

*MJ Long Prize shortlist*  
Rebecca Kalbfell

# Sunspot

HAT Projects' community and industrial centre in Jaywick Sands offers vendors and small businesses much-needed room for growth, writes *Kristina Rapacki*



Jaywick's new business centre Sunspot (opening spread), designed by Colchester-based HAT Projects, sits on the site of an old arcade of the same name. It reunites the two neighbourhoods of Brooklands and Grasslands, rare survivals of plotlands – unregulated settlements that sprung up on the Thames Estuary in the interwar years



In 1970, the council in charge of the small coastal settlement of Jaywick Sands in Essex issued 770 compulsory purchase orders. The plan was to buy up the marshy land on which the community had grown since the late 1920s, demolish its largely self-built homes, and redevelop Jaywick in its entirety. The residents fought back, winning a High Court order that halted the purchases – and the bulldozers. Today, Jaywick is one of the last remaining plotlands in Essex, a rare survival of the relatively unregulated settlements built by workers from London's East End – first for holidaying, later for permanent residence – on the inexpensive, flood-prone land around the Thames Estuary.

‘The council back then saw Jaywick as a problem that they could just get rid of,’ says Rebecca Kalbfell, associate at HAT Projects, an architecture practice based in Colchester, 20 minutes inland by car. The local authority restructured into Tendring

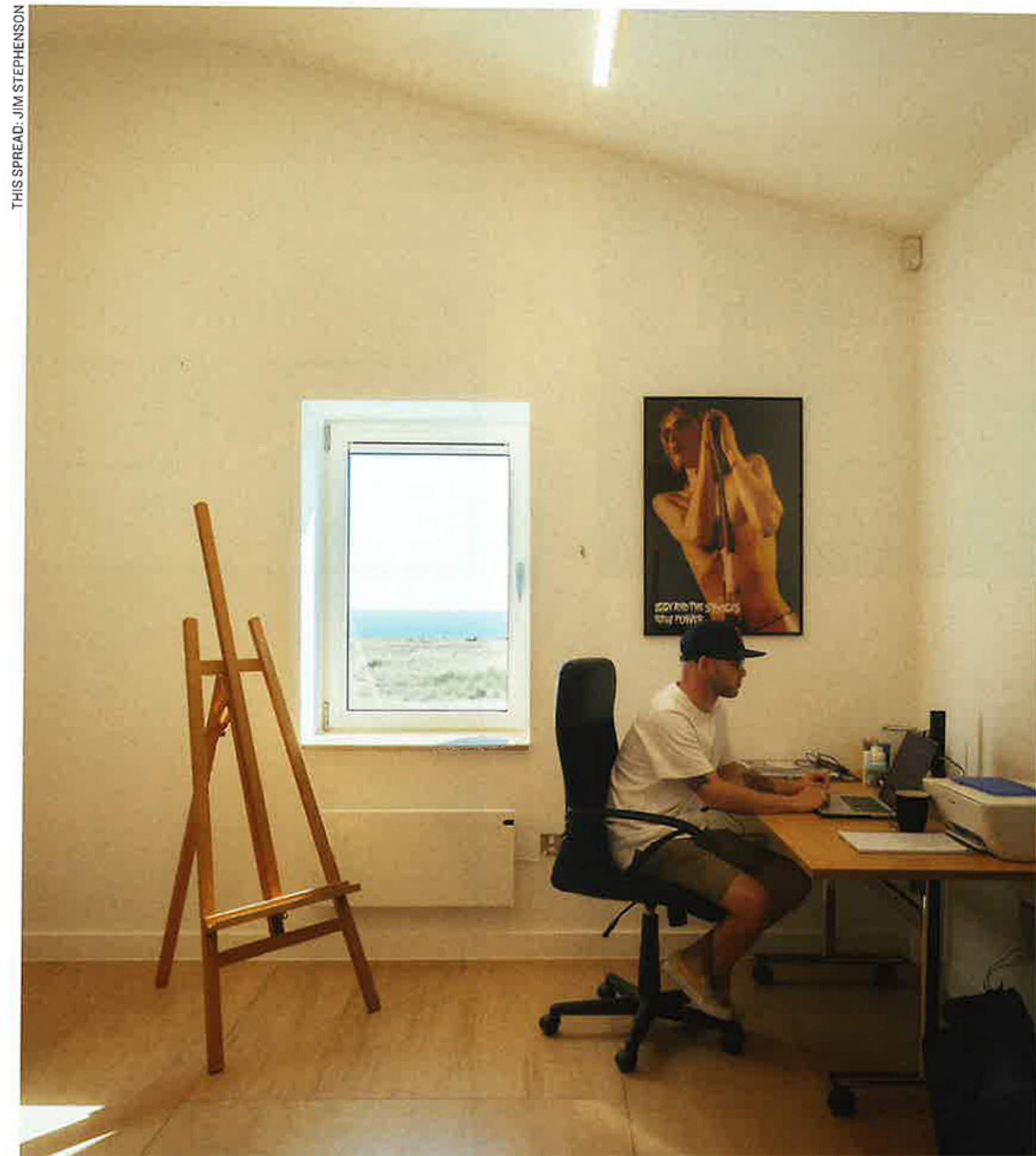
District Council shortly after the episode, but attitudes towards Jaywick took time to shift. A swathe of masterplans were produced from the 1980s to the early '00s, all of which involved partial demolition – and most of which were roundly rejected by residents. But Tendring has changed its tack recently, and its language: in 2018, it commissioned HAT to put together a ‘place plan’ for Jaywick – focused on building new homes and propping up its infrastructure and flood defences – rather than flattening it.

Kalbfell, who joined HAT in 2014, has worked on the place plan since its inception. Jaywick, the team found, shares many chronic challenges with other seaside communities around the UK. The decline of domestic tourism in the postwar years means that nothing remains of the casino, arcade and boating lake that once sat between Jaywick's Brooklands and Grasslands, stitching the two seafront neighbourhoods



Sunspot offers units on the beachfront (opposite), as well as first-floor spaces, accessed through the main entrance reception area (above), with sweeping views across the North Sea (right). Businesses range from barbers to an AI consultant

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Within six months of opening, Sunspot was at nearly full capacity. The building allows for businesses to expand as they grow, from small units such as that currently occupied by a hairdresser (below), to large double-height units, one of which houses Uniform 7, a specialist in school uniforms for students with sensory and physical disabilities (opposite)

together. 'All those I know who were kids in the '70s would have gone to Jaywick in the summer,' says Kalbfell, who grew up in Essex in the 1990s and '00s. It's one of the nicest beaches along this stretch of coast. But for my generation, it wasn't a thing.'

Compounding its vulnerability is Jaywick's plotlands status. Its low-slung chalets mostly sit just below sea level, and were never meant to be permanent homes; Brooklands and Grasslands were without basic utilities until the 1980s. The roads and lanes remain private; National Highways has no obligation to maintain them. In recent decades, the cheapest chalets have attracted absentee landlords who let them to people claiming housing benefit, while allowing the properties to deteriorate far below the national Decent Homes Standard. As HAT's interim report reads, 'There is a clear correlation between low owner occupation and poor housing conditions.' Jaywick topped the government's Deprivation Index

for England in 2010, 2015 and 2019.

It soon became clear to HAT that residents' top priority was the creation of commercial opportunities. As part of their work on the place plan, they helped form a brief for a business and industrial centre where Frank Ernest Bromige's long-demolished art deco arcade – first known as the Playdium, then as Sunspot – had once stood. Here, on derelict land, a weekly car boot sale was already taking place, but without as much as a pavement, let alone cover. 'From speaking to residents, we knew that this type of space was missing,' says Kalbfell. 'People did in fact have their own businesses, but they were running them out of their kitchens.' Had statistical analysis been done from afar by an agency, that may not have registered, suggests Kalbfell. 'They would have said there is no demand in Jaywick, because there was nothing here already.'

When Tendring District Council put out

the business centre to tender, HAT were the obvious choice, and Kalbfell became its project architect. With combined funding from Tendring, the Getting Building Fund, Essex County Council and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the £5.3 million development was named Sunspot after the old arcade. It was slated for 'long meanwhile' use – meaning 25–50 years – and designed by HAT to be easily dismantled and reconstructed elsewhere. A simple steel frame encased in corrugated aluminium and polycarbonate panels, it has piles that burrow deep into the marshy ground. It took only 18 months to construct, completing in September 2023. There are modest flourishes: a saw-tooth roofline that mimics the wide pitched roofs of Jaywick's distinctive chalets; bright yellow awnings; red structural steel; a facade the colour of mint ice cream.

Sunspot's smallest business units face the seafront, forming a promenade along the freshly paved stretch of road. Current

ground-floor tenants include Buddies Barbers, the Rainy Bakes bakery and dog groomers Spotty Dotty & Friends, which recently expanded into another larger unit around the back with a pet shop. Upstairs units are accessed via intercom through the main entrance; these house an AI consultant, a masseuse, a handbag designer and a florist, among other businesses. At its eastern end, facing Grasslands and Clacton-on-Sea, is a café run by the charity The Active Wellbeing Society; at the other, facing Brooklands and the holiday parks of Seawick, a double-height event space hosts markets, concerts, workshops and exercise classes year round. Within six months of opening, Sunspot hit nearly full occupancy, with one upstairs unit – the largest – kept empty for £15-per-day hot-desking.

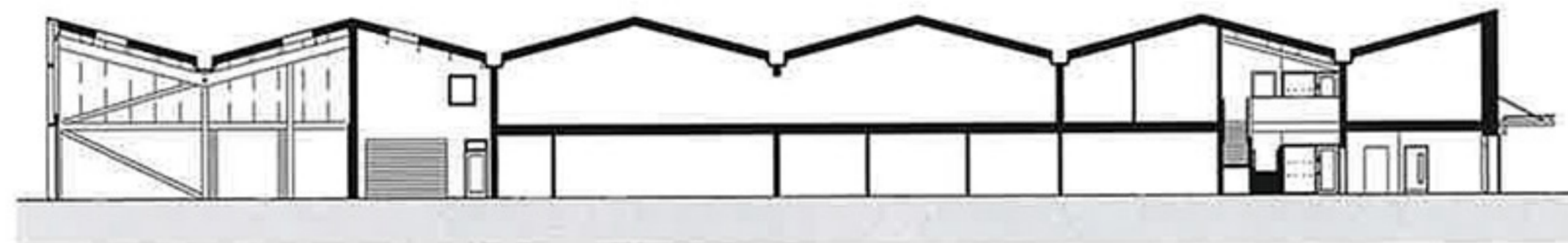
'We're inclusive to everyone,' says Mick Lister, who manages Sunspot for Tendring District Council. The units are affordable, ranging from £250 to £1,200 per month,

and the notice is only 30 days, 'so if it is not working out for you, you just leave the unit as you found it'. Two winters in, however, the pattern is of businesses growing, rather than shuttering. Something of a pipeline has emerged: 'Two people started in the market, and have gone into units,' explains Lister. 'Eight businesses have gone into small units and then expanded into bigger ones.' And the hot-desking option has paid off too, with one person starting there, later taking on a unit. Today, there is a waiting list to rent a business unit at Sunspot.

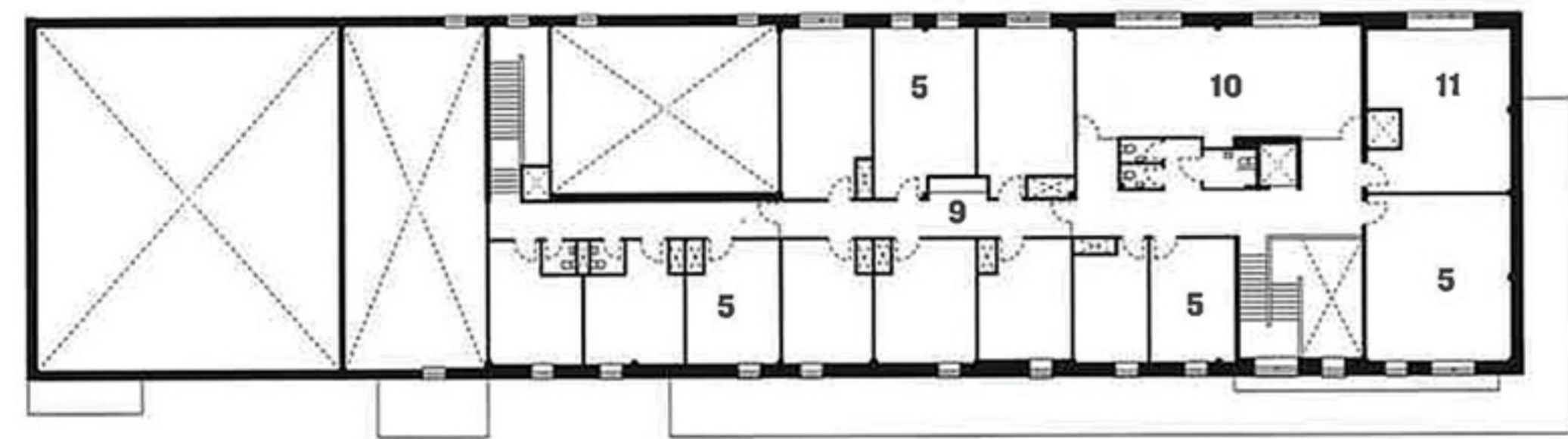
This flexibility is reflected in the bare-bones design of the building. Ground-floor units are pre-fitted with a coldwater run which can be connected to the mains if necessary. Businesses such as Rainy Bakes have opted to install ventilation for their ovens – an adaptation made relatively simple through easily accessible service hatches on the first floor. The point is that the services are only plugged in if



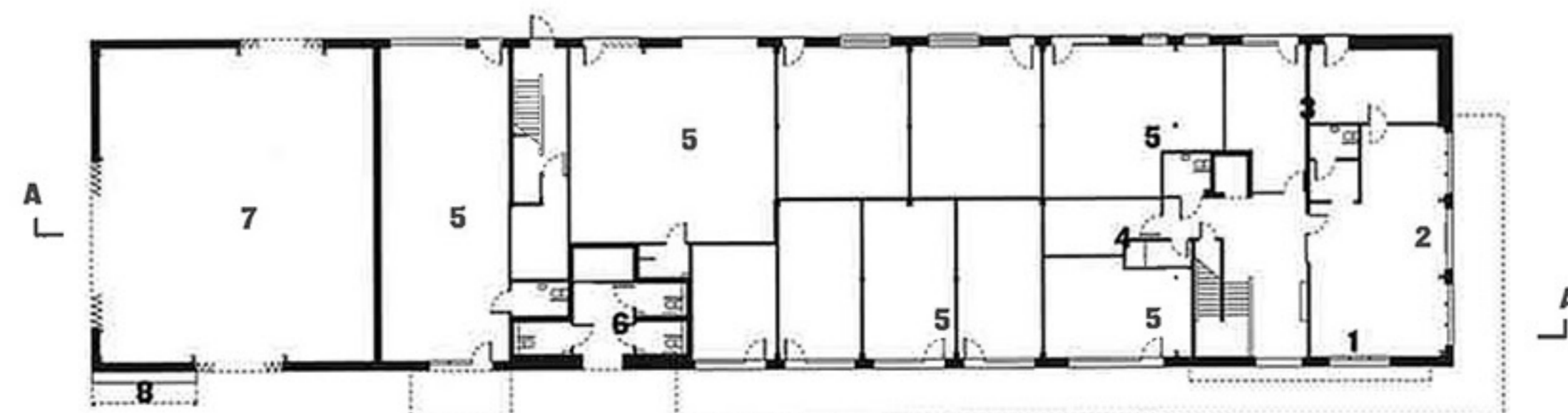
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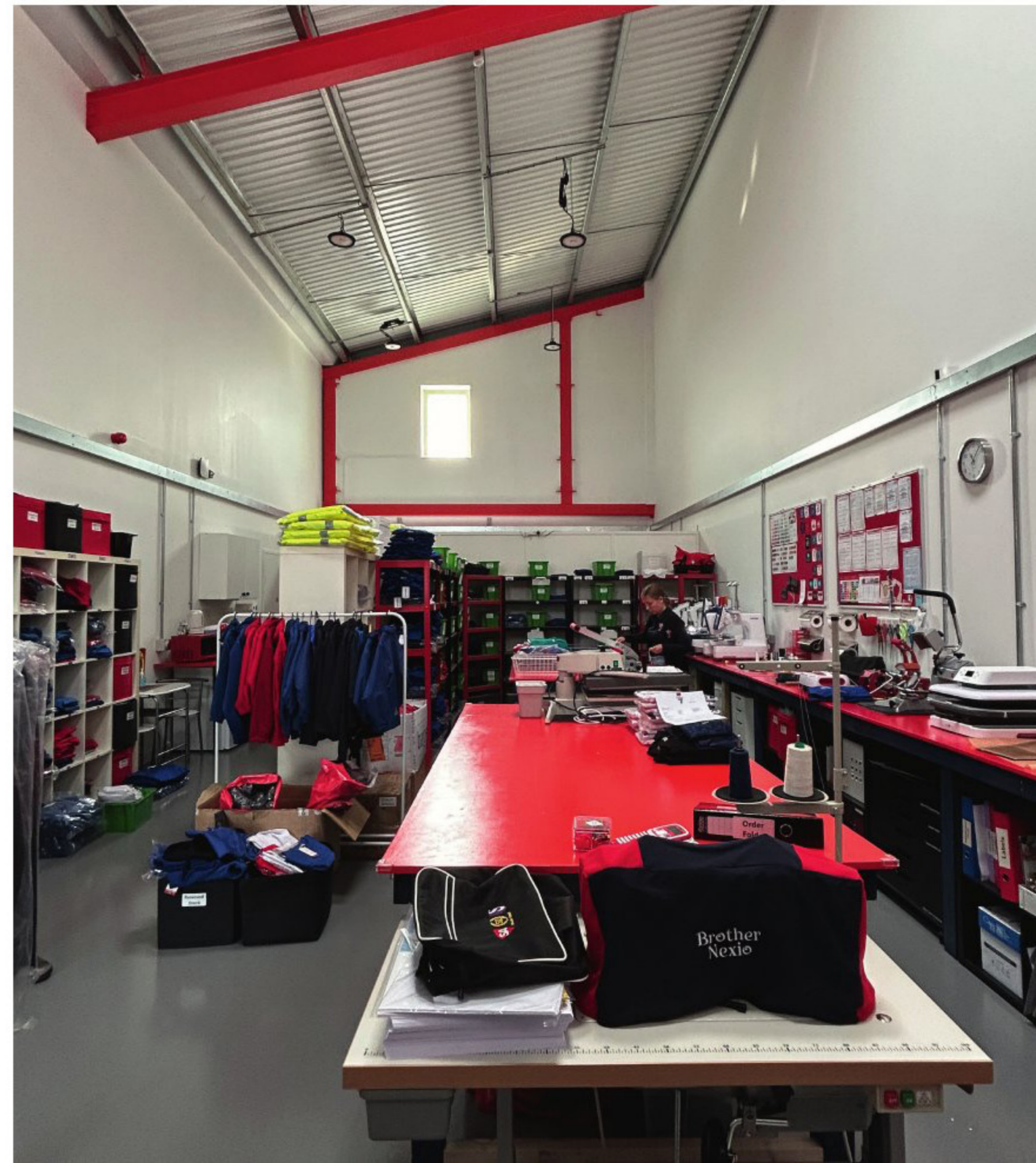
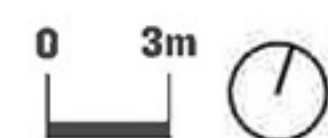


first floor



ground floor plan

- 1 entrance
- 2 café
- 3 management office
- 4 shower
- 5 business units
- 6 public toilets
- 7 market and event space
- 8 bus shelter
- 9 shared tea point
- 10 meeting room
- 11 hot-desking room



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'Two winters in, the pattern is of businesses growing, with several having gone into small units and expanded into bigger ones'

The market and event space at the scheme's western end is core to Sunspot's community programming (opposite top). It hosts a weekly car boot sale that was already taking place on the kerb where Sunspot now stands, providing cover. The space opens up on three sides (below), with views onto a community garden, and Brooklands, further down the road (opposite bottom)

required by the tenant. 'Not everyone needs it,' says Kalbfell. 'And if you don't need it, you don't pay for it.'

Jaywick is a resilient community. On a blustery January morning this year, the car boot sale is in full swing in the market space, with the beach-facing shutters pulled close to block out the icy North Sea wind. Inside, the bunting is up, and a space heater hums in the corner. At the other end of the building, the café is nearly full. 'The thought that keeps returning when I see all the people in there,' says Lister, 'is where did they go before?' The first summer was busier still, with a noticeable uptick in beachgoers coming in from neighbouring areas. Public toilets were previously tucked behind a curtain shop in Grasslands - 'you wouldn't know unless you lived here,' says Lister - and were frequently shut. Sunspot's accessible toilets, by contrast, face the beach and are clearly signposted.

While her work on Sunspot is done,

Kalbfell has returned to Jaywick over the past 18 months, often walking her dog along the sands. Eyeing a new set of curtains or fresh signage, she will know that another tenant has moved in and personalised their unit. 'I love that,' she says. 'It's not precious. The building is there to be owned by the businesses.' Soon, she will continue work on the place plan with the HAT team: £126 million of government funding was secured at the end of last year to carry out its next phases. This will involve, among other things, raising the seawall to protect Jaywick from flood risk that will only worsen in the coming half-century.

Nearer in time, Lister is planning a community day during school summer holidays, including live music in Sunspot's market space and a sandcastle competition on the beach. He hopes Kalbfell will join as a judge to assess the castles on their architectural merit and, he laughs, 'do some snagging'.



MADDIE PERSENT

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MADDIE PERSENT



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As part of its work on Sunspot and a wider 'place plan' for Jaywick, HAT designed a community garden – its furniture was constructed with residents in a workshop organised by the client, Tendring District Council



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