

# ROLL ON, RETRO FIRST

Ziona Strelitz, founder director of ZZA Responsive User Environments, reflects on adaptive reuse and the principle's high-profile status in last year's New London Awards and across the industry



Canalside contemporary — Derwent's Brunel Building by Fletcher Priest in Paddington



As guest teacher on a mid-career built environment masters at Hong Kong University in 2004, I set assignments inviting adaptive or new-build responses. Every student chose demolition and starting anew. I commented on this, noting the view to Victoria Harbour was blurred by pollution.

The reaction: 'We like new.'

My framing reflected knowledge from London that adaptive re-use can triumph. The 20 exemplars in my 2008 book *Buildings That Feel Good* showcased five London projects, demonstrating how diverse schemes like Oxo Tower, Stoke Newington's West Reservoir Centre and Soho's Third Space gym could harness existing physical capacity and perpetuate social memory.

Next, my 2012 monograph on Kings Place (replacing relatively recent light industrial units), addressed embodied energy more squarely, asking when starting anew is warranted—a live question where increasing land values offer scope for significant escalation of financial returns. I cited usage value—the improved utility that can flow from a superbly connected site like King's Cross, delivering major social as well as commercial gains.

Fast forward a decade. What's remarkable now is the integration of adaptive re-use in mainstream practice.

Building awards are a window on what's been built and proposed, and several awards have a category for adaptive re-use. But London's reconceived, renewed buildings are now so prevalent that they feature across NLA's New London Awards, on equal terms with new-build. This itself says something.

Awards events are bustling affairs—candidates scramble to compile submissions, awards teams to sort them, then assess, judge, and write citations. When it comes to announcing winners, there's loads to cover. As everyone who's been to NLA's celebratory Guildhall lunches knows, these are not occasions for drilling down. But in aggregate, submissions represent an instructive cross-section of practice, and as expert assessor of NLA's 2020 New London Awards for Working, I was blown away by its radical window on adaptation.

Of course, there were also numerous new builds. Adaptive re-use isn't always the answer or even relevant, as two shortlisted projects demonstrate so well. KPF's scheme at Plumtree Court for Goldman Sachs by Farringdon Station replaced an outdated building—as a frequent attendee at client meetings with PwC, I could vouch for its 'ripeness'—intensifying use with thoroughly thoughtful design. Also doing justice to a hub location, Derwent's Brunel Building by Fletcher Priest replaced a three-storey, 1960s office building and car park, bringing strong identity, contemporary daylight-filled space, and great user amenity to the Grand Union Canal at Paddington. But another biggie is ORMS's masterful adaptation at 160 Old Street, taking a Royal Mail building to 166,300 sq ft (c. 15,500 sqm) for 21st century use, reconciling disparate sectional heights, providing must-haves for wellbeing and signature presence, plus notable achievements in carbon efficiency (reusing the existing structure alone saved 2,856 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, or 76 per cent), and a 70 per cent increase in net lettable area.

At the other end are beautifully designed minnows. Jonathan Tuckey Design transformed a derelict Victorian pub into the practice's studio, doubling as gallery and lecture theatre. Squire & Partners' adaptation of a five-storey Salvation Army Mission Hall for x+why minimised infrastructure changes to deliver 22,500 sq ft (c. 2,040 sqm) of co-working space in Whitechapel.

Jan Kattein Architects converted a disused Haringey warehouse into 11,000 sq ft (c. 1,022 sqm) of study and production space for the Tailoring Academy, and Burwell Architects adapted the art deco Elsley House for contemporary office use. Perhaps most notable is the 70,000 sq ft (c. 6,500 sqm), 12-storey International House Brixton, involving little architectural intervention, but whose innovative 'Buy Give Work' leasing strategy for creative industry and civil society greatly enthused the jury.

Overall, of the 23 'already built' submissions in the

'working' category, 14 were adaptations, as were eight of the 10 completed buildings on the shortlist. The winner, Poplar Works by Adams & Sutherland, refurbished 100 under-used garages to create ground-floor workspace with new CLT upper floors above, avoiding new foundations. Highly commended was York House, Islington, where dMFK with TOG stripped a 1980s office building to its frame, creating contemporary workspace, with signature front and roof extensions.

## 'What's remarkable now is the integration of adaptive re-use in mainstream practice'

As we gear for climate change, and as embodied carbon becomes more significant with decarbonisation of the grid, recognising such achievements on embodied carbon is encouraging. So too are the myriad other measures these projects embrace to reduce energy in use, which remains highly important. The retrofit emphasis in the 2020 New London Awards is no blip: the vast repertoire of projects compiled in NLA's recent *WRK/LDN: Office Revolution?* report confirms adaptive re-use as a trend, with more to follow in NLA's Resilient London initiative. Very welcome industry practice—and galvanising as we head to COP26 and beyond. ●

The 2021 New London Awards shortlist will be announced in September. Visit [nla.london/awards](https://www.nla.london/awards) for full details



Post-post — ORMS' 'masterful adaption' of a Royal Mail building at 160 Old Street