
BSI Swiss Architectural Award 2014

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Introduction

With a population of just 1.7million people, and geographically located at the edge of Europe, Northern Ireland is small and somewhat isolated. A contradictory place with its recent history of conflict – its people struggle to agree on its identity. We have grown out of this environment – detached from the thriving architectural cultures of either London or Dublin.

We are trying to make buildings and places that deserve to grow old – projects that carry a sense of permanence through their engagement with site, place and history.

We have chosen 3 projects which speak to this endeavour and mark the trajectory of our practice; the first is a house set in the landscape of rural Ulster – a distinctive landscape that carries the traces of ancient structures, contested ownership, and geological activity; second, a public building in Belfast’s city centre – sited in an area of the city which is now regenerating after the economic hardship of recent decades resulting from the conflict we know locally as ‘the troubles’; finally, we show a project remote from our office – a public square in Copenhagen – this project, won through competition, reflects our need to seek opportunities beyond our immediate environment where local commissioning policies rarely afford us the opportunity to work on public projects.

The invitation to submit for this award has provided us with the opportunity to reflect on the development of our practice. These three projects outline a chronology, but also a development of complexity and ideas that respond to the projects and their contexts.



The Cloughmore Stone

House at Killowen, Rostrevor

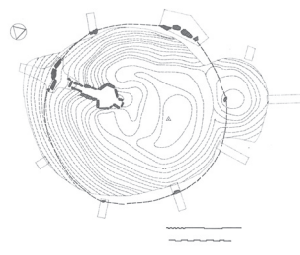
This house is sited in the townland of Killowen, on a hill-side over-looking Carlingford Lough. The Lough, along with the surrounding mountains has, for millennia, demarcated a territory between the North and South of Ireland. The markers in the landscape (such as tower houses and the more recent buildings; watch-towers along the border hill-tops) laid down over the years remind us that this landscape has always been a borderland. It is within this context that the house is sited – overlooking a landscape that is at once intrinsically beautiful yet charged with an historical undercurrent of discord and contested ownership.

The house is located on the north side of the Lough. The Lough is a fjord - a deep sea inlet formed by glacial retreat - that has a strong relationship to the identity of this part of Ireland. To the north lies the dramatic, igneous landscape of the Mourne mountains; to the south, across the Lough, are the Cooley Mountains. It was through this landscape that the first Mesolithic inhabitants of Ireland spread into the once wooded landscape of Ulster. The landscape retains a strong identity formed by glacial ice and volcanic activity; the southern edge of the Mourne mountains meet with the coast. Further inland the dramatic form of the Ring of Gullion and the Gap of the North, geological features that are interwoven with the legends and folklore of the location, overhang the glacial basin.

Carlingford Lough forms part of the border between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. While the border is no longer officially contested, the question of identity remains ambiguous; on the southern side of the Lough the matter of nationality is clear, whilst to the north (Ulster) the region is still viewed by Nationalists as 'Irish', rather than British. The troubled times the land has experienced give testimony to this lack of clarity in identity – such characteristics become more focussed at borders. The nearest large town, Newry, was a typical border town through Northern Ireland's troubles; it is just outside Newry that during the 70's and 80's one of the most fortified and militarised borders in Europe existed for two decades; the road was a fortified chicane as it crossed the border and was supervised by armed troops, surveilled by a sequence of manned military watchtowers strung along the border's hills. As with many European borders, this infrastructure of defence and conflict is no longer apparent, the border is now more prosaically identified by a change in the style of traffic signage, speed limits and road markings.



Chamber tomb on summit of Slieve Gullion



Standing stones, border watch-tower in background

The character of the landscape, however, is continuous, as is the typical mode of dwelling in the landscape. As with the development of much vernacular form, the building methods that accrue over time in response to landscape, climate and the available resources eventually define an established idea of how one should properly build in the landscape and how these buildings should look. This is an accommodation of sorts; a recognition or acceptance of what is appropriate that has developed over time through experience and learning from the environment.

As architects we are interested in this idea; the idea of assimilation between landscape and form, initially derived from practicality and pragmatism, eventually absorbed into culture, values and ‘folk’ aesthetic judgement. The traditional mode of dwelling; narrow-gabled cottages, stone rubble-wall, white-washed, once thatched, now slated, prevail either side of the border. These buildings were traditionally collected together in informal groups – as the extended family outgrew its space a ‘clachan’ or collection of these buildings would form a homestead of collected long cottages, often shifting their alignment in response to local topography, wind, views. Their presentation as a collection of pitched roofs on the hill-side, sometimes 2 storey, sometimes single storey, will have a corresponding phenomenon in many rural communities in the western world. Here, with our particular issues of religious and political identity, it is of interest to us that these facts of the relationship between built form and landscape transcend culture and identity.

Whilst these received values of local vernacular culture have informed the development of the house, we were also interested in how a simple dwelling might begin to transcend its basic qualities and become a gesture of embedded permanence that would allow this house to become engaged with more ancient phenomena within this landscape. The nearby presence of the Cloughmore Stone (a giant boulder - a glacial erratic - deposited on an adjacent mountainside) and a scattering of ancient monuments such as Standing Stones, Court Cairns and Chamber tombs offer another reading of this landscape where these elements might be seen as permanent pieces belonging to the land as much as they did to any historical origin. We wanted the house to be read in the land as an object that is at once specific (clearly a building of domestic purpose) yet abstract as it stands on the hillside – another stone object.



House as stone object on hillside

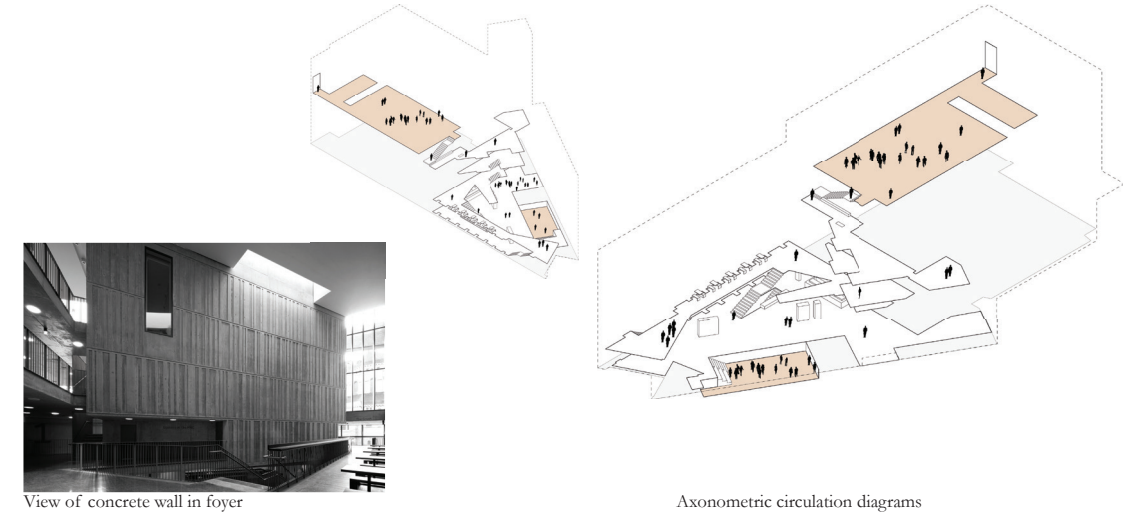


Interior views



On both sides of the border the principles of rural dwelling design are enshrined in official planning policies and design guides. Often applied in an over-prescriptive ways, planning policy developed metrics to define appropriate rural form to stop the proliferation of inappropriate bungalow development. A maximum length is permitted – we had originally endeavoured to accommodate the house under one roof, though found this not to be possible. Instead we developed the design as two parallel forms of subtly differing scale: to the fore, the primary living functions are spread across the length of the block to address views over the Lough through a row of four windows. The windows are generous in their scale, providing a specific relationship to the Lough and Mountain beyond – a relationship that we felt to be more powerful than might be afforded through the more obvious strategy of a more fully glazed screen. The second block to the rear houses the bedrooms. It is a taller block (with some upper level accommodation) where the circulation is to the Loughside – here we have made a loggia-space where 3 windows characterise the circulation space as a colonnade-like experience where the bedrooms are accessed by stairs and steps – through this approach, the bedrooms detach from the circulation and take on a more valued status than would be the case with a more typical house. The bedrooms look out to the mountainside behind.

The house has a steadfast quality – the deep walls, finished in thick stone, anchor its two pitched forms to the land in a way not possible with a more traditional white-washed render. We have used stone (slate) that is precisely cut to 100mm courses – this scale having been judged to allow the surface of the house to be read as one continuous mass rather than as a collection of small material pieces. The roof (also slate) and walls all contribute to this sense of singularity. The windows, excised from the stone walls, have their reveals lined in grey glass – reminiscent of the glossy sheer marks left by spades after cutting peat from Irish bogland.



View of concrete wall in foyer

Axonometric circulation diagrams

The MAC, Belfast

The house in Killowen addresses a position on the border and recognises the significance of the landscape of Ulster and the buildings which relate to that landscape as a ‘neutral’ or unifying definer of an ambiguous identity. Our next project addresses the more sharply drawn questions of identity in the main city of Northern Ireland, Belfast.

Belfast is where we are from; the name is familiar to many as a troubled place, a place associated with conflict in the past, and with a sometimes an unstable peace in the present. To us Belfast is home.

The recent history of the city is part of what makes Belfast a place with a particular character and atmosphere; for the years of the Troubles the city struggled to develop, and in that time the relief associated with the progression of any investment in the city, left little space for an architectural culture to flourish; architectural endeavour was a luxury that no-one was interested in. Perhaps this reflected an ever-present fear of impermanence; a tacit recognition of the potential for any new development to be rendered temporary at the operation of an explosive device. The embryonic architectural culture which developed through the work of skilled architects in Belfast during the sixties and early seventies was arrested in its progress during the worst quarter century of the Troubles. During our childhood, at the height of the violence, the centre of the city became a utilitarian space, entered through a set of barriers and security checks, a space for the carrying out of transactions. The citizens of Belfast largely withdrew to their communities at nightfall and in the seventies and early eighties Belfast was a barren and empty place at night.

We don’t revel in the notoriety associated with the troubled history of our home city; however we do value the lessons that this experience has imbued in us; the importance of history in the negotiation of the future; the need to remember in order to apprehend the real value of a place; the value of memory.

The history of the city makes its regeneration more worthy of celebration. The citizens of Belfast are learning to occupy and enjoy public space for the first time in a generation as the city embarks on defining a new, more positive, communal period of its history, day by day, week by week.

In the last decade the city has experienced a building boom, driven largely by the economics of peace and price inflation, and yet in the absence of any great value being placed on design, the architectural value of the city did not benefit. Instead of discovering an architectural expression for the city, or the region, the city has seen a proliferation of recent buildings that express expedient delivery systems and construction economics.

Belfast has a wider issue with identity as the main city in a place which cannot decide if it is culturally Irish or British. Vestiges of this crisis of identity remain in the form of barriers separating and defining communities. Belfast is now becoming established as a destination; no longer defined solely by its troubled history, its reputation is now at least partly defined by its spaces and buildings. The city’s built environment has the opportunity to create a shared identity for the citizens of Belfast; a series of buildings and spaces with which they can identify themselves.

The MAC is a project that has developed from our understanding of our home; we hope to design buildings for Belfast that distinctly express, through material, craft and detail; a language of architecture which can be traced to specific local characteristics. In a place where so much has been temporary we aim to address the need to create a modern cultural building that expects to age, and to be drawn into the existing, present phenomenon of the city.

The commission was won through an open design contest run by the RIBA; the MAC is a mixed arts venue; performing and visual arts are presented in a series of galleries, studios and auditoria. The site was once part of the merchant city associated with a time when the docks were much closer to the city centre. The foyer occupies a space that has been developed with the scale and character of an old street - a narrow space of vertical brick faces and top-lit. The internal elevations are derived through the re-interpretation of the construction of the nineteenth century warehouses and mills that sprung up during the city’s linen manufacturing and shipbuilding hey-day. The qualities of these buildings derive from the methods of construction and the simplicity of the details. It is to these robust qualities of pragmatism and strength that the practice has referred in developing the design of the MAC.

During the competition stages of the project we referred to the poem ‘Turn Again’ by Ciaran Carson. It speaks of the old city – an older Belfast with which we wanted the building to feel connected. In respect of this the context was difficult. The building completes the fourth side of the square, whilst designed in an historical indeterminate pastiche style, did not have a ‘depth’ to its apparent history. So, instead we looked to the more authentic characteristics of the Victorian brick city and, particularly, its warehouses. Our way of engaging with this space was through the design of a tower that addresses the Square - a campanile-like form which registers the building on the city’s skyline. The tower, in our reading, has a sense of predating everything else on the site, its solidity and constructional weight conferring a sense of permanence to the space as a contrast to the ‘pattern book’ pastiche of the square.



External views and detail

Belfast is truly a brick-built city; while brick manufacturing has now disappeared from the area, the selection of a brick which expressed the colour and characteristic of the typical Victorian buildings was an important decision for the success of the project. In addition to the presence of the tower the project is defined by two brick-clad blocks, constructed from in-situ concrete, which contain the main spaces. The expression of each block is distinct due to minor adjustments to the architectural language. One is a regular cuboid form expressed with a repeated elevational treatment that reflects the wrapping of large spaces with cellular accommodation; the other is a less regular form with large, individual openings offering into larger, more volumetrically generous spaces. The foyer occupies the tall voids between these two brick-clad forms.

The main spaces of the building are the foyer and cafe bar, 2 auditoria, 1000m² of gallery and dance studios. The gallery spaces are connected together by the multi-level foyer which provides a new territory in Belfast, a place for people to meet and interact. From the earliest concept designs our proposal sought to re-create the life of a street or square within an ‘open’ public building; the purpose of the foyer is neither private nor commercial, it is social, urban, convivial and popular. The foyer is conceived as an extension of the public realm, inviting occupation and use from the street, it controls and permits visual connections across the building to invite the uninitiated to investigate and explore; it is inclusive and open, and particular. This space has been highly successful in this city that for so long lacked an idea of the purpose and use of public space.

Site constraints required that the building developed with a dense sectional stacking of large and significant spaces – galleries are arranged on top of the theatres, studios on top of galleries – the visitor is drawn upwards via the staircases that traverse and ascend their way around the foyer to a kind of ‘plateau’ of large gallery spaces above the main theatre. Above this, 2 large spaces accommodate dance/rehearsal studios. The spaces are designed to be robust and flexible; in order to be sustainable in provincial cities such as Belfast, cultural centres need to provide spaces that are attractive and adaptable to a wide range of uses.

The gallery spaces have been designed to provide a wide range of options for lighting; natural light can be admitted or excluded to allow numerous environments for art. The galleries have also achieved environmental control and security standards that allow the MAC to benefit from government indemnification of loans from major art institutions. The dance and rehearsal studios can be used as rooms for conferences and mass video conferencing. These more prosaic aspects of the design contribute to ensuring the ongoing economic sustainability of the venue; unlike many provincial arts venues, the MAC generates a budget surplus.



Interior views

In addition to considerations of social and economic sustainability, the MAC has achieved the demanding environmental standard of BREEAM ‘Excellent’. This has been achieved through the use of carefully designed natural ventilation, the use of geothermal energy for heating and cooling in the form of a deep borehole array, improved insulation and airtightness design and material selection.

Consideration of the brick elevations influenced our approach to the stone and concrete walls which express similar surface depth and relief. The brick skin of one of the concrete boxes has been peeled away within the foyer to reveal a 5-storey high concrete wall. The deliberate introduction of pattern to the wall is expressed as a kind of abstract drawing through the use of smooth concrete framing to fields of highly textured board-marked concrete; we recognised that the desire to introduce the texture of boards was an instinct towards softening the surface through breaking down its scale; a decorative instinct to introduce pattern and texture. Therefore the particular detail reflects our recognition that this is not a surface that is derived from a constructional imperative – timber boards are no longer the most economic or common way to create formwork for in-situ concrete – however they do introduce a texture into the material that evokes a softer, more yielding material. This ‘drawn’ or ‘marked’ elevational approach is also employed on the exterior, where the basalt surface of the tower presents a modelling of relief texture to the Square that is deployed to express weight and permanence.

Internally, brickwork extends to the walls that address the urban qualities of the foyer where terrazzo floors prevail; in-situ concrete is recurrently exposed as an internal finish for walls and soffits and fitted furniture provides more intimate enclosure within the large spaces.

In making a building for a city that has an ambivalent attitude towards modern buildings we sought to understand what qualities of the nineteenth century buildings are attractive to the public. Our re-working of the traditional details of the mills and associated warehouses results in vertical surfaces of brick that generate modelling and surface relief, reflecting the solidity and permanence of the nineteenth century buildings.

Vartov Square, Copenhagen

Right next to the green embankment that surrounds Copenhagen and once was part of its defences stands a large building with many windows; in each is a potted plant. Poverty has stamped its mark both on the outside and the inside of the building; this is Vartov, a home for the aged poor.

An old maid is leaning out of the window; she picks a dead leaf from the balsam plant that stands on the window sill, and looks out at the children who are playing on the embankment. What is she thinking about? She is reliving the drama of a life.

From ‘A Window in Vartov’ by Hans Christian Andersen

By creating a new type of internal public space, by trying to develop a contemporary language that is human, engaging and rooted in its place, the MAC has made an impact on our city and its architecture. As this project progressed on site, we were given the opportunity to consider how we might apply our experience and approach in the context of a different city with a strong existing architectural character and history.

Above is a picture of Vartov Square in Central Copenhagen; we were drawn to this photograph because it is from the end of the nineteenth century and because it expresses movement frozen in the past – the suggestion of life. So often we tend to think of history as a collection or succession of facts – because we have some knowledge of past events, we forget that life then was full of ambiguity, contradiction, personal judgement – vagaries of individual, embodied consciousness. In considering this, we were reminded of the need to understand and absorb some of the particular characteristics of the life of this city that we had only visited briefly. The photo reminded us of our responsibility to maintain and continue the history of a place, whilst making a proposal that was transformative. Perhaps we could make a project of ambiguous age – a project that created a space that felt like it had been present for a long time.

The project to make a new place at Vartov (Alms-House in Danish) started as another competition entry. The site was an unloved and undervalued, roughly triangular space filled with cars and cobbles immediately adjacent to the City Hall. Our approach in developing our proposal was to derive a response that was grounded in an understanding of the site; physically and historically and to understand how a redevelopment of this space could take its place in the city of Copenhagen.



One of the distorted, aged windows



Historic photograph of the Vartov building

As we studied the maps of the city we noticed that the strong, truncated triangular shape of the space now referred to as ‘Vartov’ is visible on the oldest maps we could find. The site was originally the church-yard of an early Christian church dating back to 700 AD. Maps which pre-date the drainage and reclamation of the marsh, the construction of the planned nineteenth century city, and the removal of the defensive wall show how the space existed on the edge of the city, overlooking the ramparts.

During our research we discovered the little-known short story by Hans Christian Andersen ‘Fra et Vindue i Vartou’ : ‘From The Alms-House Window’. Perhaps Andersen was aware of the ancient nature of the location; its connection with the long story of this city; it is one of the few buildings that survived the British bombardment of the city in 1809.

The story recounts a tale of an old maid looking out of the window to the city wall, reflecting on the history of the city, including details of grisly legends from folklore which were superstitiously connected to the endurance of the city and its structural stability. The Alms-House is the oldest remaining building on the space, its courtyard contains the church where the great Danish vicar, poet and founder of the folk-high school system, Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig ministered for a time. The Almshouse is the only part of the environment around the town hall where the order of the older mediaeval city, which has been skinned by a layer of nineteenth century buildings along Vester-Voldgade, breaks through at a lower scale; a rupture of the deeper history, the evidence of an underlying margin or border. The site marks a border between the phenomena of the intact mediaeval city form and that of the grid-planned nineteenth century city. It is a significant site for this and many other reasons; in terms of development and built form, in terms of stories and folklore and in terms of national identity, Vartov is significant in relation to the identity of Copenhagen.

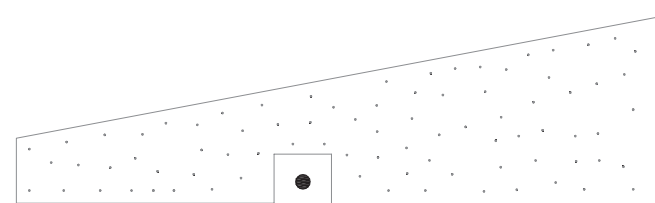
Our particular experience has instilled in us the importance of identity; to be respectful of the things that have endured as they are the physical connections with the collective identity of a place. Part of contributing to this identity must therefore be to understand what is sustaining this durability. The durability can be materially inherent; properties of indestructibility and permanence that have rendered the demolition highly inconvenient or difficult. Other phenomena are relatively fragile and have endured because of the intervention of people because of real or perceived value. The Alms-House which fronts the square is clearly of this second category; its fragility is visible in where the window surrounds distort as a record of settlements below ground that are probably hundreds of years old.



Early 17th Century map with site indicated



Images showing the window pattern propagated across the Square



Plan of the cherry trees and the base column of the Lure Players statue



This building has endured because of the value the people of Copenhagen place in it - its connection to the past, its place within the social history of the city. We discovered that the value is in no way connected to the Hans Christian Andersen story – in fact the story is almost unknown in Copenhagen.

So if this building has been here longer than any other on the square, and because it has a compromised relationship to the square – the project for us became about finding a way of establishing or imprinting the significance of the building in a space where it is dominated by its neighbours; City Hall, The Palace Hotel. We set out to define the new square by using the oldest, most modest and diminutive building on the square, the Alms House, bringing it somehow into the foreground of the space. Through this we intended to give the space a new, strong, identity in the city, defined by an ancient underlying structure – a new location in the mental map of Copenhagen.

This is accomplished by two primary moves; the alignment of the geometry of the new square to the geometry of the old Almshouse. The paving pattern was conceived of fields of ‘windows’ imprinted in textural differences with a mix of recycled and new cobbles and maintained to the limits of the space at the arrow point of the space. The depiction of the windows reflects the elevation of the almshouse in an array of ‘windows’ imprinted in the paving with the abstraction of the representation increasing with distance from the building.

The panels of stone which reflect the windows resonate with the ancient graves around 1.2m underneath the site; this resonance of window to grave is further enhanced by the inscription of the text of the story, in English and Danish on two slabs closest to the Almshouse. The elevation of the building itself is reflected by a change in texture, where the surround to the window panels in the ground shifts from old-recycled stone for the height of the building’s elevation, to new stone for the rest of the square. The colonisation of the long, tapering extent of the site allows the influence of the ‘Vartov’ building (the Alms House) to extend to the point where it crosses with the movement of the Stroget across to the Radhuspladsen, two of the main thoroughfares in the city.

The second move was the use of a plantation or woodland of cherry trees to spatially define the main part of the square as distinct from the busy-ness of the frontage along the Palace Hotel, the end of the primary shopping Street (Stroget) and the enormous space of Radhuspladsen – the city hall square. The grove creates a separation which allows the new space to be contained and described; it permits the new square to assume a scale and an orientation to the old Almshouse. In this way the project is transformative; we inherited a site that existed in the minds of the people of the city only as a cobbled widening of Vester Voldgade; a road running parallel to Hans Christian Andersen Boulevard and flanking the city hall and its square; a useful car park for the city centre.

Embedded within the Grove of Trees are the ‘Lurblæserne’ or Lure Players; a sculpture held on top of a 20m high column, viewed across the frontage of and orientated towards Radhuspladsen, this sculpture celebrates the archaeological discovery of ancient examples of the instrument which Danes connect with the Nordic identity. The column, previously surrounded by tour buses, taxis and parked cars now rises from the middle of the grove: a reframing that brings the primordial mythology evoked by the sculpture into greater focus and which re-establishes value to and appreciation of the monument.

The project has created a space in the square that feels neither new nor old; it feels as if it might have been there for a long time; its age is ambiguous. By night the grove of informally planted trees is lit, the lighter gravel below the canopies illuminated to create a distinct moment in the city centre; so while the space has been very quickly absorbed into the context of this city of public realm, it has also become identifiable and distinct as a destination, a venue for events, speeches and festivals.

The design for the new square at Vartov involved working with the archaeology, avoiding the disturbing of ancient graves; however it was also important to allow the space to work practically for the city. Vartov is the starting point for the city sightseeing tour buses; this provision was engineered into the design; as was the provision for the taxi rank; pick up and drop off for the Palace Hotel, and large quantities of cycle parking. The major north-south cycle route along Vester Voldgade is integrated into the project (in stone paving) and the square also provides reserved parking space,s providing re-charging points for electric vehicles. Lighting to the space is enhanced in terms of quality and light levels yet uses only 40% of the energy of the original installation.

The new space is intentionally gentle in how it relates to the existing fabric of Copenhagen; it uncovers the reality of what was already there – a space that rewards recognition and re-discovery. The project uncovered this remnant of a previous version of the city to allow it to be re-integrated with the contemporary city to strengthen and maintain the identity of Copenhagen. We have learned to be happy with making something that is not assertive of its inherent worth as separate from its context; and to make a project that is not immediately identifiable as a project.

“ From your little room in Vartov with the green balsam plant on the window sill, you look out at the playing children and imagine that you see your own story repeated.”

From ‘A Window in Vartov’ by Hans Christian Andersen