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## Rooted in the Everyday

Comments on the architecture of Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates

**Bruno Krucker** The buildings and projects of Sergison Bates are impressive in their physical presence. They are developed from the specific conditions of the place and from its everyday use. Their architecture seems set, calm, and natural. In addition, it also renders aspects of a search resulting from an alert curiosity. Those characteristics lend it an appropriate depth and are emotionally charged.

At the latest since the *Outside In – London Architecture*<sup>1</sup> publication, it has become obvious that in England over the last years apart from the world-wide recognised high-tech architecture different positions have been established, which until now only existed at the margins. With the mentioned publication, a loose group of architects steps into the foreground, whose interests lie in the existing city and whose projects come out of a heterogeneous and fragmentary perception of the place. Connected with this "realism" is an extensive preoccupation with the effect of materials, their abstraction and detailing. With these interests in mind, a whole range of buildings were realised in and around London over the last years, which in their presence and precision exhibit a certain proximity to the younger Swiss-German architecture and thus were able to arouse interest here.

The advantage of a perception of this "London scene" as a group in the broadest sense is therefore not to be underestimated: it stresses the relevance of

the issues, brings a better chance of their wider appreciation and at the time essentially could supply sufficient "illustrative material" for its establishment with an important building, the Walsall New Art Gallery by Caruso St John (1997–2000).

At the same time and directly next to the gallery the so-called Public House by architects Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates was built, a building that was just as important for the image of the group. Furthermore the building, which is used as a pub and community center, expresses the characteristics of an architecture that is developed out of the specific place and apart from everyday use, and does not shrink from the ordinary.

On the exterior, the variety of used materials is striking and appears to be taken directly from the immediate surroundings. An irregular hipped roof shapes the volume and reacts to the different aspects of the site. An almost black colouredness ties the different materials together and produces a homogeneous effect. One finds a similar procedure in the interior, which is lined just as carefully as vernacular with timber boards and brick and whose surfaces are then covered with bright paint. The total effect of the building evokes a precise atmosphere, almost a feeling of home, allowing immediate emotional connotations. The building seems to have been accepted by the local population; it is widely used.

### Influenced by the Smithsons

Beside these immediate qualities, other typical characteristics in the work of Sergison Bates can be named: among those belong the quite direct use and adaptation of other architectures. In the Public House in Walsall for instance this becomes clear in the wide aluminum fascias of the glazed restaurant elevation or in the prominent placement of a diagonal timber bracing directly behind the window pane, which thematically and in their form are reminiscent of projects by Alison and Peter Smithson. Without doubt their work influenced the two architects the most. In the enduring fascination for the work of Alison and Peter Smithson also lie the beginnings of our acquaintance.<sup>2</sup>

In an article in *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui* Sergison Bates describe that "these notes are not able to express, what we owe to Alison and Peter Smithson..."<sup>3</sup>. And they dare, in a completely didactical way, to transfer issues and interests, which are deduced from the Smithsons, to their own buildings. Terms such as orientation, conglomerate ordering, strategy and detail, Janus head, ground notations and "as found" are illustrated with one of their own projects and one of the Smithsons'. Beside these very direct references their theoretical interests as well as the continuous development of their own writings are also to be traced back to the model of the Smithsons.<sup>4</sup>

How clearly the Smithsons are still present in the current work of Sergison Bates, shows itself in the recently finished Studio House in Bethnal Green. The expression of the rear elevation with wide horizontal bands and contrasting vertical fixed glazing and narrow shutter elements, is a direct reference to the Upper Lawn pavilion by the Smithsons.<sup>5</sup> However the independent kind of the realisation with up-to-date details and the maintained conciseness of the glazing let the Studio House appear unquestionable as a building of today.

### Working with references

The preoccupation with other architectures, beside that of the Smithsons or anonymous rural architecture, extends to contemporary, international projects. Thus for instance the roof extension of the Mixed Use Development in Wandsworth reminds us very directly of the wooden lining of the top floor of a residential and office building by Herzog & de Meuron in Solothurn. With other projects a certain proximity can be found to designs by Hans Kollhoff, such as the Piraeus building in Amsterdam, or further back in time although not in relevance, to the well-known brick buildings by Sigurd Lewerentz.

Even if such references are of amazing directness or occasionally even seem to stem from a certain naivety, the proximity to other architectures is not explicitly looked for. It represents no major problem, as long as the transferred issues are suitable to carry their own intentions adequately. In addition, such affinities are only single aspects, which are supplemented by an abundance of other intentions and reasons. To that extent Sergison Bates are interested in the effects, which can be achieved with this appropriation and in the use of individual topics.

In the case of the development in Wandsworth the interest lies in the spatial expression of the entrance situation to the dwellings with their enclosed small courtyards, which enriches the spatial development of the dwelling and is supported by the homogeneous wooden finishes. The superimposition of contents achieves an integration of the different references into a world of its own, also an independent world, which shows enormous and new qualities. Generally Sergison Bates' projects express a refreshing ease in the way other themes are integrated and worked with, which do not bear on the independ-

<sup>1</sup> *Outside In – London Architecture*, Peter Allison, Salzburg 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Without knowing each other at that time, in May 2000 we contributed to "Alltag – The Everyday", the last issue of *Daidalos*. SB with their Public House in Walsall, I with a first draft of my work about the Upper Lawn pavilion.

<sup>3</sup> Sergison Bates, "Six lessons learnt from Alison and Peter Smithson", in: *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui* 344/2003, p. 74ff.

<sup>4</sup> Similarly direct references can be made within the area of writings: Both Caruso St John and Sergison Bates have written texts in a similar vein to the Smithsons, texts, in which for example



ence of their architecture, but result in a mixture of high ambition and normality.

This process of appropriation (at present) seems inconceivable for Swiss architects, be it from an almost moral impetus against copying or because certain topics are regarded as "occupied" and therefore can no longer be a symptom of a certain tightness of our local conditions. From this point of view the fearlessness of Sergison Bates not to shun occupied areas but actually utilise them comes as a surprise.

This method can be observed in the elevations of the apartment building in Wandsworth: at first sight the horizontally shifting arrangement of the windows on different floors is reminiscent of a well-known topic, internationally as in Swiss architecture, and to that extent seems hardly independent or original. Only a more precise examination reveals the nuances of this measure, which is combined with slightly different window formats and a continuous railing profile, giving the individual elements a horizontal connection. In the sensitivity of the arrangement and design the facades receive a poetic expression of their own, which is sufficiently distant from the cliché of the shifted window arrangement.

Asked for the reason for this theme Stephen Bates immediately lists several: the different conditions of the prospect on the individual floors, the varying spatial character of equivalent spaces and, thirdly, the interest in composition.

In the sense of a further refinement of these issues I consider the façade of the Assisted Self-Build Housing in Tilbury exemplary: here the shifts in the elevations are controlled by the dimensioning of the individual boards of the cladding. What at first glance could appear as slight inaccuracies in the cutting of the boards, was based on an exact calculation between accurate and randomness, a procedure that Robert Maxwell has described as "carefully careless"<sup>6</sup>. The façade thereby receives an informality and oscillates between formal precision and trashy shed.

This kind of cultivated inaccuracy does not primarily mean a lack of craftsmanship, though it does not exclude those. This for instance can be observed in the internal shutters in the house of Jonathan Sergison. These are made from timber boards, without any detail, almost somewhat roughly manufactured and hardly covered by paint and because of this, hold an enormous charm. What is so fascinating – possibly

from a Swiss point of view – is the simplicity of the workmanship in combination with a pleasant measure of inaccuracy, which is however not detrimental to the intended effect (that Sergison Bates are annoyed by badly executed details is only an aside). Apart from differences in the quality of craftsmanship, these observations reveal peculiarities in cultural understanding.

These topics are reminiscent of the Dirty Realism, which has also been received in Switzerland<sup>7</sup>, which is also of reoccurring relevance for the work of our office: an attempt in this direction shows for instance the alterations in the roof section of an existing building in the Josefstrasse in Zurich, where the use of Duripanel in irregular widths, and therefore permitting leftovers, shows certain similarities to the façade of Tilbury. Also here the concern was to consciously break through the usual perfection and to find other rules and images.

#### Emotional qualities

So far the kind of use as much as the physical presence of materials themselves form one of the main foundations of the atmosphere achieved in the buildings of Sergison Bates. Beside the individual materials themselves such as wood, timber panels, brick or aluminium, their combination lie at the center of attention. Innovative developments like bespoke windows with wide casement sections are important elements of a kind of bricolage, which with its purposeful play is able to evoke fresh images (which are not solely fixed on the completely homogeneous).

Due to the integration of such topics, together with a quite personal way of working, the buildings of Sergison Bates transmit specific emotional qualities and unfold an irritating poetry. In the early design process the feeling for a building and the atmosphere of the material have already an important status – as guarding rail and foundation of the process. The multiple basis of their work, emotional and rational, impresses and together results in an intelligent mixture of powerful physical presence. The buildings seem at the same time set, calm, and natural; in addition, they show aspects which are rooted in their investigations and alert curiosity. Those characteristics lend an appropriate depth and seriousness to the projects, leading to an architecture that also contains a reflective moment (again a characteristic

that can be found within the work of the Smithsons).

These remarks are congruent with the call by Sergison Bates for more openness – tolerance as they say<sup>8</sup> – to be sensitive enough to the phenomena of the everyday life, from the interpretation of which amongst other things their specific kind of architecture is derived. The stimulating effect of the inconspicuous, only slightly different or also mildly quirky appears to be much more interesting than some "star architecture". Gladly I regard the attention for the architecture shown here as a suggestion of an appreciation of a calmer, tranquil, realistic architecture, which finds its legitimation as part of an everyday culture and can offer a lasting contribution. It is to be hoped that such "English tendencies" will also leave traces in Swiss architecture.

English translation: Tim Rettler

**Bruno Krucker**, born 1961, architect, office with Thomas von Ballmoos in Zurich. Assistant professor at ETH Zurich. Research activity with several emphases: post-war architecture, Alison and Peter Smithson; structural and constructive topics, prefabrication; interaction of theory and practice.



## Outlooks

*Jonathan Sergison* In different forms we have explored the presence of what lies around us as a potent force affecting the manner in which we see the world and the way we make building proposals. In other words, we are interested in making readings of a place and employ these as the basis for assisting our production as architects. This is an act of extending, distorting and adjusting to the point where the qualities of the element we have drawn influence from, as a reference, is far removed from the building form that we propose.

the way to work is described, full of sensitive observations, at the same time verging on the brink to banality. In Switzerland descriptions of such kind are hardly conceivable. The reliability of such writings cannot be separated from the cultural background, the handling of language, and in addition also not from the self understanding of the author: In particular with Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates it seems essential, how witty, curious and open to debate and, at least not without a sense of humour they operate.

<sup>5</sup> The Upper Lawn pavilion has interested them like myself for a

long time; in the meantime they have brought it back into a usable state with a fine, nearly invisible renovation.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Maxwell: "Sweet disorder and the carefully careless", in: Architectural Design, April 1971. In conjunction with the picturesque, which also for Sergison Bates is a useful term to understand certain methods, I have treated this subject in: Complex Ordinariness, Zürich 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Archithese 1-1990. In particular the article by Liane Lefavre.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates, "More Tolerance", in: The Everyday, Daidalos 75, May 2000, pp. 28-37.



For many years this has been an almost "regional" concern in as much as all our built work has been realised in the culture we know best. Nearly all that we have built is no more than a two-hour journey away. This situation has changed with the recent invitation to build outside of our native England and it remains to be seen what influence this will have on our work.

In writing this I am struck by the influence that the situation that is the most familiar has on the way one works. Our studio lies at the centre of London on the fifth floor of an early twentieth century industrial building. My home is a twenty-minute walk from the studio. The area between these two fixes in my life is one of the most "planned" parts of the city with its pattern of north south, east west streets and squares that characterise Georgian Bloomsbury.

From the windows of our studio I can view the city through nearly 360 degrees and while London is not dense it feels infinite. My view over the city is a privileged one because the majority of buildings in the neighbourhood we work in are four stories high and were built in the nineteenth century. This gives an uninterrupted view over their rooftops. From this vantage point it is difficult to read any clear urban structure. London is a city that was always resistant to the big plan. Much of what now exists as an urban fabric and transport infrastructure was built in the nineteenth century as a result of private speculation. More recently this "unplanned" city fell under the influence of the need to conserve and protect buildings that were never more than expedient responses to a practical need. By virtue of their ability to remain standing it is now necessary to treat them as fragments of the city that need to be respected. This factor creates a further distortion to the way the city might adjust and grow because large-scale demolition is restricted by older fragments that have protected status. We operate as architects in the slack within the chaotic urban fabric we are invited to add to. As the result of these circumstances we use the found situation as a constant source of inspiration. The view from our studio window is an encyclopaedia of the possible in architecture, and much of it was built without architects.

From our meeting room I can see the massive Middlesex hospital building. It is an impressive example of a strong tectonic façade. The decision to deeply recess the windows reinforces the feeling of weight. This is further reinforced through the arrangement of brick piers that describe both a structural need and a compositional order to the façade. By means of familiarity with the standard dimensions of a brick it is possible to sense immediately how deep these reveals are. Another building that we can see which works with an image of civic authority is the Senate House building for London University. This building deliberately distorts a feeling of its authority by re-

ducing the size of the windows to create a feeling it is considerably bigger than it is. Architecturally, it has the imposing character popular with regimes that wanted you to know your place within the order of things.

From the windows of the main studio room one looks into the interior space of an urban block. If its outer skin is orderly, the void on the inside has been more capable of absorbing the myriad adjustments that have been made over time. These include extract flues for restaurant kitchens, escape stairs and changes to the window arrangement. Very often these have been made because buildings have been converted from their original very clear programme of shops with homes above, to a situation of multioccupancy. There are numerous different examples of repair to the building fabric. In the summer, with the windows open, I can hear the Imam calling the faithful to prayer at the nearby mosque and we are reminded of the multicultural nature of our city, now more so than ever.

When we look out of the windows from the main studio space we can see in the distance the financial districts of the city of London and its place of overflow at Canary Wharf. To the south we can see the Gothic towers of the houses of Parliament. I am reminded that London is a major financial market with a somewhat dysfunctional relationship with the expression of democracy. Between these two points are the law courts and legal institutions and the position they have found centuries ago was adopted for good reason.

I am able to look down the street in which our studio is located because the building is on a bend. Many London streets follow mediaeval street patterns and it is no longer clear (if it ever was) what forces governed their arrangement in the first place. At times they read like the loose structures of fields you see from the air when you fly over this country. This somewhat accidental condition is to our advantage in terms of the clearer view I am afforded.

The views from the windows of my house are also intensely urban but because of a different viewpoint I see the city more in elevation than in plan. The building I live in was built in the 1830's as a commercial property with a shop at the street level and store in the basement. A family would have lived in the two upper floors. This situation existed until 25 years ago when it started to be used only as a residential property. The majority of buildings on the street I live retain their original programme. The street, which on Fridays hosts a street market, is unusually wide by London standards and has trees on one side. The buildings immediately across the street from my building were built in the beginning of the twentieth century and represent an early example of a philanthropists' compulsion to provide housing for the dis-

advantaged. The material language chosen for this large series of courtyard buildings is white render, suggestive of an overall impression of cleanliness. These buildings must have seemed very modern to the first residents. They are atypical of the housing typologies that predominate in London to the extent that, together with the neo-gothic towers of St Pancras station, they make me feel I am in a central European city.

To the rear, the view opens towards a composition of intensely brick buildings. These bricks have darkened in time to several hues, and the existing volumes are loose forms providing a composition that I find strong and simple. This view contains inspiring lessons that can be learnt about the power of employing a single material and simple, repeated forms. I like the manner in which different programmes, in this instance light industry and housing, are layered in parallel to each other within the depth of the block. It is a clear indication that the planning system's impulse to order neighbourhoods according to clear single programmes is simplistic, especially when judged against the rich lessons of London, a city largely built without clear planning codes.

To the left-hand side of the view from the rear of my house a large office building was built in the 1970s. It is clearly Miesian in spirit and it reminds me of the manner in which architectural culture is distilled through the influence a great artist has on the lesser architects he or she might inspire. This does not make it a bad building. I am happy to look to a building that reminds me of the Seagram building in New York.

The view from the back of my house has a Hitchcock, "rear window" quality to it. In contrast to my single-family house, the neighbouring apartment building dominates the view and reminds me of the intrinsically shared nature of living in the city. The distance between buildings allows me to witness scenes of everyday life but never at the expense of privacy. If I passed one of my neighbours from this building in the street I would not recognise them, and I value the possibility to feel the presence of humanity without losing a sense of personal space.

London is a low-density city of 9 million inhabitants, in which a considerable amount of negotiation is required to preserve the status quo. It is a place of reconciliation where cultures that don't coexist peacefully in their place of origin casually live next door to one another. Indian and Pakistanis "share" Whitechapel, Greek and Turkish Cypriots cohabit in Tottenham, and religious Jews live next door to Muslims in Stamford Hill. The thoroughly cosmopolitan nature of this city is one reason why I choose to live and work here – that and its complement, the possibility to get anywhere in the world relatively easily from one of its many international airports.



All of these observations and many others not expressed inform a way of informing our work as architects. We find that by being able to refer to existing things our ideas have some grounding over and against the innate subjectivity of the creative act. A reference acts as an explicit example of the qualities we are interested in working with and evoking. We are happy to work in this manner because we do not take as our starting point an ambition to create something new for its own sake. The recent history of architecture has shown that this ambition is invariably prone to failure because the result is often alienating. If through the reinterpretation of existing sets of conditions one achieves a feeling of newness, then this is a consequence of the multilayered process of design. It is not our goal from the outset because we do not believe it is possible to work in a vacuum, independently of what already exists. It would be possible to precisely refer to the buildings that have informed everything we have built, but that is an exercise for another occasion. Here it will be sufficient to conclude that what we see every day has always influenced our architectural outlooks.



## Otherness and Tradition

A genealogy of difference in British modern architecture

*Irina Davidovici* Within the eclectic realm of contemporary British architecture, ranging between formal sensationalism and a tame reworking of modernism, a particular and very different niche has been carved by a handful of practices over the last fifteen years. One cannot assign a recognisable style to this kind

of production, although certain affinities can be found: a penchant for austerity (albeit with a hint of playfulness), a sensual awareness of materiality, quiet but self-conscious detailing. In reaction to a widespread mediocrity of execution, where the choice of materials and their assembly are given relatively little thought, this approach places specific emphasis on the presence of buildings and therefore the way they come together at all scales. Most design and construction decisions are articulated and conceptualised, and even the space left for intuitive form making tends to be carefully delineated with words.

This phenomenon is embedded in a critical interpretation of the everyday – a useful, if overused, term indicating the deeper cultural situation that is being addressed. The lack of a given formal language points to a keen willingness to mimic the physical context while detaching itself from it. In other words, the architecture endorses the use of vernacular quotation with very large inverted commas – familiar forms are cleverly distorted, ubiquitous façades intensified through tectonic or material presence, banal (but practical) details, oversized to achieve individuality. Through such devices, which are novel only inasmuch as the wit or sensitivity of their application allows, the architecture achieves an ambiguous presence in which familiarity blends with otherness, and the unnoticeable is granted a second look.

Beyond matters of style, there is a practical desire in this kind of production to fulfil its assigned role, to fit in with cultural and social realities. In that respect such works share not a given style, but a common ethos. By means of their humanist stance, critical contextualism and resistance to the mainstream, they relate to the past episodes of British modernism which, incidentally, constitute the backbone of architectural development in this country. The written production that usually accompanies contemporary projects repeatedly acknowledges their debt to the work of Alison and Peter Smithson, James Gowan, James Stirling (pre-postmodern works), Denys Lasdun, Leslie Martin and before them, that of the few pre-war modernists that graced these shores. A brief and selective review of this genealogy might throw some light on what ultimately connects them.

The theme of otherness is a first such connection, and it is not restricted to the presence of buildings alone. Much of Britain's contribution to the early modern movement is due, significantly, to the work of immigrant or refugee architects (Lubetkin, Wells Coates, Chermayeff, Goldfinger, Gropius on the way to the US and Mendelsohn to Israel) or British nationals of foreign descent (Denys Lasdun). The strength of their proposals was possibly reinforced by the precariousness of their position in relation to a native culture, to which they didn't feel obliged or even capable to pay tribute. In spite of having long

achieved iconic status, modernist works preserve even today a quality of difference in the British built landscape, a distancing from their surroundings which renders them as exceptions to the rule.

After the Second World War, matters turned more ambiguous with the critical reassessment of tradition, and with modern architecture beginning to be perceived as a tradition in itself. The criticism levied during the early 50s by the new generation of British architects, against a profession dominated by nostalgic planning and a pseudo-vernacular style, had to be measured against Team 10-led commensurate dissatisfaction with the principles of CIAM dogma, formulaic formalism and functional urbanism. The question was set as to what could be a tenable alternative to the dominant models, vernacular pastiche and utopian tabula rasa. With their high profile in opposing both, the Smithsons were the first to meet the dilemma head-on. The gradual shift of New Brutalism from a stylistic language influenced by the Modern Masters, particularly Le Corbusier and Mies, to a concern with realism and the human occupation of architecture, is perhaps best summarised by Peter Smithson himself, in 1957:

"From individual buildings, disciplined on the whole by classical aesthetic techniques, we moved on to an examination of the 'whole' problem of human associations and the relationship that building and community has to them. From this study has grown a completely new attitude and a non-classical aesthetic. Any discussion of Brutalism will miss the point if it does not take into account Brutalism's attempt to be objective about 'reality' – the cultural objectives of society, its urges, its techniques and so on. Brutalism tries to face up to mass-production society, and drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work. Up to now Brutalism has been discussed stylistically, whereas its essence is ethical."<sup>2</sup>

The gradual inclusion of social ethics alongside architectural aesthetics in the Smithson's Brutalist model is illustrated by two influential early works, Hunstanton School (completed 1954) and Sugden House in Watford (1957). Putting aside the obvious differences relating to programme, they represent the two sides of the Brutalist coin. The former seems at first glance an elegant reworking of the Miesian formal language at IIT, but its rhetorically direct employment of exposed materials and services plants it firmly on new territory. In terms of its language, massing, planning, the School stands out as a clear statement endorsing the hard Miesian modernism that had never properly penetrated British architecture. At a closer look however, the direct detailing, the straight-faced treatment of materials and services reveal a quintessential Englishness. As identified by Rayner Banham, the School displays the "engrained



English traditions... of suppressed extremism, of gentlemanly 'bloody-mindedness' imprisoned within the grid".<sup>3</sup>

The Sugden residence makes an equally determined statement by taking one of the most modest local typologies – that of the detached suburban house – and subjecting it to an overall, yet painfully discreet treatment of adjustments. Its dour realism makes it difficult to accept the House as a stylistic statement, unless one acknowledges in its presence the "rough poetry" of the simple act of suburban living in an English satellite town. While both projects work consciously with image, one implants an intrinsically "strange" object into the landscape, whereas the other takes an image familiar to the point of anonymity and infuses it with strangeness. These distinct strategies mark the limits of the New Brutalist spectrum, dominated by the tension between otherness and tradition, between High Architecture and local contemporary culture.

The Smithsons' early projects were supported by an intense intellectual infrastructure, energetic and timely in the cultural context of the fifties. Their insistence for an architecture grounded in the ethical lost momentum as elements of the New Brutalist aesthetic began to gain currency, locally and internationally, during the late fifties and early sixties. This phenomenon was compounded by the influence generated by original works like Le Corbusier's *Maison Jaoul* (Neuilly, 1956) and, in Britain, Stirling and Gowan's *Ham Common* apartments (London, 1958). There follows the translation of the Brutalist ethos into a style of brick and exposed concrete, like that employed by Sheppard Robson for their Churchill College flats in Cambridge (1964). The success of the Brutalist style, beyond the historical inevitability of a dilution process, was due to the obvious economic merit of grafting such 'gritty' elements on schemes dictated by functional and constructional convenience.<sup>4</sup>

It is poignant that the Sheppard Robson project (which in its accomplishment poses a pertinent but uneasy question as to the relevance of ideology to practice) would be built in Cambridge. In a place where the culture of architecture as a marker of status is one of the oldest traditions, its stylistic edge constitutes a rule rather than an exception. Behind college walls and hedges, the University has acquired an exceptional density of post-war architec-

ture of quality. This is due firstly to the fact that the commissioning process was conducted by colleges – cultivated clients with sizeable economic means – and secondly, that the public and social nature of the required buildings required, and attracted, signature architecture. Cambridge is characterised by the marked contrast between the adjacent territories of "university" and "town", where the protective bubble of academic life and the gritty realism of its supporting infrastructure translate quite clearly in urban and architectural form. This distance is indeed analogous to the ideological distance between the realist Brutalism of the Smithsons and its "cultivated" counterpart, practised by the so-called Cambridge School, which is equally relevant in the present discussion.

Contemporary with the Smithsons and often grouped together under the umbrella of stylistic resemblance, the representatives of the Cambridge School proposed a heavy architecture, charged with historical reference and, literally, with the massive presence of brick and concrete. Leslie Martin, the first to occupy the Chair of Architecture created by the University in 1956, was a leading figure of British Modernism. From his association in the thirties with the *Circle* publication alongside Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo,<sup>5</sup> to his acclaimed design for the Royal Festival Hall (London, 1951) and the academic posts held in various universities, Martin had been able to combine throughout architectural practice with research and teaching. Both the new Cambridge school and his studio were structured according to this approach, which allowed Martin to continue teaching<sup>6</sup> (alongside like-minded individuals Colin Rowe, Colin St John Wilson and Peter Eisenmann) while gaining some of the most interesting local commissions.<sup>7</sup>

The built and written production of the school associates it with a reassessment of modern architecture, in particular the late works of Le Corbusier. Colin St John Wilson and Alex Hardy's extension to the School of Architecture (1959) is a brick box dense with intellectual references, spanning from the interior details reminiscent of 1920s Machine aesthetic and 1950s Chandigarh, to the Modulor-inspired proportioning of the façades. While it conforms to the New Brutalist canon in its pragmatic and humanistic approach to programme and the overall "as found" treatment of materials, the underlying ethos is quite different from that proposed by the Smithsons. In-

stead of articulating the "rough poetry" of the everyday, it reads rather like a built piece of research, a rarefied and informed take on architectural culture replete with commentary and quotations.

Harvey Court (1962), the student residential halls for Gonville and Caius College designed by Colin St John Wilson, together with Patrick Hodgkinson, in Martin's studio, uses historical reference in an altogether different manner. The nature and scale of the programme allows Harvey Court to create its own environment, isolated from and raised above its surroundings. The building is based in plan on the collegiate typology of inward-looking courtyard blocks, but its section is adjusted to dramatic effect. The internal courtyard is a raised platform separating the accommodation stories from the chthonic public areas below, connected to the back garden through a ceremonial brick staircase. Unlike the traditional type where the floors are stacked, here each storey of rooms steps back from the one below, opening toward the sky and liberating some space for private terraces. The blank "front" façades preserve this stepping in negative form, as a reversed ziggurat supported by the strong rhythm of brick pillars. The feeling of mass resulting from the intense employment of brick combines with the sectional organisation and its resulting structural expression to create an architecture evocative of primitive ritual. In this respect Harvey Court owes as much to Louis Kahn as to the Corbusian later projects in Chandigarh.

The Cambridge School practice has been consistently supported by a body of research that reads like a sophisticated commentary on the modernist tradition, rather than the articulation of an ideological manifesto. A case in point is the written output of Colin St John Wilson, his essays grouped together as *Architectural Reflections* (1992) and *The Other Tradition* (1995), a work endorsing the Scandinavian modernism of Aalto and Lewerentz.<sup>8</sup> In spite of their differences, Wilson shares with the Smithsons a profound erudition of the history of modernism and a belief in the ethical nature of architecture "as practical art" – in which lies its redeeming potential. The same position informs the contemporary practice mentioned at the outset, which today articulates an ethical stance in terms of readings of place, architectural quotations, a human concern with reality and the intelligent integrity of construction. Its production maintains a discreet but distinct presence in re-

<sup>1</sup> It is not in the scope of this paper to deal in depth with the phenomenon of modernism in Britain. Nevertheless, one must also take into consideration the significant contributions made by British architects, for example Owen Williams (*Wets Factory for Boots*, Nottingham, 1930–32), Crabtree Slater and Moberly (*Peter Jones Department Store*, Chelsea, London, 1936–39). The fact remains that such works sided with Continental modernism and, in spite of their success, they fell short of inspiring a large-scale embracing of the modernist canon in this country.

<sup>2</sup> *Architectural Design*, April 1957.

<sup>3</sup> Rayner Banham, *The New Brutalism – Ethic or Aesthetic?*, London 1966, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> See op. cit., chapter 6.3, "The Brutalist Style", p. 89–91.

<sup>5</sup> Leslie Martin, Naum Gabo, Ben Nicholson (eds.), *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, Faber and Faber, London 1937 reprinted 1971.

<sup>6</sup> See Peter Carolin, Trevor Dannatt (ed.), *Architecture, Education and Research – The Work of Leslie Martin:*

*Papers and Selected Articles*, Academy Editions, London 1996.

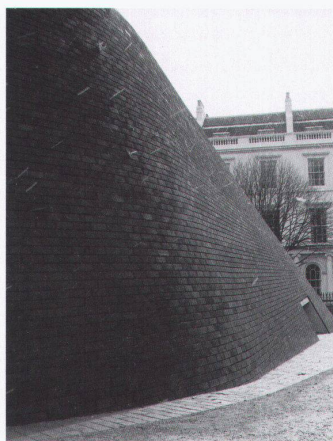
<sup>7</sup> See Leslie Martin, *Buildings and Ideas 1933–83, From the Studio of Leslie Martin and His Associates*, Cambridge University Press 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Colin St John Wilson, *Architectural Reflections*, *Studies in the Philosophy and Practice of Architecture* Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1992; *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture, The Uncompleted Project*, Academy Editions, London, 1995.



lation to the mainstream architecture and building industry in the UK. Following on to the early modernists, Brutalists and Cambridge scholars, this is the latest episode of an "other tradition" of British architecture, the tradition of otherness.

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## Useful Reference

*Jonathan Sergison and Stephen Bates* There seems to be a reticence in acknowledging the role of reference in architecture. One may observe a resistance in contemporary Swiss architecture to work with known precedent and instead reference is usually confined to abstract models and materials. And yet, we find it not only a compelling and useful tool but also a necessary state in which to place our work. We work with reference because we work as two people and find it helpful to refer to things that exist. With this reference comes a landscape of memories, associations and emotions, some of which are personal, others are shared. These aspects can be held up to gauge the making of new places and spaces. As we recognise that our work contributes to an existing and evolving culture of architecture it feels necessary to familiarise ourselves with the work of previous generations. We are not driven by a compulsion to originate newness for its own sake or to work in isolation of precedent, but instead to develop contemporary inter-

pretations of forms which, somewhere, exist already. In this way we find Harvey Court, Kettles Yard and the Royal College of Physicians useful as they contribute to an ongoing discussion between us of a developing position. Despite being completed between 30–45 years ago they still seem relevant to the contemporary condition we find ourselves working in.

Leslie Martin, Colin St. John Wilson and Denys Lasdun received their architectural education at a time when the world was changing more quickly than it had done any time in contemporary history, due to advances being made in technology. Their reaction to this condition of potential disorientation has parallels with Louis Kahn's thinking in terms of his interest in working with the essence of things, a material directness and a search for primitive reference. The work of these architects was also demonstrating a suspicion of the canon of Universal Modernism and through that, they began to explore a more regional and critical response to form and place. We find ourselves in a similar situation at the beginning of the new century and, like previous generations, have favoured a more reflective position as a point of resistance to the domination of a global technological culture.

The student residence at Harvey Court, Cambridge by Leslie Martin, Colin St. John Wilson and Patrick Hodgkinson has qualities that we can observe as helpful in understanding this position. The project is a reinterpretation of a known typology, in this case the collegiate model, but adjusts it by inserting the most communal space in the programme (the refectory) in the middle of the plan, thereby creating a raised courtyard and a renewed relationship with adjoining landscape. It employs a reduced palette of materials; brick, concrete and timber (Douglas Fir) thereby intensifying its tectonic character and minimising articulation. It explores repetition as a device to organise the programme of multiple use but knowingly adjusts the repeated element to achieve a level of individuality within the whole. This brings about an expression of difference in sameness. And perhaps most memorably, the building employs the massive properties of brick in a manner reminiscent of ancient structures. The double height order, exaggerated volumetric modelling and tonal equivalence achieved between brick and concrete give the impression of an overall material intensity and a monumental presence.

The small gallery at Kettles Yard, extended by Leslie Martin in Cambridge is exemplary in its programmatic ambiguity. It is a project that blurs the boundaries between artefact and container. It is conceived as both home and public gallery. As an extension to three former workers' cottages, converted previously into a sequence of domestic-sized rooms, the new building introduces a new concept of spatial

organisation which is more anti-room. A single complex volume defined by a variety of spatial characters is made where the subtlety of threshold and the inward-looking quality of topight, with no views to the outside, make a space that is intimately connected with the work it houses. This is a project which is not afraid of working with beauty and sensuality. Background and artefact comprise a single and comfortable entity in ways that are more akin to a domestic setting than a gallery. And yet this place feels like neither home nor gallery. This ambiguity gives the building a character which we find compelling. The collection of art and artefact is featured in a book produced by the owner Jim Ede, entitled "A way of life – Kettle's Yard" in which object and space are presented like one continuous still-life. This is both a highly personal document of life surrounded by art and suggestive of space occupied after the architecture is complete and everyday life begins.

The Royal College of Physicians in London by Denys Lasdun displays a formal freedom in the sculptural brick mound-like auditorium which is in dramatic contrast to the systematised regularity of the most public front of the building. This brick and lead clad volume demonstrates a primordial expression of enclosure and focus, similar to that of an ancient burial mound or barrow. The brick walls which lean inwards and bulge outwards are precisely detailed but make a loose form that may easily be described in an emotive way. It has a brooding, mysterious or melancholic character which is made all the more intense by the consistent use of a hard blue/black engineering brick with recessed bedded joint. The decision to use a black brick contrasts directly with the neo-classical neighbouring buildings, resembling instead the grass banks found opposite within the grounds of Regents Park. In complete contrast to this, the street façade on Albany Street displays a high degree of order and seemingly achieves a calm continuity with its neighbours. The building is intended as an infill to the streetscape and may be read as a responsible act of urban continuity in the way it joins the neighbouring buildings in scale and line. However, on more careful study, the subtle shifts in rhythm to the elevation reveal a greater complexity and resistance to the static architecture of its neighbours. Fixed window panes create a repeated major order to the elevation, which are organised along a series of horizontal layers. But this repetitive order is displaced by a secondary order of more narrow opening lights, which alter between floors of the four-storey elevation. The characteristics of building form, material intensity and syncopated repetition seem contemporary and reveal the folly in the contemporary belief that originality exists in the making of form free of reference.





## Projects

# Mixed Use Development, Wandsworth, London

The project involved the partial demolition, refurbishment and extension of existing buildings, known as Wandsworth Workshops, in South West London. The buildings had originally been a paint factory sited alongside the fast flowing River Wandle and Garratt Lane and more recently, had provided sixty light industrial workspaces for modest sized local businesses ranging from printers to watchmakers.

The factory building was built along the boundary line to the street and as such the blocks shift direction, along their length, thereby accommodating the changing site geometry. Built in the 1930s the building conforms to an heroic style. The horizontality of the ribbon glazing and string courses is further emphasised by the meandering form of the building surface which gives the building a unique character.

The approach to the transformation of the factory was to provide large shell studio-office spaces of between 85–200 m<sup>2</sup>. Most of the internal walls are removed with some new walls added to form unit division and a service core of toilets and stairs. The façades of the existing buildings have been refurbished in the most expedient ways and all surfaces are painted a new colour of earthy grey which unifies the two building blocks and integrates new infill elements with the existing fabric.

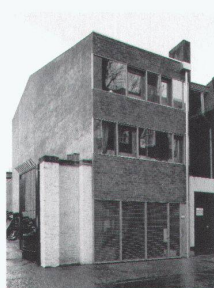
A timber framed extension is added on top of the existing buildings. Occupying the complete area available on the roof, the new storey resembles a great mat which has been laid down and trimmed to suit the form of the existing footprint. Supported on a steel transfer structure, the new accommodation comprises eleven one and two-bedroom apartments. Entry to the apartments is from a timber decked, covered walkway, accessed by lift, which extends from one end of the building to the other. The walkway is protected but open to the elements and offers high level views to the West, East and North. Small open-air courtyards, with wooden gates, connect with the walkway providing access to each apartment. Windows from the kitchen and timber-lined bathroom open into this space giving privacy, daylight and ven-

tilation. Rooms are arranged around a central hall connected to the open-air courtyards. The principal living and sleeping spaces generally open towards the West to a private balcony which is enclosed by walls on three sides and roofed over to give the sense of an open-sided room.

The experience of being on the open-air walkway, connecting all apartments, with its length broken by sharp twists and changes of direction, is intensified by using the same material surface on the walls, floors and ceilings. Timber (Larch) panels create a total enclosure of wood, punctuated by light shafts and open views giving a unique impression of urban domesticity.

A new six-storey apartment building is located at the southern end of the site. Twenty apartments are arranged, four per floor, with two work units on the ground floor. As a carved, extruded block, the formal qualities of the building seek to compliment the industrial character of the existing workshops and mediate with the surrounding buildings from the 50s and 60s.

The concrete flat slab and column structure is cranked in plan to follow the boundary of the site and the consequent angled facets of the elevations create oblique sightlines, giving a vertical emphasis to the building, despite its polygonal footprint. The composition of the elevations is organised by storey height horizontal galvanised metal rails that run around the building, which reflect the process of construction, emphasising the wall as a non-load bearing element. The position of full height window assemblies varies from floor to floor giving a shifting composition that reflects the possibility of difference within a repeatedly stacked plan. SB



## Projects

# Studio House, Bethnal Green, London

Located in a previously semi-industrial area of East London which is now dense and fragmented in char-

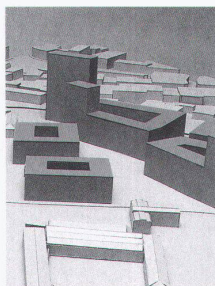
acter, the site occupies a piece of derelict land on a street of light industrial buildings and large pre-war housing blocks.

The complex requirements of the brief with four different programmes; two apartments, a studio for an artist and a space for a joint therapy practice, suggested a form that did not immediately announce its purpose. It can be read as an urban house or a small industrial building and its form is generated, in the most part, by the extraordinary site footprint of 4.5 m wide by 20 m long and the constraints given by the planning department on massing and sightlines. Internally, the client's wishes suggested a labyrinthine arrangement of interconnected rooms and changes of level much like the spatial qualities of Kettle's Yard, Cambridge and a relaxed definition of the use of rooms which gave a changeable and spontaneous character to the building interior.

Entry to the building from the street is via a porch, open on one side with a mesh screen providing security and semi-privacy. Staircases are placed along one side in long flights and rooms are arranged around a central courtyard which is exposed to the sky. The rear of the building is a single storey with a roof terrace above it at first floor level. The principal space in the top floor apartment is attic-like with a high pitched roof overhead and the bedroom is placed at the front towards the street with a step down where the pitch is at its lowest. From the low strip window in this space views are possible into the leaf canopy of an old Plane tree, the only tree planted on the street.

The timber framed structure allows for the stacking of a variety of spatial volumes within a compact form. The expression of the softwood frame becomes an important element within the architectural language, as vertical Douglas Fir studs become visible within the structural openings of windows and internal rooms (such as the bathrooms). External claddings and windows are detailed as added layers to the framed structure and become visibly more complex by the misalignment of structure and cladding and the use of semi-reflective glass that cover solid and void alike. Brick was chosen as the primary cladding, a material which is common to the modest architecture of London. However, in this situation it is treated and detailed as a coarse wrapping with a mortar slurry washed over the surface. The construction adopted on two walls was a brick slip system where thinly cut bricks, bonded to rebated strips are slotted together in the manner of ship-lap boarding to achieve a surface cladding. The contradictory character of the wall, as both monolithic and delicate, gives it a quiet awkwardness and imperfection which connects it with the flawed heroism of nearby industrial buildings. In this way the building adds to the realism of the city condition "as found". SB





#### Projects

## Royal Arsenal Masterplan, Woolwich, London

Located between Woolwich town centre and the river Thames, the development land and historic buildings at The Royal Arsenal are regarded as a major development site in London and the Thames Gateway region. The commission was for the development of a masterplan, or urban strategy plan, for the Arsenal site and adjoining Warren Lane area. The project followed a previous commission to carry out a Framework Plan for Woolwich town centre which was undertaken with East, a collaborator on a number of other urban projects, including the Barking Town Centre Framework plan.

The urban strategy plan aimed to develop a development framework for the site which could evolve in time and be realised through a series of controlled phases. Test planning would be carried out on each phase with a high level of consultation with Greenwich Council planning department and government agencies including the London Development Agency (LDA), The Greater London Authority (Architecture + Urbanism Unit), Commission for the Built Environment (CABE), Transport For London (TFL) and English Heritage. With major urban infrastructure projects such as Crossrail (cross city fast train route), the Greenwich Waterfront Transit and the extension of the Docklands Light Railway planned for implementation within the next ten years, the urban strategy plan was required to be adaptable enough to accommodate changing scenarios which could affect development, without losing a coherent identity.

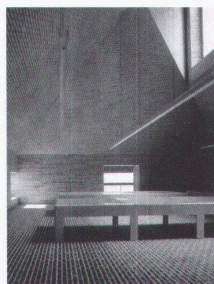
The plan proposes a predominantly residential scheme of approximately 2500 units, with integrated commercial, retail and leisure uses, acting as a vital extension to Woolwich town centre.

The major public spaces of the town centre, General Gordon Square and Beresford Square, are extended across the four lane carriageway of Plumstead Road and linked to a series of existing and new open spaces within the Arsenal to form a linear landscaped park which runs down to the river edge. These linear spaces reflect and reinforce a series of radial urban geometries which exist already and be-

come a guiding infrastructure for new development fields. Its location, between the formal layout of the Royal Arsenal site and the looser and more intense urban grain of the Warren Lane area, also creates a clearly defined threshold between two proposed building typologies.

Within the boundaries of the historic Arsenal site, a courtyard building typology is proposed to reinforce the existing formal urban structure. A maximum height difference between lower and upper parts is established to ensure a legibility to the courtyard building without reducing the possibilities for subtle variation and appearance. A "tower and tail" building typology is proposed for the Warren Lane area. Towers are proposed as orientating elements and lower linear blocks define clear edges to the public realm. The mixed-use character of these buildings seeks to work with adjacency, proximity, and diversity to encourage a lively urban atmosphere.

The project is envisaged as a ten-year phased programme. Each phase will be test planned against the urban strategy plan and framework guidelines will be developed for adoption by a variety of invited architects who will realise buildings in each phase. SB



#### Projects

## Cultural History Museum, Bornholm, Denmark

The architecture of the re-organised museum is intended to provide an intense and abstract representation of the character of the town with its clusters of buildings around open courtyards. Strong and simple forms, reminiscent of "smokehouses" and "rundkirkes" present on the island, are proposed which are adjusted in accordance with the scale of streets and houses close to it to make a new, but reconciliatory architecture.

The material of the new building is brick, overall and monolithic in its presence. Soft in texture, with joints which are blurred by the wash of slurry over

the surface, the bricks become more like aggregate within a conglomerate structure than distinct, stacked masonry units. In parts the brickwork is stretched to form an open pattern, increasing ventilation into the cavity behind it. Structural expression is suppressed to give the material an autonomy from technique, which intensifies its expression as wrapping, heavyweight enclosure or perforated screen. Large windows, with deeply angled reveals, give the building an appropriately public character within the predominantly residential neighbourhood.

The building has a straightforward organisation of interconnected rooms. Education and research facilities are contained in the existing "Gamle Museumsbygning"; administration and staff facilities occupy the existing "Gule Længe" building and exhibition spaces and workshop facilities are contained within the new building. This is organised on three floors with the reception, café, temporary exhibition and conservation workshops located at ground floor level; the "Rønnes/Bornholms-History", the additional exhibition spaces (including a model of the town), offices and workshops at first floor and the permanent Ancient, Middle and New Times collections at basement level. A lift connects all floors and rises to a viewing platform overlooking the town. Controlled access to the Gamle Museumsbygning is achieved by a basement link with the new building.

The arrangement and integration of spaces is intended to give the museum an atmosphere of openness. Gallery spaces, offices and archive are located within sight of each other in order to facilitate everyday working and emphasise the equivalence between viewing, research and cataloguing.

A variety of gallery volumes and optional routes between them are provided so that the experience of viewing is changeable and the opportunities for display are flexible. A variety of lighting conditions are possible with side light, top light from the ceiling and clerestory light from the side. Artificial lighting installations are intended to give both a very steady, bright light as well as special effects to highlight selected objects. The combination of these conditions enrich the potential for the installation of art and artefact as each piece engages with a variation of background, surface, view and light level.

A double brick skin construction is proposed with an outer skin of self supporting brickwork on the walls and as ballast on the roofs and an inner structure of solid brickwork with keystone reinforcement in finely tuned compression spanning between concrete ring beams. The roofs form a series of interconnected vaults, running across the east-west axis, springing from double skin walls. The varied set of spaces inside is encased by this enveloping mass of brick which is ever present. SB