



## REGENERATION ■ Quiet confidence: Stiff & Trevillion's Latimer Place Studios

*Creative reuse is central to the redevelopment of a derelict industrial site in London. Critique: Wendy Shillam. Photos: Kilian O'Sullivan.*

How do clients choose good architects? Without a certain level of discernment it can be all too easy for a client to opt for style over substance. Bodies like CABE tell clients that they should seek out quality architecture but how many really know what that means? There seems to be a common misapprehension that to be

good, design must be overt – Galliano rather than Armani. But like good haute couture, quiet architecture can allow the personality of the occupant to shine through, rather than broadcasting the personality of the designer. The problem with high style is that it tends to go out of fashion very quickly. This cluster of office buildings in north Kensington by Stiff & Trevillion displays a subtle understanding of how to design good understated architecture – the sort that I believe will endure.

It's no surprise to discover that Latimer Place Studios has been occupied principally by Designers Guild as its head office and showroom – Tricia Guild's exuberant fabrics are a dramatic counterpoint to the monochrome simplicity of the buildings.

Mike Stiff had had an eye on this set of derelict industrial buildings since he moved into the area several years ago. But then it was someone else – the young developer Richard Cook – who walked in one day, made an offer, and bought the lot. By word of mouth he was introduced to Stiff and they 'clicked' straight away.

The intention was to create flexibility of occupation and initially Stiff & Trevillion themselves were interested in taking the entrance block for their own office. But when Designers Guild made an offer for the three northern blocks – most of the development – they had to give way.

Because the site is relatively hidden, Kensington & Chelsea's planners did not raise any objections, although neighbours did scotch a proposed modest raising of the height. Conceptually the architects saw the original buildings as four blocks – two big ones at either end of the site, with two smaller ones in the middle flanking a long, thin delivery yard. They decided to 'flip' one of the small blocks over, creating two roughly square interlocking spaces rather than a corridor. In so doing they have generated a more dynamic layout, giving each individual building its own outlook and some sense of domain.

The most successful element of the design is the entrance sequence. From the first glimpse from the street we see a well-composed assembly consisting of a wall, gates and the low horizontal window of the first block. This form immediately signals something new and intriguing. Once inside the security gates – which glide open at the touch of a button – we are confronted by the first building, its huge window dominating the first courtyard. Discreet entrances to the other blocks are behind a planted strip, with each entrance having some separation and identity.

In the second courtyard we are completely within Designers Guild's domain. Here the architects have created a new facade of glass and brise-soleil which draws the eye, though it is not in fact the entrance facade for these buildings. Designers Guild has further animated the courtyard with tables and chairs for al fresco lunches (there are no sandwich bars nearby). Immediately to the left, the small single-storey block forms the reception, complete with a gleaming cafe-style stainless steel kitchen – serious entertaining is clearly on the agenda.

Inside, the original concrete frames have been sandblasted and left bare, with simple category 2 galvanised lighting slung from the ceiling. All other services are hidden within a raised floor.

Externally most of the buildings are 'iced' with white Sto render, which is standing up well to wear in what is, after all, a relatively rarefied atmosphere. Where the existing brickwork, steel and concrete frame is allowed to show through, we get a welcome respite. Glimpses of the old structure are a



Plan Blocks to the north (left) and south were refurbished and two new small buildings added between them, each facing a small yard. Apartments were formed within the existing linear building to the west in a separate, earlier contract for the same client.

**Michael Stiff writes** The development potential of London W10 has been hindered by poor public transport links, but it has always been of interest as an affordable neighbour to Notting Hill. As a local I had often wondered about this backland site off Latimer Place, originally a furniture depository and later a bus servicing depot. We were fortunate to be introduced to

Richard Cook of developer Hitchwood, who had agreed a deal on the brownfield site and had aspirations to do something special. While consideration was given to change of use to residential, the UDP was clear in its commitment to maintain employment in the area. Planning was therefore relatively straightforward. Indeed this is a model project in many ways; it

takes a redundant and contaminated site and creates an employment zone that sits happily with its residential neighbours and the conservation area on its east boundary. Architecturally the site was reorganised to create two groups of buildings and a linked double courtyard. The new buildings and interventions into existing buildings are primarily elevational; the interi-

ors are raw and sculptural, relying on the industrial quality of the original structure. All four existing buildings were in poor condition; two of the single-storey structures had asbestos roofs and demolition was the only viable option. The largest single-storey structure – a concrete-framed depot – deserved to be retained.

The three-storey depository was a lightless space with party walls on three sides. By removing one of the single-storey buildings and relocating the lift shaft to the interior it was possible to open up the south elevation, introducing daylight and allowing views across the courtyard through a new facade which was layered into the existing London stock brick building.

While daylighting issues were resolved, south-facing windows in a



building that otherwise had no openings created ventilation and cooling problems that could only be economically resolved mechanically. However simple solar shading, low-E glass and Sto-rendered blockwork mediate the problem and the facade identifies the new use without losing the industrial heritage of the original.

The single-storey structures were more straightforward. A horizontal order was established which contrasts with the verticality of the three-storey facade and articulates the courtyards while allowing the three buildings to read individually. Internally, existing concrete and brick structures were sand-blasted and sealed, services are not concealed and a simple core was provided in each unit.

Flexibility was at the core of the design. The site could work as a corporate HQ or six individual units. In the event most of the site was taken by Designers Guild, and the south unit by a fashion company. Ultimately this project is about economically viable regeneration, retaining the best bits of the existing buildings and recognising that the density established on the site would probably not be achievable today.



reminder that underneath most of this construction lurk old industrial buildings. Complete smothering would have been too much. The red stock-brick staircases with their precast treads and risers make a good backdrop to Designers Guild fabrics, which are stretched over frames and hung like old masters in the interior spaces. If the remaining part of the scheme appears less successful, it is mainly because the



**Above** The new south facade to the existing three-storey depository incorporates simple solar shading. **Above left** Interiors are robust, with sandblasted concrete frames and exposed services. **Left** Designers Guild staff cafe. **Below** The two new single-storey buildings each face onto a small court. **Below left** Simple but effective landscaping defines the new external courts.





occupant has added a full-height solid wall to form a reception area, breaking up what is otherwise a fine space.

There are wider lessons to be learned from this series of buildings. Designers Guild is part of the thriving designer economy – the ‘Cool Britannia’ that Tony Blair was so lampooned for defining. These new industries require a type of office space very different to that of conglomerates. Stiff & Trevillion are known for the offices they have designed for multi-nationals like Siemens (AT122) but they have not lost the ability to work with this very different type of client. Whereas old-style offices were generally located within a business park, these new types of business opt for a more urban location. Here Designers Guild rubs shoulders with production companies and TV studios which have clustered around the BBC’s nearby White City complex.

This type of office development is great for the health and vitality of our cities. In contrast to a business park, no one here drives to work and the courtyards are free of cars and valued as sitting-out space. A

**Above** Access gateway at the end of Latimer Place; the two new single-storey buildings were each planned to overlook a court; section through added facade. The overall 1350m<sup>2</sup> development, including the Latimer Road flats, cost £1.25m (excluding fit-out).

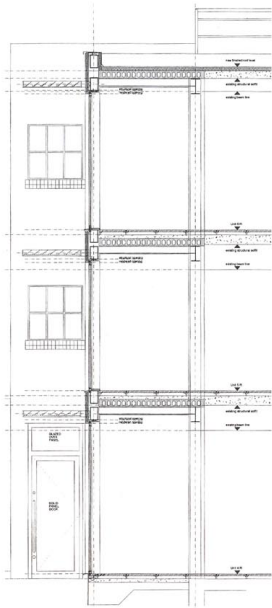
**Below** Designers Guild showroom.

**Project team**

Architect: Stiff & Trevillion; design team: Michael Stiff, Daniel Campbell, Ed Mullett; qs/project manager: Gardiner & Theobald; structural engineer: Christopher George Assocs; mke: Curona Design; client: Richard Cook, Hitchwood; contractor: H&B 2000.

**Selected subcontractors and suppliers**

Demolition, groundworks: Purbeck Plant; lift: Stannah; structural steelwork: Steel Fab; external glazing, doors: Raymond Wood; roof cladding: Littleman Contracts; electrical installation: WD Wilson & Sons; mechanical installation: Hevertech; entrance gates: Frontier-Pitts; flat roofing: DMS Roofing Services; steel windows: Metal Casement; plastering: CDI Partitions; Sika rendering. Armores flooring: Aquareted; Sto render: Stoneguard; specialist concrete repair: Concrete Restoration; safety systems: Safety & Security; internal partitions, doors: Prestige Interiors; raised floors: Atlas Access Flooring; floor screeding: DJ Patch Plastering; decoration: Total Decor; standing seam roof: Kalzip; windows: Technal; glass Pilkington; rooflights: Lonsdale Metal Company; lighting: Vandalight, Genesis (suspended office lighting), Concord Marlin (external); external ironmongery: AS4 Architectural Hardware; paving: Marshalls; paints: Dulux; insulation: Celotex.



useful new life has been generated in redundant buildings. The scale of the business creates quite a different office atmosphere – more like a large family than a corporate culture. This is business on a human scale and the architects have created buildings that reflect that humanity. It is the greatest compliment the architects can pay to the occupiers and users of the building – it is as if they have said, ‘we wish our buildings to express the ethos and desires of your business – not our egos’.

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