

FORM FOLLOWS FICTION

Medieval ruins and the foundations of long-demolished Victorian warehouses are the starting points for Lynch Architects' romantic Abbey Green masterplan, writes *Jay Merrick*



IMAGES COURTESY OF PATRICK LYNCH

West Gate of Abbey

A view from Abbey Road, from the new courtyards that could one day re-situate the Abbey as part of a series of thresholds between the river and the town. The West Gate would have towered above everything else for miles around. Something of the height of this will be recovered in the bell, which will sit atop a simple timber pole, vulnerable to destruction, available to warn of floods and acting as a *memento mori*, a weak monument. *Claudia and Patrick Lynch*

Abbey Green: next steps

- Lynch Architects' masterplan for Abbey Green has been approved for application by London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
- A Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) bid financed by Design for London (DfL) was submitted in March. Match funding is also required for the project to proceed. East London Green Grid has expressed interest in supporting the project. The HLF will make its decision in June
- A planning application, again financed by DfL, will now be made
- Full project funding and an approved application are expected by February 2011

Opposite Aerial drawing of the site, finished in watercolour

Barking town centre contains two of the most socio-economically deprived wards in a Britain where the top 20 per cent of British earners are now making 75 times more than the bottom 20 per cent. The current Barking Riverside and town centre regeneration schemes are the first large-scale development projects since the 1960s, and there can be few more interesting tableaux of urban regeneration than the 2.5ha area bounded by Ripple Road to the east, Abbey Green and Abbey Road to the west, and East Street and St Paul's Road on its other edges.

It is on the western edge of the town centre, a literal stone's throw from the wharf on Barking Creek where billions of herring were landed between the 14th and early 20th centuries, that Lynch Architects is developing its scheme for Abbey Green, having won a Design for London-sponsored competition

to reinvent it (AJ 08.10.09) and give it a fresh and newly meaningful presence. Lynch's will be the third of three regenerative architectural and public realm schemes in the town centre.

All three schemes are, in very different ways, fictions. Allford Hall Monaghan Morris' Barking Central mixed-use blocks face the Town Hall, above whose portal a banner proclaims, 'Supporting You Through Tough Times, We Have Frozen Your Council Tax'. The developer's approach to placemaking here lacks only loudspeakers broadcasting Ian Dury's *Reasons to be Cheerful, Part Three* to complete their contextual 'blingkrieg'. Muf's treatment of the groundplane between the mixed-use blocks and the Town Hall, with the *memento mori* of a 'ruinous' wall and beautifully childish birch grove, is a wittily phantasmal counterweight to the development's lip-gloss colours. >>

Basement gallery for 19th-century industrial ruins

This image was made for the competition and it shows a sunken gallery revealing ruins of 19th-century warehouses that were demolished in the 1980s. This space sits below a sloped grass bank, which acts as a notional 'city wall' to Abbey Road. It has been conceived as something like a hollow retaining wall or an opened basement. Lighting comes from rooflights set in the concrete ceiling voids. The space will not be heated. *Claudia and Patrick Lynch*



Three hundred metres to the west, in Abbey Green, Lynch's scheme will create a landscape in which fragment, form, and spatial organisation are part-literal and part-fictional embodiments of historical precedent relating to the Green, and the nearby ruins of Barking's 7th-century Abbey. The scheme's graceful approach to the Green and the site of the Abbey is part of a wider masterplan by the practice designed to regenerate what are currently retail shed sites along Barking Creek, and to strongly support the listing of the Abbey ruins as a World Heritage Site.

Practice director Patrick Lynch is interested in how history and the auras and details of place can be re-expressed through architecture in ways that are distinctly suggestive, yet also fugitive. The architectural eye will look at his visualisations and automatically deduce the stripped classicism of Sverre Fehn's Nordic Pavilion in Venice; but there is an extra level of artifice here, as if Donald Judd's concrete artworks had emerged, purified and given a

travertine-like patina, from the prism of the legendary spiritual virginity associated with the Abbey's nuns.

Thus, the fictions of artifice have very clearly been based on evidence of what has existed here, and what remains of it. Abbey Green as a whole possesses a notably quiet gravitas, despite the fact that its main public open space is flat and bounded on two sides by busy roads. Lynch, working initially with landscape architect Lynn Kinnear, has realised that his interventions must not 'busy' this ensemble of spaces unnecessarily, or the intervening St Margaret's churchyard, a highly atmospheric glade-like monument to terminal Victorian exhaustion.

Lynch's design rationale is too dense with historic reference to be described in detail here. But its main move is to make the Abbey ruins accessible with very carefully applied, elegantly formed and relatively lightweight concrete structures that will subtly frame and programme the visitor experience: the >>

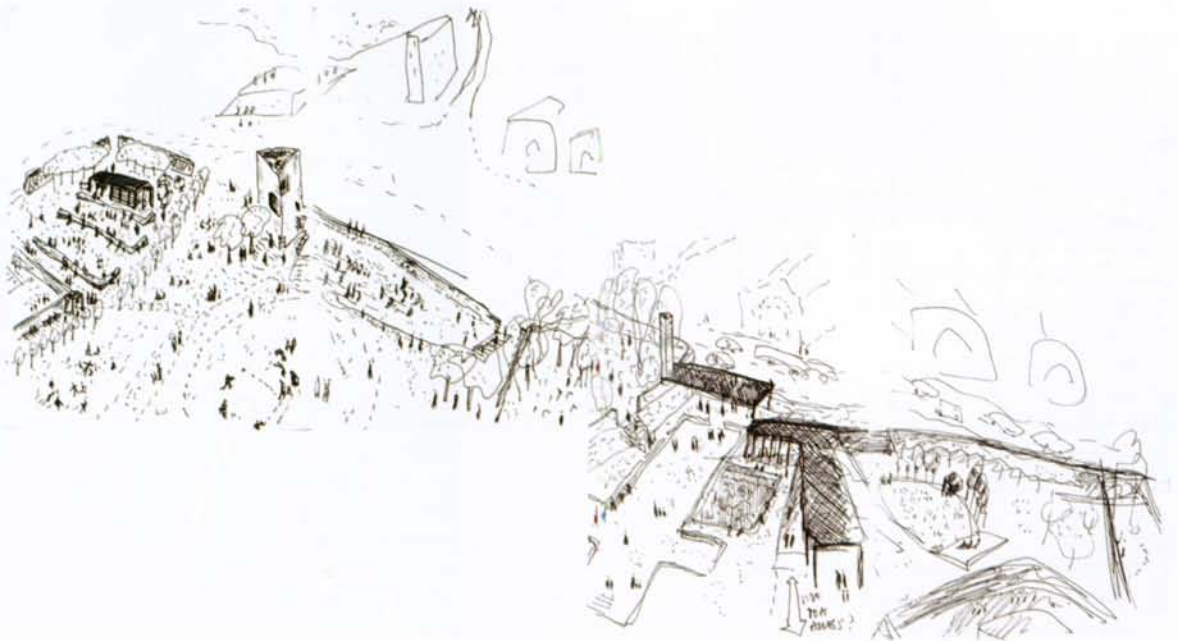


Above Sketch showing relationship between the visitors' centre's basement

Right Sketch of Lynch Architects' Abbey Green masterplan

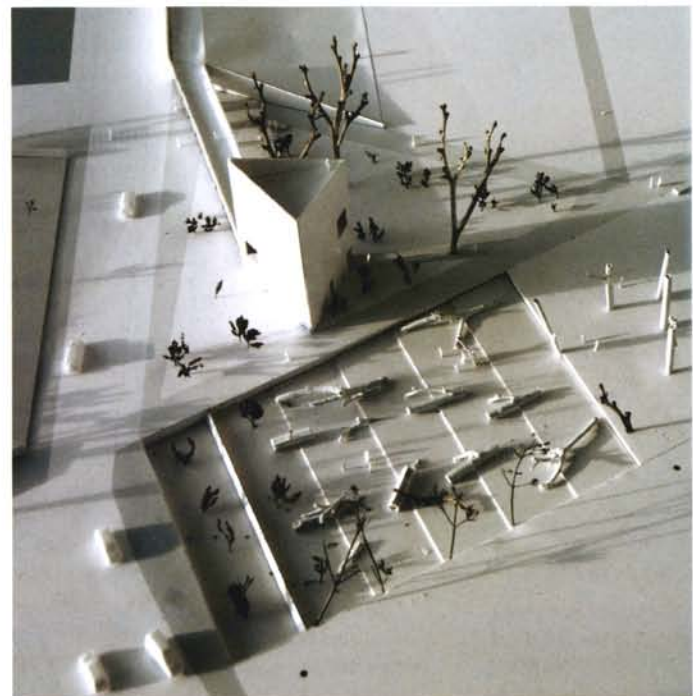
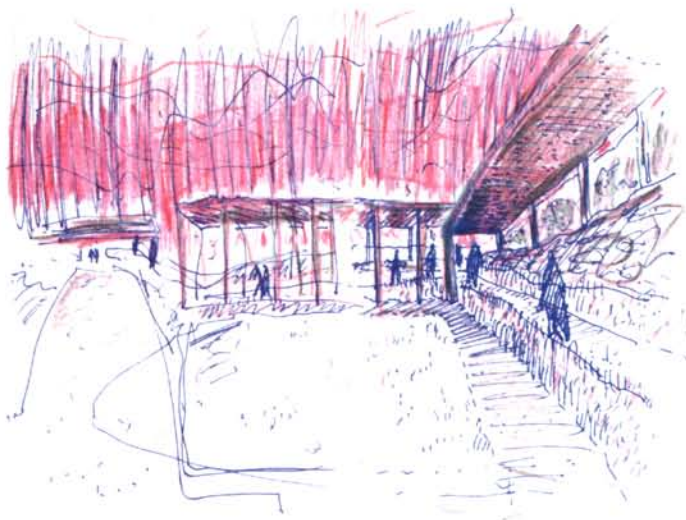
St Joseph's playing field with visitors' centre

At the rear of St Joseph's RC school a 'play builder' type playground will encourage imaginative play. The ground steps down towards Abbey Road in sections that imitate the scale of the terraced houses demolished in the 1970s, creating specific gardens planted with rushes and water at the lowest point (as a 'haha' or barrier to the road). Hollow concrete Corinthian columns become trees again and collapse into the ground like a ruined forest. Kids will play over and through them. *Claudia and Patrick Lynch*



Visitors' centre and 'city wall' from the river

Abbey Road distinguishes Barking from Newham, and yet from the A13 and the river it seems to peter out without a clear border. In the photograph below you can see the new mound beside the river that is higher than the flood wall, repositioning Ian Hamilton Findlay's river sculpture where it and visitors can see the water. In this view Barking appears as a series of towers in a Marsh, with a city wall and the river's edge defining it as a place. *Claudia and Patrick Lynch*



View of abbey ruins looking towards new West Gate

A 1:20 (flat) ramp connects the upper level of the Abbey ruins (the level of the town) to the 2m drop across the site to Abbey Road (the level of the river). The ancient cloister described a route around the sacred garden ('hortus conclusus'), which will be recreated in part in the new colonnade of 'The Dorter' and 'The Frater' to be partly reconstructed from stone and concrete. The Part M access route makes accessible a narrative, an experience of history. *Claudia and Patrick Lynch*



Lynch's proposals could reset the gravities of Barking in an original, carefully weighted way

Far left and left sketches, as well as maquettes and computer graphic

renders, were used to explore the masterplan's intent

structures follow the outlines of two sides of the Abbey's vanished cloister. Lynch's engineer, Mervyn Rodrigues, has been particularly successful in answering English Heritage's concerns about ground disturbance; and a slight remodelling of the slope across part of the ruins will create a flat, full-access 1:20 gradient route through the site, which can also be entered through a kind of stretched porte cochère on the western edge of the ruins.

The Abbey's arcane presence will also be re-invoked by creating a path running at an angle northeast across the Green, from the Broadway to Barking Creek, a route once used by pilgrims moving to and from the landing stage on the River Roding. In Lynch's scheme, this path will encourage strategic connection of the town centre to the Town Quay area, and set up encounters with a cluster of three interventions: a 'grove' of classical columns, some standing, others toppled and hollow for children to climb on or through; a café; and a lookout tower, embossed with a large gilded artwork by Hilary Koob-Sassen giving views

to the town centre and across Town Quay. Lynch has also designed a new pull-in area by the Abbey Watchtower, on the town centre edge of the Green, to accentuate its pedestrian connection with East Street and Clockhouse Avenue, leading to central Barking.

The palimpsests of historic precedent that have created Lynch Architects' diagram, programme, and proposed architectural interventions could reset the gravities of Barking in an original, carefully weighted way. Five hundred metres west of Barking Central and Redrow's oxymoronic sign proclaiming 'Enjoy Luxury Living As Standard', the Abbey Green scheme has the potential to demonstrate that a better life in the borough can involve something other than shiny, box-fresh objects implanted a few metres from the Poundsaver Superstore in Ripple Road. ■

More of Lynch Architects' descriptions of Abbey Green at architectsjournal.co.uk