

COMMUNITY CATALYSTS

The RIBA's Community Projects Fund has established itself as a valuable pump-primer for voluntary sector building projects and has opened up a promising new area of work for architects. *Nick Wates* reports on the Fund's first two years and some projects which have benefitted from employing a Fund-financed architect.

IN Penzance this autumn, an abandoned warehouse in the town centre is re-opening as a 'drop-in' centre for the young unemployed. There will be a coffee bar, information office and space for such things as repairing motorbikes, holding meetings and band practice.

At almost the same time, an old flint farm store next to the duck pond in Ashill, Norfolk will open as a 'social meeting point' for the elderly, with a luncheon club, chiropody clinic and branch surgery.

Both projects were initiated by small voluntary organisations comprised of the eventual users – a handful of unemployed teenagers in the former case and of elderly people in the latter. And both have come to fruition through a grant from the RIBA's Community Projects Fund which enabled these organisations to employ an architect. They are just two of 66 projects funded in the last two years and they herald a new approach to designing social facilities which couples the expertise of the architect

with the initiative of users.

In its evidence in 1982 to the House of Commons Environment Committee inquiry into urban renewal, the RIBA stated: "Lack of professional and management skills has been a major obstacle holding back local self-help initiatives and has prevented many people from gaining access to funds to which they are entitled." The Community Projects Fund attempts to overcome this problem, and not just for urban areas.

The scheme is funded by an annual grant from the DoE's Urban Initiatives Fund (Special Grants Programme) which is matched by the RIBA (mainly in staff resources). The RIBA uses the money to make small grants to voluntary organisations normally unable to afford professional advice so that they can employ architects to undertake feasibility studies for building and other environmental projects. If the projects obtain capital funding, the money is returned to the RIBA and recycled. The steady

increase in the DoE allocation – from £12,000 in 1982/3 to £16,000 in 1983/4 and £36,000 in 1984/85 – is evidence of the Government's satisfaction with the scheme and is part of growing DoE support for the voluntary sector. Voluntary projects in urban areas received £60 million under the urban programme last year compared with £18 million in 1979/80 – an increase of more than 300 per cent in five years.

It is also part of a significant change in DoE priorities. Announcing plans for voluntary sector funding for 1984 Environment Secretary Patrick Jenkin said there would be "an important change of direction. We are embracing the concept of supporting the 'enabling' organisations. These bodies help to make the work of local volunteers more productive and more effective. They can help local groups undertake projects which might otherwise not have got off the ground."

The RIBA scheme, thought up and administered by the Institute's Community Archi-

ecture Group (formerly Community Projects Group), aims at doing precisely that. Surprisingly perhaps, voluntary groups can often obtain funds for building projects relatively easily – from local authorities, industry or charities. But only if they have well worked out proposals. Their difficulty is paying for the professional assistance necessary to draw up the proposals which have to be designed to adequate standards, comply with planning and building regulations and be accurately costed. It is this crucial gap – between good ideas and viable schemes – which the scheme is designed to fill.

In the first two years over 200 applications were received despite the absence of much publicity. To make the limited funds stretch as far as possible a ceiling of £500 per project was imposed – less than half the real cost of a feasibility study in most cases.

The most distinctive thing about the 66 projects selected is their diversity. There are 36



Finlay: RIBA's CAG chairman

different types of client organisation ranging from play associations to parish councils and from small business centres to ethnic women's groups. Projects range from converting a redundant abattoir to workshops and a church to a community centre to an inner city regeneration strategy and the restoration of a reservoir. At least 35 different project types can be identified although they are hard to define when they propose several uses not normally associated with one another. For instance, there is a proposal by a trust in Frome, Somerset to convert a Grade II listed building to provide workshops for the unemployed, a shop for the workshop users to sell their wares, a café, an art gallery and a caretaker's flat.

Over half the projects involve conversions, one third new-build, and the remainder a smattering of environmental improvements, development plans and campaigns to save buildings or communities.

The projects are spread evenly throughout the country with one quarter in London, a quarter in other large cities, a quarter in small provincial towns and a quarter in rural areas or villages. But common to all is an attempt by ordinary citizens to reshape their environment to provide social facilities - designed by a partnership of users and architects - for which there is strongly felt local need and for which an enthusiastic group of people already exists to ensure adequate future management. It is this which makes these projects such a departure from the centralised provision of facilities, so often inappropriate, badly designed by architects remote from the users and ultimately abused by the people they were intended for, which has been the hallmark of post-war social architecture.

How many of these projects will ultimately come to fruition is uncertain. Some are bogged

down by bureaucracy or political opposition. Many are awaiting decisions from planning and funding authorities. If they all went ahead the total value of building work would be several million pounds.

Until more are completed it is impossible to assess the ultimate value of this brand of community architecture. But Ian Finlay, an architect with Design Co-operative in Manchester and chairman of the RIBA's Community Architecture Group is optimistic about the scheme. "It satisfies the growing demand from the general public to have a say in their environment, it's employment generating and it's very cost effective because it's decentralised," he says. "The projects provide a clear demonstration of creativity within the community and the extent to which a catalyst role can be provided by architects."

His hope is that the projects will eventually provide widespread and concrete evidence that the environment works better when the users are involved in shaping it. He accepts, however, that the work involves significant changes in the professional's role. Architects have to get involved in project management, fund-raising and education since many people are dealing with architects and architecture for the first time.

Doubts over the scheme from architects involved centre mainly around money. The ceiling for grants has been raised from £500 to £750 but even this is rarely enough. "A lot more architects would like to get involved but they can't do because it costs them a lot of money," says Finlay. There is also a certain amount of frustration over obstacles put in their way by landowners, planners and funding authorities unused to treating the voluntary sector as a viable developer (though the prestige value of RIBA backing has proved useful in several cases).

Despite these difficulties, architects appear to enjoy the work and a wide range of architectural practices are now involved. "At the beginning it tended to be architects with a track record in community architecture. Now a wide range of practices are taking it on," says Lynne Hutton, the RIBA officer dealing with the scheme.

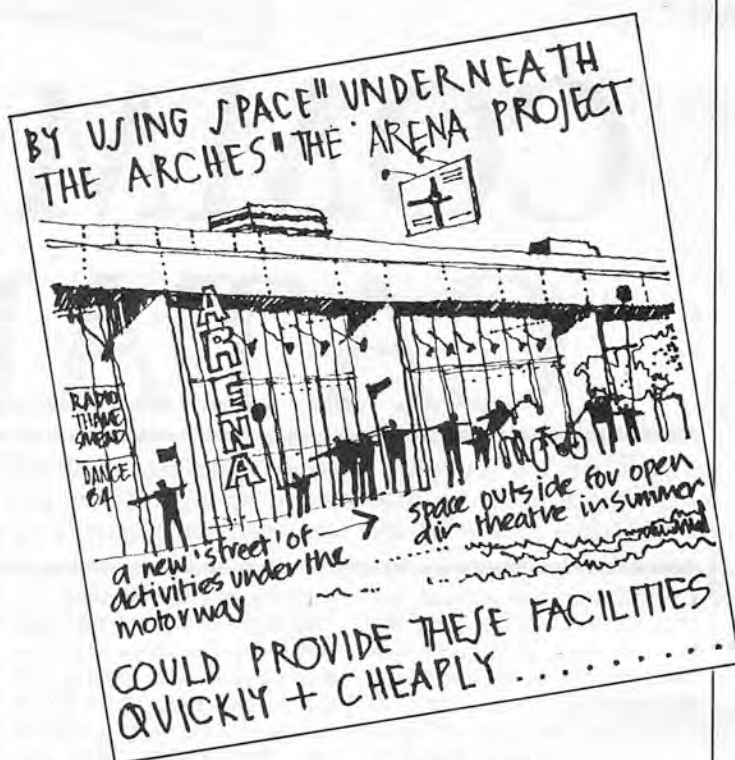
With two years' experience under its belt, the Community

Architecture Group is hoping to expand the scheme by attracting additional funding. It also intends to decentralise the scheme so that applications are dealt with at regional level. Community architecture coordinators have been appointed in most regions and it is hoped they will be able to tap local sources of funding and initiative as well as being better placed to judge the merits of applications from voluntary groups in their area.

With an annual budget of only £72,000, the scheme is at present little more than a pilot project and an interesting ex-

periment. Whether it has greater significance will depend on whether the facilities prove to be more efficient, useful and popular than the equivalent provided by conventional means. If they do, and if as a result the principle of funding users to employ architects directly can be extended more widely, the community projects scheme may prove to be one of the most important RIBA initiatives of the decade.

Application forms and grant conditions are available from Lynne Hutton, Community Projects Fund, RIBA, 66 Portland Place, London WIN 4AD (01-580 5533).



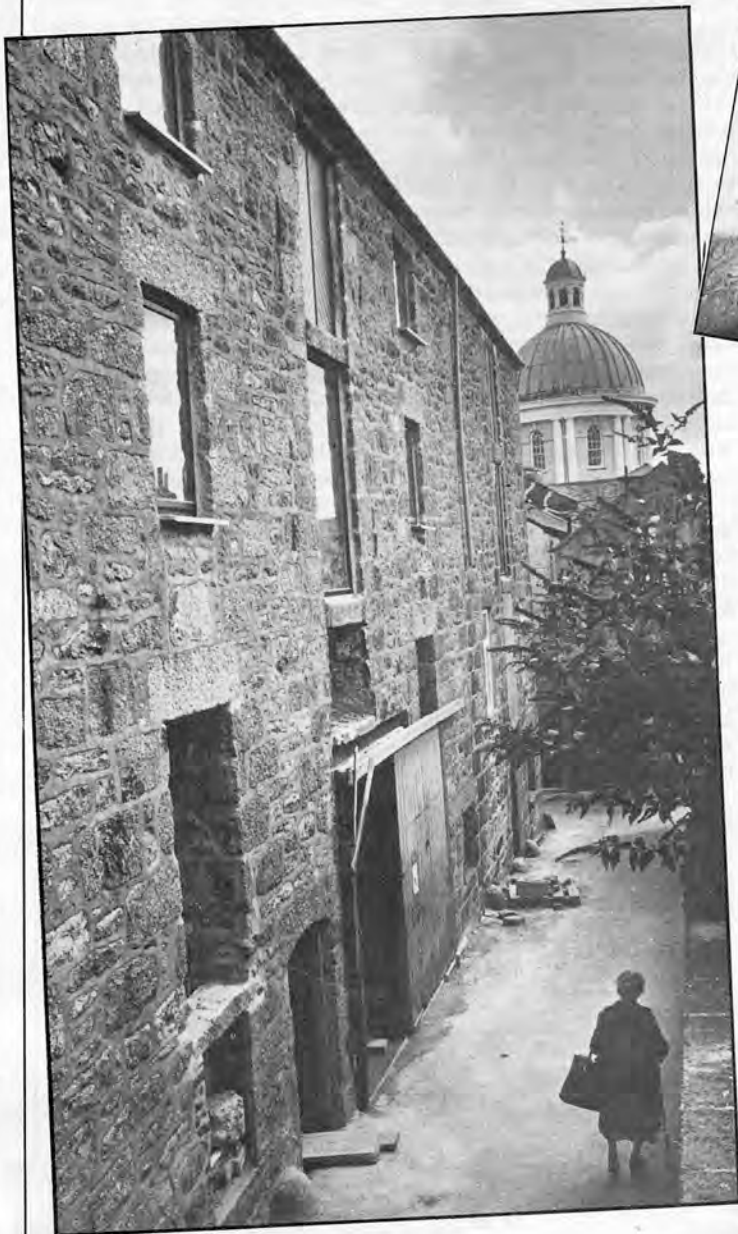
THAMESMEAD'S NEW THEATRE

The Arena Project was launched by Trust Thamesmead in 1982 to explore the possibility of building a theatre for schools and the local drama club.

THAMESMEAD, with a population of 22,000 and expected to rise to 40,000, is a new town being developed mainly by the Greater London Council. Trust Thamesmead is a registered charity set up on the initiative of local people in 1976 to rectify deficiencies in the town's recreational and social facilities. It is run by a council made up of four local authorities and individuals from several local voluntary organisations and interest

groups.

Trust Thamesmead's aims are "to encourage people and groups in Thamesmead to express their hopes and ambitions" and "to create an imaginative community lifestyle". With 32 local groups now under its umbrella it has had considerable success in initiating and raising money for a range of projects - from a swimming pool to a good neighbour scheme. But funds raised are tied to specific projects and the



SOCIAL CENTRE WAREHOUSE

Breadline is a project initiated and run by unemployed young people in Penzance to convert a derelict warehouse into a centre for social activities.

ACCOMMODATION at the new Penzance youth centre will include a coffee bar, meeting room, office and project space for band practice and motor-bike repair. The organisers – the Penzance Youth Forum – see it as a ‘refuge’, an information office and volunteer bureau providing counselling, work experience, education/training, domestic facilities and recreation. It will be managed by the young unemployed themselves. Building work started in March and completion is expected in November.

The Penzance Youth Forum was started in 1982 by 12 unemployed youngsters. Technically a sub-committee of the Penwith Youth Development Council it represents a desire by the young unemployed to organise their own activity rather than rely on that provided by well meaning adults.

High unemployment rates in Cornwall are compounded by Penzance’s role as a holiday resort. While thriving in the summer, in winter “it’s a ghost town”, according to Youth Forum Chairman Nick Walton – “the only places open are the pubs and we have no money to buy drinks.”

A survey by four youth leaders in 1982 revealed the need for an unemployment centre in Penzance and Penwith District Council agreed to lease to the Youth Forum a

disused warehouse in Bread Street for £1 a year. The project was named ‘Breadline’.

Architect Dilwyn Lloyd was approached by the Forum and, with the aid of a £500 grant, prepared a feasibility study for conversion and secured planning and building regulations approvals. Building works include refurbishment of the structure, installation of services, fireproofing and new staircase and partitioning.

Conversion of the building by young unemployed people is seen as an essential part of the project. Building work has been designed to be labour intensive with low material costs – for instance all new joinery will be constructed on site. The Manpower Services Commission is executing the work under its Community Programme scheme with the local authority as managing agent. The Commission is also being asked to fund the running costs of the project.

Capital costs (materials only) are estimated at £16,500. By March 1 when work on the first phase started on site, the Youth Forum had raised £2,500 by organising rock band contests and other events. Grants totalling £6,500 had been secured from the County Council and the private sector and the Church of St Paul and St Mary had initiated a fund-raising scheme with a target of £2,000.

Trust still operates on a shoestring.

The idea for a community theatre arose from the needs of the drama club and schools. The nearest theatre is at Woolwich, a difficult bus journey and five miles away.

Architects Brian Carter and Annette Lecuyer were approached because of the Trust’s admiration for the way they had handled an earlier project for a youth club. A brief was drawn up for a theatre seating 100-120 together with support facilities. A £500 grant was obtained from the RIBA and the architects produced a feasibility study including details of costs (total £165,000), possible sources of funding, manage-

ment and relevant legislation. After examining five alternatives, a site was chosen using arches under an elevated roadway. The study includes ideas for adjacent arches and open space so as “to animate and transform this small part of the new town” and concludes: “such development would not only provide important and much needed amenities inexpensively but also bring new life to what is currently a shoddy backwater of left over space.”

The Trust has now approached the Greater London Council and various charitable institutions for capital funding and if successful intends to apply for an urban aid grant for running costs.

SPECIAL NEEDS SPORTS CENTRE

An indoor riding school for the disabled and other sports facilities are to be built in a disused railway shed in Broadbottom, on the edge of the Pennines.

THE sports centre project was initiated by Broadbottom Community Association, a voluntary group and registered charity. The Association attempted to obtain a disused railway shed for a community centre in 1978 but failed to persuade British Rail to grant a lease, so they resorted to building a new centre instead. But the appearance of a 'for sale' sign in 1981 prompted the Association to renew its efforts to find a suitable use for the rapidly deteriorating railway shed,

empty since 1970.

Community Regeneration – an architect and librarian team specialising in enabling local groups to undertake community projects – were contacted and asked for advice on appropriate uses. "We have at present no money and no skills but interest and enthusiasm," wrote the Association's Honorary Secretary Pat Hetherington. With the aid of an RIBA grant of £500 Community Regeneration held discussions with a number of local orga-

nisations, British Rail and the local Tameside Council and produced a feasibility study. Quantity surveying and structural engineering services were obtained as well as those of timber treatment and heating engineering.

Conversion possibilities are limited by proximity to an operational railway, the need to maintain access to a high voltage electricity cable below the ground floor and a forest of cast iron columns. Community Regeneration concluded that commercial interests were unlikely to be able to restore and regenerate the building and that the voluntary sector was more likely to be successful if the right package could be assembled.

With the help of a working model, a preferred option evolved for using the ground floor as an indoor riding school for the disabled to be run by the Riding for the Disabled Association. The upper floor is to be a training space for the Longendale Gymnastic Club which has been looking for premises for 18 months.

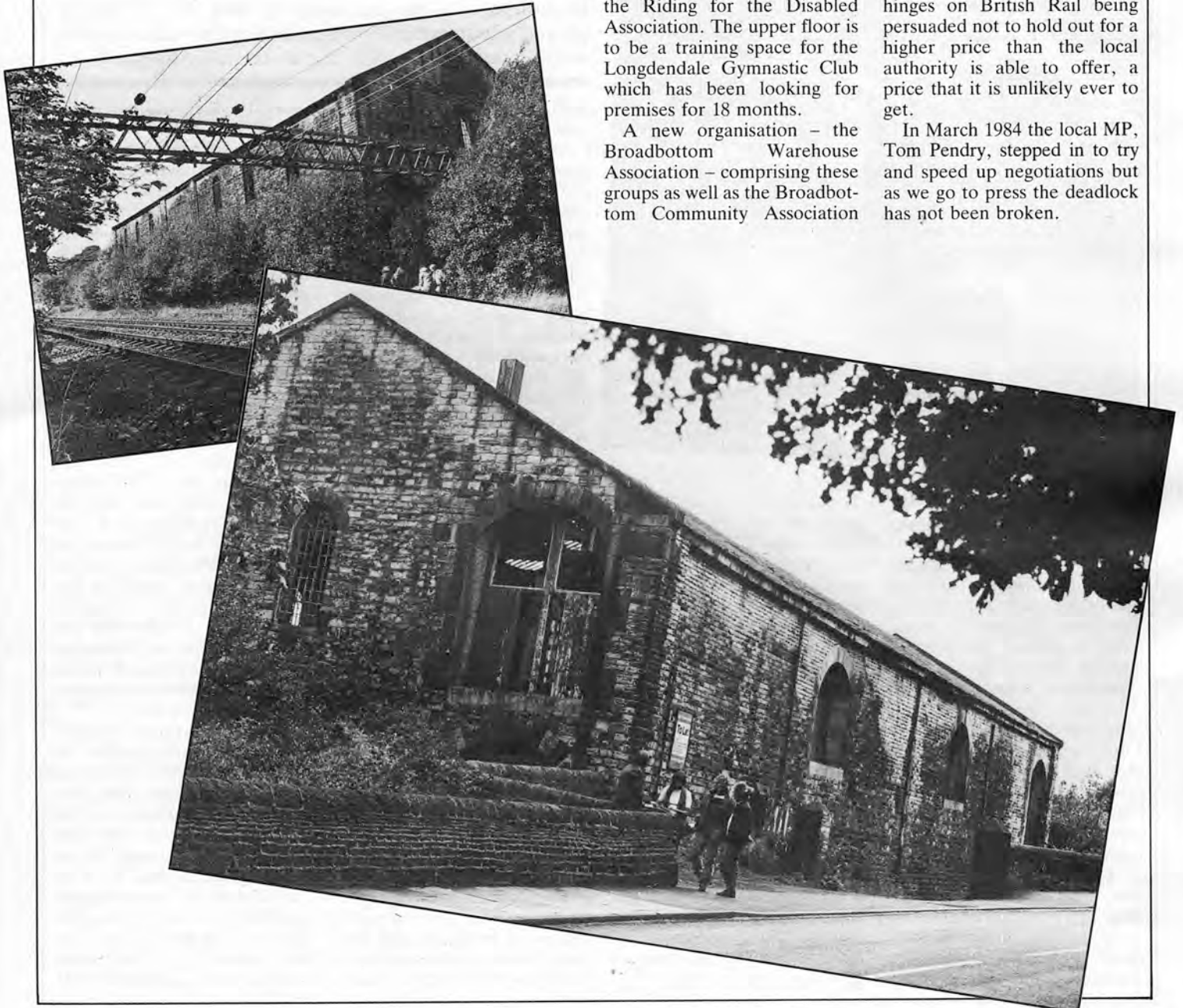
A new organisation – the Broadbottom Warehouse Association – comprising these groups as well as the Broadbottom Community Association

and the local amenity and heritage trusts was formed to pursue the proposal and, hopefully, to manage the completed scheme. In July 1983 Tameside Council agreed to back the scheme by making a bid to buy the building from British Rail and lease it to the Association.

Capital costs are estimated at £165,000, or £100,000 if the project is taken up by the Manpower Services Commission. Work involves restoration of the shell and provision of new staircases, services and a range of back-up facilities at either end of the building. Two mezzanines are planned which include viewing galleries.

Once completed, the project will be self-financing. Capital funds are being sought from the urban programme, the Sports Council and the Riding for Disabled Association. All three sources are reported to be enthusiastic and the project hinges on British Rail being persuaded not to hold out for a higher price than the local authority is able to offer, a price that it is unlikely ever to get.

In March 1984 the local MP, Tom Pendry, stepped in to try and speed up negotiations but as we go to press the deadlock has not been broken.





WORKSPACE SHARED

The Horse and Groom Small Business Centre, Cheltenham, is to create cheap offices, workshops and studios in a vacant property owned by the Council.

THERE is growing demand for small business units as an increasing number of people become redundant and want to start up on their own. Two schemes already set up by the Horse and Groom Small Business Centre – a non-profit-making company run by an architect Rod Smith and journalist Ted Stevens – are now oversubscribed. These provide 20 spaces for small firms which range from a bookshop to a stained glass restorer and a computer company to a musical instrument maker. Both buildings are run on a non-profit-making basis and, after loans for construction costs have been repaid, will be run by the firms that occupy them.

Rents are lower than for similar space in the area, being set at levels that just cover outgoings. Users also benefit from shared facilities – common reception, secretarial and kitchen facilities – and from mutual support in the form of advice and the exchange of services.

Impressed by these projects but unwilling to get involved in such complex small-scale man-

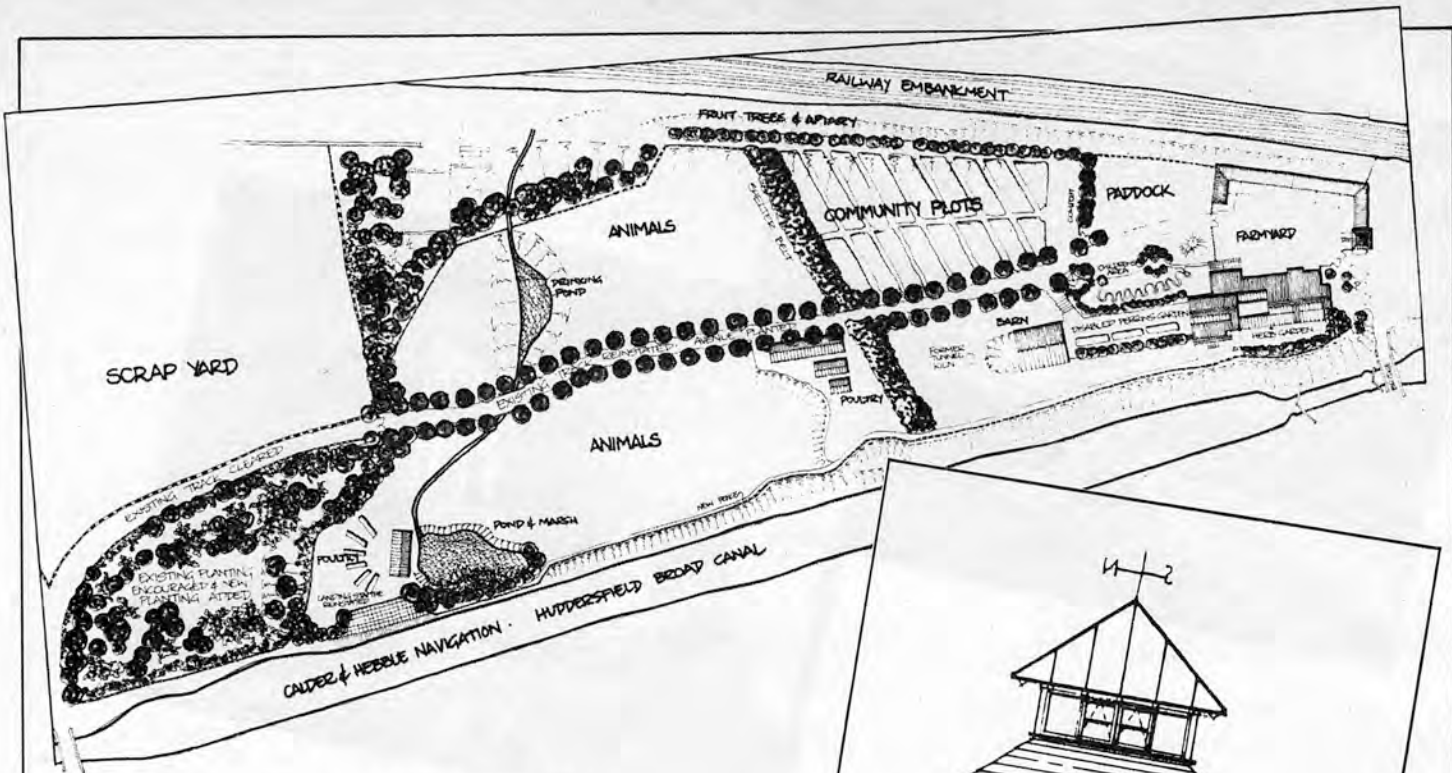
agement, Cheltenham Borough Council approached Horse and Groom to see if a run-down building in Council ownership – Norfolk House – could be tackled on the same basis.

The RIBA paid £500 towards a feasibility study by Rod Smith which found that conversion into 15 units would cost £55,000 (materials only). Horse and Groom propose that the project should be done by the Manpower Services Commission, employing 25-30 unemployed building workers under its Community Programme.

The MSC would contribute £18,000 towards materials, the Historic Buildings Council has been asked for a grant of £4,000 and the remainder will be financed by a cheap loan from the Architectural Heritage Fund. Once completed the project will be self-financing.

If the scheme goes ahead it will tidy up a derelict corner of the city centre, bring a vacant building into use, create training and employment for building workers and give a small boost to the small business sector of Cheltenham.





HUDDERSFIELD'S URBAN FARM

Urban farms are educational and recreational establishments giving urban dwellers experience of rural activities they do not otherwise have access to.

A GROUP of individuals interested in starting an urban farm in Huddersfield formed an *ad hoc* working group and were tentatively offered the three-acre Fieldhouse Fireclay Brickworks site by the local Kirklees Metropolitan Council. On the strength of their known experience of urban farms and working for community organisations, architects Tod Petherick Allen were asked to prepare a feasibility study with the aid of a £500 RIBA grant.

Total capital costs are likely to be in excess of £150,000. But with funding and organisation uncertain, the architects drew up a flexible incremental strategy making maximum use of salvaged materials and Manpower Services programmes. Work stages are designed to be complete in themselves and provide opportunities for job satisfaction and training. A low energy approach to buildings is adopted with use of Porta-

kabins and temporary structures pending provision of mains services and finance for permanent buildings.

Facilities proposed include allotments, a market garden, raised beds for the disabled, a herb garden, an orchard, an apiary, a greenhouse, grassed areas for grazing animals, ducks and a children's play and a farm yard. Buildings include kitchen and canteen, space for teaching and social functions, stables, barns, workshops and washing facilities.

After completion of the feasibility study Kirklees Metropolitan Council took over sponsorship of the project because the working party did not feel strong enough. The group, however, will eventually run the project as the local authority has no wish to do so. Involving more people and strengthening the group is seen as an essential part of the project.



An urban aid grant of £3,500 has been secured and, although the bulk of finance has not been found, an MSC community programme started reclamation work on site last spring. Volunteer weekends have been organised by the working party and it is hoped that the project will snowball.

Architect Nick Allen describes the project as "an excellent example of the benefits of this kind of pump-priming exercise. If the group had not had the RIBA money it would have disappeared into the ether."

