

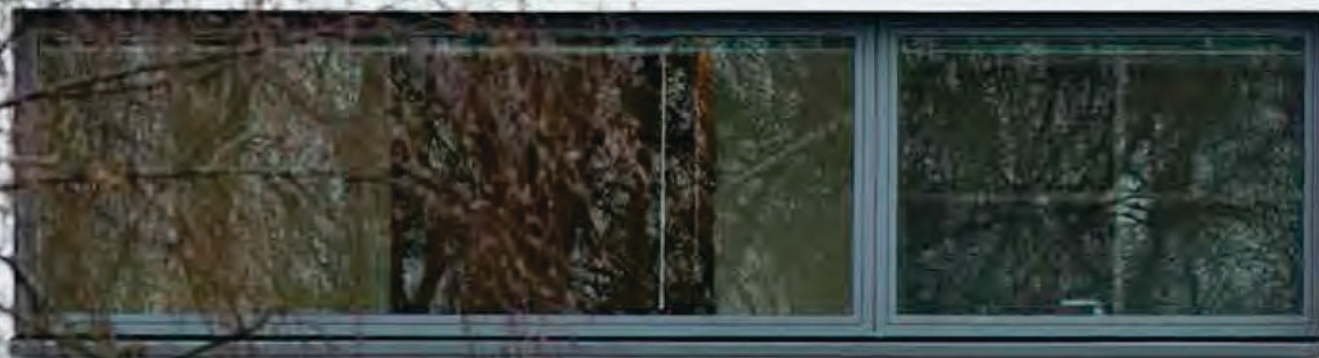


30.05.14

# Healthy living

Barbara Weiss' Tardis-like GP surgery

**FOOTPRINT** The architect redeveloping  
elBulli as an eco-centre for foodies



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# The doctors' Tardis

Barbara Weiss Architects' unclinical GP surgery provides ambience as well as ingeniously compact spaces, writes *Felix Mara*.

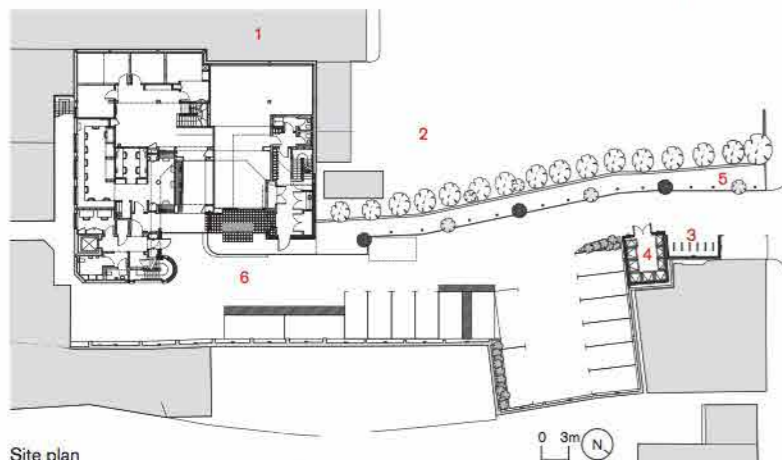
Photography by *Paul Riddle*

Although it's sometimes reported as being in terminal decline or patronisingly dismissed as a quaint, naive vestige of post-war altruism, the British are on the whole justifiably proud of their National Health Service. Bad press, however shocking, reflects expectations that it should be accountable and reformist, and the original NHS ethos is still very much alive. In the case of GP surgeries, while some give the impression they want to limit their

registers to the bare minimum, others, like Wokingham Medical Centre, radiate optimism and appear keen to expand. When I visited the centre's new home with its designer Barbara Weiss, three months after welcoming its first patients in February, it was like walking into a house party.

Anticipating a sharp rise in registrars generated by 4,000 new homes planned for the former market town, and mindful that the floor space of its existing premises in two separate >>

**Right** The north-east elevation with set-back roof pavilion above bespoke Intelligent Glass curtain wall



Site plan

1. Marks & Spencer
2. Marks & Spencer car park
3. Cycle parking
4. Bin store
5. New entrance approach
6. Resurfaced car park approach



historic buildings was 50 per cent adrift of Department of Health recommendations and therefore likely to raise Care Quality Commission eyebrows, Wokingham Medical Centre commissioned Barbara Weiss Architects to design a new purpose-built home, saying goodbye to converted residence surgery culture and potentially making it Britain's largest single-site GP practice.

Chancing upon its north-west frontage in the town centre conservation area backlands, you'd never guess this is a makeover of a horrific, long-vacant 1980s PoMo spec office block. Barbara Weiss Architects gutted this L-shaped structure, removed two of its mini-pedimented facades along with some incongruous curved stair-tower glazing, infilled the space between its two legs and persuaded the planners a rooftop pavilion would rarely be visible, topping up the total floorplate increase to 400m<sup>2</sup>.

Without an expansion of this magnitude, it would have been impossible to meet the Clinical Commissioning Group's ambitions to make life easier for the public, reduce costs by decanting secondary health services from hospitals to GP surgeries, or for it to facilitate NHS strategy to amalgamate medical centres with other primary services such as dentistry.

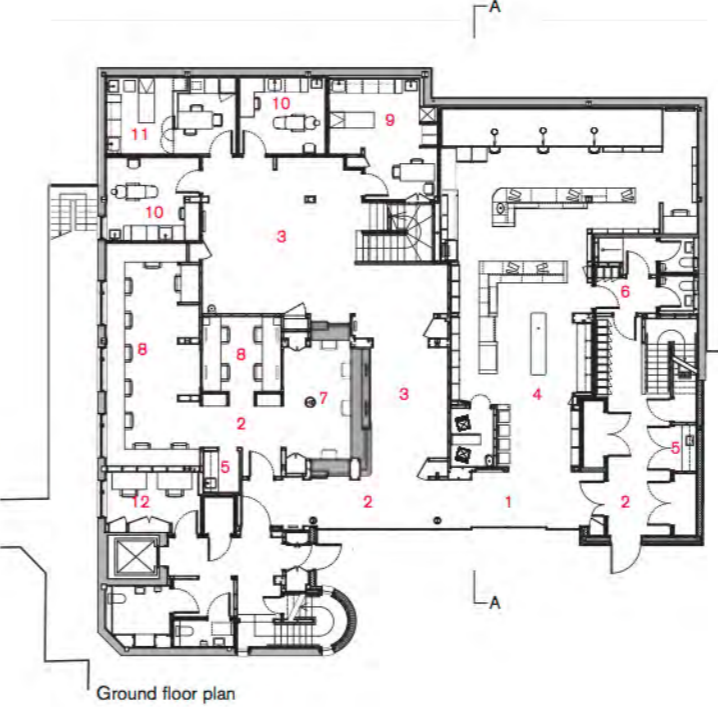
With services such as paediatrics, psychiatry, physiotherapy, audiology and even acupuncture either already in place or on the practice's horizons – along with phlebotomy facilities, a pharmacy and provision for minor surgery – it's not surprising visitors refer to the well-appointed but compact centre as the Tardis. Director Barbara Weiss, a self-confessed storage obsessive and author of a book on >>

**You'd never guess this is a makeover of a horrific 1980s PoMo office block**

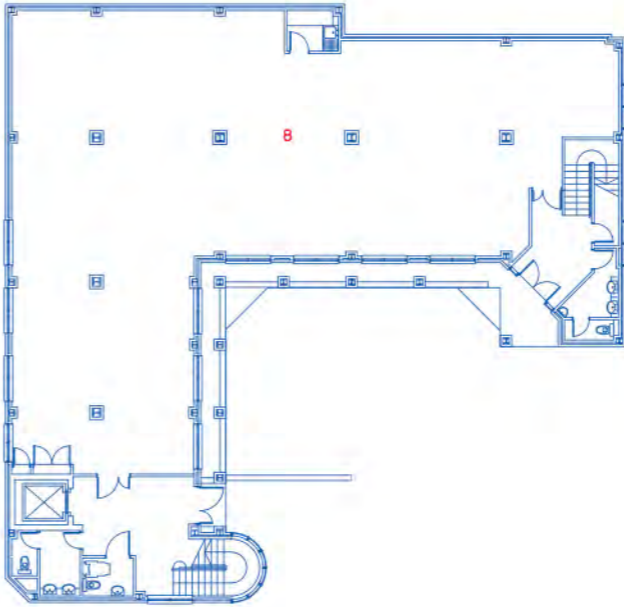


**Above** Ground-floor waiting area, with reception area beyond desk  
**Left** The pharmacy, with grey plastic robot dispensers on right, continues the architectural language of the medical centre

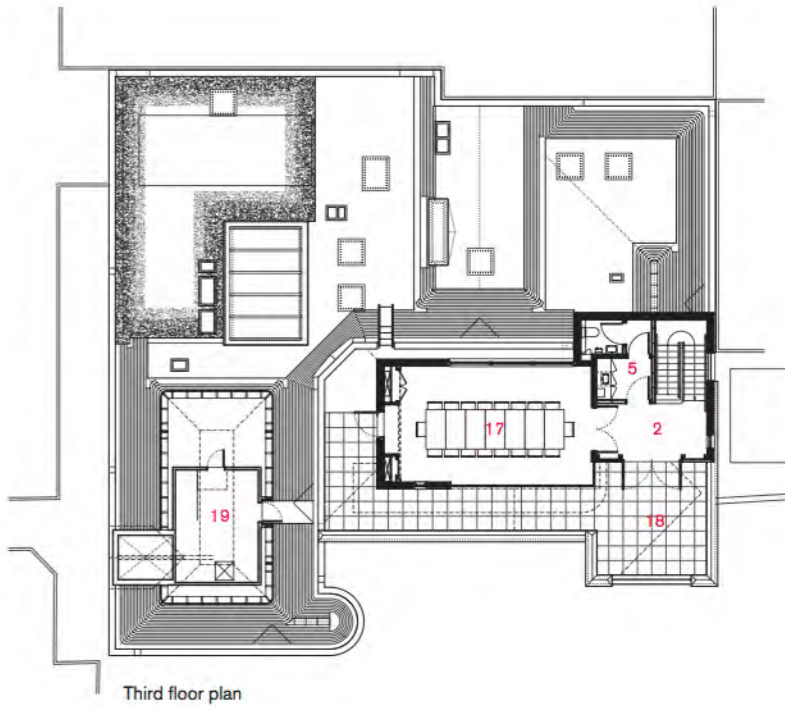
- 1. Main entrance
- 2. Lobby
- 3. Waiting area
- 4. Pharmacy
- 5. Tea point
- 6. Locker room
- 7. Reception
- 8. Office
- 9. Multi-purpose
- 10. Phlebotomy
- 11. Treatment
- 12. Meeting
- 13. Consultation
- 14. Common room
- 15. Minor surgery
- 16. IT server
- 17. Conference room/library
- 18. Terrace
- 19. Plant



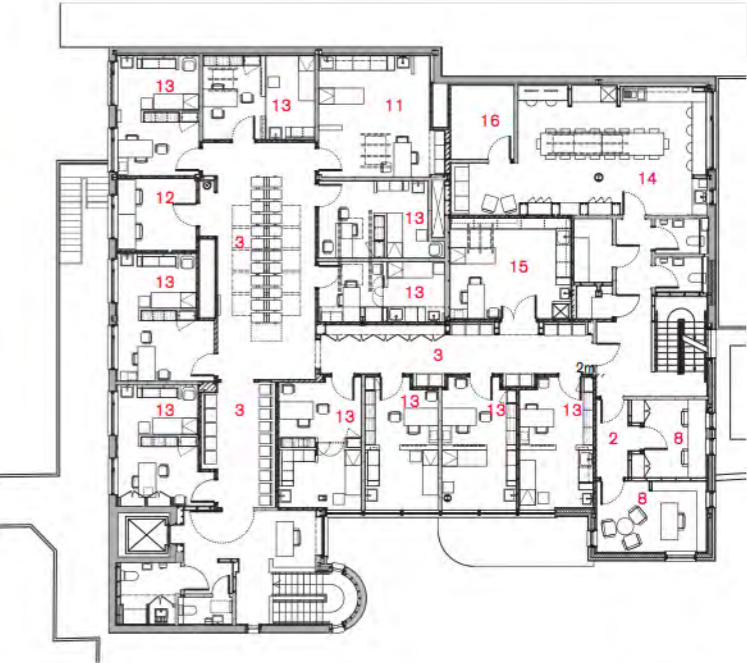
Ground floor plan



Existing ground floor plan



Third floor plan



Second floor plan



Section A-A



1. Main entrance
2. Pharmacy
3. Consultation
4. Waiting area
5. Minor surgery
6. Common room
7. IT server
8. Conference room/library
9. Terrace

the subject, has packed a lexicon of healthcare facilities into this project. She has drawn on experience gained on over 200 residential projects completed by her practice as well as previous healthcare experience to devise an ingenious, highly practical plan. Waiting areas, relieved by a triage system in which nurses assess patients over the phone, are spread across three floors rather than concentrated in one pool, and a separate, vertical back-of-house zone for staff and tenants enables them to mix informally and take essential respite from the pressures of public service.

A row of new bollards separates the 1.8m-wide approach leading to the centre from an adjacent area with an existing right of way for servicing vehicles. Because of the project's financial constraints, plans for rationalised access, with visitors using an existing supermarket car park, never

## Weiss declared war on banal institutional details and finishes

materialised. Nevertheless, the centre's white-rendered frontage and glazed ground floor, capped by an oak-framed curtain wall, radiates order and calm as you approach the entrance, which is sheltered by a projecting stair tower and a canopy, its level dictated by truck heights.

Intensively used facilities, such as phlebotomy, flu immunisation and administration, are concentrated at ground level, along with the pharmacy, which has eye-catching, shiny bright plastic displays, anthropomorphic arms and dispensing robot shoots spiralling down from the ceiling. 'The pharmacy, owned by us but run by others, is an income generator without which we couldn't have done the project,' says lead client GP Vipin Bhardwaj. A sliding gate enables it to be separated from the surgery reception and operate at different times.

Taking exception to the irregularly spaced existing columns, Weiss concealed most behind new walls and clad others with colourful circular casings. New ceiling levels and bulkheads were fine-tuned and co-ordinated with old and new downstand beams to optimise

headroom: 'I fought for every centimetre,' says Weiss. The existing staircases and lift shaft stayed, enhanced by elegant handrails and a new car. Declaring war on banal institutional details and finishes, Weiss avoided deadly stainless steel lift car surfaces and coved skirtings, and specified domestic basins in consulting rooms.

Despite mandatory requirements covering mixer taps and traps, medical centres enjoy much more independence from design guidelines, regulation and inspection than hospitals, provided authorities are convinced that the installation and maintenance of unconventional features, such as the inset sinks at Wokingham, don't compromise hygiene. In fact, the centre's mixer taps achieve enhanced standards.

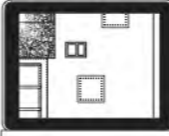
As Barbara Weiss Architects director Nicholas Jamieson explains, in the wake of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 funding for medical centres has been fiendishly difficult to unlock. 'Five partners each took out huge bank loans instead,' says the centre's Dr Ishac Jalisi. Although the lender's valuers commented on features they considered expensive and

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**Left** Consultation rooms each have their own colour scheme and privacy screens are used to organise pinned-up notices

**Below** The second-floor common room, with its communal table and skylights penetrated by retained structure, is a favourite with staff

**Overleaf, main image**

View from conference room, a potential revenue source, looking north-east across terrace

**Overleaf, top right** Pools of light, cherry piping and domestic sinks give consulting rooms an unclinical ambience

the partners had to convince them the centre would generate sufficient revenue, they were not hemmed in by government cost-benchmarking.

A new accommodation staircase links the ground- and first-floor waiting areas, which have mounted rows of stylish Italian chairs. 'I spent days and days looking for the cheapest of the cheap on the internet,' Weiss reflects. The surrounding consulting rooms hark back to a traditional model that separates the GP's desk and the examination area, with a dividing screen, bespoke cherry-lipped cabinetry, and handy recesses and containers designed to be hard for children to break. They're much more interested in the curtain wall, which can be switched from clear to opaque for privacy. Its expense will be partly offset against savings on curtains and blinds, which have to be thrown away every six >>





months as part of the hygiene regime. Weiss forewarned the partners that the consulting rooms would overheat in the summer and suggests awnings or solar control film as possible remedies.

The waiting area on the floor above has a long skylight and feels like a traditional residential atrium. As elsewhere, there are ventilation slots rather than cumbersome grilles; cupboard, access and fire panels are regular and discreetly flushed into walls. Natural carpet and timber finishes complete the ambience, along with halogen lighting in waiting areas negotiated with building control. The contrasting world of the treatment rooms has high-performance lighting and 10 air changes per minute.

'Slightly "woman's touch", there are dishwashers and tea points on every floor,' says Weiss. 'It's been designed so things work, with storage for sugar and coffee.' Staff are especially pleased with the convivial, echoey common room with its long bespoke table, and they're delighted with the glassy conference room and roof terrace overhead. Bhardwaj jests that the fine views of the skyline and the countryside beyond make it difficult to work.

Looking back across the backland car parking, I realise Weiss is more of an internalising Soane than an >>

**Staff are delighted with the glassy conference room and roof terrace**

externalising Nash. At Wokingham, her interiors fit more comfortably into the modern architect mould than in earlier projects where, despite having worked for Richard Meier and Stirling Wilford & Associates, she sympathetically reworked period buildings. The centre's exterior seems closer to Adolf Loos, apart from the fussy, quirky steps at the parapet corners, like vestigial acroteria or abstracted giant's hands. The centre's exterior never really looks of its time in daylight, and this is how Weiss seems to want it. Nevertheless, the conscientious work of the interior and its clean but colourist Minimalism is let down by blemishes such as a vertical fold line in the render, which only extends as far as the budget, abruptly exposing the brickwork and corbelling of the original structure, with its mocking tiled roofs. But despite its frontality, the centre, which is well insulated and sealed, is no Regency facade. Its treasures lie within, and may one day be matched by enhancements to its exterior. ■

Project data

START ON SITE January 2013  
COMPLETION January 2014  
GROSS INTERNAL AREA 1,500m<sup>2</sup>  
GROSS INTERNAL AREA OF ORIGINAL BUILDING 1,100m<sup>2</sup>  
PROCUREMENT JCT Standard Building Contract 2011 with Quantities (SBC/Q 2011) with Contractor's Designed Portion. Single-stage competitive tenders  
COST Not available  
APPROXIMATE COST PER SQUARE METRE £1,600  
CLIENT Wokingham Medical Centre, previously Tudor House and Rectory Road Medical Practice  
ARCHITECT Barbara Weiss Architects  
INTERIORS Barbara Weiss Architects  
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER Conisbee  
M&E CONSULTANT Peter Deer and Associates  
QUANTITY SURVEYOR Smith Turner  
APPROVED BUILDING INSPECTOR Building Control  
CDM CO-ORDINATOR Smith Turner  
MAIN CONTRACTOR Beard  
ESTIMATED ANNUAL CO<sub>2</sub> EMISSIONS 24.3kg/m<sup>2</sup>  
CURTAIN WALL GLAZING Intelligent Glass  
LIGHTING Deltalight UK, Hampshire Light UK, Fagerhult Lighting, Aurora Lighting  
RUBBER FLOORING Nora Rubber Flooring Systems  
SLATE FLOORING Burlington Stone  
TERRACE PAVING The Deck Tile Co  
WAITING ROOM CHAIRS Mostly Crassey and Replica Series 7 Jacobsen from The Design Net  
CARPET Tretford Cord  
OFFICE FURNITURE Unique  
TIMBER FLOORING Waxed Floors  
BESPOKE COMMON ROOM TABLE Retrovius



Working detail

Wokingham Medical Centre, Berkshire

Barbara Weiss Architects

Bespoke curtain wall

It was not possible to find a proprietary curtain-wall system that could be used to provide the desired aesthetic. It was therefore necessary to design a bespoke system from scratch. We established the concept, then developed the details with the main contractor and specialist joinery manufacturer, Essex Woodcraft.

The system was conceived as a series of storey-height windows each supported at the bottom by a steel angle fixed to the main building structure. Differential movement between curtain-wall elements and structure was thereby minimised. Lateral restraint and resistance to wind loads is provided by a series of steel flitch plates running vertically through every other mullion. Each window is made up of a series of solid oak components that wrap around an internal ply frame to maximise stability.

The oak is finished with a Sikkens lacquer, providing high-quality protection while ensuring the appearance of the wood looks as natural as possible, without fading to grey.

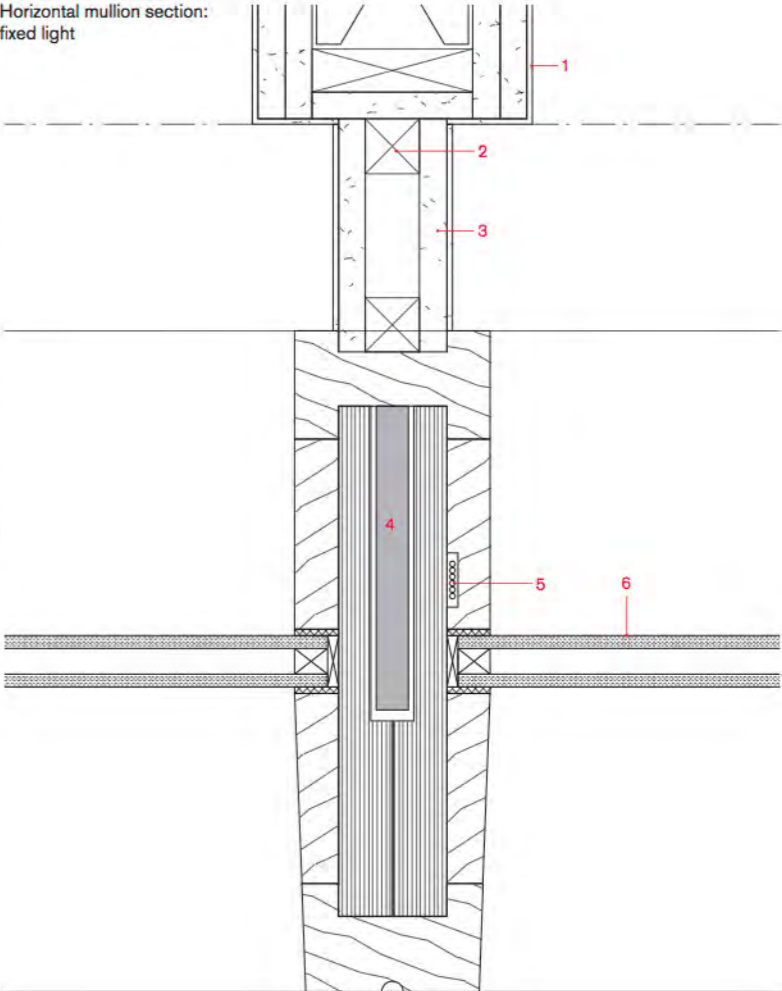
The glazing is notable for making use of Intelligent Glass which can, at the flick of a remote control button, alternate between opacity and transparency. It permits the doctors to offer their patients privacy and daylight, without resorting to dusty blinds and curtains.

An opaque window film was applied to the outside face of the spandrel panel, chosen to match the effect of the main glazing when in privacy mode.

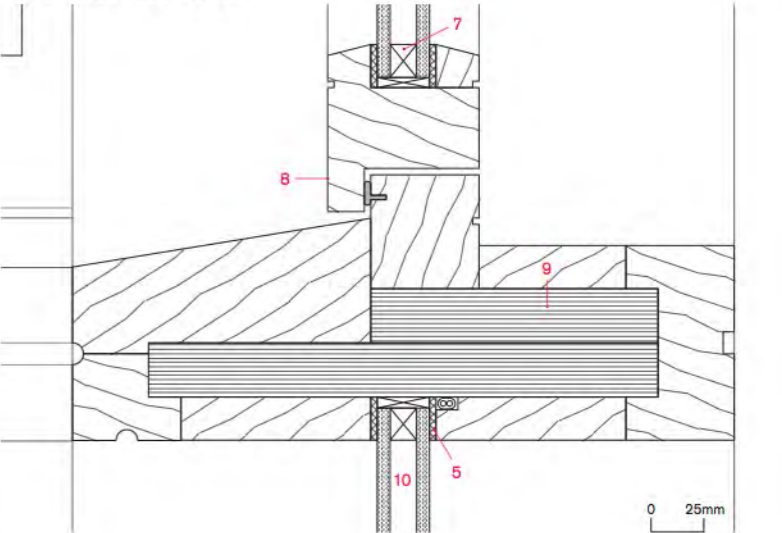
Melanie Whittington, project architect, Barbara Weiss Architects

1. Gypsum board partition
2. 25 x 25mm batten
3. Two layers 6mm Cembit HD board to both sides of batten
4. Steel flitch plate
5. Wiring channel for Intelligent Glass
6. ProDisplay Intelligent Glass IG Switchable IGU
7. Double-glazed unit
8. Outward-opening oak casement
9. Marine plywood
10. Intelligent Glass unit

Horizontal mullion section: fixed light



Transom section: opening light



Left Barbara Weiss Architects slightly upped the scale of the building, with a glazed entrance serving the reception, left, and the pharmacy