

# touchstone

2023 THE JOURNAL FOR ARCHITECTURE IN WALES REVIEW PROSPECT DIRECTORY £10



ISSN: 2398-2780

RSAW   
Architecture.com/wales

Touchstone 2023 is published by  
the Royal Society of Architects in Wales

RSAW   
Architecture.com/wales

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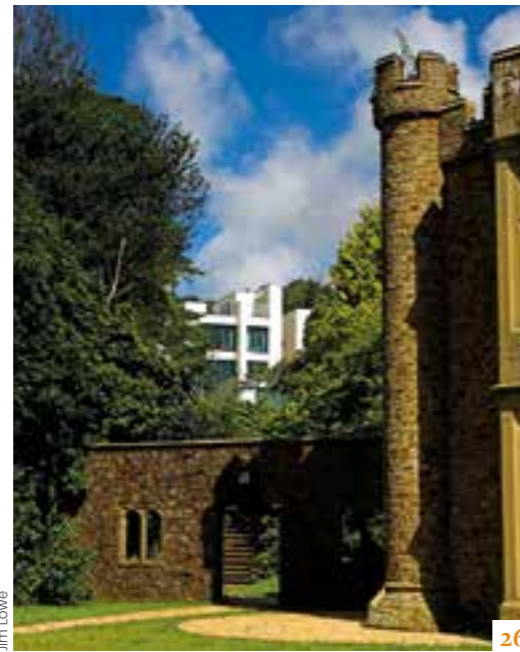
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# The state of the public estate: lifting the lid

We may be justifiably celebrating some anniversaries this year: 25 years of the Welsh devolution adventure and 20 years of considered advice by the Design Commission for Wales; but few will be celebrating in the public estate. According to a UK National Audit Office report, central government's contribution to local authority budgets was cut by 49% between 2010–11 and 2017–18. Cameron, Osborne and Clegg ignored the lessons of John Maynard Keynes of investing in public works to move a financial system out of market failure and an economic banking collapse, like the one we faced in 2008. Instead, they stripped things in local authorities to the bone.

The pre-2008 public-estate capital investments by the Blair and Brown governments were clearly of a different order, but they did little to alter the Thatcher legacy of stripping money and power out of local authorities. They continued the obsessions with outsourcing professional

services (such as architecture) and compulsory competitive tendering, while distrusting professional fee scale cartels and assuming the 'market' can always do things more efficiently. This has been an underpinning dogma that has drifted through the public estate for over 40 years. All the benefits of the best in-house, architect-led multi-disciplinary teams, ensuring the advice to public clients remained outside the value-engineering mentality of the market, meant that expertise remained always on tap, available pre-commission, post-completion – a continuity of public service unquestioned. So much of that has drifted away (pp. 3–17) but not all of it (pp. 10–15).

All this was exacerbated in Wales by John Redwood's local government reforms of 1996, breaking up eight county teams of comprehensive public services into 22 units with a much diminished range of expertise. Where did all that architectural expertise and multi-disciplinary working go? Nobody at an institutional or

government level seems to have cared. There is a terrible silence. No one is monitoring the decline. It just drifted and drifted as the bean counters and the powerful national contractor groups moved in to fill the void. We may congratulate ourselves in Wales as having ducked the crushing revenue implications of the private finance initiative but in school buildings we now have in essence an extraordinary one-stop-shop of a single outsourced architectural practice and a preferred contractor, whose head offices don't reside in Wales (p. 88). This is an appealing pitch to those who have stripped out all in-house architects from their wage bill.

But it is in our utterly broken housing system, stripping out again the public initiative, that the evidence is so stark. Those right-to-buy quality council homes were never replaced, one for one, as promised. The stripping out again began 40 years ago, but now there are small shafts of positive light. We are beginning to see signs of a substantial shift. The terms 'council house', 'compulsory purchase orders' (CPOs), 'social rents' instead of the illusory 'affordable homes' that few can afford, are now heard in public discourse. Councils in Croydon, Exeter, Islington (p. 14), Norwich, Waltham Forest, and Cardiff (pp. 36–37) are all attempting to break the mould, trying to value and respect architectural skill in public housing as we did so clearly in the best of post-war local authorities up to the mid-1960s in Ynys Môn (pp. 30–35) and Newport (pp. 20–25); but we should note that in 2023 Newport City Council has outsourced most services – it has no architects – and Cardiff Council's in-house architect numbers are a fraction of what they used to be.

The shift required for in-house architecture, if it is acknowledged beyond these pages, has to get some institutional and government left behind it, to halt and swiftly reverse the drift. We need to hear from ministers, the Welsh Local Government Association, the Consortium of Local Authorities in Wales, and the building professions of Wales whether what we illustrate in this issue is worthy of their committed attention and action. We have lifted the lid just a little. Others should blow it wide open.

Patrick Hannay: Editor

A moment when the tide started to turn against public-sector architecture and council-procured housing action. 1987. Islington public architect and councillor join GLC leader Ken Livingstone to protest against Thatcher's cuts (see also pp. 14–15).



'Professional fee scales would be attacked as anti-competitive practice. Bidding to the bottom became the top focus. Every authority service could be outsourced to the allegedly so-much-more-efficient private sector.'

## Yma o hyd (still here) – but only just

Dafydd Iwan's defiant anthem, raising spirits at the Cardiff City Stadium, may also be needed elsewhere to sound the alarm on the state of public-sector architecture in Wales. After all, Iwan was trained as an architect...  
Tim Graham reports

It is easy to revel in a nostalgic glow when reflecting on the best contributions of the UK local authority public architects. Early post-second-world-war tales of young, politically committed architects working eagerly for the likes of the Greater London Council (GLC), Hertfordshire, Nottingham, and so many more, are legion. Andrew Saint's remarkable testament to that glorious period in his 1987 book *Towards a Social Architecture* celebrated that exuberance. But then, on the downside, Patrick Dunleavy's 1981 exposure of the corrupt realities of high-rise, council tower-block delivery in his *The Politics of*

*Mass Housing in Britain*, and Louis Hellman's 1973 assault on the MACE schools' system in the GLC, or even Peter Malpass's 1979 exposure of the truth that lay behind Ralph Erskine's participatory new council housing adventure at Newcastle's Byker estate. All of these and many more make for a messier telling of the public architect's record.

A decade after the scandal of the 1968 gas explosions at the high-rise council housing at Ronan Point and the architectural profession's embarrassment at John Poulson in 1973,

(continues on p. 8)

# The only way is Perthcelyn

Twenty three years ago, Rhondda Cynon Taf was given an RIBA award for a primary school at Perthcelyn, procured in a way, that to current delivery professionals, must seem quaint and somewhat archaic. Touchstone reviewed it. Richard Woods, RCT's architect at the time, recently revisited the school with Touchstone's editor. What a day it was. **Patrick Hannay** sets the scene

Perthcelyn Community Primary School was in august company at the 2000 RIBA Awards ceremony. It shared the stage for Welsh awards with Foster Associates' Great Glasshouse at The National Botanic Garden of Wales. In scale, materials, technologies, and methods of procurement they were worlds apart. Only one other school in Wales, the Eveswell Junior and Infants School in Newport by Norman Robson-Smith and Stephen Thwaites under Gwent County Council's chief architect, Ken Jones, had won an RIBA award before Perthcelyn. There has not been one since then.

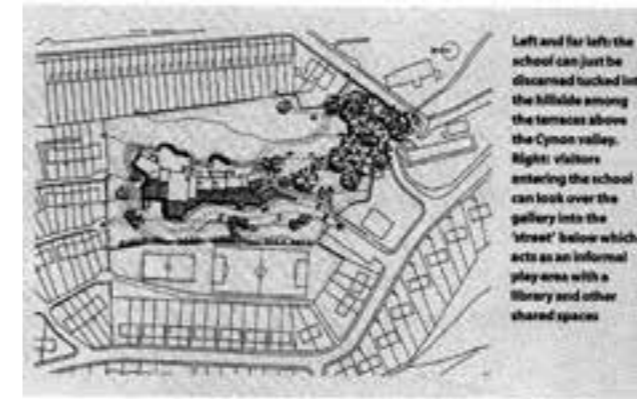
Perthcelyn was designed in a local authority in-house multi-disciplinary team 30-strong at the time with six architects. The Tory secretary of state for Wales, John Redwood, had broken up the eight large authorities in Wales in 1996 and dispersed them into 22 unitary authorities. Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (RCT) was one of those new authorities. The standard RIBA JCT form of contract was used. Clerks of works were employed. It was built by the council's direct labour organisation (DLO). (How many current schools'



Patrick Hannay



photos: Richard Woods



Left and far left the school can just be discerned tucked into the hillside among the terraces above the Cynon valley. Right: visitors entering the school can look over the gallery into the 'street' below which acts as an informal play area with a library and other shared spaces



Cross-section



Upper level floor plan



Lower level floor plan



- 1 Progressive architecture for progressive education: after 23 years Perthcelyn's primary school designed in the public sector still inspires.
- 2 Nestled into the landscape contours, the children's approach path, allowing them to enter each classroom individually, laid out in an arc running round the contour.
- 3 Each year's teaching space with its outdoor play area is distinctly spatially defined by the architecture.
- 4 The interior, 23 years after completion, with its original architect revisiting, meeting the current head and a member of staff, a former pupil of the school.

architects even know what a DLO is or their raisons d'être?) European Union funds allowed generous community playing fields to be added. The architects were expected to take a lead, advising the local authority's client department and the community on site selection, and discussing building form, materials and internal finishes with the staff.

It was a splendid site, perched high on the valley ridge. The school form sweetly rode the contours. In *Touchstone's* review in 2002 the late Richard Feilden contrasted Perthcelyn with one of Wales's rare excursions into the world of the private finance initiative (PFI) procurement, another primary school at Pembroke Dock. The contrast was telling. Pembroke Dock would

never win any award. It might have the biggest classrooms but 'delight' was not in the playbook. In contrast, the chair of the RIBA jury for Wales, Julia Barfield, said on visiting Perthcelyn that 'she and other jury members were genuinely moved to tears by the building, its design, and specifically its response to its site and cultural context'.

All this may be ancient history. School buildings are not delivered this way anymore. There are now no architects working for RCT at all. There is no DLO. Three of their currently programmed new primary schools are being delivered through the Welsh Government mutual-investment-model-organisation WEPCo (see p. 88), all designed by the UK practice Sheppard Robson.

We should not, however, be completely dewy-eyed. Perthcelyn's procurement was not all a bed of roses as the *Touchstone* review pointed out at the time. The DLO did not deliver on time or within budget – but it seems they built a well-detailed fabric and structure very well. The level of staff engagement in design decisions was questioned, but overall, everything in 2000 seemed relatively set fair for its future. So, how did it survive 23 years of changing educational demands, changing staff, and the rough-and-tumble of day-to-day primary school exertions. Richard Woods, RCT's architect of 2000, tells us overleaf what he found.

Patrick Hannay

# Perthcelyn review

Richard Woods writes...

It's 24 years since Perthcelyn Community Primary School opened and 23 since I last visited. So, when the invitation came to revisit, I was excited, but also a little wary. I'd invested much hope and belief in designing this school, spurred with the conviction that public architecture can be genuinely transformational; and I knew I'd be saddened if the school had turned out to have had little impact, and was perhaps looking a bit shabby. But, in the event, I found the experience highly moving; with long dormant memories evoked even as I drove the serpentine route along the Cynon Valley to the school's extraordinary setting. And I met so many staff and pupils who genuinely seemed to love the building: it was unequivocally a humbling and uplifting visit.

'You see, good design *really* matters', said the school head Mr James, 'because when children come to this school it makes them feel special and that they are important. That's what this school gives them'. I had toured the building with the school's head teacher, before sitting down to tea and Welsh cakes in the community room. He shared his perspectives of running a school that provides a community haven as much as a teaching environment. Perthcelyn, at the time of



the school's construction, was the second most deprived ward in Wales, with 85% of children receiving free school meals; and I learned that the intervening years have scarcely altered this stark cultural context. The social housing estate built at Perthcelyn after the second world war had been locally dubbed as 'the lost city', and at the time of the school's building, primary age children were being taught in leaking, cold and draughty, temporary accommodation.

But, it's a beautiful place too, with stunning elevated views across the valley, and I can distinctly remember first visiting the school's site when I'd been asked by my local authority boss to take on designing my first primary school. Excited at the prospect, I had driven up on the weekend to get an early look, and I can vividly



recall sitting on a sandstone outcrop gazing over the extraordinary terrain – the school site slopes over 30 m from top to bottom – and thinking I was the luckiest architect alive. I was beginning to imagine a split-section school, communal spaces upstairs and teaching spaces below connected by a wandering street, and building volumes sliding against each other tracing the contours of the site.

### Coping with change and yet keeping the quality

Both the school's young students and their building are fortunate to be cared for by a settled staff. On the day of my visit, I was introduced to two staff members who had been there since the school's opening; another, Steph, had been a year six student at the time. They spoke effusively on how they valued teaching at Perthcelyn, and how they loved the building and its location with its magnificent views. They seemed determined to keep the original design intact, right down to the interior scheme, and to look after the building carefully. This took me by surprise, but I could see for myself the reality: replacement carpets adopted the original colours, contrast panels to the white wall interiors remained in place, and I was shown additional library shelving designed

to blend with existing built-in furniture.

Mr James told me that the exterior render had been recently repainted. The council had recommended that a beige colour be used, spuriously citing that it would last longer, but the school was having none of it. The render was repainted in its original white. It looks great.

Inevitably some alterations and additions have been made. New green and red hooped fencing has been introduced, replacing the original timber boarding to the outer line of the upper playground, and external canopies have been added at either end to provide additional outdoor covered play space. The canopy at the eastern end, though ostensibly a standard product, has been sensitively executed, with the pitch of the new roof exactly in line with the low pitch of the classroom roof beyond. New low-energy suspended light fittings in the classroom are well chosen. Cabling wireways for the introduction of IT equipment are carefully set out and have found comfortable and discrete locations along the winding central spine.

When the school opened, teenage pregnancy was a major issue in the area and the eastern section of the building was established as a family centre, for the continuing education of teenage mothers. 24 years on, the school is responding to a newer challenge and re-purposing the area to provide an autism unit. This repurposing required no building alterations, and I reflected that the school design community have over the years put a lot of emphasis on flexibility and adaptability. But school leadership is often very adept at bringing functional change irrespective of the provision of knock-out partitions and sliding folding doors.

### In safe hands

The physical condition of the building was extraordinary throughout. I was told that visitors frequently ask if the building is new, and as the designer of a building about a quarter of a century old, I felt immense gratitude both to the school's staff and to the maintenance regime that the building is in such safe hands.

It struck me afresh that both a good budget and a generous design programme pay dividends and present excellent value in the long run. Before I set to work on the design, the council's property management team had set the budget on the assumption that the school would be located on flat, made ground at the top of the site with large-scale earthworks and retaining walls required to remodel the steeply sloping southern part of the site to provide sports pitches. I managed to advocate successfully for a different approach: sports pitches would fit comfortably on the upper flat land, and a split-section



- 1 Perthcelyn's stunning site context.
- 2 Proper investment in detail and assembly by public architect and direct labour organisation survives well in 2023.
- 3 Beautifully day-lit mezzanine level of admin looking over teaching areas below.



- 4 Through use of the section, the classroom spaces have generous volumes (looking here up to admin mezzanine) and intimate volumes.
- 5 The school hall 23 years later, in fine condition.
- 6 A mural to a local sporting hero installed 2000, carefully maintained.

school would sit more subtly into the slope, and accordingly would require vastly less extensive earthworks. This released more budget for good materials and finishes. It's not easy to argue, for instance, for zinc standing seam roofs, but it is such a long-life material, and the installation at Perthcelyn is in pristine condition.

I worked on the project with one other colleague, Petr Petrovic, a talented year-out student, and between us we had sufficient time to hand-draw every junction detail. The design is relatively complex, and I reflected that school design culture has – with some good logical reasons – moved subsequently to simpler design forms, responding to issues of standardisation, de-risking, speed of supply, and the 'form factor' for minimising thermal leakage. However, as we toured the building, it struck me afresh that part of the character of Perthcelyn is how it folds into its landscape, and that moving through the building brings unexpected moments and surprises. The split section and shifting geometry of the plan permits a complex mix of each class-space feeling distinct, while connected together to the sinuous street and the views of the sky above. This is a rich experience that simple boxes can't so readily provide. Perhaps Perthcelyn's 'hand-crafted' quality, reinforced by being built by the council's direct labour organisation now seems anachronistic, but I suspect it is also part of why the building is so cherished.

I'd joined Mid Glamorgan County Council in 1997 (and latterly the splintered grouping of Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's property consultancy) with a conviction that

architects are ultimately public servants. At the time many thought council architects' departments were moribund places, with the real architectural energy to be found in commercially orientated private practices. But I found myself working with a great team: talented and committed to creating high-quality public buildings. Now, two decades later, my current practice, Urban Fabric Architects, remains dedicated to the architect as public servant ideal, but I wouldn't have missed my time working for a council architects' department for all the world.

*Richard Woods worked for Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council for eight years 1996–2002; he is co-founder and partner at Urban Fabric Architects and a design review panellist for the Design Commission for Wales and Design:Midlands. He is a regular conference speaker on education design and sustainability.*



‘When I came in early every morning, what was at the top of my screen? Of course, the company share price on the stock exchange. That says it all.’

an outsourced former public architect

(continued from p. 3)

...Margaret Thatcher was to ride to power on the backs of those negative emblems of public-service mismanagement (and it also has to be acknowledged, the poor Tory government procurement of the majority of industrialised high-rise tower systems). The architectural profession it seems just rolled over in a sort of mea culpa. There was no effective kickback or defence of the public sector. The architectural profession simply found riches elsewhere in other fast-growing building sectors.

The dismantling of the public architect and the architectural profession was then set about with further 1980s’ relish, with the Prince of Wales adding his hefty boot in 1984. Right to buy would dismantle and erase from public memory the best designed bits of public-architect-designed council housing. Professional fee scales would be attacked as anti-competitive practice. Bidding to the bottom became the top focus. Every authority service could be outsourced to the allegedly so much more efficient private sector; the likes of Capita, Carillion, Interserve, Pace and Serco would ride to the rescue – and then later on, of course, implode; there was fierce central government capping of local authority budgets and independent income generation; the insistence on compulsory competitive tendering; the encouragement of Tory-party-funding big contractors into construction frameworks to de-risk the increasing ignorance of public client procurement, reinforced by the love-affair with the private finance initiative (PFI); all these forces eroded that practice of ethical ‘social architecture’. Public sector architecture then went into a layby only to be revived by New Labour’s PFI-fuelled education and health building boom, but by then the practice of outsourcing public sector work was an unshakeable mantra. At odd moments the architectural press sounded the alarm, once

in the *Architects’ Journal* in 2015, again in 2017, and once in *Building Design* online in 2019, but silence followed their concerned headlines.

To counter that decline one can only so often keep pointing to the miraculous award-winning output that is Hampshire County Architects (*see Touchstone 2017, pp. 52–55*) with their 44 public architects still in-house now, but that only highlights the bleak reality almost everywhere else (except maybe for Scotland), that the seeming decimation of architecture as a necessary public service within many local authorities is a done deal, not to be resuscitated. But, is that the full factual truth for Wales?

You cannot easily access the ARB register to check how many architects are working in local authorities. The RIBA won’t be able to tell you either because so many registered architects are not RIBA members. The RSAW cannot access them either. The Consortium of Local Authorities in Wales (CLAW), founded in 1962 and still surviving, cannot tell you how many in-house public architects are members or even attendees. Unsurprising, therefore, that there were no clarion calls of concern from the architectural profession nor its regional branches. The UK-wide Salaried Architects Group, once the bastion of public-sector architects, has long faded away. The Society of County Architects in Local Authorities (SCALA) has merged with other professional bodies. Its demise does not seem to be a conference topic. The radical critic of the in-house public architect, the 1980s’ Association of Community Technical Aid Centres (ACTAC), was eventually suffocated by lack of public funding. The collective bodies of local government service providers hardly seem bothered that there was little independent architectural advice, free of market pressures, to guide the best architectural procurement. National design advice bodies across the UK have long been dismembered. The Design Commission

for Wales singularly survives, but it can only advise those public bodies that volunteer to engage. The diminishing number of public-sector architects appears not to be a subject of concern.

#### The view from Wales

So do we find all this picture mirrored in Wales? We didn’t thankfully have the legions of high-rise tower blocks to sink its reputation. There have been, of course, iconic chief public architects such as Johnson Blackett at Newport (*see pp. 20–25*). He had a team of 26 architects in his department at one point. Then there was Norman Squire Johnson at Anglesey, Ken Jones of Gwent County Council, and Gordon Redfern at Cwmbran Development Corporation.

With a small population of about 3 million in Wales and a historical imbalance of a high public-service to private-sector employment base, and potentially a young architectural skills base that was being constantly attracted to the bright lights of the metropolis over the border, there was once a sizeable and professionally competent section of private practices at the end of the twentieth century. This serviced the public sector, setting high standards – the likes of Colwyn Foulkes (*see pp. 30–35*) and Bowen Dann Davies in the north, and Alex Gordon and Partners and Percy Thomas Partnership in the south. A portion of the last still serves the capital city.

The public service (socialist) ethic was consistently strong, at least in the highly populated south of Wales. This was after all Keir Hardie, Aneurin Bevan, and Michael Foot territory. But with its small population (the equivalent of Greater Manchester) spread over a land mass of 5 million acres, it was wisely decided in 1974 that to assemble a critical mass of officer expertise to provide all the necessary skills and services, eight large counties would be created across Wales to provide the principal public services.

At its height one of those eight, South Glamorgan (that included the capital city Cardiff) had ‘over 100 staff in the county architect’s department including approximately 20 registered architects. Others were architectural technicians, interior design team staff, clerks of works (25), and other admin and support staff’.

Following the Tory Secretary of State John Redwood’s fragmentary restructuring of those eight counties into 22 Welsh unitary authorities in 1996, the newly formed Cardiff Council architectural team comprised about 25 members including five registered architects, the remaining members being architectural technicians and interior design staff. Ten years later, the architectural team had become an integral part of what was known as a ‘projects design and development’ department and included other disciplines for project management, structural engineering, and mechanical and electrical services engineering. Overall, the number of staff was then approximately 75 including administrative support.

Whereas in South Glamorgan, architects had been well represented at chief officer level, post-1996 cultural changes placed more decision making in the hands of the project managers, the money men, and property professionals. Now in Cardiff Council there are just three architects, and they are not all in the same department, and none is in a chief officer role. How the mighty have fallen (*see also inset story p. 17, ‘A typical dissolution’*). This is a curious strategy given the capital’s determination to keep building and managing council houses (*see pp. 36–37*).

The other two south Wales cities, Newport and Swansea, illustrate the two extremes of what is occurring across Wales. Swansea has 12 architects in-house, the largest group in Wales by a long way (Swansea has kept all its council housing in-house, unlike so many other authorities that transferred them to registered social landlords). Newport has no architects. All its property services are outsourced to the Norse Group (that originated in Norfolk County Council, when various services were forced to outsource in 1988).

The following Welsh local authorities have no architects in-house: Gwynedd, Flintshire, Merthyr Tydfil, Torfaen, Monmouthshire, Vale of Glamorgan, Conway, and Rhondda Cynon Taf (the home of the current chair of CLAW). (This appears to correlate with LAs that have handed their council housing to RSLs.) The three national park authorities in Wales have no in-house architects, yet they are the planning authorities for large swathes of Wales. They have no in-house architectural advice on major applications.

‘What we come across all too often are commissioners who have little or no experience of the services they are attempting to commission, they don’t know what to ask for, how to ask for it – and how to recognise good from bad when they get responses – let alone be able to manage the service they go on to commission.’

Wrexham has five architects in-house; Denbighshire and Carmarthenshire three each; Caerphilly, Pembrokeshire and Blaenau Gwent each have two; Ynys Môn and Bridgend have one, as does Ceredigion, who leads a tiny team of two quantity surveyors and one architectural technician. This one in-house architect is possibly the only one in Wales who holds a departmental head post in an authority and is thus at the top table of officers; and yet, ironically, but not surprisingly with such a tiny in-house team, virtually all architectural design and delivery work is outsourced to the private sector.

Powys, the largest county by land-mass in Wales, is the most telling of cases. In May 2017 the council (30 independent, 19 Conservative, 13 Liberal Democrats, seven Labour, and two Plaid Cymru) elected to outsource the whole property services department, with a full multi-disciplinary team, to a council-private sector joint venture partnership with contractor Kier. Fortunately, they had a five-year break-clause in the agreement. After five years and another election (24 Liberal Democrats, 17 independents, 14 Conservative, nine Labour, three Plaid Cymru, and one Green) the property team was returned in-house in July 2022, diminished, but relieved to be back. Another outsourcing debacle.

In the best of in-house days Powys had six architects, six building services engineers, two quantity surveyors, two surveyors, and two architectural technicians. Post-outsourcing, it now has two architects, two architectural technicians, two surveyors, one quantity surveyor, four building services engineers,

and six project managers. The lead focus has shifted. Managing dominates, not design. As Mark Turner, union regional organiser observed ‘this is another example of a failed venture which has wasted taxpayer’s money. The private sector struggles to provide public services. This is proven time and again when outsourced provision fails and local authorities have a duty to rectify the damage’.

#### A cause for concern?

Does any of this matter? One hugely experienced architect with a logbook of fine architecture for public-sector projects in Wales, and who has worked for decades in both public and now the private sector, made the following observation about Wales’s current predicament:

‘The way commissioning is working in reality, exposes a lack of relevant commissioning expertise, exacerbated by a lack of capacity. What we come across all too often are commissioners who have little or no experience of the services they are attempting to commission. They don’t know what to ask for, how to ask for it – and how to recognise good from bad when they get responses – let alone be able to manage the service they go on to commission. They are also generally poorly equipped with technology and training, to match what they ask of the private sector. In the case of building information management (BIM) clients have requirements that are delivered on projects and yet the client is unable to use what they have paid for.

(continues on p. 16)



have had just bus-shelter architecture to celebrate these two important public transport initiatives. Dissatisfied with this lack of ambition, Allen quickly sketched out better possibilities for both, took them to his superiors, cajoled the search for funds, and hey presto no more bus shelters (1, 2, 5).

In creatively employing two architectural interns through the European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci programme, they executed together what definitely feels like European-quality public realm in important spaces around those college and school environments (6). The team was awarded the Best Work Placement Excellence Award by the University of Navarra.

Surrounded by huge commissions for a hospital, a tertiary college, and a large secondary school scooped up by outsiders, Blaenau Gwent's team got stuck in, producing a scheme up to RIBA stage 3 for a new primary school and the adjacent Pen-y-Cwm Special School. Allen is not too proud to admit that when architect BDP, attached to the contractor Leadbitter, took over the delivery, they did improve the design (7).

Allen's team designed and delivered nearby a major new sports centre (3), it seems well within their comfort zone.

Before joining Blaenau Gwent, Allen had 15 years' private-sector experience at all scales in four different practices. He had also worked for the Vale of Glamorgan. He has seen all sides of the messy jungle that is delivering architecture. He currently manages three disciplines and coordinates the building services engineers. His current team has three architects (one awaiting full registration), two construction supervisors, three quantity surveyors, and three architectural technicians (one also acting as a project manager).

Seeing the growing public demand for Welsh-medium education he took the initiative, searching out site options around Nant-y-glo, sketching out speculative schemes. The full job then came his way, completed in 2010. With its jaunty fenestration and tilting timber-framed canopies, Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Helyg certainly breaks the mould of the austere monotone biscuit-brick that has become de rigueur in so many monotonous

# Busy at Blaenau Gwent

**Against the bleak cloud of dissolving public architects' offices in Wales, some with great vigour and creative energy are determinedly offering a full public service. One is Jim Allen's team at Blaenau Gwent**

If you are going to survive and thrive as a committed public service architect in Wales in this age of politically imposed austerity you have to be agile, creative, both administratively and financially; you need the goodwill and support of those who head your section; you need to have earned the respect of your client departments; you need to think and importantly act outside the box that your political masters might possibly insist you should stay within.

While around you many officers and politicians may be doing everything to avoid risk, owing to a lack of in-house knowledge, skill and experience, cut out through decades of cuts, you must in contrast speculatively and

creatively search out opportunities, not just for survival, but because for all the best reasons things in the public realm need action. It's no use grumbling about the endless outsourcing, the private-sector dominated construction frameworks, the dominance of design-build contractors with their private architects in tow. You have to get ahead of it all.

This appears to be the narrative that has underpinned the 22 years of positive public service architecture work by the lead architect and his small team operating in Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council.

Yes, £350 million of Welsh Government/European Union regeneration funding has been pumped into the heart of Blaenau Gwent's largest settlement at Ebbw Vale following the closure of its steelworks in 2001. But much of that major design work of public facilities has inevitably been scooped up by large private architectural practices and contractors, with head-offices outside Wales. If it wasn't for Jim Allen's nimble-footed energy, a distinct cliff-balanced railway project known as Cableway and a new railway station for Ebbw Vale would





8



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new schools (8, 9). They are developing another Welsh-medium school at Tredegar.

The team, through Allen, has a good working relationship with his two departmental bosses, the head of community services, who is a chartered civil engineer, and the head of property services, who is a chartered quantity surveyor. ‘I don’t deal directly with councillors’. With those heads, he says, ‘it’s a pragmatic and “solutions-focused” relationship. I hate that bit of businessy jargon, but it’s concise and accurate’.

‘There seems to be a clear understanding’, he says, ‘that Blaenau Gwent is in effect not really paying for my team any more. We generate income from external sources to cover salaries and some on-costs, and generate a surplus that is used to fund other areas. This also allows us to undertake whatever speculative

work is required, effectively at zero cost to the authority, but obviously that work most likely won’t be prioritised; it has to take its place in the queue. These arrangements also allow other local authorities to get speculative work carried out by us, because they can invoice it to budgets for other formal projects with which we are assisting them, and it avoids any aggravation and time with procurement elsewhere’. Allen’s team does work for Merthyr Tydfil CBC, Torfaen CBC, and Monmouthshire CC, none of which has architects in-house. It has just completed a school for Merthyr, Ysgol y Graig Primary, working with Austin-Smith:Lord, which was shortlisted for the Welsh Education Building of the year award in Wales 2023. Allen’s team also supervised the consultancies on the Caldicot and Monmouth secondary school projects for Monmouthshire CC.

While working for Gaunt Francis Architects, Allen met Paulo Santos doing fine work in the practice. Santos unusually had a distinctive interior architecture degree from the former UWIC, and a MArch from the Centre for Alternative Technology. He would feel comfortable with Allen’s claim that ‘new major buildings are being designed with a net-zero target in terms of embodied and operational

energy’. Santos joined the Blaenau Gwent team seven years ago. His latest project is a respite care centre in Ebbw Vale for those able to live independently or semi-independently, which overlooks the Garden Festival site. Its language is very much a counter to the common institutional setting (4).

With the Blaenau Gwent regeneration client department, Allen has initiated schemes for starter business units, which along with the Lime Avenue business units (1), won the CLAW Building of the Year award in 2022. For the same regeneration department, the team delivered what is now known as the REGAIN development, which was a speculative business incubator project (10, 11). A second phase is just about to complete (12).

I asked online about awards the team had won. ‘I submit our buildings for Constructing

Excellence Wales and CLAW awards’, he replied. ‘I don’t submit any for RSAW awards because our work is not ‘architectural’ enough’.

Having visited some of the work, that response brought me up short. ‘That will undoubtedly sound rather odd’, he continues, ‘but it’s probably easier to explain it face to face’. We never did have that particular part of the conversation, but on the basis of photographic evidence received and some project visits, it simply leaves me wondering whether this is just self-imposed humility, or him making an assumption about an in-built cultural bias against the public sector within the RIBA/RSAW system? After all what’s the record? How many RSAW awards for public-sector architects over the last two decades have there been? (Perthcelyn Community Primary School by Rhondda Cynon Taf was the last in 2000). Then

how many were submitted or shortlisted but never made it? There is certainly a view in the Welsh profession that RSAW Awards are several notches up on other building awards in Wales. Is this just a simple fact of reality or a self-reinforcing myth?

Busy Jim just left me wondering. Is there a whole raft of public-sector projects out there in Wales that nobody has ever submitted or credited? After all, in the 1980’s Louis Hellman, the world’s most long-standing and brilliant architectural cartoonist did refer then to the RIBA as the *Royal Institute of Boss Architects*, and Jim never sees himself, and has never seen himself, as being in the boss class. He leads a team for public service – creatively.

Patrick Hannay

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11



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**‘There seems to be a clear understanding, that Blaenau Gwent is in effect not really paying for my team any more. We generate income from external sources to cover salaries and some on-costs, and generate a surplus that is used to fund other areas.’**



Thirty-six years separate the experiences of three public servants commissioning and designing public architecture in London and Wales. What do they share? Janet Marshall reports.

# Three of a kind

Maurice Barnes met David Haswell in London in 1983. Barnes was an Islington borough councillor and public client; Haswell a public architect, assistant borough architect, part of a team of 25 architects and technicians embedded in a multi-disciplinary team of a further 60 professionals from 1983–87. Both he and Barnes were operating in the turbulent times of Thatcher, with her determination to outsource everything and subject every public service to compulsory competitive tender.

Barnes was chair of housing, neighbourhood and even technical services for most of the eight years he was a Labour councillor. He led the Islington and cross-London housing committees and even led the national committee in his final year as a councillor. In Islington, he was driving the vastly innovative decentralising programme of new neighbourhood council offices across the borough, always seeking to get close and be directly accountable to the tenants and citizens. He fronted the renowned Estate Action programme that the Tory government



Maurice Barnes, Islington borough councillor 1983–90.



David Haswell, Islington assistant borough architect 1983–87.



Fiona Monkman, Islington principal architect 1997–2023.

cut off in its prime. Those were heady times in Islington. ‘The attitude of staff, rather than their age’, said Haswell, ‘made it feel as though it was a youthful enterprise’.

Barnes and Haswell are both clear about the many essential values of public-service, in-house architects. The architects were on tap, always available, ‘they could help protect us from “mistakes” and when they happened, they worked with us and tenants to rectify them often without cost to the council’. Barnes remembers he was ‘often able to defend staff from tenant and resident attacks, as I knew those in-house architects’ track records, constraints and ability to deliver’. They were ‘often remarkably honest in their presentations and did not try to cover things up as the occasional external consultants often did’. Haswell adds that ‘they had detailed local knowledge of every area and estate. This contract with the local community is difficult to define but evident when problems emerge or challenges are presented [...] We worked within RIBA fee scales but were not driven by them. Managers expected staff to spend appropriate time on consultation. It could often be demonstrated that in-house staff could deliver services cheaper than external consultants’. Public-sector architects were paid about 15% less than private-sector equivalents but ‘there was job certainty and longer holidays’.

So, how is it now in Islington, post-Thatcher, Major, Blair, Brown, Cameron, May, and Johnson – 36 years later? Despite that political turbulence, Islington public architecture is still burning bright. It is now back in rude health.

Fiona Monkman joined as a principal architect in 1997. Now aged 56 she is Islington’s ‘architects’ design manager’ leading a team very deliberately entitled Islington Architects of ten architects and two landscape architects. (A separate team of six or seven architects does cyclical repairs on the existing housing stock). The design team she leads dropped to a low of around three architects in 2010 (they still had quantity surveyors, building services engineers, and surveyors), but then everything changed.

‘In 2010’, Monkman says, ‘we designed the first new council housing in Islington for over 20 years, and since then we have continued to design award-winning council housing for the borough’s residents, being also still responsible for large estate regeneration schemes’ (see 00–00).

Maurice Barnes would be proud of them still. They ‘work closely with residents on those estates’, says Monkman. ‘Our portfolio also includes schools, public buildings, offices, and community centres’. The remarkably inspiring quality of her quiet but determined design leadership over so many years at last received national recognition in 2022. Monkman was

somewhat overwhelmed when it was announced that she was awarded the prestigious M J Long Prize for Excellence in Practice, awarded to women in architecture across the UK. It was hugely deserved.

She affirms all of what Barnes and Haswell said were the key benefits of in-house public architects, all those decades ago. The benefits are still here. ‘It’s all about the long-standing strong relationships with key in-house colleagues’, she adds, ‘such as with building control, the planners, other members of staff who have to maintain the new build homes, long after building contractors and private architects have collected their final retention money and fee settlements and left’. The public architect is vital continuity.

But what of their public council department clients? Monkman is clear that ‘our in-house client team, having used private architects for many projects now, are beginning to see the benefit of having an eager in-house architects’ practice, and not being constantly served with claims for additional fees from private architectural consultants. We are beginning to see more and more work coming our way, as a result’. Would that this was the story across public authorities in Wales.

So, what of Barnes and Haswell now? By a curious act of fate, they are both now residents in Abergavenny, south-east Wales. Barnes, back from decades of political turbulence and activism in South Africa and Uganda, is already

making waves as a recently elected ward town councillor. His energy and vision are undimmed.

Haswell has seen it all in public architecture, the good times and the times when it gets truly rough. Before Islington there was the Greater London Council and Hackney. After Islington he even took on the London Borough of Wandsworth at the height of it being Thatcher’s favourite borough. He effectively fought off privatisation of his department. To do that required a fierce precision in establishing the facts of comparing honestly all the costs and benefits of in-house and out. It was always clear; outsourcing may have seemed a short-term saving, but if you studied all the figures, looked at benefits in the round, and were creative and energetic about how and to whom you promoted your services, then in-house was a no-brainer.

Haswell was to bring all that experience to Wales, taking up the post of county architect of Gwent from 1991 to 1995, following on from the fine work of county architect Ken Jones. Gwent at the time was of a population size and with a flow of work similar to Islington. Haswell led a multi-disciplinary team of 140 staff, of which 25 were architects, and included also a small group of architectural technicians.

The secretary of state for Wales, the right-wing John Redwood, was in 1996 to tear up all that teamwork, by fragmenting Wales into 22 rather than the former eight counties. Haswell was to move briefly to become county architect of one of those 22, Monmouthshire. His skilful

maintenance of workloads to make sure the team would always make surplus income to put towards other public services, sometimes by taking on work from other government departments, was all cut from under him. He left after two years.

He is still very clear. ‘Without in-house architects, the client is unprotected, against possible undetected professional failures by external consultants and contractors; against inadequate development briefs; against incorrect fee claims; against time extensions granted by external consultants that protect the consultant, not the client; against errors or misjudgement in the creation of consultant panels; and finally, most importantly, against the failure to reach or exceed minimum standards of good design’. Monmouthshire now has no in-house architectural team.

In the email conversations between Monkman, Haswell and Barnes, Haswell suggested that many of the problems associated with the Grenfell Tower fire could be attributed to the issues listed above, for example, ‘appointing a design firm with no experience of tower blocks, failing to monitor the decisions of a job architect with little knowledge of the building regulations’. Monkman agreed. ‘The Grenfell Tower example is important, as much for the method of procurement (design & build) as the decision to contract-out all the building professional consultants’. Barnes simply confirmed ‘the point is potent’.



- Current Islington borough housing projects
- 1 Armour Close (photo: Tim Crocker).
- 2 Centurion Close (photo: Martina Ferrera).
- 3 Lyon Street.
- 4 Proposal for Harvist Estate scheme.
- 5 Armour Close (photo: Tim Crocker).
- 6 Neptune scheme.



## ‘You are definitely not wasting your time’ but ‘are we fighting a fatalism that is becoming endemic as public-sector budgets shrink? How do we resist that fatalism?’

(continued from p. 9)

‘On the whole, it is woeful and getting worse. We see public sector commissioning of design increasingly treated more as ‘procurement’ and run no differently than a procurement to supply light bulbs. So, if the public sector is not going to provide the design expertise in-house, it is essential for a good quality outcome, that they maintain a level of relevant expertise, even if the role becomes focussed on commissioning, contract managing and design quality assessment.’ Case made.

Another perspective comes from an architect of 32 years’ public-architecture experience, dealing more recently with private-sector consultants. His critique is that ‘the quality of production information at tender stage is generally poor, as most (but not all) consultants just want to get the work out of the door as quickly as possible so that fees can be claimed. There seems to be a culture of get the job out as quickly as possible with the minimum amount of information, and we’ll sort the rest out on site. As a consequence of this, almost every scheme has gone over budget’. It’s clearly not a happy picture anywhere you look.

Clearly, when John Redwood took the no-doubt populist decision to return Wales to many of its historically smaller 22 authorities, the move may have returned the decision-makers closer to the public they served; but it should have been noticed that the break-up of the architectural/property departments of those former eight authorities was almost inevitably going to lead to a long decline of architectural knowledge in designing and delivering architecture. It simply became spread too thin. In the best cases these former eight county teams had highly competent and experienced multi-disciplinary building professional teams mostly led by architects (the former Gwent County Council was probably the archetype of a well-functioning team with at its peak 140 building-related professionals of whom 25 were registered architects (see also inset story p. 17).

### Singular truths

Among all the many architects that *Touchstone* has talked to and heard from on this issue across Wales, both in-house and those who have worked in both sectors, it is utterly obvious to all of them that the positive potential benefits of in-house architects to local authorities’ client departments is because of the dependable, consistent, available-on-tap, largely free of market forces, trusted advice and judgement.

Many in-house clients and architects are equally clear about a distinct ethical position and set of values that drives their work. Put most bluntly as a contrast, by one who left the public sector and entered the full-on contractor-led design-build sector that now dominates local authority building procurement, he recalled ‘when I came in early every morning, what was at the top of my screen? Of course, the company share price on the stock exchange. That says it all. Everything follows from that’.

The construction industry has changed immensely over the past few years, and it’s not enough anymore simply to have architects and quantity surveyors and the invaluable and much missed clerk of works. There are countless other expert consultants needed to deliver a major project. As one in-house architects said ‘on the last scheme, we had about nine or ten different consultants involved in the scheme’.

Given the 13 years of Tory austerity on public services and the forced selling off of public assets to the third sector and community groups, none of the 22 local authorities in Wales is likely to have the workflow of new building work that would sustain those levels and quantities of expertise now required. But one good public commissioning architect can spot when his public clients are being sold a punt! They can guard quality. Each authority needs that in-house or should be able to draw on it from an adjoining authority.

There are still rare examples of in-house small teams of building professionals imitating the survival strategy adopted by county architect David Haswell for the early years’ transfer from Gwent to Monmouthshire, where he

supplemented income for his department by bidding for and gaining Home Office work in the region, thus turning a profit that could continue to sustain a decent multi-disciplinary team. Energetic design service work in Blaenau Gwent, led by public architect Jim Allen, continues this pattern (see pp.10–13).

### Turning the tide

Inevitably with *Touchstone’s* very limited resources we have only been able to scratch the surface of the true amount of data required to establish an absolute truth on these troubling trends. Nevertheless, the broad picture of substantial decline is clear. What is to be done to counter it and who will do it?

The shift in strategy by Welsh Government from using Constructing Excellence Wales as lead on its 21st Century Schools and Education Programme with its phalanx of private-sector-dominated construction frameworks to the new mutual investment model of WEPCo, with its single UK architectural firm of Sheppard Robson as lead, is potentially a recognition, but also a dangerous acceptance and reinforcement of the architectural-skills drought in many Welsh local authorities.

It’s clear that given the austere state of so many of the 22 local authorities’ budgets in Wales, and when one factors in climate emergency future impacts requiring vast reductions in embodied carbon in construction, that expecting each authority to maintain or build back up a crack team of architects and other building professionals delivering new buildings is not a strategy that can be resurrected. A few local authorities in very particular circumstances and with focused energy and skills may buck the trend for a while, but history demonstrates that the proper scale at which effective public service architecture in Wales can responsibly and effectively operate was the eight-county model created in 1974, even if retrofit should be now the principal focus of their work. But how to do that?

As it was argued in *Touchstone 2022*, faced with a future potential scenario of institutional system collapse and with the urgent need to protect the most vulnerable, local, small volunteer, community-based environmental and building initiatives would still need skilled public architectural advice that operates outside the market-place. The visionary but short-lived, seven-year experiment of the late 1970s/80s, publicly funded ACTAC maybe should be revisited.

# A typical dissolution – a personal report from the front line.

‘When one of the eight large county councils existed in Wales, it had an architects’ department that was a large organisation, comprising the county architect, his deputy, three assistant county architects, four section leaders, each with two or three architects. This was a total of approximately 20 or so qualified architects, together with assistants and technicians. The quantity surveyor and mechanical and electrical (M&E) engineering functions all came under the county architect, with some 14 or so RICS quantity surveyors, and some 16 qualified M&E engineers supplemented by technicians. Some 26 clerks of works. They were responsible for new schools and school extensions, social-services specialist housing, and the police and fire brigade services.

‘Following the dissolution and dispersal of the eight counties into 22 local authorities in 1996, architects, quantity surveyors and

most of the M&E staff were redistributed into the succeeding, geographically adjacent, three new unitary authorities. Architects seemed to disappear, mostly to early retirement. The new smaller county council I joined in 1997, initially had no architects except me, supplemented by technicians. The architecture section, such as it was, was not known as such but was a section within the ‘operations’ department and was headed by a quantity surveyor as design manager. There were a few quantity surveyors, and two M&E engineers. This section was part of a directorate headed now by a civil engineer, and since those days, the architectural function, such as it is, has always resided within a directorate headed by civil engineers. In 1998, a couple of years after the restructuring, in order to supplement in-house resources, a partnering framework was set up with a multi-disciplinary international consultancy that lasted for several years to

provide professional services ranging from architectural services through quantity surveyor support to highway engineering. This was replaced by a consultancy framework.

‘Following dissolution of the large county councils, professional critical mass has been lost, and the fragmented nature of architectural functions seems to have become marooned as a small island in a sea of project management and bureaucratic procurement. However, that said, it is vital in my mind that requirements and briefs are formulated by suitably qualified in-house professionals. I consider that my local authority has been able to deliver award-winning schemes of enduring value precisely because we have retained a committed nucleus of an in-house building professional team of whom architects are still respected contributors.’

*A public architect*

We should possibly look long and hard at the intentions and performance of the 2017 birth of Public Practice, the co-founder and current chief executive of which, Pooja Agrawal, was given considerably prominence in the *Architects’ Journal* AJ100 survey analysis in June this year. (A curious irony, appearing in a private-sector practice league-table bible; why is there no AJ top 100 public architectural teams? I guess all of the above gives us the answer.) Public Practice, a social enterprise, has so far placed 296 built-environment experts in 78 local authorities around the UK. (It’s not clear whether any were in Wales). Pooja Agrawal was awarded the 2023 AJ100 Contribution to the Profession award for boosting built environment expertise in the public sector. So, is this a sign of the tide shifting? Clearly, the Design Commission for Wales has been delivering some of this type of function

for more than a decade, but is it at a scale and focused so that it faces the reality of the public-architecture skill collapse in Wales?

Shouldn’t CLAW be hosting a major national debate with all the institutional players on these matters to scope the damage and address government with a strategy to mend it?

### Fighting a fatalism

In the process of researching all this, faced at times with seemingly total institutional indifference in Wales to the fate of public architectural service (and even the UK), this author had a brief crisis of confidence. He contacted a regular adviser to the *Touchstone* Editorial Advisory Group, Geraint Talfan Davies. The response came swiftly back:

‘You are definitely not wasting your time’, but, ‘are we fighting a fatalism that is becoming endemic as public-sector budgets shrink?

How do we resist that fatalism?’ He continued ‘I always point to the fact that the work of the Beveridge Commission, which laid the foundations of our welfare state, started *before* the battle of El Alamein – that is before, not after, the fortunes of war had turned. We need to start thinking now of the new paradigm that we want to emerge. Do we need to ask Julie James and Lee Waters to put something in train – a commission on the contribution of architecture to a post-austerity future?’

Whatever is done the ‘we’ needs to include a wide range of coordinated lobbying and campaigning bodies that care about public architecture’s future. This article is just day one on that journey. We are still here – just.

*Tim Graham is a Welsh architectural journalist and regular contributor to Touchstone*

# touchstones

## THE ART AND DESIGN ERASURE



Patrick Henney

It tends to be the assumption that architecture of the public sector focuses mostly on schools, libraries, housing, community centres, and maybe even leisure centres, but how about higher education art and design schools? Surely not.

In the days before eight county council in Wales were broken up and 22 unitary authorities established in 1996, Cardiff's main art and design school was part of the South Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education (SGIHE). Before that, in the early 1960s – as Cardiff College of Art and under the remit of the then Cardiff City Council – a new purpose-built campus was needed to cope with expanding numbers, and it turned to the fine architectural leadership of city architect John Dryburgh to design its new school at Howard Gardens. This was completed in 1965. The result was a fine six-storey, robust, generous-spaced building, full of daylight and admirably suited to all forms of art and design practice (see right). An invaluable terrazzo-floored public art gallery with a moveable wall system to allow for many show configurations, was added on later, on the ground floor. Howard Gardens didn't win any architectural awards, but Dryburgh did the students and staff a great public service. It was instantly recognisable as an art school from Newport Road for its tall top floor windows serving the fine art studios.



20 years later, in 1985, in the county of Gwent, the Newport College of Art and Design wanted to gather together its departments, which were dispersed all over Newport, into a new purpose-built art and design campus at Caerleon on the edge of Newport. The college turned to the well-respected Gwent county architect Ken Jones. (Gwent County Council's architects were major players in leading the Consortium of Local Authorities in Wales (CLAW) design group). Gwent's team led by architect Norman Robson-Smith, assisted by Stephen Thwaites, created a dramatic assemblage of glass and steel flowing down a north-facing slope (see below right) with fine views over to the River Usk beyond. The project caught the eye of the architectural press. The *Architects' Journal*, the UK's leading weekly architectural magazine, commissioned a young architect-academic who had just moved to the Welsh School of Architecture to write the review. The building was on the AJ's front cover. This was the first of Richard Weston's many fine writings on architecture that led eventually to world-renowned monographs and a legion of fine books on modern architecture.

Even before secretary of state for Wales, John Redwood, ripped up the public infrastructure of public service in Wales in the mid-1990s, in 1990 the SGIHE changed its name to Cardiff Institute of Higher Education, later joining the University of Wales and becoming, in 1996, the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC). That morphed in 2011 into Cardiff Metropolitan University, becoming in this long process essentially an autonomous fiefdom, turning to the world of

private-sector design and building consultancy to marshal its property assets.

The same for Newport. What was the 1975 Gwent College of Higher Education with its art college and particularly its photography and documentary film department having an international reputation, in 1992, it moved out from Gwent County Council control and became in 1996 the University of Wales College Newport, then the University of Wales, Newport and finally merging with the University of Glamorgan in 2013 to become the University of South Wales.

Howard Gardens became too valuable a land asset occupying a city-centre site. So, it was razed to the ground in 2008, (left), to make way for student housing. Apart from those with good memories of learning and teaching in this fine environment, nobody remarked on its demolition. The art and design school moved to Cardiff Met's suburban Llandaf campus in a new building by Austin-Smith:Lord in 2014.

The Caerleon campus closed in 2016, with its highly distinctive college of art and design also demolished (top left), this time without a peep from any professional or institutional quarter. It was replaced by a Redrow housing scheme, the funds from which must have partly covered the cost of the new city-centre campus building on the Usk by BDP.

Those who watched the recent groundbreaking BBC TV series *Sex Education* may have spotted the Caerleon campus's original turn-of-the-twentieth-century sandstone college building. The Robson-Smith/Thwaites building would have offered a far more appropriate setting.



## ALL THINGS ALTERNATIVE

In September 2016, Peter Harper the long standing 'philosophe' of thirty years at Machynlleth's Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT), was in reflective mood at a 40th anniversary meeting in Bristol with his fellow radical technology travellers. Besides sharing the energy with Godfrey Boyle that brought about the 1976 publication *Radical Technology*, Harper owned up to founding the term 'alternative technology'. He appeared to regret its creation almost immediately. Could it ever remain always alternative? Surely not, and yet CAT still has the term in its title. But in those heady days of the 70s, everything had to be 'alternative'.

So how was it now, in the early decades of the 21st century, when surely most that was then 'alternative', 'radical' was potentially now mainstream? Would it be tragic or a bit of truth-telling or hopefully inspirational if one was faced by some of those alternatives still being worked through in 2023?

RSAW members assembled at CAT for their Spring School in April (above). The title of the day still sounded confrontational: 'All things Alternative'. It raised high expectations. One would be provoked, unsettled, made to change course to go with the alternative. But it was actually gentler than that, but none the less still something to stretch one's ambition.

As Chris Loyn started the programme of talks, beguiling the audience as ever with his painterly sensitivity, one could sense the

question mark in the room. An alternative... really? In our digital-screen-dominated practice Loyn's hand craft will be always a radical alternative. Delegates were even invited to leave their Apple notebooks on their seats and spend time in the CAT landscape outside, drawing its essence. This will still be for so many an unsettling alternative.

One had to be inspired by the deeply serious embodied-energy rigour that underpinned the architecture of Knox Bhavan Architects as set out by Ben Hair. There was a uniform beauty in the serious clarity of their material analysis and the visual beauty executed in their work, something that you would rarely find on site at CAT before the architecture of David Lea and Pat Borer raised the bar. For some older delegates who might have been early visitors to CAT, the young and impressive seriousness of Knox Bhavan would hopefully jolt them to change gear, to catch up on this younger generation.

Sarah Featherstone, operating on a master-planning-national-infrastructure scale, was describing the further applications of the all-female team's 2017 competition winning inspirational 'Velo-city' entry as a radical answer to developing the region between Oxford and Cambridge. As the team wrote then 'increasingly the housing crisis is placing huge pressure to build in the countryside but with solutions that only concentrate on towns, urban centres and

'So how was it now, in the early decades of the 21st century, when surely most that was then "alternative", "radical" was potentially now mainstream?'

developments along roads. It is clear we need a different approach [...] Traditional planning has led to rural areas being disconnected and only accessible by car'. They instead proposed a 'holistic and layered approach to densifying rural villages in manageable increments while investing in great cycling and walking routes between them, as well as to the nearest railways'. This is such an intelligent and thought-provoking strategy. How about applying it to the settlements and the spaces in between, strung out along the Heart of Wales railway line from Swansea to Shrewsbury? After all Wales will want to find a way of housing and integrating millions of climate-change migrants in the century to come. With the electric bike those mid-Wales separating hills and valleys would be now easily surmountable. Will Welsh Government ask for Featherstone's team's involvement?

Lucy Picardo of the Architects Declare founding practice, Haworth Tompkins, demonstrated how when even working for the supposed highest of academic institutions with leading technologists and climate scientists, like Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, they found their American Repertory Theatre client assumptions profoundly challenged by Picardo and her team's climate-responsible architecture. They won through but the initial gulf of understanding was troubling.

Many in the RSAW audience were hoping for a reveal by Picardo of the next step-change project for CAT, commissioned by CAT management from Haworth Tompkins in 2022. Eileen Kinsman, co-leader of CAT management, was giving little away. In her warm welcome to delegates there was clearly excitement afoot, but the funding complexities of such bold re-visioning was forcing an understandable caution.

Harper's understandable hesitations about 'alternatives' should be heeded but one hopes that the radical thinking seen in the best of CAT's zero-carbon work and the leading thinking of so many of CAT's post-graduate students will remain the leading radical edge of any future for CAT and become the foundation of any step-change project.

1



# Municipal master

If we should ever need a reminder of the best aspirations and execution of local-authority urban architecture in post-war Wales then we should go to Newport, and admire and seek to emulate the work of the in-house council team led by borough architect Johnson Blackett. While doing that, we should also note that Newport's council today has no in-house architects. **Jonathan Vining** records Blackett's remarkable achievement.

Seventy years ago, five new county primary schools were opened *on the same day* in Newport.

Just let that sink in for a moment...

Five new schools, officially opened on Friday, 6 November 1953, by the minister for education in Churchill's third ministry, Florence Horsbrugh. The county primary schools in question, which were all designed by Newport borough architect, Johnson Blackett, were at: Alway, Gaer, Maesglas, Malpas Court, and St Julian's (this last one, admittedly, incomplete by 1953). Apart from Maesglas, which had been started before the second world war, they were all built to serve large housing areas that were being developed around the town by the local authority to help satisfy the desperate need for new housing after the second world war.

Throughout the post-war period, the planning and design of the enormous number of new homes relied heavily on local-authority architects' departments, which first began to appear at the turn of the twentieth century. In Wales, both Swansea and Newport established departments in 1912, with Charles F Ward being the latter's first borough architect.<sup>1</sup>

In Wales, the county borough of Newport was a prominent contributor to the supply of new homes in the post-war period, not least because of Johnson Blackett, who rose to the

position of borough architect just before the end of the second world war. He was committed to and advocated the role of the municipal architect in local government – and to the vital nature of council-housing provision. He said at a conference in 1951:

‘to live – civilised man must have, among other things, food and clothing, he must also have shelter, and it is this latter fundamental which concerns the Municipal Architect to a marked degree by the necessity to provide Housing, and Educational Buildings and in a lesser sense with all other types of buildings for Local Authorities.’<sup>2</sup>

## Revelatory modernism

Johnson Blackett was born in Birkenhead, Cheshire in 1896, the elder of two children who survived beyond infancy. He lived for many years in one of the great ‘villages of vision’, Port Sunlight, but received his academic education at preparatory school in Liverpool where the architect Segar Owen (1874–1929) – who designed much of Port Sunlight in partnership with his father – dropped in for a drawing lesson and, looking over the shoulder of the ten-year old, apparently said ‘this boy should be an architect’.<sup>3</sup> He served in the Royal Engineers throughout the first world war, was seriously injured at Ypres, after which he became an instructor at military training facilities in Caernarfon and Monmouth.

After the war, he resumed his studies at the University of Liverpool School of Architecture under the Roscoe Professor of Architecture Charles H Reilly (1874–1948), gaining a certificate in architecture there in 1921.<sup>4</sup> He was elected as a member of the RIBA in December 1921 (and as a fellow in 1945) and initially worked in private practice with Rees and Holt, architects and surveyors of Liverpool, before moving to the Liverpool Corporation as a senior assistant architect under its chief architect, R A Landstein. In September 1925, Blackett moved to Newport in the role of deputy borough architect becoming one of the first of the university's graduates to make a career as a municipal architect.

Like most young architects, he entered architectural competitions, including one in 1925 for a proposed art gallery and museum in Manchester and another in 1929 for new premises for the RIBA in Portland Place. In 1927, Blackett won the Gold Medal for reinforced concrete design in The Institution of Structural Engineers' prestigious Brenforce Travelling Scholarship with his design for a combined water tower and tank.<sup>5</sup> He was granted special leave of absence by his employer to spend over six weeks in mainland Europe studying the work in reinforced concrete of early-modernist designers, although he also took the opportunity to examine ‘current architecture in other mediums, and the



2

accumulation of ideas, some of which were truly amazing’.<sup>6</sup> He saw J J P Oud's workers' houses at the Hook of Holland, which were ‘typical of the style dominating architectural thought in Holland’ at the time, and had ‘everything to commend them; good if unusual proportions’. He visited a large suburban housing scheme in Rotterdam, constructed in reinforced concrete, with flat roofs and sun balconies, which bore ‘a family likeness to the already famous examples in France by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret’. His route then took him to some of the principal cities in Belgium, France, and Germany. In the last, he visited the Weißenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart, which had just been completed, and which had such an effect on the promotion of the Modern Movement. He concluded that architecture was ‘passing through a stage of reincarnation’ and that ‘reinforced concrete had ‘a grip on the imagination of designers the world over’.<sup>7</sup>

Given that the architectural training Blackett received at Liverpool under Reilly was in the Beaux Arts classical method, his experience on this travelling scholarship studying European modernism must have been revelatory. A year later, he declared himself to be a modernist writing ‘with such multiplicity of new building material constantly appearing, there is no place for old-fashioned methods which create stale design, and it behoves architects throughout the country to keep awake to the possibilities of logically using these mediums out of which a new building art must arise’.<sup>8</sup>

As deputy borough architect, Blackett worked under Ward on projects for the re-planning of the county borough, and visualisations of civic centre improvements and a new bus station that were proposed at the time.

Blackett was appointed borough architect at Newport in April 1945. This was a time when public-service architecture was favoured as a career path by many talented and socially responsible architects, owing to the opportunities available through the creation of the welfare system, investment in mass housing, and innovative industrialised building systems gaining prominence. By 1957, Blackett was leading a team of 26 architects<sup>9</sup> and he took pleasure that some of those who passed through the department under his direction achieved eminence elsewhere, such as: Harold B Rowe, city architect of Exeter; David Percival, city architect, Norwich; John Darch, regional architect of the Ministry of Health, Cardiff; and George Edwards, county architect, Radnorshire.<sup>10</sup>

Public housing was a major priority of 1945 Attlee's post-war Labour government, and Newport was ambitious and purposeful in constructing large new neighbourhoods on the edges of the town: Gaer-Stelvio to the south-



3



- 1 Johnson Blackett in 1945 on his promotion to borough architect (S122/1, Blackett Collection, Architecture Museum, University of South Australia).
- 2 Johnson Blackett at Blackett Avenue, Malpas Court (S122/2, Blackett Collection, AM UniSA).

- 3 Aerial photograph of the Gaer-Stelvio neighbourhood unit from the south-east (Crown copyright and reproduced with the permission of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW), under delegated authority from The Keeper of Public Records).

west of the town centre; Malpas Court to the north; St Julian's to the north-east; and Alway and Ringland Top to the east. These were all designed by Johnson Blackett and his team, from master planning to the detailed design of the individual dwellings. Each was intended as a coherent, self-contained ‘neighbourhood unit’ – an idea that had emerged in the United States in the early twentieth century and was promoted in the immediate post-war years by the UK's pre-eminent town planner at the time, Patrick Abercrombie – with sites allocated for shops, schools (usually the most prominent buildings in the neighbourhood) and other community facilities as appropriate. It's remarkable today how faithful the developments appear in relation to their original master plans – and how dissimilar they are to the perimeter block plans favoured by today's urban designers.

## Gaer-Stelvio

The Gaer-Stelvio neighbourhood unit (c. 1946–51) is regarded as one of the best post-war housing developments in Britain. It was planned

to accommodate 3,900 people on a 66-hectare steeply sloping hillside overlooking south Newport and the Bristol Channel. It is a superb location between Tredegar Fort – and Iron Age hillfort of national significance – and the former Stelvio House, built in 1893 for the industrialist, Charles H Bailey (1847–1907). A stream in a steeply wooded valley running through the site was retained as open parkland.

In the inter-war period, Gaer Park, on the northern part of the hill, had been developed with a regular grid of streets of semi-detached houses. Johnson Blackett's design of the Gaer-Stelvio estate is quite different with the plan combining pairs of houses, terraces of different lengths, small blocks of flats, a school, and shops. The layout is of low density by today's standards but is remarkable for the way the houses are built on only one side of the estate roads and closely follow the contours of the site. There are long sinuous curves on the lowest part of the hillside; higher up the slope the three-storey blocks of flats are skilfully composed with a concave-fronted storage block set in front of a full-height glazed



Malpas Court

The Malpas Court neighbourhood unit (late 1940s–early 1950s) is bounded by the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal to the west and set around a Tudor-style mansion house (T H Wyatt, 1834–38, now listed Grade II) that was re-purposed as a community centre. The development is of low density – planned at a population of 3,157 on a 51-hectare site – owing largely to the uneven and, in parts, steep topography and the retention of much of the original woodland to the mansion house. The layout's conformity to the contours is not unlike Gaer-Stelvio, but pairs of houses predominate with flat-roofed terraces that are straight and informally arranged. Most of the houses are of non-traditional construction, including BISF houses and three-storey Easiform (a type of cast-in-situ concrete construction developed by John Laing) flats, and the scheme usefully includes a row of shops as well as the Malpas Court Primary School (1953). The topography, layout and parkland setting give the neighbourhood a picturesque quality.



- 4 Sinuous housing terrace in Shaw Grove (photo: Jonathan Vining).
- 5 Gaer Road shops with three-bedroom maisonettes over (photo: Jonathan Vining).
- 6 Dickens Drive (photo: Jonathan Vining).

stair projection. Over 100 BISF houses<sup>11</sup> and 183 prefabricated bungalows were included also.<sup>12</sup>

Blackett's modernism was typical of the polite New Empiricist style adopted by local authorities throughout Britain. Here, he used a simple vocabulary of brown-coloured brickwork or rendered walls and flat roofs, with a picturesque attention to the relationship between the buildings and their landscape. Most of the houses have uninterrupted views to the south over the Bristol Channel owing to the combination of single-sided development and the use of flat roofs. J M Richards chose part of the scheme as one of his best projects of the year for 1949 and wrote in *The Architects' Journal* that it represented 'the sort of efforts that are being made by the more enlightened local authorities' and that:

'In spite of some crudities of detail, this scheme earns high marks for a judicious mixture of repetition and variety and for regarding a sequence of terraces as an architectural whole. The split up into small units was a natural reaction against the squalid monotony of the nineteenth century byelaw streets, but it is time Britain showed the world she is good at something else besides endless country cottages.'<sup>13</sup>

The school at the centre of the neighbourhood, Gaer County Primary School (1949–53), is regarded as the best of the schools that Blackett designed, and is currently listed Grade II. It is essentially H-shaped in plan, single storey, long and low, with flat roofs and concrete overhanging eaves. The accommodation is arranged as two parallel wings with classrooms on one side of a lower corridor, allowing for a clerestory to the classrooms for cross-ventilation and daylighting from both sides. The wings step with the slope, with an assembly hall and dining room in the linking block. The central entrance block is higher with an asymmetrically placed clock tower, flue and porthole windows.

**Malpas Court (left)**

Top: Malpas Court site plan (S116, Blackett Collection, AM UniSA).

Left: Russell Drive shops and maisonettes (S122/25, Blackett Collection, AM UniSA).

Bottom left: Semi-detached houses in Penny Crescent overlooking green (photo: Jonathan Vining).

Bottom right: Refurbished three-bedroom BISF houses in Darwin Drive (photo: Jonathan Vining).



- 8 Grade II-listed Gaer County Primary School (photo: Jonathan Vining).
- 9 Assembly hall, Gaer school (photo: Jonathan Vining).
- 10 Classroom with clerestory above corridor, Gaer school (photo: Jonathan Vining).

The cubic massing, with walls faced in brown brick with long horizontal window ranges, seems to hark back to the pre-war modernism of the Dutch architect Willem Dudok (1884–1974), rather than the more technologically innovative schools of the time in Hertfordshire and elsewhere. Bullnose brick specials are used to round the corners of wall, which subtly soften the appearance – an idiosyncratic detail that Blackett used on other schools, such as Alway County Primary.

The design of the Gaer-Stelvio neighbourhood unit won a Ministry of Local Government and Planning Housing Medal for in 1951 and a Festival of Britain Award of Merit in Civic and Landscape Design in 1951 – the latter being the only one awarded in Wales out of 19 awarded in Britain.

**A rare honour**

In 1956, in recognition of his outstanding contribution to civic design, Blackett was presented with the RIBA's award for distinction in town planning for outstanding work in the design, layout and planning of the corporation's various neighbourhood units, culminating with the Alway/Ringwood Top neighbourhoods. A rare honour, it had previously been presented to only a very few members, such as the Welsh architect and town planner A G Sheppard Fidler (1909–1990), who was Birmingham city architect 1952–64, and Hugh Wilson (1913–1985), who was Canterbury city architect and planning officer 1945–56, before moving to become chief architect at Cumbernauld new town.

Over and above this well-deserved distinction in town planning, one of Blackett's other major projects through the 1950s was Uskmouth Power Station at Nash, for which he was consultant architect for the elevational treatment (the British Electricity Authority encouraged architects to be integrated into the design teams for new power stations). It was built in two phases: Uskmouth A (1948–53, demolished 2002) and Uskmouth B (1957–63), and was reputedly the largest generating station in Europe when it was completed.

- 7 Three-storey, two-bedroom flats in Shakespeare Crescent are skilfully composed with concave-fronted storage block set in front of full-height glazed stair projection (photo: Jonathan Vining).

- 8 Grade II-listed Gaer County Primary School (photo: Jonathan Vining).

- 9 Assembly hall, Gaer school (photo: Jonathan Vining).

- 10 Classroom with clerestory above corridor, Gaer school (photo: Jonathan Vining).

**St Julian's (right)**

Top: St Julian's site plan (S116, Blackett Collection, AM UniSA).

Right: Junior classroom wing, St Julian's County Primary School (S116, Blackett Collection, AM UniSA).

Bottom left: Curved terrace of three-bedroom houses (S116, Blackett Collection, AM UniSA).

Bottom right: View looking north-west along Constable Drive (photo: Jonathan Vining).



St Julian's

St Julian's was planned for an ultimate population of 4,320 on 46 hectares of land with fine views north towards Caerleon and the River Usk valley. The neighbourhood unit was divided into two to allow for a bypass – later the M4 motorway – which was to be in a deep cutting, resulting in road bridges connecting the two parts of the neighbourhood. As at Gaer-Stelvio, curved terraces have been used extensively, but at St Julian's these are arranged on both sides of the streets, with narrow service roads to the backs of some of the houses. Started in the late 1940s and completed c. 1957, the housing is largely non-traditional in construction, with about 350 'no-fines' houses (with the walls constructed from concrete that contains no sand or other small particles of gravel), and over 225 flats in Easiform construction. Brickwork and flat roofs predominate. The scheme includes a shopping centre (since redeveloped), St Julian's County Primary School (c. 1952–54), and other facilities.



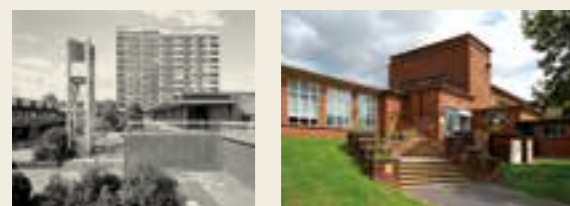


### Alway/Ringland Top

The Alway and Ringland Top neighbourhood units are adjacent to each other, bounded by Ringland Way to the south and Chepstow Road to the north. Much of the area was too steep for development and large areas of woodland were retained with open space provided at the highest point, Ringland Top, from which there are good views south over the Bristol Channel.

The neighbourhood units were designed for a population of 14,202 on 148 hectares with Alway being started during the second world war – with some now-demolished houses for war workers by Geoffrey Jellicoe – and Ringland in the second half of the 1950s, completing in the early 1960s. Most of the housing is of traditional construction, but there was a large estate of Arcon prefabricated bungalows (1946–47) at the Bishpool and Treberth estates, of which only a few now remain. The scheme included four schools (including Alway County Primary, 1949–52 and Ringland Primary, 1956–59), churches, and neighbourhood centres. Although the Alway Centre has been redeveloped, the notable Ringland Centre still exists, although the first-floor maisonettes are now derelict and boarded up and only a few shops are still operating. This is a multi-level precinct of shops, supermarket and public house, combined with low- and high-rise housing set around a courtyard, which originally had a more complex landscape arrangement with raised plinth, steps, and tower structure, and shrub and tree planting – all now lost – giving it almost a ‘new town’ character.

Apart from the high-rise block, the centre is set to be demolished in 2025 as part of a major redevelopment master-planned by Powell Dobson Architects.



11



11, 13 Early modernism visited by Blackett in 1927: Doppelhaus, Weißenhofsiedlung, Stuttgart (Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, 1924) and workers' housing, Hook of Holland (J J P Oud, 1924) (photos: Jonathan Vining).

12 Uskmouth B power station, Nash (photo: Jonathan Vining).

14 Drawing of combined water tower and tank, Brenforce Travelling Scholarship winner, 1927 (S115, Blackett Collection, AM UniSA).

15 Bullnose brickwork corner detail used at Alway school (pictured) and elsewhere (photo: Jonathan Vining).

### Alway/Ringland Top (left)

Top: Alway/Ringland Top site plan (S116, Blackett Collection, AM UniSA).

Bottom left: Ringland Centre viewed from the south, 2001 (© Crown copyright: RCAHMW).

Bottom right: Alway County Primary School (photo: Jonathan Vining).

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Uskmouth is in the ‘brick-cathedral’ tradition of power station design – the monumental style as exemplified by Battersea power station – although the elevational treatment of the second phase was more functionalist in its composition. The original, larger phase had two reinforced-concrete, fluted chimney stacks, while Uskmouth B has a single fluted chimney, which remains one of the finest in the UK.

Johnson Blackett retired from Newport in 1961 at around the same time as other prominent architectural figures, such as Leslie Martin, Robert Matthew and J L Womersley, were leaving public appointments to establish their own private practices, and before public-service architecture reached its heyday in the mid-1960s (with budget cuts and the ideological shift of the 1979 Thatcher government later putting paid to most municipal architecture departments). However, he didn't retire completely; rather, he established a private practice in Newport with two ex-members of his staff. In 1974, he emigrated to Adelaide, South Australia, where he was registered as an architect in July that year, and lived for a further ten years before his death in 1984.

### Lessons for today and tomorrow

So, what is the relevance of Johnson Blackett's extraordinary story – and those of others who dedicated themselves as architects in public service – to today?

House-building is in crisis. We are not building nearly enough houses to satisfy demand, particularly in the form of social homes for rent. The latest House of Commons Library figures<sup>14</sup> show that only 170,000 new homes were completed in the UK in 2020, below the annual average required to reach even the promised ‘300,000 new homes a year by the mid-2020s’ for just England,<sup>15</sup> with the Home Builders Federation recently warning that current policies ‘threaten to dramatically slow development’ even further.<sup>16</sup> Of the UK's 170,000 new homes in 2020, only 2% were built by local authorities.<sup>17</sup>

The construction of new homes relies principally on private developers that operate speculatively, with a duty to shareholder value rather than to meeting community needs. Numbers are controlled by developers to maximise land values, sales revenues, and profit – and an annual volume of 300,000 homes per year hasn't been achieved in the UK since before the 1979 Thatcher government came to power and ended

the post-war consensus of social democracy. Indeed, we have never built the homes we need – in volume, affordability or community need – without a substantial proportion being provided by the public sector.

Over the whole 40-year period from 1981 to 2020, the average annual completions were just under 190,000, 82% by the private sector, 13% by housing associations, and 5% by local authorities.<sup>18</sup> The percentages for Wales over that period are similar – notwithstanding that housing has been a devolved responsibility in Wales since 1999.

The picture is starkly different, however, if you look at the immediate post-war period – as the stories of Johnson Blackett and Sydney Colwyn Foulkes (see pp. 30–35) illustrate. From 1946 to 1980 (and even with a slow start in the first few years after the second world war), nearly 10.5 million homes were built in the UK, at an average of marginally under 300,000 per year. Of these, 46% were built by the private sector, 4% by housing associations, and 50% by local authorities.<sup>19</sup> In 1953, a record 245,160 council homes were built in that year alone, 13,310 in Wales (also a record) – and the Wales-only percentages are again very similar.

The reduction in the number of council houses for rent is largely down to the changes under Thatcher: funding removed, local-government borrowing capped, and the delivery of social housing becoming the responsibility of housing associations, or private developers under planning obligations. There was also the popular right-to-buy scheme, brought in under the *Housing Act 1980*, which allowed council tenants to buy their homes a discount. The long-term consequences to the depletion of the social-rented sector are

now with us with people having to exist in often poor-quality, private-rented housing, temporary accommodation, or become homeless.

But there are glimmers of hope, such as the council housing in Cardiff (see p. 36), which demonstrate the value of sustainable new homes with secure tenancies. Let's hope that the next UK government – and by extension the Welsh Government – will get serious about the deep-rooted housing crisis with a funded programme of a new generation of council-led home building, with performance standards fit to face the climate emergency, learning lessons from the record of public-service leaders such as Blackett, and the context of post-war austerity in which he and others operated.

During his 36 years as a distinguished deputy and chief borough architect, Blackett was responsible for the design of over 6,000 dwellings, 15 primary schools, four secondary schools, a fire station, as well as shops, homes for older people, clinical and other buildings. He was the epitome in Wales of an architect as a public servant, the *South Wales Argus* writing on his retirement that:

‘No man has done more to change the face of Newport than Mr. Johnson Blackett. He cannot set foot in any part of the town without seeing a monument to his part in reshaping and rebuilding it.’<sup>20</sup>

His is an impressive legacy, and one that deserves to be better appreciated – and emulated.

*Jonathan Vining is an architect and urban designer. He is a commissioner of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.*

### Johnson Blackett awards

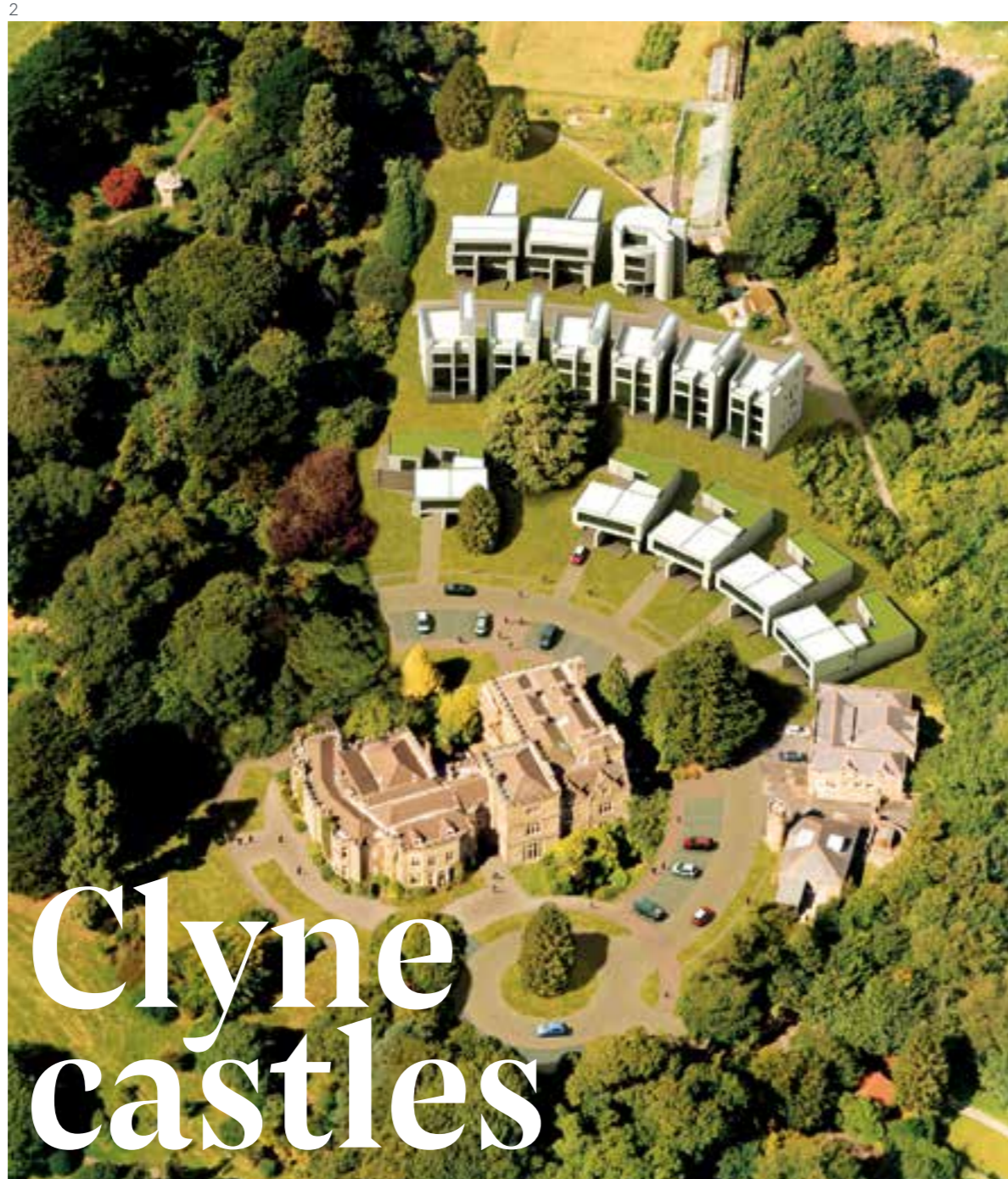


S113/4, Blackett Collection, AM UniSA

- Institution of Structural Engineers Brenforce Travelling Scholarship, 1927
- Gold Medal for reinforced concrete design.
- Royal Institute of British Architects Alfred Bossom Travelling Studentship, 1929
- Silver Medal for commercial architecture.
- Ministry of Local Government and Planning Housing Medal for the merit of his design for the Newport County Borough Council at Gaer-Stelvio Neighbourhood Unit, 7 June 1951.
- Festival of Britain
- The Festival Award of Merit in Civic and Landscape Design to Johnson Blackett FRIBA for work at Gaer Housing Estate, Newport, 1951.
- Royal Institute of British Architects award for distinction in town planning, 10 January 1956.
- Civic Trust Awards
- Alway/Ringland Neighbourhood Unit commended for its contribution to the appearance of the local scene, 1960.

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- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Their Designs Brought Them Reward.' In: *South Wales Argus*, September 1952, p. 2 (Johnson Blackett Collection, S441/9).
- 4 Lionel B Budden (ed), *The Book of the Liverpool School of Architecture*. The University Press of Liverpool and Hodder and Stroughton, London, 1932, p. 62.
- 5 *The Architects' Journal Competition Supplement*, 29 June 1927 (Johnson Blackett Collection, S120).
- 6 Johnson Blackett. 'Continental Architecture and Town Planning'. In: *The Housing and Development Year Book*, no. 13, 1928, p. 107.
- 7 'Brenforce Travelling Scholarship (1927) – Thesis by the Winner (Johnson Blackett, ARIBA, Associate)'. In: *The Structural Engineer*, volume 6, issue 7, 1928.
- 8 Johnson Blackett. 'Continental Architecture and Town Planning, op cit, p. 109.
- 9 'Newport's bid to solve the housing problem'. In: *South Wales Argus*, 7 May 1957, p. 8 (Johnson Blackett Collection, S441/2).
- 10 'He has helped to reshape Newport'. In: *South Wales Argus*, January 1962, p. 4 (Johnson Blackett Collection, S441/4).
- 11 BISF houses were steel-framed, designed and produced by the British Iron and Steel Federation from 1946, often with brickwork cladding to the ground storey and steel sheet cladding to the upper storey.
- 12 See *Touchstone*, issue 14, August 2004, pp. 1–3 for article on prefabs in Newport.
- 13 J M Richards. 'Buildings of the Year 1949'. In: *The Architects' Journal*, volume 111, number 2867, 19 January 1950, p. 73.
- 14 House of Commons Library. Tackling the under-supply of housing in England. *Housing supply: Historical statistics for the UK*, 25 April 2023 [online]. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7671/> [accessed 8 June 2023].
- 15 *Get Brexit Done: Unleash Britain's Potential*, The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto, 2019, p. 31. Presumably, the figure pledged refers to just England. The current target of the Welsh Government's is to build 20,000 new low-carbon social homes for rent during its current term, 2021–26.
- 16 Kiran Stacey. 'England's new housing supply likely to fall to lowest level in decades, study says'. In: *The Guardian*, 26 February 2023 [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/feb/26/england-new-housing-housebuilding-planning-policy> [accessed 27 February 2023].
- 17 House of Commons Library, op cit.
- 18 The figures for Wales for the period 1981–2020 are 8,005 per annum, 81% by the private sector, 5% by local authorities and 14% by housing associations: House of Commons Library, op cit.
- 19 The corresponding figures for Wales for the period 1946–80 are 13,525 per annum, 44% by the private sector, 1% by housing associations, and 56% by local authorities: House of Commons Library, op cit.
- 20 'He has helped to reshape Newport'. Op cit, p. 4 (Johnson Blackett Collection, S441/4).



# Clyne castles

Private residential developers tend to be cautious and risk averse in terms of design and innovation, favouring the familiar and traditional to create a sense of place. This was not the case for a remarkable scheme of houses at Clyne Castle completed 15 years ago. Garnering no architect professional award at the time, nor published in *Touchstone*, this risk-taking project potentially deserved both. **Wayne Forster** reviews this striking development

Clyne Castle is a Grade II\*-listed building situated on a hill overlooking Swansea Bay, adjacent to the Clyne valley, near Blackpill, Swansea. Originally built in 1791 by a wealthy landowner it passed into the hands of the Vivian family – Swansea industrialists. William Graham Vivian extended the house with a great hall and a large three-storey north wing. The estate passed to the nephew Algernon, ‘the admiral’, in 1921 who enjoyed the spectacular panoramic views over Swansea and the bay, owning it until his death in 1952. He had the greatest influence on the gardens as they are experienced today. In 1954, the land and the house were separated for the first time; the gardens became a public park and the castle was sold to the University of Swansea for a hall of residence. The castle, the warden’s house and immediate land was then offered for development in 2004.

The castle was to be converted to one- and two-bedroom flats, and the initial presumption by the local planners was that the proposed new houses on the land surrounding the listed Clyne Castle would be individual stone cottages on self-contained plots, probably seen as complementary to the castle’s warden’s house and other outbuildings, but within an adoptable highway system.

The developer had other ideas. With strong Swansea family ties, but also experience of major development in London, Lee Goldstone of Regalian

brought an informed ambition for contemporary dwellings that would exploit the potential for dwelling in the landscape with the panoramic views and visual connections to woodland that the site offered. This ambition endured the whole development process and the architect Stephen Hill of Holder Mathias Architects (HMA) acknowledges the value of the probably unique continual creative dialogue between developer and designer throughout the project.

Having worked together on schemes in London, the developer appointed HMA (better known for larger commercial schemes than low-rise residential schemes) as architect for the new houses. Hill had been the designer of

the then recently completed Altolusso high-rise apartments, Cardiff in 2005.

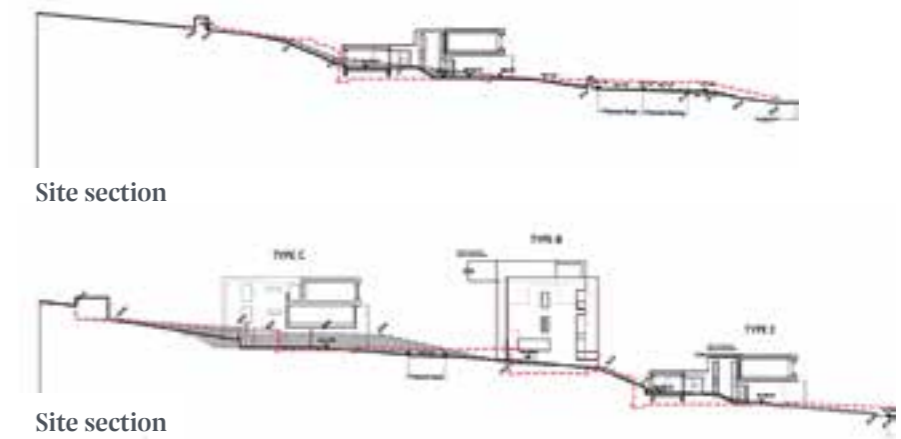
The original house (castle) was set in a natural bowl with land sloping from the stone boundary wall to the north and east with a number of significant specimen trees. According to Hill, then a partner in HMA, the concept behind the layout of the new dwelling units was based upon establishing a new visual dialogue between the castle and its grounds and the new neighbouring houses. The design and architectural language of the new dwellings was to be a ‘blend of modern influences’, with an emphasis on an architecture of space and light, contemporary living, and the avoidance of any pastiche.



Type A: first floor plan

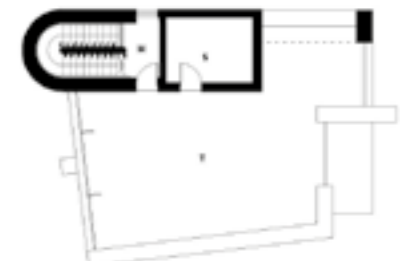


Type A: ground floor plan



Site section

Site section



Type B: third floor plan



Type B: second floor plan



Type B: first floor plan



Type B: ground floor plan

- 1 Aerial view of site before redevelopment with university halls of residence encroaching on the original house on the site.
- 2 Aerial view of completed development.



Site plan

**Topography and context**

The site has a change of level of some 15 m from the rear of the castle to the far rear of the grounds, with an existing topography of embankments and plateaux. As such, it offered the opportunity for a series of terraced, concentric radial crescents of individual dwellings generated from the castle's principal entrance axis and effective centre-point.

The scheme was developed mainly in section to work with the topography. By using the existing coach house as the building line for the first arc of dwellings (house type A), and by creating an incremental vertical stepped rhythm of approximately 1.2 m between each house, across the site, a visual framework was created. These type A houses were all designed as split-level dwellings responding to levels, on the basis of a rear single-storey courtyard arrangement of reception and living accommodation, accessed from the front, and lower level, with a reduced second storey of bedroom accommodation to the front focusing on the castle. In an early iteration of the scheme, this up-slope portion of the houses was designed as earth-sheltered. This was later revised to become flat sedum roofs, which reduces

the visual mass of the dwellings and also serves to visually bed the houses into the site, particularly when viewed from the upper crescent.

House type B, by contrast – employed in the second sweep of concentric houses – is three storeys with roof terraces accessed from the rear, which also engages with the landscape and, again, is focused on the castle and further views.

House types C and D form the third concentric sweep of development and offer glimpses to the castle and views over the coast and Clyne Gardens. House type C is a hybrid of house type A over three storeys, whereas house type D is a single, standalone four-storey unit that offers panoramic views and acts as a 'beacon' for the development as a whole. House type E is a hybrid of house type A and is designed to respond to the situation created by the retention of the large Mexican white pine tree.

The house types are a 'family' of forms that reference the white dwellings of the international style but in a more articulated form. It is difficult to pinpoint the precise source of this. The architect offers no reference to any precedent and nothing built locally, nor UK-wide, leaps out, except maybe the sectional development



3 Type A dwelling showing inner courtyard.  
 4 Type A with sedum roofs to single-storey element integrated with slope.  
 5 Roof terraces of type B form second rank of houses and exploit spectacular views over the bay.



6 Regulated rhythmical composition of housing groups on entry.  
 7 Type B houses in echelon.  
 8 Elevation to type B houses; panoramic fenestration to all habitable rooms.  
 9 Type D: four-storey 'beacon'.



of the Branch Hill estate by Gordon Benson and Alan Forsyth of London Borough of Camden's architects' department (1978). The flavour at Clyne seems more west coast USA than European. More 'raumplan' than 'free plan'. The house forms are reminiscent of the later houses of Schindler, such as the Wolfe house (1928).

**Tectonics and visions**

The building enclosure takes on the role of a purely neutral atectonic, with whatever structural devices are necessary hidden from view, in a stucco envelope projecting and recessing as

dictated by the spaces within. The houses were built to thermal standards well in excess of the regulations current then. The recourse to the hybrid timber-and-steel frame is a pragmatic solution given spans and areas of glazing, and the desire for a plastic expression of internal space. In walking the scheme, I think of Christian de Portzamparc's formally exuberant interpretation on modernism.

The compositions are informed by space, texture, form, light, and whiteness, all shaped by Hill's personal vision. This reinvented architecture still has its common source in modernism, appropriately assimilated. As for landscape, the vision is one of pristine white villas surrounding the castle sitting on a clipped green carpet of grass. The car is accommodated with integral car ports rather than celebrated with detached multiple car garages.

Visiting some 15 years after completion the adherence to the landscape management plan is observed in a very disciplined way and the white stucco houses remain crisp and fresh in spite of their exposed site.

Following the successful release for sale of the castle apartments the houses were procured

on a design-and-build contract using a major contractor (Laing O'Rourke). This was on the verge of, and during, the global financial crisis of 2008 when economic confidence fell through the floor.

Clyne is a bravura and almost unique speculative development, breaking the mould of orthodox-developer executive homes that aspire to a sense of stability and permanence founded on a reinterpretation of some longed-for past. Clyne is a development obviously aimed at the upper end of the speculative market. Space standards are generous (2,000 to 3,000 sq ft. depending on house type). Houses are well planned for inhabitation and the rituals of contemporary life.

In conversation with a resident who was one of the first purchasers of a type B house, the appeal to buy transcended kerb appeal, but once inside the dwelling he was struck by the sense of space, light, and the great views. He emphasised that after 15 happy years dwelling at Clyne, he and his wife could not wish for a better place to live.

Is Clyne more than just a necklace of 'gin palaces'? It's difficult to place the scheme within any framework of private residential development as the developer and architect have deliberately evaded some of the more orthodox features of normal practice especially references to the past, not just to be different, but in a sincere desire to make a great contemporary place to live.

In the final analysis it seems modern housing is less a matter of symbolic references to the past or future or to some localised condition. What is required and is present at Clyne is the creative expression of place and dwelling.

*Wayne Forster is based at the Welsh School of Architecture, where he teaches and conducts design research through the medium of design.*



# A council-house architecture



1



2

There was once a bold ambition to improve housing for those most in need. Architects were trusted with their design and tried to resist the corruption of standards. Adam Voelcker reports on the council-house architecture of Sidney Colwyn Foulkes, 1945-65.

Frequently nowadays we hear references to the ambitions and achievements of the 1945 Labour government as a spur to resist our current experience of imposed austerity. The term ‘council housing’ has even reappeared. Much of our so-called ‘affordable’ housing is not affordable and leaves much to be desired in terms of quality. Back in the post-war period, how did those who cared about the quality of architectural design and space standards cope with the rough and tumble of national politics, and the inevitable budgetary and regulatory changes? Can we be inspired by their experiences? Is there anything we can learn from them for today?

One architect in Wales is Sidney Colwyn Foulkes (1884-1971), who turned his hand to housing, around the age of sixty, after a long career of designing almost every type of building. In the two decades following the second world war, he designed half a dozen council housing schemes, mostly in north-eastern Wales. One in particular, the Cae Tyddyn estate at Llanrwst, has extensive surviving archival records of both Foulkes’s architectural drawings and Llanrwst Urban District Council’s meeting minutes. The six phases of work on the same site span the full 1945-65 period and thus makes this scheme particularly interesting to explore.

475,000 houses had been destroyed or made uninhabitable by the war, with many more damaged. The incoming 1945 Labour government

**‘The brief he received from the council was for 52 houses, 40 of them permanent and 12 temporary. This is all he got from them, a mark of the trust that was put on architects at the time.’**

under Clement Attlee pledged to build 240,000 houses each year, but the economy was in disarray. The major wartime industries were now redundant, other industries more useful for peace time were too small or did not yet exist. Britain had nothing to export, and could not afford imports; and Truman suspended his lend-lease arrangements. A daunting future lay ahead.

One of first tasks for government was to delegate responsibility for housing, through its Ministry of Health, to the local authorities. In Wales, this was devolved to the Welsh Board of Health (WHB), which operated until 1951 when the Conservatives merged health with town and country planning and formed the Ministry of Housing and Local Government. The WHB operated through regional offices across Wales, each with its own architect, and it was they who made housing allocations to the local authorities. 625 houses were allocated to Denbighshire County Council for its first-year programme. Of these, Llanrwst would have 30 (later increased to 40). Initially, sites within the town were investigated as these would help clear existing slum areas, but they were too small, and farmland at Tyddyn Fadog, on the edge of town to the north, was finally selected. The housing committee of the Llanrwst UDC hoped the planning officer would prepare a layout, until it was pointed out that they needed to appoint an architect. Foulkes was selected from a list of five local architects and he began work in September 1945, at the same time that he was embarking on another scheme, at Beaumaris, Anglesey.

### Trusted architect

Foulkes admitted to being terrified when first presented with the Beaumaris site because it was on a hillside. As it happens, the site selected for the Llanrwst development also sloped and he could apply the same strategy to both. The brief he received from the council was for 52 houses, 40 of them permanent and 12 temporary. This is all he got from them, a mark of the trust that was put on architects at the time. He was expected to seek out the necessary guidelines, budgets, and space standards from information published by the government, in particular the 1944 Housing

Manual. Stressing the need for local authorities to employ qualified architects in their housing schemes, this 100-page document included advice on planning the house, with recommended room areas, examples of floor plans, information on kitchen fittings and services, limited advice on the layout of estates, and photographs of completed schemes – a far cry indeed from today’s context and the diminished role of the architect in housing.

One of Foulkes’s main strategies at Beaumaris and Llanrwst was doing away with the back access lane, which was a common feature of pre-first-world-war housing. He considered it an unnecessary expense, using up money more usefully spent within the house. A second aim was to avoid the monotonous repetition of semi-detached pairs of houses seen so often on interwar estates. His preference was for the terrace. The only problem was getting access to the rear of

**‘How did those who cared about the quality of architectural design and space standards cope with the rough and tumble of national politics, and the inevitable budgetary and regulatory changes?’**

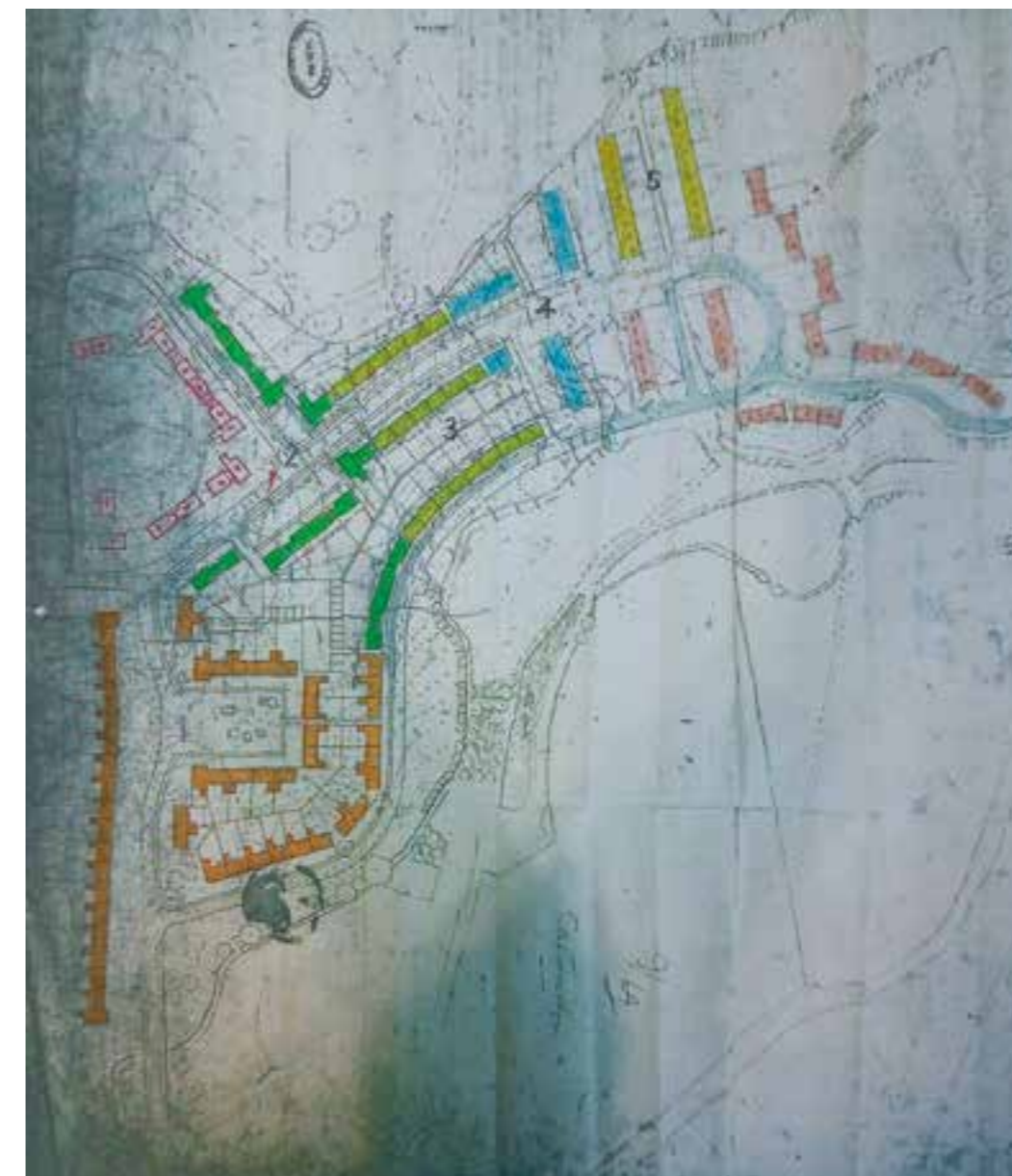
the house now that there was no back lane. He didn’t like tunnels cut through the terrace, so his solution was to plan for coal deliveries and bin collections on the front, street side. Much thought went into this, resulting in an ingenious but overcomplicated arrangement of stores with dual access hatches that then had to be concealed behind low screen walls or hedges, because they

would otherwise be in public view. As for the road and pavement at the front, now the only means of access, here another of Foulkes’s preferences came into play, the avoidance of private front gardens. A shared greensward was provided instead, through which the access paths would meander, softening the usual effect of the road and the hard kerb between it and the pavement. An example of such an arrangement, at Welwyn Garden City, was illustrated in the manual, and seems to have been acceptable generally at a time before marking out territory and stamping individuality on each front elevation became widespread.

Also shown amongst the manual’s indicative layout drawings was a terrace on a sloping site, its houses stepping down in section and stepping back in plan as they descended the hill. Whether Foulkes consciously saw this illustration or not, it’s the arrangement he chose at Beaumaris and Llanrwst, and very good use he made of it, particularly at Beaumaris where the rows curve too and are stunning when viewed with the backdrop of Snowdonia beyond. Foulkes may have said he had been terrified and he later played down the aesthetic side of the architect’s role, but he undoubtedly had a keen visual sensibility when it came to composing his layouts. In this respect he was similar to Tayler and Green, who were designing exemplary housing at the same time in south Norfolk.

The houses (at both estates) were built of brick, with steep slate roofs and dark painted Crittall windows. The external walls were rendered and colour-washed in pink, grey, turquoise or lemon. Foulkes said he was inspired by the cottages and villages of Anglesey, but one cannot help thinking of modern estates on the continent like the Weissenhofsiedlung, Stuttgart, and Le Corbusier’s Cité Frugès estate at Pessac. And there was perhaps also an example closer to

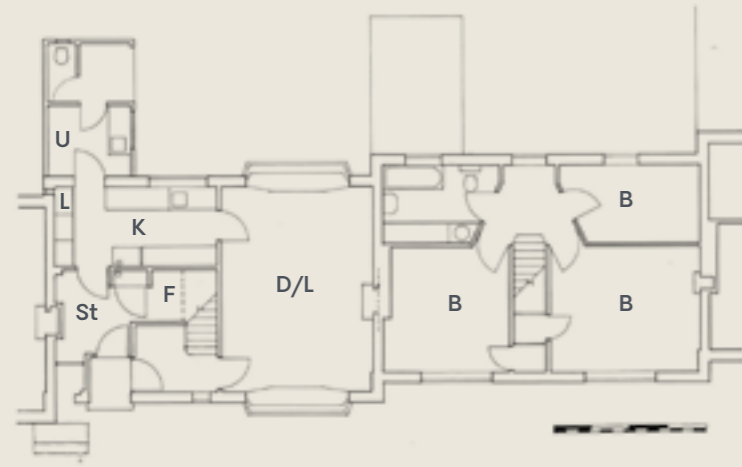
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### Colour key

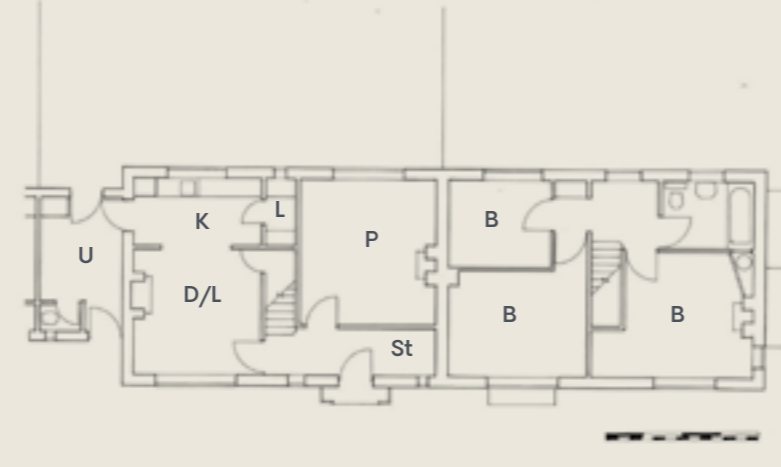
- Phase 1
- Phase 2
- Phase 3
- Phase 4
- Phase 5
- Phase 6. Planned but unbuilt houses

- 1 Facing page, top: Llanrwst phase 1 soon after construction. One has to imagine the pretty colours of the walls as originally painted, contrasted with the dark-grey window frames (Conway Archive Service).
- 2 Facing page below, from left to right: Ralph Colwyn Foulkes (Sidney’s son), Frank Lloyd Wright, Sidney Colwyn Foulkes, and Clough Williams-Ellis on a visit to Elwy Road in 1956.
- 3 Llanrwst site phasing plan 1945-1965.



**Phase 1**

A carefully considered and intricate plan on both floors. Because they were on the street side, much thought went into the bin and fuel stores, making them convenient to use but hidden from public view, and in the two 'front' doors. Other thoughtful touches include the wide window facing the garden, doubling as dining table, and the arrangement of bedroom doors next to the staircase.



**Phase 2**

The single-storey utility link solves the bin/fuel access problem as well as providing a useful space with dual-access to front and back. Furthermore, by removing the bin/fuel stores of the phase 1 house to the link, it was possible to provide a parlour, an important bonus for Foulkes, for whom the provision of a parlour became something of a personal crusade.

home: Portmeirion, being built around the same time by Foulkes's friend, Clough Williams-Ellis.

Regarding the house interior, the 1944 Housing Manual illustrated three types:

- a) the Kitchen-Living Room House;
- b) the Working-Kitchen House; and
- c) the Dining-Kitchen House.

The first type was suitable in rural and mining areas, where cooking was still done on the range rather than by gas or electricity. Eating and family sitting would be in this same space, and a parlour would provide a more formal room for visitors. The second type kept the kitchen size to a minimum, with eating and family sitting in another room. This seems to have been the most popular layout in the numerous surveys carried out for the Dudley Committee by women's organisations. The third layout combined cooking and eating in one room, with a separate sitting room.

Foulkes's earliest house layout, used in the first phases at both Beaumaris and Llanrwst, was the Working-Kitchen type with a compact kitchen similar to the 'Frankfurt kitchen' developed in Germany by Ernst May around 1930. The frontage was wide and the total floor area, including the outbuilding, was a generous 1,000 sq ft. or so, exceeding the area shown for a comparable layout in the manual, yet still within the slightly higher area recommended in the Dudley Report. Most of the houses in this phase were of the same size and had three bedrooms, as recommended in the manual. Terrace ends were marked with a slightly smaller 'terminal' type, set at right angles to the row for visual rather than functional reasons.

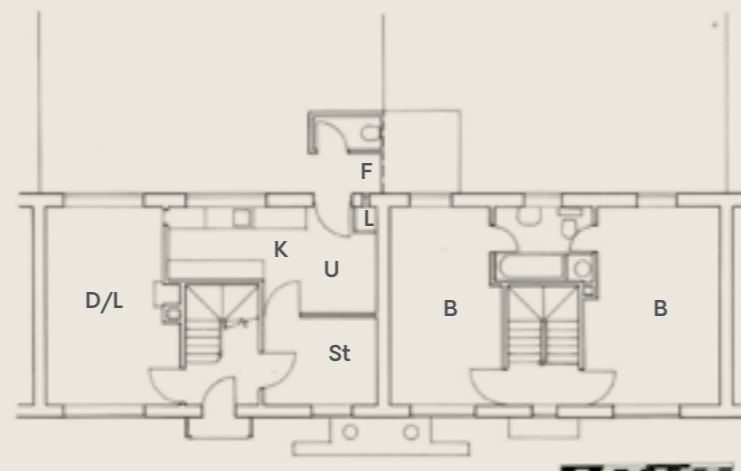
**Still moving forward**

From inception to completion, the first phase of Cae Tyddyn took four years. But it was hardly surprising. The inevitable shortages of materials and labour in these early years following the war delayed progress repeatedly, and there was a particularly severe winter in 1946-47. Before the scheme was finished, in early 1949, the council was notified of its allocation of houses

**'For Macmillan, quantity was more important than quality. Standards began to drop. The decline of council housing had begun.'**

**Phase 3**

The generous utility space with its front and back doors has disappeared. The bin and coal access hatches and store have returned to the front, with awkward access through the store from the front door to the kitchen. In the case of the two-bedroom house, access to the upstairs bathroom is not from the landing (because there isn't one) but from each of the two bedrooms – quite a nimble move, displaying Foulkes's three-dimensional imagination to overcome the restrictions that were besetting him more and more.



4



5



- 4 Llanrwst Phase 1, designs begun 1945 under a Labour government. It's a scheme for 52 houses (40 permanent, 12 temporary) and took four years to complete.
- 5 Llanrwst Phase 2, an improvement on phase 1, semi-detached pairs joined by single-storey 'through-stores'.

for the next year, and Foulkes was appointed to design a further 20 houses on fields adjoining the same site. He was busy finalising the house plans at the same time that a revised housing manual was published, at the end of 1949. It is not clear, therefore, whether his plans were in accordance with the earlier or the new manual, but the news was good rather than bad. Not only was there more and better guidance on all aspects of housing design, the space standards had increased. What is more, Foulkes had his Beaumaris scheme included in the new manual among the photographs of exemplary housing. Just a few months later, the Llanrwst scheme won a Ministry of Health Bronze Medal for housing carried out between 1945 and 1949. The council may have been getting exasperated with Foulkes and the contractor for not completing on time, but at least they knew they had a good architect.

Phase 2 followed on up the hillside but with a different house plan. Instead of a continuous terrace of identical houses, they were now designed as semi-detached pairs joined by paired single-storey 'through-stores'. It is a clever plan and an improvement on the phase 1 plan. The benefit is better access from street side to garden for coal deliveries, bin collection, pram and cycle storage, and the visual effect of the continuous terrace is preserved, albeit slightly chopped up. The total floor area is much the same as that for the previous type of house and the wide frontage allows good daylight and cross-ventilation as

well as minimising acoustic disturbance between adjoining houses. It is interesting to see how this plan prevails in the range of house plans offered in the 1949 manual, and it's certainly one that Tayler and Green liked and used frequently in their Norfolk schemes.

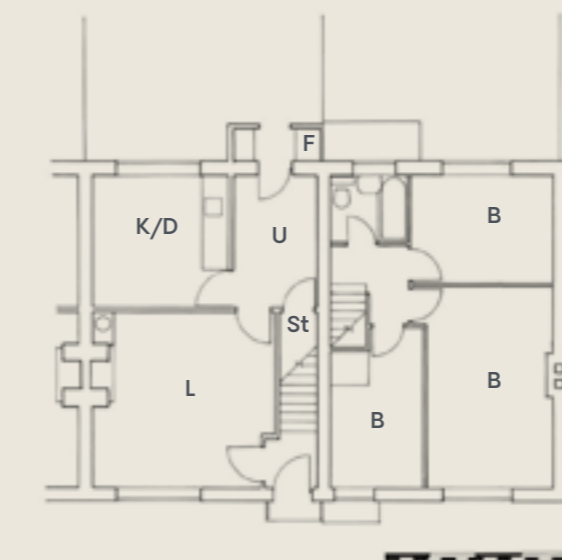
Why, then, was this house plan not repeated in phase 3, which began in early 1952? Although councils could never be certain how many houses would be allocated to them by the ministry for the next year, thus making it difficult to master-plan a site, they could always assume some increase. Indeed, Foulkes produced in 1949 a tentative master plan for the site, with a continuous row of houses snaking its way up the hillside to the north-east, round and down again. Phase 3 set off with this plan in mind, and then a change of mind seems to have occurred when phase 4 was planned.

**The tide turns**

In 1950 there had been a general election. The Labour government had achieved much on the welfare front but had failed to meet its target of 240,000 new houses each year. By 1951, only 900,000 had been built. Inflation was rife. The Tories were elected, and the new minister of housing, Harold Macmillan, promised 300,000 houses per year. Changes in policy were not immediate but gradually the paternalistic state-centred ethos that had traditionally underpinned public housing was overtaken by a

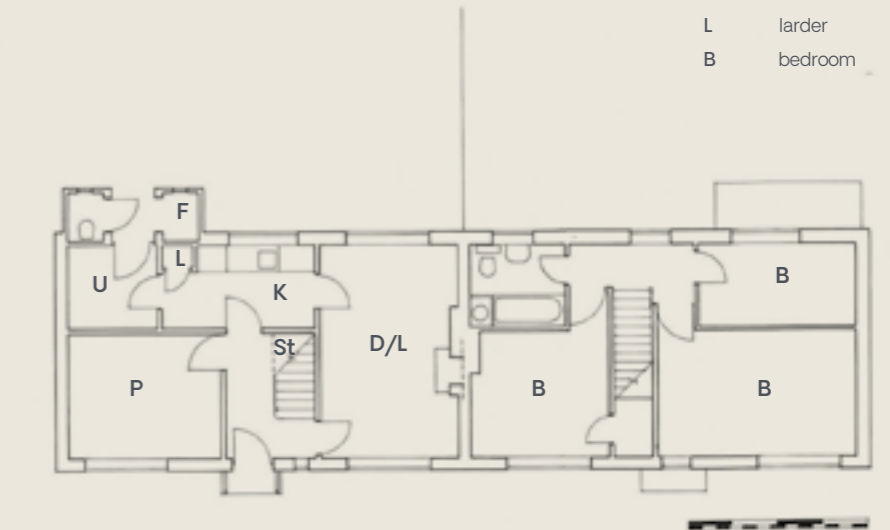
**Phases 4/5**

The phases 4/5 houses are the least satisfactory of all in size and layout. They look mean and lack the relaxed horizontal emphasis that is characteristic of Foulkes's earlier houses at Llanrwst. The roofs are shallower than the previous ones, somehow emphasising the boxiness of the dwellings.



**Final phase**

The final phase plan returns to the wide-frontage format of the phase 2 house but with a small rear extension instead of the single-storey through-store. It has the popular working-kitchen, it has a parlour in addition to a through living room, and, being semi-detached, there are no complications with access to the rear, even if it's not Foulkes's preferred terrace arrangement.



**Key to floor plans**

- K kitchen
- P parlour
- D/L dining/living room
- F fuel store
- U utility
- St store
- L larder
- B bedroom

belief in delivery through private enterprise. For Macmillan, quantity was more important than quality. Standards began to drop. The decline of council housing had begun.

Phase 3 was for a further 20 houses, to be designed in accordance with the 1952 supplement of the 1949 Housing Manual. Part of the previous phase had anticipated a continuation of one of the two roads already established on the site by beginning a terrace on each side of the road. Phase 3 continued the terraces with six houses each; the remaining eight were located on the other estate road to the south. The houses were a mixture of two-bedroom and three-bedroom types, to reflect the trend towards a greater variety in house size. But the frontage and depth of the houses were reduced from the previous dimensions, the total floor area dropped as a consequence, the quality of the interior layout deteriorated and the parlour disappeared.

The council's allocation for 1954 was another 20 houses. But by now the Tories had been in

**‘One cannot help thinking of modern estates on the continent like the Weissenhofsiedlung, Stuttgart, and Le Corbusier’s Cité Frugès estate at Pessac... also perhaps an example closer to home: Portmeirion, being built by Clough Williams-Ellis.’**



6 Llanrwst Phase 3 begun in 1952 under the Tory government of Macmillan, a further 20 houses; the total floor area dropped, the quality of the interior layout deteriorated, and the parlour disappeared.

7 Llanrwst Phase 4: 20 houses were approved in 1954. The Tories removed general housing needs subsidies in 1956. Former wide-frontage homes became narrow-fronted. Room sizes have again decreased.



8 Llanrwst Phase 5, post Parker Morris, post the 1964 Labour election win. General needs housing subsidies were restored, but curiously this last phase of 20 houses did not improve on phase 4 standards.

power for two years and their priorities were clear: private enterprise in housing was the way forward, not local authority council housing, and to encourage this, licence restrictions were removed. Phase 4 would not be easy. Foulkes obtained approval for the 20 houses at the end of 1954 but then the scheme went quiet, and through 1955 there was no progress. From March 1956 to March 1957, no progress is recorded on any of the council's new housing schemes and any future development was put on hold, owing to the government's decision in 1956 to remove general housing needs subsidies for all but one-bedroom dwellings, and to focus on slum clearance. During this time Foulkes turned his attention to a scheme for ten bungalows for older people, on a site nearer the centre of town.

In mid-1959, after a long period of inactivity and uncertainty on the housing front, the council began investigating one of the many non-traditional methods of building, as a cheaper alternative for phase 4. They identified a firm, Unity Structures, which seemed keen to join up with Foulkes and could offer a 'traditional' house costing £1,350, inclusive of roads and sewers. But nothing came of this idea and it was dropped. Instead, he was asked to obtain the necessary approvals and tenders for a scheme built using traditional methods and to negotiate a fixed price with a contractor nominated by him; another example of the trust that was placed in the architect, in contrast to today's context.

Work proceeded and this phase was completed in late 1961, just before another year of inactivity and uncertainty. The built result must have been a disappointment for Foulkes. One wonders whether the change from wide- to narrow-frontage was his decision or was forced on him by either the council or the WHB. It is even possible that he initially agreed to go down the non-traditional path and to submit a layout based on the Unity house.

The first eight houses in this phase follow on from the pair of terraces of the previous phase, but suddenly they stop and the remaining 12 houses are built in two short rows at right angles to the road – short, because they now have narrow frontages. Less road is required as a result. A narrow back lane is provided, chiefly for coal deliveries and bin collections (and it's also cheaper than a main access road). The room sizes have all decreased, resulting in a total floor area that has reduced to less than 750 sq ft. There is no WC on the ground floor, the upstairs bathroom is tight, eating has to be done in either the kitchen or the small living room. The houses are designed to be either two-bedroom or three-bedroom, even though the size remains the same for both; in other words, a third bedroom can be carved out of the main bedroom but only to the detriment of both.



**‘What we see at Llanrwst is the history of post-war housing unravelling in front of our very eyes.’**

In 1961, a decade after the Tories came to power, there was a glimmer of hope on two fronts, prompted by an acute shortage of housing for the lower-income groups. The first was the publication of the Parker Morris Report recommending the improving of standards within the home. It heralded an updated way of designing the home, concentrating on activities rather than specific rooms, and more in line with Functionalist thinking on the continent rather than the 'cottage' mentality underlying the earlier housing manuals. The second was the restoration of general housing needs subsidies. These two events may have helped to kickstart the council into commissioning, in late 1962, phase 5 consisting of a further 20 houses. But, instead of being of a higher standard, they were of the same type, this time all with just two bedrooms. Two rows were built, either side of a narrow back lane and parallel to the previous rows. A further paring back of quality is seen in the change of roof material, from Welsh slates to concrete tiles. Why had the Parker Morris Report had no effect on this phase? Maybe Llanrwst UDC could not yet afford the cost of improving house standards. As a result of charging low rents compared with the national average, it found itself penalised rather than helped by the new revenue-based system of subsidies.

However, in 1964 there was a change of government, the second during the course of Foulkes's work at Llanrwst. The new Labour government under Harold Wilson set new housing targets notwithstanding the increasingly fierce competition from the private sector and it doubled the amount of money available to local

authorities. The council felt confident enough to commission a further 40 houses. Foulkes was asked to prepare a scheme, but by now the site at Cae Tyddyn had nearly reached its limits, and he was able to fit only 30 houses at the northern extremity. His brief was for a further 12 of the two-bedroom, narrow-frontage terrace type built in phases 4 and 5, and nine pairs of semi-detached, three-bedroom houses, requested by the council to be 'slightly better quality' than the previous ones. And, indeed, they are better since they almost return to the phase 2 plan. Why, in this final phase, were the inferior narrow-frontage houses repeated? Perhaps they were necessary in order to fit on the tight site the better-quality semi-detached pairs, which inevitably take up more land.

#### Resisting the unravelling

What did Foulkes achieve during more than two decades of house building at Llanrwst? Did he always keep his head above water, or did he eventually drown – along with the idea of council housing? Following the path from the heady early days of 1945, up to a peak around 1949–50 and then a steady downhill tumble over the next decade, it would be easy to conclude that not even Foulkes was able to design a satisfactory council house in the prevailing political and economic climates. The narrow-frontage phase 5 house is indeed a poorly provided house. But with the better-quality, semi-detached houses built in the final phase, there was a glimmer of hope. Foulkes was able to reuse the house he had built at Elwy Road, the scheme that Frank Lloyd Wright had liked when Clough Williams-Ellis took him there in 1956. He had been very proud of this and had seen it as a significant advance on the Beaumaris house, chiefly because it had a parlour in addition to a living room, all within a total floor area of 915–930 sq ft. The parlour became the subject of a personal crusade for Foulkes. As early as 1952, when the 1952 supplement to the 1949 Housing Manual was published, he was frustrated that not one of the 17 illustrations of terraced house floor plans contained a parlour. 'I have been putting these children into the seventeen terrace-house examples illustrated in the 1952 Manual, and I have come to the conclusion that none of them adequately answers the requirements of a family large or small', he wrote to J H Forshaw, the chief architect at the ministry. Later in the 1950s, he addressed national conferences and local women's meetings with the same zeal for the parlour. If he felt that the Elwy Road house was a triumph, the phase 6 house at Llanrwst was surely a bigger achievement because here he managed to fit a parlour into a house that was actually smaller.

By the time the final phase was finished, Foulkes (until he died in 1971) and his practice were involved in designing blocks of flats and older peoples' accommodation on sites elsewhere in Llanrwst. Times had moved on and the type of state-funded, rented house that Foulkes had devoted two decades of his career to developing was no longer relevant in a society where aspirations focused on owning your home and stamping it with your individual mark. What we see at Llanrwst is the history of post-war housing unravelling in front of our very eyes. We glimpse the heady early days of Nye Bevan's dream, with generously provided houses set within attractive greenswards, and we also sense a trust in, and respect for, the architects who devoted their careers to public service. Then we witness the slow decline in standards as the houses become smaller, more tightly packed and shorn of even the tiny decorative gestures that Foulkes delighted in and felt were so important. Today, a visit to the estate will reveal a few traces of the original atmosphere. But, with so many types of windows and front doors, so many wall finishes and colours, so many added porches and green spaces grabbed for private garden, we are light-years from the idea that the state can and should provide a decent house in an attractive estate for those who cannot afford it.

*Adam Voelcker retired from architectural practice in 2014 and then spent as long on a BA course in fine art as he had on his architecture course (and read far more books too). After living nearly 40 years on the western edge of Snowdonia, he moved to Bangor in 2021 and is currently researching the work of Sidney Colwyn Foulkes.*

#### References

- 1 Denbighshire County Council had its own architects' department, as did Anglesey County Council, but they tended to design schools, libraries, council offices, and police headquarters, rather than housing. An exception was the Queen's Park estate in Wrexham, designed in 1950 by the borough engineer and surveyor. Interestingly, it was the first estate in Britain to adopt the Radburn layout to separate vehicles from pedestrians.
- 2 At this time, the government was keen to investigate alternative, non-traditional methods of construction in order to help reach its targets. Building temporary houses was one of the possible options.
- 3 A 15-page document, consisting chiefly of mean-looking floor plans illustrating how space can be saved (i.e. reduced). They were examples of Macmillan's 'People's House'.
- 4 Elwy Road, Llandrillo-yn-Rhos. A scheme of 148 houses and 90 flats, built in two phases between 1952 and 1961.

Councils in Wales are back to building homes, and our capital city has embarked on a sizeable house-building programme – the largest in Wales. So how is it getting on, and do the emerging developments set a sufficiently aspirational example for others to learn from? Mike Biddulph reports.



# Are they really council houses?

Despite a rich history of very significant design innovation and achievement, many people would dismiss council housing as a place of last resort, and yet social housing schemes are well represented in the national housing design awards because some housing associations and councils positively invest in good design.

Cardiff Council has been well-placed to move back into building homes. The Welsh Government removed the debt cap in 2014, allowing councils to once again borrow against assets. Cardiff Council had managed to retain a lot of its housing stock and was thus free to explore a comprehensive programme of development on its own land. It quickly found 25 sites and partnered with Wates Residential to create its Cardiff Living programme.

In the first phase of development there was a focus on mixed tenure and a desire to allow existing residents to buy a new house in an established council housing area. The aspiration towards good design was still being established with little substantive briefing on place making or building performance. The most significant scheme from this early period is Silverdale Park, designed by Pentan Architects, a small fragment of the much larger St Mellons area (1). If you go there, you will see how place-making ideas have created a much more coherent and attractive development when compared to the older streets and homes nearby.

## In favour of design

The visible success of this programme resulted in politicians wanting to do more. The council created an additional programme to deliver

4,000 new homes on 60 sites by circa 2035. About 2,800 of these will be retained by the council as social housing.

Talking to everyone involved it's clear that they readily acknowledge that the council's team has had to learn a lot, and building capacity remains a challenge, but it's really good to know that the private-sector architects working on these projects genuinely think that Cardiff Council is one of their best clients. My sense is that this is down to their interest and investment in design.

The briefs are now clear about what is expected against the RIBA stages. Usefully, the council can call on officer expertise on SuDS, ecology, and place making. It has also seconded someone from Welsh Government for critical guidance on energy efficiency. These briefs avoid being too prescriptive, focusing on key deliverables and allowing time for designers to add value. The procurement also weighs heavily in favour of design, weighting bids 70:30 in favour of design quality against cost. The architects are happy to turn up to the party. The council team has noticed that this means it gets more time from senior experienced architects, and it puts the brakes on undervalued quotes where architects subsequently charge for every bit of additional necessary work.

Finding land is a challenge, but to date the schemes have pieced together pockets of land that reflect wider trends in the development of the city. The Channel View development intensifies the number of homes on a former lower-density council estate, while not too controversially using a small part of a local park.

The Iowerth Jones development puts 20 homes on the site of a former council resource centre that was no longer needed. The Moorland Road development integrates a community building already on the site into a denser mixed-use scheme of homes for older people. The 'well-being village' at Michaelston-super-Ely and the development of homes at St Teilo's, Llanedeyrn are both progressing on land released after secondary schools were relocated. The council has also bought land such as the former gas works in Grangetown, near IKEA's store.

Allford Hall Monaghan Morris (AHMM) has designed three striking older persons' schemes in different parts of the city (5). They've all been shortlisted for a housing design award. The architects spoke of how they enjoyed coming from Bristol and working with the Welsh Government's *Beautiful Homes and Spaces* standards, which are more generous than those of their clients in the rest of the UK. They enjoyed the challenge of complex sites, careful context analysis, and a robust review at the Design Commission for Wales. *Time for design* led to the emergence of improved schemes that were so good that they gained unanimous support at planning committee despite their scale.

## Leading exemplars

Powell Dobson Architects (PDA) remarked on the valuable inclusion of local communities in the design development process. When a proposal came forward for a 'well-being village' on the former Michaelston College site (2), someone was brave enough to ask exactly what that might mean. Ten sessions over 20 weeks with both older

people and neighbourhood children, including a sample of the target population at which the development was aimed, allowed the designers to refine an answer (2). Specific drawings show exactly how areas of public realm design have been informed by specific suggestions from this process. This provides evidence for how the council works as a UNICEF child-friendly city. The emerging development has a good master plan combining a significant group of mixed-use health and community buildings, with new older persons' accommodation, (4), by architect PRP. These will combine with homes designed by PDA into a landscape designed by Tir Collective. We should keep an eye on this project. It's potentially a leading exemplar for the city.

Pentan Architects drew attention to the emerging net-zero-carbon design agenda. The council has never wanted its tenants to have big fuel bills that they can't afford, while they have always recognised that homes built well now will be future-proofed from any need (and cost) for improvements later. Homes on Allensbank Road, designed by Pentan Architects, were built to Passivhaus standards, reflecting the importance of a fabric-first approach. A development of Crofts Street designed by RSHP has innovated in the use of off-site manufacturing techniques. It has been awarded an RSAW award for sustainability (*see pp. 38-41*). More recently, homes at Aspen Grove in Rumney designed by PDA (3) include ground-source heat pumps, photovoltaic panels, thermal and battery storage, electric vehicle charging points throughout, and critically, intelligent energy system controls provided by the local company, Sero, to monitor and manage energy use in the homes and make this visible to homeowners. This development won the Climate Crisis Initiative – Residential category in the Property Week's 2022 RESI Awards.

Pentan Architects is currently commissioned to innovate again and produce a zero-carbon scheme on the site of the former St Teilo's high school. This will involve a whole-life assessment of carbon use in the development, evaluated and monitored using the LETI framework. This will push planners to re-evaluate common place-making principles. A different housing aesthetic may also arise.

## Tilted funding and feedback

Hiding in all this exciting innovation is an uncomfortable fact. These more responsibly specified schemes have been paid for with grants from the Welsh Government's Innovative Housing Programme and Social Housing Grant. The private sector, which builds the bulk of our homes, tell us they don't have anything like the value generated in their developments to deliver these qualities more widely. That is still a crisis. Costs need to come down and house buyers need to demand these carbon-reducing features as standard, if more draconian regulations are to be avoided.

Highway negotiations still remain a bone of contention. Highway design, common to the best residential projects across the UK, are relentlessly shunned by our local engineers who unpick features in their road safety audits, often after planning permission is granted. They carry on littering residential streets with unnecessary bollards and line markings. Asphalt is still king for streetscapes as well; and yet I visit schemes that have been paved properly for 30 years that still look fine.

There is a cynical tendency by some to compare unfavourably what happens in Wales with what is happening in some more affluent corners of England. Are all the good precedents in Bristol, London or Cambridge? While I will always enjoy seeing the work going on elsewhere, in Cardiff we are also starting to see things to celebrate *yn nes at adref*. We need to do more with less, something those with bigger budgets might also learn. That doesn't mean that we need to be less creative and innovative. Most important, of course, is who is doing the judging. As professionals we have a range of particular and very important concerns, but there is something to take from a recent anecdote shared by a colleague who took council members to see an emerging scheme, and had to smile with understandable pride when they turned and asked 'they're not council houses are they?'

*Dr Mike Biddulph is an urban designer working for Cardiff Council. He is also a commissioner of the Design Commission for Wales.*



- 1 Willowbrook, Cardiff, the Silverdale Park scheme by Pentan Architects, 2018.
- 2 Powell Dobson Architects' scheme for the Michaelston 'well-being village'.

- 3 Aspen Grove, by Powell Dobson Architects in Rumney with ground-source heat pumps.
- 4 New old persons' accommodation by PRP architects at Michaelston site.
- 5 One of AHMM's old persons' schemes.



# Housing design: *object and identity*

An award-winning housing project in Cardiff brings unresolved tensions in housing design to the fore. Report by Ed Green and Wayne Forster

One of the projects given awards in this year's RSAW Welsh Architecture Awards was a social housing scheme at Crofts Street in Cardiff. According to the jury, it is 'an important precedent for successful partnering, speed of assembly, comfort of living and positive contributions to the urban realm – all the criteria that our homes for the future demand'. For these reasons, it is worthy of closer scrutiny.

The surrounding neighbourhood is, for the most part, dense Victorian streets of stereotypically compact terraced houses. Partridge Road and Crofts Street include some of the oldest houses in the area. They were established between 1861 and 1867 by the wealthy Williams family, who lived nearby at Roath Court. The site, located at the junction of the two streets, was originally a row of nine tightly terraced homes. A bombing raid in 1941 devastated the area, clearing the site and surrounds to the extent that Winston Churchill later visited it in person. In the 1960s, the adjacent pub and housing plots were rebuilt, along with the Cardiff Scientific Laboratory, which occupied the site until its demolition in 2016. The flat site then stood empty for five years, earmarked for new housing in the Local Development Plan.

The Crofts Street project was delivered by Cardiff Living – a partnership between the council and the Wates group – one of the UK's largest contractors. The development was designed by internationally renowned practice RSHF, and is a flagship project for Welsh Government's Innovative Housing Programme, which provided £1.4 million in financial support. Nine new houses have been delivered, arranged in a neat row that echoes the original Victorian street pattern.



Photos: Joao Souza

The project has successfully overcome many technical hurdles. The site is very constrained and overlooked – traditional construction would have had a negative impact on the surrounding residents, and the impetus for off-site fabrication was clear. For some years, Cardiff Council have been working with Wates on its housebuilding programme, and have developed the 'Cardiff standard' which requires that new social housing performs considerably better than both UK and Welsh building regulations. For this project they adopted a laudable fabric-first approach, delivering dwellings that will be carbon-negative in operation through a combination of demanding U-values (0.11 W/sqm°C) and airtightness (1.5 ac/hour@50Pa), and the use of electric panel heaters powered primarily by energy from roof-mounted photovoltaic panels and stored on-site in batteries.

Like other volumetric housing projects, the scheme embraces the tectonic challenges of a closed system based on large prefabricated modules. Repetition and simple forms are key, but at the scale of a room, rather than a brick or a slate. The proportions of the system are evident, in the width and depth of each dwelling, and in the height of a storey (each module is 3.5 m wide, 11.4 m long and 3.45 m tall). To maximise efficiency of fabrication, this module is not compromised or complicated by the design, and so its size and scale are instrumental in defining the scheme's character. Indeed, simple detailing (including a seamless transition from brick slip at street level to cementitious board cladding at

**'The site is very constrained and overlooked – traditional construction would have had a negative impact on the surrounding residents, and the impetus for off-site fabrication was clear.'**



- 1 A new Cardiff terrace, Crofts Street, a 21st-century variation on modular building.
- 2 Nine new houses with roof PVs slipped into the Victorian street pattern.
- 3 Rear elevations.
- 4 Off-site fabricated modular units arriving on site: reducing street building disturbance time.
- 5 Location plan.
- 6 First floor plans.
- 7 Ground floor plans.



5



7



**‘At Crofts Street, the design adopts a coherent starting point rooted in the historic use of the site, and the organisation and pattern of nine terraced houses lost during the second world war.’**



- 8 Nuances of the surrounding terraces eliminated by efficiency of production?
- 9 Crofts Street as home.
- 10 Avoiding the creation of architecturally reductive and contextually unresponsive places?

first floor), flat roofs and a lack of any projecting features, all heighten the flatness of the dwelling façades and form, visually expressing a rigorous, precise, technical approach to fabrication.

Peter Rowe in *Modernity and Housing*<sup>1</sup> noted that the modern technical focus of housing was shaped, and is sustained, by three complementary imperatives: a technological way of making things, a technocratic way of managing things, and a technical way of people and their world. These three imperatives underpin the design

and construction of the housing at Crofts Street. More recently, in *The Prefabricated Home*,<sup>2</sup> Colin Davies adopts a more provocative stance:

‘Architecture’s sensitivity to the nuances of “place” is admirable in its way but it has become a fetish, especially in schools of architecture. The idea that the form of a building should emerge naturally from the unique combination of factors generated by a particular client and a particular site is

appealing but unrealistic. Most houses are standard products adaptable to almost any site.’

Cardiff Council’s own *Cardiff Residential Design Guide* contests that ‘in the past many housing developments have been criticised for ignoring aspects of their context, or resulting from the imposition of standard highway and housing designs.’<sup>3</sup> Architectural theorist and author Christian Norberg Schulz in 1979 explained

that ‘since ancient times the *genius loci*, or “spirit of place”, has been recognized as the concrete reality man has to face and come to terms with in his daily life. Architecture means to visualize the *genius loci*, and the task of the architect is to create meaningful places, whereby he helps man to dwell.’<sup>4</sup> In his 1961 essay *Universal Civilization and National Cultures*, author Paul Ricoeur laments that ‘everywhere throughout the world, one finds the same bad movies, the same slot machines, the same plastic or aluminium atrocities, the same twisting of language by propaganda...’<sup>5</sup> Surely our homes and neighbourhoods, of all places, should provide a vibrant and distinctive resistance to the standardised generic spaces and bland experiences offered by much of the contemporary built environment.

To this end, place making lies at the heart of recent changes to national planning policy and has been enthusiastically adopted by the wide range of signatories to the Placemaking Wales Charter, which requires that ‘the positive, distinctive qualities of existing places are valued and respected. The unique features and opportunities of a location, including heritage, culture, language, built and natural physical attributes, are identified and responded to.’<sup>6</sup> Planning policy document *TAN 12* states that ‘understanding the site and its immediate and wider context is the basis for a meaningful and sustainable design response, and is the responsibility of all those involved in the design process.’<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, local planning policy requires that any development ‘responds to the local character and context of the built and landscape setting so that layout, scale, form, massing, height, density, colour, materials, detailing and impact on the built and

natural heritage are all addressed.’<sup>8</sup>

A key challenge for modular housing (particularly for volumetric construction, which relies on large, standardised, stackable factory-built modules) is avoiding the creation of architecturally reductive and contextually unresponsive places through an overt focus on repetition and efficiency of production. At Crofts Street, the design adopts a coherent starting point rooted in the historic use of the site, and the organisation and pattern of nine terraced houses lost during the second world war. However, by fabricating these homes in large format modules off-site, some subtler nuances of the surrounding terraced homes – projecting bay windows, tiled entrance alcoves, decorated gables – have been ignored.

The late Dickon Robinson, development director at Peabody between 1988 and 2004, championed the use of modular methods of construction (MMC) in a number of the housing association’s progressive developments. He described how Murray Grove, Hoxton by Cartwright Pickard, a milestone in the use of volumetric construction for social housing ‘effortlessly marries architectural excellence with great constructional innovation. It is popular with residents and economical to maintain.’<sup>9</sup> This balance between delivering technical innovation and creating (or reinforcing) distinctive identity may be key to the future success of MMC in housing, and will be particularly difficult to strike in neighbourhoods with a defined, nuanced sense of place.

The same potential tension is evident in the *Welsh Development Quality Requirements 2021*, the document that sets out the Welsh Government’s expectations for all new (and converted) social

housing. Subtitled *Creating Beautiful Homes and Places*, it establishes that ‘housing quality is as much about the value of the external spaces created as it is about the design of the homes. Homes and their environs should therefore focus on the role of placemaking’.<sup>10</sup> However, it goes no further in explaining how place making might be improved. Instead, it advocates modern methods of construction, before listing a range of performance and space standards with which all new housing should comply, including the requirement that new homes provide good value for money. All of these ‘technical’ requirements are measurable, and therefore enforceable, and inevitably become a priority for designers. None of them actively contributes to place making. Some of them, as established above, diminish it.

The design of good housing has always been challenging. The complexity of the challenge has increased over the last century, in parallel with expectations around performance and comfort. The technical challenge can only intensify if we are to create a housing stock that is no longer a carbon burden but part of our collective pathway out of the climate emergency. Peter Rowe’s three imperatives need to be balanced with a focus on the experiential dimension, if we are to succeed in creating beautiful homes and places.

**References**

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- 7 Welsh Government, 2016. *Technical Advice Note 12: Design*, p. 13.
- 8 Cardiff Council, 2017. Op cit, p. 5.
- 9 Cartwright Pickard. *Murray Grove* [online]. Available at: <https://www.cartwrightpickard.com/housing/murray-grove/> [accessed 27 July 2023].
- 10 Welsh Government, 2021. *Welsh Development Quality Requirements 2021: Creating Beautiful Homes and Places*, p. 1.



# touchstones

## DEMANDING RENEWABLES

**It's clear that if renewable energy generation is to provide the majority of our future electricity demand,** then there will still have to be a massive upscaling of installations.

Given the colossal logjams created by the incapacities of the current national grid and the slow evolution of its connection points, building-based renewables, taking power direct to the demand source, will still be a major game-player.

The domestic marketplace as ever will favour the comfortably-off who can cover their domestic roofs with photovoltaics (PVs). The registered social landlords will look after their former council tenants with government subsidies. Then

there will be a large group in between those two poles, the private landlords and their tenants, the employed homeowners but with little savings, who simply cannot afford it. So, until finances are sorted to help those sectors, it is essential that every public building (with the right orientation) in every settlement should be installing PVs. The big ones need to lead the way. It's good to see that the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff has installed 730 solar modules and four inverters on six of its south-facing roof spaces. It sounds and looks impressive. But what does it actually generate?

David Booney of the Wales Millennium Centre's building management team claims

**'The notion that those lucky enough to have cars at the moment can just swap them all over to electric vehicles so that we can carry on the same level of mobility in our lives is simply untenable as a future strategy on every front, from whatever angle of analysis you start.'**

that 'solar power will produce around 10% of the electrical energy that the centre uses each year (based on pre-covid figures of 2019), and the predicted annual generation of 192,922 kWh is more than enough to power its stage activities (including the heating and cooling of the auditorium) for each year, over the next 25 years'. Well, that's a start, and all public buildings should be following their lead, and should also be investing to replace it all in 25 years' time... but it's only servicing 10% of demand.

So, there's the rub, which so many don't want to face. Yes, we should maximise renewables but in parallel we simply all have to reduce demand and that's not just a matter of upgrading the energy ratings on the domestic appliances.

The notion that those lucky enough to have cars at the moment can just swap them all over to electric vehicles so that we can carry on the same level of mobility in our lives is simply untenable as a future strategy on every front, from whatever angle of analysis you start. According to DN Media group's *Hydrogen Insight*, in their 3rd August 2023 issue, part of the German railway system has just announced that it is ceasing its piloting of 17 hydrogen-powered trains and will be relying instead on electric power. Europe's second-largest truck maker says hydrogen will not be a major road freight fuel. So much for hydrogen being the ultimate game changer for public transport and heavy industry.

So, we can all play the game of expecting technological breakthroughs to save our bacon whether that be modular nuclear, or fission, or fusion, or hydrogen, or carbon capture and storage, or tidal power, or wave power, but we simply have to reduce demand, as António Guterres asks, by 40% by 2030 – and that's only seven years away. So up with the PVs and down with the demand.



## BASEMENT THINKING FOR REVENUE FUNDING



1

### The same mistakes are made over and over again.

At the beginning there is huge excitement for a new community project and its design. Massive efforts are made to state-fund its capital cost, but everyone forgets the follow-on revenue funding for maintenance, ongoing necessary additions, and running the place.

Many may remember the remarkable and memorable 2010 National Eisteddfod venue sunk into one of the two remaining huge derelict basement sites of the former Corus steelworks in Ebbw Vale (1).

In June 2009 Russ + Henshaw, a young Welsh design practice, won a competition to transform the second derelict basement into a 'vertical community garden' offered to community organisations and local schools for both food and decorative planting cultivation (2, 3).

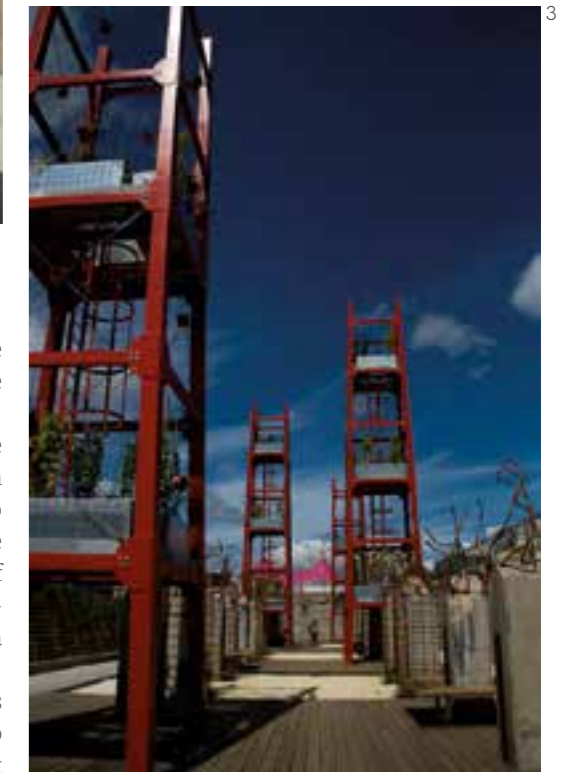
Russ + Henshaw was retained as design consultant for its delivery, working alongside local authority Blaenau Gwent's architects on the £100,000 project. It was on a tight, eight-month programme. The Blaenau Gwent office provided support in terms of design and construction advice, and site inspections. They organised a community-based initiative to undertake the construction.

Unemployed local people, in collaboration with Gee Construction, were taught the skills to complete the basement. All very impressive.

Sadly, it has been neglected (4) because the protection to the site perimeter has not been completed. Despite the colossal capital sum of £350 million provided by Welsh Government and the European Union (EU) for the whole regeneration of the steelworks site, there was no funding for long-term maintenance nor for completing the site to a standard suitable for public visitors.

As adjacent sites were developed it was hoped funding for those could do a mopping up exercise. Yet again, EU and Welsh Government capital funding for these were tightly controlled and did not permit expenditure on elements outside the brief.

Some might look on the totally fenced-off basement now as a wonderful act of magnificent rewilding. Nature may be reclaiming it all but we have to get better at follow-through. Was it really likely given its somewhat isolated position in a business park that those young generations would own it and make it blossom? People and things move on. We have to get cleverer at these acts of ensuring continuity in the community.



3



4

# Wales Architecture Awards 2023



House:

**Harepitts, Rhosili**

Maich Swift Architects

- *RSAW Welsh Architecture Project*

- *Architect of the Year Award*

- *RIBA National Award 2023*

- *National Eisteddfod of Wales shortlist*



House:

**Pen y Common, Hay-on-Wye**

Nidus Architects and Rural Office

- *RSAW Welsh Architecture Award*

- *RSAW Welsh Architecture Building of the Year Award*

- *RSAW Welsh Architecture Conservation Award*

- *RSAW Welsh Architecture Small Project of the Year Award*

- *RIBA National Award 2023*

- *National Eisteddfod of Wales Gold Medal for Architecture*



# Dewi-Prys Thomas Award 2023



After a hiatus of eight years, the Dewi-Prys Thomas Trust is delighted that – with the fantastic support of the RSAW – it has been possible to reactivate a prize in honour of one of the great Welshmen of the twentieth century, Dewi-Prys Thomas – and alongside the RSAW architecture awards' programme at that.



Many of you, I hope, will remember that from 2003 to 2015 the trust awarded the Dewi-Prys Thomas Prize every three years, and it was a prize deliberately wider in scope than others in that it rewarded excellence not just in architectural projects, but also in public art works, landscape design, books and publications, and the often lifetime contributions of individuals and organisations (see <http://dewi-prysthomas.org/prizes03-15-en.html>).

For this year's new award, which is intended to be an annual award, we have continued the ethos of honouring a project from a wide range of disciplines but, because of the shorter interval between awards, the trust has more closely defined the criteria: now, the winner will not only have to demonstrate excellence in its field, but will be the one that, in the view of the judges, also best responds to its site and context, contributes positively to the distinctiveness of the place, and addresses responsibly the environmental and social challenges of Wales in the twenty-first



Synapse (bronze domestic chairs)  
Deborah Jones, 2021  
Image: Studio Response/Phillip Roberts



Nurture  
Howard Bowcott, 2021  
Image: Studio Response

century – be it architectural, landscape, urban design, public art, or whatever.

A healthy 18 entries were received, including six individual private houses, conversions or house extensions; three individual public art works; a public art programme for a major hospital; four community buildings; two master-planning projects; a café extension to an independent arts centre; and a city-centre hotel.





Houses:  
**Crofts Street, Cardiff**  
 RSHP  
 – R*SAW* Welsh Architecture Award  
 – R*SAW* Welsh Architecture Sustainability Award  
 – R*SAW* Welsh Architecture Client of the Year Award



House:  
**Castle High, Broad Haven**  
 Hyde + Hyde Architects  
 – R*SAW* Welsh Architecture Award  
 – National Eisteddfod of Wales shortlist



**Parkgate Hotel, Cardiff**  
 Gaunt Francis Architects  
 – National Eisteddfod of Wales shortlist



**RIBA Wales jury:**  
**Chair**  
 Ceri Davies, *Allford Hall Monaghan Morris*  
**Regional representative**  
 Dan Benham, *Benham Architects*  
**Lay assessor**  
 Steffan Jones-Hughes, *Oriel Davies Gallery*  
**Conservation adviser**  
 Robert Mitchell, *Mitchell Eley Gould Architects*  
**Sustainability adviser**  
 Jon James, *Jon James Studio Architecture*

<https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/knowledge-landing-page/four-projects-shortlisted-for-2023-rsaw-welsh-architecture-awards>

**National Eisteddfod of Wales Selectors:**  
 Dewi Jones, *Hawkins Brown Architects*  
 Elinor Gray-Williams, *PegwArchitects*  
 Philip Henshaw, *architect*

<https://eisteddfod.wales/node/1356>

**Dewi-Prys Thomas Award 2023**



**Artist in resident**  
 Geraint Ross Evans, 2021  
 Image: Studio Response/Geraint Ross Evans



**The Healing Garden**  
 Cecile Johnson Soliz, 2021 to present  
 Image: Studio Response/Phillip Roberts



**AXON I-VI**  
 Charlotte Grayland, 2021  
 Image: Charlotte Grayland

range across the themes of nature, community, and science and education. But they are not a random selection: it is a well-coordinated, broad range of murals, paintings, textiles, glass screens, photography integrated into the building, helping orientation around the building – and creating a real sense of place.

The Dewi-Prys Thomas Trust congratulates Jo Breckon and Emma Price of Studio Response, who

received the award certificate and silver medal from the trust’s chair, Elin Wyn, before the R*SAW* Welsh Architecture Awards ceremony and dinner at the Parkgate Hotel, Cardiff on 25 May 2023.

*Jonathan Vining*

**Dewi-Prys Thomas Award 2023 judges**

Pat Borer: *architect and visiting professor at the Centre for Alternative Technology.*  
 Simon Fenoulhet: *artist, public art consultant and trustee of the Dewi-Prys Thomas Trust.*  
 Steffan Jones-Hughes: *artist and director of Oriel Davies, Newtown.*  
 Simon Richards, *director of Land Studio.*  
 Jonathan Vining (chair): *architect, urban designer, commissioner of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, and trustee of the Dewi-Prys Thomas Trust.*

**Website**

If you’re interested in finding out about Dewi-Prys Thomas, the work of the trust, or if you wish to support the trust’s ongoing activities through donation, please visit: <http://dewi-prythomas.org/>



**From the Mountains to the Sea**  
 Catrin Jones, 2020  
 Image: Studio Response/Phillip Roberts



# touchstones

## A SYSTEM UNRAVELLING?

Maybe when the *Town and Country Planning Act 1990* brought in section 106 (s106) agreements as a way of cross-funding much needed public services from private-sector development profits, it seemed like a pretty canny system. The Developer gets his development, takes his profit as he sells it on, the public get more social-rent housing, or a school or whatever is most urgently required for the public domain. But 30 years on, is it really working?

In *Touchstone 2022* we drew attention to Central Quay, Cardiff, a high-rise development of 718 new flats by property developer Rightacres, right in the centre adjacent to Cardiff Central railway station. Cardiff Council's officers initially thought they could squeeze £20 million of betterment through a s106 agreement. Once the district valuer had finished the confidential negotiations with the developer it was £2.2 million. There were shockingly to be no 'affordable'/social-rent apartments in the development. The figures didn't allow it apparently. Some of that £2.2 million was supposedly to go towards affordable housing elsewhere in the ward. The planning committee, after some discussion, just nodded it through; but Cardiff Civic Society was made of sterner stuff. It dug deeper into the planning officer's reports and found that they didn't even get the £2.2 million (see table below).

That secured sum of £200,000 for affordable housing could possibly build 1.5 homes. Is this just a one-off oddity, a unique case? It was after all a site right at the heart of the city. The land sale price must have cost an arm and a leg, and assembling 35 storeys is not cheap.

So, let's take another site, this time brownfield, suburban, ex-industrial/office use, out in Torfaen on the edge of rural Monmouthshire. Part of it



Jonathan Vining

is the Grade II\*-listed former nylon spinners factory, 17% of which will be demolished. The site owner and developer, Johnsey Estates, wants to create eventually up to 900 new homes as part of an 'urban village'. There could be two neighbourhood centres, shops, a community hall, active travel routes throughout the site, sports facilities, a bus service connecting to other local centres, and nearby railway station. There is so far planned to be £2 million worth of s106 contributions covering the improvement and extension of cycle routes, park and ride improvements, the funding of a subsidised bus service at a cost of £500,000 for the early years of the development, plus a £150,000 payment to Welsh Government for trunk road improvements to access the development. But that's not all. Then the developer is expected to pay for a 315-place primary school on the site, the cost of

which has increased from £6 million in 2020 to £7.6 million, and rising. Small wonder that in the intense confidential negotiations on the viability of the scheme this results in only 15% of the 900 homes being 'affordable', which is 10% below the number expected in that area.

Is there any other part of Europe where we go about planning in such a way? We seem to have privatised the cost of providing all public facilities, but then we wonder why we never have delivered the homes that are desperately needed. And the planning officer's report is still not happy:

'From a placemaking perspective, the amended plans reduce the community provision to an unacceptably low level and relocate such provision as remains further away from residential occupiers so that occupiers are less likely to use active travel means within the site itself.'

So, everyone is compromising, driven by financial viability. Is this really a civil way to proceed? The next-door county, Monmouthshire, in its draft replacement local development plan, is going to be asking for 50% 'affordable' or social-rent homes on any housing development. Good luck with that one if it wants all the other public goodies too. Maybe the council will just compulsorily purchase sites at agricultural prices and build council houses with its direct labour organisation. That would be a real 'back to the future'.

Contribution	Requested (£)	Secured (£)
Affordable Housing	6,209,364	200,000
Community Facilities	298,902	30,000
Education	121,212	10,000
Public Open Space	559,550	60,000
Public Realm/Bridge	639,912	500,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,828,940</b>	<b>800,000</b>



## BRACING FOR A BRIDGE WIN

*Touchstone* slightly jumped the gun last year. The Centre for Alternative Technology's MArch student annual build-week project ambitiously set out to build a whole bridge. With the structural engineering aid of Richard Heath of Momentum and the on-site carpentry mentoring of Dieter Brandstatter, the team had all the framework up. Finishing off, however, is always challenging for a build-team of highly stretched students who are only on site one week a month. That's the CAT post-graduate education format. But now it is complete, fully roofed, and awaiting its invaluable role in any new CAT site revamp. Now the delays are on the other foot. Rather than select one post graduate's student work to submit for the AJ student prize, the students agreed to submit their collective bridge assembly. They were awarded one of the AJ student prizes 2023.



## ELIZABETH FOULKES: A LIFETIME OF SERVICE

The RSAW was sorry to learn of the death of Elizabeth Foulkes, JP MBE DL FRIBA, at the age of 98 on 10 January 2023. She married the late Ralph Colwyn Foulkes in 1950, the son of north-Wales architect Sydney Colwyn Foulkes (see pp.28-33).

She was the first ever female president of the Society of Architects in Wales holding office from 1984-86. As her successor, Peter Mathias wrote in the society's *Year Book* for 1986:

'Elizabeth Colwyn Foulkes brought a wide range of skills to the presidential office. Her duties were undertaken in a statesmanlike manner; her chairmanship of Council was carried out with sound direction and firmness; her leadership of the Society was pursued with enthusiasm and dedication.'

She was born in Abertillery on 8 October 1926. As her son Nick Foulkes recorded in his obituary in the *Guardian* on 1 March 2023 'she served, as chair or committee member, with the Countryside Commission, the Nature Conservancy Council, the National Parks Council and the Council for the Protection of Rural Wales, and was an adviser to the National Grid. She also became a justice of the peace, deputy lord lieutenant of Clwyd and ombudsman

of Aberconwy district council'. To that list of service ex-RIBA librarian and academic Lyn Walker added that the *Liverpool Echo* in April 1970 reported that before her SAW presidency she was president of the North Wales Society of Architects and, in 1986, she was referred to as 'the former president of the Civic Society of Cardiff' (*South Wales Echo*, 17 April 1986). She was also honorary president of Heaton Place Trust, Rhos-on-Sea, which provided affordable accommodation for retired people who had made a 'contribution for the betterment of others in the community'.

To the UK architectural profession her contribution was equally significant. As one of the RIBA vice presidents in 1975, Nick Foulkes recorded that 'Elizabeth chaired the committee that produced the "competence report", which defined expected behaviour in the profession after a corrupt architect was found to have bribed a local authority official to win contracts'. That 'corrupt architect' was John Poulson; the Poulson scandal was a seismic and embarrassing moment in the public perception of an architect's status and behavioural codes. Elizabeth as a fellow of the RIBA steered new rules into being, a substantial achievement.

This is a tremendous lifetime record of an architect's commitment to public service.

# The campus and the city

Cardiff University has been patron to a sizeable expansion of its architectural estate over the last decade. Can its master-planning and architectural execution live up to standards set at the start of the last century? The expansion poses important questions for the city, the identity of the civic centre, and the evolution of the university. **Andrew Carr** reviews the results to date.



A railway line running through the centre of Cardiff has become a trajectory for the evolving Cardiff University estate. Opening in 1841, the Taff Vale Railway transported iron and coal from Merthyr Tydfil to the docks in Cardiff. Its route ran through nineteenth-century Cardiff, later dividing the terraced streets of Cathays from Cathays Park – with the latter becoming the civic centre of the city and home of the university – creating a heady confluence of coal, iron, industry, town, gown and civic life.

By the late twentieth century, with the coal and iron industry in decline, the railway (which included the sidings serving the former Cathays locomotive depot) was reduced from thirteen tracks to just two. It created linear expanses of empty land available for other uses. This has become a territory host to a significant expansion of the university's estate (left).

The first phase of that expansion occurred in the late twentieth century, just opposite the civic centre, on a long thin strip of that former railway land where it rubbed up against the nineteenth-century terraced streets of Cathays. Two significant civic buildings were put in place bridging the railway: the Sherman Theatre, and the students' union building, (both by Alex Gordon and Partners, 1973). The shift in scale to these bulkier, block forms created a fault line along Senghennydd Road that has, nearly 50 years later, informed the massing of a recent new university building named 'Abacws' (see also p. 54). Designed by Stride Treglown, with Adjaye



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**'When you cross the road bridge to the Cathays side of the railway line, the urban composure of the civic centre utterly dissolves.'**

Associates, Abacws opened in 2021. A six-storey high rectangular form, it combines the schools of mathematics and computing in a single building. Entered from both the railway-line side and a pointy colonnade on Senghennydd Road, the form of the building looms, like its students' union neighbour, over the two-storey terrace of Llandough Street (1).

Behind the colonnade is a pleasant circulation space that stretches the full length of the frontage (2) to provide access to a large lecture theatre and teaching space, with plenty of niches and seats where students can perch, watching, and being watched, from the street. It terminates in a double-height space on its sunny south side, overlooking a widened section of pavement (3). Frustratingly, students cannot step directly outside from here, nor enter. This is doubly frustrating as from here a master plan proposed a new staircase that would cross the railway line, landing in the new Centre for Student Life (see pp. 56–59). This new bridge would have replaced the current rickety one at Cathays railway station situated behind Abacws. Small links like these would help unlock potential street life, movement and connectivity.

The Abacws colonnade is a good move. Its graphical cuts are the strongest part of an otherwise unconvincing facade but the colonnade is an awkward depth (4), being not quite wide enough to invite someone to comfortably walk

along it. Had the brickwork colonnade to Alex Gordon's students' union building next door not been filled in – perhaps an unintended outcome of Gordon's 'Long Life/Loose Fit/Low Energy' mantra – the two buildings would begin to form a covered route along Senghennydd Road, linking parts of the campus together. Combined with the wide cycle lane in place along the pavement edge, these elements suggest a more ambitious public realm, part of a master-planning strategy that might improve active travel across the campus and city, creating a spine of sheltered walking routes and green spaces connecting the Senghennydd Road buildings with the most recent campus buildings emerging further along the railway line at what used to be the Maindy sidings.

### Maindy sidings campus extension

When you cross the road bridge to the Cathays side of the railway line, the urban composure of the civic centre utterly dissolves. Advertising hoardings mask the car park of a Lidl supermarket, beyond which the clunky roof of the 2004 School of Optometry and Vision Sciences is visible (5). Designed by Boyes Rees Architects, for a time this building masked a large area of disused railway land behind, known as Maindy sidings, which then became earmarked as an 'innovation campus' for the university.

Several large redundant engine sheds occupied this locomotive-depot territory. The

university commissioned a master plan from the Welsh School of Architecture's Design Research Unit Wales (DRUw) (see p.52). As part of its 2007 'First Visions' master plan for the site, DRUw proposed the sheds should be retained and reused. The sheds would combine with new buildings to create a new 'integrated' campus organised around 'cloisters' with covered 'arcades' joining it all together.<sup>2</sup> Forms stepped up in height from the terraced houses fronting on to Maindy Road, its plan form inflected by cues taken from surrounding streets layouts. A bridge was proposed as a wide-open space crossing the railway line and connecting the sidings with the existing university buildings on the Colum Road site opposite. In a 2009 master plan by Powell Dobson Architects (PDA) (see p. 52), they retained the covered routes but proposed demolishing all of the remaining railway buildings, increasing densities and simplifying the crossing to a narrower bridge. Several of the buildings proposed in the master plan have now been constructed. Starting at the south end, in 2013 the Hadyn Ellis Building opened, designed by Nightingale Associates Architects/IBI Group (6). This was followed by the Cardiff University Brain Imaging Centre (CUBRIC) (7) in 2016 to designs

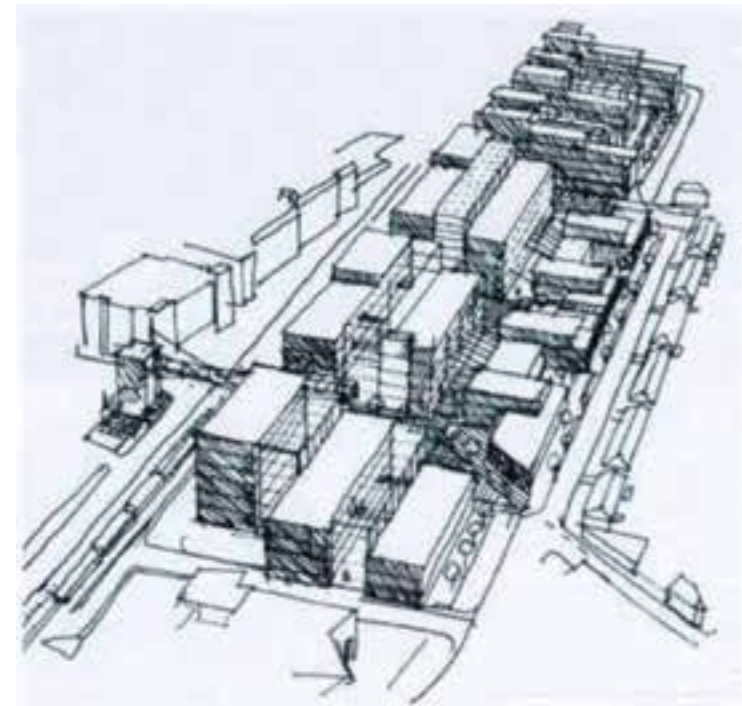
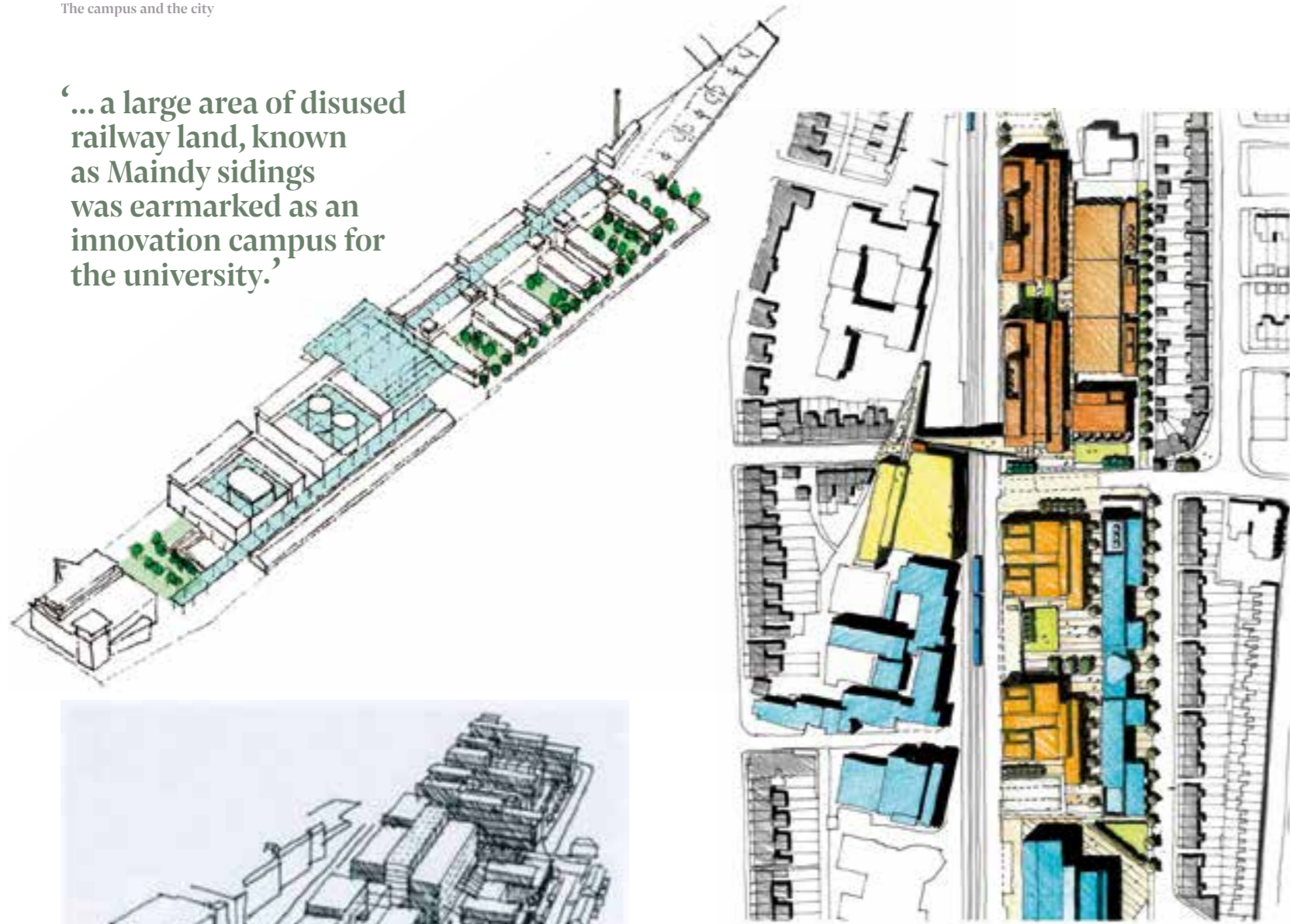


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‘... a large area of disused railway land, known as Maindy sidings was earmarked as an innovation campus for the university.’



**Three master plans for the Maindy sidings site.**

Top left: In 2007 DRUw proposed retaining and reusing one of the railway sheds, combined with new buildings to create an 'integrated' campus organised around 'cloisters' with covered 'arcades' joining it together.

Bottom left: A 2009 master plan by Powell Dobson Architects increased densities on the site using building forms stepping up in height from the adjacent terraced houses to the railway line.

Top right: In 2014 Moses Cameron Williams Architects extended the master plan across the railway line, moving the new bridge further north where it would land aligned with the frontage of the Sbarc | Spark building.

also by IBI Group, this being perhaps the most successful in urban terms: a series of alternating building forms and courtyards, layered with brick planes to address the pavement edge and terraced houses opposite (7). In parallel, a third master plan evolved, authored in 2014 by Moses Cameron Williams Architects (above). This placed the 'innovation campus' in a wider context of the whole university estate and made some adjustments to the PDA master plan, removing the covered routes and moving the bridge location further north where it would relate to a new building proposed for the opposite side of the line.

The latest and penultimate iteration of building work on the Maindy sidings' site includes the Translation Research Hub (TRH) by HOK London and most recently the Sbarc | Spark building by Hawkins\Brown (see also p. 55). These hold the top, north-western end of the site leaving the central plots as a large car park (8), awaiting development. The bridge remains undeveloped, kicked down the delivery pipeline from phase to



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‘Its barcode facade, in several blacks and greys, is a little more articulated than most, but feels flimsy compared to the energetic interior...’



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8 The centre of the Maindy sidings site currently remains a car park awaiting the later phases of a master plan. In the meantime it allows distant views from the recent Sbarc | Spark building across the city.

9 An unrealised bridge, aligned with the frontage of the Sbarc | Spark building, would help connect the campus together and create a route for the public and a point of connection with the university.

10 Sbarc | Spark sits at the head of the car park. Two volumes comprise the taller 'stack of books that don't quite align', which contains most of the accommodation, and a lower element hosting the entrance cafe and event space, aligned to the potential footfall from the unrealised bridge.

phase, though forming a key part of the section 106 planning obligation for the site as a whole. Sbarc | Spark is organised with the bridge in mind, which would establish footfall across its frontage (9) linking Llantrisant Street with Colum Road and its campus on the other side of the railway.

The Sbarc | Spark building (10) is handled as two volumes, a lower one relating to Llantrisant Street and a taller seven-storey 'stack of books that don't quite align' to the railway.<sup>3</sup> The building aims to provide a 'front door' to this socio/cultural home for business; inside hand-picked, private-sector collaborators with the university are set within an impressive interior landscape of work environments and facilities. The exterior form, though identifiable, is less convincing and essentially masks the simpler large plain shed of the adjacent Translation Research Hub behind. At present this whole composition sits at the head of a large car park (8), which will be developed as the final stage of the master plan, hopefully including the bridge too. Its barcode facade, in several blacks and greys, is a little more articulated than most, but feels flimsy compared to the energetic interior.

Curiously, many of the buildings try to justify their appearance, though rarely their form, with reference to existing architecture in Cardiff, typically that of the civic centre: visual rhythms found in existing facades are turned into each of the bar codes or charcoal-coloured cladding materials justified with reference to the 'black gold' once transported in coal trucks on the

railway. The thinness of these stories is revealed when they result in facades that share little in common and are widespread in other cities. The initial cohesion of the civic centre campus resulted from a shared materiality, geometry and defined plot. A shared story here is harder to discern, but must urgently be gathered.

**An incomplete vision**

The various master plans, Abacws and Sparc | Sbarc – and the Centre for Student Life (see pp. 56–59) – represent a snapshot of the thinking that was present at the time of their conception, all of which took place before the Covid-19 pandemic. A strong sense of incompleteness resides in each: the bridge link over the railway, which would land by Abacws and bring life to the stepped route of the Centre for Student Life, is missing; Sbarc | Spark is missing its bridge; and the innovation campus is missing its final phase, creating some odd relationships and routes that do not go anywhere; and Park Place (framing the civic centre) may, or may not, become pedestrianised, reframing the Centre for Student Life as the missing fourth side of the main university building courtyard.

Master plans can take decades to realise, the danger being that they are never fully implemented. In time they might be completed, other events could overtake them, or thinking moves on and earlier decisions become reframed to suit different futures. Who would have thought that the route of iron and coal trucks would become the organising vector for a twenty-first century university? The new buildings add a significant volume of new built form to the university's estate and pose significant questions about what might happen next.

The Lidl site has become pivotal in the completion of the Maindy sidings strip – allowing the formation of a strong, legible end to the new campus, in both symbolic and urban terms. Bridge connections remain absent but vital. A considered linear public realm, promoting active travel for the city and university, connecting the Senghennydd Road buildings and Innovation Campus is teasingly implied, but unrealised. Just as Sbarc | Spark invites the world beyond the university through its doors, might the wider campus offer a similar invitation to local communities to engage with its spaces, buildings and activities? The ambiguity created by the 'white-city' architecture of the Centre for Student Life asks questions about the remaining properties on Park Place and the loose north-eastern edge of the civic centre. Each new building also poses questions about the development of the city beyond its Victorian

scale; all three are dominant compared with their surroundings. These volumes derive from academic needs, rather than commercial returns, though with incomes derived from the numbers of fee-paying students and research grants this is perhaps a moot point. What seems lacking is an overall vision for the city and the presence of the university within it. How might new building forms be integrated within its existing fabric? How can its existing fabric be retained, reused and evolved?

Where a vision is evident, without strong leadership, energy and 'buy in', it becomes revised and diluted. The initial Centre for Student Life competition was criticised by procurement campaigners Project Compass for opaque selection criteria and restrictive turnover requirements.<sup>4</sup> There remains little of the DRUw vision for the Maindy sidings site in what is being realised; no converted engine shed, arcades nor cloisters. At Sbarc | Spark, a strong vision and commitment combined with a good, engaged architect has resulted in a strong interior landscape.

Hopefully, the Cardiff University will learn from this – apparently, its hierarchy like to use the top-floor meeting room of Sbarc | Spark with its views and balcony, so clearly see its value. Looking at the pattern of buildings commissioned by the university over the last decade, or so, there seems to be a modest, but discernible, improvement in the quality of the work it is producing. Cardiff University is investing in its campus and engaging with a broader range of architects, often beyond the boundaries of Cardiff and Wales, helping to freshen its thinking and output. There is clearly much higher to go, but the trajectory has some promise.

*Andrew Carr is an architect who practices with Brady Mallalieu Architects in London and was runner up in the Architecture Foundation Writing Prize 2022. He graduated from the Welsh School of Architecture in 1999.*

## Abacws

**Designed by Stride Treglown**, with Adjaye Associates, Abacws opened in 2021. A six-storey high rectangular form, it combines the schools of mathematics and computing in a single building. Entered from both the railway-line side and a pointy colonnade on Senghennydd Road, visitors find themselves in a tall space extending the full height of the building. An open staircase rises through the space, surrounded by balconies that provide informal workspaces – inhabited by ever-present students on laptops – around which is an economically planned racetrack floor plate of perimeter offices with the deeper, darker parts of the plan used for computer laboratories and two lecture theatres. The offices are enclosed with glazed partitions, which help borrow light from the outside walls for the double-loaded corridors, filtered through bafflingly complex equations scribbled on the glass by academics. The monotony of the plan is punctuated with occasional study spaces that relate to the deep window boxes appearing on the otherwise flat façade, which looms, like its students' union neighbour, over the two-storey terrace of Llandough Street.



**Credits: Abacws: Mathematics, and Computer Science and Informatics departments**  
 Client: Cardiff University  
 Architect: Stride Treglown and Adjaye Associates  
 Structural engineer: Arup  
 Building services engineer: Arup  
 Landscape architect: Stride Treglown  
 Project manager: Arcadis  
 Cost manager: Gleeds  
 Main contractor: ISG  
 Work completed: 2021  
 Photography: Tom Bright

## Sbarc | Spark

**Designed by Hawkins\Brown**, the Sbarc | Spark building aims to provide a 'front door' to business – the university accepting tenants from the private sector that share a synergy with their research centres concerning societal issues. Co-locating businesses in this way, within a university context, is a concept developed from research trips to comparable initiatives at Harvard, Stanford and MIT in the United States.

A relaxed but productive atmosphere is established on entering the building through a double-height cafe space, amid exposed elements of concrete and steel structure, ductwork and hanging acoustic slabs, punctuated with fruity red forms concealing an event space. It feels more like a hip office for a Google spin-off company than something you might immediately associate with a building for the university. Compulsively your eye is drawn up, through a series of receding hooped balustrades and hanging flights of stairs that disappear up through the floors of the building to daylight beyond. Immediately recognisable as a location, tenants often post pictures taken on these steps on social media, surrounded by its concentric fiery halos, to signal the arrival of their company in the building. Beyond the visual dynamics, the offsetting voids create visual links between the loose breakout and social spaces on each floor, which are intended to promote collaboration and connection. Each is surrounded by glazed enclosed spaces for each tenant, support facilities such as visualisation rooms and labs alongside meeting spaces, many of which relate to outdoor terraces with fantastic views across the city to Cardiff Bay. This range of well-delivered environments is the outcome of a productive relationship between the architect, Hawkins\Brown, working with all of the research centres involved in the building, supported by a client who has a strong conceptual sense of what the building needed to be and a commitment to realising it.

**Credits: Sbarc | Spark: social science research park**  
 Client: Cardiff University  
 Architect: Hawkins\Brown  
 Civil and structural engineer: CH2M  
 Building services engineer: Arup  
 Project manager: Gleeds  
 Town planning consultant: DPP  
 Cost consultant: Faithful + Gould  
 Fire engineer: Arup  
 Acoustic engineer: Arup  
 People tracking: Buro Happold  
 Main contractor: ISG  
 Work completed: 2022  
 Photography: Will Scott



### References

- 1 Alex Gordon. 1972. 'Designing for survival: the President introduces his long life/loose fit/low energy study'. In: *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal*. 79(9), 1972, pp. 374-376.
- 2 DRUw. Welsh School of Architecture. 2007. *The Plan for Cardiff in Maindy: First Visions*. Draft, July 2007.
- 3 Sally O'Connor (Cardiff University) in conversation with Andrew Carr and Jonathan Vining on a tour of the Sbarc | Spark building on 23 May 2023.
- 4 Merilin Fulcher. 2015. 'Menteth blasts re-launched Cardiff student union contest'. In: *The Architects Journal* [online]. 7 May 2015. Available at: <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/competitions/menteth-blasts-re-launched-cardiff-student-union-contest> [accessed 19 June 2023].

# Crossing the line

A major new building for Cardiff University, the Centre for Student Life, confronts Cardiff's world-famous civic centre. Are there benefits to disrupting the traditional framing of that centre? **Andrew Carr** explores the project's execution.



Constructed in 1973, the students' union building on Park Place, by Alex Gordon and Partners, was one of the first to take advantage of land that became available owing to the decline of the Taff Vale Railway that ran alongside the civic centre (2). The union building's brickwork mass along with its adjoining Sherman Theatre asserted itself among the terraced houses, on the Cathays side of the line. It then projected that brickwork mass over the railway line towards the white, Portland-stone architecture of the civic centre. As it crossed the railway line it became a wide, open-air staircase that dropped down on to Park Place, on axis with the university's Main University opposite. It is here that Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios has, 50 years later, replaced and re-worked Gordon's staircase, wrapping accommodation around it to become a new five-storey Centre for Student Life.

The most significant difference in the new project, set among the brick and earthy stone villas of Park Place, is the scale and material presence of the new building. The sheer quantity of accommodation added to the slim site creates

a significant volume (1) immediately opposite the lower Main Building of the university.

The interior spaces and new staircase are set behind a colonnade (8) that is divided horizontally into two bands, each handled in white concrete, which echo the white Portland stone of the Cathays Park buildings opposite. It contrasts with that red brick, or earthy stonework, of its older and lower neighbours along the same, non-civic centre side of Park Place too. As such, it presents a direct challenge to – or opens a conversation with, depending on how you view it – the 'white city' architecture of Cathays Park. (Something similar occurred on the opposite side of the Civic Centre when the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama building on North Road was enlarged in 2011, to designs by BFLS (see *Touchstone*, December 2011, pp. 10–18). Up until this point buildings facing the civic centre have adopted a non-white palette, thus retaining the Cathay Park's distinctive set-piece urban framing; Gordon chose a brown brick for the students' union building and an earthy orange one for the university's 1970 School of Music on Corbett Road

– the north-western edge of Cathays Park. The Centre for Student Life breaches this perimeter frame, posing questions about the setting of the civic centre and its future.

### Breaking the framing

On one hand, it seems clear that the civic centre derives its distinctive presence through its Portland-stone whiteness. It would follow that its perimeter, in order to frame it, should then be different, like Gordon's brickwork stair and its Park Place neighbours. The Centre for Student Life adopts a different approach, one that is arguably responsive to some of the weaknesses of the civic centre as an urban ensemble, particularly along the Park Place edge. As an urban form it is generally very inward looking, turning its back on the surrounding city. Most civic centre buildings are entered from the central Alexandra Gardens side. The university Main Building is organised around an axis with entrances on both sides. The outward face of this axis is framed by an incomplete courtyard, missing the Great Hall that was proposed but never constructed

in W D Caroe's 1903 plans for the building.<sup>1</sup> The Centre for Student Life (4) closes this gap, forming the missing section of the courtyard and, perhaps subliminally, establishes a new power relationship between fee-paying students and the university that they fund. Tellingly, the university describes the new centre – not the more obvious and established Main Building – as its 'front door'. Students can perch on their new balcony colonnade (3) able to survey and scrutinise the Main Building, their new building and vantage point asserting their significant role within the institution. Behind them, two floors of curtain walling give the building a dominant presence. The building is a literal and metaphorical bridge between the students' union and historic university institutional hierarchy.

By following the curve of Park Place, rather than adopting the rectilinear geometry of the civic centre, FCBS partner Andy Couling argues the monumentality of the building is 'softened' (8).<sup>2</sup> Clearly, there were a lot of student-services to include, leading to two full upper storeys that

only become more prominent when articulated with the colonnade rising from pavement level and topped with a planar cornice. Handled another way, with less accommodation, gaps in the building form and a different articulation the building would sit more comfortably.

### Handling the pressures

FCBS is not alone in the challenges faced by architects in adding bulkier new university volumes in established settings. Even acclaimed Royal Gold Medallists like Grafton Architects struggle with this; its recent Marshall Building for the London School of Economics at Lincoln's Inn Fields has a similar, looming presence within a historic square (6). Here Grafton has eroded and layered the façade, lining through with adjacent building heights – as FCBS chose to do at the Centre for Student Life – and tying its taller projecting masses back to their lower base using screens of fins. It just about works, but remains dominant compared to its surroundings, unlike the Saw Swee Hock Student Centre (7) around



the back by fellow Dubliners and medallists O'Donnell + Tuomey. Here, using an angular brick form, the building performs urban jiu-jitsu moves to adjust to the street scene. Its form is clearly not historic, but is deftly judged and sits well (7).

The more assertive presence of the Centre for Student Life could be considered productive: it asks questions of the Main Building's courtyard, which remains a car park pending the implementation of a scheme to pedestrianise Park Place, directly addressing the weaknesses of the perimeter of the civic centre and opening up a lateral expansion of the campus. That so much attention is given to these issues is perhaps a function of the Centre for Student Life essentially having a single civic side. The railway facade was clearly seen as less important and was 'value engineered' from precast concrete cladding to a cheaper white, framed metal sheeting (9). It's interiors, though pleasant enough, suffered a similar fate.

Alex Gordon's original staircase (2) emerged from the robust brickly volumes of the students' union building at second floor level, allowing students views across to the civic centre as it dropped to a wide half landing, one storey above Park Place, before turning back on itself

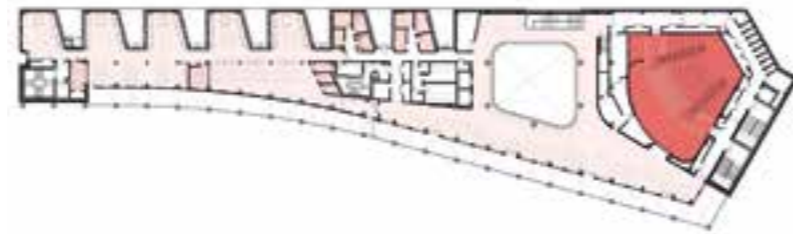
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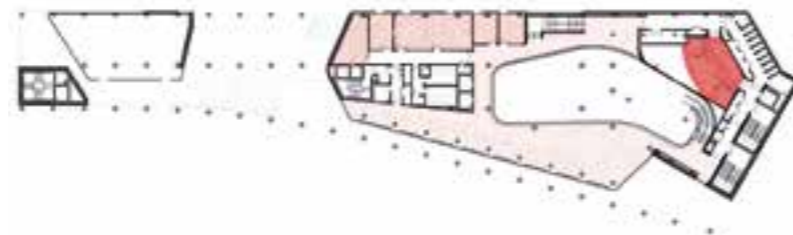
Fourth floor plan



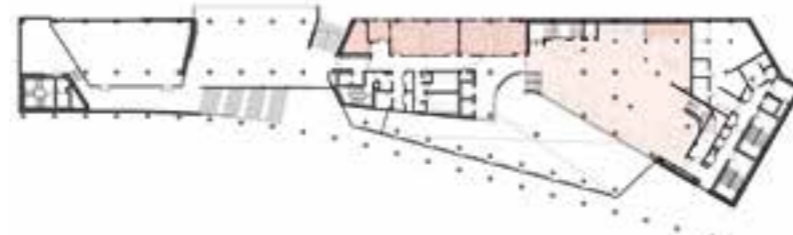
Third floor plan



Second floor plan



First floor plan



Ground floor plan



twice and reaching the pavement under cover of the landing above. The resultant raised plinth, covered section and tough brick balustrades created, perhaps inadvertently, a fascinating social space. You could hang out on the steps – enjoying the sun, view and people coming and going – or shelter under cover of the landing, waiting for your friend without getting drenched in the Cardiff rain. Banners would be hung from its sides, campaigners could challenge you and flyers be distributed, all within sight of the vice chancellor's office over the road (2). Here, as a student, I was once asked to take part in a police identity parade. Luckily, I didn't get picked from the line-up and happily left with twenty quid in my pocket. Even so, it was not a gentle territory. A lift was included along an unwelcoming side passage around the corner, for those unable to make the intimidating stepped climb.

Ambiguous and incomplete

The territory created by the new public staircase, as it weaves its way through the tall, curving colonnade (5), assumes an ambiguous quality, which, frustratingly, does not engage with the interior spaces of the new building that would help bring life and activity to its path. The top of the stair widens and stretches across the railway line, allowing the 'Taff' bar in the union to spill out on to a partially sheltered podium with views back across to Cathays Park (12). Here, the architect hopes students might gather, petition and campaign. Perhaps they will, though an empty retail unit to one side of the space really needs to be let, or another interim use found for it, to help make the podium work. Two routes lead from the covered space: one disappears into the students' union itself, where it burrows through the original Alex Gordon building and emerges on Senghennydd Road; the second, along the front of the empty unit, leads to what would be the landing of a new footbridge across the railway line connecting Cathays (and its student population) with the civic centre, connecting Park Place to Sengennydd Road. The new stair and bridge would have landed in a small square between the students' union and another new university building named Abacws (13). It will be important for the success of the podium and its empty unit. A timescale and commitment to the implementation of this bridge remains unclear (see also pp. 50–55).

Time will tell how all of this works out – how students take to their new building, whether the



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empty unit is inhabited, and if the bridge is ever built. In the longer term, the planned cohesion of the civic centre – based on a shared materiality, geometry and defined plot – has been challenged. A new building has established a different trajectory for this edge of the Cathays Park, posing further questions about the remaining properties along the Park Place boundary which could conceivably be redeveloped in a similar way, as white architecture that squares off the civic plot. Alternatively, the transgression might be regarded as a one-off, dead end or a mistake. What is missing, and would be reassuring, is a bigger vision that projects a sense of what Cardiff's civic centre is and could be, and how it should relate to the wider city. This sense of both continuity and renewal is what John Tuomey considers as the 'task of architecture', preferring to think of 'all buildings co-existing in the context of the living present', whether new or old:

'The perseverance to hold the line or the courage to change course is not the reaction of an individual moment, but the exercise of an established craft in the continuity of time.'

Andrew Carr is an architect who practices with Brady Mallalieu Architects in London and was runner up in the Architecture Foundation Writing Prize 2022. He graduated from the Welsh School of Architecture in 1999.

Credits:

- Client: Cardiff University
- Design architect: Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios
- Executant architect: Arcadis | IBI Group
- Structural engineer: Arup
- Building services engineer: Arup
- Landscape architect: Grant Associates
- Construction project manager: AECOM
- Cost manager: Currie & Brown
- Main contractor: BAM Construction
- Work completed: 2021
- Photography: Kyle Pearce (except for 2, 4, 5, 12, 13)

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- 2 Andy Couling (FCBS) in conversation with Andrew Carr, Jonathan Vining and Andrew Street (IBI Group) on a tour of the Centre for Student Life, 23 May 2023.
- 3 John Tuomey, 2004. *Architecture, Craft and Culture: Reflections on the work of O'Donnell + Tuomey*. Kinsale: Gandon Editions, p. 30.

# touchstones



Wales gained a well-deserved reputation internationally for its visionary *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*. The strategic thinking that underpinned it was admirable. New public service boards (PSBs) across Wales, peopled by representatives of all major public service providers, were put in place. They were all required to produce ‘well-being plans’. Few of these have set the public alight with their determined actions based on that radical vision. Have you read your local PSB plan?

The now infamous seven-segment circle diagram of the act’s goals appears in every public service document in Wales, in every PowerPoint. The big-picture-vision mantra is trotted out relentlessly, too often too mechanically. We are good at that in Wales, and there is a lot of ‘we’ in all the well-being talk, without recognising that there are fragmented conflicting forces generating a lot of ‘us’ and ‘them’ that need confronting. Planning consultants are becoming experts at bending their clients’ rapacious intentions to fit the model well-being goals. Consultations and ‘inclusiveness’ are everywhere. Newsletters from the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales are filled with endless rounds of conversational initiatives, which like the infamous diagram appear very circular. They go round and round, but where’s the actual action?

**‘The now infamous seven-segment circle diagram of the act’s goals appears in every public service document in Wales, in every PowerPoint. The big-picture-vision mantra is trotted out relentlessly, too often too mechanically.’**

When Wales’s first commissioner, Sophie Howe, delivered her first five-year report, its basic summary was, we’re here for the long term; it takes time to embed deeply all this thinking across all sections of Welsh culture, but there was no doubting her deep sense of frustration at the incredible lethargy of action on policy changes that would have real bite, particularly in the area of under-resourced local authority planning. She praised the creative work of the Design Commission for Wales but rightly recognised its limited capacity. It should be expanded and given more executive clout.

When Howe stepped down in February 2023 many would ask, so what’s been achieved? The Senedd’s decision to take off the drawing board the M4 relief road project was the go-to evidence of a win... but what else? Silence...

Now as of 1 March 2023 we have a new future generations commissioner Derek Walker (*left*). No doubt conscious of the above, he called for ‘urgent and transformational change’ in Wales. One looked to the newsletters for evidence of a new more urgent broom, but initially it seemed there were to be more rounds of consultations, and inclusive conversations to try and work out what the priorities were. More round and round.

And then suddenly the mood seemingly changed. Walker got on the front foot. On 24 July, just ahead of the Royal Welsh Show, he put out the headline ‘we need a new long-term vision for food in Wales’. In the six-minute press release the city of Liège inevitably gets a mention as a model (a recent *Observer* article, if reading between the lines, suggested that despite over 10 years’ action they are still miles off real-capacity delivery). A flurry of Welsh references, Menter Môn, Carmarthenshire County Council, Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board, and local food partnerships in Powys, suggested a current busyness, but then Walker having confirmed that ‘farmers are critical to our nation’s health, rural communities and [of course] a thriving Welsh language.’ He then states baldly ‘we grow only 2% of the fruit and vegetables we consume in Wales’. Two per cent!

There’s that ‘we’ again. It’s not ‘we,’ it’s those ‘critical’ farmers hemmed in on all sides by an agricultural economy and a budgeting system that is utterly broken, hidebound by history, the overbearing livestock habit, unable, or unwilling to make space for an eager, younger generation of growers. We should be on a war footing on this, and of course wars are not conducted by round and round conversations, and yet to transition at speed in peace time we need to carry influential opinion setters in all sectors with us. Oh no... who is us? Walker points out that ‘currently, the well-being plans that councils have to publish under the act *don’t mention* healthy diets [my emphasis] and our well-being goals and the 50 indicators that measure our success against them, leave out food’. So, Walker is right; there is a need for ‘urgent and transformational change’ in Wales... on food at least. *Tim Graham*



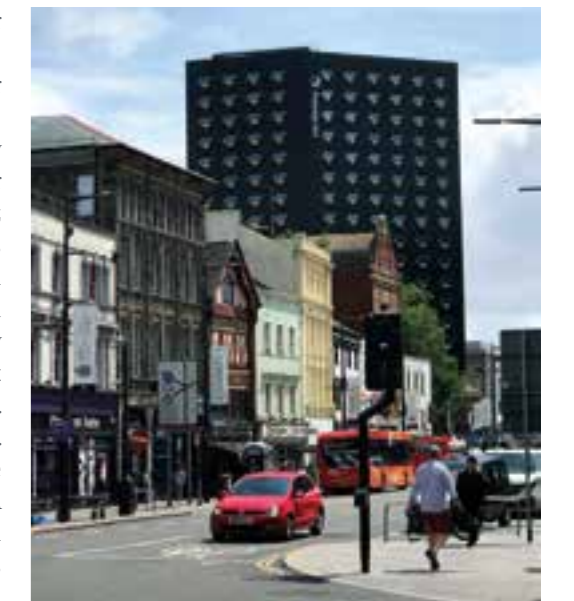
## PLAYING BY THE RULES BY THE RAILS



To find plum city-centre sites capable of development is a tough call. Back in 2007 a very creative small-scale developer spotted a market for a sort of backpacker/small room/boutique hotel demand, ideally to be located as close to railway stations as possible. Small awkward sites were sought all over the rail network in slivers of land left over between the geometry of the tracks and the surrounding streets. The ‘Sleeperz’ chain of hotels was born. One was close to Cardiff Central station and designed sweetly by Clash Associates and delivered by Holder Mathias Architects. It won an RIBA Award in 2010 (*left above*). For a hotel chain that’s a rarity. Peter Clash did others in Newcastle and Dundee.

The development economics were inevitably tough particularly as Clash and the developer wanted to do something of real quality. Sleeperz desperately tried to persuade Cardiff Council’s planners to allow more storeys on their initial application for a five-storey hotel. Every extra floor of bedspaces could have meant a potentially better spec of public facilities and no doubt better balance sheet to fund further small hotels. But no, the planners were firm. Not a floor more. Adjacent historic buildings were of similar scale and height. But suddenly, the rules change. A few years later on an adjacent site, another hotel developer, Clayton Hotel, with suddenly was

allowed five floors more than Sleeperz (*left below*). Clash was furious. Six more floors than Sleeperz. Where was the consistency of planning rules? Now in 2023 the gloves are truly off. Dominating and towering over one vista down the historic St Mary Street, and not a stone’s throw from Sleeperz, we now have a 17-floor Premier Inn. It seems that in Cardiff anything goes now, any height – and that goes for the architectural manners of city elevations too (*below*).



## LIME IN DISTRESS



Around the time of the Ebbw Vale Garden Festival in 2011 three innovative houses were assembled on sites close to the then brand new Aneurin Bevan Hospital. They proved hugely popular to visitors, although the volume house-builders are clearly still not willing to be the early adopters.

Two were Passivhaus homes, Lime House and Larch House, by Bere:architects experimenting with different fabric assemblies as is suggested by their names. Built in demanding environments described by the architects as ‘this exposed and misty, hilltop location in south Wales’, they were part funded and managed by United Welsh Housing Association (UWHA). The third house was Tŷ Unnos by Stephen Coombs of the Welsh School of Architecture’s Design Research Unit Wales (*above left*).

So, how are they faring over a decade later? Tŷ Unnos looks as it did on day one, confident and assured although sadly this model form of assembly has not been taken up by the Welsh timber industry. The timber-clad, Passivhaus, Larch House also appears sound and, like Tŷ Unnos, occupied, but Lime House is clearly in distress and unoccupied (*left*).

A spokesperson for UWHA confirmed that ‘the disrepair at the property is due to water

penetrating through to the structural timber frame, but investigations are still underway to determine what caused it to happen. We’re working with a few different specialists for Passivhaus, structural engineering, timber frame and rendering to provide advice and recommendations for repairs work. As we are still establishing the scope of the work and understanding how it may impact the wider operation of the home, it’s too early to share findings, but we’re open to sharing any learning with you once we have the facts – we appreciate it’s important to do this given the innovation of the design of the home’.

Interestingly on Bere:architects’ website the Lime House is described as ‘cheaper to build than the Larch House because it has smaller windows that do not need blinds for summer shading, reducing the cost of the windows and eliminating the cost of the blinds. It is named after its lime rendered walls and follows the unfussy form of a traditional Welsh cottage’. Might this be a case of cultural heritage concerns being prioritised over contemporary science? *Touchstone* will report on findings when they become available.





# The supermarket reimagined

MArch student from the Centre for Alternative Technology, **Emily Edwards**, proposed a radical rethink of our food delivery systems for a future Super Market for Oswestry.

The supermarket *reimagined* seeks to place local food systems back at the centre of a community, proposing systems for democratising food, kitchen facilities, storage, and eating spaces, reclaiming them all as community assets. Cognisant of a radically changing future climate, this project seeks to create food security in the historic market town of Oswestry, north Shropshire.

Supermarkets control 97% of all food exchanged in the UK today.<sup>1</sup> Food systems in Oswestry currently are primarily at the mercy of supermarkets on its periphery, dependent on car usage, and expecting unseasonal fare all year

round. They distance people from how food is actually produced and from having any direct relationship with nature. It is a largely extractive system where people are removed from the processes at its centre. In a time where the use of food banks is increasing<sup>2</sup> and food prices are soaring,<sup>3</sup> food inequalities are rife. At the same time 'cheap food is an oxymoron' with low supermarket prices hiding the costs of pollution, ecological destruction, poverty and obesity.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, Oswestry was a market town, owing to its location among the high-quality arable land of the Shropshire plains. Hosting a livestock market, horse market, butter and milk

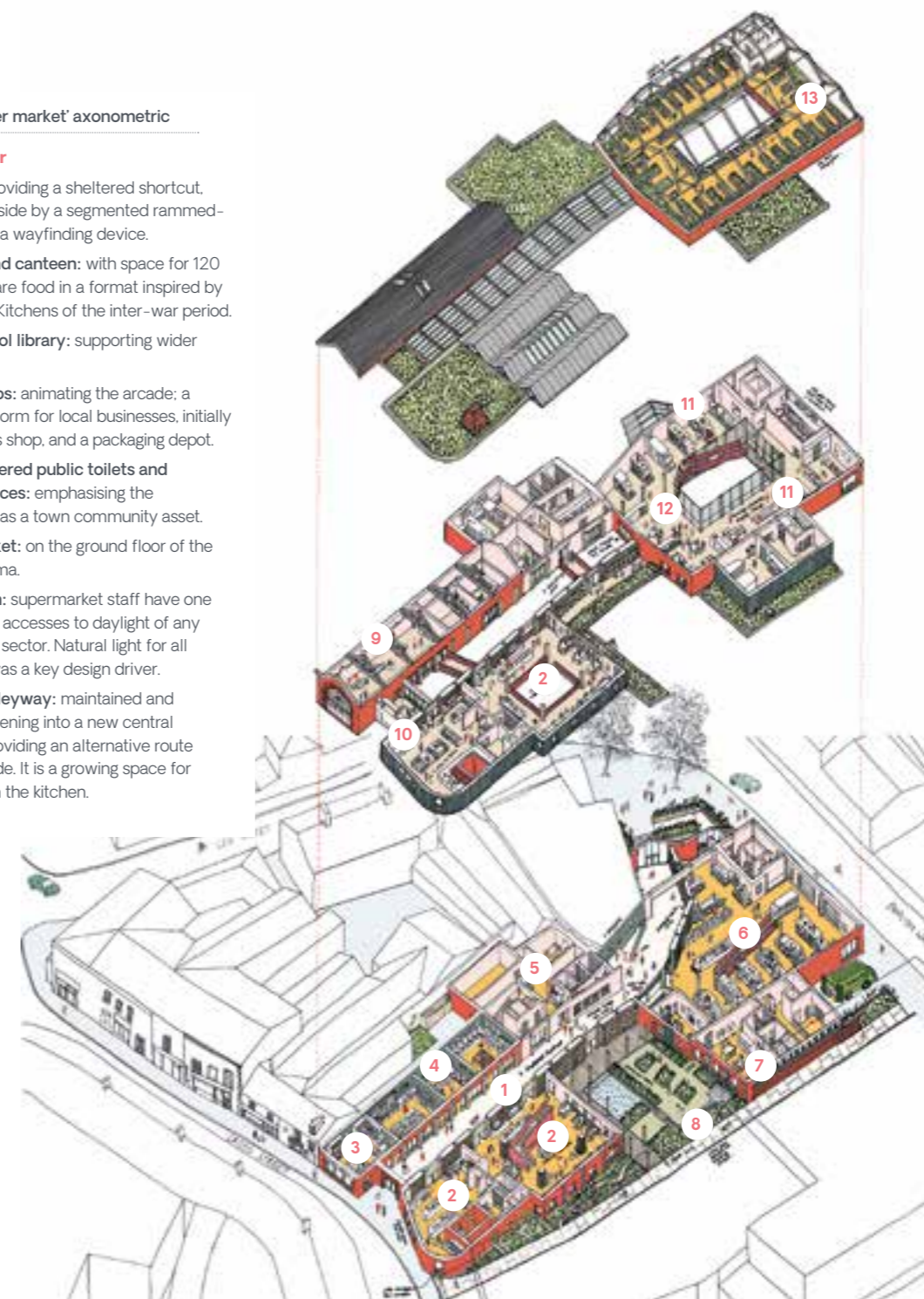
## A manifesto for the supermarket reimagined

- 1 Advocating interaction over transaction:** promote food as a social phenomenon. Advocate interaction over transaction, celebrate food as the backbone of collective life.
- 2 Provide a place of sustenance:** feed your neighbour as yourself. Out with consumption and in with sustenance, make space for generosity and create a network of meaningful social contributors.
- 3 Encourage imaginative reuse:** food waste is an oxymoron. Support rethinking around the redistribution and reuse of food from the individual to the community scale, and everywhere in between.
- 4 Seek food sovereignty** through education and culturally appropriate cooks, alongside systems of care for those in need.
- 5 Make animated space:** create and promote routes through the site. Ensure these offer views into the activity and offer a variety of interaction.
- 6 Celebrate seasonality through food and events.** Respond to the circadian rhythms of the town.
- 7 Create accessible green** for citizens, staff and more than human occupants to enjoy. Learn from the land in an urban space to form a new understanding of the word agri-culture.
- 8 Facilitate food culture:** encourage connections between people and local growing places through food activities that reach beyond the building footprint to nurture a resilience to future climate, social, and economic changes.

## Key for 'super market' axonometric

### Ground floor

- 1. Arcade:** providing a sheltered shortcut, lined on one side by a segmented rammed-earth wall as a wayfinding device.
- 2. Kitchen and canteen:** with space for 120 people to share food in a format inspired by the National Kitchens of the inter-war period.
- 3. Kitchen tool library:** supporting wider food culture.
- 4. Small shops:** animating the arcade: a start-up platform for local businesses, initially a cut-flowers shop, and a packaging depot.
- 5. Non-gendered public toilets and changing places:** emphasising the supermarket as a town community asset.
- 6. Food market:** on the ground floor of the existing cinema.
- 7. Staff room:** supermarket staff have one of the lowest accesses to daylight of any employment sector. Natural light for all throughout was a key design driver.
- 8. Existing alleyway:** maintained and improved, opening into a new central courtyard providing an alternative route into the arcade. It is a growing space for herbs used in the kitchen.



### First floor

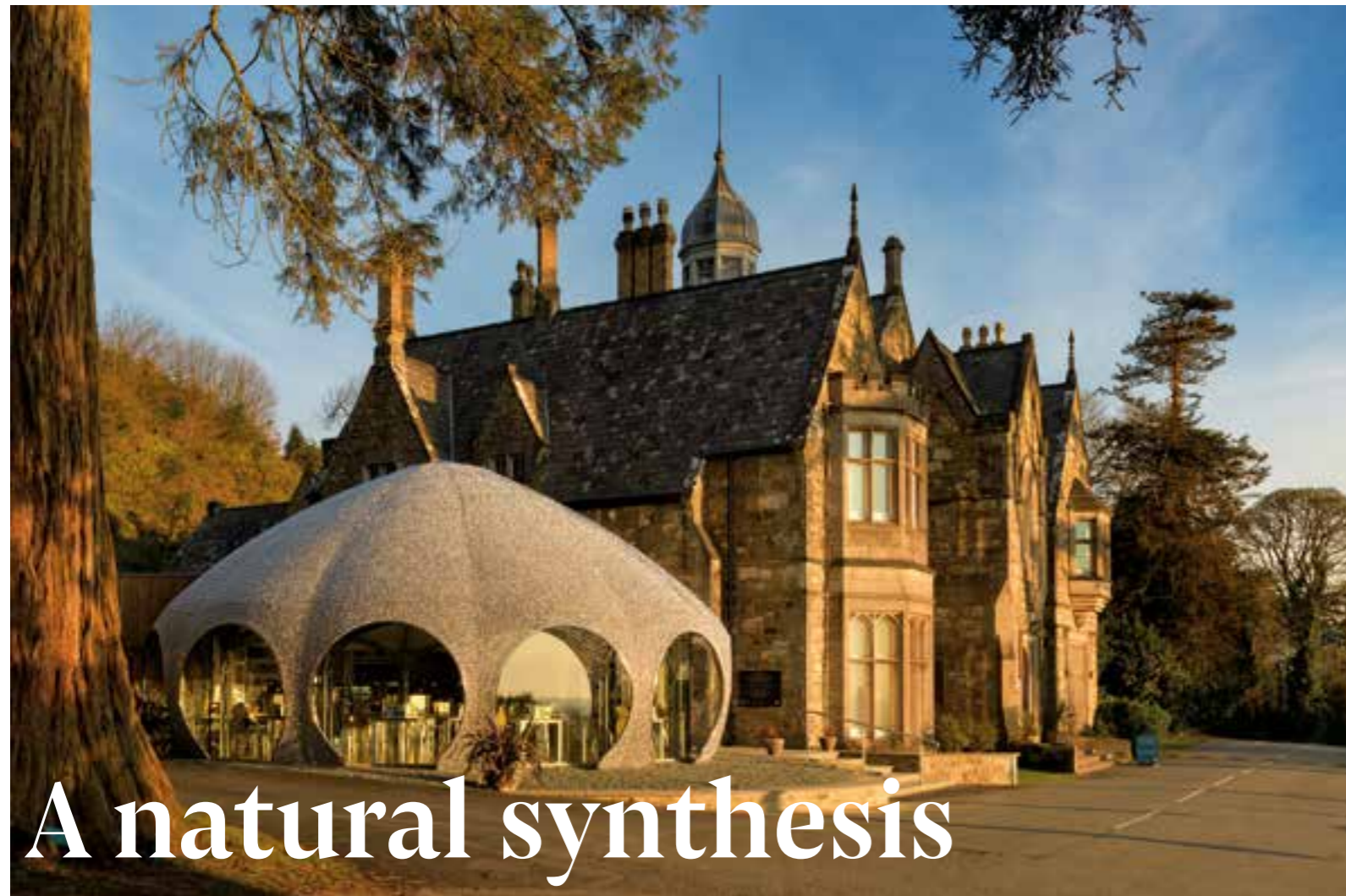
- 9. Hall:** a space for talks, workshops, and the sharing of food production practices.
- 10. Teaching kitchen:** a classroom for groups of people to learn resilient food skills such as drying, fermenting, and basic cooking skills.
- 11. Food processing, packing, drying, and storing spaces:** supporting the market below and creating a seasonal super market that is resilient to food waste.
- 12. Citizens' advice:** offering help with food and welfare-related services. This space has views back through the arcade.

### Second floor

- 13. Greenhouse:** an on-site teaching growing space. The roof structure of the existing cinema is removed and reused elsewhere on site. The new rooftop growing space allows daylight to flood into the market space at ground floor level while creating a visual connection between growing and exchange.

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# A natural synthesis

Artists and architects make good bedfellows when the chemistry of their empathies aligns and complementary skills are respected. The experience can ramp up a further notch when the client is a gallery owner. Adam Voelcker reports on a new little gem near Pwllheli.

The patterns and structures that occur in the natural world have frequently fascinated architects and provided inspiration for their buildings, either because they look so beautiful or because they have an irrefutable formal logic. One has only to think of Utzon's opera house shells or Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes, two very different types of structure yet united in their emulation of nature's forms, to see that both apply.

The new café at Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, Llanbedrog may be small in comparison, but it is every bit as inspired by nature as Utzon and Fuller. The way the project came about was both fortuitous and unusual, and the process by which the end result was achieved is an example of how a small team of devoted people can work together creatively and harmoniously.

Plas Glyn-y-Weddw is an imposing Victorian pile designed in 1856 by Henry Kennedy as the dower house for Elizabeth, widow of Sir Love

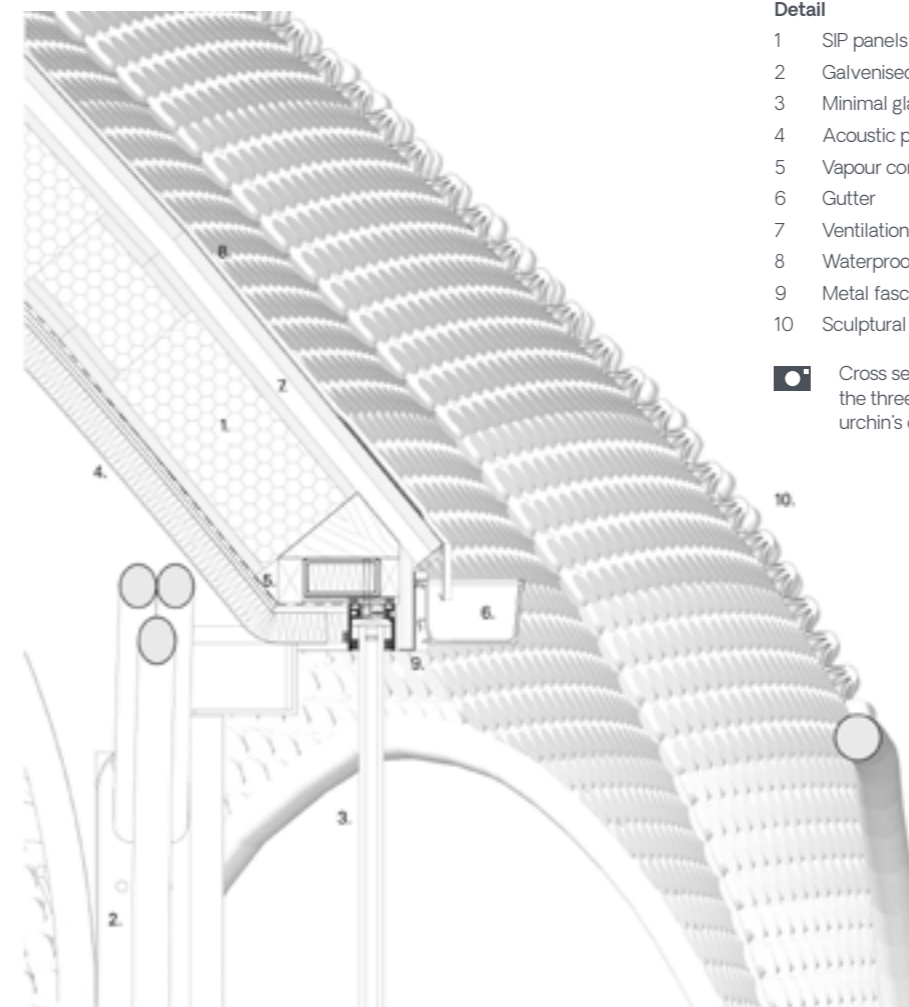
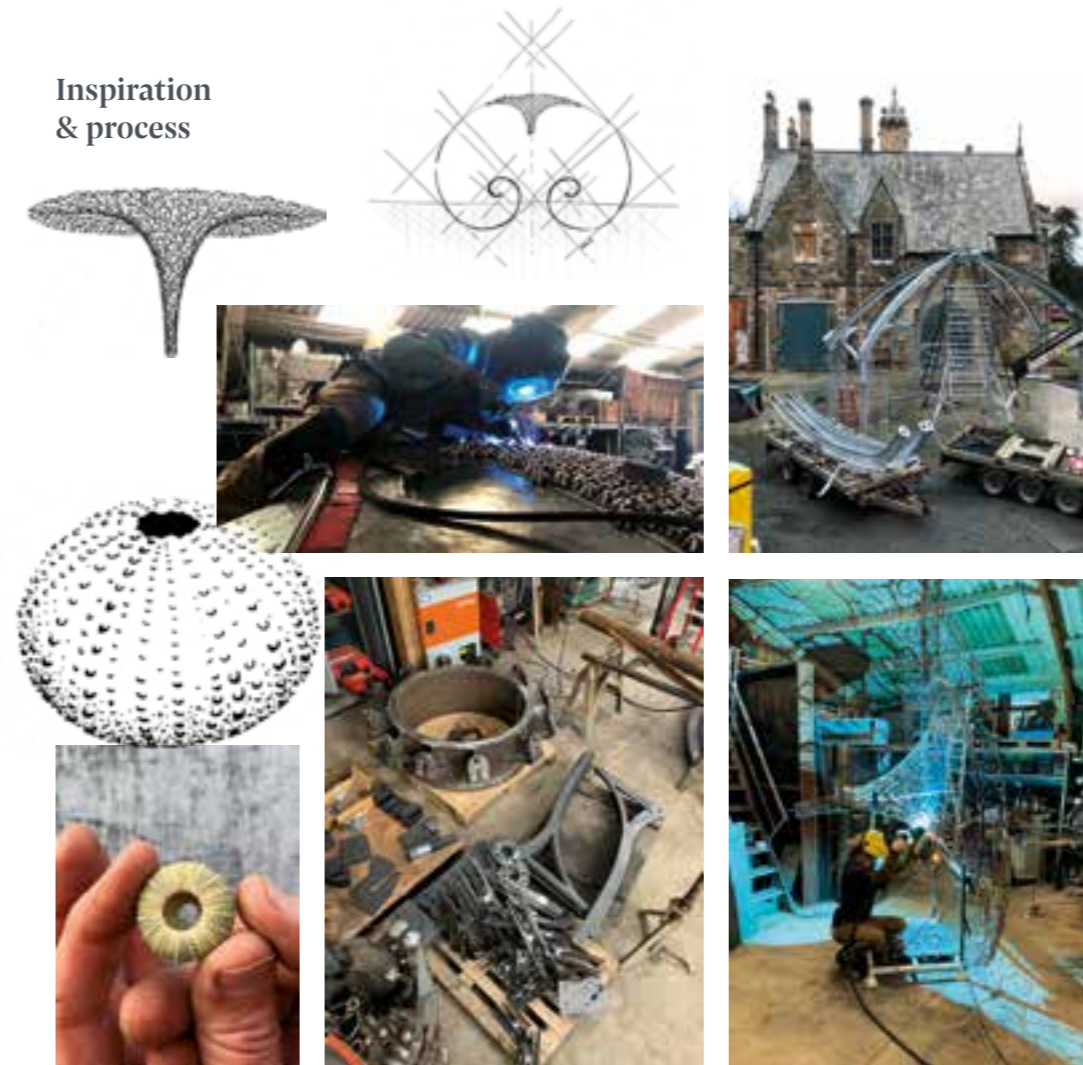
Jones-Parry of Madryn Castle. She never slept here but instead used it to display the family art collection. In 1896 Solomon Andrews, the Cardiff entrepreneur, developed it as a public art gallery, with tea room and ornamental gardens, and linked it to Pwllheli with a horse tramway along the seashore. It has remained an art gallery ever since, its tea room becoming more and more the attraction rather than its exhibitions. A conservatory added on the south side in 1993 to display sculpture was turned into a tea room, but it proved uncomfortably cold in the winter and too hot in the summer; the kitchen was inadequate, and the tea room could seat only three dozen. Donald Insall Associates was invited to design a proposal for a bigger tea room, a better kitchen and improved toilet and office accommodation, but the director and trustees were lukewarm about their scheme, some disliking its Brutalist appearance.

### Inspirations from the sea

Whilst on a regular visit to the gallery in 2018, partners Rew (Rachel) Wood and Matthew Sanderson happened to meet the director, Gwyn Jones, and he described his plans and the stalemate preventing further progress. Sanderson, an artist who thinks of himself as a designer and maker rather than a sculptor, eagerly offered to help out. Within a few months, he came back with a concept model of the café, which excited the clients to such an extent that they appointed him to realise his design. What also excited them was that, as an artist, he was something other than 'your' normal architect: he seemed particularly appropriate for an art gallery.

The concept model was inspired by the shell of an urchin. As a designer, Sanderson takes the natural world as his source material and recreates its forms in metal. Sometimes they are figurative and recognisable; at others they are more abstract, perhaps because they are based on forms too small to see without a microscope. Sanderson loves the 'natural mathematics' of life's forms, its sea creatures in particular, and gets much inspiration from the work of the German zoologist and artist, Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). He told me that he thinks 'surgically'

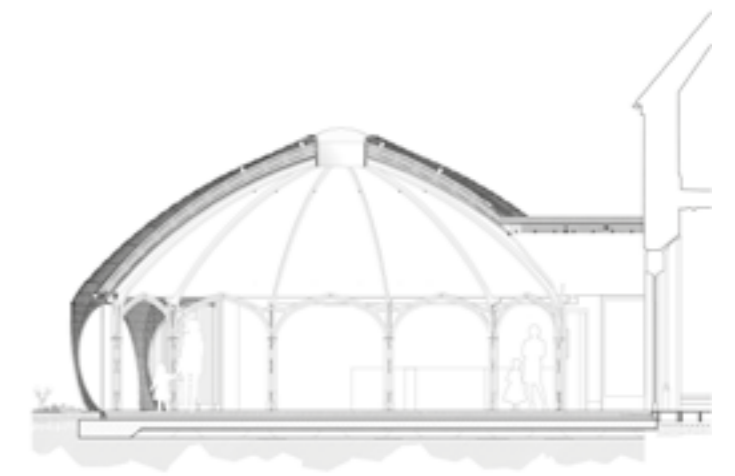
### Inspiration & process



### Detail

- 1 SIP panels
- 2 Galvanised steel structure
- 3 Minimal glazing
- 4 Acoustic plaster
- 5 Vapour control Layer
- 6 Gutter
- 7 Ventilation zone
- 8 Waterproofing layer
- 9 Metal fascia
- 10 Sculptural barnacles

☐ Cross section through eaves, showing the three-layer construction of the urchin's carapace.



about structure and loves the work of Gaudi and Calatrava. During the design stage of the project, he visited the Royal Pavilion in Brighton and the Museum of Natural History in Oxford, and one can see hints of both in his café design.

A walk along the Llanbedrog beach provided Sanderson with the idea for the urchin café. Just an inch in diameter, he magnified his found shell to 11 m. But first of all came an intermediate version, the concept model: about 20 cm in diameter, laser cut in steel and a work of art in itself. Sanderson brought in Austen Cook, of Fold Engineering, to be his 'structural priest' (as he calls him) and together they approached the architect Mark Wray to complete their design team. By all accounts it proved to be a very creative and successful partnership.

### Rising to the challenge

A regular, natural form, especially if it is multi-symmetrical, poses a challenge when used for an extension that must relate to another, existing building. At Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, there was the definite fix of the existing mansion and a more fluid component, the new kitchen. Pride of place would naturally go to the café itself, sitting prominently at the far front corner of the mansion. Being a self-contained object, it sits happily and confidently. It is so different from the mansion in every way that any discussion about 'fitting in' or 'paying homage' flies out of the window. A planning officer's nightmare? Not at all. The officer at Gwynedd Council and the architect at Cadw were totally behind the project from the very beginning, as were the funders. These included private and trust sponsors, namely: Lord Mervyn Davies and Lady Jeanne Davies of Abersoch; the late Paul Edwards and the John Andrews Charitable Trust; and public bodies such as MALD (the Museums, Archives and Libraries Division of the Welsh Government), the Coastal Communities Fund and Menter Môn. 70% of the funds were raised privately. Ironically, such generosity was prompted by the Covid-19



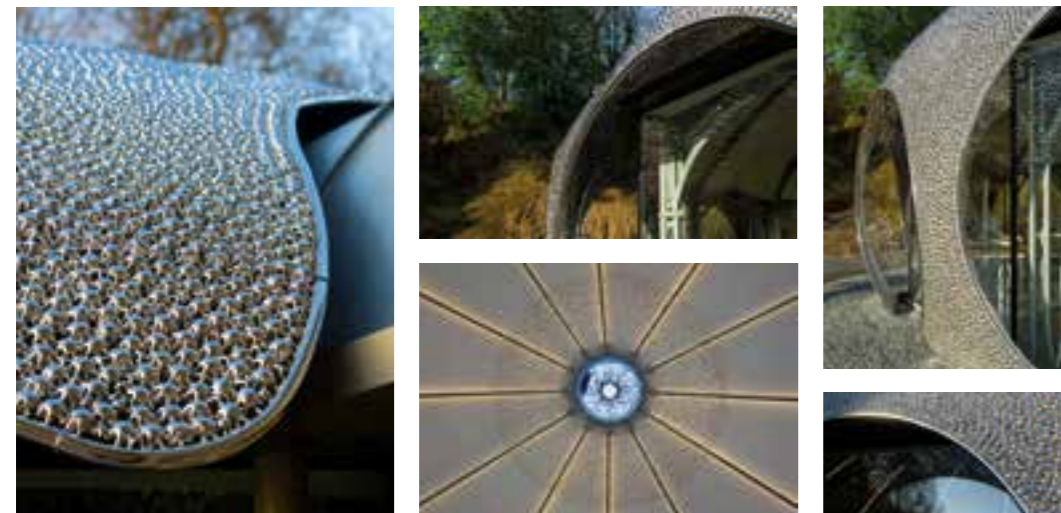
- 1 Café, and kitchen off to the right, not compromising the purity of the café space and volume.
- 2 Accessible entrance at rear, and new kitchen to the right.
- 3 One of Sanderson's sculptures in the landscape, using the same barnacles as on the café's shell.
- 4 The elegant arches pick up the Gothic door heads of the mansion.
- 5 View from the mansion, through a Gothic doorway.

pandemic, which threatened to scupper the entire project as public funding bodies closed down.

The café's structure is in three distinct parts: supporting frame, weather-proofed envelope, consisting of a glass wall and insulated roof/ceiling, and outer covering. From the top down, the frame comprises an oculus, twelve curved ribs, column heads and quatrefoil columns, connected with shallowly arched trusses inspired

by the Gothic door- and window-heads of the mansion – and all made of laser-cut galvanised steel. And from the top down it was erected in Sanderson's studio yard in Herefordshire, as a trial run, with a crane holding up the oculus as the rest was assembled below. Sanderson's initial design had as many as twenty facets to the café's polyhedron but, as a team, they reduced them to a dozen, to look less busy and to relate better to the

Detail



café tables. Fewer columns would mean thicker, heavier sections but, by making each support quatrefoil rather than single, it could be more delicate in appearance. It's an elegant structure, both in its component parts and in its assembled entirety. It feels so right when viewed from the house through the arched connecting doorway.

Maybe more impressive still is the outer shell. This is formed from twenty-eight connecting panels, each of them a rigid net made out of small stainless-steel barnacles (again, inspired by the beach) spot-welded to each other. There are 80,000 of them, requiring more than half a million welding-torch trigger actions to fix and taking a small team of craftspeople (and Sanderson's family) many months to complete. When formed, the panels were transported to Birmingham to undergo electro-passivation and electro-polishing, before being taken to Llanbedrog for final erection. The outer shell is perforated to allow good ventilation around the inner enclosure; at night-time the perforations allow electric light to filter out, like twinkling stars.

It would be simplistic and inaccurate to parcel out the boring bits – the kitchen and servery area, the toilets, the office refurbishment in the house – to Mark Wray and the assistant-in-charge, Seb Walker (who incidentally was a sculptor before turning architect). They were in control of these but they also played a part in the development of the exciting bits and transforming an urchin shell into a workable building. They provided Sanderson with the technical and graphical skills he lacked and they pushed the project through planning, listed building consent and building regulations approval. The work in the house was carried out as phase 1 and completed before the erection of the café and kitchen in phase 2. The kitchen and areas in the house all work well and are a great improvement on the previous accommodation. So often the fixtures and furnishings can ruin a good building, but the café's tables and chairs have been carefully selected (from IKEA). The clear separation of frame and seat or table top matches the structural concept of the building (circular tables might have been more in keeping but are less flexible in use) and the colour goes well too.



Tricky connections

But there are a few rough edges, it is only fair to add, and these concern chiefly the interface between the shell and the parts to which the shell connects. With a stone mansion to one side and a timber-clad kitchen behind, it was always going to be a challenge to join the three parts convincingly. The junction with the main house is less problematic since there is the natural break of an entrance there. But with the kitchen, there is no functional element to form a break, just a rather abrupt cut in the fabric of both buildings. Inside the connection is hardly more successful as the perfection of the shell meets the less-perfect reality of the kitchen.

The director and trustees sound delighted with the project and, by all accounts, visitors love it too. What will be less obvious to them, at least to the café users, is the way the building team cooperated to make the gallery's dream come

true. Having initially thought that the project had been led by the artist, I realised, while talking with the team, that there was hardly a single design decision to which any one of them could singly lay claim. Sanderson described it to me by way of a musical analogy: he as composer, the architects as directors, the engineer as stage manager or producer, and Gwyn, the director, as theatre owner. Each had his own expertise and a mutual understanding of the others' roles without stepping on their toes. What we see at Plas Glyn-y-Weddw is a fine example of how such a synthesis of disciplines can work.

*After retiring, architect Adam Voelcker found freedom on a degree course in art focusing on 'sculpture' – assembling functionless pieces from reject materials e.g rusty steel, cardboard profiles, rubber inner tubes, nylon tights. His dissertation was on Caro's use of colour.*

Funding:

Private and trust sponsors, Lord Mervyn Davies and Lady Jeanne Davies of Abersoch; the late Paul Edwards; the John Andrews Charitable Trust; Friends of Plas Glyn-y-Weddw; and other anonymous donors.  
Public bodies, MALD (the Museums, Archives and Libraries Division of the Welsh Government); The Coastal Communities Fund; Menter Môn.

Credits:

Client: Trustees of Oriel Plas Glyn-y-Weddw  
Artist: Matthew Sanderson  
Architect: Mark Wray Architects: Seb Walker, Mark Wray, Isaac Lim, Charlotte Ward  
Structural engineer: FOLD Consulting Engineers  
Building services consultant: KGA (UK) (up to stage 4)  
Quantity surveyor/CDM coordinator: Adeiladol  
Kitchen design: Chris Chown  
Approved building inspector: Quadrant Building Control  
Main contractor: Henry Jones Builders (phase 1); OBR Construction (phase 2)  
Photography: Gareth Jenkins.

# The Centre for Alternative Materials

Reigniting a long tradition of lifting building materials directly from the earth, MArch student **Georgemma Hunt** proposes an extension of her own practical learning adventure at the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) with the creation of a 'sister' centre for material experimentation and nature recovery on the West Sussex coast.

Part of CAT's Zero Carbon Britain roadmap (2010) revealed how a re-prioritisation of our land use could make the UK self-sufficient through weaving together sustainable food production, biomaterial innovation, and habitat management.

The Centre for Alternative Materials (CAM) is a proposal for a sister educational initiative to the word-renowned CAT. As a hands-on graduate school, it would pioneer a material-first approach for promoting and disseminating knowledge on regenerative material experimentation. At the same time the new centre's buildings and landscaping would act as a major contributor to a wetland rehabilitation project that would form part of a coastal resilience strategy for Climping – an agricultural seafront parish in West Sussex. The construction fabric showcases how experimental building could foster the empathetic management of natural resources for ultra-low carbon materials, without compromising on the balance between the agricultural, recreational, and environmental demands on our coastline.

The project, which also includes a wetland visitor centre, is interwoven with Weald to Waves, an existing collaboration between landowners and community stakeholders, which is establishing a nature recovery corridor from the Knepp Estate to the Sussex coast along three rivers: the Arun, Adur and Ouse. Its primary aim is to enable over 20,000 ha of contiguous habitat. CAM is situated within the dynamic littoral zone at the mouth of the River Arun – where the land and sea meet – and thus acts as a celebratory gateway to this wider network of diverse ecosystems.

The key landscape strategy is to recover what was once a complex coastal habitat through reincorporating a wetland amid otherwise-dry, arable farmland. At the same time, the sensitive architecture and porous landscape interventions would bring a stop to our never-ending engineering battle against coastal erosion. Learning from the failings of resource-heavy, hard-lined defences designed to keep the land dry and the coast in shape, CAM's landscape strategy begins with a non-invasive flint shingle bank. This surrounds a large swathe of coastal floodplain that would increasingly become inundated with rising sea levels and storm surges.

The newly re-wetted saltmarsh would be left to design itself freely and any excavated loam and chalk would be used for plasters, mortars and cob in the construction of the building. The continuous shingle bank would double-up as an educational trail route for walkers and cyclists, as well as extending the internationally rare habitat of vegetated shingle beyond the extent of the existing SSSI on the shoreline.

Arranged in clusters and united by a continuous rammed-chalk colonnade, the centre's buildings would make the most of uninterrupted horizon views from diverging gable ends, while at once carving out a sheltered 'makers' yard' – with a lime kiln's chimney at its core. Spanning across the shingle bank, the buildings would employ three key material expressions and spatial programmes responding to the *dry*, *porous* and *wet* land conditions on which they are founded.

Following the curve of the *porous* bank, the 'building barn' would greet visitors and house

a live, public exhibition of building. A raised walkway would skirt around the perimeter and offer passers-by a unique vantage point from which to watch CAM students making and testing prototypes in the roofed, yet open-air demonstration space. The barn would have a cathedral-like quality with an ash glulam cruck-frame rising out of flint gabion footings, reaching up to 13 m in order to accommodate tall structures. From head-height upwards, the barn walls would be porous and made from reclaimed fishing net to expose the prototypes to external temperature fluctuations and sea winds. Those who are building would be protected under a louvred glass roof, which would be made with locally farmed kelp to lower the burning temperature of the sand.

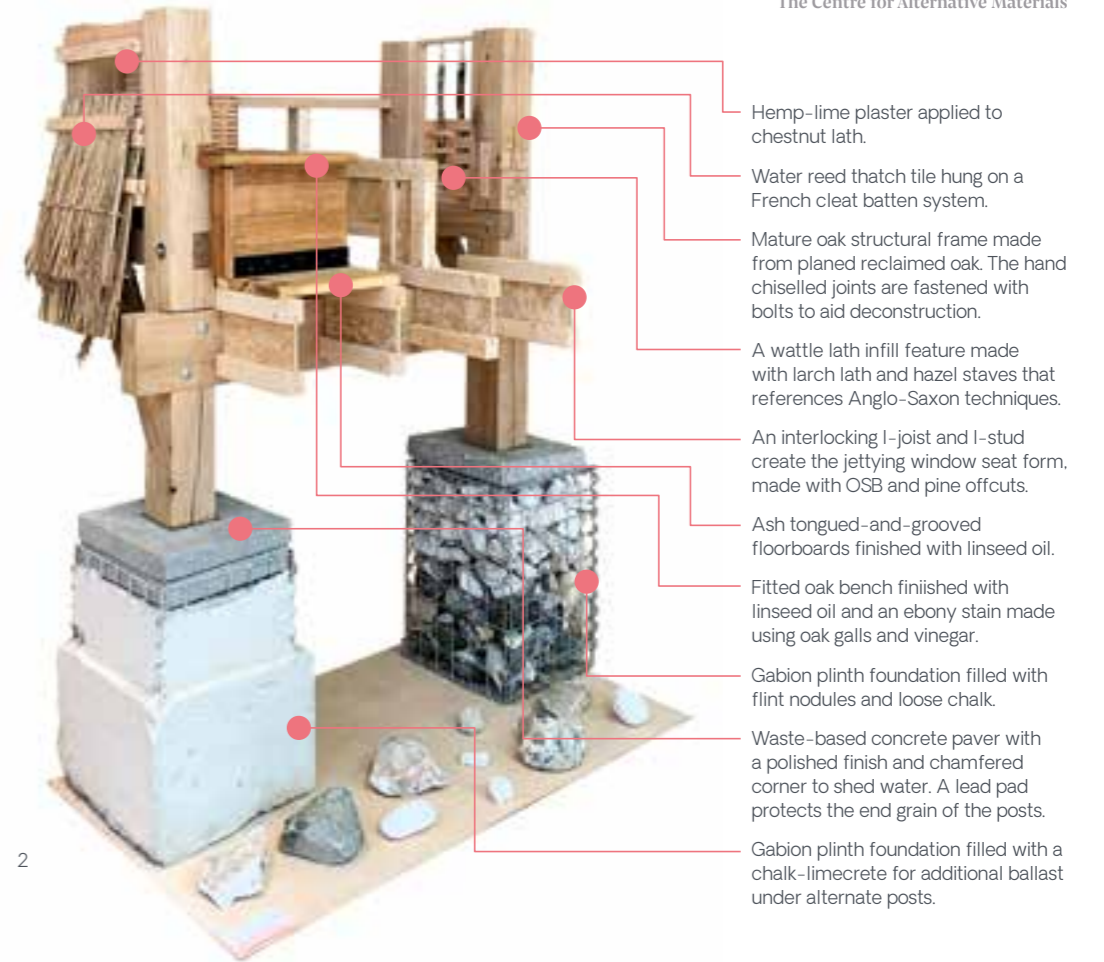
Co-products from spelt, wheat and hemp cultivation, among other food crops, would be harnessed in the mass wall construction of the 'material research centre', which would be located on the *dry* land. This oak A-framed building would assume a dog-leg form and be finished with ceramic peg-tiles on the weather-facing facade and saw-toothed pitched roof, changing to a chalk-lime render on the internal courtyard faces. Conceived as a room within a room, the auditorium could be opened or closed by drawing retractable woollen drapes along a

curved timber-frame roof to achieve specific lighting, ventilation and acoustic requirements.

The wetland visitor centre would reignite Climping's vernacular heritage with a prefabricated, water-reed-thatch tile system, which would hang on French cleat battens. With a lopsided oak king-post truss, the eaves would be low and tactile on the bank elevation, but the building would open up in height to maximise views of the wetland and pull in fresh sea air. The primary oak posts would be supported by gabion plinth foundations that would sit directly on to the chalk bedrock beneath the silty marsh deposits; these would be filled alternately with flint and limecrete, where the latter would provide additional ballast.

Bay windows would jetty from the structure to provide a place of sheltered exposure from the harsh conditions of the wet landscape. Bespoke oak furniture would be enmeshed within these bays and reference the intimate setting of traditional pub booths. This assembly was explored using a 1:2 scale prototype, which offered the opportunity to investigate a combination of traditional oak framing and deconstruction principles. The crafting process revealed an exciting niche for upscaling hyper-local, regenerative building within the context of a climate and ecological emergency. Testing one's intuition in the form of large-scale models closely resembles the practical pedagogy advocated at CAM.

*Special thanks go to Dieter Brandstatter for his unwavering guidance in the detailing and execution of the 1:2 scale prototype.*



- 1 Site model.
- 2 Prototype of a jettying window bay for the wetland visitor centre. The model is not a true representation of the construction, but an educational tool for conveying the design principles, heritage references and concepts for the building industry.
- 3 Material samples.
- 4 Looking out to the courtyard.
- 5 Site entrance space.
- 6 Courtyard.
- 7 Building barn.
- 8 Boardwalk.

# BOOK REVIEW



## Frank Lloyd Wright: The Architecture of Defiance

Jonathan Adams | University of Wales Press

*Paul Harries*

It seems that much writing on Frank Lloyd Wright hinges on the intersections between personality, ideology and formal dexterity. His life was so extraordinary that it is almost impossible to ignore his personal biography in any account of the architect’s life and architecture. However, in his study of Wright, Robert McCarter keeps the character study, the biography, to a minimum.<sup>1</sup> Just enough to characterise influences, beliefs, and values, and to contextualise the progression of the work. McCarter’s emphasis is on the development of formal solutions. Meryle Secrest’s biography of Wright, in contrast, focuses more on the character, the personality, and the underlying beliefs and values.<sup>2</sup> She carefully records Wright’s Welsh heritage, the influences of Celtic mythology, Unitarianism and druidic animism on Wright’s formative years.

In his book *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Architecture of Defiance*, Jonathan Adams, a Welsh architect practising in Wales, focuses closely on the intersections between personality and belief. In trying to locate Wright in the context of his Welsh ancestry he poses the following questions in the book’s introduction: ‘just how Welsh was Frank Lloyd Wright? To what extent did he think of himself as one of us? [...] what exactly was it he was trying to do, and why? Why was he so compelled, so determined to make himself so exceptional?’

For Adams, the answers to these questions lie in Wright’s Welsh ancestry, to the religious beliefs he inherited from his Welsh family ‘the almighty Lloyd Jones’. His account is as much an act of detective work as biography, tracking down the Welsh influences, trying to connect these to the ways in which Wright practised, his thought, his process.

### The Welsh connection

The opening section of Adams’s book focuses on Wright’s ancestors, based in Cardiganshire. This is a story of religious non-conformity, starting with the founding of an Arminian chapel in Llwynrhydowen in 1733, by Jenkin Jones. Arminians denied the biblical concept of pre-destination, and held that all could be ‘saved’. The established church was outraged by this proposition – the Joneses were to become radical outsiders.

Following Jenkin Jones’s death, his nephew, David Lloyd, took on the Arminian congregation. It was anticipated that Charles Lloyd, David Lloyd’s son, would eventually take over the congregation at Llwynrhydowen, but this was not to be. Instead, Charles Lloyd delivered Unitarian services, rejecting the idea of the Trinity and promoting the idea of one god, eventually leading a Unitarian breakaway from Llwynrhydowen Chapel. Charles Lloyd was Frank Lloyd Wright’s great uncle from whom he would inherit his Unitarianian faith.

Charles Lloyd was an acquaintance of Edward Williams who adopted the bardic name of Iolo Morganwg. Born in 1747 in the Vale of Glamorgan, it is difficult to overestimate the influence that Morganwg had on defining Wales’s consciousness as a nation. A leading spirit in the Unitarian Association, his efforts to revive Welsh tradition were immense. He is credited with reviving the Eisteddfod, a national contest of music and poetry, he invented the Gorsedd – the order of the bards – he collected medieval Welsh literature, he even forged some. In a way he invented Welsh tradition, an imagined community, and forged a vision of the Welsh nation rooted in antique Welsh mythology: a cultural nationalism.

It was Morganwg who also revived, or probably invented, the Druidic symbol /I\ – held to mean ‘truth against the world’. This was to become the Lloyd Jones’s family motto, and for Wright a leitmotif expressing his contempt for convention and authority. For Wright, the symbol /I\ depicted three rays of light ‘the downward rays of the sun were Joy! Joy! Set against and dispelling the hatreds that were the sorrows of this world’.

A further aspect of the Welsh inheritance that Adams explores is the connection to nature – the Celtic belief that found the divine in trees, leaves, and streams. This animism was bound into Morganwg’s interpretation of nature; indeed it formed its poetic essence:

‘The three primary and indispensable requisites of poetic genius are,  
An eye that can see nature  
A heart that can feel nature  
And a resolution that dares follow nature.’

### Reclaiming Frank Lloyd Wright

For Wright nature was spelt with a capital ‘N’ ‘because all that we can learn of God we will learn from the body of God, which we call Nature’. Adams notes that Iolo also spelt nature with a capital ‘N’ when writing of the poetry of the ancient Britons, a poetry of ‘indigenous growth, founded on principles which [...] are undoubtedly those of Nature’.

It was this set of values and beliefs that Wright’s grandparents, Mallie and Richard Jones, took to America when they emigrated in 1844. It was the resilience born of non-conformity and ‘truth against the world’ that led them, eventually, to ‘The valley of the God-Almighty Jones’ in Wisconsin. Wright’s mother, Hannah Lloyd Jones, had departed Wales with her parents at the age of six. In 1866 she married William Wright, of English descent, a gifted orator and preacher. A man with a love of music, with self-assurance and confidence in public speaking, a tendency to spend money on luxuries, and to exaggerate and distort the truth. Clearly, characteristics that he passed on to his son. If these were the influences of his father, the influence of his mother was much more profound. Adams describes the relationship in some detail as he does their return to the valley – to the valley where Wright would eventually build, and rebuild, ‘Taliesin’, his spiritual home.

Adams’s description of Wright’s ancestry is a detailed and compelling read. He acknowledges the fine scholarship of Meryle Secrest, whom he describes as writing the definitive biography. Secrest’s biography traverses similar terrain; however, Adams weaves together several sources to paint an illuminating picture of both Wright’s ancestry and his formative years. This is accompanied by excellent illustrations, maps, plans and, most usefully, a diagram of the family tree for those who find it difficult to navigate the connections between the Joneses, the Lloyds and the Lloyd-Joneses. You are left in no doubt of the Welsh influence, the tenaciousness, the non-conformity, the veneration of nature. The ideological links are clear, as is, to a large extent, the formation of his character. The case is well argued and related in a very readable style.

There is clearly truth in the story Adams writes. But, of course, Frank Lloyd Wright is the most difficult of characters to pin down to certain truths. The historian Thomas S. Thomas observed the Wright ‘had no conception of the ‘truth’ as most people defined it [...] His unique creative nature demanded and conceived for himself a persona, a mythic personality, surrounded by a partially mythic world. Adams asserts that Wright may well have occupied the persona of Taliesin, the mythical magician, the poet saviour, the shape shifter ‘there could be no doubting the resemblance’, writes Adams, ‘the artistic brilliance, the ability to evolve, adapt, always to stay ahead of the game by way of staying aside and, regardless of the most harrowing blows, always to come back and prevail. When Frank spoke about Taliesin he was really describing himself’. Adams also makes similar comparisons between Iolo Morganwg and Wright: ‘Frank understood his creativity in terms that were identical to Iolo Morganwg’s. Both built their reputation on a platform of critical defiance’. It could also be said they both built their reputations on mythologising.

While Adams speculates on how Welsh Frank Lloyd Wright was, he also acknowledges the myriad of other influences that informed Wright’s creativity – Japanese and Mayan Architecture in particular – and of course the major influence of

a man of Irish descent, Louis Sullivan, Wright’s ‘lieber meister’, the only influence that Wright acknowledged in unqualified terms. For here was both architect and theoretician, a master of form and thought. It was Sullivan who was to provide the link between Wright’s Welsh ideological inheritance and his formal mastery, the idea central to organic architecture that a building’s function should be expressed in the harmony of its form, and that it should become the conjunction between the tangible and spiritual aspects found in nature.

### A Welsh encounter with America

Adams’s story is of a Welsh encounter with America ‘the new nation became transposed upon the old’. Peter Blake, in his book *Frank Lloyd Wright: Architecture and Space* asserts that ‘Frank Lloyd Wright was, very probably, the last of the true Americans’.<sup>3</sup> This, argued Blake, was because he was:

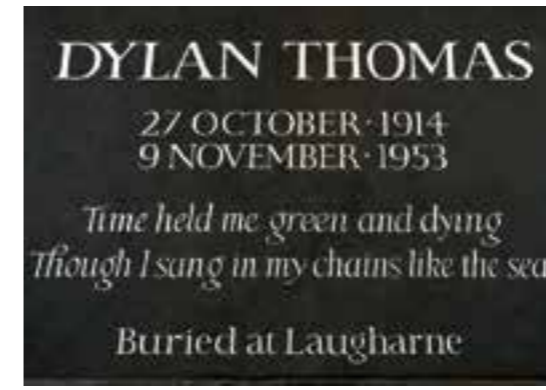
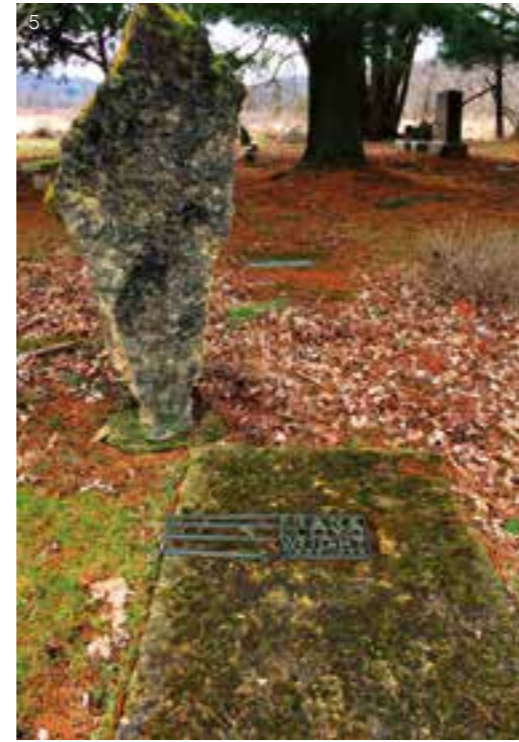
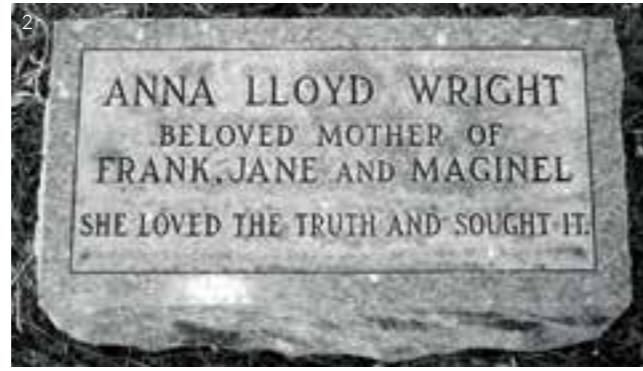
‘the last great representative of all the things his country once stood for in the world when ‘America’ was still a radical concept, rather than a settled continent: a symbol of absolute, untrammelled freedom for every individual, of as little government as possible, of the end of class and caste, of unlimited and equal physical opportunities of the adventurous, of the absence of all prejudice, of the absence of form and formality, and, finally, a symbol of a society of many individuals living as individuals in individual settlements – not a society of masses living in giant cities.’

The changes in American society were vast over the course of Wright’s long life. When he was born, America had a population of 38 million, three quarters of whom lived in rural areas; by the time of his death the population was 180 million, three quarters of whom lived in urban centres. Wright’s vision of society was distinctly rural. His Broadacre City utopia was an evocation of the dreams of Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson of a community of individuals.

A country rural in character, with seemingly endless possibilities. This was the potential seen by Wright’s ancestors, to build their settlement, their small patch of Wales in Wisconsin. The American influence on Wright was profound – in particular the influence of the transcendentalists – Whitman and, in particular, Emerson. Adams traces the line to the transcendentalists back to Wales, via Wordsworth and Coleridge to Iolo Morganwg. There are always connections – history is a web of connections. However, the influence of Emerson and his essay ‘Self Reliance’ is profound and Adams acknowledges and chronicles this most important of influences on the development of Wright’s character. This fusion of Welsh Unitarianism and American Transcendentalism is at the heart of Wright’s personal development.

### Maternal influence

It is clear from Adams’s argument that Wright, to some extent, did think of himself as Welsh. The second question – why did he feel so compelled to make himself exceptional, would appear to lie in the driving force of his mother. Adams writes that she was ‘the single most important influence on the making of the “architectural genius” that her son became’. It is well recorded that she wished to create an architect son. Various educational tools were used to facilitate this, notably those developed by the German educationalist, Froebel, and in particular the building blocks he invented to stimulate creativity. Her



unstinting support drove Wright forward. She instilled in him a sense of destiny. She had claimed him as an architect before his birth. Adams pays particular attention to Hannah Lloyd Jones, tracing the life of this intelligent, intellectually astute, politically radicalised and driven woman. It was a life of personal frustration and, as Ada Louise Huxtable has observed, she appeared to live her unfulfilled ambitions through her son.

Adams also explores the influence of Wales directly on the buildings of Wright. The centrality of the hearth, he argues, is derived from Welsh tradition – the functional and spiritual centre of the Welsh farm houses – and also of Wright's domestic settings.

The most extended formal argument regarding the influence of Welsh architecture on his architectural work concerns Unity Temple. The observation that the square plan of Unity Temple may have been influenced by the model for Welsh non-conformist chapels is referred to by Adams. While this is well understood and documented elsewhere, Adams extends his analysis to the sequence of entry and exit, along with the disposition of ceremonial furniture, which, it is argued, is derived from the long-wall Chapel in Llwynrhydowen. The analysis is compelling – it may well be true, but it does depend on the supposition that his mother offered a description of the interior arrangement to her son, as it is she, not he, who had visited the chapel.

### Compelling narrative

Adams's emphasis on historical background is such that the seminal buildings of Wright arrive around half way through his book. His formal analysis of the buildings continue to blend biography, ideology and personality with vivid descriptions and analysis of Wright's buildings. The buildings appear in a format similar to diary entries, which give a specific social context before moving on to a more formal analysis. These 'diary entries' are also grouped under various chapter headings – giving them a more thematic base. The mix of thematic

and diary-entry formats does lead to a rather unusual chronological arrangement of the buildings, for example: Fallingwater precedes the Dana House and the early prairie houses; the Ennis House appears before the Johnson Wax administration building. This is perhaps driven by Adams's focus on ideological development as opposed to formal and technical developments.

Adams's book is engaging and challenges us to think about the impact of Wright's Welsh ancestry on his values and thought processes. He does this with commensurate skill and is persuasive in his arguments. The book is part history, part biography, part an examination of personality, and part an analysis of some of Wright's seminal buildings. Of course, the formal analysis makes the Welsh connection more difficult to substantiate. Wright's masterly use of composition, modelling, the extension of the horizontal line, the dynamic form and space, the unified nature of his interiors, the control, the craft, the invention, the connection to the landscape. The ability to assimilate and synthesis. These, for Adams, stand on a bedrock of belief, on a fusion of Welsh Unitarianism and American transcendentalism. However, there is, of course, the formal dexterity of an American genius to consider.

Adams has woven a compelling narrative. How Welsh was Wright? Read his book and decide for yourself, it's an engaging story, well written, beautifully illustrated and elegantly formatted in The Architecture of Wales series of books.

*At the age of 21 Paul Harries visited the Robie House in Chicago, the stimulant to a life-long fascination with Wright's extraordinary life and work, followed by later visits to Unity Temple, the Dana House, the Guggenheim Museum and the magnificent Johnson Wax Headquarters. Dr Paul Harries, born in west Wales, is currently head of Swansea School of Architecture and a director of BCHN Architects.*



- 1 The Lloyd Joneses and Lloyd Wrights at the entrance to the Oak Park home and studio: Frank Lloyd Wright seated right, and his mother Anna Lloyd Wright seated to the right of doorway.
- 2 Anna Lloyd Wright's grave at Unity Chapel. The Valley, Wisconsin (photo: Rob Barnett).
- 3 Interior of Llwynrhydowen Chapel, south-east Ceredigion, 1879, the mother chapel of the Unitarians (photo: Iain Wright).
- 4 Adams argues the influences of Llwynrhydowen – possibly conveyed through Wright's family and relatives – on the design of the sanctuary of Wright's seminal Unity Temple (photo: Tom Rossiter).
- 5 Frank Lloyd Wright's memorial at Unity Chapel with the Lloyd Jones cemetery and pine grove beyond.
- 6 Dylan Thomas memorial stone Westminster Abbey.
- 7 Dylan Thomas at Laugharne, kindred spirit to Wright.

### References

- 1 Robert McCarter, 1997. *Frank Lloyd Wright*. London: Phaidon Press.
- 2 Meryle Secrest, 1998. *Frank Lloyd Wright: A Biography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 3 Peter Blake, 1963. *Frank Lloyd Wright: Architecture and Space*. London: Pelican Books.
- 4 Thomas Hines in Ada Louise Huxtable, 2004. *Frank Lloyd Wright*. Viking.

### Kindred spirits

*M Wynn Thomas*

Jonathan Adams's outstanding study is ground-breaking in two interconnected respects. It establishes definitively that, far from being mentally unstable and ignorant, Frank Lloyd Wright's mother was an educated woman, and that her influence on her gifted son's development was therefore far more substantial than previously suspected; this discovery, in turn, enables a demonstration of the seminal importance for Wright's work of the Welsh Unitarian background to which his Welsh-speaking mother was by far her son's most important bridge.

These insights lead to the intriguing possibility that a fruitful parallel may exist between the case of Frank Lloyd Wright and that of Dylan Thomas, named 'Marlais' in honour of his distinguished, and highly controversial, uncle Gwilym Marles, a leading Unitarian of the same place, period, and spiritual vision as Wright's family. Marles – a prominent figure locally who led the counter-attack by Welsh tenant-farmers against their grasping and ruthless landlords – was highly suspect amongst his fellow Unitarians because of his deep interest in the work of the American Transcendentalists, whose philosophy also influenced Frank Lloyd Wright. And I have argued elsewhere that such 'spirituality' as is evinced in Dylan Thomas's poetry owes something to the Unitarianism of his great uncle, as that was significantly inflected by the teachings of the Transcendentalists. So, the work of both poet and architect could be said to be informed by the same hybrid mix of Welsh Unitarianism and American Transcendentalism.

Adams notes that 'when Anna [Frank's mother] was a twenty-one-year old teacher [...] she was deeply absorbed in Transcendentalist ideas', and adds that her progressive approach to infant education probably owed much to the work of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who was both a Unitarian and a Transcendentalist. They were cognate philosophies, since both emphasised the divine capacities of human individuals. And Frank continued his mother's interest in the Transcendentalists. The most influential of his early mentors was Louis Sullivan,

at the time the leading architect in Chicago, and Sullivan had been the pupil of Frank Furness, whose friends included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau and Walt Whitman. Frank was to draw on the same sources to sustain his unconventional lifestyle and maintain his 'spiritual independence'. He was, Adams notes 'guided by the fluid credo' he found in the work of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman.

As for Gwilym Marles and his equally unconventional renegade nephew Dylan Thomas, both espoused the kind of vision persuasively articulated by Marles's favourite Transcendentalist, Theodore Parker. An address by him that appeared in the very first number of Emerson's influential new journal *The Dial* captured the core of his vision:

'Nature ever grows, and changes, and becomes something anew, as God's all-pervading energy flows into it without ceasing. Hence in nature, there is constant change but no ultimate death. The quality of life is never diminished. The leaves fall but they furnish for new leaves yet to appear, whose swelling germs crowd off the old foliage [...] Since God is essentially and vitally present in each atom of space, there can be no such thing as sheer and absolute extinction of being.'

The whole cosmos is charged with endlessly self-renewing energy, and every human being is both the expression of that energy and its conduit, so that prodigal and unfettered creativity is of the very essence of human being. It is a creed to which both Dylan Thomas and Frank Lloyd Wright fully and enthusiastically subscribed, and it powered the restless originality of their respective productions. Both Wright and Thomas chafed at any attempt to curb or otherwise frustrate this crucial energy, and both were angered at the way in which these divine energies were repressed by humankind, ruthlessly policed by the established social, political and religious order, and destructively disfigured through human mistreatment of the natural world. Adams's study is studded with examples of Wright's reactions against such restrictions both in his unconventional lifestyle and in his aesthetics of boundless organic freedom.

In the concluding pages of his masterly study, Jonathan Adams succinctly summarises the credo that governed the whole of Frank Lloyd Wright's life and work:

'The idea of Nature, of the organic and primitive had passed to Frank unmodified, pristine artefacts from the revolutionary Unitarian and Romantic polemic of the late nineteenth century. They were ideas that were never given fuller expression than they were in the life and art of Frank Lloyd Wright. To Frank it was a simple, unambiguous fact, no less than God's own will, that he should create according to his own intuition, that his own voice was the only one that he should heed, that conformity was the enemy of Truth.'

And here is the cognate credo of the young Dylan Thomas: 'The divinity of man is not to be trifled with [...] the manna of God is not the lukewarm soup and starch of the chapels, but the redhot grains of love and life distributed equally and impartially among us all [...] the desire, large as a universe, to express ourselves freely and to the utmost limits of our individual capacities.'

As can be seen, Wright and Thomas were two kindred spirits.

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# touchstones



## FIRING FORWARD

There was a time when architecture was locked away in its own room or, in extreme cases, in a darkened black-walled space segregated from the rest of fine art, craft, film and photography at national eisteddfodau. It once even left the Y Lle Celf pavilion completely and went into a pavilion of its own.

Michael Nixon, the renowned art curator, broke the habit at the 2015 Meifod National Eisteddfod of Wales. Although still in an area of the pavilion, visitors simply flowed through from one space to another; one could see art

juxtaposed against architecture. This move coincided with the RSAW boldly commissioning the photographer James Morris to photograph all the architecture and display it on large prints.

Like every institution used to putting on large public gatherings, the pandemic was a body blow. In the case of the National Eisteddfod this downturn was potentially exacerbated by its arts officer of over 20 years, Robyn Tomos, stepping down. But, as so often, the institution has an energy of its own not dependent on any one individual. This is particularly so with a peripatetic gathering visiting a new location each year.

This year's annual centrepiece of Welsh culture returned to its heartland as the Llŷn and Eifionydd National Eisteddfod at Boduan; one could sense the full magnificent energy utterly revived and moving the tradition forward. The architecture display also took a further step of openness, photos of schemes being spread throughout the show, boundaries overlapping (above left).

This energy for striding forward was beautifully encapsulated in a large-scale installation and performance space on the Maes, entitled 'Tân yn Llŷn' (Fire in Llŷn) (right),

building on the memory of the protest for peace when Saunders Lewis, David John Williams, and Lewis Valentine set fire in 1936 to the recently commissioned RAF bombing school at Penrhos on the Llŷn peninsula. The space on the Maes, framed by *crawiau*, the local tradition of slate fencing, with a web backdrop of exuberant bunting hosted the climactic closing performance of the week with fire-installation artists Mandy Dike and Ben Rigby of AndNow, with musician and poets. Their core message, 'tradition is not worshiping the ashes but tending the fire', could resonate across every challenging context we face currently in Wales.



of massive global warming and impacts on UK-dependent Mediterranean horticulture. The UK imports a ridiculous amount of what will become highly vulnerable vegetable and fruit, while current government policies make it incredibly difficult to set up home-grown smallholder horticultural enterprises.

Lobbying and campaigning groups in Wales are beginning to face up to this. Our Food 1200 (OF1200), seeking to generate 1,200 acres of fruit and vegetable growing across south-east and mid-Wales, has been pushing hard over the last 12 months. In conversations with Powys, Monmouthshire and Bannau Brycheiniog planners, OF1200 commissioned and submitted a substantial investigative piece of research by Jamie Shorten on the current policy blockages to new smallholders gaining accommodation adjacent to their holdings. Without RED policies changing allied to subsidy alterations, which currently ignore smallholder horticulture, then the chances of us getting on a necessary war-footing on vegetable and fruit growing, as we did in the 1939-45 war, will just allow us bury

our heads in the sand for another generation. Luckily all sides of this challenge are beginning to talk to each other. Curious bedfellows, the Land Workers' Alliance Cymru and the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) with OF1200, have been seen sharing platforms at the Royal Welsh Show. Renowned food policy academic Tim Lang was at the Abergavenny Food Festival with OF1200. Before the new Welsh agricultural subsidy system becomes fully operational new rules on small-scale horticulture support should be drafted in to ensure an important part of our more sustainable future food security strategy.

To wake up people and policymakers to this future reality one needs exemplars, pilot projects. One possible opening could be the re-purposing of some county farms in Wales when tenancies come up, dividing them into several small holdings each with net-zero-carbon small dwellings. The journey has begun in Powys. *Touchstone* will be watching closely as this experiment unfolds.

For more information see:  
<https://ourfood1200.wales/>

## DESIGN COMMISSION FOR WALES AT 20



For its 20th birthday present, the Design Commission for Wales (DCfW) gave itself and Wales a 67-page book of design wisdom born of experience. Entitled *A culture of quality*, there are some real nuggets of critical thought within it

DCfW's design review panel co-chair, Ewan Jones of Grimshaw Architects, beautifully balances the praise and the doubts. 'Arguably', he writes, 'there is no more coherent suite of planning policy and legislation in the UK', but he follows that by a telling reflection comparing Scottish architecture awards to those in Wales, and this is not in Wales's favour. This year's architecture awards (pp. 44-47) confirms his critique. He points to the tougher stance in England's *National Planning Policy Framework* where it states that 'development that is not well designed should be refused'. You don't get plainer speaking than that. Wales needs to get tougher. Jen Heal, design adviser at DCfW, rightly points to the commission's contribution to the Welsh Government's *Technical Advice Note 12*:

*Design* and its requisite demand for design and access statements. But a perusal by any reviewer of these would suggest the demand may have been made, but the delivery is, in so many cases, incoherent.

Craig Sheach, of architects PRP and a DCfW design review panellist, offers a beautifully judged piece for all councillors to read on planning committees and the officers who serve them. He posits the bold challenge 'what is good design (and what it isn't)?'. There is no mystery or jargon here. It's all plain-speaking truths. Do read it.

Steven Smith, of Urban Narrative and another DCfW design review panellist, argues for a way of planning thinking specific to Wales's particular geography. Perhaps 'Wales is a land of reluctant urbanists', but from that one simple observation he argues for 'a regional urbanism' where 'planning becomes more a branch of landscape architecture than a by-product of politics, law and regulation'. He points to the Valleys Regional Park concept, a way of thinking that some would point out started its life as 'valley city' promoted by valley community activists back in the heady days of community action in the late 1970s and early 80s before city boosterism focused everything on Cardiff.

The writer with the last say, one of the early promoters of the need for a design commission, Geraint Talfan Davies, revisits a dilemma that has faced DCfW since its creation: the balance of stick and carrot. He still comes down pro-carrot but argues for expanding capacity and operating on a wider front (the former future generations commissioner made exactly the same point to the Senedd in her five-year review). Davies argues this despite all the many urgings of his fellow contributors, for example 'we cannot keep talking and acting as if these crises exist in the future. There is an urgent 'nowness' that requires

serious change – quickly', and this exhortation came from DCfW's director, Carole-Anne Davies.

All the thousands or hours of core design reviewing by unpaid expert panellists, the dedicated multi-disciplinary bespoke client support across such a diverse range of building types and patronage contexts, the seminars to planning officers and committee members, the publications, the best practice guides, the embedding of 'place making' at the heart of all Wales's planning thinking... all this 'carrot' work might be upended and ruined by a more 'stick' approach. But then DCfW has been at this for 20 years. *Touchstone* has been at it since 1996. The RSAW has been running inspirational conferences for over 25 years and we now have C20 Cymru working furiously to improve a culture of valuing the modern, and yet despite all this, it seems reaching a DCfW 'culture of quality' seems permanently holed below the waterline. This is troubling.

The director will rightly keep saying 'the importance of design must be made explicit and must be accelerated', and, 'the scale and pace of change must go well beyond anything we are currently doing and must rapidly accelerate'. However, nothing on the current public-sector economic horizon suggests that this is a viable position, however strongly the argument is made, without a stick.

Both the former future generations commissioner and those writing in this birthday book know really what is at stake. As one observes 'we cannot continue with an under-resourced, under-trained, under-invested-in public sector – out-skilled and out-resourced by the private sector on whose partnership it is so heavily reliant'. This has been sliding from under us all over more than 20 years, maybe even 40. It has to halt and be reversed with a stick.

**“...the importance of design must be made explicit and must be accelerated”, and, “the scale and pace of change must go well beyond anything we are currently doing and must rapidly accelerate”. However, nothing on the current public-sector economic horizon suggests that this is a viable position, however strongly the argument is made, without a stick.**



**Touchstone** hasn't reported on the vital issue of the listing of our significant post-war heritage since before the COVID-19 pandemic, nor indeed since the establishment of C20 Cymru in October 2020. So, what's been happening on this front for the last few years? **Jonathan Vining** reports.



# Listless listing...



All photographs by Jonathan Vining except no.9 by Bill Davies.

As noted in *Touchstone* in 2018 p. 38, Cadw had commissioned a report from Holland Heritage and this was published in March 2019 as *Advice to inform post-war listing in Wales*. Running to about 80 pages plus appendices, it's a good piece of work, providing an overview of the principal building types and architectural themes in post-war Wales, focusing on public commissions, and public and private housing. It starts to address the lack of thematic studies of building types, which would properly support the comprehensive listing of significant post-war buildings – a period that was generally excluded from Cadw's resurvey of Wales that was completed in 2005.

On 3 October 2022, the Twentieth Century Society was delighted to be appointed as a 'national amenity society' that has to be consulted on applications for listed building consent to demolish or significantly alter a listed building. This is to allow us to comment on relevant applications in the same manner that the Georgian Group and the Victorian Society, for example, have been able to do for many years.

Since its inauguration, C20 Cymru has supported its parent body, the Twentieth Century Society, in submitting several listing applications for post-war buildings that we believe are exceptional and key examples of significance to the Welsh nation. The response has been mixed.

First, the positives: on 3 May 2023, Plas Menai (National Outdoor Pursuits Centre), near Bangor (Bowen Dann Davies Partnership, 1980) (1) was listed at grade II\* with the associated housing at grade II. This is excellent news, not just because it's one of the most important buildings in Wales of the last quarter of the twentieth century, but also its designation will hopefully place some control over future works to the buildings – no more uPVC windows as replacement for the original stained timber ones, please...

St David's Hall, Cardiff, (J Seymour Harris Partnership, 1982) (2) was listed at grade II on 10 May 2023, thankfully before Cardiff Council's

proposal to grant a lease to a commercial operator to run Wales's national concert hall for the next 45 years. It's now down to Cardiff Council's planners and the vigilance of the statutory amenity societies to make sure that any proposed alteration works are carried out sensitively under the listed building consent process.

Also, we are hopeful that Pencadlys Gwynedd, Caernarfon, (Merfyn H Roberts, county architect and Dewi-Prys Thomas, consultant to Wyn Thomas + Partners, 1984) (3) which was covered comprehensively in *Touchstone* issue two (May 1997, pp. 9–17), will be listed shortly (at the time of writing it is under interim protection pending listing).

On the downside, it's disappointing that another significant county hall of the period, Swansea Civic Centre, (J S Webb, West Glamorgan County Architect, 1984) (4) was turned down for listing on 20 April 2023. Let's hope that the building is retained and converted to new uses under any proposals brought forward by Swansea Council's development partner, Urban Splash (see *Touchstone*, 2022, pp. 16–21).

Argoed High School, Bryn-y-baal, Mold (K J Denley, Clwyd county architect, 1981) was refused for listing on 2 September 2021 on the basis that it did 'not meet the criteria for listing', despite the

building being the only, and a fine, example of a brutalist-style school left in Wales following the destruction of the exceptional (and also unlisted) Newport Comprehensive School in 2008. A new school campus designed by Sheppard Robson for WEPCo, replacing an infants' school, junior school, as well as Argoed High School itself, is scheduled to be completed by September 2025 (see *Touchstone*, 2022, p. 67).

In May 2021 the Twentieth Century Society appealed Cadw's refusal to list the water garden in Cwmbrân town centre, (Gordon Redfern, chief architect, Cwmbran Development Corporation, 1968–69) (5) a listing request initially submitted by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. Although unique in Wales and acknowledged as 'an ambitious and serious piece of civic art', refusal was justified on the current condition of the structure, later additions in the form of railings, and, perhaps most controversially, the garden's comparison to similar features in English new towns. This case usefully highlighted

the limitations of the appeal process that currently exists in Wales for non-listings, where there is no recourse to an independent third party to look at the evidence afresh, with any appeal simply returning to the original Cadw assessor.

There are two listing applications still outstanding after over two years: Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth University, (Percy Thomas Partnership, 1970–76) (6) submitted on 12 August 2021; and the Inmos (now WaferFab) microprocessor factory, Newport, (Richard Rogers and Partners, 1982) (7) the application for which was submitted 18 August 2021. Two obvious, key buildings in Wales's post-war architectural history that should be designated at a high level.

Three other applications on which we are also waiting are: County Hall, Cardiff, (J R C Bethell, South Glamorgan county architect, 1987) (8); Hafan Elan housing for older people, Llanrug, (Bowen Dann Davies Partnership, 1982) (9); and Capel y Groes, Wrexham, (Bowen Dann Davies Partnership, 1982) (10).



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The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, in partnership with the Twentieth Century Society/C20 Cymru, is organising a two-day conference on understanding twentieth-century Welsh architecture and design to be held next March in Aberystwyth. Further details will be announced in due course.



# ups and downs





# A biophilic breakthrough

Pat Borer combs through the mountain of documents that suggest the design of the new Velindre Cancer Centre, Cardiff could be truly groundbreaking.

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An old friend of mine is currently in hospital with cancer. The small window by his bed looks out on to a flat roof covered in a jumble of ventilation ductwork. But the benefits to patients, and their recovery, of a view of nature has been studied by Ulrich (1984)<sup>1</sup> and many others, for example by Jo, et al (2019)<sup>2</sup> and van den Berg, et al (2016),<sup>3</sup> and has been acknowledged for some time – perhaps even since Lluís Domènech’s 1904 Hospital Sant Pau in Barcelona, with its shallow blocks separated by dense vegetation – to have a healing effect.

Although my friend is being wonderfully looked after by the hospital staff – the ward, with its hard gloss finishes, metal and plastic fittings, lack of daylight and sunlight, harsh overhead lighting, and constant noise, is hardly conducive

to recovery. Again, the benefits of timber and other ‘natural’ interior finishes, daylighting, fresh air and quiet, together with views and access to nature, and of art, have been studied and well proven (Nyrud, et al, 2014 and Van den Berg, 2005).<sup>4,5</sup> The inclusion of these design features is termed ‘biophilic’. As Totaforti states in his 2018 paper ‘Applying the benefits of biophilic theory to hospital design’:

‘Humanity evolves through adaptive responses to natural conditions and natural stimuli, such as sunlight, plants, animals, water and landscapes [...] the age of technology has facilitated the conviction that humans can ignore their association with nature and that progress can be

measured with the ability to transform the natural world. This illusion has encouraged the environmental degradation and the separation of humankind from natural systems and processes.’<sup>6</sup>

There are many precedents for biophilic design in the health sector but most are modest, single storey buildings, with a simple caring brief, where every room can have access to the landscape. In contrast, the new Velindre Cancer Centre (nVCC) is a huge specialist building, serving thousands of people in south Wales, that is also bristling with the latest high-tech machinery for treatments – and yet, after years of research, lobbying, consultations and reports, the brief still has biophilic design at its heart. Not only that, but



‘Humanity evolves through adaptive responses to natural conditions and natural stimuli, such as sunlight, plants, animals, water and landscapes.’

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- 1 Approaching from the M4 at Coryton.
- 2 The winter garden viewed from Y Lolfa.
- 3 Y Lolfa (living room, or central core) looking south.
- 4 The Danish Construction Materials Pyramid (for carbon measurement).

all the documentation shows that a seemingly radical environmental hospital-building policy has been adopted.

All patient bedrooms and almost all staff-occupied rooms have views of the landscape – and what a landscape! On Cardiff Council's online planning portal there are at least 20 documents relating to the landscape and ecology, going into minute detail over the plants and animals present to be retained, and to be encouraged, in this wild and beautiful site.

The building is necessarily of deep-plan form, and yet daylight has been introduced using rooflights, cut-outs, atria, clerestory lights, and so on, so that all occupied spaces can have a sense of the outside – also all corridors terminate in a big window to help with orientation and circadian-time rhythms.

As befits a hugely complex project like this, there is a library-full of documents that have been written, fought over, re-written, fought over again and again, and eventually published, describing the 'brief' for the scheme – the design and access statement alone is in 24 sections. Phil Roberts (*design adviser, Velindre University NHS Trust*), who together with Professor Phillip Jones of Cardiff University, are still continuing the

'good fight' developing their own independent analyses of embodied and operational carbon, and toxicity of materials, rather than relying on generic environmental assessments, although the scheme has applied to be accredited with the Building with Nature scheme. The design team is also undertaking an extensive analysis of the central, highly glazed entrance space (called Y Lolfa) in terms of daylight, overheating and glare. With such experienced help – if fully supported – the project will, I believe, live up to the claim to be the 'greenest hospital ever' (not to be confused with 'the greenest government ever'!).

So, what will be built? There are two other core environmental related themes:

- low-impact, constructions of low-carbon, benign materials; and
- low operational energy/low carbon dioxide emissions.

The Velindre brief shows the familiar Danish construction material pyramid (4)<sup>7</sup> whereby the wide base is occupied by little-processed mono materials from organic or plentiful mineral sources (wood, straw, clay, hemp, earth, stone, etc.). These will have a very low embodied

## 'All patient bedrooms and almost all staff-occupied rooms have views of the landscape – and what a landscape!'

- 5 Y Lolfa (living room, or central core) looking north.
- 6 The Whitchurch entrance.



carbon 'score'. If you find that you cannot build satisfactorily with these materials, you have to move up the pyramid, to perhaps a bio-composite such as hemp-lime, but you should use less of these, be leaner. Then you move up to the layers we call 'industrial vitamins', such as glass and metals. These should be used minimally if claims for low impact are to be made, but of course they contribute considerably to our comfortable, civilized lifestyle, and in this case the clinical technology. Hopefully, you should never get to the tip of the pyramid. So, it is with Velindre: the images of Y Lolfa (5) and other areas show an impressive laminated timber frame that will run right through the building. One great benefit of using these materials, apart from the low-carbon, benign one, is that they have a 'vernacular familiarity', in other words, humans have lived with them for millennia and find them visually and olfactorily comfortable and calming – very helpful in a building where the occupants are nervous and worried. Our 'design champions' are working hard to use the pyramid principal everywhere, but given that this is a complex building full of highly technical equipment that's a tough call. For example, some equipment is very sensitive to vibration but timber is marvellously springy, so the solid timber floor decks will be dampened down by a concrete topping. There are nine radiotherapy units, which would normally be enclosed by in-situ concrete walls, but instead hemp-lime/hempcrete blocks will be used. And so on. The final specification documentation talks of a palette of hemp-lime/hempcrete blocks for external walls, a great deal of timber for partitions (rather than metal studwork) and internal and external finishes, lime plaster, cross laminated timber, recycled copper cladding, recycled façade brickwork, green roofs.

The result of all this hard work is that the RICS Whole Carbon Assessment should hopefully be halved from a target of 355 kg CO<sub>2</sub>eq/m<sup>2</sup> down to, provisionally, 171 kg CO<sub>2</sub>eq/m<sup>2</sup>. Most contemporary buildings are now a mix of less sustainable, high-impact materials – reinforced concrete, steel, aluminium, plastics – with a veneer of 'green' materials (even greenery) on the façade. My colleague David Lea used to call this 'fakery'! A section through Velindre will, I hope, reveal a through-and-through, low-impact construction – it shall be what its façade proclaims.

Embodied energy/carbon can be seen as the most urgent current task, given the need to flatten off the steeply rising curve of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but it is just as vital to minimise operational energy/carbon. 'The industry' is more familiar with how to do this. Familiar with, yes, but mostly ignoring. The nVCC brief and other

documentation describes the 'usual' (in some quarters) low-energy methods employed. So, we have low U-values for the heat-loss elements (e.g. 0.10 W/m<sup>2</sup>°K for the hemp-lime/hempcrete external walls), optimised glazing areas for the differently orientated façades, horizontal and vertical shading, an appropriate mix of natural ventilation and mechanical ventilation with heat recovery, airtightness through internal lime render with an external barrier, appropriate daylighting with glare control, thermal mass,<sup>8</sup> and using the cooling effects of landscaping. The building would appear to have a low 'form factor'.

There was a significant decision made early on to absolutely prohibit the use of fossil fuels – early designs showed a chimney. The building is to be all-electric, with power coming from renewable electricity tariffs ('green grid') and a roof full of photovoltaic (PV) panels. Space heating demand is quite low at 25 kWh/m<sup>2</sup>.a. The necessarily high domestic hot water demand will be supplied by heat pumps. The cooling demand for an intensive medical facility (comfort, server and clinical) is obviously going to be high (39 kWh/m<sup>2</sup>.a), as is the 'unregulated' electrical energy requirement (small power, servers, etc.) at 104 kWh/m<sup>2</sup>.a. The overall delivered energy is expected to be around 225 kWh/m<sup>2</sup>.a, of which 30 kWh/m<sup>2</sup>.a will be supplied by the PV array.

Despite having read all of the publicly-available documentation, your reporter has only scratched the surface of the project in this report. We haven't discussed community initiatives and benefits, preserving wild publicly-accessible habitats, biodiverse green roofs and enhancement, the wetland habitat, therapeutic and sensory gardens, the education programme, off-site construction and reduced earthworks to mitigate air quality, SuDS, maintaining ecological corridors and habitat creation, the 53 ha of forest planting to help offset embodied carbon – all of which contribute to a scheme that I believe to be internationally, genuinely, groundbreaking in the field of environmentally-friendly public works.

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### Notes and references

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- 7 CINARK, 2021. *The Construction Material Pyramid* [online]. Centre for Industrialised Architecture, The Royal Danish Academy, Available at: <https://www.materialepyramiden.dk/>.
- 8 The façade gabion walls are claimed to give thermal mass, but these are outside of the thermal envelope?

# Tribute

**Kelly Bednarczyk**  
18/04/1979 – 15/12/2022



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2

When you approach the parish boundary of Llanhenwyg deep in the south-Monmouthshire countryside, you could almost miss what is the quiet, assured modesty of Silver How, the new home of Emma and Dave Powell, which was shortlisted and televised for the UK House of the Year 2019.

To the road frontage with its rural five-bar wooden gate between hedges, there is simply a stone barn-like gable end, adjoining a small, pantile-roofed, domestic-scaled dwelling with dormers. It sits there so comfortably. It seems like it's been there, like so much of the rest of the village, for centuries; and yet in reality it is a sizeable new contemporary home, one of many award-winning pieces of domestic architecture by the Chepstow-based Hall + Bednarczyk Architects. This is architecture executed with great clarity and sensitivity in all its contextual, spatial, and material detail.

The north-eastern-Pennsylvania-born Kelly Bednarczyk, Martin Hall's partner in life and practice since setting up in 2006, died on 22 December 2022 at the age of 43 after eight years battling with acute myeloid leukaemia.

For a designer of such talent and such promise from an early age, graduating from high school as an honors student, and on graduation given the Architecture School Prize for Professional Promise, how do you indicate to those at the funeral ceremony a record of an extraordinary architectural legacy packed into such a cruelly short life? What do you put in the order of service? Words may be insufficient. There was one architectural image on that order of service – Silver How.

Given Bednarczyk's challenging health conditions it was almost inevitable that Hall would conduct much of the hectic front-end, face-to-face client negotiations on early brief-taking and strategic options. (There was a rather second rate 1930s villa on part of the site. The clients had already been through one unsatisfactory design

process with another practice that had been rejected by the planners).

Like so many busy clients who have an instinctive desire to make a leap into a completely new way of living, leaving everything of the old home and lifestyle behind can be unnerving. Judgement, selection, composition is not easy. They were in unfamiliar territory, but they instinctively knew how they wanted to be. Emma Powell refers so frequently, in our conversation at the house, to the calm, confident, assured hand-holding that Bednarczyk offered them both. On every detail of external materials, internal surfaces, lighting, and furnishing, Bednarczyk always offered a quiet but assured steer, which always resulted in a sense of shared ownership and enthusiasm for the end result. This required a fine balance of negotiating skills.

The project may have had the added bonus of a top-rate and trusted contractor who had built many of Hall + Bednarczyk's award-winning projects, but not for a minute was this a sort of cosy design-and-build contract. The huge respect that Bednarczyk commanded on site from all who assembled Silver How was visibly evident to the clients throughout the build process, at every stage. Nothing would escape Bednarczyk's unerring eye for precision and care. There would be no bending of quality just because contracting relationships were familiar, but equally, as with the client, it was always also a collaboration of minds executed with empathetic respect.

More than anything Bednarczyk never forgot that this was 'home' in all its complexity, not as so many contemporary house designers do, imagining their creation as some fetishistic art gallery where living is to be subordinated to the photoshoot press release. Silver How is unerringly comfortable as a family home even though it does not conform to most expected domestic spatial conventions.

One small detail conveys much of Bednarczyk's sensibility. When specifying the



- 1 Kelly Bednarczyk at Loch Ness, February 2018.
- 2 Landscape study, Virginia, by Kelly, 2003.
- 3 Clients, designer and contractor of Silver How. From left to right: Rob MacCormac of Manylion Construction, Kelly of Hall + Bednarczyk, clients Emma Powell and Dave Powell.
- 4 Road frontage elevation: gable end to new extension to the left stitched into an existing building on the site, now the new kitchen.
- 5 New addition facing on to the garden courtyard.
- 6,7 Inside/outside living space.
- 8 New kitchen inside the remodelled existing building on the site.
- 9 A masterly composition.



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upgrading of the existing roof performance, she insisted that as the pantiles were removed, they were all to be numbered and the years of lichen and weathering were not to be brushed off or cleaned up. Everything would be put back as was. Inevitably this was more costly and time consuming. That sensitive respect for the passage of time is so poignantly juxtaposed against the sophisticated, considered detailing of the contemporary new masonry rain screen of the larger new addition.

In Hall's oration at her funeral, he spoke of 'her particular talent for giving wonderful presents to those around her'. She had 'an acute awareness of others, which she demonstrated through the act of giving'. It would be 'consistently something of beauty and relevance, chosen with impeccable taste'. It was this 'level of thoughtfulness, combined with the good habits of organisation and anticipation, that were so rare. These traits go some way to explaining what made Kelly such a talented and perceptive designer of buildings'.

Hall continued: 'architecture is essentially the art of foreseeing, at times in mind-boggling detail, what someone will go on to fully experience in the future. Kelly could make deeply thoughtful leaps of imagination into an as-yet unbuild situation, to work out the detail involved, and then bring that into being with a team of other people. She rarely put a foot wrong'.

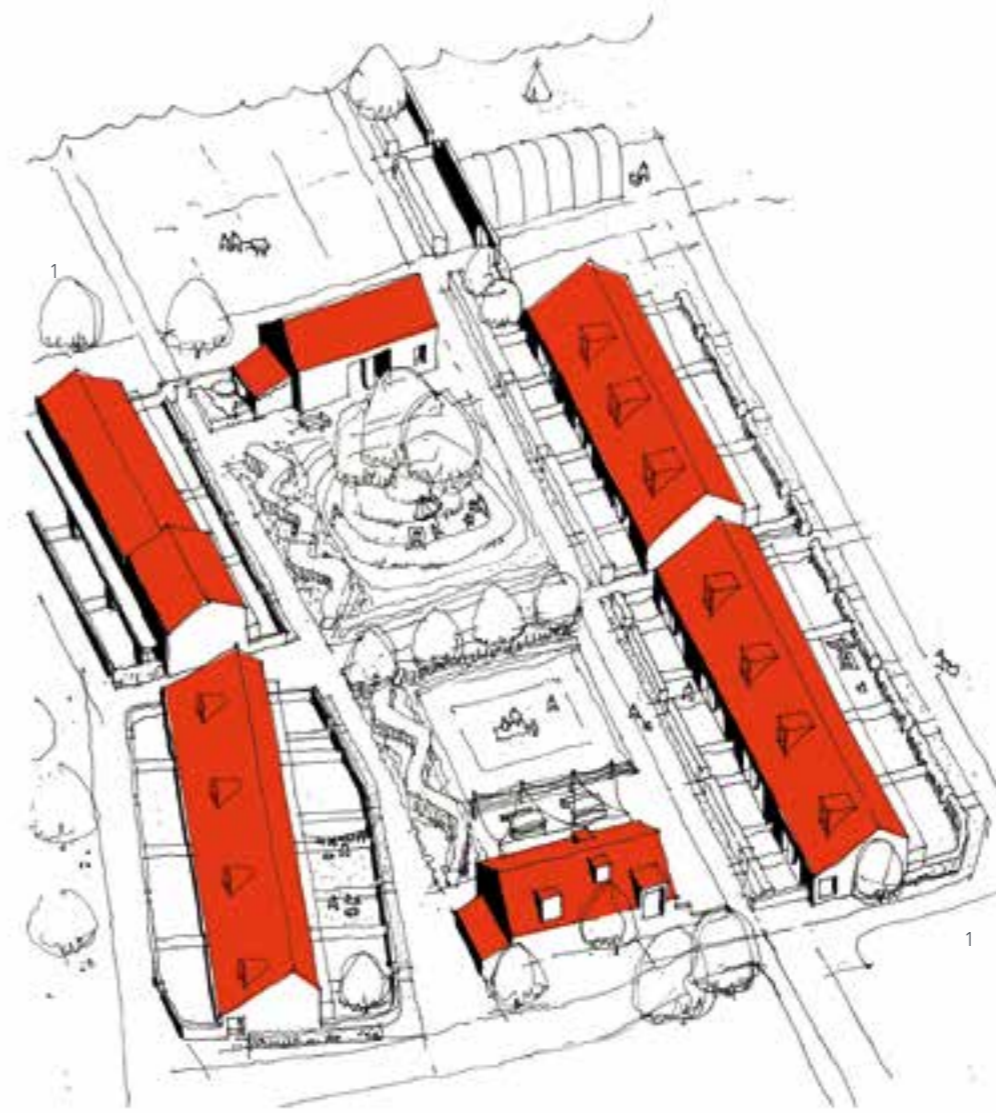
Silver How is a complete expression of all that life and talent. It is one of those many wonderful presents she has left us. It is, as her partner Martin Hall said, 'an utter tragedy that she is no longer with us'. *Patrick Hannay*

Kelly Bednarczyk: architect born north-eastern Pennsylvania, 18 April 1979 married Martin Hall, 2006 (one daughter, one son) died 15 December 2022.



One of architect Jonathan Adams's longstanding art-science-craft collaborators is the glass wizard and academic Rodney Bender. One of their earliest explorations was to envisage horizontal veins of glass slivers on edge, weaving their way through the waste-slate cliff faces of the Wales Millennium Centre. Their latest collaboration is on the much anticipated new handkerchief-vaulted roof that will form a new sheltered dispersal space at Maxwell Fry's Grade-II\*-listed Coychurch Crematorium of 1970. The installation was close to completion as *Touchstone* went to press (*above*). We shall pay it a visit in 2024. ■

## Glass architecture collaborators

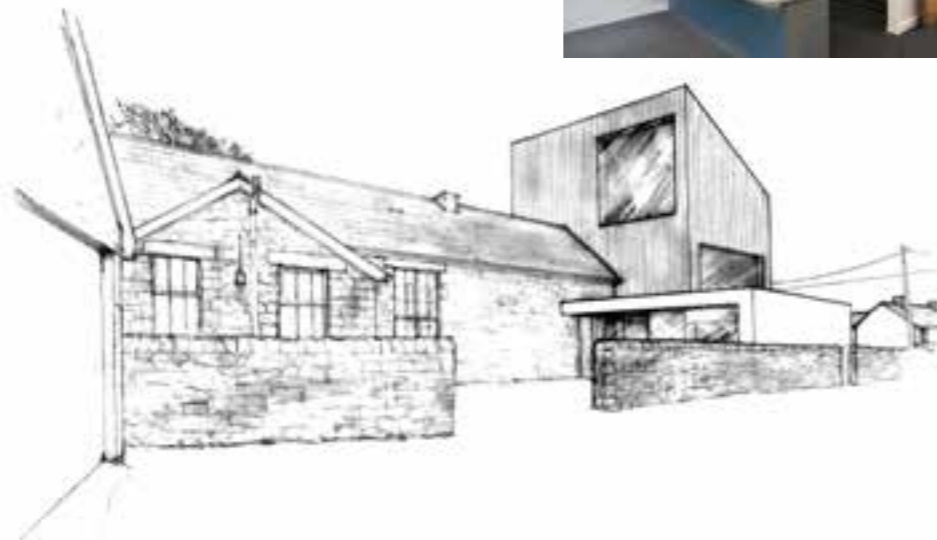


## Booking the future

As the financial screws have tightened on county council budgets – some being cut to the bone, some having to declare themselves bankrupt – it seems some have taken the threats of library closures to rethink creatively the range of services that a library could offer. They have rethought their building's estate, and reconfigured that most clichéd of concepts, 'hubs'.

Monmouthshire acted ahead of the curve and as a result its major settlements each now has reborn public-service hubs that include all sorts of information services. A classic of the new genre is at Abergavenny (1) where retrofitted spaces in the magnificent town hall now offer a fantastic, flexible set of spaces and services to the community (most recently for the Greener Abergavenny 'climate conversations') (2) including what one would have traditionally expected from a public library.

Monmouthshire is not alone. Loyn & Co Architects has been busy at Dinas Powys (3) and St Athan (4) in the Vale of Glamorgan. *Touchstone* will be investigating the quality executed in preserving this most important public service in its 2024 issue. ■



## A chink of light on the Gower



Communities in other parts of the UK have rights that simply don't exist in Wales. For example, the Community Right to Buy in Scotland and the Community Right to Bid in England. This was a key finding of Senedd Research published in January 2023.

Tom Chance, chief executive of the Community Land Trust Network, a body across England and Wales, wrote a commissioned report published by Welsh Government in October 2022 noting that 'while there are 340 incorporated Community Land Trusts in England, there are only a handful in Wales, and none that has yet developed and owned any assets'. There were 16 recommendations. A government-funded independent commission on community ownership of land and assets was supposed to be set up within 12 months. By March 2023 the Institute of Welsh Affairs, which had set the rabbit running a year earlier, was still waiting. We are still waiting even now.

We should not confuse community land trusts (CLTs) with the over 400 community-owned or run assets in Wales mapped by the Building Communities Trust. The key differential for CLTs is land and getting access to it with planning permission, and thus funding and, as Tom Chance reported, there is:

'some government money to cover early project costs in forming a group, developing a concept and looking for a site. But there is precious little funding to secure a site and develop a full planning application. Until groups reach this stage it's impossible to access bank lending and affordable housing grants.'

So, Wales is way off the pace.

A chink of light can be spotted at the village of Bishopston on the Gower peninsula, six miles south-west of Swansea city centre. The Gŵyr Community Land Trust is seeking to self-build 14 zero-carbon, community-owned homes on a six-acre site (*above left*). Formed in 2020, it secured an options agreement on the site in September 2022. It has within the group, members experienced in project management, building, planning, design and business. It hired Pentan Architects in February 2023 to work alongside its in-house architect. The trust claims that 'this scheme will be the first community-led, built and owned zero-carbon affordable co-housing development in Wales to be delivered by a Community Land Trust'. *Touchstone* will follow this with interest. ■

1 Outline draft site proposal worked up by the community and Pentan Architects.

2 Members of Gŵyr Community Land Trust celebrating securing an option agreement on the site.

## On the horizon



## Ceredigion community in action

Cardigan Memorial Hospital, at one time a Benedictine priory, was acquired by Thomas Johnes in the eighteenth century (a wealthy local landowner who became a prolific developer across west Wales). He appointed architect John Nash for a new country house.

Priory House (as it became known) was one of Nash's earliest commissions on his return to Wales. The new house, in typical Nash picturesque style, was set in extensive surrounding grounds on the banks of the River Teifi. It changed hands a few times over the ensuing decades.

In the early twentieth century a syndicate of local people acquired it, with the aim of converting it to a convalescent home for first world war veterans (hence the 'memorial' name). It opened in 1922, but before long its management was passed to the local health board, which then went on a major development spree, demolishing large parts of the original house and extending it prolifically including removing its roof and adding a new third floor. Indeed, by the late twentieth century it was difficult to recognise the original house, so extensive were the hospital 'extensions'. The constant piecemeal reinventions inevitably took their toll and could never suit a twenty-first century clinical need so, in 2019, it was closed down with all services transferred to a new health centre north of the town. The site was once again put on the market, and was acquired by Wales & West Housing Association.

Following the significant success of Ceredigion community activism on the Castle Green development), they had no intention of letting another heritage asset disappear, even though it lay buried in an ill-conceived and poorly delivered twentieth-century institutional development.

Gaunt Francis was appointed in 2020 to consider the site's development potential, its initial task focusing on meeting with the local community (though COVID-19 had just announced itself, so this was a 'virtual' process). The local community's passion and interest for the site and the former Priory House was immediately apparent, and that formed the basis of a successful collaboration. The client's brief was for affordable housing but in the form of accommodation for older people – a bit of a tour de force for Gaunt Francis these days – and an office for the new owner who had been occupying a series of smaller units across west Wales. It is hoped the project will start on site summer 2024 and be completed by 2026.

Permission was granted for the new scheme in late 2021. It has been an especially interesting journey for a complex scheme seeking an appropriate juxtaposition with the grade I-listed St Mary's Church; the reinstatement of the Nash house and a secure, private, and comfortable environment for the residents. It was also a brave move for the owner, as Gaunt Francis promoted dual-aspect, energy-neutral, deck-access dwelling types, which was a model untried by the owner previously. ■

## Service to the nation

As has been noted in the main theme essay of this *Touchstone* (p. 3), one distinctive feature of public-sector architecture in Wales has been the sizeable contribution of significant Wales-based, private-sector practices. At the top of that tree has to be Sir Percy Thomas's practice. It seems thus entirely appropriate that Dr Robert Proctor's prospective title for his University of Wales Press (UWP) 2024 publication will be *Percy Thomas: Modern Architecture in Service to the Nation*.

*Dr Robert Proctor writes:*

'Sir Percy Thomas was the most important architect of twentieth-century Wales, and his practice, founded in 1912, became one of the largest in Britain. From town halls such as Swansea Guildhall (*top right*) to power stations, from factories such as the British Nylon Spinners at Pontypool to cathedrals, from hospitals to office complexes, the practice built much of the defining infrastructure of twentieth-century Wales and, indeed, of Britain, the setting for the daily lives of millions of people.

'Centred in Cardiff during a century of growing Welsh national consciousness and self-confidence, the firm's architecture reveals the distinctively Welsh experience of such movements alongside the practice's wider work in Britain and overseas.'

This publication will be another important milestone in the UWP series initiated and currently overseen by former director of RSAW, Mary Wrenn. It is poignant that the author of this year's UWP publication *Frank Lloyd Wight: The Architecture of Defiance* (p. 70) is Jonathan Adams. As senior project architect for the Wales Millennium Centre working in the Percy Thomas Partnership in its dying days leading up to its takeover by Capita, he will be hoping that final chapter will give us a full record and understanding of this tragic ending to a fine century of architectural service. ■



Top Swansea Guildhall (Ivor Jones & Percy Thomas, completed 1932) (photo: Robert Proctor).  
Above Arts Building, University College of North Wales, Bangor (Sir Percy Thomas & Son, completed 1968) (photo: Robert Proctor).

## By the water's edge

The 2016 RIBA award-winning Llandegfedd reservoir pavilion by Martin Hall and the late Kelly Bednarczyk (*see p. 82*) will be a hard act to follow in the league of reservoir pavilions of Wales. One contender may be the just completed in Cardiff, the Lisvane and Llanishen Reservoir visitor centre by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios (*left*). The landscape is still very raw around it, it is too early to make any reasonable appraisal; so, we shall bide our time, and *Touchstone* will undertake a full visit after spring 2024. ■



Jonathan Yining

The WEPCo school-building mission creeps forward in Wales. Funded through Welsh Government's Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme – with its mutual investment model revenue funding stream – it must be appealing to some Welsh local authorities with no in-house architects, with no desire to waste time poring through competing framework consortia tenderers, trying to judge bids without the skill and judgement to assess the architecture. Instead, with WEPCo you get one model, one firm of award-winning UK architects, Sheppard Robson, with school awards to its



## One model to save them all

name, teamed up with one UK contractor Morgan Sindall with a long string of school buildings in its portfolio. What's not to like? It's not as though a bit of systematising is not possible in school procurement. After all, Powys recently procured five primary schools all opening within a year of each other through Powell Dobson Architects teaming up with Wilmott Dixon (see *Touchstone*, 2019, pp. 12–15), and in 1953 the Newport borough architect Johnson Blackett opened five primary

schools on the same day (see p. 20). It might be instructive to run a comparison of Newport, Powys and the latest WEPCo projects given the go ahead, three primary schools for Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (RCT) at Llanilltud Faerdref, Penygawsi and Pont-y-clun (1, 2, 3). In each case, like WEPCo's arguments for demolishing the 1981 brutalist architecture of Argoed High School near Wrexham to make way for the first WEPCo replacement school

**'So, they won't get brownie carbon points for embodied energy but they are claiming to be designed to be net zero carbon in operation.'**

(see *Touchstone*, 2022, p. 67), all existing three school buildings on the RCT sites are being demolished (Pengawsi (1975), Llanilltud Faerdref (1974 with 1990 additions), and Pont-y-clun (1925 with 2000 additions)). All are said to be out of date and unadaptable, and of course there would always be the challenge of working around the existing schools in operation. So, they won't get brownie carbon points for embodied energy but they are claiming to be designed to be net zero carbon in operation. What the 'net' calculation involves will be the crucial bit to watch. They are all being provided with substantially improved outdoor sports and play facilities, some available to the community.

*Touchstone* will follow with interest this trio of pacesetters and will reflect on how they match the same authority's 2000 RIBA-award-winning Perthcelyn primary school from the days when RCT had in-house architects and a direct labour organisation to build it (see pp. 4–7). ■



Sea levels may be rising, the ferocity of coastal storms increasing, and every national photographer knows that Porthcawl will deliver the archetypal storm shot, as mountainous seas break over the sea walls (1); but for the moment, a different sort of excitement is gripping this south-Wales coastal town.

As one of twelve projects in Wales, Porthcawl's iconic grade II-listed Grand Pavilion has been awarded £18 million of the UK government's Round Two Levelling Up Fund. Bridgend County Borough Council worked in partnership with Awen Cultural Trust to develop the bid, supported by heritage architect Purcell, to restore and extend the twentieth-century seafront arts venue.

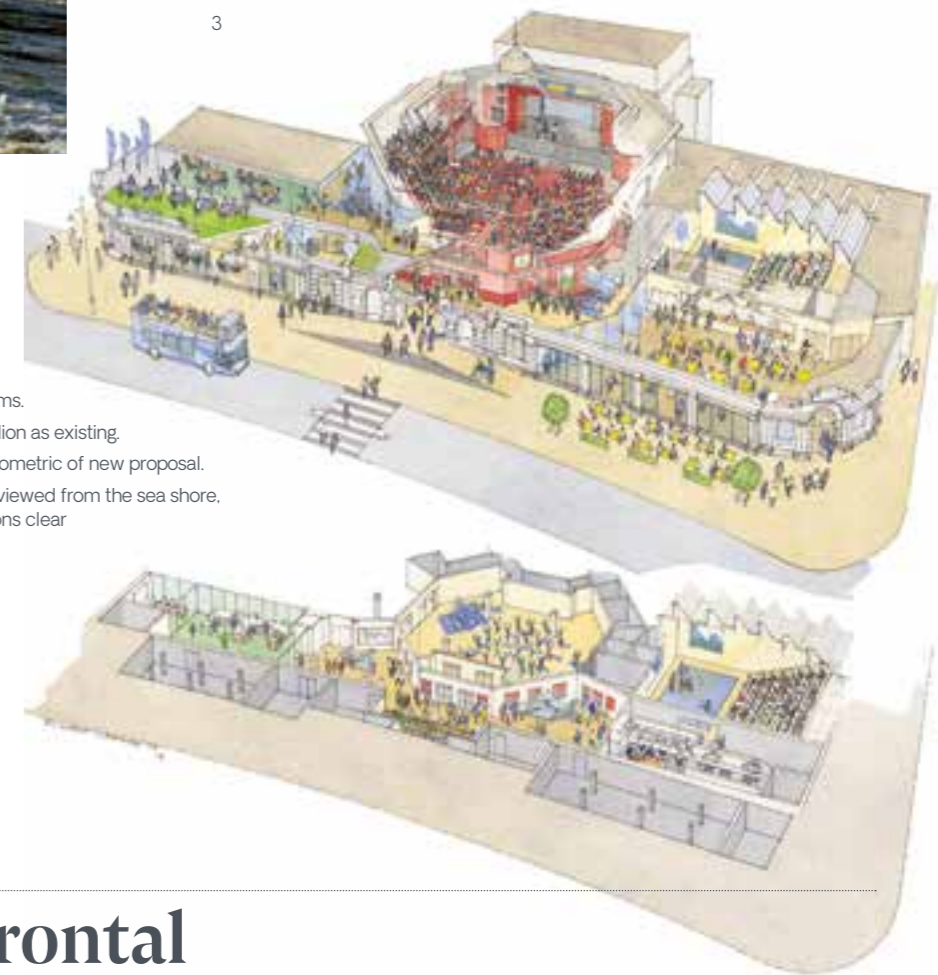
Purcell is not new to the Welsh coastal pavilion restoration challenge. After years of indecision in Penarth, Purcell delivered a fine remodelling of the 1920s pavilion on the pier in 2013.

Porthcawl followed Penarth, its pavilion being completed in 1932 as an entertainment venue. It was defined by a striking three-storey octagonal domed theatre and two single-storey loggias fanning out from the dome (2). This much-loved art deco landmark was, like Penarth, one of the early buildings in the country to be constructed from Ferrocete, consisting of iron and concrete poured over a fine metal mesh.

The funding will be used to restore the existing façade and roofs, to make them better insulated and stormproof, and they will allow the auditorium and back-of-house spaces to be refurbished to provide improved accessibility and facilities for visitors and performers. A new extension to the rear of the building will provide a studio theatre and gallery space (3), while glass-fronted additions with swooping canopied roofs on top of the existing loggias, referencing the art deco styling of the original building, will provide a new café with fantastic views across the bay. The roofs will form shaded verandas for the new café (4). *Touchstone* will be there with its bucket and spade when it officially opens. ■



- 1 Porthcawl storms.
- 2 Porthcawl Pavilion as existing.
- 3 Cut-away isonometric of new proposal.
- 4 New proposal viewed from the sea shore. the roof additions clear



## Full frontal



## The shot in the arm

If there was one major post-devolution piece of architecture in Wales that appeared to radically divide public opinion more than any other from some respected architectural critics it was the Wales Millennium Centre, by the Percy Thomas Partnership (PTP) team led by Jonathan Adams. Rising phoenix-like from the ashes of the rejected Zaha Hadid opera house competition-winning entry (also linked to PTP), curiously the project has never been fully reviewed in *Touchstone's* pages. This we shall correct in 2024, the WMC's 20th anniversary.

One former honorary member of the RIBA and resident of Llanystumdwy, the world-renowned writer the late Jan Morris (see *Touchstone*, 2021, pp. 56–57), sent a personal handwritten card to Jonathan Adams. She wrote:

'Only a line from a total stranger to thank you so very much for the shot in the arm which your magnificent plan for the Millennium Building has already given to Cardiff & will eventually give to the entire Welsh nation.'

All kind wishes & thanks again,

(Ms) Jan Morris. ■

Only a line from a total stranger to thank you so very much for the shot in the arm which your magnificent plan for the Millennium Building has already given to Cardiff & will eventually give to the entire Welsh nation. All kind wishes & thanks again. (Ms) Jan Morris

# Backfire

**Chris Jofeh argues the Welsh Government is backsliding on its previous housing retrofit commitments. None of us can afford for this to happen.**

The Welsh Government declared a climate emergency on 29 April 2019. On 18 July 2019 the *Better Homes, Better Wales, Better World* report on decarbonising existing homes was presented to ministers Mark Drakeford, Julie James and Lesley Griffiths at the Coal Exchange in Cardiff. The Welsh Government quickly accepted all its recommendations 'in principle'.

The report contained seven headline recommendations, but by my reckoning the Welsh Government has made no progress on four of them, which were that Welsh Government should:

- put in place the right quality system and delivery mechanisms across all tenures to help achieve the targets;
- work with others to develop a holistic package of support across all tenures to motivate and facilitate action;
- collect data about the status and condition of the housing stock to inform future decisions and measure progress towards targets; and
- make maximum use of communities, networks, associations and third-sector organisations in helping to decarbonise homes.

The Senedd's Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee published its report into privately owned homes in February this year. It identified 'a pressing need for a comprehensive plan' for decarbonisation.

The report continued 'it's a massive undertaking. But, with no long-term strategy or plan for getting the sector ready to decarbonise, no firm policy proposals to [encourage] retrofit, and a gaping hole where financial solutions

[...] should be, the Welsh government has an inordinate amount of work to do'.

There are many low-cost things that the Welsh Government should and could be doing right now to help prepare the nation for large-scale residential decarbonisation. Here is a list of some of them, with a brief description of why each action would be helpful.

1. *Commission and publish guidance about when it is appropriate to install an air source heat pump (ASHP).* Many reported ASHP problems have occurred because the ASHP was inappropriately specified.
2. *Commission studies to help determine better energy efficiency targets than EPC 'C'.* There is sound evidence that different types and forms of construction lose heat differently and the law of diminishing returns applies to energy efficiency improvements: targets should reflect these. The Netherlands has adopted this approach.
3. *Commission the completion of work begun during the preparation of Better Homes, Better Wales, Better World to identify what is needed to create an enabling environment for residential decarbonisation.* The behaviour of homeowners is influenced by the actions of many actors in the energy system, including insurers, valuers, planners, lenders, builders, builders' merchants, and many others. It is important to understand what these actors need to do to help make decarbonisation socially normal.
4. *Commission work to assess correct residential and other sectoral emissions.* At present the Welsh Government publishes data that significantly underestimates residential greenhouse-gas emissions. Accurate data are essential.
5. *Create with others and implement a residential retrofit quality regime.* All parties must know their rights and expectations and that they will be treated justly.
6. *Identify homes whose decarbonisation cost is not matched by an increase in property value or whose owners cannot afford to carry out the work.* The Welsh Government needs to understand the scale of this problem so that it can begin to think about what to do.
7. *Initiate data collection about every home.* Comprehensive and accurate data will inform decisions. Such data are lacking at present. A recent data collection workshop identified that useful data about every home could be collected by year 11 schoolchildren in one or two years.
8. *Introduce regulations requiring the owners of holiday lets and second homes to improve their energy efficiency.* Everybody must play their part. Also of symbolic importance.
9. *Make maximum use of communities, networks, associations and third-sector organisations.* These groups have enormous potential to convene stakeholders, share information, facilitate learning, and provide resources.
10. *Mandate and fund each local authority to publish conservation area local development orders.* There are over 500 conservation areas in Wales and there is good evidence that homes in them have lower energy efficiency, experience lower investment in retrofitting, and consume more energy than nearby homes outside them. English local authorities have begun to publish conservation area local development orders to make it easier for homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.
11. *Share Optimised RetroFit Programme data with UCL's Smart Energy Research Lab.* Sharing data is important.
12. *Trial variable Land Transaction Tax.* Many respected organisations believe that the introduction of long-term structural incentives, such as a variable Land



Transaction Tax, would help create the market conditions for a thriving energy efficiency market.

13. *Work with others to identify and create financial solutions for all tenures.* These are urgently needed.

There are three other actions that the Welsh Government says it has in hand, but Wales has been waiting for their completion/implementation for a long time.

- Engage with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero for access to smart meter data. This is essential for the Welsh Government to understand the impact of its policies and actions.
- Change the current planning regulation that says that an ASHP must be no closer than 3m from the boundary of a property.
- Vastly improve climate change communications with the public.

The Welsh Government can rightly point to Covid-19 and Ukrainian refugees as having placed huge demands on its resources, but these have now passed their peaks and global warming is a bigger emergency than either. The Welsh Government now needs to raise its game and increase the tempo of its actions. This may require changes to some of its internal processes.

Chris Jofeh, former director of Arup in Cardiff, led the team that produced *Better Homes, Better Wales, Better World: Decarbonising existing homes in Wales, Report to Welsh Ministers from the Decarbonisation of Homes in Wales, Advisory Group, 18 July 2019.*

# RIBA FUTURE ARCHITECTS

Help shape the future of architecture

Every year, RIBA/RSAW facilitates a dynamic mentoring programme for students of architecture designed to bridge the gap between education and practice. In the 2022/23 academic year, an impressive 1,200 students from 37 RIBA accredited Schools of Architecture connected with 314 Chartered Practices in this transformative initiative.

Our flexible programme offers flexibility and a golden opportunity for students to gain a unique insight into the profession and start to build a future network. If you're an architect working in a RIBA Chartered Practice or a RIBA Chartered Member, you can become a mentor.

As a mentor, you'll play a pivotal role by introducing students to the realities of architectural practice, helping them chart their career paths, and providing invaluable support and guidance to the next generation of architects. Help shape the future and mentor with us.

Register your interest here:



RSAW   
Architecture.com/wales

## Directory 2023

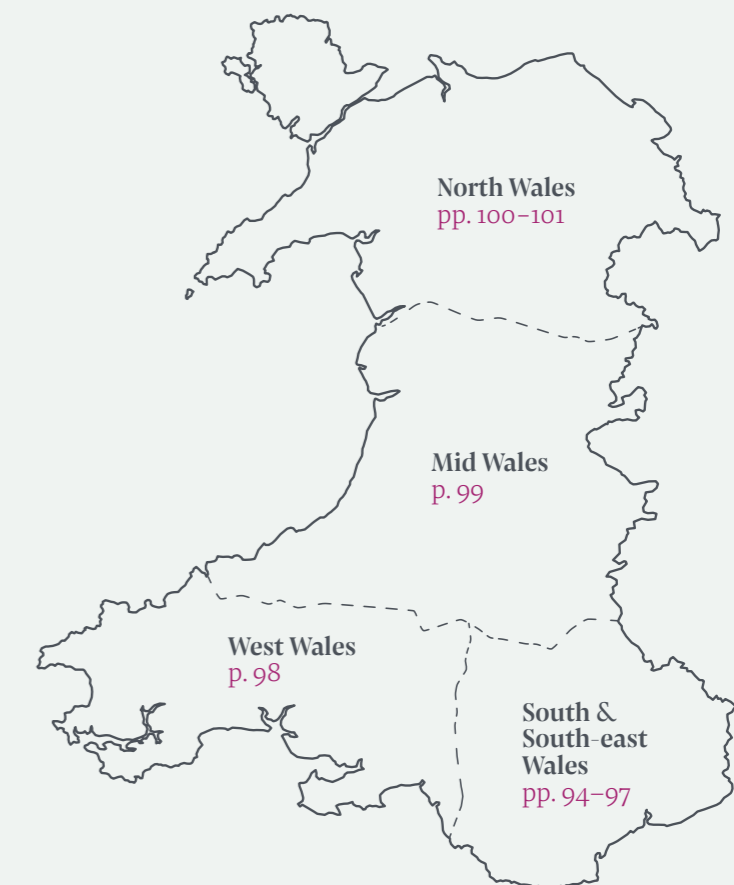
The following pages of Touchstone 2023 comprise a directory of architectural practices in Wales. The directory is divided into four areas, as indicated on the map. Within each area, architectural practices are listed under the town in which (or nearest to which) they operate, in alphabetical order of the business name. At the end of the directory section is a list cross-referencing practice names to page numbers.

All the architects featured in this directory are members of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), which means they are highly skilled professionals trained to turn clients' aspirations into reality. Many also operate their businesses as RIBA Chartered Practices (denoted by \* in the listings) indicating that they comply with strict criteria covering insurance, health and safety, and quality management systems.

Architects offer guidance on all the aspects of a building project from design and cost through to planning and construction. Architects have a unique ability to see things from the widest possible perspective as well as focusing on the small things that can make a big difference to a project.

The Royal Society of Architects in Wales and its parent body, the Royal Institute of British Architects, offer a free-of-charge service to tailor a shortlist of practices with the appropriate skills and experience for every type and size of project. The 'Find an Architect' service is available at <https://find-an-architect.architecture.com/> – and you can also email [clientservices@riba.org](mailto:clientservices@riba.org) or ring RSAW on 029 2022 8987.

To find an individual RIBA/RSAW member by name, go to <https://members.architecture.com/directory/default.asp?dir=3>





# South & South–east Wales

## Abergavenny

### **CRSH Architecture and Energy**\*

One the Orchard, Llanelen Road, Llanfoist, Abergavenny NP7 9NF

CRSH Architecture and Energy are an award-winning RIBA Chartered Architects practice who specialise in design led architecture and energy efficiency. Projects include sensitive and characterful renovations and retrofits of existing buildings and new build schemes, all with good spatial design and the highest level of sustainability at their core. We welcome enquires from all sectors.

**Contact:** Steven Harris  
01873 853238  
mail@crsh-arch.co.uk  
www.crsharchitects.co.uk

## Barry

### **Dennis Hellyar Architects**\*

Pinecroft, Romilly Park Road, Barry, Vale of Glamorgan CF62 6RN

Dennis Hellyar Architects is an RIBA Chartered Practice. As a dedicated team of architects, based in Barry, South Wales, we create buildings to enhance life through function and form with sustainability at heart. Established in 2013, our small team of residential and commercial architects boasts extensive expertise in new build, extending and renovating of residential and commercial properties, across private and public sectors. Our studio in Barry has worked on public and private projects across South Wales and the South West, including Bristol, Cardiff, Vale of Glamorgan and Swansea. Providing Architectural Services for projects at all stages, from Feasibility, Planning and Building Regulations to Construction and Handover. We are passionate about beautiful design that supports low energy and eco–friendly lifestyles, integrating perfectly into local environments. Our architecture and design process is efficient, thorough, and collaborative – client, design and sustainability focused.

**Contact:** Dennis Hellyar  
01446 500720  
dh@dennishellyar-architects.com  
www.dennishellyar-architects.com

## Brecon

### **Mundo Architecture**\*

2 Wheat Street, Brecon, Powys LD3 7DG

We work with existing buildings, appreciating their historic character whilst giving them new life, as well as dynamic designs for new build projects. Focusing on both energy efficiency and incorporation of sustainable materials. Our Concept designs share a common thread; a journey through spaces that strive to reveal the best of each and every site, with natural light being a key element in our work. We operate pan Wales from our office in Brecon, as well as English borders, Ireland and Cornwall.

**Contact:** Agnieszka Pearson  
01874 624775  
agnieszka@mandoarchitecture.com  
www.mundoarchitecture.com

## Bridgend

### **PJL Architect Limited**

2 Court Road, Bridgend CF31 1BN

We are an established architect’s practice based in Bridgend town centre and offer bespoke building design and management services. We undertake projects both in the commercial and residential sectors with a construction value generally ranging from £100k to £5m. This includes new –build, refurbishment and conservation work.

Our main area of operation is within the South East Wales area, which includes Bridgend County, Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan.

01656 660004  
info@pjl-a.com  
www.pjl-a.com

## Cardiff

### **Arcadis**\*

105–106 Creative Quarter, Morgan Arcade, Cardiff CF10 1AF

Proud recipient of a 2022 RSAW Welsh Architecture Award and RIBA Chartered Practice with specialists across commercial, education, healthcare, science and knowledge–based R&D, residential and senior living sectors. We are a team of dedicated professionals who share a common desire – to help our clients create liveable, sustainable, urban environments. Our experience encompasses architecture, urban design and masterplanning, interior design and landscape architecture. Approved across all leading procurement Frameworks, we’re delivering exemplary built environments with sustainable outcomes. We understand the importance of vision and strategy as well as the practical requirements of delivery, working with our partners from inception through RIBA 0–7 stages including post–occupancy review.

**Contact:** Andrew Street, Associate Principal  
02920 448900 / 07812 993902  
andrew.street@arcadis.com  
www.arcadis.com

### **Ashley DAVIES Architects Limited**

15 Pickwick Close, Thornhill, Cardiff CF14 9DA

ADA specialises in historic building conservation – repairing, restoring and adapting historic and listed buildings – and the design of insertions and extensions to historic buildings. We also undertake and prepare Heritage Assessments, Heritage Impact Statements, Conservation Plans and Detailed Condition Assessments, and provide assistance with funding applications. Principal, Ashley Davies, is a Chartered Architect, an RIBA–accredited Specialist Conservation Architect and a Supporter of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation, with 30 years’ experience.

**Contact:** Ashley Davies  
07413 000761  
ashleydavesarchitects@gmail.com  
www.ashleydavesarchitects.co.uk

### **Austin–Smith:Lord Ltd\***

18 Park Place, Cardiff CF10 3DQ

Enhancing Life and Environments by Design. Austin–Smith:Lord provides services in architecture, conservation, interior, landscape, urban design and masterplanning. With a world–wide portfolio of award–winning projects across a wide range of sectors, we employ around 60 people in five studios. Encouraged by a legacy of innovative leadership, all members of the practice are committed to achieving architecture of the highest order, combining commercial viability and sustainability with intelligent and elegant design solutions. As a highly collaborative and creative practice with a commitment to quality, we consistently provide our clients with a level of design and service excellence that exceeds expectations. Additional offices in Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool, and London.

**Contact:** Martin Roe  
02920 225208  
cardiff@austinsmithlord.com  
www.austinsmithlord.com

### **Brian MacEntee Architecture & Design\***

Top Floor Mackintosh House, 136 Newport Road, Cardiff CF24 1DJ

BMAD Ltd is an award winning, design led practice with experience of working across several different sectors. Our services include architectural design, interior design, project co–ordination, planning applications and construction detail design. Offering the right advice and design solutions, we often implement our in–depth knowledge of the current permitted development legislation, to ensure your project achieves planning and has good buildability. We pride ourselves on always working closely and collaboratively to produce innovative designs that cater to individual requirements, creating spectacular spaces that are truly bespoke.

**Contact:** Brian MacEntee  
02920 490237  
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### **DB3 Architecture\***

2 Callaghan Square, Cardiff CF10 5BT

DB3 Architecture is a leading, award–winning consultancy providing an architecture–led, multi–disciplinary service including architectural design, project co–ordination, building services design, low carbon design consultancy, drone surveying, interior design and conservation. Our approach to design and operations provides a comprehensive, client focused service for schemes throughout the UK. Creativity is at the heart of our service and we focus on the development of real value for our clients. We challenge ourselves to envision and deliver projects that make a positive difference to our clients.

**Contact:** Matthew Savory  
07718 809476  
matthew.savory@db3group.com  
www.db3group.com

### **Davies Llewelyn and Jones LLP\***

The Malting, East Tyndall Street, Cardiff CF24 5EA

The practice was founded in Cardiff in 1974 and has, from its earliest time, specialised in working with public sector clients including local authorities, health authorities and housing associations in the provision of both new and refurbished social housing, elderly persons housing and health care projects up to £5m in value. The practice has developed expertise in industrial and commercial development and the refurbishment of existing industrial, commercial units and offices for private sector clients.

**Contact:** David Davies or Wyn Jones  
02920 464433  
daviesllewelyn@aol.com  
www.daviesllewelynandjones.co.uk

### **Downs Merrifield Architects\***

The Studio, 5 Cefn Coed Crescent, Cardiff CF23 6AT

Downs Merrifield Architects specialise in high end residential and hospitality work, bringing design quality and a highly personalised service to all our clients. We believe that well–designed environments which optimise daylight and are crafted from natural materials, create environmentally sustainable buildings which will be long lasting and exceed expectations. Our niche practice has grown from the two founding partners’ many years of experience in the commercial and luxury sectors, plus our new partner Rob Boltman. This has enabled us to create a unique perspective to all of our designs, combining practical sustainability with attention to detail, together with full virtual reality rendering. Our projects include one–off homes (including Passive Haus), residential refurbishments, hotels, large housing developments, listed buildings and a green energy park.

**Contact:** Nic Downs, Carolyn Merrifield or Rob Boltman  
02921 672672  
info@downsmerrifield.com  
www.downsmerrifield.com

### **Gaunt Francis Architects\***

23 Womanby Street, Cardiff CF10 1BR

Gaunt Francis Architects is a creative commercial design studio that blends business acumen and technical excellence with design creativity. Formed in 1997, the practice has delivered award–winning projects throughout the UK from its offices in London and Cardiff. The practice has an enviable reputation in its four work sectors – working, caring, living and learning. We strive for environmentally responsible, cost–efficient, beautiful places and buildings; passionately believing that good design will always create value. Additional offices in London.

**Contact:** Toby Adam  
02920 233993  
info@gauntfrancis.co.uk  
www.gauntfrancis.co.uk

### **Hiraeth Architecture\***

The Maltings, East Tyndall Street, Cardiff CF24 5EA

Hiraeth Architects: Embracing the past, creating the future. Whether we’re making a relic relevant or a house a home, we combine a deep understanding of the site with innovative, low carbon, low impact design. We put our clients at the heart of our process and are best known for our twin specialisms: – Low carbon design, including Passivhaus certification, using natural based materials for high performance, whole building systems. – The conservation, alteration and evolution of sites and buildings of sensitive and specialist interest.

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www.hiraetharchitecture.co.uk

### **HLM Architects\***

Suite 104, The Creative Quarter, Morgan Arcade, The Hayes, Cardiff CF10 1AF

HLM is an award winning, leading design practice which combines flair, imagination and passion to create innovative, sustainable ‘Thoughtful Designs’.

Our talented team offer a holistic set of design skills including Architecture, Landscape, Urban Design, Interior Design, Environmental Design and Master–Planning to all projects. We work across a wide range of sectors, including Education, Health, Defence, Hospitality/leisure & Culture, Justice & Emergency Services, Asset & Workplace and Living & Communities throughout the UK with additional offices in London, Sheffield, Glasgow and Belfast.

We create places of education that inspire, healthcare environments that nurture, homes that are part of thriving communities, and infrastructure that is sustainable in every sense. Our design philosophy put people at its centre.

**Contact:** Gareth Woodfin, Studio Director

### **Holder Mathias LLP\***

The Bonded Warehouse, Atlantic Wharf, Cardiff CF10 4HF

Holder Mathias has created projects of enduring value for over fifty years. Our reputation is built upon high quality design within a sound commercial framework, creating solutions that make a real contribution to our clients’ success. Operating throughout the UK and into Europe from Cardiff and London, Holder Mathias combines specialist expertise in retail, leisure, urban residential and workplace design together with a recognised approach to integrated, sustainable mixed–use development.

Whether providing strategic advice on complex mixed–use schemes, specialist leisure design expertise, or technical resources for construction; Holder Mathias brings a powerful combination of creativity, commercial awareness, commitment and capacity to deliver.

**Contact:** Stephen Hill  
02920 498681 / 07715 476667  
enquiries@holdermathias.com  
www.holdermathias.com

### **Kotzmuth Williams Architects\***

Canton House, 435–451 Cowbridge Road East, Cardiff CF5 1JH

Established in 2003, our Cardiff based practice provides a bespoke design service tailored to each individual client.

We aim to create well considered modern buildings that are sympathetic to their surroundings. Our designs are a response to our clients objectives, the location, landscape, views and orientation. A significant number of our projects are in sensitive contexts, including work to listed buildings and within conservation areas.

We take pride not just in our design work but also in our understanding of construction, materials and detailing that makes for complete service.

**Contact:** Siôn Williams  
02921 780001  
office@kwarchitects.com  
www.kwarchitects.com

### **Latter Davies\***

6 Park Grove, Cardiff CF10 3BN

We aim to combine creativity with a rigorous approach, providing elegant solutions and efficient buildings responding to the needs of users and the environment.

Experience across a spectrum of building types in the private, public and charitable sectors throughout Wales and beyond, including:

- the adaptation and refurbishment of listed and historic buildings.
- healthcare and special needs care buildings.
- private housing; new–build, remodelling, refurbishment.

Yn darparu gwaith creadigol a gwasanaeth drylwyr led–led Cymru a thu hwnt.

**Contact:** Gwyn Davies  
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admin@latterdavies.co.uk  
www.latterdavies.co.uk

#### **Lawray Architects\***

Greenmeadow Springs, 1 Cae Gwyrdd, Tongwynlais, Cardiff CF15 7AB

Originating in Wales, Lawray Architects has flourished for over 40 years.

From our Cardiff inception, we expanded to North Wales in Wrexham, and then transplanted our inviting, professional ethos to the vibrant heart of London.

Our core principles revolve around honouring local identity, uniting stakeholders' visions, and crafting outstanding results that are of true benefit to our clients. Additional offices in Wrexham and London.

**Contact:** Sarah Parker

02920 528140  
cardiff@lawray.co.uk  
www.lawray.co.uk

#### **Lloyd Britton Architect Limited\***

13 Sturminster Road, Penylan, Cardiff CF23 5AQ

Less is more (more or less...) – a small architectural studio providing bespoke and tailor-made architectural services and solutions on a broad range of project types in urban and rural locations throughout Wales. Work is undertaken on commissions ranging from commercial and domestic new buildings, extensions, refurbishments and conversions including listed buildings / buildings in conservation areas as well as interestingly challenging sites and development opportunities. The practice encourages the client to be an integral part of the design process working closely with the client to provide advice and guidance from concept to completion.

**Contact:** Lloyd Britton

07967 017749  
lloyd@lbarchitect.co.uk

#### **Maredudd ab Iestyn RIBA\***

16 Preswylfa Street, Canton, Cardiff, Caerdydd CF5 1FS

Yn dathlu mwy na chwarter canrif o adeiladu'r Gymru newydd.

An award-winning practice established in 1994. Projects feature site specific responses to new builds, contemporary insertions and additions to existing buildings and sensitive conservation and alterations to listed buildings.

Working with clients from the private, public and commercial sectors we have designed, build and delivered a wide range of projects throughout Wales and beyond.

**Contact:** Maredudd ab Iestyn

07850 092883  
abiestyn@btinternet.com  
www.abiestyn.com

#### **Pentan Architects\***

22 Cathedral Road, Pontcanna, Cardiff CF11 9LJ

Pentan Architects is an award-winning design practice, with over 25 years' experience in the residential and supported living sectors. The practice holds an excellent reputation in innovation and sustainable design. People are central to our architecture and we are exponents of place-making as critical to all projects. Our portfolio of work extends across Wales and the South West, ranging from small innovative housing projects to specialist care-homes and extra-care housing, and large residential developments and master-planning.

**Contact:** Andrew Hole / Alun Lock

02920 309010  
info@pentan.co.uk  
www.pentan.co.uk

#### **Prichard Barnes Architects\***

18 St Andrews Crescent, Cardiff CF10 3DD

Prichard Barnes Architects is a contemporary British architectural practice based in Cardiff. Led by its founding partners, architects Shaun Prichard and James Barnes, the practice is committed to excellence in architectural design. Prichard Barnes Architects can provide a full architectural design service from concept design to construction supervision. The practice has successfully embedded thoughtful design and sustainable principles using Building Information Modelling (BIM).

**Contact:** Shaun Prichard

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shaun@prichardbarnes.co.uk  
https://prichardbarnes.co.uk/

#### **Sillitoe Architectural Services**

24 Caerleon Road, Cardiff CF14 3DR

Sillitoe Architectural Services is a Christian architectural practice, providing an idiosyncratic approach to achieving the aspirations of our clients. Using traditional drawing and model-making techniques, the practice provides a friendly and professional service, and which is dedicated to sustainability and the conservation of the natural world, and the historic environment.

Services include building design, interior design, planning and building regulation applications, project management, CDM principal designer, listed building consent applications.

Consultancy: design and access statement writing; heritage impact assessments; hand-drawn and painted illustrations to an extremely high standard.

**Contact:** Geoffrey R. Sillitoe

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geoff@geoffreysillitoe.com  
www.geoffreysillitoe.com

#### **Stride Treglown\***

Treglown Court, Dowlais Road, Cardiff CF24 5LQ

Stride Treglown's Cardiff studio is proudly focused on the needs of our clients and the people that use our projects, creating inspiring, sustainable spaces that genuinely work. Our diverse portfolio includes award winning schools, exemplary higher education buildings, cutting edge tech and innovation facilities, patient-centric healthcare schemes and leading edge environmental residential design. With over 20 years in Wales, our Cardiff studio is one of Stride Treglown's nine regional offices across the UK. We are a certified B Corporation, and an employee-owned practice with creativity and technical excellence at the heart of everything we do. We create space and places that people love to use.

**Contact:** Pierre Wassenaar

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pierrewassenaar@stridetreglown.com  
www.stridetreglown.com

#### **TDArchitect\***

19 Conybearre Road, Victoria Park, Cardiff CF5 1GB

TDArchitect provide architectural design and consultancy services for people, businesses and organisations across Wales and SW England.

Our range of services cover everything from CAD drafting; eco-refurbishment advice; feasibility studies and surveys; planning and tender advice and on-site, contract and project management. Recognising that every project is unique, we provide a personal service tailored towards your particular brief and budget, producing individual design solutions to exceed your expectations and requirements.

**Contact:** Cathryn Teagle-Davies

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### **Chepstow**

#### **Hall + Bednarczyk Architects\***

The Coachworks, 12A Lower Church Street, Chepstow NP16 5HJ

Hall + Bednarczyk Architects has gained prominence as one of Wales's leading practices, with a track record of multiple RIBA award-winning projects for residential, commercial and public architecture. It aims to create confident well-judged modern buildings in contexts which are frequently sensitive and multi-layered, including pristine landscapes, protected historic buildings and conservation areas.

In 2016 the practice was the recipient of the National Eisteddfod Gold Medal for Architecture and Welsh Building of the Year in the RIBA Awards. In 2019 and 2023 Hall + Bednarczyk projects were selected as contenders for RIBA's House of the Year.

**Contact:** Martin Hall

01291 627 777  
mail@hallbednarczyk.com  
www.hallbednarczyk.com

### **Newport**

#### **KWL Architects Limited\***

Poplar House, Hazell Drive, Newport NP10 8FY

KWL Architects is a multi-award-winning Practice, based in Newport. Originally formed in 2001, in 2023 the Practice ownership was transferred to an Employee Ownership Trust (EOT). The Practice has significant expertise in the design and development of Care Villages, Extra Care Housing, Care Homes and Specialist care facilities, as well as undertaking a range of other commissions.

The Practice has completed developments throughout the UK, for a broad range of clients including charitable trusts, housing associations, not for profit organisations, as well as commercial developer/operators.

**Contact:** Sally Morgan

01633 817171  
kw@kwlarchitects.co.uk  
www.kwlarchitects.co.uk

#### **Roberts Limbrick Architects\***

1 Gold Tops, Newport NP20 4PG

Roberts Limbrick are a team of over 100 talented and ambitious creatives with offices in Gloucester, Newport and London. Our architects understand how people interact with places, and they use this knowledge to make a positive impact in every design. Our approach is solution-led and collaborative from start to finish. Each project is unique, but joined in the common aims of improving lives, connecting communities, and enhancing our environment. By combining capability with creativity, we produce eye-catching designs that maintain the balance between form and function. We offer a full range of architectural services as well as interior design, urban design, masterplanning, consultancy and 3D modelling. We work within a variety of sectors, including healthcare, education, commercial, sport and leisure, community, residential and mixed-use. With over 25 years of experience and a varied portfolio of successful projects, we can work together to design spaces that work for our client.

**Contact:** Mark Jones

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www.robertslimbrick.com

#### **Sustainable Studio Architects\***

One Gold Tops, Newport NP20 4PG

Sustainable Studio Architects is a RIBA Chartered Practice based in Newport, South Wales. The practice offers full architectural services across all RIBA stages from concept design through to on site project management. The studio prides itself on high-quality and creative design with a focus on sustainable; architecture, developments & technologies.

We work closely with our clients and collaboratively as part of a wider design team. The practice provides architectural and planning services to; commercial, domestic and contractor clients with specialisms in; healthcare, education, retail fit-out, listed buildings/conservation, ecclesiastical, residential and the leisure sector. The practice promotes technical excellence paired with a responsive and considered design approach with completed projects located all over the UK.

**Contact:** Aled Jones or Jack Davies

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info@sustainablestudio.co.uk  
www.sustainablestudio.co.uk

### **Penarth**

#### **Loyn + Co Architects Ltd\***

88 Glebe Street, Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan CF64 1EF

Principal Architect Chris Loyn set up practice in 1987 and founded LOYN + CO Architects over 30 years ago in 1992. From the outset we have been one of the few architects in Wales to champion contemporary design. During its history the practice has enjoyed recognition for its achievements in architecture through published projects and many significant awards and nominations including RIBA Stirling Prize, various RIBA Awards including winning The Manser Medal twice (the only Practice ever to do so), Sunday Times House of the Year and the Eisteddfod Gold Medal for Architecture which the practice has won three times.

The practice philosophy favours working as a team, operating in a studio environment where we share ideas and collectively review design development through each stage of a project's evolution. With a wide range of experience, specialisms and skills our team is committed to delivering high quality schemes true to their original concept, relevant to our time and unique to their site and to their client.

**Contact:** Chris Loyn, James Stroud, Victoria Coombs

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architecture@loyn.co.uk  
www.loyn.co.uk



# North Wales

## Bala

### Rhys Llwyd Davies – Architect | Pensaer\*

Swyddfa Heulwen, 29 Y Stryd Fawr, Y Bala, Gwynedd LL23 7AG

Rhys Llwyd Davies runs a small rural practice working mostly in North and Mid Wales. We regularly work on a range of projects including domestic, public and commercial buildings. The practice was established with the aim of improving the rural built environment by concentrating on the character of buildings, spirit of place, and sustainability. We encourage a contemporary vernacular architectural language and have established a reputation for sensitive alterations / renovations of traditional and historic buildings.

01678 521450  
post@rhysllwyddavies.co.uk  
www.rhysllwyddavies.co.uk

## Conwy

### Donald Insall Associates\*

Y Becws, Pool Lane, Conwy LL32 8PZ

Donald Insall Associates is an award-winning, people focussed architectural practice and historic buildings consultancy, specialising in the care, repair and adaptation of historic buildings and designing new buildings in sensitive sites. We believe that change is continuous and that buildings are, in effect, 'alive'. Historic buildings should be constantly maintained and sensitively adapted so they may be lastingly used and enjoyed. All of our projects are unique and balance the preservation of a place with the need for considered intervention to ensure its continued vitality. We have been trusted to work on seminal buildings in Wales, and are proud of our record of never having a planning or listed building consent application rejected in the 17 years we have been operating from our Conwy studio in North Wales.

Contact: Matt Osmont  
01492 592378  
conwy@insall-architects.co.uk  
www.donaldinsallassociates.co.uk

### Mallindine Architects\*

Erw Lydan, Conwy Old Road, Penmaenmawr, Conwy LL34 6YF

We are a small practice based in North Wales with 30 years of working with private clients specialising in re modelling houses and apartments and also providing Interior Design services. Additional offices in London.

Contact: Mark Mallindine  
07775 690951  
mark@mallindinearchitects.com  
www.mallindinearchitects.com

### Matthew Jones Architects\*

115 Station Road, Deganwy, Conwy LL31 9EJ

We are a small, award winning, fresh thinking, RIBA Chartered Practice based in Conwy and Mold, working throughout North Wales, Chester and Cheshire. Whether it is a modest domestic remodel of your home, a new build residential project or something of a grander scale, we take the same pride and commitment to get the best of your project. We take a collaborative approach that produces responsive, sustainable and visually exciting buildings for our clients.

Contact: Matthew Jones  
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www.matthewjonesarchitects.com  
admin@matthewjonesarchitects.com

### Saer Architects

9 Ashdown House, Riverside Business Park, Benarth Road, Conwy LL32 8UB

Saer are a team of architects based in Conwy, with projects covering North Wales and North West England. We have over 30 years combined experience working in housing, regeneration, agricultural, education and masterplanning. We are a young practice with a strong passion for sustainable and community led design. We offer a bilingual service and aim to work closely with our clients to deliver contemporary high-quality buildings that complement their surroundings and context.

Contact: Sarah Davies, Gethin Jones, David Parry  
01492 472478  
studio@saer.wales  
www.saer.wales

## Dolgellau

### Eric Edwards

1 Ffordd Y Gader, Dolgellau, Gwynedd LL40 1RH

A well-established multi-award winning small rural practice since 1977 operating within the heart of Snowdonia National Park and throughout north and mid Wales. Specialising in works on listed buildings, barn conversions, single dwellings, commercial buildings, including dental & vet surgeries, sports buildings, caravan parks and sites for shepherds' huts and pods. Providing bilingual service.

Contact: Eric Edwards  
01341 422436

## Hawarden

### Ainsley Gommon Architects\*

The Old Police Station, 15 Glynne Way, Hawarden, Flintshire CH5 3NS

Ainsley Gommon is a leading Chartered Practice of Architects and urban designers with a broad range of experience that includes housing, extra care, supported living, urban regeneration, education, healthcare, industrial, conservation and community projects. By promoting environmental responsibility and innovation in all our projects, we adopt a low-carbon approach in the design, construction and operation of our buildings and landscape designs and are signatories to the Placemaking Wales Charter. We work proactively and collaboratively with clients, consultants and contractors, using the latest BIM technology, to deliver high quality projects on time and within budget. Additional offices in Birkenhead, Merseyside.

Contact:Simon Venables  
01244 537100  
wales@agarchitects.co.uk  
www.agarchitects.co.uk

## Llangefni

### Russell-Hughes Cyf \*

56 Bridge Street, Llangefni, Ynys Môn LL77 7HH

Russell-Hughes Cyf is an RIBA Chartered Practice originally formed in 1989. Since formation, the practice has developed a wide range of completed building projects both in the public and private sectors. The diversity of the commissions undertaken is a feature of the practice's work.

The practice has a track record of successful commissions in the educational, commercial, residential, leisure, health and community care, industrial and museum sectors. Current project values range from £10,000 to £4.5million. In addition to its base in Llangefni, Russell-Hughes Cyf has an office in Galeri, Caernarfon.

Contact: Owain D. Evans  
01248 722333 (Llangefni)  
01286 685224 (Caernarfon)  
info@russellhughes.co.uk  
www.russellhughes.co.uk

## Mynytho

### Huw Meredydd Owen / V&O\*

Nant, Mynytho, Pwllheli LL53 7SG

Creu cysylltiad rhwng cymdeithas a'i gwerthoedd, meithrin ei chyfoeth drwy greu "ile". Creu pensaernïaeth anweledig? Efallai.

Making a connection between society and its values, nurturing its richness by creating "place". Creating invisible architecture? Perhaps.

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## Pwllheli

### Dobson:Owen\*

3 Thomas Buildings, New Street, Pwllheli, Gwynedd LL53 5HH

Cwmni pensaernïol profiadol yn ymrwymedig i wrando ar anghenion a dyheadau ein cwsmeriaid gan ddarparu gwasanaeth o safon gyda gwreiddioldeb a gweledigaeth a chyda'r dyfnder gwybodaeth angenrheidiol ar gyfer prosiectau adeiladu heddiw.

An experienced architectural design practice, we value listening to the needs and aspirations of clients providing a value added service with originality and vision and with the depth of knowledge necessary for today's construction projects.

Contact: Rhodri Evans  
01758 614181  
post@dobsonowen.com  
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## Wrexham

### Hughes:O'Hanlon Architects\*

9, Edison Court, Wrexham LL13 7YT

At Hughes:O'Hanlon we believe architecture is about making life better, about shaping vibrant communities by creating places and spaces that have a positive impact on their users, and on the immediate and wider environment.

We are highly experienced across a wide range of sectors and building types including residential, industrial, commercial, leisure and emergency services. We understand the dialogue required to achieve successful architecture and are proud to have nurtured many long-standing client relationships.

We believe our buildings should be underpinned by a powerful idea; the idea should be an intelligent and logical response to functionality and a sense of place; and the power of that idea should be embedded in the built form. We should 'tread carefully but build with conviction'.

Contact: David Hughes  
01978 510178  
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### Lawray Architects\*

The Byre, Croesnewydd Hall, Wrexham LL13 7YP

Originating in Wales, Lawray Architects has flourished for over 40 years.

From our Cardiff inception, we expanded to North Wales in Wrexham, and then transplanted our inviting, professional ethos to the vibrant heart of London.

Our core principles revolve around honouring local identity, uniting stakeholders' visions, and crafting outstanding results that are of true benefit to our clients.

Additional offices in Cardiff and London.

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www.lawray.co.uk

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### Public architect delivery

It can be argued that if we are to face adaptation to the climate emergency in the UK, or crack the utterly broken homes procurement system, or ensure sufficient horticulture is grown again in the UK to feed ourselves, then we need, as a society, to get on a war footing. The last time we did that for food, between 1939 and 1945 in 'Dig for Victory', was a remarkable response.

The post-war ideal of knowing that 'the market' was never going to provide the things most needed, led to them being delivered through public service; this was a natural follow-through from military service. The market after all would never have defeated Hitler. The architecture of homes for those most in need – and of hospitals, schools, care homes, libraries, recreation facilities – came primarily through public service. Public architects were trusted (maybe sometimes too much) and remarkable things were achieved, such as the work in south-east Wales of Newport's 'municipal master' architect Johnson Blackett, illustrated on this cover and inside on pp. 20–25.

Staring through the dense smokescreen of 40 years of often calamitous outsourcing of public services to the market-place, it's almost impossible to believe that so much was achieved in earlier times through dedication to public service.

As the eminent historian of 20th-century architecture Alan Powers wrote in his introductory chapter to *The Architecture of Public Service*, 'the rise and decline of architects answerable to the public through local democracy and skilled by long experience to interpret the needs of national services remains a compelling tale, especially to a generation that has grown up with the structure of the Welfare State being knocked away year by year'. We are that generation. The tale of its decline and the declining influence of public architects in Wales needs reversing.

**Top:** Gaer housing estate, Newport, site plan. (S116, Blackett Collection, Architecture Museum, University of South Australia).

**Cover image:** Gaer housing estate, Newport from the south-east.

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