

ARCHITECT PROFILE

EDMUNDFOWLES

ED FOWLES, FEILDEN FOWLES, TALKS TO JADE TILLEY ABOUT RETURNING TO CAMBRIDGE TO DESIGN FOR THE UNIVERSITY, AND THE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY ON EDUCATION



EDMUND FOWLES, IS THE CO-FOUNDER OF FEILDEN FOWLES.

In 2009, Edmund, along with business partner Fergus Feilden, opened their studio, having both studied their Part 1's at Cambridge University and worked together to forge their careers in the industry through projects that display a clear moral compass in design and understanding of location and historical vernacular.

Ed and Fergus have built a studio out of an academic and hands-on approach to architecture, seeking to achieve quality and clarity of design in each project they undertake. Here, Ed takes us into more detail about the founding steps of Feilden Fowles and the sensitivity that architecture requires.

WHAT IS YOUR EARLIEST MEMORY OF DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE?

My uncle is an architect and when I was very young we used to travel to London to stay with him. I remember sitting at his drawing desk and recall all the instruments and measuring devices he had. It was a practical obsession for me; I was a very hands-on child and liked building things. The mathematical tools and mechanics of it all made sense to me. I renovated a barn during a summer holiday once so that curiosity to build has always been there. I grew up in the Dedham Vale in Constable Country, so I was fortunate to benefit from the rich landscapes and local vernacular of the Essex and Suffolk countryside. As a result, visual art, drawing and representation of location, with a sensitivity of

place has always been important to me. This backdrop, combined with my sense of intrigue and curiosity about how things come together, have evolved into this life of architecture.

WHERE DID YOU STUDY?

I was at Cambridge for my Part 1. It was a really challenging three years, but the academic side of the course really appealed to me. Spanning studies across a broad spectrum from history and theory, to the political, philosophical and sociological influences that underpin architecture; not to mention the more pragmatic aspects of structural, constructional and environmental design.

I think it's important to understand how places that you study in and visit can inform your choices. For example, I went to work for



Images: Headshot courtesy of Kendal Noctor and this page, Feilden Fowles Waterloo Studio

Hopkins for two years after university. While I wasn't entirely enthralled with the design approach there, I was completely engaged with their processes of running a big office and learned a great deal about the technical design and delivery of larger projects. It's about realising how you can get the most out of it. It was at Cambridge that I met Ferg (Fergus Feilden, Partner); we worked on a competition together and landed a speculative project for a house on a site in. It was a really informal working set up; I was in Hackney, Ferg lived in Pimlico and we would meet half way to develop designs for the project.

For my Part 2 I went to the AA and Ferg went to RCA. During the first year of the Diploma, the Welsh project, Ty Pren got planning and so we worked on that simultaneously whilst it was on site. The client had complete trust in us. We were two young graduates, not even qualified, but very ambitious and good value for money, working to complete our education and trying to make our mark in the industry. The gamble paid off as Ty Pren was completed and featured in AJ. I went back to Hopkins for six months after my Part 2 and in 2009 we set up the practice.

HOW DO YOU FEEL THE ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION SYSTEM HAS CHANGED IN RECENT YEARS?

We were studying for our undergraduates 15 years ago and things have moved on since then. What we have found with our Part 2 employees at Feilden Fowles is that they are incredibly skilled up, perhaps because of the competition for jobs. Schools have certainly sharpened student's production skills in drawing and representation.

One critique of this approach is that students are often dealing with overly pragmatic projects and there seems to be less opportunity to do something more radical or conceptual. I think it's crucial that students are given the space and exposure to all forms of architecture so they don't just work within certain conventions. We should be stretching their abilities and their imaginations during their undergraduate years. Architecture is a way of thinking, a way of looking at the world, documenting it and reinterpreting it.

WHAT KIND OF ARCHITECT DID YOU ASPIRE TO BE?

I'm surprised at where we've got in such a

short space of time. If I think back to our time sketching Ty Pren in a café in Hackney (our nomadic studio) there was certainly a naivety in starting our business and perhaps that's the best way to go about it.

Ferg and I were talking recently, on a walk through Homerton College, Cambridge, about how being back there after winning a competition to design for Homerton Dining Hall is a real milestone for our studio. It had always been an ambition of the practice to design a building for the University, not least since Cambridge Colleges are renowned to be fantastic clients; progressive, supportive and ambitious. Not only that but the rich tradition and history of the Dining Hall, where students and fellows come together to debate and discuss over lunch or formal dinner, falls in line with our interests in spaces for learning, exchange of ideas and enhancing communities generally. We have both, as architects, always wanted to respond sustainably to place and maintain a social conscience, whilst also being environmentally responsible.

We are ambitious as a practice but it comes with an understanding and belief in what we

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Can achieve. Education defines us and we are acutely aware on education projects of our role in creating a positive social impact. In our studio we like to share our learning with younger architects in the practice – the Cambridge project epitomises this ethos of inspiring curiosity to learn and of collective endeavour.

WHO ARE YOUR DESIGN/ ARCHITECTURE INSPIRATIONS?

I have a few for different reasons. One building I love is the Centre Pompidou, Paris, by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano. It has such ambition in its design; it's a utopian building and speaks of a time when there was great confidence in the architect. It is triumphant; a remarkable public space and shows such clarity of an idea. As radical as it looks visually, there is a sensitivity in the public space that is generates. That is something that I always look for in buildings. I admire civic awareness and timelessness in design;

buildings with real integrity.

HOW DID FEILDEN FOWLES START AS A PRACTICE?

Ferg and I met at Cambridge and worked on our first project together whilst studying. It experienced quite an organic growth from there. Our official start date was 2009 and we incorporated into a studio in 2010 with just a couple of employees. I'd say there was a four to five year inception period; it wasn't a thriving business overnight. Neither of us had any money, so we still had to work for other practices to pay the bills, whilst working away on Feilden Fowles projects in our spare time and gradually building a profile. It instilled a real shrewdness in our approach to business management. Our main focus has always been that we both love to build, so right from the start we aimed to establish a reputation for delivered buildings to gain the confidence of potential clients. We have been growing at the rate of roughly

two employees each year. It allows for conscientious growth and for us to nurture the culture of the practice, which is so important to us. The campus we created in Waterloo is the embodiment of what we do. We are not a top down practice, not dictatorial; we are all equals, all designers and architects who enjoy sharing ideas and working together to deliver successful buildings and places.

HOW DO YOU CONTINUE TO CARVE YOUR OWN UNIQUE PATH IN THE INDUSTRY?

Knowing when to turn down work is a tough call to make, especially when it is commercially valued, is hard. We could take on more profitable projects but it wouldn't be sustainable for us. It's one of the reasons why our speed of growth is limited as well. We pride ourselves on maintaining an open dialogue within the studio. We have a communal kitchen table where we all sit down for lunch together and share thoughts about wider discourse, not just architecture but news, politics, all of which informs us as architects. We continue to be challenged and supported by one another and the success of the practice is down to the fact that we want our employees to be happy. I think these strong values will help us carve our own, unique path in the industry.

WHERE IS THE MAJORITY OF YOUR WORK BASED AS A PRACTICE?

In the most part it is all in the UK. We're open to working and collaborating internationally: we have worked on exhibitions in NYC. The key is to balance the carbon emissions of travel etc. much of what we do is rural, the West Country, Somerset, Bath, Carlisle, Yorkshire, Chatsworth House...those sorts of locations. We make our buildings appropriate to the surroundings.

I have a passion for cycling: through this I get to explore the countryside in depth and you begin to absorb the different traditions and particularities of buildings. Cornwall has a very particular type of render for example, the Polperro Ripple. This creates distinct types of buildings and informs our processes as architects. We don't want buildings to feel awkward, uncanny or out of place, they must be contextual. Something can be contemporary and progressive in its construction methods whilst respecting the traditions of its location. Ty Pren in Wales is an example of this. It uses on an age-old typology of the Welsh Long House, and using reclaimed local timber and slate as cladding, but combines this with modern construction systems, in this case SIPs panels (structured insulated panels) which improved the speed of construction and reduce energy use through their high insulation and airtightness. It is mixing old and new to better the build for the future, whilst resonating with its origins.



Images: This page, YSP Visitor Centre and opposite, Homerton College

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR BIGGEST DESIGN COMMISSION TO DATE?

We're currently working with Charlie Bigham, a food entrepreneur who's company produces a variety of hand made, pre-prepared meals for the supermarkets. Charlie's company was in need of new production kitchen facility. We're creating a new 'campus' on the site of a disused quarry in Somerset with a budget of £20 million. Using concepts derived more from our educational work, we have brought a campus-like feel to the site, reflecting Charlie's top priority, of staff wellbeing in the workplace, being the key to delivering the most delicious food. We worked closely with Charlie's team to understand what aspects of their working environment could be improved and enhance the wellbeing of staff. The design brings in as much natural light as possible through carefully positioned windows in the kitchen spaces to give employees a workspace with a view and a connection to nature and the changing seasons. An elevated courtyard overlooking the quarry provides a valuable communal space for the whole company to

come together.

The architectural language was drawn from the quarry vernacular, which we adapted to meet the building's demanding process and flow design. It is reminiscent of old factory buildings with saw-tooth style roof, ideal for bringing in diffuse north light deep into the plan.

WHAT DOES THE FACE OF ARCHITECTURE LOOK LIKE TO YOU IN 10 YEARS TIME?

There's a lot of concern around the rise of developer-led housing construction and the role of the architect being so diminished. Combined with this there is the concern about automation and automated processes, which might infringe on the role of the architect as well. Architects need to broaden their role, let's move up the chain and be more involved in the decision-making for future buildings, get involved in policy making, planning and being in strategically involved in conceiving the new towns and 'garden cities' of the future.

A good example of this is in education. Schools policy shouldn't be governed by statistics and budgets. If architects are

brought in at an earlier stage, we can help implement ideas that better serve school estates for the long term.

A big priority for us here at Feilden Fowles is education. We have the ability to make change and I believe it is our responsibility to drive positive change.

IF YOU HADN'T BECOME AN ARCHITECT WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING?

I have never regretted studying architecture, even when sometimes the complexities and hurdles of delivering a successful building feel insurmountable. Dealing with people can often be challenging but also one of the most rewarding aspects of the role. There is nothing quite like seeing one of your buildings completed and happily occupied and I cannot think of another profession that offers such clear and tangible outcomes to one's endeavours.

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