

MacEwen Award 2019

Star and Shadow Cinema, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Knostrop Weir Bridge, Leeds

Burbridge Close, London

Bethnal Green Mission Church, London

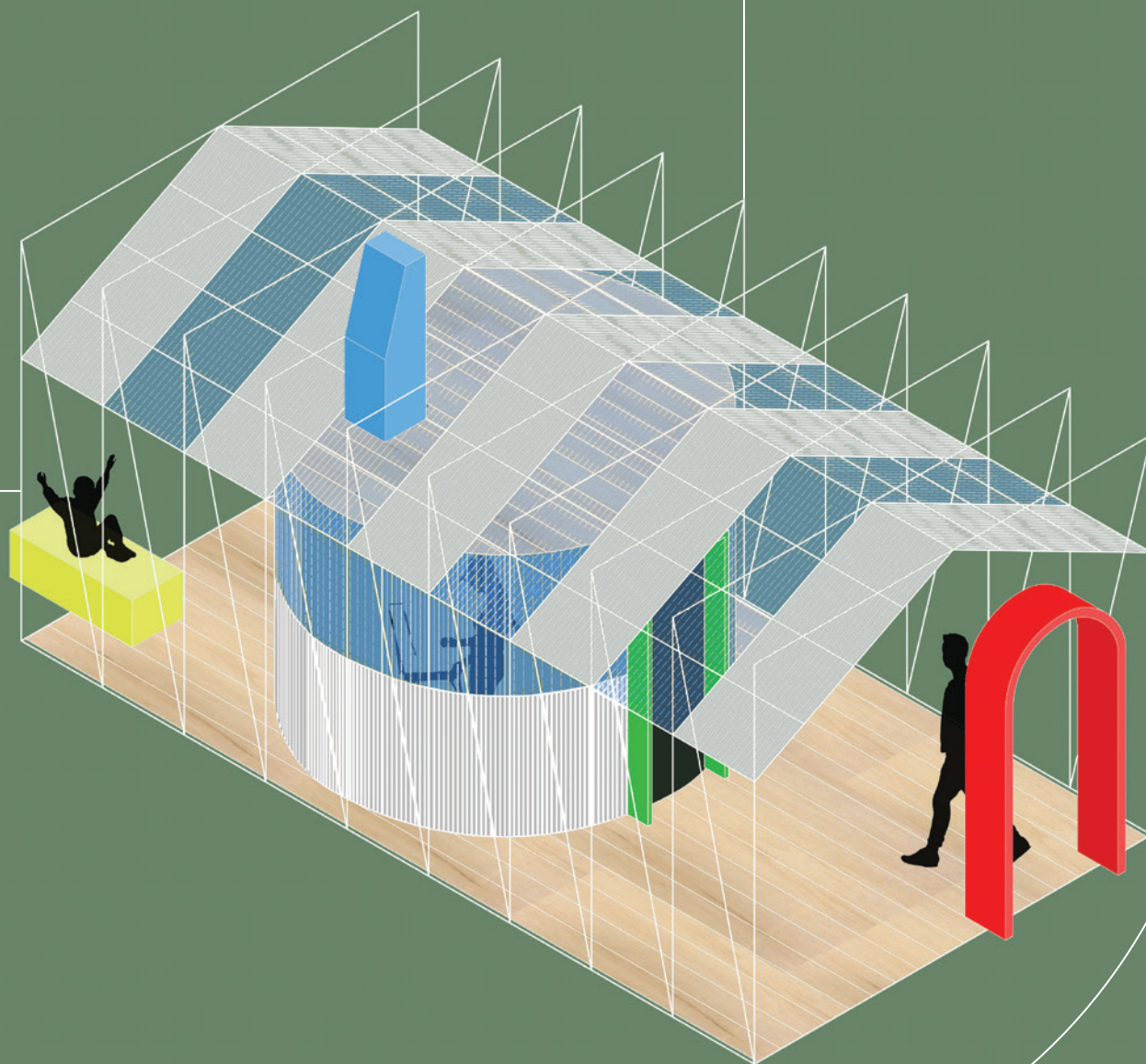
Bridgend Inspiring Growth, Edinburgh

Plus eight shortlisted projects

**The RIBA Journal**

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# 1: Buildings

Our buildings this month are all drawn from the 2019 MacEwen Award. This is our fourth annual winter quest to unearth places that are of maximum social benefit, across society.

Our winner is the shoestring-budget conversion of a nondescript industrial building into a cultural and community focus for which the word 'cinema' seems inadequate. Our commendations involve an inspired work combining architecture and big civil engineering, a church in a box of delights, a derelict farmstead turned training centre, and a companionable mews of tiny

houses for older people. Our shortlist is equally impressive and varied.

It's always worth remembering Malcolm and Anni MacEwen. He was a campaigning journalist and former editor of this magazine who in the 1970s helped to reset the RIBA's attitude to wider society. She was a town planner who was among the first to tackle urban motor traffic by positively balancing the needs of transport and residence. Both were concerned with the rural – especially national parks – as well as the urban. We hope they would approve of the projects in this issue. ●

**ONLY ON RIBAJ.COM**  
Castle Vale estate contained 4,800 homes in 34 towers six miles from the city centre. It was an example of what can happen when there isn't an architect at the helm and instead you simply focus on producing the numbers

**Kate Macintosh is still studying housing:**  
[ribaj.com/kate-macintoshreading-housing](http://ribaj.com/kate-macintoshreading-housing)

**Below**  
Writ in Water, page 36



NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES: ANDREW BUTLER

# All star turns

Everyone involved in MacEwen winner Star and Shadow Cinema is an enthusiast or expert – but all are volunteers. MawsonKerr was called in to make its latest, permanent, venture happen

Words: Jan-Carlos Kucharek Photographs: Arto Polus

Join the party: the hireable event space, a sound-insulated box within the former carpet store, has helped make Star and Shadow viable.

**Right** Volunteers expertly fabricated the venue's striking sign.



We admire the way they sourced material from all over town

Judge Hugh Pearman

## Star and Shadow Cinema

Newcastle-Upon-Tyne

MawsonKerr Architects for Star and Shadow

Being shown around the Star and Shadow Cinema one cold December afternoon it's hard to keep track of all the people speaking to me at once. Between architects and the venue volunteers there's half a dozen accompanying me around, a cohort added to every time we enter another part of the building by others more than ready to add their tuppence-worth to the story of a space born of nothing and built by them on a shoestring budget. I seem to be being carried through the place on nothing but a wave of effusive energy; which is as it should be for something conjured up on a wing and a prayer.

This is the third iteration of the cinema in the city. A group of film buffs, keen to have their own venue to show independent, art and 'fringe' movies and documentaries, set up in the Side Cinema on the city's Quayside decades ago and garnered enough interest to make it just viable. It was then forced in the late 90s to squat in an abandoned Tynes prop store in Stepney Bank. All was well until the regeneration of the city's industrial Ouseburn, which drove Star and Shadow out again. But this time the local council recognised the





critical mass of this volunteer collective and lent them the cash to take a mortgage out on one of its sites, a former carpet store further north in Sandyford, to finally give it the home the itinerant cinema needed.

But you might not think that at first glance. 'Even though we've been up and running since last May, we still get people knocking on the door and asking us "when are you guys going to open?"' quips Dan, one of Star and Shadow's more seasoned volunteers. That might be because the lobby space, filling a good length of the former shopfront, remains a work in progress – despite hosting local council surgeries, Extinction Rebellion meets and, on the day we visit, an International Migrants Day event. This, along with the rest of the building, has been formed from materials ripped out of the previous venue. That plasterboard you see, recycled; the OSB board there, repurposed. It's unheated, but not for much longer. Star and Shadow held an event here recently to thank local sponsors helping it get this far. 'They thought it was cold too, so they clubbed together and gave us £25,000 to do something about it,' says Dawn, another volunteer, beaming. It seems that their can-do attitude is infectious.

There is absolutely no hierarchy to Star

#### Credits

**Client** Star and Shadow  
**Builder** Star and Shadow volunteers

**Architect** MawsonKerr  
**Structural engineer**

James Christopher Consulting

**Acoustic consultant** Apex Acoustics

#### IN NUMBERS

**£1.1m**  
overall cost including  
building purchase

**100**  
percent volunteer run

**632**  
volunteer hrs/week to run

**Above** The café's wall to the 'winter garden' was formed from donated glass.

**Below left** The bar is formed from the timber floor of the previous venue.

**Below right** The unheated lobby/reception runs along the former storefront.

and Shadow says Michelle; the opinions of each of its 360 active volunteers, who put in to the 632 volunteer hours a week it takes to run the place, carry equal weight. It was something that MawsonKerr, having set a low fixed fee and then being appointed, was initially concerned about: the idea it would be having to engage with more heads than necessary. The feeling might have been mutual. The cinema volunteers had always done everything off their own back but the bigger picture got the better of them. They didn't just want a cinema but an events venue and bar that could be hired out, with kitchen and gallery space between them. 'We knew we had to meet loads of technical requirements and just didn't have the expertise,' recalls volunteer Dan. 'So we were brought onboard as facilitators, initially at workshops where literally everyone turned up to put their oar in,' continues architect Dan (Kerr). The experience can't have been bad; everyone's jocular, like they've all been reading from the same hymn sheet for a while.

Those technical demands, and accessibility and planning conditions around acoustics, generated MawsonKerr's simple proposal for two independent sections: a bar/venue space and a cinema, with a separating 'service' space of kitchen, gallery space and projection room sandwiched between them. All beneath the warehouse's portal frame – 'the same concept as the Sage Gateshead!' In the conditioned, hermetically sealed and incredibly well insulated space, a sound-





**Right** Donated tiles in the washrooms create beauty from contingency.

**Above** Roof off layout

savvy volunteer cranks the sound system up to 10,000W to demonstrate how effectively that repurposed plasterboard cavity wall soundproofs it, assuring me that it'll cope with 20,000W if local ravers demand.

'We had to get the acoustics right as it was a pre-requisite for the operating licence,' self-styled project manager Bev tells me; who, incidentally, ensured volunteers were given healthy and safety inductions to allow them to work on site. 'If the acoustics failed we couldn't hire it out, so we had to get it right first time,' she explains. So they threw all the money they had at it – and money they didn't. In the cinema German artist Annette Knol designed an artwork on the screen wall and a suspended ceiling light installation that volunteers built on the floor and slowly raised into place.

'Basically, we commissioned an artwork and built a cinema round it so we could get

£60,000 from the Arts Council,' says Dan the volunteer. 'We think it's the only UK cinema that's been funded by them.'

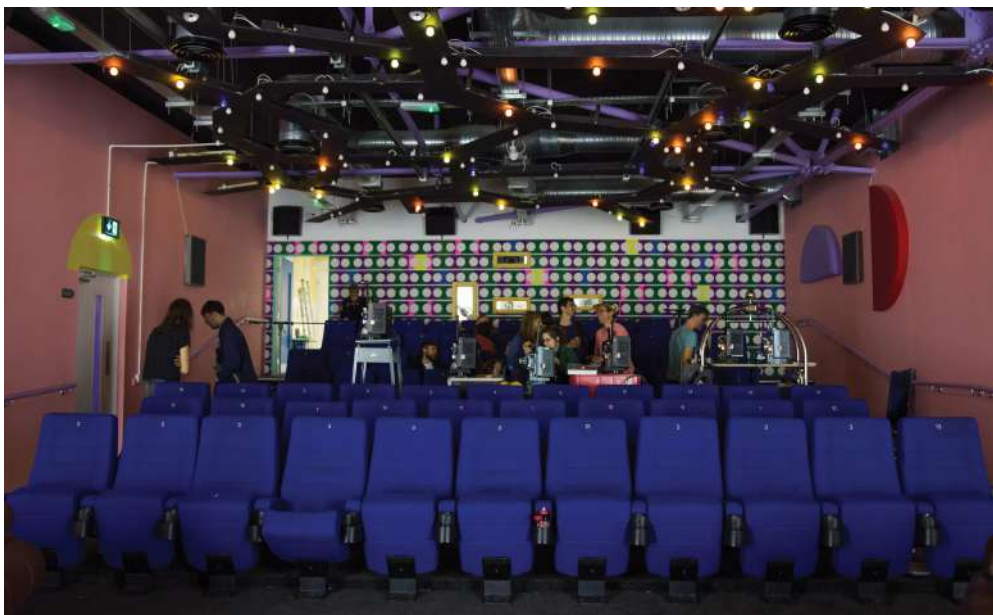
The financial ingenuity of Star and Shadow is part of a much broader skill. The café glass wall was created from glass offcuts from local builders' merchants, which they built timber frames around and installed. To change floor levels, 50 tonnes of reclaimed concrete went in as hard core. Loo pans and partitions were requisitioned from the old building and a call-out went to the community for wall tiles. What's installed now looks like Hundertwasser might have grouted it in. The beautiful resin-coated bar was made from recycled parquet floor; and Michelle's favourite detail, the sinewy, hand-formed railings to its winter garden overlooking the park, were formed poetically from the security bars on the previous place.

'Our motto – well, there's a lot of them



actually – is 'with, not for'; we don't programme for people but with them,' Bev tells me. Which accounts for the frenzy of activity – the cinema, the dance-nights and gigs, 'Fix-It' workshops, political gatherings, minority social events and asylum-seeker work experience. Everyone is invested; everyone has ownership.

And their ambition is unassailable. Dan is already eyeing-up the vacant council-owned site behind the cinema as possible future co-housing, once all that venue hire has paid the mortgage off. And why not? The volunteers have already demonstrated the power of collective action and are immensely proud of what's been achieved. 'We've managed to take a part of the city and make it a community-locked arts space in perpetuity,' says Bev. 'It's a "Creative Commons" in physical form.' Our MacEwen winner has just stepped out of its own shadow. Watch this space. ●



**Left** The new cinema, with its artist-designed ceiling, is now a high-spec facility.

**Below** The winter garden gives views over the park and has become a social space in its own right.



# Downsizers upgraded

Peter Barber's skill in filling small urban gaps with sociable, contextual homes fosters right-sizing to please everyone

Words: Hugh Pearman Photographs: Morley von Sternberg

## Burbridge Close Becontree

Peter Barber Architects for BeFirst

I'm nosing around at the back of some garages in east London. Naturally, this seems suspicious. Accordingly a beefy man in an equally beefy SUV (note to future archivists: this means sports utility vehicle, an automotive fad of the early decades of the 21st century) pauses on his way in, lowers his window, and gives me a Hard Stare. What's my business there? – the stare suggests. I explain that I'm interested in the little terrace of housing just

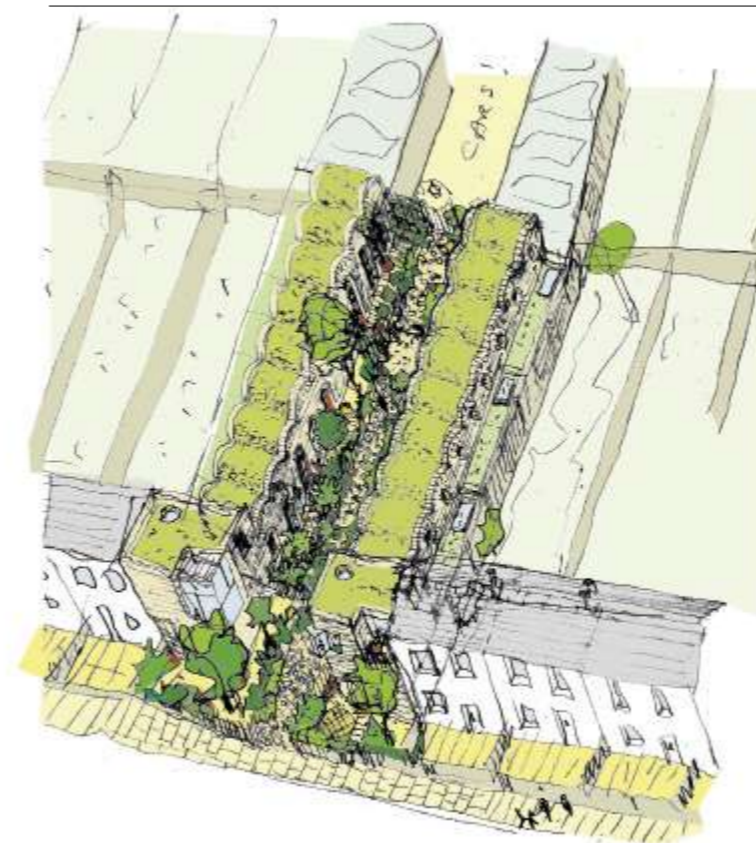
behind the garages, and happen to know its architect, Peter Barber. The Hard Stare relaxes. It seems Barber's name is OK in these parts. Beefy man becomes helpful. Barber has done another, identical, set of housing in the street behind, he offers, and gives me directions. It's the first I've heard of it so I set off to see and so it is: an identical little mews behind another set of garages. It's so new the builders have clearly only just left.

Set in the heart of the 1920s Becontree Estate, arguably still the world's largest council estate which was conceived as 'homes for heroes' nearly a century ago, Burbridge Close –

**Below** Homes have individually coloured front doors, and the wavy roofline echoes vaulted ceilings inside.

and its clone Tarling Close – are the first two of three infill developments by Peter Barber Architects which show the practice's skill in conjuring homes out of restricted sites which draw on successful examples from the past.

Each is a little mews of six single-storey homes for over-60s placed either side of a narrow alley. A further pair of two-storey two-bed houses act as a gateway from the main street. Built by Barking and Dagenham's development company BeFirst, this is a development which has successfully tempted older people to downsize (or right-size in the current jargon), so freeing up larger homes



**Left** Barber aerial sketch shows relationship of terraces to the garages behind.

Part of east London heritage, people live a lot of life historically on the front step

Judge Yuli Cadney-Toh

for families. Rather than the standard flats in blocks of sheltered housing, it offers a congenial environment where everyone gets a front door and front yard on a cheerful little street. The front room ceilings are vaulted as the facades indicate. In a way it is an anti-loneliness design, encouraging interaction. One resident reveals that it's not unknown for them to break into song when they're out front together. Barber points out that it is based on similarly hugger-mugger 19th century precedents such as Choumert Square in Peckham.

Later, Jennie Coombes of BeFirst explains the rationale. The blocks of garages, built by



It's a typically Barberish exercise... It has an almshouses feel and deals with issues of loneliness

Judge Hugh Pearman

#### Ground floor plan

- 1 Main street
- 2 Traffic-free alley
- 3 Typical front yard
- 4 Reorganised/existing garages
- 5 Typical single storey dwelling
- 6 Ground floors of two-storey dwellings



**Below** The return of the traffic-free alley: little front yards make a congenial environment for older people.

the Greater London Council on what were formerly short cross-streets, had fallen into disrepair, many used only for storage and so targeted for break-ins. A deal was made with the Becontree Estate residents: if half of the garage sites were given over for these little mews, then the remaining garages would be refurbished and made secure. It's a half-way-house variant of what is happening all over London right now as space-hungry and little-used local authority garages are replaced by new social housing.

Peter Barber Architects has evolved a highly distinctive approach to its housing, and if you know that, you'd immediately recognise this as his. Both our judges and local councillors point out how it also draws on the tradition of the old East End of open front doors and people sitting chatting on their front door steps. They are effectively bungalows, but have more the air of almshouses. As for the residents, so far so good: they say it's a splendidly sociable way to live. This is urban densification with a human touch, ingeniously carried out for the benefit not only of those living there, but also those whom it helps to house elsewhere.

Beyond that, it introduces an interesting new (or old, if you prefer) housing type into what is otherwise a fairly uniform and loosely-structured interwar estate which nonetheless enjoys a strong sense of community identity, and is now gearing up for its centenary in 2021. ●

