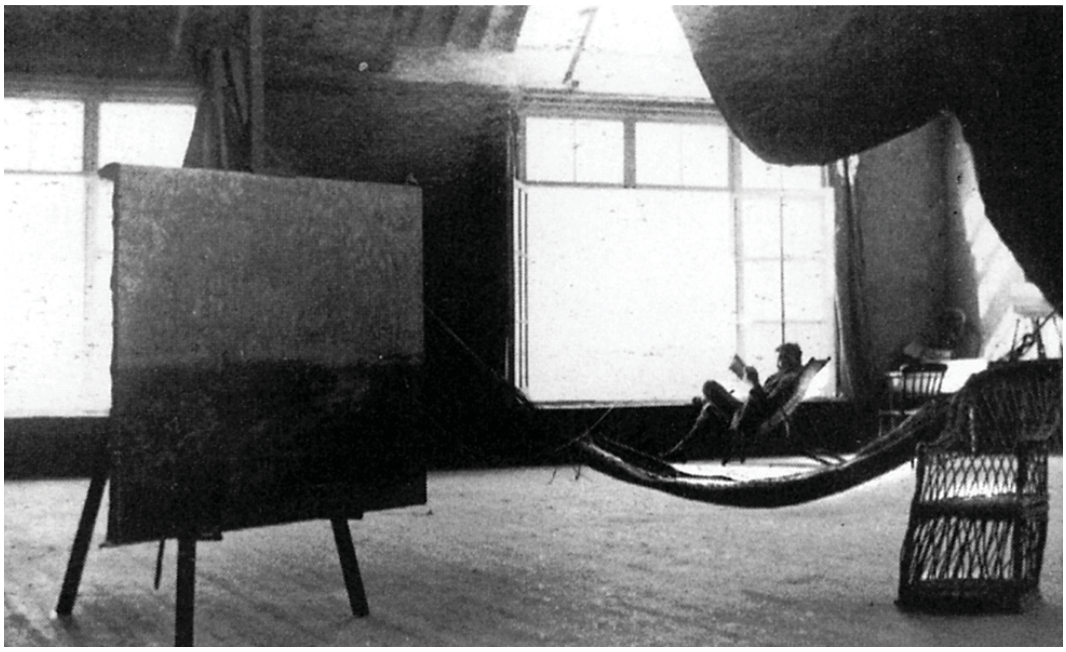
Long & Kentish architects

Porthmeor artists' studios
St Ives, Cornwall
The Architectural Project



Site plan

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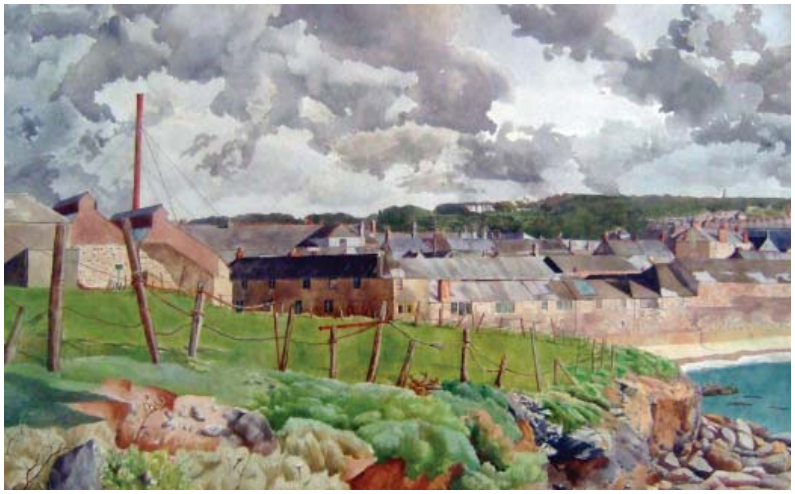
View of Porthmeor Beach, Piazza and Barnaloft from the Island, Balmford



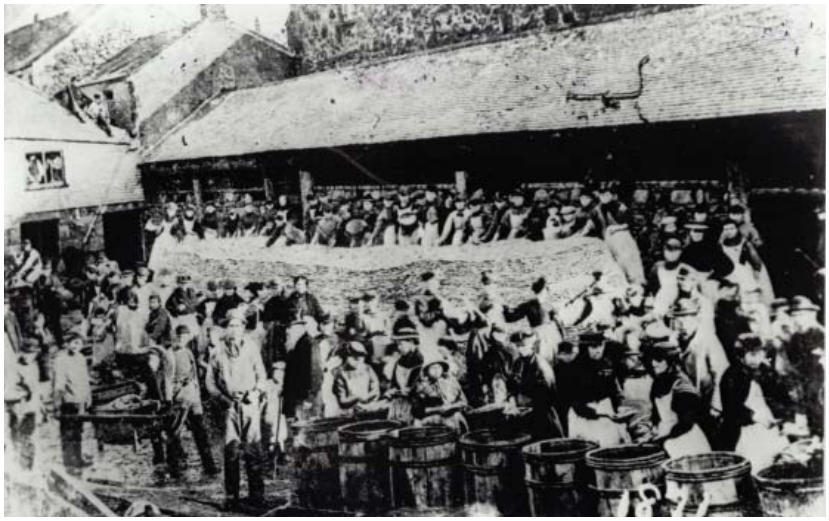
View of Porthmeor Beach, Piazza and Barnaloft from the Island, MacLean

View of Porthmeor Beach and the Island from Tate cafe

1 Porthmeor Studios

Porthmeor Studios are best appreciated from the beach, where they loom like a stranded whale over the surfers. It is a remarkable building; unique, precious and vulnerable. At dusk, when the slate roof planes start to fade into the evening sky, and the lights come on behind the large studio windows, the special nature of this building becomes clear and its survival among the holiday flats seems most poignant.

It is no accident that the Tate Gallery is located near this last surviving example of a building type that once ran the length of Porthmeor Beach. It is a building type that brought together the two traditional industries of St. Ives: fishing and painting.



Maid Betsy's 1871

Dandy Dick in his loft 1905

Julius Olsson in his studio

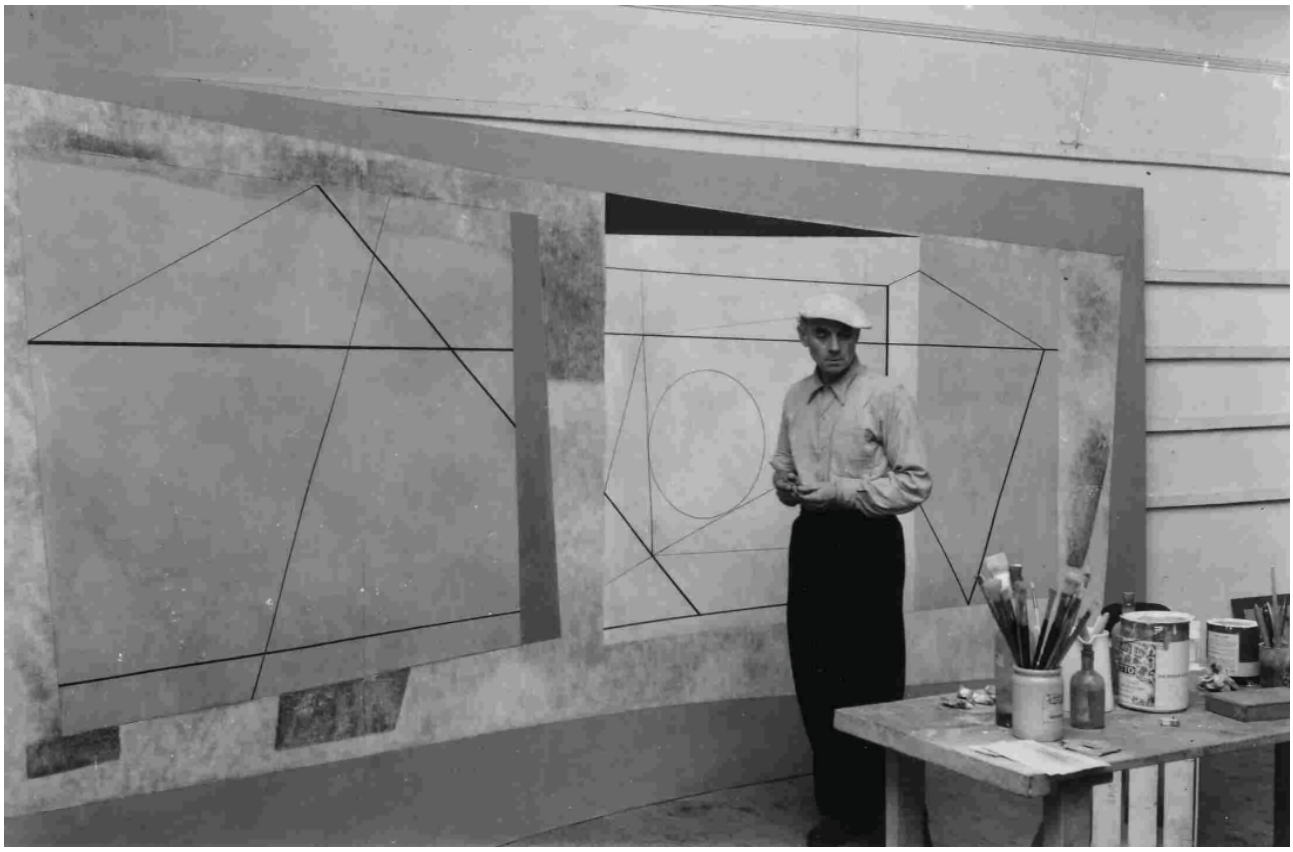
2 History

The pilchard industry was at the heart of St. Ives' fortunes in the 19th century, and the sea wall constructed by Smeaton to control the shifting beach sand provided the fishermen with a place to develop their cellars, with net lofts above. It was Whistler and Sickert in the 1880's who remarked on the quality of light in St. Ives and in a very short period of time, net lofts were converted into (or replaced by) studios. By 1898, Porthmeor Studios were basically as they are today, with fishermen pressing pilchards in the cellars, and painters filling the loft above.

With the opening of the St. Ives School of Painting in the 1930's, the third occupant of the building was in place, and all three have operated happily together to the present day.

In 1949, the studios were struggling, and responding to a local campaign, the Arts Council supported their purchase. Since then, they have been managed by the Borlase Smart John Wells Trust.

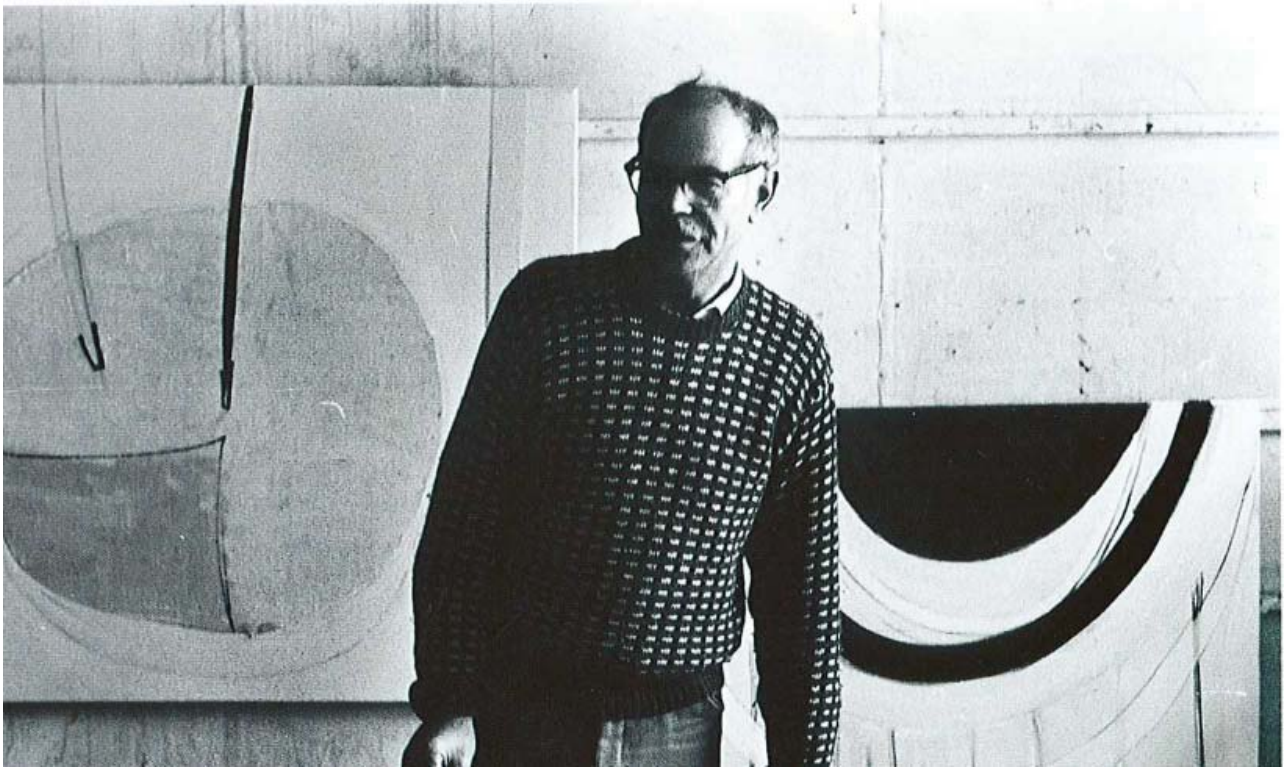
Leonard Fuller in the School of Painting 1944



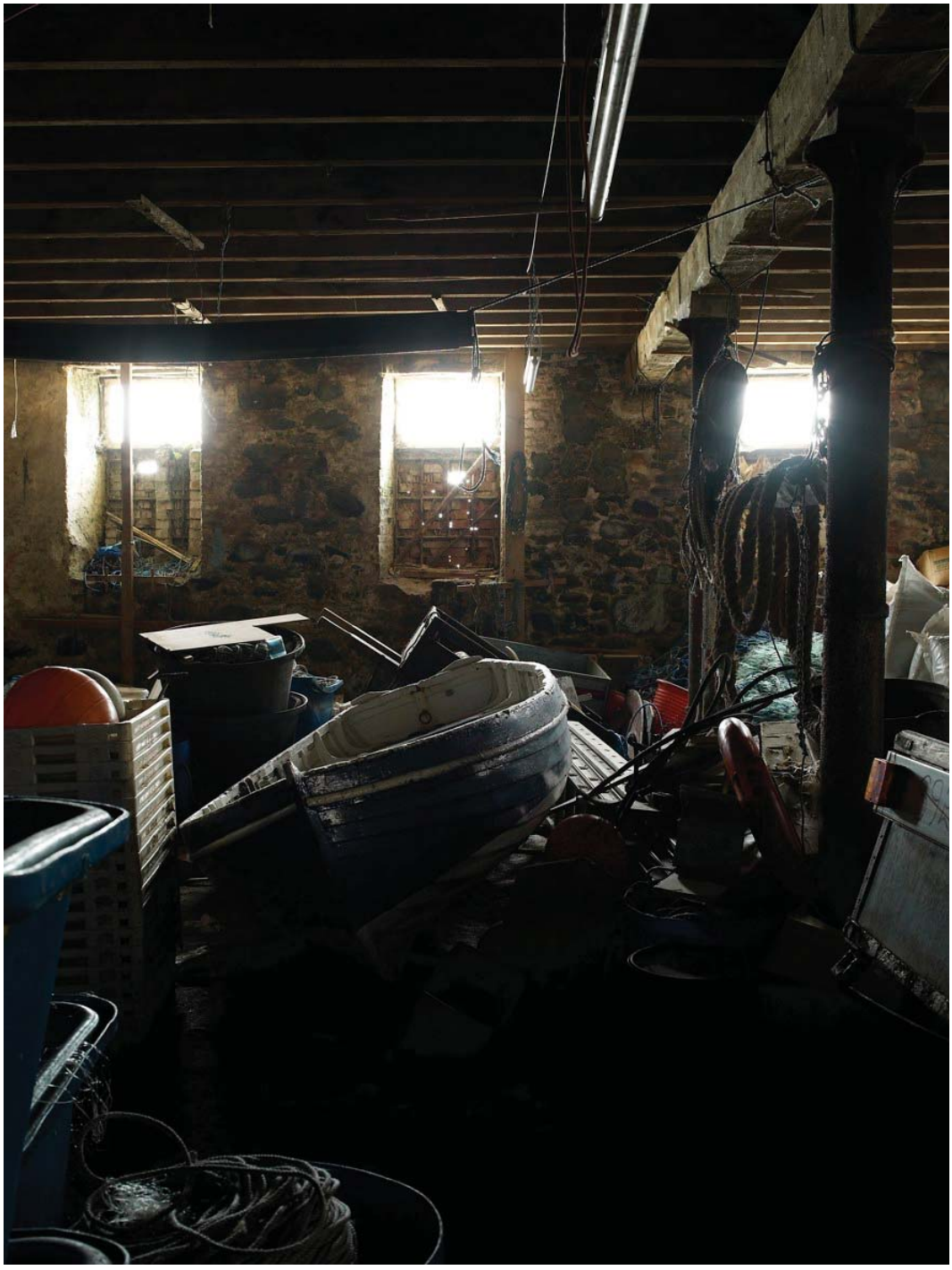
Ben Nicholson with mural 1951

Over the years, the studios have been used by a remarkable list of painters. Starting with Olsson. Smart, and Fuller. In the 1950's and 60's, the Porthmeor artists were known internationally: Ben Nicholson was followed closely by the "Middle Generation" of Terry Frost, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, Patrick Heron, and Sandra Blow. St Ives was visited regularly by the New York Galleries, by the critic Clement Greenberg, by Mark Rothko, and there were entirely plausible references to the "New York-St. Ives axis" in painting taking over from Paris as the centre of the painting world. It is this legacy, and this unbroken activity that brought the Tate to Porthmeor Beach, and their artist-in-residence continues to use the studio once used by Nicholson and Heron.

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham



Terry Frost



Fishermen's cellar 2

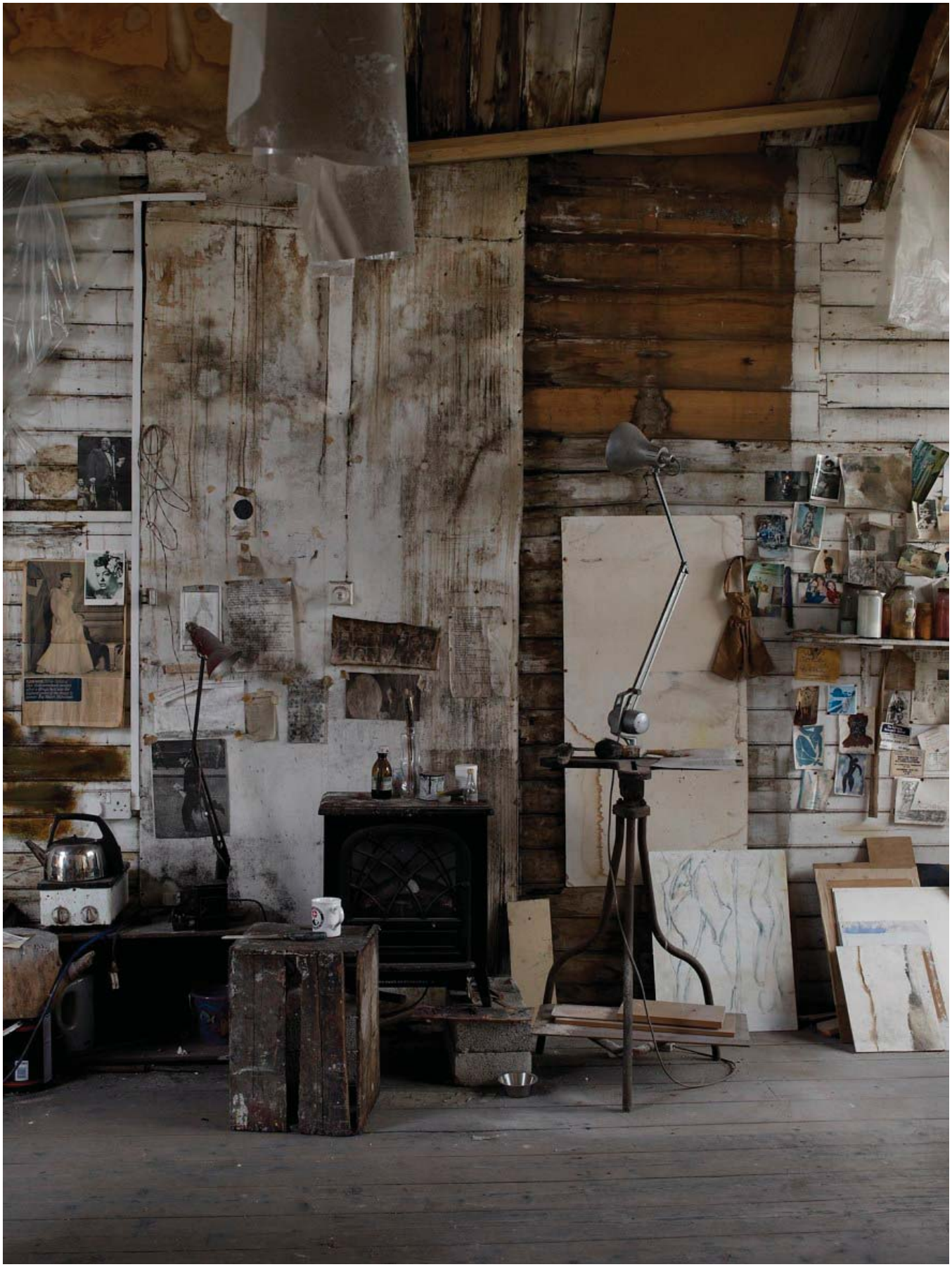
Studio 3

The main studio in the School of Painting

3 Today

Now the studios are seriously threatened once again, and their status as a Grade II* Listed Building will not in itself save them. This is a timber frame building battered by Atlantic gales and the shifting sands of the beach, and unable to raise adequate money for maintenance through the rents from painters and fishermen. The roof has been patched and repaired over the years, but it is now vulnerable at many points, and water is causing serious damage in a number of studios. Two of the large studio windows have blown in during gales causing havoc with the paintings inside.

The aim of this project is to save this precious building from destruction, and to expand its activities to ensure that its future life is sustainable.



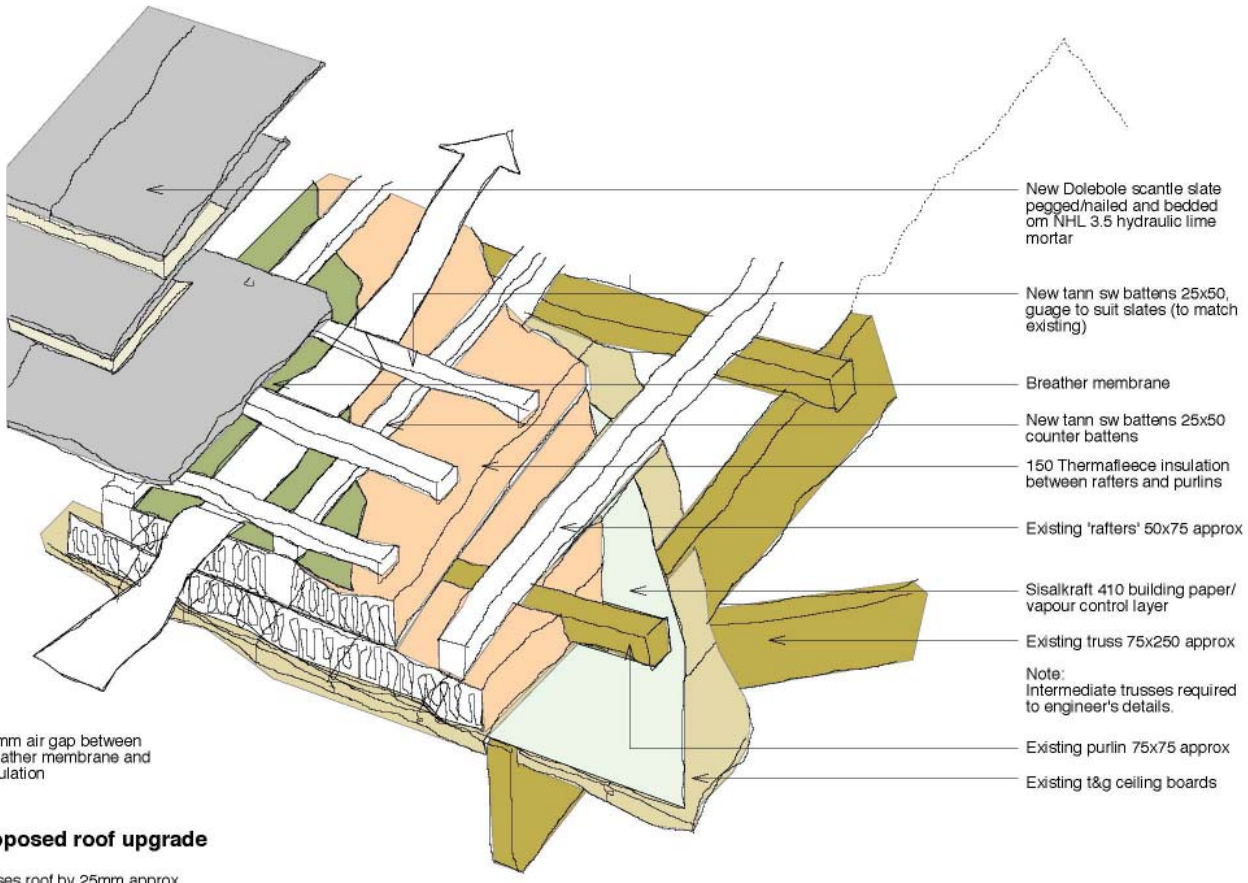
Studio 2

4 The architectural project

There are two threads to the project:

1 Repair and restoration of the fabric to ensure its integrity and improve fire separation and thermal insulation (without changing its character).

2 Local remodelling to improve access, provide for public enjoyment of the building, and increase revenue to ensure the future maintenance will be sustainable.



Proposed roof upgrade

- raises roof by 25mm approx.
- full fill insulation - maximum U-value
- airtight
- breathable
- hygroscopic insulation

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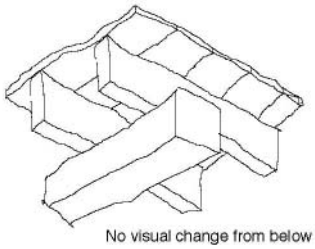
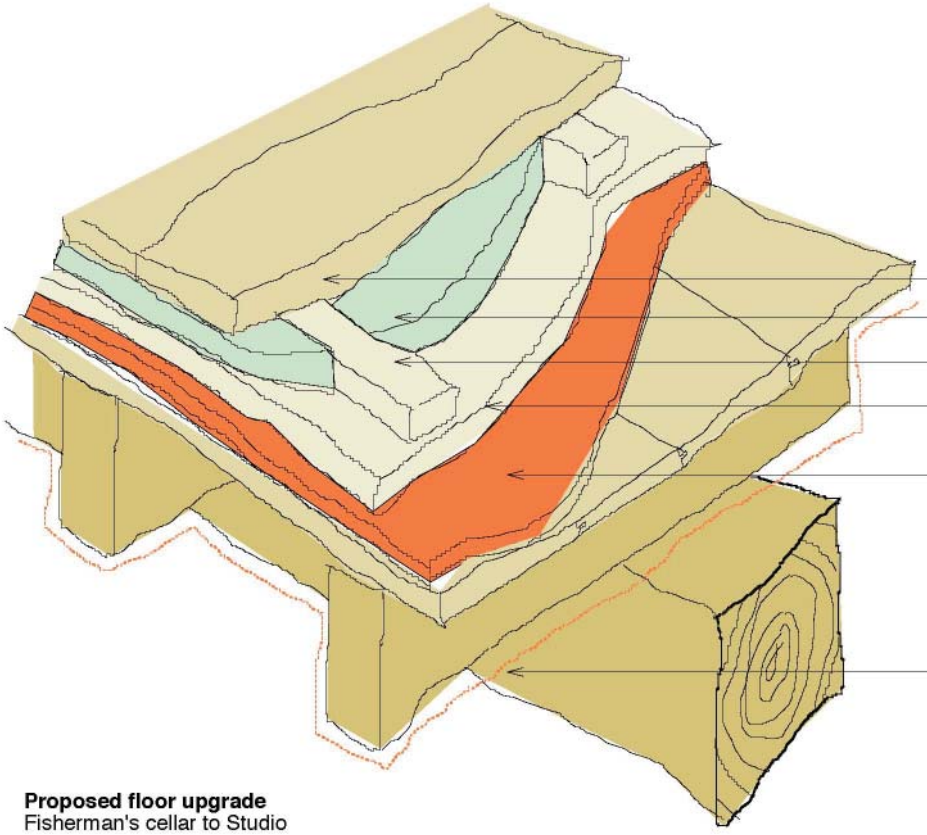


No visual change from below



Proposed floor upgrade
Fisherman's cellar to Studio

- some improvement in sound reduction
- some improvement in thermal insulation
- 60min fire
- minimal disruption to ex fabric
- appearance remains unchanged below

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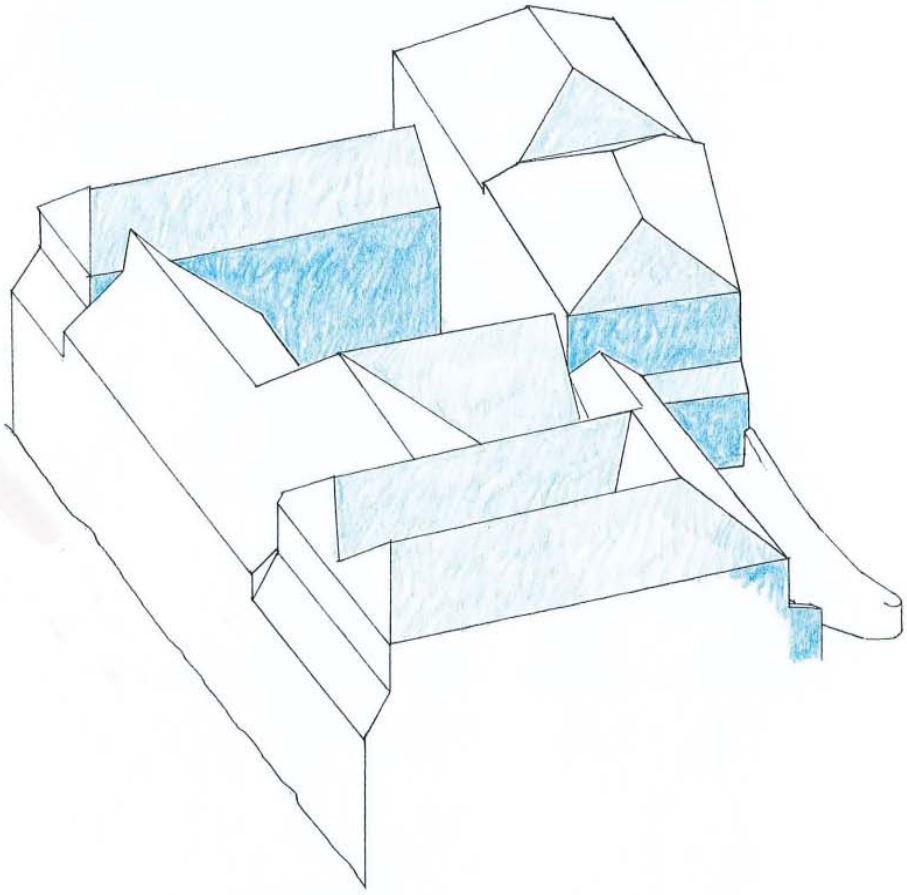
5 Repair

Methods have been proposed for repairing the building while keeping the character and fabric as unchanged as possible. A new wet laid Delabole scantle slate roof is proposed over the whole building. This will preserve its original appearance and give it a long life solution to the problems of water penetration. New insulation will be installed from the outside, leaving the internal wall claddings untouched.

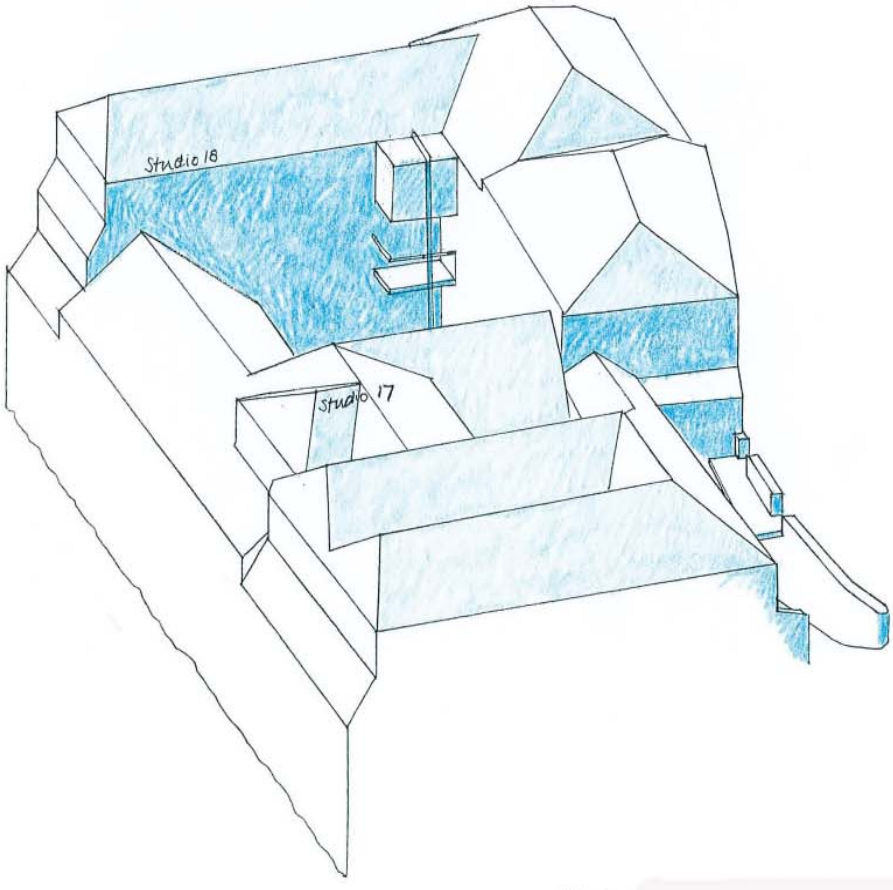
The windows will be preserved wherever possible and the connections between frame and wall strengthened. Where mullions need to be replaced, the existing windows will be used as a pattern, The plastic skylights will be replaced with traditional patent glazing.

Fire separation between the cellars and the studios will be installed above the existing ground floor boards to avoid any change to the visible cellar structure and materials. A new boarded floor will be installed at Ground Floor level to match the existing board types and sizes.

This strategy for repairs has been submitted with the Listed Building application, and approved in principle.



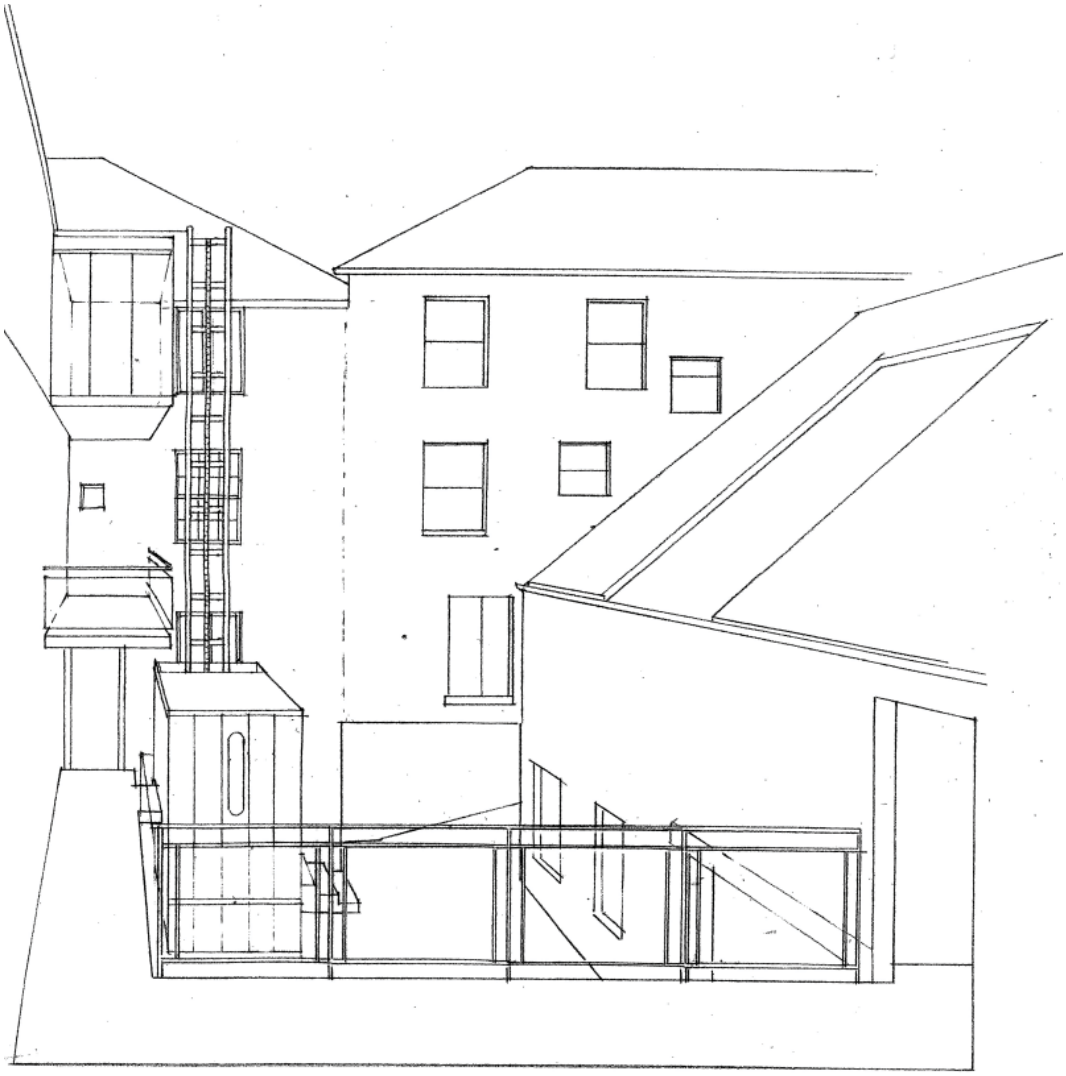
Exisiting aerial view



Proposed aerial view showing new lift and step free access from road

6 Access

No floor level in Porthmeor Studios is currently accessible to wheelchairs. The slight raising of the ground floor level (described above) will deal with ground level access at the east end, and a new bridge over the fishermen's slipway will provide access from the street at the west end.



View of courtyard showing new lift and step free access to studios

An industrial hoist, located in the courtyard of the studios to avoid disrupting the building, will give lift access to all levels except the cellars (which retain their autonomy and their exclusive use of the courtyard level). Only two of the private studios will remain inaccessible to disabled users, and all of the publicly accessible areas will have good access

Existing view from Porthmeor Beach

Proposed photomontage view from Porthmeor Beach

7 Additions

The poor state of repair of the Porthmeor Studios results from the lack of funds for repair. The rents charged do not cover the need for repairs, and the burden is bound to be heavy in a timber frame building facing the full force of Atlantic gales.

There are only two ways of dealing with this: putting rents up or finding more uses and more tenants. The former would start to exclude the talented local artists for whom the building has always been a haven and an inspiration.

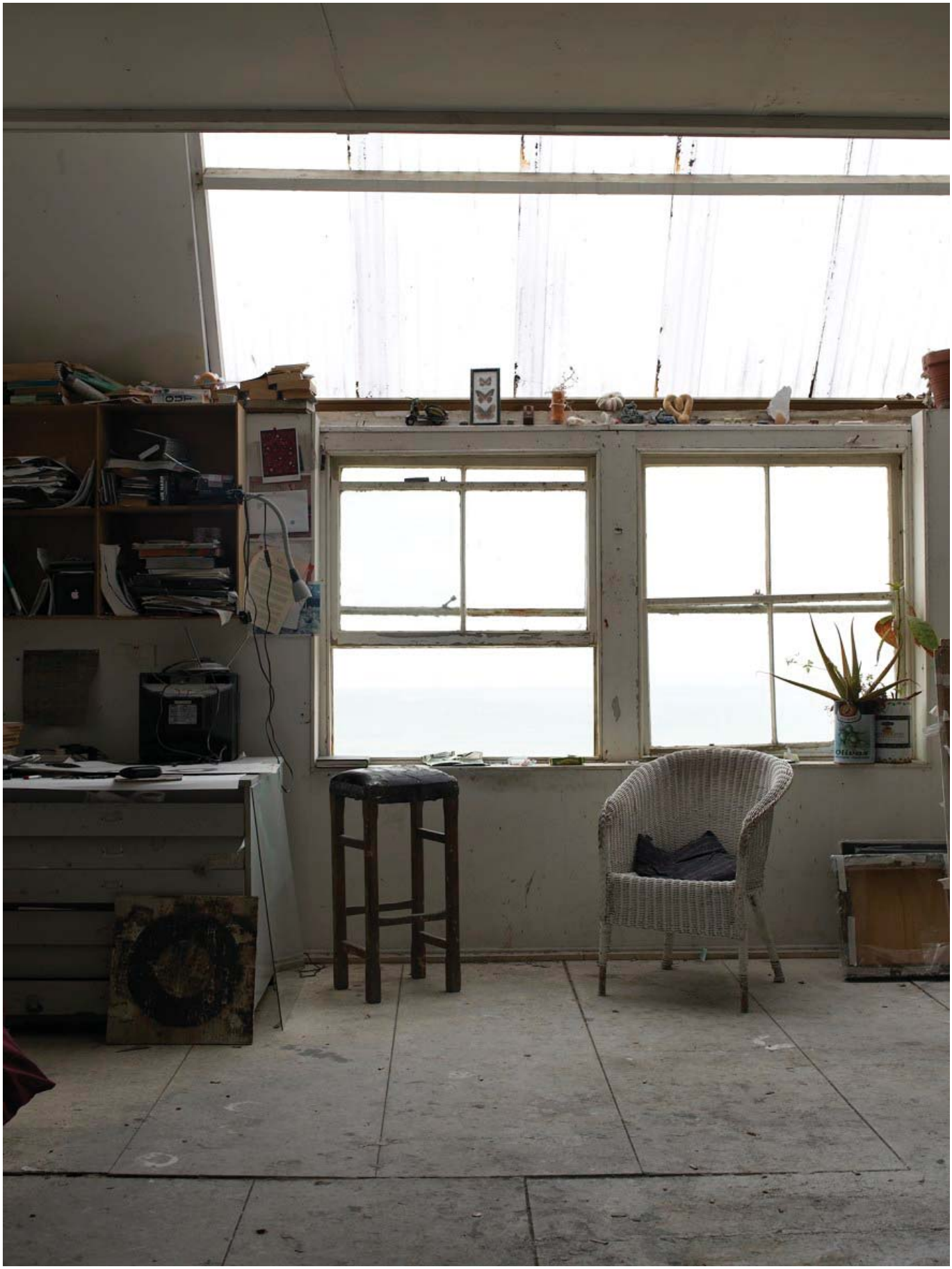
The project therefore has addressed the problem by suggesting the addition of two new studios in the roof, and the reconfiguration of the building to create four more. The new studios are seen as a natural extension of the organic growth pattern of a building which has grown and changed over the years.

Roof plan with new additions shaded blue

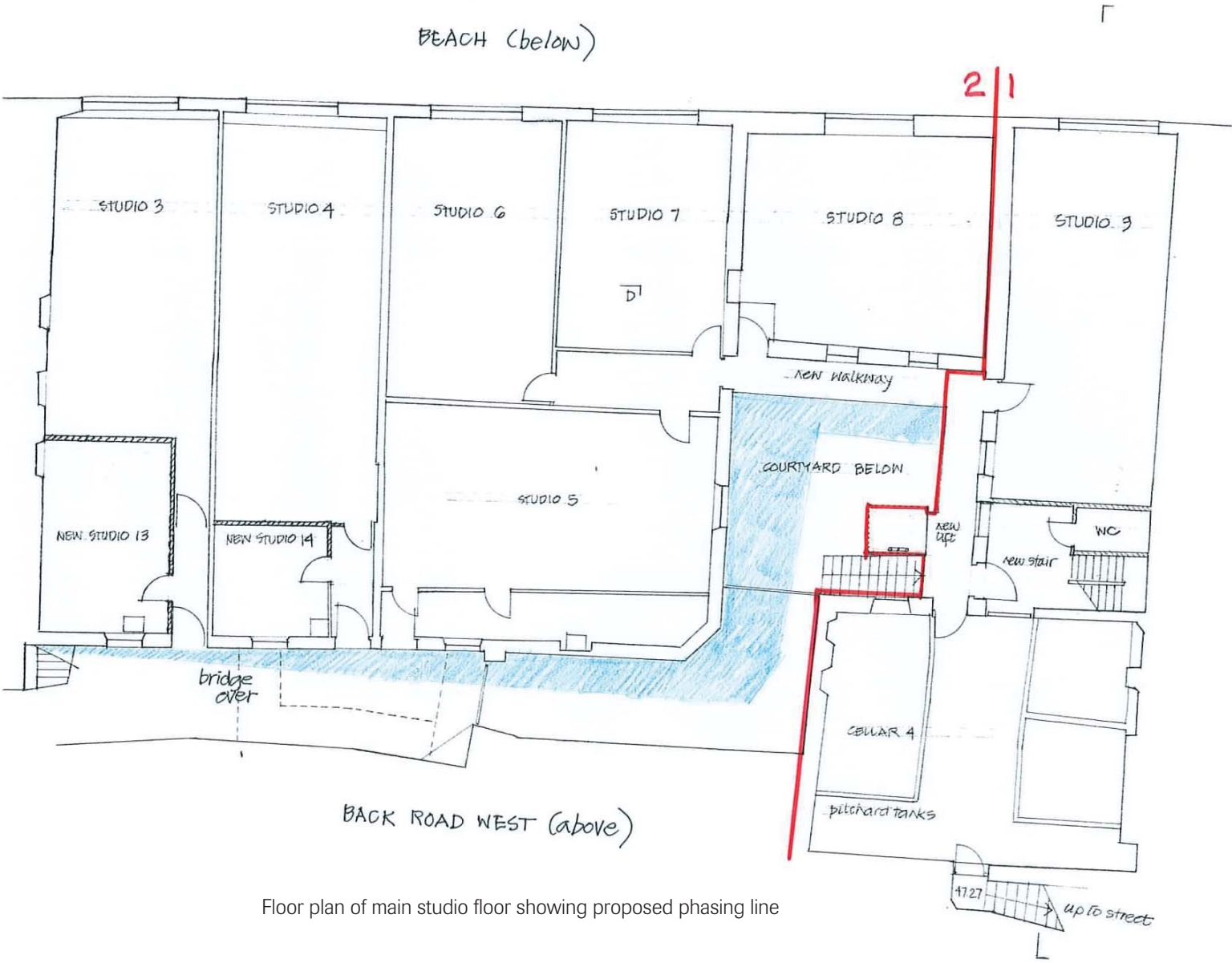
The extra space allows the painting school to concentrate its activities on the (newly accessible) top floor, and it frees up part of the ground level to take on for the first time a full programme of public exhibition and education, and incidentally to give local residents the astonishing “through the looking glass “ experience of walking in from a tight village street and finding themselves in the breathtaking environment of one of studios looking directly onto the Atlantic swells.

View of entrance to School of Painting from Back Road West

Steps up to entrance to studios 1 and 2



Studio 9

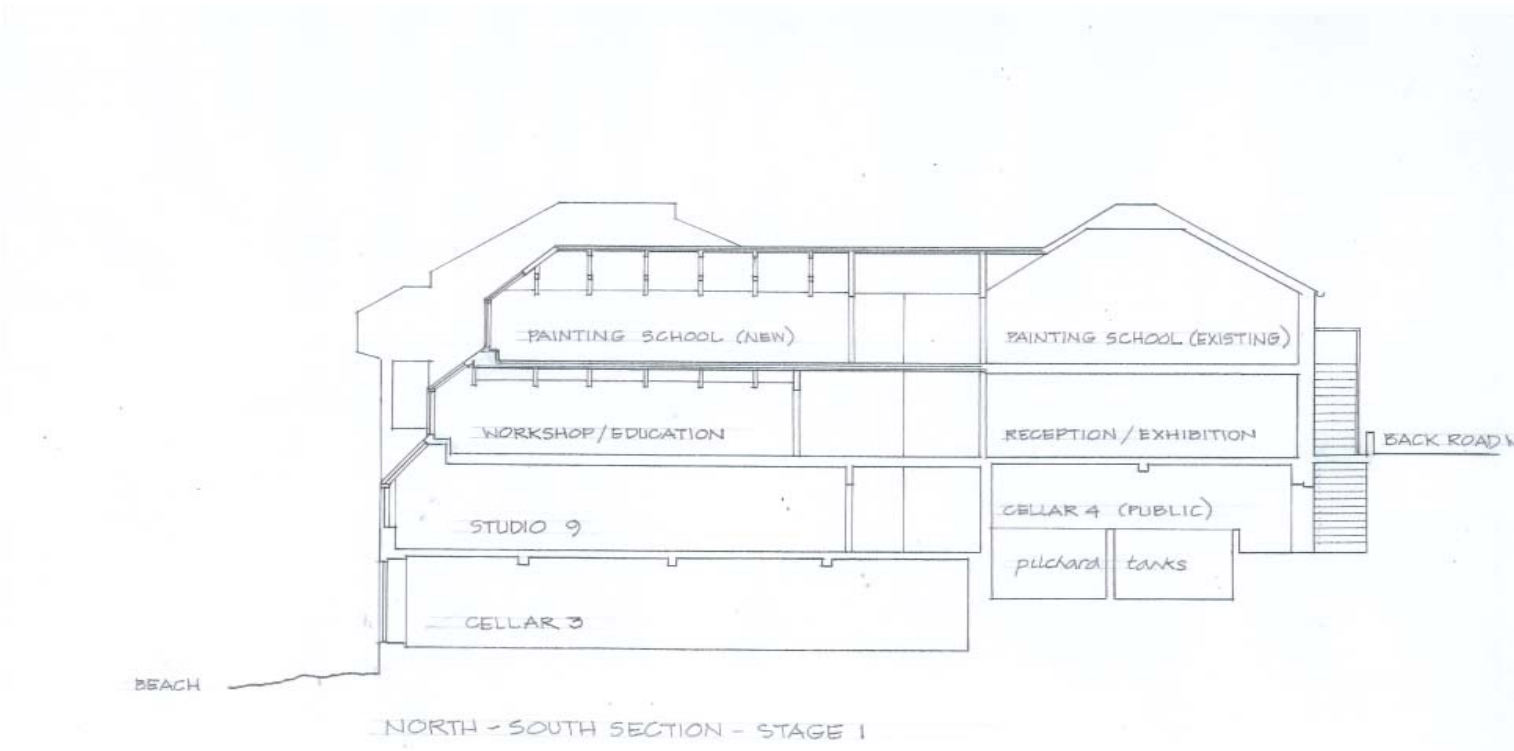


Floor plan of main studio floor showing proposed phasing line

8 Phasing and Sea Change

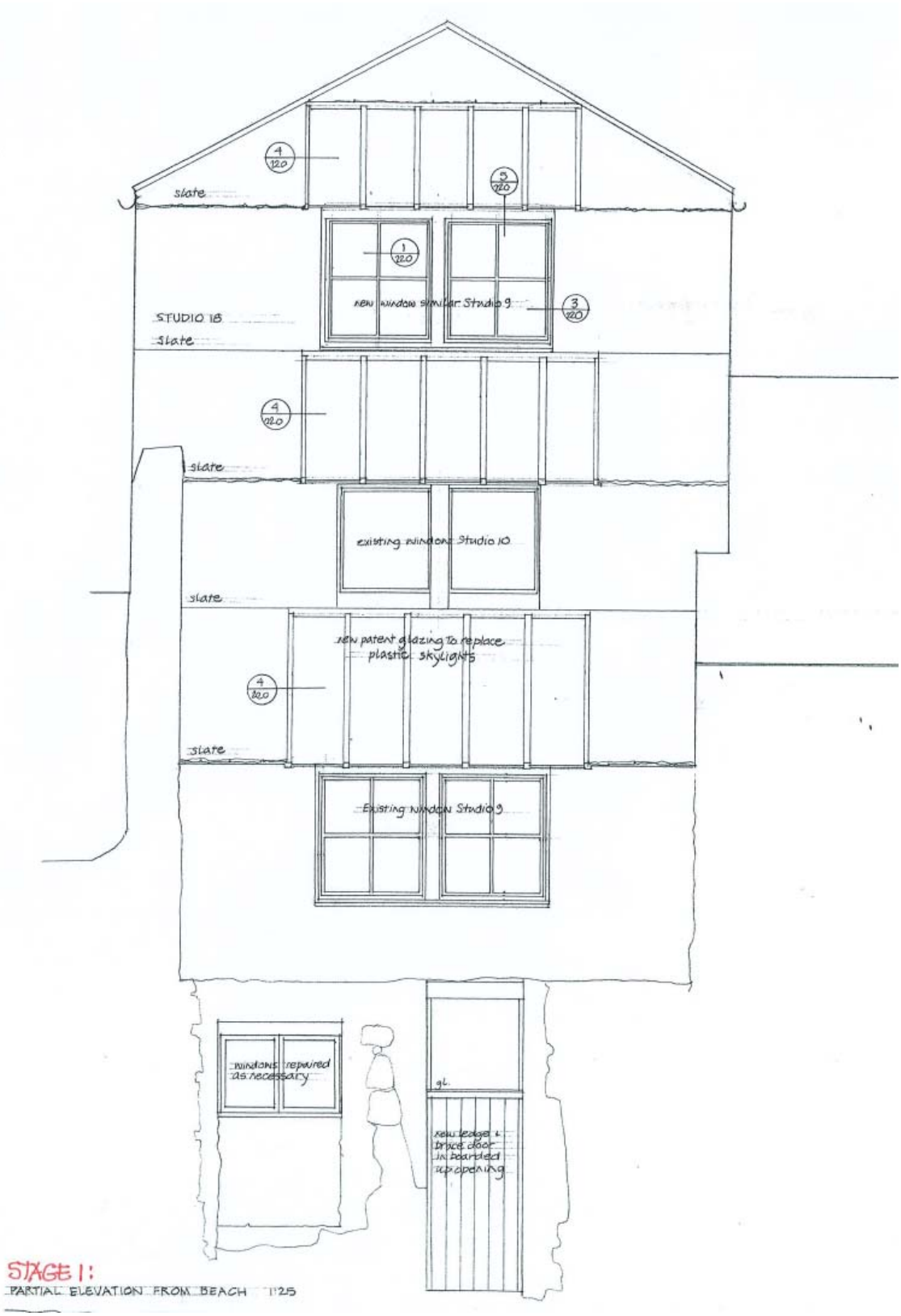
It is intended to do the building work in one extended contract if the funding becomes available on a reasonable timetable, but we have taken care to phase it to ensure that no part of the building will be started without funding for that part in place.

The first phase will be the east end of the building, which takes the form of a vertical slice from top to bottom, and includes two of the fishermen's cellars (including the one which they have agreed could be open to the public), two restored private studios, the two studios to be used by the School of Painting, and all of public space, constituting a reception and display area facing the street and a workshop/ studio facing the beach. The lift will be installed in that phase to give access to all levels (except for the non-public cellar).



North- south section through proposed phase 1

This phase will start and firmly establish the intentions for the repair, restoration, and rejuvenation of this beautiful and important building. It will keep the fishermen and artists operating where they have always been, and will guarantee their future role in the activities of St. Ives. It will keep this unique place and its remarkable history alive.



North beach elevation of proposed phase 1