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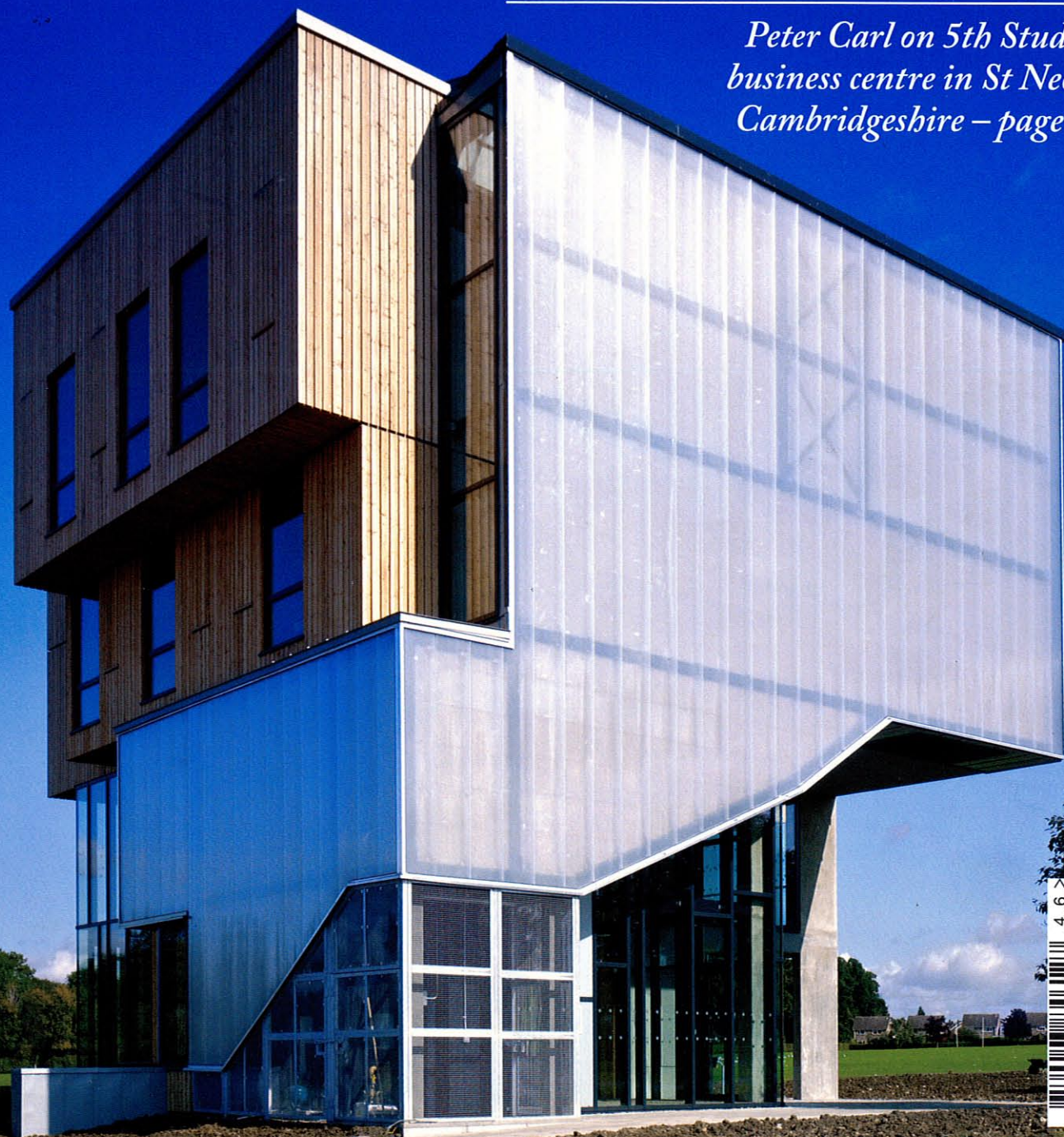
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CREATIVE EXCHANGE

*Peter Carl on 5th Studio's
business centre in St Neots,
Cambridgeshire – page 22*



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A CIVIC ENDEAVOUR

5th Studio has designed a rural building in Cambridgeshire with urban resonance, writes *Peter Carl*. Photography by *Timothy Soar*



Creative Exchange, St Neots, Cambridgeshire, by 5th Studio

5th Studio's Creative Exchange for St Neots in Cambridgeshire is a wonderful example of why it's a good idea to hire a decent architect. In principle, an enterprise centre is a good thing; in practice, the architecture can bow to the economics, resulting in repetitive rentable space off a corridor. The ingenuity of Tom Holbrook and his team at 5th Studio allowed the Creative Exchange to fulfil its potential on several levels – socially, politically, urbanistically, architecturally.

Relics of the 4ft-tall monk named Saint Neot made their way from Cornwall to Cambridgeshire in the Middle Ages, and

christened this small town. Its market square has echoes of a forum or central square, with rich structure behind it. But today, agricultural market towns within commuting distance of London are forced to survive as part of the government's housing policy. This has several effects. Firstly, the corporate identity of the market square surrenders its authority to the extensive patterns of privacy that comprise housing today. Secondly, St Neots has become more directly related to London than to its neighbours, such as Cambridge or Bedford. Thirdly, renewal comes from the industries

located on the periphery of the town, not from the market square.

The Creative Exchange is adjacent to Longsands College, which specialises in technology, media and the arts. These are, of course, key areas of economic growth and potential creativity. The Creative Exchange will serve about 20 fledgling firms working in these areas, with the opportunity for exchange of ideas with college students, as well as with each other. The firms' activities will range from the physical making of prototypes or artworks to more ephemeral forms of creativity, which are not rooted to any >>



The Creative Exchange establishes an incipient urbanity

particular place and require broadband access more than the town. 5th Studio recognised the importance of a dialogue between these two forms of creativity, and was aware that the Creative Exchange was not only an addition to the college, but an important element in St Neots' urban transformation.

The college and the enterprise centre are located on the northern edge of St Neots, on a route that leads from the market square to the railway station. 5th Studio's site strategy placed the centre at the eastern end of a sequence of future buildings that ends in the

college. This sequence addresses Priory Park (although the college, a tangle of circumstantial accretion, does not). Priory Park lost its manor house in the 1960s, and the centre and the college now command its attractive allées of trees and sports pitches. As such, the centre takes on several roles at once: it marks a new hub of urban renewal; it establishes a sequence with the college that structures the town's relationship to Priory Park; and it is the gateway to this sequence.

The centre is vertical, rising four storeys above the plateau of the park and above the



roofs and back gardens of the suburbs to the south. This verticality is sufficient to organise and orient the relentless horizontality of the northern edge of St Neots, reclaiming the scale of the original manor house as well as establishing an incipient urbanity. One enters from the east, following a newly planted line of lime trees towards the open corner beneath the second floor.

An apparent optical illusion guides one's approach – a stair that ascends both towards and away across a skylight marking entry. This stair, clothed in polycarbonate that reveals the structure beneath its skin, commands the south facade. It is a bridge between a suspended plane and the building, creating a dramatic slot addressing the scale of the site. It also acts as the fire stair, and can be sealed off from the rest of the building, with the significant consequence that the vertical order of the centre can be allowed to develop freely, with openings between floors.

The primary achievement of this building is the continuity of the public realm – from the scale of St Neots to that of the site, and to the various collectives that will form in the centre itself. The vertical order (coupled with the fire-isolation of the stair) enables this, since what might ordinarily have been a corridor becomes here a generous public room on each floor, opening on to the park. In fact, the building exhibits the vertical hierarchy of a town house, with large public spaces on the first two floors and smaller, more particular rooms on the upper two floors. The progressive ascent to light culminates in a roof-garden that offers recesses for outdoor seminars or working, plus wireless access and wonderful views across St Neots, the park and the flood-plain of the River Ouse.

It is remarkable how consistently the centre plays on three registers at the same time: it is part of an incipient urban transformation; it is a prominent element in a landscape configuration; and it has its own business to accomplish, as the Creative Exchange. These registers are sustained on the interior, according to a diagonal organisation with entry from the east and the public rooms oriented north, to the park. The south facade above the first floor is blind, to prevent overlooking the neighbours' gardens.

The pillars of the reinforced concrete armature avoid the corners, allowing the glass to determine the primary envelope. At the same time, the exposed concrete constantly >>



This page The stairs, expressed externally on both the west (left) and south (above) facades, are 'clothed in a polycarbonate skin' that reveals the centre's structure. The building is entered through the open corner of the east facade, marked by a lime tree (far left)



Sunlight rakes across rooms, grazing the elements and casting moving shadows

This page The interiors are open to Priory Park (above left) and connect with each other both vertically (above right) and

horizontally, contrasting with the 'rentable space off a corridor' model associated with creative business centres

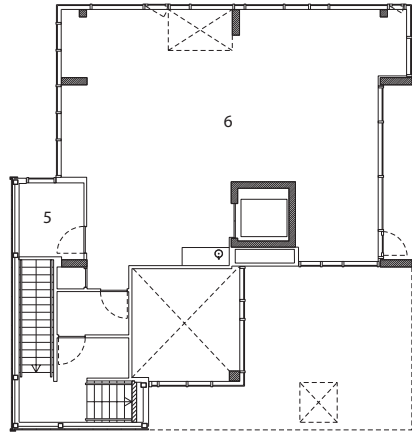
recalls the earth and, thus, the park, which is always in view from the public rooms. The ground and first floors frame the double-height reception, which is scaled to the site and allows access to the stair through its back wall, as if stepping outdoors before ascending. This gives on to a space that acts as a reception, exhibition room and seminar room. Like the open-plan office on the first floor, this room opens to the park.

The upper rooms extend beyond the armature, gaining space, shading the rooms below, and creating a public room that acts like a small forum (in which a spigot for coffee and tea plays the role of town fountain). These rooms are not just repetitive boxes – they adjust to their conditions with balconies or recesses that give each a locale; an identity. The building's exterior larch boarding will weather to a light grey, and the rooms' interiors are varnished plywood. These materials obviously respond to a stringent budget, but they are, in fact, more useful and more solid than your typical white wallboard and wall sockets.

Plywood and concrete work well together because they are both ambiguously natural and technical; materials that mediate between the earth and the emancipated world of computing and contemporary media.

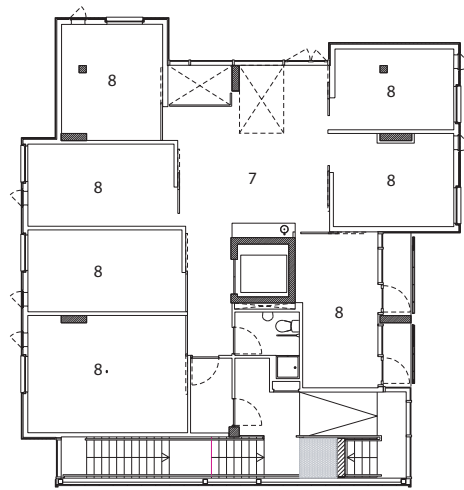
The Creative Exchange is as much a vertical garden as it is a building; and this consistent appeal to the chthonic provides an orienting substrate for the monitors, posters, office kit, and generally busy lives of the eventual inhabitants. Mediating between these is the exposed galvanised piping for power and IT, which attains a celebratory status in the inventive light fixtures. The vertical-garden effect is largely a result of the way light is structured. The north orientation of the public rooms means that, firstly, Priory Park is always illuminated, viewed from a position of shadow. The rooms' centre of gravity is always determined by the horizons of the park and its activities. Secondly, the open configuration means that sunlight rakes across rooms, grazing the elements and casting moving shadows. Coupled with the >>



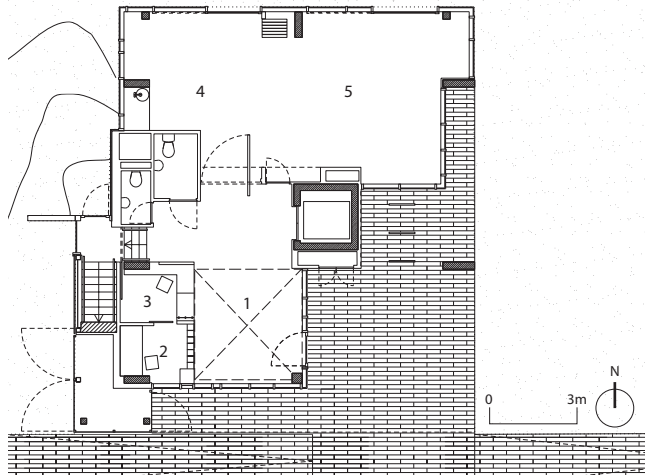


First-floor plan

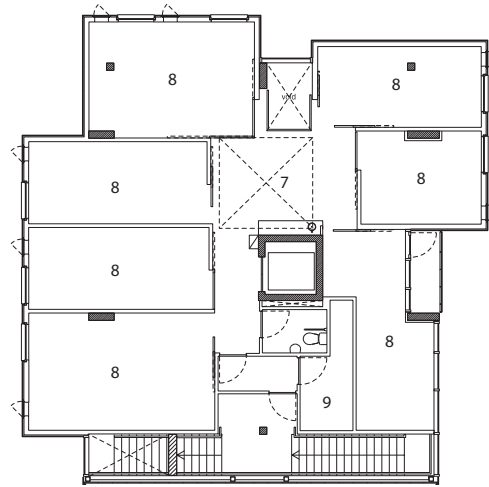
1. Foyer
2. Reception
3. Office
4. Lounge
5. Meeting room
6. Studio
7. Park lounge
8. Workshop 'huts'
9. Plant



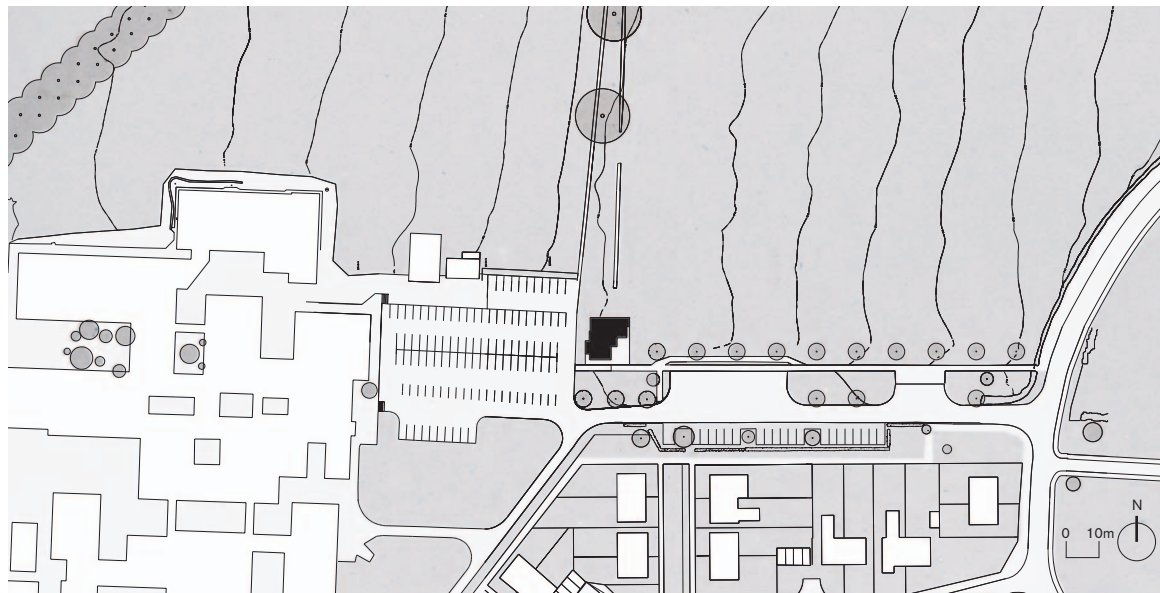
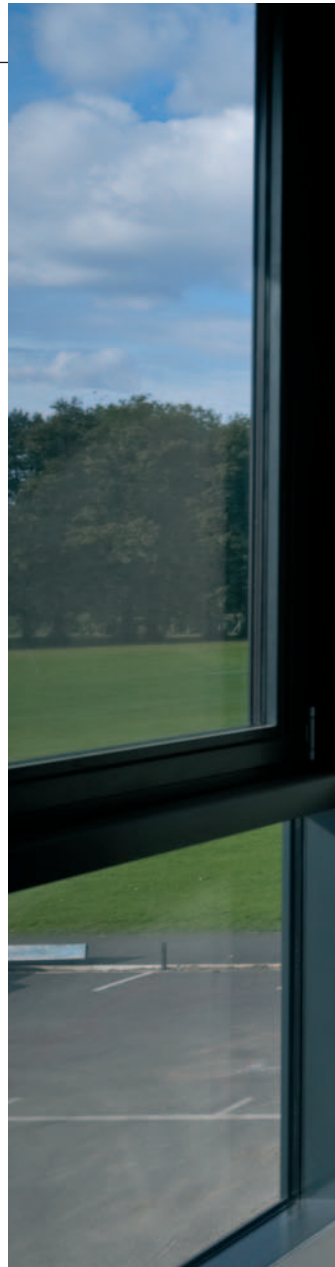
Second-floor plan



Ground-floor plan



Third-floor plan



Left The site plan shows that the centre is approached from the east along a route defined by trees

Above left The plans reveal an internal order similar to that of a town house: large public rooms on the first two floors, with smaller particular rooms on the upper floors

Above The concrete columns of the structure avoid the corners, allowing the glass to determine the primary envelope



openings to the central skylight, this literally lightens the building, anticipating the culmination of the ascent from earthly shadow to the roof garden.

Aristotle identified civic praxis as action and reflection for the common good (ethical), divided between the know-how to produce something (a shoe, a building, a speech) and things done for their own sake (morals and politics). This building could have been a decorated shed – an autonomous form framed by grass. Pure form is the architectural equivalent of a credit default swap (insurance against purchase of a fictitious principal), by which the appearance of a building is taken for its substance.¹ The several forces that the Creative Exchange elects to negotiate – urban and rural, natural and technical, education and service, economics and ethos, making and

politics – are not, so to speak, added value. Rather it is a matter of basic honesty – these forces acknowledge the conflicts inherent in the proposition. Once it was common, but now it is rare for one to be able to hear in a rural building the urban resonances – the deep consistency of town – of civic praxis. ■ [Peter Carl teaches architecture at Cambridge University and will take up a chair at London Metropolitan University in January](#)

1. The credit default swap was invented as cover for dodgy financial instruments rooted in, for example, sub-prime mortgages. It is a fictitious insurance against a fictitious principal, capitalism without the capital, a sort of simulated economy. Similarly, form is simulated architecture. The conversion of architecture into form – roughly speaking, an Enlightenment project – made it easier to innovate, but disconnected architecture from use, place, local materials and modes of construction, etc. Digital design is all form (defined ultimately by code and algorithms), to which everything needs to be supplied, including scale, to make 'architecture'.

Tender date July 2007

Start on site date October 2008

Contract duration 11 months

Gross external floor area 812.2m². Roof garden 224m²

Form of contract JCT 98 Intermediate Contract. Single-stage tender with negotiations

Total cost £1.4 million

Client/planning supervisor Huntingdonshire District Council

Architect 5th Studio

Structural engineer Scott Wilson

Services engineer ZEF

Quantity surveyor Davis Langdon

Main contractor SDC Special Projects

Annual CO₂ emissions Predicted rate of 15.9kgCO₂/m²
