Building study

SIDCUP SUCCESS STORY

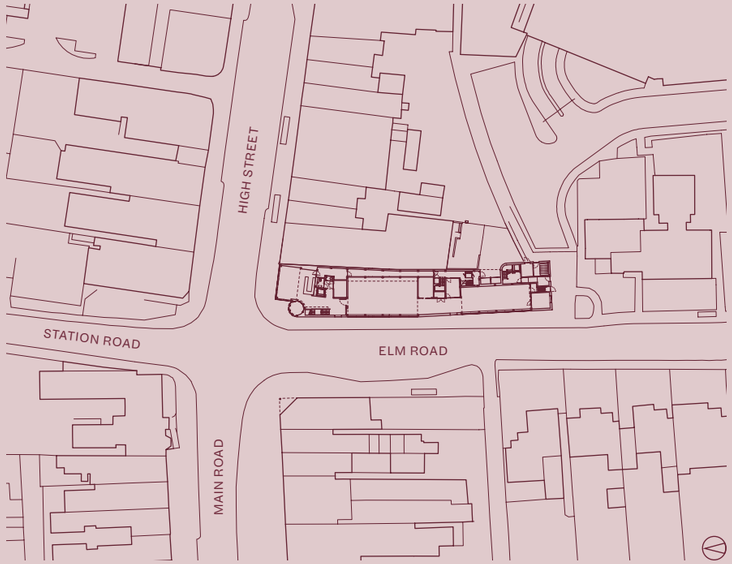
Storyteller by DRDH Architects combines a library, cinema and housing in a scheme remarkable for the intelligence and generosity of its design

Storyteller is the centrepiece of the London Borough of Bexley's strategy to revitalise Sidcup High Street. The project occupies a neglected site on an important crossroads, formerly a two-storey Blockbuster video store. Its hybrid programme includes public and commercial elements: a public library, café, three-screen cinema, community room and a Changing Places sanitary facility that serves the wider high street. Above the children's library, nine apartments cross-subsidise the building's capital cost, together with the pre-let to a commercial tenant and the sale, for housing, of the previous library site, which was located on a residential side street.

Words David Knight
Photography David Grandorge

The train from London Bridge to Sidcup runs between the allotments and back gardens of suburban London. Along the way there are occasional glimpses of suburban town centres like Bexleyheath, swollen and densified by recent development, instilling the nagging feeling that some recent regeneration in these sorts of places is at times more responsive to central London journey times than it is to the spirit of the place.

In defining London's suburbs in this way, we risk eroding those qualities that give London's peripheral places – of which Sidcup is a prime example – their dignity and quality of life, ultimately robbing London as a whole of much of its oft-celebrated cultural diversity and spatial richness. What if London's public sector was more able to support and





Architect's view

From the outset, the project embodied environmental and sustainable approaches, achieving its target of BREAAM Very Good. A holistic approach takes advantage of site conditions, integrates efficient building systems and technologies and proactively uses structural design to minimise ground works.

Mass is carefully controlled and distributed, through the extensive use of lightweight construction technologies, to allow the use of shallow raft foundations, minimising excavation, removing requirements for large mass concrete foundations or piles and prioritising the retention of a neighbouring mature tree.

The design uses the long thin site footprint to maximise natural light into public rooms at ground floor. Large areas of glazing open on to these double-height spaces, allowing daylight deep into the plan, with unwanted solar gain minimised through solar control. When required, low-energy lighting systems are employed throughout.

The building's energy strategy takes a fabric-first approach with high-performance glazing, u-values exceeding compliance with Part L (2016) and concrete left exposed to provide thermal mass. Technology is employed through the use of air-source heat pumps in both commercial and residential elements, alongside photovoltaic solar cells. Overall, this reduces the building's CO_2 emissions by more than 36 per cent, compared with baseline compliance (2016).

The cinemas, where energy intensive uses cannot be avoided, are placed directly below roof level plant to maximise efficiency. Screened by walls, the plant is installed above a 'blue roof', which minimises the building's impact on the sewers. On the residential element, a green roof, below photovoltaics, offers opportunities for biodiversity.

Daniel Rosbottom, co-director, DRDH Architects



commission projects in these outer London conditions that combine intensification with genuine investment in place, creating more reasons to be in a place rather than relying on its relationship to somewhere else?

Storyteller, a new building on Sidcup High Street, housing a public library, cinema and private-sale flats, is an answer to this question. Commissioned by the London Borough of Bexley and designed by London and Antwerp-based architect DRDH, it is remarkable not only for its design's intelligence and generosity but also for the entrepreneurial nature of its procurement. The site, a former Blockbuster video rental shop on a prominent but unloved corner of the high street, was acquired by the council, which then put together a hybrid brief combining a public library, a commercial cinema and nine private-sale flats, the sale of which has subsidised the project.

The building shares its high street intersection with a police station that's no longer a police station, a bank that's no longer a bank, and an estate agent that continues to be an estate agent. Facing the high street, Storyteller presents a humble, glossily abstract brick frontage reminiscent of the interwar cinema vernacular and its expressively blank elevations. This elevation also 'finishes off' the adjacent 1930s former department store by rising to the level of its portico, giving new prominence to the street corner. A red-brick drum creates a recessive corner entrance space in which to shake a brolly or linger on the doorstep.

The side flank of the building, addressing the more traffic-heavy and arterial Elm Road, presents a much more substantial character than the one facing the high street, and one that contains and resolves the expansive windows of the ground-floor library, the windowless boxes of the upper-storey cinema, and the residential windows and balconies of the flats to the rear of the site. Here and elsewhere, rather than attempt to 'fix the site', the scheme seeks to give it a new quality as a focal point of the high street, taking its cues and geometries from its neighbours and creating a new coherence that simultaneously celebrates and challenges what came before.

Internally, the building is made up of spaces that feel alternately institutional and domestic, all sharing a welcoming but open character befitting the building's multiple programmes. A double-height café space at the front forms a lofty shop window to the high street. Visitors pass the café on their left as they enter, finding themselves in an almost domestic space: a timber-lined lobby and staircase leading up to a cinema lobby, public room and the three small screening rooms, one of which doubles as a performance space. Back at ground level, the timber lobby is followed by a sequence of library rooms that are progressively more private and more 'dug in' to the site as the road outside rises, culminating in a children's library and a single window, facing south directly into the branches of a mature holm oak tree. There is a certain austerity and solemnity to these main rooms but this is lifted by inhabitation and the fact that the rooms are so easily available to the public. We can get right into the heart

Engineer’s view

Storyteller sits within a constrained site with existing commercial premises to the western boundary and the highway, Station Road, to the east.

To maintain the lower ground floor level, the building is sunken into the ground at the northern end. The structural design responds to the contrasting uses and differing size ‘rooms’ as you move north across the footprint, using exposed reinforced-concrete beams that reflect the load paths from the cinema and residential structures above, including the raked/set back façade line to the main elevation.

The building’s overall mass was closely monitored to allow the use of a concrete raft foundation, reducing ground works and allowing for the bridging of adjacent tree roots. The use of visual in-situ concrete minimised the application of finishes in these areas and their associated embodied carbon. It also added thermal mass to the building, reducing its energy consumption in use.

The cantilever ‘drum’ section over the building’s main entrance allowed for a relatively long and thin in-situ stair supported from one side.

Martin Waters, director, Engineers HRW







of the plan, reaching books, toilets (including a Changing Places accessible toilet), a pick ‘n’ mix stand and work tables all before passing a reception desk, lending the whole ground floor an unusually public quality. Throughout, a complex game of size and proportion is playing out. Windows that feel inconsequential from outside are suddenly vast and expansive on the inside, maintaining a close relationship between the library and the street.

When Robert Venturi wrote in 1966 of ‘the obligation to the difficult whole’, he was concerned with finding ways by which the kind of ‘complex and contradictory’ forms and spaces he was pursuing could be accommodated within a coherent building form. His primary example of a successful ‘difficult whole’ was, interestingly, a commercial building on an urban street corner: the Farmers and Merchants Union Bank in Columbus, Wisconsin, by Louis Sullivan. Venturi sees in the bank’s primary elevation a play of symmetries that accommodates the dualities of the building’s internal programme while also providing a symmetrical, centred composition. Something similar is going on at Storyteller, though the spatial and programmatic complexities of Venturi are replaced here by more powerful social complexities – this is at once a commercial, civic and domestic building. There’s the popular commercialism of the cinema (popcorn machines and free-standing adverts for upcoming features abound); there’s the increasingly complex and vital public offer represented by the library; and then there’s the need to provide uplifting, good quality flats, though the presence of these will be lost to most visitors.

As a public building, Storyteller is chiefly a place to read and to work, but it is also a place for birthday parties and reading groups, a place to pay bills or access council services, and ultimately somewhere for different generations to meet. The three main groups on my visit were parents of young children attending a storytelling session, teenagers doing their half-term coursework, and pensioners chatting and browsing the



bookshelves. Sonic Youth played quietly on the café speakers, vital nattering took place around library desks, and a swarm of laden buggies sat at the edge of the children's library. As the day rolled on, this sort of thing would be supplemented by after-work cinemagoers sharing circulation and café spaces with library users.

The building does not attempt to express the tensions inherent in such a complex programme but instead is concerned with creating an allusive, integrated and cross-programmed 'difficult whole' to make a hybrid public building that feels not only like a place for the communities of Sidcup to meet and be together, but a genuinely new form of public building, particularly in its UK context. Though both client and architect are reluctant to describe it as an exemplar given the effort involved in making it happen, it nevertheless feels like a model for how architecture with a public consciousness and an entrepreneurial state can together 'lift' a town centre in a way that is responsive to the contemporary needs and challenges of public life. Our communities deserve – need – more of this.



Project data

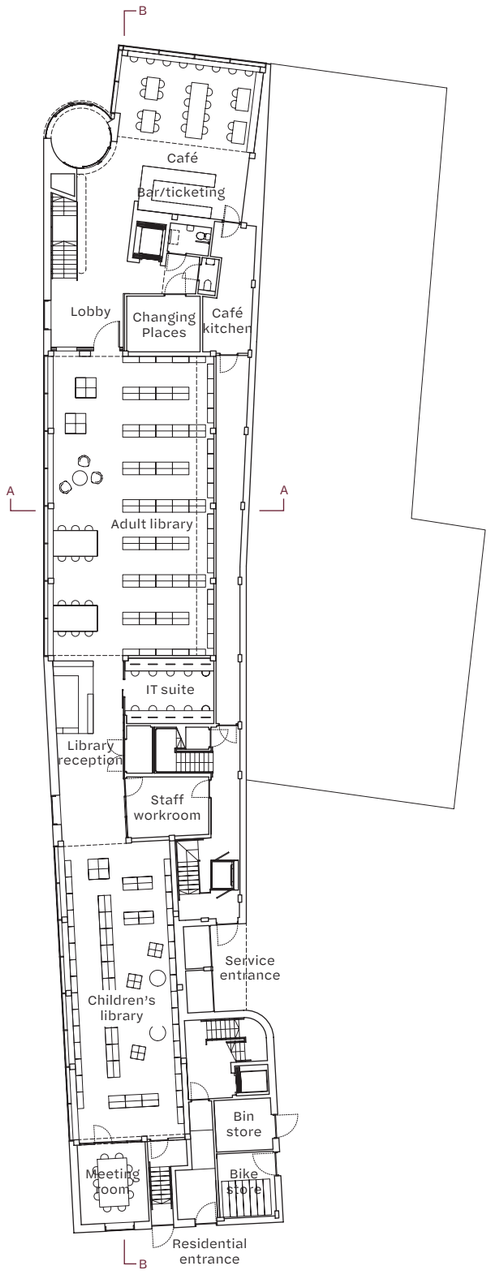
Start on site January 2021
Completion May 2023
Gross internal floor area 1,932m²
Construction cost Undisclosed
Architect DRDH Architects
Client London Borough of Bexley (LBB)
Structural engineer Engineers HRW
CDM co-ordinator Playle & Partners
M&E consultant Harley Haddow
Quantity surveyor Playle & Partners
Approved building inspector LBB Building Control
Project manager LBB Regeneration Team
Principal designer DRDH Architects
Acoustic consultant Charcoal Blue
BREEAM consultant Whitecode
Main contractor Neilcott Construction
CAD software used MicroStation
Annual CO_2 emissions 36.3 $kgCO_2/m^2$

Sustainability data

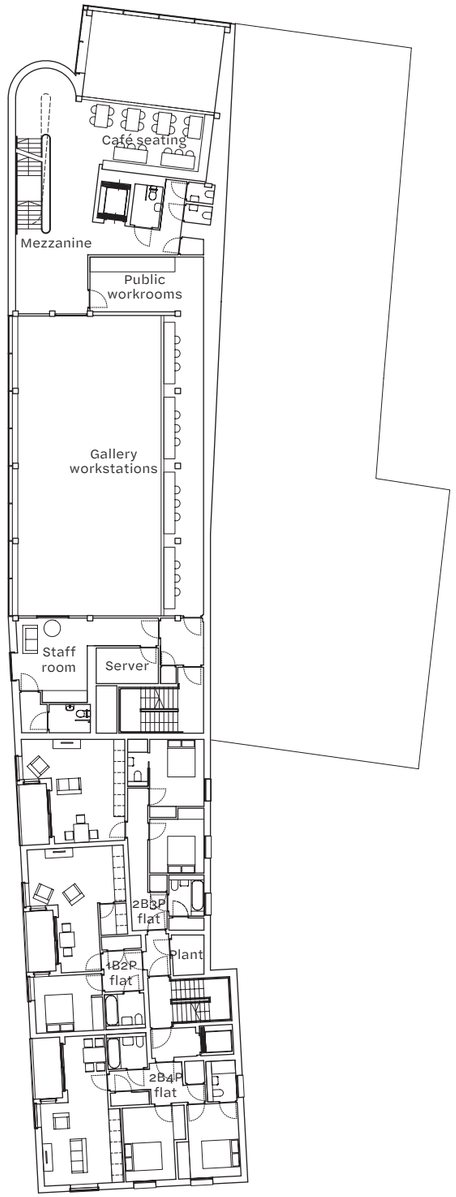
Percentage of floor area with daylight factor >2% Not supplied
Percentage of floor area with daylight factor >5% Not supplied
On-site energy generation 12.7%
Heating and hot water load 32.3 $kWh/m^2/yr$
Total energy load 82.4 $kWh/m^2/yr$
Carbon emissions (all) 36.3 $KgCO_2/m^2$
Annual mains water consumption Not supplied
Airtightness at 50Pa 6.16 $m^3/hr/m^2$
Overall thermal bridging heat transfer coefficient (Y value) 0.03 W/m^2K
Overall area-weighted U-value 0.28 W/m^2K
Embodied / whole-life carbon Not supplied
Predicted design life 30 years



Ground floor plan



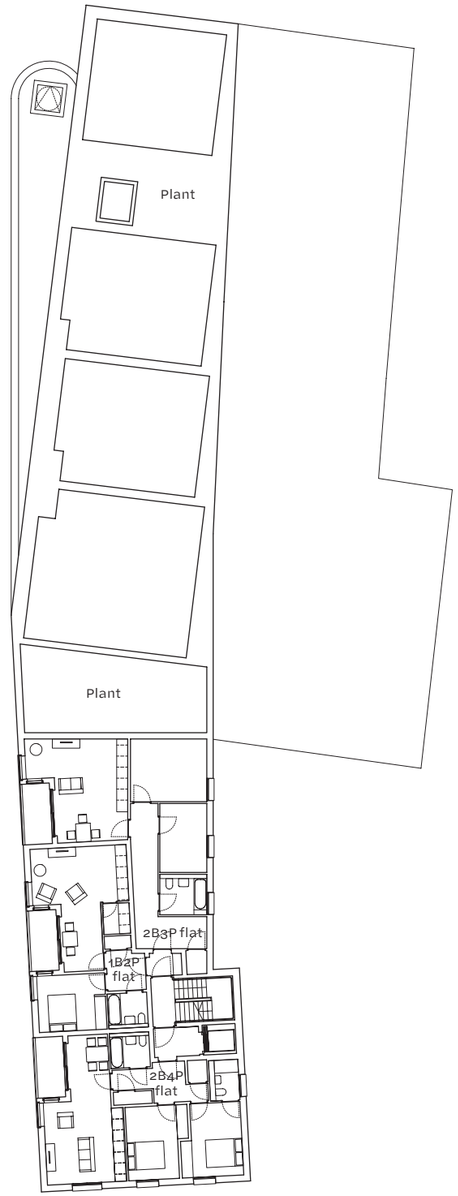
First floor plan



Second floor plan

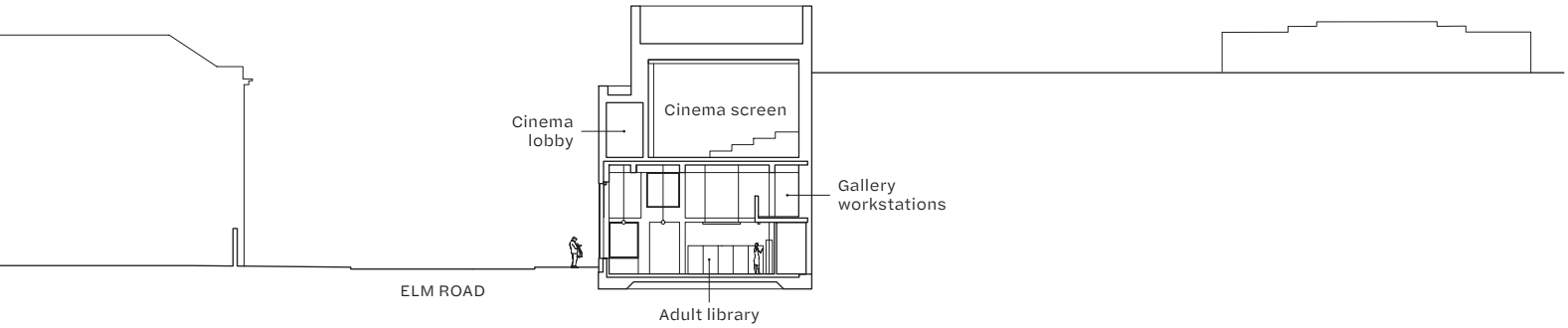


Third floor plan

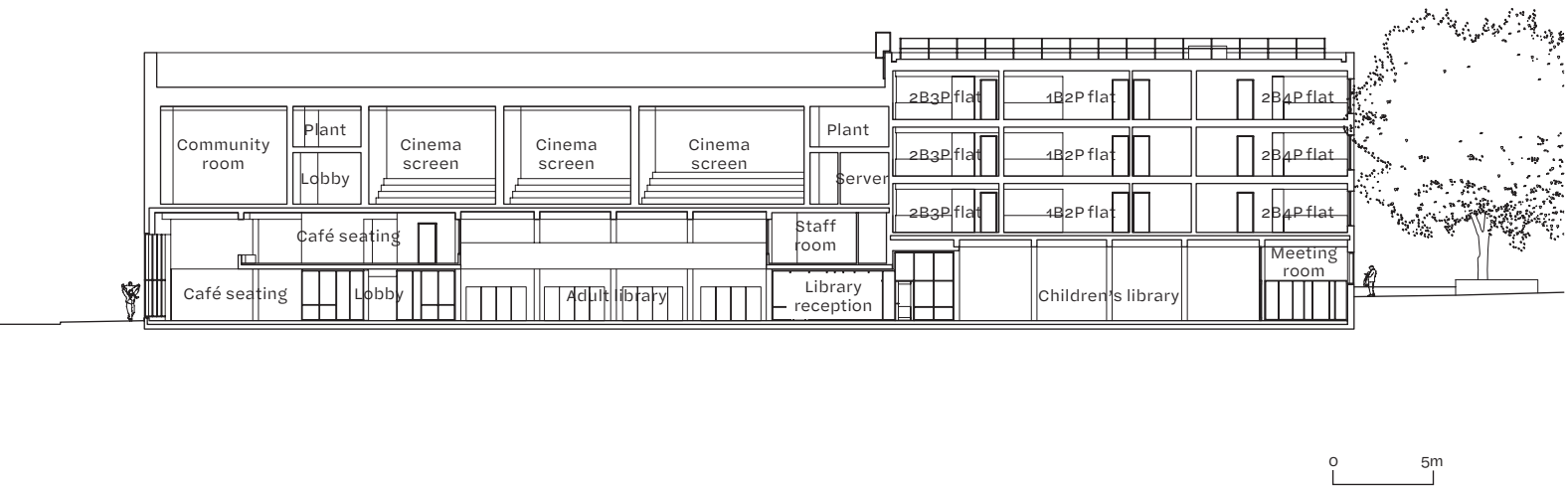


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Section A-A



Section B-B



Client's view

For many years, a key site stood empty on Sidcup's high street. Adjacent to what was once a thriving department store, left abandoned following the demise of Blockbuster, it clearly had potential, yet needed vision.

The council bought the land, creating an opportunity for an exemplary building that would fuse council services with commercial and cultural activity, strengthening and enriching a struggling local economy.

Co-locating the local library alongside an independent cinema and residential units has created a place that serves the contemporary needs of the whole community. Started pre-Covid, the project's role in consolidating the high street as a thriving cultural hub that welcomes everyone is now even more critical.

The old library premises were tired, inefficient and costly to run. Moving to a bright, well-designed new home creates new opportunities, including sessions for groups with special requirements and a Changing Places facility that allows vulnerable, housebound people to take their place in the community.

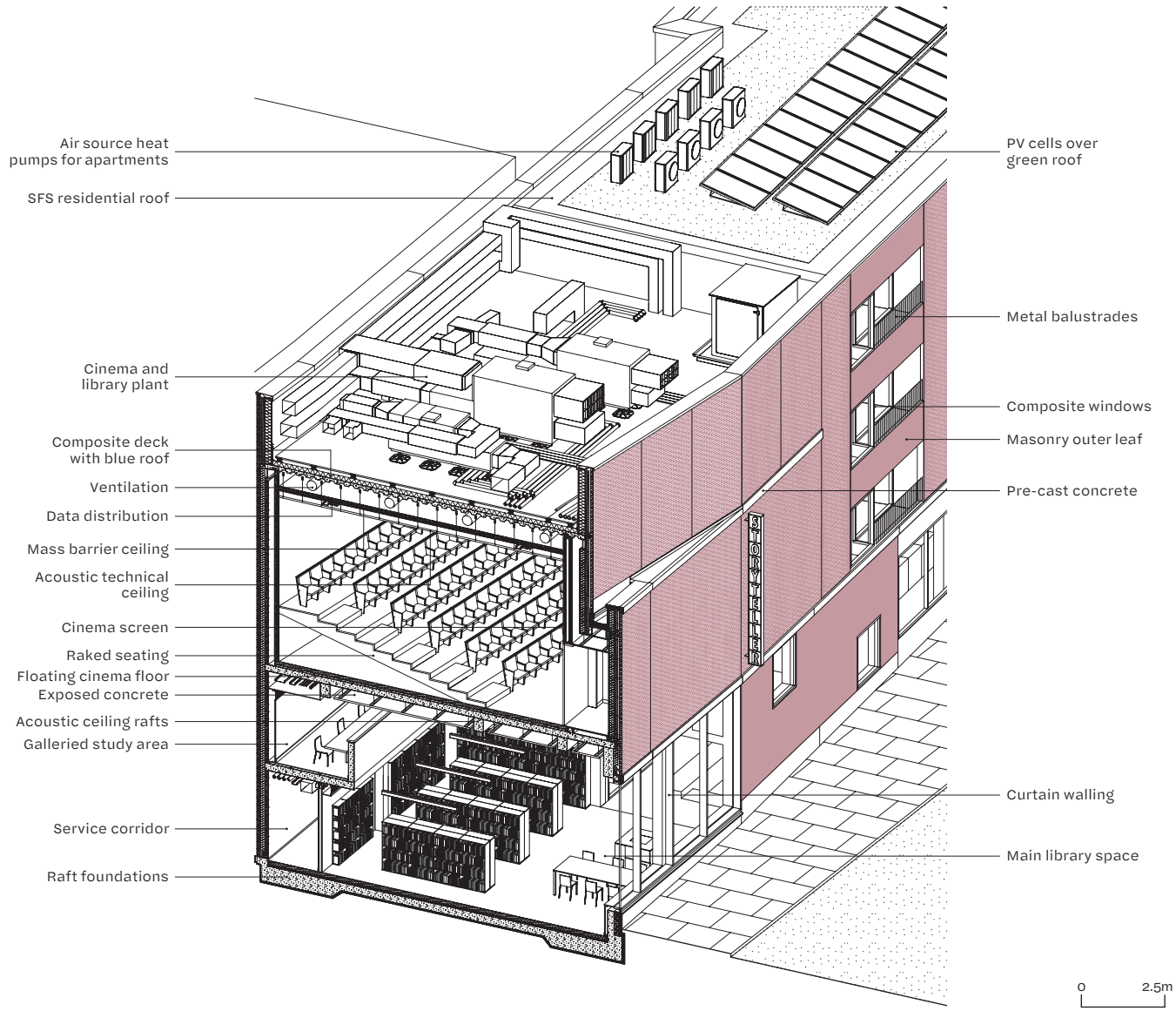
The building is designed to offer flexibility and to encourage synergies and cross programming between the various functions. Its prominent location and bold, yet welcoming, image are bringing more people to the high street and encouraging other businesses to invest. Membership of the library has doubled since its move.

Bexley's ambitious design brief asked for a building that reduced its carbon footprint through the use of sympathetic, high-quality and robust materials, sustainably sourced. It needs to stand the test of time, ease maintenance pressures and set a precedent for the future.

A strong emphasis on reuse meant usable furniture from the old library was repurposed in the new building, or found alternative homes in the wider estate.

Jane Richardson, deputy director of housing and strategic planning, London Borough of Bexley

Axonometric section



Working detail

The hybrid programme of Storyteller translates into hybrid construction; a story told in the folded geometries of a façade that wraps around its variegated interior. In fact, it is a self-supporting skin of small-scale Belgian brick, only 80mm deep, which, like the other building components, is slimmed down as far as possible to be lightweight and to maximise interior space within the constrained site while retaining its tectonic integrity.

It stands upon a precast plinth that negotiates the rising pavement. This is one of a series of precast elements that resolve geometries and weathering while giving image and continuity to the façade composition, counterpointing a panelised character that allows movement joints to be visually integrated along its 68m length.

Within, an expressive in-situ GGBS concrete frame defines the double-height ground-floor rooms. Its mass creates an acoustically isolating 'table', off which a steel frame encloses the plasterboard box-in-box construction of the cinema auditoriums and community room, while lightweight steel framing defines the residential component. Mechanical plant for the cinemas is placed directly above them, maximising efficiency, within a 'blue roof' that controls run-off. Above the apartments, a green roof supports photovoltaics and heat pumps. Against the party wall a ground-floor service corridor doubles as a spine to horizontally distribute mechanical and electrical services. The resulting building mass is light enough to be founded on a concrete raft, minimising ground works and, importantly, allowing the roots of an ancient holm oak to be bridged and protected.

Paolo Scianna, associate and project architect, DRDH Architects