



THE HACKNEY SOCIETY

SPACES 2022

News and views about Hackney's built environment

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Mole House



© Ecl Reeve/Adjaye Associates

Mole House is a three-storey live-work space in Dalston/De Beauvoir, designed as a single-family dwelling for contemporary artist Sue Webster. The project came together as an exercise in excavation and retention, with Webster's vision for the new home being strongly tied to the history and fabric of the original building.

Mole Man is something of a local legend. William Lyttle was finally evicted from the detached Victorian house in 2006, after a 40 year tenancy.

He had spent years burrowing a network of tunnels beneath the property, but unsurprisingly seriously damaged the house and even, it is said, nearby pavements. After the eviction the tunnels were plugged with aerated concrete to re-establish structural safety and over 33 tonnes of debris were removed. The Council's bill for scaffolding alone was reported to be in the region of £800,000.

Sue Webster had already lived in 'Dirty House' (2002) in Shoreditch, an early David Adjaye designed building, and she enlisted him to carry out the project on the house

she had seen while cycling home. She was compelled by its potential and accumulated layers of history – both architectural and social.

The resulting conversion celebrates this unique site, preserving authenticity with new additions. The design is born from an archaeological exercise, a gradual reveal of time through the process of excavation – an unearthing of up to 2,000 tonnes of concrete. The house occupies a triangular plot and has been expanded at basement level, offering open-plan spaces, each surrounded by a sunken garden. There are multiple entrances to the house, a reflection of the unearthed tunnels beneath, two of these entrances are directly accessible from the driveway and Mortimer Road.

Externally, the original masonry fabric is preserved, with 15,000 reclaimed London stock bricks used to repair the damage. The exterior render is retained, expressing the building's derelict bunker-like appearance. New concrete bay windows were installed.

Original internal walls and floors have been removed completely, having either collapsed or eroded beyond repair. An existing party wall that once divided the property into two houses has also been demolished, creating a flexible space, with a cantilevered staircase descending into a light-filled basement studio. The upper floor, which has been heavily reinforced following fire damage and corrosion now has a skylight. Natural light permeates throughout the residence, filtering in through full-height windows and doors that line each storey. The building has been excavated to below street level and a single slate sheet replaces the building's original roof.

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The Peace Mural By Laurie Elks

At the start of the 1980s, a cultural dam seemed to break in Hackney. The 1970s had seen a steady inflow of artists and left-wing intellectuals and several important cultural organisations were established including Centerprise, Space Studios, Free Form Arts Trust and Chats Palace. It was akin to an archipelago of alternative voices in a Borough still controlled by an old school Labour group bent on staving off outside leftist influences.

These alternative voices began to coalesce into a more potent force. Key influences included the strength of the anti-racist response to the offensive of the National Front and the British National Party in Hoxton; the resurgence of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) ; and the polarisation of national politics after the election of Margaret Thatcher. Meanwhile, more artists kept coming. An important nucleus was in Beck Road, a run-down street of working class housing scheduled

(like so many others) for demolition. It was progressively squatted as live-work spaces by artists and eventually the Greater London Council (GLC) agreed to transfer the street to Acme, a housing charity set up by two artists. Early residents included the sculptor Helen Chadwick, later to be recognised by an exhibition at the Tate and the radical singer songwriter Genesis P'Orridge. Another was Ray Walker, creator of the Hackney Peace Mural.

In 1981, Labour regained control of the GLC and Tony Banks became chairman of the Community Arts Panel. The following year, Anthony Kendall, erstwhile community worker at Centerprise, was elected leader of Hackney Council and the Council became more ready to adopt an overt political stance against the government. Hackney was declared a nuclear free borough and the Council made noisy but ineffective efforts to prevent nuclear waste being routed through Hackney along the North London railway.

Tony Banks' committee had a generous budget to support alternative voices. Among the projects they supported in Hackney were Cultural Partnerships, a community arts organisation which spun off from Free Form.

Banks's committee commissioned Ray Walker's Peace Mural, one of six murals with the theme of Peace though Nuclear Disarmament. The Peace March portrayed took place in 1983. I have read that it is shown going down Dalston Lane with Navarino Mansions in the background, but the railway bridge more resembles the one in Beck Road. The mural is a depiction of the peace movement rather than a precise representation of the event. The nuclear stand-off between USA and the USSR is depicted by a giant puppet borne aloft by men in skeleton masks. In the foreground is the Chats Arkestra which grew out of the Chats Palace house band which first performed at the Chats Christmas show "Robbin the Rich" (in which I appeared as a Merrie Man). The saxophonist Al May



1. Alan May
2. Daisy Carridice
3. George
4. Matthew Weir
5. Stephen Murray
6. Jah Globe
7. Dylan Lockwood
8. Roland Walker
9. Joni (?) Lockwood
10. Ray Walker
11. Anna Walker



Alan May, 2016



is seen on the right, together with the legendary Jah Globe (sax), Steve Murray (trumpet), George (surname not recalled) (trombone), and Matthew Weir on tenor horn. Ray and Anna Walker and their son Roland are depicted in the foreground. The Arkestra played a composition on the march by Jah Globe, Celebration Time is

here. The mural is based on photographs of the Arkestra playing at the Hackney Marsh Fun Festival and includes a number of other Chats characters including two of the "Chats Palace kids", Dylan and Joni(?) Lockwood whose mum Diane was stage manager. Next to Al May is Daisy Carradice who did the cleaning at Chats. George's

miner's helmet recalls the 1984 miners' strike when many Hackney families paid host to families of striking Welsh miners.

Ray completed a detailed sketch for the mural in 1983 before dying unexpectedly. The mural, following Ray's sketch, was completed in 1985 by his widow Anna and friend Mick Jones.

The mural, executed in durable keim paint, has held up remarkably well over time but was restored with a grant from Hackney Council in 2014. Described by Hackney's Guy Nicholson as an "iconic landmark" it represents, sort of, a monument of hip Dalston. However, the voices and people it depicts would in some cases feel less than comfortable with the place Dalston has now become.

See 'Events' for a planned visit to the Curve Garden and Peace Mural

If any readers have additions to or comments on this article please let us know and we'll publish a revised version on the Hackney Society website.

Publications

Tyll a novel by Daniel Kehlmann, was nominated for the Booker Prize in 2020. It weaves medieval German folklore and European wars, and features the Winter King of Bohemia, and his Queen, Elizabeth Stuart. Elizabeth – by tradition at least – lodged in Bohemia Place off the Narroway, Mare Street on her return to England. She features in the Hackney Society and Hackney History joint publication, *Women from Hackney's History*. Pantheon/Penguin Random House, various prices

Wivenhoe is written by one of the co-owners of Hackney bookshop Burley Fisher. Samuel Fisher's second novel is set in an alternate present, in a world slowly waking up to the fact it is living through an environmental disaster. Little Brown, £12.99



New Trustees

The Hackney Society has encouraged positive development of the borough's built and natural environments, through engagement with a broad cross-section of local people and experts. We encourage exemplary new design, regeneration and conservation of our rich heritage through *Spaces* (our newsletter), our publications, walks, talks, meetings, website and social media.

The Trustees of the Society are currently down by three members – if you would like to be involved in the running of the Society, and can commit to

- attending at least four Trustees' meetings a year
- the AGM

- such sub-groups as are appropriate to your interests and expertise
- lend whatever specialist knowledge or expertise you can offer
- assisting with routine administration and at events
- sharing our mission in promoting the highest standards in design and protecting Hackney's unique heritage

then the Trustees would love to hear from you.

If you wish to help the Society in practical ways but can't commit to becoming a Trustee then, as ever, we'd be keen to have your help in whatever form it might come.

The Hackney Society represents all of Hackney and we are especially keen to hear from younger people and those from minority groups, both of which we've struggled to recruit over the years.

If you've any questions or wish to express an interest in getting more involved please email us at info@hackneysociety.org with a short biography and contact details.

The trustees will invite possible candidates to attend the next Trustees meeting and will then co-opt any suitable members until the next AGM when they will be invited to stand for formal election.

Hackney Society Events

We are keeping Covid restrictions and advice under review and plan to offer a mix of online and in-person events to match the changing situation. Please check the website hackneysociety.org and your emails for details of what's coming up.

To join the Hackney Society email list visit <http://hackneysociety.org/page/maillinglist>

Two dates for the diary for in-person events if conditions permit.

23 April 11:30am. **Visit to Eastern Curve Garden and the Dalston Peace Mural**

12 May 7pm. **Talk on the New River** by Nick Higham, West Reservoir Centre

Noticeboard

Walrond House in Newington Green, an intergenerational housing development, was nominated in two categories in the 2021 Inside Housing Development Awards. It won the award for Best Urban Regeneration Project.

It is named after Eric Walrond, who was a part of the revival of African-American Arts in Harlem, New York in the 1920s and 30s, but also lived locally in Stoke Newington until his death in 1966. He is buried at Abney Park Cemetery.

Walrond House was completed in August 2020 and was developed by Anchor, who are a not-for-profit provider of housing for those in later life.

Shoreditch Park School's first permanent building has opened in Hyde Road. It is part of the Britannia Project, which includes the new leisure centre at Shoreditch Park and new homes. The school includes music and theatre facilities and a sports pitch on the roof. The school opened in 2017, but had been using temporary buildings.

Restoration plans have been announced for **An Viet House**, the Old Bath House, on Englefield Road. For decades after opening in 1981, the building had been used to support the Vietnamese community who arrived in Britain after the Vietnam war. Amongst other assistance, it helped train generations of Vietnamese chefs. Funds will come from the Greater London Authority's 'Good Growth' programme, and from Hackney Council. The building will be known as the South-East Asian Community Centre. Hackney Archives are currently restoring An Viet's records in order to make them accessible to the public.

Plans for a new workspace development by HB Reavis in Worship Street, intend to be net zero carbon in both construction and operation. **Worship Square**, under construction and due to be completed in 2024, will be home to one of Europe's most sustainable buildings.

The public gardens in Cassland Crescent are now named **Kit Crowley Gardens** after a local resident who died in 2018. The renaming was part of the move to celebrate local people and reclaim places named after people connected with slavery. The gardens

include a picture of Kit and a plaque explaining her work at a local nursery and her valuable contribution to the community.

The Hackney Empire is celebrating its 120 year anniversary. It was built on Mare Street in 1901 and designed by Frank Matcham. It is now Grade II listed.

As part of the 'Dedicate a Seat' fundraising campaign, the Empire are giving donors the chance to dedicate one of 120 seats in the auditorium.

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

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