

St James's Community Farm

THE TEAM

Client Belfast City Council

Architect MMAS

Quantity Surveyor PQS

Mechanical & Electrical
SCC

Structural & Civil
Design ID

Main Contractor
Earney Contracts

Photography
MMAS, Aurora PA





In plan, the city of Belfast is an arrowhead; from the open mouth of Belfast Lough narrowing towards the fertile floodplain of the Lagan Valley to the southwest. The tip of the arrow is located in an area of soggy grassland between the narrow Blackstaff River as it flows down from Black Mountain, and the River Lagan as it meanders its way towards the sea; an area known as Bog Meadows. The slow creep of the Victorian suburbs did not encroach on the area, which the 4th edition OS map of 1916 noted as being 'Liable to Flooding.' As such, when the time came to develop a motorway system for Northern Ireland, this undeveloped area became an ideal location for the M1, one of four new roads in the province to be constructed to the Motorway standard over the course of the early sixties.

As the Motorways sliced through this part of the city – an act of civic violence whose effect on the urban fabric we are only

now coming to terms with – many residual spaces were created; an array of blighted gap sites, areas of redundant industry and liminal buffer areas between the noise and air pollution of the road and people's back gardens. One such site developed into a unique opportunity for a project that would not only provide a new focus for a historically deprived community but would also serve as an example of the potential power of an otherwise subtle architectural intervention.

St James' Community Farm was established in 2016 as a homelessness initiative. Beginning as a chicken coop located in a semi-derelict shed on a site caught between the inner-city suburbs to the west, Bog Meadows nature reserve to the south and the six-lane M1 to the east, the concept of an urban farm took hold. Before long, the site was not only home to a brood of chickens, but also to a flock of sheep, a herd of goats and a





of the terracing of Rodden, St James' and St Katharine's Streets, as well as providing a humane space for the animals and the community farmers. The vision convinced the council and - thanks to funding from the Belfast City Council Local Investment Fund, the Department for Communities and Groundwork NI's Whitemountain Programme - the project became a reality.

Fearghal describes the building as a 'little humble red shed' but - while this is unarguably true - this does not do justice to the intelligence of that initial vision. The building is a linear mono-pitched shed presenting in plan as a barrier between the road and the nearby housing. The hard corrugated metal eastern elevation and roof - positioned to reflect the worst of the traffic noise back towards the road - folds upwards to present a softer timber-boarded western elevation facing Rodden Street and the looming hills beyond, painted a deep red that invokes the archetype of the 'big red barn.'

A simple plan form locates covered animal pens to the south and an enclosed schoolroom/workshop to the north, connected by an external covered space open to the garden. This open space is a subtle design move that performs the practical task of providing a 'lobby' space from both north to south between the workshop (the realm of the humans) and the pens (the realm of the animals) but also east to west from the motorway (the condition of the jarringly urban) to the garden and the streetscape (the condition of the softly

gang of ducks (thanks to Google for the assistance with my collective animal nouns...) being tended to by local school children ably assisted by a team of dedicated volunteers.

The project came to the notice of Fearghal Murray, director of MMAS, an architecture and urbanism practice based in the nearby Conway Mill. At a community event held in the mill, the unusual presence of livestock caught Fearghal's attention and, on hearing the council's intentions of providing the farm with a number of shipping containers to improve the facilities, he saw an opportunity to provide something more appropriate for both the context and the brief.

To persuade the council that their money could be better spent, MMAS provided a pro bono vision for the site; a purpose-built structure that would act as a buffer between the aggression of the motorway and the delicate urban grain

Architect's Account



Situated between the Bog Meadows nature reserve and the terraced streets of St. James' in West Belfast, a piece of vacant, publicly owned land was identified by local people as a potential community resource. A proactive group of residents decided to adapt the space as an urban farmyard, cultivating some crops and introducing a few livestock.

The group was initially offered funding for several shipping containers. MMAS approached them initially on a pro-bono basis to help develop a more appropriate vision to spend the money on.

The design intention was to use a linear form of simple mono-pitched buildings to shelter central, interior space from road noise, fumes and excessive breezes, thus creating a micro-climate conducive for growing, playing and hosting performances, discussions and events. These pre-fabricated modular forms are clad in reflective metal to refer to typical agricultural buildings while creating a robust 'shell' to the outside. Within the main farm and garden space, the buildings are clad by the farm's volunteers with 'found' timber, that was treated and fixed on site. The resulting structure of the community building displays tactile and characterful facades, reflecting the ad-hoc and self-built spirit of the farm. With the involvement in the construction and curation

of the building's external appearance, a deeper pride and ownership of the finished project has been cultivated.

A 'colonnade' of 'V' shaped timber posts support the projecting roof on the inner side of the buildings, heightening the sense of enclosure within the courtyard garden and orientating the space up toward the Belfast Hills beyond the roofs of surrounding Belfast brick terraces. These columns are planted with creeper species, allowing the buildings to embed within the garden over time.

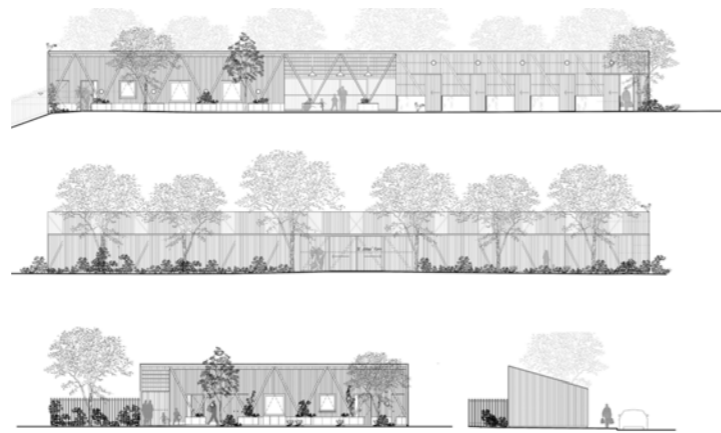
St James' Community 'farm' has become a much-loved aspect of the neighbourhood, with inner city dwellers waking to the stirring sound of a cock crowing, while a growing collection of animals graze adjacent Bog Meadow grassland given over to the group by Ulster Wildlife. Local children learn about life and food and gain new skills and interests within the peripheral space between city streets and landscape.

'And the imagination fills
Bog meadow and surrounding hills . . .'

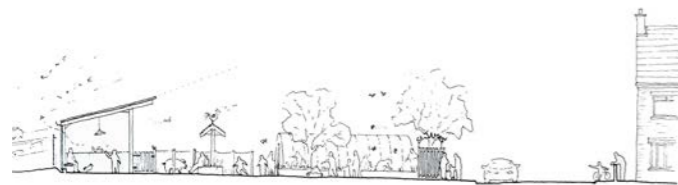
Garreth McMahon
MMAS



Figure Ground Plan



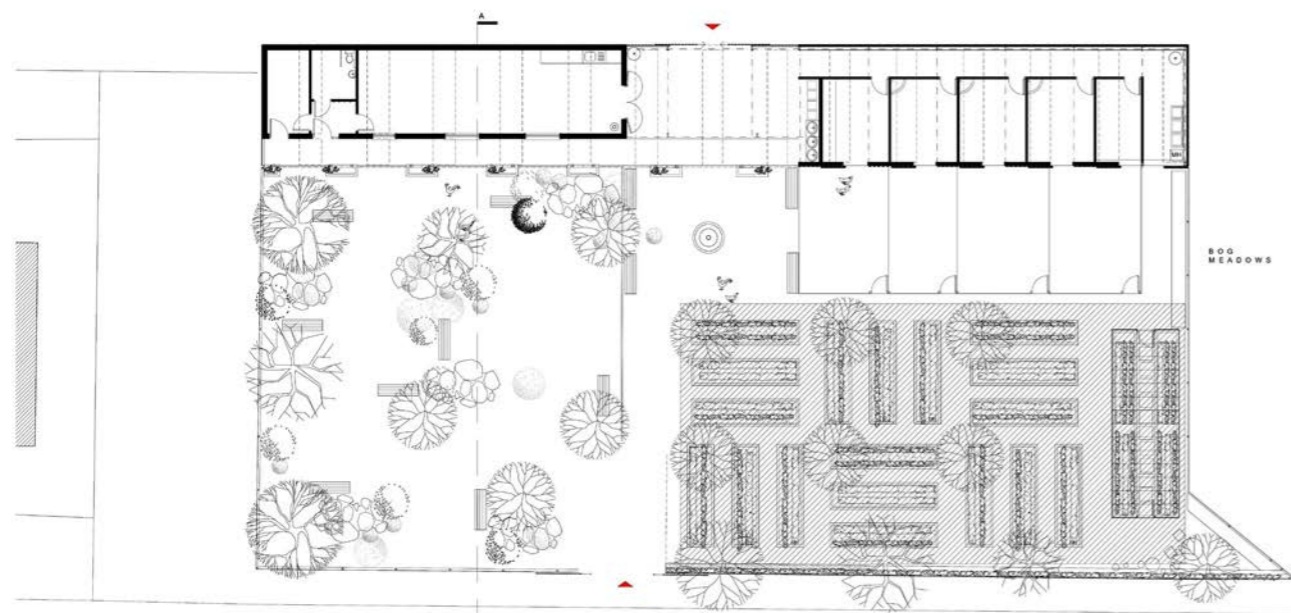
Elevations



Section sketch



Section



Floor Plan



spoken suburban). The gentle slope of the site towards the west also makes the open space ideal for performance, facing – as it does – the auditorium of the garden, the street, and the hills beyond. If this central space brings a sense of the civic to an otherwise agricultural building, then the angled columns zigzagging across the northern end of the western elevation bring a sense of refinement and gentility. A simple configuration of structure that creates a porch to sit and take in the view, safely sheltered from the noise and haste of the road.

This quiet project is indicative of the latent power of subtle architecture. A simple brief that was initially to be satisfied by a couple of shipping containers craned onto the site has been elevated through careful consideration and architectural articulation. The result goes beyond satisfying the brief in not only creating a new local landmark and focal point for the community but also in amplifying the conditions of the site that made it a suitable location for an urban farm in the first place and creating

an entirely new set of conditions that unlock possibilities that were otherwise concealed. It is for these reasons, no doubt, that the project was awarded the Living Places award at the 2023 RSUA Design Awards for its contribution to the community and for the example it sets for the positive contribution of simple but skilful architectural interventions.

The ongoing activities of the farm serve to educate visitors about food production, healthy eating, and sustainable living while also providing a social hub that opens up a previously insular and understandably defensive area of Belfast to the broader life of the city. This asserts the local community's right to be here, something often lost through the worst years of the Troubles and the resultant horrors of urban planning. The building is a physical expression of this assertion.

Dr Andrew Molloy