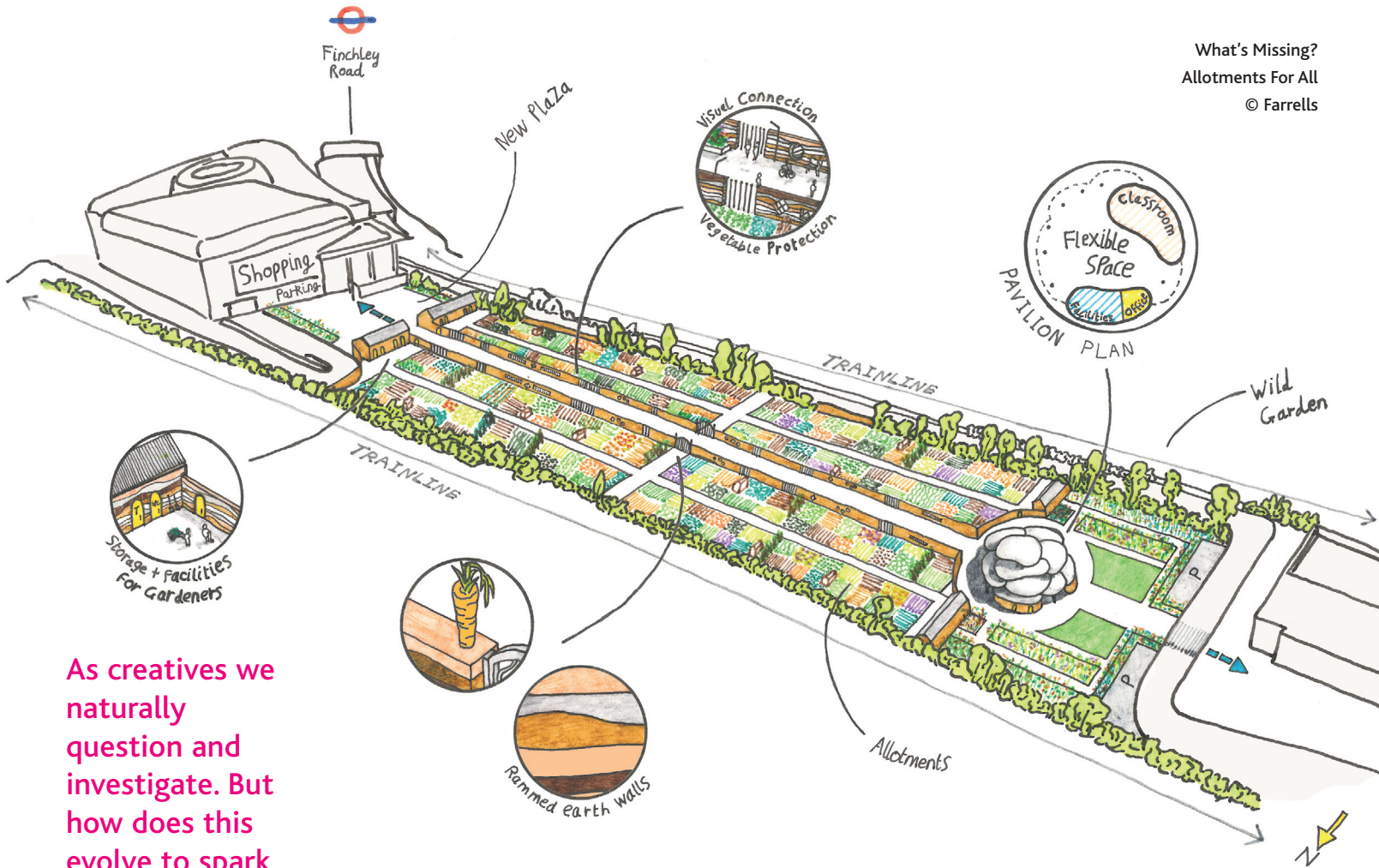


What's Missing?
Allotments For All
© Farrells



As creatives we naturally question and investigate. But how does this evolve to spark small actions within practice and our local community? asks Alistair Backhouse

Sparking small actions

Going beyond day-to-day project work, as creatives, we naturally look outside of defined parameters to question and investigate. From lunchtime debate with colleagues to whole office design reviews, opportunities like design competitions and thought leadership also provide a great opportunity to challenge each other's ideas and develop our thinking. But how does this evolve to spark small actions within practice and our local community?

The pandemic gave us time to think and act locally. We naturally adjusted our focus to our neighbourhoods and local context and started looking at ways of improving our surroundings, asking ourselves 'What is missing?'. As a team, we started investigating, sketching and comparing ideas, with a strong focus on green space. One instance explored the conversion of the large O2 car park in North London into community allotments, reclaiming tarmacked infrastructure for nature and residents alike. Incorporating a new flexible pavilion space with a contemporary rammed earth walled garden, the local community would be provided with space to get their hands earthy and reconnect with nature, enjoying the

associated health benefits. This vision for a resilient and productive urban community was one idea that saw urban agriculture sitting high on the agenda as those of us in city's looked forward, towards a greener urban landscape.

Our proposal for The Property Week Great Design Challenge was a similar springboard for us to continue to develop these ideas, but this time within a defined architectural setting, reimagining how a tired 1970's shopping centre could be retrofitted for the future. Envisioning a self-sufficient vessel of sustainable micro-ecosystems, different natural and artificial components would act together to create and promote a circular and sustainable building. Deep floor plates and double height atriums would facilitate vertical farming, with solar, wind and water collection providing the nutrients for the 'walled garden of the future'. Zero waste supermarkets and 'Fix it don't bin it' repair and upcycling stores would act as commercial anchors, whilst a carefully curated programme of spaces ensured the building would act as a social hub from dawn through into the night. This exercise saw the shopping centre become an exciting typology through which we could >>>



Alistair Backhouse is an architect with Farrells

RIGHT:
Property Week Design
Competition - The
Shopping Centre as an
Ecosystem © Farrells



>>> apply our thinking, with a template for productive reuse that embraces positive sustainable outcomes within our towns and cities.

RIGHT:
Integrated Green
Landscape At The Royal
Albert Docks
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Intertwining these ideas within our project work is a process that is a carefully considered journey. As a result, smaller initiatives with a direct approach have therefore channelled this energy into more immediate tangible outcomes. For example, employing an annual programme with a local school, King Solomon Academy, as part of the RIBA Architecture Ambassadors initiative, has allowed us to share our profession and passion for sustainability and the future of our cities with students. It has created a space where the next generation can be involved with the conversation, developing grand ideas of their own whilst building upon a range of skills. Recent workshops aim to see bird boxes designed and produced out of recycled materials, initiating conversation around improved biodiversity within high density areas, whilst benefiting the wildlife that call the school home. Never failing to be impressed by students' enthusiasm and un-



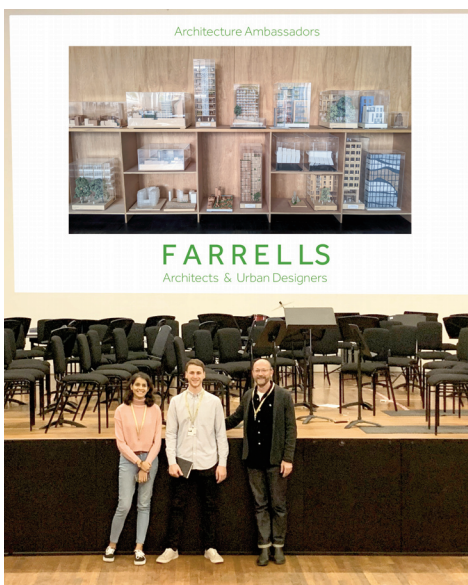


Circular
Ecosystems
GROUND SOURCE HEAT RECOVERY
 • A building that supports itself

• A garden for the town and its community

• A shift in identity towards a circular and no waste hub

• A sustainable social system centred around food, grown in the building!



tered creativity, this step has translated those earlier ideas into learning and into more immediate feasible outcomes which we aim to continue.

This year's London festival of Architecture (LFA) theme of 'Act' could then not have been a more appropriate direction through which to further grow this action. Hosting an event in collaboration with our local school as part of the LFA programme, we hope to improve awareness of the importance of nature and natural landscapes within the urban environment.

With a focus on green productive space, our aim is to discuss simple strategies to tackle the climate and biodiversity emergency through small actions. Encouraging participation and improving our urban neighbourhoods, the event itself will centre on planting cuttings and seeds within the school that pupils and participants have cultivated at home. Our own cultivation has begun in the office, making the most of the natural light from our three-meter-high windows, with discussions around turning our own workspace into a more permanent productive landscape already

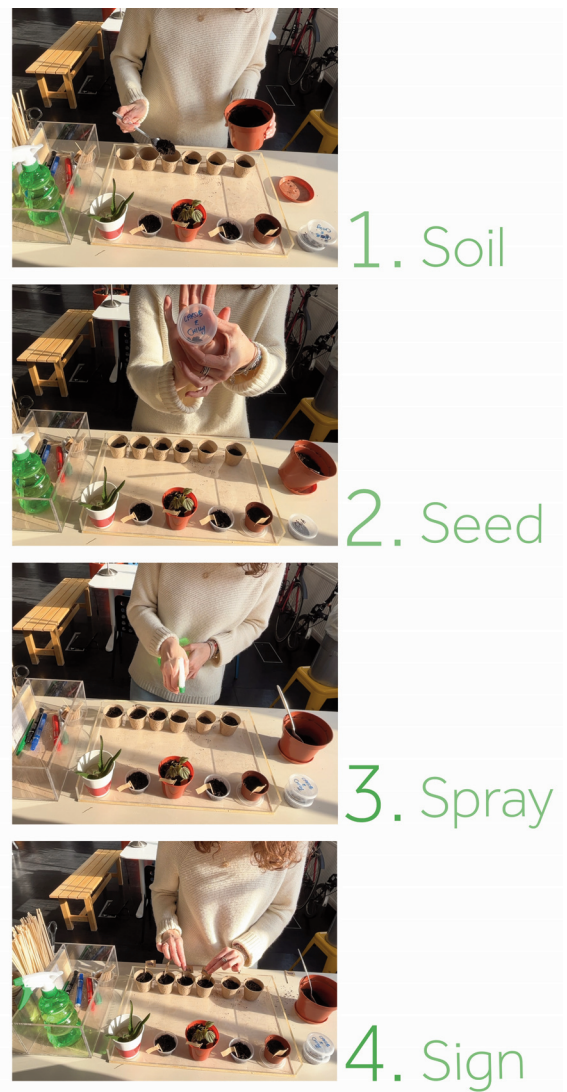
LEFT:
 Integrated Green
 Landscape At The Royal
 Albert Docks
 © FARRELLS

>>>

RIGHT:
Seed Planting For The LFA
Event Commences
©FARRELLS

>>> gaining momentum!

So where will this go next? While the office is about to become an allotment, hopefully acting as a catalyst for further conversation with clients, we are continuously working with the local community and the Church Street Ward Neighbourhood Forum to find potential funding streams, to deliver bottom-up initiatives in the local area. Competitions and thought leadership act as ideas incubators, where teams of passionate thinkers and designers share and develop ideas within and beyond ordinary practice work, making the most of diverse perspectives and experiences. Setting an agenda, they challenge us to problem solve, acting as a lightning rod for our contemplation and creativity, with these ideas polished and defined further as the journey here shows. Our ambition is that these small actions will lead to bigger outcomes, both within our local area and potentially at a larger scale. We would encourage everyone to see how their thinking can transform into quick wins and direct action, from one-on-one conversations, to group collaboration and larger organised initiatives, for this so often acts as a catalyst for positive local change. ■



RIGHT:
Proposal To Integrate
Productive Community
Landscapes Within Dense
Environments
© FARRELLS]

