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AGENDA SETTERS

The New London Agenda special | Graeme Craig | Claire Bennie | Jamestown's Michael Phillips | Jo Bacon | Elliott Wood | John Morden Centre

A PLACE OF HOPE

We take a look at the John Morden Centre:
a place of hope during a social care crisis

Architect: **Mæ**
Structural engineer: **MHA Structural Design**
Landscape architect: **J&L Gibbons**



THE ARCHITECT'S ACCOUNT

Alex Ely
Founding director, Mæ

Our commission to design the John Morden Centre, which won RIBA's Stirling Prize 2023, came at a time when, according to the Care Quality Commission report, England's health and social care system was 'gridlocked' and there was a 'tsunami of unmet care' that continues to this day. The daycare centre houses health and social facilities and shines a spotlight on the potential for architecture to uplift the human spirit and help residents thrive in their older years.

Tackling social isolation

Morden College has been at the forefront of enriching older people's lives for more than 300 years. Today, the charity's core purpose is to provide older people in financial hardship with a home for life, to support them as they grow older, and to provide care services, including residential nursing care, if the need arises. Morden College is a strong community, committed to enabling the older people they support to have the highest quality of life, for the rest of their lives.

The John Morden Centre is designed to be a hub for beneficiaries' social activities and health and wellbeing needs. It is home to Café 19, Merchant's Hall (a theatre space), resident arts and crafts facilities and a health centre. The hub aims to tackle social isolation and loneliness among older people, creating a friendly and convivial space for them to thrive, with support and companionship.

Age UK in its report *The State of Health and Care of Older People in England 2023* stated that among our older population: 'Many lack the social care they need, and/or end up in hospital when this might have been avoided.' It also notes: 'The crisis in the NHS therefore ultimately reflects our failure to care as effectively as we could and should for our growing older population.' We see the John Morden Centre as a model that could be find a wider application in the health and social care sector.

A building that ties old and new

Morden College is a grade I-listed almshouse in Blackheath, London founded in 1695 by Sir John Morden and built by Sir Christopher Wren's master builder and successor, Edward Strong.

The new building makes reference to the historic architecture in its colonnade, roofscape and brickwork. Its generous social spaces are linked by a meandering colonnade, which forms a spine of circulation and opens up connections to the mature landscaped gardens which characterise the site.

It sensitively engages with the existing context in a familiar architectural language, delivered using modern methods of construction to provide a high-quality, long-lasting and sustainable facility for the next 100 years of the college's work. The John Morden Hall has been retained, integrated and refurbished as part of the project.

A cloister, like an avenue of trees, runs through the building, off which a series of generous tent-like pavilions hang, accommodating the functional and communal spaces. The cloister—wide enough for two passing wheelchairs with seats for resting on your journey—facilitates a happy and surprising journey along a winding path past carefully curated pockets, niches, courtyard gardens and spatially delightful rooms. Visitors are always aware of nature, with generous views over gardens and a large cedar tree that sits at the centre of the building. The positive feedback I get from residents every time I visit reassures me that it is a project that delivers on its purpose to create a building that uplifts the spirit for the long term and helps residents thrive.



Care in the community — the John Morden Centre's Blackheath site in context



RIBA president **Muyiwa Oki**, said: 'Loneliness and isolation are critical issues, particularly for older people. The John Morden Centre's elegance and efficacy set a high standard for spaces that support healthier, happier and more independent lives. It illustrates the positive potential of architecture to strengthen vibrant and active communities. This is a skilfully designed package that minimises the building's impact on our planet's delicate ecology, while also harnessing the therapeutic value of the surrounding nature. It stands as a testament to the vision and ambition of Morden College, Mæ's creativity — and the exemplary collaboration between them.'

RIBA Stirling Prize jury chair, **Ellen van Loon**, said: 'The John Morden Centre is a place of joy and inspiration. It sensitively and seamlessly integrates medical facilities and social spaces, delivering a bold and hopeful model for the design of health and care centres for the elderly. Creating an environment that lifts the spirits and fosters community is evident at every turn and in every detail. This building provides comfort and warmth, with thoughtful features designed to prevent isolation. It illustrates how buildings can themselves be therapeutic — supporting care and instilling a sense of belonging. Great architecture orients people so they can thrive, and this building is exemplary at achieving exactly that.'



Brick external facing suits the listed building setting

**THE STRUCTURAL ENGINEER'S ACCOUNT****Michael Hayes**

Director, MHA Structural Design

MHA Structural Design was delighted to be asked by Mæ Architects to join its limited competition-winning team.

Mæ Architects' sensitive and insightful approach to the listed building, set in a rather remote part of the overall John Morden College site, and its desire to deliver a welcoming and uplifting building in response to the brief provided a number of interesting structural engineering opportunities and challenges, despite the structure being single storey. Sustainability and reducing carbon emissions are two of the key challenges facing the construction industry. This building addresses these topics in a number of different ways, including the use of mass timber to sequester CO₂, retention and refurbishment rather than demolition of John Morden Hall, adoption of cement replacement products for reinforced concrete elements and the use of lime mortar to enable the bricks used to clad the building to be more easily cleaned and reused at the end of the building's life.

Wood was selected for sustainability reasons and because of the recognised health benefits of using a natural material. Of all the various engineered wood products available, cross-laminated timber (CLT) was chosen for its breathability, factory tolerances, speed of erection and ability to support the brick external facing chosen by Mæ Architects to suit the listed building setting. It is also a modern method of construction, accruing the associated efficiencies and H&S benefits.

Being made from untreated softwood, CLT is prone to rot if the wood gets too wet. The edges of the panels therefore need to be sealed while exposed during construction, and the upper faces protected by a film such as Siga Wetguard until the permanent weathering is added. The Structural Timber Association has produced a moisture management strategy document for guidance.

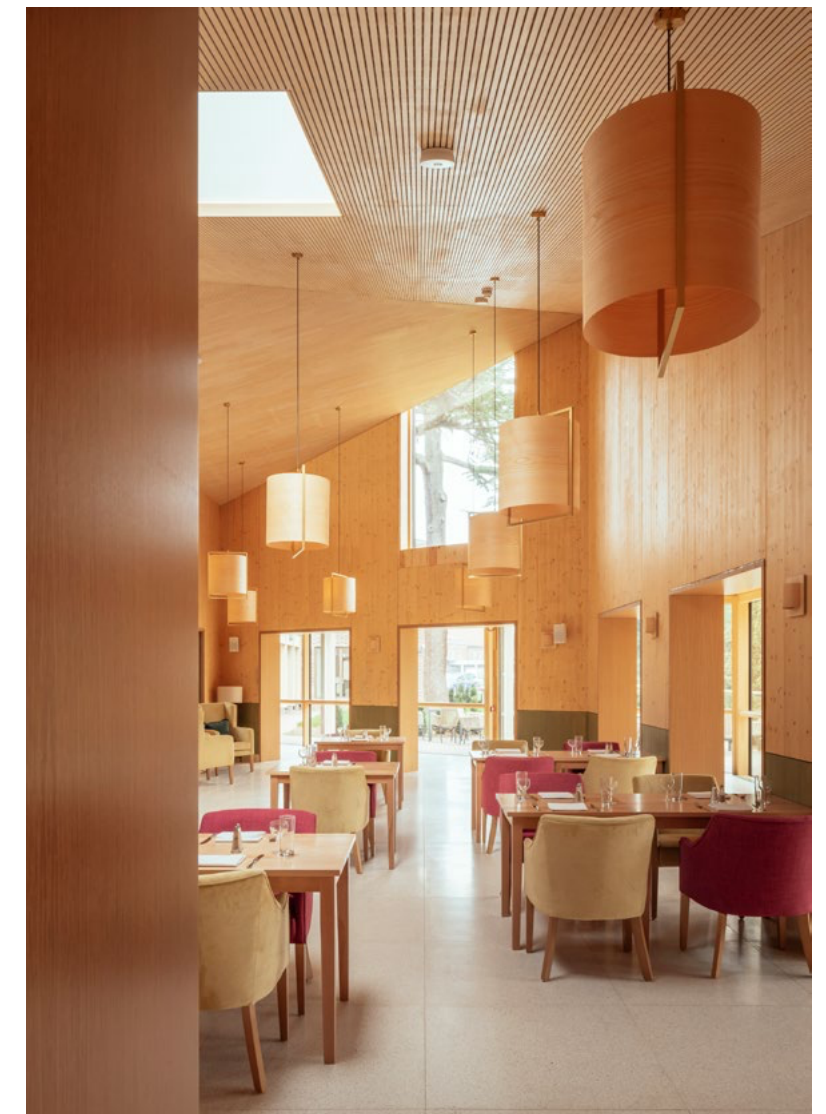
Externally, the timber columns of the colonnade are constructed using Accoya, the brand name of a very durable acetylated softwood product, with the base of the columns raised out of the splash zone using cruciform stainless-steel plates.

A structural movement joint divides the building approximately in two. Stability of the building is provided by the CLT, mobilising the kentledge of the ground-floor slab and the foundations. Panels of CLT have a maximum width of 3m, for transportation purposes, and the openings into the Bakers dozen generally work within this constraint.

Geologically, the site sits in the Harwich Formation, a soil type comprising silt or silty or sandy clays. Fortunately, given the desire

to keep the existing large cedar trees, the site investigation encountered a silty, sandy, flint gravel, with little shrinkable fraction, below a relatively shallow layer of made ground. The foundations of the building are therefore taken into this flint gravel, poured monolithically with the slab to provide both a flat surface for the CLT frame fixing and the kentledge for stability. Polystyrene was added to the sides of the foundations to try to limit the effects of thermal and shrinkage forces on the slab. Fifty-per-cent European-sourced GGBS was also used in the concrete mix, which helps control the heat of hydration and reduce the embodied carbon. The made ground and various existing foundations and drainage runs were grubbed out and replaced with engineered fill to provide a sound bearing beneath the slab and allow for erection of the CLT frame by a spider crane traversing the slab.

We very much enjoyed working collaboratively and creatively as a proactive member of the strong design team to deliver this sensitively detailed building.



Wood was used extensively for sustainability and health reasons





THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT'S ACCOUNT

Neil Davidson
Partner, J&L Gibbons

rooms' alongside listed structures, existing trees, an existing memorial orchard and meadow, and essential functional requirements of the college such as emergency access for ambulances.

A forensic understanding of the root protection areas of the existing trees, particularly the large cedar of Lebanon, was required to be able to carefully accommodate the new buildings. Working closely with arboricultural consultant CBA Trees we were able to understand what was possible and to develop methodologies to inform the building footprint and construction process, ensuring the trees were protected throughout and could be enjoyed for generations to come.

Following a collaborative design process, the landscape and architectural proposals combined to sensitively engage with the built and living heritage of the college, notably the character of the grade I-listed almshouse courtyards and the setting provided by the magnificent mature trees. By working with what otherwise might be considered insurmountable constraints, the designs maximised the potential of the long narrow site, seamlessly integrating new buildings and 'garden



Outside, in — 'garden rooms' were integrated alongside listed structures and existing trees, memorial orchard and meadow



Al fresco — a dining terrace next to the café is sheltered by thick yew hedges

Due to the outlying location of the John Morden Centre, it needed to have a legible arrival sequence from the outset, with a clearly defined pedestrian focus and accessible routes throughout. The journey through the building starts with a familiar garden wall embellished with subtle brick details and offers glimpses into the courtyard with a specimen tree and seating beyond, which denotes the start of the cloister. The medical centre office at the corner provides safety and surveillance as the elderly residents approach the building. The entrance space was designed to be generous, with views from other parts of the college and through to the garden beyond.

The courtyard garden provides an external space that sits alongside and adjacent to the cloister. It provides a quiet area with informal seating for meeting friends, an outdoor space to wait for an appointment, and a place to enjoy the quiet setting and catch the morning sun.

Aligning with the ethos of the building, the other landscape spaces were designed to be convivial, where residents and visitors can meet, learn and socialise. The cloister adopts a similar architectural language to the original almshouse courtyards, providing uninterrupted circulation between the pavilions and a warm and protected space to enjoy the garden during the winter months.

The large garden space to the south is divided into smaller 'garden rooms' complementing the internal

functions and providing a verdant outlook from the cloister. A dining terrace next to the café is sheltered by thick yew hedges. The welcome feeling of the 'snug' is reinforced by the containment of herbaceous planting and yew hedges. A larger space for relaxation sits below the lofty canopy of a cedar tree, catching the afternoon sun. The understorey boundary was enriched with native woodland species with seasonal interest.

'The landscape spaces were designed to be convivial, where residents and visitors can meet, learn and socialise'

Existing hardstanding was replaced with permeable clay pavers, allowing water to gradually replenish the water table. Rain gardens and green roofs help attenuate water and enhance biodiversity. ●