

The Ladywell Commons - RUSS Bid to Restore the Playtower

Overview of proposals

"Human flourishing is not a mechanical process; it's an organic process... All you can do, like a farmer, is create the conditions under which they will begin to flourish"
– Ken Robinson

The original 1884 vision behind the Ladywell Public Baths was to invest in community infrastructure that promoted health, leisure and dignity. Our proposal aims to bring that vision into the 21st Century by transforming the whole site into a multi-use community commons, shaped and owned by the people of Ladywell. A place to connect, create and thrive. We're calling it The Playtower Commons.

We want to create a sustainable neighbourhood for human flourishing. By human flourishing, we mean the tangible foundations people need to live well: secure housing, social connection, health, creative enterprise, and access to green public space. These essentials can no longer be taken for granted, so our proposal intentionally designs them in to create a new centre for the entire community that brings people from different ages and backgrounds together through the following uses:

A new gateway into Ladywell – Connecting the whole site into one civic campus

The Playtower, Coroner's Court, Mortuary, Village Green and neighbouring St Mary's site will work together as one connected civic campus – creating a welcoming new gateway into Ladywell and linking the site more closely with the village, churchyard and Ladywell Fields.

The Playtower – Ladywell's new public living room and event space

The restored Playtower will be somewhere to drop in as well as somewhere to attend an event: with a café and informal public "living room", affordable studios and workspaces, and the magnificent former Pool Hall transformed into a flexible space for performances, celebrations, classes, markets and community events.

Nursery and Affordable Housing – Bringing generations together

A new flagship LEYF nursery and Early Years Training Academy will provide places for more than 100 children and train around 100 apprentices at any one time. Above it, 11 affordable homes intended for older people will create opportunities for an intergenerational programme bringing children and older residents together.

A Village Green and the Ladywell Fountain – new public realm

A new Village Green will create much-needed public space for relaxing, meeting, community gardening, food growing, markets and events. New landscaping will include a water feature marking Ladywell's historic well and improved green connections through the site towards St Mary's and Ladywell Fields.

The Coroner's Court Comes Back to Life – Health, Wellbeing and Early Activation

We plan to bring the Coroner's Court and Mortuary back into use within the first year, with affordable health, wellbeing and creative activities including yoga and movement, therapy, osteopathy and physiotherapy, children's arts activities, and Arts and Health programmes. We will have outdoor saunas on the green and our partner Public Works will help animate the wider site with community gardening and micro-allotments, community meals and training, alongside an interim café run by GCDA.

Building Design and Restoration Approach

Our vision for connection and flourishing has shaped the design of the site itself. Where the historic layout of The Playtower was designed to separate people by class, we want the restored building to bring people together across backgrounds and generations. We have also connected the Playtower and the Coroner's Court directly with a path across the Green.

The magnificent First-Class Pool Hall will remain one large, open space, with its roof, windows and galleries restored, its original cast-iron balustrades reinstated and the rose window reopened. The building will be made accessible, with lifts added. The Playtower's distinctive original conical roof will return too, with a new public viewing gallery at the top giving people the chance to experience the tower – and views across Lewisham.

At the heart of the whole design is our decision to retain the large trees and keep the central green as open public space, and to reinstate the original fountain that paid tribute to the wells of Ladywell.

The Village Green becomes the place where the different parts of the Commons meet: connecting the Playtower with the Coroner's Court and Mortuary and creating opportunities for people of different ages and backgrounds to cross paths, spend time together and take part in community life.

From this new green heart, people will be able to enter the Playtower through a new and accessible main entrance to the side of the building, which opens into a glazed atrium connecting the café, the First-Class pool hall and upper floors, while new openings from the hall will allow life to flow between the building and gardens at the front and back.

Most of these changes take place in parts of the building with lesser historic significance, allowing us to protect and restore its most important historic fabric.

And the connections continue beyond the Playtower itself. New landscaped paths will lead people from the Playtower to St Mary's Hall and through the site from Ladywell Road, subject to the necessary permissions, to a new opening through the boundary wall into St Mary's churchyard and onwards towards Ladywell Fields.

So our restoration is about more than saving a beautiful historic building. It is about opening it up – connecting old and new, indoors and outdoors, the Playtower and its neighbours, and above all, people with one another.



The sunken garden



The Mortuary court



A walk to the accessible entrance and churchyard beyond



The Playtower – Ladywell's new public living room and event space



The fountain in the Common green



A new accessible entrance and cafe leading into the first-class pool hall



Cutaway axo through first-class pool hall



Aerial view of housing courtyard



Proposed section looking south at the workshop and mortuary and through the accessible entrance leading to the first-class pool hall

