

# Peace of mind

Where the existing facade and built fabric remains, it has been given a 'fresh face' to conceal the original architecture

**Barbara Weiss Architects (BWA) has completed the extensive refurbishment, extension and change of use of a redundant 1990s office block into the new Wokingham Medical Centre, to create the largest single-site GP practice in the UK.**

The 1600m<sup>2</sup> NHS building, provides new facilities for up to 16 GPs (currently home to 11), and five nurses, along with a new pharmacy and flexible medical suite. The relocation from two separate sites, now occupies a site in the heart of Wokingham's town centre in Berkshire, a key area for the continued regeneration of the town.

The brief was simply to accommodate a large number of patients (the centre will serve a catchment area of up to 32,000) and GPs within a calm, non-institutionalised environment. BWA substantially extended the existing building and added a penthouse conference room on the roof. Design features include bespoke joinery used to create an intimate suite of consulting areas throughout the building and 'clinical' examination areas at the rear. The use of Intelligent Glass glazing on the front elevation at first and second floors, provides touch-of-a-button privacy to the consulting rooms behind.

Due to the variation in Wokingham's building styles – from 14th century timber framed buildings in Rose Street, 15th century overhangs in Peach Street, to white rendered Georgian houses and 1990s red brick office blocks – the challenge for BWA was to design Wokingham Medical Centre so that its materials and appearance were appropriate both to its context and to its use as a modern public medical facility.

BWA began the design process with the complete strip-out of the existing steel frame and cavity wall office building and remodeled

the space to meet a number of key objectives including need for additional floorspace for new services and clinics, and additional consulting and treatment rooms.

To meet government ambitions on the provision of more care locally, the new building also needed to allow for the co-location of a pharmacy, physiotherapy and other services, whilst comfortably catering for the likely increase in patient numbers, a predicted additional 9-10,000, from 4000 newly-built homes in the area.

BWA positioned the main surgery entrance

on the ground floor within a large canopy with curved ends that mirrors the existing curved stair tower. The ground floor also houses the reception; administrative and waiting areas; nurse and treatment rooms; and the pharmacy. A sliding gate aids flexibility for the space, separating the surgery reception from the pharmacy entrance to enable out-of-hours use.

## Additional links

An extensive provision of roof lights allows natural light to flow into all rooms on the second floor, which houses further consulting rooms, waiting areas, nurse and treatment rooms. The second floor also accommodates a large staff common room, the heart of the practice's community, along with additional offices.

Along with a number of successful alterations to the existing built fabric, BWA designed the integration of a new third floor to accommodate a pavilion, housing a meeting and conference space. The third floor extension is also set back from the northeast elevation and opens out onto a spacious terrace.

A new accommodation staircase provides an additional link between the ground and first floor waiting rooms. The original stairs and lift have been completely refurbished, including the provision of a new lift car. A light shaft is extended from the stairwell to the roof, to bring natural light to filter into the lower floors of the building.

Externally, the new extensions are rendered with simply proportioned window openings. Window frames are made of aluminium,



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with the exception of the glazed screen in the entrance elevation, which is framed in deep oak mullions and transoms to provide warmth, and a degree of privacy from upward views. The service and escape door and adjoining screen are also faced in oak.

The upper levels, above the entrance, are enclosed with a bespoke curtain wall system, constructed of oak and Intelligent Glass, designed specifically for the project. Intelligent Glass, at the flick of a remote control button, alternates between opacity and transparency, permitting doctors to offer their patients both

privacy and daylight.

In the northwest elevation, facing Rose Street and the principal site entrance, the previously blank windows are opened up and redesigned to provide daylight to adjoining rooms and some passive surveillance of the adjoining car park and public areas.

Where the existing facade and built fabric remains, it has been given a 'fresh face' to conceal the original architecture. The need to extend the building, especially to the northeast, has seen extensive glazing emphasise and enhance the entrance and its approach.

The building is approached, from Rose Street, along a new 1.8m wide pedestrian-safe access, separated from vehicles by new, modern lighting bollards and a mixture of newly-planted, largely indigenous trees.

The Wokingham Medical Centre was completed on site in just over a year and is now fully operational for the public use.

Dr Vijay Bhardwaj, Lead Client GP says: "Barbara Weiss Architects' approach to design has enabled us to deliver for Wokingham a beautiful, contemporary and innovative building. The practice has shown beyond doubt that medical spaces can be fit for purpose without being institutional, clinical or bland. Wokingham Medical Centre has warmth, character and, with its lighting and palette of materials and colours, is a building that is calm and reassuring."

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