Eye Line: drawings of power and passion
Steyn Studio’s café beds into the garden
Low-tech design must be the starting point
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Building in picturesque Danish landscapes is not free play. Comprehensive regulations are designed to preserve what is left of open space in this small and highly-populated country. The Author’s House is a new home for a writer near Aarhus on the east coast of the Jutland peninsula, designed by Danish practice SLETH. Its planning listing allowed only a reiteration of the small house that was already there.

But this is no ordinary home. The author comes here every day to work, to get inspired, to think, read and write. It is her workspace, a comforting writing sanctuary with the opportunity for sporadic sleepovers. Materially it explains itself in copper, concrete and timber with some splashes of Yves Klein blue. It is primarily living space, with the option of taking a coffee and working on every surface while enveloped by views of the forest. Bedrooms take a back seat. There are not really walls – only bookcases. The building is evolving, changing by the season as the copper patinates and settles, becoming a small example of its use in a distinguished Danish architectural history.

Inside, the smells of the forest continue in the apexed, timber-lined space, in a robust and delicately designed interior that exhibits the craftsmanship of its making. A workshop for DIY repair is not necessary here – the architect is conferred and a skilled professional is engaged. But does the house really engage with nature as it is proclaimed, propelling the genre of contemporary architecture forward like so many of SLETH’s other projects? Or does it offer a model for something else? And as a place to produce books, what kind would it be if it was one itself? 

RASMUS HJORTSHØJ

THE AUTHOR’S HOUSE
JUTLAND, DENMARK
SLETH
Read the full story by Morten Birk Jørgensen ribaj.com/authors-house

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PIONEERING NEW AIR TECHNOLOGY
South London practice Stolon Studio has completed several projects that it labels ‘sociable housing’. The first was Forest Mews, a grey brick development of three live/work houses, one of which was for practice directors Robert and Jessica Barker. You may have seen another, Kaolin Court, in the RIBA Awards shortlists last year with its rain chains and red clay tiled facades. The self-named building type has become a speciality for Stolon. Information about sociable housing is everywhere on its website, while over the past year its directors have been accumulating evidence to send to journalists about how successful the model has been during lockdown.

The key idea of ‘sociable housing’ is to create infill urban homes around a communal courtyard. The concept is not new, but the labelling is. Residents are supposed to chat to each other while sheltering under their front door canopies, have barbecues in the yard together or, as the firm has been keen to advertise, let their kids out at the same time, turning the central space into a private secure playground – a boon during home-schooling.

The benefits from having like-minded, close neighbours is the pivotal point. It all sounds quite cosy and left-wing doesn’t it? It may be one step to the centre from co-housing. Or maybe you trip over the words and are somewhat led to assume it is some kind of social housing – an easy mistake to make.

Imagine the surprise then, when you turn up at Stolon’s latest sociable housing scheme, Penrose Mews, just off Lillie Road in Fulham, to learn this is not a cosy development providing solutions to the housing and loneliness crisis one small perfectly formed affordable home at a time, but in fact, a high-end, lock-and-leave-able gated community occupied by, among others, a professional footballer, a former CFO of a major furniture company and a couple who sweetly acknowledged that they moved from near Wembley after ‘our fortunes changed’. Armed with this knowledge, a differently tinted light shines across the scheme. But the first point, as you cross under the ‘gatehouse’ – one of two passageways from the street into the courtyard – and pass by the ubiquitous storage lockers and bike racks is that even the wealthy do not live well in London. Has Penrose Mews got me feeling sorry for a footballer?

Not too sorry. Penrose Mews is the brainchild of Crane Investments. Aprajay Patel from the family firm meets me on site with Stolon Studio’s latest example of ‘sociable housing’, Penrose Mews, offers a compact community setting unusual for the well-heeled west London residents it accommodates.

Words: Isabelle Priest Photographs: Tim Crocker

IN NUMBERS

975m²
GIFA
£4,500
cost/m²
(including substation works)

Eight houses around a courtyard, with scattered windows blurring where one ends and the next begins.
architect Robert Barker. Crane bought the backland triangular site in 2013/4 for £2 million when it was occupied by design company Seymourpowell with workshops on the ground floor and offices above. Patel then leased it back for a couple of years. Stolon had to find 900m² of residential footprint to make the scheme work; it managed 975m². The development creates nine homes: eight red brick terraces and a maisonette above the gateway. It is entirely rented and doesn’t include any affordable homes because it is below the ‘magic number’ that would trigger that requirement. The scheme cost £4,500/m², which includes relocating an electricity substation, but is generous for housing. Koa-lin Court was £2,726/m². The money at Pen-rose Mews – so named for its ‘impossibility in its purest form’ – is sunk into a vast basement that spans the site and makes the scheme possible by putting all living spaces into it, and into necessities and logistics like moving the substation and 37 party wall agreements. Not all developers would take this on.

Coming through the tunnel, we are dealing with a courtyard of charming small houses that cling to the plot perimeter. They butt to the boundary, tucking in behind a 1990s development of semis on one side; the four-storey rear of Lillie Road’s Victorian parade towers above another. The houses range in size from 109m² to 156m², but appear as two-up, two-downs. Immediately you would associate the architecture more with Peter Barber’s north London work. When I visit, the all-paved courtyard is empty except for a maintenance man milling about, but it is...
The formula inside is living space in the basement, kitchens under the communal courtyard, eking space out around the sub-basement, kitchens under the communal lightwell courtyard. Each house is different, acknowledging the lack of views, and says you get privacy in its place, which you do from the street, but you are geographically and psychologically very close to your immediate neighbours – the courtyard leaves only circa 10m between houses in the corner of the triangle and there is overlooking that way. Problem is, while visiting, you can’t really shake the feeling that the price point doesn’t marry up with your architectural expectations. Even though the development is interesting architecturally, complex, a labour of love and worth the efforts in so many ways, the expenditure is not evident in the quality of life it provides. If London’s property boom continues, perhaps in a decade’s time it will.

Buildings
Housing

Windows are scattered whimsically across the otherwise flat facades of the new houses. Internal floor finishes include concrete-effect large-format tiles in the living spaces and timber engineered flooring that changes from natural finish in hall space to grey-washed in the bedrooms. Kitchens vary – some are charcoal grey with rose-tinted mirror splashbacks, others white-fronted. Bathrooms have quirky bulbous brick tiles. Crane Investments has gone the extra mile on certain aspects, like ensuring ceiling heights of 3.1m in the basement and 2.5m upstairs. Roofs curve away from the communal courtyard, with fitted wardrobes and shower rooms squeezed into eaves. Specially glazed windows are scattered whimsically across the otherwise flat facades, though its basement courtyard gives a rawer industrial feel to one corner of the original building, a new office building adjacent to the existing structure.

Taylor Maxwell were pleased to work with AHMM and appointed contractor Bandsley Construction to specify and supply the facing and special modern materials and colour palette. The original building is a great example of Victorian Gothic architecture, previously operating as the Royal Veteran Tavern before it fell into a state of disrepair and dilapidation. Considerable care was taken to restore the historic features of the existing facade. The new structure was cleverly designed to blend harmoniously, incorporating period features such as large window arches, with a contemporary twist in the use of more modern materials and colour palettes.

Taylor Maxwell were pleased to work with AHMM and appointed contractor Bandsley Construction to specify and supply the facing and special shaped bricks for the new structure of the Riverside House development. Riverside House in Salford, a four-storey, 11,000 sq. ft office building, has undergone an extensive redevelopment. Alford Hall Monaghan Morris (AHMM) architects designed the refurbishment, which included the restoration of the 19th century brick facade and the construction of a new office building adjacent to the existing structure.

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Mill gets back to work

Regeneration of Derwent Valley’s heritage continues with Bauman Lyons’ Museum of Making, an interactive and practical project that keeps industrial creativity alive

Words: Hugh Pearman Photographs: Nick Dearden

The Civic Hall or entrance atrium to the museum with a café and stairs rising to the museum shop and main exhibition galleries. A Rolls-Royce Trent jet engine dominates the space.

The Industrial Revolution is said to have started here, in the early 18th century in what was originally Derby Silk Mill. Supposedly the first British water-powered factory organised on modern lines, it had a sequence of processes from raw material to finished product. The chain of Derwent Valley mills in Derbyshire that runs north from here has Unesco World Heritage status. As the southern gateway to this 15-mile linear site, following an earlier incarnation as an ad-hoc industrial museum and a long period of closure, the mill has been reborn as the expanded Museum of Making. The National Heritage Lottery Fund is the majority funder.

The red brick building you see today is mostly Edwardian and later, though from the riverside path you can still make out the shallow arches of the original silk mill foundations, designed to allow flood water to swill through when the building was on an island in the since-narrowed river. Floods are commonplace so the new museum had to be designed to shrug them off: you’ll never be able to keep the water out in extreme conditions, so the fit-out here makes it relatively straightforward to recover from. The ground floor level is slightly raised, impervious materials are used up to a certain height and sometimes beyond; it helps that the overall aesthetic is industrial anyway. This also explains why the main exhibition sequence of the museum starts on the first floor.

A triple height atrium grafted onto the side of the existing building serves as the arrival and circulation point. A grand
raw-steel staircase (plus lift) takes you to the first floor, where you will also find the museum shop. That, combined with some judicious knocking through of the spaces in the mill, makes for a reasonably clear route round this L-shaped museum. The entrance hall supplies an introduction to the collection, with objects arranged along the left hand wall as you enter and continuing up the stairs. And of course it also provides space for a decent café/restaurant.

It seems incredible now, but there used to be a coal-fired power station between Derby’s nearby cathedral (as a former parish church much rebuilt by James Gibbs around the time the Silk Mill was built) and the river. It was demolished in 1972 but power stations always leave a legacy and here it is, next door to the Silk Mill: a very large 1960s electricity sub-station surrounded by a tall brick zig-zag perimeter wall. There was enough space to slot the new atrium (‘civic hall’) between the two, but the power company needed room to access the cables running in and out. The casual visitor has no idea that there is a gap for this behind the atrium wall, though a section of blank panels to the left of the entrance facade is the giveaway.

As you enter the building through its glass-and-copper entrance, two big physical objects make it clear that manufacturing in Derby has moved on considerably since its textile days. A part-exploded Toyota car is suspended over the entrance (Toyota’s UK factory is within the city limits) while high up at the far end is a Rolls-Royce Trent engine, the kind that powers so many of the world’s airliners. Rolls-Royce is synonymous with Derby, but the city is also a historic train manufacturer and railway centre. So the collection has lots of railway ephemera including a huge model railway set-up in one room that dates back to the Festival of Britain and has been added to ever since. And let’s not forget ceramics, another big local industry.

Bauman Lyons’ director Guy Smith is keen to emphasise the collaborative nature of this project in which the architect and the exhibition designer Creative Core worked together in the same team as the engineers, contractor and client under an integrated project insurance (IPI) contract designed to be non-confrontational. The Museum of Making is only the second project in the country to be delivered in this way, the first having been the newbuild Dudley College of Technology. Smith applauds the model: it wasn’t always easy, he says, but it achieved its aim of everyone working together to overcome the inevitable problems (which here include sorting the electricity substation zone, dealing with asbestos, coping with flooding and the pandemic) and to achieve a common goal. His client Hannah Fox, director of projects and programmes for Derby Museums, is equally positive. She sees the process of ‘co-production’ as extending more widely to the people of the city and region to help define what the museum should be: there was a great deal of hands-on consultation.

This museum has a lot of rentable space for events – especially the ground-floor ‘Italian Mill’ section, a large catered space which has its own entrance (originally the main entrance). But there is also design workspace up under the roof and, gloriously, some very well-equipped workshops at the back with machinery from ancient to modern, where you can make stuff whether it involves forging metal or using a CNC cutting machine.

Two relatively conventional galleries – one introducing you to the history of the whole World Heritage Site, the other taking you through the themes of manufacture in the area – are trumped by the controlled daylight a welcome bonus. The mill’s existing structure is revealed and sensitively adapted, with filtered daylight and windows rewired.
chaos of ‘The Assemblage’, essentially open-access storage of objects organised by material. From touchscreens you can find particular objects or groups of objects, and download or print out a path through the room, opening drawers, sliding racking or just peering at stuff on shelves.

One key decision made by the architect and exhibition designer was to embrace daylight and views out rather than excluding them. There are a lot of windows everywhere; light levels are mostly controlled by filtering film applied to the panes. So you always know where you are relative to the city and the river. There is even a new glazed belvedere at roof level, with comfy chairs, looking south across the square outside.

It’s commendable that everything remains very workmanlike. The new architecture keeps itself functional and discreet, the alterations are appropriate, the exhibition design mostly avoids trickiness (though not the curse of slow-responding touchscreens). The story told here is a fascinating one for anyone interested in manufacturing and making. What’s so far unknown is whether the move to include workshops and workspace will take off, so reconnecting the history of the area with the present day.

All in all, it’s an audacious move by Derby Museums, and one with a genuine civic quality to it.
Cultivated hybrid

Wilkinson Eyre’s Hilltop, Home of Gardening Science at RHS Wisley in Surrey is ambitious in its programme but less so in its sustainability

Words: Eleanor Young
Hilltop, Home of Gardening Science, Wilkinson Eyre’s £35 million new building at the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS)’s gardens at Wisley in Surrey, poses a question about the language of architecture. You may know the site, as I did, from seeing the signs for it while driving out of London on the A3. It started life as a place of science with laboratories and trial fields. Now it is better known by its 1.2 million annual visitors (pre-Covid) as a garden-based visitor attraction, with cafés and shelves of plants to buy. The institution’s mission is split and so too is the building.

Set on the site of old glasshouses and the Honest Sausage café, Hilltop attempts to house café, flower shows and functions with plant science labs, library and classrooms in a bifurcating Y-shaped plan. On the science side it takes over from the Edwardian laboratories with their fluctuating temperatures, floods and biscuit beetles, which didn’t sit well with ensuring bio-secure labs or storing specimens from Charles Darwin’s Voyage of the Beagle. And it spreads out the visitors, giving them another destination, away from the existing honeypots of cafés, loos and shop at the entrance and the great glasshouses.

The two functions and the two other garden destinations set the diagram of the building. Wilkinson Eyre’s Jim Eyre throws open his arms to demonstrate the welcoming embrace of the plan, one arm out towards the entrance, the other to the glass houses.

What is the right language for a building that takes in all these functions? Should it have the presence of a great house, like the old labs, or the massing of a village cluster like the more recent welcome buildings? Should it have an arts and crafts flavour like the small cottages dotted around? None of these. Away from other buildings, Hilltop crests the hill, taking over from a broad belt of trees and half hidden by more trees from the main garden. Its narrow lengths of sweet chestnut cladding signal its fit with this wooded edge. In some places they hint at an agricultural antecedent. But the 2m cladding modules that the chestnut sits within tell another story, of buildability over craft. As does the ground floor in-situ concrete which took over from the lower-carbon steel option amid concerns for the programme when the contractor, Osborne, came on board. Large steels, glass expanses, an atrium; this large scale way of building – and designing for that
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Buildings
Horticulture

Section AA

– although this is currently stymied by the malady of the green beyond the building of the formal gardens at the front with the information panels which sweepingly connect outwards. The rigour of the steel grid marks the thermal mass). The concrete planks of the soffit (giving the space an edge) and the scale towards the glazed gable ends with coloured baffles suspended from the thin 50mm concrete planks of the soft (giving the space thermal mass).

Climbing up to Hilltop, the building reaches out towards you with that embrace but it is the gable ends that, oddly, are the first encounter, as if those arms are not thrown quite wide enough. And the building appears as if in many angled pieces. Each side of the “Y”, and the central atrium volume, has a split section with a clerestory for ventilation. Add in a glazed colonnade on each side and then extend two sections of glazed atrium roof as canopies over the colonnades and you don’t know where to look.

The last few Wilkinson Eyre buildings I visited were for James Dyson on his campus in Wiltshire, which stand taut with design discipline. Hilltop has none of that rigorous editing of materials and expression. This is emphasised by its immediate surroundings where early planting has yet to take hold and soften the edges of the paths, and the scale of the plants throws the architecture into coarse relief.

Inside, the design is more straightforward. The rigour of the steel grid marks out the atrium which sweepingly connects formal gardens at the front with the information of the green beyond the building – although this is currently stymied by the exhibition design and its large-scale panel at the entrance. The atrium neatly both draws together and divides the separate functions. One arm of the building has ‘science’ with a herbarium of rolling shelves of horticultural specimens, and a more conventional library of books. Above are plain labs where work on pests and diseases can be investigated in a contained way. The offices – unusually – encounter, as if those arms are not thrown quite wide enough. And the building appears as if in many angled pieces. Each side of the “Y”, and the central atrium volume, has a split section with a clerestory for ventilation. Add in a glazed colonnade on each side and then extend two sections of glazed atrium roof as canopies over the colonnades and you don’t know where to look.

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The second wing has classrooms opening out on to garden teaching spaces and the newly planted world food garden. A small café kinks out from the atrium as the wing opens out into a double-height event hall with rooflights and windows sliced into the facade. They are part shaded, with hit-and-miss cedar slats above double doors. The building is contained—and partially protected from the noise of the A3—by a bund edging the ‘back’ of the building and bursting with poppies and grasses.

The last decade has seen a huge investment in buildings and gardens by the RHS, both at its new Bridgewater Garden in Salford and at Wisley. At times there have been 30 capital investment projects running. At Hilltop’s opening, ‘ambition’ was a big theme, along with new Covid recruits to gardening and the potential positive impact of 30 million gardeners and their pots and plots on climate change and the biodiversity crisis.

What is surprising is that this ambition and climate concern didn’t translate into a more fundamentally sustainable building. Yes, it has timber cladding, PVs, LEDs and water attenuation. But it doesn’t, to give the most obvious example for a horticultural charity, use plants to improve air quality nor to create a protective microclimate around the building. Instead there are a few climbers scrambling up wires on the west elevation and a sample panel of a planted living wall inside. Experimenting with this could have put the RHS in the lead on another important area of garden science and put the £9 million investment in gardens at Hilltop to a double use. And perhaps it could have found a more appropriate expression for the fascinating work going on in this hybrid building. •
Nature shrouds and reveals Steyn Studio’s elegant café and shop discreetly planted in a new garden that binds together Bosjes country estate in South Africa’s Breede valley.

Words: Sean O’Toole

The family of the current owner of Bosjes, an ambitious new hospitality development and garden on a working farm 110km northeast of Cape Town, took ownership of this mountainside property in 1831. Among the fixtures was a rectangular manor house erected in 1790 in the prevailing Cape-Dutch style. The years between the house’s construction and its acquisition by the Botha-Stofberg clan were tumultuous. Deep ravines in the neighbouring mountains provided ample refuge for bandits and cattle rustlers. Waaihoek Peak, immediately behind Bosjes and named for the intemperate winds that plague the heat-wracked Cape in summer, was especially notorious. The last ‘drosters’ were flushed out of their elevated hideout only in the 1820s.

South Africa’s colonial history is inescapable at Bosjes. Formerly known as Bosjesman’s Valley Farm, the estate’s shortened name retains a vestigial reference to the region’s indigenous San peoples – Bushmen, or Bosjesmans in Dutch. Its new name translates as ‘bushes’ and shifts the focus to the region’s once dominant, but now critically endangered heathland of fynbos and renosterveld. Opened to the public in early 2017, Bosjes initially comprised a guesthouse, restaurant and audacious chapel. This year it unveiled an elegant garden café and shop, tactfully placed in two sunken, amphitheatre-like spaces within a processional garden. To keep their charm discreet, their vaulted ceilings are over-wrapped by the lush landscape. The new garden, laid out next to a long thin vineyard that mirrors its dimensions, binds together the estate’s disparate architectural elements – notably the fusty manor house and chapel – into a coherent unity.

IN NUMBERS

2ha total garden area

190m² café GIA

559m² deli GIA

This image The café, one of two new buildings, sinks into the landscape for visitors to Bosjes.

Right Rewilded greenery and heathland will envelope the excavated prairie bays in the variable sills to sit at leisure.
While discontinuous with the stolid vernacular of the surrounding farms, Bosjes forms part of a wider post-apartheid reimagining of the fruit and wine farms around Cape Town into ritzy hospitality destinations, notably in Stellenbosch and Franschhoek. In its abundant novelty and experimentation, the estate nonetheless preserves many signifiers of the building ethos and cultural values particular to a valley once at the outer edge of white settlement in this part of Africa.

The architect responsible for much of the estate's features with dry-packed stone walls. The client wanted elevated timber walkway, children's play area and extensive water pond bridge crossing – the manor house and chapel – are visible as white browns. The garden is a secondary intervention, despite the submerging garden café and gift shop, an elevated bridge, children's play area and extensive water features with dry-packed stone walls. The client wanted a podium and flanked by a reflective water feature on one side, the chapel acoustically charged – space from which to view the abundant landscape. Its undulations, incorporating glass facades, gesture to the theatrical gables of English architect Herbert Baker's Cape-Dutch Revival style (1892-1912), although that's only the half of it.

The chapel is located next to the family's burial plot and is flanked by a small garden with a water feature illustrating the biblical parting of the Red Sea. Steyn adapted the ‘sinuous shape’ of birds in flight that he saw recorded in photographs by Eadweard Muybridge – from his 1887 series on animal locomotion – into a membranous roof that mediates the biblical verses, ‘We find protection under the shadow of your wings’ (Psalm 36:7). Set on a podium and flanked by a reflective water feature on one side, the chapel is unequivocally a Wing to be gazed at. It evokes a rabbinical confidence, as pavilions so often do. But once entered it becomes a reverent – and acoustically charged – space from which to view the abundant landscape. Its glass panes are centrally joined with wooden elements that form crucifixes, fostering a mediated encounter with the landscape.
a scheme that would add bulk without interrupting existing sightlines, to create a subordinate environment informed by architectural modesty.

Steyn was unfazed by the brief. He likens the estate’s manor house and chapel to the region’s two dominant mountains, Waaibroek and Slanghoek, and the garden to the fertile valley that once sustained a floral abundance. To implement the technically demanding brief of holding approximately 750m² of building in a rolling garden environment, Steyn partnered with Square One Landscape Architects. The practice’s founder, Sydney-based Mark Saint Põl who is originally from Cape Town, brought a wealth of experience to the project. Saint Põl had worked on Green Point Urban Park, a lauded public project in Cape Town that includes a didactic public garden, and nearby Botha’s Hall Primary School, a thoroughly reimagining of a rural farm school.

Bosjes was reached via an unpaved road that threads past the primary school and the undulating chapel roof, providing a jumble of first impressions. But now a new access road from the valley’s arterial route approaches the estate frontally, through vineyards and farmlands, with the manor house functioning as the chief orientating beacon. This formal approach is in keeping with the choreographed way Cape Dutch estates are traditionally encountered. In this idealised schema, the garden operates as an interstitial space to access the chapel, which presents as the coup de grâce following the garden’s approach to the estate. Saint Põl worked on Green Point Urban Park, a lauded public project in Cape Town that includes a didactic public garden, and nearby Botha’s Hall Primary School, a thorough reimagining of a rural farm school.

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Despite occasional Covid restrictions and a winter downpour, the garden café was brimful on a recent visit. Big it isn’t, but seating areas are generous and the flow between the serving counter and kitchen – an entirely concealed space that doubles as a prep area during functions at the restaurant – is effortless. In the absence of mature trees, white umbrellas shade outdoor diners from the harsh summer sun. Picnics are encouraged on the lawn. The cosy atmosphere of the café may well be tested by the seasonal influx of upcountry visitors and international tourists (tip: arrive early). The evolution of the larger garden, both in height and lushness – as well as the reopening later this year of the suspended retail shop, which focuses on local design – will take some pressure off the more attractive café.

Balancing beauty with self-abnegation is central to the garden additions at Bosjes. ‘You cannot be completely quiet and hide the architecture,’ concedes Steyn, pointing to the slim, dome-like facades and trellises as important lures into the experience of the hidden architectural spaces in the garden. ‘The chapel is a true pavilion, whereas here the buildings and their placement became more like clearances in a forest.’ Retail and catering imperatives notwithstanding, the principal function of these theatrical spaces is to invite pause and contemplative nature worship. ‘I see them as amphitheatres that still the environment around you and amplify the mountains beyond.’ Appreciation of the architecture is, of course, encouraged too.

Sean O’Toole is a Cape Town-based journalist and editor.
Michael Davies

The Climate Change Committee is the UK government’s independent advisor on emissions targets and preparations for climate change. CCC member and Bartlett professor Michael Davies explains the findings of its latest reports

What does the CCC’s Independent Assessment of Climate Risk say about the built environment?

It identifies the eight most urgent risks, of which one is overheating in buildings. At the extreme, that brings increased risk of mortality: there are several thousand heat-related deaths every year in the UK and that’s predicted to triple by mid-century. Heat can also affect sleep, cause discomfort and impact productivity in offices, for example. There are challenges in schools, prisons, hospitals and care settings – both for new builds and retrofits. We urgently need to amend regulations to reflect that.

Over the next five years, 1.5 million new homes are due to be built in the UK, and we should start to retrofit existing buildings at the rate that’s required to reduce emissions. The risk is that we lock in future problems by inadequate construction. Adding insulation is valuable in reducing energy demand, but without a carefully co-ordinated approach to ventilation it can increase the risk of overheating.

Low-energy retrofitting is absolutely essential, but must be done in ways which minimise the risks rather than aggravate them.

There has been a great success in reducing emissions from electricity generation, but that hasn’t been matched in transport, industry, agriculture or the built environment. It’s a big challenge now, and we still await the government’s much-delayed Heat and Buildings Strategy – expected imminently – which is critical to reducing the carbon emissions of millions of dwellings. Adaptation action has also failed to keep pace with worsening climate risk.

Yes. There is a perception that if we focus on emission reductions everything will be fine, but that’s not the case. The climate has already changed. There is now 25% chance of a hot summer like that of 2018, compared to 10% a few decades ago. Our current housing stock is not fit to cope with that. It’s likely that the UK will experience something like a further 0.5°C temperature rise by mid-century, even in really ambitious scenarios. Alongside the vital mitigation work – reduction of emissions – we need to adapt the built environment for the climate change that is already locked in.

Theccc.org.uk/publications

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

Paul Jolly on the newly published Building Safety Act: ribaj.com/principaldesigner

Is there appetite for taking on the significant liabilities associated with the principal designer role?

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35
The architectural approaches of recent years, often gathered together under the untranslatable umbrella of ‘contemporary architecture’, appear to be falling well short of the radical reform needed to tackle today’s climate and biodiversity emergency. Without a compelling theory of architecture to respond to the challenges and opportunities of our own age, spatial and material ideals instilled by the modern movement still define mainstream attitudes to building.

A century ago, in ‘Vers une Architecture’, Le Corbusier dismissed over-stylistic trends, repplying in the possibilities of mass production and materials such as reinforced concrete, which facilitated his use of pilotis and ribbon windows to enable the free plan. A generation later, digital design tools and advanced manufacturing processes facilitated the seemingly limitless structural possibilities of the high-tech movement. Paired with the optimism and booms of the 80s and 90s, it led to an extraordinary development in methods of construction, fit for the scale of global growth that followed. The best examples of high-tech were dazzling in their clarity, efficiency and elegance of structural expression, such as the 1971 Centre Pompidou by Rogers and Piano in Paris.

However, Richard Rogers’ stridently cantilevering final building this year felt particularly poignant. Given the Château de Versailles’ grand disregard for embodied carbon, it seems a fitting memorial to an era of depleting resources and an urgent need to reduce carbon emissions. Fortunately, a new generation of practitioners and thinkers is leading a growing shift away from the preoccupation with high-tech and stylistic eclecticism, towards a more coherent vision of architecture. We call this approach low-tech. It is not a call to return to hand-crafted materials, reduced reliance on technology and the imperative that we would one day have to dismantle and move it. But this was the start of a great partnership working with structural engineer Peter Laidler of Structural Workshop. Parameters were set early in the design process, such as using solid hipped roof generating a clerestory window. The building, a simple pitched extrusion, was undulating, contorted, writhing masses about anything, resulting in buildings that offer little to nourish the soul.

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Intelligence
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to fulfill more than one purpose. For example, the ply sheathing to the roof and perimeter walls doubles as the visual lining, there is no plasterboard nor wet trades involved. Gutter and downpipes were eliminated, with run-off from the cantilevered canopy captured by a siltbin and delivered to the garden. The result is a building which achieves an embodied carbon of just 310kg CO₂e/m². The studio building proved instrumental in putting into practice our early thinking on low-tech principles. The challenge is how to scale these ideas, but recently we have been trying to apply and develop these principles through larger, more high-profile projects.

The complexity of modern cavity wall construction, with endless layers and secondary elements that will degrade and fail over time, led us to explore the use of solid masonry wall construction on a trio of buildings at Green Templeton College, Oxford. This approach also reduces the associated high Kg/CO₂e of typical steel or concrete frame infilled with blockwork. To model the thermal characteristics, we worked closely with Structure Workshop, which developed its own embodied carbon tool, and Ritchie + Daffin environmental and services engineers. The proposed construction simply uses two densities of Porotherm blocks. Extruded clay captures air in a matrix of voids to increase its thermal properties while omitting the need for cavity insulation. They are load-bearing up to four storeys, with floor slabs bearing onto the inner block. They can be simply finished inside and out with lime renders, achieving a breathable system that also moderates internal humidity and has exposed thermal mass, reducing temperature fluctuations. This method of construction eliminates swathes of materials: cavity insulation, wall ties and trays; building papers; secondary structure; plasterboard and so on.

It also raises interesting questions about the formal possibilities of more primitive and low-tech construction approaches combined with factors such as the reduction in glazed area to lessen heat loss. The result is a more stereotomic architecture, where openings are carved from a singular mass forming deep reveals and more dramatic play of light and shadow.

Working with natural materials
We pursued this monolithic language of architecture, with deep load-bearing walls, activated to serve multiple purposes, at Yorkshire Sculpture Park on its gallery and visitor centre, The Weston. Aware of the scrupulously controlled environments often required to moderate temperature, humidity and ventilation to preserve artworks, we talked to Julian Cottrill of Skelly & Couch, about how to achieve this. Julian told us how natural materials buffer moisture and humidity in many historic, vernacular buildings. This is due to the hygroscopic qualities of materials such as lime and clay, which can absorb moisture from the air. Despite this, the science and data have only recently been developed, notably by Tim Padfield at the University of Denmark.

The concept was developed through a mixture of thermal modelling using IES, spreadsheet humidity calculations and measurements taken on the hygroscopic properties of specific clays. The resulting design uses 10,000 unfired clay bricks, arranged in a labyrinth within a deep section of wall adjacent to the main gallery space. Air is drawn through here to absorb humidity before reaching the gallery via a discreet low-level plenum. This passive humidity buffer reduces energy use compared to mechanical systems by up to 60%. It was however only possible due to the client’s boldness in departing from the norms of a highly serviced and controlled gallery environment, often dictated by artwork owners and insurers. Humidity records have shown that the system is able to achieve very slight humidity variations of just +/- 4%.

It goes to show how much construction wis...
dom has been lost over years and only now being resurrected. It can be seen in companies like Ty Mawr, a manufacturer and distributor of sustainable building materials based in Brecon, which has long promoted the benefits of age-old materials and forgotten methods of building. There are great opportunities for architects to employ these techniques and materials on new commissions, although with more contemporary applications.

Such an approach has been brilliantly demonstrated by Practice Architecture, which featured in the recent RIBA Architecture Awards book. The Flat House project at Margent Farm in Cambridgeshire, uses hemp grown on site to form prefabricated, timber-framed cassettes containing hempcrete, which constitute the main wall construction system of the three-bedroom house. Not only does the hemp serve to sequester carbon; minimising the distance between raw material production, harvesting, processing, manufacture and delivery, it significantly reduces the project’s embodied carbon footprint. The hempcrete is used in timber frame - the main wall construction.

It is encouraging to see a range of public projects being delivered that echo these low-tech principles. Below is a selection of projects that demonstrate how the material choices had to work as hard as possible, obviating the use of unnecessary linings to use less material more efficiently. Over 35% of the building’s materials contain recycled matter, together with a CLT timber structure that has been responsibly sourced – in this instance, recycled glass – to form up to 70% of the brick compound. The reformed brick, therefore has far lower embodied carbon than newly formed UK brick – and upcycles construction waste. Scale remains one of the greatest challenges to the low-tech agenda. While there are many exciting and encouraging projects they remain of a relatively modest size. It is hard to conceive how these principles may be effectively and economically scaled up to larger buildings, but we are now embarking on a project with The National Railway Museum in York on its new Central Hall project, putting forward a 3,500m² solid timber frame. Fortunately, the Science Museum Group, which runs the museum, is an ambitious and enlightened client. To initiate real change at scale, architects need inspired and visionary clients, developers and patrons to buy in, but vitally we need the backstop of intelligently defined policy and more radical regulation to kick the construction industry as whole into action. The RIBA’s 2030 Climate Challenge has set admirable and ambitious targets for architects to move towards, but they remain optional and we need regulation to catch up.

To initiate real change at scale, architects need to reduce will of course be seen as regressive by some, but it should be framed positively as the spirit of our age, reflective of the broader societal changes we will need to embrace over the coming decades – consuming and travelling less, moderating our diets and even comfort levels.

Architecture must seize this opportunity to define a new language of architecture for our time. Actually, less is less, but today that is precisely the aim.
Light roof

A competition to design a house daylit from above seeks inspiring and inventive interiors

As our cities densify and straightforward sites become ever more scarce, attention turns to backland plots and enclosed courtyards that – with a good dose of persistence and architectural ingenuity – might just accommodate a house. Access is often tricky, as is the negotiation of numerous party walls, but the greatest challenge of such landlocked sites is the availability of daylight, fresh air and views. Hemmed in on all sides, often overlooked, they receive light only from above, which must be brought down through the building by skilful manipulation of roof and the section.

In recent years, the architects of some exceptional projects have turned such constraints into opportunities to make powerful and exceptional interiors shaped by light. Limited access to daylight underlines its value, driving the arrangement of spaces and the character of the interior. Shadow patterns and views of the sky and changing weather might enrich the experience of living in the house.

The winning proposal will:

- Relate the form and architectural character of the house to the sources of available light
- Be spatially innovative
- Add character and interest to spaces through direct, borrowed, filtered or reflected illumination, but to add character and interest to spaces through direct, borrowed, filtered or reflected illumination
- Include some exceptional projects have turned such constraints into opportunities to make powerful and exceptional interiors shaped by light. Limited access to daylight underlines its value, driving the arrangement of spaces and the character of the interior. Shadow patterns and views of the sky and changing weather might enrich the experience of living in the house.

The winning proposal will:

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- Be spatially innovative
- Add character and interest to spaces through direct, borrowed, filtered or reflected illumination, but to add character and interest to spaces through direct, borrowed, filtered or reflected illumination
- Include

**BRIEF**

The house should be arranged over more than one storey. Atria and internal lightwells may be used, but should not account for more than 20% of the site area. Consideration should be given to how views of the sky and changing weather might enrich the experience of living in the house. Design should use the configuration of plans and sections, and the type and location of openings in the roof, to create daylight conditions that vary throughout the building and over time. The means might include:

- Atria, windows onto lightwells and internal courtyards (uniform and vaulted)
- Skylights and opaque roof windows
- Reflective light tubes, mirrors and light shelves
- Blinds and shading devices

**CRITERIA**

Judges will look for imaginative but workable schemes which take limited access to daylight as an opportunity to explore the potential of toplight, borrowed daylight and sky views in a domestic setting. The winning proposal will:

- Be spatially innovative
- Relate the form and architectural character of the building to the sources of available light
- Turn the limitations of the site into an architectural advantage

**SUBMISSIONS**

Entries must include the following:

- An entry form, including a text of no more than 400 words, describing the approach to daylighting
- Drawings: at least one plan, and one or more sections, and the type and location of openings in the roof, over time. The means might include:
- Atria, windows onto lightwells and internal courtyards (uniform and vaulted)
- Skylights and opaque roof windows
- Reflective light tubes, mirrors and light shelves
- Blinds and shading devices

**DEADLINE**

14.00 hours, Tuesday 14 September

**PRIZE**

Winning and commended entries will:

- Be spatially innovative
- Relate the form and architectural character of the building to the sources of available light
- Turn the limitations of the site into an architectural advantage

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**Download the entry form at:** ribaj.com/lightroof
The settings of business parks work in their favour as at Apt’s Longwater Avenue. The early ideas for this project had the spaces in front of the office buildings themselves as community hubs. One of our first drawings included flexible green spaces for weekend markets, sport and leisure, reimagining the village green and cricket pitch, against the backdrop of our buildings. As the project progressed, this idea fell away, but it has since re-emerged in recent sketches and imaginings related to future phases of the park, with hotels, leisure pavilions, creches and community halls, food offerings and small retail all co-existing alongside variations on the office workplace model, but importantly all feeding off each other to improve the environment, sense of place and desirability to be here in this ever-competitive market.

And business park buildings can make a significant positive contribution to tackling the climate crisis. Much of the 1980s and 1990s business park building stock is already becoming obsolete. By pursuing aggressive retrofit programmes using materials with low embodied carbon, business parks can set a new standard for holistically sustainable design that goes well beyond BREEAM and WELL certification and is morebefitting of their landscape environments.

Providing a greater mix of uses and focusing on a meaningful, sustainable agenda that promotes health and wellbeing for their occupants, there is an opportunity to accelerate the idea of becoming more localised, drawing parallels with the idea of the ‘15-minute city’, where everything one needs is within a quarter of an hour, either by foot or bicycle. If business parks can become more self-sustaining and the current sight of building frontages being dominated by cars becomes redundant and the current challenges they face around location become less restrictive.

Without evolution, business parks will struggle, but they have great potential to create a much more positive identity, attracting a more diverse range of people over the next 10 years and evolving into small village communities in their own right, which can surely lead to lasting success. •

James Ewen is project leader at Apt

Light is what you make it.
Retrofit reaches Stage 2

The project to upgrade the future home of the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership has got to Stage 2 of the Plan of Work, after last month’s report of Stages 0 and 1.

Eleanor Young

At Stage 2 of the RIBA Plan of Work architects develop the conceptual design and it is signed off by the client. This is where we pick up the story of a 1930s telephone exchange that is undergoing a deep retrofit to become the new home of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership.

It is no surprise that the original design of the telephone exchange hadn’t prioritised daylight. ‘It was quite gloomy,’ says project architect Architype’s Ben Humphries. Light modelling from BDP, and some mini-studies looking at the impact of the windows on heat demands and daylighting, proved the old sash windows needed tackling. Good daylight is a must for BREEAM and existing light levels would have scored zero credits. Options included triple-glazing to achieve Passivhaus levels of insulation.

Conservation vs sustainability

Cost and the conservation area put paid to the planning committee with support from some councillors for its sustainability agenda. But back to the fabric. Surveys started to give a greater understanding of what the team had to work with. Point testing of U-values gave some information but thermal imaging was less useful as the heating had been mothballed so there was little heat leakage to pick up. It was clear, though, that area retrofitted in the late 90s performed better thermally. Ironically, it was harder to make this section – with its steel and precast concrete – airtight.

The circular economy is a difficult one to crack, even when you are just looking for waste

An early stumbling block at the project engagement meeting was the use of bio-based materials – specified in the brief but specifically ruled out in the university design guide. Then there were the partitions, fixed in place and on the keep list, but not meeting the mandate for future ease of reconfiguration. There were eventually ditched. Passivhaus fundamentals also had to run past the groups using low grade heat around the ventilation system was a deviation from the norm and needed approval.

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In the meantime there was the perennial question of the cost of sustainability. French says the cost consultant added 20% for every performance criteria – which had to be resisted. ‘Yes there are costs of extra insulation and triple glazing, but it doesn’t mean it is a free for all piling on cost and risk,’ he says. There was only one air source heat pump, for instance. And French could see potential savings too, one of which was realised in the flooring – the cheaper solution of low embodied carbon floor finishes. ‘We’d have had an idea of that but not the numbers,’ explains Bishop. ‘A generic carpet tile would blow the carbon budget.’ So the raised access floor was left exposed, the gluf baffled off to provide a clean surface.

Searching for waste

University waste streams were also explored. If the projects’ progenitor, the Enterprise Centre at the University of East Anglia, had rescued and repurposed a Foster and Partners-designed desk, what riches might be found in Cambridge? Talk of using timber that was being felled on the university estate didn’t come off. As ever in design, many avenues were explored but not all led somewhere. The circular economy is a difficult one to crack, even when you are just looking for waste.

CISL had initiated the building process and embedded itself into the project far more firmly than a normal university department, which would attend meetings as a user rather than project director. But as a professional client the university has its processes. When the project didn’t follow its design and standards brief a ‘derogation’, or variation, had to be agreed at the project engagement meeting held at the end of each stage. Talking to both Architype and project director John French you sense a mix of defiant eco warrior and quaking school child as the rule breaking was justified. There was a palpable tension in pushing sustainability when innovation and guidance conflicted – even though the university already had at least one timber framed Passivhaus building at King’s College.
Practices are turning to data-driven processes for project intelligence. A RIBAJ seminar in association with Deltek found out why

In the last year, adoption of digital has taken a quantum leap. Businesses worldwide are investing heavily in digital technologies and transformation of their processes. Without the same acceleration in architecture, though, there is a real danger the profession will lag and lose ground.

The significance of other sectors’ more subdued performance was underscored by the RIBAJ Benchmarking survey that showed that in terms of revenue housing project costs have never been under greater pressure. In the UK, this is exacerbated by increased materials costs and shortages.

Although these issues need digital solutions, practices have been slow to respond. While architects often embrace digital design software, there is less advanced use of data-driven processes for project intelligence – tracking project costs, timesheets and workloads for finance management and business performance.

Scanning the horizon

Adrian Malleson, RIBA

Malleson kicked off with an overview of the economic context, quality assurance and architecture market drawn from recent data. As he stated: “We can only have insight into what’s going on by looking at the data behind it.”

He highlighted the Bank of England’s prediction of a buoyant economy, which is anticipated to reach pre-pandemic levels into what’s going on by looking at the data behind it.”

He highlighted the Bank of England’s prediction of a buoyant economy, which is anticipated to reach pre-pandemic levels in March 2020, practices have gone from focusing on managing the closure of the economy in spring 2020 to focusing on managing the workforces and managing the workload for financial systems.

The major challenges are collaboration and communication and accurate cost forecasting.

The Deltek Clarity report can be downloaded via the QR code at the end of the seminar. The report highlights the exploratory or nascent phase of digital transformation, with a mere 19% at the mature or advanced end of the spectrum. There has been a marked increase, though, during the last year in the number of practices taking important first steps as the lessons of the pandemic have led businesses ‘to expedite and move more quickly’.

Top technology initiatives confirm that practices are still in the early stages of adoption, focusing on creating a strategic plan for implementing technology.

The current post-Covid onus on resetting and improvement provides the perfect chance to evaluate where you are, where you want to be and use the opportunity to learn lessons from the pandemic and leverage the lessons of the pandemic.

A digitally literate future

Miller emphasised strong interdependencies between project and business management, where architectural practices are seeking to streamline killing processes, focus on business process improvement, manage growth better and implement new digital systems.

The post-Covid reset is wanting to build their digital literacy.”

One question posed during the closing Q&A was “what advice would you give a student wanting to build their digital literacy?”

“Coding, generative design and understanding technology quality assurance compliance is being used to identify a number of key processes that each project has to go through. The key four areas are applied to provide a measure of confidence for auditing business management, design process, environmental safety. They reflect BDP’s commitment to determining outcomes through data, connecting them across the global practices from a strategic to a project level.”

project forecasting and financial checks for month-end figures and for the creation of a planning health dashboard, which identifies key issues with project resource plans across projects company-wide.

Progressing further, Deltek’s information management strategy, employing cloud to embed the practice’s commitment to the government’s core priorities outlined in the Construction Playbook – health and safety and wellbeing, building safety and Build Back Greener – within their project processes. This is ‘in all about data for smarter more determined outcomes.’

Linking multiple databases to obtain additional strategic data, quality assurance compliance is being used to identify a number of key processes that each project has to go through. The key four areas are applied to provide a measure of confidence for auditing business management, design process, environmental safety. They reflect BDP’s commitment to determining outcomes through data, connecting them across the global practices from a strategic to a project level.

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It was ‘what advice would you give a student wanting to build their digital literacy?’
James Reeve says this image is the right way up; and considering the lengths he went to to take it, I'm not going to argue.

The pool is at Villa 356 in the Côte d'Azur, designed by Rudy Ricciotti for art collector clients in an isolated, rambling landscape, along the coast from Reeve’s adopted home in Marseille. Commissioned to document Ricciotti’s work after his Department of Islamic Arts at the Louvre in Paris, Reeve was struck by the singular qualities of this futuristic, one-storey, black concrete villa – mostly by its ‘phenomenal’ 44m long pool, columns rising from it to meet a gravity-defying roof, oversailing its long glass elevation.

By contrast, gravity was used rather than foiled when he returned in 2017 to take this shot. Reeve loves capturing buildings at twilight using a long exposure, and did so here. To counter the significant buoyancy of his camera’s waterproof housing he anchored the tripod with gym plates to the pool’s floor. Reeve himself, almost immobile for hours in 12ºC water, wore three wetsuits, and to stay steady at the viewfinder, tied a bag of rocks to his belt to bear him down. And to ensure the water’s surface was as calm as he needed it to be, he’d hold his breath, descend, wait, open the shutter, wait, close the shutter, then haul himself up. Only then did he exhale.

So much effort to ensure that your presence was nullified, not even by inference; observe even the absence of shadows. This was moonlight on a cold spring evening, its sunless ultraviolet lending a sense of the uncanny to the strange serenity of the inverted. •

Jan-Carlos Kucharek
Did you see the hydrofoil surfboard flying down the Thames in front of the Houses of Parliament? It was the next best thing to a flying carpet, complete with an Olympic snowboard champion riding out the wash of passing Thames clippers.

Dig into the technology and you see the propeller beneath the surface. Follow the YouTube trail and you see the lithium-ion battery strapped inside. Batteries have already powered a communications revolution with mobile phones. And it is becoming clearer that they could offer a fundamental shift in mobility and away from fossil fuel.

Everyone’s eyes are on the transport possibilities, possibly electric planes but particularly electric cars given the UK deadline of 2030 for an end to the sale of new petrol and diesel cars. But the original leader in electric cars, Elon Musk and Tesla, early on realised the value of batteries for buildings as well as cars. Tesla launched its slim Powerwall in 2015. Now Samsung, Nissan and others have ‘home batteries’ on the market. Electric cars may play a part in creating active structures, powering a building’s devices as well as charging from PVs, and helping better use energy from renewables at grid level too.

The costs of such batteries are currently measured in thousands of pounds (starting around the £2000 mark). Across the world, in universities and research labs, there are trials for more powerful, lighter, longer lasting, less polluting battery technology. It should make them cheaper too. In June the UK government pitched in with investment that includes £22 million for the Faraday Institution, which brings together academic and industry research on batteries from a decommissioning atomic energy research campus in Oxfordshire.

In the meantime, lightweight batteries are fuelling a smaller scale revolution in personal transport. In recent years there have been effortless uphill pedalling (without outstanding muscle power) on e-bikes, vast improvements in electric wheelchairs and, since June in London, e-scooters for hire. And London is not the only city with e-scooters; Manchester is trying them out in Salford Quays and Rochdale, and the West of England Authority is trialling them at campuses, train stations and in city centres. As they are classified as vehicles, local authority trials are the only way to ride them without being on the wrong side of the law.

In 2019 e-bike sales were up 60% year on year to 100,000 and in 2020 e-bike sales rose 70%. Perhaps e-bikes and e-scooters will force the pace of change in creating dedicated infrastructure. They will certainly extend the 15 minute city and, anecdotally, e-bikes are already giving those in villages and outlying areas a new freedom and pace for navigating local lanes and reaching services.

While the hydrofoil surfboard looks like it will remain an extreme sport, the battery power of e-scooters and e-bikes are driving a lower-carbon, joined up transport system. Batteries will shift how we think of energy and buildings too.
A giant mural featuring a windmill on a flank wall beckons me forward and, as I continue my journey, I encounter a floral scent trailing over a row of Edwardian terraced houses. I wander further, the tintinnabulation of a distant church bell lures me to proceed onwards … I meander around my locale, free from the obligation to navigate the city with a purpose. I allow my senses to guide me forward instinctively, wandering and feeling my way through, and in so doing, I am able to lose myself in the urban landscape in the same way I immerse myself in an orchestra performance.

No doubt the practice of psychogeography is subjective rather than scientific. It never observed any precise laws governing the specific effects of the geographical environment on the emotions and behaviour of individuals, as claimed by its eccentric proponent Guy Debord, who coined the term in the first place. Psychogeography was a well-intentioned but somewhat naive endeavour to understand how different places make us feel and behave. While it inspired an array of artists, writers and filmmakers worldwide, no architects or town planners seem to have ever taken it seriously. Perhaps its vagueness makes it a better recipe for creating enigmatic art which is an end in itself, instead of an informed design strategy. Indeed, if walking the city aimlessly is psychogeography’s ultimate goal, it would be paradoxical to imagine it could be of any practical use to architects.


The radical practice of psychogeography could bring a renewed energy to urban planning, says Tszwai So

In order to fully appreciate the legacy and relevance of psychogeography in urbanism, it is crucial to understand the intellectual underpinnings as well as the anti-capitalist origins of the Situationist International from the 60s – the movement from which psychogeography sprang. One of their most radical ideas was to liberate our minds from the limitations of consumerist homogeneity. The functionalist and utilitarian town planning approach is the outcome of the market’s invisible hand, whereas the mesmerising psychogeographical maps tear apart our conventional understanding of urban spaces, setting out a subjective emotional dimension to our relationship with cities.

Every psychogeographic map is unique because it manifests its author’s subjective reading of the city, as we see in British situationist Ralph Rumney’s works. Through his spellbinding maps we learnt that urbanism is about more than built environment; it is about the people in the city. The situationists sought an emotion-based urbanism and so should we.

Filmmaker David Lynch once told an audience: ‘If you have a golf ball-sized consciousness, when you read a book you will have a golf ball-sized understanding.’ An artist’s job is to expand that consciousness, and we learnt from the situationists that experiencing a city is highly subjective and involves the whole body; it is poetry in motion.

Alas, codification remains the orthodoxy well into the 21st century in planning policy. Technocrats are obsessed with regulating space standards, building heights and even ‘beauty’ – but how can we codify subjective experiences of our city? The lazy assumption that one can tabulate our lived experiences can be explained by capitalism’s raison d’etre: the commodification of everything – which ensures we maintain a golf ball-sized understanding of urban spaces. Psychogeography can certainly bring renewed artistic energy to urban planning and architecture, dismantling architects’ overt reliance on the visual and an almost authoritarian attitude that we know better than anyone else about how people feel about their cities. In psychogeography we rediscover the most innocent, sensuous and visceral interaction with our built environment.

•

Tszwai So is a founding director of Spheron Architects

The sensory city

The radic...
The ideas of renowned critic and theorist Reyner Banham belong to a different age, but he remains an iconic figure, writes Stephen Parnell. A new biography asks how to make sense of him now.

How should we read Banham today?

The British architecture and design historian Peter Reyner Banham recalled the 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen as the most bruising experience of his life. His discomfort began when on the last day of the conference French delegates – led by Jean Baudrillard – complained that in espousing naíve faith in the ability of technology to construct a better tomorrow, he, personally, had ‘clearly shown the moral and technical limits and the illusions of design and environment practices’. Attending students then issued an 11-point resolution challenging design’s complicity in social injustice and extractive practices that were destroying the planet in the name of profit. A bruised Banham wrote to his wife later that evening, ‘I shall not soon forget the hostility vibes that were coming up from the floor’. Recounting this episode in his fascinating new study of Banham’s life, Richard Williams presents it as a turning point – a kind of mid-life crisis. ‘Having been accustomed for nearly 20 years to being the provocateur’, Williams writes, ‘here he was cast as the voice of the establishment’.

The conference and Banham’s part in it clearly resonates with the crises that – incredibly – we are still living with half a century later. As Williams notes, Banham’s oeuvre is colossal – ‘anywhere between 750 and 1000 articles, depending on whose account you read, and up to 16 books’, each one adding to the myth that ‘there were always technological fixes… the “boffins” always had a solution, the humans would always come out on top’. There is no doubt Banham was a complicated and contradictory character. An intelligent, erudite, straightforward communicator and cultural interpreter, he was the Marlboro man of architectural criticism. However, his unshakable belief in technology and the Enlightenment ideals of progress and scientific rationality underpinned his world view and writings. The quintessential voice of the establishment’. This is how his early works should be taught today. The self-proclaimed aim of Williams’ book is to ‘make sense of Banham now’ – a difficult job considering his prolificity and the fact that there is little in the archive at the Getty Center that isn’t already in the public domain. (Having no sense of his own legacy, as his daughter explained, ‘he burned his drafts’.)

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more an evaluation of the man and his position in architectural historiography today. It is a book-length expansion of a chapter on Banham in his and Mark Crinson’s 2019 The Architecture of Art History, itself an overdue evaluation of the overlooked and awkward Crinson’s 2019 The Architecture of Art History, itself expansion of a chapter on Banham in his and Mark architectural historiography today. It is a book-length more a re-evaluation of the man and his position in the context of his life and career, getting behind the bombastic bamboozlement, sassy straight-talking, ‘fashionable sonofabitch’, and erudite masculinist public performer, and leaving the reader with a rich sense of a man with ideas and what they mean today. Perhaps the least explained of Banham’s major books in this volume is Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past, a facsimile of which has just been published with a new introduction by Gannon. It’s a very crisp and faithful reproduction, and the orgy of black and white photos pops brightly from the page. Like The New Brutalism, it starts with a definition: a megastructure is a massive, long-life extendable (‘plug-in’ or ‘clip-on’) structural framework that houses individual prefabricated units constituting all the functions of a city. It then documents candidates for canonicalisation, from Sant’Elia’s Milan Central Station project to the Metabolists, Archigram, Moshe Safdie’s Habitat at Expo ’67 and Paolo Soleri’s Arcosanti: self-contained, self-sufficient spaceships that could land on any planet and spawn a new colony powered by a techno-utopian belief in human ingenuity and charisma. Most interesting is an epilogue where Banham ponders the ‘meaning of megastructure’ as it was about to be delivered in the Centre Pompidou. He declares the movement over, closing the debate down rather than seeing it as the opening gambit for something that he concludes, in typically contrarian fashion, ‘was a melancholy but apt metaphor for the state of the modern movement, as well as perhaps for Banham himself’. So what might we learn from Banham today? Perhaps I appear too harsh in my judgments, based on the early material that I am most familiar with. Williams’ book helped me to appreciate the post-middle crisis Banham, the more reflective, grown-up thinker, coming to terms with being considered the establishment to be rebelled against, while still doing his own thing, still desperately seeking the next disappointment. Banham never lost his enthusiasm for experiencing buildings, but by the end of his life had come to terms with an expanded field of architecture; that architectural history was ‘not just a “set of actual monuments”, as Williams notes, but also a “set of actual books” and “a set of actual historians”. Who knows what he would have made of the crises that face us today, but I like to think this self-suffering Banham would revisit his earlier high-modernist works, conclude that it was over as a movement, and cheer on the ideals proposed by those critics from the 1970 IDCA who advocated a different kind of architecture autre. »

Stephen Parnell is an architect and historian of post-war architecture.  

Expo ’67 and Paolo Soleri’s Arcosanti: self-contained, self-sufficient spaceships that could land on any planet and spawn a new colony powered by a techno-utopian belief in human ingenuity and charisma.

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The RIBA Journal August 2021

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Have you created an explosion of excitement as you set up in practice? Invented new systems to deal with long distance working? Had a chance to focus on excellent design and detailing? Dreamt up robust methods for remote site visits? Set up communications to keep in close contact with clients? Or skilfully managed a project during the most unexpected year?

The best early-career professionals have brought their teams the agile thinking and resilience needed to come through this big bang, and readied them to grasp new opportunities. Wherever your talents lie we want to hear from you.

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RIBAJ Rising Stars is produced in association with Origin Doors and Windows

Deadline 2pm, Monday 6 September

Winners will be profiled in the RIBA Journal and on ribaj.com, and invited to an exclusive Class of 2021 roundtable

RISING STARS 2021 ENTER NOW

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RISING STARS 2021 EVALUATION PANEL
Yasmin Al-Ani Spence, architect and director, Wilkinson Eyre, lead on Dyson Campus
Bushra Mohamed, RIBAJ Rising Star 2020 and architect at David Kohn Architects
Steve Webb, Welsh Yurts Engineer and author of series on hacks for embodied carbon structures
Eleanor Young, acting editor RIBA Journal (chair)

With a formidable judging line up of respected architects, artists and academics it was clear from the outset that the judging process was going to be a challenging one. The 303 initial entries had been whittled down to 54, and from these the winners were to be chosen – but with each judge fighting their specialist ground, this ninth year was, more than usual, dominated by horse trading.

‘In general, I prefer the entries that I know I would struggle to draw myself – not just the product of a good model or skillful rendering’ said Bartlett professor Laura Allen, but hers was one opinion among many. The academic Neil Shasore was driven more by the way the drawing manifested aspects of the written project narrative, while architects Ian Langlands and Nikki Bell, whose ‘art examines human relationships from the personal to the political by exploring the structures we inhabit’ were keen that it be the drawing itself that spoke rather than any accompanying text. Respected architect Eva Jiřičná, in a spirit of openness and optimism, merely sought architectural drawing skill, without agenda.

The only slam dunk this year would be our 2021 student winner; in every other case – including the practitioner winner, championed by an intransigent Langlands & Bell – rankings were only agreed after much heated debate and bartering of judges’ preferred entries. And this proved difficult because the general bar – especially in the student category – is now so high. At the end of the judging, Allen couldn’t help but observe ‘the schism between all the technologies students throw at their work’ and the generally reactionary drawing methods of practitioners, and wondered why that was. Shasore challenged her view, arguing that student work left architecture in an isolated position, divorced from reality. But JIŘÍNÁ’S pragmatism brought the whole discussion back down to earth: ‘Perhaps you just don’t have time to do such beautiful drawings in the office.’

The power of drawing

Eye Line entrants bared heart and soul in impassioned, thoughtful images

Eye Line 2021 JUDGES
Laura Allen Professor of architecture and augmented landscapes, Bartlett School UCL
Eva Jiřičná RA Architect, co-founder AI DESIGN
Benedict Langlands & Nikki Bell
Neal Shasore Head of school and CEO, London School of Architecture
Chair: Jan-Carlos Kucharek Acting deputy editor, The RIBA Journal

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The RIBAJ Journal August 2021

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The RIBAJ Journal August 2021
Rory Chisholm has a thing about courtyards, arguing that the typology has been developed for the last 10,000 years by a number of civilizations. Further back than that, in fact: ‘It’s easy to imagine that it comforted our ancestors to dwell in buildings that resembled a simple clearing in the woods,’ he tells us. But he continues, it also has a prescient role: ‘It lends itself to passive ventilation, to positive mental health, even to social distancing.’ Chisholm’s submission reminds us these concerns today, but they are fundamentally human necessities.

Chisholm’s pencil and ink rendering is a courtyard proposal for Manchester – a whole city centre quarter made up of small, medium and large scale courtyard houses, linked together by a community courtyard, and built on the site of one of the city’s great Victorian courtyard factories, what he terms an ‘interwoven micro to macro courtyard design.’

The jury enjoyed the cinematic scope of the rendering and Chisholm’s methodology of handling it. But it was Langlands & Bell who really championed it. Nikki Bell enjoyed its sense of the camera obscura: ‘You can look far, around and down – from the cityscape you can zoom into the detail. It has a strong narrative as a drawing.’ Benedict Langlands was taken by ‘the very imagination with a good sense of colour.’

He marvelled in this conclusion, adding: ‘It is so detailed and feeling but is actually quite free, even when constraining. The whole image appreciates its breadth and ambition as a drawing.

And, as with his interpretation of Denizen Worklife’s Temperate House at Kew, which earned him the category second prize in 2018, his facility with the pen and the ink that secured his first prize here. Water and ink express how the building feels to us, as perceived by the body, says Chisholm. ‘This design is based on the architecture of the primal, of the body; and so the ink shines brighter.’

Small, medium and large scale courtyard houses, an interwoven micro to macro courtyard design.
Culture
Eye Line drawing competition

Practitioner: 2nd Winner
Mel Galley
Independent artist and researcher

With her digital rendering ‘How Tall Do We Stand?’ our second-prize winner Mel Galley starts with a question: ‘If I were a landscape, what would it be?’. It is, she says, ‘a self portrait in the most abstracted sense; a rendered, surreal place constructed out of the elements of the landscape [that] I feel reflect my perception of self.’ The dunes we see may curiously reference the Cumbrian coastline of Galley’s past, but the house on stilts represents the fragility of the present and the precarious uncertainty of our futures set against the backdrop of an almost utopian landscape. Galley’s work proved a slow-burner in the practitioner category. While Laura Allen dismissed the work at first as ‘text-book examples of things that are hard to render; grass, fire and sand, probably all done in a game engine;’ over the judging morning, she would continue to return to it – and draw the other judges’ attention to it. Neal Shasore took convincing, but Arinjoy Sen began to appreciate ‘the plays on scale being what bring these images alive – it feels like a surreal expression.’ And it was this component and the skill of how they were rendered, rather than the red herring of a narrative, that ended up convincing the rest of the judges. ‘I like the ambiguity of the drawings’ construction and how it shifts how we might understand them,’ noted Allen. ‘I don’t mind that I don’t know what I’m looking at; it’s the fact they even draw you in to examine it.’

Above How tall do we stand?
Digital render, 400mm × 700mm.

A rendered, surreal place I feel reflects my perception of self

Practitioner: 3rd Winner
Dominic Murray-Vaughan
Feilden Fowles Architects

Dominic Murray-Vaughan’s vignettes of spatial encounters at the Spanish town of Lavacolla, a symbolic site on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage route, charmed skeptical judges with their inscrutability. This is a famed bathing site due to the convergence of three rivers, and so the image’s delicate watercolour qualities that first caught the eye of the judges – before they began to question what they were seeing. Murray-Vaughan introduces curious, box-like follies into the frame, set against the rolling, natural landscape beyond. But what of these ‘eerily empty’ images? ‘Perhaps, photograph here, and what has been drawn or painted?’ The very fact that the judges couldn’t actually tell, that the images almost defied interrogation, perhaps left them wondering about the nature of the intervention. Benedict Langlands felt them to be ‘minimalist, restrained and elegant, with a beautiful sky – painted or painted on a stone’. Laura Allen perceived them as ‘pretty magical, it might be an image drawn over a photograph but it’s actually off at its way. It’s very skillful.’ Arinjoy Sen considered the interventions ‘quite sublime’, and while Neal Shasore didn’t warm to them, he nonetheless thought the work had ‘intricate and sophisticated’. ‘So, flawed perhaps, but a captivating example of “paper” fallibility.’

Left Detail.
Below El Hórreo de agua.
Collage, 300mm × 400mm.
Culture
Eye Line drawing competition

Left Utopia No. 23. Pencil on paper. 385mm x 200mm.

Practitioner: Commended
Hamid Zeayaian
Architect

Zeayaian’s detailed pencil studies, despite being imaginary buildings, have a Calvino-like sense of measured dreaminess – as if they live in some alternative reality running parallel to our own. The artist is as evocative in his words: ‘Sometimes the architecture originates from form and concludes in form; sometimes, the inception of the architecture is in the mind and grows into the form. Occasionally, the architecture starts from the heart, travels through the mind and emerges in the form.’

Eva Jiřičná was impressed by them as a set, feeling there was ‘real skill at work here – the windows and the trees are beautifully rendered,’ and both Benedict Langlands and Nikki Bell loved the section through a vaulted undercroft. Arinjoy Sen felt it to be ‘highly controlled work; the quality of reflection on the water is wonderful.’ Ultimately, it was that ‘one degree of separation’ quality that drew the judges to the work and held them there, in what Langlands called ‘its serene calmness.’

Practitioner: Commended
Jolene Liam
Studio Egret West

Liam received a commendation in the 2018 Eye Line for her obsessively observed ‘exercises in banality’, a modern-day visual allusion to Xavier de Maistre’s ‘A Journey Around My Room’. This caught the imagination of the judges long before pandemic lockdown gave the work a devastating currency, so it is good to see her acknowledged in this year’s cohort. Here, it is a return to Singapore to isolate, and the two-week quarantine it necessitated, that proved to be a rich territory for Liam’s graphic musings. And it is both the room in which she quarantined and her grandmother’s city council-built home, with its notional corridor garden, that feeds her imagination.

It was Neal Shasore who argued most strongly for her inclusion on the winners’ list, seeing it very much as ‘a meditation on the spaces around us and how they define our identity – and feeling very true to the moment’. And Arinjoy Sen loved the images, agreeing that they gave ‘a sense of enclosure and a focus on spaces in between’.

Below Shared Garden. Ink drawing, 240mm × 240mm.

A journey to a peaceful mind
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Culture
Eye Line drawing competition

Our Eye Line 2021 student winner’s reputation precedes her. Annabelle Tan was winner of the RIBA Bronze Medal in 2019; and as she enters her fifth year at the Bartlett, judging by what she presented to us, her output is going from strength to strength. Tan’s investigation of Norfolk riverscapes leads to a speculation that seeks to empower and employ local communities along its banks through the recreation of folklore as well as the generation of new rituals in a way that is both holistic and sustainable. Her proposal is not a single building but a paraphernalia of structures, objects and materials that revolve around the ecosystem of the River Wensum.

The aim is to create healing craft industries that contribute to the existing culture while cleansing the landscape and regenerating local communities. ‘River Rover’ moves downstream, settling, assembling and disassembling when ‘restoration’ has been completed and the landscape augmented: its arrival and departure marked by ceremonies. All the judges — the Bartlett’s Laura Allen and Arinjoy Sen — sat out due to conflict of interest — were nonetheless unanimous that Tan’s proposal should clinch first prize, staggered by the depth and rigour of her approach. Eva Jiřičná was deeply struck ‘by the visual power of her constructed narrative’. Nikki Bell, despite reservations over the “rose-tinted concept”, agreed they were ‘beautifully made images; well-observed, consistent and extremely skilled’. Neal Shasore meanwhile, praised Tan’s work as ‘one of the few entrants aspiring to the clear sense of spatial narrative that most others fail to reach’.

Adding to the fascinating mix was Tan’s own Singaporean roots, layering traditional forms of Asian drawn representation onto the Romantic English landscape, resulting in a compelling mash-up of Song dynasty landscape traditions with Gainsborough and Sydney Lee, a multivalent complexity that made it this year’s stand-out winner.

One of the few entrants aspiring to the clear sense of spatial narrative that most others fail to reach.
The paintings are romantic and nostalgic at the same time – almost Hopper-esque.

Pu Zhang
Glasgow School of Art

In an interesting parallel with the thinking of our winner, Pu Zhang’s work makes great currency of traditional Chinese representation in his fictional studies of the existing domestic typology of Chinese cities. Zhang’s three oil paintings depict the sentiment and perception of the atmosphere of the type, compositions brought forth from the memory, long after the hu-tong buildings of his imagined cities were replaced by modern constructions. But see how the colours, light, tone and texture evoke those memories, the paintings rendered almost in a gaussian blur, as if painted on blotting paper and on the edge of dissolution. Eva Jiřičná, who has walked through these disappearing urban communities, felt the work was ‘amazingly impressive in conveying a sense of place – something that’s incredibly hard to do’; while Arinjoy Sen saw it as ‘rooted in a very cultural medium of painting’. Neal Shasore, at first circumspect about the work’s lack of a propositional quality, was won around by Langlands and Bell. ‘The compositions seem to lead you into the images’, they claimed. ‘They are romantic and nostalgic at the same time – almost Hopper-esque,’ added Bell. Laura Allen picked up on the pervading sense of loss and melancholy, calling it ‘essentially good boundaries with from the past and environment’. And that sense of things slightly lost in the shadows, a proposition perhaps in yet fewer, was what won over the jury in the end, conceding that they were ‘charged with a sense of the uncanny’.

Left The Courtyard.
Oil on canvas,
500mm × 600mm.

Above The Corner.
Oil on Canvas,
800mm × 1000mm.
As a gay man studying ‘queerspace’, challenging the territory of the home as the site ‘where heteronormativity is most firmly rooted’ goes to the core of Andrew Riddell’s submission. In creating spaces for three specific queer characters, Riddell hopes to create his own ‘bespoke queer domestic’, employing visuals within his propositions ‘linked to the notion that drag is the strongest visual act of queering the body.’

Shasore was sold on the texture of Riddell’s statement supporting his work, calling his ‘aesthetic challenging of norms conceptually strong and sophisticated.’ Nikki Bell initially found the sheer outrageousness of the images ‘over the top and clichéd’ but, as she studied them more deeply, found herself drawn to his columns with a base of chrome platform heels and the technical skill of his kitchen roof’s ‘shimmering translucency.’

There is no escaping the explosion of queerness that emanates from Riddell’s ‘Elevation’ and ‘Queenie’s Room’, but it was ‘The Kitchen’ that ultimately engrossed the judges, whose detail could be rewardingly zoomed into. With two main premiated winners coming from the Bartlett School, Shasore’s remark that there will be eyerolls was countered by Jiřičná. Like Riddell’s work, ‘it’s a provocation – architectural discourse should be about raising people’s blood pressure now and again.’

Architectural discourse should be about raising people’s blood pressure now and again.

Above The Kitchen. Digital drawing, 750mm × 1000mm.
Left Elevation. Digital drawing, 500mm × 1170mm.
The RIBA Journal August 2021

Culture

Eye Line drawing competition

Nicole Ng
Architectural Association

Nicole Ng’s abstraction of the Scottish landscape caught the judges’ imagination with its stylistic rigour. It ‘proposes an act of terraformation for an evenly distributed resource and settlement pattern for the Scottish coast’ – a benign statement that belies the geological consequences of such an approach. And her drawn language evinces that one degree of separation from reality – mostly the result of multiple photocopies, digitally collaged. ‘Coast’ evokes a world modified by winds, tide and human action, ‘Quarry’ employs scalelessness to inform her proposition for housing, and ‘Field’ a photocopy bitmap, modern-day ‘enclosure act’ landscape, for zero-hour contract workers. Not all bought into Ng’s Cartesian world of representation, but Benedict Langlands & Nikki Bell thought the work a worthy commendation. Shasore won over the initial naysayers, convinced that in its image-making and narrative skill, ‘it’s refreshing and joyous’.

Three Conditions on the coast of Scotland:

Coast (above), Field (left).

Photocopy manipulated hand drawn textures with digital collage, 305mm × 200mm.

A well-rendered sense of fun... that exhibits an ‘almost child-like understanding of memory’

Immigrating to the UK as a young girl, the nostalgia associated with Areesha Khalid’s childhood home is channelled here through a fictional magazine cover, ‘Diaspora Digest’ that dreamily re-presents past recollections. Both Arinjoy Sen and Jiřičná were impressed closely to its cultural candour while contentiously adopting an almost Herge-like language. Sen agreed with Shasore’s view of this image as ‘more experimental, contrasting blackboard and atmosphere’, while Jiřičná enjoyed its well-rendered sense of fun, saying it exhibited an ‘almost child-like understanding of memory’.

That sense of naïve exposition was carried through Khalid’s supplementary Lloyd’s of London image, making overt theatre of the organisation’s hidden narratives and agendas, her intervention allowing for its virtual reality trading performance. But it was Khalid’s ‘hold the front page’ past reflections, shown here, that earned her the commendation.

Areesha Khalid
University of Westminster

Student: Commended

Diaspora Digest

Digital drawing, 1150mm × 920mm.

Student: Commended

Nicole Ng
Architectural Association

Areesha Khalid
University of Westminster

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Nicole Ng
Architectural Association

Nicole Ng’s abstraction of the Scottish landscape caught the judges’ imagination with its stylistic rigour. It ‘proposes an act of terraformation for an evenly distributed resource and settlement pattern for the Scottish coast’ – a benign statement that belies the geological consequences of such an approach. And her drawn language evinces that one degree of separation from reality – mostly the result of multiple photocopies, digitally collaged. ‘Coast’ evokes a world modified by winds, tide and human action, ‘Quarry’ employs scalelessness to inform her proposition for housing, and ‘Field’ a photocopy bitmap, modern-day ‘enclosure act’ landscape, for zero-hour contract workers. Not all bought into Ng’s Cartesian world of representation, but Benedict Langlands & Nikki Bell thought the work a worthy commendation. Shasore won over the initial naysayers, convinced that in its image-making and narrative skill, ‘it’s refreshing and joyous’.

Three Conditions on the coast of Scotland:

Coast (above), Field (left).

Photocopy manipulated hand drawn textures with digital collage, 305mm × 200mm.
We are witnessing an accelerating shift in emphasis from what architecture is to what architecture does. Society and government are realizing that it is about not just appearance, but a manifestation of balancing large-scale issues with fine detail delivery. This is changing how architecture is created, what it allows to happen, its impact and how it performs. Architecture and what architects achieve through how they work with others is being recognized as integral to the success and wellbeing of society.

With the optimum, most valuable intervention and solution not necessarily being a building, the RIBA is championing architects and the value that they create.

Our value starts with seven years of education and professional experience to registration. Our ongoing professional development, mandatory competencies, practice and being the subject of a government regulator (in the UK) give architects a strategic, theoretical, ethical, technical, and professional overview. That is why it takes so much to become and be an architect, and why we need to realise our value to society and for ourselves.

The deep generalist education of architects makes them a natural fit to be the ‘guardians of the built environment’. Many collaborators and professionals involved within the built environment have specialist blocks of focused knowledge and associated expertise, and others have generalist knowledge. Architects connect multiple fields of knowledge and cross-disciplinary thinking; they are the modern-day polymaths of the built environment, whose knowledge is deeper than that of generalists and broader than that of specialists.

Instead of continuing to encourage greater levels of specialism, the government, society, academia and the industry must realize why they also need deep generalists who draw on a complex body of knowledge to help solve problems, balancing risk, opportunity and interdependency across a substantial number of issues. Without the deep generalist, from start to finish, solutions cannot be truly and effectively identified and developed, with gaps in the consideration of risk, opportunity and interdependency occurring, manifesting in the result, as anything from a sub-optimal solution to a Piper Alpha or Grenfell Tower type disaster.

This is more than a golden thread of responsibility or a simple ability to hold to account. Government must understand that a fractured and lazy ‘single point of contact is easiest for us’ procurement process, with your best team members on the bench, needs to stop. A more integrated process, with deep generalists from start to finish, is needed to realize the optimum, most valuable, safe, uplifting outcome for everyone.

Government needs to lead, accepting that shoestring fees, unreasonable time schedules and low budgets keep the industry in perpetual decline.

We have started and more is to be done. As I handover the presidential baton to Simon Allford, the RIBA must put out our best team as we aim to realise greater funding of the education of future architects, show why the right person must be in each function of the design and realisation process, respond to new legislation, and address procurement. We must take these opportunities. I will not wish us luck, as preparation, research and advocacy will prevail. 

president@riba.org @AlanJonesPRIBA
IN MEMORIAM
Keith Louis Hilton
ELECTED 1967, YORK
Neville William Gordon Wilson
ELECTED 1972, NORTHWICH
Alan Dean Ward
ELECTED 1978, TWICKENHAM
Paul William Roberts
ELECTED 2002, LONDON

To inform the RIBA of the death of a member, please email membership.services@riba.org with details of next of kin.

Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral. Tarn worked with the Art and Architecture Department of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese.

PHOTO CREDIT

John Meagher, who has died aged 73, was a founding partner of de Blacam and Meagher Architects, a practice pre-eminent in bringing Irish architecture to international attention in recent decades.

The son of a top civil servant, John graduated from the Dublin Institute of Technology before winning a scholarship to study in Helsinki, where he came under the long-term influence of the great Nordic architects of the 20th century – Aalto, Lewerentz, and Asplund. He then travelled to Philadelphia where he worked at Venturi Scott Brown, remarkably unaware that his future partner, Shane de Blacam, was a few blocks away in the office of Louis Kahn.

Following the 1976 opening of their Dawson Street office, John and Shane combined practice and teaching, and were inspirational tutors at University College Dublin to a generation that includes some of Ireland’s leading architects. Their first commissions were mostly domestic; three announced de Blacam & Meagher as a force to be reckoned with – John’s terrace of six Ballsbridge mews houses, his double win in the Dublin diocese’s competition for new churches in the city’s expanding suburbs, and the firm’s second-placed entry to the 1979 competition for a Taoiseach’s residence in Phoenix Park. De Blacam and Meagher’s prolific output over 45 years encompassed education, conservation, commercial, and cultural architecture, but I believe John’s particular contribution to the practice’s residential and church architecture is what he would most wish to be his legacy. At his funeral, Shane’s eulogy referred to John’s ‘special genius in the design of houses’, and it is evident in everything from his first mews houses to the more recent Ibiza villas. He had a reputation as the ‘go-to’ architect of high-end houses for the rich and famous, but his mastery of residential form and space could equally be applied to more modest commissions. The Herbert Lane and Harold’s Cross terraces are classic exemplars of the low-rise, high-density genre that Ireland needs so much in today’s housing crisis.

He also had a thorough understanding of the fundamentals of ecclesiastical architecture. A treasured memory of visits to John’s second home on Ibiza was being taken to inspect his favourites among the island’s whitewashed churches, bell-towers and porticos. There wasn’t one he did not know, or a plan he couldn’t draw from memory. This is not surprising; his 1977 Firhouse church continues to be the subject of architecture school dissertations, and his 1989 Knock chapel of reconciliation is one of the iconic buildings of late-20th-century Ireland.

Arguably the most talented among the many illustrious architects that it has been my good fortune to work with, John had a brilliant ability to understand immediately what was at issue in trying to sort an idea or a plan. An exceptionally gifted draftsman, he could start an A1 drawing at the top left-hand corner and work his way across the page to the bottom right-hand corner, at which point a fully-realised design would emerge, from anything from a construction detail to the plan of an entire project.

John was hugely public-spirited and made numerous pro bono contributions to architectural causes. He was also the most sociable and convivial of persons, and a generous and entertaining host. To quote from Seamus Heaney’s tribute to their mutual friend Robin Walker, John was ‘no slouch… whether to lash into it, or just to lash it out’.

Survived by his mother, Theresa, and his sister Anne, John was predeceased by his father Gerry and his brother Barry.

Paul Keogh is founding director of Paul Keogh Architects.
Robust case for brick

‘Climate action: We can put a block on brick’ (RIBAJ July p59) highlights the ongoing problem of considering sustainability in isolation.

In the context of housebuilding, few materials are as well suited as masonry to meeting the UK’s new homes target as quickly or with the same, long, term suitability. How better to provide quality homes for future generations than with building products possessing a minimum design life of 150 years?

As for sustainability, the masonry sector is in a race to becoming carbon negative by 2050. In part, this is being achieved through a small, local supply chain and the block’s ability to reabsorb atmosphere’s CO2.

It’s also climate change adaptable, reducing the risk of overheating and protecting against flood and storm damage. That’s even before touching on a block’s high thermal performance and energy efficiency.

While other materials may appear more eco-friendly, a carbon footprint must consider all aspects of the life cycle. For example, a comprehensive NHBC study of structural materials, cradle to gate, concluded a timber frame house has only 3% lower embodied carbon than a masonry-built house.

Material sustainability is not always immediately obvious. Let’s not mistake traditional for outdated. Masonry is here to stay, quite literally.

Chris Stanley, housing manager, Modern Masonry

Broadgate’s partial green calculations

Surely something is missing from the embodied carbon (and eco-calculations) for the Rebuilding of Broadgate (RIBAJ June p52)? What of the embodied energy contained in the parts demolished? And then there’s the energy needed for demolition, for recycling and for disposal.

Through the expenditure of energy most of the steel frame was no doubt recycled, but the tons of indestructible granite presumably went to landfill.

Can replacing much of a massive building not yet 40 years old really be applauded as exemplary green practice?

Russell Taylor, Russell Taylor Architects, London/Cornwall

Clarity calls for clear plans ...

The RIBAJ Journal is much improved and now, I think, one of the better architectural magazines. The choice of buildings reviewed is excellent but I still have problems with being able to understand some of the plans that have been included. The July issue (p68) has a crematorium at Guildford which needs careful study to understand the circulation necessary for the different groups of mourners. The site plan and layout plan were far too small (I had to use a magnifying glass) and not orientated the same way which made appreciation of the building very difficult.

The Journal must not just be another magazine with nice photos to look at.

Martin Hewitt

... but we need sections too

Am I alone in wondering why architecture journals, including RIBAJ, present buildings in photographs and plans. Sections are rarely used. To fully understand the design of a building we need cross sections. After all, to paraphrase Alberti, order is found in the plan but beauty lies in the section. And in terms of today’s agenda, sustainability cannot be understood without a good cross section.

Brian Edwards, professor emeritus of architecture, ECA, Edinburgh University

Seeding your thoughts:

Write to: letters.ribaj@riba.org

RIBAJ, RIBA Publishing,
66 Portland Place, London W1B 1AD

We welcome letters but retain the right to edit them.
Scottish Widows Fund and Life Assurance Society
Edinburgh, 1976

This headquarters for the Scottish Widows Fund and Life Assurance Society in Edinburgh was the second to be designed for the company by Sir Basil Spence, Glover & Ferguson in 15 years. The first, in 1962, was a simple block with a grid-like facade of windows and marble slabs built on a square plan.

This newer building was completed in 1976 and was a more complex design consisting of 12 interlocking hexagonal blocks of varying heights which recall the local geological structures of basalt rock. Clad in a continuous curtain wall of brown solar glass with York stone boundary walls, its design emphasized harmony and scale with its site; special consideration was given to its aerial view as it could be viewed from the nearby Arthur’s Seat and Salisbury Crags. The relationship with the exterior continued inside the offices, with planting echoing the gardens designed by landscape architect Sylvia Crowe.

The building is captured here by Henk Snoek who exploits the reflective qualities of the glass walls and the contrasting texture of the stone wall.

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