

NLQ

NEW LONDON QUARTERLY
ISSUE 47 | Q3 2021 | £10

nla



POCKET ROCKETS

Pocket Living flying high | Mae at 20 | Vicky Richardson | Yolande Barnes | Wembley Park | 60 London Wall

NLQ 47



FEATURES

- The new teams** 14
Pocket Living is about to build its 1,000th home. David Taylor meets a team with its eye on future growth
- Look back on lockdown** 24
Peter Murray weaves his way through a year of online interviews with key built environment thinkers
- Exposure** 28
David Taylor catches up with Peter Barber and his long-term photographer collaborator, Morley von Sternberg
- Top of their game** 36
Louise Rodgers on Mae and its prime mover Alex Ely as the practice approaches its 20th birthday
- Estate review** 70
We take a look at Wembley Park as the fast-growing estate prepares to host the Euro 2020 finals
- Building review** 80
LaSalle Investment Management's 60 London Wall, designed by EPR Architects

REGULARS

- Need to know** 4
The quarter—our summary of all the key news events this term
- Viewpoint** 8
We ask: what did you learn about working practices during lockdown that you will implement at your physical office or across the company?
- Murray Mint** 13
Peter Murray takes a look back at the mayoral contest and hatches a plan to stand next time, on a pro-London, built environment ticket
- Opinion** 21
Hawkins|Brown's Helena Howard asks: are we ignoring a powerful tool to support dementia patients?
- Columnist** 42
Yolande Barnes proposes automatically affordable tenure (AAT)—a new idea for a new mayor
- Coffee break** 48
Vicky Richardson, new head of architecture and Heinz curator at the Royal Academy answers the questions
- Briefing notes** 50
Our regular round-up of conferences and events at NLA
- My London** 132
Architect and NAME Architecture founder Nathalie Rozencwajg talks about her dual perspective on Paris and London

PLUS...

- Portfolio** 6
This year's *Don't Move, Improve!* competition overall prizewinner, the House Recast, by Studio Ben Allen
- From the team — Collaborate** 22
Rosa Rogina of the London Festival of Architecture and NLA Collaborate on experimentation in the urban realm
- Best of the web** 34
David Taylor catches up with Pooja Agrawal the new CEO of Public Practice about taking the organisation to the next, national step
- Expert Panel digest** 46
Katrina Kostic Samen of KKS Savills looks at the workplace vs working from home
- Out of office** 68
Robert Gordon Clark of London Communications Agency on acting, writing a play, and his indoor rowing machine...
- Market essay** 90
London's enduring resilience, by Jonny Lee and Kate Horton of Knight Frank

Grant Smith; Morley von Sternberg; Agnese Sanvito; High Level Photography Ltd; Gareth Gardner



» WICTEC EL evo

Efficient construction process for modern architecture

The WICTEC EL evo is a fast, cost-effective façade system for buildings of all sizes, where the units are delivered ready-assembled to the construction site. Thus we offer you a high quality standard through just-in-time logistics, numerous patents and a wide variety of accessories. WICTEC EL evo is certified with C2C silver.

WICONA®

By **Hydro**

Find out more:
www.wicona.co.uk



TOWARDS RESILIENCE — MAE AT 20

Alex Ely has followed his nose to take Mae Architects to its 20th birthday and a solid portfolio of quality housing along the way, with a key project on Agar Grove and international expansion the practice's latest. By Louise Rodgers



'I just follow my nose and see where it takes me.'

Following his nose has taken Alex Ely, principal of Mae Architects, to a great many places.

The week after we speak, Ely is addressing a conference in Russia attended by, he has been told, 7,000 people ('but I can't believe they will all be watching'). Meanwhile the practice is working on several international projects, including a mixed-use building in Milan and a masterplan in Derbent, in the southern Russian republic of Dagestan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and Russia's oldest city.

Mae's international reputation and reach is down to its residential architecture specialism, specifically affordable housing. But as principal, Ely's influence extends way beyond the practice's portfolio of work. Ely is a mayor's design advocate and a CABE built environment expert, has been on review panels at the GLA, LLDC and the RIBA's Housing Policy Group, and has been a frequent speaker at national and international urban and design forums.

The practice also maintains strong links with academia. With his colleague Michael Dillon, Ely runs a practice unit, the School of Art, Architecture and Design at London Metropolitan University, where Dillon is also a postgraduate teacher.

'Our portfolio as a practice is small in the big scheme of things,' he says. 'But I really enjoy the idea that architects can offer influence beyond our commissioned work. I am proud of what we are doing as a practice and we have some great commissions, but I don't want my thinking just to reside in those projects. It is important that I demonstrate that thinking in our practice, in our built work, but I like the idea that the research we do, and the architecture we practise, can be translated into policies that then hopefully improve the quality of the built environment for everyone. I have always been interested in the wider context of what we do: the political and social context.'



Upwardly mobile — M-house

This spirit of enquiry has guided Ely since he first set up Mae with Michael Howe. The two met at the Royal College of Art where they studied architecture, and then went on to become teaching partners at Greenwich University before teaming up to form Mae (Michael-Alex-Ely). They worked on some interesting projects before Howe decided his interests lay more with teaching. He is now a senior lecturer at Brighton University's School of Architecture and Design.

The most notable project from these early days was a scheme called M-house (pronounced 'mouse'), a mobile home initially built as a prototype and exhibited at Whitstable, Kent, in 2002. It featured in the RIBA's 2006 exhibition *Model Housing: from mobile home to country house*, and the client was Tim Pyne, a notable designer himself.

At just over 1,000 sq ft (c 93 sqm), M-house is entirely manufactured under controlled factory conditions, which guarantees both quality of build and delivery time. It arrives in two pieces, each 3m wide, which are then joined together on site, which takes about a day.

'The original M-house was for Tim's personal use, and was a dream commission for a young practice,' explains Ely. 'It was a little, freestanding, detached building and we were working on both the exterior and the interior.'

'M-house met all the standards in terms of thermal efficiency and quality of internal space as a house, but because it sat on the land rather than in it, it only required permission for leisure use. M-house can be moved between sites or dismantled and recycled. It advances a sustainable agenda while addressing the constraints of the planning system and delivering ample living space.'

'For me, M-house was asking much bigger questions. It made me think about sustainability and about housing, and particularly about how you tackle the problems of affordability and housing. These are the progressive values that have been at the heart of the practice ever since.'

While a team, Howe and Ely also secured their first public commission, for a cemetery and chapel. The pair wrote an article in response to an Oliver Burkeman article in *The Guardian* about the shortage of burial places in the





Family friendly — Mae’s award-winning New Islington scheme in Manchester



A filip for Fulham — Mae’s Sands End Arts and Community Centre

UK, using work they had been doing with their students at Greenwich University. It was published in *The Journal of Burial and Cremation Administration*.

‘It sounds like a title that would appear on *Have I Got News for You*,’ says Ely. ‘But it got us in front of a lovely guy called Andrew Mills who managed the cemeteries and parks for North Hertfordshire District Council, and he invited us to respond to a tender. Again, it was that wider inquiry that got us the job. With the M-house it was about housing and affordability. With the chapel and cemetery, it was about the shortage of burial space. Architects are holistic thinkers and problem-solvers at heart. We see those challenges and think, “maybe we can find a design solution for this”.’

The experience of M-house also ignited an interest in policy reform so when, despite these two successful commissions, new work didn’t flood in, Howe returned to teaching and Ely went to work for the (then) recently established Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), as head of sustainable communities.

‘It was really this time that made us rethink the practice,’ Ely recalls. ‘Michael is a gifted teacher and realised he wanted to teach full time. And I came back from CABE in 2005 knowing that what I wanted to focus on was housing, social infrastructure and urbanism.’

How did his experience at CABE convince him of that? ‘It just opened my eyes. The teaching of architecture can be quite narrow. CABE had a much broader ambition, which was to champion design quality across the built environment — not just buildings. Urban design is more about the spaces between the buildings. If you are designing housing, then you are immediately into a conversation about the spaces between them. That got me interested in urban design and I subsequently also qualified as a town planner’.

Not getting involved in private residential housing, or housing extensions, was an early decision, ‘Because it sucks up energy and you can get stuck in that world,’ explains Ely. ‘I made it my goal to do a larger scheme.’ Initially that meant reaching out to larger practices, such as Feilden Clegg Bradley and Proctor Matthews, to support them on projects and gain valuable experience. Mae’s first solo large scheme of note was a commission to design 18 affordable homes in Manchester, as part of the New Islington masterplan for residents of the former Cardroom Estate. Completed in 2012, the scheme for client Great Places Housing Group came out of the reputation and contacts Ely had built while at CABE. The practice also designed multi-award-winning affordable housing as part of a large regeneration project at Brentford Lock West, which completed in 2018.

‘Part of my work at CABE was to advocate for, and champion, good design. I set up an initiative called Building for Life which helped me to build connections in the housing sector, particularly with local authorities and housing associations.’

The Building for Life standard was part of this initiative and covered issues of place making, character and identity, access and movement, construction and technology, public space, amenity and community. Launched by the then deputy prime minister John Prescott in 2003, the standard was adopted by the government as the benchmark for new housing projects.

Fast-forward to 2021 and Mae is now a practice of 38 people, preparing to move into a new Clerkenwell office that Ely doesn’t want to talk about in case he jinxes it. Pre-COVID, they had been tenants of project manager Buro Four for nine years, occupying various spaces in an old, converted school building just behind Exmouth Market. Ely is full of praise for Buro Four as a landlord, but excited about the impending move. It will also be a short walk from his Barbican apartment – Ely has lived in the Barbican since 2011.

The style and spirit of modernism has been a strong influence on both his life and his work. To celebrate 20 years in practice, Mae is publishing a book celebrating 20 projects realised over that period. Its title *Towards a Resilient Architecture* deliberately reflects the title of Le Corbusier’s manifesto to modernism *Towards a New Architecture*.

In the foreword of his book Ely writes: ‘Corbusier’s argument that “modern life demands, and is waiting for, a new kind of plan, both for the house and the city” should read “climate and biodiversity crisis demands, and is waiting for, a new kind of plan, both for the house and the city”’. Just as Corbusier’s writings promoted a new mode of living to reflect the new spirit of the industrial age, the imperative now is to build a consensus towards creating an architecture where beauty is derived from an environmental response.’

‘For me, social justice is also environmental justice, and vice versa’

The practice’s recently completed project, Sands End Arts & Community Centre in Hammersmith and Fulham, encapsulates this ideal. The building not only meets the aspirations of the local authority for a beautiful building which enriches and provides a valuable resource for the neighbourhood around it but is also designed with the circular economy in mind.

Thirty-five percent of the building is made from recycled materials, such as a CLT timber structure and bricks made from discarded ceramics and crushed toilet bowls. ‘All in all, the building has upcycled over 28 tonnes of potential construction landfill material,’ says Ely.

Mae’s environmental concerns are rooted in a deeper sense of social justice. ‘I have always been interested in that relationship between architecture, design and society in its broadest terms,’ explains Ely. ‘At an urban design level this means trying to make sure we are designing inclusively and in a way that empowers people and enriches the quality of those lives. For me, social justice is also environmental justice, and vice versa.’

‘CABE did a lot of good research about the social value of good design, for example, how recovery rates can improve in hospitals if there are views of the sky and greenery, and how educational attainment can be improved in schools if there is good ventilation.’

This wider social awareness informed Mae’s work on the John Morden Centre, a new community facility for residents

at the Morden College Care Home, which won a New London Award in 2020 in the CARING category and opens this year.

‘The building shares the same aspirations as a Maggie Centre,’ explains Ely. ‘And it was the Maggie Centres our client had in mind when they put together the brief. The design aims to tackle social isolation and loneliness among older people, bringing together uses that were formerly scattered across the site and providing workshops, an arts space, a café, medical facilities and a number of resident lounges where people can mix and talk.’

Tackling loneliness comes up again when Ely tells me about Chimes, a landmark retirement home in Westminster for client, and retirement specialist, Pegasus Life. Chimes was completed in 2020 and will open in 2021, when lockdown restrictions end.

‘One of the challenges we face as a society is that we grow older,’ says Ely. ‘But despite increasing frailty we want to stay in our own homes, and these are often unsuited to our needs, and we are totally alone there and may seldom speak to anyone at all. This was really highlighted by the pandemic. In 2020 twice the number of people as normal spent Christmas alone, many of them older people living on their own.’

‘Later life housing is about trying to give people the dignity of independent living without those hazards, thus reducing dependency on the care service until people really need it. It’s also about creating beautiful communal spaces for people to connect and to socialise, reducing loneliness and depression, which itself is a public health issue.’

Chimes is designed for people in later life in a way that allows residents to live as independently as possible for as long as possible, including the flexibility for live-in care. At its heart



Striking the right note — the Chimes retirement home in Westminster



Tackling social isolation — Mae's John Morden Centre in Blackheath

are shared amenities including a garden, a lounge, and a dining room, which form part of the journey from the street to front door. As Ely explains, ‘The opportunity for chance encounter and neighbourly interaction is embedded in the scheme’s plan, drawing on the principle of progressive privacy; it reflects Mae’s goal to ‘uplift the human spirit’ and aims to mitigate any chance of loneliness amongst its residents.’

2021 is an important year for Mae Architects, with the official opening of several important projects including Sands End, Morden College and Chimes. It will also see the completion of the first phase of Agar Grove, the practice’s biggest scheme to date, and will celebrate its 20th birthday.

Agar Grove is the largest of Camden Council’s community investment projects. It will provide 493 affordable homes for new and existing tenants and once completed will be Passivhaus accredited, promoting a ‘fabric first’ approach to making sure residents have comfortable homes with low heating bills. Mae is working with Hawkins\Brown and Grant Associates to deliver the masterplan, which is based upon the traditional concept of streets and squares, with front doors at street level and livable spaces between buildings so that people can move across, through and within the site.

‘For a number of reasons, Agar Grove is illustrative of what we are trying to do as a practice,’ says Ely. ‘One is the urban design thinking. The choices of terraces, villas and mansion blocks builds on the panoply of block types found in the wider area. Their distribution is managed around maximising natural light, to mitigate overshadowing and create enjoyable public spaces.’

‘As a practice we are against formulaic responses and Agar also demonstrates this. It is one of the largest Passivhaus schemes in Europe, and we have also experimented with features such as re-visiting the split-level interior, familiar to fans of 60s residential architecture.’

‘Finally, it has been a truly collaborative project. Not just with other architects but with the people who live there. We spent a lot of time meeting the locals and hearing their stories, and that informed both the masterplan and the final design of the individual elements of the project.’

And then there is that new office to think about. Ely is clearly a little on edge about it. ‘I have a fabulous team and we need a space we can make our mark on,’ he says. ‘Clerkenwell is my spiritual home. It is where I have lived for most of my life in London and it will be great to plan the next phase of Mae Architects from there.’ ●

Agnese Sanvito; Morley von Sternberg; Tim Soar; Rory Gardiner; Tim Crocker; Jim Stephenson

VitrA

A journey to a peaceful mind

Introducing Voyage designed for VitrA by Arik Levy.



VitrA London flagship showroom now open
 64 Turnmill Street, Clerkenwell, EC1M 5RR

Facebook Twitter Instagram @vitrabathrooms