

# Design a penthouse – then feed the pigs

*Why is this architecture firm so successful? Maybe it's because chicks, lambs and pigs are part of the team. **Oliver Wainwright** reports*

Off to the pig palace ...  
the practice's HQ at  
Oasis Farm Waterloo;  
below, feeding time



**L**ambs are bleating, pigs are snuffling and a chicken is wandering about between planters spilling over with tomatoes and courgettes. All this is just a short walk from the teetering towers of Southbank Place, where £10m apartments are rising behind the London Eye. But there's a different type of regeneration going on in this city farm, which sits on a sliver of land in Lambeth, between the tangled tracks of Waterloo station and the slabs of St Thomas' hospital. Today the animals are going about their business while young architects are toiling away in a studio at the other end of the site from a great wooden barn.

"The name Lambeth originally means 'landing place for lambs,'" says architect Fergus Feilden. "So it's sort of fitting that we've brought them back here." Many architects have a yearning for the primitive hut, but few can boast pigs outside the window of their office. "It does lead to some awkward phone calls," Feilden adds. "Clients ask what the grunting noise is in the background."

His practice Feilden Fowles, which he founded in 2009 with Edmund Fowles, is one of London's rising stars with a portfolio that spans schools, Oxbridge colleges and a new visitors' centre for the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, as well as a factory for Charlie Bigham's ready meals - recently voted Riba South West building of the year. That's quite a crop to emerge from a farmyard, yet the unlikely setting of their HQ has helped: it would be hard for any prospective client to visit the studio and not be seduced by this pastoral utopia.

The architects began working pro bono on plans for London's most central urban farm in 2013, when Feilden's brother was planning an outpost for his charity, Jamie's Farm, which takes disadvantaged city kids on residential trips to farms in the countryside. Teaming up with the charity Oasis they secured the plot on a "meanwhile lease" from Guy's and St Thomas' charity. The architects became so enveloped in the project they decided to move their office to the half-acre site.

The result is a radical realisation of "mixed use", a slippery term that all too often means a Tesco Metro with flats on top. But here it means a studio of well-dressed young designers just a plywood wall away from a dungheap, with a chance to do some weeding and check on the chicks during coffee breaks.

Client meetings are sometimes disrupted by armies of children in hi-vis, popping over from the local primary school.

Oasis Farm Waterloo is a world away from the usual city farm scenes full of shipping containers and gazebos. A low wall of rusty red sheeting runs along the facade of the firm's office, conceived as a mixture of artist's studio and farm shed, with tilted north-lights and a mono-pitched roof. Next door stands the "pig palace" and chicken coop, along with raised accessible flowerbeds, an outdoor kitchen and a composting toilet, all arranged around a path that culminates in the barn.

Drawing on the tradition of stately tithe barns, it is a simple wooden-framed structure with an imposing presence. Great zinc doors slide open to reveal a church-like interior, with a central nave marked by rows of columns and criss-crossing trusses, while the side aisles are strewn with straw bales. In a poetic flourish, a mulberry tree pokes through the floor.

The power of coming across this unlikely oasis in one of London's most overheated enclaves of riverside property speculation is made all the more poignant by its imminent destruction. The charities signed a five-year lease in 2014, which means it expires in January next year. Before the farm came along, this land had been a dumping ground. It has since become a thriving community asset. With the temporary lifespan always in mind, all of the structures have been designed with bolted joints, allowing them to be relocated, but much of the cost has been in its construction - and it won't be easy to find a similar site for free within earshot of Big Ben.

Guy's and St Thomas' charity will likely sell the site for development to generate much-needed income for the hospital. But, while there are no concrete plans, it would be a tragedy if the farm was razed and the site became a fenced-off dump for years, waiting for the developers to arrive.

