

Buildings
MacEwen Award
2023

MacEwen Award special mention: Big local buy-in is key to East Quay's success



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Words: Eleanor Young

A transformative local community project by Invisible Studio, East Quay in Watchet on the Somerset coast, won a special mention in this year's awards

One of the key criteria of the MacEwen Award is the impact of a building. For Jessica Prendergrast, one of the all-female Onion Collective which dreamt up and commissioned community arts centre East Quay, this was all in a day's work. She had studied a mix of politics and economics before going into economic research and helped put together the funding bid to show the Coastal Communities Fund how transformative such a community hub could be to the Somerset coastal town of Watchet.

What surprised her is that over a year on it really is delivering on that. 'You do all the impact analysis, following the methodology and rules, but you always wonder, will it translate into reality?' she says. In numbers that is 32 permanent jobs, supporting 140 indirect jobs such as those at the handmade paper mill on the ground floor, and giving makers studios they can sell from. At 108,000, visitor



numbers in the first year reached the estimates for year three, giving the town a significant financial boost (calculating exactly how much is a longer job though).



The spaces between the courtyard buildings and the first floor street give locals and tourists an informal way to experience East Quay before even crossing the threshold.
Credit: Jim Stephenson

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‘But it is hard to capture in the numbers a sense of what it feels like and why it is important,’ says Prendergrast. She sketches out the economic context of West Somerset, which is peripheral, even to tourism. There is no big industry and barely any local or national government intervention: ‘We are filling the gap in state and economic failure.’ The district has the lowest social mobility in the country. ‘Disadvantaged children have less chance of changing their future,’ she explains. ‘There is a lack of visibility of alternative paths or places, in fact you have to sit on a bus for an hour to get to almost anywhere.’

The Onion Collective has been active in Watchet since 2014 and does regular surveys of locals’ perception of the town. Results have been encouraging since East Quay was completed with a greater sense of wellbeing and community. And the number agreeing that Watchet has a positive future has jumped from below 40% in 2017 to over 60% in 2021.

‘This came about as part of a community project and has big buy-in. It could be transformative in Watchet’

So what of the building that has enabled these changes? It extends the town to make a new communal edge of Watchet harbour. Its V-shaped plan has two arms of a podium of pink concrete with gallery, shop, paper press, café and print studio looking out into a protected courtyard space. Architect Piers Taylor of Invisible Studio designed it for an incremental build that would deal with piecemeal funding. Though funding was forthcoming so that was not needed, it has given East Quay its flavour and on top of the podium sit the lightweight metal-clad structures, accessed externally. Here are makers’ studios, a second gallery and education space on steroids (ply structures, brilliant lights, all reconfigurable). Above these are five little holiday lets. Each perkily looks out to sea, some on stilts, and fitouts by Pearce+Fægen create unexpected spaces, some decorated with drawings, some with timber and nets, others tiny objects. Windows and rooflights at unexpected angles capture the views and the light and create a great sense of character.

Approaching from the town the building scoops you in. From the coast path an alleyway of candy-striped walls draws you in. Taylor describes it as a city, its cluster of volumes do make it seem like more than a single building and its open grain lets you poke around at different levels without feeling you are trespassing.

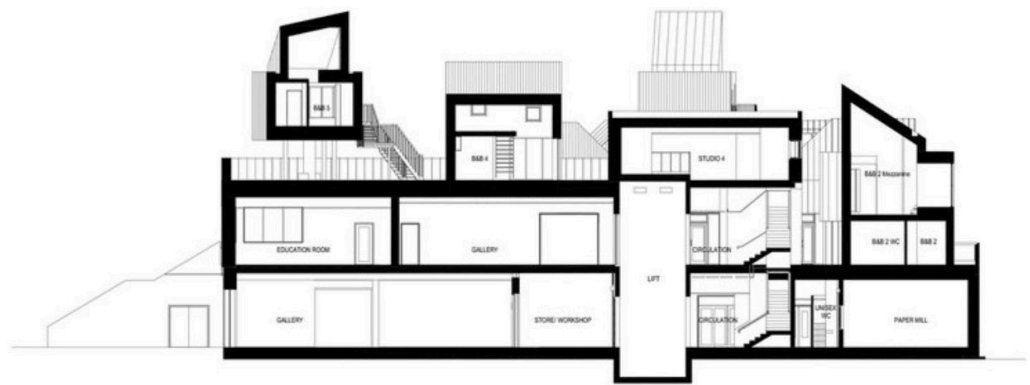


East Quay is a beacon on the harbour. Credit: Jim Stephenson

The courtyard breaks down any reservation about entering the building. Here you can linger, look through windows to see what’s going on, have a coffee or join one of the many activities East Quay puts on. And then perhaps go inside and see the latest art exhibition or watch the paper making. The roughed up concrete and blue shipping containers of the courtyard were used as studios and for discussions before the build project got off the ground. They are one of the things that mark this project out from more glossy lottery-funded arts buildings where a once in a lifetime chance to resolve a project sometimes makes things just too tidy.

The building’s activities have to make money to keep it going – hence the accommodation pods – but importantly this is not the point of East Quay. It is a not-for-profit social enterprise. ‘It’s not about making money but connections and community,’ says Prendergrast. The very particular architecture allows that in a fun, playful way.

Awarding East Quay a special mention, the judges praised the mixed ecosystem of the ‘strong’ project’s programme. They also remarked on its gestation. Its story was ‘amazing’, said judge Anthony Staples of RCKa. Kathy MacEwen said ‘Watchet had gone from being a thriving harbour into a steep decline. It is an area of deprivation. That is part of the story... it came about as part of a community project and has big buy-in. It could be transformative in Watchet.’



East Quay Section

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