

CANTEEN

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London + Food + Architecture

Edited by Ingrid Bjerkan

Editor's Letter

Why a Canteen magazine?

In the context of a world constantly reminding us of inequality and destruction, so much of what we read is of wasteful practices, greed, ego, a lack of humanity.

When food should be the most basic human right, we see everyday the hungry, the overlooked, the isolated.

Within a hospitality industry on its knees, we hear stories of abuse behind kitchen doors.

Having worked this summer in a food bank, and witnessing the food waste not considered good enough for the public given to the homeless, a 'sticking plaster' approach reliant on volunteers and overworked staff, this can not be a longterm solution.

I am driven by the gut feeling that our city's food provision needs to change, to recognise that affordable food spaces can bring support and familiarity, nourished by comfort food.

This is an idea that lingers despite feeling modest against such global challenges.

With our familiar gathering spaces, including pubs and churches, being converted into luxury flats. Cultural spaces and community centres at risk. Where pubs and churches do remain, for those who feel excluded, where to go to socialise?

The idea of a canteen space, like the ones I have sought out as I try to navigate the city.

The idea that in a busy city, we can find a space to stop and slow down and feel a sense of belonging and connection. A mundane routine as part of our everyday, daily lives.

I have talked to those who have set up such businesses, and heard their experiences of success, setbacks and heartfelt investment. A sense of optimism mixed with energy and wit, a respite in an overwhelming chaos. Stories that have been driven by passion and the same gut feeling that something can be better.

I have spoken to architects, a background like my own, that have stepped out of traditional roles to set up food spaces that bring people together.

When faced with uncertainty, when questioning that small changes can be enough, I lean on their experiences to validate my own idea of a canteen.

Ingrid



Front Cover and Figure Right - Photographs by Emily Wells.

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A NEW CANTEEN CULTURE

canteens + cafeterias + diners +
refectories + foodhalls + lunchrooms

What gives a food space the definition of a canteen is nuanced and subtle, but perhaps they could be described as social, democratic and dynamic food spaces which serve everyone as equals. Rebecca May Johnson's essay resonates with the importance of these everyday eating spaces where we can stop and slow down.

"Few things make me feel more romantically full of hope than a cheap cafe or canteen. to encounter a menu like this is to encounter oneself in a safe, holding space."¹

Rebecca May Johnson

In the rush to homogenise, monetise and modernise our city, the importance of these communal dining spaces has been pushed aside, in cities where opportunities for social interaction are less and less frequent.

In a society where mealtimes are often being 'eroded or reduced to snacks', a typical lunch for many would be the 'meal deal', wrapped in plastic, of little nutritional value and often eaten alone, at a desk or on the go. The canteen offers a nourishing alternative, and in an age of increasing social isolation, the opportunity to eat together.

'a canteen connotes "proper" cooking'²

Canteens were once the backbone of British industries, with workers canteens an integral part of the manufacturing or labouring industries in the mid 20th century.

'In the 1950s, a canteen offered workers the chance to switch off from their trade with their colleagues by their side. As a space, they help to foster a real sense of belonging'³

In the early 1950s, TFL operated hundreds of canteens, providing daily health meals to the working classes, but which were withdrawn in the 1980s as budget constraints saw canteens largely shut down.

Workplace canteens have now been largely eroded, outsourced to private corporations, as companies seek to cut costs.

In the UK today we mostly see canteens in institutions such as schools and hospitals, mostly taken over by private providers and often uninspiring, bland and generic, "canteens generally are just a bit sad"⁴.

'Unless you work at Google or Goldman Sachs, most staff canteens are fairly miserable affairs: somewhere to microwave your home leftovers, with bad lighting, soulless stretches of tables and vending machines.'⁵

In what can be seen to reflect a push for hyper-productivity and convenience in London, the popularity of the canteen in other European countries, reflects a more balanced work culture.

'[In France] meals are sacrosanct. You leave work; you go to a restaurant; you have an hour that's completely devoted to lunch'⁶



'If there were more places like this on very high street, under every building, then London would be a more humane place to live'¹²

Jonathan Nunn

Whilst workplace canteens are no longer commonplace, we can see a growing popularity of communal workplace dining in creative industries, where a communal lunch is seen as a vital moment to bring staff together over a shared meal, with these social interactions fuelling creativity.

'To do your best, you should feel that you're wanted, that you're comfortable. Breaking bread is a way to engender that sense of community. Sitting down, inviting people to be themselves, sharing a good meal - these are the building blocks.'⁷

In Berlin, for example, described as having a 'democratic canteen culture'⁸, workplace canteens open their doors to include members of the public, responding to the provocation, "Why should work canteens be just for the workers, and not for the rest of us?"⁹.

'In Berlin, countless works canteens are open to the public. Anybody can wander in, pick up a tray, queue of course, and then buy a mountain of a meal for the price of a snack. And then return your tray and dishes because that's what you do in a canteen.'¹⁰

As at Refettorio Felix, the canteen operational model also targets food waste, with a shared, simple meal served at set mealtimes allowing the provider to manage overheads and reduce waste.

The idea of a simple canteen carries the potential to help reshape London's broken food industry and balance food inequality. As seen in Copenhagen, the communal Absalon canteen encourages social integration as described as necessary by the GLA to rebuild communities, a sentiment echoed by Jonathan Nunn.

Whilst the historical connotations of 'canteen culture' describe workplace prejudices, we can ask, what would a new form of 'canteen culture' look like today? One which values these truly inclusive, affordable food spaces, integrating them back into our everyday routines.

'The canteen feels dynamic in an era of generic hospitality.'¹¹



Britain's Wartime Canteens

'The wartime memory of eating that has been encouraged to survive is of rationing, of lack, but for many people, there had never been so much hot, filling food.'¹

Rebecca May Johnson

The state-backed canteens developed by the British Government during the war - 'National Kitchens' during World War I and 'British Restaurants' during World War II - were powerful emergency responses to food poverty.

In both cases, the government were careful to select a title that avoided any controversial associations with socialism, avoiding labels such as 'communal' or 'public'.

Social Dining

The wartime kitchens boosted public morale through social eating, bringing those together whose homes had been bombed by the war.

Financial Viability

A clear distinction was made that the 'National Kitchens' and 'British Restaurants' were not to be operated as charities but as profit-making businesses, with kitchen staff, cashiers and cooks all paid a salary.

The canteens were operated as state-backed, privately-owned and profitable businesses and occupied prime retail spaces on the high street.

Affordability + Nourishment

As profit-making businesses, meals were not provided for free, but workers and 'ordinary people' had access to simple, nutritionally balanced, hot and affordable meals.



'I tried to imagine a British Restaurant now, a government-backed scheme to make sure all comers were fed as a matter of the greatest national importance: I couldn't.'¹⁴

Rebecca May Johnson

Homely

The restaurants were to be a place in which "ordinary people in ordinary circumstances"² would purchase an 'attractive yet cheap meal'³ and that they "must not resemble a soup kitchen for the poorest sections of society"⁴.

Homely features were included in the canteens, such as 'fresh flowers on the tables and gramophones and pianos'⁵.

Inclusivity

The government believed that customers should not be 'patronised as members of the deserving poor'⁶ and that these wartime restaurants would be a place where all members of society were welcomed and served as equals, sharing a meal together at long canteen tables.

Both initiatives were seen as a huge success, with a total of 363 officially registered 'National Kitchens' across Britain by the end of World War I and an even greater network of 2,160 'British Restaurants' during World War II.

It was hoped that 'National Kitchens' would become a "permanent national institution"⁷. Following the success of 'National Kitchens', 'British Restaurants' were equally recognised in parliament for their role in 'astonishing improvements in workers' wellbeing'⁸, with the Conservative Minister for Food describing them as "one of the greatest social revolutions that has taken place in the industry our country"⁹.

'British Restaurants' were able to feed over half a million people per day, turning over a huge profit equivalent to £6 million today.¹⁰

In both cases, the government-backed canteens were not able to survive beyond the war.

A lack of political backing where local councils no longer saw their need and government institutions dismissed them as not making enough profit, as well as a backlash from the restaurant trade, ultimately resulted in their closure.

Reflections

Despite the good intentions of bringing people together at a time of crisis and providing food in a democratic way, the downfall of these canteens has been attributed to social attitudes of the time.

The 'working man' felt uncomfortable in unfamiliar surroundings of what could be seen as a restaurant, seeing these as 'upmarket and snobby'¹¹, and would prefer to be at home with his family.

Members of the public were opposed to the 'egalitarian'¹² nature of the public dining venture, which had an 'unexotic air of social levelling, communism and fair shares'¹³.

Whilst setting out to solve a crisis by imposing a blanket response on a situation, the canteens did not take into consideration how they would be received.

Despite having valid 'ingredients' for a social space, it is not as straightforward as assuming everyone wants to come together, especially at a time of heightened emotions.

Then again, in trying to appeal to a wide demographic, these examples highlight that you are never going to be able to cater to everyone, and you have to respect an individual's personal choice.

We could ask, what if a similar, government-backed initiative were reinstated today? Where social eating spaces serving diverse clientele occupied prime locations on the high street, bringing people together and serving affordable food.

Some argue that we should bring back state-funded community kitchens to tackle the growing cost of living crisis and food poverty.

To others, this feels an unlikely and unrealistic possibility.

Foodhall + The National Food Service

‘We need to build a service that stops people getting to a place where they are in a crisis situation’¹

Carys Kettlety

Inspired by historical examples of communal dining spaces, and seeking to address some of the challenges surrounding the food industry, an organisation named the National Food Service was founded in 2018.

The organisation operates as a network of community food projects across the country, centred around the idea of social eating and seeking to address four food issues; food insecurity, food waste, social inequality and social isolation, aims to ‘change the food system from the bottom up’².

The organisation seek to utilise alternative business models, such as ‘not-for-profit’ and ‘pay-as-you-can’, recognising the downfalls of the typical charity model that whilst tackling the crisis response, does not address the larger problem.

Through community-led initiatives, the organisation seeks to build an alternative model for food provision that is done by and for the community, rather than imposed upon individuals, emphasising that this should not be a ‘source of shame’³.

“no segregation between rich and poor, working and non-working, deserving and undeserving”⁴

The National Food Service argues that this form of community organising through food will have wider impacts beyond just food, ‘build[ing] the foundations for strong, connected communities that can work cooperatively on challenges they face’⁵, such as housing, security, evictions and deportations.

“Eating together is probably the most important way we build friendships. So a National Food Service would do more for our collective happiness and well-being, not to mention our health, than anything else we might think of doing”

Robin Dunbar, Evolutionary Psychologist at the University of Oxford⁶

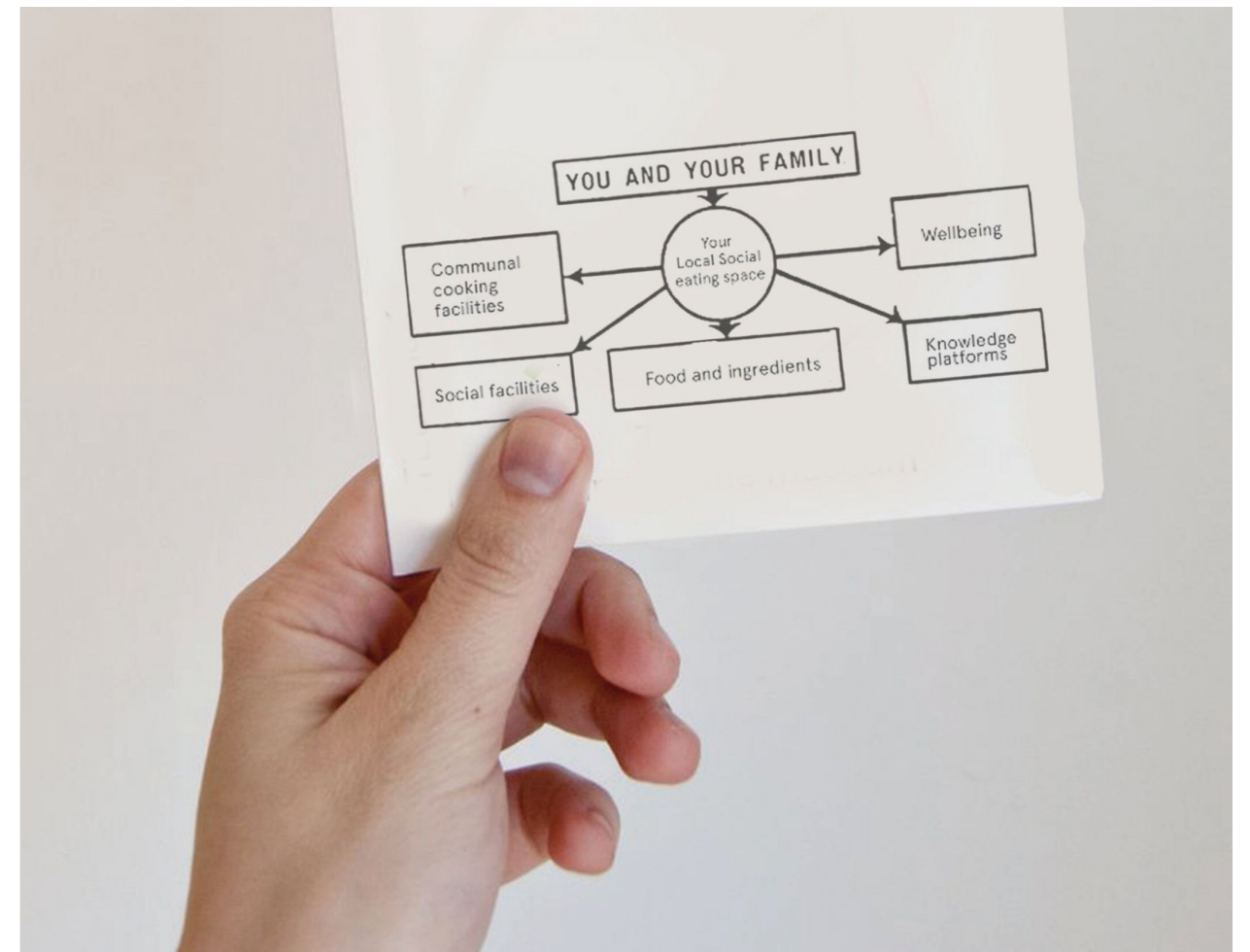
In February 2019, the National Food Service had nine city branches from Falmouth to Glasgow, with individual initiatives operating separately within each city.

The National Food Service argues for a ‘public eating space on every street and in every community of the country’⁷, seeing the potential for the network to grow and expand to achieve a ‘robust system of food security’ in the face of a climate emergency and rising food bank usage.

With no social media posts since 2023, it is unclear whether The National Food Service is still in operation.

“Imagine a world without hunger or social isolation. Imagine a social eating space in every street and high-rise made by people from all backgrounds, created in common.”⁸

The National Food Service



The 'birthplace' of the National Food Service organisation, Foodhall was a social eating project in Sheffield, established in 2015.

The project was initiated to tackle social isolation, food waste and food poverty through a community-led approach.

'anti-capitalist, anti-establishment alternative for community food provision and organising'⁹

Social Eating

At the core of the project was the idea of bringing people together through food, where sharing a meal together would be an opportunity for 'genuine human connection'¹⁰.

Inclusivity

The project did not look to cater to a specific demographic and instead encouraged anyone from the community to join.

"When someone comes into FoodHall, they experience almost a patchwork quilt of almost one hundred different cultures"¹¹

Louis, FoodHall

Foodhall utilised a 'contribute-what-you-can' ethos, in order to ensure accessibility of their service to as wide of a demographic as possible.

Diverse Programme

The Foodhall provided a diverse programme of activities, as 'a utopian community space, apart from the increasingly consumerist society around us; a place to be ourselves'¹². To raise additional funds, the project hosted events such as 'Lates' and 'Plates, with DIY parties and themed evening meals plus additional workshops and exhibitions.

Locality

By using meanwhile spaces, the Foodhall was able to operate in a city centre location, key to its visibility and ability to draw people from across the city.

The ambition of the project when it opened was to expand to see a Foodhall in every city, and lead to the establishment of the National Food Service which was to connect similar initiatives.

Financial Viability

Faced with financial difficulty, Foodhall was forced to close in 2022. Where the project relied on grants and donations from crowdfunding, this was insufficient to

cover their overheads. In their 'elegy', Leftovers, the organiser highlighted 'funding' as key, and recognised they lacked a clear financial plan.

'Self-sustainability is the goal, but finding how to do this without exploitative working conditions or exclusionary pricing of services is a constant challenge'¹⁴

Power and Structure

Whilst ambitiously setting out to have a non-hierarchical structure with 'autonomous decision-making'¹⁵, Foodhall ultimately recognised the need for leadership where they had both paid staff and volunteers.

With the governance structure changing over time, they recognised that this situation was difficult to navigate and that they needed a 'transparent structure and clear distribution of power'¹⁶.

Reflections

Given our current broken food system, the National Food Service's agenda of a network of community-led food initiatives is clearly a positive step forward.

It is sad to see that despite the best intentions, the founders Louis and Isaac and their team, were unable to sustain their project.

Whilst recognising this is for a complex number of reasons, one area that would be interesting to understand more fully is the financial model of Foodhall.

Additionally, their ambition for a non-hierarchical, democratic structure faced difficulties in practice. Whilst their ambitions are commendable, there is an argument that this structure is unrealistic and unsustainable.

'If there is one place I know I am always welcome at it's the Foodhall, and that simple belief unequivocally proves that the project has achieved its main objective: making everybody feel at home.'¹⁶

Melina Theodorou, Exposed Magazine



Photograph via Exposed Magazine

Photograph by Alastair Philip Wiper and Mathias Skafte Andersen



Folkehuset Absalon, Copenhagen

Folkeshuset Absalon in Copenhagen is a multifunctional communal dining and community space.

The name draws on traditional 'folkets hus', or "people's houses", which date back to 19th-century Russia, as leisure and cultural centres built to make art and culture accessible to the working classes.

Folkeshuset Absalon ("Absalon") operates as a truly local community space, described as a 'space where people connect with each other by doing things together'.

Communal Dining

Absalon is most known for its 'Fællesspisning' or Communal Dinner, where every evening at six o'clock, visitors are seated at long communal tables.

'You will be seated at long tables with other nice people'²

These hugely popular events, seating up to 200 people at a time and most often sold out, bring large groups of people together to share dinner in a family style.

'Making socialising all but compulsory'³

Affordability

Absalon prides itself on providing a truly inclusive and accessible offer through its simple and affordable menu, where a coffee costs 10-kroner (£1.15) and dinner costs no more than 50-kroner (£5.73).

Nourishment

Absalon does not offer a menu of choices but rather a daily changing meal, served on large sharing platters.

Inclusivity

Visitors are able to co-exist in this welcoming space, which encourages a 'collage of generations'.

'visit the place to enjoy a cup of tea and read newspapers'⁴

Ursula, 79-year-old pensioner

Homeliness

The second-hand furniture, crockery and lighting all contribute to a sense of comfort aiming to feel like an "extension of your living room"⁵. As such, users find themselves to be accountable for maintaining the space as they would their own home, or visiting the home of a friend.

'Being surrounded by different happenings [...] like being at home with a friend'⁶

"To just sit and look at people, and I don't have to spend a lot of money, sometimes I learn more than reading a book. [...] I think about who I am in the world, who other people are, all these things, you know, it's a place to find out"⁷

Michael
26-year-old gap year student

Diverse Programme

The building operates a diverse range of events and activities, including creative and exercise classes and evening entertainment events such as Drag Queen Bingo, Silent Disco and late-night flea market.

The 200-square metre ground floor provides a flexible space, with rows of dining tables, varied seating areas and table tennis tables all able to be reconfigured to accommodate a varied programme of events and the 'dynamic traffic' of people coming and going.

Informality

The homely and informal atmosphere can also be attributed to the constant activity, with people coming and going, and a sense of acceptance for people to use the building as they please. Visitors describe the 'buzz' of the building through its background noise, a 'key element of the easygoing social setting'.

Adaptive Reuse

Absalon occupies an old church building, key to its welcoming and inviting atmosphere.

Opening Hours

The building is able to provide a true integration into the everyday lives of its visitors, partly through its extended opening hours of half-past seven in the morning to midnight every day.

Financial Viability

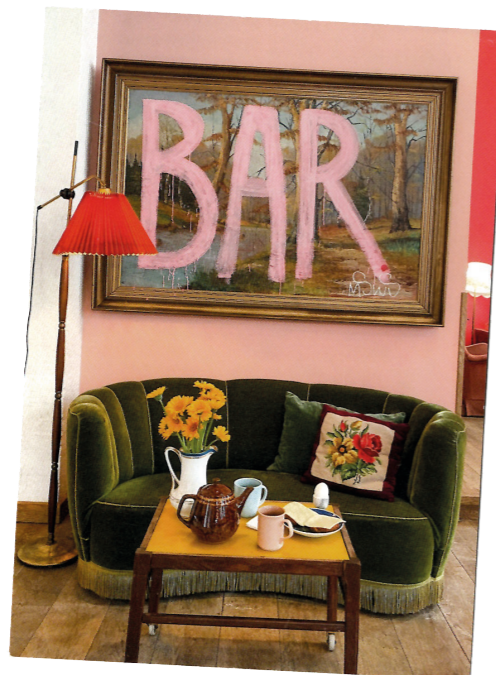
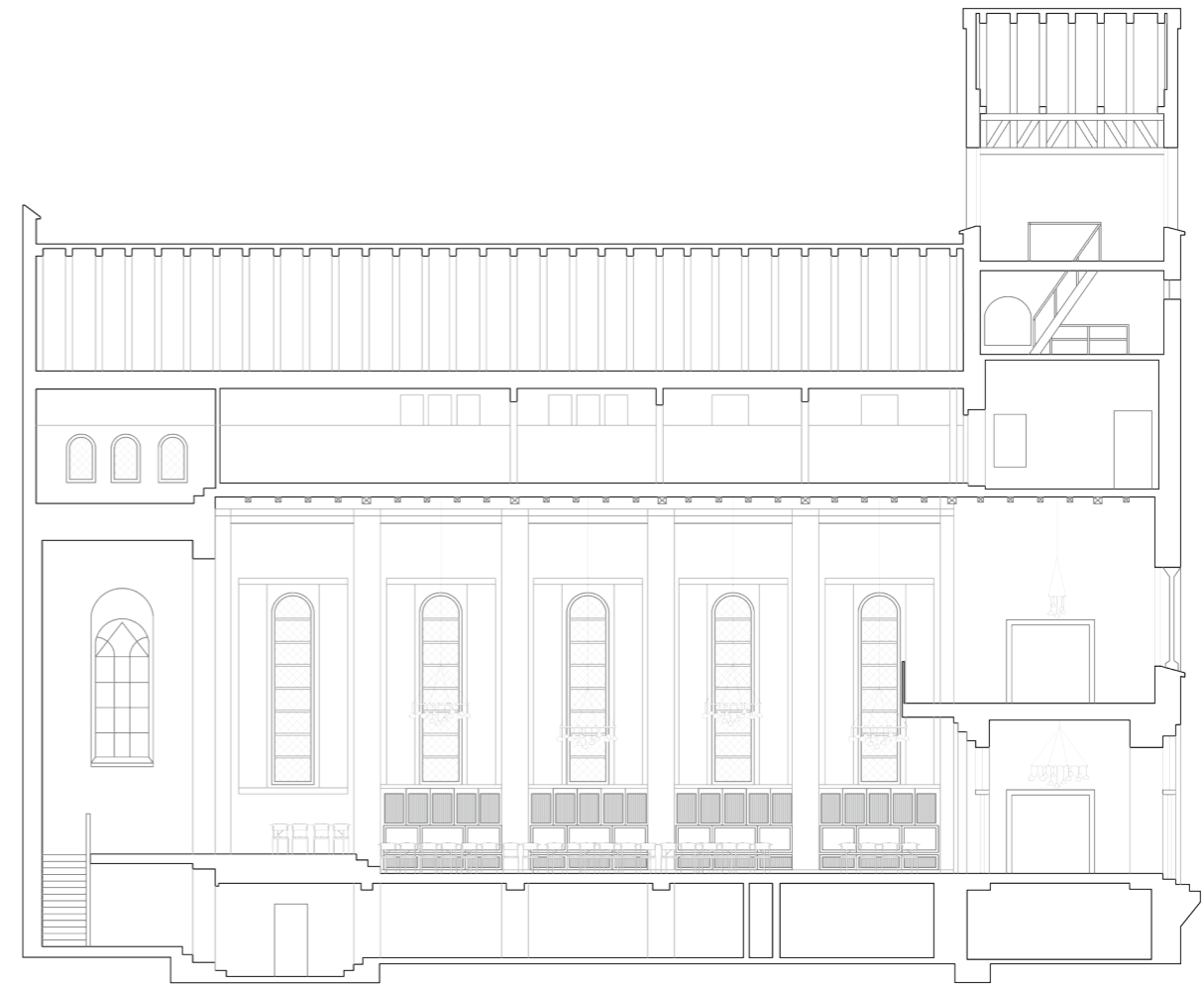
Unlike previous examples, which operate as either charity organisations or not-for-profit community organisations, Absalon is privately owned by the Danish entrepreneurs behind the Tiger stores.

The founders, Lennart and Sus Lajoboschitz, argue that the success of the project is in its private financial ownership, and perhaps more so, their personal and emotional investment.

Absalon is, perhaps, surprisingly not profitable and largely funded through Lajoboschitz's own investments and funding.

"We're losing quite a bit of money," he says of the center, the annual expenses of which - \$335,000 - are fully funded from his own pocket. "We're not making money out of it".¹⁸

Lennart Lajoboschitz



Reflections

It would be naive to suggest that the Absalon model in Copenhagen can be directly translated to such a diverse and complex city as London, with its wide range of social challenges.

We also cannot ignore that despite significant private financial funding, Absalon still operates at a loss. It continues because of its owners' strong belief that it benefits the local community.

In taking inspiration from Absalon, we could ask how to replicate the human response to such a space, and the sense of belonging, affordability, inclusion and optimism, whilst taking into consideration the intricacies of a specific place, and how this can be supported through a sustainable business model.

'Babies crying, children's laughter, footsteps, multiple conversations, and bouncing table tennis balls'¹⁹

Reflections on a canteen

A conversation with Kaja Dons, former Folkehuset Absalon employee and architecture student reflects on her experiences in Copenhagen.

Ingrid Bjerkan: What was it like to work at Absalon?

Kaja Dons: It was a great experience, because as it was much more than a café/bar job, it was a workplace with great colleagues where the main focus for the house was to feel as welcome as possible. **A culture house which was hospitable and inclusive**, as an experience for the guests as much as for the people working there. It was a place where you felt at home somehow. And as an employee, you could get engaged in other parts in the house, such as hosting workshops.

Our title as employees are **“hosts”** and not “café worker” or “bartender”, which I feel in itself proves a point in how the administrations sees their employees. If you had a good idea, you got the chance to try it out. Very fun!

Ingrid: What’s your favourite thing about Absalon?

Kaja: The fact that there is so many things going on in the house at the same time. The whole idea behind the culture house/Folkehus is to be **people’s second living room**. In Absalon you can come alone or together with someone. This is very clear in the communal diners for example, where people come in large groups but also a lot of people come alone quite regularly. As a host working there, you have to seat everyone, it’s like a big Tetris puzzle, finding space for everyone, but also matching up people together somehow, that you hope could have a nice dinner experience together.

Ingrid: What makes Absalon so special?

Kaja: It’s atmosphere and interior. It’s very **“folkeligt”** as we say in Danish. It’s **neither pretentious or tacky, it’s warm and welcoming** with all the colours and lighting. And the fact that it can host so many varied events is great. The old church hall gives space for a very flexible room. We’ve hosted dinners for 200 people every day as theatre performances, concerts, ping pong- and dodgeball-tournaments.



Ingrid: Would you say that Absalon is inclusive to anyone? What makes it feel inclusive (or exclusive)?

Kaja: It tries to, and in many ways I think it’s a success. The fact that they try to **keep the prices very low** is one of the main key element. There is a principle behind the philosophy in the house that everyone should be able to come and have a cup of coffee. That’s why it only costs 10kr (~£1). They’ve kept that principle through inflation times, and I find that very great. Same with the communal dinner that only costs 50kr (~£5). It’s a very great thing. There is a lot of different people coming in the house.

Though it’s become more and more popular among tourists because of internet articles etc. which is great in many ways, but sometimes feels like is also making it **more fragile** as it can sometimes feel like someone is coming there as a **tourist attraction** more than coming to stay and enjoy the house in a more local way.

Ingrid: What makes Absalon different to a restaurant or cafe? Similarly, what makes it different to a community centre?

Kaja: It’s all a lot of **functions in one building**. The prices makes it different. The whole idea behind the project is for it to be **non-profit**. So it’s not about earning a lot of money, which I find maybe a key difference to a restaurant or café. It’s about **giving something back to a community**.

I think it’s different to a community centre because it somehow has a **very strong, own identity**. The aesthetic is one they have worked on for all the years now and has evolved to a very recognizable one. All the graphics are all made by two-three people in the office. Many people have worked there for very long. It’s about creating **great experiences for people where they can connect but also hang out**. I find that very special.

Ingrid: How do you think the architecture contributes to the success of Absalon?

Kaja: It’s **joyful and warm**. All the furniture is picked out by Sus who is one of the owners and a furniture upholsterer. The interior has a homely feeling with different patterns, textiles, lighting etc. I think people find it fun and refreshing and the fact that it is **not pretentious** as I mentioned earlier.

Ingrid: How does Absalon respond to the social context of Copenhagen?

Kaja: It’s located in a great neighbourhood, but on the edge of a busy street. It has a great location where it uses the **space in front of the building** and taking space outside the house itself. In that way it **engages a lot with the local area around and during summer** it feels like the house is prolonged in that way. It gives a lot of great value to an area of Vesterbro which is very popular, but has it’s own location where it **gets a bit of attention alone somehow, undisturbed by a lot of other activities** around.

Ingrid: Do you foresee any challenges in translating Absalon to London?

Kaja: If you were to use the same ideology and idea in London I think you would have to think a lot about to make it **affordable** to people. It should be a house for the people. In a lot of different economic conditions. Not for the rich or the average, but also for the elderly and young and middle aged people with very little money but who also wants **company and a cheap cup of coffee**.

I think you would have to think a lot about the **location**. Place it in an area where there is **mixed user groups, but not too gentrified**. Think about the fact that it should work as the **people’s second living room**.

Reuse, Repair, Reprogram, Rethink

In order to meet climate targets, the carbon footprint of new buildings needs to be 6.3kgCO₂e/m².

Today's lowest carbon, bespoke new build homes have a footprint of 150kgCO₂e/m².¹

It is clear we cannot keep building the way we are building.

We must use what we already have and 'profoundly transform how we design, build, use, re-use and live with the built environment around us'².

Where discussions around the retrofit of existing buildings to meet future needs are largely focused on the provision of housing, we should equally look at how our existing structures hold the potential for greater cultural and social uses.

When presented with derelict buildings facing disrepair it is all too easy for profit-driven developers to justify the economic inviability, and instead demolish and 'rebuild anew'³. Our economic and political systems are stacked against a renovation approach and instead favour new-build.

'This system, in which renovation and adaptation have taken a backseat to demolition and new construction, disregards dramatic social, economic, and environmental consequences of its actions' ⁴

Where vast amounts of energy are embedded in the fabric of a building, it is criminal that we allow them to be demolished and sent to landfill.

The future role of the architect is not only one that reimagines how we design for this new approach but also one that looks for opportunities to reprogram existing buildings to insert new functions where they are needed.

The work of maintenance and repair, advocated for by feminist theorists, calls for a new set of ethics and values, one which respects and cares for what is already there.

Whilst the work of heritage organisations looks to protect the buildings of the most significant architectural value, we can also look for opportunities on a smaller scale and in buildings that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Even the most ordinary 'modest' buildings hold potential.

Where these buildings risk falling through the gaps, the local residents of an area play a vital role in ensuring their recognition.

The Sala Beckett project in Barcelona by Flores i Prats provides an inspiring example where the strong emotional bonds felt by a community to their built environment, ensured that what could have otherwise been a disregarded building was returned into cultural use with a social purpose to be enjoyed by the whole neighbourhood.

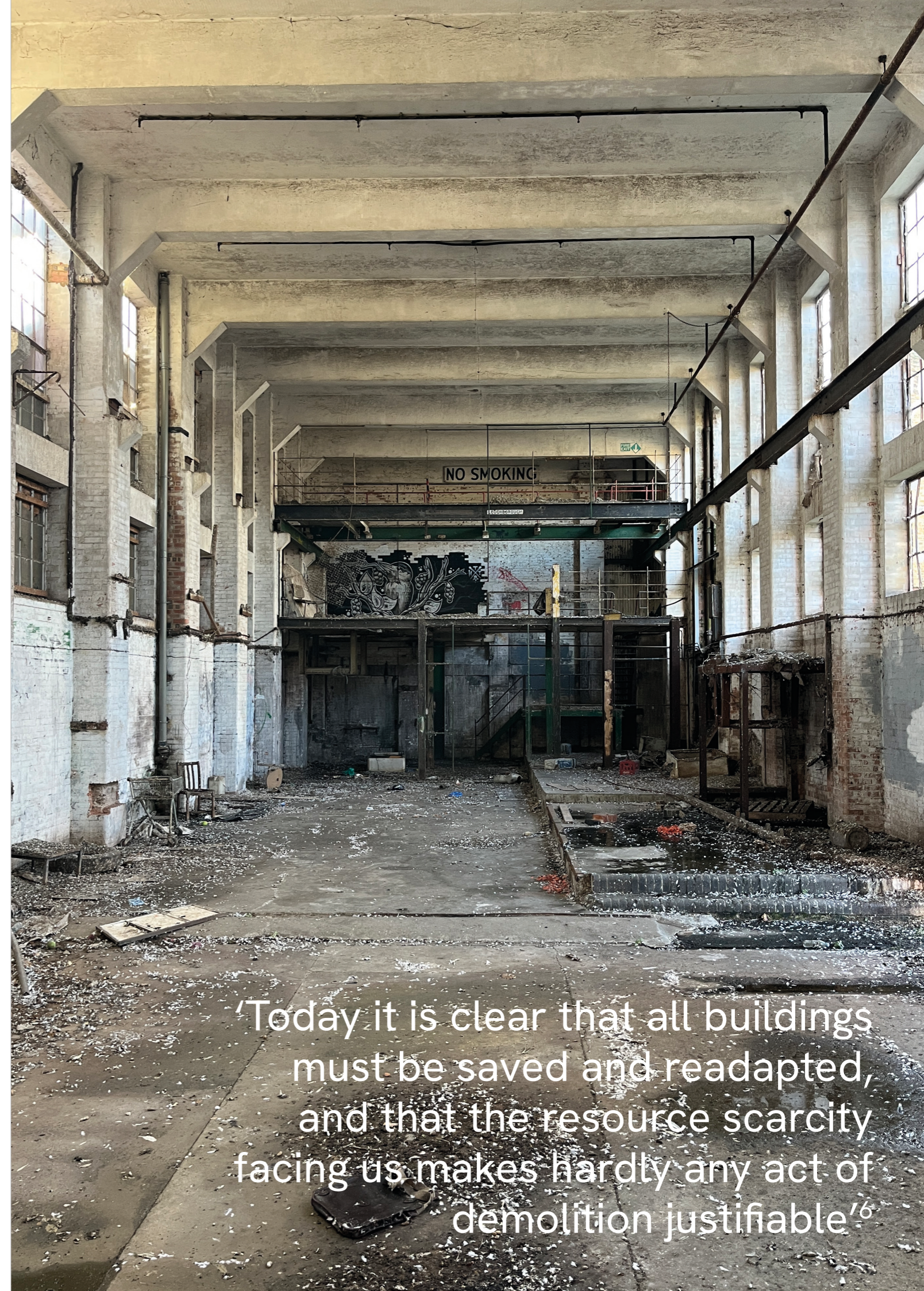
In the context of the hospitality industry and social dining spaces, this example also highlights the value of extending the function of an existing building to provide vital gathering space in a community and simultaneously opposing the ongoing 'smoothing' of our hospitality industry.

"Giving this generous space to the activity of the bar is one of the great successes, because the bar is communicating with the neighbourhood"⁵

Sergi Belbel

In the context of my own work, proposing the reimagining of a derelict building in Bow as a community food space, this inspirational project shows what can be achieved through community determination and a slower, more thoughtful approach to the design of our built environment.

This derelict brewery in Chisenhale Works is a powerful example of an existing building left to decay, the victim of a political stalemate.



'Today it is clear that all buildings must be saved and readapted, and that the resource scarcity facing us makes hardly any act of demolition justifiable'¹⁶

“Making Things Happen”

‘a new wave is going it alone: putting their money where their design ethos is and developing their own buildings’¹

Will Ing, *The Architects’ Journal*

In response to the frustrations felt by many architects working within traditional practice, a new wave of practices are emerging, initiating their own projects and working for themselves rather than a client.

As an emerging designer faced with the increasing uncertainty of a profession that can be seen to be losing its relevance in the context of ongoing global crises, individuals and practices that are reinventing themselves provide inspiration for my own future practice.

Where an architect is typically working for a client, there is the feeling of being removed from the final outcome. Instead, examples with a closer emotional investment in the end product and with the people involved with a project provide a, n optimistic alternative.

The well-known example, Assemble, whose practice emerged in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, works to the ethos of “Making Things and Making Things Happen”. Rather than waiting for a project to find them, they made it happen themselves. Examples of their work include providing a ‘landlord’ position through setting up and managing artistic workspaces or, such as at House of Anetta, taking on the role of ‘custodian’, overseeing the management of a building but allowing community groups to operate within the building individually.

Examples such as Solidspace and Arrant Land work within the ‘ethical development’ of housing, working on projects ultimately for profit through buying and selling.

This methodology can be applied to buildings other than housing where, rather than being sold for profit, the project is operated as a commercial business.

In looking to work on projects which reflect one’s own ethics, having a much closer hands-on involvement, the architect-operator can ensure that their values are carried through the entire project.

Having worked on wider, city-scale, strategic-level thinking, and in considering my future practice, I have struggled with feeling that a single project in isolation lacks impact. Rather, I can see that by putting small ideas for change into action, a single project can act as a demonstrator for a wider strategy, and as such, independently-led projects can act as a ‘catalyst for change’², through ‘tiny but important incremental steps’³, in approaches that do not require ‘dramatic political shift’⁴.

‘small, independently produced [buildings] that demonstrate the wider possibilities of incremental development. [...] As citizens of the city, disappointed by the mundanity of what we see being built around us, this is our chance to change the current situation. Let small make big.’⁵

Roger Zogolovitch, *Solidspace*

The skills of an architect make them well-placed to start their own projects as able to draw upon expertise and mediate relationships with different professions in the built environment. Rather than a separation between the architect as the thinker and the builder as the labourer, through initiating and running a project, the architect gains a closer relationship with the physical processes behind making a project in actuality, including the hands-on making and construction processes, and ensures that design aspirations can be met.



A conversation with Rob Morrison, co-founder of Civic House and Agile City

I joined Rob Morrison, from Civic House and Agile City, to discuss both my own work on my Master's Architecture course, and how this relates to his work as part of Civic House.

Following his degree in Architecture, Rob Morrison co-founded the not-for-profit and community-interest-company, Agile City, which are the building operator of Civic House, a work and event space with a canteen restaurant.

The project provides an example of repurposing and refurbishing a disused building on a small budget to become an important piece of civic infrastructure.

This example also showcases that through a closer involvement with the delivery of a project, the designer as its own client, can have an overseeing role and ensure that aspirations in terms of sustainability are met.

In our discussion we spoke about the behind-the-scenes of the Civic House project including retrofit, funding, business models and the changing role of the architect.

"[Civic House] sets a precedent for showcasing a process of development that is less capital intensive, more energy efficient and quicker to respond to people and change"¹

Architects' Journal



Rob Morrison: Shall we start with you telling me about your work?

Ingrid Bjerkan: Yes, so my project is based in a derelict building in Bow, in East London. Through my research so far my interests are in community spaces and more specifically, communal food spaces.

Alongside that, and in considering the changing role of an architect, I have an interest in and am inspired by examples of designer's being involved more long term in their work, and having a personal investment in it through being involved in the longer-term running of and operations of a project.

And in my research, I could see that these two elements came together in Civic House.

Through the course of the project, I have been contemplating how much of my work I see as being reality versus hypothetical. And the feeling of wanting to do something for real. It's a bit of a running joke about the fantasy of opening a café...

And I think that has led me to consider how this becomes a Master's Project. I have been struggling with the feeling of 'academicising' something where a lot of it happens through 'just doing it', rather than studying it.

But maybe that's a tangent...

Rob: No it's not. I think **that's at the heart of it really.**

I now am less involved with Agile City. In terms of my day-to-day job it is now transitioning from being exec Director which is running and being very much on the ground everyday, to being on the Board.

So I've now started a new role at an organisation called BE-ST, which is an academic innovation centre. It's so interesting because so many projects that get pitched to us sound amazing. And yesterday we were meeting with a developer, and it felt like an architecture project, this just sounds like all the best ideas that you've read about on all the different sustainability blogs in one project.

But all that stuff is **dramatically impacted by the delivery and the reality of making it happen.**

I'm in the phase now where I'm thinking back and realising all the vast amount of knowledge and **learning that comes from doing the thing.** And you can build in **cycles of doing and then thinking.**

That's the challenge.

If I could give my younger self one piece of advice it would always be **'start the thing earlier'**.

Anyway, questions!

Ingrid: Questions!

Could you start by telling me why and how Civic House happened. What were your motivations? And what was your role at the beginning and then going forward?

Rob: So, it started as a project to focus on the frustration with architecture education in Glasgow, which was focused on new builds in in the context of city with this abundance of amazing **empty buildings.** That led to wanting to set up space with that cross section of different practise of art, design, architecture, music, food.

And that led us to setting up a place called the Glue Factory, which is another building that we run, then that led on to Civic House.

I felt that in Scotland there wasn't really anyone commissioning the type of building or project that I really wanted to see.

Because it's a much more **durational approach** versus architecture, which ultimately needs a different type of **business model.**

It can't survive on a fee based architecture practise because you spend all your money on the fees, not on the doing.

And so, that was what led us to setting up a social enterprise.

So I'm like pals with some of the guys who also set up Assemble. Do you know them?

Ingrid: Yeah!

Rob: So that was a similar time, Assemble were *kind of like*, developing projects in London around 2010, 2011.

It was all about this idea of **setting up organisations that did the thing. That makes the thing that makes the thing.**

I think a lot of [similar organisations] came off the back of the crash in 2008. There was not much architecture happening. **So, let's just build some stuff.** And so yeah, that's the background.

Ingrid: How has that evolved over time since you set it up. You said you're less hands on now?

Rob: That's very much the intention, but it's, *very like it's*, been hard to be honest.

I think that's the other thing. Like the flip side of doing it is that you become very embedded, right? So what I was saying to you before about like my advice is always **start doing things.** I think that's really positive.

But the flip side is you become very, very committed, more so than you would be with a job.

If you went and got a job in an architect practise, you could leave the job, and you could also step back from the projects, potentially, or you'd have the opportunity to do so.

But when you set up a company with responsibilities to deliver a certain thing, then that comes with a whole bunch of **different commitments** that not everyone's sort of got appetite for.

So I think that there's a **balance** there.

The flip side is it's your own thing and you can take it in a direction you want. So it's a **compromise**.

Ingrid: I can imagine it's a huge amount of work and personal investment.

Did you set it up with others or alone?

Rob: We initially set up as a **volunteer** group. It was seven people initially and then that dwindled when **everyone had to start making money**. And there wasn't enough money to pay everyone. So that then dwindled.

And now we're trying to expand it out again.

So there's more resource to pay people. It's probably about a team of six now in total.

Still small.

But I think what's been really interesting is that we've been able to set really, really high level ambitious briefs around certain things that we believe in, specifically about like the standard of retrofit.

Because we can both **set the brief and then raise the funds** to deliver that brief, the outcomes in my opinion are really high.

It's not like finessed architecture, like highly detailed. It's very rough and but it's robust and it's industrial.

I think there's a sort of **balance to be struck** there.

Ingrid: How do you access building like that? How do you raise the funds?

Rob: The whole principle is it's a **social enterprise**.

The ambition is always to try and raise our own finance through enterprise ultimately.

It was running as a nightclub for the first three years and that was where the majority of the money used to come from. Primarily alcohol sales and then some hires in terms of film, TV productions, exhibitions... We had the degree show from the Glasgow School of Art and places like that.

As it evolved then we got to do the actual capital works, the physical improvements, with funding from the Scottish Government, Glasgow City Council, Scottish Power... and a bunch of other people.

So that was a massive part of my job basically aligning the capital work with the architectural ambition.



Ingrid: Before you took over Civic House, who owned it?

I guess it's a leading question because my site of interest is owned by Tower Hamlets Council, so I'm looking into what are the processes that you have to go through to convince the Council to lease it to you?

Rob: The project started at the Glue Factory, which we ran as a nightclub.

And then off the back of that, we got funding to buy Civic House, which was privately owned.

Ingrid: So you own the building?

Rob: Yes, we're incredibly fortunate that we got given funding to do so. So we **own the building out right** now.

And that's a huge, huge advantage, we're incredibly privileged to be in that position.

I think one of the key areas to focus on [for you] is who within the Council makes the decisions.

Both who makes the decisions on the building and then adjacent to that, who in the Council is supportive of you to do the thing that you want to do. And there's always some. There's always people in the council... don't target like the chief exec, at the executive level, that's just a waste of time because their too busy.

There's people in **middle management** who are proactive. If you can find people who go to events or community engagement sessions or, there's people who

demonstrate they are committed to a certain thing. Find that those people who know how to navigate the council and then they will help you figure out who to speak to.

Often success is bound down to how to navigate the bureaucracy and it's not easy. Even people within the Council don't often know how to do it, but there's always a few people who are the most effective.

So in terms of like maximising the leverage of your time, figure out who gets things done within the Council, that you're talking about, and figure out a way of engaging them.

Ingrid: Yeah, figure out how to get them on side..

Rob: A way to do that would probably be to look at what **interesting architecture** has been done in that local authority and find the practise who has been commissioned to do that and figure out who it was that they recommend speaking to within that Council.

And then you've got to figure out how to convince them... That's your job.

Ingrid: I guess I'm figuring out what the best approach [for my work] is at the moment. I have been considering whether it's through community organisations, but then that feels like it would lead down the root of a more community owned project which comes with complexities.

Or rather, a model like yours, which is more of a commercial business.

Rob: I think you have to **really, really figure out and be explicit** about what it is that you want to do from the outset.

Because if you start it as a community initiative, that has its own value.

But you have to be really ready to commit to a **huge amount of engagement** and that's not necessarily for everyone.

There's a project in Stoke-on-Trent called The Portland Inn project that is run by an artist, *who's a friend of mine*, called Becca Davies.

What's interesting is that she often talks about the differences between our two approaches.

One is that she basically designed and built this project with the local community. It's incredibly **community-orientated** because it's a pub in a residential neighbourhood and it's been very like, designed **'with and for'** that group of people.

Whereas, where Civic House is effectively in an industrial estate, so there's not really a clear residential community in proximity who already would feel a **sense of ownership** of it as a building.

For us it's more focused around the idea of **community of interest**. Like build this thing and then through its activity we will engage people who have an interest in the content of what is being produced.

We still try and do a lot to engage local people who live in that vicinity, but being clear on that dynamic is important at the outset.

Like is it a community-led design project or is it a design project that responds to a context and engages a community?

If you can try and be clear on that from the outset, that means you reduce the number of stumbling blocks you get further down the line because once you've set on a certain course, it can be quite hard to unpick.

Ingrid: I think it's something I find difficult to justify to myself and to others, of why it shouldn't be a community-led approach.

To do the community engagement is, like you said, a big commitment, more than can fit into a Masters project. I mean, I guess you can design how you would do that in the future...

I also feel that, from going to a community group meeting, I am realising how much time and commitment it takes for people to be involved, and a lot of that work is unpaid...

And whether that's the best and fairest approach...

Rob: Yeah, fair.

I think that's a really, really important thing to distinguish within these projects.



I think there's sometimes a risk that architects, and designers generally, **don't value their own skills sufficiently** and that they don't have confidence to make their own decisions.

Not everything has to be done through **engagement** and, *ultimately*, through **consensus or consent**.

There is a way of making an **interpretation of what you believe to be the right thing** based on your best judgement and then do it in a way that that can evolve **in response to action and feedback**.

That was the route that we took.

Coming back to this food idea, we took the building, we developed it, *not like*, we stripped it all back.

And **the first thing we did was build a kitchen** and then off the back of that, that was the place where we hosted events and talks and dinners and different things.

And ultimately when we opened that space, we had no idea who was going to come.

And so like, you can design all this stuff for people who, when you actually open, they're no longer involved or no longer interested.

And I've seen this happen so many times, with businesses, people get really involved when it's free and as soon as they have to start paying, then they're no longer there.

And so if you're trying to set up a business, you have to engage people who are going to be willing to pay for the thing that you want to sell.

Otherwise you're spending a vast amount of energy communicating with the wrong audiences.

If you want to set it up as a social enterprise, you have to be really explicit that it is an enterprise.

It still needs to make money,

If it is a social enterprise, then you have to be really, really clear about that from the outset, I think.

Ingrid: Why did you choose the social enterprise model over a charity?

Rob: Now more than ever, **funding is tight**, like it is increasingly hard to secure.

So it just felt logical from the outset that we would try and set up a structure that could **financially sustain itself**.

That's was a massive part of how that was arrived at.

Otherwise your job becomes fundraising.

I think that's a real challenge. *You want basically to make the money...from the thing...*

So say you wanted to set up a community bakery. Right. The more bread you sell, the more bread you bake, because that's what you're set up to do. You're set up to bake bread. I've seen loads of food projects where they'll set up that structure but it will be delivered through a funding model. So actually they're generally spending the majority of the time not baking bread, but raising funds.

I think it's important to **do the thing that you aim to do** and I'd have **confidence** in that.

Ingrid: Yeah, cool. This feels very aligned with what I've been thinking.

It's interesting to hear that that's how Civic House started as a food space, could you explain why that was the approach and why that was an important part of the project. And whether that has carried on going forward, whether the canteen is still an key aspect?

Rob: So, yeah.

Like, I'm not a chef... *I've worked... I'm no where near a chef.*

But I love cooking and I've always loved hosting dinner parties and stuff.

To come back to this idea of **what the role of the architect is...** I think it's the **intellectualisation of architecture** as a profession, where people are *like*, **reinventing** everything all the time.

“There is a way of making an interpretation of what you believe to be the right thing based on your best judgement and then do it in a way that that can evolve in response to action and feedback.

That was the route that we took.”

But **people are basic**, *you know*, like they just need **food, drink and to be around other people that they associate with**, like it's not complex.

So actually, just by doing those three things well in a space, if you want it to be a social space and you want to invite people in, it's at the core of what I think creates a **social, convivial environment** in which you can, *kind of like*, **build relationships**.

So that's where we started. **Start with the kitchen, it's like the heart of the house.**

And we built it really slowly... We put an oven in... We put the bar, *you know what I mean*, it was all done very, very basic.

Running a food business is really hard.

In Civic House, the canteen is operated by an independent company, but we work very closely with them in terms of the selection process and then like there's been a very close working partnership.

But it's hard, man.

The **margins are super tight**. It's a challenge.

But it's one of the things that I'm most proud of in teRobs of just going in and seeing the canteen really busy and everyone there eating delicious food. It's like, really, really important.

I think it's often overlooked, *you know*.

When you go into an office building or like a studio or... You think about all the thousands of office spaces... They've built all this building and then they just got this sort of like, ground floor, restaurant undesignated space and they all seem so generic.

It's so often the last thing to think about rather than the first. For us, it was the inversion of that. **Put the kitchen in first** and then from that, that developed into **what the rest of the building should become**.

So, we didn't have a set brief of what the architecture, *so to speak*. We had an idea of what those things were, but the definition wasn't clear until we actually saw how the space was used and what worked, what didn't, who was accessing the space, who was motivated to be there and get involved.

So yeah, it was, I think the idea of **durational evolving brief led by food**, by a kitchen in a building, was the anchor point for Civic House.

Ingrid: Cool, amazing. Thank you so much!

Thank you so much, hopefully I can come up to Glasgow to see the building in person soon!

Rob: Good luck with your project! I hope it goes well.

I think it's a good angle to be looking at.

Try and build in some time for **the doing bit as well as the thinking bit**, there's something really positive about that.

Ingrid: Amazing, thank you!





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