



Edmund Fowles and Fergus Feilden
Photo: Kendal Noctor

FEILDEN FOWLES

A learning experience

interview by

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The sustainable credentials of architectural practice Feilden Fowles are not just embedded in the buildings it designs. This is a practice fuelled by pedal power and train tickets. With projects that span sectors from cultural to workplace, competition-winning works in the educational field have also been grabbing headlines. And places of education are not just markers in the portfolio, Feilden Fowles is committed to learning from others and sharing its knowledge and experiences.

Following spread:
Waterloo City Farm, London, UK
Photo: Peter Cook

Fergus Feilden is 36, Edmund Fowles 34. Many of the architecture students they studied with at Cambridge University are now in the throes of setting up on their own in practice. Not Feilden Fowles. They started while still studying, designing Ty Pren, a crafted vernacular form for a house in Wales. When, in his second year, Fergus heard about the job he went looking for Edmund. The practice followed and is now nearly 10 years old.

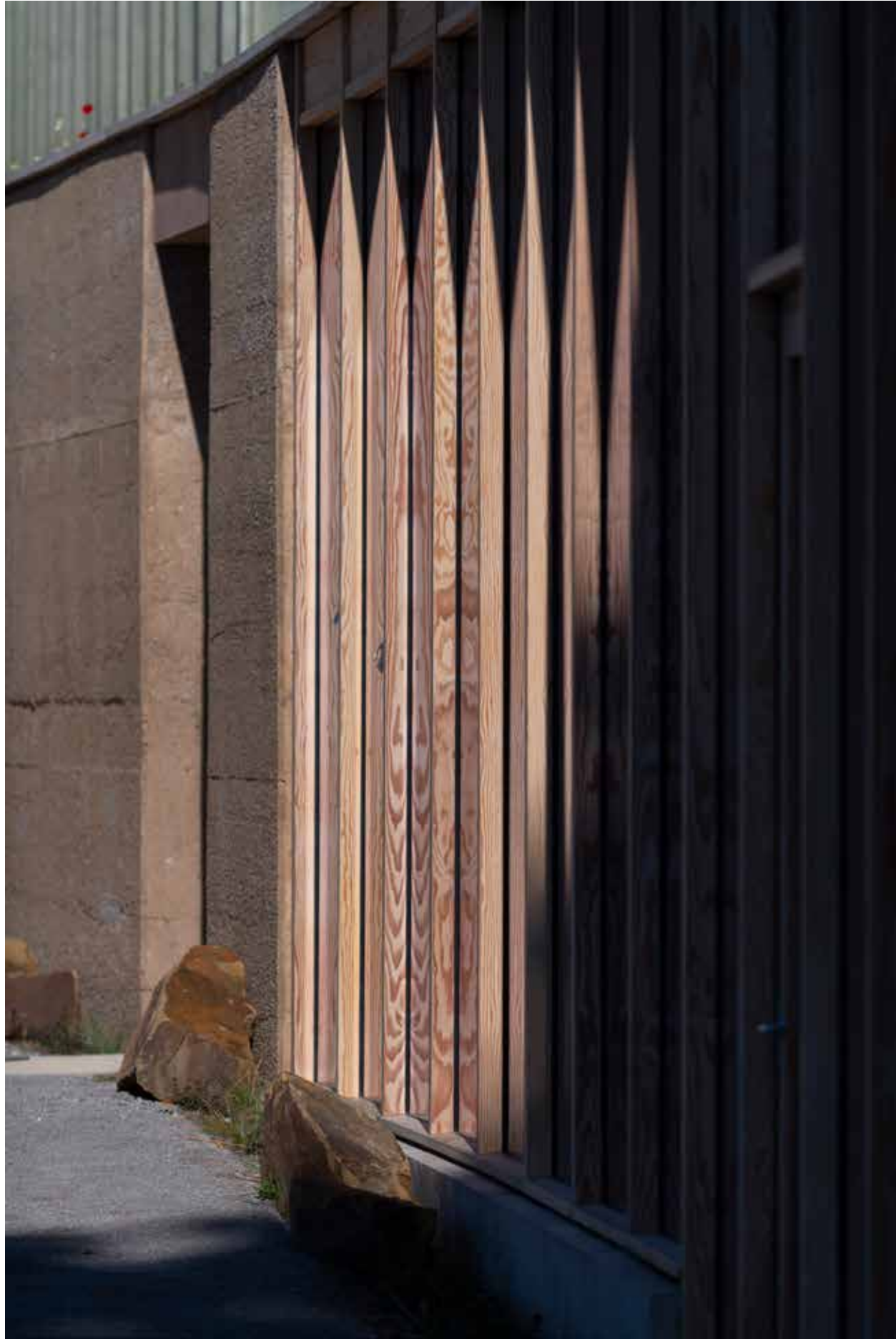
Earlier this year, Feilden Fowles completed a new visitor centre, gallery and café at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. It is the latest in a line of high-profile architectural works at the Park, a site that draws people into its protected landscape with permanent and temporary sculptures by such artists as Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, James Turrell, Antony Gormley, Ai Weiwei and Damien Hirst. For Feilden Fowles this follows wins at the heart of England's establishment with projects for both Oxford and Cambridge University, recognition in the form of UK's Young Architect of the Year Award (2016), and a nomination for the EU Mies Award for a food factory campus in rural Somerset. There is a buzz about many young practices,

but the PR fuelled excitement of festival pavilions is hard to convert into this sort of winning, and delivering, of outstanding bigger projects.

So how has Feilden Fowles made that transition? I visited them at their studio, minutes away from the hectic commuters of London's Waterloo Station, to find out. Many architects are now finding central London space too expensive; some move further out, others you have to climb flights of stairs to reach a cramped office above a noisy street. Feilden Fowles' studio, designed by them on the side of a city farm, couldn't be more different. It is an oasis of calm, a linear building architecturally defensive against the street yet opening up in fine detail to a gracious garden alongside. It is here I find Fergus and Edmund.

They are enjoying the last warmth of the day around a long outdoor table amidst the feathery grasses, debating a knotty client problem with one of their advisors. This is one of the things they have got right, asking for help when they need it – and before. With this experienced project manager they rehearse how they pitch for work, even how they walk into





The Weston, Yorkshire Sculpture Park
Photo: Jonty Wilde

Charlie Bigham's West: Phase 1, Dulcote Quarry, Wells, Somerset
Photo: Peter Cook



a competitive interview and set up. The same advisor comes in and talks to project architects (they are a practice of 17) about billing and fees, one comes in to interrogate technical details, another advises on communications. It is part of investing in the practice.

As is their remarkable studio and the timber barn alongside, both fruits of a close collaboration with the social enterprises that run the farm on which it is based. As Feilden Fowles' pro bono work for the farm expanded they struck a deal to use some of the space for their studio. It is a testament to thinking beyond the predictable, to having the bravura to ask (a method they apply to fee negotiations too) and to bravery in taking risks – this is a site awaiting development and even this demountable design was a substantial outlay for a small practice. Though, Edmund assures me, it has already paid for itself in saved rent. The studio and barn also demonstrate the care, craft and calm Feilden Fowles bring to their projects. Fergus and Edmund certainly credit it with having helped them step up in scale.

One of the results of that stepping up is The Weston at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. A visitor centre, gallery and café at the motorway boundary of the 200-hectare park, this building makes the most of being embedded in the depression of an old quarry, deep walls of almost-geological concrete grounding it into the land before it opens up lightly to the park. It stretches the landscape, turning a neglected corner into a contemplative destination for park visitors and those breaking

their trip on the M1 motorway. Even outside, in the lee of the building, the persistent roar of vehicles is blocked.

The café slips you into the landscape, with a smooth terrazzo and spare timber structure opening up to oak and beech trees with deep mulioned glazing. Turn the other way, through the high doors of the lobby and you step into a gallery with quite different cool light, drawn in through north-facing lights in the roof, with valleys of timber textured concrete rounding into a bull-nose. A single lighting track is cast into each concrete valley, showing a restraint and control that few architects achieve in the building process. This is an unassuming building with a simple diagram that creeps up on you with its beauty. Like the best music, the huge effort of creation, of testing and perfecting concretes, is invisible.

For years, since Fergus first arrived at the quarry site at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park on his fold-up Brompton, he has been cycling to and from the London train. It is either that or taxis and he likes to cycle – both growing up in the country, it was one of the things that first drew him and Edmund together. That, and their joint passion for architecture (not a given, even in architecture school). The day after my visit his cycle hop was eight miles either way to Fountains Abbey, an ancient abbey where Feilden Fowles is designing a new entrance to the Georgian water gardens. It is one of the practices ongoing projects in the north, the other being at Carlisle Cathedral where they are on site with a Gothic-inspired entrance building.

Many London practices confine themselves to projects in the south-east of the UK, some even to their area of London. Feilden Fowles are more geographically ambitious, though have limited themselves to four hours train travel from London. This has given them a wider range of more interesting projects – while keeping their carbon conscience clear. This suits the sort of work they have excelled at since that first Welsh house, the understanding of buildings in a landscape, the drawing on place, the unconventional use of local and vernacular materials. Logically their four hour limit extends their reach into continental Europe – four hours take you easily to Ghent and Antwerp and, with the right train, as far as Rotterdam. And for the next 10 year plan they are starting to look in that direction.

Whatever the next project, there is always the question of establishing your credibility. Fergus likes to draw a Venn diagram with two sets of experiences in circles and an overlap showing the perfect mixture of experience. This is how it worked on a rareish foray into an open competition for a dining hall at Cambridge University's Homerton College. Here, the Venn diagram read food preparation on one hand and education experience and research on the other. Also in the practice's bid/nobid calculation was a whole set of shared values about long-term thinking, the importance of research and inquiry, being centred on people, and the chance for consultation with the client before the final competition submission. It turns out their punt on stumping up the cost of going for the competition paid off, despite a dis-



Waterloo City Farm, London, UK
Photo: Mikael Olsson

tinguished shortlist including widely revered Caruso St John, Stirling Prize-winning dRMM, and veterans of elite educational establishments, Walters & Cohen.

Homerton College dining hall is now in detailed design (one more dramatic timber structure, pushed to the limit). At Oxford University's Green Templeton College, the competition-winning design for new graduation accommodation and academic spaces is being drawn up to go for planning. This is the one where the team rehearsed how to enter the interview room and lay things out. The four architects who attended the presentation each had a role to play and an equal amount to say in the presentation. 'There were no bag carriers,' says Fergus. Not only did Feilden Fowles win the job but even now, as the practice draws up the concept design, the client still refers back to the interview. That doesn't seem so surprising in an interview climate forged by the pressure and defensiveness of the student crit – where ideas and design development are often foregrounded ahead of the needs of a client. It is one thing when the client is an academic fiction, another when they are right in front of you.

There are a plethora of other things that can hold back a small practice from larger projects. It is well-documented that in the UK the European Union's procurement rules are applied inflexibly, resulting in scoring for potential projects on best value normally being disproportionately weighted towards cost. There doesn't seem much that a practice determined to have a properly resourced design can do about this. But they

can ensure they are at least at the table by preparing for all the hoops for pre-qualification questions. 'We are very good at generating ideas,' says Fergus. 'Now we are getting the infrastructure behind them to make them happen.'

They have always done that to some extent – the third member of the team was, unusually, an office manager. And they have always wanted professional recognition in the form of awards and their own licence to practice – unlike some designers who never go for full professional accreditation they took their final exams as soon as possible, allowing them to officially be called architects and start being recognised as such. They will happily chat about file structures and naming conventions. But now the infrastructure is things like ensuring they have the right standards like ISO 9001, supporting staff with training and ensuring they have an office culture where the personal strengths of a small practice are not lost – like friendly, properly written, professional emails. It could be this is a bit like their design, they like to choose the furniture and have a say in the cutlery. 'We are interested in everything,' admits Edmund.

So is it all looking positive with bigger projects on the horizon? That doesn't sound like Brexit Britain. I suspect Fergus and Edmund are an optimistic pair – during the last recession they were still operating on a shoestring out of a small flat in Hackney with not much to lose. But Edmund explains why a downturn, that the UK has been teetering on the edge of for some time, might affect them less than other practices. 'We work

for more stable institutions,' he says. 'They are long-term thinkers.' And perhaps they also value what the practice brings, even when times are tight – this sense of value is often generated by the personal relationships as much as the work. 'You don't go to an architect focused on design unless you value design,' they say. On each of their projects they can identify the champions of design who keep the project on course and have often brought in the practice. What do they want from the next 10 years? Both now with young families, Edmund has a knee-jerk response: 'Keep up the energy levels.' But it is more than that. 'We want to work on impactful buildings,' says Fergus. He expands: this means places where people go, not just a wealthy home-owner but the public or school children. Edmund, who has recently finished a three-year stint teaching an architecture studio on education design, can see the value in sharing lessons from some of Feilden Fowles' school buildings. A good example of this is the Applied Learning Centre for the Ralph Allen School in Bath, where a pleasant, airy and spacious classroom block was built inexpensively due to ingenuity in the planning and engineering. And applying things more widely would also be a pleasure: 'There is a culture of commissioning in Belgium and the Low Countries we would like to be part of,' says Feilden. 'We have honed our craft in the UK for 10 years, in the long term we don't want to be just UK-focused.'

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