

Arriving at net zero

Citizens Design Bureau secures planning for accessible, sustainable welcome centre for National Trust's Shugborough Estate



Constructed from sustainable materials, the new centre will invite visitors into Shugborough Estate, setting the tone for discovery and adventure. Visualisation by Secchi Smith.

When you are responsible for managing 500 properties, monuments, parks and estates, achieving net zero by 2030 is an ambitious goal. If the National Trust is to achieve it, their choice of partners for architectural projects matters more than ever.

Citizens Design Bureau, the forward-thinking architecture practice headed up by Katy Marks, has recently been granted planning permission for its proposal for a new welcome centre for the 17th-century Grade I-listed Shugborough Estate in Staffordshire. Citizens Design Bureau's plans are part of the National Trust's 'Reorientating Shugborough' masterplan, which includes improvements to access and accessibility, re-wilding and improving visitor experience across the site. The

masterplan comes in response to the National Trust assuming management of the estate from Staffordshire Council in 2017.

Once complete, the interventions will see the 900-acre parkland estate benefit from a new, visually distinctive and ecologically sensitive welcome building; a safer, one-way system for cars and rationalised parking facilities that enables the estate to be traffic-free, and a new maintenance centre housed in a preserved WW2 hospital building.

“Shugborough is extremely special – full of incredible trees and wildlife, unusual architecture, relics, follies, and other wonders. It has been a privilege to bring our experience working on cultural buildings to this project – set within such an impressive, historic landscape. It brings together thinking around characterful public buildings, conservation, sitting sensitively within a dramatic landscape – and doing all this with incredibly ambitious sustainability goals.”

– Katy Marks, founder, Citizens Design Bureau



Citizens Design Bureau's new visitor centre is curved to protect the root system of an ancient oak. Visualisation by Secchi Smith.

Naturally welcoming

The new visitor centre is the largest and most significant element of Citizen Design Bureau's plans for the estate. On a typical National Trust property, the visitor centre is usually an unobtrusive timber pavilion or outhouse conversion, designed to be modest and recessive to avoid distracting from historic monuments and buildings that are often the main focus. At Shugborough, however, the site is so large that the manor house is not visible from the visitor entrance. This led to a brief from the National Trust that called for a structure that would have a distinctive appeal of its own, capturing the identity of Shugborough while setting the tone for the estate as a place of discovery, with a spirit of adventure and innovation.

Housing ticketing, café, toilet and access facilities, the new centre will occupy the site of an underutilised outbuilding. An ancient oak tree on the site serves as the reference point for the visitor centre's orientation and design approach, with the arc of the tree's root protection zone defining the gently curving form of the structure. A second building containing WCs and services mirrors this, gently curving around the contours of the landscape and protecting the root zone of the chestnut trees behind the building.

Embracing the oak in this way creates a welcoming focal point and calls attention to the many unusual and ancient trees on the estate. A large café window emphasises the connection to the oak. The reflected arcs of the building forms are designed to draw visitors through the welcome area into the estate, where they can discover walled kitchen gardens, wild, wooded play areas in an abandoned quarry, a working farm, an ornamental dairy, exotic gardens, follies, walking and cycling trails as well as the hall itself. Dramatic overhanging roofs create space for informal picnicking, dog washing and boot cleaning – a building designed as a gateway to activity and adventure.

Another episode in the story of Shugborough – the first place in the UK to grow a hothoused pineapple – is referenced in the centre's detailing, with an abstracted pineapple-skin textured pargetted lime rendered façade playfully nodding towards Shugborough's history of horticultural innovation.

House of straw

At the core of the Citizen Design Bureau's plan is the commitment to go beyond statutory targets for energy use and to create a 'net zero carbon' building that requires minimal operational energy in line with the National Trust's 2030 net zero goals. Heating will be drawn from ground source heat pumps, with electricity coming from a combination of roof- and ground-mounted photovoltaic cells.



Accessibility was a project priority; Citizens Design Bureau considered visitors' access needs from the broadest possible perspective. Visualisation by Secchi Smith.

Fundamental to the net-zero ambition is the choice of renewable and locally sourced materials. The visitor centre will be constructed as a hybrid building: a timber structure with straw bale infill. This – alongside other measures, including low-carbon foundations and roof structure, as well as energy-efficient services – is central to the goal of minimising embodied carbon in the construction and the ongoing operational carbon of the building in use.

Citizens Design Bureau's design uses both round and rectangular bale elements, allowing for the construction of both columns and walls and enabling the building to

have a refined finish that belies the rusticity of the material and shows the versatility of natural, readily available construction materials.

Whereas standard building techniques require multiple material layers (sheathing boards, insulation, vapour-control membranes, cladding and so on), straw bale requires only plastering. In addition, it is breathable, a great insulator and, with the application of lime render, water- and fireproof. Straw is, of course, biodegradable, simplifying end-of-life disposal, but properly constructed straw-bale buildings are durable enough to last for many decades.

“Nowadays we are all aiming high in terms of sustainability. Inevitably we come up against cost constraints and, in this case, conservation constraints as well, so we are keen to honestly document and publish the process.”

– Katy Marks, founder, Citizens Design Bureau

Designed for accessibility

Alongside sustainability, accessibility is integral to the scheme. For Citizens Design Bureau, this means much more than physical access to the site. Alongside landscape designers HTA, the practice has taken a holistic approach to access, ensuring that Shugborough offers and provides an equitable array of opportunities for outdoor adventure, learning, ecological and cultural experience for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities.

In practical terms, that means that toilets with accessible changing, family and gender neutral toilets, dog wash and external picnic areas as well as a pick-up and drop-off station for access buggies to use around the site. More broadly, it means that careful consideration of visitors’ journeys around the site has resulted in a considered collection of landscapes that offer all visitors the surprise and delight inherent in the process of exploration.

With planning now secured, construction is set to begin this summer, with completion anticipated in summer 2025.

Notes for editors

For more information about Citizens Design Bureau and the plans for the Shugborough Estate, contact Sabine Zetteler at cbd@zetteler.co.uk.

Citizens Design Bureau

Citizens Design Bureau is an award-winning team of architects, interior designers and new-enterprise strategists, founded by Katy Marks in 2013. It collaborates with inspired, forward-thinking organisations and individuals, distilling complex functional briefs to create spaces that are woven with ingenuity and character.

The practice was named Public Building Architect of the Year at the 2022 Building Design Awards and received a RIBA National Award in 2023 for its renovation of Manchester Jewish Museum.

citizensdesignbureau.net