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Commissions don’t come much grander than the colonnaded buildings lining Venice’s Piazza San Marco. The square’s three sides, addressing and framing the Basilica and Campanile, form one of the most celebrated urban set pieces in history, the backdrop to Venice’s history of politics, power, trade and tourism. Though the buildings read as a continuous architecture, they were built as separate components at different periods. The oldest, to the north, is a base for public prosecutors, the Procuratie Vecchie, begun in 1517 by Bartolomeo Bon, and completed by Jacopo Sansovino in 1538.

Now, with a delicate confidence, David Chipperfield Architects has added to its story, incorporating a series of interventions throughout the building. They include a sequence of new arches running through the third floor to transform small, enclosed rooms into a long enfilade offering Piazza views through oculus windows. Such interventions have a subtly recessive quality, allowing historic fabric and spatial qualities to be read with clarity, the most overt new ‘statement moment’ being the new Central Stair, folding up from second to fourth floor, opening onto a small roof terrace.

The vast project covers not only two floors of refurbished offices for the client, insurance firm Generali, but also new public spaces for its charitable arm, The Human Safety Net. During Venice Art Biennale’s opening week, the new Procuratie Vecchie auditorium hosted Antony Gormley discussing his exhibition in Carlo Scarpa’s Olivetti Showroom at ground level, while Louise Nevelson’s wooden sculptures filled new exhibition galleries, resonantly presented against Chipperfield’s chalky white aesthetic. •

Will Jennings
From barn to rural mews

Peak Architects’ scheme in rural Yorkshire complies with stringent Class Q rules to create five new homes within the envelope of a former livestock barn

Words: Isabelle Priest  Photographs: Dug Wilders

Converting an agricultural building to housing under Class Q comes with many criteria. The building itself must be capable of conversion without being demolished. You can create up to three larger dwellings as long as the total area converted does not exceed 465m² or up to five smaller homes of up to 100m² each.

These kinds of calculations had not initially been required at this project, Hill View Farm by Sheffield-based Peak Architects in Tickhill, a Yorkshire village 13km south of Doncaster. The client, a commercial and industrial property developer, had bought a 4.2ha grassy plot with an existing bungalow/former farmhouse, a scattering of outbuildings and a 929m² agricultural unit.

The idea was that the client would demolish the existing agricultural building abutting the small country road, and build a large family house behind it further up the plot. At the same time they would convert the farmhouse at the far eastern side of the site into a separate annexe for a relative.

The setting is on the edge of the village in open countryside, classified as green belt. It is gently sloping with pleasant long views, albeit the peace interrupted somewhat by the reasonable roar from the A1(M) just over a kilometre away.

When it became apparent that planning guidance wouldn’t permit such a scheme, the client and architect changed tack and instead developed a proposal to retain the agricultural unit by converting it into a series of five speculative small homes.

Further rules under Class Q stipulate that the entire dwelling must be contained within the envelope of the existing building. In this case, Doncaster’s local authority specified that this included the private gardens. Proposals also had to show explicitly that the existing structure was sufficient for conversion. Peak Architects’ response to these strictures has been rather ingenious.

The agricultural unit had long been disused and fallen into disrepair. It had previously been used to house cattle and poultry and comprised eight clear span precast concrete portal frames
supporting a corrugated roof with single-skin concrete blockwork and vertical timber infill walls. Along the front elevation, a series of pitched steel roof beams supported on external steel columns formed an additional lean-to.

Although the project has not been realised exactly to the architect’s plans (Peak Architects was only involved to RIBA stage 4), the practice’s concept was to retain all the existing structure and to reveal and enclose it in accordance with meeting the square meterage permissible under Class Q rules. In the rear section, for example, the plan was to remove the existing cladding and roof, leaving the structure exposed with the gardens in between. The houses, meanwhile, would be positioned within the tallest main section of the former barn, to accommodate two levels.

There were two key moves that have elevated this from a simple squeezing of houses into the envelope of a barn. Rather than demolish the additional lean-to at the front of the site, Peak Architects opted to retain it, recladding and enclosing it more simply as covered parking for 10 cars – two per house – including electric charging points. This maintains the building’s overall original volume as well as its large sliding doors for access, and means it still reads in the landscape and from the road entrance very much as a barn. Only snippet views through the large openings allow views of the new houses within.

The second crucial move takes place between this volume and the houses. The rear of the garage is open, leading on to a lateral courtyard that runs directly in front of all the houses. The roof and wall cladding have been removed, and the open-air space that is left has been paved with dynamically laid zigzagging paths to the front doors and luscious planting. The addition of louvres between the concrete structure above offers some sun protection. This design decision transforms the whole composition of the development into a kind of rural mews, set within an enclosing barn in the middle of fields. It is unusual and unexpected but the most interesting and successful aspect of the scheme.

Externally, materials were selected to reference the original barn. To the lower half of the external blockwork walls is a grey render with horizontal detailing; the upper half is clad in staggered vertical timber with feature fins and projecting window surrounds. The roof is aluminium standing seam. The rear is a different affair completely, the client opted to remove the existing structures within the gardens, which has had the effect of making it much more domestic in nature and rather urban with its concrete effect render and grey uPVC windows. The interiors likewise were completed by the client and are standard developer style with glossy kitchen units, carpets and grey bathrooms.
Indeed, there are other moderations that were made during construction that slightly compromise the quality of the exterior, including the sliding barn doors, which are not real, just made for effect. Likewise those on the side elevation windows, as well as plastic drainpipes rather than galvanised steel. These replacement details are a shame perhaps but do not detract from a cleverly conceived and executed scheme that contains many ideas worth repeating for Class Q conversions.
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UCH digs deep for cancer centre

University College Hospital’s Grafton Way Building is twice what it seems, with a proton beam cancer therapy unit tucked securely into a 29m-deep basement

Words: Chris Foges  Photographs: Paul Raftery
There is so much more to the Grafton Way Building than meets the eye. That’s a simple statement of fact – a large chunk of this extraordinary cancer and surgical centre at London’s University College Hospital is out of sight, in a basement as big as the Albert Hall – and also true in a more general sense. Its refined appearance and serene interiors give little hint of the challenges overcome in what contractor Bouygues says is one of the most complex public buildings ever undertaken.

Alongside operating theatres, a critical care unit, imaging suites and haematology wards – each with its own support services, plant and access requirements – the 37,000m² building on the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Grafton Way contains the UK’s second centre for proton beam therapy (PBT), an advanced form of radiotherapy.

These disparate facilities have been organised with great sensitivity on a constrained site by Scott Tallon Walker Architects and Edward Williams Architects. The firms were paired by the NHS client in a shrewd bit of matchmaking; Sheila Carney, lead director of STWA’s London office, has experience in both healthcare and nuclear shielding; Edward Williams’ practice was brand new when appointed in 2011, but as a partner at Hopkins he had designed the adjacent MacMillan Cancer Centre and a masterplan for the hospital, so knew the quirks of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.

With a height restriction imposed by protected views, creating the requisite space meant digging down 29m. Much of the basement is occupied by the PBT centre – a triple-height bunker with concrete walls up to 5m thick which would, in any case, have been too heavy to put up high and too obstructive to locate at ground level. It sits below two storeys of plant and a surgical floor, linked to tunnels though which patients are ferried from around the campus. ‘It is a fantastic fruit salad’, says Williams, ‘but there’s a strong logic to where things are’.

Above ground, a six-storey L-shaped wing marries up with a neighbouring 1930s apartment building to restore a perimeter block. More space is provided in a smaller building set in the central courtyard, distinguished by an exposed steel frame. The space between is enclosed to form a lofty atrium.

Glazed facades to surrounding streets are screened by a delicate aluminium brises-soleil, broken up into bays that loosely recall nearby Victorian mansion blocks. The ground floor is

### Opposite
North west corner of the Grafton Way Building, adjoining Paramount Court on Tottenham Court Road. Total capital cost was £380 million.

### Below
North-south perspective section. PBT treatment rooms, or gantries, project into a triple-height hall within the 29m-deep basement.
Above An exposed steel frame distinguishes the courtyard building from the larger concrete-framed wing across the atrium. Rooflights with mirrored reveals and a shaded high-level curtain wall illuminate the space.

Right The building provides 167 beds, including 43 for a private healthcare provider on the upper floors of the L-shaped wing.

The brief was that it shouldn’t feel like a typical NHS hospital. There’s no Virgin-Mary-blue lino
weightier, framed by chunky columns and a tapering slab of precast concrete, but remarkably open. From a deeply recessed ambulance bay on Grafton Way one can see into the heart of the building.

Subtle contextual relationships are also developed in the plan. My tour with the architects began at the main entrance on the chamfered north-east corner, which faces the heart of the hospital campus. It sets up a diagonal route through a timber-lined foyer to the atrium that picks up on the angles of the 1906 Cruciform Building opposite. More importantly it is direct and intuitive, removing stress from patient journeys.

The atrium is an awesome space, with ribbon-like staircases descending from high-level bridges between the buildings and light pouring in from all sides, but calmed by STWA’s interior design. Artworks line the walls and soft colours evoke gardens and the sky. ‘The brief was that it shouldn’t feel like a typical NHS hospital’, says Carney. ‘There’s no Virgin-Mary-blue lino flooring’.

We head up to the wards, where high-ceilinged rooms are double-loaded on wide corridors. A few face the atrium but most look out to the streets. Here the rationale for the facade design is obvious, as glass walls make the most of daylight and views – hugely valuable to immuno-compromised patients who spend months in isolation. ‘There’s a big drive in hospital design towards patient wellbeing but it’s not just a “nice-to-have”,’ says Carney. ‘There’s lots of evidence for the medical benefits’.

Patient-controlled blinds are integrated into triple-glazed units to avoid harbouring germs, and can be repaired from gangways outside so sterile conditions are not compromised. Such details are representative of an anticipatory intelligence at work through the whole building, with innumerable problems resolved by design in a coherent, understated way.

From the wards we cross a bridge to a sheltered rooftop garden above the courtyard block, where patients are recuperating among planters filled with medicinal herbs and shrubs. Giant air
ducts are neatly gathered in steel frames at both ends, but exposed and celebrated with a Pompidou-esque pop of colour. ‘Hospitals are technical buildings, so we don’t apologise if that’s occasionally on display’, says Williams. ‘The question is how to make it delightful’.

Down in the subterranean PBT centre, where clever lighting and natural materials create a relaxed atmosphere in waiting areas, the only evidence of the technology at work are beds in each of four treatment bays that resemble the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. These intimate little rooms set within a dense maze of concrete are known as ‘gantries’, because giant cranes, out of sight but occupying whole floors above and below, rotate magnets that direct the flow of protons from a on-site particle accelerator.

There is something particularly powerful about the idea of so much stuff – space, structure, money, know-how – brought into conjunction to focus invisible beams so precisely on a human body, but I found every part of the Grafton Way Building surprisingly moving. The skill and compassion that have shaped it will make a real difference to people at the worst time in their lives.

Left
A rooftop garden on the courtyard block features healing and medicinal plants.

Below left
A Macmillan Cancer Support Living Room within the proton beam therapy centre provides space for patients to relax.

Bottom
Proton beam therapy table and manufacturer-supplied enclosure.

Credits
Client University College London NHS Foundation Trust
Architects Scott Tallon Walker Architects in association with Edward Williams Architects
Lead designer and interior designer Scott Tallon Walker Architects
Main contractor Bouygues UK
Client’s project manager Aecom
Structural, civil and geotechnical consultant Campbell Reith
M&E consultant WSP
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Since Covid-19 aborted a couple of overseas trips, my partner and I have made it our mission to cycle around the coast of the UK. In the summer of 2020, we cycled the south coast from Ramsgate to St Ives, cruising across the top of the Isle of Wight. Since then, we have been filling in the gaps at weekends, sections at a time. Our most recent ride started in Spalding and finished in Lowestoft via north Norfolk and Great Yarmouth. While there is a long way to the finish, it has given me a kind of 'state of the coast' overview of its joys and challenges. I’ve seen how some areas are awash with excess cash flooding into new-build architect-designed homes, restaurants, shops and pristine beaches, while the next town along might be struggling to let empty retail units. A couple of hours’ cycle further, another coastal town might have entrenched generational deprivation; the cost-of-living crisis tearing through, with its consequences on health and life chances.

Existing architecture tells the story of how fortunes can change up and down rapidly or over centuries – Roman and early medieval Rochester, late Middle Ages and early modern Kings Lynn, Georgian Wisbech, Victorian Scarborough, contemporary Sandbanks. It’s a luxurious position to take from the saddle of my bike, but one seemingly simple observation about Britain’s coast is there is so much of it – more than anyone knows what to do with – and you can witness Britain’s fundamentally laissez-faire economics along it perhaps more profoundly than on any other journey across the UK.

That’s why what is happening in Folkestone, and by comparison the nearby resorts of Hastings and Margate, is of such importance. Located on the southern edge of the North Downs, Folkestone is a rather grand Victorian and Edwardian seaside resort, which also had successful harbours and shipping trade. But the decline of these industries and the loss of its ferry to Boulogne in 2000 – prompted by the opening of the Eurotunnel – presented the town with economic difficulties.

Now boarding at Folkestone

Hollaway Studio’s multi-storey skating facility is the latest element in a mission to revive what had been a declining coastal town

Words: Isabelle Priest Photographs: Hufton + Crow

Left The F51 is the world’s first purpose-built multi-storey skatepark. Each floor cantilevers over the one below, the curving form reducing the building’s perceived scale as one never sees the whole thing.

Right The Modern Bowl on the concrete first floor, the shapes of which appear to hang mid-air, punctuating the curtain walling and ceiling of the reception floor.

IN NUMBERS

£17m
Construction cost
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Gross internal area
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Climbing wall
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As Guy Hollaway of Hollaway Studio explained at the press event for F51, his practice’s new multistorey indoor skate, climbing and boxing facility up from the main harbour on the escarpment in the town centre, Folkestone has some of the most deprived wards in Kent and in the years around the millennium it developed a tougher reputation. Hollaway grew up in Kent and says the mindset was ‘how to get out’.

These days many of Kent’s coastal towns are undergoing a renaissance as they are gentrified by both insiders and outsiders. Whitstable is another example. Money is flowing in, some council-led, some governmental; as are people, some from London as well as those priced out of neighbouring areas such as Brighton. Though of course, this can cause tensions with the communities that already live there.

Much of these revivals may have taken place anyway, but at least some is down to the trickle-down arising from key interventionist approaches like Chipperfield’s Turner Contemporary in Margate and HAT Projects’ Hastings Contemporary. Catch yourself on a slow train from Ramsgate to London and it will take you 2.5 hours, but domestic High Speed 1 services, running since 2009, have halved this.

At Folkestone, the local council has a programme of redevelopment, including a Place Plan drawn up by We Made That with Fletcher Priest Architects one of the consultants, and it purchased the vacant Debenhams store for £2 million in 2020 to relaunch as a mixed-use building including co-working spaces. But what is different about Folkestone is that its regeneration is also, unusually, being substantially pioneered and financed by the charitable trust of a private benefactor, Roger de Haan, the former director of Saga group, which was founded by his father and based in the town.

‘When he left Saga,’ explains Hollaway, ‘Roger decided his new project would be Folkestone. He has invested more than £100 million into it. His vision is to create Folkestone as a great place to live, work and play.’

Folkestone’s regeneration is being substantially pioneered and financed by a private benefactor.
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He has done this through a series of projects, which include a secondary academy school designed by Foster + Partners and the Quarterhouse theatre by Alison Brooks Architects, and by developing a creative quarter around the old cobbled high street, building up a portfolio of buildings to lease out (each marked out by brightly coloured paint) with the Folkestone Triennial arts festival acting as a periodic focus.

F51 is one of these projects, and the fourth designed by Hollaway for de Haan. The others are a junior school, the harbourside Rocksalt restaurant and Three Hills Sports Park. Meanwhile, Acme’s 1,000-unit housing masterplan is being built on the seafront.

This investment has been carried out somewhat in hope, not knowing who, if anyone, would come. Folkestone’s regeneration may be less well-known than that at Margate and Hastings, yet it is also more advanced and cohesive with fewer gaps.

F51, on the site of a redundant bingo hall which ‘had no architectural value’, originated nine years ago as a proposal for a multistorey car park for the homes being built on the front. When Hollaway presented the first plans to de Haan, however, he asked him to relocate a skatepark from the beach to the roof. In the end the idea grew to take over the building altogether as an extreme sports venue that integrated a boxing club and created a climbing and bouldering centre, ditching the car park altogether.

Wrapped in 1,000 metal mesh cladding panels, with only a few spotted triangular slit windows and a half-glazed ground floor, F51 does still look a bit like a multistorey car park. Nevertheless, on three levels (not the roof), the building is the world’s first purpose-built multistorey skatepark – a coup to attract a wider audience in itself.

The building sits on a triangular plot surrounded by road junctions at an awkward spot in the town. The only external tasters for what it contains are the bulbous concrete shapes that burst through the underside of the ceiling and curtain wall at ground floor – you pass under a hanging bowl as you go through the entrance and a rolling rough finish topography unfurls above you in the reception and bar/café in contrast to the smooth polished floors. This suspended landscape is the visual expression of the ‘bowl’ floor skatepark above, the first of three levels each dedicated to

The only external tasters for what it contains are the bulbous concrete shapes that burst through...
mental boundaries within a safe space, away from screens’ and to make it as inclusive as possible. Membership for under 16s who attend any of the 42 partnered local schools is set at £1 per month. Otherwise, peak sessions for skating are £9 and £10 for climbing. It’s open until 10pm everyday except Sunday when it closes at 8pm.

Architecturally, the building adheres to an aesthetic of concrete, metal sheeting, black paint and orange painted exposed steelwork, of which there is a lot. Because of the cantilevering and weight of the concrete bowls, the concrete pillars are broad enough to ordinarily support a 33-storey building. The architectural emphasis is on the quality of the skating surfaces. These have been designed and made with Maverick Skateparks for the concrete floor and Cambian Engineering Solutions for the timber levels, using expert forming and moulding techniques and craftsmanship to make them suitable for Olympic training. Artworks by international and local artists, animate the occasional wall and open space.

Questions hang over the project, including the logic in creating such a supervised space for what is for many a countercultural activity. Then there is the environmental issue of making a multistorey building that proliferates steel and concrete – as well as the lack of windows that blinker the sense of being in the centre of the town.

Yet how one sees and surmises this project must be in the round. It is a £17 million gift to young people that says they have a place and a voice; that they are seen and included. It supports people being active, interested and participating, with a stated aim of ‘generational regeneration’. Folkestone is developing its own unique alternative identity to Margate and Hastings, seemingly more local, diverse and homespun. Does one wonder about the reliance of an individual on the regeneration of a single place? Possibly, but there’s a specific strategy here with ambition, listening and action taking place, one that all Britain’s coast could learn from – some urgently.

**Above** The 15m-tall climbing wall soars through three floors while a bouldering area is at the back.

**Below** The timber ‘flow’ level; the steel structure at the timber skate levels would allow the surfaces to be rebuilt to different configurations in future if change is required.

The project’s aim was to create a building that gives ‘young locals the opportunity to push both physical and different genres or abilities of skater, BMXer or other rider. The first floor has a 2.65m-deep ‘pool’, inspired by 1970s Californian backyard skating in drained swimming pools, as well as a ‘modern bowl’ more geared to those learning transition.

The second floor is ‘flow’ – 650m² of skateable timber surface with waterfalls, blends, humps, bumps, corner bowls, pillars and a quarter pipe and volcano. Meanwhile, on the top ‘street’ floor, also timber, you are more likely to find beginners and maybe scooters testing its stair sets, handrails, ledges, hips and banks. Surging through all levels at the rear is the 15m-tall top-lit climbing wall – the tallest in the South East – with 350m² of climbing surface as well as a 230m² of bouldering area at the ground level. The boxing gym and community studio are also on the ground floor.
The New Waverley development is part of a huge regeneration scheme in Edinburgh’s Old Town.

The £240m masterplan aims to provide additional links between the development quarter to Waverley train station and the historic Royal Mile, areas that experience high volumes of people during festival periods.

Allan Murray Architects have designed a pedestrian-friendly space, mixing public and residential areas with retailers, restaurants, hotels and leisure opportunities.

The regeneration seeks to make the area desirable for both long-term residence and short-term stay.

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Photography by Richard Fraser.
For better or worse
Some controversial decisions attended John McAslan and Partners’ renovation of Glasgow’s Burrell Collection. Do the improvements outweigh the perceived drawbacks?

Words: Kieran Gaffney

The Burrell Collection in Glasgow has reopened to the public following a five year renovation led by John McAslan and Partners. The building had been suffering from myriad issues that required attention, but the scheme has been called into question due to its reconfiguration, which threatened the fundamental qualities that made it one of the best modern buildings in Scotland.

An open RIBA competition was held in 1972 to design a new home for the art collection of wealthy shipping magnate Sir William Burrell and his wife Constance. Won by young Cambridge architects Barry Gasson, John Meunier and Brit Andresen, the new gallery would go on to house 9,000 objects considered by many to be the best private collection of its type in the world.

Glasgow loves its civic architecture and embraced The Burrell Collection with enthusiasm upon its opening in 1983. The new gallery eschewed fashion; critic Jonathan Glancey wrote at the time that it ‘will never be in or out of vogue – it is a silent, timeless, reticent servant’. It was an intelligent and sensitive piece of architecture that succeeded with a quiet authority: managing the experience of arrival through a sequence of spaces culminating in the seminal ‘walk in the woods’ gallery. Here the art objects were set on plinths against a glazed wall with the wooded northern edge of Pollok Park providing an ever-changing backdrop.

In 2013, immediately upon being eligible, the Burrell Collection was Category A-listed – the highest protection available. However, the space had fallen from the public consciousness and visitor numbers were down, to 150,000 per year from over a million in its prime.

The Burrell’s fabric faults were consistent with a building of its time; low levels of insulation; overheating from too much south facing glass; poor energy efficiency; and leaking flat roofs a particular problem with tarpaulins and buckets a regular sight. These faults affected the exhibitions too, with only a small collection on display due to the poor insulation.
conditions; and a lack of flexibility in the galleries’

environment meant the exhibition couldn’t change.

John McAslan and Partners was appointed

in 2016 to lead the ‘re-invention’ of the museum

as part of a five year, £68 million undertaking to

refurbish and improve the Burrell. It was also

controversially tasked with altering the circulation,

including the removal of two of the three original

rooms which were reproduced from Hutton Castle

at Burrell’s request, and creating a new entrance in

conflict with the architects’ original vision.

Along with consultants Arup and Atelier

Ten, the architect has achieved a significant

improvement of the building’s fabric: a

comprehensive programme of flat roof insulation

and waterproofing, M&E upgrades and new

glazing have resulted in a 50% reduction in heating

requirements and a BREEAM ‘excellent’ rating.

Modern standards have been met without resorting

to ugly parapet details and the original glazing bars

have been reused, maintaining the elegance of the

original.

The question is: would fixing the building’s

defaults in a faithful restoration – as Chipperfield has
done, for example, at Mies’ Neue Nationalgalerie

– have been enough? Not according to McAslan and

his client; they have made significant changes.

The first of these was to remove the original

poorly-used lecture space to make way for a new

central ‘hub’ with tiered step seating over three

floors. While the original theatre may not be

missed, this new gathering space seems to lack

function. Artificially lit and without addressing

the landscape this new area feels corporate, with

glass handrails and dark grey finishes, incongruous

against the original building’s restrained palette of

timber, concrete and red sandstone.

The most contentious move is the addition of a

new entrance in the south east internal corner of

the plan. Numerous commentators and the original

Above The top-lit covered courtyard, heading towards the galleries.

Opposite From above it is clear how the galleries to the north sit alongside the woodland edge.
The RIBA Journal June 2022

architect John Meunier objected to the disruption of the carefully thought out entrance sequence: from the historic archway embedded in the southern gable to the courtyard, galleries and woods beyond. This decision was a result of consultation which read that the original entrance was unwelcoming and unclear, a view many have disputed.

The actual experience is less fatalistic – the original entrance is still widely used (my straw poll found 60% of visitors using it) and this entry has been tidied up and decluttered with shop and main desk moved. Would this have been enough? The purpose of the second entrance is unclear, although it does help to connect the ground floor back out to the landscape and a new ‘piazza’. This is perhaps a bit urban in this parkland location and only time will tell how successful it is.

The ambition to improve the display of the collection is clear and well executed with a reported 35% more gallery space and much more of the exhibition now accessible. There are more light controlled galleries, which is welcome, and work undertaken by the experienced exhibition team on the frameless display cases has significantly improved the visual clarity of artefacts and the view through the gallery itself.

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The comparison made at The Burrell is that the building is like a musical score and adding in a few extra bars or cutting out the first movement is a form of cultural vandalism. But buildings need to be able to adapt as their requirements change and the people who use, pay for, and work in them change.

The worry is that the drive for visitor numbers will continue to conflict with the kind of quiet, subtle building that the Burrell is. While the remodelling lacks the nuance of the original, successes are found in the additional gallery spaces, better access to the collection and in the energy improvements. It is reassuring to see the aerial photographs with the new roof – a sea of 400 solar panels and the building still nestled among the trees.

The architecture of the Burrell is brilliant. It has proved robust and the elements that make it special remain: its relaxed welcomeness, the balance of inside and out, the sequencing of spaces, the carefully considered geometry of the ‘walk in the woods’ gallery. It is still one of the best galleries in the UK and much of its quality is a sensory experience that should be felt in person.

Kieran Gaffney is co-founder of Konishi Gaffney

£33m build cost
£63m project costs including all fit out / exhibition
13,253 area m²
14,600 GIFA cost per m²
NEC3 form of contract
27.7 kgCo₂/m² calculation
excellent BREEAM

Credits
Architect & landscape architect John McAslan + Partners
Structural engineer David Narro Associates
Environmental engineer / services / fire engineer / BREEAM Atelier Ten
Cost consultant Gardiner & Theobald
Project manager Gardiner & Theobald
Main contractor Kier
Planning consultant John McAslan + Partners
Acoustic consultant Sandy Brown Acoustics
Access consultant David Bonnett Associates
Exhibition designer Event Communication
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Suppliers
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Flat roof coverings Bauder
Insulation Rockwool
Glass Saint-Gobain
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Above Part of the original entry sequence, the historic archway is embedded in the southern gable to the courtyard with galleries and woods beyond.
Right Woodland-facing galleries.
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Níall McLaughlin Architects worked closely with Magdalene College to design a fittingly intimate and restrained new library inspired by the solitary reader

Words: Jan-Carlos Kucharek Photographs: Nick Kane
In an inflationary world, Magdalene College’s historical sense of itself as one of Cambridge University’s poorer institutions, seems on point. Yet it’s just spent a good few million on a lovely new library. For its 600-year history has been something of a financial rollercoaster.

Founded 1428, Magdalene is one of the city’s smaller colleges by size, but in terms of assets – just shy of £200 million – it punches above its weight in the Cambridge University rich list.

The fact that the college maintains a Cistercian silence on the library’s cost stems from its humble beginnings as a Benedictine monk’s hostel. A lucrative land legacy from post-Dissolution owner Thomas Audley was lost in 1574 in a bad – but legal – sale to shrewd banker Benedict Spinola, forcing it to

The east side of the new Magdalene library, facing the Fellows’ Garden. Ground floor is a picture gallery, with dedicated reader spaces above. Tall chimneys point to its stack ventilation strategy.

The old Pepys Library, part Jacobean manor, part Classical mash-up, sits just to the south of the new library.
go begging to get its First Court finished. Time has brought financial security if not psychological closure; set in the opposite river bank, a 1989 gargoyle of Spinola, commissioned by Magdalen, is destined to gawp at the college – and at his own waterboarded reflection when he’s a storm drain – until, perhaps, he finally coughs up.

Despite the college’s clear wealth, past penury has instilled a moderation that shines through in Níall McLaughlin Architects’ proposal for its new library, won in a 2014 invited competition. Associate and project architect Tim Allen-Booth says that the firm was struck more with the medieval simplicity of the college’s plainly-named First and Second Courts than with the sophistry of its existing Pepys Library, and you can see why. Walking from the porter’s lodge, its Tudor red-brick First Court, modest by Oxbridge standards, bears all the charming hallmarks of contingent repair and infill over time. Passing the Dining Hall (the only in Oxbridge not served by modern electricity) on to the 1909 mock-Tudor Second Court, it’s the centrepiece 17th century, grade I listed Pepys Library that comes across with the shock of the new. Built over 70 years and victim to vagaries of taste, the court side of the red-brick Jacobean building is a distinctly uneasy classical facade of Ketton stone, its curious double gables – of which the faux inner pair serve only to hide chimneys – bookending its west face and odd loggia. Though its wroughtness might recall the grandiloquence of the famed diarist whose collection it holds, it seems an anomaly out of keeping with the college’s general restraint or modern student needs.

Out of respect to Pepys perhaps, the architect picked up on its – albeit scrambled – notion of gables and chimneys while making a sensible decision to run with Magdalen’s calmer and more pleasing red-brick materiality; an aspect that creeps up on you gradually as you pass through a small gate to encounter the new library beyond two gnarled yew trees. With a crisp and strong exterior articulation, it’s surprising to hear Allen-Booth say that it was designed from the inside out, with the exterior resolved only after protracted client discussions – ones that proved pivotal. The firm’s initial design for a grand three-storey volume facing east, enjoying the ancient Fellows’ Garden, received polite push-back from the college. It was enamoured with its timber interiors but felt its ostentation would be counter to the college’s sense of modesty. Its response, to flip both position and scale of the sectional move from east to west sides, fundamentally shifts how one experiences the library, with the best views now reserved for the

**Critique**

Magdalene College library

*Above* The west side, facing the New Master’s Lodge, responds to its need for privacy. A large window to the 3-storey volume is bookended by blank modules, with ‘service’ ones to the left staggering out and away.

*Below* The triple-height entrance volume with high-level picture window to the west. At ground, service areas lie beyond, with archive and picture gallery to the east.
A  First Court  
B  Second Court  
C  Pepys Library  
D  Master’s Garden  
E  New Master’s Lodge  
F  New Library  
G  Fellows’ Garden  
H  River Cam  

1  Entrance lobby  
2  Reading room  
3  Librarian office and help desk  
4  Archive workroom  
5  Archive store  
6  Picture gallery  
7  Social area  
8  WC  
9  Double height reading room  
10  Reading room  
11  Bookshelves  
12  Group reading room (glazed off)  
13  Lounge reading  
14  Long reading room  

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most intimate reader spaces.

In turns out that this resonated better with the architect’s ideas. Allen-Booth claims intimacy was the prime driver, starting with the physical experience of the solitary reader and multiplying the tactility of brick and oak; that ‘the library be an aggregation of the single reader space’. So the sense of modularity you perceive on viewing from the outside is exactly that – 12 three-storey, 4.7 metre square modules in plan, connected to each other by 1.3m wide corridor links that all tessellate cleverly around a constrained site to generate the building’s massing.

To the south, the central of its three modules denotes the library’s formal entrance, reached via a circuitous yet apt route around the old yews; to the west, a further three bays, two of them blank, will defer to respect the privacy of the Master’s Garden. Stepping back and out on the north side, three rear ‘service’ modules, containing stairs and toilets will accommodate the curio of the college’s pet cemetery and its boundary wall, before culminating at five bays on the east, offering broad garden and river views up to its picture gallery and the humble readers sat atop it. All ostensibly the same module but, so arranged, all performing different tasks.

Collectively too they create a strong formality, each module defined on its corners by 660 x 320mm brick piers, some hollowed out at high level to act as vents – part of the library’s natural ventilation strategy. And if each module is a housing for its readers, then each merits a roof and chimney, a glazed gable on each side – far enough away from each to allow light into the building and near enough to shade and ensure it is not excessive. These contribute to the special feel of the building interior, a cooling breeze slowly passing through the space and shards of sunlight creeping around brick piers, whose spanning new redness is mitigated by a smaller brick size and thicker mortar joints, to better match the college's existing walls.

Internally, that decision to down-play and flip the three-storey volume from the garden side to the west plays out engagingly – as do the modules themselves as they interconnect in surprising ways. Here, the only three-storey experience is at the entrance, where a sole reading room nestles into ground floor

Intimacy was the prime driver, starting with the physical experience of the solitary reader

Critique
Magdalene College library, Cambridge
archive and garden-facing picture gallery. But what it lacks in size it makes up for in drama, soaring full-height and with a great west window letting light pour in beyond its deep oak baffles.

The building’s modularity shows within, as do its Baroque qualities as the reader moves through it. At first floor, one module’s width is ennobled in a four-module long, double height reading room. Long central tables run its length; these as well as all other fine joinery are expressed in oak where the hand can touch it. But that’s counterpointed in the whitewashed, raised grain finish of a fire-treated spruce CLT floor and glulam beams that run throughout, sitting on precast concrete lintels that span the 1.3m corridor zones from brick pier to brick pier.

Joined by a north stair, reading spaces go from discrete on the first floor to interconnected on the second, the latter gifted the view down past the double height volume and beyond in a long diagonal west to the ground level of the triple height space. Here, the interplay of corridors with modular volumes and brick piers creates a lovely perspectival layering, worked into even further by holes cut into bookstack floors to connect with reading spaces below,yielding complex spatial plays even out of repetition. It also generates a variety of study spaces; both collectively and individually, with some built-in desks nestled discreetly among bookshelves or others – notably one lording it over the entrance volume with views out to the west window extravagantly exposed; responding with sophisticated architectonics to neurodiversity demands. Taken as a whole, it’s delightful.

Architect and college fellow David Roberts built Magdalene’s New Master’s Lodge in 1966 – though it’s telling that the college later replaced its failing modernist flat roof with a pitched, plain clay tile, make-do one. Over his career, Roberts built more buildings for the university than any other architect, but Niall McLaughlin, with 15 Oxbridge projects built or on the go – in his more ‘local hero’ than ‘heroic’ new contextualism – might just match that record. Not surpass though; for Magdalene at least, the excess simply wouldn’t do.
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Firestopping brings peace of mind to patients

With the added difficulties of evacuating bed-bound or restricted mobility patients in the event of fire, those at Jutland’s largest hospital may rest secure in the knowledge that if it occurs, Hilti’s systems can contain and control fire spread.

Hospitals present a significant challenge when designing for fire safety. They are complex buildings occupied by vulnerable people, some with restricted mobility or confined to bed, which means that should a fire occur, evacuation would be a major logistics exercise and a potentially dangerous one for some occupants.

The early involvement of Hilti fire specialists ensured that these concerns were addressed with the fire safety solution for the New University Hospital, Aalborg, Denmark.

Designed by the Indigo Consortium – schmidt hammer lassen architects, aarhus arkitekterne, Creo Arkitekter and engineering consultants NNE.

Above New University Hospital Aalborg forms part of a vast 330,000m² healthcare complex serving the entire region of northern Jutland.
Hornstrup, Hilti senior field engineer M&E.

Critically, to ensure integrity of compartmentation there must be no gaps in the construction of the element, which is why openings in compartment walls and floors for pipes, cables and conduits to pass through must be firestopped. Firestops for this type of application incorporate an intumescent element that will swell in the presence of heat to seal the opening around the combustible penetrants, such as plastic pipes or conduits to prevent fire or smoke travelling between compartments. To be effective, the firestop must be tested and third party-approved and have a fire resistance equivalent to that of the compartment wall or floor in which it is housed.

The early involvement of Hilti fire specialists was key to developing the safest and most cost effective fire stopping for the New University Hospital. The giant new facility features cast in-situ concrete floor slabs, rather than the more common Danish practice of using precast hollow-core elements to form the floor plates. Hilti exploited this feature by integrating its CFS-CID, cast-in firestop devices into the slab to enable plastic drainage pipework to pass safely between floors.

The CFS-CID features a firestop sleeve, complete with a lid, which is attached to the floor formwork, between rebar elements, before the concrete is poured. ‘It does makes demands on the user, because they must have decided the exact position of all pipework openings before the slab is cast,’ explains Hornstrup. ‘But this simply in line with design and construction best practice.’ Once the concrete is set and formwork dismantled, the device lid is removed to reveal the sleeve and its integrated fire and smoke seal. It is ready for pipes to be threaded through without the need for coring or drilling, while its integrated smoke gasket makes caulking unnecessary.

The contractor responsible for the construction of the floors appreciates the benefits the system delivers: ‘Hilti's CID is a smart two-in-one solution as it creates the opening for the pipes to go through and at the same time offers an embedded fire stopping system,’ explains Nikolaj Pedersen, production manager. ‘The product is so efficient and easy to install that we’ve fitted 5000 pieces [on this project] and we’ve had zero failures,’ he adds.

Having used firestopping to ensure the integrity and insulation of the fire compartmentation, the challenge for the hospital is to maintain this integrity while accommodating changes to pipe and cabling installations from equipment upgrades and space reconfiguration. To futureproof the firestopping solution, Hilti’s CFS-SL Speed Sleeve has been used in compartment walls to enable cables to be removed and new ones added.

The speed sleeve is a firestop device with a twist mechanism that opens and closes an integral iris-like damper around the cables passing through the sleeve. This innovative device will help minimise air transfer between rooms and improve infection and dust control, and may even improve energy efficiency. ‘The Speed Sleeve means you don’t need a firestop professional each time a cable is added or removed, saving the FM team time and money and helping minimise the hospital’s running costs,’ explains Hornstrup.

Savings on both running and installation costs are major benefits of using Hilti’s pre-engineered firestop solutions on the New University Hospital. The real advantage, however, will be to the vulnerable people using the facility because it will improve patient safety by eliminating the danger from badly installed or poorly maintained fire stopping.
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I opened Balbek Bureau in Kyiv 12 years ago. We are a team of 70 and most of our work is interior design. Cafes and restaurants are my favourite – you need to analyse society and present something useful – which is why I set up two cafes in the city.

I have been here since the start of the war and will stay whatever happens. Territorial defence units were oversubscribed so I found other ways to help, from clearing streets to evacuations. Early in the war people struggled to get food, and with others we set up Kyiv Volunteers Team to supply 11-13,000 meals daily to city defenders.

Most architectural work paused. Previously we had around 40 projects, now only three or four international ones. We will divide the income so everyone receives some salary; nobody will be fired. Some staff are now in territorial defense, while others went to work elsewhere in Europe. We are still going as much as possible, although we had one Zoom call when all 10 of us had a bomb shelter or basement for a background. We had to laugh about it.

The main thing I am working on is Re:Ukraine, our project for temporary accommodation for refugees which began on day 10 of the war. We are sorting through many offers from companies that want to help.

Only after we finish fighting can we plan for reconstruction; we’ll need help from the international architecture community but it should be centrally co-ordinated. Meanwhile, I am committed to doing what can be done each day.

Slava Balbek spoke to Isabelle Priest on day 36 of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

‘With others we set up Kyiv Volunteers Team to supply 11-13,000 meals daily to city defenders’
Rammed concrete walls, Narbonne

In the latest in our series on architects’ details, Hugh Stewart, partner at Foster + Partners, tells Andy Pearson about the thinking and construction technique behind the rammed concrete walls of Narbo Via, a new museum of Roman antiquities in Narbonne, France.

What were you trying to achieve with the form of this building?
First and foremost, a degree of monumentality. This came in part from the subject matter of the museum, which is archaeology, but the stratified nature of archaeological investigation. In addition, from an environmental point of view, because Narbonne is in the hottest part of France, we based our approach on a substantially solid facade with relatively small amounts of glazing shaded by an over-sailing roof canopy. Once we’d taken these decisions, a conventional framed approach to the building proved inadequate.

Where does the technique of tamping concrete to form a wall originate?
We were researching how best to do a solid wall and that’s what led us to use layers of dry-mixed concrete tamped into place on site.

We worked with a Canadian specialist, Meror Krayenhoff, who has been working in this field for a number of years. He calls the technique Sirewall [Structural Insulated Rammed Earth Wall]. He advised on the technique from the project’s early days and supported the contractor during construction.

At Narbo Via, the 5.5m high walls are built up in 200mm tamped layers. They are 800mm wide, with a 200mm wide insulated core sandwiched between 200mm of rammed concrete on the outer face and 400mm of rammed concrete on the inner. Each layer of concrete is reinforced, and the two sides are tied together across the insulation.

The variations in layer colour are deliberate. We created four basic colours using iron oxides in differing quantities. We then mocked up the full-size walls in our office using paper prints until we contrived a seemingly organic ‘layering’ to the wall.
Are all the walls built using this technique?
Conceptually the building is split into two parts, display spaces and the research centre with a big internal street between the two. Both parts are defined by the coloured concrete walls with the primary structural columns also made of the same material. The walls support a grey concrete precast roof structure. Because the building is in a seismic zone, the walls are structurally connected using a wet concrete connection to the primary roof beams.

However, the basement walls are composed of conventional grey concrete – a decision taken by the contractor because the stratified walls takes longer to construct than conventional concrete walls.

How did you decide on an appropriate concrete mix?
The tamping technique relies on very careful grading of the aggregates. Normal concrete aggregate is about 15-20mm in diameter, along with sand, whereas this technique has a whole range of different sized aggregates, which the originator says makes it stronger. But in practice it is about as strong as a conventional grade concrete.

We built a prototype in a testing lab during the design process to convince ourselves of its viability.

Once a contractor was on board we produced a series of full-size prototypes. The concrete was mixed in a volumetric mixer along with the oxides for colouring and very little water. It was a very dry mix, you could lift it in your hand and nothing would stick. We used local aggregates, producing a neutral tone, and experimented to get the colour and texture of the layers to the level we wanted. With each variation we used a marginally different mix until we were satisfied with the outcome.

How are the walls constructed?
The walls were built between formwork, one layer at a time. One of the things we were particularly concerned about was to avoid having temporary tie rods linking the inner and outer formers, which would leave marks on the finished surface. To get round this the contractor, Vinci, used a full height former on one side and jump formwork on the other. The jump formwork was progressively lifted in sections and propped as the wall was constructed to avoid people having to work at height between the two formwork walls.

A hand-held pneumatic tamper was used to compact the placed concrete. It was a quasi-manual process in that respect. The tamping caused the larger aggregate to rise to the top, which
gave that part of the layer a slightly grainier texture that added to the walls’ character.

We were also insistent on the uniformity of layers, which was quite onerous for the builder. The tamping operatives in the formwork used a stick to measure and keep the layers horizontal and uniform in thickness.

Did the construction technique require any building regulation exemptions? This is a project we did with our own in-house structural engineers. There were no major exemptions required to allow this technique to be used; it is regulation-compliant. It also complies with Eurocodes as a concrete with a prescribed composition. Cube tests were done every step of the way, including for each layer of concrete, to test its compressive strength.

How do the walls perform thermally? The walls have a fantastic environmental performance, partly because of the internal layer of insulation and partly because of thermal mass, which is cathedral-like in its effect. For that mass, the thermal cycle is measured in months rather than in days, which would be the case for a lighter weight construction.

Interestingly, the walls’ textured surface also allows a degree of acoustic absorption.

How does the embodied carbon compare to that of conventional concrete? The cement content is similar to conventional concrete, however it uses local aggregates, which makes it of its place. Significantly, there is no cladding; in a conventional structure you have to invest in both internal and external finishes. With this technique the rammed structure is the finish.

What do you like most about the walls? What I find very attractive about it is that compared to almost all contemporary construction you get exactly the same expression internally and externally. Most contemporary construction, because of the framed approach and thermal insulation, tends to be covered up. This technique is a pure expression of structure and there is a tremendous simplicity about it. The walls showcase how they provide the lateral and vertical structural support to the building.

**Above** Without tie-rods to hold the front and back formwork in place, extensive temporary supports had to be used.
Location, location, location

and yes, light, peace and tranquility…

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Mixed use high streets

Redundant shops could house health outlets and leisure facilities to create a dynamic high street. The shelves are laden with opportunities for architects, finds Pamela Buxton

While the decline in bricks and mortar retail had set in well before Covid-19, the pandemic has accelerated the move towards repurposing redundant shopping space for all manner of uses. Newspapers have been awash with headline-grabbing stories such as Heatherwick Studio’s radical vision for a reinvention of Nottingham’s part-demolished Broadmarsh shopping centre, the conversion of various Oxford Street department stores into offices, and plans to knock down the notorious brutalist town centre of Cumbernauld. These projects are just the tip of the iceberg in a sector ripe for reinvention.

There is no shortage of compelling statistics driving such change. The proportion of shopping now carried out online stands at 27.8% according to the Office for National Statistics – down from a pandemic peak of 37.7% but up from 19.4% pre-pandemic. This is expected to rise to 33.5% by 2025 according to the Retail Economics research consultancy.

Vacancy rates were running at 15.6% in February 2022 according to the Local Data Company. Knight Frank’s research charts a decline of 8.4% in all retail capital values between March 2020 and 2022, with rents down by 10.7%. Shopping centres fared the worst, with capital values down 32.6%, and rents falling by 16.1%. Cost of living concerns driven by rising energy prices are likely to dampen any bounce-back in consumer spending from the worst of the pandemic.

‘There is a recognition that there is too much retail floor space and something needs to happen,’ says Stephen Springham, head of retail research at Knight Frank.

Such fundamental market changes potentially bring multiple opportunities for architects, whether facilitating new uses for existing sites such as the 100 or so former Debenhams stores lying vacant around the country, or working with owners and developers on more complex, broader redevelopments of shopping centres and town centres.

And as such large-scale repurposing will take time, there are also likely to be plenty of creative ‘meanwhile’ projects around – such as RCKa’s Nourish Hub retail turned community café, training kitchen and workspace, winner of this year’s MacEwen Award.

Property developer Hammerson said earlier this year that it expects as much as one fifth of its portfolio to switch to other uses, including healthcare, hospitality and workspaces. Meanwhile in Glasgow, Land Securities is working with Glasgow City Council on plans to redevelop its Buchanan Galleries shopping centre, and has recently launched a consultation on what additional new uses could be brought into the 4ha site. A design team is yet to be announced for the project, which is expected to take a decade to realise.

‘Our vision is to replace the existing shopping centre with an exciting new mixed-use urban neighbourhood in the heart of Glasgow city centre, blending world-class shopping with places to work, live and play,’ says managing
The decline in retail space demand presents opportunities, says David Leech, architectural director of Ryder, whose recent work includes a mixed-use masterplan for the regeneration of a precinct at Yate and a retail-to-park proposal in Stockton (see case study).

‘But there always have been [opportunities] because retail has to keep adapting. Lockdown has accelerated the changes that were coming anyway,’ he says, adding that retail centres are increasingly moving away from an approach of inward-facing, anchor stores with malls towards more outward-facing mixed-uses of all varieties.

‘There’s nothing that can’t be explored, although there will be hurdles. It’s about looking outside the box to see what uses could be supported,’ he says.

According to Lisa Finlay, group leader at Heatherwick Studio, we need a ‘mindset shift’ about what activities other than retail can be supported in city centres. This is happening in Nottingham, where the practice is part of the team behind a new concept for the Broadmarsh retail centre (see case study).

**High streets redefined**

‘There needs to be a redefinition of why we go to the high street and what it’s for. We’re thinking of it like an eco-system – what kinds of offers will support other businesses?’ she says.

Mono-use retail, she adds, is too limited. A greater variety of offers and uses attuned to the locality is needed, with more variety in unit size and leases and more dynamic programming.

‘If we have a great mix, the high street can do so many things for us, forming connections with people and promoting new opportunities.’

In addition to its work in

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**CASTLEGATE, STOCKTON**

Designed by disgraced architect John Poulson in the early 1970s, Castlegate shopping centre in Stockton-on-Tees is to undergo the most radical reinvention possible – redevelopment as a 2.5ha riverside park. Provisional designs by Ryder Architecture show a 40m wide land bridge spanning a narrowed and tunnelled Riverside Road to link the new park to the riverside. The park will include a terraced arena, play park, central lawn and pavilion, and waterside food and beverage outlets. The park is part of a broader initiative by Stockton-on-Tees council to consolidate retail into a more compact area – vacancy rates were three times the national average – as well as creating a new attraction that makes the most of the town’s waterfront. Demolition is expected to begin in mid-May with a target completion date of 2025 for the wider waterfront development.
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Nottingham, the practice is carrying out research into the potential to introduce more healthcare uses to city centres. This has also been explored in the Shopping For Health report by iDEA, Carter Jonas, Macmillan Cancer Support and ADP Architecture, which considers the scope for a national strategy to repurpose retail space for this use. It identifies a potential need for 1.25 million m$^2$ of healthcare space such as clinics, and investigates how this might be provided within vacant retail space – citing 1.63 million m$^2$ of vacant retail space in English shopping centres alone in early 2021.

Such a repurposing is a ‘huge opportunity,’ according to Hannah Brewster, regional director of ADP, which has produced standardised clinic layouts of 490m$^2$ and 1,680m$^2$ as part of the report. Not only does this free up space on hospital sites, she says, it makes such services accessible to those who wouldn’t go to a hospital or GP, but might well go to a high street.

ADP is also working on a retail-to-education repurposing with a conversion of the former Debenham’s in Gloucester for university use (see case study).

Fun in the mall
Leisure is another key new use – Knight Frank identified the sector as one of the few growth areas in shopping centre income in 2018-2021. Recent examples include the conversion of the Debenhams in Wandsworth, south London into the Gravity entertainment venue, including trampolines, pool, darts and bowling alleys.

So what architectural skillset is needed to be best placed to benefit from this market activity? Ryder’s Leech says that in addition to the usual backbone of technical skills, practices will need an understanding of how existing buildings can adapt and change. When repurposing retail, particular considerations are bringing
daylight into often deep floor plates as well as sufficient floor-to-floor heights.

For major city centre retail regenerations in particular, also key will be the placemaking skills required to bring together uses as potentially diverse as older living, co-working and youth-oriented leisure successfully. A track record in handing the complexities of juxtaposing multiple uses across multiple levels would be an asset too.

'It’s not an easy journey. But in terms of creating authentic town centres with a sense of place, it’s a fantastic opportunity,’ says Adrian Griffiths, group board director of Chapman Taylor, which recently refurbished Upper Precinct in Coventry.

He feels that it is now time for retail owners to reconsider their assets.

‘We’re at a point where values have dropped, and owners of shopping centres can’t do nothing. They have to decide what to do. Some that are outdated and hard to change should be demolished. Others can be partially demolished.’

Move from words to action
Yet according to Knight Frank’s Springham, the will among owners to address market changes is there, it is still manifested more as interest in doing so than in actual activity. Planning is now less of a problem, especially with the recent introduction of the Class E commercial, business and service class, but financing is still a barrier, since many potential new uses yield far less than retail. Yet a more fundamental rethink of the asset will take time and considerable investment. In some cases, the answer may be more local authority involvement in taking over and reimagining shopping centres as part of broader town centre revivals, as is happening in Sutton.

One way or another, with vacancy rates so high, change is afoot. •
Promotion
RIBAJ SterlingOSB Zero competition

The Retreat

Imagine a modern-day escape from the world, formed of SterlingOSB Zero, and win £2,500 courtesy of West Fraser (formerly known as Norbord)

The idea of the retreat has long been embedded in western culture. Take 14th century Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio’s The Decameron, written from 1348-53, whose plot revolves around 10 people fleeing a Florence beset by Black Death to seek shelter in a deserted villa outside the city. In the safety of its walled garden, each agrees to tell a story each day over 10 days—100 in all—as a diversion to pass the days of isolation.

Recent events have made the premise of this nearly 700-year-old text prescient. Indeed, if the pandemic revealed anything, it is the desire to escape the city and seek refuge in the country.

West Fraser is asking you to hold that thought in mind for its seventh annual SterlingOSB Zero competition, The Retreat. We want you to select a site and design a country escape for up to 10 people; one whose form and material have a strong, considered relationship with the landscape it sits in, as well as internal volumes that elicit meaningful interactions between users. Which spaces allow small, contemplative gatherings and which give exposure to the landscape? How are relationships between them mediated?

JUDGES

Chaired by the RIBA Journal, judges will look for imaginative uses of SterlingOSB Zero that best responds to the competition brief. Pre-fabrication or CNC fabrication to create novel forms will be considered. Other materials may form an integral part of the proposition, but it is expected that the design will make good use of SterlingOSB Zero.

While we do not seek to curb imagination, we would ask you to consider the nature of SterlingOSB Zero and ensure propositions reflect its material capabilities. SterlingOSB Zero used externally should be adequately protected with a cladding material and/or insulation; this may also apply to internal finishes.

DEADLINE

Entries should be received by 14.00 UK time on Monday June 20, 2022.

TO ENTER

Go to ribaj.com/retreat-competition-enter

Entries must include the following, laid out on no more than two A3 sheets, supplied electronically as pdfs:

• An explanation of no more than 500 words on the entry form, describing the design of the building, stating clearly where SterlingOSB Zero has been used and the core ideas around the design of the proposition, its siting and configuration.
• Plans and sections explaining the nature of the building, its structure, build-up and materials used.
• 3D Axonometric or perspective images conveying the nature of the proposition.
• Any supplementary images you consider helpful.

NOTES

• Judging day: 6 July 2022
• The judges’ decision is final
• First prize £2,500. Three commended prizes of £500
• No correspondence will be entered into by the organisers or judges regarding entries and winners.
• Shortlisted entries will be notified in writing.
• National guidance permitting, shortlisted entries will be invited to the prize-giving event in September
• Please email questions to ribaj.retreat@riba.org

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Where to learn eco-activism

Black Mountains College in the Brecon Beacons will train proactive advocates for sustainability. Co-founder Ben Rawlence tells Eleanor Young about the thinking behind a new sort of environmental education

On the northern edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park, amid bracken-browned mountains and rocky streams, sits a ramshackle farm. This could be the site of a game-changing new college that trains activists – proactive advocates for sustainability: Black Mountains College.

It all starts with a car park in the small mid-Wales town of Talgarth. Ben Rawlence, co-founder of the college, is waiting to guide architect Sarah Featherstone of Featherstone Young and me up through the fields, walking as the students do each week learning from the pastures around them, from a climb though the protected temperate rainforest, taking samples from the stream to examine temperature, phosphates, nitrates and turbidity, marvelling at fungi.

Rawlence is an author, most recently of Treeline, which tells the story of the advance of the boreal forest into the warming Arctic tundra. He has worked trying to tackle the devastation of successive famines in Somalia – a threat that he sees as getting closer to home with global warming: the Arctic and the tropics are the sharp end of climatic disruption but it’s heading this way. His work in journalism and political speech writing for the Liberal Democrats has made him well aware that mainstream politics move too slowly for this crisis.

This is a tale of creating your own change – from Rawlence setting up the college in his home town, via the architect Featherstone Young taking on the site, to the willing but perhaps unwitting students. Interrupting the first cohort studying regenerative horticulture as they break for lunch, I expect missionary zeal and Damascene conversions. There is a little of that, but a good half of the students simply arrived for the college’s free local
horticulure NVQ and have gradually become convinced about preserving soil health and no dig cultivation.

That democratic access to the sustainability knowledge is what Rawlence wants from his college – and what he sees the UK needs. It is knowledge our grandchildren will thank us for and an aim that is enshrined in Wales’ still barely-understood Well-being of Future Generations Act.

Rawlence has a vision of a liberal arts college like the similarly-named Black Mountain College in the US, where Buckminster Fuller famously taught. But Rawlence wants his courses to be available through funded standard education paths – first NVQs which are free in Wales and ultimately undergraduate degrees – rather than high cost MScs. For him that’s the difference between Black Mountains College and Schumacher College or the Centre for Alternative Technology.

These are plans with grand ideas. They have won the college recognition from George Soros’ Open Society University Network (give a boost by local trustee Bill Newton Smith, previously head of Soros’ higher education programme). The original site that Featherstone Young worked on – the 19th century Mid Wales Hospital which once housed over 350 mentally ill patients – gives you a sense of the ambition. The hospital had been the subject of plans for business parks and residential conversion since the NHS left in 2007, along with demolition. But after sinking £250,000 into feasibility it became obvious that the buildings with their caved-in roofs would be too much of a financial drain for a new institution. With the nearby Troed-yr-Harn Farm gifted rent free to the college for three years, that option remains open – perhaps something for the future, working with a residential developer.

Architects are used to grand plans and change making. But this project is particularly close to the heart of Featherstone Young with Sarah Featherstone and Jeremy Young trying to set up a Welsh base in addition to their east London office. They have long retreated to Wales and their award winning house Ty Hedfan. At the same time Featherstone has been a key proponent of VeloCity, with its emphasis on reconnecting and reinvigorating rural settlements.

The college designs, which are in for planning, include longhouse style buildings with rooms for early cohorts of students, opening up a stone barn for eating and socialising, and re-using the slab that supported dilapidated sheds as the foundation for teaching rooms. In between the buildings, firepit, informal amphitheatre and farming plots there is the chance to be outside and connected with the land, both in cultivation and in wildness.

How realistic is the big mission and the stepping stones for getting there? For Featherstone Young the challenge has been getting certainty on re-using buildings, and balancing choices between locally-sourced materials, low embodied carbon and reducing operational carbon. For Rawlence it is now discussions on funding with potential partners, having found the right site and got the multi-disciplinary degree (neuro-science, creative practice, mainstreaming ecology and systems change) agreed by awarding body Cardiff University.

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As we grapple with the lasting effects of colonialism, many of us choose to focus on social issues such as racism or slavery. For others though, there are prominent physical reminders of the pain which has been inflicted upon their communities. One example is the system of Indian residential schools (IRS) which operated in Canada for more than a century until the last closed in 1997.

The primary purpose of the IRS system was to assimilate indigenous children into British-Canadian culture. Children were taken away from their homes as young as five years old, given ‘western’ clothes and names, only allowed to speak English or French, and only practice the religion of the order that ran the schools on behalf of the government, not their own spiritual practices.

Many IRS buildings were designed without reference to either the local context or the culture of those who would be attending. Take Muskowekwan IRS (Musk-o-we-gan) as an example – a dark building both literally and figuratively. It was built in a Collegiate Gothic style, with an imposing facade overlooking straight rows of trees planted by the students. The chapel at the back of the building is of particular abhorrence to many people who were forced to attend prayers there daily for hours at a time.

In order to simplify construction, most IRS buildings were built from the same few designs provided by the British/Canadian governments. Muskowekwan IRS’s architectural siblings exist across the country and were based on designs by Rolland Orr, chief architect of the Department of Indian Affairs. Altogether, Orr designed 35 schools.
Intelligence
Writing competition

... during his 15 year inter-war tenure, all in the same style.

It’s now widely known that physical, mental and sexual abuse was rife in IRS schools, instigated by priests and nuns, other staff or older students. That led to many suicides, runaways, and deaths, and children were buried behind the schools without informing their families. At Muskowekwan IRS many children were cremated in the boiler room.

Incomplete records contribute to uncertainty about how many children died under the IRS System. Although various school lands have been surveyed in recent years using ground-penetrating radar, the tragedies which occurred on these sites finally became international news in the summer of 2021, when 215 child graves were discovered next to the Kamloops IRS in British Columbia. Later that summer, 35 graves were confirmed to have been found next to Muskowekwan, with more to uncover. At the time of writing, 2352 unmarked graves have been found on the 15 sites so far surveyed, of more than 130 IRS sites across Canada.

As we learn about the negative history of these sites of trauma, questions are raised about how we respond as a populous and as architects. Do we preserve, contextualise or tear down these buildings? Similar questions arose in the summers of 2020 and 2021 around the world, as Black Lives Matter protests and questions on colonial influences simmered to the surface. Indigenous students and staff at Ryerson University in Toronto started the push for the name of their school to be changed as its namesake, 19th century educator Egerton Ryerson, is recognised as a key influence in the design of the IRS system. His statue in Toronto was torn down by protestors, along with many that memorialised people who were integral to colonialism. Others had plaques added to them to explain and contextualise their roles in the history of colonialism instead.

The question of what to do with the IRS buildings was brought up after the last schools closed. With the encouragement of government incentives, many communities decided that it would be best to demolish them. But the people of Muskowekwan First Nation, among others, felt that this would be just another opportunity for the government to sweep the history and reality of what happened under the rug, and so voted to keep the building standing on their reserve. Muskowekwan IRS currently sits unused and deteriorating while the community decides how to move forward.

A limited number of IRS buildings have been adaptively reused, some as education or community centres, such as the Old Sun Boarding School in Alberta which now houses the Blackfoot Nation’s Old Sun Community College. Another building, Kootenay (Koo-tuh-nay) IRS, was transformed into the St Eugene Golf Resort and Casino, a ‘powerful economic engine’ for the Kootenay First Nation. It also houses the Ktunaxa (K-tu-na-ha) Interpretive Centre, providing necessary context to the site.

What has been evidenced these past few years is that architecture plays an important role in both acknowledging and suppressing identity. IRS buildings were designed to aid in the effort to assimilate Indigenous youth. However, in a defiant and continuing effort to reclaim ownership of their past and future, many Indigenous peoples of Canada have decided to maintain these buildings and sites. Some decide to take it a step further and empower themselves and future generations through the adaptive reuse of that same architecture with their own values in mind.

There, the individuals and communities affected by colonialism have taken the lead in deciding the buildings’ fate. The debates around such structures and diverse solutions indicate the complexity of the issue. As architects it is our responsibility not only to be conscious of the cultural and historical significance of the sites we work on, but to understand their impact on society as a whole. Only if we are educated by those directly affected by the impact of colonialism on society can we bring a meaningful consideration of these issues into the design process, and create a brighter future.

Danica Mitrić is an MArch student at Nottingham Trent University

Above Volunteers prepare for a June 2021 press conference and prayer vigil at the former Muskowekwan Indian Residential School.

Egerton Ryerson’s statue in Toronto was torn down by protestors
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Winners will be profiled in the RIBA Journal and on ribaj.com and invited to an exclusive Class of 2022 round table.

ribaj.com/enter-rising-stars
Set in the foothills southeast of the Rocky Mountains, probably the only reason for anyone to go out of their way to visit the town of Rawlins would be to see its historic Wyoming State Penitentiary, by Salt Lake City architect Walter E Ware and completed in 1901. Now a museum, with his rash of vermiculation and heavy entrance arches set on short capitals, neo-Romanesque leanings crash with Scottish Baronial where circular turrets attempt a breakout at the top.

While photographer Martine Hamilton Knight, on a family road trip to the US, had chosen to visit the monument en route to the mountains, the real photographic destination proved to be 20 miles outside Rawlins. Off the interstate highways, traces of abandoned settlement abound; ‘things get fascinating,’ she tells me. ‘The landscape feels familiar but entropic.’

Cruising along the road in the sunshine, her attention was lassoed by a dazzling glint emanating from a dusty side lot near an old garage, drawing her back until she pulled over. With its curious finials, it might not have been an Airstream caravan that had caught her eye, but in the day’s clear azure, it seemed a worthy pretender to its Dymaxion legacy. Like Ware’s turrets – quirks feathering the cap of the uncanny landscape. © Jan-Carlos Kucharek
The latest State of the UK Climate report shows the weather has become wetter over the last few decades, despite annual variation. Between 2011 and 2020, the UK experienced 9% more rainfall than in any period between the 1960s and 1990s. Moving forwards, we’re expected to see even wetter winters and drier summers. So where does this leave us when designing flood resilient spaces? And how can we mitigate potential damage and build in resistance to more extreme weather events?

SuDS is a holistic approach for managing surface water from excess rainfall (short for ‘sustainable drainage systems’). SuDS collect rainwater at the source, attenuating it and slowing its flow downstream. Captured water can either infiltrate into the ground or be channelled away at a controlled rate, helping to minimise future flood events. A mix of guidance and legislation is pushing for greater inclusion of SuDS into urban developments, not just for the proven drainage advantages but for the many other benefits that the systems provide. These include water and air quality improvements, biodiversity habitat creation - and simply creating more appealing spaces for people in which to live, work and play.

**Using permeable paving as a source control measure**

Well-designed drainage solutions should consider a range of measures to positively impact water flow rates, from soakaways and infiltration trenches to rainwater harvesting and permeable paving. Permeable paving products, such as Marshalls Conservation X, offer a loadbearing surface coupled with source control attenuation for pavements and roads, car parks or public realm schemes, preventing surface water run-off by collecting rainfall where it lands.

As well as cleansing the attenuated water (via both mechanical filtration and natural biological processes) the use of permeable paving also prevents water pooling, avoiding puddles and ice which can present a health and safety risk.

**Using SuDS within a flood protection context**

Whilst ‘designing in’ permeable paving solutions early in the process can make a significant (and very cost effective) impact on water management, specifiers shouldn’t neglect other defensive measures. Indeed, the SuDS guidance recognises that all water management systems, philosophies and products have their place in a sensible water management approach. Flooding is the biggest environmental threat facing the UK today, used in combination, flood defence and SuDS measures provide a joined-up water management approach.

To find out more visit: marshalls.co.uk/commercial
Whenever I move house I get a sense of geographical vertigo as the map tilts and I reorientate the world around me, the streets, the routes, what is near or far, round-the-corner-handly or a bit-far-to-be-worth-the-trip. One change leads to another, how we eat, our car, bike, walking habits.

Every option’s appraisal and feasibility study embodies hundreds of micro-opportunities not just to maximise the net to gross but to rethink how people move, who they bump into, what they see, how they frame it. A geographical or lifestyle shift acts as an impetus: when children move away to university, when people set up home with a partner, when they start work in a different office or when they retire and downsize. So too can new surroundings, a new cut-through or bench in a square.

At the Black Mountains College (see page 55) both professional habits and systems change are being addressed, starting with horticultural and land management. It is important to agitate for and support systems change – from legislation to finance norms – in addressing the climate emergency (see Brian Green on the impact of environmental, social and governance reporting coming down the line: ribaj.com/governance).

But on an everyday level there are also many architects working on changing their own and their practices’ professional habits. It should be easy – after all, architects are change makers, aren’t they?

I have always admired practices that give their own enterprise a job number and recognise that it takes planning and work to design a firm and its processes. The changes coming over the hill need a new job number. First there is winning new work against a backdrop of a cost of living crisis. Then there is the new stuff that just can’t wait: buildings regulations evolving, the Building Safety Bill just published and the Levelling up and Regeneration Bill looking like it will bring in a bundle of new planning rules. And into all that there must be time to understand and embed low carbon design. It is in our hands to adjust to different requirements.

Kodak is a favourite example to demonstrate the need to adapt: it didn’t do digital and went bankrupt in 2012. But I prefer the instance of another extinct giant, Prototaxites. In the Silurian period, over 400 million years ago, this giant fungi was the largest organism on earth at up to 8m high. It helped build the soil that still sustains us today. It has gone – it only lasted 100 million years or so – but today in just a handful of soil there are 50km of fungal threads finely involved in decomposing and regenerating organic matter. The habits have changed but it keeps contributing as it adapts.

Adapt to thrive

Eleanor Young recommends a magic mushroom that should inspire us to make the adjustments we need to if we are to evolve in sync with a changing world.

‘Change should be easy – after all, architects are change makers, aren’t they?’
I recently spent a delightfully busy two days in a very hot Ahmedabad, presenting the Royal Gold Medal to Balkrishna Doshi. We will hold a global celebration of his remarkable career online in June and I encourage you to join us.

Doshi and his wife are both sprightly nonagenarians but, in the post Covid world it was agreed it was best they did not travel this time. The consequence was a uniquely different format (the institute mountain coming to the man) that was much appreciated by Doshi, his office, his extended family and the many inhabitants of the city who have celebrated his career for decades.

Much is said of our global world but Doshi is a reminder that the layers of history that connect us all are as ancient as Indian civilisation. Doshi travelled by boat to London in the early 1950s. Like many great architects he is not a product of a formal education. His story is one of digs in the then unfashionable Ladbroke Grove; fish and chip suppers; part-time courses at North London Polytechnic and many hours in the RIBA Library studying books, drawings, photographs and the magnificent space – all washed down by tea with the Librarian. His experience is relevant to our discussions today as to how we make the architectural profession ever more accessible.

The import of a welcoming and generous RIBA must also inform our plan to reinvent the Institute as a House of Architecture open to everyone, from school children to scholars.

The connections and the relevance of Doshi’s story does not end there. He met Fry and Drew (Fry was awarded the Royal Gold Medal in 1964) who worked in London and India. He went to 35 Rue de Sevres and then Ahmedabad to work for Le Corbusier. He was with Corb in Chandigarh in 1953 when the RIBA invited the great man to travel to London to receive the Gold Medal. He went to Japan to meet Tange (RGM 1972), Maki and others. When teaching at Penn, Philadelphia, he befriended a shy Louis Khan (RGM 1972) who was in such awe of his hero Le Corbusier that he resisted an invitation to meet him. Doshi was so struck by Kahn’s talent and humility that, when he, Doshi, won the competition for the Indian Institute of Management he offered Kahn the commission.

Of course his recollections of connections made on his various travels tell you as much about Doshi as they do of those he met. He speaks of his two masters, Corb and Kahn, and of their generosity as mentors. He is clear that the study of history, and even more importantly life, are key to his architectural philosophy. I refrain from calling it ‘his architecture’. For Doshi is very clear that while architecture is explored in his long established office and constructed conceptually and literarily from the history and materials of the sites in which they work, it is never ‘his’. To Balkrishna Doshi, architectural practice is an inquiry, informed by history and lived experience. It is research into possibilities for the improvement of the human condition, a study into constructing an idea for a future suggested and encouraged, but not prescribed, by the work carried out by three generations of his family and a diaspora of talented young Indian architects.

His mentors informed his inquiry, but so has the Indian model of adoption and adaptation that creates the concept of the distinguished hybrid that has shaped the rich culture of the sub-continent. For Doshi architecture only comes into being when people move in, take over and extend and adapt that which he has helped initiate.

While his architecture is configured of concrete, brick and timber it is actually constructed from generosity and a delight in providing a framework that is but the backdrop to the accommodation of the theatre of everyday life.
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In the thick of it

Home-grown practice Lacol is shaking things up in Sants, Barcelona – so much so that the 13-strong team has won the EUmies Prize for Emerging Architecture for its embedded, transgressive ethic

Words: Jan-Carlos Kucharek Portrait: Lacol
While the 2022 Mies Award for the EU’s best building went to Grafton Architects, who received it at Mies’ iconic 1929 pavilion in Barcelona, there was something of an affirmation for the city itself when the EUmies Award for Emerging Architecture this year went to its own citizens, with young practice Lacol stepping up to receive the award and €20,000 prize for La Borda Cooperative Housing.

Completed 2018, La Borda is a 28 unit, 3000m² social housing project in the city’s Sants district, of self-contained apartments built in and around shared kitchen, dining and laundry spaces and multi-level, multi-purpose covered exterior patios and terraces. While being a novel six-storey CLT construction for Spain, it wasn’t this that drew the jury’s attention to it but the innovative way that it was procured. Built on city land in a world where housing is driven by macroeconomic interest and private speculation, La Borda is proof that another way is possible; where disempowered communities can be galvanised, that land deemed out of reach can be secured, and that co-operation by all at the most fundamental levels can – when guided by architects – realise great design. It was for these reasons that the Mies jury’s citation pointedly referred to La Borda as ‘transgressive’. It is.

Speaking to Lacol’s Cristina Gamboa and Eliseu Arrufat, two members of the fresh-faced,
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13-strong, architecture collective, the day before their win was announced, both were ‘super-happy’ and unphased by the career-changing potential of the award. Working since 2010 at the coalface of their community, this Iberian Assemble, while grateful for the recognition, views its place in a wider world with a degree of abstraction. When the economic downturn of 2008 forced architects everywhere to confront their fragility in the free market economy, Lacol was the answer – at least here, where the challenges have been so personal as well as local.

‘We’re the sons and daughters of the Great Spanish Recession,’ Eliseu Arrufat tells me, speaking of their final year at Barcelona University in 2009. ‘We graduated at a time when the Spanish economy was broken and finding a job here was almost impossible – and one with dignity even harder. Faced with the prospect of becoming migrants if we wanted careers, we decided to see how we could come together as a group to meet our need to work and to be able to establish roots in our own city.’ As 25-year-old students just out of college, he recalls, ‘with one architect for every 800 citizens’, the scale of challenge seemed enormous.

In 2008, after a massive property boom in Spain, the bust was spectacular, with up to 40% wiped off property values in Catalunya – and more elsewhere. The sense of construction falling off a cliff is curiously intimated in Spain’s own EUmies Award’s stats, with three big-money projects winning in the 30 years before 2007 and none thereafter; and three ‘Emerging Architecture’ wins in the last 10 years by young firms doing small-scale work focused on material efficiency or re-use. Between 2008 and 2012 there was a ground shift when new architects, working through a recession, began thinking in contingent and ingenious ways. Lacol’s win – the fourth – brings a holistic layer to that thinking.

Cristina Gamboa explains that, at the outset, the collective had to think on its feet. Their school had taught them about ‘architecture with a capital ‘A’, and that ideas of ‘bottom-up city transformation’ remained in the realms of theory. Faced with ‘the city’s socio-economic crisis, we wanted to look at other ways of understanding the discipline and of engaging with our locality in a real way,’ she tells me. Needing a supportive environment in which to come together, the group settled on the Sants district on Barcelona’s southwest fringe to hire a space – and not without reason. Rents were cheaper here and, being a former industrial district, the workers’ movements and organisations born of it still held sway. Back then, its residents and political groups were organising to resist strain on the local economy through tourism with occupy events and strikes. ‘The co-operative movement emerged here and as we didn’t know anything about it, over time they passed their networks and collective politics on to us.’ Arrufat contends that although its recent embracing of market capitalism has marginalised that spirit, the militancy has a long history: ‘During the Civil War, Barcelona was controlled by a revolutionary government for two years (of anarchists, communists and trade unions) – the only one to be so’. That’s why Lacol (whether it be a diminutive of ‘La Colectiva’, ‘local’ in reverse or the Spanish for ‘cabbage’) ‘as it is, could not exist in another city – in fact I don’t think it could have come out of any other neighbourhood’.

Lacol was embedded in its district before 2014, and small interventions – which as a loose group, they were already involved with – came their way; mostly upgrading spaces that local organisations had appropriated, to make them fit for purpose. There were domestic residential

Above Lacol’s 1400m² La Comunal co-operative hub in Sants. It is the home not only of Lacol but of a number of other grassroots organisations.

Below The 20-unit La Balma housing in Barcelona’s Poblenou district for La Boqueria co-operative, completed 2017.
or community engagement projects, gauging resident need, notably with the nearby Can Battló neighbourhood community. But in working with clients on a daily basis, not only was a relationship of trust being built up but Arrufat says they were honing their participatory craft – ‘learning skills from people who weren’t architects’.

As one of the many participants of the ‘Spanish Spring’ 15-M Movement – protests, demonstrations and occupations in 2011 against Spain’s austerity policies – Lacol’s fortunes changed in 2014. Political party ‘Barcelona en Comú’ became the city’s minority government, with an agenda of social justice, community rights and participatory democracy – and led from 2016 by activist mayor Ada Colau. By then, Lacol had a firm grasp of the neighbourhood’s housing need, having earned the trust of local co-operatives and learned to argue land rights or build business cases for development. They were at the genesis of La Borda and the later, 20-unit La Balma development. Gamboa, who is a La Borda resident, says these jobs were as much about Lacol as their clients. ‘We were a practice situated in unique conditions; it wasn’t just about us as architects, but how we treated each other in the studio and how we engaged with our neighbourhood. Something in Stavros Stavrides’ Common Space really resonated for me – that you can’t do something different if you are not organising differently.’

It also meant changing the mindsets of residents wedded to the aspiration of private ownership and concrete as the go-to material to build with. How did they convince them? ‘What if I said La Borda, our first big project, is occupied by people who are fearless?’ states Arrufat. ‘We had no experience of public co-op housing, let alone the technologies we were proposing. Over seven years, residents just listened, thought and decided, knowing it could all be a failure.’ Over time they were won around to the building’s ‘common’ zones, its CLT structure and passive strategies – despite the expense. They taught residents how to climate manage their homes so the development is almost zero energy – solving energy poverty for them.

And, as with all their projects, it’s a reciprocal process, Gamboa continues. ‘We are empowering people to understand why we propose things. They participate actively in it – but it’s their decision in the end. As architects, we share in the project and accept that the final outcome might be different to what we wanted.’ The gains were enormous at La Borda. It is the country’s tallest CLT structure and Lacol not only helped negotiate the land lease with the city but won a landmark decision for no underground parking provision – a first for the city. This made the project viable and brought massive carbon savings.

Quite how success will change Lacol remains to be seen. But housing projects from other co-ops are coming in thick and fast and the golden cage of Sants, where its new offices are in the La Comunal refurbishment project that it helped instigate, no longer seems able to hold them. Will future growth change its ‘flat’ hierarchy or modify how they work in other places? Each person in the tight-knit group has specialist skills, but Arrufat thinks collective decision-making will stay much as it is, with some concentrating on participatory process, some on technical aspects, some on politics or pedagogy. Arrufat sees their model as equipping other practices with the tools they have acquired. ‘Experience has taught us about humility,’ he says. ‘We’d never do something where we know neither the geography nor politics of the place. We’d collaborate with local partners and work with their knowledge.’

Gamboa concurs: ‘We don’t see ourselves growing a lot bigger, but rather networking and working in contexts where our way of procuring can be replicated. There would still be self-management but at a bigger scale – from neighbourhood level to a co-op city perhaps.’ If success means anything to them, says Arrufat, it’s not about getting rich (the prize money will be shared) but creating credibility in activism and community empowerment and dignity for citizens. ‘Who knows? It might help us make a scale jump. To work where we can help generate an active climate, social and economic lobby together with our co-operativism. Part of a common fight against capitalism’s assault on our cities.’
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Revived Outram colours our world again

John Outram stands out from the post modern canon. Hugh Pearman enjoys the return to popularity of his exuberant, ingenious and joyful designs.

If there’s one thing better than revisiting a building that has been off-limits to the public for more than three decades, it is doing so in the company of its architect. And so came the day in April when the gates of the grade II* listed Isle of Dogs pumping station swung open, and into the yard drove John Outram, in the same pale green Citroen DS Safari that he had when he first designed the building.

Building, car and architect have all aged well – Outram himself is nearly 88, his car is 48 years old so the building, designed and built in 1986-88, is the relative youngster here at 34. Post modernism generally is roaring back into fashion, though Outram’s style was always highly individual and stood out from all the rest: he is more of an ultra-progressive freestyle classicist. None of his peers could ever match Outram’s exuberance, wit, and ingenuity.

People responded to the Victorian-ness of the ‘Temple of Storms’, the fact that it went well beyond its ostensible function. When it opened, Franklin relates, Outram wrote to his daughter Iliona about it: ‘The pumping station is setting my architectural friends a real test. It is so big, so colourful, so easy to like, so obviously beautiful, like a great flower’. The test went deeper than ornamentalism and neoclassical references, however. Outram rejected the brittle visual connectivity of the critically favoured style of the time, high-tech. ‘The best buildings are soft, soft all through; soft especially in their very marrow. They are flabby and disjointed, having no physical tension whatsoever,’ Outram wrote in 1988.

This brings us naturally enough to Outram’s great and beguilingly simple innovation, the ‘Robot Order’. Those fat brick columns, which first appeared on his Mackay Trading estate in North Kensington (1978-80) and first sprouted
‘Had his invited proposal to re-imagine Battersea Power Station come good, what a richly pleasurable pleasure dome London would have had’

vividly flaming neoclassical capitals on his Harp Heating building of 1983-5 at Swanley in Kent (a recladding of an existing 1960s curtain-wall building, sadly demolished in 2016) are nothing more than oversized vertical ducts to thread services and structure through. There’s a lovely Krier-ish cartoon by Outram which shows the various functions depicted as people lining up to enter a door in the column at the invitation of the architect. In a bin nearby are rolled up drawings titled ‘High Tech’.

Franklin’s excellent book, one in the ‘20th Century Architects’ series, reminds us that Outram’s reputation hangs on a relatively small oeuvre of about a dozen buildings in the quarter century from the mid 1970s to the early 2000s. The fact that this collection ranges from a cheap trading estate near Heathrow to the magnificence of Duncan Hall at Rice University in Houston, Texas, via the Judge Institute of Management Studies in Cambridge (the former Addenbrooke’s Hospital transformed utterly), tells us plenty about Outram’s range and ambition.

He even built a small retail complex in the Netherlands. Plus of course he oversaw successive phases of his unique New House at Wadhurst in Sussex for the Raising family. It is grade I listed now, but is not the only Outram country house: Sphinx Hill, for an Egyptologist built in Oxfordshire, may be incredibly mannered but is an altogether jollier affair.

That he did not build more was not down to any lack of publicity: he produced sumptuous images (either from his own office or by architect-turned artist Carl Laubin) and the media, from the architecture and design magazines to national newspapers, all loved Outram. Much was made of his experiments with concrete – ‘Blitzcrete’ like a Terrazzo but with crunched-up brick in it, and ‘Doodlecrete’ in patterned fast-colour concrete.

We can mourn the ones which got away, for he entered many of the big competitions of the time, and was much published because of this. If his early (1971) competition entry for the Burrell Collection outside Glasgow, conceived as a linked campus of historicist forms, made little impact this cannot be said of some of his later work.

He entered competitions for Pembroke and St Clare’s Colleges in Oxford, Bracken House (the Financial Times building) the Peter’s Hill office development in the City, Epsom racecourse stand, St George’s Hall at Windsor Castle, Compton Verney Opera House (where his Mughal-influenced design came second to Henning Larsen but nothing was ever built anyway), and a private hospital in Milan.

Some projects he was commissioned for did not happen, most notably his 200 Queen Victoria Street office building in London for developer Rosehaugh Stanhope, which would have had trains running through it and which is a personal favourite of his. And had his invited proposal to re-imagine Battersea Power Station come good, what a richly pleasurable pleasure dome London would have had.

Did the sheer intensity of his work put potential clients off? But architecture does not have to be built to exist, especially not in Outram’s case. This book presents the unbuilt on an equal footing with the built. Franklin is a perceptive author. ‘He thought of classicism as a pluralistic, multicultural construct which drew upon the trabeated architectures of non-Western cultures – Sumer, Egypt, China, India and Maya – as well as those of Athens and Rome. It represented not so much a set of rules as a liberation, offering the possibility of an architecture that could be polychromatic, over-scaled, wildly decorated and, above all, unfamiliar,’ he writes.

True enough, and how satisfying to see John, his buildings loved and listed at what is now once again a time of depressing bogged-down Trad versus Mod binarism, offer a way through the swamp.
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Obituary

Architect known for low impact design and pioneering use and development of sustainable materials, whose philosophies were exemplified in his WISE building.

David Lea, who has died aged 82, practised for most of his 50-plus-year career with a deep care for our fragile planet and a need to give people a closer relationship with the natural world. When he knew his time here was coming to an end, he wrote: ‘I see that I have always been amazed by the beauty of nature and the human response to it’. He was also concerned by the advances of capitalism and its impact on vernacular architecture and traditional building techniques, and worried by the increasing lack of creativity and knowledge in architecture.

These ideas were founded in a childhood love of the natural world and education at the University of Cambridge. Enrolling in 1958, he was taught by Leslie Martin, Colin Rowe and Colin St John Wilson, with whom he worked after completing his studies. He joined a London local authority for a short time in the late 1960s but was increasingly unhappy with the lifestyle the city offered, and after six months learning about self-sufficiency with John Seymour in Pembrokeshire, made the move to Wales. In 1976, he set up his home and studio at Ogoronwy, a smallholding in the Snowdonia National Park.

The first work to really bring Lea to public attention was a sheltered housing scheme in Churt, Surrey, begun in 1968. He would be involved with this project for more than 20 years and it reflects a development in his architectural style, from the easy-to-build timber details devised by Walter Segal to more complicated joinery influenced by a visit to Japan in 1975. Student accommodation built for the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, in 1982 was inspired by Cotswold vernacular architecture and saw the reopening of a local quarry to provide stone tiles for its roof.

In a collaboration with Pat Borer, Lea worked on many buildings at the Centre for Alternative Technology in Machynlleth, Wales. At the AtEIC building (2000) they explored natural materials: sheep’s wool insulation, rammed earth walls, and limecrete floors. But it was his largest commission at CAT, for the Wales Institute for Sustainable Education, in the WISE Building, that became a true manifestation of Lea’s philosophies about low-impact building.

Completed in 2010, it was designed to house a growing graduate school and featured monastic study bedrooms alongside classrooms, meeting spaces, studios, a dining hall, and a 7m-tall circular rammed earth lecture theatre. The spaces are all arranged around landscaped courtyards with an almost Japanese feel. Wherever you are in the building there is always a connection to outside; classrooms look out to the piles of slate that surround the complex while in the auditorium a revolving oculus opens up to the sky. I studied there myself, and it was a beautiful, simple and inspiring environment in which to learn.

It was at WISE that Borer and Lea began using hempcrete – a mix of hemp and lime – as a sustainable alternative to concrete, and experiments with the material continued with students at the Welsh School of Architecture.

Lea was an activist at heart. He instilled in students a need to think about the future we were building – and an appreciation of the changing light, of simplicity and of taking inspiration from a site. At a time of environmental crisis, when the way we build has a critical impact on our planet, we need more architects that think and act with his combination of responsibility and creativity.

He is survived by his partner Sylvia Harris and his children Tystan and Teleri from his previous marriage to Awel Irene.

Laura Mark is an architect, critic and keeper of Walmer Yard.

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

Exchange

Grenfell tests specialist mettle
Peter Apps’ sobering article What architects can learn from Grenfell (RIBAJ April p41) raises serious questions about the testing of the products we specify. Can we assume that the tests he refers to were BSI or BBA certified? If so, how could the sales people slant their test results to hide their limitations? Is it time for an industry review of certification to regain our confidence in specifying the right products?

I would find it useful to read an overview of available insulation alternatives. I am disinclined to specify dodgy products even on low-rise projects!

Neil Pollard, Neil Pollard Architect, Somerset

Peter Apps’ article makes a good point about the professionalism required from us architects. I have the greatest sympathy with the members of Studio E in finding themselves exposed by their reliance on technical assurances from suppliers, contractors and, indeed, the building inspectorate. As designers we always used to expect other specialists to be straight and true.

During 25 years in private practice I was fortunate to work with two major US practices on large London projects. It was then that I learned about real professionalism. They knew everybody else’s job backwards and could pick holes in proposals put forward by engineers of all kinds, including fire engineers. Before that, we thought we were pretty good in our practice at designing and putting up buildings, but I became more humble. This served me well in design management on major projects during the last decade of my professional life. I came to realise that you cannot afford to take anything at face value, all advice has to be interrogated, analysed and proved before you can rely on it. This is a lot easier to do when the project is big and the fees large enough to support it, but nevertheless you are at risk as the architect if you do not question everything.

We used to think that a firm of about 20 people was the optimum, large enough to encompass a wide range of skills, small enough to be fast, flexible and adventurous. Now I am not so sure. It is a dangerous world out there and to design buildings safely requires ever more time, care and resources.

George Lisle, Salisbury

The trouble with timber
In contravention of UK policy on sustainability, the encouragement of timber framed building under the guise of ‘modern methods of construction,’ will neither prevent nor discourage the felling of trees.

Any promotion of oak frame buildings is counter to making our indigenous climax flora renewable. Architects need to drastically reduce specifying English oak, western red cedar and iroko.

Hazards from the use of timber in construction are now under review by the insurance industry. Since the governments’ privatisation of its public sector architects, the use of design and build means architects no longer oversee building contracts using their drawings and specifications. Rights to the title ‘architect’ are at risk if we are not master builders.

Michael Gove’s ‘cartel’ of timber frame housebuilders needs to adopt new permanent methods of construction using architects and bricks.

Barrie Moore is an architect and inventor of large format KingBrick

Correction
Kate Macintosh worked with Denys Lasdun but never Berthold Lubetkin (RIBAJ March p62).

Something to get off your chest?
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We welcome letters but retain the right to edit them
A trip to Blackpool Pleasure Beach is one of the most British of summer occupations, but in fact the inspiration behind its construction was American. Trips to New York’s Coney Island prompted William Bean to develop an existing funfair on Blackpool’s South Shore into ‘an American-style amusement park... to make adults feel like children again’ and it opened in 1904.

Bean’s daughter Doris Thompson and her husband Leonard took over in 1929 and began a dramatic rebuild of the park based on the theme parks that Leonard visited in Philadelphia. They employed architect Joseph Emberton, whose design for the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club had represented Britain at the influential 1932 International Exhibition of Modern Architecture, to create ‘a unified, modern design’.

One of Emberton’s new structures was the Fun House, photographed here in 1935 by Charles Howell. It housed an ‘architectural promenade’ through a series of surprising spaces and practical jokes. The streamline moderne facade was decorated with murals by Margaret Blundell and was particularly striking at night, illuminated by neon lettering and light features. It was destroyed by fire in 1992.

Justine Sambrook
architectural acoustic finishes

Oscar Elite in Auriens, Chelsea.

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