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HOME

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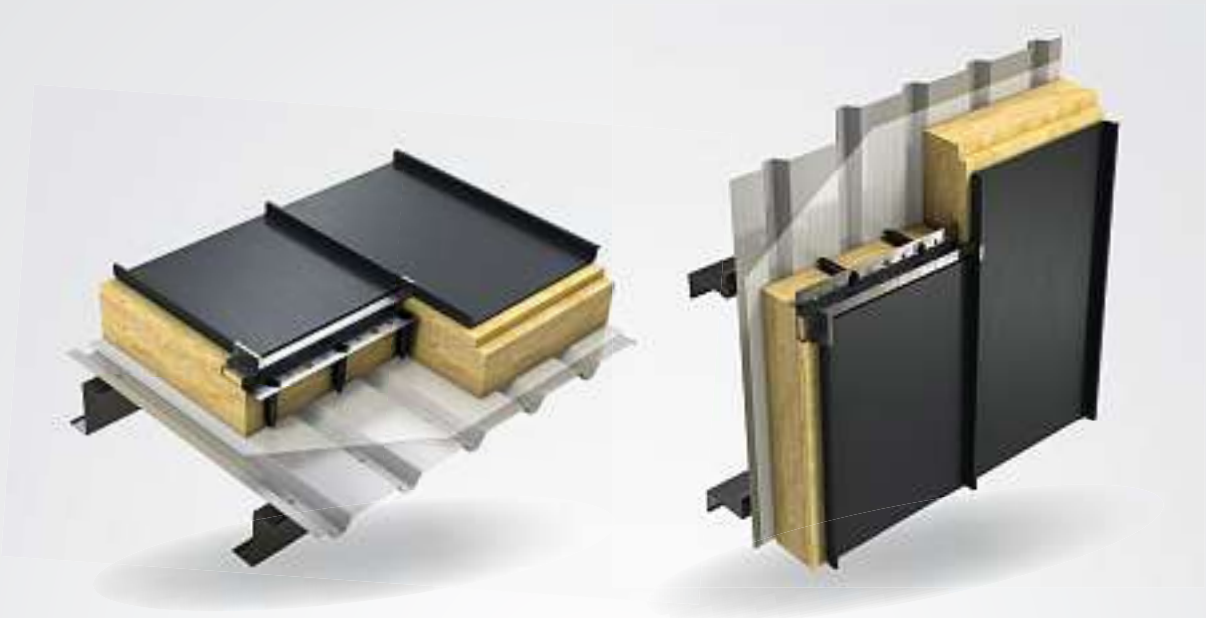
Cover image: Sightline through a
crescent of new homes at Brabazon,
near Bristol, by Rebecca Noakes



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HOME

From microspace to masterplan, architects are defining how we will live and influencing the extent to which housing is invested with a sense of belonging; these are hugely important powers we should cherish, writes Eleanor Young

There is nothing like the power of a home to set the tone of life for its inhabitants, and the tone of place for both people living in it and those who pass through.

Sometimes architects feel that between regulations, costs and client demands there is little scope for them to make a difference. But there is always some way. Talking to us about social housing, Parisian architect Emmanuelle Déchelette identified “microspaces” (page 16); her London-based peer Adam Khan speaks of the “beautiful quirks that are really hard to get” (page 58).

That is why our features this issue themed around Home look at the defining power of homes to create place and, in the best cases, a sense of belonging. Going back to Adam Khan, his work at Custom House, east London, drew on an existing sense of belonging in

a co-design process, culminating in a vote that brought the community along with it in the difficult process of regeneration.

Creating that sense of place initially is still hard. We visited Bristol’s outskirts to see if FCBS’ Brabazon development – where it has acted as masterplanner and architect – can rise to its city aspirations in more than just density, and offer any lessons for other new towns (page 52). We chatted to Jason Prior of Prior + Partners (page 38), whose projects include Queen Elizabeth Park in Stratford, east London. The practice has turned masterplanning into a multidisciplinary artform, through a close examination of each site’s peculiarities and character, fostering the roots and belonging that matter so much, embedded in layout, streets and landscaping as well as the mix of housing and other uses.

Underpinning all this is the planning system. The new National Planning Policy Framework alone has very limited powers to unlock housing growth, despite the hopes of politicians. You will have read a lot about it by now; perhaps even done an AI spot-the-difference on the 130 pages published over the summer. Hana Loftus, an architect and planner, takes a look at the key changes (page 12).

She points at where new rules might make a difference to our homes and the places they create, on densities around stations and allowing housing infill of backland sites, as Croydon pioneered. It is a good reminder that just as shedkm repurposes so many historic – and sometimes unloved – buildings for housing (page 32), so we can repurpose our cities for living. Just don’t forget about those quirks. ■

ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE

WORDS

Kemide Lawson

Cottage Noir is a wisteria-fronted, Grade II-listed cottage on the outskirts of London. Built in the 18th century and quintessentially English, it might seem an unlikely space for a Black home. However, when we acquired it in 2020, I could not wait to begin a comprehensive renovation, with the aim of transforming it into a joyful home which centred on and celebrated my family's mixed Jamaican and Nigerian heritage.

I prioritised connections to my ancestors, discarded dictums of what made something kitsch versus clever, and chose what made me feel good over what signalled luxury and 'class'.

It was, however, a real challenge to find Black home inspiration in the world of interiors publishing, or to source furniture and decorative objects which aligned with my mission. So difficult, in fact, that I ended up co-founding a home accessories and lifestyle store, The Cornrow, and writing a book, House Proud, to address the gap.

Humanity began in Africa, and therefore so did the act of making home. There is much to learn from its ancestral intelligence: eco-conscious design; community; outdoor living; the architecture of joy and rhythm; and the importance of sacred spaces. These values offer a powerful alternative to the dominant capitalist model of homemaking, with its emphasis on mass production, hyper-individualism and endless consumption. It turns out our ancestors were way ahead of their time. ■

House Proud: Black Interiors and Architecture Across Continents and Centuries by Kemide Lawson is available from ribabooks.com

Below: The living room's geometric tiled fireplace creates a rhythmic energy and is inspired by the monochrome facades of Kassena homes in Burkina Faso.

Bottom left: The Ancestor Wall is filled with photographs honouring Lawson's lineage.

Bottom right: A vivid yellow wallpaper by Haitian textile brand Yaël & Valérie features six Black women from history who have resisted oppression with strength and grace.



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THE LIVES OF OTHERS

WORDS

Charlotte Banks

In the opening vignette of Sonia Solicari's new book, *Real Rooms*, she recounts the only time a museum has brought her to tears. Small details of the recreated living room of a family of Italian immigrants in Manhattan's Tenement Museum – a cheese grater, sash windows – conjured up some universal human instinct which she could relate to her upbringing on the other side of the world.

Through a series of thematic musings on case studies from all over the world, *Real Rooms* charts our impulse to understand the world through looking inside other people's spaces. There is perhaps no one better placed to meditate on the topic than Solicari, who has for nearly a decade led London's Museum of the Home, the world's only such institution dedicated to understanding home as a concept.

"Museum of the Home and the book really make the case for approaching the world through a domestic lens first," she explains. "The home is actually the space that shapes everything, and could be the start and endpoint for how we think about a number of challenges."

On Solicari's watch, the museum has transmogrified from a rarefied collection of historic interiors, then known as the Geffrye Museum, to an interactive, multisensory experience interrogating what she describes as the "emotional, psychological, sociopolitical space" of home. The rebrand was enabled by a sensitive reworking by Wright & Wright of the Grade I-listed almshouses it calls home, which reopened in 2021. By burrowing new galleries into basement areas and knocking through connections to the outside realm, the architects more than doubled public space while keeping the 18th-century frontage intact.

Solicari is particularly interested in the cultural impulse to look into others' intimate living spaces: home renovation shows; dolls houses; even the urge to cast a glance through someone's window when the curtains are drawn back.

Since the 1930s, the museum has had as its centrepiece an enfilade of painstakingly recreated simulacra of rooms at certain historical moments. Although the practice of displaying objects in this way originated from pioneering curators Marjorie Quennell and Molly Harrison, to engage children in the history of the local furniture trade, it has developed into a vehicle for exploring bigger themes. The most recent curatorial refresh, led by gallery design specialist ZMMA and unveiled in 2024, added seven new rooms tackling topics such as migration, colonialism and sexuality. Additions included a 1913 tenement flat prepared by its Jewish inhabitants for Shabbos and a 2024 terraced house belonging to a Vietnamese family coming together for lunch and karaoke.

Common to all rooms are personal paraphernalia that hint at a full social world just outside the frame: party clothes strewn across a bed; a well-stocked drinks trolley with novelty decanters; a biscuit tin full of sewing notions. For Solicari, a universal feature of homemaking is its centrality in negotiating how we construct our most intimate relationships. "How you share your domestic space with others is a key tension and opportunity for homes around the world," she says.

The final room imagines a scene from 2049: either nightmarish or utopian, depending on your political proclivities. Meat-free protein patties are being prepared for a family dinner in a converted flat with mycelium insulation, as autonomous vehicles and emissions patrol drones swarm outside the window. It's a painful reminder of the fragility of our values surrounding what constitutes a home, especially as climate change and conflict displace more and more people. But it's also a testament to the human desire to live well together, no matter the circumstances. ■

Real Rooms by Sonia Solicari is published 13 November 2026 by Lund Humphries

Opposite top left and right: A Terraced House in 2024, Museum of the Home.

Opposite bottom: The Baldizzi Family Kitchen, Tenement Museum, New York, USA.



HOUSES, THE PLAN

Below: Designs for one of the liveable neighbourhoods for Tendring Colchester Borders Garden Community in Essex, with a team from Haworth Tompkins, Kjellander Sjöberg, Grounded Practice, Periscope, Arup, Michael Pawlyn, Jas Bhalla Works, Bell Phillips Architects, and HAT Projects.



The National Planning Policy Framework's 2026 update brings both welcome simplifications and frustrating ambiguities for architects

WORDS
Hana Loftus

The new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was published on 17 August 2026, effective immediately. It is a major restructure: gone are numbered paragraphs; in come lettered policies labelled as “plan-making” or “decision-making”. If you are an architect rather than a masterplanner working on speculative sites, pay attention to the decision-making sections. These are now “material considerations” of “critical” importance; and if the local plan for your area has policies that contradict, the NPPF takes precedence.

This restructure reflects a big change in how the government wants planning to operate. The new NPPF states that local plans are there to set a plan vision and spatial strategy, and should only include other policies where these address very specific local issues or support the delivery of specific allocated sites. They should not include the general development management policies found in every local plan in the country at present, which are virtually interchangeable, with small, frustrating wording differences. Instead, planners should refer to the NPPF.

Furthermore, it is explicit that local plans must not cover matters addressed in Building Regulations, except for accessibility standards (in other words the

proportion of M4(2) and M4 (3) dwellings), and water and energy efficiency standards. These can be set locally at a higher level, with a key caveat: there must be a clear, robustly costed rationale which shows there will not be an adverse impact on the viability and deliverability of development. Planners are also told not to use conditions to duplicate requirements imposed by other regulatory regimes (such as licensing or health and safety).

This all sounds like a welcome simplification, which it is – but there is a get-out clause: supplementary plans are still permitted, and these can set out “locally-specific design standards” (meaning design codes). I’m disappointed by this: although I have authored design codes, I stick to my view that 90% of design code content is generic.

And overall, the design chapter of the new NPPF is the one I am least enthusiastic about. A lot has been made of the fact that policy DP3 is one of the few which provide grounds for outright refusal unless there is “clear justification”. So we should all be happy about this, because bad design will be refused, right?

Not so fast. Nobody will disagree with the “key principles for well-designed places” in DP3. But this is because they are ambiguous and subjective. How is a

planner to determine what is “visually attractive” or “vibrant”? These principles overlap with many other policies – such as climate change, transport and biodiversity, but with vaguer wording.

So noncompliance with climate change policies (CC2 and CC3) can weigh against other factors, but DP3 requires development to “contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation” or face refusal unless there is “clear justification” as to why your proposal conflicts.

Given the vagueness of the wording of the design principles, there is ample scope for disagreement about what justifies compliance – and noncompliance. My advice for government: subject the NPPF to the same test of de-duplicating that you have placed on local plans. Most of the requirements in DP3 can then be ditched, and you will have removed a major source of ambiguity which will slow down the process you are trying to speed up.

On to other matters. Thanks to Russell Curtis, the architect most active in this sphere, you will probably be aware of the default ‘yes’ to development within an 800m walk of “well-connected” rail stations. This is good news, but I’m disappointed the government has downgraded the minimum density to 35dph, from 50dph at consultation stage.

The development sector has welcomed this, claiming 50dph would be undeliverable. I'm not convinced – 800m is a relatively short walk or cycle unless you have mobility issues, which could allow low parking ratios (the factor that most affects density in rural-ish locations.) With smart design, 50dph is readily achievable while still delivering single-family homes, and would encourage people to actually use the public transport on offer, rather than jumping in their car.

A few more technical points to note. Aren't validation checklists, varying illogically from authority to authority, the ultimate frustration? Well, we now have a national validation checklist in Annex C, and DM2 says local authorities should only require additional information in very limited circumstances. And there should be no more outline applications with all matters reserved other than access. HO13 says a consent for a strategic site must set parameters for design, infrastructure and other features of development. This is good news for masterplanners, bad news for land promoters trying to get an allocation on the cheap.

The first NPPF in 2012 came in at a historic low for housing starts prompted by the global financial crisis, but its first chapter was on "building a strong, competitive economy". Delivering homes was at chapter 6, with the emphasis on a "wide choice" rather than numbers. By the 2024 update, the first chapter was on housing and no longer emphasised choice but a "sufficient supply". This shift shows how the housing shortage rose up the priority list as housebuilding rates failed to reach anywhere near the levels required to keep pace with household formation.

The housing shortage is worse than ever, with development near standstill in parts of the country. This new framework is clear the default answer to a planning application should be yes. But we still have a discretionary planning system, and the concept of balancing benefits and adverse effects remains. We lack planners who are confident in judging this balance, and we remain hamstrung by the politics of the planning committee. Until we have a truly unambiguous decision-making framework, planning consultants and lawyers will still be making big money, and housing delivery will not speed up. ■

Hana Loftus is a writer, architect and planner, and co-founder of HAT Projects; for RIBA's response to and commentary on the new NPPF, see [riba.org](https://www.riba.org)

"WE STILL HAVE A DISCRETIONARY PLANNING SYSTEM, AND THE CONCEPT OF BALANCING BENEFITS AND ADVERSE EFFECTS"

Key policies for architects

CC2: Mitigation of climate change

Take a look at this one in terms of everything from sustainable and active travel, to energy-efficient design and reusing existing structures and materials.

CC3: Adaptation to climate change

This policy talks about SudS, overheating, tree planting, wildfire risk. One of my least favourite parts of housebuilder schemes are cheap close-boarded fences facing onto surrounding countryside. I'm delighted to see this policy state that timber panel fences should be avoided where wildfires pose a risk. After all, isn't that virtually everywhere, as we've seen this summer?

L2: Making effective use of land

This is a big step forward in supporting densification, including the use of airspace above existing buildings, mansard roof extensions, filling gaps in the existing roof line, introducing higher buildings at street corners, and backland development on residential plots. Yes, there's a requirement to be consistent with the street scene, and for backland proposals to be invisible from the street, but this is clear: Croydon-style backland infill is a goer. I'm surprised this hasn't received more attention.

L3: Achieving appropriate densities

Development must now increase the density of the area, unless there is clear justification (for which specific examples are given). And this is one of the few policies where development should be refused if it does not comply.

DP3: Key principles for well-designed places

See previous page. This is motherhood and apple-pie, and any architect worth their salt will be able to use it to justify their scheme.

P5: Maintaining public safety and security

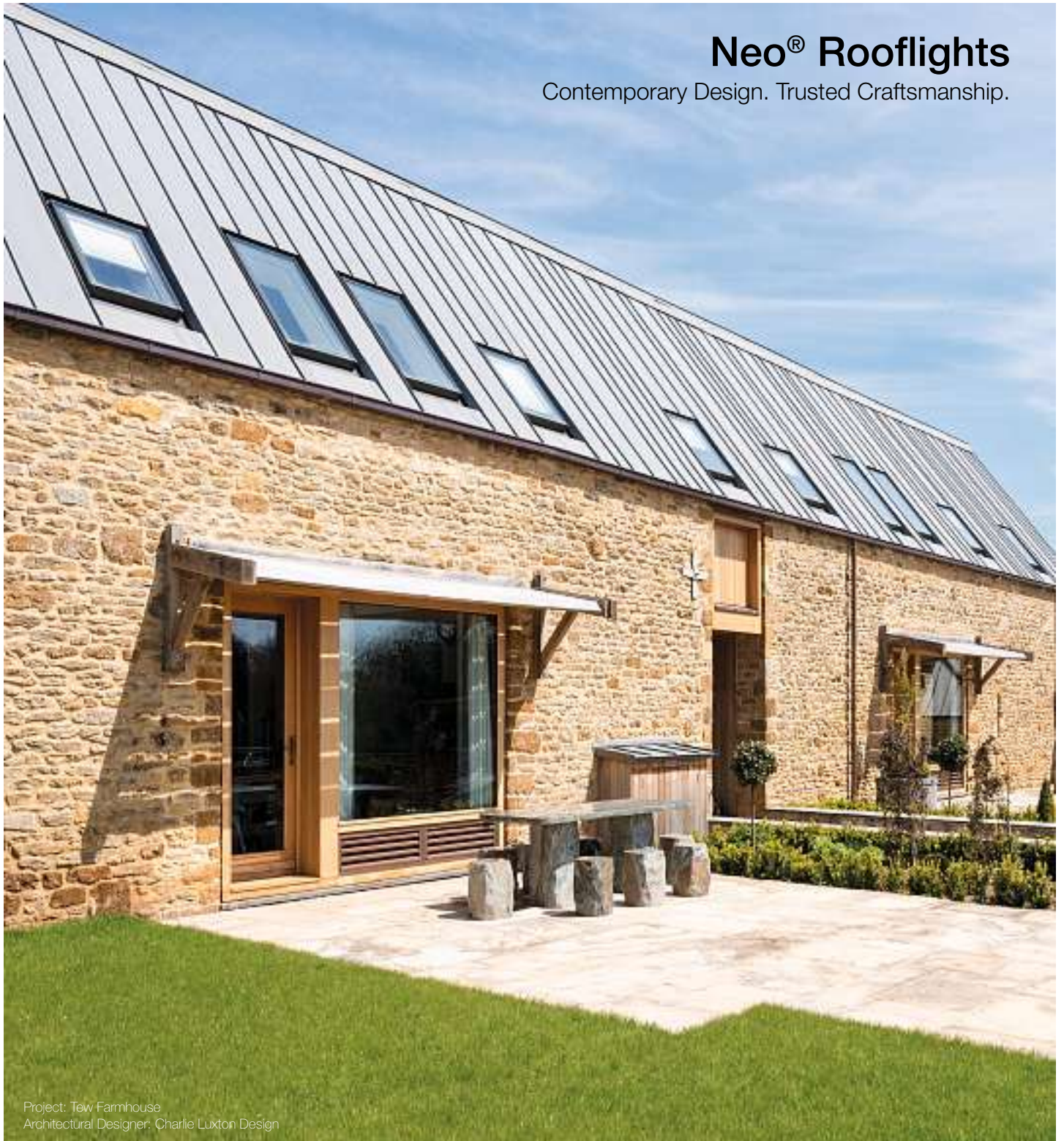
For those who find Secured by Design over-prescriptive, this policy is helpful. It states that mitigation of safety risks such as crime should be "proportionate". This could be used to push back attempts to require Secured by Design in planning conditions.

HE5: Assessing effects on heritage assets

Now a heritage assessment can identify positive effects; if present, proposals should be supported. "Substantial harm" is more clearly defined, albeit it will never be possible for this to be entirely objective.

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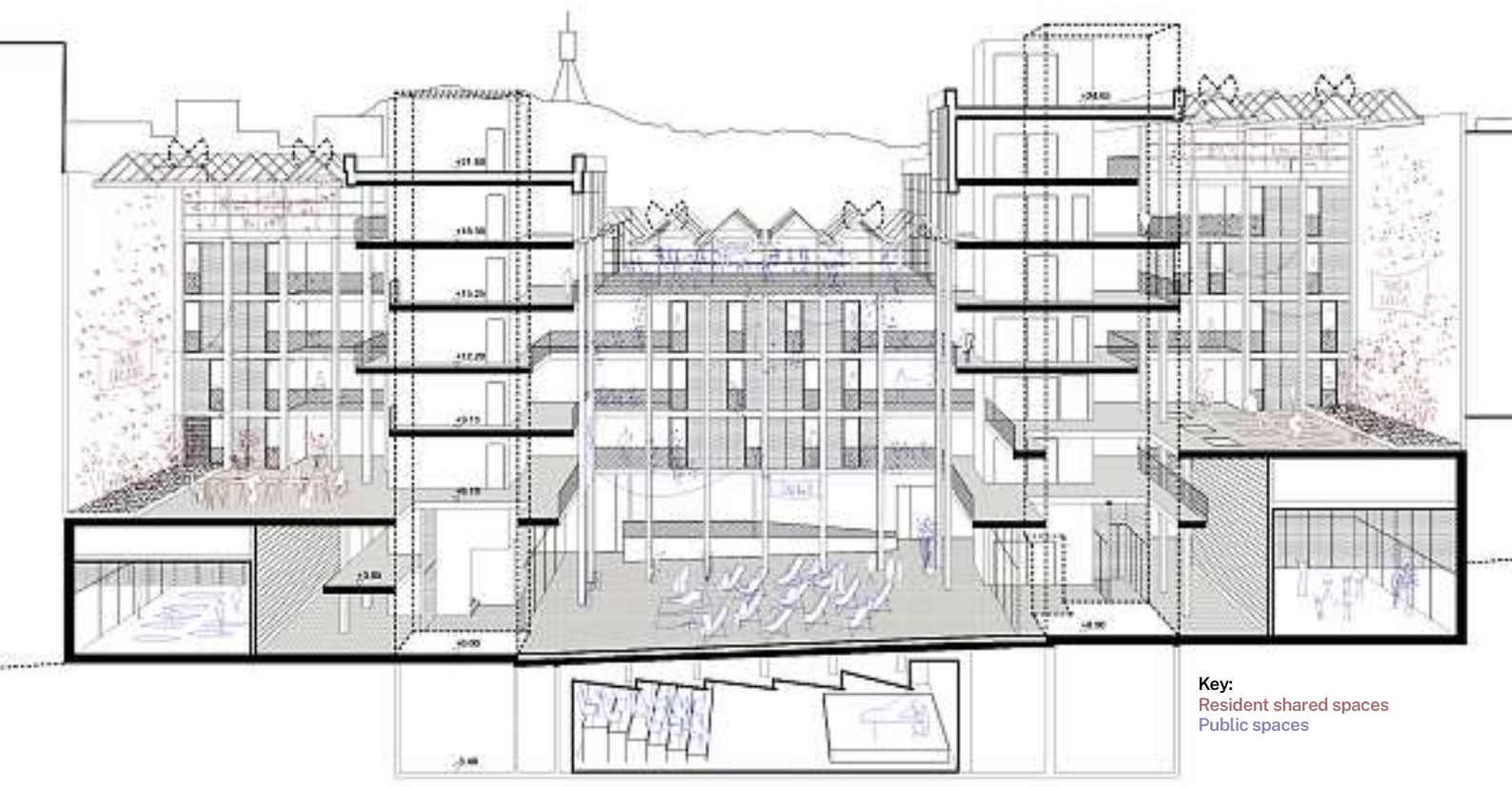


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SOCIAL



Public, communal resident-shared and private resident space is thoughtfully sequenced at Quiró, Barcelona, designed by Bajet Giramé + Espinet Ubach.

Key:
Resident shared spaces
Public spaces

BAJET GIRAMÉ

CHANNELS

Facing multiple pressures including supply, affordability and climate, architects across Europe are thinking creatively around how social housing serves residents and the urban fabric

There is a housing affordability crisis across Europe, which is meeting the climate change crisis – but also a generation of bold city leaders and inventive architects. That’s resulting in fresh design thinking about social housing at the heart of our cities.

Working with Karakusevic Carson Architects, and drawing on research for its book *Social Housing: Definitions and Design Exemplars*, we brought together three architects with insight into the best designs in their cities. They are Emmanuelle Déchelette of Déchelette Architecture, from Paris, with an expertise in biomaterials; Pau Bajet of Bajet Giramé, which has had a streak of winning social housing projects in Barcelona; and Abigail Batchelor of Karakusevic Carson Architects, based in London but also practising in France and with experience of the Netherlands, who was an editor of the book.

We had big questions to tackle about the impact of political decisions on social housing design, how social homes set the relationship between their residents and the city, how architects are designing for inhabitants, present and future in the city – and how adapting to climate change fits into that.

The conditions for social housing

We started by talking about London and how its once-generous social housing stock has been in decline. Batchelor highlighted the impact of the introduction of the GLA’s London Plan and the housing design guide that came with it; the quality and ambition of social housing, from space standards to council-commissioned Passivhaus-standard homes. She also pointed to how local authorities’ appreciation of housing’s wider impacts, such as childhood opportunities and health benefits, has fuelled a shift to a more holistic approach.

Spain, meanwhile, has always built social housing; but ownership is transferred, via a lottery for people in need, into the private market. This, Bajet explained, is why it is one of the European countries with the smallest amount of social housing. In Madrid, the city council is chasing volume via a partnership with private developers, with an impact on numbers but raising questions over the ultimate quality of new homes, he said. In Barcelona, by contrast, the public sector is pursuing high-quality housing projects “through competitions and architecture”, with

innovative typologies emerging such as the 2024 RIBA International Prize winner, *Modulus Matrix*.

“The buildings themselves are already better projects,” said Bajet. “As they are for long-term rental, they have good quality materials and are low maintenance. They are buildings that will be there in maybe 200, 300 years – they value a good layout, and sustainability, not only in terms of hitting numbers, but in terms of passive architecture that reduces energy demands.”

Clients such as Metropolitan Institute of Land Development and Property Management (IMPSOL) and Barcelona Municipal Institute of Housing and Rehabilitation (IMHAB) see a home “not just as a unit” but as part of Barcelona’s city ecosystem, Bajet added.

Déchelette agreed that social housing providers’ responsibility for a house over the long term results in better buildings. “For us architects, it’s often much more interesting to work with them because they are more open to innovation,” she said. But the big change she sees in Paris is the 2023 Bioclimatic Local Urban Plan (PLUb). “It has changed the way we design projects because it sets strong requirements for the carbon



Left: St Ann's New Neighbourhood, Haringey, London, occupies the site of an old isolation hospital.

Below: St Ann's Neighbourhood, designed by Karakusevic Carson Architects.

footprint of building, permeable grounds, green roofs and the use of low-carbon materials," she said. "It pushes us to be much more creative, and to find the right balance between environmental goals and architecture." You can see one outcome in the practice's self-supporting prefabricated rammed earth housing at Rue des Quatre-Cheminées.

Connecting residents and the city

Once architects get to work on a project, how can they design it to help inhabitants connect better to the city and to each other? Much of their power is in choreographing the entrance sequence and the relationship between public and private – and perhaps a communal space in a courtyard sitting between those two, Bajet believes.

"We try to enhance the threshold sequence; so rather than designing a sad little door we design it so there's a window next to it," he said. "Then maybe people can open a window from the kitchen, and use an external little counter as if it was an extension of an kitchen island and talk to neighbours – the person who is going to live there can decide whether they want to open up more or close it."

Bajet sees architects having the opportunity to design spaces where communities can choose to gather – an orchard, a winter garden or a space on the ground floor for functions – which catalyse or "lubricate" neighbourliness.

For Déchelette, the density of Paris means generosity of space is hard to find. It is more about creating atmosphere and transparency and ensuring things that need to be at the entrance – bikes, post boxes – are catered for.

Batchelor, meanwhile, is an advocate for intervening in London's modernist housing estates to help tackle the way some feel as if they have turned their backs on the city. "We're trying to stitch existing homes and neighbourhoods back into the network of the city, but also into the wider urban consciousness," she said. "There were often spaces that wouldn't be traversed if you didn't live there, and they have created a separation in the economic life of the street." Karakusevic Carson, instead, might reintroduce a semi-secure communal courtyard. Sometimes ground floors are also used to solve other problems; with a crèche or an affordable supermarket, for example.





Left: Quiró, Barcelona, designed by Bajet Giramé + Espinet Ubach.

Below: Views across central atrio at the heart of the building show how private and shared space might work together.



Equally, though, Karakusevic Carson is trying to design new homes that appeal to the British psyche – with front doors running down a street – using maisonette forms either stacked or with apartments above. The question then becomes about the depth of the zone at the front door, and avoiding the desert of crisp packets and bins when you get it wrong, Batchelor continued. “We think about them carefully, with a little bit of planting; maybe a little bench next to the front door or a covered space there so you can find your keys in the dark.”

Regulation, innovation and facades

Interestingly, participants all view environmental constraints as contributing positively to buildings’ character and quality. “They encourage us to have more depth in the elevations – overhangs, overhanging lintels to stop overheating, simple detailing around windows – which can make a project feel better quality and more specific,” Batchelor said. “Maybe we’ll give a different treatment to a window on the west and the south than north and the east.”

Bajet agrees regulation has an important part to play in the balancing

"WE REALLY THINK ABOUT WHAT MATERIAL WILL MAKE MOST SENSE REGARDING THE LOCATION"

of the triangle of matter, materiality and structure that drives facade design: "These regulations are fundamentally necessary for the future of architecture," he said. "And let's be optimistic, we need these kinds of regulations: both the private and public sector need them to be convinced to make the investment, because you need to spend maybe 10% or 20% extra on some decisions."

He draws on the facade as a space: "We can inhabit facades – with winter gardens, balconies, loggias." These buffer zones, he pointed out, can help deal with extreme temperatures.

For Déchelette, it is Paris' shift away from concrete that is enabling more nuanced and contextual facades. "When I was at school, we were just drawing 18cm of material over the concrete," she said. "Now it's the opposite: we really think about what material will make most sense regarding the location and budgets and how the structure expresses the architecture." And when that is a stone facade amid historic Haussmann stone buildings, that is all the better.

Getting under the skin of social housing

But she is very aware that regulations (along with briefs and budgets) can leave architects with little room for manoeuvre. So, much care goes into the "microspaces – for example, an extra window depth to put some plants in", or a "shared library" between the common space and private door. "We design and draw them as much as possible so they can be used in everyday life," she said.

This focus on individual and shared experience beyond unit delivery echoed strongly with Bajet, who took it out to a wider focus, setting more for architects, their clients and society to do. "We are designing for real families, so we should be thinking on what kind of built ensembles would make people feel less lonely and help them live better in the future," he said. "This needs a reflection on the building typology, beyond the individual units." ■

Social Housing: Definitions and Design Exemplars (second edition), edited by Abigail Batchelor and Paul Karakusevic, is published by RIBA Publishing

Rammed earth load-bearing walls on the social housing at Rue des Quatre Cheminées, Paris, designed by Déchelette Architecture.





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THIRD AGE

Downsizing meant accepting we were moving into the next phase of life and doing it on our own terms, says the co-founder of Wright & Wright, who also looks back on her own experiences of designing for the elderly

WORDS
Clare Wright

Opposite: Charterhouse, a historic almshouse in central London, is still a haven for residents aged 60 and over.

Right: Wright & Wright is currently restoring and updating the Washhouse Court.

If I had known that when Sandy Wright and I moved to London as recent graduates in our 20s we would be living in the same flat in our 70s, I would have thought it frankly unbelievable.

Looking back, 1979 seems like a lost golden age – we had no student debt, and housing was truly affordable. No couple on Part 2 salaries could buy a garden flat in Camden now, but we could. And over the next decade we bashed our flat around and extended it to accommodate a growing family. We had to sell up when the 1991 recession hit, moving just across the road to a dangerous four-storey structure, complete with sitting tenant. The tenant moved on and the house was slowly renovated, becoming our home for over 35 years.

When we were contemplating downsizing, our old flat came on the market. Strangely, it still felt like ours and was eminently suitable as the place for us to live for the last phase of our lives. So we bought it back and started the process of considering our future design needs. But I had been thinking about housing for older people for decades.

In 1994, Wright & Wright was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to develop the concept of Lifetime Homes. Its premise was that many people, especially the elderly, lose

mobility, often suddenly. If their homes then become inaccessible, they cannot continue living there and often end up in hospital, unhappily bed-blocking, at great cost to the state. We were charged with identifying the minimum needed to create accessible homes: getting in the front door, having access at entrance level to a WC and kitchen, with space for a bed and/or the flexibility for future installation of a through-the-floor lift.

With the election of the New Labour government in 1997, we were asked to further progress these ideas and were commissioned to assess the impact of making accessibility compulsory in all new dwellings, working with the House Builders Federation (HBF). Before setting up Wright & Wright, I had been design manager at Circle 33 Housing Trust, so I knew about social housing and accessibility.

The HBF identified the steepest sloping sites in the country for us to review, as it thought a blanket requirement for access was impossible. This was an eye-opener for me. Unlike social housing, new private homes were already very accessible. On steeply sloping sites, either developers flattened the site or they designed homes so that owners could drive right up to their back doors. Presumably everyone wants good



access, whether they're carrying babies, golf clubs or heavy shopping, as well as it aiding the elderly and disabled. The HBF houses all had WCs at entrance level and covered porches, for finding keys out of the rain and so on. The only criterion they didn't meet was level access at external doors. There were always two steps up to the internal floor level because of concerns about flooding, which have since been addressed through construction detailing.

Around that time, five of my father's elderly siblings were well into their 90s, so I became acutely aware of the factors affecting their lives. Patrick and Kathleen were the eldest two, and both lived active, independent lives. Joey developed dementia but was looked after by Kathleen.

Maurie, who had been a consultant anaesthetist, was in a care home with thick carpets and a blazing fire in the entrance hall, her room accessed through a maze of corridors. She was unable to move, left to sit all day alone in her room, with only a brief exchange when food was delivered. She became confused, paranoid and deeply unhappy until Kathleen moved her to a far less glamorous place where people interacted constantly and she could actively practise her faith. Una was the



youngest and outlived the others. She moved into supported housing where she ate communally and valued the companionship.

My elderly relatives' experiences had a great impact on our proposal for private housing for the elderly in Stratford-upon-Avon. For ease of orientation, key spaces were arranged in a cruciform around the highly visible entrance, with each route having a unique aspect. There were one, two and three-bedroom flats. The latter would have been uncle Patrick's preferred option, with a living room large enough to accommodate some furniture from his bigger home and for family gatherings of his children and grandchildren. He could have had a study, bedroom and spare bedroom, the latter for his daughter, visiting from abroad. In our design, flats of that size had large roof terraces, as most people want immediate connection to the outside. The shared gardens were divided into four, each providing a different internal view, and were designed in a continuous route for those with slight dementia.

Now it is our turn. Deciding to downsize meant accepting that we were moving into the next phase of life, planning for what that might mean and doing it on our own terms. This was invigorating. I revel in our space being more compact and in travelling lighter. I enjoyed clearing 50 years of books,

student drawings and the minutes of meetings I don't remember. If I didn't do it, who would? But many decisions were difficult and arbitrary: what to keep and what to give away. We kept what was personally meaningful and made our flat our home. We carefully considered good lighting, to avoid trips and falls, level access inside and out, a bathroom designed for reduced mobility, physical security, a wonderful aspect and a garden that will attract wildlife, with the sound of moving water, and raised flowerbeds we can tend easily. Our flat has all of that as well as air-source heating, greatly increased insulation and, most importantly, toasty underfloor heating.

Our personal experience proved immensely useful when we came to upgrade Washhouse Court at the Charterhouse, a complex of historic almshouses in the City of London. The residents there are part of a community but are also downsizing, usually into a smaller personal home. Everything that was important to Sandy and me is important to them too. They are a community of men and women, who live together in buildings that date back to the 12th century. They each have individual flats with a bathroom and small kitchen but eat communally in a beautiful hall. There is also a chapel. It is right in the middle of the city and yet absolutely secure. It has beautiful gardens set within

courts of historic and modern buildings, a stone's throw from galleries, museums, theatres and the city buzz. The residents have the comfort of knowing they are secure and of having companionship. It is a wonderful place and, unsurprisingly, its residents have very high levels of wellbeing.

Frank Lloyd Wright was 69 and thought his creative years were over when he was commissioned to design Fallingwater in Pennsylvania. Matisse and Picasso were over 80 when they did some of their best work. Britain has an ageing population, many of whom are isolated and lonely with little stimulation, living in inappropriate accommodation.

Society must learn to recognise not only the particular physical and domestic needs of older people, but also their great potential, so that we plan properly for our ever increasing elders who still have so much to offer. ■

Above left: Clare and Sandy Wright have moved back into the Camden flat they first bought in 1979.

Middle: Meaningful items were kept; clutter ditched.

Right: Good lighting, level access and an accessible bathroom were carefully considered.

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TEMPLATES FOR BETTER LIVING

UK homes may be in disrepair, insecure and ill-prepared for climate change. Three projects are working on prototypes to tackle these issues

WORDS
Charlotte Banks

Too hot, too cold, too leaky, too cramped – much of our current housing stock has a damaging effect on our health and economy. So here, we present three housing prototypes testing how better design could tackle some of society’s biggest challenges.

Rethinking 1.4 million council houses

After the First World War, Tudor Walters’ seminal report set the scene for Britain’s first wave of council housing. Between 1919 and 1939, hundreds of schemes were built to his vision: low-density neighbourhoods of family houses, with large gardens for growing vegetables and newfangled indoor plumbing.

Around 1.4 million of these houses still stand across England and Wales, now bearing a century’s wear and tear. Common perils of Walters’ favoured designs include damp and mould pooling under dropped eaves, along with moisture ingress from shoddily retrofitted cavity wall insulation.

The Transforming Homes project, led by researchers from Bristol University and Cardiff University, is

creating a blueprint for upgrading and decarbonising the typology. By adapting and monitoring six demonstration homes – two owner-occupied in Bristol and four council-owned in Swansea – they aim to develop a retrofit model that can be replicated 1.4 million times over.

Each home is receiving slightly different interventions, fitting around inhabitants’ needs. A more fabric-first approach is being taken in Bristol, where houses are receiving external wool insulation, high-spec sustainable doors and windows, bio-based floor and loft insulation and a porch. The Swansea homes are getting a more holistic retrofit, including onsite renewables and battery storage. Most inventively, some of the homes will host ‘tech sheds’ – bio-based modular additions parked in those spacious back gardens, providing room for battery storage and additional roof space for PV panels.

Multiple modelling tools are assessing energy use, thermal comfort, moisture and condensation risk, ensuring the homes are comfortable to live in as well as more sustainable. “The condition of

the housing stock is terrible, and if we start doing DIY or patching things up, then we’re just creating more problems,” says Transforming Homes director Jo Patterson.

Close collaboration with residents is crucial to the programme’s success, to make sure adaptations mesh with how people actually use their space. The team have also conducted charrettes and workshops across the country, gathering opinions on what residents of interwar homes enjoy about living there – and how they would like their living spaces to improve.

From these activities, a picture is emerging of how differently people live in these houses compared with when they were built, using more storage space and spending more time in their bedrooms. This creates an interesting challenge for designers: how can houses built for 20th-century lifestyles incorporate 21st-century technologies? “I truly believe architects have got a massive role to play in this to make sure that we’re improving our stock in the right way,” says Patterson.



LEARNINGS SO FAR

Social relations shape opportunities for retrofit – trust for various solutions can be built and lost through word-of-mouth.

Residents gain useful practical knowledge about how their homes function through everyday caretaking activities, which can be harnessed to target retrofit measures in the right places.

Left: Charrette participants build models of their interwar home.



Left: Visual showing how several demonstrator modules could form part of a larger development.

Below: Demonstrator module interior, showing living/dining room and bedroom.

Tackling the temporary housing scandal

It's no secret that London's development market is struggling. High material costs, building safety regulation and faltering apartment sales have stymied regeneration projects up and down the city, leaving empty patches of land to languish. What others might see as tragedy, RCKa instead views as an opportunity to address London's temporary accommodation crisis.

The practice has created a prototype demountable modular home that can be installed within hours and taken down just as quickly – perfect for meanwhile use on stalled regeneration sites. The family-sized homes are designed with a 60-year lifespan, with the intention that they can be taken apart and moved elsewhere once the land is ceded to permanent development. RCKa's founding director Russell Curtis hopes the prototype can give local authorities confidence to invest in longer-term solutions for meeting their overwhelming statutory homelessness duties, providing more dignity and stability to people caught in the capital's housing crisis.

"London councils are spending £5.5 million a day on housing families in substandard accommodation: anything from B&Bs, small flats, hotel rooms," Curtis says. "What we're proposing is that you can deliver these homes which are much safer, much larger and much more comfortable – and much cheaper than the alternative."

The firm was approached by modular provider Rollalong in late 2024 and challenged to design, manufacture and install a relocatable housing unit in just 70 days, in time to feature as part of the Building Centre's New Homes in New Ways exhibition. To demonstrate how easily the module could be reused, it was deconstructed after 28 days and moved outside City Hall.

The design challenge for RCKa was to conceive of something that could be built as much as possible in a factory – down to internal fixtures and decoration – so very little construction work had to be done on site, aside from groundworks and drainage. Units are above minimum space standard and contain plenty of storage.

"It was really to demonstrate that good quality, well-designed homes could be built and moved around with relative ease, and that doesn't mean that they should be inferior to a normal home," says Curtis.

The project has already secured its first buyer, the London Borough of Havering, which has bought 18 of the modules for installation on a stalled plot earmarked for 1,380 homes. Having bought the modules outright, the council will be able to relocate them once construction of permanent homes starts. RCKa is also proposing a financial model whereby local authorities lease modules from a provider, which can later be repurposed as site cabins or temporary classrooms.





Cutting carbon emissions by 75%

Two houses stand side by side, a combination of brick slip, white render and French doors you might find in any UK suburb. One day they are pelted with snow and ice; the next they scorch under desert sun.

That all this can take place in temperate Greater Manchester is thanks to the University of Salford's Energy House 2.0. In a imposing black cube, hulking weather rigs can recreate all sorts of climate scenarios, reaching temperatures up to 52°C and down to minus 23°C.

The two homes being put through their paces within these chambers were built by Bellway and Barratt Redrow to sustainability levels anticipating the upcoming Future Homes Standard, the final text of which was published in March this year. The two housebuilders then handed the keys over to researchers in January 2023 to "test them to death on all sorts of parameters", according to Will Swan, director of the university's Energy House Laboratories.

When the Future Homes Standard comes into force in March 2027, new-build homes will need to emit 75% less

carbon compared with 2013 standards. This requires the rollout of relatively new low-carbon technologies on an unprecedented scale, with limited understanding of how they might cope long-term in a warmer, wilder climate.

The ability to test sustainability innovations in real-world conditions helps to give builders the confidence to incorporate them into their new developments, Swan explains. "That's the benefit of Energy House, our ability to prototype, an ability to get things wrong, an ability to take risks – because it's not people's real homes," he says.

After 2026's record-breaking summer of heatwaves, overheating and ventilation are at the top of the research agenda. A recent study undertaken in the chambers demonstrated that heat pumps can, counterintuitively, help rooms remain a comfortable temperature in hot weather.

"Buildings are really complicated – think about air quality, comfort, usability, light, acoustics," says Swan. "Architects can think outside the box in how we might solve something, and our benefit is we bring the science to it to say what works." ■

Above left: Bellway and Barratt Redrow have constructed two typical houses to test in the University of Salford's facilities.

Above top: The exterior of Energy House 2.0 at the University of Salford.

Above: Each room is equipped with sensors to track multiple data points.

INSIGHTS FROM EXPERIMENTS

Heat-emitting systems, including radiators, underfloor heating and skirting board emitters, all failed to warm rooms up enough when used intermittently, especially in more extreme winter temperatures.

Building layout needs to be considered in designing heating and ventilation systems to avoid transporting pollutants into closed rooms.

External wall, loft ceiling and window insulation are most important for achieving airtightness and minimising heating demand.

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Crusader, completed in 2022, retained much of the Manchester mill's fabric while introducing bold new circulation.



DANIEL HOPKINSON

FINE

As the range of housing schemes led by shedkm shows, adaptive reuse remains key to revitalising our urban centres – despite growing challenges

WORDS

Flo Armitage-Hookes

With 20 major retrofits under its belt, from a listed cotton spinning mill to a 1960s office block, shedkm is well versed in the benefits of reuse for communities, the environment and a place's identity. Yet despite the urgent need to deliver more homes in town centres and the government's commitment to reach net zero by 2050, the Liverpool-based practice is finding it harder than ever to convert to residential.

Sitting in their Manchester studio, which opened in 2025, directors Ian Killick and Mark Sidebotham unpack what's changed over the last three decades, their design approach, and which typologies have the most future potential for housing. Both joined the practice in 1998; it was founded by Dave King, Jonathan Falkingham and James Weston the year before, a time when many highly visible, often industrial buildings lay latent in northern towns and cities. "At the beginning, it was just

about economic necessity and saving landmarks, which people loved and had worked in," remembers Killick.

The firm kicked off with two such projects for Urban Splash in Liverpool: the renovations of a fire-ravaged early Victorian school into 95 apartments, and a 1918 match factory into offices. Both were listed, but shedkm didn't fret over heritage concerns or regulations. Instead the team focused on practical ways to retain as much of the buildings' fabric as possible without overcomplicating things. "I think what we achieved was partly due to our naivety, because I was straight out of university," Sidebotham reflects.

Even now, shedkm doesn't employ any conservation architects. The studio hasn't needed to, and remains more interested in a scheme's wider urban impact than the art of preservation. "We're [doing] regeneration – which means looking at a building with a bit

more of an open mind," says Sidebotham. Heritage specialists are called in when needed, but team members work much more closely with landscape designers to create a renewed sense of place.

New elements are clearly signalled, often clad in the practice's favourite canary yellow. At its Crusader project in Manchester, which converted a cluster of historic mills into 126 apartments around a courtyard, new lift cores stand away from the original fabric. This was presented to clients as a pragmatic solution, minimising changes to the original cast-iron structure and removing noise and bin stores from corridors. Just as importantly, though, it retained more of the mills' red-brick facades.

As we peek inside flats in another of shedkm's central Manchester conversions, this time a former shipping warehouse, it's easy to see why they are so popular with tenants. Instead of anonymous hallways and repetitive

MARGINS



Left: Shedkm transformed two derelict Victorian shipping warehouses into 59 apartments for rent as part of the mixed-use Kampus scheme in Manchester, completed in 2021.

Below: Within the former warehouses, original features irregularly animate corridors and homes.

Opposite: At Chimney Pot Park in Salford, shedkm regenerated 349 rundown terraced houses back in 2008.

units (the staples of new builds), historic features distinguish the internal spaces. Cast-iron columns pepper corridors, wooden trusses cut across living spaces, and one crossbrace frames a teenager's electric guitars. The contractor wanted to box them off, but shedkm fought to keep them, painstakingly mapping exposed services around them. "Everyone loves being in an old building that's got a bit of history and place; perhaps it's the psyche of people in the UK," says Sidebotham. A resident tells us that she didn't have many belongings when she first moved in, but it didn't matter because her space was full of character already.

However, it's no surprise that tighter regulations in response to the Grenfell tragedy have made retrofit to residential more challenging. Previously, shedkm would design bespoke details from first principles, but now the testing required is too prolonged and costly. The extra requirements for higher-risk buildings also mean some spaces can only feasibly become offices or retail. To make the most of the UK's building stock, there needs to be more flexibility for existing structures, the directors argue.

The VAT applied to retrofit projects is a further disadvantage. "If they stopped it or even halved it, it would unlock so many projects," laments Sidebotham, who says the issue is perpetually returned to at reuse conferences. Ludicrously, shedkm's renovation of 349 Victorian

Salford terraces in 2008 demolished far more than was necessary, retaining only the facades; the project would not have stacked up financially without qualifying as a new build, the director says.

Shedkm's later housing schemes have often included taller new structures to meet developers' viability thresholds. Phoenix, a 10-storey block next to Crusader, smoothed the way for the mills' reuse. Similarly, at Kampus, the cost of refurbishing two Victorian warehouses was offset by new buildings by Mecanoo. Both directors chuckle, recalling their concern that Phoenix may have been too high. With a whole fleet of towers above 40 storeys in today's Manchester, it now seems remarkably modest.

Clients, in their own ways, have come around to the environmental benefits of reuse. It started with shedkm persuading them to collect carbon and energy data to enter architecture awards. These days, it's central to their marketing campaigns.

For councils, retrofit's regenerative potential is particularly compelling. "All these peripheral towns: if they're going to make themselves a place, they've got to build on the history that exists – and that doesn't mean just Victorian history, but all the history," explains Sidebotham.

In 2025, shedkm and developer Capital&Centric were granted planning approval for 391 new apartments and homes on four central sites, including a 1960s car park and shopping centre,



**"IF THEY STOPPED THE VAT ON
RETROFIT, OR EVEN HALVED IT, THAT
WOULD UNLOCK SO MANY PROJECTS"**





CAPITAL&CENTRIC, OUR STUDIO (2)

in Newcastle-under-Lyme. The town is struggling, with the centre empty most evenings, meaning the local authority is strongly motivated to bring in residents. Some councils are very slow to work with, say the directors, but Newcastle-under-Lyme's knows this could be a make or break scheme for the area. "It's quite a responsibility," admits Killick.

Since the announcement, shedkm has had a lot of excited calls from people wanting to convert their decaying concrete car parks. Along with offices and shopping centres from the same era, the typology has so far been largely overlooked for reuse. But given their central locations, underuse and increasing profile thanks to Brutalism-enthusiasts, that's now changing.

Not all car parks would work for residential: ceiling heights became squeezed in the 1970s and deep plans mean slabs must be cut away to introduce light and circulation. Extending up can deliver more units; at the Newcastle-under-Lyme car park, an extra storey of pitched aluminium-clad homes will top the existing structure. However, shedkm took care not to hit seven storeys. "We

didn't need that extra complication [of an HRB], when doing something quite complex already," says Killick. Luckily, net-to-gross ratio is less important to the council client than meaningfully revitalising the town centre, and £35 million has been secured from Town Deals and the Future High Streets Fund.

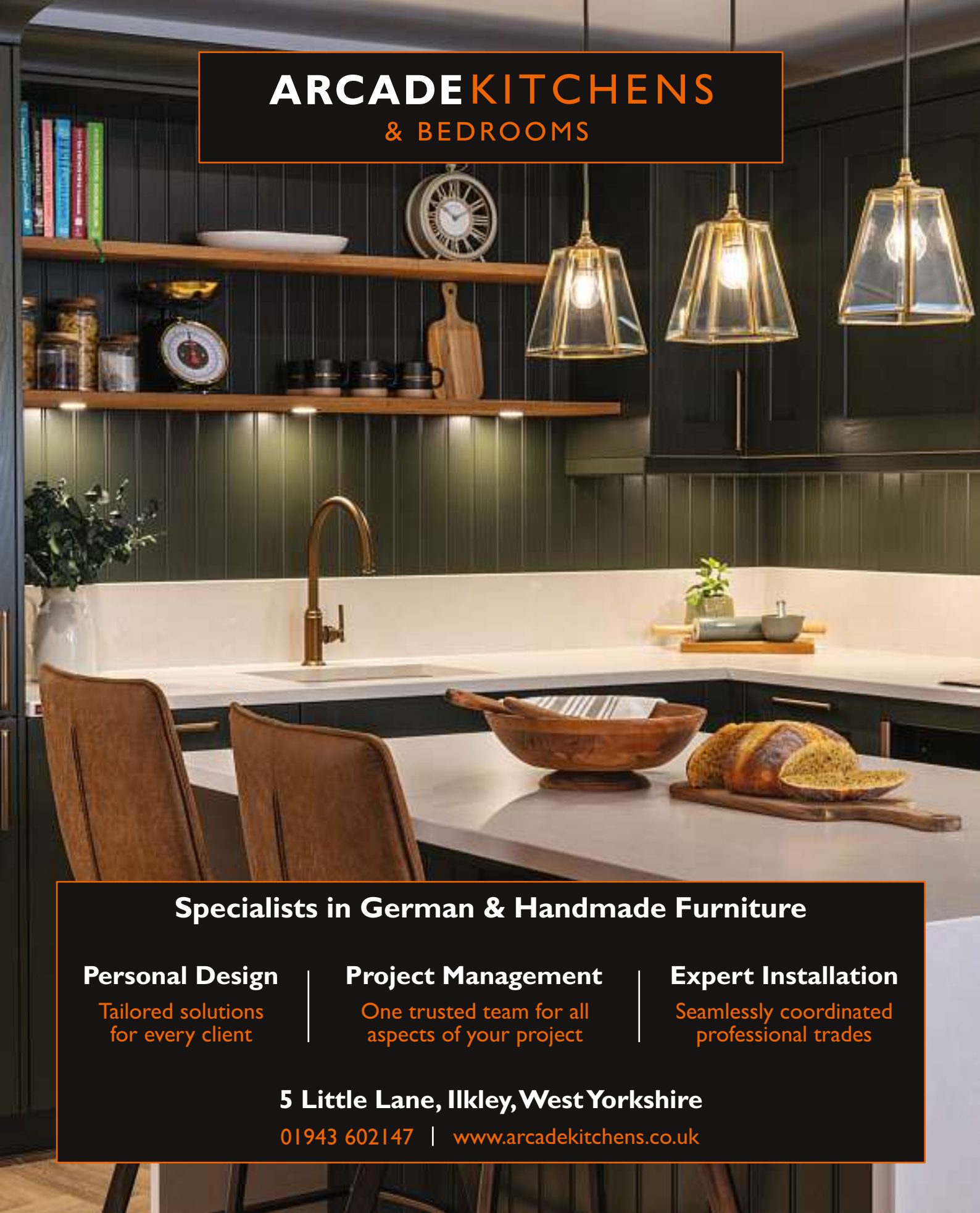
The studio's most recently completed retrofit is Zodiac House in Croydon, of Peep Show fame. Its four-storey office plinth had stood empty for over 30 years and has now been converted into 73 one-, two- and three-bedroom flats for emergency housing, with a greened forecourt. While shedkm has delivered multiple new-build and modular schemes in London, it marks the firm's first reuse project in the city – perhaps due to greater competition, or because its network of clients and collaborators is concentrated up north.

Despite taking ever more stamina to deliver in the UK, retrofit is essential to sustainably rekindling our towns and cities, allowing for both change and continuity. "It's more difficult than just building something new, but it creates a better place," asserts Killick. ■

Above: Karparc in Newcastle-under-Lyme is one of four sites which shedkm has recently secured planning permission for in the town. It will become 111 one- and two-bedroom homes.

Below: Positioned centrally and underused, 1960s carparks have distinct potential for urban retrofit.





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SPIRIT OF PLACE



WORDS

Josephine Smit

PORTRAIT

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Opposite: Jason Prior – “Good growth is inherent to all the projects we work on.”

Left: Prior + Partners has been working on the future of Bristol Temple Quarter since 2023 and has led development of the masterplan framework for its largest regeneration area, St Philip's Marsh.

Jason Prior, co-founder of Prior + Partners, talks about finding the clues that help create distinct places to live

It's common enough for people to look away into the distance as they form their thoughts in a conversation. For Jason Prior, the gesture seems to sum up a working life focused not on the here and now, but on shaping places and communities so they can grow and thrive far into the future.

Three decades ago, he created a masterplan that put the heart back into Manchester city centre – along with homes, commercial vibrancy and public realm – in the wake of the 1996 IRA bomb. The landscape architect-turned-masterplanner also charted the course for 226ha of post-industrial east London to become today's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, as well as the setting for the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Those projects, undertaken when Prior was European president of consultancy EDAW (now AECOM), have been followed by many more. For the past nine years they have been carried

out by his masterplanning, planning and economics practice, Prior + Partners. Prior and co-founder, architect and fellow EDAW alumnus Graham Goymour, brought together a like-minded team for this new company – people who, Prior recalls, “had largely steered clear of architecture and focused on place in the round – the economics, social infrastructure, environment, landscape, social amenity and community building of place”.

Since then, the practice's London office has been joined by another in Dubai, and has become an employee-owned trust with a new leadership team, including managing director Elise Baudon. It has also extended its focus into data and digital. A long list of UK projects includes the 7,000-home Silvertown regeneration in east London's Royal Docks, which in June secured £100 million of investment from the London mayor, and the 135ha Bristol

Temple Quarter. Internationally, it has worked in the Middle East, the USA, Australia, Serbia and, unusually, Bhutan, where it created the structure plan, plotting good growth alongside 20,000 homes for its capital city, Thimphu.

Such projects are hugely significant in their scale, ambition and complexity. For clients, says Prior, masterplanning gives “an analysis beyond place; an analysis that includes need, context, accessibility and speaks to not just some made-up model citizen but anticipates a diverse population, age group, need, whatever, which makes the place richer”. Good growth may have been a focus of the Thimphu project, but it is, he says, “inherent to all the projects we work on”. For project delivery, the process establishes “good bones, good muscles, good infrastructure – the big decisions made and the frameworks set up”.

This quality of placemaking is relatively rare across UK housebuilding,



where only 6% of homes are designed by architects, according to 2018 data. “I think there is a lack of appreciation of place, of topography,” says Prior. “All places are situated on a piece of ground, in a district, in a county, on a certain soil type with indigenous vegetation and usually with a view. There is always something, however small, that distinguishes one greenfield site from the next or an urban regeneration scheme from another, and those hints and clues can be incredibly valuable in creating distinguishing places.”

The current challenges of delivering large-scale communities and housing have prompted many to call for cost and regulatory burdens to be lifted. While Prior joins those calls, his practice has also contributed constructively to the debate, establishing a panel of strategic specialists to offer their thoughts to the government.

He sees recent planning policy changes as “radical and important and they’re going to make a difference”, including the reintroduction of strategic planning, ditched by the coalition government in 2010 – a move Prior describes as “an unmitigated disaster”.

Then there’s the drive for devolution, accelerating under Andy Burnham’s premiership, and the increasing deployment of urban development corporations to deliver growth through the mayoral authorities and, potentially, a new generation of new towns.

Prior has seen some of this before. As a student he worked at Milton Keynes Development Corporation in his year out. “My memory of that is just an extraordinary passion for the mission,” he says. “There were people in that team who lived and breathed making a new town, and they did it with massive commitment and verve and energy.” Later, at EDAW he worked with the then Labour government’s urban regeneration companies in Liverpool and Sheffield.

More recently, his practice has worked with Cambridge Growth Company – now evolved into the Greater Cambridge Development Corporation. Its work, Prior says, has focused on “looking at the bigger pressures, having an eye over the horizon, but also looking at the need to coordinate all the big moves that need to be made to bring the bigger idea forward”.

Policy change is intended to help spur progress towards the government’s 1.5 million homes target, but the UK could also benefit from learning from other countries, says Prior. Despite changes, he argues that the UK planning system remains “bogged down”, while “a lot of countries are now saying we need to work faster, get there quicker and are adopting digital and data”. While priorities like health and wellbeing are the stuff of exemplar housing projects in the UK, in locations like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Prior says, health is among the top two or three metrics listed by clients.

He believes there’s a different attitude beyond the English Channel. “People make some very big moves, and I feel we’re slightly losing the art of that. We can do these things, but I think we hesitate sometimes in making it happen.”

None of this has restricted Prior + Partners from growing its UK workload. The return of strategic planning and increased policy support for new communities have contributed to that. So too has the practice’s decision to expand its digital and data capabilities. One consequence of the latter is its Place+

"WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT HOUSING AS THE ROOTS OF COMMUNITY"



TONY JACKSON

platform, launched earlier this year, and the first tool on the platform, the freely available National Place Portrait.

The latter sets out social, economic, environmental and other place-based data for England and Wales, with the aim of helping to grow understanding of the characteristics and needs of places, identify priorities effectively and, ultimately, drive more evidence-led decisions. "A lot of that stuff never gets used and should be used – and it should be right up at the front of discussions," says Prior. "This data isn't making projects any easier, but I think it's making them smarter." The practice already works with analysis tools – a move he says is significant. "It's a sure signpost from us that masterplanning is a more complex, deeper rooted process into how communities work."

Prior wants to reframe the conversation on house-building, and data is essential to that. "Can we stop asking the question about the number of units?" he asks. Instead, the focus should be on community-orientated and evidence-based questions like: "How many more homes do we need of this demographic to

put enough kids into that primary school to make sure the school stays?

"We ought to think about housing at one level as national infrastructure – how can you run a successful country without enough houses for people?

"Secondly, we need to think about housing as the kind of roots of community and belonging because that's where it starts from ... who your neighbours are and whether you feel a sense of place." Like those creators of Milton Keynes, Prior clearly has an extraordinary passion for his mission.

Above: Prior + Partners recently returned to one of Jason Prior's earlier projects, the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, to assess its economic and social impacts.

Opposite: The indicative masterplan for the 28ha Silvertown site in the Royal Docks provides around 7,000 homes, workspace and cultural and community spaces.

PRIOR + PARTNERS IN NUMBERS

2017

Prior + Partners is founded

2023

The practice transitions to an employee owned trust

2025

Opens Dubai office

2026

140 staff spanning 27 nationalities

50:50

The practice's present ratio of international to UK work

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DISCOMFORTS OF HOME

Henry Woide
Swings (from Chiswick Cuckoo) 2020
henrywoide.co.uk
Instagram: @henrywoide

Returning to live at his childhood home out of financial necessity as Covid struck, Henry Woide, like many others, was left with the uneasy luxury of time to reflect on his life. For him it was an introspection compounded by having committed to a photography MA, ultimately completed during 2020's many lockdowns. As he reassimilated, maybe the idea of a fixed deadline lurking in that strange period's otherwise contingent timeline is what saw him look to the reassurance of the family's photo albums: the pain of present uncertainty numbed by the balm of the past.

Within their pages Woide saw their Victorian Chiswick home as the backdrop for family Christmases, birthday parties and barbecues; here too were school plays, family holidays, random high jinks with his brother. It all seemed so idyllic and happy, but in light of the intervening years – adulthood, the reappraisal of family 'givens' and the deterioration of some relationships – had it really been so? His Chiswick Cuckoo series looked to critically revisit his past via these images, and went on to form his MA submission.

The methodology was experimental – or childlike. Some images were intervened on in subtle ways, such as being rephotographed through water or another medium, lending an illusory quality. In others, elements were cut out or montaged by hand, forcing rereading. Some, like the playground shown here, were new, revisiting sites of memory but left ambiguous as if to insinuate themselves into his set: a rubber mat cut out to form a puddle to the past, or a smashed plant pot lying on a floor with the pathos of a washed-up squid. Most strange in Woide's rereading, a few shots seem left untouched; inserted into his running order, together they all seem to tremulate around a kind of truth, from normal to unusual to uncanny.

For his parents the research raised tricky questions. Had they done a good job? Had home life really been unhappy? But this would be to read too much into it: the work was purely personal, relieving the burden of a self-imposed narrative of a home he'd outgrown. Asked about his favourite memory, Woide recalls the trampoline at the end of the garden and the visceral thrill of flying it induced. Physical laws that also apply to his swing, where at the momentary apex of its arc, the body's so light it's almost not there. ■

Jan-Carlos Kucharek

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This is your chance to be published by RIBA and to be a part of the 11th edition of the awards. ■

JUDGES

Anna Liu, Tonkin Liu
Beth Bourrelly, BDP
Kathy MacEwen,
planner
Chair: Flo Armitage-
Hookes, RIBA

TO ENTER

ribaj.com/enter-now-macewen-award

DEADLINE

Wednesday 28
October, 11am GMT

Left: Tonkin Liu's
Heritage Quad and
Tech Hub in York won
the 2026 award.



In Somerset, architect Charles Gillespie has drawn on local vernacular – the linhay barn – in creating a remarkable new multigenerational homestead

CREDITS

Planning consultant

Whiteacre Planning

Structural and civil engineer

Build Collective

MEP consultant

Greengauge Building Energy Consultants

Ecologist

Ecological Surveys

Quantity surveyor

Wessex Estate Management

Opposite: The colonnade shades the south-facing facade while a ground-floor living space projects northwards.

Below: The Linhay and Highland homes amongst their low-lying outbuildings.



When RIBA invited me to visit Charles Gillespie's new brace of rural homes on a Somerset farm, I confess to jumping to a few conclusions. The grey-blue uniformity of the blue lias stone on the grander house, The Linhay, seemed to exacerbate the apparently corporate scale of the architecture; I had seen the colonnade and thought it more akin to a bank than a home. I questioned how using a feature of this mass could benefit a domestic setting. But I had drawn my conclusions too soon.

A gallery of framed views

As I drive through village after village of blue lias homes, its choice for the gables becomes an obvious one. Then, rounding the corner and seeing The Linhay, set in its range of low outbuildings, the whole composition becomes clearer. They counterpoint the magnitude of the facade, at once framing and tempering the scale that seems austere in photographs. The composition creates a sense of arrival and place that another low barn form or conventional house would not have achieved.

The irony isn't lost on me. A house designed to mimic an agricultural building: the columned, open-fronted linhay barn, a form that was itself mimicking a house. It completes a full-circle parody: from Andrea Palladio's Villa Rotunda to Squire John Warren Barry's classicist pigsty, and back again. Maybe it's a statement on where we stand today, desperately hunting for a vernacular that honours our past without glorifying the architectural legacy of an empire that plundered wealth to build its grandeur.

This building continues a rich history of 'weird' buildings around the Glastonbury area, each designed to perfectly fit with their owners' tastes and lifestyle – often to the point of incomprehensibility for many passers-by without inside knowledge of why decisions were made. These two houses





are for the young family of architect Charles and for his parents, and he has drawn on his experience at Foster + Partners, Marks Barfield and Allies and Morrison, while producing something quite unexpected. I tell my children that being weird can be a good thing if you're true to yourself. So why should that differ for a home?

Like many historic farmsteads, even reaching the front door takes you through an array of outbuildings, which makes you feel as if you've entered the home long before you arrive at the threshold. The seating area to the front is testament to the shared nature of this site; as you go into the building through a space that could seem tight, it opens itself up to you with a range of tantalising views deep into the family's more private spaces.

Step forward and you're in a double-height lobby that might have been wasted space, but acts as a place of convergence with the family piano bringing a musical accompaniment (thanks to Charles' daughter). The lobby is further defined by a stunning red-sand-pigmented concrete staircase, detailed to perfection.

The main living area beyond is subtle yet warm, and is anchored at one end by a picture window that must heavily define the room through the seasons and give a wonderful connection to the rewilded landscape beyond – a nod to the traditionally managed grasslands of the nearby Babcarly Meadows.

One of my favourite unexpected spaces is the first-floor corridor, which again has confused desktop commentators with its southerly aspect. But its low sills invite you to sit on them, and in doing so you are transported into the colonnade behind, backdropped by a wider landscape worthy of a Ridley Scott movie. This is a space between spaces, where the family are drawn out of their rooms to share life together.

To the rear, The Linhay's main wing has a lovely sense of proportion, looking more like a Georgian farmhouse than the agricultural premise of its southerly elevation. So many large windows on the north elevation might ire Passivhaus designers, but it affords each room a wonderful and monastic northern light not unlike a studio space. These are calm, reverent rooms which might have made In Praise of Shadows' author Jun'ichirō Tanizaki very happy.

The external intersection of the main wing to the single-storey portion, which houses the living spaces of kitchen, dining and play rooms, is dealt with in a style closer to the original linhay barn model. The detailing suggests it is slid into a larger formerly open end bay of the north elevation. The first floor's internal spaces step back from the gable end of the building as if telling of a staged or evolutionary enclosure of space, which gives a double framing of the view onto western skies from the main lobby.

Top left: A sunny south-facing yard sits between the houses.

Top right: The open first floor and colonnade of The Linhay.

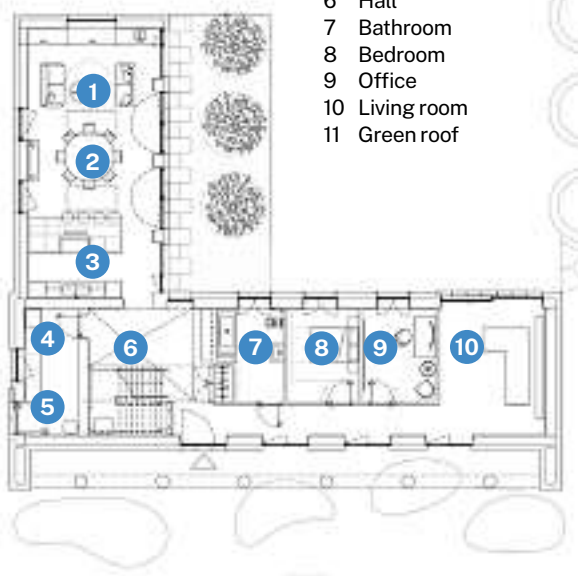
Below: Kitchen, eating and playroom with picture window to the landscape beyond.

Opposite: A gentle composition amid the higgledy-piggledy telephone poles.

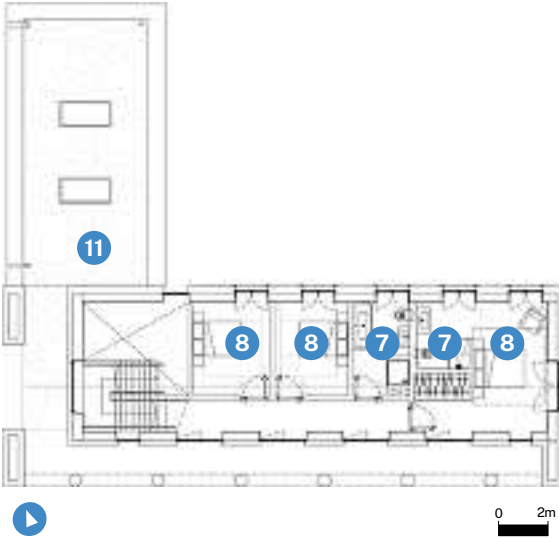


THE LINHAY: GROUND FLOOR PLAN

- 1 Playroom
- 2 Dining
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Utility
- 5 Plant
- 6 Hall
- 7 Bathroom
- 8 Bedroom
- 9 Office
- 10 Living room
- 11 Green roof



THE LINHAY: FIRST FLOOR PLAN



KEY DATA: THE LINHAY

TOTAL CONTRACT COST

Confidential

GIFA COST PER M²

£3,100

AREA

230m²

FORM OF CONTRACT

Domestic building
contract

WHOLE-LIFE CARBON

574kgCO₂e/m²

CHARLES GILLESPIE ARCHITECTURE (2)



SUPPLIERS

Steico wood-fibre insulation

Back to Earth

Blue lias stone

AR Purnells

Larch cladding

Land Logic Timber

Juwo blocks

Evolved Group

Precast stone

Minsterstone

Laminated veneer lumber

Kithurst Homes

Bespoke joinery

Kennard Brothers

Hand-finished clay roof tiles

(The Linhay)

Marley

Greencoat PLX

standing-seam

roofing (Highlands)

Metal Roofing

Company

DAVE WATTS PHOTOGRAPHY



An upside-down house for downsizers

The adjoining Highlands property is perhaps more conventional in landscaping and architectural response, thanks to Charles' parents' own views on what a house should be and how it should be set. Yet it is also superb architecture that manages to provide a downsized property without making it feel in any way constricted or ungenerous. Its upside-down living permits a large open-plan space with almost 360-degree views, which still feels distinctly agricultural in its expressed simple junctions and the scale of timber and steel.

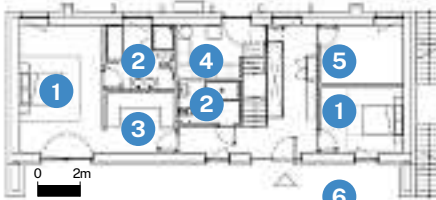
There may not be many people who would design their neighbours' living room to look directly toward the main house's master bedroom, especially if they are your parents. But the two existing mature trees on the site afford a surprising level of privacy between the two interiors, while allowing an innate sense of interwovenness for a multigenerational living space. How delightful for Charles' parents to be able to watch their grandchildren play, albeit in a wildflower meadow that perhaps is less appealing to a different generation's sense of place and order.

It is to my discredit that I allowed myself to dismiss this scheme from a short survey of a few selected photos. Charles' designs are truly worthy of a place in the ongoing discussions about an evolving English rural vernacular. ■

Robert Elkins is an architect with Wiltshire-based Artel31



HIGHLANDS: GROUND FLOOR PLAN



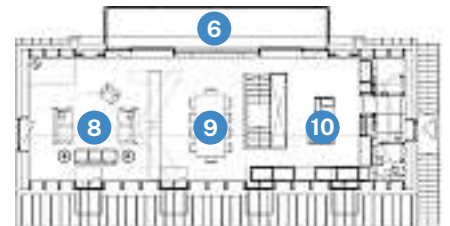
Top left: Stair up to the first-floor living spaces in Highlands.

Top right: The low pitched roof gives a sense of a smaller building that has been extended.

Left: The two houses and garage from the field next door.



HIGHLANDS: FIRST FLOOR PLAN



- 1 Bedroom
- 2 Bathroom
- 3 Dressing room
- 4 Utility
- 5 Study/bedroom
- 6 Terrace/balcony
- 7 Gym/garden room
- 8 Sitting room
- 9 Dining
- 10 Kitchen



KEY DATA: HIGHLANDS

TOTAL CONTRACT COST

Confidential
GIFA COST PER M²
£3,500

AREA
211m²

FORM OF CONTRACT

RIBA Domestic Building Contract

WHOLE-LIFE CARBON
806kgCO₂e/m²



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TAKING FLIGHT



Articulated rooflines and a studied use of white brick are among the things that make Brabazon a convincing place.



The early phases of FCBS' Brabazon scheme, on an airfield just beyond Bristol's city limits, have important lessons for the new towns programme

WORDS

Eleanor Young

"You can deliver at a good density and deliver houses," rounds up YTL Developments director Seb Loyn. That – in almost simplistic terms – is his lesson for new towns. It is a conclusion drawn by Loyn from his eight years of work on Brabazon, a new 142ha community just north of Bristol on which the first two phases of new homes, designed by FeildenCleggBradley Studios, have now been completed. The density in phase one is 75dph, compared with the typical local 30. And the majority are houses, with front doors, gardens and often garages too.

The old airfield site, named after a prototype aircraft that was one of the largest-ever when built there in the 1940s, is an essential part of the government's new towns programme. Brabazon and the surrounding Western Innovation Arc was announced in March as one of seven projects to be taken forward. Sir Michael Lyons, the chair of the New Towns Taskforce, also chose Loyn's new baby as the poster child for the taskforce launch – Loyn was then living in Brabazon himself, with his small family.

It could have been a different story. This edge of Bristol is typified by sprawling suburban housing, from which people have to jump in their cars to get somewhere. Loyn explains how the site had consent for 2,000 homes, until the case was made for it as a new piece of city under a fresh masterplan by FCBS. Now 6,500 homes are planned, along with community and startup spaces, offices, the Aviva Arena – a reworking of giant hangars by Grimshaw – parks and a lake. A new station, Bristol Brabazon, is due to open during 2026. For now, bus routes, e-scooters for hire and bike lanes connect residents to Bristol, stations to London, Wales and the North.

It all sounds like it is shaping up nicely. But is still a vast construction site. And the community and connectivity is not there yet: parking pressure suggests many still want a second or third car to get to work or for the quick drive to out-of-town shopping centre Cribbs Causeway. The clutch of

REBECCA NOAKES

four hundred homes have had to start shifting perceptions on their own.

Any tour has to start at the newly reopened Spitfire Hangar, where the café and community room are becoming a gathering space in the repurposed building. I walk around with Andy Macintosh of FCBS. From here you can see the wildflower edge of the central park to come. A terrace of brick houses backs onto the edge, a bank of pretty planting to their garden walls, the dark brick skin given inner life with two-storey lighter brick setbacks. The homes have partly enclosed first-floor balconies which the windows on the second floor look out onto, so they act almost as a lightwell. A vertical brick rebate clearly delineates each house, ensuring there is a human scale to the rhythm. The roofline is energised by the flick up of the roof, creating double-height spaces and storage.

These tropes – some tested out on FCBS’ Stirling Prize-winning homes at Accordia in Cambridge – are the ones that set Brabazon apart among new-build housing schemes, not just locally but across many areas of the UK. Interesting green streets and layouts; thoughtful, high-quality brickwork design; a developed roofline beneath which can be found double-height spaces and storage. So let’s consider each attribute in turn.

- 1 Spitfire Hangar
- 2 Public open space
- 3 Residents’ gardens
- 4 Play street
- 5 Phase to come

Below: Some of the simpler terraces, benefiting from generous planting.

Right: The main crescent is broken up with two partly covered alleyways.



THE SKYLARK LEVEL 1.5



LEVEL 1



LEVEL 0



SECTION



- | | |
|------------|-----------|
| 1 Bed | 5 Garden |
| 2 Bathroom | 6 Terrace |
| 3 Living | 7 Garage |
| 4 Kitchen | |

Green streets and layouts

Anyone interested in a modal shift to get us travelling more actively on foot, on bikes and on scooters, and being less reliant on cars, will see some important moves at Brabazon. It's as you might expect from a project advised by Gehl. Yes there are bike lanes; but once in among the houses it made sense to argue for slower cars sharing narrower (13m-wide) roads with bikes, so the streets feel more comfortably enclosed. Where to put still-needed cars when parked (one space for one- or two-bed units in phase one, lower in phase two) was an ever-present puzzle.

Two crescents arc away from each other between the two phases of housing, demanding a kink in the feeder road, while breaking up the geometry of short streets and blocks and creating opportunities for green spaces along the way. There are garden streets: planted and green places asking for conversation and play, with cars tucked away in parking courts. There are communal gardens; at one, the terraces on three sides have generous first-floor balconies, looking out over them. These, for Macintosh, are choice houses offering greenery and community life, and places for children to play within sight of home. On this block FCBS took advantage of the difference in site levels to design a podium

that avoids the costs of a full basement of car parking (with the bonus that trees on its northern edge can be planted direct into the ground).

Besides this, these spaces work on a pleasure principle. They will be more enjoyable to be in, with trees and banks of planting softening hard road and building surfaces – one of the definite improvements on the best high-density schemes over recent years, from here to Elephant Park in London's Southwark. Later phases even include maintained hedges edging the small front gardens, a decision that also brings order to the street, no matter residents' levels of enthusiasm for tending their front plots.

Brickwork design

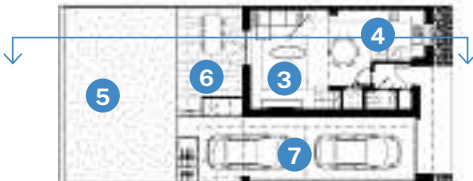
Against this, brickwork could feel rather plain. But, living here at Brabazon, it seems likely to grow on you. Patterns are used for relief and architectural emphasis, or sometimes in a gesture of generosity. The crescents have a top band of projecting bricks, creating a diagonal latticework, and front doors where the bricks step back to give a generous entrance and a natural home to a door number and light. Elsewhere, projecting courses enliven an almost austere facade.

Below: Brickwork stepbacks and stepdowns give a sense of consideration and order to elements such as the downlight.

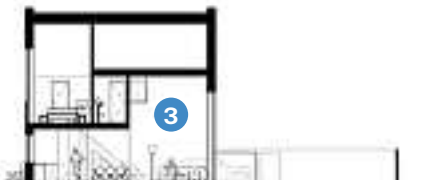
THE BADMINTON LEVEL 1



LEVEL 0



SECTION





Double-height living room.



Above: The occasional flourishes of curves and shared gardens create an interesting urban texture.

Rooflines, lofty spaces and storage

The articulated rooflines on many of the houses work in a similar way to the brick detailing, creating visual eventfulness without busyness. And yes, there is a solar rationale on most homes. But in the extra space of the pop-up pitches also lies some of the secret wow of the buildings: double-height master bedrooms and the continuation of that space into what owners of older houses would expect as the norm – a loft.

The first phase also had double-height living rooms with tall windows to match – these are things that make a home feel expansive and modern – but on reflection FCBS felt they made over-tall spaces for their area. So in phase two, while the general floor-to-ceiling dimensions remain a generous 2.7m, the extra height of the living room is reallocated to an additional room on the upper-level top floor. The back-to-back distance of each house is also squeezed in phase two, going from the 18m South Gloucestershire Council standard to 15m: a recognition of a more urban condition that Brabazon is working towards.

This more compact design will see Brabazon catering for a wider demographic than the houses already built. Three-hundred-plus flats coming along at the end of phase two will take the density of this segment of the development to 90dph.

The elements of the scheme that work less well make up the battleground

for most people designing suburban housing. Air-source heat pumps were brought in for phase two, but deciding where to put them was a headache given their size, looks and the clearance needed around them. Avoiding communal gardens being dominated by the noise of pumps switching on and off was solved by putting them in some front gardens. But this resulted in awkward outside spaces; a refinement with higher front walls and grouping pumps visually with the bin stores is less bad. Siting white goods like these in back gardens (any surface treatment by the supplier or YTL was a no-go) looks ugly. Residents are bound to screen the pumps to avoid seeing them from their living rooms, and that is likely to bring its own problems.

Besides this, finding places to park cars – despite there being various options – inevitably creates vehicle-based backlands. Brabazon's parking courts could have worked better with a stronger landscaping and planting strategy, but that was a natural target for cuts.

Reflecting, it seems the most important lesson here for new towns does not only concern houses and density; it is in the importance of mixed-use development – with investment in public transport infrastructure and a positive emphasis on green spaces even in higher-density areas. These can avoid the curse of isolated, car-dependent suburban housing estates. In future years Brabazon may be a truly desirable city district. ■

CREDITS

**Masterplanner/architect/
interior designer**

FeildenCleggBradley Studios

Client/developer/contractor

YTL Developments (UK)

Landscape architect

Grant Associates

Transport consultant

PJA

Civil engineer

Hydrock Consultants

Structural/civil/M&E engineer

Hydrock Consultants

Building control

NHBC Building Control Services

Fire consultant

Hoare Lea

Principal designer

Taylor Lewis

IN NUMBERS

TOTAL CONTRACT COST

CONFIDENTIAL

DEVELOPMENT AREA (GIA)

31,957m²

**PREDICTED ONSITE RENEWABLE
ENERGY GENERATION**

PHASE 1: 367,000kWh/yr

PHASE 2: 239,000kWh/yr

**LIFE CYCLE EMBODIED CARBON
(RICS MODULES A1-B5 AND C1-C4)**

PHASE 1: 603kgCO₂e/m²

PHASE 2: 544kgCO₂e/m²

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CUSTOM BUILT

WORDS

Chris Foges

PHOTOS

David Grandorge

In east London, Adam Khan Architects has worked closely with residents – disillusioned by a drawn-out regeneration saga – in co-designing new homes for their neighbourhood

Below: New blocks by AKA (right) and Haworth Tompkins (left) rise over Custom House.





- 1 Station square
- 2 Working yards
- 3 Village green
- 4 Freemasons Road
- 5 Lucy House
- 6 Tillet House and Dellamura House
- 7 Park Square
- 8 Cundy Park
- 9 Victoria Dock Road

For decades, Custom House has been a place that is done to by others. Whether it's the wartime bombing that took out terraces of dockworkers' housing, or the cheap social housing that took their place, the closure of east London's docks by the 1980s or the recent reinvention of the waterfront as a glitzy entrepôt of conference centres and hotels, seismic changes have occurred without local input. So the latest transformation feels a little different: three new apartment blocks are the first fruits of a regeneration masterplan, devised by Adam Khan Architects with close involvement of the local Custom House community in a co-design process.

Residents' groups had long agitated for something to be done about their struggling high street and cold homes in poor repair. There were placard-waving protests at the town hall. These had little success until the arrival of the Elizabeth Line at Custom House changed the development maths. That fractious history, and the wariness it engendered, led Newham Council to prioritise genuine engagement in its brief to designers.

Adam Khan Architects (AKA) was selected from the GLA's Architecture + Urbanism framework to develop the masterplan, which would put around

800 homes on 4.2ha, along with shops and a health hub. AKA brought in three other practices – Haworth Tompkins, East and Office Sian – to give individual character to the various buildings, and to design the landscape elements between them. It also enlisted participatory design specialist Daisy Froud to work on the co-design process.

That was unusually lengthy and detailed – quite unlike the cursory surveys sometimes billed as public consultation, says Adam Khan: "Typically programmes get it done in four weeks, and then teams move to concept design. We invested very heavily in those early stages."

The design team began by creating a venue for community discussions, taking over a disused post office on the high street. As well as workshops and presentations, it was used for things like upskilling sessions. The aim, continues Khan, was "to effectively equip people to be good, constructive clients, and not to have the wool pulled over their eyes".

Equally important were frank discussions about viability – something councils often prefer to keep out of the public domain at early stages. "My experience," says Khan, "is that when you're open about it you get completely pragmatic, sensible decisions."

IN NUMBERS

TOTAL HOMES, PHASE ONE
95

THREE- AND FOUR-BEDROOM HOMES
41%

TOTAL GIA
8,957m²

HEATING DEMAND
12kWh/m²a

Below: Massing model, viewed from the northwest.



In the now conventional way, public investment was to be paid for by private development, requiring a significant uplift in density for the low-rise neighbourhood. Residents had a clear idea of what they did not want: look west from Custom House, and Canning Town now resembles a wall of generic beige brick, towering over Bow Creek. But with the financial parameters clearly understood, discussion could move quickly from whether they would accept tall buildings to where they should go.

Gathered around a model in the old post office, with a big lamp simulating the sun, locals could see how tentpoling heights within the masterplan area would avoid jarring clashes at its edges, and that pronounced setbacks in upper storeys helped to preserve daylight at ground level. Volunteers on the project steering group had “enlightened” discussions about things like parking, and took the proposals out into the wider community.

“It wasn’t difficult to win the argument to replace grey with green,” recalls Khan, “and give priority in public space to play”.

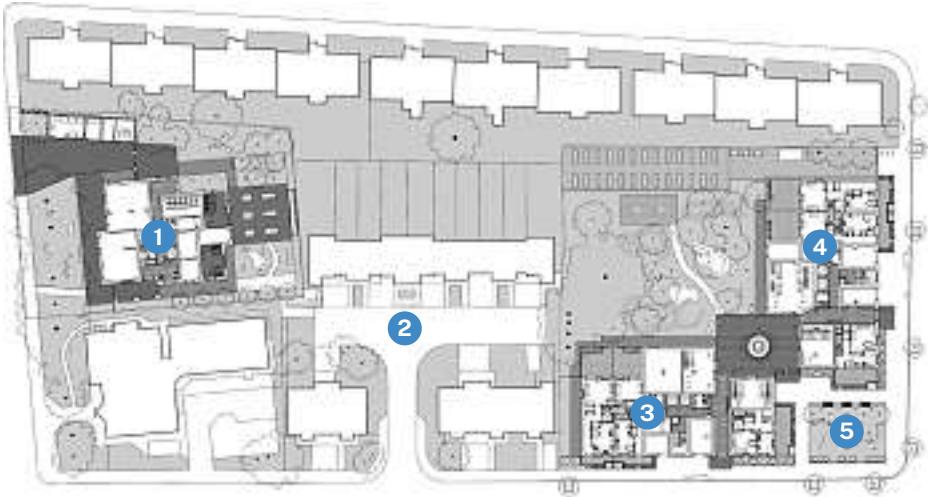
There were tensions and controversies along the way. Residents pressed Newham Council for clarity over locals’ right to return to rebuilt homes, and for equitable rent levels. Some opposed demolition entirely. There was also trouble when council staff raised the question of where decision-making authority finally lay. In the event, however, the co-design process translated clear design principles into physical form: there were no false hopes or hidden ambiguities. A residents’ ballot demonstrated support for the scheme ahead of its planning consent.

From the bridge spanning between the elevated Elizabeth Line station and the neighbourhood, Khan points out key moves. As things are, it lands against the gable of a tatty low-rise block that aligns the local high street, Freemasons Road. That will be cleared to make a new arrival

square, framed by build-to-rent housing rising to 15 storeys. West of the high street, new mixed-use buildings rehouse shops, and create some working yards behind that can support commercial activity. On the east side, new housing is jigsawed around private properties, and some existing buildings that AKA suggested could be retrofitted rather than levelled. That took careful diplomacy with residents, in whose experience repair meant occasional bodge-jobs with mastic and paint, says Khan.

Though dense, the area will be greener, with landscaped areas threaded through, making “fat edges” where the masterplan area meets neighbouring buildings. Resetting the street pattern makes a new entrance to the local park. AKA also proposed that a portion of the outdoor space for each building should be part of the public realm, rather than set behind locked gates. With housing tenures mixed throughout the area, shared open space can be a place for all to meet.

GROUND FLOOR PLAN



- 1 Lucy House
- 2 Existing homes
- 3 Tillet House
- 4 Dellamura House
- 5 Public space

Opposite: Tillet House on Leslie Road, designed by AKA.

Below: Lucy House on Freemasons Road, by Haworth Tompkins.

FIRST FLOOR PLAN



THIRD FLOOR PLAN





SUPPLIERS: TILLET HOUSE & DELLAMURA HOUSE

Brick

Ibstock Birtley Brown, Ibstock Birtley Commercial Red, Ibstock Arden Red Brick, Weinerberger PT449 Carbon, Ketley Brown Brindle

Windows & doors

Nordan, Neos

Roofing

Radmat

Waterproofing

RIW

Insulation

Knauf Dritherm Full-Fill

Below: A concrete gatepost marks the entrance to a private garden behind AKA's two buildings.



Many of these principles are reflected in the three 'mansion blocks' that have kicked off redevelopment, at opposite ends of an urban block in the heart of the neighbourhood. Providing 95 homes, they are built for affordable rent and are Passivhaus-certified. The first, by Haworth Tompkins, faces onto the high street and will be extended further when a neighbouring health centre is relocated. Another scheme, by AKA, comprises two buildings at the opposite end of the block, set at right angles and making a firm edge to a newly reinstated side street.

Haworth Tompkins' eight-storey mixed-use block is set behind a screen of mature plane trees, and a broad and protected strip of public space in front of big shop windows. Low walls double as well-used benches from which to watch life on the street. Pink and orange stripes that give a pop to the facades are achieved with an economical and effective trick of the eye: the whole facade is composed from a single brick, but varying the mortar creates the impression of two different-coloured stocks.

AKA's hefty seven- and eight-storey buildings hinge on a knuckle of public space dotted with trees and benches. Freeing the corner of the urban block creates an openness that is echoed in the architecture. Inset balconies make re-entrant corners on the two buildings, emphasising a kind of energy created by the buildings' situation, almost in touching distance from each other.

With housing design in London driven "algorithmically" by procurement routes, space standards and so on, says Khan, it's inevitable so much looks the same. The task is to "work within that to find a sense of decency, dignity and the beautiful quirks that are really hard to get".

Expressing the concrete frame in places gives a robust character that won't be overwhelmed by the bamboo screens and washing lines that always accrue on balconies. In-situ cast columns have notched corners – an idea picked up from car park construction, which allows a small idiosyncrasy at no added cost. Concrete lintels and sills give more presence to smallish, Passivhaus-compliant windows in the big russet-brick facades. Chunky porches are supported by posts rotated 45 degrees. From the street entrances, framed by decorative brickwork, there are views through roomy foyers to communal gardens at the back. Though modest, these touches combine

to make buildings that appear both well-made and subtly distinctive.

Ahead of the arrival of more new structures that will remould the urban profile, the height and bulk of the 'kickstart' blocks is rather incongruous. Yet in other ways, they already fit in well. Their spare, muscular expression and warm brickwork echo some of the better 1960s housing nearby. Small inflections in form and materials add interest at street level. The setbacks mitigate the impact on existing neighbours with good grace.

Residents might be reassured that what's coming to Custom House will meet their expectations, but the headwinds buffeting all London housing development leave some uncertainty. The next phase is currently on hold. Other building heights may have to be reconsidered as regulatory changes feed into viability figures. AKA's project shows the value of local input, but more top-down action on housing is still needed here, and everywhere in the city. ■

Right: A rotated column marks the entry to Dellamura House.

Below left: A high proportion of homes are 'family-sized' three-bedroom flats and maisonettes.

Below right: Setbacks reduce the impact of Tillet House on nearby homes.



CREDITS

Lead & masterplan architect

Adam Khan Architects

Collaborating architects, masterplan

East, Haworth Tompkins Architects, Office Sian

Collaborating architect (plot 1B to planning)

Haworth Tompkins Architects

Landscape architect

East

Planning consultant

Tibbalds

M&E engineer

Robinson Engineers

Passivhaus designer

Etude

Contractor

Hill

Structural engineer

Walker Associates

Fire consultant

Affinity

Transport consultant

Velocity



AS TOLD TO

Jan-Carlos
Kucharek

PHOTOS

Tim Crocker

SAFE AS HOUSES

Designing in a sense of safety – via either low- or high-tech approaches – can make a huge difference to how housing developments are experienced and ultimately used. Maria Joao Reis, associate director at Maccreeanor Lavington, reflects on her practice's experience at a range of social and private schemes



Right: Maccreeanor Lavington created duplex homes facing onto a new ribbon park at Brent Cross Town.

What is your general approach to issues of security on your housing developments?

MJR: We try to address it in a holistic way, and that means starting at the masterplan scale, where we attempt to build relationships between our proposal and the existing fabric to create both design clarity and a rapport with what is already there. This involves a host of considerations such as street alignments and widths, ground-floor design strategy, and events that happen on the journey through the public realm – for both residents and the wider public. Are areas zoned, for instance, or do they need to integrate various uses? In imagining experiences residents on journeys to and from home – or people walking through the site – might have, safety can manifest in an organic way.

As you go into detail from the public realm to the private threshold and entrance control, then ideas of ‘security’ take over from those of ‘safety’. We see the latter concept as passively embedded in the design itself, whereas ‘security’ is more actively technology-driven. But where public and private come together becomes a critical interface for us, and where a lot of careful design decisions need to be made.



Right: Key to maintaining a sense of safety is creating an active street frontage at ground level.

Below: Waste and cycle stores, as shown here at Dujardin Mews in Enfield, should be easily accessible from homes.

What kind of decisions?



MJR: The resident journey and experience is very important and it's one where, if possible, we take on board the input of local people and potential building users. The building entrance should be very visible and the route to it illuminated. Door buzzers want to be in a well-lit, covered zone for security and ease of use. You need to consider cycle storage and its proximity to this entrance because if it is tucked away or remote, it's likely residents will just end

up bringing their bikes into the building. The same goes for refuse stores: are they strategically placed on the way out of the building on a nice, safe path? Is the store door as carefully designed? Anyone using them wants a clear and visible route; otherwise you'll find rubbish being dumped where it shouldn't be. More often than not, if housing evidences dysfunction in this way, it's the result of the design not making it convenient or safe for residents to use it.

You mentioned specific concerns of users, over and above general approaches – can you tell me more?

MJR: Architects need to be mindful of specific concerns or needs of different user groups that might not be immediately apparent to them. For example, things like cycle storage mechanisms, security doors or even refuse storage units can require quite high levels of physical strength and this needs to be properly considered, since it can introduce a gender or ability component into the notion of security. Similarly, surface contrast and light levels may not be identically perceived by different users, so the lighting design

strategy – which is crucial to safety and security – must take that into account.

There is an ongoing debate around gated areas too. Some see them as safer for elderly people, or mothers with kids, but others perceive them as isolating people behind a fence when they would rather be in a space that's more trafficked, observed and social. These discussions are ones that ideally should be had with the community or potential resident groups early on in the design process, alongside clients and other stakeholders.

How easy is it to discuss safety and security with your clients?

MJR: All clients will have a view on the security aspects for their sites, and obviously facilities management and ongoing maintenance. Clearly most know their own product well and how it works. Often clients for higher-end developments will push for gated developments where all the amenity remains off limits to everyone except residents; but we will always try and demonstrate to them the value of a certain level of integrated public and private amenity. Housing associations and councils obviously have concerns over maintenance, but can be more easily won over to ideas of sites having permeability with the locations they are set within.

What about the recommendations of Secured by Design?

MJR: The conversations here tend to be more challenging and generally involve compromise. Spaces that are open to the public are always more onerous to manage in terms of site security and maintenance; it can mean the use of CCTV and other technology to compensate for that openness. Timed approaches to gating can be a good mitigation: during the day landscaped communal amenity spaces and routes remain open, but come sunset they close to make the site accessible only to residents. We prefer passive measures to designing in security but can't dictate client demands, so it's better for the design to be flexible and discreetly embed possibilities for site control in the hope they are ultimately not considered necessary.



Right: South Gardens, Elephant Park – fencing to create private amenity should be designed with the potential to open it out in the future.

Right: At South Gardens, the public path runs between private front gardens and a narrow public ribbon park, creating defensible space for the houses and usable play on the go for the community.



How do you approach provision of secure ground-level housing off what may be publicly accessible routes?

MJR: Keeping public routes animated is key. At our South Gardens housing in Southwark, the public route runs between terraced townhouses and the ribbon park running alongside. It offers good overlooking from homes to the natural 'play on the go' space as well as the facility to observe the public route. The small garden in front of homes, with its low gate, is enough to create a defensible space that can be modified by residents to provide the privacy they desire through planting. The safety – and visual interest – of the route has made it popular with the public.

Sometimes location or density precludes having a front garden. At Gayton Road in Harrow, we had ground-floor flats on a busy road with no defensible space and so raised flats about 1m above pavement level. There are challenges to this: providing level access requires space for ramped access or use of dual-entry

lifts. But doing so creates a relationship that privileges residents' privacy while maintaining a visual connection for pedestrians to the home itself, and so a reciprocal sense of activity and safety. Common entrances here were grand, covered but open on all sides and well-lit.

York Way in King's Cross is an infill project on an existing estate, which is completing now. It's complicated by the fact that there are both longstanding residential units and garage access at ground floor. We aimed to integrate the existing uses by creating a new public route through the space fronting onto our new accommodation, as well as dealing with extant vehicle access. Our landscape intervention gives coherence to what had been unprogrammed space between blocks, while increasing density and improving connectivity, the public realm, and perceptions of safety – for all.

How do you deal with security aspects of public courtyard housing for residents?



Above: The completing Besson Street project in Lewisham represents an ideal model of housing with a public realm but defined defensible space.

What are the technical security challenges in this case?



Above: At Gayton Road, Harrow, ground-floor flats are raised to offer privacy and overlooking. Common entrances are open and well-lit.

Have you had feedback from residents, or lessons learned?

MJR: Whether courtyards are gated or not, entrances to common lobbies on both street and courtyard sides will be electronically fobbed. As technical security, these are distributed to residents for their use only. Entrance areas have CCTV cameras plus a buzzer intercom to individual flats. Clients tend to prefer two lines of security: the first, from the external entrance to an internal lobby where postboxes can be situated and which postal workers have access to. An internal lobby door then offers a second line beyond which are the staircases and lifts, and where visitors will be screened by residents using a video intercom. A room off the front lobby can cater for online deliveries, with residents being

MJR: We try our best to do that, and some clients have arranged resident sessions to look at the quality of homes and public realm. We recently attended an engagement event at our 2017 Royal Albert Wharf project in Newham for Notting Hill Genesis, of housing above retail and artists workshops, where we got lots of feedback from residents. It made us clearly realise how critical the success of the ground floor and the public realm

MJR: Besson Street in Lewisham, a development of build-to-rent housing, is a classic example of an unused infill site development that provides new high-quality public space for a whole neighbourhood. The landscaped space at the centre of our new blocks has through-routes that connect with the existing urban fabric. From the beginning, we wanted this openness to be balanced by a sense of security for new residents. Ground-floor balconies looking into the space are strongly delineated and raised to create a distinction between private and public, while enabling residents to, say, watch their kids from their own window. It acts as a pocket park for residents as well as providing amenity for the wider community. With no gates to control site access and all routes being permeable, for us it's a very positive model for housing development.

able to buzz drivers into it. Housing associations sometimes prefer having an onsite concierge acting as a first line of security, as well as dealing with receipt of parcels and so on.

On arrival at upper floors there can also be a third line of security, where corridors off lift and stair lobbies need to be buzzed into. Most clients might prefer that resident fobs only give them access to the particular floor they live on. If residents wish to access a flat on another floor, that means them being buzzed into a particular corridor by the relevant resident. Fobbing lifts is also an option, but can come at a cost over merely fobbing the floors' corridor. In the event of a fire, all security systems switch off to enable unimpeded egress.

is to notions of safety for residents. The housing association was careful to curate the businesses filling ground-level retail retail units to ensure they met resident needs and had longevity. And the presence of artists on site was a great idea, not just for the benefit of the wider community but also as active tenants helping look after the neighbourhood. When you have that much investment and ownership, a sense of security follows in its wake. ■

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NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

WORDS
Pamela Buxton

Research and experimentation were vital in realising these three projects, with brick key to the appearance of a mission building and a retail/office block, while limestone blocks are preferred to splashbacks in a new kitchen

Below: Creating the lower brick niches was a significant challenge

Opposite left: Arched brick-clad lintels help form the open arches of the upper level.

Opposite right: Double lintels were used for the characteristic arched windows above ground level.





Lambeth Mission

Appointed at Stage 3, Aros Architects was delivery architect for the Studio Kyson-designed Lambeth Mission and an adjacent 11-storey hotel, which together comprised a redevelopment of the Methodist Church and Mission site near Waterloo Station.

The biggest challenge was realising the impressive brick facade, with its complex composition of niches and arches. Brickwork took just over a year on site after five months of sampling and experimentation.

“While the visualisation of the double-curved arches was compelling, replicating that form in masonry required a significant amount of technical development to bridge the gap between digital representation and physical construction,” says Aros associate Natasha Coutts.

Studio Kyson’s design of the brick facade featured a series of 3.84m-high, 2.72m-wide ground-floor niches along two elevations with three floors of arched windows above. There is a terrace on the corner of Lambeth Road and Lambeth Walk on the upper of these floors, and here some apertures are instead left open with balustrades. A small number of bricked-in upper arches throughout the facade complete the composition.

Retaining brick as the primary facade material was a given, as was use of a long, thin brick. Use of “red rubber” handcrafted bricks to realise the contoured facade was ruled out on both cost and colour grounds. Pre-assembled bricks and precast concrete arches were also explored and

discounted. Using specials to achieve the curves was off limits due to budget constraints, while an additional factor was that the brickwork could only be laid from the front.

“This ultimately brought us back to the original challenge: constructing a compound-curved brick niche whose geometry shifted in three dimensions simultaneously,” explains Coutts.

Aros then experimented in collaboration with bricklayers to see what could be achieved with standard Petersen-style bricks using a polystyrene mould, accepting that there would have to be wider vertical mortar joints to achieve the inward curves of the niche.

The eventual brickwork was carried out by brickwork subcontractor Bishop after an extensive search to find a company that could provide the right level of craftsmanship.

The desired result was achieved by cutting the mould into sections and laying over the mould from the front to achieve a smooth curve using 290mm-long MSZ-12C bricks by Janinhoff (with the exception of the centre bricks, which had to be slightly shorter). These pinky brown bricks were chosen to give a contrast with the redder hues of the adjacent hotel tower.

Hand-laid piers between the niches support pre-made arched lintels, created using slips of the same Janinhoff brick with an IG arch system. While the original design intention was for the arches to meet at the corners, instead, three types of corner bricks are used to provide the

tolerance needed to get a good finish. The use of wider mortar joints gave leeway for achieving acceptable vertical and horizontal alignment.

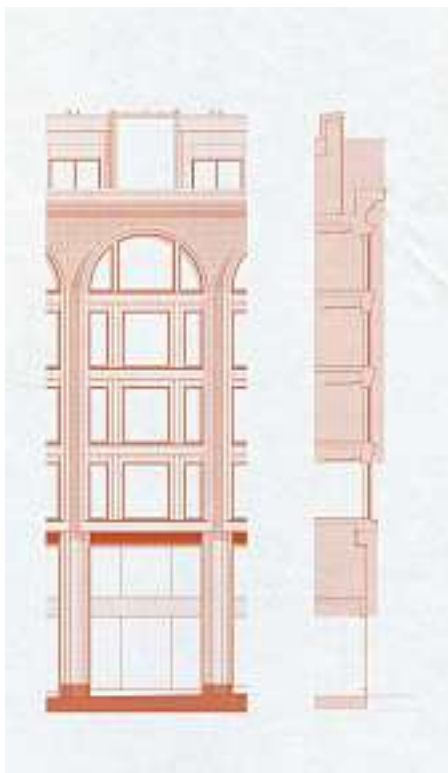
A double band of hand-laid, soldier course bricks divides the ground and first floors.

A similar combination of hand-laid piers and infill, and pre-made IG arched lintels was used to realise the facade above the ground-floor niches. Windows are generally inset within a double lintel, with a single lintel used for the open arches on the top floor, fixed back to the concealed steel framework.

Coutts is delighted with the result. “At times, the process felt painstaking, with each design development raising a fresh set of challenges,” she says. “Yet seeing the completed building, I think it was worthwhile. The quality of the finished result fully justifies the effort involved.”

CREDITS

Design architect
Studio Kyson
Delivery architect
Aros Architects
Engineer
Heyne Tillet Steel
Contractor
HG Construction
Brickwork subcontractor
Bishop
Selected suppliers
IG Lintel (brick lintels);
Janinhoff (bricks)



Above: Brick piers frame tall bays of articulated glazing.

Below: The precast brick facades were installed in less than five months.

Opposite: The Ribbon's form was influenced by other buildings in the vicinity.



The Ribbon

Back in the 1600s, a brickmaker called George Wells occupied a street off London's Oxford Street that subsequently took his name. Some four centuries later, the site's historical link with brick-making inspired the materiality for The Ribbon, a 9,300m² retail, and office building designed by Orms and commissioned by M&G Real Estate and CBRE Development Management. The nine-storey building, on the corner of Wells Street and Oxford Street, also includes a basement venue.

Orms associate Oliver Cowan says the Wells connection helped spur the practice towards using brick, with a red brick – relatively unusual for Oxford Street – helping to make the building stand out.

"We very much thought that this building should sing as a brick building," says Cowan, "and we played with the proportions of the facade instead of changing the materiality to designate the different uses in the building. The brick is the canvas that allows the sculptural form of the building to come through."

There were other contextual influences. Mappin House, which bookends the other end of the block on the corner of Winsley Street, provided the reference for The Ribbon's proportions and strong cornice line, while Marks & Spencer's Pantheon building opposite informed the use of black granite within the facade. Its innovative 1938 modular facade also influenced The Ribbon's use of off-site prefabrication.

Orms worked with Thorp Precast to realise the brick-faced precast facades, installed on site by crane in just 18 weeks, minimising disruption in the busy location by bringing the facade sections to site with the windows, sills and lintels already integrated within the brickwork.

Initially, the plan was to use clamp-fired bricks, but mock-ups demonstrated that when these were cut to create slips, there was considerable wastage. The architects also felt the rustic nature of the edges meant they would be read as individual bricks, rather than providing the cohesive sculptural look they were after.

Cowan worked with EH Smith to extensively research brick alternatives that could provide four presentation faces, settling on Ibstock's Heritage Red Blend. This had a much more consistent and crisper appearance and resulted in far less waste when cut.

The composition of the load-bearing facade varies to suit the two different elevations. On Oxford Street, deeply

articulated brick piers frame bays of three windows, culminating in semicircular arches below the projecting brick cornice. The facade terminates in projecting bricks, with the amount of projection graduating from 10mm between the arches, up to 40mm beneath the cornice. Off-cuts from the smaller projections were used further up as larger projections. On Wells Street, the window bays project by 450mm and by 900mm on the three bays above the office reception furthest from Oxford Street.

Thorp Precast created the facade in "doughnut" panels to give a full brick and concrete aperture for three windows in each bay, which could be glazed in its yard. Brickwork is stacked, which the architects felt was integral to the design and proportion of the facade and its sculptural form. The stacking is horizontal on the piers and flanking the mullions, with a soldier bond vertical stack used above and below the windows.

Colour-matched 10mm mortar joints reinforce the homogeneity of the brick facade, with joints where movement was allowed matching these dimensions.

The windows are dressed with dark, hardwearing granite sills and with green glazed bespoke bricks manufactured by S.Anselmo. The glazed elements have a silver top coat to give controlled variation. Cow-nosed specials were made for the mullions, with glazed units forming the lintels, including units with two glazed faces for the bottom course of lintels.

"We wanted a bit of life and play through the glazed elements," says Cowan.

The only hand-laid bricks in the whole project are used to clad the inside of the two brick columns in the reception.

CREDITS

Architect

Orms

Main contractor

Wates

Structural engineer

Heyne Tillett Steel

Brick search partner

EH Smith

Selected suppliers

Ibstock

(red brick manufacturer);

S.Anselmo

(glazed bricks and tiles);

Thorp Precast

(brick faced precast panels)



CREDIT

TIM SOAR

Tooting Bec House

You won't find conventional splashbacks in architect Adam Draper's new kitchen. Instead, a wall of limestone blocks creates a distinctive textured finish for the principal of Draper Studio, with the added visual bonus of the odd fossil.

This unusual solution was a response to a very late change in the positioning of the rear extension to Draper's mid-terrace, Victorian house in south London. The practice had planned a full-width kitchen/dining room extension on the ground floor, with a smaller new bedroom above, replacing an existing, smaller extension. But Draper needed to move the side wall in by 50mm to satisfy the adjacent neighbour after a difference of opinion over agreed measurements, so he rethought his plan for a conventional cavity wall construction.

"I thought, well, we've got to shift everything in by 50mm," says Draper, "and we're going to lose area as a result. Why don't we just accept that the blocks can be on show? And where would I find a block that can be good enough?"

Draper is a long-term advocate for the greater use of stone, and its use is also a nod to Jørn Utzon's Can Lis house in Mallorca. Draper chose 440 x 215 x 110mm limestone blocks from the recently established RocBloc. He then sorted them into three grades with consideration of the best faces and edges, but also taking care to include a variety of textures.

These blocks were laid horizontally to form a 4.2m x 3m kitchen wall, with joints of 4-5mm to accommodate wall ties, then sealed straight away with a water-based clear sealer.

"The grout lines and the joints can all be much, much smaller than conventional cement-based blockwork walling," he says. "It's more like stone masonry."

Treatment of the mortar was important, with raked verticals and flush mortar beds emphasising the wall's vertical aspect and drawing the eye up to the beams.

After a year of use, the wall shows no signs of discolouration despite the lack of splashback. It helps, says Draper, that there is an extra-deep counter and that they've been protective about how they use it. He is also delighted with its visual appearance, especially in combination with direct or diffused sunlight.

"This warm glow comes off it, and it's just very different to a painted finish or a lime wash finish," he says. "You see all the texture, you see all the bumps, you see all the shadows that form off it. It's great."

He adds that, although the limestone blocks cost five times more than concrete blocks, once the other materials and, in particular, the time savings are factored in, the costs were on a par. And, the U-values of the overall limestone block wall build-up were better than building regs compliance.

The wall opposite has a more conventional dry-lined, insulated

plasterboard with a hemp lime plaster.

Although RocBloc blocks are recommended for internal use, Draper experimented by using them externally to build steps in the garden, and hopes they will acquire the indentations of wear.

The project also features limestone bricks on the rear elevation on either side of the glazing. Made by Polycor from limestone waste, they were left over from one of Draper's previous projects, Hackney House, and have since been discontinued.

The house is proving to be something of a showcase for the use of limestone blocks, with some of Draper's clients expressing interest in using them as a surface material.

CREDITS

Architect

Draper Studio

Structural engineer

Baker Chatterton

Contractor

I.C. Construction Services

Selected suppliers

Compass Glass (glass);

Jupiter (heating);

Polycor (limestone bricks);

RocBloc (limestone block);

Thorogood (timber supplier);

Wilder Timber Framing

(timber framer)

Exposed limestone blocks form a distinctive kitchen wall.



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BEAUTY AND THE BRICK



FRANCESCO MONTAGUTI

Brick's versatility, artistry and sustainability is highlighted in these four recent projects by Hawkins\Brown, ranging from housing and a school to catenary arches

The humble brick is, quite literally, one of the foundational building blocks of architecture. In the UK, brick architecture is near ubiquitous, from London's yellowish stock brick to the bright red Lancashire versions that give the UK's redbrick universities their name. Its robustness and extraordinary versatility has made it an ever-popular choice, particularly with the Victorians, whose industrial innovations spurred a boom in brick manufacture.

Brick's popularity took a hit in post-war design, when it lost out to cheaper concrete in public architecture. However, the enduring affection held for brick means its potential has never disappeared.

At Hawkins\Brown, we want to reclaim some of that craftsmanship, artistry and beauty associated with brick architecture, while exploring what it can do in terms of performance, structure and sustainability. These recent projects demonstrate how a simple, modular unit can support an extraordinary range of spatial, environmental and aesthetic possibilities.

BurrIDGE Gardens, Battersea

BurrIDGE Gardens revisits and reinterprets the London tradition of brick homes, using different colours and textures to give each building a distinct character.

The project comprised a multi-phase rebuilding of the Peabody estate at St John's Hill in Battersea. We wanted to open up the estate, reconnecting it with the surrounding streetscape and establishing a strong identity for each building through a variety of brick choices: dark engineering brick next to the railway; softer handmade brick facing Bolingbroke Grove. Each building also has its own vibrantly coloured entrance, lined in jewel-toned glazed brick.

We also collaborated with artists Rodney Harris and Valda Jackson, who created a series of brick artworks inspired by memories from the residents of the original estate, all of whom were invited to stay in the new development. From a child's dress to a "tree of life", these artworks demonstrate how the unassuming brick can be transformed into an art medium.



Chelsea Quay, Chelsea

Chelsea Quay, one of the public realm sites delivered as part of the Thames Tideway Tunnel, draws inspiration from another important brick tradition: its use in civic and engineering infrastructure. Some of the most enduring pieces of brick architecture in this country are not buildings, but bridges, railway arches and sewers. Joseph Bazalgette, the engineer of London's Victorian sewer network, made extensive use of brick, including at the Embankment at Chelsea. The design for Chelsea Quay reinterprets this heritage through a modern lens, extending the embankment outwards in a gently sloping curve that steps down to the river. Its expressive brickwork responds to the surrounding natural context while emphasising longevity, robustness and public value, and is punctuated by stripes of brightly coloured glazed brick designed by artist Florian Roithmayr, adding a contemporary pop to the traditional fabric.



Notting Hill & Ealing High School Junior School, Ealing

At Notting Hill & Ealing High School, we took things further. Brick plays an important role as an ornament, with vibrant green glazed brick adding a playful quality to the school at ground floor, otherwise clad in red brick to match the local context. However, it is also fundamental to the building's technical performance, managing daylight levels through deep chamfered reveals. The facade conceals a building working hard to minimise emissions, with natural ventilation facilitated through hit-and-miss brickwork, contributing to the school's net zero carbon emissions in operation. Here, craft is not an embellishment but an integral component of a high-performing, sustainable educational building.



Brick from A Stone: Arch Revival, Clerkenwell

For Clerkenwell Design Week 2025, we worked with suppliers Albion Stone and Hutton Stone to showcase their innovative stone bricks, which have a considerably lower carbon cost than traditional clay-fired bricks. We wanted to experiment with how far we could take this new material, combining the versatility of a small, repeated unit with the durability and aesthetic quality of stone. The result was Brick from A Stone: Arch Revival, two catenary arches, which became one of the highlights of the festival, each only 102mm thick, the depth of a single stone brick. Brick can be used in so many exciting, beautiful ways. The arches explored how we can carry this tradition on – a familiar, beloved component with improved structural capacity and lower carbon.

VELUX ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITION 2026/27

Entries are open for the annual awards organised by VELUX in cooperation with RIBA J and DETAIL magazine, celebrating the power of daylight in architecture

Opposite: 2025 award-winner Casa Bassa by Francesco Pierazzi Architects.

Below: 2025 award-winner Kindergarten Horn, by Lukas Imhof Architecture.

Have you completed a project in which daylight was central to its success? The VELUX Architectural Competition 2026/27, organised by VELUX in cooperation with RIBA J and DETAIL magazine, celebrates buildings whose arrangement, use and enjoyment has been transformed by the introduction of natural light as an integral element of a larger architectural idea.

We are seeking outstanding projects that demonstrate how daylight improves the quality of life, enhances the spatial impact of architecture and the sustainability of buildings. Whether it's a new construction, a renovation, or a restoration, we want to highlight design that handles daylight in distinctive and powerful ways.





Completed buildings can be entered for the VELUX Architectural Competition 2026/27 in two categories:

Light.Space.Human.

The Light.Space.Human. category celebrates the use of daylight in the design of domestic environments. Submissions can include both new and remodelled residential buildings.

Projects will be assessed on the intelligent and imaginative use of natural light to establish atmosphere and mood; on the targeted positioning of light sources; on design that establishes optimal lighting conditions for the particular uses of rooms; and as architecture that works with the dynamism and changeability of natural light.

Commercial and Public Buildings – supported by VELUX Commercial

The Commercial and Public Buildings category recognises projects that make exceptional use of VELUX Modular Skylights to enhance the experience of a building. From schools and offices to cultural venues, civic buildings, transport hubs and industrial facilities, successful projects demonstrate how daylight can improve wellbeing, support sustainability goals and elevate architectural design.

Judges will be looking for projects where VELUX Modular Skylights are thoughtfully integrated into the overall architectural concept, delivering measurable impact through innovative daylighting solutions that enhance user experience and building performance.

Who can enter?

The VELUX Architectural Competition 2026/2027 covers two regions, with separate judging processes and prizes for each region. Completed buildings in the United Kingdom are eligible in the UK region, while those in Germany, Austria and Switzerland are eligible in the DACH region.

All submitted buildings must have been completed between 31 August 2023 and 31 December 2026, and use products from VELUX (roof windows, roof window combinations, flat roof windows, and VELUX Modular Skylights) as part of the daylighting concept.

Entrants must register at the competition website to receive login credentials. Competition entries are submitted via the competition website. They must include an A2-format project sheet illustrating the project in drawings and photographs, a separate explanatory report, and declarations of consent from architects/participants and photographers.

Full details on competition submissions are given in the Competition Document. Deadline for entries is 28 February 2027.

Judging and prizes

Competition entries will be reviewed by an independent jury: Claudia Lynch, director at Lynch Architects; Nick Hayhurst, co-founder of Hayhurst & Co; Mary Ann Steane, architect, academic and writer; Jakob Schoof, deputy editor-in-chief of DETAIL; Richard Williams, senior architect development manager at VELUX UK; and Chris Foges, contributing editor at RIBA J (chair).

Winners will be announced at an awards event in April 2027. Winners and commended entries will be published in RIBA J, DETAIL, and on VELUX websites. A total of £16,000 in prize money has been announced for the UK region: £5,000 each for the winners in the two categories, and £1,500 for highly commended entries. ■

Visit the competition website to download the competition document, and to register to enter:
velux.co.uk/professionals/architects/architecture-competition

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STORYBOARD

STORYBOARD

STORYBOARD

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STORYBOARD

GETTING LOST IN STORIES

It was great to see a record 80 entries this year, highlighting the growing appeal of our annual ideas competition and the ever-expanding popularity of SterlingOSB Zero.

The overarching aim of the now 11 annual competitions has been to encourage entrants to explore SterlingOSB Zero's structural, aesthetic and sustainable qualities, and the winning submissions this year have certainly delivered! At West Fraser, we know that net carbon negative, responsibly sourced engineered wood panels can help reduce embodied carbon while delivering proven structural performance and design flexibility.

This year's brief to encourage reading and storytelling is for me, as a father of three young children, a particularly important one. In a time when picking up a book often loses out to a screen and game controller, or to endless doomscrolling, the competition asked entrants to engage with the audience's imagination and entice them with an appealing place to listen to and read stories. Time spent losing oneself in a story as a child is a source of comfort that can last a lifetime.

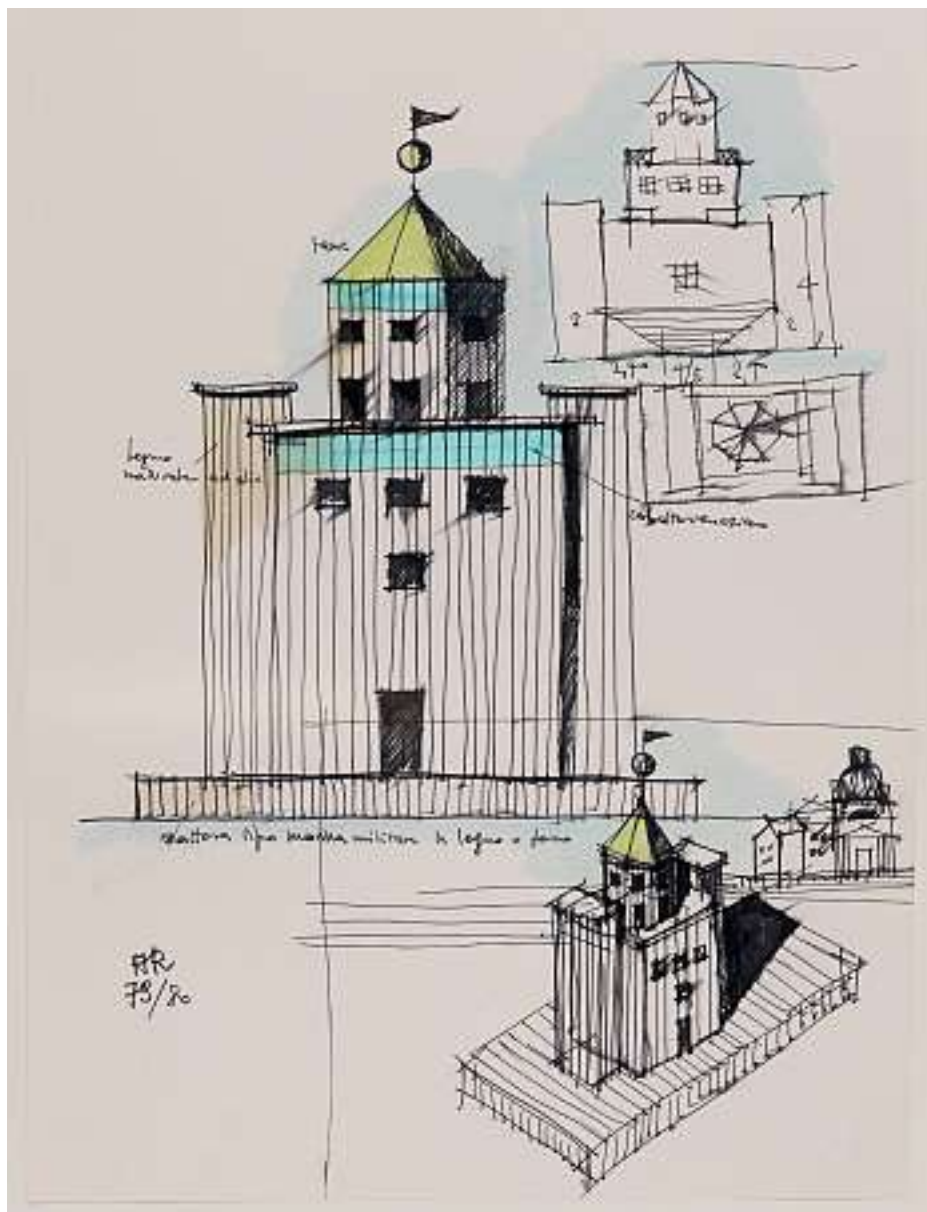
I'd like to thank all the judges for their time and expertise. But mostly, thanks to all who took the time to enter the competition. Your continued support and interest make sponsoring it worthwhile, and the imagination displayed in the submissions made for enjoyable judging.



David Connacher
Marketing manager, West Fraser Europe, and Storyboard judge

Top right: Drama on the high seas – Aldo Rossi's designs for Il Teatro del Mondo, Venice: sketch plan, elevations and perspective (1979).

Right: Designed with children in mind – the public plaza of Shonandai Culture Centre, Tokyo (1990) by Itsuko Hasegawa.



NARRATIVE FORMS

A total of 80 entries – the most in the 11 year-history of West Fraser's annual ideas competition with RIBA – is perhaps testimony to the highly appealing nature of this year's brief.

For Storyboard, entrants were asked to design a mobile centre that celebrates storytelling and reading. We asked that proposals provide a main space for storytelling, as well as a library/reading space and a reception, with accommodation totalling 400m² or less. Designs were expected to be demountable and movable and, crucially, to make the best use of SterlingOSB Zero.

The theme of the brief is pertinent in multiple ways: 2026 is the UK's National Year of Reading and, coincidentally, marks the 100th anniversary of AA Milne's celebrated Winnie the Pooh. Yet it is also a time of continued decline in children's reading, with only one in three children aged eight to 18 enjoying reading in their free time according to the National Literacy Trust – a 20-year low.

Alarming, more than a quarter of children starting reception are unsure how to use a book, with some trying to swipe and tap on pages rather than turn them according to charity Kindred²'s School Readiness Survey. Initiatives that can spread the word about the joy of listening to and reading stories – such as a mobile storytelling centre – would therefore seem to be more needed than ever.

So what were judges hoping to see in the entries? "It's about imagination – capturing attention," said David Connacher. Keji Malik was looking for designs where people could "let their imagination run wild... where I see children really exploring", while Stephen Proctor was hoping for entries that "lift the spirits". Jan-Carlos Kucharek talked about the idea of appealing not just to youngsters but to adults through designs that enable them to "enjoy what it is to be a child again".

Overall, the judges were looking for joyful and imaginative responses and they

mostly got them, with designs ranging from a flat-pack fairytale forest to teepee and treehouse-inspired creations.

Given the need to appeal to a very young target audience, it's perhaps no surprise there were plenty of engaging shapes and folly-like structures. These include the winning entry, which used its distinctive form as a landmark to attract an audience, as well as plentiful playful references to standing stones, dragons and – in particular – snaking forms.

In a lively judging session, judges enjoyed detecting diverse resonances – whether intentional or not – with, variously, Aldo Rossi's Teatro del Mondo, Adam Khan's Brockholes nature reserve, Jeremy Deller's inflatable replica of Stonehenge and most perturbingly, the Child-Catcher's cart from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

Many entries centred on the concept of gathering around a fire or hearth to hear a story, an idea that naturally lends itself to circular form. Others, however, took a more rectilinear approach, drawing on the idea of a medieval cloister or a stoa, while still enclosing a sheltered space for group stories. The majority provided space not only for groups to gather but for individual reading in secluded nooks. While the majority favoured a single structure, some took a more dispersed approach with groupings of small pavilions creating the appearance of a mini-village or festival.

Most designs responded to the need for mobility by producing demountable structures that could be relocated by road. The judges appreciated the few who thought outside the box on this, including one that proposed moving the structure, rather heroically, by bicycle, and another by the more romantic medium of a travelling canalboat gliding around Britain's waterways.

Congratulations to the standout winner, as well as the three commendations and four shortlisted projects, from a fertile crop of entries. All the prize-winning designs are shown on the following pages.

JUDGES



Julian Kashdan Brown
Director, Kashdan Brown Architects, and 2025 competition winner



Jan-Carlos Kucharek
Deputy editor, RIBA



Keji Malik
Project director, Adjaye Associates



Stephen Proctor,
Director, Proctor and Matthews



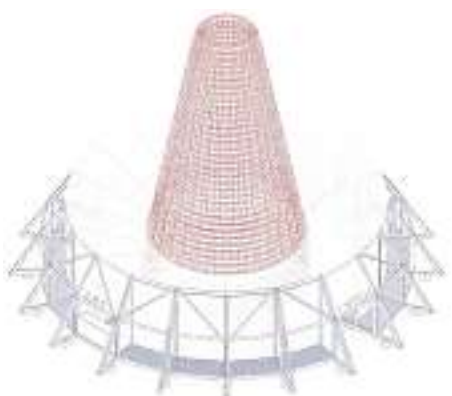
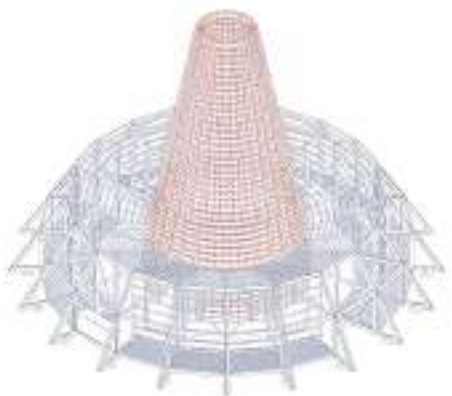
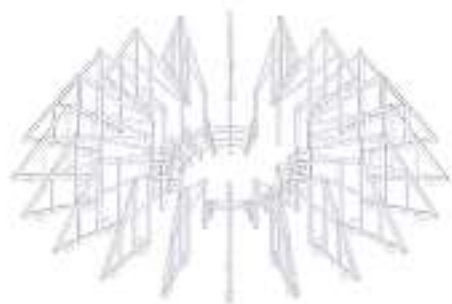
CREDITS

Produced by RIBA in partnership with West Fraser
Supplement editor/ Jan-Carlos Kucharek
Writer/ Pamela Buxton
Design/ Linda Byrne
Subeditor/ Alex Turner

FIRST PLACE
£2,500 PRIZE

ALZBETA FRANEKOVA

CWTCH: WHERE STORIES GATHER



Above: The main structure has 20 softwood sections supporting a clear polycarbonate roof, with the hearth formed of overlapping modules of terracotta-painted SterlingOSB Zero.

Top right: The SterlingOSB Zero outer wall acts as a hoarding – a canvas for local artists – as it travels around the country.



In Welsh, *cwtch* – a word with no literal English translation – means a hug, or place of warmth, safety and comfort. This was the inspiration for Alzbeta Franeckova's winning entry, a pavilion featuring a central "Story Hearth" with a landmark chimney to attract visitors.

Judges appreciated both the distinctive silhouette and the variety of spaces within, which include a library around the outside of the storytelling area. Here, the structure thickens to accommodate bookshelves.

"There's a sense of mystery to the core. You're being drawn into the heart of the building," said Julian Kashdan Brown. "It's a very clear form of storytelling space."

The pavilion aims to celebrate both stories as they are spoken and those that have already been written down. It is designed as a lightweight, demountable structure with a primary structure of 20 repeated timber frames assembled around a circle.

Interlocking SterlingOSB Zero panels form the Story Hearth, which is painted a deep terracotta shade. A single opening overhead illuminates the space and draws attention to the storyteller.

Polycarbonate roofing brings daylight into the surrounding library.

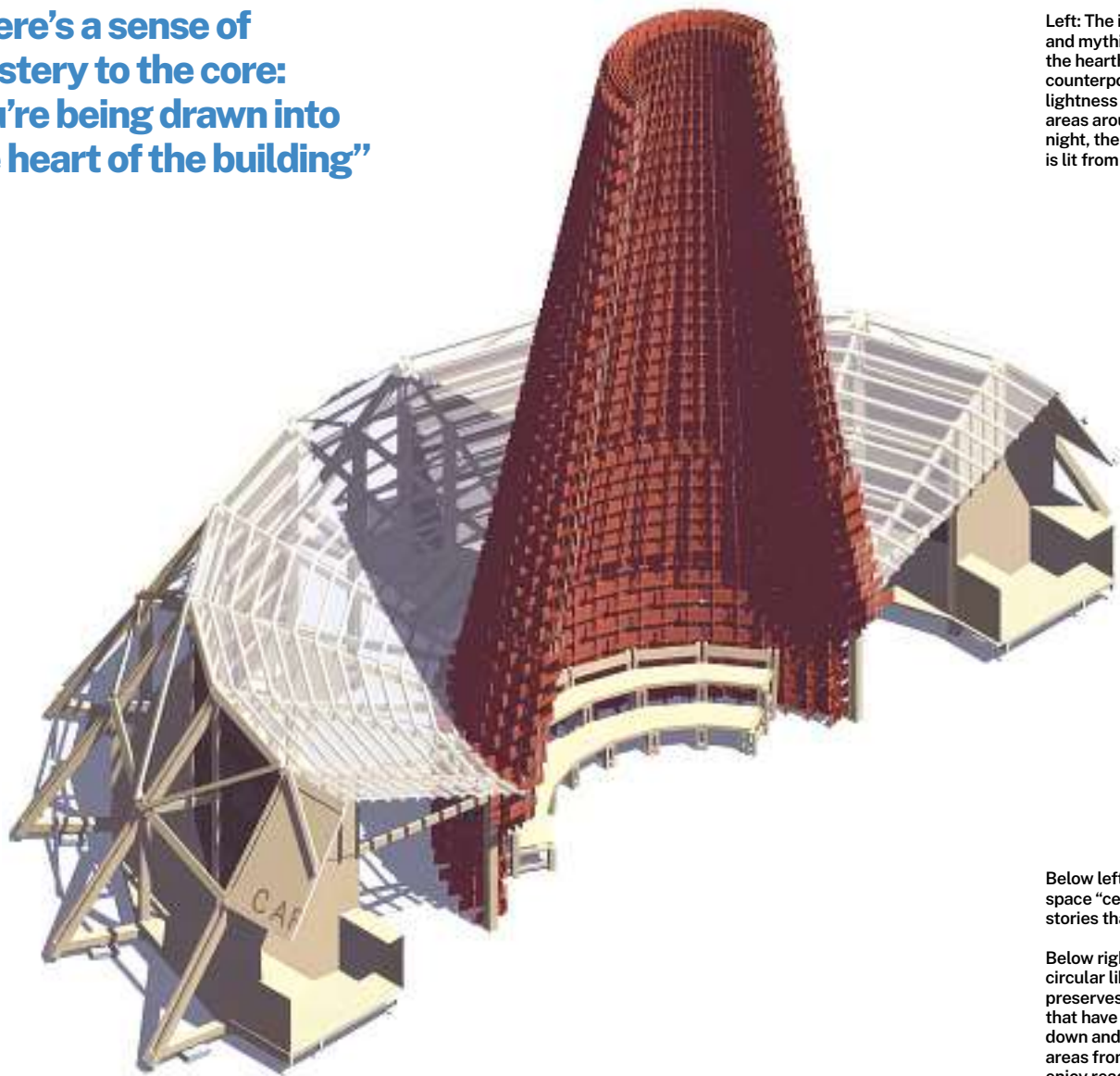
The exterior of the chimney is also made from interlocking rectangular OSB panels; more panels are used for the pavilion's outer skin. These would be illustrated by artists from its various locations, each contributing interpretations of regional myths and folklore. In this way, hopes Franeckova, the pavilion would become a travelling collection of stories of the places it visits.

At the base, the timber is raised above the ground using adjustable fittings fixed to reinforced concrete footings, enabling the structure to accommodate uneven ground conditions.

"It's a dramatic form," added Jan-Carlos Kucharek. "I like the way you approach it, and then once you're in, you are flooded with light. I think it could end up being beautifully detailed."

Stephen Proctor enjoyed the idea of a perambulation around the circular library to pick books, before sitting down to read them. Keji Malik thought the design, unlike some entries, would be attractive to teenagers and adults as well as to younger children.

“There’s a sense of mystery to the core: you’re being drawn into the heart of the building”



Left: The intimacy and mythic nature of the hearth space is counterpointed by the lightness of reading areas around it. By night, the hearth space is lit from below.

Below left: The hearth space “celebrates stories that are spoken”.

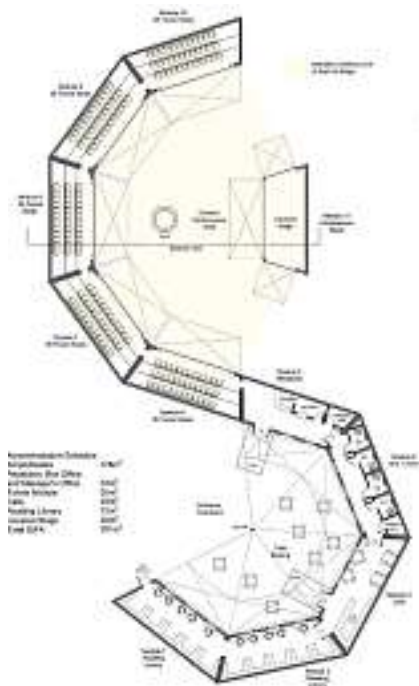
Below right: The circular library preserves those stories that have been written down and offers seating areas from which to enjoy reading them.



COMMENDED
£500 PRIZE

RORIE ASH

THE STORY SNAKE



The Story Snake encloses two outdoor spaces within a serpentine form clad in patinated copper shingles. The first forms an entrance courtyard, with the surrounding structure housing a library, a café, toilets and a reception. The second space is an outdoor performance area, with seating for an audience of 180 housed in the other half of the 'snake' form.

The snake is created from 10 linked modules with an eleventh, standalone module functioning as a performance stage. Modules are formed using SterlingOSB Zero sheathing board panels on a steel framework, with the patinated copper cladding and roof covering. In the entrance courtyard, shading is provided by suspended canvas panels. Around the stage, the sides of the snake fold

open to create a series of canopies over the audience during performances.

Judges appreciated the toy-like quality of the form, and its appeal for young children.

"I like the fact there are different elements in which people can partake in storytelling. The open element is inclusive and would attract people—you can definitely see it being made," said David Connacher.

Julian Kashdan Brown praised the good use of form and neat modularity, while Jan-Carlos Kucharek enjoyed the use of the copper cladding to give a suggestion of snakeskin.

Stephen Proctor felt it could successfully close down at night “and become just an object in the park”.



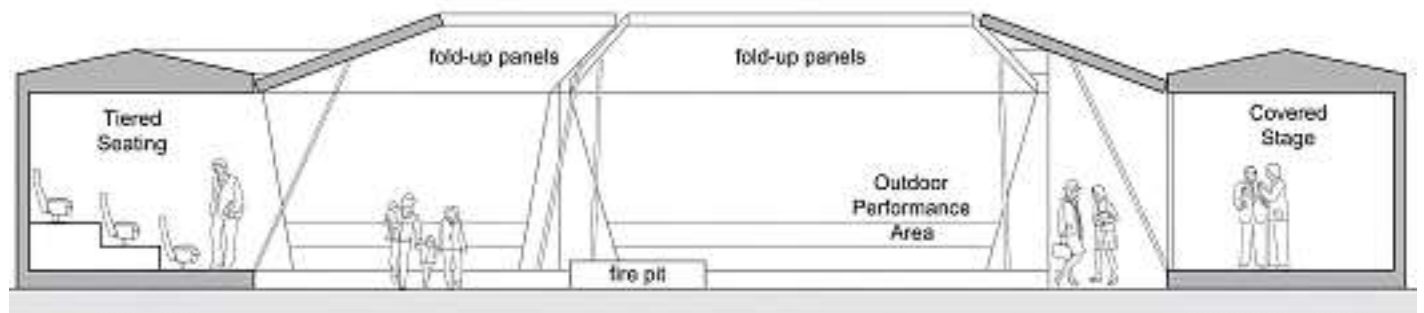
Opposite left: The form both addresses the park and looks in on itself.

Opposite bottom: Of a few similar propositions, Story Snake was deemed the most workable.

Right: The relationship to the park around is direct and functional.

Below: SterlingOSB Zero board proved an appropriate materiality for the simple form.

Bottom: Copper shingles emulate snakeskin.



COMMENDED
£500 PRIZE

CHENG-HSIN CHAN CABINET ON WATER



Above: There was an intrinsic romance to the idea of stories being told on water.

Below: Section showing how the structure could be occupied – both internally and externally.



“They’ve thought outside the box on transport,” said judge Keji Malik approvingly of Cabinet on Water. It proposes a floating storytelling centre designed to travel along London’s Regent’s Canal – and the wider UK canal network – as a piece of mobile civic infrastructure.

Inspired by James Stirling’s Bookshop Pavilion in the Giardini, Venice, the design reimagines the canal boat as “a travelling room for learning, gathering and imagination”. The pavilion is created using a modular timber system that can be reconfigured on the boat to suit different sites, activities and communities. Metal-clad panels create a robust exterior for when the centre is travelling or shut. When in use, these fold open to reveal the different spaces within, providing shade and creating a welcoming visual connection to the towpath. Internally, SterlingOSB Zero forms a warm, tactile and durable lining for everyday use.

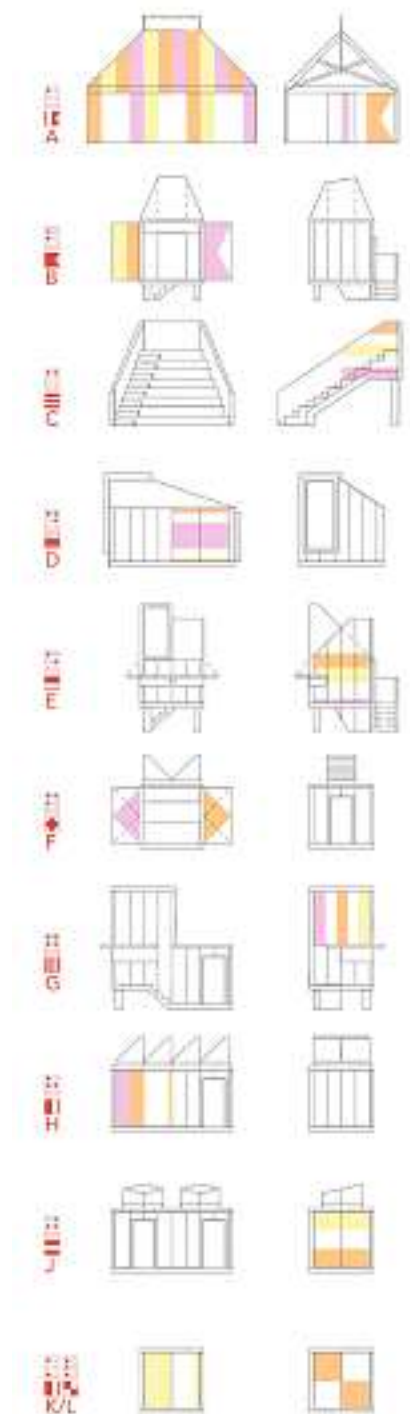
The pavilion supports both inward-focused activities and outward-facing public events through the provision of

the transformable exterior and a variety of spaces. These include a café, a nook for reading, retreat and parent-child storytelling, and two larger, multifunctional spaces catering for storytelling, talks and performances, workshops and other group activities. A core with toilets and stairs provides access to a rooftop terrace, which is conceived as a place “for observation, meditation and connection to the city”.

Above: There’s a drama to the way the proposal unfurls itself and opens out to users once it has moored on the canalside.

**COMMENDED
£500 PRIZE**

NICK TYSON & MING CHUNG TALES FROM THE URBAN FOREST: A FESTIVAL OF STORYTELLING



Judges were instantly drawn to this engaging collection of temporary architectural follies, which they felt fitted the joyful part of the competition brief well. "It's a little town of storytelling booths that are all different – quite a nice place to be," said Stephen Proctor, adding that it feels like somewhere you could make your own story up about.

The entry aims to provide spaces for reading and performance while "using the architectural potential of wood to connect young visitors to the life cycle of trees", from the forest through to lumber and paper. Its zones range from quiet micro-spaces for independent reading to open clearings for communal storytelling.

A theatre and listening terrace can be used for formal spoken-word events, while further group seating is accommodated in the Big Top, which also houses a community tuck shop. A Book House facilitates the exchange of reading material, while the Tree Den is an elevated retreat space combining a living tree with flexible furniture such as SterlingOSB Zero crates, urban timber blocks and log slices.

The OSB also forms the main structural sheathing board to ensure "a warm, tactile canvas for spacemaking and graphic imprint". This is combined with locally salvaged timber. Standardised 2.4 x 1.2m modules are used to construct lightweight 'scenic flats' for flat-packed transport.



Above: SterlingOSB Zero internal linings complement the salvaged urban timber structure.

Left: Individual "follies" form a plethora of varied reading and engagement spaces.

Below: Together these form a 'festival village', whose permutations generate different external spaces.



SHORTLISTED

CHARLIE CASTIAU JUFFKINS

CANOPY TALES STORY CENTRE



Inspired by treehouses and teepees, the Canopy Tales Story Centre aims to encourage discovery and ignite the imagination. The design groups interconnected, elevated timber enclosures – “trees” – as spaces for communal storytelling and shared reading, with ramps to an upper canopy level.

Smaller “nests” provide quieter breakout spaces for reading, writing and illustration. Each tree is formed with a demountable LVL radial timber frame and braced with prefabricated SterlingOSB Zero cassettes. OSB is also used for the shingles that clad the structures and for floor decking, shelving and reading pods.

Judges appreciated the joyful spirit of the design. “It has a sort of folk-tale quality to it,” said Stephen Proctor. Jan-Carlos Kucharek also liked “the change of perspective and the different nature of spaces” created by the elevated design.

DIANA GRIGORIE

SANCTUARY OF STORYTELLING

Judges felt the folly-like Sanctuary of Storytelling would be instantly appealing to children – even if only on the ground floor. “It’s setting a platform to let your imagination run wild,” said Keji Malik of the design, which provides three levels of storytelling space with ladders to reach the second floor.

Diana Grigorie’s design is conceived as a “forest” of vertical SterlingOSB Zero panels, with each element representing a fragment of a story. A central amphitheatre on the ground floor forms the heart of the project, functioning as a contemporary campfire for the performing and sharing of stories. This is overlooked on the first floor by a library and reading space, designed as “a labyrinth of arches and niches”. Quiet space is provided in four reading pods on the top floor.

“It’s beautifully rendered,” said Jan-Carlos Kucharek of the entry. “And I like the idea of what seems a timber ruin.”



KA KIN NG

STORYSCAPE: A NARRATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE



Storyscape is an open spatial framework that can be reconfigured according to different scales and contexts to create areas of enclosure and openness. Repeated modular components achieve spatial variation through accumulation, rotation and recombination, creating curved, semi-circular and circular formations. These support a variety of activities on both sides including storytelling and performance, informal gathering and exhibition.

The structure is a kit of parts primarily of SterlingOSB Zero panels and ribs, connected with a pin-slot assembly system. Bookshelves, seating platforms and display surfaces periodically stiffen the structure. Accordion-like infill blocks accommodate changing geometries and become the inhabitable layer of the pavilion.

Judges liked the flexibility of the system and the attention to buildability. "It's well rationalised. They have taken time to understand the kit of parts required to build it," said Keji Malik.



SHAUN JENKINS

LITTLE MO – AN ARCHITECTURAL STORYTELLING SPACE

"It's an interesting maze to explore. It provides a route and sends you on a journey," said judge Julian Kashdan Brown of Little Mo – An Architectural Storytelling Space. The entry's name is derived from the phrase "little moment", and the idea that "even the briefest experiences can leave lasting impressions".

The design proposes 16 modular SterlingOSB Zero 'chapters' arranged as a narrative sequence within a larger 'architectural book', with internal panels that can be reconfigured to transform the narrative journey, as stories are rewritten. Each spatial transition becomes part of the story, via the framing of views and changing levels of enclosure. As well as areas for storytelling, the centre includes a café and a library on dual-aspect corners to maximise visibility and light.

"It felt quite contingent and could be done easily and quite simply," said judge Jan-Carlos Kucharek, who also praised the "really beautifully rendered" drawings.



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PRESIDENT: THE CASE FOR JUDGING ARCHITECTURE ON A WORLD STAGE

With RIBA's grand jury out and about visiting projects shortlisted for this year's International Prize, Chris Williamson reflects on the importance of looking beyond borders to find buildings that rise to today's challenges



Green Field Factory in Rangpur, Bangladesh is designed by Nakshabid Architects. It reimagines the textile factory as a place of work, wellbeing and community around courtyards with verandahs, greenery and water.

The countdown to reveal the world's best building is on. With the RIBA International Prize shortlist announced and grand jury members now on their travels, visiting projects before the winner is revealed, it's a good moment to ask why we run an international prize at all.

Raising the bar in architecture doesn't happen by looking inward. It happens by looking across borders: sharing knowledge, testing solutions against different climates, economies and cultures, and learning from how other places are solving the problems we all face. That's the case for going beyond the UK, and it's the thinking behind the RIBA International Prize, which marks its 10th year in 2026 – one of five major award anniversaries we're celebrating this year, alongside 20 years of the Norman Foster Travelling Scholarship, 30 of the Stirling Prize, 60 of the RIBA Awards, and 190 of the President's Medals.

We're marking the milestone by expanding the programme for 2027, building on a global network of architects, practices and partners that keeps growing year on year. Before taking up the position of president, I served as RIBA's vice president of international, a role I took

on because of my own keen interest in architecture worldwide. It's with that interest, and what's coming next for our international awards, that I want to focus on the International Prize here.

Awarded biennially to the world's best building, the prize has in its first decade shone a light on some remarkable projects across the globe. From radical social housing in Spain and a rainwater-harvesting hospital in rural Bangladesh, to a boarding school on the edge of the Brazilian rainforest and a private university in Peru, each showed how architecture can benefit places and lives.

What strikes me about these winners is their shared ability to inspire while tackling some of the most pressing social, cultural and environmental challenges of our time. In a year where we've done a lot of thinking about awards and anniversaries, perhaps what stands out most is how, over time, awards truly can serve as a benchmark for architectural excellence on the international stage.

You don't need to go far to find that excellence in this year's International Prize cohort. Our four shortlisted projects, two in Belgium and two in Bangladesh, burst with ingenuity, ambition and

quality. In Belgium, the transformation of a 1960s modernist office tower into a vibrant new city hub (Royale Belge) and the reimagining of a 1958 museum as a dynamic space for contemporary art, design and public gathering (Z33) make up the first half of our shortlist, while in Bangladesh, a naturally ventilated university campus (BRAC University) and a pioneering worker-first textile factory (Green Field Factory of Karupannya Rangpur Limited) round it off.

And just as we marvel at architecture on a global stage, it is an exciting time to dive deeper and look closer, region by region, across the world. From the 2027-28 cycle, the programme expands across all four international regions for the very first time, introducing Europe and the Americas alongside Asia Pacific and Middle East & Africa – the two regions featured in last year's pilot. This is an important step in strengthening our global reach and influence, creating greater opportunities to recognise outstanding architecture worldwide, and adding real value for our members. ■

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OBITUARY: ROBIN MIDDLETON 1931–2026

By Alan Powers



MONICA PIDGEON / RIBA COLLECTIONS

IN MEMORIAM

WEI TAK MOK

Elected 1962, Hong Kong

ALAN THOMAS PHILP

Elected 1967, Shropshire

WILLIAM PETTY

Elected 1975, Cumbria

Robin Middleton, who has died aged 94, made an outstanding, diverse – and hard to encapsulate – contribution to architectural thought. Born in South Africa, he was given a copy of Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* by a schoolteacher, which led him to study architecture at Witwatersrand University. The memory of the late pioneering modernist Rex Martensen was still alive there, including a major collection of his books and magazines. Middleton and a friend invited Nikolaus Pevsner as a visiting speaker, and he suggested coming to Cambridge for a PhD in 1953.

Having read John Summerson's essay on Viollet-le-Duc, Middleton was inspired to study this neglected figure, going back a further 150 years to trace his intellectual roots in 'The Greco-Gothic Idea' through Cordemoy, Laugier and others. Two important articles came from the thesis and French architecture from 1750 to 1850 became Middleton's teaching focus at Cambridge (1972-1985), and Columbia University until 2003.

Much else happened before and during these events. Middleton had met the Lakofski sisters Ruth and Denise (Scott-Brown) in South Africa. Ruth became his partner in London and Paris, with extended travels in the Middle East. In Paris, Peter Smithson called to tell him about a job with Theo Crosby on the redesign of Euston Station, where the team was joined by most of the members of Archigram and Middleton designed the hotel – the end of his practice experience, bar two eccentrically converted industrial buildings as homes in New York. The project was axed in 1964, and he became technical editor of *Architectural Design* (AD) as deputy to Monica Pidgeon.

When a lifelong servitude to his boss loomed, he left for Cambridge but was also involved with the Architectural Association as Alvin Boyarsky's trusted lieutenant and general studies coordinator. The AA's creativity and craziness contrasted agreeably with

Cambridge, but he formed a successful team with David Watkin there, teaching French and English history courses respectively, enshrined in *Neoclassical and 19th Century Architecture* (1980).

Middleton's breakneck-pace lectures were daunting but exhilarating, his design background evident in his attention to buildings' formal qualities. His reading programmes for students were rigorous ("Find the original edition, read the whole thing") and there were never any right answers, but he also had a fondness for ancien régime gardens and sensuous interiors. As faculty librarian, Middleton built up the holdings with fanatical energy and no concern for budgets. European periodicals were a special focus. He defied the residence requirement of his job and never spent a night there, arriving at Cambridge station with a bulging shoulder bag of new items over his green snakeskin jacket.

At the AA, meanwhile, Middleton's programme of open lectures flourished along with a lively run of exhibitions, some contemporary and many historical. The grandest was drawings from the *École des Beaux-Arts* in 1978 with an extended conference of historians and architects, published in a Thames & Hudson book and a special issue of AD.

Middleton's hypercritical standards limited his own output, which consisted mainly of introductions, reviews and anonymous Wikipedia posts. But these still deserve a bibliography, if not a collected volume. A festschrift for his 75th birthday, *Fragments: Architecture and the Unfinished*, was published in 2006. More recently he moved into the 20th century, which had long fascinated him but not been a focus of study. Taking over a project from another scholar, he planned an ambitious collection of studies of individual buildings and texts by specialist authors with the working title *Flashpoints: Architecture since 1900* – which may yet be his memorial. ■

Alan Powers is an architectural historian

THE SMITHSONS' HOUSE OF THE FUTURE

Designed by Alison (1928-1993) and Peter (1923-2003) Smithson

By Valeria Carullo

The House of the Future, designed by husband-and-wife team Alison and Peter Smithson, was singled out by the Times as one of the highlights of the 1956 Ideal Home Exhibition. Imagining a new way of living for the 1980s, the architects created a townhouse moulded in plastic-impregnated plaster and consisting of units each comprising the wall, floor and ceiling as a continuous surface.

The units were connected by flexible joints to allow for thermal movement and provide a structural break for reducing noise. The house, heated and air-conditioned throughout, was designed as part of a back-to-back

group of terrace houses, where the adjoining walls had a soundproof, fireproof outer casing.

The rooms of the House of the Future, flowing into one another around a central patio garden, could however be separated, if needed, by hidden folding doors. All the furniture and fittings were moulded in the wall surface, with the exception of the chairs, also designed by the Smithsons (the 'Petal' chair can be seen in this photograph). While the futuristic cooking area was inspired by the design of aeroplane kitchens, echoes of the architects' ideas can also be found in contemporary and later pop art. ■





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