Tower Hamlets' transport manager Ivor Pryke has just ordered a consignment of new boots for the borough's vehicle fitters. The fitters' old boots, saturated with years of oil and dirt, are leaving marks on the pristine floors of the department's new, purpose-designed workshop building in London's Docklands. Bright, colourful, warm and airy, the transport complex marks an evolutionary step forward from the department's former basement garage premises. When complete, it will bring together on one site the dirty, physical side of the business with social and office accommodation, with bathing and laundering facilities at the interface of the two.

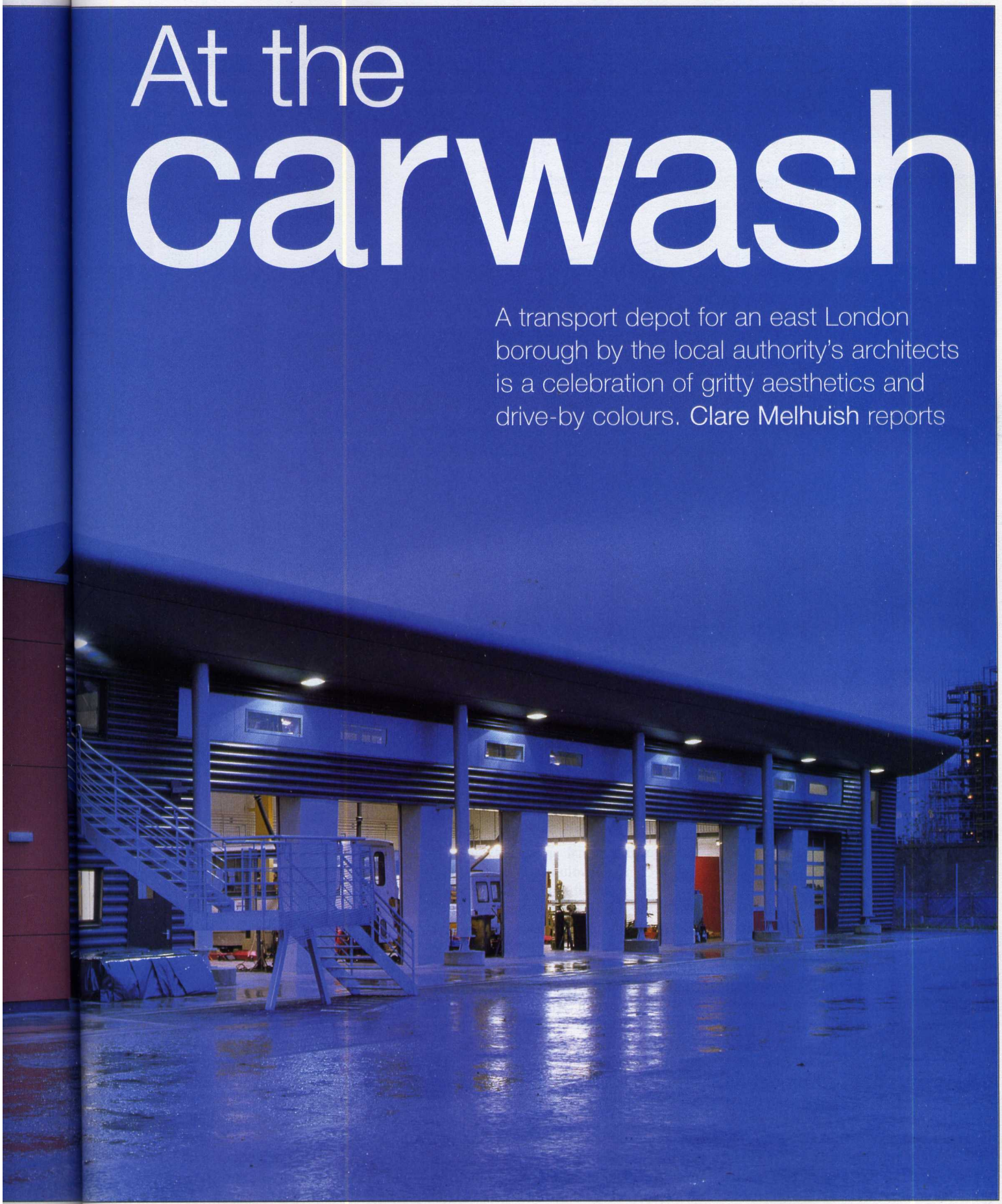
Commissioned by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, the building occupies a commanding position alongside the Blackwell Tunnel approach road, at the gateway to the London Docklands Development Corporation's former empire and within the boundaries of the corporation's planning authority. The LDDC planners made it clear they wanted a building that would do justice to its site and symbolic role. They closely briefed the architect, Tower Hamlets' in-house team within its Capital Works Group, on the materials and aesthetic deemed acceptable, and when it looked as if the design was going to be too 'organic', they threatened to hold a competition and give the work to a practice that could deliver a slicker, more conventional, high-tech image.

Fortunately for Tower Hamlets' architects, the client proved loyal and supportive, enabling the job to proceed after a number of aesthetic compromises were negotiated with the LDDC. Chief among these were changes to the primary facade seen from the motorway travelling south. The sequence of structural columns across

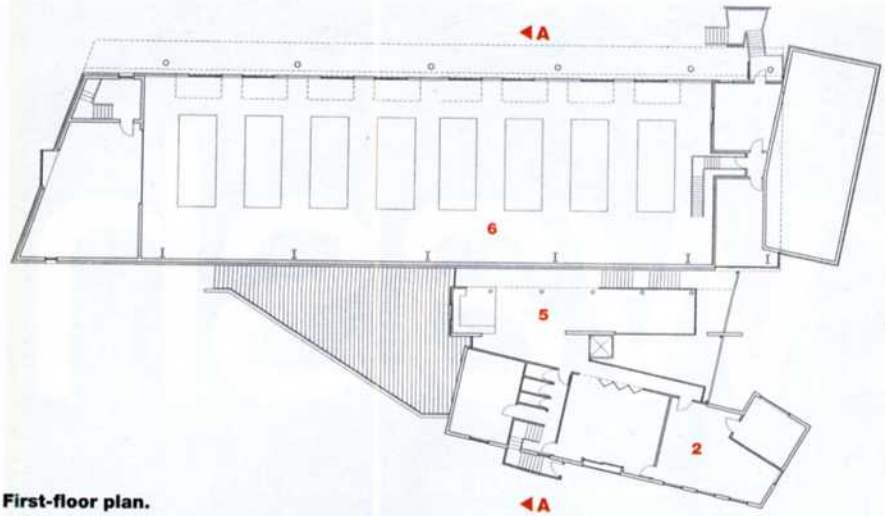
The depot is located between the Isle of Dogs and the Royals, an area of London's Docklands far from completion (see site plan below). The architecture, with its rigour and colour, competes against such an urban vacuum.

At the carwash

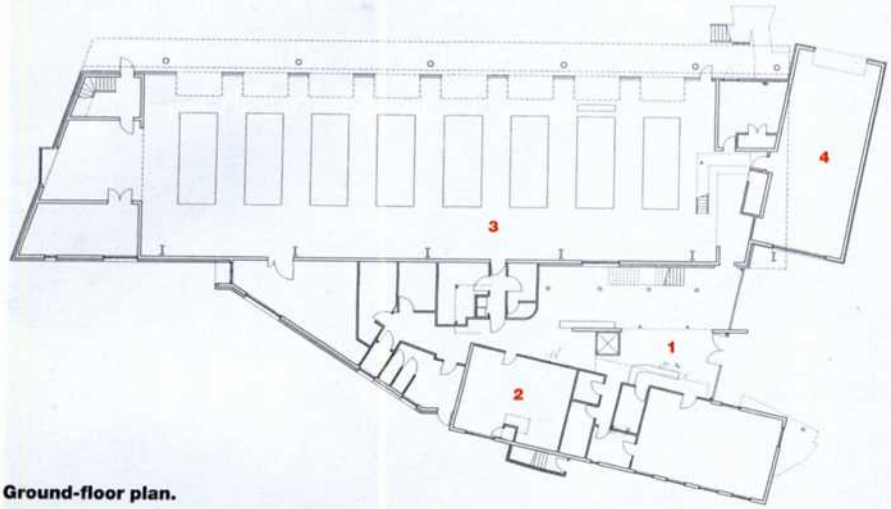
A transport depot for an east London borough by the local authority's architects is a celebration of gritty aesthetics and drive-by colours. **Clare Melhuish** reports



NICHOLAS KANE



First-floor plan.



Ground-floor plan.

KEY TO FLOOR PLANS

1 Main entrance
2 Offices
3 Main workshop
4 MOT bay
5 Restaurant
6 Void over garage

Offices overlook a typical service bay in the main workshop (right).

the front and the roofline above were straightened up, sacrificing what project architect Nasser Golzari (who declared an interest in the 'organic' as an organiser of the RIBA's well-attended Hans Scharoun exhibition some years ago) describes as the 'looser' look of the previous design.

The proposed insulated glass cladding of the projecting MOT bay, conceived as an illuminated box of mechanical wonders, had to be substituted by solid resin panels. But the angled steel escape stair to the rest room and office on the mezzanine, which Golzari happily acknowledges as being inspired by Rem Koolhaas' work at Euralille, was designed later, and embodies the spirit of the original scheme.

Golzari also cites the influence of French practice Decq Cornette (currently reeling under the impact of the tragic death of Benoit Cornette). At a fairly superficial level, this influence is evident in the use of plum-coloured, profiled metal cladding for the workshop building, specially made in Switzerland. Like the long narrow bricks specified for the exterior of the office and social building (due for completion in June 1999), it was chosen to heighten the horizontal emphasis of the complex in deference to that of the surrounding roads, bridges, railway and industrial buildings.

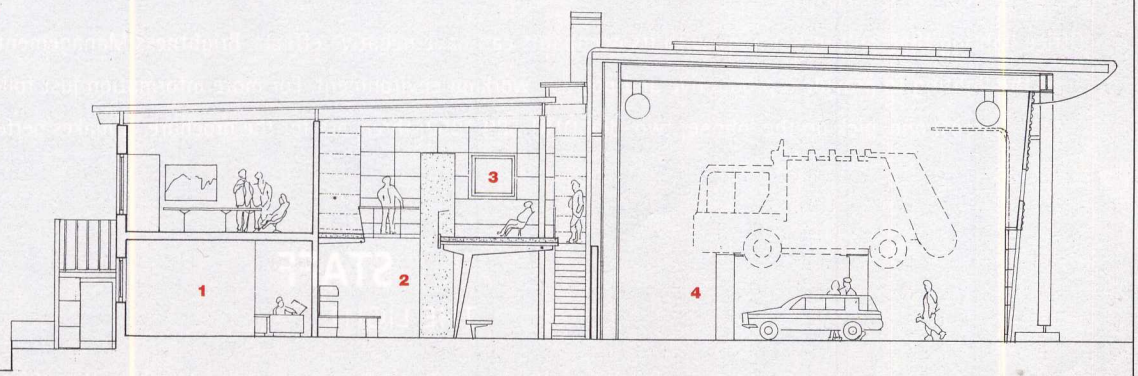
But an influence can also be seen in the way the elements of the complex are set at acute angles to each other, opening up slivers of interstitial space between the basic rectangular volumes into which special areas of accommodation can be inserted: for instance, the supervisor's office, mezzanine and metal and timber stair between the workshop building and the office and social block on the south side. This treatment generates a sense of architectural 'movement', which contrasts with the static, set-piece quality of the more conventional British high-tech genre to which Decq Cornette's work is often compared – principally because of the practice's use of glass and metal.

The rationale for handling the disposition of the buildings on the site in this way lies in the meeting of two grids, traced from the 1950s housing development to the north, and the new 1980s commercial development masterminded by the LDDC to the south. It makes for a certain degree of architectural theatre, in the way that the main entrance, sandwiched between the two main volumes on the east elevation, will appear and open up into an ambiguous internal/external double-height space enclosing the metallic external south wall of the workshop building.

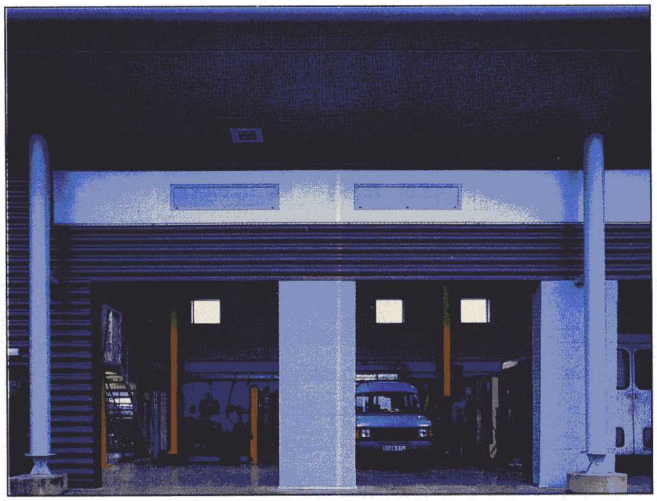
This area will form the hub of the social interaction in the complex, with direct access into the workshop building, and washing and changing facilities behind it. It creates a natural extension

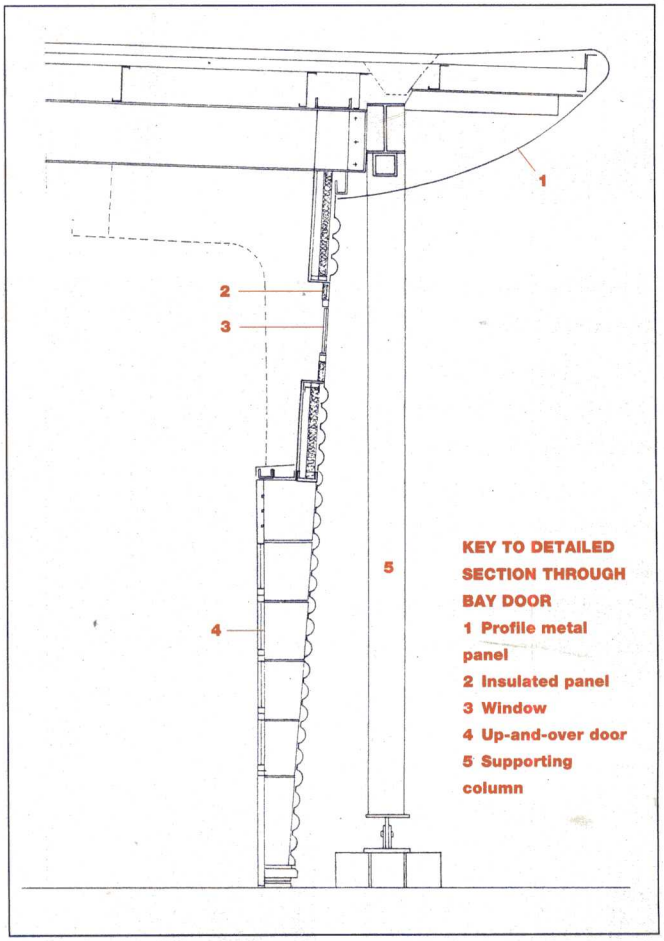
KEY TO SECTION AA

1 Offices
2 Reception
3 Restaurant
4 Main workshop



Section AA.





KEY TO DETAILED SECTION THROUGH BAY DOOR
1 Profile metal panel
2 Insulated panel
3 Window
4 Up-and-over door
5 Supporting column

Each bay boasts its own up-and-over door (above), facilitating access and architecture (see detail, right).

of the workshop environment, subtly re-presented.

The workshop building itself, now completed, provides an unusually civilised environment for servicing vehicles. By giving each service bay its own up-and-over door to the external forecourt, unnecessary vehicle circulation space is eliminated and, with it, excess exhaust emissions. The building's internal height aids ventilation and the glazing of the doors allows for a high level of natural light, supplemented by a series of suspended downlighters. A gas-fired, warm-air heating system keeps the ambient temperature at a decent level throughout the year.

At the east end, the mezzanine provides both a look-out point for the supervisor and a rest room for short breaks, blurring any too obvious expression of hierarchy. The staircase's timber treads, contrasting with the workshop's concrete floor and exposed steel structure, introduce a note of warmth and tactility that resonates through the complex. If you want to see the MOT bay, and own a car, you can: it's open for public use.

CREDITS

Client London Borough of Tower Hamlets Facilities Management & Transport Department

Architect London Borough of Tower Hamlets Capital Works Group (Alex Freemantle, Mike Rush, Nasser Golzari, Roy MacPepple, Robert Hodges, Paul Middleton, Patricia Flint)

Structural engineer Chambarlain & Partners

QS and M&E engineer Tower Hamlets Capital Works Group

Main contractor phase 1 Jerram Falkus Construction; phase 2 Sindall Construction

Cost Specification

Phases 1 & 2 building works	£2.17m
Floor area	1,500m²
External and parking	6,300m²

Costs

Excavation and ground works	£120,000
Substructure, floor and concrete works	£218,000
Masonry, brick and block	£120,000
Framing	£81,000
Cladding and roof cover	£186,000
Windows, doors and stairs	£197,000
Finishes	£113,000
Furniture & fittings	£38,000
M&E works	£562,000
External works and drainage	£535,000

Specifications

Roof

Solid roof, sheet metal profile by Euroclad (reader enquiry no 301). Glazed roof, patent glazing system by Flame Patent Glazing (enquiry no 302).

External walls

Profile aluminium cladding with double pigmented metallic spray paint, by Gasell Profile (no 303), fixed by Kelsi Roofing (no 304). Flat aluminium cladding by Florall Metal Products (no 305). Flat rigid cladding on steel frame by Trespa UK (no 306). Insulated cavity brickwork by Ibstock (no 307).

Windows and doors

Steel double-glazed corporate 2000 by Critals (no 308). Steel double-glazed W40 and glazed screen by Senlac Windows & Doors (no 309). Main workshop doors, sectional up-and-over doors, double-skinned insulated by Horman UK (no 310). Internal doors, generally painted softwood with lining and vision panels by Shapland & Petter (no 311).

Steel staircases

Steel frame and balustrade with steel angle supports for iroko timber treads.

Internal walls, wall & ceiling finishes

Internal blockwork paint by Lignicite (no 313). Dry lining British Gypsum with Thistle Finish plaster (no 314). Wall tiling by Pavigres-wich (no 315). Column encasements by Gyproc Duplex wallboard (no 316) and New Tacfire by Promat Fire Protection (no 317). Wall paint by ICI Dulux (no 318). Metal profile self-finish on main workshop. Suspended ceiling profile metal and suspended ceiling aluminium tube ceiling system by SAS (no 319).

Floor finishes

Concrete industrial paint in main workshop by Wetco (no 320). Carpet in offices by Mannigton (no 321) and Flotex by Flotex-Bonar (no 322). Ground floor common entrance floor tiles by Pavigres-wich (no 315).

Fittings

Sanitary fittings by Armitage Shanks (no 323). Ironmongery by Allgoods (no 324). Kitchen units by JT Thorpe (no 325)