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'Sinnlich gebaut'
by Jay Merrick

Simon Henley and his practice, Henley Halebrown, are designing substantial London buildings whose monumental character has an unusual degree of outer three-dimensionality. Chadwick Hall at Roehampton University, three student residential blocks with deeply sculpted facades, was shortlisted for the Riba Stirling Prize and the EU Mies Award. These buildings instantly convey weight, permanence, and a very solid neo-19th century quality of construction.

The practice's 333 Kingsland Road scheme, completed in 2020, is more boldly expressive. Here, a primary school and an apartment block are combined in a tableau most strongly characterised by the way the facades of the apartment building are layered in plan and elevation. This is their most interestingly composed large scheme, physically and philosophically.

At a recent architectural conference at KU Leuven, Belgium, Henley cited Buckminster Fuller's 1968 Manhattan geodesic dome proposal as the beginning of a technics-led evolution in the way architects thought about facades: "Today, walls are a complex configuration divided into abstract and imperceptible technical systems. The fabric is not matter, as such, but a series of lines that perform discrete technological roles.

"The reasoning that underpins these abstract elements has been separated from the sensible and perceptible aspects of building. Materials are not being used appropriately." Henley believes that large buildings, perhaps especially for housing, should be designed so that their occupation and engagement with the landscape and activities around them is very obvious.

The school and apartment block stand on the corner of Downham Road and the traffic-heavy Kingsland Road in a once poor part of London which is experiencing increasing gentrification. About 300m north of Henley's scheme is an elegant concave terrace of mostly 18th century homes, and opposite them is what used to be the 1886 Metropolitan Free Hospital, with decorative brickwork, balconies, and projecting stone-framed window bays.

These buildings are insulted by the train-crash of massing and differing architectural styles in the recently constructed Ability Plaza live-work development directly opposite 333 Kingsland Road. London has regurgitated hundreds of buildings like

this in the last 20 years: ugly, contextually ignorant, supposedly trendy, and very profitable.

The 333 Kingsland Road scheme delivers an 11-storey residential block whose carefully reduced footprint allowed Henley to create a 350-pupil primary school in the form of a three-level cloister around a large central play area-cum-agera. The architecture has a physically cool, calm, rather northern European character. Open galleries wrap around the courtyard, producing a space-efficient, light-filled plan – no internal corridors, and a direct relationship between inside and outside. Internal classroom seating is right up against windows that are set flush into the walls; outside, precast concrete benches sit beneath big, deeply recessed windows. This is shrewd, environmentally and socially.

The school hall is a double-height space, overlooked by the glass-walls of the first floor staff room. The hall's ceiling and walls are clasped by an exposed concrete frame, and a reinforced concrete crosspiece projects externally from the east wall to support concrete decking. The cross was designed so that, when seen from the ground floor, it visually frames the stairs leading to the first floor deck.

The top deck of the southern side of the school is an activity space, with a strange toilet that bulges out over the top of the staircase – a playful repeat of the cantilevered toilet designed by Henley when he was a student. There is an equally unexpected, and very satisfying, architectural moment at the northeast corner of the first floor: the walls of the double-height music practice room are surfaced with concrete and plasterboard; higher up, under a skylight, the concrete is coated with terracotta-coloured Keim paint which matches the colour of the apartment building. The atmosphere in this high, narrow room is almost monastic.

The school gate's dandelion and spider's web metal artwork casts abstract patterns across the entrance area, which sits under an elegantly radiused concrete deck connecting the southeast corner of the first floor with stairs down to the play area. Looking up from here, ivory glazed bricks shimmer on the classroom walls under gapped canopies designed in homage to Asplund's canopies at Stockholm's Woodland Cemetery.

The south facade of the school and the entrance gates align with the Downham Road pavement, and there are concrete benches set into the brick wall for public use. This gives the whole street side of the school an inclusive civic-social character.

Public engagement is more dramatically expressed in the design of the apartment building. Here, the outer structure was conceived as a ruin that encloses functional inner facades. One might, very broadly, compare this approach with the outer structure of Grafton Architects Town House at Kingston University (*db issue XX date XX*).

The modelling of the outer and inner walls articulate depth, effects of light and shadow, and connect the lives of those inside and outside the building. The first time Henley attempted this was in his proposed 2013 design for a 21-storey social housing block whose apartments were recessed behind an outer 'ruin' composed of three-storey arches.

The elevations of the apartment building are partly inspired by Czech Cubist architecture, and they have an in situ concrete structure whose decks rise in two storey segments to a top-floor loggia level, a third of which is for those in the 68 social rent homes, and two-thirds for the owners of the three private maisonettes.

The apartments are set back behind the outer 'ruin' structure which has giant columns that rise from the ground through the deeply coffered ground floor arcades and entablature to the crowning loggia. The in situ concrete cross-beams, some faced with brick, are a mixture of red sand and sandstone aggregate (with matching brick mortar) and this gives the elevations a richly granular, faux ruinous surface. The bold layering of the facades recalls buildings such as of Josef Gočár's 1912 House of the Black Madonna department store, Prague.

At the base of the south and east sides of the building the arcades are quite wide and obviously public; but not on the northern side, where the columns stand very close to the glass fronts of the retail units. This tightness is partly due to another unusual aspect of the design: in plan, the building's southwest and northeast corners are pinched and twisted to create radiuses that allowed the dual-outlook apartments to be laid out diagonally.

Internally, the most striking feature is the octagonal central staircase, which has 12 angular facets per rotation. This is splendidly atmospheric and recalls the heavy geometric cornices of Josef Chochol's 1914 Hodek Apartment block in Prague; such a pity that the contractor, who generally built well here, couldn't execute the in situ concrete accurately; one or two of the external entablature joints are also slightly misaligned.

The practice's resolution of the scheme's ethical intentions and two architectural styles is admirable. As Henley said at KU Leuven: "The façade's capacity to expose each of us to natural phenomena – consciousness breeds conscience – is in complete opposition to the prevailing technocratic response to the environment and the amoral citizen-consumer of buildings and space." How perfectly ironic that the school has asked Henley Halebrown to help the children construct a small geodesic dome on the top deck. The structure will certainly be examined by the ghost of Bucky, who will be deeply puzzled by the ruins next door.