

## Bere Essentials

**North London's Bere Architects are at the forefront of the UK's Passivhaus rush, continuing to push at the boundaries of the Passiv agenda. But what makes founder Justin Bere run?**

Sometime in mid 2006, a young architectural assistant happened to turn to his employer, Justin Bere, and remark how similar the detailing on which he was working on-screen, was to the well established continental Passivhaus approach to air-tight building design. Bere, who has had a life-long passion for low energy building, listened as the young Tobias Schaffrin, from Germany, continued. There are literally hundreds of architects working on similar projects across Europe, said Schaffrin, showing Bere examples found on the web. Bere was stunned. "I thought, - this is incredible!" Incredible as he had spent literally years aspiring to such a rigorous low energy 'Fabric First' approach. Schaffrin, almost inadvertently, had set him on a search enabling him to understand Passivhaus more fully; which has resulted in him becoming one of the most ardent Passivhaus advocates in the UK.

Focus House, the project they were working on at the time, was the second of two experimental homes where Bere had committed much intellectual and practical effort to drawing down the building energy footprint as far as he could. And it was only once he discovered Passivhaus, that a fully thought through system providing credible answers to these low to no energy questions, presented themselves. Not surprisingly, he wanted to find out as much as he could.



The Muse, Bere Architects leafy head quarters off Newington Green, North London  
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Towards Passivhaus - Focus House (2004)

The first opportunity for Bere to get an up close overview was at the International Passivhaus Association next conference, timetabled for late spring 2007 in the small Austrian town of Bregenz, at the eastern end of Lake Constance. Bregenz contains less than 30 000 people, but in the story of continental sustainable architecture, it plays something of a starring role. As county town of Austria's Western Vorarlberg land or state, Bregenz was one of the main urban centres in which an avant eco-building and architecture community had developed from the late seventies onwards. This included some of the early Passivhaus buildings, built mainly through EU Cepheus funding in the nineties. The Energie Institute, to the conference, had developed an impressive portfolio of research, training, courses, support for residential and ongoing retrofit programmes since opening in 1986 in Dornbirn, Vorarlberg's second town. The state's building regulations were also embedding Passivhaus criteria into the standards new buildings were to attain; so that by the time Bere arrived at the conference, Passivhaus was a commonplace for the lively regional architectural and building culture. (for an in-depth look at Vorarlberg eco-building culture see [Fourth Door Review 8](#))

Not surprisingly the conference host laid on tours for its guests including some of the stand-out Passivhaus project examples. For instance one of the best known Vorarlberg sustainable practices, Hermann Kaufmann's Olzbundt

social housing project. The British contingent was minuscule, 13 in all, apparently; a lack for which Bere would excoriate the UK sustainable architecture scene, in a post conference report in [EcoTech magazine](#).

For Bere the experience seems to have been nothing short of architectural revelation. In Vorarlberg he saw a building and architectural culture in which Passivhaus was completely developed. "I was amazed. It was just so exciting," he says now. It was also where he discovered the AECB (read [Unstructured Sitelines AECB and Passivhaus history story](#)) and made contact with Germany's Passivhaus Institute. "I talked with the AECB's Liz Reason and also ordered the PHPP programming, and began investigating how to use it." The following winter he returned to Vorarlberg for 10 days, and undertook a tour of Passiv-buildings in the region; including Hermann Kaufmann's Ludesch Community Centre, and also paid the Kaufmann practice a visit, enjoying a half-day in the studio learning about their work. "Kaufmann was very encouraging, nice and friendly." (See [Kaufmann Country](#) piece from [Fourth Door Review 8](#) for the full story on Hermann Kaufmann)



Compare and contrast: A Passivhaus project from Hermann Kaufmann Arkitekten and Bere Architects Camden House, (Photo 1 - Hermann Kaufmann Bureau)



It does not seem contentious to say that for Bere Passivhaus was a turning point, and given that his first real contact was in Bregenz, Vorarlberg has been a significant influence on his architectural development. In the period since the Bregenz conference Bere has emerged as the most passionate Passivhaus evangelist working from within London's hothouse architectural scene. And as he began to fully assimilate the implications of the Passivhaus approach, the practices work took on the new passive informed direction as soon as the first project was available. He has been an assiduous promoter in Britain, and because of his London base, and arguably his connections, he has helped spark interest, which wouldn't perhaps have come so quickly, were he to have chosen a different career years earlier. \* Bere was instrumental in organising Wolfgang Feist's 2008 visit and talks, and also in helping set up the first UK Passivhaus conference in October 2010. His first Passivhaus project, Camden House, as the bijou residence is slightly misleadingly called (given most in London associate Camden as one of the boroughs most 'right on' progressive parts of the capital) is a home for an adult daughter, apparently paid for completely by the parents in one of the more exclusive, leafy parts of North London. Since Camden House was completed in 2010, Bere has also completed two further Passivhaus projects, both of which demonstrate its potential for Everyman: the Mayville Community Centre, a retrofit of a down at heel centre, a stone's throw from the practice's Newington Green studio, and the Welsh Passivhaus experimental houses, Larch and Lime House. While further social housing projects are on the practice's books, including a [Retrofit for the Future research project](#) Bere and his young, enthusiastic and well-spoken staff are also working on a number of very upmarket houses for further wealthy clients.

The above demonstrates is a noticeable aspect of how Bere is an oddity in the architectural world, not easily slotting into any of the profession's obvious archetypes. Passionate to the point of obsession about sustainability in architecture, he is respected by others for the transparency of his beliefs, his sincerity, and for speaking his mind regarding environmental issues; while also at times, perhaps, seeming something of an innocent in his hopes and enthusiasms. His environmental conscience began, he



Camden House

initially one might place Bere. Unlike [SimmondsMills](#), or for that matter, [Archtype](#) in the former context, or [Sarah Wigglesworth](#) or [Edward Cullinan](#) in the latter, Bere doesn't give the impression of any default umbilical connection between environmental issues and those of the social sphere. The moral energy he brings to his work, seems consumed by the emotional and intellectual weight of the unfolding ecological disaster towards which the world is drifting. It finds expression in a species of certainty, which can be both admirable and at times, simultaneously offputting.



Focus House

During a day discussing his discovery of Passivhaus at the Studio, I also listened as Bere outlined his biographical story, one which I couldn't help thinking provides clues as to where this idiosyncratic quest-like certainty came from. This included an account of growing up in Kenya, where his father headed up a proto-Ordinance Survey unit charged with mapping all of East Africa, before Bere senior took on Northern Ireland as the next field of his cartographic focus. When he left the Northern Irish public school where he'd been sent on arriving in Northern Ireland, the younger Bere was awarded an end of school prize; a book token, which he opted to exchange for [Robert and Brenda Vale's](#) eighties solar architecture tome, *The Autonomous House Book*. Soon after, he moved to Britain, passing a three year spell working and a period of what he describes as 'independent study'. Work included jobs on boats, driving vans, restoration and some time in a factory ("so I could learn about trade unions.") After Northern Ireland, he found people in London and on the mainland, "completely and utterly complacent". Eventually he turned to architecture, signing up to Canterbury in the late 80's; but architecture school wasn't quite what he'd expected. "It was just like going back to school." Worse perhaps. Fascinated by underground earth buildings, he developed an underground earth building design for his end of first year project. It was taken apart by a disapproving tutor, whose pronouncement that he never wanted to see Bere design an

underground house again, precipitated departure. After another year of one short term job after another, he attempted, unsuccessfully, to get into the AA and [Ted Happold's Bath architecture and engineering school](#), as he didn't have the funds for the former or the maths for the latter.

By this time his parents were living in a farmhouse in the Quantock Hills, Somerset. Noticing the coldness of the house while visiting, what Bere describes his father's belief that central heating should not be considered, or if it was, only as a "decadent" choice. Researching alternatives, Bere found and ordered a wood-burning boiler. The subsequent winter was spent walking the nearby woods searching for fallen wood for fuel. "This is where most architects are at today," he observes, while recalling that during this time - and maybe up to this day - an early dream returned recurrently: to knock down the farm-house and build a new underground house. Deciding to give Canterbury another try, he returned in the new autumn term, this time meeting people with whom he shared common perspectives; including a tutor, David Porter, who focused his mind on architectural and design approaches while addressing buildings and their circulation. This time Bere stayed, even continuing on to do a Masters.

On leaving Canterbury, he got a job with, [Martin Richardson](#), then working in the West Country who, according to Bere, persuaded him to try returning to London and enter a larger practice. Which is what he did, initially at [StantonWilliams](#) and then through the early part of the nineties, at [Michael Hopkins](#).

The time at these two London practices presents the beginning of a new chapter in Bere's architectural journey. For the first time he was working within the heart of the British architectural world. It sounds as if he arrived fresh-faced, and within a few days met another young architect, with a parallel passion for sustainability: [Bill Dunster](#). There was a flash of like-minded recognition. Dunster was Hopkins' best card into the new world of sustainability that, as some in the practice already sensed, was on its way. Bere arrived around the turn of the nineties decade; and their shared tenure covered the middle of Dunster's fifteen years - he having joined in the mid eighties. He would eventually leave in 1999, after seeing through project managing the completion of the [Jubilee campus](#) (at Nottingham University, probably the best known of Hopkins eco-hued projects; helping Dunster on his way to setting up Zed Factory and BedZED. Bere used to go to supper with Dunster and his wife, Sue, and says he, Bere, introduced and educated the two of them into organic food. "Sue would cook me organic chicken." Architecturally they bonded over Robert and Brenda Vale's solar architecture, "Bill was very into using the sun as much as possible, and topping up the energy needs with biomass. But he didn't have the benefit of my experience in the country in Somerset." They also started and briefly ran a company together, Eco ID selling ecological building materials.

If Dunster's projects were leading towards greater things, the same could not really be said of Bere. He worked on a number of projects in the Hopkins office, but none of them got further than the drawing board. The longer he was there, the deeper entangled he became with practice politics, leading to frustration and thoughts of leaving. This eventually happened in the early naughties - he was vague about dates - when Bere resolved to try and make something of going it alone. Hopkins, he now acknowledges, also diverted him somewhat from his environmental focus and sense of mission. He became particularly interested in glass and its detailing; and his use of zinc and copper facades on the two early projects, his studio, what he called 'The Muse' and Focus House, feel as if they are a partial left over from Hopkins, a practice known for its refined detailing with tech materials.

In fact by the time Bere parted from Hopkins, he had already found a small strip of land stuck away at the back of Newington Green; and it was here, in between various jobs, that he began testing a whole set of ideas generated by sustainable building, which would eventually turn into The Muse. A core line of enquiry was the Muse's thick walls and insulation although not, at first, heat recovery. Bere had got to know the respected engineer, [Max Fordham](#). He had seen one of Fordham's buildings, within a school in Cheshire, which required very low amounts of heating. The building had been designed without any heating plant, he read in an AJ article, which claimed it worked pretty well, he recalls, apart from a certain stuffiness in the air. Curious he visited the school. Yes, the air certainly was stuffy, but the building was quite airtight, and was also triple glazed, and there was no heating plant. He made contact with Fordham, and entered into a dialogue with the engineer. Ideas for what he would do on the Newington Green plot of land had now progressed to a set of sketches, but the issue of heating flummoxed him. Looking over the sketches, Fordham asked him whether he'd heard of heat recovery units. Bere confessed he hadn't. "It's what you need," replied Fordham. "Where do I get one?", asked Bere, he himself was thinking along the lines of thick insulation in the walls along with triple glazing, integrated into his build. He did not yet know anything about the techniques of airtight design. "I'd just become aware of cold bridging but didn't know how to work with cold

says, early before his teenage years, and appears to have motivated him in studying the subject, although he recoils at the world of star or personality architecture. Yet he's also unlike almost every other architect I've come across within the leftfield sustainable architectural firmament, who, while carrying out public sector work does not push the architectural social dimension, nor that between the environmental and the social. This is quite a contrast to the small number of other pioneering practices which have gravitated towards Passivhaus, and the (mainly north)

London, network of progressive, left leaning, socially minded 'conscience' architects where



Wolfgang Feist explaining a finer Passiv point to the Bere Architecture team, summer 2008



The Muse from above





In profile - The Muse

bridging – no-one told us,” and was about to use a cavity wall, with perinsol, a foam-glass, dense structural insulation. A fabric first approach was emerging before his eyes. PV, he had become convinced, didn't contribute efficiently to lowering a building's energy footprint; and in order to save energy most effectively, he needed to concentrate on the fabric. A first step was planning out the site, beginning with brickworks 5 cm's thick. He was happy to be back involved in what he had believed in, in an earlier pre-Hopkins life. “It was an exercise, by myself, in what I thought I ought to be doing.” One by one, he eliminated parts of the design, which demanded too much energy, or conflicted with the rigorous energy levels he was committed to ensuring the building would reach. A degree of solar thermal was integrated while the boundary, he points out, is a wall half a metre thick. “It was thought a bit odd.” He could try out the kinds of experiments, however, which were not possible if he were being paid for the design by someone else.

The Muse stands off behind Newington Green, as if dropped compactly into the build space. There is an unfinished, ongoing experiment quality to the building, first encountered on entering and head up the scaffold system staircase to the first floor, adding to a certain charm. The main first floor, today serving as the studio space, opens onto a spacious and delightful open roof garden. Since becoming a visual motif through which the building has become well known, this external space has received a string of 'landscape architecture' type awards, and often been used to illustrate roof gardens in popular magazine stories.

Bere began working with today's practice co-director, Dan Gibbons, in 2001, taking on commercial work; interior design for various lawyers chambers seems to have been a staple. Around 2004/5 in the Muse's slipstream another domestic project also began: Focus House. “Focus House came out of this kind of design thinking, although the windows are only double glazed. “I couldn't persuade the client to go with triple, it was too expensive.” The contrast between Focus House – what Bere Architects' website now describes as, 'Towards Passivhaus' – shows how different Bere's early steps were to other of the Passivhaus pioneers; whether SimmondsMills, [John Williamson](#), Architype, or in Scotland, Gokay Deveci. This is a house in the Modernist tradition, exuding design, thereby avoiding what Bere perceives as the pit-fall of being too identified with mainstream perceptions of eco-design: tree huggers, or even wozos, hippies. Indeed, both Focus House and the Muse are a long way from Bere's schoolboy starting point, the Vales autonomous house – today Bere describes its conservatory as 'unsightly'; while also distanced from Dunster's adapted solar sustainability philosophy, by now becoming known through [BedZED](#). Bere, it seems, has at no point been interested in adapting or exploring a systems approach to sustainable building, BedZED's starting point. Rather than eco-districts, autonomous, single dwellings are his unit of concern. Not only this, but during the afternoon's conversation Bere underlines his faith in an 'aspirational,' strategy, persuading mainstream individuals towards sustainability through appealing architectural design, ones which do not suggest, “anything second class or compromised in its ecological design.” It was at this moment that he postulated a character truth about the traditional eco-architectural domain. “Ecological architecture is generally done by people who are less interested in design. If it's going to become mainstream, it needs to do so among design-aware architects.” Focus House emerged from this design approach: a low energy house designed for someone with some financial wherewithal. If most of the AECB connected Passivhaus pioneer architects could be understood as heirs to the spirit of [Walter Segal's](#) low tech, social, approach, Bere's design sensibility can at least in part be traced to his Hopkins background; the concern for detailing, the design values, and also a key influence on the source of Bere's subsequent architectural path since leaving the influential British hi tech practice. In time, one consequence of both the Muse and Focus House were to be clients with large bank accounts wanting expensive eco-conscious homes. Given Bere had worked at Hopkins, architect of choice to the great and the good, he was himself seemingly socially well-connected and had through these early years, tended to work with the well off and wealthy; the aspirational route to spreading the word about eco-design making sense at least as partially intentional in approach. What seems less planned, was what happened next, when Bere's assistant, Schaffrin, threw a sizable spanner in the works by unassumingly highlighting the similarity of some of the detailing to Passivhaus.



The Muse's roof garden loving the sun

Work on the Muse continued at a stop-start

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Camden House a) under construction and b) project visit (picture 2 – Oliver Lowenstein)

Describing the two early projects as 'Towards Passivhaus,' suggests Bere and his growing team were already independently inching towards Passiv principles, prior to becoming aware of Passivhaus. If this is the case, they were, at the time, also heading down the cross-laminated timber route, Focus House being an experiment in CLT massive wood, “We thought it was the way forward,” says Bere today. But six months after visiting the Kaufmann studio in Vorarlberg, Bere received a phone call from the office, asking if he knew anyone who would take Kaufmann's nephew, Matthias, recently graduated as architect as an unpaid intern. Bere offered his own office, and Matthias subsequently arrived and began working in the practice in 2009. The funny thing, at least in the way Bere relates this, is that the office learnt so much from their intern during those months; possibly more than Matthias did from his sojourn in London – “Kaufmann's nephew taught

us a huge amount about timber framing. We'd been afraid to do the timber framing, and they gave us the confidence” Bere's worries had focused on decay and wet rot of timber. After this initial period of knowledge transfer from Kauffmann's Wolfurt village headquarters in Vorarlberg. Bere and his small band felt able to take on timber as a material to work with. “It's like cardboard models. You don't have to be terrible proficient.”

The first post Passivhaus eureka moment of Bere Architects, is the confusingly named project, Camden House. Situated off the main road out of central London towards the beginning of the M1, bordering West Hampstead, Camden House is Bere Architects first certified Passivhaus project. The two-bedroom split-level house, sits on a concrete slab, with a prefabricated timber frame and European larch cladding. Two roofs, one flat, and the other with a low tilt, offer extra space, designed into the relatively small 1082 m2 dwelling, overshadowed as it is by larger homes. This meant considerable work with the PHPP programme, modelling the design. The building uses variants on the Passive themes of tech and materials, a MHVR unit, between 280 and 380 mm's of mineral wool and wood chip insulation for the roofs, floors, and walls, and triple glazed windows. It passed Passivhaus certification, after Peter Warm's Consultancy did final checks on the 1st April 2010. Bere had to prepare over 50 spreadsheets and diagram as documentation, which was then sent off to the Passivhaus Institute in Darmstadt, Germany for checking before being awarded certification.



Camden House - exterior and interior



Although the newfound timber knowledge by the young Matthias Kaufmann, introduced to the practice, fed into Camden House, it really came into its own on their Welsh Passivhaus project. This was the result of a successful entry into a competition to design two experimental, affordable houses as part of [Future Works](#), a big South Wales building programme, on the grounds of an old closed steelworks factory at the edge of ex-coal mining town, Ebbw Vale. The large Future Works project, was launched by [BRE Wales](#) in partnership with [Wood Knowledge Wales](#), and the [Design Research Unit, Wales](#) (- the latter has since also built its own completed project, [Ty Unnos](#), on the site.) The brief called for two and three room social housing, which were each to be experimental Passivhaus level buildings, each providing the research backdrop and



prospective template for a larger Passivhaus housing development on the old steelwork site. This included some 750 units, as a core part of 'Future Works' showcase environmental development, as well as a passive low-tech research centre.

The two pilot houses, titled Larch and Lime House respectively, were designed specifically to very low affordable housing budgets, and with the wetter, higher ground and the South Wales climate in mind. Bere Architects, working with BRE Wales, began developing the brief, with a specific local industries agenda. This included a group of Welsh joinery companies, working together under the name, **Custom Precision Joinery**, who developed and began producing the first UK standardised Passivhaus window. The timberframe was also developed in collaboration with a local framer, **Holbrook Timberframe** who, although initially somewhat cautious about the approach, apparently embraced it whole-heartedly, much to Bere's delight. The three bedroom Larch House passed the Sustainable Housing code's level 6, and with its photo-voltaics also recouped what at the time was over a £1000 income in energy sold to the grid on top of free lighting and heating, an important factor, Bere and others believed, in helping to combat fuel poverty. Lime House, the smaller two bed-roomed residential house, so named because of its lime rendered facades, was also certified, even though it only reached BREEAM level three rating.

With buildings successfully certified by the Passivhaus Institute in the second half of 2010, which appeared to be putting the future into Future Works buildings initiative, for a while Bere began to talk of South Wales as the Vorarlberg of Britain. There was a small network of local companies just beginning to emerge, and political support; as well as significant next steps in the FutureWorks masterplan, including the housing and a timber technology research centre. But as 2010 continued, particular after the new May elections, major funding problems emerged, and by early 2011 much of the committed funding appeared to have been all but swallowed up by cuts. The whole project seemed almost dead, and the future of both the Passivhaus and timber research elements, were increasingly difficult to envision proceeding further.

As it is Bere's, comparison with Vorarlberg ignores how the Austrian eco-scene developed out of a small though significant group – including non-architects - being passionately committed to sustainability, but for a long period at odds with Vorarlberg's mainstream culture. There was neither architectural, nor state funding



Future Works Lime and Larch Houses



support. Vorarlberg's eco-architecture community only developed after several years of concerted action – much of the eighties – doing so outside and despite the mainstream. By contrast FutureWorks is a regeneration project, with funding pouring in from above, in a top down process, including, it has to be noted, a London architect semi-parachuted into the local landscape. The attempt to root this culture into the South Wales building sector, has been at the level of topsoil, and without careful tending will quickly die back. A deeper, more organic regional eco-building culture which feels more credibly comparable with Vorarlberg in certain regards, is that which has grown out of the **Centre for Alternative Technology's (CAT)** thirty plus years tenure in a quarry pit in West Wales. Although here too, there are many differences, including how, unlike Vorarlberg, the West Wales scene has not developed into such a focused, Protestant work ethic led building culture.

The third of Bere's crop of Passivhaus projects, is arguably the most remarkable. **Mayville Community Centre**. A five minute walk from Bere architects Muse studio on the eastern side of Newington Green, the centre, originally built in 1890, was in a dilapidated state when Bere were invited to see what could be done with the building. A previous architect had recommended it be demolished, proposing a new start. The Mildmay Community Partnership, a community group running the centre, listened to Bere's argument that the building could be saved, however; and through a radical overhaul that included implementing Passivhaus principles, could be refurbished: both drawing down the energy bill to next to nothing, and providing an exemplar for sustainability in the immediate neighbourhood, one of the poorest parts of London. This was back in 2007, and the Mildmay Community Partnership were themselves struggling to keep afloat. Working together, architect and community group, were doggedly tenacious in their fund-raising efforts, at one point resorting to hand-bagging a possible rich donor outside an art-gallery opening in Kings Cross. Although this attempt at support proved unsuccessful, getting other funding for the £2.2 million refurbishment was achieved, including nearly £220 000 from Islington Council for a range of technical kit; 126 m<sup>2</sup> of Photovoltaics, solar thermal collectors, and a heat pump. Again the core refurbishment strategy was the intensive thick mineral insulation, hi-tech triple glazed windows, a zinc roof façade. The extra large windows were complemented by 4 by 2 metre roof lights, helping to make the interior feel light and spacious.



Mayville Community House



Mayville Community Centre before the rebuild and Early computer visualisation of Bere Architects Mayville Community Centre



The whole building has been re-oriented south, with the immediate foreground to the lower ground floor hollowed out to receive light. A new timber roof has been added, upon which one of the two wild flower meadow roof gardens have been planted, as part of the re-creation of the centre as a sustainability teaching and learning instrument for the local estate community and others visiting. In front of the entrance, micro-allotment community gardens, fed by the centres rainwater harvesting, are in the process of beginning to grow. As Bere Architects are keen to point out at every opportunity, Mayville is the first non-domestic retrofit to be Passivhaus certified, delivering around 90% less energy bills, with its performance currently being monitored through a Technology Strategy Board grant. These three projects, all successfully certified and presently undergoing monitoring, have established Bere Architects at the forefront of the British, or at least English and Welsh Passivhaus network. The contrast

between building types: exclusive up-market house as eco-plaything, social housing exploring fuel poverty mitigation, and a community based retrofit - may influence the path Bere Architects travel along next. That the practice is working out of London will likely also influence the way in which their work feeds into the next stage of Passivhaus. Connections with the AECB wing of UK Passivhaus could well diminish, given the contrast in values, which range from aesthetics to work tempo, between the two. Bere himself, seems concerned at how the practice may be swallowed up in the Passivrush, although looking in from outside, this seems unlikely, given how well established the practice has worked at becoming. Still, how Bere Architects will develop depends on a mixture of what projects come their way, and the choices the practice itself decide to pursue. So far, the emphasis has been urban, although whether weighted towards wealth or contributing to a social agenda, will be interesting to see. If the Ebbw Vale FutureWorks amplified the different stresses of a more deeply rooted local building culture in CAT influenced West Wales, to that developed through top-down regeneration funding largesse, the West Wales receptivity to Passivhaus also underlines just how enthusiastically some among the wider alternative culture have taken up this essentially

scientific approach. It will be interesting to see how the practice relates, or doesn't, with this committed constituency. They may find potentially receptive clients amidst the Transition Town movement, the current media savvy, post internet iteration of alternative culture. Certainly one of its founders, indeed 'architect,' Rob Hopkins, is enthusiastic about Passivhaus. In an [interview with Bere](#), Hopkins talked up a marriage of Passivhaus building principals, to locally sourced renewable and natural materials, as an exemplar of the localist thinking that lies at the heart of the Transition movement. If this trend were to begin to bear fruit, it would be interesting to see how such localist agenda collaborations negotiate the hi-tech, increasingly nanotechnology manufactured superwindow's, that are part of the heart of Passivhaus's insulation regime.



Given how Bere himself underlines having no interest in the architectural star machine, and that his career has been overwhelmingly motivated by answering core ecological questions around energy reduction in the built environment arena, it's not difficult to envisage a natural home from home for him and his practice among, or closer to a passion-driven group like the Transition Town movement. There again, perhaps he is – and his practice compatriots are – too straight a type to fit with the wilder edges of Transition Town. While there's a good fit with the well-heeled, at times aristocratic, 'Country Life' type greens found, for instance, in the Ecologist-Schumacher Society end of the eco-landscape, the admittedly urban practice could find others within this spectrum challenging. Well populated with individuals just as obsessed by one another particular dénouement of eco-thinking, as Bere is about the energy of building fabric, those among these wilder eco-culture shores, who might have been found massing at the now banned Big Green Gathering, do not seem to wholly register with Bere himself. When talking in the spring at the [2011 Brighton Green Architecture Day](#), organised by [Brighton's Permaculture Trust](#), he professed not to know anything of Permaculture. Having now heard Bere talking publically several times I have admired aspects of how forthright he can be, while also surprised at how he can, rather alarmingly, launch into situations without

apparently completely reading the social and/or cultural context. In Brighton he began his talk with a couple of building physics equations; something which immediately turned a fair contingent of the enthusiastic, yet overwhelmingly non-technical, and somewhat crusty, audience off.

It would be nice to envisage a trajectory which continues the inclusiveness of the Mayville Community Centre; the completion of which another Passivhaus architect described as something of a minor miracle. Bere, well and quietly spoken, can initially come across as a mite hesitant and tentative, though this masks a ferocious work ethic; one reason, perhaps, why he hit it off with the equally work focused Hermann Kaufmann. Whether he'll feel committed to communicating and working with the latest generation of alternative culture, across the board, is hard to foretell. The words 'decadent', 'discipline', and 'corrupt,' slip out every now and then, and although I'm sure, that from his perspective, Bere, is only trying to do his best, the sheer strength of certainty about his perspective may alienate him from parts of the 'everyday' community potentially most responsive to his message. At times conversation with Bere turn to worries about being marginalised in the Passiv-rush by larger, more mainstream forces. I can't help feel this perception feels a mite misplaced, given Bere's unflagging energies, which have already ensured the practice is established, well positioned, and at the forefront of a new generation of Passivhaus architects in Britain. It seems likely that it cannot but prosper. If this indeed happens, despite the increasingly scary economic waters the UK, as much as the rest of Europe, is heading into, Bere Architects' next tranche of projects, once realised, will likely up the bar in influencing debate and thinking on sustainable building design issues, both within and beyond the Passivhaus community, in the immediate future. *Oliver Lowenstein*



Mayville Community Centre - Interior

