

01 October 2019

London Fruit and Wool Exchange completes in Spitalfields

Bennetts Associates, working with interior designers ID:SR, has completed a new 460,000 sqft mixed-use development on the former London Fruit and Wool Exchange (LFWE) site in Brushfield Street, directly opposite Christ Church, the baroque masterpiece by Nicholas Hawksmoor

Following an invited competition in 2009, Bennetts Associates was appointed by Exemplar Properties to redevelop the landmark Spitalfields building. The project, emerging from a design process which aimed to reinforce rather than disrupt the existing townscape, gained detailed planning consent in 2012

In 2014, ID:SR was brought on board as interior designers and workplace consultants to work with Bennetts Associates. This involved creating a consistent design quality between the exterior form and interior spaces as well as working closely with developer Exemplar to undertake occupier analysis. This approach resulted in attracting Ashurst as the anchor tenant, with ID:SR appointed to design the fit-out for the international law firm.

Townscape

Sensitive massing, retention of an important façade, and enhancement of the public realm were critical to achieving planning consent in an area where tensions between economic regeneration and the local community had increased since commercial property serving the City of London pushed eastwards into Spitalfields.

The adjacency of two existing buildings - a multi-storey car park and the largely vacant London Fruit & Wool Exchange - meant that the unusually broad site had the potential for the type of large trading floors that are extremely difficult to achieve within the Square Mile itself. The primary volume of the building expresses this through a simple, four-storey structure with two smaller floors set back at roof level, thereby avoiding having to build tall. The total height of six floors barely exceeds that of the existing buildings. Visually this volume emulates a large brick warehouse, inspired by nearby industrial buildings constructed to serve the once thriving London docks.

Subtle variations to the elevations on three of the main volume's four corners allow the building to mediate with the very different contexts around its perimeter. The fourth corner is unadorned, so that it leaves room for a freestanding retail pavilion and the small public space requested by Tower Hamlets planners.

On Brushfield Street itself, Bennetts Associates' architectural solution retained the building's existing neo-classical main façade, repairing and enhancing it to its original pre-1960s stature, complete with the full-size pediment in the centre and stone 'gables' at each end, to become the centrepiece of the new scheme. The unyielding symmetry of the façade and the contrast between its stone and brick elements dictated the position of everything inside, from office entrances, the central courtyard, the main cores, the perimeter escapes and the column grid.

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The re-worked entrance to the London Fruit & Wool Exchange signals a new public route through the central courtyard to Artillery Row, using a busy desire-line from Bishopsgate that now terminates directly opposite Spitalfields Market's main gateway.

Interior Strategy

Sheppard Robson's interior design group ID:SR were brought on board during Stage 3 for the detailed design of the common areas, including the reception. This included collaborating with Bennetts Associates to create a close dialogue between the building's interior and exterior, referencing the site's industrial heritage with use of robust materials such as concrete and blackened steel.

ID:SR worked with Exemplar in an advisory capacity to map out optimal arrangements for future occupiers, which formed the backdrop for the ID:SR-designed fit-out for the development's anchor tenant, the international law firm Ashurst. The fit-out, like the wider development, is distinctly modern whilst also feeling rooted within its Spitalfields context. Through a palette that combines handcrafted and industrial materials, the project weaves together the history of the site with the character of the new development, creating a rich variety of work settings, amenities and client spaces.

The fit-out design makes the most of the retained historic elements, forming characterful spaces that frame views out over Christ Church. The interiors also respond to the new elements of the transformed urban block, with a range of formal meeting rooms, auditorium spaces and informal work settings arranged around the new courtyard at the heart of the development.

Retail Pavilion

A retail pavilion to the east side of the development was part of Bennetts Associates' original planning permission for the development. Sheppard Robson was appointed to design the freestanding structure – occupied by café Crispin – as a lightweight, geometric form that acts as a counterpoint to the robust main building.

Rab Bennetts, Founding Director of Bennetts Associates said: "LFWE has been an important building for Spitalfields since its construction in 1929, but its original function disappeared with the closure of Spitalfields Market in the early 1990s. The development retains the LFWE's principle façade and creates a series of new volumes across the entire site in a language of brick and reconstituted stone that derives from the nearby industrial buildings. An unsightly 1960s multi-storey car park has also been removed, such that the whole project adds to the grain and texture of the area."

Maxwell Shand, former Director at Exemplar and founder of YardNine said: "Working in partnership with the City of London the ambition was to create a workplace for the future which respects the important heritage of the Spitalfields area. Led by Bennetts Associates a great team worked closely with the local community and Tower Hamlets to realise the next chapter for the LFWE building. Using materials reflected in the local area, alongside a flexible internal layout, extensive landscaped terraces and new public spaces; the LFWE attracted Ashurst to make it their home. In addition a new employment and training centre, retail, cafes, a public house and new pedestrian routes have all been combined to create this important addition to Spitalfields."

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With large-scale commercial developments encroaching from the west and tight-knit Georgian and Victorian streets to the east and south, Bennetts' design not only preserves the spirit of the conservation area but responds to the value of broad office floorplates in its Central London location.

Team

Client: Exemplar Properties

Architect: Bennetts Associates (Concept up to RIBA Stage 3)

Interior designer: ID:SR

Pavilion Architect: Sheppard Robson

Structural Engineer: Ramboll

Services Engineer: AECOM

Cost Consultant: EC Harris

Project Manager: GVA Second London Wall

Contractor: Sir Robert McAlpine

About Bennetts Associates

Bennetts Associates creates sustainable and enduring architecture that is more than skin deep. As one of the UK's leading practices, their diverse portfolio has been celebrated with more than 150 awards over 30 years and covers cultural, workplace and education projects in both the public and private sector, ranging from masterplans to small historic buildings. Bennetts Associates is an employee-owned trust of 70 people with studios in London, Edinburgh and Manchester, and has recently earned Building Design's Higher Education Architect of the Year 2019 Award.

The practice is responsible for many prominent projects, most recently both the Royal College of Pathologists and the London Borough of Camden headquarters in London, Storyhouse in Chester and the Bayes Centre for the University of Edinburgh. Bennetts Associates is currently working on Facebook's London HQ in King's Cross, the Woolwich Creative District in London and the University of Edinburgh's Edinburgh Futures Institute.

Bennetts Associates leads their field in sustainability - in April 2019 they became the world's first architects to secure Science Based Target approval and commit to the UN's Climate Neutral Now campaign. The practice is a founding member of the UK Green Building Council and the first architecture practice in the world to report company impacts using the GRI Guidelines.

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