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Al-Jawad Pike steps up in Hackney
A century of council housing lessons
Author Gillian Tindall: people and places
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With the Abrahamic Family House, the UAE is positioning itself in the vanguard of interfaith initiatives, with architecture as its medium for this ambition. A city with many publicly permitted faiths and their places of worship is not a new phenomenon. But putting three new houses of worship on one site, designed by Adjaye Associates, in the Middle East, each with the same external and internal dimensions, and created from shared materials, is remarkable. Such effective and coherent architecture makes this project even more so. The commonality of the faiths descended from the teaching of Abraham – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – are revealed in the Abrahamic Family House not because of their similarities, but because of the way detail has been used to differentiate between the three, though it is never used to set them apart. The close physical proximity of the synagogue, church and mosque is underscored in the compelling visual and auditory experience of the permanent exhibition, which is about prayer, words, sound and light. The curatorial focus of the interfaith story, and its geopolitical context, is expertly treated in the ground floor lobby. Inside, seen through a floor to ceiling glass panel, is a century-old olive tree imported from Italy; nearby is an almost sculptural presentation of water as symbolic of purification, and forming the third aspect is the genesis for this project – a signed declaration by the leaders of the UAE and the Islamic and Christian faiths. The Abrahamic Family House is on Saadiyat Island, itself already home to the Louvre Abu Dhabi and other cultural projects in progress that together will become a record of architectural enterprise in the Middle East in the early 21st century. 

Oliver Urquhart Irvine
Before anything else, the architect sought to address connectivity on a fundamental level on the site of a former retail park. In the shadow of both, the sexy brick curves of Peter Barber’s 14-home North Street terrace and the geometric, concrete starkness of Apparata’s House for Artists seem quaint and reactionary by comparison.

Be First pre-empted the maxim ‘where artists go, developers follow’ by tempting them at the outset with a carrot of less-than-market rents for enviable architect-designed living spaces. It might seem a cynical marketing ploy, but artists are just another demographic, and tailoring your product to cater to a specific niche can yield a profit – something the more prosaic Pocket Living has been doing for nearly 20 years. Pocket’s model of working with London councils to create starter homes for local first-time buyers at a 20% discount on market rates has ensured a steady stream of key workers and professional couples buying in to get on the housing ladder, people who would otherwise be priced out of their own neighbourhood.

It’s that aspirational component that drove Pocket Living to take a punt on early career architects rethinking how those lifestyles could be – evidenced here by Reed Watts’ housing for it at Harbard Close just off Whiting Avenue’s 1950s social housing. Appointed in 2019 to carry out a feasibility study which went to Stage 2 and on to completion, it was a steep learning curve for the practice. But here it is; three 4-6 storey blocks, containing 78 one-bed homes, epitomise Pocket’s ethos. Eager young buyers are stacked in identical, well-planned and functional 38m² flats on either side of internal corridors, and accessed from external steel stair cores.
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With profit margins tight, it was incumbent on Reed Watts from the start to achieve all of this on a strict budget. Inspired by the site’s post-war prefab housing – demolished in the 1970s with the site left vacant – the firm looked to volumetric solutions to eke savings from the reduced construction programme, with a boon of less inconvenience to neighbouring residents. The exercise in considered austerity that you see on the busy A124 that divides the flats from the River Rodring is the result of both that initial idea and contingent factors – not least of which was the insolvency of the original contractor in late 2019 followed by the Covid pandemic in 2020. All affected the final design.

But before all this, the architect had sought to address connectivity on a fundamental level. A cul-de-sac hemmed in by a semi-circular curve of the Northern Relief Road, the opening that divides a pair of blocks from the single tower of the three, serves a strategic purpose. The architect points out that had the three blocks run in a line they would have reinforced the peninsular nature of the existing estate from the surrounding development, and Reed Watts felt that would have meant blocks ‘facing one way or the other’. Luckily, infrastructure intervened. A massive underground sewer right there, running under the relief road to a pumping station, would have required costly foundation works to address. The gap has instead become a public pedestrian route through the new blocks to the road and retail areas beyond, helping bed the new blocks into the existing estate and making Harbard Close – well, not a close at all.

Build Offsite Property Assurance (BOPAS) Accreditation, the flats would be unmortgageable. So Reed Watts had to revert to on-site construction. The Grenfell fire also played a part when nervous planners reneged on aspects of their permission, insisting that the approved GRC tiles on timber battens and timber windows be replaced with brick facing and metal frames. But with foundation loadings based on an already-procured light-gauge steel frame on a D&B contract, late change options were limited; it was not without a degree of trepidation that Reed Watts was forced to consider brick slips.

The firm’s collaboration with Sto for blended coloured brick slips bonded onto mesh-reinforced, rendered, insulated panels is oddly satisfying, bearing the curious imprint of craft. Hand-fixed, the manual component was crucial. As a result, you won’t see expected panel or expansion joints, just a notable precision which, working together with the anodised metal Juliet balcony handrails and almost face-fixed glazing frames, creates a Low Countries levels of aesthetic austerity. It works well with the oxblood red of the two expressed external stair cores, the taller of which includes an access lift. The outer faces of these are partly clad

Buildings
Housing

IN NUMBERS
£11.5m construction cost
£2750 cost per m²
4093m² gfa
2 years construction time

Above Block ‘airlock’ entrances are set behind the doors of a ‘walled garden’, part of an over-zealous security strategy.

Below Access staircases to flats all have wide landings, to encourage gradual occupation by residents.

Above Access staircases to flats all have wide landings, to encourage gradual occupation by residents.
in Reglit panels, so they not only act as a useful windbreak in this exposed location but will look good backlit – which they are – by night.

Pocket’s wish to encourage social interaction between residents resulted in stair cores designed wide enough for residents to place pots and planters and offer a sense of ownership. Curiously, the Juliet balconies are part of the same thinking; not just about keeping costs low, it encourages residents to not sequester themselves in their flats but use the common ‘meadow land’ exterior spaces as well as the simply fitted-out bike storage areas, should give residents the assurance to ensure both are better used in the summer months.

Residents moved in over the course of last year and while I might have concerns about the robustness of those brick slip insulated panels, Reed Watts insists they were passed by the NHBC and will take a good kicking. Certainly the development looks unscathed and seems to be bedding in. It’s doing its bit, says the architect, in broadening the estate’s demographic mix, answering a need that wasn’t being met elsewhere. And it seems consciously deferential to what’s already there, although I’m unsure if its continental austerity doesn’t verge on the severe in this context. But looking through windows, the super-efficient, open-plan flats seem happily occupied.

Reed Watts completed the £11.5 million project after two years on site, 18 months after it had originally intended; but for Pocket Living the story continued. Project delays here reportedly contributed £1.3 million to its pre-tax losses of £19 million in the last financial year, which may have precipitated Pocket Living’s recent sale of the Harbard Close freehold to the less-evocatively named ‘Adriatic Land 13.’ Whether its owner, ground rent fund Long Harbour, shares Pocket Living’s founding ambitions, remains to be seen.

Seren is a Fusion Students university accommodation and commercial development in Swansea, South Wales. Built on a brownfield site, the student accommodation was designed by architects Corstorphine & Wright and managed by main contractors, ISG Construction.

Throughout the design process the aspiration was to create a detailed facade that made reference to the copper mined locally, by using a blend of colours to mimic the natural weathering of this metal to patina. Taylor Maxwell worked with Corstorphine & Wright to explain how Anvil metal cladding had been used for this purpose previously and how it could meet their project requirements.

After proposing and testing a number of colour variations and panel sizes, 4,420sqm of A1 fire rated Anvil metal cladding and 300,000 cream and black facing bricks were specified and supplied to the 17-storey development.

Due to its high-profile location and it forming a key part of the regeneration of Swansea, the Seren buildings were designed as a vibrant and aesthetically pleasing landmark that successfully merits being one of the first things seen when stepping out of the train station.

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Photography by Alex Upton.
All hands on decks

A scheme in south London by Studio Woodroffe Papa and Poggi Architecture could signal the revival of deck access housing.

Words: Rory Olcayto Photographs: Tim Crocker

As anyone familiar with British television will know, deck access housing is a shorthand for urban dystopia, cropping up everywhere from police drama Line of Duty to the Channel 4 ident filmed in a rundown patch of London’s Aylesbury Estate. While the tower block is a more obvious lightning conductor for impassioned debate about our housing market and planning framework, government-backed reports in the 1980s cited deck access housing as a root cause of social unrest in Britain’s towns and cities, leading to the demolition of thousands of homes built in the previous two decades.

Yet done well, like the new 111-home complex in Bermondsey’s Dockley Road designed by Anglo-Dutch Studio Woodroffe Papa and Bordeaux-based Poggi Architecture, deck access housing can provide an inclusive, adaptable and healthy answer to the demand for urban homes. The building wraps around a shared courtyard, overlooked by wide galleries that extend onto planted roof terraces on three levels, breaking up the bulk of its outline.

The project is the latest evidence that despite its reputational baggage, deck access is enjoying a design-focused comeback in London. My new publication, Deck Access Housing Design Guide from Pollard Thomas Edwards, explores why this surprising turnaround has happened. A critical factor was the London Housing Design Guide published in 2010, which stressed a preference for dual aspect homes and cited deck access as a viable means of achieving this.

Subsequently, we’ve seen a number of British practices – many involved in drafting the 2010 guidance – complete schemes that evolve the typology in imaginative ways, from Haworth Tompkins’ brick facades for Notting Hill’s Silchester Estate that build on the tradition of early philanthropic dwellings, to Henley Halebrown’s playful bridges, arches and loggias that define its sculptural newbuild additions to the Frampton Park Estate in Hackney.

The Dockley Road scheme occupies a former industrial estate pressed up against a railway viaduct, itself the site of London’s first railway terminus. The new housing is set back from the viaduct, creating a new lane alongside its arches, which are occupied by food producers and wholesalers – part of the London Borough of Southwark’s ‘Low Line’ pedestrian route – and face ground-floor units (including a honey shop) in the development’s single-storey brick base.

The approach to the building along Dockley Road, which leads you through an arch in the viaduct, generates a properly satisfying urban encounter. As you emerge from the tunnel, black-painted steel sections appear to hold the angular, cliff-like composition in place, while the skyward thrust of the nine-storey corner on the lane speaks to a

Decks pull away from the facades over windows.

Full-width balconies on street facades are angled to create differentiation.
split across four cores. These one-, two- and three-bedroom flats sit around a spacious courtyard providing a decent amount of children’s play including a sheltered outdoor room with table tennis and spongy floor that you can imagine appealing to teenage residents. It’s less gloomy than you might imagine too, given the sheer scale of the building. This is partly because the lane-side elevation drops to a single storey, which not only allows daylight deep into the plan, but also creates dynamic views across the railway and city beyond, for residents using the decks. But it’s also because of the effect created by those finely-tuned metal panels. The colour, tonal intensity, even the apparent weight, mass of the building, feel lighter than you might expect – especially if it had been rendered in brick.

On the whole, recent British examples of deck access housing are pretty conservative compared with their more dynamic European counterparts. There are good reasons for this, from public disillusion with modern architecture in general to prescriptive planning standards and Building Regulations, which leave little room for innovation. Many European exemplars, especially those featuring extensive use of timber, would not be permitted in the UK. Dockley Road however, like Studio Woodroffe Papa itself, feels like a blended confection, part British, part European. That’s particularly apparent in the generosity of the decks, and the way they are pulled away from facades to create light wells, improving privacy for rooms overlooking the courtyard while reducing overshadowing of windows on levels below. All homes have balconies too. These outside spaces, in other words, feel both social and functional. Because of the various shared
terraces that the plan generates – like the spacious one at the top of steps connecting the courtyard and first floor – and because of the scale of the building, its urban location and its striking steel frame, walking these decks feels like a fresh and vital new way of experiencing this part of London.

Despite the obvious appeal of deck access, both for efficient planning and opportunities to add value, it remains misunderstood in some quarters. Writing in the guide, critic Owen Hatherley notes that in Britain ‘insurers and mortgage lenders regard access decks with suspicion; planning guides advise against them; they might be enclosed or removed entirely to deter criminal activity’. It makes you wonder: can projects like Dockley Road – high-density housing equating to 308 dual-aspect dwellings per hectare, with circulation that responds to social and urban considerations – change perceptions for good? With the reputational rollercoaster rising fast, decks might once again become the default for affordable mid-rise housing in London.

Rory Olcayto is a writer and critic at Pollard Thomas Edwards, and co-author of The Deck Access Housing Design Guide (Routledge). Buy at ribabooks.com

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Different procurement routes and contextual responses lie behind the success of two high-quality, uplifting housing schemes by Al-Jawad Pike for Hackney Council

Words: Isabelle Priest

Dean Pike and Jessam Al-Jawad had been set up as a practice for under three years (and in the thick of it for about two) when it was appointed to redesign a garage and backland site with housing on Mandeville Street in Clapton, east London, in January 2017. It was an open competition as part of Hackney Council’s initiative to meet housing delivery targets by doing infill developments on small, underused snippet sites, rather than redeveloping existing estates. The idea was that it is less disruptive and more sensitive to residents. The local authority has 30 sites like this and between 2018 and 2022 had nearly 2000 homes completed, under way or approved. By August 2017, Al-Jawad Pike had submitted its scheme for planning and a few months later was commissioned by the council to undertake another brownfield plot five minutes’ walk away. That had come via a mini competition with just one other firm and came about because the local authority was impressed with the work so far. Consequently, the two schemes developed almost in parallel, and completed in that way too.

The two projects share many similarities. They are both built on slivers of sites owned by Hackney Council that had been used as garages and makeshift parking, both adjacent to Victorian school-board primaries.
Mandeville Street had become a thoroughfare. Daubeney Road had an ad hoc community garden; you can still see the homespun mosaic artwork on the retained perimeter wall. Both schemes have accommodated the same number of units too – 11 – and are pedestrianised. However, there are the similarities end. The contexts are quite different. Mandeville Street is higher rise – three storeys rather than two – and the adjacent school towers over an area that’s generally tougher, more urban with fewer trees, mostly made up of post-war social housing and has a refuse centre on the far corner. Daubeney Road is two storeys, intermingling tightly-knit streets of terraced Victorian and post-war housing with a taller housing tower.

Likewise, the resulting schemes reflect these different contexts. The Daubeney Road project, Chowdhury Walk, is more architecturally worked through; crispy detailed and refined windows.

The window is large, beautiful and helps distinguish the entire development with sophisticated subversions. Tori Ann Walk on Mandeville Street is rougher, more robust, warehouse-like and that bit grittier – perhaps partly because it came first and partly because of differences in procurement. ‘At Chowdhury Walk, Hackney Council decided to experiment on two fronts,’ explains Pike. ‘The first was to use CLT construction, the second was by using a traditional contract.’ Tori Ann Walk was design and build, with Al-Jawad Pike appointed by the council to Stage 3, and then reappointed to the contractor for the build.

These differences are what make both schemes successful. Chowdhury Walk is a terrace of 11 houses on the southern side of the site, perpendicular to the street. However, rather than running in a straight line, the houses are staggered towards the road to minimise overlooking front and back, and to engage more directly with the street. Each house therefore juts forward by around 1m, presenting like a stretched-out accordion – their cut-out front door niches all visible at once. Both developments are car-free so on the wall opposite the terrace the garages that were no longer large enough to fit modern cars have been concealed. The paving is permeable and there are intermontine hedgehog boxes to encourage biodiversity and prevent surface flooding.

The granite of the landscape subsequently rises to form a robust and satisfying plinth to the houses, as well as deep defensible planters at the head of the site and in front of each house. These act as a buffer, preventing passers-by from getting uncomfortably close to the ground floor kitchen windows. The granite plinth, meanwhile, is a flourish, the first house on Daubeney Street. Here Al-Jawad and Pike explain, common to Spain and Portugal, but also, I would say, Belgium and northern European architecture too.

Above this datum, the scheme plays out in waterstruck Weinerberger red bricks, beautifully varied in colour to create an overall softness, and laid in traditional English course which is endlessly a joy to see. Across the development there are four two-bed houses, six three-bed houses and one accessible four-bed house. Seven houses are socially rented, and the four nearest to Daubeney Street are private sale to help fund, in combination with Hackney Council’s wider building programme, the entire project. The four-bedroom accessible unit, designed with a specific local family in mind, is at the furthest end where the ground floor can be more generously as it steps down to single-storey. The rhythm of types is otherwise blended through the terrace – three-bedroom houses identified by two windows at the first floor level, rather than one for two-beds, which adds variation and shows the practice’s desire to individualise. Monopitched roofs slope away from the street.

The rear elevation of the houses was the aspect that had to be most worked through. The terrace backs onto the gardens of another row of houses just metres away. This meant many party wall agreements, but also many tricky planning objections from residents. To reduce overlooking, the regular window in the back bedroom was swapped for a porthole and a side window that faces away inserted into the concertina corner between each house.

However, the window that identifies the scheme is that on the blind wall of the first house on Daubeney Street. Here Al-Jawad Pike was encouraged to be bold, and its upside-down arched form hovering in the stairwell is inspired by windows common to Victorian end of terraces – only the other way up. The window is large, beautiful and helps distinguish the entire development with extra character and quality.

Such architectural embellishments are not particularly present at Tori Ann Walk. However, it does have its own quirks. Unlike Chowdhury Walk, Tori Ann Walk combines flats with individual houses. Again, it is
long narrow site with a L-shape. Here, because it backs onto Mandeville Primary School, the challenge was that it couldn't be one long terrace. To fit in the required number of homes and avoid overlooking, houses in the middle would have had to be single-aspect. Al-Jawad Pike's solution was to split the plot into four separate buildings: apartment blocks at either side of the site that bookend a short mews of two three-bed social rent houses separated by courtyards. The apartment block to the east on Mandeville Street contains three one-bedroom social rent apartments, one of which is accessible. The larger block along Oswald Street has three one-bed and three two-bed flats that are shared ownership.

The practice uses repeated gables, a dark brick ground floor, red brick upper levels and red concrete precast beams between the houses to link the scheme together, as well as design details like brick soffits in the entrance ways and deep loggias. Windows are flush on the ground floor and set back above. The larger block on Oswald Street was originally intended as three townhouses with a gable fronting each, but when these changed to apartments, rather than realign the windows, the practice offset them so they do not correspond with the roofs. Likewise, a mound running front to back across the site was incorporated to deal with a flooding risk that became apparent at the last minute. It gives the pedestrian through-route a curious hump, but it's no bad thing.

In terms of performance, both schemes use gas, but are highly insulated and low energy. Chowdhury Walk is triple-glazed and the radiators are 'about the size of A4 sheets of paper', reports Al-Jawad Pike. Hackney Council demands a 35% improvement on Part L. The projects both also integrate solar panels. At Tori Ann Walk, this is done using an innovative, complete zinc standing seam roof called Flextron by Tata Steel.

As the houses are now occupied, it wasn't possible to go inside. However, from the street it's clear that people are appropriating their homes, with loggias full of potted plants, daffodils growing in railing planters and children's toys sprawled across the back gardens. Tori Ann Walk's dark bricks are suffering from salting, which adds to their present grittiness, but both schemes exhibit a major welcome investment in urban improvement, including densification that encourages greater participation and socialisation. At Chowdhury Walk in particular, the exterior quality of the houses is as good and elegant as any I've seen, and fun too.
This is what we want

A pioneering Community Land Trust housing scheme keeps homes affordable – and architect Archio started by asking neighbours how they could benefit too.

Words: Chris Foges  Photographs: French and Tye

Balconies overlook a terrace shared with estate residents.
Standing outside the front door of his new home, Alex Ingram is counting his blessings. ‘With rising prices I was getting to the stage where I thought I wouldn’t be able to stay in London, near my friends and work,’ he says. At Citizens House, a small community-led development in Lewisham, he was able to buy a flat at a third below market price, whose future value is pegged to local incomes. ‘A phenomenal amount of stress has gone from my life,’ he says, ‘and I’m safeguarding an affordable home for somebody else in the future. That feels really good.’

‘It’s a sentiment that reflects a remarkable generosity found in every stage of the project. Its genesis, 10 years ago, came when the charity Lewisham Citizens identified housing as a key issue. One member knew of an innovative development under way at a former workhouse infirmary in Bow, containing the city’s first Community Land Trust – or CLT – housing. The model, which originates in the US, involves non-profit organisations in developing affordable homes for rent or sale, with an eye to the wider interests of local people, and while ensuring that ownership of the land remains in trust as a community asset.

The charity paired up with the same organisation, London CLT, and its volunteers trawled the borough for suitable sites, finding 43. Eventually Lewisham Council offered the free transfer of a ropey collection of garages in the corner of a post-war estate for what would be the first housing in the city to be delivered by a CLT without a commercial developer.

The next step was door-knocking, leafleting and setting up an estate residents’ steering group,’ says one of the volunteers, assistant headteacher Janet Emmanuel. ‘We didn’t want the first thing neighbours knew about it to be when trucks rolled in.’

Architects bidding for the job were invited to present themselves at a community pizza party, followed by a public vote. Archio got the nod. ‘I don’t think architecture gets any more X-Factor,’ says director Mellis Haward. ‘But it really established the dynamic of the project, and made it very collaborative from the start.’

A three-day workshop on site with estate residents helped to define the design objectives. ‘We brought cutting mats and tools so people could be architects for the day,’ says Haward. There were useful invitations into back gardens to get a feel for light and views, and some surprises too. Archio thought estate residents might like the development to provide allotments or a new bit of green space. ‘They said they had enough already,’ adds Haward. ‘What they wanted was somewhere that everyone on the estate could pull up a chair for a chat.’

The scheme Archio put together reflects that input together with some complexities typical of small backland sites – not least a gas main. Massing of the four-storey, 11-flat building suggests three blocks stepped up a plan. It is set close to the boundary of a primary school on the eastern edge of the site to form a sunny piazza to the west. Lightwells are notched into both ends, so bedrooms on the upper floors don’t overlook neighbours. The residents approved. When the planning application went in with 107 letters of support, the council initially suspected fraud.

As you approach the completed building through the estate, its pale grey brickwork and projecting balconies seem to lighten the architectural atmosphere, and enhance the apparent openness of the brick-paved terrace out front.

Built for £2.5 million, the block has a strong identity but few frills; there’s no set-back at the top or deep recess at the entrance. ‘They add cost but not value for residents,’ says Archio director Kyle Buchanan. ‘It’s a nice design challenge to produce something good with not much’. Liveliness comes from the way metal balconies are shuffled across the staggered west facade, rather than stacked. With thick concrete floors, Buchanan observes, there’s no problem

in putting living rooms above bedrooms, and the arrangement gives each balcony some breathing space while remaining close enough to its neighbours for a chat over the balustrade.

First-floor balconies double as porches to ground-floor flats, which are entered directly from the piazza and have little back gardens. A second-floor balcony makes a lofty canopy to the main entrance, which opens onto a brick-lined passage leading to an external stair.

Open to the elements, the curved steel stair is economical but designed with intent. The architects imagine the people now living in the building getting to know each other through their comings and goings. Deep access decks on every floor might allow for a small table and chairs in the shared space.

Inevitably, the mix of one- and two-bed flats conforms to London’s minimum space standards, but sensitive planning means they feel light and spacious. On one side the flats have entrance halls big enough to put a desk in. ‘The tricky thing with deck access for three flats per floor is that two are entered at the corner, and you can end up with a lot of corridor,’ says Buchanan. ‘By giving it an extra two square metres we’ve made a room’. On the other side, long corridors are wide enough for two

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people to pass comfortably, and with windows at both ends. Most flats are triple aspect without compromising neighbours’ privacy.

The balconies are a highlight, overlooking the terrace. Down below, the mat of brick is extended to the edge of perimeter parking bays, making it seem larger, with the car-free area subtly indicated by rocks. Neighbours previously avoided the ‘intimidating’ garages; now they stroll through en route to the shops. The terrace will host the estate’s summer barbecue.

Everyone seems to have got something out of this project, through a commitment to the wider interests of a community. The new owners got their homes, of course, but also describe the sense of belonging that the neighbours’ participation gives. For Archio it has been highly rewarding – and perhaps the entrée to a fascinating field: its current projects include inter-generational co-housing, community-led schemes for self-builders in London and single mothers in Bristol, and work with several new CLTs. ‘We are particularly drawn to projects where our work might have a wider social impact,’ says director Kyle Buchanan. ‘And the ones we win do seem to require a regard for more than how many units you can get out of a site.’

For London CLT, it’s proof of concept at what could be a critical moment. ‘We need 300,000 homes a year but the private sector can only provide 200,000,’ says executive director Oliver Bulleid – an architect by background. ‘We can be part of the solution.’ A report published in March by the Community Land Trust Network counts 468 British CLTs – more than anywhere else in the world – with many more forming, and estimates that they could deliver 278,000 homes, alone or with development partners. ‘We need funding and more land that’s treated as a community asset, not a commodity,’ says Bulleid, ‘but this could be the start of something amazing.’


Credits
Client London CLT
Architect Archio
Campaigners Lewisham Citizens
Project manager BPM Project Management
Quantity surveyor Alistair Russell
Contractor Rooff
Grant funding London Housing Fund, Greater London Authority
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Below left Light fills west-facing kitchens and living rooms.
Below Brick detail adds interest to the entrance.

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On the local wavelength

ADAM Architecture’s Nansledan housing outside Newquay builds an intimate Cornish feel with texture, colour and variety – and some strong local materials

Words: Eleanor Young

Nansledan’s road names are carved into slate: Bownder Agravaen, Stret Goryan, Garth Iger. This is Cornish housing drawing on its roots. Seeking directions through the gently curving streets I am told to follow the road round by the double blue houses then cut through by the Cornish house, ‘Yellow and black, you know?’

There are few housing developments where you could navigate by the houses, most are too similar. But everywhere you look in this extension to surf town Newquay there is a new delight. The curve of a lead-lined porch, a tiny unexpected window, a granite sill, pretty coloured terrace, a bay window, pair of dormers, slate hung porch. Someone has enjoyed designing Nansledan and that joy translates into the streetscape, little roads you want to explore with tall houses, and little set backs. Even the parking courts are fun with timber and tin sheds on garages – in fact they are so good we will come back to them.

There at around 640 houses at Nansledan, with another 100 under way; the plan is for 4000, split into neighbourhoods or quarters. It is all on Duchy of Cornwall land, long held by King Charles and now passed on to Prince William. Project design started with a sketch by Leon Krier. ADAM Architecture took over with an Enquiry by Design engagement process in 2005. Encouraged by chief planning officer Phil Mason, the process was widened to encompass the whole of Newquay and its 50 year future. What was needed to make a better town, less reliant on high volume, low spending tourists? The answers that came back were affordable homes, family houses, employment opportunities, new railway, school and medical centre. That set the background and helped crystallise ambitions for a mixed development at Nansledan and the subsequent planning applications for 200, then 300 homes and their build-out.

Two significant administrative tools have made a huge difference to the continued growth of Newquay: the SANG (Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space) plan and the town’s Local Plan. There is a huge area of recreation ground, a large area for industrial and commercial development with a rail park and ride scheme, and a lot of public open space. The local town square is the heart of the development and is now the site of various community initiatives.

1. Recreation ground
2. Industrial development
3. Rail park and ride
4. Public open space
5. High street
6. Town square
7. School
8. Suitable alternative natural green space (SANG)
and quality of Nansledan. The first is a Local Development Order, one of the regulatory incentives the government hopes will open up Investment Areas, as announced in the March budget. It is worth seeing how it was done in Nansledan and the freedom it has brought since 2021. ‘It was a big upfront cost,’ says ADAM Architecture project director Hugh Petter. ‘A lot of documents including parameter plans with uses and densities, equal to super outline consent.’ There are periodic checks from the council but so long as plans remain within the agreed parameters development can go ahead with no planning risk to either housebuilders or commercial organisations which might want a base there. And it has a flexibility that detailed consent does not.

In place from the start was the second bedrock of development, a specially drawn up Common Key suppliers
Roofing slate
Trevillet Slate, Penryn Quarry, Wakes, Burlington Stone, Cumbria
Granite for kerb stones and cobbles
De Lank Quarry, Bodmin Moor
Rustic stone for housing and Cornish hedges
Callywith Quarry, Bodmin
Cut slate for street signage and sills
Delabole Slate Quarry, north Cornwall

Above Sometimes it is the positioning of the houses on a curving street that brings charm to Nansledan.

Below You can cut through the parking courts, you might even keep an eye on comings and goings from your first floor flat or office over the garage.

The resolution was pragmatic but even that would have been unachievable without the control of the Common Aspiration contract.

The rules that are being policed are drawn from the Design Manual and its companions on landscape and streets. James was with a contractor before joining the Duchy to work on Poundbury and he is quite brutal about what is being built here: ‘They’re simple buildings with a few gob-ons, they’re not difficult.’ He is right, to some extent, these are box buildings on the whole and the lovely details that catch the eye don’t alter the fundamental buildability.

Can it be true that it is gob-ons that give the houses elegance and imbue them with the warmth of pastel? Thank you for clarifying that.

Key suppliers
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Granite for kerb stones and cobbles
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Aspiration contract with a 10-year review between the Duchy and the three housebuilders it works with on the site. All sit on the executive board, along with architect Petter and the Duchy’s estates director Peter James. The housebuilders each take on tranches of land with the mix of road hierarchies and house typologies established, their standard layouts fit into these. But this is not joint control, it builds in the marking-up of working drawings at 1:20, with a focus on the public elevations, with potential reworking of ‘ugly’ or incorrect classical detail and for Petter and team to give direction on colour and highlights. This policing extends onto site, so when housebuilders fixed problems with ground conditions by breaking up the roofline of a paired villa; there was a quick intervention. The resolution was pragmatic but even that would have been unachievable without the control of the Common Aspiration contract.

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Working with Thrislington, Bobrick, the global washroom accessory brand, has created the Fino Collection. A beautiful line of washroom accessories designed for both high-end installations and to complement Thrislington’s range of washroom products.

Crafted with high-quality satin finish stainless steel, seamless construction, well-defined edges and concealed hardware, Fino offers the perfect balance of function and design sensibility.

Our new Fino Grab Bars are manufactured in the UK with 14 gauge (2mm) high quality stainless steel machined flanges with hidden fixings and offer safety, beauty and a timeless design statement. They are available in a range of UK and international sizes.

Top Walls or railings are used for boundaries to public space.

Above Road names in Delabole slate are set on the walls of houses.

Below left Door and window embellishments avoid a formula.

Below right Clapboard adds variety on less formal streets

do not thrive in this salty air without protection – so had to go in after the buildings, thus the distinctly diminutive holm oaks and Monterey pines.

A step up in scale for commercial buildings alongside a busier road is marked architecturally with forays into arts and crafts and art deco. A primary school designed by Francis Robert Architects, at the outer end of the development area, serves Nanledan and its neighbouring village. It sits marooned in fields but with an aspect softened by its red tiles, arts and crafts details and natural ventilation chimneys. A nursery in the midst of the development has a similar charm, its gable end facing the street with a little campanile and a date stone; it fits the feel of the houses. ADAM
Architecture’s art deco shops (and a flat block), paired with roundabouts and tarmac currently, lack sufficient decoration to give them a lift; they have the symmetry but not the hint of curvaceous voluptuousness and look like cheap anywhere blocks. However, they do create spaces for jobs in Nansledan, from web optimisers in the new office hub to a bespoke hat maker, and a Cornish food outlet and café that picks up the pastels of the houses in its crockery.

That is one sort of sustainability ticked off. There is no disguising that building 4000 houses has a massive carbon cost – even if the spoil is being shifted to what will be a community orchard just the other side of the site, running into meadows being cultivated on old farmland. But the buildings already exceed targets for the RIBA 2030 Climate Challenge. The team puts it down to high quality construction, including air tightness, mass sourcing of local materials with long term relationships with local stone and slate quarries, and blocks using recycled china clay, another Cornish source. The housebuilders aim to reach LETI recommended levels and use Passivhaus principles, with one switching to timber structures to help.

As Nansledan progresses, at a rate of 100 houses a year or so, the character of the eight quarters will emerge – as already outlined in the Design Manual. And there will be more nearby places to walk to through these walkable neighbourhoods. Can it be a truly local place or will it end up as a giant holiday village? Short term whole-house lets are not allowed, but it is harder to stop second homes. I spotted a typical touristy sign of ‘gone surfing’ through a window. And a new road to Newquay Airport will supply a faster route to London for commuters and holiday makers. But the team hopes to keep delivering houses for local people and so far 70% of the buyers have had a Cornish postcode, with three of the foreman and site managers among them.

It is all a royal fantasy? James argues not. There is still a profit requirement. This scheme is more about longer term ambition and the ability to invest in enduring quality urban space and landscape. Petter stresses the importance of doing things differently and not just selling land to housebuilders for the highest price. If it is a dream it certainly feels more grounded than Poundbury. Take a trip, perhaps stay over, get in some surfing too...
Enter now: Department 4 Education

The department store has seen its popularity decline, but more schools are needed than ever. Could one become the other? This competition challenges you to imagine how it could be done.

**The Brief**

Choose any UK department store, redundant or not, and show us how it might be turned into a small secondary school for 750 pupils with an average class size of 30. Inspired by the likes of Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood's 1960 Fun Palace perhaps, how can the plan form accommodate new educational uses? How could the complex programme and adjacencies of classrooms, labs, refectory, library and school hall play out within the deep plan? Could you knock through floor plates or repurpose the atrium – and what about roof level? Will it fill a playground or even a playing field? And how does the new programme manifest outside? The Victorian schoolhouse was intrinsic to the city fabric – how might it be again? Using SterlingOSB Zero as one of the main components in your intervention, show us how your design generates an exciting 21st century school.

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In response to global warming, the redesign of existing buildings has become the most compelling preoccupation of architects. The general public has also begun to appreciate the carbon cost of demolition, notably through the campaign to retain the Marks & Spencer building on Oxford Street.

Architects who specialise in altering buildings may have been pioneers in minimising embodied carbon, albeit unwittingly, but we also seek to contribute to residents’ lives and the attractiveness of surroundings: the full Vitruvian triad of commodity, firmness and delight. Therefore we do not like the description ‘retrofit’, which seems to limit our role to one of thermal upgrading. I also dislike the term ‘conservation architect’, which suggests a narrow technical focus on materials and repair.

Naming what we do has been a source of confusion for decades. First it was called ‘preservation’, in reaction to wartime destruction and later comprehensive redevelopment. Then it became ‘conservation’, recognising the need for continuity and change. Americans call it ‘adaptive reuse’. Others have called it ‘refurbishment’, ‘renewal’ or ‘renovation’ — all clunky words that deny its place as a branch of the art of architecture.

I think we should be known as ‘redesign architects’, just as architects for new buildings are called ‘design architects’. Names inform perception, and altering buildings should be recognised as equal to the creation of new ones — as it has been throughout most of history. We must welcome a new focus on redesigning buildings for a sustainable future, but let us ensure that the new layers and the totality are worthy of the name of architecture.
**Town and country**

Securing planning permission turned out not to be the biggest issue with Hayhurst & Co’s radical build in London’s Clyde Circus conservation area.

Words: Jan-Carlo Koehnke   Photographs Killian O’Sullivan

Above: The site is a dead-end lane in Haringey’s Clyde Circus conservation area.

**Tom van Schelven, client, Claire Taggart, associates, and Nick Hayhurst, Hayhurst & Co Architects**

It seems a very tucked-away site?

**Tom van Schelven:** The site, in an unmade lane in the Clyde Circus Conservation Area in Haringey, was ideal for us. There was a 1980s building on the plot that had been haphazardly extended. At the end of the lane is woodland and a Victorian coach house. Modern flats had been built further towards the road.

**Nick Hayhurst:** The language of the house emerged from the history of the site. We considered mimicking the later brick development but that would have reinforced the sense of a ‘street’, which this site never was. It was a ‘working’ lane of orchards and animals so our design reflects historic use and aspires to rural rather than urban typologies. That’s also why we inverted the normal house form, which was lower and less protruding. It helped that we proposed lowering the overall built height. It is also set back on the lane side where the original house at the end of 2018, when everything went on hold due to Covid. But demolition began in autumn 2020 and Eurban’s CLT frame arrived the week before Christmas – critically before the UK left the EU. It just took 10 days to install. The CLT arrived in a 10 days to install. The CLT arrived in a protective film which stayed on during construction, which was handy since it rained a lot when it was going up. We had told Tom and Amandine to expect to go through the process twice, but we got consent in 8 weeks without any changes. Tom liaised with the neighbours about the design early on and when he told the local environmental group supported the idea that it was going to be a low-impact CLT structure. In the end, we didn’t get a single objection and even received letters of support.

**Why did you choose to build with CLT?**

**CT:** We had a limited budget so we chose a simple block form for the house – for its material and constructional efficiencies and a form factor for thermal efficiency. We wanted to reduce embodied carbon, but it was also about the potential speed of construction. The client moved into the original house at the end of 2018, we got consent in 2019 and contractor pricings came back in March 2020 – then everything went on hold due to Covid. But demolition began in autumn 2020 and Eurban’s CLT frame arrived the week before Christmas – critically before the UK left the EU. It just took 10 days to install. The CLT arrived in a protective film which stayed on during construction, which was handy since it rained a lot when it was going up. We had told Tom and Amandine to expect to go through the process twice, but we got consent in 8 weeks without any changes. Tom liaised with the neighbours about the design early on and when he told the local environmental group supported the idea that it was going to be a low-impact CLT structure. In the end, we didn’t get a single objection and even received letters of support.

**NH:** CLT forms almost all of the dividing walls and we used it in detail too, creating consistency with CLT panels for the doors. With no frames or architraves it keeps referencing the agricultural aesthetic we wanted. In the end, the CLT was the project’s most expensive part – about £100,000 with design fees.

**The CLT procurement was tricky.** Eurban required staged payments well before the start on site as all the work was being done up front. At design sign-off, it was necessary to pay 90% of the fee, with only 10% outstanding by the time the structure was installed. Also, its lead-in time was 20 weeks, but as there wasn’t 20 weeks’ of slab and drainage groundworks managing the programme was critical to avoid site downtime. Compared to a traditional construction programme, it required some leaps of faith. But once the CLT was up, you could have multiple trades in at the same time, so we could place orders for glazing, roofing and cladding with more surety of structural dimensions and openings.

**What influenced your other material choices?**

**CT:** Well, obviously the agricultural aesthetic that we were looking for. The design is open-plan at ground level and runs from kitchen and dining space on the south side to the north-facing living space at the rear with the central rooflight space, like a kind of Moroccan riad.
The green wall at the front, on a galvanised steel secondary structure, makes a big difference to the internal temperatures of south facing rooms. Polycarbonate sliding screens filter light and the planters behind act as a green curtain with passive heat mitigation. To ensure fixing bolts for the galvanised frame did not pop through to the internal wall, we put them in the small void above the CLT beams where the services run.

NH: The rear elevation’s recycled cellulose and black bitumen corrugation is cheap as chips and meets building regulation – and is a bona fide material for agricultural cladding. We specified high-quality Schueco glazing throughout but to keep costs down on for the glass panels and doors at the rear we designed them as big as they could be - 2.2m- while avoiding size premiums. The whole glazing contract, including the rooflights, came to only £20,000.

How does the building perform environmentally? NH: It was fabric first. We wanted to achieve environmental performance through the design itself rather than by adding kit. There’s no MVHR so all heat mitigation is achieved through natural means. That meant giving depth to the elevations, through layering and screening on the south and insulating on the others. Exterior walls have a u-value of 0.16W/m²K. The 26m² central rooflight glazing was pitched to the north to mitigate heat gain with two actuators for cooling through stack effect conditioning. The whole roof has a u-value of 0.13W/m²K. Air source heat pumps on the roof serve the under-floor heating system and heat a 400 litre hot water tank. A battery charged by 24m² of roof-mounted PV keeps the house virtually off-grid in summer and can be charged using off-peak electricity the rest of the year. The whole building’s embodied carbon is 373KgCO₂eq/m².

What was the biggest challenge?
CT: There were LABC warranty issues about exposing the CLT; they insisted on a vapour control layer on the inside face, despite a condensation risk analysis from the engineer saying one wasn’t needed. Incorporating it would have meant a plasterboard finish to the CLT to hide the VCL, which would have scuppered our material exposure idea. In the end we secured a warranty with Protek as designed. TVS: Even with Protek, it involved a lot of protracted and involved conversations. I couldn’t help feeling that while this process must have been done hundreds of times before, that we seemed to be going through it for the first time. It’s almost as if building administration doesn’t keep pace with building technologies. While this was the most painful process for us as clients, we couldn’t be happier. The project came in at under £3000/m².

The green-painted steel stair and gallery access is the centrepiece of the central double-height volume.
How to design schemes that are at home in their place

How do we make developments that belong? Andrew Matthews and Stephen Proctor look at how design codes can encourage deeper investigations into a narrative of place.

The UK’s housing crisis remains a major challenge and barely a day goes by without statistical-laden articles warning of the grave dangers our dysfunctional housing market poses for the future.

The government still relies heavily on the private sector and particularly volume housebuilders for the supply of most new housing. Operating primarily on greenfield and edge-of-settlement locations, these developments tend to attract significant local opposition which stalls supply. A new way of thinking about design codes could help.

Not surprisingly, successive local and national governments have launched policy initiatives to address the dilemma, including local design codes and supplementary guidance, while advisory bodies like The Building Better Building Beautiful Commission and the NPPF attempt to influence what is hoped will be a more appropriate design response.

Despite this many communities still feel that one housebuilder’s model looks much like another. There are many reasons why local people resist these developments. It is not all about design of course; road congestion, local services and air quality all play a part, but design is still a significant factor with many feeling new development does not ‘belong’.

The wider place

We have always felt that context and settlement form lie at the heart of the problem and often quote Gordon Cullen, who observed in a 1974 design report for a new settlement in Maryculter to the southwest of Aberdeen: ‘People live in houses, but where do the houses live? If they are homeless, then all we are left with is the typical endless, featureless suburbia.’

Cullen’s concerns ran deeper than what we might think beautiful, or what prescriptive planning and design code guidance might offer. He reminds us that new settlements need grounding in place, not in a superficial way (pantiles, porches and bargeboards) but in a manner that interprets topography, boundaries, landscape, settlement morphology and local typologies.

He precisely illustrates this in his design narrative for Maryculter – a reinterpretation of historic Scottish kale yard enclosures. There is a kind of authenticity about housing design that, like this, invests time in considering these characteristics. While the public might not understand how designers manage this process (why should they?), they certainly seem to recognise it when they see it, and in our experience the result is a proactive, rather than antagonistic engagement.

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Grounding place can start with the topography as written into our place names which Proctor & Matthews used for St Albans and Dacorum’s Strategic Sites Design Guidance.

Right: Grounding place can start with the topography as written into our place names which Proctor & Matthews used for St Albans and Dacorum’s Strategic Sites Design Guidance.
linear forms of ancient burgage plots, or the distinctive garden walls that connect dwellings in some of Britain’s historic villages, are examples of the UK’s defining regional vernacular architecture – as are regional farmsteads or vernacular farmyard configurations. All these may trigger a specific design response to the clustering and orientation of new homes in an exposed and windswept landscape.

However, regional vernacular should not precipitate thoughtless replication of agricultural structures, projecting bays, dormers, and bargeboards. This devalues the original typology and ignores the needs of 21st century living.

Certain locations have distinctive spatial characteristics: the collegiate and monastic courts of Cambridge; the wynds and closes of Edinburgh Old Town; the twittens of Hastings, Brighton and Hove, Kent’s gridded orchards and hop field landscapes and the snickets of Oldham. Others have hidden or less obvious defining characteristics requiring a more forensic approach to contextual analysis.

The nature of existing settlement edges needs to be clearly understood and it is often the precise configuration and celebration of boundaries that form the defining characteristics of existing neighbourhoods. A contemporary design approach needs to be clearly understood and it is often the precise configuration and celebration of boundaries that form the defining characteristics of existing neighbourhoods. A contemporary
example of this is the edge of the new neighbourhood at Abode, in Great Knighton, Cambridge, which is defined by a strong profile of house gables and connecting garden walls at the plantation edge, reflecting the scale and grain of historic fenland burgage plots.

**Edge houses**

A similar strategy is adopted in a more recent proposal for a new village, Little Impney, set within the grounds of the Impney Hall Estate in Droitwich, Worcestershire. Interconnected houses and garden walls define a strong silhouette to the landscape edges while the orthogonal layout and footprint of the original walled garden (demolished in the latter half of the 20th century) inspired a new defined quarter of ‘parterre’ houses and gardens. In these locations opportunities exist to create new dwelling types which help to define a strong transition from built form to landscape. ‘Edge houses’ were similarly explored in studies for Inholm, a new neighbourhood of around 400 homes at Northstowe, Cambridgeshire, which was inspired by the form of ancient settlement enframements discovered during local archaeological investigations. These help to define the settlement edge – a clear threshold between landscape and built form for the new quarter.

The design narratives that grow out of these studies should be reinforced by a similar approach to the development of a specific architecture and use of materials. While modern manufacturing and transportation allows mass produced goods to be deployed across the country, this does little to anchor new housing developments in a local context. These investigations allow an insight often squeezed out of fast track design, and gives homes a better chance to belong.

Andrew Matthews and Stephen Proctor are founder directors at Proctor & Matthews Architects.
Biodiversity Net gain – a powerful tool for sustainable design

Biodiversity Net Gain becomes a legal requirement on all new development in November. It should be viewed as a powerful tool to promote smart and sustainable development design, rather than an ecological planning hurdle supporting biodiversity. But use of natural green space within development schemes is not always compatible with maximising the biodiversity value of land. Some habitat types and species are sensitive to regular disturbance and require conservation management techniques that are not feasible within a busy development site, for example grazing. Further, natural spaces are not always aesthetically what residents or users want to see, and small fragmented and highly disturbed habitats can offer limited value. It isn’t surprising that for many developments, squeezing in the project footprint alongside an overall increase in biodiversity value is unrealistic and unachievable. The reality is often that even when high value habitats have been retained, created or enhanced on a site, there is still a residual deficit in biodiversity that must be met elsewhere.

Environment Bank provides a simple, auditable, compliant and risk-free solution to meet that deficit.

Through establishing a national network of Habitat Banks, Environment Bank has launched BNG Units. This pioneering product enables effective compliance with mandatory BNG requirements by giving developers a nationwide access to offsite Biodiversity Units across the UK – now.

Habitat Banks are landscape scale nature recovery projects that deliver a measurable uplift in biodiversity value by establishing high quality semi-natural habitats. In line with best practice ecological principles, Habitat Banks offer bigger, better and more joined up nature recovery solutions, ensuring the best outcomes for nature. The uplift is measured by the Biodiversity Metric and translates into BNG Units that developers can buy to meet BNG planning requirements.

Environment Bank estimates there could be demand for as many as 6,200 offsite BNG Units each year. Unit will vary regionally and by habitat type but is estimated at £20-25,000.

Environment Bank’s director of ecology, Emma Towsey, says: ‘We are investing more than £200million in these amazing places for nature to recover and thrive, as well as providing much needed investment in rural communities. We can then use the BNG rules to turn these habitat into a ready supply of BNG Units that developers are already using to deliver their BNG requirements.

‘It’s a simple model that allows the developer to pay and walk away “risk free”. It is fully compliant with planning rules and offers supply and cost certainty to the developer. We believe that the cost of transforming the plight of nature in this country is less than 0.5% of the overall project value of a typical development.

‘BNG is enabling a private market that brings economic visibility to biodiversity restoration that delivers brilliant ecology outcomes alongside solutions to unlock sustainable development across the country.

The benefits of early engagement

Implementing BNG onsite and offsite can be challenging and requires simple and early site planning including expert ecological advice, but it has many potential rewards for all involved parties. Architects, developers and project partners can minimise their biodiversity impact, reduce their need for offsite BNG solutions and maximise their developable areas if they engage with BNG and use the Metric early and iteratively in their journey towards planning consent. Engaging early in the design process creates an opportunity for genuinely innovative design, in which many benefits can be overlaid in the same space.

Experienced ecologists can say what habitat should and can feasibly be retained and managed within the site and propose appropriate habitat creation proposals. They will also be able to provide advice on how the landscaping and green space designed into a scheme can be adapted and managed to maximise any possible biodiversity gains, while meeting wider environmental needs such as noise abatement, flood retention or recreational space. A long-term Habitat Management Plan, to be funded and implemented for at least 50 years, would need to be developed for all habitats that are to contribute to BNG calculations. The risk of not engaging early in BNG is that any onsite deficit cannot easily be brought to the programme offsite, leading to a need to buy government’s statutory credits, which will be purposely priced to be uncompetitive against market value.

Early engagement with ecologists, BNG tools and application of the mitigation hierarchy reduces biodiversity impacts, enables high quality sustainable design, manages consenting risks, and protects project viability.
When this piece was commissioned, it was suggested I write about the lessons that past council housing schemes might hold for current practice. It was a good idea but I hesitated. First, we live in a very changed world – between 1945 and 1979, we built on average 126,000 council houses a year, now that figure is around 6,000. That might in itself take care of some of the lessons to be drawn from the past. Secondly, are there really easy lessons? One generation’s big idea tends to get overturned by the next and that is in turn superseded. And, of course, ideas don’t exist in a vacuum; the best-laid plans are very often victims of far broader dynamics. So this is rather about lessons learnt and unlearnt, and the changing circumstances that shape the limits of what architects and planners might achieve.

Arguably, the primary feature of past council housing was its basic overall form – the estate, a term that now carries its own baggage. These began in rather bijou form; London County Council’s Old Oak Estate in west London, begun in 1911, represents the early ideal – arts and crafts-style cottages in a landscaped setting. The housing speaks for itself but its green environs merit emphasis. The same is true of the much larger, multi-storey Churchill Gardens Estate built by Westminster City Council after World War II. Its architects, Philip Powell and Hidalgo Moya, then in their twenties, commissioned a former head gardener at Kew to design an unfussy but verdant environment that softened the lines of the scheme’s glass and concrete slab blocks. Its contrast with many high rise schemes of the 1960s, set all too often in bleak and barren terrain, is clear.

Building at scale
The generous financial regime of the 1919 Housing Act, embodying the wartime promise of ‘Homes for Heroes’, briefly strengthened the ideals of Old Oak but central government support was cut in 1921 in an early iteration of austerity. The laudable desire to build at scale to rehouse the many in desperate need played its own part in the declining standards of design that followed. London County Council built some 25,000 houses on the inter-war Becontree Estate, and while architects pointed out that this total comprised 91 different house types, commentators were critical of the estate’s monolithic mass and uniformity. That problem of scale might be one that contemporary architects of social housing would be pleased to share but, overall, the frustratingly obvious lesson here is that quality is not achieved on the cheap. Becontree was also criticised for its lack of community, in contrast apparently to that found in the fetid slums it replaced, and post-war building efforts focused heavily on neighbourliness. The ‘Neighbourhood Unit’, promoted by the planner Patrick Abercrombie, proposed a more or less self-contained area with core amenities based on the catchment area of the local infant school. In the Stowlawn Estate in Bilston, West Midlands, Charles Reilly, formerly professor of architecture at the University of Liverpool, envisaged all-purpose community centres and village greens. That was scotched by the Ministry of Health and Housing on cost grounds but perhaps it was really just too fanciful. The reality is that the ‘Neighbourhood Unit’ was outdated even as it was being implemented, superseded by greater geographic mobility and new forms of socialising.

Necessity and good intent
If changing context did for that benign form of social engineering, it will be interesting to see what awaits that bête noire of contemporary conspiracy theorists, the ‘15-minute city’ – essentially a differently motivated retread of the earlier concept.

The necessity of reform is undeniable but people’s behaviour is often resistant to drawing board visions
Council housing

Essentially reclassified the innovations of modernist estate design as, in Alice Coleman’s words, elements of ‘design disadvantage’ – ruled supreme. As another reminder of the transience and partiality of historical judgement, it’s nevertheless worth recalling the later words of one long-time Aylesbury resident who ‘knew all the neighbours’ and believed ‘you would never have got that sort of community in a row of houses as you did with the landings’.

Demand for speedy construction

But Aylesbury also suffered from its construction method – the prefabricated large panel system much in vogue in the 1960s. The quest for rapid, mechanised housing production has a long history that belies the name of its latest iteration, Modern Methods of Construction. Central government pursued non-traditional construction after both world wars, predominantly in the form of two-storey housing built using steel, concrete, sometimes timber, in various combinations. In general, they rarely achieved the cost savings hoped for; some of more unconventional appearance (such as the 1920s Nissen-Petren houses in Somerset – the clue is in the name) were deemed unattractive; too many were flawed in conception and construction. Under the 1984 Housing Defects Act, 52 types of prefabricated housing were designated defective.

Above The ‘streets in the sky’ at Park Hill in Sheffield were designed to foster neighbourliness.

You would never have got that sort of community in a row of houses as you did with the landings.

You would never have got that sort of community in a row of houses as you did with the landings.

good intent and, to most eyes, pressing necessity for reform are undeniable but people’s behaviour is often resistant to drawing board visions.

Neighbourliness, rather than the grander but more amorphous idea of community perhaps, remained a goal of post-war design and planning and acquired increased salience as high-rise construction spread. Balcony-access tenement blocks were among the very first – and most common – forms of social housing. Reimagined as deck-access or as ‘streets in the sky’ in the 1950s, they were now envisaged as a means of fostering neighbourly interaction. Park Hill, Sheffield, completed in 1961, provided the initially much-admired model; other similarly motivated schemes such as Southwark’s Aylesbury Estate never enjoyed such kudos. Its long-slab blocks are now being demolished in a long-drawn-out process of regeneration.

It is, ironically, precisely the features the original architects of such schemes valued most that were later judged most problematic. As anti-social behaviour increased, the decks became seen as rat runs and escape routes for the bad actors now held, in media stereotypes at least, to populate modernist estates. The public-private mix within common areas was criticised as illegible, creating the lack of ownership (literally and figuratively) that enabled and encouraged bad behaviour. By the 1980s, the theory of ‘Defensible Space’ – that essentially reclassified the innovations of modernist estate design as, in Alice Coleman’s words, elements of ‘design disadvantage’ – ruled supreme. As another reminder of the transience and partiality of historical judgement, it’s nevertheless worth recalling the later words of one long-time Aylesbury resident who ‘knew all the neighbours’ and believed ‘you would never have got that sort of community in a row of houses as you did with the landings’.

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The headline failure had come
believed council estates themselves could embody what Labour’s post-war minister of health and housing, Nye Bevan, described as ‘the living tapestry of a mixed community’.

If that idealism has passed, the opportunity now is to design thoughtfully and build well and perhaps, by default, avoid some of the errors of overweening ambition and scale that marred previous development. Many, if not most, of the best schemes of the past were architect-designed. And while we are unlikely to return to the era of the 1970s, when almost half of qualified architects worked in the public sector, it is heartening to see so many excellent architectural practices demonstrating a real commitment to designing high-quality social housing. At its best, council housing has been in the vanguard of good design and practice. That is perhaps truer today than ever as councils and housing associations across the country lead the way in building sustainable housing to mitigate the impact of the climate crisis. We can learn from the past as we look to the future.

A History of Council Housing in 100 Estates by John Boughton, RIBA Publishing, is available to buy at the RIBA Bookshop.

Low-rise’s last gasp
Grenfell was begun in 1972. By this time, high-rise blocks were already under severe scrutiny, not least for rather expensively failing to deliver the assumed higher density accommodation. ‘Low-rise, high-density’ housing became the mantra of the 1970s, seen in various forms – the long, zig-zag terraces of Richard MacCormac and Peter Jamieson’s perimeter planning in Duffryn, Newport, for example; Ted Hollamby’s intimate, brick-built, villagelike estates in Lambeth; most famously, Camden’s signature-style white concrete stepped terraces. In Cressingham Gardens, Hollamby created facing front doors to encourage resident interaction. In Dunboyne Road, Camden, the borough’s stylistic prototype, Neave Brown ensured the houses were ‘in terraces as near traditional as possible’.

This era, sadly, was something of a council housing swansong. Indeed, the idea of the estate as such is now questioned, reflecting practically the fact that councils no longer have the capacity to build at such scale but also – necessity turned into virtue – the belief in mixed communities fortuitously driven by the cross-subsidising public-private partnership and mixed development model which finances most new social housing. There was a time, of course, when progressive politicians earlier, of course, in the collapse of the Ronan Point tower block in east London in May 1968 – the victim of terribly botched large panel construction. While the case for the benefits of system building (in terms of pace and potential cost) remains seductive, particularly at a time of housing crisis, history compels humility. It is hard to say we’ve ever got this right in the past.

Contrary to appearance perhaps, Grenfell Tower – the site of more recent and unspeakable tragedy – was sturdily built by traditional methods. It was betrayed by its flammable cladding and the deregulatory and cost-cutting frenzy that licensed it. That’s at least one lesson we can readily draw – don’t build on the cheap and do embrace properly-policed building standards that prioritise public safety.

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Above The Dunboyne Road Estate in Camden is a mix of modernist design and terraced homely living.

The customizable bathroom range Qatego offers you a place of relaxation and simple naturalness. www.duravit.co.uk and pro.duravit.co.uk.

Pure elements. Pure energy. Pure me.
Certification risks

Contract administrators could put their clients and themselves at risk if interim certificates are not issued, writes Neal Morris.

A failure by architects to issue interim certificates in accordance with the contract for retention sums on projects beyond practical completion could leave their clients exposed to inflated payment claims from contractors.

Clients then unable to recover these excess payments could in turn make a claim against the architect for negligence in the administration of the contract.

RIBA specialist practice advisor and litigation consultant at Russell Cooke, Robert Stevenson, says more calls to the RIBA Helpline are raising instances where architects simply cease to issue certificates after they have issued a practical completion certificate, with a consequent rise in payment disputes.

Don’t assume interim certificates are not needed after practical completion

What contractor administrators are occasionally failing to do after practical completion is render punctual interim certificates. If they did that, even if for zero, it would close down the possibility of a contractor’s application becoming the sum ‘due’ because of the lack of either a certificate or a Pay Less Notice. Some architects assume that as no payments appear to be due to contractors after practical completion – apart from the second half of retention money that is withheld until final completion – interim certificates serve no useful purpose and so are not issued.

This may be OK, explains Stevenson, as long as the contractor makes no additional payment application. But if it does, in the absence of interim certificates and if the architect doesn’t alert the client that it must issue a payment or Pay Less Notice, the amount of the contractor’s payment application will become what is due, whether reasonable or not.

If the employer does not pay, an adjudicator would, without a Payment Notice (the Certificate) or Pay Less Notice, award the amount of the contractor’s application. This can be turned into a judgement and will be upheld.

There is a brief window (the period will depend on the contract) when a payment application post practical completion may be countered by the client issuing a Pay Less Notice (in the absence of an interim certificate), but this is not a fall-back option to rely on, says Stevenson. Failure to issue interim certificates and/or failing to alert the client to issue the Pay Less Notice in time could leave the architect open to a claim, especially if the overpayment cannot be clawed back in another adjudication because the contractor is now insolvent.

On larger, more complex contracts, there might be legitimate reasons for a contractor to seek to justify additional payments after practical completion. They might have won a time extension and incurred loss or expense for instance.

Rectifying defects before certification is issued

The process of practical completion remains an important requirement. Precise legal definitions are always difficult in case law, but the contract administrator certifies practical completion when all the works described in the contract are completed.

Then half the retention is released to the contractor and the client will normally take possession of the building. Any defects apparent before practical completion should be rectified before a certificate is issued. Certification then marks the start of the defects liability period, during which the contractor may be required to rectify any defects that appear after practical completion.

The final completion should be issued after there is a certificate of making good defects, at which point the second half of the retention can be released.

More experienced contract administrators will diarise the issuing of interim certificates beyond practical completion according to cycle dates – usually 28 days or monthly, depending on the contract terms – until final completion. Any applications for payment will be dealt with accordingly.

Stevenson says it is not only good practice to continue to issue interim certificates until final completion, but an obligation on the contract administrator under the terms of the standard contract forms, which mirror the payment terms covered by the Construction Act.

The message to architects is that practical completion should never be regarded as the trigger point at which interim certificates no longer need to be issued.

Even when there is no new contractor work to value and the value of certificates is zero, they should continue to be issued until final completion, Stevenson concludes.

PEXELS

Architects failing to issue interim certificates after practical completion could expose clients to inflated payment claims.
It's no wonder Norway was twice a location in the most recent James Bond film, No Time To Die. Norway's landscape was brought to life by the creative team behind the film, who were inspired by the country's dramatic and dominating landscape. The landscape was a key driver in the design of the film, contributing to the overall atmosphere and mood of the production. The landscape's influence can be seen in the film's locations, sets, and props, which were all designed to reflect the country's natural beauty and ruggedness.

Guest content

Hadeland

The RIBA Journal May 2023  ribaj.com

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It's no wonder Norway was twice a location in the most recent James Bond film, No Time To Die. Norway's landscape was brought to life by the creative team behind the film, who were inspired by the country's dramatic and dominating landscape. The landscape was a key driver in the design of the film, contributing to the overall atmosphere and mood of the production. The landscape's influence can be seen in the film's locations, sets, and props, which were all designed to reflect the country's natural beauty and ruggedness.

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Under, Snøhetta’s undersea restaurant in southern Norway.

Fed by the landscape

The forests draped across Norway benefit from the country’s abundance of rain. This water surface exposes and provides the shadows from which Norwegian folk art and folklore stories emerge. Furniture company Eikund is similarly drawn to story telling, with a desire to recover Norway’s modernist past through wooden craft. ‘We wanted to bring back mid-century pieces that had been lost or forgotten in hidden corners,’ explains Åse Tønsgard, Eikund’s CEO, who tracks down these collectable objects. The company was founded in the 1950s and 60s. He describes this process as a treasure hunt, with the discoveries forming the 21st century oak and walnut woods Eikund uses. Norway’s trees grow in such pace and force there is no need for replanting, he explains, but Eikund’s approach to sustainability is embedded in the desire to conserve and preserve.

Two buildings discreetly nestled in Norwegian forests highlight the poetic way such furniture can converge with the historic landscapes from which they were born. Woodnest by Helen & Hard and Snøhetta’s The Bolder cabin retreats offer vantage over landscapes that have inspired so much painting, prose, and music — perhaps future works will emerge from artists in Eikund chairs gazing into deep waves.

The picture windows of Woodnest and Bolder frame seasonal shifts mirror-like waters reflect iridescent sky with, under it all, the brute force of geology, erupted stone long cooled and calmed into the nation’s backbone. ‘It took eight million years for the Larvikite magma to harden,’ says Tor Arne Lundh Håkestad, CEO of Lundh, which sees in natural stone not only a depth of history, but a building material for the future. Currently, 60% of ‘Lind’ quarried stone finds its way into high-end kitchens. The company is keen to emphasise the breadth of possibilities the material can offer architects, but it is no surprise that the rich surfaces of Larvikite and Anorthosite stone are desired by those who specify spaces of culinary luxury, not least because they are extremely durable and maintenance free. ‘This was the test when Lundh invited skateboarders to one of its quarries to slide and ride over the stone, leaving no trace.

Norway’s landscape was brought to life by the creative team behind the film, who were inspired by the country’s dramatic and dominating landscape. The landscape was a key driver in the design of the film, contributing to the overall atmosphere and mood of the production. The landscape’s influence can be seen in the film’s locations, sets, and props, which were all designed to reflect the country’s natural beauty and ruggedness.

Light and action

Behind Norway’s landscapes is energy. The nearby countryside is regularly smashed by 25m high waves, yet the space is designed to be calming. Working with Kvadrat, Eikund developed acoustic paneling inspired by Norwegian cross-weave patterns, for it not only achieves the desired acoustic performance but delivers an immersive 24m2 gradient of yellow, light pink, orange, brown, blue and deep turquoise, reflecting the atmosphere of a sunset.

If the wind makes waves, or the rain hammers down, the water’s surface appears as a chandelier with prisms changing with the weather conditions,’ Pettersvold Nygaard told the audience at Hadeland Glassverk’s London showroom — the rich Nordic light, so inspiring to the glassmaker’s designs, penetrates the depth of Norway’s water as much as it dances through its trees and glisters the coarseness of its stone. A

Up and under water

Water is central to Norway’s natural and cultural histories, both the surface and depths beneath. Snøhetta takes both as its site in a unique architecture which sits both above and below the waters of Lindesnes, southern Norway. A restaurant — simple in idea, though complicated in ambition and execution — Under is a project that comprises nature, marine biology and architecture — explains Heidi Pettersvold Nygaard, the firm’s senior interior architect. ‘Experience from our previous projects was not particularly relevant — I mean, how many of us have actually built under water before?’ she asks, explaining that knowledge from local offshore and tunneling industries aided the design of a 35m long wooden-plank formed concrete tube that contains a highly-specified, predominantly timber interior. Pettersvold Nygaard says Håkestad envisioned a building within a building, structurally and externally a wooden-plank formed concrete tube, submerged at 20m after being craned into place from the nearby deepwater harbour. Pettersvold Nygaard has created an internal design language to ‘help the visitor understand the building and feel safe,’ with a sightline to the entrance from all areas, reassuring guests of a route to escape. It’s perhaps more a psychological than practical safety device as the 25cm thick 1in 1in 5.8mm formed of acrylic, is designed to withstand underwater pressure.

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Francesco Russo finds that even in modern Italian cities development can feel preserved in aspic. But during his architecture studies at the University of Venice Russo had a Romantic fascination with London’s post-industrial landscapes and their swift loss. Perhaps that is what brought him to live and work here in 2016.

The placelessness of Nine Elms as a site of global speculation brought him back to earth with a bump but that Romanticism stuck.

It resulted in the curious ambivalence of this image; as if acknowledging some sublime threat bearing down on the city from on high, but still leaving the viewer transfixed by its beauty. A sense of otherworldliness is made literal; Russo intimates new development as a kind of extra-terrestrial presence. ‘The counterpoint of the Victorian city with encroaching modern development is like the silent menace of violence,’ he says. But for him it is also stunning – like the meteor shower that triggers devastating events in John Wyndham’s Day of the Triffids, where its fantastic, glorious rain of bright, green light is alien, mesmerising – and malevolent.

Jan-Carlos Kucharek
Francesco Russo
Urban Beings V, London, 2021
Camera Nikon Z6
with 45mm shift lens
Eye Line 2023: call for entries

Get your pencil out – or your mouse. Whatever you choose to draw with, our annual drawing competition is open for submissions.

Eye Line 2023, RIBA’s annual, international competition showcasing the best drawing and rendering skills, is open for entries. As ever, we ask for images in two categories – student and practitioner – that brilliantly convey architecture, in any medium or combination of media. In the competition’s 11th year, we are once again seeking the best and most exciting submissions from those at the sharp end of representation.

We want images of all kinds, from a hand-drawn concept sketch to technically proficient and layered renders. For us, ‘drawing’ includes any method by which the power of an architectural idea is communicated; be it depictions of existing buildings or works of imagination. Practitioners and students enter in different categories:

• Practitioner category – images made by those in architectural education or who are submitting images made before final qualification.

• Student category – images made by those in occupation can create an architecture of absence.

Every year we are delighted by the originality, wit and talent in the Eye Line entries; a free-to-enter, truly international award. Show us your best drawings and join a prestigious cohort of winners.

Drawings competition

We seek the best 2D representations of a building design or concept through visual means. They may be hand or digitally drawn, incorporating collage or any combination or overlay of methods. Video and straight photography excluded. Enter in either the student or practitioner category. The RIBA Journal reserves the right to redistribute to a different category if deemed necessary.

Maximum of three images per entry, which can be from different projects, or all from the same project.

Joint entries on which more than one person has worked are permissible.

All entries must be uploaded online (see link). We cannot accept physical works.

Dimensions of the original work presented, in mm. Date it was completed.

The drawing competition

Brand new housing estates are often missing something: the fourth dimension, time. During the construction process time is about the struggle of sequencing and delivery up to completion. That moment is a triumph over the inertia of physical forces; change has been wrought. It has gone from field and farm to houses, but not yet homes. At this point even the best architecture is often hollow and soulless – empty tarmac, expressionless walls, dull doors. Then the clock starts again with the life of the building, the activity of the people and the place around it. Here is the grass starting to green, a tree coming into leaf, here is the buffeting wind and rain, now come the feet on the mat and the scuffs on the walls and the reimagining and extension. It is fanciful to say that design details can smooth the disconnect between the time before and time after completion, between the production of the building and its inhabitation.

But they do. Remember – remember walking alongside reworked old buildings, the deep reveals, the worn bricks and lights inside draw you in, they don’t spit you out as an unwelcome visitor, an interloper. Compare it to a new street in extended suburbia, where you rattle around between two dozen mean front lawns and short drives. The forms are familiar, but how you fit into them is not, they are made not for the body but for the car. At Nansledan, on the edge of Newquay in Cornwall, I saw how the porches, little windows, flagstone front doors, touches of tiles and lead, make a bridge between empty buildings and those full of life, between inside and out. They reminded me of the best of houses and streets, the human moments of comings and goings.

The staircase on Archito’s Citizen House project for a local Community Land Trust in south east London does the same, inviting use, promising shared experience. Both schemes are drawn from meaningful community consultations; perhaps there is a link.

These details are the signature of design that is in touch with its future inhabitation. Not just Le Corbusier’s sound bite of the machine for living, but the more powerful manifestos that he built with sun decks and ribbon windows and a slim roof projecting over the door.

A new housing estate has a blankness, something that repels haphazard life, like the defensive shine of a new acorn shell. It needs to grow into a cracked and gnarled oak, where life can exist in crevices and a community of creatures finds sustenance, until it becomes a whole ecosystem unto itself. Architects can seed this with thoughtful design, with houses, flats and streets built with a sense of being imbued with life right from the start. They don’t need a future king as the landowner – although perhaps it helped at Nansledan with the Duchy of Cornwall – but they do need people who care beyond quarterly profits about the long term future of a place.

Above Eye Line 2022 Practitioner winner Alan Power’s ‘Interior. Early morning’. Oil on canvas, 610 x 508mm

Eye Line 2023 judging: End May 2023

Key dates

Deadline: Tuesday 9 May 2023

Judging: End May 2023

Winners and commendations announced: July/August issue of RIBAJ and online.

Correspondence: eye.line@riba.org

For more details go to ribaj.com/eye-line/enter

2023 judges

Jan-Carlos Kucharek

Rana Begum RA

Artist

Jos Fennie

Curator and critic

Alan Power

Architect and Eye Line 2022 practitioner winner

Hansaj Shakh

Architect and predecessor

Jae-Carlos Nsofore

Dandy editor, RIBA Journal

2023 judges

2023 JUDGES

Painting: Rana Begum RA

Curator: Jos Fennie

Practitioner: Alan Power

Heritage: Hansaj Shakh

Previous Judge: Jae-Carlos Nsofore, RIBA Journal

Information required:

Title of work(s) if applicable, and medium.

Name of author(s) of the work.

Name of organisation where author works or studies.

Email, postal address and phone number.

Dimensions of the original work presented, in mm.

Date it was completed.

Drawings rules:

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All entries must be uploaded online (see link). We cannot accept physical works. Images must be at 300dpi, file size maximum 5MB.

The work must have been produced within the three years up to the closing date of Tuesday 9 May 2023 and must not previously have been entered for Eye Line.

Drawings and archives collection

Our colleagues at RIBA’s drawings and archives collection will consider winners for potential inclusion in one of the largest architectural collections in the world.

Last year’s student winner was the Bartlett School’s Mengqiao Zhang, who translated the architectural space of George Orwell’s 1984 into a surreal and compelling narrative that was technically proficient and highly rigorous. The winning practitioner was architect Alan Power with sublime oil paintings of assisted living housing that conveyed the vulnerability and sense of isolation that residents might feel. Commented looks at cartography, tips as a future urban form and how occupation can create an architecture of absence.

Every day we are delighted by the originality, wit and talent in the Eye Line entries; a free-to-enter, truly international award. Show us your best drawings and join a prestigious cohort of winners.

Why can’t a housing estate be more like an oak?

Brand new housing estates are often missing something: the fourth dimension, time. During the construction process time is about the struggle of sequencing and delivery up to completion. That moment is a triumph over the inertia of physical forces; change has been wrought. It has gone from field and farm to houses, but not yet homes. At this point even the best architecture is often hollow and soulless – empty tarmac, expressionless walls, dull doors. Then the clock starts again with the life of the building, the activity of the people and the place around it. Here is the grass starting to green, a tree coming into leaf, here is the buffeting wind and rain, now come the feet on the mat and the scuffs on the walls and the reimagining and extension. It is fanciful to say that design details can smooth the disconnect between the time before and time after completion, between the production of the building and its inhabitation. But they do. Remember – remember walking alongside reworked old buildings, the deep reveals, the worn bricks and lights inside draw you in, they don’t spit you out as an unwelcome visitor, an interloper. Compare it to a new street in extended suburbia, where you rattle around between two dozen mean front lawns and short drives. The forms are familiar, but how you fit into them is not, they are made not for the body but for the car. At Nansledan, on the edge of Newquay in Cornwall, I saw how the porches, little windows, flagstone front doors, touches of tiles and lead, make a bridge between empty buildings and those full of life, between inside and out. They reminded me of the best of houses and streets, the human moments of comings and goings. The staircase on Archito’s Citizen House project for a local Community Land Trust in south east London does the same, inviting use, promising shared experience. Both schemes are drawn from meaningful community consultations; perhaps there is a link.

These details are the signature of design that is in touch with its future inhabitation. Not just Le Corbusier’s sound bite of the machine for living, but the more powerful manifestos that he built with sun decks and ribbon windows and a slim roof projecting over the door. A new housing estate has a blankness, something that repels haphazard life, like the defensive shine of a new acorn shell. It needs to grow into a cracked and gnarled oak, where life can exist in crevices and a community of creatures finds sustenance, until it becomes a whole ecosystem unto itself. Architects can seed this with thoughtful design, with houses, flats and streets built with a sense of being imbued with life right from the start. They don’t need a future king as the landowner – although perhaps it helped at Nansledan with the Duchy of Cornwall – but they do need people who care beyond quarterly profits about the long term future of a place.

Why can’t a housing estate be more like an oak?
The art made by young children might not be ‘realistic’, but it does exhibit a paradoxical kind of reality. Children are naturally abstract – they go far beyond making life easy for the reader; they present a new vision of things as they are, bringing a sense of seeing a world as it is, and not as it was. They remain enchanting, but possibly because they are a form of technical drawing, and so they become directed and concise to the meaning of a subject. Reality. Children are naturally abstract – they go far beyond making life easy for the reader; they present a new vision of things as they are, bringing a sense of seeing a world as it is, and not as it was. They remain enchanting, but possibly because they are a form of technical drawing, and so they become directed and concise to the meaning of a subject. Reality. Children are naturally abstract – they go far beyond making life easy for the reader; they present a new vision of things as they are, bringing a sense of seeing a world as it is, and not as it was. They remain enchanting, but possibly because they are a form of technical drawing, and so they become directed and concise to the meaning of a subject. Reality. Children are naturally abstract – they go far beyond making life easy for the reader; they present a new vision of things as they are, bringing a sense of seeing a world as it is, and not as it was. They remain enchanting, but possibly because they are a form of technical drawing, and so they become directed and concise to the meaning of a subject. Reality. Children are naturally abstract – they go far beyond making life easy for the reader; they present a new vision of things as they are, bringing a sense of seeing a world as it is, and not as it was. They remain enchanting, but possibly because they are a form of technical drawing, and so they become directed and concise to the meaning of a subject.}

**Architecture’s skills for life**

Helping decide the 2023 RIBA Royal Gold Medal sets Simon Allford thinking about the broad value of an architectural education.
It’s only proper to interview the author Gillian Tindall in the home in which she has lived for nearly 60 years. She writes in intensive detail on places and communities in ways that have changed their future and that of others. Tindall moved from Primrose Hill to Kentish Town in 1964, when you could buy a house near Regent’s Park for £7000; further north in Kentish Town it was £5000. Her two-storey terraced home, she explains, would have been a country-style house when it was built in 1828. A visitor might notice that the hall is substantially wider than the usual Georgian London terrace, with enough space for a bench to drop your coat and hat, and a couple of utility dogs to greet you. The long rear garden would have had a vegetable patch, orchard and room for chickens, and looked over fields.

Off the hall in her drawing room, which opens to the back rooms and on to the garden, are shelves of neatly arranged books and accumulated objects that have informed her writing. In the corner, a glass bookcase contains her complete works. On the fireplace mantel is a frame containing the pulse glass, a medical sand timer to measure the pulse, that inspired her most recent book of the same name published in 2019.

For the first part of her career, Tindall was a novelist (her first book came out just after she graduated from the University of Oxford) and journalist, writing on topics including, she recalls, being a ‘rotten speller’, the cult of natural childbirth being a ‘load of old codswallop’ and a protest article about a historical artefact being sold to the Swiss. You may not know Tindall by name, but from this house she wrote The Fields Beneath: The History of one London Village (1977), a seminal work of urban history that traces the transformation of Kentish Town from sleepy hamlet to densely populated inner London.

The book emerged from Tindall’s desire to understand the area at a time when west and east Kentish Town were under immense threat of near-total demolition by the council, which was belatedly interested in implementing the LCC’s 1943 London Plan with highways and Ville Radieuse-style housing. She got interested in the folly of destroying things and thinking you could manipulate the nature of areas. ‘The illusion was that it was the destiny of every town to be turned into a version of Los Angeles,’ explains Tindall. ‘That you couldn’t stop people driving wherever they wanted to drive.’

The Fields Beneath marked a turning point in Tindall’s career that established a rich seam of how to write about places, buildings, and the people that make and inhabit them over the centuries. Directly and indirectly, the book has helped forge a way of seeing cities and places that is integral to most practising architects’ education and toolkit whether they realise it or not; intense mapping through drawing and research to understand how a context came to be, the flows of people, money, goods, transport and infrastructure that’s shaped it. The genre is called ‘miniaturist history’; told through the lives of individuals, it resonates with wider history, and has grown through other authors and television programmes like The Secret History of our Streets (2012-14) and A House through Time (2018-21).

Tindall’s book Célestine (1997), for example, builds a picture of a changing France with new roads, railways and other infrastructure through the exploration of a rural Haute-Loire village. Other vigorously studied places include Paris and
Mumbai (City of Gold: The Biography of Bombay, 1992), which helped save Mumbai's historic Saracenic gothic buildings (a phrase Tindall attributes to her late friend Gavin Stamp) which were threatened by ruin and development. These works led to preservation movements. Her books often centre on a thing or object. Célestine, for example, was inspired by a collection of letters that Tindall found when she bought the house in which Célestine had lived. Three Houses, Many Lives (2012) focuses on a terrace on the Thames. The Tunnel Through Time: A New Route for an Old London Journey (2016) charts a history around the centuries-old flux of commuters along the route of Crossrail, now the Elizabeth Line.

A lifetime writing about place means Tindall has a matter-of-fact approach to cities and urbanism, delivered with a gently acerbic wit. However, much of her work centres on the themes of roots and identity. She believes it was a mistake to make buildings post-war that were only expected to last 40 years. If there is a way of creating a sense of identity in new places, it’s that they should be embedded with a sense of design and material longevity. ‘Traditionally, buildings were expected to last indefinitely – almost any of them could be kept going if properly maintained,’ she says. ‘When writing about the history of places, one automatically becomes involved in the future of them too.’

Tindall has been ‘sitting forever’ on the conservation and historic building committee of London and Middlesex Archaeological Society (LAMAS). Most of her time is spent going through planning applications about minutiae – changes to rear extensions, replacing inauthentic glazing. ‘You don’t feel the need to intervene unless you think something is getting through undesirably,’ she says. ‘When writing about the history of places, one automatically becomes involved in the future of them too.’

She believes it was a mistake to make buildings post-war that were only expected to last 40 years crucially – but badly damaged by over-building in that way and it’s a thousand pities that a decision wasn’t taken a generation and a half ago that we would only put skyscrapers in Canary Wharf. Trouble is it wasn’t quite developed then.’ In this she looks to Paris and the good fortune that President Georges Pompidou, who led an agenda transforming Paris with motorways and skyscrapers, ‘died rather quicker than he or anyone else expected’, ushering in the opposing party that put a stop to it.

Cann, down from Kentish Town, makes HS2 a site of interest to Tindall, not least the devastation either side of Hampstead Road, the wrecking of Drummond Street, tree felling and its plan to reach Old Oak Common in the near future. However, her view is not nuanced you might expect. She is not against the principle of a new train line, she just feels its planning should have been better. ‘It’s difficult not to embark on a lay-by of what’s gone wrong,’ she says, including starting with a trans-Pennine line. Nor does she have much sympathy for the residents of Park Village (where she ‘was born pre-war, as was Simon Jenkins’) fearful for their houses: ‘I’m always wary of too much hysterical fuss. If notice had been taken of the public in the 1840s, we wouldn’t have a single railway.’

One aspect that hasn’t, to date, featured in Tindall’s writing is what impact climate has and will have on urbanism – how and where people choose to live. We disagree perhaps on this matter, although Tindall’s outlook feels like reassuring wisdom. ‘I am not a scientist, but the social aspect of a changing climate by a few degrees doesn’t exist. We have an unpredictable climate anyway... Therefore, whatever climate change is coming, and I do believe it’s going to affect the world globally, it’s not going to have a very comprehensive effect here.’

So, what of Kentish Town’s future? ‘We will surely see fewer single-family dwellings and more houses being divided. Several generations in many parts of England had the expectation of living with a house to themselves. That must end because of financial pressures and space. Kentish Town is considerably less dense than it was 100 years ago. If we pursue anti-pollution measures, you can accommodate more people.’
Disruption tactics

An installation of foraged oddments speaks of the cracks in our society, and through reuse celebrates what might grow in the gaps they make.

Pamela Buxton visits

Foraged materials have taken over The Curve gallery at the Barbican Centre as part of ‘them’s the breaks’, an installation by inter-disciplinary design practice RESOLVE Collective. Disparate bits of old hoardings, reclaimed building materials, packing cases and oddments of furniture have been documented and inventively repurposed as pockets of unorthodox seating, a low stage and a library along the curved gallery wall. This curious landscape will be the setting for a programme of conversations and events co-curated by the collective, exploring discussions about and around society’s institutions.

‘We’re not here to be the reformers of the institution, that’s not how we see our role. Too often practitioners, and I think particularly black practitioners, are... expected to change these institutions because of their existence,’ says collective co-founder Akil Scafe-Smith. ‘We’re here to disrupt in a way that we see fit and exciting, in a way that brings together organisations that are doing the same sort of disruptive work,’ he adds.

This desire to use their own design practice to platform others – especially the young and marginalised – is at the heart of their mission. Formed in 2016, the Croydon-based collective’s projects range across architecture, engineering, technology and art to address social challenges. ‘Two of the directors, brothers Akil and Seth Scafe-Smith, teach a unit at the Architectural Association, and have just been made RIBA honorary fellows. The third, architect Melissa Haniff, is a committee member of the Black Females in Architecture membership network and enterprise. RESOLVE’s practice is founded on collaboration, and the dialogues and connections made along the way, rather than necessarily a permanent physical outcome – usually the built outcome is a temporary installation. An exception is the collaboration with artist Farouk Agoro on the Brixton Bridge mural in London in 2018 – Proclaiming ‘Come in Love’ and ‘Stay in Peace’.

In this show at The Curve, the collective employed ultrasound methods to explore actual cracks in the physical structure of the Barbican and used this to inform aspects of the installation as well as acting as a metaphor for its overall theme. They are interested in what they see as the cracks forming within society’s structures and the possibilities for what can grow between them.

The collective is keen to disrupt traditional exhibition-making practices. As well as a circular approach to materials, this attitude extends to how visitors interact with the installation. Visitors are invited to touch, sit on, consider, and even, at the end, take away anything they want. On the wall, the construction process is documented with taped up schedules, drawings to aid construction, notes, questions and observations – this is about celebrating the journey, not just its completion.

Haniff says they avoided too much cutting, taking care to construct the installation so the components could be of most use afterwards. ‘We made sure we got the best out of our materials,’ she says, and hopes everything at the end of their stint will either be given away in their ‘closing down sale’, or reused by others – visitors are invited to put in requests. Throughout its work a common theme is facilitating the production of new knowledge and ideas, and providing an infrastructure for others.

‘Architecture is a good place to have these conversations,’ says Seth Scafe-Smith.
Peter Tábori, who has died aged 83, was an understated hero of social housing. One of the key architects in the development of Camden Council’s radical, and now celebrated, ‘golden age’ of low-rise, high-density housing in the 1960s and 70s, he was often reticent about his achievements.

At a 2010 symposium organised by the historian Mark Swenarton, Peter’s Camden colleague and later Royal Gold Medalist Neave Brown described the vision and ambition of these groundbreaking projects that turned away from the tower block and reintroduced the street. When it was Peter’s moment to speak, he quietly and almost apologetically described the difficulty of building the best known of his projects, Highgate New Town, highlighting the design battles lost and painful omissions, rather than extolling the quality of what was achieved.

But as longstanding residents of the estate, we owe him a huge debt of gratitude. We moved in as young architects in the mid-90s, working long hours and living with an array of guests and lodgers — blessed by the space, light and flexibility our homes provided.

Later we raised our families there, thankful for the car-free routes giving safe playing out opportunities to children and way home from school alone.

Highgate New Town is a quiet domestic masterpiece that is finally being recognised for its invention and humanity. It’s a shame that an application for listing, made by residents, didn’t go through in Peter’s lifetime. We also wish he could have seen the enthusiasm of the latest group of students visiting last month, but it is testament to the enduring quality and relevance of his work that this neighbourhood has so much to teach us today. Just ask anyone who lives there.»

Rachel Stevenson is senior architect at David Miller Architects and teaches at the Bartlett; Jo McCafferty is a director at Levitt Bernstein.


Michael Wilford, who has died aged 84, first won international renown in his partnership with James Stirling, which produced some of our most important postmodern buildings, from No. 1 Poultry in the City of London to the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart.

After Stirling’s death in 1992, Michael’s own practice maintained an excellent reputation for significant public buildings, from the British embassy in Berlin and Epsomdale cultural centre in Salford, to the famous red brick trilogy — the Florey, Oxford; the history faculty library, Cambridge; and Leicester’s engineering building — plus halls of residence for the University of St Andrews, Dorman Long’s headquarters, and housing in Runcorn, Cheshire.

The Stirling/Wilford partnership was set up after Gowan left in 1971. I joined in the early 1990s, and could see the strength of their working relationship. Jim and Michael sat on opposite sides of their first-floor office at 8 Fitzroy Square, overlooking the gardens. Michael was both a pragmatist and a creative foil to Jim’s ideas, and a consummate administrator; leading the team of able associates and talented architects took a talent for stewardship that he had in buckets.

Many stayed on to work at Michael Wilford & Partners, which was resolutely a design studio, deeply and forthrightly composed computer drawings.

Models required a significant financial outlay, and tended to be used only after a design had come to maturity, to better explain a project or ideas. At the same time Michael established a Stuttgart office with Manuel Schupp, building on the success of the Staatsgalerie. Major commissions came from WZB, Bilraun, Sto and the Bauhaus Archive for the state of Baden-Württemberg. He loved flying off to visit new projects and places, often working all the way. When the work was done, however, he enjoyed a good party as much as Stirling had.

The partnership in London disbanded in 2000 as work dwindled, but Michael continued to work in Germany, and to collaborate with practices established by former employees, including MUMA, Sutherland Hussey and my own.

Alongside practice he taught widely, with stints at Yale, Harvard and Rice, at McGill University Montreal in Canada, University of Newcastle in Australia, and the A.A. He was a critic, external examiner and visiting professor at the University of Liverpool’s School of Architecture in a close relationship that lasted until the end of his life.

His contributions to architecture were recognised with awards including the 1997 Stirling Prize for the Stuttgart Music School—a project originally conceived with his former partner — and the Royal Fine Art Commission Trust’s Building of the Year for the Lowry. In 2001, he was awarded a CBE.

He is survived by his wife, Angela, and children Karen, Carl, Paul, Jane and Anna.»

Chris Dyson is the director of Chris Dyson Architects.
Parting shot

Prospect Inn
Minster, Kent, 1938

The inter-war period saw the introduction in Britain of a new type of inn, the Improved Public House. This new type of establishment, which included dining or tea rooms, outdoor amenities and generally larger interior spaces, was developed in response to the widespread problem of drunkenness, especially in the workforce: the public house could now be seen not only as a place for drinking but also for social and leisure activities – and therefore also attract new customers, including women. Children’s rooms were also provided.

Most of the Improved Public Houses adopted traditional architectural styles, but in the later inter-war years a modern language for pubs was developed, whose distinctive features included horizontal steel windows and curved forms, both inside and outside. They were built mostly in the suburbs or roads just out of town, but the Prospect Inn in Minster, designed by Oliver Hill, was located instead in the countryside, on a road leading to Kent’s holiday resorts. This steel-framed, brick building could be seen from a considerable distance thanks to its rooftop pylon, which was floodlit at night.

Valeria Carullo

architectural acoustic finishes

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