

The Ladywell Commons - RUSS Bid to Restore the Playtower

About us

RUSS (Rural Urban Synthesis Society) is a Lewisham-based, volunteer-led Community Land Trust established in 2009 to create socially, environmentally and economically sustainable neighbourhoods and permanently affordable homes. We believe local people should have a genuine role in shaping, delivering and managing the places around them, and that important community assets should be protected for future generations.

That is why we have bid for the Ladywell Playtower: we want to bring this much-loved landmark back to life and secure it in community stewardship in perpetuity, creating a place that belongs to and benefits the whole community.

We know how difficult ambitious community-led development can be. In 2024, after a 15-year journey, RUSS completed 36 permanently affordable homes at 12 Church Grove in Lewisham – London’s largest community-led, 100% affordable housing scheme – alongside the RUSS Community Hub. Delivering Church Grove required RUSS to assemble land, grants, borrowing and other finance; manage a complex capital development; work closely with Lewisham Council and professional advisers; and remain committed to the original community vision over many years. That experience is directly relevant to the Playtower: we understand both the financial realities of delivering a major community asset and the persistence required to see a complex project through.

We have brought together a partnership with the skills and experience needed to do it again, at a larger scale. Our anchor and delivery partners include London Early Years Foundation (LEYF), Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency (GCDA), St Mary the Virgin Church, Community Sauna Baths, Public Works and J49, supported by an experienced professional team covering architecture, planning, heritage, sustainability, social enterprise, finance and fundraising. The business plan and operating model have been developed by RUSS Playtower Project Manager Sydney Thornbury, drawing on more than 20 years’ experience leading and fundraising for cultural organisations and running venues including the Conservatoire in Blackheath, the Mansion at Beckenham Place Park and The Art House in Wakefield.

The Playtower will require a substantial programme of fundraising and finance, and we have built that expertise into the project from the outset. RUSS has commissioned Achates, one of the UK’s leading cultural and heritage fundraising consultancies, to work alongside us on the capital campaign; its Director, Caroline McCormick, brings 25 years’ experience across more than 100 multi-million-pound cultural capital projects. Achates will work with us over three years on the fundraising strategy, case for support, funder pipeline and major applications, alongside Sydney Thornbury and a fundraising-focused board and development committee.

Together, RUSS’s track record of delivering community-owned capital projects, our partners’ specialist expertise and our experience of fundraising and finance give us the foundations to take on the challenge of restoring the Playtower – and to keep it working for Ladywell for generations to come.

Restoring a building designed for separation as a place for connection.

Our vision for connection has shaped the design itself. Where the historic Playtower separated people by class, we want the restored building to bring different people together. The magnificent Bathing Hall will remain one large space. Its roof, windows and galleries will be restored, original cast-iron balustrades reinstated and the rose window reopened. The building will become accessible, and the Playtower’s distinctive conical roof will return. At the heart of the design is our decision to retain the central green as public space. It becomes the place where the different parts of the Commons meet – connecting the Playtower, Coroner’s Court, Mortuary and neighbouring St Mary’s site.

Community benefit

We didn’t develop this proposal just to make these buildings look beautiful again. We wanted to use their restoration as an opportunity to create something transformative for our community – something that makes Ladywell greener and more beautiful, strengthens the local economy and, most importantly, creates new opportunities for people to connect, create and thrive.

Lewisham is a borough of enormous creativity and potential, but also real inequality. Within a 20-minute walk of the Playtower, 14% of neighbourhoods are among the 20% most deprived in the country, and almost a third are among the 30% most deprived. These communities sit side-by-side with some of Ladywell’s more affluent streets. People face barriers to employment and skills, inequalities in health and wellbeing, social isolation and a lack of affordable space in which to work, create and come together.

That is why our proposal brings so many different uses together. The Playtower Commons is designed to create connections and opportunities between people who might otherwise never meet – and to make sure the benefits of restoring this extraordinary building reach beyond its walls.

A centre for young people, skills and opportunity

Young people will be at the heart of the Playtower. Lewisham Youth Theatre will bring youth arts and creative activity to the site, while we will work with local schools, colleges and youth services to provide work experience, mentoring, careers activities and opportunities to help shape the Playtower itself. LEYF’s Nursery will provide places for 100 children a year and the Training Academy will support around 100 apprentices at any one time, creating routes into Early Years careers, alongside apprenticeships and training in construction and hospitality.

Creating local jobs and helping enterprise flourish

We will use the restoration itself to create opportunities, working with Lewisham Council to maximise local recruitment and providing construction apprenticeships and work experience. Once open, affordable studios and workspaces will help local artists, social enterprises and small businesses put down roots here rather than being priced out or having to leave the borough. The Playtower will also bring new footfall to this end of Ladywell, and we will work with existing local businesses so that they benefit from that increased activity.

Making Lewisham healthier and more connected

The Coroner’s Court, gardens and wider Commons will make opportunities to live well part of everyday life, through affordable yoga and movement, physiotherapy and osteopathy, gardening, saunas and Arts and Health programmes targeted at improving both physical and mental health. Our nursery and affordable homes for older people will create opportunities for different generations to spend time together, helping to tackle isolation and build stronger connections across ages and backgrounds.

Creating a greener place that everyone can enjoy

Instead of building on the large central green, we are keeping it for the community. Around 625 square metres of green space will be brought into active use, with community gardening, food growing, new planting and wildlife habitats, and a target of at least 10% biodiversity net gain. It will be somewhere to play, grow, learn, meet people or simply sit outside – without having to spend money.

A place that belongs to everyone

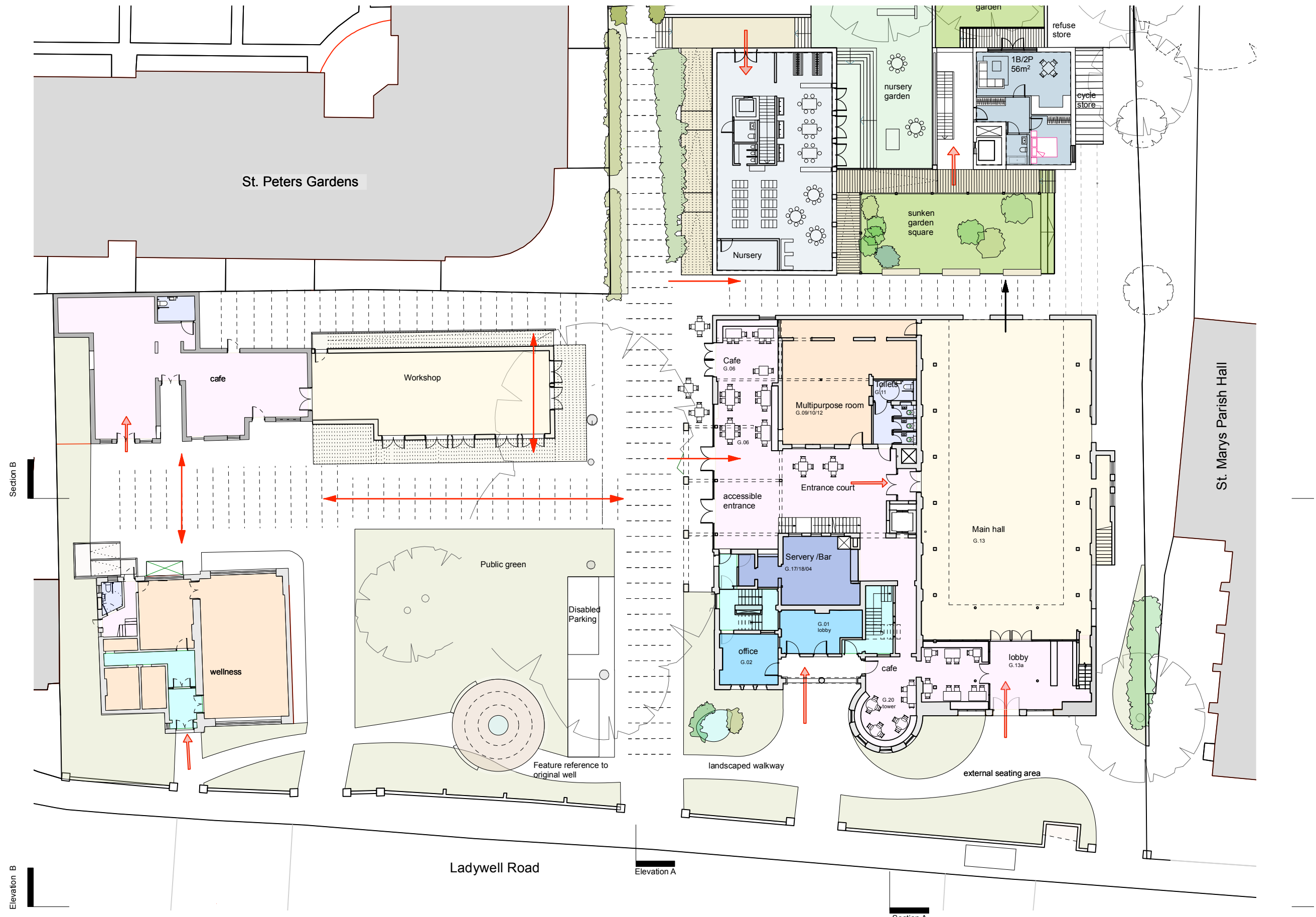
Perhaps most importantly, our proposal will keep the Playtower in community ownership in perpetuity, ensuring that this important local asset continues to serve the people of Ladywell for generations to come. It will be somewhere you can meet a friend for coffee, sit in the garden, work, volunteer, learn, exercise or simply spend time – but also somewhere the community can make its own: local people, groups and organisations will be able to hire the magnificent Bathing Hall for their own celebrations, performances, meetings and events. And behind all this activity, the Playtower will be a place of employment too, creating local jobs and opportunities across culture, hospitality, early years, health and wellbeing, creative enterprise and the running of the site itself.



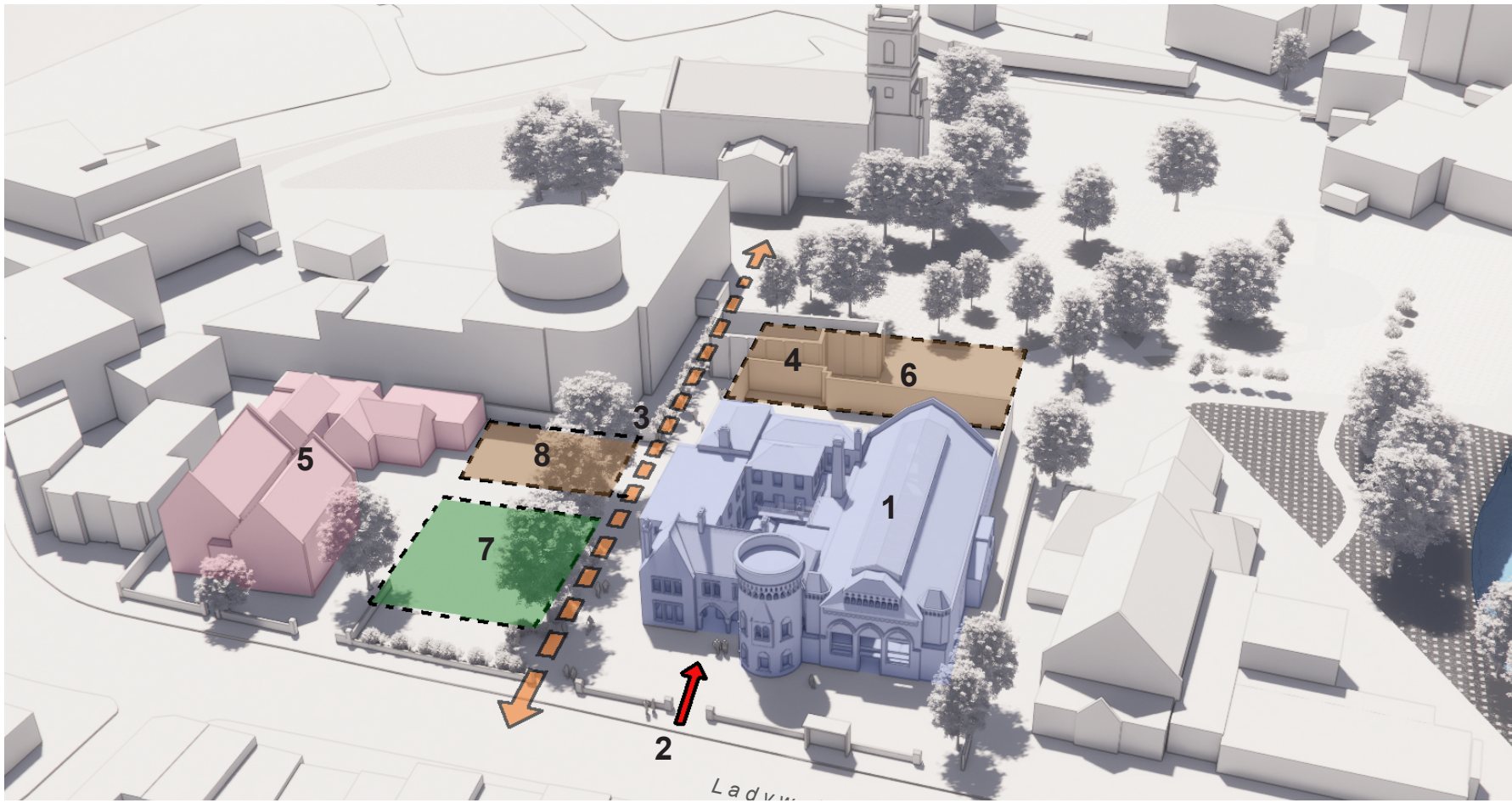
12 Church Grove-A community development by RUSS



Aerial view of site location



Proposed site plan for the Ladywell commons



Site opportunities

1. The full refurbishment and restoration of the Playtower for the benefit of the local community.
2. Ensuring the Playtower is accessible to all users.
3. Creating a new connection between Ladywell Road and St Mary's Church.
4. Creating a new nursery.
5. Transform the Coroner's Court and mortuary for use by the local community.
6. Providing new affordable (self-build) housing.
7. Reinstatement of the historical garden between the listed buildings incorporating a new fountain / water feature referencing the original well on the site.
8. New (self-build) workshops following use as community saunas.

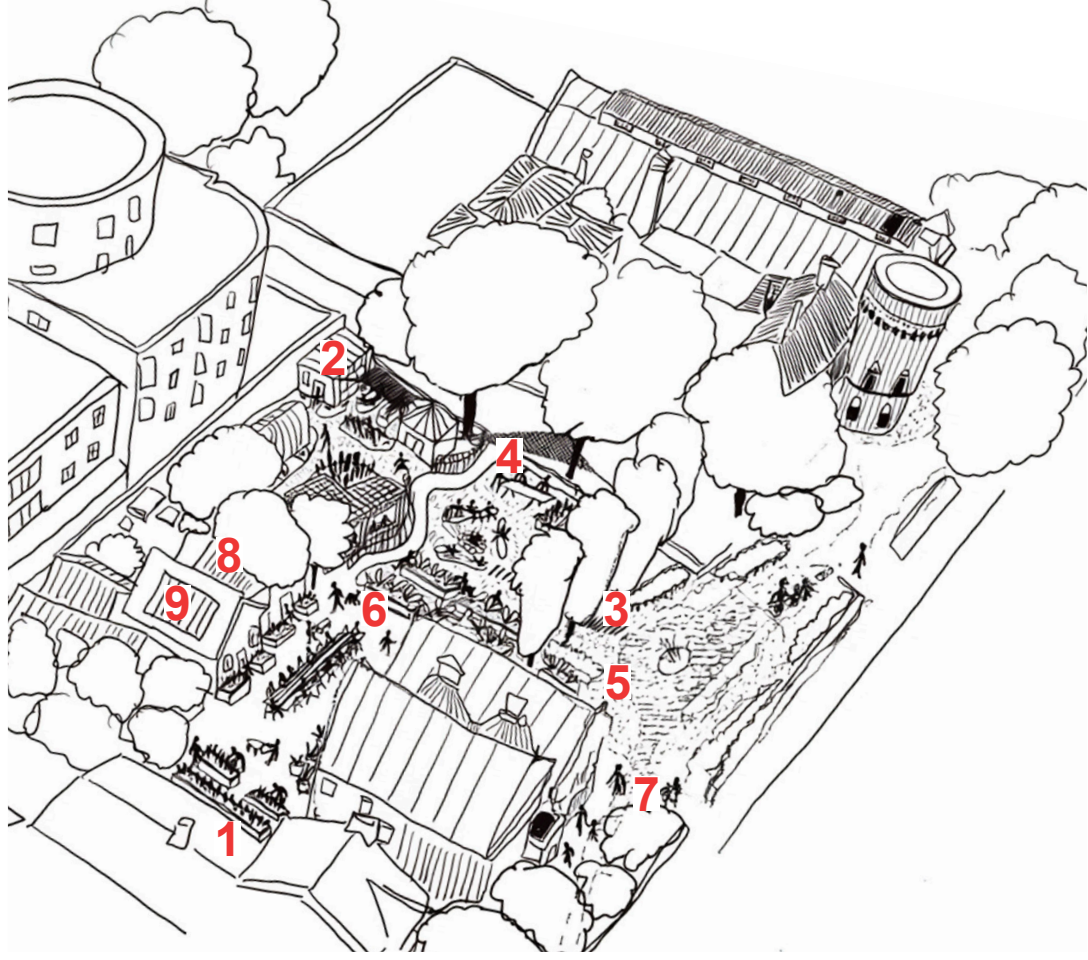


Aerial view of landscape proposals

1. Informal, Victoriana hedgerow with flowering arches to frontage - shrub roses, elderflower and camellias
2. Babbling fountain at footprint of historic well in centre of civic circle. Surrounded by seasonal, in-ground play fountains
3. Conifer and two large existing sycamores retained. Stumpiness (using removed tree material) with shady perennials and ferns
4. Community sauna and raised allotment beds
5. Species-rich green roofs with varied substrates and habitat elements
6. Sunken garden on site of former swimming pool: steps lead-down to trees, ferns, mosses and wet grasses, occasionally revealing tiling and original pool fittings
7. Edible corridor of soft fruits and espalier trees. Leading to a floral 'hychgate' framing access to the church-yard
8. Trailing climbers
9. Paving encroached by shady perennials and ferns, birch trees and honeysuckles with revealed playful elements
10. Shallow retention pond with reeds and lush marginal planting



Aerial view of proposals



Public Works proposals for the activation of the Playtower common



Aerial view of the proposed development



Proposed section looking West to the raised residential block and glazed courtyard leading to the first-class pool hall



Proposed Elevation looking West along the new connection to St Mary's Church