

## Appleby Blue almshouse and its residents sit firmly in the community



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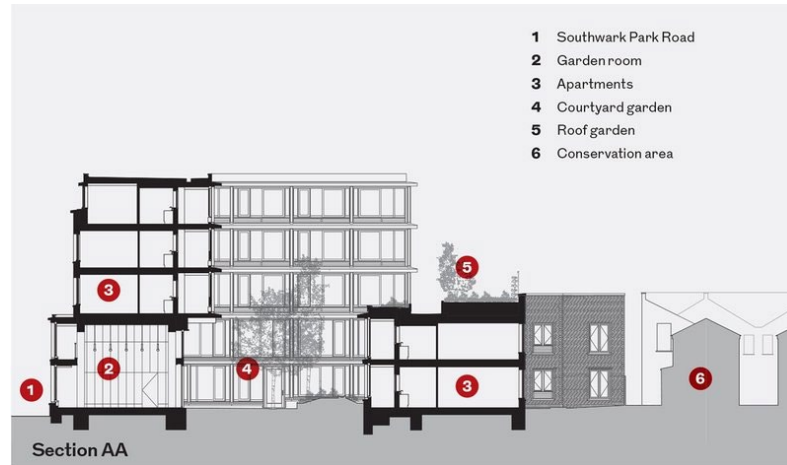
### Words:

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### Witherford Watson Mann's Southwark almshouse gives ordinary older people the kind of housing that is normally the preserve of the wealthy

A good few buildings have one remarkable room. Only the best have more, and of those just a few make travelling from one lovely space to another a pleasure in itself. Appleby Blue almshouse in Bermondsey, designed by Witherford Watson Mann, is one such place. Built to house the older residents of Southwark in south London, it corrals the sun into airy social spaces, warm, generous walkways and 57 neatly appointed flats that borrow their character from the structure and the city. At its centre are ginkgo trees and the sound of water runs through its courtyard, while on the boundary to local terraced streets, pleached fruit trees edge sunny growing spaces. Residents can take a circuit right around the building, pausing for conversation at the benches in front of each kitchen window.

Over the last decade housing for older people has had its own market grow up around it. You no longer need to buy a bungalow to downsize, you can move to a tailor-made community of older peers, with classes and tea parties and a lift to your brand new flat. It has a certain appeal – and a hefty monthly fee.



The social, low cost version of this arcadia has traditionally been provided by almshouses. Influenced by ideas from the visitors' book at its Stirling Prize-winning Astley Castle, and news of the much reported killer loneliness, Stephen Witherford, co-founder of WWM, unwittingly contributed to a new brief for such a place when he attended the away day for a small Southwark almshouse and grant-giving charity, United St Saviour's. There he listed the best things a building can bring: a sense of how light moves, time, memory, the joy of garden focus, shared place. These, rather than space requirements became the brief. The relationship with the charity grew.

The project took time to crystallise, eventually settling on the site of a squatted 1960s former care home and car park on which Southwark Council bought out the lease. The money was to come from a Section 106 on a major development, [Tryptych Bankside](#) behind the Tate Modern, for developer JTRE London. Happily, JTRE, which hails from Slovakia and has developments across central Europe, took on the drawings at Stage 4.2 and kept on Witherford Watson Mann through the construction management contract, even though much of the professional team was changed.

Witherford explains that the design started with the traditional almshouse diagram – a U-shape of homes reaching towards the street. But instead of burying community spaces at the heart of the homes, the practice designed them to face the street, separating the courtyard while offering views into it.





Benches outside kitchen windows on the wide walkways create immediate sociable space. Credit: Philip Vile



On side streets projecting bays set up a rhythms that fit the terraced houses they run into. Credit: Philip Vile

Approaching the building the four storeys of brick with a stepped-back zinc top storey has much in common with the many brick apartments that have gone up over the last decades across England's major cities. But it is somehow more. A few small details, and one big one, make it stand out. The big one is the two-storey projecting timber and glass of the community elements with just a kink to guide you to the entrance. The timber window frames and panels and projecting brick headers in bluey Danish brick give depth and a warmth of extra detail. Playful corners enliven the block as it turns towards local terraces and steps down from five storeys to two, using projecting two-storey bays with little gardens at their feet, as it cosies up to its neighbours.

The design has subtle layers of public and communal space. While the building appears open and welcoming from the street, the raised ground floor gives those inside the gallery a view onto it. Its signalling fits the charity's plan for a place that the community can be invited in to, as valued guests. Thus the communal double-height garden room that spans the building from street to courtyard garden feels self-contained, and turns naturally towards the internal courtyard it opens onto.

The walkway acts an organising device, running around the edge of the courtyard, except for a first floor diversion to the street side of the building. It is a buffer between the communal and the more private spaces of private front doors and kitchen windows. Some residents have separated themselves off further with net curtains, others have populated their windowsills with plants and decorative jars of pasta and cornflakes; still others have started to colonise the walkways, planters and benches with ferns, roses and conversation – it is the perfect place to slide back the glass screens of the walkway and sit down with a passing friend, a kind of sociable winter garden. And all overlooking the courtyard and the planted roof garden.



The south-facing courtyard is overlooked by walkways with windows that can be smoothly slid open. Credit: Philip Vile





Cut aways at the corners make them interesting, in the tradition of Bermondsey corners says Witherford. Credit: Philip Vile

The walkway is also an example of how London's Housing Design Standards open up architectural possibilities. In project workshops people asked why they would want a balcony when they would be on their own. So the allocation for private outside space was folded into that of the circulation to provide these generous, tempered spaces that also give shade to the windows. At a build level the walkways are a testament to collaboration. JTRE brought on board the Lithuanian-based [Boisrois](#) which worked with WWM on the design of solid oak frames for the windows and glazed screens, with integrated glass balustrades and vents – both passive and automated. The frames are robust and handsome, promising quality and care from Appleby Blue.

As we walk around a small group of residents is finishing up in the community kitchen and share slices of brownie. Residents pause to exchange a few words; many of them came for Witherford Watson Mann's 21st party here a week before. There is a sense of the jobs people have had, the work that still continues for some, lives of addiction or the move with family (one local resident has her sister living just along the way). There is optimism about being able to move somewhere new – often from tired council housing – in their local area, where red double deckers going past the window can take them up to their club at London Bridge or a short ride to Bermondsey Iceland. They can gather in the lounge and watch Strictly or take a comfortable chair looking out over Southwark Park Road.



On first floor the walkway takes over the front of the building giving access to communal spaces and looking out over the street. Credit: Philip Vile

The charity sees itself, and its two earlier almshouses, as enabling people over 65 to remain part of the city, rather than retreating. Different local groups are being brought in – gardening, cooking, perhaps sharing craft skills – bringing the 63 residents together with people from other generations. For many there are challenges with the move itself and failing health, and despite the immense feeling of privilege in being among the natural materials of the building and the gardens, there is acknowledgement that lives can be hard. The community kitchen is something of stand against both food poverty and loneliness. There is a logic in sharing resources, one example: shower rooms in the modest flats are augmented with what is jokingly named ‘Bermondsey Spa’ where any inhabitant can take a soak in the bath.

Charity chief executive Martyn Craddock says: ‘We expect this to be a benchmark for older peoples’ housing for a number of years.’ It has been a huge undertaking, avoiding the dumping down of the project as the developer took on the contract, the worries over Covid and materials shortages. And now there’s the pressure on staff and finances of taking on another almshouse. Despite that, Craddock is toying with the idea of building another. Spending time at Appleby Blue it is easy to see why embarking on another almshouse build is such a compelling idea.



Garden room with the red buses of south east London to one side and the gentle trees and water of the courtyard on the other. Credit: Philip Vile





Spending time at Appleby Blue it is easy to see why embarking on another such project is such a compelling idea. Credit: Philip Vile



## IN NUMBERS

**Construction value** £25.1m

**GIA** 5,800m<sup>2</sup>

**Cost per sqm** £4,328

**Predicted on-site renewable energy generation** 77,000 kWh/yr

**Predicted potable water use per person per day** 105 litres

**Predicted annual gas usage** 56 kWh/m<sup>2</sup>/yr

**Apartments** 57 plus 2 studios

**Form of contract** Construction Management

## Credits

**Client** JTRE

**User** United St Saviour's Charity

**Architect** Witherford Watson Mann

**Structural engineer** Price & Myers (stage 0-3) / Pringer James (stage 4-5)

**Services engineer** Skelly & Couch (stage 0-3) / AWA Consultants (stage 4-5)

**Landscape architect** Grant Associates

**QS** Thompson Cole (stage 4)

**Project management** Gardiner and Theobald (stage 2-3), Beyond (stage 4)

**Planning consultant** DP9

**Fire consultant** The Fire Surgery

**Acoustic and thermal consultant** Ramboll

**Main contractor** JTRE London

## Suppliers

**Hardwood windows and glazed screens** Boisrois

**External brickwork** Leighway Brickwork

**Internal joinery** Horohoe Construction

**External pre-cast concrete** Shire Cast Stone

**Steelwork** Powerhouse Design and Engineering

