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## Sunspot, Jaywick Sands review – a ray of hope for the beleaguered Essex resort

A bright, no-frills business development of office space, workshops and market hall is bringing amenities and employment to one of the country's most beleaguered communities

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**J**aywick Sands in Essex, population 4,800, is a survivor of a largely lost world, the interwar phenomenon called “plotlands” that enabled the working-class dwellers of big cities to own, and often build, their own home in the countryside and by the sea. It manifests a dream of freedom and self-reliance, with a DIY pioneer spirit of tenacity and improvisation more typical of American timber houses than rural England. It also has problems. It is threatened by the rising sea, and it has been identified several times as the [most deprived neighbourhood in England](#). A dismal photograph of Jaywick was [infamously used in a Trumpian campaign ad](#) that purported to show the terrible consequences of Democrat rule.

**Sunspot**, a bright and breezy overgrown shed, aims to bring jobs and optimism. It is a new landmark, but one with the ad hoc spirit of the village. Built at a cost of £4.8m for Tendring district council, partly funded by the government's Getting Building Fund, it provides offices and workshops, plus a cafe, training rooms and a hall for markets and events. It is designed by the Colchester-based **HAT Projects**, whose former seaside experience includes the **Hastings Contemporary** art gallery and whose **High House** artists' studios in Purfleet, Essex, were – like Sunspot – about making affordable workspace with limited means.

A hundred years ago, Jaywick Sands was nothing but marshy land near the resort of Clacton-on-Sea. Then, from 1928, a London surveyor and developer called Frank C Stedman started buying it up, building an access road and dividing it into plots for chalets. Over time, the holiday homes evolved into places for retirement and year-round living. Brick and rendered walls would sometimes replace timber boarding, but the houses kept much of the lightweight character of beach huts. Infrastructure did not always keep up with the changes – parts of Jaywick didn't get sewage connections for 50 years, and residents organised their own service, called the "Bisto kids", for emptying their Elsan chemical toilets.

## ■ ■ 'It looks like you're building an Aldi,' said a passerby to Hana Loftus of HAT Projects, which she says she took as a compliment

The anarchist thinker **Colin Ward** would later celebrate the plotlands for their "defensive independence and their strong community bonds". He admired the way that the necessity of cheapness was the mother of constructional invention – reused railway carriages, repurposed joinery and trellises. But for planners, plotlands were an affront. The 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, partly motivated by often snobbish horror at these bottom-up settlements, introduced controls that made their permission-free construction impossible. Many plotlands enclaves were replaced by more orthodox developments.

Jaywick's avoidance of this fate owed something both to residents' resistance and to its marginal location – it is awkwardly connected to Clacton, which itself is at the end of a sluggish railway line. The terrible **Essex floods of 1953**, which killed 307 people, 37 of them in Jaywick, also discouraged redevelopment. These factors keep property prices affordable (a one-bedroom home might go for £60,000) but they deter investment. Meanwhile, private landlords find it profitable to rent out the tiny and rickety houses to people on housing benefit, which brings people to a place where they have little prospect of employment. The consequences of Jaywick's geography and history include high levels of ill health, overcrowding and poor housing, too few jobs and inadequate services.



■ On the margins... an aerial view of the Sunspot development under construction, February 2023. Photograph: Aerial Essex/Getty Images

Something has to be done, but what and, above all, how has yet to be completely decided. It's agreed that Jaywick's flood defences need to be improved, but no agency has yet committed to paying a "baseline cost" estimated at £50m. HAT Projects were brought in five years ago to create a "place plan" for improving the fabric of Jaywick, of which Sunspot is the most tangible outcome. Rather than hang around waiting for grander plans to happen, the idea was to build something quick, cheap and effective, that could give faith that change for the better is possible.

Named after an amusement arcade formerly on the site, Sunspot has the scale of a village church, rising above the bungalows with a long roofline of V-shaped gables that might be said to echo, in their angular metallic way, the nearby waves. A big arch



shape cut into one end announces the double-height market space behind. At the same time it is designed to be demountable, in case future regeneration has other uses for the site, so it is made of bolt-together stuff, aluminium sheets on a steel frame, their struts and fixings visible.

“It looks like you’re building an Aldi,” said a passerby to Hana Loftus of HAT Projects, which she says she took as a compliment. The point is not to be too precious, to create something “robust and playful but not too grand”. It relies on colour – a pale mint green plus the three primaries – and shifts of scale and volume to lift it above the average box. Just when you might think that it is, after all, just a shed, you get something like the generous interior of the market hall, its skinny structure painted red.



📷 'The V-shaped gables might be said to echo the nearby waves.' Photograph: Maddie Persent

There are some basic but helpful additions to the neighbourhood. There's a pavement in front – something that the road on which it stands never had – and a bus shelter, a yellow canopy fixed to the front of the building. Most importantly, it seems to be doing its job of bringing services and employment to Jaywick: 23 out of its 24 units have been rented out, with the help of low and flexible rents, to businesses that include a barber shop, a maker of specialist school uniforms, a multimedia artist and an asset finance company.

So Sunspot is practical and hopeful at once, attuned to its place, aspirational but not vainglorious. It's hard to know for sure whether such places truly work until they have been running for a while, but the signs for Sunspot are about as good as they can be.