

Disegno

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This issue includes:

Hannah Beachler's time-travelling, Afrofuturist period room, featuring *Ini Archibong* and *Jomo Tariku*; digital realities with *David Chalmers* and *Space Popular*; community outreach with the *Onion Collective*; a return to the decaying pods of Tokyo's *Nagakin Capsule Tower*; the demolition of Mumbai's chawls; déjà vu for feminist architecture collective *Matrix*; a stay at *Emeco House* with *David Saik*; and *Stefan Diez's* electric textile ribbon.



Onions Have Layers

Words India Block Photographs Jim Stephenson

Most architecture journalists visit a new opening once. The PRs hustle you round on the press tour, you harangue a captive architect with questions, some shiny press images land in your inbox, and the job's a good'un. But I've kept coming back to East Quay in Watchet, south west England. A community-focused chimera, East Quay is a multi-level complex that encompasses a restaurant, art galleries, artists' studios, an education space, shop and holiday rentals. It's also the culmination of eight years of effort on the part of the Onion Collective, a female-led group of locals who banded together to try and address the chronic shortage of jobs, cultural venues and programming, community facilities and opportunities facing this sorely deprived part of the country.

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I've returned to the space not because the media didn't get it right the first time – *The Guardian* hailed it as an "enchanted place" and it made a lot of end-of-year best-of lists in the UK architecture press – but because it just works. East Quay is an art gallery with a dog-friendly restaurant that's a 45-minute drive from my house – practically nothing in Somerset terms. I've taken my mum there. I've taken my next door neighbour there. You can enjoy some culture in the form of an exhibition; sit in the sun with a glass of wine and a bowl of pasta, listening to the wind whistle through the nearby boat riggings; then buy a vegan candle, a book to make you think, and a fancy bar of chocolate in the shop. If you want to stay the whole weekend, you'll soon be able to rent one of five holiday pods.

This, of course, is the point of a social enterprise. You come along, engage with a place and spend your money there, which should then all get ploughed back into the town. The first time I saw East Quay, I got the grand tour from Georgie Grant, one of the Onion Collective's five directors, and Piers Taylor, whose architecture practice Invisible Studios, along with Ellis Williams Architects, took on the job of designing the £7.3m government-and-grant-funded project. "Unquestionably, in 25 years of practice, it's the most ambitious project I've ever been involved with," says Taylor. Grant is more sanguine: "Life is complex, and buildings should talk about how life really is."

East Quay is a beacon of hope in post-industrial Watchet, a town whose fortunes have taken a significant dive in the past century. Once a thriving harbour and mill town, and the terminus of the West Somerset Mineral Railway, Watchet is today the sixth most deprived ward in Somerset; West Somerset, in which Watchet sits, is the 45th most deprived of England's 326 local authorities. In 2007 there were around 500 employment opportunities recorded in the town, for a population just shy of 4,000 people. In 2010, a report conducted by Somerset County Council and NHS Somerset sounded the alarm on the area's high number of hospital admissions for alcohol misuse, which it linked to a poisonous combination of low employment and high house prices.

In 2015, the situation worsened. Watchet's 265-year-old paper mill shut down and 176 jobs vanished almost overnight. "It wasn't just the lost

jobs," says Grant. "It was a sense of identity. It's like when someone dies, that death reverberates out." That same year, a report conducted by the Office of National Statistics found that four in every ten workers in West Somerset earn less than a living wage – the worst statistic in all of England. Watchet's ward also ranks in the top tenth percentile for mental health issues across the country and, while the whole of England is facing a housing crisis, Somerset is at the eye of the storm; a 2021 survey from Halifax named Taunton – just 30 minutes' drive from Watchet – as the town with fastest rising house prices in the country.

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It wasn't always like this. In the 19th century, Watchet was a port town with a mill fuelled by some of the very coal it was importing and exporting. The West Somerset Mineral Railway was built to bring iron ore down from the hills to the harbour, where it was shipped across the Bristol Channel to Wales until the mines closed in 1883. The town's busy harbour was the inspiration for one of the era's most famous epic poems: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Samuel Taylor Coleridge made a home in nearby Nether Stowey and wrote his best work here amongst the hills and sea views, before succumbing to an opium addiction. Today, there's a 7ft-high statue of the Ancient Mariner and his infamous dead seabird on the esplanade. The harbour isn't open to commercial craft any more – it was shut in 2000 under a controversial Harbour Revision Order. Alongside sobering statistics about people's lives, there are still architectural tells around the town that speak to Watchet's more industrious past. From the window of one of East Quay's holiday pods, which are having the finishing touches put to them at the time of writing, a workman points out the old trackway where cargo of local quicklime



could be loaded directly onto boats from the West Pier before the lime kilns were abandoned in the early 20th century. All that remains, the workman tells me, are three tumbledown stacks in various stages of decay. "There's a lot of those remnants kicking around," he says.

The architecture of East Quay is a contradiction that coalesces into something more than the sum of its parts. It is a new thing on salty earth in an ancient place. It represents jobs in a post-industrial town, and a community centre in a country whittled down to the bone by decades of austerity. Up close, you can't miss East Quay. On top of the centre's sturdy concrete base is a strange collection of angular structures clad in corrugated metal, which bring to mind jetsam blown in from the sea, or farm buildings tumbled down the hill behind. But walk out along the sea wall and you can see it start to blend with the red-tiled rooflines of Watchet. Once you're up on the hills looking down, it almost vanishes – invisible Studio living up to its name.

At its base, East Quay is built like a fortress. Its high, flat-faced walls of pinkish concrete buffed smooth are unscalable, a bulwark against the wind that whips in from the sea. Although the space appears impregnable, there are multiple routes in and around East Quay via stone steps, cut-throughs and alleys that connect to the quayside, and a coastal path that runs behind the site, parallel to the town's railway. The centre's plan is L-shaped, with a sheltered outdoor space at its centre. "We wanted to make a courtyard that was protected from extreme weather where people could gather," explains Taylor. The courtyard is also host to Contains Art, three shipping containers that have been converted into miniature art galleries, and outdoor seating for the restaurant. Wide glass doors open onto the restaurant on one side and the art gallery on another. The rosy-hued concrete has been left raw, giving the halls a bunker-like feel apart from in Gallery One, where a cathedral-like cylindrical column has been buffed as smooth and shiny as rose quartz. Taylor insists I reach out to give it a pat.

Atop this monolithic base is a pleasingly ramshackle-looking second level where the architects have installed the artists' studios, full of inimitable seaside light for painters and photographers, and equipped with shopfronts to attract passing customers (the tenancies help fund East Quay). Across the way is Gallery Two

and the education space, a cosy wood-lined room furnished with floor cushions made from rag-stuffed recycled bouncy castles and bouncy stools that look like the buoys that bob in the sea below. Scattered across the first and second level are the rental pods, one perched on stilts like the well-kitted-out crows nest of a ship. Each features a unique interior designed by Pearce+ Fægen. The designers, who relocated to Watchet for the duration of the project, have managed to translate some of East Quay's madcap DIY spirit into their interiors. One pod features a netting floor and a code painted onto the walls in maritime signal flags. Another features a cheeky illusion in the form of a bathtub sawn in half and turned into a sofa. Leave the curtains open and anyone looking up from the seaside would think someone sat in it had been caught taking a semi-public soak.

On the exterior, the pink concrete continues up from the ground floor in some places, augmented by corrugated metal cladding with rust-red stripes and sharp angles of grey metal that stick out against the sky. For the traditional British seaside, it is decidedly postmodern. "It's two lightweight sheds on a plinth," summarises Taylor, "All of us loved the ad hoc, anti-architecture-type buildings around town," he continues, enamoured by Watchet's boat sheds and lean-tos. "They really influenced us."

Local reception to its design was initially mixed. "It's a shockingly contemporary building in an ancient harbour town in West Somerset," says Grant, who estimates that there was a 50/50 split of fans and detractors on the Onion Collective's Facebook page right up until the building opened in November 2021. They found that if they posted interior shots then the reaction would be positive, but renders of the exterior or construction photos would soon attract a 200-post-long argument over modern architecture. The mud-slinging got so heated that a local paper, the West Somerset Free Press, started printing some of the choicest insults against the design, accusing it of resembling "Legoland" or looking like a "four-year-old drew [it]". But once the huffy denizens of social media were able to experience East Quay in real life, the grumbles about modern design have, it appears, melted away. "When they experience it, they get what the architecture is trying to achieve," says Grant. "You see people's surprise and joy. It's so unexpected; it allows architecture to express something more."

Making sure Watchet's residents know they have a place in East Quay is important to the Onions. The press attention has brought interest from further afield: the pods are booking up far in advance. Once they're finished and ready to be rented out, the group plan to hold a grand opening for this final stage of East Quay, along with a screening of a film about the project made by Taylor and Owen Pearce of Pearce+ Fægen. But before that, the Onions want to have an open day to allow Watchet's residents to come and snoop around the holiday lets, giving them a sense of ownership over what will be the only non-public parts of the whole complex. Nosiness is a vital part of community engagement.

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—Piers Taylor

The East Quay Kitchen – a way to create jobs and turn a profit, with the enterprise part of social enterprise being crucial to East Quay's long-term prospects – already has its regulars who come for breakfast. "It's becoming a meeting place," says Grant. The Onions have also found it has become an unexpected but welcome staging post for those visitors who may not feel comfortable walking straight into an art gallery. Invisible Studio's architecture is beautiful, but those big, ruddy concrete walls and the white art-filled rooms within are a little intimidating. From the cafe windows or, on dry days, the trestle tables outside, those who may be less confident about entering an art space can "test the air", says Grant. They're considering putting a sign for the gallery in the courtyard to create an enticing breadcrumb trail right up to its door.

One group the space is already popular with are the local teenagers. The first time I visited in October, Grant was quick to tell me with a certain amount of pride that when school finishes they flock there

to order a portion of chips washed down with a Coke. "It's funny," she says, "when we gave a talk to the police commissioner he asked us, 'So tell me, how are you going to stop the youths from congregating?'" They tried to explain that young people congregating in East Quay would be a feature, not a bug. When I returned in February, it transpired that they've grown even bolder in congregating over the winter. "The teens are lovely and troublesome," adds Grant. "They love the reception area because it has a free sofa and, when they get rowdy, we push them upstairs to Gallery Two. They'll be on their phones, but maybe they'll take the art in, unconsciously."

Formal youth engagement programmes can often be cringeworthy, but at East Quay the connection has been allowed to happen organically. In a first-floor workshop, for instance, local carpenter Hannah Griffith Prendergrast has been squirrelling away and working with the odds and ends of wood left over from the space's construction and fit-out. "It would have been skipped otherwise," shrugs Griffith Prendergrast. "It would have cost the builders more to get rid of it." With supply chain issues pushing up the price of timber, it's a thrifty solution and one that produces beautiful results – everything from old scaffold boards that Griffith Prendergrast has turned into tables and benches for the café, to clever little shelves for sandpaper (ordered by grade) made from leftover plywood. Young people, Grant and Griffith Prendergrast tell me, love to drop in here and try their hand at making things. While I'm there, they earmark a place to store a vast Minecraft-inspired figurative sculpture one of the teenagers is planning. Meanwhile, up at the topmost pod, graffiti is drying on the walls. The teens were involved, but it's not the casual vandalism the police commissioner was afraid of; a graffiti artist was invited to decorate the space as part of a residency, so showed them how to master the art of spray paint. The murals are meant to evoke local symbols, but there's clearly been a bit of creative licence – rad-looking motorbikes and dinosaurs feature heavily in the design. "I didn't know Godzilla visited Watchet," quips Grant.

Teenagers are, in fact, the origin story of the Onion Collective; without them, there wouldn't be an East Quay. The seeds were planted by two local sisters, Naomi Griffith and Jessica Prendergrast, who set up a youth centre called Minehead Eye. The centre was supported with £3.2m in funding obtained through



Myplace, a government scheme that ran from 2008 to 2013, and which gave a total of 63 grants towards the development of youth centres. Myplace was the last bit of money the UK government put towards

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—George Grant

youth services; analysis from the YMCA estimates that funding for youth centres was cut by 70 per cent between 2010 and 2020. Over that decade, 750 youth centres closed down. At the same time, anti-teenager sentiment in the UK reached an all-time high from which it hasn’t significantly decreased since. Moral panics over antisocial behaviour have seen shopping centres and train stations install devices that emit high-pitched sounds that assault the more sensitive hearing of those under the age of 20. Businesses and councils install pink lighting in an attempt to ward off young people by highlighting acne. In a country full of architecture openly hostile to teenagers, a gallery space that welcomes teens to drop by to eat chips and hang out is radical.

Minehead Eye managed to adapt and survive when many youth centres went under. They added a skate park and a climbing centre, and became so successful that when the local council was forced to jettison its youth services team a few years ago, Minehead Eye was able to step in and take them on. Griffith and Prendergrast saw more untapped potential in their local area, particularly as to how combining social justice with judicious enterprise could do good where local councils struggled with meagre funds. “We used to meet all the time in the pub, drink cider and have endless conversations about what should happen in Watchet and why it never does,” says Grant, “[We kept wondering], why isn’t anyone doing anything?”

Frustrated, they took matters into their own hands. The Onion Collective incorporated in 2013 as a community interest company – a type of social enterprise that operates for the community rather than private shareholders. Through arts programmes and local collaborations they built inroads and networks, with East Quay as the latest step in their plans. With its pods for weekenders, shops selling paintings, and a restaurant offering roasted romanescos and tahini, East Quay isn’t necessarily a teens-first kind of building. But in a county where more than 62 per cent of the population will be over the age of 50 by 2029, the Onion Collective is keeping one eye on the youth of Watchet. “If you’re a kid growing up from a deprived background here,” says Grant, “you’ve got the least chance of anywhere in the country.”

It’s hard to talk about East Quay without overusing the C-word: community. “When you talk about community it’s sort of a misnomer, because there’s no such thing as one community,” says Grant. “It’s a whole load of different groups coming together.” There’s not a single Watchet community, but rather scores of overlapping economic and social layers, sometimes interlocking – and sometimes at loggerheads. “When we talk about community, what we really mean is conversation,” says Grant. “You build community by having as many organised conversations as possible. Even though they have differences of opinion, you ask people to imagine what that perfect future might look like, if everything went well.” Keeping everyone’s eyes on the communal prize is more than half the battle, it seems. “Any community organising is three quarters managing relationships,” says Grant.

To help capitalise on these relationships, the Onions have decided to map them. Free Ice Cream is a studio that uses video game design technology to create digital products for arts projects and public sector entities. Working with the Onion Collective, Free Ice Cream’s founders Simon Johnson and Sam Howey Nunn built an interactive digital map of Watchet’s residents and their connections to each other. The methodology was low-tech: the Onions got 50 townspeople in a room together and asked them to write down answers to questions designed to help plot the people and organisations that make Watchet tick. The result of this is Understory, which may sound steampunk but in actuality looks like a blossoming network of spiderwebs or a map



More Together Than Alone, an exhibition by artist Neville Gable that was the first to be shown at East Quay.



The courtyard space at East Quay.



The Ten River Paper paper mill.



of the stars. Each node represents an organisation or person, and you can filter them by shared goals such as mental health, housing or economic growth. Understory charts the bonds and links made by social capital, with a slider that can be moved to adjust the degrees of separation between each node. Want to find out who else is committed to improving people's physical health? Tinker with a few settings and you'll

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—Georgie Grant

learn that you can hit up the town band for help. A wide cross-section of Watchet society is already on Understory: the mayor; the school's head teacher; the local disability volunteer; the youth worker. “In times of trouble these people are tasked with disseminating information,” says Grant.

Of course, there have been troubled times recently. When the pandemic began, the Onions spearheaded the response with the Watchet Coastal Communities Team to form a coronavirus support group for the town. They coordinated with a local Co-op supermarket to bootstrap a system where people isolating could call a helpline with their shopping order, which would then be passed on to volunteers to bag, before being picked up to deliver to people's doorways. An old-fashioned community effort with a contemporary twist, the scheme featured doorstep payments enabled by a card reader from SumUp, a mobile payment startup, so that the Co-op could be paid back at the end of the day. But as the pandemic drags on, even community organisers are feeling the drag. “Lockdown was exciting, there was that adrenaline,” says Grant. “Now so many people are so sad. We need gathering again, [we miss] the importance of physically being together.”

My last visit to Watchet came just after Storm Eunice had blasted up the Bristol Channel, putting our part

of West Somerset on a red weather warning. Luckily, East Quay had been left unscathed by the high winds. Over a coffee in the café, Grant told me it had reminded her of one of the darker days of the project, when Storm Ciara – “a particularly horrible storm” – battered Watchet in December 2019, just as they were due to start construction. A cavernous hole opened up in the Victorian-era harbour wall and there were fears that the site would be found to be structurally unsound. “We thought it was game over,” says Grant. “I remember sitting in the office in tears.”

Although engineers ultimately deemed the area to be safe, the site had already been burned by one doomed project. In 2008, developer Urban Splash, which specialises in building homes in decaying industrial spaces, obtained planning permission to build 75 homes designed by London-based studio Mikhail Riches. It was the year of the financial crash, however, and the plans never got off the ground, with the developers unable to agree with stakeholders on the details of the development. “Watchet is unique,” says Grant, “and they didn't get it.” Reading over the notes from a council meeting in November 2013, you can see the unease with the Urban Splash scheme bubbling to the surface. “It was felt that the community aspect in the project was not catered for,” reads one bullet point. “Lack of affordable housing element,” reads another. The Onions had to work hard to nurture advocates who could lobby for East Quay from within the corridors of council power. Bridgwater and West Somerset is a Conservative safe seat, meaning its elected officials tend towards the traditional. A rabble-rousing group of women looking to set up a social enterprise was an outlier. “It was a big risk for the council to take,” acknowledges Grant. “Not every councillor is even going to understand what a social enterprise is.”

Even today, with East Quay resplendent by the sea, it's not all plain sailing. With the project almost complete, there has been a sting in the tail as the space's contractor Midas Construction went into administration in February 2022. East Quay is safe enough, with just a bit of snagging and some janky plumbing and lifts to sort out. But if it goes under, the loss of Midas Construction will hit the region hard – it employs almost 500 people with the same number again relying on it holding its place in the supply chain.

The Midas touch was a gift that became a curse, but Watchet, along with a swath of the Quantock Hills,

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is under the protection of a scourge that became a blessing. Somerset folklore has it that, long ago, the area was terrorised by the Gurt Worm, a dragon who fulfilled its fire-breathing, sheep-pilfering instincts until an axeman split it in half. The halved dragon formed a distinctive, humping topography, while its blood soaked into the earth and blessed the place. Driving the winding roads to Watchet today, the only hulking beasts you pass are tractors from local farms and the haulage lorries trundling down to Hinkley Point C nuclear power station. It's here where you can see Big Carl – the world's largest crane – outlined like a yellow skeleton against the sky. Livestock remain unmolested and cows even have their own traffic light systems to cross the road at milking time. But on a wet day, the soil weeps a sanguineous copper red that could well be dragon blood. Indeed, the Gurt Worm is a part of East Quay – Pearce+ Fægen carved his fearsome likeness into the wooden frieze that lines one of the pods, while the local blood-red sandstone was ground up as the aggregate that stained its walls a sunset-pink.

With this fairy story in the walls, I was primed to believe in magic when my first tour of East Quay concluded with a flourish. In the concrete guts of the ground floor is a form of resurrection – a new paper mill. Two Rivers Paper makes rag paper by hand, wringing a soft and textured surface from the pulped up fibres of cotton clothing that can't be worn any more. It's a neat symmetry: Watchet's original paper mill made its products from recycled materials, and here's a recycling paper mill that makes art paper installed by a collective that uses art as a tool of revitalisation. It was a journalist's gift: a perfect metaphor, the neat closing of a circle of life, a bow on a story about rebirth and rejuvenation. The conclusion would practically write itself.

Except, it became apparent that the Onion Collective has far grander necromantic plans than a single artisanal paper mill to help symbolically replace the town's lost industry. East Quay currently employs just shy of 30 people, making it Watchet's biggest employer. But the Onions don't want to stop until they've replaced all the jobs lost in the closure of the mill. I've been sworn to secrecy about the specifics of their experiments, but things are happening with fungi in the bowels of the abandoned paper factory. The design industry is increasingly turning to mycelium as a sustainable alternative to materials such as plastic. It grows fast,

feeding on dead things in dark places, and can be grown into all kinds of shapes. Once it has served its purpose, it rots back into the soil. The Onion Collective are at the prototyping stages of designing a series of mycelium-based products, the manufacture and sales of which they hope could one day employ scores of local people.

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It's a wonkier kind of metaphor, but there's a link between mycelium and this unusual social enterprise. They both are organisms held together by myriad inconspicuous threads that communicate in mysterious ways. Life that doesn't just survive, but thrives in a place where there was once decay, recycling nutrients that were already there, but hard to see to the untrained eye. **END**