

This award-winning live/work studio was once a derelict Borough shop

Jeweller Alex Monroe, beloved of London fashionistas, turned a derelict shop off Borough High Street into an impressive live/work studio that is both comfy and creative.
Philippa Stockley

Publish Date: 22 October 2014



**Time out: Monroe in the staff sitting room. The wood burning stove was “a must”
Photographs by David Butler**

South of London Bridge railway station, behind sprawling Guy’s Hospital, lurks one of the last bits of real Dickensian London. Off Borough High Street, alleys and narrow streets are dotted with old warehouses and crumbling brick buildings. Above it all soars the Shard, glinting pale blue, while tall cranes busily develop this increasingly desirable area.

Along one street, jutting from the end of a row of old-fashioned shops, is what looks like a slender triangular ship’s prow. Five floors high, clad in vertically ribbed brown metal, further metal stripes provide shade over the windows. At pavement level there’s still the old shop front and window, charmingly refurbished.

Inside it is a humming jewellery shop, one of an army of small businesses opening up and providing a marketplace for UK craftspeople. What makes Alex Monroe’s business outstanding is the care with which he has, with the help of his architects DSDHA, curated a stimulating and creative atmosphere in this building.

Above the jewellery store perch small workshops, one to a floor, while at the top is a pleasant living space and balcony for Monroe and his jewellery makers, for whom this building is a home-and-studio, every day of the week. Rather than the designers and makers working alone, there’s a sense of life and fun.



Craftsman's quarters: the building near London Bridge has a workshop on each floor. The rooms rise floor by floor on tiny triangular floors, cantilevered around a huge single timber spine, with a curving handrail on which a plant twines. While business goes on below, on the penultimate floor things relax. There's a sitting room everyone shares, with a square whitewashed central pine table, shelves, a wood burning stove, a kitchenette, and gorgeous light. And on the floor above, the pièce de résistance, a tiny roof terrace, with fabulous views in all directions, particularly to the ever-changing Shard. It's where the close-knit team have lunch, drinks and birthday parties.

At 51, Monroe is the darling of the glossies, and his gilded bee necklace is one of Liberty's best-selling items. He grew up in Suffolk, one of five children. His exquisite silver-gilt or gold jewellery is entirely handmade in the UK. The Japanese adore it. His new range, inspired by haberdashery, includes the smallest, most delicate pair of working scissors you've ever seen, hung from a chain.

"I would have been an architect," he says. "My mother and father were architects. But I didn't have the patience to study. At school I cut off every avenue until only the art room would have me. So I became a jeweller." He learned his craft at the renowned Sir John Cass Faculty of Art in E1. "After that," he says, "you have a bench, and you make things. Either the strong or the stupid survive. Years of poverty followed, but in the end, I made fashion jewellery, and sold that successfully, and that was it — though no one in the UK knew who I was."

By then, father-of-three Monroe was renting a workshop in Iliffe Yard, Walworth. As his business expanded, he took over neighbouring workshops, but renting didn't make financial sense. Ten years ago, he decided to get a shop.

He got on his bike and cycled south from Vauxhall, "and came across a romantic, tumbledown ruin at the end of a parade, with a For Sale sign." There was room to build workrooms above. "I bought it with cash, all in a week, for about £330,000."



Light and bright: (left) the essential wood-burning stove. (Right) the staff room's central table and kitchenette

Next door to Monroe in Iliffe Yard, architect Deborah Saunt had her award-winning practice, DSDHA. “They’d been shortlisted for the Stirling Prize... so I asked if they’d mind designing a building for me. When they said yes, I felt I had an architect above my station.

“The building has such a tiny footprint — it’s called a pencil building in Japan. I wanted it to have a presence, like my jewellery. So it had to be handmade, and tell a quirky story. It also had to have a wood burning stove and some outside space. Those were musts.” That’s quite a tall order for what was basically a pile of thin air on top of a derelict shop.

Monroe and the DSDHA team came up with the idea of the zinc-clad building, with a timber skeleton that was prefabricated in Austria, delivered on lorries and put up in a single day, before skilled workers hand-crafted the metal sections that cover the outside so strikingly.



Illustrious neighbours: Monroe’s award-winning jewellery store and zinc-clad workshops above it, with Guy’s Hospital tower and the Shard in the background

But there was a monumental delay at the planning stage, almost entirely, Monroe says, because of the cladding. “Here was a gem of a building that would bring in employment. We took it to the planners and for two years they hit us with everything they’d got. For some

reason they wanted it covered in ceramic. Then they didn't want stripes over the windows. In the end we took it to a council meeting, and it went straight through. Now it's won loads of awards, and the planners like it. But that added at least £100,000 to the overall bill."

The shop-cum-workshop-cum-home is delicate yet robust, charming yet practical; a model for artistic live-work premises. Monroe laughs. "When we started, there was no Shard in the background. But because of the delay, that got built before we finished this."

Get the look Alex Monroe's jewellery: alexmonroe.com The building has won the RIBA Stephen Lawrence Prize and this year's RIBA London Award. Find architect Deborah Saunt at dsdha.co.uk Timber building of cross-laminated spruce: made by klhuk.com Pigmented zinc cladding: by VM Zinc, at vmzinc.co.uk Loft and Augustin industrial lamps in shop and workrooms: from jiede.com Pine is whitewashed with simple thinned white emulsion (with fireproofing on top)