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Canalside Press
66 Regent Studios
8 Andrews Rd
London E8 4QN
+44 (0)20 7278 2553
info@canalsidepress.com
www.canalsidepress.com

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Mallalieu Architects (21); Piers Taylor (22)

CONTRIBUTORS

MIRAJ AHMED is an artist who makes
work that includes painting, drawing,
photography and installation. His core
practice of painting plays with light
and darkness, mass and void. With a
background in Architecture, graduating
with DipArch from Canterbury College
of Art (1987), he subsequently worked
in a number of architectural practices
and collaborated extensively with Pierre
d’Avoine Architects, exploring overlaps
between art and architecture. He has
taught at the Architectural Association
since 2000, currently co-directing
Diploma 1 and was an Associate Lecturer
at Camberwell College of Art (2008-19)
and Design Fellow and Studio Master
at University of Cambridge (2006-14).
Miraj has exhibited his paintings and
installations at galleries and festivals
such as; Turner Contemporary, Margate;
MK Gallery, Milton Keynes; Nunnery
Gallery, London; London Art Fair; Fabbrika
Europa, Florence; Art Laguna, Venice;
Dilston Grove, London; The John Moores
Painting Prize Exhibition at the Walker
Art Gallery, Liverpool.

ANDREW CARR is an architect practising
with Brady Mallalieu Architects in
London. He trained at the Welsh School
of Architecture, where he taught for
over ten years, developing his thinking
on approaches to time which is often
the focus of this writing—most recently
a study of the work of Níall McLaughlin
Architects for arq (Architectural
Research Quarterly). Alongside the WSA
he has taught at Newcastle University,
The London School of Architecture and
is presently a guest reviewer to DS22 at
the University of Westminster.

ARIJIT CHATTERJEE is an architect
working at the intersection of
architectural research and practice.
His work focuses on situating the agency
of repair in relation to environmental
ecology and the geohumanities to
envision an ethical framework for
making. Arijit is an alumnus of the
School of Architecture, CEPT,
Ahmedabad; ENSAPB, Paris; and
the School of Architecture and Design,
Valparaíso. Arijit is a visiting tutor at
The Bengal Institute for Architecture,
Landscape and Settlements, Dhaka.

ALBA DEANGELIS (b.1988) is a
photographer who uses architecture as a
subject of her artistic work. Grown up in
Apulia, South Italy, she moved to Milan
in 2007 to study architecture, discovering
photography in the classrooms of the
Polytechnic University. Self-taught, she
has been working professionally since
2017 with Italian and international private
clients, publishing houses and magazines
like The New York Times, Taschen, ICON

Design. Her work has been exhibited
in Italy in many venues, and abroad for
the first time in a group exhibition in
2020 held at the International Center of
Photography in New York.

MARINA ENGEL founded and directed
the contemporary art programme at the
British School at Rome in the 1990s.
She then worked on contemporary art
projects in Switzerland before returning
to Rome, where she set up and curated
the BSR’s architecture programme from
2005 to 2020. Marina now works as a
freelance curator and writer, based in
Rome. She has an MA Honours degree
in History with Italian from Edinburgh
University.

J&L GIBBONS is an established and
visionary Landscape Architecture studio
based in London. The practice was
founded in 1986 by Johanna Gibbons,
Royal Designer for Industry, Fellow of
the Landscape Institute and a member
of the International Scientific Committee
for the World Forum on Urban Forests.
Neil Davidson became a partner in 2005
and is a Fellow of the Royal Society
of Arts, a member of the International
Scientific Committee, Masters of
Landscape, Libria, Rome and a trustee
of the Bethnal Green Nature Reserve,
host of the art and ecology project
Phytology. Both studied at Edinburgh
College of Art and have practiced and
taught internationally, including in
Norway, United States, Italy and the
Netherlands. The practice is renowned
for its innovative and holistic design
process combining research and
an open-minded approach to design.
In 2016 Johanna and Neil established
a social enterprise, Landscape Learn,
a new prototype for learning and
engaging with the landscape, sharing
knowledge between disciplines and
using the seasonality of nature to
structure an approach to adaptive
and immersive learning.

DUNCAN GIBBS is a sole practitioner
landscape architect based in Northern
New South Wales in Australia. He
has had over thirty years of design
experience, completing a wide range
of projects from large scale works
such as stormwater detention basins
that are dual purpose ecological and
recreational landscapes to very small
domestic courtyards. He has mostly
practiced as a sole practitioner but also
worked in contract work for large private
and government organisations. He has
also tutored & lectured in landscape
architecture and urban design at QUT,
RMIT & UNSW. Practice locations
have varied from Ames, Iowa (USA),
Melbourne, Cairns, Brisbane, Sydney,
Qatar to his current location in the
Gold Coast / Northern NSW region.

He maintains a keen interest in the
inquiry of design history and how
precedent and theory feeds into current
design thinking and practice.

JULIAN LEWIS is a co-founding architect
and director of architecture, urban
design and landscape practice East.
He is interested in how places influence
architecture and the designed public
realm, and what role architecture
can have in cities. Julian is one of
the Mayor of London Design Advocates
advising Sadiq Khan on the Good
Growth manifesto in terms of design
quality. Julian has been a member of
the Newham Design Review Panel since
its inception, and he also sits on the
Harrow and Hounslow Design Review
Panels. Julian has been teaching and
lecturing since 1992, including as Visiting
Professor at the school of architecture
in Mendrisio, Switzerland. Julian is an
Honorary Fellow at the University of
Nottingham Department of Architecture
and Built Environment, and is external
examiner at the University of Cambridge
Department of Architecture. Julian is
regularly invited to lecture nationally and
internationally on the work of East.

MARK PIMLOTT (Montréal, 1958)
is a designer, artist, writer, and
teacher, whose practice incorporates
photography, art for public places, and
interiors. He is the author of ‘Without
and Within: Essays on Territory and the
Interior’ (2007); and ‘The Public Interior
as Idea and Project’ (2016). Works include
‘World’, BBC Broadcasting House,
London (2013); ‘La scala’, Aberystwyth
(2003); and interiors of the Red House,
London (2001; 2011), in collaboration
with Tony Fretton architects. He studied
architecture at McGill University and
the Architectural Association, and
visual art at Goldsmiths’ College,
University of London. Currently, he is
Assistant Professor of Architectural
Design/Interiors at Delft University
of Technology. He lives and works in
The Hague.

CLAIRE POTTER is the author of four
poetry collections, most recently
Acanthus (2022) published by Giramondo.
Her poetry has been published in Poetry
Chicago, London Review of Books, New
York Review of Books, Best Australian
Poems, New Statesman, and Poetry
Ireland Review and translated into
Chinese and French. She studied at the
University of Western Australia, and the
University of NSW, and has a Masters in
Psychoanalysis from Université Paris VII
and in Psychoanalytic Infant Studies from
the Tavistock Institute. She teaches at the
Architectural Association London where
she also runs the AA Writing Centre.



The Experienced City

East

All the East projects included in this article, which comprise a mixture of buildings and landscapes, have been developed in the light of their relationship to their physical and social context. In taking a broad view on how architecture engages with the city, the projects that we have worked on in recent years have been increasingly rich and varied, and have led to outcomes that are sometimes both surprising and specific. Places are experienced in complex ways; all sizes and perspectives are countenanced in any view, and we like to design in ways that juxtapose different scales, strategy with detail, in design method and designed outcomes. Often this results in uneven distributions of architectural value, which we find very interesting at both urban and architectural scales.

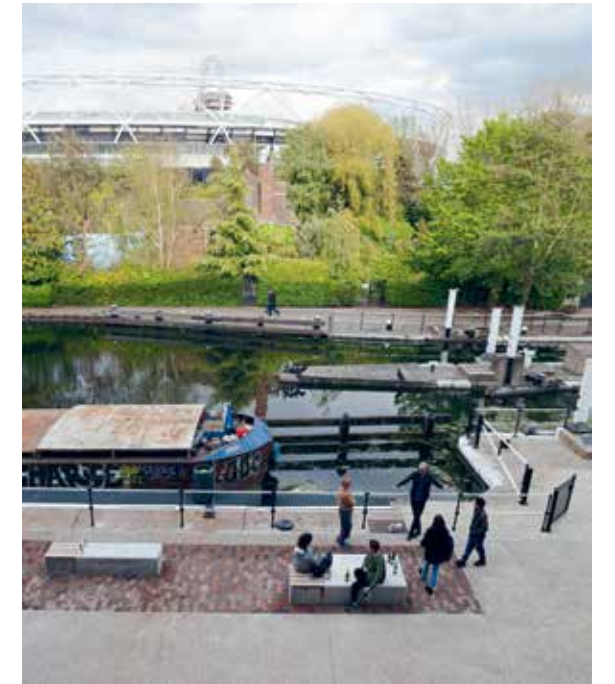
It is perhaps only relatively recently that clients have understood that East design buildings and landscapes; and often design them together. We can these days take some pleasure in sustaining the mixture of professionalism and naivete that comes with combining the specifics of client requirements and building regulations and we can remain open to the influence of places on any design narrative that can help shape a street, a façade, or the depth of a window sill.

There is also something interesting about the fact that as we continue to work on projects that merge buildings and landscape, the projects sometimes evolve over extended periods of time, in layers, with additional scope added, and even time built in to allow for testing the public realm as communities evolve. In this way, our projects start to feel more like *places* than buildings or landscapes.



STRATEGY AND DETAIL

Leyton High Road was required to be improved as an increasingly busy route, and as a new front door to the Olympic Parklands. Key measures range from the special to the sensible. The sensible measures are about managing car parking, improving and decluttering footway surfaces, and lighting, and helping to strengthen linkages throughout the High Road, and in particular, to the western areas, where links to the Olympic Parklands have been established with new bridges. Elsewhere, special measures are scoped and located to relate to the place. They include stainless steel bridge parapet cladding to reduce noise and reflect passers by, cast hand scaled souvenirs of key Olympic buildings, a 10m tall illuminated timber bird box sign reading 'Leyton', and a stainless steel fence with a cricket bat as handle.

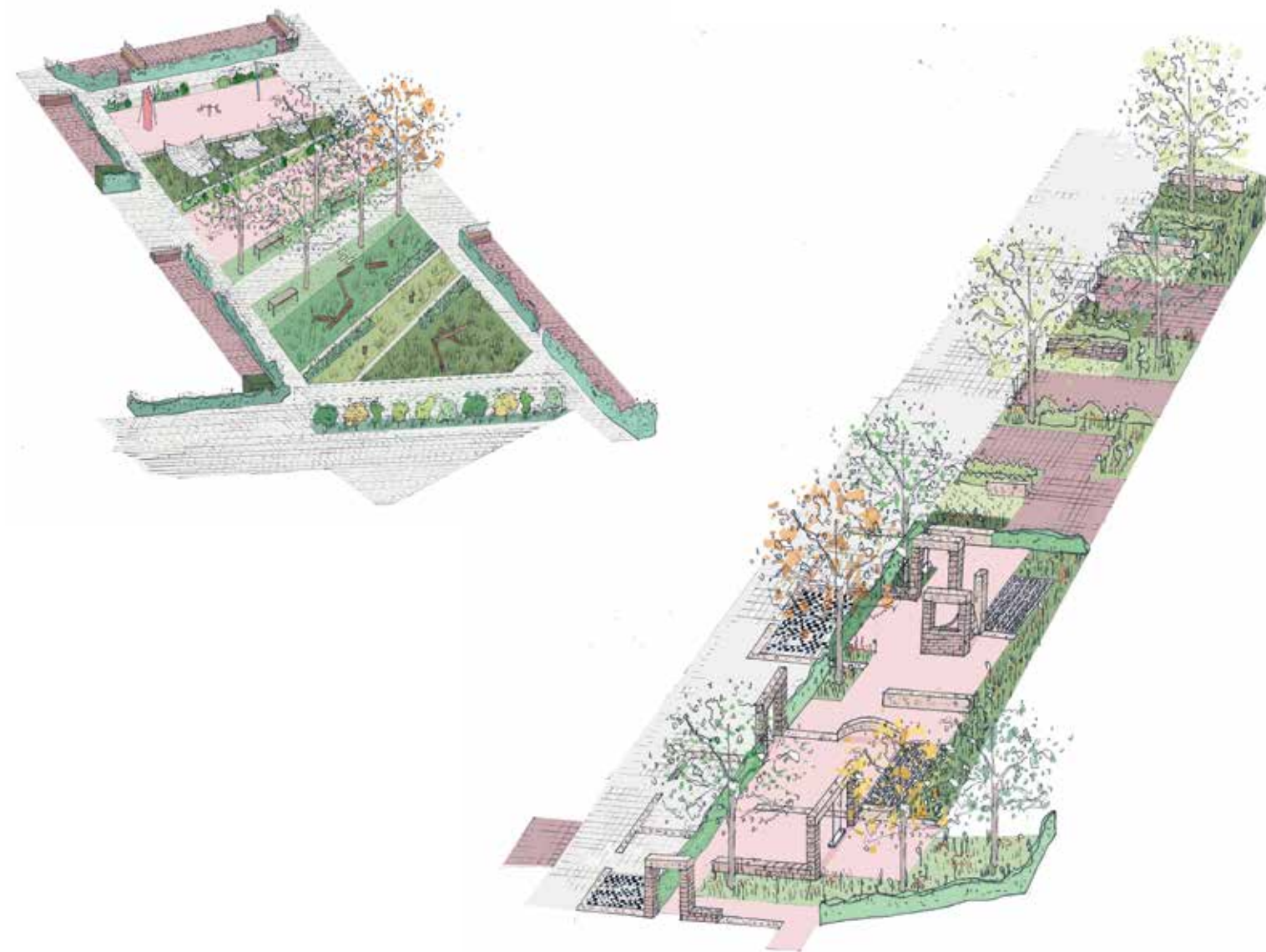


KNITTING-IN

The building at Hackney Wick is a roughly cubic figure; a strong prismatic form that offers a positive frontage at all sides. As well as fifteen affordable rent units, there is an employment space, bike storage, car ramp access, and two residential entrances at the ground floor; one of which engages closely with the adjacent play space for young children.

The brick building has been designed to be viewed obliquely, two elevations at a time, with horizontal ledges to give scale and a salmon clad façade to respond to Foremans' Fish Factory next door.





FLAXYARD

East designed 81 of the 168 units at the Flaxyard site in Peckham for Southwark Council. The scheme includes a refurbished school building and three new blocks. East worked with Adam Khan Architects and Levitt Bernstein on Southwark's Regeneration in Partnership Programme which aims to deliver 11,000 new council homes by 2043. East designed the public realm and landscape spaces for the wider area.

We re-purposed existing materials and structures found in the site as if they were precious archaeological finds, making a rough textured and distinctive public realm that extended into the ground floor façade of the building.





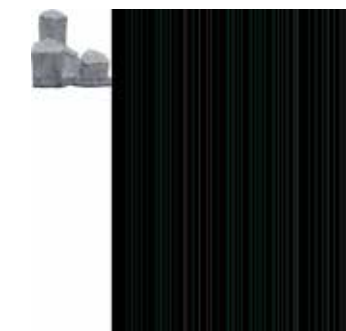
PARK AS SCHOOL

At Parish Wood Park we developed enhancements to the river channel, the creation of an area of wetland habitat (including standing water, a reed bed and wet marginal areas), along with improvements to access, paths and useability of the park as a whole. The introduction of a wildflower meadow and additional native planting has increased the biodiversity of the site.

Phase I involved negotiations with Our Lady of the Rosary Primary School to swap a section of land to enable the creation of a Bexley-owned entrance way to the east of the park, which was implemented in early 2009.



BRENT CROSS EXPLORATORY
At Brent Cross, for Argent Related, we designed a temporary park called the Brent Cross Exploratory, which anticipates an emerging swathe of residential neighbourhoods coming forward, re-uses parts of the site, and rehearses what people may want their public realm to provide.



KODAK PROJECTS

At the Kodak site at Harrow, we have been working over a period of 10 years on a series of project layers. First we provided an area action plan for the Local Authority to shape the delivery of housing, community and commercial uses, public realm, and transport infrastructure in Harrow, followed new housing, extra care homes, and an energy centre, alongside public realm and landscape designs. All of these projects are now on site. The latest layer is an art strategy with Michael Marriott, where we are adding a layer of playful infrastructure that recalls the colours of Kodak; often associated with holidays and feelings of happiness. Or as Roy Ayers puts it '...everyone loves the sunshine'.

Roots in Reality

A conversation between Julian Lewis of East and Patrick Lynch, London, August-October 2021

PATRICK LYNCH: As a way to start our conversation can you say something please about your involvement in AIII Magazine, life at North London Polytechnic in the 1980s, how you got into architecture, who you were taught by, how you ended up working with Florian Beigel, etc.?

JULIAN LEWIS: During the degree years that I spent at North London Polytechnic, from 1984-1986, the school of architecture and interior design was largely of a technical and practical character. The various *Mitchells* technical manuals (Finishes, Materials, Construction, etc.) produced at the time with the input of various staff members exuded a kind of friendly pragmatism through guidance and examples that were accessible and useful. The Victorian Holloway Road Polytechnic buildings themselves seemed sometimes more laboratory than studio in atmosphere with a substantial and well-staffed materials workshop, technical library and photography studio providing the kind of technical resource that a scientist might expect. Lectures were didactic in a formal staged theatre context, and lecturers were specialists in their field. Alan Blanc, who worked with Walter Segal, gave animated lectures on construction each of which were accompanied with hand drawn dimensioned and annotated ‘comic strip’ papers explaining, for example, how to make good details for resistance to water and wind. Krome Barratt, who studied as a civil engineer and became a painter (good paintings; look him up) taught art like someone who wasn’t sure what art was; which I appreciated a lot.

Architecture was approached a little like an anatomy class; each aspect—construction, materials, services, structures, analysed separately in teaching. As if the more we observed each part, the more we could know what architecture was made of and deduce its meaning.

A few tutors did manage to throw some light across the technical specifics in ways that started to reveal a shape for architecture as a whole. Jos Boys taught the second year, and her focus was on spaces for cultural uses, and art. Bound up in her studio briefs was an interest in public space. That seemed exciting precisely because the answer to the brief could not be found in a technical study, but instead derived through close looking at a site, a place, and in close conversation with real clients. Roger Bloomfield, an expert in building failures at Bickerdyke Allen asked the students to study and draw building failures observed in the street; an effective way to think about assembly and construction, as well as time.

These tutors; each getting in their own ways closer to aspects of use and social relevance in architecture were—in retrospect—a kind

of primer for a specific change in perspective at PNL. Instead of the—often—capricious post-modern ‘fun’ at the time, mixed with hi-tech highlights, all of which seemed to bypass architecture and instead go straight to images of it, a new critical discourse emerged that located buildings as part of life, rather than at their own centres. One source of this discourse was in the newspaper called the AIII Times. Until recently I had imagined this predated the 9H Journal, though of course 9H actually started in 1980. Nevertheless, the AIII publication was an influential and compelling introduction to European architecture; and to ideas about architecture. The articles presented buildings that were described not as ideals but as ideas. Richard Padovan on Dom Hans Van Der Laan, Loos, Florian Beigel’s Half Moon Theatre, Walter Segal’s self-build, Ricola by H&DM, Ginzburg’s Narkomfin. Many of these pieces gave a jolt of freshness and clarity; they took a position.

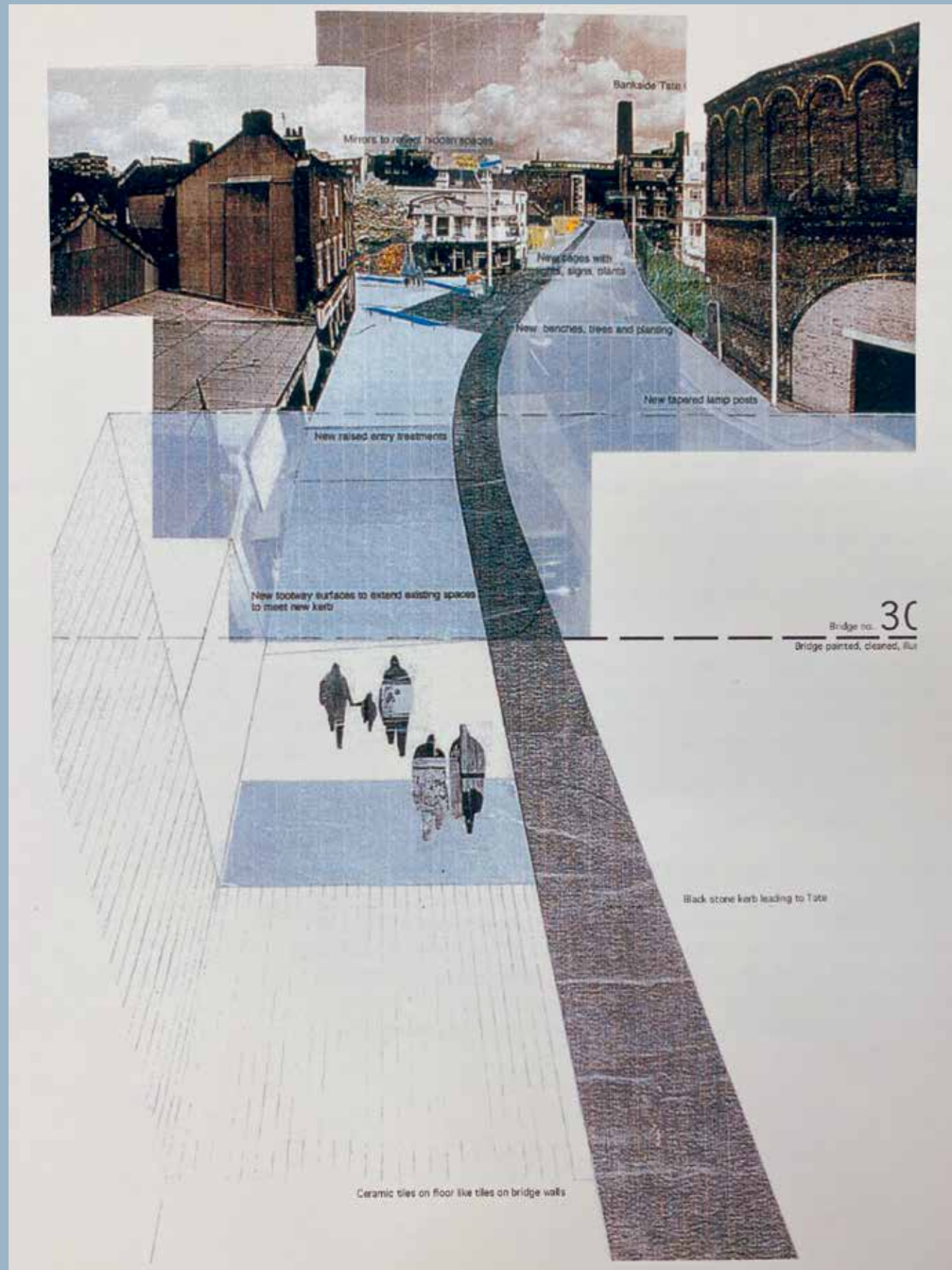
This was coming from a group of people involved in publishing the paper which included Nasser Golzari, Nicolas Hobbs and Amanda Penn, among others.

The most influential player in this critical discourse however—at least for me—was the ARU (the Architecture Research Unit) led by Florian Beigel. His office was situated in a ground floor corner of the Polytechnic itself, (the physical juxtaposition of teaching and practice seemed thrillingly audacious at the time); and the space was used for designing, meeting and making prototypes related to teaching and projects; the studio itself a kind of ongoing architectural project.

I visited the Half Moon Theatre on site in 1985; to see Florian present a building that suddenly seemed like architecture. A theatre described as a street; steel shutters presented as curtains, and a steel roof and truss cast as a night sky above a processional carnival. Concrete blockwork abstracted the high street; windows made familiar with concrete sills gave theatre goers views to a stage that led through to a Young Peoples theatre; a Loosian cube adjacent to the existing cemetery. Peter Blundell Jones and Walter Segal were both fans of the Half Moon; each in their own way recognising an architecture that was pragmatic, rigorous, authentic, and human. A language of ideas in forms that sought roots in reality.

I sought Florian out for tutorials and worked with him for a few years during my study, and then after my part 2 in around 1988/1989. We had a rather atelier- like experience in the office together, very close and intense. Ideas were discussed as first principles. Suresh A’ Raj was there, with Philip Christou, and there was a little overlap with Adam Caruso. Florian introduced me to many key architects: to Walter Segal (I made a drawing of Segal’s Compayne Gardens for the Festival Hall exhibition; a way to remember a building for ever), Scharoun’s Library and Philharmonie Berlin, Lewerentz (via detailing

Opposite: Link to the Tate, approx 1997





for a gallery interior; glass held against a wall with clamps), Hans Van der Laan (proportions in terms of human perception) when I attended a workshop with Richard Padovan, organised by Florian and Wilfred Wang. Luigi Snozzi and Jacques Herzog both spoke at PNL for lectures invited by ARU in the late 80s.

PL: That’s very interesting, gives a real sense of the vitality of the scene in Islington at the time. You mentioned the other week, when we visited your projects at Hackney Wick and Borough, your dissatisfaction with working for others and your joy at meeting Mark Pimlott, and of winning the commission in Borough. Can you tell us a bit more about that moment too please and why “landscape” and ordinary things attracted you?

JL: After having spent a year working with Florian after my studies, over the next years I worked for quite a few practices; including Fosters, Kit Allsopp, Alsop and Störmer, and MacCormac Jamieson Prichard (MJP); but there were several others. I rarely stayed for longer than a few months at these practices, though some were for a few years. The recession around this time, the early 90s, was partly to blame for me moving around a lot, but I suspect it was also because I was a poor employee; not really able to ‘lock into’ the ethos of the office, and I think I was probably more fascinated with the people and the strangeness of the preoccupations of the office rather than the work itself. For example there was a peculiar kind of elaboration of detail that projects at MJP were ‘subjected’ to; a characteristic of design iteration that was referred to by someone I knew as ‘knitting’. (This was Tony Swannell; in a traffic jam; perhaps 30 years ago, he delightedly saw me in the next car; wound his window down, and shouted, even as he drove away, “are you still doing the knitting Julian?”).

I won’t say that this was an uninteresting time, or that I didn’t gain valuable working experience, but the fact was that I felt only partly awake in these contexts.

I entered the European competition in 1994 with a friend as a way to get closer to some of the things I felt close to in terms of design interests; the site was in Marl, Germany, where the project provided a cultural centre and new housing in a forest context. This was 1994. We got first prize, and the money paid for a trip to India. We didn’t get to

build it because of the economy requiring money to be pulled back into Berlin at the time. Or maybe someone did build it... I should check.

The win also provided a moment of confidence to break away from working at other practices and set up on my own. Even without any work available and an office at home, just the action of being ready for business, was entirely empowering, and enlivening. The feeling of experiencing a kind of motivation and privilege in designing architecture in a context of my choosing is something I retain today. The first project I was asked to do was an advertising agency, which was a real pleasure. I knew the client, and the area of London, but the opportunity was exciting because of the feeling of direct design responsibility being a new experience. You could say it was an adventure into the known.

I was teaching at Manchester for a few years. I had no money; and barely enough to pay for my ticket there, and I stayed over in the evening sharing a flat with a teaching colleague. Kit Allsopp was there, and I worked with him for a while. His approach to detail was the very opposite to ‘knitting’. It was about designing walls, windows and roofs to throw water away, and specifying materials to be able to move without cracking. The refreshing clarity of these buildings bordered on the laconic.

I got together with Mark Brearley after winning the European competition. We met at the AA when presenting the projects at an event entitled *Atopos* chaired by David Turnbull and Jeff Kipnis. There is still a video available in the AA web site, and there is an amusing moment when a young Adam Caruso berates Dominic Papa for being over deterministic. Mark had made a competition proposal with Peter Beard, and I liked his work, and the way he spoke about experience.

We set up East at Mark’s house. The name relating to an intention to not use individual names, and to relate to a part of London that seemed out of bounds once you went past the Thames Barrier. We shared a distrust of the way architecture is often perceived in isolation, as an only value to the city. Mark knew the areas well; and had been documenting them in on foot surveys for years. His approach: focussing on the place, documenting uses, skirting around fences, car parks, industrial compounds, yards, marshes, caravans, influencing local authorities to review Unitary Development Plans, and looking at plans as actions rather than maps, was influential for me in finding a way to



appreciate places as a living territory for architecture. And in turn to more compellingly find value in architecture by, perhaps paradoxically, moving away from it as a hermetic discipline, and into places.

We won the Borough High Street project for the Future Southwark programme; managed by the Architecture Foundation. Walking along this historic street in London, as if seen for the first time, to decide what a street might need, and what a brief required; a site without boundaries or fences; a public territory to find value within, was an exhilarating experience. We realised how contested the public realm is, and it became clear that there are many specialists who knew about specific parts of the street; the sub base, the traffic, the lighting. But it was up to us to decide what to make of it. Ideas were coined to identify ways to describe the language of a design approach for a public realm that already existed. They covered ideas about splicing in, (like a kind of urban marquetry), and judging when to make a foreground, and when to leave as a ‘decent’ background. In this way we found ways to manage our own design appetites; and allow some degree of anonymity in the design outcomes. Repair of paving. Lights fixed to buildings. Painted street furniture. The location of a feeder pillar in the footway to allow access. Elsewhere, bold or ‘showy’ measures could be located; a large mirror to reflect Southwark Cathedral. A large, illuminated sign naming the place. Terrazzo mats, designed (in conjunction with Paul Elliman), to celebrate and name public amenities and shops. (Particularly enjoyable to have used public money on mats naming private spaces, in public footways, giving access to publicly accessible shops that are used for public access every day. Even better for the names to change while the mats stay the same; an increasingly rich trace of history and identity beneath your feet; even changing today, 25 years later). Large granite quadrants to reflect an interest in enhancing the status of the pedestrian public realm in proximity to vehicles.

You mentioned Mark Pimlott. Our relationship with him came later although we had been in dialogue with him over many years. His sensibility to place, and identity is one we identify with closely, though his skill in communication and drawing is hard to match. He was a

collaborator for the Rainham Village projects, where we made two urban pieces with him. One was ‘Railing Hall’; a community garden using fencing that evokes the spirit of Rainham Hall (and in form, Hardwick Hall). A kind of rhetoric of civic image, geared towards enhancing public access to something special. And there was the Cardinal Seat; a granite quadrangle acting as companion to the adjacent War Memorial. The Seat is inscribed with words marking the faces that address north, south, east and west, and it marks a new public square at the heart of the mediaeval Village. The design process was very rapid; a conversation, a site visit, some sketches, and these were then built with the Council; with East marking up suppliers’ fabrication drawings. We visited these again as an office recently, and there is something quite amazing about the way these pieces can be *monumental*, whilst remaining socially and spatially open; their value contingent on their use. We are always looking to find another project to collaborate with him on.

PL: This sounds like a very fruitful period in what was otherwise, as you suggest, a pretty arid period on British architecture (all that pretend technology in Hi-Tech and fake everyday in “community architecture”?). Ironically, Florian had progressed from the study of Frei Otto (his masters at UCL) to investigating Walter Segal, i.e. had shifted from interest in civil engineering led mega-structures (as a metaphor for anarchical non-programmatic design?), to anarchical self-build tectonics. One can see therefore where the strongly material, and everyday haptic qualities of simple architectural materials used without elaboration came from and became magical in the theatre project. At Cambridge at the time this interest in the haptic, bodily character of spatiality was being called “phenomenology”. Later, of course, he moved to London and met Peter Carl (2009–2016) and there was anyway a rich tradition of students moving between the two schools eg Ellis Woodman and Rod Heyes et al did RIBA part 1 at Cambridge and their diploma at the Met; David Grandorge etc, going the other way. Were there any explicit theoretical links to philosophy in the school at the time? Was Bob Harbison an influence on you? Or were you influenced by writing on art e.g. the phenomenology of Don Judd et al? And at what point did you intersect with Mark Brearley and the Cambridge tradition? What did you talk about?! Did you start to work together immediately? Or was it work as talk followed by drawings? Or drawings first?

This page: Borough High Street sign, 1996
Opposite: River Places Cartier Bresson at Rainham, approx 1995



JL: It's interesting to think about what kind of theoretical identity was emerging at PNL at the time, though I increasingly distrust my memories as accurate as they keep changing as I get older. History lives! I remember people talking about *authenticity* a lot, and I read quite a lot of existentialist writing (though not as much as you I imagine); Heidegger, Sartre. But I think the empirical tended to supersede the intellectual at the time. The art of Dan Graham, Judd, Lee Friedlander, Gordon Matta-Clarke, were becoming visible at the time and all resonated with something human in architecture (and they have continued to do so).

I don't think I ever really intersected with the Cambridge tradition in my dialogues with Mark, as I felt (you'd have to ask him if that's true) that he had somewhat rejected an ethos of philosophising and turned instead to a passionately enacted form of direct action; one that circled around architecture and held it at bay as the central issue. He was busy documenting East London places, scrutinising Unitary Development Plans, compounds and fences, Port of London Authority Spaces; an urban activism that was importantly spatial in interest as well as socio-economic. His focus was on research, influence, and industry. Walks came first. We went for a lot of walks around East London river towns. This experience helped to develop conversations about places that located the specific role of architecture as only one part of the wider social and economic conditions. Mark wrote—uniquely I think—without jargon and was very good at coining assertions about urban design from first principles. Things like 'splicing in' and 'decent background' are examples of using a colloquial reading of something that explains an urban strategy. Our conversations about architecture were therefore set in the context of these kinds of spaces and values. Simple forms. Straightforward spaces. Directness almost to the point of naivety. One of his studio briefs was titled 'big fat and red'; a brief encapsulated in the title. Discussions with him about meanings of architecture tended to go along the lines of 'it is what it is'. Meaning that a pile of coal was just that and a spade a spade etc.

We did talk about Peter Carl's writings on play and the importance of play in architecture. Judd was later a reference for sculptural and spatial clarity and continues to be. East visited Marfa, Texas with our students about 10 years ago which was the best way to see simple sheds in large spaces (like those in Belvedere that we studied), and the impact of those spatial qualities; the juxtaposition of precision and looseness, is something we remember today. And thinking of some of the work the students did, when I and co-directors Judith Lösing and Dann Jessen held drawing workshops for the students, on site at the Thunderbird Motel, in Marfa, and asked them to make paper models of the spaces they had seen; there is something so fresh about the way specific conditions can be represented so differently.

I taught with Mark for several years at UEL and focussed on industrial projects set in places like Tilbury and Erith. Architecture seen through this lens was more distilled; precise and charged in value in curating new and expressive characteristics amidst constraints and conditions that were givens. The limitations: the edges, roads, fences, and other compromising circumstances started to become aspects of architectural study, and even fascination. The handmade drawings we made together at the time reflected this condition; using photographs with propositions cut into them, with text added to highlight what was shown. Sometimes drawings were line backgrounds; with bits of photocopies highlighting a patch of municipal planting or a road, the proposal drawn into this scene; expressing equivalence of unlike conditions in proximity. These drawings were efforts to scope interest and locate generosity. They were intended to capture intentions. A photo by Henri-Cartier

This page: Circle 33 AF competition at Bow Road, 2001
Opposite: Borough High Street day and night, 1996



Bresson of a French family picnic was collaged into Rainham's landfill mound. A plan made of smashed plates showed our attitude to 'repairing' the urban condition of The Potteries in Stoke-on-Trent (we didn't win but they asked us if they could have the drawing), and a model portrayed *as lucky* the number of islands in Stratford to assert the positive condition of what is often perceived as its main drawback, the severance of infrastructure.

PL: Can you tell us a bit about how the Borough project led to the portfolio of projects that we are publishing in this issue of the JoCA? You mentioned meeting also Judith and Dann—can you tell us about the structure of the office, the range of things you do, i.e. Landscape projects and buildings. I guess I'm interested in both the procedural aspects of running a hybrid studio, and the underlying design ethos. You mentioned hand-drawing and walking, and I think also collage as an actual design method, no?

JL: The Borough High Street project helped us to define value in architecture with conceptual precision, and to consider how some aspects of design are specific to their place, and some generic. Along with several other of our early projects it helped us to understand the relationship between buildings and spaces as an architectural project.



I met Dann and Judith while teaching at UEL with Mark. After Mark left East to go to work with Richard Rogers at the GLA's new Architecture and Urbanism Unit, it felt right to reconsolidate; no longer in the form of a partnership, but as a company led by a trio focussed around a critical design dialogue; providing a vehicle to share and test ideas together. We have worked and taught together for over 20 years, and our working method is a critical and organic one. We have two senior associates and a mixture of architectural and landscape staff. We ask each other questions and trust each other to discuss ideas that are not fully developed. Each of us, in different ways, is interested in sustaining a critical freshness in the context of constrained budgets and client expectations. We are anti-cynical realists who aim to locate generosity in our projects to enhance architectural quality and social value. We share the excitement of a project becoming more convincing through dialogue, and sometimes surprise ourselves when we see what architectural form that leads to.

We have always walked as a practice. Walking helps you to talk, to think and to see. It is invaluable as a design tool, and often in ways that are unpredictable. Visiting and walking around a place or a site is a special act, a kind of privilege of the job, and in doing so you feel especially sensitive to experiencing what is around you.



Practically speaking, there is something about the nature of our more urban projects that demands a whole day to visit a site. If you go as a group, by the end of the day you feel like an expert in something, though its not clear what. For many years we asked our students to walk before designing, and this is something we continue to try to do in our practice; though it seems to get harder to find the time to do it in the way we used to because of the increasingly frenetic nature of architectural practice. That's one of the good things about teaching; time goes at a different speed; and you can choose to spend time looking and walking without feeling the need to check your emails.

Drawings are important to us; especially hand drawings which are quick to make and precise in intent. This is because apart from talking and writing, drawings (I know I am preaching to the converted in this interview) are where we think about architecture. The role of drawings is still largely misunderstood as holding a resolved presentational status. We know that even the most slick CGI's these days are often made in advance of ideas. All drawings—even surveys—are propositions, and their status as a provocation for testing ideas being considered even as they are drawn is underestimated in value. In the early 90s we developed a collage approach to making drawings that placed equivalence on the existing situation (often selected parts of a photocopy of a photograph) and spliced into these coloured shapes, with text and lines that suggested the form of intervention (a building, a section of paving, a wall) without being too prescriptive about its specific design. The use of text made it clear that the idea of the design was not entirely reliant on the visual, and the hand made quality helped to communicate a degree of provisionality. We still make collage-like drawings, though with more of a mixture of hand made and computer-generated images. You ask about the ethos of our office. I suppose the drawings are a

symbol of this; images that seek to locate interest in the city, and to make architecture that is not just about architecture, but about social life. Architecture seen through the lens of places enables us to be precise and rigorous about architecture itself, and the intensity of architectural value may be unevenly distributed across places.

We have not followed the more traditional trajectory of an architect's practice, one which starts with small projects and gradually grows the project size as well as the office size. Rather, we started *big* with very few people; at the scale of city landscapes and their urban potential, and from there we were able to choose how to curate our architectural interest across a range of scales. This sharpened our ideas and attitudes about architecture, and we have developed the office around a consequent broad praxis which operates across urban strategies, considering the role of housing in the city, shaping living spaces, designing boundaries, documenting the spatial texture of the experienced city, accommodating community use; all set around an interest in public space and the civic value of design. The office remains at the medium size of a studio; around or under 20 people, and that has remained stable for many years now; people know each other's names, and the communication is more organic than systematic in management terms. In other words, enabling a dialogue still.

Above: Charlton Retail Park Montage from street 1998
Opposite: Sketch by Nadine Coetzee, one of East's Diploma students at the Met. The drawing uses a 'camouflage of pavement' to devise an architectural language that traverses the monumental and the domestic.

