

PRESS RELEASE

Appleby Blue in Bermondsey reimagines the almshouse for 21st century inner-city living

- United St. Saviour's Charity welcomes its 63 residents aged 65+ to live in Appleby Blue, its newly developed social housing project that reimagines the concept of the almshouse for inner-city living
- Designed by RIBA Stirling Prize-winning architects Witherford- Watson Mann, the building provides a blueprint for future adult social housing projects
- The Appleby Blue community kitchen is the heart of the home, with United St Saviour's Charity running community projects with local organisations to foster intergenerational connection in Southwark

LONDON, 10 October 2023 - Appleby Blue, a social housing development of 57 almshouses in Bermondsey, south London, has reached completion, and is welcoming its 63 residents. The building is managed by United St Saviour's Charity and provides independent living with a resident support model for over 65-year-olds in Southwark.

Designed by Stirling Prize winners Witherford Watson Mann Architects for United St Saviour's Charity (UStSC), the new development reimagines the almshouse concept and sets a new benchmark for the provision of older people's social housing. It is designed specifically for today's generation of older people who want to lead an active life in the heart of the inner city.

Reinventing the historic model of an almshouse, a form of sheltered housing by a private charity offering low-cost residential accommodation to the elderly, Appleby Blue provides a blueprint for future adult social housing. The building is designed to encourage residents and non-residents to come together through its open nature and progression of places to share, extending from the busy public high street to the more intimate walkways, cultivating a strong sense of community and reducing loneliness. A recent report, [Almshouse Longevity Study](#) co-authored by Alison Benzimra, Head of Research at UStSC, and published by Bayes Business School (May 2023), has found that living in an almshouse can boost a resident's lifespan by as much as two and a half years.

Appleby Blue represents a progressive evolution of almost every conventional model of older people's accommodation, from being a form of retreat into an active, open and shared building. So many homes for older people are built at the margins of the city, removed from busy streets and inward-looking. WWM has re-imagined the almshouse typology, 'flipping' it so that Appleby Blue engages directly with the high street. Located close to the heart of Bermondsey, with a bus stop right outside and the hustle and bustle of a busy high street, Appleby Blue enables its residents to remain active members of a thriving, intergenerational and diverse London community.

The almshouse is the newest development to be managed by United St Saviour's Charity, which has worked to support the people and communities of Southwark for almost 500 years. Uniting the people and charitable organisations in the borough, the charity tackles social need through a grant-making programme and offers sheltered housing for older people in almshouses, helping to build strong, supportive and well-served communities.

On the ground floor is the UStSC Resident Support office, as well as the Appleby Blue community kitchen, which is managed by the charity and works with a variety of partnership organisations to deliver intergenerational culinary events based on upskilling and nutrition, and to foster connection between residents and the wider Southwark community. The building also includes a library area, hobby room and skills room, where events from crochet lessons to digital skills sessions will be hosted.

The mid-rise development, which varies from five to two storeys, sits directly on the high street. It has a number of public-facing facilities, including the generous double-height Garden Room for shared activities. This is positioned between the high street and the interior Garden Court, linking the public activity of the street to the more reflective interior of the block. This light-filled room creates an invitation to the neighbourhood to engage in the array of intergenerational activities that will be programmed in this new community space.

The Garden Room opens on to an expansive and lushly planted Garden Court, designed by Grant Associates. Measuring 40m x 8m, it echoes the courts of the coaching inns that were located along nearby Borough High Street, and forms the visual focus of the building, around which the individual homes are arranged. The Garden Court is conceived as an abstract woodland glade with a raised and gently cascading linear water feature running between a grove of ginkgo trees and an understorey of seasonal woodland flora (including ferns; sedges; hellebores; anemones; foxgloves; dogwood and flushes of seasonal bulbs like snowdrops and winter aconites). It offers a space for residents and visitors to socialise or relax in peace and quiet. The acoustics of the space coupled with the sound of the water feature combine to create a relaxing, sanctuary-like space for residents and visitors, whilst remaining just a few feet away from the local transport links that connect them into the city.

A roof terrace on the second floor features a productive garden with raised beds for growing herbs and vegetables, as well as a planting mix of herbs, fruits, vegetables and companion planting with flowers for cutting, creating outdoor rooms for communal summer dining. The planting includes fennel, rosemary, thyme, sage, mint, marjoram, wild strawberry, rhubarb with a mix of local apple and pear tree varieties. Raised beds have been created with residents in mind, to enable recreational gardening activities to continue to be accessible despite potential loss of mobility. Both gardens will be managed by a local gardening group, and United St Saviour's is working alongside research partners at Bournemouth University to explore how multigenerational, socially inclusive activities can be co-created with older people around food growing, cooking and meal sharing, to improve their health, wellbeing and social connectedness.

Designed to extend the grain of the Victorian terraced streets, reform the line of terraces to the high street, and rise to the scale of the adjacent post-war social housing, Appleby Blue is deeply embedded in its place. This is reinforced through its articulation of volume, projecting two-storey bay windows, articulated corners, and palette of long-lasting materials – pre-cast concrete, brick and solid oak. 35% of the energy required to run the building is generated on site from photovoltaics on the roof. The building is passively ventilated, with common areas equipped with an automated system of opening vents.

Residents' apartments are arranged around the Garden Court. The rear south-facing wing of the almshouse reduces down to two storeys, allowing full sunlight into the court. Apartments are all dual aspect, accessed by a glazed gallery with large sliding glazed screens opening onto the Garden Court, bringing the changing colours, textures, sounds and light of the seasons into the residents' and local communities' everyday experience. Apartments range from 55m² one-bedroom to 79m² two-bedrooms, with 11 wheelchair apartments and two studio units for research assistants, many of whom will be incorporated into the Appleby Blue community during their work.

Appleby Blue occupies a site previously occupied by a care home, which had fallen into disrepair and was no longer fit for purpose. It is the off-site social housing provision funded by a private residential development 'Triptych', developed by JTRE London in neighbouring Bankside. The development has been made possible through a partnership between the London Borough of Southwark, who owned the land, and UStSC, who will manage it in perpetuity.

The name Appleby Blue celebrates the memory of one of UStSC's original benefactors, Dorothy Appleby. 'Blue' refers to the central marketplace of Bermondsey, rooting the development in its locale and noting the charity's ties to the area going back more than five hundred years.

Martyn Craddock, CEO, United St Saviour's Charity, said:

"Appleby Blue reimagines the historic model of a retreat from society, in favour of direct contact with urban life. The beautiful design of the building, and our charity's support services, aims to change the perception of sheltered social housing, and influence future developments. By providing a high quality and well-designed home, older people should be more ready to move from their often unsuitable or under-occupied housing, yet remain in the community where they have lived for many years. The building is designed with social interaction as a core principle, and the charity now has a fantastic building to help us to continue to transform lives and meet the needs of our older residents."

Stephen Witherford, Witherford Watson Mann Architects, said:

"It has become increasingly common practice to relocate over 60s away from urban centres, pushed or incentivised to the city edge or the coast. Yet, as people live longer and remain active later in life, not everyone wants to withdraw from the bustle of the city; on the contrary, many wish to remain close to the neighbourhoods they have spent their lives in. Older people have a lot to contribute, providing commitment and continuity in the locality. Our design for Appleby Blue in Bermondsey is the result of a collaborative and iterative process working with a highly experienced and ambitious client committed to transform the age-old model of sheltered housing for older people. Every element of the almshouse has been carefully considered and designed to make Appleby Blue a place where people can spend time, meet with friends, and participate in a range of activities that enable both residents and people from the local community to keep fit, healthy and active - a place where residents are firmly at the centre of life around them."

Alison Benzimra, Head of Research and Insight, United St. Saviours Charity, said:

"Appleby Blue provides us with a unique opportunity to discover what the beneficial factors are of living in an almshouse embedded in a modern, urban environment. United St Saviour's Charity will be incorporating all our learnings into our practices. We are journeying with our residents to determine what aspects of the building's physical design, community activities and resident support model impact health and wellbeing in later life. Through collaborations with trusted research partners, we aim to share our findings widely so we can positively influence policy and practise both locally and nationally as our ageing population continues to increase."

Steve Platts, Director of Planning and Growth, Southwark Council, said:

"Appleby Blue is a triumphant example of what can be achieved when the public, private, and voluntary sectors work together. It offers an outstanding facility for our older residents in Southwark and welcoming space for different generations to come together and enhance the sense of local community."

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Notes to editors:

Location:	Bermondsey, Southwark, London
Address:	Appleby Blue, 94-116 Southwark Park Road, London SE16 3RD
Site in sqm:	2875m ² (0.287 hectares)
GIA:	5,800m ²
Construction Value:	£25.1 million
Client:	United St Saviour's Charity
Architects:	Witherford Watson Mann Architects
Project architect/s:	Helen Lee, Anna Tenow, Graham Mateer, Pepijn Nolet
Social historian:	Ken Worpole
Structural engineers:	Price & Myers (stage 0-3) Pringer James Consulting engineers (stage 4-5)
Services engineers:	Skelly & Couch (stage 0-3) AWA Consultants (stage 4-5)
Landscape architects:	Grant Associates
Fire consultants:	The Fire Surgery
Planning consultant:	DP9
Acoustic consultant:	Ramboll associates / Hann Tucker
Developer:	JTRE London
Construction Manager:	JTRE London
Photography:	© Philip Vile (@philipvile)
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About United St Saviour's Charity

United St Saviour's Charity has worked to support the people and communities of Southwark for almost 500 years. Uniting the people and charitable organisations in the borough, we tackle social need through our grant making programme and offer sheltered housing for older people in our almshouses, St Saviours Court, Hopton's and Appleby Blue, helping to build strong, supportive and well-served communities.

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About Witherford Watson Mann Architects

Witherford Watson Mann Architects was founded in 2002 by Stephen Witherford, Chris Watson and William Mann. The practice has won critical acclaim for imaginative and carefully crafted one-off projects covering social housing, cultural buildings and public spaces, as well as strategies for the renewal of large urban areas. They started their collaboration twenty-one years ago, following a series of walks through the edges of London; since then, they have approached every project as an open-ended enquiry, turning the constraints of inherited situations into surprising opportunities. The practice is shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize for their transformation of the Courtauld Institute of Art in Somerset House. They won the Stirling Prize in 2013 for Astley Castle in Warwickshire and were again shortlisted in 2019 for Nevill Holt Opera theatre. Appleby Blue represents the practice's third housing project, following completion of Gistel social housing in Belgium (2015), and Ryle Yard in Eddington (2018), which provides accommodation for post graduate students of the University of Cambridge. The practice has recently completed Brickfields business centre in Hoxton, the Courtauld Institute of Art at Somerset House, and Old Court, Clare College in Cambridge. Together with Appleby Blue, each of these projects distils the complexities of contemporary collectives, of urban sites and public processes into durable, economical solutions that remain open to future change.

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