

RUSSIAN FOR FISH

PRESS RELEASE
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Taxis to taxidermy

Russian For Fish steers evolution of Still Life café in Hackney



Still Life, Russian for Fish, Photography by Peter Landers

- Bethnal Green-based architects oversee transformation of run-down Well Street minicab office into deliciously offbeat live/work space.
- Russian For Fish overcome limited budget and reels of red tape to realise client's 'impossible dream'.
- Repurposed building now holds taxidermy-themed café, one-bed flat and office.

London is a city that never stands still. Its history can be mapped on the evolution of its buildings. Warehouses become apartment blocks; pubs morph into design boutiques; factories are reborn as studios and galleries – and minicab offices turn into stylish East End cafés. With a muted black fascia and bright yellow door, Still Life on Well Street, E9, is a trinity of café, interior shop and gallery of natural curiosities. Lined with cabinets filled with skulls and skeletons, taxidermy animal and fossils, this wunderkammer of a space is the vision of owner – antiques enthusiast and entrepreneur Aidan Pass – realised by architects Russian For Fish.



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An unlovely prospect

Until recently, 263 Well Street was an inconspicuous mid-Victorian affair, blending unremarkably into the urban blur of the street. The front half of the ground floor was a shabby minicab office; the back simply dead space. The first floor had been developed into an unexceptional and poorly laid out flat and, without planning consent, a second, tiny flat had been wedged onto the third floor. It was, in Aidan's words, an 'unlovely prospect' – far from the high-end commercial space he'd envisaged for his live/work lifestyle dream.

Repurposing a building is complex project – architecturally, logistically and bureaucratically – and requires ingenuity and know-how to navigate the dense web of permissions and regulations. Aidan knew what he wanted to create for himself, and had a clear plan for its design, but he couldn't see a

way to making it happen in such a run-down, mixed-use planning nightmare of a building. Knowing the practice's aptitude for problem solving, he turned to Russian For Fish to break the deadlock.



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Founders Pieren d’Avoine and Nilesh Shah took on the task of creating a master plan that would enable Aidan to achieve his long-term goals. The first challenge was financial. As a mixed-use property, the building was ineligible for conventional mortgage products, so Russian For Fish first found a way to secure temporary financing to complete the purchase, then of breaking down the various component areas of the building into individual leaseholds that could secure mortgaging.

‘Russian For Fish were able to take apart the building spatially like a jigsaw puzzle, presenting us with a series of solutions and opportunities for phased development that will comfortably carry us through for the next 10 years. Rabbit after rabbit was pulled from the unpromising hat of our project!’

– Aidan Pass (Owner of Still Life)

A labour of love

The ground floor is now the domain of the multitasking café/shop/museum – a white and wood-toned corridor of curiosity. Throughout the process, Russian For Fish provided interior design guidance,

helping Aidan ensure that the project was delivered in as environmentally sensitive a manner as possible, and that, in terms of planning permissions, Still Life was 'future-proofed' for the years to come. With Aidan taking on personal responsibility for everything from the carpentry to the wiring and sourcing the taxidermy for display, bronze cabinets from the V&A, and marble for the tabletops himself, Still Life couldn't be more of a labour of love.



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Up a tall wooden stair, what used to be a cramped flat has become a compact but comfortable one-bed with a spacious private terrace above the street. A separate door gives access to the second floor, which now houses an office space. With direction from Russian For Fish, Aidan has carved out a self-contained universe of work, rest and play in the heart of Hackney. The daily commute is now merely a matter of staircases.

'Still Life was a wonderful opportunity to apply skills we have honed working on residential projects and live work artists studios, to a mixed-use building. We often work on projects that require phasing and can't stress enough the importance of taking a holistic approach from the outset, not only does it reduce abortive work/costs as construction moves forward but moral is boosted as everyone is invested in the final goal. Working with Aidan was inspiring - he had such a clear vision for what Still

Life would be, it was exciting to consult on interiors that realised his vision and made such good use on his construction skills!

– Pieren d'Avoine (Founder of Russian for Fish)

A work in progress

Although deemed a success by Aidan, the project is by no means complete. Russian For Fish are currently working to secure consent for the second-floor extension, with a view to ultimately transforming the apartment into a duplex. There are also plans in the pipeline for a community garden in the – currently neglected and inaccessible – green space to the rear of the site.



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Still Life is therefore very much an ongoing concern, but thanks in no small part to Russian For Fish, the life that Aidan once called an 'impossible dream' is precisely what he wakes up to each morning.

For more information about Russian For Fish, Still Life and the practice's other projects, please contact Georgia Maxwell at georgia@zetteler.co.uk or on +44 (0)20 3735 5855.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

Still Life is open from 10am to 5pm, Wednesday to Sunday.

About Russian for Fish

Russian for Fish is an award-winning London-based architectural and design practice founded by RIBA-chartered architect Pereen d'Avoine in 2006. Now run by Pereen and co-director Nilesch Shah, the company works on extension and new-build projects for both residential and commercial clients, and is especially adept at transforming compact spaces. Their work is characterised by simplified material palettes, contemporary and minimalist detailing, and a cohesive, sympathetic approach to surroundings.

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