

MADE

Electric Wharf

location: Coventry

The transformation of this redundant Victorian power station and depot into an attractive and vibrant mixed use development on the fringe of Coventry city centre illustrates how a commitment to sensitive design and creative working practice can lead to the successful re-integration of our derelict industrial heritage with our urban centres.

A key feature of the development is the way in which the modern building requirements have been sensitively married with the historic fabric of the site and buildings. Notable design features are the successful integration of a public arts strategy within the design process and the installation of a new public footbridge offering a direct link into the city centre.

Introduction

The former Victorian power station and depot sits adjacent to the Coventry canal approximately a third of a mile from the city centre. The station was constructed 1894-1895 and supplied a growing demand for electricity across the city from this period. The power station became the crucial factor in a growing community and economy and rapidly expanded to supply surrounding factories including famous names like Daimler, Standard and Coventry Eagle.



By 1997 however, the site was unused and looking for a new owner. By 2000 Powergen (the sites owner), had sold the property to Complex Development Projects (CPD) whose Coventry-based directors recognised the unique qualities and opportunities of the site and saw the potential to create a high quality mixed-use development aimed at small businesses in the creative and high technology sectors.

The project has been developed over four phases between 2004-2008, and the completed scheme comprises; 68 live/work loft units, 21 eco-homes, and 3,500 sq.m of fully serviced high-tech office accommodation. The project also includes areas of high quality public realm and public art, and a new landmark pedestrian footbridge. The footbridge and associated extensions to the canal towpath network link the development directly to the city centre and should help encourage further regeneration in the area.

Design process

CPD had spent two years searching for a site in which to create a home for the cities creative community, and they believed that they had found the site on which to realise their aspirations. From the start of the project there was recognition from CPD that most of the existing Victorian buildings could be retained, and that their architectural qualities combined with the outstanding canal side setting would ensure a high quality and very individual regeneration project if handled sensitively. The turbine hall for instance is a smaller and older version of the building that is now known as Tate Modern.

Close collaboration between the developer and his design team, and the City Council ensured an efficient planning process. Both parties worked together to secure funding from Advantage West Midlands (AWM) and the European Regional Development Fund. An enabling partnering process with AWM and the Arts Council brought the defining factor of artist / architect collaboration to the project. In the summer of 2001, Insite Arts produced a Public Art Strategy for the site which identified key themes, concepts, locations and opportunities in respect of public art. This document has gone on to guide an extensive programme of artist commissions. In early 2002, Insite Arts and Bryant Priest Newman Architects met to produce a Design Statement which was the start of a considerable partnership in the design process. This document played a key role in informing the subsequent detailed design process, with these two parties working innovatively together on both the physical environmental design aspects and the community engagement process. In this respect, a community engagement programme was developed by muf architectureart to engage with different sectors of the community that were affected by their proximity to the development.

Inspired by early site visits, the design team felt that a sense of discovery should be an important element of the project. They did not want to lose the glimpses of the former industrial uses, the lives of people who had worked there and the power of the architecture.

The brief was developed to ensure that once selective demolition had taken place and the structurally sound elements of original buildings were identified, they were not to be polished up, but to be left to form distinctive elements that showed their industrial scarring intact within the finished project. Extending this aim of ensuring that the essential character of the place was not lost, around 80 per cent of material from demolished areas was reclaimed and reused in the conversion, construction and landscaping. Salvaged materials have been used as found, i.e. not cleaned or painted to reinforce the notion of the history of the old power station. A key example of this is where a major steel structure has been retained in the gardens of one of the residential units. Other examples include; reclaimed brickwork used in the gabion walls, reclaimed floor gratings used as stair enclosures and rusted steel sections used for new steelwork edges, kerbs and ramps.

To reinforce and enhance the existing character of the place, the architectural language for the new elements is very much a contrast to the old. It does not

overwhelm the old as only a limited palette of materials, form and colour are used. New aluminium roofs, high performance windows, coloured render and galvanised steelwork, both contrast and compliment the existing brickwork and steelwork, which has only been lightly restored and repaired to retain its essential character. The landscape design also reflects this approach. The 'soft' elements offer a limited palette of trees and groundcover and have been selected to be in keeping with the Victorian era to reinforce the historic context. The 'hard' elements use 'as found' salvaged materials to add to the romantic sense of the old buildings and spaces.

Creation of a public art strategy for the site early in the overall development process helped ensure the integration of artistic work within the wider design process. There are numerous examples of art working with architecture in an almost seamless blend. One notable artistic intervention is a 'wave' of reclaimed sleepers denoting the motion of light and inset with hundreds of metres of LED strips recalling the thousands of metres of live electrical cabling that had to be removed from the site.

Evaluation

There are many aspects to this project that are viewed as highly successful and worth noting when visiting the development. The project has won a number of awards including: the Coventry Design Awards 2007 for Public Art/Lighting, the RICS Award 2007 for Regeneration, finalist for the 2008 Waterways Renaissance Awards, finalist for Creating the Future 2008 and ASC Award for sustainable communities.

The scheme is visually and spatially engaging and attractive, and testifies to the success of the architectural approach of the design team. It is particularly evocative and successful in the way it blends the historic industrial structures with the new architectural interventions. Already more than 20 companies have established themselves at Electric Wharf.

The environmental credentials of the project are worth noting. The south-facing canal side setting has been maximised, not only by centering the development upon 400m of new public space, but also by designing the new eco-homes to take full advantage of the southerly aspect by using passive gain through solid construction. These homes also provide levels of insulation above the regulatory requirements, thereby reducing heating requirements. Rainwater and grey water recycling has also been implemented together with the provision of A-rated appliances. Perhaps the most innovative and architecturally rich environmental design approach has been the sensitive re-use of the old buildings and using recycled materials in new construction thereby saving raw materials and reducing land-fill. Day to day life within the project also creates environmental benefits in that working in a community of similar businesses within a short walk of the city centre, reduces vehicle journeys and saves time and money. Living sedum roofs retain water and soften hard urban edges. Electric Wharf's environmental aspects compliment the creative environment at the heart of this unique development.

The success of the project, and the way in which it has been progressed to completion by the development partners, demonstrates the need within other projects to support an extended range of clients and partners on an ongoing basis with scheme visualisation, in order to assist with process and decision making.

The scheme is an excellent example of how joint working between artists, architects and the clients ensured an overlap of ideas and made artwork an integral part of the design rather than an applied element.

The project clearly demonstrates that it is possible to combine industrial heritage with a strong contemporary identity to create an engaging and evocative built environment for people to enjoy living and working in.

Thinking beyond the boundaries of the site to include wider public realm improvements has the real effect of maximising potential and encouraging further regeneration within an area that was until recently deemed as being undesirable.

Key design features to look out for

- The way in which the new architectural elements work with the existing buildings to complement the character of the original buildings rather than overpowering them. Achieved through sensitive juxtaposition of both form and materials.
- The new architectural interventions mostly contrasting with the existing, and using a limited palette of materials form and colour.. New aluminium roofs, high performance windows, coloured render and galvanised steelwork both contrast with and compliment the existing brickwork and steelwork which has been lightly restored and repaired to retain its essential character.
- The use of 'as found' salvage material from the demolition process within the fabric of the revitalised development.
- The tradition of painted signage to the elevations of canalside buildings being adopted for the new elements, bringing a natural synergy between the old and new.
- The often seamless integration of artistic elements within the overall architectural expression.
- The overall improvement to the quality of the canal side environment through the successful integration of high quality public realm, public art, and the creation of new linkages to city centre.
- The bridge itself has a striking and modern theme, and though the integration of its design with the artistic elements of the project were diluted by restrictive engineering issues, it none the less has strong visual and physical design links to other substantial public art works in the city centre.

Link and downloads

Project architects

<http://www.bryantpriestnewman.com/>

Developer website

<http://www.complexdevelopmentprojects.co.uk/>

RegenWM case Study

http://www.regenwm.org/casestudies/casestudies_details.asp?cat=2007%5FPrize%5FWinners&cid=75

Project website

<http://www.electricwharf.com/>

Public Art Strategy

http://www.publicartonline.org.uk/casestudies/regeneration/electric_wharf/

Artistic consultants

<http://www.insiteart.com/>

Contact for further information

Dean Shaw
Bryant Priest Newman Architects
3 Mary Street
Birmingham
B3 1UD

0121 233 1818
mail@bryantpriestnewman.com