

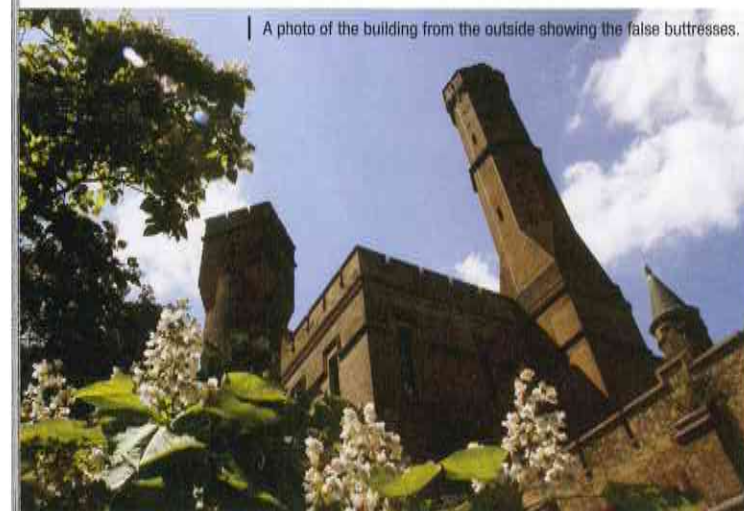
URBAN CLIMBER

FROM WELLS TO WALLS

by Efuia Uiterwijk

I open a small hatch in the floor, the dank smell of 150 years and no daylight smacking me in the face as I look down into 12m of darkness. I can hear the sound of water trickling between the grinding impact drill of the setters removing holds and the heavy techno playing on the stereo. This is a place with atmosphere. Feeling as if I were in an art house film, trying not to lose my footing on the rusting metal stairs that are barely lit by my head torch, I step down into the area underneath the main lead walls at The Castle, where I am Centre Manager. This area was a collection of 12m deep wells used when The Castle was a water pumping station and decommissioned in the middle of the 20th century, more than 100 years after they were built. The reason I am going down now is we are looking at how we can fit our new tall walls around the existing beams and if a metre-wide chimney set into one of the walls would make a good climb.

A photo of the building from the outside showing the false buttresses.



One of the wells is full of water and provides an inky, seemingly bottomless soloing opportunities? The others are dry and the possibilities here seem endless. As you snake your way around under the existing climbing areas at The Castle you discover a myriad of secret chambers, tunnels and pipes. Many of them have high, vaulted ceilings in beautiful Victorian brick which glows a pale yellow in the dim light. This is a magical and eerie place. Part of our goal is to retain some of that magic when we develop these areas. Of course they need to be clean and comfortable and will house climbing walls designed and built by a top national setter and a British climbing team member. These are going to be built by climbers for climbers. But we want to respect the building and to be sensitive both to the historical legacy and to the environment.

In 1971 The Castle was close to being razed; the Metropolitan Water Board applied to the local planning department for permission to demolish the now redundant building and develop the site. A letter written in 1972 to the Department of the Environment by

Harry Pitchforth, Clerk to the Board, describes The Castle as 'completely useless for any purpose connected with the water industry' and as 'a very expensive lavatory for the local pigeons'. Luckily it was saved from being turned to rubble by strong local opposition and gained listed status in 1974. We took it over in 1993 and since 1995 we have been a climbing wall with a unique and very special ambience. A grade II* listed pumping station built in 1854 lends its spaces well to the adventurous nature of climbers. It also forces us to get creative with our walls. We have just received planning permission to develop the unused areas of the building and, in addition to converting the wells to tall walls, we also have planned a whole new 400m² of bouldering above the Castle Café, 40m of traversing, a circuits room and a new outdoor boulder park.

In the main new bouldering area we will create a freestanding boulder on a new floor above the openings where the beams of the pumping engines below used to protrude. On a quiet morning you can imagine an echo of the cast iron rocker beams thundering a huge arc up through the air. There were 6 engines of such size that the engine house had to be constructed around them and they had to be cut up to be removed (long before our time). The first 2 engines were known as 'the lion' and 'the lioness' and pumped filtered water directly to the covered reservoir at Claremont Square in Islington. Each pair of engines was coupled into

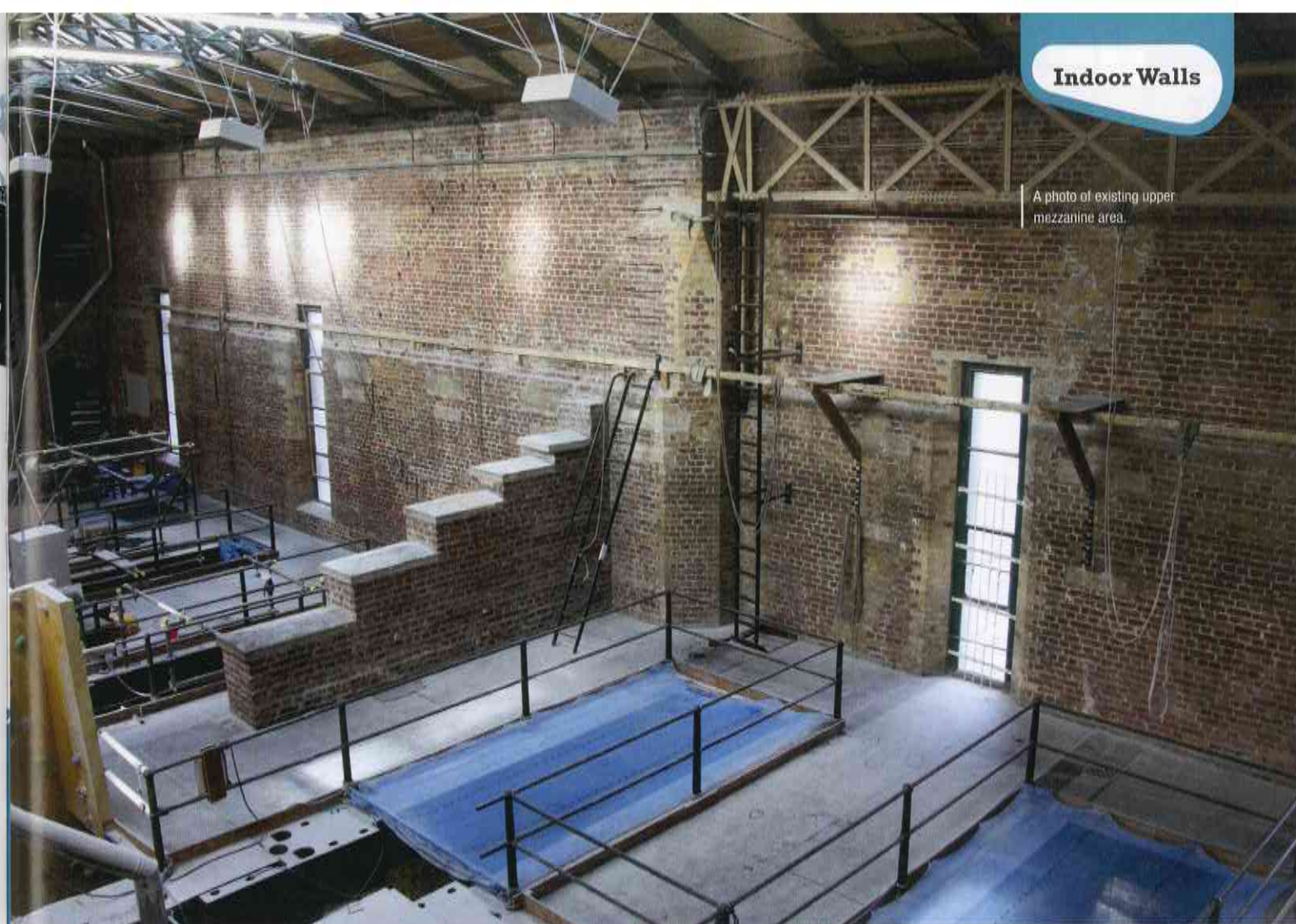


An artist's impression of the outdoor boulder park.

"This is a place with atmosphere. Feeling as if I were in an art house film, trying not to lose my footing on the rusting metal stairs that are barely lit by my head torch, I step down into the area underneath the main lead walls at The Castle"

Indoor Walls

A photo of existing upper mezzanine area.



one crank shaft with a common flywheel. Assembled from ten cast iron segments, these flywheels were 7.6m (25ft) in diameter and weighed 35 tons. If you look on the outside of the building, along the Green Lanes elevation, you can see some false buttresses which are hollow to accommodate the wheels. These wheels were mounted on large beams, one of which forms the front of the café (have a look next time you are there).

This feels like quite a responsibility. How can we protect this historical landmark, best use this space for creating exciting new climbing facilities and, at the same time, endeavor to make this leaky old building as green and environmentally friendly as possible. For the latter we have planned a major overhaul to the roof (amongst other measures), insulating it and installing solar panels, all without affecting the architectural character of this important landmark. We are going to be undertaking the developments over the coming few years. The first phase will be the new bouldering above the café which we plan to open early in 2013. The centre will remain open throughout our building works (noisy work will happen before we open) so you can watch our progress. And slowly we will be revealing some of the secret tunnels and unusual spaces that this incredible old building has to offer.

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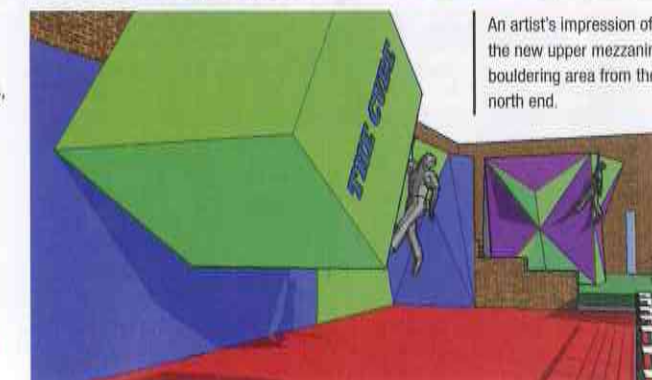
The old rocker beams are cut up (historical photo).



An artist's impression of the new upper mezzanine bouldering area from the south end.

My intention, as far as I can, is to help steer this project in such a way that as well as new, world class climbing facilities, we will respect this piece of London's industrial heritage and retain some of the mysterious atmosphere that pervades the air even whilst the hum and bustle of climbers taking on new challenges reverberates through the building.

Extracts from our heritage statement (with permission from Cook Townsend Chartered Architects) are in *italics*.



An artist's impression of the new upper mezzanine bouldering area from the north end.