

IBP Awards Architecture Writer of the Year 2018 submission

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RIBA Journal

Articles:

'Power to the people' (RIBA Journal, February 2018)

'Licensed to thrill' (RIBA Journal, August 2018)

'Body & soul' (RIBA Journal, April 2018)

In popular culture, architects are often portrayed as the same – they wear the same clothes, are resolute in their beliefs, and are mostly the edgy, cool characters in films and books. Yet the architecture they produce, certainly at the moment, is incredibly diverse and can combine a lot under its umbrella. In these three articles I question who is pulling the strings to make it happen and who is really in control of its look.

In 'Power to the people', I revisit Latimer Road seven months after the fire at Grenfell Tower to capture a moment in time for the public spaces there, to see how they were appropriated by local people empowering themselves against a council and area that had long ignored them, something that likely caused the fire too. The article investigates what, where and how things have changed, what was lacking and what might happen in the future, but there is a question hanging over the piece about whether the community will really be empowered – with the help of architects – to make these spaces grow and continue to maintain their control, or whether, once national interest has abated, things will go back to how they were.

In 'Licensed to thrill', on the other hand, the reader is transported from the struggle of ordinary people to gather and be seen and heard to the ever-more luxurious world of Macallan whisky – a contrast that reminds us of the extreme inequalities of built environment experience in Britain. Here, the client is keen to push the perception of the brand well beyond any correlation with its product, and uses architecture to present a bewitching spectacle to visitors, distributors and VIPs that will see them forever devoted to Macallan. An Instagrammable building so of its time, it has its eyes on the stars, leaving conservatism behind – unlike, say, Bloomberg HQ which also completed this year – while whipping up any experiential sensation for the purposes of commercialisation and pandering to a trend-conscious globe-trotting elite at the expense of engineering common sense. It would have been so easy to criticise this, but that would have missed the point.

The final piece, 'Body & soul', however, interviews Amin Taha, who was not that well known at the time. In this story of how the person, practice and work have developed over the years, we discover an architect who would on principle be against the dazzling showman architecture of the Macallan distillery – even if the steel beams that smash through walls add drama to his own office. Taha reveals himself to be obsessed with chronology, narrative (often fabricated) and logic. The latter makes its mark most when Taha speaks of structure, revealing an approach that could be seen as looking backwards, but makes us wonder why we ever stopped building like that in the first place and whether architects have just been charmed by the marketing powers of corporate entities like Macallan so convincing at selling their perhaps overstated and unnecessary architectural wares?



Architecture for social purpose



Places, planning & community



After Grenfell

Power to the people

Grenfell locals have created community spaces where none were provided

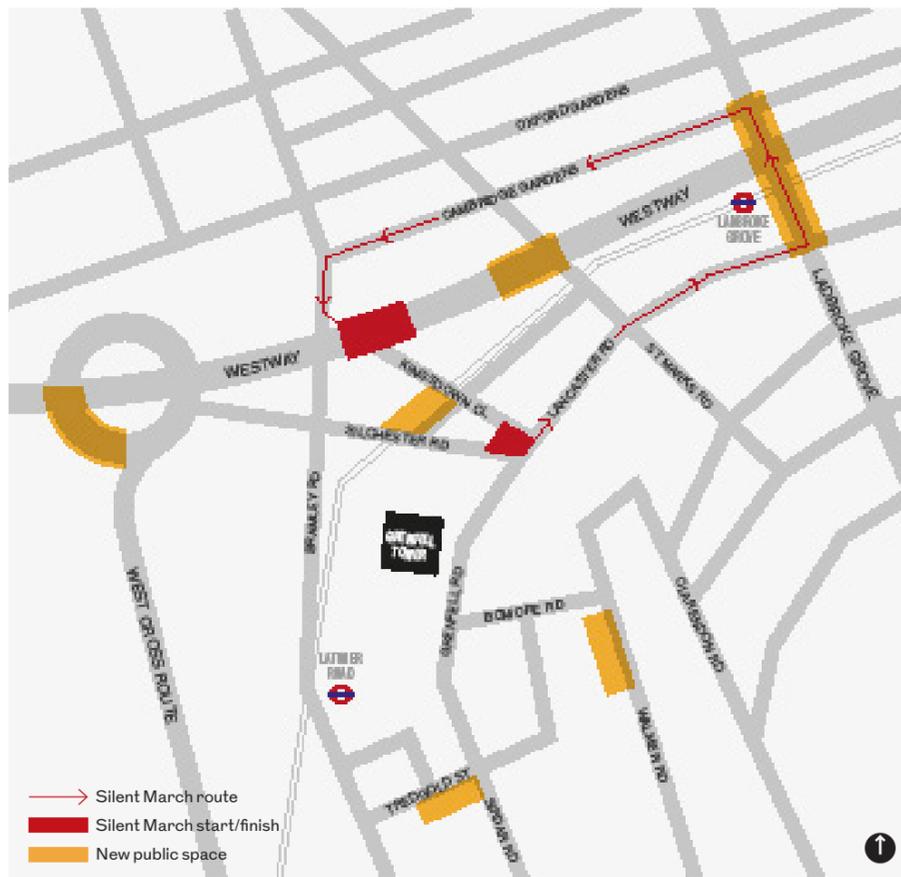
Words: Isabelle Priest Photographs: Sarah Lee

The first time I came to Latimer Road in west London, knowingly, was in December 2015. I was getting kicked out of the apartment I'd been renting and I'd seen this place online that seemed OK, so I went to have a look.

My first impression was of a strange area. On this winter week night it was oddly deserted and very dark. It's in Zone 2 but it could have been Zone 5. I wasn't convinced I'd enjoy living there, to the extent that we avoided a minimum term contract in exchange for an extra month's notice. There was nothing around – barely any shops, pubs or any of the usual stuff you expect from London; just an assortment of housing.

Latimer Road is not on the hipster map. The area is trapped by arterial roads, over-ground railways, motorways and to the north a canal that bears no relation to its guise downstream in Camden and Hackney. I was astonished to learn I'd be paying council tax to Kensington & Chelsea. I wasn't naïve enough to think nothing was happening here, it just had to be happening behind closed doors. There was no public side to the place, no community expression. Certainly, nowhere obvious to gather.

In the days after the fire at Grenfell Tower last June, all that changed. There was an outpouring of expression and need that flowed onto the streets in a kind of takeover. Roads couldn't function for the numbers of people walking around, congregating, listening to impromptu speeches, laying flowers, writing tributes, pinning up missing posters, handing out information and hot food. In



the seven months since, that sense of public presence has continued. The immediate crowds have dwindled, as has the press, but the community takeover is very much alive.

'The community feels vindicated,' explains Kensington & Chelsea MP and local resident Emma Dent Coad as we walk around the area with photographer Sarah Lee. We are doing a kind of dérive of the area to establish what has happened to public space – why, by whom and what comes next. I still live there and people seem to have gained a confidence in the street in ways that would have been unimaginable before. I'm speaking to local people as we walk around and I'm later joined on the phone by Will Hoyles, communications manager for the Westway Trust which manages the area beneath the A40.

'There are lots of people who had been fighting lots of battles for many years who now feel vindicated,' says Dent Coad. 'They have a confidence to speak out publicly – they have right on their side.'

In the absence of a council response after the fire, people gravitated towards spaces that offered help – churches, mosques, community centres, the Rugby Club, but also more surprisingly to the underside of the A40 elevated dual carriageway, known as the Westway. For want of formal gathering places, the community appropriated in-between spaces. We start our walk in a place of Dent Coad's choosing, by the fenced-off Bay 20 under that road. She wants to show me local artist Sophie Lodge's 24hearts project. It sprung out of the Come Unity heart that she originally created for the Notting Hill Carnival 2016. After the fire she started putting up huge hearts made of tissue paper all over the place and turned it into an art project for children, making smaller hearts that are now pinned to the fence.

It's one of the many examples in the area of art and words being used to appropriate spaces that didn't look like much before. There are roughly 12 of these spots that now have new identities and uses – everywhere from alleyways to particular columns. They stand in stark contrast to the area immediately below the burnt-out tower which looks deliberately avoided; eerie and empty.

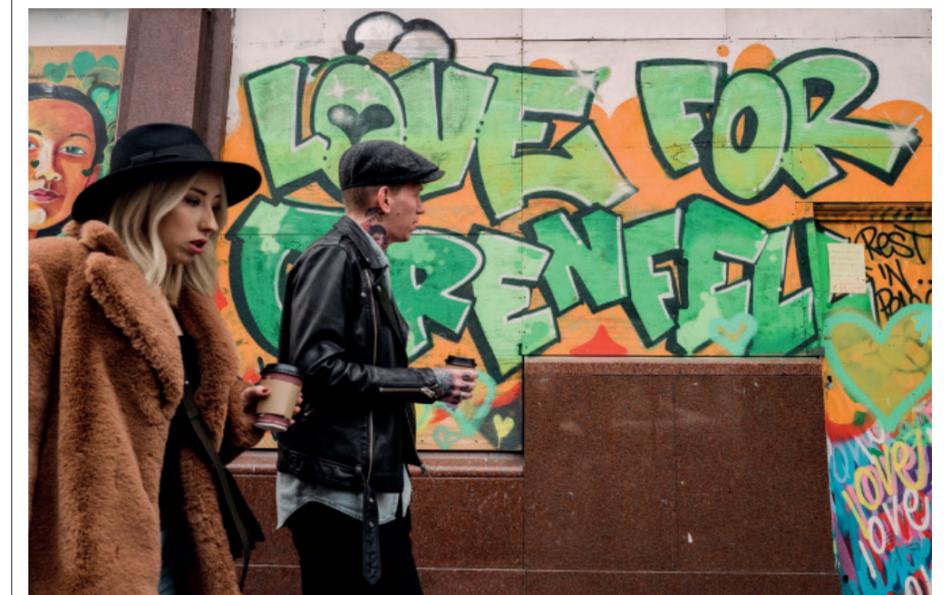
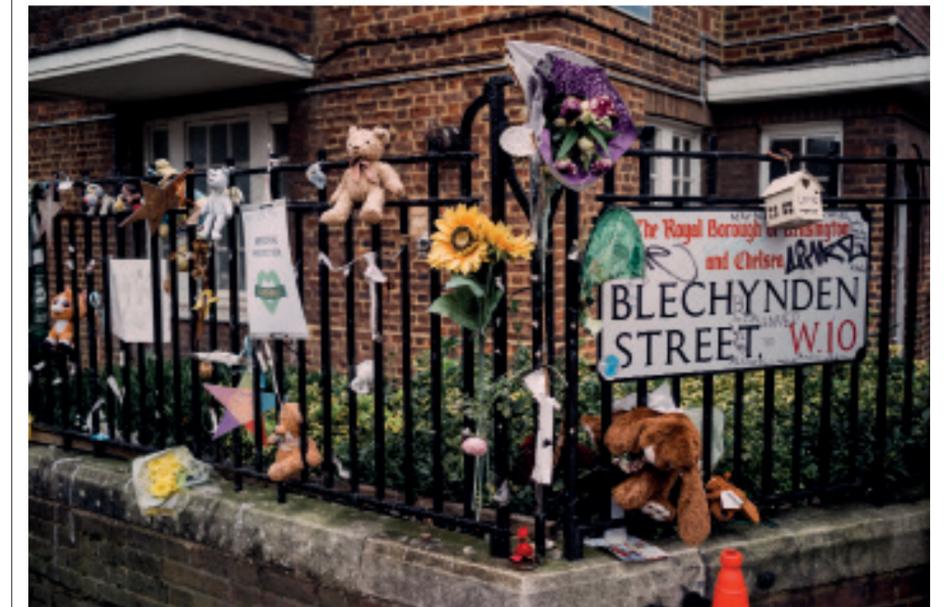
The largest of these appropriated spaces is the Truth Wall, a covered area under the Westway that became a kind of auditorium overlooking the tower. Dent Code describes it as 'our public square'. Characterised by

Opposite Grenfell Tower from and the Truth Wall and social area.

Below One of the corners on Bramley Road/Blechynden Street that has become a location for tributes.

Bottom Graffiti at Ladbrooke Grove.

An outpouring of expression and need flowed onto the streets in a kind of takeover

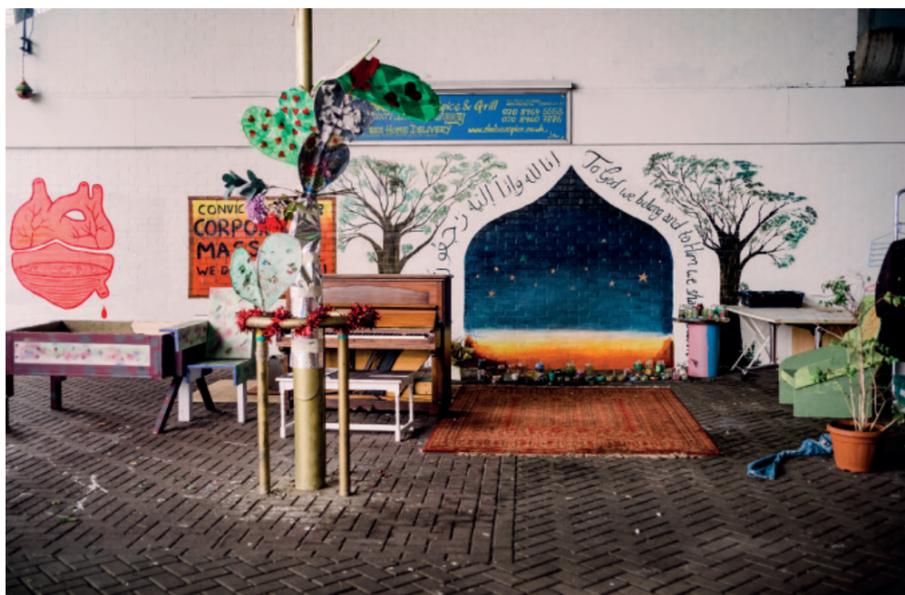


small and vast political artworks on the walls and columns, the space has been developed incrementally by the community, with people adding seating, pianos, bookshelves and books. One area has been set up as a prayer space, another as a bar/altar/speaker's lectern. People come to eat, play cards, chat or just sit. A man is playing Bach on the piano when we go through. One survivor of the fire comes at night when he can't sleep. Used at all hours, it is also where the monthly silent marches to remember victims of the fire end and where speeches are delivered.

Another location lies to the south of Latymer Community Church. After the fire it became a place to write messages of condolence on the wall, as opposed to tying up posters as elsewhere. The church has tried to preserve it with awnings and clear film but it remains the most static of the sites.

Nevertheless acts of community are taking place in changed ways across the area. The grungy space beneath the A40 and A3220 interchange, for example, had always been a toleration zone for graffiti. Before the fire it would be repainted every night, sometimes more often. Afterwards, graffiti added in honour of the victims has remained untouched. People are appropriating inside space too. By chance, one group led by Nii Sackley had the keys to the Acklam Village food market by Portobello Road when the fire happened and ended up using it to store donations. Since then the group has taken over another indoor space under the Westway nearer the tower to put on community events.

For the most part these appropriated spaces are being used and refreshed regularly. Outside the Notting Hill Methodist Church, for example, someone has recently woven chains of yellow hearts and yellow ribbons into the street railings, trees and bushes. Only the spot across the road from the Rugby Portobello Trust on Walmer Road, which became an area for tributes and missing posters tied to the railings, has deteriorated to such an extent it is almost gone. St



Top The area south of Latymer Community Church.
Middle Sophie Lodge's 24hearts project by Bay 20.
Right Prayer space by the Truth Wall.

Clement Church, which became a relief centre from 3am on the night of 14 June, is the only place where tributes have been officially removed, which vicar Alan Everett explains as the result of a 'background pastoral issue'.

Why has the community come together in this way? The fact that it was high summer when the fire broke out would have helped, but it also feels like an act of democracy to be seen and heard. The spaces support people who feel disenfranchised.

'People are calling it "reparations"', says Dent Coad. 'Residents are taking back the assets that many organisations had been trying to privatise.' And knowing the place both before and after the fire, it's obvious that the community didn't feel able to do this before. Over the years the area had lost a Citizens Advice bureau, pony stables, a community centre and a day centre for old people – and the authorities wanted to close others.

'There was no political will,' continues Dent Coad. 'There was absolutely no way the people at the top at that time would have let that happen. They thought people should just pull themselves up by their bootstraps. It's reparation for years of that kind of disdain.'

Although many different types of spaces are being appropriated, not everyone in the community is happy about it. The shopkeeper beside memorials on Bramley Road, who is of Pakistani origin, says that it is 'too much and creates too much sadness'. He is concerned that they attract too many visitors, particularly the marches. On the January march it's clear that in the same way that some people felt excluded from the few public spaces before, some groups – notably Muslims – might still be.

So what is the potential for this public space activism long term? Many of the various points that started informally are slowly getting formalised. Beyond the Bay 20 fence, for example, 24hearts has been adopted as the symbol for the community and is used to lead the marches. Out of that project came another – a series of banners for the area around Ladbroke Grove that use the 24hearts images. It is the only public space initiative that has received public funding to date.

There are other plans on the horizon too. At St Clement's, the parish will create a garden for peace and healing over the next few months, advised by architect Mike Stiff of Stiff + Trevillion. Meanwhile, Hoyles at Bay 20 says: 'The fire has given the Westway



Above Protected memorial on Bramley Road under the Westway.
Below Political artwork on one of the Westway's columns.



Trust a kick to bring it back into use.' The latest idea is for the BBC to use it to construct a community centre for an episode of The Big Build, giving a new home to groups displaced by the fire, including the boxing club that was based in the bottom of the tower.

As for the other plots under the Westway, the trust has commissioned artworks to make the area feel brighter, but there aren't plans to formalise the Truth Wall, graffiti and Bramley Road memorials yet.

'The patterns of ownership under the Westway are complicated,' says Hoyles. 'Some walls are managed by the Westway Trust, the columns are owned by Transport for London. For now, it's more about checking no one is planning anything – even just maintenance that might see murals painted over out of routine, not malice.'

Whatever happens, Dent Coad and Hoyles agree: the need must come from the community. 'We have to listen to the community,' continues Hoyles. 'The trust is still learning about what is required for going forward. It's impossible to speculate, we don't know what they will need – it's too raw.'

'The last thing anybody wants is for the "authorities" to come in and tell them what they need, take control and only let them get involved a bit,' says Dent Coad. 'The authorities will have to act on it [the spaces] if they want to keep the peace.' As part of what happens – and she suggests things will happen whether authorised or not – she reckons it would be gracious if the council permanently handed over spaces to community groups that have been working in the area since the fire, and it should formalise that handover. What's more, in recognition of the work the community is doing, the council should give them funding: 'The council is talking about employing community engagement officers, but it's not engagement people need, it's empowerment. People have already taken over a lot of these spaces, they know what they are doing – empower them to continue.'

Even without the authorities, new public spaces are being added, beyond those that emerged after the fire. One of the several new charities formed in the aftermath, the Olive Branch Charity, is currently installing the area's first formal built project: a sensory garden on a plot in the grounds of Kingsnorth House opposite Grenfell Tower. The garden is being laid out with an avenue of posts either side of a central tree.



Above Emma Dent
Coad MP in front of the
24hearts project.

Below The Olive
Branch Charity's
sensory garden under
construction.

Architects are in a good
position to help this
community move forward

In essence, it feels as though architects have stepped back from being involved here. What can they learn from the public spaces that have emerged out of the fire? First, they are in a good position to help this community move forward (as indeed Stiff is doing at St Clement's). One hut structure that the community built at the Truth Wall, for example, had to be dismantled by the Westway Trust because it was considered unsafe. This would be a genuinely needed outlet for those pop-up projects that must prove their usefulness somehow – perhaps replacing those temporary marques.

But at a wider level, what has happened around Grenfell Tower shows an overlay of public space that was previously missing. There was an inexhaustible need for community spaces, but getting consensus among groups was slow. The good thing is that after the fire they just happened. It is grassroots and a sure demonstration of what communities instinctively need.

It has also shown that the community and people have the ability to look after themselves, which could be seen as attractive from both ends of the political spectrum – pulled up by their bootstraps and all. Out of devastating circumstances these people took their chance and acquired the confidence to make change happen – showing what community can offer at the worst of times and making it happen where it was not provided. We can learn from that, for good times and bad. ●



Licensed to thrill



La-la-land on the outside and Bat Cave within, RSHP's new distillery and visitor centre for Macallan leaves the nose empty but the eyes popping

Words: Isabelle Priest Photographs: Joas Souza

Left The glulam roof has 1,800 single beams, 2,500 different elements and 380,000 components, very few the same.

Below A narrowing avenue connects the new building with the original Easter Elchies House. The entrance is a cave-like hole in the hillside at the end.

It's a curious building that to ordinary members of the public, who have never heard of Richard Rogers or RSHP, combines Teletubby La-la-land architecture on the outside with the menacing darkness and subterranean drama of Christopher Nolan's Bat Cave on the inside. The two images hardly go together. Add a layer of popular culture to perception of the Macallan brand – James Bond's penchant for the drink and that scene from Skyfall where a tot of the fine smooth scotch is used as a target on top of actress Bérénice Marlohe's head – and you end up with a staggering blend of references, as well as architecturally considerably confused.

But roll up the tartan and put away the tweed, because Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners' new £140 million distillery and visitor centre for premium whisky maker Macallan is a beguiling building designed to impress and overwhelm. Is it a giant rectangular meadow-topped magic carpet rippling over the crest of the hillside like a stingray along the ocean floor? Or a Soviet bunker semi-attempting to hide from view, rolling up over



The distillery was seen as an opportunity to enhance the magnetism of the brand

MARK POWER/MAGNUM PHOTOS



the hill from the banks of the gushing, bouldered river Spey which gives this whisky area north of the Cairngorms one of its principal ingredients?

Whatever the simile – and these are just from asking whoever happened to be around – grabbing public attention is the aim of this building. And, with its thrilling architectural mix of slow reveal and intensity, it is difficult not to come away fascinated by it as a building, by Macallan, and sans bottle of 12-year-old £60 first fill sherry-cask whisky in hand as a souvenir.

‘Over the past 20 years as the scotch market has become premiumised, Macallan has been constrained by the amount of liquid it was able to produce,’ explains Macallan’s engineering manager George McKenzie. ‘For the last five years we have not been able to increase volume of sales... but with some fairly clever sales and marketing, we have ridden the crest to take Macallan out with the luxury brands and beyond.’

The intentions for the new building, therefore, were twofold. First, to increase production to meet a seemingly insatiable global demand (90% of Macallan is exported), and second, to use the resulting distillery as an opportunity to enhance the magnetism and lustre of the brand.

‘We are now marketing ourselves alongside the likes of Bentley,’ continues McKenzie. ‘That allows us to command some really high prices, so the board wanted a home to reflect that status – a place for visitors, aficionados, entertaining overseas distributors and high net worth individuals.’

After investigating the option of building a basic distillery with a high-quality visitor centre attached (which would have cost £55 million), Macallan put the project out to competition, inviting 15 architects to submit expressions of interest. The brief was relatively open: it had to produce 15 million litres of whisky per year with the possibility of expanding to 20-25 million litres, the drink had to retain its character, and it had to be a world-class building and visitor attraction.

Fourteen practices replied, and over a year, these were whittled down to five, and then to two – RSHP and Herzog & de Meuron. In this area of great landscape value, where Macallan has become accustomed to burying and hiding to appease influential local landowners, an underground building seemed most appropriate. In contrast to Macallan’s previous visitor centre, which was more of a shop and a tour, RSHP’s approach was to combine both elements – distillery and visitor centre – in one building, the former in

full view of the latter as a celebration of the modern distilling process.

‘It was very difficult to put a self-standing building in the landscape,’ explains architect Graham Stirk, ‘so it became a landscape building.’

Dug down 10m into a slope on the site of a former barley field, the 220m-long undulating row of five ‘mini Ben Rinneses’ burst through the slope on this side of the valley covered in wild flower meadow – parched at this moment. Numbers one to four are raised as external expressions of the circular distilling cells inside while five, slightly taller than the rest at 17m, signifies the entrance and visitor hub. Around this floating island shafts of earth have been excavated to connect the building to features in the landscape – the 17th century Easter Elchies House, where Macallan’s story began, two new concrete chimneys (one for the CO₂ by-product, the other for steam) cut adrift from the main body of the building at the end of polished concrete retaining walls, and the service road behind, sunk into the hill at the point of the building to make it disappear. Driving round the bend, following the rhythm of the roof between the pine trees to the entrance, the complexity of the building becomes apparent through the glazed curtain wall, enormous gable end

Above New ‘humps’ can be added to the building to enable Macallan to increase its whisky production by 5 million litres.

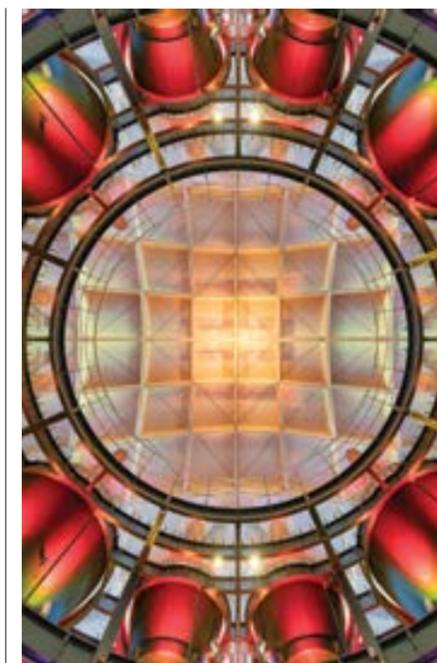
- 1 New RSHP visitor centre and distillery
- 2 Warehouses designed by Blythe + Blyth Consulting Engineers
- 3 Easter Elchies House
- 4 Service road



warehouses rising like majestic terracotta soldiers behind.

Through the deep, cave-like threshold you are transported from light, air and grassy nature into a below-ground experience of darkness, polished surfaces, moon doors and atmospheric coloured lighting thrown across walls, building guts, stills and pipes. Ahead the reception is recessed into a giant freestanding open top cylinder containing a core for entertainment including a tasting bar, two VIP drinking lounges and a cellar, which sits like an enormous barrel below the exposed double parabolic glulam grid roof. To the left, a wall of whisky introduces Macallan’s 194-year history in bottles, alongside the ‘jewel box’ – a interactive exhibition space. To the right is a boutique arranged in glass cabinets like a museum and a view through a glazed separation wall into the mechanical underbelly of the distillery behind.

The typical tour begins upstairs. Under the vault of the roof, within the distillery itself, the full workings are on display, with grille floors showing the plethora of equipment underneath. You are hit by the intense



Above Epic view up to the grid shell roof through one of five ‘Game of Thrones moon door’ openings – but not accessible to ordinary visitors.

heat and loud whirring of the machinery. Sparkling stainless steel and copper stills are arranged as a series of circular modules, one under each dome, of which three are in use, each producing 5m litres of spirit a year. The technology is Victorian in its appearance and its arrangement classical and temple-like in form. This module format means the building can, as per the brief, cleverly increase production in future by building more humps on, and indeed Macallan is already anticipating moving into the spare fourth pod in 2023.

Yet as McKenzie explains, ‘No engineer would dream of building a distillery in a circular fashion; normally the process would be separated into parts from one room to another for risk of explosion.’ The process is the same as before, using Macallan’s ‘curiously small stills’ – just in a configuration that enhances the theatricality of the experience.

And throughout, this sensationalising the image of the process through its architecture has been prioritised over displaying the raw genuine engineering of a distillery, because this is largely where the building ends. In the colour-lit cellar, for example,

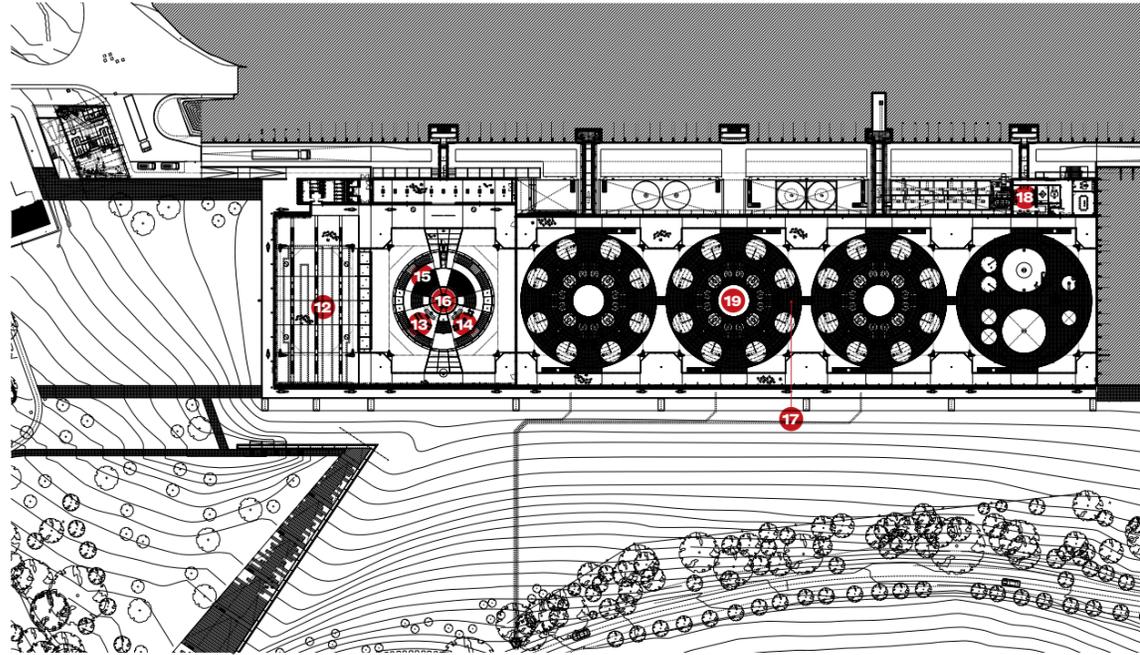


The underbelly of the stills production, a reverse Pompidou, dramatically displayed using coloured uplighting.

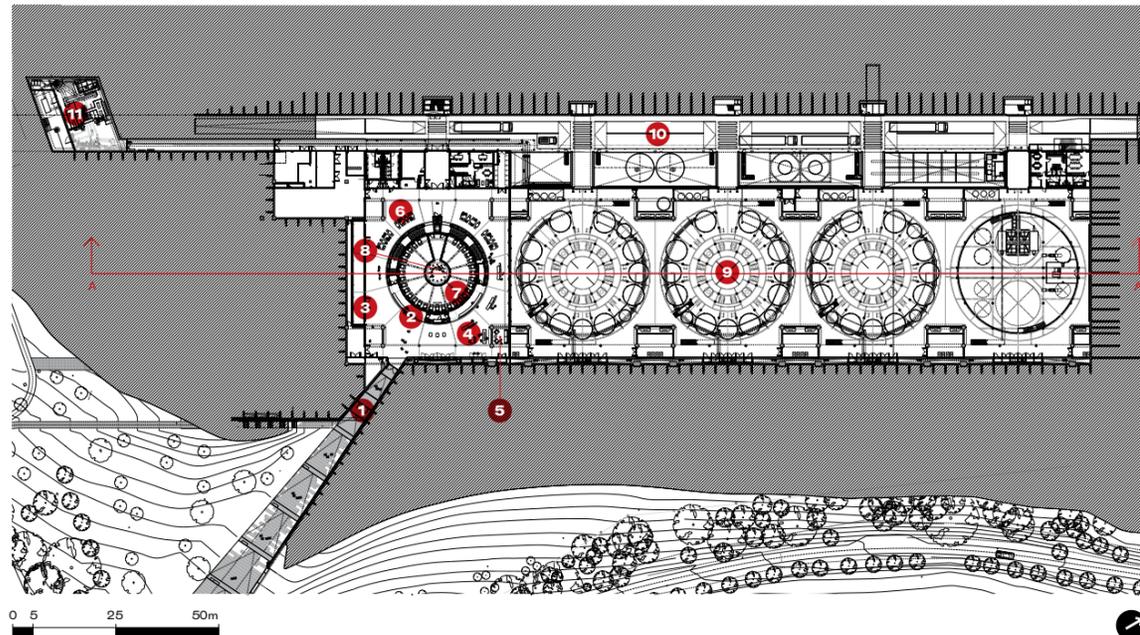
Section A-A



First floor plan



Ground floor plan



IN NUMBERS
£140m
 building cost
220m
 length
1,200m²
 roof
£400,000
 cost of fire testing a
 separation panel at BRE

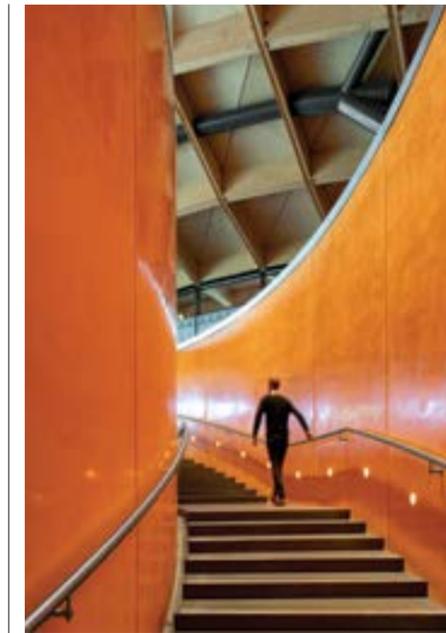
- 1 Entrance avenue connecting to Easter Elchies House
- 2 Reception
- 3 Wall of Whisky and the Jewel Box
- 4 Shop
- 5 VIP buyers room
- 6 Restaurant
- 7 Cellar
- 8 Cellar viewing box
- 9 Underbelly of stills pod (not accessible to the public)
- 10 Service yard
- 11 Boiler room and chimney
- 12 Exhibition area
- 13 Tasting bar
- 14 Lingering bar
- 15 Shutter-ceiling VIP drinking lounges
- 16 Whisky vault with moon opening into cellar below
- 17 Distillery room with circular pod stills arrangement
- 18 Distillery operating room
- 19 Opening in floor for stills replacement

At no point do you get the amazing aroma of scotch maturing in the barrel

casks line the curved walls while a highly polished floor and ceiling give the illusion of an infinitely vertical space. It's a marvel for entertaining high-paying guests with elaborate dinners, but far from the tightly packed, racked, creaky looming warehouses storing the bulk of Macallan's stock behind. And trapped behind glass, at no point on the tour do you get to sniff the amazing aroma of scotch maturing in its barrel. That moment you've been waiting for never happens, leaving the experience a bit lacking compared with, say, visiting a winemaker's cellar in Bordeaux, or a port distillery in Vila Nova de Gaia. Likewise, the filling station, blending and bottling all take place elsewhere so the visit is not comprehensive either.

Don't get me wrong, Macallan's new visitor centre and distillery is as crisply cut as a Savile Row suit – finished with an elegance that disguises the effort of its making. But what this means is some of the most interesting parts of the scheme – like the those warehouses which are being built at a rate of 6,000m² per year, the boiler room which took three people three years to design, and service yard with its 9m concrete retaining wall, crossing pipes and stairs – are the ones you don't actually get to see. These parts, purely engineered, reveal the elsewhere indulgent showmanship of the architecture, although note that RSHP had to overcome hard challenges to achieve it, particularly around energy use and fire (the building is more similar to a petrochemical plant than a winery).

The drama and glamour nevertheless earn their own praise. Here we come back to



Above The diminishing curved stair with polished plaster walls increases expectation.
Below left Services thrust to the outside: this feels most like an RSHP building of old.
Below The 153-cask cellar seems an infinitely vertical space, but visitors are unable to smell the whisky.

Credits
Architect Roger Stirk
 Harbour + Partners
Main contractor
 Robertsons Construction
Structural and services engineer Arup
Project manager Equals
 Consultancy
Landscape architect
 Gillespies
Lighting consultant
 Speirs + Major
Fire consultant Arup

Bond and the badass architecture of Batman, as well as Macallan's public face. RSHP's building is the biggest 'clever marketing' device I've ever seen. With it, Macallan has left the other 41 Speyside distilleries behind and propelled itself even further into the hyper luxury world of Virgin Galactica spaceports, McLaren engineering centres and Rolex visitor hubs. Drunk on luxury, the building is part of a wider, often British architecture, that has become less pop and more suave, smooth and rich, like the maturing whisky here and the heads of practices that lead this type of work.

Taking in the curves and contours of the landscape, this architecture hijacks land art – those hills, excavations – for the purposes of commercialisation to create buildings designed to be seen from the cockpit of an aeroplane or the back seat of a helicopter – as no doubt aspirational visitors would prefer to arrive. Floating in this elite super realm above the ubiquity of brick, these architects are transforming an ecological movement to bring luxe to landscape that crashes into bling. Buildings like this don't come around often and their critique must work on a different level too. I don't feel like I've been to a whisky distillery. It was a distinctly unScottish experience. But the building is dramatic, disorienting, entertaining and leaves a lingering sensation of excitement and awe on the palate. From that point of view, and Macallan's, the building cannot be considered anything but a resounding success. ●



Amin Taha could so easily have become a doctor. Instead he brings his holistic, structure-first approach to architecture

Words: Isabelle Priest Portrait: Ivan Jones

Body & soul

In contrast to most other professions in Britain, the average age for doctors in the NHS to draw their pensions is decreasing. Seven years ago it was 60.4 years, last year it was 58.5. It's kind of ironic then that all of Amin Taha's discussion about why he is an architect is framed around how he could have, more easily perhaps, been a doctor. Both of his parents were, the rest of his siblings are, and he looked for a different career because he didn't like the way his parents were completely absorbed in their jobs and he 'wanted to find something where I could do regular working hours, sit at a drawing board and colour in trees'.

He's sort of kidding, but from the outside, teenager perspective, architecture can look like that stable profession. Now, aged 52, if Taha had chosen medicine, he would likely be within six years of retirement. Yet, only in the alternative reality of architecture can someone so near to pension-drawing age be this month described in *Icon* magazine as 'one of the most promising, interesting young architects working in the UK at the moment'.

Let's not build on architecture's self-pity foundations here though. Taha and I

are sitting in a glass and bronze box perched mid-air over a huge newly excavated basement in Clerkenwell, east London that has just become his new office. Walls and steel beams have been smashed through to make way for a bigger, open sunken concrete-lined tank below us. We're sitting on a handsome set of mid-century modern chairs at an opulent long art deco-style table. Through the window, beyond an engraved stone column propped on its side, the magnificent Georgian St James' Church dominates the view.

Taha bought the plot outright seven years ago, moving eventually to architect-loving Clerkenwell from, initially, the increasingly quiet and unfashionable Westbourne Grove. He put up with the 1950s building for a while, moving in his practice before getting planning in 2013 to knock it down and redevelop the lot. In its place he's built eight flats,

Despite notching up acclaim, the practice remains a mysterious entity

including a penthouse for himself and his family (he's recently become a father), and a two-storey office at the bottom. Basically, you get what I'm saying; Taha could no doubt retire if he wanted.

Yet to some extent *Icon* is right. Taha's life position doesn't seem that 'young', but his practice, and work, is only just coming of age. Most architects would not recognise a photograph of him straight away and even though his practice is notching up acclaim, with its Barratt's Grove shortlisted for the Stirling Prize last year, it remains a mysterious entity. That's why we are here – and the fact the firm has completed several projects in quick succession: a mixed-use scheme on Upper Street, Islington for the furniture shop *Aria*; Clerkenwell Green where our interview takes place (and which architecture news followers might remember from the hoo-ha about whether it is bigger than the building it received planning permission for); and *Caroline Place*, a 1970s private house refurbishment in Bayswater that had £600,000 more in the budget than the whole of Barratt's Grove.

Taha attributes Clerkenwell Green to being 'in the right place at the right time',





but he's been on quite a journey to get to this point. Only a complex character can contentedly weave together successive years working at such diverse practices as Andris Bersins & Associates, Rick Mather Architects, Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands and Zaha Hadid Architects (ZHA) before setting out alone. He even worked for four years at Chris Wilkinson Architects (Wilkinson Eyre) on the bridges team.

So who is he?

Coffee in hand and flicking from interview to photoshoot to regular work during the afternoon, Taha is steady-spoken with a cut-glass British accent and a relaxed and affable manner. He was born in Berlin, his parents Iraqi and Sudanese, but came to live in Southend-on-Sea aged seven. 'That was our introduction to England,' he says wryly. When he was a teenager, his parents moved to Abu Dhabi, leaving him to continue his education here, observing the Middle East's transformation from afar and completing both his Part 1 and 2 at the University of Edinburgh. He's keen, unlike other profile subjects I've researched, for me to settle in, speak to others in the office and get to know it well. That includes the office rescue dog, Moo,

Taha is keen for me to settle in and get to know the office, including the rescue dog Moo

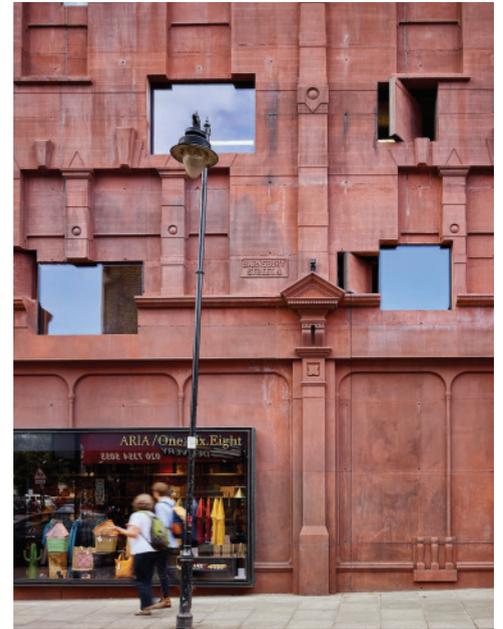


which potters around with a similarly gentle and inquisitive demeanour.

Taha's enigmatic persona is apparently not deliberate. He appears most concerned by press coverage that applauds big media-friendly personalities whose own work doesn't stand up to the scrutiny. 'It's best the work has its own quality,' he says.

This goes some way to explaining the phenomenon. Taha's own work has been evolving, gathering depth and conviction, since he set up in 2004 and he now has between 12 and 16 employees at any one time. It started off the back of winning three competitions he entered in his free time when working at ZHA - European in Manchester, a strategic masterplan in Barking and an arts centre in London Fields. Interestingly, there doesn't seem much direct evidence of this heterogeneous architectural heritage in the output of Groupwork + Amin Taha (the full name of his practice) today. Clerkenwell Green is, for example, a tough-textured but luxurious space full of bare state materials, while Caroline Place is a super refined scheme with a Mies and Scarpaesque palette of materials and level of detailing - the project architect even designed a built-in make-up cabinet.

Nevertheless, for Taha, Andris Bersins was 'a fantastic lesson in detailing', Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands taught him the importance of managing a contract, and ZHA showed him how to develop ideas for competitions by splitting up into teams that work individually on ideas that then get progres-



Left Clerkenwell Green's picturesque quality is a direct consequence of how stone is quarried.

Above Upper Street, a monument to a bygone building misremembered and inspired by Rachel Whiteread and Fouquet's Barrière by Edouard François Architecte in Paris.

Middle Inside, the wall is scraped back to reveal a previous history.

sively disposed of and distilled. But overall it seems the largest lessons these practices had for Taha was how not to do things, one effect being that once Amin Taha Architects expanded, it became an employee ownership trust with its own name. Indeed, Taha is remarkably scathing about the situation of architecture now, particularly objecting to how buildings are built, and the way he describes the practice's work seems to be in opposition to other architects rather than in parallel:

'You look at most architecture, how it is taught is you draw it in plan, section and elevation and you are always initially sketching those lines that start off with a form and define the space. Very rarely are you beginning with what those forms are made of that give it its atmosphere, tactile nature and its structure. What tends to happen is you draw the stuff and the design team begins to dictate for you whether it's a steel frame, etc. As an architect you are there then to colour the facade and plasterboard the inside, and those things can be dictated by the fashions of the day - today the fashion is for brick vernacular, used like a kind of brick wash. That brick wash will not have lintels, for example, because no one

Architecture is really born of structure – why have we forgotten that?

has understood it is a piece of structure. It's just a finish and inevitably manufacturers encourage the thinking of – why bother with real brick when you can stick on something that is paper thin?

If there's one period that positively influences how Taha designs today, though, it is his time with Wilkinson Eyre, where he worked on the Gateshead Millennium Bridge, the Royal Victoria Dock Bridge and the Hungerford Bridge, among others.

'Working on such a fundamental level of structure to form the architecture is not something you get exposed to normally,' he explains. 'It changes the perspective because occasionally a building comes your way and we would look at it from a structure-first perspective. It makes you realise that architecture is really born of structure and you have to ask yourself why we have forgotten that. Before you know it, the structure is driving the architecture and you question what is all this other stuff we are layering onto buildings?'



As a writer on architecture, it's refreshing to hear architects questioning these things. At Groupwork it's part of an approach that treats buildings as holistic entities; every element, every material contributes to the health of the whole. The suggestion is once you work like that, there's no going back. And when you look closely, many of the practice's buildings, from the brick rainscreen at Barratt's Grove to the stone grid shell at Clerkenwell Green, use loadbearing structures. It's a method that Taha says saves time and money because it doesn't split the budget into components – structure, finishes, etc. They can often be the same thing. On a smaller scale, in Taha's flat, the fitted furniture becomes the partitions; some things are static but many things move. At Caroline Place, a wall is a fold-down bed, cupboard and fire lobby.

As part of that approach Taha uses a building's history like a patient's records. He doesn't believe in face-lifts but rather the surgical removal of a beam here, and a wall there, ignoring aspects that pose no overall threat. For a refurbishment, he scrapes away the layers of architectural toxicity that have accumulated, while for a new-build he designs with that in mind too; cutting the fat of both the process and the architecture not for some aesthetic or moral reason, but because it makes the building cheaper to construct and run, creating architectural wholesomeness and a better place to live.

To this process of splicing, isolating and reassembling, Taha imprints a psychoanalytical dimension too – the what ifs, imagined pasts and scarred memories. This layer of scrutiny materialises as interesting idiosyncrasies and meaning, drawing in references and qualities far and wide, and to achieve it he follows a rigorous method: first 'explore', second 'restore' and third 'ignore'. Explore by drawing long context studies, reading and speaking to local people, anything 'that might add a bit of poetry to fundamental aspects of the design, to small areas that make it physically more relevant and culturally deeper'. Restore is about reinstating the idea of a narrative, while 'ignore' is about decisions to leave things as they are with positive effect. At Upper Street, at the end of a Palladian-mannered parade of shops, on a bombsite from the second world war, this approach meant reinstating the missing block as a 1:1 pigmented concrete monument to the vanished past and misremembered memories – 'as monuments



Above Taha's method is explore, restore, ignore.

Left Design for housing on Finchley Road.

so often are'. It is deliberately contrasting, windows and ventilation panels punctuated in an almost alien fashion, the formwork made to slip and panels in the wrong place.

Taha says he didn't take up medicine because 'creatively all bodies are the same'. However, he simultaneously describes architecture as a language with a vocabulary and alphabet: 'All you have to be is literate in the alphabet and vocabulary to make a literate piece of architecture that says something and is readable.' A mystery remains about how the practice sustains itself in terms of workload – there are apparently hotels and shops as well as some 10-storey housing for Finchley Road – but intellectually at least, it seems to me, for Taha the building is the body, and what it speaks of is its soul. With the hours, of course, maybe Taha is a doctor after all. ●