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RESOLVE COLLIDE RESOLVE
In Conversation with Nicholas Lobo Brennan and Astrid Smitham of Apparata

fig. a Old Manor Park Library

We meet Astrid Smitham and Nicholas Lobo Brennan on Skype. They start with taking us on a tour through Old Manor Park Library, a project they recently completed and now have their studio in. They introduce us to the project and explain the initiative behind.

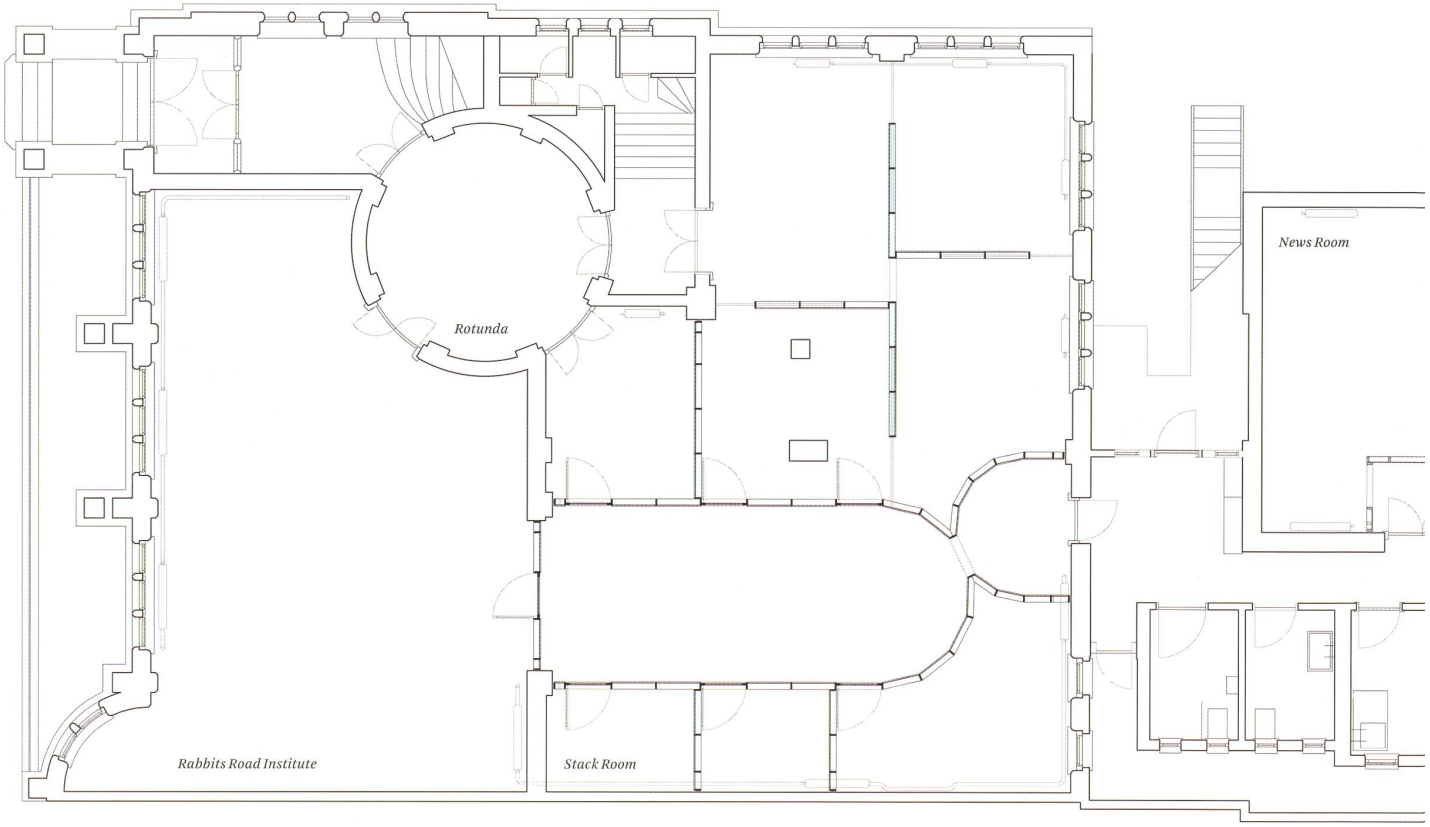
Nicholas Lobo Brennan & Astrid Smitham (app): The project is about bringing a disused and deteriorating public building back into use in a way that it still maintains its public function but can survive for the time being without public funding. The project is a direct consequence of the deterioration of both the idea of state funded public facilities in Britain and the fabric of the building itself. The building's poor condition had resulted in the building being unfit for use as a public library, and as such the council vacated the premise and moved to a new build 500m down the road. The issues with the building included hidden leaks, multiple electrical systems, asbestos, non-breathable paints, rotten carpets, damp and so on.

As the original building was a Carnegie funded library, today's project aims to continue the wider library movement's mission to provide spaces capable of cultivating self-directed learning and self-improvement. We worked with two arts charities on the project to bring the building back in to use. Create London run the front rooms as public events space and the other charity run artists studio spaces throughout the building. The essential idea of the project is that the relationship between the public space and the studios works with the studio users on the ground floor having a socially engaged practice and offering workshops to the public. The idea then is that these studios are subsidised in relation to the teaching work undertaken. The building hosts public events and studio users, with the relationship model between those parts working but also still being worked out as it is a rather new idea of a public building and studio spaces. In essence it has a strong educational agenda.

The building itself is in Manor Park, at the very edge of London proper, about 1000m before the county of Essex starts. To a certain extent Essex is to London what Aargau is to Zurich. The area was built in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a residential area predominantly occupied by what would have been seen in the UK as the lower middle class (in particular post office workers and train workers here). It was originally a neighbourhood in a good condition, with trams, tree lined avenues, quality shops and so on. It suffered an economic decline through the 20th century as much of London did, but has not been part of the London economic boom of the last 15 to 20 years. It is currently one of poorest areas in the country, and has an extremely vibrant and large immigrant Muslim community.

Old Manor Park Library itself is a very handsome and perhaps architecturally overly muscular building, built in 1905. Considering the amount of detail and plasticity in the facade the building is quite small, which gives it the presence of a much larger building. This is derived from the fact that the original architect designed a much larger building nearby for the council a few years earlier, and imported all the pilasters, mullions and elements from that larger project on to the much smaller site of the library. The result is that the smaller building is a much richer and more interesting building through its condensed bringing together of parts designed for another project. It feels more like a the result of a game, a quick piling up of primary elements rather than cooly restrained composition. The building no longer hosts the library, but the community still understands it as a public building. People approach it as a public building, ask to come inside, people gather outside. So the architecture is well understood by everyone as having a public character. This is the great success of the original architecture. The same cannot be said of the new library building down the road, which is built in such a way that is inadvertently makes clear that it is the product of an era that has degraded the idea of a welfare state and the idea that the space in front and between buildings is public. It does not feature in people's minds as the centre of Manor Park or even as a public building. It is a building where you have to look for a sign to show people what it is. Old Manor Park Library is a testament to the power of architecture to connect to everyday people. People understand what it is, they feel it.

On top of the leaks and asbestos, another problem was that the qualities of the Old Library have been misjudged over the years of occupation. The quick and easy option for the council was to move the library into a new building and shut down the old one. The decision not to solve the problems of the old building is probably a peculiar part of the English condition. A small illustration of this is that in the streets you might see a new street light, and right next to it a street light that is fifteen years older, and next


Rotunda
News Room
Rabbits Road Institute
Stack Room

to that a street light that is twenty-five years older. This is the cheapest option: to install a new light and not take down the old one, just keep adding on more and more.

The council's general approach to working with the existing, or rather not working with the existing, also explains how this building was treated physically. We think there have been two distinct eras of this, each with their own response to management and mismanagement, each we believe the consequence of the councils having a lack of funding. The first era starts from when the building became a council building and ends at the end of the 70s, and the second era starts from around 1980 onwards to when the building was closed. The first is marked by a state commitment to architecture and architectural solutions, the second by bureaucratic low-capital solutions. The council's difficulties with finding the right way to deal with the building become far more pronounced from 1980 as council budgets are cut by central government. Instead of addressing each problem, over the years the council just kept piling more and more materials on top as a quick aesthetic fix, lacking the funding for more serious work.
If they had a problem with moisture, they put a layer of wallpaper on top of it. If the floor was showing signs of damp, they put a layer of vinyl flooring on top. This continued until they had an unsustainable and indecipherable mass of building materials. No wonder that it became unmanageable. Ultimately this approach rejects the beautiful original piece of architecture and moves the library in to a piece of *capital works*. This is descriptive of what happen across Britain where there was a swift abandonment of architecture from a state level from 1980 onwards. All solutions became either technocratic or bureaucratic. These works have a certain aesthetic that claims to be neutral (they are not), that aims to be perceived as cheap (even if they are not). This is the approach that covered the original parquet floor with screed, pinned plywood, glue and carpet tiles.

The first era, as we see it, of management/mismanagement derives from a lack of information being cast down through decades. This building for sure has been mistreated in this era, but the responses are architectural and embracing of the original architecture. For example there are two columns at the heart of the building. You instantly see the contradiction of them being so close to each other. One of them is the original structural member, the other a later structural addition. But this is not Peter Märkli *one post for the engineer, one column for the architect* situation. The reason why it became necessary lies in the problem of not maintaining a full set of plans. When this building first opened, it used to follow a now outmoded library model, the stack room with separate reading rooms. The organisation was shifted to an open stack model by knocking down the walls that were enclosing the stack area. At a later date a room was added on top of the stack room, which caused a structural failure to occur, requiring the additional column. The failure was dramatic, but the response was to reconstruct and turn the new post in to an architectural column of sorts. We found this approach of embracing the collision admirable, and instructive of how we could respond to the building ourselves.

With our design we wanted state that the restructuring of public buildings can still respond to the existing with architectural solutions. The second column referring to the original one, being just a little bit out of line is actually quite beautiful. We took a similar approach with our design.

The general decision to use the conflict as a design generator was also found in the original design: the building itself is not clear to read at all. With the architectural language of a much bigger building Old Manor Park Library ended up being very full of conflicting ideas. It results in moments where there are ruptures in the geometries and elements. The original architect does not resolve these. It will remain unknown why not!
The ceiling subtly doesn't line up with the windows; the windows don't line up with the doors or the floors; the pilasters are occasionally offset from any perceivable grid. The building is typically English in this sense. It is the picture of architecture rather than a system of architecture.

transMagazin (tm): So the first aim you had was to go back to an initial state of the building and find a way to be respectful with it.

app: This is true in the sense that we wanted to return to anything that could be identified as an authentic architectural surface. The initial state of course did not always exist, and no particular point in history has complete importance over any other. The general approach was to paint all walls and ceiling in the same tone, white with a very small quantity of black to highlight their plastic quality. The floors were all stripped of a late 1990s carpet covering to reveal a

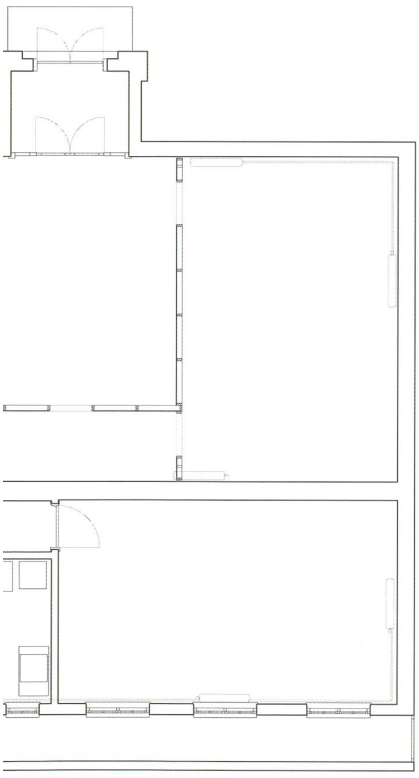


fig. b Old Manor Park Library, ground floor plan

fig. c Ballroom studios on the first floor

fig. d curved common room

patchwork of floors from different eras. The walls and ceilings were full of pseudo-
historical colours. Every detail of the mouldings on the ceiling had a different shade of blue, which prevented them from functioning as modulators of the light across its surfaces. The colours were so dark that you could not see the difference between light and shadow. We decided put them in a state that would at least show the plasticity of the details, where you could see the changing of the light.

We restored the original floors or replaced them them where they had failed. In the kitchen for example the vinyl had caused the parquet underneath to rot. We took away the added vinyl and replaced the rotten parts of the parquet with floor screed, an inexpensive and uniform surface that could deal with being wet.

For us it was essential to understand that this building will carry on having problems, as such you need to be able to observe the problems. The roof for example still has a few issues, which will be covered in the next phase of construction. Until our work you could not really see where water was leaking in, due to there being so much wallpaper. Now the condition of the building is observable and manageable.

tm: You then started adding. A very strong element in your design is the curve. The existing building already had this idea of the curved space being public.

app: The focus of the project is to restructure the ground floor in such a way so as to ensure that a public spine of spaces runs from the front of the building to the back. This was so that building's predominant character remains public rather than private, and that there is straightforward connection between public front room and the public facilities at the back. The restructuring runs through the entire building, setting out the public spaces, studio spaces and public/studios common spaces. This is done with rectilinear light weight timber walls, set out in elevation as a grid two and a half squares in height.

These rectilinear walls become faceted curves in the public parts of the building, as you say. This is for two reasons. One was to resolve the geometry of the building. The new structure had to create the public spine that mediated the offset between the archway at the front hall and entrance to the 1930s appendix. The existing building had created a spatial conflict that we had to find a way to resolve positively through an architectural way of thinking. This gave rise to the second reason for the curves. The original building uses curves in the plan at the rotunda to orientate and distribute the arriving public, and in the front hall as a kick-out in the facade to catch the evening sun. So the curve indicates the public spaces, and uses the geometrical possibility of the curved line to connect things, or even *grab* things, either side of a straight line.

The curves define the idea of a common ground at the heart of the building and ensures that the spatial sequence from the back (which is also the wheelchair entrance) has its own graceful architectural entrance with a public character. The common area is large enough to be a room, a place where people can sit. It is not just a corridor, functionally connecting the organs of the body. It is an organ in itself.

tm: In the end the curve becomes an independent element that you use in plan and in elevation at different scales. This is bringing together the old building with your design. It is interesting to see that you use the same geometry you used to solve problems in plan for details as well.

app: Completely, we were aiming to find a consistent and coherent new layer to add to the building, that although it has the qualities of a system, resists fully becoming a system. In other words it is a grid whose logic breaks at certain points. We wanted to add something that felt like it fits in a calm, straightforward way, but also has an architectural tension where things meet. On the one hand we wanted to make sure that the conflicts are apparent (we see the conflict as a useful way to generate architecture), and on the other hand we wanted the additions to have a geometric calmness by using the building as an architectural history to work with. So it is not a completely foreign geometry that we add, but one that makes sense with the existing. Examples are the new details jumping over existing details, like the high skirting, and cast iron radiators. With the radiator, we could have decided to put the wall in a different location so that we did not have to jump over it. But then we would not have been able to resolve all the other aspects of strange geometry (in this case the location of new walls in relation to beams and pilasters) and so it seemed the most logical thing to do. We did not want to cut into anything that would change the existing building other than the revealing of what we could identify as authentic surfaces.

tm: We were wondering about the reasons to choose different materials in different parts of the building. The appearance of the transparent partition walls is very different compared to the first floor solution. Did you decide not to use the same system and material for economical reasons?

app: It was to do with the practical issues of use and an economical decision. The most public parts receive the most attention when it comes to costs. The more private ones have the less expensive materials but the same architectural attention with a different solution. We wanted to make sure that the quality of space-making is respectful of the public. So next to the common room and the public front room the partitions are beautifully made with white European ash with beautiful joints. Upstairs and at the back we made much simpler solutions. So we used normal softwood lengths with plywood infill. The idea here was to take very normal construction details and see where you can make things more elegant. The building offers a gradient of transparencies which lend themselves to a variety of different uses and practices. We looked very carefully the history of places of artistic production from the bottega and studiolo to the atelier and factory.

With the transparency of the glass we also wanted to respect the fact that these are big halls with ornamental ceilings. We did not want to block up all of the rooms so that you no longer have the view to the outside or a sense of the whole. We decided not to go too high with the partitions, so that you can still see the whole ceiling. The glass also stems from the era of the building. Edwardian building often used glass and timber partitions in offices, museums, pubs, libraries, and to a certain degree in domestic settings. Ours is a more abstracted version of this kind of partition.

Lighting was an important part of the design as well. We wanted to respect the structure of the original lighting idea, which is a centralised big light that fills the whole room. We found an inflating light that is designed for lighting film studios and buildings sites. With having a very low budget, the inflating light was a way for us to do something that is cheaper but that still respects the original architecture by saying: this is the original location of the lights, but we can't afford a very expensive chandelier, so we just

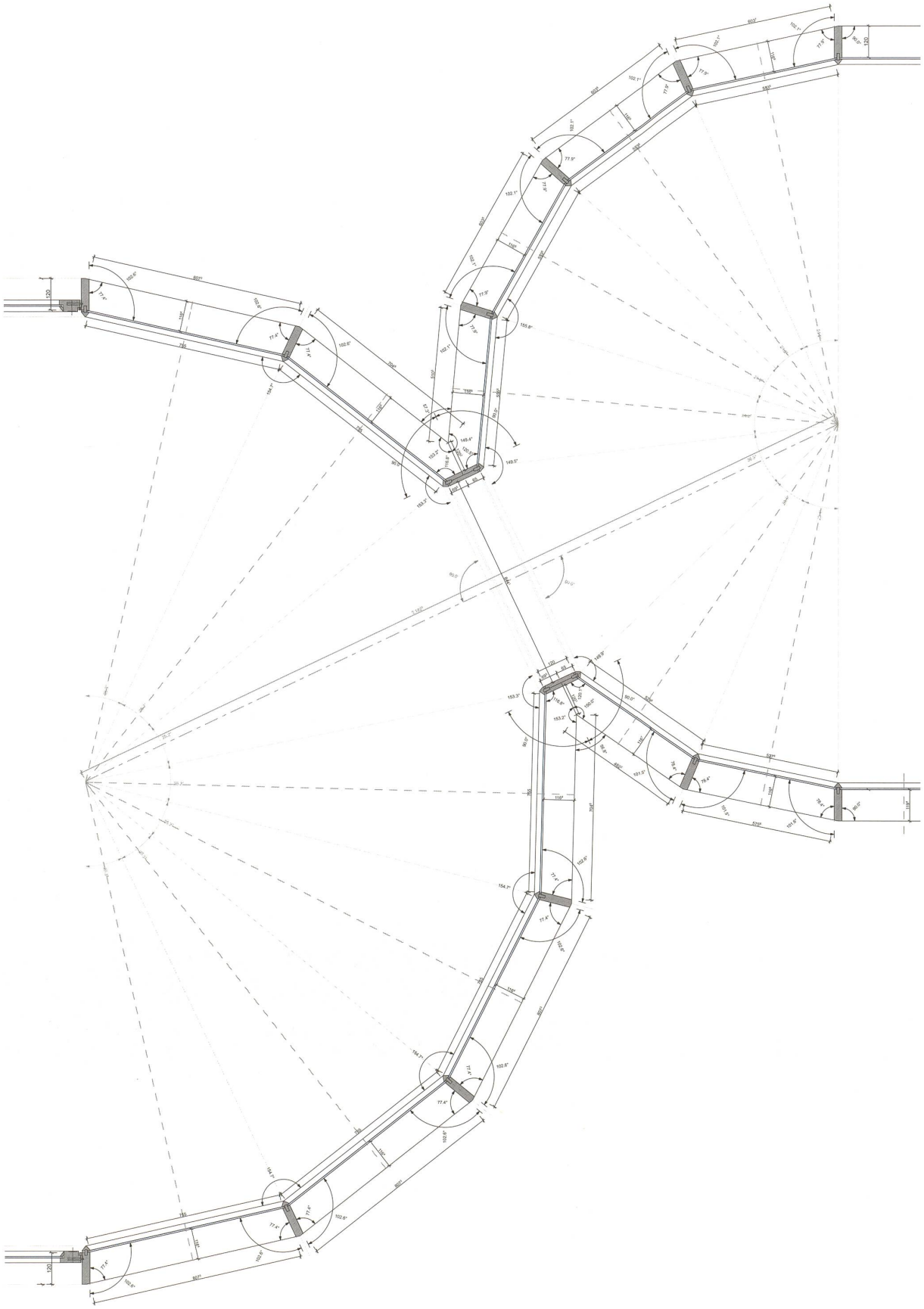


fig. e detail plan, kissing curves, common room, ground floor

put an industrial light in.
tm: There is a critical way of looking at projects from especially young architects working in such an intense way that it is unaffordable and unsustainable to make projects that way. So have you been able to earn your living from the project?

app: We live purely from our projects, so the answer is yes. Also it is a public building not the extension of someone's house, which in our perception makes a real difference, when judging it economically in terms of expectations. We certainly did work with some volunteers on this project which makes a difference to a low budget project. This was balanced with the key work being carried out with tradespeople. The volunteering perhaps had a more important use than economy. It helps make the building the centre of a community. If you engage people during the process of building, it makes a big difference to how it is used and cared for afterwards.

tm: With the architecture you introduced to the library, you designed an architecture that invites all inhabitants of the building to work together on different levels.

app: One of the things we are always looking for in a project is that secret formula: how do you make something that is designed for specific formal occupation, so things can go on there, but can also invite informal occupation. It's the moment where the autonomous nature of architecture meets its social nature. This common room here is hyper specifically designed, but it is designed in such a way that non specific things happen. We also chose to make the common room the room that you cross several times per day. It is not one of the rooms upstairs in the back that is then called the common room.

In use, it has become a very active place that allows interesting juxtapositions and chance meetings. For example there was recently a meeting of artists and economists having a discussion in the common space, and behind it, in the public room, there was a Czech cartoon film family day. Along side this in the studios people were working privately. You could see people being able to drop in from one to the other, with chance discoveries and meeting occurring as though it was all occurring in the street. Like this, architecture always has the quality of the city.

tm: Can you tell us something about your decision to keep on working in Old Manor Park with your studio and rent a workspace there?

app: We think it is a good idea not to cut off after you design something, because the work does not really stop there. It would be a much more fruitful relationship for many projects if there is a continuing dialogue and planning. So that is what we wanted to try here. We want to be part of this thing as it develops. As the building has problems we can technically help it. Also as the social element of the building grows, we want to make sure that we can help it adapt and move. Of course when you hand over the design the client is free to do whatever they want, at the same time it is useful for them to have an ongoing discourse about how things could be used.

For example just to communicate that the central common space is allowed to be used by everyone we placed some tables and chairs there. The people managing the building were not going to do that by themselves as they instinctually perceive the space between rooms as a corridor (despite its size). Instantly the space started being used. We were very interested in assisting the quite complex idea of combining the public with producing artists. Or let's go even further to say that as architects who deal with designing physical spaces, we should also be engaged for designing non-physical things. It could be that someone has an existing situation, and they just want an architect to help them understand what they have and help them work with it. It does not have to be a materialised intervention. We should understand that we have a certain expertise to help people work with space and to try to link up the social and the physical. Which is why it is useful to carry on after the project is finished.

tm: You were also very closely involved in the actual construction of the project.

app: For us it is very important to be involved in construction and have a good understanding of building. The way that the architectural details have been developed in this project, for example the moment of jumping over existing details, the way that the columns stand communicating to each other, one as an original column and one as a *disaster* column, a lot of that attitude comes from getting some confidence from a knowledge of building together with architecture. Confidence in building puts you in the position of being able to practice architecture with a seriousness that is difficult without it. But it also allows space for a sense of humour, to be lyrical. Construction also becomes politically quite important because you can present the world as smooth, complete, resolved, or as something that is in the making, adaptable. And that is something that we try to put in all our projects.

We believe the project has value in saying you can make public spaces on a budget and you can do that with architecture as the primary driver. The primary generator is not going to be an image of cheapness and haste, it is going to be architecture as a social art.

fig. f curved detail, ground floor studio partitions

fig. g jumping over the radiator, ground floor studio partitions

Astrid Smitham, born in Manchester, studied fine art in the UK and architecture at TU Berlin and ETH Zurich. She worked with Caruso St John, and Bosshard Vaquer before establishing APPARATA with Nicholas Lobo Brennan. She practised as a painter and screenwriter in Berlin, and an architect in Zurich.

Nicholas Lobo Brennan, born in London, began collaborating with Astrid Smitham in 2011, forming a studio in 2015. He studied art and architecture at Chelsea College of Arts, Cass Faculty of Architecture, and The Royal College of Art. He worked with Florian Beigel and Philip Christou (ARU), Tom Emerson, and UNA in São Paulo.

The construction of Old Manor Park Library reuse was executed with Philip T Ryan. Lorenzo Iandelli assisted in the design development of the project. The engineering was developed with Eva Macnamara at Expedition. The project was carried out with Bow Arts and Create London, and was funded by the Greater London Authority.