



Saved by the (So)bell

CELEBRATED LONDON LEISURE CENTRE ONCE SET FOR DEMOLITION NOW DELIGHTS AFTER MAJOR REFURBISHMENT

Pellings, the multi-disciplinary architectural, property and construction practice has completed the £1.3m refurbishment of the Sobell Leisure Centre in Islington, north London. The centre opened in 1973 and was the only leisure centre to be designed by celebrated Centre Point architect Richard Seifert, working with Bill Laming.

Opened by the Duke of Edinburgh in 1973, the Sobell Leisure Centre was a gift to Islington's residents from Sir Michael Sobell, a wealthy businessman, philanthropist and a prominent owner/breeder of thoroughbred racehorses.

The neo-brutalist building, an important example of the Seifert architectural school, was at the time one of the largest sports facilities in the country and became part of a regional network of new super leisure centres. Since its launch it has become a much loved facility and a hub for sporting development including being an official training facility for volleyball during the London Olympics in 2012.

But a decade ago the centre's future didn't look so bright. Its structural condition was a cause for concern. The roof leaked and the heating, the lighting and ventilation systems all needed replacing.

Islington Council initially said the centre was in a too poor state and too costly to repair. It favoured demolition and rebuilding and for a period this was championed as a golden opportunity "to do something really radical".

But as details for the proposed £20M housing-led redevelopment emerged, so enthusiasm waned. Locals challenged whether bulldozing the centre and replacing it was economically and socially the right approach. In the aftermath of the financial crash there was real concern that the centre would be demolished, but funding secured on the back of private sector housing would fail to materialize and nothing would be built.

An alternative "no bull dozer" vision emerged in which the original building was retained and refurbished as the focal point of a local regeneration masterplan. And all at a fraction of the cost of the new build option.

Step forward to 2013 and Pellings was appointed by the London Borough of Islington to provide concept and outline design for the internal refurbishment of the centre, to undertake the Construction Design Management Co-ordinator role, and Employer's Agent services (space planning and achieving Sport England compliance).

The refurbishment has been funded by the London Borough of Islington, Sport England and the London Marathon Charitable Trust.

Situated in the heart of Islington, the centre is minutes away from Arsenal's Emirates Stadium, and boasts a sports hall, Junior/Gallery Gym, exercise studios, squash courts and ice rink. It is used by around half a million people each year.

Pellings' brief was to remodel the existing space to encourage wider participation in sport in the local area, increase membership within the 13-19 year old age group, and make the centre more accessible for disabled and disadvantaged members of the community by bringing the centre up to Sport England and Part M (disabled access) requirements.

The scope of works comprised the refurbishment of the junior gym to include a sprint track, part-refurbishment and expansion of the Gallery Gym to provide a boxing facility, remodelling of existing changing rooms, and refurbishment of meeting rooms. An unused shower/store area was also refurbished to assist with the phasing of the construction works. The refurbished areas also provide a new accessible changing places unit comprising an adjustable table, ceiling track hoist, wash-down facility and accessible toilets.

Furthermore, as part of the Olympic legacy, a new volleyball court was created in the main arena using donations from the London 2012 Olympic Legacy Fund.

The completed refurbishment has provided a state-of-the-art facility fit for use by all members of the local community. The Sport England transformation has not only dramatically improved the centre's facilities such as 'Boxfit' fitness classes for all ages, but has also created an 'urban space' which should help to increase the centre's appeal to young people. Also, there are increased opportunities for basketball, gymnastics, netball and volleyball within the centre.

The design & build construction contract was undertaken by local contractor Cosmur Construction (London) and the works were completed in 10 months.

Cosmur says: "The Sobell Centre is a landmark facility and a key provider of sports and fitness for Islington residents. The improvements to the centre entailed the modernisation of the facility, giving it a clean and contemporary feel. As design and build contractor we introduced innovative design throughout the project, whilst providing practical, robust solutions to achieve an improved internal layout."

Councillor Janet Burgess, Islington Council's deputy leader and executive member for health and wellbeing, said: "Improving the health and wellbeing of our residents is a council priority. One of the ways we do this is providing great value leisure facilities for residents of all ages and abilities to enjoy. So I'm delighted that we were able to make this investment in the Sobell Centre to offer the type of sports and facilities local people welcome at an affordable price."

Works were undertaken with the centre remaining in use and required careful phasing to ensure that areas adjacent to the working areas remained safe, in use and continued to be in service.

The scope of works included:

- Enlargement of the existing ground floor gymnasium in order to provide an increase in facilities in response to the demand of users.
- Alterations to the ground floor male, female and disabled use changing room areas and showers, including use of existing plant space and creation of external access.
- Refurbishment of first floor Junior Gymnasium
- Conversion of existing bar area into Boxing gymnasium
- Refurbishment of first floor changing rooms to facilitate temporary facilities during the works
- Installation of floor sockets to the main hall
- Installation of fixed gymnasium equipment.

