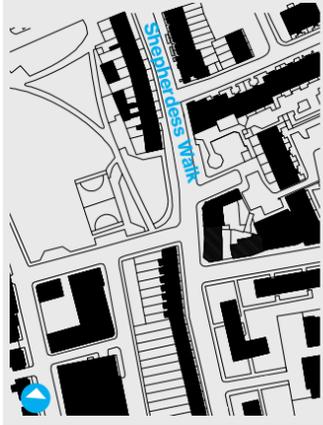


Right, bottom
Shepherdess Walk housing by Jaccaud-Zein Architects (phs: H el ene Binet, David Grandorge).

Below
Location plan. "Situated at the corner of Shepherdess Walk and Wenlock Street, the project mediates between the different historical conditions and formal qualities of the site to propose an unapologetically contemporary terrace of houses and an apartment building with a strong sense of place", says the architect.



DSDHA's Deborah Saunt writes:

The term 'speculative housing' sometimes carries pejorative connotations of seeing what one can get away with, or force onto a site. And as this type of architecture is perceived as essentially clientless — led by the market and shaped by the opinion of agents — it is seen as a poor cousin of the private commission. But a recent project on London's Shepherdess Walk shows that genuine speculation can be a force for good.

Situated on a street corner and comprising a small block of five flats and three houses in a row, it is a test-bed project by architect-led developer Solid Space in a joint venture with co-client Jaccaud Zein Architects. Here, the Swiss practice has further developed a typology that Solidspace has been evolving over the last decade or so — the split section.

This has been deployed to conjure a welcome and careful counterpoint to the normal housing fare of stacked floors, repeated plans and tight spaces. The houses offer three or four bedrooms on staggered levels between traditional party walls, while the flats range from two to five bedrooms, and each covers between three and six levels.

This carefully composed fragment of new city, not far from the unruly explosion of towers on City Road, is an urban anchor between broken rows of terraces and post-war housing. An incidental gap between the two elements reflects the heterogeneity of the context. Their calm forms reveal nothing of the anxieties of bringing London housing to fruition: acquiring the site, determining the volume and mix, the journey from planning permission onwards, balancing the risks that arise during delivery. Here that rapacious world seems to pause.

On the street there is little to disclose the dynamic complexity within. Heavy masonry facades of indeterminate scale wrap both sculptural forms, shifting and cranking in a compositional conversation with each other and their neighbours. Their strong physicality offers a rebuke to the standard speculative development's 'wallpapering' brickwork — cladding as a vernacular shorthand. Here a sedimentary layering shows the bricklayer's hand. Its 'muddiness' is counterpointed by occasional shimmering hints of brass on inset balconies and deep windows, hinting at covert luxury. Raw, weighty cornices cap each block, echoing the streetscape's latent nineteenth-century rhetoric.





Interiors continue the reduced palette, where the natural quality of materials comes to the fore: bees-waxed unpainted plaster, timber floors, concrete, brass and steel, all designed to patinate over time.

It is hard to convey the lyrical spatial effect of the split section that allows one volume to interplay across three levels, between 'work', 'live', and 'eat'. There is a kinetic sense of space between these semi-public rooms, especially if entering one of the larger flats at mid-level, with a choice of going either up or down between floors.

As their plans are more lateral than those of the houses, the flats promote an extraordinary sensation of interconnectivity that is freighted with potential, allowing glimpses down to a living space or up to a galleried work space.

One senses the tradition of 'Das Englische Haus' here, a continuity with the Arts & Crafts tradition that connects the occupant to specificity, craft and choreographed social interaction, in a manner missing from many modern homes.

In the houses, each over seven staggered floors, the sense of enclosure increases as one moves upwards via a generous dog-leg stair to the more private spaces, culminating in a master bedroom suite and the modest luxury of an enclosed rooftop terrace. From this hidden eyrie, in a sharp juxtaposition of values, new housing blocks crowd the view like a tawdry residential Las Vegas.

The sense that this project embodies a different value system is amplified by an artful approach to design risk: a flat with front doors on three different levels, for example, offers an inherent adaptability, as well as a delightful idiosyncrasy. This is a design strategy that is simply not available in any other housing types today, yet it feels reassuring, appealing and not contrived. One could happily move into the flat on the top six floors and enjoy the innumerable permutations it offers, allowing one's life to shift, stretch or compress over time. These larger apartments appear to allow for the reprogramming of spaces from bedrooms to living spaces or kitchens, or further division into self-contained flats or work spaces.

This invites comparison with the Georgian terrace house, another adaptable speculative type, equally capable of providing small bedsits or grand living spaces, whose inherent flexibility may have moved on with the stepped split-section as a three-dimensional arrangement. When deployed laterally in the flats, it offers an interaction between parts that seems particularly appropriate now, as many people live together in diverse configurations. Compartmentation with partial openness can overcome competing individual needs in a positive way.

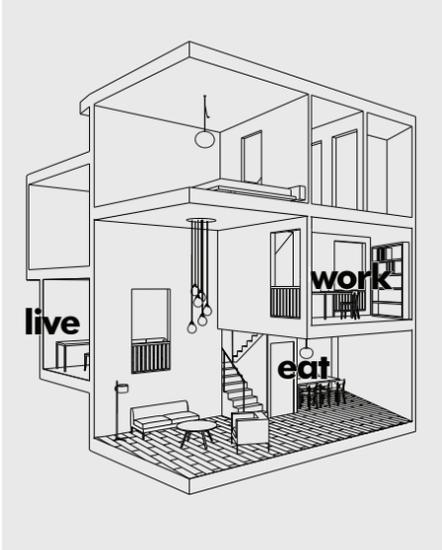
It's not often that something emerges in the field of housing that asks as many questions as it answers. Here one finds the promise that if the boundaries within which architects work in housing are pushed and redefined, something more appropriate to today's way of life can be created. ↗

Project team

Architect
Jaccaud Zein Architects
Project team
Tanya Zein, Jean-Paul Jaccaud, Fanny Noel
Fonseca Lopes, Stephan Gratzler, Marco Ferrari
Quantity surveyor, contract administrator
Measur
Structural engineer
Conisbee
Planning consultant
AZ Urban Studio
Main contractor
Rooff
Landscape designer
Forum Landscape
Developer
SolidSpace

Selected suppliers & subcontractors

Brick
Van de Moortel
Plaster to internal walls
Knauf
Timber flooring
Junckers
Kitchens
Hispec



Top, far right
Interior and exterior views of Jaccaud-Zein's Shepherdess Walk (phs: HB, DG).

Above, right
Shepherdess Walk floor plans, section and axonometric view showing the split-level configuration of living areas that characterises projects by developer Solid Space.

