

The Next Era of Retrofitting

Designing for Each Asset's Latent Value



The Northcliffe. (CoStar)

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It has been heartening to see retrofit-first become industry standard at home and abroad.

When JRA was founded in 1993, we, like most architectural practices, were often asked by clients to put forward redevelopment proposals for new schemes. Though we have always operated across the UK, a large proportion of our work is in central London – principally the Cities of London and Westminster – and soon these redevelopment schemes became important new additions to London's iconic cityscape, notably office schemes at [One Great St Helen's](#), [20 Cursitor Street](#) and [120 Fleet Street](#).

But alongside these projects, and perhaps as a sign of a changing industry, we saw clients increasingly ask for designs where we could maintain as much of the existing structure – and often floorplates – of a building as possible; whilst upgrading the interiors and amenities to contemporary standards. We focused on training and developing architects who understood the inherent value of a building, and worked with developers to unlock this potential through what became known as "retrofitting".

While we often assume that this change was driven solely by environmental considerations, this is not the whole story. For many schemes, practical, and often planning policy, considerations made wholesale demolition and replacement both unpalatable and non-viable, which motivated building owners to consider what they could achieve with their existing context.

In many cases these considerations incentivised schemes where flexibility was paramount, with floor plans and interior designs that were calculated to future-proof an asset's leasability, influenced by recent British Council for Offices guidance. Unfortunately, this occasionally led to office space that was anonymous, and generic, with the interior designs focused on affording maximum adaptability, rather than the imaginative repositioning that many schemes require. As property funds, and other asset managers, began to increasingly report their environmental and ecological impacts, we saw the need for top-tier ESG accreditations further incentivise retrofit-first approaches.

However, since the pandemic, it is increasingly clear that we have entered into a new era of retrofitting – one that requires architects, designers and developers to update their understanding of asset repositioning. Alongside the well-established industry focus on the environmental reporting benefits of retrofitting, we are seeing developers and their agents vocalise the commercial and leasing benefits of retrofitted heritage assets.

Our industry is beginning to recognise that occupiers often prioritise aligning their brand to a structure with character, and are finding it easier to encourage workers back into the office within buildings that not only tell stories with their designs; but also fit into the context of London's wider history. Therefore, our designs will have to increasingly look to preserve heritage structures, not just because it fits well into GRESB – but because future tenants want to feel and see this history. This is something we delivered at 1-3 Fredericks Place, where our regeneration for the Mercers' Company focused on showcasing the 18th century estate's commercial heritage, whilst supplementing this history with a contemporary food and beverage provision.

In turn, our designs need to bring character into often unloved buildings through careful, but often substantial, interventions. At two very different buildings – the [Northcliffe](#), the Art Deco former HQ of the Daily Mail off Fleet Street, and [One Westferry](#) in Canary Wharf – adding new roof terraces, and significantly broadening the existing entrance spaces, has brought new depth and light into legacy offices, whilst connecting their workers to the wider skyline.

This need for character transcends age. For potentially stranded assets with more contemporary designs, and less history, retrofitting schemes will often benefit from designing with the final occupier in mind; transplanting the character of a tenant on to the existing structure. At [1 Hercules Way](#) in Leavesden, we extensively consulted with Skanska UK to produce a new HQ that would reflect their brand ethos. Teeming with urban greening, with a new central atrium, and benefitting from dozens of co-working spaces and breakout spots, we're proud to have created a truly collaborative and fun office in an out-of-town location. The office has become an extension of Skanska, and has left its previously bland, and uninspiring, design.

Our industry has made great progress in embracing retrofitting, and we remain confident that this will continue as it enters into a new era.

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