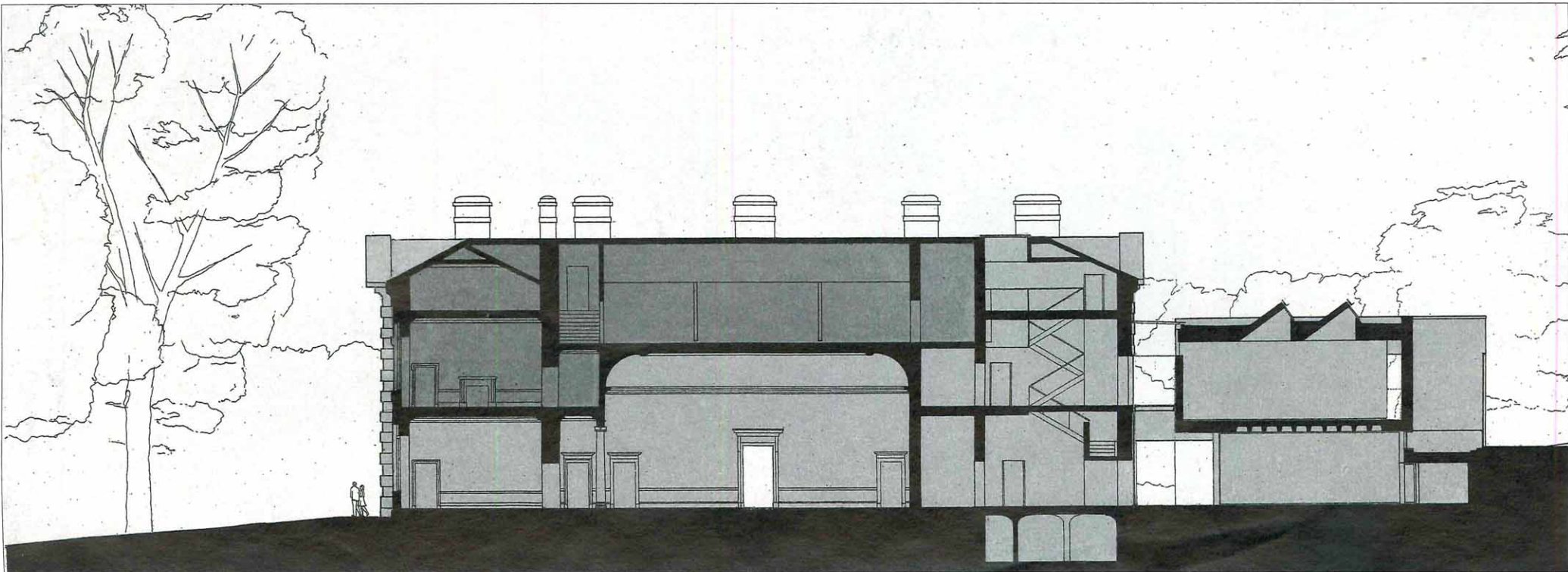
This interface between the old and new is harmonious yet forceful and one of the rare recent examples of such successful grafts in this country. In Italy they happen all the time, but here such dialogues are few and even then are usually embedded within or between buildings (such as the Sackler galleries at the Royal Academy). On this occasion the authorities were unusually flexible.

"If applause should be given," says Williams, "it is to English Heritage and the Stratford-upon-Avon planners for their foresight. They were brilliant."

Scarpa's Castle Vecchio is the celebrated precursor and an influence which

Williams readily acknowledges. It is not just the layering, it's the ability to draw people through space, to slow the pace and create meditative places, that Williams appreciates.

Internally, the circulation below the frameless glazing emphasises the organisational separation of the existing house and the uses on both floors of the new wing. At ground floor a sequence of spaces opens off the north side of this promenade: café, cloakroom, etc. Visitors are then guided between the stone wall on their left and the concrete wall on their right into the mansion proper, before returning to the first floor of the new wing via the ►



Top right: The restored mansion has an off-white painted interior as a neutral foil to the art.
Below right: The white space in the new wing gives an even purer top northern light and more wall space.
Top far right: The glass ramp below the frameless glass link roof is supported on bearings in a stonework course channel.
Below centre right: Glass balustrades hang down the staircases; a glass pathway leads into the new wing.
Below far right: A promenade space below the ramp links the ancillary uses: cloakroom, café and shop to the north.



new steel and glass circulation core.
The temporary exhibition space at first-floor level provides a "purer" and more environmentally controlled environment than the main house. In deliberate contrast the light is more even and its walls largely uninterrupted by openings. Views out to the west and the evening sun are, however, created at various points in the new wing.
From the new-stair core, a glazed section of floor leads at first floor from the staircase back towards the link. Then turning through 90 degrees, there is a glass ramp with stone-faced landings leading to the first-floor temporary exhibitions gallery. The ramp is cantilevered off the concrete wall, leaving a discreet gap in front of the beautifully-modelled lias of the mansion's external wall.
Above your head, the glazing rests on loose bearings in a slot created by cutting out a course of stone. From below, the soles of feet press against the glass treads, a commentary on the baroque drama of Vanbrugh's work (Adam's alterations removed the grand staircase of 1714). More practically, this zone allows differential movement between the old and new building elements.
Given this textural richness and layering of man-made materials, it seems appropriate that the first exhibition in the largely top-lit white room is the heroic detritus of the Boyle Family's urban floorscapes. The fascination for layering, the romantic abstraction, and technical precision are as perfect a foil for the smooth perfection of Stanton Williams' gallery as the house is to the house itself.
It is difficult to know whether to suggest waiting to see it – when it has mellowed more and the landscape bloomed – or to go now, before the crowds come and while it is in its pristine splendour. Or, you could always go twice.

Architect: Stanton Williams. **Conservation architect:** Rodney Melville & Partners. **Structural engineer:** Gifford & Partners. **Services engineer:** Oscar Faber. **Landscape architect:** Cass Associates. **Client architect:** Jim O'Donahue. **Traffic consultant:** Oscar Faber TPA.

