

Condé Nast College of Fashion & Design by Feilden Clegg Bradley

10 July 2013 | By [Amanda Baillieu](#)



By taking on an all-encompassing role in the creation of Condé Nast's fashion college, Feilden Clegg Bradley has succeeded in delivering a timeless classic

Out of all the buildings that pass across BD's desk each year, Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios' Condé Nast College of Fashion & Design intrigued me because the client is a magazine publisher having to diversify its business by extending its "brand".

Translating ideas from the printed page into a whole new world is now seen as essential to all publishers and Condé Nast is no stranger to this. The publisher of GQ, Vanity Fair, Tatler and its flagship title Vogue has followed the well-trodden path into events and awards, as well as investing heavily in app editions of its monthly magazines.

Yet, few brand extensions are ever successful enough to have an independent life of their own, which is the challenge set by Condé Nast's UK boss Nicholas Coleridge when he came up with the idea of a standalone college.

As an idea it's almost unique — an exception is Domus Academy in Milan, which was set up some 60 years after the magazine — and there's an obvious reason why: the upfront investment required for a building dwarfs the cost of a magazine launch many times over.



SECTION

The college offers two courses, the 10-week Vogue Fashion Certificate, which is a broad introduction into how the fashion industry works, and a year-long Foundation Diploma course, certified by the Open College Network, which counts towards a degree. Neither comes cheap. The diploma costs £19,560 but, as Coleridge has made clear, this is a “for-profit enterprise” where hefty fees are partly justified by access to fashion’s cognoscenti, including editors, and a newly refurbished building in the heart of Soho within walking distance of Condé Nast’s headquarters in Hanover Square.

FCB was initially approached to compete for the project by Michael Benson whose arts consultancy, Candlestar, had been appointed by Condé Nast to select an architect. Three practices were asked to present different initial ideas based on a property in Greek Street. In fact, it was Nos 16 and 17 a few doors away, which had been occupied by Central St Martins before its move to King’s Cross, that were eventually deemed most suitable to requirements.

Greek Street needs little by way of introduction. One of Soho’s liveliest streets running between the main arteries of Oxford Street to the north and Shaftesbury Avenue to the south. The college is opposite L’Escargot, one of the prettiest restaurant frontages in London; for a student, particularly those new to London, there is no better location.

Originally the college principal Susie Forbes (an ex-CN editor) hoped that, having found a building, the college would be open in less than nine months. This was always optimistic, as FCB was quick to point out. Internally the buildings were in a bad way — far worse than first thought — and while structural work ate into the budget, pushing it up to £2.2 million, it also gave the architect, led by managing partner Julian Gitsham, the freedom to start from scratch bringing in Andrew Harrison, an ex-senior consultant at DEGW now specialising in education, to advise on the teaching spaces.

Source: [Nick Rochowski Photography](#)

The elevations are a modern interpretation of the Georgian brick frontages that characterised the area.

These had to be carefully modelled to avoid congestion issues at class changeover time, bearing in mind that the building itself is only 1,450sq m and its small upper floor plates were unsuitable for teaching spaces. Both existing elevators needed replacing but only one was to be put back while one of the two staircases had to be solely used as an emergency exit stair for the nightclub below.

As a textbook example of what can go wrong when you combine an inexperienced client, a listed building and an escalating budget, it had all the necessary ingredients. But its success, at least in building terms, was due, in part, to the architect’s all-encompassing role across the project (FCB took on space planning, interior design and project management)



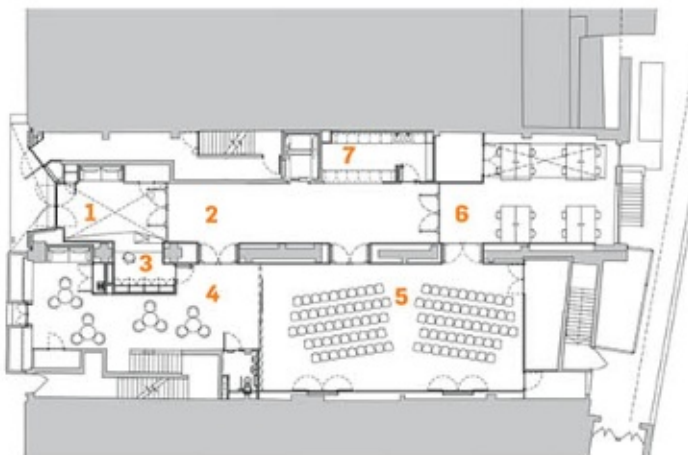
and a client who was a fast decision-maker — something that, as Forbes points out, editors are good at.

While internally the challenge was around space planning, externally it was how to do something bold that would also be acceptable to Westminster planners. Despite being almost entirely rebuilt in the 1970s after a fire, the curtain walling on No 16 was at the end of its life, and remedial work was needed to the brickwork of No 17, which

was also listed due to a 19th century bow window shop front.

GROUND FLOOR

- 1 Lobby
- 2 Foyer
- 3 Reception
- 4 Student lounge
- 5 Lecture space
- 6 Diploma space
- 7 Kitchen

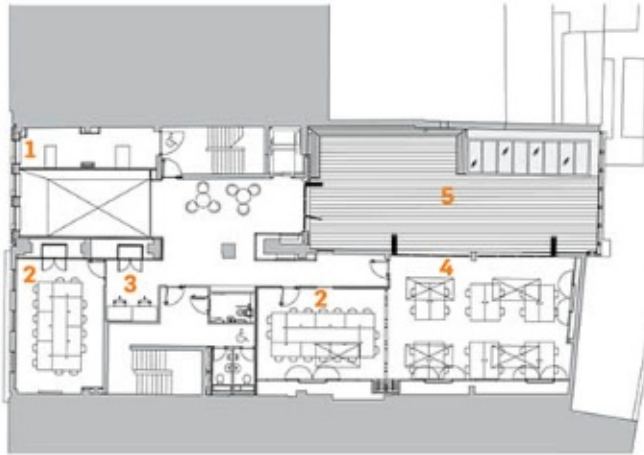


FIRST FLOOR

Given more time, FCB could have been bolder still. An earlier proposal for a double-height entrance ended up being scaled back. But it is no great loss. The crisp new brickwork, and fenestration lined in dark bronze alloy and echoed in the new recessed entrance, bring the two elevations together with a common language that is robustly modern.

Internally it is very white save for a vast pendant light by up-and-coming designer Naomi Paul that dominates the double-height entrance lobby. It's as if the entire college is a backdrop to a photo shoot and the effect is slightly unnerving. Gitsham describes it as a "blank canvas", for when the building is

- 1 Server room
- 2 Seminar space
- 3 AV suite
- 4 Diploma space
- 5 Roof terrace



hired out for corporate events — an important extra source of revenue — and companies can splash their own logo and branding on the walls.

Renting the building out at times when the college is closed also justified the creation of an outdoor terrace on the unused first-floor roof space. The views over Soho rooftops are reason enough for it to become a desirable party venue — although Condé Nast also sees it as another blank canvas where students studying gardening and interiors can test out their skills.

Source: [Nick Rochowski Photography](#)

First floor diploma space opening on to the new roof terrace.

This balance between creating a building that must earn its keep and one that has to satisfy the pedagogy of higher education is not without its challenges. One of the results is that it doesn't feel much like a place of learning — but then neither does it feel like a brand extension of the most famous magazine in the world.

The library has a few artfully arranged books, but the walls are bare. This might strike one as odd, given Vogue's extraordinary archive, but it's deliberate so that no one magazine is seen to have ownership of the building, which in time will offer different courses from across the Condé Nast stable.

Other decisions, such as not providing students with their own café, were straightforward but the issue of what kind of spaces, aside from classrooms, they need was more difficult. After all, this is Soho with shops, restaurants and cafés on the doorstep — and it's not one that seems entirely resolved.

For example, the breakout areas, which consist of Vitra sofas and coffee tables, seem to be left over from the exigencies of teaching and seem neither particularly convivial or contrarily quiet enough to read a book — but this is a small quibble.

Given its heritage, one might expect

SECOND FLOOR

- 1 Diploma space
- 2 Seminar space
- 3 Social learning



THIRD FLOOR

- 1 Diploma space
- 2 Seminar space
- 3 Library



FOURTH FLOOR

- 1 Academic workspace
- 2 Principal's office
- 3 Meeting area





Condé Nast to have employed the kind of architect that sometimes graces the pages of its magazines, but FCB has

served it well, helping it through a daunting process and doing something that doesn't come naturally to architects — holding the client's hand.

As Forbes put it, the publisher didn't want "a great big fashion statement" but an investment piece — a building, in other words, that might have cost more than it intended to spend but will wear extremely well.



PROJECT TEAM
 Architect
 Feilden Clegg
 Bradley Studios
 Space
 programming /
 strategic
 briefing Spaces
 That Work
 Quantity
 surveyors &
 CDMC Jackson
 Coles
 Structural
 engineer Jane
 Wernick
 Associates
 M&E OR
 Consulting
 Engineers
 Fire

engineering JGA
 Party wall surveyor Anstey Horne
 Building control services Oculus Building Consultancy
 Main contractor Blenheim House Construction

SUPPLIERS

Lighting Viabizzuno, Tom Dixon, Saxby Lighting, Thorn Lighting, DAL
 Entrance feature lighting Naomi Paul
 Furniture Vitra
 Glass partitions and doors Optima
 Rooflights Sunsquare

Postscript: Pictures by Nick Rochowski Photography

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