

PRESS ENQUIRIES
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Mole

PRESS RELEASE

DOVEHOUSE COURT ALMSHOUSES

LOW ENERGY ALMSHOUSES CARING FOR PEOPLE AND PLANET IN THE VILLAGE OF GIRTON

11/2023

Mole Architects has completed a new Passivhaus certified almshouse development for Girton Town Charity in the village of Girton on the outskirts of Cambridge. The low-rise two-storey community-centred, accessible housing is characterised by white bricks and colourful entrance doors. It consists of three buildings gathered around a newly landscaped communal courtyard, a configuration consistent with the almshouse typology.

Historically almshouses were established to help the needy and infirm, and have often been associated with a particular group, serving older members of a church or the military. Girton Town Charity was established 1521 and now offers almshouses expressly for those with a close connection to Girton, offering affordable housing to residents at different stages of their lives, either families, to help them to save money enabling them to move into their own house, or for active retirees who are able to live independently. Residents or 'appointees' pay an affordable maintenance fee in lieu of rent, and the homes provide a much-needed source of housing to those with limited means.

Dovehouse Court is specifically designed as permanent housing for over-55-year-olds who are able to live independently within the community, and applicants must have a close connection to Girton, having lived, worked in or have family already in the village.

The 15 energy-efficient, one-bedroom homes, suitable for couples or single residents, are arranged as five bungalows and 10 apartments. The scheme also includes a new office for the charity, adjacent to the homes, which accommodates up to four staff and has been future-proofed for conversion into a one-bedroom bungalow should needs change.

The development replaces a previous almshouse development which had reached the end of its serviceable life, and offered poor thermal efficiency with high heating costs, posing problems to residents. Dovehouse Court is constructed with a prefabricated timber structure system which ensures airtightness and thermal efficiency to meet Passivhaus standards, fulfilling the charity's commitment to sustainability and drive to reduce the cost of living for its residents. It is a fully electric scheme. Air source heat pump (ASHP), hot water generation and mechanical ventilation with heat recovery (MVHR) systems ensure the homes receive a constant supply of fresh filtered air and exceed current energy efficiency regulations.

Adopting a fabric first approach to achieve energy efficiency, the design uses natural materials constructed simply, prioritising abundant daylight and clear sightlines. Each dual-aspect home has minimal corridor space and includes spacious and flexible rooms: one bedroom and bathroom, kitchen, open plan living/dining room, and a study which can also be used as a small occasional guest room, for visiting grandchildren, temporary care provision, or a couple who choose to sleep separately.

13 of the 15 homes meet M4(2) access requirements. Internally all meet M4(3) accessibility, exceed local authority internal space standards and are adaptable to residents' changing accessibility demands, including kitchen cupboards positioned at a low, reachable height. Every resident has a small private terrace to make their own, as well as views and access to a variety of landscaped communal gardens with southern exposure, including an orchard, vegetable garden and lawned areas, and shared, sheltered terraces to encourage social interaction. The development is purposely not gated and designed with easy, intuitive wayfinding. Kitchens or living spaces face onto the shared courtyard garden to ensure passive surveillance and promote neighbourliness.

Emulating Mole Architects' award-winning cohousing development Marmalade Lane, also in Cambridge, the three new buildings face into a car-free central planted court, and the scheme carefully balances the interplay of private thresholds and a central communal garden. Primary access is via a parking courtyard for cars and cycles with a secure footpath entrance, and the housing is set back from the High Street behind meadow planting, a hornbeam hedge and specimen street trees.

Dovehouse Court's material palette of white rendered walls and white brick walls for entrances and raised bed planters brings a sunny disposition to the setting. Elevations are offset by black matte clay roof tiles, harmonising the new development with the local distinctiveness of the area, where white painted brick walls and clay tile roofs are ubiquitous. The stairwells, in contrast, are redolent of agricultural infrastructure and defined as slatted Corten steel volumes with sheet metal roofs.

The development is split into three 'houses': a two-storey 'house' of six 65.4m² apartments running laterally along the High Street with lift access; a two-storey house of four 62.6m² apartments to the rear of the site; both linked by a third 'house' of five single-storey 61.9m² bungalows at the heart of the site. Front doors are brightly coloured with no two colours repeated within each 'house' so that residents can identify their home easily, aiding recognition.

The garden, designed in collaboration with Jamie Buchanan Landscape, ties the site into its context, developing a structure and hierarchy for the external spaces to create order and legibility. The design is sensitive to the needs of the residents, and integrates the new development into the wider semi-rural setting with the minimum of impact. The gardens include a variety of plant species to provide year-round interest, enhancing biodiversity as well as dramatically improving the wellbeing of Dovehouse Court's residents.

Ian Bramwell, Director, Mole Architects, said:

"The Charity's vision to build generous Passivhaus homes for the over-55 residents of Girton was ambitious, and the result is a credit to the perseverance of the Trustees. We worked hard alongside a talented design and construction team to deliver homes that feel safe and are welcoming, light-filled and warm, with direct access to beautiful gardens. The development offers homes built to the very highest environmental specification, and we're delighted to hear that living in Dovehouse Court is bringing such joy to the new residents."

Ann Bonnett, Chair, Girton Town Charity, said:

"The completion of Dovehouse Court is a major milestone for us, after many years seeing our plans to futureproof housing in our village come to fruition. It has been a special project, building to Passivhaus standards to deliver energy-efficient almshouses that will be cost-effective to run and comfortable for residents. I'd like to thank the team at Mole for their vision in creating such inspiring contemporary and practical homes which will be enjoyed by many generations to come."

Jenny Knights, former Trustee, Girton Town Charity, said:

“It’s wonderful to see the fulfilment of all the many years of hard work, and I am so impressed to see the totally inspirational vision now realised.”

Press enquiries:

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Notes to editors:

Location:	Girton, Cambridge
Client:	Girton Town Charity
Site:	0.34ha
Gross internal area:	996m ²
Value:	£5 million
Funding:	Cambridge & Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) Affordable Housing Programme provided a grant of £675,000
Schedule:	Appointment spring 2017; design phase 2017-19; construction 2021-23; completion April 2023
Architect:	Mole Architects
Design team:	Ian Bramwell, April Glasby, Louise McGarrigle
Project architect:	Ian Bramwell
Contractor:	Barnes Construction Ltd
Project manager:	Northmores
Structural engineer:	Conisbee
M&E:	Hoare Lea (Stages 1-4a); JG Consulting (Stages 4b-6)
Quantity surveyor:	Faithful and Gould
Landscape:	Jamie Buchanan Landscape
Passivhaus certifier:	WARM
Photographs:	© David Butler

Mole Architects is a Cambridge-based architecture practice founded by Meredith Bowles in 1997, which combines innovation and individuality with a commitment to cutting-edge sustainability.

Recent projects include two new mixed-use workspaces, C2 and D2, in London’s Design District on Greenwich Peninsular (2021); and Marmalade Lane, a multi-award winning, council-led, custom-built cohousing scheme for developers TOWN and residents of the K1 Co-housing group, in Orchard Park, Cambridge (2019).

The practice has a reputation for ‘green and gorgeous’ buildings, as evidenced by one-off houses such as the Black House in the Cambridgeshire Fens (winner of the 2004 Manser Medal), and The Houseboat (winner of the 2017 Stephen Lawrence Prize), and their latest single dwelling, Riverview House in Essex, which won a RIBA East Award 2023 and has been longlisted for the RIBA House of the Year 2023.

The practice has also been a delivery architect for Living Architecture’s houses, working as collaborator on The Balancing Barn with Dutch practice MVRDV; Dune House with Norwegian practice Jarmund Vignsnaes; and The Secular Retreat – Swiss architect and Pritzker Prize winner Peter Zumthor’s first permanent UK building. Meredith was a key member of the delivery team for Peter Salter’s award-winning Walmer Yard in Notting Hill.



In the housing sector Mole has completed a Passivhaus development for Broadland Housing Association (2013) and postgraduate apartments in Eddington, Cambridge (2019), and is currently designing homes and a healthcare centre for Human Nature's The Phoenix, a sustainable neighbourhood on a former industrial site in Lewes. A second almshouse commission in Cambridge, for The Foundation of Edward Storey, is currently underway. In 2022 Mole won the William Sutton Prize with a proposal for a zero-carbon community homebuilding system.

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Girton Town Charity (GTC) is registered with the Charity Commission and exists to enable Girton residents to lead as full a life as possible in the comfort and safety of their own homes.

One of the principal ways Girton Town Charity fulfils its remit to relieve the needs of village residents is through housing provision. It currently has 28 almshouses at Suffolk Terrace, Centenary Court and most recently at Dovehouse Court. GTC almshouses are intended for Girton families, either to help them save and move onto their own housing, or for active retirees who can live independently.

As well as helping residents in specific circumstances with personal grants – each one assessed on need and eligibility, GTC also offers a range of schemes and grants which encompass all ages and stages of village life.

girtontowncharity.org.uk