

Best in Britain

Stirling prize gem is one for the ages

Oliver Wainwright

A lively art class is under way in the high-ceilinged painting studio of the John Morden Centre, visible through big picture windows from the adjacent cafe, where the facility's residents catch up over a cuppa. Others are getting their hair and nails done in the salon next door, while some sit and admire the view of a grand old cedar tree in the cloistered garden.

This day centre for residents of Morden College, a retirement community in south-east London, has been named winner of the 2023 RIBA Stirling prize for the best building in the country, and it's not hard to see why. In its arrangement of spaces, carefully judged details and tactile material qualities, it is a model for how to create a sociable setting for life in older age - a beacon of optimism after a decade of swingeing cuts to social care.

"Loneliness and isolation cause twice the number of deaths as obesity among older people," says Alex Ely, director of Mae, the architects behind the project. "It's a critical health issue that simply isn't talked about enough."

For Ely, it is a question of design just as much as social policy. He has dedicated a large chunk of his career to the interface of the two, as one of the brains behind the mayor of



London's housing design guide, and designer of a number of exemplary housing projects for later living and extra care across the capital.

Here in Blackheath, Ely and his team have taken their cues from the adjacent 17th-century almshouse, built by Edward Strong, Christopher Wren's master mason, riffing off the form and materials of the stately pile. They have taken a similar courtyard arrangement but unwrapped it along the length of the long, narrow plot, creating a kind of unfolded cloister, facing on to a new garden.

This timber colonnade meanders its way through the site, with the

various rooms - health centre, snug, salon, studio and cafe - arranged like pavilions along its length, "dancing around the landscape", as Ely puts it.

Built from cross-laminated timber that is left exposed on the inside, the spaces have a warm Scandinavian feel, rising to double-height volumes with windows carefully positioned in the roofs and walls to capture views of the foliage outside. Externally, the brickwork matches the colour and texture of the original almshouse, with areas of projecting "dogtooth" bricks to add variety.

The pitched-roof pavilions each



'The building has a lovely touchy-feely quality, so you just want to stay longer'

Lori Morley
Resident



◀ *The cedar tree in the cloistered garden is the focal point of the John Morden Centre, a sociable setting for older people*

PHOTOGRAPHS:
JIM STEPHENSON

rise to a tall chimney, giving them the look of a cluster of little houses. A shaggy green roof on top of the colonnade bursts with cornflowers and daisies in summer, helping to soften the hard edges.

"It's such a sociable place," says resident Lori Morley, 81, sitting in the cafe. "The building has a lovely touchy-feely quality, so you just want to stay longer."

David Rutherford-Jones, the chief executive of Morden College, agrees: "It has really become the heart of our community."

The charity was founded in 1695 by the merchant Sir John Morden, to house 40 destitute seamen. It has since grown to a community of about 300 people, across two sites. Today, residents (the demographic expanded beyond impoverished sailors) must be in financial need to qualify for accommodation, and must also have held a managerial or leadership position in their careers.

"The John Morden Centre's elegance and efficacy sets a high standard for spaces that support healthier, happier and more independent lives," says the RIBA president, Muyiwa Oki.

Sunak to push ahead with law to ban LGBTQ+ conversion practices

Kiran Stacey

Political correspondent

Rishi Sunak will push ahead with long-delayed plans to ban gay and trans conversion practices after Conservative whips warned MPs could rebel if he failed to do so.

The prime minister will include a draft bill in the king's speech banning conversion practices, government sources confirmed, after the move was first revealed by the Times.

Campaigners had feared the government had left it too late to include such a bill in next month's package of legislation, despite Theresa May having first promised to introduce one in 2018.

Senior Tories have been worried about splitting the party on the issue, with some MPs concerned that a ban on trans conversion practices could unintentionally criminalise parents or teachers who give advice to children struggling with their gender identities.

Downing Street was concerned that the legislation was unnecessary given some conversion practices are already unlawful, and it could divide the party not long before an election.

However, other MPs have told party whips they would rebel if no legislation was forthcoming, potentially by forcing amendments to the police and crime bill to bring a ban into place.

The Times reported that some ministers had warned the prime minister the party was at risk of losing votes from the LGBTQ+ community, especially after Suella Braverman's comments at the party conference, where the home secretary said asylum seekers were pretending to be gay to game the system. The paper

added that some even said they would quit if Sunak failed to follow through with a ban.

A Downing Street spokesperson said yesterday they would not comment on the possibility of the bill being introduced in the king's speech, but would provide an update "in due course". They added: "You've heard us talk before about the abhorrent nature of so-called conversion therapy [and] that no one should be harmed or harassed for who they are."

The draft bill will delight campaigners who have pushed for years for legislation to explicitly ban conversion practices. Government research found 7% of LGBTQ+ people had experienced some form of conversion practice. Campaigners say it can drive people into depression and to suicide. Human rights lawyers and experts have said such practices are degrading and harmful, and should not be tolerated.

May first promised to ban conversion practices in 2018, saying: "No one should ever have to hide who they are or who they love."

The issue caused problems for Boris Johnson, who at one point last year U-turned twice on the policy in the space of 24 hours.

7%

The proportion of LGBTQ+ people who have experienced some form of conversion practice