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Growing needs: Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses in London, UK by Feilden Fowles

3 JULY 2023 | BY [HARRIET THORPE](#) | [BUILDINGS](#)



1/10 The Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses (BPCG) charity has operated within the Walled Garden south London park since 1998, running growing workshops for the local community. A new events space |

A new events space by Feilden Fowles in London's Brockwell Park enables a local horticultural community to expand its commercial and educational activities

Located between Brixton and Dulwich in the south London borough of Lambeth, Brockwell Park has, like many London parks, a social and environmental ecosystem, where the needs of plants and people are often competing. Yet, on a sunny spring Sunday, they appear to exist in a beautiful – albeit chaotic – equilibrium, with children criss-crossing pathways, friends and families sprawled on colourful picnic rugs, ducks bobbing in the pond, 2,000 trees enjoying the sunshine after weeks of rain: plants, animals and people of all ages convening.

It all feels like a utopian vision of 'peak park', yet British parks have changed over the centuries and continue to evolve. Two centuries ago, Brockwell Park was a quiet estate owned by a single person, John Blades, a glassmaker who lived in the late-Georgian Brockwell Hall, built 1811–13. After being acquired by the Metropolitan Board of Works, which later became the London County Council, Brockwell Park opened to the public in 1892 and Brockwell Hall became a café. More leisure facilities were established over the course of the 20th century. Brockwell Lido, for example, London's largest outdoor pool, opened in 1937. In 1998, the

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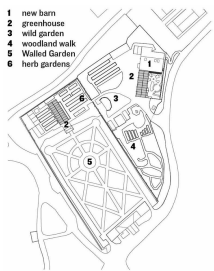
one-acre Walled Garden – which originally provided new plants for the Hall, then the park itself – was designated as a community growing space, set up as the Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses (BPCG) charity, promoting education about plants through learning, playing and growing.



The past twenty years have seen the Walled Garden blossom into a microcosm of native permaculture. Two greenhouses foster 12 tomato varieties, ornamental plants such as zinnias and nasturtiums; herbs, salads and vegetables grow in rotational beds; an orchard hosts medlar and quince trees, and goji, Worcesterberry and gooseberry bushes; there is a honey bee hive (with a rogue swarm waiting to colonise some unexpected vessel), new hotels for solitary bees and seasonal all-year flowering beds to keep them happy; composting 'kitchens'; a Piet-Oudolf-inspired bed of 'architectural plants' with sculptural seed heads, good for pollinating insects; and a gravel garden informed by Beth Chatto that, in anticipation of climate crisis-induced droughts, requires no irrigation.

This patch is not just a lifeline for pollinators, but for people too. It is a busy social hub committed to serving its community with school classes, family events, public workshops,

supper clubs and sunset gigs. Primary-school classes learn about the science of plants, teenagers visit for their Duke of Edinburgh Award, and therapeutic horticulture sessions welcome all ages with the oldest participant in their 80s. BPCG has a team of 200 volunteers, three part-time employees and eight trustees, a shop selling houseplants, chutneys and pestos, and magical seating spaces for visitors (74,000 in the past three years) that make them feel far away from London.



All of this activity, however, was hindered by the seasons. A lack of insulated space meant that programming and event hires had to be stripped back over the winter months, reducing the charity's social and commercial capacity. The buildings on-site – including a shipping container office, a timber volunteers' hut with a small kitchen for making tea, and two greenhouses – were certainly useful and used to their maximum capabilities, yet not functional or rain-proof enough to be commercially reliable. So, the charity made a business case for a new building and received funding from the Mayor of London, the London Economic Action Partnership, the Bernard Sunley Foundation and the Monument Trust.

Since late 2022, events can go ahead when when it is raining, because a new timber and steel-framed barn designed by Feilden Fowles has enabled the

charity's activities to happen all year around and scale up to reach even more people. The charity hosts school groups three days a week and is open for event hire four days a week.

The new barn is connected to one of the greenhouses (which was partly demolished to make space for it) and the volunteers' hut, creating a little complex of spaces within the garden. The new building takes the form of a simple section extruded and supported by an exposed steel portal frame informed by agriculturally sized spans of shelter, with a corrugated-iron roof. The double-height interior space is split into two: a teaching kitchen connected to one of the greenhouses, and a daylight-filled event space overlooking the garden, separated by a flexible timber wall with a hatch, enabling them to operate independently or together. This also maximises commercial opportunity. Crucially, plenty of storage and practical back-of-house facilities support BPCG's functions. A new, accessible, covered entrance improves the inclusiveness of all activities, enabling a safe and welcoming route into the main activity space for all.

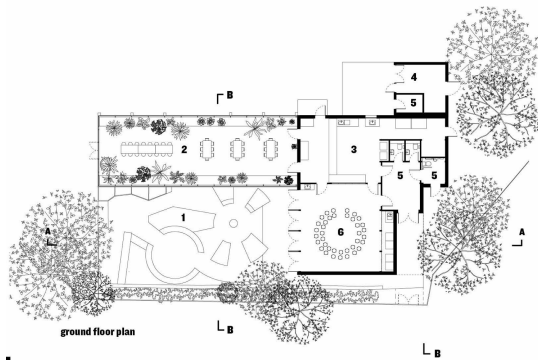
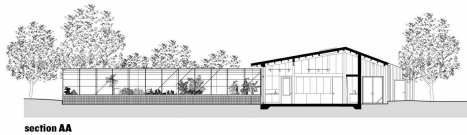
‘Carefully
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'I've always seen it as a piece of infrastructure rather than a building,' says architect Fergus Feilden. 'When you provide that within or near to parks, people will always colonise it and use it in unexpected ways.' This infrastructure offers the conditions for the function of the charity and its activities; finishes are 'crude' and 'unveiled' because budget was put instead towards the generous expanse of power-floated concrete floor, where activities will play out. What it lacks in refinement, it makes up for in the endless potential of adaptability and evolution.

Future growth was very much designed into the barn, and was even part of the design process. Standardised components such as the sheet materials reduce costs and allow for flexible future replacement. Materials changed as discoveries were made on site and new ideas input by the BPCG team; originally, the barn was going to be clad in corrugated metal, for example, but timber was eventually chosen for its environmental credentials and softer material qualities. Space was also made for the future installation of solar panels and rainwater collection systems. 'It's always the case with low-cost community projects that things are forever evolving,' says Feilden.

Feilden Fowles is an expert in the 'urban barn' typology for the community sector, since building and operating its own such space in London's Waterloo since 2017. The site consists of an office, farm and events barn, built in collaboration with local

charity Oasis, which runs the Waterloo City Farm. Their events barn was initially just a roof frame, then slowly came later additions: an enclosing wall, an insulated classroom, a bar and extra storage.



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Waterloo City Farm is a curious juxtaposition with the high-rise buildings and a railway bridge leading into London's busiest station, its rural informality pitted against the powerful sense of order and rhythm of its surroundings. Unlike other urban sites in London, the BPCG site calls for a similar ad hoc approach, and the barn co-exists comfortably with other accumulated structures – the timber volunteers' hut with a tiny kitchen (previously the only kitchen on-site) which it adjoins; the shipping container office; the garden shed-style shop, the raised beds and storage sheds. Both urban barns are classed as 'temporary' by local planning authorities; BPCG's barn has a 20-year lease, which is almost certain to be extended, and Waterloo City Farm's

‘meanwhile use’ lease expires this year.

Feilden Fowles is currently working on other urban garden projects across London: there is a garden renovation for the Natural History Museum, for example, which will open up a previously inaccessible outdoor space into an exhibition of native plants through time. This will connect to the Tube exit and might see the museum’s 5.5 million annual visitors passing through it – hence it will be necessarily robust. At the Horniman Museum and Gardens in south London, a vastly different topography with a 30m difference in height across its grounds, Feilden Fowles is exploring ideas including accessibility, climate resilience and sustainable gardening. In both projects, Feilden Fowles is working in collaboration with landscape architects J&L Gibbons.

As London approaches the status of megacity (with a population of more than 10 million), and continues to face the multiple 21st-century challenges associated with the climate crisis and social inequality, parks and green spaces are increasingly valuable to its inhabitants’ education and well-being. Feilden believes that carefully and selectively adding new buildings or retrofitting unused or inefficiently used ones in parks is crucial to their success and survival as community assets. ‘London has so many parks, and the more they are used and loved, with people taking community ownership of them, the better.’

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