

DREAM HQ

# SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

You don't have to be big or wealthy to justify your dream architects' HQ. Three small London practices have deployed ingenuity, resourcefulness and imagination to create exemplary but quite different offices, in one of the world's most expensive cities.  
Veronica Simpson reports

**DESIGNING AND BUILDING** your own bespoke, flagship office is a luxury usually reserved for the mega-sized, and/or starchitect type of architecture practice. Rarely will those with less than 20 staff (which is the majority of practices) find the reserves or the opportunities to realise their dream workspace, especially those operating in the bigger, more expensive, competitive cities like London. And even more rarely will those as young as Feilden Fowles, founded in 2009 by Fergus Feilden and Edmund Fowles.

From beneath the deep eaves of their new office, Feilden Fowles' staff can gaze out on to a walled garden, landscaped by Dan Pearson. On rainy days, water trickles or pours directly from these eaves into a narrow trench that runs along the perimeter paving, while in summer the glass doors can be pushed back to create a semi-outdoor oasis; and all within a stone's throw of the Houses of Parliament. Says co-director Fergus Feilding: 'Previously, like most architects, we were tucked away in an old factory somewhere, with no front door you could say was your own.'

But this opportunity came about through the firm's involvement with Jamie's Farm – a charity that provides opportunities for city schoolchildren to encounter the restorative experience of working outdoors with animals on one of the growing number of farms the charity owns or operates around the UK. Run by Fergus Feilden's older brother Jamie, the charity wanted an urban base in London as a way of offering something of that rural experience within the city.

This site emerged when Guy's and St Thomas's Hospital invited meanwhile use proposals for 1,630 sq m of derelict land near its Southbank site. Jamie's Farm, working with local charity Oasis, won the lease for its mixed educational/agricultural proposal, with masterplanning by Feilden Fowles. This then led to the design and construction of animal pens, and then an outdoor kitchen and dining area, with the ultimate aim to build a barn that could host classes and actually generate revenue from events. As the urban-farm project gained momentum, an office space became necessary and it became clear there were mutual benefits to the architects basing themselves on this site in return for the charity's workers having office and meeting facilities.

The office was completed in 2017. With the final touches put to the barn in 2018, the whole site has become an exemplar for how the practice wishes to design and to operate, says Feilden: 'It was always about lean architecture and social architecture – having >



## CASE STUDY FEILDEN FOWLES

Feilden Fowles' office embodies the values of this young practice, established in 2009 by Fergus Feilden and Edmund Fowles, 'to make fine buildings with integrity



that are both tectonic in their expression and above all socially and environmentally responsible'.

This rational, highly articulated and low-cost structure was designed to be fully demountable, yet its flexibility in no way detracts from its appeal. The frame is Douglas fir, with a pitched roof that is raised at the north, street-facing side to create a clerestory window, and that juts out over the long south-facing elevation, providing shading for the floor-to-ceiling glazing, supported by steel T columns. This glazed elevation looks on to a walled garden with landscaping by Dan Pearson Studio (a guilty pleasure, won through Section 106 money from the ill-fated Garden Bridge project nearby). Street side, however, the building is clad in corrugated Onduline bitumen sheets more typical of farm buildings – which suits the setting perfectly,

embedded as it is in a 1,630 sq m previously disused site owned by Guy's and St Thomas's Hospital, now transformed into an urban farm, complete with own-grown vegetables, pigs and chickens.

Feilden Fowles worked pro bono on the masterplanning of the site for Feilden's brother Jamie, founder of charity Jamie's Farm, which provides therapeutic farm experiences to disadvantaged urban schoolchildren. Jamie's Farm and Feilden Fowles teamed up with local community charity Oasis to secure a five-year, meanwhile-use lease for the site in 2014. After installing animal pens, vegetable beds and outdoor cooking facilities, construction of Feilden Fowles' office began in 2016, on the proviso that the other charities' staff could also use the office space whenever they needed to. An outdoor annex for model making and construction was also added in 2018.

There is a pleasing permeability between all the communities that occupy this site, with the studio garden frequently playing host to troupes of London schoolchildren and after-hours garden therapy sessions. The community beyond it is also involved, with many locals lending a hand when the main structure of



the final masterplanned element – a barn – was first raised, in late summer 2017. Now, as of summer 2018, the stately, almost ecclesiastical barn – with aisles and a long nave – is fully weather-tight and enclosed in a mixture of crafted timber elements and agricultural sheeting. It has become a popular venue for weddings, school groups, musical events, performances and fairs, adding a useful revenue stream for the charity, at least for the time being.

Though the initial five-year lease was up this January, no actual development proposals were on the table, and so, thanks to local campaigning – and with the help of The Guardian's architecture critic Oliver Wainwright, who declared that it would be a 'tragedy' if the buildings were cleared and the site became a 'derelict dumping ground' again – the hospital has extended the lease by another two years.

**Client** Feilden Fowles, Jamie's Farm, Oasis Waterloo Hub

**Architect** Feilden Fowles

**Area** Studio 135 sq m, annex 18 sq m

**Construction value** Studio £180,000, annex £23,000, barn £143,000

**Completed** Spring 2017 (studio), annex and barn 2018

**Awards** RIBA London Award 2017 for the studio, and RIBA London Award 2018 for farm and barn

**Structural engineer** Peter Laidler, Structure Workshop

**Landscape design** Dan Pearson Studio

**Timber frames for barn and studio** Timber Workshop

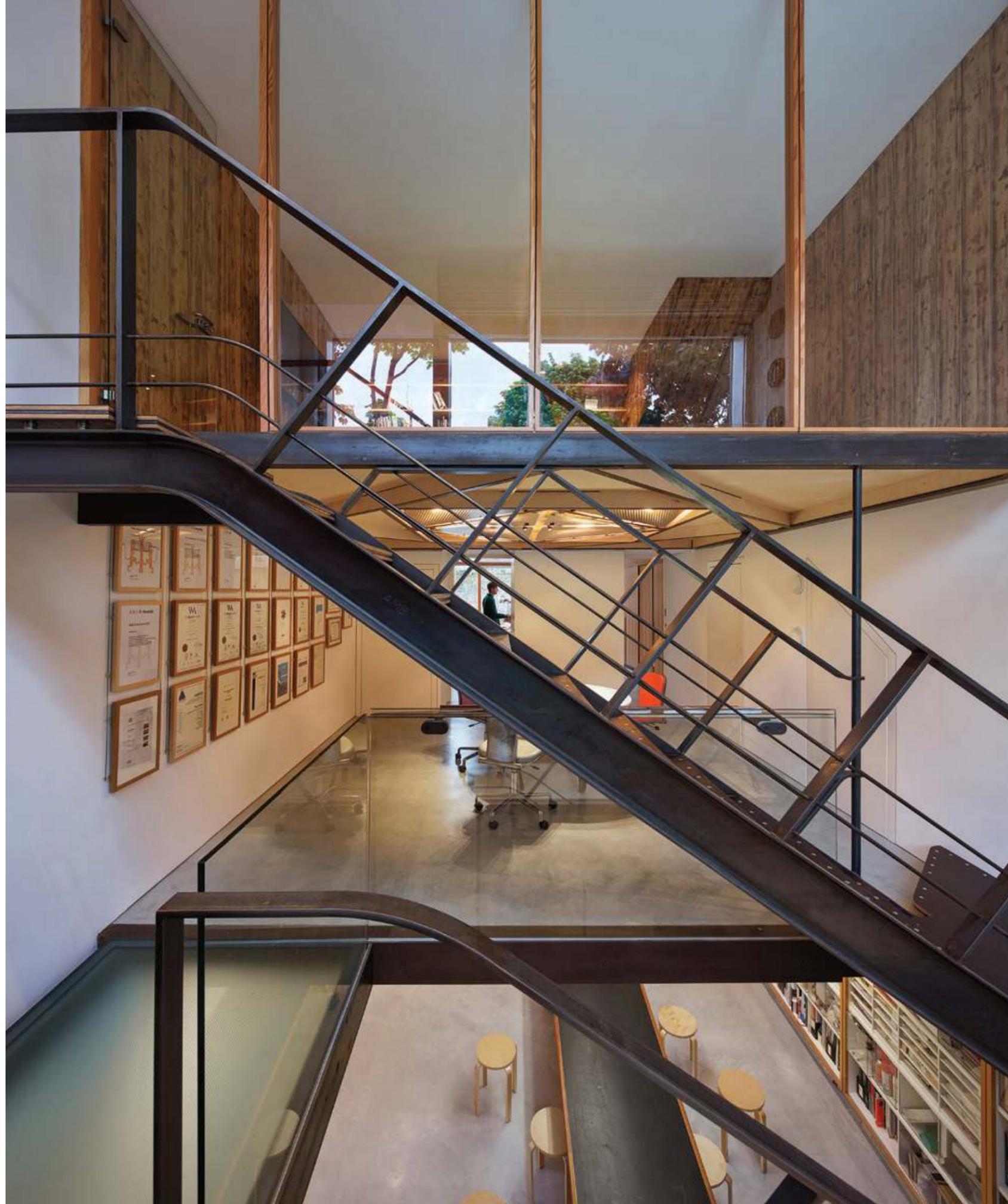
an outward-facing, civic approach.' It also demonstrates the practice's interest in and commitment to education, an area it has won an increasing amount of business in, as well as social sustainability. As the Guardian's architecture critic Oliver Wainwright declared, having seen the completed site last year: 'It would be hard for any prospective client to visit the studio and not be seduced by the pastoral utopia the team have created here.' Feilden says: 'Bringing clients here is just so different. Now you can entice them over. That helped win quite a few of our more important projects, especially in education.'

In terms of the day-to-day pleasures of working there, however, the garden has possibly made the biggest difference, not just in the restorative pleasures of the adjacent landscape. Says Feilden: 'Model making can go on out there. Cutting and casting. All the messier activities that you'd want to do outside.' A semi-enclosed garden annex was added in 2018 to facilitate outdoor work in bad weather.

Sometimes building your own office can be a way of making your work fit better around your life. Sasha Bhavan, one half of multiple award-winning duo Knox Bhavan, knew that well when she and her husband Simon Knox set up their own practice 20 years ago, just as they were starting a family.

She says: 'Architects work so hard that if you want to have a family and want to have children who you have a relationship with, we thought you have to have an office next to the house.' Having moved into a large, semi-detached Victorian house in Camberwell, they had space in their garden to build an elegant, albeit small, timber and glass pavilion, which has served them well for the past two decades: Says Bhavan: 'The kids would come back from school and come straight to the office and do their homework in the office and we'd carry on sitting there. The office was where we spent most of our time. It was very cosy.'

The problem with that set-up, says Bhavan, was that 'it only appealed to a certain kind of young architect. It didn't feel exciting enough to many. I can understand that...So, as the kids left home, we decided that we would try and move out. It was now or never.' A small Victorian building that housed an office-stationary supplier in nearby Peckham announced it would be shutting down, and Knox Bhavan expressed an interest. The money for the acquisition – nearly £900,000 – took a leap of faith that they would be able to sell their family home to fund the office and the building of a new, smaller house on the >



**Left** A view from the entrance of the new office's triple height space

**Below right** The practice has a street presence in its new office

**Bottom** Koi carp from a pond at the old studio have a new home too

## CASE STUDY

### KNOX BHAVAN

A RIBA 2018 National Award sits proudly next to the huge front door of Knox Bhavan's Peckham office. It's no small achievement for a project of this size (146 sq m) in a city as bristling with new, ambitious schemes as London – never mind the wider UK – to have received this national accolade. But when you see how much has been packed into this narrow site, the reasons for the award are clear.

A former two-storey Victorian stationers has been demolished and a basement gouged out (with substantial underpinning), which now houses a decent-sized kitchen with eating area, a fully equipped workshop, stationery storage and library. Despite its subterranean location, light floods down into the basement from the huge concrete-framed bay window at the front, which creates a real civic presence for the practice on to this leafy, mostly residential street, a few hundred yards from the hustle of Peckham's Rye Lane.

Models are clustered along the front window ledge, and glimpses offered to passers-by of internal activity, from staff circulating up and down the staircases that fill the triple-height entrance hall to discussions in the mezzanine meeting room or – just visible beyond the lobby meeting space – the high-ceilinged, ground-floor office. The dominant feature of the latter is a bespoke, hand-carved central desk – designed by co-director Simon Knox for stand-up or sit-down working for all 12 staff – stretching off to a small garden, where koi carp (brought from the pond at the old studio) swim in a rectangular pool sitting between the building's southern edge and a small courtyard. Light from the pool



is reflected into the office from a mirrored brise soleil, which also cuts out glare onto computer screens. Daylight – rather than dazzle – also flows into the space from two linear rooflights either side of the office ceiling.

Tall cupboards line the walls either side, into which the staff now pack away all their desk clutter, including computer equipment and monitors, each night, leaving the desktops completely clear; for Christmas 2018, this desk was easily transformed into a banqueting table for the staff Christmas dinner.

Costs were kept as low as possible by directing all the works themselves, using individual sub-contractors. Recycled materials were used where possible: most of the shelving and tables were recycled from the old studio, and wood from the previous stationers' floor has been reused for wall-panels in the mezzanine meeting room. An additional revenue stream is built in, with rent from the refurbished three-bedroomed flat above the office.

The kind of clients the practice attracts has evolved with this new public presence. While private houses and extensions – formerly regular staples – have increased, the practice now has a Buddhist centre in Peckham, as well as housing in Mumbai in the pipeline, both arising as a result of this new visibility.

**Client** Simon Knox and Sasha Bhavan

**Architects** Knox Bhavan Architects

**Gross floor area** 191 sq m

**Construction cost** £350,000

**Completed** late 2017

**Structural engineer** Price & Myers

**Environmental/M&E engineer**  
Paul Bastick Associates

site of their former studio. In the end, the construction of the office has become an entrepreneurial exercise of a different sort. The energy and dynamism generated by this initiative – not to mention the evident quality of their new, elegant, crafted space – seems to have given the practice a new lease of life, adding four new members of staff and a raft of new projects. Says Bhavan: ‘We have some

really lovely talented youngsters working with us, and they want to work with us because it’s such a good working environment.

Having a street presence has also made a big difference. Says Bhavan: ‘I had no idea it would be quite so impactful. We have people coming and looking in the window. They come up and take pictures. Everybody knows us. Clients come and knock on the door. We have

definitely won a couple of clients just because we have a face on the street.’

Street presence, in Jonathan Tuckey’s case, was a key factor in wanting to relocate his 12-strong practice from the shared office space it had inhabited for 10 years. He says: ‘It was never very collaborative even though it was shared workspace. We just didn’t feel that we were gaining the benefits of being in the bigger >



JAMES BRITAIN

## CASE STUDY

### JONATHAN TUCKEY DESIGN

As a self-professed ‘advocate for remodelling and radically transforming old buildings for modern uses’, Jonathan Tuckey Design seized the chance to demonstrate the benefits of this approach when it came to creating a bespoke London office for itself out of a derelict Victorian pub in west London.

Sat on a prominent corner, the redesign incorporated many of the pub’s historic elements, including ceramic exterior tiles uncovered during the renovation process. The biggest intervention, however, was cutting an L-shaped hole into the ground floor, which runs along the original facade to bring daylight into what had been a low, dank and smelly basement. The basement was substantially excavated, and the

ground floor now takes the form of a freestanding timber box that sits in this basement, incorporating stairs and shelving. Underpavement vaults have been punched through to create a pleasing array of pavement lights that illuminate each vault. They are now used as distinct areas for samples, printing, models and model-making equipment, which means that the main lower ground-floor area can be kept clear as a work and meeting room.

Upstairs, a timber-lattice shelving structure wraps around the office walls to offer space for books, models and drawings, while the arrangement of desks expresses something communal but also close to the spirit of the former pub. These desks are now regularly cleared away for events to interest the local and architectural community. Says Tuckey: ‘After the isolation we had experienced in the previous office, we wanted to enjoy not having that.

We wanted to hold exhibitions, lectures, events – this is part of why we’re in an old pub.’ (for details, go to website: Building on the Built).

Says Tuckey: ‘It’s very much a village around here. There’s a real sense of community. Even though the pub hadn’t functioned for years it still had a presence, from its corner position. We wanted the lights to be always on and people to come in and be welcomed.’

**Client** Jonathan Tuckey Design

**Architects** Jonathan Tuckey Design

**Cost** £225,000

**Construction cost** £350,000

**Completion** December 2017

**Ground Works** KK Contractors

**Fit-out** Lioneye Properties

**Structural engineer**  
Webb Yates Engineers

**Mechanical + electrical engineer**  
SGA Consulting

**Tanking** Wing Waterproofing

**Underfloor heating** EcoHeatCool

**Enamel** A J Wells & Sons

**Plastering** Decor Bristol

**Plumbing** BBS Plumbing and Heating

**Lighting** Architectural Lighting Works; Dyke & Dean

**Exterior steel railings**  
OA Steel Fabrication

**Gratings** Elephant Gratings

space. We were really keen to try and find a space where we had a bit more of an interaction with the normal community rather than the workspace community. Trying to find something street level was our brief to ourselves.'

A Victorian pub building in west London, comprising a near-derelict basement and ground floor with newly renovated flats on the first, second and attic floors, came up for grabs, and was acquired with the help of Tuckey's father (who wanted to downsize and sold his house to help fund the acquisition of the whole building; he now lives in one of the upper floor flats, gaining rent from another). Tuckey and his practice bought the basement, ground and first floor.

The basement was the biggest challenge, although Tuckey embraced that: 'What I liked about it was the constraints of it: three quarters of our footprint was smelly and dark and you couldn't stand up in it... When we first walked around here, many of our team said: "We're really not going to work down there, are we? It's horrible." I was convinced we would be able to make it a beautiful space.



We changed where the stair was and put a double-height space in, by stepping back the ground floor from the facade so the facade becomes a two-storey piece in the room.' Daylight washes over both ground and lower-ground floors from all the windows and doors (only one of which now leads into a solid floor, accessing the office) and from new pavement lights punched into the six underground vaults that once stored beer and wine.

Now, Tuckey says, that basement has come into its own: 'The light is such a joy. We've really had to mine it carefully. It isn't just a glazed box.' And that skill with basement light has won the practice more than one new client; convincing them – far better than any plans or drawings could – that underground spaces could be rendered wonderful.

Though the practice has not expanded with this move, that also was a deliberate choice: Tuckey says he is not sure he wants the practice to get any bigger, given the additional admin and reduced creative input that larger projects and larger teams bring with them. Although if they really had to they could expand into the first floor (currently rented), this new office can accommodate a few more than the current '13 or so' that the practice has remained at for the past two years, but 'we wouldn't fit in if we were 20'.

A further benefit, says Tuckey, was that the whole team was reminded what it is to be a client. Having taken on the entire project and construction management themselves, to save money, it put the team through additional pressures. 'It was both very interesting and, at times stressful, especially when costs or people didn't perform in the way you wanted. I think we are able to empathise with clients more easily as a result of having done that.'

Furthermore, he adds: 'There is an enormous benefit to living and working in something you have done the drawings for because you can really test the dimensions in a much more relevant way than you do when you've just inherited something. You really notice the difference in, say, the proportions or thicknesses between two bits of timber. It's nice to measure up those new decisions.

'And it's very interesting for clients to come here. It is much more personal for them to see how we've worked, from a sketch to a model to something we're sitting in. They can see how that relates to what we're doing for them.' **FX**



**Top** The stairs were repositioned and a double-height space was installed

**Left** Once a dark and dank space, the basement is now testimony to how wonderful underground spaces can be

**Right** The corner site was once home to a pub

