

Architecture



THE NEW CHARLIE BIGHAM'S WEST PRODUCTION FACILITY IS LOCATED IN A FORMER LIMESTONE QUARRY IN SOMERSET. UNUSUALLY FOR SUCH A BUILDING, ALL STAFF USE THE SAME ENTRANCE, SITUATED AT THE FOOT OF A TIMBER-CLAD TOWER

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CHARLIE BIGHAM'S, UK Architects: Feilden Fowles

A typical location for a food processing plant is a vast out-of-town industrial estate, but for a company trying to stand out from the ready-meal crowd, an anonymous shed doesn't cut the mustard. Which is why Charlie Bigham's, which prides itself on preparing fresh ingredients by hand, took the audacious decision to bring in the architects and build a new home. The brand's fish pies and chicken tikkas, marketed as the antidote to low-grade convenience food, are now made in a timber-clad, pitched-roofed, light-filled 'kitchen' courtesy of young London firm Feilden Fowles.

Charlie Bigham, who founded the business in his own kitchen in 1996, believes that the highest-quality food can only be produced in a high-quality working environment. But rather than extend his existing site on west London's Park Royal Trading Estate, he has moved part of the business to a disused limestone quarry near his Somerset home. Here, Feilden Fowles' £21m building has a backdrop of 50m-tall cliff walls of iron-rich stone, and shares the 18-acre site with peregrine falcons and great crested newts.

'We wanted to get away from the standardised shed, which is low-ceilinged and windowless,' explains project architect Elli Farrant. Instead, the firm turned to typical quarry vernacular, and found inspiration in Bernd and Hilla Becher's iconic images of industrial buildings. Bigham wanted to foster a collaborative, non-hierarchical dynamic between the office and production staff. So Feilden Fowles set out to create a 6,500 sq m structure on a human scale and to make it as good a place to work as possible. Hence the

IN DETAIL

SIZE

6,500 SQ M

CONSTRUCTION

STEEL FRAME AND INSULATED KINGSPAN PANELS

CLADDING

ROUGH-SAWN SIBERIAN LARCH FOR THE OFFICE SPACE; GREY MICRO-RIB PANEL FOR THE PRODUCTION SPACE; AND RED SINUSOIDAL PANELS FOR THE PLANT AND STORAGE SPACE

WEBSITES

FEILDENFOWLES.CO.UK;
BIGHAMS.COM

asymmetric pitched roof line, with north-facing roof openings that let natural light into the building.

That structure means the ground-floor production facilities have 5m-high ceilings, a good 2m higher than those in standard sheds. Feilden Fowles' involvement took the architects right on to the production floor, to make the flow of goods 'as linear and efficient as possible', with storage, cooking, assembling, chilling and dispatch all positioned in their logical order.

Instead of being located on the mezzanine, the open-plan office space overlooks the nearby quarry wall. That means suited staff are not peering down on to the shop floor through glass walls. Rather, the mezzanine houses a light-filled canteen, used by all. At the centre of the plan is the development kitchen, where Bigham concocts new recipes.

At the macro scale, the architects have considered the whole campus layout, grouping the buildings on the southern edge of the plot to leave the northern edge and its ecosystem in peace. The intention is to encourage yet more wildlife by eventually adding lagoons. Also on the drawing board are another two kitchens, a dispatch centre, visitors' centre, pavilions in the landscape for the eventual 1,000 employees to take their lunch breaks, and a Bigham's Academy.

'To be a long-term business, you need to retain the best people, and to do that you need to create the best possible working environment,' says Bigham. 'For us, that's about making a bit of a statement with our environment. And that means good architecture and a uniform you are proud to put on.' Long-term for the founder means 20 years, a timescale he can work to, as the business owns the site. Gratifyingly, Feilden Fowles has also taken the long view. Hence the building's rough-sawn Siberian larch timber exterior, which will take on a silver hue over time. ★ CD

Photography: Max Creasy