

Architecture

New kid on the block

With its plain brickwork and flowing, split-section interiors, a Swiss couple's new London housing development is an exemplar of thoughtful design in keeping with the area's hard-edged past

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Jean-Paul Jaccaud, an architect who with his partner Tanya Zein has designed a new block of three houses and five apartments in Shepherdess Walk, north London, is talking about the pointing of brickwork – the way in which the mortar joints are finished off to give one texture or another to a wall. He also talks about the balance of horizontals and verticals, the “slight folding” of the building, “patinated materiality”, the complexity of the cross section. All of which things, nerdy and obscure though they might sound, have a lot to do with the enjoyment of architecture.

Behind and around him, as he stands on the pavement looking at his work, is the new normal of the London property Klondike. Slabs and towers are rising in a riot of banging, of dust clouds, construction vehicles and big, swinging cranes. They are in approximations of modern architectural styles – sub-hi-tech, a-bit-Zaha, a lot of rectangularised, gridded stuff that I suppose might once have been on the same hard drive as some downloaded images of David Chipperfield's work, a hotel apparently inspired by Daniel Libeskind's memorials to grief and trauma (which at least is an original way of using your inspirations). There is a tower going up branded as “Canaletto” (“an award-winning masterpiece”), but the totality has notes of Hieronymus Bosch.

It's the more striking for the fact that this area, on the border of the boroughs of Hackney and Islington,

not far from the spot where Jamie Oliver set up his not-for-profit Fifteen restaurant to help train apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds, used to be one of the more hard-edged parts of central London, a place shaped by both industry and bombing. There are workshops, factories and council housing built in the aftermath of the second world war of the most basic kind – cheap bricks, metal window frames now replaced by plastic, scanty details, thin walls – of a type too much driven by urgent need and scarce resources to afford the luxury of a style or an ideology. Mixed up with it all are bits of Georgian or early Victorian terrace, some of them nicely curved.

The ultra-cheap (to build) 1940s stuff and the ultra-expensive (to buy) 2010s stuff have this much in common: they both exhibit a kind of functionalism that doesn't leave much room for architecture. For all the differentiating gesticulations of their exteriors, the new developments tend toward being fundamentally the same buildings: frame, stuck-on cladding, flats calculated according to spreadsheets of market demand. By contrast, Jaccaud and Zein, whose practice is based in both Geneva and London, have ambitions to shape space and materials subtly to enhance the experience of inhabitants and passers-by. It makes their little complex a rare and endangered thing, a quagga amid raging beasts.

Inside, the homes are based on what their developer Roger Zogolovitch calls the “split section”, an idea he has explored on other smallish developments that his company Solidspace has dotted around the capital. This means that you progress up them from half-level to half-



Jaccaud Zein's Shepherdess Walk development, left, 'hints at rather than proclaims the inner elaboration'. The interior, below, is designed to 'make movement through the houses and apartments into imaginative journeys'. Hélène Binet; Andy Tye

visiting journalist asked them what they had actually done – the assumption was that it was the conversion of an existing building. Jaccaud and Zein take this as a compliment.

At the same time it has qualities you don't find in typical Georgian houses, in particular a sense of solidity that comes from setting the windows unusually deep (and at “outrageous” expense). It undulates and inflects in response to the irregularities of its surrounding. There are unusual jiggers in the proportions and fenestration, and the bricks are London-coloured but of an altered dimension more common in Belgium, where they were made. Care is taken to create both affinity and difference between the block of apartments and row of houses. Consideration is given to the fact that the apartment block can only be seen in oblique views, exaggerating its vertical proportions, which are therefore counteracted by horizontal bands of differently pointed brickwork.

Then this severe palette is lifted by other materials, such as a large brass panel for such things as the entry-phone buttons, hardwood rails and waxed plaster walls, especially in places you might touch. Again there is an idea of time here, to go with the time scales of daily habitation and the suggestion that the building is old: the expectation is that the materials will age well and patinate. There is an underlying belief, not shared by most of the stuff going up around it, that a building can contribute to something other than itself, both the future lives it will contain and to the urban fabric that surrounds it.

It might seem like there's a bit too much interpretation going on here of a plain brown building, and I'm expecting some comments to this effect below the line on the digital version of this story, but the qualities I describe are definitely there. The project is also not a solution to any housing crisis. This is a private development whose largest units will sell for around £2m. Nor is it a heart-stopping, mind-blowing masterpiece, but it's a reminder that architecture can be an art of living.

level, rather than whole floors at a time, which means that space flows through the building rather than being compartmentalised. A stair, rather than being encased in walls and lobbies, becomes part of the living spaces, and the designation of any one place to any particular activity – eating, working, sleeping, socialising – becomes blurred. The idea is to reflect contemporary ways of living, rather than replicate Victorian hierarchies that have long since disappeared.

The arrangement also makes movement through the houses and apartments into imaginative journeys, with continuously changing shapes and proportions, falls of light, relationships of one room or level to another, and of interior to external terraces and balconies and to views of surroundings or of the sky. It considers

Its architects profess a desire to make it look as if it has always been there, the result of '100 years of grime'

inhabitation to be something done in different ways in different places, and at different times of day.

The exterior hints at rather than proclaims the inner elaboration. It presents plain brickwork that aims to respect rather than imitate the Georgian and Victorian fragments around. Its architects and developer profess a desire to make it look as if it has always been there, as if it were the result of “100 years of grime”, and they succeeded to the extent that one

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