



BURO FOUR

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A NEW HOME: 1 NAOROJI STREET

A sensitive but dramatic renovation of a Victorian school creates a confident new home for Buro Four. By *Oliver Richards*

Sustainability is top of today's agenda, but what Buro Four and architects Chapman Workhouse have done at Naoroji Street is more important than ticking sustainability boxes on project management charts.

Fernsbury School (an old spelling of Finsbury) was built in 1876. The first phase for 572 pupils was extended in 1884 for another 585 pupils in this 1,800m² – a density of one person per 1.6m², which would make today's occupants blush at the embarrassment of space. In 1915 the school closed, and it became an early instance of reuse for a London Board Schools. It then housed offices for the new National Insurance scheme.

In 1938–39 it was substantially modified and turned back-to-front, with a new faience facade applied to what had been the back of the building, along with further alterations and general simplification of its form.

This latest phase of occupation has carefully edited the building, simplifying its layout and perception and adding a new layer to the richness of its architectural history.

So what is it that makes this building sufficiently flexible to have survived when

many redundant neighbours have been torn down and replaced with more efficient, but less lovable modern buildings?

Perhaps the best answer is to look at Buro Four's thought process. The choice of any home says a lot about its inhabitants; Buro Four's choice distances it from its competitors, who tend to lease modern offices with large, air-conditioned floor plates.

At first glance this looks like a building for any creative business, with a reflective grey resin floor, a neutral white and grey colour scheme with accent colour on furniture, and carefully placed graphics on ceilings and walls. The building feels flooded with light and very spacious. Basement areas have low ceilings and comfortably – but perhaps extravagantly – house functions including a Friday night bar, and a training room.

Tony's Cafe is central to the life of the building and sits at the end of the glazed meeting room corridor. It is used for informal meetings and general camaraderie. The top-floor studios are currently used for a large large bedroom mock-up for a hotel client – defraying the cost of holding expansion space.

This is a building that recognises the importance of moving around, of talking to colleagues in search of better solutions, and the corporate energy that this can create. It is essentially an assembly of simple, beautifully lit, large spaces, with child-sized stairs that exaggerate the 4.6m floor-to-floor heights.

We have lots of good Victorian buildings in this country, and this is a civilised and well-considered example – but it is the way in which it is being used that is exceptional.

Design is about asking questions, and Buro Four's Steve Hollingbery and Richard >>



An atrium reaching the full height of the building links the two parts of the former school

MORLEY VON STERNBERG

A SERVICES ENGINEER'S VIEW

Buro Four did not set specific environmental or sustainability targets, but was keen to follow a green agenda. The existing building provided a great opportunity for this. It is a classic Victorian school with high ceilings, full-height windows and shallow floorplates, so daylight is plentiful.

There has been minimal intervention to the existing fabric as full part L approval was not needed. External walls are not insulated, exposing thermal mass and the single-glazed, manually openable windows remain. High-level hopper windows allow secure night-time ventilation which, coupled with the walls' mass, helps to cool the spaces cool in the summer.

Buro Four reused the existing boilers and radiators, with new TRVs for simple control. A new atrium provides a secondary air-path for natural ventilation and allows both cross-ventilation of the office floor plates and stack-effect outlet for the whole building, particularly at night.

Offices are lit by high bay fittings with compact fluorescent lamps. Their consistent light is well suited to PC use.

Environmental conditioning is passive, simple and controlled by the occupants. Summertime energy use is low; we wait to see how it performs in the winter.

The key, though, is the reuse of the building fabric and also much of the existing M&E plant. The energy saved by this offsets many years of heating bills. There is growing recognition that embodied energy is crucial to understanding buildings' environmental impact.

This is a well executed and sympathetic reuse that creates a well daylight, well ventilated and comfortable working environment: Buro Four should be commended for its efforts.

Guy Nevill is a partner at Max Fordham



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Left Exposed original brickwork creates a pleasing contrast with the slick modern interventions
Above Facts about the site's history are

emblazoned onto circulation spaces
Above right and below right Breakout and dining spaces continue the bright, post-industrial feel



Young started the process by setting up user groups before establishing key principles:

- At the end of each day all desks would be cleared and all work stored in central lockers;
- This would be a truly flexible workplace and not just another hot-desking company;
- There would be no eating at desks;
- To achieve this everyone in the company would need a laptop.

Even for disciplined project managers it is impressive to see such an extreme version of a paperless clean-desk office. The bank of colourful lockers by the reception area sends a strong message to clients, collaborators and staff alike that these people know how to organise things.

The only piece of new building is the atrium, created by infilling the final junction between the two 19th-century buildings. It is fully glazed and faces south overlooking the old playground. It is a simple but important gesture that makes this feel like a single organisation. Combined with long views through the building and a simple materials palette, you quickly get a mental map of how all the spaces link together. Each is big enough to house 30-40 people, but as staff can choose where they work each day, these spaces are truly flexible.

With all these hard surfaces, acoustics could have been a problem: this building would spectacularly fail compliance with

modern school acoustic design criteria. But Buro Four has taken an intelligent approach – with good reason, as it is difficult to predict how spaces will work in practice. The tall spaces, downstand beams, use of carpet in the office areas, and double-skin glass walls to meeting rooms all have an impact. But Buro Four's people also adapt their behaviour in these live acoustics, which provide buzz.

Another important aspect is the building's challenge to the need for air conditioning. The spaces and windows are tall, and even in the hot summer of 2010, this exposed mass building has worked well. I wonder whether the south-facing top-vented atrium has really helped to cool the building, but the original >>



Far left Flashes of bright colour prevent the space from feeling anodyne
Centre and left Ample natural daylight and high-level openable windows make for comfortable working conditions

AN OFFICE EXPERT'S VIEW

Buro Four's new building off Amwell Street in Clerkenwell – like the firm's name and every other aspect of this practice's presentation of itself – is crisp, professional, and thoroughly well thought out. Every cubic millimetre of the project announces that you are in good hands, whether you are a client, collaborator, consultant, or even architectural critic.

And we are not talking about superficial crispness but crispness of depth, layer after layer of considered, businesslike workplace design: the most up-to-date information systems, a wireless environment, voice over

IP, ruthless elimination of paper, rational, interchangeable workstations, cool meeting rooms and meeting spaces, elegant space planning and furniture, great signage and graphics, brilliantly efficient lighting and environmental services, superb eating spaces and staff facilities – the lot.

The project is an object lesson in the successful recycling and return to beneficial use of a beautiful but redundant late Victorian parish school. This sturdy building features skilfully crafted original brickwork, gently rising and curving stone staircases, generous circulation and high windows and ceilings. It's a pleasure to see how Buro Four has thriftily brought the

building back to life to accommodate a cutting-edge, 21st-century, knowledge economy business, but also allowing Buro Four to broadcast its vision, experience and virtues not just internally, but outwards to Clerkenwell, to London and the world.

Architecture above all else is a language. Buildings and interiors can express a spectrum of aspirations and ideas with a reach, an eloquence and a staying power that no other medium can rival. Buro Four has taken advantage of the design of this excellent project to tell a convincing story about itself, its values and its skills.

Except, apparently, in one respect. DEGW has four decades' experience, not

just in workplace design but in the reuse of redundant buildings. From this perspective, I find it curious that the building still contains unconverted and unused space.

More than 30 years ago David Rock, the former president of the RIBA, set a precedent by converting a redundant warehouse space in Dryden Street in then-neglected Covent Garden. He created an office that was occupied by his own practice, and also several complementary businesses, creating a community of firms sharing space collaboratively in a thrifty way. London now has numerous such spaces used on a touchdown basis by increasingly mobile workers, as boundaries

between businesses become more fluid. Of course, Buro Four has sensible plans to sublet their space, but what struck me is that what they propose to do is somewhat stiff and old-fashioned – absolutely unlike everything else they have done.

David Rock anticipated this fluidity, erosion of boundaries and complementarities between businesses 30 years ago. It would have been lovely – and to Buro Four's commercial advantage – to have exploited this trend towards co-working today. They could still do it if they wanted.

Frank Duffy is founder of DEGW, an international workplace consultancy

tall windows with their pivoted top lights are the major component keeping the space fresh.

This is a fantastic opportunity to test the performance of a long-life, loose-fit building in practice and compare it with other modern examples – many of which fail to meet their energy-saving predictions. Fernsbury School started life with relatively low energy use. Nowadays we have far more efficient equipment and plant, so I see no reason why this building could not score top marks on sustainability. Saved energy and the reuse of the embedded material production energy, excellent daylight from the tall windows, and the stack-effect cooling will all play their part.

Buro Four says a tight budget forced it to think hard about how it spent its money. It recognises the need to 'fine tune' the building, and this is my challenge to the practice. It should record and measure how the building works in practice. These ideas are not new but

reliable data is scarce, and this building could become an excellent testing lab – for the company, its staff and a wider audience.

I have long suspected that regulations are excessively focused on the minimisation of running energy. This is a fantastic chance to measure how buildings and people interact in practice, and I challenge Buro Four to use it.

I am sure that the process of making a new home has many surprising benefits and lessons for the main business and will make Buro Four into an even better project manager. The gained knowledge of the 'test bed' project could put it well in front of its field and help direct the national debate on the importance of sensitive and intelligent reuse of our rich heritage of buildings.

Oliver Richards is founding director of ORMS Architecture Design and vice-president of education at the RIBA

Credits

Tender date June 2009
Start on site September 2009
Contract duration 7 months
Gross internal floor area 2,000m²
Form of contract JCT Minor works Building Contract with contractor's design 2005 revision 2 2009
Total cost £1.2 million
Client Buro Four
Architect Chapman Workhouse
Interior architect Desalles Flint
Structural engineer Greg Ling
M&E consultant Cundalls
CDM coordinator RLF
Main contractor Broadoak