

*Building study*

# TAILORED TO FIT

The AJ visits HAT Projects, Gort Scott Architects and Moxon: three practices that have recently designed their own offices

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Photography Jim Stephenson

## HAT PROJECTS

Founded 2007  
Number of employees 6

The ur-space of architecture for most practitioners is perhaps not the Primitive Hut but their own studio, a workspace which, ideally, they'll have designed themselves and which epitomises their design approach, acting as a shop window for clients.

'As architects you want to be in a space you designed. Otherwise, it's a bit like fashion designers not wearing their own clothes,' laughs Hana Loftus, one of the directors of HAT Projects.

The practice, founded in 2007, recently converted a former-Christian Science church in the centre of Colchester, designed in the 1970s by local architect Brian Thomas, into Trinity Works, its studio, incorporating a café and Makerspace alongside.

'We originally started, like many people, in a spare bedroom, then later did the typical thing of renting a small office space, then a slightly bigger one. But a rented space never really represents you; you don't have control over its management,' says Loftus.

Having previously been in first-floor offices above shops, the practice also felt it important to find a space more connected to the surrounding town.

'We didn't want to buy a small building and just be ourselves in it. We liked the idea of cross-fertilisation, of having other people in it: of making a contribution to the town. We wanted to put our money where our mouth





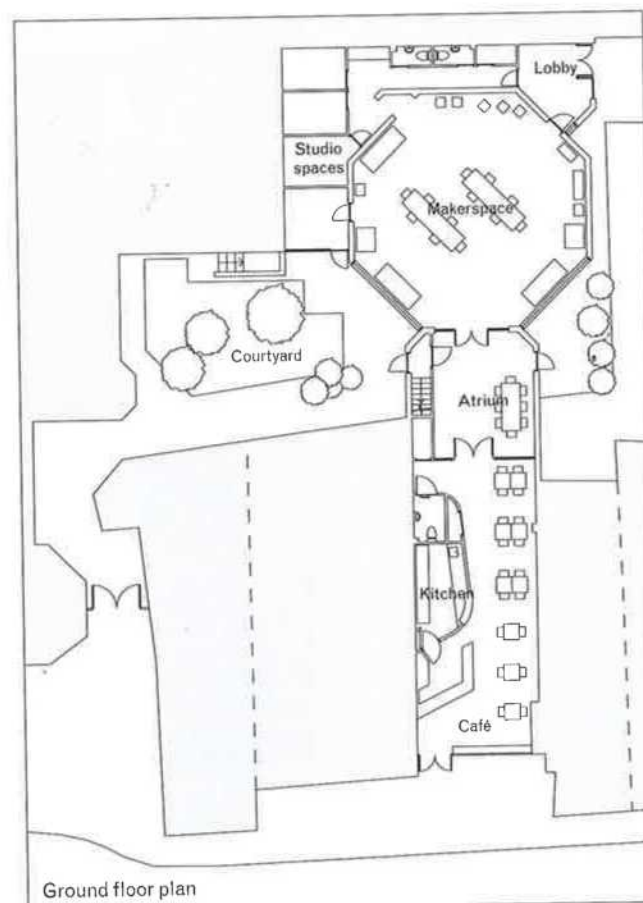
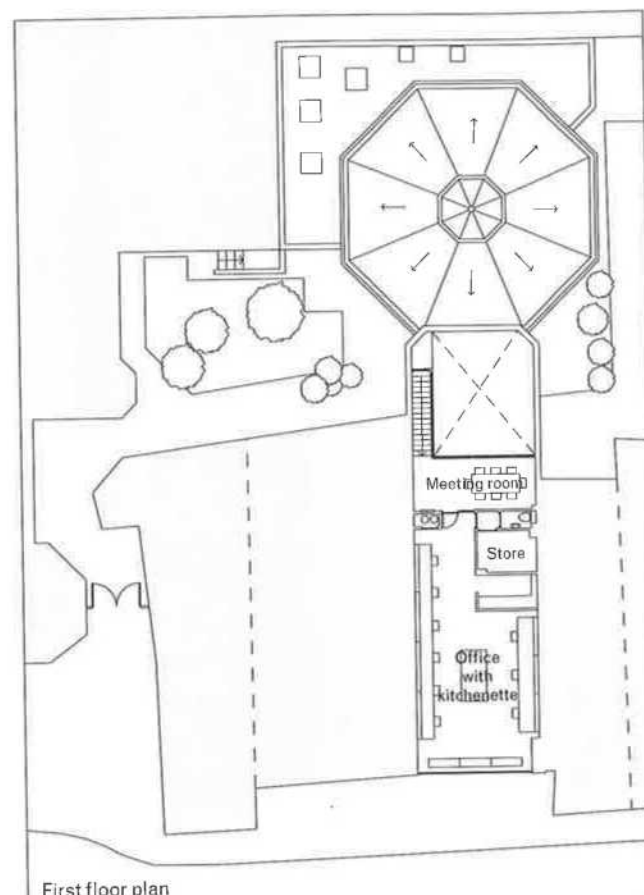


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is. Everyone talks about the decline of retail and the town centre, but the problem is often a lack of creativity – not being more imaginative about what town centres could be like. If we have any skills as architects, it is to take unpromising sites and buildings and make something unexpected that makes people go "wow, I never thought this was possible". Take here for example: this was a great building but an odd one. No one knew how to make it work.'

HAT opened up what had been the ground floor entrance passage and church offices to form a single café space. They placed their new offices above this, stripping out the octagonal church at the rear to form an airy, flexible space – now rented as a makerspace. All elements look onto and can be accessed off a shared glazed covered courtyard.

'The key thing was finding activities to suit the building, rather than forcing the building to suit activities,' says Tom Grieve, HAT's other director. 'We had to do minimal intervention to make it work: more opening-up spaces than imposing on them. The one strong design gesture has been the insertion of the curved timber wall around the kitchen: we carefully modelled this to read like an object in the space, maintaining site lines through, and not creating a corridor feel to the surrounding café.'



### Project description

Trinity Works is a light-touch retrofit which celebrates and extends the language of the existing building's original early 1970s architecture. We chose to purchase the building in part because of the strong and very different architecture it had, compared with many town centre buildings – a fully glazed shopfront over two floors, sawtooth roofs over the front portion, a double-height brick atrium (originally a 'garden court') and the big octagonal auditorium to the rear.

It is difficult to imagine a similarly designed street frontage being granted

planning permission today, in the heart of the town centre conservation area and surrounded by jettied Tudor buildings. Yet it feels fully appropriate. The first floor itself projects out over the ground.

However, the potential for the shopfront to allow great views through the whole building, to the 'garden court', was denied in the original because of the cellular layout. As a result, few people had any idea of the extent of the building.

When we opened it up, stripping out all the ground floor partitions, it was a wonderful

surprise to find the atrium and octagon beyond. The new layout we created balanced the need for flexibility with the specific needs of each tenant. It ensures that each tenant has separate, secure, 24/7 access while sharing the main entrance during most of the working day.

We did the minimum amount necessary to bring the building back into productive use, while designing each element to be attractive in a simple studio aesthetic with the odd flourish.

*Hana Loftus, director, HAT Projects*



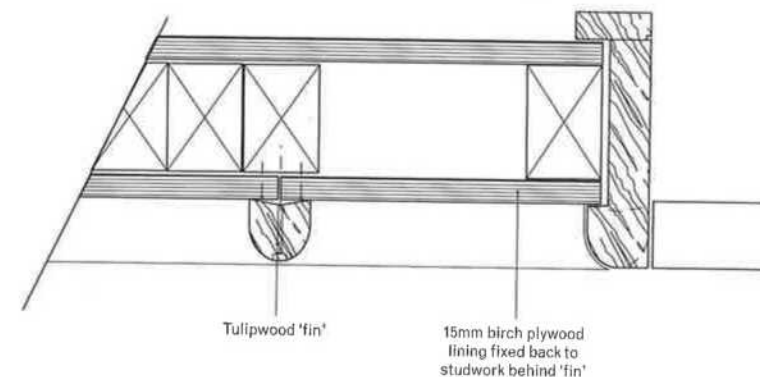
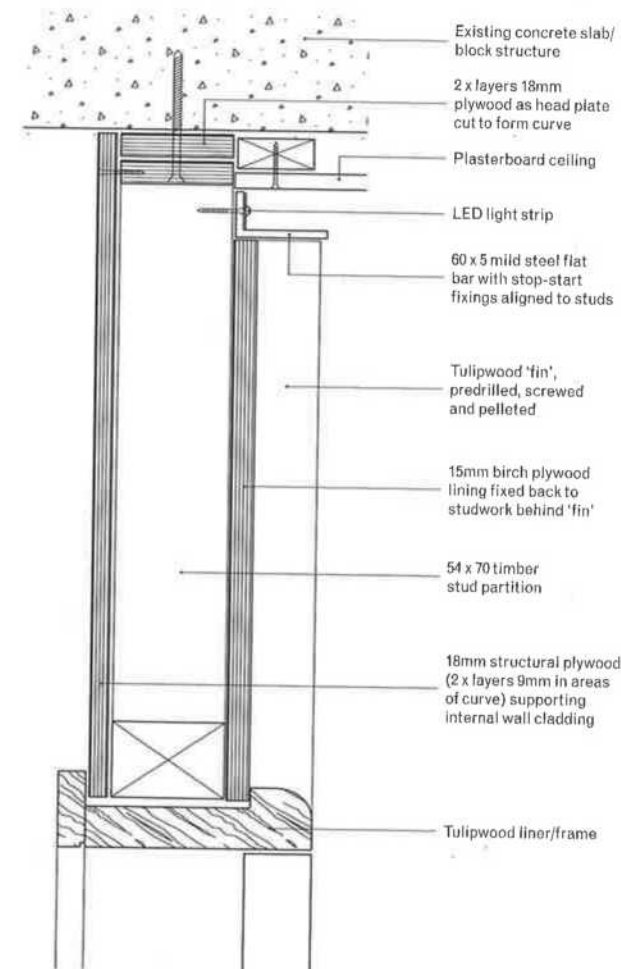
'We funded the project privately – with a little bit of capital saved up. The purchase price was less than the value of such a building to build, so we felt instinctively this was a good purchase. But the key thing was getting the business plan right. It's now funding itself, people are paying us rent, we are paying ourselves rent and it's paying off that debt. It's pretty standard but not something that would have been possible in London.'

HAT's project is typical of a trend for many new architecture offices to present a more public face, to be more embedded in their surroundings. It's a shift epitomised at a grand scale by Squire and Partners' 2018 conversion of a former department store in Brixton to their practice office. Whereas in the past a big practice like Squire's might be expected to design a signature look-at-me new-build, something along the lines of Fosters' Battersea home, perhaps, here their conversion/restoration has deliberately created a palimpsest of the building's past. Now this reworked fragment of the existing urban fabric houses their offices, as well as retail spaces, a ground-level restaurant and rooftop club/bar.



#### Project data

Start on site April 2018  
Completion September 2018  
Gross internal floor area 366m<sup>2</sup>  
Construction cost £130,000  
Construction cost £355/m<sup>2</sup>  
Architect HAT Projects  
Client HAT Projects  
Structural engineer  
Momentum Engineering  
Approved building inspector LABC  
CAD software used MicroStation



Curved timber wall detail in section & plan

0 50mm

#### Specification

We adapted and extended the existing material palette very simply and practically. Working with local fabricators, we ensured that the retrofit could be achieved economically and on time. Products were selected for a combination of cost, durability and aesthetics. Almost all are generic products, with the exception of the lighting. We like simple, often self-coloured materials, given character by their treatment.

A coat of white paint brightened the buff brickwork of the atrium and created a bright heart to the building. Keeping the brick texture in combination with white-painted timber-framed screens glazed with wired fire-resistant glass created a plain, light, studio aesthetic. In the atrium we reused the wonderful 1970s chandelier light fittings – in a very fashionable champagne bronze finish – from the auditorium.

In the café, the curved wall that surrounds the kitchen and WC creates an enclosure without sharp corners. This improves the sightlines for the staff and avoids any sense of creating a corridor or dividing the café into zones. It is something special and joyful – a reinterpretation of Aalto's ribbed ceramics in timber – which gives a distinctive character to the space. We are very glad that the café tenant suggested a serving hatch in the curve – this gives a lovely glimpse into the warm, busy kitchen. The rest of the furniture – all purpose-made for us by local fabricators – is simple and plain: black tabletops on untreated mild steel table legs; a practical stainless steel counter top over a scuff-resistant black base; white shelves that hold leaflets from local venues, cookbooks, ceramics for sale by makerspace artists, flowers and plants. The lighting in the café was very carefully considered and the only product we spent good money on.

The makerspace required virtually no alteration – just practical batten lighting and plenty of power outlets for equipment. The makerspace team themselves adapted, recycled and made their own work benches, shelving and other fittings, exactly as it should be.

Upstairs, our office is simply fitted with birch ply shelves and kitchenette and desks brought from our last office. Again, simple batten lighting is used with a few spot lamps over meeting tables. We had the mild steel balustrade purpose-made by our usual local fabricator, David Wesbroom, with a lovely curve at the top of the stairs.

Hana Lbftus, director, HAT Projects