

DESIGN DELIGHT
Archmongers, CAN
and Studio Ben
Allen swap recipes
for bringing joy
to buildings

LAUGHTER LINES
Tracing the history of
humour in
architecture, with
Koldo Lus Arana
and Gabriele Neri

FUN

RELAX
AND
LET
COLOUR
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SERIOUS FUN

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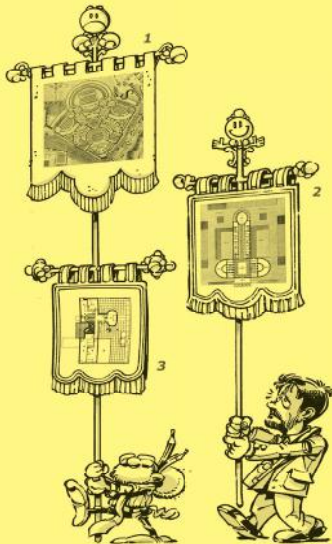
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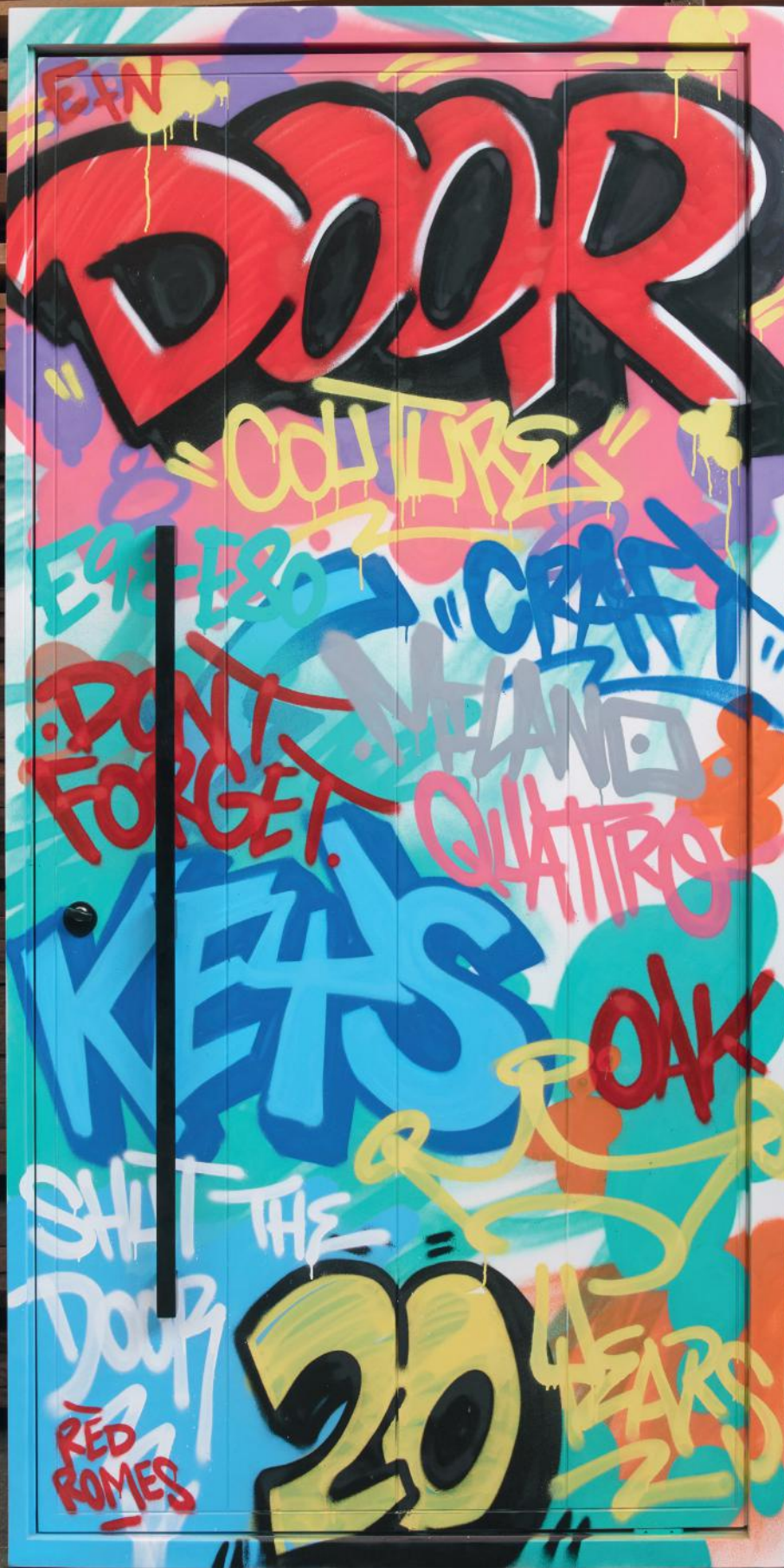
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Published by RIBA 1834 Ltd

Registered office:

66 Portland Place,

London, W1B 1AD

Printed by Warners, Midlands plc

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Cover image: Chin-ups in the conservatory at Studio Ben Allen's A Place in the Country, Kent, captured by French+Tye.



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FUN

It's bleak out there – for the world in general, and for architecture, which is facing an array of destabilising factors. But when times are dark, it's all the more important to acknowledge joyous things – and that's what we're doing this issue, writes Eleanor Young

I took a mini-survey of four architects, asking them to rate the health of architecture as a profession right now on a scale of one to 10. No one rated it above six – which came from the optimists. With precarious project pipelines, a squeeze on fees and salaries, uncertainty over the implications of regulation and the frequent references to living in the era of polycrisis, it might seem an unfortunate time to be plastering the word 'Fun' across the RIBA cover and urging architects to “relax and let the colour and playfulness back in”.

But this is the time when it is most needed. Whether you are absorbed in endlessly optimising your BIM model, checking the AI minutes of your latest difficult site meeting or putting in the hours on competitions to ensure that you have work for the next two years, you need to be reminded of the best things in architecture.

In this issue we talk to architects who are revelling in the playfulness they are bringing to their work, and how that spreads, in ripples of pleasure, to those

who experience their spaces. Architects from three young practices who have elevated domestic architecture talk about shape and colour, and why they enjoy going beyond white walls, and touch on fun as a serious pursuit (p12).

Others, who design play spaces, share the enjoyment of coming up with sometimes quite elaborate concepts – dinosaurs, anyone? – and turning them into places to climb and crawl, dig and explore (p26). These are pleasure-giving spaces. And visiting playgrounds, I saw they weren't just occupying children but also dog walkers, balancing along the logs following their four-legged companions; older people sharing the sounds of children playing; and teenagers and students – some of them a little high – rocking to and fro to infinity in the net swings.

We are so well versed in how architecture meets people's needs from shelter to safety (extending now perhaps to wellbeing), that we forget how it can engender emotional transformation when paired with theatre, music or

performance. Ray Winkler of Stufish, a self-described “entertainment architect” designing things such as ABBA Arena, probably touches more people's lives than many a starchitect (p18). Big shows when you are immersed in an experience are powerful.

So here are strategies for giving back 'fun' to your neighbourhood, making places of dancing and partying as well as playing. And as you read them think on how laughter, which is a tonic – even if one should avoid clichés – can be engendered by architecture. Exactly how is taken apart by Luis Miguel Lus Arana and Gabriele Neri (p32). As you read their essay, you can laugh along with your peers at the cartoon parade of humour in architecture.

Magazines are entertainment too, of course – and here we are performing for your delight. I hope you enjoy the issue. ■

Correction: Sydney Metro – referred to on page 29 of RIBA vol 133.4 – was designed by Woods Bagot, in collaboration with John McAslan + Partners

PORTMEIRION'S MERRIMENT

WORDS

Flo Armitage-Hookes

What is the 'architecture of pleasure'? According to Dr Sarah Baylis, author of a new book by that name, it can be found in Portmeirion. Animating a secluded hillside in North Wales, the village is a vibrant collage of architectural styles and colours. Yellows, blues and pastel pinks adorn domes, colonnades, cottages and towers. It is at once exotic and familiar.

The theatrical holiday resort, which first opened in 1926, was conceived by Welsh architect Clough Williams-Ellis. In the wake of the First World War and with unsightly seaside developments sweeping UK coasts, he was a proponent of visual delight and entertainment. "For Clough, beauty was synonymous with fun. He got enormous pleasure from visual things," says Baylis.

To some, Portmeirion may appear garish, kitsch or a bit Disney. However, a hundred years on, it is still enjoyed by holidaymakers: over 250,000 of them per year. "It has survived because it's evolved," Baylis asserts.

Public amenities and modern facilities were added from the 1950s, Portmeirion Pottery was set up and cameras welcomed in for TV's *The Prisoner* in the 1960s, and the site hosted music and arts event Festival No. 6 in the 2010s. To sustain its creator's vision, the village has actively adapted to those who inhabit it, rather than fastidiously preserving itself. "Portmeirion allows things to happen. It is a backdrop to human activities," reflects Baylis.

In a period where true flamboyance is scarce in architecture, there is something to learn from Portmeirion and its enduring appeal. It is the village's wonderfully bizarre architecture that drives its innate allure. Perhaps to inject pleasure into design and be sure people will fight to keep it alive – in a verb discovered during Baylis' research – architects would be wise to "Clough up". ■

Portmeirion: The Architecture of Pleasure by Dr Sarah Baylis, 2026, is published by Yale University Press

"PORTMEIRION LETS THINGS HAPPEN: IT IS A BACKDROP TO HUMAN ACTIVITIES"

Right: Salvaged architecture, including a colonnaded portico from a Cheshire country house, was incorporated into Portmeirion after the Second World War.



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Opposite right:
Looking towards the
south 'crinkle crinkle'
brick wall and east
entrance/exit.

Opposite below: Thin
brick columns within
hold up a steel and
polycarbonate roof.

How many kinds of pavilions grow in an English country garden? Twenty-five episodes into the annual Serpentine pavilion commission, RIBA J carried out an admittedly more picturesque than sublime audit of past ones and the answer seems to be four: 'Fun', 'Crafted', 'Conceptual' and 'Dour'.

That's three more than strictly necessary, since anyone who has grown up in the UK – with its summers notoriously beset by cloudy, wet weather – knows that all Joe Public desires from their pavilions is a sense of enjoyment. But this is an art gallery, which means architects may insist on pandering to the more highfalutin aspects of what ideally just wants to be a tent in a garden.

It started so fun-loving, with Zaha Hadid's inaugural pavilion in 2000 being exactly that: a tent. The baton was then dropped by Daniel Libeskind and Toyo Ito, who went all conceptual, only to have the fun reinstated by Oscar Niemeyer (2003) Rem Koolhaas and Cecil Balmond's balloon (2006), Olafur Eliasson and Kjetil Thorsen's spinning top (2007) Frank Gehry's giant Jenga (2008) and Jean Nouvel's red beach bar (2010).

The dark age of Dour began with Peter Zumthor in 2011, followed by Ai Wei Wei

and Herzog de Meuron's cork basement (2012) and Smiljan Radić's odd 2014 shell, to be bookended later by the 2020 global pandemic (no pavilion that year) and Theaster Gates' mausoleum-like Black Chapel (2022). All these made efforts to control or block out light – antithetical to the idea of a building to celebrate those few blissful days we might call 'summer'.

This year's pavilion, by Mexico's LANZA Atelier, Isabel Abascal and Alessandro Arienzo, sits alongside Francis Kéré (2017), Frida Escobedo (2018), Jun'ya Ishigami (2019), Lina Ghotmeh (2023) and Marina Tabassum (2025) as firmly in the Crafted category, despite the use of amusingly onomatopoeic word 'crinkle-crinkle' to describe its curving brick entrance wall. This turns out to be more pun than fun, playing on ideas of 'serpentine' as well as on the host gallery's earthy brick. Its curvilinear form gives stability to its dry-stacked wall, which with its aligned perps, gives snatched views out to the park.

Once inside, a second wavy wall helps define an internal volume set with a grid of one-brick-thick columns. These hold up a clear polycarbonate roof atop a slim steel structure, with sail-like brise soleil offering shade from the sun. Lightly

hovering over the wall, its elemental buildup gives reassurance that it is waterproof. That's something Álvaro Siza and Eduardo Souto de Moura's timber and clear plastic pavilion resolutely wasn't during a press evening deluge in 2005, with bodies running for cover the unwittingly comedic result (also excluding it from the Crafted category).

That brings us to 'Conceptual', for which notion of shelter may not even be a priority. Into this pantheon we may admit SANAA (2009) – a roof, yes, but barely; Sou Fujimoto (2013), BIG's blocks (2016) and Counterspace (2021) – roofed but theoretically 'in bits'.

Fun did pop its head up briefly in 2015 and 2024 with SelgasCano's dazzling dichroic tent shedding light on the Dour decade and Minsuk Cho's 'islands' bringing some much-needed play back into the equation.

Predicting what iteration any future commission will realise for London's park-goers is all part of the fun, but we'd hope it, too, starts with an F. "I remember the pavilion – we had big fun there!" says Eddie Murphy's Billy Ray Valentine in Trading Places. As the world gets grimmer by degrees, it's an experience we also wouldn't willingly want to swap. ■



LANZA ATELIER BY IWAN BAAH COURTESY SERPENTINE (2)

PLEASURE



FRENCH+TYE

PRINCIPLES

What does fun look like in architecture? Ben Allen of Studio Ben Allen, Mat Barnes of CAN, and Margaret Bursa of Archmongers – small studios embracing colour, complexity and materiality – go looking for answers

Opposite: An “excessive conservatory”, as briefed by the client, at the reworked farmhouse A Place in the Country, Kent, by Studio Ben Allen.

AS TOLD TO
Hugh Pearman

Let’s talk about serious fun, colour, shape, form, material. Are you aware of being part of a kind of collective endeavour in terms of architectural approach?

Margaret Bursa Not necessarily, as a sort of movement that’s happening now, because I feel like it’s always been happening to an extent. To me, it feels like a natural progression of what’s been, and what we’re influenced by and what we’re learning from. Importantly it’s not a trend, but more something that humans have always been exploring.

Mat Barnes I agree. I don’t know how everyone else feels, maybe it’s a symptom of my education, but it just feels like the right way to do it for my personal expression. I do have a bit of an issue with the word ‘fun’, because as soon as someone uses colour, then people don’t know how to describe it. So there’s playful, fun, quirky, funky. But actually, it’s just another design tool to communicate a different atmosphere, or whatever you’re trying to convey, and it’s just that it’s not beige and made of handmade bricks that makes it ‘fun’.

Ben Allen There’s definitely a renewed interest in colour. As an architect, I think I’m always frightened of the cyclical nature of taste and design because our buildings are meant to stand the test of time. When I started my own practice I was really wary of colour, and it was the last ingredient. The early projects we did,

we didn’t have any colour at all. It was just about trying to use natural materials. But I can’t help myself, because I like projects that are reasonably elaborate and have a degree of visual complexity, and I think colour is a great way of adding an extra layer, even though I know it’s going to get labelled in a certain way. But for me, colour is not the driver: if somebody wants a room that’s brightly painted, they don’t need an architect for that, and I’m always aware of how colour can date a project very quickly. It’s just part of the toolbox.

Margaret Bursa How we think of it is as just another characteristic – a material characteristic – and it just depends what you want from that particular element, and whether that feels like a nice way of handling it.

Mat Barnes Choosing something to be white or chrome is just as much of a choice as choosing it to be orange or red, and this idea that making it colourful is like you’re being provocative – it’s only provocative because most people just default to minimalist white. We always try and tell our clients: if you look at the natural world, or outside your home, then the complexity of different textures, colours, shadows, whatever, is massive. Having it white is the anomaly, not having it colourful. I think that fundamentally, a richness in an environment is what people enjoy.

How do you develop your ideas with your clients?

Ben Allen We get plenty of freedom to do what we want, and I think our clients are often excited to see what we’re going to come up with. But it’s quite destructive to constantly reinvent things all the time, even in terms of just running a business. My background is working for Olafur Eliasson, and he used to sit down and say, as perhaps only an artist these days could do: “Let’s do something really, really complicated.” I find it very interesting to add complexity, not to reduce it, but there’s always a slight guilty worry as an architect. Will it just be too much? I don’t think we’ve ever had that feedback from our clients. I think generally they’re like, it’s really enjoyable to walk down that staircase, or to see that curved wall with odd-shaped holes in.

Mat Barnes We’re interested in responding to clients’ aesthetic sensibilities, I guess. We always try to understand their homes, or the type of homes they grew up in, or what kind of art they like, or graphics, and then try and get the architecture from that information. Whether that’s hardcore minimalism, or timber-led or whatever, we just enjoy responding to that in an unexpected way for them.

Margaret Bursa The relationship tends to be someone who’s chosen you for what you do already, right?



Left: Sometimes eclecticism can be what clients are looking for, says Matt Barnes of CAN. It is delivered here in the Lomax Studio (2018).

Mat Barnes As I'm sure happens with you, they'll see a particular project and they come to you based on that. Though we have had a few where they just come for the eclecticism rather than a specific project, which is what we are aiming for.

Margaret Bursa It's really important to understand where you got your clients from, why you got them, and also how they live now. We always ask for a couple of hours in a client's house without them, which they always accept – sit in their chairs, you know, really spend time in the house. But occasionally, that isn't possible because they don't have that long-lived house set up, and it is very hard to then understand what they might enjoy materially. So in that case, you have to just go forth and propose something, and work on it from there.

Who or what influences your work?

Margaret Bursa We look at classic modernist or postmodern architects. Johan, who I work with, is Danish, so there's a lot of Danish Scandinavian influence, and then Belgian architects; there's plenty going on in Central Western Europe that's interesting. Some modern Danish architects as well, like Søren Pihlmann, who uses lots of reused materials and did the Danish Pavilion at the 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale. He's quite a big influence on our work, really expressing the materials, stripping things back, and I think that's where our practice is changing a little. Trying not to shut too many things behind plasterboard. And looking at old summer

houses and things, which stand the test of time, analysing them for the materials, and seeing what still looks fresh, and what still works.

Mat Barnes When I went to do my Part 2 in Westminster, I was tutored by Kester Rattenbury and by Sean Griffiths of FAT, and obviously you can see the FAT undertones in our work. But I think what really changed things for me was just a validation that you can take as your source a bit of reference from wherever, your own personal experience. That changed my view of how you can express yourself; so that's really where our stuff, or my inspiration, came from. And we look to a lot of sculptors in terms of the way they're testing materials out. There's a guy called Jesse Pollock, who's relatively young, and he does a lot of iridescent metal work and panel beating. For architecture, I agree a lot with what Margaret's saying – the Belgians are doing good things at the moment. It's architecture with a capital A, but in a very material-led way, and treating the structure as an expression.

Ben Allen Definitely pre-Bauhaus. I find Arts and Crafts in Britain and the equivalent movements across Europe absolutely fascinating. There was a conspicuous move to leave classical architecture behind, but it's before the hegemony of modernism. It's incredibly inventive but also a little strange: they're trying to create new ways of doing things. Then, when I was studying in Glasgow, Isi Metzstein and Andy MacMillan showed how there were five ways to do an entrance

Opposite: CAN takes references seriously, including those from personal experience as with its Druid Grove extension and reconfiguration.





Left: Juliet balcony with shutters, enabling communication from bedroom to kitchen below, in Ben Allen's A Place in the Country.

Right: A red water spout gives a sharp contrast with the yellow of the rolltop bath.

Below: Window nook and hideyhole.



“FUNDAMENTALLY, A RICHNESS IN AN ENVIRONMENT IS WHAT PEOPLE ENJOY”

hall, and there was modularity. You could crash one way of doing an entrance hall into a different way of doing a staircase. That’s something that, as a designer, you can play with – you can decide to make something more expected or less expected. I love these kinds of typologies. The breadth of interesting things people were trying across Europe at that time is just staggering really.

Much of the work that all three of you do is private residential. Do you have plans for progression, or other areas you would like to move into?

Margaret Bursa We’d like to keep the residential, because we enjoy it. We love making homes for people, and we’ve currently got a new-build house, which we really enjoy. I think dealing with something not yet existing is wonderful: we’d like to do more of that. But what we do is now for the lucky few, unfortunately, and so it can’t really be mainstream. It’s a privilege to work on it, and it’s a privilege, I think, to be able to commission it, sadly. I guess the dream for many architects is public community buildings. We are working on something, but just on a pro bono basis at the moment. We’re trying to pitch for smaller public projects, something that I could see my family using, or the wider community using, something changing a particular neighbourhood. That would be where we’d like to move into a bit more,

but we also love what we do – and we’re increasingly confident with it.

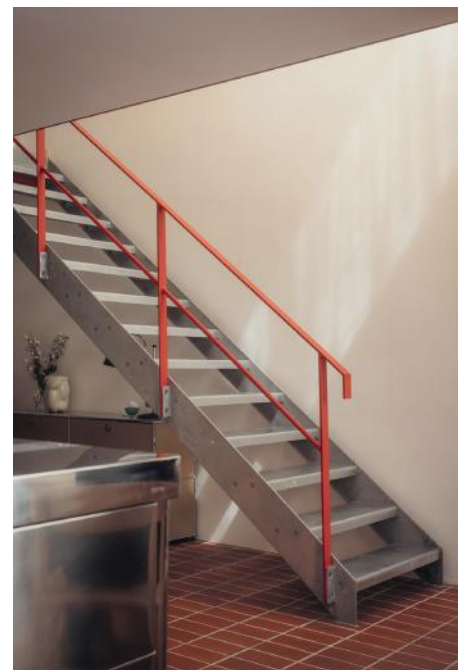
Mat Barnes Similar: private resi gets a bad rep a lot of the time, but it’s 75% of our workload, and the thing we’re most experienced in. It can be hard to make it pay, but we’ve done so much that I would like to think our process is fairly streamlined. I’d agree that one thing I want to progress into is more public-facing projects, whatever they may be. Spaces the public can inhabit. A thing I find a bit jarring with residential work is that 99.9% of people only ever experience it through photographs. Being inside a building feels very, very different. Like Margaret, we’re doing a pro bono job – it’s for a local sports club – because we wanted to do something public-facing. We do a lot of exhibition pitches and lose 90% of them because as soon as you get into that cultural institution world, there are lots of good architects, and the competition is fierce.

Ben Allen We’ve just done a little library in St Helens, in collaboration with an artist. It’s designed as an inclusive space with special educational needs and disabilities in mind, it’s Arts Council funded, and it’s been really nice – it’s an area I’d love to move into; the response was really touching. It was design and build and we only just managed a small profit. The client, the local council, loved it from day one. As Mat says, it’s so difficult to get these commissions. I’m not sure we’re very close to getting an Oxford library yet. ■



Above: Archmongers fully refurbished this 1960s townhouse in Tylney Avenue, southeast London.

Below: New steel stair and balustrade by Archmongers for 1970s Elemental House, Hackney.





THE JOY FACTOR

Ray Winkler of Stufish talks about his practice's work as 'entertainment architects' creating stage designs for some of the world's biggest live shows

WORDS
Pamela Buxton

"Joy is a highly undervalued component of our everyday lives," says Ray Winkler, chief executive and design director of preminent entertainment architect Stufish. It's certainly one of the words that comes up repeatedly when talking to Winkler about the work of the 30-strong practice, which was established by the renowned set designer and architect Mark Fisher, who died in 2013.

There can't be many architectural practices who describe "joy/fun" as one of their core values, but for Stufish, it makes perfect sense. Winkler began at the practice (then the Mark Fisher Studio) as Fisher's assistant – or "sorcerer's apprentice" as he likes to term it. Three decades on, Winkler still exudes huge enthusiasm for his craft, and delight in the enjoyment the practice's work brings.

This ranges from stage design for a roll-call of music royalty, including the Rolling Stones, Madonna, Beyoncé and U2, right through to stars of today, such as Sabrina Carpenter, at festivals including Coachella. Added to this are major sporting events such as the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony and the Champions League Final kick-off show, technology experiences such as LEAP (in 2022 and 2025), events such as Apple's 50th anniversary celebrations at Battersea Power Station, and the semi-permanent arena for the Abba Voyage show.



Stufish developed custom "Sabrina Carpenter architecture" for her first arena tour in 2025.

“It is true to say that what we do generates joy, and I don’t think you can have other people enjoying the fruits of your work if you yourself didn’t enjoy producing it,” he says.

As well as his work at Stufish, Winkler has been a visiting professor at Yale University, where he taught on the future of entertainment architecture. So he’s certainly a good person to talk to about the changing nature of this specialism, having started out at a time when the design of ephemeral environments for live shows was generally thought, he says, “far too frivolous to get anywhere near to architecture”.

Winkler himself came to architecture via furniture design, studying at the Bartlett with an exchange semester at the Southern California Institute of Architecture in LA, where his interest in ephemeral design took off. Fisher was a Bartlett external assessor, and Winkler ended up working for him, despite Fisher having been, he remembers, “rather unkind” about his diploma work.

For Winkler, entertainment and architecture have always been synonymous. He cites the excitement and joy of experiencing views of the London

skyline, South Bank landmarks such as the National Theatre and Millennium Bridge, and the ethereal joy of great cathedrals and mosques.

“Entertainment architecture has always been the two sides of the same coin for us,” he says. “Or I like to call it, the two ends of the same rainbow”.

Although Stufish started coining the idea of “entertainment architecture” as a distinct discipline over a decade ago, he thinks this is still not widely accepted by many architects. Yet as he points out, he and many of the team at Stufish are architects, and their spectacular projects follow RIBA’s plan of work, with the added needs for their live show designs to deliver on time, and to be entirely demountable. And, as demonstrated with the Abba Arena in east London and Dai Show Theatre in Xishuangbanna, China, Stufish also designs permanent and semi-permanent buildings.

By applying its architectural skills to the world of entertainment on such a broad scale, however, Stufish is something of a hybrid, albeit rooted in the traditions of architecture. Winkler is at pains to emphasise the “extraordinary pool of talent and range of skills and

cultural references at Stufish”, where the team ranges in age from 21 to 74. This has surely been a key factor in maintaining its relevance by understanding both the needs of the artistic talent and those of the audience, then using its skills to solve spatial problems and give both what they want.

Stufish’s aim, thinks Winkler, is to make the architecture almost symbiotic with the entertainment it is showcasing, adding: “As I like to say, we put rock and roll into architecture, and architecture into rock and roll.”

Entertainment has always been about telling stories, and selecting the right tools with which to do this. Regarding the impact of changing technologies such as digital media and, increasingly, AI on entertainment and how Stufish works, it all comes back, once again, to joy – as demonstrated in the Abba Voyage show, where the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief is part of the experience.

“Our approach has been: let’s see how we can employ these tools to the benefit of our core values without undermining what we are and who we are,” he explains. “And one of our values is joy. If the means are using AI in its many different





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“Having everybody working in a common environment gives us that ability to take that top level view across the business.”

– Tim Boxford, Executive Director, Maber Architects



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manifestations, and the end is joy, then so be it.” And while Voyage is about digital avatars of real people, he expects in the future that entertainment will embrace songs and performances that are entirely artificial.

Asked about the role of entertainment as part of wider placemaking and regeneration, Winkler reports increasing inquiries from clients exploring ways to get people to come back into city centres amid the decline of bricks-and-mortar retail and cinema-going.

“I think architects, developers and planners are getting more and more aware of the fact that city centres are dying out, and we need to do something about that. And a good place to start is to think about the architecture of entertainment. What is it that will bring people together?”

This could be, he suggests, the inclusion of some aspect of live entertainment infused into initiatives such as the pedestrianisation of Oxford Street, or even the simple pleasure of markets where people can not only buy their vegetables but have a coffee, meet friends and maybe watch some buskers or some other entertainment.

This all ties into something that Winkler feels the global pandemic really showed the value of: “Our core human desire of coming together, sharing the analogue environment we live in, and sharing that together.” This desire to congregate and experience together is particularly relevant today, he feels, for the people who already have what they need materially.

“Where I see the big shift – and I see it in my two daughters – is we’re now moving into the experience culture,” he says. “People want to have experiences because they’re unique.”

For live events, one trend he has noticed recently – with Stufish’s recent work with Adele – was the extension of the event beyond the show itself into “a much larger envelope” through activities before and after, enabling concert-goers to spend more memorable times with friends.

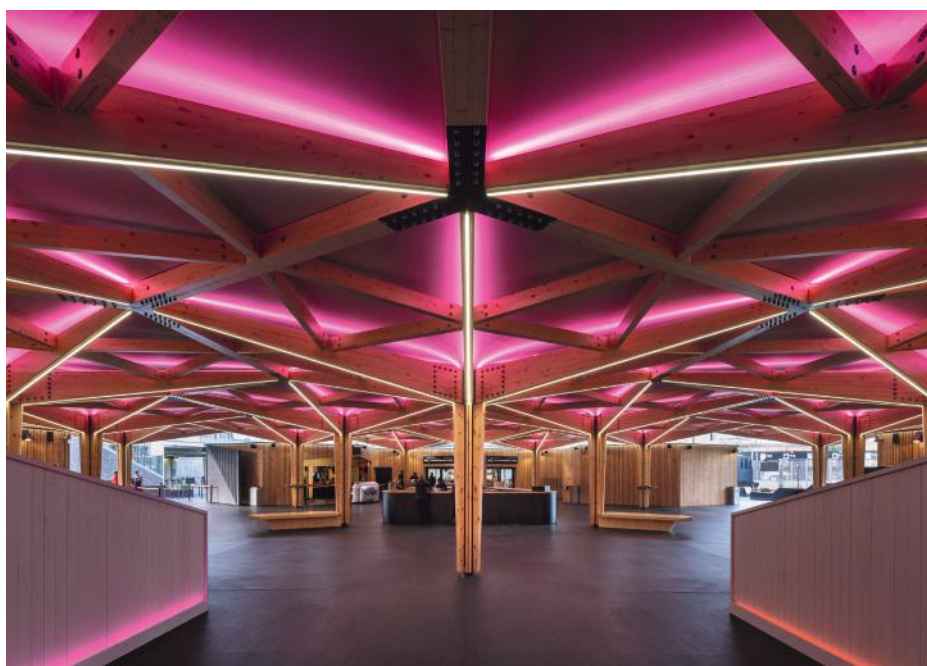
“People want this experience culture to proliferate beyond just the reason of being there,” he says.

Winkler also has strong views on the sustainability side of entertainment architecture, stressing its circular practices: 90 per cent of the building components used in a major show for



Above: The 3,000-capacity Abba Arena in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (2022) is wrapped in larch fins nodding to the band's Swedish roots.

Below: The arena's hexagonal geometry continues within.





Above: The opening ceremony for the 2008 Olympic Games was centred on symbolic globe. The collapsible sphere rose on a telescoping 40m mast.

Below: The globe carried 60 dancers.



the likes of Robbie Williams, Adele or Madonna are rental stock; all go back into the warehouse along with the lights video and sound gear. The recent use of more energy-efficient lighting and sound systems has also been significant. Gone are the days when having a show that required a fleet of 100 trucks was a badge of honour; now it's almost the opposite, with some bands even stipulating the use of biofuels.

Stufish's demountable, mass timber and steel Abba Arena proved that it was possible to build more permanent venues with smaller carbon footprints and a light touch, with very shallow foundations and all services running above ground.

However Winkler raises the difficult, broader issue of the carbon impact of audience transport to events, even though such factors also apply to all manner of lifestyle choices, from online shopping to holidays. According to him, the industry itself is "not blind" to these issues. "So, that is an interesting aspect because we are designing shows for a new generation of artists and a new generation of fans who will have different sensibilities," he says. Might there even, as one of his daughters suggested, be a case for energy ratings for events, akin to those for items such as fridges?

What's next? Winkler is tantalisingly restricted by NDAs, answering: "All I can say is that we're working on a number of projects that will redefine what we think entertainment is and should or could be."

Entertainment architecture is an extremely unforgiving world, and Winkler is proud of the practice's many repeat big-name clients. "If we don't hit the deadlines, if we don't hit these targets, if we don't hit the budgets, if we don't hit this, that and the other, there would be no business for us," he says.

He is also proud of the sheer reach Stufish's work has had. "I would dare to hazard a guess that more people have seen Stufish's work than many of the star architects combined," he says. "If you picked the Beijing Olympics, how many architects can say that 2.4 billion people – a quarter of the world's population – saw your work?"

Equally he has no problem that the practice is not in the limelight itself – quite the opposite. "There's also some joy in the fact that it's not about us," he concludes. "The spotlight should not be on us and our work; the spotlight should be on the experience." ■

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Below left: A landscape print in an optician's waiting room that provides escape and comfort; with Signature, every surface becomes an emotion to be experienced.

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OPENING PLAY



JOSEPH HORTON



BERKELEY GROUP

Both in designated spaces and beyond, building in play and exploration can enliven landscaping and create better environments for us all: masterplanners, architects and developers should take note

Deeper into the woods we go, navigating little paths and the lie of the land. Architect Owen Hughes Pearce of PEARCE+ is taking me to what has become known as the ‘acorn’: a magic place to climb into above the forest floor. Then we will come down and clamber over logs, balancing on a tree trunk to cross the sunken gully of this old quarry in Forestry England’s Westonbirt, the National Arboretum, in Gloucestershire.

Whether in rural or urban settings, spaces for play can be evocative and bring out the best in a place – as well as being used as both an attractor and a sop by developers. In southeast London, HTA Design created the fabulous Kite Park in Kidbrooke Village in the early stages of the build out of flats for Berkeley Homes, which has been so unexpectedly popular that it has generated extra traffic. It has also helped hit targets on spoil reuse (30,000m³) and biodiversity net gain. I have also, however, come across

a playground being included in a data centre proposal to help it give back to the neighbourhood.

As is the way with most such community infrastructure, the need for play spaces is built into the National Planning Policy Framework with requirements for “adequate accessible” provision, as well as protection for existing “formal play spaces”. Masterplanners and those looking to revive high streets or working on cultural projects should all consider play as part of their toolkit – it can be an enlivening, beneficial component of your scheme.

Playful expectations

Supplementary planning documents set out requirements – or more normally, ambitions – authority by authority for play space relating to housing developments, typically using the standard from charity Fields in Trust as a benchmark. The Greater

Opposite: Nature exploration at PEARCE+ and Invisible Studios’ ‘acorn’ and self-built timber play space at Westonbirt, the National Arboretum, in Gloucestershire.

Above right: Kite Park, designed by HTA, alongside the new homes of Kidbrooke Village, Greenwich.





Opposite: Play as sculpture at Chilton Square, King's Cross, designed by Root and Erect.

Left: Early plans for regeneration in Newhaven, East Sussex, included a waiting room with multigenerational play and fitness outside a cluster of health hubs, designed by Root and Erect.

London Authority (GLA), in its Play and Informal Recreation supplementary planning guidance, suggests asking for play provision on developments where it is expected that 10 or more children will live; its calculator helps figure out how many might live in a development.

Distance to play spaces can be another defining factor, along with project size, as is the case in Bristol. The South West's biggest city is seeing a £1.1 million investment in its parks and play areas, funded by the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) charged to developers. This, along with Section 106 agreements, is a typical mechanism for meeting play requirements – though word on the ground is that delivery can be patchy or underwhelming, with standard kit brought out of storage and installed with little design consideration.

This year's Davidson Prize has focused architectural attention on play in and around housing schemes, thinking beyond such standard arrangements. Finalists include *This is Not a Road*, by Artform Architects, a toolkit for reimagining streets and neighbourhood spaces to support play; and a suggestion for underused second staircases in high-rises becoming "safe spaces for connection, curiosity and everyday play".

Why play spaces matter

Too often, playgrounds offer children tiny ghettos of possibility amid a landscape of grown-up prohibitions: "Don't swing round the lamppost"; "never jump off the curb"; "don't pick up that stick, there is someone behind us".

At times in history, these spaces have been seen as offering partial answers to so-called idle youth: counterbalances to poverty, to poor housing and to inequality. Think of the National Play Strategy, launched by Andy Burnham and Ed Balls in 2008 with £225 million to refurbish 3,500 play spaces, before being summarily killed off under the coalition government in 2011. Now, playgrounds are more seen as helping children to learn about the world, to coordinate newly long limbs, to share and collaborate, and to assess when and how to take risks.

This is backed up by a wealth of literature on child development and, in the world of design and construction, has been led by Tim Gill with his writing on risk and, more recently, on the city as a place of play. The author of two important books, *No Fear* (2007) and *Urban Playground* (2021), he lists to RIBA the negatives of children not playing out: "Obesity, sedentary lifestyles, [poor] mental health, a lack

of sense of connection and agency". And that is before we even get into the alternative: the dominance of screens.

Imagination, risk and reward

On a sunny day, I jump off the tube at King's Cross and make my way past the shouts and cries of kids in the tight school playground echoing between the layers of flats. Scooter parking and planters flank wide pavements; I imagine children hopping, skipping and twirling along as I head to the new playground at Chilton Square. Sculptural golden tubes snake around the site, up and over, holding nets, swings, a punch bag – the afternoon light lands perfectly on it.

The playground's architect, Susanne Tutsch of Root and Erect, is well versed in play needs, having worked in the sector since the early 2000s and co-authored the GLA's *Making London Child-Friendly* report in 2020. She is aware of the pressures of viability on landscaping space from her own projects and design review panels, and has seen Camden Council reduce its direct demands. This, Tutsch argues, makes a stronger case for any play space serving more than one function. "A bench is not only interesting for someone to sit on," she says, referencing balancing and



Left: Dinosaur-themed playground at Crystal Palace Park, commissioned by Bromley Council and Crystal Palace Park Trust, with HTA Design as lead consultant.

Below: Skeleton-style climbing frame at Crystal Palace Park.



stretching, and offering the reminder that play should not just be easy. “There has to be a motor challenge.”

Gill describes designing for play as “an art”, adding: “There are principles, but no basic formula.” So why are original play interventions not more common? One main factor is that it is simply not a spending priority, he says, echoing Tutsch. Another, perhaps more easily tackled, is mindset: “It is not part of our default set of ideas for highway and high street improvements, for sustainable urban drainage and social spaces.”

And then there is the culture of risk aversion. To help designers exercise their imagination, without being stymied by the fear of litigation he describes as “prevalent” in the built environment and public sector, Gill has developed a benefit risk assessment: ISO4980. Yes, this is a risk management tool – but it turns the process into a balancing act, with positive factors also accounted for.

Conceptually exciting work

In south London, Natalia Roussou, architect-turned-landscape designer at HTA Design, has been working on the fun job of designing the playground at Crystal Palace Park – drawing from its 19th-century history as dinosaur ‘theme park’. Working alongside equipment

specialist PlayEquip, some of the risk sensitivities were taken off the architect’s shoulders. The immersive play space is imagined as a palaeontological dig site, using rocks in a sequence, according to their age. Children can explore fossils and deconstructed prehistoric structures, from claw marks and footprints to a dinosaur tail, using their imagination to piece them together. Even the climbing frames are conceived of as skeletal prehistoric remains.

Back at Westonbirt, meanwhile, Owen Hughes Pearce operates quite differently, utilising the arboretum’s own materials. After working on the design with Piers Taylor of Invisible Studio, he took on the build of the play space, using discarded timber that had been stored in the aptly named Waste Drive. With the help of the tree team and all their kit, the trunks were manoeuvred into place, with other workers on the site helping prep surface finishes. For Forestry England, which owns the arboretum, this has created a new attraction and a way to draw families and dog walkers further into the site.

Beyond the playground

Looking at environments more broadly, Gill emphasises the importance of creating places that work for children – in terms of play, and also safety and

mobility. When it comes to our cities children are an “indicator species”, he says: if the environment works for them, it works for all of us. That applies to things you can do, like moving around safely, and the things there must not be too much of, such as polluting cars – and fast ones in particular.

You can see some of those ideas at the King’s Cross Central development, where Gill wrote the play strategy. While it was not fully delivered because of the financial crash, it provided the impetus for Identified Flying Object, the ‘swing in a bird cage’ by the station, which always has more than one person – child or adult – standing waiting to use it. He also initiated the idea of the popular fountains in Granary Square by Central St Martins.

How could such attitudes to play and playfulness inform other places? Root And Erect’s knowhow has helped design in play as a way of enlivening other schemes, such as a public realm improvement project at Newhaven in East Sussex. Early ideas showed how the edges of the area could be made more playable with a treasure hunt of creatures in stonework, bringing in greenery, tactility, places to balance and pause; all part of the concept of ‘play on the way’.

What could you bring to your scheme if you considered play? ■



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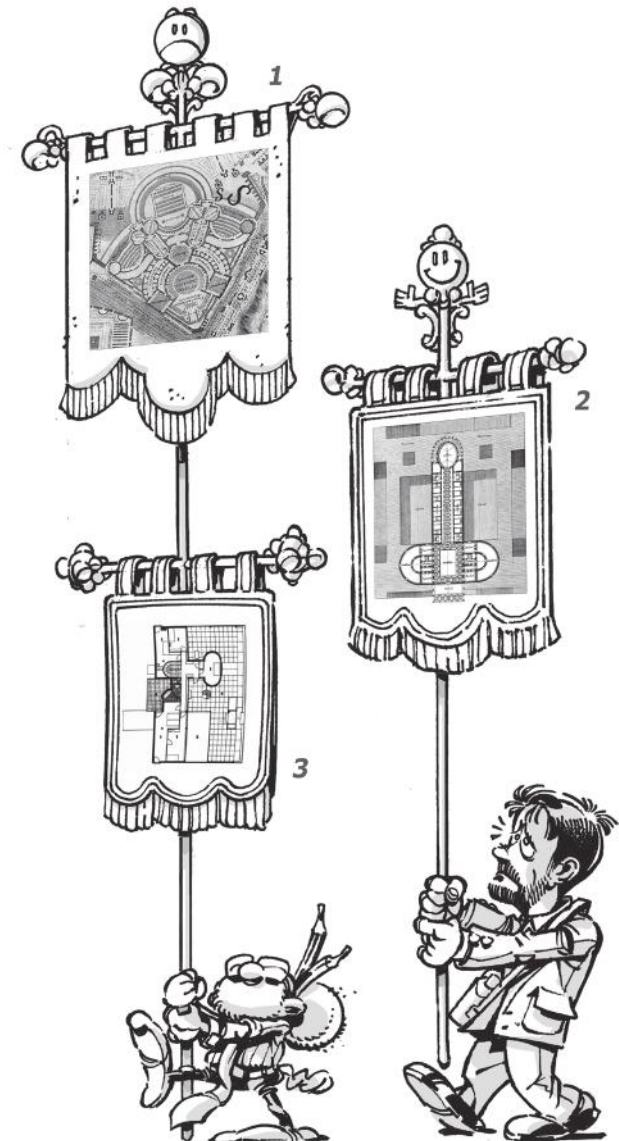
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COMEDIC CONSTRUCTS*



Below, front: Luis Miguel (Koldo) Lus Arana is associate professor of architectural theory and history at the University of Zaragoza. In his spare time, he is also architectural cartoonist Klaus (Klaustoon).

Below, rear: Gabriele Neri is associate professor of architectural history at Politecnico di Torino and the author of *Alan Dunn: The Cartoonist as Architectural Critic* (MIT Press, 2026).

*Or, everything you always wanted to know about humour in architecture, but were afraid to ask...

WORDS

Luis Miguel Lus Arana
and Gabriele Neri

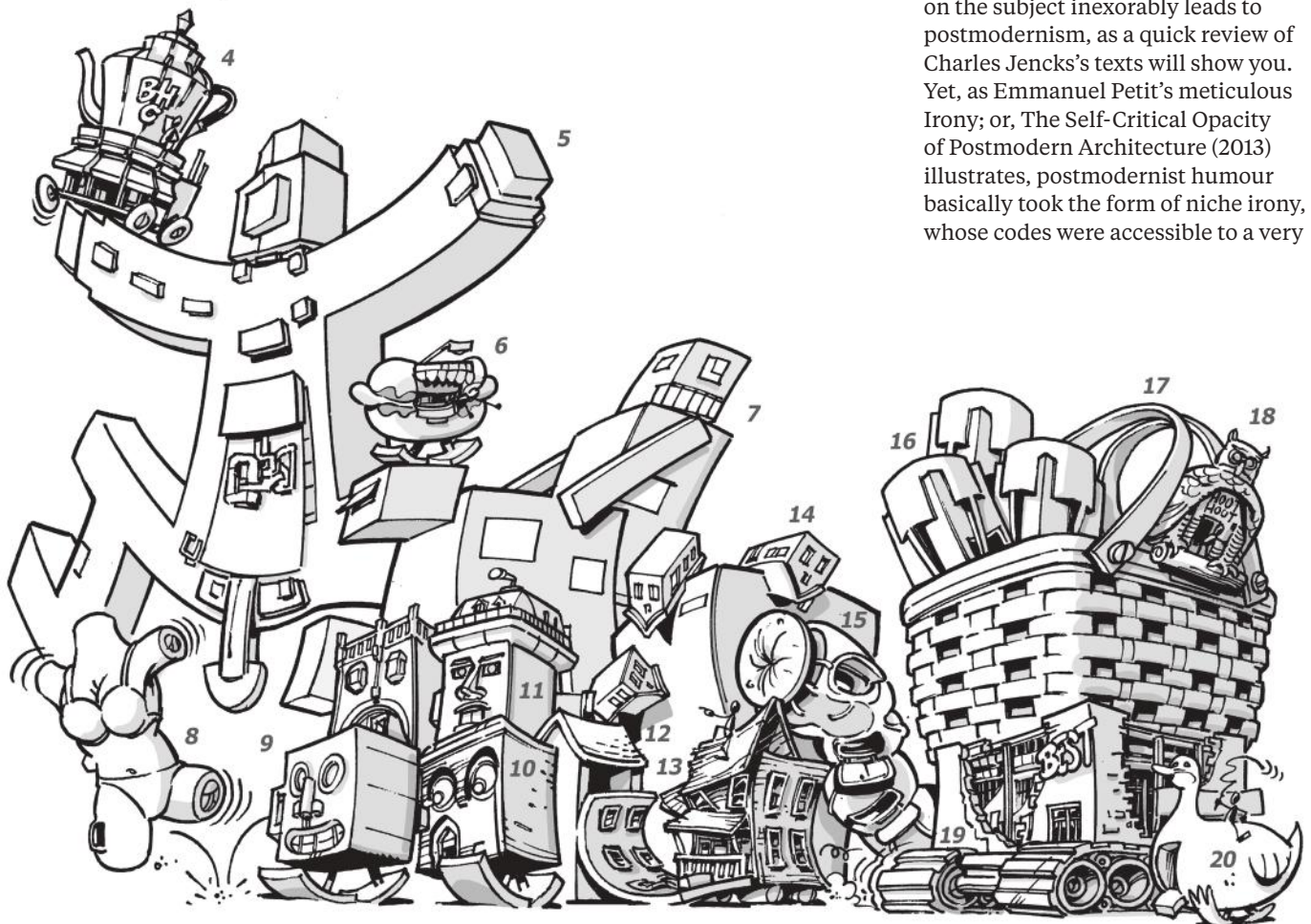
ILLUSTRATION

Klaustoon

“Men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth or a wig, [but] how many will own up to a lack of humor?”, wrote American essayist Frank Colby a century ago. “False humor-worship is the deadliest of social sins, and one of the commonest. People without a grain of humor in their composition will eulogize it by the hour.”

But then humour is a slippery slope. Traditionally, from Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian to Hobbes, and even Baudelaire, it was considered degrading to morals, art and religion... a form of behaviour, Aristotle said, “from which civilised man should shrink”. Humour is always looked upon with a mixture of suspicion and disdain: you need to have proved your intellectual pedigree before you can indulge yourself with a splash in the muddy waters of funniness. Yet ostracising it is not an option either, since, as Colby pointed out, nothing seems to be more suspicious, socially crippling, and intellectually dubious – how about that for a paradox? – than a complete lack of humour.

In architecture, any discussion on the subject inexorably leads to postmodernism, as a quick review of Charles Jencks’s texts will show you. Yet, as Emmanuel Petit’s meticulous *Irony; or, The Self-Critical Opacity of Postmodern Architecture* (2013) illustrates, postmodernist humour basically took the form of niche irony, whose codes were accessible to a very



limited audience and which anybody else would find plain dull. Modern architecture had lost touch – euphemism alert – with the people on the street, so humour arrived as a way to help it be more relatable. And right away, we filled it with intellectual puns and ‘Easter eggs’: private jokes aimed at colleagues (nudge, nudge, wink, wink) which left the public nonplussed, and as alienated as before. Some geniuses we are.

There were, of course, historical, pre-modern, proto-modern, and even modernist precedents that were both clever and funny, such as Berthold Lubetkin’s multilevel joke at his Highpoint II luxury flats, where the addition of two caryatids to the entrance canopy made sure to make fun of the clients in several ways concurrently. Take note, Monty Pythonesque postmodernists: witty, good ol’ Berthold also pioneered the strategy of deriding your audience.

Still, we also seem desperate to prove there is actual humour in architecture. In 2021, American architect Stewart Hicks, co-creator of Design With Company’s witty and legitimately humorous projects, and a telegenic YouTuber, devoted an episode of his Architecture With Stewart to ‘What’s Hidden Behind Architecture’s Hidden Humor’. Persuasive as he is, the case studies he cited made it obvious that

architectural humour – that produced by architects – is far from hysterical. There’s no shortage of wacky, tacky, goofy and unintentionally risible buildings; some are purpose-built in an effort to be funny. But, looking at some attempts, you’re led to the sad realisation that, even if things turn out ridiculously funny, there’s nothing worse than trying to be funny – only to appear just plain ridiculous.

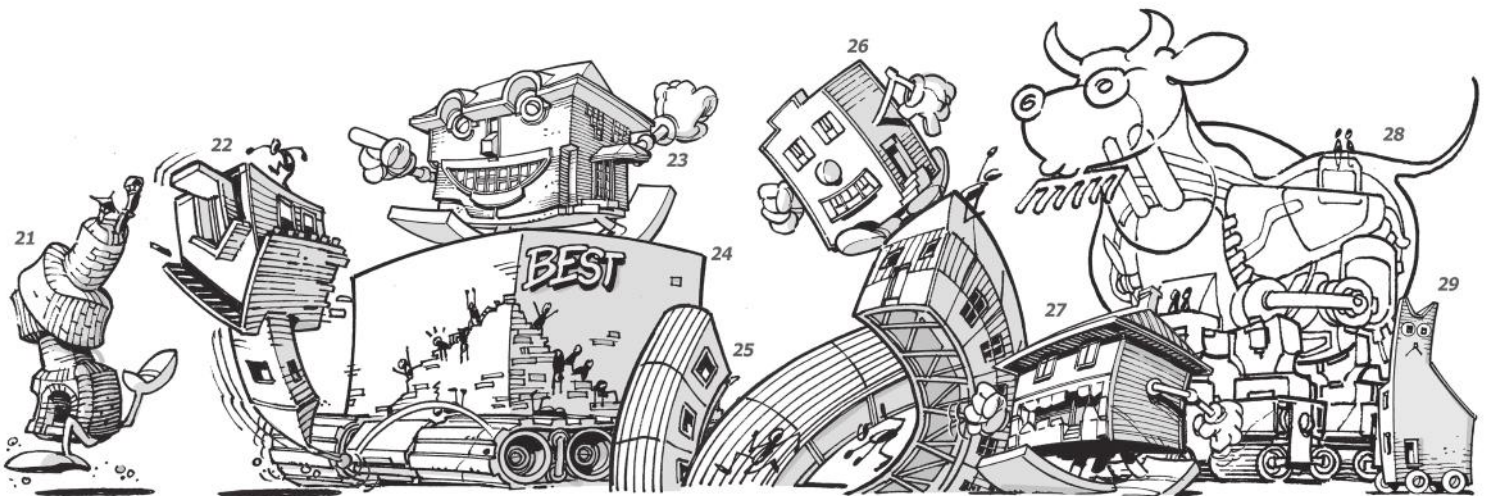
Strategies of (architectural) humour

However, we know architecture can indeed be funny, as anybody who has watched Buster Keaton’s 1920 *One Week* can attest to. Slapstick cinema showed many instances of slapstick architecture: in films where physical humour came from the interplay with buildings which were, eventually, the subject of architectural slapstick themselves. Keaton’s *Steamboy Bill*, *The High Sign*, and *One Week* are prime examples.

Of course, the humour of slapstick comedy is difficult to translate to real architecture. Lawyers would undoubtedly call designed-in slapstick involving humans illegal – although accidental cases often occur – while a purely architectural equivalent is hard to recreate in largely static, durable buildings. Yet if the mechanics of

slapstick might be complicated to import into reality, the fictional recreation of its effects is not, and has proven rather effective as a comedic resource.

The paradigmatic example of this are James Wines/SITE’s BEST showrooms from the 1970s and 80s. They were never popular with architectural critics, who dismissed them as “some kind of joke”, “nothing but a one-liner”, “an affront to human dignity, an insult to architectural innovativeness, and stooping to the lowest altar of gimmickry”, “vandalism and property destruction tending toward nihilism”, “evidence of “America’s love affair with watching violence”, and even “sheer lunacy”. But they were often celebrated by the public, who received them with varying degrees of enthusiasm, from simple amusement to violent uplift, as the citizen who commented: “That’s what I’ve always wanted to do – kick the shit out of one of those buildings!” How relatable is that? Wines even took a shot at actual architectural slapstick in the mechanised Notch Building in Sacramento (1977), opening the door for many other slapstick-imbued buildings, real and simulated, by other architects and, most notably and more recently, artists such as Dennis Oppenheim, Alex Chinneck and Erwin Wurm.



Anthropomorphism, zoomorphism and figurativism have been typical strategies when trying to coax an easy laugh from architectural form. The first group includes the ‘early’ late entries submitted by three cartoonists to the 1923 Chicago Tribune Tower competition, whose laughability benefited from marrying anthropomorphism and cartooniness. In the last two we can place many examples of novelty architecture, which has produced an endless array of object and animal-shaped buildings, from ducks to cats, beagles to hot dogs and tea kettles, to name a few.

Similarly are the equally abundant cases of pareidolia, which, among other phenomena, defines our tendency to see faces in common objects, including building facades. Of course, the comical power of all these varies, and effectiveness depends on an alchemy that is hard to pinpoint. Architectural pareidolia, for instance, seems funnier the more accidental it is. The moai-looking ‘angry guys’ at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport – actually, the parking’s cooling towers – are more likely to prompt a guffaw than, say, the Kyoto ‘Face House’, which seems too on the nose to work.

Finally, and related to this, we have to resort to scatology, with sex

matter a particularly celebrated form. A resource dating back to antiquity, it has been used by architects throughout history, from Piranesi to Le Corbusier, and, most famously, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, whose never-erected plans for an Oikéma in Chauv and a House of Pleasure in Montmartre in 1780s played with ‘upwards transposition’ as defined by Henri Bergson. That is: “To express in reputable language some disreputable idea, to take some scandalous situation... and describe them in terms of the utmost ‘respectability’.”

After Ledoux, other well-known architects have played this card, together with many anonymous authors, such as the designers of the Christian Science Church in – of all places – Dixon, Illinois, a less vigorous but much more anatomically correct take on Ledoux’s plan; or the Keith Haring-esque 1950s Newmarket Medical Centre in Ontario, both of them sources of endless puns and witty headlines in the digital media.

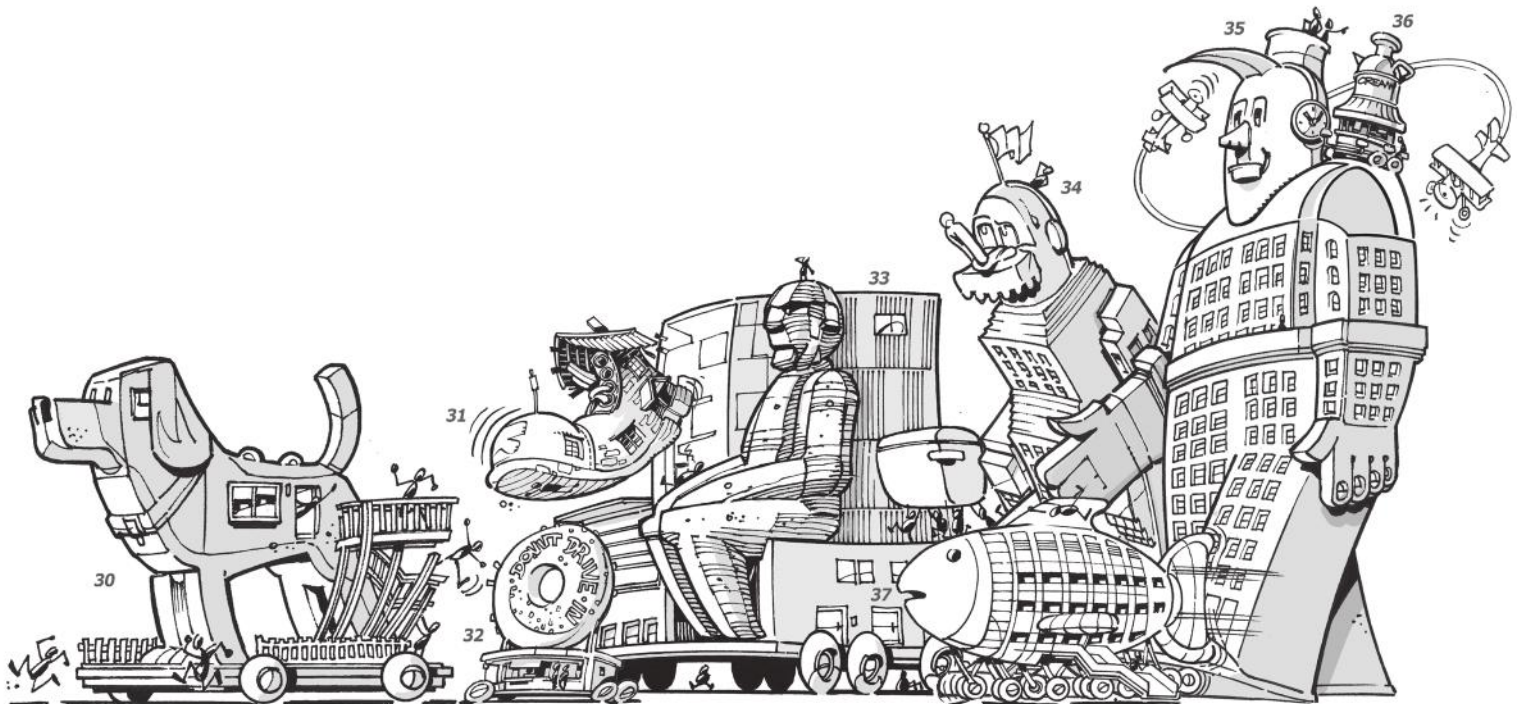
Outmost in their dedication to this architectural branch of toilet humour are Atelier van Lieshout, whose art village for the 2015 Ruhrtriennale Festival included two scatological structures: the Domestikator, a building roughly in the shape of a man having a doggy-style

illicit encounter with what looks like a sheep, and the BarRectum, a structure in the shape of a human digestive tract, from tongue through stomach to a very detailed rear end – which lends itself to a nice array of inappropriate interactions. Completing the trio, their disembodied BikiniBar works well, too, as chuckle material of the Sam Raimi-type. Many other artworks could be included in this section, but, if we were to end on a high, bottom-produced note, that would be artist Paul McCarthy’s delightful inflatable Complex Pile, which while not actually a building, should be.

The case for funny architecture

As a result, the discourse so far might seem like an ode to nonsensical humour. That is: we are giving up any attempt at infusing architecture with intelligent humour, to win over the favour of the public. While there’s nothing wrong with that, it is also true that ethics is an aspect generally absent from discussions about humour, architectural or otherwise. No matter how low, easy or straightforward, humour – including its sub-categories, from irony to parody, comedy to satire – is rarely neutral.

Often, it can be a vehicle to convey a message, as can be seen in examples



even in this brief overview. Jacques Tati's *Villa Arpel* in *Mon Oncle* (1958), a caricature of Corbusian houses, or SITE's various follies, involved a good measure of social criticism, standing as visual puns, but also as satirical comment on the society and forces that had produced them and ultimately use them. Thus, they joined the countless caricatures and cartoons that, over the last two centuries, have mocked the noble art of building and its protagonists; so, behind a vast corpus of seemingly light-hearted images lay motives that could be both noble or sinister.

At one end of the spectrum might stand George Cruikshank's defence of urban aesthetics in his caricature of John Nash impaled on the spire of his own All Souls Church, Langham Place (1824), a building denounced at the time as a "deplorable, horrible object". At the other lies the Nazi propaganda that sponsored vicious cartoons attacking the Bauhaus during the 1930s. The power of humour must be carefully weighed in architecture no less than elsewhere. Otherwise, laughter may have a bitter aftertaste – or we may discover someone else has been laughing at us all along.

Consider, as an extreme example, the well-known AI-generated viral

video *Trump Gaza*, which appeared in February 2025 and was later shared by the president himself. In the video, the Gaza Strip is depicted as a Dubai-style paradise, filled with skyscrapers and glittering prosperity. As the Guardian newspaper reported, Solo Avital, an Israeli-born American filmmaker, stated that the video had originally been created as a form of political satire, only to be subsequently repurposed by Trump as a compelling piece of propaganda.

Despite all the caveats, we assert that instilling humour in architecture is not only possible, but a legitimate right – even a moral imperative, but that we level the stakes by making sure it is not only architects that have fun with it. Also, as the Latin adage *castigat ridendo mores* ('it corrects customs through laughter') states, humour in general, but applied to architecture, can become a tool that takes advantage of buildings' physical presence in the real world to expose the distortions and contradictions embedded within the field itself – as the place where social, political, economic, and cultural tensions often crystallise.

In doing so, architecture could demonstrate possession of a powerful intellectual and spiritual resource

beyond humour alone: self-irony. Thus, architectural self-irony may be understood not merely as a comic device, but as a form of critical self-awareness. In a Kierkegaardian sense, it implies the capacity of architecture to distance itself from its own claims to authority, seriousness and permanence, revealing their contingency without necessarily renouncing them.

In 1920, Piero Portaluppi – designer of dozens of projects ranging from power stations and villas to public buildings – conceived a proposal for an enormous skyscraper in Manhattan, rising hundreds of metres above the existing skyline like a modern Tower of Babel. Architectural megalomania? The building's name, SKNE, revealed the project's true meaning and self-ironic intent. Read aloud as a single word, the acronym sounds like the Italian 'scappane!' – an exclamation that translates as: 'Run away!' Through this playful gesture, Portaluppi both embraced and mocked the modern fascination with gigantism, exposing the absurdity latent in the architectural ambitions of his age.

If we can make new architecture emulate this, we should go for it. But if we can't, just making it funny would be a huge improvement. ■

Can you identify all the buildings mentioned in the article in in Klaustoon's 'Architectural Parade'? Go to ribaj.com/intelligence/humour to discover the full list.



VIBRANCY AND A SENSE OF FUN

Presented by

HIMACS

A fount of material wisdom: HIMACS brings joy and colour to public spaces

Stuart Melrose and Kev Munday's stunning backlit mural at Station Hill, fabricated by AGS System Ltd, celebrates Reading's culture and showcases the translucency of HIMACS.



Above: The Sounds of Hayes by The Decorators honours the legacy of iconic EMI Records via the medium of engraved and illuminated HIMACS.

Below: The Fountain by NEON at Related Argent's Brent Cross Town development, fabricated in vivid tones of robust and homogenous HIMACS by DFMK & Whitewall.

Architects looking to add vibrancy and a sense of fun to their projects, especially for outdoor or public realm installations, need look no further than HIMACS solid surface.

As demonstrated by several recent high-profile projects, HIMACS ticks all the essential boxes from design versatility to outstanding performance. Striking examples include The Fountain by NEON for Brent Cross Town; Royals, Residents and a Rock Festival, the luminous mural by Stuart Melrose and Kev Munday in Reading; and The Sounds of Hayes Underpass by The Decorators, near the former home of EMI records.

An extensive colour palette, ranging from vibrant solids to ethereal pastels, and from terrazzo, marble and stone effects to classic neutrals, means there's always a shade of HIMACS to match any creative vision. What's more, several choices feature SCS-certified percentages of recycled content, while others offer a translucency ideal for backlighting – as embodied by the mural projects celebrating history and

community in Reading and Hayes.

Because HIMACS is so malleable, with enhanced thermoformability in certain colours, it can be worked into any shape desired and seamlessly joined. This flexibility, together with its non-porosity and resistance to water, makes it perfect for complex structures such as The Fountain by NEON, a bold statement in both colour and form.

Add the superior functionality and safety inherent in this robust, homogenous and repairable material and you have the kind of weather resistance, compatibility with technology and ease of maintenance that ensures longevity and dynamic performance for high-traffic installations.

These three impressive yet very different designs serve the public in several ways, from creating locally inspired art to forming a hub for community gatherings to illuminating public thoroughfares, thereby enhancing safety while encouraging civic pride and creating a sense of place. lxhausys.com/uk



RIBA

Notice of RIBA Annual General Meeting

The RIBA Annual General Meeting will be held on Thursday 24 September 2026, 14:00 to 15:00 (BST) at BMA House, Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9JP and online.

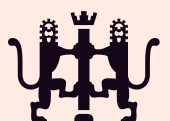
The Agenda, together with the Annual Report and Accounts, will be published on www.riba.org/agm on Tuesday 1 September 2026.

To attend the AGM or to ask questions in advance, please register at www.riba.org/agm no later than 12:00 on Wednesday 23 September 2026. When you register, please indicate whether you wish to attend the meeting in person or online.

Whilst all RIBA members may attend the AGM, only Chartered members are entitled to vote.

Yours sincerely,
Manuel Nogueira, Honorary Secretary

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EYE LINE 2026 JUDGING: MANUAL TECHNIQUES HOLD FIRM

WORDS

Jan-Carlos Kucharek

One that got away:
Student Faye
Blackshaw's From
Closet to Cubicle
trptych. Left to right:
The Commercial
Panopticon; A
'Respectable' Queer
Utopia; Comfort on Tap.



FAYE BLACKSHAW

It's curious when the same entrants' work resonates with a different set of judges over different years. But there's a sense of reassurance in the process working; that when it comes to a critical view of architectural representation, judges are relying on similar criteria.

Such was the case this year, where two entrants from the 2024 and 2025 Eye Line competitions both made it through to get a 2026 gong. And interestingly, both practitioners relied on traditional hand-drawing and rendering skills.

This seemed surprising. Last year's practitioner winners, Nic Clear and Hyun Jun Park, both on this year's judging panel, were early adopters of digital technologies in academia, and actively promoted and developed these skills in their units, so I'd assumed that winning them over to manual techniques in this golden age of AI would be an uphill struggle.

I was wrong. Both evidenced a deep knowledge and love of 20th-century architects, illustrators and renderers, whose work paved the way for how we visualise the future now. They also have

the current digital and AI techniques down pat, so their ability to interrogate and question digital methodologies of entries made them highly critical gatekeepers. In a year when there were more AI entries than ever, see how few made it through.

Balancing this specific expertise was judge Kieren Majhail, her eye developed through years of professional practice; living through the changes and opportunities that AI is bringing to the industry but also aware of how manual skills can cut through the obfuscations that architects using the technology can create for themselves.

Annette Spiro's years at Zurich's ETH not only brought a continental view to the judges, but research that yielded her book *The Working Drawing*, a tome analysing modern architects' technical representation, which fed her thinking.

For me, having run Eye Line for more than a decade, there are inevitably wince moments when I see work I genuinely like fall by the wayside, and this year was no exception. University of Cambridge student Faye Blackshaw's triptych, *From*

Closet to Cubicle, felt, for me, a subtle critique of queer spaces and how former radicalism is being subsumed in creeping commercialism. 'Looks like [OMA's] Madelon Vriesendorp in a nightclub,' mused Clear approvingly. Blackshaw's work shares Vriesendorp's sense of chill detachment, like a cold tap turned. ■

Eye Line 2026 judges

Nic Clear

Dean, School of Arts and Humanities, University of Huddersfield

Kieren Majhail

Associate director, Karakusevic Carson, and member of the RIBA J editorial panel

Hyun Jun Park

Director, postgraduate architecture, Leeds Beckett School of Architecture

Annette Spiro

Professor emeritus, ETH Zurich

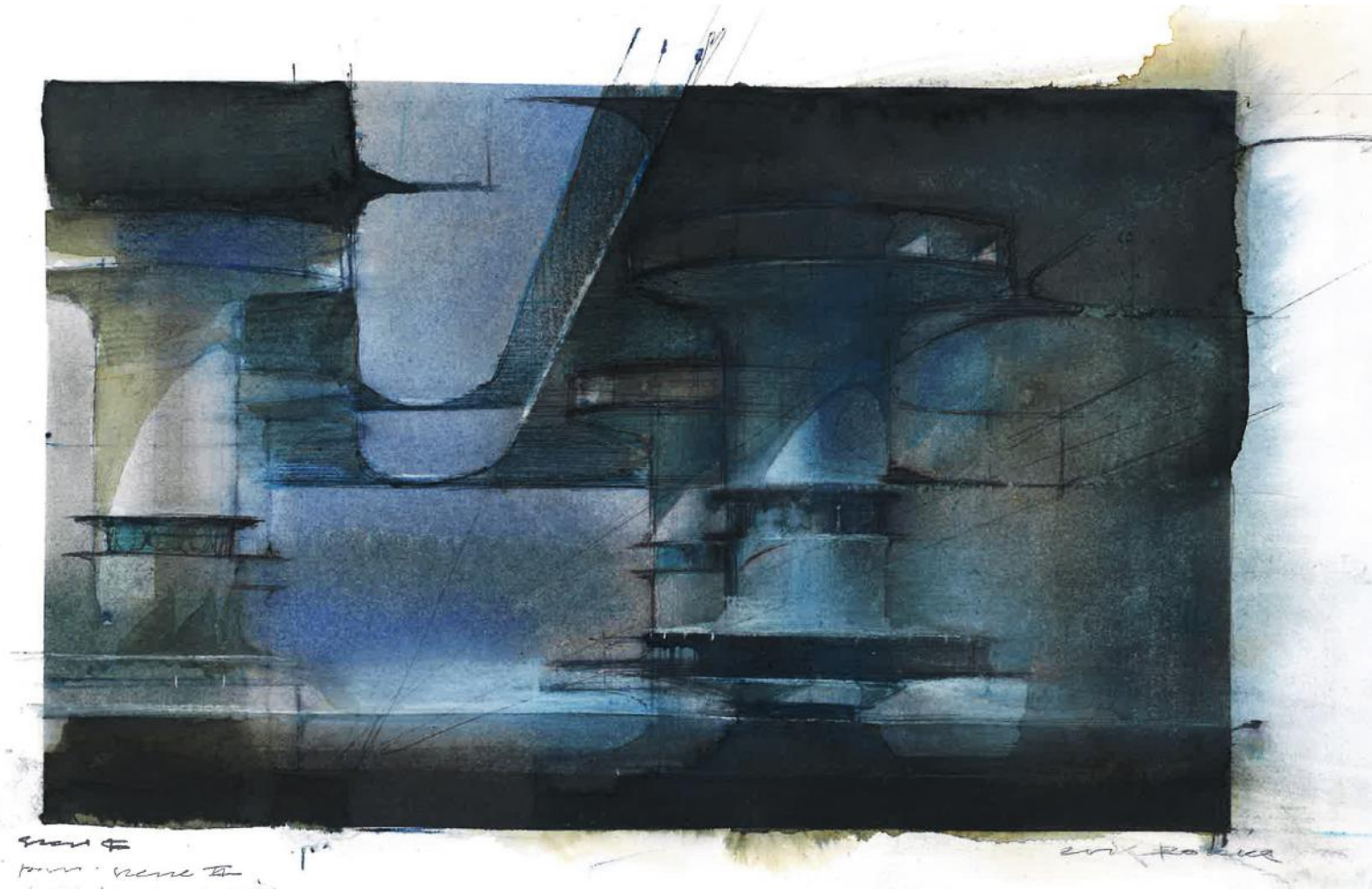
Jan-Carlos Kucharek
Deputy editor RIBA J



art volume

2026 106 - 10

Above: Deep Focus.
Watercolour.
500 x 750mm.



FIRST PLACE, PRACTITIONER

ERIK ROKKE

LEAD ARCHITECT, STENUNGSUND MUNICIPALITY, GOTHENBURG, SWEDEN

“Watercolor becomes the restless lens, revealing how fragile certainty becomes once the frame refuses to hold still,” Erik Rokke tells us of his work *Parallax*. Of another, he says that his “drawing behaves like a deep focus shot, where every layer stays equally sharp. Emotional foreground and architectural depth collapse into one plane, while a Baroque spatial drama is quietly recast in industrial material.” Rokke draws heavily from film terminology in presenting the three images that took him from third place in 2025 to first place this year.

Rokke’s limpid, confident watercolour and pencil drawings with their sharp perspective also conjured filmic associations. Hyun Jun Park observed a “Bladerunner-like” quality and the influence of British science-fiction illustrator John Harris. Jan-Carlos Kucharek meanwhile felt they resembled the production sketches of noted film set designer Ken Adam, while Nic Clear stayed in the realms of the still image, likening it to works by US artist Richard Diebenkorn.

Annette Spiro enjoyed that “what he says about the work corresponds with the mode of execution, that there’s a coincidence of technique and thinking”. She felt too the hand of the architect rather than artist. “It’s a fluid technique combined with precise drawing,” she said, “and you don’t often see that with watercolour work.”

In a competition that is being increasingly characterised by AI-driven work, the judges enjoyed the simple, bold confidence of Rokke’s hand as a celebration of manual skills. “Architects seldom feel relaxed with watercolour,” observed Kucharek. “Perhaps it feels too uncontrollable a medium to them, but I don’t sense that here.” Kieren Majhail was first to place the work in her top three choices, stating: “I think they are simply beautiful.”

Above: *Afterimage*.
Watercolour.
450 x 300mm.

Below: *Parallax*.
Watercolour.
350 x 450mm.



SECOND PLACE, PRACTITIONER

PAUL BEDSON

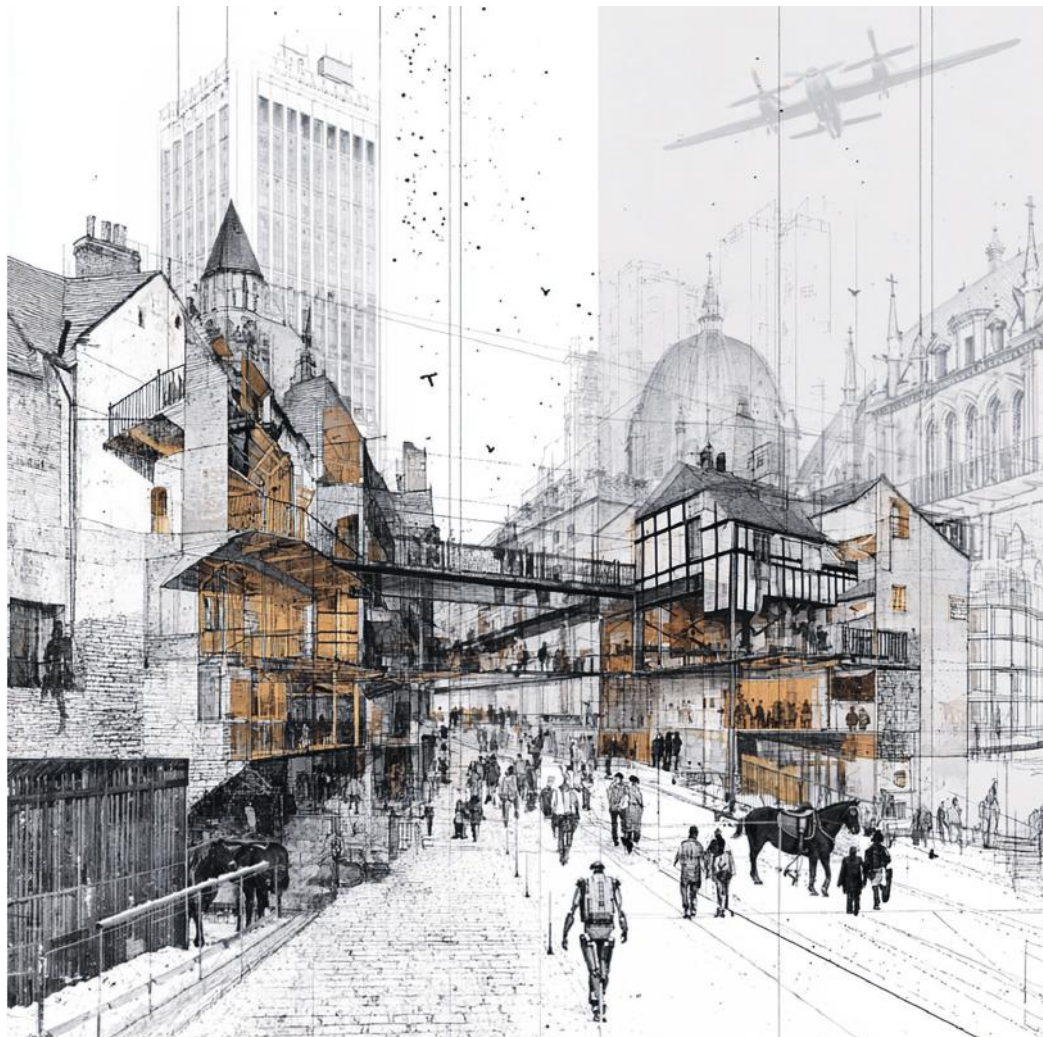
PROJECT ARCHITECT, S+SA ARCHITECTS, HARROGATE, NORTH YORKSHIRE

“The composition foregrounds architecture not as static object but as an ongoing process. Scaffolding, cranes and exposed structural grids articulate a city perpetually under construction, while ghosted figures and faint linework suggest both memory and projection.” So says Paul Bedson, describing his AI-created visualisations, which brim with layered energy, depicting a world in which “historic elements are neither preserved in isolation nor erased, but absorbed into a fabric of newer interventions to form a dialogue across time”.

Eye Line has seen much AI-generated imagery where visual glitches give away the trick, but none are evident in Bedson’s submission, which reveals itself as something far more complex and considered, with visuals that have been worked and reworked to generate richness and density. “I wish we’d got to see the prompts for this,” said Clear.

While he felt it to be “multiple image generations stitched together in Photoshop maybe”, both he and Park recognised the trace of precedents, with Clear noting: “It has touches of Richard Neutra. This is someone who clearly knows about post-war architectural rendering.”

“The composition and colours feel stitched together in a highly conscious way,” observed Majhail. “And I love the playful offsetting of past and future elements.”



Above: Architectural Palimpsest 01: Reconstructing the City Through Time. Midjourney, Chat GPT, Photoshop. 722 x 722mm.

Left: Architectural Palimpsest 02. Midjourney, Chat GPT, Photoshop. 361 x 361mm



THIRD PLACE, PRACTITIONER

ROBERT DAVID EVANS

FOUNDING DIRECTOR, EVANS VETTORI, MATLOCK, DERBYSHIRE

Robert Evans, who was second-placed practitioner in Eye Line 2024, has come through again, his Kiln Bank: Oculus painting coming third in this year's competition.

The painting, of Evans Vettori's new-build family home, constructed in a disused limestone quarry in Wirksworth, Derbyshire, has an oculus to mark the entrance—a motif Evans describes as “warped and echoed around the painting, placing the limestone house in a somewhat idealised, arcadian version of autumnal Derbyshire”.

Its highly bucolic nature had some judges wondering whether this was more a landscape than an architectural image. “If it is an architectural image, it's one that has been highly synthesised alongside nature and geometry,” remarked Spiro. Kucharek said: “He's thrown everything at the canvas, but there's a high level of representational skill there. It seems on the edge of evaporating.”

Clear concurred. “It's very evocative, with the merging of the landscape as a rough layering, into which his geometrically constrained architecture has been inserted,” he said. Was it a piece of art rather than an architectural drawing? Perhaps it was both — “Turner's bungalow!”

Above: Kiln Bank:
Oculus.
Collage/acrylic/water-
soluble pastel and
pencil/oil paint.
500 x 400mm.



Left: Everyday Autorides.
Hand drawing with pen + Procreate.
210 x 294mm

COMMENDED, PRACTITIONER

PRACHI PANVALKAR

FOUNDER, VOCAL HABITATS STUDIO,
BENGALURU, INDIA.

Judges felt there was quotidian joy to Prachi Panvalkar's three cartoon-like drawings: one of his home office, another capturing moments of Bengaluru City seen from a taxi, and this, Everyday Autorides. Kucharek felt that the plays of text and image had a playful, Lewis Carroll aspect to them. Clear was more analytical. "I'm a child of Archigram - taught by David Greene and given my first teaching job by Peter Cook," he explained, "so I like them, and I'm getting more of a 1960s, François Dallegret 'dematerialised architecture' vibe."

All seemed to relish their infographic, curiously nostalgic quality. "I really like them as a set," mused Park, "and what he draws reflects perfectly the text that he positions the drawings around or within. They feel like graphic observances."

"They are not new, but they are good," remarked Spiro, acknowledging the works' retro feel. "They tell a story, and it's great that his lines have a similar import; there's no hierarchy or distinction between them. It gives his drawings a satisfying directness."



Left: Approach.
Hand-drawn pencil.
340 x 440mm

COMMENDED PRACTITIONER

JOHN CLAYSON & ANDREI DINU

KREN STUDIO LONDON/VIENNA

Kren Studio's "hand-drawn axonometric, produced during the design process for the adaptive reuse of a derelict barn on the outskirts of London ... exploring the structure's situation within the landscape, and the carving approach connecting it to the road" was another hand-drawn practitioner image that caught the judges' attention.

While accepting that the drawing was based on a CAD plan, they enjoyed the work's investigative nature. "They are thinking while they are drawing. It's like they didn't quite know where they were going with it at the point that they started," said Majhail. Spiro agreed, adding: "You can see the working method, we can see all the traces of making." Kucharek added: "I'm not sure if the smudging obscures more than it tells, but it definitely feels exploratory."

Clear, meanwhile, was reminded of Peter Salter's early sketches for his Walmer's Yard project, while all the judges enjoyed the contrast and handwritten notes appearing over the paper traces of human hand and thought. "It has abstraction but also a lot of atmosphere," noted Spiro.

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FIRST PLACE, STUDENT

EMMANOUIL LOUVARIS

MArch, UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH

Looking like a vast space ship waiting to launch, Emmanouil Louvaris's visualisations of his Global Collective Memory Institute fired on all cylinders for our judges. Louvaris seems to reference the likes of both Archigram and Neil Denari in the design of his isolated, working memory bank, set in the ocean's vastness, "positioned between accessibility and detachment". The institute is set within pods connected to a spine-like structure that rise from its watery base, forming "a network where structure, data and circulation are integrated".

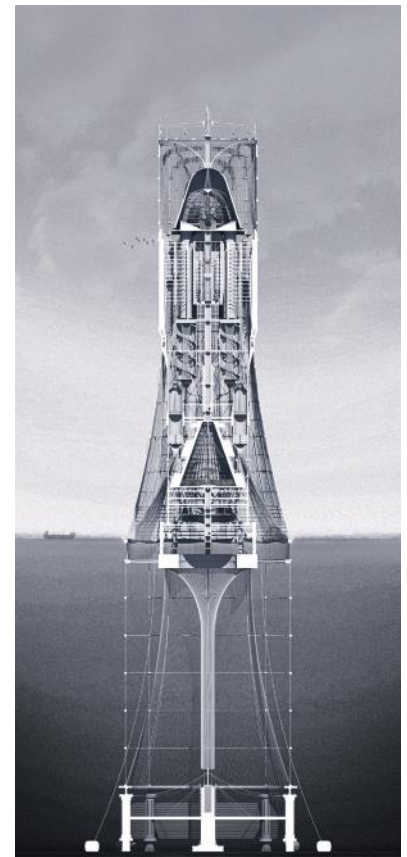
Louvaris used the triumvirate of Rhino, V-Ray and Photoshop, charming judges with his total confident control of the medium and an obsessive level of detail that rewarded interrogation. With a decade of judging experience, Jan-Carlos Kucharek was "mildly surprised" at the other judges' enthusiasm for this "conventional if accomplished" presentation but added: "You get a real sense that he is convinced by his own world and because he feels it, so do we." Nic Clear added: "This is the strongest set of images we have seen."

ETH Zurich's Annette Spiro added: "While you can drill in to the drawings to see how it is constructed, there is also something out of time and dreamlike about the project. Not just deeply architectonic but fantastical." Kieren Majhail said: "He has thought through every aspect of the project, the details, the lighting, the atmosphere." Hyun Jun Park considered "his narratives to be delivered in each of the three drawings; the architectural machine, the landscape, the composition".

Clear remarked: "One of my judging criteria is always 'am I slightly jealous?' ... and I am."

Opposite: A Field of Connections.
Rhino, V-Ray, Photoshop.
656x820mm.

Below: Still Within the Vastness.
Rhino, V-Ray, Photoshop.
928x522mm.



Above: From Seabed to Sky:
Sectional Organisation.
Rhino, V-Ray, Photoshop.
420x928mm.

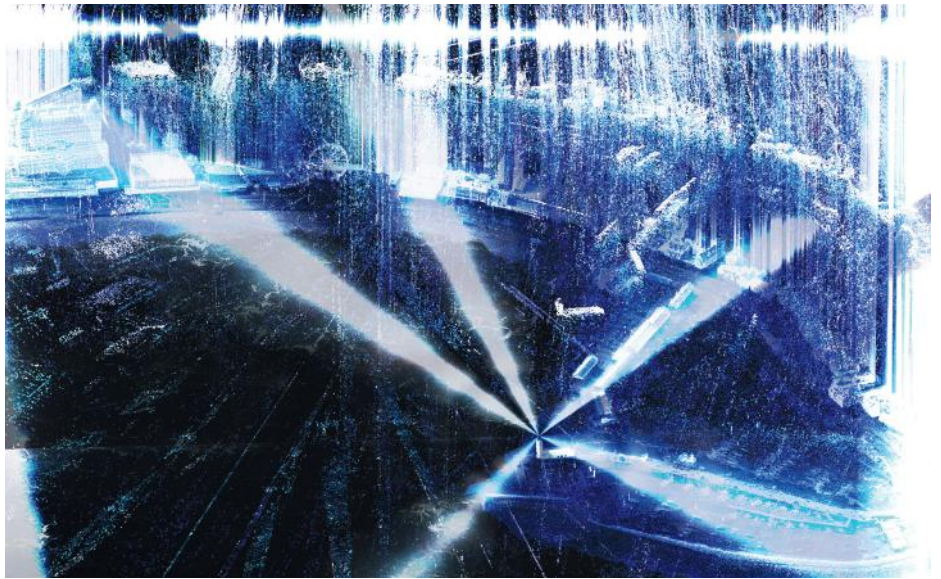


While the Maldives is on the front line now, Scarborough will likely come to replace it to perhaps suffer the same fate. Morgan Wymes-Arthur conjectures that sea level rises in his lifetime could see the famous UK holiday resort consigned to the waters.

What else, then, but to Lidar-scan the existing urban coastline from the town's lighthouse on the south bay, not only to record what may be lost but to use the digital information as a basis for a new urban morphology for the resort? For as the sea levels rise, so do the temperatures and the likelihood that Scarborough's economic decline will be reversed, transforming what remains into the Marbella of Yorkshire.

The judges really enjoyed both the visual techniques employed and the layering of other digital information, such as current footfall and predicted seasonal populations to generate images that fizzed with visceral energy and potential, despite everything. Spiro loved its "graphic, abstract, atmospheric expression, as if a film still of a chemical process", while Kucharek felt "architectural drawing needs to ultimately be optimistic and that's what I'm sensing here: a future for a place that hasn't materialised yet, which is still in nascent formation".

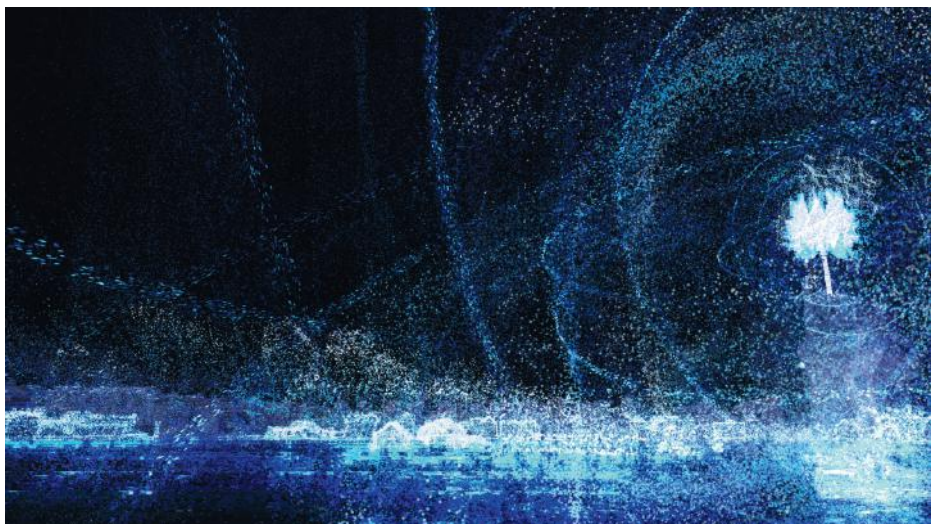
Clear added: "I like it because it suggests looking beyond the conventional spectrum that we assign to architectural drawings. It is looking at multiple wavelengths and data sets, and finding something new and interesting about the place itself."



Top: Digital Archive #1
Recording the Lost.
Blender, After Effects,
Photoshop.
1,075x660mm.

Middle: Digital
Archive #3 Digital
Reconstruction Of A
Fragmented Coast Line.
Blender.
680 x380mm.

Bottom: Digital Archive
#2 Tourism Legacy Hot
Spots.
Google, Rhino,
Blender, After Effects,
Photoshop.
680x380mm.



Below: A Cathedral of Passions.
Pen on paper.
297x420mm plus detail.



THIRD PLACE, STUDENT

GEORGE WILLIAM MICHAEL MANNIX

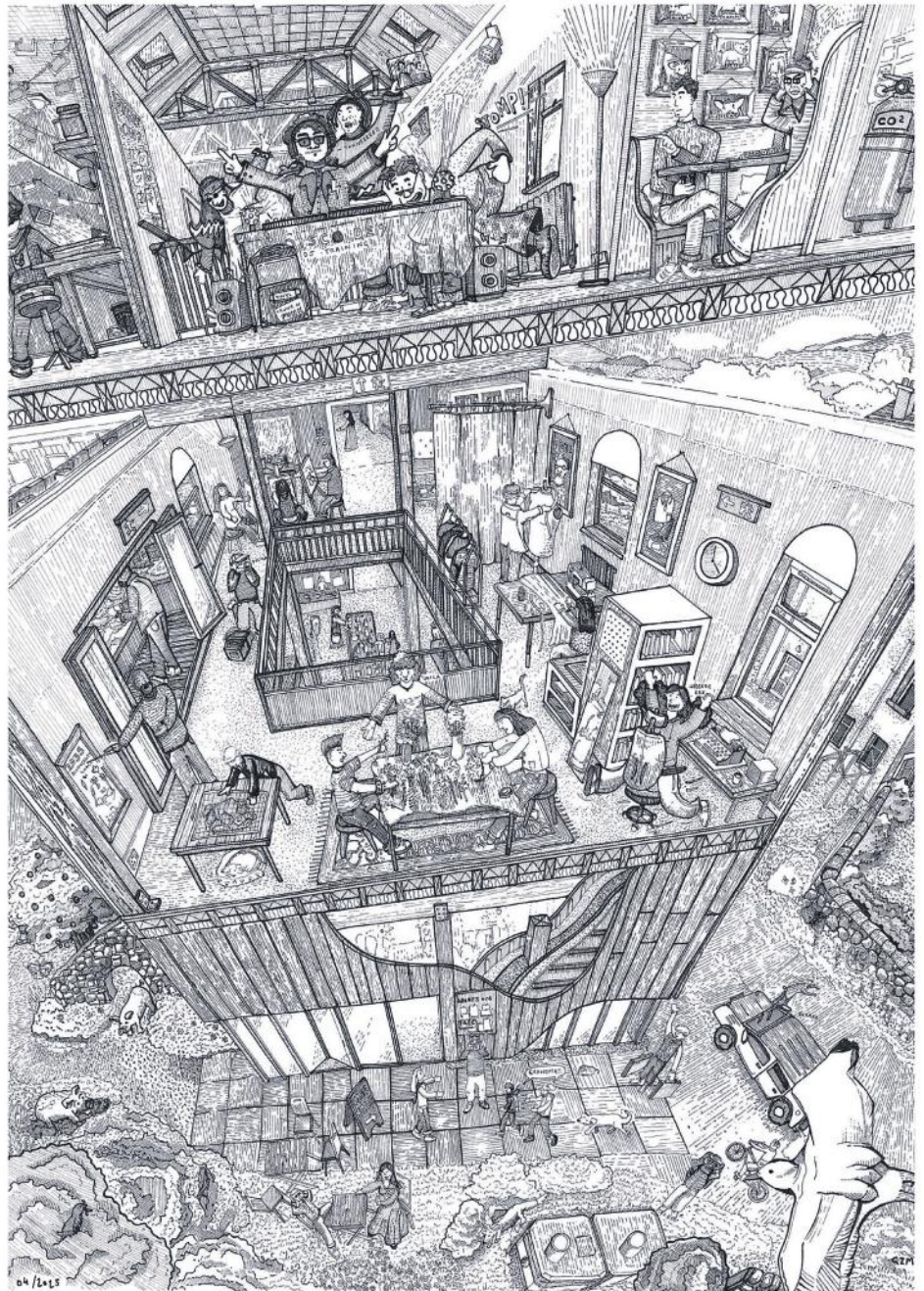
PART 2, OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

In an atomised world where generational disassociation feels more prevalent than ever, George Mannix makes a societal leap of faith in his Cathedral of Passions project, creating “a therapeutic cooperative for flourishing in the final years of life, leaving a legacy of biodiversity net gain and genuine connection to young adults who are struggling to find their purpose in the 21st century”.

Majhail found herself drawn to it early on. “There is so much detail and multiple stories going on in the image,” she said, with Kucharek also admiring its “cornucopia of events”.

Park and Clear are both champions of the digital image, so their joint investment in this pen drawing’s density was of interest in itself, Clear terming it “nostalgic”, not least for the rendering of its insulation. Park, meanwhile, called it a “highly dynamic composition with a real sense of humour”.

It was these traits that won through with Majhail concluding: “It is, after all, a drawing competition, and this is an amazing drawing.”



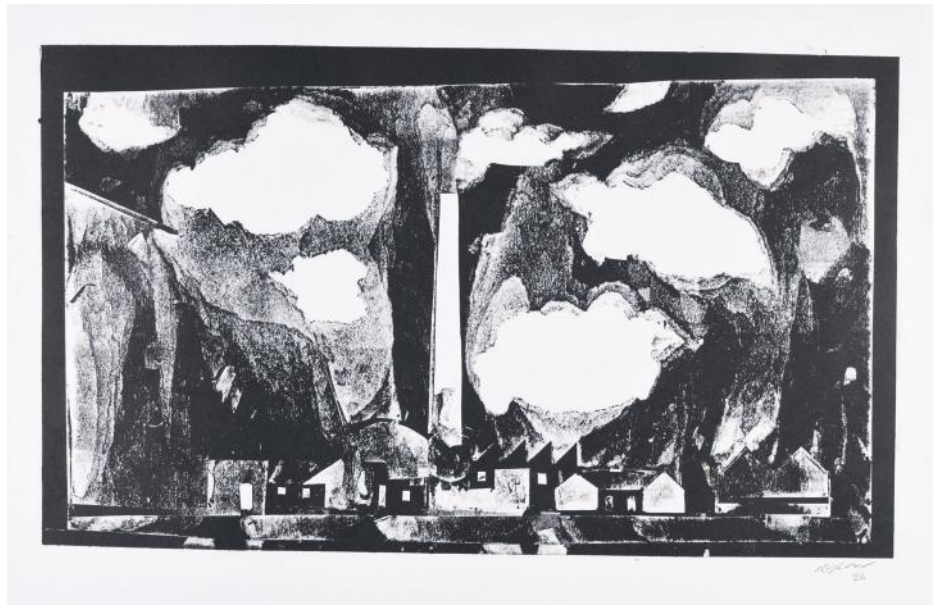
COMMEDED, STUDENT
RYLAN CHURCHILL-JONES
PART 2, KINGSTON UNIVERSITY

“What I really like is how he turns nature into a kind of architecture, that you can’t in a sense distinguish that the clouds look man-made; nature and industrial architecture are atmospherically merged. I think it’s just fantastic,” said Spiro of Rylan Churchill-Jones’ relief printmaking image Stormy Hastings.

She championed the elevation of his scheme at Rock-a-Nore, capturing the layered character of its streets and buildings, with the pumping station chimney rising above, extending into the clouds.

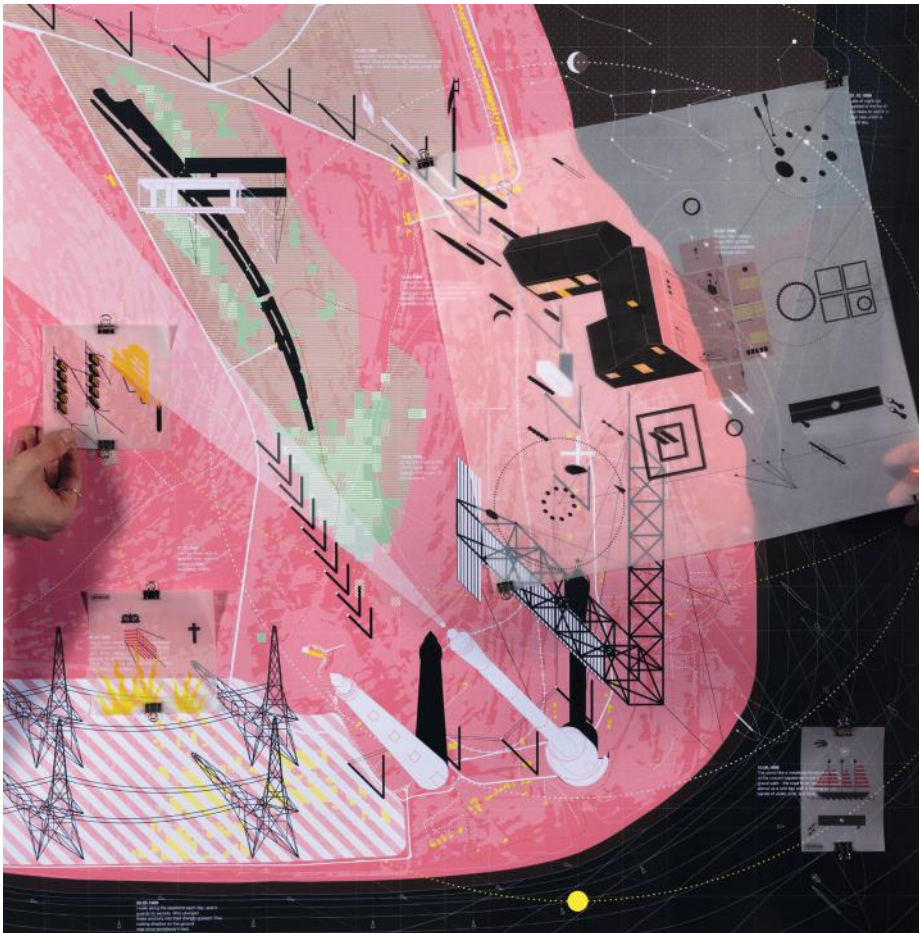
This was enough to convince a sceptical Clear, who initially found it “David Nash-like and a little nostalgic ... making Hastings look nicer than it is”. Kucharek, meanwhile, enjoyed what Spiro called its “expressionist quality”; and how the style recalled works of the great 20th-century British printmakers.

In the end, the hand-crafted, almost primitive visual power of the work convinced the judges to award it the commendation that Spiro called for. “It’s one technique and one expression,” she said, “but look a little longer and you can see layers of richness inside.”



Above: Stormy Hastings.
Relief printmaking.
420x594mm.

Below: The Garden.
Photograph and digital
drawing on paper/
tracing paper.
900x900mm.



COMMEDED, STUDENT
SAM SYMES
PART 2, ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART, LONDON

Taking film maker Derek Jarman’s Prospect Cottage in Dungeness as his subject, Sam Symes took its idiosyncratic garden, created from flotsam and jetsam, as a methodology for his initial investigations into this unique, uncanny shingle landscape. Symes’ project involving “construction and staging of architectural props across Dungeness” is driven by his study of “Jarman’s films, writings and material assemblages, which become tools to record this fragile landscape”.

Symes’ submission was a slow burner, coming to the fore as judging progressed, and driven by Clear’s feeling that the work chimed with his love of the work of architecture practice Bolles+Wilson.

“Go into the drawing and you can begin to read its layers and textures,” he directed. And so the judges did. Spiro acknowledged its manual, speculative and investigative nature, which made it “very special”.

After some discussion, if ultimately it lost out to George Mannix’s penwork after the criteria of the competition had been revisited, there was no doubting the elegant architectural quality of Symes’ work.



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FRONT-OF-HOUSE FLAIR

Haworth Tompkins' timber-framed foyer enhances Theatr Clywd's internal coherence and drama, while deep retrofit delivers exemplary sustainability and technological upgrades

WORDS

Chris Foges

PHOTOS

Philip Vile

Opposite: The foyer. A copper lining marks the second-floor green room.

It is lunchtime on an ordinary weekday and almost every part of Theatr Clywd hums with activity. A full house is arriving for the matinee performance of *Under Milk Wood*. Actors are workshoping other plays in an adjacent studio theatre and in airy rehearsal rooms. Back-of-house staff are busy in rugged scenery workshops or in offices with sumptuous views over the Clwydian Range. And milling crowds of theatre-goers and casual diners fill every corner of a convivial triple-height foyer that is the most visible result of Haworth Tompkins' £38 million renovation of the 50-year-old complex.

Ahead of my visit I'd looked at the theatre's remote setting – on the edge of the small town of Mold – and at its characteristically 1970s municipal architecture, and made the easy assumption that the overhaul was a bid to reanimate a struggling institution.

Quite the contrary, says Theatr Clywd's executive director and chief executive Liam Evans-Ford. This has been the biggest producing theatre in Wales since the 1990s, and the last decade has seen significant growth in turnover, staff numbers and audiences.

The theatre's ambitions – artistic and social – have also been growing, with a determined focus on broadening inclusion. Renovation was needed to squeeze new potential from spaces that were originally conceived for very different purposes, as well as to restore exhausted fabric.

"It's a 10,000m² building and there wasn't an inch that didn't need an upgrade," says Evans-Ford. "A 2010 condition survey said that many parts were at or near the end of life, and there was a real risk of the theatre closing."

The original building was by Flintshire architect RW Harvey, who may have been channeling James Stirling: boxes of red brick met sloping roofs and huge stretches of single glazing. Forming part of a civic campus on a gentle hillside, it originally contained not only the theatre but television studios for HTV. When the broadcaster moved out, Theatr Clywd expanded into its spaces in a more or less ad-hoc way, but still lacked some of the resources needed for every aspect of theatre-making.

Consultation with more than 20,000 local people revealed a great fondness for the old building. "One thing they told

us was not to mess too much with the theatre spaces,” says Evans-Ford.

Further impetus to respect the existing architecture came when the complex was listed during the design process. “We really embraced that as a team – pushed for it, even,” says Haworth Tompkins director Lucy Picardo. “It offered us a strong narrative when looking for funding because it meant the theatre couldn’t be knocked down and replaced by housing or a supermarket.”

Outwardly, the only significant alterations are three extensions. One encloses a former service yard at the back of the building to make a rugged and capacious new scenery workshop. Raising the roof of former cellular offices has created a rehearsal space tall enough to contain full-height theatre sets. And most prominently, a three-storey glass-walled addition to the south-east corner creates the new foyer, replacing a poky recessed entrance and cramped foyer-bar above, along with an old water tower and the original main stair.

The Twentieth Century Society opposed the scheme, saying it compromised Harvey’s modular, legible composition, but I think the gains outweigh the loss. Not only does the new, rather Scandinavian-looking foyer extension project a friendly welcome as visitors approach, but it is the key that

unlocks a newly efficient and suitably dramatic interior organisation.

The open framework of larch glulam and cross-laminated timber floorplates – configured to make a double-height café overlooked by landings – links at first-floor level to the building’s main circulation route. Cleared of obstructions and with big windows now looking onto the landscape at either end, this internal “highway” gives easy, intuitive access to most of the performance and rehearsal spaces. At the same time, the conjunction of the new structure and existing building makes a rich, intricate spatial matrix, with variety in scale – from intimate nooks to gathering places with a sense of occasion – and sets up layered views backdropped by rolling hills.

Haworth Tompkins has a real flair for front-of-house spaces, evident in many of its theatre projects. It manages to reconcile two potentially contradictory aims. First, there is the need to create a rapid shift in focus and mood as visitors leave the outside world and prepare to enter the darkened auditorium and the imaginative world of the play. That is coupled with a distinctly democratic ethos: a clear intention to make theatre foyers seem like natural extensions of the public realm, with qualities of light and space that suggest they are open to all. That has been evident from early projects

like London’s Young Vic, whose foyer-bar open to the street is intended to function as a “public living room” during the day.

At Theatr Clwyd this second ambition is reflected in the single point of entry for all visitors – be they performers, crew or theatregoers – and by the glassy expanse of the south-west facade whose oversailing roof canopy averted the need for any brise soleil, allowing unobstructed views in as well as out. It reveals a ground-floor shop and ticket desk, diners in a first-floor café, and theatre staff in their own common room within this larger shared public space.

“You don’t get many fully glazed facades where you get the full Wes Anderson view of what’s going on inside,” says Picardo. “It’s more inviting; you want to get involved as soon as you arrive”.

The atmospheric shift is produced by adroit handling of light, colour and materials. Steel balustrades are painted a deep oxblood red which tones with the warmth of the larch glulam frame and oak floor, and also with sheets of shimmering copper that line staircases ascending through the structure. Subtle details add more lustre. There’s soft light from scores of custom-made pendant fixtures designed by Rob Featherstone McIntyre, whose supple shades of cast silicone quiver in the breeze when the glass doors to the forecourt are open.

Below: The new foyer and forecourt are the most visible alterations to the 1976 complex.



Below: The extension is glulam-framed, with external steel posts for weather resilience.





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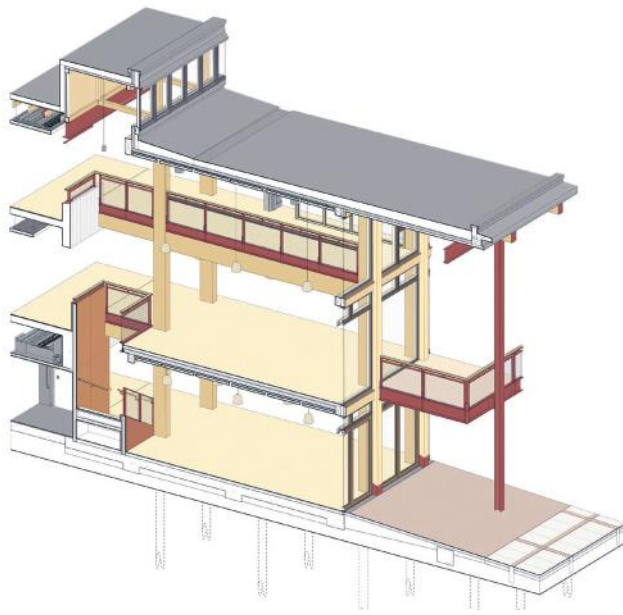
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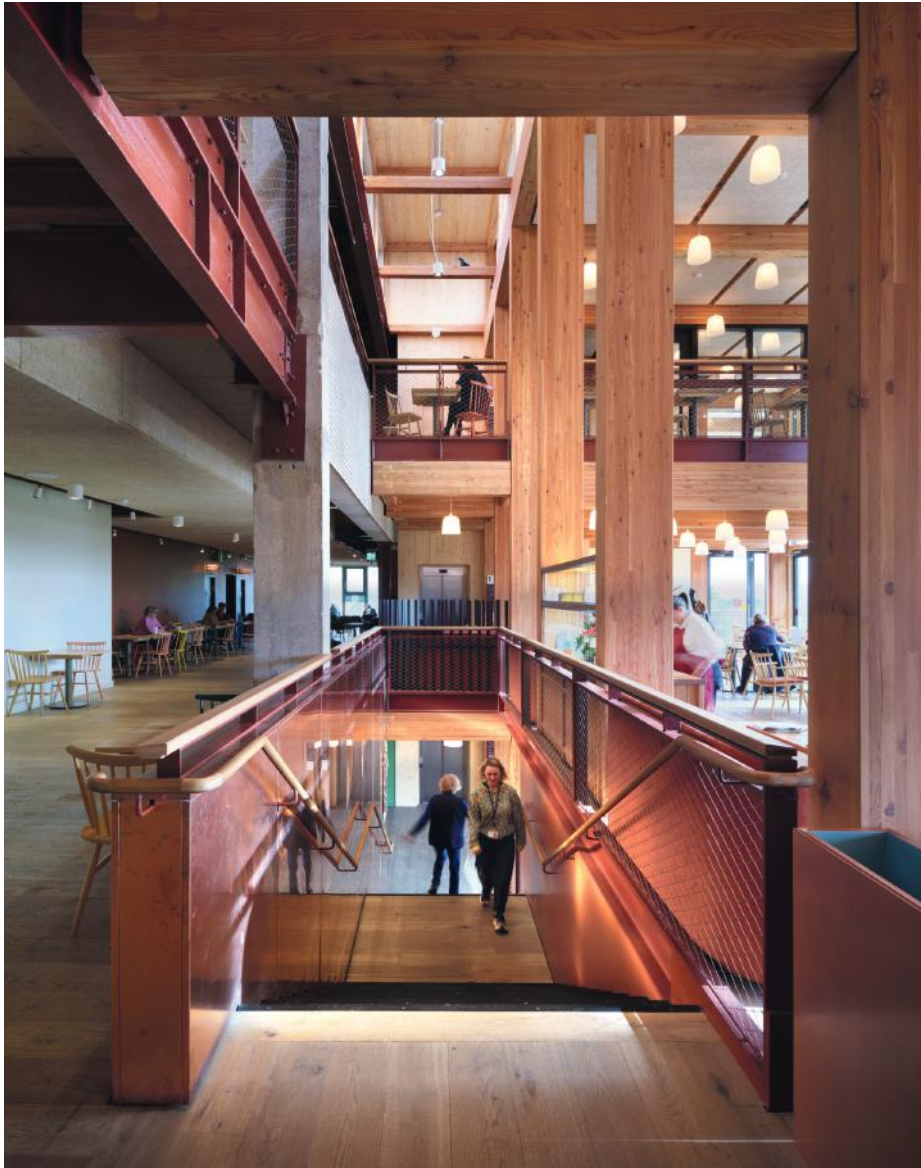
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Right: The new foyer comprises a concrete slab and piles, with a glulam frame, CLT floor slabs, composite timber and aluminium windows, and roofing felt laid on insulation.



Below: Copper lines the stair from the ticket office to the first-floor restaurant.



IN NUMBERS

TIME ON SITE
34 MONTHS

GIFA
10,000m²

GIFA: NEW BUILD
980m²

CONSTRUCTION COST
£37.8 MILLION

PREDICTED OPERATIONAL CARBON
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SERVICES AND EXTERNAL WORKS)**
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WHOLE-LIFE CARBON
1,880kgCO₂/m²

Daylight from roof windows also glitters behind the bar on tilework made by ceramicist Frances Priest, an art commission that lends a distinct hint of the 1970s. Fragments of original fabric also remain visible – a patch of tile and scarred concrete columns – layered against warm woodwork.

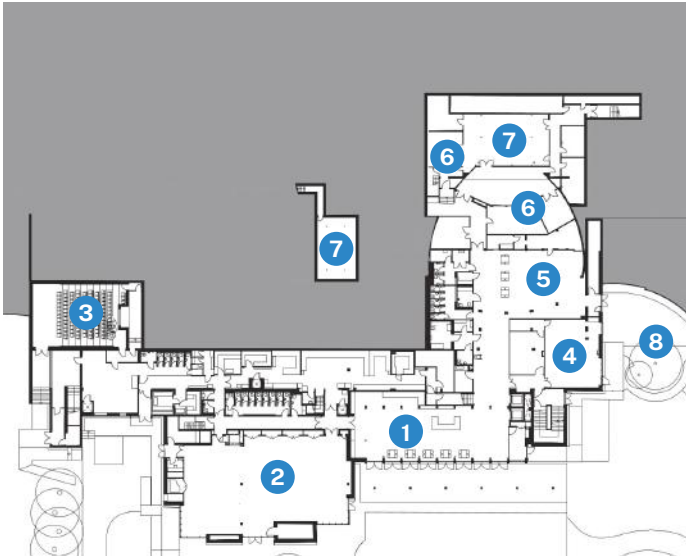
Exposed timber is also something of a recurring trope in Haworth Tompkins' theatre work. It's the salient feature of the new Backstage building at London's Old Vic, completed last year, and of the forthcoming American Repertory Theater at Harvard University, and the Theater im Prater under construction in Vienna.

Given the general climate of concern around fire, it's good to learn that this did not cause significant problems in Mold. The local authority was broadly supportive, asking only that the design team should engage an independent fire engineer to check its workings. And it helped that there's a natural break between the timber-framed foyer and the auditoria, set behind heavy-duty fire doors within the existing concrete-framed building, says Haworth Tompkins associate director Will Mesher.

Savings in embodied carbon afforded by a timber structure are part of a holistic approach to sustainability. "Because it was such a long project, we managed to increase the ambitions as we went on," adds Mesher.

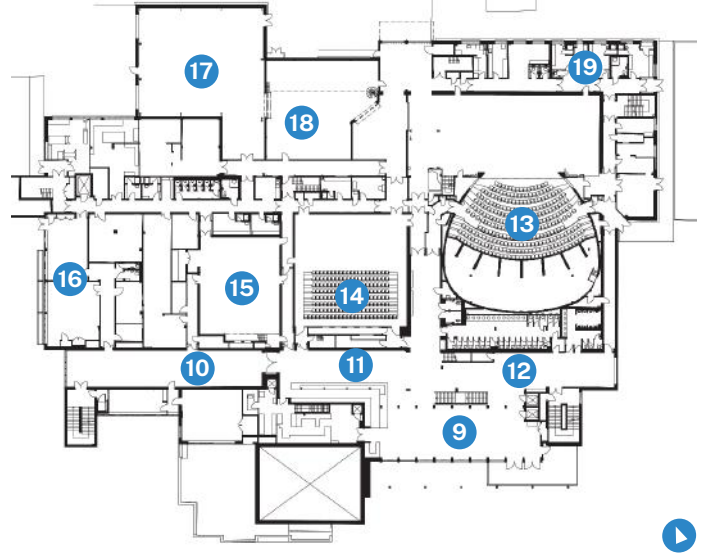
Much of this is hidden from view, but three gas boilers have been replaced by two air-source heat pumps, while the envelope is supplemented with enough insulation and double glazing to make

GROUND FLOOR PLAN



- | | | |
|--------------|----------------|------------------|
| 1 Café/shop | wellbeing room | 8 Sensory garden |
| 2 Foyle Room | 5 Play area | 9 Restaurant |
| 3 Sinema | 6 Band room | 10 Gallery |
| 4 Health and | 7 Sub-stage | 11 Bar |

FIRST FLOOR PLAN



- | | | |
|------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| 12 "Highway" | 15 Stiwdio Anne | 18 Scenic workshop |
| 13 Theatr | 16 Studios | 19 Dressing rooms |
| Moondance | 17 Construction workshop | |
| 14 Theatr Weston | | |



Stiwdio Anne was made by relining a former television studio and repositioning a staircase.



Left: A bespoke drape covers timber-battened walls in the Foyle Room, intended for private hire.

Above: Construction workshop created from a former service yard at the rear.

them effective. Rooftops are used for photovoltaics, rainwater harvesting and planting. The project was used as a case study for the pilot of the new UK Net Zero Carbon Buildings Standard.

This deep retrofit has been carried out with a light touch in the performance spaces. In the main auditorium – newly renamed Theatr Moondance – Haworth Tompkins retained the distinctive cladding of hand-carved bricks that lines its curved walls, while adjusting the seating rake to make a plenum for the MVHR system and to improve sightlines. Rows can be removed to increase the number of wheelchair spaces – one of numerous improvements to accessibility that range from five new lifts and a Changing Places room to a sensory garden.

There are also many technical upgrades to enhance the space’s theatrical potential, as there are in the adjacent black box studio theatre where, again, the colour scheme and design details take their cues from the original theatre.

Alongside are a range of characterful spaces for theatrical production. All retain idiosyncrasies of the old building, paired with new interventions that enhance their usefulness. Plywood linings, exposed structure and batts of woodwool acoustic insulation lend a robust, almost industrial character that

evokes the craft of theatre-making and the energy of live performance.

In Stiwidio Anne, a former TV studio, Haworth Tompkins has retained the canted glass walls of a mezzanine-level production gallery as a quirky feature within an otherwise adaptable room. On my visit, a group of secondary school drama students were there preparing an exam piece.

“It’s a space whose use people argue over,” says Evans-Ford, “which is a useful tension to have in an organisation.” In the Foyle Room, intended for private hire, the original sunken dance floor has been levelled, and windows can be screened by a gorgeous perimeter drape, created by textile designer Sauda Imam.

As we tour the complex, the theatre managers point out new potential in every room – and not only the capacity to make things and show them, but also to bind the cultural institution more closely to its setting, from providing children’s play spaces to collaboration with the NHS on projects for older people suffering memory loss. Their excitement about all of this is palpable.

There is simply a good feeling to the whole place – a pervasive sense of purposeful activity, and of pleasure in the place and the company of other people. Haworth Tompkins’ renovation might not be wholly responsible for this, but it gives it a powerful new charge. ■

CREDITS

Architect

Haworth Tompkins

Client

Theatr Clwyd and Flintshire County Council

Structural engineer

Betts Associates

Services engineer

Skelly & Couch

Theatre and acoustic consultant

Charcoalblue

Project manager

Plann

Main contractor

Gilbert Ash

Access consultant

HADA

Fire consultant

OFR

Design consultant

Studio Three Sixty

Landscape designer

Studio Bristow

Wayfinding consultant

Studio Mothership

BREEAM assessor

WYG/Tetra Tech

Catering consultant

Keith Winton Design

Restaurant designer

Rosendale Design

HITTING THE SWEET SPOT

WORDS
Chris Foges

PHOTOS
David Grandorge

Amid a heatwave, new social homes by Stephen Taylor Architects at Ealing's Golf Links Estate can show off their climate resilience – one of many design elements that bodes well for the future



As the mercury hits 35C at Heathrow Airport – the highest UK May temperature since records began – I am only a couple of miles away, enjoying the surprising cool of a new apartment building on the Golf Links Estate in Ealing. The credit for the comfortable conditions on that day isn't entirely due to the scheme's Passivhaus design; the chillers haven't yet been switched on. Instead, it owes much to the big architectural moves by Stephen Taylor Architects. In the bay-fronted mansion blocks shaded by deep balconies, barely a scrap of direct sunlight makes it through the generous windows onto apartment floors. It is one of many subtle signs of an architect who knows what they are doing, and cares deeply about it.

That's particularly important in social housing today, where financial challenges weigh against success. Simply getting a scheme off the ground is remarkable. A recent report by the charity Shelter points out that while there are 1.3 million households on waiting lists for a social home, only 12,198 were built across England last year. The three-block scheme on the Golf Links Estate is fully 'affordable' – the 143 flats are a

mix of social rent, shared ownership and intermediate rent – and equally notable for applying Passivhaus at large scale, at the behest of the council client.

"Among a number of social housing schemes we've worked on, this one finally got lift-off because Ealing has pushed it forward," Taylor recalls as we hurry between the buildings under a variety of improvised sunshades. "In some ways we feel like it slipped through the net."

STA was appointed seven years ago to create a masterplan for redevelopment of the estate in suburban south Greenford. Built from the early 1960s, its collection of system-built Easiform and Jespersen maisonettes had some structural issues, and were getting decidedly tatty.

The new plan seeks to create higher density and a more "civic" inner-urban character, using blocks of around six storeys to make a series of north-south streets with firm edges, and more private garden courts behind. Taller blocks line a perpendicular through-route that leads down a gentle slope towards a golf course to the east. The arrangement adjoins a handful of recent buildings, which are now regarded as the first two phases in a comprehensive renewal.

STA was appointed again to design the newly complete third phase, inheriting an outline consent for a scheme by Levitt Bernstein: an L-shaped megablock replacing two existing buildings.

Its first move was to pull the L apart, making three buildings separated by landscaped courtyards – sources of welcome patches of shade during my tour. An early intention was that these courts should have grand entrance portals on the street, like the various celebrated housing projects on Page Street in Pimlico, but that didn't survive the first swipes of the budgetary axe. Nevertheless, they make legible thresholds, helping give definition and identity to a children's play area embraced by the L-shape.

STA initially favoured slender deck-access blocks but changed course due to cost, as well as the presence of a subterranean water main which forms a diagonal edge to the 0.7ha plot, and limited the buildable area. Switching to internal circulation in deeper buildings gave the impetus for their sculpted form. Stair cores are expressed in pronounced chamfered bays. Between them, the elevations are filled out with more bays

Opposite: Golf Links
Estate masterplan.

This image: The two six-
storey blocks face east
to a children's play area
and shared park.



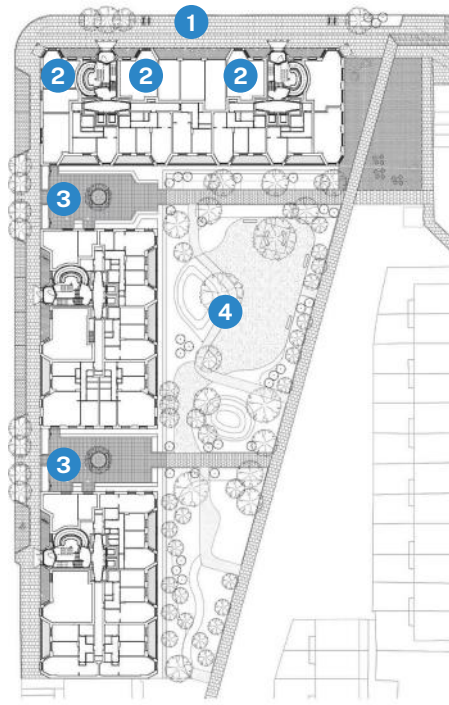
belonging to the flats, which separate each balcony from the neighbours, giving real privacy. With the range of oblique views created by the bays, almost all homes are at least dual aspect, and just a few balconies are shared by the smallest.

“I’m surprised we got away with the bays – especially in a Passivhaus scheme, where the drive is to reduce the envelope,” says Taylor. “But we had a good Passivhaus consultant who embraced what it was, and worked with us to make it possible.”

The blocks have a subtly classical tripartite composition, with a solid-seeming rectilinear base up to first-floor level and a more articulated form above, with faceted corners and those pronounced bays rising to a parapet.

The influence of 19th-century mansion blocks extends into material choices and design details, melded with allusions to the brick-and-tile facades of the Arts and Crafts movement, as well as Amsterdam School housing. These features have largely survived the sort of D&B procurement process that is so often fatal to the built quality of housing. (STA developed the design to Stage 3+ and took it to tender, but the council opted to go with the contractor’s architect for delivery; the first practice went bust, but STA, which was retained as a client-side advisor, enjoyed a good relationship with its successor, ECE Architecture.)

Brickwork is the highlight. Two earthy stocks – one buff facing brick with



SITE PLAN

Below left and right:
Fleming Road
facade and
rear balcony.

Opposite top: Cutaway
corner, enfilade balcony
and living room bay
with brick-deep reveals.

- 1 Fleming Road
- 2 Commercial
- 3 Courtyard
- 4 Play area
- 5 Refuse
- 6 Cycles

a matt waterstruck finish, and another more reflective accent – are composed to lend interest at every turn, from the rusticated bases to panels of patterned bonding, and from a suggestion of clay tile roofing on the attic storeys to a kind of dogtooth detail at the corners. Strong sun showed these to their best effect, pulling out the varied textures that make a refined counterpoint to the buildings’ muscular heft.

There’s more quirky articulation in the concrete balconies, which have a criss-cross downstand on the soffits (the legacy of an early intention to use thinner precast slabs) and appear to bear on stubby concrete brackets that flare out from the corners. “That’s about seeking a moment of joy in the expression of what’s happening,” says Taylor. “To my eye it needed a detail to mark the coming together of these slabs and the 60-degree geometry of the bays”.

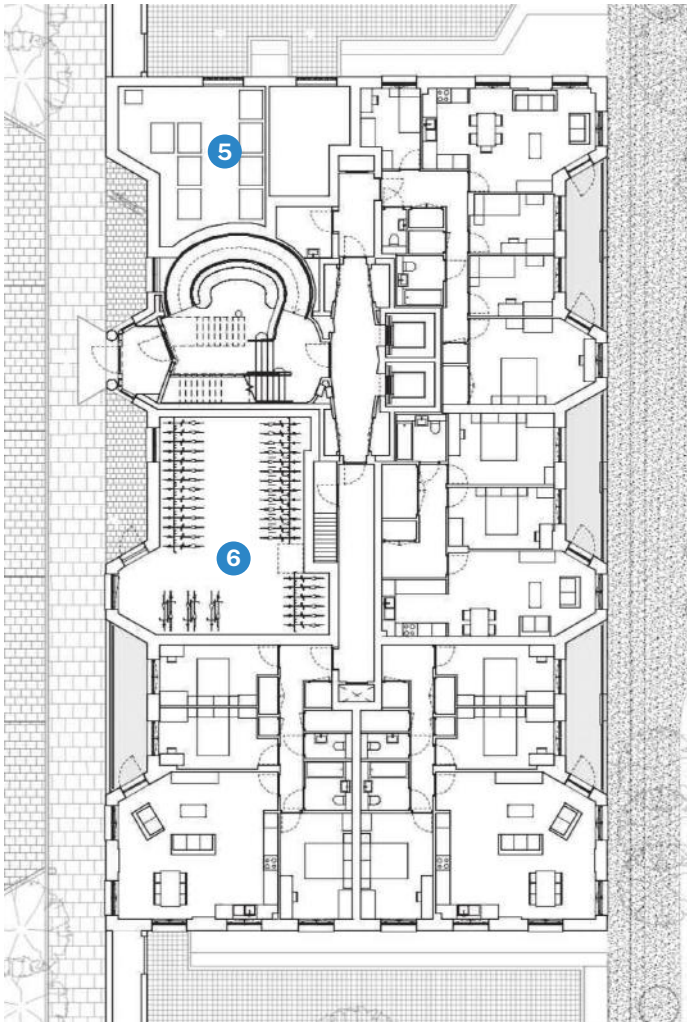
In the eight-storey block on Fleming Road, one of the big east-west routes through the estate, this “controlled exuberance” is dialled up to make characterful commercial units and tall residential entrances capped by a jutting wedge-shaped canopy – an inversion of the bays rising behind. The eye is drawn irresistibly upward, over string courses and splayed reveals that bring angled planes of brickwork together with impressive precision, finally arriving at some cheerful oversized porthole windows at the top.



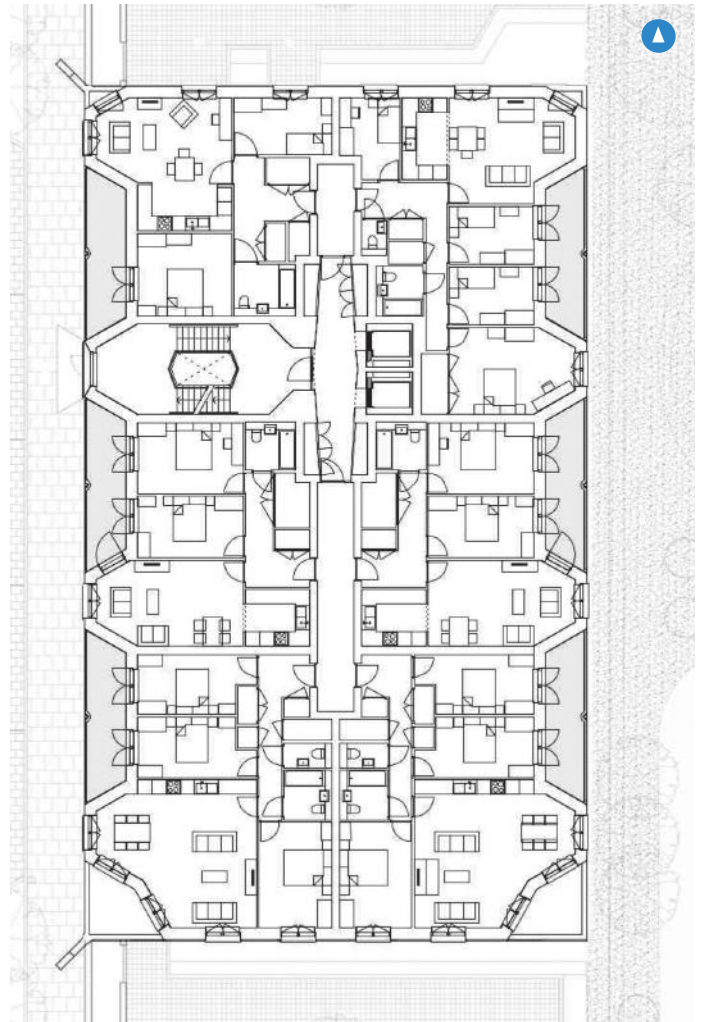


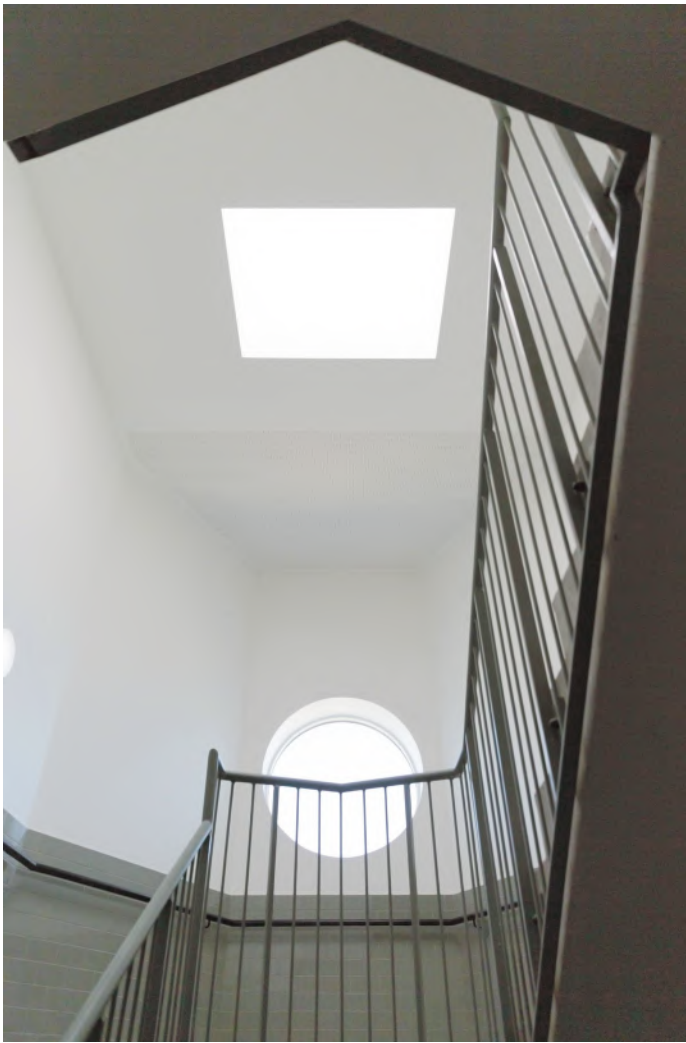
HAN WANG

BLOCK B GROUND FLOOR PLAN



BLOCK B UPPER FLOOR PLAN





Left: Geometric play in the stairwells; light is brought in via a variety of low- and high-level windows through the height of the buildings.

Above: A ramped route forms a miniature Corbusian 'promenade architecturale' in residents' lobbies.

IN NUMBERS

PLOT SIZE
7,691M²

GIA
16,331M²

PRIMARY ENERGY REQUIREMENT
271.5KWH

HEATING REQUIREMENT
38.5KWH

CREDITS

Lead consultant, planning architect, design guardian
Stephen Taylor Architects
Delivery architect
ECE Architecture
Landscape architect
Jonathan Cook Landscape Architects
Structural and civil engineer Stantec
MEP and Passivhaus designer XCO2
Project manager, QS
AtkinsRéalis
Main contractor
Hill Group

Step inside, and hints of the 19th-century give way to something more redolent of 1930s modernism. One touchstone was Lubetkin's High Point One in Highgate; there are echoes here in cool green tiling, cylindrical columns of raw concrete and globular pendant lights.

Unusual height makes a generous first impression. Ground-floor homes at the back of the building are raised on a "bel étage" so passersby don't look directly in, giving lobbies on the street side an extra half-storey of headroom. Lifts ascend from the raised ground floor, requiring a wheelchair ramp to that level, which provided the opportunity for a beautiful little architectural promenade. Curved ramps that wind around two columns in the middle of each lobby offer unfolding views of a space rich in distinctive details, from the angular glass vestibule inside the street door to the hexagonal stairwell flooded with toplight. I can imagine all residents naturally choosing this more leisurely, uplifting route to their homes.

The ramp's tiled balustrade makes a high back for a curving concrete bench – a protected nook with a fine view of comings and goings. In many new apartment blocks such communal gathering places seem over-optimistic; there's no real reason to linger. Here, you can absolutely see it happening.

Though the flats are built to the compact London space standards – and have to accommodate what STA associate director Pepyn Nolet calls the "big beasts" of Passivhaus MVHR units – there is a striking roominess within. Dimensions seem generous, or at least not pinched in the familiar way, and there's plenty of sensible built-in storage. Residents have some choice about how to arrange the furniture, even if the airtightness requirements of Passivhaus design preclude sockets in the thick external walls.

Multiple viewpoints from the bay windows add to the sense of openness, as do the secluded balconies which appear

very like additional rooms, protected by their heavy concrete soffits and between the splayed brick cheeks of the bays. In a child's bedroom, full-height windows seem to extend the interior to the balcony. In larger family apartments there is a lovely enfilade view from the master bedroom, through the balcony and into the bay window of a living room.

This will be a very good place to live, and with its robust, weighty presence already has a settled quality. It's a solid foundation for the neighbourhood that will emerge. Of course, the buildings have their share of minor defects and disappointments – many of which the architects point out with regret as we pass – but the whole conception is so strong, and the material qualities so potent, that none matters very much. "I'm delighted the big ideas have been realised," says Taylor as we take a last look at the sunbaked facades. "My obsession is that a building should look good in 100 years' time, and I believe that these ones will." ■



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DIFFERENT STROKES

WORDS

Flo Armitage-Hookes

PHOTOS

Hufton + Crow

Tim Ronalds Architects has given the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration a delightfully quirky new home, worthy of its patron's work, within the buildings at a historic London waterworks site

Opposite: A 1707 windmill base was kept largely 'as found'.



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

0 10m





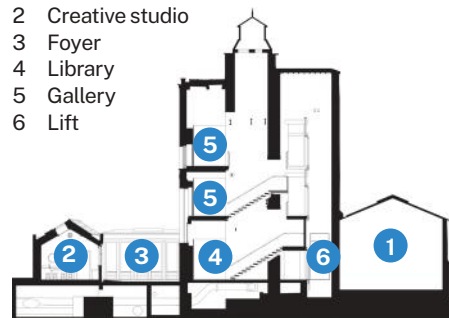
This image: Energy from wind, horses, steam and finally coal pumped water on the historic site.

Right: A new raised terrace is one of few external changes.



SECTION

- 1 Thames Water pump house
- 2 Creative studio
- 3 Foyer
- 4 Library
- 5 Gallery
- 6 Lift



In a once derelict Grade II-listed waterworks in Clerkenwell, the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration has found itself an unlikely new home. Set within a windmill base, engine house, stores and boiler room, and beside a live Thames Water pump house, heritage and logistical constraints were obvious. But sensitively preserved and transformed into a cultural hub by Tim Ronalds Architects, the storytelling-focused charity now occupies the perfect muse.

“My kids used to call it the giant’s house,” recalls Tim Ronalds, who lives nearby and would often catch glimpses of the fenced-off structures. The 0.36ha site, dating back to the creation of the New River Head in the early 1600s, had stood empty for decades until it was bought by the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration in 2019. The charity, founded in 2002, had been renting a space in King’s Cross for six years but needed a larger permanent home to expand its public activities. “[New River Head] felt like a very natural home for us... to be somewhere that’s got stories and fabric,” says director Lindsey Glen, who notes that it is already the subject of workshops and commissions.

As with his RIBA Award-winning Wilton’s Music Hall project, Tim wanted the buildings to feel “as found” and to only intervene where essential. “We tried not to convert it, but just find a way of occupying it,” he says. Yet to make sense of the unplanned cluster of buildings and support their new public function, more changes were needed than hoped. Nothing was level, floorspace was limited and building on the site was forbidden, given the tangle of water mains and electricity cables below it. “If you wanted to find a building suitable for a gallery, this would be the least likely,” he jokes.

Standing by the south entrance, you’d be forgiven for wondering if the project had happened at all (landscaping works will follow in a later phase). However, at the north entrance, a new visitor foyer and shop hints at the transformation inside. The timber and glazed structure delicately connects and hangs from the boiler room, now a café, and a line of stores, now creative studios. It functions as both cloister and porch, allowing passersby to wander through and creating a more transparent, inviting entrance to the austere brick facades.

On shop shelves, Blake classics such Mister Magnolia (my favourite) and Clown (Tim’s) sit beside a wide variety of comics and books. The centre expects 100,000 visitors in its first year and aims to appeal to audiences young and old, based locally and from afar. While Blake was added to the charity’s name in 2020, to reflect his generosity and capitalise on the public’s interest, only one of three gallery spaces is dedicated to his work.

Just off the foyer, the ground-floor gallery occupies a former coal store. To protect the paper works, skylights are covered with insulation and low artificial lighting used. Discreet units, specified with engineer Max Fordham, condition air to strict exhibition standards, while an air-source heat pump heats the whole site. Despite movable display walls largely hiding original brickwork, the iron roof structure remains exposed – and is even painted blue – to draw the visitor’s eye back to the industrial building.

Throughout the project, the balance between preservation and change fluctuates, carefully calibrated room by room. To make the central café space more enjoyable, Tim knew it needed to

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Architect: Squire & Partners
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be opened up to the site and sunlight. "It was so incredibly dark in here," says Lindsey, who remembers it windowless, fraught with puddles, a stud wall and huge oil tank. Now, light floods in from reinstalled skylights, an opening to a raised terrace and new picture window overlooking a work-in-progress pond. A Blake mural, capturing the uses of the New River from 1600 to present, runs along one of the painted brick walls.

Despite its similarities in volume and roof structure to the adjacent gallery, it could not feel more different. The café is a public hub; a place to pause, absorb the architecture and a crucial pivot point to the outside or onto the adjoining engine house. "We had quite a time with the conservation officer," sighs Tim, who says they seemed reluctant to embrace the new life of the waterworks. Hard-fought for, the changes are major wins.

The engine house proved most complex: 20m tall and with a D-shaped floor plate, the 1768 structure needed to house a library, two exhibition spaces, a staircase and lift. It was once topped with a tall chimney, demolished in the 1950s. Thames Water added a first floor to the largely open volume and Tim dreamed of returning the space to a void. Alas, the project couldn't forgo the floorspace.

A second floor was installed and staircase inserted into an existing central shaft. The logical position for a lift was another shaft on the west wall. However, this had been filled with solid brickwork that could only be removed by hand. Unable to build externally and with other options significantly reducing exhibition space, excavation began. "We knew this would be the most challenging part of the project," says Lindsey. Over three months, four workers dug out about 125m³ of material.

Tim compares the lift's motion to a piston, whizzing up and down in a space that once held beam engines. Fittingly, unpainted brick and lift machinery is visible though metal gauze fascia panels and glazed lift car walls. Using the stairs, the movement is more corkscrew: you're swept round and up the doughnut-shaped galleries, guided by glimpses of feet through open risers and slender balustrades. The curved east wall makes

Top right: New openings transform the boiler room into a bright and permeable café.

Bottom right: The engine house's industrial fabric is palpable in new exhibition spaces.





the procession feel natural rather than forced; the single route also makes it easier for parents to keep track of kids.

Reaching the top steps, just before the Blake-dedicated gallery, is a special moment. I almost miss it, until Lindsey encourages me to look up. The ceiling rises into the stunted remains of the octagonal chimney, with paint flaking away and three rusting portholes giving views inside the cupola. It captures the site's evolving fabric, and feels like you're standing under the nozzles of a rocket.

You are never quarantined from the fabric of the building though. Its quirks follow you from floor to floor: curious wall protrusions, uneven brickwork and a beam (adorned with pulley) chopping through the top gallery. The engine house couldn't be further away from a 'white cube', and its characterful imperfections feel a fitting companion for Quentin Blake's scratchy, frenetic drawings.

Set aside from the other structures, the windmill base is an outlier in other ways: not subject to the engine house's endless add-ons, it has remained remarkably intact and self-contained. Built in 1707, it's London's oldest surviving windmill, and while its six

sails are long gone, it offers a wonderful welcome to those arriving from the south.

"The windmill is as one dreams of it," says Tim fondly. "You just leave it as it is." Only essential works were undertaken, including repairing the lantern and roof. Standing within the circular brick walls, with light filtering down and cold slabs underfoot, you wouldn't know you were in London, nor indeed the 21st century.

That said, the structure – now a space for artist and community residencies – didn't need to contend much with its new use. Studios, toilets (including a Changing Places toilet), storage and a quiet room, all in the former stores, cater to visiting groups' needs, granting the windmill its special sparseness.

Illustration needs a story to tell or message to communicate. The Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration embraces the history of its site and London's water as a fertile subject: through programming, plans for landscaping and a dedication to the building's fabric. Tim Ronalds may have initially imagined more 'as found' spaces, but the centre's success rests on considered mediations between the original building, its new role and the experience of visitors. ■

IN NUMBERS

SITE AREA
0.36HA

GIA
1,061M²

TOTAL PROJECT COST
£12.5 MILLION

CREDITS

Architect

Tim Ronalds Architects

Client

Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration

Main contractor

Rise Contracts

Structural engineer

Eckersley O'Callaghan

Services, sustainability

Max Fordham

Cost consultant

Core Five Consulting

Planning consultant

Montagu Evans

Acoustic consultant

Ramboll UK

Access consultant Earnscliffe



Opposite: The semi-transparent foyer draws visitors in from the north entrance.

Left: Brass handrails are a nod to the former beam engines.

Below: A surprising view up the octagonal chimney base.



BUILT TO LAST

What are the criteria for creating futureproof housing?
A RIBA Spec webinar set out to explore the principles,
practices and products that provide homes with longevity



Opposite top left:
HTA Design delivered
452 homes for Royal
Borough of Greenwich
at Kidbrooke Park North.

Opposite top right:
Defensible space
at Haysom Ward
Miller's More's
Meadow Almshouses,
Cambridgeshire.

Opposite bottom right:
Contemporary Arts and
Crafts at Metropolitan
Workshop's Farmstead
Road infill, on London's
Bellingham Estate.

Opposite bottom left:
Wood Up apartments,
by architect LAN,
is France's tallest
timber building.

“What makes a home fit for the future?” This deceptively simple question underpins Wallpaper* architecture editor Ellie Stathaki’s new book, *Future Homes: Domestic Architecture in a Changing World*. International in outlook, it argues – without prescribing a unifying aesthetic or technological solution – that future housing must address sustainability, wellbeing, social impact and synergy with nature. At a RIBA Spec webinar exploring these issues, she called it “a toolbox of ideas” and “a survey of possibility”, with the encouraging reminder that “all these solutions are already available to us”.

Richard Williams of VELUX knows this well. His company, in partnership with EFFEKT, Artelia, and the UIA World Congress of Architects in Copenhagen, developed the prototype Living Places – a full-scale demonstration of five pavilions and two finished homes built through responsible, regenerative construction practices. It achieved a carbon footprint three times lower than that of an average Danish single-family home while delivering a high-quality indoor environment. Crucially, this experimentation has been

deployed in the real world as part of the Children’s Living Places initiative that provides healthy, low-carbon homes for children displaced by the war in Ukraine. Tomorrow’s homes need not emphasise futuristic aesthetics, but transferable principles and products readily available now: this was a useful lens through which to consider the different projects presented during the webinar.

Innovations in sustainability were explored at the urban scale by Umberto Napolitano, co-founder of LAN, whose project in Paris’ 13th arrondissement, Wood Up, reinterpreted the Haussmanian urban condition of “domesticity and monumentality” that defines Paris. The structure – France’s tallest timber building – used Normandy-sourced wood brought along the Seine, direct to the site. It features flexible apartment modules and extensive communal spaces, with surplus timber left alongside furniture design templates for residents to make use of at the end of the project.

The relationship between creativity and practical limitations often surfaces in architectural discussion. Yet regulation,

historic context and tricky sites do not have to be barriers, but can become catalysts. Wood Up’s constrained plot next to major rail infrastructure and the river provided ripe conditions for innovation. The building was also developed under strict fire and acoustic regulations following the 2019 blaze at Notre-Dame; as such, the project required extensive testing and the development of new construction standards. “Constraints can generate novel approaches,” Ellie pointed out.

This was evident in presentations dealing with constrained urban infill and historic settings. Set within the historic Bellingham Estate, Metropolitan Workshop’s Farmstead Road scheme responded directly to residents’ anxieties about “bland and boxy” contemporary housing. The architects developed “a contemporary interpretation of an Arts and Crafts building,” explained partner Tom Mitchell, producing a Passivhaus scheme in a back-garden infill that “read like it was part of the original estate”. Through a symmetrical arrangement of gatehouses and a “butterfly block” configuration, the project increases density to 84 dwellings



per hectare, from the original estate's 14, while preserving daylight, social interaction and a strong sense of locality.

Questions of sustainability and social housing were explored in depth by Patrick Rolt of HTA Design, whose Kidbrooke Park Road North scheme delivers 452 council homes across two phases for the Royal Borough of Greenwich. The development similarly combines density, landscape and net-zero ambitions, using communal green space and varied housing typologies to support long-term neighbourhood stability. Central to the design is a landscaped green spine linking the phases and promoting community interaction. Patrick stressed the importance of standardised, repeatable, affordable construction methods, careful detailing and resident consultation throughout the process, citing Ralph Erskine as a key influence.

Community input as a driver of long-term sustainability emerged as another major thread during the webinar. Haysom Ward Miller director Rowan Haysom framed his MacEwen Award-nominated project, More's Meadow Almshouses in Great Shelford, Cambridgeshire, not as

"designed by committee" but as "mapping the human context of space". The project evolved via extensive resident consultation, transforming fears about green belt development into what he described as "the best of both environments". The resulting terraces and green created "a really communal shared space" where residents naturally occupy and overlook the landscape. Rowan concluded that "if people have agency over how their built environment can grow and expand, they'll be more likely to support change".

Finally, the issue of what it means to live at close quarters with others in an urban environment, while retaining a sense of comfort, wellbeing and even luxury, was addressed by Alex Bourne and Rodrigo García, of sponsors Getzner. These ideals rely on the constant R&D of products and solutions addressing practical concerns; the pair cited luxury mixed-use developments – 66-storey Aston Martin Residences in Miami, Florida – to discuss the technicalities of vibration isolation systems for gyms. Within such towers, repetitive vibrations and high-energy impacts can transmit throughout

the structure. Considering how these acoustic challenges play out in the real world highlighted how modern housing increasingly requires architects to offer clients the best of all possible worlds.

As RIBA deputy editor Jan-Carlos Kucharek noted early in the webinar, meaningful housing projects often come to fruition via a mixture of "determination" and "professional optimism". If, in today's world, the latter is in short supply, housing is one area in which architects can rethink the model and improve lives. "Pat yourself on the back," he urged, "because you're all ultimately at the coal face of change". ■

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FIT FOR A QUEEN

On a brownfield site at Regent's Park, HTA Design has created a garden celebrating Elizabeth II's life, which is full of subtle references to the monarch – and places a strong emphasis on imaginative material reuse

WORDS

Pamela Buxton

PHOTOGRAPHS

Clive Nichols



"It's there if you want to see it," says HTA Design partner James Lord of the subtle symbolism within the practice's design of the new Queen Elizabeth II garden in Regent's Park, conceived as a celebration of the late monarch's life, legacy and love of nature.

As they stroll around the tranquil garden, sharp-eyed visitors may well spot motifs in the folly metalwork referring to the four home nations. But they will surely have no idea that the pergola's 56 steel uprights refer to the number of countries in the Commonwealth, for example, or that the number of sections in the cast terrazzo pathway equals the years of the late sovereign's reign. And that's the way the designers like it – they are happy for the garden's planting, and its overall air of calm and wellbeing, to be the story.

"We're not trying to excite people in the design. It's very recessive and lets the planting be the main exhibit," adds Lord.

Despite the background hum of the city, the garden is a place of calm and birdsong. Created on a former storeyard, the project has been designed as a biodiverse, climate-resilient garden with a particular emphasis on material reuse, including a surprising second life for the

concrete on the brownfield site. HTA took cues from both the Queen's favourite gardens and the surrounding park for the layout and content of the new landscape, which is part of a long tradition of individual gardens within the Royal Parks.

The design combines formal geometry with meandering pathways, plus a number of key features to draw visitors around the 0.8ha space. These include a pergola and terrace at the entrance, a folly, and more informal areas of wildflower planting at the northern end where the garden transitions into the surrounding park.

The new space is located just to the west of the park's Broad Walk, and is separated from this thoroughfare by a mature screen of existing trees. The garden's key axis is a straight promenade running in parallel to the Broad Walk, intended to reference the late queen's lifelong commitment to duty. Named the Path of Service, this forms a link between the circular pond near the entrance and a central roundel of seating designed as an area of reflection. As well as this formal geometry a second, more leisurely, route – the Path of Life – meanders across to create different bays of the garden, which represent personal chapters in the

Queen's life. Smaller, gravel-surfaced offshoots create subsidiary pathways, including an accessible route to the folly. Together, all these elements, says Lord, form the "bones" of the garden.

For the main axis, pergola terrace and roundel, HTA specified Yorkstone for its formality and as a very familiar stone to London and the Royal Parks. Care was taken to choose stones with a recessive appearance for the precision-cut paving slabs. In contrast, stones from a different quarry with more distinctive grains were selected for a stretch requiring a low retaining wall, and deliberately used with their stitch-drilled quarry marks visible.

At the pool, the paving was crafted by stonemasons standing in the water to hone the pool edge with hammers and chisels. Yorkstone boulders have been added around the perimeter of the pond to give a more natural edge, and have proved popular perches for birds.

The path tapers from 4m wide at the pond to 3m at the roundel, creating a false perspective that gives the sense of a long path ahead from the pond at the beginning of life, but appears shorter when looking back from the roundel at the other end.



▲
Left: The garden has been created on a brownfield site alongside the park's Broad Walk thoroughfare.

Opposite: A new viewing balcony forms part of the folly – the refurbished water tower.

Below: The folly is to the west of the main axis of the park – the Path of Service.

- 1 Pergola
- 2 Terrace
- 3 Pond
- 4 Path of Service
- 5 Path of Life
- 6 Roundel
- 7 Folly
- 8 Broad Walk





Above: The main axis leads to a roundel framed by seating, around a central magnolia.



Above: HTA's modular Accoya seating, shown here at the roundel, is in plentiful supply around the park.



Above: The pergola utilises steels salvaged from a greenhouse previously on the site.

At the roundel, the stones are laid concentrically around circular, slightly domed central planting that includes a focal point magnolia, with a ring of seating arranged around the outer edge. On a low stone plinth around the planting is a carved inscription of a quote from the late Queen about striking a balance between action and reflection. Lord says he hopes the formal geometry and inward-looking orientation of the roundel creates a tranquil space appropriate for such reflection.

Reuse of material from the site is a major theme in the specification. In contrast with the Yorkstone of the Path of Service, the meandering Path of Life is created in terrazzo incorporating Thames gravel – once ballast in the greenhouse previously occupying the site. This was used in the concrete mix, which was cast in situ and then ground off to expose the aggregate, and given a slight colour tint.

Innovatively, 670m³ of crushed concrete from the foundations of the storeyard buildings on the site have been blended with topsoil from it to create low-fertility growing environments for the new garden; the only exception is beneath the existing tree belt and where

new trees requiring more fertile soil are planted. Developed in collaboration with soil specialists, Lord believes this to be the technique's first such use at scale, contributing to a reduction in embodied carbon of around 80% over usual practices. (HTA Design hopes the garden will gain a BREEAM Excellent rating.) The free-draining, slightly alkaline end product demands careful plant selection, favouring climate-resilient species suited to Mediterranean climates. An accompanying water strategy includes a series of swales in the landscape, to prevent water entering the sewers, and concealed irrigation tanks below the folly.

The steel pergola incorporates a horizontal lattice of steels recycled from the greenhouse previously on the site, as well as new steel verticals. All are given a mottled dark brown finish – although the idea is that little of this will be visible once the climbing plants flourish.

The folly is another reuse, the only visible part of what was once a water tower on the top of a boilerhouse. The designers were keen to keep the tower as a memory of the existing site, and collaborated with architect Tate + Co on both that and the pergola.

Reached either by two sets of Yorkstone steps or by ramped path, it has been repurposed as a landmark and bijou viewing platform, with nesting boxes in the header tank for both swifts and bats, and a corgi incorporated into the design of the skylight metalwork. The new water tanks are housed in the subsumed lower level.

Visitors walk through the tower to emerge onto a small balcony, where they can enjoy an elevated perspective of the garden – or seize the clearly very popular opportunity to pose for photographs. The tower's exterior is embellished by metalwork – by blacksmith Ian Thackray – depicting a climbing plant, incorporating blooms of national emblems created by a variety of artisan blacksmiths. Lord hopes this rare decorative flourish in the garden helps to “elevate” the tower's functional structure.

Another aim of the garden is inclusivity. All areas, including the folly, are wheelchair accessible. “Surfaces are designed very purposely to be interruption-free, with very little detail, so that people of all abilities can walk around enjoying the planting and not looking at their feet,” adds Lord.



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The Conservation Rooflight

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The Cowshed | Design Storey
RIBA South West Conservation Award 2025



Image: Lawrence Grigg

The Cowshed is the transformation of a Grade II listed C17th barn into a residential dwelling, celebrating the agricultural character of the building. The Conservation Rooflight with its traditional design, slim frame and flush finish to the roofline complement the aesthetics and provide natural light and ventilation to the living spaces.

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Inclusivity is also demonstrated in the plentiful and comfortable seating, some with back supports and armrests for ease of use. Rather than specify a product, HTA Design felt it was more appropriate to create modular seating specially for the garden. The results are distinctive for their tactile contours.

“We call them bum-scoops,” remarks Lord of the generous indentations that characterise each 700mm-wide module. While that’s hardly the most elegant description, the seating is attractive and suitably robust in character and gives, Lord adds, “enough personal space to be comfortable sitting next to a stranger”.

The studio worked with maker Millimetre on the seating. This uses Accoya, a modified softwood product that has been treated with an acetylation process to prevent water absorbance and increase longevity, giving a 50-year above-ground outdoor warranty. After the Accoya components were laminated together, the top panel was shaped using a seven-axis robot to create the contoured seat, mounted on a steel frame, and finished with a grey stain. The lack of gaps between the components – rather than usual slats – gives, says Lord, “a monumentality to the benches, a solidity that gives a degree of reassurance”. Accoya is also used for handrails at the steps and for both the pond’s jetty and folly’s balcony.

The seats are found at the pergola and roundel, arranged with spaces for wheelchairs to slot in alongside, with stretches of others distributed throughout the garden. Continuing the spirit of reuse, a few additional benches have been crafted from fallen trees in the park.

It’s still early days for the garden, which will transform as it matures in the coming years. A great deal of thought has gone into the climate-resilient planting, which includes personal favourites of the late monarch and specimens donated from her gardens and plants from around the Commonwealth. The aspiration is that repeat visitors will be able to see something different in bloom every month.

“It’s a baby garden at the moment – we’re looking forward to its long and healthy life,” says Lord. ■

Top: Looking back down the main axis towards the pergola and pond at the park’s main entrance.

Right: Meandering paths provide a leisurely route around the garden.



CREDITS

Client

The Royal Parks

Lead designer, landscape architect, sustainability and principal designer

HTA Design

Landscape construction

Blakedown Landscapes

Architect

Tate + Co

Civil and structural engineer

Price & Myers

Planting design

Dr Noel Kingsbury

Soil scientist

Tim O’Hare Associates

SUPPLIERS

Timber

Accoya

Wales&Wales Chico bench

Benchmark Furniture

Self-binding gravel

Breedon

Seating

Millimetre

Yorkstone supplier for

paving, steps and boulders

Tectonix

Lead blacksmith

Ian Thackray



WORDS

Andy Pearson

PHOTOGRAPHS

Hufton + Crow

REALM OF POSSIBILITY

Oxford North is a new employment-led, mixed-use district being built on the edge of the city. Conceived as an innovation and science quarter to support its knowledge economy, the scheme includes labs, workspace buildings and new homes. Key to its success is the 9ha of public realm that ties together the site's activities, giving it a sense of place and stitching it into the city's social and movement ecosystems. Jonathan Kendall and Sibylla Hartel, partners at masterplanner Fletcher Priest and landscape architect Gustafson Porter + Bowman, discuss its design

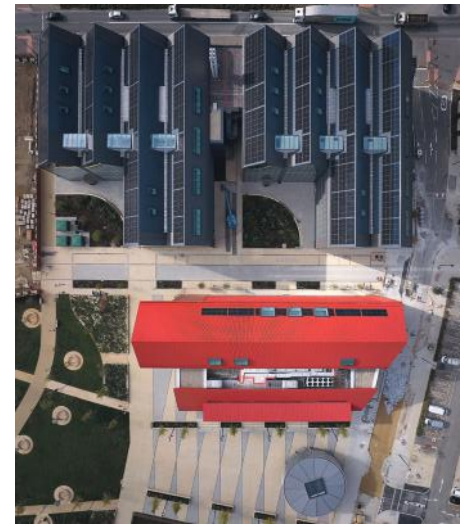


Right: The formal square next to the Red Hall is surrounded by informal landscaped spaces, both for events and other types of gathering, and connects to the wider landscape.

How did Fletcher Priest first get involved in this project?

JONATHAN KENDALL: Oxford North is about creating a new employment-led urban district. It is a triangle of land between the Oxford Canal and the railway line, subdivided into three parcels by a series of A-roads. We were competitively selected to masterplan the 30ha scheme in 2015 by Thomas White Oxford, which is the development company of St John's College.

The project combines laboratory and workspace buildings and homes, set within a series of open public spaces to support contemporary ways of working and living. As it's so big and challenging, planners wanted proof of concept: our role evolved from masterplanner to masterplanner and architect, with a commission to design the first phase in detail.



Right: The new central urban district acts as the heart of the larger masterplan.

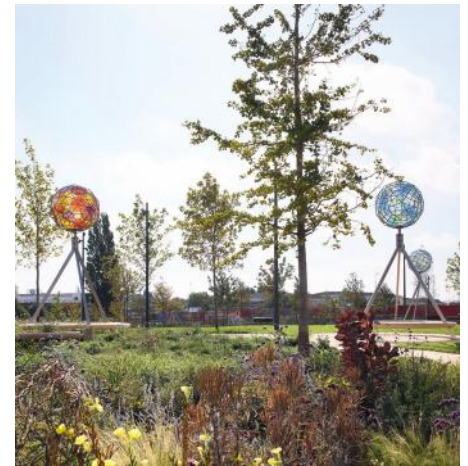
What was the starting point for developing the design?

JK: This was conceived as a new urban district, so having a strong identity was really important. That's a combination of architecture and the role of public realm, where the design of the streets and urban spaces convey that you've arrived somewhere that is special. We were conscious of the scheme being in and of

Oxford, but we wanted it to be forward-looking and not trying to replicate historic places. We also looked further afield to North America and parts of Europe to draw on lessons from where knowledge-intensive employment successfully coexists with places where people live, socialise and interact.

Did the client set you a brief in terms of what they were expecting the public realm to deliver?

JK: The role of landscape in the public realm was absolutely baked into planning policy before we started. After achieving planning consent the clients challenged us to make the landscaping work harder, and that's when landscape architect Gustafson Porter + Bowman was appointed. They inherited our strategic thinking and added multiple layers to it.



Right: Danish artist Olafur Eliasson was part of the team delivering landscape art pieces for the project.

SIBYLLA HARTEL: What really intrigued us about the masterplan was just how open it was. That was a really important aspect of the scheme and that was what interested us in working together with Jonathan and his team.

What are the main elements of the urban realm?

SH: The first-phase buildings are workspace buildings and the Red Hall, a community and coworking space, at the heart of the site. We placed a square next to Red Hall with a café so that chairs and tables spill-out onto the square. The intention is for the square to hold markets, fairs, music and cinema events.

An events field connects to this space to enable larger events to take place. This is framed by a community orchard with wildflower meadows and informal play facilities. A Mediterranean garden on the

northern edge of the space will trial plant adaptability for a changing climate.

South of the events field, a shared bike and pedestrian route links into strategic bike routes from east and west. Adjacent to this is a stepped grass amphitheatre, which slopes down to a big pond. Concerts will take place on a stage next to the pond; at other times the space can be used for picnics and informal gatherings. Framing the pond is a woodland planted with native trees to create an edge to the park, within which is a small children's playground.

The masterplan links the site to the city centre and railway station with new walking and cycling routes, but how is vehicular traffic managed on site?

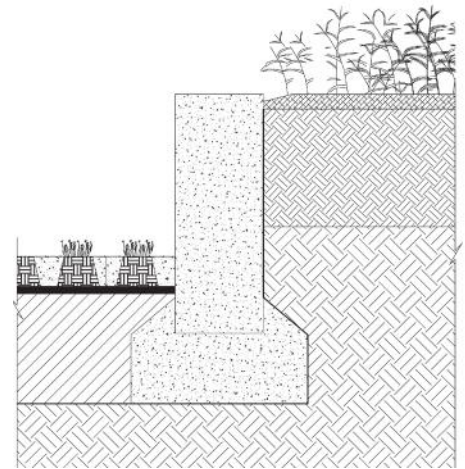
SH: A link road forms the major vehicular entrance to the centre of the site with access to a secondary loop road, laboratory buildings and car park on the north side, while on the south side is a network of tertiary shared surface service routes providing access to the Red

Hall and lab buildings and to the central landscape for maintenance and events. We set out to make the streetscape part of the public realm by slowing down the traffic so as to create shared-use environments where pedestrians have priority over vehicles.

Was drainage a particular issue on this site?

SH: We set out to manage rainfall runoff within the site itself. We saw the drainage as an opportunity to do something interesting with the water, so we created a stream. And because we've got this beautifully sloping site, the stream goes over a series of weirs that aerates the water. It's planted on the sides. It ends up in the big pond, in front of the amphitheatre. If you've got to manage the water, then use it as a benefit.

Below: A 300mm wide exposed-finish, precast concrete retaining wall borders a grasscrete paving system.



This is a phased development; how do you ensure coherence and quality is maintained in the public realm as the development evolves?

SH: We thought about all the different phases at concept level. We developed a palette of materials and a design language which ties everything together. Future developments will need to be coherent with that palette.

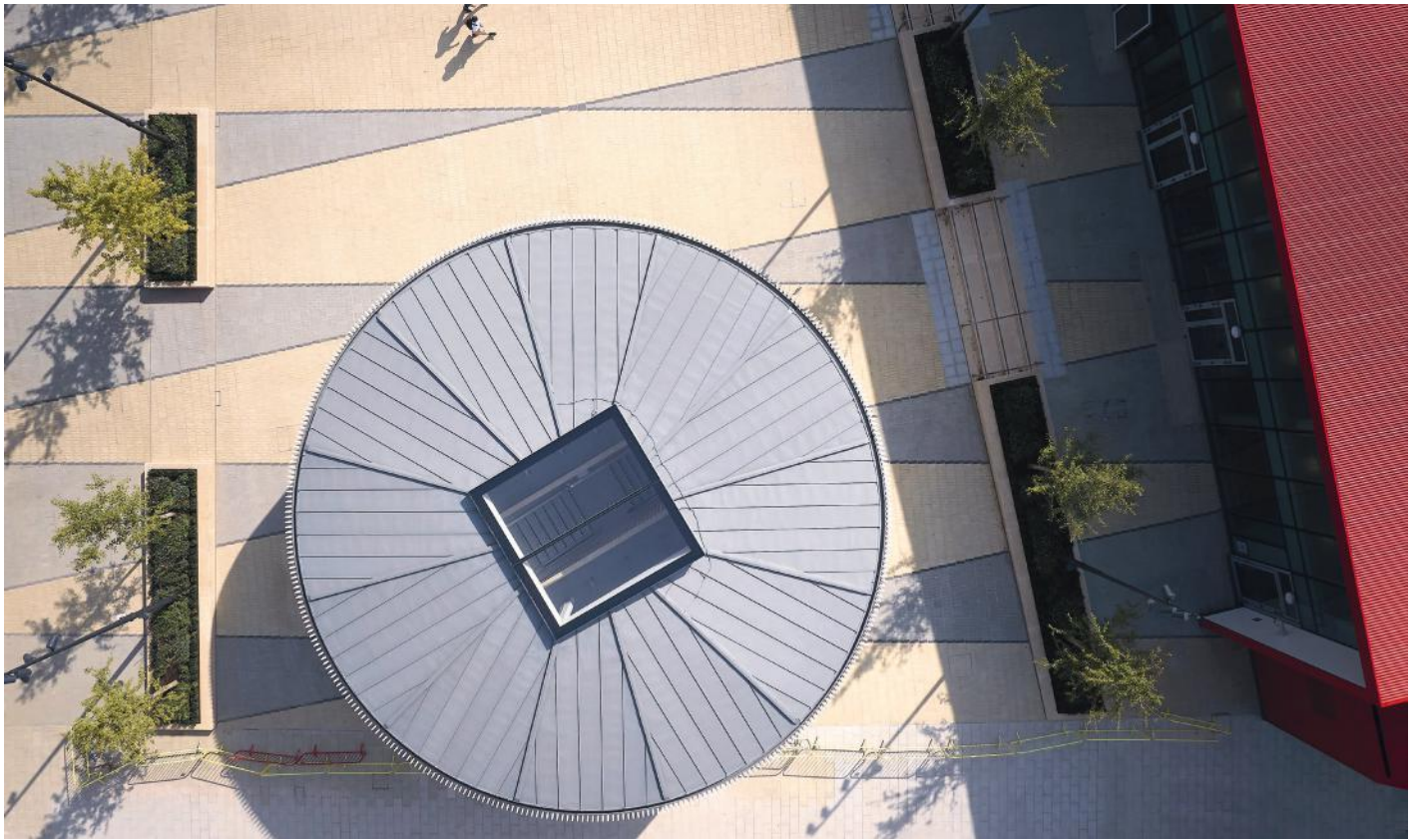
Do things such as street furniture, street lighting and EV charging points all come into the remit of public realm design?

SH: Yes. We had a lighting designer, Pritchard Themis, working alongside the team. They looked after street lighting design, which was coordinated to align with our strategy in terms of what was lit and to what intensity. We've got eight pieces of public artwork, designed by Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, drawing you through the development. They are internally lit and function like lanterns, so the lighting around them is subdued.

JK: For things like electric vehicle charging, we looked to our infrastructure engineers for input and guidance. Then we worked with Sibylla and her team to coordinate them. Multiple specialists fed into the design process to make this happen. Every external stakeholder, statutory authority or consultant had their focus. As masterplanner we synthesised the pull and push – and sometimes the contradictions – to reach a solution.

Right: The central square was designed to stitch into the wider landscape.





What is the purpose of the circular timber cycle pavilion?

JK: It is deliberately expressive and symbolic, but functional as well. Its functional purpose is to provide cycle parking for first-phase occupiers and visitors. Earlier iterations of the scheme had cycle parking below the buildings. It was a conscious design decision to move the parking to outside to celebrate cycling in the context of encouraging active travel, which seemed a good thing to do.

Above: The external cycling pavilion celebrates this sustainable mode of transport.

Below: The pitched roof form brings domesticity to the new neighbourhood's civic centre.

Is the public realm now complete for all phases of this development?

JK: No, this is a very generous piece of public landscape that provides the setting for the first-phase buildings, many of which are now open. What's been delivered establishes the structure of the site. There is more to come, but it will be an incremental approach.

How do you stop the public realm element of the scheme being value-engineered out?

JK: Good clients don't think like that. That's not to say we didn't value-engineer, but good clients understand the role of the public realm as the setting for the buildings. It is part of establishing the value for the space and encouraging people to come to a place as a location for their businesses which, a few years ago, wasn't even on the map. ■





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0.13	70	250	275
0.12	75	270	295
0.11	80	290	320
0.10	100	320	355

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COME OUT AND PLAY



Factoring exploration and recreation into public spaces instils them with life and energy. Anne Wynne, DSDHA associate, explains how the practice gave that spark to four contrasting London projects

Public space is central to DSDHA's output – be that architecture, urban design or research. We see landscapes and external works as essential civic and cultural infrastructure and put special emphasis on the design of play spaces and learning landscapes, where environments should fuel curiosity and enable interaction with nature, exploration and socialising across ages and communities. Through planting, topography, materiality and flexible spatial arrangements, we aim to create public spaces that engage over time and suit formal events and informal occupation alike, while fostering a sense of welcome, ownership and belonging.

At Central Somers Town, a landscaped masterplan reconnected fragmented open spaces, creating generous, inclusive green commons. At Crabtree Fields, the revival of a beloved park balances respect for historic character with new options around play, accessibility and everyday use. At Senate House West Courtyard and Exchange Square, targeted interventions turn hardworking civic spaces into places that promote gathering, rest and learning.

Exchange Square, City of London

Exchange Square is a new park above the tracks of Liverpool Street Station, designed as a flexible and accessible urban landscape that encourages meeting, movement, rest and open-ended play throughout the day. Forming the culmination of DSDHA's Broadgate Public Realm Framework for British Land, the project demonstrates how public space can reshape the identity of an office-led campus into a welcoming neighbourhood, accommodating the varied life of the city.

Inspired by the Essex coastline's topography, the park invites exploration and interpretation through its changing terrain. Stepped terraces and a cascading fountain form interactive, non-prescriptive play elements, encouraging children to use imagination and physical movement rather than fixed play equipment. These spaces also accommodate lunchtime seating, informal gatherings and amphitheatrestyle events, supporting a wide range of everyday uses. Exchange Square offers types of play, social activity, and relaxation previously absent from this part of London.

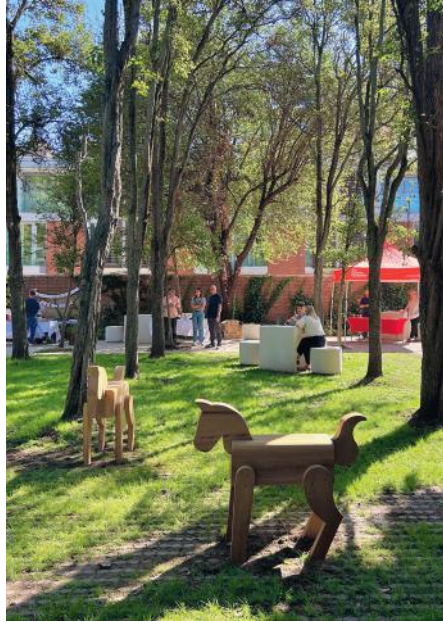
“We are economical with new elements - a principle that’s central to our practice’s regenerative design approach”



Senate House Courtyards, University of London, Bloomsbury

Our Senate House Courtyards scheme acknowledges that learning happens outside institutional settings, aligning with the university’s ambition to make this a welcoming, inspiring place. An integral part of Bloomsbury’s educational landscape, the area acts as a ‘lobby’ for the academic complex and library and offers space to support the breadth of university life, where students develop critical skills through discussion and peer mentoring.

We are sensitive to Charles Holden’s architecture and his elegant approach to landscaping. Removing a tall, barrier-like bleacher seating installation, we revealed the generous routes through the building and the dignified facades of the complex, while enhancing the existing by introducing a simple gravel-paved surface. We are economical with new elements – a principle that’s central to our practice’s regenerative design approach – adding movable seating and new planted areas that offer ways to informally occupy an otherwise formal building complex.



Crabtree Fields, Fitzrovia

Our project to restore and repair Crabtree Fields, a much-loved neighbourhood park and public space in the heart of Fitzrovia, was commissioned by Camden Council. Previously a Second World War bombsite, the area became a car park before campaigning by the Fitzrovia Neighbourhood Association led to its transformation into a public park in the 1980s. Designed by Greater London Council landscape architect Gill Wynne-Williams, the park used planting and changes in level to create a series of distinct outdoor ‘rooms’, but required revitalisation after decades of use.

DSDHA balanced respect for the original design with improvements to safety, accessibility and play. Working with community engagement specialist Something Collective, and with engaged local inhabitants, we restored the pergola, reinstated the original play horses, and adjusted the layout of the children’s play area, supporting Crabtree Fields’ role as an inclusive, safe and welcoming playable landscape for a diverse population.



Central Somers Town, Camden

Central Somers Town is our urban framework for Camden Council, placing play, young people and shared public life at the centre of neighbourhood rejuvenation. It was developed through a decade-long co-design process with residents, engaging under-represented groups, and particularly young people. In later stages, we collaborated with feminist collective EDIT to deliver Purchase Street Social Space, an equitable, multifunctional play and social space, co-designed with local teenagers. It includes a trail of ‘fossil’ bricks, made by EDIT with young people, to animate the public realm.

A main ambition was to transform fenced-off slivers of space into a cohesive public green culminating in a 100m-long ribbon-like park that is the focus for the community, connecting homes, schools and communal amenities via a network of generous public spaces. Through land assembly and strategic reconfiguration, the project created a neighbourhood common that supports playful and social everyday movement, learning and play. ■

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COSTINGS STREET AND LANDSCAPE FURNITURE

WORDS

Bethan Abbott,
senior cost manager,
Turner & Townsend alinea

Street furniture varies significantly in specification and price, depending on whether they are off-the-shelf products or bespoke-designed. Achieving a balance between functionality, materials and cost requires continual review as the project brief and wider landscaping design develop. This helps in meeting performance and aesthetic requirements while representing best value to clients.

A holistic approach to landscaping design and security requirements is vital to ensure costs stay competitive while delivering appropriate security levels for the project. Design efficiency and clarity of the brief remain the biggest cost drivers on landscaping projects and, when well considered, avoid unnecessary specification and rework. In addition, material selection, the balance between bespoke and standard off-the-shelf design, overall quantities, foundation requirements and any associated services all significantly influence the final cost.

Costs are based on Q2 2026 (excluding preliminaries, overheads, and profit) and have been informed by the Turner & Townsend Hive app – a centralised digital benchmarking and cost intelligence platform – supplemented by engagement with specialist contractors.

ACCESS, CONTROL AND SECURITY

Bollards

Bollard specifications are driven by security requirements, vehicle logistics on site and emergency vehicle access requirements.

For schemes that demand a high level of security, hostile mitigation designs with deep, robust foundations capable of withstanding vehicle impacts are detailed by specialists. Automated systems, driven by specialist engineering and hydraulic systems, and requiring connection to a central control room, represent the most expensive options.

An integrated approach to landscaping design and planters should be considered to mitigate the total quantity required.

- Simple, static timber bollards (each): £300
- Steel alternatives (each): from £650
- Removable or collapsible bollards (each): £350-£2,000
- Static high-security bollards (each): £10,000+
- Automated systems (each): £40,000

Basic gates within fencing (non-security)

Bespoke designs, materiality, size and security/access control requirements may substantially affect unit rates.

- Timber gates (single): £1,200-£3,500
- Steel gates (single): £1,800-£5,000

OUTDOOR SEATING AND TABLES

Seating costs vary by material choice and design complexity, including radius of curves and accessories such as backrest, armrest and fixings.

- Timber benches (1,800mm): from £1,700
- Metal benches (1,800mm): from £2,300
- Concrete benches (1,800mm): from £3,300
- Stone benches (1,800mm): £3,000-£4,000
- Composite or recycled plastic options (1,800mm): from £3,000
- Picnic tables: £2,700-£4,300
- Bespoke or curved benches: from £2,000 per linear metre

Foundations and supporting structures should be considered, since they may have specific site requirements and cost implications.

WASTE AND STORAGE UNITS / SYSTEMS

Litter bins are a relatively low-cost category. Costs demonstrate how durability and functionality can lead to increased pricing. Specification of timber and sustainability requirements may also limit supply chains available for some bins, which can drive up prices.

- Basic steel bins (each): £600-£2,100
- Timber bins (each): £800-£1,500
- Anti-vandal bins (each): around £1,100
- Recycling bins (each; can double their singular counterparts due to multi-stream separation requirements): from £1,200

CYCLE INFRASTRUCTURE

Cycle parking illustrates the impact of scale. Secure cycle lockers vary hugely with size and complexity; jumps in cost reflect capacity, enclosure, security and installation requirements such as foundations.

- Sheffield stands (low-cost, single-user solution, each): from £250
- Two-tier racks (each): £1,000
- Secure 36-space locker: approx £40,000

LIGHTING & ELECTRICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Lighting and powered elements show moderate to high costs. Factors are electrical connections, cabling requirements and local infrastructure, which can vary by location. Lighting column costs are affected by material choices and finishes.

- LED bollard lighting (each): £1,500-£2,500
- Decorative lighting columns (each): approx £10,000
- Electric vehicle charging points (7kW capacity, each): approx £5,000
- Electric bicycle charging points (each): approx £1,500

SIGNAGE

Signage is among the lowest per-unit elements; standardised mass-produced items are cheaper than bespoke designs.

- Directional signage: £300
- Standard traffic signs: around £300
- Monolithic signs: £3,000-£5,000

PLAY & PUBLIC REALM FEATURES

Public realm and recreational features carry higher costs because of safety requirements. They require certification, the use of impact-tested materials and installation expertise.

- Multi-play playground equipment (per unit): £25,000-£100,000
- Large bespoke playground pieces (dependent on scale, structural requirements and intricate designs): £500,000+
- Small fitness equipment set (each): approx £11,500
- Safety surfacing (depending on maximum potential 'fall-from-height' which drives surfacing depth): approx £150/m²

LET THE SYSTEM SET YOU FREE

When practices struggle to succeed, it's rarely due to bad design, but because they don't have the right operational support systems, said contributors to a RIBA J webinar in partnership with Fresh Projects

"If you're wondering whether you need a system or even a finance professional in your practice, then the answer is probably yes, you do," observes Rachael Trott, executive director at Maber Architects. Her comment figured as part of a wider discussion on how the right operational support systems can determine the success of practices.

When practices struggle to succeed, it's rarely because of bad design. More often than not, they are buckling under the weight of their own growth. While the studio is producing slick designs for clients, it may have neglected to streamline or even buttress its own internal procedures.

What begins as a nimble studio can gradually become a fragmented operation where information is scattered and in the minds of a few overstretched individuals, causing key-person dependencies.

That was the central theme of the recent RIBA J webinar *Running a modern architecture practice: visibility, performance and control*.

Strategy consultant and architect at Hawkins\Brown, Nigel Ostime regularly advises practices of different scales, and believes that most firms only realise they have a problem when something breaks. At this point, "the business has outgrown the systems that once worked perfectly", he observes. In other words, operational complexity grows faster than the time it takes to implement rigorous systems.

In smaller firms, he noted, information often lives in spreadsheets, inboxes and

with "three heroic individuals who know everything in their heads"; but as practices expand, that informality becomes a risk.

Nigel identified three recurring operational problems in growing firms: fragmented data, delayed reporting and unclear ownership. Together, these create what he described as "operational blind spots" with financial, cultural and strategic consequences.

Financially, practices lose visibility over profitability and scope creep. Culturally, teams become trapped in cycles of firefighting, often with a lack of accountability, duplicated work or assumptions made about not wanting to "step on toes". Strategically, it then becomes difficult to plan recruitment, investment or growth. "Without visibility," said Nigel, "everything feels riskier."

Indeed, the webinar's live poll suggested that many practices recognise this pattern. Asked how confident they were in the accuracy of their project and financial data, 68% said they were "mostly confident", albeit, as moderator Chris Foges observed, "there could be an element of selection bias," as a delegate who logs into a webinar about practice management may already be on the ball.

Even so, 23% said they were "not very confident", which is still higher than ideal, and 2% revealed they don't trust their own data at all. The thing is, said Nigel, "it's not enough to collect data. Data must tell a story that helps make better decisions".

When asked about the biggest barrier to better visibility, 60% cited time and

resource constraints, compared with 21% who pointed to too many disconnected tools and 18% who identified a lack of system adoption. "You can imagine lots of people wanting to put systems in place," Chris added, "if only they had the time."

All three speakers emphasised that stronger systems should create more freedom for design teams, not less. "The solution isn't to add more spreadsheets or more meetings," Nigel argued. "It's to create clarity through structure."

In practice this means clearly defining ownership over fees, programme management and risk; standardising key processes; and building systems that create a reliable "single source of truth".

Importantly, transformation does not begin with software, but even so, the right programs can help greatly. According to Simon Berry, whose company Fresh Projects works with more than 500 architecture and engineering practices, there are two critical pinch points that firms commonly experience as they grow.

The first comes when founders can no longer personally oversee every aspect of the business. At this stage, practices must begin delegating operational responsibility to others. Simon illustrated this through the example of an overwhelmed practice founder doing invoicing and forecasting at 10pm, and thinking: "I just can't do this anymore."

By introducing clearer accountability and integrated project management systems, responsibility for invoicing shifts from the founder to project leads, while



leadership retains visibility over cash flow and performance.

The second pinch point typically emerges in firms of around 50 to 80 people, particularly those operating across multiple offices or disciplines. At this scale, different teams often maintain their own parallel systems and spreadsheets, creating competing versions of reality. “You end up arguing about what is the right source of the truth,” Simon explained.

The third question in the live poll asked: Where does most of your financial and project data currently live? Only 11% responded in “a single integrated system”, while 33% said “multiple (partially connected) systems” and 36% said “in spreadsheets and systems” – perhaps not a surprise. Somewhat alarmingly, though, 20% said “mostly spreadsheets”. Surely a recipe for future complications.

Rather than attempting to eliminate spreadsheets altogether, Simon advocated integrating them into wider live systems so teams could retain flexibility while working from shared data, the goal being not technological sophistication for its own sake, but immediate visibility into staffing, project pipelines and future workload.

This was echoed by Rachael, whose practice, Maber Architects, has grown steadily from a small studio into a multi-office employee-owned business and B Corp. To maintain a culture that balances design quality with staff empowerment, she believes that such systems are essential, enabling the practice to “turn

up and do the job that we’re supposed to do for our clients” – namely, produce good design.

As projects became larger and more complex, Maber had moved away from fragmented spreadsheets towards centralised systems. But, Rachael cautioned, systems only succeed if staff understand and trust them. “The team has to be on the bus before you leave the stop,” she said.

For Rachael, operational transparency is especially important within an employee-owned business because staff are directly invested in performance and decision-making. “They have ownership of their own destinies, their own futures,” she said.

Throughout the discussion, all three speakers returned repeatedly to the same principle: systems exist to support people. As practices confront the increasingly volatile economic conditions we are witnessing today, coupled with the rapid rise of AI, the need to adapt becomes even more necessary. The firms that thrive will be those willing to regularly rethink how they operate, and to do that, you need clarity.

“Everything can improve,” Rachael said. “Those people that stand still will be left behind.”

Fundamentally, taking the time and trouble to introduce smoother, more integrated operations frees up time for the practice of architecture. “Operational clarity is not bureaucracy,” Nigel concluded. “It’s creative freedom.”

Above left: As Maber Architects has grown and taken on more complex projects, such as the Engineering and IIDRA Building in Nottingham, organisational visibility has proved essential.

Above: Hawkins\Brown team comparing samples; strong systems free up time for designing.

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PRESIDENT: FACING UP TO OUR FUTURE

People in our profession are clear-eyed about the multiple challenges confronting it. RIBA's Towards Tomorrow's Architecture initiative will continue to tackle these issues proactively, with your input, writes Chris Williamson

Since I became RIBA president I have been travelling the country visiting students, practices and colleagues, and have become acutely aware of the challenges and opportunities we all face. My findings have been incorporated into the work initiated by RIBA in Towards Tomorrow's Architecture. Our initiative responds to mounting pressures on architects and the wider built environment sector, while seeking to position the profession for long-term resilience and relevance.

Architecture is contending with multiple, interrelated challenges including regulatory complexity, declining fee levels, problematic procurement systems, and broader cultural and technical shifts. These have contributed to a sense that the profession is now at a critical juncture, with some even suggesting existential risks. The current convergence of issues requires substantial reform.

Towards Tomorrow's Architecture is structured around four central themes. The first focuses on ensuring architectural education is inclusive, accessible and aligned with future skills needs. Significant developments are under way, including collaboration with schools of architecture to promote flexible pathways to qualification, such as four-year integrated master's programmes.

RIBA is also reforming its education and professional development framework to emphasise outcomes rather than time-based requirements.

The second theme seeks to improve the commercial viability of architectural practices. Initiatives include gathering and publishing fee data to enhance transparency for clients, while ensuring compliance with competition law. There is also a focus on improving procurement processes through a dedicated expert advisory group. RIBA is additionally exploring the development of an MBA tailored to architects to strengthen business acumen across the profession. We are developing guidance on emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), including our forthcoming third annual AI report and best practice guidance, reflecting the importance of digital transformation in practice.

The third topic centres on regulatory reform, with our Repeal, Reserve, Regulate campaign the cornerstone of the programme. This advocates for a competence-based regulatory system across built environment professions, including clearer definitions of reserved activities. RIBA has proposed the creation of a Built Environment Council within a single construction regulator to improve oversight and coordination. In parallel, we continue to influence planning policy,



Above: Towards Tomorrow's Architecture responds to mounting pressures on architects.

proactively making the case for stronger integration of architectural expertise in housing and placemaking processes.

The final theme focuses on raising the profession's profile and demonstrating its value to society and clients. This includes a national communications campaign highlighting the benefits that architects bring, which will also support enhancements to the Find an Architect service. A key advocacy element within this topic is the promotion of architects in local and regional government. Through our report 'Making the case for city architects', highlighted in my last column, we recommend a pilot scheme to fund such roles across combined authorities, alongside additional architectural resources within planning departments.

Towards Tomorrow's Architecture represents a comprehensive and proactive response to the challenges facing the architectural profession. By addressing education, business practices, regulation and public perception in a coordinated manner, it seeks to reposition architects at the centre of shaping the built environment – where they should be.

On my journeys around the country these initiatives have been well received, along with pleas for urgent action. If you would like to input into this work or see me in your region, please reach out at president@riba.org ■

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OBITUARY: PETER ALDINGTON 1933-2026

By Alan Powers



PAUL WILKINSON

IN MEMORIAM

KENNETH LUND

Elected 1956, Essex

HARRY NOBLE

Elected 1960, London

LAWRENCE ANDERSON LYON ROLLAND, PPRIBA

Elected 1960, Fife

JOHN RHEINALLT EVANS

Elected 1961, Ceredigion

GRAHAM LEONARD FINCH

Elected 1964, Essex

MATTHEW JOHN LOBLEY

Elected 2007, West Yorkshire

If you know someone who thinks they dislike modern architecture, there is nowhere better to help change their mind than Turn End, the house Peter Aldington built at Haddenham, Buckinghamshire in the 1960s. It was his second solo project, part of a group of three homes in the village, where he lived and gardened since its completion. He wanted to show connection between indoor and outdoor spaces, the use of concrete blocks supporting pine beams, all sitting at ease in an unusual context of vernacular wychert garden walls.

Aldington, who died in April at 93, was born in Preston and studied architecture at Manchester University. He worked for London County Council before his first commission to build a small house at Asnett, Buckinghamshire. In an active career as an architect that was short in relation to his long life, every building he made – the verb he preferred to ‘designed’ – has multiple points of interest owing to the thinking behind it.

Materials were important to Aldington, and detailing them mattered equally. Relationship to landscape was fundamental, but there was an intensely human side to his projects, in which he was helped by his business partner from 1970 to 1986, John Craig. With no architectural training, but with the eye of an artist-craftsman and a gift with words, Craig’s role developed as “the client’s representative in the office”, interviewing prospective inhabitants and users before distilling the essence of the brief, to which Aldington responded with designs.

His one-off houses, which became the subject of a substantial book in 2016 with a text by John Pardey, will always be the best remembered. They include the Anderton House near Barnstaple, the first modern building acquired by the Landmark Trust through Aldington’s instrumentality – and since enjoyed by short-term visitors – plus others in Buckinghamshire and Suffolk, mostly protected by listing.

Aldington created another notable housing group at Bledlow: Lyde End, a cluster of homes for local people around a shared entrance courtyard. Doctors’ surgeries became another speciality, always crafted to offer patients a feeling of reassurance. A late work of 1986 was the Royal Mail Mechanised Letter Office at Hemel Hempstead (demolished), with a large metal roof and the usual attention to process and the wellbeing of staff.

By this point, both Aldington and Craig were bruised by the number of projects that had failed to reach fruition owing to 1970s inflation, changes in planning regimes and clients’ timidity. Their prolonged briefing process was an extra cost for which fees made scant allowance. As the partnership grew to include Paul Collinge, the early intimacy of the office operating from a room at Turn End was lost. They reluctantly agreed with Collinge to retire, allowing him to retain the studio name, and to cease architectural practice themselves. Both were recorded at length by the British Library’s Architects’ Lives oral history programme and their archive was donated to RIBA soon after the publication of my 2009 monograph on their work in the series Twentieth Century Architects.

During a long retirement, Aldington and his wife Margaret enjoyed annual visits to the Scottish Highlands, and the development of the Turn End Garden, which, with their house, they made into an educational trust for promoting the relationship of buildings and landscapes in 1998 following its listing at Grade II*, linked to Jane Brown’s book, *A Garden and Three Houses*. Aldington and Craig both taught at Oxford Brookes for Robert Maguire, whose work had been grouped with theirs in an Architectural Review article labelling them ‘Romantic Pragmatists’. It’s an oxymoron that well describes their combination of emotional engagement and practicality. ■

Alan Powers is an architectural historian

KATHARINE HAMNETT SHOP, SLOANE STREET, CHELSEA

Designed by Nigel Coates (1949–)

Photograph by Alastair Hunter, 1988

Words: Suzanne Waters

This witty and exuberant shop interior was designed by Nigel Coates in 1988. The space, which is characteristic of his work at the time, exhibits a strong element of theatricality – seen in the curved fibrous plaster ceiling mimicking rolls of fabric, the huge decorative mirror (inspired by Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée*), the chandelier and the Daliesque ‘Mae West Lips’ sofa. Around the wall are hung drapes of white fabric, and at the back is a bank of fish tanks, visible in the distance near the centre of the photograph.

Coates, who was keen on encouraging young talent, employed stage designer Zaza Wentworth Stanley. She painted the mirror and made all the drapes along

with the blueish stiffened swags that sit above the lighting rig. A series of black tracks, which snake across the ceiling, was designed by another young talent, Patrice Butler.

Behind Coates’ scheme lay Hamnett’s quirky imagination and enthusiasm for the offbeat. Ideas also stemmed from Coates’ founding in 1983 of the radical architectural group NATØ (Narrative Architecture Today). Promoting a narrative practice in commercial architecture, he wanted to create environments to engage and tease those who entered them. Here, the customer can relax and enjoy – and be stimulated by – the playful surroundings. ■

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