WESTMINSTER

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Output  2      (Design)

# CEDARS ROAD

**Barber, Peter (2004-07)**
**Cedars Road Hostel, Clapham - and associated homeless hostels**

**General Description:**

Cedar's Road is one of a sequence of five homeless hostel designs by Peter Barber for St Mungo's Association, all of them located in the inner boroughs of London. It acts as a stepping stone or 'mini-foyer' facility in Clapham for homeless people who are attempting to make the important jump from institutionalised hostel living to independent living. This strategy is now enshrined as government policy, but these built projects by Peter Barber, including Cedar's Road, were the first to give it a more ambitious and distinctive architectural agenda. All of these hostels are part-funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government, and thus are expressly intended as research exemplars for others to learn from. As such, the Cedars Road Hostel needs to be seen in conjunction with the four other schemes for the same client association:

*   Church Walk in Hackney
*   Cinderella House in Southwark
*   St Pancras Way near Kings Cross
*   Ennersdale House in Lewisham - a larger scheme currently in design for a mixed scheme of homeless hostel and starter housing units

As a design, Barber's addition to the Cedars Road hostel is conceived as an expressive sculptural form made from a single ribbon of structure which folds back on itself to create the floors and primary spaces. It provides dayrooms, a kitchen, counselling rooms and studio flats, all with south views across beautiful lawned gardens. The Cinderella House in Southwark is another new-build project inserted into a underused back plot, whereas Church Walk and St Pancras Way involve the renovation of  Victorian houses.

**Research Questions:**

The primary issues in the Cedars Road Hostel and the others include:

(1) How to use the program requirements and site conditions in all these cases to create a new model of homeless hostel as community buildings on compact inner-city sites; Cedars Road was seen from the outset as the defining example, and so was essential it could serve as a protoype for a hostel that would be more welcoming and could give greater empowerment to residents, helping them towards an independent life.

(2) How to use the design of Cedars Road and the other hostels to create therapeutic communities in which the involvement of residents in running their own affairs can enable them to build up useful skills which they can use later on their own.

(3) How to utilise an extensive process of physical model-making to test out complex permutations for the layout of the hostels, and how to adapt construction technologies to meet the design objectives within very tight budget and construction schedules.

Thus the core of the research work behind Cedars Road (and the associated projects for homeless hostels) is to how to synchronize the demand for innovative, adventurous architecture with the overriding necessity of meeting vital community needs.

**Aims/Objectives:**

(1) The crucial issue which has been identified by Peter Barber, and the one which under-lay the design of Cedars Road Hostel and the other hostels, was how to reconceive and reposition the idea of an utopian social agenda within British architectural practice.

After the 'Oil Crisis' of 1973-74, and the subsequent withering away of the ideals of the Welfar State in Britain and other European countries, coupled with the assault of the free-market ideology of Thatcherism, the possibilities for a socially engaged practice of architecture has become ever harder. But it is equally true that the most vulnerable and dispossessed members of British society need the help of concerned professionals such as architects as much as - if not more than - ever before. So the problem has become how to reconcile these aims, and thereby to use architecture as a means to effect an im-provement in the lives of the least powerful members of our society, rather than just for the search of personal success and glory by architects.

(2) An objective of the Cedars Road Hostel and the other hostels is thus to test the notion that space conditions, and is in turn conditioned by, society and culture, and that there-fore architecture can create the potential for social action and activity.

The research driver in all of these projects is that of architecture as a social endeavour which can be deployed to meet, and ideally enhance, the needs of the community. Cedars Road and its companion hostels should thus be understood as an ambitious and innovative attempt to devise an architectural approach which can offer benefits to those who are in socially vulnerable positions without dominating or alienating them. Social intentions of architects need not always be patronising, misguided or negative, as writ-ers such as Colin Rowe tried to argue; conversely, they can empower and be beneficial. This can be seen in the resulting project for the Cedars Road Hostel, which is amongst the best exemplars of its kind in Britain, or indeed anywhere around the world.

(3) To give renewed currency to the spatial and visual language of Modernism, removing its negative associations or its recent re-absorption into the world of commercial design.

Cedars Road Hostel traces its lineage to the bold and experimental building types that progressive Modernist architects embarked upon in the early-twentieth century. Indeed, as a new building inserted into the back plot of a modest urban area, and a design which relies on glazed transparency and white abstract forms, an obvious parallel would be the seminal Open-Air School by Jan Duiker in 1930s South Amsterdam. Like that project, Cedars Road offers a dramatically new vision for an existing typology, in this case the homeless hostel - a building type which in social and architectural terms had hitheto been put near the bottom of the heap. In doing so, Peter Barber is also trying to direct Modernist architecture away from its more frequent use today in expensive stylish shops, restaurants and apartments, reconnecting it more to its original social ambitions.

(4) To re-establish a process of design which, while accepting the benefits of compu-ter-aided-design, still locates the key decisions in the realm of the hand-made, through sketching and physical model-making.

Any of the projects by Peter Barber rely heavily on his sketches to envisage the original moves, and then many models which come to clutter up his office as they get made and remade to test ideas. It is least a working hypothesis that the most creative architects today, from Koolhaas to Herzog to Chipperfield, all depend on lots of physical models.

**Context:**

The 'foyer' idea to provide a more inclusive type of hostel for urban homeless people is one which developed in France and then was taken up in Britain a decade or so ago, but which had never really achieved any real substance before. Now the concept of a temporary bridging hostel that can empower the homeless is being given a renewed lease of life, along with a more dramatic and attractive architectural treatment, through these five projects so far by Peter Barber Architects for St Mungo's Association.

It is a novel approach that is being warmly welcomed by the client, St Mungo's Association, which declares itself absolutely delighted with the Cedars Road Hostel. 'We didn't know what to expect at first', says one of their managers, Cliff Dymond, 'but what we've got is something spectacular and innovative, and something which really responds to our buzzword of a "Place of Change".' [*RIBA Journal*, August 2007, p. 46]

Hostels are widely seen by the government and other agencies as imperative in the fight against homelessness, and have helped cut the number of those sleeping rough from around 2,000 people in 1998 to just 500 now. There are about 35,000 bed spaces in homeless hostels across Britain, with about 20,000 in London. The policy of encouraging people to stay in hostels is seen as vital by the Department of Communities and Local Government in tackling the associated problems of alcohol and drug abuse, given that hostel dwellers fare much better in such matters. An added dimension to the problem is that people from black and other ethnic minority populations are more highly represented amongst those who are homeless, meaning the issue is one that is related to the general distribution of wealth and power in British society. The difficulty in providing hostels however is to stop hostel residents from becoming institutionalised; hence the urgent need for innovative models such as Cedars Road to encourage its residents to become more self-reliant, build lives they can then continue outside within the wider community. It is for this reason the government has given such strongly support to important pilots like those designed by Peter Barber Architects.

**Research Methods:**

Numerous visits were made to all of the five hostel sites in order to understand their inherent complexity and potentials. Extensive dicussions were then held with the client body, St Mungo's, and also the relevant officials in the Department of Communities and Local Givernment, to research into what kinds of innovation could be made in terms of the spatial and institutional needs of the buildings' inhabitants. Concurrently a variety of programmatic solutions and spatial permutations, as well as the detailed three-dimensional complexity of each of the buildings and their surroundings, were tested out through extensive physical model-making and other forms of visualisation. These analyses in turn allowed the refinement of the overall configuration of the building in terms of accessibility, circulation, lighting conditions, structural expression, historical references and general functional viability. The many physical models were all constructed with the same logic as the real construction operations on site, being regularly and quickly updated throughout the whole process.

Another important aspect of the research carried out by Peter Barber involved not just looking at precedents in homeless hostel design, such as in the French 'foyer' system, but also into the legacy of Modernism and above all leading contemporary practitiners such as Oscar Niemeyer or Alvaro Siza.

**Dissemination:**

Cedars Road and the other hostels have been written up variously in the architectural press, with the most extensive and glowing testimony for Cedars Road appearing in:

• Kucharek, Jan-Carlos. 'Transition Zone'. *RIBA Journal*, August 2007, pp. 40-46.

Peter Barber is frequently invited to give public lectures on his architectural work, now having presented nearly 50 talks across Britain and in countries abroad. As well as the perhaps more expected lectures to architectural schools, the RIBA, or the Architectural League of New York, these talks by Barber have also included an invitation to address a symposium on contemporary urbanism in Genoa, Italy (May 2005), or the special session on housing policy at the Labour Party Conference in Manchester (October 2006), or most recently at a multidisciplinary event on urban development for Middle Eastern city mayors held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran, Iran (October 2007).Talking about the Cedars Road Hostel, and indeed the other hostels for St Mungo's Association, forms a major element of these public lectures on his design work.

**Esteem Indicators:**

Cedars Road and the other hostels by Peter Barber for St Mungo's Association were part-funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government, and are now held up by that body as exemplars of good design practice for other hostel associations and their architects to follow.

In part due to his work on Cedars Road Hostel and similar schemes for housing homeless people, Peter Barber has recently been awarded with the following prize:

• Winner of Affordable Housing Architect of the Year in the *Building Design* Annual Awards (2007)

In the judges' praises for the work of Peter Barber Architects in gaining this award, it should be noted that the Cedars Road Hostel was described as being 'beautifully crafted'. [*Building Design*, 2 November 2007. p. 11]

Image 1: Photo of Cedars Road Hostel showing its 'back-plot' context

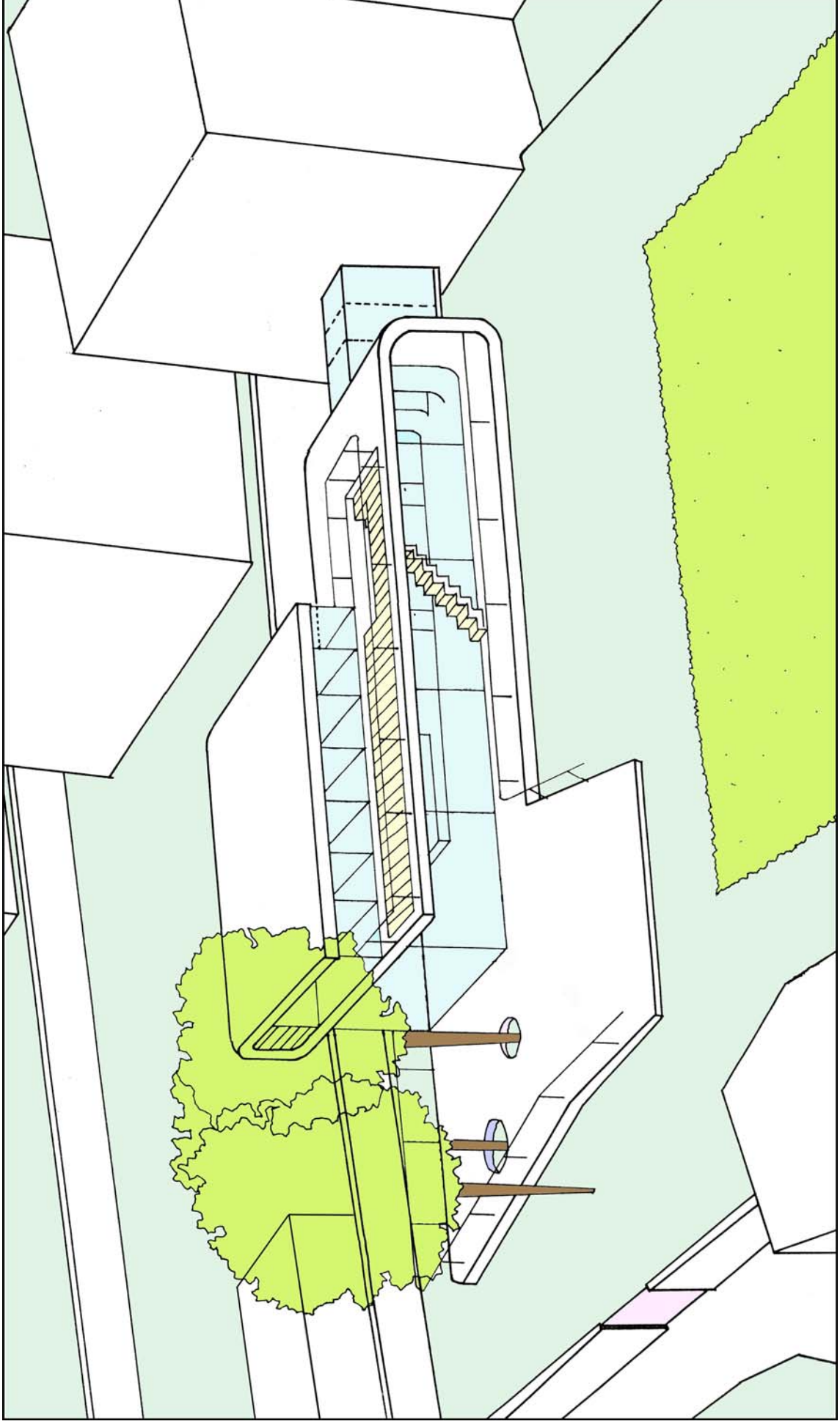Image 2:   Site plan of Cedars Road Hostel

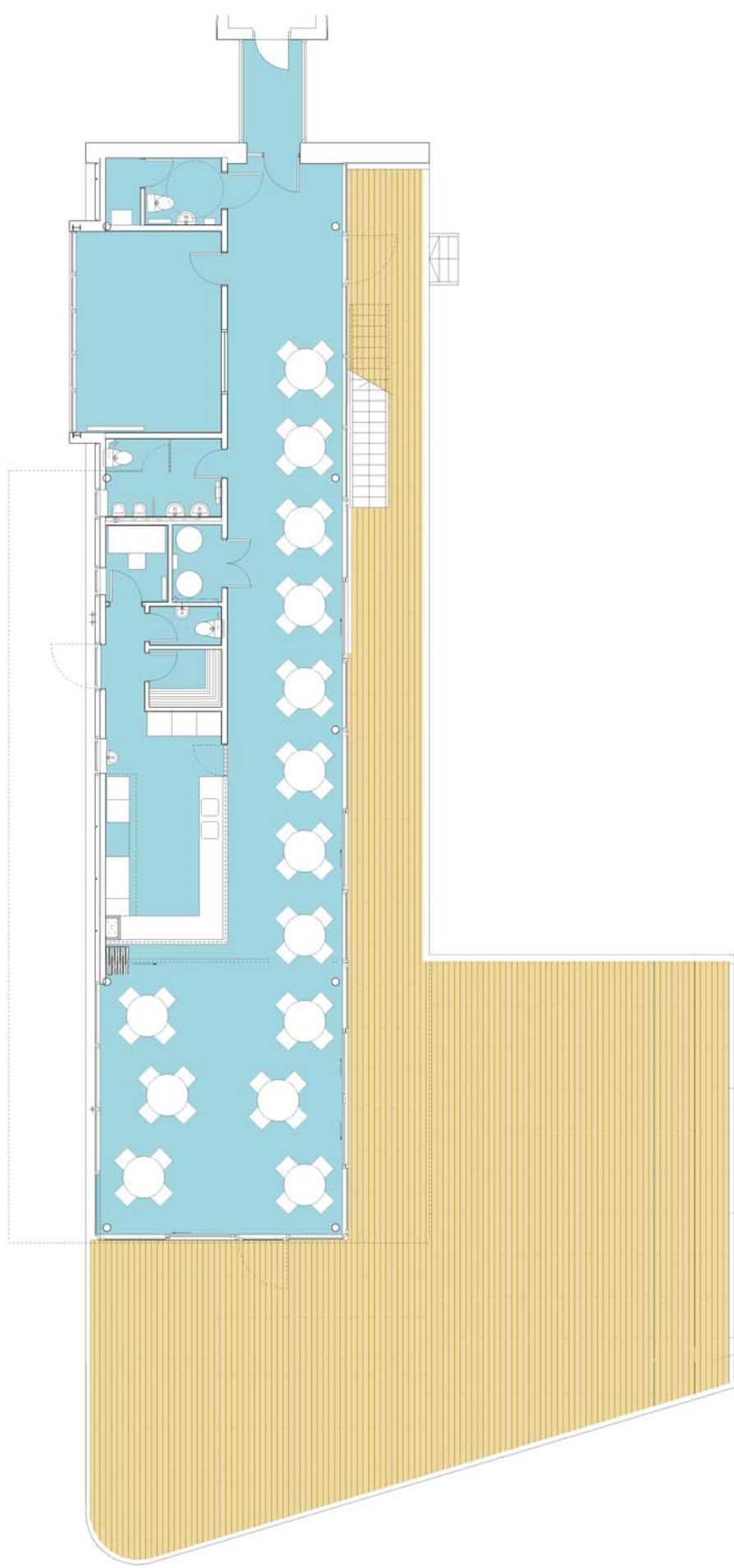Image 3: Isometric projection of Cedars Road Hostel

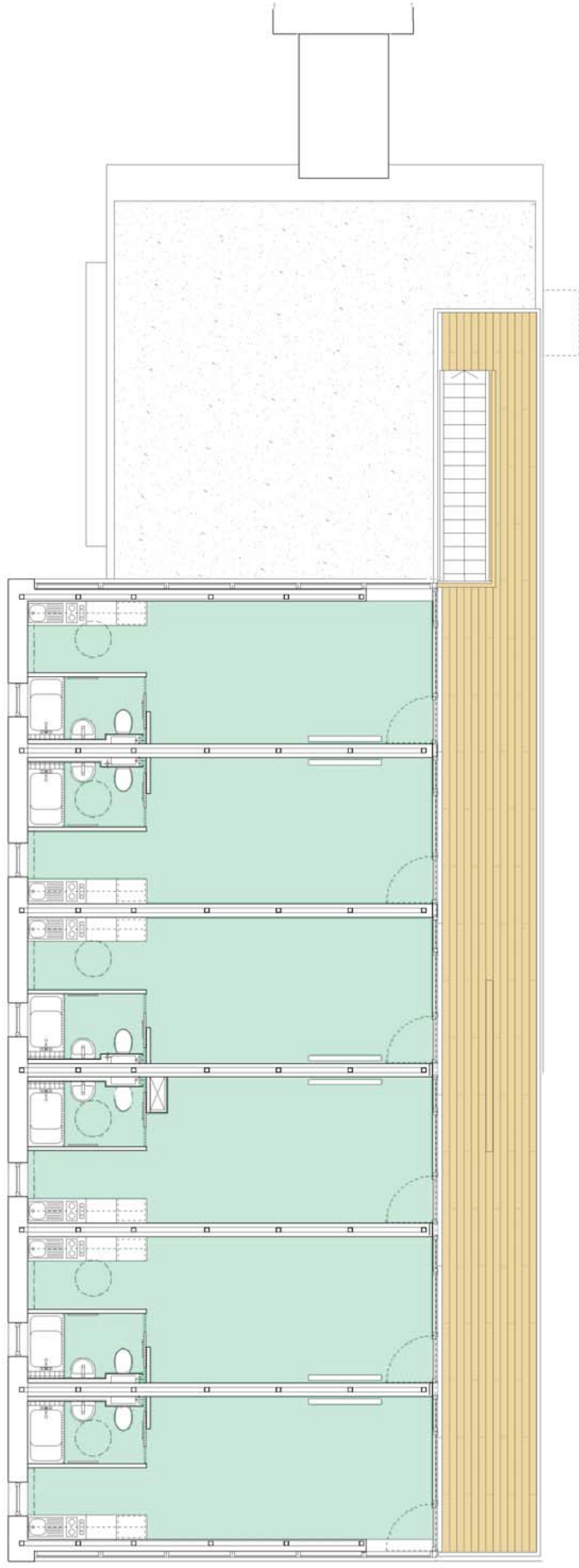Image 4: Ground Floor plan of Cedars Road Hostel

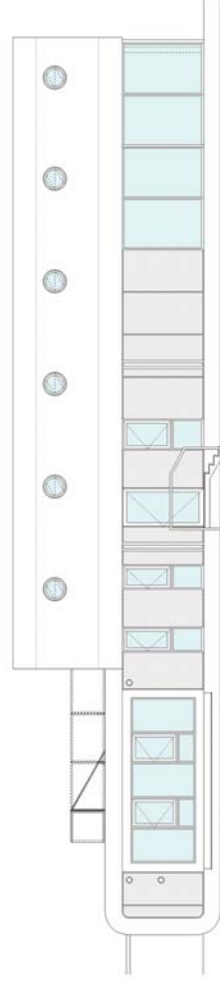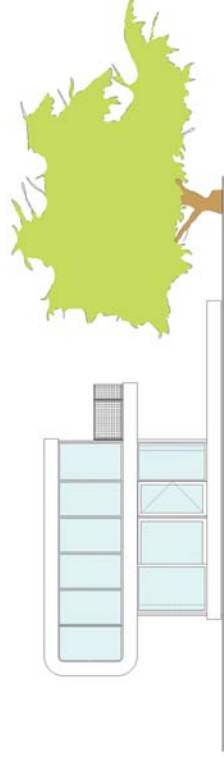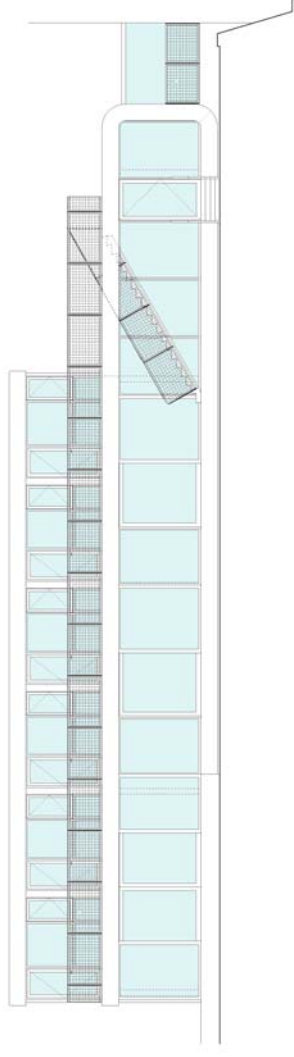Image 5: First Floor plan of Cedars Road Hostel

Image 6: Elevations of Cedars Road Hostel

Image 7: Model of Cedars Road Hostel

Image 8:  Model of Cedars Road Hostel

Image 9: Photo of Cedars Road Hostel with gardens in front

Image 10:  Photos of Cedars Road Hostel

Image 11: Photos of Cedars Road Hostel

Image 12:  Cinderella House Hostel in Southwark, showing an alternative design configuration for another 'back-plot' hostel

Image 13: Axonometric view of latest design proposal for Ennersdale House, Lewisham, showing a larger homeless hostel mixed with start-up housing units around a communal garden
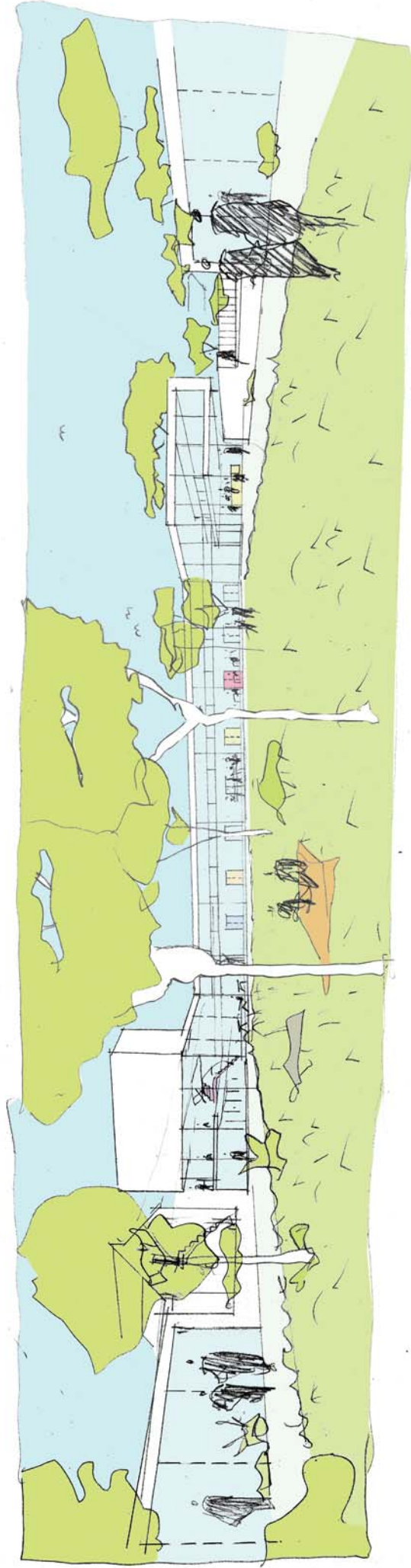
Image 14:  Sketch of Ennersdale House showing the buildings encircling the garden

Image 15: Model of proposal for Ennersdale House showing its 'back-plot' status