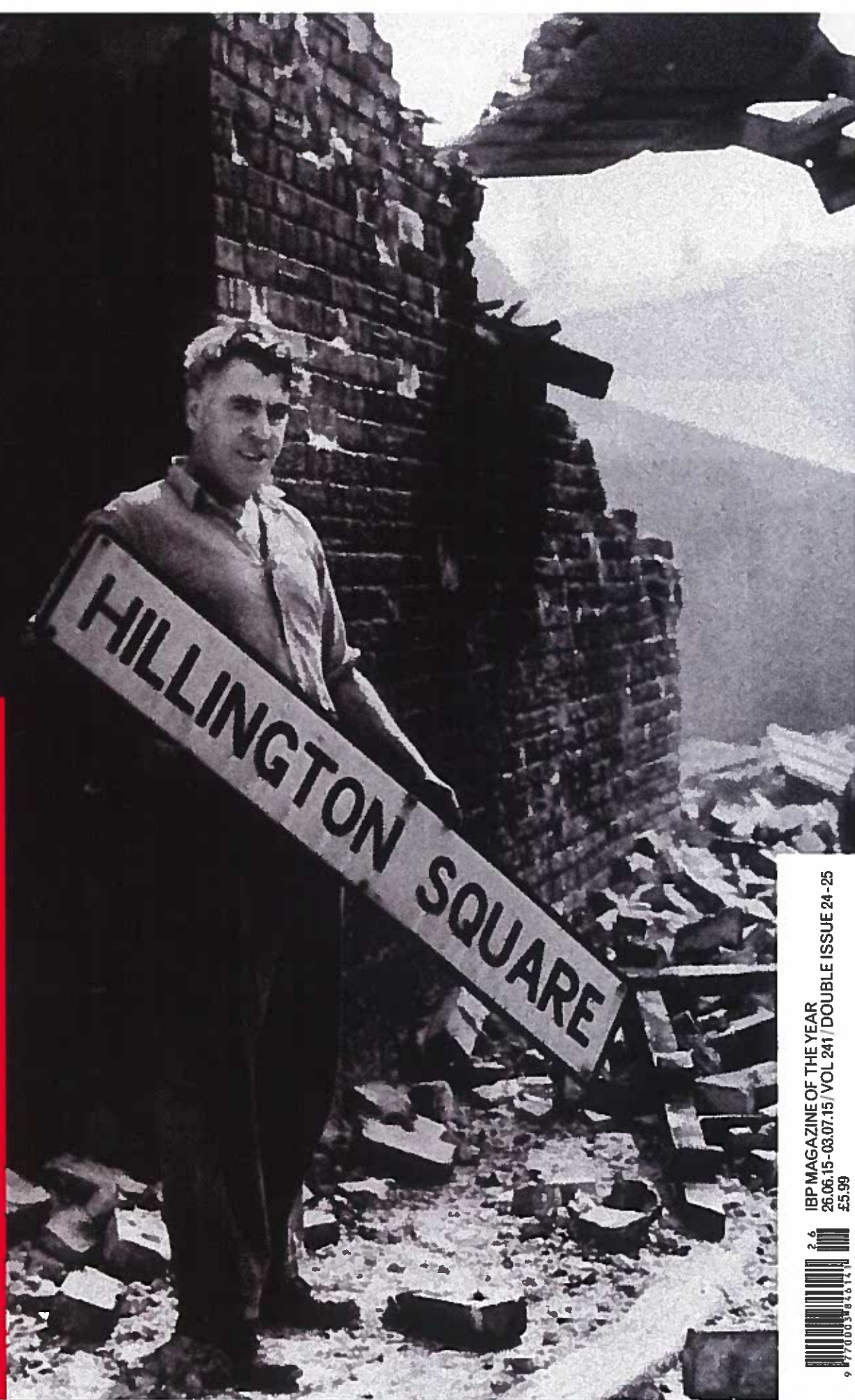


AJ

HOUSING

MAE IN KING'S LYNN + HOUSING CRISIS PRIMER
RICHARD ROGERS ON ROBIN HOOD GARDENS



26

IBP MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR

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BUILDING STUDY

HILLINGTON SQUARE, KING'S LYNN

MAE ARCHITECTS

**MORE
HOMES
BETTER
HOMES**



Brief

Alex Ely, partner, Mae Architects

Hillington Square consists of 320 flats. There are 15 residential blocks on the site; four and five storey flat-roof buildings with communal stairs, lifts and deck areas. The accommodation consists of 40 bedsits, 62 one-bedroom flats, 40 two-bedroom flats, 98 two-bedroom maisonettes and 80 three-bedroom maisonettes.

For this flagship project, Freebridge Community Housing aims to improve the liveability, appearance, wider public perception and desirability of the estate, to make the development feel safer and less claustrophobic, to improve the condition of the dwellings themselves, and to improve the properties' energy performance.

Data

Start on site April 2013
Completion November 2014 (Phase 1)
Gross internal floor area 4,454m² (Phase 1)
Form of contract Design and build
Construction cost: £30 million, phase 1 £4.9 million
Construction per sq m: £1,100
Architect Mae
Client Freebridge Housing Association
Structural engineer Rossi Long
M&E consultant URS and ALH Building Services
QS GC Baxter & Associates
Landscape architect NeilTully Associates
Client design adviser Hemingway Design
CDM coordinator Davis Langdon
Approved building inspector CNC building control
Main contractor Lovell
CAD software used Vectorworks 2013

APPRAISAL

By Owen Pritchard
Photography by Jack Hobhouse

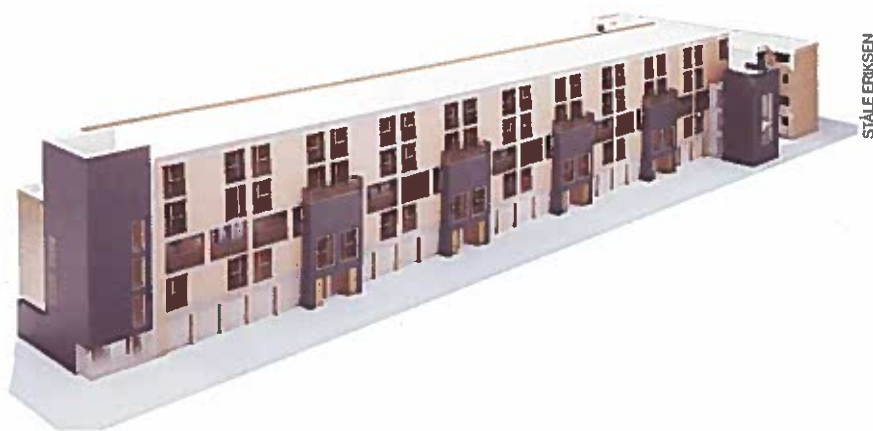
At the AJ120 Awards, protesters gathered to accuse architects of being 'funeral directors of the working class'. Point one of the leaflets that showered down on the attendees gathered on the lawns of the Tower of London read: 'We protest against the AJ120 nomination of HTA Design, Hawkins\ Brown and Mae Architects for the award of collaboration of the year for their part in the eviction, demolition and gentrification of the Aylesbury estate.' Another point declared: 'We protest against the demolition of housing estates built by architects who had a vision of the social duties of architecture so lacking in today's architects.'

The protest showed that architects matter, and that campaigners think the profession will listen to their concerns. The solutions are less clear. Architecture's role in wider social, economic and political mechanisms is hard to pin down qualitatively or quantitatively – architecture's purpose shifts depending on the context of the discussion. When I read the protesters' manifesto, Mae was one of only three architects named specifically. Which made me think of King's Lynn.

You probably won't have heard of Hillington Square. It's an unremarkable, rather unlovable, estate in the Norfolk market town of King's Lynn. You probably wouldn't even notice it despite the fact it flanks the town centre and contains 320 homes. It was built between 1967 and 1971 to provide housing for London overspill, and is a familiar five-storey 'slab-block' covering just under 1ha. In 2006 the housing stock was transferred from the council to Freebridge Community Housing, which was tasked with improving the quality of the buildings and the lives of tenants.

This is not a glamorous project. It is unlikely to capture the imagination in the way a new-build development such as Newhall in Harlow has, and it doesn't have the architectural qualities of, say, the Brunswick Centre or Park Hill to work with. It does, however, offer an approach that makes the most of the existing scheme's modest qualities, and does justice to the ideas underpinning the original development. It was this approach that saw Mae beat more than 70 other practices to win the job, with the judges particularly impressed by its intention to work closely with the residents and wider community.

The Hillington estate has a list of familiar problems: a series of blocks with confusing deck access and poor legibility;



STALE ERIKSEN



1. (page 32) Third-floor deck access has been divided into private balconies
2. A model by Mae Architects of the proposed refurbishment
3. The ground floor garages have been removed by the architect
4. Bridges across the entrance to the estate have been demolished
5. The facades have been rendered; each will have a slightly different colour tone



an inward-facing development with little connectivity to the wider area; poorly maintained and underused outdoor space; and failing building fabric which meant homes were expensive to heat. Hillington Square was ripe for demolition, but without the money to rebuild, Freebridge Community Housing asked Mae to find the latent opportunities to breathe life back into this estate.

Mae's approach has been to understand the estate at the urban scale, the scale of the neighbourhood and the way individuals will live in the units. By studying the structure and layout of the estate and the surrounding historic urban grain, the architect has identified where to open up the estate to improve circulation and connectivity. Its first bold move was to demolish the walkways that linked the housing blocks, so removing a physical barrier across the estate's principal entrance. The refurbishment work to each of the blocks is a continuation of the provincial quirkiness of King's Lynn's architectural language, but with restrained flourishes such as 'hit and miss' brickwork at the top of the new circulation cores and patterns cut into the storage room doors.

This is an exercise in common sense. The long continuous deck access has been divided up to provide balconies and shorter shared spaces for up to eight families. Each block now has designated entrances with stair and lift cores, which allow each to now have its own address. These tactics aim to give the residents a sense of ownership. Coupled with well-planned circulation and a legible layout, this maze of buildings should become more appealing. Mae has started to unpick the

Mae has provided a model of sustainable and intelligent redevelopment

overbearing structures that created a unified, cumbersome mass, giving each block some much-needed independence.

One of the other drawbacks of the original design was that the ground floors were lined with rows of garage doors, providing an uninspiring facade wrapped around the internal courtyards. The garages are now gone, and the ground-floor bedsit flats have been slightly enlarged. There are new entrances to the first-floor flats, and secure storage space off the communal walkway, clearly designated by new brown brick bay extensions that provide circulation across the frontages.

Above, individual units range from bedsits to three-bedroom maisonettes. The layouts remain the same as before but the building fabric has been updated to improve performance and appearance. Some access decks have become balconies, giving the elevated properties some private outdoor space.

Phase one of this £30 million transformation is now complete. The tenants have moved back in and the second block is being renovated. Mae has provided a model of sustainable and intelligent redevelopment for an estate and community that could have been easily displaced and lost. It is here where some of the protesters' criticisms are, partially at least, answered.

Phase one of Hillington Square may not be Park Hill or Robin Hood Gardens, but this is a quiet and effective model of regeneration that retains a community and updates a tired piece of King's Lynn. It places the rapid development of London, and in this case the Aylesbury Estate, into sharp focus. Mae is an architect juggling the consequences of being such a visible agent of change in the city and beyond. It is at the centre of the dichotomy the profession faces as part of the mechanisms of regeneration and its perceived evil twin: gentrification.



6. The estate before renovation work started
7. Gold-coloured metal panelling and brown brick bays define the entrances
8. (page 47) View from a ground-floor maisonette
9. (page 47) The brick bays provide a balcony for the dwellings that face the town



CLIENT'S VIEW

Tony Hall, chief executive, Freebridge Community Housing

Our organisation is committed to developing homes and creating opportunities for people within west Norfolk. We see ourselves as a place-shaping housing provider; not just interested in the quality of the housing but also in creating a sense of place around the homes that we own.

When people first moved into Hillington Square in the late 1960s, they felt they were 'moving into paradise'. The estate offered modern space standards, fitted kitchens, heating and indoor bathrooms. But over time it became tired and outdated; a place to live for people who had little alternative.

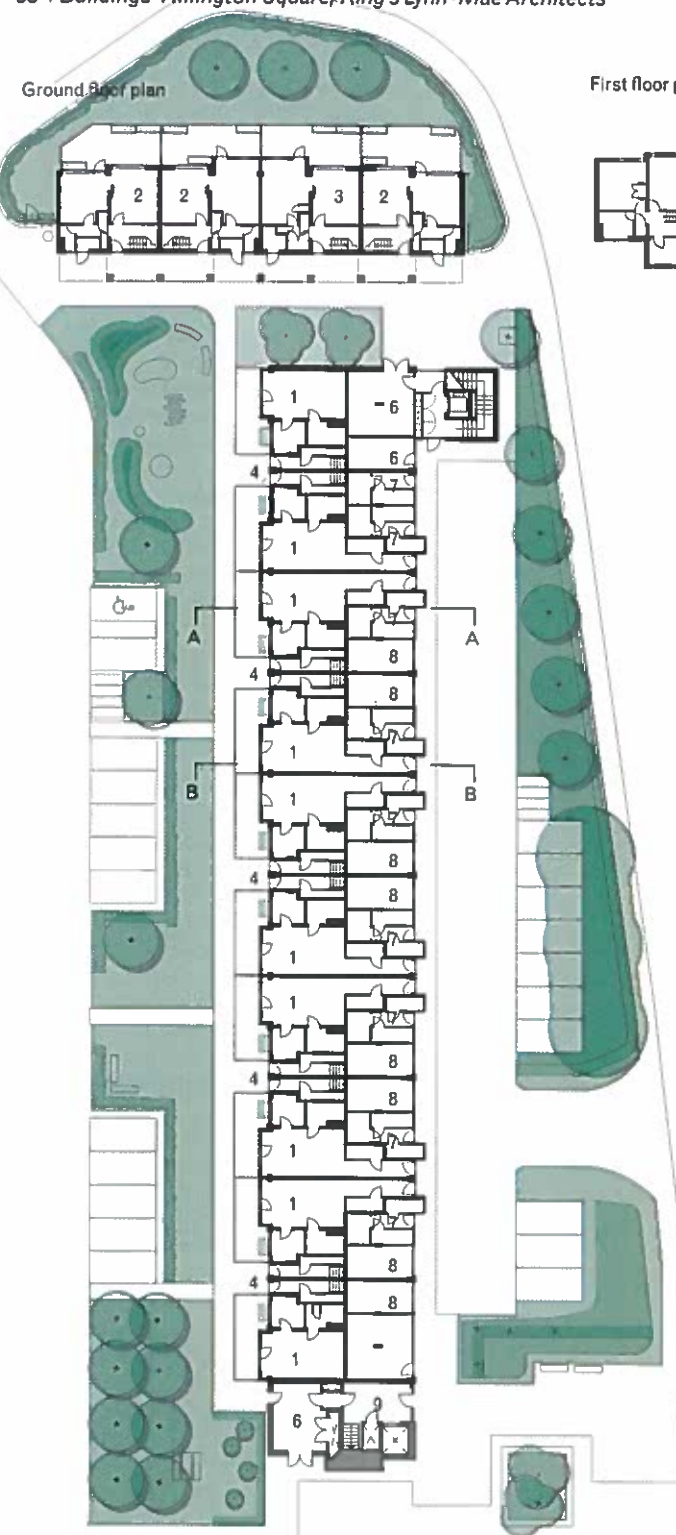
We spent a long time thinking about what we wanted to achieve, and a lot of time talking to the residents too.

A number of options were available. We could have just completed the work the government required of us in respect of the Decent Homes Standard, patching up areas where necessary. We also considered knocking down the estate and starting again, although this would have presented us with other difficulties in respect of planning.

We rejected both these options and developed a brief, working with Hemingway Design, which helped us define how we could make the very best from what was already there and select the best design team. We also worked with the Cabinet Office's Behavioural Insights Team to ensure we removed barriers to community contact throughout the estate, creating a place where people wanted to live.

Once we had an idea of what we wanted to achieve, we appointed Mae to develop a vision and help us make it happen. Mae brought a strong team to the project, with an attention to detail that hasn't gone unnoticed.

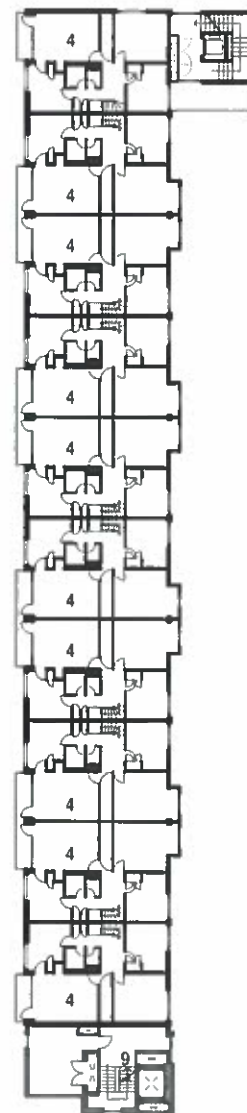
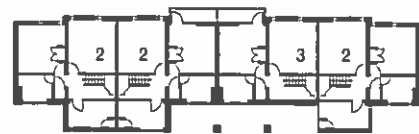
It was involved in the many consultation events we continued to have, speaking with residents, the wider community and the local authority's planning team. And we're sure that without this approach we wouldn't be successfully bringing the heart back into the community and making Hillington Square a place where residents are very proud to live.



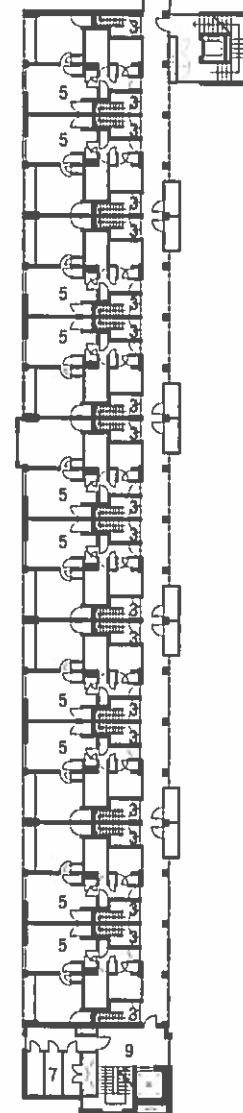
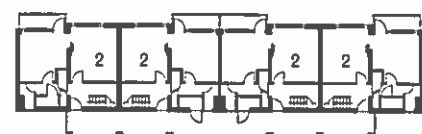
North elevation



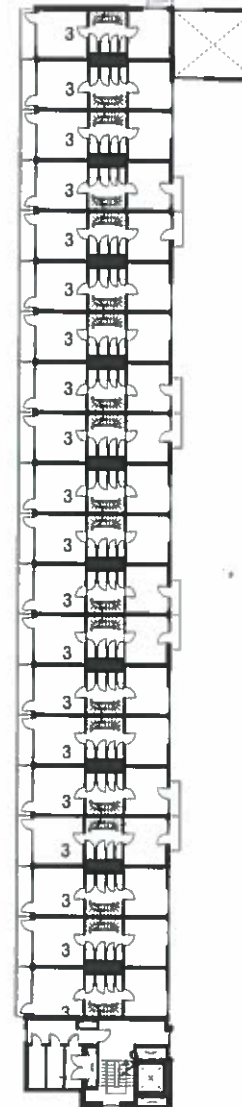
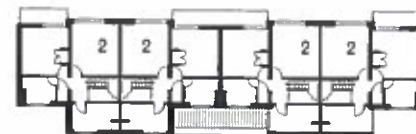
First floor plan



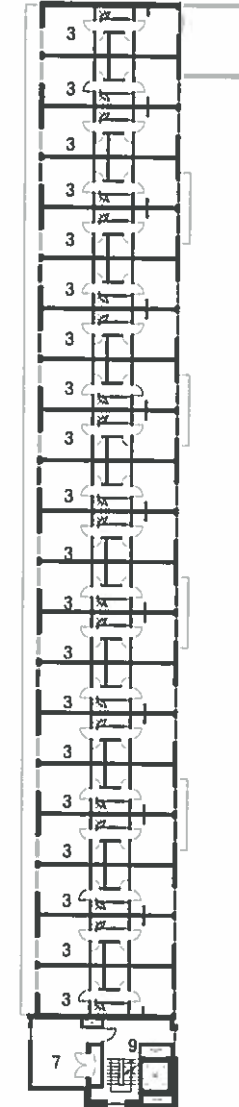
Second floor plan



Third floor plan



Fourth floor plan



1. Bedsit
2. Three-bed maisonette
3. Two-bed maisonette
4. Two-bed flat
5. One-bed flat
6. Bin and bike storage
7. Storage
8. Retained garage
9. Refurbished core

South elevation



ARCHITECT'S VIEW

Alex Ely, partner, Mae Architects

Hillington Square is a £30-million refurbishment of 320 properties and remodelling of the estate layout and public realm improvements.

The scheme aims to improve the liveability, appearance, wider public perception and desirability of the estate, to make the development feel safer and less claustrophobic, to improve the condition of the dwellings themselves and to improve the properties' energy performance.

Our view was that the estate had inherent value and meaning, and that through intelligent replanning and refurbishment it could overcome its social and environmental problems.

The remodelling delivers a neighbourhood that fulfills the aspirations of the client and the residents in the following ways:

- **Creating a Place** Building on urban structure, urban grain, morphology and public realm to create a new identity for the area.
- **Improving connectivity** Drawing on the historic street pattern, we have created better links for pedestrians and cyclists to the rest of the town.
- **Finding an appropriate architectural language** We have reimagined the architecture, removing the continuous frontage of garages and reconfiguring the elevations.
- **Improving public realm** We have identified spaces for new landscaped public gardens, remodeling the low-grade outdoor environment that lacked places to play or socialise.
- **Making a humane neighbourhood** We have remodelled the estate, reconfiguring the continuous deck access by providing new clear entrances, well planned circulation and legible street layout.
- **Securing long-term sustainability** We have upgraded the building fabric to cut the cost of heating the homes.
- **Leaving a legacy** Creating a carefully balanced, mixed residential neighbourhood for existing and new residents, mitigating social segregation.

WORKING DETAIL

Alex Ely, partner, Mae Architects

The scheme's most visible markers of change are the new brick bay extensions, which accentuate the front of the existing building, and the new stair cores, which allow each block to work independently, giving a more human scale and reducing the number of properties sharing a walkway.

These extensions achieve a number of aims: practically by providing ground-floor studios with more space and a better connection to the main street through proper front doors (removing an inactive ground floor comprising a bank of garages, which were poorly maintained and underused); and aesthetically, varying the scale to better relate to the three-storey context across the road.

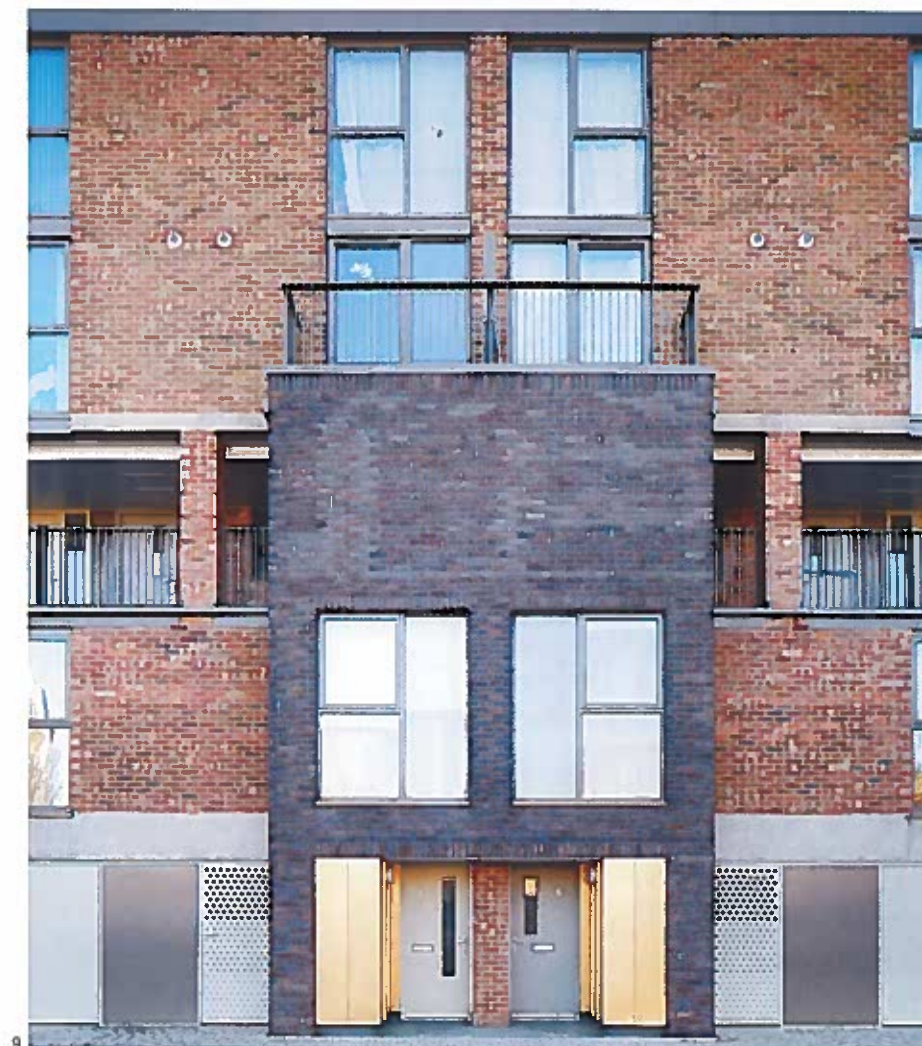
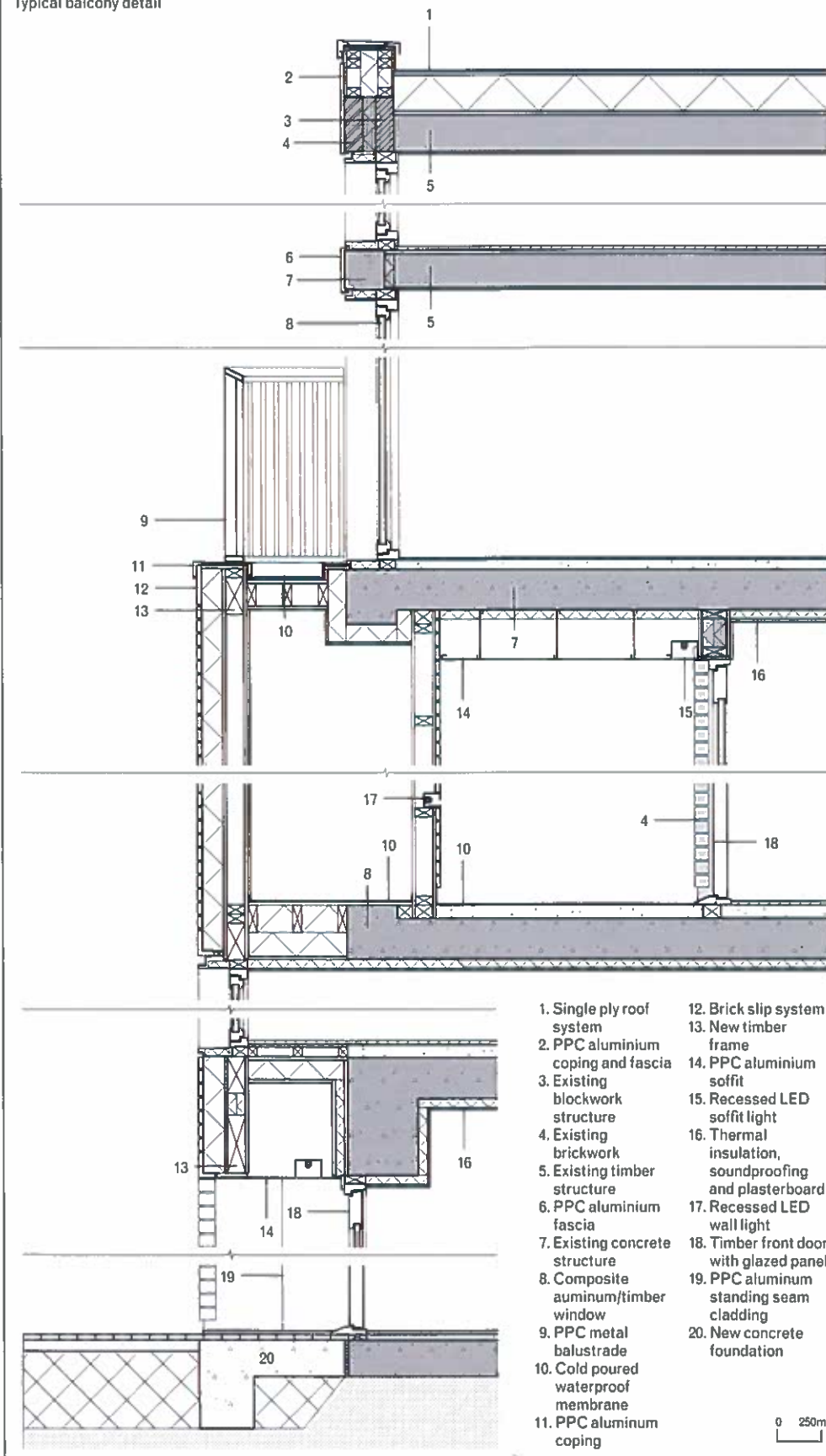
At the first floor level they provide a large bay window, increasing the flats' internal space; at second floor the extension provides private storage spaces off the communal walkway (previously provided in ground-level external brick sheds, which broke up communal spaces). For the top-floor maisonettes they provide external amenity, allowing a view back towards the town centre.

The condition of the ground meant the extensions had to be as lightweight as possible, using a timber-frame structure and faced with insulated brick cladding. Dark brown brick and gold-coloured metal cladding are used to signify new entry points to the block, allowing for better legibility.

The communal walkway is the main access route for both residents on the upper floors and for water, electric and telecommunication infrastructure services. Head height becomes crucial here as services require maximum space to distribute water to the far ends of the 93m block. Clustered lighting at ceiling level and at low level to the rear of bay extensions aims to visually break the apparent length of the walkway.

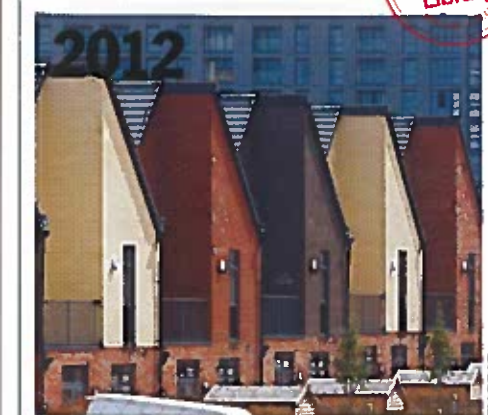
The remaining garage spaces have multiple uses: some remain as garages and some become bike storage spaces; all are refaced to give a more active street frontage. The subtle diamond pattern here and on cores is reminiscent of the patina found on the nearby Guildhall.

Typical balcony detail



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