



Housing LIN

*Connecting people, ideas and resources*

## Case Study 171

# The John Morden Centre: An award-winning place of hope during a social care crisis

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Written for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by **Heather Bell**, Associate, Mæ.



# Introduction

The John Morden Centre designed by Mæ Architects has won the RIBA's Stirling Prize 2023. It is a day care centre adjoining the almshouses at Morden College, a charity in Blackheath, London.

At a time when England's health and social care is "gridlocked" and we face a "tsunami of unmet care" ([Care Quality Commission report](#)), this day care centre housing health and social facilities shines a spotlight on the potential for architecture to uplift the human spirit and help residents thrive in their later years. Over one million people with care needs in the UK receive no formal or informal support, everyone should have a right to live well in their later years and the John Morden Centre is designed to help the residents of Morden College lead a fulfilling and rich life.

*"Loneliness and isolation are critical issues, particularly for older people. The John Morden Centre's elegance and efficacy sets a high standard for spaces that support healthier, happier and more independent lives. It illustrates the positive potential of architecture to strengthen vibrant and active communities."*

*"This is a skilfully designed package that minimises the building's impact on our planet's delicate ecology, while also harnessing the therapeutic value of the surrounding nature. It stands as a testament to the vision and ambition of Morden College, Mæ's creativity – and the exemplary collaboration between them."*

**Muyiwa Oki, RIBA President**





# Tackling Social Isolation

Morden College has been at the forefront of enriching older people's lives for more than 300 years. Today the Charity's core purpose is to provide older people in financial hardship, who are in need with a home for life, to support them as they grow older, and to provide care services, including residential care and residential nursing care, if the need arises. They manage over 200 units of accommodation in South London.

Morden College is a strong community, committed to enabling the older people they support to have the highest quality of life, for the rest of their life. The John Morden Centre is designed to be a hub for beneficiaries' social activities and health and wellbeing needs. It is home to Café 19, Merchant's Hall (a theatre space) and resident arts and crafts facilities and a health centre. The hub aims to tackle social isolation and loneliness among older people creating a friendly and convivial space for them to thrive creating a space for support and companionship.

This has been echoed by the Chief Executive of the John Morden Centre commenting on improvements to their health and wellbeing.

*"Morden College is absolutely thrilled to have won the Stirling Prize 2023. Our mission is to give the very best possible life to the older people we provide homes, love, support and care for. The John Morden Centre, a beautiful, tactile space that has true purpose, sits at the heart of that effort; a true hub of life. Thank you Mæ. Thank you RIBA."*

David RutherfordJones, Chief Executive, Morden College



*The courtyard at The John Morden Centre*

Age UK in their report '[The State of Health and Care of Older People in England 2023](#)', report that amongst our older population "many lack the social care they need, and/or end up in hospital when this might have been avoided" and that "The crisis in the NHS therefore ultimately reflects our failure to care as effectively as we could and should for our growing older population". The architects of the John Morden Centre see it as a model that could be find a wider application in the health and social care sector.

*"The John Morden Centre has been a really fulfilling project to work on. At a time when adult social care is in a perilous state this Award demonstrates that there is hope for the sector and the project offers up a model for others in the health and care sector; inspiring them to create environments that positively impact on people's mental and physical health."*

*The John Morden Centre is a special project for us at Mæ. The brief for the Centre reflected perfectly our studio's purpose: to design buildings that improve social wellbeing particularly for the most vulnerable in society, advance environmental architecture and create buildings that uplift the human spirit."*

Alex Ely, Founding Director Mæ



## A building that ties old and new

Morden College is a Grade I listed almshouse in Blackheath, London founded in 1695 by Sir John Morden and built by Sir Christopher Wren's master builder and successor, Edward Strong.

The new building makes reference to the historic architecture in its colonnade, roofscape and brickwork. The generous social spaces of the new building are linked by a meandering colonnade, which forms a spine of circulation and opens up connections to the mature landscaped gardens which characterise the site.

In this manner, it sensitively engages with existing context in a familiar architectural language, delivered using modern methods of construction to provide a high quality, long lasting, and sustainable facility for the next 100 years of the College's work. The John Morden Hall has been retained, integrated and refurbished as part of the project.

A cloister, like an avenue of trees, runs through the building, off of which a series of pavilions hang. These generous tent like pavilions accommodate the functional and communal spaces. The cloister is wide enough for two passing wheelchairs with seats for resting on your journey. It facilitates a happy and surprising journey along a winding path past carefully curated pockets, niches, courtyard gardens, and spatially delightful rooms. Visitors to the building are always aware of nature with generous views to gardens and a large cedar tree that sits at the centre of the building.





*The cloister at The John Morden Centre*

The RIBA judges said:

*"The John Morden Centre is a place of joy and inspiration. It sensitively and seamlessly integrates medical facilities and social spaces, delivering a bold and hopeful model for the design of health and care centres for the elderly. Dedication to creating an environment that lifts the spirits and fosters community is evident at every turn and in every detail.*

*This robust building provides comfort and warmth, with thoughtful features designed to prevent isolation. It illustrates how buildings can themselves be therapeutic – supporting care and instilling a sense of belonging. Great architecture orients people so they can thrive, and this building is exemplary at achieving exactly that."*

**Ellen van Loon, Chair of the RIBA Stirling Prize jury**



# A low carbon building

Total Embodied Carbon = 560t CO<sub>2</sub>  
(including biogenic)

The building aims for a low carbon footprint and is constructed of load-bearing Cross-Laminated Timber (CLT) structural panels. These are highly insulated with an outer skin of self-supporting masonry. The walls have a full brick wall base with half-stone brick leaf on top arranged in a Flemish Bond with a lime mortar, reflecting the more traditional craftsmanship of the main college building.

The scheme includes retrofit, refurbishing a large 1970s assembly hall, with upgrades to the building fabric, new flooring and an acoustic ceiling suitable for music and theatrical performances.

A number of smaller lean-to structures were demolished to make way for the new building. 10,000 bricks from the demolition were salvaged and used to construct new retaining and garden walls on the site.

Key materials include:

- CLT Structured framework
- Glulam columns
- Glazed curtain walling
- Fair faced brickwork
- Zinc and green roofs
- Underfloor heating and cooling
- PV panels



# Summary

Location	Blackheath, London
Date commenced	February 2019
Planning approved	Validated December 2016 Consent received November 2017 Amendments Approved October 2018
Key Consultation events	Residents: Summer 15, June 18, Nov 18 Trustees: Nov 15, March 18, June 18, Nov 18

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Estimated Construction Cost	(confidential)
Cost per sq.m	(confidential)

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Client Consultant team	
Project Manager	CalfordSeaden
Structural Engineer	Michael Hadi (novated)
Sustainability	
Landscape Architect	J&L Gibbons (2-4)
Quantity Surveyor	CalfordSeaden (3-4)

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Site Area Hectares	approximately 0.6 ha
GEA	911 sq.m
Number of Dwellings	n/a
Tenure Mix	n/a

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Design Standards met BREEAM Excellent Target



# Key learning points/comments

Our brief was well written by our client, which we further developed through engagement with the residents of the College, however, we didn't anticipate how popular the art room would be and it is already short of storage. I think it is always worth increasing storage provision in community buildings.

The building, being made of timber, is thermally lightweight. This means that it heats up quickly and cools down quickly so cross-ventilation is needed in summer. These require careful facilities management and an understanding from the user how to moderate the building temperature. It has taken a bit of getting used to by the College to get the temperature and thermal comfort right.

## Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

## Image Credits

Permission given by Jim Stephenson

## About Mæ

Mæ are award-winning architects, urban designers and researchers. Led by Alex Ely, former Head of Sustainable Communities at CABI, Mæ design buildings that seek to address today's urban, social and environmental challenges. Their aim is always to create buildings and places that enrich culture and society. They thrive on collaboration. Working on regeneration projects for public and private sector clients, we talk – and listen – to colleagues and communities.

Their design solutions match their client's brief with the varied day-to-day needs of the building's users. With a generalist approach they understand specialist needs. Whether it's health centres or care homes they design to meet specific requirements.

Through creativity they plan delightful healthcare environments, avoiding an institutional feel, convinced that everything benefits from good design and that good design has a positive impact on our health.



# About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 20,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England, Wales and Scotland to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population. Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'ideas lab' on specialist/supported housing, our online and regional networked activities, and consultancy services:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing that enables older and disabled people to live independently in a home of their choice
- provide insight and intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice to support sector learning and improvement
- showcase what's best in specialist/supported housing and feature innovative projects and services that demonstrate how lives of people have been transformed, and
- support commissioners and providers to review their existing provision and develop, test out and deliver solutions so that they are best placed to respond to their customers' changing needs and aspirations.

Access a selection of related resources on the Housing LIN's dedicated almshouse pages at:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Almshouses>

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