

BUILDING STUDY: SHAKESPEARE HOUSE

Through its transformation of a 1930s block of council flats in Hackney, east London, bptw has proved that refurbishment need not be a second-class citizen, writes **Ike Ijeh**



With an estimated 80% of all UK housing that will exist in 2050 already built - 75% of it before 1975 - it is clear that refurbishment will play as big a role in expanding Britain's housing stock as new-builds. Yet refurbishment is still seen as the poor relation to new-build, a patchwork of remediation and repair that can lack the glamour or ambition of new-builds. For some, no matter how inventive the retrofit, it is always constrained by what existed before.

However, a newly renovated block of flats in east London is determined to prove otherwise. Until its revamp by bptw Partnership Architects, Shakespeare House in Hackney, which reopens this month, was an unassuming if surprisingly contemporary-looking block of council flats dating back to 1934. With its yellow London-stock brickwork, flat roof, casement windows and strip balconies, it slotted easily into the familiar urban sprawl of London housing.

Today, however, Shakespeare House has been transformed. A new storey has been added, yellow brickwork replaced by black, new balconies and windows installed and the building's entire elevational and massing composition altered. It looks and feels like an entirely new building. "It may be an existing building," says bptw partner Justin Kelly, "but to have a serious approach to refurbishment, the end product had to look new."

Pre-renovation, Shakespeare House exhibited the familiar litany of problems common to much post- and pre-war social housing in Britain. The four-storey U-shaped block of 24 flats was blighted by small units (one-beds of 34m sq), poor thermal performance (150mm single-leaf external brick walls), a lack of balconies, inadequate amenity space and a crumbling fabric. Three cores and no lift meant circulation was inefficient and, without a clearly defined main entrance, multiplication of entrances exacerbated security problems.

Refurbishment has taken place both internally and externally. Internally, 18 flats have been created principally by knocking through



"We wanted to create a modern vernacular that was traditional but in a contemporary way"



The building is clad in a black Corian bonded brick slip system fixed to the existing outer walls



party walls to create larger units and adding three additional flats on a new fourth floor. Homes are Lifetime Homes compliant and meet Code for Sustainable Homes standards.

Internal circulation space has been radically reordered. One clearly defined main entrance and circulation core replaces the previous three and is accessible through a double-height space located at the centre of the U-plan. A lift has also been installed for the first time.

But it is outside that the most radical changes have taken place. The most striking difference is the brickwork. The building has been over-clad in a black Corian bonded brick slip system, fixed to the outer face of the existing brick walls. This is stack bonded, abandoning the traditional stretcher bond of the original bricks.

There were various reasons for choosing the system. "Structurally

we had to have a brick slip solution as a solid brick outer leaf would have been heavier and required bigger foundations," says Kelly. "We wanted a light frame cladding solution we could hang from the existing walls without having to underpin or increase the foundation size."

The choice was aesthetic too. "We wanted to create a modern vernacular that was traditional but in a contemporary way. We looked at other materials such as render and timber but many of those can deteriorate. We wanted something strong and robust that would remain timeless. It also had to sit comfortably with its context - we consulted extensively with the conservation officer on this. It may be a dramatically different colour, but there are precedents for a huge variety of brickwork colours other than London stock in the area."

The use of this brickwork also

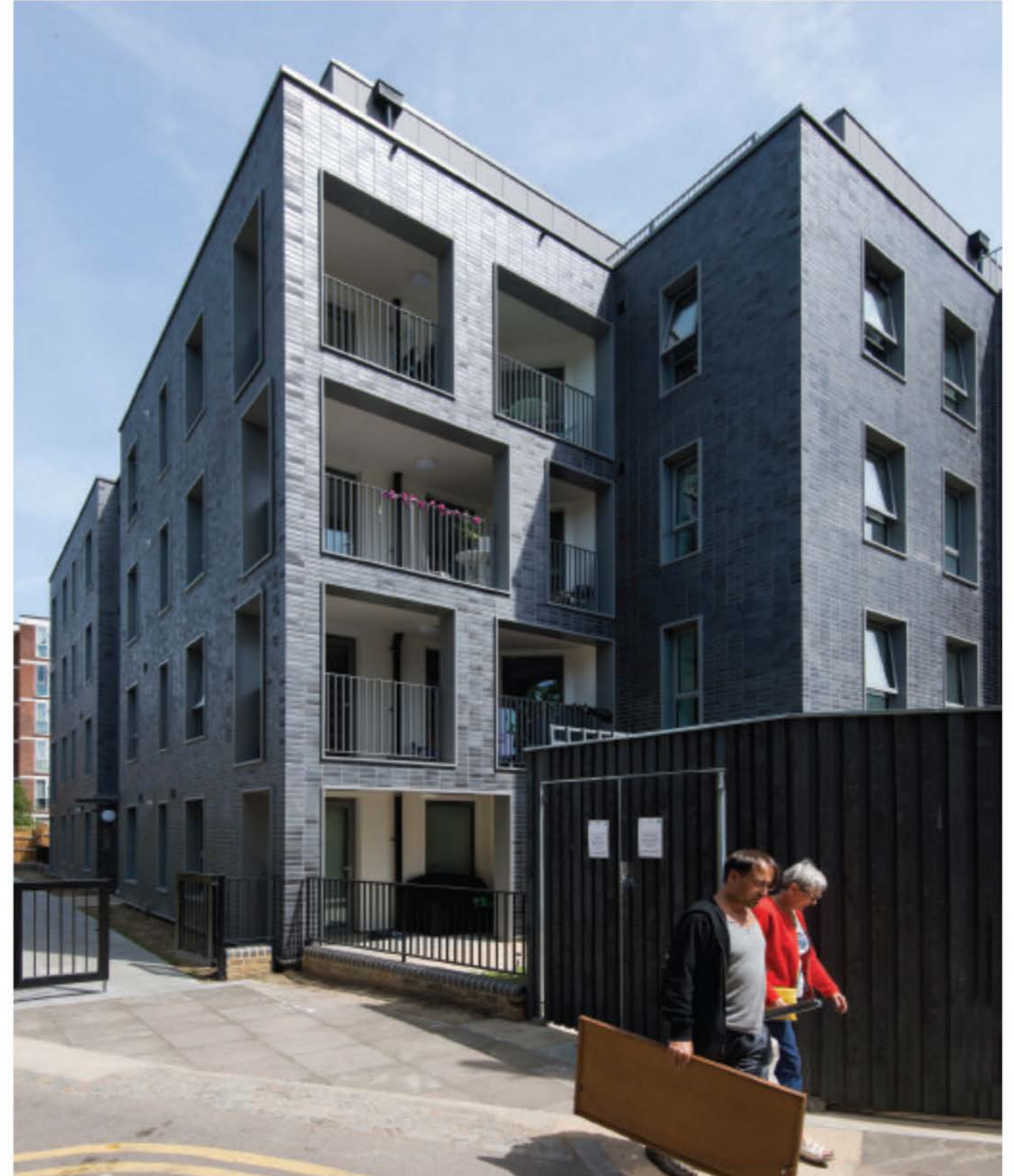
makes a wider point about trends in housing design. "Tenants don't want to be guinea pigs for modern methods of construction," argues Kelly. "Look at a lot of the housing in London and you see architects trying to squeeze as many different materials as possible onto individual blocks. That may be fashionable but it isn't timeless."

A key complimentary component of the exterior are deep window reveals, a consequence of the applied overcladding system - the new envelope adds 250mm to 300mm onto walls 150mm to 200mm thick.

Architecturally, the result is the mass and solidity Kelly alludes to, as well as the reassuring depth of heavy masonry dramatically appended by punched openings and shifting planes. This alone is a welcome departure from the hermetic flatness of much recent housing, which, Kelly rightly claims,

Above: A new fourth storey houses three additional flats

Right: New overclad balconies have been inserted into the corners



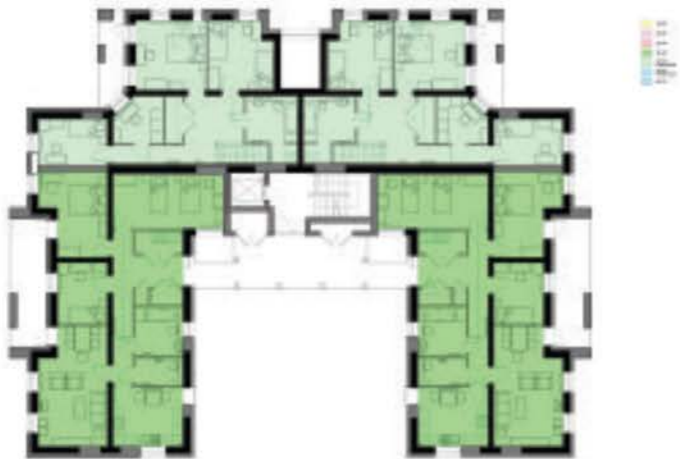


Powder-coated aluminium used on the new windows and top storey is an effective counterfoil to the heavy brickwork

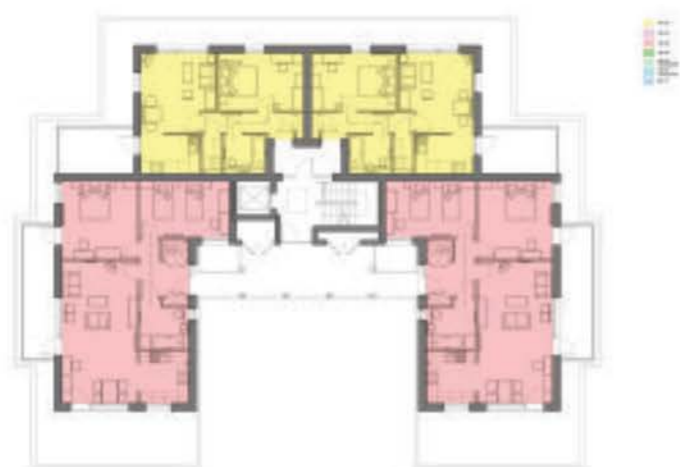
Ground floor existing



Ground floor plan



Fourth floor plan



Access decks and London stock brickwork have been replaced by ...

... new balconies, Corian brick slips and a new storey

is often overcompensated for by an overactive material palette.

The secondary material on the exterior is powder-coated aluminium. As the material for the new windows and top-storey envelope and the elegant trim around the window reveals and balcony openings, its metallic lightness forms an effective counterfoil to the heaviness of the brickwork.

The final external component is the building's subtly but effectively remodelled massing. The new balconies are central to this. Previously the centre in each of the three wings of the U-plan was filled with recessed decks that provided access to flats. These also corresponded to the old position of the stair cores. With the cores

consolidated into one central shaft, two banks of these access decks have been converted into private balconies. Additional private balconies have been inserted in the twin outer corners of the U.

But rather than being 'bolted on' these balconies have been enwrapped in the new cladding envelope, with the Corian brick slips extending over them and, as Kelly's says, "continuously integrating them with the rest of the building."

Architecturally, this succeeds in establishing a new physical identity that further separates the renovated building from its former state. Not only does the reconfiguration of the balconies alter the building's massing and envelope, it underpins the building's fresh geometry of rigorous

rectilinearity, punched openings and interplaying recessed and projecting volumes. This is not refurbishment as applied fancy dress, it is wholesale architectural reinvention.

As with all refurbishment projects, there were limitations and unknowns and Kelly stresses the importance of a detailed survey.

"The floor heights were particularly constrictive," he says. "Also, were the building demolished and rebuilt to London Design Guide standards with the same accommodation mix, it would be around 1.5 storeys taller and wield a more oppressive overlooking impact in planning terms."

The building's original structure also proved problematic. "The building was a combination of load-

bearing walls and concrete frame. There are all manner of bulkheads, concrete downstand beams and suspended ceilings, most of which we couldn't survey properly during the design process, as the block was still occupied - we couldn't exactly drill holes in people's flats.

"While we were able to design the new top storey as a lightweight steel structure, we had to retain much of the original load-bearing structure elsewhere. This is why some rooms have awkward shapes or jutting downstands. One advantage of this was the storage we were able to create in various corners and voids."

The deep window reveals so prevalent on the exterior also had internal consequences. "We could almost fit seats into many of the

internal cills and in order to ensure the deep reveals didn't reduce the amount of internal daylight, we dropped the cill heights by over 200mm, which meant new bigger windows and more natural light."

Another familiar refurbishment challenge was alignment of floor levels. New sound insulation had to be applied to the floors to meet acoustic requirements. Careful readjustment of the stair levels was required to ensure the top staircase aligned with the new floor levels without increasing the height of the risers beyond compliance with Building Regulations.

Shakespeare House proves that refurbishment need not be the poor relation of newbuild. It shows that even the most complex and

constrained original fabric can still be comprehensively transformed by bold and imaginative thinking.

That Shakespeare House achieves this within the constrained budgets of the social housing sector and with an architectural language marked for its powerful simplicity is to the design team's credit. It is also a timely lesson in how the remainder of our vast existing housing stock can be similarly rejuvenated.

PROJECT TEAM

Architect: **bptw partnership**
 Client: **Islington & Shoreditch Housing Association**
 Main contractor: **Indecon Building**
 Structural/M&E Engineer: **Clancy Consulting**
 Cost consultant: **Cox Drew Neale**