touchstone

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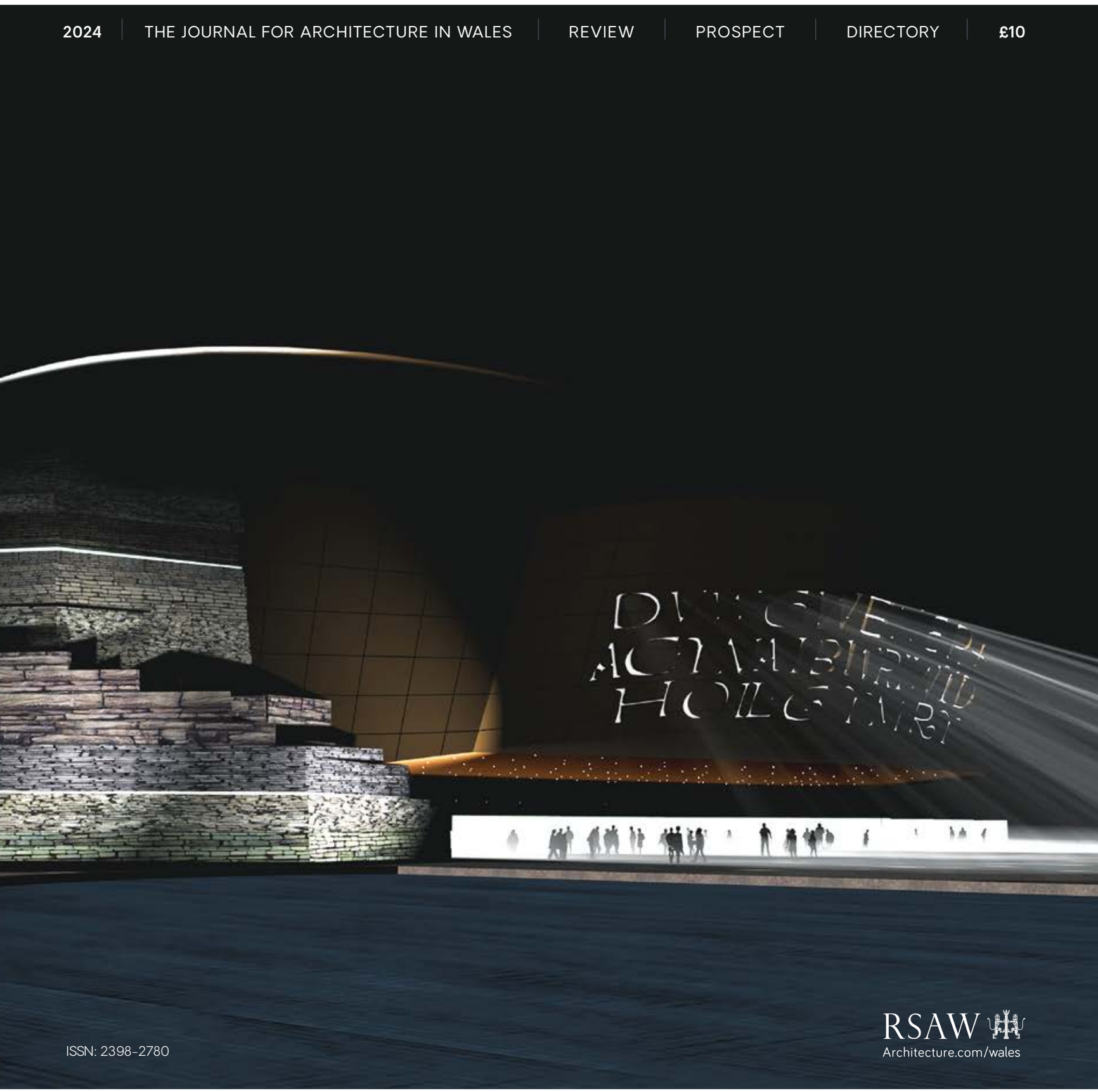

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The Royal Society of Architects in Wales (RSAW) represents and supports around 600 Chartered Members of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in Wales. Through our members' expertise and our advocacy work in government, public and private sectors, we champion well-designed buildings and places across Wales.

Mae Cymdeithas Frenhiniol Penseiri yng Nghymru yn cynrychioli ac yn cefnogi tua 600 o Aelodau Siartredig o Sefydliad Brenhinol Penseiri Prydain yng Nghymru. Trwy arbenigedd ein haelodau a'n gwaith eiriol ni gyda'r llywodraeth ac yn sectorau cyhoeddus a phreifat, rydym yn hyrwyddo adeiladau a lleoedd sydd wedi'u dylunio'n dda ledled Cymru.

Cover image: Early visualisation of the Wales Millennium Centre 1998, by James Jackson.

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The blackness or the sunlight?

1 National Women Against Pit Closures' 40th anniversary march in Durham on 2 March 2024 in memory of the 1984 national miners' strike against the massive acceleration of pit closures, set in train by Margaret Thatcher's government.

2 Union workers demonstrate against the savage Port Talbot steelworks closures by Tata in 2024.

3 A remarkable moment in Wales 2024. Michael Sheen's performance as Nye Bevan at the Wales Millennium Centre during its 20th anniversary year. A poignant reminder of a scale of cultural ambition.

2

Forty years on… 20 years back: how are we doing? Do we look back to offer hope going forward or can we simply move to the sunlight in front of us?

There's been a lot of poignant memorialising in 2024.

The 100th anniversary of the first signs of the great depression in the valleys of south Wales reminding us of continuing depressions (p. 82). The 40th anniversary of Welsh solidarity in the 1984 miners' strike. The 40th anniversary of the setting up of Cadw, a guardian of parts of our building history (p. 74). The 20th anniversary of the joyous opening of the Wales Millennium Centre (WMC), devolution's largest cultural icon (p. 4). Twenty years of unstinting support to those most in need by Warm Wales addressing fuel poverty (p. 46). Can we gain wisdom by all this looking back to go forward? Does a longer perspective backwards lift our horizons for the future?

You might have thought that the avalanche of 1980s' pit closures would surely be a case of 'never again'. The 2024 publishing of Brad Evans's *How Black was my Valley* reminds us of the length and depth of the grievances generated. Surely things have moved on – a glimpse of light somewhere (p. 48); but here we are in 2024, another colossal community of workers are being laid-off, this time the Port Talbot steelworkers. The red flags of resistance are still fluttering, but losing, and this, like the recent closing of the UK's last coal-fired power station at Ratcliffe-on-Soar, enacted all in the name of a determined carbon-emission reduction strategy, is not well managed in the transitioning of human labour.

Unfortunately, we are good in Wales at reminding ourselves of the moments we lost. The villages under the reservoirs, the last march of the Maerdy miners, the Chartists deported, the vanished defeated Owain Glyndŵr, the closed-down Machynlleth parliament. It can be a long, sorry tale. Some see the anger, bitterness and resentment constantly memorialised as a vital energising force for future action. 'Brittle with relics', 'cofiwch Dryweryn' are their constant anthems. Some still cannot see the WMC without saying that we should have had Zaha Hadid's first major project in the world. How did the Percy Thomas Partnership, a Welsh practice with a remarkable legacy (p. 70) and hand-maidens to Zaha at that fateful competition, then slide into the jaws of the behemoth Capita? Will we ever see their like again? What was needed then was the sort of statement the architect Jonathan Adams made in a presentation to the Institute of Welsh Affairs:

'We in Wales do not have a contemporary architectural idiom from which to draw. So, if it is done with honesty, the architecture will inevitably be unlike any that has gone before.'

Now that was ambition.

This may be the last hard-copy edition of *Touchstone*. Looking back at all that effort expended over 30 years, and looking around at the seemingly unmovable low status that architecture still has within Welsh culture, one could easily join the army of resentment. Looking across the Irish sea, why is their strike-rate in architectural excellence so culturally more impressive? (p.16) Has *Touchstone's* 28 years of publishing, the energising momentum of 30 years of RSAW's creative conferences and the Design Commission for Wales's 20 years of patient and creative cajoling, made little difference? Is *Touchstone*, simply a record of solid quality evidence, to be lost to history, parked in the National Library of Wales and quietly forgotten? Surely not…

Looking back over 20 years and more of our dedicated, hard-working and invaluable Design Commission (p. 19), the buffers that prevent a step to another level of architectural public influence in the culture are still in place. Even some of their most ambitious architectural hand-holding, as at the new Velindre Cancer Centre, are still having to battle remorselessly to keep the progressive vision alive. But then there are also always moments of bright sunlight.

In drilling down into the memories of key movers and shakers that delivered and ran the WMC, what a remarkable leap of faith that was, despite the constant naysayers (p. 4). Seeing Michael Sheen as 'Nye' on that magnificent stage in 2024 (below left) was such a tonic of hope for what we can really deliver.

The wisdom of world-respected environmentalist, Herbert Girardet (p. 30), can still from Tintern in Monmouthshire provide a biophilic inspiration to a Swansea developer (p. 34). Percy Thomas is still, for some, a name to be proud of (p. 70), and under its revival it could deliver uplifting architecture under its moniker (p. 12). Wales can still set the highest of benchmarks through backing a local authority's enlightened patronage of architecture for those handling dementia (p. 36). We still have at the Centre for Alternative Technology the world's earliest and best insulated low-carbon house that deserves a little TLC (p. 40). We can publicly fund architectural interventions so that everyone can at last scale the ramparts of those colonising castles (p. 26). Place-making plans for our towns may turn the corner for many (pp. 48 and 87). The long tradition of moving architecture forward and upward through the patronage of the private house is very much alive and kicking in Wales (p. 56). Those who envisioned and achieved so much in Welsh Government in those very early years of devolution are still stretching the envelope of creative climate policy-making.

So, let's keep pushing towards the sunlight by whatever means we can. The blackness of justifiable grievances cannot be our principal motivator. *Patrick Hannay: editor*

3

The long tortuous journey ended in a fireworks extravaganza and an extraordinary night of stardom on the stage. The Wales Millennium Centre – that deliberately imprecise moniker – finally opened its doors 20 years ago in November 2024. It's now a celebrated public icon of post-devolution Welsh culture.

Millennium memories

1

For those who think the narratives in Wales are largely driven by grievance about what we have lost, the opening and substantial survival of the Wales Millennium Centre (WMC) is a massive counterblast of concerted ambition and determination.

The project has such a confident distinct external presence – we now think it's always been there – but we may, in contrast, be surprised at the human-complex, risky tightrope, hidden from public gaze, that brought it to fruition.

Marvelling at any show in the spectacular auditorium we cannot see the massive back-of-house functions that guarantee its success and reputation worldwide. It's those activities, so often hidden from view, that made the WMC what it is.

So, we have asked some of those who walked that tightrope, to set down some formerly hidden anecdotes of that precarious journey.

The architecture of the WMC – still incomplete and in some quarters still contested – should at least be seen as a truly seismic architectural shift.

As its recognised architectural originator, Jonathan Adams, wrote in its early stages of conception:

'We in Wales do not have a contemporary architectural idiom from which to draw. So, if it is done with honesty, the architecture will inevitably be unlike any that has gone before ... it had to be expressed in a form that in its telling was engaging, firstly to the lay person, and only then, hopefully, to the connoisseur. It could only do this if it was derived from observations of a world outside of the claustrophobic limits of conventional modern architecture. The obvious place to look for inspiration for the building, it seemed to me, was the environment, and the cultural and social traditions of our own country.'

This was bold as was everything that followed to make it a reality. It should be celebrated. Happy birthday WMC. *Patrick Hannay*

2

1 Wales Millennium Centre (WMC) opening celebrations, November 2004.

2 Globally renowned opera star Bryn Terfel at the engraved slate foundation stone of the WMC. Bryn Terfel organised the opening ceremony and was the creative director of the opening weekend, 26- 28 November 2004.

Facing page: The images of the 'homeland story' on pp. 6-10 formed a major part of the conceptual narrative underpinning the project's architecture.

All the world's a stage

Peter Angier

Welsh National Opera (WNO) made its name over decades taking high-quality opera productions on tour. Most final rehearsals and first performances in the twentieth century were held in The New Theatre, Cardiff. Its labour-intensive inadequacies started the dream of a new auditorium, excellent for opera.

In 1986, when both funding and a site in Cardiff Bay seemed a real possibility, Carr & Angier was commissioned by the Welsh Arts Council to write a brief for a new centre for the performing arts. The main auditorium was to be excellent for opera but with many alternative uses. This document was used as the basis for an architectural competition brief, but it was noted with some surprise that the competition was to design a specifically named Cardiff Bay Opera House. Zaha Hadid's practice won. After much upheaval her scheme was rejected.

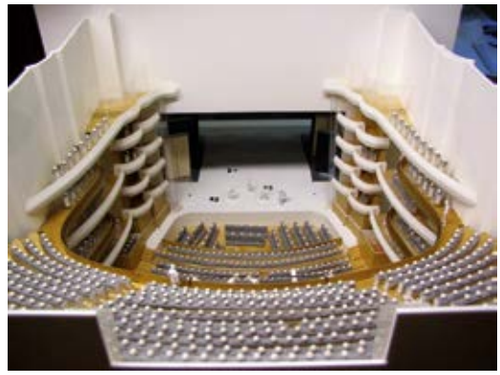
Out of the ruins emerged a new building proposal. The main auditorium would still be for opera but the word 'opera' was not given prominence and the emphasis was more on multiple uses with reduced or zero subsidy. When WNO was not using the auditorium, it had to earn its keep by taking tours, including lucrative musicals.

Two conflicting sorts of excellence were needed. A good natural acoustic for voice and orchestra, but adaptable for musicals with amplified sound. The design team, with heavy and detailed client involvement, learnt the hard way that the natural acoustic had to come first. The auditorium that resulted had slipped in the design sequence for the rest of the building. Foyer levels had become fixed, ahead of resolving final auditorium levels and sight lines.

A large tiered auditorium had to reconcile acoustic shaping, seating capacity, sight lines, row length, comfort, means of escape, wheelchairs, ventilation, variable acoustic devices, stage lighting positions, and much else. It could not be 'tweaked' to suit surrounding foyer levels. In the end foyer levels had to yield. The complex result can be seen today.

The backstage planning is unusual in being able to work in three quite separate ways: touring theatre, securely separated from WNO working and rehearsing next door; opera preparation with barriers raised so that opera sets can be moved from next door on to the main stage for final stage rehearsals and then performance; and opera in repertoire with space and height for three full sets to be stored for operas performed in repertoire.

Technical excellence was less contentious. My

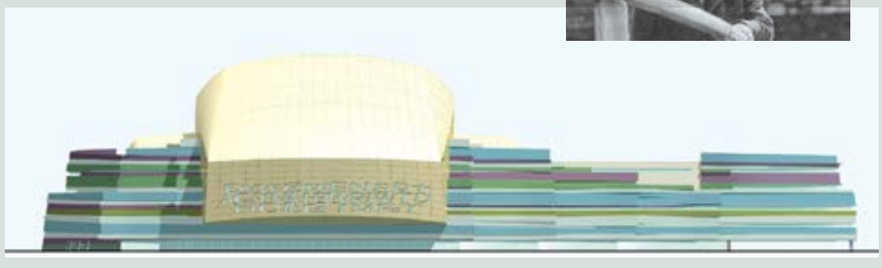


suggestion from the outset that the theatre should be able to accommodate a touring production from anywhere on the world was agreed. The generous stage dimensions, orchestra pit options, backstage accommodation, and direct, short, level stage deliveries from ample loading bays make the WMC the best date in the UK. Happily, this was confirmed by the technical director of the Mariinsky (formerly Kirov) Ballet that the WMC was the easiest date they encountered worldwide.

Peter Angier with Martin Carr set up Carr & Angier Theatre Consultants in 1974. Notable new buildings in the UK include Laban Centre London, Milton Keynes Theatre, Plymouth Theatre Royal, Belfast MAC and Waterfront Hall, Aylesbury Waterside, Guildford G Live. Completed projects abroad include nine in Hong Kong and the Wexford Opera House.

Homeland journey

Jonathan Adams



I might have gone back home from London in 1983 to complete my part-2 studies at the Welsh School of Architecture (WSA). But for me it felt like a step back. London's Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) accepted me on condition that I did a foundation year before the final two years in diploma school.

Will Alsop and John Lyall were my principal tutors for that first year. It was said I stood out because I could draw, I had a good technical grounding, and I worked hard. Thank you, WSA. Within a few months I was employed by Alsop & Lyall, an office of five, including me.

It was a much larger office ten years later, and I was an AA tutor, when we made our entry for the 1994 Cardiff Bay Opera House competition. The AA was a tight milieu. Zaha Hadid was part of it. Her competition win was celebrated, but it went the way of most UK open competitions.

Our eldest child was born in November 1996. It was time to move out of London, but we weren't in a rush. A year later an attempt was underway in Wales to revive the opera house

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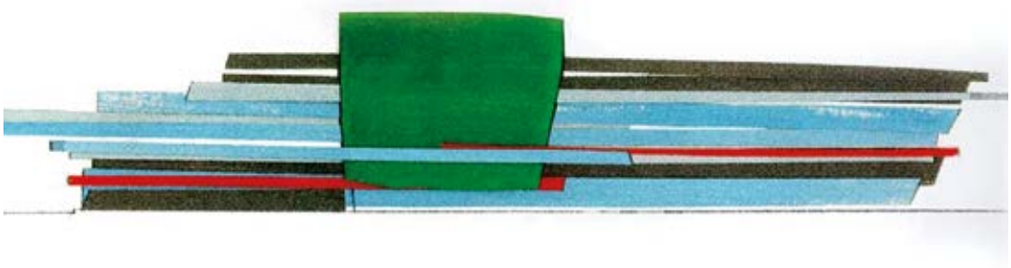
Early days singing Wales

Ian Layzell



After Zaha Hadid's opera house project folded, a trust was formed to take forward what would become the Wales Millennium Centre (WMC). A committee chaired by Sir Alan Cox interviewed six architects and in October 1996 appointed Percy Thomas Partnership (PTP) led by John Rudge. Cardiff Bay Development Corporation (CBDC) had a keen interest in the WMC, not only as a venue but as a 'world-class' piece of architecture.

PTP presented their scheme to CBDC's Design Advisory Panel (DAP) on several occasions in 1997. It had not been going well as far as the panel was concerned, a note of a panel meeting in July 1997 reading 'DAP considered scheme still undeveloped/weak architectural articulation/ need expertise added to team'.

Welsh-born Jonathan Adams had been involved in later iterations of the highly popular 'tube' visitor centre for Cardiff Bay working in the London office of Alsop and Lyall. He had seen reports of the PTP scheme in the press and thought he could contribute. He joined PTP around March 1998.

A few months later, John Rudge and Neil Graham of PTP came to present their latest iteration, but yet again it still fell short in the panel's view. DAP met in CBDC's board room facing a long presentation wall. Much to everyone's surprise, Rudge introduced Jonathan Adams.

Next to the PTP drawings, Adams pinned up images of Welsh landscapes – fields, hedges, ancient forest, cliffs – and materials such as slate, copper and glass-on-edge. With passion he outlined his ideas for a building that would sing 'Wales', then laid an A3 coloured collage on the table of how the building might look – thin layers, hinting at slate, with a large wedge of green, which may have been a fly tower. The 'tortoise' roof came later.

The panel included its chair, Professor Richard Silverman then head of the Welsh School of Architecture, Judy Hillman, CBDC board member Hugh Hudson-Davies, architects Professor Michael Brawne, James Burland and John Lyall. They were electrified by this new direction, James Burland of Arup Associates remarking 'this is rocket fuel!'. There was no turning back. The panel advised PTP that Jonathan's ideas should be developed further. The rest is history.

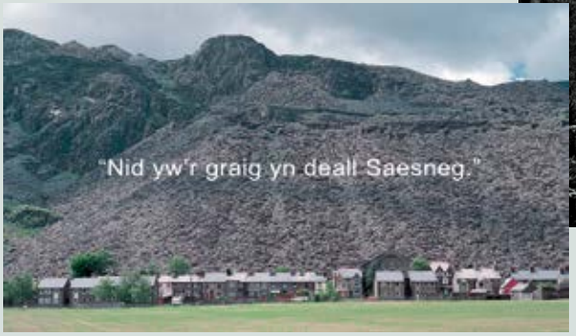
Ian Layzell was senior architect and design manager at Cardiff Bay Development Corporation from 1993 to 2000. He was responsible for managing the Design Advisory Panel.

Homeland journey (continued)

dream. A story on the front of *Building Design* reported a proposal by Percy Thomas Partnership (PTP) being in trouble, a project on a precipice again. More snide remarks from the London press. It was exasperating. I knew my home nation had an appetite for new architecture. Our Cardiff Bay Visitor Centre was hugely popular. PTP clearly needed help. A curious sense of duty crept up on me: what if I said nothing, and the project failed again, with all the opprobrium that would bring to Cardiff and Wales? With slender expectation I wrote, unsolicited, to John Rudge at PTP in autumn 1997. When he replied with a job offer, he told me that I would be working on WMC if I accepted.

The principal ideas for the building were developed in London while I worked out my three months' notice. As I had learnt from experience to do, I looked outside architecture for form, texture, colour and atmosphere, avoiding tired tropes, concentrating on how people connect with architecture and how they feel. It seemed to me that compatriots would share aspects of my own experience of Welshness, and that it would be fertile ground to explore.

I took my place at PTP in Cardiff in March 1998. It was so different from everything I had known. They were at a low ebb,



'Here we have this perfect place to tell stories on a large scale, big stories about who we are, where we've come from and where we are going, and to tell them in here is just perfect.'

Michael Sheen on playing Nye Bevan at the WMC

Engineering the invisible

Chris Jofeh

It is easy for the public to think that any building is the result of a singular focused journey from inception to completion. But for every design that is built, the reality is that several, sometimes many other, options might have taken their place and most of the results of key decisions are often hidden from view. The years between 1996 and 2001 on the Wales Millennium Centre (WMC) project saw continuous design and redesign, to reconcile budget with ambition, and to give the funders and tenants confidence that the business plan was robust and the project sustainable.

Behind the scenes the team charged with delivering the design we see today also changed. While the architect, engineer, acoustician and theatre consultant were unchanged, by opening day the team was on its third quantity surveyor, its third project manager, its fourth main contractor and its second chairman-client. Despite all that, the building was delivered at one third of the cost per square metre of the Oslo Opera House, which opened around the same time. Some of the factors that contributed to this are:

- continuity of the core design team;
- the tenant organisations agreeing to share some facilities, thus avoiding duplication;
- the use of a limited palette of inexpensive wall materials, including waste slate and waney-edge timber;
- interior finishes being kept to a minimum or eliminated in areas inaccessible to the public;
- the decision to use steel as the main structural material for the auditorium enabling its primary frame to be erected and made watertight more quickly, allowing the earliest start on the installation of services and interior finishes;
- the elimination of a great deal of steel thanks to the client agreeing that, for pop concerts, crowd management would be used to prevent synchronised jumping on the main balconies of the auditorium; and
- eliminating the need for bearings on the top of every pile cap to isolate the theatre from ground-borne vibrations, in particular vehicle noise from the very close road tunnel, following acoustic measurements providing evidence that omitting the acoustic isolation was an acceptable risk (this decision also eliminated the need to make provision for the future inspection and replacement of failed bearings).

Most of this is hidden from view. Without it there would have been no WMC.

Chris Jofeh was Arup's project director for the Wales Millennium Centre.

the office half empty, its leadership in fragments. A few large health-care projects were keeping the business going. Senior colleagues were, for the most part, neither Welsh nor interested in architecture. I was told, repeatedly, that design was PTP's lowest priority and that, more than anything else, they wanted to be known as a 'safe pair of hands'. The Wales Millennium Centre (WMC) already seemed a lost cause. They were at a dead end with the project.

When I showed them my initial ideas in the office the reaction was mixed. There was bemusement, and also a sense that none of them wanted to say anything that was either encouraging or discouraging – it was as if they didn't feel they could or should have views of their own, because everything was being decided by people outside the office. The attitude seemed to be 'at least he's got some ideas, we might as well give him a try'. Not long after the first Cardiff Bay Development Corporation Design Advisory Panel meeting on the scheme, I showed John Rudge my idea of having the large inscription window on the front. He kept his face impassive and said

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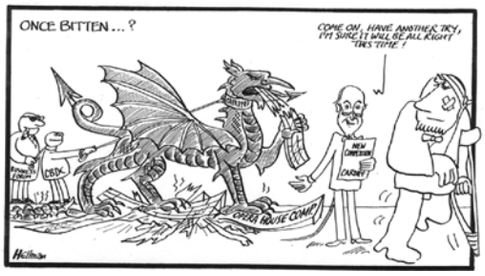
None of this, some of this, happened

Peter Finch



The ground where the Bute East Dock basin once was, and where Adams's Wales Millennium Centre (WMC) soon would be, was formally broken in 2000. To add authenticity a trumpet voluntary was played by a member of the Welsh National Orchestra. The route from Hadid to here had been tortuous. Along the way things, many things, had been jettisoned. To overcome the upwelling of anti-elitist opera feeling, the proposal had been for an IMAX cinema, a national arts gallery, a museum of the sea, a Welsh League of Youth residential centre, along with a variety of multi-cultural and Celtic-interest providers all to be shoehorned in alongside a 2000-seat lyric theatre doubling as an opera house. High culture made friendly.

But, by the time we got to the end of the year, of the original clients only the Urdd remained. It had now been joined by a wider band of art providers collectively known as the residents. These included literature's Academi, Diversions Dance, Hi-Jinx Theatre, and the arts therapy charity, Touch Trust.

The plan was for the residents' facilities to face on to a grand internal courtyard across which would occur great artistic interweavings. To the south, outside, would be Dafydd El's Welsh public square complete with statues of our cultural worthies (Alun Hoddinott, Dafydd ap Gwilym, Gareth Edwards and R S Thomas. Academi chair Harri Pritchard-Jones suggested R S, and that in keeping with his character, he be personified by a massive block of old red sandstone). Among these would operate a sort of free-speech Hyde Park Corner come-all-ye.

Cost cuts got the in the way and, naturally, absolutely none of this happened. To the south, on a plinth, there's a poor version of Wales's greatest popular composer, Ivor Novello. Below is a rather bad celebratory poem, which even the poet now disowns and has suggested to me that he wished he hadn't been talked into composing it. The internal courtyard has been shrunk and stretched to become a sort of airy tunnel surrounded by cafes. A few of the residents (two) have frontage here, but most have been relegated out the back with doors on to Pierhead Street. The Academi's Glyn Jones Centre doesn't even have an internal route back into the WMC. The easiest way of accessing the concourse is to step out into the rain, walk 100 yards around into Bute Place, and enter by the main public doors.

But 20 years down the road the whole enterprise is still running. The residents do not interact in the ways many might have hoped they would. In fact, artistic interaction rarely happens at all. But they flourish nevertheless. Was Jonathan Adams's great millennium creation worth the bother? Certainly yes.

Peter Finch as the one-time director of Academi residing in the WMC, is also a poet and author of a number of psychogeographies of south Wales. Jan Morris called his Real Cardiff *'one of the best books about a city I have ever read'. His two-volume* Collected Poems *have recently appeared from Seren.*

Homeland journey (continued)

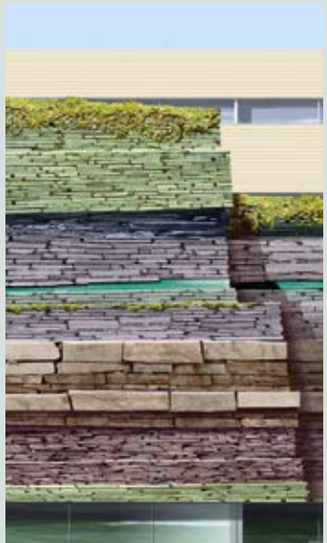
'I'd leave that one in the drawer for now'.

I came to depend on the enthusiasm, support and critical guidance of WMC board members under Sir Alan Cox, the Institute of Welsh Affairs driven by Geraint Talfan Davies, Cardiff Bay Development Corporation's Design Advisory Panel, RSAW and many others outside the practice who saw the potential in my ideas to provide the momentum that might bring the project to fruition. I lost count of the number of talks and presentations I gave, to all sorts of groups, from infant schools to retirees, and was always encouraged by them and the planners, that I was on the right track.

There were three attempts at procurement, all excessively over budget, all abandoned. Each time the building was cut and squeezed, and we started again. It was a vindication, of sorts, for a design approach that was robust enough to take a battering and be, in essence, the same building at the end. There were also vital changes of personnel. Sir David Rowe-Beddoe, all charm and diplomacy, took over as WMC chair. It eased the relationship with the Welsh Assembly Government. Judith Isherwood came from Sydney Opera House to become CEO. Confidence surged.

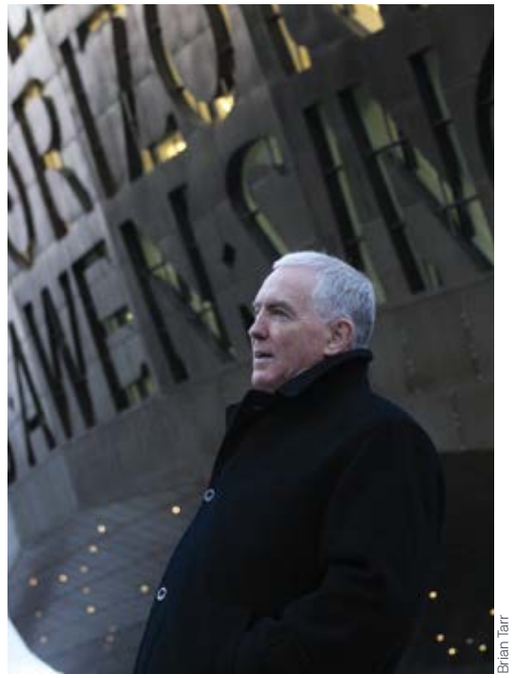
'I wrote the words to reflect the cultural ambition of Wales Millennium Centre. The stones inside the theatre literally sing with opera, musicals and orchestral music, and I wanted to convey the sense of an international space created by the art of music.'

Gwyneth Lewis, former National Poet of Wales, about the inscription that she authored



The national conch

Geraint Talfan Davies



Brian Tarr

It's hard to pin down the appropriate simile for the shape of the Wales Millennium Centre (WMC). Some see its dome as a gleaming metal helmet. I prefer to see it as a large conch shell – hold it to your ear and the air vibrates with wonderful sounds. That is what it has been doing for two decades. Shake it once and it resounds to opera. Shake it again and you hear musicals. Shake it again....

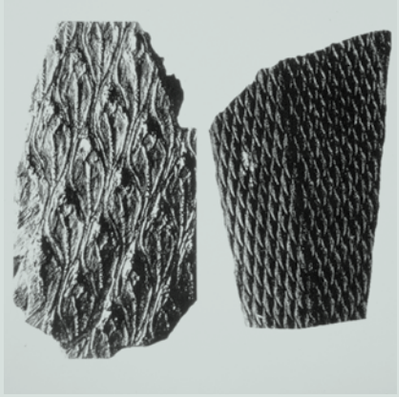
It is hard, too, to imagine how the Welsh capital managed without it. I grew up in a city with no WMC, no St David's Hall, and no Dora Stoutzker Hall at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. For decades orchestral concerts and operas grappled with unsuitable spaces for both performers and audiences. In contrast, in this generation, once the roof of St. David's Hall is fixed, we shall revert to having a complete set of beautiful performing spaces, as any capital should.

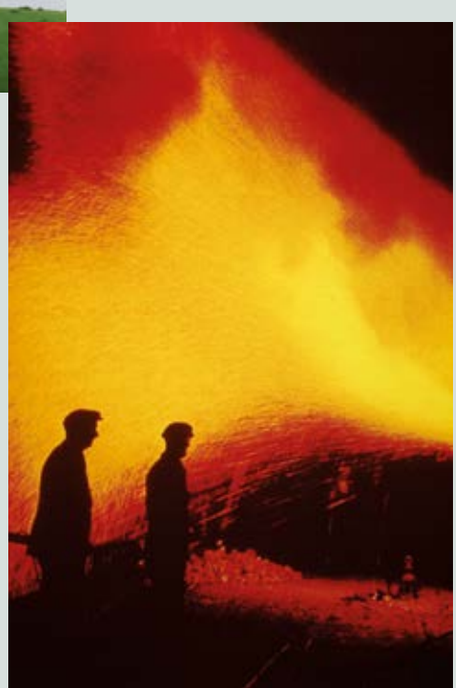
It had been a long wait. Schemes for a fitting home for our national opera company had come and gone – a plan to convert the Capitol cinema (since demolished) and another to fill the still empty space behind the National Museum in Cathays Park. St David's Hall, our main orchestral auditorium, had been shoehorned into a shopping precinct with scarcely any external presence, great though the hall's internal acoustic proved to be.

It was an empty space in the emerging Cardiff Bay development that cried out for something of WMC's scale; and it was the impending millennium that provided the necessary impetus and cash, albeit that Cardiff's Millennium Stadium managed to jump the queue. For two decades WMC has commanded its space overlooking the emblematic Oval Basin, and the expanse of Cardiff Bay beyond, and created a fitting home for Welsh National Opera – that had always been the primary motivating purpose – as well as a clutch of other cultural organisations.

Its birth had to contend with a chorus of complaint that it was not the scheme first envisaged by the late Zaha Hadid, something that some older architectural commentators still struggle to get over. But in my view Jonathan Adams delivered a scheme of national import that better suited its exposed site, and which has grown to be much loved. All that is needed now is a substantial revival in culture funding so that the conch can sound ever more loudly and regularly.

Geraint Talfan Davies was a board member of WMC from 2000–03 and from 2006–09 in his capacity as chair of Welsh National Opera. Between 2003–06 he was chair of the Arts Council of Wales.





It was at the fourth attempt, four years after my start at PTP, that work finally began on site. When it came to the business of getting large projects built, PTP was far better equipped than Alsop & Lyall. The novated team, mostly young graduates, moved into a site hut alongside contractor Sir Robert McAlpine (SRM). All major design aspects were settled by that time; I didn't need to be part of that group. I hovered between them, and the client and the contractor applying the little influence I had to resist what Richard Silverman referred to as the 'countervailing forces': the egotism, greed, and low-brow risk aversion that pushed in from all sides as soon as large cheques began to be written. There were a few that worked on the project from start to end with real energy: Mike Dacey, senior technician, always a great support; Keith Vince his colleague; and Rob Firman, a tenacious and committed team-lead who got the best out of the young group, and out of SRM.

During that time, I came to value my connection to the Percy Thomas name and its legacy. It is a PTP project. Twenty years on, I'm grateful and relieved that the building is so

Continues >

We were blessed

Jonathan Poyner

We stand on the shoulders of giants!

To understand how important the Wales Millennium Centre (WMC) is, it's necessary to consider the time and context in which the decisions were made and how many people and organisations had to come together to make it happen.

The very fact that it exists says something especially important about us as a people and as a country – we had reached a level of confidence and maturity post-devolution where we could see the value of culture in nation-building.

To all of those who had the vision, could see the need for and importance of WMC, and how it could bring us together, reflect our new-found confidence as a nation, and project us onto the world stage – diolch yn fawr yawn.

Running WMC was a dream – it was designed with the customer in mind.

To paraphrase Jonathan Adams, who so succinctly put it in the archive interview recordings, and used the analogy of a racing car:

'The secret to designing the WMC was to design it so that the customer felt that you had designed it for them – those in the audience and visiting the building, those performing on

stage and behind the scenes, and those running the building – while at the same time, we were actually designing the car body around the world's best engine (the auditorium).'

On one of the many occasions when Valery Gergiev, the Russian artistic director of the Bolshoi and Mariinsky Theatres visited with his Mariinsky Opera, I had the pleasure of showing him around. Having just opened his own new building, and having had us move the WMC chorus seating forward a few metres the night before, to get the perfect acoustics, he remarked on seeing our flexible acoustic design 'I wish I had seen this before I built mine!'.

One of the things that impressed me most was the attention to detail. On meeting a man in the foyer showing his young granddaughter around, he explained that he had been a brickie during the construction phase. I remarked how impressive it was that every single brick, even the out-of-sight ones, had been individually 'licked' (the mortar between the bricks is tidied up with a wet finger or specific tool for the job). He replied, 'we all knew that the WMC was going to be the most important building that we would work on in our lives – we were very proud of it, so we put our hearts and souls into it'.

The WMC used to host around 80 international delegations a year, important people coming from all over the world to see what we had achieved in Wales. They were all suitably impressed with what they saw, and especially impressed with how we had achieved so much with what (to them) seemed like so little (less than £110 million).

It takes great people to have vision and to make things happen. It takes passionate people to turn a dream into a reality. It takes self-sacrificing and committed people to open and make the most of a building such as the WMC. We were blessed at that crucial time in our evolution as a nation to have them all.

The WMC is not only an architectural and operational exemplar, but also a milestone in our evolution as a nation, proving the value of culture in nation-building.

It's architecture that has enabled that, providing the focus, and delivering our 'furnace of inspiration'.

Jonathon Poyner was strategic director of the WMC from 2008–17 and up to 2023 held a similar position at the City of London Corporation (Barbican and Guildhall School of Music and Drama).

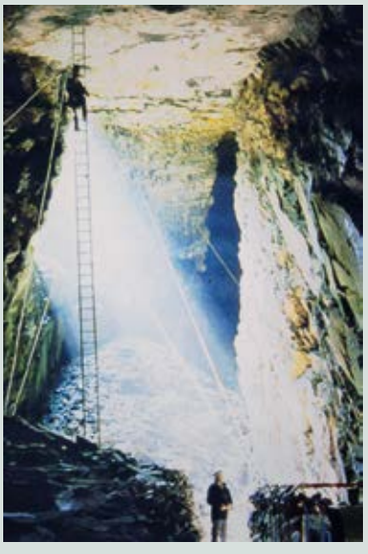
Homeland journey (continued)

widely enjoyed and recognised. I see it used, still, across the media as a symbol of Wales, even a landmark of Britain; on merchandise and on the web, in selfies, of which there must be millions by now.

There are some minor regrets, and the obvious large one: there should have been a relaunch of the Percy Thomas practice, with its new generation of architects. But Capita had decided otherwise. Only a few months ahead of the WMC opening, PTP was no more. If we could have avoided that, I am sure that there would have been more landmark projects here and overseas. It's small consolation that there's been no comparable project in Wales since then, and that nothing that I might have designed elsewhere in the world would have mattered to me as much.

Jonathan Adams

'I wanted to create something unmistakeably Welsh and internationally recognisable and outstanding.'



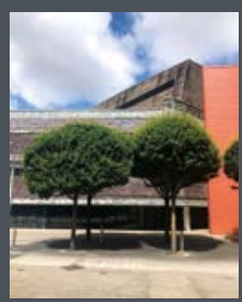
Above: the WMC back of house elevation behind which is the generous and far sighted strategic provision all that contributes to the WMC's success.

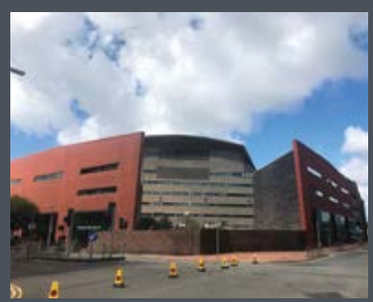
In a typical year the Wales Millennium Centre...

- Welcomes up to 1.8 million visitors through its doors.
- Works with over 900 local, national, and international suppliers – generating £19 million for businesses.
- Generates £1.6 million in donations and philanthropic income for its charitable work with young people, artists, and communities.
- Produces over 150 community celebrations and events, shared with over 7,300 community audience members.
- Welcomes over 19,000 audience members experiencing innovative productions on its stages.
- Hosts up to 15 artist-led exhibitions and installations, welcoming over 100,000 visitors.
- Volunteers, numbering over 250, contribute more than 22,000 hours of their time, expertise, and passion for the arts in Wales.
- Issues over 5,000 'pay what you can' seats to remove barriers to accessing world-class performances on its stages.
- Engages over 6,000 young people in free creative training and workshops.
- Awards over 50 Radio Platform training accreditations to 11- to 25-year-olds.
- Enables over 26,000 people to experience digital storytelling and virtual reality on its site.
- Offers over 1,400 hours of free space to creative groups, artists, and schools for creative exploration.
- Equips emerging talent with over 11,700 hours of paid world-class technical theatre experience through its technical apprenticeship scheme.

Source: Wales Millennium Centre communications manager Cadan ap Tomos

James Jackson 1998





Since the Wales Millennium Centre opened its doors in 2004...

- It has issued over 7 million show tickets with over 700,000 of these being for shows from its cultural residents, Welsh National Opera and National Dance Company Wales.
- Seventeen Wales Millennium Centre productions have welcomed more than 92,000 people through its doors.

'No West End theatre boasts what we have here. There's nowhere in London that comes close to this facility.'

Andrew Lloyd Webber, composer

Respect for the departed

1

2024 was a year when one of the great practice names in Welsh architecture, Percy Thomas, won the opportunity to add a much-needed and sensitive addition to a crematorium project created by the renowned modernists Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew. Something full-circle occurred. Janet Marshall reports

Leaving the departed is never easy. The most important words have been said indoors in a place of spiritual importance. At least outdoors, by the graveside, possibly under umbrellas, when the familiar words are said 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust', there can be a vast solemn gathering listening in. It all feels appropriately final as the coffin goes down.

But what of cremation? Around 80% of funerals in the UK are now cremations. The favourite music, the poignant poems, and tributes are read – but then what? The curtains close (the ashes to be collected days later), you file out, many conscious that another flood of mourners are pressing close behind them. Those bearing witness to the 'almost departed' must not meet the 'yet to be departed'. The architecture of a crematorium has to not only resolve this sensitively but give 'moment' to this delayed departing – to allow for varying scales of outdoor gathering. Not every crematorium does this well.

Even the renowned modernist Maxwell Fry, of the practice Fry Drew and Partners, when giving a lecture to the Royal Society of Arts on what is now the grade II*-listed Coychurch (originally Mid Glamorgan) Crematorium they completed in 1970, conceded in response to an audience question 'that the omission of a dispersal social space was an oversight'. All

2

1 Coychurch Crematorium, Bridgend by Fry Drew and Partners (1970) in its spectacular landscape setting. The new expanded dispersal space can be glimpsed at the far-right-hand end of this elevation

2 The arrival cloister sequence of urn-like bays of the 1970 building, forming niches for memorial plaques.

3 The canopy at dusk over the new much-enlarged dispersal space, offering mourners a generous covered and partially enclosed gathering space on leaving the chapel.

John Reape

3

that was provided was a steel columned, flat-roofed, single open-sided 'cloister' (a somewhat generous term), which had later fairly crude additions of obscured polycarbonate sheeting to provide weather protection, and a long brickwork shelf for flowers. This could never be an appropriate spiritual departure. In 2024 Jonathan Adams for Percy Thomas has corrected that omission magnificently.

In everything up to that point Fry and Drew had demonstrated remarkable sensitivity to the emotional journey and this particular regional context. The most overt references to iconic modernism were taken from Le Corbusier's pilgrimage church at Ronchamp (1950–55) and were most clearly apparent in the concrete cowl that originally surrounded the cross on the roof (now sadly demolished), the overhanging 'cushiony' concrete roof of the main chapel, the simplicity of the interiors, and the curving plan forms offering an embrace to mourners. But this 'modernism' was offset by a remarkable arrival cloister sequence of urn-like bays that form niches for memorials, all assembled along a curving rising route to the chapel – these niches assembled in storey-height local limestone from old demolished local buildings. Each was separated by dramatic slits of stained glass commissioned by Fry and Drew from the local Swansea School of Art.

4 The 1970s' arrival cloister rising slowly from the entrance to the chapel.

5 The arrival approach.

6, 7 The dispersal corridor-like space of the 1970 building, enclosed here in later years by polycarbonate sheeting. Acknowledged by Fry as an 'oversight' particularly given the emotionally charged arrival sequence.

Call and response

Now, in 2024, Coychurch has a 'dispersal' cloister to rival that of its arrival. The subtlety of the regional modernism is equal to that of Fry and Drew. The grid of slender, circular steel columns of the original dispersal route has been extended laterally to form a court, roofed by hardwood 'handkerchief' vaults enclosed in solid polycarbonate, which were thermo-formed into large curved panels with cloud/flower patterns grit-blasted on to them by glass artist Rodney Bender. The court is still open to the air but protected from the prevailing wind on one side by delicately inscribed glass with imagery of floating autumnal leaves – symbolically well-judged – and crafted by the glass-working skills of a Swansea company connected to the UWTSD's Swansea School of Art. (The same glassworks led by Rodney Bender developed the memorable glass-on-edge 'veins' that slid through the slithers of slate on Adams's Wales Millenium Centre, Cardiff (see pp. 00–00). The same language adorns the glazing – also by Rodney Bender – enclosing the arched springing points at the head of each column, which on late winter afternoons will give added subtle electric light to the court.

Each line of columns is embraced by low stone surfaces with rounded ends, suitable for floral tributes or for just resting tired legs. An original window in the chapel has become an additional door into the court to ease the flow and avoid the former bottleneck queue that tended to form at the only former exit. The scale

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of the new court resolves the wheelchair access challenge – Fry and Drew simply had steps – by extending into the sloping contours of the surrounding site to allow level access.

Context and traditions

Those early modernists were so often attacked for their supposed insensitivity to architectural historic traditions and regional contexts. Only the lazy or the incompetent deserved that charge. Those who inspired Fry and Drew rarely warranted that level of opprobrium. Thus, it is with the new court. In one sense Fry and Drew's original is now history, it is protected. But the new court in all its forms structures and material does not slavishly imitate the original. Equally, it is not cringingly subservient to it. It is quite clearly a distinct new addition, but one full of positive respect for its host. The handkerchief vault is an ancient architectural form assembled in an utterly contemporary way, this time in hardwood, and yet its curvatures echo Fry and Drew's elemental geometry. The floor patterns and materials of the court are also an extension of a comparable pattern in the chapel. Similar low, limestone walling to that used by Fry and Drew encloses two edges of the court.

The court deserves to have visual presence and feel part of the whole of what is now largely a strong horizontal composition in the landscape. Its social purpose also requires appropriate presence. Inevitably, in its level of prominence, it is an architectural and

8

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8 Eastern elevation: the new column grid takes it dimensions from the 1970 flat-roofed, dispersal-corridor space.

9 Raised linear plinths in the space for seating and flower display.

Details

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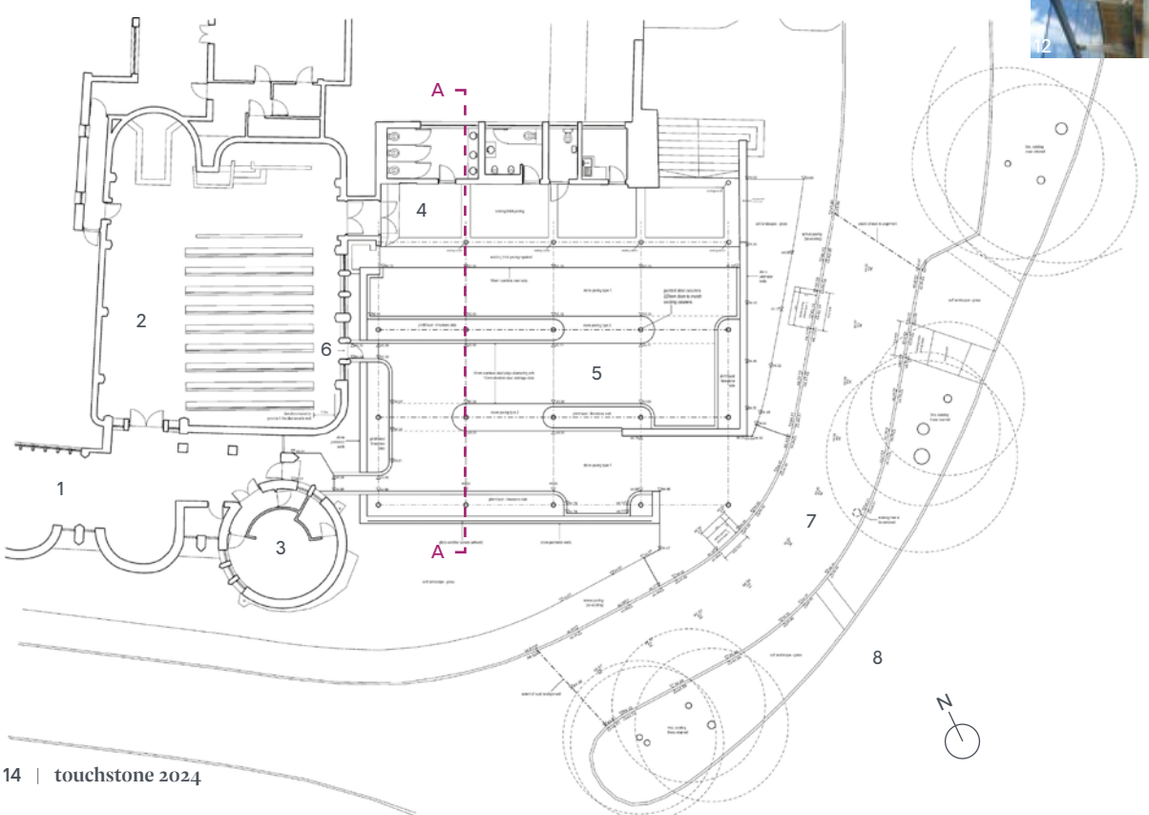
10–12 Details of the vertical glazing to the southern elevation.

13 Cloud-like imagery baked into the thermo-formed solid polycarbonate enclosures to the 'handkerchief' vaults.

14 Original window converted into a door to ease the flow of those leaving the chapel.



Key to site plan

1	Arrival cloister
2	Capel Crallo
3	Vestry
4	Original dispersal corridor
5	Extended new departure area
6	New additional door
7	Perimeter access road
8	Car park

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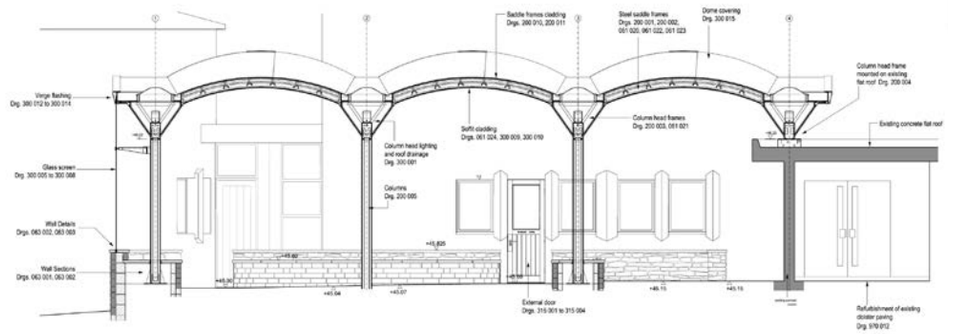

Section A-A

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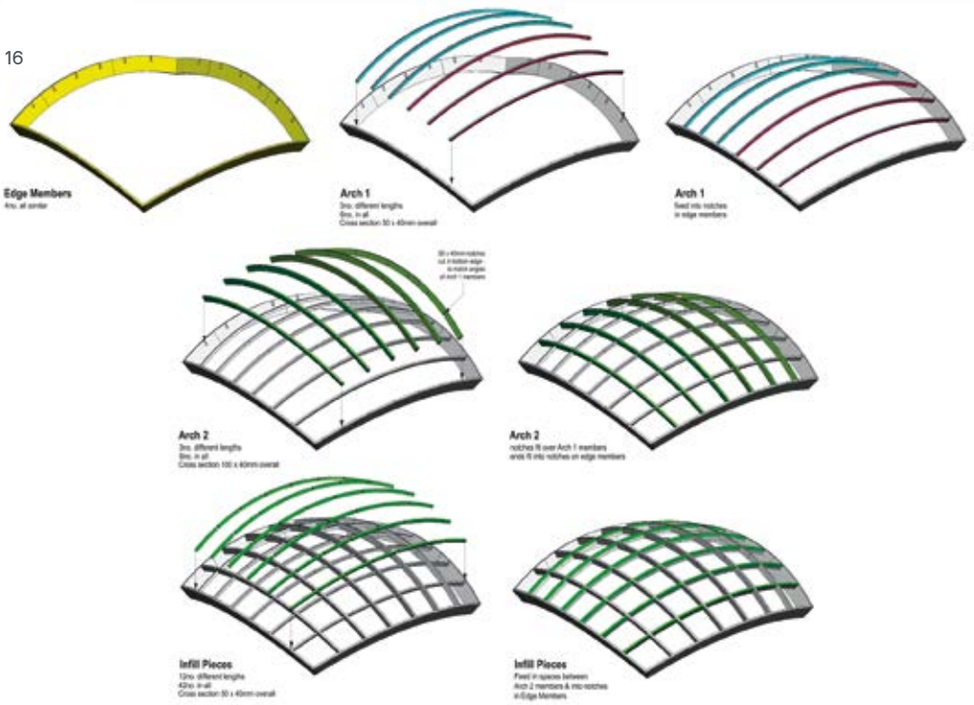

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social balancing act; the arrival and dispersal processions must not be equally on view to all at the same time. The subtle partial concealment offered by parts of the magnificent landscape assists in that delicate separation, but equally the act of departing now has real presence. For the architecture one can read in the architect's heritage impact statement an appropriate, but not subservient, level of respect for the historical value of their host buildings and landscape. The balancing act is strikingly apt and well judged. Fry and Drew have found an appropriate soulmate in Jonathan Adams.

In writing a short piece for the *Architects' Journal* a couple of months before the Wales Millennium Centre (WMC) was to be opened, Adams wrote 'if another opportunity of this kind presents itself in the future I would focus on one important lesson; the quality of trust that you build at the beginning is directly proportional to the quality of the building you make at the end'. The dispersal court at Coychurch is of a very different scale from the WMC, but it is still an absolute truism here. The principal client, the bereavement services manager and registrar, Joanna Hamilton, built a relationship of utter trust with Adams. The outcome says it all.

Janet Marshall has been a regular contributor and architectural critic for Touchstone. *She is, as of the end of 2024, finally retiring from journalism and moving back to her allotment in Pandy.*

'Thank you for your incisive contributions over the years' (ed).

15 Section A-A through new dispersal departure space.

16 Sequence of assembly for 'handkerchief' vaults.

17 View of the glazed southern elevation, the curvilinear composition empathetic to the language of the original crematorium architecture.

Credits:

Client: Joanna Hamilton, Coychurch Crematorium Joint Committee.

Architect: Percy Thomas (Jonathan Adams, Elliot Board)

Structural engineer: Mann Williams (Tom Martin, Pat Ruddock and Alex Ancell)

Cost consultant: WSP (Lewis Westlake)

Contractor: South Wales Contractors (John Reape)

Project artist and glass specialist: Innovative Glass Products (Rodney Bender).

Timber sub-contractor: Stradform (Llanelli)

Steelwork: Dollcast (Bridgend)

Main photographs: Patrick Hannay

Cultured cousins

A small strip of sea separates us from Ireland, but there appears to be a chasm between us in our energies to make architecture a fully paid-up and impactful member of our culture. We need to change this. Wayne Forster argues the case.

A cursory glance along my bookshelves reveals the spines of journals dedicated to contemporary architectural practice, some of which are devoted to Ireland: two issues of *a+u* magazine – one on Grafton Architects, one on the domestic work of six young Irish practices; another recent Portuguese journal on the same topic; and further along the shelf one whole issue of an *Architectural Review* from 2019 and an *Architects' Journal* from 2022 on contemporary Irish architecture. There is one anthology of Irish architecture, including that of Northern Ireland, and monographs on O'Donnell + Tuomey, McCullough Mulvin Architects, and Grafton Architects. I can see no equivalent in Wales other than the excellent book on the late, great David Lea, and no architectural monograph on a current practice or recent buildings.

Over the past 25 years, Irish architecture has enjoyed a stellar reputation and is celebrated at home and abroad. An independent state from 1922, located at the western extremity of the continent and with a population of just 5 million people, this is a remarkable achievement. Irish architecture is particularly relevant to that of Wales's wider architectural discourse as we share a similar geographical context on the western fringe of Europe, climate, building regulations, materiality, and construction techniques. What can we learn and apply from the Irish situation?

In researching this, I identified a number of possible reasons relevant to practice in Wales. Prominent among them was a positive and proactive attitude to the publication of critical accounts of finished buildings in the principal national newspaper. A leading protagonist in this is Shane O'Toole, a qualified architect and member of the collective of architects, Group 91, which visioned, designed and built Dublin's Temple Bar in the 1990s. He went on to become the architecture correspondent for *The Irish Times* and claims:

'It is a truism to say that journalism is the first draft of history. Historians always place great weight on contemporary accounts. I would go further and suggest that even though very few buildings are ever reviewed, a work of architecture is not complete until it has been written about. Certainly, it cannot yet enter the canon. So, in a certain way, when you are writing about architecture, you are completing the project. The architect develops the work to a stage of physical completion and then hands the building over to its users. At this point the critic completes the job the architect has had to relinquish. In a way, it's a bit like christening a baby. If the architect is the baby's parent, you are giving her a name in front of the community, a name she will carry around for the rest of her life.'[1]

Building the canon in the culture

The idea of building the canon and being part of it, is key. A canon is a measure, more than a list.

Selection of publications on Irish architecture from the shelves of Wayne Forster's library

‘Prominent among them was a positive and proactive attitude to the publication of critical accounts of finished buildings in the principal national newspaper.’

The richness and complexity of our architectural heritage, the roadmap of our future, the outlines against which we measure ourselves: that is what a canon preserves. That may be why that a generation of Irish architects who have, as Emmett Scanlon notes, remained ‘committed to paying architectural attention to Ireland’ have embraced the need for the critical review and publication. ‘It appears in their nature to remain grounded there, conceptually and literally… this has been important to how a culture of architecture on the island has emerged and been sustained since the late 1990s.’[2]

Central to this commitment is to promote and disseminate the best of contemporary practice to the wider world. This may be because that they have learnt that, as O’Toole put it:

‘The most important lesson any ambitious architect from a small country can draw. It is a simple, if brutal, fact. You have to work harder to promote buildings that lie off the beaten track. If work in Ireland, or anywhere on the periphery of Europe for that matter, is not published abroad – and not just in the English-speaking press either – it will not register on the international radar of architects, critics or, in due course, historians.’[3]

Culture can be defined as all the ways of life including arts, beliefs and institutions of a population that are passed down from generation to generation. Culture has been called ‘the way of life for an entire society’. As such, it includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, art and of course architecture. Raymond Williams, best known for his work on culture, argued that culture is ordinary and not elite, calling for a democratic approach to the arts. His most important piece of writing is his essay *Culture is ordinary* published in 1958; it remains worth reading today.

As Seamus Heaney reasoned in an address to the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland in 1986 entitled *From Maecenas to MacAlpine*, architecture’s unique reciprocity and engagement is like language’s place in our world:

‘Buildings and monuments constitute a system of signs which we read and construe into a system of attachments and relationships … we read them into ourselves … They take us in and we take them in, first as imprints on the retina, then as known dwellings, then as remembered forms. They begin to insist themselves into our consciousness as a kind of language…’[4]

Commitment to architecture is not just confined to professionals engaged in practice. Unlike Wales:

‘In Ireland, architecture is defined as an art form under the 1971 Arts Act, and the Arts Council is the statutory body responsible for the cultural development of architecture. Specifically, its focus is on supporting the creative practice of architects, and building public audiences for architecture. Architects are funded to take time out or take risks, to experiment with materials or to conduct research that might develop their individual or collaborative practice. In addition, local authorities are funded to have architects in residence, and arts venues are supported to host architecture exhibitions….’ [5]

‘There is one anthology of Irish architecture, including that of Northern Ireland, and monographs on O’Donnell + Tuomey, McCullough Mulvin Architects, and Grafton Architects. I can see no equivalent in Wales other than the excellent book on the late, great David Lea…’

Group 91 architects, (back row, left to right) Michael McGarry, Derek Tynan, Sheila O’Donnell, Shelly McNamara, Niall McCullough, Shay Cleary, John Tuomey; (front row, left to right) Paul Keogh, Rachael Chidlow, Siobhán Ní Éanaigh, Yvonne Farrell, Valerie Mulvin and Shane O’Toole. Photograph by Tony Higgins from *Architectural Review* June 2019.

Ireland has no architectural press to equal that of the UK. Many of the architects whose work is the subject of the international awards and admiration of peers, benefit from support from The Arts Council and other Irish cultural organisations such as Aosdána (meaning literally people of the arts or bards), an affiliation of creative artists founded in 1981; it honours artists whose work has made an outstanding contribution to the creative arts in Ireland, and assists members in devoting their energies fully to their art practice. It has 250 members drawn from all areas of the creative arts but currently has a dozen architects on the roster six of whom are women. This obviously brings

‘A canon is a measure, more than a list. The richness and complexity of our architectural heritage, the roadmap of our future, the outlines against which we measure ourselves…’

huge status but is not just a grouping of elites but acts to support practice both financially and intellectually.in a direct way.

This is supplemented by the presence of Gandon Editions that publishes elegant, well-designed monographs of contemporary artists and architects for which there is no equivalent for Wales, the University of Wales Press architecture series focusing on the past – castles and heritage.

Diaspora and homecomings

The tendency to look and reach out may be in the Irish national DNA. Among the golden generation of Group 91 was an acceptance that they would probably have to travel to and work across Europe to assimilate and build new knowledge. Examples are Paul Keogh of Paul Keogh Architects and John Tuomey both of whom worked at James Stirling’s office at a most interesting time for that practice.

The natural route for Irish architecture in the 20th century was of emigration – and, indeed, that was the case until very recently. Most celebrated figures from before that time – Eileen Gray or, later, Kevin Roche and Peter Rice – were people who, like Joyce and Beckett, had left the island’s repressive confines, had blossomed in places with a larger horizon. These were followed by Shane de Blacam (Kahn in Penn) and his partner John Meagher in Finland, both of whom had brought their experiences to the studios of the Dublin schools. Others researched and wrote – notably McCullough, Mulvin, Shane O’Toole and, crucially, one, John O’Regan, who dropped out to establish Gandon Editions, a publishing house that would focus on contemporary Irish art and architecture.

As well as its histories, Group 91 and their achievements in Temple Bar put Irish architecture on at least a European footing as it became a kind of model for the regeneration of the European city. The Temple Bar projects were founded on a kind of activism – a willingness to challenge existing proposals on the basis of promoting better design and to roll sleeves up, get involved and shake things up. I remember, in 1996, attending with Bernard Gilna from Murray Ó Laoire and Jonathan Vining a quiz night in the workmen’s institute in Temple Bar arranged to fund planning appeals – it was packed out. John Tuomey in his biography *First Quarter* notes that the practice’s first two ‘public projects resulted from activism, volunteering as part of a movement, professional skills offered to develop, and test sites.’[6]

If the first post-qualification destination for the Group 91 generation was either Europe or personal research and writing, the following generation has subscribed to the challenges and opportunities presented by PhD-by-design programmes.

Pioneered largely by Leon van Schaik at RMIT University, the pan-European ADAPT-r – Architecture, Design and Art Practice Training-research programme is aimed to significantly increase European research capacity through a unique and groundbreaking research model. It recruited Andrew Clancy, Steve Larkin, Alice Casey, Cian Deegan, Siobhan ni Eannaigh and others. The programme is designed explicitly to encourage designers to understand and extend their knowledge and practices and involves in-depth reflection, scrutiny, peer review, and exposition of work across various European venues.

The result is a newer generation of super-qualified Irish architects, many with practice-based PhDs, emerging portfolios almost exclusively comprising beautifully executed and strikingly thoughtful extensions, conservatories and one-off houses – often subsidised by a busy teaching schedule as new schools of architecture have opened. ‘Some great architects in Ireland have had entire careers designing houses’, Andrew Clancy, co-founder of Clancy Moore, explains.

Lessons to be learnt

This is all evidence of a collective commitment in Ireland to pay attention to architecture compared to a general ambivalence or apathy in Wales. It would be neat if certain steps could be recommended that would lead to at least a bridging of the gap between Ireland and Wales. Raymond Williams’s advice or cri de cœur was as follows: ‘The only thing to do is to live out the tension, to try to work it out by changing the situation.’[7]

This means challenging, personally and publicly, and from wherever we are, the immense imperatives that are not only flattening but preventing the realities of identity and culture.

So, what are the chances? The future looks bleak as the journal *Planet* is finished after half a century of offering an independent approach to the culture and politics of Wales and the world, and *Touchstone* as a hard-copy publication may become only digital. Will architecture slip away even further from serious attention?

Some urgent positive actions may include:

- a concerted effort from practices to publish and disseminate their best work as widely as possible – first in national and then international journals;
- urge the Welsh Government, through its arts council and design commission to regard architecture as a central discipline in the arts in Wales by, for example, funding presence for architecture at the Venice Biennale; and
- establish a foundation or association beyond the RIBA, the purpose of which would be to promote and afford resources for the study of architecture and the allied arts while providing a medium of friendly communication between the members and others interested in the progress of architecture.

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4 Ellen Rowley. *Cultural heritage: Architecture’s storybook* [online]. Irish Research Council: LoveIrishResearch Blog, 14 September 2018. Available at: https://research.ie/what-we-do/loveirishresearch/blog/cultural-heritage-architectures-storybook/.

5 Emmett Scanlon, op cit.

6 John Tuomey. *First Quarter*, The Lilliput Press, Dublin, 2023.

7 Raymond Williams, edited by Daniel G Williams. *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity*. University of Wales Press, Cardiff, second edition, 2021, pp. 48–49.

Raising the bar

The Design Commission for Wales has a new chair. Reflecting on its journey since its founding days in 2002, has the highest of architectural standards found its standard bearer? The editor, Patrick Hannay, asked the DCfW's first chair Richard Parnaby (above) and its current chair Ewan Jones (right), for their views.

John Punter, an early significant player in the Design Commission for Wales (DCfW), was a strong advocate of 'design review' being a potential game-changer in raising the architectural quality bar in Wales. Richard Parnaby, as the DCfW's first chair in 2002, was initially sceptical. 'My worry was that we would not have the capacity to offer an effective service given our limited resources', he says. 'In particular, would we be able to find enough appropriately skilled volunteers to be design review panellists?' As it turned out, those worries proved to be unjustified. There are currently 39 highly qualified professionals committing their time and expertise.

'Design review did raise some standards', he says, 'particularly in the middle range of the quality spectrum. But, naturally, it's very hard for design review to improve the already excellent, and then a critique of the really awful often falls on totally deaf ears'. He has a caveat. 'I do think it is very difficult to provide really convincing evidence that this level of improvement is the case without very detailed investigation – comparing pre-design review proposals with the revised scheme after review and of course the final built result.' That needs a follow-up service of rigorous architectural reviewing. Despite the RIBA building in post-occupancy evaluation formally into its Plan of Work stages, it rarely occurs. At practical completion everyone has moved on to the next project. The DCfW certainly doesn't have the resources to do it on its own.

Parnaby has vivid memories of getting stuck into Cardiff's St David's 2 shopping behemoth early on in the commission's existence, since that was clearly going to substantially change a large section of the city centre. Did the commission make a difference there? He thinks so.

The DCfW cannot demand attendance at its review processes but Land Securities, the developer of St David's 2, chose to be there. There is no effective stick, only carrots, even though a few public-sector funders may make design review attendance a requirement. It is not quite clear what the carrots are. Local planning authorities can recommend attendance by project patrons and designers, but if they are at design review reluctantly, won't any changes be made grudgingly? Those willingly subjecting themselves to informed discussions with their peers (all volunteering their services) may enjoy the creative discussion, but their design aspiration was already high, and those high aspirers are few and far between. Some may attend to get the badge of the commission's approval to hopefully secure planning permission later. Is the process just trying to make the mediocre a little better? Surely that's worth doing, but is that a sufficient ambition for what is surely one of Wales's principal architectural standard bearers?

A transformational mechanism?

The DCfW's new chair, Ewan Jones, is not a new boy to the commission. He has worked with the DCfW since 2005, including a 10-year term as a commissioner, and he currently chairs design reviews and client advisory panels for the commission. He has seen it all. Jones is an energetic practising architect with an international perspective. As a partner at Grimshaw, he has over 30 years' experience working on infrastructure, commercial and education projects in the UK, Europe and Australia. But Jones has local roots too: he was born in Newport and raised in Porthcawl.

So, is the DCfW winning in raising the bar? Are design and access statements presented to the review panels, setting out a project's design logic, are they improving over the 20 years of the commission's existence? 'Not really', Jones admits. 'You see a few outstanding exemplars but they are few and far between. There is too much box-ticking and mouthing of predictable platitudes.'

The astonishing unpaid contributions of the reviewers over all these years, from all environmental disciplines, are of course laudable, and ensure valuable collaborative cross-disciplinary conversations on projects. But finding convincing evidence of game-changing interventions by the commission on design review requires the follow up. The DCfW's reviews are made public once the projects are formally in the public domain in the planning application process. If reviews were made public in advance maybe few would turn up for review.

What was known early on in the DCfW's life, was that the review process often arrives too late. The missteps were already solidified.

'The astonishing unpaid contributions of the reviewers over all these years, from all environmental disciplines, are of course laudable, and ensure valuable collaborative cross-disciplinary conversations on projects.'

The commission, if it is really to have an impact, needs to get in much earlier in ensuring the right brief is set for the right site, and that the patron commissions the highest quality architects and other professionals. A small number of notable projects in Wales have experienced this from the commission: the St Fagans projects (see *Touchstone*, 2018, pp. 24–27 and *Touchstone*, 2019, pp. 40–45); the Merthyr 'Crucible' project promoted by Geraint Talfan Davies (see *Touchstone*, 2021, pp. 6–11); the A465 Heads of the Valleys Road (see *Touchstone*, 2022, pp. 04-07); the new Velindre Cancer Centre project at Whitchurch, Cardiff; The BBC Cymru Wales HQ in Cardiff (see *Touchstone*, 2022, pp. 23–25); the Newtown bypass; and the proposed Global Centre for Rail Excellence near Ystradgynlais, (p. 85). But are these projects vigorously and collectively promoted by the DCfW through national media outlets or travelling roadshows to raise patronage overall in Wales? Is this canon of high achieving design in Wales publicly known? Not really.

Jones points out that the 'development community' in Wales is relatively small and intimate. Everyone tends to know everyone so maybe there is influence by osmosis. But is that too complacent? Will Jones continue this early engagement strategy? Yes. But surely it must eat up sizeable resources of the DCfW's limited budgets? Without vigorous outward promotion, is it really worth it just to know that six or seven good projects are out there somewhere?

'Without vigorous outward promotion, is it really worth it just to know that six or seven good projects are out there somewhere?'

Influencing the bigger picture

Jones is clear about one huge benefit of the continuous design reviews, namely the broader overview it offers of development trends in Wales across major sectors of work, which might allow the DCfW to feed that knowledge into future Welsh Government policy. So why did the 21st Century Schools and Education Programme fall into the hands of Constructing Excellence in Wales (CEW), and 'frameworks' of a few large contractors and large professional practices? Who was judging the architectural quality? Was such a process really going to guarantee excellence or simply focus on delivery on time and price – important, but not the full story? The Welsh Government eventually altered CEW's oversight. Did the DCfW bring that about? 'No', Jones says, 'this is not a matter for the DCfW'. Did they encourage the setting up of the new Mutual Investment Model for schools, WEPCo, with Sheppard Robson selected as architects to all the school projects? 'No, the DCfW was not involved.'

So did the DCfW's overview of the very visible, fast-diminishing numbers of public architects in Wales's local authorities over two decades set alarm bells going? After all, with top-notch public architects advising planning authorities and ensuring top-quality patronage of public buildings, the DCfW would have its workload considerably lightened. Jones responds that 'they were diminishing long before our existence – the skills drain across disciplines is something we routinely comment on'. But is anyone listening and acting on it?

The DCfW's concerted efforts to support local authority planners through workshops and seminars is very much appreciated and valuable, but it is clearly sticking-plaster work as the number of planners drops in local authorities, lured away by the more lucrative remuneration of planning consultancies in the private sector.

Should the DCfW seek to counter the brain drain of architectural talent out of Wales? 'Even if they wanted to', says Jones, 'it would be wasted effort'. Parnaby reminds us of better tactics, like opening up new architecture schools as at the University of Wales Trinity St David in Swansea, which focuses on educating home-grown talent. Do they promote the best of Welsh architectural talent from smaller practices to link up with the big deliverers? 'What the DCfW promotes', say Jones, 'is getting the best architects possible for projects in Wales, from anywhere'.

Expanding the action portfolio

So could the DCfW fund architectural monographs, as Ireland has done (p. 16) on major building types in Wales? The DCfW doesn't have the resources for that, but one senses from Jones, it would not be an appropriate priority. The DCfW has supported and actually delivered an exhibition in The Senedd. It has originated, devised and delivered two others with accompanying conferences in partnership with others. But the DCfW is a long way from meeting the aspiration set out in the Institute of Welsh Affairs' *Designing Success* report (June 2000) campaigning for a Welsh commission for architecture and design. Has the DCfW been 'educating the public, children and adults about

Making a seismic difference: schemes where DCfW has been in at ground level day one to ensure quality procurement.

1 St Fagans National Museum of History, Cardiff.

2 The Crucible Project for Merthyr Tydfil.

3 Dualling of the A465 through the Clydach Gorge.

best standards in sustaining and enhancing our natural and built environment'. The consistent annual initiative has been the DCfW putting time and resources into supporting the annual National Eisteddfod of Wales Gold Medal for Architecture process, along with the RSAW. This contact has dried up this year (see p. 79). For the National Eisteddfod, architecture, art and craft appear to be worryingly sliding down the scale of priorities of Wales's central cultural event.

The small office team at the DCfW, resourced by the Welsh Government, was massively praised by Sophie Howe in her first 5-year report to government on the progress of public bodies in implementing the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act*. She argued strongly for more resources for the DCfW, a larger staff team to roll out on a greater scale their best work. They certainly need it if they are to promote the best of the best and to raise the bar. 'They have raised their revenue base the last two years in a row, in line with their remit and directly for specific activities' says Jones.

One DCfW roll-out that has really taken off is the place-making agenda. Now it is core to national policy and guidance and thus local authority planning policies. We even have 'directors of place', as opposed to 'directors of planning'. Town after town in Wales are drawing up place-making plans. Maybe this will be the DCfW's most effective public legacy, promoting a truly holistic understanding of the whole realm of which the architecture of a single building is only a part. But some are sceptical. As one review panel member said it's potentially 'all process and very little, places that actually enchant'. The jury is out. It's early days (pp. 48, 87).

Outward and upward

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment in England evaporated in 2011. It produced in its time volumes of influential architectural bar-setting documents and national media outputs. Its budget was huge, way beyond what is currently available to the DCfW.

Jones makes it clear:

'I am not expecting significant change in our broad priorities, we will continue to balance design review, client advisory work, and development of policy as our three main roles. But how we achieve each of those will continue to be refined and developed. Evolution not revolution. Across all aspects of government, we recognise that public finances are constrained so we are not anticipating further additional funding on top of the revenue uplifts for 2023 and 2024. The DCfW has a funding agreement for the 2021–2025 term of government, accompanied by an annual letter that defines our remit in relation to our company objects and powers. We also receive additional funding for specific tasks where that is appropriate, but matching demand for our services and the expectations on us, is challenging with current resources.'

So, we need to face this with some honesty. The gains achieved so far on a stringent budget are to be applauded. The volunteer review panels have offered unswerving service. But Howe was right; to go up the next step will require more resources from somewhere. With that, the DCfW could do international dissemination of the best outcomes and organise a small number of published limited competitions on politically crucial projects. It could chair a colloquium of design leaders in Wales – not a 'leadership group' quango – and publicise their visions. It could invite a conversation with larger firms about possibly partnering with smaller, younger design-led practices. It could promote the fine architecture of our arts and visitor centres and a whole suite of private houses through monographs, although Jones argues that architectural monograph publications have a rapidly reducing audience. Maybe it's the Venice Biennale of Architecture that the DCfW should be aiming at, if the National Eisteddfod is cutting loose. Jones replies that 'this is a long-running debate which consistently fails to gain support'.

Could substantial architectural bar-raising be more visible to all in Wales and in the world? The DCfW's ambition after all should surely be to ensure architecture has its proper respectful place in Welsh culture. At the moment, maybe too much is hidden from view. Jones argues that 'our experience over two decades is that information for, and influence on, key decision makers in governments and clients is more valuable'. So, if not the DCfW, and with *Touchstone* potentially being less physically visible, who will care for architecture's proper respectful place in the culture of Wales?

'The DCfW's ambition after all should surely be to ensure architecture has its proper respectful place in Welsh culture. At the moment, maybe too much is hidden from view.'

4 New Velindre Cancer Centre, Whitchurch, Cardiff.

5 BBC Cymru Wales headquarters, Central Square, Cardiff.

6 The Newtown bypass, Powys.

7 Global Centre for Rail Excellence, Ystradgynlais.

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1,2 Outcomes of the 1939 and 1977 fires, leaving the east wing of the Jacobean mansion house roofless and derelict.

3,4 Before and after: the southern elevation reconstructed.

5 Shelf-like floors that partially occupy the space, while maintaining the masonry cavern of the three-storey volume created by earlier fires.

Making Hay: the sun shines

An exemplary restoration and adaptation of a series of at-risk structures. Paul Harries reviews the award-winning Hay Castle project by MICA Architects.

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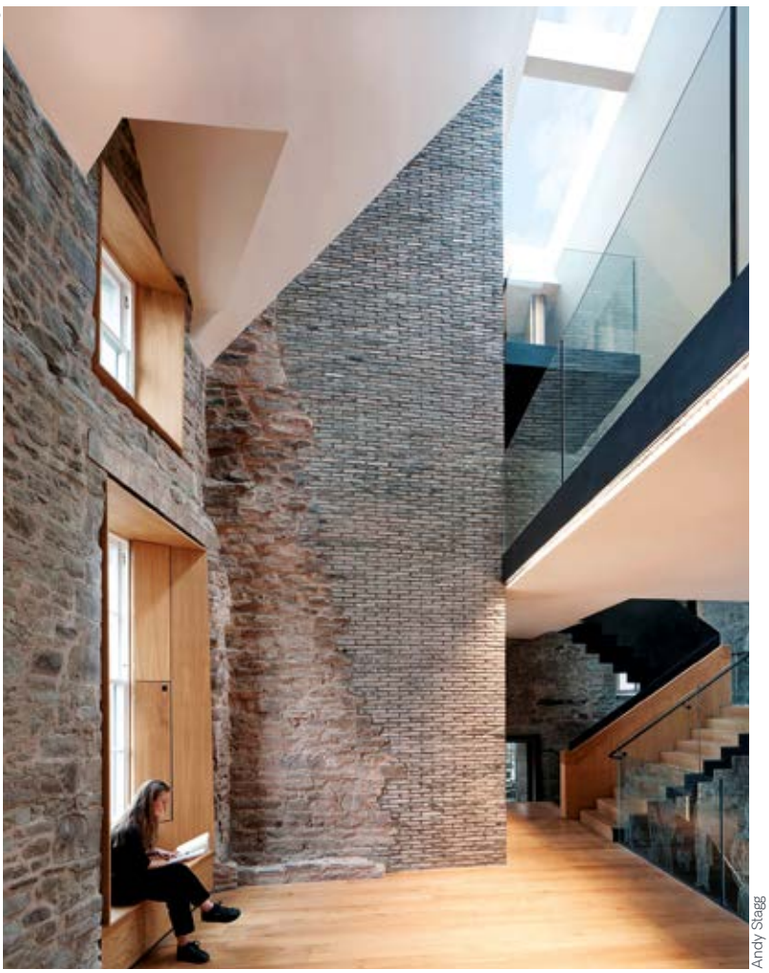

Andy Stagg

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Hay Castle, set in the market town of Hay-on-Wye, is one of the many medieval defence structures erected by the Normans along the Welsh border. Built in the 12th century by the de Braose family, it was damaged in 1231 when the town was sacked by Llewelyn ab Iorwerth and rebuilt by Henry III in 1233.

Following the 16th-century annexation of Wales by England a Jacobean mansion was built adjacent to the remains of the castle in 1640. It is possible that elements of the castle were demolished to make way for the mansion, with parts of the walls demolished to open up views. A reminder that conservation is a relatively modern concept, the fragments that remain were probably only retained for their picturesque, as opposed to historical value. In 1939 and again in 1977 the Jacobean mansion was severely damaged by fire, leaving the east wing roofless and derelict. The castle was purchased in 1963 by the self-coronated king of the 'town of books', the bibliophile Richard Booth. In 2011 the site was purchased by the Hay Castle Trust. In 2016 the trust received a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant, which with match funding allowed the £7.5 million project to progress to construction.

The assemblage of buildings known as Hay Castle includes a scheduled monument, a grade I-listed building and other grade II-listed structures. After a limited competition, Rick Mather Architects (RMA) was appointed in 2015 to transform this group of buildings into a centre for arts and education. The practice had a fine record of working with old and venerable buildings such as the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, the Wallace Collection courtyard, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, and the Dulwich Picture Gallery. Rick Mather died in 2013 and the practice was renamed MICA Architects in 2016 by two of the partners. The practice has maintained the architectural ethos that characterised the work of Rick Mather: a thoughtful rational approach, a skilful manipulation of space and volume, a creative sequencing of spatial flow, a feeling for materials, the use of modern technology, and, most importantly, a rigorous attention to detail. All of the above are in clear evidence in the work of MICA at Hay Castle.

Adapting the ruined and neglected

Of the three existing buildings that occupy the site very little remains of the castle, apart from a tower, portcullis, and a short section of wall.

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The Jacobean mansion house, by far the largest building, was partially destroyed by fire. The third building, a Victorian stable block, sits adjacent to the mansion house. The challenge for the architects was to adapt this ruined and neglected assembly of at-risk buildings into a centre for arts, literature, and learning. This process of adaptation involved extensive research over several years, drawing upon the knowledge of archaeological consultants, historic building experts, and heritage skills advisers. The result is a beautifully adapted building comprising galleries, an event space, an educational suite, a reading room, bookshop, and café.

Much of the work involved is careful conservation, sometimes an invisible hand, repairing what exists so the result is self-effacing, the art of not being noticed. However, in contrast to this quiet and restrained work there are bold interventions – placing the new, the contemporary, adjacent to the old, the ancient.

The architectural interventions are primarily focused on the Jacobean mansion house and the remaining castle tower. When the east wing of the mansion house was burnt out, it left a three-storey shell, open to the sky. A shell connected, conjoined, to the remaining, ruined, castle tower. This adjacency opened the opportunity for interplay between the original volume of the tower and the burnt-out volume of the mansion house.

Externally, the new works follow principles of conservation and restoration. Lost elements, such as gables on the mansion house, have been reinstated, windows have been repaired and replaced. While the external modifications are difficult to detect, the internal adaptation provides a dramatic series of architectural interventions.

Visitors enter into the three-storey section of the house. MICA has preserved the volume of this space, intervening with a series of shelf-like floors that partially occupy the space, while maintaining the masonry cavern of the three-storey space. The interventions are unabashedly

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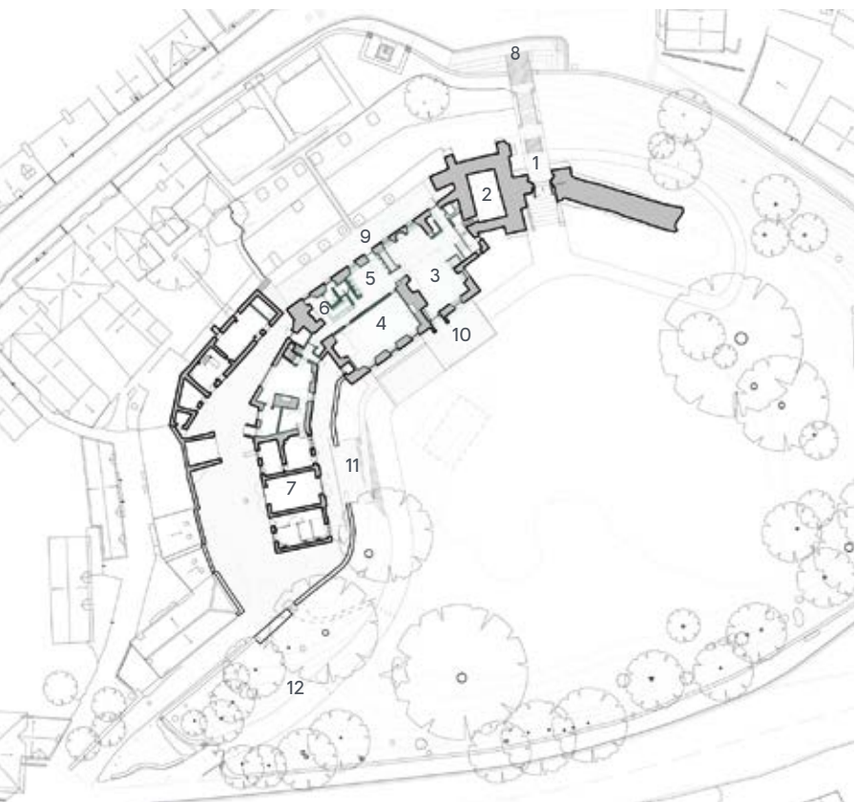
6 Town-facing elevation restored.

7 The ancient gatehouse reopened and reintegrated, connecting the town to the castle.

8, 9 New viewing platform looking over the town, formed in the ruined medieval keep.

Photos 6, 8, 9 Andy Stagg.

‘The interplay between the tower and the mansion house is one of the great delights of the scheme, moving between internal and external spaces, between the crafted modernism of the staircase and the rugged, ruined interior of the tower.’



Key to site plan

1	Gate house
2	Medieval keep
3	Great Hall
4	Restaurant/events
5	Bookshop
6	Kitchen
7	Coach house
8	Town steps
9	North terrace
10	South terrace
11	Coach house terrace
12	Carriage drive

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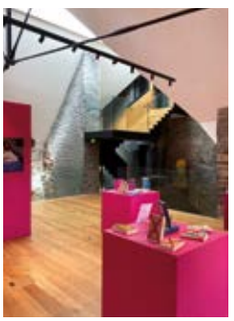

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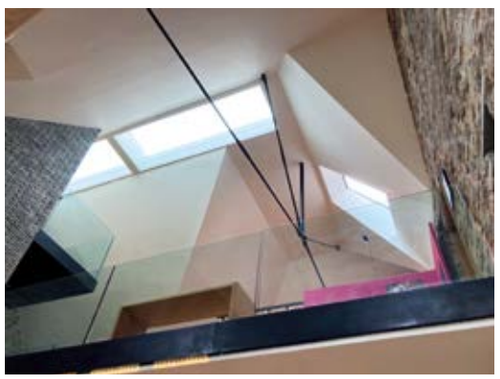

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10, 11 Ground-floor entrance space before and after the installation of security reception desk, not envisaged in the original brief.

12–14 The day-lit, three-storey volume with layers of gallery space inserted, reached via a discrete lift and a boldly expressed monolithic steel staircase, which appears to float in the space, with a sheathed and layered balustrade that is stripped away as it ascends the building. The balustrades become fully glazed as they reach the top floor. A minimal steel-tied new roof structure encloses the volume.

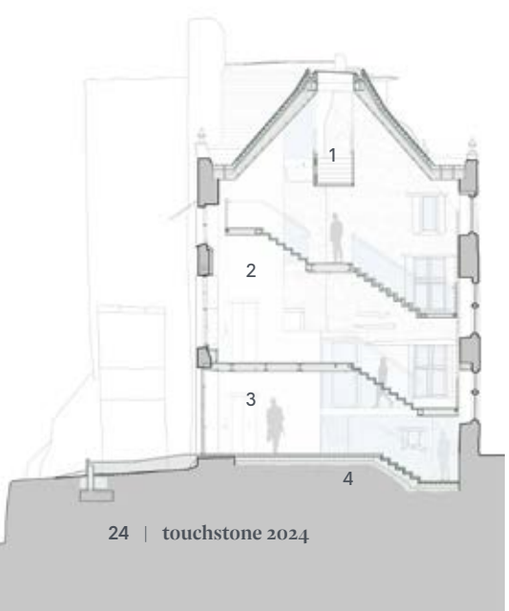
‘… in contrast to this quiet and restrained work there are bold interventions – placing the new, the contemporary, directly adjacent to the old, the ancient.’

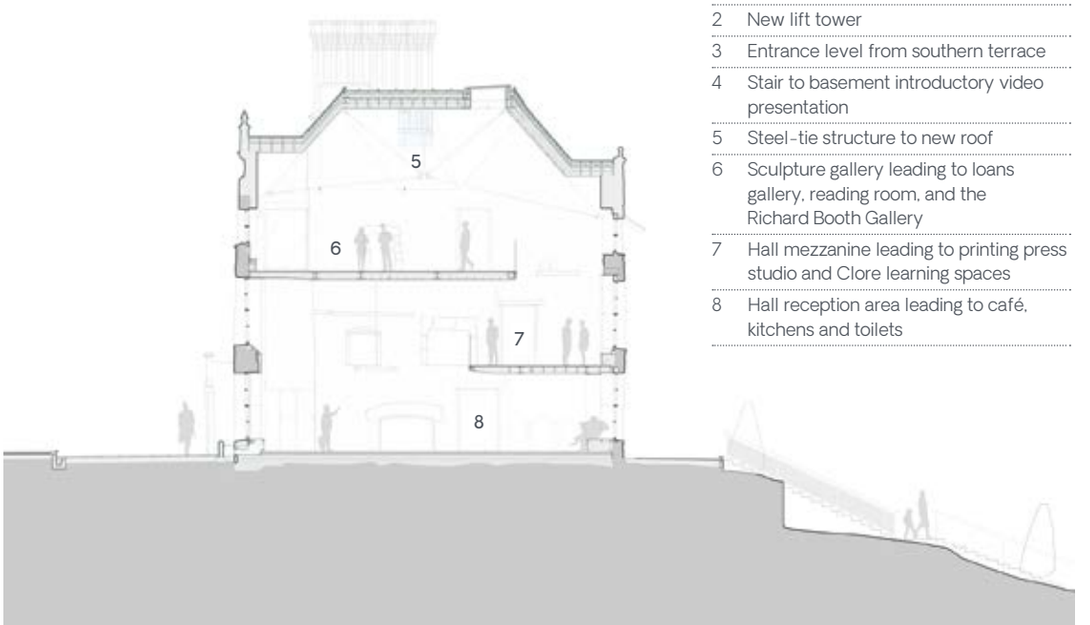
modern in character, with smooth white soffits, steel stairs, glass balustrades and screen walls. To increase transparency between the ascending spaces and maintain the spatial flow, the edges of the floors are completed with structural glass balustrades. Such balustrades have become so ubiquitous of late that it is easy to forget that Rick Mather pioneered the use of structural glazing, with dramatic effect, in his all-glass domestic house extension in Hampstead in 1992.

Beautifully crafted

An elegant staircase rises up through the triple-height space; formed in steel plate the steps are expressed and, despite what must be a heavy structure, with minimal connections back to the original masonry walls, the monolithic steel staircase appears to float in the space. The construction of the stairs is similar to that used by Rick Mather at the Sloane Robinson Building at Keble College, Oxford constructed in welded steel, with stepped steel stringers and steel balustrades. However, the idea is developed further in the staircase at Hay Castle, commencing with a glass balustrade on one side and a steel plate balustrade lined with oak panelling on the other. This sheathed and layered balustrade is stripped away as it ascends the building, with the balustrades becoming fully glazed as they reach the top floor. It is all very rich and beautifully crafted and flows gracefully up to the light.

The theme of lining or sheathing is apparent throughout the project. The reveals to doors and windows are lined with oak panelling, protruding beyond the line of the original masonry and set apart with flash-gaps scribed to the stonework. The material palette comprises timber, glass, steel and copper – smooth, engineered materials that contrast with the original stonework. Where





Key to cross sections

1	Access to viewing platform based in the old keep
2	New lift tower
3	Entrance level from southern terrace
4	Stair to basement introductory video presentation
5	Steel-tie structure to new roof
6	Sculpture gallery leading to loans gallery, reading room, and the Richard Booth Gallery
7	Hall mezzanine leading to printing press studio and Clore learning spaces
8	Hall reception area leading to café, kitchens and toilets

15

Andy Stagg

15 On the upper floor the new gallery spaces have original exposed-oak trusses and rafters, and internal walls with exposed-timber frames. The quality of the original spaces is preserved, the touches are light, with timber-lined reveals and carefully crafted joinery for panels and cupboards.

Details






sections of stonework have had to be rebuilt or new walls introduced, these have been achieved with brickwork – similar in tone to the stone, but distinct in module, and clearly defining the new against the old.

In the base of the tower is an animated introduction to the history of the castle, which is projected directly on to the stone walls. As you rise up the stairs there are points at which you can enter the ruined tower. The apertures that form the transition between the Jacobean house and ancient tower slice through the thick masonry walls lined with copper sheathing that frame the glass doors. The interplay between the tower and the mansion house is one of the great delights of the scheme, moving between internal and external spaces, between the crafted modernism of the staircase and the rugged, ruined interior of the tower. At the highest point of the staircase you enter into the top of the tower, which offers splendid views across the town and the River Wye beyond. There is a further set of steps that rise to a steel platform at the highest point of the tower. This is not generally accessible to the public but, for a reviewing architect, an exception was made.

The magnificent views from the tower are an obvious magnet for the tourist. A treat for the modern eye, but also a reminder of the fearful gaze of the occupying force that would have looked out on these surroundings in earlier times – a point of unrivalled surveillance of the Welsh resistance.

The roof to the east wing of the building was completely destroyed by fire. While the original roof would have been held up with stout oak trusses, it has been reinstated in a most delicate manner to reveal the irregular volume to the roof space as a folded soffit held together with the lightest of steel-tie structures. It is a wonderful open space, punctuated by large-scale rooflights that provide natural light to an open gallery, while offering close-up views of the glorious, fluted, brick Jacobean chimneys that crown the building.

Light touches

While MICA Architects has clearly relished intervening in the remains of the east wing, exploiting the volume, the texture of the masonry, and the form of the roof space, in the other half of the building they have embarked upon a careful repair and restoration of the original structure. The quality of the original spaces is preserved, the touches are light, with timber-lined reveals and carefully crafted joinery for panels and cupboards. On the upper floor the new gallery spaces have original exposed oak trusses and rafters and internal walls with exposed timber frames. The transition from the open volume of the grand space with its modern interventions, to the intimacy of the restored gallery spaces, provides a dramatic spatial counterpoint. The entrance to the gallery is lined with oak, which extends at soffit level to provide a canopy that joins to the lining of the reveal to an adjacent window. It is an inventive, layered arrangement that holds a complex recessed corner while signalling the entrance to the gallery.

The new gallery spaces hold temporary exhibitions. When I visited there was an exhibition devoted to the life of April Ashley, the LGBT rights activist who was once a resident of Hay-on-Wye. Exhibitions can be arranged in the larger spaces of the three-storey volume, or in the exhibition spaces that retain the domestic scale of the original mansion house. These provide opportunities for exhibiting small- and large-scale objects. There are other, domestic-scale intimate spaces, such as the reading room, the education suite, and the very successful café. These are all beautifully, delicately, restored spaces. The eye for detail, for thoughtful care and attention, is present throughout, with flush, shadow-gapped joinery set against ancient oak flooring.

To reconnect the castle to the town, the castle gateway has been restored. The 12th-century wooden doors, that had remained closed since 1600, have been opened, offering a direct connection to the town. The route to the top of the castle tower can now commence from the town's market place.

This is a fine and skilful example of how to bring an at-risk building back to life. MICA Architects has worked painstakingly to fully absorb the brief, to clearly understand the context, to pull together the many threads that make this project a success. It is a building that not only works well for the client on a practical level, but is also a source of surprise, interest and delight to the visitor. The combination of careful conservation and modern intervention has transformed a sad and ruined structure into a vibrant architectural encounter, providing joy to the residents of, and visitors to, the market town of Hay-on-Wye.

Dr Paul Harries is a director of BCHN Architects and head of Swansea School of Architecture. For much of his career he has been involved with designing contemporary architecture in historic contexts. Between 1988 and 2011 he taught the final year of the first interior architecture course in the UK, in the Cardiff School of Art and Design, which pioneered and focused on the adaptation and re-use of existing buidings – an idea that is now mainstream....

Credits:

Client: Hay Castle Trust
Architect: MICA Architects
Structural engineer: engineersHRW (Stephen Haskins)
Services engineer: CO2O Consulting (Andrew Long)
Archaeological consultant: Oxford Archaeology (Julian Munby)
Cost consultant and fire consultant: Aecom (David Owen, Tom Lewis)
Landscape architect: Jeremy Rye
Interpretation consultant: Imagemakers (Charlie Curnow)
Project management: Mott Macdonald (Gemma Rees)
Clerk of works: McNamara & Co (Martin McNamara)
Contractor: John Weaver Contactors (Nathan Davies)

Scaling the ramparts

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In 2024 Cadw celebrated its 40th anniversary. High up on the league table of its most ambitious achievements must be the recent interventions at Castell Caernarfon adding another layer of narrative and physical access to this place of many confrontations. **Adam Voelcker** explores the links between the physical and the intellectual layers added to these towers of power.

The King's Gate project is the latest and most ambitious of Cadw's modernisations at Castell Caernarfon, completed in April 2023 after a three-year construction period and at a cost of £5 million – both increased as a result of the pandemic. If there is one word that sums up the aims of the project, it is 'accessibility', the buzz word that pervades so much of modern culture. Making a medieval castle fully accessible might seem crazily optimistic, but this is what Cadw has aspired to do, and this ambition must be applauded.

Two distinct but interconnected strands to this aim have underpinned the project: physical accessibility and intellectual accessibility. The first concerns the architectural interventions; the second is more to do with exhibition and interpretation, in other words what gets put into those interventions to entertain visitors, maybe even educate them. Buttress Architects was the chief player in the first; Hotrod Creations, the main interpretation designer, in the second. By all accounts, they and Cadw have all worked together positively, with a creative cross-flow of ideas between all parties.

Reflecting the grandeur

Providing a lift up to battlement level seems to have been one of the main aims of the project, for not just the young and fit to enjoy the views and the sheer experience of being up so high. Located in the King's Gate, it is conveniently near the castle entrance and the intermediate lift-stop serves some but not all of the new spaces created in the three volumes of the gateway, hitherto little used. Into these volumes, the architects have inserted a series of interventions, touching the existing fabric as lightly as possible and entirely reversible. They describe their approach as 'bold and innovative', though I am not sure what is innovative about it. It is certainly bold up at roof level, where instead of capping off the upper-level chambers with roofs, Buttress has created an exciting landscape of Accoya timber decking, steps and seating to greet the visitor as s/he exits the lift after it pops through the deck in a black-framed glass box. There is nothing timid about the application of all this wood, the lift enclosure and the glass balustrades around the terraces. Indeed, the architects' aim was to 'not shy away from celebrating the new architecture as clearly modern interventions that reflected the grandeur of the castle in a contemporary way'. Yet, oddly, they also talk about their wish 'to minimise the impact of their work on the castle's significance'. I wonder which they really believed? Certainly, as you look up at the King's Gate from below, the balustrades are very assertive. The heavy handrails and the

1 The new roof terrace, looking west. New commissioned artworks add to the existing historical narrative.

2 Honest expression of new and old. Balancing safety and transparency of views leads to busy handrail compositions. The window lights the new café servery.

3 Tiered seating and steps in Accoya slats with more commissioned artworks, form a new roof to the Prison Tower.

4 What was once to have been the space for a great hall, is now a viewing platform for visitors to imagine themselves as castle occupiers looking down into the castle's lower ward or out across the Menai Strait to Anglesey.

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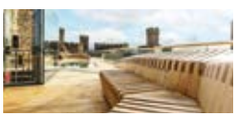
Timber insertions



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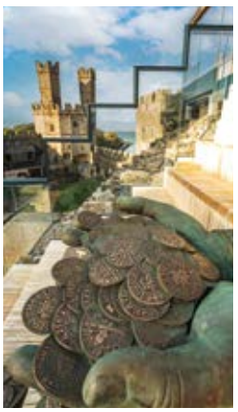
insistent zigzags they make at the steps draw too much attention to them, and reflections of the sky in the glass turn the balustrades into very obvious opaque strips. Is this celebration of honest modern architecture, or is it actually a misjudgement of the visual impact? By the time you reach the viewing platforms, however, perhaps the question does not matter. It's a thrill being up there, and visitors clearly love it, especially children. But then what? Did Cadw miss a trick here? What was all that commanding view for? How was it perceived by those below for centuries and even now?

Below this level, the architectural intervention is less obtrusive. Windows and loops are protected with plain sheets of glass fixed with simple brackets (cleaning will be an expensive nightmare); there is a handsome timber spiral staircase (the stepped alternative to the lift) and the ribbed leitmotif of the timber seating is repeated in the café, the shop, and the revamped ticket office/entrance area. This feels a good move as it unites the various interventions and gives them a satisfying consistency. Less happy is the current situation with the lift. It has remained out of use for much of the time because of procedural and fire-safety issues rather than technical problems. Without the lift, the café has to shut, meaning visitors must use the secondary café in a timber shed in the Lower Ward – admittedly quite a handsome shed, but with minimal seating inside. All this is highly unsatisfactory considering the lift was to be the star of the show.

Commissioned artworks



Contentious messages

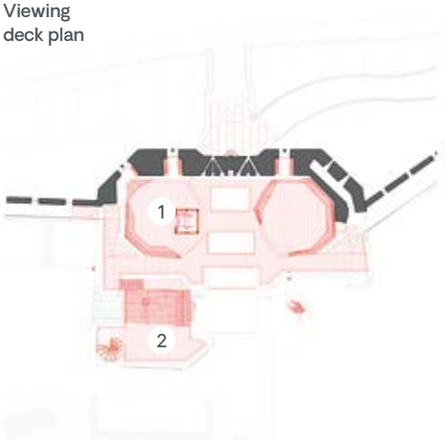
While other heritage bodies like the National Trust are coming to terms with awkward questions connected with empire and slavery, Cadw has avoided expanding on the most obviously confrontational issue of the castle's creator towards its Welsh-speaking local culture over centuries. It seems to have decided to follow a less contentious and easier interpretative path to share with its visitors. 'Caernarfon Castle – Built by Hand' is the chosen theme, an idea conceived by Hotrod Creations, the interpretation consultant, to champion the builders and craftsmen who made the castle in the late 13th and subsequent centuries. Hotrod engaged artists to create sculptures in the form of giant hands to describe the work of the mason, carpenter and blacksmith, and these are distributed within, on top, and around the King's Gate, along with a description and the artist's name. To my mind, they are distracting and superfluous. No doubt fascinating to children, these hands do little to inform the adult visitor about the crafts they purport to depict and they draw attention away from the very stone and mortar of the castle that is already there for the taking. Surely, clever

5 The secondary café in a timber shed in the Lower Ward – admittedly quite a handsome shed, but with minimal seating.

6 First floor level: new café sitting area with more commissioned artwork, The *Mason's Hand*, on the left and the new lift enclosure on the right.

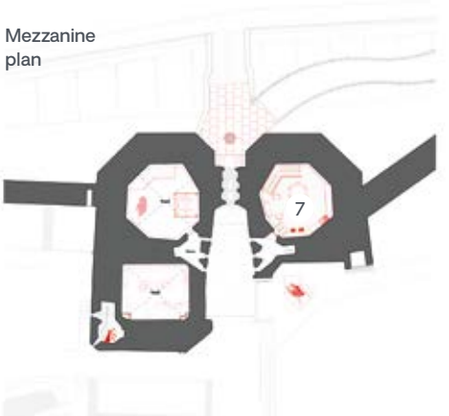
6

Viewing deck plan



First floor plan

Mezzanine plan

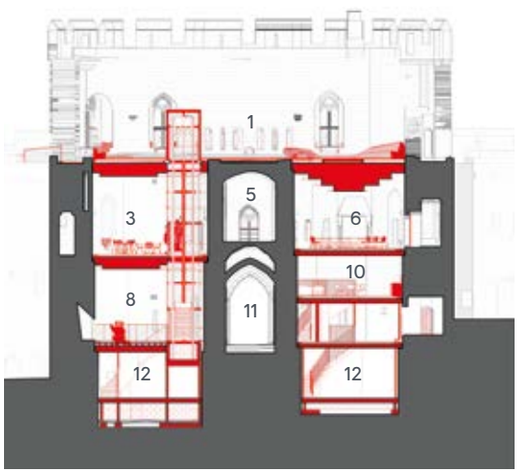


Ground floor plan

modern technology could have played a major role here, with interactive imagery and handheld digital devices to describe aspects such as exactly how the castle was built, how the materials were sourced, what it was like to be an Englishman from hundreds of miles away to build a prodigiously huge fortification in a wild hostile country (and what it was like to be a Welshman too, and not forgetting any women who may have been involved!). In its zeal to engage the paying public and provide a memorable visitor experience, I fear Cadw has missed some tricks here.

Something else is missing, too. If the project's big story is the building of the castle, and if, in the words of the architects, 'we are simply adding another layer to its story', how come they and the contractors don't get to feature more prominently in this story? Surely a £5-million 'groundbreaking redevelopment' (Cadw's words) represents a substantial addition to the castle's history? Is it modesty that prevents the latest phase of work being added to the jigsaw that is presented to the public? Or has the status of the architect reduced so much that s/he is no longer recognised as a major contributor to design in the built environment? So much has been achieved at Castell Caernarfon on the accessibility front, but as a cultural experience I wonder if Cadw could not have encouraged a braver, more informative approach to telling the story.

7 The lift enclosure – and even the litter bin – are incorporated into the sculptural landscape awaiting those who venture up to the ramparts.



Key to floor plans and sections

1 Viewing deck with glazed inserts
2 Tiered viewing deck
3 Café
4 Café servery
5 Chapel/exhibition
6 Education room
7 Staff mess
8 Exhibition
9 Retail
10 Store
11 Entrance/reception
12 Store (both sides)
13 WCs/changing place

Credits:

Client: Cadw (Chris Wilson, head of conservation)

Architect: Buttress Architects (Stephen Anderson, director; Lucy Ashcroft, project architect)

Structural engineer: Mann Williams (Pat Ruddock)

Cost consultant: SP Projects (Ika Hulanova)

Environmental/services engineer: Silcock Leedham (Nick Barton)

Interpretation designer: Hotrod Creations (Mark Woods)

Main contractor: Grosvenor Construction (Will Mellor, director)

Photography: Caroline Bridges Photography

Moving to north Wales in 1979 to work with David Lea, Adam Voelcker then worked in private practice with his wife Frances, mainly dealing with existing buildings, some of them places of worship - churches in need of careful repair, some of them existing buildings suitable for a more extensive re-ordering. He was a co-author of the Gwynedd *volume in the* Buildings of Wales *(Pevsner) series and wrote a book about the arts and crafts architect Herbert North before turning to a monograph on David Lea and, more recently, one on Sidney Colwyn Foulkes, to be published as part of the UWP/RSAW* Architecture of Wales *series.*

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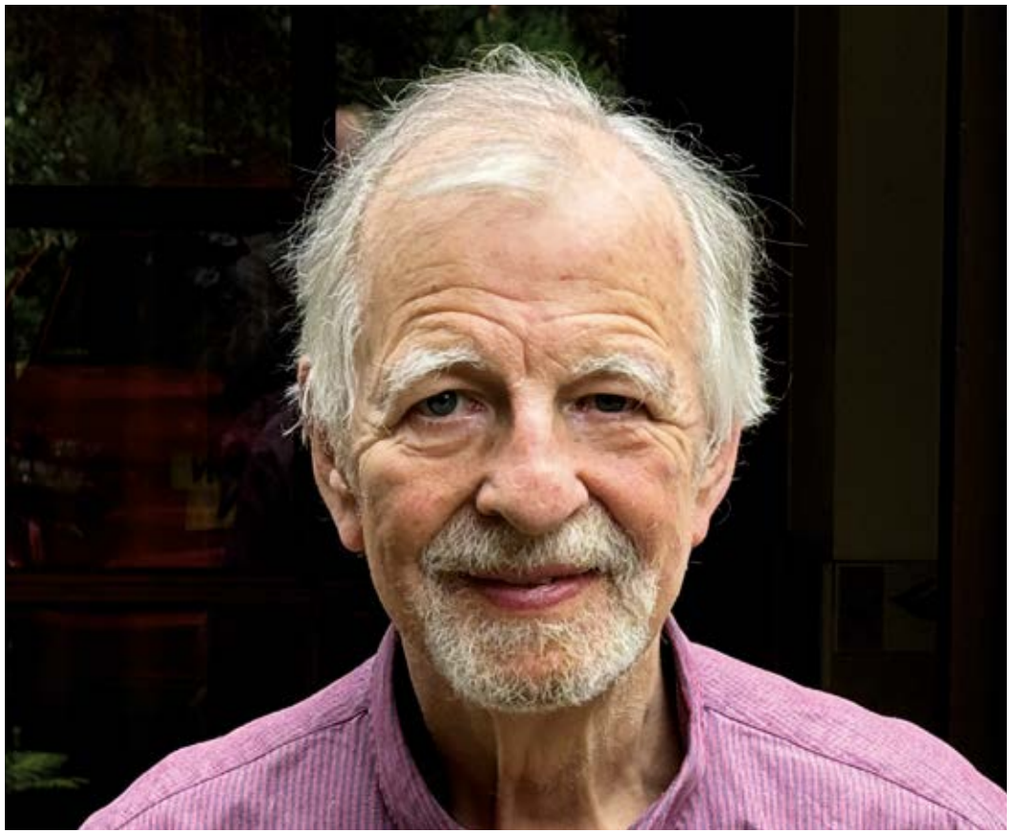

Gareth Jones

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1 The ecological visionary, Herbert Girardet, at his home near Trellech, 2024.

2 A gathering of the World Future Council of which Girardret was a co-founder (second row, fifth from left).

From resurgence to regeneration

He came back to the land, but his ecological intellect turned to sorting out the unsustainability of the dense city. Gareth Jones catches up on renowned environmentalist Herbert Girardet's life's journey from Tintern to Adelaide.

Shortly after I arrive at Herbert Girardet's cottage, nestled on the edge of Tintern forest in the hills above the River Wye, a potential disaster looms. His wife Barbara announces there's no water coming out of the taps. Their property's spring-fed tank has unexpectedly emptied, meaning their only source of water, and that of several families who share their 15 acres of land to grow vegetables, has disappeared, inexplicably. By the end of my interview with the 81-year-old environmentalist, however, the locals have rallied around. They bring emergency water supplies, identify the problem and begin to repair the tank.

It's an illustration of the self-reliant lifestyle that the Girardets and their neighbours have practised since the couple arrived in Tintern in 1976, refugees from a dirty, crime-ridden London, wanting to lead a simpler life: '... people were moving out of cities like London ... partly to find a more ecological way of life, because we were beginning to realise there's a limit to what we could do to the planet if we were going to have a long-term future living on this lovely bit of earth that we all cherish,' he tells me.

The couple soon found to their frustration that while their land could provide them with enough to eat, they just couldn't make a living from it. So, Girardet turned to writing for *The Guardian* and other papers, launching him into a career of environmental publishing and activism that has seen him work with such influential figures as E F Schumacher, author of *Small is Beautiful*. He became a leading urban ecologist advising cities worldwide, co-founding the environmental campaigning organisation, the World Future Council, in 2007.

Far from paradise

It was when he was writing for *Resurgence* magazine that Girardet got to know John Seymour, another London exile who'd settled in Wales and whose landmark *The Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency* sold a million copies and was translated into 20 languages. In 1986 the pair made a series for BBC TV called 'Far from Paradise', on the history of human impact on planet earth, and it proved to be a turning point in Girardet's intellectual development:

'... it gave me a big-picture perspective in terms of the fact that we shouldn't just concern ourselves with our little patches of land locally, as we were doing on our little few acres in south

3 **Agropolis: The 'isolated' traditional town with minimal transport connections to the outside world, self-reliant in local food and forest resources.**

In his book *The Isolated State*, published in 1826, pioneering German economist Johann Heinrich von Thünen described how isolated towns and villages were surrounded by concentric rings of varying land uses: market gardens and milk production were in the first, 'inner', ring, since perishable vegetables, fruit and dairy products must get to market quickly; timber and firewood, heavy to transport but essential for urban living, came from the second ring, the 'town forest', also used for recreational purposes.

Less perishable grain and other field crops came from the third, fourth and fifth rings. The sixth, outermost ring, was used for ranching purposes. Beyond these zones lay uncultivated 'wilderness'. These complex land-use arrangements helped to ensure food and energy security for local urban populations on the basis of sound ecological practices.

4 **Petropolis: The modern city, systemically dependent for all its functions on fossil-fuel technologies, facilitating global connectedness.**

Petropolis is the fossil-fuel-powered city of the industrial revolution. All its key functions are enabled by daily injections of coal, oil and gas. Cities of unprecedented scale have emerged on the basis of ever-increasing supplies from ever-deeper coal mines, oil and gas fields, feeding power stations and refineries.

Petropolis is a gas guzzler par excellence. Global transport systems supply resources and products from factories and farms located across the planet. According to Lewis Mumford, modern cities are products of 'carboniferous capitalism' – its functioning systemically reliant on profitable investments in carbon-fuel-based technologies. But the modern city, with its vast global ecological footprint, is profoundly unsustainable, being deeply implicated in the global environmental crisis, most clearly seen in ever-growing climate uncertainty.

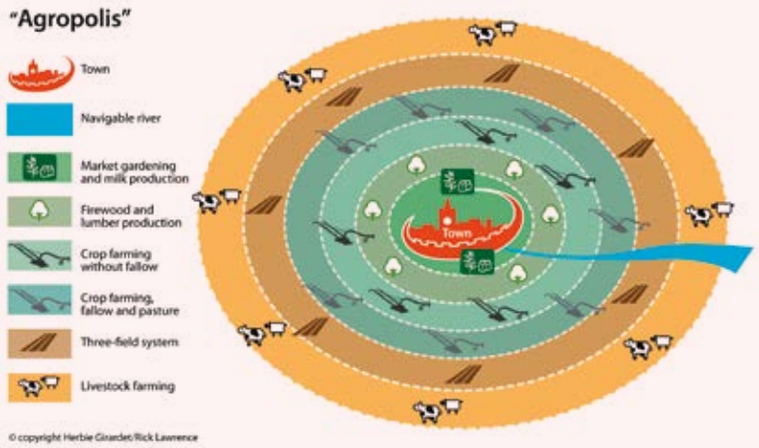
5 **Ecopolis: the city that reconnects to its local hinterland, utilising new renewable energy and regenerative, soil-restoring food production systems.**

The concept of 'ecopolis' proposes a new paradigm for cities: the idea of 'future-proof', regenerative urbanisation. To exist long term, cities would have to deliberately set out to minimise their ecological footprints. A wide spectrum of environmental technologies would become the basis for a plethora of new local job and business opportunities.

Efficient use of renewable energy, and return of organic waste from cities to the region, would enable a regenerative relationship between city and local countryside. Such innovative developments would be driven by, both, *local* creativity and initiative, and appropriate *national* policy frameworks. Suitable measures involve both 'sticks', such as waste disposal and carbon taxes, and 'carrots', such as enabling policies for renewable energy, and support schemes for local food production.

Herbert Girardet

'... a distinctive position ... somewhere between gung-ho city-builders and economists who promote urban "agglomeration" and densification and those ... who hanker after an almost pre-industrial "good life", based around smallholdings and agricultural communities.'



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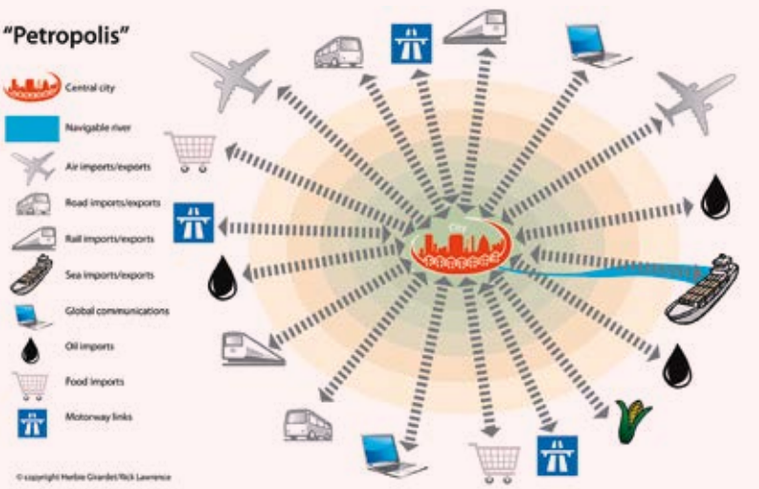
J.H. von Thüen, H. Girardet and R.Lawrence



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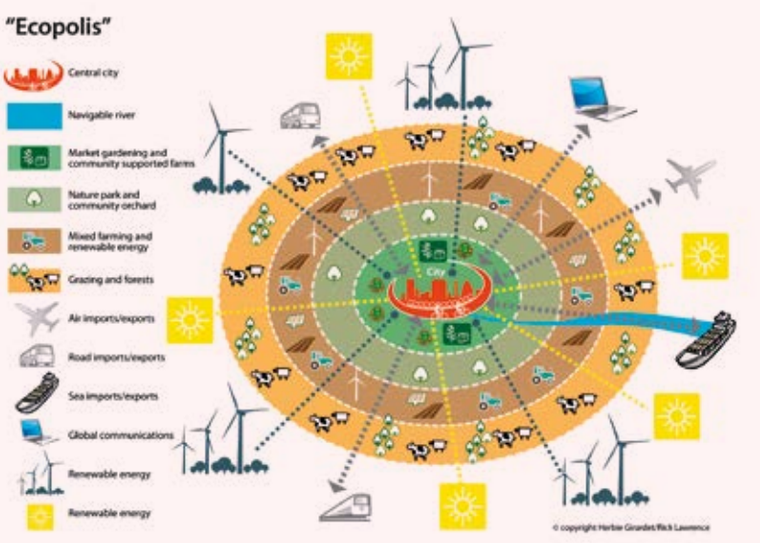
H. Girardet, R.Lawrence



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H. Girardet, R.Lawrence

Wales, but to look at the global picture of an urbanising humanity that had been moved into a completely different way of life as a result of the industrial revolution'.

Ever since, Girardet has occupied a distinctive position in the environmental movement, somewhere between gung-ho city-builders and economists who promote urban 'agglomeration' and densification and those, including his late friend Seymour, who hanker after an almost pre-industrial 'good life', based around smallholdings and agricultural communities.

In his *The Gaia Atlas of Cities* (1992) Girardet went so far as to describe cities as parasites owing to their voracious appetites for resources, from food to metals and fossil fuels, and because of the amount of waste they spewed out, much of it dumped into rivers, seas and landfill.

Girardet was writing this when the term sustainability, in environmental terms, was relatively new. He has moved on since then, however, and tells me that:

'denser cities are good because they concentrate people and therefore make possible better services, especially public transport, which then create more efficient, sustainable and healthier ways of life. But a problem that isn't acknowledged enough is that in developing countries when people move from countryside to the big city, their per capita consumption and waste outputs go up dramatically, meaning the ecological footprint of cities far exceeds their urban footprint'.

'... urgent action must be taken to restore ecosystems by turning urban organic waste into nutrients for depleted agricultural land...'

Nutrients are the issue

He believes environmental sustainability has now been overtaken by 'regeneration', a concept which is being increasingly co-opted by the ecological movement. Whereas sustainability effectively meant avoiding doing anything that degraded further an already badly damaged planet, regeneration's advocates claim that urgent action must be taken to restore ecosystems by turning urban organic waste into nutrients for depleted agricultural land, while also reducing the use of resources in the first place.

'You have this incredible global drive towards urbanisation, ever more industries for global exports and so on. So, what will happen to the land that is supposed to keep these cities fed with food, supply them with timber? What about all the nutrients that are required in order to assure that land is productive in the future? ... We can't carry on having these linear systems of resource use where we simply take from nature and give nothing back to it. This is now a major issue that we are not really addressing in any meaningful way.'

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Moving down under

In 2003, the government of South Australia invited Girardet to be a 'thinker-in-residence' to advise Adelaide, a city of more than a million people, on how to reduce its ecological impact. 'So, I ... decided ... to see whether one can change the way the city worked and at the same time create new economies in the process', he recalls. He recommended financial incentives to accelerate the use of renewable energy. There was also a major drive to increase composting and the reuse of organic waste produced in South Australia:

'In one way or another this is now returned to local farmland ... to assure sustained fertility. We also initiated significant reforestation projects in the city region ... some three million trees have been planted, partly to stabilise soils and partly to reabsorb carbon dioxide emissions.'

Girardet acknowledges there are challenges to this vision of regeneration, however, not least the fact that, unlike the 'night soil' spread on mediaeval fields by armies of peasants, modern human sewage in the UK has been found to contain enough chemical toxins to question its suitability for use as fertiliser.

Renewables – wind and solar – now dominate Adelaide's energy mix, with the result that the city has set 2025 – *next year* – to become 'net zero'. According to Girardet a new economy is been created in the process. 'There are now tens of thousands of jobs in renewable energy, in composting, in urban agriculture, and this is a very significant part of the way the city region works now. So, I think it's a real success story.'

Swansea kick-start

Five years ago, Girardet received a call from Carwyn Davies, an admirer of his work and boss of Hacer Developments, wanting advice about his proposal for a 'biophilic' building in Swansea. Giradet tells me that 'basically he's ... caught on to the idea that buildings should, first of all, be as energy self-sufficient as possible'. He applauds the combination of renewable energy and communal greenhouse built into Powell Dobson's architecture:

7

6 Large-scale composting for regenerative farming near Adelaide. According to Girardet, a new economy is being created in the process: 'There are now tens of thousands of jobs in renewable energy, in composting, in urban agriculture, and this is a very significant part of the way the Adelaide city region works now'.

7 When the fossil-fuel supply is denied, and a community has to become reliant on what it grows regionally, then dense urban horticulture, using every available open space in the city, becomes a necessity, as in Cuba.

'It looks very promising ... it's very encouraging for Carwyn Davies to be a leader in ... trying to redevelop inner-city areas in Wales, particularly in Swansea itself, into a project that really stands out as something that we can showcase for a future urban redevelopment.'

So, does he think Hacer's biophilic building can kick-start Swansea into becoming a 'regenerative city', along the lines of Adelaide? He thinks an opportunity has opened up with the new government in Westminster. 'Ed Miliband, who is now the energy secretary in London, is insisting that all future buildings should be solar-powered to a large degree and certainly be highly insulated, with all the sort of ingredients that Carwyn Davies is implementing in his biophilic building.' He says it's now vital that Swansea's city leaders, with support from the Welsh Government, develop a renewable-energy plan that will both reduce CO_2 emissions and replace jobs being lost at Port Talbot's steelworks.

Girardet is particularly taken with the vertical greenhouse in the new building. He's long advocated for much more urban agriculture and green spaces within cities. More allotments, more urban and peri-urban farms, more greenhouses heated by cheap solar energy, all reusing nutrient-rich human waste from city-dwellers – that is the vision for urban habitats that Girardet has arrived at after a lifetime of thinking and practice:

'Then you could imagine much more integration between the ... farmland around Swansea ... more active initiatives by food producers to supply local markets, I mean, active policies for urban food supply from regional hinterlands...'

Viable earth systems

It's fitting that by the end of the interview we have returned to farming, one of the issues that has preoccupied Girardet since before he set up on his Welsh smallholding, and that was the subject of his first book *Land for the People* (1976). Sometimes he can sound pessimistic, owing to what he believes is the totally inadequate response of politicians so far to the accelerating climate and ecological crises. Yet he also believes that Wales's future generations commissioner and legislation, in combination with a new government in London, is a cause for hope. Does this, on the other hand, sound too optimistic? He responds with his own question:

'Can we continue ... on this current track? No, we can't, we absolutely cannot, and the question is how we can build economies that are actually compatible with the long-term viability of earth systems.'

Girardet's advocacy and discussion of the planet's problems has always been combined with bringing to our attention real-life examples of potential solutions; projects like Swansea's biophilic building. That's to be expected. He has, after all, in tandem with his intellectual journey, tried to maintain the practical life of self-sufficiency in a tight rural community. As he demonstrated that day when I was with him and when he and the neighbours calmly collaborated to get the water back on again.

Gareth Jones first interviewed Herbert Girardet in the early 1990s as a TV journalist at BBC World. After 40 years working mostly for the BBC, but also for various UN agencies he is now a freelance TV, radio and print journalist.

'... it's now vital that Swansea's city leaders, with support from the Welsh Government, develop a renewable-energy plan that will both reduce CO_2 emissions and replace jobs being lost at Port Talbot's steelworks.'

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A developer in Swansea is in conversation with renowned urban ecologist Herbert Girardet. **Gareth Jones** asks developer **Carwyn Davies** will his Hacer development be the pace-setter for a biophilic Welsh urbanism.

Testing nature in urbe

Carwyn Davies is clearly used to heights, racing up ladders, hopping about on the vertiginous floor plates that have been slowly piling up into a 13-storey, mixed-use development in Swansea's city centre. He's showing me the elements of the structure he's proudest of, including a steel and aluminium framework that will house a giant greenhouse in the sky. 'The glasshouse is eight floors up. We couldn't find anyone who could build it at that height at first. It's quite special.' Siting a community urban farm high up in a block of apartments and offices is just one of several innovative – and challenging – features that, when completed, should make this 'biophilic' building one of the greenest and most forward-looking in Wales.

Davies, whose company Hacer is the developer, is keen to show off the heating system, which he claims will be 'as close to net zero carbon as it's possible to get'. On the roof there are two enormous air-source heat pumps, part of what he calls an ambient energy loop. 'Their sole job is to heat up our sprinkler tank, which also acts as a thermal store.' Warm water from the tank, effectively a giant battery through the day, is then circulated to offices and apartments to be boosted up by smaller heat pumps. This design should prove to be highly efficient, reducing heating and hot-water costs for everyone in the block. Rooftop photovoltaics will also provide electricity.

According to architect, Powell Dobson, the building's stepped-back massing, borne out of urban and structural constraints, has resulted in a series of south-facing terraces that will provide for rooftop horticulture. Additionally, balconies outside apartments and offices will provide 300 linear metres of space for further planting. If everyone does get planting (there could be up to 500 residents and office workers), this building will be literally green, visible across Swansea.

'There's a huge space here to grow food and we hope that's a catalyst for the creation of this urban community ... we have the five-storey glasshouse where there'll be a hydroponic system of growth so that can probably, when it's up and running, knock out quite a substantial volume of product, vegetable products, so that's exciting', Davies tells me.

This is a social experiment, then, as well as a new kind of building, something Davies readily acknowledges. 'The objective is that people come together ... to grow food, we're hoping, but ultimately the choice will be theirs.' A community interest company has been set up to run this urban farm as a social enterprise. Hacer, working with its partner, housing association Pobl Group, will vet potential residents for community spirit.

Commitment is key

The project has not been all plain sailing. When it completes in 2025, it'll be more than 12 months late and will have gone considerably over budget. Davies puts this down to a combination of Covid, bad weather, supply-chain inflation and technical

challenges associated with so much innovation: '... we've probably had to contribute ... significant sums over what was envisaged at the beginning just to ensure that we deliver it. So that's just our commitment to it'.

There is often legitimate scepticism about developments that shout so loudly about their green credentials from the outset, either because they're insincere 'greenwash' designed to gather support or because the environment-friendly aspects get value-engineered out as costs rise. So far, there appears to have been only one major casualty: the aquaponics and fish farm, much trumpeted originally, have been quietly abandoned. This, according to Hacer, is because experts have told them it just wasn't going to work in the way envisaged. 'There have been a lot of learnings', says Davies, but he insists that all other major green aspects will remain because, he says, he's in it for the long term: '... this is not going to be a gimmick, an aesthetic, which is literally discarded ... we've set up a community interest company and we are part of that board of directors'. Unusually, Hacer will not be selling the building straight after completion and will remain as hands-on manager for five years or even much longer. 'This is not a build and walkaway idea', Davies adds.

Financing frustrations

Carwyn Davies says one of the biggest challenges for a project with this much innovation is persuading funders to back it. He says a grant from the Welsh Government's Innovative Housing Programme has been crucial, as has finance from several other funders and partners. But the finance package has been complicated, prone to some frustrating delays and Davies says that if we want more green building – often seen as risky – we should get much more serious about how to raise the capital.

'I was at a round table chaired by Hillary Clinton on sustainable finance and one figure that came out was that only one project out of 20 that gets high-level funding could be called green. In Wales, we have the added problem of commercial viability. There's an opportunity for Welsh Government, post-Brexit, to increase state aid for property development and increase the gap between the costs of construction and the end value of the investment.'

Only then, says Davies, will we really boost construction outside Cardiff, in areas where property values and returns are so much lower.

Davies thinks, however, that as more biophilic buildings come on stream, overcoming their technical challenges, it should become easier to persuade risk-averse investors. He's also confident that by bringing nature into buildings, such living and working spaces will become increasingly popular, boosting commercial returns:

'We know that people like being close to nature – that's the definition of biophilic – and that we have got the best building in Wales when it comes to ESG [environmental, social, governance-credentials] ... so we may get tenants quicker because of it. We may ... get more favourable terms on the rental levels with it.'

Altogether there is 100,000 square feet of space, a third of that lettable as offices. The 50 apartments are a mix of one, two, and three bedrooms, with rents at 'affordable' levels. The duplex units on top command spectacular views of Swansea Bay. The ground floor will house educational spaces where schoolchildren can come to learn about biology, agriculture, and aquaponics. It's hoped there'll also be artisanal pop-up retail, and the like.

Regenerative feedback loops

The biophilic building can be seen as a traditional regeneration project in that it is part of efforts to revive an ailing city centre. It is, in fact, reusing an old building – a disused Woolworths store – and in the process saving 3,000 tonnes of embedded carbon. But, it's also 'regenerative' in a sense that's being increasingly adopted by environmentalists, architects and urban designers to describe buildings that do better than have zero-impact on the planet: they actually enhance it, for example by reusing resources in feedback loops to promote the regrowth of nature or creating net reductions in damaging emissions.

When Carwyn Davies was planning his biophilic scheme in 2019, one of the calls he made was to the leading urban ecologist Herbert Girardet (see pp. 30-34). Davies had read his books *Cities People Planet* and *Creating Regenerative Cities* and wanted his advice on how to build with nature in mind. Davies is an unusual property developer in Wales in that he's hard-headed enough to know projects have to make money, but appears to be aware, more than many perhaps, of the increasing importance of the environment in which homes and offices sit (while also understanding the commercial value of that, too, of course).

'I've always been interested in nature ... and how good it makes you feel ... but to positively say that I was always this evangelist for this way of being, no, because I always thought it has to work financially, margins are always quite tight. But I also think the world has changed over the last 10, 15 years, and we've begun to see the value in so-called regenerative development.'

He says he's optimistic about his building and hopes it will be a beacon for others wanting to achieve similar things'... 'it'll have an impact on the city. If it changes the perceptions of Swansea, if it regenerates Swansea, that really is the exciting bit.. We've got a way to go, but with our scheme and others around the city, it's all going in the right direction.'

Gareth Jones has worked internationally as a journalist for the BBC and the UN while maintaining a close interest in Welsh affairs. He has been a regular contributor to Touchstone *and now lives in Swansea.*

See also p. 88 for more action in Swansea: ed

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1 Carwyn Jones on site, the client-developer of the Hacer building in Swansea, inspired by Herbert Girardet's regenerative-cities ideas.

2 The Hacer building's stepped-back massing, borne out of urban and structural constraints, has resulted in a series of south-facing terraces that will provide for rooftop horticulture. Additionally, balconies outside apartments and offices will provide 300 linear metres of space for further planting.

3, 4 Visualisations by Powell Dobson Architects of the Hacer building in context.

5 Rooftop air-source heat pumps at scale.

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Crafting care

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Portskewett will become a place of pilgrimage for those wanting to see a benchmark-setting example of a landscape of care for people with varying levels of dementia. Tim Graham gets a rare glimpse of contemporary public-service architecture at its very best, recently awarded RIBA MacEwen Prize 2025.

You have to guard against romantic sentiment. You have to be wary of suspending architectural judgement when faced with 'public service' in its highest expression. Most of all you have be alert to the pitfalls of architectural determinism. You need all of this when visiting what must be one of the finest environments created for the care of people with varying levels of dementia in the UK.

This place is Severn View Park, down near Portskewett in south-east Monmouthshire. It has been a journey of utter commitment by its staff, Monmouthshire County Council (MCC) as commissioning client, and the dedicated team at Pentan Architects.

This project is no *Truman Show* nostalgic faux 'village' designed as if a particular visual kitsch familiarity for residents could be created once-and-for-all and fixed for generations. This is not a post-modern Seaside. The familiarity is of something infinitely more subtle, bound up in a critical guiding idea of the 'household' with all the spatial, material, and social complexities that this term encompasses.

It is a project that has done its homework, with influences from Australia, Netherlands, and international research by York University on how best to provide dementia care. But, in the end, nothing has been lifted directly, uncritically. Most of the strategic brief and execution of every detail of its interior has come direct from the facility's experienced staff, and their intense conversations with the architects and the constant engagement and leadership of its commissioning client, Colin Richings, formerly the integrated services manager of MCC.

Severn View had a previous existence. Like so many local authorities in the 1970s, it replaced a former two-storey workhouse building down near Chepstow. The new two-storey building was for residential care, in this case for residents with advancing dementia. The staff had for years in this building been aiming to work with 'households,' groups of eight residents, (the building forced that to be two groups of eight, one of six, and one of 10), but critically none of the rooms was en suite as your 'home' is, in its 'house'. You couldn't all have direct easy access to your ground-level garden. Food came from a central source fixed to staff rotas. Shared spaces had no spatial subtlety to them, where the introvert and extrovert could find their right scale of place. Tensions could be visibly and audibly intense. However hard the staff tried they were fighting against the institutional architecture.

The new Severn View Park was a chance to do it right. All single storey, the four households, each of eight people, have generous individual rooms are all en suite. The households are spatially distinct externally and internally, set in an arc around beautifully tended gardens with a community hall at its centre. Each household is connected by a gently curving, partially top day-lit internal route, offering connecting glimpses to all the daytime activities and resting places on one side and the residents' own rooms and supporting facilities on the other.

There is a remarkable balancing act spatially that allows a whole range of individual sitting-area privacies, each with its own distinct domestic furnishing and décor, and yet it is such that no one is hidden away, unseen, forgotten or not seen by staff when a resident is in distress. Everywhere there are views to gardens.

Each household has a kitchen space open to the household's dining table, but this is not just fitted out with the expected domestic-scaled functions of one's 'home' – all the staff are trained to cook 'home,' not institutional, food, and residents can choose to assist. There is regular banter between staff and residents over kitchen skills and what is made. A Sunday lunch is laid on for everyone who wants it, in the community hall each week.

So much thought has been put into the

Details and fittings

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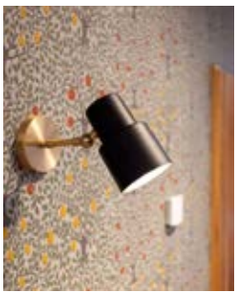

1 Aerial view of Severn View Park from the north.

2 Home rather than 'residential home'.

3, 4 Corner windows throughout the building on to the resident- and staff-maintained superb landscape disrupt that sense of an enclosed institution.

5 Aerial view from the south.

Key to floor plan

1 Residents' rooms
2 Living spaces
3 Assisted bathrooms
4 Staff rooms, stores, services
5 Garden rooms
6 Cinema room
7 Plant
8 The Barrow (community hall)

individual rooms. A lowered bulkhead over timber window seats curves round a corner in the room so that you avoid a space cluttered with empty seats awaiting visits from relatives. Vertical boarding clads one wall up to dado level behind the bed. A strong colour picks out another wall area with its small window and deep cill for memorabilia. The larger window in the room comes down to window-seat level. You can see the gardens when lying in bed. Built-in storage create spaces for a worktop/dressing table/display space of memories. The room is everywhere deinstitutionalised right down to its choice of light fittings.

Rooms of corner-window seats evoke memories of the many wonderful rooms created by the architect, the late David Lea. His sheltered housing scheme at Churt in Surrey (1968–81) is a model of carefully proportioned details and structural members. Surveying the proportions of corner posts and other details here, they maybe lack Lea's touch, but then he did equally sometimes take risks which would not be appropriate in this very public setting.

It would be impossible here to list the variety of weekly events and facilities that add further richness to this already rich place. It sets a benchmark for Wales, the UK, and possibly Europe. It didn't come entirely from a county council cabinet purse. Sixty-five per cent of funds came direct from the Welsh Government's Integrated Care Fund. Lovell Homes, which built it, and is doing much of the surrounding housing still coming out of the ground, was sometimes agog at the quality of what they were asked to provide. The private sector that dominates 95% of residential care for those with dementia will also look on agog. Their shareholders and owner's profits would not countenance such a level of public service, despite the colossal fees their residents pay. Severn View Park is one of only two places provided by MCC. The other is at Mardy Park, Abergavenny, another public building that sought high standards in its time.

It will be difficult for any other authority to replicate. It sets a very important benchmark for

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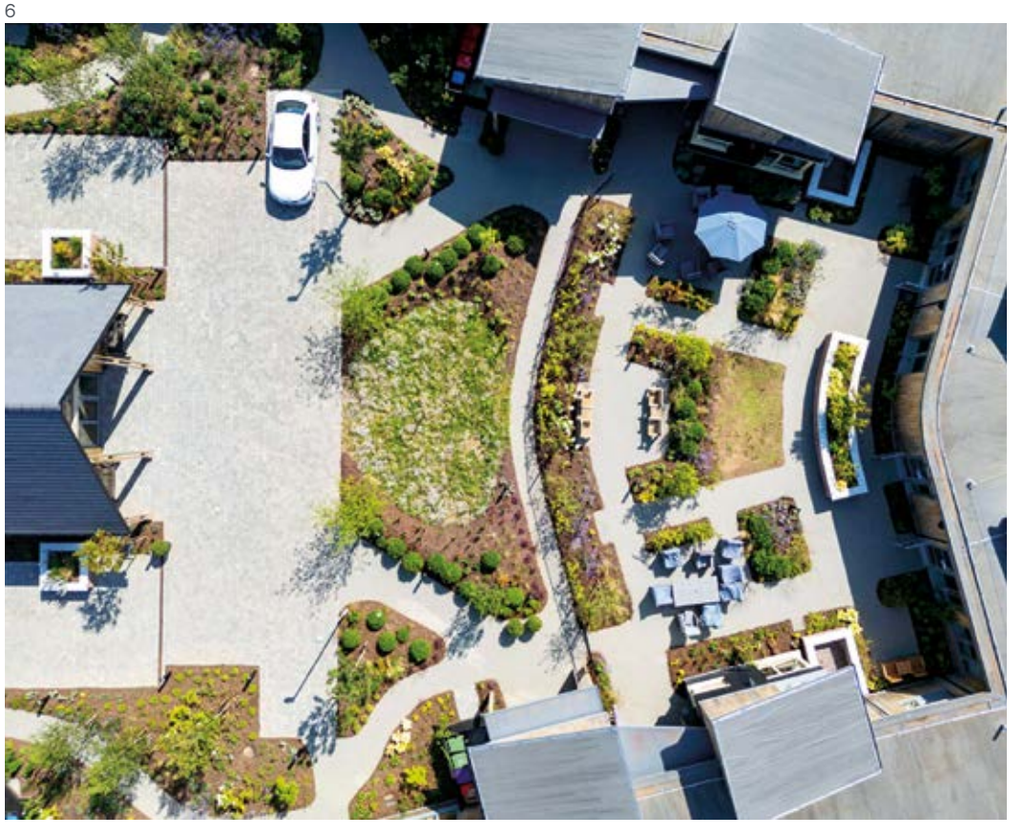

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6–9 The carefully considered landscaping offers residents many varied and distinct resting places, much like the building's interior.

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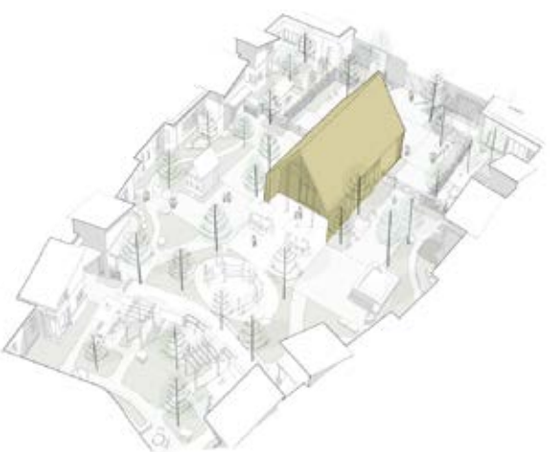

The Garden

10 Each 'household' has a garden-oriented room, an intimate space for many creative activities.

11-14 Each 'household' has a 'snug,' seats round 'a fireplace', and a 'lounge', each aesthetically and spatially distinct, offering variety with subtle visual connections to movement and activity along the top day-lit corridor leading to the individual rooms.

others to aim for, and it reminds us what public-service architecture is at its best. But the real investment here, which cannot be monetised, is in the intelligent and listened-to expertise of the staff, the sophistication of its commissioning client in it for the long haul, and above all the intense and caring thought invested in the smallest detail of this place by the architect.

Of course, there will not be a simplistic, determinist equation that will link the sophistry of those who have worked so hard to make this place, to the happiness of various residents who find themselves here. But that investment of time and intelligence must pay off somewhere, sometimes, somehow. It will be felt by its residents subliminally. The staff feel it intensely every day. It might be an irony that some might chose to see, in expending such architectural energy on a place where those within it have often such a confused and complex experience of what is reality. But we cannot call ourselves fully human without that level of care.

Tim Graham is an architectural journalist and regular contributor to Touchstone.

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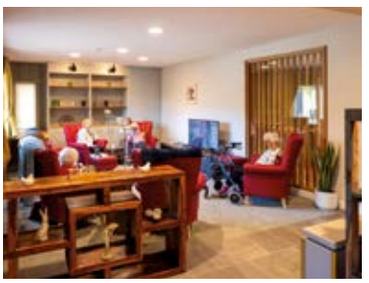

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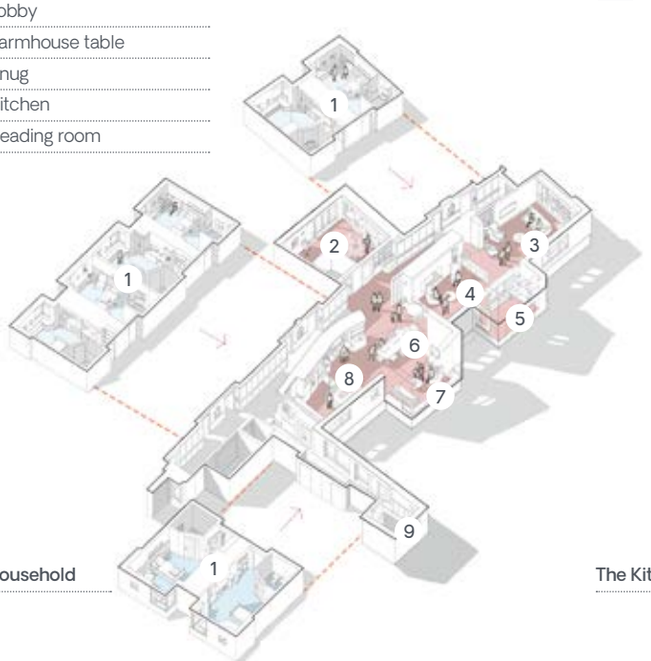
15 The 'farmhouse' table where eight residents can gather for a lunch, cooked by staff in the kitchen, open to view from the table.

16 A resident's room, the design thinking of which includes the visiting family member(s).

Key to Household isometric

1	Residents' rooms
2	Garden room
3	Lounge
4	Fireplace
5	Lobby
6	Farmhouse table
7	Snug
8	Kitchen
9	Reading room



The Household

The Kitchen Table

Credits:

Client: Monmouthshire County Council (Colin Richings, Sian Gardner)

Architect: Pentan Architects (Dafydd Tanner, John Carter, Karen Lock, Jordan Scarr)

Structural engineer: Intrado (Clare Cooke, Darren Sparkes, Mark Simmons)

Services engineer: McCann and Partners (Martin Cole, Geraint Harcombe)

Landscape architect: The Richards Partnership (Joe Gould)

Planning consultant: Asbri Planning

Fire consultant: Green Hat Consulting (Dean Partridge)

Building control: Nichoals Alfieri

Contractor: Lovell Homes

Photography: Fotohaus (Craig Auckland)

The mid-1970s' Wates House at the Centre for Alternative Technology by the architect Peter Bond is still to this day one of the best-insulated houses in the world, but it is so much more than that. **Pierre d'Avoine** and **Jonathan Vining** make the case for its full reinstatement to demonstrate how 'ordinariness' can be outstanding.

The house that Bond built

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1, 2 Old photographs of the Conservation House as originally designed in the 1970s.

3, 4 Early construction photographs: wrapping the whole fabric in 450 mm of insulation, a level half as good again as current Passivhaus standards.

Cast your mind back – if you can – to the early 1970s...

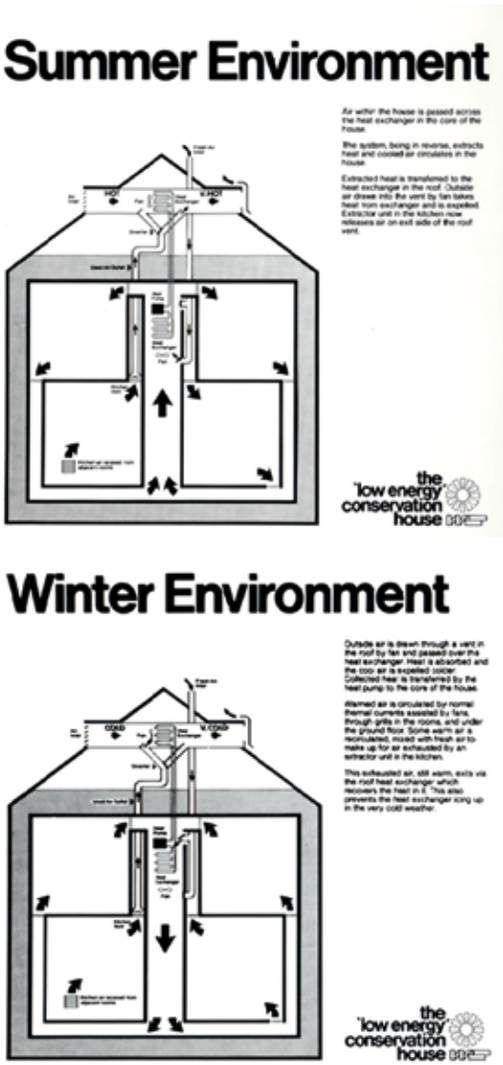
Harold Wilson's government of 'the white heat of the technological revolution' was (in terms of the pre-election polls) surprisingly beaten at the general election in 1970 by Edward Heath's Conservative Party – but only for one term. Following a series of intractable industrial relations disputes, culminating in a lengthy national coalminers' strike, Heath went to the country in February 1974 on the slogan of 'who runs Britain?'. As it turned out, well, not you Ted, actually. (There was one major achievement of Heath's government, however, and that was taking the UK into the European Economic Community on 1 January 1973.)

Decimal Day was 15 February 1971, when the UK finally moved to a currency based on units of 10. Wales won the grand slam that year too, the first of Welsh rugby's second golden era, and would likely have won a second consecutive one in 1972 had not the match against Ireland in Dublin been cancelled in the aftermath of one of the most terrible events of the Troubles, Bloody Sunday, when the British Army shot dead 13 people at a civil-rights march in Londonderry.

The Vietnam War had raged since 1955, with the direct military involvement of the United States not ending until 1973. But, the Cold War between the USA and the former Soviet Union continued. The former had won the race to put a man on the moon on 21 July 1969; the preceding December, Bill Anders – one of the astronauts on Apollo 8 who were the first to orbit the moon – took the famous 'Earthrise' photograph showing the Earth with its thin atmosphere, which is credited with giving a boost to the nascent environmentalist movement.

The dawning of ecological awareness across the world was triggered by, among other things, the publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962). In the UK, however, it was not until the 1970s that the environmental movement really got into its stride. In 1971–72, a collective of anarchist students at the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) published *Street Farmer* magazine, promoting revolutionary political change driven by serious concerns over corporate disregard of the degradation of the environment. The Street Farm collective also built the first intentionally ecological house, Street Farmhouse in Eltham, London (Graham Caine, 1972).

The need to improve building standards to conserve energy was also recognised by the architectural establishment. In 1972, the eminent, naturalised Welsh architect, Alex Gordon, in his role as president of the RIBA defined good architecture as buildings that exhibit 'long life,



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loose fit and low energy' – in today's words: sustainability, flexibility, and energy efficiency.[1] Prophetically, this was a year before the world oil crisis of 1973–74 when the oil price rose by nearly 300% with a consequent major detrimental effect on the world economy.

Disarmingly direct

In 1973, at the abandoned Llwyngwern slate quarry at Pantperthog, near Machynlleth, Powys, the adventurer and environmental activist Gerard Morgan-Grenville (1931–2009) set up a small community to demonstrate that there were ecologically sound alternatives to high-polluting technologies in construction, energy, and food production. Over the subsequent half century, the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) has developed into one of Europe's leading centres for sustainable living, inspiring, informing and enabling generations to respond practically to the climate emergency we face.

One of the first demonstration buildings to be constructed on the site was a pioneering low-energy house that pre-dated Passivhaus by over a decade, and which still today is one of the world's best insulated homes. In 1975, Wates Built Homes was approached by CAT to construct an exemplar, low-energy house of conventional appearance and size, using existing technology, concentrating on minimising energy demand rather than the production of its own energy. At the time, the Wates Group was one of the largest family-owned construction and development companies in the UK and it commissioned architect Peter Bond Associates to design the house – Peter Bond having had a personal connection with Neil Wates (1932–85), who was Wates's chairman and chief executive at the time.

Peter Bond (born 1929) studied at the AA, qualifying in 1956, together with Peter Ahrends, Richard Burton and Paul Koralek – the last being a particularly close friend of his. Bond worked for Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry, and was staff architect on the Pilkington Headquarters at St Helens, Lancashire. He set up Peter Bond Associates in the early 1970s on the basis of a commission to design a new headquarters for United Biscuits in Isleworth, Middlesex – a project that was ultimately cancelled owing to the economic recession that followed the world oil crisis. The practice was based at The Dome in Richmond, Surrey, and included associate Geoffrey Burton, ex-Powell & Moya, and five assistants.

Bond's design for the Conservation House (or Wates House) is a disarmingly direct response to minimising energy consumption. Insulation 450 mm thick is wrapped around the whole of the external fabric – under the ground floor, within the cavity/diaphragm walls (where the concrete blockwork inner skin provides significant thermal mass), and in the roof space – together with quadruple, or 'double double' glazing, as Bond himself referred to it. There is only a single entrance comprising two doors with an airlock between. It is understood to be the first house in the UK – and maybe even the world – to employ such wrap-around insulation (and at a level half as good again as Passivhaus). It was originally heated and cooled by a reversible air-source heat

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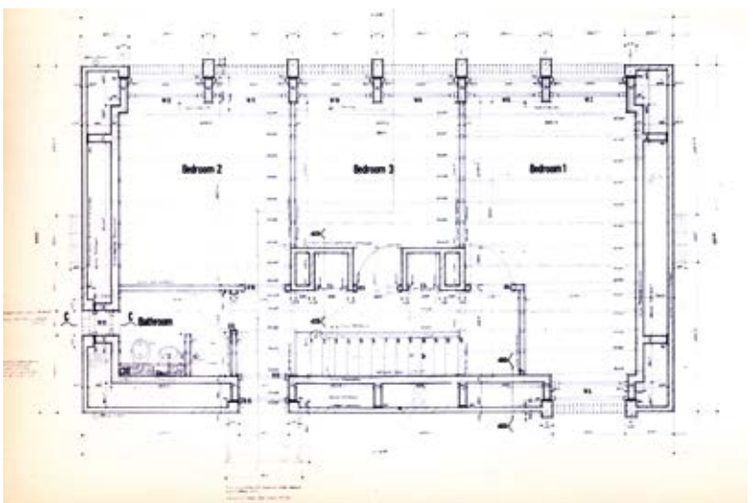

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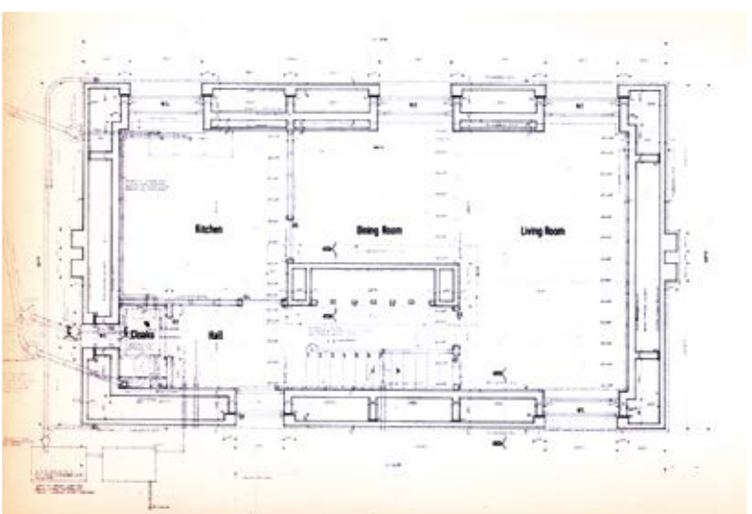

5 Environmental diagrams setting out the strategy and tactics for the Conservation House.

6 First floor plan.

7 Ground floor plan. The wall thickness still remains a prescient challenge to current private-sector volume house builders 50 years after it was created.

(Images 1–7: Peter Bond archive, courtesy of Caroline Reed.)

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8 Conservation House as it looks today from the south-east, with plant-room addition in foreground.

9 View from the south-west with added conservatory.

pump powered by a small windmill that fed a bank of batteries.

The initial brief for the house had suggested that solar energy should be used for the space-heating, but Bond soon discovered that to heat the building using solar energy in Britain's climate would involve a massive heat store, the cost and complexity of which made it unfeasible for Wates. So, a different approach was tried, as Bond explained in a BBC/Open University film:

'After a month into the programme … we set up a test calculation, which was based on the idea that all our efforts to date had been to recapture heat that had already been lost, and it was obvious [that it would be better] to pursue the idea of not losing it in the first place, and hence we chose to use heavy insulation, double-double glazing. And the calculations that we got from this test were so remarkable that even I didn't believe them at first. But it was done several times and we were quite satisfied in the end that they were right, and [this] obviously gave us the direction to move in. And, it really looks just like an ordinary house.' [2]

For Wates, the project was a success, not least because the Conservation House suggested that commercial viability might be achieved for a low-energy house within a conventional built form and layout. For Bond, the direct, simple and unforced appearance of the house achieved what Robert Maguire used to refer to as 'a high standard of ordinariness', with the potential for adaptation and use in a variety of situations.

There have been many changes to the Conservation House and its use over the years – and problems too with the spalling of brickwork. A conservatory has been added to the west side and a plant showroom to the other. The interior of the house has been drastically altered too. The staircase was taken out. The first-floor bedrooms and bathroom were removed to form an open-plan office for CAT staff accessed via a new external steel staircase. The ground floor was also opened up to create an exhibition space. The air-to-air heat pump and attendant plant were stripped out. In April 2024, Peter Harper said that:

'Getting the ventilation sorted out seemed to be the key thing, but that bit had failed because the very fine slate dust got into the system and nobody could really be bothered to sort it out. So, then [the house] became genuinely passive in the sense that it had no moving parts. It was just this heavily insulated building, the most insulated building in Europe, I think.' [3]

It's evident that building's current use and configuration do not do justice to Peter Bond's visionary concept for the house, which is one of the most significant in environmental terms to have been built in the UK in the last 50 years.

Telling the best story

Over the last few years, CAT has been working on a major regeneration project for the site, with Haworth Tompkins leading a master-planning team that also includes environmental engineers, Max Fordham. The proposal is that CAT will be developed as an 'innovative sustainable skills hub and inspiring new visitor experience' with new and refurbished teaching and workshop spaces, exhibition spaces, additional on-site accommodation, a larger café, nature trails, a new welcome hub, refurbishment of the cliff railway, new introductory exhibition and themed exhibition zones site.[4] The whole project is forecast to cost £48 million, and CAT has been successful in bidding to become one of six projects in the Mid Wales Growth Deal portfolio, with match funding needing to be obtained from other sources. Currently, CAT is trying to raise funds to progress the design to a stage where a full business case could be submitted.

The Conservation House will be retained in the future regeneration of the CAT site and consideration will be given to how best it could be used and how its story as a pioneering building (and that of its architect) can best be told. Eileen Kinsman, interim co-CEO at CAT, said that 'it's a really important building for us … and we will be thinking about how we use it, and how we tell its story. We don't do this currently … However, there's a lot of amazing material including archive footage and documents that we have that tell a really lovely story'.[5] This is great news as the way CAT communicates the Conservation House to visitors has never done proper justice to what the building can teach us all.

We believe the Conservation House should be restored as far as possible to its original design, and in a manner that signifies its historical importance, making it useful and viable to CAT, its ongoing research, and educational activities.

The wrap-around insulation of the Conservation House and its 'ordinary' appearance are the key to its importance. To quote Peter Harper again: 'to achieve high take-up, modern eco-houses have got to look the part, and the Wates House already passed this test in the mid-70s'.[6] In a 2008 report by Dr Simon Tucker, commissioned by Paul Davies of Wates Living Spaces, he states that the Wates House was in some senses over-insulated and that it could have performed to codes applicable at the time of the report with less insulation.[7] However, if the initial project had undergone evaluation and refinement then its successors would undoubtedly have evolved progressively and in response to emerging building construction and environmental issues, such as the use of locally sourced and low embodied-energy materials, the need for better daylighting (the Wates House window openings are sometimes criticised as being too small), energy generation, and liveability.

The Conservation House's current state of neglect or semi-abandonment raises questions of why this is the case. It predates Passivhaus by at least a decade and is now nearly fifty years old.

The Conservation House is a significant milestone in the evolution of house design in the UK and we advocate that it should be restored as far as possible to its original layout, including the reversible heat pump and other equipment. The St Fagans National Museum of History provides an example of what could be done. Pierre d'Avoine Architects' Monad House project was shortlisted for the 'Welsh House of the Future' competition in 2000. It draws on the Wates House for inspiration in its essentially passive approach and 'ordinary' appearance (see *Touchstone* issue six, October 1999, p. 10 and *Touchstone* issue seven, May 2000, pp. 23–25). The competition jury, however, chose as its winner a much more active design by Jestico + Whiles (*Touchstone* issue six, October 1999, p. 15 and *Touchstone* issue seven, May 2000, p. 18), which was built in 2000 as the first newly

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designed exhibit-building at St Fagans (and later converted to an educational centre).

We conclude by asking, as a provocation, the following questions...

Where are the far-sighted patrons of private- (and public-) sector new housing today?

Why, if CAT commissioned the Wates House in 1975, have private-sector housebuilders dragged their feet for so long in matching Wates's example?

Why is the retrofitting of our appallingly insulated housing stock so far behind where it should be given what we knew in the 1970s?

Pierre d'Avoine is an architect based in London who also teaches the Diploma 14 unit at the Architectural Association. He worked for Peter Bond Associates from 1975–77.
Jonathan Vining is an architect and urban designer. He writes on post-war Welsh architecture and is a commissioner of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.

The Conservation House, and its architect Peter Bond, will be celebrated in a book to be published by Pattern Book Press in 2026 on the building's 50th anniversary.

References

1 Alex Gordon. 'Designing for survival: the President introduces his long life/loose fit/low energy study', in: *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal*, volume 79, number 9, September 1972, pp. 374–376.

2 *Alternative Technology Centre*, TV, BBC/The Open University, 1 August 1978 [Open University Library, T361/06].

3 Peter Harper interview with Pierre d'Avoine, videoconference, 22 April 2024.

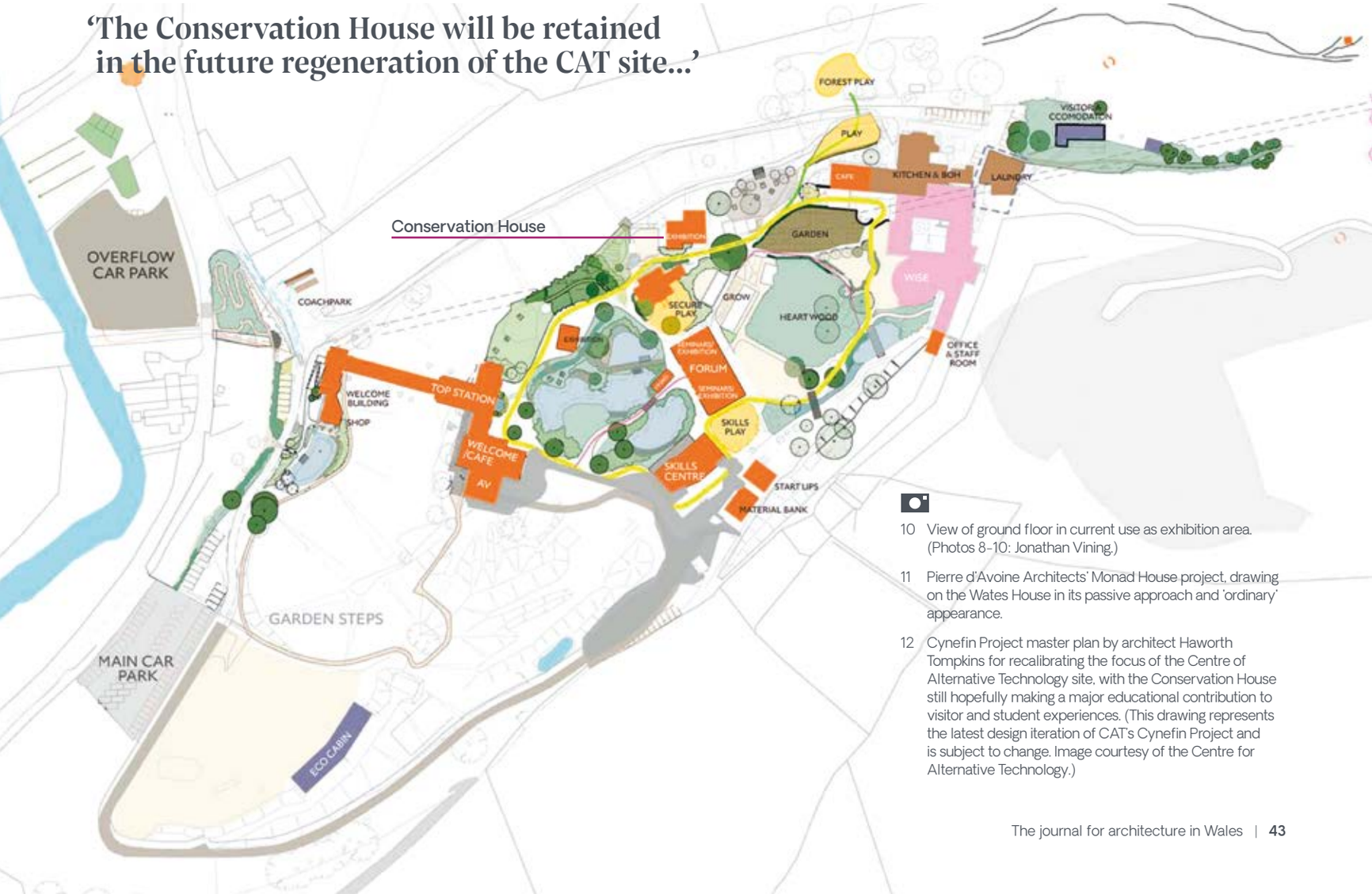
4 Centre for Alternative Technology, 2024. *Future plans taking shape* [online]. Available at: https://cat.org.uk/future-plans-take-shape/ [accessed 31 August 2024].

5 Eileen Kinsman interview with Pierre d'Avoine and Jonathan Vining, CAT, 8 April 2024.

6 Peter Harper interview, op cit.

7 Simon Tucker. *The Wates Conservation House and the Code for Sustainable Homes*, Graduate School of the Environment, Centre for Alternative Technology, October 2008, p. 22.

'The Conservation House will be retained in the future regeneration of the CAT site...'



10 View of ground floor in current use as exhibition area. (Photos 8–10: Jonathan Vining.)

11 Pierre d'Avoine Architects' Monad House project, drawing on the Wates House in its passive approach and 'ordinary' appearance.

12 Cynefin Project master plan by architect Haworth Tompkins for recalibrating the focus of the Centre of Alternative Technology site, with the Conservation House still hopefully making a major educational contribution to visitor and student experiences. (This drawing represents the latest design iteration of CAT's Cynefin Project and is subject to change. Image courtesy of the Centre for Alternative Technology.)

‘In short, the individual reader will need the succour of collective endeavour to take on this guide in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the climate and ecology challenges that pose existential threats to life on planet Earth.’

A need

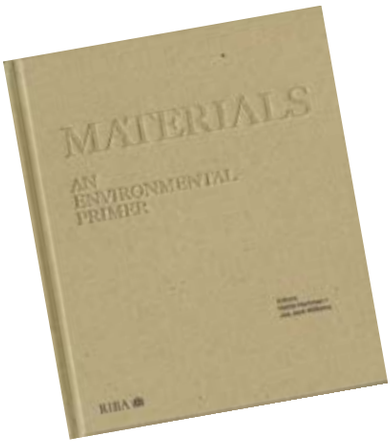
The ‘House of Architecture’ at Portland Place has put out two major books on both the strategic and detailed material challenges of facing up to the existential bullet-train that is coming our way – climate collapse. Will these publications help practitioners to urgently step up to the plate? John Carter thinks not. The RIBA branches and regions need to do some heavy lifting to make them worthwhile.

RIBA Climate Guide
Mina Hasman
RIBA Publishing (2023)

This ‘guide’ proclaims that it is ‘both an important learning tool and a practical check-list’. So, is it? Well, part-way through reading it, I was reminded that, when studying for my Part 3, the volume of learning seemed Everest-like; before the very wise Stanley Cox suggested working with others, via a study group. So, we each studied separate paragraphs of the JCT ‘80 contract before sharing our thoughts in weekly study-group sessions. We all shared our practical applications of the contract, based on what we had witnessed in our respective offices. Theory and practice writ large. It turned it into an enjoyable learning experience. Group sharing and group learning is my suggestion for how practitioners might best approach a reading of the *RIBA Climate Guide*. Why do I suggest this?

Well, the guide is both packed with detailed research and follow-up references that make for an almost overwhelmingly dense cover-to cover read; and its formatting makes for a challenging, some might say ‘staccato’ read.[1] In short, the individual reader will need the succour of collective endeavour to take on this guide in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the climate and ecology challenges that pose existential threats to life on planet Earth. I offer this advice because I urge you to read this guide to understand how one can both think globally and act locally in response to these challenges. You will get the big climate picture, which is very comprehensively covered in the guide, broken down into chapters based on the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 (UN, 2015); and you will see examples of local actions via case studies from across the (mostly developed) world, albeit often too sketchy. (Why are there no plans and sections to allow readers to fully understand the propositions illustrated?!) What the *RIBA Climate Guide* really needs is an attendant portfolio of detailed case studies, to allow practitioners to fully understand how local climates, responsible consumption and production, and health and well-being, to name but three of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, affect design. With this (a tall ask in publishing terms, I suspect), the guide would break out of its cursory analysis of many of the case studies. Detailed case studies, which open up as many questions as they provide answers through sufficiency of explanation and analysis, would promote this self- and group-learning.

So, yes, I believe this *RIBA Climate Guide* to be a learning tool (albeit see my caveats above), but has it achieved its ambition of being a practical checklist. It is some way from this as it currently stands. Compare it, for example, with *Zero Carbon Britain: Rising to the Climate Emergency*,[2] that sets a particular scope of ambition (the British Isles), sets the British Isles in a global context (imploring us to think globally and act locally), and then proceeds to analyse, within a clearly-defined strategy (eg power-down to reduce the renewable energy required) and timescale (2030), what we can do to realise a zero-carbon Britain. Via this clarity it is both learning tool and practical checklist. *RIBA Climate Guide* take note.



Materials: An environmental primer

Hattie Hartman and Joe Jack Williams (editors)
RIBA Publishing (2024)

to share

> ‘Their publication shows that it is cognisant of the challenges that practitioners face in relation to climate and embodied carbon, but it now needs to follow this up with practical assistance if we are to avoid being overwhelmed.’

Like the *RIBA Climate Guide*, the *Materials: An environmental primer* book also from the RIBA also lacks advice on knowledge application. After its pithy, easily read, scene-setting ‘introduction’ and ‘primer’, in which there are two stand-out practical suggestions,[3] it is content to introduce (reintroduce?) a dictionary of materials or elements and their environmental properties (particularly embodied carbon) and then leave the reader to apply this information in practice, via a series of short and not aways sharp ‘key takeaways’. Is it trying to be student primer or practitioner-reminder, or perhaps both? This reader is left unsure. As with the *RIBA Climate Guide*, I am desperate for reasonable-depth case studies, to understand how others have approached the challenge of responsible, holistic design and specification; but I am left wanting. In short, having been primed by this book, I need advice on how I might apply this knowledge in practice. I am reminded of, for example, Peter Harper’s 20-80 principle[4] in which he advocates a target mix of 20% high-carbon materials where they can be most effective (eg an aluminium bottom bead to prolong the life of a timber window casement) and 80% low-carbon bulk materials (eg hemp-lime or rammed earth). The book’s chapter on ‘Earth’ illustrates, but does not elaborate on an example of this 20–80 principle applied in practice in Wales, the WISE building at the Centre for Alternative Technology, near Machynlleth; and it is detailed case-study examples like this that this book is lacking. In short, it undermines its stated advocacy to ‘use of the right amount of the right material in the right place’ because we are not given detailed whole-building examples of how we might achieve this.

So, I come back to my group-learning and group-sharing point. Is it now over to us, the practitioners? If so, one is left asking what is the RIBA hoping to achieve by commissioning these two books? Their publication shows that it is cognisant of the challenges that practitioners face in relation to climate and embodied carbon, but it now needs to follow this up with practical assistance if we are to avoid being overwhelmed. It should invest in facilitating knowledge-sharing and -understanding via its regional offices, in the manner of my Part 3 group-learning experience. It should promote and facilitate inter-practice and intra-practice learning and sharing! Individual practices out of their silos! In this way the profession would quickly (time really is of the essence!) build up a library of learned case studies that could just help to realise the stated ambitions of these two books.

John Carter co-founded Cardiff-based Pentan Architects in 1995. For over 30 years he both taught and practised architecture, before in 2015 taking on the role of programme leader of the MArch course at the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT), Machynlleth. He retired from this role in 2021 but continues to teach at CAT, alongside his work with Pentan. *(see also p. 36)*

Notes

1 A ‘staccato’ read caused by a too-many-diagrams-to-a-page approach to the important key-strategies checklists, with all diagrams using the same palette of colours and some with legends on the previous over-page – criminal in publishing terms!

2 Paul Allen, et al. *Zero Carbon Britain: Rising to the Climate Emergency*, Centre for Alternative Technology, Machynlleth, 2019: free download at: https://cat.org.uk/info-resources/zero-carbon-britain/research-reports/zero-carbon-britain-rising-to-the-climate-emergency/).

3 ‘The use of a “harvest map” to survey manufactured, quarried, bio-renewable and reclaimed materials within a given radius of a project’ (p. 1); and the Royal Danish Academy’s CINARK – Center for Industrialised Architecture’s ‘Carbon Intensity Material(s) Pyramid’ (p. 3).

4 From a Peter Harper talk in 2012 ‘History for AEES 2012’, Centre for Alternative Technology (unpublished).

Turning up the heat

1 Over 90% of Warm Wales's staff are in direct contact with the communities they serve.

2–4 The housing conditions resulting from fuel poverty that Warm Wales seeks to eradicate.

1

One anniversary that might slip quietly by unnoticed is that of two decades of work by Warm Wales. This is social architecture at the sharp end. To those it has served, they know it made a difference. That should be recognised. **Tim Graham** reports.

Given the recent public outcry over withdrawing pensioners' winter fuel allowance, one might be lulled into thinking that if only that was restored, all would be well, keeping some of the most vulnerable in our community warm and thus giving them a chance of being in reasonable health. This, however, is only the tip of the iceberg. This struggle against fuel poverty across a far wider section of the community, with all the negative social and health factors that come with it, has been the focus of work by Warm Wales (Cymru Gynnes) for 20 years.

'The Welsh Government estimates that up to 45% (614,000) of households in Wales were in fuel poverty, following the price cap increase of April 2022.'

2

Fuel poverty occurs when a household spends more than 10% of its disposable income on fuel for heating and electricity use. This is affected by the individual home's energy performance (Wales has the highest level of poor housing in the UK) and then the ever-fluctuating cost of fuel alongside household income. These are the key exacerbating factors.

The Welsh Government estimates that up to 45% (614,000) of households in Wales were in fuel poverty, following the price cap increase of April 2022. Furthermore, up to 8% (115,000) of Welsh households are estimated to be in 'severe' fuel poverty.

Gearing up to face the challenge

So, 20 years ago in 2004, the then state-owned National Grid, as part of its social commitment policy and its corporate responsibility to government, set up the Affordable Warmth Programme. Warm Wales came into being as its action-arm in Wales focusing on providing

affordable warmth to communities across the country to reduce fuel poverty levels. Warm Wales is at the forefront of providing assistance to households in Wales and one channel to do this is through the scheme management, for a number of local authorities, of the Energy Company Obligation (ECO Flex), a UK government energy-efficiency scheme to help reduce carbon emissions and tackle fuel poverty. Measures available through the scheme include cavity-wall insulation, internal wall and loft insulation, air-source heat pumps, and solar photovoltaics. Over 3,000 ECO Flex declarations have now been issued to partner organisations creating vast improvements to the standards of homes in Wales.

Within two years of being set up, in 2006, Warm Wales changed its company status to become Wales's first community interest company, thus ensuring that any financial surpluses were put back into the communities being served.

In 2010, Warm Wales was commissioned to deliver one third of the energy-saving projects through the Welsh Government's phase 1 ARBED scheme, which aimed – on an area basis – to improve the fabric efficiency of the worst housing stock in Wales.

Another major gear change came in 2014 when Warm Wales started working with the private sector and specifically Wales & West Utilities. A distribution network operator, which serves Wales and the west of England. It helped deliver Wales & West Utilities' 'social obligation programme' and recently has generated saving of over £2 million for 1,500 householders (an average of £750.00 per household assisted) under its Healthy Homes Healthy People scheme.

A suite of services

Warm Wales's current services include energy advice and affordable warmth provision that include support to qualifying households with applications to grant-funded schemes to provide replacement boilers, central heating systems, and insulation. It provides information and advice about smart meters and understanding bills, plus support to accessing discount schemes including the Warm Homes Discount.

Another vital service is 'money maximisation' helping to reduce energy and water bills, support with debt, and assistance with housing needs as well as access to full-benefits checks to ensure households are claiming their full entitlement.

This support can be accompanied by home safety information and advice about carbon monoxide, excess cold, dampness and mould, and support to access home adaptions schemes. Depending on the location of the household, help is also available through Warm Wales for emergency support in the form of emergency top-up vouchers for pre-payment meters.

'Alongside all this practical, physical support, Warm Wales also offers contacts and services to improve mental and physical health, well-being, and reducing isolation.'

Alongside all this practical, physical support, Warm Wales also offers contacts and services to improve mental and physical health, well-being, and reducing isolation. It supports households to make positive changes to their lifestyle as well as access to activities and support through 'social prescribing'.

For this approach, Warm Wales won Best Digital Initiative at the recent UK Public Health Register Innovation in Public Health Awards, an accolade of which it is very proud. The programme has fostered collaboration with health boards, housing associations, and many more key stakeholders. Through enhanced data collection, Warm Wales's approach has significantly improved the lives of many communities; by employing Access Elemental Social Prescribing software, it improves the wider health and well-being of communities by simplifying, streamlining, and measuring the impact of the social-prescribing model of care.

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Working for those most in need

One of the biggest challenges in all this work is to ensure that support is accurately targeted to those most in need in Wales, not just to those in a certain local authority area who happen to gain access to public funds.

Foundation Data for Robust Energy Strategies for Housing, or FRESH, is a partnership project run by Warm Wales, in conjunction with Cardiff University's Welsh School of Architecture, and Wales & West Utilities. The research is undertaken at the Welsh School of Architecture. It takes complex big data on poor health and poor income matching it with street-level maps of poor housing. It identifies 'street clusters' of fuel-poor, energy inefficient households providing a suite of powerful maps, showing levels of vulnerability that can then be cross-matched with local agencies, including the Department for Work & Pensions' housing benefits and GP health cluster data, to help prioritise existing resources, showing exactly where extra help is required.

Warm Wales currently has 46 staff spread across offices in north and south Wales. The challenge they face is mounting by the day. Warm Wales's current CEO, Jonathan Cosson, notes that 'we have recently secured funding to take on more staff to respond to extreme current hardship owing to austerity and fuel price rises. We have always operated a lean organisation with over 90% of our staff in direct contact with the communities we serve'. They work at the raw coalface of housing architecture and social care. The chairman of the board of directors, since the company was set up, Professor Phil Jones OBE, argues that 'the service that Warm Wales provides is needed now more than ever, with our experience of securing whatever funding is available and directing it to where it is most needed'. Simply restoring the winter fuel allowance for pensioners simply won't hack it.

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1, 2 A council well connected into Welsh Government urban development financing and ambitious for its major settlement, Pontypridd. Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (RCTCBC) played host in Pontypridd to the National Eisteddfod in 2024.

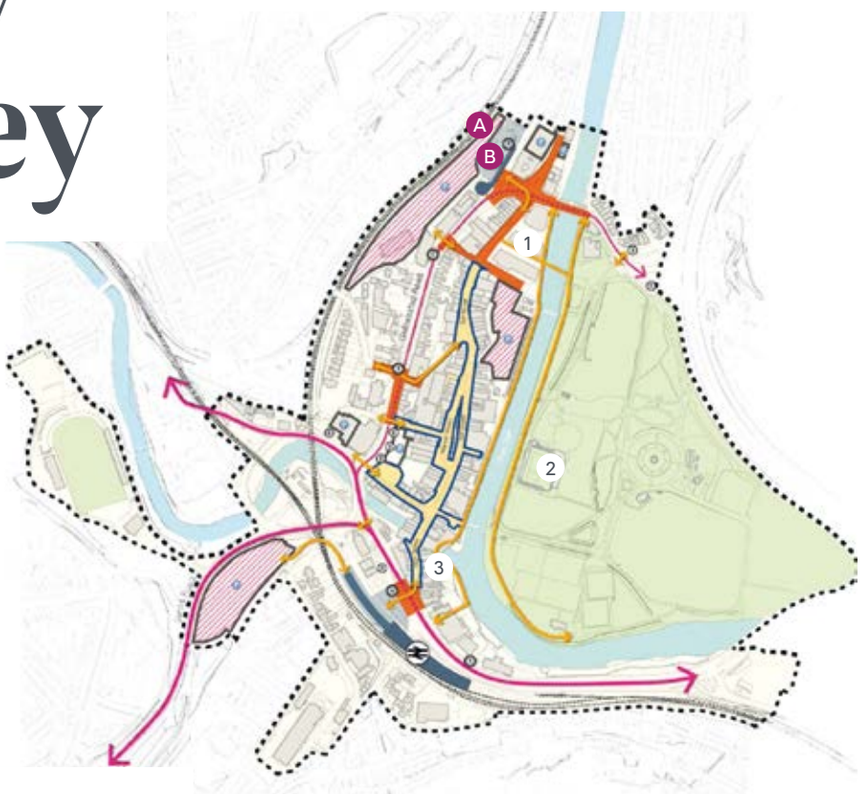
3 A comprehensive place-making plan commissioned by RCTCBC in 2019, from The Urbanists, set a clear framework for schemes to regenerate the whole centre of Pontypridd.

4 Reconnecting Ponty to its magnificent rivers has been a central idea underpinning much of the planning. This potential new route along the western bank of the River Taff still awaits development.

How lively is my valley

There are those who see the south Wales valleys as an irresoluble, stranded, post-industrial heartland of poverty and abandonment. There are many others working furiously to breathe new life into that heart at a town scale. Pontypridd, known locally as 'Ponty', is one such place. Tim Graham reports.

Just as in the brutal way the market and distant political forces swept away the industrial livelihoods of so many in the valleys, so the market of development capitalism can simply keep promising but never delivering healing to the equally brutal scars in any town's landscape that are left behind by years of landowners' and investors' neglect. If you wait for the market to deliver in such places, abandonment will always be the dominant atmosphere. The public sphere has to be willing to take intelligent, well-thought-through risks. You need to publicly fund the feasibility of another vision, and then use all possible government funding programmes and the low-interest borrowing environment at the time as ways of investing in physical and social change. The market may follow but the public realm must lead. Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (RCTCBC) has not been afraid to use its own resources to pump prime regeneration investment projects and has not sought to rely on grant funding alone.



3

Key to place plan:

1 Llys Cadwyn
2 Lido
3 Southern gateway site

Legend:

- Existing priority pedestrian space
- Street interventions
- Pedestrian link to enhance
- Vehicle movement
- A Possible location for new station
- B Redeveloped bus station
- Primary vehicle routes
- Improved pedestrian space
- New development with public space

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6

5–7 Many settlements across the UK allowed their lidos to slide into dereliction. Pontypridd near lost its, 5, but local residents allied to council ambition aided by National Lottery funding revived and improved the lido, now named the National Lido of Wales.

7

This has been the driving mantra that has underpinned action in Pontypridd, which has accelerated since Councillor Andrew Morgan OBE became council leader and reissued a redirected corporate plan in 2016, followed by a report to cabinet in 2017 entitled 'Pivotal Ponty'. There had to be a better future than simply wallowing in abandonment.

Two emblematic cases: first the visible scar of a derelict lido at the heart of the town's central Ynysangharad War Memorial Park; and second, endless rounds of failed private-sector initiatives to redevelop an utterly unloved and abandoned 1960s' shopping precinct with out-of-date offices vacated by the Inland Revenue, plus an undercroft car park below, all in their unthinking way blocking access to the majesty of the River Taff from Taff Street at the heart of the town. What an irony.

Oven-ready for delivery

Through the National Lottery the lido – now called The National Lido of Wales, Lido Ponty – was magnificently restored in 2015 ahead of Morgan fully getting into gear. But you don't achieve such things without risking in advance publicly funding the case for the means of restoration. The project needed to be ready, on the shelf, oven-ready for delivery when the public funding cycles came round. RCTCBC won three awards at round one of the UK government's Levelling Up Fund, probably more than any other single settlement in the UK. Ambition and risk taking has to underpin that preparedness. Now people come from all over the valleys, and up from Cardiff, to share in the Lido's air of exuberant optimism. The increasing regularity of the South Wales Metro train service thorough Pontypridd station, with its world-renowned long platforms close by, will only increase its popularity.

'Now people come from all over the valleys, and up from Cardiff, to share in the Lido's air of exuberant optimism.'

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8 Tired of outside developers promising and then disappearing, the council forward-funded the feasibility of the Llys Cadwyn development opening up the main street to the river.

9, 10 The utterly unloved and abandoned 1960s' shopping precinct with out-of-date offices vacated by the Inland Revenue, plus an undercroft car park, now transformed into Llys Cadwyn.

11, 12 A new bridge springing from Llys Cadwyn to Ynysangharad Park adds to the many fine historic crossings of the River Taff. 12.

'The footfall of the office workers in the heart of the main street help drive the street-level retail and hospitality economy.'

Same story for the utterly transformed site on Taff Street now entitled 'Llys Cadwyn'. Forward investment of architectural feasibility studies by Gaunt Francis Architects led to an outline proposal of two new linear work and retail buildings set at right angles to the river and Taff Street, leading to a new waterfront/flood defence walk and a new pedestrian bridge across to Ynysangharad War Memorial Park. Old Labour sceptics, such as Kim Howells, asked in exasperated tones 'why do you need another bridge?' If he was present at the 2024 National Eisteddfod of Wales in Ynysangharad War Memorial Park across that bridge, he would have had his answer in spades.

The northern gateway building that completes the Llys Cadwyn development designed by Darnton B3 with Gaunt Francis's oversight, houses a popular town library with a state-of-the-art gym above it. A Gatto Lounge bistro has arrived at ground level now with Morgan's major coup of landing the headquarters of Transport for Wales as a tenant to one of the new Llys Cadwyn office buildings. The council closed many of its fragmented and inadequate office assets spread inefficiently around the county and concentrated them in the second Llys Cadwyn building. The footfall of the office workers in the heart of the main street help drive the street-level retail and hospitality economy. The recent opening of the retrofitted YMCA designed by architects including Jonathan Adams on the other side of Taff Street from Llys Cadwyn and the MUNI Arts Centre by Purcell Architects on Gelliwastad Road, a street

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‘Hidden from view for decades by an out-of-use bingo hall riddled with asbestos and the vacated shops of Mark & Spencer, Burton and Dorothy Perkins, a whole new public realm area, again by Darnton B3, will open up views on to the river junction and the park.’

block away, which was again financed through the Levelling Up Fund, have added to the regeneration of the town.

River junction on view

Now there is work underway on a ‘southern gateway’ project and reconfigured public realm at a culturally important site adjacent to where the River Rhondda meets the River Taff. Hidden from view for decades by an out-of-use bingo hall riddled with asbestos and the vacated shops of Mark & Spencer, Burton and Dorothy Perkins, a whole new public realm area, again by Darnton B3, will open up views on to the river junction and the park. This will link up to the recent reworking of the public realm around the station and its new bus connections. The funding at the southern gateway is a blend of RCTCBC, Welsh Government, Cardiff Capital Region and UK government. Llys Cadwyn was a blend of Welsh Government and council funding.

There had been some early public realm investment work in the town centre done in 2013 that lifted retailing expectations, removing also the car traffic from the main retail street between 11:00 and 15:00. A commission from RCTCBC to The Urbanists in 2019 to bring about through public consultation a place-making plan, has given a coherent framework to all these initiatives. There may be a new pedestrian route that will link the southern gateway to Llys Cadwyn along the western bank of the Taff.

This ambition to lift the town visibly through the public leadership of projects and a canny determination to bypass the traditional routes of market-led change is impressive. All of it is done with eyes fully wide-open and equal energetic actions being taken to serve those whom the so often repeated stats on poverty and ill health want to leave in a state of hopelessness. There is visible hope on the Taff at Ponty. It’s palpable.

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13 Model of the southern gateway public landscape project that, when built, will overlook the junction of the settlement’s two major rivers, 15.

14 Connected to the southern gateway, a much-improved public realm for bus transport, closely connected to the existing railway station.

16 The recently reopened and retrofitted YMCA on Taff Street.

17 The MUNI arts centre on Gelliwastad Road financed by the Levelling Up Fund, the third project in the settlement to gain such funds from the same source

Photos: Claire Priest

Welsh Architecture Awards 2024

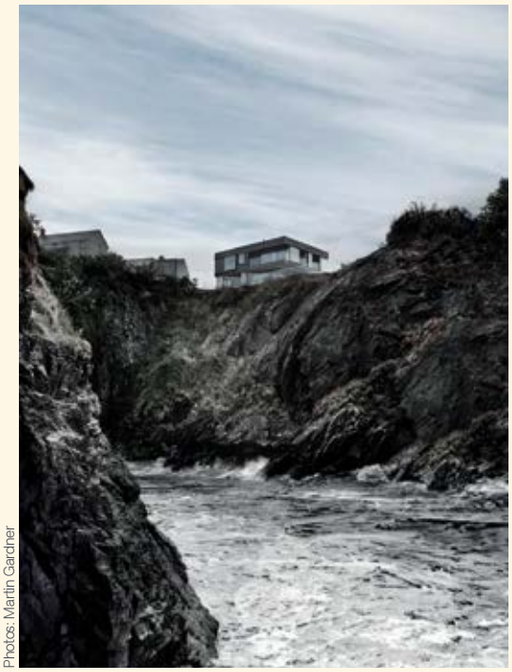
Dewi-Prys Thomas Award 2024

This is the second year that the Dewi-Prys Thomas Trust has partnered with the RSAW to make its annual award alongside the RSAW Architecture Awards, and we are delighted that this partnership has enabled us to reactivate the prize on a regular basis. My involvement with the trust stems from working with architects, landscape designers and planners over many years to integrate public art into the built environment of Wales and beyond. It's important that the award recognises excellence in landscape design, public art, town planning, publications as well as architecture and it means that our judging panel considers submissions for their response to the site and its context, the benefit to the public, and their distinctive contribution to the culture of Wales.

House:

Plas Hendy stable block, Bryngwyn, near Raglan
Studio Brassica Architects

– *RSAW Welsh Architecture Award*
– *RSAW Project Architect of the Year*
– *RSAW Small Project of the Year*
– *RSAW Sustainability Award*
– *National Eisteddfod Norah Dunphy Gold Medal*



Photos: Martin Gardner

House:

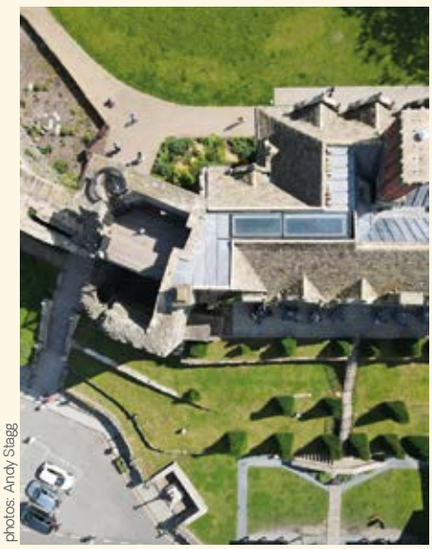
Edge House, Aberporth
Hyde + Hyde Architects

– *RSAW Welsh Architecture Award*

This year we received 11 submissions, which included a wide range of projects from all around Wales, including private houses, the restoration and repurposing of historic buildings, town planning, regeneration, and public art. When considering such a diverse range of projects, comparisons are often unhelpful and the judging panel was keen to focus on the positives from each submission. We considered some innovative local consultation and mapping along with the creation of new community facilities run by volunteers. We saw private houses with a great attention paid to the use of materials and their sustainability. We also saw projects that had public art built into their thinking as well as long-term town planning that successfully managed the involvement of numerous interest groups.

We were particularly struck by those schemes

Photos: Hufton+Crow, courtesy of Acme.



photos: Andy Stagg

Visitor centre:

Hay Castle, Hay-on-Wye
MICA Architects

– RSAW Welsh Architecture Award
– RSAW Conservation Award
– RSAW Building of the Year Award

Gareth Jenkins

Arts centre café:

Plas Glyn y Weddw, Llanbedrog, Pwllheli
Mark Wray Architects, Sanderson Sculptures and Fold Engineering

– RSAW Welsh Architecture Award
– RSAW Client of the Year Award

Dewi-Prys Thomas Award 2024

that have brought with them substantial public benefit and have found ways to contribute to the renewal of their communities.

Our discussions reduced the list down to two schemes: Hay Castle, Hay-on-Wye; and Copr Bay phase 1, Swansea. The former is a sensitive restoration of the Grade I-listed Jacobean castle-house by MICA Architects for the Hay Castle Trust. The previously derelict part of the house has been rebuilt to reinstate the original facade, preserving existing elements and reusing materials from the site wherever possible. The restoration work has created an open interior as a new space that can be used for a variety of community events or for private hire. A new steel staircase and generous roof light make this part of the building an elegant blend of space and light which is regularly used for art and craft displays on the upper floors.

The winner of the 2024 award, however, is the Copr Bay phase 1 development by master planners and architects Acme, for Swansea Council, working with the artist Marc Rees and others. The award recognises the contribution of the project to the long-term vision for the regeneration of Swansea, and positive impact the scheme has on creating new links between the city centre and the bay area. Swansea Arena forms the centrepiece of project and serves a wide catchment of adjacent communities in the region. The project also includes housing, improved pedestrian links, and much needed green space for the city. The pedestrian bridge is worthy of special mention with its striking form and bold colour, marking Swansea out as a place of fresh thinking.

Simon Fenoulhet

Will Scott

Workplace:

Sbarc | Spark, Cardiff
Hawkins\Brown
– RSAW Welsh Architecture Award

RSAW Wales jury

Chair
Kevin Hong, *AtkinsRealis Cardiff*

Regional representative
Victoria Coombs, *Loyn & Co*

Lay assessor
Finn Beales, *Made by Finn*

Sustainability assessor
Demian Erbar, *Erbar Mattes Architects*

Conservation assessor
Ashley Davies, *Ashley Davies Architects*

National Eisteddfod of Wales selectors

Eurig Wyn Williams, *Alwyn Jones Architects*
James Lingard, *Nidus Architects*

Photos: Hufton+Crow, courtesy of Acme.

Dewi-Prys Thomas Award 2024 judges

Victoria Coombs:
director, Loyn & Co Architects

Rhys Llwyd Davies:
architect and trustee of the Dewi-Prys Thomas Trust

Philip Hughes:
director, Ruthin Craft Centre

Professor Joanne Patterson,
director of research, Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University

Simon Fenoulhet (chair):
artist, public art consultant and trustee of the Dewi-Prys Thomas Trust

Photos: *Hufton + Crow, courtesy of Acme*

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-prysthomas.org

1

1, 3 The spectacular context of Croes Fach in the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park; how could you not embrace it?

2 Early conceptual sketch.

3 The view across a major ridge in the region and the Sugar Loaf mountain.

4 The new house was positioned on the upper ground of the former garden opening up to a spectacular outlook.

5 Family house to the left, granny annex and garage to the right, centred and pivoted around the hearth of the house and the solid enclosure of the snug.

4

A country in the house

South-east Wales is home to an evolving line of single-house architectures in rural settings by Hall + Bednarczyk. Croes Fach, the most recent of these projects, demonstrates an assured confidence in refining the language.

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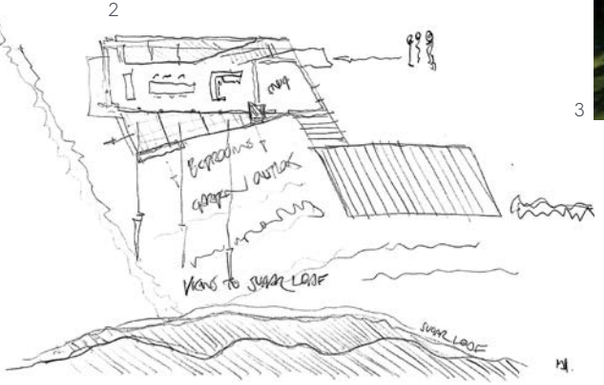

The 'house-in-the-country' has a prominent and sometimes distinguished architectural pedigree, being frequently an opportunity where wealthy, enlightened patronage permits a shifting of the architectural dial.

Over the decades since *Touchstone* began publication, Wales has become home to a significant number of this architectural type, many of them award-winning. They are the last redoubt of true architectural patronage where architects are expected, when paid properly, to deliver everything alongside a team of trusted building craftspeople and suppliers – a whole world away from the design-and-build, project-manager-disconnected, competitive aggression that dominates most other current building types. Prominent among these practices for the private house is Hall + Bednarczyk Architects, with most of its work located in south-east Wales.

These homes are not of the home-county tradition personified by Edwin Lutyens set in the glorious gardens of Gertrude Jekyll, nor the arts and crafts of C F A Voysey. They are rarely a temporary retreat to the country as an antidote to a pressured urban rat race. They are not there, as in an earlier country-house tradition, to express power, creating long-approach axial vistas to impress the visitor, and then through the substantial remoulding of a Capability Brown-style landscape or an Uvedale Price picturesque re-imagining, paint an imaginary idyll. They are not rural homes dependent for their livelihood on food production from the surrounding landscape, although they partially recreate a rural visual familiarity through long-established masonry traditions and the more contemporary steel-and-timber agricultura vocabularies of the farmyard. They are not homes for the landed aristocracy; they are instead homes

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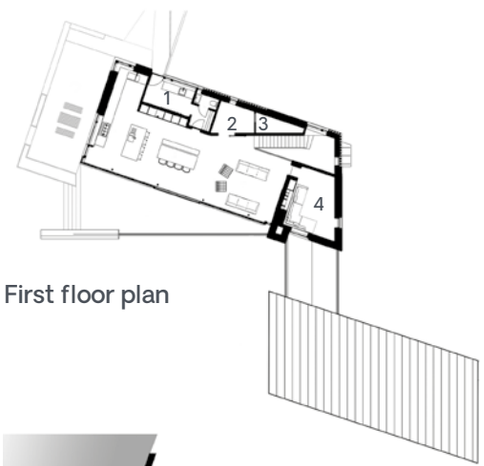
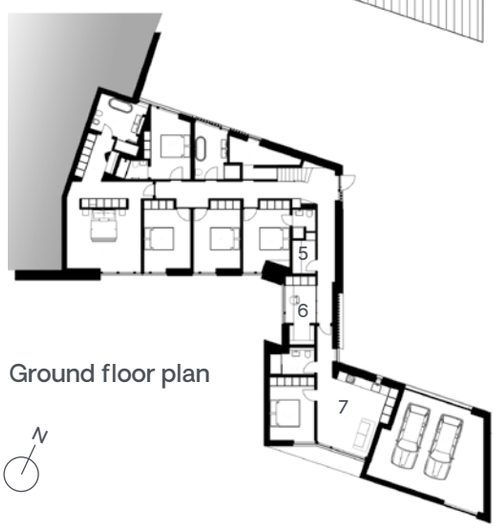
Key to floor plans:

1	Utility
2	Playroom
3	Store
4	Snug
5	Utility
6	Study
7	Annex



First floor plan



Ground floor plan

for successful professionals mostly set in modest landholdings, but their positions frequently allow the living space to be a landscape grandstand for the sites' dramatic settings. Their secluded exposure to that grandeur allows for spectacular open architecture. The landscape is lived everyday as a giant tableau to everyday domesticity. One lives in the landscape.

Early day developments

Through the practice's earliest projects (see p.60) Blue Door and Carreg y Gwydyr, Hall + Bednarczyk Architects was refining a contemporary country-home language and, most importantly, learning what was deliverable within different budgets. When Martin Hall and the late Kelly Bednarczyk came to eventually build their own home, The Nook (p.60), on a much tighter budget, circumstances forced a focus on essentials, a material language of partially expressed steel structures, framing floor-to-ceiling panels of either western red cedar or glass, counterpointed by full-height areas of local, quarried masonry; these then became a regular palette to most of their home projects. The elevational language of solid-to-void is not bound by a timid and unthinking repetition of planning authority's residential expectations nor the ancient, mostly solid, farmhouse tradition sheltering from the elements as a relief to the everyday outdoor-life necessary for agriculture. In contrast to those traditions, the seclusion and seeming isolation of many of the sites, allied to the use of the steel frame, permits majestic expanses of glazed living space. Standing-seam, low-monopitch or gently curving zinc-covered roofs regularly float over the varying compositions below. The architectural language has a confidence and coherence that has won over many planning committees.

The homes, however, frequently incorporate the ancient tradition of a hearth to a more sheltered inner space using its prominent chimney as a counterpoint to an almost inevitable dominant horizontality, as each home perches on a contour looking to embrace the spectacular outlook to the horizon of hills and valleys.

The day-to-day experience of living in these homes in the countryside builds on another ancient tradition where a single large space houses all of life's messy richness embracing all generations of the family. But in its contemporary version (or at least the images offered by the photographer's promotional shots) the furniture

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6 The principal living space looking west.

7–9 The approach elevations.

of living is evident, but not the life; this is all artfully concealed, easily accessible to the main space, but located behind an architectural wall-like element that contains storage, services and smaller scale, more intimate spaces for focused work or children's play.

Much of Hall + Bednarczyk Architects' oeuvre sits more classically 'on-the-land', while some (in the 'organic' tradition) is more 'of-the-land' allowing the folds and contours, the walls and hedgerows, to mould the form, geometry and positioning (see Carreg y Gwydyr: p.60). The beautifully organised and economical floor plans of these homes are mostly orthogonal, with only the curvilinear sweeping volumes and plans of Blue Door with its additional client-inspired ceramic tile additions to the elevations, departing from that discipline.

A new departure

But at Croes Fach Forest Coal Pit, the most recent home in the lineage, the vocabulary of Hall+ Bednarczyk Architects has found a more complex and sophisticated volumetric geometry, arising from a bold and thoughtful strategic response to site and the client's brief. All of the familiar material language is present, but its particular arrangement across this site has lifted the work to another level.

Returning to a valley of his upbringing, the Croes Fach client purchased an existing 1950s' house that had already been functionally

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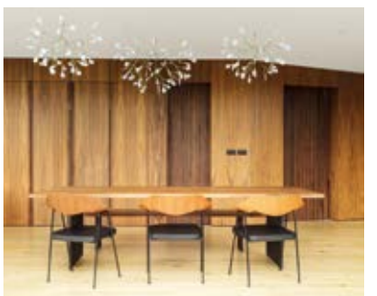


10 The principal living space looking east to the approach staircase, the adjacent hearth and snug beyond.

Construction notes – Croes fach:

Stonework wall construction above retaining wall (U-value = 0.18 W/m²K)
– Black Mountain Quarries blue/green hue sandstone, cropped to nominal 175 mm thickness.
– 75 mm dense blockwork backing to allow waterproofing at junction to reinforced concrete wall below.
– 25 mm SureCav spacer.
– Tyvek Housewrap breather membrane.
– 12 mm OSB3 sheathing.
– 235 mm treated Canadian Lumber Standard (CLS) timber
– studwork fully filled with Rockwool mineral wool insulation.
– Vapour control layer.
– Internal finishes and linings to suit.

The stonework uses a lime mortar mix raked back to emphasise the pronounced joints and shadows, more evocative of drystone walling and vernacular barns. The coursing of random stonework establishes a crucial texture and sense of ordered adaptive informality, which a good stonemason has a feel for. The stone is a weathering layer rather than a waterproofing carapace, therefore there is no need for the pointing to completely seal the stonework wall, which can often result in the heavy-handed application of mortar. Large quoin blocks are used at corners, which may be adapted with a stone saw on the interior corner to tessellate comfortably.

Cedar wall construction:
(U-value = 0.18 W/m²K)
– Western red cedar with hit-and-miss vertical slats.
– 25 mm shaped treated timber counter-batten.
– Vertical treated battens.
– Tyvek Housewrap breather membrane.
– 12 mm oriented strand board sheathing.
– 235 mm treated CLS timber studwork fully filled with
– Rockwool mineral wool insulation.
– Vapour control layer.~
– Internal finishes and linings to suit.

Ground floor construction:
(U-value = 0.16 W/m²K)
– (25 mm finish zone)
– 50 mm (nominal) Flo Screed with integrated underfloor heating pipework.
– 100 mm EcoTherm Eco-Versal polyisocyanurate insulation.
– Damp-proof membrane.
– Beam-and-block suspended floor.
– Minimum 175 mm void, ventilated with telescopic periscope vents to walls.
– Water-permeable geotextile layer.

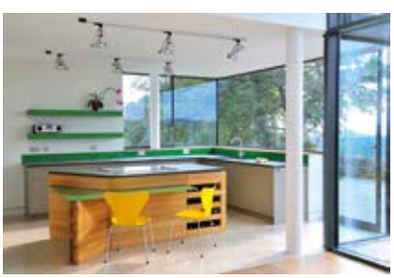
First floor construction
– Internal finishes (28 mm zone)
– 22 mm Omnie TorFloor to facilitate future underfloor heating installation.
– 235 mm joists fully filled with mineral wool insulation.
– 140 mm treated timber boxing to align with window heads.
– Internal finishes by others after shell-and-core works.

Heating
The ground-source heat pump is connected to 1,600 linear metres of below-ground heat loops. This is longer than might be expected because of the adjacent field having soil with low heat-transfer capacity.

Embodied energy
The masonry material from the original house was crushed into aggregate and deployed in the ground-works and driveway.

The Nook

Careg y Gwydyr



Blue Door

extended. The multitude of rooms looked on to a somewhat-enclosed garden setting in the lower corner of the site, sheltered by trees and suburban garden shrubbery. Even the first-floor rooms with their traditional windows set into the pitched roof pushed one's eye down into that sheltered corner. The rather claustrophobic room arrangements ignored the potential of the site's wider context; but walking up the slope of the garden a view opened out to the horizon at its top corner, to one of the most majestic long ridge-lines of this whole area of the Brecon Beacons. Surely this was the proper place for a contemporary home in this unique countryside setting, but the overall case for demolition also included a multitude of other environmental and social gains that the former existing house could never offer. The family moved out to a local settlement while the new project took shape.

The new positioning for Croes Fach sought to capture the magnificent ridge-line context into the heart of its living space while not losing the sheltering qualities of its lower garden. While the quiet sleeping spaces could be offered ground-level shelter focused down towards the lower garden, the living space above centred on the distant ridge and could lift its gaze to the sky; but while being raised it needed also to connect to the upper ground. New living accommodation for a grandmother would ideally be single storey, no stairs, feel discrete and independent, but connected directly to the rest of the assemblage and its primary entrance, while having its own distinct outward view.

In other parts of the same valley are more ancient farmhouse settlements where accretions of masonry structures have been assembled over time, in a loose variable disposition responding to contours and the functional relationship between them. Thus, to belong responsibly and empathetically in this particular place, the experience of approaching Croes Fach consists of a sequence of shifting masonry elevations dominated by the quarried stone of the area.

If the immediate and distant very contrasting landscapes were to be embraced, the elevational geometry of upper and lower floors needed to swivel, pivot, hinge, from the masonry-clad entrance corner with its hearth and chimney firmly anchoring to the site those looser shifts in plan. Both landscapes are addressed.

The geometry of the garden-focused bedroom volumes slide out under a terrace to the upper living level, which in turn opens towards the upper level of the garden where a secondary entrance comes directly into the upper-level kitchen and living space. The garage volume at lower level is absorbed into the grandmother's living space. One mono-pitched roof over the living floor rises towards the distant ridge line; another over the lower-ground-floor level granny flat and garage drops toward the garden.

Peter Blundell Jones wrote lyrically about the architectural breakthrough moment where Hans Scharoun in his 1933 Schminke House loosened the geometry of a two-storey floor plan so that each could separately address the different surrounding site conditions. Scharoun also pivoted the geometry of his entrance staircase away from the orthogonality of the rest of the plan to create an 'aperspectival' spatial experience where movement flows without the need for abruptly turning at right angles to reach a destination. At Croes Fach the angled entrance stair and shifting floor-plan geometries combined with the rising mono-pitched roof delivers one to the stunning living space where home and landscape become one magnificence. This more complex language offers so many other important spatial subtleties. This really is a very twenty-first-century home in the country, the outcome of Hall + Bednarczyk Architects at full throttle. *Patrick Hannay*

Credits for Croes Fach:

Architect: Hall + Bednarczyk Architects (project director: Martin Hall; project architect: Michael Boyes; architect: Louisa Holmes).

Structural engineer: Team 4 Consulting (Mahesh Parmar)

Heating engineer (ground-source heat pump, underfloor heating, and plumbing): Alan Reynolds Heating

Main contractor: Manylion Construction (Rob MacCormac)

Large-format glazing: Maxlight

Stone: Black Mountain Quarries (BMQ Sandstone)

Kitchen: Cymru Kitchens

Lighting: Moooi

Photography: Simon Maxwell

Drone photography: Matt Cant

Tributes

John B. Hilling
10/06/1934 – 08/08/2024

The author and architect John Hilling, who has died aged 90, was a pioneer in the study of architectural history in Wales who pursued it for fifty years after the publication of his first book in 1973. One of his last publications was an article for *Touchstone* in 2021 that tackled the trope among English writers that there is no such thing as 'Welsh architecture'. He was among the first to champion the built heritage of the south Wales coalfield.

John Brian Hilling was born in 1934 in the mining village of Abertyswg, high up the Rhymney Valley. His father Ernest was a mining electrician. After Tredegar Grammar School, he studied at the Welsh School of Architecture from 1951 to 1956 and began his career in the practice of Sir Basil Spence. He took a diploma in town planning at the Polytechnic-Regent Street and worked briefly in Carmarthenshire and Edinburgh. He and his first wife, Helen, moved to Cardiff to give their children a Welsh-speaking education. In 1960, he won first prize in an architectural competition at the National Eisteddfod.

During the 1960s John worked for Sir Percy Thomas and Son, later the Percy Thomas Partnership. He became project architect for the main building (recently listed) at the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans and travelled with Dale Owen to look at Scandinavian inspirations, including the entrance building to the Maihaugen open-air museum at Lillehammer, Norway. He also worked on the 'Billybanks' housing estate in Penarth (since demolished) and the Tower Building at Cardiff University. In the 1970s he became a partner with Alex Robertson and Peter Francis and worked on town planning and residential, educational and public buildings across south Wales. His first books were published in this period: *Cardiff and the Valleys: Architecture and Townscape* (1973), which was a substantial Lund Humphries hardback, and guidebooks to northern and southern Wales. He also curated the influential 1975 Welsh Arts Council touring exhibition *Plans & Prospects: Architecture in Wales 1780–1914*, the large-format catalogue of which is still cherished. His book for the University of Wales Press in 1976, *The Historic Architecture of Wales*, was the first full overview of the subject.

His continuing fascination with Nordic architecture led to his meeting Liisa Syrjakari, a Finnish clinical psychologist, whom he married in 1984. When Cadw was created in the same year, John joined it as a conservation architect for ancient monuments. He treated the properties in state care with practicality and sensitivity, as engaged with the work of Cadw's own stonemasons as with ideas for major projects. He led the consolidation of monuments such as Blaenafon Ironworks and Haverfordwest Priory and advised on sites that were the subject of grant aid or applications for scheduled monument consent such as Carew and Manorbier castles in Pembrokeshire. He wrote a widely used Cadw advice booklet, *Chapels in Wales: Conservation and Conversion*. At the same time, his historical expertise had a quiet influence on the listing resurvey of Wales, led by his close ally and long-term friend, the late David McLees.

In person, John could seem reserved and brisk, hidden behind a sometimes-unruly beard. Nevertheless, colleagues cherished his provocative sense of humour and found him a brilliant team player, debating interpretations and proffering ideas to reach a shared conclusion. In print, he wrote in plain and accessible style after thorough research.

After retiring from Cadw in 1996, he was able to dedicate his time to scholarship. Among his sustained passions was Cardiff's Portland-stone civic centre, which he considered one of the finest ensembles of public buildings in Britain. In 2016 he produced his authoritative study, *The History and Architecture of Cardiff Civic Centre*, published by the University of Wales Press in partnership with the RSAW. Encouraged by the then RSAW director, Mary Wrenn, he went on in 2018 to prepare a wholly new edition of his 1976 survey, *The Architecture of Wales: From the first to the twenty-first century*. She recalls enjoyable production meetings that he would curtail so as to get back to work, remarking: 'Well Mary, I've got a book to write. I'm 83!' It was a substantial illustrated history that brought up to date a lifetime's research and thought, assisted by Professor Simon Unwin, who contributed the final chapter. His final book, in 2022, was to be *The Wooden Architecture of Northern Europe: From the Viking Era to the 20th Century*; he was tickled that his first and last books had had one and the same publisher, Lund Humphries.

John's belief in the possibility of writing coherently about Welsh architecture brought some hostile reactions in the earlier days. A reviewer in the journal *Antiquity* attacked the first edition of *The Historic Architecture of Wales* as 'a political tract presenting a tendentious, not to say racist, view of Welsh history', and stated that, 'in all material respects (that is, apart from the language of an ever-decreasing minority) [Wales] is essentially a region of southern Britain'. In his article for *Touchstone* in 2021, John implied that the attitude that there was 'no such thing as Welsh architecture' was a driving force for his lifetime's research and writing. He pointed out that while 'English' architecture was permitted to encompass the works of architects from other countries – the Adam brothers, Goldfinger, Spence – Welsh architecture was expected to be entirely home-grown if it was to make a claim to exist. Across a lifetime's work he celebrated Welsh-born architects and home-grown styles together with architecture by outsiders who responded to the Welsh context. The neglect of Welsh architecture was unjustified, and John Hilling led the way in doing something about it.

Peter Wakelin and David Lermon

John Brian Hilling, architect and author:
born Abertyswg, 10 June 1934;
married Helen Margaret Lloyd 17 September 1957: divorced 1981 (one daughter, two sons (one deceased 2005));
married Liisa Syrjakari 1984;
died Cardiff 8 August 2024.

T G Jones and J R Evans
A practice of friends


1


2

T G Jones & J R Evans was a small but significant practice on the Welsh architectural scene in the 1960s and 70s, which was most well-known for the award-winning, widely published, and grade II-listed Little Orchard housing development in Dinas Powys, Vale of Glamorgan. The younger partner in the practice, John Robert Evans, died in December 2023, some 20 years after his great friend and professional colleague, Thomas Glyn Jones.

John Evans was born in Caernarfon in 1931, the son of a Welsh-speaking grocer who had a store near the castle; his mother was from Manchester. He attended Caernarvon Grammar School where his interest in drawing was encouraged by his art master, Tudor O Thomas, such that he stayed on at school to complete his Higher School Certificate in drawing and painting. He trained at the Welsh School of Architecture (WSA), at what was then Cardiff Technical College under Lewis John, gaining his diploma in architecture with distinction in 1954, his thesis design project being for a climbers' hotel in Snowdonia.

It was at the WSA that John Evans and Glyn Jones, who was also from north Wales, first met – and they became best friends from their first day at college. Glyn Jones was born in Harlech in 1926, but lived for most of his childhood in Penrhyndeudraeth. Jones was educated at Barmouth Grammar School, where he won a scholarship to the WSA, his interest in architecture having been kindled by one of his grandfathers who had worked on the construction of Portmeirion. Through his grandfather, and a common interest in the Ffestiniog Railway, he became a long-term friend of the 'architect errant' Clough Williams-Ellis. Jones's career path was interrupted by being called up to the army but, after demobilisation in 1948, he began his architecture studies at the WSA concurrently with John Evans, also achieving his diploma in architecture with distinction in 1954.[1]

Interestingly, both Evans and Jones continued their education in Cardiff for a further year, the former studying engineering, the latter archaeology, before working for a short period at T Alwyn Lloyd and Gordon. They then formed their own practice on the basis of winning a competition for the design of a flower shop in Albany Road, Cardiff.

Jones and Evans's first large-scale project, though, was for the design of a garage and showroom at Newport Road, Cardiff that was the prelude to an extended series of commercial projects on which the long-term viability of the practice was founded. These were generally factories or telephone exchanges – and predominantly in the Midlands – but they also designed the post office building at St John's Square, Abergavenny, and a factory in Morriston, Swansea for Siliconix [c. 1973], which was reputedly the first £one-million construction project in Wales.

However, it was in the field of housing design where the talent – and entrepreneurial spirit – of Jones and Evans really came to the fore. By the late 1950s, the commercial success of the practice provided the financial wherewithal for the pair to purchase some land at Cherry Close, Dinas Powys. Here, they designed and developed seven houses, including a house each for themselves: Jones's one with steeply pitched roofs, Evans's with a predominantly flat roof (c. 1961–62, subsequently substantially altered). This was their first foray into housing design and ideas with which they were experimenting in these houses, such as floor-to-ceiling windows and strip-wood ceilings, were carried over to the later Little Orchard development.[2]

It was on land a little further north-west of Cherry Close, Dinas Powys that Jones and Evans gave full rein to their modernist – indeed brutalist – architect-developer ambitions with the Little Orchard development of six houses (*Touchstone*, 2016, p. 12). The site had been the subject of previous refusals of planning permission when they daringly bought it at auction in December 1963. Four houses were built initially and completed in 1968: two were sold, while numbers 1 and 2 became the new homes of the architects' families. The sale of numbers 3 and 4 and of their previous houses in Cherry Close financed the construction of the final two houses, which were completed in 1973. Number 5 became the Evans household and number 6 home to the Jones family.[3]

The six houses have a common architectural vocabulary but are all slightly different being individually attuned to their particular location on the site. Flat roofed, with the living

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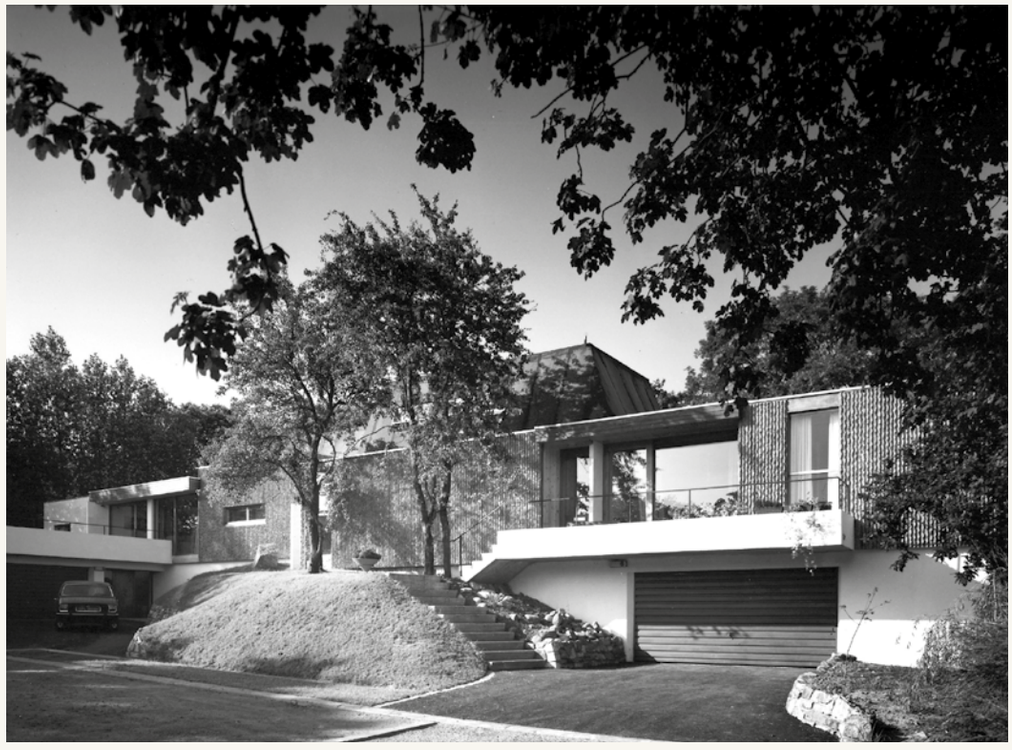

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1 Glyn Jones (photo: courtesy of Russell Jones).

2 John Evans (photo: courtesy of Jacqui Walmsley).

3 Little Orchard, Dinas Powys (photo: T G Jones & J R Evans, courtesy of Russell Jones).

4 Chapel at Singleton Hospital, Swansea (photo: Jonathan Vining).

accommodation elevated above garages to take advantage of the sloping site, the houses are constructed mainly from vertically-ribbed in situ concrete, bush hammered to create a broken texture. The material, which was used internally as well as externally, was inspired by Paul Rudolph's Brutalist Yale Art and Architecture Building in New Haven, Connecticut, which featured in *Progressive Architecture* magazine in February 1964. At Little Orchard, though, the concrete has a reddish tone from the use of a local aggregate from Tongwynlais, the texture being achieved through the use of tapered battens fixed to the formwork, with the ribs being bush hammered after the concrete had cured for a month. The architects intended that the textured concrete would weather gracefully over time – as it has – to evoke elements of the Welsh landscape.

By the time of Little Orchard, the practice had moved from Park Place into Holst House in Museum Place, Cardiff – a six-storey office building with 'some of the best board-marked in situ concrete to be found in Britain', and a remarkable concrete shell roof over the top-floor drawing office.[5] This must also have provided inspiration for the high-quality of in-situ concrete achieved at Little Orchard. The design of the houses was also influenced by Nordic precedents, Jones and Evans, with Gordon Jones of Powell & Alport, having travelled in 1958 to Finland and visited, among other things, Alvar Aalto's Villa Mairea (where they met the owner Harry Gullichsen) and Säynätsalo town hall, and housing projects by Toivo Korhonen. Richard Neutra's work was cited as an influence too.[4]

The first four houses at Little Orchard won a Welsh Office medal for good design in housing in 1968 – the first time this medal had been awarded to a private development – and an award from the Cement and Concrete Society in 1969. The scheme also won the Gold Medal for Architecture at the National Eisteddfod of Wales in 1972 and was listed grade II in 2006.

In around 1973, Jones and Evans bought an old, red-brick pharmacy and office building in Cardiff Road, Llandaf, Cardiff, converted and extended it sympathetically, and relocated their practice to the top-floor studio space while letting out the other three floors. The stand-out building of Jones and Evans's time in that office is the chapel at Singleton Hospital, Swansea (dedicated on 17 June 1977), which is also constructed predominantly of in-situ concrete. The chapel is conceived as a discrete, irregular form set against an eight-storey ward block, to which it is connected by a corridor link. Overlapping planes of wall contain narrow, vertical openings (one of which contains the *dalle de verre* east window by Celtic Studios of Swansea, 1976) and result in a serrated parapet profile that confirms the chapel's precious, jewel-like status against its contrasting backdrop.

Jones and Evans thought alike about architecture, with their influences being primarily 'Scandinavia with a sprinkling of California'.[6] In some ways they were ahead of their contemporaries in Wales about design, the nobility and expression of materials, and energy conservation using passive design principles. Both were talented designers, but John was the more capable businessman, Glyn being quieter and more creative. They were insistent on taking projects from start to finish and meticulous about craftsmanship on site. They even ventured into furniture design and were early adopters of Terence Conran's furniture.

In the early 1990s, Evans retired to Salcombe in Devon but later returned to Dinas Powys. He was an accomplished painter and in 2005 was commissioned to produce a series of 12 large canvases for a penthouse in Mallorca. In 2008 he held an exhibition at the former Kooywood Gallery in Museum Place, Cardiff entitled *Transition*, to mark his evolution from architect to artist. Two years later, he exhibited over 60 landscape paintings of Anglesey and the Menai Strait at Oriel Ynys Môn, Llangefni under the name John Roose Evans, in recognition of his ancestor Jonathan Roose (1731–1815), who was the supervisor of a team of miners who rediscovered the copper ore of Parys Mountain.[7]

Jonathan Vining

Thomas Glyn Jones, architect:
born Harlech 21 May 1926;
married Margaret Picton Thomas 1958
(one daughter, two sons);
died Barry, Vale of Glamorgan 21 November 2003.

John Robert Evans, architect and artist:
born Caernarfon 14 August 1931;
married Santa Nadena Condon 1958
(two daughters);
died Llandough, Vale of Glamorgan 16 December 2023.

Thanks to Glyn Jones's architect-son, Russell Jones, and John Evans's architect-daughter, Jacqui Walmsley, for their assistance in preparing this article.

References

1 The only other distinction in that year was awarded to Gordon Jones, who went on to become a partner in the Newport-based practice of Powell & Alport. Two other notable architects who trained at Cardiff around the same time were Graham Brooks (1928–2020) (*Touchstone*, 2021, p. 58) and Wyn Thomas (1928–2017) (*Touchstone*, 2017, pp. 56–59).

2 Jacqui Walmsley. *In-situ Concrete: A model for housing in Wales*, unpublished dissertation, Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff, 2003, p. 35.

3 Ibid, pp. 32–34.

4 Ibid, p. 38.

5 Holst House, designed by Alex Gordon and Partners and completed in 1962, was unsympathetically refurbished in the 2010s and is now known as James William House. It was originally published in *Concrete Quarterly*, number 27, April–June 1963, p. 2.

6 Author's interview with Russell Jones, Cardiff, 20 September 2024.

7 John Roose Evans. *Paintings: Ynys Môn*, exhibition catalogue, Oriel Ynys Môn, Llangefni, 2010, p. 2.

John Chris Jones
Reflections on designing designing

John Christopher Jones (1927–2022) was a Welsh designer, writer, educator and artist, perhaps best known in the world of architecture for his writing on design methods. His hugely influential book *Design Methods: seeds of human futures* (1970, 1980, 1992) informed the design curriculum both nationally and internationally, inspiring a generation of architects, engineers and designers to think beyond a product and consider the needs of users in their design process. Today, this approach is better known as 'human-centred design' or 'design thinking' and is widely practised in design consultancies and taught in business and design schools around the world.

After studying engineering at Cambridge in the 1940s, John Chris began his career in post-war Britain, first working as an industrial designer for the Festival of Britain (1950–1951) and then for one of the world's largest heavy engineering facilities at the time, Metropolitan-Vickers, a subsidiary of Associated Electrical Industries (AEI). Here, he was tasked to visit various design companies, reviewing products and investigating design problems. For example, he spent time at Olivetti in Ivrea, Italy, carrying out a kind of visual and written design ethnography of the offices, factory plants and library. Based on his learnings he started courses in aesthetics and design methods for engineers and ran one of the first ergonomics labs in British industry. He also began publishing his insights into the design process in design journals, including the Design Council's *Design* magazine.

John Chris recognised early on that 'massive unsolved problems' had been created through 'the use of manmade things', such as traffic congestion and urban decay.[1] Our designed and engineered world had begun to create new forms of complexity, which called for a new focus for design. He challenged what he observed as industry's overly mechanised systems that were insensitive to human needs. John Chris proposed a radical shift in the role of the designer, from the sole orchestrator of a design solution to advocating the needs of users within a design process.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s he taught at Manchester Metropolitan University and at UMIST, Manchester University, pioneering courses in design and technology and developing research into user-centred design and design methods. In 1962, he led the organisation of a 'Conference on Systematic and Intuitive Methods in Engineering, Industrial Design, Architecture and Communications', which brought together designers, artists and engineers. The conference paved the way for the founding of the Design Research Society, which continues to be a leading research body today.

In 1970, he published *Design Methods*, a design research handbook including a compendium of creative and systematic methods by leading researchers at the time, including, for example, Christopher Alexander, Stafford Beer and Henry Sanoff. The introductory chapter charts design's evolution from craftwork, through industrialised design and manufacture, to potential post-industrial futures.

In 1971, John Chris was appointed as the first design professor at the Open University (OU). He left the OU in 1975, unable to reconcile his own vision of an open university – the use of new technologies to facilitate a more radically open and accessible education – with the constraints of the OU.

Through his later career as an independent artist and writer, he continued to reinvent and reimagine the potential of design and technology 'as a process or way of living in itself'.[2] He shared his writings, which he captured on a hand-held digital device while out walking on Hampstead Heath, on his website *Softopia*, in an early form of blogging.[3]

He was inspired by the work of the American composer John Cage (1912–92), being especially drawn to the notion of 'purposeful purposelessness' and chance. His chance-based experiments inspired the form and content his book *designing designing* (1991, 2021) in which John Chris challenged traditional product-orientated design with a process-orientated approach through a collection of essays, interviews, plays, poems, photographs, collages and quotes. The book was recently reissued by Bloomsbury Publishing as a part of its 'Radical Thinkers in Design' series, reaching new designers navigating today's everchanging landscape of design and technology.

Hannah Jones

John Christopher Jones: design educator
07/10/1927 – 13/08/2022

Dr Hannah Jones is a London-based design educator and researcher with expertise in design, collaboration, and sustainable futures.

Photograph: John Chris Jones, Antwerp, 1985 (photo: estate of J C Jones, with the permission of Kathy Moyson)

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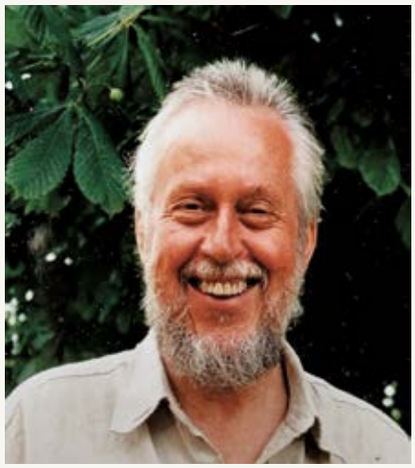
1 J Christopher Jones. *Design Methods: seeds of human futures*, John Wiley & Sons, 1970, p. 31.

2 John Chris Jones. *designing designing*, Architecture Design and Technology Press, 1991.

3 John Chris Jones. *Softopia* [online]. http://www.publicwriting.net.



Peter Stonebridge
04/12/1934 – 27/09/2024

In a recent RSAW survey on membership communications, what was resoundingly clear was how 'events and in-person lectures' were valued as top-of-the-league inspirations for practising architects.

For over two decades in north Wales, Peter Stonebridge, who died on 27 September 2024, put on an exemplary series of in-person talks to the North Wales Society of Architects (NWSA) from the great-and-good in UK and European architecture. He would simply pick up the phone to all those outstanding and no-doubt very busy architects. They could never resist the warmth and enthusiasm of his invitation to north Wales, despite the travel distances and tricky public transport connections. They always appreciated the care with which he delivered hospitality. Among the list of luminaries Stonebridge lured were the late Enric Miralles, Studio Libeskind, Richard Murphy, Patel Taylor, Kathryn Findlay, Ash Sakula, Lifschutz Davidson, Bob Allies, Sutherland and Hussey, Deyan Sudjic, and two of the trio of practices of that infamous Royal Academy show, Rogers and Foster, but not Stirling.

Born on 4 December 1934 in Luton, Stonebridge was an only child, extremely gifted in drawing and painting and model making, playing also the violin and viola. He gained architectural and town planning qualifications between 1954 and 1961. After 16 years of practising architecture in a variety of scales of practice in London – where he was always overlapping practice with part-time tutoring at the Architectural Association and the Polytechnic of Central London – he moved to Llansannan in north Wales in 1984 with his partner (later his second wife, married in 2004).

While in London he worked for Architects Co-Partnership, Douglas Stephens and Partners, Theo Crosby, and in 1964–68 Arthur Swift and Partners working on the Ballymun new town and Victoria Centre, Nottingham as an associate partner. For a year, in 1968–69, he worked as an architectural assistant for the public-service architect, renowned for many UK town halls, Clifford Culpin & Partners. In 1973, Stonebridge became part of the HSTB Partnership of Haenlein, Stonebridge, Threlfall and Berzins (1973–77). The link with Hans Haenlein, based in London's Hammersmith, survived the eventual move to north Wales linking up in a brief partnership with David Goodwin doing housing association and hospital works.

Stonebridge's longest practice partnership of 15 years' duration was formed with Chris Sanders, based in Denbigh, again working on health authority and private housing projects. With the solidity of the Sanders & Stonebridge partnership as a base, Stonebridge launched his ambitious series of renowned architectural lectures to the NWSA.

Clifford Culpin wrote a reference for Stonebridge in 1970:

'My partners and I formed a very high opinion of him as a man and as an architect. His design ability is quite outstanding and ideas flowed from him at a remarkable rate and were set down in a rapid and fluent manner.

'Above all he possesses unquenchable enthusiasm for architecture and for life. I cannot think of anyone more fitted to impart to students of architecture a feeling for design and a dedication to a career in our profession.'

After all, as the RIBA hopes, we should be continuous students of our discipline. Stonebridge gave the architects of north Wales and further afield an extraordinary diet of inspiration. Thank you, Peter.

Patrick Hannay

Peter Frank Stonebridge, architect:
born Luton 4 December 1934;
married Patricia Williams 1959 (three sons), dissolved 1972;
married Beverly Gratton 1974, dissolved 1983;
lived with Jean Rowe from 1984 and married 2004;
died Plas Eleri Care Home,
Denbigh 27 September 2024.

'Above all he possesses unquenchable enthusiasm for architecture and for life. I cannot think of anyone more fitted to impart to students of architecture a feeling for design and a dedication to a career in our profession.'

1

1, 2 One of the most celebrated new libraries in the ancient city of Barcelona, the Sant Antoni – Joan Oliver Library, completed by RCR Arquitectes in 2007. The project reclaims an interior courtyard of the Cerda grid as public realm, and the library creates a generous two-storey 'door' on to this courtyard from the street outside. Coupled with a retirement home, which wraps around the rear of the courtyard, the convivial ground floor of the library is populated every morning by older people who gather to read together.

The case for the book

2

As public libraries in Wales become 'anywhere' places, are we losing something fundamental? Ed Green asks what we can learn from library developments elsewhere.

'When culture is in question, the knowledge of books, the amount of reading, and the possession of a library – all become measures of value, not only of the individual but also of the community.'[1]

In Wales and throughout the UK, public libraries are being lost at an unprecedented rate. Every library that closes its doors deprives the surrounding community of an essential resource a hundred years in the making. If the new Labour government is genuinely interested in delivering change through 'a decade of renewal',[2] libraries are surely an important place to begin. But to do so, we must understand the role of libraries and their significance in terms of knowledge, culture and community.

The British public-library movement can be traced back to Victorian urges to 'improve' the working classes by providing free access to knowledge, and the endeavours of industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie who adopted education of the national workforce as a personal crusade.

In 1848, a select committee was established to determine the 'best means of extending the establishment of libraries freely open to the public'. The subsequent *Public Libraries Act 1850* provided a method for delivering libraries, and dictated that they should be publicly funded, freely accessible, and embrace the needs and interests of all members of the community 'without bias or interference'.[3]

Cardiff was the first town in Wales to establish a public library. 'City leaders considered the library as an achievement the whole city should be proud of, something to uplift civic life and local democracy.'[4] Around the same time, the Welsh working class took matters into its own hands. During the late 19th century, miners' institutes were created in communities throughout the coalfields of north and south Wales with workers creating their own committees and collecting funds. By 1934, Welsh mining families had access to more than a hundred well-stocked libraries.

In the UK, a centralised library programme was finally formalised by the *Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964*, which still operates today, and places 'a duty on local authorities to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service'.[5] Recently, however, the nature of library services has been changing. Satellite and community libraries have been systematically shut down as local authorities consolidate services. Since 2010, more than 800 public libraries have closed and the number of qualified librarians has shrunk by more than 12,000. Paid staff are being replaced with volunteers. The day-to-day running of libraries has been offloaded on to charitable or community-based organisations. In extreme cases 'local authorities are proposing that libraries can be operated at times without any professional librarians, relying on self-service technology, smartcards for entry and CCTV'.[6]

In Wales, many surviving public libraries have become one-stop-shops for a diverse range of council services including housing support and access to schools, employment and waste management. Coupled with excellent work by charities and support groups:

'The average public library is not only a provider of the latest Anne Enright or Julia Donaldson: it is now an informal citizens advice bureau, a business development centre, a community centre and a mental health provider. It is an unofficial Sure Start centre, a homelessness shelter, a literacy and foreign language-learning centre, a calm space where tutors can help struggling kids, an asylum support provider, a citizenship and driving theory test centre, and a place to sit still all day and stare at the wall, if that is what you need to do, without anyone expecting you to buy anything'.[7]

But in attempting to be all things to all people, is it possible that the true purpose of a library is being compromised? Three contemporary libraries offer different visions of what libraries in Wales could be, and how they might operate.

A place for books and knowledge

Etymologically speaking, a library is built around books, from the Latin *liber* meaning book. The word also enjoys an association with *liber*, Latin for free. But as libraries diversify, there is a tension between space that is occupied by books and space for other activities. In Cardiff, 'library services' are listed fifth on a list of 11 services offered by local 'hubs'. Books are mentioned obliquely as 'items'. References to 'learning' and 'reading and relaxation' are lost amid a broad spectrum of other services. A decline in the

'The average public library is not only a provider of the latest Anne Enright or Julia Donaldson: it is now an informal citizens advice bureau, a business development centre, a community centre and a mental health provider.'

3, 4 The Word in South Shields by FaulknerBrowns Architects: a new library completed in 2016 is also intended as a national centre for language and promotes and supports writers located in the north-east of England. The books quietly frame a view out over ferries that come and go on the Tyne.

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popularity of reading has inevitably been used to justify reconfiguring libraries, but diminished levels of literacy surely make places for books even more essential. With the proliferation of fake news, it is worth remembering that a key benefit proposed by the 1849 public libraries report was that they should 'lessen, or perhaps entirely destroy, the influence of frivolous, unsound or dangerous work'.

For 20 years, the city of Barcelona has made access to knowledge a priority. The current *Barcelona Libraries 2030 Master Plan* states that the 'function of public libraries, in addition to fostering reading and culture, is to guarantee access to information and knowledge. They also promote the creation of knowledge and individual and collective development through dynamic learning, creativity and innovation'.[8] The number of libraries in the city has doubled. One of the most celebrated is the Sant Antoni – Joan Oliver Library, completed by RCR Arquitectes in 2007. The project reclaims an interior courtyard of the Cerda grid as public realm, and the library creates a generous two storey 'door' on to this courtyard from the street outside. Coupled with a retirement home, which wraps around the rear of the courtyard, the convivial ground floor of the library is populated every morning by older people who gather to read together. Across Barcelona, new libraries have provided citizens with open access to knowledge within joyful, distinctive places.

5, 6 Helsinki's Central Library, Oodi, was designed by ALA Architects and completed in 2018. It was conceived as a living meeting place where local residents and visitors alike can socialise, learn, work, and hold events. It works on three levels: a robustly civic ground floor; a peaceful upper floor with an ethereal cloud-like quality that looks out over the city; and a utilitarian in-between level combining studios, meeting spaces, and craft-based workshops.

A place for culture and language

Since 2016, the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act* has provided a legislative blueprint for a sustainable future. One of the act's seven goals requires that Wales becomes a place 'of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language'.[9] It is difficult to imagine culture and language being protected, or even valued, by a society that allows an infrastructure of public libraries to be dissolved.

The Word was commissioned by South Tyneside Council with the ambition to create a nationally significant place for language and culture within a specific regional context. Designed by FaulknerBrowns Architects, the centre links the historic high street of South Shields to the River Tyne and Customs House, a centre for the arts and is described as 'a library for the 21st century, celebrating the dynamic relationship between people, books, traditional media and interactive technologies, in a truly inspiring environment'.[10] The project is intended as a national centre for language and promotes and supports writers located in the north-east of England. It combines bookshelves with flexible spaces for exhibition and storytelling, workshops and a café, all wrapped around a central atrium. The Word was completed in 2016 and won a RIBA award. It sits in an extremely challenging context – both architecturally and socially. Seven years on, it still welcomes a steady flow of people with an array of community-facing activities and events. Interestingly, books signify what it does best. The café, exhibition and retail spaces mirror the tired high street outside and lack a sense of place. But upstairs is a distinctly nice place to be, under the

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‘The library is where the tunnel is if you want to escape. The library is the key. All the knowledge in the world is there … Great brains are there to be picked. Books are your ticket to the whole world. It’s a free ticket to the entire Earth. Some nice person saying: come in and listen to this. You’ve never heard this before – it’ll change you for the better…’ Billy Connolly

rafters, where the books quietly frame a view out over ferries that come and go on the Tyne.

A place for community

In sociology, the ‘third place’ refers to a social setting that is distinct from both home (‘first place’) and work (‘second place’). In *The Great Good Place* (1989), Ray Oldenburg argues that third places are important for civil society, democracy, civic engagement and establishing a sense of place. The last may be particularly important for libraries, as our high streets struggle to find purpose post-Covid:

‘A library in the middle of a community is a cross between an emergency exit, a life raft, and a festival. They are cathedrals of the mind; hospitals of the soul; theme parks of the imagination. On a cold, rainy island, they are the only sheltered public spaces where you are not a consumer, but a citizen instead. A human with a brain, a heart and a desire to be uplifted, rather than a consumer with a credit card and an inchoate “need” for “stuff”.’[11]

Helsinki’s Central Library, Oodi, was designed by ALA Architects and completed in 2018. Adjacent to the railway station, it faces the Parliament House across a generous piazza, alongside a concert hall and a contemporary gallery by Steven Holl. It was conceived as a living meeting place where local residents and visitors alike can socialise, learn, work, and hold events. The building, made almost entirely of Finnish spruce, works on three levels: a robustly civic ground floor; a peaceful upper floor with an ethereal cloud-like quality that looks out over the city; and a utilitarian in-between level combining studios, meeting spaces, and craft-based workshops. ‘Oodi is one of the freest buildings in Helsinki, or even the Nordic Countries, where the visitor can do many things and take initiative in what they want to do. It is a constantly learning and developing tool for those living in or visiting Helsinki.’[12] Oodi is Finnish for ‘ode’, an apt name for this building – celebrating the synergy between a society that funds libraries properly and a community that understands what they are for.

Learning from libraries

It isn’t hard to find wonderful examples of what libraries can be, if properly funded and resourced. In Wales, and across the UK, libraries are being used to plug social and cultural gaps arising in other sectors. While this may keep libraries alive, it results in a loss of focus and quality. There are examples everywhere of places for books, language and culture that do not operate at a vast scale or consume huge budgets – a phone-box stacked with donated Jackie Collins novels or a community tool chest that lends out tools along with decades of experience. These acts of generosity are filling a gap – something important that we do not have, that should be organised and administered at a societal level. Perhaps, with a new government in place, the first step to re-establishing the UK as a nation that takes knowledge, culture and community seriously is revisiting the work of the 1850 steering group and taking time to define what a future library should – and should not – be.

‘The library is where the tunnel is if you want to escape. The library is the key. All the knowledge in the world is there … Great brains are there to be picked. Books are your ticket to the whole world. It’s a free ticket to the entire Earth. Some nice person saying: come in and listen to this. You’ve never heard this before – it’ll change you for the better…’ (Billy Connolly)

Dr Edmund Green is a senior lecturer at the Welsh School of Architecture, where he runs year 2 of the undergraduate programme. Before joining WSA he worked at Pentan Architects for fifteen years, during which time he was lead designer for Bargoed public library among other projects. His current research focus is the story of housing – past, present and future.

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Book reviews

Percy Thomas: Modern architecture as a National Service

Robert Proctor
University of Wales Press

Simon Unwin

The Percy Thomas Partnership was the largest and most successful architectural practice in Wales ever. Many of you reading this review could probably find your place on the extensive architectural 'family tree' that descends from Percy Thomas as its patriarch.

This is the latest volume in the University of Wales Press's 'The Architecture of Wales series', which began in 2016 with John Hilling's *The History and Architecture of Cardiff Civic Centre*. Dr Robert Proctor's monograph explores the work of this Welsh architectural firm that, in one guise or another, contributed more buildings than any other to that civic centre, stretching through the twentieth century from the neo-classical Cardiff Technical College (now the Bute Building, home of the Welsh School of Architecture) in 1914 and the 1930s Temple of Peace, through to the modernist Martin Evans and Tower Buildings of the 1960s, both for University College Cardiff (now Cardiff University).

Proctor's account of the practice's output is detailed and erudite. He focuses on the argument that Britain, participant in two major twentieth-century wars and retaining a self-image as an imperial power, was driven by the idea of 'national service' in a sense much wider than serving in the armed forces. Thomas himself served on the western front. In peace time, Proctor sees Percy Thomas as serving the nation through architecture. His practice prospered in the periods when Britain strived to recover from the trauma of the wars. These were times when changing governments sought to cultivate municipal leadership, higher education, commerce, industry, transport, housing and, after the second world war, the welfare state. The practice was less involved in planned housing but his practice served, and profited from, all the others.

In thematic, rather than chronological chapters, Proctor charts the partnership's prolific output through eight decades, giving due attention to the inter-war masterpieces of Swansea's Guildhall (Brangwyn Hall) and Cardiff's Temple of Peace, but also illustrating its eclectic range of Cardiff pubs and private houses (generally arts and crafts), and churches for various denominations, including the impressive early 1970s Clifton Cathedral, designed by Ronald Weeks, and often described simplistically by architectural historians as 'brutalist' despite its refined concrete detailing and human scale internally. Clifton Cathedral was perhaps the high-point of the practice's post-war transition to modernism when Percy Thomas's son Norman became involved in the practice that he would later head.

In the decades after the second world war the practice became design consultant to industry, power generation and transport infrastructure, including steel works, power stations, and famously the first Severn Bridge, mooted in the 1940s but not completed until the late 1960s. Not only was it involved with vast industrial and major transport projects, but it also contributed some of the most significant modern education buildings in Wales, especially for the various colleges of the then federal University of Wales, including at Bangor, Swansea, Cardiff, and pre-eminently at Aberystwyth, where the Cardiff-born but partly US (MIT and Harvard)-educated Dale Owen produced some of his finest work – which also includes the now demolished (and much lamented) BBC Broadcasting House in Llandaf and the (much altered) entrance building to the then Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans (although the late

1 Hallinan's bar and restaurant, Cardiff, c. 1920.

2 House for D Rupert and Isabel Phillips, Radyr, 1923–27.

3 Westgate Hotel, Cardiff, 1932.

4 Swansea Guildhall, 1930–34, Council chamber.

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John Hilling claimed responsibility for the latter).

The range of the practice's work through the twentieth century is dizzying – too much to mention in this short review – but Proctor covers it diligently and in great detail, giving due weight to the major projects while also accounting for the lesser, and setting it all in the context of the social and political tides of the era. The text is the product of obviously deep and conscientious research and the images are copious (though the majority are photographs; no plans). This is a book essential for the record of architecture in Wales in the twentieth century. The Percy Thomas Partnership was (it has latterly been subsumed under Capita) *that* important.

Proctor concludes his story with an account of the gestation of the practice's last major project, the Wales Millennium Centre, designed by Jonathan Adams and opened in 2004 (see also pp. 00–00). Proctor's account is somewhat restrained. He does mention something about 'controversy' (described in the press as 'Zaha Hadid's doomed plans for a Cardiff Bay Opera House') but anyone involved in architecture in Cardiff (and further afield) in the 1990s will surely remember it as being rather more than that. It was, to use a Scottish term, a real stushi! (But that is a story in its own right, and it has been told, somewhat partially, in Nicholas Crickhowell's 1997 book *Opera House Lottery: Zaha Hadid and the Cardiff Bay Project*.)

One thing I miss from Proctor's text is insight into the character of the man who started it all. (A man who was the son of a sea captain from a small town in Pembrokeshire and went on to set up one of the most successful British architectural practices of the twentieth century, becoming president of the RIBA in 1937, and awarded its Gold Medal two years later. A man who, according to his 1963 memoir – *Pupil to President* – first took up architecture on the advice of a phrenologist… and was knighted in 1946.) Proctor does make it clear at the outset that his book is about the work of the practice rather than the life of the man (though he does mention in passing Thomas's experiences building trenches in the 1914–18 war) but, nevertheless, the practice could not have been so successful without the man. It is clear from Proctor's account that the practice grew from Thomas's undoubted flair for design in the US Beaux Arts mode – especially his 1930s masterpieces Swansea's Guildhall (Brangwyn Hall) and the Temple of Peace in Cardiff's civic centre. But any successful architectural practice depends on more than flair. It depends on ambition, determination, reliability, leadership, collaboration…; it also relies on business acumen, cultivation of influential clients and the media, the diplomacy to negotiate with planning authorities, the ability to spot and nurture talent … and a sense of the zeitgeist. Thomas must have possessed these qualities in abundance. He also built his practice at a time when 'the architect' was the driving force of civic building procurement. During recent decades the ways in which major architectural projects are run has changed fundamentally; architects now are more often members of a team rather than project leader. The Percy Thomas Partnership was initiated and through its heyday driven by the man himself, but it was also a product of its times. Maybe, because of these changes, we shall never see the like of the Percy Thomas Partnership again, instilled with the identity of a particular individual and a devotion to national service.

Simon Unwin is emeritus professor of architecture at the University of Dundee. He lives in Cardiff where he taught for many years in the Welsh School of Architecture. He is the author of books including Analysing Architecture, Twenty-Five+ Buildings Every Architect Should Understand*, and* Exercises in Architecture. *He is currently working on a series of Analysing Architecture Notebooks, which to date includes volumes on* Metaphor, Shadow, Curve *and* Children as Place-Makers.

Robert Proctor is a senior lecturer at the University of Bath. His research focuses on the history and theory of nineteenth- and twentieth century British architecture. His publications include the book Building the Modern Church: Roman Catholic Church Architecture in Britain, 1955 to 1975 *(Ashgate, 2014).*

As well as the Cardiff Civic Centre *volume, the University of Wales Press's 'The Architecture of Wales series' also includes John Hilling's* The Architecture of Wales *(2018) and Jonathan Adams's* Frank Lloyd Wright: The Architecture of Defiance *(2022), which focuses on the Wright family's roots in Wales. In prospect are volumes on Welsh architects Sidney Colwyn Foulkes (Adam Voelcker), and the one-time head of the Welsh School of Architecture, Dewi-Prys Thomas (edited by Alan Powers).*

5 Welsh National Temple of Peace and Health, Cardiff, 1936–38.

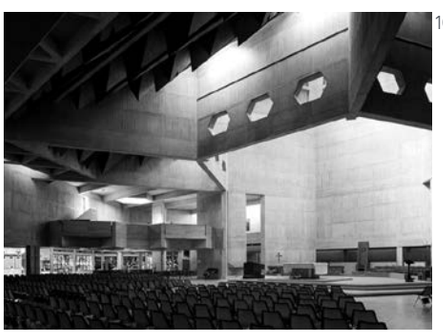
6 Trostre cold reduction tinplate plant, 1947–54.

7 Severn Bridge, perspective by Frank Buckley of final design, 1961.

8 Great Hall and students' union, University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1966–70.

9 Roman Catholic Cathedral Church of Saints Peter and Paul, Clifton, Bristol, 1965–73.

10 Interior of Roman Catholic Cathedral Church of Saints Peter and Paul, Clifton, Bristol.



Book reviews

Brutal Wales/Cymru Friwtalaidd

Simon Phipps, with contributions from John Grindrod and Mark Durden
September Publishing

Wayne Forster

According to the Twentieth Century Society 'later twentieth-century architecture in Wales, particularly for the forty-year period following the Second World War, does not attract widespread public appreciation or admiration – in fact there is a popular notion that in terms of post-war architecture, Wales is a wilderness. But this is far from the truth because the country has a rich heritage of modern buildings and structures designed by architects engaged in the same wider currents and discourse' as the rest of Europe.[1] This includes the one labelled 'brutalism'.

Brutalism is the term widely used to describe much of what was often the biggest and boldest in modern architecture, including some of the most forward-looking buildings constructed on a scale and with an ambition unlikely to be repeated. As Elaine Harwood noted 'perhaps no other architecture is so distinctive and defines so short a period'.[2] Simon Phipps's *Brutal Wales* reveals that Wales is surprisingly well represented when it comes to brutalism.

Reyner Banham felt the phrase 'the new brutalism' existed as both an attitude toward design, as well as a descriptive label for the architecture itself, and that it 'eludes precise description, while remaining a living force'. He attempted to codify the movement in systematic language, insisting that a brutalist structure must satisfy the following terms: '1, Formal legibility of plan; 2, clear exhibition of structure; and 3, valuation of Materials for their inherent qualities "as found"'.[3] Also crucial was the aesthetic 'image', or 'coherence of the building as a visual entity'.[4]

Sixty-four buildings or structures are chosen to represent the genre in this book, although Phipps does not bind himself to the narrower definition of a brutalist aesthetic and selects from a broader repertoire of post-war architecture in Wales. These include buildings by architects such as Basil Spence, known for their enthusiasm for brutalism.

Phipps's photographic technique (perhaps informed by his background in sculpture) is well suited to its subject. The black and white digital photographs focus on imageability, structural tectonics, materiality and surface texture, and underline the defiant boldness of the genre. The medium and technique favours and promotes an abstracted vision befitting brutalism. But, as each building is celebrated generally with one image, only some of the qualities of the architecture can be communicated in the photograph. It is a form of representation where built reality, spatial qualities, place and inhabitation are necessarily sacrificed.

However, introductory and concluding essays help put the whole in context, and altogether, this volume is a valuable record of the rich legacy of buildings and structures from this period in Wales. The book not only includes buildings by well-known exponents of brutalist architecture, such as Basil Spence, Gollins Melvin Ward and Seymour Harris, but also introduces lesser-known gems such as the theatre at Harlech by Colwyn Foulkes & Partners, perhaps the apogee of brutalism in Wales, as well as the Tredegar branch library and Fairwater district shopping precinct in Cwmbran.

Following decades of demonisation and antagonism, a recent proliferation of books such as those by Barnabas Calder, Elain Harwood, John Grindrod and Phipps himself, plus the evangelical work of Jonathan Meades, have pointed toward a growing interest in and admiration for brutalist architecture. But, with one or two exceptions, brutalist architecture in Wales remained invisible. Similarly, the number of buildings and structures that are listed can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

It is likely that this book will open eyes and minds to a rich and distinctive period of architecture in Wales, during which a raft of buildings and structures were made that often celebrated a confident, optimistic and creative continuum of a shared social democracy. It is a phenomenon to be embraced and celebrated not rejected.

As Simon Henley has noted, brutalism is not a style. It is a sensibility. The celebration of this architectural legacy in Wales is well deserved, if somewhat overdue.

Wayne Forster is professor of architecture at the Welsh School of Architecture where he teaches and conducts research through design.

This review was first published by Building Design*, 18 April 2024, and is re-presented here in a slightly amended form.*

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4 Ibid, p. 358.

touchstones

THE LOST PERFORMING ARTS CENTRE

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National Trust: Andrew Butler

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Heather Birnie: Dynevor archive

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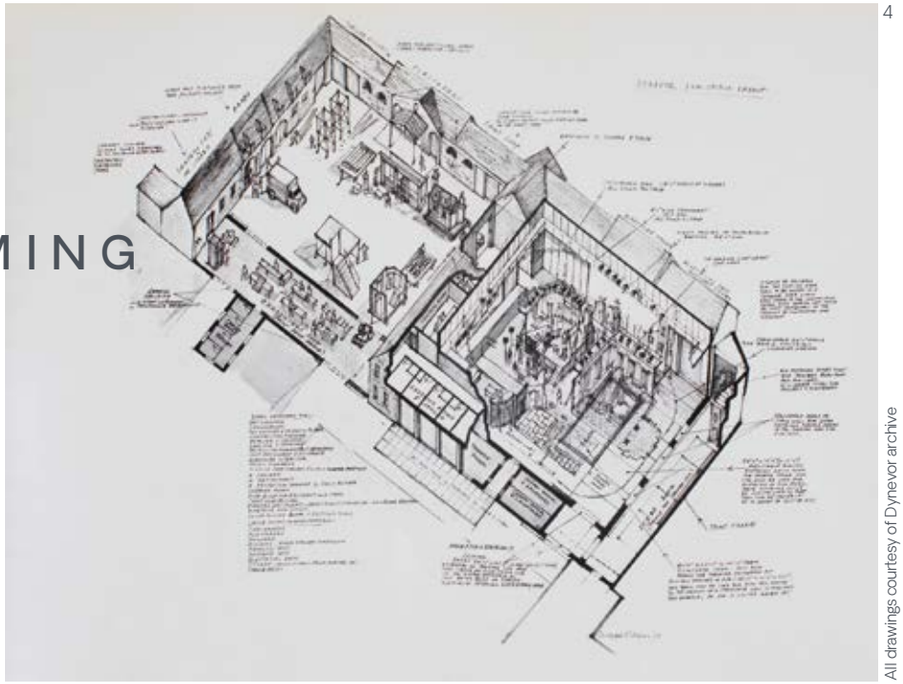

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All drawings courtesy of Dynevor archive

Richard Rhys was 27 when he unexpectedly inherited Dinefwr Park near Llandeilo (1, 2) and the title of ninth Baron Dynevor. Simultaneously, he inherited colossal death duties, accumulated on both his father's estate and his grandfather's. His rescue plan was to make the house and grounds into a major arts centre (6).

Rhys (3) was an unorthodox aristocrat: a member of the Labour Party, committed to Welsh culture and keen to share his estate with the public. Already working as a theatre producer, he had brought *Beyond the Fringe* to the West End, commissioned plays by Gwyn Thomas and set up the Merlin Theatre in Swansea. His wife, Lucy, was a painting conservator whose father, John Rothenstein, was director of the Tate Gallery.

Thousands of people came to Dinefwr to experience the programmes they devised for three years with support from the Welsh Arts Council, starting in 1966 – concerts, film showings, exhibitions, masterclasses, conferences and even a commissioned opera. An extraordinary roster of talent came to Carmarthenshire. Among dozens of participants were the writers Emyr Humphreys and J P Donleavy, the artists Ceri Richards and Ernest Zobole, and the musicians Osian Ellis, Geraint Evans, Alun Hoddinott, Cleo Laine, Michael Tippett and Malcolm Williamson.

In 1968, the theatre architect Elidir Davies & Partners designed the conversion of the courtyards at Dinefwr into a theatre and film studio directly linked to spaces in the mansion (4, 6). It was to be the heart of a permanent arts centre and a home for a national theatre. The plans included a 700-seat auditorium that could be used for filming when the seats were removed, (5) workshops for costumes, sets and props, a bar, a projection room, a recording studio and – in the grounds – artists' studios and a circular restaurant. A remarkable achievement of the design was to accommodate so many facilities without disrupting the envelope of the historic buildings.

Richard hoped the estate would be passed to the National Trust in lieu of death duties and leased back to the arts centre. He set up a charity to run it, with trustees who included Richard Burton, Julian Hodge, Harry Secombe and the former secretary of state for Wales Jim Griffiths. However, government negotiations stalled and arts council funding came to an end. Ambitious plans for the 1969 festival were cancelled. The estate had to be sold off and would come to the National Trust only piecemeal decades later.

The project may eventually have failed, but it lasted for three thrilling years, now remembered in a National Trust exhibition in the house where it all took place.

Peter Wakelin has curated the exhibition Castle of Culture: Dinefwr and the Spirit of the Sixties*; at Dynevor until summer 2026.*

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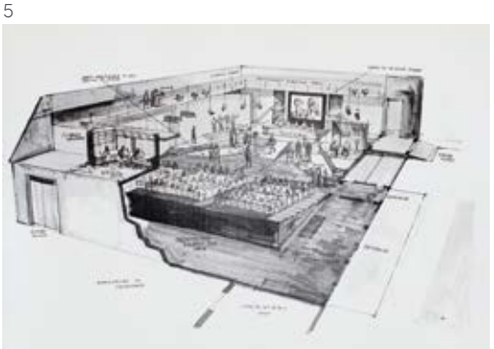

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BRITTLE WITH RELICS

touchstones

‘Many of Cadw’s sites are free to enter and unstaffed. But there is no doubt about the pressures to raise or generate revenue from public visits and other sources’

Cadw, Wales’s protector of historic places, was 40 years old in 2024. As institutions do on major anniversaries, the numerical achievements are promoted as reminders of why it deserves our public money.

‘Established in 1984, Cadw’, claims it has ‘welcomed over 50 million visitors … to its historic monuments in Wales. There are now over 30,000 listed historic buildings, over 4,200 protected historic monuments, nearly 400 registered historic parks and gardens, and four World Heritage sites’. It has certainly been hard at work in certain spheres ‘the number of listed buildings has more than tripled to over 30,000’, but as *Touchstone* has argued for over a decade, listing anything of architectural substance after about 1920 seems off Cadw’s radar, although there have been another few important recent wins (see pp. 78-79).

To keep all this heritage in good shape requires a substantial cohort of specialists. The Cadw 40th anniversary press release records that:

‘“Cadwraeth Cymru”, Cadw’s in-house team of specialist stonemasons, joiners and surveyors, have spent over 408,000 hours over the last decade on the conservation of smaller, more remote historic monuments across Wales. They received a prestigious Europa Nostra award for the 15 year conservation of St Davids Bishop’s Palace in Pembrokeshire.’

The number of protected monuments has increased from 2,700 to over 4,200. It cares for over 130 historic monuments. Cadw claims to have delivered ‘over 2,500 community events and welcomed up to 100,000 educational visits every year to the monuments in its care’ and ‘the creation of the first Cadw World in Minecraft has revolutionised how children experience Welsh heritage, using AR and VR to explore 20 different Cadw sites. It is the first Welsh language Minecraft in the world’.

Films, TV series and music videos including *The Crown*, *Doctor Who*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and Iron Maiden's music video for *Can I Play With Madness* used parts of Cadw’s heritage, all bringing in, no doubt, valuable revenue.

The Cadw Monument Pass allows unlimited access to any one of Cadw's monuments starting from £10.00 per person. Some of the 27 largest and most popular Cadw sites charge admission. Many of Cadw’s sites are free to enter and unstaffed. But there is no doubt about the pressures to raise or generate revenue from public visits and other sources.

The overriding ambition of the head of Cadw, Gwilym Hughes, is ‘engaging with visitors’. Promoting the ‘world leading visitor attractions’ is argued to be also vital to the economy of the settlements the top monuments sit within. The cabinet secretary for culture and social justice at the time of the press release, Lesley Griffiths, argued these monuments and their visitor numbers ‘are crucial to our regions’.

And yet more and more, the dominant narratives of our heritage are frequently contested. Trotting out the stats on visitor numbers cannot hide this. What are all these generations understanding about our heritage? ‘Historical-themed weekends uncovering medieval treasures, knight and sword schools for children, (1) flying displays of majestic birds and fantasy-themed activities such as “dragon’ training!”’ Is this crowd-pleasing a pleasant, comforting smokescreen, obscuring more brutal realities?

One only has to lock into heated debates around policy shifts of the National Trust to recognise how important this contestation is. Because so much of Cadw’s most prominent heritage of monuments precede the well-evidenced controversies of the British empire by centuries, and circumstantial evidence around medieval realities is so much thinner, it is tempting to just sell the awe of the physical visitor experience. It can be argued, for example, that the longstanding and profound contestations around one of the greatest of Cadw monuments, Castell Caernarfon, (2) has still not been given its proper airing despite spending £5 million on a three-year construction project to allow all visitors access to the awe-generating view from the ramparts (see pp. 26-29).

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OVER-CLADDING MAKEOVER

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The Lydstep flats in Gabalfa, Cardiff were built in the late 1950s as one of the first major projects to be executed under the leadership of John Dryburgh, city architect from 1957 to 1974. On his appointment, Dryburgh had initially supervised the construction of the Wales Empire Pool and later went on to become responsible for a large portfolio of public projects in Cardiff, including the 1966 Cardiff College of Art, Howard Gardens, the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama of the same date, the 1968 Fitzalan High School, the Central Police Station in Cathays Park of that same date, and large-scale Radburn housing estates around the city, including those at Fairwater, Llanedeyrn and Pentwyn.

The site in Gabalfa adjoins the River Taff, opposite Llandaff Cathedral. There was an imperative to preserve the views of the cathedral – hence the disposition of the required 126 two-bedroom flats into three 11-storey towers arranged in echelon. Construction was in situ, no fines concrete with brickwork to the ground floor and 'spar dash' render elsewhere (1).

HLM Architects has recently completed the over-cladding of these towers using a brick-slip system, aluminium windows and doors, and new balcony fronts. They look rather good, with the panels of brick in different orientations well-conceived and executed, if a little – to use a Reyner Banham word – 'fashiony' (2, 3).

Cardiff Council and the architects should be congratulated on the retention and refurbishment of these blocks, and of the consequent saving of the embodied carbon in their original construction. It raises the question of why this strategy was not employed for a similar block at Grangetown (*Touchstone*, 2022, p. 83), which is due to be demolished, but no one was available from the client or the architect to answer this. Anyway, let's hope other tower blocks in the city, such as Beech House, Coryton (1959), will receive similar investment and thoughtful design in future. *Jonathan Vining*

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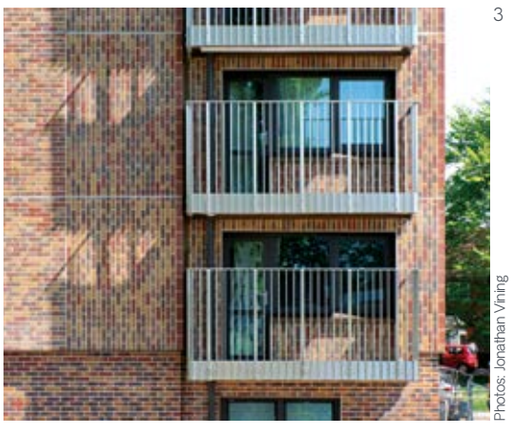

Photos: Jonathan Vining

MAKING ARCHITECTURE PUBLIC

An honorary member of RSAW, Gwenda Griffith, a passionate patron of architecture in Wales through film, died on 21 May 2024 in Cardiff.

David Thomas writes… In 1982, with the advent of S4C, Gwenda Griffith established the Welsh language television production company Fflic. Under her directorship, she produced many programmes for Welsh television but, perhaps, foremost among these were the programmes on Welsh architecture.

The first series, *Galwch Acw* (*Call By*) was about people and their homes. This was followed by the long-running series *04Wal* (*Four Walls*), which ran from 2000 to 2010, placed an increasing emphasis on houses and their design. This deepening interest in domestic architecture resulted in *04Wal* evolving into the series of programmes called *Y Tŷ Cymreig* (*The Welsh House*), which in its first series concentrated on houses of particular architectural styles – Victorian, Georgian, modern – and through examining the interior design and architecture of these styles, brought a much wider audience to the subject. The subsequent series examined the architectural riches of each of the old 13 counties of Wales. This series drew an even larger audience.

Then came *Y Dref Gymreig* (*The Welsh Town*), which, in addition to looking at buildings of architectural interest, examined the planning and historical development of the towns.

In 2008 work began on the landmark series based on the seminal book, *Houses of the Welsh Countryside*, by Peter Smith of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. This was commissioned by S4C and made in collaboration with the Royal Commission and completed in 2010.

Other projects included a series examining mainly post-war buildings, based on the book *Building Wales | Adeiladu Cymru*, by Monica Cherry, and a second series in collaboration with the Royal Commission on Welsh chapels.

Gwenda Griffiths managed to combine two passions: making television programmes and celebrating the buildings of Wales. She was also deeply involved with the restoration of Nant Gwrtheyrn the Welsh language and heritage centre in north Wales. In so doing she has done great work to broaden and deepen interest in architecture in Wales.

Her passion for architecture was publicly recognised when she was made an honorary member of the RSAW in 2011.

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LET'S MAKE IT FIVE FOR BILL DAVIES AT 90

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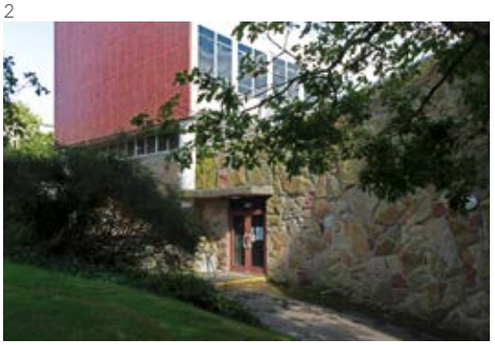

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Jonathan Vining writes: In the last issue of *Touchstone* (2023, pp. 76–77), I reported on Cadw's progress over the preceding few years with the listing of our significant post-war heritage. It was a mixed story, but it's good to note that Pencadlys Gwynedd, Caernarfon (Merfyn H Roberts, county architect and Dewi-Prys Thomas, consultant to Wyn Thomas + Partners, 1984) – which was under interim protection at the time of writing last year's article – was duly listed at grade II on 23 October 2023.

It's a similar, mixed story over the last year too...

One of the long-outstanding applications that the Twentieth Century Society had made, with the support of C20 Cymru, was Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth University (Percy Thomas Partnership, 1970–76), which was submitted as long ago as 12 August 2021. I am delighted to report that on 14 August 2024 the Great Hall was listed at grade II*, the bell tower at grade II, and the Hugh Owen Library at grade II.

On the downside, however, the Twentieth Century Society's application to list County Hall, Cardiff (J R C Bethell, South Glamorgan county architect, 1987) was not successful, Cadw saying that 'it did not meet the criteria for listing' (see also p. 80). Similarly, the request to list the hugely significant Hafan Elan housing for older people, Llanrug (Bowen Dann Davies Partnership, 1982) was refused, owing apparently to the level of alteration that has taken place over the years. Well, in that case, perhaps Cadw should have considered listing it a decade ago.

There is one listing application that is still outstanding after over three years: Inmos (now Vishay) microprocessor factory, Newport (Richard Rogers and Partners, 1982) (1), the application for which was submitted 18 August 2021. As one of the most significant post-war buildings in Wales, and the only one from the country to be included in a number of reference books on twentieth-century world architecture, one wonders why it's taking so long.

Two other applications on which we are still waiting are: Capel y Groes, Wrexham (Bowen Dann Davies Partnership, 1982) (6), submitted on 5 July 2023; and the Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water headquarters, Nelson (J R Gammon, H O Williams & Associates, 1971) (3), submitted on 31 October 2023, which is at risk because the company is reportedly in the process of vacating the site.

We have also recently submitted two buildings by Sir Percy Thomas and Son at Aberystwyth University: the Llandinam Building (1960) (4) and the Physics Building (1962) (2).

There are some other interesting post-war listings too, which were not the result of requests from the Twentieth Century Society. Two projects in Pembrokeshire by the eco-pioneer Christopher Day (*Touchstone*, 2019, p. 67) were listed at grade II on 24 January 2024 and 8 April 2024 respectively: the kindergarten of the Nant-y-cwm Steiner School, Clynderwen (1989); and his own home, Tŷ Cwrdd Bach, Pontfaen (1974). These follow the listing of his Ffald y Brenin Christian Retreat Centre in 2021.

At the time of writing, there are also several post-war buildings under interim protection, pending listing. One of these is Wrexham Waterworld leisure and activity centre (F D Williamson & Associates, 1970) (5), which has one of the earliest applications of a hyperbolic paraboloid roof to an indoor swimming pool.

Taking Stock (https://taking-stock.org.uk/) was a project of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales undertaken between 2005 and 2020 to provide an architectural and historical audit of Catholic churches in England and Wales. In the light of this, Cadw has been reviewing the listing of Catholic churches in Wales methodically, on a diocese-by-diocese basis, and those that it has placed under interim protection, pending listing, include: the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes, Benllech (S Powell Bowen, 1967) (12); the Church of Christ the King, Towyn (Bowen Dann Davies,1974) (10); and the Church of St Illtyd, Rhuddlan (Bowen Dann Davies, 1976) (11).

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When confirmed, these churches, together with the five houses at Pen-y-bryn Road, Colwyn Bay (S Powell Bowen, 1966) (8), and Plas Menai National Outdoor Centre near Caernarfon (Bowen Dann Davies Partnership, 1982) (9), will mean that Bill Davies – that doyen of Welsh architects who consistently from the start of his career followed a trajectory of developing a modern, regionalist architecture – will have had listed within his lifetime five projects that he designed. This is great news for Davies who turned 90 in March 2024, seen here at Kilpeck Church, Herefordshire (7).

Jonathan Vining is casework coordinator for C20 Cymru.

Sadly, the two-day conference, which I noted last year was being organised for March 2024 by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales in partnership with the Twentieth Century Society/C20 Cymru, had to be cancelled following budget cuts imposed on the commission.

All photographs by Jonathan Vining, except numbers 8 and 9 by Bill Davies.

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touchstones

PROCUREMENT CRITICAL

On 4 October 2024 the managing director of Powell Dobson Architects, Ann-Marie Smale, set out a few home truths on the burdensome conditions surrounding contemporary architectural procurement. Published online in BusinessNewsWales online's property section, below are highlights of what she wrote in her guest column:

'There's no doubt that legislation has transformed the construction landscape in recent years. Quite rightly, following the Grenfell tragedy, building safety is now a top priority. Ensuring that all projects meet these stricter safety standards is essential...

'Beyond safety, climate change and sustainability are central to every decision in construction ... It's not just about meeting regulatory requirements; it's about recognising our role in tackling the climate crisis.

'On top of all this, we have faced significant economic challenges. For SMEs, navigating the construction landscape right now is incredibly tough. The cost of materials has skyrocketed causing financial pressures on many projects, labour shortages have created delays, and inflation has affected everything from project bids to operating costs. For a small business trying to plan ahead, it's like trying to predict the weather a year in advance – uncertain at best, and at worst, disastrous.

'Amid all these challenges, procurement still remains the most critical issue for the industry. As an SME, the procurement process is incredibly burdensome and costly. Each time we bid for a public sector project, we could be looking at tens of thousands of pounds in costs – money that's often tied up with no guarantee of a return. Public sector procurement frameworks, while well-intentioned, have yet to create a fair and streamlined system for businesses, especially smaller ones.

'... The sheer cost and complexity of the current system mean that many smaller firms will struggle to compete, and that will limit innovation and diversity in the construction industry in Wales. On top of the procurement process, the time it takes from the initial decision-making process to actual project approval and implementation is far too long. This stagnation impacts everything else we're trying to tackle – whether it's building safety, sustainability, or innovation. Procurement has to be the priority for reform.'

And so say all of you, no doubt, struggling to produce decent architecture in a procurement regime that seeks to suffocate that decency at every turn.

HOW ARE THE MIGHTY FALLEN

Following the RSAW/University of Wales Press's last major publication of Jonathan Adam's *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Architecture of Defiance* (*Touchstone*, 2023 pp. 70–73), in May 2025 we will see Robert Proctor's *Percy Thomas: Modern Architecture as a National Service* (pp. 70-71) in our bookshops. Then it will be followed in November 2025 by Adam Voelcker's *A Reluctant Modernist: The Architecture of Sidney Colwyn Foulkes*.

Part of the council-house-building story of Colwyn Foulkes's practice was told in *Touchstone* 2023, pp. 30–35.

Both of these books will remind us of times when architectural practices of all scales based in Wales were trusted and expected to lead and deliver works on all sorts of building types for both the public and private sector. They walked in tandem with housing ministers, as Sydney Colwyn Foulkes did with Aneurin Bevan (above left) on Ynys Môn. A far cry from our contemporary beleaguered condition (see this page top left).

SKILLS GAP

A September 2024 survey of recruitment and skills in practices by the excellent and innovative organisation Public Practice concluded that 'difficulty attracting qualified and skilled candidates' was by far the most common issue, being faced by over 70% of respondents.

So, what's going on? The number of qualifying architecture students and architecture courses in the UK has been increasing exponentially over the last decade. So where are they all going? Is it just a time-lag issue, in that you only really become a 'skilled' architect at about the age of 40? And do we have to wait another 15 years to see a drop in that 70%?

No doubt Brexit, with the departure of European architects, has added to these challenges. With the pressures on architectural knowledge and appropriate application post-Grenfell, the time-lag effect will only exacerbate all this, given that most architecture courses' curricula are struggling to adjust to the post-Grenfell pressures from the Architects Registration Board.

Public Practice is devoted to finding the right people with the right skills for the right roles in public-sector practice. It is due to launch in Wales in April 2025 and will be an invaluable presence, linking to the schools, public authorities, and private practice through the RSAW in seeking to square this circle more effectively.

To access the Public Practice survey, see: https://www.publicpractice.org.uk/reports/recruitment-skills-insights-2024.

TILL IT'S GONE

Maybe there were artists in Wales who looked at the moment when Robyn Tomos's curations of countless Y Lle Celf pavilions at the annual National Esiteddfodau ended, thinking, maybe the formula has become a little tired and new blood will inject new imagination into this national curatorial process.

For architecture at Y Lle Celf, the curation road had its highs and lows. Architecture was always a challenging medium to convey publicly in the sort of single-shot impact that painting and craft object inevitably have. The RSAW and the Design Commission for Wales (DCfW) kept faith with the process all the way through Tomos's long tenure, DCfW funding the Gold Medal for Architecture year after year.

As others took on the curation task following Tomos's departure, the enormity of the task became all too evident. Any curator was almost running three annual shows in parallel: closing down and learning from the previous year's, mounting the complex curation process of the year in hand, alongside setting up the following year's – each having to handle an agreement on selectors in art, craft, and architecture – while matching the pavilion's capacity to the selectors' ambitions, organising visiting jurors to buildings, driving the local arts committee to curate its own contribution, with each local committee being a once-only experience. Such a challenge requires continuity and a vast number of work hours. Since Tomos departed, maintaining that continuity and commitment has been challenging. Curators have come and gone and often been hired at too short notice. This year at Y Lle Celf at Pontrypridd it slipped another notch. The architecture appeared, but with no liaison with DCfW or the RSAW. Studio Brassica, the Gold Medal winner for Plas Hendy, put on a display of their project worthy of the Gold Medal, but the King's Gate project at Castell Caernarfon alongside it, received neither the Plaque of Merit, nor was it clear why, out of a shortlist of four, this was displayed at all.

As Joni Mitchell sung so sharply:

'Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
'til it's gone.'

With the esteemed cultural recorders of Welsh arts and literature *Planet* and the *New Welsh Review* closing down in the last twelve months, and *Touchstone* itself potentially on the same trajectory, this cultural slippage could become a landslide. Y Lle Celf at Wrexham in 2025 must turn the tide, resist and raise the bar again to where Robyn Tomos left it.

WHOSE LAND IS IT? WHAT'S IT FOR?

Powys County Council is leading the way. If we are to turn around the livestock tanker in Welsh agriculture and generate more rural employment, more local food security, more public procurement of local fruit and vegetables, then we need more appropriately scaled horticulture with living accommodation next to their growing spaces.

Until recently Welsh Government planning policy, with local authorities keeping closely in step, was to resist most new dwellings in the countryside. Winning a planning application for a rural enterprise dwelling (RED) is currently hidebound by huge restrictions. The basic message is don't.

However, following new planning guidance issued in 2024 by Powys County Council, REDs may become more numerous. Equally importantly in October 2024, Powys granted planning permission for converting one of the council's county farms at Sarn near Welshpool into three smallholdings, with new adjacent residences for the smallholders. The project was promoted by Social Farms and Gardens working alongside the campaigning and enabling organisation OUR FOOD 1200.

The Welsh Government is clearly shifting its attitude as well, given that it has awarded £250,000 of capital funding to the Sarn project. Of course, there will be the naysayers in councils – and those whose economic power have captured their uninterrupted rural view of emptiness and inactivity – arguing that this will open the door to a flood of the hoi polloi bringing change to what is defined as a beautiful, biodiversity-rich, productive landscape. How empty is my valley may be replaced by how beautifully productive it has become.

For more information on Sarn go to:
https://ourfood1200.wales/we-are-building-three-new-farms-at-sarn-in-powys/.

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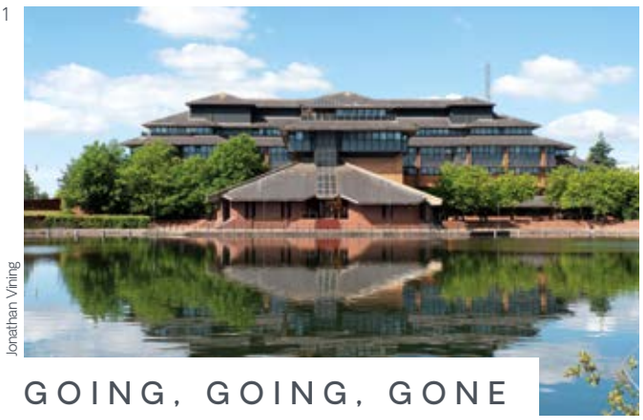

Jonathan Vining

GOING, GOING, GONE

On 17 June 2024 the Twentieth Century Society had notification from Cadw that it was not going to list the 1987 County Hall, Cardiff by J R C Bethell, formerly known as South Glamorgan County Hall (1). 'It is not a key example of a civic building in post-war Wales', wrote Cadw, 'and is of only limited interest for its contribution to the development of civic architecture in Wales in this period'.

Like so many local authorities, Covid, home-working and staff reductions, and sometimes a council changing its focus to become an enabler and facilitator rather than a direct provider of some services, all this has demanded a rethink of council assets.

Swansea's brutalist Civic Centre's future (J S Webb, 1984) (2) was also turned down for listing by Cadw. Its future is now in the hands of Urban Splash, the consultant hired by the council to regenerate major areas of the city (see p. 90). The Civic Centre's future is still unclear.

Conwy Civic Hall (3) is to be demolished under proposals by Donald Insall Associates – like Swansea, the Conwy decision appears to be more estates-/regeneration-led rather than a response to low usage. The council is planning to move staff to an office building in Colwyn Bay. The Bodlondeb office building in Conwy, a substantial historic building and former county council offices, has been leased to Ideas Forums for refurbishment as a business and innovation centre.

Rhondda Cynon Taf is selling off or leasing lots of its former fragmented estate and has concentrated most of its council workers in the brand-new Plas Cadwyn (see p. 50).

At Caerphilly County Borough Council there has been 'a coordinated move to bring personnel from peripheral offices into Ty Penallta and Tredomen House, the HQ buildings and where appropriate, [to] dispose of surplus accommodation'. As one worker reported:

'The internal furniture and fittings have been altered over the last 18 months to allow hybrid working across all departments. The majority of personnel now use laptops for working at home, with large plug-in screen docks in the offices, and with reduced seats for each section (for example, we have approx. 30 seats for 80 staff in Property.'

The former Gwent County Council headquarters in Cwmbrân by RMJM was demolished in 2013, supposedly owing to concrete cancer.

In February 2024 Newport City Council decided that the Grade II*-listed Newport Civic Centre (Thomas Cecil Howitt, opened 1964) would close for two days a week. Is this the beginning of another slippery slope?

The Blaenau Gwent Civic Centre in Ebbw Vale (J L Thomas, 1965) was demolished in 2022, the cost of upgrades not justified apparently by the remaining lifespan of the building.

In Ceredigion, the council's Aberystwyth offices are shared with the NHS for non-clinical services such as administration and physiotherapy. The offices in Aberaeron are partly used by Ceredigion County Council, and partly as a showroom and training facility for social-care services and showcase/selling of associated products. It is also looking at relocating the town library to this location.

At Powys County Council, buildings are being vacated and will be sold. Its County Hall is one of the newer buildings, so services are retreating there. Selling off offices has its own challenges in a town like Llandrindod.

The Welsh Government offices in Cathays Park are under-occupied and what of City Hall Cardiff? Despite repeated requests for information on its future, no clear direction is appearing.

Equally, despite frequent reminders to requests under FOI for information on remaining county councils, the picture that emerges is inevitably very patchy.

The final fate of County Hall, Cardiff has not been officially confirmed but ambitious plans for a whole new Atlantic Quarter (5), led in its first phase, by a new Arena by Populous (4) and landscape by The Urbanists, plus a replacement Travelodge, are already on site on the former major car park of County Hall. The whole front section public-facing part of County Hall is now closed. It would seem the die is cast. The embodied energy bound up in the fabric of County Hall will no doubt be ground into hardcore. The new arena will presumably force the closure of the ugliest building in Cardiff's city centre, the now named Utilita Arena (formerly the Cardiff International Arena) opposite its equally ugly sister, the Park Inn Hotel. No doubt more demolition likely, but there will be no tears shed there. The final irony is that County Hall looks, if we are to believe the press releases, like being replaced by a 'cutting-edge digital-first performance venue' as part of WMC's 20th anniversary birthday present to the city and its continued commitment to the future of creativity in Wales. Its architecture looks anything but cutting edge (6).

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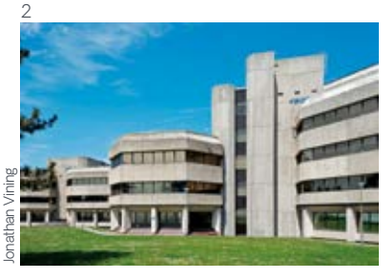

Jonathan Vining

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Photos: Rebecca Noakes

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WATERSIDE COMPOSITIONS

Lisvane and Llanishen never had the luxuries of Llandegfedd. Both of these south-east Wales Welsh Water reservoir sites have added visitor centre and watersports facilities, massively increasing the public's enjoyment of these man-made assets.

Llandegfedd's luxury was to have a decision made to keep car parks well away from the water and the buildings, and to have two quite distinct architectures by Hall + Bednarczyk Architects set in their respective landscaped water-edge contexts, one for the visitor centre and one for watersports centre (*see Touchstone* 2016 p. 52).

In contrast, the two functions at Lisvane and Llanishen are compacted one on top of the other into one new building, designed by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios, the entrance elevation fronting on to a heavily used car park, (4), in a tight corner. The two water-facing elevations are at the nexus between the two reservoirs set at differing water levels (1, 2).

It is extraordinary how the simulation of the early digital renditions of the project, and then the digital photographic record of the building in use by Rebecca Noakes, give the reader of these images such convincing confidence about the architectural composition's resolution.

When you are there in person the resolution is less comfortable. What are those two vertical tower elements with their faceted, angled timber inserts doing, besides their obvious structural function? The photos show them as seats (3). They suggest future occupation of the roof level as a viewing platform. That may happen possibly, but it's covered in solar photovoltaics currently (2). The third tower houses the lift (1), but its proportions and offset solid-to-void treatment sit uncomfortably with the other two more open tower frames. The overall composition seems unbalanced and further compromised by a large, somewhat dumpy, block of servicing functions with a mono-pitched roof set on the back part of the flat roof.

When the photos and drawn renditions are as set up as if being two dimensional elevations, the composition seems stronger, but experienced directly in 3D it starts to drift apart.

The facility is very popular and heavily used. The architect has met the client's brief and more. As a café look-out over the two expanses of water – and for the watersports users at water level – it clearly offers much enjoyment. Compositionally, it just feels unresolved and ungainly. Architectural award judges next year may think very differently. Go and see for yourself if you can and make up your own mind. *Patrick Hannay*

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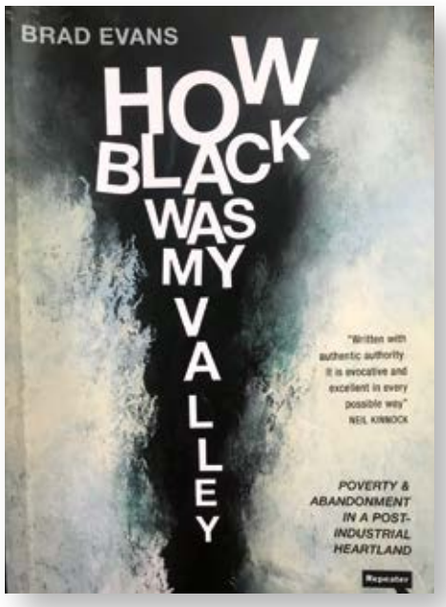


SHEDDING OF DELUSIONS

Jonathan Adams writes: **The culture of the south Wales coalfield** continues to be valorised in popular culture and academia. But there aren't so many now proclaiming that it can be the economic engine of the nation again. For too long its past has been allowed to smokescreen its problematic, post-industrial present. Have we not all been complicit in that? Rhondda native Brad Evans, the professor of political violence and aesthetics at the University of Bath, intends his book, *How Black was my Valley*, to be a corrective. As antidotes go, it is exceedingly bitter. The blend of history, polemic and memoir is lumpy, and it's sprinkled with tooth-grinding errors. But it has the potential to accelerate the shedding of collective delusions that began in the aftermath of the Brexit vote. For that, it should be welcomed. It will be hard to enjoy, but it might do you good.

Editor's note: I wonder whether Brad Evans has visited Pontypridd recently (see pp. 48-51).

THE FUSS ABOUT THE BUS

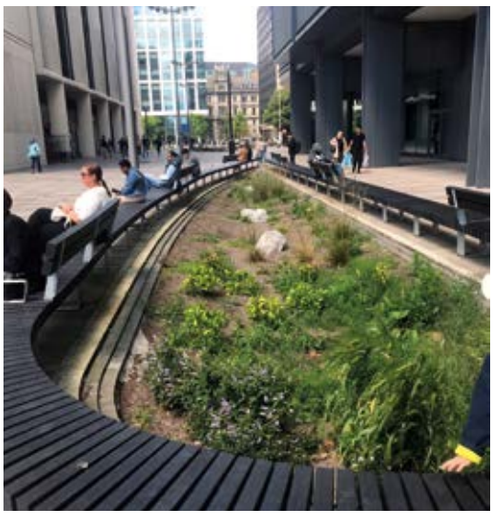
It was never a pretty sight those sun-bleached, polycarbonate, frequently dirty coverings that offered bus passengers shelter at the Wood Street central bus station in Cardiff. But it was seemingly in the right place in the city, directly outside the main railway station, even if there were those who questioned the need for a central bus station at all. Inevitably such a low-density use of land right at the heart of the city centre was too tempting. So, the bus station went on 1 August 2015 with a promise it would be reinstated close to the station in a much-improved form as part of the Foster + Partners/Rightacres Central Square redevelopment of the whole area.

As in the early computer-generated images of BBC Cymru Wales's new headquarters, the proposed new bus interchange looked light, exciting, transparent, generous in volume, airy, and prominently visible to those coming from the trains. In the end, Foster was only to execute the BBC.

The city has waited nine years for the replacement of those original 34 stands. In June 2024 the new facility opened with 14 stands at the base of the 'Cardiff Interchange' development by Holder Mathias architects, which includes the 160,000 sq ft headquarter offices of Legal & General, with an adjacent tower of 600 flats.

It's anything but light, transparent, generous, and prominently visible. When you do find the entrance, the vista with which you are presented is a long, low-ceilinged linear space with such heavy framing to all the sliding door enclosures between the passengers and the buses that, in essence, the buses are almost invisible to the eye.

Like the central railway station building itself, this new bus facility does not express love and generosity towards public transport. Equally, the bizarre piece of public landscape just outside the bus station entrance sends out the same message. After nine years of waiting, it's not what the public should expect of a capital city's major piece of transport infrastructure.

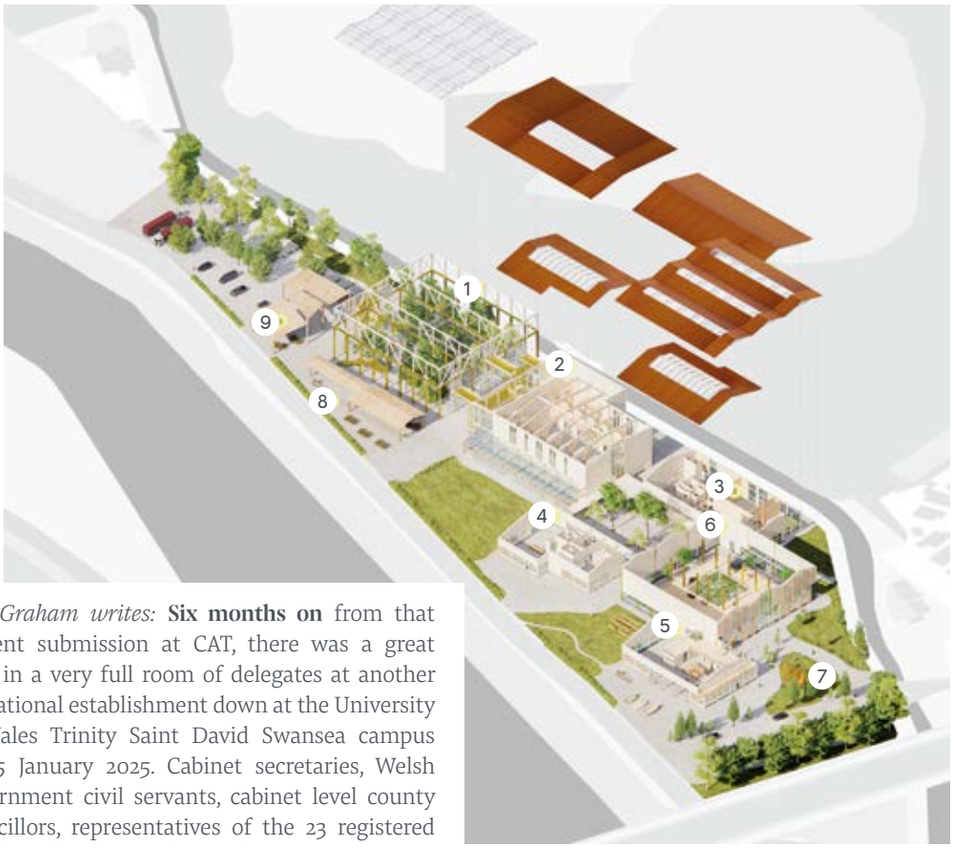


RUNNING THE BEST VENUES

Jonathan Poyner writes: **I popped into the Wales Millennium Centre** (WMC) the other day, and while the revamped front-of-house foyer has been quite well done by Viewport Studio, it's taken up the space that WMC used to use for free public exhibitions.

I recall that WMC after its opening got up to about 1,900-free-days worth of exhibitions or activities quite quickly, and there were large events with dinners. The new revamp also effectively kills off either end of the foyer (including the contractors in the units) and was full of people eating their own food and using the free Wi-Fi for work or just killing time. All remarkably like my experience of what's wrong with all the plethora of 'new' Chinese cultural venues – they got the Germans to build them ('because the Germans build the best venues, and you British run the best venues'). As I explained to my host in China, when he asked me how to get the venues busier, I said 'put stuff on, and get the Brits to design your venues and foyers next time – you need to drive footfall, and that means something to see and do, not just providing a trendy white space for people to save on office-hire costs while they use your free Wi-Fi'.

WOOD CULTURE WALES



Centre for Alternative Technology MArch student Emma Ho writes: **At present, the UK imports a staggering 80%** of its timber for the construction industry, making it the second largest net importer of timber in the world.[1] All while millions of UK-grown seedlings go unplanted, owing to a lack of human resources, equipment investment, and innovation. Current statistics for Wales show that two thirds of the country's woodlands are on privately owned land, while only one third is publicly owned by the Welsh Government and managed by Natural Resources Wales.[2] The continuity of woodland management for the construction industry and the maintenance of a secure and prosperous supply of home-grown timber are at risk. Woodland systems, land ownership, skills' training and innovation in timber development and use, are all factors that desperately and urgently need collaborative rethinking so that we can better sustain and develop the use of home-grown timber and address the climate and nature emergency regeneratively.

My proposal, Wood Culture Wales, is intended as a public centre that would provide experimental spaces from 'seed' to 'mill' to 'product', which would reduce our reliance on imports, boost skills, promote economic growth and develop a truly sustainable future for Welsh timber production.

The site is currently home to the derelict former Wern Works factory in Briton Ferry, which once rolled aluminum sheet for use in the now-retired supersonic airliner, Concorde.

The new interventions would reuse the existing heavyweight industrial steel frame, while ensuring minimal impact to the existing context by introducing innovative hybrid, reused, and new-build construction strategies.

For more information about this project please contact Jemma Ho at jemmacyho@gmail.com

Tim Graham writes: **Six months on** from that student submission at CAT, there was a great buzz in a very full room of delegates at another educational establishment down at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David Swansea campus on 15 January 2025. Cabinet secretaries, Welsh Government civil servants, cabinet level county councillors, representatives of the 23 registered social landlords in Wales, architects, contractors, and house builders, were all crowded in to welcome the launch of what the Welsh Government claimed to be a groundbreaking 'pattern book' that will help Wales build more energy-efficient, sustainable, and cost-effective homes in Wales.

The pattern book has been produced by Tai ar y Cyd, a collaboration of those 23 Welsh social landlords supported by the Welsh Government.

The official press release claims that 'these innovative green homes can be built faster and with low-carbon and natural materials, helping to reduce waste and disruption to communities'. What CAT student Emma Ho might have welcomed, was to hear that 'the new homes will utilise natural materials, including timber sourced increasingly from Welsh forests and manufactured in Welsh factories where possible'. I suppose there has to be that caveat given that only three years ago Wood Knowledge Wales was pointing out in Touchstone that there was no sign of any serious availability of Welsh grown timber for housebuilding. Tai ar y Cyd's Linkedin page actually says the timber will be from Wales … and the UK, and it uses that catch-all label of 'affordable homes' rather than homes for social rent.

Rob Wheaton of Stride Treglown Architects is the design team leader. Unlike in England, this initiative in Wales appears to have a delivery focus on the public sector for those most in need. Pattern-book factory assembled housing has a bumpy history. *Touchstone* will be watching how this develops.

Key:

1	Three interconnected passively climate-controlled greenhouses to act as a living exhibition of trees in future climate scenarios.
2	A maker's gallery with hireable studios.
3	Conference centre, break-out spaces, nursery and accommodation.
4	Cabinet maker's wood workshop for adults and children.
5	Specialist boat-making workshop.
6	Visitor building café and orientation gallery.
7	Outdoor exhibition space.
8	Sawmill facilities.
9	Reclamation yard for timber off-cuts and exchange.

References

1 Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs. *Timber in construction roadmap*, 28 December 2023 [online]. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/timber-in-construction-roadmap/timber-in-construction-roadmap.

2 Natural Resources Wales data, 2022.

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In it for the long haul

Slowly but surely the jigsaw puzzle of rail infrastructure investments for south Wales by Transport for Wales (TfW) is edging towards becoming a reality. You have to be patient. It's a decade or two since the notion of a light railway connection between Cardiff Central and Cardiff Bay was mooted.

But works are now vigorously underway at the Bute Street station with new tracks and platforms (3). In September 2024, TfW and Cardiff Council launched a six-week public consultation on the tramway known as Cardiff Crossrail to connect Cardiff Central Station's new tramway stop in the southern car park (3) through Callaghan Square (4) and down to Bute Street station. Although potentially the finest post-war square in Cardiff – fronted on one side by the best composed piece of office architecture in the capital by Nicholas Hare Architects (2002) – the square has never been fully completed by buildings to the south, east and west. The original formal landscaping envisioned by the Barcelona architects Martorell Bohigas and Mackay has always felt somewhat lost and underoccupied. The Crossrail visuals suggest that buildings will appear eventually to enclose the square, but the two-track tramway will demand a complete rethink of this public realm. Balancing a 'square' as a place of rest, against a two-track tramway through-route will be tricky for The Urbanists hired to handle this transition. Let's hope landscape concerns are given equal priority to the engineering demands. From the CGI's published to date it's difficult to make an accurate judgement.

But this is only phase 1a of Cardiff Crossrail. The ambition is to extend the tramway eastwards from Bute Street through to a new stop on Pierhead Street, then out to Cardiff East/Tremorfa (near Newport Road retail park), and to Rumney near the Capital Business Park.

It should connect to the proposed Cardiff Parkway station (5) on the South Wales Main Line, one of what should eventually be seven new stations on that main line up to Severn Tunnel Junction as proposed in the 2020 Burns report. All these ambitions would offer rail travelling options to Cardiff, Bristol and Newport avoiding the endless congestion on the M4.

Touchstone published images of the Cardiff Parkway proposal at St Mellons with its Hendre Lakes associated business park in 2021. Transport professor Mark Barry, who has promoted the South Wales Metro vision from the outset, could hardly contain his frustration at the indecision over Cardiff Parkway; Welsh Government has given outline consent in February 2025. Maybe with the new Labour UK government, we shall finally get alignment of funding and decisions between the UK government's Department for Transport (DfT), and TfW. As Mark Barry wrote:

'In an ideal world, these would all be progressed in a single programme and funded by the UK government via the DfT and delivered via National Rail in the same way they are progressing, for example, the £10-billion Transpennine Route Upgrade. Remember, this is a non-devolved matter and for £1.0–1.5 billion, the UK government could probably also electrify the South Wales Main Line to Swansea, in addition to the relief line upgrades and the new seven stations.' ■

Loops not circuits

It is hard to believe that it was only in April 2016 that former economy minister Edwina Hart pulled the plug on the carbon-emitting craziness of the proposed Circuit of Wales project that would have transformed – or wrecked the biodiversity of the common land, depending on your point of view – of 830 acres of land at the former steel town of Rassau, near Ebbw Vale in order to create a new home and racetrack for Britain's round of the MotoGP series. Only in 2020 did the Welsh Government agree to write off £14.9 million that was owed by the developer.

Fortunately, in 2024, sanity prevails and in utter contrast to the Circuit of Wales for motorheads we now may have a circuit of railway lines, a 7 km testing loop as the core of what will become the Global Centre for Rail Excellence (GCRE). This remarkably ambitious piece of infrastructure and innovatory development will be set on the now-redundant Nant Helen opencast coal mining and coal washing site at Onllwyn at the head of the Dulais Valley, just outside the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park. The Welsh Government refused to further licence the opencast facility in June 2020 with a loss of 160 jobs. Climate change implications were the primary justification. In 2021 a commitment of £50 million from the Welsh Government was confirmed. The UK government has provided £20 million and a further £7.4 million comes from Innovate UK for Research and Development.

The GCRE will eventually be a purpose-built facility for world-class research, testing and certification of rolling stock, infrastructure and innovative new rail and mobility technologies. Nowhere in Europe, so the promoters claim, will offer the range and breadth of services provided by GCRE. It will be offering rail infrastructure companies and nationalised rail services, rolling stock, infrastructure and rail systems integration testing, rail-testing capability and product showcasing. This will all be backed up with a technology park, a conference and visitor centre, plus accommodation for visiting research and engineering teams.

The site will also be a major renewable energy generator as well as being host to planting of over 500,000 native species trees.

With the Design Commission for Wales's support and advice, and through a limited competition, a team led by 5th Studio won the master-planning commission for the £150 million project in June 2022.

As reported in *Building Design* 'various tier one contractors have now been appointed including Hirwaun-based Walters Group who are working with Atkins to prepare the site for construction'.

'Arcadis are developing the rail systems design and Mott MacDonald is focused on the net zero energy strategy. The multidisciplinary team producing the overarching masterplan for the transformation of the site includes 5th Studio, Expedition Engineering, Jonathan Cook Landscape Architects, Faithful & Gould, Fairhurst, PRD, Wildwood Ecology and Thirty 4/7.'

Powys County Council has given planning permission in principle. But in April 2024 Fairhurst had to apply on behalf of GCRE to lodge a non-material amendment to the planning permission so that it could extend the three-year time limit in which it can submit a reserved matters application.

Should it be pulled off, this will a remarkable feather in the cap of this small country that led the world with its *Well-being of Future Generations Act*. Rail development has to be the better bet for an appropriately ambitious future than roaring about in souped-up cars. ■


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Pointed issues

It seems the Cardiff Pointe site, where the River Ely comes into Cardiff Bay, has been – and maybe will be – an area of planning and architecture controversy for over a decade and more.

An earlier scheme for developer Greenback designed by Neil MacOmish of Scott Brownrigg for 640 homes including 10 luxury five-bedroom detached family homes and two landmark apartment towers of 23 and 27 storeys, was never fully completed (2). The first phase of this finely designed, award-winning piece of urban residential architecture was completed in 2016 and comprised 43 one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments, and 55 three- and four-bedroom houses (3). The towers never saw the light of day. The Design Commission for Wales advised Cardiff Council planners strongly against them. There was much bad blood. The implications for the whole architectural urban composition and the financial viability were considerable. The developer eventually withdrew.

Now, in 2024, another scheme is on the horizon. According to *Wales Online* the 'Cardiff Peninsula Consortium led by Orion Land and Leisure was appointed master developer for the site (adjacent to the Scott Brownrigg first phase) by Cardiff Council in September 2023'. Again the first phase detailed application for plot 1 of a 'later living' scheme for the over 60s designed by Ascot Design (4) seems uncontroversial and likely to get approval, but it is the later plots and phases of what appears in visualisations to be a series of seven or eight waterfront-facing towers (5) that are yet again causing profound concern, not just on the scale of the towers but on every urban design issue that should form part of any serious master-planning submission (1, 5). No doubt the scheme will be advised to go to the Design Commission for Wales. Round two... seconds out.■


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Caerffili on a roll

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Key to master plan:

1	Caerphilly Castle upgrades
2	Ffos Caerffili
3	Hotel and leisure quarter
4	Pentrebane Street housing
5	Caerphilly interchange
6	Leisure and well-being hub
7	Former magistrate courts and police station sites

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All over many Welsh towns, place-making plans have been laid. The test of the effectiveness of this Design Commission for Wales-promoted and Welsh Government-backed endeavour will often depend on how truly bottom-up each process is, both in visioning and delivery, and how economically imaginative and feasible – within the vagaries of the market and public funding cycles – are its major components. The other question is whether, within the often-tight timescales set for these stakeholder engagement exercises, there can be sufficient subtlety and depth in those interactions. One hopes that the whole place-making process across Wales is being carefully monitored. A fascinating place to start might be in Caerffili.

The Urbanists delivered a town-commissioned, place-making plan funded through the Welsh Government's Transforming Towns Programme, which offered a vast list of over 60 possible projects for the town in early 2020, just as Covid hit. Even then there were doubts about the level of public ownership of its priorities.

Following the appointment of place-making programme manager, Hamish Munro, to the town's regeneration team, Stride Treglown with a bevvy of specialist consultants were employed in 2022 to put meat on the bone. In essence they had to start again. The bottom-up bit needed some substance.

Descending from the station a key, empty, council-owned site closing the axis of the town's high street, was overlooking the park with views to the centrepiece of the town's history, the spectacular castle. This was thought in The Urbanist's plan to be an ideal hotel site. When tested for delivery it was impractical. A recently closed and run-down covered market in Pentrebane Street was sorely missed. Ffos Caerffili, a new market by Stride Treglown, now occupies that high street site (2,3). It is an extraordinary development balancing act between permanence and impermanence, executed in a colourful shipping-container aesthetic with attached two-storey, framed tent structures overlooking the park, filled with food outlets. It has given back to the street and people that sense of a vibrant market. Other local food entrepreneurs are following that lead. A curiously underused and uncared for council-owned tourist information building is to become a bistro, the local owner of which is expanding his commitment to the town 'excited by the potential of their home-town'.

On the former covered-market site, Linc Cymru is aiming to provide over 70 new flats (as well as employment space) in the heart of the town (1).

A major project by architect Grimshaw to make a better integrated transport interchange around the existing station (4) did not succeed in its bid to Levelling Up funds. It is exploring new funding opportunities with the new Labour government. A large new £20 million well-being leisure hub to the east of the town centre by Watson Batty Architects did succeed in its bid for Levelling Up funds.

Two new public realm projects to improve Stockland and Windsor Squares off Cardiff Road are in the pipeline for delivery in 2025.

Intensive public engagement has been an integral part of the work, led by specialist integrated communications agency, Cowshed. The formation of a 25-person residents' committee has energised the engagement process. This refreshed, community-led approach resulted in a local successful entrepreneur, Bomper Studios, coming forward with the ambition to potentially breathe new life into a much loved but physically struggling Caerphilly Workmen's Hall, stranded on the notorious traffic island that fronts the castle. A new cultural centre is being explored.

The infamous castle, with its massive moats and 10 degree leaning tower, create a 12-hectare block at the heart of the town. It dominates and constrains the town's movement patterns – its origins, of course, being to keep the locals out; but now in the early 21st century, Cadw works tirelessly to massively uplift visitor numbers, with restoration work on the main hall underway and with a planned additional visitor centre facility and other amenities in the castle forecourt designed by Purcell (6).

The front cover of Stride's *Caerphilly 2035* summary document of up-and- coming development activity in the settlement shows the castle grounds invaded by The Caerphilly Cheese Festival (5). Hordes of marquees and pavilions peopled by a multitude of families and young children throng the castle grounds. Cadw regularly puts on other vast historical imagination events for children and families. Let's hope all this youthful energy and excitement will spill over the walls into the surrounding town and make it 'their' vibrant place. ■

The sea, the sea, the swan to the sea

The pieces of the Swansea city regeneration jigsaw are beginning to fall into place under the experienced direction of Swansea Council's 20-year partnership agreement with Urban Splash.

Connecting the core of the city back to the sea is the master-planning mantra, as Urban Splash puts it 'City on the Beach is our boast for Swansea, a city with something unique to offer, with the great outdoors on your doorstep. Time on the water and by the water. Big skies and mountaintop views. Sand between your toes and lunchbreaks on the beach.' How could you resist?

First you had to overcome the traffic maelstrom and barrier of Oystermouth Road and create a vibrant public magnet toward the sea. The award-winning Swansea Arena project with associated public realm improvements, a new active-travel bridge and adjacent housing development, was the beginning of making that new vital journey from city to sea *(see pp. 53–55)*.

The next barrier was the somewhat exclusionary presence of the 1982 brutalist Civic Centre, forcefully lined along the sea front (1). Moving all council services and workers back into the heart of the city would inevitably generate invaluable footfall for struggling retail and hospitality. (The same thinking has been underpinning moves in Pontypridd, *see p. 48*) The non-public-facing council workers are to be housed in four floors above new ground-floor retail, facing a new urban square at a new public sector 'hub' designed by architect, Shed KM (4). This new development area, 'central area north' is due to start on site in late 2025. It will also have education institutions facing the square and spaces for creative makers will form part of the mix alongside cafes and restaurants lining the route to the Swansea Arena. All within a five-minute stroll from the beach.

Public-facing council staff, including the city's main public library, the West Glamorgan Archive Service, as well as the Swansea's Careers Wales service and Citizens Advice Swansea Neath Port Talbot, will all be housed in the retrofitted city centre's former BHS store, now renamed Y Storfa.

The robust architecture of the former Civic Centre should offer a strong framework (1, 2) into which, and through which, a plethora of sea- and sand-oriented hospitality pleasures can invade, adding a little colour as they race to the incoming waves. Memories of those early 1960s Ron Herron radical images of Archigram taking over the concrete brutalism of London's Hayward Gallery come to mind (3). Harmless fun and civic seriousness can combine and survive if done with imagination and care. ■

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A walk in the park

Andrew Scott has recently begun work on the site of the new two-storey visitor centre designed by Hiraeth Architecture at the grade II*-listed Gnoll Estate Country Park for Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council. The project is part of a £17.7 million UK government Levelling Up Fund investment in the Vale of Neath Heritage Corridor Attractor project.

Alongside the new visitor centre at Gnoll, with its planned café and event meeting conference spaces, the overall investment of £10.8 million will see considerable upgrades to many of the facilities of the estate. On the 40-hectare estate there will be a new woodland adventure playground for children and families, repair works to the Gnoll House ruin, restoration work on the park's historic cascades, as well as the introduction of information and interpretation boards across the site to showcase the history of the park. The old visitor centre will be demolished. There will also be extensions added to walking routes with a new bridge linking the park with Brynau Farm, which is described as a wildlife haven on 57 hectares of Woodland Trust land. ■

May many flowers bloom

The latest and possibly most progressive iteration of the Welsh Government's school building and refurbishment programmes was launched in September 2022. Its results are now beginning to come out of the ground. Billed as the Sustainable Schools Challenge, and sub-titled as Challenging Innovation through Collaboration, this initiative fell under the wider rubric of the Welsh Government's Sustainable Communities for Learning programme.

Gradually all the dots are being joined up. Work on any school building in this programme has to become a concerted vehicle for any school's 'new curriculum', which includes teaching on sustainability. Also, there has to be the opportunity for maximum engagement for all the stakeholders, where collaboration will include learners, staff, parents, the wider community, and supply chains through all stages of design, construction and, most importantly, the operational life of a truly sustainable school – all with an emphasis on innovation.

To promote collaboration skills, the Welsh Government engaged Down to Earth Project, a social enterprise in Swansea, that for 15 years has used outdoor activities and sustainable building methods to support people and communities to collaboratively design and build projects. All three schools, with Down to Earth's help, are learning from each other's successes and struggles and this will be fed into future guidance from the Welsh Government.

Continuing the net-zero carbon ambitions of earlier Welsh Government school programmes, there is now an equally strong emphasis of learning in the landscape, biodiversity gains, learning about growing fruit and vegetables, and that is all linked to developing cooking skills and procuring locally sourced food. So bye-bye, hopefully, the acres of tarmac, the over-provision of car parking, and welcome instead to outdoor learning spaces in nature, growing areas, raised beds, and loads of cycle and scooter racks.

The Sustainable Schools Challenge invited submissions from local authorities. Initially two were selected, one from the north, one from the south, to share a budget of £30 million, a 100% funding from the Welsh Government.

In the end, this became three projects: Glyn Coch Primary School in Rhondda Cynon Taf (Stride Treglown) (1); Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg at Rhosafan in Neath Port Talbot (Arcadis) (2, 3)); and a primary school and community centre Campws Cymunedol Bontnewydd in Gwynedd (TCPA) (4). Alongside the usual Welsh Government processes of 'business case scrutiny' and satisfying the 'education investment panel', there was a further panel of 'academic, professional and industry reps to judge the innovative environmental and sustainability approaches'. RSAW nominated architects from its climate group to contribute to this last panel. 'Architectural quality' was one of the selection panel's 23 criteria!

The outcome so far, as seen in drawings, might suggest we have moved a long way from the repetitive 'system' mentality that stretched all the way from the 1960s CLASP, SCOLA and MACE through to former education minister Michael Gove's era and Wilmott Dixon's Sunesis system. We seem to be embracing more the Colin Stansfield-Smith Hampshire ethos of each outcome being distinct to its context. Looking, maybe superficially, at the three architectural propositions (1–4) it would seem they have little in common except for the fact that they must have somehow demonstrated they intended to meet all 23 criteria. As the designs evolve, refinement – or is it value engineering – occurs (see the evolving design of the Rhosafan project (2, 3)).

Some tough lessons have to be faced about the realistic levels and depth of collaborations and achieving the net-zero promises. At a March 2024 Down to Earth workshop, with representatives from the three schools, there was an agreement that 'there is an urgent need to address the challenges posed by climate change, which demands a fundamental shift in how we approach school construction'. One wonders how fundamental is 'fundamental'?

In October 2024, the Welsh Government announced the first full net-zero carbon refurbishment of its kind in Wales, Pen y Dre High School in Merthyr Tydfil. The press release boasted that 'not only will the school be carbon neutral' but 'surplus electricity will be supplied to Prince Charles Hospital'. Also 'instead of the traditional demolition and build model for creating carbon neutral schools', it claimed, 'this project will see the existing school building stripped back to its frame and built back up with high performance energy saving materials, power supplies and heating systems. It is anticipated that 48% of carbon will be saved compared to if the traditional demolition and build model was used'.

Touchstone will be around in some format to follow up with a comparative review of these two important initiatives, and hopefully the RSAW, with the Welsh Government and Down to Earth, will rigorously compare the two and find a way of disseminating the important lessons to be learnt throughout the construction industry. ■

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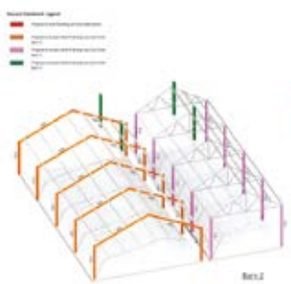
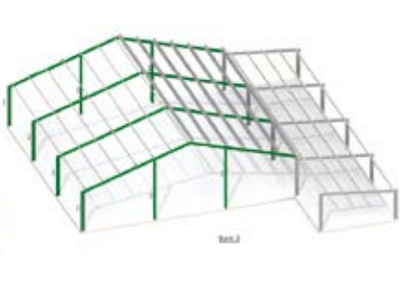
The embodied farmyard

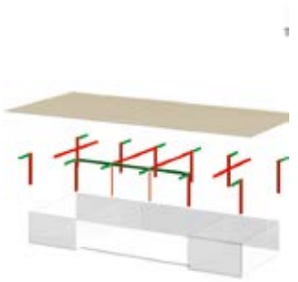
By now probably every agricultural barn in Wales that can be made residential has had 'the treatment'. But in the relentless search for new locations to make 21st-century country houses where agricultural buildings already exist, one is now left with the not-so-beautiful residue – the vast numbers of portal-framed asbestos- or rotting-timber-clad sheds, crumbling ancient brick stables and piggeries, assembled over time with varying brick types, acres of concrete hardstanding, cess pits – in other words all the detritus of the busy working farm that is working no more.

The temptation is, of course, to sweep it all away and start again. But the embodied energy of existing fabric now looms large in most responsible architects' early thinking. Tabula rasa is banished. So, the practices that have formerly survived on delivering all-new-material palatial homes in the countryside are shifting their focus.

One example of the shift comes from the stable of Loyn & Co. As much material and structure from the redundant existing buildings are forming the sensual fabric and aesthetic of both exterior and interior of its latest new home in the countryside. Gone are the pure, smooth, single-material surfaces throughout. Masonry walls are assembled in a seemingly random collection of the variety of bricks already on site. Former portal frames are repurposed to make new rectilinear frames. Vast areas of former concrete hardstanding will be sawn-up to make walling blocks. A different aesthetic emerges – one that Sigurd Lewerentz, Hugo Häring and Juhani Pallasmaa would probably appreciate. ■







Town hall turn around

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The level of use of Welshpool Town Hall (1) has seriously dwindled over the last decade. The court room is used once a year; a bookable ballroom (2), has currently only five or six events a year. There is much unused space mixed with really important functions that are being hosted in totally unsuitable spaces.

Facilities will be introduced that can support new business incubator spaces in the unused offices. The somewhat tired and inflexible stalls to the current market hall, which are essentially shops, requiring too much work for companies to set up and take down quickly, will instead have new attractive and flexible stalls. Welshpool also doesn't have a town-centre gallery.

The proposal by Hughes Architects (3) will improve accessibility and reduce running costs and seek to shift the town hall's foreboding and somewhat unattractive presence on the street. The project has been the result of a community consultation at every stage during 2024 and started on site September 2024.

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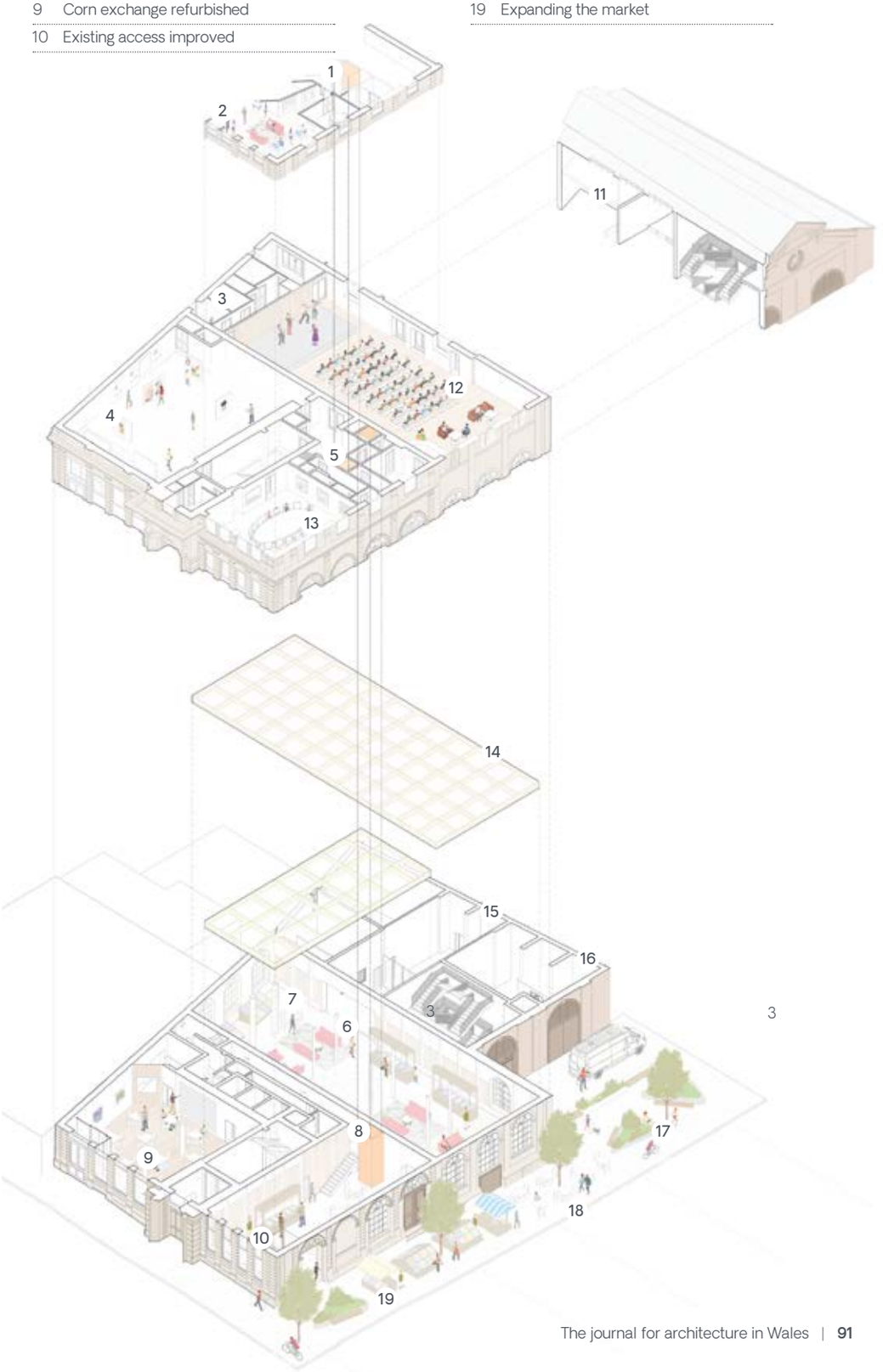
Key:

1	Additional lift
2	Flexible workspace
3	Improved facilities
4	Existing courtroom
5	Improved circulation space
6	Community café
7	Market hall refurbished
8	New lift access
9	Corn exchange refurbished
10	Existing access improved
11	Mezzanine storage floor
12	Ballroom refurbished
13	Council chamber retained
14	Market hall ceiling
15	Increasing visual connection
16	Existing workshop improved
17	Enhanced public realm
18	Outdoor seating
19	Expanding the market



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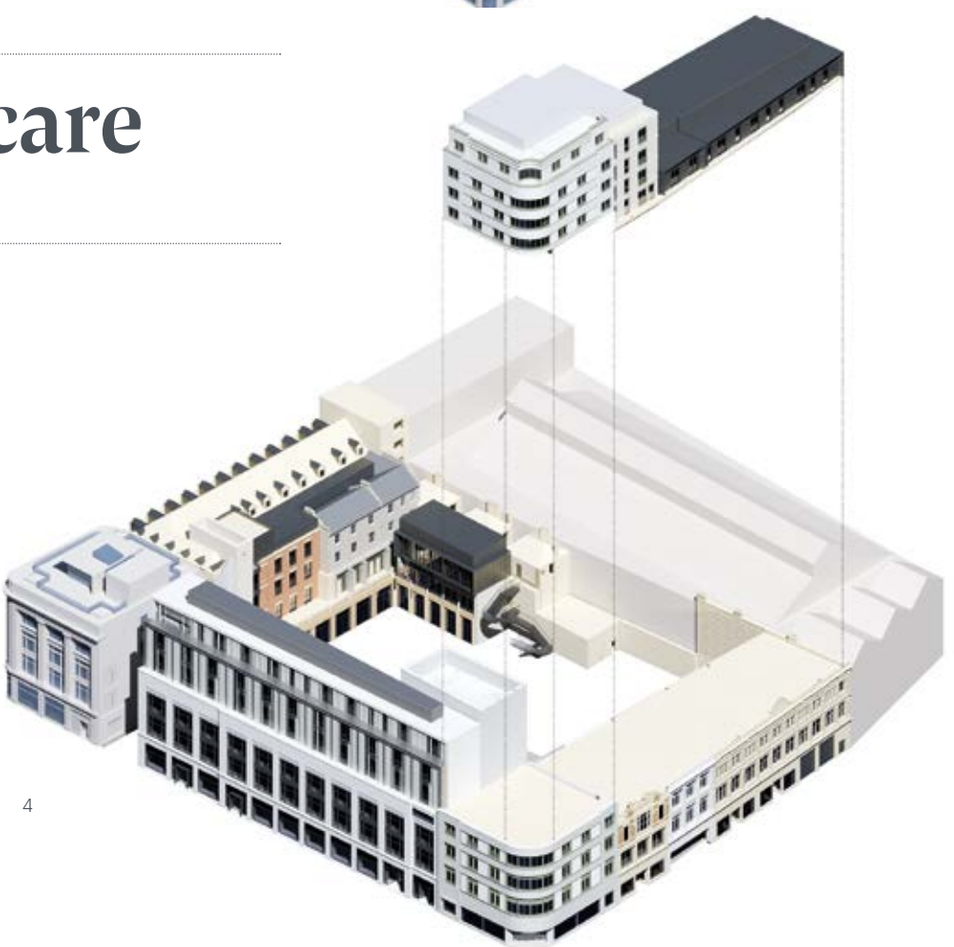
Consider with care

In late November 2024, TE Cardiff 7, a delivery vehicle for Thackeray Estates Group, made a pre-application consultation (PAC) submission to Cardiff Council for the major phases of a highly complex regeneration project of retained buildings, additions, and new buildings on the grade II*-listed former James Howell & Company department store site in the heart of Cardiff. The site is bounded by St Mary Street, Wharton Street, Trinity Street and Cardiff Central Market.

Led by architect Patel Taylor, working alongside the heritage analysis skills of Purcell, the complex and detailed application deserves a very serious and thoughtful discussion on city regeneration strategies that will mirror the similar qualities imbued in the PAC submission.



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As one would expect from a team of this considerable calibre, the challenging balancing act of making important public realm gains while breathing new hospitality, retail, and residential uses into – and in some cases on to – the best of the existing architectural street-fronting buildings, plus rescuing and retaining lost historical assets, has grown from a responsible and thoughtful assessment and judgement about the historic fabric on the site to responding to it with consummate architectural and urban design skill.

The major shifts in use classes across the site are the considerable increases in city-centre apartments sometimes adding two or three levels behind and above the existing street-fronting parapets (3,4, 6). While how sensitively these additions are executed architecturally will be a focus of some debate, the major focus of important discussion almost inevitably will be around the proposed 13-storey residential building (3). This is intended to rise from the central heart of the city block and face on to a new internal open square (2,7, 8) with important new pedestrian routes connecting the existing vibrant covered market through to Wharton Street, while opening up Bethany Chapel (5), which has been submerged and lost in decades of development by the former Howell's department store (1).

Even at this early stage in the planning process, it is clear that Patel Taylor has exercised considerable architectural sensibility on the composition and detailing of this new addition to the evolving skyline of Cardiff. Whether the economic viability of this complex project depends on the prospective income from this level of intervention will need to be made transparent in the discussion. How one executes the densification of the city on the basis of lowering carbon emissions will hopefully also be on the council's agenda.

While Cardiff Council encourages tall buildings in the city centre on a seemingly random basis, through allowing projects such as the Premier Inn on the axis of St Mary Street, the tower on the corner of Wood Street, and the much-debated overdevelopment of the Custom House Street site, we should ignore all that, and concentrate the best of our judgement and thoughtfulness on the very specific qualities of this most important evolution of Cardiff's city centre. The seriousness of the submission deserves it. ■

Grinding on the Gower

Delivering on-the-ground, progressive procurement of housing for those in need in the right place seems to be such an uphill struggle in Wales. Just take the example of 'one planet developments', still treated as pariah-like applications by most planning authorities.

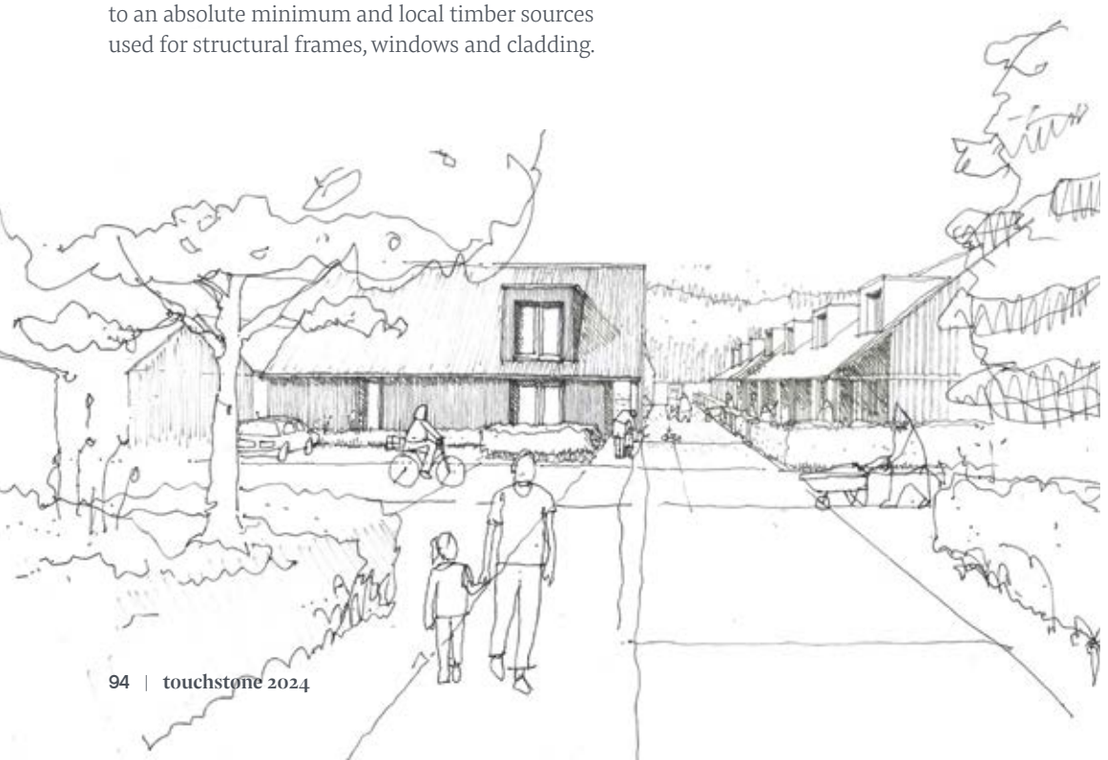
As we reported in *Touchstone*, 2023, Wales is way behind the curve in executing new affordable housing delivered by community land trusts (CLTs) – housing built by the community for the community. We haven't a single one in Wales that has yet delivered assets on the ground compared to 340 CLTs in England. The closest to realising one in Wales is on the Gower peninsula at Bishopston. An application from Gŵyr Community Land Trust with a scheme by Pentan Architects for 14 houses went through the pre-application consultation stage in late October, and a full application was submitted to the local planning authority in late November 2024.

The 14 new homes, common house, workshops, barns and allotments would be developed along a co-housing model, funded, built and occupied by CLT members – and would remain as affordable housing in perpetuity. A generous, publicly spirited offer would also see over 70% of the total site being given over to public amenity space with the wider community to benefit from new orchards, wetlands, meadows and foraging routes, as well as biodiversity net gain. The new homes would meet the aspirational Association for Environmentally Conscious Building standards towards fabric performance and energy, and would 'touch the earth lightly' with the use of carbon-intensive materials kept to an absolute minimum and local timber sources used for structural frames, windows and cladding.

For all this good, the CLT has spent a total of 16 months waiting for responses from an under-resourced local planning authority to the two pre-application submissions and the group still faces an authority unwilling to support local families wanting to build much needed new affordable homes in the village in which they live.

The trust and Pentan even went to the Design Commission for Wales (DCfW) design review process, hoping that a creative meeting of minds would occur between planners and the trust. No such luck. With the DCfW failing to challenge the planning authority on its position – especially its failure to accept this as an affordable housing scheme, even though the delivery of affordable housing via CLTs is now acknowledged in *Planning Policy Wales*.

Such colossal hard work, and all over a potentially groundbreaking and exemplary scheme of just 14 houses for the first CLT aiming to deliver on the ground in Wales. Can't someone bang heads together and break the logjam and bring it over the horizon? ■



1

4

For multiple generations

2

3

Cardiff Council has identified a need for larger family homes that support people of all ages and backgrounds to live independent lives.

To help address this housing need and reduce the current pressures of overcrowding being faced by many, the James Street proposal develops a housing model that can help support larger families and older people living together, providing mutual benefit to multiple generations.

The proposed mixed-use residential building by architect Allford Hall Monaghan Morris submitted for planning permission in December 2024 will contain 47 affordable dwellings, plus 470 sqm of ground-floor commercial space. Accommodation is arranged between two and six storeys and will provide a mix of one-, two- and three-bedroom community living and interconnecting multi-generational flats and town houses. At ground floor level, the proposal will reactivate the long-vacant site on James Street, the eastern axis of which focuses on the Wales Millennium Centre frontage. The ground floor will provide commercial frontage and community uses such as bicycle storage to the rear (3).

Organised in a horseshoe arrangement, the building form steps from the south (1) in response to the local heritage context and surrounding buildings. This envelops a south-facing communal garden at first floor level providing secure, open space for all the residents (2, 4). A roof terrace at fifth floor level affords panoramic views across Cardiff Bay.

Targeting an EPC 'A' Rating, the design adopts a fabric-first approach to sustainability and incorporates passive measures such as high fabric efficiency, as well as the potential for future connection to the local district heating network.

A simple, contextual and contemporary approach is adopted for the elevations, which reflect the buildings in the adjacent Royal Stuart Conservation Area. A clear horizontal datum is established at first floor level (3), with further depth and relief provided through the recessed private amenity balconies and gallery access routes. The principal street-frontage corners of the building are expressed with radiused brickwork (3) as a contemporary reference to many of the historic buildings in the conservation area. Simple detailing around windows is also inspired by the local context.

This project is a rare example of home-design intelligence to be seen in Cardiff and should be a minimum quality benchmark for new urban apartment living in the capital. Would that more of such socially sensitive design thinking have occurred in the dash for apartment living around the bay during the decades of boom and barrage. ■

Weston returns

You may have been thinking that the outstanding architectural author, critic and academic, Richard Weston, had hung up his pen for good since retiring from the Welsh School of Architecture in 2013 and striking off in new directions towards mineral explorations, exotic image fabrics and 'Molly's World' (more of that later).

But, in spring 2026 there will be a new book from Weston published by Lund Humphries entitled *Surface Matters: Towards a New Symbiosis between Architecture and Nature*. The subtitle has essentially been a golden thread running through all of Weston's research and writings, inspired by his early landscape architectural education with Professor Ian McHarg as a Thouron Scholar at the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Pennsylvania in 1977–79.

The new book's focus, writes Weston 'is on rethinking architectural space in the light of rain-screen cladding'. That might sound like a BRE-technical-advice-note type title, but of course in Weston's hands it is bound to be a sophisticated, thought provoking, and mind-expanding thesis no doubt bringing together in one book his lifetime of thinking and searching for this critical symbiosis. He says he will be arguing that 'rainscreen cladding invites us to reframe facades as the "insides" of outdoor spaces, to be inhabited by humans and other living organisms as part of a new symbiotic vision that goes way beyond the superficial "greening" of buildings'. Expect Weston to also take apart the current trendy loose usage of the term 'biophilic' as evidenced in a recent RIBA publication *Nature Inside: A biophilic design guide* by William D Browning and Catherine O Ryan.

Weston's book is written in collaboration with both Baroness Kathy Willis, professor of biodiversity at Oxford University and author of the acclaimed new book *Good Nature*, and Phil Coffey of Coffey Architects. Half of the book will be devoted to projects demonstrating the application of the new thinking at every scale from private houses and gardens, through urban and suburban housing, urban spaces and factory estates, to 'big sheds' (*below*). The 'world' in other words, and this brings us to Weston's other all-encompassing passion over the last decade, of how to inspire young children's education through an utterly interactive visual digital global interface created by Weston himself. It's called 'Molly's World – a utopia for the 21st century'. This embraces inspirations from cabinets and staircases of curiosity, exotic scanned minerals, the 17th-century Jan Comenius's *Orbis Pictus*, Paul Klee's *Fish Magic*, Smithson and Gilpin's picturesque, the aqueducts of Dionysius and Caesar, inflatable bouncy meadows for Quatar by Studio Souffle, the great mosque of Samara, the wisdom of Adorno, Einstein, Ian McHarg, Aldo Rossi, Alvar Aalto and Voltaire's advice to cultivate my garden; an extraordinary all-embracing utopia.■

Thirty years and counting... on you

Matthew Horwood

Three decades ago, in the mid-1990s, we upped our game as a society of architects in a special place called Wales. Members campaigned for a royal prefix to the society's title, not as a forelock-tugging desire for regal approval, but because being on the edge of a radical devolutionary moment we sought parity of recognition from our London-based mothership to align with our Celtic cousins in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

We achieved that, in title at least, but on the ground the journey is very much incomplete. You have only to read the opening subtitles of the various national architectural websites in the UK to note that we are uniquely described as 'the *voice of the RIBA* in Wales'. Is that really it? Isn't that a *Prince of Wales Bridge*-naming moment? Is that how far we have devolved? What about the voice of Welsh architectural culture loud, distinct and clear, and running its own show?

Thirty years ago, we also started upping our game in how we recorded and promoted our architectural culture by putting into quality print the RSAW's journal, *Touchstone*. Still here 30 years later, we kept expanding the content ambition and improving the production values. In parallel, we set out to have two architectural conferences a year, to be inspired, to be outward-looking, while encouraging a sense of family with shared concerns and creating places of distinct conversations about practice in Wales. We are still unique in the UK in that 'regional' achievement record of conference events.

In January 2024, however, we faced a radically disruptive moment to those self-governing ambitions. Budget realignments from the mothership to the regions were such that we could have lost our journal of record. We could have just rolled over and said, well we had a good 30-year run – not bad for a small nation with only about 650 RIBA members. But we knew our journey was incomplete. We have a lot more to do. Unfinished business. So, with the generous donations of those listed below, in a quiet act of defiance, we essentially crowd-funded the issue in your hands; we were still going to be the architectural voice of Wales in Wales, despite the imposed austerity. We intend to continue, but we will need all of you on board. More of this later in 2025.

And this is what all sectors of Welsh life face. The media, both in print and digital, are full of outrage and talk of systems' collapse. It's so overwhelming; so easy to give up in despair. It seems hard to align such remarkable visions as those imbued in the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act* with the harsh realities on the ground and the seemingly colossal transitions we need to effect, to join vision to reality. And yet there are still intoxicating public gatherings pushing forward in Wales, determined not to be cowed. The *Wales Net Zero 2035* documents published in 2024 contain an astoundingly detailed road map of how we achieve such an ambition. This is not just wishful optimism. It is hard-focused detailed action, as has always been our tradition, wonderfully exemplified by the decades of work of Paul Allen's team at the Centre for Alternative Technology. Two other gatherings recently happened in Swansea: the first was Wellbeing Economy Cymru's *Festival of Ideas* in November, promoting an utterly different conception of an economy for Wales from the growth-and-carbon-busting obsession that seems to grip current national psyches; the second was Tai ar y Cyd finally getting the multitude of players in our house-building sector in the same room – and on the same page – to deliver Welsh-grown, timber-focused, social housing pattern books for all, at pace – and of course there were architects in the room too, giving a lead. In 2021's *Touchstone*, we reported the grim factual reality of timber production in Wales, seemingly hopelessly behind the curve, and yet here Wales is, three years later, about to launch a visionary programme with everyone on board. Yes, it won't be instantaneous in its outcome, but the mood in the room was progressively defiant.

There is another spark on the horizon, this time in Cardiff, one focused more directly on our architectural culture. A younger generation is asking why does Wales never have an architectural presence at the Venice Biennale – a global gathering of distinct cultural provocations. Do we not have a story to tell? Of course we can allow logistics to defeat us – we are small after all, but is that really it?

Starting next September, the RSAW will have a new president, Alan Francis. The front foot of his manifesto was centred on a more assured intent of independence, a Welsh architectural culture telling its own story; not in a mood of inward-looking nationalism but in one of outward-facing ambition to avoid just following the crowd. A decade ago, Richard Parnaby, a former RSAW president and former chair of the Design Commission for Wales set out scenarios for increasing the level of separation of the RSAW from the RIBA. RSAW's former director, Mary Wrenn, and the 2015 president, Robert Firth, took the case to the RIBA's Nations and Regions Committee in 2015. A decade of silence from the mothership...

So, that's our next 30-year step. *Touchstone* is right behind Alan Francis, but it will need all of us to make the leap and step up to the plate with him.

Patrick Hannay: Touchstone editor

The cost of the production and distribution of *Touchstone* 2024 has been partially off-set by very welcome financial donations from the following:

Warm Wales • Gaunt Francis Architects • Jonathan Adams • Michael Davies • Professor Wayne Forster • Howard Harris • Martin Hall • Knight Architects • Teleri Lea • Trystan Lea • Fiona Lea • Chris Loyn • Alison McKenzie • Jonathan Vining • Ian Ritchie • Loyn & Co Architects • Pentan Partnership • Sunand Prasad OBE • Andrew Saint • John Sergeant • Pierre d'Avoine • Professor Peter Carolin CBE • Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council • John Carter • Geraint Talfan Davies OBE • R Davies • David Haswell • D M Jones • Meirion Jones • Norman Robson-Smith • Paul Vining • Richard Woods • Nick Alexander • Louis Hellman MBE.

Thank you to all these Touchstone supporters.

Directory 2024

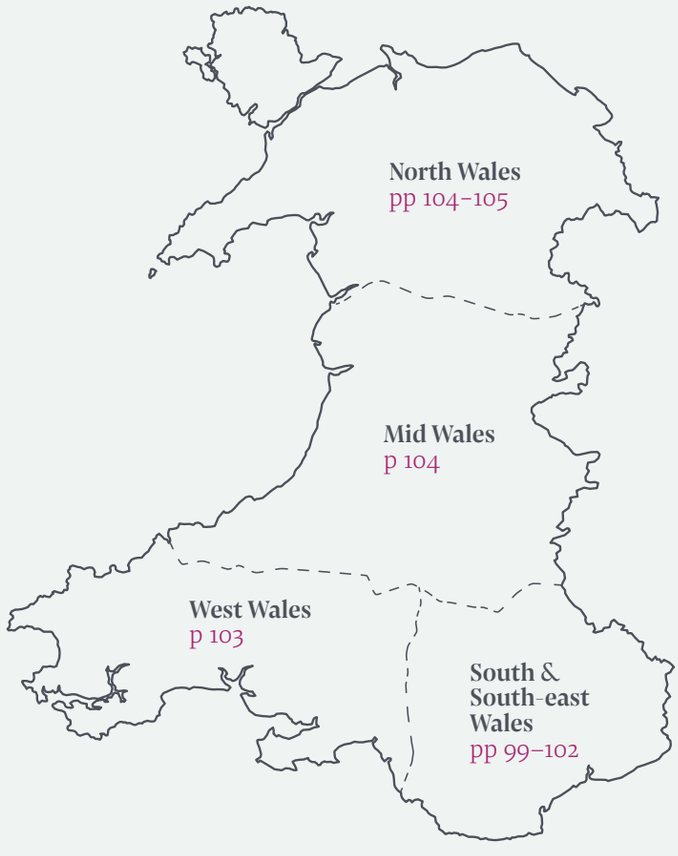
The following pages of Touchstone 2024 comprise a directory of architectural practices in Wales. The directory is divided into four areas, as indicated on the map. Within each area, architectural practices are listed under the town in which (or nearest to which) they operate, in alphabetical order of 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://www.architecture.com/find-an-architect/ – and you can also email 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*
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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.

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Barry

Dennis Hellyar Architects*
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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.

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Brecon

Mundo Architecture*
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We work with existing buildings, appreciating their historic character whilst giving them new life, as well as dynamic designs for new build projects. As we focus on both energy efficiency and incorporation of natural & sustainable materials into our projects, we're pleased to have our first Hempcrete new build house under construction. 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.

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Bridgend

PJL Architect Limited
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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.

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Cardiff

Arcadis*
Suite 4C, Hodge House, 114-116 St Mary Street,
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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.

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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.

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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 50 people in four 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 studios in Bristol, Glasgow and Liverpool.

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Brian MacEntee Architecture & Design*
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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.

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DB3 Architecture*
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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.

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Downs Merrifield Architects*
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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.

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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.

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

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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 Maltings, East Tyndall Street, Cardiff, CF24 5EA

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.

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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.

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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.

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Lawray Architects*
Southgate House, Wood Street, Cardiff, CF10 1EW

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.

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Yn dathlu dros 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. We also work on feasibility studies, Heritage Impact Assessments and community projects. 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.

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Pentan Architects*
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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.

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Prichard Barnes Architects*
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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).

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Rowlands Architecture*
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Rowlands Architecture has particular experience in the residential sector but has also worked on commercial, healthcare, and religious buildings. We seek to create well proportioned, beautifully crafted, functional, and sustainable spaces and have worked extensively on historic and listed buildings. We take a down to earth and professional approach, working collaboratively with client and contractors, tailoring a design to suit tastes, needs and budget. Additional office in Bristol.

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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.

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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 25 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

029 2043 5660
pierrewassenaar@stridetreglown.com
www.stridetreglown.com

TDArchitect*
19 Conybeare 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

029 2034 2465
info@tdarchitect.co.uk
www.tdarchitect.co.uk

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
kwl@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 landscape, 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 clients.

Contact: Mark Jones

03333 405500
mark.jones@robertslimbrick.com
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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

01633 741101
info@sustainablestudio.co.uk
www.sustainablestudio.co.uk

Penarth

Loyn+Co*
88 Glebe Street, Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan CF64 1EF

Principal Architect Chris Loyn set up practice in 1987 and founded LOYN+CO 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

029 2071 1432
architecture@loyn.co.uk
www.loyn.co.uk

West Wales

Carmarthen

Nicole Jones Architect RIBA*
6 Myrddin Crescent, Carmarthen SA31 1DX

We offer modern sustainable architecture as well as the refurbishment of listed buildings and barn and chapel conversions. Our style is always approachable and professional.

The practice is involved in a broad range of projects from residential to small commercial projects. We also specialise in refurbishment of dental surgeries.

We undertake work in Wales, Southern England and Germany.

07969 516075
n@nicolejones-architect.co.uk
www.nicolejones-architect.co.uk

Haverfordwest

David Haward Associates Ltd*
Twll Dwrgi, Goat Street, St David's,
Haverfordwest SA62 6RQ

We are a well-established Practice with a reputation with both clients and contractors, for providing high quality designs that maximise the building's potential and meet our clients' expectations. Several contractors have used the Practice when extending or making alterations to their own homes, due to our innovative design and well-coordinated drawings, which allow ease of construction on site. Additional office in Clynderwen.

Contact: David Haward

01437 729090
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Oochitecture*
The Royal, Trafalgar Terrace, Broad Haven,
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Oochitecture is a creative practice based in Broad Haven, Pembrokeshire. We deliver projects for our clients across South Wales and beyond. Passionate about both design and the process of building, we enjoy taking projects from inception to completion guiding our clients along the way.

We have a wide range of experience including residential, education and commercial projects and provide full design services and project management.

Contact: Michael Bool

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info@oochitecture.com
www.oochitecture.com

Narberth

Steve Hole Architects LLP
7 Northfield Road, Narberth, Pembrokeshire SA67 7AA

Steve Hole RIBA has been in general practice in Narberth since 1981, specialising in domestic architecture, but also with extensive commercial experience. We have developed considerable experience in identifying potential development opportunities, undertaking planning feasibilities and marrying such potential with suitable developer clients. The practice also operates as a general local practice and undertakes architects' services for one off property developments, conversions and extensions, often dealing with historic and listed buildings.

Contact: Steve Hole

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info@steveholearchitects.co.uk
www.steveholearchitects.co.uk

Pembroke

Acanthus Holden Architects*
Watermans Lane, The Green, Pembroke,
Pembroke Dock SA71 4NU

Acanthus Holden is a RIBA Chartered Architectural Practice that has provided comprehensive design services extending from inception to completion on site for more than 25 years, with an established reputation for Building Conservation, and the and the Creative Reuse of old buildings.

The practice is also acknowledged as one that pursues an environmentally sensitive and sustainable approach to projects, which in recent years has extended to the design of several Passive House buildings in West Wales.

Acanthus Holden can provide both architectural and planning services for projects, a desirable and streamlined combination for many clients.

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Pembroke Dock

Pembroke Design Ltd*
16 Meyrick Street, Pembroke Dock,
Pembrokeshire SA72 6UT

PDL Architects & Surveyors offer a friendly, client focussed service by our experienced design and technical team. We create better buildings and environments that are environmentally sensitive and highly sustainable. Through close communication and good design, we work to better our client's expectations on every project, contemporary or traditional, providing cost effective, highly sustainable and stimulating spaces in which to live, work or learn.

Contact: Julian Mansel-Thomas

01646 683439
pdock@pembrokedesign.co.uk
www.pembrokedesign.co.uk

Tenby

Argent Architects*
1 Montrose, Penally, Tenby SA70 7PU

We favour engineered timber post and beam technology - for its warmth, human scale, and endless spacial possibilities (now applied to a wider range of projects than our high-end houses featured in *Touchstone* 2022).

Contact: Michael Argent

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Whitland

BABB Architects Limited*
Landsker Business Centre, Llwynybrain,
Whitland SA34 0NG

BABB Architects is primarily an architectural practice, but in addition to its core activities, BABB Architects provides planning consultancy and historic building consultancy. It is our belief that to produce high quality, sensitive, sustainable designs, a set of skills is required which extends beyond pure architectural services, so whilst architecture remains our core business activity, the practice regularly uses its other in-house skills to add value to the service it provides.

The practice is new, but its staff have 30 years of experience of working in West Wales. Linda Jones, Director, is a Chartered Architect, Chartered Town Planner and also has experience lead designer on a number of Passivhaus projects.

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www.babb-architects.cymru

Mid Wales

Aberystwyth

DB3 Architecture*
30 Heol y Wig, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 2LN

DB3 is an architecture-led, multi-disciplinary consultancy including architectural design, surveying, conservation and project management. Our approach to design and operations provides a comprehensive, client focused and fully bilingual service for public and private projects throughout Wales. Our office at Aberystwyth specialises in housing, education, community, cultural, library and conservation projects. We have a local, dedicated and experienced team who take pride in the wide range of architectural projects we deliver.

Contact: Iwan Thomas

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www.db3group.com

Mathew Tench Architects and Associates Ltd
Studio 2, Creative Arts Unit, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Penglais Campus, Aberystwyth University, Ceredigion SY23 3LG

We provide the full range of architectural services, including design, planning permission, building regulation approval, ecological advice and building contract administration.

The business was founded by Mathew Tench who has worked in Mid Wales for 28 years and possesses a wealth of experience in design, planning and project management. We approach every job as a unique challenge and exciting opportunity to build unique spaces meeting each client's criteria and enhance the quality of the environment.

Contact: Mathew Tench

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www.mathewtencharchitects.co.uk

Machynlleth

George + Tomos Penseiri: Architects Cyf*
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George + Tomos was established in 2003 by Arwyn George and Dafydd Tomos, who have extensive experience of projects throughout Wales and beyond. Based in Machynlleth, we offer a bilingual service and combine creative design ideas with the use of sustainable construction techniques. We are a young team with a real passion for our work, always aiming to ensure the best results for our clients. We make buildings that work well, make the best possible use of site and budget, are technically and ecologically advanced, and suit their surroundings and context.

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Newtown

Hughes Architects*
29 Broad Street, Newtown, Powys SY16 2BQ

The practice was established in 2001 with the aim of bringing high quality architecture, learnt in big cities across the world to Mid Wales. Within two years the practice had grown considerably and had projects across the UK and whilst the geographical spread of our projects is still vast, our core values remain the same, wherever we have the pleasure to be working. We have expanded to provide architectural design and planning services to support our clients on a range of schemes.

We are a close-knit team drawn from a variety of backgrounds and experience and this is reflected in our work. We enjoy working in this wonderful part of the world, learning with our clients and creating their dreams. Additional offices in Aberystwyth and Welshpool.

Contact: Richard Lewis

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enquiries@hughesarchitects.co.uk
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Welshpool

Hughes Architects*
18 Berriew Street, Welshpool SY21 7SQ

The practice was established in 2001 with the aim of bringing high quality architecture, learnt in big cities across the world to Mid Wales. Within two years the practice had grown considerably and had projects across the UK and whilst the geographical spread of our projects is still vast, our core values remain the same, wherever we have the pleasure to be working. We have expanded to provide architectural design and planning services to support our clients on a range of schemes.

We are a close-knit team drawn from a variety of backgrounds and experience and this is reflected in our work. We enjoy working in this wonderful part of the world, learning with our clients and creating their dreams. Additional offices in Newtown and Aberystwyth.

Contact: Doug Hughes

01938 553 436
enquiries@hughesarchitects.co.uk
www.hughesarchitects.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.

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Conwy

Matthew Jones Architects*
115 Station Road, Deganwy, Conwy LL31 9EJ
Unit 4, Broncoed House, Wrexham Road, Mold CH7 1HP

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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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

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studio@saer.wales
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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.

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wales@agarchitects.co.uk
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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 "lle". 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

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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'.

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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

TACP Architects Ltd*
Pembroke House, Ellice Way,
Wrexham Technology Park LL13 7YT

TACP operates extensively in Wales and the North West as well as delivering projects both Nationally and Internationally. We have a wide range of prestigious Clients and valued individual businesses within the industry that require the delivery of complex and challenging projects.

We are Quality Assured Practice accredited to ISO 9001:2015 and 14001:2015. We can assist Clients with projects that are required to be BIM compliant and are experienced in delivering projects that achieve Net Zero, BREEAM, LEED and Passivhaus.

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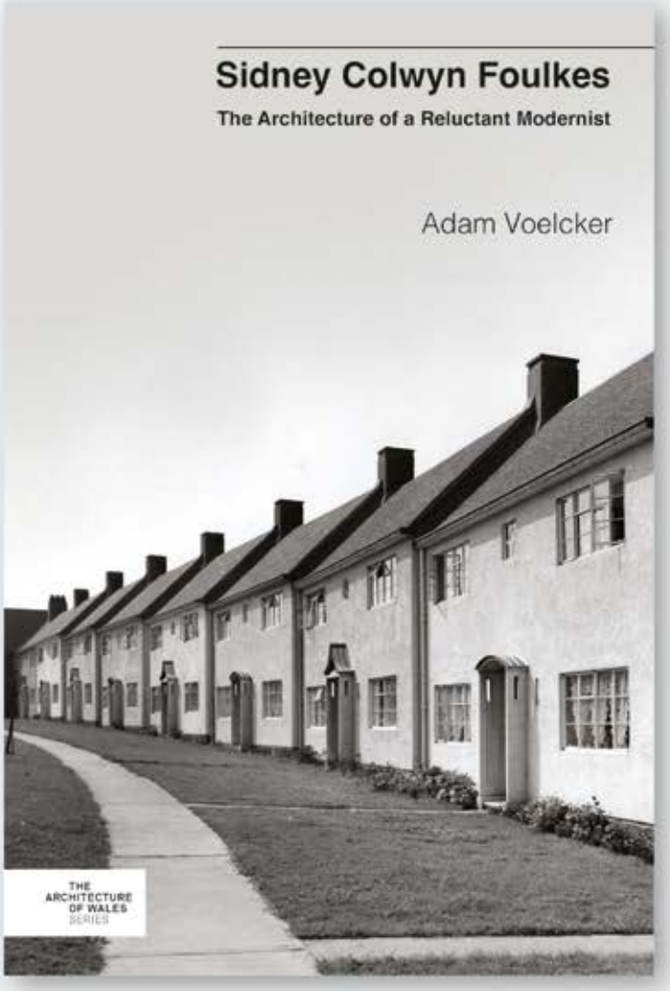
Alphabetical list of practices

Architecture of Wales

Series from the University of Wales Press in cooperation with The Royal Society of Architects in Wales – Cymdeithas Frenhinol Penseiri yng Nghymru



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Shifting circles of ambition

One cannot deny the sheer tenacity and hutzpah of all those who brought the Wales Millenium Centre (WMC) into being, opening to fanfares of song and theatre in 2004. Our admiration for that level of focused ambition is long overdue. They refused to be cowed by all the sneering and infighting that infected certain quarters of the Welsh and UK elites in those early devolutionary days.

Twenty years on we instinctively sense that the age of monumental new architecture is unlikely to mark out our Welsh landscape. Some of us have different ambitions. A more modest endeavour to reuse sweetly what we already have might be the resource-conscious dominant architectural mantra. We urgently need well-designed infrastructure. The well-being economy and environment, and a fierce focus on social care for all of us (and particularly the most vulnerable), will also be part of that ambition. And yet despite all the seemingly gloomy stats that surround so many of our public services in Wales, there are still ambitious architectural beacons being erected on the horizon, such as the new Velindre Cancer Centre in Whitchurch, the Global Centre for Rail Excellence at Ystrydgwnlais, and the award-winning new residence for those experiencing dementia at Portskewett, in Monmouthsire. There are Welsh towns and councils that are also refusing to roll over in the face of neo-liberalism's failure to deliver decent redevelopment for their citizens. They will find other ways to circumvent such failed models and they will make better places for it. They refuse to just roll over in despair. Each of them is in its own way acting out a Michael Sheen moment, as he has so magnificently done for the National Theatre of Wales.

And yet Wales's culture of creativity is truly creaking in so many quarters. At that 20th anniversary moment for the WMC with its justifiable partying, the Welsh National Opera was, and still is, in a very vulnerable place. What an irony. Is the WMC's announcement of a new 'cutting-edge digital-first performance venue' just an inevitable shifting in the visual focus from the very physical narration of our pasts to the digital creativity of a future? Surely, we can and ought to still do both?

As 2024 turned into 2025 a gathering of creative minds in Cardiff wondered if we have the will, resources and ambition to put Wales on a global stage at the Venice Architectural Biennale for the first time. Do we have an environmental narrative to promote, that will have global impact in the visual way we tell it? To answer that requires some deep soul-searching, clarity, honesty, and possibly humility to say – for the moment – we may not have the evidence, but we are still working furiously on that devolutionary spirit. We ought to have a chance to relive that Bryn Terfel moment sailing into Cardiff Bay (above) with the north-Wales-created foundation stone to the south Wales's and nation's WMC – except the next time it will be sailing across the Venice lagoon. Spirits may lift again, at least architecturally.

Image: Bryn Terfel arriving in the Spirit of Penarth lifeboat with the slate foundation stone for the Wales Millennium Centre (courtesy WMC).

Cover image: Early visualisation of the Wales Millennium Centre by James Jackson 1998.