

BUILDING

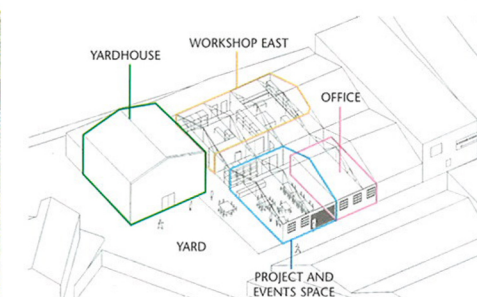
Assemble: Yardhouse

Hana Loftus admires a prototype for low-cost studio space in London.

The shortage of affordable workspace for artists and makers is so well known that it hardly needs restating. At the same time, the energy and desire of those in the sector to create their own working spaces is as present as ever, and a new generation is seeking its own iteration of the collective space-making that has been common as long as art and making have existed. Easier said than done, however, as groups struggle to find sites and

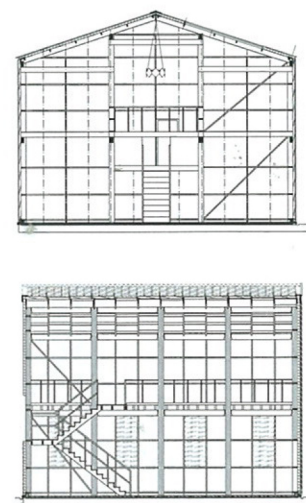
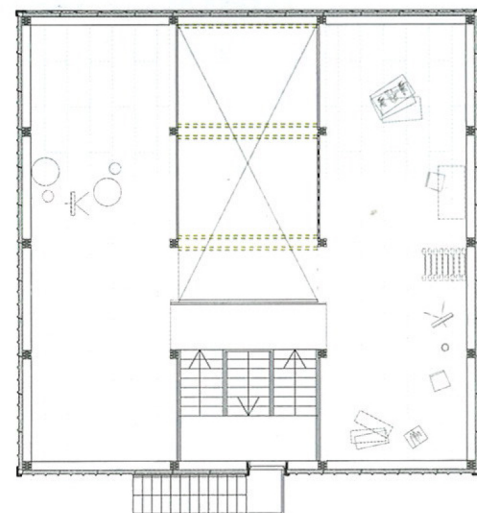
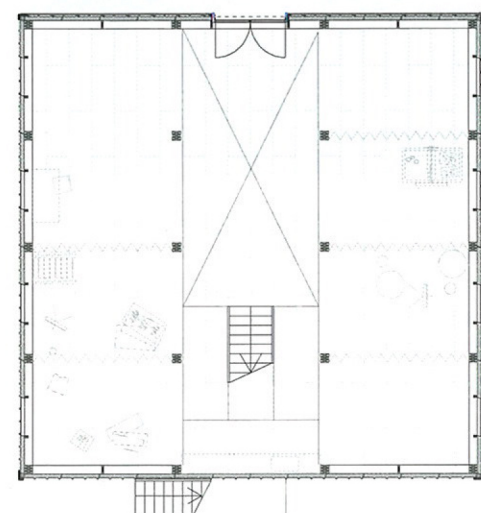
funding, and sometimes lack the capacity to build economically and manage effectively.

The architectural collective Assemble's new project at its base in Stratford, east London, demonstrates one entrepreneurial approach. Alongside the workshop, office and events space that the group has created within light-industrial sheds at Sugarhouse Yard over the last two years, it has now created a new studio building with an extraordinarily low project



cost of £80,000. Half of this was met by the collective, which will also manage the studios, and half by the London Legacy Development Corporation, which sees the project as a pilot for the provision of new creative workspaces in and around the Olympic Park.

Left The site is within a conservation area and forms part of Sugarhouse Island, bounded by Stratford High Street and two rivers. The area is undergoing rapid change, with industrial and business uses replaced by large-scale residential-led development.



Yardhouse is an appealingly simple model. A barn-warehouse hybrid, square in plan, built from standard timber sections made into 'screw-lam' columns and beams, it has more in common, formally, with the timber-framed barns of the United States than the brick- or steel-built warehouses of the urban context in which it resides. (The analogy goes further, as the building may have to be dismantled, removed and re-erected on a new site when Assemble's lease expires in two years, just as the Amish would dismantle their barns onto the back of trailers.) Clad on three sides in the simplest insulated cladding panels, the fourth side – facing the yard which serves as the focus for Assemble's little campus – is faced in tinted fibre-cement shingles, hand-made by the designers, and gives the structure a gently joyful identity that lifts it above the purely pragmatic. The 250-square-metre Yardhouse is made to appear bigger than it is through the simple device of this tall gable wall, which suggests a much longer building behind it than is the case.

Assemble stresses the economy of the design solution in terms of construction methods, dimensioning and the minimal servicing on offer: no heating, no wet services apart from a shared kitchenette – even the toilet is in a separate building. Pragmatic though the rationale may be, the design is non-standard in the kind of studio environment it creates. Essentially an open-plan space with a first-floor gallery along two sides, the starting premise is the opposite of the cellular, self-contained studios that are usually seen as ideal for the creative sector; and closer to the environment of an art school studio complex, with the cross-fertilisation and sharing of ideas and resources this suggests.

Left Fibre-cement shingles cladding the principal elevation were hand-made by the designers.

Below Ground and first-floor plans; sections. Yardhouse occupies a square footprint of 12x12m with a total internal floor area of 250sqm. The side aisles are broken down by the frame into sixteen equally-sized 12sqm studios. The central double-height space serves as circulation and a 48-square-metre communal work area.

The assumption is openness in physical and therefore cultural terms. Tenants can install their own partitions if they wish and at their own cost, but the design discourages full compartmentation through subtle nudges. The floor-to-ceiling heights, at 3.5 to four metres, mean that most user-installed partitions extend only as high as a 2.4-metre sheet of plywood or plasterboard, and the limited number of smoke detectors means that a tenant who wishes to make a full-height partition must pay for the installation of a separate smoke detector in their own space. The first-floor galleries do not allow for circulation, so the studios nearest the stair become de facto circulation into the bays beyond.



Assemble's approach to developing this brief and studio culture is appealingly common-sense but also specific to its own practice ethos. 'We really just thought about the kind of space we might like to have', says project leader Lewis Jones. The collaborative, open-ended collective has created literally open-ended studios that encourage a collective approach: a project in their own image. There has been no shortage of tenants willing to buy into this idea – the studios attracted ten times as many enquiries as there was space to fill – although of course this facility won't suit every sort of practitioner. The floor loadings may not enable heavy equipment to be installed but are perfectly adequate for most uses, and Assemble's own well-equipped workshop, with its machinery and new kiln, can be used by tenants on a time-charge basis.

Above, left The central aisle provides a communal work space and a social space for tenants. 'The design avoids the hotel-like cellular and corridor arrangements common among most London studio providers and draws from many of the qualities of shared workspace present in Hackney Wick', says Assemble.



In many ways this project is highly specific to the site, and to Assemble's own circumstances. Curiously, given that the project is billed as a prototype, Jones is reluctant to stress its replicability, although he likes the idea in principle. He suggests that the dimensions of the building would not be the same for different sites, although one might expect that the designers had found the most economic way to use standard-sized elements, and that changing the grid would result in more wastage or a jump in the sizes of the structural elements. When pressed, Jones cites the principles of the timber frame, the utilitarian cladding panels, and the open-plan nature as central to the 'system', and then adds an intriguing extra with regard to the hand-made cement shingles: 'Perhaps part of the system is that there should be a sense of fun and experiment'.

Assemble has also benefitted from a supportive relationship with one of the major powers in the area – the London Legacy Development Corporation – which in its



previous guise as the Olympic Park Legacy Company enabled the designers' occupation of the Sugarhouse site in the first place and brokered the deal with the landowner. Its financial contribution aside – which may have been 50 per cent of the build cost but was still a relatively meagre £40,000 – it is hard to see this support as incidental: without it, how many groups would have been able to negotiate a 'meanwhile' tenancy of a similar site? To point this out is in no way to lessen the entrepreneurialism and achievement of the design team in making the Yardhouse happen, as a project and as an income stream to support the group's activities. Assemble has not yet done the maths on how much bigger the space would need to be, or how much the rents would need to be raised, for a similar project to be viable on a site where ground rent would have to be paid. (A delicate balance would need to be struck between a building big enough to pay its way but small enough to be manageable.) My hunch is that it would still be a viable proposition, and if there is a lesson to be learnt it might be that landowners and local authorities should be more proactive in nurturing and enabling energetic groups like Assemble to fashion low-risk, low-cost projects like this.



Hana Loftus is a co-founder of HAT Projects, whose work includes High House Artists' Studios at Purfleet, Essex, and the Gasworks gallery and studio complex in south London.

Above, left Tenants can adapt their space as they wish. Rents are £40/week per bay, excluding electricity; or £12.79/sq ft per year including communal areas. After ongoing costs, Assemble's investment will be paid off after two years, and any surplus reinvested in public programming at Sugarhouse Studios.

Top left Inaugural dinner for Assemble, sponsors and tenants including designers, painters, a sculptor, a jeweller and a carpenter.

Project team

Designer, project manager: Assemble; engineer: Eva McManara; electricians: Robert Nathan Electrics; plumbing: Ask4Plumbers; timber staircase: WorkshopEast; exterior staircase: Focus Fabrications; bespoke element fabrication (handrail, chandelier, tiles): Assemble; insulated cladding: Kingspan KS1000RW; polycarbonate rooflights: Kingspan; softwood timber: EE Olleys & Sons; intumescent paint: Envirograf HW01 and HW02; joist hangers: Simpsons Strongtie.