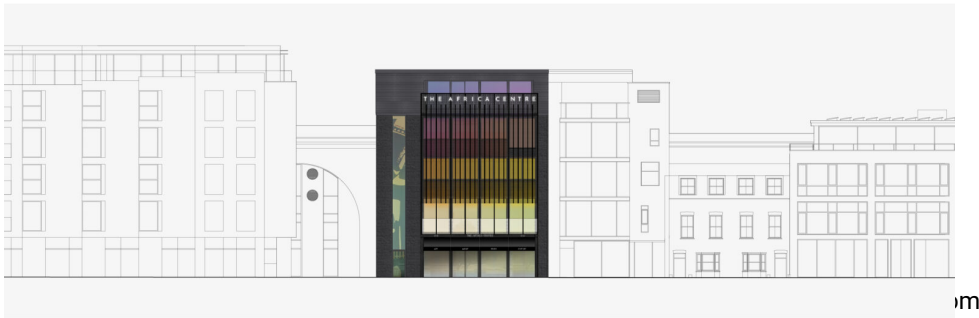


RetroFirst stories: Freehaus on turning The Africa Centre's 1960s base into 'embassy of optimism'

23 JULY 2020 - BY RICHARD WAITE



With up to 40 per cent of carbon emissions coming from the construction industry, the profession needs to find ways of adapting the type of buildings it designs, and fast.

In order to tackle the climate crisis the default – and less carbon-hungry – option for any project should be to adapt and re-use an existing building, one of the key demands of the AJ's [RetroFirst campaign](#).

With the spotlight on retrofit, our [recently launched series](#) seeks to celebrate the projects that save buildings from ruin or demolition and to hear from the architects that designed them.

Today we hear from Jonathan Hagos, director of Freehaus, about the practice's proposed revamp of The Africa Centre's existing 1960s building (*pictured below*) in Southwark to create an 'embassy of optimism'.

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The existing Africa Centre in Southwark

Tell us about the project

The Africa Centre was founded in 1964 with their first home at the Grade II-listed Georgian townhouse on King Street, Covent Garden. The centre was set up as a 'home from home' for visitors to London from the African continent and conceived as a way to foster relationships between newly independent African nations within neutral, apolitical, grounds.



Jonathan Hagos

Over the latter half of the 20th century **The Africa Centre** quickly became a key cultural institution and destination for anyone with an interest in the African continent. The building housed a gallery, meeting halls, restaurant bar and bookshop, and held a number of important exhibitions, conferences and lectures.

In 2013 The Africa Centre moved from its home at King Street, operating from various temporary venues, including Rich Mix in Bethnal Green, before relocating to Southwark in 2016. The centre's new premises include two large railway arches and an adjacent 1960s office building known as Gunpowder House, which The Africa Centre was able to buy with support from Arts Council England.

In 2017 The Africa Centre received planning consent for the change of use of this office building and then in 2018 received support from the Mayor of London's **Good Growth Fund** for the capital works. Off the back of this an open competition was announced in 2019 for a new architect-led design team to oversee the refurbishment of Gunpowder House into a new headquarters for The Africa Centre.

The competition process was rigorous and challenging, spread over several rounds of submissions.

From the outset it was clear the client had spent considerable time identifying its needs and had defined a vision for The Africa Centre to be 'the most welcoming cultural space in London'. This ambition ran through all of the rich briefing information which was provided to the competing architects.

From an initial round of 69 firms which had initially expressed interest, we were shortlisted alongside four other architectural practices. **In August last year** we were announced as winners of the competition off the back of a defined approach which sought to position The Africa Centre as an 'embassy of optimism' – which we were delighted to hear resonated strongly with The Africa Centre team.

What were the challenges of the existing building?

Gunpowder House building is approximately 1,000m² spread over six floors, including a mansard roof and basement. It is a typical 1960s concrete-framed office building, clad in brickwork, and is very much a 'background building', one that sits quietly and unremarkably within the diverse architectural context of Great Suffolk Street.

To the rear of this building the centre has long leases on two large railway arches, part of the dynamic Union

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Acceptation – Colourful Radio – and a small co-working space, *The HUB*, run by The Africa Centre for innovators and entrepreneurs. The other arch is used as an event space, both by The Africa Centre and for



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unremarkable office building into a cultural institution befitting the rich history and purpose of The Africa Centre; and secondly, how to weave these three distinct spaces and the public realm between them into a holistic and considered vision.

This has created several strands to the brief. At an urban scale the project is about place making, creating a new 'African quarter' and the challenge of how to create a new dynamic cultural institution using the 1960s building as a canvas. At a human scale, we faced the challenge of how best to create a considered sequence of spaces and visitor flows, that work operationally effectively, across three very distinct buildings

Had demolition ever been considered?

Before appointing us, The Africa Centre team had previously engaged with another architecture practice [MAAPS Design & Architecture] to prepare a schematic design for Gunpowder House, which formed the basis of a planning consent received in 2017.

As part of this early design process, initial discussions were had regarding the question of demolition versus the benefits of retrofit, especially in the context of value.

It was, and continues to be, the belief of The Africa Centre team that the careful retrofit of Gunpowder House will serve to demonstrate the broader

environmental and sustainable values held by the centre. These values, and also the process of how they were defined through detailed engagement with The Africa Centre's many stakeholders, formed an integral part of the design brief in the open competition and so we came into the picture with the conversation already well progressed.



How did you convince the client not to flatten the building?

Fortunately no one needed convincing – although I do often hear the odd residual comment from various members of the team, always in jest, that 'it would be easier to demolish and start again'.

To be honest it has a galvanising effect to know what we are doing is difficult. Alongside the many environmental benefits of retrofit over demolition repurposing a building and safeguarding its use for future

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One of the first actions was to further engage with the consented scheme we'd inherited and to ensure it still held true to The Africa Centre's growing ambitions for the building. In doing so there was a figurative 'stripping out' of the building, carried out in conjunction with several in-depth visual site assessments that helped us to determine architectural significance, value and elements of the existing building which could be retained and those that could serve as the basis for our sustainability approach.

Aside from retaining the original fabric, what other aspects of your design reduce the whole-life carbon impact of the building?

Of particular importance in defining the client's environmental approach was [Julie's Bicycle](#), a London-based charity which supports the creative community to act on climate change and environmental sustainability initiative.

At the outset of the competition The Africa Centre adopted this initiative to inform its own environmental principles. We respond to this within our competition proposal and set out an outline approach which focused on fabric-first principles, informed by Freehaus co-director Tom Bell's recent Passivhaus certification, alongside a series of low and zero-carbon strategies, that we developed with our MEP engineer, OR Consulting.

We're proposing to super-insulate the existing roof as well as the thermal envelope across the building, to reduce fabric heat loads, and to use the building's existing concrete frame to provide exposed thermal mass and facilitate a passive night-time sub-cooling strategy.

To reduce the need for artificial lighting and optimise day lighting in the building we are increasing the glazing extents on both front and rear façades, while employing solar shading on the east and west-facing new windows.

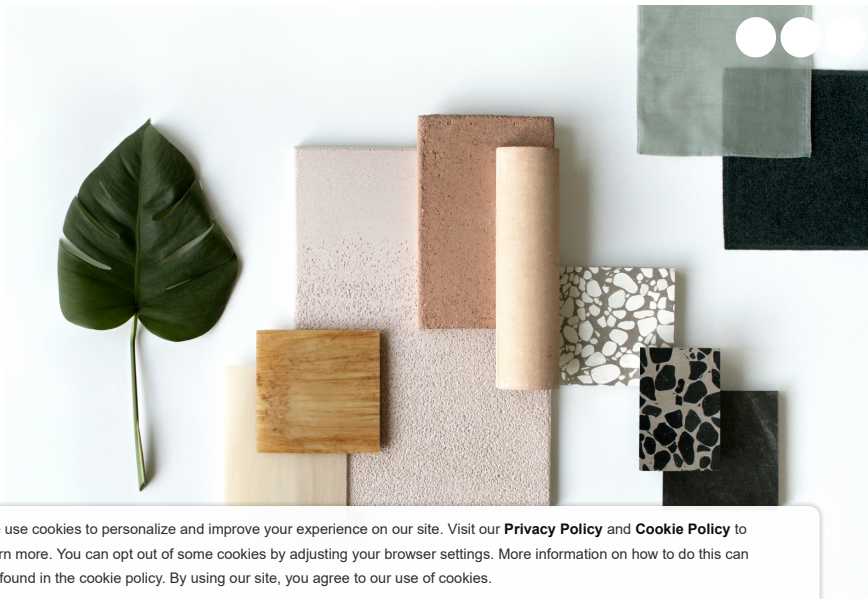
We've developed a passive ventilation strategy utilising the existing staircase as a thermal chimney, with attenuated air paths introduced between each floor and the stair, and are employing heat pumps to recover waste heat from kitchens and server rooms for the generation of hot water. Simultaneously CO2 heat recovery ventilation systems will reduce the building's fresh air ventilation loads.

Other strategies include: a building wide heat-pump heat recovery strategy to re-distribute heat across floors; the adoption of air stratification techniques to reduce cooling loads; the specification of low-energy LED light fittings and controls; the provision of free drinking water stations to reduce reliance on plastic bottles and the creation of environmental signage to facilitate the efficient use of the building by visitors.

Having attended the launch of [London National Park City](#) with The Africa Centre client team we were inspired to seek opportunities on the project to embed ecology and greening opportunities both internally and externally. A primary example of this will be a new green roof, which will help to attenuate peak surface water discharge while also providing a habitat to encourage biodiversity.

Similarly, from the outset the client has been clear in its ambition for building energy loads to be offset by renewables and a broader aspiration to be 100 per cent fossil free and as such photovoltaic panels have been specified to the roof to generate electricity.

Finally our finishes specification looks to focus on materials with a high recycled content and low embodied carbon to help compensate the fact that we will be looking to engage with suppliers and fabricators across the African continent, which is an integral part of our brief and The Africa Centre's ambitions.



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ambitions for the centre we've submitted further applications to the local authority, primarily a minor material amendment application to vary the consented design to better suit the operational requirements for the building.

Alongside this we've also prepared a full planning application for wider transformational changes to the exterior of the building so that it legibly befits the home of a cultural institution and in doing so creates dynamic spaces and moments in the building that were not afforded in the consented scheme.

In preparing the revisions to the proposals the planners have been extremely supportive and transparent. Initial discussions with the planning department through pre-application have centred on balancing 'place-making opportunities' with appropriateness. Fortunately this was something we're very aware of given our backgrounds working on listed buildings and so we were able to articulate the merits of the proposal to the planners' satisfaction.

In addition to the local authority, the GLA have also been an important figure in the development of the proposal, helping push the ambition of the project, challenge our thinking and critically engaging with the design across many iterations.

What have been the main lessons from the project that you could apply on other developments?

The Africa Centre project has a big place in the hearts of the African diaspora as well as the broader community in London. Getting the ambition right has been a significant undertaking and required effective engagement to ensure we got the right people around the table to help challenge and inform our approach.

Although we were appointed at RIBA stage 3, effectively to take the established design through to completion, we conveyed the importance of revisiting the briefing process to the client team to ensure the scheme still reflected The Africa Centre's ambition. From this we established an expansive engagement strategy that maps through to completion and beyond. As our client has often stated, 'effective engagement will build a community around the project' as opposed to waiting for that community to arrive once we open the doors to the finished building.

As an emerging practice this scheme has been a fantastic culmination of our work to date, many of those projects being retrofits themselves. We've come very close to winning competitions for projects of comparable prestige, scope and scale of The Africa Centre project, but have always been pipped to the post by many other well-deserving architecture practices.

With each of these near-wins we spent a lot of time as a team reflecting on our proposals and obtaining and reviewing detailed feedback from the competition judges. In every instance the winning practice was able to hone in more succinctly to the clients' vision, while offering something unexpected, and also often able to draw from a pool of completed projects of a similar scale by way of experience.

So not only was it thrilling that we won the competition to work with this important organisation but [it was also thrilling] to hear first-hand that the judging panel felt we were able to articulate a singular and mindful approach that resonated with them, that they felt that their brief was fully understood and critically engaged with and that we had conveyed ideas that challenged them.



Freehaus and the Africa Centre team

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