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# CONSUME

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# CONSUME

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Cover image: Celine store, Milan, shot by Simon Menges





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# CONSUME

Our changing buying habits have had huge effects on our built environment, from high streets to logistics parks. In this issue, writes Eleanor Young, we explore that shifting retail landscape and the role architects can play in shaping it for the future

The state of UK high streets, depressing to many, delights my teenage daughter. A trip with coffee (me buying) and visits to five charity shops makes the most of many town and city shopping streets (we ignore the betting shops). Like many who enjoy experimenting with inexpensive secondhand clothes, she is not fussy about whether they come from Oxfam on the high street or via the Vinted app.

The market in 'pre-loved' clothes epitomises the overconsumption of our times, while offering a small chink of hope that we can at least reuse discarded goods. It also demonstrates our mixed economy of in-person and online shopping; going into the store for the experience, the testing of fabric and size; browsing online for the precision search, the inventory and the brands – and occasionally the frustrations, as the Adidas Superstars arrive toddler-size.

Online purchases in the UK now account for 27 to 32% of total retail sales, the Office for National Statistics says.

But we couldn't base a themed issue for architects on designing under-stair cupboards to be stuffed with old shoes waiting for a 'like' on Vinted. And it is obvious we have to be designing for our new ways of consuming. So we have dipped into the world of supply, looking at the vast logistics sheds for storing, decanting and transporting goods, and asked where architects might be able to bring their skills to a tight commercial formula (see page 24).

Of course, design is typically more highly regarded when it is about creating an experience directly for consumers. Over the centuries market buildings have been at the centre of commerce. You could style them as the precursors to shopping centres; but in the regional market investment from Huddersfield to Birmingham we also see a belief in the evolving model of markets, as places to meet and eat, yet also places to continue to find small traders in a jungle of retail giants (see page 30).

Who says shopfronts and online stores have to be separate? There is a new enmeshing, between the emotional power of a great physical experience and the preferences and privileges of online identities. They call it 'phygital' and Jan-Carlos Kucharek explores it on page 36. Look out for retail spaces becoming 'clubhouses' for aspirational brands, and media megaliths such as Netflix moving from purely virtual into tangible worlds.

In this ever-changing market it is clear that inventive architects such as Jan Kattein and ACME's Friedrich Ludewig (see their sparky conversation on page 14) have a role to play informing the value judgements being made by councils, developers and landowners about whether to invest in the shopping centre or the high street, whether to offer opportunities to small businesses at lower cost or whether, in fact, to repurpose shops and shopping centres in favour of city living. Just so long as they keep a few charity shops... ■

# GLASS HALF FULL

## WORDS

Flo Armitage-Hookes

In theory, glass can be infinitely recycled. However, over time, dust and debris gets in, making it too impure to be turned back into glass. The UK generates half a million tonnes of this not-quite-glass each year, with much of it being crushed and used as a substitute aggregate. Liverpool-based manufacturer Granby Workshop and design studio Matter at Hand have developed a higher value and carbon-saving use for it: clayless ceramic tiles.

When glass is heated, crystals form around the impurities, altering and strengthening its structure. “If you’re a glassmaker, that’s a flaw. But if you’re making ceramic materials, it’s amazing,” says Matter at Hand founder Lewis Jones. This reaction takes place at 800 to 850°C, around 400°C lower than the temperature required to fire clay. Such energy savings could be game changing for an industry that has struggled with rising energy costs – renowned pottery maker Denby went into administration in March 2026.

Clay is easy to work with, and mimicking its malleability demanded some creative thinking. “One of the materials we use to help provide the plasticity to the body... is a cellulose binder that’s mainly used in cake decorating to make fondant icing,” explains Lewis. Although Granby Workshop already incorporates other waste materials into its ceramics, the manufacturing process also had to be rethought, with tiles extruded rather than formed using a hydraulic press.

Ten thousand tiles have been commissioned by Assemble and Granby Four Streets CLT, which jointly founded the workshop in 2015, to clad their new two-storey Fourth Corner building in Toxteth. The project is a rare opportunity to showcase the clayless ceramics where, among supportive and connected stakeholders, barriers to using experimental materials are softened. ■



Above: In the UK, nearly half a million tonnes of waste glass per year is too impure to be recycled back into glass.

Below: The mixture is extruded, shaped and fired at 800 to 850°C in electric kilns, around 400°C lower than clay.



Above: Granby Workshop mixes this waste, in powder form, with reactive additives and binders.

Below: The glass crystallises and forms a dense and strong ceramic material.



LEWIS JONES / MATTER AT HAND (3)

TAKIYAH DALY / GRANBY WORKSHOP

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# FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

## WORDS

Flo Armitage-  
Hooks

Opposite top left:  
Heyne Tillett Steel  
director James Morgan  
was determined to use  
salvaged steel for his  
home extension.

Opposite top right:  
The beams have  
characterful hints  
of their former use.

Opposite bottom:  
Installation of 1930s  
steel beams, reclaimed  
from the House of  
Fraser, in carbon-  
conscious workspace  
Tower Bridge Court.

Right: Tower Bridge  
Court, looking east;  
close collaboration,  
logistical planning and  
sustainability-minded  
clients made the reuse  
across sites possible.

Using reclaimed steel was a no-brainer for Heyne Tillett Steel director James Morgan when extending his family's north London home. He had been working on refurbishment projects as a structural engineer for over a decade, co-founded The Engineers Reuse Collective in 2025 and had – somewhat accidentally – salvaged steel for a previous home renovation: “It coincided with HTS’ office being done up and some I sections were about to be skipped. I said to the contractor: ‘I’ll have them!’”

The rear side extension, designed by Andy Matthews Studio, needed a 4.6 x 2.7m steel box frame to open up the kitchen to a new dining room. There were only a couple of salvage stockists to choose from and procurement was simple. “It was an email to Cleveland Steel; this is what we need, have you got any? They then fabricated, primed and delivered it” says James. Over 1.2t of CO<sub>2</sub> was saved and he believes that, given the standard sections and small volumes used, reclaimed steel should be the go-to for all domestic projects.

His only regret is that a characterful British Steel stamp has been concealed by laminated veneer lumber blocking. “It would have been good to get a photo of the beams before fabrication and agree on their orientation – we would have made a feature of it” he reflects. That said, old bolt holes visibly pattern another beam, hinting at its history.

Although takeup of reclaimed steel is growing across the industry, impediments for larger projects remain. Stocks change every day, meaning designs may have to be repeatedly revised until an order is placed. “The worst thing that happens is you have to go with new steel instead,” reasons James – but this can prove tricky if the contract sets out strict reuse parameters. “It would be helpful to have contracts that are flexible enough to accommodate more or less new steel. At the moment, it’s done a bit on the goodwill of the contractors,” he adds.

Transferring steel directly from one building to another – providing circular certainty for both giver and receiver – is possible. However, the tangle of logistics, stakeholders and timelines involved make it a rare occurrence. In 2023, it was masterfully pulled off at scale by Civic Engineers and Webb Yates, which collaborated to reuse 20t of original steel beams from the 1930s House of Fraser store on Oxford Street, then under renovation, in Tower Bridge Court, a low-carbon workspace designed by Stiff + Trevillion. Over 48t of CO<sub>2</sub> was saved, and the project has become a case study for reclamation across live schemes.

Currently, there’s little cost difference between specifying new and reclaimed steel, which often leaves clients weighing up sustainability versus perceived risk. However, with inflationary pressure and rising import tariffs, salvaged steel could turn out to be the financially savvy option too. ■





# BUILDING A VIRTUOUS CIRCLE

WORDS

Flo Armitage-Hookes

**“WE’RE NOT LOOKING TO DUPLICATE BUT TO UNLOCK NEW TERRITORY”**

Right: Tipping Point East is a new circular construction hub in Newham. Its fit-out used entirely reclaimed materials, with Yes Make acting as principal contractor.

Below: Timber partition made from salvaged sea groynes and oak by Yes Make for the London Coffee Factory, with Cupsan panels by Blast Studio.

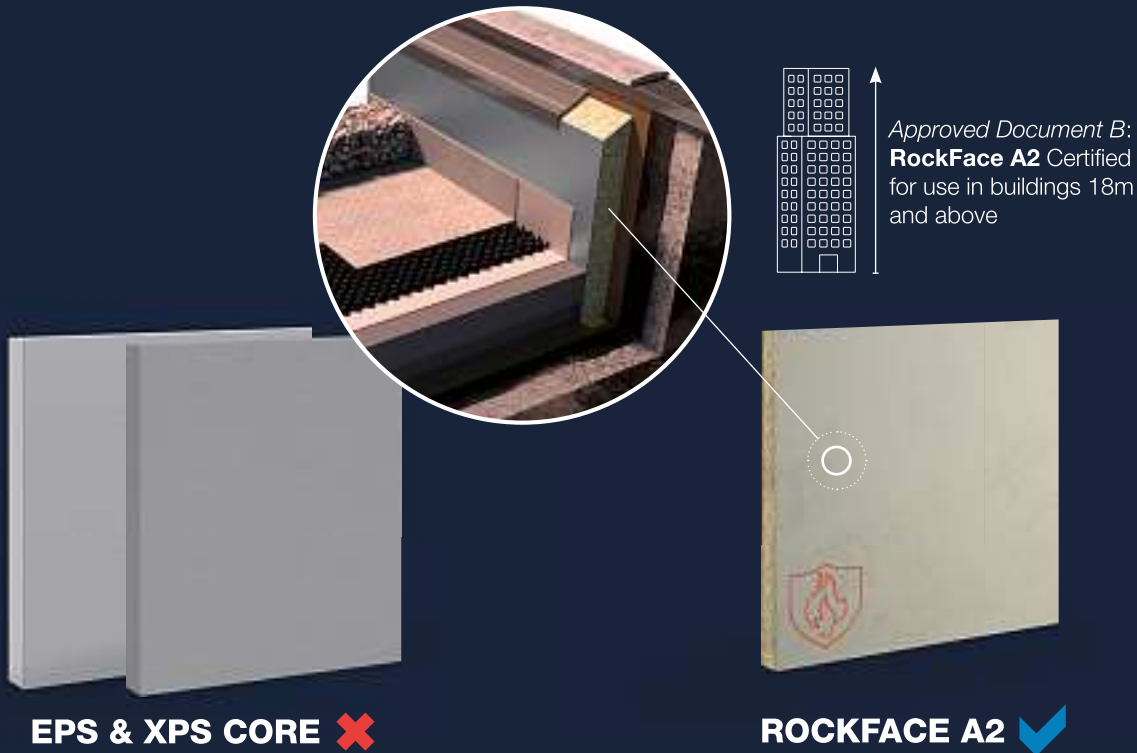


Salvaging waste material at Smithfield Market as it was being renovated by the London Museum, Yes Make founder Joel De Mowbray realised his team was barely scratching the surface. “I was walking around seeing all these things getting crushed and I thought: ‘We’re taking the nice stuff that someone else probably wanted anyway.’” Members of the reuse-driven design and build collective, set up in 2019, knew they needed to scale up and collaborate to make real impact.

This has come to fruition in Tipping Point East, a new circular economy hub in Newham, east London, co-developed by Yes Make, Material Cultures and RESOLVE Collective in partnership with Newham Council and the Greater London Authority. The 20,000m<sup>2</sup> industrial site brings together material reuse, training and cultural activities and aims to provide practical, low-carbon options within construction supply chains.

Although it is not yet at full capacity, Yes Make is processing 20t to 50t of material per week and working closely with developers, contractors, architects and institutions to receive, certificate and repurpose it. The hub now takes almost everything, from structural steel to electrical components to sanitaryware, except where reuse pathways already exist. “We’re not looking to duplicate,” Joel reflects. “We’re looking to unlock new territory.”

Whether one wants to offload or procure, projects are most successful when Yes Make is involved early on. For architects, this often means designing with what salvage is available at Stages 1 to 3, rather than later struggling to find a direct substitution. “If you start with what’s in the fridge, you can make a damned tasty dinner,” Joel advises. ■



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# RETAIL FUTURES

# Jan Kattein and Friedrich Ludewig, two very different designers of urban spaces and shopping experiences, on what's next for retail, why high streets still matter and learning from abroad

**AS TOLD TO**  
Isabelle Priest

**PORTRAIT**  
Ivan Jones

## Both of you have huge experience in designing for retail, can you tell us about it?

**Jan Kattein:** I founded Jan Kattein Architects and am an academic at UCL. A theme that runs across the practice and my research is giving communities a voice in shaping their environment. Many of the challenges we face are linked to consumerism and globalisation, where owning stuff and the associated commercial transactions are the cause of climate change. We're trying to move in a direction where monetary exchange becomes secondary. I'm not advocating for abolishing capitalism. In our projects, whether they are high street regeneration or work/community space, we help to build business plans that are sustainable by engaging with our economic system. High streets are a good example. They have a history of being about retail. As retail moves online, they must find new purpose, shifting from buying things to paying for experiences, for example.

**Friedrich Ludewig:** I'm an architect, educated in Berlin and London. I come from a family of priests and teachers on one side, and watchmakers on the other. On my father's side, there's a long history of being active on the high street, having a watch shop, then petrol stations and other things. I've been working in London since 2000. I founded ACME in 2007. A little by coincidence I've been working in retail from early on. In 2002 we won a competition to extend a shopping centre in Leicester, then another to build one in Istanbul in

2003. What has grown from those is a fascination with the potential of retail, in particular as an agent of change and ingredient of public space. In Leicester, speaking to retail developers was our best hope of achieving regeneration.

However, the glory days of retail-led town centre regeneration in the UK are behind us. Lots of cities had a try. What many architects have been engaged with in the last 10 years is unpacking the potential of things that are not working well. It's not always about building more. It's what to do with things from 10 to 50 years ago. We shouldn't be converting everything to residential. We need public spaces that have a civic sense.

## What about retail beyond the high street?

**FL:** I believe we have seen the end of department stores. Not full extinction, but a reduction of species. John Lewis is going to survive and Flannels has carved out a niche. Those that have survived are probably it.

I don't know of anyone building shopping centres. My suspicion is that the Westfield Croydon scheme is more residential-led, consolidating its existing high street elements. Values of shopping malls were rock bottom two years ago. They've gone back up. Architects can hope that leads to a little investment in those we have, since quite a few are tired and need help to compete with online.

On high streets, we have an insane number of charity shops and high vacancy rates. The UK has worse high streets than France, Germany or China. It's a national not international problem,

and so should be fixable. The French and Germans have comparable spending power and are so similar to us they are interesting models.

The state of retail is also a result of UK local authorities having given more planning consents for out-of-town retail than the French, Germans and others. In Swansea, we're fighting a 20-year losing battle against them. They are a little more convenient, parking is free and less painful. But they have no civic and public qualities. This is a failure of every local authority and the national planning system. We haven't recognised how important the high street is. Should you let the most powerful retailers go out of town into a box? The Germans and French probably haven't prevented it deliberately; they are just more conservative and laws don't permit that level of out-of-town retail. If you must make it work in the city centre, people will. Then the critical mass remains and independents are more likely to thrive. When we worked in Australia with a shopping centre developer we built a market hall with 40 independent retailers between a Coles and Woolworths – their Tesco and Sainsbury's. It is succeeding. You can put a butcher where you know the cow came from 20 miles away in front of a supermarket that sells meat. It works on proximity. People want to do one journey. But if you can make part of that journey richer, they're up for it.

**JK:** On the question of the future and viability, retailers are receding from certain parts of town centres. Our work

Opposite: Jan Kattein (left) and Friedrich Ludewig on Redchurch Street, Shoreditch, London.



Left: The Liverpool Street Station redesign by ACME brings in more retail by consolidating it on the ground floor and two balconies to Exchange Square.

Opposite: Jan Kattein Architects' Sayer Street meanwhile mini-high street for Lendlease Elephant Park in Southwark, completed 2020.

occupies a niche. If you want to open a shop on a high street, you generally need to sign a long lease and invest in fitting out a shell and core unit or one that's fallen into disrepair. You're up for a substantial business rates bill, related to the value of the property rather than what your business does or whether it provides social value and contributes to the area's vibrance. Our work often introduces a smaller model of retail and workspace, exempt from business rates with significantly lower rents. You don't have to sign a 20-year lease. People have space to fail, which means they have a greater chance of success because the risk is calculable and won't tie you in long term and to mountains of debt.

Rebalancing outside of architecture needs to happen: of business rates, the leasehold system and this idea that a freehold value is determined by the level of rent for a business unit, meaning many landowners are reluctant to drop rents because it would write off freehold values. If we tackle this stranglehold of systems, town centres would have a renaissance. People are entrepreneurial, and ready to embrace opportunities. Many spaces we create are often let before they are finished.

**FL:** One thing that has worked in the UK recently is moving to turnover rents. I would like to see that for business rates too. It would make a massive difference to how spaces are used and by whom.

### Why is the high street important?

**JK:** It's about democracy. They are the places where cultures and needs mix, that are public and accessible to all. By default it's also a place of friction. Algorithms in social media feed us things we like, which is dangerous if you've got democratic values. A low level of conflict is helpful to understand other people's needs and learn to respect them, as well as to build compromise and consensus around us as a society. Those encounters and experiences are the foundation of democracy. People sense that. High streets aren't only about shopping; they're about identity, culture and belonging. We need to claw them back as places of participation, empathy and togetherness. The government is trying to address those priorities through the Pride in Place programme, which has led to some outstanding projects.

**FL:** I agree, it's reminiscent of the broken window theorem. To me, a vacant shop is like a broken window. If there's a shop that's empty for a year and then another empty for half a year, suddenly the street feels on a fast slope to half broken. That leads to a sense that democracy isn't working and delivering. There's a feeling the UK is in a terrible state. I don't agree, but if there are too many of those moments, it's easy for it to feel under siege. For that reason, it is important that the high street performs the job of being a democratic, civic space that feels alive.

### Jan, some of your projects are retail incubators. Do people grow onwards from them?

**JK:** Aberfeldy Street in Poplar is a colourful high street. Initially, about 50% of the shops had closed. Through a process of engagement, capital works and getting in new creative entrepreneurs, we brought it back to life. Now it's part of a masterplan and the street is up for demolition. On the face of it, it's heartbreaking; but in reality wonderful things happened. There was a pharmacy that had been struggling. They embraced the regeneration and now they've doubled in size and moved into permanent premises in the new scheme. In another part, a residential building is awaiting demolition. In the interim we're turning ground-floor maisonettes into shops for an initial period of 10 years with the aim of later relocating businesses permanently. Turning flats into shops is pretty unheard of. But the housing association client is very invested in the place, which is what is needed.

### Friedrich, what can architects do about vacant shops?

**FL:** In Swansea, we've been working with the local authority to fill the Quadrant shopping centre and the high street. The retail spaces are larger than they need to be now. The first decision we put to the council was around which of the two they wanted to succeed. Both horses were not going to get over the line. We

recommended making the high street full and vibrant, and turning the 1970s concrete Quadrant into something else – perhaps an entrepreneurial space around Swansea’s marine engineering or sustainable energy generation that helps it hang onto more of the graduates it produces per year.

Other cities have different potentials. The question is: what local elements could take over? What Roger de Haan achieved in Folkestone by buying 96 buildings on the high street and letting them to artists on peppercorn rents is perhaps a model of dealing with vacancy. Once you have a few shops, you can talk about the high street differently. You can determine its future and question its identity. We don’t all want the same high street and shops. Maybe we could do more as landowners

coming together with local government to look at planning proactively.

**IP: Have the clients you worked with changed over time?**

**JK:** A large proportion of our high street work was prompted by the Greater London Authority through the Outer London Fund. Prior to that, there was a greater focus on out-of-town shopping and shopping centres. Those early high street projects were ambitious but relatively conventional, improving public realm and shopfronts. The conversation broadened to move workspaces, cultural organisations and healthcare into town centres, and a broader range of clients came our way. We are doing a bid with Lendlease for High Road West in Tottenham because it realised that it couldn’t ignore the high

street for its housing scheme behind. Recently though, it’s become more challenging because financial pressure on development has increased.

**FL:** The only places where we see people building dedicated spaces for retail, rather than activating the ground floors of larger buildings, are China and the Middle East. China does online shopping at a scale that we have never experienced. However, I would say they have picked a fight with the internet much more than in Europe, the US or Australia. We capitulated. We saw the convenience of online because our shops weren’t that special to begin with. The Chinese have not taken that approach. Shops offer a different level of haptic sensory experience. Even in average to middle-class shops there is a lot of architecture



Right: High street reuse and recycled shop redesign in Acton, London, designed by Jan Kattein Architects, completed 2022.



JAN KATTEIN ARCHITECTS

and interior design. Nothing reminds you about online. It is about how you engage with the product and have an interesting experience.

For example, one bakery in Xi'an has an amazing shop fit, but they also celebrate that they've made the goods. Everything is out on show. There's a board that says the price and when it was made. You can see when the next croissants are coming out. Something is happening every five or 10 minutes. That's what we're missing with food and retail products. The other difference is that five or 10 years ago in China, you would be building indoor shopping centres. They have rediscovered the value of outside streets that feel democratic, rather than security controlled, carefully filling them with curated independents. These are private clients with a conviction in making physical spaces I've not seen elsewhere.

**JK:** There are also interesting opportunities around the circular economy. ReTuna is a shopping mall in Sweden dedicated to reused and recycled items. Kierrätyskeskus in Finland are recycled-goods department stores offering entry-level selling space in bigger units. You pay an affordable rent and share of commission. This is starting to get ordinary people thinking carefully when buying things new – investing in items with longer life expectancies to have value later in one of these malls.

**Several UK schemes are demolishing parts of town centres, such as shopping centres, to replace them with housing.**

**What are your perspectives on that?**

**JK:** Bringing more people into town centres and cities is the most sustainable way of living. Paris works well because it has a level of density that can sustain the brasserie at the corner, butchers on the ground floor, cheesemongers next door and the person specialising in selling olives. The principle of densifying town centres, from an economic and environmental perspective, is sensible. Often in the UK, developers set rents for ground-floor retail at levels that only Tesco Express can afford. We often have to dismantle expectations to get organisations to see the real rental values. Maybe we should write off making lots of money from ground-floor rental and see these as places that contribute to public life, making upper-floor development attractive.

**FL:** I'm generally opposed to demolition. We find the generosity that you get from retail – ceiling heights, depths, column spans – are well adaptable to other uses. The head office of the property department for our developer client in Abu Dhabi is an abandoned department store in a mall. It's such a nice office. They agree 6m ceiling heights are cool to have. Then one of our clients in Dubai has a half-built abandoned shopping mall. The open space has the same dimensions

as the Tate Modern turbine hall and the shop depths are the same as the main galleries. We're looking to convert it into Dubai Contemporary. In both instances, a lot of concrete was poured for retail that didn't come to pass. I would challenge anyone who's looking to demolish a shopping centre to let me show them how good those spans are. You can always densify something by demolishing 10 or 20% to make floor space for residential.

**Friedrich, to wrap up on a positive note, is there an interesting perspective on retail you can share that's come out of ACME's Liverpool Street Station win?**

**FL:** I've learned a lot about station retail over the last 10 years. We started working on Euston Station in 2018. Stations are valuable because there's a ginormous captive audience. You can finance whole projects based on additional retail. What quite often happens is that it starts to compete with the station itself so you get little kiosks, which prevent passengers getting on and off platforms. At Liverpool Street, we've tried to say that the basement concourse is for travel and the ground floor is for more retail. We've been able to make so much space for retail that we could buy the two balconies that get you from Liverpool Street to Exchange Square. This is really a public benefit project about connecting the city to the station that Network Rail would not otherwise do. It's a better station afterwards. ■

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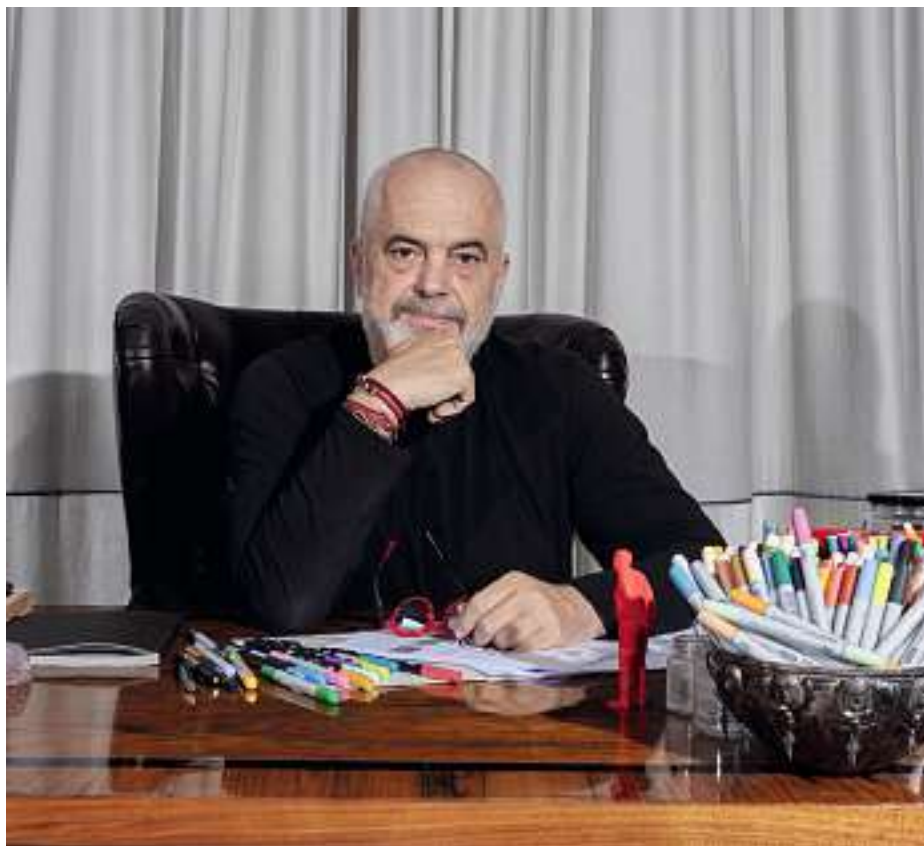
Opposite: Easy Alu Urban balconies for Jarrom St, Leicester – a modern, fascia-mounted aluminium railing system suited to largescale commercial and residential developments.

Below: Q-railing's Easy Glass® Prime system at Deanston Wharf for Ballymore – A2-s1,d0 fire-rated glass balustrades for safe, compliant residential living.



# OPENING ALBANIA

Architecture has been a key ingredient in Albania's cultural renaissance, spearheaded by prime minister Edi Rama, who spoke to RIBAJ about built-environment initiatives to boost hospitality



Albania is rapidly emerging as a global leader in architectural imagination. Until the late 1980s, under Communist rule, this was one of the world's most isolated countries, making its transformation all the more remarkable. Pivotal to this shift is Edi Rama, a man who has lived several lives: as an artist, basketball player, minister of culture, mayor of Tirana and now prime minister.

From the outset of his political career, Rama used culture as a catalyst for positive change, defying the critics who felt the world of creativity to be outside the political realm. He is an instigator and provocateur. As mayor, he famously repainted Tirana's grey, Communist-era buildings in bright colours – a gesture aimed at igniting civic pride. He was, and still is, unforgiving of the illegal building that blighted the country.

Rama has also opened the government building to the public, installing works by international artists, including a neon-lit canopy in the entrance by French artist Philippe Parreno. The newest addition, the timber-framed multistorey Garden by Chris Precht of Austrian architecture practice



Left: The Greencoast Hotel project, designed by CENTRAL, 51N4E and iRL, responds to rapidly increasing tourism and growing pressure on Albania's south coast.

Below: The Faith Park by BIG contains pavilions for many faiths on paths branching from a central museum.

Opposite: Edi Rama is one of RIBA's 2026 Honorary Fellows.



MAXIME DELVAUX , BIG/BEAUTY AND THE BIT

Studio Precht, creates a new social heart for the building.

Albania now boasts a collection of built works alongside planned projects by world-leading architects, from MVRDV to Ricardo Bofill. The speed of change is so remarkable it suggests Rama is driven by the shadow of his country's past.

"I don't think about it, but it is in the back of my mind for sure," he says. "No doubt there is something from there also in the drive to do more and more, faster and faster. It's like running towards the future and fearing the step back. That's why I talk a lot about the danger of falling back and losing speed, to see things reverse – not to Communism or isolation but to something swampy that makes no difference."

As Albania moves towards full EU Membership, Rama is aware that architecture plays an important role in a shift that needs to be more than purely physical.

"This is the thing that is difficult to explain and often misunderstood," he says. "People have to see this as a physical change, but it's not just physical change in the sense that: OK ... who cares?"

He paraphrases a quotation "We built the buildings and then the buildings build us".

Rama believes that exposure to global practices can have a positive impact on the growth of a homegrown profession. "These international architects work with local studios," he says, "and local architects have the chance to not simply have an internship as anonymous youngsters in a studio with 300 people. They have the privilege to be partners with these big guys, to participate in creating and building, and to learn.

"So it's not just that we have the biggest concentration of international architects at the same time in the same place, but it's the biggest concentration of knowledge which makes Tirana an open-air university for our people."

The inaugural Bread and Heart Festival in June 2025 further positioned Albania as a live think-tank for architecture. Framed as a celebration of Albanian hospitality and its ongoing development through architecture and dialogue, the event was named in homage to the Albanian tradition of offering your guests bread, salt and heart.

The festival convened many of the international group of architects working in the country, who Rama dubs "the arch army". Public talks included contributions from Pritzker Prize-winners Carme Pigem of Barcelona-based RCR Architects, Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, Japanese architect Toyo Ito and the Portuguese architects Álvaro Siza and Eduardo Souto de Moura.

A day of workshops followed, with architects working collectively in small groups to propose parameters for future development.

"It was so incredible to see the architects at different tables, like kids drawing," says Rama. "It was something unique and beautiful, and they want to repeat it." The second edition will take place in Tirana this coming June.

"I would say that we haven't seen this anywhere else," he observes, "and I was very touched. Listening to architects mentioning the human side of the story of the festival and saying: listen, we know each other, and we meet each other, but typically when we teach in the same place or when we compete, we never meet each other in these numbers just to share time,

to share food, to share experience.”

This sense of community didn't happen by accident, Rama points out. “It was not constructed out of the blue; it was practically raising a tent in a field that was empty.”

Rama notes that the exposure to exemplary architecture is having a positive systemic impact on the country, along with tighter regulation of construction.

“I see very well how fast and how high there is a change in the quality of local projects,” he says, “because we haven't made it impossible for locals. We have made it more difficult, but when they come with small projects, you see that they are different and they think differently because the talent is there.”

Ambitious schemes underway include Faith Park, an international competition-winning scheme by Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) for a new 200,000m<sup>2</sup> public park that reflects the “religious harmony that defines Albania”. The park will occupy the hillsides of Petrela, close to the capital, and offer a place for events that “engage and unite communities”.

In Tirana, a government initiative will bring new life to heritage architecture by redefining the idea of a museum.

“We are planning a diffused museum, so a museum which is not a museum but a chain of old houses,” Rama explains. “To visit, you go from one part of the city to another part of the city, to another part of the city, and every house is the continuation of that. These houses are our heritage we want to protect.”

Another planned project will create an underground museum. “We passed the decision to create underground parking beneath Mother Teresa Square,” says Rama, “and now we have decided to look at parking that is, at the same time, an archaeological museum. I very much believe it will be amazing.”

For the Future Hospitality Summit 2025 in Dubai, and this year's MIPIM property fair in Cannes, Albania stepped away from the generic sludge of corporate trade stands, choosing instead to represent itself more creatively. Its Soundscapes of Albania pavilion, devised in collaboration with Studio Precht, playfully presented the work underway in Albania in the form of a record store with vinyl covers featuring new projects complete with soundtracks of rivers, birdsong and traditional and contemporary Albanian music.



Above: The Making of a Garden by Studio Precht is an open-air timber framed structure in a courtyard at the government building in Tirana.

Below: Soundscapes of Albania at MIPIM, designed by Studio Precht and W10 to resemble a record store. Sleeves contained details of 80 projects by international architects.



Having avoided the destructive overdevelopment that took place in many of Europe's coastal resorts in the 1970s and 80s, Albania is now catering to growing visitor numbers with thoughtful, sustainable growth. Among the early supporters of Rama's vision was Belgian practice 5In4e, architect of Skanderbeg Square in Tirana. It has now completed the Green Coast Hotel, Himara, using local stone in its construction. Also in Himara, projects underway by Turkish practice Emre Arolat Architecture and Florida-based resort specialist Oppenheim Architecture deploy local materials and respond to the coastal landscape.

In a world where the architect's voice seems at increasing risk of being silenced, Rama remains a steadfast advocate for the power of architects as instigators of positive change.

“Architecture can transform not only spaces but also minds,” he concludes. “Not only locations, but also the imagination of our community – its sense of place and its vision of the future.” ■

Vanessa Norwood is a writer, curator and consultant

ANA SANTL ANDERSEN

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# Can warehouses make a place?

**WORDS**

Eleanor Young

Below: Urban logistics  
in Greenwich, southeast  
London, designed  
by Corstophine &  
Wright Architects.

**BIG BIG  
SHEDS SHEDS**

There is something unnatural about approaching a logistics warehouse on foot. Even in a car you are dwarfed by the scale. These are big beasts, designed to be approached by lorries pulling in from the motorway, slowing across the concrete apron and plugging into the loading bays.

At Milton Keynes' Elfield Park we walk the Redway bike route in through the gates to the pond. At the far side of the water, beyond newly planted trees, is a glass box with a pitched roof outlined in the ubiquitous 'goose wing grey' aluminium panels. Architect Chetwoods heralds it as a "next-generation industrial park". It is not inviting you to walk up to it, not least because of the extensive car parking, but it gives a sense of welcoming its workers at least and perhaps in the future, on the weekends, some of the community, exploring on their bikes.

### Space and location pressure

Logistics warehouses are ever getting closer to homes. As the demand for volume of these sheds increases, logistics parks keep growing, expanding towards new areas of housing that are also expanding towards our motorway corridors and trunk roads and slip roads. Logistics buildings are working for us, however we buy, but we don't want them up our road.

At the port of Avonmouth on the Severn Estuary, the green belt around Bristol has a gaping hole where the M5 and M49 divide a primary school and rugby club just a slip road away from warehouses expanding up and out from the docks, including the UK's largest speculatively built warehouse at 407,367 sq ft (37,846m<sup>2</sup>). One new frame has hit controversy as it has gone up, towering over the small village of Pilning, one of a series of stories on the BBC about the tension between local residents and those building logistics warehouses next door.

At Magna Park Lutterworth in the East Midlands, three small fields along the Coventry Road separate the town of Lutterworth from a 50-shed ocean encompassing 13 million sq ft (1.2 million m<sup>2</sup>) that is larger than the town itself. The road to the M1's junction 20 marks the southern boundary of Lutterworth. It was the centre of the UK logistics 'golden triangle' as it was originally identified – although since it has been adopted by the Office of National Statistics, the definition covers the 620km<sup>2</sup> from where 90% of the British population can be reached by road within four hours.

Closer in to cities, meanwhile, intensification is the name of the game. The London Plan has been explicit about that, and we have seen some experiments

with Haworth Tompkins' multistorey Industria in Barking. Even without going multistorey, the stature of warehouses is increasing: average heights for new build warehouses have increased from 28ft (8.53m) in 2015 to 38ft (11.6m) in 2025, according to Knight Frank's 2025 Future Gazing report. Volume is a key metric, as are floor space, HGV hours to markets, and access to local workforce. Co-location of logistics facilities and other urban facilities from housing to healthcare has also been mooted in places.

Planning is at the sharp end of many stories of land use clashes. A recent report by the British Property Federation (BPF) and Savills, subtitled The Infrastructure of Everything, argues that £9.7 billion of gross value added to the economy has been lost due to supply constraints, suggesting investment and jobs could follow if more logistics buildings could be built, particularly affordable, flexible midsized premises. This follows on from the BPF's manifesto before the last general election advocating for better strategic planning.

### Architecture's role in big sheds

At this scale it seems a vain hope that architectural interventions on the buildings themselves might make more difference in rendering big sheds





Left: If a shed is not grey then colour may be being used in another way to help it disguise its volume, as at 314 Magnitude Park, Milton Keynes, designed by Chetwoods.

more acceptable as good neighbours through the planning system. These are well-understood products with certain formulas and market expectations around the volume-to-loading-bay ratio and plenty of competition – so there is little design leeway. You may have seen the graduated dark-to-light facades as you speed past, but most remain standard big grey boxes.

Mike Teague, who leads on the sector for Corstorphine & Wright Architects, cycles through the options for making the character of sheds more amenable: employing dark colour to reduce mass; adding texture and articulation to the facades; using natural materials such as timber for the office element; and that inevitable planners' ask – activation. "We don't want to do something fake," he explains, as he points out what activation means in terms of lorry movements on a warehouse. "You design the mass to protect nearby inhabitants from the noise."

In West London the 1920s Firestone Building, long demolished, has been referenced in a new warehouse on the site. Chetwoods has designed the building with blue columns and mesh louvres setting up an Art Deco rhythm on the facade along Great West Road, before the white shed, a play of matt and glass panels, asserts itself.

What is strange is that these beautifying design moves are defined by cost and scale parameters that render them clumsy. At least in comparison to the lean, long-span structures inside, rationalised to such a degree that when I get inside I am startled at the scale. And then do a double take as I see the fluorescent-clad cleaners (tiny) and have to recalibrate my sense of scale. It is a lot larger than I had first taken in.

#### **Sustainability regulations' impact**

The external expression is hard to make much of, but biodiversity net gain and the much-debated demand for nutrient neutrality and sustainable urban drainage, plus planning gain negotiations, could impact on the surroundings. On greenfield sites like Elfield Park and Magna Park Lutterworth, the provision of green open space serves many purposes but also makes the development seem more welcoming and gives locals a stake in it.

Two other major factors are the wellbeing of the workforce and environmental, sustainability and governance requirements, which also play into the designs of such buildings and parks. That means attracting and retaining staff with more amenable sites, higher-quality offices and views through warehouse windows – still something

Below: Before and after refurbishment at the Disney Store's unit at Magna Park Lutterworth, designed by Corstorphine & Wright Architects.



# “THE BRITISH PROPERTY FEDERATION SAYS EVERY NEW HOME NEEDS 6.4M<sup>2</sup> OF LOGISTICS SPACE”

Below: At Elfield Park, Milton Keynes, Chetwoods designed the offices overlooking a lake with logistics building beyond and loading bays to the side.



of a rarity in this building type – or, as at Elfield Park, a trim trail for running or a walk around the park. WELL principles come into play here, says Phil Stanway, Chetwoods’ executive director on logistics. He explains that the sector is increasing bringing back-office functions, such as HR and accounts, or even product showrooms, into warehouses to bring operations closer – as seen with the practice’s Nike national distribution centre, currently on site at Magna Park in Corby.

ESG requirements for both institutional investors and would-be occupiers are also shifting the dial – a little – on design. The UK’s largest speculative developer, Pannatoni, advertises a new Avonmouth building as offering 20 to 50% lower energy bills and up to 40% water savings thanks to leak detection and grey water recycling. With a BREEAM Excellent rating on its one million plus square feet, Pannatoni takes the opportunity to foreground its target net-zero programme of reducing operational carbon – and a certain amount of embodied carbon – while engineering the structure to take a full set of photovoltaic panels, should the tenants go for that option. Logistics buildings are estimated by the BPF to be able to supply 25% of the UK’s power needs if they were all fitted with PVs.

The scale of logistics buildings is exciting; their extreme storage, and how it is serviced by pickers and packers – or by robots. But throughout the research for this article I have been turning over the fundamental question of why we need to cover so many acres of land with rather inhumane sheds, rather than agriculture or housing. The BPF argues that every new home requires 6.4m<sup>2</sup> of logistics space, which seems to assume that each new house brings a new consumer. Which is not a direct correlation, though every home might need a new bed or sofa. I have blamed Amazon and online shopping, but these builds are also serving high street shops. The only foolproof route to reducing their impact is to buy less, but despite the added bonus of reducing clutter in homes this seems unachievable for most people.

And so we come back to the question: can these buildings ever make a place that can be enjoyed on a human scale? The answer, despite architects’ best efforts and some green edges, is a resounding no. ■

Below: Timber-framed head office building alongside logistics at Rhenus Campus, Baytree Nuneaton, designed by Chetwoods.



#### Opportunity in logistics for architects

- Masterplanning followed by build out – Chetwoods’ Phil Stanway hopes to be designing 85% of the buildings on the firm’s Magna Park Lutterworth masterplan
- ‘Built to suit’: higher-quality logistics for end user clients; Amazon logistics expansion has dropped off but retailers are still a growing market
- Super-flexible speculative buildings that can accommodate a regular turnover of tenants in this competitive market
- Refurbishment of existing stock, giving buildings a facelift, perhaps increasing the ratio between offices and warehouses
- Bringing sustainability skills to bear, in reducing operational and embodied carbon at a masterplanning level

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WORDS  
Pamela Buxton

# UP TRADING



# As historic shopping centres, markets inspire nostalgic affection and offer huge potential. Yet with many facing decline and disrepair, how can they be upgraded without losing their soul?

Opposite, below:  
Market halls by David Kohn Architects form the centrepiece of a mixed-use quarter in the £1.9 billion Smithfield development by Birmingham City Council and Lendlease.

“To have a market is gold dust really; it creates a destination.” So says Selina Mason, director of masterplanning and strategic design at Lendlease, of the developer’s plans for Smithfield in Birmingham, which involve new homes for three long-established markets as a key element of the ambitious mixed-use regeneration.

Yet markets as a type, both covered and street, have long been struggling, in tandem with changing shopping habits and the decline of the high street since the 2008 financial crisis in particular. As well as the popularity of online shopping, the growth of budget supermarkets presents additional competition for those selling fresh food. The demographic age of market stallholders and their customer base is rising, along with stallholder vacancies. Meanwhile historic market buildings, which like street markets are overwhelmingly owned by local authorities, are increasingly in need of investment and upgrade.

So how can traditional markets survive, without losing their soul to gentrification? According to Raymond Linch of market and food hall consultancy Market Curators, markets need to understand what shoppers now want and adapt accordingly, or face ongoing decline. Born into a market family, he is passionate about the ability of town markets to be the “glue” that brings society together. But to do that, they have to find new ways to be relevant while avoiding disenfranchising existing customers and stallholders.

He talks about creating a “blended” market where traditional fresh food and non-food retailing is supplemented with hospitality and associated seating – hot food is increasingly used to drive footfall – and events space. Upper levels may offer other complementary uses, such as coworking. The exact formula will be different for every market, with the goal of creating “an asset that works from eight in the morning and into the evening”.

“You must make it a really interesting visit for visitors so they can dwell longer and spend more,” Linch says.

How can architects play their part? Practices working in this area are frank about both the appeal and challenges of the work. According to Adam Parker of Greig & Stephenson, which focuses exclusively on this sector, markets tick all the things you set out to do when embarking on your architectural journey: “Wanting to make an impact in local people’s lives and communities, and create spaces for all people to come together across age groups and ethnicities.” This ranges, he adds, from “a strong interplay with the wider urban realm, right down to the hyper detail of understanding individual stalls on an interior design level”.

Markets also require skilful handling of client groups. “They’re very lively projects in terms of stakeholder engagement and management, and trying to traverse that,” says Parker.

Gort Scott has explored the sector extensively through its work as consultant lead for the Greater London Authority’s Tomorrow’s Market 2.0 research and advisory programme, which aims to

increase the resilience of street markets in London, and the practice is currently working on the £8 million regeneration of Oxford’s Covered Market. “We love them but it takes time, and talking to lots of people, to really understand a place and its problems, and to get under the bonnet of how you can fix these in a holistic and cost-efficient way. That’s challenging,” says associate director Susie Hyden.

“They are highly political – a lightning rod for everyone’s thoughts and desires. It takes dedication and commitment on the part of your client and yourself to keep it going and be adaptable,” she adds.

This is clearly not a sector for design vanity; improvements to the physical space form just one part of the story. “Rather than putting a pretty surface down, you actually might be better off installing some great tarmac, drainage, and spending money on a good business incubation plan than doing ‘visible design’,” Hyden continues.

Gort Scott’s market report includes a guide to developing and delivering a market strategy. This is built around three core components: identity and offer, market management, and operations and logistics. Having identified a market’s





USP, the challenge is to lean into strengths to provide a clear identity and offer.

At Oxford's Covered Market, the USP is clearly the Grade II-listed building, which dates from 1774. The council, says Hyden, has "no interest in sanitising or gentrifying it", and there is a clear desire to avoid it being flooded by too much hot food. "They want authentic, local businesses as they are integral to the market's success and unique offer. So, they want to retain and support traders and keep costs low," she says.

Proposals, currently at RIBA Stage 3, include a new flexible area to the north, a new northern entrance, new

infrastructure and making the adjacent Market Street pedestrian-priority.

FaulknerBrowns' interventions at Newcastle-upon-Tyne's 19th-century Grainger Street market also include a new area for flexible activities to boost its core market functions. Located in the centre of the market between two new pavilions, this replaces underused units and can be used for complementary activities, such as specialist markets and events. One of these pavilions includes Hellerup steps to create a gathering/viewing area, with storage for new seating beneath.

"By no means are we trying to convert Grainger Market into a food hall," says



associate partner Tania Love. "The council is very clear, as are we, that this is not an exercise in gentrification. It's a traditional and a general market first and foremost. That's been really key to its success and popularity in the past; hopefully these interventions and events programming will help bring new footfall and wider audiences that secure its future sustainability."

Other light-touch interventions include new wayfinding, improved street presence and sliding doors to reduce draughts. "We've been careful about keeping the patina, heritage and character of what's been there for years and years," says Love. "The choice of black steel for the two pavilions was a response to the existing metalwork around the market, and very intentionally selected to allow the colours and signage of the traders' shopfronts to remain centre stage."

Market buildings can play an important role in city centre regeneration, especially those with distinctive characters and prime locations. In Huddersfield, the Grade II-listed 1970s Queensgate market building is being restored as a key part of the £210 million Our Cultural Heart city centre regeneration, designed by FCBStudios. The practice removed fabric of lesser significance to highlight the distinctive hyperbolic paraboloid concrete roof, something of a local landmark.



Opposite, top left and right: Plans for Grainger Street market in Newcastle by FaulknerBrowns include infrastructure for events such as fashion shows and live music.

Opposite, below: Gort Scott is leading renewal of Oxford's Covered Market, which dates from 1774. It aims to improve access while preserving heritage value.

Right, below: Greig & Stephenson's Darley Street market opened in Bradford in 2025. The 4,000m<sup>2</sup> hall faces onto a new public square.



FP OPUS

“It’s incredibly special. Our approach was about peeling back to reveal the structure, celebrating its unique character visually and physically within the town,” says practice partner George Wilson.

Rather than retain its original use, however, this space has been repurposed as an experiential food hall, with a library on upper levels at one end, as part of the wider scheme’s cultural offer. Although the original market function has gone, the hope is that the space’s new use will bring renewed vitality.

“The food hall has the opportunity to attract a whole range of people throughout all times of the day,” says Wilson. “In that way, it’s an extremely inclusive part of the original brief.”

In Bradford, Greig & Stephenson’s recently completed Darley Street market consolidates two existing markets on a site formerly occupied by a department store, with the aim of cementing it as a catalytic anchor in the regeneration of the town centre. The design retains the spatial generosity, permeable ground floor and natural ventilation common to traditional markets; there was no wish for it to be like a shopping mall.

“New markets have to go beyond the traditional role of just commodities and fresh food to be relevant in a contemporary retail climate. They need to be multifunctional, flexible spaces that allow that ebb and flow of activity,”

says Parker. “It’s about creating more dwell time in the space as well. People are increasingly craving more experience-led, affordable days out.”

Hybrid uses can help boost the role of the market as the centrepiece of the community in new-built developments. In the Duchy of Cornwall’s Nansledan extension to Newquay, the new ‘market’, designed by Corstorphine & Wright – in a vernacular style and currently on site – will include first-floor studios, community rooms and co-working space. This will be combined with a ground-floor food hall of Cornish produce, with the flexibility to hold events both inside and in the adjoining square.

“It needed to be more than a market – a place for people to gather and be a focus for community events – but also it has to be viable from a commercial perspective,” says Corstorphine & Wright director Ian Wilson, adding that it will still feel like a market hall.

Meanwhile in Birmingham, Lendlease is enthusiastic about embracing the positives of traditional markets as it relocates the Bull Ring markets within its Smithfield regeneration. “It’s a brilliant starting point for a masterplan to spin off from,” says the company’s Mason. “You get this whole complex pattern of daily life embedded into the 14ha masterplan from day one. We can then build on that vitality with other uses as well.”



ADAM PARKER

There are plans for a fish and meat market with dining space designed by David Kohn Architects. That practice is also one of four vying for an office development, which will incorporate the Rag Market at ground-floor level. The appointment will also include an outdoor fruit and veg market with a permanent roof cover.

The hybrid office/market building, says Mason, presents an interesting design challenge of balancing the civic purpose of the market with its function as the entrance to an office building. The other puzzle is how to come up with what the developer describes as a “next-generation market”. This means looking both back, and forwards.

“To us, it means markets that create a sense of destination and memory, and leaning back into the experiences associated with a market – the glorious interiors and material quality,” says Mason. “On the other hand, the next-gen aspect of it is that we have to recognise that there is no absolute formula any more. Market buildings have to be able to adapt and change.” ■



CORSTORPHINE & WRIGHT

Above: Visualisation of the new market hall at Nansledan by Corstorphine & Wright.

Below: Visualisation of Huddersfield's Queensgate market, whose renovation is designed by FCBS.

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## WORDS

Jan-Carlos Kucharek

The dominance of e-commerce is forcing a rethink of what retail spaces are for – and what they do. Welcome to the phygital future, where seamless integration of digital tech into physical realms aims to make you feel you're at the centre of your favourite brands' worlds

Opposite: The 40m-high fountains of Chengdu's SKP and SKP-S department stores, sunk beneath a 240,000m<sup>2</sup> urban park, which lead the world in the development of phygital space.

Below: Xfinity broadband stores. The future of retail will be more a clubhouse vibe than a shopfront.

"The most successful projects now are where you don't see the technology, but feel it – it's infused holistically," says Alon Baranowitz. The Baranowitz + Kronenberg co-founder is reflecting on his studio's 2,700m<sup>2</sup> immersive live arena experience, The Cube, based on the ITV gameshow, which opened in Canary Wharf in January 2026.

Designed for Mellors Group, it features 21 4 x 4m, high-tech gameplay cubes within a "competitive socialising" space containing lounges, restaurants and bars across two 5m-high connected floors. The designer looked to Dockland history for the space's concrete, steel and Douglas fir: "noble, time-worn" materials to counterpoint the glass cubes' state-of-the-art tech. The challenge was blending a timeless, analogue feel with advanced digital functionality. And while the project is most definitely about entertainment, it also offers a glimpse into a more experiential retail future.

In a world dominated by e-commerce, 'phygital' experiences integrate digital elements into physical spaces. This can manifest in many ways – from cashier-free checkouts to digital changing-room mirrors and physical pop-ups of online brands – all aiming to create a seductively personalised customer journey.

"Most clients still see stores as a point of sale," says Ian Johnston of retail design consultancy Quinine. He talks about retail spaces shifting from being "sales engines" to "service" or "relationship" ones: when you can get anything online,



they are no longer mainly about buying products but interacting with brands. While e-commerce offers convenience, it isolates customers' purchase experience. With societal loneliness on the rise, designers should rethink retail as a type of third space for our post-Covid world, thinks Johnston. "Take Tiffany's on Fifth Avenue," he says. "It's a beacon of trust, quality and longevity. This sense needs to be embedded into our future retail architecture – in part, via technology."

Johnston doesn't mean spaces filled with digital screens – although future

retail will need agile power and data infrastructure as part of its design. "A brand's physical space needs to augment the digital experience, otherwise why am I going in store?", he says. For Johnston, spaces need to be interactive, delightful, surprising, local and, despite being digitally driven, capable of offering human-level intimacy.

It's a perspective echoed by Ryan Carlisle, a senior strategist and architect at Journey, a 400-strong international design agency based in London and New York. Journey's work in developing



Far left: Journey worked with Foster + Partners on the Saudi Arabia pavilion at Expo 2025 in Osaka, Japan.

Left: Technology was integrated into the design at an early stage in order to make interactivity an invisible part of the performative space.

phygital spaces “recognises that today’s spatial challenges are multifaceted and span disciplines”, he says. Carlisle draws on digital media, theatre and production design to support physical experience, and sees now as an exciting moment for architects to take a front seat.

With the rise of AI ‘agentic’ shopping, where LLMs connect consumers to curated products, Carlisle says fewer people are linking to brands directly via their websites – thus weakening allegiance. “I’ve read that 30% of users are willing to turn away from a brand if they have a negative experience, so the stakes are high to create a lasting ‘moment’ or emotional experience,” he says. “There’s a big opportunity for architecture to step up. People form significant memories when interacting with physical stores – they hold emotional power.”

Retail space “isn’t a beautifully designed box where you buy products” but more of “an interface, an ‘operating system for experience’,” Carlisle continues. “Stores should be platforms for brand storytelling where architecture, content and digital are one system.” This compels architects, he believes, to ask how digital apps and physical systems can best work with each other.

Journey has taken inspiration from its cultural projects, such as with New York’s Metropolitan Opera and the British Museum, where digital experience aimed

to attract a younger demographic. Last year it worked with Foster + Partners developing the experience for its Saudi Arabia Pavilion at Japan’s World Expo. Interactive tech was integrated invisibly into the pavilion’s fabric, creating a space able to simultaneously accommodate art, performance and digital media. Carlisle sees future retail spaces responding to user apps, offering a “personalised performative experience” via which consumers will expect their personal data to modify the environments they occupy.

LA-based Rob Bischoff, Gensler’s digital experience design lead, also argues that while retail has moved significantly into the digital realm, stores must offer “a unique experience in a physical space”. His work on Netflix House – the streaming giant’s move, in Dallas and Philadelphia, into dormant retail spaces – combines destination creation and location-based entertainment. These 10,000m<sup>2</sup> black-box hangars are designed to deliver a gamut of virtual and physical experiences based around Netflix’s many shows’ IP. Bischoff says it’s about “hyperflexible” zones that can be digitally adapted to support changing stories, while creating “evergreen” food and beverage and retail spaces in between. “We are working with consultants on the digital experience, but one thing that can’t be replicated is the haptic response, the touch and feel of materials,” he says.

In this way Netflix House rethinks the conundrum of the mall. “Malls live and die by how they bring brands together – as the connective tissue of the shopping experience,” Bischoff says. With US malls suffering in a challenging market, they are best epitomised by the likes of Las Vegas’ Venetian; an overarching, immersive physical space into which individual brands insert themselves. But Bischoff also sees a less glam but more useful app-driven future for the mall, not as a physical space but as a “concierge-level service – like valet parking or to-vehicle bag drop-off – supporting users in their curated shopping journey”.

While the idea of brands reinforcing each other by association is not new, data-sharing on apps facilitates the experience becoming part of a bigger, more user-specific consumption ecosystem where brands seek to align to conscious – even subconscious – desires. You might go shopping just to buy a pair of walking boots, but return having also booked online a 10-day hiking trip for like-minded singles in the Swiss Alps. A future mall will aim to encourage, facilitate (and monetise) these digital interactions.

This is precisely what’s afoot in Chengdu, China. There, mall brand SKP’s flagship store and its Gen-Z luxury retail store SKP-S bookend an 800 x 350m site, sunk 30m below a 250,000m<sup>2</sup> park designed by New York’s James

Corner Field Operations. London-based Sybarite's Simon Mitchell and Torquil McIntosh have worked with SKP since 2012, after being tasked with its ground-up design from the tradition-inspired but fluidly contemporary logo to its physical stores' sinuous glamour. The Chengdu site's futuristic ambition belies its three-year age, on a scale that's jaw-dropping.

Of course there are bells and whistles, the 40m-high water towers and amphitheatre entrance with digital screens as much public space as customer experience. But this only presages, in this case, taking customers on an interactive, curated experiential journey to Mars, while exposing them to the store's 1,600 brands. But it's clear that the architecture eclipses the screen tech; the latter might change often but the brand must embed.

Mitchell contrasts SKP's stratospheric rise with department stores' struggles

elsewhere: "There was risk of losing a younger generation, so at Chengdu we flipped the rule book on its head: 65% of store area is about experience rather than product and we put it on brands to align their stores within SKP's broader visual narrative." After some "pushback" this has proved a success, he adds.

Mitchell credits China's "more flexible" data protection laws with elevating phygital experience; SKP's tie-in with comms giant Huawei governs everything from front-of-house tech to the building management system and more. "Open the SKP loyalty app and as you approach the store in your car, it can pre-book your parking space and guide you to it," he says. But that's not the half it. "Increasingly, we are designing retail environments to be as personalised as possible – from preferred temperature, scent and music, to details like how a

customer takes their coffee... so visits feel centred around the individual. That seamless integration of tech increases dwell time – and customer spend."

With SKP set to build another store in Guangzhou, Torquil McIntosh adds that "blueprints are being forged in China that leave everything in the West behind". The firm enters Blade Runner realms with talk of roads full of branded driverless 'pods' we will be hiring on a 'just in time' basis; where car parks are replaced by green spaces and drop-off zones, and we'll zoom about in Bentley, Ferrari, Prada or Chanel. Besides the dystopia of our personal data free-for-all, this world will be a clean, green one of limitless retail possibility – providing, of course, your sub-dermal credit chip clears the transaction. Mitchell remains optimistic: "We have to accept it – since it's coming whether we like it or not – and I say embrace it." ■

Below: Gensler's store for the San Diego Padres blends physical space with digital interactivity, allowing for customisable merchandise and in-store virtual experiences.

Below right: The Chengdu SKP-S store pushes the experiential aspect of the customer journey making it feel more like a museum visit than a shop.

## "STORES SHOULD BE STORYTELLING PLATFORMS WHERE ARCHITECTURE, CONTENT AND DIGITAL ARE ONE"





## INVITATION TO TENDER - PROFESSIONAL CONSULTANCY SERVICES

Algerian Cultural Centre - London

The Embassy of Algeria in London invites suitably qualified multidisciplinary consultancy teams to submit tenders for design, statutory approvals, tender support and construction supervision for the refurbishment and fit-out of a listed building located at 54 Holland park, London W11 3RS, to be converted into the Algerian Cultural Centre in London.

Tenders documentation and submission instructions are available upon request. Please email us at: [chancery.attache@algerianembassy.org.uk](mailto:chancery.attache@algerianembassy.org.uk)

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# EYE LINE DRAWING COMPETITION 2026 – DEADLINE 11 MAY

Eye Line 2025  
Practitioner  
second prize winner  
Thomas Parker:  
A post-lenticular  
Baroque: Study  
model #5. 3D  
scanned model,  
LLM image alteration,  
neural radiance  
field reconstruction  
and rendering,  
420mm x 290mm.



Is your gift for visual expression as sharp as your imagination? Eye Line 2026, RIBA's annual international competition showcasing the best drawing and rendering skills, is now open for entries. As always, we are asking for images in student and practitioner categories – that brilliantly convey architecture, in any medium or combination of media.

We are seeking the finest work, here and internationally, from those at the sharp end of representation. Images of all kinds, from hand-drawn concept sketches to technically proficient and layered renders are eligible: 'drawing' includes any method by which the power of an architectural idea is communicated, whether of existing buildings or works of the imagination – and AI entries are considered if they are declared as such.

Practitioners and students enter in two different categories:

- Student category: images made by those in architectural education or who are submitting work executed before final qualification.
- Practitioner category: images made by those fully qualified and working in practice or academia, whether for real projects or exploring ideas or experiences.

Winning entries will be published in the July/August issue of RIBA's *Journal* and on [ribaj.com](http://ribaj.com). Our colleagues at RIBA's Drawings and Archives Collection inspect winners for potential inclusion in their famous archive.

Last year's student winner was Royal College of Art's Max Cooper-Clark, whose emotive studies of the mining village of Nenthead in the Pennines drew not only on the site's history but on the memory of people who had died from mining-related illness, even using colour dyes extracted from petals of local lead-absorbing flora.

Practitioner winners, meanwhile, were architect academics Nic Clear and Hyun Jun Park. Their manipulated point cloud scans of Virginia Woolf's garden and writing lodge at Monk's House in East Sussex were cutting edge yet haunting in equal measure.

Every year we are gratified by the originality, wit and talent in evidence with Eye Line: our international, free-to-enter drawing and visualisation award. Practitioners and students – show us your best work and join a prestigious gallery of past winners. ■

## EYE LINE RULES

We seek the best 2D representations of a building design or concept through visual means. They may be hand or digitally drawn, incorporating collage or any combination or overlay of methods. Video and straight photography excluded. AI entries to the Eye Line competition should be stated as such. Entrants may submit a maximum of three drawings. For full competition rules and to submit an entry, go to [ribaj.com/culture/enter-eye-line](http://ribaj.com/culture/enter-eye-line)

## INFORMATION REQUIRED

All entries must include:

- title of work(s) if applicable, and medium
- name of the author(s) of the work
- name of organisation where author works or studies
- email, phone number and address
- dimensions of the original work as presented, in mm
- date work was completed

## 2026 EYE LINE JUDGES

Nic Clear

Dean, School of Arts and Humanities,  
University of Huddersfield

Kieren Majhail

Associate director, Karakusevic Carson  
Hyun Jun Park

Course director of Postgraduate  
Architecture, Leeds Beckett School  
of Architecture

Annette Spiro

Professor emeritus, ETH Zurich

Jan-Carlos Kucharek

Deputy editor, RIBA's *Journal*

## KEY DATES

Deadline: 11 May 2026, 14:00 BST

Judging: end May 2026

Winners and commendations

published: July/August RIBA's *Journal*

print issue, and online

Correspondence:

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## BRINGING HOME THE BACON

Alastair Philip Wiper  
Danish Crown Slaughterhouse,  
Horsens, Denmark, 2013  
Instagram: @alastairwiper

Denmark is the global leader in pork exports, rearing around 28 million pigs annually – five times the country’s human population. This amounts to an annual production of nearly two billion tonnes of pig meat in an industry worth over £5 billion. Production on this scale demands not just huge amounts of raw product (sows in Denmark can produce up to 35 piglets a year) but extensive, highly efficient processing facilities.

Danish Crown, Europe’s largest pork producer, believes in its business model enough to offer guided tours of its abattoirs – which Alastair Philip Wiper availed himself of in 2013. “The slaughterhouse was built with visitors in mind,” he recalls, “as there was a central corridor with windows running along it allowing people to view every part of the process.” That included the stunning and killing of the animals, should they wish to see that. It is a warts-and-all exposition

that reflects both the pride the country has in the clean efficiency of a national industry, and a desire to communicate responsibility for the welfare of the animals involved.

Thirteen years on, Wiper feels his image of “pink flesh next to cold, industrial metal” evinces in him the same response: a fine line of trying to register an activity without any sense of being judgemental, just by dint of its’ recording.

Denmark’s ‘green hearts’ animal welfare system looks to improve industry practices and bring transparency to customers by labelling products with one to three hearts according to the levels of husbandry an animal experienced while alive. Wiper does not know the facility’s rating here, but calls it an industrial process “at once horrific and just how it is; the result of the contract we sign up to as a meat-eating society”. ■

Jan-Carlos Kucharek

# BRIDGING THE IMAGINARY DIVIDE

A webinar explored how visualisation can connect human perception with architectural intention, using insights from neuroscience and practice

Architecture is the art, or science, of turning ideas into built form. But between imagination and reality lies a gap, separating what architects intend from what others understand. This webinar explored how that gap might be bridged.

This divide is not merely communicative but cognitive. Bridging it requires understanding how people perceive architecture, even before it exists.

Here, neuroscience and cognitive science are playing an ever-important role. Speaking at the webinar, RIBA editor Eleanor Young observed that these disciplines have already revealed why dull facades cause us stress, have identified the shapes that appeal to babies, and have even “unpicked” the brain mechanisms that respond to healthy built environments.

## **Applying cognitive science to circulation**

By necessity, much research to date has focused on built structures. But Michal Gath-Morad, assistant professor at Cambridge University's department of architecture, told the webinar that she was focusing on the as-yet-unbuilt. Many simulation models, she explained, already

exist for environmental conditions such as daylight, energy performance and wind flow. So why not wayfinding?

Using complex datasets, simulations, cognitive agent models and VR environments, her team's “behavioural experiments” have revealed much about how humans interpret their surroundings to find their way around – and these are far more nuanced than simply “optimising the speed of getting from A to B”.

The simulations revealed that exposing vertical circulation routes in complex multi-level buildings resulted in a clearer understanding of how to read the building. Two dominant navigational strategies emerged for gathering visual information: a “perimeter strategy” and a “central point strategy”. These results show that architecture does not merely accommodate movement; it shapes the cognitive behaviour behind that movement.

Despite the growing sophistication of models, their adoption in practice remains uneven. Architectural education often emphasises intuition and precedent over behavioural evidence.

In another of Michal's projects, at ETH

Zurich, students analysed circulation patterns in hospitals. They simulated the movements of healthcare workers through hospital layouts, comparing metrics such as trajectory density, proximity between staff, and potential interaction points.

The open-source toolkit developed from this work integrates spatial analysis, virtual-reality walkthroughs and agent-based simulation modules in an attempt to embed behavioural evidence within the design process.

Nevertheless, some students felt they lacked the scientific knowledge to fully understand the simulations and make informed choices based on them. Evidence-based design demands a new literacy in human cognition, which architecture has only just begun to embrace.

## **Communication through visualisation**

Lumion head of product David Weir-McCall said he was fascinated by “the research into the power of visuals and how they shape the way we design”.

For its part, Lumion is constantly evolving, bringing developments out of



Left: Agora helping share the detail of a concept at the Old Rectory, Norfolk.

Below: Testing out an internal light well and planting feature with visualisation at the Old Rectory, Norfolk.



the lab and into practice. Its product is an intuitive, real-time 3D visualisation tool, which it describes as “an extension of your imagination”.

In David’s experience – including as an architect – it is miscommunication, rather than missing detail, that is the major cause of costly project rework. Bridging the imaginary divide, for him, is about ensuring spatial concepts are understood by collaborators and clients.

“Whether it’s a video, an animation, a 360-degree panorama or VR experience, it’s always there because you’re trying to communicate something,” he said. “There’s no image that is just created for the sake of it.”

#### Early visualisations to stakeholders

For Ashley Broughton, principal architect at Agora, visualisation is not simply a late-stage presentation tool, depicting a building in a near-complete state, but a practical strategy for stakeholder management.

“We specialise in quite unusual, challenging sites,” Ashley explained. These include projects constrained by protected

landscapes or heritage considerations. On such projects, communicating clearly with planners, neighbours and clients is critical. Traditional planning submissions that rely on basic elevations and technical drawings leave space for misinterpretation.

“The first thing that most people do is use their mental visualisation to try and create their own image,” Ashley said. The problem is: “They are making an assumption... and what if their assumptions are wrong?”

To limit this risk, Agora embeds visualisation directly into its design process using Lumion. Early drawings combine CAD elevations with 3D render layers, while full CGI views and animations illustrate how proposals relate to context.

This approach proved valuable on a rural Norfolk site, where a new dwelling was partially embedded into the landscape near a heritage property. Initial reactions raised concerns about visibility and impact, which visualisations helped clarify.

“Misconception, we tend to find, is the biggest barrier in planning,” Ashley noted. In this case, “without the visualisations, the scheme wouldn’t have been supported”.

#### Brains moving through space

Architecture operates simultaneously in physical and cognitive domains. So, where to from here? While smell-o-vision may be the stuff of sci-fi, David points out that digital interface design, alongside emerging multisensory considerations such as acoustic modelling, could inform architectural thinking.

“We use UI and UX, which is essentially wayfinding around a product,” he noted. Can this be applied to buildings?

Bridging the imaginary divide requires recognising that design is not only about form and material, but also about how people perceive and understand spatial systems. With today’s visualisation tools, buildings have the capacity to alter our perceptions, even before they’re constructed.

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# HIGH LIFE

Nestling 250m up in a Carmarthenshire valley, Pantybara – the rebuilt home of Rural Office founder Niall Maxwell and family – balances spatial frugality with joyful details

**WORDS**  
Eleanor Young

**PHOTOS**  
Nick Dearden





It is a little odd to be obsessed with the floor tiles. But after visiting Rural Office for Architecture's Pantybara house in Carmarthenshire, built for its founder, Niall Maxwell and family, this is what was imprinted on my memory. I have visited the site before; then, it was the perfectly judged soup, with just the right swirl of intense flavoured oil, that stayed with me. Luxurious frugality.

So, those tiles. You can buy them too, from Mutina; these particular ones are Tape. But will you know how to use them? At Pantybara they run through the ground floor, hinting, defining how you use space. The intensity of the pattern gives you a resting point: here, we sit at the table or relax in a chair. You can have them half patterned, half plain, so a joint is signalled without a joint, and when they are plain the spaces flow. And where the volume of the sitting room opens up and you step down, you go from dark tiles to light.

You might look at the cost of the tiles and laugh at my reference to frugality. But frugality is in the modest, right-scaling of the spaces and windows. There are no acres of glass (showing respect for the Welsh weather at 250m); the sunken sitting room is a sensible 4 x 4m; bathrooms are intimate and interesting rather than echoing shrines to hygiene. The kitchen shares much with labour-saving utility kitchens of the 1950s in how its drawers pull out for everything needed, with blue-stained ash ply doors and reeded glass cupboards all within reach.

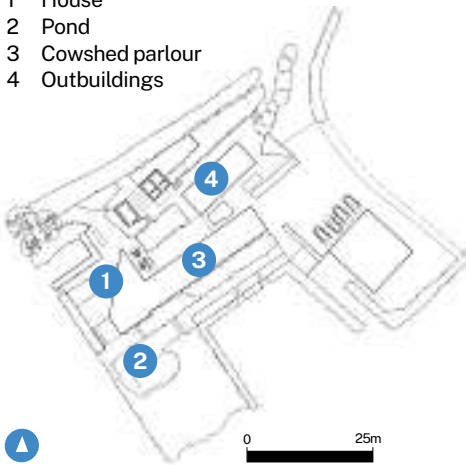
Left: Sheltered garden between ex-cowshed and cutaway gable end.

Below: The metal weave is a riff on traditional Welsh fire hoods.



## SITE PLAN

- 1 House
- 2 Pond
- 3 Cowshed parlour
- 4 Outbuildings



Top right: The house, balanced by its 'chimneys'.

Below right: Enjoying the view, without a record-breaking expanse of glass.



As such, it has less in common with the dramatic 1,500m<sup>2</sup> scale of Maxwell's 2017's RIBA House of the Year-winning Caring Wood in Kent, which made his name as an architect of homes, than with Rural Office's recent reworked entrance sequence for Parc and Dare Hall in Treorchy, one of a series of more public projects the practice has been moving into in recent years. There is no flabbiness of space, a *bête noir* – along with corridors – of Niall's.

Looking around the old farmyard you can also see the intentional accretion of small, perfectly balanced additions that marks both Rural Office's most intriguing of domestic projects, such as Aeron Parc in Ceredigion, and its most significant cultural offering to date, the National Slate Museum in Llanberis. It is a way of working that gives a sense of organic growth and is gentle on a site, and less demanding than the drastic reordering approach often applied to major cultural institutions.

The extent to which this is a landscaping and masterplanning project as much as a house design is clear as you enter the site. It sits with fields sloping up above, and garden landscape below dropping into a steep, narrow valley. The first studio for Rural Office was here, and the second grant-funded studio in the walls of the milking barn. Niall and Helen lived with their boys in an adjacent cottage for six years, planning to refurbish it, but Helen still shivers as she remembers the damp rooms, built directly onto mud. They rebuilt instead.

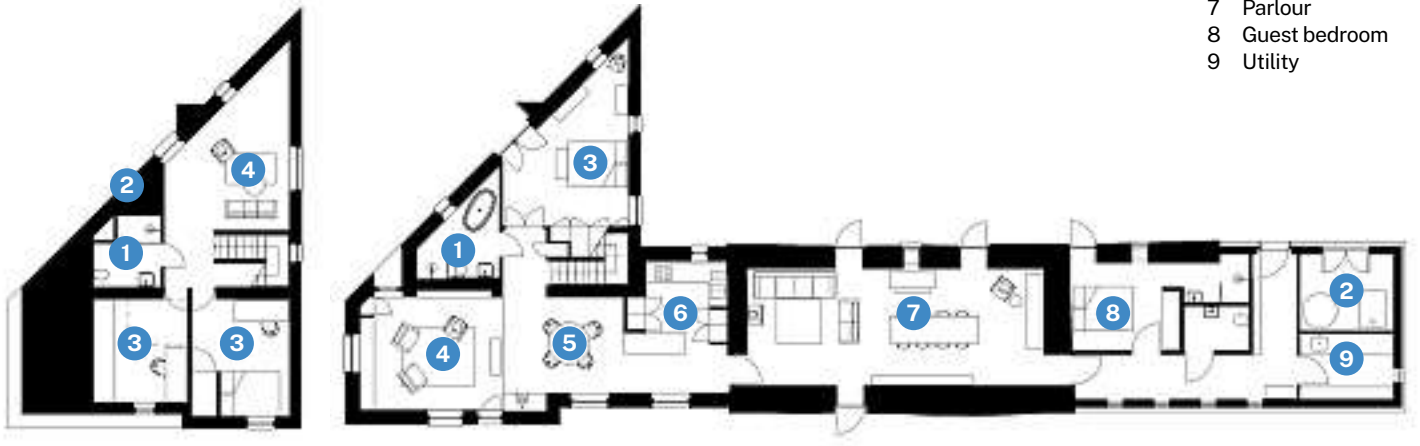




FIRST FLOOR PLAN

GROUND FLOOR PLAN

- 1 Bathroom
- 2 Plant
- 3 Bedroom
- 4 Sitting room
- 5 Dining room
- 6 Kitchen
- 7 Parlour
- 8 Guest bedroom
- 9 Utility



With the white wall of the new house to bookend it, they have now set up a sheltered courtyard between the studios, which has graduated from football kickabout to boules court – with beds of energetic perennials ready to burst into life as the weather warms. The first studio, which was pressed into service as a tiny home while the house was built, is now an occasional tea room when the garden is open to visitors. The second is used as the primary entrance to the house and has become an extra wing with a guest bedroom and a long dining/working room for visiting parents, noisy book groups into the night, new year dinners and clients being wined and dined, as well as an occasional studio space for Niall. It can be shut off from the house by an airtight door – to ensure the MVHR is not overworking since the house was planned with Passivhaus principles. This door is also a marker of more private space.

The new volume of the house, surrounded by plants and steps of salvaged stones from the site and quarry below, is full of character and even play. The slate-hung top half of the valley-facing facade is bisected by colour, half natural grey, half white-painted (the opposite of the dark to light shift in tile colour inside the house). Instead of a straight rectangle, the hill side of the house is sliced into a sharp angle to create space for a third garden. It also makes the building smaller than one expects; Niall



Above: Corrugated and stained ash joinery creates a texturally rich setting for eating.



Left: Sunken sitting room with peg board, populated by plants.

Below: First floor with delicate ash-and-bronze balustrade.



likes the conceit of the suggestion of a larger house, obfuscating a more modest building – a tradition he has observed in gentrified Welsh farms. A “chimney” projects sharply from the back wall – but is actually a series of bat chambers, where barn owls have also found a home. The MVHR vents have a grid with laser-cut patterns that match the patterned tiles. The deep, double-insulated walls allow the fun of reveals in the roughcast: a ghost of a never-there structure marked out in smooth render.

Over the years the project has been kept moving by labour from Niall and Helen, in the demolition of the concrete milking stalls, recovery and setting of stones, the painting of the white hanging tiles, the extensive gardens, the building of a pond in front of the house that attracts emperor dragonflies and swallows drinking on the wing. The construction work was by a local builder and his mate. A joiner with a workshop at a nearby farm has brought a level of sophistication through the house with corrugated ash cupboard doors, a giant pegboard planned as a bookshelf but colonised by plants. Sometimes the work was figuring things out with the builder or joiner: the balustrade on the stairs is particularly beautiful example of that process, where rods of ash vertically cantilever from the staircase with a bronze rod seemingly impossibly threaded through at the top.

Unusually the main bedroom can – and does – become part of journey through the house. Double doors wide open, you see through the room to the garden at the back of the building, the bulwark of the stair with deep wardrobes protecting the bed from views. “We are not bedroom people,” says Helen, by way of explanation, but this way of liberating the house from the tyranny of privacy gives a sense of open and flowing space. The sharp geometry and tight corners of the plan here and in the bathrooms are well used, the length of baths tucked into it, a chair in the more intimate space.

Upstairs is the snug, with big views each side over the garden and a thick curtain that turns it into cinema. Here the corner has not quite been resolved. There are plans to enclose it as a discreet studio space for Helen and her garden work for the practice. The two boys’ bedrooms, meanwhile, have a simple finesse, with the apex of the roof pitch borrowed for high beds and sleepovers. A night vent in one bed is perfectly sited for 20-mile views from the pillow.

This house is remarkable for its lookout position on the valley and across Carmarthenshire, for the detail and even more for the unexpected fun of its details, for the glorious gardens around it. But most of all because those things are good together, nestled despite its altitude, anchored into its landscape of stone, water and trees; it feels right in its place. ■

## CREDITS

**Client**  
Niall and  
Helen Maxwell  
**Architect**  
Rural Office  
**Contractor**  
Rural Office  
**Passivhaus  
designer**  
Junko Suetake  
**Structural  
engineer**  
RV Williams  
Associates  
**Landscape  
architect**  
Helen Maxwell  
**Subcontractor**  
Jonathan Firth

## SUPPLIERS

**MVHR**  
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**Floor tiles**  
Mutina  
**Timber flooring**  
Reeve Wood  
**Cabinetry**  
Studio Pren  
**Worktops**  
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**Sanitaryware  
and brassware**  
Lusso Stone  
**Lighting**  
Astro Lighting  
**Switch plates**  
Corston  
**Windows**  
Sigg & Co  
**Slate**  
Glendyne Natural  
Canadian Slate

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# IN THE PINK

## Conceived in 2015, Morris+Company's rose-hued Harold Moody Health Centre is a hopeful piece of civic architecture that's full of traces of its long gestation

### WORDS

Isabelle Priest

### PHOTOS

Jack Hobhouse

Morris+Company's Harold Moody Health Centre has had an extremely long gestation. The project is a new-format community healthcare hub that integrates two existing GP practices, children's development services, and access to other healthcare professions including physiotherapy, podiatry and mental health. It also accommodates a separate children's nursery on the upper storey. The scheme is part of the vast, contentious Aylesbury Estate regeneration in Elephant and Castle, south London. The masterplan was laid out by HTA and Morris+Company was invited to participate in the closed competition in 2015. The building officially opened last summer.

Cast your mind back to 2015, and you'll remember how different the world was. In the UK, the coalition government was still in power at the start of the year. David Cameron won a surprise Conservative majority in May's election. Elsewhere, it was the year of the January Charlie Hebdo and November 2015 Paris attacks, Greek Eurozone crisis, Paris Climate Agreement, VW emissions scandal and Iran nuclear deal. Barack Obama would remain president of the United States for two more years.

Why this matters in relation to the Harold Moody Health Centre is to underline how design decisions can, and sometimes must, stand the test of time. This period is pre-Brexit, pre-Covid pandemic, pre-Russian invasion of Ukraine and of course pre-new Iran war – all huge events that have substantially changed the construction picture both at home and abroad. When Morris+Company won the project, it was still called Duggan Morris and was a relatively young practice, 11 years in. It had recently completed Ortus, a pavilion for the Maudsley Charity promoting mental health awareness, but did not have experience on projects involving closely associated health facilities.

HTA's Simon Bayliss had asked director Joe Morris to collaborate on the proposal as an agreeable partner and neighbour to the practice's adjacent library and housing scheme. The point of difference on why, perhaps, this sculpted pink concrete building appears fresh today is that Morris didn't put forward a design, preconceived ideas or even sketches for the contest – instead the team proposed a method. This included how to work with a multifaceted client

Right: The Harold Moody Health Centre opens onto a new public square in Southwark as part of the Aylesbury Estate regeneration.





(of up to 20 people in a meeting), coordinating with HTA, and a focus on architecture alongside the heavily prescriptive NHS spatial guidelines. The reason the project took so long is because it is publicly funded – not because of the design. If anything the design tries to mitigate some of the time-consuming aspects of construction.

One of the building's most striking features is, of course, its exterior. "The pink emerged," Morris explains, "as part of the idea of creating a recognisable building, an asset for the community that would draw you in and encourage you to interact. Rather than being sombre, it is intended to be playful and a little bit whimsical... and about creating a robust and durable building with a permanence and civic quality. Metal might have felt too temporary and brick too domestic."

Designed as precast panels, the choice is deliberately a single-package material. It was fabricated off site and includes internal build-up, reducing the number of required trades.

The concrete combines with a deceptively grid-like plan that accommodates two GP practices. Architecturally this materialises as 21 consultation rooms, seven treatment rooms, two speech and language rooms, one phlebotomy room, one group session room and ancillary spaces such as clean and dirty utility rooms, cleaning cupboards and two waiting rooms. The third floor is office space for all healthcare staff. The building was allocated a former basketball court and small housing



Above: Shifted window openings, varying textures and projecting volumes bring life to what could become a monotonous brief.

Below: The third floor office terrace off the staff breakout area is about creating space for wellbeing too.



block in the masterplan whereby the design had to fit within the footprint and volume, which it more or less did with some tweaks at planning stage.

The challenge in this context was how to give the scheme a logical plan, including separate access for the nursery, while not simply replicating its interior orderliness externally. The concrete envelope helps in this regard too. The flush and punched-through openings are shifted on the grid to maintain interest. Different planes to the openings showcase different manipulations of the concrete surface, from polished to honed and acid-etched. The concrete uses Dolomite aggregates, and the process of selecting the optimum combination of finishes took many hours of experimentation. They add texture to the Tetris-effect of seemingly random vertical and horizontal blocks.

In form, meanwhile, the entrance volume steps marginally forward into the new public square as a two-sided open loggia at ground level. The rest of the plan then loosely pinwheels around two central lift and stair cores: one primarily for the healthcare levels, the other for the nursery, whose main entrance is on the more secluded north elevation, opposite the library. This is a new pedestrian route that is part of an overall ambition to bring more porosity across the site. Here, it is intimate with a retained London plane tree, planting and animated landscaping for young children to enjoy. The building works hard within the brief to push in and pull out elevations that



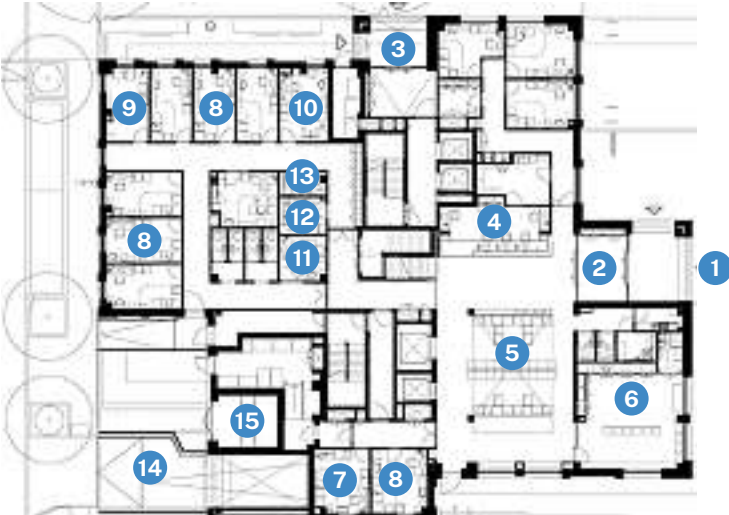
Left: The health centre is a pink-hued beacon of change and aspiration in the regeneration plan of Elephant and Castle.

- |                               |                                    |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 Public square               | 18 Community treatment room        |
| 2 Health centre entrance      | 19 Meeting room                    |
| 3 Nursery entrance            | 20 Lobby                           |
| 4 Health centre reception     | 21 Community open plan office      |
| 5 Waiting area                | 22 GP open plan office             |
| 6 Group session room          | 23 GP small offices                |
| 7 Community consult exam room | 24 Confidential work rooms         |
| 8 GP consult exam room        | 25 External terrace                |
| 9 GP counselling room         | 26 Nursery reception               |
| 10 GP treatment room          | 27 Buggy park                      |
| 11 Phlebotomy                 | 28 Staff room                      |
| 12 Clean utility              | 29 Early years zone (0 to 2 years) |
| 13 Dirty utility              | 30 Dining area                     |
| 15 Substation                 | 31 Main kitchen                    |
| 16 Void                       | 32 Early years zone (2 to 5 years) |
| 17 GP admin                   | 33 Early years terrace             |



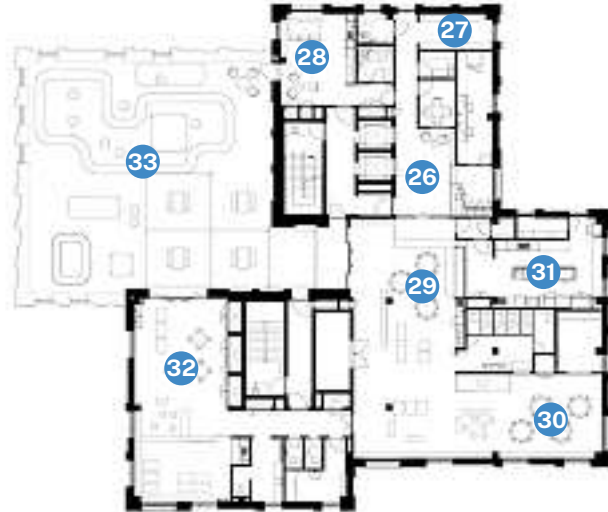
**GROUND FLOOR PLAN**

**FIRST FLOOR PLAN**



**SECOND FLOOR PLAN**

**THIRD FLOOR PLAN**



bring nooks and variety to the street scene, and de-emphasise front and rear. There is a basement for a hefty plant and parking for staff, which does have a ramped vehicle entrance at the back, but attention to detail ensures it has the same bespoke treatment for its metal doors as those of the front loggia. The roof profile continues this variety too, with the rear presenting as half-height and castellated with glazing in between to accommodate a rooftop play terrace for the nursery.

This approach to the service basement is somewhat emblematic of Morris+Company's methodology inside: to find 'architecture' among the strict practicalities of a healthcare brief where you must have ceiling tiles, accessible ducts, wipeable surfaces everywhere, visual differences between floors, walls, doors and skirtings, and a firm grasp of maintenance schedules. What the practice has brought to the project in these spaces is the beautiful detailing. It has designed every moment, down to the sharps bins in the consulting rooms. It has at the same time maximised the areas of architectural opportunity, in the carefully considered architrave that is wider on one side to integrate the panic alarm light, card entry system and room number in a typeface Morris says demonstrates "Swiss levels of control". It has also been generous where possible, including 1.8m-wide corridors, a circular route around the consultation rooms so there are no dead ends (to help with wayfinding for visitors with Alzheimer's



**Above:** One of 21 consultation rooms, which have to be flexible to meet different GP practices' and doctors' spatial preferences.

**Below left:** The double-height health centre waiting room, with its void to connect the two reception levels.

**Below right:** Cherry wood veneer joinery and bench seating – one of the upgrades to the building's architecture Morris+Company fought for.

**Opposite:** The rooftop terrace that was designed for use as a nursery playground, still unoccupied but offering impressive space and views.





disease) and picture windows to bring in views and natural light. Ceilings on the ground and first floors are 3.6m tall, too.

Where there has been room for flex away from the guidelines is the entrance and waiting areas. These open up through the loggia, hidden behind a multipurpose space for baby-weighing clinics and other uses into an elegant double-height reception area with a central void to connect the two levels. It is finished with pink-tinted terrazzo flooring, cherry wood veneer joinery and exposed concrete structural walls. The design has a calm, neutral, but high-quality and not boring decor. The staircase, immediately in front as you enter is positioned to take precedent over the lifts to the left as a way of promoting active travel. Yet there is also thoughtful zoning so every visitor can find their space within the plan, including a waiting area designed for children. The whole facility is an unimaginable upgrade from the spaces these GP surgeries used to occupy, one of which is still visible around the corner at the base of a typical Aylesbury Estate mid-rise concrete housing block.

This brings us to the top two floors. The third is a well-specified office that includes a wellbeing terrace. But it is the fourth-floor nursery that brings most drama. It offers huge picture windows with sills low enough for toddlers to marvel at the views, more incredibly tall ceilings, space to run about inside and out, with skylines from the rooftop

terrace that most Londoners only ever catch glimpses of.

Sadly though, there is at present no childcare occupier: the level remains as shell and core. This brings us back to the fact that this building has been on the drawing board since 2015. Today's falling birth rates mean there is no longer such childcare provision need. It's a real shame. Spatially, it would easily be the best London nursery I've ever seen. Southwark Council, as one half of the client with housing association Notting Hill Genesis, doesn't have the ambition to take the space on as a community nursery, like those provided by boroughs such as Islington. It has put it up for let for other uses; only time will tell what it becomes.

For the moment at least, it will not be converted to residential. And that too is possibly a point of divergence between a project that began in 2015 to one that might be started now. What is today unusual about the Harold Moody Health Centre is that it is a standalone piece of civic architecture. It has been funded in part by the housing alongside, but it is an almost sole-purpose building – not shoved at the base of a housing development. It has been given space to breathe in the public realm, and with that made room for aspirations to ameliorate wider public health so needed in this densely populated area that has long featured on deprivation indices. If architecture can improve healthy life outcomes, this building is a strong candidate to do so. ■

## CREDITS

**Client**  
London Borough of Southwark/  
Notting Hill Genesis  
**Architect**  
Morris+Company  
**Healthcare consultant**  
Sonnemann  
Toon Architects  
**Planning consultant**  
HTA Design  
**Project management/employers**  
Agent Arcadis  
**Structural/civil engineer (Stage 4-5)**  
Tully DeAth  
**MEP engineer (Stage 4-5)**  
Couch  
Perry Wilkes  
**MEP/structural engineer (Stage 1-3)** Aecom  
**Landscape architect**  
HTA Design  
**Facade consultant**  
Eckersley  
O'Callaghan  
**Fire engineer**  
Sweco  
**Building control**  
London Borough of Southwark  
**Main contractor**  
Vistry South London  
**Precast subcontractor**  
Marble Mosaic  
**Drylining subcontractor**  
Gypcraft  
**MEP subcontractor**  
Hannover  
**Electrical subcontractor**  
Emmersons  
**Joinery**  
Keenwood  
**Aluminium windows and doors**  
Soundcraft  
**Glazed partitions**  
Planet Partition

## SUPPLIERS

**Health centre clinical joinery**  
Stirling Medical  
**Health centre staff joinery**  
Kinnarps  
**Sheet flooring**  
Forbo  
**Terrazzo flooring**  
Domus

## IN NUMBERS

**Total contract cost**  
Confidential  
**GIFA**  
5,012m<sup>2</sup>  
**Building height**  
20.8m  
**Actual annual electricity usage**  
81.63kWh/m<sup>2</sup>/yr  
**RICS modules embodied carbon calculation**  
722kgCO<sub>2</sub>eq/m<sup>2</sup>  
**Consult exam rooms**  
21  
**Treatment rooms**  
7  
**Phlebotomy room**  
1  
**Speech and language therapy rooms**  
2  
**Group session room**  
1

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# ROOMS AT THE TOP

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**WORDS**

Edwin Heathcote

**PHOTOS**

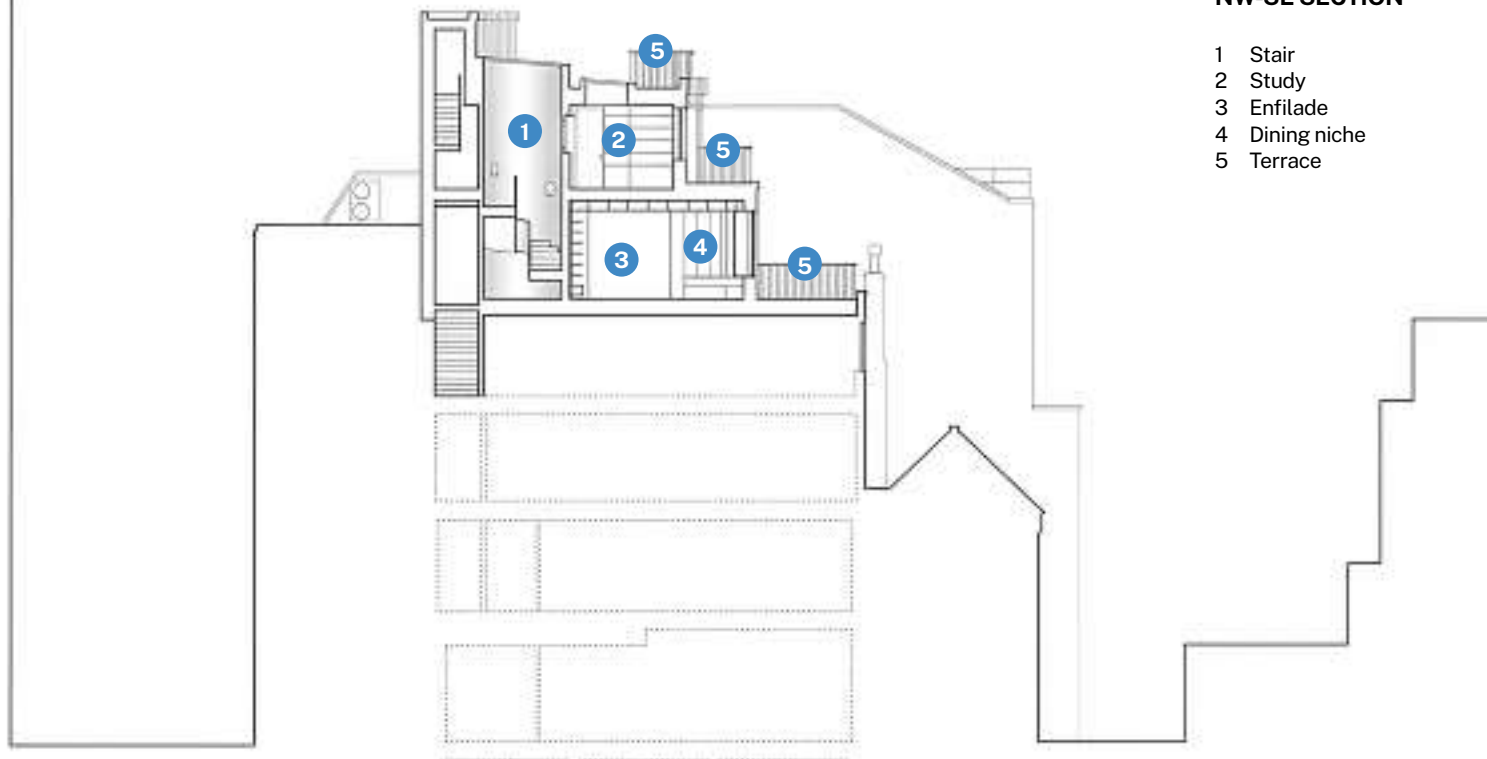
Will Pryce

David Kohn Architects has designed what is, in effect, a two-storey house on top of an existing office building, creating one of London's most original new dwellings of recent years



South-east elevation. Plants trailing from the terraces suggest hanging gardens.

## NW-SE SECTION



- 1 Stair
- 2 Study
- 3 Enfilade
- 4 Dining niche
- 5 Terrace

In what must be one of London's densest neighbourhoods, the developer client for a remarkable new home somehow found himself a site – handily, right on top of a 19th-century one-time warehouse he bought as an office building.

This area situated between Holborn and Covent Garden is a curious mix, with the hyper-touristy old market, the super-robust old warehouses, a few nice terraces and a kind of almost invisible background infill of utterly missable commercial buildings. The warehouse is one of those.

The rooftop addition is missable, too, but only because you can't see it from the street. If you could, you would see that it is utterly unmissable. In fact it is one of the most interesting, generous, original and unexpected new dwellings in the capital in recent years.

It was designed by David Kohn Architects, a practice whose work deviates joyfully from the banalities of London's bricky new vernacular. The design looks a little like a catalogue of bay window types built and stacked high above the narrow streets. Each room is defined by a distinctive form which is then expressed individually on the elevation. There's something almost Arts and Crafts about its determination to create a changeful facade.

In a way, this is a kind of two-storey

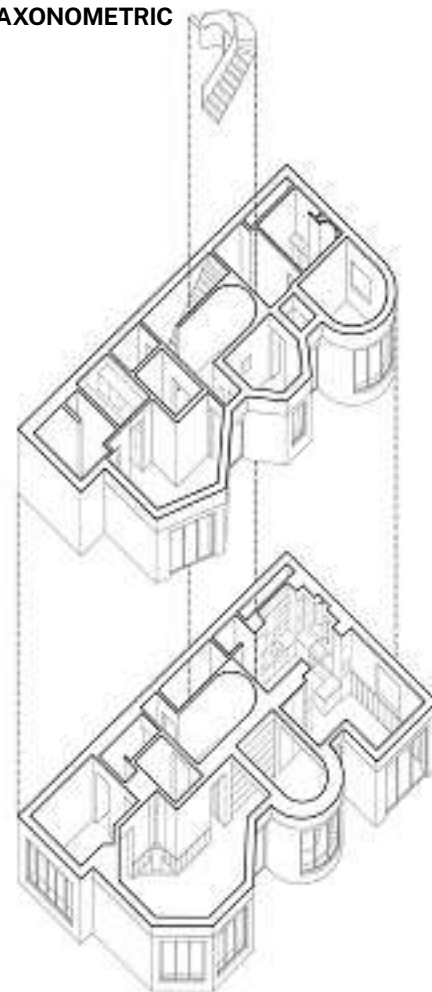
house, but one jacked up five storeys above the city. Its ground plane is the office's flat roof, an elevated urban datum. The client has done this before. It's a modus operandi, a way of gaining space for super-central residential through acquisition of a commercial building – site as side effect.

Kohn has been here before too. His first big hit was *A Room for London*, a small, nautical-looking building designed with artist Fiona Banner and placed atop the concrete mass of the Queen Elizabeth Hall at the Southbank Centre. It was designed to evoke the *Roi des Belges*, the vessel from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and it overlooked the Thames from where that boat set off.

This rooftop house overlooks the strange tower of Freemason's Hall, just as weird in its own way. It also takes in a lot more of London than that, a huge, remarkable city panorama which has the effect of making this modest dwelling appear epic in its hyper-urban way.

It is oriented roughly south to take advantage of the most dramatic views as well as the sun, while the circulation, kitchen and bathrooms create a core pushed to the back of the plan in a windowless service spine backing onto the party wall, leaving that collection of bays and corner windows to define a series of enfilade spaces.

## AXONOMETRIC





The living and dining spaces are on the “ground” floor, with the bedrooms above in a floor set back to allow space for two substantial terraces with outdoor seating and landscaping designed by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan. The landscaping is intended to drape down, creating a kind of hanging-gardens effect – one now becoming visible as the terraces segue into properly elevated gardens.

From the terraces you notice the brick, which is laid vertically in a stack bond to allow the smoothness of the curves on the bays but also makes the walls look a little like 1970s landscaping, reminding me of the brown Hawkins quarry tiles at the Barbican (and other more suburban housing estates ad infinitum, including my former 1960s house).

There is a lot of geometry here. There are round windows and diamond-shaped rooflights, semicircular window bays and terraces, wavy balconies and arched niches. It is recognisably Postmodern and, in its way, a little Play School, the big, archetypal openings appearing clearly as motifs and representations as well as things in themselves.

There is a stair with an undulating ceiling profile inspired, according to the architects, by Jørn Utzon’s sublime Bagsværd church (1976) on the outskirts of Copenhagen. Throughout the house, strikingly profiled and changing ceilings are used for acoustic as well as aesthetic purposes, giving a surprising effect, the light creating shadows in unexpected and subtle ways. It’s interesting to compare it to Kohn’s incredible designs for New College in Oxford with its wavy gables and Neo-expressionist roofline.

That is obviously a very different project at an entirely different scale, but it does usefully illustrate Kohn’s very personal and evolving architectural language, which manages to synthesise precedents from Rudolf Steiner and James Stirling to Caruso St John (where he formerly worked) and Expressionism into a kind of intriguing Vienna-Hamburg axis of early 20th-century urbanism. There is genuinely no one else



Top left: An enfilade gives intimacy to individual rooms and the generosity for larger social occasions.

Left: Brick is familiar in the context, but laid with a vertical stack bond to accommodate the bays’ geometry.

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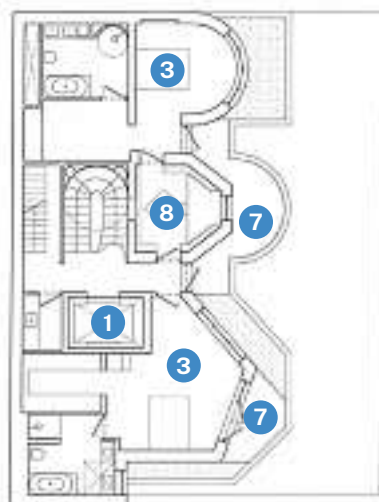
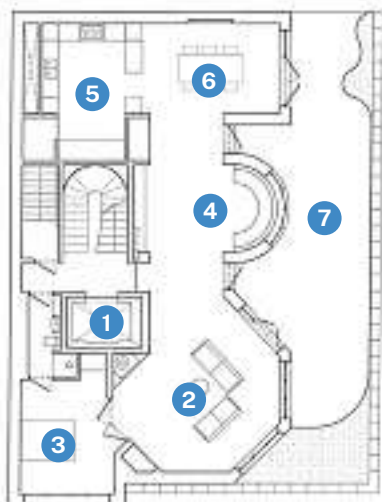


Top: Faceted doors from the living room.

Above: A dining niche in a curved bay is an Arts and Crafts motif.

Left: A curvaceous stair connects the floors.

## LOWER LEVEL, UPPER LEVEL AND ROOF PLANS



- 1 Lift
- 2 Living area
- 3 Bedroom suite
- 4 Dining niche
- 5 Kitchen
- 6 Dining area
- 7 Terrace
- 8 Study
- 9 Plant



Above: Curves continue in a toplit ensuite bathroom



Above: View through study, landing and bedroom on the upper floor.

Below: Step-backs and bays create both curved and angular rooms. Undulating ceilings help to soften the acoustics.



doing anything even vaguely similar.

If the openings appear almost childlike in their Platonic simplicity, the interiors are surprisingly complex in other ways. The lower-floor living area is arranged enfilade in a rather continental style with a kink where the plan kicks back to the kitchen creating an L-shape, but the shapes of the bays nevertheless define spaces of individual character within the overall space, interlinked but distinct.

The client is a keen collector of art and ceramics, acknowledged by an interior that includes niches, plinths, surfaces and shelves on which artefacts can be displayed. Unlike many contemporary interiors, this one is not afraid of stuff. The constant carving into surfaces and the stripping away of layers to reveal surfaces or openings imparts a sense of depth and substantiality to what are mostly otherwise plasterboard walls.

At the same time the central area of the lower floor has an oval rim of a shelf running continuously around the space, bringing the shape of the bay into the room and creating a kind of running frieze, but one full of things: books, objets d'art, pots and so on. It frames the room with physical artefacts, acknowledging things as well as space.

The upper storey, containing the more private spaces, is bright and airy and its rooms lead onto terraces that echo the shapes of the bays, each affording 180-degree views across the city from inside and out. And above all these is an undulating roof terrace which follows the contours of the bays beneath.

This is a project that seems to reflect the nature of its neighbourhood. Nearby Covent Garden became the epicentre of London's Postmodernism, not only with the reimagining of the market building and its use of Classical columns on an effectively industrial structure, and the rediscovery of Inigo Jones's Italianate and almost proto-Rossi church and public piazza, but also with the 1980s interventions into former warehouse and workshop buildings. Terry Farrell's Comyn Ching Triangle remains one of the most sophisticated pieces of PoMo urbanism in its invention and adaptive reuse, but it was also here (along, arguably, with Butler's Wharf) that warehouse architecture was rediscovered as a perfect Postmodern shell, able to accommodate huge lofts, studios or offices.



But this little confluence of Holborn and Covent Garden also features that particular mix of 1970s and 80s social housing from the post-high-rise era, the warehouses and the dim commercial stuff off late Modernism, which somehow makes for a very urban and satisfying situation in which the walker is constantly coming across the unexpected.

And this remarkable apartment is as unexpected as it could possibly be. Even though probably the only way to see it would be to look down from the neighbouring taller buildings. But just to know this little gem sits up there feels so good. ■

Above: The floorplan is organised with a spine of service spaces to the north along the party wall.

---

#### IN NUMBERS

**TIME ON SITE**  
24 MONTHS

**GROSS INTERNAL AREA**  
283M<sup>2</sup>

**OPERATIONAL ENERGY USE**  
46 KWH/M<sup>2</sup>/YR

---

#### CREDITS

**Architect**  
David Kohn Architects  
**Client**  
Private  
**Structural engineer**  
Price & Myers  
**M&E consultant**  
Webb Yates  
**Landscape design**  
Todd Longstaffe-Gowan  
**Planning consultant**  
Collective Planning  
**Main contractor**  
Millimetre

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#### SUPPLIERS

**Brick tile cladding system**  
Corium by Wienerberger  
**Stainless-steel worktop**  
GEC Anderson  
**Aluminium windows**  
Schueco  
**Rooflights**  
Flushglaze by Glazing Vision  
**European oak plan flooring**  
Ted Todd

# SHAPING SOLUTIONS

With post-Grenfell legislative and regulatory changes still in process and the government's 'gateway' system for high-risk buildings still prone to delays, a RIBAJ/Hilti conference convened to discuss how architects can play a proactive role





June 2027 will mark a decade since the Grenfell Tower fire. Yet the changes in legislation and regulation the disaster precipitated are still being worked through. The Building Safety Act has been accompanied by secondary legislation, and government policy continues to evolve, with a focus on establishing a single construction regulator and reform of the construction products regulatory regime, including introducing a general safety requirement (GSR).

“A central theme coming out of the legislation has been to try and close gaps in responsibility and ambiguity – and it’s working,” observed Ben Oram, technical director of Buckley Gray Yeoman, at the outset of a conference hosted by RIBA and sponsored by Hilti Great Britain – ‘Managing compliance in the BSA Gateway system’ – which took place at London’s Building Centre in March.

Despite the positive tone from Oram, who also chairs the Architectural Technical Leads Group (ATLG), there’s no escaping the fact that this is a period of profound change for construction. It has brought much-reported challenges for both the new Building Safety Regulator (BSR) and industry as they seek, respectively, to implement and navigate the new system of ‘gateways’ for higher-risk buildings (HRBs). For architects, he

**Above:** ATLG chair Ben Oram, technical director at Buckley Gray Yeoman, chaired half-day RIBA/Hilti events in London and Manchester.

**Top right:** CABE’s Dr Hywel Davies outlined the meaning and purpose of the ‘golden thread’.

**Below:** From left, Totus Digital’s Aman Sharma, BGY’s Ben Oram, Allan Binns of Project Four Safety Solutions, and Hilti’s Olga Reyes.



added, “the problems we’re seeing are evidence of the difficulty in interpreting high-level, goal-setting legislation into everyday processes without guidance”.

BSR is collaborating with the Construction Leadership Council to create that guidance – and it has been boosting its in-house technical expertise to tackle delays in processing Gateway 2 applications. At the same time, architects are evolving their ways of working to ensure submissions meet the regulator’s requirements and take on the responsibilities set out by the act.

### Taking the reins

Experience to date suggests the Building Safety Act, whose remit extends beyond HRBs to principal designer and contractor roles, is impacting on design thinking. “We’re seeing a real conservatism around judgements and analysis in this space. Designers are fearful about making those judgements, due to liability – that’s not just architects but fire engineers as well,” said Allan Binns, national director of safety adviser Project Four Safety Solutions. “That’s to the detriment of what we’re trying to do and to the spirit of the Building Regulations themselves, which aren’t prescriptive,” he argued.

But the new responsibilities can bring opportunities for architects – as long as

they are prepared to take the reins and adopt the right approach. That should be one of “informed analysis”, said Aman Sharma, CEO of engineering consultant Totus Digital. “We need to ask what we feel comfortable with,” he added. “Is it safe? Is what you’re doing safe?”

That applies particularly to adopting innovations, such as modern methods of construction, and to the many untested combinations and situations established products are used in every day. “We always test our firestopping system in combination with services from a range of manufacturers, so it’s a whole-system test,” said Olga Reyes, head of technical DD&E marketing, northern Europe at Hilti Great Britain. Testing can’t cover every eventuality because, she explained, components and situations are vast and ever-increasing and “testing standards haven’t caught up with the way we install, design or implement the MEP or facade applications in buildings”. Sharma added: “We have to accept that standards development generally – in the product-testing space and elsewhere – cannot keep pace with building innovation.”

Reyes cited the example of mixing ducts and dampers and mechanical and electrical penetrations. “There is no fire

testing standard for manufacturers to comply with, and we’re constantly navigating that,” she explained, with her company often being called into a project late, perhaps post-installation, to judge or test a system retrospectively.

For firestopping, there is a growing recognition that upfront thinking, design and specification are needed. But, Reyes cautioned, “the competence to do that design is still lacking” – and the answer to the challenges is clearly early engagement with manufacturers. “It’s critical that, as a manufacturer, we’re aware of what is demanded,” she continued. To that end, she called on architects in the room to share the issues they’re facing to help inform “what we should be testing, designing, innovating”.

### Submission strategies

Gateway 2 application rejection rates – currently running at 38% for remediation projects and 33% for new build – show the scope for improvement in submission quality. Independent building control consultant Colin Blatchford-Brown advised architects making applications to focus on “the

Below: The packed Manchester half-day event was held at Hilti’s UK head office.



“We have to accept that standards development generally – in the product-testing space and elsewhere – cannot keep pace with building innovation”

explanation piece: that consolidated, coordinated thought process of how you demonstrate compliance with the Building Regulations”, and to “think long and hard and review before you submit”.

Architects can turn to strategies to ease the Gateway 2 process. One is to make a staged application, generally in two parts: substructure and superstructure. “It makes it faster and easier for the applicant to make the first-stage application,” said Matt Coleman, director – structures, at engineering consultant WSP. “It is a smaller package for the BSR and the multidisciplinary team to manage and review, so it should lead to faster approval of the first Gateway 2 application.” In looking to that option, however, he said architects needed to be keep in mind that “you need to follow guidance procedures, there can be constraints on the subsequent design and it creates a bit more work for the design team”.

Whatever the approach on applications, all projects must have the golden thread of essential information that will accompany them through their lives, and this is another area where architects can take the lead. At Gateway 2, the golden thread can be the designer’s ally, said Blatchford-Brown: “It’s telling a story: navigating through (what seems) various competing and conflicting functional requirements and pieces of guidance.”

The golden thread has to be electronic, secure, maintained, accessible, and a single source of truth. But it doesn’t, Hywel Davies, head of technical insight at the Chartered Association of Building Engineers, emphasised, have to be a single platform. “It could be a group of solutions with a central repository,” Davies said. “It’s not prescribed.”

### Best laid plans

Once designs have Gateway 2 approval, there are highly likely to be changes. “I am concerned for Gateway 3 in that we just inevitably have lots of drawing revisions across all the engineer’s information – and keeping track of those is challenging, particularly when you have 800 documents,” said Victoria Millward, director at Paddock Johnson, referencing one recent application. Project Four Safety Solutions’ Binns said his firm was typically seeing 20 design changes at the start of a project’s construction phase, which often came down to “buildability and the contractor and the supply chain not being fully engaged”.

Procurement remains a thorny – and unresolved – issue, with gateway demands seeming a poor fit with design and build. “It impacts procurement fundamentally,” said Nick Keightley, studio director with Maber Architects. For its Beeston Square project in Nottingham – an exemplar submission and early achiever at Gateway 2 – the client went into a pre-construction services agreement with the contractor, later negotiating on price. “Most of our clients are changing their ideas on design and build,” Keightley added.

Millward feared the gateway approach could also remove the incentive for contractors to price competitively in competitive tendering situations. “There isn’t a [procurement] route that naturally fits the HRB process,” she said, pointing out that this created scope for a new, and more suitable, form of procurement to emerge.

While this may be beyond architects’ influence, the principal designer role and gateway submissions are well within their control. And it is by grasping their responsibilities, engaging with manufacturers, and developing a meticulous and methodical response through the gateways, that architects can help shape their future. ■



KEVIN NIXON

### RIBA and Hilti extend thanks to the speakers at our London and Manchester events:

From left Colin Blatchford-Brown, Ben Oram, Hywel Davies, Olga Reyes, Nick Keightley, Victoria Millward and Allan Binns.

#### Allan Binns

National director, Project Four Safety Solutions

Colin Blatchford-Brown  
Building control consultant, Blatchford Brown Limited

Matt Coleman

Director – structures, WSP

#### Dr Hywel Davies OBE

Head of technical insight, CABE & BSR Building Advisory member

#### Nick Keightley

Studio director,

Maber Architects

#### Victoria Millward

Director, Paddock Johnson

#### Ben Oram

Technical director, Buckley Gray Yeoman and ATLG chair

#### Dr Benjamin Ralph

Director and head of building safety and fire, Hollis

#### Peter Rankin

Deputy director, Building Safety Regulator

#### Olga Reyes

Head of technical DD&E marketing, northern Europe, Hilti Great Britain

#### Aman Sharma MBE

CEO, Totus Digital

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# ROMANCING THE STONE

WORDS

Pamela Buxton



Three London residential bathroom projects showcase stone's winning combination of visual appeal and durability – ranging from a shower screen slab of broken-edge terrazzo to an altar for washing rituals and a spa-like space in a light-filled terrace revamp

House of Porphyry's statement piece is an altar-like, curvaceous dual-sink vanity unit with a sense of industrial luxury.



The unit curiously opens out to the client's private drawing room space, with the bath hidden behind it.

## CREDITS

### Architect

Mosley Thorold

### Contractor

West Hill Projects

### Structural engineer

Phi Structures

### Selected suppliers

Ethical Stone (porphyry); Livra (stone installation); Lusso Stone (bath); Metalworks London (bathroom mirror); The Poured Project (concrete sink); The Re:claimed Flooring Company (oak flooring); The Watermark Collection (taps and showers)

## House of Porphyry

The clue's in the name at House of Porphyry, a redesign by architect Mosley Thorold of a detached north London villa that makes prominent use of Italian porphyry. This is particularly effective in the bathroom, where the stone clads an altar-like bespoke vanity unit that takes centre stage. On the basis that something this special shouldn't be hidden away, double doors from the client's private drawing room open out to reveal the unit in all its glory, while the bath behind it is cleverly concealed from view.

The bathroom is part of a sequence of increasingly private rooms – from drawing room through to bathroom, enfilade dressing room and bedroom. According to founding partner Henry Thorold, the practice looked for an alternative to the usual approach of pushing sanitaryware to the perimeter of the bathroom.

"We were thinking about doing something less typical and with a degree of theatricality and drama to it, as you imagine a journey through the suite, so we alighted on the idea of a sculptural piece almost like an altar for the rituals of daily life, which is also a screen to the bathing that happens behind it," he says.

The location was previously a dressing room that was unsympathetic to the

house's original Victorian proportions. The architects stripped this back to reinstate the legibility of the 3m-high room, and created the porphyry vanity unit as a contemporary insertion, with twin mirrors above an integrated cast concrete sink component.

The mid-span location of the unit and bath, coupled with intermittent extra loads when the bath is in use, presented considerable engineering challenges. The solution was to utilise existing steels in the floor and ceiling, with new structural ties between these cleverly concealed through the full height of the unit.

The use of porphyry was part of a broader material choice for the project. "It's a stone we really love, a stone with quite amazing classical precedents," says Thorold. "It comes in all sorts of amazing colours and has a beautiful texture and grain to it without being too jazzy and overbearing." Sourced from a quarry in Verona by Ethical Stone, the 20mm-thick stone was specified with a flame finish to suit the grain of the material, and mitred on all corners.

"There's a lot going on inside," says Thorold of the unit, which conceals a steel bracket supporting the concrete sinks, as well as the structural ties and all the plumbing and electrics. Removable

panels at either side provide access for maintenance.

The curved, lozenge-shaped concrete sink element creates a softer, more horizontal emphasis that balances the verticality of the vanity unit. With an outer depth of 260mm, this reads as a single, solid casting giving it, as Thorold puts it, "a nice heft".

The 1.25m-high twin mirrors were fabricated by Metalworks London, with flanking bronze-baffled lighting for extra dramatic effect. These are each fixed to the steel in the ceiling and to the vanity unit with twin rods including the structural ties.

Behind the vanity unit is a freestanding curved stone bath from Lusso's Picasso range, supplied with water via taps integrated into the adjacent porphyry unit. Unlike the vanity unit, the shower sits at the periphery of the room and is also shielded from drawing room view by the basin unit. The shower is a simple, frameless glass enclosure with a 100mm porphyry upstand. Water drains through a stained Accoya base.

The toilet, meanwhile, is housed in a separate enclosure off the bathroom. Flooring is stained dark Shipwrecked oak from The Re:claimed Flooring Company.



### Druid Grove

Designed for a visual artist, CAN's extraordinary refurbishment and extension of a south London terraced house features hyperreal natural imagery along with cave-like door openings and a stone monolith craned in to stand sentinel in the garden. Clearly, conventional bathrooms were going to be out of the question.

"The bathrooms throughout the whole project were leaning into this idea of imagined nature," says CAN director Mat Barnes of the Druid Grove project. "The client is an artist, and mixes hyperrealistic natural landscapes in an almost videogame style. So we tried to infuse both of the bathrooms with that idea."

On the first floor, a compact bathroom is covered in green Grestec tiles for maximum immersive impact. These form the backdrop for a black rock basin, continuing the theme established in the rest of the project. Supplied by Tikamoon, each hollowed-out rock is a one-off, making exact specification difficult; it was a case of third time lucky before the right one was found.

Fortunately, it was only the basin that had to be sent back a few times, and not the rather heavier star of the ensuite bathroom on the second floor. Here, a 2m x 1.7m slab of broken-edged terrazzo is the main feature, serving as an unconventional shower screen.

"With every element we're trying to question the standard, which in this case is a piece of glass, and then see if that fits with the concept," says Barnes, adding that if it doesn't, the team looks for a material that is more appropriate while meeting functional requirements.

Diespeker supplied the 20mm-thick terrazzo in a matt finish and created the desired irregular, craggy shape. "We literally hand-drew with the client the kind of shape we wanted the supplier to match," Barnes goes on.

The terrazzo was inset into a 20mm aluminium channel in the wall and shower base, and held in place using high-strength adhesive. The dark screen is offset with soft pink tiles and green high-gloss moisture-resistant MDF around the basin from Tom Dixon's Liquid range for Vitra. An offcut from the terrazzo screen forms a shelf above the basin taps.

CAN used an existing mezzanine space for the bath, accessed from the main bedroom up a new staircase. The enamelled steel tub is fitted into a bespoke steel frame, deliberately exposing the usually hidden sides to show the graduating sprayed enamel, which reduces towards the base. The bath sits on a floor of Douglas fir plywood, with many coats of oil for increased water resistance.

Above left: The first-floor bathroom, clad extensively in small-format tiling, has a monolithic feel.

Above centre: In a minimalist touch, the enamelled steel bath sits in a red-painted steel frame.

Above right: A huge slab of broken-edged terrazzo looks like a shower screen straight out of Middle Earth.

### CREDITS

**Architect**  
CAN

**Contractor**

MXH Construction

**Structural engineer**

Hardman Engineers

**Selected suppliers**

Diespeker & Co (shower screen);

Grestec Tiles (bathroom tiles);

Kaldewei Puro (enamelled bath);

Tikamoon (Nobu rock basin);

Vitra x Tom Dixon (basin)



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## Komorebi

ConForm's redesign of a South London terrace house is named after the Japanese concept of komorebi, the dappled effect of sunlight filtered through leaves. This was one of the inspirations for the design approach, which was sparked by an existing lightwell at the rear.

The architects, taken with what director Ben Edgley describes as "the lovely quality of light," decided to retain and extend the void rather than infill it, carefully curating the light and making new horizontal and vertical connections through the house. In tandem with a muted palette of raw and warm materials such as chalk-white bricks, whitewashed mortar and perforated steel, the result is a calm, tranquil atmosphere.

This extends to the two bathrooms, which make prominent use – it appears – of one of the key materials in the design, the Italian stone of Ceppo di Gré. But looks can be deceiving: this is actually printed porcelain in the style of the stone, a much more affordable option, and is used at the house for outdoor and indoor (kitchen) flooring and fireplaces, and extensively in the two bathrooms.

According to Edgley, the homogenous porcelain not only looked the part but will

be durable for both wet and dry settings. The product was supplied by Architile in 1,200 x 1,200mm tiles, which were cut down as appropriate.

In the first-floor main bathroom at the rear of the house, the porcelain tiling (Ceppo Grey Matt) covers the walls, including the shower and a nib wall that gives more privacy to the toilet. The matt-finish tiles also clad the bespoke duo sink unit, which is made in ply and tanked. Taps are by Lusso.

Underneath the sink is an oak cupboard, with additional storage in an adjacent full-height oak cabinet. The same oak is used to line the window reveals, and for a bespoke screen at the lower end of the window. Made by the contractor, this provides privacy against views from below.

"It was quite simply done. The brief was to create a spa-type, serene space, and that's what we did," continues Edgley, adding that the few touches of oak serve "to warm things up a bit".

On the second floor, meanwhile, a further bathroom located between two teenagers' bedrooms is similarly clad in the same stone-printed porcelain, and lit by a skylight. ■

## CREDITS

### Architect

ConForm

### Contractor

Sutton Construction

### Structural engineer

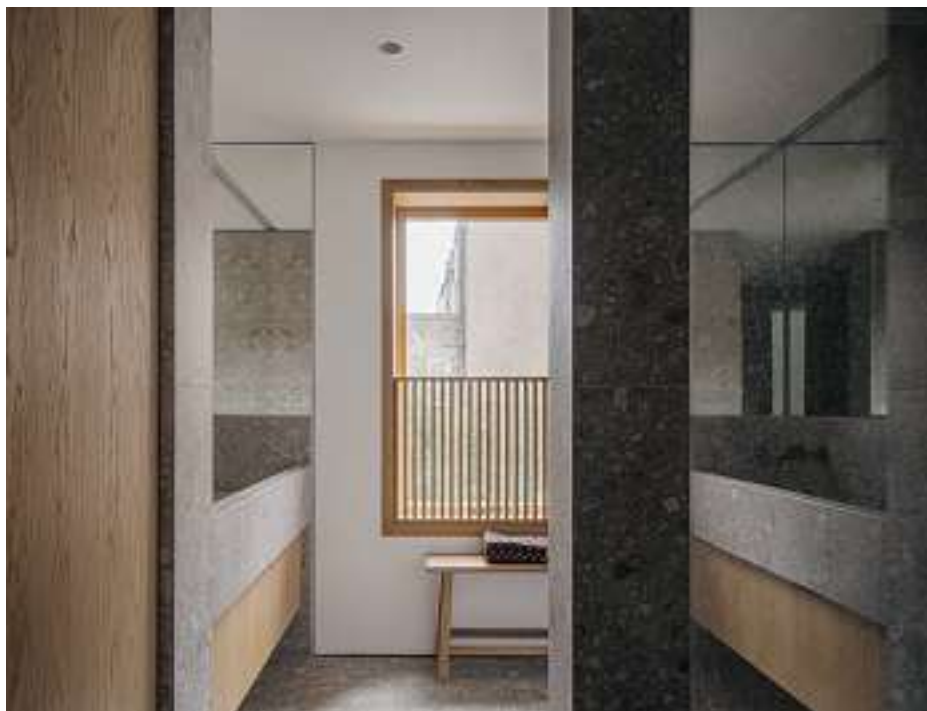
Float Structures

### Selected suppliers

Lusso (sanitaryware/brassware); Architile (Ceppo Grey Matt internal and external porcelain tiles)

Below: Oak cabinetry, set below sink units, makes for neat, integrated storage.

Below: It might look like stone, but in fact this is printed porcelain tile.





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Sam Walton

# CLUB LUX

Founded in 1922 by Princess Helena, Queen Victoria's daughter, the Ex-servicewomen's Club on Chelsea's Lower Sloane Street became the Sloane Club in 1976 when it began to admit men. Derby-based Morrison Design recently led a striking £15 million refurbishment of the club for hospitality group Queensway. Architects Peter Newman-Earp and Les Witten, and lighting consultant Michael Grubb Studio's London lead Mike Cascarino, discuss their lighting strategy



Beneath a 'parachute' ceiling, the club's intimate Demob bar is otherwise lit in Art Deco splendour.

How did a Derby firm win the commission for this historic Chelsea institution?

PN - E: Our firm has been engaged in the hospitality sector since 1948 and has worked on hotels all over the world. We started working with Queensway decades ago, initially on Holiday Inn Express hotels but since on the firm's Point A boutique hotel offering in London, Dublin, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Queensway bought the Sloane Club nine years ago and we were brought in to redevelop the building, primarily to bring the age demographic down while staying true to the institution's heritage.

LW: In addition to revamping the 64 bedrooms, it was about eking space out of the existing 5,545m<sup>2</sup> building; for instance, the exterior courtyard at first floor that we made use of by installing a retractable roof above it. One of the key additions was a new wellness, gym and spa area in the basement to attract younger people. For existing members too, we needed to upgrade facilities provision to support a rise in membership fees, while at the same time not rendering the place completely unrecognisable to them.

So has the space changed radically from its original configuration?

LW: The basic spaces are the same but they were all laid out as discrete rooms off corridors, which could be disorienting for newcomers. Part of the brief was to open it up effectively, which worked with the general lighting strategy too. Rear spaces were flooded with natural light, and we've connected ground-level public spaces via new arched openings to make this evident from the front of the club, drawing you through to the back. But it's a deep-plan building, so we had to pull light in from the side or top where we could.

MC: In bringing the spaces together, we wanted to maintain sightlines for the intelligibility of the space but while keeping a distinction in terms of individual spaces' light levels. Helena's, facing lower Sloane Street, remains dark and intimate, passing through into the Library at the back, which is flooded with north light with a Lightgraphix illuminated joinery wall at the back. The Demob cocktail bar feels like a night-time space – even during the day – as does the Lady in Black private dining space adjacent to it. We worked hard to balance the shift of lighting as you pass from one space to another, and on integration details like drawing your eye to the illuminated rear wall at the back of the Library. It's not a nightclub but a social club for use throughout the day, so the spaces have to work no matter what the time is.



The Library, with large north-facing windows, is flooded with light but an illuminated feature wall at the back offers nocturnal interest too.

You worked with interior designer Russell Sage on the lighting. How did you split the responsibilities?

MC: It was very much split – we worked with Morrison Design on the architectural and integrated lighting while Russell Sage developed the decorative lighting approaches. They might decide on a pendant or a sconce design and we'd work with them to ensure it met the required lighting levels in a particular space. We created

the 'gateway moments', such as floor-set uplights picking up arch reveals as you pass through them, or lighting around a fireplace. We were keen to avoid over-use of ceiling downlights, which homogenises spaces, and instead use architectural features and wall surfaces to consciously integrate lighting into the spaces and pull a particular focus in a room.

Can you delineate the spaces as designed?

LW: There's a new gym and wellness space in the basement alongside back-of-house areas, and we have kitchens at basement, ground and first floors. At ground, in addition to Helena's, Demob bar the Library and Lady in Black private dining room, there is the main entrance

lobby. The client wanted this to be all mirrors, but we were concerned about managing the light levels there as a result. In the end we pushed for using antique-effect mirror glass, significantly reducing glare and picking up the artificial light in far more subtle ways.

Can you tell us more about the very ostentatious modern chandelier in the Lady in Black?

MC: Russell Sage chose that. We worked on the coving details around it to ensure that there was enough overall light to deal with the low light level of the chandelier itself. We wanted the dining table to feel like the most important thing and the coving detail works to accentuate that, deflecting attention too from the lowness of the ceiling by uplighting it. For the rest of the room we used picture lights to create a low wall wash to maintain focus on the table. Two Lucent downlights are set above the doorways into the room.



Subtly lit by a modern chandelier, The Lady in Black's table is the focus of the private dining space.

How did the parachute-effect ceiling in the Demob bar come about?

MC: It's amazing to look at, and the linear run of Atea LED lighting running around the perimeter works with the material's pleating to create an understated – and very satisfying – 'dot/dash' lighting effect. Other than this, the aim was to create mood and drama with low level lighting. Atea linear LEDs set

below the bar's marble top pick up the scalloping of its marble base, and low-lit illuminated skirtings are formed of onyx-effect acrylic sheet, picking up on Russell Sage's choice of Deco-style wall sconces. We were looking for a warmer light here, so specified 2,700K fittings rather than the whiter 3,000K ones in the adjacent Library.

What was the thinking behind the Venus restaurant's showstopping glass drop chandelier around an oval skylight?

PN-E: This is the fine dining space that can be used for events too. Added in the 1990s, originally it had a much larger rooflight but we reduced its size in the reconfiguration of the courtyard above as an all-day dining terrace and bar. In doing so, we made it oval shaped – picking up on the club's signage set into the terracotta entablature above the entrance. The somewhat hidden rooflight brings a lot of daylight directly into the room but the chandelier, comprising 1,500 handmade, amber-coloured glass drops, adds real drama at night and counterpoints the white glazed terracotta scallop shell sconces with opaque 'pearl' diffusers at their centre, which run along the walls.



The Venus Room's chandelier is so ostentatious, it's a surprise to find that it is also a rooflight.

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How did you specify the new wellness zone in the basement?

PN - E: Interestingly, the Venus and the wellness zone have a similar tonality and we didn't want these spaces to feel too functional in comparison with the ostentation of the main public spaces. With low ceiling heights, we had exposed service ducts with Prolicht functional pendant lighting in the gym;

but in the reception and wellness areas we continued the theme of scalloped wall lights. Again, we used perimeter coving linear LED runs by Atea to elevate ceilings rather than emphasise lowness. Individual changing rooms are high-spec, with tiled walls and indulgent but useful backlit oval mirrors above sinks.

What about the new courtyard space?

LW: The expanded 120m<sup>2</sup> courtyard dining space and bar has been transformative for the club. Formerly a popular outdoor space in the summer, the brief was to make it work all year round, so we installed a 13 x 5m Breezefree retractable rooflight with rain sensor, which enables it to close in 20 seconds. Around it is a new private dining space with a glass wall leading straight on to it, as well as to some private coworking spaces. The sky clearly does the lion's share of the work here, but functional

indoor/outdoor Lucent downlights run around the opening, with discreet wall lights in the covered spaces around it. The private dining space, with hand-painted floral silk wallpaper, is dark and intimate in feel with uplit coving around the table, while coworking spaces opposite use more functional desk lights. In a way, this area exemplifies what we aimed for: optimising natural light where we could, while creating intimacy and atmosphere through our lighting strategy. ■

Now with its retractable rooflight, a previously seasonal outdoor space has become a restaurant and bar, with coworking and private dining spaces to the left and right



# SUSTAINABILITY NEEDS RETHINKING

Discourse around sustainability has been polluted by greenwash and distracted by attention-grabbing individual buildings. To move conversation and action forward we must work at systems level and think differently, experts told our Spec webinar

Opposite left: Gianni Botsford's Old Byre barn conversion stayed true to an agricultural aesthetic.

Opposite right top: Salutogenic principles were applied extensively at Holmes Miller's HMP Glasgow.

Opposite right bottom: Groupwork's Finchley Road project features a granite exoskeleton.

Below: Piers Taylor's Learning from the Local targets greenwash.

Against the dark backdrop of Trump's war in Iran – and its fossil-fuel-driven economic shock – our industry's pursuit of a net-zero future feels increasingly Sisyphean. Yet this webinar's speakers demonstrate that sustainable construction is not only viable, but already effective: the real challenge is embracing the leftfield ideas that bring about real change.

## Zero-carbon building as myth

Piers Taylor, author of *Learning from the Local*, highlighted a "language problem": buildings are labelled as sustainable without clear evidence – architects' PR delivering a "word salad" of greenwash. "We need to stop pretending buildings can be treated as sustainable objects," he argued, for it is at systems level that real sustainability is achieved. Cities are "humanity's greatest environmental invention"; urban living reduces per-capita energy use, infrastructure demands and emissions, and allows ecological recovery elsewhere. It is simply more efficient.

We must "stop fetishising" one-off foliage-covered buildings, said Piers, and idolise data instead. "No one has come close to making a zero-carbon building," he claimed, with embodied carbon notoriously hard to calculate and mitigate. His solution? Cease "deluding ourselves", abandon superficial green labels and adopt integrated, place-based, systems-level

methods prioritising reduction, adaptation – and truthful communication, which he called architects' "first ethical task".

## Net zero at systems level

That being so, HMP Glasgow shows how large-scale prison infrastructure can meet the Scottish Government's Net Zero Public Sector Buildings Standard, despite challenges such as 24/7 operation and reliance on "large quantities of concrete and steel". Norman Williamson of Holmes Miller and Leanne Hannah of Sussed Sustainability showed us how, after 1,000 hours of consultation, this can be done.

Central to the design are 'salutogenic' wellbeing-affirming principles, focused on creating therapeutic environments via daylight, landscape and spatial clarity. The scheme replaces "super wing" house blocks with a household model, reducing units from 30 to 20 cells, but increasing the number of those blocks from three to five. It also includes gardens, green spaces, and community-facing elements to temper the prison's institutional character. This holistic approach aims for a "modern custodial environment" within a sustainable justice system.

## The bare minimum

Despite Piers' belief that individual buildings count for little, Gianni Botsford's *The Old Byre* on the Isle of Wight resonates

with his idea of truth-telling. Starting with two redundant barns, the conversion (into a residency for artists) turns inward around a courtyard, and from a distance seems indistinguishable from other agricultural buildings because of material choices. The barns were "brought back to life with a light touch", with elements added only to meet functional needs. Insulation and a new external skin were applied, leaving interior details exposed. Spaces were remodelled flexibly, blending living, working, and residency uses.

Sustainability, Gianni concluded, lies in doing "as little as possible," extending buildings' life and "taking them as-found".

## Active materials

Expanding on why salutogenic design matters, Martin Twamley, technical





director at STEICO, was unequivocal in his belief that “a building cannot be labelled sustainable unless it supports [occupants’] long-term health and wellbeing”. His company specialises in sustainable timber construction and wood-fibre insulation, materials which offer low thermal conductivity, high heat capacity, and moisture regulation. Wood fibre’s hygroscopic nature allows buildings to breathe, reducing condensation and mould risks. Combined with low VOC emissions, it contributes to healthier indoor environments and can reduce embodied carbon and increase carbon sequestration.

### Offsetting is not enough

Piers commended materials passports and initiatives such as TP Bennett’s AD Lib – an in-house library of responsibly sourced products – to drive accountability. Two materials considered sustainable, when their supply chains are managed correctly, are brick and zinc. Both benefit from longevity, but can involve energy-intensive mining or manufacturing processes. Responsible brickmakers now go beyond simple carbon offsetting initiatives to address this. At Michelmersh, explained Sarah Le Gresley, group innovation and sustainability director, significant progress has been made, with manufacturing emissions reduced by 47% since 2003. Innovations such as hydrogen firing offer

huge potential, achieving up to 84% lower embodied carbon in experimental projects. Her argument: sustainability is not about abandoning materials, but transforming how they are produced and used.

Zinc, too, added Jonathan Lowy of VMZINC, is an exemplar in circular construction: only 1 to 2% globally ends up in landfill. Jonathan highlighted industry efforts to reduce its impact via improved manufacturing, lower-energy processes, and the development of 100% recycled products. This presents challenges (traces of lead and cadmium exist in old zinc roofs) but ongoing R&D aims to increase efficiency and post-consumer reuse.

### A balanced diet

On that theme, Amin Taha of Groupwork likened the specification of building materials to grocery shopping: the trolley may contain ultra-processed foods and still be net-healthy. “We are not going to live on a diet of boiled kale,” he said. His stance is provocative: “Don’t make the mistake of going local.” Doing so may cut transport emissions, but rigid adherence to this principle risks higher costs and limited scalability; Amin argues for flexible, system-wide optimisation.

He also advocates for increased use of stone as a primary structural material, as at his Finchley Road project. Advances in cutting and engineering allow stone to

be used in brick-sized units or as large structural elements, often at comparable cost and without specialist labour.

Finchley Road has a stone exoskeleton with no concrete core, meaning dramatic embodied carbon reductions. Amin’s work reframes stone as a viable, scalable solution for low-carbon construction. When quarried and used as aggregate for concrete, stone loses around 60% of its strength, requiring steel reinforcement: looking at it this way, “it all sounds absurd, doesn’t it?” Amin remarked.

### Absurdism

Indeed. And this illogicality is itself unsustainable. This webinar calls on us to think differently, and take meaningful action, at all scales. ■

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# COOK UP A STORM



The role of the kitchen has shifted over time to take on a central role within our living spaces. James Soane, partner at Project Orange, reflects on four of the firm's projects that have been tailored to precisely meet client needs

Everyone has an opinion on what makes a great kitchen, and it is the architect's role to weave our clients' vision seamlessly into the broader design. While trends inevitably come and go, the kitchen itself has undergone a fundamental identity shift, moving from a self-contained room, however modest, to an integral part of a larger living space. This evolution makes enormous sense from a practical standpoint, yet it introduces new challenges. The raw functionality of a kitchen must now be reconciled with intuitive ergonomics and an aesthetic that feels at home within the wider living environment.

While there is no shortage of excellent suppliers and retail showrooms catering to every taste and budget, each of the projects presented here has been designed entirely bespoke: crafted to answer a specific brief, a specific family, and a specific way of living.

## **Alwyne Place, Islington, London**

This project involved a comprehensive upgrade to a Victorian villa, including a substantial extension to the lower ground floor kitchen that was previously a dark, underused space. The clients' affinity for Italian design became the creative thread running through the scheme, most notably expressed in the use of richly textured terrazzo work surfaces. The oak joinery is crafted to reveal its construction, with frames left exposed and handles integrated seamlessly into the detailing rather than applied as afterthoughts.

A mirrored strip running along the rear wall adds a playful, bar-like quality; this was an idea drawn from the interiors we encountered during a recent trip to Venice. Opposite the island, a freestanding cabinet discreetly houses everyday appliances and crockery, while a full-height run of cupboards along the rear wall provides generous refrigeration and storage. The result is a kitchen well suited to a couple who love to entertain.

“Like many of our projects, our own kitchen was conceived to sit harmoniously within an open-plan living arrangement”



GARETH GARDNER

JACK HOBHOUSE

PAUL DIXON

### Orange Cottage, Lavenham, Suffolk

This is our own kitchen, in the house we designed 20 years ago and use every day. Like many of the projects in this collection, it was conceived to sit harmoniously within an open-plan living arrangement. The extensive use of oak, wrapping continuously up the rear wall, gives the kitchen the quality of a piece of furniture rather than a fitted installation.

An oak bench negotiates the change in level down to the living area, concealing linen storage and a drinks cabinet within. Two sprayed elements introduce a subtle pop of colour against the natural timber, while open shelving keeps crockery close at hand. The brick floor has proven resilient and, with underfloor heating in winter, genuinely comfortable. Lighting was carefully considered: a combination of architectural tube lights (originally tungsten, upgraded to LED) and a linear pendant we had fabricated. Twenty years on, one thing we would change is a larger fridge. That, at least, is in the pipeline.

### Eaton Terrace, London

This town house presented an unusual brief: a professional-grade kitchen on the piano nobile, adjacent to a dining room configurable for up to 16 guests, alongside a separate family kitchen at lower ground level. With a tight budget, resourcefulness became a design principle in its own right. Reclaimed pine floorboards, lifted from the upper floors during the refurbishment, were sanded back and repurposed as worktops and splashback, giving the space a sense of history and authenticity.

The units themselves are IKEA, while the room doors are standard blanks painted in a palette of greens that shifts subtly as you move up through the building, lending the house a graphic coherence. A glazed contemporary bay and window seat is a new addition, drawing light in and looking out onto a small, south-facing courtyard. Douglas fir skirtings and architraves introduce a period sensibility, held in check by the rawness of the industrial concrete floor beneath.

### Barbican Apartment, London

The refurbishment of this 44m<sup>2</sup> studio in the Barbican began with a clean sweep. All 1990s fixtures and fittings were removed, with original elements such as bathroom taps, a light switch and wardrobe doors donated to the Barbican Salvage Store.

We wanted to honour the building's Brutalist character while introducing a considered new material palette. Where original Barbican kitchens are typically white with stainless steel worktops, we introduced handmade grey-green tiles, a teak worktop and spray-painted cabinet doors. A brushed brass strip beneath the counter draws a quiet reflective line, tying in with the tap and brass sink.

To the right, built-in wardrobes were extended by a bay, creating a shelving unit on the studio side and, on the kitchen side, a generous fridge. The black gloss floor tiles bring a reflectance to the surfaces, lit from above by track lighting. The kitchen even fits in a washing machine, something the original Barbican designs lacked. ■

# STORYBOARD: DESIGN A CENTRE FOR STORYTELLING

Storytelling is bound into the DNA of humanity. In 2026, the UK National Year of Reading, for our RIBA/West Fraser £2,500 annual challenge we're asking you to design a demountable storytelling centre to bring the joy of reading and listening to the nation's children

Opposite left: Aldo Rossi's designs for Il Teatro del Mondo, Venice: sketch plan, elevations and perspective (1979).

Opposite right: Fraser Livingstone's RIBA Award-winning Scottish Storytelling Centre, looking west, on Edinburgh's Royal Mile.

As children, we love a good story. We've all been thrilled by The Hobbit, Harry Potter, The Hunger Games or His Dark Materials. But whatever our age, there's no escaping the visceral power of the written – or spoken – word to grip us in the same way as when the tale of Beowulf was recounted over an open fire.

Despite 2026 being designated as the UK's National Year of Reading and the hundredth anniversary of one of our most loved fictional characters – AA Milne's Winnie the Pooh, written for his young son but living in all our hearts – why is children's reading at an all-time low?

A recent annual survey by the National Literacy Trust highlighted that only one in three children aged eight to 18 said they enjoy reading in their free time, with even fewer saying they read anything daily. For a culture with historic links to children's storytelling, these statistics – the worst for 20 years – are worrying.

Architecture has a strong relationship with books. The magnificence of Egypt's Library of Alexandria is lost in legend, but architects have always since delivered

when tasked with designing libraries, whether national, academic or local. Repositories of knowledge and learning, they remain symbols of pride.

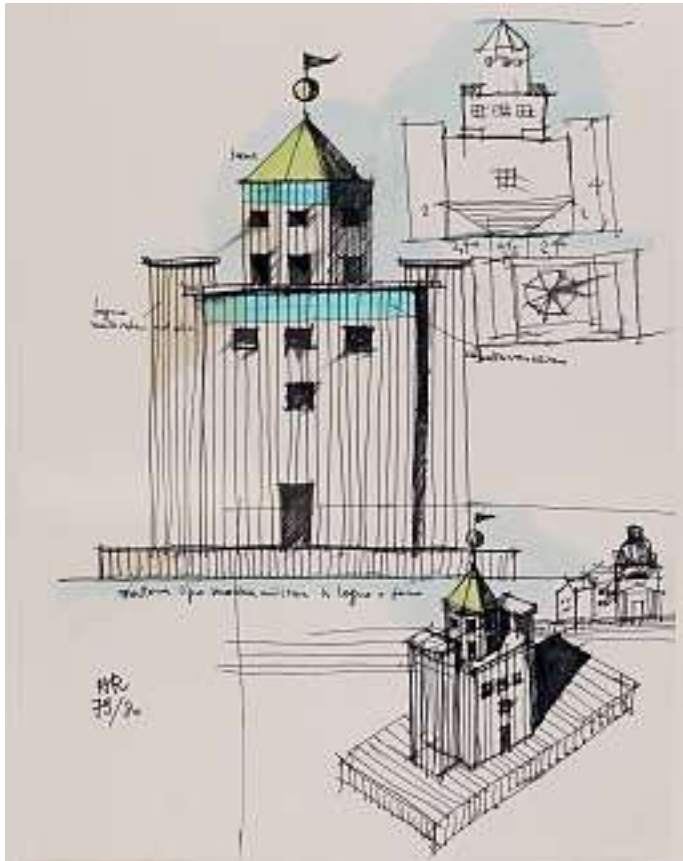
But what of the oral tradition? Where, outside of theatres, are there dedicated spaces to honour the spoken word? Such places are vanishingly few, though it should come as no surprise that Scotland, the country that gave us Burns Night, has set its love for the art in stone with its Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh, aiming to keep the craft alive for future generations.

So for this year's RIBA/West Fraser SterlingOSB Zero design challenge, we are asking you to design a mobile storytelling centre that will celebrate storytelling – and reading – nationally. With a main space that evokes the theatricality of gathering to listen, we'd also like a library/reading space, reception and even a café – but in a total of 400m<sup>2</sup> or less, all of which can be demounted to be set up in a new, temporary location. Structures can be more than one storey if desired, as long as you can ramp up to them, and these routes need not come out of the space allocation.

We are asking you to be inspired by historical spaces of engagement and exchange – the theatre, caravanserai, pavilions, fayres, even modern festivals – to come up with a space that inspires young readers of all ages to switch off their tablets and instead listen to stories old, new, and perhaps yet-to-be-uttered. ■

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### Who can enter

We welcome entries from experienced and emerging architects, those in Part 1 and 2 professional training, and diploma and undergraduate architectural students. Applying to all, the emphasis should be on imagination and fun – so enjoy yourselves!

### Judging

Chaired by RIBA, judges will look for imaginative responses to the brief that make best use of SterlingOSB Zero. While we anticipate that other materials and surfaces will form an integral part of any proposition, it is expected that the main constituent of the design will be SterlingOSB Zero panels. Given that this is a conceptual brief, we do not require entrants to meet building codes or standards.

In this ideas competition, the winning proposal will be the one that, in the judges' view, proves to be the most joyful response to creating a space for gathering and listening. The proposal may be set in a context, but the expectation is that it be demountable and that this strategy should be evidenced. You should also set out why SterlingOSB Zero is particularly relevant for use in your chosen context.

### Judges

David Connacher  
Marketing manager, West Fraser Europe  
Julian Kashdan-Brown  
Director, Kashdan Brown Architects and 2025 competition winner  
Keji Malik  
Project director, Adjaye Associates  
Stephen Proctor  
Director, Proctor & Matthews  
Jan-Carlos Kucharek  
Deputy editor, RIBA

### To enter

Visit [ribaj.com/storyboard](http://ribaj.com/storyboard) – entries should be laid out on no more than two A3 sheets, supplied electronically as PDFs and uploaded to the official entry website.

How you illustrate your proposal is at the entrant's discretion but may include:

- plans and sections explaining the proposal, its structure, material choices and demountable nature
- 3D or perspectival images that communicate a sense of the proposal in use
- supplementary images (such as model shots or fly-throughs) that help further convey the proposition

An explanation of no more than 400 words should also be uploaded to the online entry form describing the proposal and the manner in which it claims to meet the brief.

### Deadline

Entries should be received no later than 14:00 BST on Monday 15 June 2026.

### Notes

- The judges' decision is final. No correspondence will be entered into by organisers or judges regarding entries or winners.
- First prize is £2,500, plus three Commended prizes of £500 each.
- Shortlisted entries will be notified in writing, with entrants being invited to the winners' announcement and prizegiving event on Thursday 10 September 2026.
- By entering this RIBA competition, West Fraser has your agreement to using your name/company name and collateral produced by its marketing agency – videos, interviews, case studies, images – for the company's website, social media, digital and print media titles.
- Please email questions to: [ribaj.storyboard@riba.org](mailto:ribaj.storyboard@riba.org)

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# CHECKLIST

## SPECIFYING DOMESTIC KITCHENS

### WORDS

Mark Austin, technical director, SpecStudio

**Kitchens are the cornerstones of our homes. Once limited to food storage and preparation, they have since become multifunctional hubs of social interaction. Designing and specifying them involves many considerations, from visual to practical to material selection and performance, cost and maintenance. We identify some of the key concerns here.**

#### BEST PRACTICE/TECHNICAL DETAILS

Kitchen construction should be proprietary/ bespoke systems by a reputable manufacturer/ supplier with independent third-party testing.

#### Relevant standards/bodies:

- BS 6222: Part 2-2009+A1-2017 Domestic kitchen equipment: fitted kitchen units, peninsular units, island units and breakfast bars (performance requirements and test methods)
- BS 6222: Part 3-2017 Domestic kitchen equipment: performance requirements for durability of surface finish and adhesion of surfacing and edging materials (specification)
- BS EN 1116: 2018-TC Furniture/kitchen furniture: coordinating sizes for kitchen furniture and kitchen appliances
- BS EN 14749:2016+A1:2022 Furniture: domestic and kitchen storage units and kitchen-worktops (safety requirements and test methods)

#### Use of space/configurations

Potential layouts for kitchens are endless. While specific configuration is a design choice, the best ones respect the classic 'kitchen triangle' of sink, hob or stove, and fridge for efficient movement.

When it comes to fit-out, you can go with proprietary flat-pack, ready-made units or custom-built cabinetry. Generally these are standardised in terms of module dimensions—as are appliances—which assists with planning. Bespoke dimensions are often adopted with custom-built kitchens.

Services (gas, electricity, water) need to be planned and coordinated with appropriate engineers, so that sourcing and final locations for appliances, switches, lighting and the like are understood from the onset.

#### MATERIALS AND PRODUCTS

As much as aesthetics, all designs should consider durability and functionality. Materials and products must be compliant with UK/EU standards and be UKCA, UKNI or CE marked where applicable.

Some finishes require substrates to be applied or bonded to, such as chipboard/ particleboard, MDF and plywood. Because of the obvious proximity of water sources, moisture-resistant grades should be used. Consideration can be given to fire-resistant coatings but all treatments should be safe and non-toxic for use in kitchens and food preparation areas.

Combinations of finishes will be part of the overall design. Certain materials form the finish itself, and hence do not require a substrate.

Common examples are listed below (attributes can be considered subjective and for guide purposes only). In all cases apart from metals, exposed edges should be arised.

#### Solid wood/timber:

- moderate durability and low to moderate cost, for units/worktops/surrounds
- is susceptible to warping and cracking due to humidity and temperature
- will mark if direct heat is applied and is susceptible to scratching (although repairable)
- treatments such as oils, lacquers and sealers improve resistance to moisture and assist with cleaning processes

#### Natural stone:

- moderate to very high durability and cost, for worktops/splashbacks/surrounds
- granites are resistant to heat and scratching whereas marbles are not
- sealing treatment may be required for more porous stone types

#### Engineered stone:

- very high durability and high cost, for worktops/splashbacks/surrounds
- various types of engineered stone can be used to achieve desired aesthetics
- not heat resistant but resistant to scratching and easily cleaned

#### Concrete:

- extremely high durability and moderate to high cost, for worktops/splashbacks/surrounds
- precast concrete can be produced in various colours and textures—including to imitate stone
- resistant to heat and scratching
- sealing treatment may be required to inhibit dust, resist moisture and to assist with cleaning

#### Acrylic:

- low to moderate durability and moderate to high cost, for units/worktops/splashbacks
- used to achieve various effects of colour, gloss level and texture
- not heat or scratch resistant and susceptible to fingerprints, although easily cleaned

#### Glass:

- moderate to high durability and high cost, for units/splashbacks
- used to achieve various effects (colour or tints) via interlayers, opacities and textures
- safety glass should be used
- easily cleaned

#### Solid surface (resin and mineral blend):

- moderate durability and moderate to high cost, for worktops/splashbacks/surrounds
- available in various colours, gloss levels, patterns and textures
- easily cleaned; not heat resistant but damage can be easily sanded and repaired
- seamless in appearance, and sinks can be manufactured from the same material so as to be homogenous with the worktop

#### Metals (corrosion resistant):

- high to very high durability and cost, for units/worktops/splashbacks/surrounds
- all exposed edges should have tight radii

#### Melamine-faced chipboard (MFC):

- low durability and cost, for units/worktops
- used to achieve various effects (colours, gloss levels, textures or imitations of other materials)
- edges generally finished with colour-matched, adhesive backed edge
- offers moisture resistance and a surface that is easy to clean
- susceptible to impact damage and chipping, particularly at edges

### Thermofoil (vinyl/PVC):

- low durability and cost, for units
- can be used to achieve various effects (colours and gloss levels) applied to MDF
- offers moisture resistance and provides a surface that is easy to clean
- susceptible to heat and impact damage, chipping and scratching
- can discolour and delaminate over time

### Laminate:

- low to moderate durability and cost, for units/worktops/splashbacks/surrounds
- used for various effects (colours, gloss levels, textures or imitations of other materials)
- edges should be finished with acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) or PVC strips, colour matched
- offers moisture resistance, moderate impact and scratch resistance and a surface that is easy to clean

### Paints/lacquers:

- moderate to high durability and cost, for units/surrounds
- used to achieve various effects (colour and gloss levels)
- high-quality products (including water-based acrylics with low VOCs) offer high moisture, scratch and impact resistance and provide an easy to clean surface

### Timber veneers:

- moderate durability and moderate to high cost, for units/worktops/surrounds
- various types of wood species can be used to achieve desired aesthetics
- treatments such as oils, lacquers, sealers are likely required
- are not heat resistant and are susceptible to moisture ingress, particularly at joints, and scratching and chipping (though repairable)
- exposed edges to be solid timber to match

### DIMENSIONS AND WORKMANSHIP

In addition to substrates and finishes, kitchen assemblies can vary greatly in quality, with thickness of carcass along with workmanship being key to rigid fabrication. Domestic kitchen units can be flat-pack at the lower end and factory built at upper. High-quality kitchens are often verified by certifications like the FIRA Gold or TrustMark quality assurance schemes.

The following dimension ranges for standard sizes are considered minimum; upper values (in brackets) are recommended for higher-quality kitchens.

### Cabinetry:

- Doors/door fronts/end panel/divisions/bottoms/tops: 15-18mm thick
- Drawer sides/back: 12.5mm thick
- Drawer bottoms 6.5mm thick

### Worktops:

- Solid wood: 28-38+mm
- Engineered or natural stone: 15-30mm
- Laminate: 22/28mm (40mm)
- Solid surface 25+mm (38mm)
- Acrylic 25+mm (38mm)

### OTHER KITCHEN COMPONENTS

### Ironmongery/hardware:

- an integral aspect of the kitchen, with many material and design options available and a similarly broad range in cost
- hardware, such as hinges and drawer runners offer many functionality options
- soft closing mechanisms are desired on high quality kitchen assemblies
- consider 'finger pulls' as an integral part of unit doors and drawers

### Sinks and taps:

- sink specification should consider size, material (stainless steel/composite/solid surface) and whether undermounted or surface mounted
- some worktops, eg laminate or veneer on substrate core, should not be used with undermounted sinks due to water ingress at edgings
- taps can be mixer or separate; sink apertures should be coordinated with them

### Appliances:

- many manufacturers of proprietary appliances, all with different aesthetics, performance and price tags
- certain appliances can be concealed within cabinetry; research should be undertaken to determine requirements

### Lighting:

- consideration should not only be given to room lighting but integrated versions, such as cabinet undersides and interiors, or built into into skirting/plinth or inset into detailing
- colour and tone is also important

### Flooring:

- consideration to be given to slip-and moisture-resisting attributes ■

### KITCHEN SPECIFICATION CHECKLIST

Liaise with reputable kitchen suppliers/manufacturers/fabricators likely to be aligned with budgetary constraints, with regards to the points below. Look at options to benefit from wider ideas and proposals to optimise budget restrictions:

- Identify budget/cost early –if not clearly determined, it is easy to have 'creep'
- Maximise the use of space and configurations to provide a thoughtful, ergonomic and appropriate design
- Determine what services are in situ or required and agree locations in consultation with appropriate engineers
- Determine performance grade/designation with associated parameters
- Select material and finish options for cabinetry, worktops and surrounding joinery; and options for ironmongery/hardware
- Select sink and tap type(s)
- Select appliances
- Consider flooring
- Consider lighting (including integrated lighting options)
- Where kitchens are supplied/manufactured it is important that installation be by operatives recommended/approved by and trained by the supplier/manufacturer, to maximise quality control through trusted partnerships



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# RIBA

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# EMBEDDING AI INTO ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE

Going beyond ad-hoc prompting to a more powerful and contextual use of AI was demonstrated by experts and examples at RIBA's 2026 AI Summit

Curiosity was the buzzword of RIBA's AI Summit, described as the key to how enterprising architects can best get to grips with exploring the huge opportunities that AI undoubtedly offers.

A quick show of hands at this day-long event showed that not only did most delegates use AI every day, some used it every hour and others perhaps even more. The question wasn't so much whether it was used as how it was used, to what benefit, and crucially what the implications might be for the future role of architects and the profession itself.

A fast-paced series of presentations and discussions ranged from vibe-coding (the generation of functional code from natural language prompts) with large language models (LLMs), through to AI-driven apps, an academic exploration of indeterminacy in AI and an AI-enabled robot site printer going through its paces. Other spectacles included live coding app-creation on stage, and footage of Studio Tim Fun's AI-driven image generation of landscapes and buildings in response to the live movement of dance.

There was certainly an abundance of

food for thought, and also some words of comfort for any AI-novices left reeling by what they'd heard – summed up by Dan Smith of Noviun Architects, who advised “really opening yourself up to being curious” rather than trying to be too technical.

## **Opportunity knocks for the entrepreneurial architect using AI**

Several speakers shared their experiences of starting out experimenting with AI in their own time out of curiosity, accumulating expertise, then finding ways of using AI to enhance both their usual architectural workflows and to innovate.

For Saina Abdollahzadeh of Studio Tim Fu, AI has been a “platform that bridges the gaps we have within our professional practice” and requires “being forward thinking and open to change”. This includes working with LLMs to organise data for masterplans, using AI to assist in visualisation workflow, and developing apps to do this. The practice has also developed ways to animate sketches as well as the aforementioned project to use motion-tracked human movement to

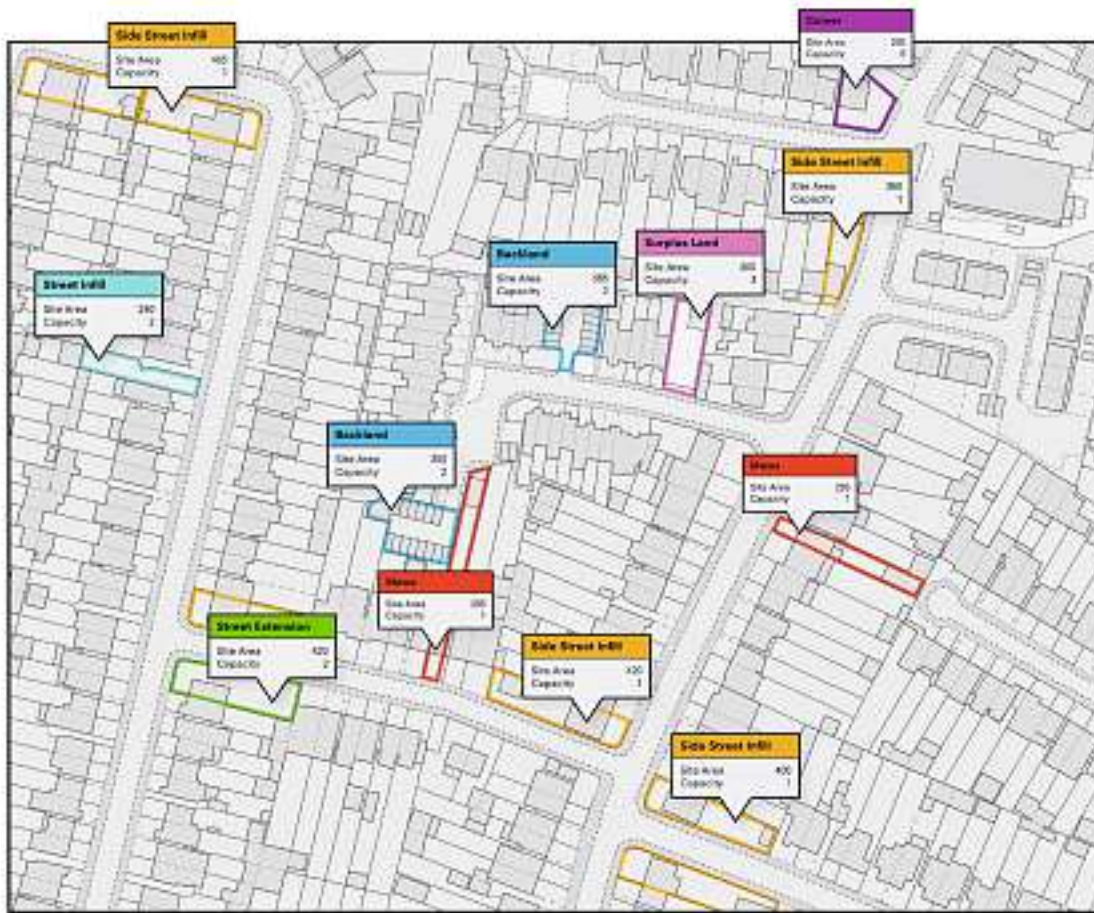
reinterpret digital visuals of buildings and landscapes.

Using AI, she said, gives “more time for your own creativity and being the designer that you always wanted to be”.

Tomas Millar urged architects to look beyond just the “safe” area of practice efficiencies such as report writing and doing things faster. Instead, he advocated expanding the “surface area” of what AI can do to find new areas with greater benefits, such as coding and evaluation. He estimates that using AI for coding can give a 20-fold increase in productivity, while using it for writing is only 50% more productive.

He has experimented extensively with AI himself, using vibe-coding to create a calculation tool for self-build costs. He impressively demonstrated creating another one for landowners – a land value calculator – live at the summit using a pre-prepared brief to generate over 2,000 lines of new code in minutes.

Thanks to the great speed of feedback loops using AI – one of the recurrent themes of the day – “the thing you're working with becomes almost like a



Small sites identified within a suburban neighbourhood by RCKa's AI tool.

material that you're sculpting", he said. The result can be the creation of tools that "get us more clients in five to ten minutes".

Russell Curtis of RCKa outlined the practice's entrepreneurial creation of a small-site finding tool developed using geospatial AI and PropTech Innovation funding. Born out of frustration with the pace of housebuilding in London and the robustness of London Plan targets, the project uses AI to find small sites that could provide some 800,000 homes.

Working with Blocktype floor plans, Python, GIS and vibe-coded software, the tool identified and assessed different site types such as backland, street, corner, and approaches such as intensification, infill and reconfiguration. Algorithms help calculate site capacity. Not only can it locate small sites, said Curtis, it could also be used to locate clusters of sites, maybe as an overlay to planning policy.

"The opportunity here is ginormous," he said, adding that the project just wouldn't have been possible without AI. The practice is now providing some of this AI data as part of preparation for the next London Plan.

The site-finding project illustrated a point made by several other speakers: that AI is most effective when put to use solving a particular real-world problem. It can also, said Keir Regan-Alexander, "turn the volume up on that very niche thing that you do" and help to deepen a practice's particular market position, such as housing, in the case of RCKa.

AI could bring new opportunities in planning. Millar wondered if it might be possible to use AI's evaluation capabilities to "sense care" in planning application.

Stefan Webb of TPX Impact was interested in whether AI could help create a more digital, redesigned planning system, noting that there was currently a government tender out for creating an AI tool to enable AI-augmented decision-making for planning applications. He felt there was scope to drive community consultation with AI models, though he also acknowledged the possibility of "AI-powered nimbyism".

HP's Javier Larraz talked about AI in the world of printing, including the AI vectorisation of images. "We don't see ourselves as printer manufacturers,"

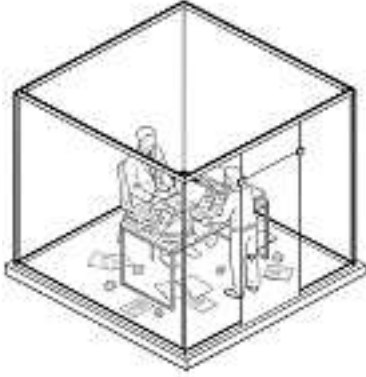
he said. "We see ourselves as bridging between the digital and the physical world."

HP's SitePrint robot, for example, prints directly onto the site floor "with extraordinary precision" to assist construction workers, while the HP Build Workspace platform is a centralised, cloud-based project information platform.

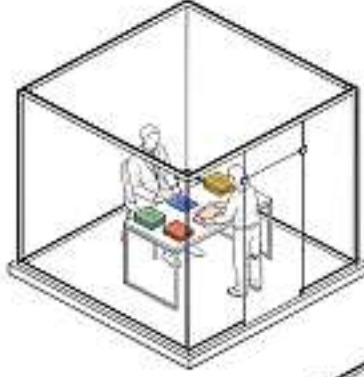
### Communicating effectively with LLMs

Don't speak to LLMs as if they are human. That was the key takeaway from Keir Regan-Alexander's informative and accessible presentation on effective communication with LLMs. Illustrated with helpful diagrams, it was full of useful tips on how to create the best conditions through effective context engineering to get results. This starts with remembering AI's deficiencies – they were trained a year or so ago so are working with incomplete knowledge, and don't know where they are or who you are – and making sure you are using enterprise rather than consumer grade APIs (application programming interfaces).

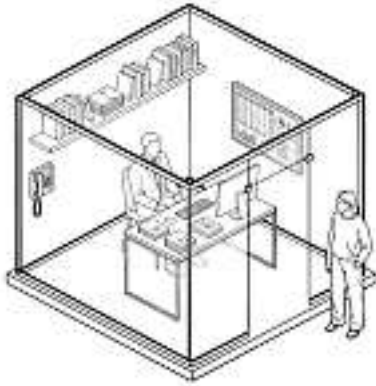
## AD-HOC PROMPTING



## BRIEFING THE MODEL



Keir Regan-Alexander on how to speak to large language models. From the basics of ad hoc prompting he advised briefing the model, using different AI agents and using enterprise-grade application programming interfaces with a larger context window.



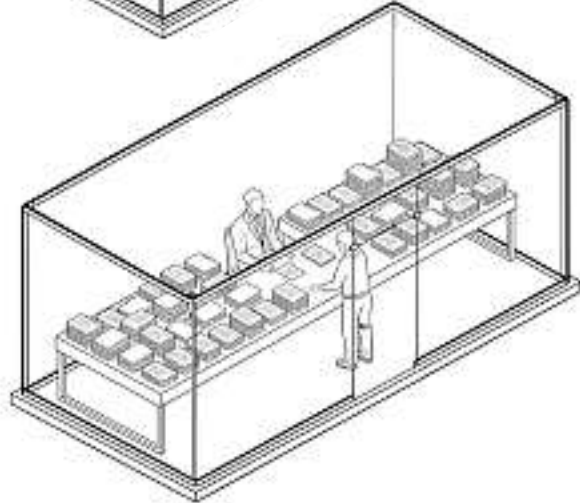
## AN AGENT IS A PRECONFIGURED CHAT

His step-by-step advice showed how to set out procedures and roles for the agent, and how to give it clear instructions – in this case for creating a planning conditions tracker – feeding it well-organised relevant documentation, plus good examples, templates, and, at the very end, language and style context for tone of voice.

He also described breaking a task down into different elements for different specialist AI agents, eg a research agent or a case study agent, resulting in a network of agents with a concierge.

Underpinning the use of AI for any work is the competency principle. It is important, he said, to only use AI if you have the underlying knowledge to critically evaluate it.

Tom Holberton of UCL gave a more academic presentation on indeterminacy in AI models. He showed research that uses LLMs to score the probability of language used in predictive text, with degrees of uncertainty indicated. He suggested that developing AI tools with natural feedback that exposes and leverages such uncertainty, rather than just presenting certainty, might work



## ENTERPRISE-GRADE CONTEXT WINDOW

better with the creative processes in architecture. He felt architects should be demanding the uncertainty as feedback from the tools that they use.

It's not just about communication with AI; communication with clients is also important. According to Regan-Alexander, to help maintain trust "you should be completely open about how you're using AI".

### Culture shock and AI slop

As well as a palpable excitement, concerns about how it might affect the culture of architectural practice bubbled under throughout the conference, surfacing now and then in both presentations and audience questions. As AI is increasingly deployed, will large tech firms "make a claim to own design work"? asked Adrian Malleon of the RIBA, and what might be the impact on early-stage roles? Several speakers worried that time efficiencies in practice processes would just drive prices down and increase competition. "We need to be better at selling us as people and what we care about," said Millar.

One question raised concerns about

the prospect of "AI slop" in the built environment. "The slops are mostly when you let AI do the design and take you over," said Abdollahzadeh, who instead advocated for its use as a helper/agent, with the architect very much in control.

There were some notes of caution over the degree to which architects depend on AI. Architects shouldn't need to use AI to complete their roles, argued Noviu's Smith. "We're on the cusp of being dependent on AI, which is quite worrying."

With new AI tools coming thick and fast, another concern was "software exhaustion". Gensler's creative AI lead, Hamza Shaikh, talked about the need for the hand to drive the AI process by putting "our human craft at the forefront" in order to use AI to make better decisions. He warned against too much focus on AI tools and not enough on approach and what the architect can bring.

He anticipated AI-driven changes in the profession with rebranding and the emergence of new services, and more widely in society, a counterculture to AI. More immediately, there are likely to be new practice roles, in particular relating to

## LESSONS FOR ARCHITECTS

1. CULTIVATE CURIOSITY AS A CORE SKILL
2. APPLY AI TO REAL DESIGN PROBLEMS NOT JUST REPORTS
3. DEVELOP BESPOKE TOOLS FOR YOUR STUDIO
4. USE STRUCTURED PROMPTS FOR BETTER OUTPUTS
5. BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT AI WITH CLIENTS
6. RETAIN HUMAN JUDGEMENT LEADING DESIGN DECISIONS
7. PREPARE FOR EMERGING AI-DRIVEN ROLES



Right: Javier Larraz of HP with HP's SitePrint robot at the AI Summit.

data organisation and interoperability, such as, for example, AI integration specialist. Practices should be looking to hire staff with these skills, he added.

"Where's the joy in AI?" asked one audience member, wondering whether it was affecting how time spent researching, reading and musing was valued? Speakers were adamant that there was plenty of joy to be found through creativity and empowerment, and also in the amount of extra time it freed up to focus on, as Studio Tim Fu's Abdollahzadeh said, what she puts out into the world.

Although Millar has found a lot of personal joy and agency from using AI, he did confess to some concerns, such as whether he found it harder to think since using AI. By using AI to write, for example, you lose the thinking process that goes into the writing.

Another question from the audience asked whether AI was helping to build better buildings, and on this, the jury was out; it was still too early to say. As Millar commented earlier in the day: "No one knows where this is going" – but we're clearly in for quite the ride.

## Speakers

Saina Abdollahzadeh lead architect at Studio Tim Fu

Russell Curtis founding director of RCKa

Renee Dobre architect and firmwide computation team leader at NBBJ.

Tom Holberton associate professor at UCL

Javier Larraz business director for HP's large format production business

Adrian Malleson head of economic research and analysis at RIBA

Tomas Millar architect, coder and founder of Millar + Howard Workshop and LivedIn Custom Build

Keir Regan-Alexander architect, founder of both Arka.Works and LLM platform OmniChat

Hamza Shaikh architect and creative AI lead at Gensler

Dan Smith digital lead at Novium Architects

Stefan Webb strategist and programme leader at TPX Impact

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Being part of the RIBA AI Summit was a powerful reminder of how quickly our industry is evolving and how essential collaboration has become. Showcasing innovation from across HP, from our advanced PC portfolio and large-format print solutions to SitePrint robotics, highlighted the breadth of technology now accelerating design and delivery. I was especially proud to demonstrate HP Build Workspace, our latest software innovation that can vectorise decades-old plans in seconds, unlocking new efficiency for project teams. What stood out most were the conversations with architects and designers who are already rethinking workflows through AI. Events like this are invaluable because they bring together the people and ideas that will define the future of the built environment. Colin Easton, UK&I large format print country lead at HP



hp.com

The background of the advertisement features a large, detailed view of the EJOT CROSS-FIX stainless steel support system. It shows a complex arrangement of polished metal brackets, cables, and rods, all converging towards a central point. The lighting highlights the metallic sheen and the precision engineering of the components.

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**WORLD OF  
FAÇADES**

Manchester June 2026

# PRESIDENT: WHY WE'RE EXPANDING OUR GLOBAL NETWORK

Lifelong learning was at the heart of my presidential campaign, and now its benefits are being extended worldwide by creating RIBA International Affiliates, writes Chris Williamson

I had intended my campaign for RIBA president to concentrate solely on our education and lifelong learning but was told that single-issue campaigns never win. So I suggested Education, Education, Education, and was told that had already been done. Most architects are concerned about low fees and salaries – the result of diminishing responsibility – and loss of respect for our specialist skills. Most members of the public, from your next-door neighbour to those within the halls of power, think we merely make buildings look a bit better.

Lifelong learning can increase the value placed on our work. I recently attended the launch of research that showed the average fee for high-end residential projects was around 10%. The next day I met with an AJ100 practice partner whose fees on hospital projects were set by the project manager at less than 2%. The distancing of architects from our clients and decision-makers is a huge problem. It results in fewer opportunities to demonstrate our range of skills and means our services are often sliced and diced. In my experience this is less of an issue when working abroad, where architects are well respected for their specialist skillsets.

To demonstrate our skills I would like to see the initials RIBA recognised as a form of qualification, a mark of academic excellence, and to enable all architects to curate their careers throughout their lifetimes and develop specialist knowledge. The certificate RIBA sends out would document and recognise these areas of expertise and help convince the government that we have the right to be the competent professional for most of the work stages as we seek to regulate reserved activities for architects.

When I was RIBA international vice president a few years ago, just about every international institute I spoke to wanted to collaborate with us on lifelong learning. The investment in the website and technology we are now making under the House of Architecture project will make this a reality. Many of the issues we have are global – management, technical skills, business skills, sustainability, reuse, ethics, equality and diversity – and we need to learn from each other to help tackle the problems we have created for the planet. That is why we have launched the RIBA International Affiliate category. Anyone recognised as an architect in their home country can become part of the RIBA family by completing



RIBA International Affiliates will benefit from our lifelong learning.

and keeping up our lifelong learning programme with expert-led courses on our comprehensive learning platform, RIBA Academy.

Affiliate members will be able to join our global community, supporting them to expand their network, advance their career and deepen skills and knowledge. They will have access to our RIBA chapters and make local connections, accessing a wide range of events and activities that help shape architecture locally. With over 25% of the UK fee income coming from projects overseas, expanding the International Affiliate membership class to bring locally trained architects into the fold, to support them to develop as competent professionals and support our practices to retain and develop talent, is a positive step forward.

The use of the title will be limited to the country where they are licenced to operate, ensuring RIBA Chartered Membership is still seen as the highest standard, and the institute to which we belong is helping raise the standard of built environment professionals globally.

We have an obligation to raise the standards of our own lifelong learning; and in doing so learn from and help architects worldwide to do the same. ■



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# OBITUARY: FRANK DUFFY 1940–2026

By Geraint Franklin



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## IN MEMORIAM

### **DEREK ANTHONY STANHOPE**

Elected 1956, Witney

### **ALAN JOHN SKILTON**

Elected 1958, Enfield

### **DAVID MCNIDDER**

Elected 1958, Paisley

### **DENNIS ANDREW JAMES**

Elected 1962, Nottinghamshire

### **GORDON LENNOX ANGELL**

Elected 1962, Longfield

### **GEOFFREY HENRY CARTER**

Elected 1963, London

### **BERNARD MINDEN CLAYTON GROOM**

Elected 1964, Shropshire

### **ALISTER MCGLASHAN**

Elected 1969, Edinburgh

### **CHRISTOPHER ROBERT SMILES**

Elected 1970, Darlington

### **DAVID ARTHUR HEATH**

Elected 1976, Cheltenham

### **RUSSELL FRANCIS WHITE**

Elected 1977, Ramsgate

### **BRIAN WADDINGTON**

Elected 1977, Saint-Aubin-Fosse-Louvain

### **TERENCE WILLIAM MALLOWS**

Elected 1987, Rainham

Frank Duffy, who has died aged 85, was a strategic thinker in the field of architecture and space planning. Much of his career was dedicated to architecture's fourth dimension: how buildings change over time. Over a five-decade career, Duffy queried the supply-side approach to workspace design, helping redefine the office as an adaptable framework able to meet changing needs. At DEGW, the consultancy he co-founded in 1973, Duffy integrated sociological research, systems theory and user involvement into the design process. The result was not just a new generation of offices but a user-centred approach to workplace design.

Duffy was interested in reforming the architectural profession too. While RIBA president (1993 to 1995), he fended off government proposals to deregister the title of architect and abbreviate the five-year educational course. His RIBA Strategic Study of the Profession (1991 to 1995) updated the landmark 1962 report *The Architect and His Office*, placing architectural knowledge at the core of the profession. In 1997 Duffy was awarded a CBE for his services to architecture.

Born in Berwick-upon-Tweed in 1940, Duffy attended St Cuthbert's Grammar School in Newcastle (two years behind Terry Farrell). In 1959 he received a Leverhulme Scholarship to study at the Architectural Association School, where he was taught by Peter Smithson, Cedric Price and John Winter. Inspired by a Reyner Banham article in the *Architectural Review*, he gained an AA travel scholarship to Germany to study *Bürolandschaft* ('office landscaping'), a type of open planning using non-orthogonal geometry to reflect patterns of communication and circulation.

The connections between planning, sociology and politics set Duffy on a lifelong path. After a spell at the National Building Agency he studied at Berkeley and Princeton, encountering Christopher Alexander, Horst Rittel and Ezra Ehrenkrantz. Working with the office

space planners JFN Associates of New York, Duffy observed a highly devolved set of processes, with architects and developers working on a 30-year cycle, space planners and corporate clients working to a five-year lease and service engineers somewhere in between.

After establishing a London office for JFN in 1971, Duffy set up DEGW with AA contemporaries Peter Eley, Luigi Giffone and John Worthington. There was a symbiotic relationship between the practice's design projects and its research and consultancy work, commissioned by developers and clients such as IBM. In the 1980s two client-sponsored ORBIT (Office Research: Buildings and Information Technology) studies examined the implications of the ICT revolution, giving rise to a smarter, more responsive strain of offices such as Stuart Lipton's Broadgate and Stockley Park schemes.

A key Duffy concept, 'shell, services, scenery and sets' (or shearing layers), analysed the bits that make up buildings as a hierarchy of longevity or adaptability. The theoretical basis was developed in writings including *The Changing City* (1989), *The Changing Workplace* (1992) and *Work and the City* (2008).

DEGW set up offices in New York, San Francisco, Berlin, Glasgow, Milan, Munich, Paris and Madrid as well as London. In 1989 it was incorporated, with Duffy as chair. He left DEGW in 2011, after it was taken over by Davis Langdon and subsequently absorbed into AECOM. The practice archive was later acquired by the University of Reading Special Collections, alongside Duffy's own book collection.

His ethos – inquisitive, evolutionary and mediating between clients' and users' changing needs – remains relevant in the age of remote working and retrofit. Duffy's work testifies to intelligence-driven design's enduring value. He leaves his wife, Jessica, daughters, Sibylla, Ellie and Katya, and three grandchildren. ■

Geraint Franklin is an architectural historian with *Historic England*

# SELFRIDGES, BIRMINGHAM BULLRING



Designed by Future Systems:  
Jan Kaplický (1937–2009)  
and Amanda Levete (1955–)

Colour transparency  
by Rod Dorling, 2003

By Alix Robinson

In 1999, Future Systems' media centre for Lord's Cricket Ground won the RIBA Stirling Prize. The firm's next big commission was a new branch of Selfridges, constructed as part of the regeneration of Birmingham's Bullring shopping centre. The Brutalist concrete centre, which opened in 1964, had failed to stand the test of time – and the city wanted to replace it with something shiny and new.

Concerns over lighting and display space led Selfridges to request minimal windows, but the client also wanted a visually striking exterior. Future Systems' solution was to give the building bulbous curves, with mirror-bubble cladding inspired by a Paco Rabanne dress. To achieve this, the design team worked closely with structural engineer Arup.

The finished cladding consists of 15,000 convex anodised aluminium discs, attached to fittings welded to reinforcement bars in the sprayed-concrete structure beneath. Prior to attaching the discs, the walls were coated with a product developed by specialist contractor Liquid Plastics to achieve a deep blue akin to an Yves Klein painting, guaranteed to last 35 years. Seen from a distance, the effect is a seamless reflective surface. Close up, the silvery discs stand out against the blue background.

The Selfridges building was completed in 2003 and won seven awards, including a RIBA Award in 2004. ■

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