



In practice

From community farm to cathedral: Feilden Fowles is carving a niche in community-minded projects

Words Laura Mark
Photography Kendal Noctor

After emerging onto the architectural scene in 2009 and being tipped for big things, Feilden Fowles has matured into a go-to practice for reliable, well-designed thoughtful buildings, strongly rooted in their social context.

Following the success of its first project, Ty Pren, a £270,000 larch-clad house in the Brecon Beacons, Feilden Fowles had a lot to live up to. Winning a string of commissions, including the sought-after job of designing a new building for the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, and picking up an RIBA Award or two along the way has proved that the practice can move beyond single house commissions.

Seven years on, the firm set up by Cambridge graduates Edmund Fowles (above, left) and Fergus Feilden (right) has just completed its own studio – a new base for its burgeoning 12-strong practice.

For this project, the practice teamed up with two charities, Oasis and Jamie's Farm (the latter run by Feilden's brother, Jamie), to develop a plan for a patch of undeveloped land opposite a concrete estate and a stone's

throw away from Waterloo Station.

The tiny working farm, which acts as a retreat for disadvantaged children, sits as a meanwhile use for the tiny sliver of land, which is owned by Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital and forms part of its future masterplan.

Feilden Fowles drew up the masterplan for the site and has subsequently designed its barns and other buildings in return for a base for its own studio, which it shares with the farm's small management team.

'We had to be quite proactive,' Feilden tells me. 'I looked around the site with my brother and Steve, who runs Oasis, but at that point they didn't really know what to do with it. We jumped on the opportunity and drew up some plans and presented it to them really early on.'

Next to where the architects work away on computers there are polytunnels and sheds of pigs, sheep and chickens, although when I visit, just as everything is winding down for Christmas, it is quiet. 'The animals have gone on their holidays,' says Feilden. Many of the animals also have a home at a larger farm in Wiltshire and travel between the two sites, but I suspect some have also ended up

on Christmas dinner tables. It's part of the farm's aim to teach children where their food comes from.

When complete, the plot will be set in a garden that is being designed by Dan Pearson – a happy result of the controversial Garden Bridge proposal. Pearson is working on the Thomas Heatherwick-designed river crossing and lending a hand on this small project with the help of funding from the Garden Bridge Trust as part of its community outreach.

Feilden Fowles' new studio faces this garden space with a fully glazed south façade protected by large overhanging eaves. To the north, high windows let in light while allowing for passive ventilation in the summer. The space is calm and quiet; it's hard to believe you are in such a busy part of the city, just a few minutes' walk from Westminster.

'The grid of our north windows references the grid of the housing block opposite,' says Fowles.

'It's about a simple, earthy palette of materials, just really well put-together,' adds Feilden.

The building, they say, will act as a testbed and also an example for clients. 'It has a





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relevance to our educational work,' says Fowles. 'It sits within a typology for smaller, primary education-type spaces. It acts as a good model in terms of quality of materials, internal daylight, ventilation, and for how to approach storage. It's like a one-to-one example of what we can do for a client.'

The project is self-funded, thanks to the practice winning a few larger jobs last year – one being a series of new visitor spaces at Carlisle Cathedral – and was built for about £1,200 per square metre, a relatively cheap way to provide a central London base.

'In terms of the business case for building rather than renting, it made so much more sense,' Feilden comments. 'The build costs for this were around £160,000 and we'd be paying around £80,000 a year in rent for a similarly sized space, so within two years our studio will have paid for itself.'

It isn't without its risks. The lease for the site will be renegotiated next year but the masterplan is a few years off being realised and efforts are being put into establishing the farm's base on the site. But when it is time to move on, the studio can be dismantled and moved to a new location, with the possibility of extending it if the need arises.

While staff numbers increased by a third

last year, the practice isn't looking to expand too much. It is, however, chasing more work in different areas. Not particularly orientated towards commercial schemes, it hopes to win more arts, cultural and civic projects but has to overcome procurement hurdles.

'For about two years we didn't do any competitions,' the partners say. 'As a really young practice, unless it is an invited competition, it's hard. The prequalification levels are often so high that, if you've only been going for three years, it's just too challenging.'

But, despite this wary start, competitions are leading to more work for the pair. They were finalists in a contest for a £1 million house, and have recently been shortlisted against Walters & Cohen, Hall McKnight, dRMM and Stirling Prize-winner Caruso St John to design a new dining hall at Homerton College, Cambridge.

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The practice emerged during the 2008 recession, when the times called for recent architectural graduates to rethink how they practised and found work. The resulting cohort of 'austerity architects' includes firms such as We Made That, Practice Architecture and Turner Prize-winner Assemble. It's a group that has used the challenges of smaller budgets and less work to carve out a place for themselves in self-build and community-minded projects.

'We've always been desperate to see our work constructed,' says Fowles. 'We're not worried about doing unglamorous projects; every piece of work we have done has formed a part of our education.'

Feilden adds: 'Social media has also meant that younger practices can have a presence in the industry quicker, without having to wait to be published in the journals, like their predecessors.'

The coming year looks set to be another good one for the firm, with the start on site of its projects at Yorkshire Sculpture Park and at Carlisle Cathedral. If competitions like the one for Homerton College also prove successful, we should see Feilden Fowles emerge from under the radar to challenge more established firms.

