



THE HACKNEY SOCIETY

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News and views about Hackney's built environment

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Pitwell Mews



© Kilian O'Sullivan

Pitwell Mews off Wilton Way (E8) consists of three houses and a small office building. The site was developed by Anna Schabel and Jochen Driessle and designed by their architecture firm Wilton Studio. They live and work on the premises.

Built on the site of a former printer's workshop, the houses sit in a courtyard hidden behind a Victorian terrace. By sinking the houses into the ground by half a storey and creating a low pitched zinc roof, the architects ensured that the houses stay within the envelope of the former workshop, but maximise the internal space. Double height spaces and fully glazed living rooms create a sense of openness within a tight site. The houses are highly energy efficient

with triple glazing, high insulation, solar panels and heat recovery.

The dark brickwork of the walls matches the tone of the old garden walls. Together with the zinc roof the building has an industrial feel relating to the shed that stood on the site. The area around the entrance doors facing the courtyard is clad in vertical oak slats. The courtyard is therefore enclosed by timber fencing, the timber shed and the new oak façade.

Pitwell Mews was a winner (commended) of the Hackney Design Awards 2018. The judges commented: 'With a limited budget and a constrained site, this mixed-use, back-land scheme is a successful combination of refurbished workshops and contemporary residential architecture... The buildings aim to maximise sunlight and afford long views across the neighbouring gardens. The internal spaces within the houses are clever, with rational layouts and the simple use of materials, to create three very useful low-cost, family dwellings.'

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Mind the Gap – A Personal View By Laurie Elks

Spaces readers are aware that ‘garden grabs’ – the new buildings built in gardens – are very much part of Hackney Council’s drive to achieve its housing target. The latest iteration of the London Plan provides some overdue rebalancing of targets towards outer London Boroughs but Hackney’s target still stands at 1330 additional dwellings each year. I, for one, do not at all dissent from this target.

But what are we to make of the buildings appearing in our streets? Two new buildings in gap sites near me bring that question sharply into view.

The house in Edenbridge Road is not a conventional gap site (a bomb fell here during the war) but its lines reflect the planners’ aspirations for articulately modern houses on small sites. The agent’s marketing blurb states that ‘its striking exterior echoes the proportions of its period neighbours, with contemporary geometric lines’.

I watched this house being built with my three-year-old grandson and got to know the builder/developer. His original conception was for a house more in keeping with the terrace but the planners steered him to this. When it came to the brick finish he proposed stock-like bricks but the planners insisted on contrasting grey. ‘My wife hates it’ were his parting words.

But is it good? Most of the neighbours who chose to live in this Victorian Street dislike it but one young man I saw passing by was full of admiration. My friend Mortimer, who has retired as a conservation officer in Richmond, shook his head in disbelief and said that this would never, never have been passed in a conservation area in Richmond.

I have tried to like it – unsuccessfully – and particularly dislike the roof dormer. To my mind, in a conservation area with strict guidelines on the maintenance of roof lines, it cannot be right for planners to permit (let alone insist upon) such discordance.

Around the corner, a pair of houses has been built on the site of the garden of a former pub, the Penshurst Arms.

The surrounding streets and pub were all built – as a piece – in the redevelopment of the Norris Estate in 1864-65. The new houses, which stand proud of the adjoining



Edenbridge Rd

terrace, could not be more contrasting.

To the planning officer recommending the scheme, this was a plus:

‘The proposal ... would provide the first modern contemporary building within a Victorian street and thereby [not] enhancing the conservation area.’ (It is clear from the context that the ‘not’ was unintended!). He added: ‘It is designed to be subservient to ... [the] adjacent terrace and its striking contemporary design and use of high quality materials will add visual interest to the site’.

It’s the ‘thereby’ in the first quote that sticks in my craw. Development in a conservation area must – to be permissible – either preserve or enhance the conservation area. As this development does not preserve the street, it must enhance it, otherwise the Council could not allow it!



Penshurst Rd

Of course, there are many modern buildings which fit well into traditional streets and several have featured in past editions of *Spaces*. But this self-affirming four legs good two legs bad dogma supporting these fiercely modern – and definitely not subservient – houses should end. Failing that, to my mind, future generations will look at these messed up Victorian streets and say ‘why did we do that’?

The Tin Tabernacle By Lisa Shell

© Regeneration Practice



The Sight of Eternal Life Church on Shrubland Road, Hackney E8, often disparagingly referred to as the Tin Tabernacle, is believed to be the oldest surviving 'iron church' in the world. Corrugated iron churches were typically prefabricated and shipped to the colonies during the mid C19, but also erected in the UK, usually to house non-conformist congregations in poor areas.

English Presbyterians commissioned the Shrubland Road church, and because Hackney remained a poor borough throughout the C20, the opportunity to replace this 'industrial imposter' with a more substantial and appropriate masonry building for worship didn't arise. Subsequently its 1996 Grade II listing further secured its survival – in the nick of time, before Hackney property values began to recover at the start of the C21.

As described by David Solman in the Hackney Society's 2009 publication *Hackney – Modern, Restored, Forgotten, Ignored*, the building was erected in 1858 in just ten weeks at a cost of £1250. Despite being reported in the *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* of 1909 as already being in a very poor condition, it was sufficiently maintained during the C20 to be kept in active community use, including the replacement of the rusting iron sheeting with new asbestos cladding. But a decline in the congregation did force it to relocate in 1971, at which point the 'tin' church was purchased by the

Sight of the Eternal Life Church, for its own use. Still in their ownership, sadly it now languishes on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register where it is described as being in poor condition, and suffering 'slow decay' and with 'no solution agreed'.

But it has not been out of the headlines since the Hackney Society identified it as one of the borough's 'Churches at Risk' in *Spaces* No. 35 in 2012.

With a dwindling and aging congregation, the owners tried to sell the building at auction in 2016. The Hackney Society's concerns were expressed by chair Nick Perry at the time: 'If achieved, the hugely optimistic guide price [of £1.6m] will probably be reflected in the desire of a rapacious developer to turn this special little church into expensive flats. Whether the building and its community use prevails in such a battle will be dependent on the Council's ability to wield the full might of local and national policy which strongly presumes against development when harm

Hackney Society Events

On 25 March 2020, the Hackney Society announced: 'In light of the public health emergency, and the government directives and advice on social gatherings, the Hackney Society has suspended our 2020 events programme until further notice.'

When circumstances allow, we hope to re-arrange as many events as possible.'

is proposed to treasures such as this rare Grade II listed building'.

But the owners misjudged the reserve, and even an over-ambitious bid in excess of £2m failed to secure the purchase. Put up for sale soon afterwards at £3m it remains on the open market today.

Idris Elba may have used the church as a location in his debut 2018 movie *Yardie* but that still doesn't explain the building's current price tag of £21m! Its listed status, the protection of its community use, and its dangerous asbestos cladding, all mean that it will probably never offer the potential a commercial developer is looking for. This building's future lies in the hands of the right community organisation, but only if it can be bought at the right price, and probably with the support of Heritage Lottery funding.

More recently, reports of unauthorised interior alterations have been investigated by Hackney Council and informal requests for essential repairs made of the owners, in an attempt to halt the decline in the fabric of the building. The Hackney Society have now learnt that these important works have been completed, and the building can languish a little longer at reduced risk, until a new user and a new future emerge.

Book Review

By Laurie Elks

Hackney Archive: Work and Life 1971-1985
by Neil Martinson, Hoxton Mini Press,
£17.95



I first met Neil Martinson around 1972 when we both helped out in the coffee bar in the new Centerprise project in Dalston Lane. Neil, a sixth former at Hackney Downs, was inspired by post-1968 student radical ideas and community activism. He and his fellow students started a school magazine, *Hackney Miscarriage*, which gave a fair indication of where their sympathies lay.

Since then, Neil has been photographing many aspects of Hackney life and *Hackney Archive* represents his work from 1971 to 1985. It recalls a Hackney past we barely remember. Working with Centerprise and Hackney Trades Council among others, he captures unreconstructed barbers offering a cut-throat shave and something for the weekend; angry marchers protesting against police misconduct in Stoke Newington; radical protesters occupying the Town Hall; workers at Lesney factories in Hackney Wick (which once employed 3500 workers) and the iconic blue Lesney buses which criss-crossed the Borough (although Neil's photos are all in black and white).

Neil captures his human subjects with great sympathy. One series shows proud tenants posing in their living rooms in a newly built Tower block; another shows residents in The Island, a tight working class community in Stoke Newington on the threshold of demolition. Many show working lives: Turkish clothing workers; workers at the Initial laundry in Upper Clapton; a skilled cutter in the last days of Simpson's factory in Stoke Newington.

A remarkable series depicts celebrations of the Chasidic community (at any rate its male members) in Stamford Hill. Decline and fall are depicted, literally, in the half demolished Metal Box factory in Urswick Road (soon to become Sutton Square – one of Hackney's first 'yuppie' housing developments) and

the Leaning Tower of Hackney which emerged from the smoke when demolition contractors botched the demolition of one of the Trowbridge Tower blocks.

Some of our long-standing members will recognise faces – including that of Ken Jacobs, the postman photographed for Centerprise's *Working Lives*, who went on to be a founding member of the campaign to save Sutton House.

Whether you were there or not, this is a terrific reminder of the Hackney, which for better and for worse, we have lost.



Noticeboard

Paddling Pools

Hackney Council has announced that the paddling pools at London Fields and Clissold Park are set to be replaced with new improved facilities. The Council will be consulting paddling pool users on the type of replacement facilities that will be delivered. While the Clissold Park facility will continue to be stand-alone, the London Fields paddling pool will be integrated into the wider project to deliver a new learner pool at the Lido site. Both pools have come to the end of their life in their existing form and, given their popularity, cannot continue to be operated safely without major work, including the introduction of automatic filtration systems – which reduce water consumption and improve hygiene. In order to facilitate the work, the paddling pool in Clissold Park will be closed for 2020 while consultation and work takes place, which is expected to cost up to £700k. London Fields paddling pool will be closed for longer while the new learner pool at London Fields Lido is developed.

Kingsland Basin

A number of groups have objected to plans for a seven-storey building to be built on the shores of the Kingsland Basin. The proposed scheme, which would replace a Travis Perkins builder's yard, would include flats and offices. Among the objectors are Kingsland Conservation Area Advisory Committee and the Wildlife Gardeners of Haggerston. There are fears that harm could be caused to an important, valued and historic environment. In addition, artificial lighting and the noise of construction work could scare away the bats that live in the area.

Independent Bookshops

Two bookshops in Hackney are on the London short list for the Independent Bookshop of the Year. They are Burley Fisher Books in Haggerston and Pages of Hackney in Clapton.

Syd's

Syd's coffee stall in Shoreditch has been acquired by the Museum of London. The stall – which sold tea, coffee and snacks – opened in 1919 and closed in December 2019. It will go on display when the museum moves to its new home in Smithfield in 2024.

Abney Park

Hackney Council has been awarded £4.4million by the National Lottery to improve Abney Park Cemetery. The work will include bringing the chapel back into use as a venue, building a new café and classroom and providing an accessible entrance on Church Street. In early 2020, restoration work was completed on the statue of Sir Isaac Watts.

Publications

The East End Canal Tales

by Carolyn Clark provides accounts of life and work on the Regent's and Hertford Union Canals over two centuries. Its publication is part of the 200th anniversary celebrations of the Regent's Canal. London Canal Museum, £9.95.



We Swim to the Shark: Overcoming Fear One Fish at a Time

by Hackney-based writer Georgie Codd is a non-fiction account of dealing with fear. Fleet, £14.99.



Spaces is published by the Hackney Society. Views expressed in the articles are not necessarily those of the Society.

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