



East Quay

Invisible Studio has designed a cultural centre in Watchet, Somerset, for the Onion Collective, a group of local women intent on reinvigorating their home town. Mellis Haward enjoys the quirky eclecticism of a project that's a perfect match for its can-do clients and its harbour-front site

Photographs by
Jim Stephenson and
Piers Taylor



Twisting through the Somerset countryside towards Watchet harbour, a silver box glints in the distance, topped with a flash of red and white stripes. Dropping down into the town, passing the winding and narrow streets, along the watery esplanade, this new gallery and community building sits elegantly jumbled on the harbour's edge.

Ten years ago, four women from Watchet were sitting in the pub asking themselves how they could use their energy and expertise to raise the aspirations of their seaside town. Like many coastal towns, Watchet suffered from high levels of

unemployment and some of the country's lowest levels of social mobility, a situation that was exacerbated by the closure of the town's paper mill in 2015, taking a fifth of Watchet's jobs with it.

The harbour edge site had previously been earmarked by Urban Splash for luxury flats, a scheme that fell through in 2010 as a result of the financial crisis. Georgie Grant, Rachel Kelly, Jessica Prendergrast and Naomi Griffith, the original members of the Onion Collective CIC, saw this as their opportunity to use the site to make a lasting impact on their town's economy and

cultural aspirations. In a truly grass-roots move, before they had sought permission for the use of the land, they started their "community conversation", asking the town's residents: what does Watchet need for a stronger future?

The women of the Onion Collective were uniquely skilled with careers in marketing, finance and arts regeneration, and so well placed to question why local people shouldn't have access to culture and career opportunities.

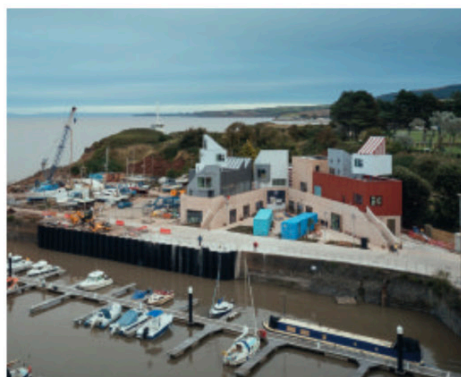
Following multiple town-wide consultations, production of a thorough business plan and

Opposite: The centre is a friendly collage of lightweight metal-clad boxes and pink concrete that gets its hue from the local red sandstone aggregate. Gehryesque pods perched on the roof contain holiday homes to rent.



Above: The building sits elegantly jumbled on the harbour's edge.

Right: The centre is formed from two "arms". Two bright blue shipping containers, rented to local artists as studio space, protect the courtyard from strong coastal winds.





Left: The ground-floor café spills out onto the outdoor dining and performance space.

a convincing feasibility study, the group was awarded £5.3m from the Coastal Communities Fund, the largest grant it had awarded.

The new East Quay centre certainly delivers on aspiration and culture. The building houses a restaurant, outdoor performance space, paper production workshop, geology workshop, many gallery spaces, artist and makers workshops, rental art studios in two remaining shipping containers, an education space and five overnight accommodation pods perched on the rooftops.

Despite setbacks and dramas,

including collapsing harbour walls, the building opened in 2021. It is an extraordinary feat and testament to the tenacity of these women, whose strength continues to grow – with a team of 21 people, the Onion Collective is now the largest employer in the town.

The building is a friendly and eclectic place, so multifaceted I feel I could as easily spend an afternoon here with my muddy-booted toddlers as attend an elegant evening gallery opening. It makes me wonder if it would have been as versatile and warm in character had it not been the brainchild of



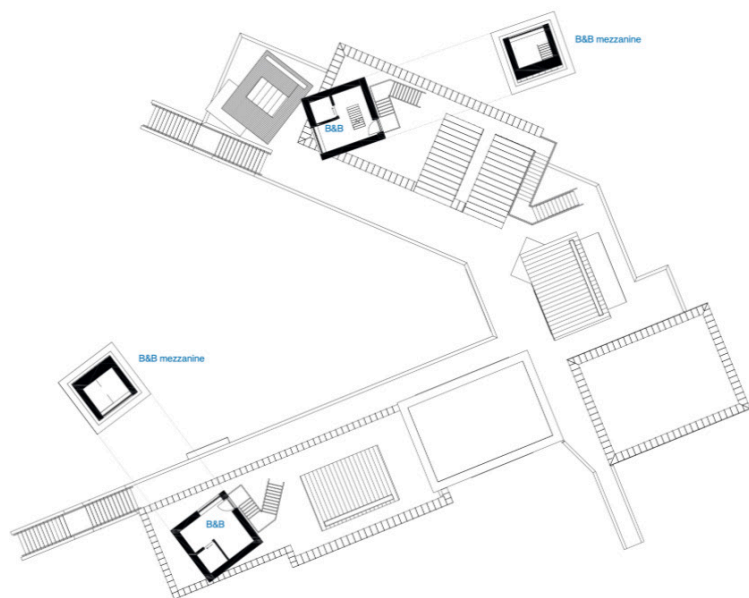
Left: A bridge at the rear of the building gives direct access from the South West Coastal Path to the centre's first-floor terrace.

Below: The building's plinth appears as if extruded out of the harbour wall.

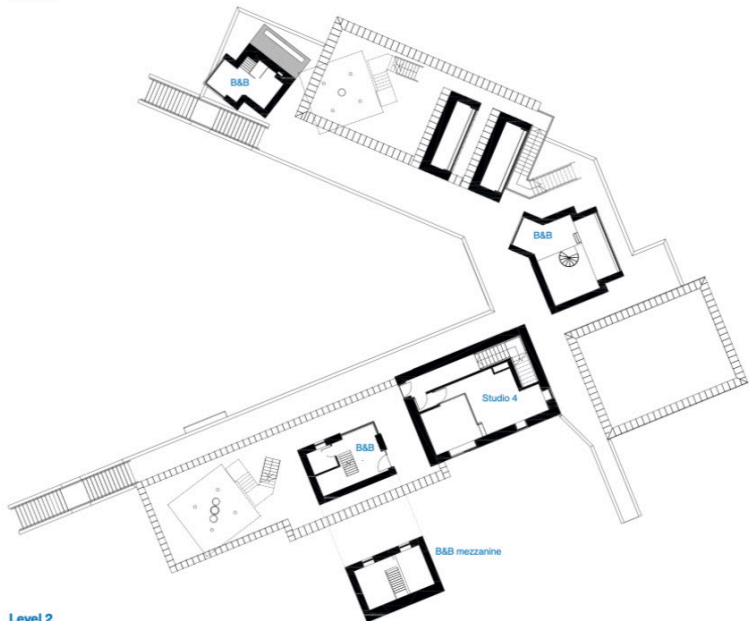


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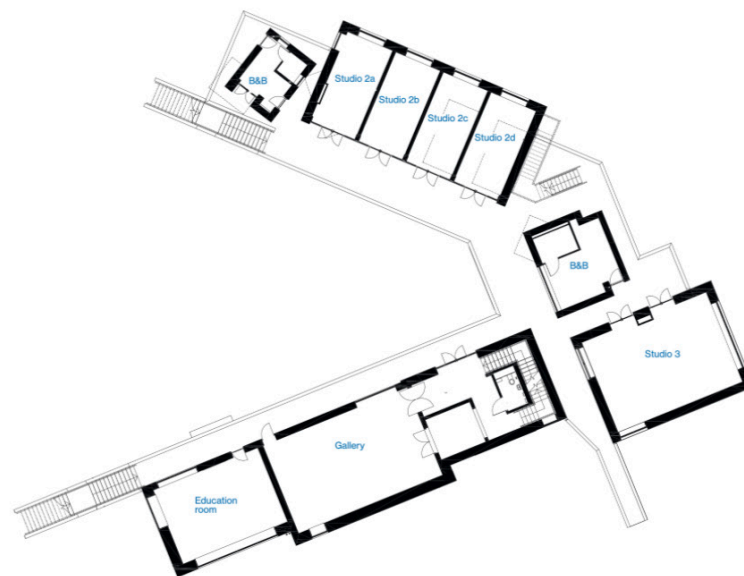




Level 3



Level 2



Level 1



Level 0



a group of mothers.

The group wanted an innovative architect interested in collaboration. It chose Piers Taylor of Invisible Studio after visiting his self-built studio in the woods. They say they "felt the energy crackle. We wanted some of that energy!"

Invisible Studio was a perfect choice. The nimbleness and purposeful looseness of Taylor's designs suit East Quay's idiosyncrasy and informality. The project also required tenacity from both architect and client, and the ability to stretch a budget, which Taylor understands through his own

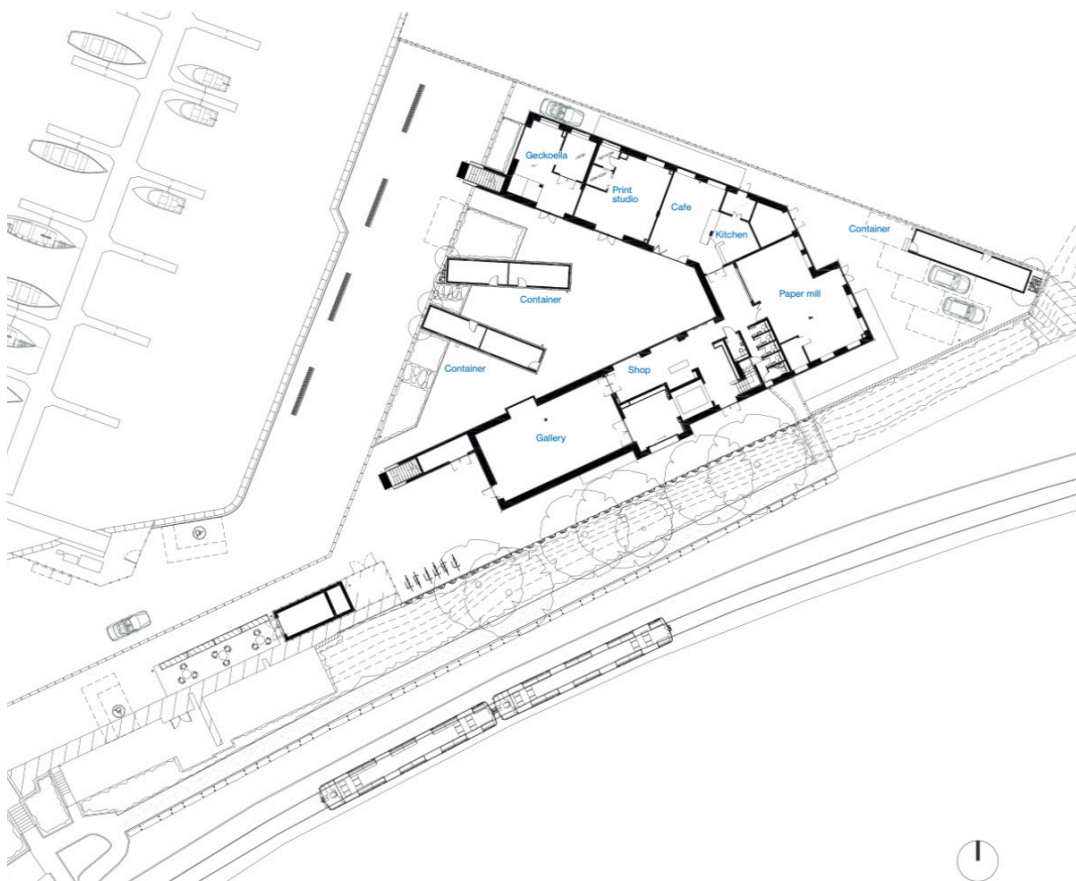
self-build projects and his longstanding involvement in the Studio in the Woods educational workshops.

The original brief did not include a list of "requirements" but instead a desire for the architecturally offbeat and a description of the community's wider aspirations. The scheme went through many iterations over the long community-led design process, but Taylor claims the resulting concrete plinth topped with joyful metal-clad boxes, seemed to him an obvious choice; he can't think how anyone wouldn't have plumped for this design.

It might be obvious to Taylor, but this is to underplay his skill as a designer. In the design's quirkiness, he has captured the ad-hoc character of Watchet and surrounding "naive" seaside references, such as the low lighthouse at nearby Burnham-on-Sea. It seems as if the building's plinth has extruded out of the concrete harbour wall, and flotsam from the fishing boats has been washed up on top after a high tide.

East Quay's ground-floor entrance is at the end of the existing harbour promenade, and when entering the building, you walk into the

Below: site plan showing the centre sandwiched between the harbour and the railway line.



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Above: Section through the northernmost wing showing external staircase giving public access to the first-floor studios and a cross section through one of five rooftop accommodation pods.

centre of the two "arms" of the plan, through the informal triangular courtyard the building encompasses. Two bright blue shipping containers remain positioned in this public space and, although you could be mistaken for thinking the contractors forgot to remove their site huts, they add to the casual atmosphere and protect the outdoor cafe/performance space from strong coastal winds.

Compare East Quay's vibrancy and architecturally open arms to Chipperfield's Tate Contemporary in Margate. While the Tate feels like an icy, milky alien, distanced and detached from the town by a concrete wall, East Quay is friendly, stripy and familiar, facing and embracing the town.

The ground floor houses a restaurant and the main gallery space, along with the paper-

making studio where craftspeople lift and dry the slushy paper pulp, all in view of the public.

The ground floor is characterised by walls of pink concrete, fortuitously coloured due to the use of local red sandstone aggregate. The joke was not lost on the design team of designing a pink building for their female clients.

Rising up to the first floor, you reach a wide terrace to access the artists' studios, gallery and educational room. At the rear of the building, the terrace links with a bridge to the South West Coastal Path. The terrace is part street, part viewing gallery and is open to the public 24 hours a day. On a visit to sign off the building, the police commissioner said they hoped there weren't any places for teenagers to hang out, to

which Piers Taylor replied: "The whole place is a place for teenagers to hang out, that's the point of it!"

At the second floor the Gehryesque metal-clad accommodation pods twist and cantilever over the concrete base. It was originally designed to be built in stages, as Taylor never expected the Onion Collective to complete the fundraising in one go. The medley of structures sit structurally apart from each other, as if built over time by different hands, though in fact, the collective secured enough funding to complete the whole scheme.

The project was concluded by a collaborative design team. When Invisible Studio was unable to take on the detailed design work "at risk" – construction information was



Right: The papermaking studio, where the public can watch craftspeople lift and dry the slushy paper pulp.



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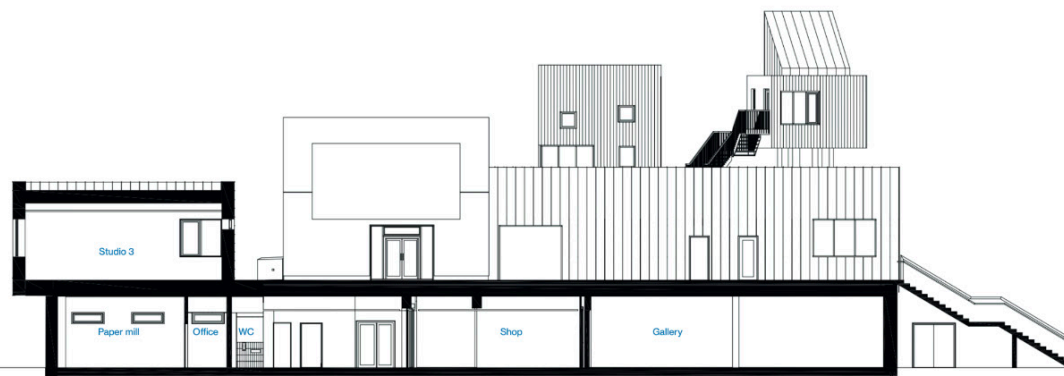
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required to release the next tranche of funding – Ellis Williams Architects came on board to translate the planning information, complete the construction details and oversee the project through to completion. IT Studio completed an informal and welcoming landscape design, and Pearce+Fagan is designing and constructing the interiors of the accommodation pods.

The education room, also developed by Pearce+Fagan along with local school children and environmental psychologist Helen King, is a wild and imaginative space, where children can climb, sit and lie among a hillside of adjustable table structures. Bouncy fabric balls hang from the walls – a sensitive and playful response to serve those children for whom balancing on a ball is actually a

way to help them stabilise and concentrate. Perhaps this room could be seen as a microcosm of the whole scheme – something outwardly playful, yet intensely human-focused and hardworking.

East Quay is an extraordinary model for community-led economic regeneration, and the project's influence will happily continue. Taylor, along with the Onion Collective, is now teaching a new master's unit at the University of Reading under the leadership of Lorraine Farrelly. The unit will "operate in a dynamic research-driven and project-based learning environment", teaching future generations how, instead of waiting for the perfect brief, they can instigate these kinds of ambitious community projects to happen themselves.

Above: Section through the southern wing showing the main gallery and education spaces and accommodation pods perched on the roof.

Project team

Client
The Onion Collective
Architects
Invisible Studio and Ellis Williams Architects
Internal design and fitout of pods
Pearce+Fagan
Main contractor
Midax Group
Engineer
Momentum Engineers
Mechanical and electrical
Troup Bywaters + Anders
Landscape architect
IT Studio
Quantity surveyor
MEA Clark
CDM
Lucion Services

Selected suppliers and subcontractors

Window, external door and curtain walling systems
Schüco
Concrete
Hopkins Concrete
Lighting
Eirco
External metal cladding
GreenCoat
External metal stairs
Earp Engineering
Insulation
Rockwool
Tiles
Johnson Tiles
Ironmongery
RBA Ironmongery
Acoustic panels
Troidtek
WC fittings
Splashlab

Right: The medley of disparate structures captures East Quay's ad hoc character and charm.



Watch a film about East Quay with client Georgie Grant of Onion Collective and architect Piers Taylor of Invisible Studio at architecturetoday.co.uk/east-quay-arts-centre



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