

# Arca Architects' Silver Café: Beacon on THE BAY

*Using the software's high-quality 3D and rendering capabilities to produce visualizations, Arca Architects gained community support to create an unorthodox café with spectacular views.*



Photo courtesy © Tim Soar/Arca



The aim of the building was to create a sheltered café space with panoramic views of the spectacular Morecambe Bay.

*Award-winning architectural firm Arca Architects is based in central Manchester, England, and headed by architect John Lee. The firm uses creative organizational techniques to create comprehensive*

*sensory experiences. Arca's Silver Café on the Morecambe Bay in England transformed the face of a quiet seaside town with a space that is both visually appealing and tactilely exciting.*

## A Bit of Background

In 1998, Lee, a former Associate at Grimshaw Architects in London, decided to strike out on his own. Drawing from a pool of highly respected architects and other experienced designers, he formed Arca Architects, a fluid team that he tailors for each architectural project. Arca designs private as well as public spaces, including hotels, infrastructure, art galleries, recreational facilities, and multi-family and single family homes. Lee strongly believes "that designs should be intellectually satisfying," so his work incorporates various tactile, graphic, and sensory components to truly stimulate the mind. His efforts paid off, and Arca's Silver Café won the 2009 Small Scale Commercial Award from the Manchester Society of Architects (MSA). The firm has also been honored with numerous Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) design competition laureates and RIBA shortlistings, and Arca was a finalist for two coveted Young Architect of the Year Awards in 2000, a distinction awarded to prominent firms including NORD and Carmody Groarke.

## Silver Café: A Bright Spot

Around the middle of the 20th century, Morecambe was a vibrant and thriving seaside resort. With the rise of the cheap package holiday and the collapse of the manufacturing industry, the area suffered a serious slowdown. Morecambe still relies heavily on tourism, hospitality, and catering to buoy its sluggish economy. Starting in the spring of 2006, the town made great strides towards reclaiming its glorious past, most

notably with the restoration of the art deco style Midland Hotel. And in 2007, Lancaster City Council and their regeneration team called "Winning Back Morecambe" sought a landmark design to fill the open space between the sea and the promenade. Entrants were encouraged to design a small café that could redefine an area alongside several weathered and worn seaside buildings.

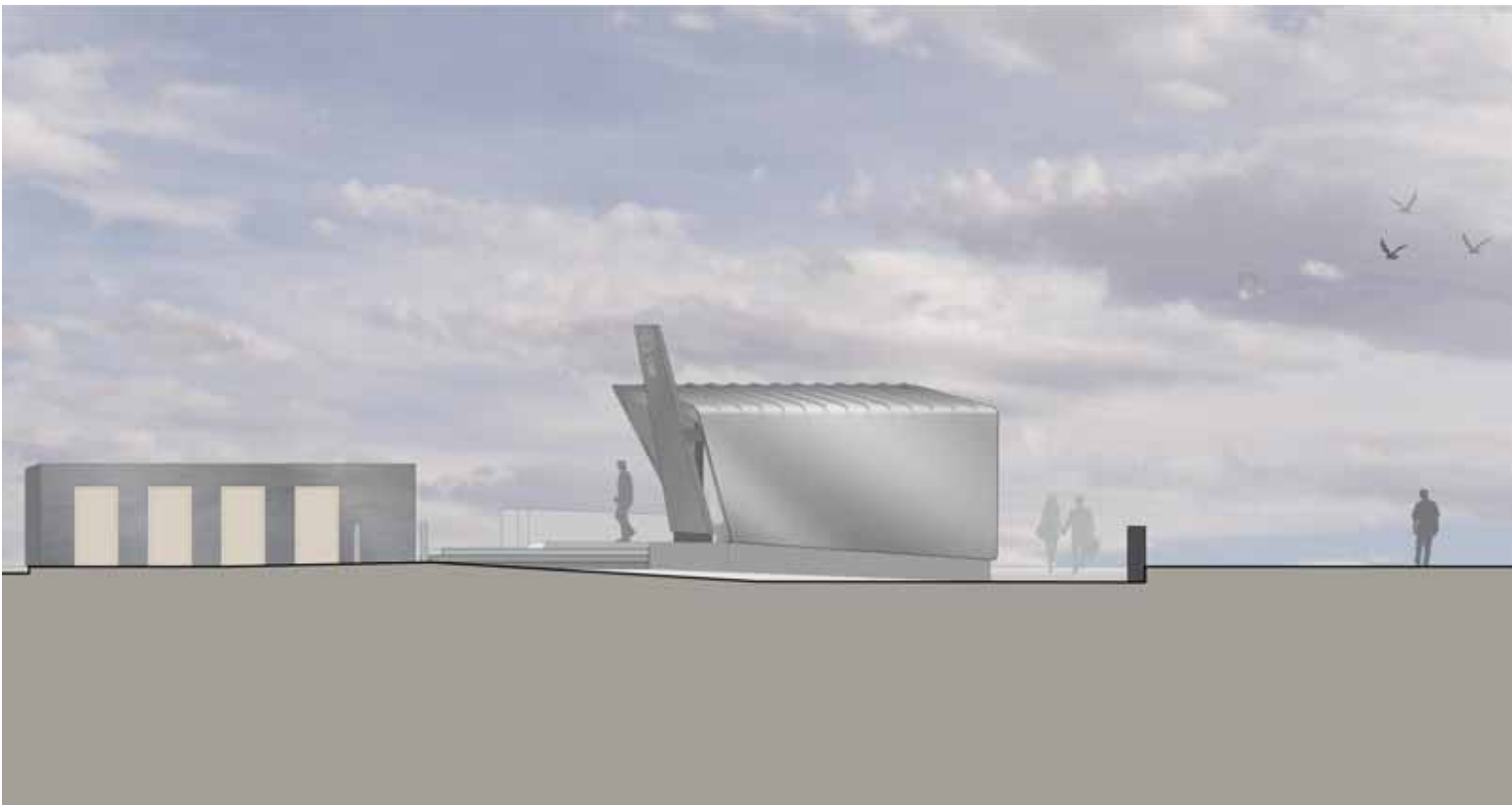
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*– John Lee, Founder, Arca Architects,  
Manchester, England*

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After considering several different firms for the job, the council selected Arca in the fall of 2007. Lee and his team met with local neighborhood representatives and discovered that these representatives were far from conservative in their views of the space. In fact, they even supported ideas for unorthodox designs with a commanding presence. This was historic, since the last building to be placed in the area between the



## Architect Case Study: Arca Architects' Silver Café

promenade and the sea was the second Midland Hotel, built in 1933. Arca understood the great importance of what they were about to undertake. "The opportunity to create a new landmark structure seemed appropriate, given the historic legacy of exuberant seaside architecture and the wider regeneration benefits of a memorable form," Lee says. He and his team took on the challenge.

Using a feasibility study to provide a baseline for the proposals, the council and regeneration team requested a 40-50 seat café with a kitchen and several auxiliary spaces, as well as four public restrooms that could be placed nearby. Sandwiched between the promenade and the tall sea wall, a small café would have a good view of the wall—but not the bay. Arca responded with an innovative suggestion—to raise the

café's floor level above the sea wall to open up a spectacular vista. The team also recommended shelter for the outdoor spaces to encourage patrons to take in the fresh air.

Rather than aligning the café and restrooms architecturally, Lee chose a different approach. He wrapped the leaning rounded rectangular frame of the café with a strip of shiny stainless steel. Meanwhile, he designed the restrooms to be a steel black cuboid. Lee describes the contrasting structures as "taking on the quality of autonomous objects deposited on the tide line." While both are softened by the beach on one side and a tiered patio on the other, they are a sharp contrast to the older architecture in their backdrop.



The land was sculpted to raise the café above the sea wall while contrasting with the architectural stone of the town.

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Lee designed the spaces to withstand the elements well. The café sits on a concrete raft foundation. It has a steel superstructure, which is bound in plywood with a high value insulation to the cladding material. "The stainless steel envelope wraps the space and frames views of the bay," he explains. To accommodate the raised site, Arca created a ramp that links the café to several redesigned promenade gardens below. The team also expanded the tiered terraces towards the south, creating a protected intimate dining space with garden views. He finished the restrooms in weather resistant black paint. Large, beautiful solid wood doors warm the industrial look and add a layered tactility to the space.

### Cutting Through the Challenges

Faced with several hurdles during the process, Lee got creative. Working with a budget of £250,000 was a challenging proposition, especially since Morecambe is a remote area with disproportionately high building costs. To overcome this challenge, Lee saved money on the restroom design by using a simple welded steel plate for the roof with no additional treatment. The effect was to allow more funds to be diverted to architecturally significant areas, like the stainless steel signature silver of the café.

Lee also contended with other challenges, including the location itself. Morecambe boasts an important and long history, so there were significant concerns regarding the integration of a new structure and how it would affect the older buildings and the character of the town, despite the support from representatives. Additionally, Lee says, the design, with its complicated geometry, was difficult to visualize.

Lee, a Vectorworks® software user since 1988, used the Vectorworks Architect product to overcome these challenges. Using the program's high-quality 3D and rendering capabilities to produce visualizations helped the team to build a consensus among the council and the local community. When Arca changed the original material from rubber cladding to stainless steel, it was easy for all stakeholders to see the difference in the elevation drawings and approve the change. Lee's team also typically works in 3D to better visualize their work, and this capability helped them understand the Silver Café's more complicated geometry. "The ability to use a similar toolset for 3D work makes it easier for designers to use the 3D capabilities for communicating complex problems, or for more formal presentations," he says. Arca uses CAD software for all of their projects,



View of the sunny south elevation from the street, showing the silver 'ribbon' element framing the view.

**Notes**  
 Landscaping design for Planning and Building Regulation approval.  
 Construction details and setting out by others.



**Plan**  
 Scale 1:50

from initial inquiries and sketch layouts through planning, working drawings, and site operations, and is successfully making the switch to Building Information Modeling (BIM) in its current projects.

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*– John Lee, Founder, Arca Architects,  
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Lee says, "Vectorworks has the power of an engineering CAD system and is able to be used in large teams. This improves the speed with which we can work, and is valuable in delivering work to clients which is impressive and communicative. There is no doubt that the speed and quality of work

we produce is an advantage over practices using an engineering CAD package. The software allows us to present our innovative designs in the best possible light."

Lee and his team frequently use the ability to reference information in conjunction with the Vectorworks classes organization feature, which he says is "particularly useful." With a standardized class-set, his team is able to input information at different scales within the same file and switch between each one. "Referencing files allows a number of team members to work on the same project simultaneously, producing information right up to a deadline," he explains. Another way they save money? For their work on another project, Parkkeeper's Hut in Manchester, one of Arca's designers was able to create an entire set of planning drawings in just one week, with one 3D model, working with BIM capabilities. "This probably halved the normal time and cost of the process," he notes.

The team completed Silver Café in the summer of 2008, and it opened after a tenant fit-out in September of the same year. Alongside the grand old buildings that have stood by the seaside for a century, The Silver Café is an attraction in itself, thanks to Arca's signature design. Through the large windows, the bay is astounding, and on many days, it reflects the mood for which it is named, a shining testament to what is to come.

## Acknowledgements

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### Arca Architects

Arca is an award-winning architectural firm that focuses on the interplay of space, light, and materials to produce striking and thought-provoking works in the public and private spheres. The firm has been honored with numerous Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) design competition laureates and RIBA shortlistings and was a finalist for two coveted Young Architect of the Year Awards in 2000.

### Images:

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