



# THE FABRIC OF TIME

Since its opening in 1839, St James' Mill has seen use as a chocolate factory, post-war veteran re-assimilation centre, printing works, and office space. Now, it's original function as a yarn mill is the thread running through a new residential scheme. Alice Laycock unpicks the interwoven references to the building's industrial past, that are by no measure a product of the designer's woolly thinking. Photography: Alice Laycock.

Left: The designer endeavoured to marry the intervention with the building envelope in as many ways as possible, seen most overtly here in one of five identical access corridors on the northern side of the building. The contrast in profile, between smooth curves reminiscent of the 'flying shuttle' and fabric output to the left, and rigid window openings on the right, is most apparent at floor level.  
Above: The project has created visual stratification; original timber beams are shown running parallel with contemporary ply panelling and fittings





**THE** noblest of all English Industrial Revolution Mills”: that’s how St James’ Mill was described by prolific 20<sup>TH</sup> Century architectural critic Ian Nairn. In 2021, he would still be correct; from the outside, that is. The handsome Flemish Bond laid, locally crafted red brick façade is punctuated with the very same six by seven paned fenestration that would have lit the whirring looms in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The original domed, half-moon shaped stair tower is clad in foliage that only gets more romantic by the season: virginia creeper engulfs the drum in fiery amber in autumn, ivy keeps it warm over the winter, wisteria grips it in pastel purple come springtime, and they all work together to shroud it in greenery for the summer months.

Unfortunately, while 180 years of use and reuse kept the mill structurally maintained, the constant necessity spurred conversions mean the same can no longer be said for the interiors.

Thankfully, Alice Laycock, founder and director of design studio Laycock Interiors, still concurred with Nairn, when the monolithic building piqued her interest from the opposite side of the River Wensum. “I’d seen the mill, but I’d never looked at it, if that makes sense” Laycock imparts. “You’d think a building with all the presence of a grounded ocean liner would stand out more to the public eye, but it sits along such a frequented walking route that it almost seeps into part of Norwich’s geography, rather than its architectural history”.

Above: The interior wall of the ‘flying shuttle’ shaped insert features three opening for the entrance, kitchen, and sleeping platform. These correspond with the natural breaks between the cast iron structural columns that run down the spine of each floor. The kitchen facings are PLYKEA, and the table and bench are bespoke, and have a variety of uses and configurations. They slot into one another to give the effect of oversized nest tables.



The mill is owned by the Jarrold family, a prominent name in the area, who own various retail premises and land around the city. They’ve owned the mill since the 1930’s, and it’s been leased to local companies as offices since the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. While the interiors are perhaps the oldest example of open plan spaces (their inception being over a century prior to the modernist architect who pioneered the layout format in a domestic sense), their architectural and historical significance was masked by decades of utilitarian office fittings and fixtures.

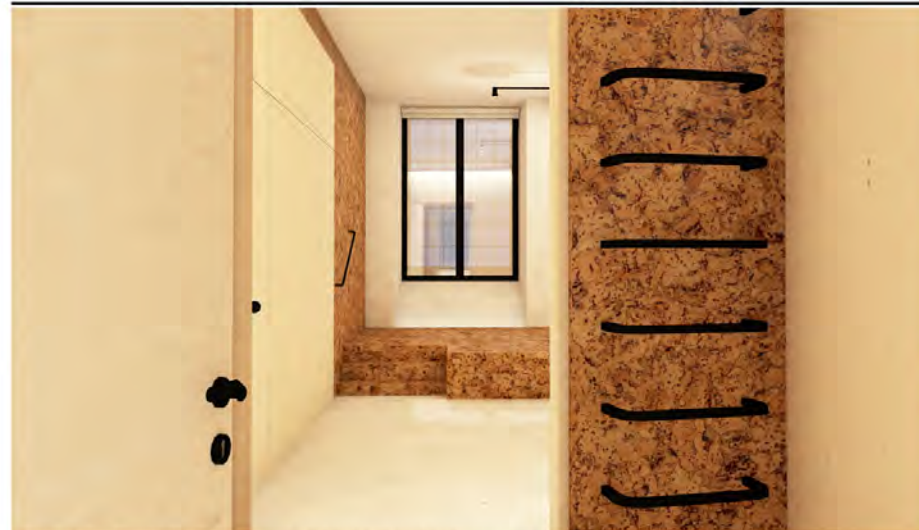
Despite a residential use being ‘at the least desirable end’ of the spectrum of possible future uses for St James’ Mill, the scheme has significantly reinvigorated the site.

The apartments are available for private rent by qualifying individuals; they must be in their twenties/thirties and be working in the creative industries in order to apply successfully. The apartments and their inhabitants would thereby form an artists colony of sorts, permeating the business district which has grown up around the mill over time.

“The St James’ Mill apartments represent the assurance of the next chapter of the building’s history” explains Laycock. “It’s a great privilege to be able to facilitate the future of such an Iconic Norwich building”. The willows that line the south side of the building tap ever so gently on the panes; an inspirational place to create, to be sure.

Above: The raised platform zones the vast full-height end of the apartment by providing a difference in height, which also makes use of the cavernous 3.1m tall ceiling. It also hides two full sized banquette sofas, wiring for in-floor outlets, and uplighting that frames the window niches. The tallest nest table iteration is seen acting as both a work bench and tall bar, depending on which surface the user stands on.





Looking through the 'flying shuttle' into the full-height living/studio space

## Laycock Interiors transforms 18<sup>th</sup> Century textile mill into loft-style artists' apartments



Alice Laycock | 10 April 2021

Birch ply clad subdividing walls carve up the vast former spinning floors of Grade I Listed St James' Mill, Norwich, into contemporary artists' lofts— with each fine detail a nod to the building's industrial past.

The stately building sits on the banks of the River Wensum in the north-east of Norwich, but its handsome red brick façade, with original windows of 1939, hid a neglected, utilitarian interior.

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The mill now contains five identically planned floors, consisting of 20 standard and 5 adaptable apartments, combined with communal storage, recreation, and laundrette facilities.

Laycock Interiors' goal was to pare back the interiors to an almost-original state, by removing false floors and ceilings and highlighting original features like the wooden transverse beams and structural columns.

Kinetic and interactive furnishings were carefully specified for their reminiscence of the repetitive movements of the machinery originally housed on each floor.

"Despite being steeped in history and tradition, Norwich manages to be a progressive and creative city. We wanted to provide accommodation that would help nurture that spirit by providing housing opportunities for young creative professionals" says studio founder Alice Laycock.



*The old and the new interact most overtly in the access corridors*

"We wanted to include both covert and overt references to the building's original function: the central riser that delineates the apartments when seen from plan view takes its form from the Flying Shuttle, an industrial revolution era invention that streamlined the process of weaving cloth. The curved wooden housing containing a core functionality is replicated on a grand scale in the apartments" explains Laycock.

"Norwich is a city rooted firmly in the past, yet still reaching into the future— and I hope the St James' Mill lofts illustrate that".