

MAKING IT WORK

Ziona Strelitz, founder director of ZZA Responsive User Environments, takes a POE-look at adaptive re-use in action — how Make Architects' reused car park office is thriving, seven years on



The practice's car park-turned offices in Fitzrovia



In 2004, tacking away from his notable career at Foster and Partners to express his aspirations for practice and ethos, Ken Shuttleworth founded Make Architects. From the start, Make chose Fitzrovia as its base, growing to occupy several floors of an office building before the momentous move

to its current home—the lower ground floor of Middlesex House in Cleveland Street, a building constructed in 1934.

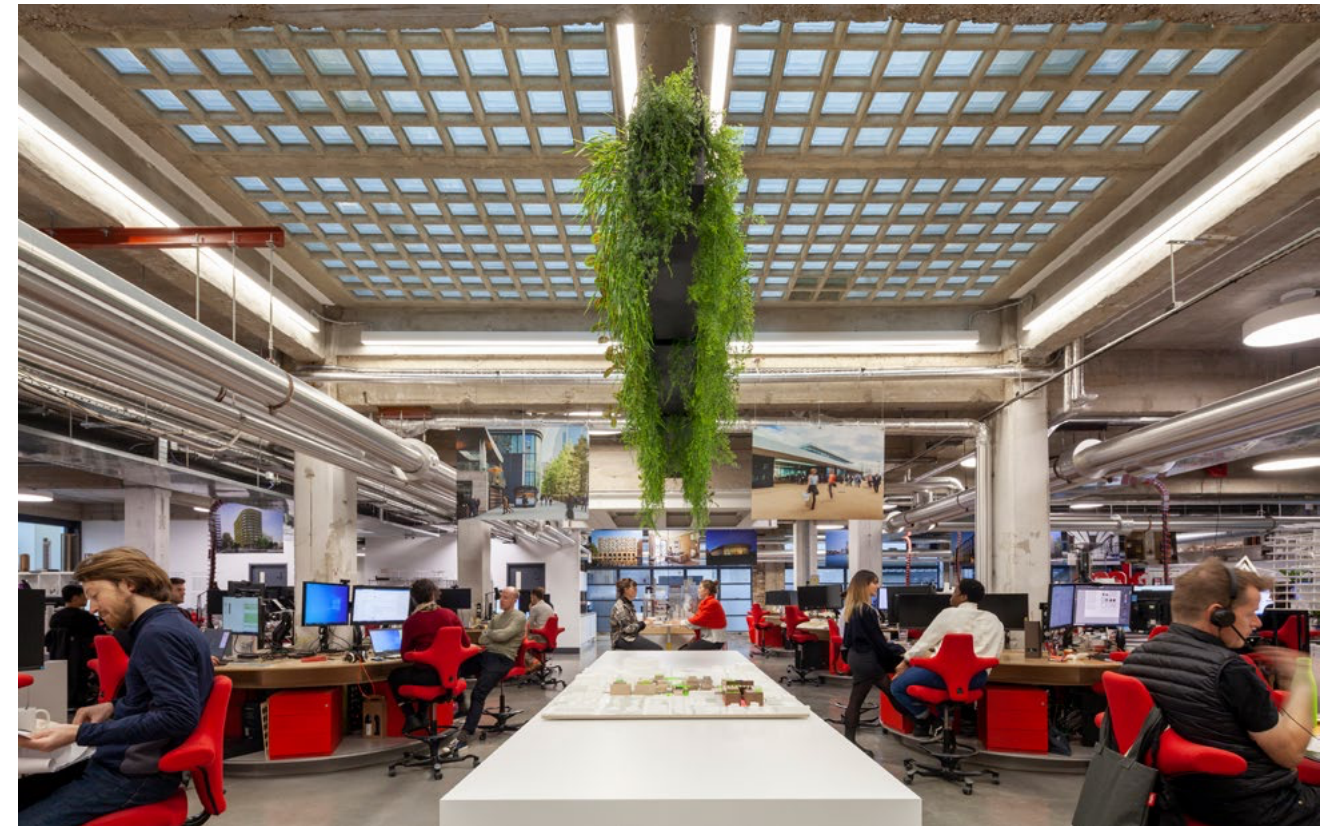
Latterly a car park, the space had key features to commend it. First was location—Make wanted to stay in Fitzrovia. Second was size—having grown further, Make needed more space. Third was rent—its lower ground floor situation made it affordable. The fourth and fifth factors were spatial—a footprint to accommodate the whole studio on one level, and enough sectional height not to feel restrictive.

But the fulcrum for the proposition was imagination. Envisioning the car park as a workplace was a creative leap, and following this through took design flair.

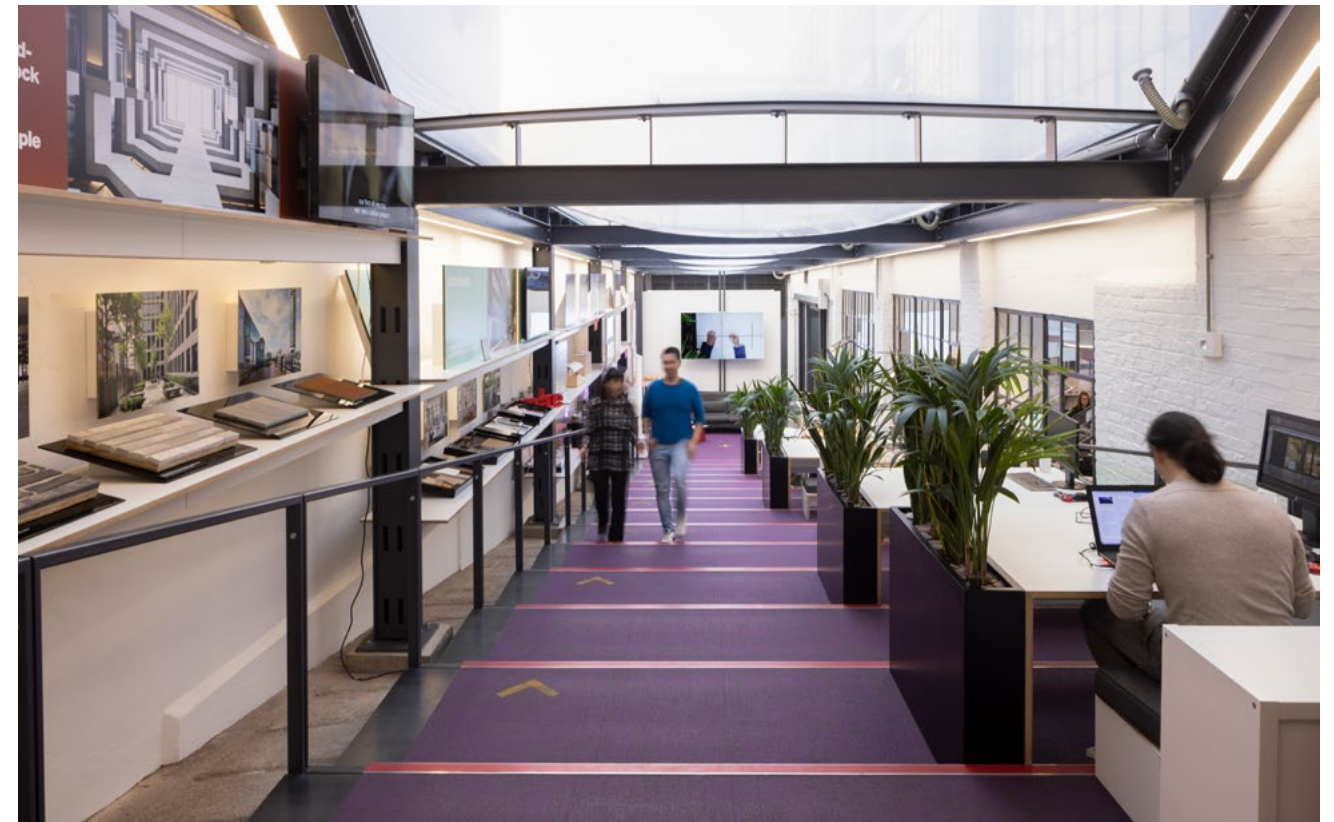
The space

The studio's realisation is predicated on clear principles. The key was to not hide the previous use. The car park's elements remain visibly expressed—concrete surfaces, coordinates on the columns marking out the parking bays, and the ramp on which cars entered and left the garage now serving as a processional entrance from Make's front door.

Another important decision was not to compartment the space, with its openness supporting the studio culture of everyone working together. The only enclosed spaces are meeting rooms, washrooms, an area to spray the models, and some storage. The result is a single



The interior bears the building's previous history...



...including a ramp on which cars entered now serving as the processional entrance from the front door

In conversation with Ken Shuttleworth

Ziona Strelitz: Ken, I never see you not sketching. In your fulsome career, this is your first workplace baby. Can a legacy place ever fully express your design impetus?

Ken Shuttleworth: I enjoy the constraints—they define the character of a place and can be used to advantage. Here, the constraints were onerous and we didn't have much money—we made it workable without trying to disguise the car park.

ZS: You chose the car park for its locational, rental and spatial potential. Are you surprised how much Makers enjoy and value its narrative value?

KS: I always thought it would be cool. That's what we do—we design interesting spaces. It's fantastic that they've been effusive about the studio to you, and great they feel that way, but to say it's a cathedral is over the top.

ZS: There've been so many changes in the seven years since Make moved here—the studio's growth, the intensified carbon agenda, IT and ways of working, greater concern for wellbeing. If you were starting the project now, what might you do differently?

KS: We'd have a bigger breakout space with more planting—a bigger town hall space, more integrated with the kitchen. A bit like a Maggie's Centre.

ZS: People may see you as a steel and glass designer. Does the studio reference you in a wider repertoire?

KS: We're exploratory. We look at each project afresh in relation to context and appropriateness, and we're agnostic on materials—as long as they don't catch alight and fall apart! We've done a straw building.

ZS: Businesses struggle with the challenge of getting their people back in person since COVID, but the studio seems very populated when I've visited, and I understand Make has a high record of staff retention. What factors can you identify in this? Does the physical studio play a part?

KS: It's about the people, and the way we're set up. Make has been 100 per cent employee-owned from day one. There's nothing to sell—the value is just the people, people who want to work together. They don't feel a massive hierarchy, they have a voice from the time they join, we listen to the best ideas, and no one shouts and loses their temper. Working with models and moving paper around is best done in teams together. And this is a cool place, in a central location with options to live anywhere. So, there's lots of traction.

ZS: Has learning from ZZA's post-occupancy evaluations (POE) been useful for other adaptive re-use projects?

KS: This is the example we use. People can't always imagine what an adapted building could look like, so we bring them here to see it, and the POE of the studio gives validation.

What the Makers say

'It just has a unique character based on its unusual location in a car park. Most organisations of our scale would have filled out an office building.'

'It's the character of the space. It's been designed around the existing features—the columns, exposed brickwork and concrete.'

'The ramp—the sense of procession and openness.'

Value from openness—The research showed that Make's retention of the open space is highly effective in serving the studio. Makers value its social benefits:

'The open plan. It's really nice being able to see everyone on the same level. It's great for communication.'

'The buzz, the sense of excitement. It's a result of its openness and integration of everyone in the same space.'

Working and learning—The studio was conceived as a workplace, but Makers report it also functioning as a learning environment. What business wouldn't prize this? And if your business is architecture, it's additionally affirming that people attribute learning not just to the culture, but to characteristics of the design. Makers cite the 'disciplines being close to you—you can see what they're doing', the mix of different places to work, and the type and arrangement of workstations:

'It's how the circles [of desks] work... and the higher desks—you can talk to people at the same height: you don't have to tower over them if you're standing talking.'

Indexing productivity—Though the common objective of workplace design is productivity, quantitative demonstration of such impact is challenging, because multiple factors are at play. But the way people feel is an unarguable ingredient to their motivation and commitment, and Makers' reflections on what the studio signifies to them speak with atypical clarity:

'When you're in the space you feel in the heart of something bigger: being in the heart communicates what Make's about—the 'Cathedral of Make', surrounded by our values and what we're about. It's visible spatially and culturally.'

Quo vadis?—The POE's learning and action points inform Make's future practice and agenda to flex aspects of the studio at this mid-term stage of the lease. To the POE's central question—whether the 'car park to workplace' conversion proved a viable adaptation—the results provide affirming validation and confidence in future imaginative visions for alternative uses for existing spaces and structures.



Driving principles — the space's openness supports the notion of everyone working together

visual field where everyone can see one another and the projects they're working on. For a visitor, this view of the whole studio in one frame on approaching down the ramp is dramatic.

A third strategy was to use the daylight that's available in varying degrees on all four sides, plus some through glass blocks over the area below the outside pavement. The ramp, with its ETFE roof, is especially light-filled, and the settings along the side that overlooks the studio invite use for informal meetings, lunch, catch-ups and working with a change of scene. The other big daylight zone is the courtyard garden. Open to the sky, this is visually incorporated in the studio and meeting room that flank it through full-height glazing, with openable partitions providing direct access to external space and fresh air.

Does it work?

While architects commonly say their buildings should be judged by users, few pay this more than lip service. In 2018, Shuttleworth committed to test how Make's designs perform by commissioning ZZA to undertake independent post-occupancy evaluations (POE). The first POE was structured engagement with UBS at Make's 5 Broadgate groundscraper, evidencing how well internal environmental comfort could be delivered on a big floorplate. Our POE of Make's teaching and learning building at the University of

Nottingham showed the design's effective enablement of simultaneous multi-use, facilitated by its vertical circulation.

Widening the typological range, ZZA's next study brought us through Make's front door. The main objective was researching the potential of adaptive re-use, by establishing whether a converted lower ground car park could succeed as a workplace.

User verdict

ZZA's evaluations generate quantitative and qualitative outputs. In this case, a large majority of the ratings to the 102 comprehensive questions on aspects of the physical studio and its occupancy were positive. These included high aggregate scores evidencing major successes for Make's workplace in meeting strategic aims: 'Looks and feels professional'; 'facilitates communication across Make's teams'; 'facilitates a sense of community'; and 'pleased with the studio environment overall'. The weight of this overall endorsement is underlined by the relatively few weaknesses identified, mostly on limited natural light and thermal experience.

Legacy as narrative

Alongside metrics that give focus, ZZA's qualitative data provides insight, and the response of Make's people to the space's retained aspects are potent in conveying the expressive value that these bring to the workplace. ●