



"...value-adding style achieved at the lowest building cost. "



Neil Parkyn talked to Bill Reed about the perils and rewards of building your own offices as architect/developer

Summing up the Studio

King's Terrace, Camden Town is anything but regal; backs of properties on Camden High Street, cobbles and a clutch of gypsy caravans on a vacant site greet one on arrival, hence the greater surprise in lighting upon Bill Reed's studio at the northern end. A double-height facade of temple-like grandeur, the gleam of brass detailing and the view on axis through to the large studio volume at the far end, with its dramatic downlighting, reinforces the first impression that you have stumbled upon something that might be equally at home as Zarastro's stamping ground in the Magic Flute - and all for a building cost of less than £54 per sq.ft.

The project has lessons for any architect who contemplates building his or her own accommodation, because it is not the sophisticated financial package that might underpin a new-build operation by a major practice or

the enabling magic of the likes of Rock Townsend, but a pragmatic, opportunist venture by a one-man architect! developer, who lived with the job and at one point expected to have to live in it if the sums went wrong.

What may distinguish Bill Reed from other architects, who might have identified the near-derelict existing building at auction as material with promise, is his background in development, with the Mornington Avenue flats (RIBA Journal November 1986) on which he worked with CJ. O'Shea Construction, as an example of value-adding style achieved at the lowest building cost. In the Camden project, the secret was to pay too much, in strict conventional percentage terms, to win the building, rather than agonise over its exact worth. In the case of King's Terrace, which Reed bought for £121,000 at auction in September 1987, he was convinced that 'this was the right thing

to do in the right place, but I couldn't justify it'. But on revisiting his purchase he admitted very strong second thoughts. The existing structure was in very poor condition; this was hardly 'designer mews' country and his own prospects running a young practice were uncertain.

Reed came to Camden armed with his retail design and interiors experience with Conran Associates, the Mornington Avenue flats, and a series of the usual speculative design studies for developers. Becoming the developer and contractor himself allowed him to sidestep the 'pawn' position of the architect and take control of everything, both process and detail. Having worked with O'Shea, detail by detail, Reed had a knowledge of buildability which meshed well with the inventive spirit of his interiors. In practice, on the job, a great deal was improvised, which is far simpler if the designer is also the general contractor, as here.

When he came upon the Camden site after two or three years of searching, he intended to develop it as a studio for himself and additional board space for rent. He admits that his estimate of building costs at £50,000 was about half what it actually took; he was saved by luck - good timing. With rentals for 81 space in the area soaring from £7 to £22 per sq.ft since he bid at auction, Reed had only to find a commercial tenant to ensure that the scheme paid its way. Ironically these same rental increases made the building too expensive for the architect workspaces who might have sheltered there. In the event, a single tenant, a Norwegian fashion company, occupies the main body of the ground floor, sharing the conference, kitchen, reception and shower areas. Reed had included these when the project was intended as a self-sufficient studio which he could also use as a temporary base if he had to sell the Mornington Avenue flat which underwrote the bank loan. Again his timing was fortuitous; what turned out to be a low fixed-rate bank loan took away some of the anxiety as interest rates climbed. The differential between refurbishment and new-build rentals soon removed any doubts about retaining the existing structure.

It took about six months to build the studios, working with a team under Danny Farrell that Bill Reed knew and



Far left, studio facade with its double-height glazed front and patterned brickwork. Left, the toplit mezzanine studio was formed using rolled steel joists and two types of trusses supporting the roof

Right, view through the £1,000 American walnut doors with their brass portholes to the main studio area showing the custom made trusses



respected from previous projects. The level of trust and enthusiasm on the job allowed much of the pricing to be retrospective and impromptu improvements were incorporated without fuss. There was no formal building agreement but about 60 drawings were available for guidance. Reed doubts whether the inevitable changes could have been worked in so readily under the conventional architect/developer relationship and reflects that many of the early design decisions were made blind to achieve what he wanted without knowing the costs ahead.

The need to keep the project moving caused some anomalies. While the front part of the building is spanned by Metsec trusses costing about £225 each, the same spans in the rear use custom-fabricated trusses costing three times the amount. Reed had begun with the intention of doing the usual hightech wire act to replace existing rotting trusses, but design and site lime ran out and the present pedestrian versions were installed.

These changes en route to the finished building do not detract from the clear image that Reed has retained of the space and architectural intentions he required. The project is perceptually symmetrical for those who linger in the mews, but with gentle inflections such

as the curved screen wall of the reception area balancing the shower room below the mezzanine level. A certain grandeur is achieved with the double-height shop front window wall flanked by solid brick walls in Redland Otterham yellow stocks with a diaper pattern of blue engineering bricks. The building 'face' becomes the logo of Bill Reed's development company, something to grace a brace of T-shirts and homage to the painting style of Robyn Denny, whom Reed much admires. Such touches might have been designed out if the building were developed by others, but there is an attractive full-circle unity in retaining control of your own design destiny. Having a tenant for most of the floor space does not seem to have blunted the overall intent. Reed has designed furniture for them and the unity of detailing means that, as he puts it, 'I can pretend I've got the whole lot, they can pretend they've got it.' The arrangement is apparently amicable and allows Reed to colonise the conference table at the end of the long axis for the occasional dinner party.

Money has been cannily spent. The studio's basic construction is very simple: brick piers with lightweight concrete blockwork between for the new long wall, a mezzanine formed with rolled steel joists and the two types of trusses

supporting Kingspan decking units with acrylic inserts for daylighting, a detail which Reed substituted for his original intention of glazing in a slate roof because he feared, v,mdaliwl. None has actually occurred, Instead of spending Oll any complication of this structure, the approach was to put money where you can see and touch it, hence the wide 'thousand pound' doors in American walnut. With their brass fittings they set a level of quality, even opulence, which attracts the eye and causes defects and irregularities elsewhere to be forgotten. Likewise the porthole openings, either glazed or as a row of small vents, are worked through the ground floor and reappear as circular fictive ventilator banks at high level. The contrast of hard, expensive-seeming details and rough irregularity is effective and probably the outcome of Reed's interior design record.

There are many small touches, such as the industrial jelly-mould inserts in the reception desk, and the purpose-designed furniture that doesn't look too quirky, which contribute to the overall blend of control and enjoyment. Many details arrived in Camden from Reed's other projects and the ambience is close to what its designer intended. But what of the actual messy process of getting there? Life with your own project can certainly be lonely. Apart from the financial gamble, from bid, through loan to final value, there are such surprises as the night just before a Bank Holiday, when the motorised shutter door had been installed and then proceeded to self-destruct, leaving an opening unprotected by the shop front, which had not been installed, and bombarded only by the increasingly hungry and cold architect! developer. Emergency repair men caused further mayhem and Reed had to work a lonely vigil until relieved. There is no walking off such a job.

In retrospect, the Camden Town studio worked out because of good timing, interest rates, collateral and a full measure of animal cunning and persistence. Gathering up a trusted team of specialist trades and using tested details must also have helped. For the would-be architect/developer, Bill Reed recommends trusting intuition in bidding for the site, md having as much previous experience of working your own details through with a contractor as possible.