

Locale: Grange Pavilion

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A few minutes’ walk west, away from Central Square you enter Grangetown – Cardiff’s largest electoral ward and Wales’s most ethnically diverse one. The cacophony of construction work in the city centre, visible from the edges of the River Taff, is replaced with insistent rows of terraced houses built in the late nineteenth century and relieved by Grange Gardens, a modest Victorian park where a new community centre has been built. The Grange Pavilion is the result of an ongoing process that began in 2012, a process that is perhaps more important than the building itself as a model of long-term collaboration and co-design.

Originating in ‘a chat at a bus stop’, which led to the establishment of a residents’ group, the Grange Pavilion Project was later joined by Community Gateway, an academic initiative of Cardiff University to develop links and partnerships beyond their walls, through ‘academic lead’, Mhairi McVicar. Over the next few years, a series of ‘vertical studios’ took place where students from the Welsh School of Architecture (WSA) engaged in open-ended events and initiatives ‘gathering stories to help

gather community’.⁸ There was no formally defined client, an agreed site or defined programme – no building, as such, to design. Instead, a longer, more patient, open-process of ‘co-production’ and ‘appreciative inquiry’ evolved. ‘Love Grangetown’ workshops and ‘Ideas’ Picnics’, with free tea and cake, captured thoughts, dreams and fears; follow-up interviews by student ‘community researchers’ explored these in more depth. By 2016, Cardiff University as ‘asset guardian’ negotiated a one-year lease for a former bowls pavilion in Grange Gardens, launching it as a potential community venue, spending £30,000 on refurbishment to bring it into use. In parallel, plans for a more ambitious new-build project were being developed, assisted by Big Lottery Funding and other major social grant funding charities and institutions. In 2017, a second successful Lottery bid helped secure enough money to fund the new building and, two further years later, a Community Asset Transfer took place as the university took on a 99-year lease for the pavilion, allowing construction work to begin.



This lengthy process created more than just the beginnings of a new building. It had established community relationships, initiatives and momentum. Everyone involved had invested hours of their time alongside full-time jobs and commitments to their families. As a result, a professional team of Dan Benham Architects with IBI Group was appointed to work with the community to develop the proposals. They were interviewed, with two other practices, through a short teaching project with the WSA and community members to ensure they were a good fit.

The resultant building occupies the south-west corner of the Grange Gardens, defining a space around the former bowling green, effectively the two walls of a walled garden. A crisply detailed roof zig-zags above a red brickwork base separating it from the rest of the gardens and nearby Victorian bandstand. A rusty metal screen slides back to reveal a gap between these brickwork walls and forms the entrance to the pavilion, past an out-of-hours window serving takeaway drinks and snacks. Entering



Hannah Theron

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Axonometric view from south west



Floor plan



Key to floor plan

- 1 Flexible multi-use space
- 2 Kitchen
- 3 Office
- 4 Café
- 5 Kitchen with outdoor counter
- 6 Store
- 7 Classroom
- 8 Garden store
- 9 Outdoor covered flexible space



the building at this corner of the L-shape, brings you into a large lobby space that doubles as a cafe and seating area with diagonal views to the square garden beyond. To the left is a large activity space, two others being accessible from a glazed corridor which overlooks the garden. These three spaces, together with the lobby and garden host a busy weekly programme of activities encompassing adult learning, dance, yoga, singing, youth groups, sewing clubs, lessons, playgroups, karate, netball and a local market. It provides a single location for the multiple, often compartmentalised communities of Grangetown to co-exist.

The internal spaces gather around the retained sunken bowling green lawn, which is lined with raised planters and fruit tree pots (avoiding contaminated ground conditions) together with SuDS beds (which also appear in surrounding streets as part of a council initiative, Greener Grangetown). More rusty metal screens, this time decorated with laser-cut swirling patterns slide back to open up one corner of the building to provide a covered, unheated shelter for tools and storage.

The walled garden form of the building is somewhat defensive in nature, creating a secure physical barrier from the gardens beyond. This allows it to be more open on the bowling green side, where large sliding glazed openings ensure a close connection between outside and

inside, assisted by a deep, near industrial, storey-high steel truss that avoids the need for any intermediate columns on the glazed facade line. The steelwork reappears in most of the spaces, which extend to the zig-zag roof lined with acoustically absorbent finishes punctuated with rooflights, and are intertwined with galvanised cable trays – all wrestling with the spatial layout. Accordingly, the spaces lack some resolution, creating unresolved junctions and juxtapositions, though this is perhaps no bad thing, permitting users to take control of the building for themselves, unafraid to pin something up or make changes that would be intimidating in a more orderly environment.

The project builds on what is already there: Grange Gardens was established, a bowling green and pavilion created and now the Grange Pavilion. This continuity refreshes and evolves the locale, enabled by a long-term commitment from the centre – Cardiff University. While McVicar is clearly a key player in this latest phase, its authorship is ultimately collective and the ‘double cut’ of benefits mutual: the community can tap into the resources, expertise and long-term stability of the university as a partner; the university can engage with the local community and fulfil directions from the Welsh Government; while students, educators and researchers are embedded in very real and worthwhile pedagogical and research experiences.

Credits: Grange Pavilion

- Architects: Benham Architects and IBI Group
- Cost consultant: Mott MacDonald
- Structural engineer: Mann Williams
- Services engineer: Holloway Partnership
- Landscape architect: The Urbanists
- Town planning consultant: CDF Planning
- Project management: Mott MacDonald
- Student involvement: Cardiff University – Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff Business School
- Community consultation: Cardiff University Community Gateway
- Contractor: BECT Building Contractors
- Business development: Development Trust Wales

Funders and supporters:

- Big Lottery Fund, Welsh Government, Garfield Weston Foundation, Enabling Natural Resources and Well-being, The Moondance Foundation, The Clothworkers' Foundation, Higher Education Funding Council Wales, Cardiff University, Cardiff Bay Rotary, Wales & West Housing Association, Lloyds Bank Foundation, Asda, IKEA, GoCompare, Colin Laver Heating, RSPB Cymru, Taff Housing Association, Cardiff and Vale College, and individual donations and volunteers



- 1 The L-shaped pavilion makes effectively two walls of a walled garden creating a protected and overseen space.
- 2 Crisply detailed zig zag roofs float above a largely transparent ground floor defining the space round the sunken former bowling green.
- 3 Corten sliding metal screens enclose a covered unheated shelter for tools and storage.
- 4 Former bowls pavilion converted in first phase but eventually replaced by new Grange Pavilion.
- 5 The public park-side approach.

Photos: Kyle Pearce Photography