

POP INDUSTRY

ARCHITECT
Jacobs Webber/WATG

CLIENT
Viacom

LOCATION
London, UK

COST
£10m

START DATE
February 2010

COMPLETION DATE
December 2013

FLOOR SPACE
10,000sq m

WORDS BY
Jenny Brewer

PHOTOGRAPHY
David Churchill





‘WE WANTED THE PROJECT TO BE A CATALYST FOR LOTS OF DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES TO COME TOGETHER’

From its rainbow-coloured headquarters on a quiet back-street wedged between Camden High Street, Regent’s Canal and Kentish Town Road, media giant Viacom transmits to tens of millions of homes across Europe. MTV, Nickelodeon and Comedy Central are the best known of more than 50 channels broadcasting from this office, one of the American company’s two main European hubs. MTV had previously resided here for 20-odd years, but the building was originally designed in 1982 by Terry Farrell as the studios for TV-am – one of the earliest examples of postmodernism in the UK, complete with giant eggcups on the roof. So, with such an outgoing reputation to uphold, Viacom’s newly renovated home had to be anything but stuffy.

What architecture practice Jacobs Webber has come up with carefully balances vibrancy with sophistication. A wall of fins protrudes from the metal mesh facade, graduating in colour through red, orange, yellow and green when viewed from the west, and from lime green to darker greens to bright blue when viewed from the east. The design is intended to celebrate the pop industrial aesthetic of its locality, according to Nic Jacobs, director at Jacobs Webber (and vice president since its merger with global firm WATG). “The idea was to relate to Camden and its colourful vernacular,” he says. “We counterposed complementary colours either sides of the fins, to create a subtle energy. It also picks up on the corporate colours of the different companies, playing on that relationship between them.”

With 450 staff relocating from its Soho office, Viacom needed the building’s capacity to expand significantly to become 800 strong. It enlisted

Jacobs Webber, a long-term collaborator, to get rid of two large, redundant television studios in place of a new extension facing onto Hawley Crescent, and refurbish the existing north half of the building. This gave the practice

a chance to rejig the disjointed and illogical interior, unifying the two halves under one roof and giving the workforce a sense of community, while making sure vital features such as new, more high-tech recording studios, production control rooms and editing suites were given the right spot.

The bold frontage highlights the sweeping curve of the building, and uniformly brings together two structures under one continuous skin. Even though the smaller structure at the west end of the street is a solid windowless mass, housing plant rooms, electrical substations and emergency generators – a necessity for a broadcaster this size – it feels part of the whole, and is cleverly masked.

The spectrum continues across the gates that open on to the service courtyard, where Jacobs Webber has coated the inner elevations with living walls, irrigated by rainwater from the roof. This is one of the site’s three outdoor areas for staff, but the others – a cobbled courtyard at the east end of the building, and canal-side terraces – are fairly urban, so this provided a rare opportunity for greenery. “This has become the lung of the building,” says Jacobs. This feature, along with the green roof, photovoltaic panels and water recycling via the under-courtyard harvesting tank, has earned the project some serious eco points (it has achieved a BREEAM Very Good rating).

In the northern half, technical rooms and recording studios had previously lined the canal side of the ground floor, blocking out the view. “You had no notion that the canal was even there, which was a huge missed opportunity,” says Jacobs, “so we cleared this whole >>

Opposite Rated BREEAM Very Good, the building includes a living wall, fed by rainwater

Above One of two atriums – an art-filled, flexible space for gigs and gatherings



side, moving all those black boxes into the middle – it's a deep building – and opened up the sides, bringing in much more daylight." Now, this area is filled with open-plan workstations and breakout areas to the sides, peppered with a few glazed meeting rooms and private offices, and the terrace is open for staff to enjoy when the sun comes out.

In the centre of the building are two large atriums. The north atrium, currently overlooked by two astronauts (part of a rotating art programme, a collaboration with local colleges) has a cafe and a large, open, flexible space for dining, whole-company meetings and sometimes gigs (this is the home of MTV, don't forget.) Past the cafe are some of the 'dark functions', like the production control room, where dozens of screens show the company's current output. This presented one of Jacobs Webber's trickiest challenges with the refurb, as it had to stay fully operational and uninterrupted during the build, so the project was planned in several phases.

The south atrium within the new building is more public facing. Studio audiences will often congregate here before being herded into a television studio, hence the placement of a cheery Spongebob Squarepants statue to greet them. It is also, however, bordered by three storeys of workspace and meeting rooms. This animates the space and makes for a lively working environment, but also called for some serious acoustic control, so walls are covered in metal mesh hiding sound absorbent panels. Above, the gradient of colour from the facade is continued in the skylight.

In Nickelodeon's workspace, departments are easily identified by the sheer amount of themed paraphernalia on the desks, from Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to Spongebob. Meeting rooms are themed with more characters, including a particularly memorable purple



room entirely covered in Dora the Explorer imagery, and a boardroom named the Boredroom. Downstairs at MTV, things are only slightly more grown-up, and we poke our heads into a top-secret corridor with red cube-like editing suites for the music studios, another example of the variety of work carried out here. "There are a lot of different environments and creative teams, so we wanted [the project] to be a catalyst for all these activities coming together," says Jacobs.

From the ground-floor desk areas, one can see the functional aspect of the colourful facade fins. They not only provide sun shading, but also give a level of privacy to the workers inside – the colourful fascia apparently instills plenty of curiosity in passers-by. And with such exciting goings-on inside, who can blame them? ■

Above Metal mesh screens conceal acoustic panels. Spongebob seems to approve

Top In the second atrium, the skylights echo the graduated colour of the facade's fins