Sanei + Hopkins slot neatly into coastal Suffolk

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A marriage of rammed earth and timber

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October 2025

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Housestead by Sanei + Hopkins Architects, photographed by Peter Landers

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1: Buildings

JOSE HEVIA

THE ROOM COMMUNITY, BARCELONA

CIERTO ESTUDIO

Read the full story: ribaj.com/room-community

In May 2025, the Plaça de les Glòries urban project was declared complete, closing a decade of construction and inaugurating a new residential and leisure hub to Barcelona's east. Central to this transformation is Illa Glòries, a cluster of four C-shaped apartment blocks in a landscaped scheme.

Block A, known as the Room Community, was designed by Cierto Estudio, a female-led cooperative of six architects who met studying at Barcelona's Escuela de Arquitectura. They aim to create architecture from a 'non-gender' perspective, challenging norms that segregate space by gendered roles or family hierarchies. The Room Community, commissioned by the Institut Municipal de l'Habitatge i Rehabilitació de Barcelona (IMHAB), is a new model for inclusive, collective urban living.

The building's 51 units sit around a cool garden courtyard, planted with Mediterranean species, by landscape architects Beatriz Borque and Miquel Mariné. Six storeys of open galleries overlook the space, drawing inspiration from traditional corral typologies and encouraging neighbourly exchange while maintaining privacy. Each home is conceived as a square divided into four equal parts, rotated at 45 degrees. Rooms are of equal size, with centrally placed bathrooms to foster visibility and interaction among residents. Jutting balconies create intimate nooks, some with views of the Sagrada Família.

Built entirely from cross-laminated timber sourced in Galicia, the homes ensure cross-ventilation, insulation and optimal solar gain. Rooftop PV panels feed a microgrid, enabling the building to meet Nearly Zero Energy Building (NZEB) standards. With its thoughtful balance of design, sustainability and social purpose, the Room Community exemplifies how public housing can foster both environmental responsibility and a renewed sense of belonging, integrating neighbours, community and newly built local neighbourhood.

Suzanne Wales

A new block nestles between existing volumes on the Whithurst Park estate.

Family resemblance

Asked to extend RIBA Award-winning Whithurst Lodge, James Gorst worried about unbalancing his original – but the new additions channel its DNA

Words: Flo Armitage-Hookes
Photographs: James Retief

IN NUMBERS

275m²
original GIA

360m²
extended GIA

23
years between commissions

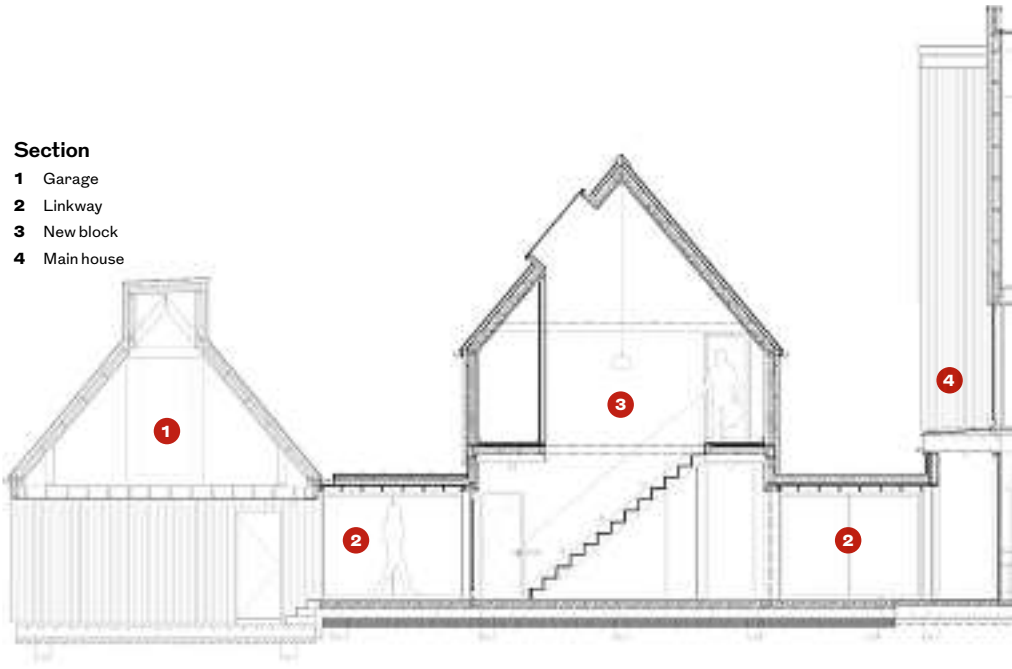
When James Gorst was asked in 2022 to extend Whithurst Lodge, a West Sussex home he had designed more than two decades earlier, his feelings were mixed. The RIBA Award-winning project meant more to him than most; it followed a spell of disillusionment with the profession and asserted a new and uncompromising approach to practice. "Until then I'd only done two houses, a cubic villa in the style of Soane and an Arts and Crafts building [Glebe Place] in Chelsea. But this was an opportunity to work beyond received idioms," Gorst recalls.

Clients Richard Taylor and Rick Englert bought the 40ha Whithurst Park estate in 1999 and commissioned James Gorst Architects to design a distinctive home near its entrance. It would be a place for them to live while building their dream neo-Jacobean mansion nearby and, later, a long-term rental property.

Light, sight lines, positionings and materiality had been precisely choreographed and Gorst was hesitant to mess with the composition. Yet he was pragmatic. "It would have fallen into the hands of another architect," he says. "So I thought, 'I better take it on.'" The aim was to increase the floor area, meeting the needs of the family renting it, without diminishing its distinctive qualities.

Previously, two barn-like forms, a house and garage, traced a tree line on the estate. Both are oak-clad and gabled, with incisions running along their spines, and connected by an 11m concrete path. Now, a third form nestles between the original elements, providing an office space on the ground floor with a bedroom and en-suite bathroom above. Glazed linkways lightly tether the blocks, while allowing

Section
1 Garage
2 Linkway
3 New block
4 Main house



The extension's oak cladding and gabled zinc roof mimic the garage and main house.

The original scheme, completed in 2001.

ALEX FRANKLYN

Ground floor plan

each to be individually silhouetted by the greenery behind. At the back of the main house, a quieter zinc-clad extension has opened up the kitchen and created new lounge space and a larger utility room.

"There's such a strong morphology to the earlier design… I think I was forced to take a mimetic approach, which took those two shapes and added a third," continues Gorst, who quickly discounted more interventional, high-contrast options. The new block's steeply pitched standing-seam zinc roof and oak cladding follow the existing vernacular and its 8.5m height mediates between the taller house and shorter garage. It's a bit Goldilocks and the Three Bears: a small volume, a medium volume and a large volume. Yet the meeting of the three looks 'just right'.

Small alliances and deviations animate the trio. Like the garage, the new block is orientated towards the clearing;

Top left Full-height glazing connects the new study to the rural landscape.

This image A dramatic 3m-tall portrait window punctuates the first-floor bedroom.

Bottom left Ash-faced plywood adds material warmth on a budget.

like the house, its ground floor is opened up with expansive glazing. Unlike either, a tall portrait window confidently punctuates the facade on the first floor. "It's taken on its own presence, the piece in the middle; it doesn't look apologetic," reflects Gorst. In a few years, once the oak cladding weathers and softens, it will look like it's always been there.

Although Gorst's repetition of the modules doesn't infringe on the original forms, the connecting linkways have altered the experience of arrival. Entrance was an important part of the 2001 design, with people routed via the garage archway, then outside courtyard, to reach the house. It drew on the entry sequence of colleges in Cambridge, Gorst tells me, where he studied and later lived. "That succession of events has now been changed – intensified – since you're going through another building," he adds.

Walking the Lodge's longitudinal axis, through linkways and blocks, the periphery seems to expand and contract; switching between rural vistas and more enclosed living spaces. But a polished concrete floor continues underfoot, and a framed view of the main house's toplit central staircase beckons you on.

Inside, the new block resembles rather than reproduces the original finishes. Ash-faced plywood panels envelop the study's ceiling and walls, evoking the timber warmth of the main house while introducing a new domestic motif. An elegant staircase, also ash-faced ply, ascends to the first floor, lit by an angled rooflight. Yet the main drama is within the lofty bedroom, where that 3m-tall window immerses guests in the bucolic landscape of Whithurst Park. It must be quite the view to wake up to.

While oak has been used sparingly internally due to budget constraints, it is employed in key areas. The main house's ribbed oak timber ceiling and full-height oak-framed glazing are closely mimicked in the new rear lounge space. Here, where old and new meet at the original scheme's heart, the transition feels seamless.

Is Gorst pleased with the outcome? Yes, but also mightily relieved that the additions have melded with and settled beside the existing project. Whithurst Lodge has enjoyed a rare continuity of guardianship, which has yielded admirable results. The homestead has been remade, rather than distorted.

Above Glazed linkways connect blocks while preserving their individual forms.

Left Making an entrance, users pass through the garage, linkways and new block.

Below Past the kitchen, a new lounge area extends the main house.

Credits
Client Richard Taylor and Rick Englert
Architect James Gorst Architects
Contractor Ceecom
Structural engineer Structure Workshop

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BUILDING TRUST

Right at home

Abigail Hopkins and Amir Sanei's farmstead-inspired family house is rigorous and refined, yet sits at ease in its coastal Suffolk surroundings

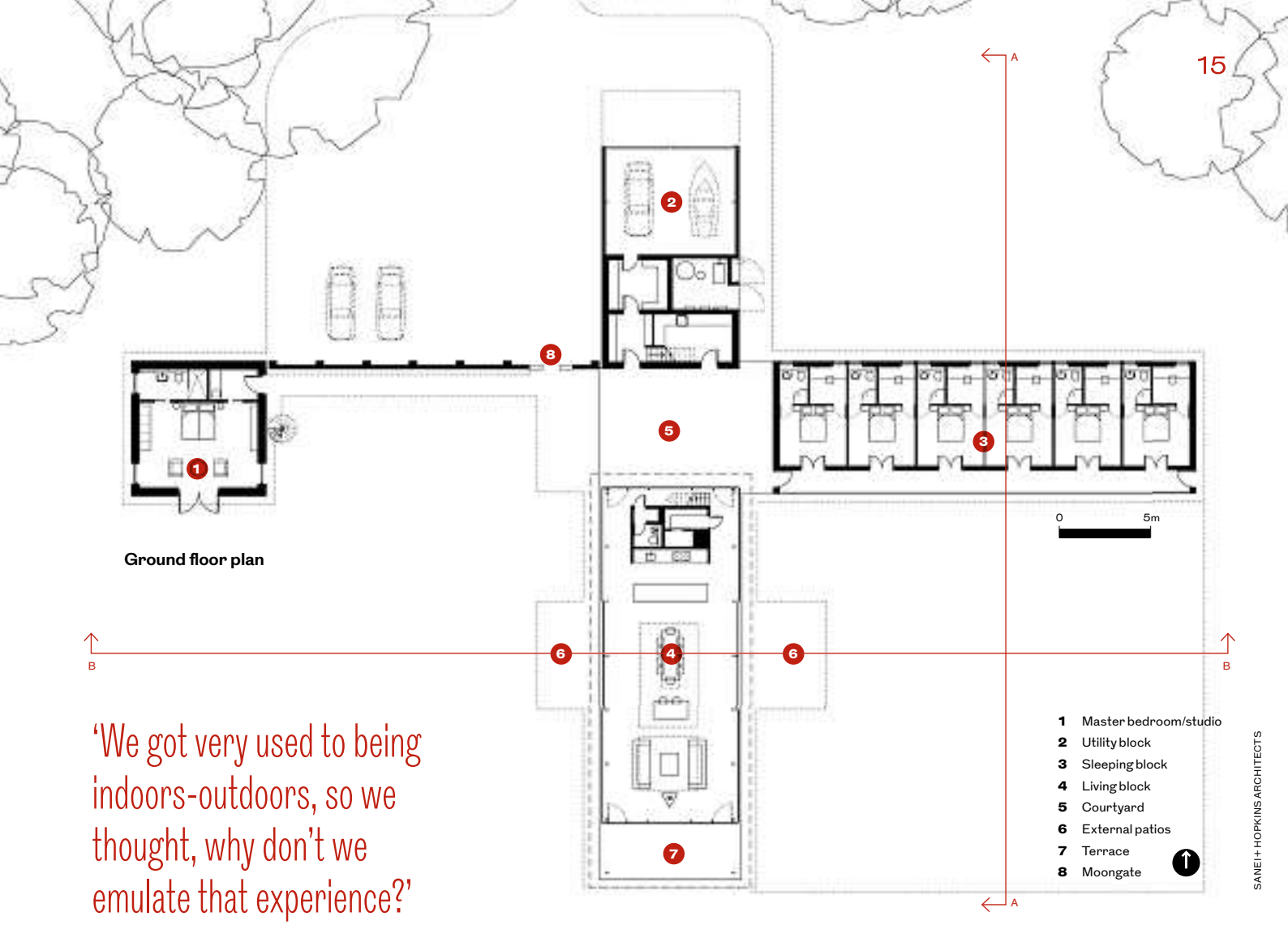
Words: John Jervis
Photographs: Peter Landers

Above Housestead sits alongside the Alde estuary, part of a site of special scientific interest and of the Suffolk and Essex Coast and Heaths National Landscape.

Architectural opportunities like this don't come along often – designing a sizeable house from scratch, on isolated heathland sloping down to the River Alde's wide estuary. Choosing an architectural language equal to that opportunity, and to that beguiling Suffolk countryside, isn't simple. Newbuild mansions hereabouts hide their chunky forms beneath ill-fitting modernist, Arts and Crafts or Georgian garb, sitting uncomfortably in the sparse coastal landscape. So it makes sense to swap monumentalism for a gathering of forms and fabrics with regional relevance, given coherence by a typology predicated on variety and change: the farmstead.

In 2023, Abigail Hopkins and Amir Sanei of Sanei + Hopkins Architects completed Housestead, their family home, on the 162ha Blackheath Estate, purchased in 1995 by Hopkins' parents, architects Patty and Michael Hopkins. The estate is encircled by farms that were once part of its demesne, on each of which is a small cluster of houses, stables, barns, workshops and sheds, evolving over the years in response to changing domestic and working needs.

"Taking this farmstead model," says Sanei, "we separated our activities into individual buildings with architectural languages dictated by function, so that each reads as separate." The four blocks of Housestead accommodate living, sleeping, working and utility, and are placed to benefit from its north-south orientation, employing massing and materials appropriate to both role and aspect. This involved one significant departure from the traditional farm: rather than turning inwards to a central yard, Housestead addresses the landscape, its cruciform plan extending into regenerated heathland that has replaced non-indigenous birch trees: "We wanted a home as much about the spaces between as the buildings themselves," Sanei explains.



Ground floor plan

‘We got very used to being indoors-outdoors, so we thought, why don’t we emulate that experience?’

Unlike the traditional farmstead, Housestead’s cruciform plan is open to the landscape.

Holidays with their five children in a small annex of the estate's main house (a late Victorian fantasy given a severe neo-Georgian makeover by Raymond Erith in the 1950s) enforced appreciation of time spent outside, occupying gardens, courtyards and outbuildings as living spaces. "We got very used to being indoors-outdoors," says Hopkins. "So we thought, why don't we emulate that experience? And that became the brief."

The focus on variety and context, as well as the fresh heathland, helped Housestead gain a sympathetic hearing on submission of the planning application in 2013 – vital given its location in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (now rebranded as a National Landscape). To qualify as a 'para 55 house' under the National Planning Policy Framework, it needed to be deemed outstanding in itself, but also "significantly enhance its immediate setting and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area".

Top left The sleeping block's south-facing corridor acts as a conservatory, with doors at both ends for cross-ventilation.

Top right The living block, viewed from the mezzanine, is Housestead's focus, where the family comes to eat and socialise.

Below The thatched roof's steep pitch ensures that rainwater is shed rapidly.

IN NUMBERS

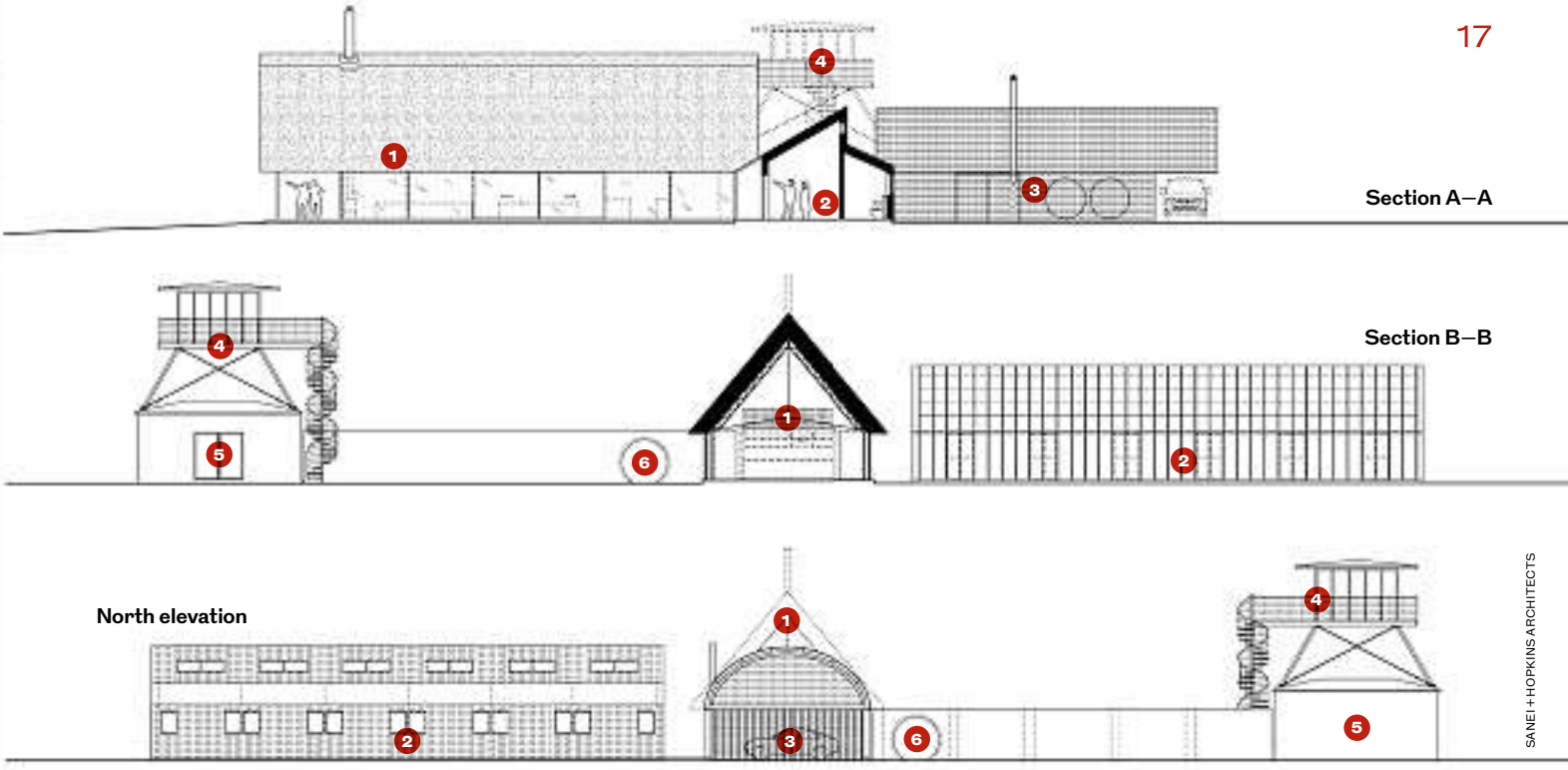
£2,480
GIFA cost per m²

510m²
GIFA

12,800
predicted onsite renewable energy generation (kWh/yr)

If a degree of spectacle is necessary to be judged outstanding, the living block – a memorable blend of Viking longhouse and transparent pavilion stretching south to the river – certainly provides. The steep pitch of its neat thatch (sourced from nearby Walberswick) maximises efficiency in shedding rainwater. Support is provided by the slender steel structure, utilising just the right amount of material to manage the forces involved, ensuring minimal interruption to the glass walls. The whole has a filmic quality, enhanced inside by the traditional 'Suffolk pink' of the steel, dialling up the postmodern collision of vernacular and high-tech.

Inside all is open, bar the cloakroom, larder and brushed-steel kitchen clustered at one end, which are topped by a comfortable mezzanine. Sliding glass doors open to patios on either side, while a covered terrace to the south gives enviable views of the Alde. The external engineering brick matches the internal quarry tiles, blurring distinctions between inside and out. Despite the



dominance of hard surfaces, acoustics and climate are amenable. This is the sole block with an MVHR system (the rest use trickle vents), but overhanging thatch and daily rituals – adjusting curtains and blinds, opening opposing doors and windows – keep it temperate on sunny days. The thatch is augmented by insulation, while the floor slab acts as a thermal store, boosted if needed by underfloor heating and a wood-burner.

The other blocks take a similarly tight approach to form, function and material. To the east is a barracks of double-height bedrooms, set slightly off Housestead's otherwise rigorous grid to create a back route for access, light and views. Erected with structural insulated panels in a single week, this "habitable greenhouse" is topped by a fly roof of photovoltaic glass, with hot-water collectors slotted behind ("a touch of Heath Robinson", in Sanei's words). Its section, derived from the estate's greenhouse, creates a striking profile against the wide Suffolk sky. The south-facing glass corridor is a suntrap, providing both access and warmth to the five mini-suites for the couple's children (plus one spare), with their unfinished oriented-strandboard walls and colourful headboards giving

1 Living block
2 Sleeping block
3 Utility block
4 Watch tower
5 Main bedroom
6 Moongate

Below left Each block employs different forms and materials, yet their surfaces and geometries achieve a satisfying coherency.

Below right Bedrooms in the sleeping block can accommodate a mezzanine and kitchen, and expand northwards to provide additional living space.

Looking towards the living block from the viewing tower's wraparound balcony.

Reached by a staircase fabricated in nearby Aldeburgh, the tower resembles a lunar module.

a 1980s Habitat vibe. Each has space for a mezzanine, with ancillary rooms sticking out at the rear serviced for conversion to small kitchens. Removable panels allow for expansion into the garden to the north, possibly with individual front doors. "Hopefully, build it and they will come," says Hopkins. "We realised how brief childhood is, how quickly you move on to new stages, so we wanted something adaptable, allowing us to carry on using it as a family, in whatever way that might be." A brief intra-practice debate ensues about the degree of freedom to be allowed: "They might muck it up," frets Sanei.

Behind, at the end of the drive, the north block houses a garage, with space for services and storage. During construction, a "post-teen hangout" was added on its upper level, which can be converted into a workshop or studio if the balance of Sanei + Hopkins' workload shifts from its Islington base. The structure "goes back to basics", in Sanei's phrase, with corrugated steel sheets, chosen as the simplest means of covering the required span, supported by purlins on a frame of I-beams rolled to curves. The result resembles Nissen huts and pig arcs, both plentiful in the surrounding countryside, and is suitably industrial for the large biomass boiler inside, which runs on the estate's wood, while its buffer vessel also harnesses solar hot water from the bedroom block. Optimising energy usage and harvesting rainwater across the four buildings are part of a low-impact approach that gives considerable satisfaction: "We haven't used any fuel for heating since April," says Sanei. "We like it; the kids complain a bit," admits Hopkins.

The utility block with its biomass storage.

Perhaps this portrays Housestead as a dry exercise in matching form to function. The final block, a metal viewing tower rising above a square brick pillbox to the west, shows how this rationality skirts excess yet generates an edge suited to Suffolk's flatlands. The upper level acts as compact office space, made generous by panoramic views of the estuary and surrounding woods through its floor-to-ceiling glass. The base (in fact timber-framed, clad in half bricks) was meant as a hideaway, but is now the main bedroom. As timelines and children grew, "distance became sensible", says Hopkins, but it may host practice work in future. If the concept is playful, the structure is minimal, reflecting Suffolk's military detritus, from the concrete pillbox and gun platforms just down the river, to multiple decaying air bases, to the Cold War pagodas on nearby Orford Ness.

The pair are reticent about aesthetics at Housestead, talking more about sustainability, detailing and the contribution of local contractors. "We weren't precious about materials and forms – or whether the buildings would work together," says Sanei, "but the overall effect was still key. In farmsteads, there aren't major decisions about form and detail, yet they evolve into ad-hoc compositions." There is a tension between the gradual accumulation and attractive dilapidation of farmyards, and the rigour and precision on display here, but East Suffolk's planners shared the belief that evolutionary projects, carefully handled, can contribute to historic estates remaining viable and attractive for future generations. With its undogmatic use of regional forms and materials, its capacity for evolution, and its relationship with wider economic and ecological systems, Housestead acts as an understated manifesto for a way of life and a way of building – a gathering of fragments that feels natural, sitting lightly in this textured landscape, yet rooted in its past, present and future. ●

Credits
Environmental, M&E and sustainability consultant Max Fordham
Structural engineer Techniker Consulting Engineers
Structural and civil engineer GC Robertson
Structural and SIPS engineer JMS Engineers
Ecologist Abrehart Ecology
Steelwork contractor J T Pegg & Sons
Electrical contractor GLS Electrical
Mechanical contractor JPS Mechanical
Groundworks contractor TDC Groundworks
Carpentry Malcolm Button
Thatcher D J Rackham
Biomass and solar hot water Green Home Energy Solutions

Gasholders, Kings Cross, London
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BBA

Come together

In Bridport, the UK's largest cohousing scheme – Hazelmead, by Barefoot Architects – has important things to say about how we live

Words: Josephine Smit Photographs: Rebecca Noakes Photography

Conventional-looking houses on conventional-looking estates are what the public wants, the big housebuilders have argued time after time. Yet every now and then, housebuilding orthodoxy is thrown into doubt by ordinary people who aspire to different – often more sustainable and community-minded – ways of living and create extraordinary homes.

Hazelmead's community origins become obvious when you see the development, slotted between the crest of a hill and a functional-looking hospital on the edge of Bridport, Dorset. The pitched roofs, chimneys and private gardens are familiar enough but the 53 homes follow the land's contours in rows of front-to-back rather than front-facing terraces, the south-facing arrangement hinting at a net zero mission. While many new developments have, at best, a meagre pocket park, here there are shared vegetable gardens and a meadow, tended by residents. And instead of being surrounded by blacktop, terraces are separated by car-free gravel streets, with car parking at the site perimeter.

BAREFOOT ARCHITECTS

Site plan

1 Terraced housing
2 Apartment buildings
3 Common house
4 Car-free streets
5 Car parking
6 Vegetable gardens
7 Meadow

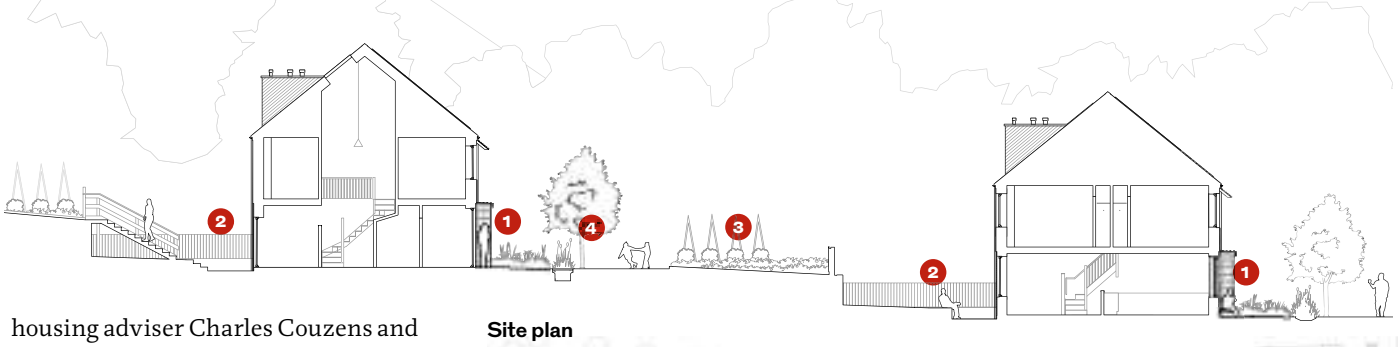
Opposite Hazelmead's short, efficient terraces create overlaps and smaller groups with shared neighbours.
Below Parking is at two sides of the site and includes spaces for the hospital, which helped the scheme stack up.

"Transformative and game changing," is how Sam Goss of Barefoot Architects describes his client's car-free approach. "It's one of the highest upstream design moves that facilitates greater social interaction, giving people a sense of community, support and care." These values are central to the cohousing ethos adopted by Bridport Cohousing Community Land Trust (CLT) for the project, and are brought to life in the everyday chatter and play invited by Hazelmead's streets.

The community group's diverse members came together to liberate themselves from a property market characterised by high priced, low quality rentals with volatile energy costs and precarious tenures. Numerous obstacles – from planning to funding to Covid – meant it took 15 years and support from local entrepreneur Alan Heeks,

Section

1 Porch to front of house
2 Private gardens to rear
3 Shared vegetable gardens
4 Car-free streets



BAREFOOT ARCHITECTS (4)

housing adviser Charles Couzens and others to realise that aim. Along the way, the group became the first to combine cohousing with a CLT structure in the UK – and created the nation's largest cohousing scheme.

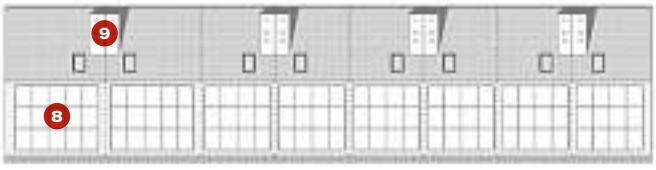
The group set affordability, sustainability and neighbourliness as early priorities for its project, but behind these lay myriad design decisions, which were fleshed into a workable scheme through codesign workshops. The site plan optimises passive and active solar gain, while addressing topographical practicalities. "We looked at how we could follow the contours of the land, minimising the need for excavations and retaining walls within the houses, making the car-free streets flat from the point of access from the car parking – and that brought out the idea of terraces," explains Goss. As a housing archetype, terraces readily resonated with the group.

Site plan

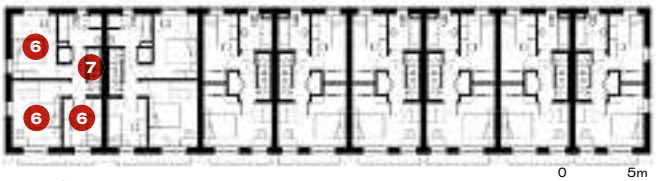
1 Terraced housing
2 Apartment buildings
3 Common house
4 Car-free streets
5 Car parking
6 Vegetable gardens
7 Meadow

Bottom left Details in the setting out of angles and panels in the larch cladding enhance the houses' character. **Bottom right** Deck access gives this apartment building (left) a feel of openness.

Terraces of two, three and four-bedroom houses sit alongside two blocks of one-bedroom apartments, all united by a common language of red brick and Siberian larch cladding. Front doors and accompanying large windows are framed by pergolas with integral benches that shelter entrances, shade windows and provide space to rest and talk. "In a Herman Hertzberger-esque way, we were looking at a layered threshold, a transition from the more public street through to the private realm of the housing, which we felt needed some layering and planting," says Goss. "A lot of the layers have ended up being quite subtle gestures, but they contribute to a sense of spatial hierarchy." Front gardens are unfenced, being delineated by streets and planted swales, the latter part of the sustainable urban drainage system and channelling rainwater to underground storage.



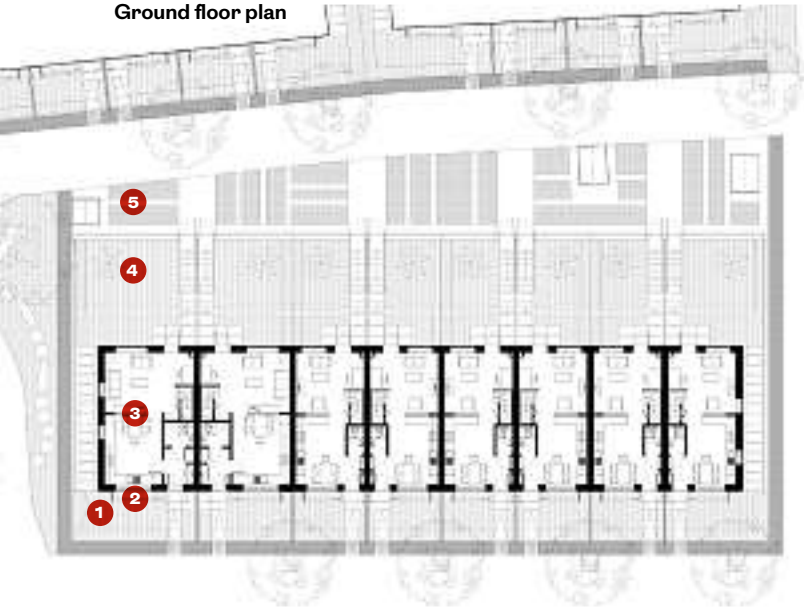
Roof plan



First floor plan

1 Private front garden
2 Pergola
3 Kitchen/diner/lounge
4 Private rear garden
5 Vegetable garden
6 Bedroom
7 Stairwell with vaulted ceiling
8 Photovoltaic panels
9 Chimneys

Ground floor plan



Above Hazelmead gets its open feel from its landscaping and homes' layers of garden, pergola and bench. **Bottom right** South-facing pergolas make for sunny places to sit out and be sociable.

Credits
Client Bridport Cohousing Community Land Trust
Architect Barefoot Architects
Landscape (concept) LT Studio Landscape Architects
Landscape (delivery) Land Products
Contractor CG Fry
AECB consultant Delta Q
Civil engineer IMA
Structural engineer JDL Consultants
Principal designer Welling Partnership
Common house architect Common Practice

Suppliers
Structural insulated panels Sevenoaks Modular
Bricks Ibstock Leicester Orange Stock
Timber cladding Russwood Siberian Larch
Natural roof slates SSQ Canterverde Brazilian
Doors and windows Rationel
External stairs and metalwork Steel Fabrications (Martock)
Stairs and internal joinery MH Joinery Products

Understandably, future residents wanted their new homes to have qualities their past ones had lacked. "We kept hearing, 'we want big windows, nice views, tall ceilings'," says Goss. So Hazelmead's homes have vaulted stairwells, 2.55m floor-to-ceiling heights and space for a dining table in front of the large, triple-glazed windows, rather than the cohousing norm of the kitchen sink. Group members, who had clearly done their homework, insisted homes were designed to Scottish acoustic standards rather than less stringent English regs, and there are age-friendly features for the multigenerational community, including lowered windowsills and knock-out ceiling panels for lifts.

Above left The open-plan kitchen and diner has a room divider just above the height of the kitchen work surfaces that gives a sense of more space.

Above right Vaulted ceilings have been incorporated into first-floor apartments.

As the group's first choice of Passivhaus was ruled out on cost grounds, homes meet the Association for Environment Conscious Building CarbonLite New Build standard. Structural insulated panel construction is combined with electric panel heaters, air-source heat pumps and mechanical ventilation with heat recovery, with ductwork concealed in rooftop chimneys. The PV array connects to an onsite battery to form a community microgrid, managed by the CLT's energy supply company. Decisions on these and other matters are made using sociocratic principles, commonly adopted in cohousing communities to give everyone a voice and to foster consensus, while the group's project mantra of 'good enough for now, safe enough to try', kept thinking open to innovation.

Twenty-six of the homes are for social rent and the remainder for shared ownership at up to 80 per cent of market value, 20 per cent equity being retained by the CLT and housing association partner Bournemouth Churches Housing Association. Six homes are ringfenced for workers at the adjacent hospital. One last building, a 'common house' for community activities, is being built by residents using timber frame, straw bales and clay render; it is designed by young local firm Common Practice.

Community features prominently when residents talk about Hazelmead. "It has opened up my life and I've made some very good friends," says one. Another references research, saying, "Often children brought up in cohousing are braver and have greater agency." A government-commissioned report published in 2021 found people living in community-led housing were less likely to experience loneliness.

This goes some way to explaining why such a tiny part of housebuilding in the UK is so captivating. Car-free streets aren't for everywhere, but Goss believes there is broadly applicable learning to be found in Hazelmead. "In design terms, I think it's about using the narratives of sustainability and regenerative design to justify to local authorities why doing things differently is better," he says. This scheme resonates because, Goss argues, "It's a form of citizen-led architecture, embracing what one hopes might be a new narrative or paradigm in the UK."

They may not offer a route to reaching the government's 1.5 million-home target, but for a society that's increasingly atomised and concerned with wellbeing, ageing and sustainable living, schemes like Hazelmead can still have important things to say. The question is, though: will their small voices be listened to?

IN NUMBERS

3,779m²
GIA

£10.24m
construction cost

£2,700
Cost per m²

47
kWh/m²/yr energy use

200
kWh/yr onsite renewable energy generation

110l
daily potable water use per person

1.5
m³/hr.m² at 50Pa airtightness

The Spanish tile industry is setting a sustainable course forward

With the UK remaining the third-biggest market for Spanish tiles, customers can take confidence in the energy-intensive industry's commitment to greener manufacturing practices

Spanish ceramic tiles continue to represent both aesthetic innovation and environmental responsibility, with Tile of Spain manufacturers making measurable progress towards a more sustainable future. Energy is central to the industry's sustainability strategy. Ceramic tile manufacturing is energy-intensive, relying heavily on thermal processes, yet the sector has demonstrated significant advances. In 2024, renewable energy generation grew by 25 per cent, while photovoltaic self-consumption now accounts for nearly 9 per cent of total electricity usage. At the same time, high-efficiency cogeneration increased by 7 per cent, supported by 28 cogeneration plants operating at an average 88 per cent efficiency. These developments mark a step-change in reducing primary energy demand and emissions.

Equally important is transparency. ASCER has renewed and extended its sectoral EPD for another five years. This independently verified certification provides architects, designers and specifiers with robust life-cycle data for Spanish tiles, ensuring informed choices in line with ISO 14025 standards.

Individual manufacturers are also innovating. Equipe Cerámicas has developed the first 100 per cent electric kiln for ceramic tile production, while Venux has invested in anti-pollution filters and Argenta Cerámica achieved ISO 17889-1 green certification. From solar-powered production facilities to advanced recycling of process water and materials, companies across Spain are investing in technologies that strengthen their sustainability credentials. Many of these initiatives align with broader EU targets of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 55 per cent by 2030 and achieving climate neutrality by 2050.

With the UK still the third-largest market for Spanish tiles, architects and specifiers can be confident that by choosing Tile of Spain's manufacturers, they are selecting not only design-driven, high-performance products, but also solutions underpinned by a genuine commitment to sustainability.

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Photography: Adelina Iliev

The sustainable benefits of Armourcoat Limewash

Natural ecological mineral paint finish produced with minimal environmental and health impact

Armourcoat Limewash is a naturally durable, highly sustainable paint finish inspired by the soft matt finish and lightly textured aesthetic of traditional lime wash. Limewash is the most recent addition to Armourcoat's carefully curated, design-led range of sustainable luxury finishes, supplied with third-party certified environmental and health documentation, guaranteeing suitability for projects targeting BREEAM or LEED certification.

Consciously crafted for architectural interiors, Armourcoat Limewash is made using slaked lime, Kaolin clay, water, mineral pigments, and natural plant additives, which help deliver a more durable, less-chalky surface finish versus traditional lime wash.

Armourcoat Limewash is hand-applied on site, presenting nuanced texture and depth across commercial and residential interiors. In keeping with the historic tradition of lime wash, Armourcoat's skilled applicators use natural brushes to apply the paint, which is suitable for application across various architectural substrates.

The characteristic tonal variation is achieved at the application stage, where thin coats are worked in a crosshatch pattern across small sections, infusing spaces with a naturally refined, elegant ambience which adds subtle visual interest to architectural interiors.

A captivating colour palette of 45 mineral tones comprises soft neutral tones to deeper, natural hues, enabling the creation of timeless, elegant interiors. Colours are achieved by adding natural, alkali-resistant pigments dictated by what the earth has to offer, each with their own unique aesthetic.

Via a brand philosophy centred upon sustainability through longevity, Armourcoat apply the most stringent of norms when it comes to product ingredients and formulations, helping architects and designers not only pass but exceed project assessments for globally recognised accreditation systems; and ensuring specifiers need not sacrifice sustainability for aesthetics.

As per all Armourcoat finishes, Limewash is manufactured in the UK using locally sourced raw materials. The finish achieves Indoor Air Comfort Gold accreditation, with full Environmental & Health Product Declarations (EPDs & HPDs) available at Armourcoat.com.

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Heart of the matter

With its blend of public space and social homes, RCKa's Highgate Newtown Community Centre brings a promising new focal point to a quirky and characterful part of Camden

Words: Hugh Pearman

Highgate New Town was the ambitious working title that stuck. It was given to Camden Council's high-density, low-rise housing development built in the area just south of Highgate Cemetery in phases over a decade from the early 1970s. It's officially known as the Whittington Estate and spawned a community centre (youth club, sports hall, café) in a nearby former Territorial Army hall, itself once part of a school. It's this centre that has now been rebuilt and augmented with housing by RCKa, a practice known for its community engagement ethos.

The area demonstrates the rapid shifting of architectural tastes. Highgate New Town started with the stepped-section, smooth precast concrete work (1972 to 1978) of Peter Tabori – who prior to Camden had worked for Denys Lasdun on the University of East Anglia. Soaring costs and construction problems led to a reaction: the folksy brick and PoMo details (1978 to 1981) of the concluding, more conventional phase by Camden's Bill Forrest and Oscar Palacio. They also produced a rather uneasy transitional phase (1976 to 1978) between these two architectural extremes. That was demolished in 2011 to make way for a large mixed-tenure Passivhaus development in chalky cream brick by Rick Mather Architects, completed in 2016.

All this sits amid handsome, pricey Victorian streets – the kind regarded as substandard slums at the time the New Town estate was planned in the mid-1960s. Individual architects also took advantage of development opportunities, such as a famous listed terrace of five houses (1963 to 1966) by a young pre-Camden Neave Brown for a private housing society where he, the Hopkinses and Ed

IN NUMBERS

£19m
contract cost

3,610m²
residential GIA

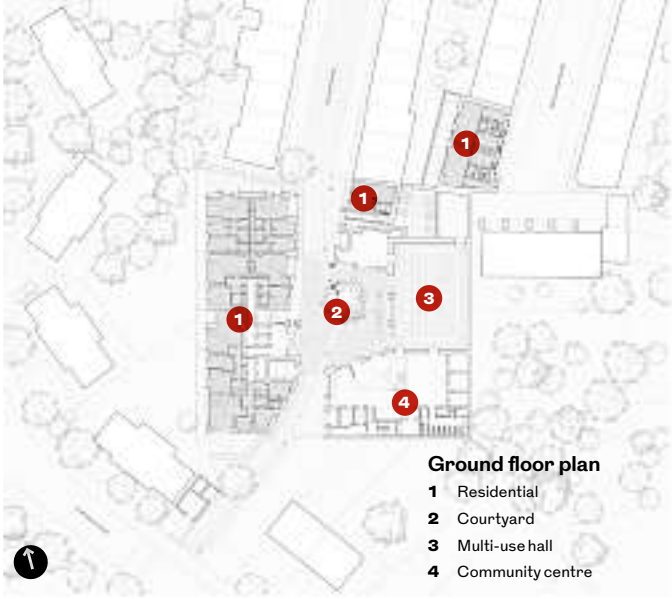
1,745m²
community GIA

70
kWh/m²/yr predicted total energy load

45%
onsite energy generation via ASHP and PV array

Very Good
BREEAM rating

JCT
design and build contract



Ground floor plan
1 Residential
2 Courtyard
3 Multi-use hall
4 Community centre

Around a courtyard, the main residential block (right) faces the multi-use hall (far left) with the community centre ahead.

HUNTERS

Openings to a greener future

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OMNIA Tilt & Turn in Feinstruktur Anthracite Grey.

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VEKA's M70 system offers a proven, versatile system that delivers on performance. M70 achieves U-values as low as 0.75 W/m²K with triple glazing – ensuring compliance with 2025 Building Regulations and beyond. Its slim sightlines maximise natural light while multiple opening configurations provide design flexibility for everything from large-scale residential schemes to education and public buildings.

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Above OMNIA Tilt & Turn Window and Residential Door in Ulti Matt Black.

Below M70 Casement Window in Anthracite Grey.

Sustainability runs through VEKA's approach. At its dedicated UK recycling facility, VEKA Recycling processes up to 25,000t of PVCu per year, ensuring old frames can be turned into high-quality new profiles – reducing waste and closing the loop on material use.

Supporting specifiers at every stage, VEKA's WinDoPlan online portal provides instant U-value calculations, BIM objects, and 3D visuals to streamline design and compliance. Combined with VEKA's dedicated commercial team, it gives architects the technical backup they need to deliver projects with confidence.

For today's specifiers, sustainable building isn't about compromise – it's about resilience, value and design freedom. With M70 and OMNIA, VEKA is helping shape greener, smarter, and future-ready buildings.

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JIM STEPHENSON

Jones lived for a while, sharing the large communal garden. This flanks the new development.

As RCKa spotted back in 2014, when the long and convoluted saga of this project began, there is also an earlier, and good, social housing 'new town', the Brookfield Estate, immediately southeast. This is a 1922 to 1930 fragment of hillside garden suburb 'homes for heroes', a mix of big-roofed compact mansion blocks and small terraces with large gardens, designed by Lutyens' main assistant Albert John Thomas. The remarkably diverse housing mix round here is completed by the very exclusive Gothic-horror Holly Village of 1865, built by local landowner Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts with her favourite architect Henry Darbishire.

All this stuff – Victorian, interwar, postwar, 21st century, affluent, poor – rubs along together to create a distinctly unconventional and characterful place. And luckily, there was a path, a right of way with blind corners and a dodgy feel to it, that connected the Brookfield Estate to Highgate New Town by squeezing round the back of the existing community centre. This right of way – rerouted via a land swap, widening into a courtyard – forms the heart of RCKa's design for the new community centre. This now includes a significant amount of social housing, mostly in one large block on one side of the courtyard, facing the multilevel community centre and attached low multipurpose hall on the other. There is a smaller residential block flanking the northern entrance, plus a house made from a retained mission hall.

Above The multi-use hall with cream fascia can open up to the courtyard, paved in split beach pebbles.

Credits
Client London Borough of Camden
Architect RCKa
Structural engineer McBains
Landscape architect Camlins
Contractor/ services engineering Farrans Construction
Delivery architect Hunters

This was a project that changed greatly over time, starting with the first commission in 2014. At first a light refurb of the existing, deteriorating building was the aim, but early community engagement sessions showed an appetite for more. Once newbuild was approved, RCKa had to re-bid for the job and won it again. Then came post-Grenfell material design changes. Planning permission was granted in March 2019, nicely in time for the Covid pandemic and Brexit-induced cost inflation. When a D&B contractor was appointed with a different delivery architect, RCKa was retained on the client side as 'design guardian'. Start on site was in April 2021.

But that did not mark the end of the changes. The initial housing mix had a high proportion of market-sale apartments so as to cross-subsidise the community centre element. Late in the day, Camden changed to an all-social housing model, having received funding from the Greater London Authority to house Afghan refugee families. This reduced the overall number of homes from 41

Section

1 Larger residential block
2 Courtyard
3 Smaller residential block
4 Multi-use hall
5 House

to 36 as some were combined for larger families. The community centre's board, meanwhile, successfully sourced funding for its fit-out. The discussions and workshops continued: in the end there were 178 stakeholder groups consulted, many represented on the project's steering group.

After all that, with the attendant controversies and press attention, finally the complex quietly opened a few months back. What you see there now is a mixed-use scheme between the two housing worlds that works hard to serve a variety of community-based interests while responding positively to the built context.

The elevations around the courtyard (paved in split beach pebbles with rough-hewn lumps of stone to sit on) borrow from both worlds too. Red brick and overall massing reference the mansion blocks of the Brookfield Estate while some hefty precast concrete elements – a reference to Tabori's blocks – form entrance portals and stacked residential balconies. These days, reckons project architect Alan Beveridge, they'd aim to use much

Left Patterned brickwork marks the heart of the scheme.

Below A pottery-making class in action.

JIM STEPHENSON (4)

Precast concrete portals make clear where the ways in are, especially the arched double-height opening for the main community centre

less concrete; but some design decisions here go back a decade. (As it is, thanks to the presence of air-source heat pumps, a rooftop photovoltaic array and high levels of insulation and airtightness, the scheme is BREEAM 'Very Good'.)

The portals – deep red in colour – make it abundantly clear where the various ways in are, especially the arched double-height opening for the main community centre building. The crude council signage apparent on my visit is hardly needed. The brickwork sends out a message too: around the courtyard it is patterned with contrasting white to indicate this is a special gathering place. It's designed to be set up for outdoor events when needed without blocking the pedestrian right of way through.

The multi-use hall with its upper facade of cream folded aluminium has to slope down towards its rear to preserve rights of light to the big garden of the Neave Brown terrace. For similar reasons, the architects' original desire for a rooftop garden and public terraces were vetoed in the consultation on grounds of overlooking. The result is rather a lot of unsightly mineral roofing felt on display from various vantage points as you ascend the main building.

The facilities in the centre are good: café at the foot of the main atrium with is sociable big-landing steel staircase; fully-equipped training kitchen and pottery; baby/toddler room; various meeting rooms; youth club on the topmost level. Meanwhile the Sport England-standard hall is also designed for other events such as cinema and theatre, and can be divided and open out to the courtyard. There's a separate gym and a secure bike store.

The complex sits well on its backland site, broken down at its edges in deference to its neighbours. It appears in glimpsed views while not rudely intruding. Now it has to earn its keep. Usage was low in the dog days of August when I visited, with some facilities still to open. Will 'build it and they will come' apply here? I hope so: this is an important asset for a fruitfully mixed community.

This image More than a community cafe, it's a family-run Italian restaurant.

Below The hall has a sloping rear roof in deference to its immediate neighbours.

South-facing gardens drop down into fields.

Different angles

Amid a welter of identikit estates, Sergison Bates architects' complex Charles Moore Place houses prove that we can do rural housing better

Words: Chris Foges Photographs: Johan Dehlin

Turning off the road between the pretty Essex villages of Felsted and Little Dunmow, a gravelled lane leads into a subtly radical piece of rural placemaking: seven detached houses gathered into a small hamlet, and eased into the landscape rather than imposed upon it. Designed by Sergison Bates architects, the spare yet complex houses of Charles Moore Place are the product of a speculative development, and a broader aim to show we can do better than the formulaic estates spreading across the countryside like a blight.

Examples of that are plentiful near the 0.59ha site, a narrow triangle extending back from the main road. There's a newly complete luxury scheme across the Flitch Way, a leafy disused rail line which bounds its straight northern edge. On its southern side a line of oaks adjoins open farmland, but in the distance a clump of generic executive homes is

Gardens are enlivened by benches at the gates and windows into the garage-workshops.

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For architects and designers, the free product library NBS Source has introduced new filters for product searches, including for sustainability data and product certifications, including Cradle to Cradle Certified, negotiated by materials consultant 540 WORLD. This provides an innovative way to quickly find science-based, positive-impact products for projects.

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Above Google's London HQ makes extensive use of Accoya.
Below left Buzon's raised floor system.
Below right Sika Sarnafil AT membrane on the roof of Chiltern Road School, Berkshire.

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Below The signature colour echoes Voysey's Brunswick green, used to harmonise with nature.

sprouting from wooded hills. Across the busy road, another has drawn freely from the housebuilders' pattern book of bolt-on traditional details in a strained impression of organic growth.

"It's the ubiquitous estate with swathes of tarmac, parking along the roads, evenly spaced detached houses as autonomous objects, and fenced front gardens that give no privacy," says Sergison Bates partner Stephen Bates. "Our reaction to all of that was to prioritise the experience of the landscape, and to echo the familiar form and scale of the Essex rural vernacular – as well as a broader range of references, in the spirit of critical regionalism."

The approach was not just a response to the immediate surroundings, but has been slowly distilled in collaborations between the architect and the project's developer, London construction company Rooff. Almost 20 years ago, Sergison Bates partnered with another developer, Baylight Properties, to explore alternatives to the Noddy boxes of suburban housebuilders, and brought in Rooff to provide real-world pricing. Their desk exercise eventually led to the development of 14 semi-detached homes in Aldershot, which was named 2016 RIBA South Building of the Year. While that project underscored the difficulty of competing at the lower end of the market, Rooff remained optimistic that there is demand for thoughtful, contemporary architecture out of town.

Charles Moore Place is pitched at more affluent buyers than the Aldershot scheme, but shares some of its DNA. Bates points to the cost-effective use of space in the roof, often overlooked by conventional housebuilders despite their cheeseparing efficiency. Here, the upper floors of the three- and four-bedroom one-and-a-half-storey houses exploit the height and volume of split-pitched roofs with large dormers, while deep projecting eaves help keep the fairly large houses hunkered down among the trees.

A Victorian farmhouse at the entrance to the lane is echoed in walls of reddish Belgian

A rainwater attenuation tank is buried beneath the second clearing.

brick, with thick joints of lime mortar and beefy concrete lintels. With no appliqué decoration, they have a suitably rustic simplicity enriched by subtle inflections. A one-third offset bond softens expanses of brickwork, while the whole-brick-deep reveals of big windows underline the heavyweight construction.

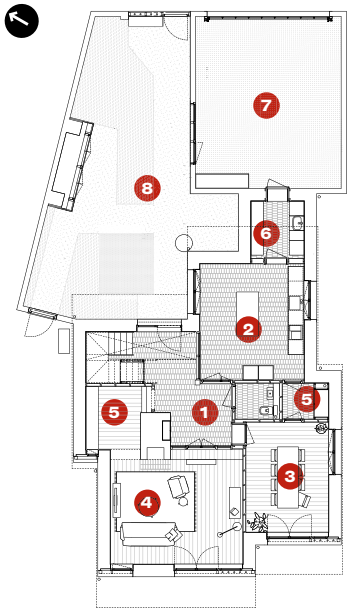
At Aldershot the semis were shifted in plan and the buildings scattered around the site, allowing a picturesque informality in what is, in essence, a cul-de-sac planned around the car. At Charles Moore Place the setup is similar, and this effect is even more pronounced as the houses are clustered in loose groups of three and four around two landscaped 'clearings' where the lane widens. One was needed to preserve a splendid walnut tree – the centrepiece of the whole settlement – while the second makes a turning circle that is marked by a new Scots pine.

In plan, each house comprises four overlapping rectangles, producing myriad projecting or receding corners. Across the whole ensemble, countless planes of brickwork set odd angles that recombine in endless variety in every perspective.

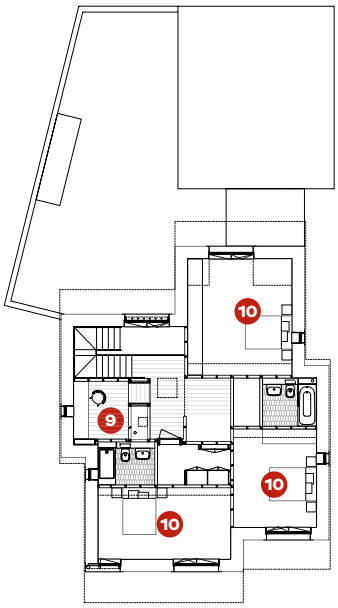
"While the organisation is spatially less efficient than straightforward boxes," says Bates, "it allows the gaps between the buildings to open and close, akin to those spaces between things you find in any rural Essex settlement."

One notable difference between Charles Moore Place and its predecessor is a greater emphasis on privacy. Again, there is the hopeful suggestion that the lane will be an active communal space, with an inviting picnic table set up under the walnut tree. The houses, though, are set well

Walls enclose kitchen gardens of between 60 and 100m².



House 1, ground floor plan

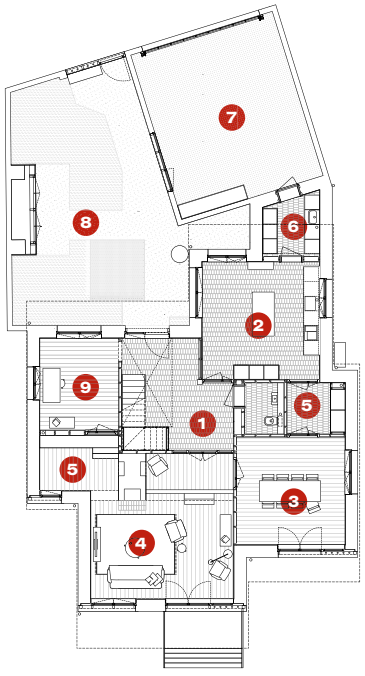


House 1, first floor plan

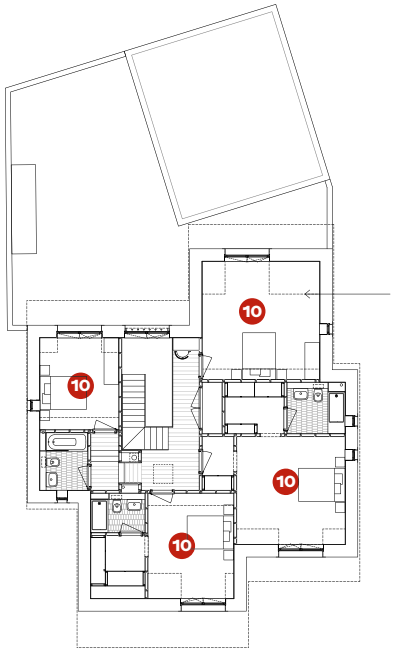
1 Hall
2 Kitchen
3 Dining room
4 Living room
5 Anteroom
6 Boot room
7 Garage-workshop
8 Courtyard
9 Study
10 Bedroom, dressing room and en-suite

'Maybe 40 per cent of the spaces don't have a name, which is how we like to make plans – and gives flexibility to the diversity of households today'

House 3, ground floor plan



House 3, first floor plan



Millions of revolutionary recycled bricks go into production after achieving industry-first certification

K-BRIQ, which is made from nearly 100 per cent recycled construction waste, is set to transform sustainable building as commercial production begins

Above The K-BRIQ is coloured using recycled pigments and is certified in 12 colours from traditional to colourful.

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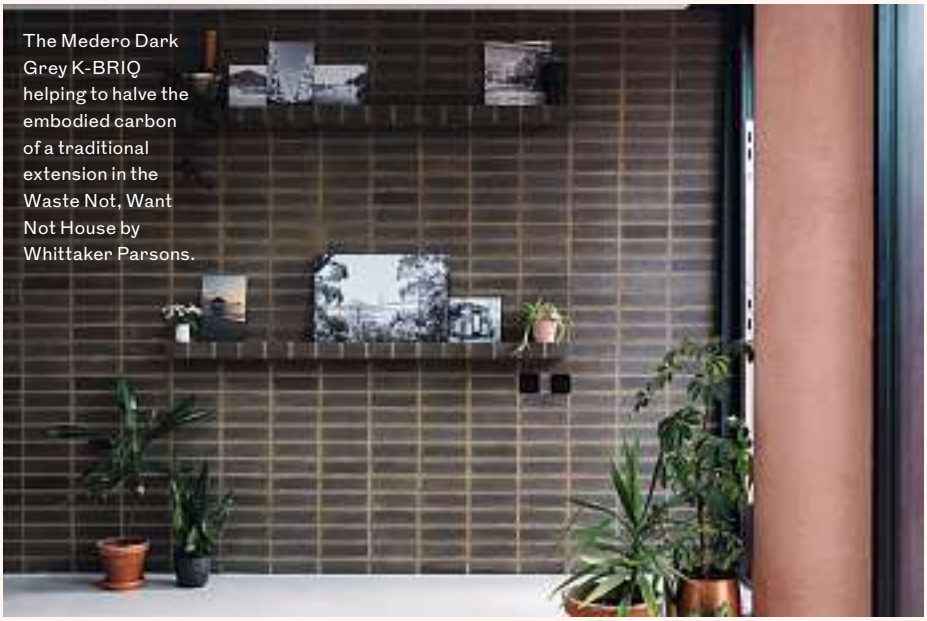
In March this year, Scottish cleantech building materials company Kenoteq marked a watershed moment for sustainable construction with its revolutionary K-BRIQ, made from construction and demolition waste, achieving full certification from the British Board of Agrément (BBA).

As one of the world's most sustainable low-carbon bricks, and the first recycled brick to achieve certification, the K-BRIQ can now be specified into a wide range of construction projects ranging from facades and feature walls to brick plinths. Kenoteq has started commercial production of up to two million bricks this year. This will scale to four million as required, from its first production facility in East Lothian. The company then plans to set up regional production both in the UK and internationally to provide low-carbon building products from local waste.

The unfired K-BRIQ, made from nearly 100 per cent recycled construction and demolition waste, has been certified with the same accreditation as standard clay bricks, yet produces 95 per cent less embodied carbon due to its innovative low-energy production process.



The Medero Dark Grey K-BRIQ helping to halve the embodied carbon of a traditional extension in the Waste Not, Want Not House by Whittaker Parsons.

ELLEN CHRISTINA HANCOCK

With no standard testing regime for a non-traditional building material of this type, the K-BRIQ underwent an unprecedented level of rigorous testing over several years.

Sam Chapman, co-founder and executive director of Kenoteq, said: "This certification marks the arrival of a truly transformative building material for the construction, interior and landscaping industries. Unlike approaches that simply treat the symptoms of construction's environmental impact, the K-BRIQ addresses the root cause by directly tackling the waste crisis while delivering a product that performs technically like traditional materials, including the clay brick.

"Securing BBA certification allows our product to be specified and procured with confidence on commercial projects across the UK," Chapman added. "We've already supplied into several noteworthy projects, and have a strong specification pipeline from leading property developers and architectural and design firms committed to reducing the carbon footprint and circularity of their construction projects."

For more information contact Lucy Black, head of business development, Kenoteq: +44(0)131 605 0409

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Left Routes between homes frame views of the landscape and evoke the informality of local villages.

back, behind high-walled kitchen gardens and tall garage-cum-workshops that stand in front like sentinels. Controlled views into the gardens are allowed by screens of vertical timber sections set at 45 degrees, reminiscent of traditional window mullions in these parts.

Like the doors and windows, these are picked out in a love-it-or-loathe-it yellowy-green based on one used by Charles Voysey, an allusion to the Arts and Crafts influence evident throughout the project. Another reference point was Jørn Utzon's 1958 Kingo Houses in Helsingør, which in turn drew on both traditional Danish farmyards and Chinese and Islamic courtyard houses. The dandyish frill of half-round tiles capping the garden walls is a direct quote.

"There's a slightly Scandinavian feeling to the whole project, which we enjoy and allowed to develop," says Bates, "but the decorative coping to the walls was also a rather instinctive decision – and a very cheap tile, which the client appreciated."

On paper the arrangement is decidedly strange, and yet it works much better than might be imagined. The garden walls give shape and an intimate character to the shared lane, and seem to embrace the visitor more than they exclude. The parcelling up of miniature compounds gives individuality to each house, while a calm consistency is maintained across the group. And the secluded courtyards – thick with fruit trees, ferns and grasses – feel like proper outdoor rooms; there are sunny spots to eat outside the kitchens, and covered areas between the house and garage that should keep DIYers happy.

The houses are equally unusual inside. Although the plan of each is unique, adjusted to deal with orientation, sloping ground, or differences in size, they are variations on a clear theme. Tall front doors open onto double-height entrance halls that rise to the roof, and introduce the palpable sense of light and space that characterises the interiors, in surprising contrast to the outward appearance.

Much of that comes from the use of materials. Other than the external walls the structure is all timber, with rough-sawn joists exposed and painted white. The careful calibration of thresholds that began outside continues within, and ground floor rooms are part-enclosed by screens of chunky timber and glass allowing views from front to back. These screens emphasise the way that the stepped plan produces interlocking spaces, so that the glazed corners of kitchens protrude into quarry-tiled halls, tucked under first-floor landings. Each room has at least two ways in and out, easing the flow of people in a loop around ground floors with a brick-built hearth at their heart.

Sandwiched between many principal rooms are small, unassigned spaces that might be pantries, snugs, or something else. The idea extends upstairs, where small studies are incorporated into landings, and bedrooms accessed through little lobbies and dressing rooms feel like self-contained apartments.

IN NUMBERS

2,058m²
GIA of all houses

264.5m² to 350m²
GIA (including garages) of homes

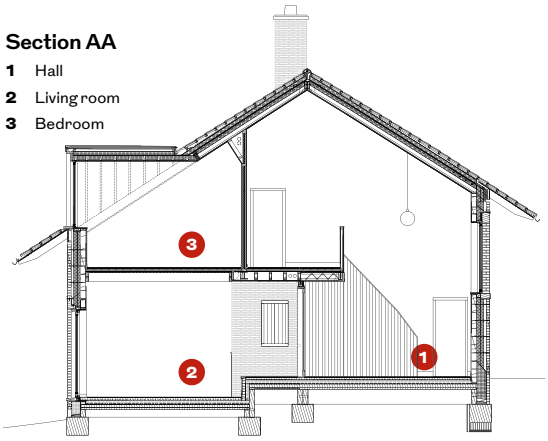
£5.1m
Tender price

0.254
w/m²K average building U-value

A high window marks front doors but every house – and garden – has several entrances.

Section AA

1 Hall
2 Living room
3 Bedroom



"Maybe 40 per cent of the spaces don't have a name, which is how we like to make plans when we can," says Bates. "It's an old idea, coming from English country houses which are full of little anterooms between the main circulation and the private areas, but gives a flexibility that might have relevance to the diversity of households today."

If there is an earnestness in Sergison Bates' intentions at Charles Moore Place, playfulness and the pursuit of pleasure is much evident too. Upstairs, there is an Alice in Wonderland quality to the bedrooms with their high sloping ceilings and super-sized dormers paired with tiny windows placed high on other walls. Downstairs, there are cosy nooks and the drama of rooms cascading down towards gardens and the fields beyond.

Given the choice, of course, many buyers might still prefer the more prosaic fare available over the Flitch Way, or coming soon to fields nearby. But at a time when attention is increasingly focused beyond the edges of the city – on green belts and new towns – this is a reminder that we should all expect more care and imagination in irrevocable changes to the landscape. Charles Moore Place reclaims the idea of the newbuild housing estate as a place of character, variety, and quiet delight.

Above Windows are triple glazed and walls 500mm thick. The EPC A-rated homes have air-source heat pumps and MVHR systems.

Below, bottom left Variation in ceilings and flooring materials define thresholds of rooms and circulation space.

Credits
Client Rooff
Architect Sergison Bates architects
Structural and civil engineer Price & Myers
MEP engineer Ritchie+Daffin
Landscape Jonathan Cook Landscape Architects
Arboriculture Marcus Foster
Planning consultant AZ Urban Studio
Contractor Rooff

Lighting the way

Signify's recently launched Pioneers of Light portal is empowering specifiers with tools for growth, inspiration,and efficiency

Pioneers of Light is a hub for specifiers, architects, lighting designers, engineers... and anyone who knows that the right lighting can make or break a space. It's designed specifically to their needs, challenges and workflows and, more importantly, to make the job of specifying a lot easier. Here's how.

Expert tools, brighter projects

Lighting designs are now more creative and ambitious than ever. But to see if those bold ideas can work in real-life projects, you need specific tools and software – tools that let you customise luminaires based on the functional, aesthetic, and technical needs of your project. And afterward, help you define and gather all the technical info you need for your customers and stakeholders to support seamless installation and integration into a space.

At Pioneers of Light, you'll find those tools all in one place. They're easy to use, highly compatible, and let you explore the world's largest collection of luminaires. They'll quickly become an essential part of any specifier's workflow. Let's take a closer look.

Inspiring insights, brighter ideas

Pioneers of Light isn't just about tools – it's also a hub for inspiration. Discover what's next in lighting and apply it to your own projects. Whether you want to get wind of the latest innovations and technologies, learn about circular lighting through case studies or webinars, or gain a better understanding of our connected lighting systems, Interact and Dynalite, the spark you're looking for is on there somewhere.

"Lighting designs are rapidly becoming more complex, creative and ambitious than ever while having increased focus on all pillars of sustainability," said Darren Smith, specification lead at Signify. "With the Pioneers of Light portal's launch, we aim to partner with the design community to empower them to bring clients' projects and vision to life with a lighting solution that makes a difference."

Use the QR code to access Signify's specifier portal

To learn more, visit: signify.com/pioneersoflight

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CRAIG AUCKLAND

Left MacEwen Award 2025 winner: Severn View Park Care Home.

MacEwen 2026 opens

Submit your scheme for the 10-year anniversary edition of RIBAJ's MacEwen Award

Have you completed a project that has been particularly inclusive? Perhaps one that provides something extra for the community? Is especially caring and considerate? Or one that is super sustainable and good for the planet?

The MacEwen Award 2026, celebrating architecture for the common good, is open for entries and we invite you to submit your projects.

We are on the lookout for the latest schemes which have gone above and beyond in architecture. We are interested in any kind of completed project that tackles one or more of the pressing social, economic, health-related or environmental issues of our time. It could be a piece of public realm, infrastructure, a health and wellbeing facility, a community or educational amenity, or even a project that brings a piece of heritage back from the brink for the betterment of a local area – we ask you to decide. This is your chance to be published by RIBAJ and to be part of our next edition of the awards, which will mark their 10-year anniversary.

With the launch of the RIBAJ MacEwen Award back in 2016, we set out to discover and bring attention to architecture serving a greater purpose – buildings that may have taken more effort, but reaped rewards for their users. Our first winner was Oasis Children's Venture, a repurposed 1980s Segal-method office building taken to pieces and reassembled by volunteers. Since then there have been many more, including Park Palace Ponies, an urban riding school in a former music hall-turned-cinema in Liverpool; and Hope Street, a newbuild women's rehabilitation centre in Southampton.

Every year, the awards have grown and developed. We've always been flexible as to what 'the common good' can mean – entrants show us the way as the context of architecture changes. But at its core, the MacEwen Award is about architecture that is responsible and acts in the wider interest – and does so with dignity and joy. The awards bring together the biggest projects alongside the smallest; well-known practices next to those that are up and coming; national schemes in addition to the incredibly local.

As with all the awards we run at RIBAJ, MacEwen is free to enter and aims to reach under-represented parts of the profession.

THE DEADLINE IS 11AM, MONDAY 17 NOVEMBER 2025.
FOR MORE INFORMATION, COMPETITION CONDITIONS AND TO ENTER VISIT: RIBAJ.COM/BUILDINGS/ENTER-NOW-MACEWEN-AWARD

THE MACEWEN AWARD

The MacEwen Award is named after Anni and Malcolm MacEwen, she an urban planner who pioneered a conservation-based approach to regeneration in both town and country; he a campaigning journalist and former editor of this magazine.

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2: Intelligence

ARCHITECTS DESERVE THE RIGHT INSURANCE

RIKUL PATEL, HEAD OF PROSPECT MUTUAL MANAGEMENT AND EDWARD DE LA BILLIERE, DIRECTOR AND SENIOR SOLICITOR AT PROSPECT LAW

There's been a lot of talk in the press about the struggles architects have in buying professional indemnity insurance (PI), both around suitable levels of coverage and price point. Much of that has been since the Grenfell Tower fire, but it seems cyclical with other legislation too. You can assume there will be issues in future; for example, building materials that are currently allowed could potentially fall foul of safety regulations. PI coverage hasn't been in place that enables architects to take on all the projects they would like to. They've had to turn down profitable work. You'll find that in the other spaces in which we operate, too.

Prospect Law is a multidisciplinary practice specialising in key sectors, including renewables and nuclear. A few years ago, we spotted a gap for a value-added service for clients around risk management and alternative risk transfer. Prospect Mutual Management came about almost to go back to the risk-sharing founding principle of insurance.

We're at the start of the journey. The Architects Insurance Scheme (AIS) will exist for a number of years as a traditional insurance scheme; but the goal is that once the scheme grows, we'll be able to deliver a mutual for members, which they'll ultimately own and run. The key is, how do we empower the product experts, enabling them to have a say over price, coverage, return of surpluses, clarity around claims and exclusions – almost to sit down with underwriters? We hope that the added influence and intelligence will enable them to configure a product and stabilise pricing.

Mutuals thrive on people who are risk-savvy and aware. It takes time, because you need a critical mass of the right practices. It's about ensuring that every person who puts their money into the pot values that pot, and understands they should be minimising losses in a professional way. From our perspective, mutuals are looking for the 80 per cent of risks that are clean, not the 20 per cent that claim a lot and might be poorly run, or operate in higher-risk areas. The reason is that that 20 per cent generates 80 per cent of claims. Mutuals allow members to be more proactive and allow for claims that might not be economical to defend. What's left in the pot at the end of a period is returned to those policyholders who are who are insured at the time.

'The Architects Insurance Scheme will exist at first as a traditional scheme; but the goal is that once it grows, we'll be able to deliver a mutual for members, which they'll ultimately own and run'

Below Rikul Patel (left) and Edward de la Billiere (right).

Intelligence is officially approved RIBA CPD. Look out for icons throughout the section indicating core curriculum areas.

Harnessing the tide of technology

How should architects be preparing for an AI-charged future? Pamela Buxton asks some human experts

Design, construction & technology

How can practices prepare for the future at a time of unprecedented technological change? The jury's out on how far AI and other innovations will revolutionise architectural practice, from design processes through to staff hierarchies and the prospect of software-led market disruptors. But there's no doubt that fast-paced change is already underway, and set to gather steam in the years to come. We ask five experts for their views on what steps architects should take to make the most of the huge opportunities – and challenges – in store.

Martha Tsigkari
Head of R&D, Foster + Partners

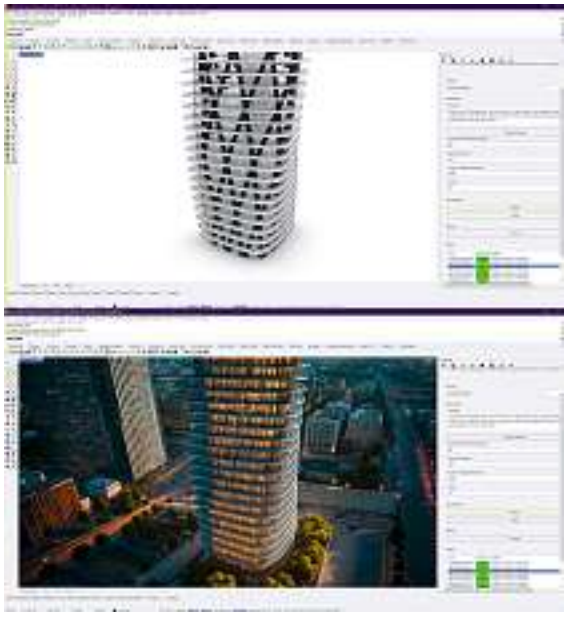
Foster + Partners, which has been researching AI and machine learning since 2018, aims to become an "AI-native company", according to its head of R&D Martha Tsigkari. Together with other technologies, including extended reality, digital twins, smart buildings and smart cities, she expects AI and machine learning to be "quite transformational in the next 10 to 20 years for the industry".

In preparation, she says, "We're trying to build process understanding, data understanding, data strategy and collaboration with clients, mainstreaming our processes and the integration of various hardware and software and legal requirements.

"There are an inordinate amount of things where AI and ML will reinvent the industry, or can help us. There needs to be very careful planning about how these things are used to augment rather than replace our creativity," Tsigkari adds, expecting they will impact equally on projects and practice management.

With AI/ML efforts led by associate partner Sherif Tarabishy, the practice is looking at which parts of the process can be automated, particularly what's not on the creative side, and how these can be linked to allow more time for creativity.

Tsigkari thinks AI could eventually allow some level of domain expertise to be commodified by non-professionals such as software firms, causing market disruption akin to Uber's on taxis.



FOSTER + PARTNERS

"You can see that big software companies could become a competitor where they start to create vertically integrated processes around design," she says. "I don't think this is sci-fi."

To prepare, architects need to think about what they can bring to the table to differentiate, such as creativity, human experience, interaction with clients and dialogue with users, in addition to using technical advancements to benefit their own competitiveness. She advises process mapping to understand scope for automation, trying new ways of delivery, being software agnostic according to needs, and being willing to change.

"Rethink [your] business model beyond traditional ways we've been contracting architecture – and think across the board, not just in terms of design but construction and operation," she says.

Chris Fulton
Digital director, ADP, and member of RIBA's expert advisory group on AI, leading on ethics and practice in data

Does your practice have a digital strategy? Does it have an AI policy and provide AI CPDs? These are all steps introduced by Chris Fulton at the 100-strong practice ADP, to ensure it is not "blindsided" by the technological upheavals underway in the architectural marketplace, both now and in the future.

"My worry for the next few years is that we're in a state of such transition and chaos and churn that we lose that critical thinking – and then we start making rash decisions that actually could have waited," he says of the profession's response to the array of software in the market.

ADP has established a digital group to road-test new software tools ahead of investment decisions to ensure they meet expectations for greater efficiency, not just in isolation, but when used within the practice's systems as a whole.

"We've built a little incubator within the company, which can make informed judgements about the value of technology in particular areas," he says.

Regarding AI, the practice is using CPDs to learn how tools such as ChatGPT work and what they are and aren't good for to help navigate the current "gold rush" of tools out there. Setting out an AI policy has been important, not just for obvious reasons such as avoiding unwise sharing of intellectual property, or information protected by a non-disclosure agreement, but to clarify scope of use. AI-generated images can be shared with clients in a mood board for example, but not presented as a render.

Fulton sees AI as a useful "broadening tool" to help with areas beyond the architect's core expertise. Specific applications, for instance generating massing studies or solar studies, by tools that use machine learning algorithms, are also really useful.

He is also optimistic for the future: "Ultimately, we'll get to a point where we know the tools that are good for us, and we use them well, and we're in charge of our tools. It's about being really focused on what it is you're actually trying to do."

Greta Jonsson
Architect and retrofit designer, Design Specifics, and member of RIBA's expert advisory group on AI

The right approach to data-handling, and more training, will make practices better placed to harness technology in the future, according to Greta Jonsson. She advises that practices invest in people with cross-professional scope.

"This is something we talk quite a lot about in the RIBA AI expert advisory group – not working in silos," she says. "A lot of professionals who work in the built environment have data sets they use that architects don't have access to – so it's about having team members who can bridge those gaps." She adds that in her practice, they have both architects who work with data, and data specialists who work closely with designers.

Jonsson says it is also important to build practical databases that enable building information to be available in the future – something especially important for retrofit, and to establish standards for how to work with AI tools on collaborative projects. "We need to understand how our data will be read, so the information is accessible going forward and can be read by AI-driven tools, and that the interoperability of different sets of data is compatible."

Upskilling is, says Jonsson, a priority. She recommends that practices invest in technology training for existing staff, rather than only employing juniors who have the skills already, because this doesn't support project leads in understanding what they're working with. "Not everyone in the hierarchy needs to understand how to use it, but they do need to understand what it's for," she says.

To prepare for the future, Jonsson advises more emphasis on learning and mastering the tools we already have. "Go to CPDs and conferences and listen to case studies about what other people are doing, and what benefits others take from using AI, so that you can look at ways that improve the outcomes, rather than just saving time," she adds.

Her company Design Specifics uses advanced technologies such as LiDAR, BIM, GIS, numerical modelling, and API-driven data sharing to capture,

Opposite, top Without reinforcement learning from human feedback (RLHF), large language models' raw output is akin to this design's unnerving nature, says Chris Fulton. **Left** Foster + Partners' in-house generative AI platform maintains client confidentiality. **Right** A drone survey and a point cloud overlaid in Revit could be fed into AI for analysis.

CHRIS FULTON/ADP ARCHITECTURE

DESIGN SPECIFICS

track and organise building data for large-scale retrofit projects. AI or machine learning is used less, but has "strong future potential, for example combining sensor data to flag risks such as damp, overheating, or equipment failure".

Kean Walmsley
Director of systems design/ architecture engineering, Autodesk Research

"Be literate. Be curious. Don't be too dismissive of it," is the advice from Autodesk's Kean Walmsley for anyone apprehensive about the considerable technological changes afoot in architectural practice. While he acknowledges that it's a "big shift", he advocates getting familiar and comfortable with the AI tools available now, in order to ease the adjustment to further change in the future.

"The challenge is to start to learn how to interact with these systems, and learn how to get the most out of the current range of AI-related offerings in order to just get that experience, because that is going to be very valuable," he says.

Walmsley, who is leading research into tools to promote human-centric design, anticipates the prospect of more natural language interfaces with AI.

"I think the technology's going to get simpler to use, with AI enabled chat-style interaction, so that the barrier to entry for using software will come down a lot," he goes on. "I think it's going to enable really interesting workflows between multiple products that are today very complicated and time-consuming. Things are going to get really easy. You're going to be able to take data from Excel, for example, and make use of it inside Revit, or whatever the tools are. And there's going to be lots of opportunities to automate things that are currently complicated to do so."

Automation could, says Walmsley, disrupt studio hierarchies by reducing tasks conventionally done by junior architects. "It has potential to change things a lot," he says, adding that firms will need to work out how to adjust the traditional model of career progression.

RLB DIGITAL

Above How a building in the virtual information world is a system of connected information.

"It's an interesting challenge to teach people the business of architecture and get them to engage in the process, without a lot of the junior tasks existing in the same way, because a lot of those will get automated," he says. "I think there's the opportunity to engage the more junior people coming in who have had a very different experience, and were probably using AI tools even during their academic studies."

A positive attitude is clearly needed to get the most out of technological innovations. "Stay open to the opportunity to take advantage of technology to be more effective and be more efficient," he says. "Technology has the potential to allow firms to do a lot more with their existing resources, which is a good thing."

Emma Hooper
Head of information management strategy, RLB Digital, and vice chair of nima and buildingSMART UK&I

Architectural practices need to pay far more attention to how they manage their data if they're to benefit from the fast-paced technological advancements already underway, according to Emma Hooper, who originally trained as an architectural technician. She is now head of information strategy at RLB Digital, which works with built environment organisations on digital strategy, information management and digital solutions.

"There's lots of talk about generative design, and how AI can actually help design buildings," she says. "But until the basics are right on the data side, we are just putting AI on top of shaky information foundations. If we start to apply AI on the chaos we currently have, then we're not going to get accuracy out of it, we're going to get risk."

This means paying more attention to everything from information accuracy to data format interoperability, in order to maximise the value of incoming technology.

"Architects need to change their mindsets," Hooper says. "We're moving into a much more data-driven way of working, and they need to start thinking in terms of how that data's going to be used so it's created in a way that's useful, and can actually pass from one system to another." She adds that the architect is in effect not only designing the real-life building, but the base of the virtual information asset as well.

After handover, she continues, it is important for clients to understand that this virtual information asset is maintained so that it's in sync with the building over its lifetime. Only once the data is structured and named in a consistent manner can technology be introduced to automate some of the more mundane information checking tasks.

"We need an information-first approach, not a technology-first approach," Hooper says. ●

Martha Tsigkari is speaking at the Future Business of Architecture global conference on 8 October 2025.

This article is one in a series developed as part of RIBA's Future Business of Architecture research programme, sponsored by Autodesk. Read more on AI at ribaj.com/ai-unreliable-outlier

Qualities that go beyond skin deep

Glass Films is the exclusive EMEA-region distributor of Solyx UltraGreen, a groundbreaking range of PVC-free decorative films combining environmentally responsible manufacturing with elegant design

Above Solyx SX-1254-UG Reeded Glass Seamless.

Below Solyx SX-1760-UG Frosted Turrets.

Glass Films is proud to stock Solyx UltraGreen, a pioneering range of decorative glass films available across the EMEA region. This collection marks a significant leap in sustainable design, combining PVC-free base materials with a cutting-edge, VOC-free clean-coating process – delivering premium performance without compromising environmental integrity.

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Healthy options

Labour's ambition to shift healthcare to the community offers huge opportunity for architects to drive change

Words: Jaime Bishop


Conservation & heritage


Design, construction & technology

Labour's Westminster government has retained a key ambition of the former Conservative administration: the New Hospital Programme (NHP), to be delivered using the 'Hospital 2.0' standardised template, developed principally with US practice HDR. Yet the greater opportunity to add lasting value lies not in acute hospitals but in responding to the government's strategy to shift care to the community – the so-called 'left shift' – set out in its 10 Year Health Plan for England.

Primary and community care is where architectural input can have the greatest impact: whether through the extension and refurbishment of existing premises, achieving high levels of environmental performance in support of the NHS's net zero commitments, or – most compellingly – the adaptive reuse of the UK's growing stock of vacant buildings. Former retail units, offices, even redundant school sites no longer needed in areas with falling birth rates, all offer potential. Community and primary care settings already account for around 90 per cent of NHS patient interactions, and this figure is set to rise.

Richard Henson and I founded Fleet Architects in 2009, brought together by a shared interest in public infrastructure, particularly healthcare. We had studied at Cambridge and the RCA respectively. At the time, this made us something of an anomaly in a field dominated by large-scale practices – many with overseas ownership. Drawing on the legacy of public works departments, the Medical Architecture Research Unit (MARU) and such influential figures in UK healthcare design as Mungo Smith, Chris Shaw, Rachael Ferguson (then MAAP), and John Cooper of Avanti Architects, we set up a practice capable of challenging these bigger players – but with the responsiveness and adaptability of a small studio.

A key part of our model was continuing to work across other

Below How the NHS might sit in central Chatham, in a project from Health on the High Street.

GORT SCOTT

sectors – not only to encourage the cross-pollination of ideas but to attract ambitious graduates to the field. Our invitation to those entering the profession remains simple: we study for years to learn our craft, so why not put that knowledge to public use?

We also encourage practices without specialist healthcare experience to explore this area. Primary and community care encompasses a wide range of uses, from local GPs to more complex clinical settings. Some services will require closer collaboration or additional expertise, but it remains a highly accessible and rewarding starting point for practices new to the sector.

In the 2000s, Lord Darzi championed a community-based care model where multiple GPs and services sat under one roof. Practices such as Buschow Henley (now Henley Halebrown), van Heyningen and Haward, and AHMM were instrumental in this movement, with AHMM's outstanding Kentish Town Health Centre shortlisted for the Stirling Prize. Today's opportunity is similar, though the emphasis has shifted.

Today's focus should be the adaptive reuse of existing structures – particularly the wealth of underused retail and office space. Large-span commercial frames, often rich in embodied carbon, are ideal candidates for meaningful transformation. The flexibility offered by Class E planning use also removes many procedural barriers. Architects are well placed to lead this work – and while technical complexity increases with clinical demand, we should see this not as a barrier but as a design challenge to embrace.

Projects currently on Fleet's boards include the reprovision of an entire elective hospital in a former Debenhams, and an outpatient service in a repurposed Wilko shop. These are not isolated examples but part of a wider pattern of bringing care to where people already are.

Last year, working with Susie Hyden and Fiona Scott of Gort Scott, we explored the lack of planning policy around the high street's potential for integrated care. Our findings as part of the Health on the High Street initiative made it clear that the urban ecology of the deep high street block is well established, yet siloed NHS decision-making has too often left health infrastructure outside of mainstream planning discourse. Opportunities are being missed – not for flagship hospitals but for vital local interventions.

Architects can add real value to a process that has seen little innovation, whether converting a former shop, office or school into clinical rooms, optimising existing daylight or cutting new lightwells into deep-plan buildings, or recognising how these settings reshape models of care and daily experience. In mental health especially, where the environment is itself part of the therapeutic offer, there is scope

In mental health especially, there is scope to develop new typologies that directly support wellbeing

Above The left shift of healthcare moving into the community includes mental health services. In southwest London, CF Møller designed new facilities at Springfield University Hospital, part of a 33ha NHS estate regeneration.

Below left At Springfield, daylight is an important part of creating a calm, safe environment.

Below The brickwork relates to the context of local listed buildings.

MARK HADDEN (3)

Advertorial
Senior Architectural Systems

Wiping out waste from windows

Senior Architectural Systems' new circularity recycling scheme is taking shape, breaking down excess polyurethane foam and eliminating landfill


Soho Yard, Sheffield featuring Senior's PURe aluminium windows.

Senior Architectural Systems, one of the UK's largest manufacturers of aluminium fenestration solutions, is set to introduce a new waste reduction initiative as part of its commitment to circularity and working towards a fully closed-loop recycling process.

The new initiative will see all polyurethane foam waste generated during the manufacture of the patented thermal break in Senior's low U-value PURe aluminium windows and doors collected and reused.

Each year, around 80t of polyurethane foam waste is produced as part of the PURe manufacturing process. This occurs when extra polyols and isocyanate chemicals are injected into the thermal breaks to prevent cold spots during curing. The result is a unique thermal barrier that delivers lower U-values and improved energy performance compared with traditional systems.

However, the process also creates excess cured foam; and although this waste has always had the potential to be reused, it has previously been difficult to manage at scale. Senior is now working with a specialist waste partner to chemically break down the expanded and cured polyurethane foam into its original raw components – polyols and isocyanates. These recovered materials will be reintroduced into Senior's own manufacturing processes, creating a circular system that eliminates landfill disposal.

The initiative is scheduled to be fully operational by the end of 2025 and once implemented, all recovered materials from the manufacture of Senior's PURe windows and doors will be reused internally. This approach is expected to reduce carbon emissions, cut waste, and lessen demand for virgin raw materials.

Available in a variety of configurations, including PURe aluminium casement windows, tilt and turn windows, and both commercial and domestic style doors, the patented system has been used across the sectors, particularly in the education and residential markets.

Above Senior's PURe aluminium windows at Aintree fire and rescue station, Merseyside.

Below Senior's King's Award for Enterprise in Innovation for its PURe range.

For more information please visit seniorarchitectural.co.uk or search for Senior Architectural Systems on LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook.

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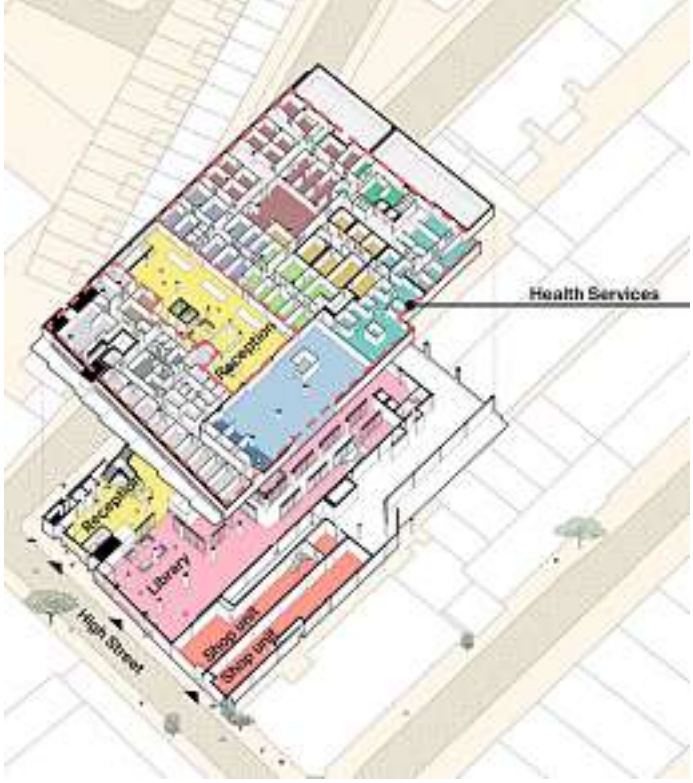


Left Fleet's Civic Supermarket for Haringey, London, explored taking over the first floor of a vacated Sainsbury's for health services, from GPs to dentists, child mental health services and minor surgery, around a shared reception space.

Below Reception area concept sketch for Rugby Central, as part of the Health on the High Street initiative for University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire.

to develop new typologies that directly support wellbeing. Lessons from retail and hospitality can also be invaluable, bringing a non-clinical perspective that helps ensure spaces are truly reimagined rather than simply transplanted.

Mental health services are also shifting into community settings. While large-scale residential facilities such as Springfield University Hospital by CF Møller, or Highgate East by Ryder, may be out of reach for practices new to the field, there is real opportunity in smaller, local outpatient facilities. Toronto's Stella's Place by Stantec is a great example of how reusing everyday buildings can create welcoming, specialist spaces to meet complex needs.

The NHS's shift from illness to wellness brings with it a broader public mission. As Sir Michael Marmot has long argued, socioeconomic factors such as education, employment, and environment are critical determinants of health. Embedding healthcare into our high streets and town centres can help replace lost anchor tenants and provide both direct and indirect employment, while offering more accessible care.

Our Civic Supermarket project with the London Borough of Haringey and Whittington Health NHS Trust explored this very principle. By co-locating a GP practice, community health services, library functions, adult education and Citizens Advice in a former Sainsbury's, we sought to create a civic anchor that reflects both local needs and long-term health outcomes. Education, advice, and access all sit at the heart of public health.

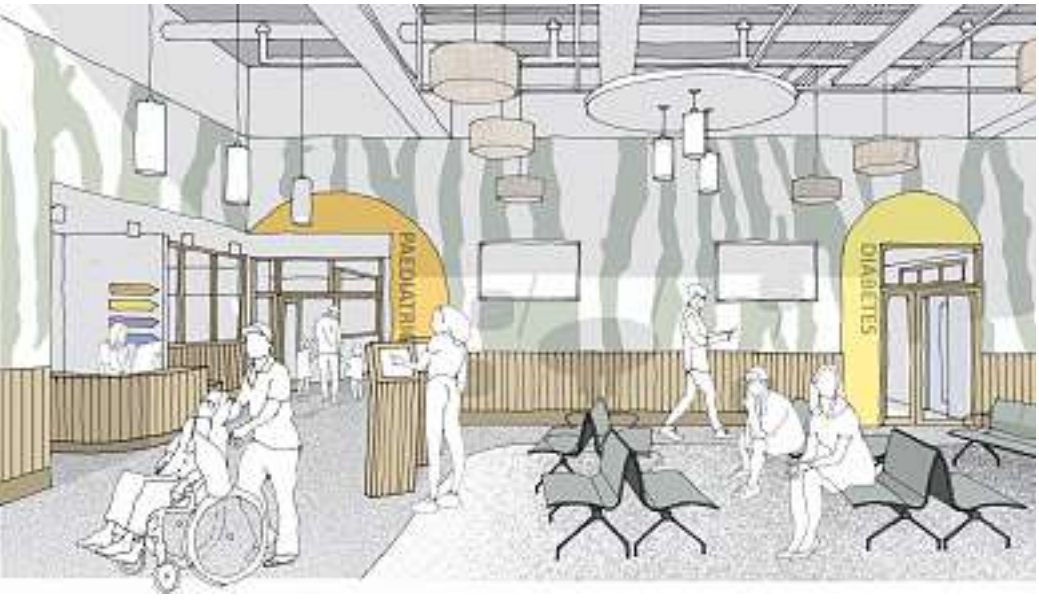
Scale and consistency are also now emerging themes. The Community Diagnostic Centre programme will see imaging and testing services made more accessible, embedded in places people already go. These are not isolated projects but potential public-sector franchises with presence across high streets from Newcastle to Truro.

Following years of austerity, the NHS is again engaging in long-term estate strategy. There is movement away from reactive, 'surface-fixed' additions that stymie strategic thinking, toward integrated planning involving transport and housing. The Jean Bishop Integrated Care Centre by Medical Architecture is a model of what can be achieved, repurposing a former school to deliver coordinated, place-based care. As local demographics shift, buildings that can flex between healthcare, education and community uses may become the next frontier in adaptive infrastructure.

Architects sit at the intersection of technical delivery and human experience. We are trained not only to solve complex problems but to do so in ways that bring clarity, dignity, and even moments of delight. The NHS, and those who work in it or are cared for by it, deserve environments that function exceptionally – but also feel considered, humane and, where possible, uplifting.

The mutual benefit of bringing more non-specialist, design-led practices into healthcare is profound. Our work at Fleet shows how principles of co-design and user-centred thinking – not just responding to briefs but challenging assumptions – can bring better outcomes for patients, staff and communities. That is a very different proposition to merely wrapping a predetermined plan in architectural clothing. There is an opportunity here – and a need – for more architects to step into this space. ●

FLEET ARCHITECTS (2)



Jaime Bishop is a founder of Fleet Architects in Hackney and Margate, and chairs national campaign body Architects for Health

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Midjourney was one of the tools used by HKS to run iterations of roof shapes for design and sustainability at the Corinthia Maldives resort.

HKS INC

Stepping up to 2030 climate goals

Can architecture practices deliver sustainable results consistently? Yes, argues Gary Clarke, lead on the RIBA Sustainable Outcomes Guide, and now managing director of HKS London, who shares some key tips

Sustainable Architecture

Design, construction & technology

In 2020, I had the privilege of being part of the team that created the RIBA suite of sustainable design guidance, including the RIBA Sustainable Outcomes Guide and the RIBA 2030 Climate Challenge, which provides a stepped approach towards net zero. We are now at the midpoint of our 2030 challenge and have five years left to achieve this goal. So where are we on the journey, and how can we consistently deliver sustainable and regenerative outcomes, including net zero, as a profession?

Senior management

Throughout my career, I have tried to realise these goals with some measure of success, both on my own projects, and as a sustainability lead at several signature firms. However, I believe the reason we are not achieving consistent results across the sector is the lack of commitment and strategic direction from senior management teams.

At HKS London, our task is no less than to transform the studio into a groundbreaking regenerative and sustainability design practice. With a board-level mandate, there are no organisational barriers to achieving this ambition, something my peers and I have harboured for nearly 40 years. So how can a practice achieve these goals and deliver against the RIBA 2030 Climate Challenge?

The most important step in transforming a studio is to win the hearts and minds of our colleagues, and empower them to create buildings of the highest level of regenerative and sustainable design quality.

Unlocking commitment

Luckily, there is no shortage of passionate young architects who believe that we must transform our profession to address climate change, but also worryingly feel constrained. It is up to the management to unlock this grassroots potential and give people real agency for change.

At HKS we have convened a small group of committed young architects led by our sustainability and technical leaders, who will be rapidly upskilling them with key knowledge, processes and tools. Our overall aim is to create passionate, committed and knowledgeable advocates in each team and sector, who can further support and upskill their peers and colleagues. We know how important this is. One

HUFTON+CROW

Above The most important step in transforming a studio is to win colleagues' hearts and minds, and empower them to create buildings of the highest level of regenerative and sustainable design quality.

of our industry's leading proponents of regenerative design, Joe Jack Williams recently shared that one of his greatest regrets while being a sustainability lead in a large practice was that he didn't delegate responsibility for delivering sustainability more widely.

Together with this grassroots delegated approach, our senior leadership teams need to lead by example. A key to getting buy-in from senior leadership teams is to define the business case benefits of sustainability to our clients, and therefore to our practice.

Business case for clients

Net zero sustainability is technically feasible, but also desirable – it creates buildings that are resilient to future climates, attracting and retaining staff, and increasingly helping to meet clients' own climate pledges. All three are fundamental to the success of our clients, the first as it assures continued viability and even potential asset appreciation, while the latter two are increasingly seen as crucial to corporate success. A recent Knight Frank study also indicated that more sustainable buildings command a 12.3 per cent commercial premium compared with less sustainable ones.

At HKS, our global design process is rooted in an aspirational vision of regenerative design based on the AIA Framework for Design Excellence's 10 guiding principles. In our London studio, we have taken it a step further, and applied the RIBA Sustainable Outcomes approach to create a set of measurable metrics to ensure that regenerative and sustainable outcomes are achieved in practice.

The key to consistency is to embed an outcomes-oriented approach into our environmental management systems (as defined in ISO 14001) and appointment documents, and to define the scope of the wider project design team to ensure proper support, as well as defining responsibilities throughout the design process. This comes quite naturally, as the RIBA Sustainable Outcomes approach is already embedded within the RIBA Plan of Work and standard appointments.

The fundamental prerequisites to this process are: first, agree stretch outcome targets or goals at a client visioning workshop at the outset of the project; second, track and measure these agreed outcomes through the design development phases of a project; and, finally, verify if the outcome has been achieved at completion and again in use at the end of the defects period.

The Passivhaus process is one well known example of this approach when delivering operational energy targets, but we need to use a similar approach to deliver many more outcomes across a varied portfolio.

Integrated design review

A central part of this approach is to set up an integrated design review process that combines traditional architectural design crits with a rigorous technical and sustainability analysis. This is vital to avoid thinking in silos and to ensure that regenerative design principles and sustainable outcomes are fully embedded into the emerging design.

There are plentiful tools to support this process. The core sustainability assessment methods such as BREEAM and LEED are an excellent starting point for non-domestic buildings, while the Passivhaus standard has grown in popularity for residential schemes and small public buildings such as schools.

Precedents

However, when using an outcomes-based approach such as RIBA Sustainable Outcomes or the Regenerative Design Index, a key tool is to find relevant precedents that align with client and practice aspirations. When combined with the UK Net Zero Carbon Buildings Standard, a set of specific benchmarks can be agreed at RIBA Stages 0-1. Sustainability is won or lost at very early stages of design concept during feasibility studies or within the first few weeks of RIBA Stage 2.

Software tools

From our experience, the best tools to use during this pre-concept phase are Autodesk Forma or free online Revit and Rhino plugins such as Energy+, Honeybee and Ladybug. In these early stages, we found it best to avoid complex dynamic simulation tools such as IES, which are more effectively wielded by expert users in collaboration with engineering partners during RIBA Stages 3 and 4.

We are also currently creating our own AI-enhanced pre-concept multifactor modelling tool, balancing bioclimatic passive design, operational energy, circular economy, embodied carbon, land use, biodiversity and cost. Whatever the set of tools, it is imperative to create an integrated workflow that works smoothly within the design

Reinforcing the push to net zero

7 Steel UK, the nation's largest recycler of scrap steel, is under new ownership but continues to lead the way as a producer of low-carbon, circular steel products

7 Steel UK is the new name for Celsa Steel UK, marking the start of an exciting new chapter while retaining the strengths that have made us the UK's leading producer of low-carbon, circular steel. Based in Cardiff, we operate an electric arc furnace (EAF) and two rolling mills, transforming 100 per cent UK-sourced scrap into high-quality steel for the nation's most iconic infrastructure projects, from Heathrow Terminal 5 and Crossrail to the Olympic Park and Hinkley Point C.

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Circularity in action is best seen through our project collaborations. At the Plaza Cinema in Swansea, we demonstrated closed-loop recycling by taking 25t of scrap from demolition and returning it as new reinforcement steel – cutting 36t of carbon for BAM Construction. At 105 Victoria Street in London's West End, meanwhile, we worked with Skanska and Careys to coordinate 'steel in, scrap out' logistics: 270t of temporary works props were returned on the same trucks that delivered rebar, in the process generating 400t of carbon savings.

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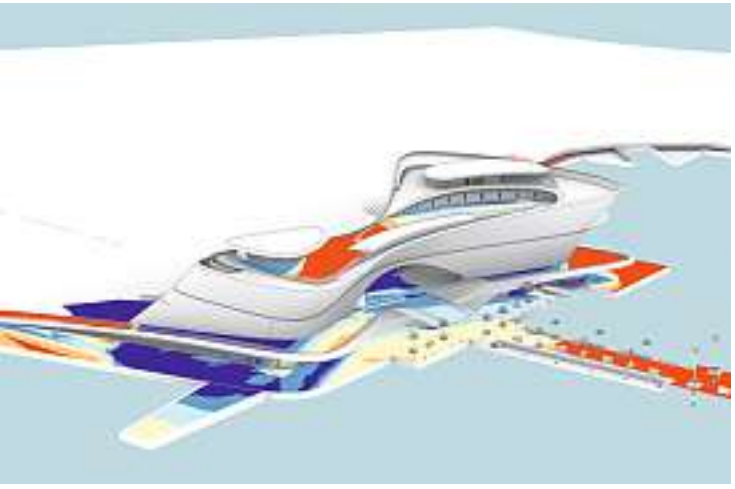
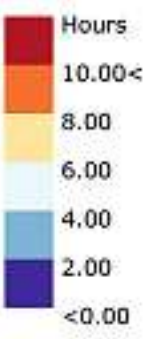
Left Low-carbon (374 $KgCO_2$/t) reinforcing steel (rebar). Melted, poured and rolled in 7 Steel, Cardiff. Made in the UK, for the UK.

Above Circular steel in motion: a billet made from 98 per cent recycled UK scrap passes through our rolling stand in Cardiff.

HKS INC





PAUL RAFTERY

Top HKS' design for the Amaala Yacht Club minimises heat gain with an overhanging facade. This reduces cooling loads in summer while enabling the spaces to open up in winter for cross-ventilation.

Above left Computational design tools were used to evaluate the amount of direct sunlight falling onto the public realm surrounding the yacht club.

Left Midland Metropolitan University Hospital, designed in close collaboration with Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust, delivers a new, future-facing facility from conception and clinical engagement through to completion.

process and upskill core team members to see these through.

Real projects and pilots

But the best way to make a difference is to start integrating regenerative strategies and tools within real projects. Don't wait to perfect your own process, but use existing guidance – whether the RIBA 2030 Climate Challenge or Sustainable Outcomes, or aspirational guides such as Architects Declare's Regenerative Architecture Index – and refine your ways of working as you go. Set realistic and, where possible, stretch targets for a range of sustainable outcomes with your client and communicate this to your internal team and to the wider design team.

To put theory into practice, we asked each of our sector teams to identify a pilot study project which could accommodate rapid experimentation: either as a competition, or in parallel with a real project, or as a separate piece of research and development.

Perhaps the most critical factor for success is that this must be carried out with a no-blame culture, while ensuring that any strategies embedded into real-world projects are thoroughly and regularly reviewed. We can and must regenerate our cities and landscapes to sustain our planet one project at a time. The best time to start was yesterday, the second-best time is now. ●

Gary Clark is principal and managing director of HKS London and lead author of the RIBA Sustainable Outcomes Guide

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What shape will the latest new towns take?

New towns may be old news – but in their latest incarnation, quality and sustainability will matter as much as raw numbers, finds Josephine Smit

Places, planning & community

Design, construction & technology

Below Whitehill Chase, part of Hampshire's Whitehill & Bordon scheme, is sensitively integrated into its woodland setting.

It looks like new towns could be making a comeback… again. After Labour's 1990s millennium communities and noughties eco-towns, and the Conservatives' garden towns and villages, comes a fresh government ambition. The New Towns Taskforce, led by Sir Michael Lyons, is defining the proposition, which in reality is focusing more on urban extensions than brand new settlements. At the same time, and entirely separately, Forest of Dean District Council is reported to be considering new towns as one of several potential ways of meeting its testing housebuilding targets.

Behind the past initiatives lie sagas of schemes facing local opposition, shifting economics and politics, and development constraints, with some ultimately falling by the wayside while others have adapted and progressed. Whitehill & Bordon, in Hampshire, for example, was first designated as a government eco-town in 2009, but has since become part of

GARDNER STEWART ARCHITECTS

COUNTRYSIDE HOMES

‘More subregional political influence means opportunity to take a longer, wider view’

Left Beaulieu Parkside, masterplanned by GSA, with its contemporary villas with distinctive gables addressing the linear park.

NHS England’s decade-old Healthy New Towns initiative, with a focus on green space and promoting active lifestyles.

“Each initiative represents a change in political direction,” says Graham Kime, director of Gardner Stewart Architects (GSA). “They bring a new impetus, based on a new rhetoric – a new way of funding; new planning powers; new ways of assembling land.” GSA has been involved in government-backed settlements from Oakgrove Millennium Community in Milton Keynes to Whitehill & Bordon, designing homes for three land parcels in the latter, including the 50-home woodland enclave of Whitehill Chase.

Where we are now

The New Towns Taskforce set out key principles for future new towns in its interim report, published in February 2025. These include providing social infrastructure and employment opportunities, having public transport connections, supporting cycling and walking, and building at higher densities. Some of these principles are being reflected in current policy and practice, with Kime noting, “We are now looking at more duplexes and alternative house types so as to provide an element of family housing within a denser area.”

Housebuilder Taylor Wimpey’s proposed 2,000-home development on the former Wisley Airfield, Surrey, where GSA led the outline-stage masterplan and did the site-wide design codes, is already illustrating the direction of active travel. It has a ‘sustainable movement corridor’ running through the site with segregated cycle routes, bus routes that are funded from the start by the developer, and more cycle routes connecting to nearby stations. The scheme, which won support from the government’s New Homes Accelerator fund in August, also incorporates three mobility hubs to provide such facilities as bus transfer points, cycle parking and hire, and car clubs.

Given their scale and multiple developers and architects, new settlements may rely on design coding to set the bar on design quality, help accelerate development and give certainty to developers. “Done well and based on a consensus, design codes can be a really effective tool,” says Kime. GSA masterplanned the Beaulieu Park urban extension to Chelmsford, which was pictured in the National Model Design Code but followed the Essex Design Guide and is cited as an exemplar in the latter’s update. There, a shared vision between developer Countryside and the council drove architect collaboration and, ultimately, design quality. As a result, Kime adds, “There was innovation, expression and invention.”

GARDNER STEWART ARCHITECTS, CGI BY RED VERTEX

A typical neighbourhood green at Wisley, with the active landscape overlooked by a range of housing types.

Changing the system

The biggest challenges in delivering large-scale settlements are often the inability to look beyond the short-term horizon, and infrastructure provision, says David Churchill, partner with property consultancy Carter Jonas. “That’s predominantly the fault of the system,” he says, pointing to the disparity between short-term political appointments and the many years it can take to deliver new places.

The government’s aim to reintroduce strategic planning, which will see local authorities join forces to create large-scale spatial development strategies, could go some way to reconciling that disparity. “With greater subregional political influence, there is a greater opportunity to take a much longer, much wider view,” says Churchill.

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill, introduced to Parliament in March, paves the way for development corporations to play a greater part in shaping new settlements, giving them expanded powers to facilitate delivery of urban extensions, and introducing

Architects: take the stairs to the next level

Kallisto's bespoke concrete staircases deliver structurally precise, sculptural solutions to make a statement in any space

KALLISTO

A striking Kallisto curved staircase in a stunning new Liverpool residence.

Kallisto's bespoke curved staircases bring sculptural elegance and structural precision to luxury interiors. For architects, they offer a rare balance: complete design freedom, technical rigour, and a low-carbon solution that transforms the staircase into a defining architectural statement.

For architects, the true measure of a project's success often lies in its ability to combine structural ingenuity with aesthetic clarity. A staircase, perhaps more so than any other architectural element, has the power to define that balance – setting the tone for how a space is experienced, navigated and remembered by those who enter it.

Kallisto, Milbank Concrete Products' luxury stair division, specialises in bespoke precast concrete helical and curved staircases that transcend function to become architectural focal points. Engineered for elegance and precision, each design is tailored to its environment, whether anchoring a grand entrance hall or threading seamlessly through a contemporary open-plan interior.

For the architect, collaboration with Kallisto offers both creative freedom and technical reassurance. Using advanced palletised mould systems and precision offsite manufacturing, the team delivers staircases with sweeping curves, slender profiles and sculptural integrity – forms that would be near-impossible with timber or steel. The result is a flawless installation, ready for onsite finishing in stone or timber or with bespoke balustrades.

Sustainability is integral. Kallisto's precast mixes carry up to 33 per cent lower embodied carbon and, as part of Milbank's wider commitment, all staircases are produced in facilities powered by renewable energy, with HVO-fuelled logistics reducing delivery emissions by up to 98 per cent. Architects also benefit from transparent carbon data at quotation stage, supporting ever more stringent reporting requirements.

In a profession where every detail must elevate the whole, a Kallisto staircase offers architects a rare combination: sculptural ambition, technical rigour, and environmental responsibility. More than just a way upstairs, it is an architectural statement – crafted to inspire, endure, and be endlessly admired.

Left A graceful Kallisto helical staircase in an award-winning Surrey home.

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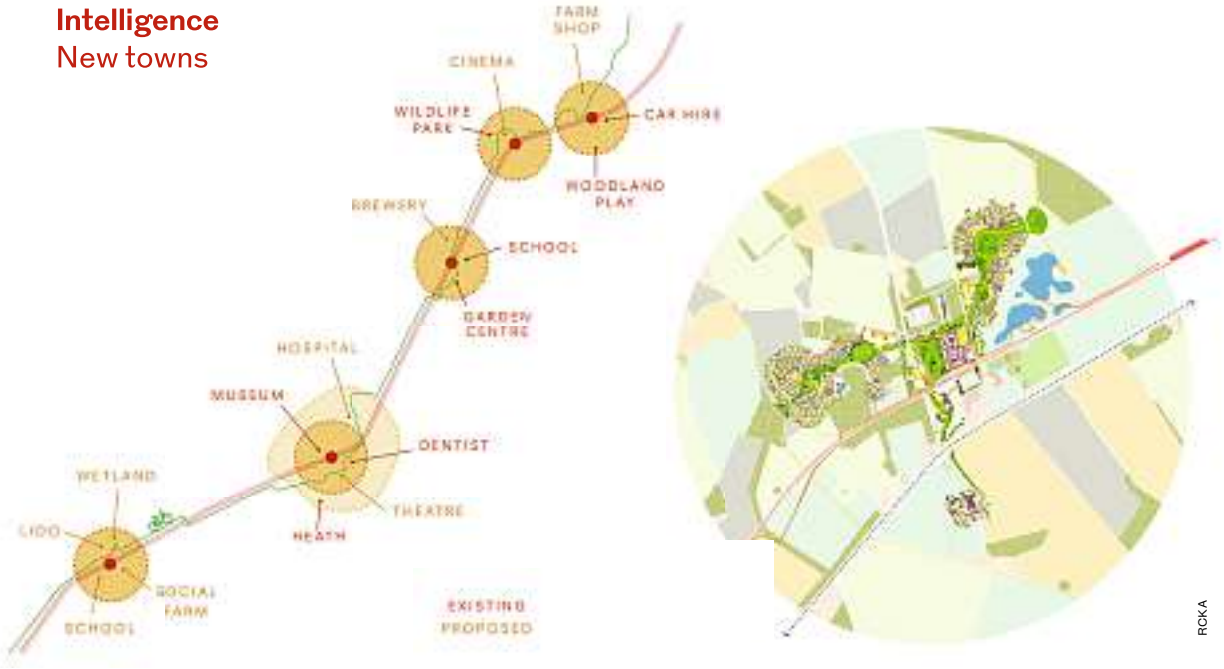


Above left RCKa demonstrates how social infrastructure needs could be met across a string of station developments.

LATEST GOVERNMENT THINKING ON NEW TOWNS

10,000
Minimum number of homes for a new town

40%
Minimum proportion of affordable homes

100+
Responses to the New Towns Taskforce's call for new town sites to be put forward for the initiative

10–12
Number of new town sites the government plans to take forward

measures to better align new housing and public transport. Tackle that issue and stations could offer more significant development opportunities, as RCKa found when it researched the potential of rural stations and then demonstrated it in a speculative masterplan for one, Ashwell & Morden in Cambridgeshire.

By having a single development corporation lead the delivery of several adjacent station schemes, which is being made feasible by the emerging legislation, it would be possible to ensure existing or new social infrastructure could meet the needs of residents from the outset, RCKa's speculative masterplan shows. "You could positively plan for a school at one location and a leisure centre at another, so that, theoretically, no amenity is more than 30 minutes away," says RCKa director Russell Curtis. "It allows development to be delivered more cost-effectively and more strategically. Delivery needs a completely different mindset."

How radical?

The New Towns Taskforce says it has identified learning from past new towns, but Curtis is one of many calling for fresh thinking around the delivery and shape of new settlements. "This is not about the average person who would have been going to live in a new town decades ago," stresses Manisha Patel, director of KPK Studios. Another principle identified by the taskforce in its interim report is the need for balanced communities, and Patel echoes that, saying, "We need to encourage downsizers, families, singles and students, and consider how each site is balanced from the start, so that we don't create pockets where one group becomes isolated."

That may mean rejecting the masterplanning convention of placing family houses around a school, in favour of a more integrated approach, and rethinking typologies to give broadest possible customer appeal. Overall for new towns, she says, "If we want resilient places, every neighbourhood has to be climate-ready, socially connected and affordable to a wide range of households."

Yolande Barnes, emeritus professor at UCL and a member of the Design Council Homes Taskforce, goes further, arguing for greater flexibility to be designed into buildings in new town centres, to enable living and working to be combined, perhaps through a planning use class around active frontages. "The problem is, our planning system doesn't allow for this because of its insistence on separate use classes," she explains. "The reliance on use classes, which themselves are based on investment asset classes, makes it impossible to create the flexibility we need to plan for our changing world."

Matthew Morgan, director of charity Quality of Life Foundation, questions another convention. "We have to imagine what a world without so many cars might look like and how we can move towards that in stages," he says. "We have to build that into thinking in terms of the space and how we might be using it, and how we might be able to repurpose it."

Above all, Morgan argues for a shift in the approach to shaping places. "Architects will say this is their bread and butter, but there is a need to innovate and think beyond buildings to the outcomes they have for people," he says. The government's 10 Year Health Plan for England, with its emphasis on moving from cure to prevention and addressing the social determinants of health, and its £39 billion commitment for new social and affordable housing, he believes, both point the way.

"Basic questions of everyday experience need to feed back into what the design, building or streetscape should be," explains Morgan, with those questions perhaps being as simple as whether people speak to their neighbours. "It means thinking about what would constitute a good daily life and how you achieve that," he continues, including for a community's most vulnerable members. The challenge now being laid down is not only to deliver housing numbers, but to make better and more sustainable places to live.

SIMON MENGES (2)

Diplomatic framework

At the former US embassy in London, David Chipperfield Architects has upgraded the building's structure and envelope as part of a huge overhaul to create a luxury hotel. Jan-Carlos Kucharek pores over the details

Design, construction & technology

It was always going to be a tall order, reflects David Chipperfield Architects associate director Ryan Butterfield of his firm's refurbishment and extension of Eero Saarinen's former US Embassy in London, to mitigate embodied carbon with any alteration to the building's concrete-framed structure. But in its new guise as the top-end Chancery Rosewood hotel, he continues, the root-and-branch changes that make the building fit for purpose have not only seen it reborn in a form Saarinen had notionally imagined. They have also realised the UK's only BREEAM Outstanding luxury hotel.

The Grade II-listed former embassy, completed in 1960 and occupying the full west side of Mayfair's Grosvenor Square, opened to guests in September. Its reported £1 billion overhaul, a project DCA won in 2015, has been radical, doubling the building's area from 25,000m^2 to 48,000m^2. It involved, over two years, digging to a depth of 18m to increase basement area – allowing for a ballroom and the hotel's sizeable MVHR plant requirements. But notably, it also meant adding a storey on top of Saarinen's listed Portland stone 'O' frame facade, as well as a new, recessed upper 'penthouse' level above that, enabling guests at its cocktail bar to look across to sculptor Theodore Roszak's 11m gilded aluminium eagle, reset on its old pediment. Butterfield says early sketches exist in which Saarinen drew a "crowning" top storey to his building, and that the practice ran with this idea.

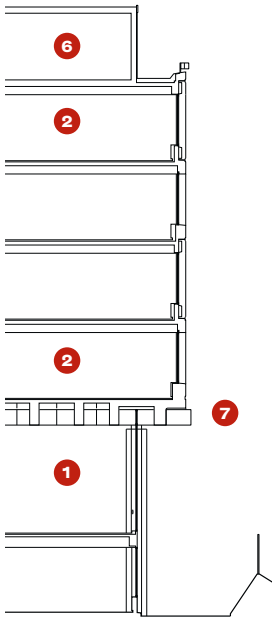
Given that the original floors were very thin, and engineered to be highly efficient, DCA's initial studies looked at reusing their concrete slabs and cores, including adding carbon fibre or topping slabs. But with the need to support those extra two storeys, to optimise slab-to-ceiling heights for servicing requirements to both suites and public areas, and to address acoustic and fire performance concerns, a decision was made to remove the original slabs. They have been replaced with 225mm post-tensioned (PT) concrete slabs supported by regularly spaced steel perimeter

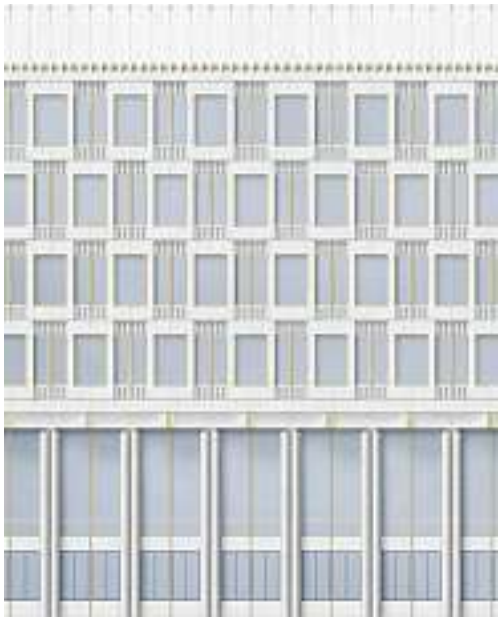
posts, to facilitate increased floor-to-ceiling heights and service zones.

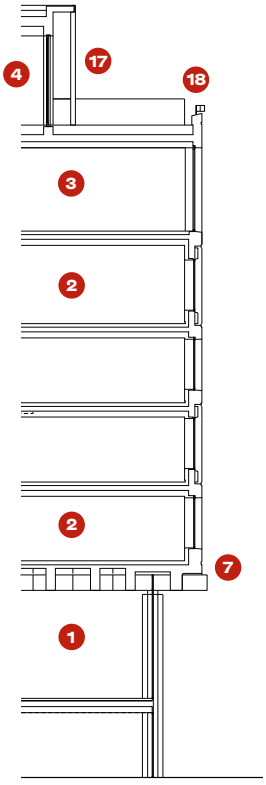
What could not be removed was the heritage-listed precast concrete diagrid beam structure that Saarinen installed as part of the building's 4.5m first-floor piano nobile, which demarcated the embassy's formal areas. Projecting out over the first floor, this distinctive element – C-shaped in plan – bore the load of both slabs and facade and transferred it down perimeter columns and a single line of internal columns midway between them and the original linear cores.

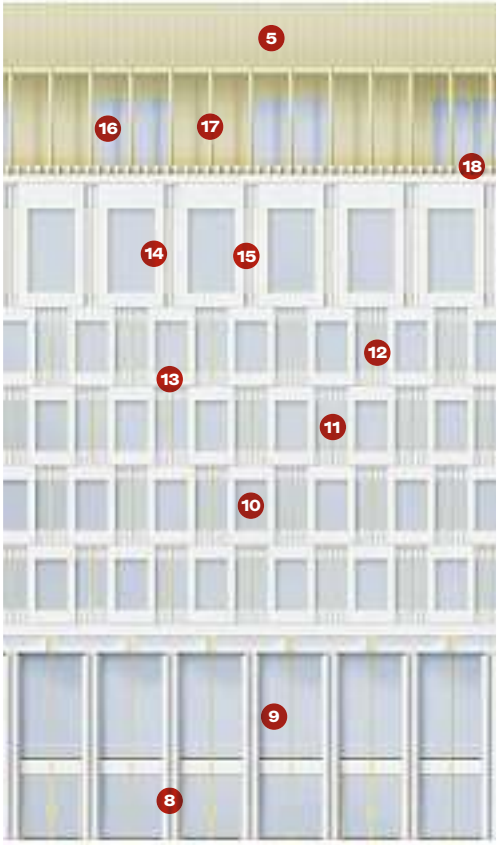
With hotel public areas now filling this form at first-floor level, DCA removed the original infill slab-and-beam arrangement in the rear former service zone and continued the diagrid geometry, now cast in situ, to extend the palatial effect across the structural ceiling. The diagrid is supported by new precast cruciform columns at 3.3m centres, mimicking the original Portland stone-clad perimeter columns. Their slenderness is intimated at the pin connection where it meets the diagrid; what Butterfield calls an expression of Saarinen's "heavy lightness".

The diagrid thus supports all the new PT concrete floor slabs above it, which are now supported by massive new gold-anodised-clad, solid steel









DAVID CHIPPERFIELD ARCHITECTS (2)

Opposite The east elevation of the Chancery Rosewood hotel onto Grosvenor Square, with its new super-sized, stone-faced 'O' frame level. The porte cochere is inspired by the one at Saarinen's other US embassy, in Oslo.
Left The west elevation showing extended diagrid and modular units making up five new levels of suites.

1 Ground and first floor
2 Typical floor
3 Extended sixth floor
4 Penthouse level
5 Top plant metal screen
6 Original rooftop pavilion
7 Diagrid
8 Cruciform columns
9 Large-format double glazing
10 New double glazing
11 New steel windows
12 Restored aluminium mullion
13 Envelope upgrade
14 Portland stone-clad 'O' frame
15 New anodised aluminium mullion
16 Sliding windows
17 Colonnade
18 Reinstated cornice and extrusion detail

columns and the existing perimeter columns. The extra load of the new floors is thus bound into the original structural ecosystem – augmented by a pair of enlarged 60m² concrete service cores that run down to connect with basement plant areas. These replace the original, smaller, pair of linear cores, whose void has been filled in with new diagrid insertions.

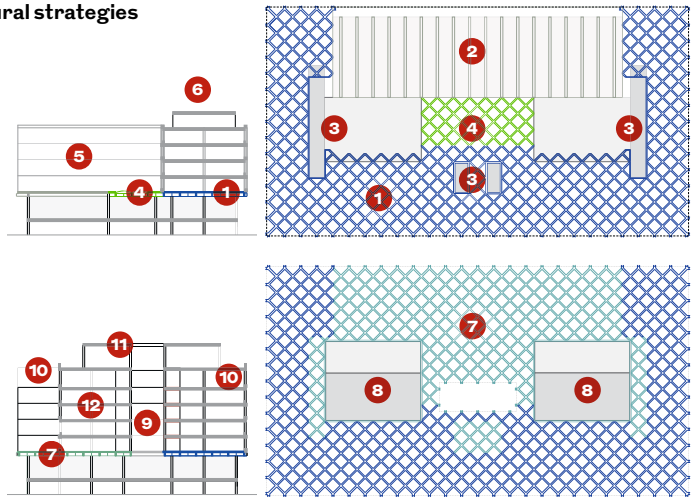
Saarinen's Portland stone-clad structural 'O' frames, referencing the rhythm of surrounding Georgian streets, were originally hand-set on the concrete. DCA kept these in situ during construction, repinning them from behind with drilled and resin-fixed stainless steel rods. They were all then delicately cleaned. Given they were lined internally at the time with nothing more than plasterboard, and with a curious vent detail feeding low-level heaters with external air that was warmed before being circulated, DCA had to address facade performance. The firm did this by running an insulation-packed Metsec subframe in front of the new 80mm steel posts running every 1600mm around the perimeter. These supplant the 'O' frames as primary structural support for the floor slabs and, using an AKT II-designed ball-and-socket detail, hold facade panels to slabs while enabling the steel structure behind to flex. With a total sectional thickness of over 370mm, the result yields a U-value of 1.14W/m²K for the facade – down from 6.28.

Super-sized 'O' frames for the new upper level were procured using modern methods, as a unitised precast system, with Portland stone sourced from the original quarry to ensure colour consistency with the main facade. D&B contractor Multiplex looked to Belgium-based concrete firm Loveld, with its skills in precast fabrication, with the 5.2m x 3.3m reinforced panels emulating the original 'O' frames and slab perimeter placement method.

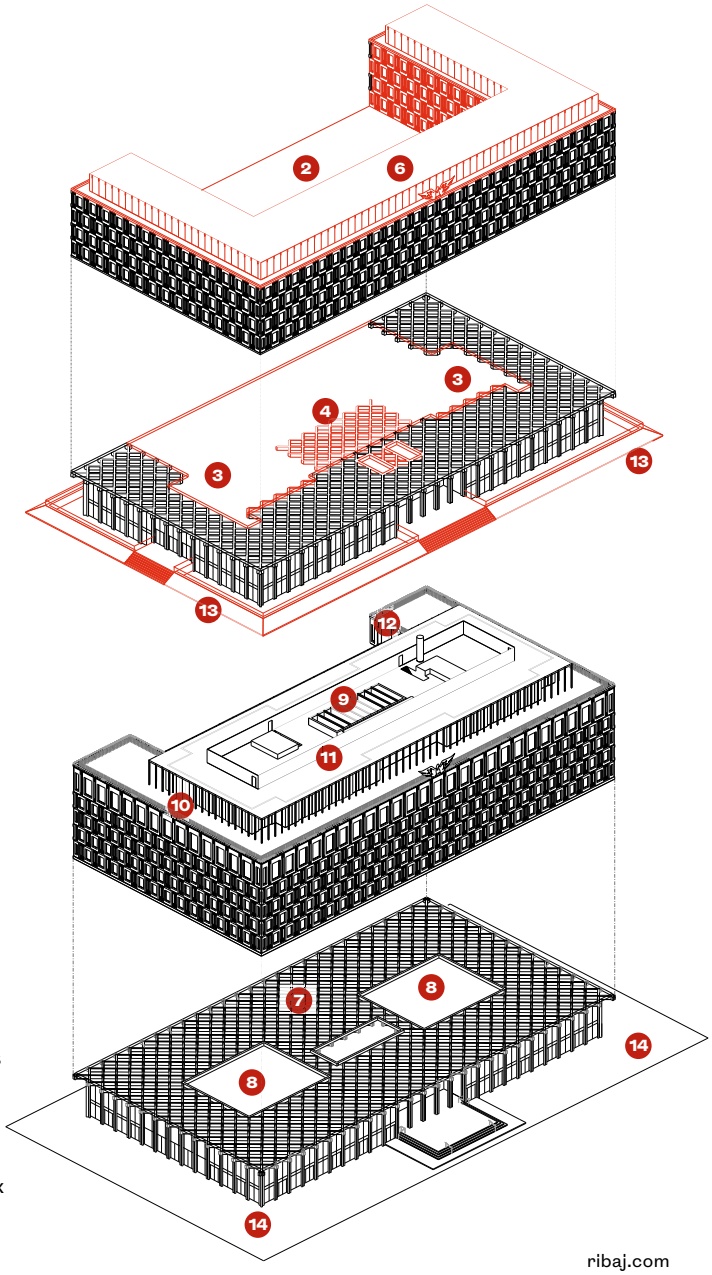
It's clear Saarinen was forced to economise on his design, with the mews-facing panels using plain concrete-faced 'O' frames rather than Portland stone-clad ones. Here, where DCA built out over their diagrid to increase suite

Original vs new structural strategies

1 Original diagrid
2 Slab and beam infill to service area
3 Original core area
4 Diagrid rooflight (demolished)
5 Concrete-faced 'O' frames
6 Rooftop pavilion (demolished)
7 Extended diagrid
8 New core area
9 Atrium with top-level rooflight
10 New floor
11 New penthouse level
12 New suites on west side
13 Ground-level defensive rampart (demolished)
14 New public realm area



DAVID CHIPPERFIELD ARCHITECTS (4)



Credits
Client Qatari Diar
User Rosewood Hotel Group
Architect David Chipperfield Architects
Heritage consultant Turley Associates
Public realm consultant Publica Associates
Landscape consultant Building Design Partnership
Structural and facade engineer AKT II
MEP Hilson Moran
Planning consultant Gerald Eve
Quantity surveyor Gardiner & Theobald
Hotel specialist Reardon Smith Architects
Project manager Buro Four Holdings
Sustainability consultant Twin and Earth
Main contractor Multiplex

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provision, the firm utilised Loveld's skill again. DCA designed with the contractor a precast 'O' frame modular unit with integral balcony and wall, which realised logistical and cost benefits. Sandblasted with Portland stone aggregate, these arrived on site with metal balustrade and balcony doors pre-installed and were simply hoisted up onto the rear facade, with a 'bird's beak' detail, as seen on perimeter columns, denoting the junction between units.

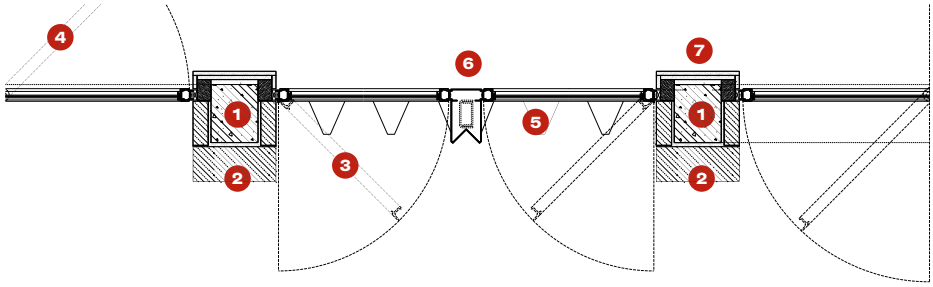
It was in tackling the building's single glazing that most progress was made around thermal and acoustic facade performance, Butterfield says. At piano nobile level, refurbishing the double-height aluminium glazing sections was mooted. But given Saarinen had nestled the 57mm frames deep in his cruciform columns to make them invisible, secondary glazing frames set back from the 9mm single-laminated panes, interfering with sight lines, were unsuitable. DCA opted instead for a Schneider GB aluminium extrusion, which copies the original central mullion detail but is thermally broken, with double-glazed units increasing the frame section to 82mm. New 38mm double glazed panels not only optimised G-values for transparency but took the U-value from 6.04 to 1.89, with acoustic performance rising from 29 to 38dB.

On upper facade levels, Saarinen's full-height, pivoting glass steel frames and corroded rolled-steel cassette windows needed to be replaced. Their bold, gold-anodised extruded aluminium central mullions were refurbished while DCA selected new frames based on both aesthetic and functional performance criteria. (A key requirement was that the windows needed to be visually consistent with the original glazing and match sight lines.) More than 400 windows had to be procured, so cost mattered: folded steel Ottostumm frames were chosen over more expensive bespoke hot-rolled frames from German firm MHB.

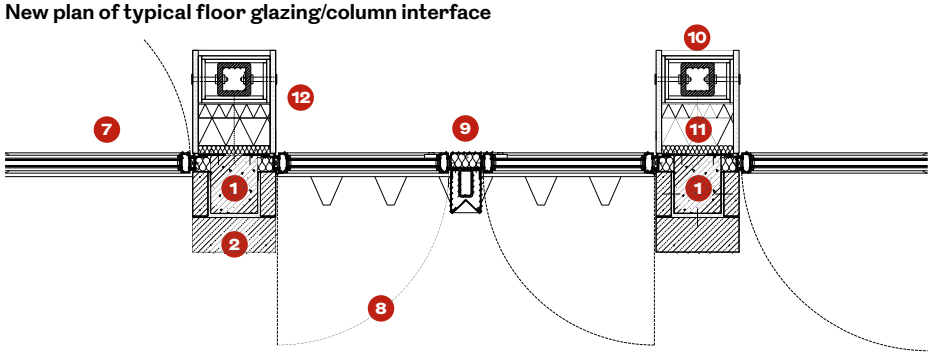
Now the project is finished, Butterfield admits that while the hotel's operational efficiency is impressive, earning its BREEAM rating, embodied energy arguments were always going to be more complex, with demands to match like-for-like influencing decision-making. In 2015, that was driven less by sustainability concerns than by heritage and conservation of architectural intent, he recalls. There was never going to be a proposal, for instance, to append new diagrid in mass timber, and so the refurbishment's higher carbon footprint was bound to its listed nature and change of use. He notes the US government's decision to build a new embassy did not only reflect modern security concerns, but also the fact that internal office comfort levels were so compromised.

In the end, DCA's transformation of Saarinen's embassy to a luxury hotel feels in keeping with its affluent context – and the grandeur of his diagrid well-suited to its front-of-house role. Looking back, Butterfield says it took a while to grasp the thinking behind his deep crenelations in window panel facade elements between 'O' frames – until old photos of the embassy at night revealed it to be skeuomorphic interpretation of the folds of the original floor-to-ceiling curtains behind the glass. In a satisfying reprise, those drapes once again allow the facade to be read in its full glory. ●

Original plan of typical floor glazing/column interface



New plan of typical floor glazing/column interface



DAVID CHIPPERFIELD ARCHITECTS (2)

1 Precast concrete 'O' frame
2 Portland stone cladding
3 Hope & Sons steel window, hinged, outward-opening
4 Full-height glazed panel, central pivot, in/out-opening
5 Carved Portland stone spandrel panel
6 Anodised aluminium mullion
7 Full-height Ottostumm fixed steel window frame and DGU
8 Ottostumm folded steel window frame with DGU
9 Original mullion refurbished and reinstated
10 80mm square steel posts at 1600mm centres
11 Metsec frame with interstitial insulation behind frame
12 Plasterboard finish

SIMON MENGES

Above Grand, 4.5m-high Portland stone-clad concrete columns support the diagrid at its perimeter. Double-height aluminium double-glazed units vastly improve the facade's thermal efficiency.

Garden of ideas

The novel union of rammed earth and structural timber is a defining feature of Hortus, a highly sustainable office block by Herzog & de Meuron. Chris Foges speaks to Martin Mackowitz of earth specialist ERDEN about the potential of this low-carbon hybrid

Design, construction & technology

In Hortus, architect Herzog & de Meuron set out to make the most sustainable office building in Switzerland. The scheme, which recently completed in Basel, is timber-framed with no basement to minimise concrete use. Facades onto a central courtyard have large areas of glass for light and ventilation. A green courtyard, with a rainwater tank beneath, is designed to create a microclimate that helps moderate temperatures in the building.

When it became apparent that this would require additional thermal mass in the ceilings, H&deM turned to Austrian rammed earth specialist Lehm Ton Erde/ERDEN – with which it had collaborated on projects such as the Ricola factory in Laufen – to develop an innovative hybrid earth-and-timber floor structure. It provides numerous benefits, as ERDEN project manager and architect Martin Mackowitz told RIBAJ. Moreover, the complementary marriage of two bio-based materials could point to the next big thing in sustainable design.

Above Commissioned by Senn, Hortus is a 'radically sustainable' office building for 600 life sciences workers, made of renewable and recyclable building materials. It will offset the energy used in its construction in 31 years and generate a surplus of operational energy on site.

How did the innovative floors at Hortus come about?

Building physics calculations revealed that the building needed more thermal mass inside, and Herzog & de Meuron explored options with ZPF Engineers. With a free floor plan, it was thought the ceilings would be the best place to put the mass; it's a simple but amazing idea: you take material excavated from the site and hold it up overhead. They worked with us to develop a hybrid floor system, which consists of prefabricated wooden frames and arched vaults of compressed clay; we produced five options and that was the 'champion'. The timber was harvested from forests close to the St Gallen base of contractor Blumer Lehmann, and fabrication of the frames was also local, in a field factory next to the building.

MARIS MEZULIS (4)

Top Good daylight, air and courtyard access promote wellbeing.
Above The building stands on stilts and wraps around a green 'atrium' designed by landscape architect Piet Oudolf.
Left Hortus stands for House of Research, Technology, Utopia, and Sustainability. The design process began by analysing naturally renewable materials' environmental and physical properties.

How does the structure work?
The timber beams have a span of about 5.3m, and work in tension together with the three-layered floorplate on top. The clay vaults are more or less an infill, and are there for a variety of reasons as well as thermal mass. They provide fire resilience and have an acoustic function, deadening the sound of people walking above. They also regulate humidity and moisture in the air, and microorganisms in the clay 'digest' odours. That can be a huge benefit in an office building where there are a lot of people, of course.

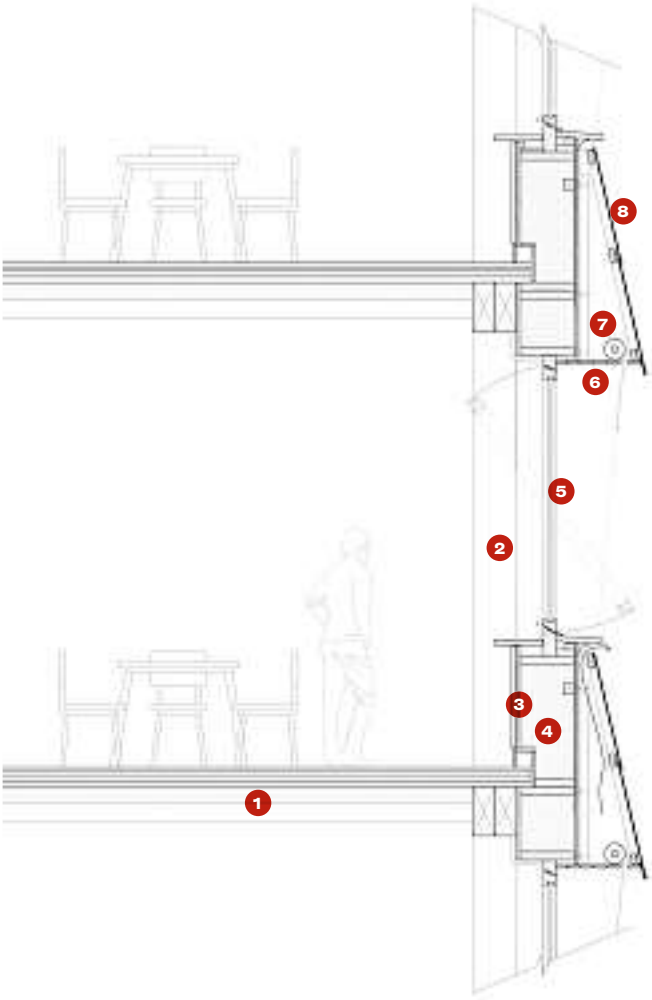
The compressed clay elements are arched, so they bear on the sides of the beams, and services run in a kind of gravel layer in the floor build-up above. It's best not to make penetrations through the rammed earth, so cabling for lighting comes down through the wood, and fixtures hang from the beams.

The rammed earth has no cement stabilisation, and we were able to use a mix comprising about 95 per cent material excavated from the site, with the addition of a little bit of gravel. We have a small laboratory and do our own strength testing, and it is important to assess the quality of the earth, develop the right recipe and continue quality management throughout the process.

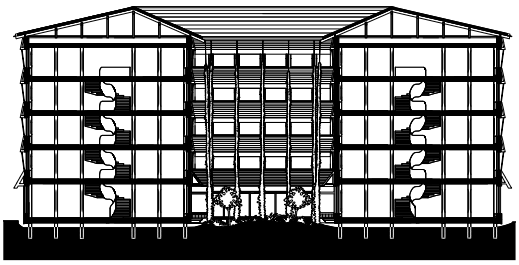
The vaults are quite resilient. If there was a leaking pipe some earth might fall down, but you'd see it immediately and could repair it invisibly. Otherwise, there are some things to bear in mind when working with earth: it's best to limit interfaces with other materials, and have simpler details – which can be harder to design. But in general we should build more simply, right? At the moment we have between 200 and 300 different materials in a conventional building; if we could reduce that to just 30 to 50 materials that would be a huge benefit in terms of efficiency and sustainability.

What were the main design challenges?
One big issue was fire: we had to reach 60 minutes fire resilience, which we were able to do. And another was the whole question of how to build economically – a matter of building the right machinery

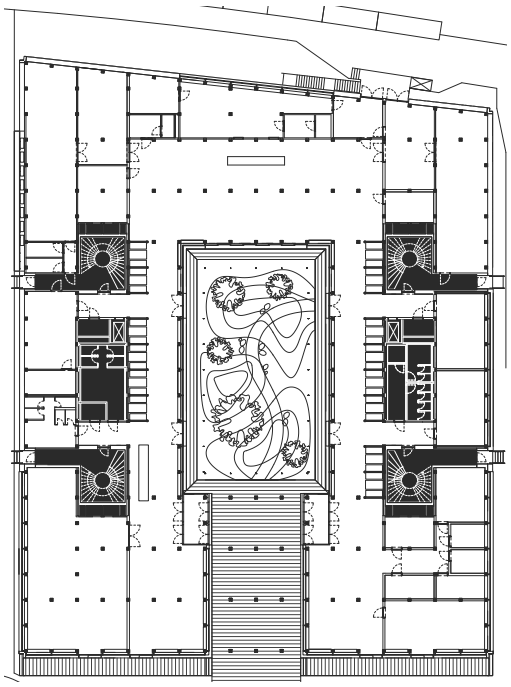
Detail section



Section



Ground floor plan



and working out logistics. We created a partly automated system in the field factory, based in tents next to the site. Within them we made two 'streets' – one for production and the other for storage. Timber contractors made up frames, including the beams and floorplate, and the clay was compacted within them. They were stored until they could be installed during windows of nice weather. In the first month we were able to produce 35 elements, but after four months of production we could make 45 elements each week, so the speed increased a lot.

There's no drying period between ramming and installation. We ram earth with about 8 per cent moisture content, so it's actually drier than the wood which has about 12 per cent moisture. You can install it straight away, and it dries further in situ to about 2 or 3 per cent moisture.

Right According to the architect, the carbon emissions of the clay-timber floor system are 10 times less than a flat concrete floor with comparable load capacity.

At the moment I would say the cost is about 30 to 40 per cent more expensive than a conventional floor structure, so it's not yet where we want it, but factor in all the benefits and maybe it equals out.

The embodied carbon cost must be very low – how do you calculate it?

There are no costs of transporting materials to site – or of transporting excavated spoil away from the site – and the contribution of the thermal mass to reducing energy demand outweighs the energy cost of production. And if the building were to be demolished, the clay could just return to the site from which it came. Alternatively, the compacted vaults are now elements which can be reused in another building.

MARISMEZULIS

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How does this project relate to other work in the region, which seems to be a hotbed of innovation in both timber and rammed earth construction?
There are companies making rammed earth blocks that can be used in floors. We think it's better to make prefabricated elements on site and install them directly, but it's good that there are a growing number of possibilities to deal with rammed earth in floor structures. We now have a joint venture with Blumer Lehmann – Lehmit – which reflects the position our industries are in: the wood industry is under pressure to incorporate more thermal mass, while construction in rammed earth alone is too niche to make a large-scale difference. The timber industry is already highly developed, so a combination of wood and earth could scale up much more easily.

Next steps will include things like activating the thermal mass, by adding tubes within the earth to be able to cool or heat the elements. We are also exploring innovation in wood-clay construction technologies at the University of Liechtenstein, where I co-founded the Earth Hub last year; the RIBA accreditation team visited last summer and was very excited about the direction we are taking.

If we look at our landscapes, we are faced with a lot of apocalyptic images arising from the building industry. But we can switch to a more positive relationship to what we call our 'kulturlandschaft' – meaning 'cultural landscape'. Mountain farmers used to be able to work with local stone, earth and timber; we can build on that knowledge and combine it with digitalisation and industrialised processes.

We think we are really in the right spot to research and develop new combinations of earth and wood, and maybe steel and concrete where it's needed, with processes that can be upscaled, where the whole-life carbon calculation is embedded, at a cost that makes sense. To get there we need to work on the education of architecture students, as well as offices, because this is a really important new sector. ●

MARIS MEZULIS (3)

SENN/DAVID WALKER/H&DEM (2)

Above and top Following cradle-to-cradle values, all components were catalogued for reuse, with metal connections avoided in timber joinery.
Top right The structure was fabricated in a tented 'field factory' on site.
Right Tamping the clay mixture into the wooden modules. The building incorporates 810 modules, which save 650t of carbon relative to conventional floor slab construction.
Below Clay is used for both thermal mass and fire protection.

Credits
Architect Herzog & de Meuron
Structural engineer ZPF Ingenieure
General planning Senn
Rammed earth consultant ERDEN/Lehm Ton Erde Baukunst
Landscape architects Piet Oudolf, Stauffer Rösch
Facade consultant Christoph Etter Fassadenplanungen
Solar energy consultant Planeco
Fire safety Aegerter & Bosshardt
Lighting engineer Reflexion
Building physics and acoustics Kopitsis Bauphysik
Timber and woodwork contractor, facade construction Blumer Lehmann
Hybrid ceiling slab system ARGE Blumer Lehmann and Lehm Ton Erde Baukunst

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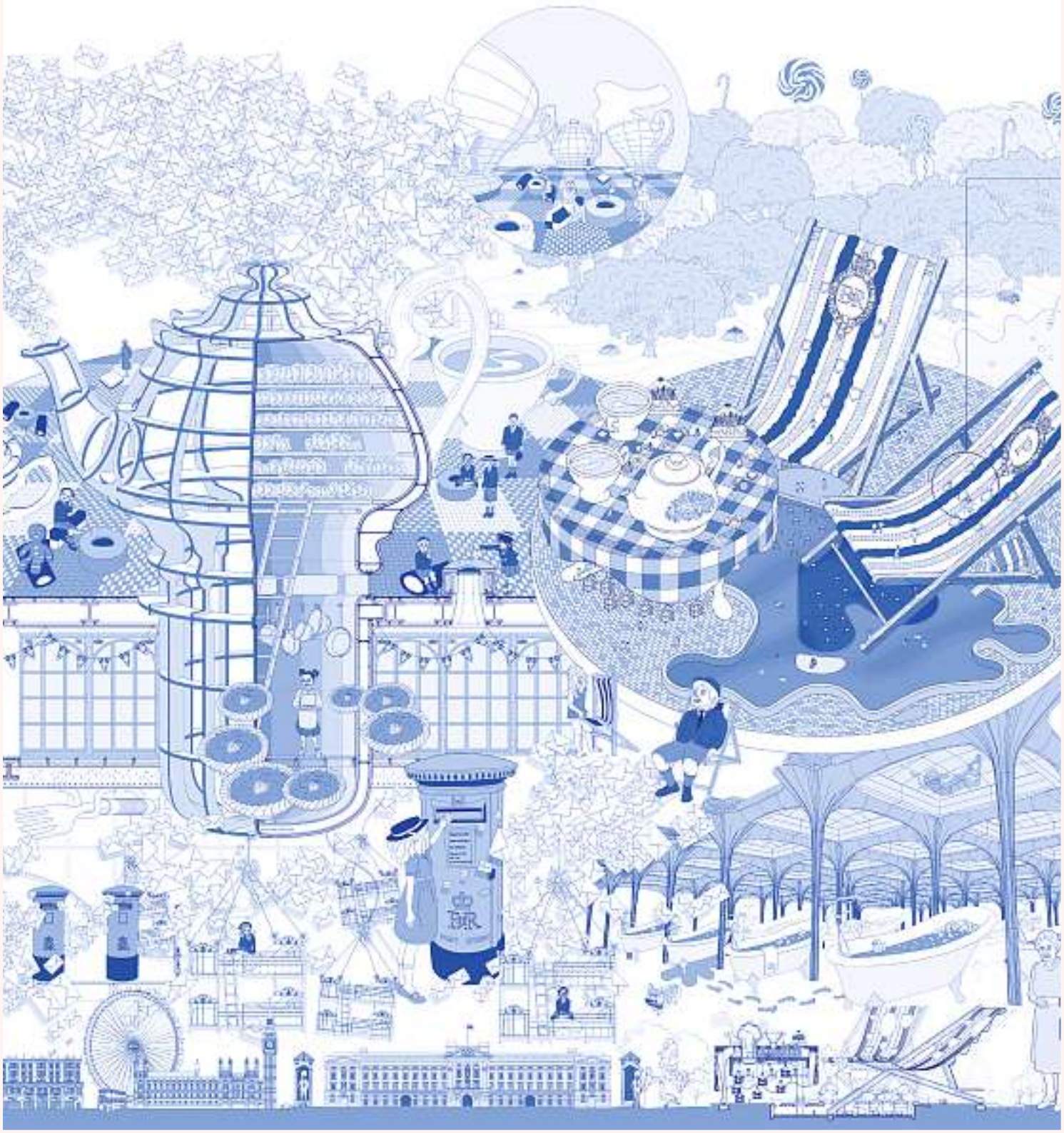
Powers of Ten



ORCH CHEMELLO/RIBA COLLECTIONS

Left Adolf Loos' American Bar in Vienna – a tiny space deceptively enlarged with mirrors – was a point of reference for the competition.

Power of a succinct response

After a break of a few years, I am back representing West Fraser on the RIBAJ SterlingOSB Zero judging panel, this year marking the competition's 10th anniversary.

This year's winner demonstrates what a succinct response to a brief can bring: understanding, clarity of thought and provocation of the significance of both location and bringing surrounding communities together.

Also this year, West Fraser Inverness is celebrating four decades of producing SterlingOSB Zero board products. When combined with the other OSB mills in the West Fraser portfolio, it makes us the world's largest OSB producer. The Inverness plant is the first OSB plant in Europe to receive the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) accreditation, recognising its commitment to sustainability and environmental stewardship.

At West Fraser, we are all about how we can assist architects. We hope our net carbon-negative, UK-manufactured panel products can contribute to these efforts.

I'd like to thank all of the judges for their time and reserves of knowledge. But mostly, thanks not just to our winners but all those who offered both time and imagination to enter this year.

David Connacher, marketing manager, West Fraser Europe, and Powers of Ten judge

Produced by the RIBA Journal in association with West Fraser

Supplement editor
Jan-Carlos Kucharek
Writer
Pamela Buxton
Design
Richard Krzyzak
Sub editor
Simon Aldous
Cover image
Commended winners Steve McCloy and CJ Lim's Tea for Two(Hundred) – A Memorial to HM Queen Elizabeth II and HRH Prince Philip

Scales fall from the eyes

From a building-size gummy bear to a four-poster bed in the form of the Battersea Power Station, there was certainly no shortage of playful entries to Powers of Ten, the latest in West Fraser's annual series of design competitions with RIBAJ.

This year's iteration challenged entrants to interrogate the nature of scale through the use of West Fraser's SterlingOSB Zero board. Entrants were tasked with designing a physical meditation that would "intrigue, amuse or confound" the viewer by playing with the principles of scale.

Tapping into architects' inherent attention to and fascination with scale, the brief was inspired by the Charles and Ray Eames' seminal Powers of Ten film from 1977, which explored shifts in scales by zooming in and out from the tiniest particle right up to the size of the universe. Other reference points to get the creative juices flowing included Adolf Loos' famous American Bar in Vienna – a tiny space deceptively enlarged with mirrors – and Frank Gehry's binoculars-shaped building for Chiat/Day in California.

While entries didn't need to conform to building codes or standards, they did have to be buildable, providing a sense of the construction approach required to transform the simplicity of the board product into something that challenged spatial perceptions. Entries did not have to have a particular context and, fittingly for the subject matter, could be any size, from model to monument, artwork to building.

The competition asked for "imaginative, intelligent or playful" responses to this fertile brief and it got them, with 45 entries riffing variously on

size, perspective, distortion, reflection and much more.

As judging panel chair Jan-Carlos Kucharek pointed out, these entries roughly fell into three themes: those that used structure to play with scale, those that created illusionary visual scale effects, and those that proposed landscape interventions.

Use of unfamiliar scale provided fun, instantly legible results. Some entries scaled up from small to large, such as the aforementioned gummy bear and other sweeties appropriated as buildings (p10), a supersized hand forming instantly recognisable and provocative gestures (p11) and an eccentric play and visitor centre in the form of a giant picnic table designed as a memorial to the late queen (p6). In the other direction, large scale was made small, as in the case of memorable buildings reimagined in the form of quirky furniture (p10).

Several entries explored the potential of distorted spatial perception, whether through use of mirroring or versions of the Ames Room illusion technique, achieved by manipulating room dimensions (p11). Others sought to activate the public realm, finding new uses for leftover urban spaces or creating emergency shelter. While some designs were designed as individual objects in a landscape, others were modular and could be scaled up in multiples as required for impact on a grander scale (p8).

One recurring theme in the judges' discussions was the appropriateness of the board material to the proposed concepts – a familiar point of tension in the West Fraser competition series, which aims to encourage architects to take a fresh approach to using a product that isn't usually visible.

"Over the years, we've seen hundreds of entries that have and haven't grasped it," said West Fraser's David Connacher.

While plenty of this year's entries made convincing use of the board's properties to create more complex shapes and configurations, SterlingOSB Zero board was a less convincing fit for some of the more curvaceous designs on show.

"Do we get a sense that the designer has fallen in love with the material?" asked judge Gurmeet Sian forlornly of one such entry. Nor were judges impressed by entries that would clearly generate considerable waste through extensive cutting of the boards.

But there were no misgivings about the outright winner (p4), applauded for both its compelling concept, described by Sian "as a beautiful illusion of scale and perspective", and also for how the product was used to achieve it.

Find out more about the winner, the three commended and four other shortlisted entries, in the following pages.

Use of unfamiliar scale provided fun, instantly legible results. Some entries scaled up from small to large, while in the other direction, large scale was made small

Judges

Sian Briggs,
director, Alcove Architecture
(2024 competition co-winner)

Stephen Proctor,
director, Proctor & Matthews

Nathalie Rozencwajg
founder, NAME Architecture

DANIELA LUQINI

Christina Seilern,
principal, Studio Seilern

Gurmeet Sian, founder, Office Sian

Jan-Carlos Kucharek.
deputy editor, RIBA Journal (chair)

First place (£2,500 prize) The Spire: reconstructing

Julian Kashdan Brown/Kashdan Brown Architects

Judges were fulsome in their appreciation of the winning entry, which uses illusion to seemingly reconstruct the spire of Malmesbury Abbey in Wiltshire, 525 years after its collapse.

The design proposes a 1:10 scale model of the missing 140m-high spire and adjoining section of abbey, constructed on a plinth adjacent to the path leading to the abbey remains. From a single point on the route, identified by a bronze marker, this structure will align with the remains to create the impression of the spire on top of the abbey. The interior of the model forms a 1m-high stage for outdoor performances and events.

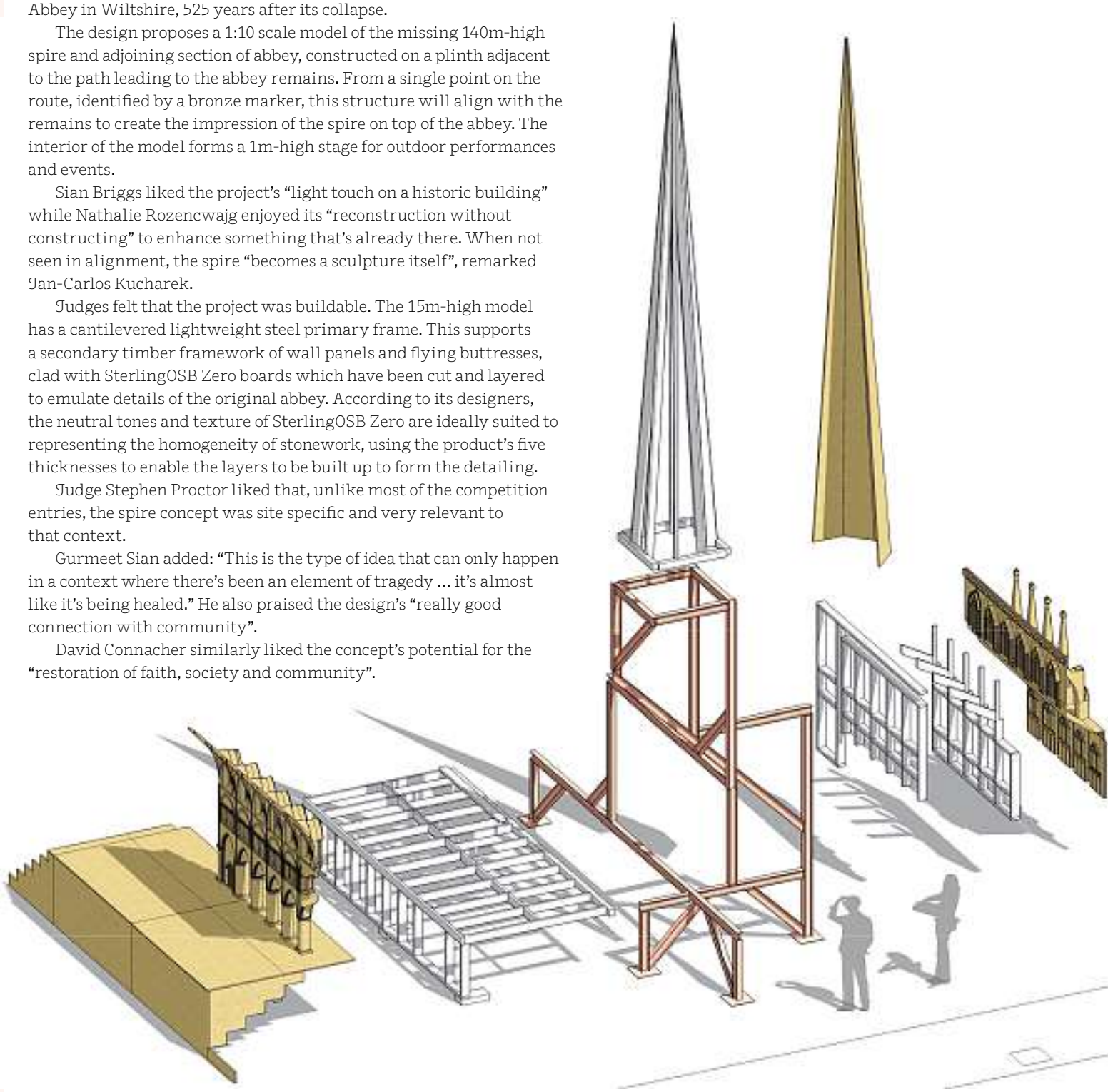
Sian Briggs liked the project's "light touch on a historic building" while Nathalie Rozencwajg enjoyed its "reconstruction without constructing" to enhance something that's already there. When not seen in alignment, the spire "becomes a sculpture itself", remarked Jan-Carlos Kucharek.

Judges felt that the project was buildable. The 15m-high model has a cantilevered lightweight steel primary frame. This supports a secondary timber framework of wall panels and flying buttresses, clad with SterlingOSB Zero boards which have been cut and layered to emulate details of the original abbey. According to its designers, the neutral tones and texture of SterlingOSB Zero are ideally suited to representing the homogeneity of stonework, using the product's five thicknesses to enable the layers to be built up to form the detailing.

Judge Stephen Proctor liked that, unlike most of the competition entries, the spire concept was site specific and very relevant to that context.

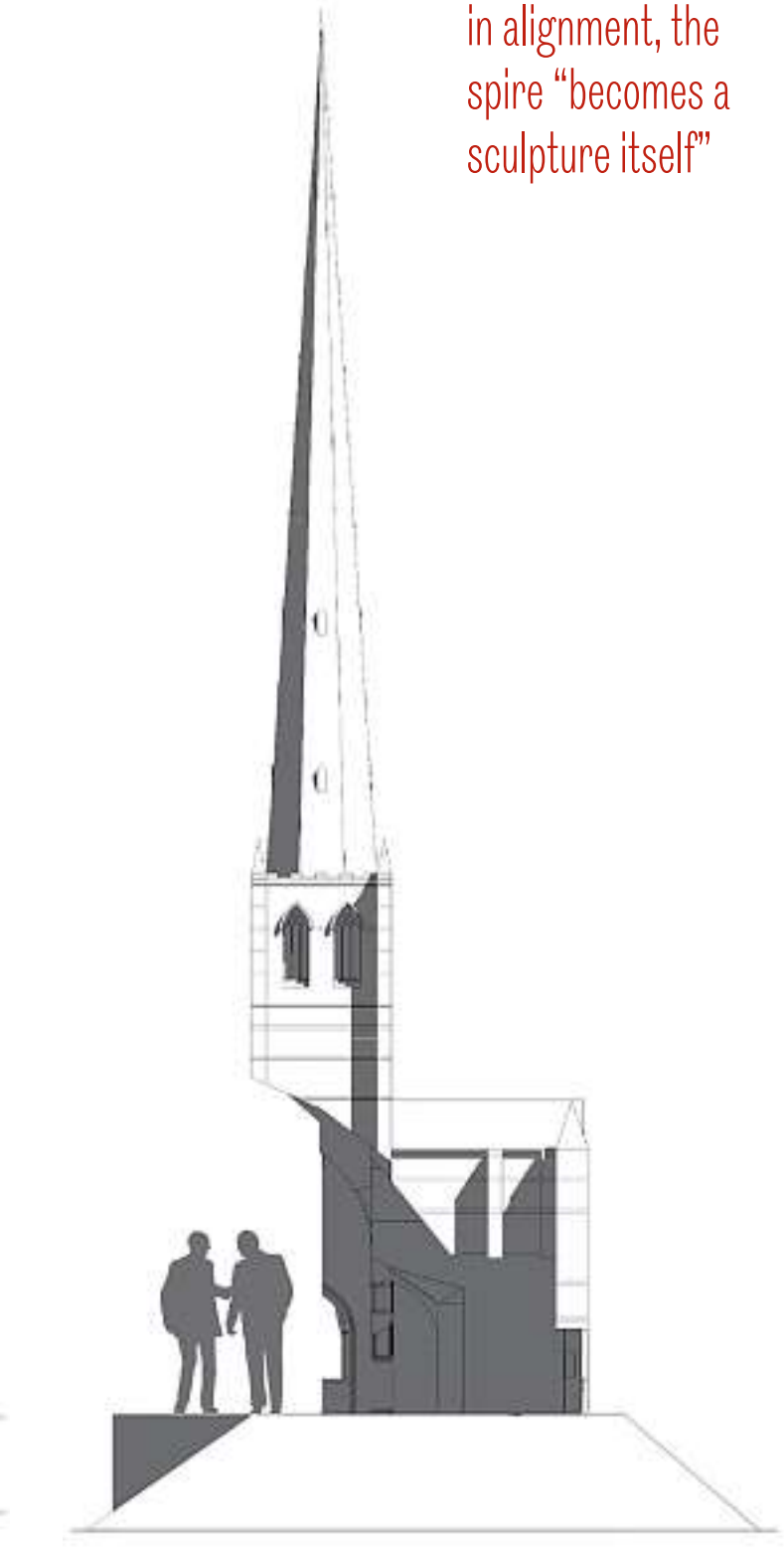
Gurmeet Sian added: "This is the type of idea that can only happen in a context where there's been an element of tragedy … it's almost like it's being healed." He also praised the design's "really good connection with community".

David Connacher similarly liked the concept's potential for the "restoration of faith, society and community".



Malmesbury's Lost Monument

When not seen in alignment, the spire "becomes a sculpture itself"



Opposite page Breakdown of the installation's structural concept.
Left Side view of the 1:10 sculpture of the lost spire.
Above Views of the 1:10 model on arrival, from the key perspectival point, and to the stage behind it.

Commended (£500 prize) Tea for Two(Hundred)- A Memo

Steve McCloy and CJ Lim

Design for a Memorial to HM Queen Elizabeth II and HRH Prince Philip

Judges were captivated by this quirky alternative memorial to the late Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip. Co-designed by Bartlett professor CJ Lim, it proposes a permanent play and refreshments structure for children in the grounds of Buckingham Palace. Conceived as a giant picnic table, it features accommodation in oversized deckchairs, cakes, teapots and puddles.

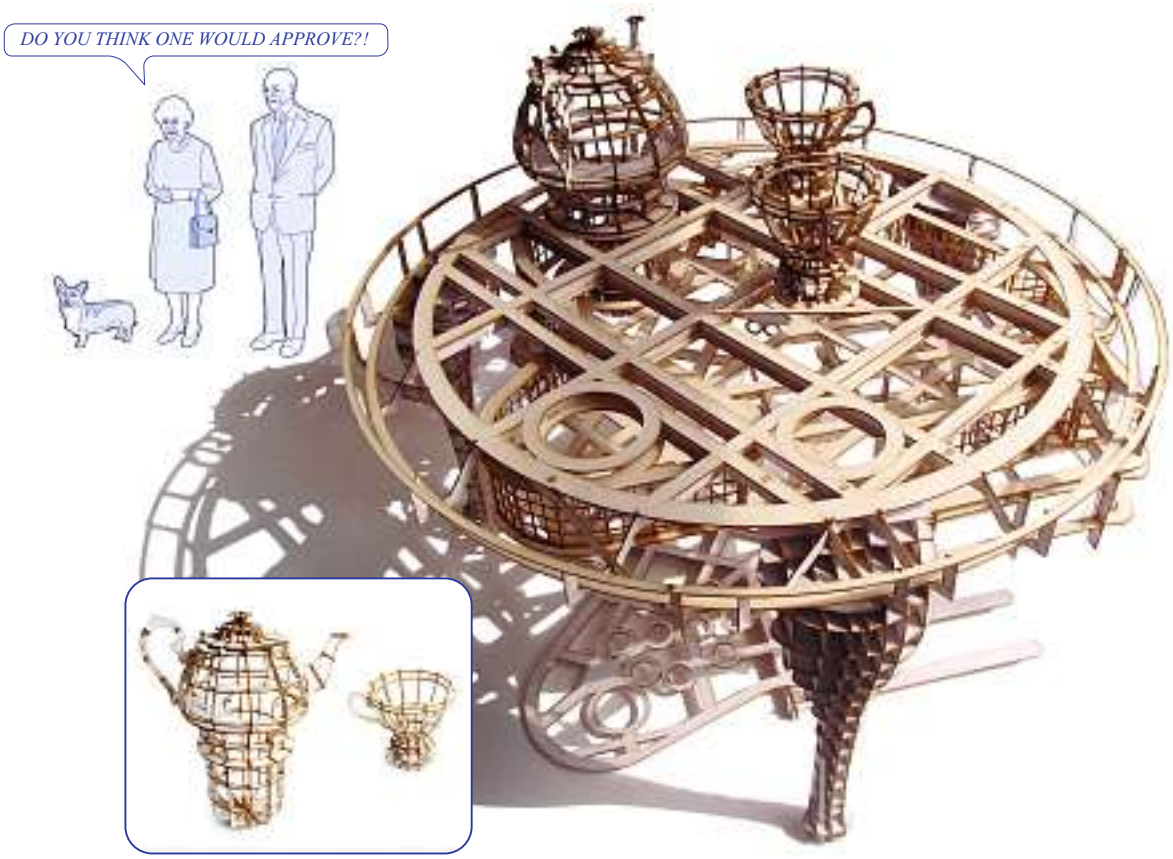
"There were various examples of enlarging things for shock value, but this was the most fun one," said Stephen Proctor, while Gurmeet Sian described it as "deceptively complex the more you delve in. I love the way it plays on eccentricity as a concept."

The sculptural architecture is constructed with an underlying framework of sustainable timber in combination with flat-sheet SterlingOSB Zero arranged in 3D "waffle" forms. This is overclad with ceramics, textiles and traditional plasterwork. Individual modules include a teapot housing the kitchens, while teacup rooflights are used to harvest rainwater, finished in porcelain with gilding and tea-stained glass.

Christina Seilern enjoyed how the design "took something straight and flat and turned it into something so wacko", and how it was "so English, so about the queen".

All the judges loved the bold visual presentation. "They've really put themselves out there," said Sian Briggs, while Jan-Carlos Kucharek described it as "very fun and eccentric".

rial to HM Queen Elizabeth II and HRH Prince Philip

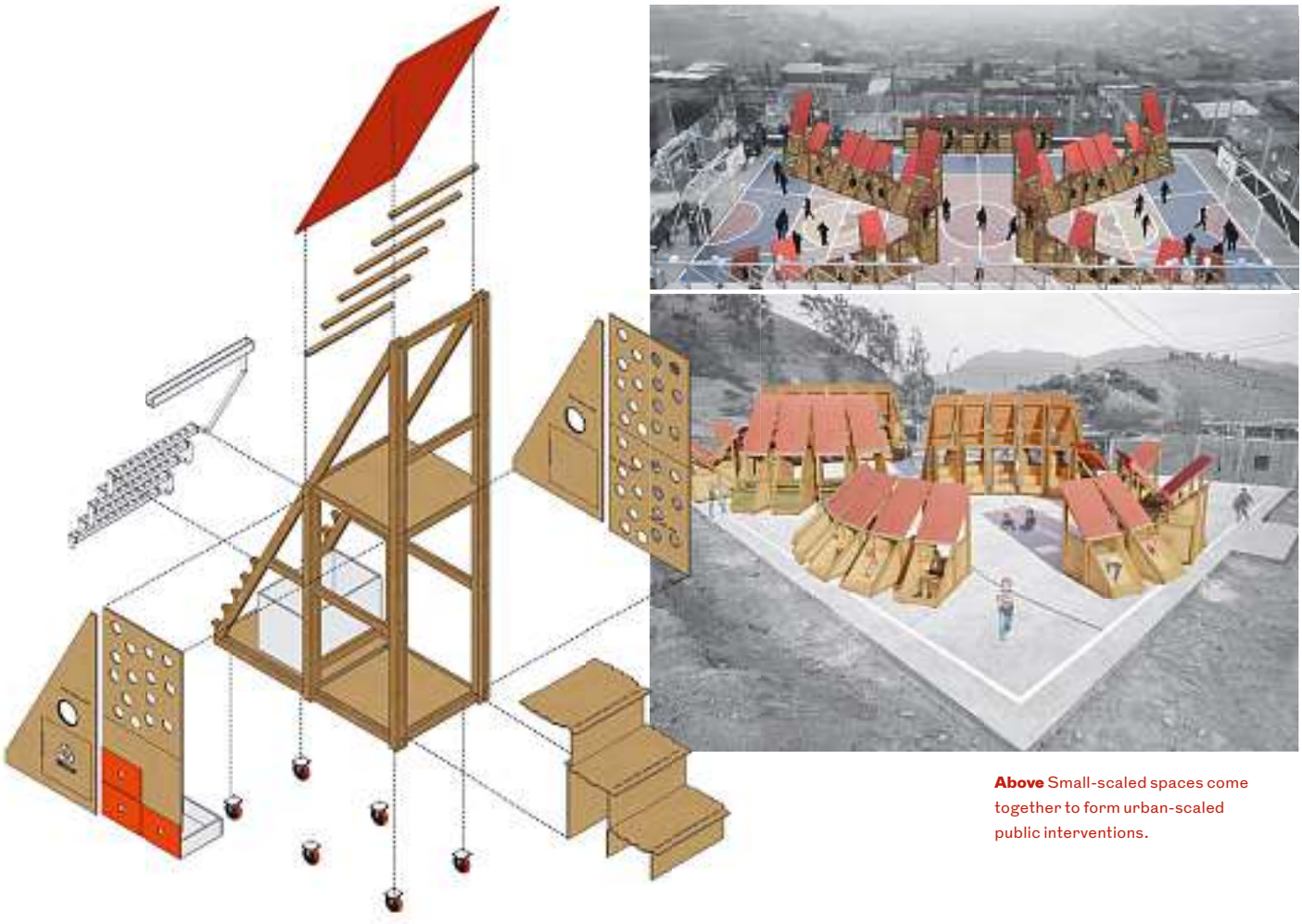


"There were various examples of enlarging things for shock value, but this was the most fun one"

Left Judges were struck by the zany eccentricity of the project presentation.
Above CNC-cut SterlingOSB Zero allows for the creation of the super-scale tea-party forms.
Right Tea For Two (hundred) can be positioned in the corner of Buckingham Palace gardens surrounded by trees, or in St James's Park or Green Park.

Commended (£500 prize) Encounters through Scale

Kevin Sulca, Sayny Robledo, Dalith Quispe



Above Small-scaled spaces come together to form urban-scaled public interventions.

"It's a very thorough piece of work," said judge Stephen Proctor of this system of mobile urban furniture, designed to work both on an object scale and, by joining components together, on a city scale.

The concept proposes playful micro-architecture modules with a 1.3m x 2.6m footprint, offering three different wheeled typologies for work, play or garden/viewpoint use. The latter includes steps, an elevated lookout platform and a rear hydroponic planter. Constructed on a wood frame with SterlingOSB Zero panels, modules are CNC-cut for precision, cost-efficiency and community-led assembly.

"This promotes a participatory, replicable model that simplifies maintenance and future adaptation," say the designers, who describe the panels as offering identity and longevity.

Individual modules can be grouped to "grow" into communal spaces such as a forum, stage or gathering space. They are conceived as working across multiple urban scales, including streets, courts and leftover spaces to "invite new forms of meeting, playing and urban appropriation".

Judges felt the idea for forming both individual space and shared space was realisable. Jan-Carlos Kucharek described it as "a simple idea, simply expressed".

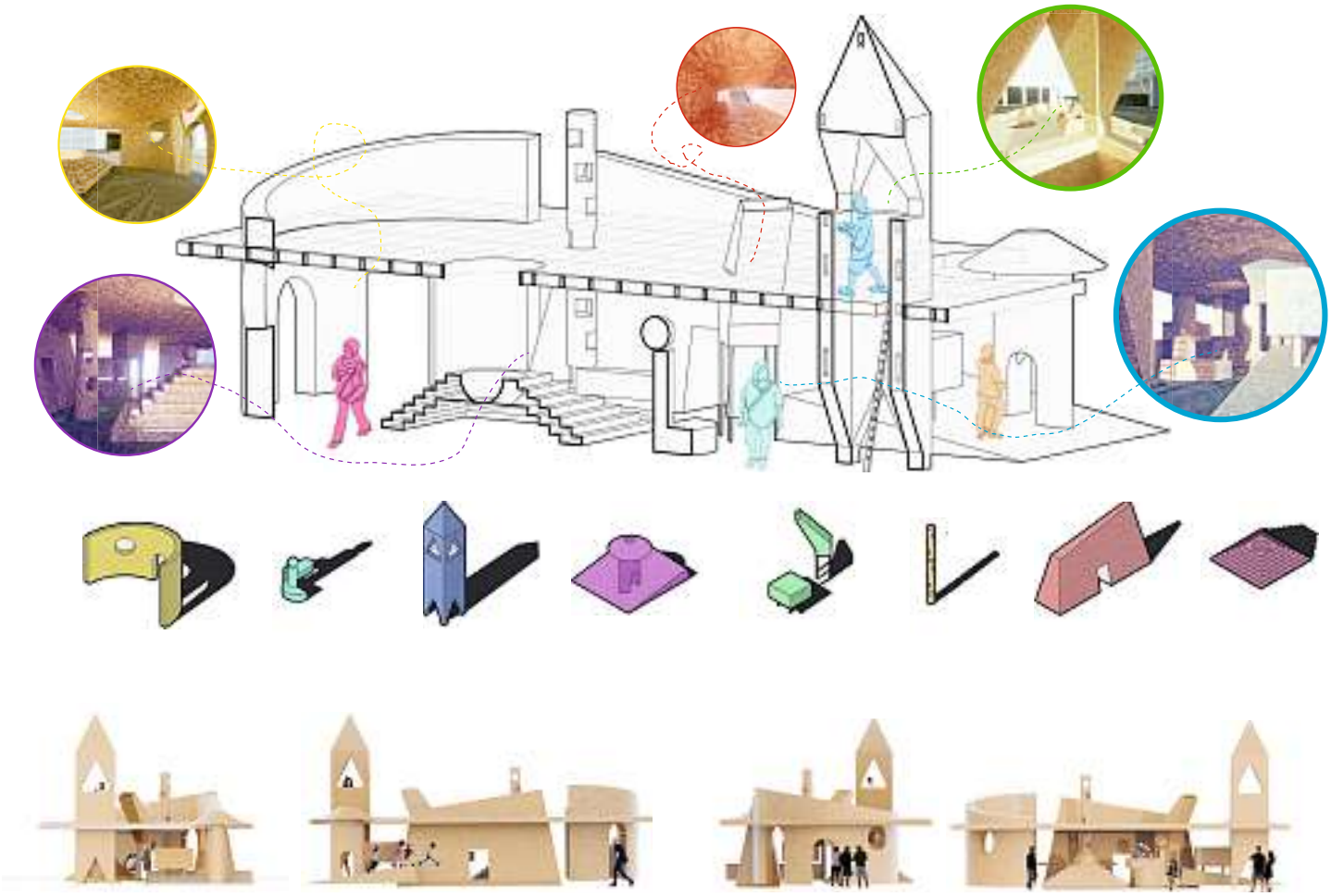
Nathalie Rozencwajg praised the "intelligence of the system to achieve, with a simple element, many different outcomes".

"I thought this was interesting," added Gurmeet Sian, "easy to understand, well drawn."

Judges felt the idea for forming both individual space and shared space was realisable

Commended (£500 prize) Monolithic Playhouse

Olivia Dolan and Sem van der Straaten



Conceived as "a versatile stage for curiosity", the Monolithic Playhouse is formed from eight wooden monoliths linked by a canopy of SterlingOSB Zero to create a unified structure.

The monoliths are designed for interaction as part of a topography that encourages movement, exploration and discovery, whether climbing, hiding, looking or resting. They include a watch tower, "looking boxes" to crawl under for new perspectives, a covered area for relaxation, and seating at varied heights. The canopy provides shelter as well as openings that frame views and cast shadows. Over time, the arrangement of monoliths can be reconfigured.

According to the designers, the playhouse "presents an immersive architectural intervention, designed to ignite wonder and challenge spatial perception, leveraging the inherent qualities of a wooden structure with SterlingOSB Zero sheeting shifting through elements and scales".

The grain and structure of the panels are intended to add a tactile richness and visual depth that enhances the emotional resonance of the space, add the designers.

Judges felt that the design was compatible with the board material, and appreciated the interchangeability of the design created by the kit of elements. "It's one of the strong ones," remarked Gurmeet Sian.

Nathalie Rozencwajg praised the entry as "both sculptural and functional" while Sian Briggs felt it looked achievable. "You can picture it in a public square," she said. "It's not too out there."

Top The various elements are intended to flip familiarity, using form and proportion to create a sense of enchantment and disorientation. **Above** Elements are designed to be arranged or configured in various ways, creating different spatial relationships.

Shortlisted

Domestic Monuments – Ryan Walsh/Ryan Walsh Design

Judges enjoyed the "playful" idea of turning iconic London structures into pieces of household furniture. Conceived as a triptych, the entry aims to interrogate how scale transforms meaning by miniaturising three monumental buildings as "tactile everyday objects".

Battersea Power Station becomes a four-poster bed, its famous chimneys given new meaning. Rather than charged with electricity, it is now "charged with dreams". St Paul's Cathedral has been reimagined as a kitchen island – a place of domestic rather than spiritual ritual. And, rather brilliantly, the Royal Albert Hall becomes "a miniature auditorium for shoes" – an elegant ottoman with integral footwear storage.

"It's a real one-liner but I really quite like it," said RIBA Journal deputy editor Jan-Carlos Kucharek. "All of it is curious, playful, slightly strange and amusing."

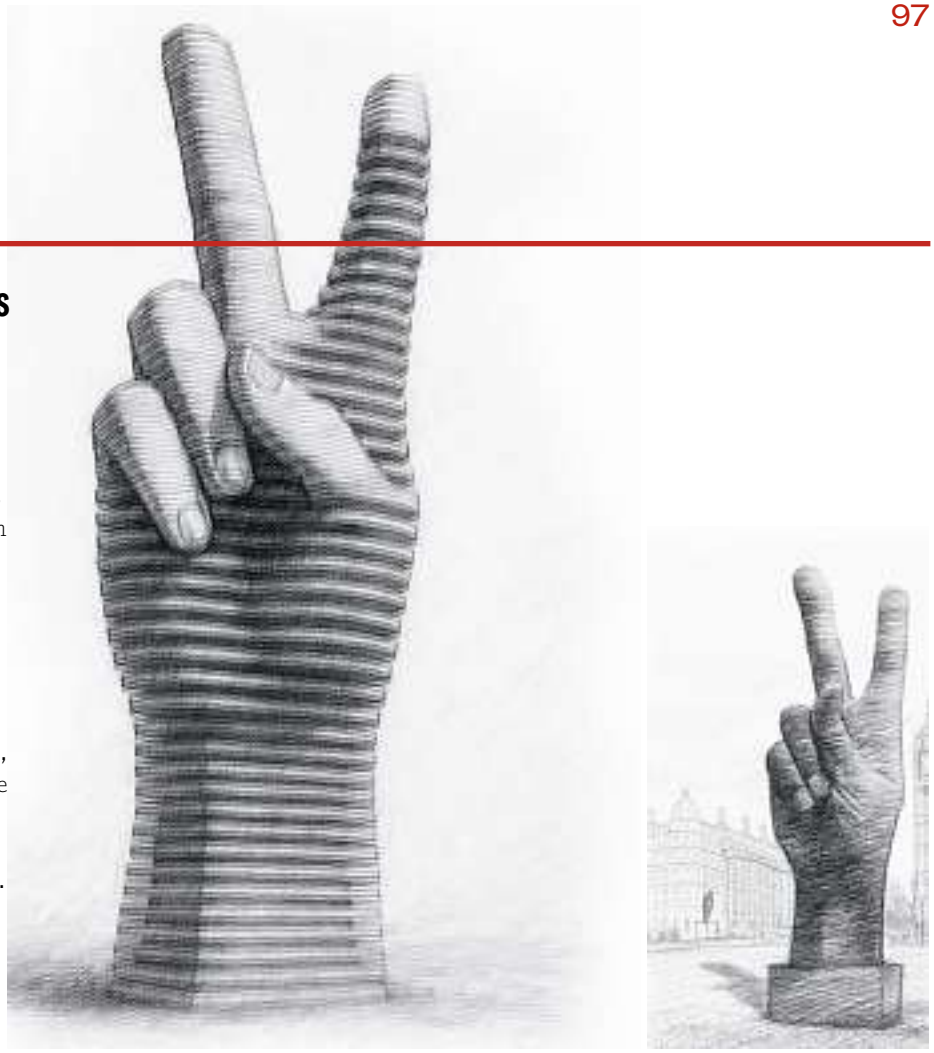
Eat Me - Pick'n'Mix Pavilions – Tim Sanderson, Jack Simpson Brandon Few, Holly Afnan/Corstophine & Wright

A collection of supersized sweets is the inspiration for a park of pavilions in the public realm. Judges enjoyed the narrative of this entry, in which "Alice" finds an enticing bag of Sterling sweets and takes a bite only to shrink and find herself "in a wonderland of colossal confections".

In the design, the scaled-up sweets become public seating and play structures including a tower of stacked liquorice allsorts, a giant walk-in banana and a huge gummy bear with an integral swing.

The panel generally liked that the entry wasn't taking itself too seriously. Gurmeet Sian described it as a "fun, playful representation of a material".

However, the suitability of the material to the design contours was questioned by some judges, including Sian Briggs, who wondered whether it was "forcing the SterlingOSB Zero to be something it's not naturally trying to be".



Peace and Protest – Joseph Watkins

Stacked horizontal sheets of SterlingOSB Zero form a giant, stratified sculpture of a hand in an artwork proposed for London's Parliament Square.

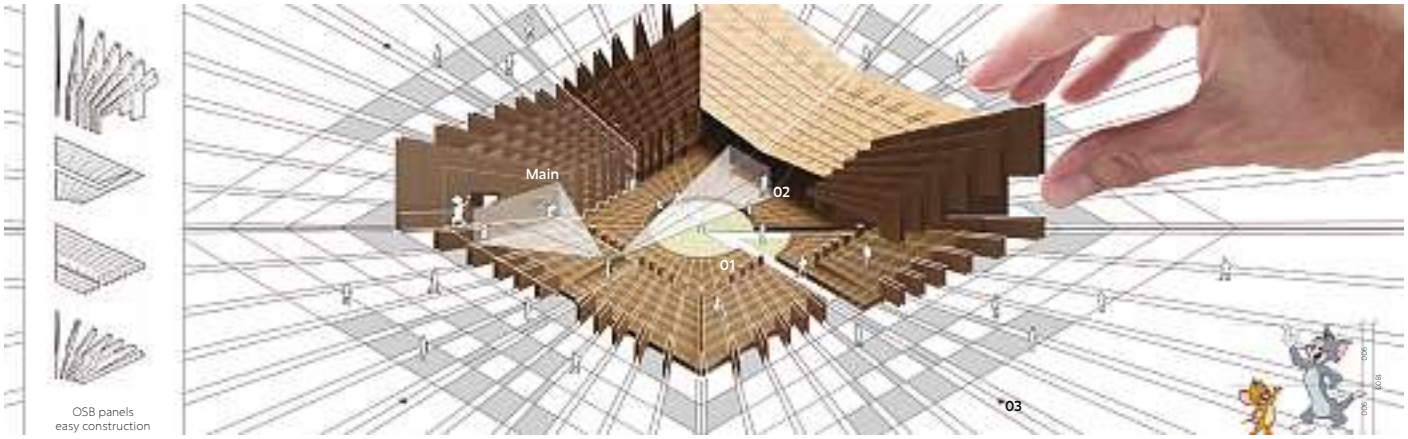
When approached from one side, it reads as a Churchillian V-sign for victory. But seen from the other side, it signifies insult (at least in British culture).

The design is intended as "both monument and participant in the ongoing dialogue between people and power".

In an added twist, being completely untreated and fully exposed to the elements, it is designed to gradually weather over time and in doing so, register rather than resist change, prompting an aesthetic discussion on structures that are "designed to dissolve".

Nevertheless, judges were greatly enthusiastic, with Christina Seilern of Studio Seilern praising how such a flat material has been turned into "a really interesting 3D shape".

Play with Scale: The Ames Matrix – Dae Song Lee, Sung Jin Lee, Hyun Hee Lee, Xin Yue Sun



This entry was among several inspired by the Ames Room, a concept for perceptual distortion achieved by intentionally sloping the floor, ceiling and walls to create optical illusions.

Judges felt that Play with Scale: The Ames Matrix took this concept the furthest. Rather than present a single room with a single-view illusion, it uses a grid of SterlingOSB Zero panels to create eight interconnected rooms as a "walkable, inhabitable system of distortions". Images showing people moving through the warped geometry are live-streamed on monitors in a central courtyard.

"The medium is not software but architecture itself – an analogue distortion that engages the viewer more intimately and unpredictably than digital trickery could," say the designers, adding that it aims to use distortion "to question authority of perspective and assumptions embedded in architectural order".

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3: Culture

Responding to an open call from UK arts producer Artichoke, journalist and photographer Arnolt Smead saw a chance to contextualise his practice. Intended to create debate around our era's big issues, The Gallery's theme for its latest iteration, It's Not Easy Being Green, challenged artists to respond to the climate crisis in the context of the COP30 conference to be held in Belém, Brazil in November. Works by 16 artists were chosen and will be displayed on billboards and digital screens, there and in the UK: provocations to a non-gallery attending public of millions.

Though he calls London home, Smead is a child of Antwerp and has lived in the Netherlands. I ask if passive exposure to the Low Countries' great port cities influenced his choice of subject; but that, it transpires, is too simplistic a reading. His shot of a shipping container was taken while wandering on the island of Kefalonia. "I came across it left sitting in the midst of some beautiful scenery, the weeds starting to reclaim it, slowly rusting under the Greek sun," he recalls.

Even then, the irony of the word 'Evergreen' – a Taiwan-based global shipping company – was not lost on him; his cropping of the image to anonymise it was deliberate. "A friend of mine got in touch to say he'd encountered another Evergreen randomly, in the middle of nowhere, while on the Pacific island of Vanuatu," Smead says. He can imagine a world having no more than a word with which to imagine the the concept of 'nature': "So many containers fabricated, used and then just abandoned. What really happens once we've made them?" ● **Jan-Carlos Kucharek**

Arnolt Smead
Evergreen, 2022
Sony Alpha 6 with FE 16-35mm F2.8 GM II lens.

It's Not Easy Being Green is at locations in the UK (7 Oct to 4 Nov) and Brazil (14 Oct-12 Nov): thegallery.org.uk

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'Too many housing layouts prioritise the car, dissuading people from walking or cycling as a first choice'

Wellbeing drive

Recent projects are increasingly showing the benefits of designing out cars from the places in which we live, finds Eleanor Young

I am something of a connoisseur of modern housing estates, taking detours around and about them wherever I go. I am intrigued by how leftover oak trees and green spaces in 1980s Wimpey developments soften and embed the very banal homes, giving them a sense of place and possibility of neighbourliness. And also distressed by the stretches of tarmacadam that constitute the shared space in many estates: front door to car in less than 30 seconds.

When I think of the alternative, I summon up two recent projects – Leeds' Climate Innovation District (ribaj.com August 2023) and cohousing in Bridport (see page 20). I can feel the sun warming my bones as I think of the two. This is not just because I visited on a warm day; it is because they were thoughtfully, radically, laid out, facing south to make the most of the sun. People said hello as we walked around; edges between front door and public realm were blurred by planting and led on to wide gravel paths – not roads – that, yes, can accommodate a fire engine, but also passing the time of day, play, and chat. And beyond these, shared outdoor spaces for gathering and activity: digging up vegetables, meeting by the river, a barbecue in the meadows or games on the pitch.

A recent brush with a mental health crisis, and reading around it searching for answers, brought home to me the importance of the tiny everyday connections with people, the value when those coalesce, and people you pass become acquaintances or even friends. The layouts of our new houses, towns and cities can support this.

Nearly 65 per cent of adults in England are estimated to be overweight or living with obesity. That can lead to depression and numerous other illnesses from type 2 diabetes to certain cancers, heart disease and strokes. Yet too many of our housing layouts prioritise the car, dissuading people from walking or cycling as a first choice. Where developments are located and whether they include community services, shops and employment also has an essential part to play, something that hopefully will be addressed by the New Towns Taskforce, whose report we are still waiting for as we go to press. (For an insight into likely recommendations, see page 69.)

Against the personal misery of loneliness and disconnectedness and health issues, the climate crisis seems an abstract third point. Despite nearly a fifth of new car sales being of electric vehicles in the UK, the International Energy Agency has modelled a sustainable development route that it will take until 2070 for cars to stop consuming fossil fuels. We need to drive less.

We still haven't cracked cars, their cost to our health, the carbon cost and the immense space we devote to parking them. But there is an urgent impetus to do so, on streets new and old. Put your foot down, architects – this needs some speed!

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'It advocates for early integration of environmental and contextual intelligence, for working with rather than against constraints.'

Studio McW rethinks a London terrace
ribaj.com/sobremesa

Below Houses at the Climate Innovation District in Leeds, by Citu, reset the relationship with cars.

STEPHANIE WUNDERLICH PHOTO: FLO ARMITAGE-HOOKES FOR RIBAJ

Spreading the word

To increase public appreciation of architects, people need to be aware of what we can do, argues Chris Williamson, the new RIBA president, in his first column

From the moment I threw my hat in the ring to become RIBA president, my mailbag from members has been dominated by two issues. Low fees, together with commensurate low salaries; and low visibility, together with greater need to influence politicians and decision makers.

To me, these two things are linked, and I see lifelong learning and the ability for architects to demonstrate their specialism and expert knowledge as the keys to unlocking both. I will write more about lifelong learning in next month's column, so will concentrate here on increasing our influence.

I was first asked to stand for RIBA Council in 1998 by then-president David Rock, who wanted to run a national advertising campaign – by Collett Dickenson Pearce – along the lines of, 'Why choose an architect, when you can chose a RIBA architect?' The idea was to have great examples of architecture, together with reasons why we can demonstrate our value. A change in president meant the campaign didn't run. But I often think that it would have helped reposition the Institute at an important time. One of the aspects to be stressed was to have been our specialisms. Most people, if they think of architects at all, do not think of us as experts in the design and delivery of infrastructure, hospitals, schools or workplaces, or with expertise in technology, sustainability, AI, conservation, heritage and so on. Architects may not have all the answers, but we do have many.

The day after my election, I sat down with the Sunday Times analysis of Keir Starmer's cabinet. I wrote names of experts from RIBA Council, chartered and student members and our honorary fellows, to pair with each cabinet member and their department. I came up with a diverse mix, young and old, but all with architectural expertise to help increase our influence. Of the 20 people I approached, not one refused.

The first meeting of this 'president's advisory group' took place in April, and was an important part of my two-year plan, now approved by Council and Board. In my mind, whenever I see the image of Keir Starmer's cabinet I see members of this group standing behind each minister. They will feed into expert advisory groups, responding to government policy proposals and initiating suggestions of our own. If you want to be involved, please get in touch.

I would also like to see this influence at a local level – at home and in our chapters and regions abroad. We need to get out into schools and involve ourselves in community groups so as to advocate for good design. When you hear our members, alongside others, being given BBC airtime or quoted in Sunday papers, you can't help but feel inspired – and eager for more. I enjoyed Thomas Heatherwick's book Humanise, but we need a much wider discourse about the industry.

I want to make RIBA more democratic and inclusive, and would welcome further input. My door is always open – please come and engage.

Below Chancellor Rachel Reeves speaks to Emma Reynolds, secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs, and Jo Stevens, secretary of state for Wales, ahead of a weekly cabinet meeting in 10 Downing Street.

STEPHANIE WUNDERLICH PHOTO: LAUREN HURLEY/NO10 DOWNING STREET

ALL TO PLAY FOR

This month we are pleased to present our first major exhibition following the temporary closure of 66 Portland Place. Home Ground: The Architecture of Football opens at RIBA North and Tate Liverpool, exploring the design and engineering history of football stadiums, while also celebrating their social and cultural impact.

Christopher Lee, co-founder and co-principal of Serie Architects, in his studio.

Christopher Lee's Serie Architects was forged during 'the peak of globalisation' – and its distinctively international outlook continues to inform its practice

Words: Isabelle Priest Portrait: Jordi Huisman

Home and away

Christopher Lee's backstory illustrates how we are often, unwittingly or not, products of the times in which we live. He is the co-founder and co-principal of Serie Architects, an architectural practice he describes as operating as "one office across three locations": London, Mumbai and Singapore. They set up the studio like this in 2008; Lee is based primarily in London. His co-founder and co-principal, Kapil Gupta, is in Mumbai.

The year 2008 is key. "It was a moment in time," explains Lee as he sits in the meeting area at Serie's London studio, on the third floor of a small converted warehouse in Dalston. The original, single-glazed metal windows all around give the effect of almost 360-degree views, in the foreground of low-rise residential Hackney and on towards the ever-growing towers in the City of London. Lee had returned to London from Singapore in 2005, invited to teach at the Architectural Association by then-chair Mohsen Mostafavi. "Looking back, as students the ambition is always that we set up our own practice," he recalls. "It was a mixture of naivety and ambition, but also opportunity. It was a less risk-averse time and more positive."

This was before the financial crisis. Lee and Gupta's plan was to win projects by open competition, which seems implausible today for a practice starting out. "It was," he says, "the peak of globalisation. There's a certain pushback now." To some extent, by comparison, what Lee describes makes setting up an architectural practice now look like a far more closed affair – beginning with house extensions for family and friends, dependent on socioeconomic connections. These would not, he says, have been possible for him.

Lee's backstory is also one of fortune dependent on geopolitical forces. He was born in Malaysia and is ethnically Chinese. He left on a full scholarship after his GCSEs to study for his A-levels in Singapore, as part of a programme offered by the Singaporean government to groups not afforded the same rights in Malaysia because of pro-Malaysian constitutional rights. The scholarship pays for everything, including travel, fees and lodging. It followed him to study architecture at the National University of Singapore and then to the AA. That's how he first came to the UK – where he met Gupta.

"I come from a very poor family, from a very small town in Malaysia," Lee says. "My entry into architecture would not have been possible if it wasn't for [the] scholarships offered by the Singapore government for Malaysians." That's

FINBARR FALLON

Below The Canopy at Geneo, a 3,000m² event plaza with a glulam arched roof structure at the Singapore Science Park.

how Lee's association with Singapore began. He had to return there after his studies for five years as part of the scholarship agreement – the reason it continues to endure.

Lee sees Serie Architects as a third-generation global practice. (IM Pei is the first-generation global architect and Foster + Partners is the second.) To him, the difference between his generation and the previous two is that they got work off the back of a clear style that usually developed in the home country of where they were born. "We are global in a completely different sense," he goes on. "We started off in India and the UK. Kapil is from India, but I am not from the UK and had zero UK work. We still have less UK work than international work."

This is what defines Serie Architects' approach. Unlike these previous generations that exported a certain architecture, Serie started without an expansive portfolio. In that void, the challenge was how the studio could operate across continents and remain consistent and relevant to the context. To some extent, the practice's approach, which began through diploma work at the AA, has been reactive to the global forces which also enabled them. "We were aware of some of the pitfalls of that form of globalisation – that it is predicated on a certain corporate homogeneity, which is positive in the way it is replicable and gives that branding consistency. But we couldn't do that, and didn't believe in that," says Lee.

Although it sounds familiar now, Lee's approach was to look at typology, history and the city. However, in the early 2000s, the excitement in architecture was around the digital. Tools were emerging and being used to find exotic forms. At the AA, Lee remembers Farshid Moussavi announcing that they were not to look at any books; to his tutors, Ben van Berkel and Michael Hensel, history and context were seen almost as taboo in order to fully embrace the digital. "Being the obedient students we were, we did the opposite," explains Lee. "I rejected that in my diploma project to look at the historical and political dimension of the city." These formed the basis of Lee's subsequent teaching at the AA and at Harvard Graduate School of Design, his PhD at the Berlage, and Serie Architects' work.

RORY GARDINER

Right The huge roof at the Singapore School of Design and Environment, which provides solar shading as well as supporting more than 1,200 PV panels.

"We feel that typology offers us an insight into why architecture is persistent or enduring," adds Lee. "If an architecture is typical, it is typical precisely by being sanctioned by social and cultural norms. This is counter to the tendency of architecture to look at what is one-off."

This approach is embodied in Serie Architects' first building, the Singapore State Courts. The project was won by international open competition in 2010 and completed in 2019. The premise of the building, which consists of two 178m-tall towers connected by 39 glazed bridges, is to rethink the surrounding typologies of the historic Chinese shophouses and modern downtown high-rises. The front tower houses the courtrooms, while the rear contains the judges' chambers and administrative functions. The Courtroom Tower is an open frame supporting a multiplication of ground floor planes of shared landscape terraces. It has no external facade, but the courtrooms are clad in 6m-tall modular pigmented precast panels, inspired by the colours and textures of the tiled roofs of the Chinatown shophouses.

The State Courts scheme was one of three open international competitions Serie won within a two-year period for Singapore, all of which finished around the same time. The second was Oasis Terraces, a neighbourhood centre that tries to make the building as publicly accessible as possible using a winding garden that ramps up to a landscaped roof, and a tropical plaza on the ground floor. The third was the National University of Singapore's School of Design and Environment, which engages with the issue of the city in a hyper-climatic way. It is a discovery, knowledge-producing project that generates as

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Left The two-tower Singapore State Courts, which combines the typologies of the Chinese shophouse and downtown high-rise.

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much, or more, energy than it consumes within its footprint, and maximises the plot with a huge roof topped by PV cells. The roof overhangs to create a 45-degree slope to the volumes underneath that reduces heat gain, and fans are included for cooling rather than air conditioning.

These projects kicked off a portfolio that now includes two buildings in a wider masterplan at Porte de Montreuil that attempt to reconnect Paris to its periphery, cut off by its ring road for decades. Recalling the Haussmann-style buildings of the centre, one building is a fully timber structure hotel and community amenity; the other is an office designed to a housing plan base that would allow easier conversion. All the materials for the projects are sourced within 50km of the site.

Eight months ago, Serie completed Satsang Hall, a magnificent centrepiece to the 100ha masterplan for the Shrimad Rajchandra Mission in Dharampur, India. It comprises 13 stacked rooms, rotated 45 degrees, and has a column-free central hall that can accommodate 5,000 people. This was awarded by invited competition, and despite its lavish appearance was funded by donations from devotees, which meant it had to be economical. The exterior marble, for example, consists of hand-cut bricks made from offcuts sourced from Makrana, Rajasthan.

Ironically, work in the UK has been less forthcoming for Lee, although his practice is starting to become fruitful. Serie is designing a purpose-built student accommodation tower, a build-to-rent tower and a linear CLT pavilion to the underside of the park, alongside Sheppard Robson, at the Earls Court redevelopment, as well as a five-storey apartment building in Woodberry Down, north London. At the latter, the studio is using ideas from its work overseas to introduce oversized balconies, open and green lift lobbies and flexible, usable entrance hallways that could be, for example, work-from-home spaces or children's play areas.

What's crucial is how Lee's work and thinking constantly skips from theory to research to practice. At Harvard, he is about to lead a sponsored research unit about 'Blue Zone' cities – the five regions of the world with the highest number of centenarians, which are all rural environments or on islands. The Ministry of Health in Singapore – the most recent sixth addition to the list – wants to be more ambitious in embedding longevity into the city's fabric, rather than it being policy-driven. It also aims to close the gap between lifespan and healthspan, which are not improving at the same rate. The architectural work lies in rethinking typologies of healthcare, sports, housing and green infrastructure.

Whatever the pushback of globalisation, herein are the benefits of being and being able to become a global architect – the ability to learn from and adapt to different environments. On differences between Serie Architects' office locations, Lee says: "India moves more slowly, but offers incredible opportunity to work with contextual materiality and build with what people can build with. Singapore is forward-thinking and daring. There is a lot of incentive to build more for the private sector and afford generosity in the architecture." Another well-known UK architect recently put it to Lee that Serie's work abroad is more inventive than it would be here. It is time some of those aspects rubbed off here too. The results could be contextual, but thrilling.

Above The build-to-rent tower proposal at the Earls Court redevelopment, London. The ground floor is landscaped to flow freely with external level changes.

Below The marble-clad 16,000m² Satsang Hall at the Shrimad Rajchandra Ashram in Dharampur, Gujarat, India.

RORY GARDINER

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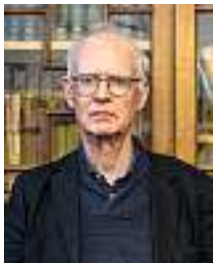
The academic and historian played a key role in the Victorian Society's rise, and influenced a generation of students with his rigorous, literary approach



Andrew Saint 1946–2025

Andrew Saint, who has died aged 78, was a historian of London's buildings and of the architectural profession, a revered teacher and a key figure in the Victorian Society's rise to influence. The son of Reverend Maxwell and Elisabeth Saint, he was educated at Christ's Hospital before reading classics at Balliol College, Oxford, where he first met lifelong friend and Victorian architectural historian Peter Howell.

After finishing a master's at the Warburg Institute, Andrew's tutor Michael Baxandall recommended him for a part-time lecturer post, with Dalibor Vesely, at the University of Essex during the tenure of Joseph Rykwert as professor of art. The experience made him perpetually wary of those who conceptualised about architecture in an imprecise or ahistorical way.

Andrew's career as an architectural historian began in 1974, as an editor at the Survey in London. On the 1986 abolition of the Greater London Council, where the Survey was based, he moved to its replacement, the London Region of English Heritage, where he worked on listing initiatives. Surrounded and encouraged by new friends, he published in 1976 Richard Norman Shaw, the book which established his reputation, and in 1983, The Image of the Architect, a lively history of the role of the architect as self-declared hero from AWN Pugin to Howard Roark.

Andrew's time at the University of Cambridge, as a professor of architecture, from 1995 to 2006, was personally less rewarding since he had little time for the machinations of academic politics. But he also took on a series of doctoral students who would all carry the flag for his literary style and standards, and his insistence on rational, thorough investigation, to a new generation.

It was with relief that Andrew returned to English Heritage to become the general editor of the Survey. This new appointment marked the launch of a series of volumes of unequalled range and quality, notably on Battersea, Woolwich, southeast Marylebone and Oxford Street.

He kept all the time a key voice at the Victorian Society with his friends Howell and Gavin Stamp, and, for a while, chaired its primary policy forum, the Southern Buildings Committee. During the 12 years in which Ian Dungavell acted as its first brilliant professionalising director, the Society's national profile took off with conservation campaigns which still make headlines today.

Andrew published prolifically, usually in the form of monographs but also in collaboration with friends including Gillian Darley, Elain Harwood and Chris Brooks. His books on the Hertfordshire schools programme (Towards a Social Architecture, 1987), on St Paul's Cathedral (with the historians Derek Keene and Arthur Burns, 2004) and on the changing relationships between building professionals (Architect and Engineer, 2007), showcase his remarkable literary fluency, breadth and rigour as a writer and historian.

His final book, a history of Waterloo Bridge, is out in November, but Andrew's legacy will endure in the literature that students of 19th- and 20th-century British architecture continue to read, and in education itself. Three innovative courses recently founded at Cambridge by Andrew's student James Campbell are based, in Saintian fashion, on developing the experience and engagement with history of the architect in practice; as Andrew himself once said, on seeing a famous phenomenologist leave the room, "My next war will be against 'Meaning'." Andrew leaves a partner, Ida Jager, and three daughters, Lily, Catherine and Leonora. ●

Timothy Brittain-Catlin is professor of architecture at the University of Cambridge

IN MEMORIAM

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Churchill Gardens
Pimlico, London, 1950

In July 1950, German architect Ernst May visited London to get acquainted with the latest buildings of note erected in the capital. May – who had studied for a period in the United Kingdom under Raymond Unwin – had been city architect and planner in his native Frankfurt, where in 1925 he initiated a large-scale housing development programme based on modernist principles. It is not surprising, then, to learn of his interest in British postwar housing, and we see him in this photograph surveying Powell and Moya's Churchill Gardens estate in Pimlico.

May also visited prewar examples of the Modern Movement in Britain, such as Highpoint by Tecton and the Pioneer Health Centre by Owen Williams. In the early 1930s, May had moved with his team to the Soviet Union in the hope of designing entire cities but by 1933 he had become disillusioned about his prospects in the country. Rather than returning to Germany (now ruled by the National Socialist party), May relocated to East Africa, where he was still living and working at the time of his visit to London. ●

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