

# ARTS

Spider-Man's  
new boss, page 22



## The grow-your-own hostel

Boasting maple floors and individual gardens, this cool modernist building is Britain's first tailor-made homeless hostel. But will it end up being a one-off? **Steve Rose** reports

**A**t first glance, you could easily mistake Spring Gardens for a fashionable new micro-hotel, or a chic health resort, tucked away behind some Edwardian terraces in south-east London. In fact, it is a new hostel for the homeless - and it's better looking than most private housing schemes. A long, low building snaking around three sides of a garden, the hostel's clean lines and white walls hark back to the work of early modernists such as Le Corbusier or JJP Oud. But

then what *should* a homeless hostel look like anyway? Before Spring Gardens, the first purpose-built homeless hostel in Britain, it was a question no one needed to ask.

Homelessness was a high-profile problem in Britain in the late 1980s. The number of rough sleepers became conspicuously higher in the UK, especially in London, giving rise to "cardboard cities" - and bringing the beneficiaries of Thatcherite Britain into uncomfortable proximity with its victims. It was partly in response to this, and the notion that the government should do

**Revolutionary thinking... the £4m Spring Gardens centre**

something about it, that Margaret Thatcher made her infamous declaration that there was "no such thing as society". In 1998, Tony Blair took a different line, pledging Labour would reduce by two-thirds the number of people sleeping rough in Britain by 2002. According to its own statistics, that target was met early, through joined-up social services and extra funds. In 2006, the government vowed to pump another £90m into raising the standard of the UK's homeless accommodation. Spring Gardens is one of the results. >>>

The hostel is run by St Mungo's, >>>

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« London's largest charity for homeless people, which houses more than 1,500 people every night. "The old building was hideous, dark and claustrophobic," says architect Peter Barber of the run-down hostel that used to sit on the site in Hither Green. "It was easy to get lost. You entered these dark, labyrinthine corridors where you didn't know what was around the corner. Some of the people there must have felt isolated. It would be easy to get into the position, if your room was in a far-flung corner, where you'd never come out. So we wondered whether it was possible to design a hostel for 40 people without any corridors."

It would be hard to get lost or feel claustrophobic in the new building. The entire public area is basically one big, airy room that serves both as a single, giant corridor and as the hostel's communal space. Most of the bedrooms open straight on to it and face away from the garden, as do shared kitchens, offices and training rooms. The garden was the other key factor in the design. The old building inexplicably turned its back on it; the new one wraps itself around it.

The entrance and reception area are at one end of the main, double-height corridor; at the other end, it widens out into a communal eating area, with various free-standing elements along the way: a small library; computer stations; benches; a pool table; giant coloured window frames. The idea was to keep the space flexible, to accommodate temporary events and activities such as film screenings, workshops, or whatever else residents want. "It still looks a bit architectural at the moment," says Barber. "We're hoping it'll get a bit more cluttered. Slowly, over time, this will come to life."

The linear layout echoes the journey from homelessness to independence that underpins the St Mungo's ethos. Most of the bedrooms are identical - simply furnished, with a small ensuite



**They can grow whatever they like in their gardens, says the manager, 'as long as it's legal'**

bathroom and a little private garden at the back, or a balcony on the upper storeys. The 10 rooms closest to reception, however, are "assessment" beds for newcomers, who will stay there for up to six weeks, during which time their health and other needs will be gauged. They might be referred to another specialist facility - for women or for drug users, for example - or perhaps move up the corridor to one of Spring Gardens' longer-term rooms, where they could stay for as long as 18 months. Then they might move into one of the five flats in the tower at the far end of the building, another step in their journey back into the community beyond.

To help people along this route, St Mungo's runs courses in basic professional and life skills, from food hygiene to DJing, from literacy to carpentry. Not to mention gardening: there are plans for allotments in the central green, where residents can grow vegetables for the kitchen. "It's amazing the confidence you can get from growing something from seed to fruit or flower," says Vicky Tunnicliff, the hostel manager. They can grow whatever they like in their small private gardens, she says, "as long as it's legal".

This open arrangement serves a security purpose, too. According to St Mungo's, 68% of their residents have

alcohol or drug problems, nearly half have mental health issues, and 37% have a history of offending. Things can get volatile in hostels, but less so here, says Tunnicliff. In other hostels, the division between staff and "clients", as they are called, is often laid out in adversarial terms, with security doors, protective shutters and hatches through which to communicate. There are no "them" and "us" barriers here - so far, there has been no need to even close the door to the staff offices.

Barber, whose practice is known for its striking but equally communally oriented housing schemes, such as the award-winning Donnybrook Quarter in London, has been working with St Mungo's for 15 years: "My first job was doing a tiling layout for one of their bathrooms. It was just bread-and-butter work to start with, but, as more money's become available, so we've grown with them. By now, we know a bit about what happens in these places."

Barber has refurbished and added to six other St Mungo's properties around the capital, with several more in the pipeline. The results have been impressive. The hostel in Covent Garden is converted from a Victorian neo-gothic school. Barber stripped back the interior, creating an

oasis of exposed brickwork and ceiling beams. The newer buildings display a clean, white, modernist bent similar to that of Spring Gardens, as do many of Barber's private housing projects. "I think it affects how people feel," he says, "this sort of light, uncluttered space."

Is there a danger these buildings might discourage people from moving on? "That's something we're aware of," says Tunnicliff. "But part of the work we're doing is to build up people's confidence and independence. It just makes it a much more supportive environment in which to get people to that point. The fact that people do want their independence is always more of a carrot to move on." However attractive the building is, says one resident, "the problem with hostel life is the people that live in hostels." Still, other residents I speak to seem taken with the place. "I've landed in a bed of roses," says one. "Nice maple floors, matching furniture, my own garden. Anything's better than the other option, but this is the best hostel I've ever seen."

Architecture alone cannot solve the problem of homelessness. And, although government money has produced praiseworthy results, there are other areas - such as health, education and employment where they could be doing a lot more, says St Mungo's. In the current economic climate, homelessness is back on the rise. The government's next big target is to eradicate street sleeping in Britain by 2012, in time for the Olympics, which may be over-ambitious. Spring Gardens, which only cost £4m (£3.2m of which came from government), could be a template for future hostels; but the prospect of raising all homeless accommodation to such a high standard now seems less likely, particularly if the Conservatives take power. Public purse-strings will tighten in the next few years, and the provision of new housing in general is already an urgent matter. One can imagine tabloid outrage over housing the homeless so well: "The Hilton of hostels!"

But, like most architects, Barber believes there is such a thing as society: "Another way of looking at it is: are people in this position different from anybody else? I'm not sure they are, but I would imagine that people are, if anything, more sensitive to their environment. Design affects how people feel about themselves and the institution. The hope is to make life easier for the residents and the people who work here. I don't think it's an indulgence to try to create a beautiful environment for people. I think it's essential" ●

**Bright and airy ... inside Spring Gardens; (below) rows of computer stations**



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