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# BUILDING DESIGN

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a space to call  
their own  
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Huge research projects to improve design in new member states as EU gives go-ahead to European Technology Platform

# One vision for new Europe

**Damian Arnold**

Brussels is plotting a single pan-European vision of the future of architecture in an expanded European Union, BD can reveal.

The European Commission last week gave the green light to the formation of a well-funded technology research body for the built environment. Researchers will be drawn from Europe's main built environment players, and British architects are being urged to jump on board.

The core group, which includes Richard Rogers Partnership, the Architects' Council of Europe (ACE), contractors such as Bouygues, Dragados and Taylor Woodrow, and research institutes including the BRE, is already working up specific research proposals worth "tens of millions of

euros" to bid for later this year.

The move is a long awaited acknowledgement of the stiff challenges facing European towns and cities. The commission considers the accession to its eastern European countries to the union poses a particular challenge in maintaining overall housing quality.

According to Adrian Joyce, an adviser to ACE involved in setting up the body, "up to 80% of the population [of the new member states] live in apartment buildings that were put up in the 1960s and need to be upgraded." That means homes for 6.4 million people.

These states also boast enormous quantities of unused brownfield land. The researchers will also address the effect of climate change on building design.

## Construction think-tank sets its sights

Research projects likely to be identified by the European Technology Platform include:

- Developing new building regulations to respond to climate change.
- Sharing innovation on design of schools and hospitals.
- Creating accessible underground urban spaces.
- Improving security of buildings in towns and cities.
- Developing self-cleaning buildings.
- New methods of working with building end users.
- New materials, especially nano-technology.
- Indoor air pollution.
- Technology transfer.
- Involving universities more in construction research.

"There will be lots of opportunities for architects," Joyce said.

Marco Goldschmidt, director of RRP, urged other UK practices to get involved to drive up the standard of building design. "The platform is particularly exciting for architects and should

giants, could lead to British architects being seconded to work on key research projects to innovate the building design of the future.

"We are all rushing around doing projects and there is never time to innovate in any depth," said Goldschmidt. "At RRP we have a lot of know-how, which we don't share even within the practice to be honest."

The platform's research agenda and planned launch with EU president Romano Prodi at Maastricht, Holland, on October 13 was last week approved by the EC's Directorate General for Research, and a permanent secretariat will now be set up. It will be based on the model of the newly launched pan-European Hydrogen Platform, which has already been deemed a huge success.

If the Technology Platform is similarly successful, it will gain research funding for projects under the EU's forthcoming funding round for research projects known as the Seventh Framework Programme for Research. Funding under the new framework is expected to double from the current €1.3 billion for Priority 3 projects, which includes construction.

The Directorate General for Research's officer for construction Christophe Lesniak told BD: "Construction has not been very successful in bidding for research money. The sector is still very fragmented, but I would expect the platform to help write the Seventh Framework."

Joyce promised: "There are going to be specific actions to get a handle on some of that money."

**Designs for a**  
**115m, 35-storey**  
**tower by Squire**  
**& Partners and a**  
**neighbouring**  
**tower by**  
**Bennetts**  
**Associates in**  
**Islington were**  
**unveiled this**  
**week. They form**  
**part of a**  
**Bennetts**  
**Associates**  
**masterplan for**  
**the City Road**  
**Basin and are**  
**expected to be**  
**adopted by**  
**Islington council**  
**next week.**  
**Bennetts**  
**Associates'**  
**tower has since**  
**been reduced to**  
**14 storeys.**



## Second Clissold legal claim to focus entirely on design

Hackney council is preparing a second legal claim over the troubled Clissold Leisure Centre in north London which will focus solely on the building's design problems.

As BD went to press, details of the legal claim were scant, but Hackney council was preparing a public statement to "further clarify the legal position" on the Stoke Newington centre.

"The second case hasn't been filed yet; it focuses on the design

flaws [with the Clissold Leisure Centre]," a spokeswoman for Hackney told BD.

The council is already taking legal action against the leisure centre's architect, Hodder Associates, and quantity surveyor Davis Langdon & Everest over cost and time overruns with the building.

Hackney commissioned a separate architect in December to look at the problems with the centre. "Serious defects in the design and construction of the

building" were identified, according to Hackney mayor Jules Pipe.

BD last year revealed problems with the building, including cracked walls, a leaking roof and blocked drains.

The centre was closed in December last year for an initial period of three weeks. The closure was then extended to three months. Last month, Hackney council announced that the flagship leisure centre would be closed indefinitely.



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# Little feat

In a London suburb quickly becoming a hub of exciting new design, DSDHA has produced a nursery rich in architectural ideas, from the monumental to the intimate, writes Ellis Woodman. Photos by Hélène Binet





## DEBORAH SAUNT DAVID HILLS ARCHITECTS, DAGENHAM 11



Deborah Saunt is struggling to give me directions. Frustratingly, Dagenham falls just outside the scope of her London A-Z. It is a situation that will surely be rectified in the next edition.

This stretch of the capital's most easterly fringe is a key development zone in the government's plans for the Thames Gateway. An enormous tract of land between Dagenham and the Thames is being assembled through compulsory purchase orders in preparation for its development to masterplans by Macramor Lavington and West 8. Already the area is undergoing a major economic shift – last year Barking & Dagenham saw the second largest rise in house prices of any London borough.

To date, there are few built signs of change. However, in the past year a number of uncommonly creative projects have offered hope that something rare might be achieved here. Tom de Paor's landscaping for the A13 and Cottrell & Vernieuwen's Parsloes Online centre stand as tributes to the imaginative and committed local authority that funded them. To this list we can add Deborah Saunt David Hills Architects' new project: a nursery for John Perry Primary School.

John Perry occupies a rather handsome brick complex built in 1952. A generous provision of outdoor space holds back the vast slick of suburban housing from which the school draws its pupils. Head teacher Jeannette Harris had long been pleading for the replacement of the dilapidated prefab that previously housed the nursery. In 2002, she was given the go-ahead and rewarded for her patience with a decent budget. The total cost was £429,000.

A competition was held. The brief asked for a facility that could accommodate 52 two- to five-year-old children on a part-time basis, taking half in the morning and half in the afternoon. The building also had to incorporate an independent special educational needs facility for children throughout the school.

The commission was awarded to DSDHA, a practice that had recently won one of the Cabé-sponsored neighbourhood nursery competitions but had yet to complete a freestanding building.

**Uncommonly creative projects have offered hope that something rare might be achieved in Dagenham.**

Nonetheless, the practice's relationship with the school has been a success and it has been retained to design a second building on a neighbouring site to accommodate a Surestart facility supplemented by on-site health visitors and educational specialists.

The completed building is a single-storey structure which closes off the east end of an existing three-sided courtyard. The nursery's three outward-looking elevations present a rather defensive appearance, offering only child-height or high-level openings within a wall of adamantine Dutch engineering brick. The brick actually sits on a rendered base – the first indication of a wilfully perverse tectonic grammar which guides the building's detailing throughout.

Another of the building's key concerns is signalled midway along the east elevation, where the height of the rendered base suddenly increases. This move, supported by a slight level drop from north to south, fools the eye into reading the building's south elevation as that of a two-storey structure. Such a pre-occupation with the mutability of architectural scale underpins a number of the project's major formal decisions.

Harris believes many of her pupils lead an overly housebound life, starved of access to outside space. Encouraging children to spend more time outside is key to her vision for the school. To this end, John Perry's grounds have been developed as a range of contrasting environments. There ▶



## 12 BUILDING STUDY



are the usual football pitch and play area, but also a meadow and an area known as the "Monet-landscape" with a pond and bridge. The newly configured courtyard has been conceived as yet another kind of space. Harris calls it a "learning landscape", and it is equipped with educational features such as a black-board and mirror walls, a balancing bar, a solar fountain and a rill.

Saunt says a key point of reference for the relationship between the nursery and the courtyard was Barbara Hepworth's sculpture garden in St Ives, which features a series of polycarbonate lean-to studios ranged around its perimeter, establishing an indoor/outdoor life focused on an active landscape.

DSDHA has developed that image into what Saunt calls "a studio for children". The elevation to the courtyard enables an open relationship between the interior and the learning landscape. Behind a polycarbonate skin, secondary steelwork supports a series of opening windows (put in place before the walls in which they sit), scaled so as to preserve a delicately judged sense of enclosure.

In good weather, foldaway doors allow the space to be opened up to the courtyard. This connection is enhanced by the scheme's most dramatic feature: the steel and polycarbonate canopy, which cantilevers an improbable 8m from the face of the building. The cantilever dispenses with the need for vertical

supports, which might be hazardous to children, but its raison d'être is broader, dissolving the boundary between building and courtyard and dramatically shifting perceptions of the nursery's scale.

Internally, the building is divided between the nursery, which runs the full width of the courtyard, and the more internalised special educational needs facility, tucked away to one end. The nursery is dominated by a cork-faced "landscape wall" named in recognition of its stratified character and cranking geometry. It flexes down the length of the playroom, providing pin-up space and enclosing toilets, an office, a kitchen and a storeroom. At one point it kicks back to establish a storytelling niche which looks out to the football pitch.

These tactile, small-scale environments, complete with miniature fixtures and fittings, sit side by side with the building's more heroic moments. This sense of plurality is one of the design's most distinctive characteristics. At once heavy and lightweight, industrial and domestic, monumental and intimate, the building offers a whole world of possibilities waiting to be explored by its young users.

### Architect DSDHA

Client London Borough of Barking & Dagenham

Contractor Forest Gate Construction Co Ltd

Structural engineer Price & Myers

Service engineer Pearce & Associates





**Previous page:**  
The new building addresses a "learning landscape" featuring a richly modulated ground surface.

**Left:** The play area has a robust quasi-industrial character, with a springy lino floor, polycarbonate wall to the courtyard and a ceiling of softwood battens with recessed fluorescent lights.

**Bottom left:** The landscape wall runs the length of the play area, accommodating a storytelling area (right).

**Bottom middle:** Detail of point where brick meets polycarbonate screen.

**Top right:** The new building viewed across the football pitch, with the entrance on the north elevation.

**Middle right:** The south elevation has the presence of a two-storey building. The horizontality of the composition is enhanced by recessing the mortar of every third brick course and by using a frameless Technal window system.

**Bottom right:** Plan showing the completed building in relation to the phase 2 works.

