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MacEwen Award 2024:

Architecture for the common good

Hope Street offers women a better future

Sunspot rejuvenates Jaywick Sands

Citizens House keeps people close to home

St James' farm brings Belfast together

Local activism saves Aqueduct Cottage

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Coastal immersion

HAT Projects' holistic approach to Jaywick Sands' Sunspot business centre has brought new livelihoods and liveliness to an isolated and deprived community

Words: Chris Foges Photographs: Jim Stephenson, Maddie Persent

MacEwen award

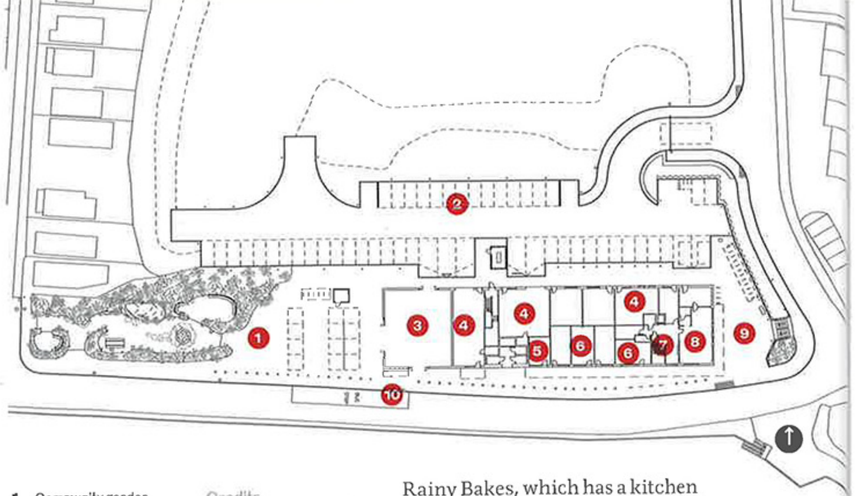
Jaywick Sands is often called the most deprived place in the country. The interwar plotland development on the Essex coast originally provided holiday homes for Londoners in simple chalets crowded along narrow lanes. Permanent residents gradually took over and today the isolated settlement has a tight-knit 4800-strong community, but one that suffers high levels of poverty, ill-health and overcrowding. Flood risk and threatened demolitions have added to the sense of an uncertain future. Against this gloomy backdrop the new Sunspot business centre stands in cheerful contrast, bringing jobs, life and colour to the centre of the village. Its presence owes much to the commitment of architect HAT Projects.

The Colchester-based practice was initially commissioned to develop a 'place plan' for Jaywick, where the history of neglect and unwelcome interventions have made residents suspicious of outsiders' intentions. 'All previous masterplans have failed for lack of engagement with local people,' says practice director Hana Loftus. 'If the community doesn't like something they'll lie in the road to stop it.'

HAT Projects took a more sensitive approach. Instead of public meetings the architects visited residents at home, making connections through word of mouth. When employment emerged as a primary objective the practice saw the opportunity for a new business hub which could be brought into use immediately, without waiting for full adoption of the place plan. Its client, Tendring District Council, agreed to a feasibility study for 'long meanwhile use' on a central seafront site that had been vacant since the Sunspot amusement arcade was demolished 20 years ago.

Reasoning that a conventional survey of agents would show no demand, the architects interviewed local businesses to

HAT Projects' place plan improves connections between the village and its greatest asset – the beach.



1 Community garden
2 Car park
3 Market hall
4 Light-industrial unit
5 Public toilets
6 Shop
7 Office foyer
8 Cafe
9 Café terrace
10 Bus stop

Credits
Architect
HAT Projects
Client
Tendring District Council
Structural engineer
Momentum
Services consultant
Ingleton Wood
Cost consultant
Potter Raper Partnership
Main contractor
TJ Evers

demonstrate that they could be persuaded to locate in Jaywick. With a business case and economic impact assessment written by the practice, the £4.8 million project won additional backing from the government's Getting Building Fund.

It was HAT Projects' enterprise and skill in fostering the conditions for the project that particularly impressed the MacEwen Award jury. They praised the optimism and confidence it exudes. Judge Je Ahn emphasised the challenge of creating projects of social value from the ground up, without the autonomy of some philanthropic ventures. 'We should be aware of who can achieve what with the means available,' he said, 'and recognise the struggle to make a project like Sunspot in this location.'

Within the 1500m² two-storey building 24 units cater for a broad range of enterprises. There are offices above beach-facing shops, and light industrial units opening onto the car park at the back. A manufacturer of school uniforms has its first premises alongside a barber and a dog grooming parlour. At one end there's a cafe, and at the other, a double-height market hall where small traders can launch businesses at negligible cost. On my visit a decent crowd was circulating between tables of jam and wooden toys and rails of clothes. For Rainy Bakes, which has a kitchen upstairs, a thriving cake stall has already proved a stepping stone to a proper shop.

All this is contained within what is, in essence, an inexpensive metal shed, but the practice was determined to add some architectural flair. 'To get people to base their businesses in Jaywick they needed a building to be proud of,' says Loftus. The signature see-saw roofline echoes the street-facing gables of Jaywick chalets. It makes the building look bigger too – important given its civic significance.

Metal awnings over the windows also increase the building's apparent size, like the plumage of an exotic bird. Against a cladding of translucent polycarbonate and pale green aluminium, all exterior appendages are picked out in primary colours with the saturated Kodachrome tints of vintage seaside postcards.

One vivid yellow canopy shelters a bus-stop that HAT Projects arranged to relocate from nearby. Like the inclusion of public toilets, a community garden and a new pavement outside – still a rarity in Jaywick – it's a small, thoughtful touch intended to make Sunspot a magnet for street life. It seems to be working.

IN NUMBERS

£4.8m
contract cost

1500m²
gifa

Below A translucent arch highlights the entrance to the market hall.
Right Trading inside and outside the hall gives local children a rare view of business.

Shops are secure, with interiors designed to withstand flooding.

This image Offices share a foyer, meeting rooms and a kitchen.

Right First-floor rooms benefit from height and light.

Inside, there are practical workspaces with strong character that comes from generous volumes and robust materials assembled to allow future reuse. The deep red exposed steel frame features some surprisingly elegant details. Wisely, the architect focussed its design ambitions on such essentials. 'Structure can't be value-engineered out,' says Loftus, citing the bright-coloured steelwork of London's Billingsgate market as an inspiration. 'That's what we were aiming for: a shed with "attitude" plus a bit of playfulness.'

HAT Projects also made a bid to operate Sunspot, drawing on the experience of running its own multi-tenanted Colchester studios. Although that didn't come to pass, the architect was alert to the risk of a lacklustre launch and galvanised a marketing campaign. All the units were let, with around 100 people now working in the building.

In the success of this architect-initiated project the MacEwen Award jury saw an example for similarly disadvantaged places. 'We are going to see more of this,' suggested Alex Scott-Whitby, 'because we need to.' For Jaywick, which still awaits decisions on funding for vital new sea defences, Sunspot is not only an economic lifeline but a tangible assurance that talk of regeneration might be more than hot air. 'There is a lot of scepticism that it will ever happen here,' says Loftus. 'Well, this building happened; and by doing this we've shown people that things can be done.'