



↑ Large windows link activities inside with the surrounding community, which has a high density of social housing.

↓ The timber structure's raw aesthetic reflects cost-saving solutions.





## New generation centre, London

Despite the odds, this design-and-build project for a youth and community centre by **RCKa** is a resounding success.

🇬🇧 UNITED KINGDOM — TEXT: CORDULA ZEIDLER, PHOTOGRAPHY: IOANA MARINESCU, JAKOB SPIESTERSBACH

RCKa's new youth and community centre isn't just a good piece of architecture. Yes, RCKa have created something beautiful with a small budget; a successful building put together rather simply with a timber frame and polycarbonate cladding is an achievement worth celebrating. But the most impressive thing about the building becomes clear when Dieter Kleiner, director at RCKa, and I meet the local youth worker who helps managing the centre. Shaun Sutar from Lewisham Council takes us through the activities. They cover it all, from baby groups to professional table tennis training, and from boxing fitness for teenagers to films for the local senior group. The building

has an auditorium, a professional training kitchen, a consultation room with medical equipment, a climbing frame, an outdoor games area and much adaptable space. Sutar has counted 270 people in the building at peak times, and very enthusiastically states that it is a success.

The building came into being almost against the odds. Funding had to be secured from central government, via a last-minute bid that left RCKa with only six weeks to get stakeholders on board and pull together a scheme that was good enough to be given €4.2 million in public money. Agreeing on the venue and getting the green light from the client, Lewisham Council, had taken time.

The building sits at the edges of Lewisham, in what at first sight appears as an idyllic spot. Here is a rolling suburban south London landscape, with parks and long views, apparently remote from urban pressures. But the site was carefully chosen. It is 'gang neutral', the architect explains, but also has a high density of social housing.

The funding bid went through and, as Kleiner explains, this is when proper design work and programming began. The list of those involved is 30-odd long and includes the neighbouring church, the health service, the local Conservation Area Group, and most importantly, the young people in the area. In the beginning

they were cynical, says Kleiner. A new building, worth millions, just for them? Surely, this would never happen. But it did, and the teenagers involved began to be drawn in. They became very clear about what was needed here; not just sports facilities, but also a sexual health clinic and a proper training programme.

Given such a multi-headed client body, it is a great testament to RCKa's skill that the building holds together as a piece of design. There are consistent themes that work well and make it a joy to explore the building. The reception area and the more flexible spaces tend to be double- or even triple-height, and give a feeling of spaciousness on a limited ▶

**'Given such a multi-headed client body... the building still holds together as a piece of design.'**

**(New generation centre, London)**

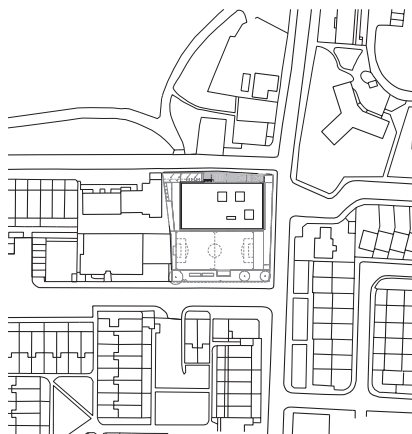
footprint. There are also views in and out of each room via panoramic windows; this means the building feels busy, and there is a sense of security. The aesthetic is raw, with most of the structure exposed, simple signage being almost the sole ornament.

It is perhaps surprising that this is a design-and-build project, where the architect was reduced to the role of a subcontractor to the builder when construction began. And, in the eyes of the architect, some corners were cut: the handrail isn't as elegant as it should have been, and the exposed timber structure has an inappropriate finish. Interestingly, however, the process also resulted in some very good design solutions. Money was short, and costs had to be saved, so the planned beautiful pendant lights in the main space were substituted with industrial strip lights on a simple frame, which nicely reflect the grid of the structure.

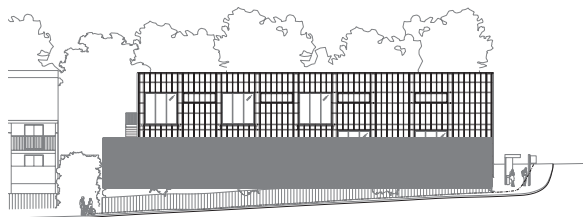
It is hard to find fault with the design of this building, and it is uplifting to see the enjoyment of those who use it. But there is a potential dark cloud on the horizon. When I leave, Kleiner has a meeting with Lewisham's fundraising officer; whilst this building was fully funded from public monies, its upkeep and maintenance will be a juggling act. Lewisham Council, like all local authorities in the UK, has seen its funding cut, and it seems that it will fall more and more in the hands of charities and the private sector to take on responsibility for projects such as this one. Hopefully, the civic and public spirit that created the centre will survive these pressures. ◀

**'THE NEW GENERATION' YOUTH AND COMMUNITY CENTRE, 2012 - 2013**

Architect RCKa  
 Established 2008  
 Client Lewisham Council, Myplace  
 Address 111 Wells Park Road, London  
 Info www.rcka.co



↑ Situation ↓ East elevation



↓ North elevation



↑↑ Flexible double- and triple-height areas give the building a feeling of spaciousness on a limited footprint.



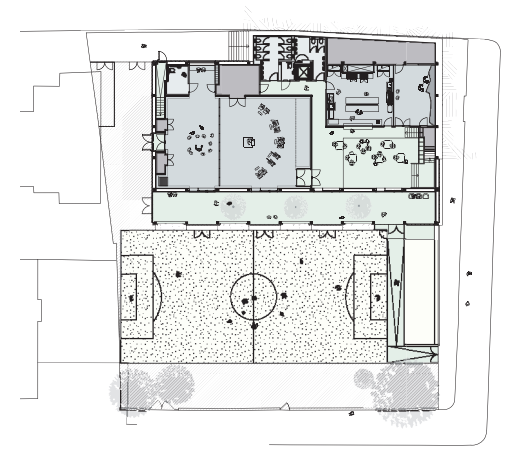
↓ Section



↓ Section



↓ Lower-ground floor



**FACTS & FIGURES**

Nearly half of Europe's young people live in households experiencing some form of deprivation, with 27% at moderate levels and 22% experiencing serious deprivation.

England and Wales have particularly high rates of youth custody, second in absolute number only to Turkey in Europe.

The New Generation Youth and Community Centre in Lewisham is a member of LondonYouth, a network of 400 community youth organizations supporting young people in neighbourhoods across London.