

They are changing the face of Britain. From low-cost houses to colourful seaside benches, and from pop-up cinemas and bars to flagship art galleries, a new breed of dynamic and creative twentysomethings are leaving their mark.

Meet Britain's most promising young architects

BY ROWAN MOORE

I get an email from a young architect after the *Observer* has asked if we can photograph her and her partner for this article. She is uneasy and wants to know the point of the photograph. Would it not be better just to show their work? Another group had severe misgivings when they were invited to appear in *Vogue*. This reticence is striking and rare; I have almost never met an architect who didn't want their face in print. A media-tart gene seems to be buried somewhere in the DNA of most members of the profession.

My mission is to uncover the brightest of the newest generation of British architects and I am also struck to find young architects who really are young. Almost all are at some point in their 20s, with one or two past 30. Architecture is a slow-moving business, which makes a young architect – that is, someone of tender years with a distinctive achievement to their name – a much-requested beast. Prizes, exhibitions and books are created to lure them into the light. Usually the definition of youth is elastic: under 40 is a common limit, or maybe a bit over. I was once involved in such a project where an over-40 raged at being excluded. Couldn't we recognise, she said, that she was young at heart? Indeed, many gathered here are so young that

they are not technically architects, in that they have not completed every stage of the seven-year qualification process. But they have all designed structures that have been built and that are worth a detour, make ripples or are just plain good. Many are ephemera, temporary structures, things the PR world has called pop-ups, whose short lives leave an impression on the memory.

They have also all built things with their own hands. They have wielded hammers and saws and chivvied and hustled construction materials from unlikely sources. They have, in some cases, approached questions such as building regulations and health and safety with a degree of youthful naivety and got away with it. Architecture is hit harder than most professions by the bad times, to which they respond by going and making their own work.

One architect, Maria Smith, says they are the "Challenge Anneka generation", inspired by the 1990s TV series in which Anneka Rice performed seemingly impossible tasks in implausibly short periods of time. Another, Paloma Strelitz, says they are reacting to the over-computerised processes of big architectural offices. "We wanted to escape microstation lethargy," she says. Another describes, with a shudder, her stint in the back-back-office of a well-known maestro,

being asked to apply a parody of the house style to a cultural building in the far east. Work like this is disembodied, abstract and remote from the physical experience of buildings, and self-built projects are an antidote.

Of these, the most impactful is the Cineroleum, the cinema formed out of a former petrol station in Clerkenwell, London, for 15 screenings last autumn, before disappearing again. It is not exactly the work of a practice, but of a group of students "with no coherent plan", and who "can't decide on a name", whose precise numbers and hierarchy are hard to define. They needed people to sign cheques and planning application forms, but these were "whoever turned up at the time".

One of the group, Lewis Jones, says the project

They have the building bug: 'There is a joy in making something and you can lose it too easily'

grew out of "the general idea that it would be nice to do something", followed by the discovery that in Britain 600 petrol stations faced closure last year. They decided it would be interesting to make "a provocation, a prototype", something that might generate ideas that could be applied to other examples of this widespread form of modern dereliction, the ex-garage. "We always thought we'd find one," says Jones, and eventually a property company called Tiger Developments offered them the one in Clerkenwell.

They considered different uses and eventually came up with a cinema because, according to another of their number, Paloma Strelitz, they liked the idea of having a performance in the street. Their construction budget was £6,500, financed by ticket sales, with three weeks to build it. They "invited friends to come and build and there were 50 people there by the end". Construction methods were basic and "for more demanding elements we just asked for loads of help".

They worked their networks: friends, friends' dads, sisters. They were given some Tyvek, a synthetic fabric usually used as a water barrier in house building, to make a curtain which, hanging off the canopy that once covered the pumps, enclosed the auditorium. Theatrical chandlers, Alasdair Flint and Gerry Jeatt, showed them how to





work the rigging that would make the curtain rise and fall. Film director Mike Leigh gave them his blessing, saying: "It's fantastic to see young people who believe in cinema as a physical space that can do something positive for the local community."

There were alarms and panics. One night, the bar sold bloody marys without vodka and on another the building inspector threatened to close Cineroleum down, only declaring himself satisfied "as people were coming in and the popcorn machine was filling up". "We had no idea it was going to be successful," says Jones, but it inspired "a weird internet frenzy". When tickets went on sale online, they sold out almost instantly.

Cineroleum is not the first of its kind, but part of a lineage of temporary installations fuelled by the "power of enthusiasm". Some of its makers were inspired by working on Frank's Café, a bar that has appeared in the last two summers. Its makers were in turn inspired by working on another project, Southwark Lido, in 2008.

Frank's Café is the work of Lettice Drake, Henry Stringer and another Paloma, Gormley, who call themselves Practice Architecture. Gormley had run a community arts space when an undergraduate at Cambridge University and decided she would love to do a bar. Gallerist Hannah Barry gave her the opportunity to put one



The Cineroleum project, with temporary walls hanging off the petrol station structure. Lewis Jones

up near her gallery in Peckham, south London, on the unused top deck of a 10-storey car park with what would be, in another location, a millionaire's penthouse views. She started work on it while studying for her finals, without telling her tutors.

Volunteers built it in 25 days, for a budget of £5,000. Scaffolding boards were bolted together to make columns and a fabric roof was supplied by a company that usually makes the drop-down canvas for the sides of lorries. It got rave reviews, at least from those critics who were not perturbed by the noisome lifts you had to take to get there and the sometimes happy-go-lucky service. A fashionable crowd and sponsors – Mont Blanc, Campari – moved in.

Practice Architecture was happy and grateful and also slightly disconcerted. Drake says: "When Frank's exploded there was a feeling of, 'Oh shit, we've ruined Peckham.'" Worried that they had become agents of gentrification, they tried to atone with a plan to turn the old ticker office at Peckham Rye station, a disused "ballroom-like" space, into a "community restaurant". But they realised that the local communities were capable of setting up restaurants without their help. "We were trying to invent an infrastructure that already existed and it wasn't our place to do it. It felt patronising and dodgy."

They want to "make things with a social conscience", but are still feeling their way as to what this might mean. They have no imminent intention to complete their studies, but they don't have five-year business plan either. They are exploring what might happen next. They have built a 70-seat, open-air, wooden amphitheatre at Roche Court, near Salisbury, and a temporary art library with Hannah Barry is in the air.

Compared with the fluid group behind Cineroleum, and the slightly more firmed-up Practice Architecture, Studio Weave is almost venerable. Its partners, Je Ahn and Maria Smith, have just got their registrations as architects and they have a history of built projects going back nearly five years. It started when Ahn and Smith, then still students, created a project called 140 Boomerangs for the London Festival of Architecture in 2006. They invented a system of identical pieces of curved wood, which could be made into benches, play structures and pavilions.

The project caught the eye of the City of London's planners, ever eager for small, softening

THE GROUP BEHIND CINEROLEUM



HAT PROJECTS



STUDIO WEAVE



FEILDEN FOWLES



PRACTICE ARCHITECTURE



Top: the huge Cineroleum team, including Lewis Jones (centre in beard and duffle coat) and Paloma Strelitz (red jumper). Below, from left: Hana Loftus and Tom Grieve of Hat Projects; Je Ahn and Maria Smith of Studio Weave; Fergus Feilden (left) and Edmund Fowles of Feilden Fowles; Paloma Gormley and Henry Stringer of Practice Architecture. Photographs by Karen Robinson, Antonio Olmos, Valerie Bennett, Jack Barnes

Continued from page 13

gestures amid the brute finance of the Square Mile, and the boomerangs started to adorn walls of granite outside office blocks. They have also completed The Longest Bench, a wiggly thing in reclaimed timber on the beach at Littlehampton that can seat 300 people, and a pair of decorative shelters, called Freya and Robin, at Kielder Water in Northumberland. They have filled the courtyard of Somerset House, London, with a temporary installation of giant chairs, installed a charred wooden pyramid (for sitting on and looking at) at the Glastonbury festival and won a competition to make "a secret landscape garden" in the centre of Blackburn. They have volunteered to help find a site for a secondary school in Camden, London, in what might possibly be an example of that elusive thing, the "big society".

Their style is sweet. A jellybean dispenser and freshly made mince pies greet me on arrival at their office and they write little stories to generate ideas for their projects ("Not so long ago, not so very far from here, there lived a beautiful lady named Freya. Freya loved flowers..."). The Littlehampton bench is inspired by a charm bracelet. They have hit a winning streak with local authorities in search of public space improvements, for whom child-friendly charm is just what they want. They press some of the same buttons as the hugely successful Thomas Heatherwick.

It can get, at times, a teensy-weensy bit too icky-wicky, but their projects are redeemed by the quality with which they build. They do delightful things with gold-coloured finishes and plywood cut into elaborate tree-like curves. Their structures

are polished and refined, compared with the necessarily rough-hewn finishes of structures thrown up with voluntary labour in a few weeks.

Also impressively organised is Feilden Fowles, which, while still not fully qualified, has an orderly, professional-looking studio in east London deep inside an old Hackney factory, its walls covered with environmentally aware sheep-wool insulation. It has built a house in Wales where the materials come from within two miles of the site, including reused slate and larch grown nearby. The two partners, Edmund Fowles and Fergus Feilden, are keen to reel off the impressive data on how little carbon it consumes. They built part of it themselves and like to talk about the characters of different timbers.

"We didn't know we would have an office a year ago," they say. Now they have a studios-looking band of employees and a clutch of projects that includes another sustainable house in Wales, just granted planning permission on a sensitive site. Feilden Fowles is also remodelling a secondary school in Bath, a project being carried out under the protective wing of Feilden Clegg Bradley, the

'We invited friends to come and help us build the Cineroleum. There were 50 people there by the end'

practice set up by Fergus's late father, Richard. Its buildings look both confident and thoughtful. They have an air of calm enthusiasm and ambition and look very much like a successful practice in the making.

Most grown up of all is HAT Projects, a Colchester-based practice run by Tom Grieve and Hana Loftus. It has a substantial, serious building due to open this year, the £4m Jerwood Gallery in Hastings. This aims to be "not too shocking, not the star, not dominating", but "an environment in which to experience and understand art". It stands next to one of Hastings's marvels, the ranks of black wooden towers built to serve the fishing fleet. The dark, ceramic cladding of the Jerwood aims to respect its neighbour but not mimic it. It is a cultural temple, but on the beach, so it has to be civic and informal at the same time.

They talk about "carefully calibrated" spaces like longer-established architects such as Tony Fretton, for whom Grieve once worked, but they are also keen to do more than just design buildings. Their work for Jerwood included finding the best location out of a number of potential towns, and consulting residents, which, as there were some vociferous objectors, was not entirely smooth.

Loftus also worked at the Rural Studio in Alabama, where architecture students have to build real projects, in her case, a house costing \$20,000, for local communities. She, too, has the building bug: "There's a joy in making something and you can lose it too easily."

These five groups of architects do not constitute a movement. They do not have a polemic, a style or a grand theory. But they share a mood, of getting back to the basic pleasures of building. They are opposed to the computerised, corporate, compartmentalised ways big buildings are built now.

In building almost-free structures, it helps, it must be said, if you come from backgrounds sufficiently comfortable that making a living is not an overriding priority. As it now costs many tens of thousands of pounds to train to be an architect, and without much prospect of highly paid work at the end of it, there's a danger that architecture like this could become a delightful, middle class game.

There's also a danger that the idea of the pop-up, which is being rapidly commercialised by gin companies and smoothie-makers, becomes a charming distraction from the big, ugly buildings that go up without anyone much noticing until it is too late. It's not a good thing if architecture is always seen as a form of volunteer work, that costs almost nothing and requires only the most basic details.

But these young architects can't be expected to take on all the economic forces that surround them. Their overwhelming desire is to do stuff and to do it in a way that anyone, whether in Littlehampton, Alabama, Hastings or Peckham, can enjoy. It's not a bad way to start.

Gallery online

See our gallery of the architects' work at: observer.co.uk/new-review