

## ‘The planners were bemused why we wanted to keep it’: the clients championing retrofit



27<sup>th</sup> February, By AJ News Desk

**Conrad Peberdy, managing director of the Ethical Property Company**



**The Green House, Before and After**

**Developer** Ethical Property Company

**Architect** Waugh Thistleton

**Scheme** The Green House, east London

### **Tell us about the project ...**

The Green House in Bethnal Green, east London, is a hybrid project. The original building was a factory built in the 1970s for the rag trade; it's an industrial structure which had fallen into disrepair and was used for illegal raves. We refurbished the original building and then built an extension out of cross-laminated timber (CLT) – effectively doubling its size.

### **What were the challenges of the existing building?**

There were challenges around waste collection and security, but the biggest challenge was working out how air could be ventilated around the building. Concrete and timber have very different properties around heating and cooling, so trying to ensure an effective and sustainable system for the entire building was hard.

## **Had demolition or partial demolition ever been considered?**

Around 80-85 per cent of our projects are retrofit. Our company has a social mission and advocates for the circular economy, so we support retrofit from a carbon perspective. But we also own a portfolio of incredibly odd places and believe historic buildings are attractive to people – so there is a commercial element too. When we developed the Green House we needed a new office space in a very short amount of time because one of our existing offices in east London, sadly, did have to be demolished. So time mattered and a new-build scheme would have taken a lot longer.

## **What other aspects of your design reduce the whole-life carbon impact of the building?**

The use of CLT reduced its carbon footprint by about 60 per cent compared to using concrete. And when we fitted out the interior, we primarily used wood, bark and other natural products. We also have a gigantic area to the rear which is made out of recycled plastics, we have a whole roof of solar panels and we also installed green roofs. And we used a natural ventilation system – there is no air conditioning.

## **Were the planners supportive of the proposals?**

They loved the reuse of an existing building, but there were some issues. The planners were demanding we created turning circles for bins and deliveries to come through, but the existing building took up most of the front of the site, so it was almost like they were forcing us to demolish part of the existing building in order to extend.

They were not really reflecting or being flexible enough about the actual constraints of that site – it was almost like their own policies were trying to force us at times to demolish, even though the planners were supportive of what we did.

## **Some people might say this building is not beautiful. What would you say to them?**

I can understand that some people might look at the building and think it's a bit of an ugly duckling. What is important, though, is the quality of the space inside. I'm not an architect, I'm an operator, so it's all about the functionality of the inside spaces. I want them to look good and I want them to reflect what our tenants want, but I'm not about building a building to make it look like a Picasso.

## **What skills are you looking for when you employ an architect on a retrofit job?**

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