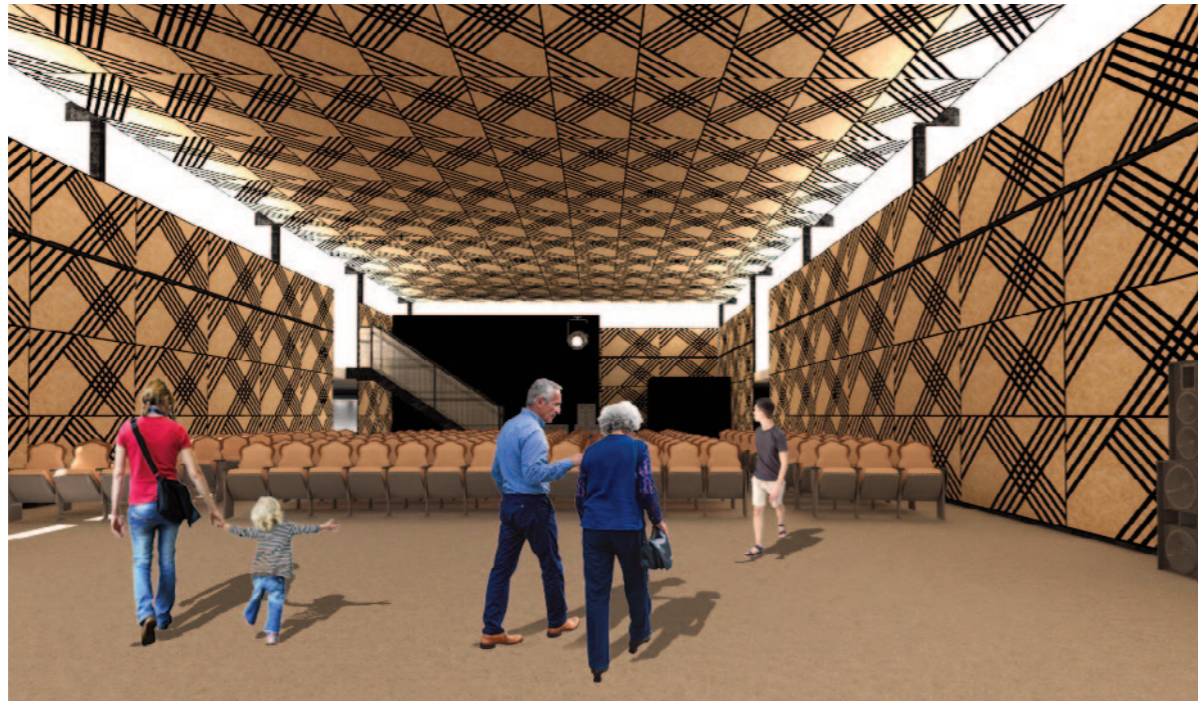


Embracing the power of civic architecture



Daniel Leon looks at the value of building stronger and more inclusive communities

Earlier this month shocking news surfaced that thousands of public buildings constructed in Britain from the 1950s to the 1990s may be at risk of collapse. The culprit? 'Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete' (RAAC), a cheap substitute for concrete widely used in these structures. With a lifespan of only around thirty years and a susceptibility to disintegration when exposed to moisture, RAAC raises concerns about the quality, sustainability, and longevity of our civic buildings.

The RAAC controversy sheds light on a disheartening trend. Over the past few decades, Britain has treated many of its civic buildings as disposable objects. Many of these structures have gained notoriety for their poor construction and lack of aesthetic appeal. Consequently, a significant number of them are now earmarked for demolition, while others, like the ill-fated Marble Arch Mound, have already collapsed under their own (physical and financial) weight.

The problem is manifold. First of all, the vicious cycle of construction, refurbishment, and eventual demolition comes at a staggering environmental cost. Secondly, unsuitable and ill-judged public architecture can cause a sense of alienation among the urban populations who have to exist in and alongside them. Finally, ill-designed and cheaply built structures can drain once vibrant areas of their community life and impact our mental well-being. We must get back to building for the future – in an environmental, aesthetic and communal sense. Cheap and disposable public buildings may seem like a cost-saving measure, but they are a false economy, exacting social, environmental, and financial tolls. Renewed focus on creativity, beauty, and quality in civic design

would vastly improve the lives of people across London.

Building for a better planet

It is a widely known fact that construction is responsible for 40 per cent of the world's energy usage, 25 per cent of water usage and around 33 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions¹. London's sprawling cityscape presents a significant challenge in this regard. The capital's vast urban footprint, with its multitude of residential, commercial, and public structures, accounts for a substantial portion of the whole country's carbon emissions. Inefficient energy use, reliance on fossil fuels for heating and cooling, and inadequate insulation all contribute to the carbon footprint of buildings. The scale of the issue is amplified by London's population density and the high demand for energy.

Retrofitting existing buildings is one obvious solution. Another is to approach new builds with a conscious attempt at improving the city's environmental impact. This goes beyond adhering to sustainable regulation but showing true ambition by using architecture to actively improve our environment. Choosing local, high-quality materials, investing in innovative insulation technology, and embracing biophilic designs which add to the city's green lung are just some of the actionable options available to architects, planners, and developers in order to build towards a net-zero future.

One of our own design proposals, for the Woodside Park Synagogue in Finchley (Pictures 1 & 2), aims to turn a rather tired 1960s hall building in this community complex into an inviting and environmentally friendly space. Using local materials not only >>>



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>>> reduces the environmental cost of construction, but also connects the structure to its area and creates a link to both the built and natural surroundings. The modern design provides an open, bright, and inviting space for prayer, community events and functions, as well as flexible learning facilities.

Using large windows and state of the art insulation technologies provides light and airy interiors, while saving both electricity and heating costs in the process. Communal buildings such as these can therefore play a dual role – that of providing a welcoming space for a specific community and neighbourhood, while actively benefiting London’s environment and energy use.

Creating civic pride through regeneration

Architecture shapes the way we perceive and experience our surroundings. Well-designed structures, rooted in the local context and reflecting the needs and desires of the people, foster a sense of belonging and attachment. They become the backdrop for cherished memories, encapsulating the stories and experiences of generations. They create spaces where families thrive. By approaching the built environment with care and consideration, architects can nurture deep civic pride and a lasting sense of home within communities.

As our high streets undergo transformations due to factors like hybrid working, it is essential to plan our built environments with the future in mind, ensuring they reflect the wishes and needs of our populations for years to come. Too often, urban



areas can become vacuums of social life, devoid of social interaction or purpose. There are many spaces across London which have suffered this fate. From concrete wastelands created by crumbling housing blocks to former commercial hubs which have fallen into disrepair, a dynamic and creative approach is required to reclaim these unused spaces and turn them into locales of communal pride and cultural energy.

One such example is a housing block near Church Street in Northwest London. We noticed an empty, unused space set within the courtyard of the housing complex, so we approached the Regeneration Office with proposals that it could become an excellent short-term facility to work for film screenings, exhibitions and community events (Pictures 3 & 4). Slated for regeneration in the future, spaces like these can become vibrant meeting points for the local community.

Rather than depending on a few over-serviced cultural hubs dotted around the city, temporary exhibition venues, events facilities, and community centres can elevate whole neighbourhoods and inject life into areas of London that have been left to decay. They bring people together and act as points of civic pride and inclusion for local residents, improving quality of life.

Improving well-being and mental health

As architects, we should embrace our role as catalysts for positive change. Each project presents an opportunity to transform the way people live, work, and interact with one another. Moreover, the impact of beautiful and high-quality buildings on individual well-being should not be underestimated. Research shows that urban dwellers are 40 per cent more likely to develop depression. Aesthetically pleasing and well-designed urban architecture can profoundly affect people’s mental and emotional states.

Incorporating elements of nature, such as green spaces, parks, and gardens, provides a respite from the hustle and bustle of city life.

To see how truly green our residential spaces can be, we need look no further than Milan’s Bosco Verticale, with its two towers, each housing hundreds of trees, ensuring the complex lives up to its name as a ‘vertical forest’.

Research has shown that exposure to nature has a positive effect on mental health, reducing anxiety and improving overall well-being. By integrating more greenery into urban settings is not only beneficial for the environment; it is also conducive to maintaining a high standard of mental and physical health among residents.

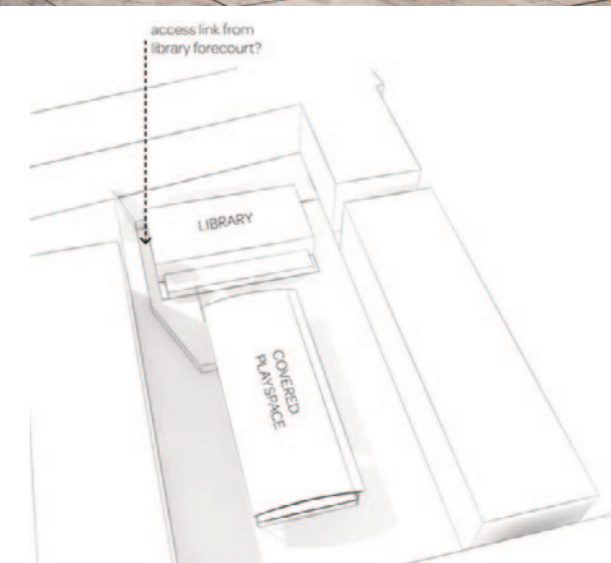
Additionally, well-designed urban architecture can prioritise accessibility and inclusivity, ensuring that everyone can fully participate in and enjoy public spaces. Incorporating features such as ramps, elevators, and sensory elements can make urban environments more welcoming for individuals with disabilities or senso-



ry sensitivities, fostering a sense of inclusiveness and reducing barriers to engagement.

By creating spaces that promote relaxation, connection with nature, social interaction, and a sense of pride, architects can contribute to healthier and happier communities. It is essential to prioritise the integration of these principles in urban design to create environments that support the holistic well-being of individuals and foster a sense of belonging and connection.

While it may seem strange to think of architects as activists, it is a useful way of illustrating how powerful a force for good our built environment can be. By prioritising beauty, sustainability, and civic pride in our designs, we can build stronger and more inclusive communities. Architects have an opportunity to shape the world around us, redefining the essence of community through thoughtful and visionary design. Together, 2023 could be the year we really unleash architecture’s potential to facilitate environmental and social change. ■



IMAGES:
Woodside Park Synagogue
in Finchley

¹<https://www.pbctoday.co.uk/news/planning-construction-news/building-for-a-better-tomorrow-how-can-the-sector-deliver-a-sustainable-built-environment/114855/>