Fun, fast and furious: Fala Atelier
Reed Watts gives cricket pavilion an edge
Housing act: Scomodo takes to the street
It would be interesting if one could build a building with changing surface colour, perhaps depending on varying light conditions throughout a day or a year. Howon Lee on what buildings might gain from the humble octopus.

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In Rotterdam, a building getting a nickname is a favourable sign, so the future looks bright for the new depot for Museum Boijmans van Beuningen. The Flower Pot, The Salad Bowl, Grand Mirror are a few of the names that locals have come up with for the mirror glass building-with-roof park by MVRDV. Passersby marvel at the curved facades that deform reflections of the Rotterdam skyline and in which they see themselves walking as though through a laughing mirror. Tourists kneel deep to photograph it.

In September 2020, the so-called Silver Opening took place on the occasion of the architectural completion. The 151,000 works of art still had to be moved in, but the depot has already received jubilant reviews. This is because this storage building, seven floors and 40m high, is not on an industrial estate, but right next to the Boijmans museum in the city centre. From September 2021 the public may enter the depot to see how the collection – with works by Van Gogh, Rembrandt and Rothko – is preserved, and to take a look at the restoration studios. This has never been done before in the world.

The atmosphere in the museum will be ‘a cross between Alice in Wonderland and Night at the Museum’, says MVRDV’s Winy Maas. There’s a James Bond-style entrance, invisibly concealed in the facade, and a Grand glass lift that takes you to the roof park, offering spectacular views of the city. At the same time the building takes and gives back views from all sides, creating a sense of space in the Museum Park, despite its prominent presence. That prompted one person to write to the museum suggesting that the nickname therefore should be ‘De BlikVanger’ – the Catcher of the View.

Kirsten Hannema
Delivering flyers for the first consultation on a new bridge for the Lake District village of Pooley Bridge, Héctor Beade Pereda of Knight Architects could tell this was going to be a tricky job. The council had charged Knight with delivering a concept design for bridge and a unanimous community decision. The village lost its stone bridge to Storm Desmond in December 2015 as the rain ran off the fells, filling Ullswater and then draining through the valley and taking the bridge with it. Now the community was looking for a replacement that would match the beautiful landscape, and there was a campaign to get back a stone bridge.

This was never an option, the heavy piers sitting in the River Eamont had exacerbated flooding in the village, as well as leading the bridge’s collapse. It was a no-no for the Environment Agency. The hastily erected temporary bridge – with the look of an army installation – didn’t have many admirers either, though villagers and visitors alike appreciated not having to drive an extra half an hour to cross the river. They were also only too aware of the disruption of having no bridge, especially in the tourist season which the town depends on.

After discussions over the parameters – speed of construction and water flow – in consultation session one, session two was a presentation of three concept designs. Knight wanted to know what people liked or not about each. Lots of contradictory opinions meant no idea came out a clear winner. ‘We were pretty scared,’ admits Beade Pereda. ‘There was not much time between showing the designs and the end of the commission.’ Instead the firm explained the contradictions in its next consultation session, the more modern/too modern preferences and the simple is boring/simplicity is best dilemma. And it used the feedback to draw out positives as design principles, looking at words and phrases like open views, unobtrusive, elegant, made to withstand flooding, lightness and transparency.

They were helped by the fact that this was to only be a single lane for traffic so the structure and impact barriers could be less weighty or clumsy than normal. The bridge design Knight presented, along with a model, was welcomed at the consultation meeting; it was a simple arch with a 40m span. It does indeed look light, more like a footbridge than a road bridge, and the spandrel columns between arch and deck give the extra suggestion of waterflow – which Knight found was very important to locals.

It has now been built. At the base of the wooded valley, the arcing underbelly of in-situ concrete sits on prefabricated stainless steel sections above the shallow Eamont. Above is the road deck, permanently in tension. On the surface it looks very simple but there is a hidden structure in the lime-stone-faced abutments which avoided huge foundation work on uncertain ground. Invisible extra side spans give an uplift that needed to be held at each end of the structure.

When Knight Architects was asked to replace a river crossing lost in Storm Desmond, winning local support was top of the design brief.
It’s a bow string arch bridge though you wouldn’t know it... if the result is a happy village, why should anyone complain?

Knight continued with the project throughout as concept guardian for the design and build contract. So Beade Pereda saw the outsize crane that took days (and more cranes) to erect before swinging the steels into place in just hours last summer. And while surfaces were laid the Covid swell of visitors used a temporary footbridge.

The crossing at Pooley Bridge was just one of 450 that Cumbria Council had to repair or replace after the 2019 floods. This one, embedded in the village, had special treatment. At £7 million, Beade Pereda admits it would have been ‘possible to cross the river for less’. Using it you get a sense of the care that went into it. The delicate balustrades enable even young children to join in with pooh sticks and drop a stick through where the bridge and pavement widen over the centre of the Eamont. Perhaps the stepping over the high Trief kerb (as seen in petrol stations) is a little hard work if you are dashing to see where the river has taken the stick, but using these safety kerbs meant that other barriers weren’t needed. But it may be that many pedestrians will have their eyes down, looking out for their names in sandstone pavers, where Beade Pereda and the teams’ names are carved alongside those of members of the community and many regular visitors. •

Above: Steel spandrel columns give strength with lightness.

Below: Ullswater and the River Eamont calmly flowing from it through Pooley Bridge.

Credits
Architect
Knight Architects
Client
Cumbria County Council
Project management
Mott MacDonald
Design & build contractor
Eric Wright Civil Engineering
Concept design engineer
Mott MacDonald
Contractor’s consultant
QID
Geit 13 checking
Inertia Consulting
Concept design
Independent checking
Inertia Consulting
Environmental consultant
PBA Ecology
Stainless steel fabricator
WEC Group / m-tec
Reinforced concrete
works: Beta Construction
Strand jacks / tensioning equipment: Bill Boley
Operated plant: Bartlett

Central
Quarter
End section

CONCA
design: Ludovica + Roberto Palomba

The RIBA Journal March 2021
ribaj.com
I’ll be clear at the opening; I don’t know the first thing about cricket. That quintessential summer clack of leather on willow that seems to send English pulses racing doesn’t register even a blip in my continental heart. As a child, cricket coverage on TV was responded to with blank bafflement and as a teenager at school PE classes, I was so Long Off I was in the local shopping parade. And as I write, only yesterday reports of the latest test against whoever had me mentally reaching for that Polish citizenship form again – and I barely speak a word of that.

If these experiences have afforded me any insights, it’s an awareness of the deeply temporal aspects of the game and how, unlike any other sport, it seems to carve out Time; insinuating itself into the everyday lives of a 2.5 billion strong global fan base, with its ‘lunch’ and ‘tea’, ‘refreshments’ and ‘drinks’. And there’s a synchronicity with that notion at Reed Watts’ Teddington Cricket Club in London’s Bushy Park, sat within the 6.5 mile brick perimeter wall of Henry VIII’s Hampton Court hunting ground, where a languid pitch invasion by a herd of deer is just one more reason to stop play and retire to the bar.

Established in 1867, TCC played out of little more than a shed until the end of the sequestration of Bushy Park for the US Air Force’s Camp Griffiss, when it inherited a couple of their decommissioned Nissen Huts in 1945, left over from D-Day. It set these up on the northern perimeter of the park to serve as its clubhouse; and while somewhat basic and dark, it served this purpose perfectly well until Jim Reed, whose son was a member of TCC’s junior team, was appointed along with his firm in 2014 to create a permanent home for the TCC for its summer seasons well into the future, as well acting as the base for the local Teddington Athletic FC.

In a move of satisfying continuity, they decided not to fix something that wasn’t broken, retaining the idea of two buildings, but unifying them with a large bar/social space offering enviable views of the TCC’s two cricket pitches. All built in a mere eight months, those Nissen huts have been reified, now expressed as MMC timber SIPS panels clad in dignified black-stained larch, allowing the pavilion to serve as its clubhouse; and while somewhat basic and dark, it served this purpose perfectly well until Jim Reed, whose son was a member of TCC’s junior team, was appointed along with his firm in 2014 to create a permanent home for the TCC for its summer seasons well into the future, as well acting as the base for the local Teddington Athletic FC.

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structure to camouflage itself among the trees of the SSSI between it and a site of scientific interest – the National Physical Laboratory campus – to the east.

Since the firm was building next to this, in a Royal Park and a conservation area, the £2.2 million pavilion generated considerable public interest. Reed thinks that most objections were headed off by the support of the Royal Parks, which bought into the BREEAM Excellent project from the get-go. Not only did it recommend moving the site to have better proximity to the pitches but, in a design meeting that pavilion manager Matt Rees recalls ‘had us picking our jaws off the floor’, suggested knocking an opening through the 16th century wall to allow for access to a dedicated perimeter parking area. This worked to remove vehicles from Bushy; and the TCC, incensed by the scaffolding details for the grade II listed wall, rolled over. But assurance was a draw for the National Physical Lab demographic too, when it chose TCC for its pre-pandemic Christmas party. A bunch of boffins working out the minutiae of Metrology, whose predecessors built the first Caesium-133 atomic clock in 1955. I mean, it’s become a draw for local kids, who congregate at the gate beneath its pavilion clock. They boot break bottles out front. ‘Lockdown’s probably got something to do with it – they need a release,’ he surmises. But it’s notable that not a window is cracked and that none of the metal letters of the pavilion has been prized off. Like any good civic building, it has to take a licking.

Telling the time for the park, the clock just ticks away above them regardless. Perhaps what’s missing now is the play-along重要内容。
Lunchtime special

Maccreanor Lavington has created a magnificent, cathedral-like refectory for Ibstock Place School in south-west London

Words: Isabelle Priest Photographs: Jack Hobhouse

This project, a refectory for Ibstock Place School in Roehampton, all started with a sketch by Richard Lavington which broke down the brief into three simple attached volumes: a kitchen, a servery and a dining hall. ‘It’s a once-in-a-career project,’ explains associate and project lead Tom Waddicor. ‘The school loved the concept and wanted it to be built as it was conceived. The work was in delivering the detail.’ And this is what Maccreanor Lavington has done in a very undistracted and precise way.

Ibstock Place School is a co-educational private school in south-west London which runs through from nursery to sixth form, and the new building provides lunch for all years. The school is split across two sites diagonally opposite from each other over a main road, next to the Alton Estate on one side and Richmond Park on another. One site is primarily for the sports fields, the other is for teaching. The school was founded in 1894 in Kensington but moved in 1946 to occupy the house and grounds of an elegant 16-bedroom Edwardian mansion designed by Frank Chesterton and completed in 1913. The house still provides the entrance and main school building, set back from the road, while the rest of the buildings are set out around the original landscaped gardens to the rear with an indoor swimming pool in the position of the original 1920s outdoor pool. Buildings cluster between and around an orchard which slopes away from the house’s terrace. ‘It’s a landscape-focused campus,’ says Waddicor. Department buildings nestle between existing trees, with pupils crossing the grass to their next lessons, under the blossom in spring.

The previous school refectory was sited to the east of this orchard along the boundary, abutting the main house terrace at the northern end. It was built in the 1990s in a conservatory style that had a short lifespan and was added to in a piecemeal fashion as the school expanded enormously over the next 20 to 30 years. There are now 1,200 pupils and an accompanying large staff body and the building was not coping with circulation flows and capacity. As part of an invited competition in 2016, Maccreanor Lavington looked at what it could reuse but ultimately decided the building needed to be completely replaced. The new three-part building sits on roughly the same footprint but from a 580m² floor area creates 1,950m² by including a basement, mezzanine and hidden sixth-form study room in the left.

‘The school wanted to make as much space as possible,’ says Waddicor. ‘We wanted to keep it in the same position at the heart of the school so people would look out to the orchard while having lunch. And we wanted to make it about the roof – low and secondary to the main house but maintaining volume; a kind of country house with a barn.’

The three-volume form provides glimpses of the trees beyond, allowing light through the slots between the three roofs. The team spent time studying Lutyens’ country houses for ideas on how to manage volumes using low eaves that step down to deliver huge but not overwhelming houses – as well as learning from his attention to materials, bonnet hips and roof pitches. Other inspiration came on a minibus trip to Oxford to visit Arne Jacobsen’s refectory at St Catherine’s College, where everything was designed by the architect down to the cutlery. This inspired the idea for individual desk lights in the sixth-form area. The team also stopped off at Duggan Morris’s Alfriston School swimming pool to see the vaulted ceilings and at Níall McLaughlin’s Mid-Anglia School to see the vaulted ceilings and at Níall McLaughlin’s Mid-Anglia School to see the vaulted ceilings and at Níall McLaughlin’s Mid-Anglia School to see the vaulted ceilings and at Níall McLaughlin’s Mid-Anglia School to see the vaulted ceilings and at...
McLaughlin's Bishop Edward Chapel. You can see the influences.

Externally, the three initial volumes resemble joined pavilions, bridging the change in level down the 60m-long site. The hall is at the northern end, servery and small hall are in the middle, and kitchens are to the south with access to the basements, which contain storage, the maintenance office, plant and kitchen staff welfare areas, forming a scattered plan around tree root protection zones.

The low-hanging eaves and cloister, added to the design in the original sketch, allow pupils to queue outside, covered from the elements, before being let into the central volume, while also creating a softer human scale and edge to the orchard lawn.

The material composition of the façade also comprises three elements: brickwork; precast concrete coping, tinted slightly red; and handmade clay tiles, which will weather over time, adding variation and texture. The bricks and tiles were sourced from the same clay area in Sussex and chosen to complement the bright red cobbles and dark red walls of the main school building.

'It's no secret that Maccreanor Lavington loves brick,' adds Waddicor. 'It's often the obvious choice – easy to handle, durable, weathers well – all the reasons it would have been used on the main house. We wanted the building to feel part of it.'

While primarily a dining hall, the space can be rearranged for performances, events and assemblies.

The hall is a celebration of space, we wanted it to have grandeur and a ceremonial quality for moments of coming together,'
The occupants of a high rise or high-risk building don’t really know if its façade is sufficiently fireproof or not. Only you can be sure that it is safe. Only you can guarantee the correct level of fire protection, and this is possible by choosing a state-of-the-art façade construction. The Stamisol Safe One façade breather membrane enables you to combine maximum fire safety with a high degree of design freedom, even for open façade cladding projects. And the Euroclass A2-s1,d0 rating will leave you secure knowing you made the right choice.

SAFE? OR UNSAFE?

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Wright and Wright adds another tower to Lambeth Palace’s historic collection with a subtle, solid and respectful new library.

Critique
Lambeth Palace Library

‘Jam factories’, they used to call them. Long before the modern variants of architectural insult (‘academy for secret police’, ‘alien spaceship’, ‘prison’ etc) the ‘jam factory’ put-down was applied to various modern civic and cultural buildings in brick. Most notable of these was Elisabeth Scott’s Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-on-Avon, which opened in 1932. I’ve wondered if there was an actual prominent jam factory somewhere to which these buildings were being compared. I suspect not. Why jam, anyway? Why not chocolate, or baked beans?

The new Lambeth Palace Library by Wright and Wright (RIBAJ, November 2016) is a bit of a jam factory on that curious basis, then. Its hand-made brick laid in various textures is rather better than the inter-war examples and includes ‘Bishop bond’, a recessed cruciform pattern, and the use of random blue headers: both of these are nods to the old palace. It has the equivalent of a blocky fly tower, the merest touch of restrained glamour in the lofty foyer, even the cast-iron rainwater hoppers and downpipes that you saw on Scott’s theatre. It has duly attracted some criticism from the keyboard warriors who like to reach for their architectural analogies (‘like a railway signal box’ was the oddest) generally homing in on its industrial look. As in the jam-factory era, the objection always seems to be that the building in question does not look like what it is, but something else which should be somewhere else. As if everyone instinctively knows what a museum-conservation grade archive building by a river in the vicinity of a medieval ecclesiastical complex should look like.

The Church of England wanted a straightforward building. Nothing fancy – that would have looked self-indulgent. But good, robust, long-lasting, not-over-complex or energy hungry. This is, in fact, as much of an industrial as a cultural building. Beneath the brick skin it is in-situ concrete. The tower rises to nine storeys, with flanking wings of four and five storeys topped with a lot of PV panels and terminating in staircase towers which visually narrow the ends. It is just a fraction higher than Hopkins’ Evelina Children’s Hospital opposite, so you...
can see over it. Only two of these levels – ground and first – are busy with people, plus a seminar room and viewing platform at the very top of the tower. The rest stores the collection, floor after airlocked floor of rolling steel shelving, still being filled when I visited pre-lockdown 3. Hence the lack of windows. No basement levels because to go deep like the British Library, here right next to the Thames with its flood risk, was considered unwise: another client caveat. There were some late tweaks post-Grenfell such as the inclusion of a second staircase in the tower which ate into the space but even so there is 20% expansion space for the collection.

So this building is not very densely inhabited, with a maximum staff of 38 and perhaps 120 visitors if all reader and seminar seats are taken, plus a number wandering around the public areas. You could call the place a cold store, if you wanted to wind people up with another analogy. Though a cold store with a relatively small but imposing double-height reading room, a low rear wing of conservation studios, much-improved garden landscape by Dan Pearson incorporating an enlarged lake which helps with the building’s cooling.

There will be public access to the foyer and mezzanine where there is some exhibition material on display in satisfyingly old-fashioned glass display cases. For special events, you will be able to ascend to the roof terrace which has one of the best views in London. But it’s mostly a by-appointment kind of place, certainly not a tourist destination. No café. No access to the palace gardens behind which you can glimpse through the building from the street – unless you work at the Evelina, in which case you are welcome. But the rest of us can get in there on open-garden weekends.

The plan is cranked at the main core rather more than the curve in the road at this point demands, so the east wing peels away from the street to allow a wedge of landscape. The plan is also relatively narrow so as not to take any more land than necessary. And besides, as Clare Wright points out, Lambeth Palace – HQ of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Communion worldwide – is all about towers which have accumulated since medieval times, so the case for height was there. Of course the Church Commissioners had debated whether the library/archive should be here at all, or housed off-site somewhere – Swindon is always mentioned in this context, as it is well-connected and so many cultural institutions have their stores there. The collection was previously divided between the palace itself and an outpost in Bermondsey. But on this the Church made up its mind: the collection, which is an
unparalleled insight into not only British history but of the Church worldwide, should be built in the palace grounds, which itself is just across the river from the Palace of Westminster. Church and state: the collections intertwine the two. For instance they have the prayer book of Elizabeth I and her execution warrant for her sister, Mary, Queen of Scots.

Wright and Wright has done one of its garden-wall buildings, placing this in line of descent from its libraries at Magdalen and St John’s Colleges in Oxford. It was undoubtedly the firm’s experience working with historic buildings and gardens – especially libraries – that won it this job. It is a building with no back really, given that its entrance, and a projecting glazed visitor gallery, are on Lambeth Palace Road, but it does act as a defensive barrier to that busy road. This is noticeable. I have been in the Archbishop’s garden and what should be a kind of contemplative paradise was somewhat degraded by the noise and fumes of traffic. On the garden side, the new building embraces the much-improved landscaping and shelters it from this. The well-daylit conservation studios in particular benefit, looking across the lake, while the long views down the garden from the palace are preserved. It might be large, but in spirit it’s still a garden outbuilding, set well away from the palace proper.

Inside, the reception and reading room are British Library in feel – modern with an awareness of history, a few well-chosen materials (stone, brick, wood, bronze, brass). The entrance foyer is a cruciform design, the weight of the tower and its stacks above taken by four stout brick-clad columns and a massive concrete slab forming the ceiling. This is incised crossways, the centre marked by a circular light fitting with brasswork details. The Christian symbolism is clear enough.

Overall this is a subtle, rewarding building and landscape, acknowledging its workaday function while enriching it as a place of study and of huge cultural and historical value. If it’s a jam factory, to paraphrase Inigo Jones, it is the handsomest jam factory in England.
Temple revival

Arriving into Bristol Temple Meads by train, you are landed in the centre of Temple Quarter Enterprise Zone. You can see it from the train coming in but the station funnels you out between the long arms of its buildings and pushes you towards the mile-long walk into the city centre. You have to backtrack to see around and behind the station—the fractured complex of roads, dated offices, historic walls and industrial sheds, carved into islands by the curves of the river Avon and a network of canal and old floating harbour that make up the 100ha Temple Quarter Enterprise Zone.

The enterprise zone has had a special status since 2012 and was given added weight by the setting up of the West of England Combined Authority in 2016 with a £500 million Economic Development Fund. Homes England is on board and Network Rail too. Bristol mayor Marvin Rees describes it as ‘massively significant’. It has had great hopes attached to it, the most high profile being the £90 million Bristol Arena. Populous and Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios (FCBS) worked on its design before it was cancelled in favour of a developer-led site, north of the city. The bridges installed for the arena are a testament to the failed hope. But now there are now fresh moves, most notably Bristol University’s new Temple Quarter Enterprise Campus. And in March a new development framework comes before the city authorities to be embedded into the Local Plan running to 2035.

I dodge the gothic castellations of the station’s embrace and slip out though a side entrance. Here, over the last 25 years, six-to-eight-storey blocks have gathered, rather lumpishly around Temple Quay, housing legal firms and public bodies. They are topped by Glenn Howells Architects’ 13-storey Eye—a block of glittery apartments completed in 2009. The showy Valentine Bridge and Mead bridge over to Glass Wharf take you over the water; nice moments in a rather dull walk.
from the station. Temple Quay is familiar territory – in architecture, masterplan, development model – recognisable from early London Docklands development, Dublin Docklands and London’s Paddington Basin. The bulk of the enterprise quarter is reached through a low, dank tunnel under the railway lines, but in the 1800s it was a busy section of the port. The wealth it brought into the city – including the empire’s slave trade economy – is embedded in the massive rubble walls along Silverthorne Lane from the St Vincent’s Iron Works and Bristol Gas Works, where coal was stored before being hauled to release gas. Now empty sales forecourts front the old walls, topped with razor wire. Here is imagined a development larger than London’s King’s Cross Central: Bristol University’s campus will give it the first visible buildings of a new generation.

As the city consults on introducing a conservation area, the most visible landmarks of the industrial uses, albeit modern ones, the gasometers, have recently been levelled as work starts. There are plans for 370 houses and a 1,600-place new academy (currently called in by the secretary of state). Bristol University, with AHMM, has been consulting on its plans, including an incubator unit for the as-yet-unlisted coal sheds and around 700 student residences. But this is phase 2 for the university’s Temple Enterprise Quarter, earmarked for sometime in the future. Phase 1 is sandwiched between the water of Totterdown Basin and Temple Meads station, scheduled for completion in autumn 2023. The person driving the build is Barra Mac Ruairí, the university’s chief property officer and one-time council strategic director of place. Under the short mayoralty of architect George Ferguson, Mac Ruairí purchased the long-derelict postal sorting office on this site for the council and stripped it back to its frame. He could see then that the site would ‘need real patient capital’.

It hasn’t got any easier, but he believes the university has the right, long-term ambitions for the job. ‘You can’t underestimate the challenges,’ he says. The sorting office has now been demolished but was hugely solid with 2m-thick concrete into the basement which is not shifting (100 piles will be core drilled into it for the foundations). Ground contamination seemed a given since there was no wall to the historic floating harbour. Between this and the tidal River Avon just south, the water table necessitates raising the site by a metre. In addition, service access to the station had to be maintained. ‘It has really taxed me,’ Mac Ruairí admits.

Despite that, the masterplan, by FCBS, gives an effortless flow to the public spaces. It was given a boost by Network Rail plans to open new station entrances (still awaiting funding agreements), eventually opening up a direct route from and through the station and city centre and into the new campus.
Buildings
Bristol

The centrepiece is FCBS’s mega 39,017m² academic building with a 6m-high ground floor, Bristol Rooms, which will welcome the public for shopping, eating and events. Above will be collaboration spaces with a focus on innovation and entrepreneurship, management, digital and quantum engineering and their partners in back spaces, labs and research facilities. For an institution largely based in villas in the rather precious Clifton, above Bristol, this is a big move.

Making it a public place has been an essential part of the message – from a new green edge to Totterdown Basin to the squares that will face each other over a new bridge, ‘We are conscious to create a porous campus: open but dense,’ says Mac Ruairí. ‘Winning over the public – or at least planners – has also meant reducing the height of some of AHMM’s postgraduate student housing on the adjoining site of Temple Island, although it still ranges from 12 to 21 storeys.

The height of buildings on Temple Island taps into Bristol’s ongoing debate about height, fuelled by the visuals for ZHA’s towers for 500 homes next door for L&G (with a conference centre and hotel as a possible phase 2). Elsewhere the city is about to get its tallest building yet: Chapman Taylor’s 26-storey Castle Park View. Former mayor Ferguson fears the tall buildings are taking the city in the wrong direction. On Temple Island he de-spairs of the ‘piling’ up of the housing. ‘This is not the way we should be housing students,’ he says. For current mayor, Rees, housing is one of Bristol’s biggest issues. Building enough of it, close in to the city, is part of addressing Bristol’s inequality, and sustainability for the whole city. The opportunity of 10,000 new homes in Temple Quarter is a gift. ‘It’s in active travel distance and yes, higher density in the middle of the city,’ he says.

There are still areas of great opportunity in Temple Quarter, such as the southern section, St Philip’s Marsh, currently home to cement batching, car dealerships, scrapyards and a fruit wholesale market – though Rees sounds a note of caution about the need to retain jobs and not just white collar ones. It will also need flood resilient infrastructure to underpin what the council hopes will be a ‘series of sustainable mixed-use neighbourhoods’.

And right next door is Redcliffe with its 60s housing blocks clustered around the landmark St Mary Redcliffe church, lately the subject of great community push for a neighbourhood plan. Hall McKnight has designed a £12-15 million scheme for the church with local community spaces, which has still to receive planning. And there is Grimshaw’s Engine Shed 2, which takes on the very for 500 homes next door for L&G (with a conference centre and hotel as a possible phase 2). Elsewhere the city is about to get its tallest building yet: Chapman Taylor’s 26-storey Castle Park View. Former mayor Ferguson fears the tall buildings are taking the city in the wrong direction. On Temple Island he de-spairs of the ‘piling’ up of the housing. ‘This is not the way we should be housing students,’ he says. For current mayor, Rees, housing is one of Bristol’s biggest issues. Building enough of it, close in to the city, is part of addressing Bristol’s inequality, and sustainability for the whole city. The opportunity of 10,000 new homes in Temple Quarter is a gift. ‘It’s in active travel distance and yes, higher density in the middle of the city,’ he says.

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Buildings

Bristol

successful model of the existing supported work, innovation and incubation space into an extended George and Railway Hotel – between Temple Quay and Redcliffe. Developer Skanska is waiting to push the button, or not. There are huge sums involved – £32 million has been quoted on council remediation of land at Temple Island, L&G is reportedly investing £240 million and the cost of the campus is £300 million. It is hard to see how the values and revenues these rely on will be sustained in a coronavirus (and Brexit) recession, though they are planning for the long term into 2041. Elsewhere in the city, shelved development plans could perhaps be hidden but here everything is on show to visitors. At the moment two new bridges span the muddy tidal reaches of the Avon leading to nowhere, gathering graffiti, and waiting for the development to finally come. It needs to happen says Rees. ‘It adds to the city’s reputation as a place where you can get stuff done.’

See Bristol Mayor Marvin Rees talking about Temple Quarter and the city with Eleanor Young as part of the RIBA’s People Place Planet series at tinyurl.com/7auyplpd

Above: Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios’ main academic building on Temple Island.
Top right: Temple Quarter broken down into development areas.
Right: AHMM’s visualisation of student towers on Temple Island.
Below: AHMM’s masterplan with new public squares on Avon Street and reuse of the coal sheds.
Far right: Station entrance view.

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The benefits of brick

The varied qualities of brick can add design depth to all types of buildings. Michelmersh showcases some of its favourite examples, from towering apartments in Wembley Park to a tiny church.

Landby
Architect: Flanagan Lawrence
Brick: Michelmersh’s Floren Polaris

The Wembley Park redevelopment is on a grand scale. One of the largest such schemes in the UK, it is transforming the long-neglected space around the iconic Wembley Stadium into a new area of London. Fundamentally to its success is a series of new residential developments, the most iconic of which is architect Flanagan Lawrence’s Landby development. This giant scheme, with its distinctive grey-brick facades, has a towering presence on Olympic Way, the north-south processional route that leads spectators from Wembley Park Station to the stadium. ‘All the buildings along this historic route are at quite a heroic scale,’ says Tiziano Flaassang, design director at Flanagan Lawrence. The Landby development is actually two residential buildings – Landsby East and Landsby West – separated by a pedestrian street; together the buildings are home to 361 apartments. Landsby East fronts the west side of Olympic Way. It is formed of two linked rectangular blocks: the northern block frames the view of the stadium and its arch from Olympic Way, while the taller southern block is pushed back, away from the road, to maintain the stadium view. The building’s architectural character is derived from a series of giant brick planes which extend beyond the apartments to enclose balconies on the north and south elevations. When it came to selecting a brick for the scheme, the architect wanted a pale grey with a variation in tone and colour that, from a distance, would look uniform and monolithic ‘to give us the ability to create these very simple sculptural shapes,’ he says.

Crossway Church
Architect: Van Huyning and Haward
Brick: Michelmersh’s Floren Vega Rustic

Community is at the heart of Van Huyning and Haward’s Crossway United Reformed Church in London’s Elephant and Castle. Its use of textured brick and copper detailing on the new-storey elevations gives the church both a welcoming, human scale and a strong presence in an extremely challenging urban context sandwiched between a large housing block and looming railway viaduct. A large cross formed in Michelmersh’s textured Floren Vega Rustic brick on its east elevation makes a proclamation visible to traffic on the railway above.

Above: Landby East: a series of giant brick planes which extend beyond the apartments on the north and south elevations.

The building’s scale has been addressed by sub-dividing it into a series of four distinct blocks; these increase in height from nine to 16 storeys as the massing moves away from the Civic Centre. The building’s stepped form also helps it relate to the Flanagan Lawrence-designed Alto building (the Landby development’s predecessor), which it faces across the park.

While Landsby East, Landsby West and the Alto building each have their own distinct architectural character, all three are related to each other and to Brent Civic Centre (designed by Hopkins Architects) through the common architectural feature described by Flanagan as “loops”. On the Civic Centre the loops appear as frames on the facade to define the different zones of accommodation. Flanagan Lawrence developed this reference on Landby where vertical brick-clad frames enclose the balconies on the east and west elevations of Landby West. On Landsby East, however, the loops are subtly incorporated into the monolithic brick facades where they frame the projecting balconies on the east and west facades.

This common architectural language is endorsed by developer Quintain, Italian Tullio Tissait, head of masterplanning and design, says all the Quintain buildings at Wembley Park ‘avoid a monostylistic solution but equally avoid a plethora of different styles’. He summaries this as: ‘architectural brick with a light grey-colour mortar was paramount to the success of the scheme. ‘The mortar complemented the colour of the brick and enhanced the contrast with scheme’s dark grey aluminium window frames,’ he says. The lighter mortar also helped to disguise the movement joints within the monolithic brick facades.

In fact, the use of the pale grey Polaris brick was such a popular choice that it has even been used internally on the exposed walls in the common areas of Landsby West where it enhances the ground floor reception, residents’ lounge and library.

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solidly built, uniform and well-detailed
of this quirky housing scheme reference
Road is a contemporary take on a Victorian
deviation opposite. ‘There is something
selected to work tonally with its metal roofs,
parapet to form a small roof terrace.
this the pitched roofs are set back from the
corner warehouse to an existing three-
three-storey block, also set back, links the
scheme’s Tryon Crescent frontage. A lower,
corner block, a terrace of four similar sized
scheme at the junction of King Edward’s
The RIBA Journal March 2021 ribaj.com

Michelmersh’s pale brown Floren Pollux
Hawkins\Brown
Michelmersh

Architect: Henley Halebrown
Brick: Michelmersh’s Floren Vega Rustic

A drift of brick — an estimated 1,400 of them — have been
used in Michelmersh’s new housing scheme.

Brickwork plinth enclosing the ground floor
help define the entrance openings, and on the
corner of the building to help ground the corner block.

The charm of this scheme is its simplicity
and inclusion on the shortlist for the 2018
Silver in the Fritz Höger Award 2020
Architecture, for its ‘high
quality of design and sustainability.

NG: The new London Plan has a lot to say about
affordable housing and the aspiration is that 50% of all
new homes be affordable, especially those on public
land. The ‘unaffordable/affordable’ housing designation
has gone, the mayor now has an ‘affordable London rent’,
which is like social rent and ‘London living rent’
set at keyworker level; then there’s shared ownership.
The new plan has a big uplift in the number of homes
to be built each year, and its affordable component; the
committee wants to see more family housing.

AB: Robert Jenrick’s intervention on homes and density
is pertinent because of so many people’s experience
over the last year. It’s focused Londoners’ minds on the
kind of housing we should be living in. There have been
too many small, identikit high-rise flats that, lockdown
proved, are a poor environment for growing families.

AB: A key difference between the previous draft and the
new plan is direction on tall buildings. Now local
authorities can factor in the idea that a tall building
can be anything above six storeys. It will be a useful
template for boroughs to decide the heights they want. This makes
height a conscious decision — previously local councils
often let a tall building application go through because
they thought it would get overturned on appeal. The
amendments help deal with that.

NG: The mayor defines good growth as ‘socially inclusive,
economic and environmentally sustainable growth’. I think
there is a strong attempt to integrate these, so
there are not quick-fixes and short term trade-offs. This
underpins the new London Plan. Architects will find
much more emphasis given to social value and how
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To see in it

AB: Robert Jenrick’s three-job council decision
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Intelligence
Practice profile

Community service

Studio Polpo isn’t your everyday practice. It’s there to spot ways it can improve its community, working with a network of architects, clients, and often opportunist ideas

Eleanor Young

In the optimism of early autumn last year Mark Parsons spent half a day a week in a Wakefield nursery, playing. One week he took a projector; on another the ideas of the elements – earth, air, wind and fire. He wouldn’t describe himself as a play specialist, or community facilitator or artist, but he and practice Studio Polpo are all of these at times. It slips in the title artist sometimes, to test if it gives it licence to do more than an architect. It does. Studio Polpo is a light footed practice that thrives on the sort of projects most firms only allow themselves as occasional forays. There are campaigns, supporting artists, ply structures on wheels, a housing research newspaper, a hydroponic fish farm and mycelium grown theatre sets. Oh, and a bioreactor.

Yes there are designs, reports and funding bids. But also fungal panels in the basement, some cured to act as building blocks, some allowed to sprout oyster mushrooms. ‘I don’t want just to be organising, leaving other people to have all the fun,’ says Parsons. ‘I like designing, building, spreadsheets and testing.’ When lockdown eases, the design from those trials with four year olds in Wakefield will be fabricated and built by Studio Polpo into a mini mobile landscape for the garden at the Hepworth, to encourage locals to the gallery through their children.

Parsons describes Studio Polpo as part of a network of freelancers

Cristina Cerulli. But it is not a charity project. ‘It is important that it pays its way,’ he says. That means rent of a shared workspace, professional indemnity insurance and, of course, time. But not regular staff. He describes Studio Polpo as part of a network of freelancers – some are long term collaborators, even directors of the business, like Julia Udall and John Orlek. Others are recent graduates.

This was always the plan; when Studio Polpo was set up in 2008 Parsons and Cerulli designed it to be a different model to standard practice. It was formed as a social enterprise when there were very few architects using this structure. Its stated objectives include supporting graduates to carry out their own projects and to offer them the scaffolding, mentoring and PI to do this. Parsons and Cerulli see the importance of this in Sheffield where practices are polarised and the employment options are large scale corporate or one man band – leading many graduates to leave the city.

In practice previously, Parsons and Cerulli spotted a gap that many community organisations struggle with – accessing advice and expertise at those early stages before feasibility studies or any sign of funding. So another of their aims as a social enterprise is to support third sector organisations and help them develop strategically. Through a formal asset lock, they committed to spending profit or surplus in that sector – they use it for funding early stage feasibility work. Occasionally this work has generated payment, as organisations take on the ‘receipt’ for the work to the funding bid. But more excitingly it has meant Polpo establishing working relationships with interesting organisations that over time have enriched both.

Take Portland Works, a 19th century cutlery works used by musicians, artists and modern day cutlery makers. One of the team, Udall, was looking at the site for her masters project, but feared it would be lost as the landlord had started the process of selling it for apartments. Polpo’s campaigning posters about those working there galvanised opposition, but how could they turn that into a proposition? Wearing her academic hat

Parsons describes Studio Polpo as part of a network of freelancers

Left: Tree theatre set for Hardbacks Touring Theatre company, using repurposed grown panels (Cristina Ce).
Below: Diagram of components for the hydroponic microfarm.
Bottom right: Sketches for play structures in the grounds of the Hepworth in Wakefield.
Polpo rescued a kitchen with years of life left in it from a car park skip and installed it in Sheffield’s Foodhall.

brining the community in with posters and flyers. Polpo conversations about research into cleaning up the air there brought in his engineers from Sheffield University and a bid to develop an algal bioreactor in which the algal cleans the air and water as it grows. Polpo had designed it, bus stop size, with lively graphics – but Covid saw the funding pulled.

Even apparently half finished projects should have a life though. Cerulli is clear about the morality of making publicly funded research freely available. ‘Something might not be ground breaking or the most authoritative but others might see it and be able to use it in their area,’ she says. So when Polpo won funds to research a large scale house share in an old building, then found the project stymied by an historic covenant, it turned the research into a newspaper. Of course it made available on its website and presented it at research seminars but more significantly, it distributed the paper in pubs and health centres – natural community hubs.

Polpo’s work demonstrates a way of seeing the world with fewer social (and technological) boundaries. Later this year, Covid-depending, it will be part of the British Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale, investigating high streets as places of more than financial exchange – ‘a hairdressers is more like a confessional isn’t it?’ Many of these ideas feed back to the profession through teaching, such as Cerulli’s concentration on infrastructures of self organisation through teaching, such as Cerulli’s concentration on infrastructures of self organisation for Sheffield Hallam and her research such as Right to Build (RIBA President’s Award for Research winner 2012) – ex students have strongly influenced Wilkinson and the Community Land Trust movement. Very few similar practices have survived so long but Studio Polpo offers an example to the whole profession on bringing together unexpected disciplines, marginal communities, artists and funding to tackle important issues of our day, while having fun. You can’t ask for more from architecture than that.

Cerulli won a £10,000 knowledge transfer pot from the university and brought tenants and experts in these processes to a meeting, which decided to buy the building. That happened, supported by an alternative business plan and Sheffield’s first community share launch. Studio Polpo took on and funded an open source strategy to retrofit the building. Later it undertook an access audit. The long term relationships also give Polpo to match up opportunities. For instance, it rescued a specially designed kitchen with years of life left in it from a car park skip and installed it in Sheffield’s Foodhall (highly commended in the MacEwen Awards for inclusive social delivery of food in the city, run by ex-students of Parsons). And when the practice needed to find a site for an algal bioreactor, it turned to occasional client the Picture House.

The scale and characteristics of Sheffield make this modus operandi easier. It’s a small city; people know each other. And the legacy of not very good Victorian buildings means intervention is often needed. Add an industrial past and a legacy of socialism and there is a sense of working together for the city. But Studio Polpo is aware of the disparities between central Sheffield and the lower density periphery where people rarely access the city’s culture, university or even its hospitals. A two-year residency at Tinsley school on the other side of the M1 gave them an insight into these lives. The school buildings were empty – closed due to the high levels of air pollution, though, Cerulli adds, people still lived right there. Polpo seeded a community hub and accessed funds to make it more usable as well as

Top The Microfarm modeled. Above Discovering lessons from research, the newspaper of Experimental Research takes a step. Below Portland Works, along relationship giving the building and its makers a new life.

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Specify responsibly:
It's what's on the inside that counts.
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Don’t get comfortable

An Uncomfortable Night in Rome is no longer means just another struggle for a home. It’s Scomodo’s disruptive takeover of abandoned buildings to force change

Above

Scomodo at Palazzo Nardini. Below

Entrance to Scomodo at Spin Time Labs.
Le Notti Scomode show how young people can capitalise on potential in the city’s resources

and, in these bleak times, it aims to recreate hope and the desire for change by proposing projects that encourage young people to take a more active part in society. One of its best known enterprises endeavours to focus their attention on the need to transform Rome’s ‘Mostri’ (Monsters) – its term for abandoned or unfinished buildings – from spaces of ‘ugliness and danger’ into ones that offer a ‘new possibility’. The magazine publishes a piece on a different Mostro regularly. These Mostri are also the subject of regular Le Notti Scomode (Uncomfortable nights) – attended by thousands of the under 30s – in which Scomodo occupies or ‘liberates and reanimates’ a disused building, to ‘wake up the city’ and restore a public space to its citizens, if only temporarily. (They are temporarily suspended during Covid, and will take place in other Italian cities when they re-open.)

Le Notti Scomode are carefully organised. Volunteers clean, prepare and, with professionals, check the security of the designated venue ahead of time, only revealing the location on social media at the last minute. Volunteers, supported by some local residents, moved to a nearby park. Other Notti Scomode have continued undisturbed, as has their one day occupation in 2018 of the handsome 15th century Palazzo Nardini, which had been left derelict for decades in the centre of Rome. In collaboration with different cultural associations, as well as the Stalker architects’ and artist’s collective, Scomodo concocted a day of performances, talks and exhibitions to oppose the sale of the palazzo to private developers for a €5 entrance fee, such nights help finance the journal. Over the years, Le Notti Scomode have become an efficient, if illegal, way of showing how young people can join forces to capitalise on the huge potential in the city’s resources and its empty buildings to create new cultural models – a potential they feel is being ignored by the political authorities.

Some of the buildings selected as Mostri are architectural masterpieces, like Pier Luigi Nervi’s Stadio Flaminio, inaugurated in 1959 but abandoned for years. Others are infamous landmarks, such as the ‘Bidet di San Paolo,’ as Romans call this unsightly white cement seven-floor skeletal building. Following an agreement in 2004 between the city council and some powerful developers, it was designed as a 180-room hotel but has never opened. On both Notti Scomode here, the police ordered people to leave, but the party, supported by some local residents, have continued undisturbed, as has their one day occupation in 2018 of the handsome 15th century Palazzo Nardini, which had been left derelict for decades in the centre of Rome.

In collaboration with different cultural associations, as well as the Stalker architects’ and artist’s collective, Scomodo concocted a day of performances, talks and exhibitions to oppose the sale of the palazzo to private developers. A banner they erected above the entrance read ‘Roma sospesa’ (Rome dreamt). And the dreams continue. Scomodo has functioned as a nomadic enterprise since it was founded, but a few months ago it was able to move into new headquarters in the garage basement of Spin Time Labs. Unfortunately, at the same time, Rome was settling into its second lockdown and the organisation had to close temporarily to the public.

Over the last two years, the disused garage has been renovated in a hands-on, participatory planning programme that has involved 24 young architects (including students) and over 1400 volunteers. A crowd-funding campaign and call for donations – as well as a bank loan – have financed the entire venture and sponsorship in kind has helped furnish the space. Today, its 2200m² contain an open plan centre open to all residents, regardless of age. Scomodo can accommodate a rare 150 seat study room for students, open 24/7, as well as a library containing tens of thousands of books received in donation. Its own office sits to one side. Other zones include a project/screening room with armchairs supplied by a former cinema, a lecture space, a bar and an outdoor theatre area that can also host workshops for children.

In only four years, Scomodo has launched the most widely read magazine by Italian under 25s, a journal that defies the inter-net. It has ingeniously drawn together tens of thousands of young people to participate in projects that exemplify the urgent need to requalify Rome’s and Italy’s abandoned buildings. And, hopefully soon, it will be able to open Rome’s first cultural hub, operated by its youngest citizens. At just 21, Falassi’s dream of ‘contributing to turn this country into the one we would like to live in’ appears to be on track.

Martin Engels is a writer and curator based in Rome.

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This new generation of innovative window and door solutions reflects the current architectural trend towards maximising daylight while offering ultimate insulation levels. MasterLine 8 jointed doors even come with passive house certification.
The pandemic exhibited the paradox of the ‘livable’ centre few people choose to live in

Grand public spaces became accessible only to locals. The pandemic predicament of personal need versus crowds was not an issue here. At first, I attributed it to the triumph of ‘people-first’ planning that dispersed people across different open spaces. But after a few weeks it became apparent the area was desolate not only because of missing traffic but also missing residents. Whether people chose to lock down in summer houses away from the city or whether it was a reflection of the strength of the neighbourhood, the pandemic exhibited the paradox of the ‘livable’ centre that very few people choose to live in.

Redefining livability
Contemporary planning in the city centre has focused on enhancing commercial and leisure qualities, conjuring an environment with unplanned opportunities to stroll down streets and indulge in retail. However, high levels of noise and intense use have restricted appeal largely to strollors, students and young people. This is not unique to Copenhagen but symptomatic of many European cities that have become reservoirs of history and culture. This left them largely unused during the pandemic as users retreated. While the centre embodies the ‘livable city’, the fallout from the pandemic means Copenhagen’s ‘livability’ must be redefined to include residential users and its programming must be diversified through strategic zoning to anchor non-traditional functions.

A residential-friendly environment should be cultivated through demarcated quiet streets, children’s play areas and by upgrading/incladding housing. This would not 

subdue its role as a focal point of activity, but would expand its utility and resilience.

Danila Sadri: Ample space but everything else missing

Havnehollmen is a redeveloped mixed-use area in south Copenhagen. Clean building blocks stand tall in well-defined, sanitised district of residential, commercial and office blocks with connections to the harbourside and a shopping mall.

Over the past seven decades, Copenhagen’s urban form and development have been guided by a ‘finger plan’ drawn up in 1947, which steered growth along linear mobility corridors outwards from the centre, preserving in-between wedges as green areas to ensure access to recreation space. Since the turn of the millennium, ecological sensitivity has encouraged the casting of a ‘green glow’ around the city, with qualitative aspects influenced by architect Jan Gehl’s work on defining the catalysts for public life. The pandemic has, however, imposed on new social and health protocols, forcing us to reassess how urban spaces are structured.

Saloni Parekh: The walkable centre without people
Sankt Anna Vester Kvarter is an old residential quarter near the city centre, composed of tightly packed five-storey blocks around shared courtyards. The area is abutted by a busy main street with many shops, frequented by both locals and tourists. Consistent planning has nurtured a vitality through the design of pedestrian-friendly streets, wide pavements, cycleways, plazas and green areas.

During lockdown, the neighbourhood served its residents as essential services including the supermarket, chemist and recreational spaces were all within five minutes’ walk. The area’s livability ranked well even under distress as the walkable city eliminated reliance on public/private transport and so contained virus exposure. Access to open areas became essential as limited mobility reduced the usual footfall.

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Architect’s safer schools guide aims for clarity and joy

As the government announces a capital boost for schools, practice alma-nac has used the pandemic to deepen its relationship with schools by producing a new guide

Initialled prepared to help schools get ready for re-opening last September, the guide has been updated to assist with the anticipated return to school this spring following the post-Christmas lockdown. It has had the added benefit of building stronger links with local schools for alma-nac and raised its profile far more widely. It is good timing as the government has highlighted it’s £1 billion investment into school rebuilding.

Pamela Burton

“These were blown away by how much it’s support-ed us a school… I found it so useful – it’s very visual.” So says head teacher Reema Reid of Simple Solutions for Safer Schools, a guide produced by architect alma-nac to help schools navigate the difficult task of ensuring a Covid-safe school environment.

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Reid’s Hollydale School was one of seven in London’s Southwark, plus one in Bar-net, that alma-nac worked with to produce the guidance. And the document has had far wider exposure not just nationally, but internationally too. Online, it has been downloaded hundreds of times from as far afield as Australia, India, Russia and Sin-gapore. It’s certainly reached much further than we thought it would,” says the practice’s Chris Bryant.

For the firm, the pro-bono project was a self-initiated response to the pandemic crisis that has enabled it not only to provide much-needed practical help to schools, but also to deepen its own research into the design of school buildings.

‘When the pandemic hit, we thought about what skills we could offer as architects and what we could do to help,’ says Bryant. ‘Alma-nac was able to draw on a network of schools it had built up as part of a project (currently paused) to repurpose the 2019 Dulwich Pavilion as planters for local education establishments.

Clarity and joy

The practice intended simply to supplement rather than supersede the rather dry government advice with positive and achievable guidance informed by insights gained from talking to the schools themselves. ‘We felt we could offer something very clear and hopefully more joyful and positive,’ he explains.

After evaluating the government advice, alma-nac spent time talking to leaders at the cohort of primaries and secondaries, which included both state and private schools of various sizes and building vintages. Where possible the practice visited alma-nac’s Tristan Wigfall was already familiar with the school his son attends - to gain an understanding of the challenges and proposed strategies.

Schools highlighted particular challenges of facilitating regular hand washing, achieving socially-distanced circulation in narrow corridors, seating configuration, and dealing with the school entrance, which has become the key interface between school and parents/the wider community now that entry is no longer allowed beyond that point. Presented in an accessible style, the guide sets out key principles of communication, wellbeing and context as well as specific guidance for areas such as drop off/pick up; distancing; circulation, and classrooms including the increasingly important outside learning. This includes diagrams showing different seating configurations – the schools consulted often preferred horseshoe arrangements. There is useful advice on hygiene, classroom equipment and dealing with personal belongings as well as tips such as the use of ‘social wings’ to help children judge distances.

Participating schools valued the clarity of the document, and found it useful not only in practical terms for themselves as guidance and a checklist, but as an educational tool for sharing with older pupils, and in doing so, providing them with a reassuring explanation for the Covid-safe changes.

Benefit beyond Covid

The guidance ends with a positive ‘what if’ vision of a school with new elements designed to be of long-term benefit beyond just the creation of a Covid-safe environment. These include temporary structures for outdoor learning, outdoor classrooms with kitchen facilities and allotments, studios to allow for remote teaching, and classrooms equipped for remote teaching sessions.

It’s likely that even these relatively modest proposals to adapt existing buildings

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Right: Bringing joy to regulations

Above: Future Plan – a spatial summary of the ideas in Safer Schools.
might struggle to get past the current stringent EFA funding regime that exists for new buildings. But they can, with the rest of the document, feed into what the architect hopes will be an ongoing reconsideration of priorities for school buildings and the value that design can bring to this. Perhaps, for example, the provision of decent outdoor space with outdoor classrooms will no longer seem a luxury, nor hot water for hand-washing in classrooms, nor spaces with the flexibility for adaptation.

‘There will be resistance of course as money is an issue. But if you get it high up the agenda, as schools are at the moment, ultimately government will take notice,’ says Bryant.

So could this proactive initiative be a useful model for other practices? Getting involved ‘upstream’ in policy and consultation is definitely a good way forward for influencing the design of a building further down the line according to Bryant, who adds that many of their peers have also been doing this. If, for example, worked with Libraries

Connected to produce a Safer Libraries guide as part of an initiative funded by Innovate UK. However, doing these sorts of projects pro-bono regularly is more problematic. ‘Ultimately you want to be commissioned to do this kind of work, or be able to find funding for it, so it’s sustainable,’ says Bryant.

Future gains

Not that such projects don’t yield valuable other benefits. Already it has indirectly led to a new commission for a playground project at John Donne School in Peckham. Here alma-nac is working with pupils to design ‘joyous’ mandalas for floor murals.

‘Some schools were segregating their playgrounds with hazard tape. We’re applying for funding for floor murals to help create informal divisions in a more celebratory way,’ says Wigfall. He hopes this will provide a welcome positive and fun outcome.

The guidance has also informed the practice’s ongoing education projects such as the redevelopment and enhancement of the junior and lower school buildings at Dulwich College, which was designed pre-pandemic. alma-nac is now revisiting the design in the light of lessons learnt over the last year.

And it is carrying on with its research – a particular aim is to capture the experiences of pupils over the last year.

Perhaps the last word should go to head teacher Reema Reid, on the importance of taking forward the positives from last year’s experiences. She is part of a new steering group of heads in Southwark who are meeting to discuss both the lessons learnt from the lockdowns and their easings, and how schools can be supported. She is keen to use this intelligence to facilitate long-term improvements in how schools are designed and managed.

‘It shouldn’t have taken a pandemic, but it has and we need to hold on to what we’ve learnt,’ she says.

Perhaps the provision of decent outdoor space with outdoor classrooms will no longer seem a luxury.
Insurance exclusions cast ominous shadow

The many grim legacies of the Grenfell fire include its effects on construction’s reputation, nowhere more so than PI cover which has all but vanished. Hope is scarce, but it does exist.

Rather than a rainy day, the industry has faced a storm following the Grenfell Tower tragedy

The insurance industry markets itself on the reassurance and protection it provides for, as the advertising slogans so often say, life’s rainy days. That is not quite the way it is working out for the construction industry. Rather than a rainy day, the industry has faced a storm following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and the weaknesses it has exposed in construction’s fire safety standards, processes, practice and systems have had an impact on insurers’ policy approaches.

As a result, securing essential insurance covers is single claims for a construction business during its life’s rainy days. That is not quite the way it is working out for the construction industry.

The many grim legacies of the Grenfell fire include its effects on construction’s reputation, nowhere more so than PI cover which has all but vanished. Hope is scarce, but it does exist.

The insurance industry’s position was set out clearly by Matthew Greene, senior underwriter with Manchester Underwriting Management. ‘What PI insurance covers is single claims for a particular circumstance or maybe multiple circumstances, on a single company. What it does not cover is where there has been a market failure, or in this case almost a government failure, where it causes a systemic issue, which we’ve seen with fire safety. Problems in securing cover in relation to fire since Grenfell reflect the fact, that, he added bluntly, ‘the insurance industry has pretty much lost faith in the construction industry managing its ability to reduce fire claims.’

S Jenny Carter-Vaughan, managing director of the Industry Select Insurance Services, said her own recent calls to sellers had failed to find anyone offering exclusion-free policies. ‘Your experience at the moment is essentially that all underwriters are applying very, very strong combustibility exclusions,’ she explained. ‘And essentially if you are wanting to get cover for design and fire escape and safety systems, doors, windows – anything which has a fire connection to it – effectively that is now written out of all insurance policies.’ With insurers taking a more cautious stance and withdrawing from some markets in the UK, construction’s fire safety failings have left it with little purchasing power. To put that into context, Carter-Vaughan says that while 60-70 insurers are currently offering motor insurance, only five offer PI insurance to architects.

It is a gloomy picture and one that puts the onus on architects to provide as much information as possible to enable the insurer to fully understand their risk profile. Carter-Vaughan outlined what that means in practice: ‘If we send a form out and the architect looks at it and thinks, that’s not applicable to me and they write N/A on it, that really doesn’t help us. What helps us is when they fill it in and give us answers and details, so that’s things like their quality assurance processes and procedures, knowing those bits and pieces of information makes a huge difference from our point of view in the conversations we can have with insurers.’

Her points were confirmed by Will Freeman, design director at Wates and a non-executive board member of the Architects Registration Board. ‘I’m hearing of more and more architects getting exclusions and the range of these exclusions is becoming more and more worrying,’ he said. But a forum facilitated by Arch to discuss the challenges found that a few architects had developed positive relationships with their insurers, he explained. ‘We started to see that those that were able to demonstrate proper quality assurance processes within their practices were able to mitigate the risks through a documented process and help reassure the insurer.’

Architects’ Risk Management was among those construction professionals to discuss the challenges faced by architects. ‘We started to see that those that were able to demonstrate proper quality assurance processes within their practices were able to mitigate the risks through a documented process and help reassure the insurer.’

While 60-70 insurers are currently offering motor insurance, only five offer PI insurance to architects

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) select committees came to a similar view in its pre-legislative scrutiny of the bill, published last November. ‘The select committees noticed that there was a big problem,’ said William Rody, consultant in the real estate department of law firm Fladgate. ‘It recommended that we don’t have another version of the bill and put it before parliament until there has been an evaluation of the availability of adequate insurance for all dutyholders and a report to parliament on that.’

That evaluation may be essential but it is a slow step in what has become a long running process. As the fourth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire approaches this summer, the bill and its much needed safety reforms seem a distant prospect. ‘We are more than three years on now and the detail is still very much being worked out, argued about and then is going to be implemented,’ said insurance underwriter Greene. ‘It is going to take another two years to really start to show the benefit.’ In the meantime, insurers look unlikely to change their assessment of construction. x
An Oxford company’s development of the world’s most efficient PV cell could play a critical role in combating climate change

Stephen Cousins

An Oxford University spin-off company has developed the world’s most efficient solar cell, and plans to begin mass production at its European factory next year.

Oxford PV’s perovskite-silicon tandem cell was independently proven to convert 29.52 per cent of solar energy into electricity, a new world record and well above the current practical maximum of 26 per cent achievable using regular solar cells.

The power boost was made possible by coating ordinary silicon with a thin film of perovskite, a synthetic ‘wonder’ material that makes better use of photons across the solar spectrum. According to the company, just 35kg of perovskite can generate the same power as 7 tonnes of silicon.

A 125MW-capacity production line in Berlin is under construction and, from 2022, will produce solar cells for residential roof-top panels, using manufacturing equipment from Meyer Burger in Switzerland.

Higher cell efficiencies are already being targeted and Oxford PV has a roadmap to achieve at least 33 per cent efficiency in the short-to-medium term, and potentially 39 per cent in the longer-term.

Oxford PV’s chief technology officer Chris Case explains: ‘The 29.5 per cent achieved using our tandem solar cell is more efficient than silicon alone will ever get in production; it’s more efficient than the most efficient solar cell material in the world, gallium arsenide.

What’s more, it represents just the beginning of a journey and we expect to extend performance well into the 30s.

More efficient and affordable renewable technologies are critical in the fight against climate change, and solar is predicted to provide 50 per cent of global electricity generation by 2050.

The key benefits of using perovskite are its light-converting efficiency, low cost and relative abundance as a material. According to Case, there’s enough in the Earth’s crust to deliver terawatt-scale PV to transform the world’s carbon footprint.

Oxford PV had originally intended to use perovskite in a transparent Building Integrated PV (BIPV) but despite significant research and development, the work was suspended due to challenges around market demand for the tinted glass and scaling up for manufacture. Instead, the company decided to switch to augmenting regular silicon cells with perovskite to boost efficiency.

‘After 65 years, silicon has hit a wall that can’t be climbed using the same technology,’ says Case. ‘But perovskite is particularly good at converting photons to electricity in the [blue] colour range, and the silicon solar cell we developed is particularly good at taking advantage of perovskite. There’s innovation in the architecture of the solar cell and in the materials engineering.’

Homeowners may end up paying more for the panels, due to the extra engineering involved, says Case, but a typical rooftop will generate 20 per cent more power from the same number of cells resulting in longer-term savings on energy bills.

Since rooftops have a fixed size, the system is expected to attract customers keen to maximise output for their available surface area. ‘If your dream is to get more power, then you need to have a technology like ours,’ Case concludes.
Hindsight: Julia Barfield on principles and practice

It’s a privilege to be an architect, says the co-founder of Marks Barfield Architects, and important to design sustainable and socially useful as well as beautiful schemes.

Julia Barfield is managing director of Marks Barfield Architects. Now 68, she co-founded the practice with David Marks in 1989 after working for Foster+Partners and Richard Rogers Partnership.

Knowing what you know now, did you make the right decision to be an architect? Would you still be one if you were starting out today?

Yes. I feel it’s a privilege being an architect and creating things every day that are both useful and, hopefully, beautiful. At school, I liked both arts and sciences so architecture, a marriage of the two, was the natural outcome.

What has been the biggest obstacle to overcome?

The finance is always the most difficult thing to deal with, and it took a very long time to come through for projects such as the Cambridge Mosque and the i360 Viewing Tower in Brighton. As architects, we can’t pretend that we’re not part of the financial side of things – we need to try to understand those models and work with them. Certainly that was something that David was very good at doing. But it was particularly difficult in the 2007 financial crisis when we lost 90% of our work, just when we’d gutted our house in preparation for a major refurb. We realised we weren’t very good at letting staff go – you become a family so it’s very hard – and we didn’t do so as soon as we should have.

Have you ever encountered sexism in your career as an architect?

Yes, in that it still exists every day. But I’ve never found it to be a barrier and have generally ignored it when I’ve encountered it, although I did call out a services engineer for his girly poster back when I was at Richard Rogers, and he had the decency to be shame-faced. I think mindsets have changed a lot since then. David and I were a 50-50 equal partnership and always had a 50-50 balance of men and women architects in the office.
Has your time in practice been a good period to work as an architect?

At the time, it felt like a great time to practice, but in hindsight we’ve seen the destruction of the natural world and we’ve been sleep-walking into the climate emergency. And as a profession, we’ve been sleepwalking into ever more complex, high carbon, toxic building materials and construction systems.

Like many practices we’ve been trying to design sustainably for years, but given that the next 10 years are critical, it’s not enough. We need to go beyond simply not doing any harm to being a positive part of the solution. As architects, we need to think about our consultancy role for clients, and even more to those that design them, which doesn’t usually happen.

Your practice has been entrepreneurial in developing projects such as the London Eye. Would you recommend this approach to other architects?

I’d recommend that architects should be the masters of their own futures if they can be, while being very careful about their business plans. David and I were part of a group who set up a model-making company straight after the AA, as we wanted to have our destiny in our own hands. Then we instigated the London Eye, and when I look at some of the new building there I wince – some of it is closer to 3D capital than architecture. We need a whole new mindset, and that’s what Architects’ Declare is about.

Is it easier, or harder, to get high-quality buildings built now than when you first started out?

Achieving the best outcome comes down to our ambitions as architects, and to our powers of persuasion to make the case for high-quality architecture to the client. It is also a lot to do with the ambitions of the client and whether they have a long-term view. We’ve always worked very closely with engineers from an early stage, which helps.

Looking back on your work over the years, who has been your biggest influence?

I’d say David. We met at the AA and in many ways grew up together. We were part of the squatting movement in the 1970s, spent a year in South America working in the barriadas of Lima and both worked at Richard Rogers. When I went to work at Foster’s where I was project architect on the Royal Academy Sackler Gallery, he stayed on and worked on the Lloyd’s Building. After David, I’d say Richard Rogers has been influential for his generosity of spirit, and Norman Foster for his clarity of thought.

Is there anything you wish you’d done differently?

We got a bit distracted by projects in the Middle East at one point, but I don’t have regrets.

Do you have a dream project you’d still like to achieve?

A project that’s an exemplar of regenerative architecture such as the Severn Barrage, a project we worked on pro-bono for a number years. If built, it would have produced 3% of UK electricity demand with clean, renewable, predictable energy, protected 90,000 homes from flooding, and would have lasted three times longer than a nuclear power station.

You’ve been closely involved in Architects Declare. What more needs to be done?

We need to put the greatest part of our creativity into finding a new ways of practising architecture. This begins with reforming architectural education, and I’m involved at Bath and Bath in changes to the curriculum. But it will better prepare architects for the challenges we are facing in the world today.

What is your most treasured possession?

David’s wedding ring, which I wear on a chain around my neck. •

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It probably doesn’t take much to summon the ghosts of Ypres. Its magnificent 13th century Cloth Hall, along with much of the city, was razed by German bombing in April 1915. Churchill thought it should be left as a monumental ruin, but memorials aside, it probably doesn’t take much to summon the ghosts of Ypres. Its magnificent 13th century Cloth Hall, along with much of the city, was razed by German bombing in April 1915. Churchill thought it should be left as a monumental ruin, but memorials aside, the people just wanted their hall back. By 1967 they had it – its old stone niches of dead nobles now largely vacant, in default marking the noble dead.

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Stijn Bollaert, 2020
One of a series of Stijn Bollaert images for the 2020 book “Plants” (Photopress) by Belgian architect Philippe Vanlise.

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From under its dark cloth, Bollaert’s series monochrome exposure gives little away. Is this image a 100 years old? 50? What black arts allow us to see the hall newly completed? Only the single white cloth hung from the tower marking the fight for the living, and the deserted Grote Markt at its foot, intimate a battle of a very different kind. Jan-Carlos Kucharek

From under its dark cloth, Bollaert’s series monochrome exposure gives little away. Is this image a 100 years old? 50? What black arts allow us to see the hall newly completed? Only the single white cloth hung from the tower marking the fight for the living, and the deserted Grote Markt at its foot, intimate a battle of a very different kind. Jan-Carlos Kucharek
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Let’s give buildings a traceur test

Balletic parkour practitioners bring buildings to lively life. Don’t lose the details that make their footholds to efficiencies, says Eleanor Young

Have you ever watched parkour? I would pay to, if it wasn’t so terrifying. It is balletic and athletic. Seen in real life, with kids leaping across vertiginous gaps above London’s Embankment, I waver between fear and fascination with a warning on the tip of my tongue – ready to cry out before every jump. I had to walk away to stop myself. Seen on YouTube favourite locations are megastructures, ideally brutalist with cliff edges of concrete. One group, Storror, carry cameras in their mouths so you get stomach lurching shots, jumping with them. But I was caught by Storror action in more mundane territory. In back gardens of thin-skinned, boxy 70s estates dauntless fingers latch onto the narrowest of ledges. And with a swing and controlled scramble they are up and over the wall.

On the least promising of facades they have found a handhold. Since the 1960s and 70s, most building facades have got flatter if not thinner, with increasing systemisation. The migration of our language is a reflection of that as walls become facades. Think of the smooth panels of Trespa, Pilkington Planar, VitraBond; find the system and clip it on. There is no space for fingers here. Yes, we still have window reveals but they seem more like architectural play. In the highly researched, yet curiously primitive, Cork House, the little imperfections of the bonded cork give it a complex texture up close. You would need crampons to climb here, apart from the fact that the architects treated it to the language of structural stone, laid in courses with recessed joints. And for a traceur to run up a wall and bring it all back into focus – at speed.

Perhaps less visibly. And when they do I vote for a celebration of joints and depth. And for a traceur to tackle it with heroic steel nodes and tie fixings. We have lost a lot to a blind acceptance of the efficiencies of product systemisation – a sense of scale and the human-made being high on the list along with an understanding of the materials – as shown by Grenfell and the cladding scandal. And a sense of the real – can you really be proud when your buildings look like a visualisation?

As conversations around architecture in the time of climate emergency continue to push practices towards different materials and techniques, it seems there is a chance that old ideas will come back. Perhaps less visibly. And when they do I vote for a celebration of joints and depth. And for a traceur to run up a wall and bring it all back into focus – at speed.

Culture refresher

I have become a junkie for the tangible in the last year. The texture of walls, the wind on my face, the ground beneath my feet. And, in the warm, holding books comfortably in my lap or flipping out a magazine on the table. So I was delighted to find Hamburg-based illustrator Stephanie Wunderlich and her cut outs. With a fine pair of scissors and a scalpel she crafts card into silhouettes of faces, before scanning them with delicate, almost indetectable shadows. You can see our contributors here and throughout the refreshed culture section, with Wunderlich’s cutouts bringing a sense of a maker of things into the magazine, alongside the work of designer Linda Byrne stripping down the pages to allow the stories and images to come clearly and elegantly through.
Design to save lives

We love tall buildings... but we must address hidden dangers, says Will Wiles

Samaritans, the charity that helps people experiencing mental health crises, has a number of extremely detailed and useful guides on its website for people writing about the topic of suicide. One thing these guides advise is that any discussion of suicide should be preceded by a warning – so, please, consider yourself warned. Besides that courtesy to the reader, the number one instruction is: do not mention the method used.

Why such caution? The Samaritans website quotes Professor Keith Hawton, director of the Centre for Suicide Research at the University of Oxford: ‘There is abundant international evidence that media... portrayal of suicide can be extremely influential. Poor media practice can cause further loss of life, especially in more vulnerable groups such as the young and people with mental health problems.’

Suicide begins as a stubborn and insidious idea, that can spread and be influenced by others. If the reporting of a celebrity’s death at their own hand includes the method, others turn to that method. This can lead to a vicious cycle, one with grim implications for architecture. In January, the Vessel observation tower at New York’s Hudson Yards was temporarily closed after a person jumped to their death from an upper level. This was the third such incident at the basket-shaped structure, designed by Studio Heatherwick, and the site owner is consulting with experts over possible modifications to the attraction.

The RIBA Journal March 2021 ribaj.com

It’s a tragedy that illustrates some of the awful paradoxes of a deadly act that manifests as a dark seed will be planted. It’s an unpalatable job, but more successful the idea, the greater the chance that your attraction comes to mind at the unwelcome time when someone is experiencing a crisis. The more successful the idea, the greater the chance that a dark seed will be planted. It’s an unpalatable job, but that chance should be considered at the design stage for some projects. Having that bleak idea early might prevent a deadly idea forming later. www.samaritans.org/

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Network of ideas

Look at Portuguese studio Fala Atelier’s work and it is hard to believe its three founding directors’ claim that 48 out of 50 of their clients are not interested in architecture and most don’t even know the practice’s name. The firm’s mostly residential work is so colourful, graphical and different to most architecture in the public domain it seems implausible their clients aren’t commissioning them specifically. “That,” says co-founder Filipe Magalhães, “is the main martial art we have to deal with … Clients are not hiring a designer, they are hiring a lawyer to oversee the project.”

The construction industry is different in Portugal to the UK. To build, drawings must be signed off by an architect. ‘The vast amount of clients come out of need, not design,’ explains Magalhães, ‘and they bring an image of a white box villa with them as a reference.’

The practice’s other co-founders are Ana Luisa Soares and Ahmed Belkhodja. The trio met working at Harry Gugger Studio in Basel in 2011 (Gugger having been central to Herzog & de Meuron’s success). Magalhães is from Porto and Soares from just outside, while Belkhodja is Swiss. Between them they have studied in Porto, Lausanne, Zurich, Ljubljana, Tokyo, Gothenburg and Singapore. They each worked in Japan too: Magalhães at SANAA, Soares at Toyo Ito, and Belkhodja at Atelier Bow-Wow. Like many young southern EU citizens, Magalhães and Soares left their country of origin because of the 2007/8 financial crisis, but they threw in their nice, safe, well-salaried jobs in Switzerland to return home at what was the bottom of the recession curve, and they invited Belkhodja to join them. They won work by being in the right place at the right time when there wasn’t competition from other architects of their generation. The first stage for any project is therefore “pedagogical” – to explain what Fala Atelier is and...
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we do otherwise the boring parts wouldn’t pay off... You can feel the first and last project are part of the same family, like a genealogical tree.

The team’s toolkit is doors, walls, windows, columns – normal elements organised in different way. Colours are used to highlight and inhabit spaces, materials too. Objects are made proud. Drawing, models, collages and lots of talking are the means. There is always a budget for paint – but the cultural connotations of colours can be subverted in the process. Never call it pink; call it ‘pastel’, ‘salmon’ or ‘a summer kitchen’.

You’ll notice not a single named project has been mentioned yet. This is deliberate. Fala’s theory is that all its work is the same. It is about tropes. The practice is not defined by one experience everything at once – a world of collections and obsessions. The practice is not defined by one project, but lots of small ones – to the extent that the directors think it would be possible to franchise it.

people who fled the economic catastrophe to make money elsewhere and think it is better to put it in real estate than the bank. Comparatively cheap prices have made small developers out of ordinary people, young and old, all wanting a piece of the mania. Fala’s identifiable, fun, photogenic architecture has been helpful in this scene – when someone visits 20 schemes, they remember Fala’s. AirBnB and a proliferation of tourism in the city also plays its part. Half of its clients aim to live in their projects, others have been flipped and sold three times before anyone moves in. Porto has given the practice an unrivalled opportunity to be a tiny architect in this process with chances to build young that would be virtually impossible in much of western Europe.

The first-time amateur nature of these investors has virtually impossible in much of western Europe. The first-time amateur nature of these investors has given it the space to play around with its architecture – contacts with bigger professional developers never go anywhere. ‘This limits our growth,’ says Belchioda. ‘We must be marginal. I wish we could never go anywhere. ’This limits our growth,’ says Belchioda. ‘We must be marginal. I wish we could never go anywhere. ’This limits our growth,’ says Belchioda. ‘We must be marginal. I wish we could never go anywhere. ’This limits our growth,’ says Belchioda. ‘We must be marginal. I wish we could never go anywhere. ’This limits our growth,’ says Belchioda. ‘We must be marginal. I wish we could never go anywhere. ’This limits our growth,’ says Belchioda. ‘We must be marginal. I wish we could never go anywhere. ’This limits our growth,’ says Belchioda. ‘We must be marginal. I wish we could never go anywhere. ’

There are, however, two other crucial ingredients to Fala’s work. The first is Porto where the Firm is based. In the nearly 10 years since the three set up here, the city has undergone a spectacular speculative property boom. Prices have been driven up 800 per cent, in part by money brought back by Portuguese expatriates. In the nearly 10 years since the three set up here, the city has undergone a spectacular speculative property boom. Prices have been driven up 800 per cent, in part by money brought back by Portuguese expatriates. In the nearly 10 years since the three set up here, the city has undergone a spectacular speculative property boom. Prices have been driven up 800 per cent, in part by money brought back by Portuguese expatriates.

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Wish you were there

Since we must all make do just with virtual holidays nowadays, this modernist travel guide is the way to do it, says Michèle Woodger.

February 2021. I am still in the attic. My fingers are slowly defrosting in order to write this review. Stefi Orazi’s Modernist Escapes is an architectural travel guide of mouth-wateringly well-appointed residences, all of which – once we exit hibernation – may be visited, Orazi has stayed in several herself: Peter Aldington’s Anderton House in Devon (1970), was ‘the perfect escape and inspiration to help [her] to write’. Insert wistful sigh. Later, when daunted by a deadline, she stayed in a cell at Le Corbusier’s La Tourette. At least the cells are perfectly proportioned. At this point I’d even settle for a holiday in Essex; Oliver Hill’s Frinton Park Estate (1935) looks just the thing.

From Philip Johnson’s Glass House (1949) in Connecticut (all very well, but how does one swim lengths in a circular pool?), to Ernö Goldfinger’s 2 Willow Road (1939), many are the architects’ own private escapes. Some are family homes in secluded landscapes, others, city-centre hidey-holes. Kisho Kurokawa’s Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo, for instance, is a futuristic agglomeration of pods with integrated telephones, televisions and reel-to-reel tape players – everything you need for self-isolation in 1972. It is Japan’s best example of Metabolist architecture, and in demolition limbo. Eero Saarinen’s TWA Hotel at JFK Airport (1962) was originally a flight terminal, from those heady days of international travel.

My only reservation with this book (an unfortunate word – none of us will be reserving holidays any time soon) is its geographical spread. Almost all 130 examples are American and European, with a sprinkling from Latin America and very few from elsewhere (Israel, Japan and Australia only). Nevertheless, the escapes showcased certainly have us longing for happier times and sunnier climes. Crucially, we’re reminded of the aspiration characterising modernist design: it looked to a future that was fresh and filled with promise.

Time to reflect

Unleash your imagination, pent-up by lockdown, in an undisturbed week in London’s highest hotel

With better times on the horizon, Shangri-La Hotel, At The Shard, London, is offering the opportunity for ‘Time to Reflect’ to escape from the daily home/office or work structures that might confine you and to experience life from a new, different and liberating perspective.

Six RIBA-registered members will get the chance to spend a week in one of the hotel’s 202 rooms, located from level 34-52 at Pritzker-Prize winner Renzo Piano’s dramatic 310m high tower; which, since completing in 2012, has become an unmistakable addition to the capital’s skyline. The opportunity can be taken up at an agreed time over the year from September 2021. To win an exclusive stay in this iconic design, including £100 a day to spend at your choice of the hotel’s restaurants and bars (GŎNG, TĪNG and Bar 31), you just need to tell us what you plan to do with your time there.

As a mid-career UK-based architect with at least five years of post-qualification practice behind you, you might be thinking about your position at the firm you work at and how you might progress to the next level. You may be considering going it alone; you may have already made the leap. ‘Time to Reflect’ proposes to be just that – time out – and will provide the opportunity for you to take stock of your real life down there in the rarefied air up here.

You may wish to continue your everyday practice work while there, using the hotel’s lobby for design meetings or to win work over drinks or a meal at one of its restaurants. Or you might want to spend the week away from your usual commitments to start your personal research project after an invigorating morning swim in western Europe’s highest hotel pool. Or, like Bill Murray’s Bob Harris in ‘Lost in Translation’, you might just self-reflect, in excitement or ennui, on a dérive around Southwark’s historic streets. The choice, and time, is yours to do what you will with.

All we ask is that you leave a trace that you were there, which the hotel will display to inspire self-reflection in other guests. It could be a sketch of some local landmark, a crisp detail in London Bridge station that caught your eye, or an expansive perspective of the city as seen from your room. It could be the archetypal esquisse on a napkin you did for your client – as Piano did of the Shard itself – a game-changer proposal, or just a diary of your stay.

Covid-permitting, the six winners will be invited back to Shangri-La Hotel, At The Shard, London, at the end of the residencies to discuss their submissions and experiences of their stay. And with two days of the week optioned for you to share with your partner, we hope that ‘Time to Reflect’ will become a good memory for you both. So get writing your proposal – and elevate yourself! •
Procurement needs leadership from us all

Procurement is the one topic that every RIBA practice owner will likely agree needs improvement. Procurement ranges from the selection and appointment of architects’ services to how the development and delivery of projects is structured. It is a problem for practices large and small, from excessive selection criteria to the costs of bidding. Firms are sinking slim profits into pursuing new work rather than investing in colleagues and innovations. The Grenfell inquiry and Scottish Schools report have both shown how procurement is failing industry and society. Better procurement would improve delivery of client goals and project performance; help meet zero carbon commitments; improve salaries and repayment of student debt; and boost wellbeing, diversity and retention of experienced staff. Procurement is central to the sustainability of our profession.

The UK government spends almost £40 billion a year on construction projects, and with the industry so integral to its success, procurement needs its attention and leadership. Knowing how central government arranges procurement also influences the private sector and devolved nations. Architects are not alone; the systems are fraught with problems for everyone involved.

There was a flurry of activity in late 2020, when a review of the Treasury’s Green Book – government guidelines on how value is assessed when spending public money and deciding future expenditure – led to the publication of a new one. At the same time the Cabinet Office produced the Construction Playbook, co-developed with the Construction Leadership Council. The CLC has become the interface between government and the construction industry and is very much weighted towards large-scale contractors and businesses. Although the industry is largely made up of small and medium enterprises, including architects’ practices, the report leans towards big business. Spreading opportunity across a broader spectrum of businesses would resonate with the government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda.

Beyond government, some clients tell of architects being prepared to sign up to really low fees, or recently, zero fees for the early feasibility stages, at the very beginning where we add greatest strategic value. Solicitors wouldn’t give their advice and services for free, so why should we? We need to discuss procurement and the stance we take collectively.

Just before Christmas the encouragingly entitled ‘Transforming public procurement’ green paper was also published by the Cabinet Office. More of a nudge than signalling a major change in procurement culture, this consultation paper leaves certain issues unmentioned, but makes some encouraging proposals. It drops the problematic single measure of ‘economically’ replacing the EU’s MEAT with MAT to spell out Most Advantageous Tender with an emphasis on balancing initial cost with long term performance and value. But the proposals could go further and be firmer against ‘gold plating’ procedures, poor procurement practice and the multitude of procurement portals. The RIBA will be leading a co-ordinated response to the paper.

The paper is a start, but if the government is serious about improving the construction industry, and about keeping expertise along the golden thread of each project, then a bigger conversation must be had. Everyone must focus on outcomes of zero carbon, value for money, health and wellbeing, and levelling up, and reverse engineer our procurement processes to achieve them. Procurement is not just about our profession and industry, it is about much bigger and important matters, of delivering promises to society and the world.

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From police stations like AHMM’s RIBA Award winning New Scotland Yard to Whitehall departments, schools and hospitals, government procurement processes drive a huge number of projects for practices large and small.

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The RIBA Journal March 2021
Obituary

**John Nelson Tarn 1934 – 2020**

John Tarn, although qualified with the RIBA letters after his name at an early age, did not really do buildings. Born in 1934 in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, John attended Durham University where he obtained a first class Bachelor of Architecture before continuing his study with a PhD in architectural history from the University of Cambridge.

Shortly after he embarked on a career as an academic, lecturing at the University of Sheffield in 1963 and becoming a professor at the age 33 at the University of Nottingham. He joined the University of Liverpool in 1973 as its Roscoe Professor of Architecture and stayed, holding the post until his retirement in 1995. During this time he rose up the ranks of the university to serve as pro-vice-chancellor and acting vice-chancellor. Internationally he was closely involved in The Chinese University of Hong Kong, taking a lead in developing the architecture programme there.

His early career books on housing history in Britain were influential in their day. In the 1970s he drew together work on 19th century working class housing. And in 1974 he published his best known book, Five Per Cent Philanthropy: An Account of Housing in Urban Areas between 1840 and 1914, which dealt with some of the most famous of philanthropic visions of housing in Bournville and Letchworth but also delved in smaller scale projects in Glasgow, Birmingham and other cities.

Outside the world of academia, John volunteered his expertise in art and architecture to the Archdiocese of Liverpool and chaired the precursor of ARB. More locally he was president and vice-president of the Liverpool Architectural Society and President of the Wirral Association.

John’s ability on committees and his knowledge of housing were put to good use, as for much of his later career he took an active part in change in the social housing sector as chair of Merseyside Improved Houses – which over his 18 years there grew from a local to a national social housing provider, now known as Riverside Housing Group.

John had a great fondness for the Peak District, devoting 20 years to chairing the national park’s planning committee, as well as serving as vice-president of the Friends of the Peak District. He was organist and choirmaster at Great Longstone parish church since being roped in on a rota to help in 1977, keeping it up even when he was only weekending in the Peak District. He had lived for a number of years in Darley Dale in his beloved Peak District, before passing away late last year, aged 85.

With thanks to Simon Pepper, Rod Tann and the University of Liverpool

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Wolverhampton wonderer

The opening of new facilities for an architecture course at Wolverhampton University (RIBAJ January 2021, p20-25) presents the RIBA with a real dilemma. If the course succeeds in its mission to integrate architecture with other professions engaged in the built environment, how can its graduates succeed in retaining their professional autonomy? Of the 42 staff listed on the college website, only five are shown to have a background in architecture. The rest cover a very wide range of allied professions though there are some notable omissions. In our profession there has been a growing trend towards integrated project management leaving several aspects to specialists, but how can architects hold on to the integrity of building design and its cultural qualities under these circumstances?

So far the RIBA is reported to have awarded the course only part 1 recognition and it seems to be hesitating about part 2, quite understandably. Our profession has increasingly distanced itself from commercial domination by getting back towards better serving the community but a wide ranging debate seems to be needed on how this is to be managed. Otherwise the pandemic might allow radical change to serve the community but a wide ranging debate seems to be needed on how this is to be managed. Otherwise the pandemic might allow radical change to happen covertly.

Richard Harbord, Norfolk

Classic defence

I was saddened to see Hugh Pearman’s swipe at traditional architects (The Way I See It, January 2021, p52). He describes ‘modernism’ in terms of 1950s and 60s buildings, which is an stylistic category. His view is that it’s a name for an attitude to modernity that persists. As a journalist and classifier, perhaps Hugh can tell us what else we should call it? And I would like to know what ‘neo-classical ways of looking’ might be. Neo-classicism was an artistic and architectural movement from the late 18th and early 19th century. Traditional architecture has no period but the present and can range from the most simple to the most historically elaborate. It’s not a style, it’s an attitude to where the past fits into the present.

Quite why he thinks that a few firms should get together to disclaim their lunatic fringe, I don’t know. All architectural movements have their outriders. On this basis, perhaps modernists, or whatever he wants to call them, should get together to disclaim their heroes for their work for repressive regimes; Koolhaas for the propaganda HQ of China Central Television; Foster for the ironically named ‘Palace for Peace and Reconciliation’ for the brutal dictator of Kazakhstan; Hadid for her work (never completed) for Gaddhafi. In spite of what he concludes from the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, traditionalists aren’t interested in the return to any kind of style war. There’s a room for us all in what he calls ‘stylistic biodiversity’. Can’t we just get on with producing good architecture that people want?

Robert Adam, Winchester

Letters

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The RIBA Journal March 2021
The Union Tank Car Dome in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was one of the first geodesic domes built by Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983), the visionary and highly influential American designer and inventor. This unusual architectural type, which he pioneered, evolved from his studies of the geometry of circles and tetrahedrons, combined with his interest in creating economical multi-purpose structures. When completed in 1958, the Union Tank Car Dome was, at 384ft in diameter, the largest clear-span structure in the world. Both its shape and the lack of internal support facilitated the work carried out inside, the repair of tank cars, which were then moved to the long tunnel attached to the dome to be repainted. The Dome became very popular and was considered a success by the company, but after being sold on it fell into disrepair and was demolished in 2007 by its owner, who had struggled to give it a new purpose. In 2010 a documentary on the building, titled ‘A Necessary Ruin’, chronicled the structure’s history, decline and demolition, still regretted by many. ● Valeria Carullo
Light works

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