

# Peter Barber

Output 2: Homeless Facility  
Spring Gardens, Lewisham, 2009  
Redbridge Welcome Centre, Ilford, 2011

## Abstract

Spring Gardens, Lewisham (2009) and the Redbridge Welcome Centre, Ilford (2011) are two homeless facilities designed by Peter Barber Architects that have come to define the Homes and Communities Agency's *Places of Change* programme. This programme defined a policy shift in homeless shelter provision from maintenance to recovery and aimed at integrating the homeless back into society. The primary research questions addressed by the projects are: How can facilities for the homeless be deinstitutionalised? How can homeless facilities provide for the emotional aspects of home as well as the basics of food and shelter? How can facilities for the homeless respond to a policy shift from maintenance to recovery? How can relationships between the homeless and the wider community be encouraged? How can the experience of being homeless be incorporated into the design process of homeless facilities? The research methodology involved site visits, analysis of existing hostels and discussions with clients, hostel staff and residents. Conceptual design strategies drew on the writings of Walter Benjamin and Jane Jacobs, both buildings being conceived around internal streets and as multi-levelled landscapes to be inhabited by people. Key urban design moves were established early on in the design processes and remained consistent throughout their evolution. Extensive physical model making, three-dimensional sketching and other forms of visualisation

tested design options and refined the overall configuration of the buildings in terms of accessibility, circulation, lighting, and general functional viability. The many exploratory physical models for each scheme were all constructed with the same logic as the real construction operations would be on site, being regularly and quickly updated throughout the design process. Research into low budget curtain wall construction resulted in the use of a standard glazing system, with individual panels bolted together. The projects have been widely published and favourably reviewed widely in the architectural and popular media. Spring Gardens has been nominated for a 2013 Index Award in the Community Category.

## Key Words

Homeless facilities, deinstitutionalisation, home, recovery, re-integration

## Context

Since the early 2000's, Peter Barber has been at the forefront of new attitudes and perspectives on the provision of housing for the homeless, designing facilities that encourage residents to take on roles of responsibility and collective ownership. This work began with the Endell Street Hostel (2008), where he refurbished an existing Grade 2 listed Victorian School building for St. Mungo's Community Housing Association, the largest provider of housing for the homeless in London. This project is not included in this return, but resulted in commissions for the two that are, Spring Gardens, Lewisham (2009) and the Redbridge Welcome Centre, Ilford

(2011). They are state-of-the-art facilities that have come to define, aesthetically and programmatically, the Homes and Communities Agency's *Places of Change* programme. This was a £90 million capital fund set up in 2006 to improve hostels and other facilities for homeless people. It defined a policy shift from maintenance to recovery, set out the need for hostels to be welcoming and promote self-esteem and aimed at integrating the homeless back into society. Both Spring Gardens and the Redbridge Welcome Centre were funded in part through this programme.

## General Description

The Spring Gardens facility in Lewisham (fig.01) was the first purpose built homeless hostel in Britain and replaced Ennersdale House, a Ministry of Defence housing block, which had been taken over by St Mungo's in 2005. It is located in a quiet residential neighbourhood behind a row of Edwardian terraces.(fig.06, fig.08) The building comprises a two-storey perimeter block terminated by a four-storey tower, partly encircling a communal courtyard garden, where allotments, a badminton court and seating are planned.(fig.02) Its circulation space, a double height glazed lobby wraps around the courtyard garden.(fig.04) This is glazed from floor to ceiling. Informal seating areas in the lobby and colourfully framed window openings in the glazing provide space for reading and writing and frame views into the garden.(fig.05) This open communal space accommodates kitchen,

dining, library and IT facilities at the north end, creating a flexible and informal space that serves as the social hub of the hostel. (fig.09) The facility has forty en-suite bedrooms. On the ground floor, these open directly into the glazed lobby.(fig.09, fig.16c) More bedrooms are located above the canteen at mezzanine level and the tower houses self-contained apartments with their own kitchen and dining area. (fig.10, fig.11a, fig.11b) An existing hostel adjacent to the new building continues to provide additional accommodation. This will be replaced in Phase 2 of the project.

The four-storey Redbridge Welcome Centre on the other hand is a highly visible, state of the art building on a prominent site in Ilford. (fig.19) It is composed of a series of folded planes forming a continuous ribbon of structure from pavement entrance ramp to roof.(fig.20, fig.21) These

create several irregularly stacked volumes, with an uppermost level that cantilevers out towards the road. (fig.24) This dramatic volume with its randomly placed circular windows defines the corner of the site and gives the building an urban scale.(fig.36) Like at Spring Gardens, the building's interior spaces are flooded with light from fully glazed facades. (fig.37) The Centre houses drop-in facilities and

training rooms for the community on the lower two levels and temporary accommodation for homeless people above. Each of ten en-suite rooms faces a secluded garden at the rear of the building.(fig.26) The building achieved a Code for Sustainable Homes Level 3 rating. To achieve this, it provided ground source heat pumps and photovoltaic panels on the roof that provide energy for heating.

## Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in the design of these two facilities:

- 1) How can facilities for the homeless be de-institutionalised?
- 2) How can homeless facilities provide for the emotional aspects of home as well as the basics of food and shelter?
- 3) How can facilities for the homeless respond to a policy shift from maintenance to recovery?
- 4) How can relationships between the homeless and the wider community be encouraged?
- 5) How can the experience of being homeless be incorporated into the design process?

## Aims and Objectives

- 1) To deinstitutionalise facilities for the homeless

Responding to the objectives of the *Places for Change* Programme to deinstitutionalise facilities for the homeless, the design of these two buildings aimed to challenge assumptions about what hostel buildings look like and to question the exclusion of homeless people from the benefits of good design. To quote from an interview with Barber: "I would imagine that people who have had difficulties in their life are, if anything, more sensitive to their

environment. Design affects how people feel about themselves and the institution ... I don't think it's an indulgence to try to create a beautiful environment for people. I think it's essential." <sup>1</sup>

In these buildings, Barber used the same elements and materials as he would for any other public institution: white surfaces, coloured foci, natural wood and glass. (fig.17, fig 38) Large glazed curtain walls created

<sup>1</sup> S. Rose. 'The grow-your-own homeless hostel.' *The Guardian*, 1 September 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/sep/01/spring-gardens-homeless-hostel>>

transparency between inside and outside and between institutional types like hostel, hotel or university.(fig.16a) Quotes from visitors to Spring Gardens indicate the success of these design decisions in de-institutionalising the facilities: "The reception area has an image not far from the lobby of a boutique hotel," "This doesn't feel like a hostel for homeless people, more like a modern University building."<sup>2</sup> The primary organising devices of the buildings - a secluded courtyard surrounded by a glazed lobby, at once reception, circulation and social space - went a considerable way to de-institutionalising the buildings.(fig.07, fig.16b, fig.16c, fig.25) These elements eliminated the secured, air-locked entrance and internal double loaded corridor that characterised most hostel buildings.(fig.37) Influenced by a reading of Robin Evan's essay "Figures, doors and passages,"<sup>3</sup> Barber not only minimised corridors by making them wide and high enough to accommodate social activities, he eliminated them altogether.(fig.07) Corridors were transformed into two-storey high, light filled lobbies, connecting inside and outside and filled with social and educational activities.(fig.39) This created a positive, open, communal atmosphere and contributed to making the facilities welcoming, sociable, safe and humane places.

In both buildings, hostel dormitories were eliminated. Hostels provide security and privacy in group living conditions where residents are often strangers. In these facilities, every resident was accommodated in a single

occupancy room with an en-suite bathroom. Residents are able to socialise communally or to be on their own. At Spring Gardens, ground floor rooms were designed with small individual gardens, allowing pets to stay with residents. (fig.09) At the Redbridge Welcome Centre, temporary accommodation for the homeless in the form of ten en-suite bedrooms was located on the second and third floors of the facility accessed by its own front door. (fig.28) These rooms were arranged around generous communal kitchens that spilled out onto broad decks and enjoyed views to the south east.(fig.29)

These changes from the norm contributed to the creation of open, inclusive and supportive environments. Residents' experiences of the buildings indicate that this has had positive impact on their lives: "I've landed in a bed of roses... nice maple floors, matching furniture, my own garden. Anything's better than the other option, but this is the best hostel I've ever seen,"<sup>4</sup> and "People love visiting me here because it's a friendly atmosphere and the building's nice ... even my mum visits me and she loves it."<sup>5</sup>

2) To design homeless facilities that provide for the emotional aspects of home as well as the basics of food and shelter

The aim of deinstitutionalising hostel buildings is to provide for the emotional aspects of home as well as the basics of food and shelter. Hostel design prior to this was dominated by

2 'A design for life.' Inside Housing, 11 September 2009  
<<http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/a-design-for-life/6506339.article>>

3 R. Evans. 'Figures, doors and passages'. AD, 4,1978, pp. 42-57.

4 Rose, S. *ibid.*

5 'A design for life,' *ibid.*



a security mind-set. Hostels had resembled prisons, with gates, locks and barriers creating strict separation between staff and residents and the institution and the outside world. Forty three percent of people living in St Mungo's hostels suffer from mental health problems including depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. A poor physical environment where they feel unsafe and insecure exacerbates these problems and affects their sense of self worth and belonging. The former Ennersdale House on the Spring Gardens site was a labyrinth of corridors that were dark and difficult to navigate. Residents were isolated in their rooms and felt threatened by dark unwelcoming corridors, nooks and crannies. It was these aspects of the hostel environment that Barber's deinstitutionalisation of the building, described above, transformed. Design made it into a more secure, humane and hopeful place. In both buildings, the provision of quality social and private spaces coupled with training opportunities and access to health care have contributed to raising peoples' aspirations and self esteem.(fig.26, fig.27)

3) To respond to a policy shift from maintenance to recovery in the design of homeless facilities

It is widely accepted that environment is crucial to encouraging homeless people to gain the confidence and skills needed to progress into the wider world. The spaces at Spring Gardens were designed with the idea of promoting social contact and creating bonds among hostel residents and other users.(fig.16) This was intended to build peoples' confidence and assist them to move on with their lives. Staff

commented that because people enjoyed being in the building, it made it easier to work with them. At Spring Gardens, the spatial arrangement of the facility made recovery and reintegration into society spatially legible. Admission rooms were located overlooking the entrance.(fig.10a) Here incoming residents' support needs were assessed. From here, they were allocated to en-suite rooms around the courtyard (fig.09a) or on the mezzanine level overlooking the kitchen, which provided more space and independence. (fig.10b) After this five bedrooms in the tower block provided self contained accommodation for residents who were most ready to move into general needs housing.(fig.11b, fig11c) Their kitchen was a communal space with far-reaching views across London.(fig.01) This design reflected the transition that residents experienced from the time they entered the building to the moment they left. Its organisational structure of the building and the relationship between different spaces was very clear. All private spaces were clearly connected to the central communal area, making it easy for residents to find their way around. (fig.05) Floors were flush so there was no need for ramps. Lifts were provided in the tower so that the self-contained flats were accessible for people who use wheelchairs or sticks.

At the Redbridge Welcome Centre, the nature of the space itself was seen as contributing to focus and a sense of purpose. The combination of a homeless shelter and a community centre into an integrated community hub that included rehabilitation, education and training made accessing such services easier and facilitated the re-entry of homeless people into regular society. (fig.26, fig.27)

4) To facilitate the formation of relationships between the homeless and the wider community

One of the objectives of the *Places of Change* programme was to create a flow of traffic through facilities for the homeless that mixed staff and residents and provided integrated activity space and space and facilities to share with the local community. (fig.30, fig.31, fig.32, fig.33) The Redbridge Welcome Centre's visible, transparent aesthetic was a clear response to this brief. (fig.35, fig.40) Barber used this aesthetic to convey the idea that the building was open, transparent and not separated from its community. Its ground floor was conceived as an open-plan multi functional space, a glazed L shaped space oriented South East around a garden. (fig.26) It was entered from the street corner through a glazed lobby framed by an open reception and two interview rooms. This led to the main community space, furnished with casually arranged coffee tables and chairs. The rest of the ground floor accommodated a nurse's room, ablutions, a communal laundry and a glazed classroom. In the centre of the ground floor lobby, a dining room and kitchen serve about sixty people daily. A separately accessible unit with a large meeting room on the first floor is leased for drug and alcohol treatment. (fig.27) This variety of separate spaces functioned as a series of lively animated interior stages. They allowed for multiple simultaneous uses while still accommodating overlooking and observation. (fig.41) The manager of the institution expressed the view that the character of the spaces changed the culture of the place, conveying an experience of dynamism and integration with the community.

5) To incorporate the experience of being homeless into a design and construction process

The design of these two buildings was undertaken with the needs of residents in mind and with the understanding that the experience of the users of the buildings added value and knowledge to the design process. This was based on the understanding that the design and management of homeless and community facilities has a profound effect on the physical and mental well being of the people using them and that their input was essential. As well as in depth consultation with managers and staff, *Outside In*, a residents' action group worked with the architects on the design development of Spring Gardens, in order to better understand people's needs and how to support them. Involvement of residents went beyond consultation. Former residents worked on the building sites, finding step up jobs in the construction industry while working on the building site.

## Research Methods

Research for these buildings involved site visits, analysis of existing hostels and discussions with clients, hostel staff and residents as described above. Conceptual design strategies drew on the writings of Walter Benjamin and Jane Jacobs. Barber conceived both buildings as organised around interior streets and as multi-level stages to be inhabited by people, (fig.24, fig.25) in line with his manifesto, which borrows from Marxist critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin's *One Way Street*.<sup>6</sup> Key urban design moves were established early on in the design process and remained consistent through the evolution of the designs. (fig.06, fig.20) This is particularly evident at the Redbridge Welcome Centre, which completes the corner of two low-rise streets of Victorian terraced housing. Its stack of horizontal planes slip and slide to a height of four storeys, held apart by continuous full-height glazing.(fig.19) The first floor band picks up the covered porch line of adjacent houses, and the second floor band picks up on the line of their eaves.(fig.34) This not only creates a beacon of hope in the community, but also reinforces the character of the existing streets. Extensive physical model making, three-dimensional sketching and other forms of visualisation tested design options and refined the overall configuration of the buildings in terms of accessibility, circulation, lighting, and general functional viability.(fig.12, fig.22) The many exploratory physical models for each scheme were all constructed with the same logic as the real construction operations would be on site, being regularly and quickly updated throughout the design

process.(fig23a,fig23b) Research into low budget curtain wall construction resulted in the use of a standard glazing system with individual panels bolted together. (fig18, fig34a, fig.34b)

<sup>6</sup> W. Benjamin. *One Way Street and other Writings*. Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott and K. Shorter. London : NLB, 1979.

## Dissemination / Impact

Spring Gardens has been nominated for a 2013 Index Award in the Community Category. The projects have been widely published and favourably reviewed in the architectural and popular media, including the following:

### Spring Gardens:

'A design for life.' Inside Housing, 11 September 2009  
<<http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/a-design-for-life/6506339.article>>

Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) Archive, 1 Jan 2011  
<<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110118095356/http://www.cabe.org.uk/case-studies/spring-gardens-hostel>>

Rose, S. 'The grow-your-own homeless hostel.' The Guardian, 1 September 2009  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/sep/01/spring-gardens-homeless-hostel>>

Dezeen magazine, 4 August 2009  
<<http://www.dezeen.com/2009/08/04/spring-gardens-by-peter-barber-architects/>>

Woodman, E. 'Gimme shelter.' Building Design, 24 July 2009, pp.10-13.

### Redbridge Welcome Centre:

Wainwright, Oliver. 'Redbridge Welcome Centre by Peter Barber Architects.' Building Design, 22 Feb 2012  
<<http://www.bdonline.co.uk/buildings/redbridge-welcome-centre-by-peter-barber-architects/5032329.article>>

Dezeen magazine, 27 February 2012  
<<http://www.dezeen.com/2012/02/27/redbridge-welcome-centre-by-peter-barber-architects/>>

## Evidence

### Images and Drawings

#### Spring Gardens

Fig. 01 View from courtyard, photograph  
Morley von Sternberg

Fig. 02 Early conceptual sketch of courtyard  
garden and perimeter block

Fig. 03 Conceptual sketch of perimeter block  
and tower

Fig. 04 Conceptual sketch of perimeter block  
across courtyard

Fig. 05 Conceptual sketch of courtyard from  
double volume glazed lobby

Fig. 06 Conceptual model showing courtyard,  
perimeter block and relationship to  
surroundings

Fig. 07 Detail of conceptual model

Fig. 08 Location and Site Plan

Fig. 09a Ground Floor Plan

Fig. 09b Ground Floor Plan with courtyard  
suites highlighted

Fig. 10a First Floor Plan

Fig. 10b First Floor Plan, with assessment  
rooms highlighted

Fig. 10c First Floor Plan, with mezzanine suites  
highlighted

Fig. 11a Second Floor Plan

Fig. 11b Third Floor Plan

Fig. 12 Elevations

Fig. 13 Sections

Fig. 14 View from entrance, photograph  
Morley von Sternberg

Fig. 15 View towards entrance, photograph  
Morley von Sternberg

Fig. 16a, b, c Views of glazed lobby  
occupied, photographs Morley von  
Sternberg

Fig. 17 Detail of glazed lobby corner,  
photograph Morley von Sternberg

Fig. 18 Curtain wall detail

## Welcome Centre

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- Fig. 20 Early conceptual axonometric, street corner view
- Fig. 21 Later conceptual axonometric, street corner view 1
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- Fig. 30 St. Mary's Road Elevation
- Fig. 31 Green Lane Elevation
- Fig. 32 Garden Elevation looking north
- Fig. 33 Garden Elevation looking west
- Fig. 34a, b Curtain wall detail
- Fig. 35 View from corner of St. Mary's Road and Green Lane, photograph Morley von Sternberg
- Fig. 36 View from Green Lane, detail, photograph Morley von Sternberg
- Fig. 37 Glazed lobby, entrance lock, photograph Morley von Sternberg
- Fig. 38 Glazed lobby around courtyard towards reception desk, photograph Morley von Sternberg
- Fig. 39 Glazed lobby towards courtyard, photograph Morley von Sternberg
- Fig. 40 Building from courtyard, photograph Morley von Sternberg
- Fig. 041 a, b, c Lobby occupied, photographs Morley von Sternberg

## Press

- P.01 Woodman, E. 'Gimme shelter.' *Building Design*, 24 July 2009
- P.02 Rose, S. 'The grow-your-own homeless hostel.' *The Guardian*, 1 September 2009
- P.03 'A design for life.' *Inside Housing*, 11 September 2009
- P.04 Wainwright, O. 'Redbridge Welcome Centre by Peter Barber Architects.' *Building Design*, 24 Feb 2012

Spring Gardens



Fig.01 Spring Gardens: View from courtyard, photograph Morley Von Sternberg



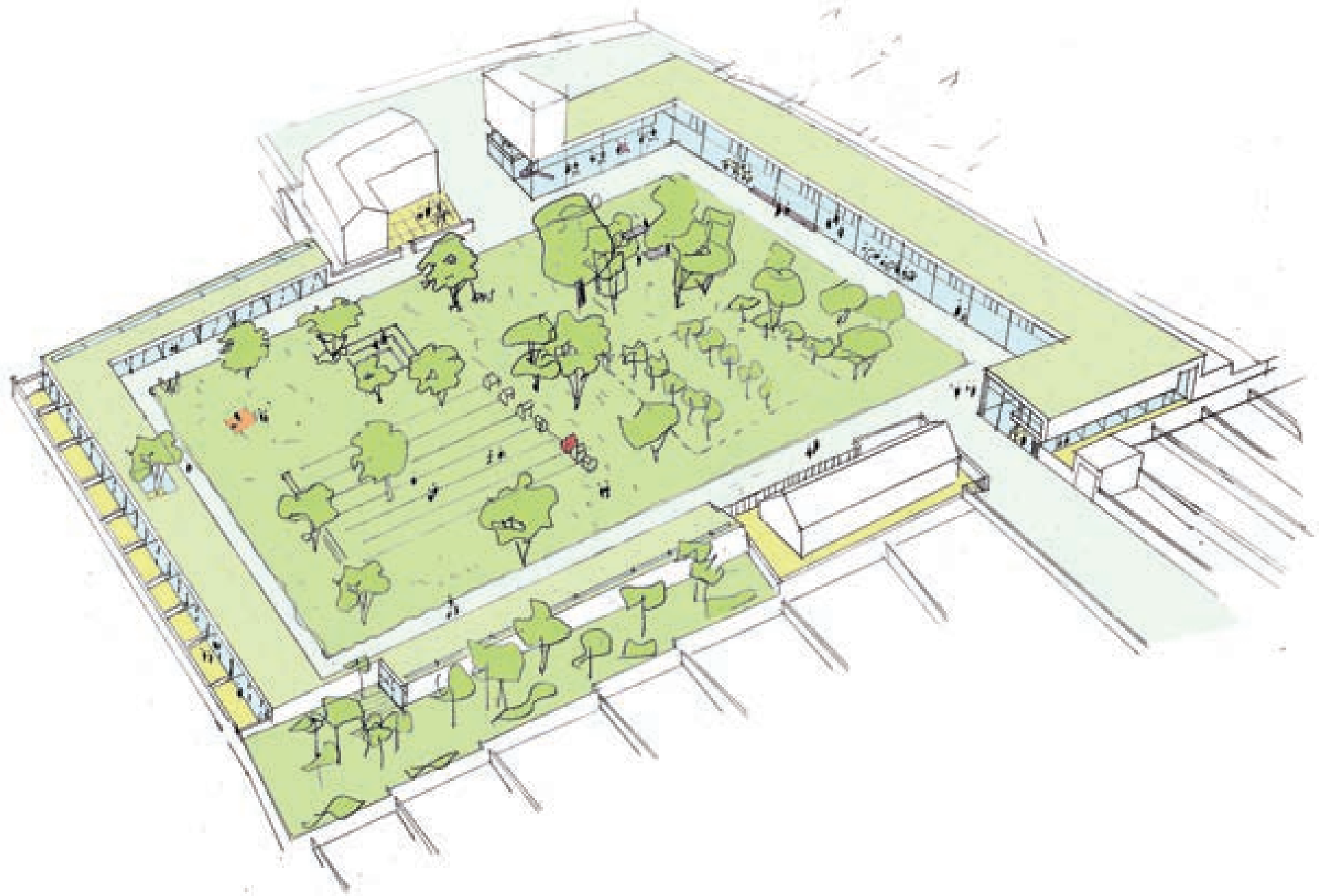


Fig.02 Spring Gardens: Early conceptual sketch of courtyard garden and perimeter block



Fig.03. Spring Gardens: Conceptual sketch of perimeter block and tower.



Fig.04 Spring Gardens: Conceptual sketch of perimeter block across courtyard

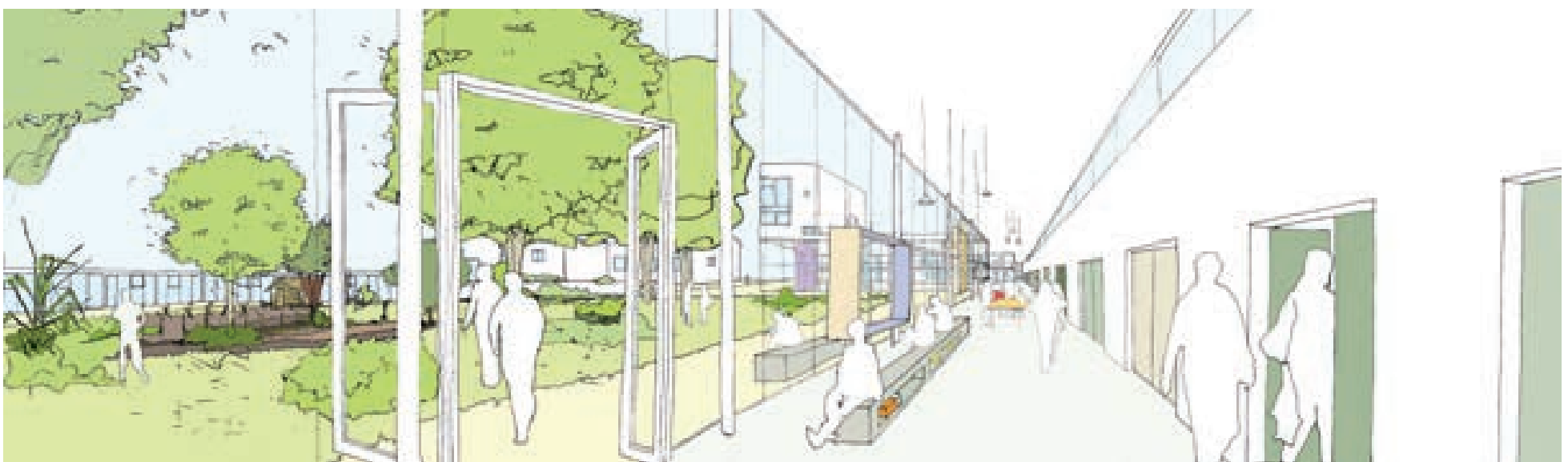


Fig.05 Spring Gardens: Conceptual sketch of courtyard from double volume glazed lobby

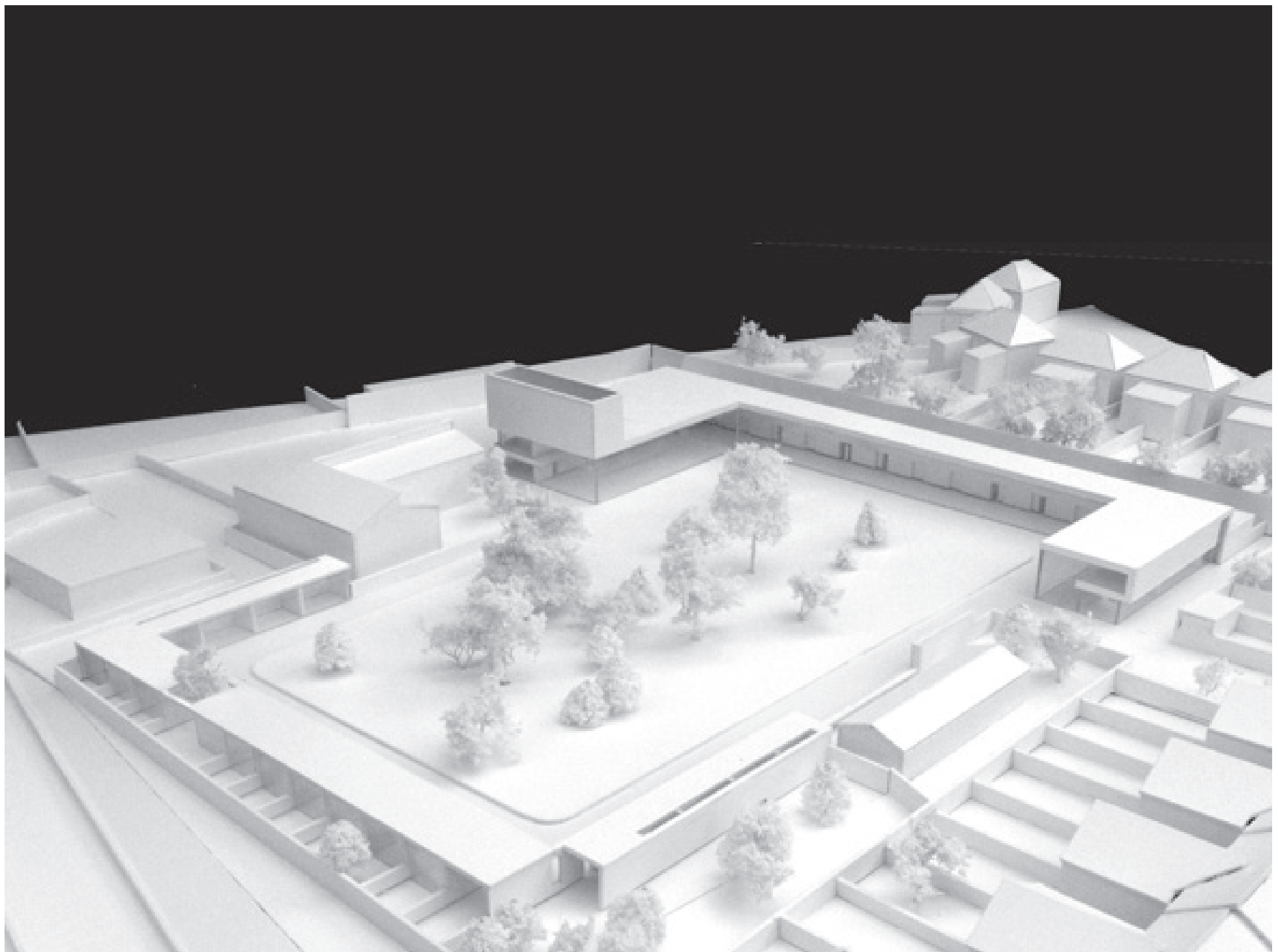


Fig.06. Spring Gardens: Conceptual model showing courtyard, perimeter block and relationship to surroundings

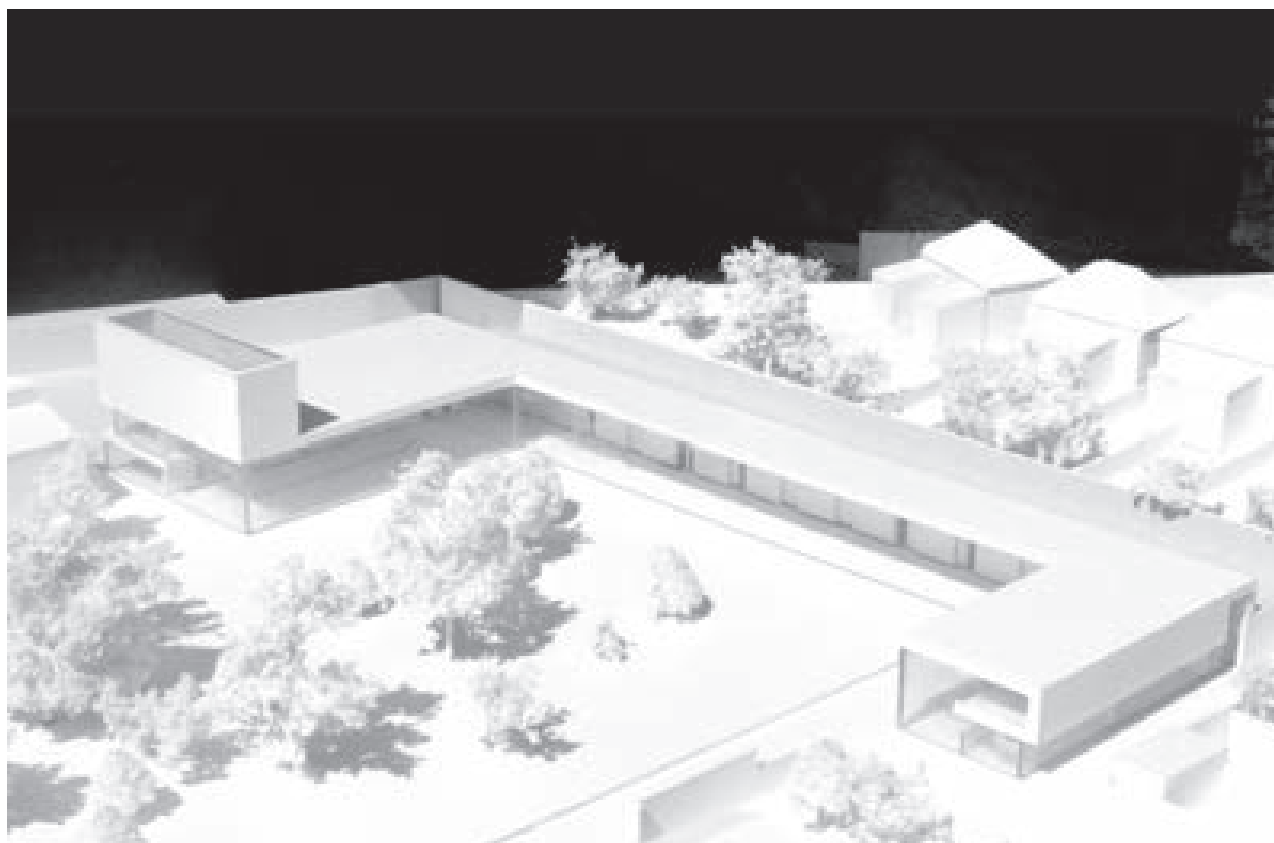


Fig.07 Spring Gardens: Detail of conceptual model

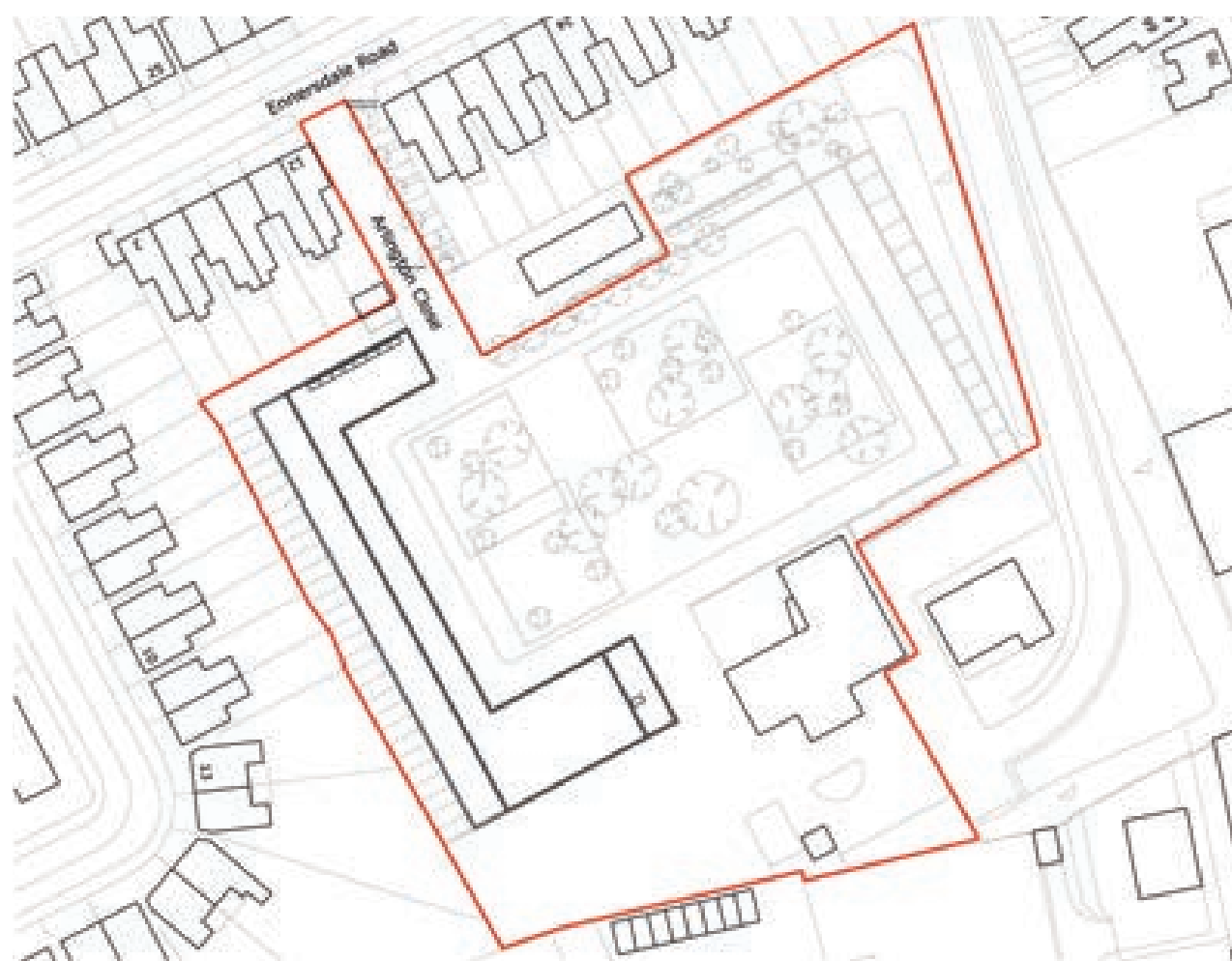


Fig.08. Spring Gardens: Location and Site Plan

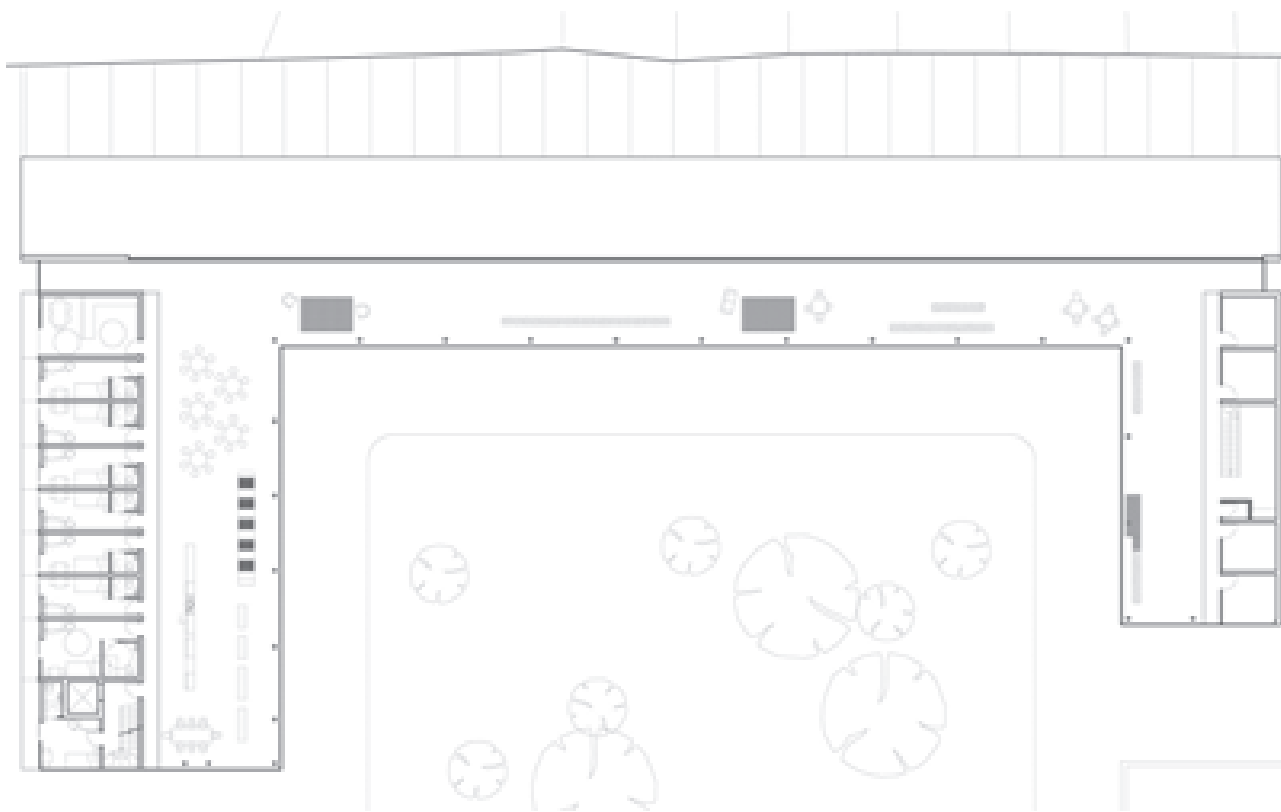


Fig.10. Spring Gardens: First Floor Plan

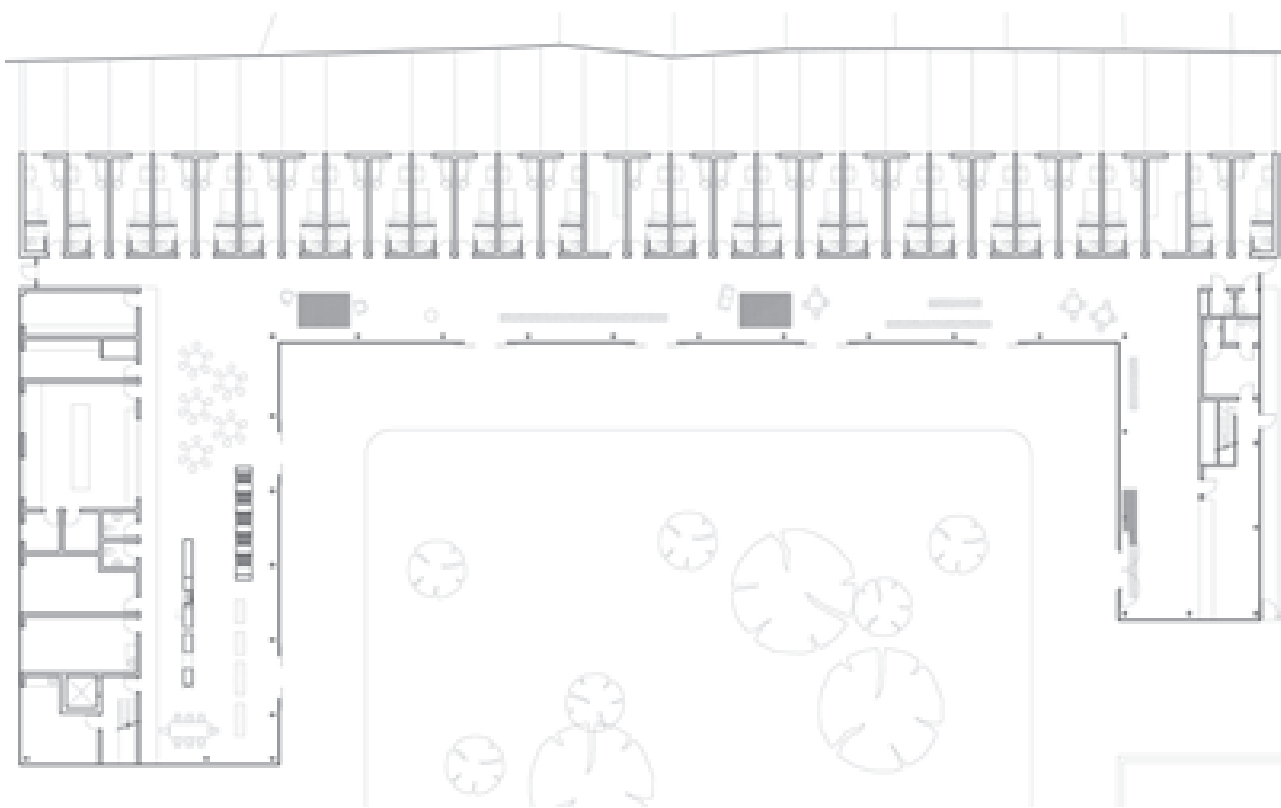


Fig.09.Spring Gardens: Ground Floor Plan

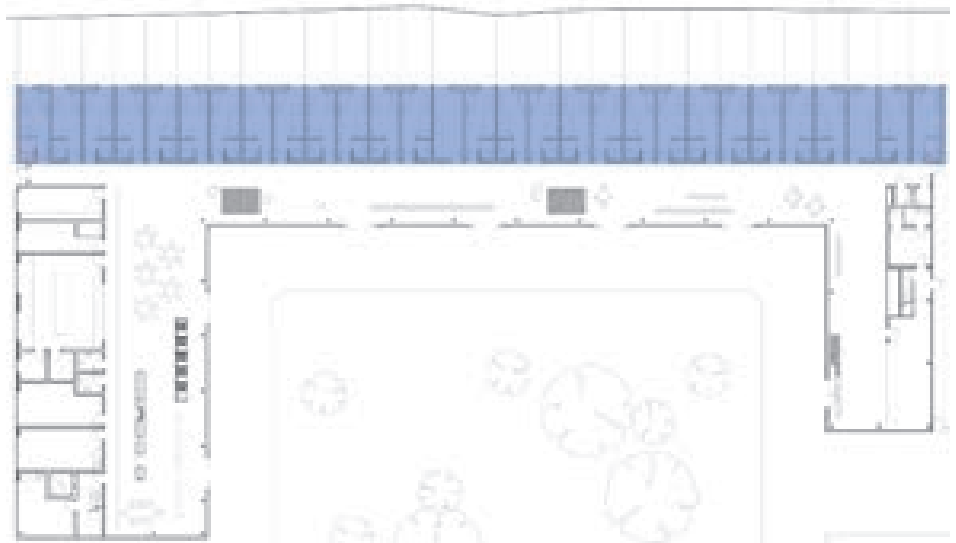


Fig.09a. Spring Gardens: Ground Floor Plan with courtyard suites highlighted



Fig.10a. Spring Gardens: First Floor Plan, with assessment rooms highlighted

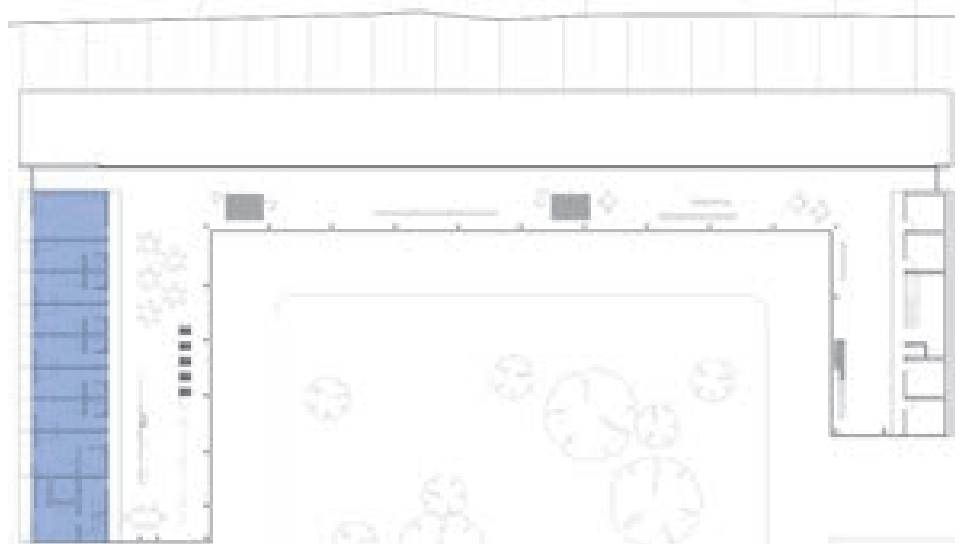


Fig.10b. Spring Gardens: First Floor Plan, with mezzanine suites highlighted

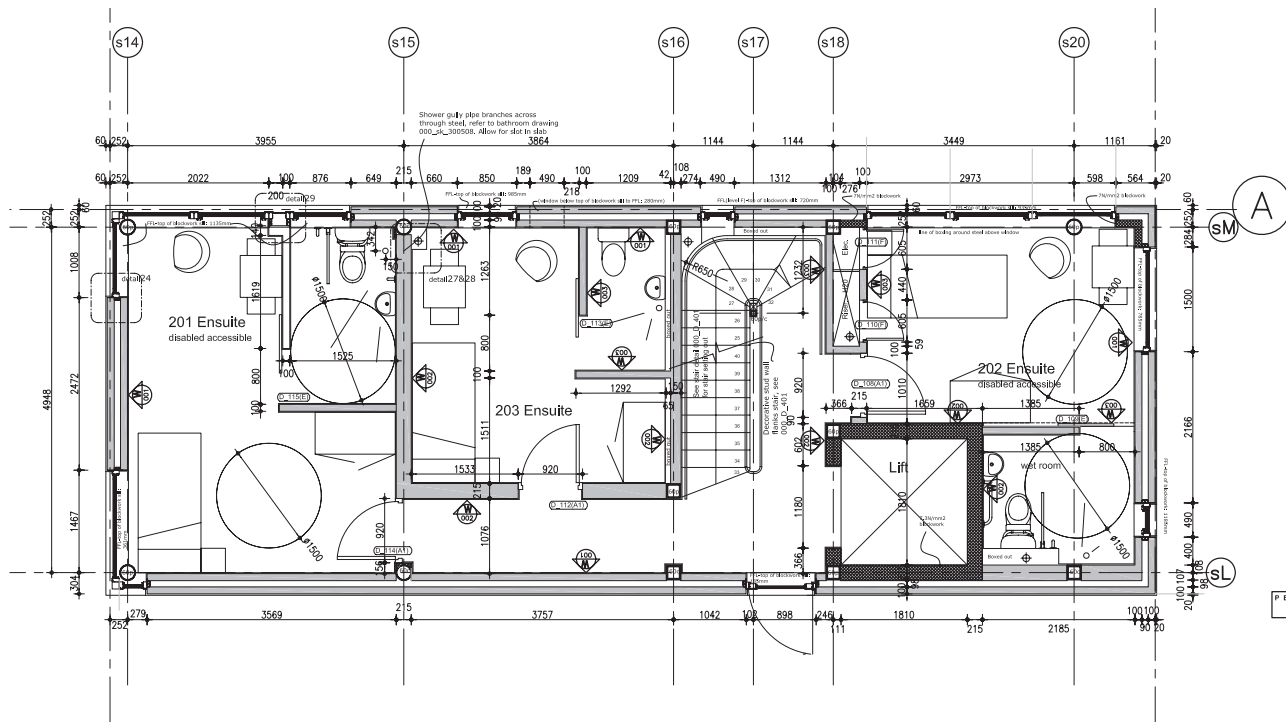


Fig. 11 a. Spring Gardens: Second Floor Plan (bedrooms, self contained accommodation)

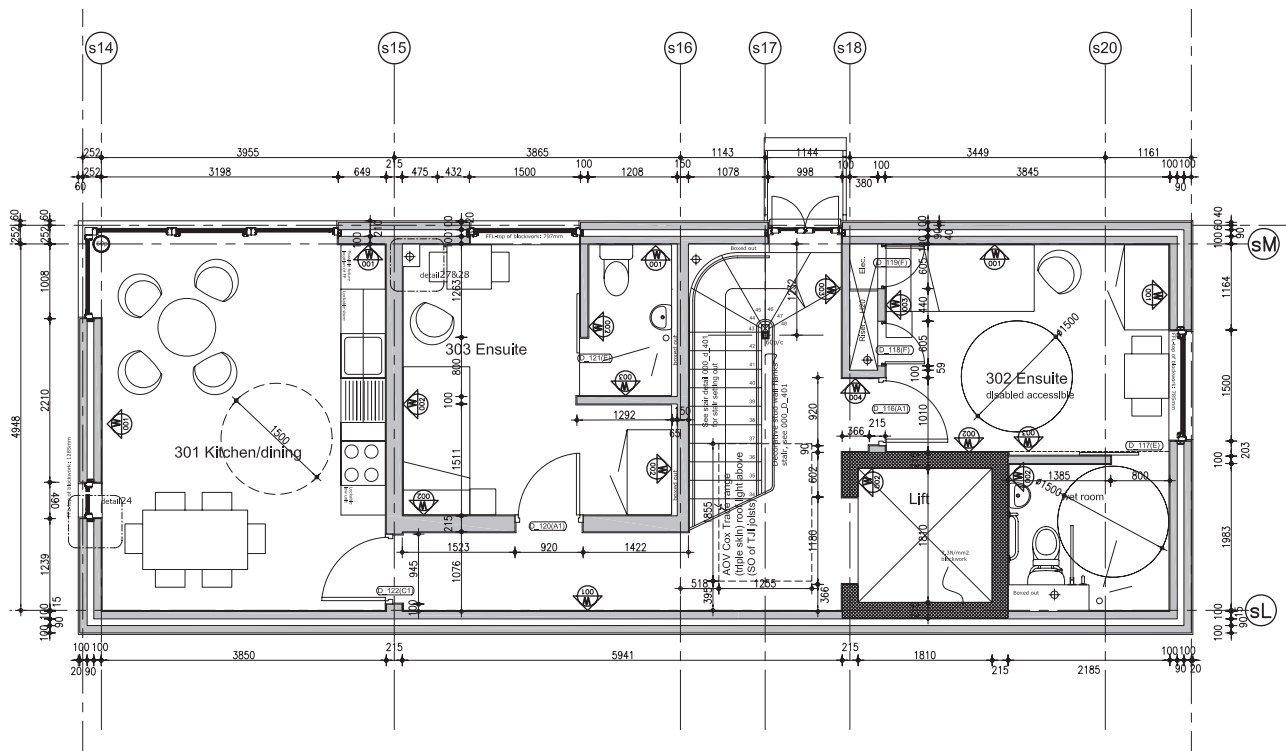
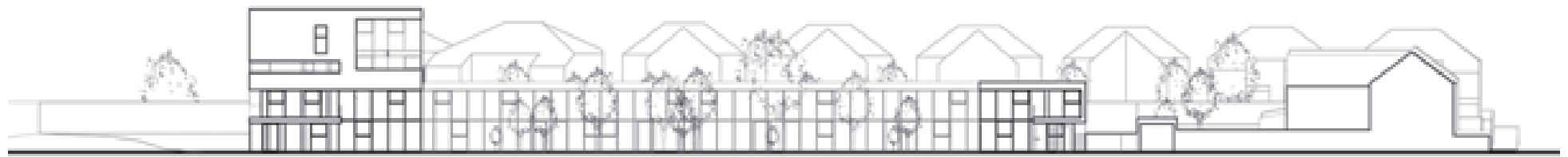
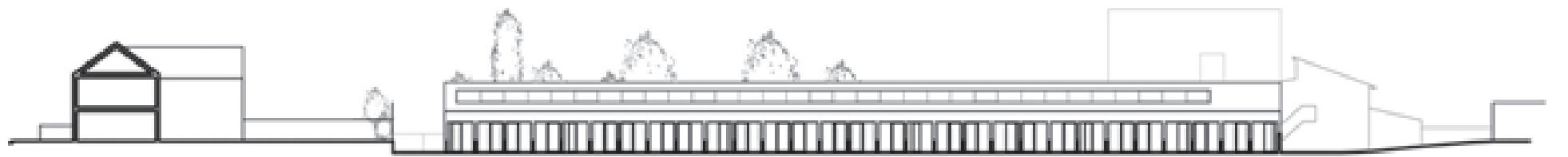


Fig. 11 b. Spring Gardens: Third Floor Plan (communal rooms, self contained accommodation)

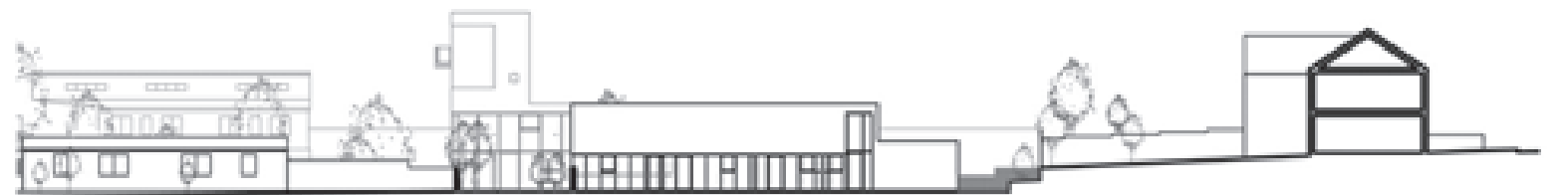




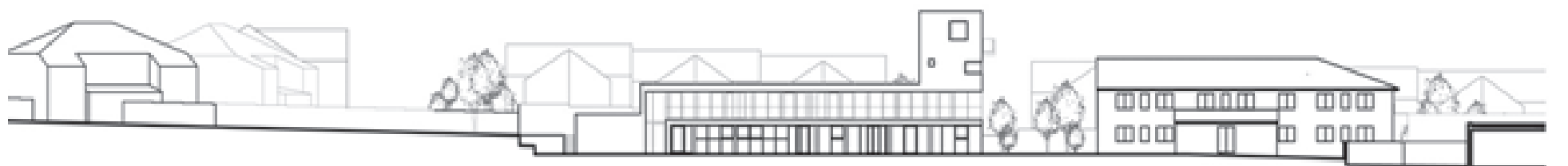
North East Elevation



South West Elevation

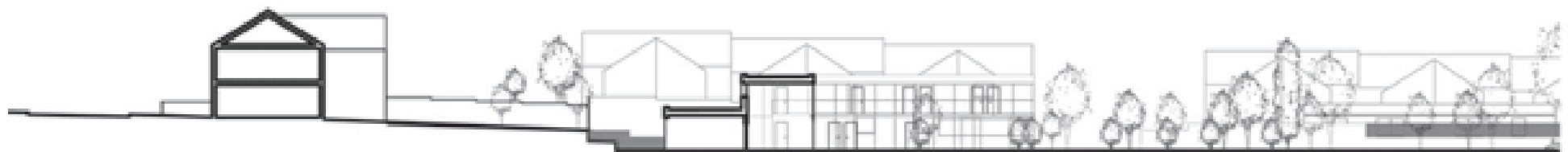


North West Elevation

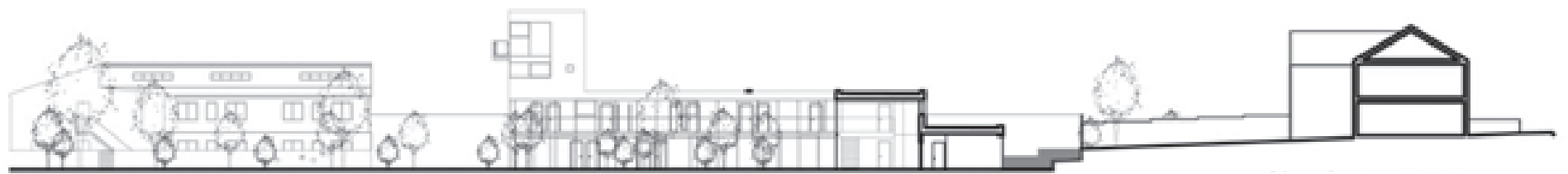


South East Elevation

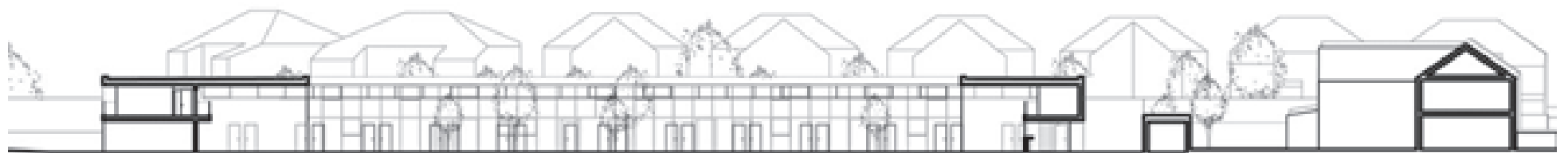
Fig.12. Spring Gardens: Elevations



South East Facing Section



North West Section



North East Section

Fig.13. Spring Gardens: Sections



Fig. 14. Spring Gardens: View from entrance, photograph Morley Von Sternberg



Fig.15. Spring Gardens: View towards entrance, photograph Morley Von Sternberg



Fig.16. Spring Gardens: View from glazed lobby looking out towards courtyard, photograph Morley Von Sternberg

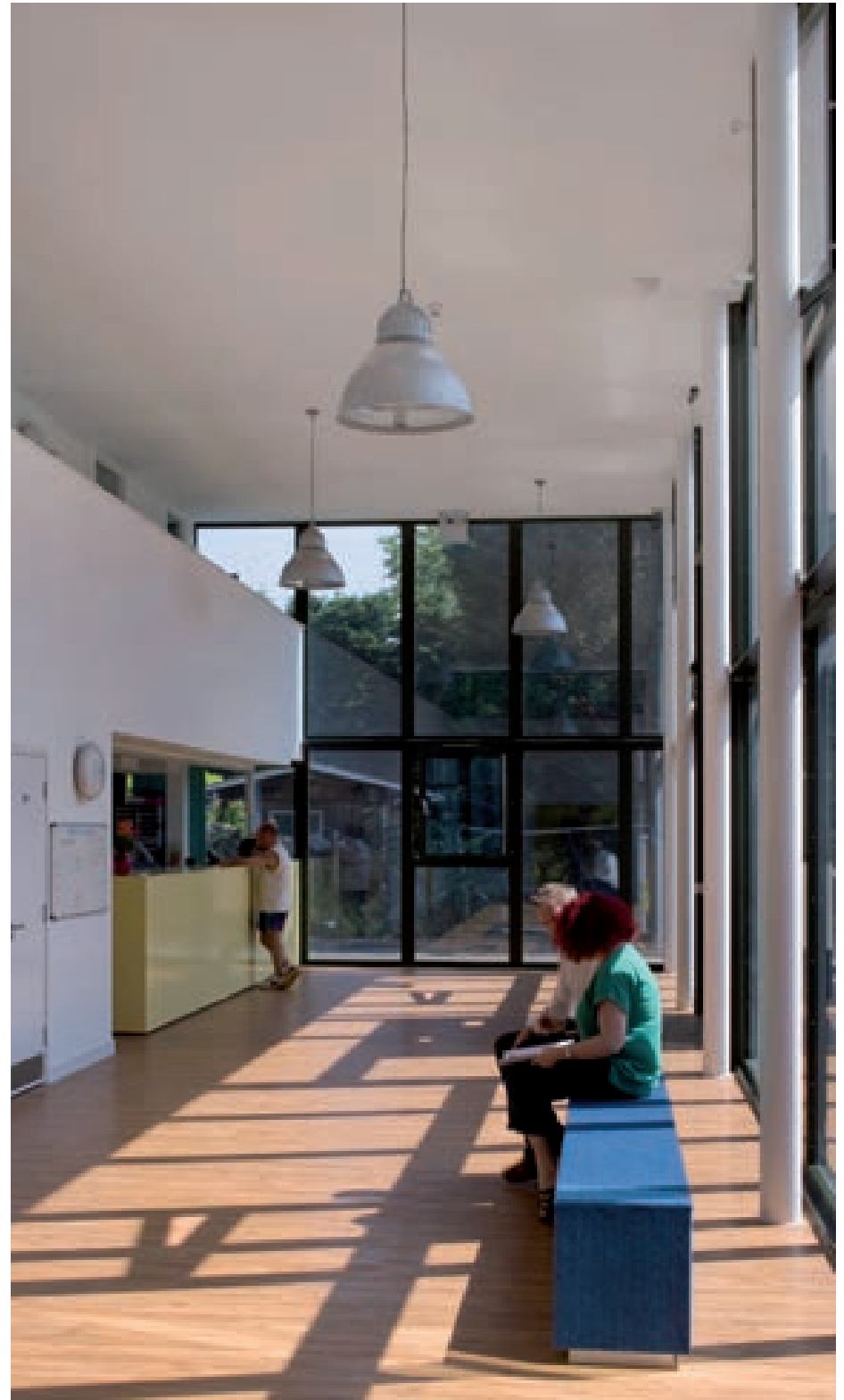


Fig. 16b, 16c. Spring Gardens: View from glazed lobby looking out towards courtyard, photograph Morley Von Sternberg

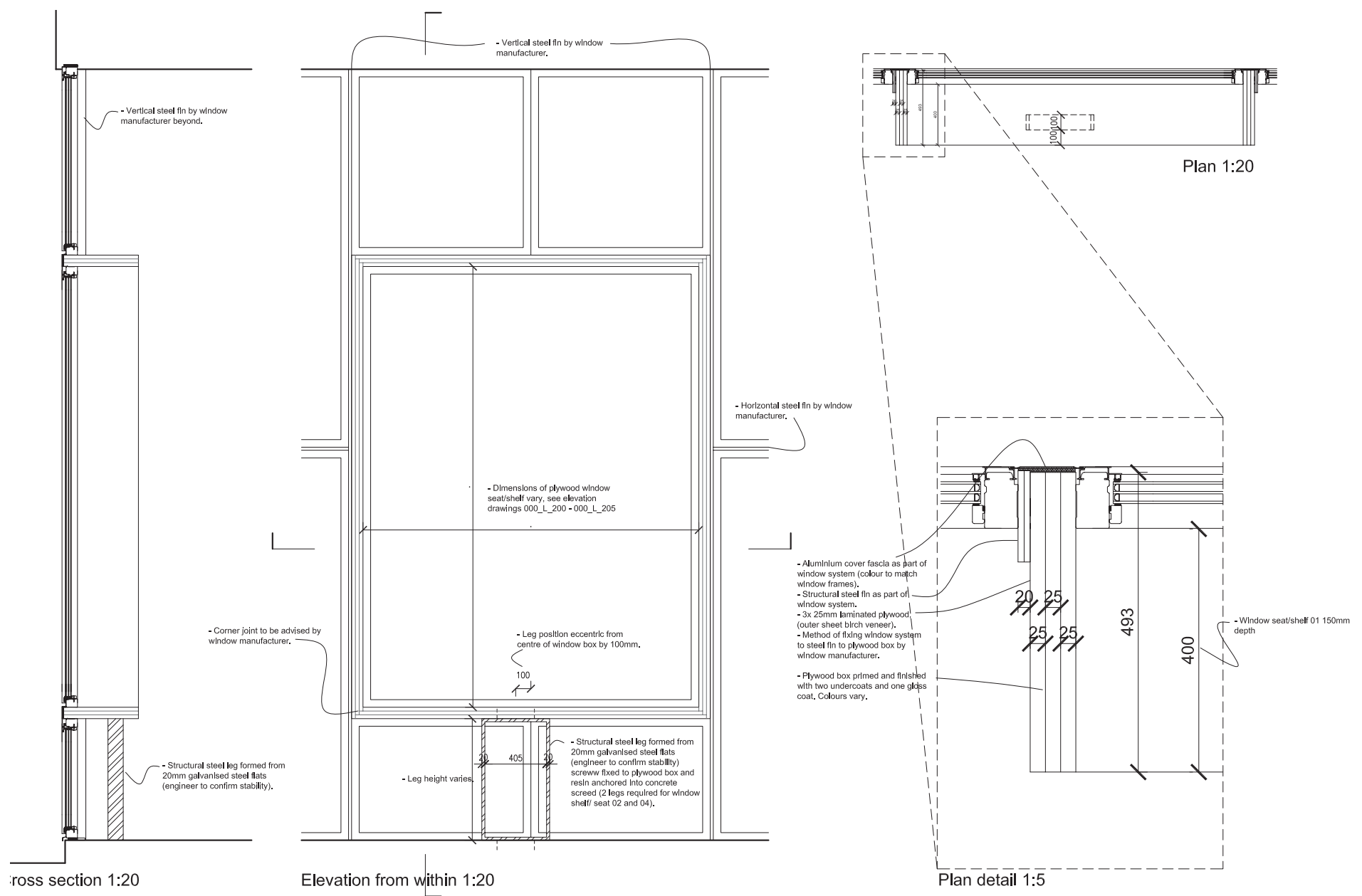


Fig. 18. Spring Gardens: Curtain wall detail



Fig. 17. Spring Gardens: Detail of glazed lobby corner, photograph Morley Von Sternberg



Redbridge Welcome Centre



Fig. 19. Welcome Centre: Street elevation, photograph Morley Von Sternberg.

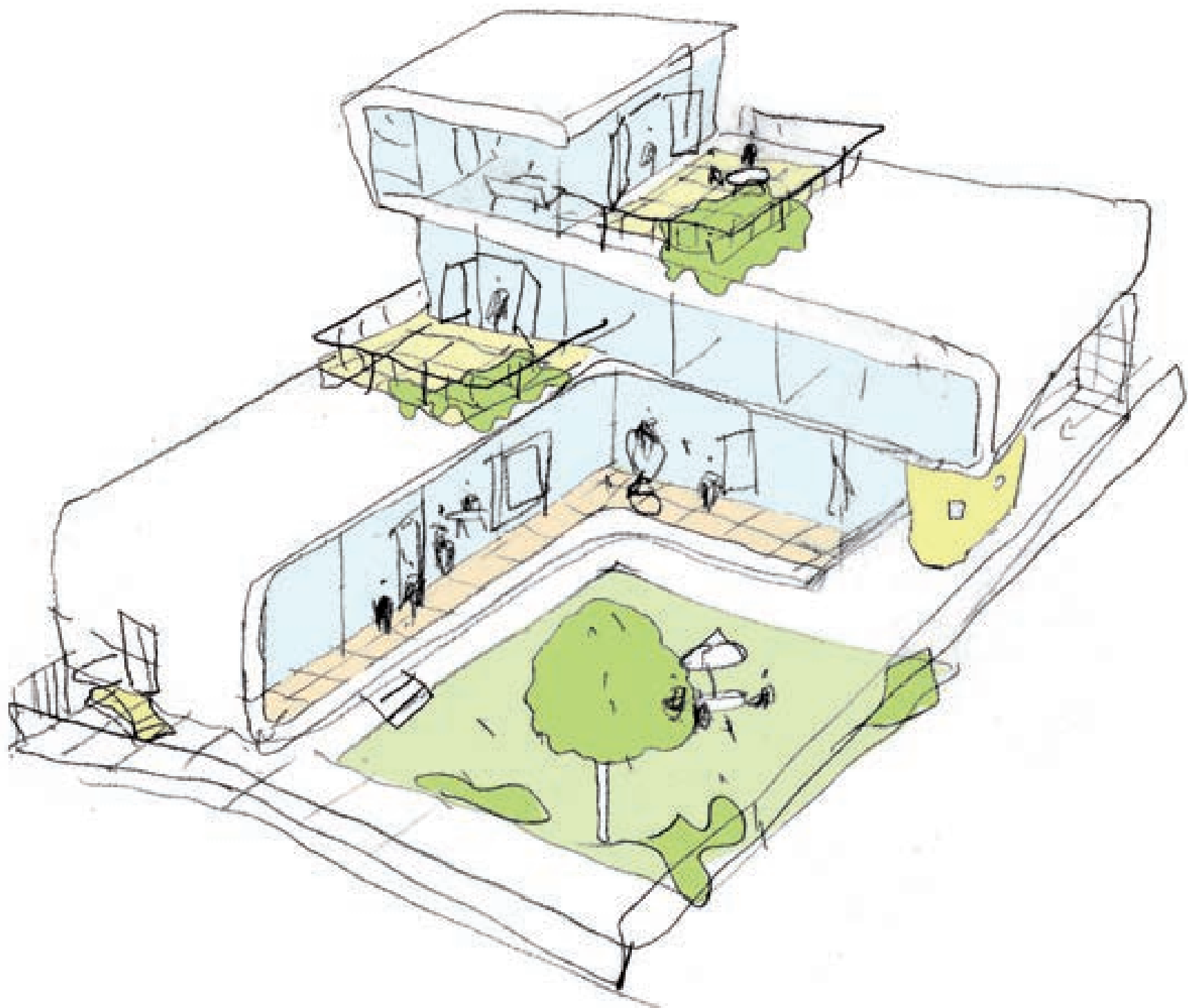


Fig.20. Welcome Centre: Early conceptual axonometric, courtyard view

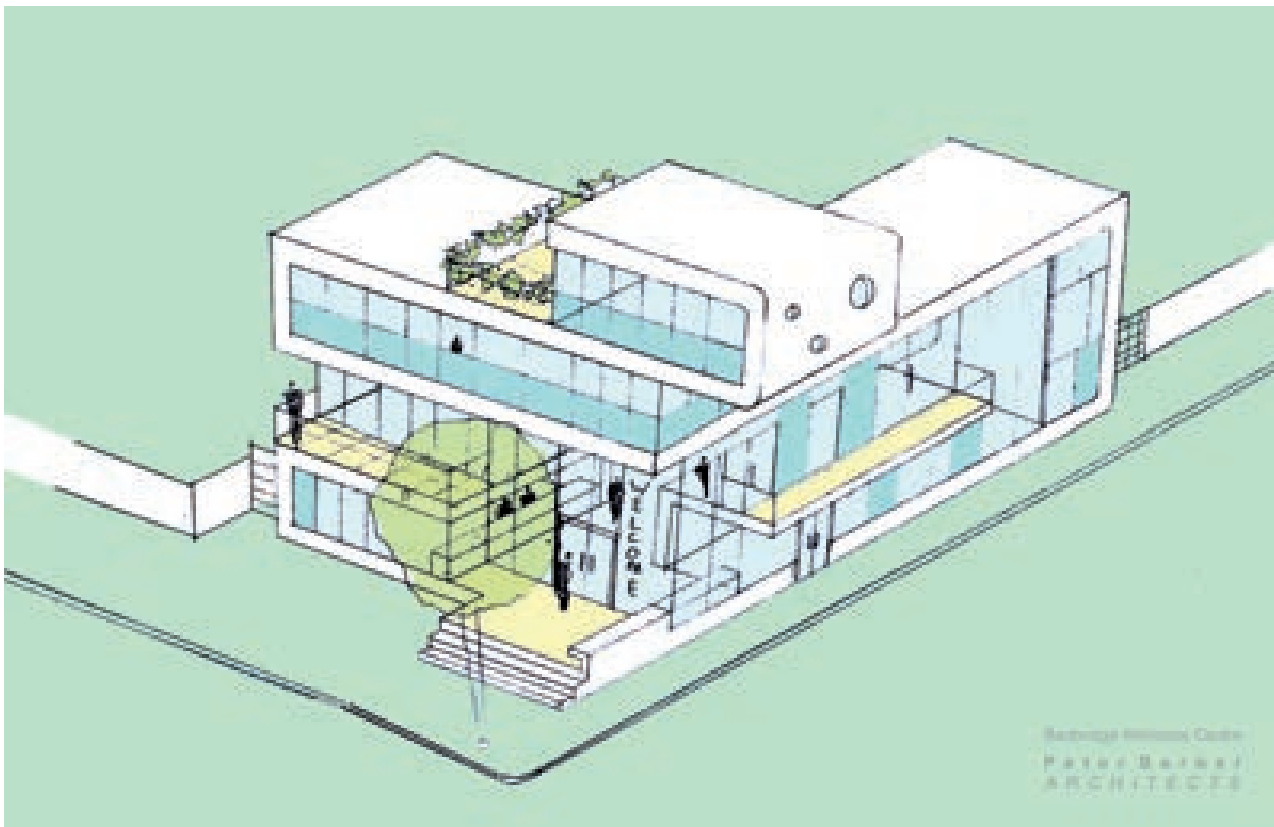


Fig.21. Welcome Centre: Later conceptual axonometric, street corner view 1

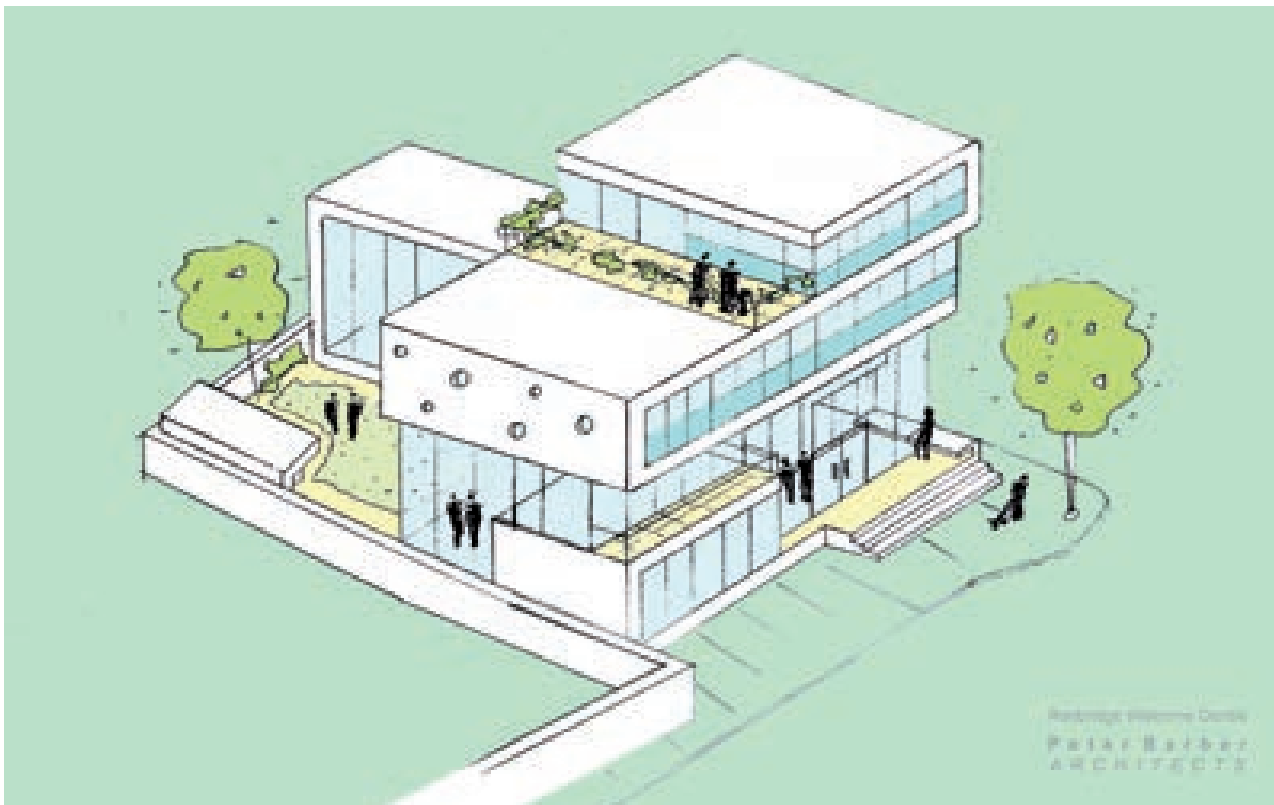


Fig.22. Welcome Centre: Later conceptual axonometric, street corner view 2

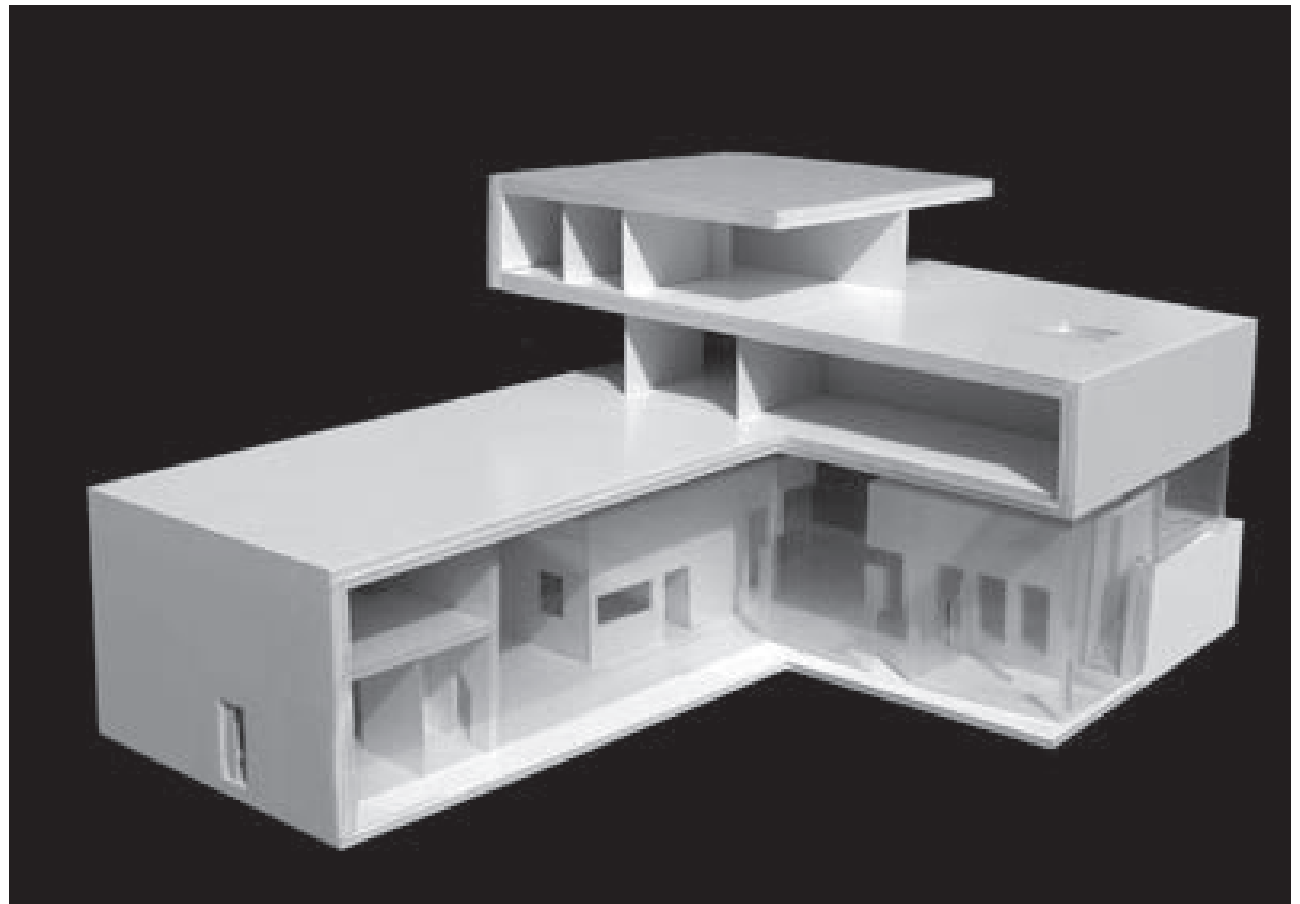


Fig. 23a. Welcome Centre: Early conceptual models, courtyard view

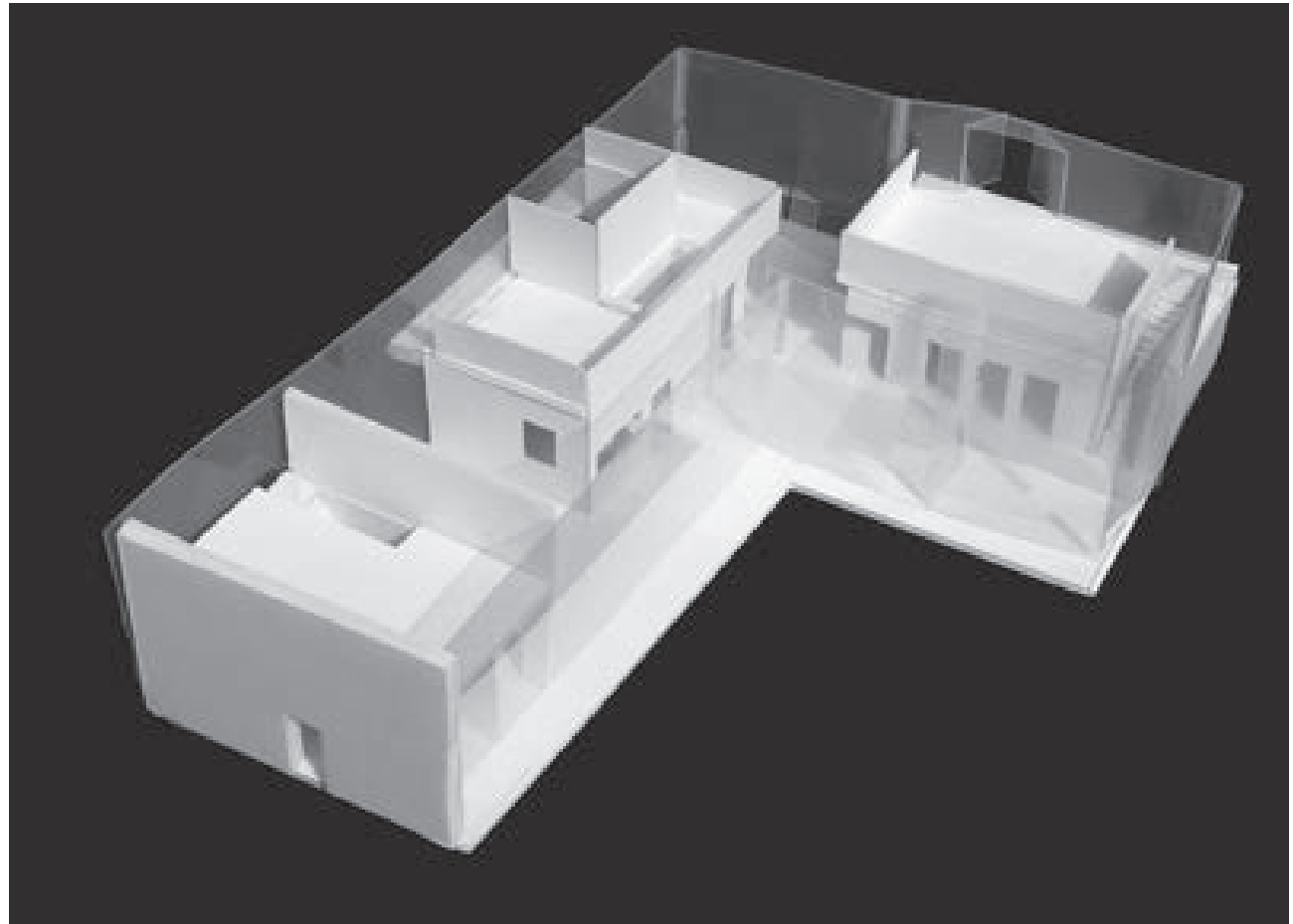


Fig. 23b. Welcome Centre: Early conceptual models, interior spatial organisation



Fig.24. Welcome Centre: Model, street corner view

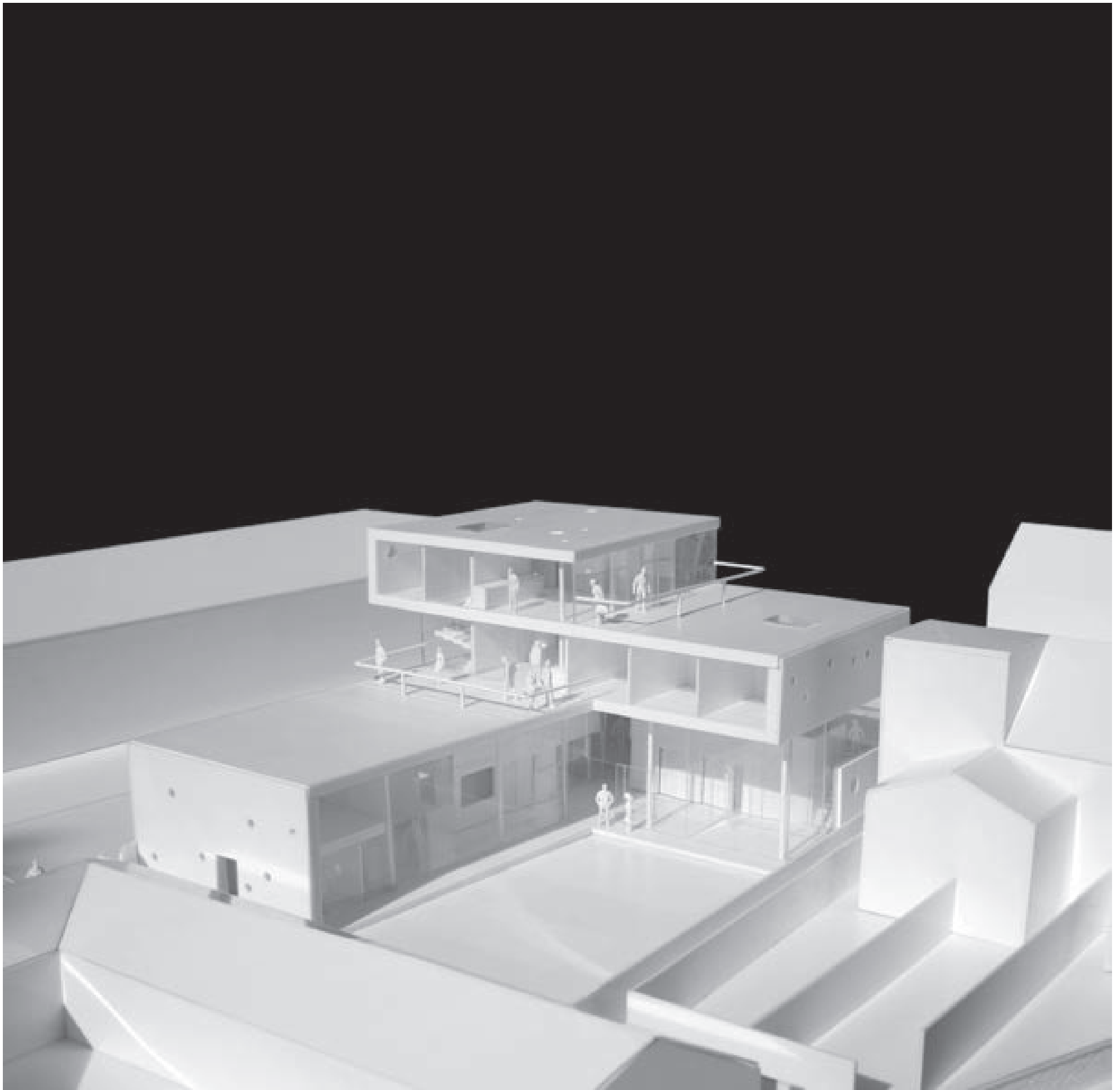


Fig.25. Welcome Centre: Model, courtyard view



Fig.26. Welcome Centre: Ground Floor Plan

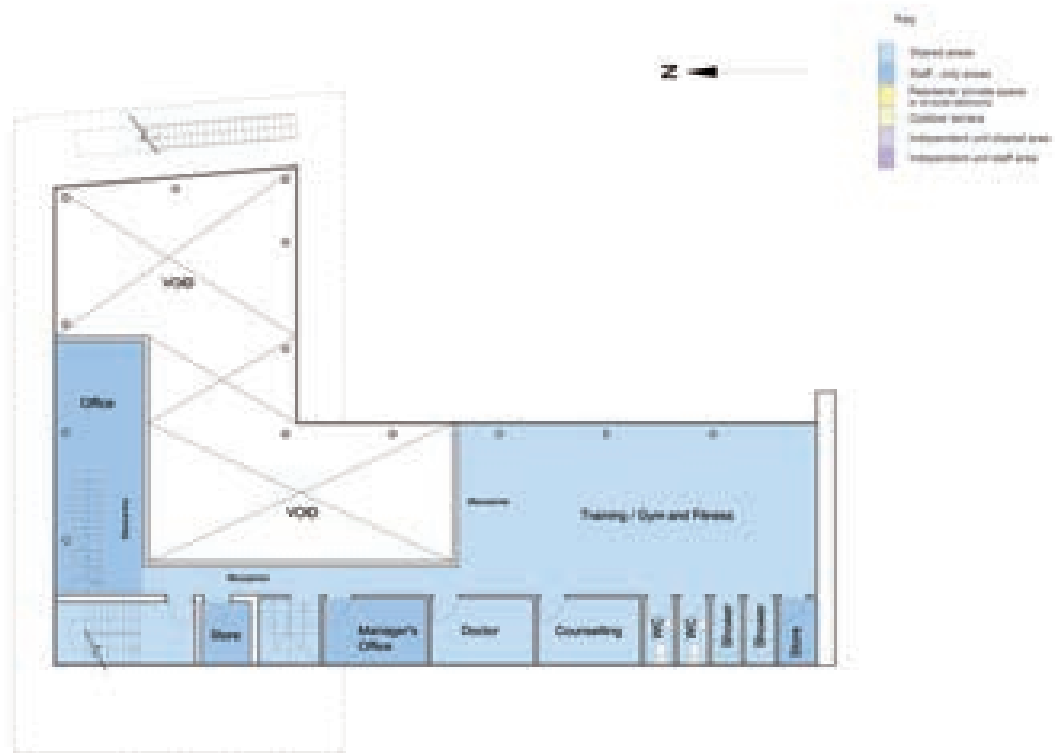


Fig.27. Welcome Centre: Mezzanine Floor Plan





Fig.28. Welcome Centre: First Floor Plan

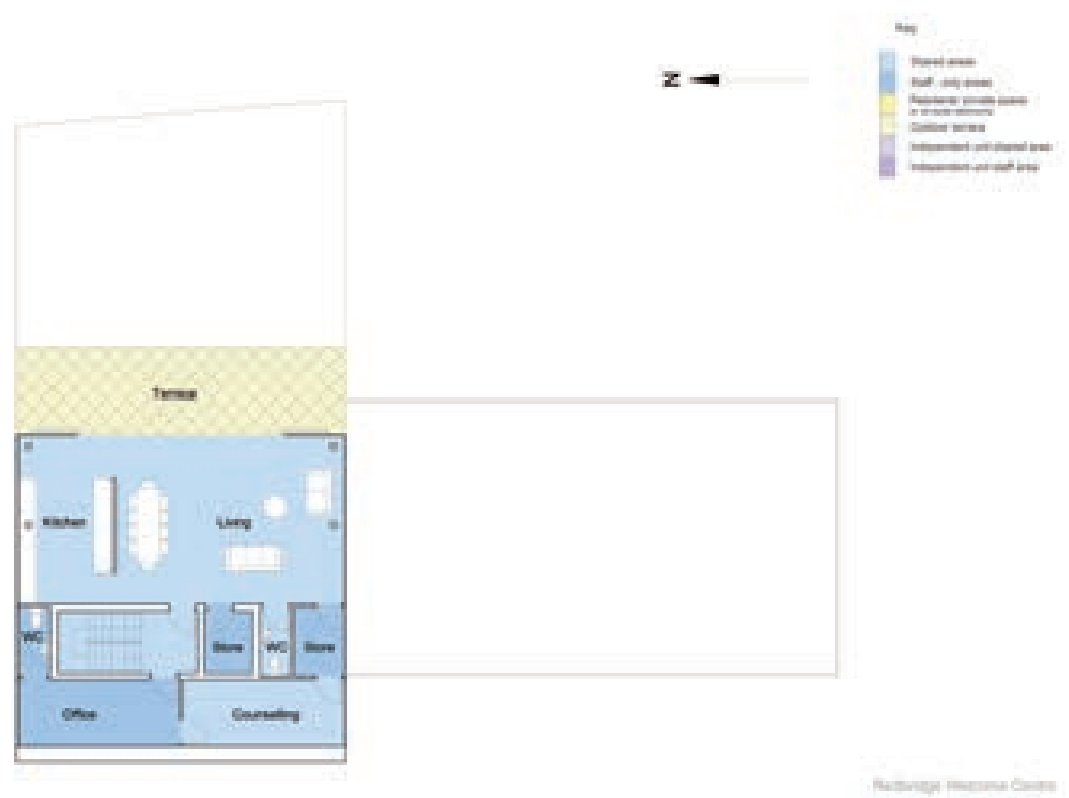


Fig.29. Welcome Centre: Second Floor Plan



Fig.30. Welcome Centre: St. Mary's Road Elevation

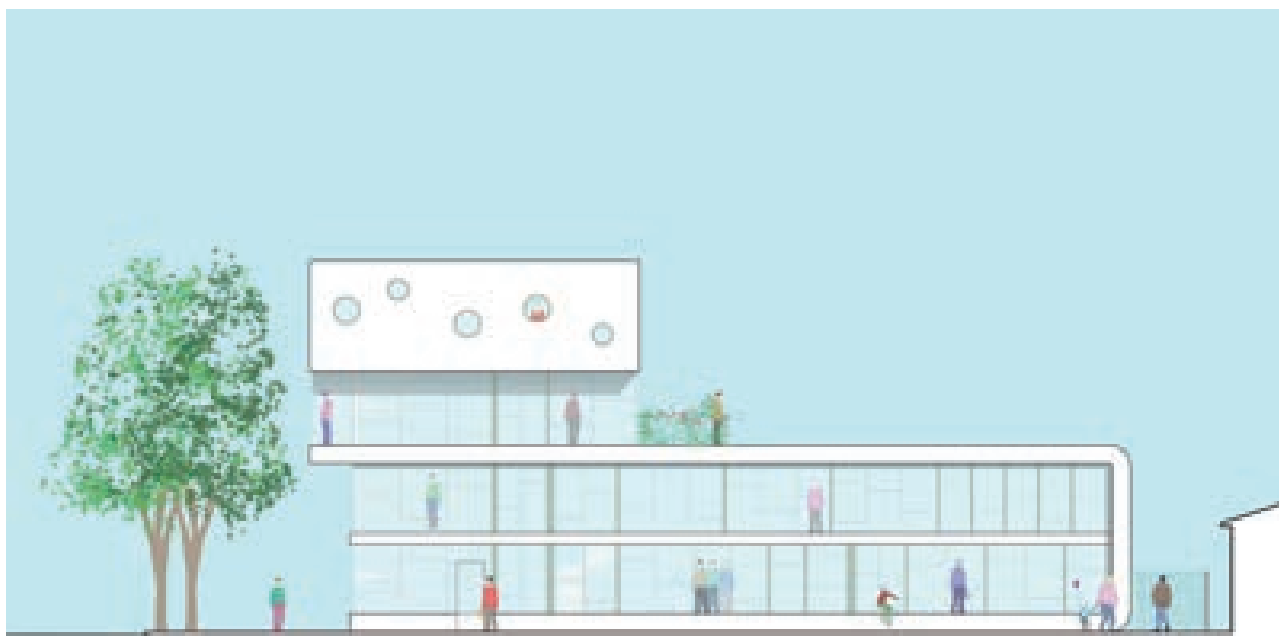


Fig.31. Welcome Centre: Green Lane Elevation

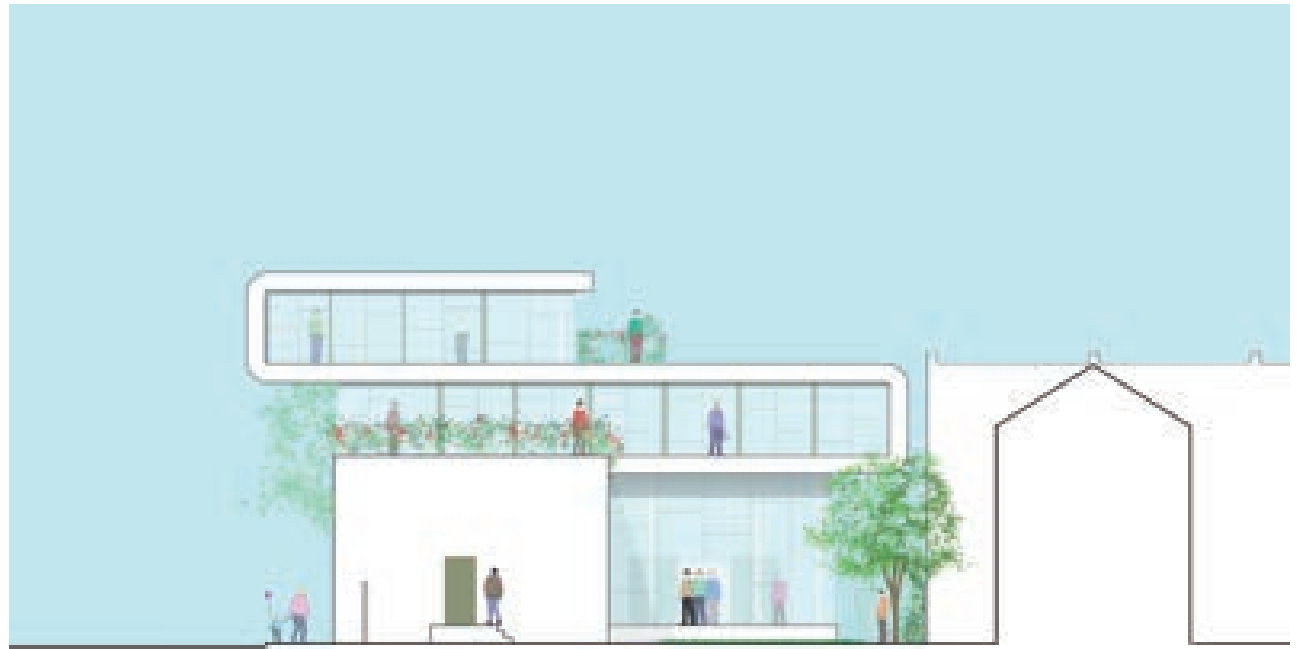


Fig.32. Welcome Centre: Garden Elevation looking north



Fig.33. Welcome Centre: Garden Elevation looking west

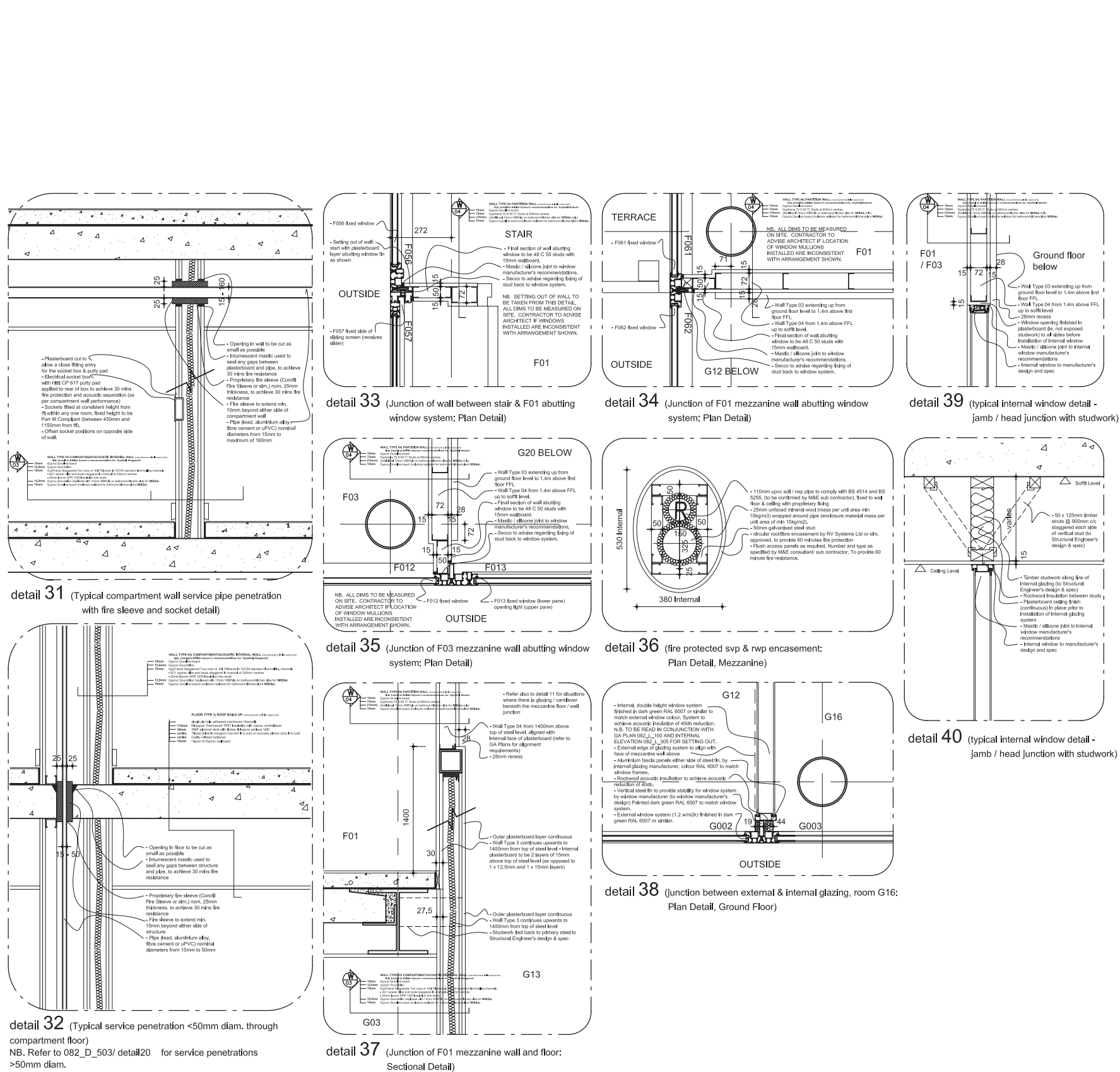
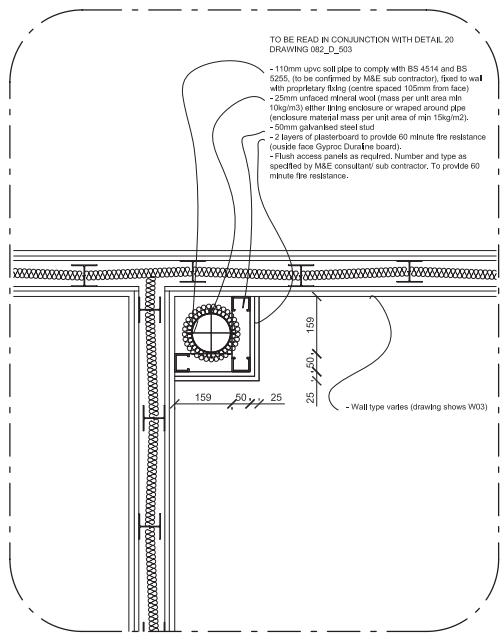
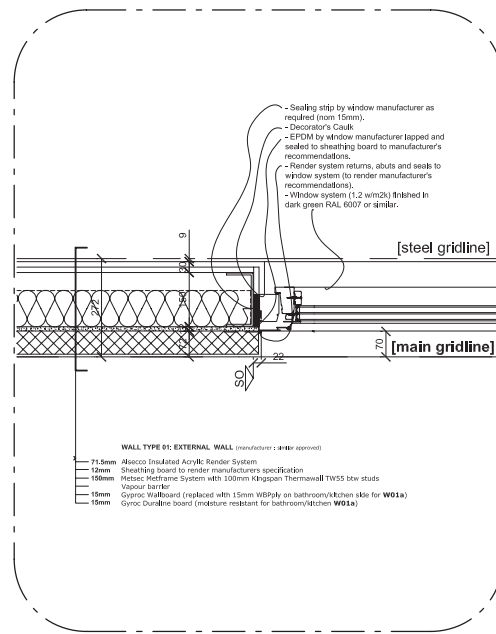


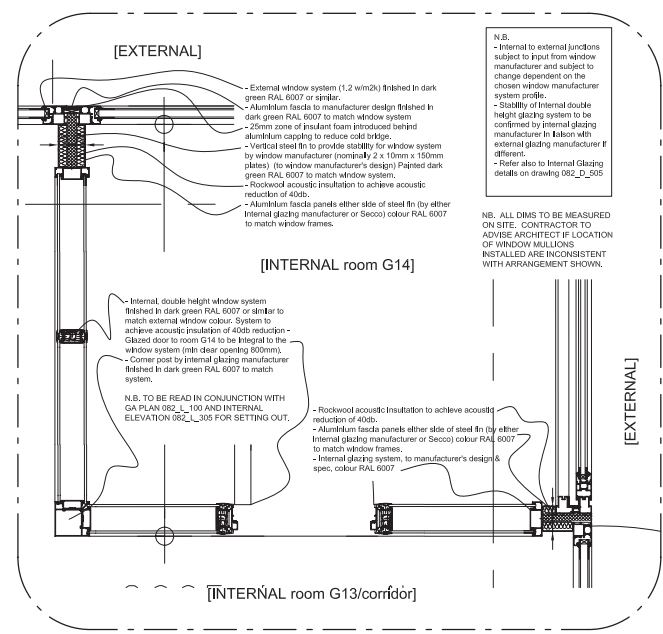
Fig.34a. Curtain Wall Detail: Sections



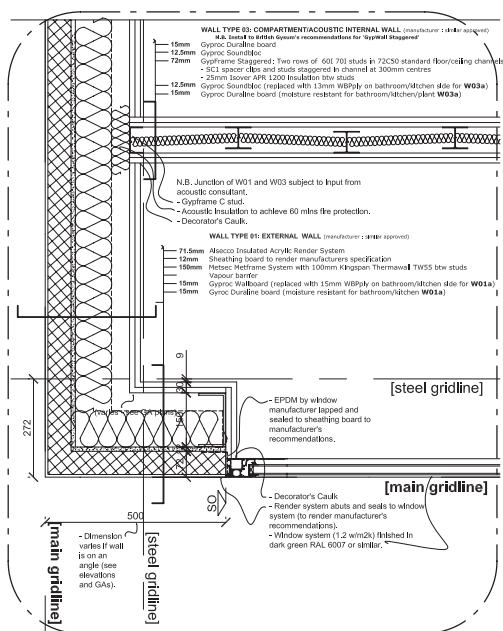
detail 25 (SVP/RWP boxing)



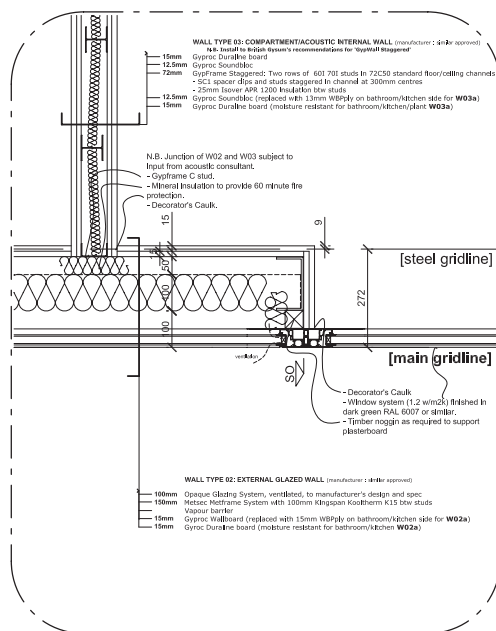
detail 26 (typical jamb detail for 'punched' windows - not glazed screen)



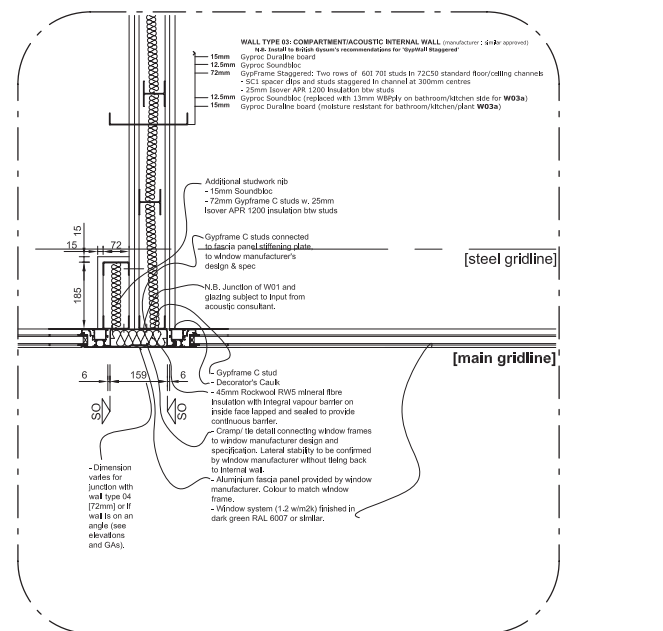
detail 27 (Internal/ external glazing junction)



detail 28 (glazed screen jamb detail - walltype 01)



detail 29 (opaque glazed screen [W02] junction with W03)



detail 30 (glazed screen junction with Wall type 03)

Fig.34b. Curtain Wall Detail: Plans



Fig.35. Welcome Centre: View from corner of St. Mary's Road and Green Lane, photograph Morley Von Sternberg



Fig.36. Welcome Centre: View from Green Lane, detail, photograph Morley Von Sternberg.



Fig.37. Welcome Centre: Glazed lobby, entrance lock, photograph Morley Von Sternberg





Fig.38. Welcome Centre: Glazed lobby around courtyard towards reception desk, photograph Morley Von Sternberg.



Fig.39. Welcome Centre: Glazed lobby towards courtyard, photograph Morley Von Sternberg



Fig.40. Welcome Centre: Building from courtyard, photograph Morley Von Sternberg



Fig.41a. Welcome Centre: Lobby occupied, photographs Morley von Sternberg

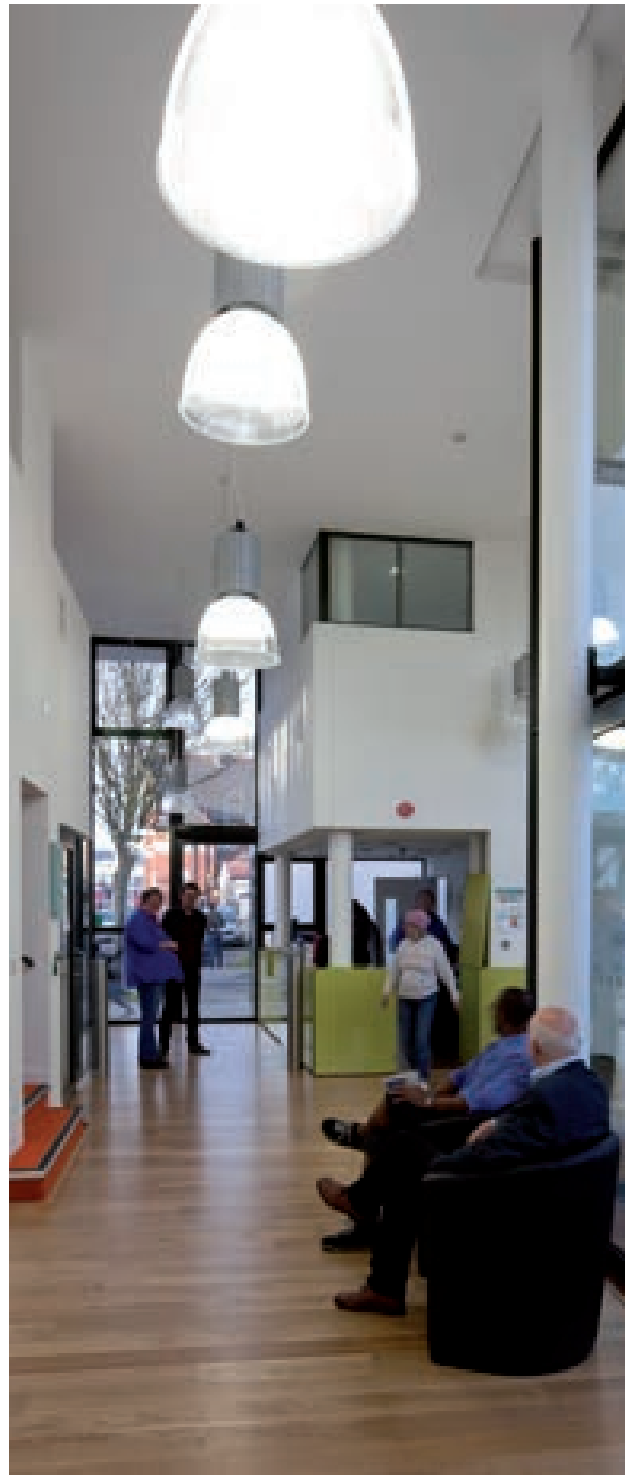


Fig.41b, 41c. Welcome Centre: Lobby occupied, photographs Morley von Sternberg



10 | FRIDAY, JULY 24, 2009 | WWW.COOL.ING.CO.UK | WWW.COOL.ING.CO.UK | FRIDAY, JULY 24, 2009 | 11

**WORKS: PETER BARBER ARCHITECTS**

PROJECT TEAM: Architect Peter Barber Architects, Client St Mungo's, Structural engineer Brand Leonard Consulting Engineers, MBE (pre contract) Promote, Contractor New Partnership Homes, Employer's agent/project manager Philip Park Partnership

The residents closest to enjoying their independence are housed in the tower.

# Gimme shelter

A hostel for the homeless creates an environment that enables residents to regain their independence, writes **Ellis Woodman**

*Pictures by Morley von Sternberg*

**J**ust as Peter Barber and I am preparing to leave Spring Gardens, the homeless person's hotel that Barber's practice has built in south-east London, all hell breaks loose. The conversation that two residents are conducting a few yards away suddenly heats up alarmingly, a stream of Special Brew is sent arcing through the air and fists are clearly set to follow. Barber and I both slunk by a good six inches

but the member of staff who has been guiding us around strolls over, cool as you like, and speedily restores peace.

I am shocked, embarrassed and yet soon realise it is a valuable scene to have witnessed. The problems faced by the 40 residents that Spring Gardens can accommodate are by no means limited to the lack of a home. Drug and alcohol addiction, mental health issues and time spent in prison have shaped the lives of many of them.

While the combustible nature of that mix makes violent encounters all but unavoidable, the frequency of such incidents can be limited. Maintaining appropriate staffing levels may be the most important consideration in this respect, but as Barber's admirable building makes clear, architecture also has a significant role to play.

Spring Gardens' plot has a long history as a site of short-term accommodation for those in need. It is concealed behind streets of

Edwardian terraced housing and was originally occupied by a hotel for (imagine) Irish workers. In the early 1970s that building was replaced by a custom designed homeless shelter – a low-lying structure, comprising a series of dormitories configured around internal courtyards. From a management perspective its dispersal, corridor-laden plan proved far from ideal, requiring the introduction of air-lock style doors as a means of maintaining

security. It also lent the building a decidedly introverted character – a particularly curious decision given the large garden that lay to the immediate east.

The possibility of redeveloping the site was presented by a recently established Department of Communities & Local Government initiative called Places of Change. This scheme's key ambition is to shift the culture of homeless care away from one of maintenance to one of recovery, by providing facilities that will enable residents to re-establish independent lives. Barber and his client, St Mungo's Community Housing Association, previously used capital funding from the programme to undertake the remodeling of the Tackell Street hostel in central London (H&P May 23, 2008). However, as a new structure on a relatively unencumbered site, Spring Gardens represents their first real

opportunity to explore how the Places of Change agenda might give rise to a bespoke building type, suitable for widespread application.

The fundamental difference between the new structure and the old is the configuration in plan. Rather than the sprawling mat that occupied the site previously, the new building is a linear intrusion that holds fast to the edge of the site. What has been built is one of recovery, by providing facilities that will enable residents to carry around the perimeter, enclosing an expansive garden populated by allotments, a

balconium court and seating. It is a persuasive model, but the site conditions have not always allowed it to be applied with the clarity one might wish for. Two existing buildings will interrupt Barber's perimeter development: a grim but recently built residential block that lies on the south edge of the site and a derelict scout hut, that stands to the north. This latter structure – which St Mungo's unfortunately does not own – proves particularly disruptive. The site is reached by way of a gap in a row of terraced houses, at the end of which we proceed through a security gate before passing between the new building and the scout hut. It is a serviceable arrangement, but the topography of the courtyard and form is such that the building provides its own means of securing the site. Were it not for the scout hut precluding the creation of such a feature, ▶

P.01 Woodman, E. 'Gimme shelter.' Building Design, 24 July 2009.



## WORKS: PETER BARBER ARCHITECTS



one would therefore expect to find some form of gatehouse. This conundrum may be irresolvable, but Barber has at least found a means of giving the entrance sequence some degree of articulation. His building comprises a central wing that extends along the entire western edge of the site and two side wings that project forward from it at either end. The southern one actually jukes out a little further than its opposite number and at its end point, suddenly doubles in height. The northern four-storey tower lies square on the main approach axis, providing a termination to the view.

The danger of introducing such an emphatic feature is that it could be taken for the entrance, whereas the front door is actually tucked away, halfway down the length of the north wing. There was a moment in the course of the project when it looked like the approach road would need to be extended through the middle of the site in order to provide access for a fire engine – an outcome that would certainly have generated confusion. Thankfully, Barber was able to maintain his preferred arrangement, in which the road tracks around the inside face of the building, thus maintaining the garden as a unified space and delivering us to the front door in a light manner.

While the building's section varies, the 5m high circulation space that provides access to all rooms – but these in the tower – remains a constant. This space addresses the garden through a wall of full-height glazing – a green-glass curtain, but also one that allows staff to monitor the building's communal area effectively. Even at its narrowest, this territory is as wide as it is tall and so can happily serve as both a circulation area and as the site of exercise groups, film presentations, quiz nights and life-training classes. The relevance of the cross-section is offset by a synoptical arrangement of pendant lights and multi-coloured benches, while the glazing also incorporates a series

of variably sized windows, the colourful, internally-projecting reveals of which can be put to use as shelves or seats. At present the main internally-occupied area is the south wing, where the space widens to fit, allowing the introduction of a dining area, IT facilities and a small library. One hopes that before long, rug and soft furnishings might also be admitted, not least because they would serve to mitigate the rather live acoustic.

Spring Gardens' residents are all at different stages on the journey towards independence and the building's linear nature helps communicate the progress that each has made. Two-thirds of the rooms are ranged down the long central wing. While diminutive, each is equipped with its own fridge and bathroom and gives onto a pocket

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work. He employs the material both as a field within which openings are distributed in busy, picturesque arrangements and as a framing device that delineates large expanses of floor to ceiling glazing. The dynamism of the composition is extremely engaging and the graphic quality of the all-white surfaces undoubtedly contributes to that effect.

As a means of detailing the scheme in a manner that can survive the potentially rough translation of a design-and-build contract, the strategy also holds obvious appeal. And yet, can this really be the catch-all solution that Barber's oeuvre suggests he takes it to be? In his practice's housing projects, the spatial configuration and its material realisation ultimately feel more fundamentally related. There, the white surfaces draw light into what are frequently intimately scaled spaces and while the uniform treatment gives the houses' fronts and backs a surprising opaqueness, one senses an intention behind that choice; namely, a desire to present the street as an extension of the domestic realm. By contrast, the front and rear elevations of Spring Gardens are presented as dramatically opposing conditions. Barber handles the switch with considerable formal aplomb but it is curious that he seems not to view it as a subject worthy of tectonic articulation.

It is perhaps simply the case that for this architect, the brilliant white surface appeals much in the way that it did to the early modernists: as an emblem of a better world. Given the loss of innocence that we have experienced over the past century, one might think this a difficult correlation to sustain. And yet in the context of the truly life-changing work that is undertaken at Spring Gardens, one can almost believe it. The very purpose of the facility is to allow its residents to imagine a better world than the one that they have escaped. The unadorned optimism of Barber's building will surely prove a valuable ally in that mission.

### Can white render really be the catch-all solution that Barber's oeuvre suggests he takes it to be?

handkerchief gables at the back. Residents that I spoke to could not believe their luck. Newcomers are housed closest to the main entrance, where they undergo a six-to-eight-week assessment before moving down the line. If they make sufficient progress, they graduate to the more generously sized rooms in the tower. These share their own kitchen and dining room and are conceived as an environment in which residents can rehearse their return to domesticity. Barber's proposed second phase includes more accommodation of this kind: 20 self-contained 'tenured' 'cottages', which combine an almshouse-like effect.

In applying white painted render to every one of the scheme's external walls, Barber gives the building an articulation that is much of a piece with his earlier



Above: The tower (to the left) lies on the main approach axis.  
Left: The 5m-high communal area extends around the courtyard.  
Right: IT facilities are provided in the communal area.



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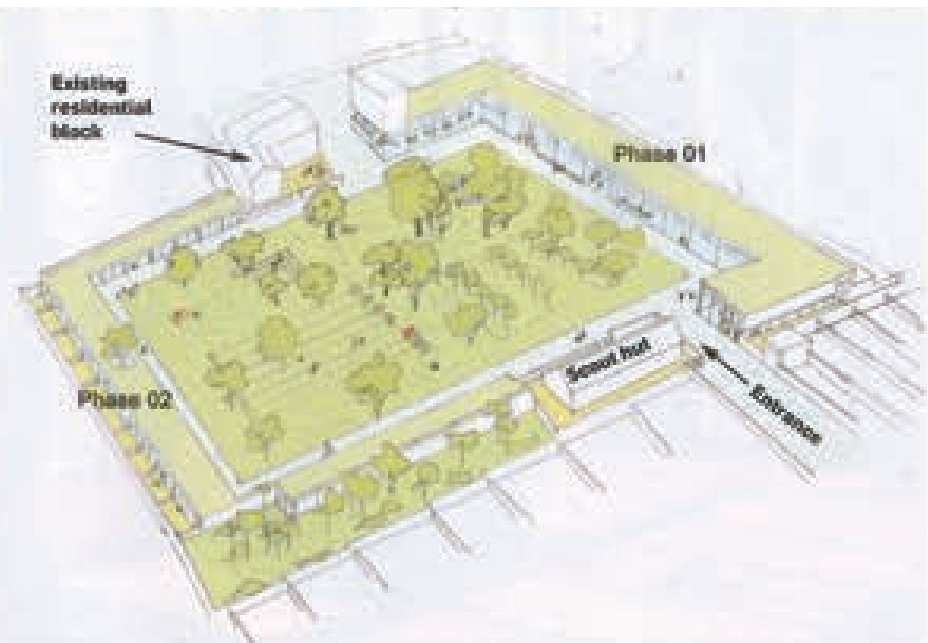
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The fundamental difference between the new structure and the old is the configuration in plan. Rather than the sprawling mat that occupied the site previously, the new building is a linear intrusion that holds fast to the edge of the site. What has been built is only the first of two phases but, once complete, the scheme will carry around the perimeter, enclosing an expansive garden populated by allotments, a

**Residents that I spoke to could not believe their luck**

badminton court and seating.

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# ARTS

Spider-Man's  
new boss, page 12



## The grow-your-own hostel

Boasting maple floors and individual gardens, this cool modernist building is Britain's first tailor-made homeless hostel. But will it end up being a one-off? **Steve Rose** reports

**A**t first glance, you could easily mistake Spring Gardens for a fashionable new micro-hotel, or a chic health resort, tucked away behind some Edwardian terraces in south-east London. In fact, it is a new hostel for the homeless - and it's better looking than most private housing schemes. A long, low building snaking around three sides of a garden, the hostel's clean lines and white walls hark back to the work of early modernists such as Le Corbusier or JIP Oud. But

then what should a homeless hostel look like anyway? Before Spring Gardens, the first purpose-built homeless hostel in Britain, it was a question no one needed to ask.

Homelessness was a high-profile problem in Britain in the late 1980s. The number of rough sleepers became conspicuously higher in the UK, especially in London, giving rise to "cardboard cities" - and bringing the beneficiaries of Thatcherite Britain into uncomfortable proximity with its victims. It was partly in response to this, and the notion that the government should do

**Revolutionary thinking...**  
**the £4m Spring Gardens centre**

something about it, that Margaret Thatcher made her infamous declaration that there was "no such thing as society". In 1998, Tony Blair took a different line, pledging Labour would reduce by two-thirds the number of people sleeping rough in Britain by 2002. According to its own statistics, that target was met early, through joined-up social services and extra funds. In 2006, the government vowed to pump another £90m into raising the standard of the UK's homeless accommodation. Spring Gardens is one of the results.

The hostel is run by St Mungo's. >>>

# Arts Architecture

London's largest charity for homeless people, which houses more than 1,000 people every night. "The old building was gloomy, dark and claustrophobic," says architect Peter Barber of the run-down hotel that used to sit on the site in Hither Green. "It was easy to get lost. You entered these dark, labyrinthine corridors where you didn't know what was around the corner. Some of the people there must have felt isolated. It would be easy to get into the position, if your room was in a far-flung corner, where you'd never come out. So we wondered whether it was possible to design a hostel for all people without any corridors."

It would be hard to get lost or feel claustrophobic in the new building. The entire public area is basically one big, airy room that serves both as a single, giant corridor and as the hostel's communal space. Most of the bedrooms open straight on to it and face away from the garden, as do shared kitchens, offices and training rooms. The garden was the other key factor in the design. The old building emphatically turned its back on it; the new one wraps itself around it.

The entrance and reception area are at one end of the main, double-height corridor, at the other end, it widens out into a communal eating area, with various free-standing elements along the way: a small library, computer stations, benches, a good table, giant coloured window frames. The idea was to keep the space flexible, to accommodate temporary events and activities such as film screenings, workshops, or whatever the residents want. "It still looks a bit architectural at the moment," says Barber. "We're hoping it'll get a bit more cluttered. Slowly, over time, this will come to life."

The linear layout allows the journey from homelessness to independence that underpins the St Mungo's ethos. Most of the bedrooms are identical - simply furnished, with a small ensuite



**They can grow whatever they like in their gardens, says the manager, 'as long as it's legal'**

bathroom and a little private garden at the back, or a balcony on the upper stories. The six rooms closest to reception, however, are "assisted" beds for newcomers, who will stay there for up to six weeks, during which time their health and other needs will be gauged. They might be referred to another specialist facility - for women or for drug users, for example - or perhaps serve up the outdoor lounge of Spring Gardens' longer-term rooms, where they could stay for as long as 18 months. Then they might move into one of the five flats in the tower at the far end of the building, another step in their journey back into the community beyond.

To help people along this route, St Mungo's runs courses in basic professional and life skills, from food hygiene to fitting, from literacy to carpentry. But to nurture gardening, there are plans for allotments in the central green, where residents can grow vegetables for the kitchen. "It's amazing the confidence you can get from growing something from seed to fruit or flower," says Yvonne Tanswell, the hostel manager. They can grow whatever they like in their small private gardens, she says, "as long as it's legal".

This open arrangement serves a security purpose, too. According to St Mungo's, 68% of these residents have

alcohol or drug problems, nearly half have mental health issues, and 37% have a history of offending. Things can get volatile in hostels, but not so here, says Tanswell. In other hostels, the division between staff and "clients", as they are called, is often laid out in architectural terms, with security doors, protective shutters and barriers through which to communicate. There are no "them" and "us" barriers here - so far, there has been no need to erect close the door to the staff office.

Barber, whose practice is known for its striking but equally communally oriented housing schemes, such as the award-winning Derrybank Quarter in London, has been working with St Mungo's for 25 years. "My first job was doing a living layout for one of their hostels. It was just formal and button-work to start with, but, as more money's become available, so we've grown with them. By now, we know a bit about what happens in these places."

Barber has refurbished and added to six other St Mungo's properties around the capital, with several more in the pipeline. The results have been impressive. The tower in Covent Garden is converted from a Victorian neo-gothic school, Barber stripped back the terrace, creating an

area of exposed brickwork and ceiling beams. The newer buildings display a clean, white, modernist bent similar to that of Spring Gardens, as do many of Barber's private housing projects. "I think it affects how people feel," he says, "this sort of light, uncluttered space."

In these designs these buildings might discourage people from moving on. "That's something we've grappled with," says Tanswell. "But part of the work we're doing is to build up people's confidence and independence. It just makes it a much more supportive environment in which to get people to that point. The fact that people do want their independence is always more of a carrot to move on." However attractive the building is, says one resident, "the problem with hostel life is the people that live in hostels." Still, other residents speak in more taken-with-the-place terms. "I've landed in a bed of roses," says one. "Nice maple flowers, matching furniture, my own garden. Anything's better than the other option, but this is the best hostel I've ever seen."

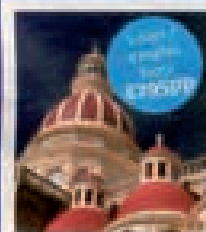
Architects alone cannot solve the problem of homelessness. And, although government money has produced generosity results, there are other areas - such as health, education and employment where they could be doing a lot more, says St Mungo's. In the current economic climate, homelessness is back on the rise. The government's next big target is to eradicate street sleeping in Britain by 2012, in time for the Olympics, which may be over-ambitious. Spring Gardens, which only cost £48m (£1.2m of which came from government), could be a template for future hostels, but the prospect of ending all homeless accommodation to such a high standard now seems less likely, particularly if the Conservatives take power. Public-private ventures will tighten in the next few years, and the provision of new housing in general is already at urgent levels. One can imagine robust outrage over housing the homeless or not. "The Million of hankies!"

But, like most architects, Barber believes there is such a thing as society. "Another way of looking at it is are people in this position different from anybody else? I'm not sure they are, but I would imagine that people who have had difficulties in life are, if anything, more sensitive to their environment. Design affects how people feel about themselves and the institution. The hope is to make life easier for the residents and the people who work here. I don't think it's an indulgence to try to create a beautiful environment for people. I think it's essential." ■

**Bright and airy ... Inside Spring Gardens, behind rows of computer stations**



PHOTOGRAPHY: PHILIPPE VERON/REUTERS



## Malta 4\* short break

This is a new Victorian Hotel in a stunning property located in the centre of Valletta, close to restaurants, shops and bars. The hotel is a short drive from the capital, Valletta which is renowned for its baroque architecture and galleries.

Breakdown	Nights	Price 4*P	Single Price	Breakdown	Nights	Price 4*P	Single Price
1 Nov - 10 Nov	7	£250	£35	1 Nov - 10 Nov	7	£250	£35
1 Nov - 22 Nov	22	£700	£100	1 Nov - 22 Nov	22	£700	£100

### Includes:

- 4\* 4 night hotel stay accommodation in the Victorian Hotel
- Breakfast
- Flight from London Gatwick with Air Miles
- Transfer
- Breakfast only

Subject to Standard Hotel Book 100 per person return. 7 nights accommodation from £200 per person.

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Small print: Maltese 4\* short break is a 4\* hotel. The hotel is a short drive from the capital, Valletta which is renowned for its baroque architecture and galleries. The hotel is a short drive from the capital, Valletta which is renowned for its baroque architecture and galleries. The hotel is a short drive from the capital, Valletta which is renowned for its baroque architecture and galleries.



## Need to know



# A design for life

If you had £4 million to build a new hostel for homeless people, what would it look like? *Christopher Smith* visits an innovative project that rose to the challenge



'If you didn't know it was a homeless shelter you'd think it was a school,' says Michael Philpotts, a resident at Spring Gardens homeless shelter.

This new, 40-bed state of the art development in Lewisham, south London, cost £4 million to build. Those behind the new shelter, which opened in mid-June, claim its design can help lift residents out of homelessness.

As I enter, the open spaces and natural light coming from every angle are immediately striking. This doesn't feel like a hostel for homeless people, more like a modern university building - and that, says one of the architects behind the design, is the point.

'Older hostels feel very oppressive,' explains Phil Hamilton, associate director at Peter Barber Architects. 'Claustrophobic, labyrinth-style corridors make it hard to pull yourself out of a situation. We concentrated on giving residents an open and uplifting environment.'

'It's like a clear pathway to the final goal of going back into general needs housing.'

The architects learned valuable lessons from building the 53-bed, £33.2 million Endell Street hostel, which opened in London's Covent

Garden in December last year. Like Spring Gardens, it was commissioned by homelessness charity St Mungo's.

'With the Endell Street project the main drive was to make it welcoming and less oppressive when people come through the door and that has translated to our ethos for Spring Gardens,' explains Mr Hamilton.

### Progression

The layout of the shelter reflects the rehabilitation process that clients undergo. Ten of the beds are reserved for new clients who will stay in this section while their support needs are assessed. Depending on their needs, residents can be moved into one of two other levels of accommodation. Most will be given more space and independence, while five beds in the building's tower block are reserved for those clients who are most ready to move into general needs housing.

The incentive to progress is visible from the communal kitchen with its far-reaching views across London. It is now home to a regular curry night among residents.

Every room at Spring Gardens has an en suite bathroom and individual garden area, distinguishing ▶



Uplifting: floor to ceiling glass, bright colours and wide corridors create a welcoming atmosphere, while study booths (above) are big enough for two people

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### → Continued from page 36

features that help residents feel like they aren't in the average homeless shelter.

Creating the right environment is crucial to allow residents to gain the confidence and skills needed to progress through the hostel. The large open communal spaces were designed with the idea of promoting social contact and creating bonds among hostel users. Even the computer bays are big enough for two people.

'People love visiting me here because it's a friendly atmosphere and the building's nice,' explains Mr

**"The positive atmosphere makes people easier to work with because they enjoy being here."**

Philpotts. 'Even my mum visits me. She loves it.'

The main garden also creates a distinctive feel and plays a large role in helping residents.

'The plan is to have individual allotments so people can grow their own vegetables,' says hostel manager Vicky Tunnicliff. 'It's crucial in developing people's skills for when they finish their time here and also gives them a lot of confidence. Plus we can use the vegetables in the canteen.'

The staff at Spring Gardens also feel the design of the building helps them to do their job. 'When I first saw it I

thought it was amazing. The fact that it is so light creates a really positive atmosphere,' says senior project worker Emily Adams.

'The positive atmosphere makes people easier to work with because they enjoy being here,' adds Ms Tunnicliff.

Her sentiment is echoed by Mr Philpotts. 'When I visit my friends in other places I know that I'm walking into a homeless shelter,' he says. '[Spring Gardens] is completely different.'

 Find out more at [www.insidehousing.co.uk](http://www.insidehousing.co.uk)



PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER BARBER ARCHITECTS

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER BARBER ARCHITECTS



# ACTIVITY CENTRE

The open-plan layout of Peter Barber's centre for the homeless in Ilford, east London, creates a lively atmosphere conducive to getting things done, writes **Oliver Wainwright**

**P**eter Barber's new building in Ilford, east London, is a landmark in the city's regeneration. It is a modern, multi-story structure with a prominent cantilevered upper floor and large glass windows. The building is designed to be a hub for the homeless community, providing a space for social interaction and support. The open-plan layout is a key feature, creating a lively atmosphere conducive to getting things done. The building is a testament to Peter Barber's architectural vision and commitment to social housing.

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**"There is a real sense of isolation in the classic Victorian hostel... something we've tried to eradicate"**

Peter Barber

P.04. Wainwright, O. 'Redbridge Welcome Centre by Peter Barber Architects.' Building Design, 22 Feb 2012.

**P**eter Barber is just back from a trip to Morocco when we meet. He was there to tour Marrakech and Fez with his students from Westminster University, not because they have a project there, but because “they should see good places”, he says, “places that might inspire them”.

The medinas and kasbahs of Arab cities have long been an inspiration for Barber’s own work. His housing schemes are dense spatial puzzles of notched terraces, clever courtyards and clusters of blocks, all rendered in a brilliant whiteness that longs for a sunnier climate. But, more than anything, they are conceived as multi-levelled landscapes to be animated by people.

His practice manifesto begins with a quote from Walter Benjamin’s description of Naples, where “buildings are used as a popular stage. They are all divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theatres. Balcony, courtyard, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stages and boxes.” Barber talks of space as inert without people and culture, and where better to see this than the bustling streets of Morocco?

Well, in these chastened times, his students could do worse than get on the train to Ilford.

Announced by TripAdvisor as Europe’s fastest growing tourist destination – apparently due to it being 15 minutes up the A11 from the Olympic site – Ilford might seem a long way from the electric atmosphere of the Jemaa el Fna. But it does have a new project that draws on Barber’s experience of crafting carefully tuned stage sets for people, with

a great economy of means, in the form of the Redbridge Welcome Centre. This is no neon-daubed pop-up visitor hub for London 2012, but a welcoming base for travellers of a different kind – some of the capital’s 4,000 rough-sleeping population.

For the last 20 years, Barber has devoted a large part of his considerable energies to the question of homeless housing. His series of hostels for St Mungo’s Community Housing Association have demonstrated how the layout and organisation of spaces can have a fundamental impact on people’s states of mind – from the light-flooded Cedars Road in Clapham, to Spring Gardens in Hither Green (*Buildings* July 24, 2009), where the individual rooms open directly into a wide social space.

“The classic Victorian hostel is just endless corridors,” says



**‘There is a real sense of isolation in the classic Victorian hostel... something we’ve tried to eradicate’**

**Peter Barber**

Barber. “There is a real sense of isolation because of all the circulation, something we’ve tried to eradicate.”

He was lecturing on his model of a “hostel without corridors” in 2007 when Peter Bradbeer, strategic housing officer at Redbridge, happened to be in the audience. Five years on and Barber’s £1.6 million Welcome Centre is up and running – the latest phase of the borough’s £3.2 million central government-funded Places for Change programme.

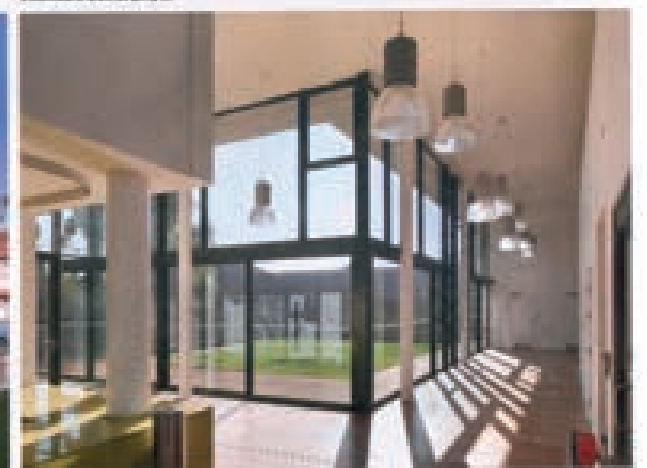
Completing the corner of two low-rise streets of Victorian terraced housing, the building stands as a gleaming beacon, a stack of horizontal planes slipping and sliding to and fro up to a height of four storeys. With its continuous white bands, held apart by full-height glazing, floors protruding here and there to become balconies, volumes shifting to create decks, it has the look of a cruise liner – run aground in suburbia. Where the continuous white plane folds up to become a wall, playful scatters of porthole windows dance across the facade, adding to the nautical aesthetic.

But it is not as alien as it might initially seem. The band of the first floor continues the datum established by the covered porch line of St Mary’s Road; the second floor picks up on its eaves. Despite rising a full two storeys above its neighbours, it does so with good manners, its cubic massing carefully staggered, floors nudged further back until the uppermost volume projects 2.5m to peck out over Green Lane, providing a jaunty marker, visible from the end of the street. ▶

Exterior opening spaces  
between buildings to form  
a courtyard with lawn.



The open-plan layout of the  
main space with views  
of the courtyard and sky.



The spaces are fantastic... the classes are much more focused now.

The main space of the building is a large, open-plan area that is designed to be a flexible learning environment. It features high ceilings, large windows, and modern lighting fixtures. The space is divided into different levels and zones, allowing for a variety of learning activities. The design is inspired by the concept of a 'learning commons', where students can collaborate, create, and learn in a supportive and engaging environment.

The building is designed to be a hub for learning and innovation. It provides a space where students can work together, share ideas, and develop their skills. The design is focused on creating a sense of community and belonging, while also providing a high-quality learning environment. The building is a testament to the power of good design to create a positive impact on education.

**RETHINKING THE ALPS HOUSE**

The Alps House is a modern building that has been designed to provide a high-quality learning environment. The building is designed to be a hub for learning and innovation, providing a space where students can collaborate, create, and learn in a supportive and engaging environment.

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Barber describes his approach as “scooped-up minimalism”, the composition as “picturesque modernism”, and there is a “refreshing energy in this architecture, which doesn’t take itself too seriously – and is all the more approachable for it.”

The visibly accessible nature of the building was a key part of the brief for the project, which replaces a well-used but outdated 1930s building on the site.

“It was all blank brick walls and closed doors,” says Phil Herbert, manager of Healthy Living Projects, the charitable arm of the Ilford High Road Baptist Church, which runs the centre. “It was always a problem that you couldn’t see in, as if these people were somehow separated from the community.”

The vision for the new centre is one of an integrated community hub: “It should be full of old ladies knitting, kids doing their homework, church meetings,” says Barber, who sees this as much more than a hostel.

As such, the ground floor is conceived as an open-plan multi-functional space, a double-height glazed L-shape oriented south-east around a garden lawn. Entered from the street corner, a lobby area is framed by an open reception to the left and two small interview rooms to the right. A low-level barrier leads through to the main space, which has the air of an oversized domestic conservatory: someone’s washing is hanging up to dry between groups of casually arranged armchairs and coffee tables. Doors to the left lead to a music room, as well as toilets, showers and a laundry room, while at the end of the eastern wing stands a full-height glasshouse for classes and meetings.

The vast amount of floor-to-ceiling glass throughout – complete with sliding doors that open up the corner of the building to the garden in summer – belies the tight budget. This is testament to the skill of the project director Phil Hamilton. The architect has reworked a standard system, assembling panels in what he describes as a “Mondrianesque composition” to invent a curtain wall on a budget.

At the end of the right-hand wing, the space widens into a dining area, on to which the kitchen scrovy opens. Lunch is clearly one of the key draws of the day, attracting around 60 people, many of whom stay on for the programme of classes and the chance to do some laundry while they learn. The southernmost portion of the building, meanwhile, is a separately accessible unit, with a large upstairs meeting room – soon to be leased to an aftercare centre for drug and alcohol treatment.

“Everything had to happen in one space in our old building, which was very distracting” says Herbert. “It didn’t have the flexibility to do everything we wanted to do at the same time.” Now, a back-to-work skills session can take place in the large classroom upstairs, while a numeracy class goes on in the glasshouse.

“The spaces are fantastic,” says Peter Vickers, the centre’s life skills co-ordinator. “The classes are much more focused now, because of the separation.” The positioning and orientation of the rooms still allows overlooking and observation, essential to the nature of the programme – and creates a lively series of animated interior stages, worthy of Benjamin’s Naples.

Vickers has also noticed a

## ‘The spaces are fantastic... the classes are much more focused now’

change in the culture of the place, thanks to the character of the spaces. “It has a feeling that it is a place about getting things done and moving on,” he says. “It doesn’t have that lingering atmosphere you get in hostels with a TV room and hundreds of chairs.” The open-plan thoroughfare nature of the main space, from where you can sense the multitude of things going on, is not conducive to staying inactive for long.

Accessed from its own front door on Green Lane, the upper

two floors comprise 12 en-suite bedrooms, run by the charity Single Homeless Project. Arranged around generous communal kitchens that spill out on to broad decks, enjoying expansive views to the south-east, it could easily be a yuppieish penthouse on the Olympic fringe.

“If you give people nice accommodation, they tend to respect it,” says the SHP centre manager – and, judging by the condition of the communal spaces, this looks to be true.

One resident, Sharon, moved here from the Redbridge night shelter in November, and already the walls of her bedroom are lined with certificates from the courses downstairs. Along with four others, she is now ready to move into rental accommodation within the next few weeks and SHP has helped her to find work.

In many ways it is difficult to

fault a project like this, which works so hard with a basic set of tools. “Our approach is that the spaces should be the main design feature,” says Hamilton. “It’s not about specifying expensive finishes.” Walls are of insulated, render and plasterboard over a metal frame, while upstairs floors are lined in hard-wearing, bright orange and green goat hair carpet.

For the domestic nature of the brief, it is perhaps a little too glassy, the form executed in a somewhat dated language. With its swoopy planes of crisp white render, it could easily be mistaken for the office of a thriving media start-up. But there are signs that this may well be the final product of Barber’s slick white oeuvre; that he is finally shaking off the Sixties tendency.

“The thing about render is that it conceals everything about how a building is made,” he says, as

we leave the site. “From now on, the work is going to be a lot more about structure; we have become more interested in texture of materials, from rustic brick vaults to oak shingles.”

His plans for a new almshouse-type hostel (see box) suggest, this is yet another reinvention of homeless housing to look forward to.

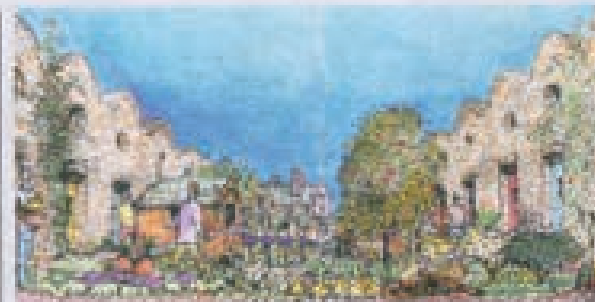
### PROJECT TEAM

**Architect**  
Peter Barber Architects  
**Clients** London Borough of Redbridge, Ilford Baptist Healthy Living Projects, Centrepoint and SHP  
**Contractor** Durkan  
**Project manager** Philip Park Partnership  
**Structural engineer** Bolton Priestley  
**M&E consultant** Barker & Steels

## RETHINKING THE ALMS HOUSE

Our next project tackles the refurbishment of an existing hostel in north London, along with the introduction of a walled garden surrounded by miniature two-storey houses under crinkle-crenle, brick vaulted roofs. It has an almshousey vibe and the goal is to create an uplifting, beautiful, inspiring place for homeless people to live, learn and get back on their feet.

We imagine a group of residents working with a gardener to create and maintain an intensely planted and beautiful garden. There will be a greenhouse, a potting



The courtyard will include a garden tended by residents.

shed and a sunny spot to sit and rest. Little rooms/sheds will nestle in the garden to provide an opportunity for

private chats and counselling. The garden will help create a homely, domestic atmosphere in the hostel, giving residents an

interest and outlet for their energy. It will help foster a sense of belonging, self-worth and empowerment and provide an opportunity to develop gardening skills.

Furthermore, those not actively involved in the garden will be able to enjoy the setting and might be inspired by seeing what is going on in their midst.

Each house has a stable door leading into a double-height brick vaulted living space and stairs leading to a cosy mezzanine bedroom above the bathroom.

**Peter Barber**