

# MADE

## **IKON gallery**

**location: Birmingham**

Prior to its refurbishment into the new Ikon Gallery, the Oozells Street School which had been designed in the neo-gothic style by one of Birmingham's most prolific Victorian architects, was a burnt out wreck of a building. The total refurbishment and extension of the Grade II listed building by Levitt Bernstein Architects in 1997 has breathed new life into this historically important building, allowing it to retake its place as a landmark focal point within the community.

One of the keys to the successful reinvigoration of the building was an unreserved commitment to contemporary design, where the new elements of the buildings juxtapose with the fine old Victorian building.

### **Introduction**

Situated in the heart of Birmingham's Brindley Place development, Ikon Gallery is now an internationally acclaimed contemporary art venue providing a full range of facilities and services to both the surrounding community and wider world. The Gallery has four interdependent strands to its artistic programme:

1. two floors of gallery space giving 450sq.m of exhibition space
2. a close working affiliation with Birmingham's Eastside regeneration project
3. an off-site programme building relationships between artists and outside audiences
4. education, which is at the heart of Ikon's programme, stimulating interest through talks, workshops tours etc.



The project is an excellent example of how a contemporary design approach to the refurbishment of historic buildings can both reinvigorate and enhance historic buildings that carries their own distinctive architectural style and character.

The building began life as Oozells Street School, designed by J H Chamberlain (of Martin & Chamberlain), architect of Birmingham's School of Art, and formed part of a legacy of more than 30 Board Schools across the

city. These outstanding buildings were built as the result of a drive on the part of Birmingham's politicians to make Birmingham better.

The Oozells Street School is a quality neo-Gothic style building, predominantly of brick and tile construction. The building also incorporates fine terracotta and stone detailing and ornamentation.

Maps of this area show that to the rear of the school building was an iron works, to the right was an engine works and just next to the iron works was a pin factory. Even though the original building was surrounded by a dense area of factories and workshops, (and so must have seemed very incongruous within its industrial setting), there was also a very high density of housing for the working classes.

As industry in the area deteriorated due to the slowing pace of national manufacturing, the school and area around it fell into a state of neglect. The school building was boarded up and only a few unlucky families remained in the area with the factories.

## **Design process**

The Ikon was conceived in 1964 by Angus Skene and four artists from the Birmingham School of Art as a 'gallery without walls', with exhibitions planned to tour unusual locations. It eventually saw physical form as a small octagonal glass-walled kiosk in the then new Bullring shopping centre.



In 1996 Levitt Berstein Architects were chosen as architectural partner by Ikon and Argent (Brindley Place developer), to help secure National Lottery funding. This ultimately enabled the realisation of Ikon's third move to its current location. It marks Argent's innovative and committed approach to regeneration that they recognised the potential contribution that the Oozells Street School building could make to the overall Brindley Place development. Construction cost was approximately £4.7m, with completion taking place in 1997.

The school building was converted in two phases: firstly, removal of 20<sup>th</sup> century extensions and fabric repairs; secondly, and following one of the first lottery grants, the conversion into an art gallery. Café Ikon, on the ground floor, was designed by Birmingham-based architects The Space Studio.

Levitt Berstein's architectural proposals were unashamedly contemporary in their architectural solution, both in regard to spatial quality and choice of materials. New extensions add vertical circulation routes to the original

building. These new glass-and-steel stair towers juxtapose with Chamberlain's warm brick walls and Gothic openings. The contrast in materials and detailing works very well and successfully highlights the aesthetic qualities of both new and old architecture. The see-through stair tower gives you close-up glimpses of the fine Victorian brick and stone detailing while the overall expression of the stair itself adds all kinds of new lines and curves in counterpoint to those of the original structure.

The dynamism of the public circulation and foyers is balanced by the more contemplative character of the gallery spaces. These spaces are formed out of the original classrooms, and designed to adapt in a relaxed manner to the varied nature of contemporary artists' demands. The gallery spaces themselves are elegant and spacious providing an exceptional setting with high vaulted ceilings and an abundance of natural light.

The project also incorporated an excellent collaboration with the artist Tania Kovats, who was a participating member of the design team and conceived the dark slate plinth upon which the building rests.

The result is a piece of architecture that creates a dramatic, interesting, and complimentary dialogue between the old and the new. This sense continues when viewing the building in its wider setting of Oozell Square and Brindley Place where the rich decorative tradition of Victorian neo-gothic architecture contrasts with the modern buildings and public realm that surrounds it.

## **Evaluation**

The refurbished Ikon gallery has breathed new life into an important historic building in a way that has added to the architectural legacy of Birmingham. This is evident from the many awards the project has won, including:

- Refurbishment Category - 2000 Brick Awards
- Civic Trust Award 2000
- RIBA Architecture Award 1999
- Royal Fine Art Commission/BSkyB - Building of the Year Award 1999
- Institution of Civil Engineers' Midlands Association Project Award 1998

Since moving to their new gallery, the Ikon's contribution to Birmingham's city life has grown considerably as has its reputation for innovation and excellence both within the city and internationally.

The project is an excellent demonstration of successfully blending contemporary architectural design solutions within an historic building.

The building is also a major contributor to the character of Brindley Place, and the sense of vibrancy and diversity that Brindley Place brings to the wider city.

## **Key design features to look out for**

- While the building is often missed by visitors to Brindley Place , the refurbished building and the setting of Oozell Square contribute positively to the overall richness and diversity of the area.
- The successful contrast between the old and new elements within the overall architectural composition.
- The new glass and steel stair towers and floors improve movement through the building and bring the visitor into close contact with elements of the old building that would not have been possible previously. This 'close up' experience heightens the sense of contrast.
- The excellent levels of natural diffused light and spatial qualities within the gallery spaces create a wholly appropriate neutral and contemplative character, yet they convey a familiarity from their previous life as classrooms.

## **Link and downloads**

Levitt Bernstein Architects

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

Ikon Gallery

<http://www.ikon-gallery.co.uk/>

English Buildings Website - article

<http://englishbuildings.blogspot.com/2007/09/ikon-gallery-birmingham.html>

Birmingham: Architectural and Historical - article

<http://expbirmingham.wordpress.com/>