



News and events / News /

Digital rendering of AcrossRCA students final library courtyard garden

# A new leaf for the RCA, biophilic garden unveiled at Battersea, bringing nature to designers


One month after its completion, the Royal College of Art's newest installation has something for everyone, no matter how many legs, wings, antennae, whiskers, leaves, or petals they might have. A new garden space situated in the library courtyard of the Battersea Studio has been garnering attention from visitors of all shapes and sizes since its opening this February.


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## Key details

Date

23 March 2025

School, Centre or Area

Battersea Studios

Read time

10 minutes

The garden was first conceived as part of AcrossRCA, a new college module (piloted two years ago alongside the single year MA programs) in which students from across the college are placed into multidisciplinary teams to work together on the globe's most pressing issues. Instead these young designers cultivated an intervention much closer to their own workplace. Identifying RCA spaces that were being underutilised, but holding great promise in their adopted bug eyes. Two years later, the project has made the perilous journey from concept to reality, blossoming into a botanical haven for RCA inhabitants and local pollinators alike. Situating itself within a larger network of wildlife corridors creeping and crawling their way through London.



These urban wildlife corridors are seen as essential components of a biophilic movement to integrate human centres back into the natural ecosystems that sustain them, and to reconstitute the built environment as a welcoming habitat for an accelerated number of diverse wildlife to inhabit the space alongside humans. We caught up with the members of the AcrossRCA team who established the project two years ago, and who have since handed over the space's management and undertakings to a collaborative & cross-disciplinary RCA society created to serve this very purpose.

## Interview with the designers behind the garden

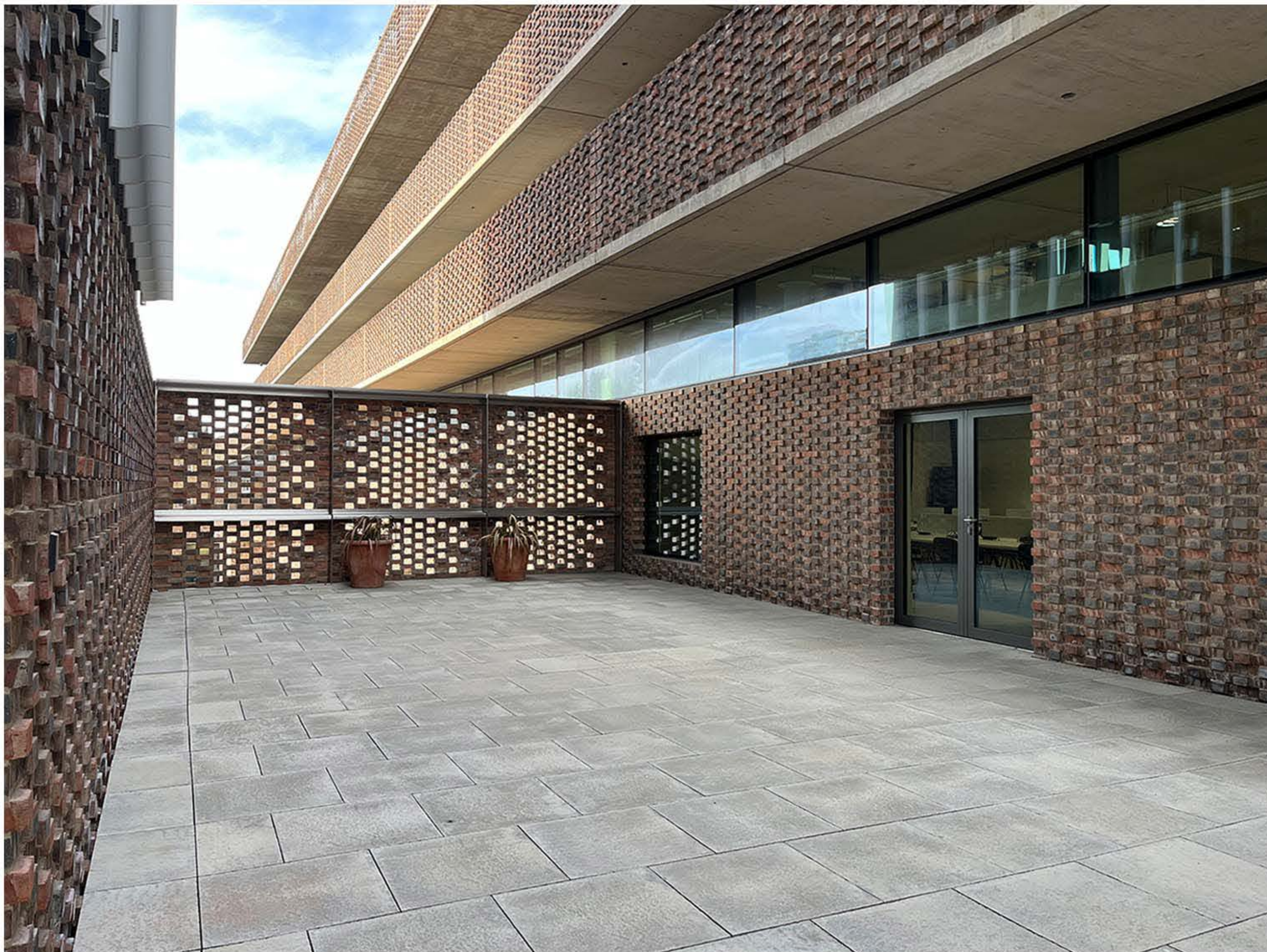


Illustration by Edie Medley of the original AcrossRCA Team, Edie, Zihan, Nathan, Ben & Qiqi respectively

### **Why are spaces like this so necessary and beneficial, especially in the context of a school of art and design?**

Regenerative urban design has a wide range of advantages. Within the UK landscape, wildlife habitats have been replaced in favour of urban centres for many decades now. The calamity of this decision is only now being unravelled, especially within the UK farming industry. Certainly, the creation of these spaces constitutes a stepping stone in rebalancing ecosystems, and re-aligning ourselves with nature, to nurture a more symbiotic biocentric relationship. This concept of Biophilia, humans innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life, was referred to throughout our project. We believe that familiarising designers to operate within shared spaces helps to facilitate future initiatives for large-scale regenerative action, by fostering community members & makers who are able and willing to consider a complex framework of human and non-human participants throughout their lives.

Additionally we have come to understand that designers in particular should take more notice of the environments around them, or in many cases their lack of, and the impact of this on their psyche. Alongside this space being complementary to education, bringing much needed context to the urgency of the works being created within the college. We were also interested in the physical and psychological benefits of contact with natural spaces such as: stress recovery, cognitive function, focus, mood, learning, productivity, creativity.



The emptiness of the RCA Battersea Studio library courtyard, as seen two years ago, in 2023

### **Why is it important that natural spaces are integrated into learning environments?**

Because learning environments have always been places of ideological malleability. A space to rethink ourselves. The type of engagement here might be different than in other encounters with natural spaces, such as weekend walks to the park, or exotice vacations etc. So the magnitude of susceptibility to this engagement is amplified. And as a school of art and design at an institution like the RCA, this might be spread even further throughout society, due to the fact that artists and designers typically disseminate their ideologies, whether directly or indirectly, to wide audiences because of their roles in cultural creation.

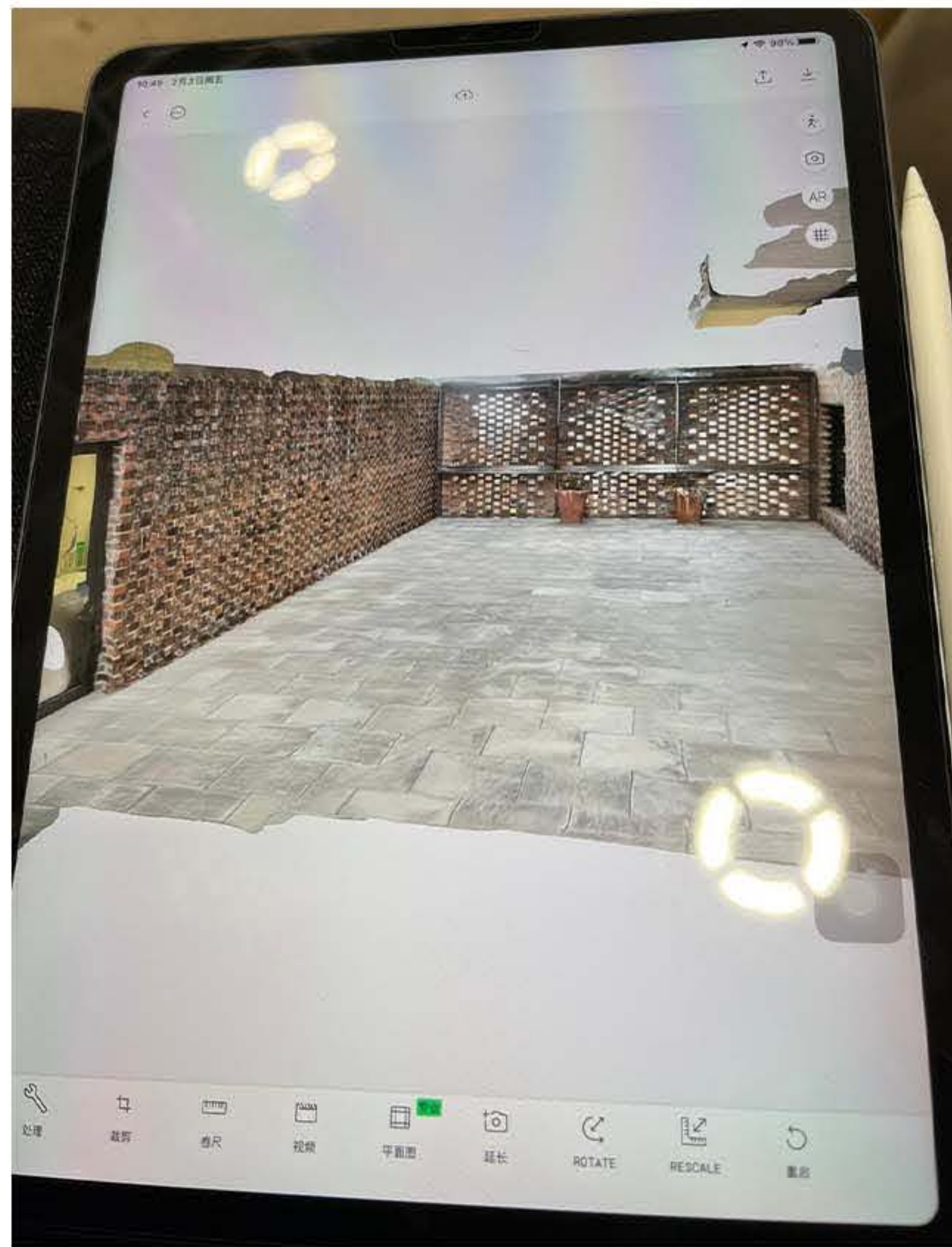


The specific philosophies encouraged by natural spaces is a topic with absolutely boundless scope, and we won't blunder around with generalising proclamations, but can attest to our perspectives. In our opinion, the natural spaces provide entirely their own brand of pedagogy, and in a language that becomes mute as it leaves their thresholds. Learning this language, and the in situ process that it requires, is perhaps the most important component of this education.

Being present in natural spaces has helped broaden our thinking beyond hierarchical, top-down, human-centric models of thought that sometimes abound in educational environments, and suggest alternative—potentially horizontal or bottom-up— models for understanding our position and responsibilities in earth's myriad ecosystems, ways of interacting with the world as a participant among participants, instead of intelligent agents managing and rearranging a vast unintelligent environment. It has taught us to pay attention, and notice when intervention is required, and when a respect for non-human, or non-western, modes of functioning is required; when to act, and when to resist acting in favour of affording others the right of self-determination.

While plenty of our education—especially with regard to climate action—focuses on the urgency of our obligation to act, natural spaces offer us a space for stillness, and a view of what it looks like to practise inaction, not out of indifference, but to allow space for non-human, or even more-than-human, value systems, stories, and agents to self-advocate without being forced into conformity with human (and generally a specific sect of human) methodologies and values. As artists and designers, these perspectives are invaluable, and of huge importance in facing a climate crisis propelled by human action, even if, or especially when, the dominant narratives frame the crisis as being a product of our failing to act.

Self admittedly we found it incredibly difficult to design a garden for non humans, finding ourselves in a design rut. It's not a perspective widely discussed or understood, especially by anthropological and architectural novices. And that might be because as a society we still don't understand very well the needs of many different animals. As we live far too removed from them. This highlights the importance of our work in increasing accessibility to nature, and what might come from it. We resorted to using rather unconventional design tools that were all the rage at the time, like scanning the physical space into a digital 3D rendering, and using AI to generate design inspirations. The intention was to try to distance some of our human perspectives from our work. But this wasn't enough to remove human bias. The goal in the future would be to almost use technology to advocate on behalf of these non-humans, that we cannot directly communicate with. And we've accepted it must become a longer ambition to understand what designing for nature means as a design practice and process. And additionally as a framework, whether it means to relinquish our design decisions to no great function, or to design with the purpose of counterbalancing other detrimental human forces, or additional viewpoints.



Poly.cam iPad app used to scan the Library Courtyard into digital 3D for mock up

### **Were you inspired by any specific existing or previous projects/spaces, whether at the RCA, across London, or Globally?**

We were inspired by many other projects, mostly pre-existing or previously attempted projects at the RCA, but also spaces and integrations across London. The focus of this project was never really to forward 'new' or 'innovative' solutions, but to briefly put aside the RCA's role in global artistic and intellectual communities in favour of considering its role as a physical structure based in both a local community and a local ecosystem.

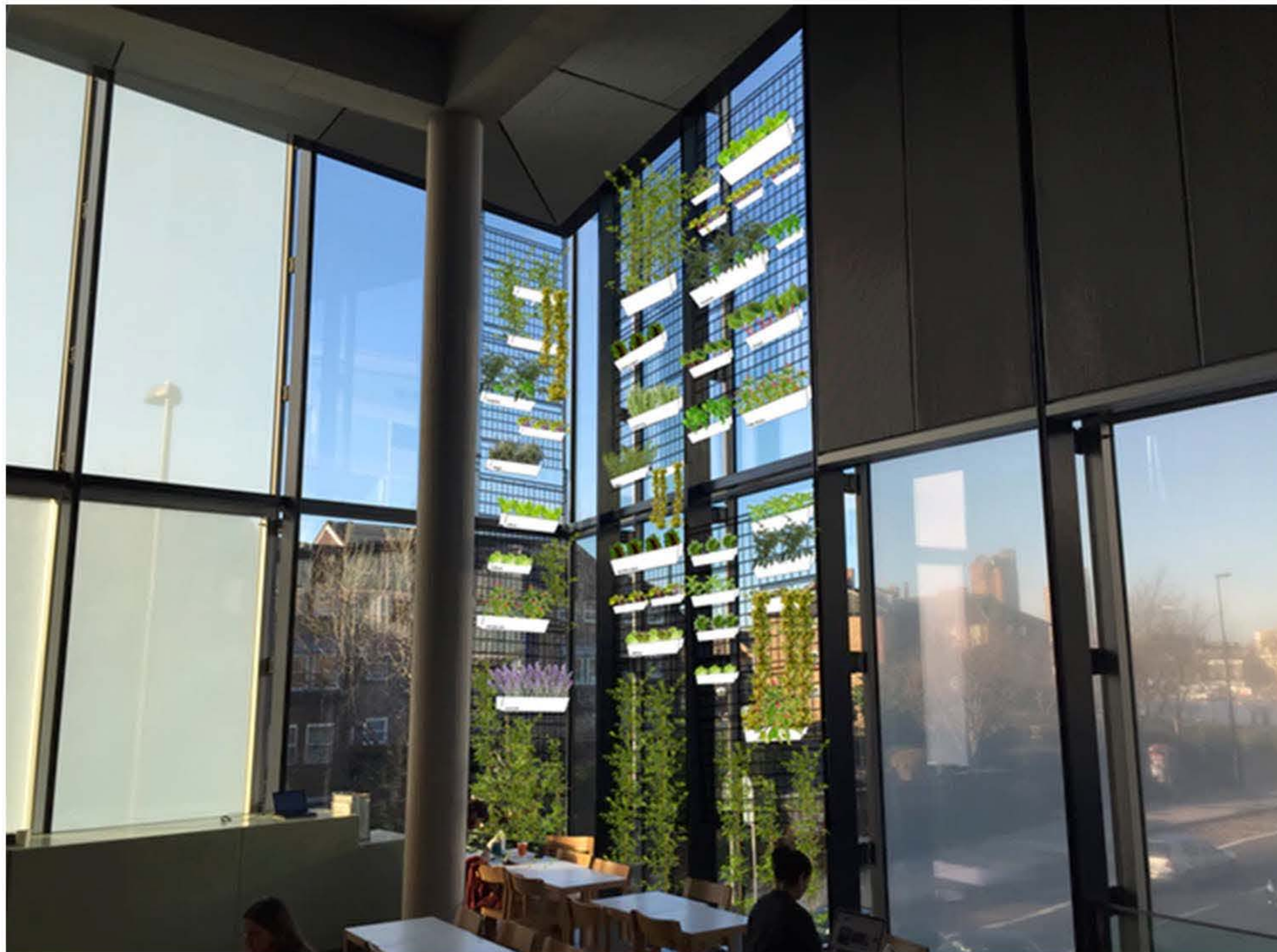
The existing green roof of the Studio Building is obviously something we were keeping in mind while developing the project. It features a range of pollinator-friendly plant species weaved through the rows of a solar array, and is spotted with mounds made from dirt, rocks, and twigs, which provide habitats for many varieties of insect. We wanted to add to this patch of vegetation, to build an area where people and wildlife could cohabitate and develop patterns for closer interaction. Since the roof is inaccessible and so not open to students & staff. And we have heard reports about the light from solar panels unintentionally causing harm to wildlife.





RCA Battersea Studio green rooftop

We also drew inspiration from an attempted hanging sustenance garden inside the cafe of the Dyson Building. While the project was not able to gather enough funding to be realised, we took inspiration from the renders and communication packages, as well as their modular designs for the scaffolding for the garden. It also forced us to really consider our funding levels and channels, as well as their longevity, as key pillars to the sustainability of the garden.



Hanging garden, by RCASU, past proposal for RCA dyson building

### **What are the biggest challenges you've faced in setting up and maintaining this space so far?**

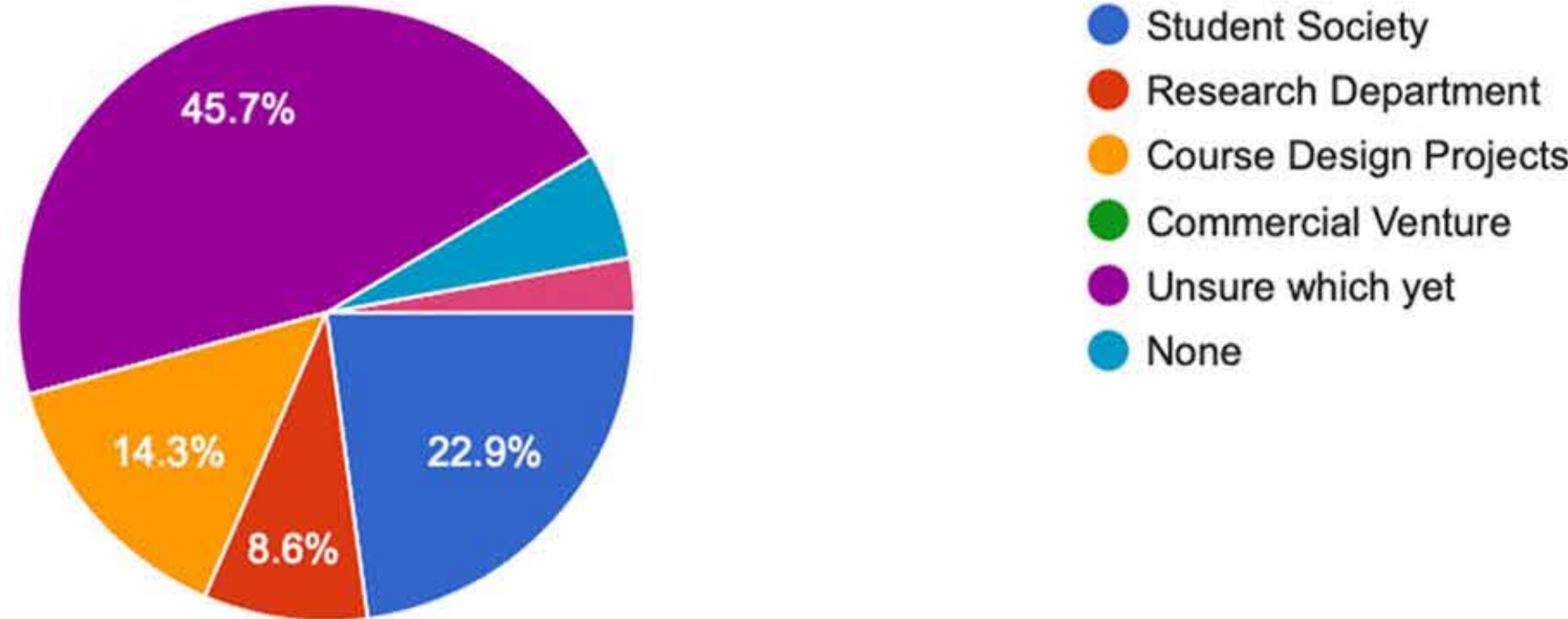
The regulatory/administrative process was easier than originally anticipated, and we were able to gain access to the space within three months. After a more detailed architectural plan in line with current standards was formulated and iterated. One of the most difficult decisions we had to make turned out to be how to fund the project beyond us and the AcrossRCA module. After considering a number of options including applying for a UKRI grant and an auction in which alumni donate artwork, we decided to collaborate with another department on a research project being funded by the RCA. This involved researchers from the Textiles Circularity Centre setting up sensors to track how many pollinators get introduced to the garden after its opening, based on their reaction to certain design choices, such as biomaterial rugs. This was aligned with one of our greater ambitions for this garden, in meeting the needs of the existing students and staff that showed an interest for its inception. Providing the platform & physical space for them to act on their desire to engage with it in whichever way they wanted, without having to motivate them further. Therefore, it was surprising when one of the biggest challenges faced became human coordination, in organising people around maintaining the space, as our earliest surveys and polls suggested a willingness from students and staff to participate. In these we engaged with Operational management, Tutors, Admin, Leading Researchers and students across multiple disciplines: Design Product, Interior Design, Visual communication and so on. As time progressed we also got in contact with Environmental Architecture, City Design & Design Futures which live and breathe this stuff.



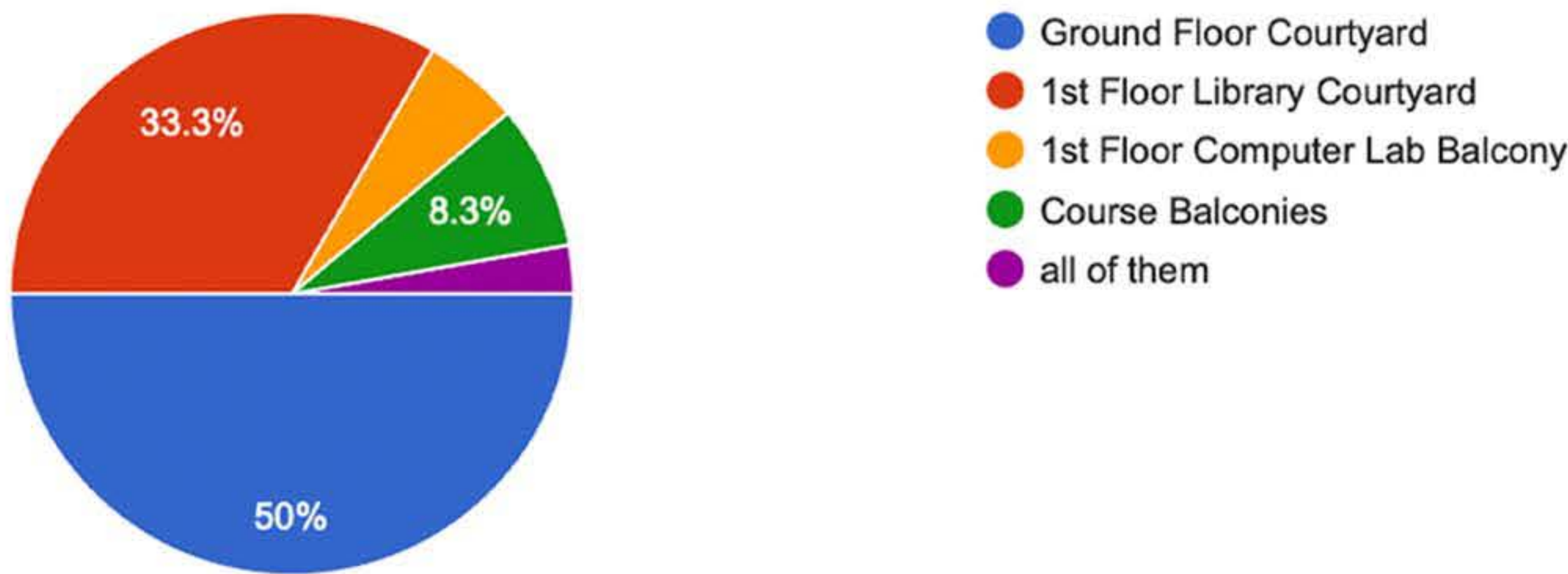


AcrossRCA survey published in RCA newsletter's 16th feb 2023 edition, to gather insights from inhabitants across the RCA institution

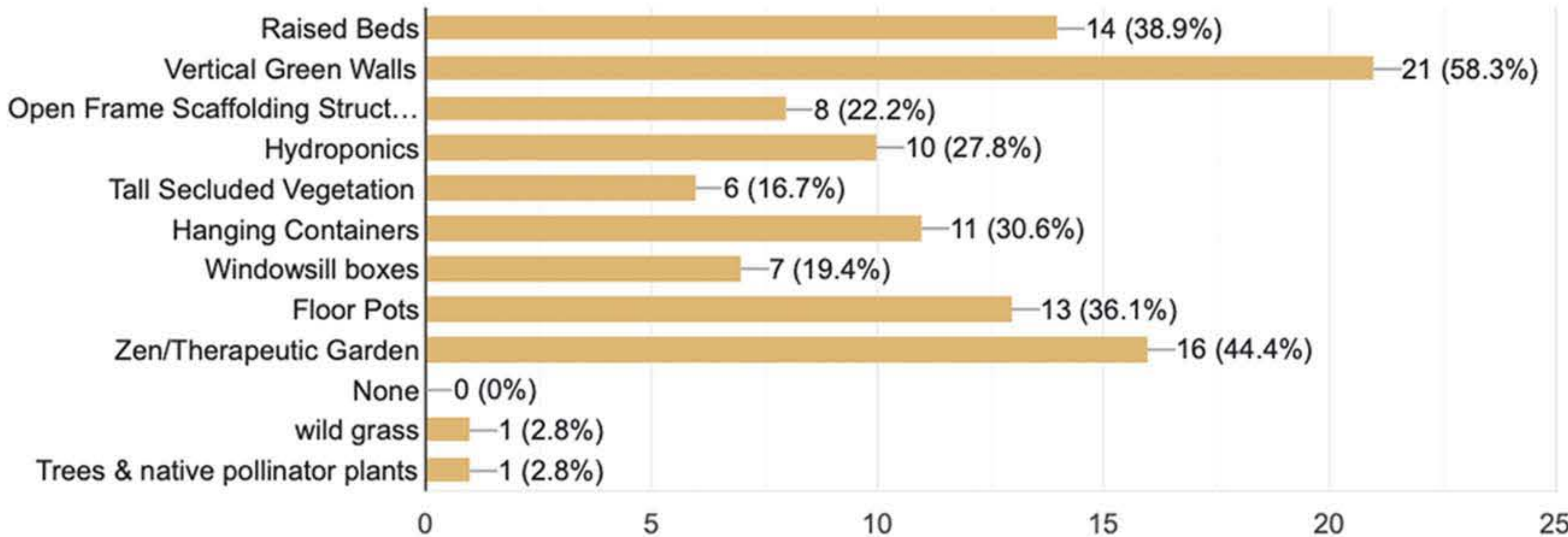
Which new RCA Association, responsible for the upkeep/activities in this space, would you be most interested in joining?



Which space would benefit most from increased greenery?

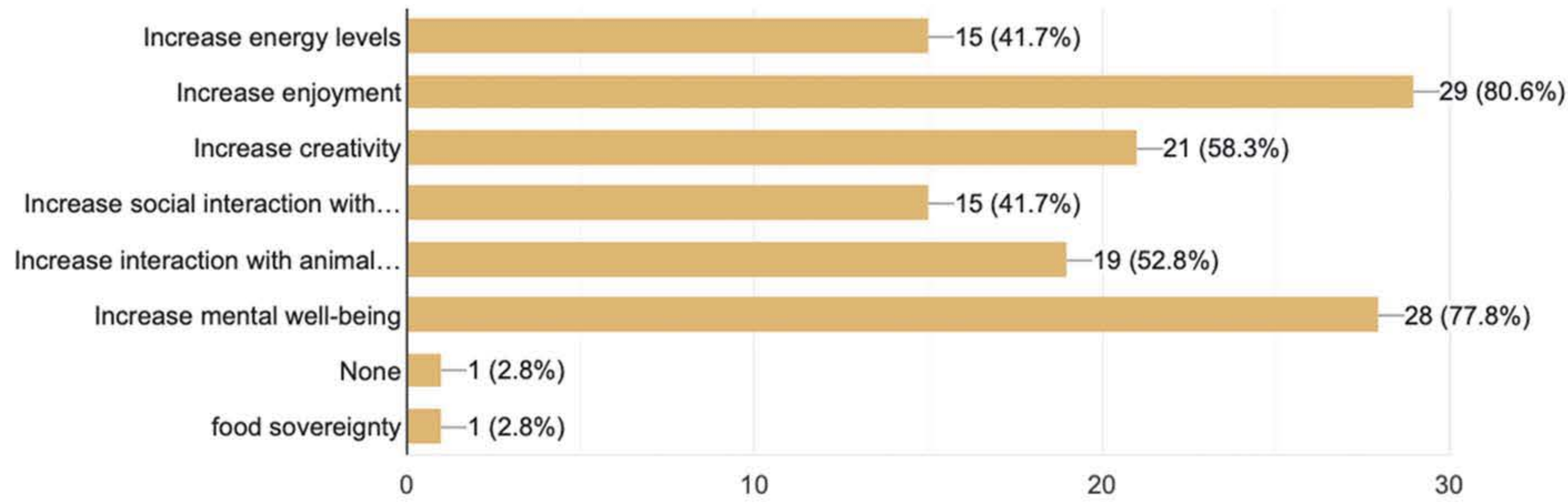


Do you have a preference on the type of garden you would like to see?





How might increasing greenery on campus benefit you the most?



Major insights gathered within the AcrossRCA survey published

Indeed, this is something we are working on and should get easier the more people know about the garden and the opportunities it holds. For now we have set up a student society to deal with this, that collaborates with other pre-existing societies, namely SustainLab and Ecocrit. This is whilst we move on in our careers to an ever expanding list of things to do.



RCASU society SustainLab, and previously hosted workshop events

What kinds of wildlife has the space been designed for?

Anything that can naturally fly or climb its way to the courtyard above ground. Namely we expected to support London native/dwelling species of bees, butterflies, moths, flies, bats. Birds such as pigeons. And additional crawling and climbing insects & rodents like beetles, squirrels, rats, mice. Many of these species are forgotten about in conversations surrounding pollination, as we believe some do it only to a lesser extent. However, how we approached the design was to accept that we don't have the necessary knowledge to fully understand the problem space, and to know what might have the greatest impact in our proposal. But that we could make the overarching assumption that utilising the full vertical height of the space would be crucial in attracting both birds and floor dwelling animals. And that the plant species introduced must be as diverse or more so than the list of animals. With this in mind we played around with different structures, materials, and biological systems. We were also able to incorporate the industrial elements that inspired the Studio's wider architectural design, namely Battersea's power station, into the watering system pipeworks.

What made things easier was, out of all the RCA Battersea Spaces that we identified as having potential to explore and boost regenerative garden practises. We believed because of its secluded nature, with the high surrounding walls, this space would be the most attractive for exploring Biophilic design, and therefore weirdly still very much human orientated. So we were able to focus on meeting the needs of humans, such as throwing down some rugs and bean bags to make it comfortable, whilst trying to cram in as many plants as we could in these features & artefacts. We took inspiration from Zen gardens & Moroccan Riads. Allowing people to be encompassed learn and observe nature. The other spaces more suited to animals, might pose greater philosophical challenges and decisions.







Conceptual Garden Features generated using DALL-E AI



RCA library courtyard garden concept design process, using visual inspirations

**How have the students and staff reacted to it so far? Were there any benefits or compromises that you hadn't anticipated?**

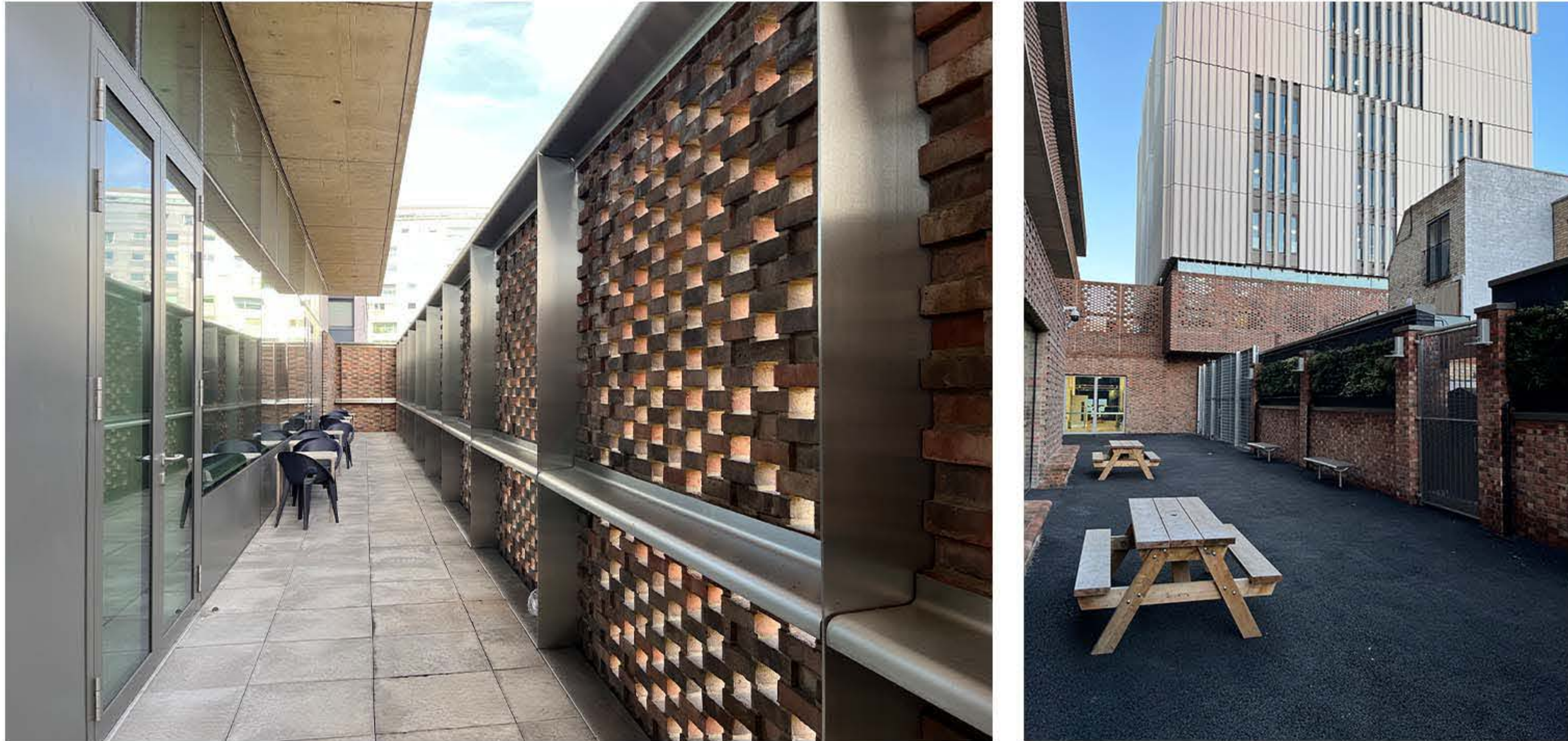
The reactions so far have been largely positive. Students and staff alike are using the garden to eat lunch, as a quiet place to study or work, and just as an area to relax and recharge during the day. However, it's still rather chilly out, and with spring and summer coming around, the garden will start to take more shape as the various flowers come into bloom. We'll then have a much more complete idea of what these interactions will look like under peak season conditions for most of the pollinator and plant species, but also peak stress season for students and staff as we head into degree shows, final projects and dissertations. These seasons will bring increased traffic from all directions, which will likely increase the intensity of both positive and negative experiences. Working with natural environments and rhythms means that the situation will always be evolving, which we anticipate being equally rewarding and challenging. We just hope to lessen the negative impacts with time, as the RCA inhabitants continue to learn how to share their space with pollinators.

**What are the next steps to take the reintegration /regeneration of wildlife into cities even further?**

For the moment, we're just excited to see how this space fares and evolves over the rest of the year. It's an ever evolving and expanding space. Ideally, it would be nice to see similar initiatives expanded to the balconies outside the program departments, where departmental design projects might challenge the students and staff to imbue their own creative flair to the design of these spaces. Perhaps through the exploration of biomaterial created artefacts, whether that be an outdoor chair or lunch time cutlery. A number of RCA courses are tackling these within a regenerative context, like the Supergreen Module on IDE for example. The difference is these have not yet been set within the local university context, usually more global contexts. Also to the ground floor courtyard space, which students expressed a lot of support for in our initial surveys. Part of the reason why we began with the library courtyard is that it presented less logistical challenges than those other locations, but it would be exciting to tackle those challenges (or see others tackle them) in the future. They present great opportunities to explore other nature inspired design frameworks, like biomimicry, green design, ecological design, permaculture etc.



We are also looking forward to some upcoming conversations with representatives of the RCA regarding possibilities for joint custody/care of these spaces as they continue to grow and possibly exceed the abilities and resources of the society to care for it alone. For now, the space's dedicated and passionate society members are currently looking into additional RCA structures that can be utilised for the funding & maintenance of spaces, such as the various research, commercial and community orientated branches of the RCA.



RCA Battersea Studio Floor 1 Balcony & Ground Floor courtyard as photographed in 2023

**“We are committed to treating this space collaboratively, both as a partnership with the students and staff who access the space, as well as the non-human entities and rhythms that occupy and steer its existence. It’s important to us to honour that ethos of collaboration as opposed to seeing it as a space that we exhaustively manage or direct, allowing the ecosystems that the space envelops and is enveloped by to dictate any interventions, and not the other way around.”**



Digital rendering of AcrossRCA students final library courtyard garden design, as seen from above



This was a response by students to a global context of unprecedented change, and destruction. According to Regeneration.org, urban cities cause 70% of global greenhouse emissions, despite only taking up 1.5% of land use within the UK. With the buildings themselves causing 40% of these emissions, 28% of which related to ongoing energy use. We are clearly using a lot of resources to sustain our buildings. Within this context, UK pollinators have lost 97% of their wildflower meadows, 75,000 miles of hedgerows and 65% of wetlands. These are their homes and workplaces. As a society of people, we increasingly rely on these pollinators for food, medicine and clothing

This is a call to action to everyone at the RCA and beyond in urban metropolises across the globe. Let's rebuild their homes together, right here, alongside us.

Find out more  
about this  
project



[AcrossRCA webpage ↗](#)



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