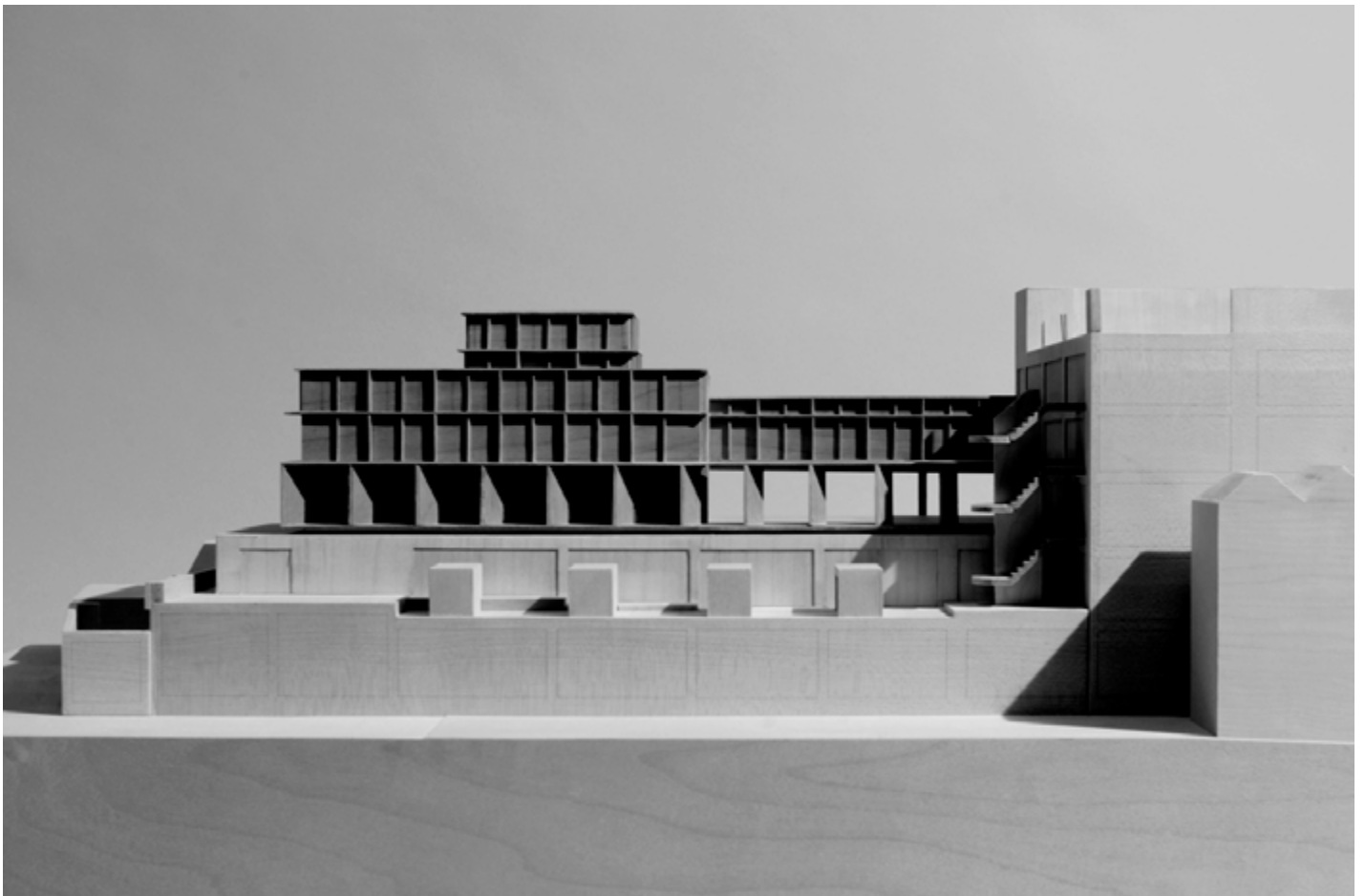
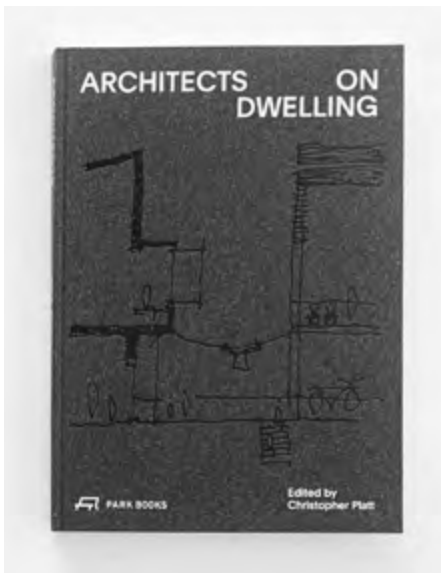


## The Blinded Man sees with his Ears and Hands





First published in 'Architects on Dwelling', Christopher Platt (editor), Park Books, 2022

All too often discussions about building dwell on the technocratic and formal, and the extent to which material decoration has re-emerged as a necessary dimension of all kinds of architecture not least the domestic. But these global addictions belie a lack of purpose and content. Not so the work of the practitioners teaching at the Mackintosh School of Architecture. Instead their thoughts and work address what it means to inhabit a dwelling, and to observe that inhabitation, often at the threshold between inside and out. Studio KAP's "Corrections" by their very nature act on, and remake, the edges of domestic space; Elder and Cannon's work enjoys the 'paraphernalia of life' to be found, and the rich experience to be had, within these threshold spaces; Stacey Philips also writes about the edges of their buildings, of 'a graduation of defined thresholds', and these spaces where they are adopted serve as a 'calm background for life'; whereas DO Architecture consider the functional-behavioural aspects of these types of space and their metrics. Cameron Webster write about 'instinct' (Aalto), 'ordinariness' (Smithsons) and 'touching the senses'. Orkid Studio reminds us of the absolute necessity, the economics and ethics of shelter. Ideas about culture, climate and typology recur. And, Ian Alexander and Henry McKeowan relate these themes to what they term the 'undesigned'. Again, and again, the notion of psycho-social and physiological space prevails.

In his poem "Recalling War" Robert Graves wrote the lines,  
*'The blinded man sees with his ears and hands  
As much or more than once with both his eyes'.*

I first came across this when working on a competition that the practice subsequently won to adapt a Brutalist warehouse for a charity called *We Are 336* that provides conference and workspace for a number of disability and age-related charities. Graves' notion was, that soldiers confronted with the loss of a sense, in this case sight, might develop greater acuity in another.

In the UK, the Building Regulations and British Standards dictate how we build for disability. People talk of *inclusive design* and *barrier free access* when describing what is expected of a design. In most cases this translates into the use of lifts and ramps and finishes with contrasting surface tonalities (Light Reflectance Values) so that a partially sighted individual can distinguish between the floor and wall planes, and a door within a wall. These are necessary prescriptions. They are quantitative not qualitative, designed not to enrich but only to enable. But Graves' words raise a much more profound point for architects and their architecture which is usually evaluated by sight, and as a consequence by our desire to judge shape and

Fig 1 Conference centre and offices for charity *We Are 336*, competition, 1st place (2008)



form, and indeed space by eye. His words direct us to think about the other senses – to touch, hearing, smell and taste – and to the way space works in terms of experience, not simply something to be glanced at.

For *We Are 336* his words led us to propose an architecture of contrasting natural luminosities, of material textures and temperatures due to their conductivity or insulating properties, and to the extent to which an open window, and outside, a window box or a garden terrace may bring first flora then fauna, first smells then sound, close to somebody's work or a meeting. Birdsong or the noise generated by an insect's wing beat frequency become a part of the architecture. After more than a decade this project has not been realized but we are again exploring the same concerns with a project for *The Poppy Factory*, a charity that both employs and coaches veterans with disabilities back to work.

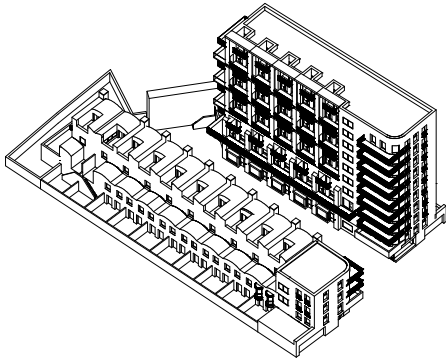
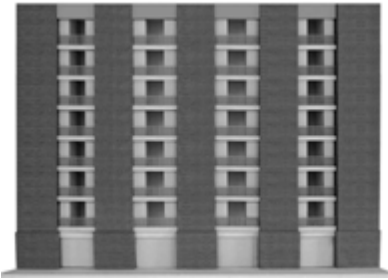
From the outset, our architecture has exploited the outdoor space adjacent to a building. The decks at *Talkback* framed a garden of herbs that may be crushed under foot by staff moving between buildings created within what was, in effect, a multistorey cloister. There, the office and the idea of work were associated not with the interior but with the captured landscape. Our competition for *Letchworth Town Hall* envisaged the council chamber and committee rooms surrounded by a brim (much like that of a hat) that would afford those outside, shelter and at the same time the opportunity of proximity to an open window, to hear discussion and debate, and so to be closer to the democratic process.

These works suggest that it is the threshold – the morphology and fabric of the façade and space immediately beyond it – itself that becomes the architecture, the nature of which differs one from the next. A study of the threshold becomes therefore a study in type. In the case of the dwelling, the significance of the threshold lies in its capacity to associate the household with, and disassociate it from, the city; and the way in which it might establish common ground between neighbours, and within an urban quarter, all of which depend on the sensible properties of these external environments.

More recently our work has turned to housing and the question of *dwelling* in liminal space. *Arnold Road* is a quiet street in the East End of London with railway arches on one side and a community centre on the other. Our project replaces the community centre on its triangular site between the street and an Underground line as it resurfaces. The parti breaks what might have been one long block (that would have cast long shadows) into two heavy masonry buildings surrounded by interconnecting courtyards

Fig 2 "Poppy Portico", The Poppy Factory, in collaboration with artist Paul Morrison (2017-2021)

Fig 3 Letchworth Town Hall, 'Designs on Democracy' competition, 2nd place (2002)



and gardens that the structures shape. These offer sanctuary to the families that live here and a playful world for children. The arrangement permits morning and afternoon light to permeate between the buildings, penetrate the courts and illuminate interiors. Each dwelling is conceived as a courtyard house, stacked one on top of another. A loggia extends the space of the hall, creating a focus for the home, and in the larger dwellings divides living rooms and bedrooms much like the floors of a house. Windows are concentrated around the loggia, so the life of the interior is channelled through this point in the façade. The external room appears as a cleft in the masonry, its floor a small concrete bridge spanning the void, surrounded by a curtain of glass that recedes into the shadows. This protects the interiors from the noise of the trains and the impact of the sun, but also mediates between the private realm and its exposure to the metropolis.

*Tent Street*, another social housing scheme in London's East End, develops a different idea, the opportunity for casual association on route to a dwelling. Near Whitechapel, the land is isolated from the city at-large by railway lines, a housing estate and industrial compounds. Therefore any hope of urban continuity is frustrated by the surroundings. The design therefore has more in common with the isolated industrial urban artefacts to be found in the Potteries and in the Liverpool docks that ape the urbanism from which they were removed. Like an 18<sup>th</sup> Century new model village it begins to piece together a language of urbanism. The new mews is flanked by a 4-storey terrace to the south and a 10-storey terrace to the north. Bull-nose corners mark the start of a pedestrian space, lined by front doors, bay windows and behind these, kitchen tables. Overhead, lights, suspended between the facades literally tie the buildings either side of the precinct together. All the dwellings except for the lateral flats behind the bullnose are 2-storey. Those above ground are served by wide internal staircases that open onto decks on every other floor. The second floor decks project from the façade so those who use them are *in* the space, intimately connected to the theatre of life and conversation below.

Above, where the decks are further from the ground they recede into the body of the building. Each dwelling is framed by a pair of masonry buttresses between which the vaulted concrete walkways span. Inside this truncated but open 2-storey room the dwelling and a constellation of apertures – entrance doorway, kitchen window, and above the projecting bay of the living room terrace – begin to reveal a domestic interior. Neighbours passing through this outer room – a structural and spatial distillation of the dwelling as a whole – to reach their home are incidentally passing through the domain of another household. The bench beneath the kitchen

Fig 4 Façade study model, Arnold Road (2016-todate)

Fig 5 Mews flanked by four and ten storey terraces, Tent Street (2016)



window and recessed doorway, structure encounter and, when not used as such, leave traces of inhabitation. Furthermore the living room terrace on the upper floor of the dwelling enable a resident and their neighbour to enjoy both the privacy and theatre that this vertical arrangement allows. By contrast to the communality that the mews and first floor deck afford, these spaces favour the more intimate association of a handful of households and at the same time a particular household's perception of the wider city. With both the *Arnold Road* and *Tent Street* social housing projects, the architecture establishes a parity between the interior and the world outside.



Like *Tent Street* our buildings on the post-war Frampton Park estate in Hackney take their cue from history. Both establish the dialectic between two types of construction and two kinds of space. The design for *Frampton Arms* proposes three villas. Each couples a masonry block with an exposed concrete frame. Whilst not equal in area the masonry *blocks* and the structural *frames* offer parity even in the UK climate between a life lived indoors and one lived outside.

By convention each home must have private outside space. Couple this with external circulation and these two functions generate a critical mass of outside space and the opportunity to invest meaning in a *frame* where individuals are exposed to the more varied sensations of the natural world. Again, these frames serve as a threshold between city-street & private dwelling. And, there is playfulness in the way the design uses a balcony to create an entrance canopy and – saving a lift and stair – bridges to connect dwellings within one villa to the circulation in another. Of course, these decisions have formal implications but above all they are experiential and revitalizing. By contrast to the villas on the site of the *Frampton Arms*, *Lyttelton House* forms a small urban block or palazzo. This time the frames that wrap around the surface of the masonry block vary in depth in response to orientation, and quiet and busy thoroughfares, lessening the impact of street life on the interior.

At a much larger scale the four hundred homes on the *Nightingale Estate* create a new urban quarter. Our design establishes a number of new north-south streets. Oriel windows thrust the domestic interiors of east and west facing dual aspect apartments into the space of the street. Common entrances and passageways connect street and communal garden. Each terrace of apartments forms a belvedere – the gable end façade – overlooking Hackney Downs. The proposition offers the prospect of a model district where the specific architecture, like much of that in the eighteenth and nineteenth century city, plays only a supporting role. Compare these

Fig 6 Detail of dwelling framed by a pair of masonry buttresses, *Tent Street* (2016)

Fig 7 Study models of Taylor, Chatto & Wilmott Court, Frampton Park Estate (2013-2021)



situations and sensations, the conscious product of restraint, to the cacophony of scales and forms that do little more than signify the value of property and in so doing continue to fragment the city fabric.

Co-housing is different. Residents share activities such as childcare and gardening. The social and economic imperatives mean the architect must explore where to draw the line, the threshold, between the household and their neighbours, the home and the city. What most of us think of as home seeps out into the communal spaces – where we eat, where we wash our cloths, mend the bike, where children play, and how and where we exercise. Communal meals and gardening naturally create social patterns for residents of all ages. And, in an inter-generational community the old may look after the young.

The residents at *Copper Lane* describe how their “*project developed out of a shared interest in a way of living that would allow [them] as a group to have more interaction with each other than regular terraced houses which typically come with private gardens and a sense that the public sphere ends at the front door.*” The alienating effects of modern life encouraged them to pursue a more communal approach providing companionship and mutual support.

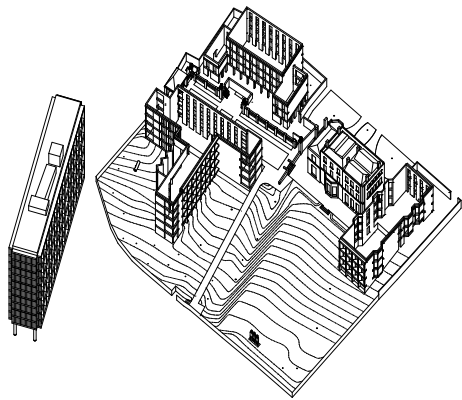
The six households share a continuous perimeter of communal gardens which offer varied atmospheres, and inside a laundry, workshop and hall – for exercise classes, parties and projects. The design develops a typology that manifests the idea of *communality*. The resulting *cluster* model places a court at the heart of the back land site beneath which the communal facilities are located and, around which the houses are planned. Two 2-storey houses are located east and west of the hall, the four 3-storey houses north and south, thereby reconciling the discrepancy between the orientation of the site and the path of the sun.

The lower ground floor is submerged 1.2 metres below ground, bringing the window cills and the expansive sliding windows down to earth, and outside the flora and fauna to chest level. Each house is unique, the internal arrangement of spaces, window positions and dimensions, and cill heights negotiating the exposure to both the elements and neighbouring folk, and the privacy of each dwelling, and each room within each dwelling, in particular around the central court. The rough timber and masonry surfaces complete an environment that may be seen, touched, heard, smelt and from time-to-time tasted. Overall, the sharing of the qualities of the site is a negotiated form of egalitarianism.

Fig 8 Copper Lane Co-housing (2009-2014)



By comparison to co-housing and contemporary social housing, student accommodation with its minimal floorspace, light and air is an extreme form of *Existenzminimum*. *Chadwick Hall* at Roehampton University seeks to remedy this phenomenon. Here, students live in a mix of flats and houses in three buildings set within the gardens of a Georgian villa on the edge of the London County Council's Brutalist Alton West Estate itself the appropriation of eighteenth century parkland. Each of the buildings employs a distinct plan type, and two are paired around an existing sunken garden to form a new court. Communal rooms are carefully positioned in relation to the type and siting of each building. But it is their construction that distinguishes these dwellings. The Vice-chancellor sought an intentionally theatrical relationship between the student room and the outside world. As a result every student in every room – or *camera* – has a balcony, the door to which serves as the aperture to the landscape. The construction encases conventional, concrete-framed structures inside freestanding, load-bearing brick and precast concrete structures. The interiors are therefore wrapped in heavy 'ruins', with deep walls that incorporate these balconies mediating between the common ground of the remarkable landscape enjoyed by all and the more private realm of the individual student's room. The sentient student is caste into the roles of both actor and receptor.



These works explore and exploit liminal space, and the connection between, on the one hand typology, structure and matter, and on the other psycho-social and physiological phenomena. Contemporary buildings can and should point to a strong public life and a commitment to social values, and to an architecture of social solidarity and individual perception. It is by these means and not the more prevalent obsession with hyperbolic forms and material decoration – a symptom of our materialist culture – deployed in the design of dwellings, judged by eye, often from a photograph, that will serve as the durable foundations for a community. As Graves reminds us in "Recalling War" it is the possibility that 'The blinded man sees with his ears and hands' that directs our practice to think about the other senses – to touch, hearing, smell and taste – and to the way space *works* in terms of experience.

1 — The design is a collaboration with Stephen Taylor Architects and Karakusevic Carson Architects

2 — The adjacent slab and point blocks were designed by Bill Howell, John Killick, John Partridge and Stan Amis whilst working at the London County Council

Fig 9 Chadwick Hall (2012-2016)

Fig 10 Isometric drawing of the 'facade ruins' of Chadwick Hall with LCC's Grade II\* listed Binley House, Alton West Estate (2012-2016)