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'Refurbishment is true sustainability'

Hawkins Brown has been in demand for creative office conversions for nearly two decades, making it an ideal mentor for upcoming practice Hut Architecture

Words Elaine Knutt Photographs Edward Tyler

Everything goes in circles, and Hawkins Brown feels that the commercial office sector has just travelled 360 degrees. When the practice was starting out in the late '80s and early '90s, refurbishment and reuse were a client's default options; the weak occupier market often made commissioning new build a risk too far, and planners were in any case too cowed by Prince Charles to embrace anything "modern".

So Hawkins Brown made its name with imaginative reworkings of existing office buildings for media clients in Soho. It delivered serial projects for small, local developers until the economic cycle and the firm's growing reputation shifted it into large-scale office projects, public buildings and education.

Now directors Russell Brown and John Turner are anticipating another turn in the office market, but this time it will be one driven by sustainability and climate change. "Refurbishment is true sustainability, it's recycling," says Turner. "Part I is about saving energy, but what saves more energy than an existing building?"

Brown also welcomes the anticipated shift back to refurb for design reasons. "With refurb, you share more with the client. You can talk to each other because people share the basic model. With cad walk-throughs [of new build], people nod but don't necessarily get it!"

Hut Architecture, set up by Andy Whiting and Scott Batty five years ago, will be in an excellent position to benefit. The growing, six-strong practice has already tucked several small office refurbishments under its belt, including basement office space for a radio advertising client in Fitzrovia and the reception for a division of News International.

The firm is now moving on to a more substantial commission, a £1.5million project to reinvent a 1970s office building in Hoxton, east London, giving it external green fins and an internal garden to evoke the area's history as a grassy meadow.

Batty particularly likes the way refurbish-

Inside track on refurbishment

Scott Batty and Andy Whiting put their questions on commercial refurbishment projects to Russell Brown and John Turner of Hawkins Brown

Moving up in scale

Scott Batty: The projects we've done so far belong to the plasterboard and graphic design family — sometimes we feel we're interior designers!

Russell Brown: If the aim is to do bigger and better office projects, you need to skill up. That way, when you do get a chance, you'll know what to say. Go the British Council for Offices conferences, where you learn the language, see who's in the market and make contacts. We also go to Mipim, that's where we met Chelsfield and Urban Splash. Learn to talk the talk and read the property magazines like Property Week.

The second tip is collaboration — all of the big architects are very busy, so we're talking about collaborating with smaller practices [on major masterplans]. The planners see it as bringing variety to projects, and it takes the pressure off everyone. Or you can collaborate with builders and fit-out contractors.

The other thing is to accept dealing with a junior person, not a director. Build a relationship and they might

take you to the next project or float up in the company.

John Turner: Get to know project managers. The big commercial developers will have in-house staff, or talk to firms like Jackson Coles, Buro Four and EC Harris.

Andy Whiting: What are the mechanics of doing that?

JT: Invite them to lunch. **RB:** The ad agencies have client managers who talk to client contacts once a month, so ring them up if you see them in the paper, and send them any press you get. It's about putting your name in front of them. Have parties twice a year and send Christmas cards!

Fees and contracts

AW: Sometimes the fee is long gone and we're still fiddling away, going to site. As a young practice, we



Hawkins Brown's 2002 refurb at 91 Farringdon Road.

feel we're only as good as our last project.

RB: We do some speculative work, but we still get it wrong sometimes. We try to make it clear what we will do for free and what we won't because once you start, it can be difficult to stop. We might do a speculative capacity study on a site on the understanding that we'd be appointed if the project were to go ahead, or if the developer were to sell the site on, we'd get a fee.

SB: A verbal agreement? **RB:** No, written. You can't send a full fee agreement, but we try to get a one-page document that commits to a fee. And we have had to remind people of it.

SB: That's interesting. We've had a similar situation where we did a capacity study and we weren't told that other practices were also doing the same thing.

RB: Then there's not much you can do, except stop working for them. But it's important to look at how clients do business. If people want meetings, go to their offices. That tells you all sorts of things. Are they big? Who's got the cheque book? ▶

ment gives the architect the benefit of 20:20 hindsight. "Refurbishment is about taking away — removing the horrible suspended ceilings, the air-conditioning units." But Whiting sees a flaw in this argument. "Of course, in 20 years people will walk in and take away our interventions!"

Despite its success, Hut is aware that it has a lot to learn about commercial refurbishment. It has questions on the practicalities of fee negotiation, reaching the decision makers and designing speculative schemes without an end-user to define the design. But the conversation also turns to the sense of isolation that often goes with running a small firm, and Hut's nagging doubts that some of its refurbishment work has been over-designed, while some could have been bolder and more assertive.

From the standpoint of nearly 20 years in practice, Brown offers the reassurance and perspective that Whiting and Batty could probably offer their own staff, but appreciate hearing from a third party. "So much of any project is about the basics — making the space useful, the building regs — and about being pragmatic," he says. "If you can do all that, and manage to create some architecture as well, you're doing pretty well."



From left: John Turner, Andy Whiting, Scott Batty and Russell Brown.

Are there builders sitting round the table? Show you've got a vision for their business, and for your own. Then if things change, the client can't say, "Oh, didn't you realise...?"

The human condition

SB: We did a refurbishment on New Bond Street [in London's West End]. It was an attempt to do a good job on a small scale in the hope that the next project [from the same client] would come our way. It's quite simple and polite, but did we miss a trick?

JT: Go back in six months' time and see how you feel.

RB: The world of planning and building regs is pushing you back. It looks perfectly sensible and when there are so many barriers, that's an achievement.

SB: The client is delighted, but we haven't had the call back yet.

RB: That's the human condition, we're never happy with what we've done! We're always saying we could have tried harder. But I think architects have to be careful about making ourselves unhappy. There's fantastic work in your portfolio, that's what architecture's all about.

By building stuff, you limit yourself. You're dealing with the

real world, not lecturing at the AA. But by building stuff, you learn, and the architecture gets bigger and better, building on that experience. You have to lie down like Woody Allen and say, "I like myself. This is my place in the architectural world."

SB: So you have to be in your own comfort zone?

RB: Exactly. We've done designs where people have said: "We're not convinced, that's not really you." People outside often have a better judgment of that than you.

Technical issues

SB: When you start to uncover what's on site, the surprises can be good or bad.

JT: That's when you need a good team, a good approved building inspector. You find out problems — like the stairs aren't in compliance with the regs.

AW: We've had good results with independent approved inspectors — they actually make suggestions!

JT: Have everything measured and surveyed both below ground and above. Investment at the front end in surveys is the most important thing in a refurb.

RB: But you can go to a structural engineer with lots of experience in

refurb, then find you're on site with a guy who's only done new build. Refurb is actually being an architect, getting involved in the site process. For new structures, builders want it big and simple. Refurbishment is more traditional — you need a bricklayer and a joiner. As refurb returns, so will skills.

Designing on spec

AW: For our spec scheme in Hoxton, we did a ton of research about the area, the history of printing and weaving there.

RB: Clients love this bit. It's not directly relevant, but they like it. **JT:** And it gives them something to hang the marketing on. Thinking of the lettings brochure even before you start on site brings you into the client's processes early on.

SB: In the end, we took inspiration from its original name of Hog's Town, the

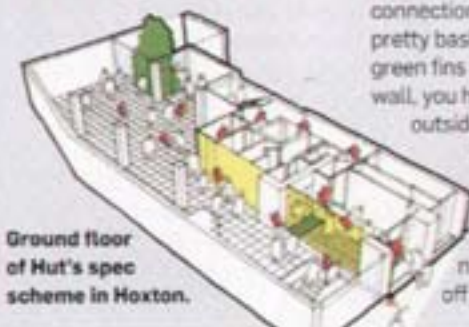
meadow area beyond the City walls. We took ideas of colour and form, and used green fins across the front. A key part of the brief is to make the basement useable, so we'll cut holes in the floor for a lightwell with green planting, and reconfigure the common parts.

RB: If you have a long slot lightwell at the rear instead of a square hole, you can wrap the meadow all the way up the back wall to get more usable space. And put the loos in the basement. It's the cheapest space.

SB: On the upper floors, is a shower of more benefit than views through the building?

RB: I'd give them more space. It's all about net lettable. I'd design it very much to shell, then you just do "stories" about the layouts. People will be attracted by the address and the transport connections, but they want a pretty basic building. With the green fins and the wacky green wall, you have a great surprise outside and a surprise inside.

Beyond that, you can be quite straightforward. Do the basics, add a couple of nice touches and you're off to your next building.



Ground floor of Hut's spec scheme in Hoxton.