

# WORKING THE SOCIAL

Henley Halebrown is celebrating 25 years of creating human, sensitive and civic-minded buildings, and 'quietly fighting a rear-guard action for the welfare state'. By *David Taylor*



'Thoughtful'.

If there's a word that comes to mind when you hear the practice name Henley Halebrown, it's that, with the outfit's general approach to projects, underpinned as it is by a deeply engrained sense of social purpose and humanity.

I catch up with Simon Henley and Gavin Hale-Brown at their new primary school in Hackney, a clever scheme hewn among the London borough's busy-ness to provide an idyll of calm, part-facilitated by an 11-storey affordable housing block of 68 well-appointed key-worker flats they also designed alongside.

Built on a former fire station, the scheme is, in essence, rather a good symbol of their work more generally. That is, the project was born out of a general philanthropic, altruistic and long-lasting placemaking gesture through Edward Benyon of the Benyon Estate family (owner of a fair proportion of De Beauvoir Town) and Thornsett. 'He's reinvigorated the shopping around here, he's established places where people can work, and as part of the equation he has created these two schools', says Henley, pointing to the secondary school the practice did across the road too. Furthermore, the architects questioned the brief and prodded and poked clever new ways of thinking about what the 350-place free school could look like and how it could function. The result is a warm and very humane, materially rich pair of buildings with a 'carved-out' courtyard—the housing acting as a 'buffer' to the school—all of which is popular, and works. There is also none of the waste of space, inefficiency and potential conflict-flashpoint zone that corridors often represent, a particular bugbear of the practice and a tactic here that allowed them to create more music and drama

teaching spaces and outdoor spaces than were originally in the brief. 'It's actually quite hard to create a community around a corridor', says Henley. 'Very easy to create a community around a courtyard.' Rather than have a school as spec space at the bottom of a tower, the result in Hackney is a space of Spanish glazed brick (they are 'brick fans') that is 'magical' for the small, two-form entry, music-and-drama specialism school's happy pupils, Henley suggests with pride. It is a primitive building. 'It's not a monastery; it's not a palazzo; it's just timeless space and it works really well.'

Indeed, in discussion, 'humane' is another good word the pair feel is a good motif. Ever since a 20-something Henley spent six weeks in the summer of 1991 driving over 13,000 miles in the US in search of Louis Kahn projects, he has been deeply influenced by that architect's responses to sites, and the pair admit that they aspire to provide something in that Kahn lineage, imbued with a greater responsibility to the city. 'He is the architect who never disappoints', says Henley.

The Hackney school is a scheme that is easy to 'get' for the main users, the children, and, says Hale-Brown, a little of the design here relates back to a seminal 'concentric' scheme for the practice, for Talkback.

At Talkback they designed what they regard as an early 'radical', sustainable and naturally ventilated office scheme in Newman Street set around a medieval physic garden of herbs. It has shown its adaptability by having since been converted into the Mandrake Hotel. 'But it has the same idea—all external circulation around a courtyard', says Hale-Brown. 'We took four buildings, knocked them together, with everyone in peripatetic offices. The brief there was to try and create the best environment so they got the best writers.' The process even involved the pair convincing Peter Fincham, then in charge of BBC2, that the tenants might only get wet in the outside spaces two or three times a year, and then only if they took the same route every day. 'It was hugely successful and was the same idea', adds Hale-Brown. 'Externalising the circulation means that the whole of the building works for you,



Hackney New Primary school: a haven of peace

and it forces people to interact.' During the project the practice had also, incidentally, had a 'massive argument' with Griff Rhys Jones on the scheme the day before they let the contract over air conditioning, after an agent had told the actor that the building would be worth more with it. 'The same agent came back when it was finished saying actually it was worth 30 per cent more than we thought because it was naturally ventilated', recalls Hale-Brown. Writers like Graham Linehan of *Father Ted* fame and Steve Coogan even stayed with them because they liked the building, he adds. 'The value of good architecture doesn't have to be the value of the building; it can be the value of the space.'

Henley agrees, and picks up the corridor theme. If we go back to the 19th century and even before that, he adds, there is basically no circulation in public buildings. With churches, public baths and libraries, for example, you're straight in, without 'wasted space'. Consequently, there is a much more direct relationship with the public realm, resulting in a more vibrant city, and avoiding the 20th-21st century 'mistake' of bringing too much public life into the building. Whereas the corridor is a 20th-century affliction; even with the country house, servants popped up from secret doorways, while everyone else moved enfilade from room to room, enjoying those spaces. Again, it's thoughtful, again fully conversant with history and context. 'It's those things we are looking to.'

Henley and Hale-Brown met at Liverpool University in 1986, and now, after starting on interiors and various iterations of the firm including first Buschow Henley and then Henley Halebrown Rorrison, it is their names that are on the Kingsland Road studio. The firm's first project in the 1990s



Encouraging conversation: Talkback on Newman Street

was for an advertising agency where they simply combined budgets and made them an 18m-long, tapering steel and wood table, whose 'inherently convivial' nature as 'the office' stands as something of a practice metaphor. 'It's interesting because it's a combination of mathematics, sociology, typology, has got to do with the history of architecture and design, craftsmanship', says Henley. 'And it is also economic', adds Hale-Brown.

With a staff of 25, around a third of whom also teach, the practice is celebrating 25 years in business this year, but they're 'not really party people' when there's so much else to get on with. 'We're rubbish at that', laughs Hale-Brown of their party-throwing capabilities. Schemes like the Poppy Factory in Richmond or four buildings it is doing for Land Securities in Victoria are in progress, with an approach that favours brick over cladding. 'It's a poetic thing', says Henley. They are also doing student housing at Chadwick Hall where they proposed load-bearing facades for its brick, deemed unfeasible by the contractor. But they are not interested in 'making shapes and patterns', as they feel many architects do. They took the

money that normally would have gone into stiffening the frame to support the brick cantilevered off the facade to invest in a craft process in the facade. 'We're interested in looking at 16th, 17th and 18th century typologies—civic building, where you look at the spatial qualities of the building, the essence of which is communal, and then look at how you might make the building.'

## 'Our agenda isn't to make things complicated or expensive. It's to do things well'

It is getting harder as an architect today, though, says Hale-Brown, as respect for the profession has dropped. Henley, meanwhile, bemoans the fact that the architect is often brought to the table too late, with clients having already decided what they want before asking, advised by quantity surveyors and planning consultants getting in early. Like many, they revel in being able to 'wind back' and ask what clients really need. As happened with, say, the National Theatre, where the team entered with an open mind and

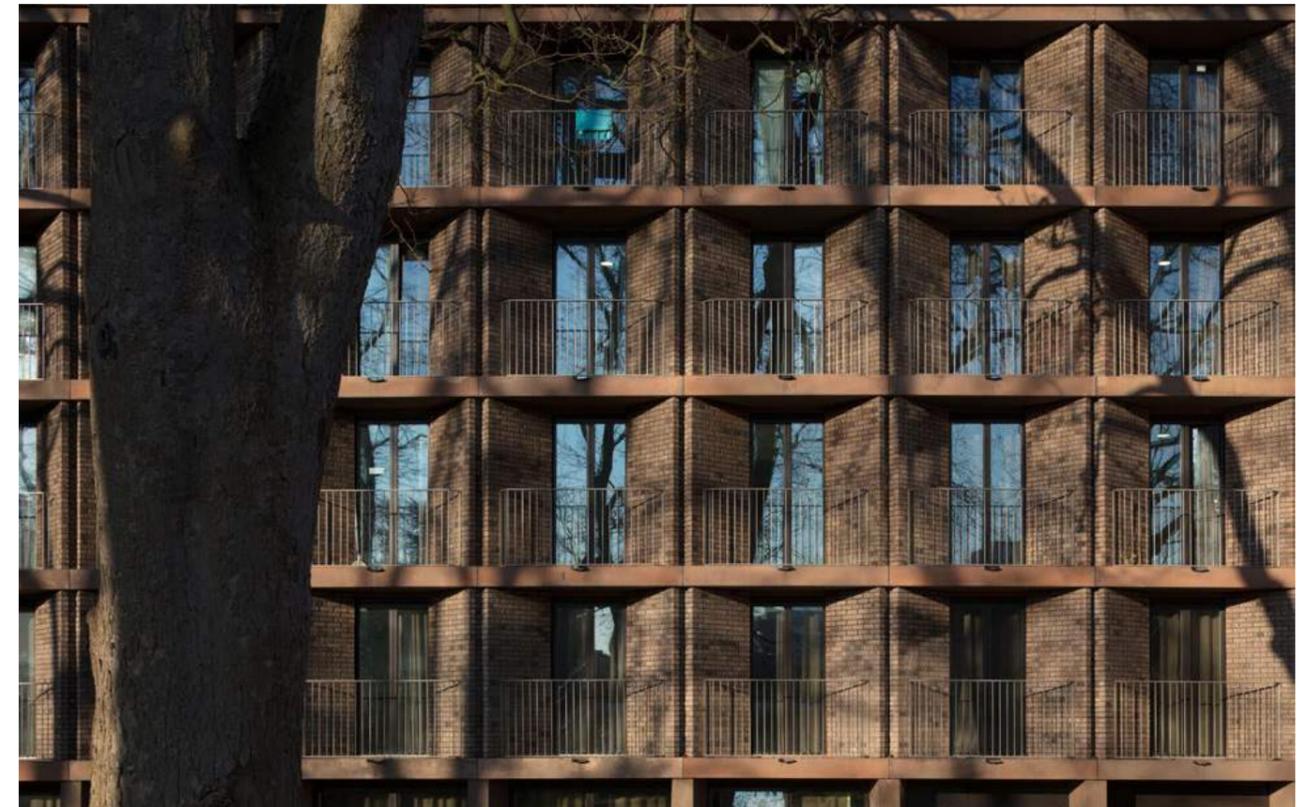
where it was a more open, discursive discussion between the professions. 'Thinking time is undervalued', says Hale-Brown. 'Our agenda isn't to make things complicated or expensive. It's to do things well.'

There are, the pair say, probably three consistent themes and research strands in Henley Halebrown's work which inform the way they plan and detail their buildings. They characterise the first as 'the human dimension'—the degree to which building can provide a social foundation or create intentional or unintentional communities. Henley says they have begun to call this 'the social question'.

An example of this is an architecture where the facade—spaces on the threshold between the interior and the natural world—can be inhabited, as evidenced at the Hackney New School, where an 'exterior' south-facing bench is set into the building and allows queuing parents to gather and chat in comfort. The practice's student housing, Chadwick Hall at the University of Roehampton, also exemplifies this, as did the Talkback scheme two decades ago. In other words, facades have nothing to do with style and pattern-making,



Remembering the past — the practice's designs for the Poppy Factory in Richmond



Student life — the practice's Chadwick Hall, Roehampton

## TOP OF THEIR GAME

and everything to do with how they are made, used and experienced.

Adaptive reuse is another major concern. This harks back to the practice's work at the firm's first substantial project at Shepherdess Walk and, from that, Talkback. It continues to this day with schemes like its De Beauvoir Block co-workspace, the adaptation of the 19th-century brewery housing on Castle Lane in Westminster for Land Securities and adaptation of the 1960s homes on the Kings Crescent Estate in Hackney. This dimension of its work has proved to be a big influence on its new-build projects in recognising what makes for an adaptable (plan) and durable (facade) building, adds Henley.

And, of course, there are the aspects of sustainability (natural ventilation, daylit space, utilising embodied energy, and the role of courtyards, gardens and landscape) that run across all of Henley Halebrown's work.

The practice has also got a way of working which they feel sets them apart. 'I guess the key thing is we collaborate

on every project, which is quite unusual', says Henley. 'Most other offices seem to divide the projects between the partners.' Housing is a major part of the practice's work, with plans for the regeneration of the De Beauvoir Estate, with some 300 new homes on six sites, a masterplan in all but name, collaborating with Stephen Taylor Architects. It is also working with KCA and Stephen Taylor Architects over at Kings Crescent and Nightingale Estate in Hackney Downs.

## 'We spend a lot of time thinking about history'

'It seems to me that it is actually quite hard for architects to articulate an ethos', says Henley. 'They're simply more preoccupied by aesthetics. But actually, I think our work is deeply ethical. We're not always doing affordable housing or

state schools or health centres, but I don't think you need to be doing that exclusively to be able to say you have an ethical position.' There is, though, a period of architecture soon after the Second world War where there seemed to be a correlation between why people were building buildings and what they were thinking about while they were doing it, he adds, with an interest in nodding to previous methods and architects, 'creating a kind of fondness' people have in their schemes, and building to last. 'We spend a lot of time thinking about history. This is much more about building with a knowledge of the past.' It is also about leveraging people to do things they don't realise they like doing, says Hale-Brown; not imposing or social engineering, just encouraging. But they are constantly reminded of the responsibility architects shoulder and the social ambition projects have, or perhaps should have. 'We are quietly fighting a rear-guard action for the welfare state', smiles Henley. 'It's about building substantial, lovable buildings ... For us, there is that power to establish the foundation for community in any building, so you're always looking to do that.' It's a lesson they learned right from the start, and working with Space Syntax on patterns of movement in its early commercial schemes, turning what is intuitive into what you can put a value on and prove empirically.

In the end, Henley puts it simply—and thoughtfully: 'Everything is social', he says. 'Everything is human; everything is to do with people and interaction.' ●



Architecture — design for the 22-storey Edith Summerskill House plans in Fulham