

CULTURE

Wherever I lay my flat...

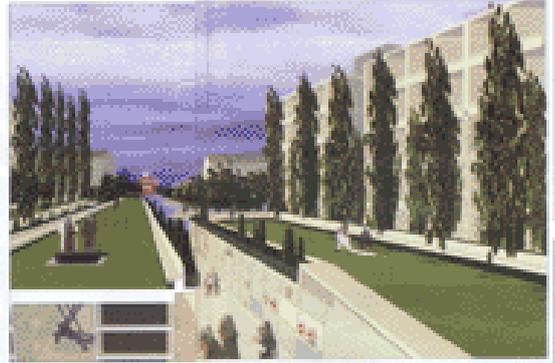
An Architecture Foundation lecture by Mae showed off projects of varied ingenuity, writes Kester Rattenbury



Right with the 19th century, a modern house with the design quality of a London flat apartment.

Right Mae's second winning scheme for an inner-city apartment, with a courtyard, a playground and a landscaped garden.

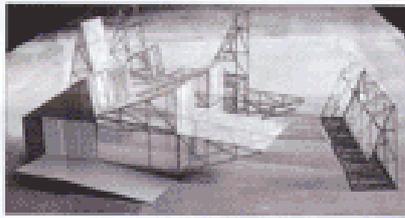
Richard's Art House, a modern studio space for artists in London, which can be easily set up in an inner-city site awaiting development.



ON THE RADAR
Richard Murphy
I read occasionally on building - at History of Policy Press, Background and context in the Geography of East London by Steve Cohen, a newly read architectural history (they have books on the picture).

"Young? and interesting?" Mae's tantalisingly-entitled talk at the opening of the Architecture Foundation's Winter Nights series re-established the lecture programme's role as a forum for new and fairly unknown architects, and packed out BDP's Clerkenwell foyer.

Partner Michael Howe's delicate, entertaining disingenuity ("Maintaining financial buoyancy is an interesting trick - how do you pay the rent?") was a great opener for an insight into an intriguing new practice. Mae has been up and running for two and-a-half years, and seems to be making considerable virtue from necessity.



The partners pay the rent through Michael Howe teaching at Greenwich University and Alex Ely working full-time at Cabe.

Mae is developing a distinct genius for identifying and using loopholes in our cumbersome procurement system to make new projects. "Alex's work at Cabe is an extended CPD session for the

office - how the small can learn from the big - though the number of daylight hours the man is away is a concern," said Howe. His own teaching is a laborator, for testing and developing those ideas.

land and adapted to produce white-line galleries on their less dignified quality space as needed. Mae's next project, for a tall sliver on a building in Hoxton, near London, was first treated planning permission after the month. "The sort of thing that some smart people have either built, proposed or had turned down, and those there is very very simple prohibited, too-limited and extremely lightweight for doing traditional foundations. Planning officers, for sure, "shouldn't even have to see any of this scale", but apparently it makes up 75% of the country's planning applications. He noted that Roger Federer was looking at a proposal that would fit in with the planning system. Mae's bookish project is the Museum for Van Praag, who first asked the practice to design a museum with all the quality of tall apartments in London, then a new in its element. "The legislation for concrete is heavy - you can be an expert in 10 minutes",

The only criteria are that they should be moved into site in no more than two years - they don't have to be modernity. The planning application is being there as "Urban regeneration" and the Museum has three ground out, the same blueprint as the Museum last project. There developed as a series for sale, it is both very elegant and could be put together in sites.

Less visually affecting, but equally clever was Mae's "party wall house" proposal, a multiple, which will build model using simple party wall structures and a single planning application for a whole street. Volume house builders would put up the houses at speed, and the owners would then fit out and adapt as needed.

More classically architectural - but most challenging of all - was the practice's city-centre project, which was the two-ground Museum shared away from the foundations of Royal Exchange. This challenged the Victorian era of modern, with its structure materials and form of

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Mae started as a "vehicle for brief-writing" at Greenwich and was influenced by a previous generation of tutors, such as Pierre d'Avoine, Alex de Rijke and Pankaj Patel. But they didn't want to be "buried in good taste glass back extensions in Camden (though we have done that kind of work, and value the client immensely)". Their own work has spotted a "metaphorical gap in the hedge". Or, as the talk suggested, a whole series of them.

Mae is developing a distinct genius for identifying and using loopholes in our cumbersome procurement system to make new projects. "Alex's work at Cabe is an extended CPD session for the office - how the small can learn from the big - though the number of daylight hours the man is away is a concern," said Howe. His own teaching is a laborator, for testing and developing those ideas.

The six or seven projects shown depended on considerable and varied ingenuity. First was a small project for the Association for

Cultural Advancement through Visual Art, which provides studio space for London artists. Mae devised Art Sacks; temporary, flexible mobile units to occupy inner-city wasted spaces or sites set for future development. It proposed the most demountable of structures with an absolute minimum of detailing. The designs are low-loader-friendly, stiff technology, simple structure, sheathed in cheap, plastic reinforced sheet for the most basic weathershielding. They can be gradually lined and adapted to produce white-box galleries or black-box digital quality space as needed.

Mae's next project, for a loft storey on a building in Hoxton, east London, has just received planning permission after five months - "the sort of thing I'm sure most people have either built, proposed or had turned down," said Howe. Theirs is very, very simple: prefabricated, timber-framed and extremely lightweight for dodgy traditional foundations. Planning officers, he says, "shouldn't even have to see stuff of this scale", but apparently it makes up 72% of the country's planning applications. He noted that Roger Zogolovitch was looking at a proposal that work of this kind be taken right out of the planning system.

Mae's best-known project is the M-house for Tim Pyne, who first asked the practice to design a caravan with all the quality of loft apartments in London. Here it was in its element: "The legislation for caravans is teeny - you can be an expert in 30 minutes". The only criteria are that they should be towed onto site in no more than two pieces - they don't have to be roadworthy. The planning applications for siting them are "almost meaningless" and the M-house has, Howe pointed out, the same floorplate as the Hoxton loft project. Then developed as a series for sale, it is both very

elegant and "could be put together by idiots".

Less visually alluring, but equally clever, was Mae's "party wall house" proposal, a multiple, urban self-build model using simple party wall structures and a single planning application for a whole terrace. Volume housebuilders would put up the basics at speed, and the owners would then fit out and adapt as needed.

More classically architectural - but most challenging of all - was the practice's city cemetery proposal, which won the Stoneguard Phoenix Award 2003 from the Association of Burial Authorities. This challenged the Victorian out-of-town model, with its attendant vandalism and loss of community. Instead, it sought to reclaim the intimacy and beauty of the village churchyard in an urban setting, proposing new, European-style, sarcophagi stacked cemeteries as landscaped gardens in inner-city sites, such as those between tower blocks.

Mae has yet to see much built: its Sittingbourne Library competition entry, which packed creche, library, offices etc behind a low-budget, clever facade, was unplaced. And its house in Scotland, for a client to overlook their baronial, now National Trust, property - a clever, abstraction of the dour local building type - is still on hold. But journalist Kieran Long, introducing the lecture, challenged the idea that its formal expression was undecided. The formal expression is produced by the highly specific rethinking of the very narrow possibilities open to small London practices, and using their considerable brainpower to expand them as far as possible.

Definitely a practice - and a series - to watch.

