IN WITH THE OLD

As UK attention turns to refurbishment as an affordable way to create new building spaces, Laing O’Rourke is well placed to lend an experienced hand. Mark Smulian reports.

WHETHER CONVERTING GRADE I-LISTED offices to homes fit for ambassadation, helping hospitals to rationalise their spaces or bringing schools up to modern standards, Laing O’Rourke has demonstrated it can rise to the refurbishment market’s challenges. The UK economic climate now favours refurbishments, renovations and restorations as a cost-effective way of creating new building spaces. The financial and environmental merits of breathing new life into a structure, rather than demolishing and starting from scratch, translate to all sectors – from healthcare and education to retail and leisure. On the other hand, such projects often involve buildings still in use, creating new issues and requiring thorough planning.

Peter Brown, Laing O’Rourke’s north-west and West Midlands operations director, says, “Refurbishment is crucial. Given the uncertainty in securing finance for new build, a number of our clients are exploring the option to refurbish or reconfigure existing stock and are making the most appropriate use of what they already have.”

Laing O’Rourke can expect fresh technical challenges as clients seek modern environmental standards in buildings that might otherwise have been demolished. But the company’s refurbishment teams can call on colleagues with a range of expertise to help them tackle the most complex projects.

Healthy planning

In 2009-2010, Laing O’Rourke Construction North led a refurbishment scheme at St James’s University Hospital and Leeds General Infirmary hospitals for Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust. The trust wanted to co-locate children’s services at Leeds General Infirmary and healthcare for elderly people at St James’s, rather than splitting them across both sites.

Project leader Paul Brett steered the supporting work by subsidiary company Crown House Technologies (CHT). “There were 18 separate work fronts around wards that were still in use,” he explains, “so it was very complex logistically.”

St James’s was a refurb and required re-planning of existing wards to maximise bed spaces and improve clinical functionality, but Leeds General was stripped right back to its perimeter, and some areas were a complete change of use, for example from offices to clinical areas. One notable challenge was the conversion of various non-clinical spaces into a new operating theatre; but, again, surrounded by theatres still in use.

“The 18 handovers meant the project was, Paul adds, “like a jigsaw that required very careful planning, as any lateness would have a knock-on effect.”

“It takes all the usual planning, but to the nth degree for maintaining services, and because of infection control, you cannot just put up a hoarding. You need sign-off from infection control authorities for sealing off,” he adds.

Naturally, the refurbishment of premises used by mental health patients calls for special sensitivity. In Morpeth, project manager Joe Jefferson led the conversion of Northgate Villas, at Northgate Hospital, from offices to accommodation for patients with learning difficulties. Both villas were taken down to the load bearing walls and rebuilt with anti-ligature features to prevent self-harming.

A lot of Joe’s other work for Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Trust is on live mental health wards. “That’s very difficult as only small sections can be screened off for work,” says Joe. “If any incident happens, we have to stop.”

Going back in time

The Grand Ocean Hotel at Saltdean, East Sussex, was completed in fine Art Deco style in 1938. It was used by the wartime military, as a Butlins resort and as a hotel, before planning permission was granted to convert it into 280 luxury apartments, with restoration of the Art Deco features.

Explore Living sales and marketing director John Inglis says: “It was a dilapidated Grade II-listed concrete frame building that had been empty for three years. It’s important for us to work closely with the local authority conservation officers on projects like this to gain their co-operation and approval of the conservation scope of works, ultimately to ensure the programme is met.”

The facade had to be stripped, with render and guttering replaced and old Crittal windows substituted for similar double-glazed ones to meet modern environmental standards. Upper floors were gutted and Expanded constructed the concrete frames of four new wings, which complement the Art Deco design.

The project also saw the team hone its artistic skills. The main work was in the foyer, which contained the bulk of the Art Deco features. Bronze sculpture elements were repaired, while new ceiling decorations were made to replace existing ones that were covered with Artex.

“We showed we could return this building to its 1930s glory,” John concludes, “which is a rewarding aspect of restoration.”

The more even historic Cornwall Terrace – commissioned by the Prince Regent (later George IV) exactly 200 years ago – overlooks London’s West End.
skills FOCUS:

REfuRbishmEnt skills FOCUs:

REfuRbishmEnt projects in the north include the conversion of Manchester’s debating and concert venue Free Trade Hall into a Radisson Edwardian hotel (left), and Sheffield’s Meadowhall shopping centre (below)

Regent’s Park in an area noted for imposing Georgian architecture. It was a two-year challenge for project leader Ian Russell to convert the Grade I-listed terrace from the headquarters of property firm British Land to what developer Falmouth Developments describes as eight luxury “ambassadorial residences”.

Such projects highlight the precision skills required when teams are limited by the basic structure already in place, especially the parts that are protected.

“We had to get all the floorboards up and take down all the walls apart from the exterior and the ones around the staircases, which are listed, and then rebuild,” Ian says. “All but one lift shaft had to be reconstructed around the staircases, which are listed, and then down all the walls apart from the exterior and the ones which, Langdon, will become the country’s largest all-through school, for pupils aged 3-16.

General manager Peter Chappell says: “We are bringing premises that have not kept pace with repair and maintenance up to modern educational standards. Typical older classrooms are 35 to 40 square metres, and schools now want 60.”

Newham’s schools are not alone in seeing the changes, with chancellor George Osborne having announced last October a £15.8 billion budget for the refurbishment of 600 schools nationwide.

Close co-ordination with schools ensures they have enough space for teaching while work takes place, so avoiding temporary accommodation costs.

Laing O’Rourke project leader Paul Kennard says: “Pre-planning is the key with school operations, and you must do surveys to understand the building and the risks in its design.”

CH2, the Design for Manufacture and Assembly (DfMA) plant in Steetley, Expanded and Select are involved in the Newham redevelopments.

“I’ve been surprised at how flexible DfMA can be,” Peter says. “We are building a quite-dramatic dining hall, which will be semicircular with a glass face. We’ve used DfMA to make the parts for that, and it’s a great example of the company working together to solve issues at the right cost.”

A London Underground line runs beneath the terrace, causing vibration and noise. This was minimised by the creation of a floating floor and walls, while the actual floor rests on acoustic pads. Vetter provided the marble in these homes, a particular feature of the bathrooms, and Laing O’Rourke constructed the brick and block work.

Ian believes top-end refurbishment will thrive: “Very wealthy individuals will always be looking to invest in their properties, particularly their residences.”

An education in refurbishment

Across London, Laing O’Rourke is in the Newham School Transformation Forum Partnership joint venture with Newham Council, Research Machines and Building Schools for the Future. The forum is working on two primary and four secondary schools, one of which, Langdon, will become the country’s largest all-through school, for pupils aged 3-16.

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The new word in construction

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