WESTMINSTER

RAE 2008, RA2 - H 30

GRIFFITHS, Sean

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Output 3 (Design)

ISLINGTON SQUARE

Griffiths, Sean (2006)
Islington Square Housing Project, Woodward Place, Manchester

General Description:

This built project, involving the rebuilding of Woodward Place, arose after Fashion-Architecture-Taste (FAT) was selected unanimously by residents in a 2003 competition to design a small estate of houses for the Manchester Methodist Housing Group. The estate forms but part of Urban Splash's larger New Islington development. The £2.3 million scheme comprises 23 two-to-four bedroom family homes and gardens. The design's aim is to unify the residents' desire for more traditional homes with the commitment in Urban Splash's masterplan to create innovative world-class architecture, and the eventual project was developed in close collaboration with the occupants. The Woodward Place scheme in New Islington is also designed to meet ambitious sustainability targets, and as such it is intended as an exemplar for future UK construction. The design tries to reduce primary energy, CO2 emissions and water consumption, used a 'green' specification of materials and reduction of construction waste, and is designed for life-cycle adaptability on the Lifetime Homes principles. It has been given an EcoHomes 'excellent' rating.

Established in 1995, FAT has since developed a enviably broad approach to architecture. Early work included a series of seminal interior projects and art installations, but today the practice is far more involved in social housing and urban design work. FAT is also run along with Sam Jacobs and Charles Holland, but Sean Griffiths is the founding figure and senior participant in the firm, and he was the lead designer for Woodward Place. FAT are now gaining widespread accolades for their designs, such as being chosen as the Architecture Foundation's Next Generation Award winners in 2006 and being included in the 'Gritty Brits' exhibition at the Carnegie Mellon Institute, Pittsburgh, in 2007.

Research Questions:

The research issues involved in the Woodward Place / Islington Square project include:

(1) How to utilise the program requirements and site conditions for the estate to create a new model of mass urban housing which is able to play visually and psychologically on common everyday notions about domesticity.

(2) How then to achieve this effect within an undeniably restricted budget.

(3) How to revive the idea of community participation in architectural design, now that the heyday of so-called 'community architecture' is long been and gone.

(4) How to come up with innovative methods of adapting the traditional forms of brick cavity-wall construction and internal domestic servicing in order to meet the higher ecological standards now being asked of architectural projects.

Thus the core of the research work behind the Islington Square scheme lies in the combination of spatial and technical inventiveness to devise a new mass housing typology for a more sustainable urban environment, and also add something positive to the visual public iconography of a relatively deprived and hard-bitten area of Manchester.

Aims/Objectives:

(1) To come up with a fresh approach to ways of expressing popular iconography about domesticity, and of consciously hybridising this time in relation to new models of mass housing provision.

As well as the relationship to the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown mentioned in the Blue House project, for the design of the Woodward Place estate at New Islington there was an accompanying interest by Sean Griffiths in the legacy of Classicism, Baroque, Arts and Crafts, and the traditions of vernacular housing in general. The aim was thus of combining tactics from various eras including Brit Art and currently unpopular ones, particularly Post-Modernism. Thus the project can be regarded as an intelligent re-exploration of many of the themes which drove Post-Modernism in its early days, before it turned into a debased and standard approach to commercial development, with the aim of addressing the approach again to more sensitive and communitybased projects. Again, it takes up that challenge of how and why 'high' and 'low' or 'popular' architectural taste are considered to diverge, and whether they can be re-integrated using contemporary techniques such as those from Brit Art - abstraction, cartoon imagery, mixed codes, irony - while still addressing human, technical and social needs.

(2) To find more inventive and inclusive methods to integrate the wishes of residents into the design of the housing estate.

After the errors of post-war Modernist high-rise estates, and the breast-beating attempts of 'community architects' in the 1970's and 1980's to atone for those mistakes, the idea of resident participation in design has fallen out of favour. Here, however, the express intention was to get residents - already identified by the housing association - to engage more fully in the design process, and also to allow future provision for users to alter the configuration of their dwellings. Thus, importantly, a consultation booklet was produced early on by FAT to enable residents to make a contribution. Out of the extensive consultation with residents came the choice of a particular form of building (terraced houses) as well as the material and iconography of the design. Indeed the Dutch visual influence arose after the residents and FAT visited Holland together to look at historical exemplars there. There followed detailed design work which was tailored to encourage residents to continue their normal processes of DIY customisation, so that essentials like individual fishponds, hanging baskets and bird boxes could be included in the finished scheme.

(3) To adapt traditional brickwork construction technologies to meet higher standards of energy performance within a tight budget and construction schedule.

Another distinctive aspect of the work of Sean Griffiths and FAT is their Arts-and-Crafts emphasis on the detailing and construction of their projects, which works in a different intellectual territory to their Venturian interest in the ways that buildings communicate visually within the urban realm. Much effort was spent by Griffiths in Woodward Place in adapting typical constructional techniques in brickwork to achieve formal innovation and variety while working with a commonplace pallette of materials. This interest in the nitty-gritty of construction has led to a number of articles on FAT projects which focus more on the building's details, and to them winning a variety of construction-related prizes for their work. In particular in the Islington Square housing estate, much of the attention went into sourcing 'green' materials, reducing the energy load and water consumption of the dwellings, and in designing a more adaptable housing form that could better change over time in line with its users' needs.

Context:

Sean Griffiths is well known as one of the most talented, articulate and lively British architects who is operating in the fields of social housing and urban design, linking his research into the nature of contemporary visual communication with the creation of innovative domestic models. The Woodward Place estate hence contributes squarely to the research by Griffiths into current social structures and patterns of urban life, and continues in a knowing way the investigations first started by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) and then in the famous 'Signs of Life' exhibition in Washington DC (1976).

In addition, Woodward Place just happens to be one of the recent mass housing projects which have most earnestly tried to promote a sustainable approach to urbanism, and well as conceiving a 'greener' approach to domestic design that might also appeal to the general public. It is furthermore an exemplar of the way that a community-orientated form of architectural practice might be applied to housing design.

Research Methods:

Many visits were made to the site in order to meet with local planning officers to discover how far they would allow the use of bold visual iconography in the project. Meanwhile, as noted, an extensive package of community consulations was carried out with residents, reinforcing FAT's belief in collaborative design processes. Again, a variety of programmatic solutions and spatial permutations, as well as the detailed three-dimensional complexity of the Woodward Place housing estate and its surroundings, were tested out through extensive physical model-making and other forms of visualisation. These analyses in turn refined the overall configuration of the estate in terms of accessibility, internal layouts, lighting conditions, external colouration, historical references and functional viability. As with the Blue House, the nature of Photoshop and Vectorworks was used creatively to design the 'flat' billboard facades of the terraced dwellings.

Dissemination:

Woodward Place has featured widely on television and in the national press and architectural journals, including BBC2's 'Culture Show', *Guardian*, *Times*, *Financial Times*, *Daily Mirror*, *Evening Standard*, *Icon*, *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, etc. Reviews include:

- Bullivant, Lucy. *Anglo Files: UK Architecture's Rising Generation*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, pp. 125-7.
- Ryan, Raymund. *Gritty Brits: New London Architecture*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, pp. 56-59.
- Woodman, Ellis. 'The last laugh' , *Building Design*, 28 April 2006, pp. 14-20.
- Spring, Martin. 'Is this a joke?', *Building*, 31 March 2006, pp. 54-58.
- Rose, Steve. 'Give us a frill', *Guardian*, 17 April 2006, pp. 16-17.
- Richardson, Vicky, 'Eccentric architecture', *Blueprint*, May 2006, pp. 84-87.
- Monaghan, Paul. 'Social housing in New Islington', *Architecture Today*, May 2006, pp. 56-61.
- Stewart, Bruce. 'Home Run', *Architectural Design: Special issue on Programming Cultures*, July/August 2006, pp. 122-128.
- Sudjic, Deyan. 'No more bleak houses', *Observer*, 26 February 2007, p. 20.

Significant exhibitions on the work of Fashion-Architecture-Taste (FAT) have been held since 2001 in places as far apart as London, Lisbon, Stockholm, Tokyo, Los Angeles and Pittsburgh - the latter, as mentioned, as part of the 'Gritty Brits: New London Architecture' show at the Carnegie Mellon Institute (January-June 2007). Furthermore, Griffiths has given nearly 50 public lectures on FAT's work across Britain, Europe and America, covering on each of these occasions the Islington Square project as the most complex social housing estate built by FAT to date. To give examples, these lectures include those at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam (November 2005), MIPIM property development fair in Cannes (March 2006), Yale University (January 2006), Royal College of Art (April 2006) and Tate Modern (May 2006 and June 2007).

Esteem Indicators:

The Woodward Place estate at Islington Square has won several awards:

- Best Public Housing Project in Brick Development Association Awards (2006)
- *Daily Telegraph's* 'What House' Award (2006)
- *Building* Magazine's 'Best Development' Award (2006)
- Regeneration Partnership of the Year Award (2006)
- Voted one of Channel 4's top new buildings in Britain (2007)

The project was, however, notoriously rejected for a RIBA Regional Award (2007) by the local judges - possibly out of prejudice against its Post-Modernist allusions - despite considerable pressure from the RIBA's central committee and other commentators for it to be given this accolade, which it clearly deserves. Nonetheless, and largely due to the Woodward Place scheme at Islington Square, Sean Griffiths along with FAT has recently been awarded with the following prizes:

- Winners of Architecture Foundation's New Generation Award (2006)
- Runner-up in the category of Best Affordable Housing Architect in the *Building Design* Annual Awards for Architecture (2007)

In being handed the latter commendation by *Building Design*, the journal reported its judges as having said about the Woodward Place scheme at Islington Square: 'Its architecture is brave, bold and maverick, and they admired what it is trying to achieve; but most importantly, residents like what it does.' [*Building Design*, 2 Nov 2007, p. 11] Prior to this accolade, Deyan Sudjic had described the project as 'a visionary development'. [Observer, 26 February 2007, p. 20] It could also be mentioned that being appointed by Urban Splash is in itself a measure of esteem, given that organisation's well-known policy of only selecting high-quality architects for its projects.

Urban Splash, leading housing provides, appointed FAT after residents chose them....

And as noted before, Sean Griffiths has also been appointed as a visiting professor at Yale University for the 2007-08 academic year, indicating he is operating at a top international standard. Griffiths along with FAT were recently chosen as one of English Partnerships' Architecture Consultants Panel for 2006-10, one of a group of 20 innovative and progressive practices across Europe, to carry out exemplar housing designs as part of specially designated EP initiatives.

APPENDIX A

Tom Dyckhoff, *Times*, March 15, 2006

Welcome to the house of fun.
Heard the one about the architects with a sense of humour?

Wit in architecture is tough to pull off. Architecture clashes uneasily with rat-a-tat one-liners. By the time a "witty" building is complete, its in-built epigrams, so clever on the drawing board, can make you squirm.

There's humour aplenty in Baroque, Regency or Victorian architecture, though the gentle, intellectual jokes would hardly split sides at a librarians' convention, let alone Jongleurs. Wit, too, came back in a big way with 1970s postmodernism, with architects hogging the stage with their humorous asides on historicism. But Woody Allen wasn't quaking.

Fashion Architecture Taste (Fat) do wit, big time. I'm sure they get bored stiff being called architectural pranksters, but then they've only themselves to blame. Charles Holland, Sean Griffiths and Sam Jacob — bright chaps who left university just in time for the 1990s building slump — needed something to twiddle thumbs with, so they called themselves an art-architecture collective, peppered the installation and public-art scene with irony-loaded stunts and professed a passion for the love that dare not speak its name — 1970s postmodernism. This was like admitting that you thought Cannon and Ball underrated.

Still, they careered around, being outrageous, dissing Corbusier and Conran in favour of architecture with knobs on. One pavilion shimmered in sequins like a disco diva. Their 1999 exhibition Kill the Modernist Within trumpeted 1930s Tudorbethan. They covered bus shelters in thatched roofs.

Their Big Serious Point, learnt, naturally, from the now unfashionable 1970s postmodernists Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, is that overfunctionalist, po-faced modernism has stripped architecture of meaning, history, fun and joie de vivre. God knows how they kept going, but they made it through the hard times, and at last they have found someone who'll take their serious fun seriously.

You can't miss Woodward Place. There are few terraced houses in Manchester with slap on like this: one long, defiantly stage-set brick façade, doubling back on itself and looking like a cardboard cut-out from *The Simpsons*, coloured in bright polychrome brick and topped with Dutch gables. You can't help smiling.

There is depth to the depthlessness. Focus hard on the diagonal brickwork and you'll see ballooned-up arts and crafts patterning. There's more William Morris in the hearts and crosses carved into the distinctly DIY balconies. This social housing replaces a previous attempt to cosy-up modernism, the Cardroom estate's 1970s suburban brick boxes. They were loved by most tenants, but badly planned, isolated and blighted with deprivation. The quarter is now being ambitiously rebuilt with an eclectic mix of architects by the developer Urban Splash as one of the Government's millennium communities.

Urban Splash has to square the sociological circle of improving the lot of the existing locals while giving this scrap of inner-city Manchester a viable future by attracting the more affluent. The first step is to rehouse the much-abused locals in homes a little denser — to make room for the new lot — though as spacious and of better quality, and not to annoy them with fancy architecty ideas about good taste. Step forward Fat, the very last architects in the world to impose wood floors and middle-class taste on anyone. Their pop-culture love of crazy paving and knick-knacks is at least heartfelt. The tenants voted 99 per cent for their design.

Behind a showy façade is a plain shell in the shape of a (modern?) box — a functional device, but also an intellectual one. This is definitely a decorated shed, which Venturi and Scott Brown presciently foresaw as architecture's future three decades ago. But it's a spacious shed, high-ceilinged, humanely detailed (no PVC windows) and well planned, with the kind of homely elements (bay windows, nooks that serve no purpose) usually edited out by Scrooge-like housing association book-keepers.

Fat do wit well, though enough is definitely as good as a feast. Praise be, few other architects have the stomach for it, let alone 1970s po-mo. Fat's tardy emergence, though, does point towards this season's big architectural trend, decoration. Herzog & De Meuron are at it, Rem Koolhaas is at it. Steel and glass are out. So unsustainable. So 1996. Even the arch-monochromist Lord Foster's been spotted wearing a jaunty salmon-pink suit. It's a slippery slope to flock wallpaper.

Image 1:
Street scene

Lilian

Image 2: Consultations with future residents

Agnes

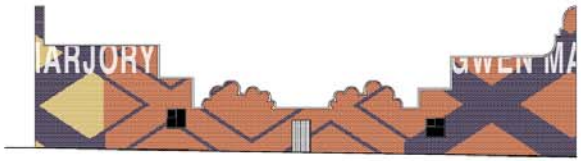
Joan

Image 3: Consultations with residents

ELEVATION TO WOODWARD PLACE

ELEVATION TO NEW ISLINGTON

ELEVATION TO WOODWARD STREET



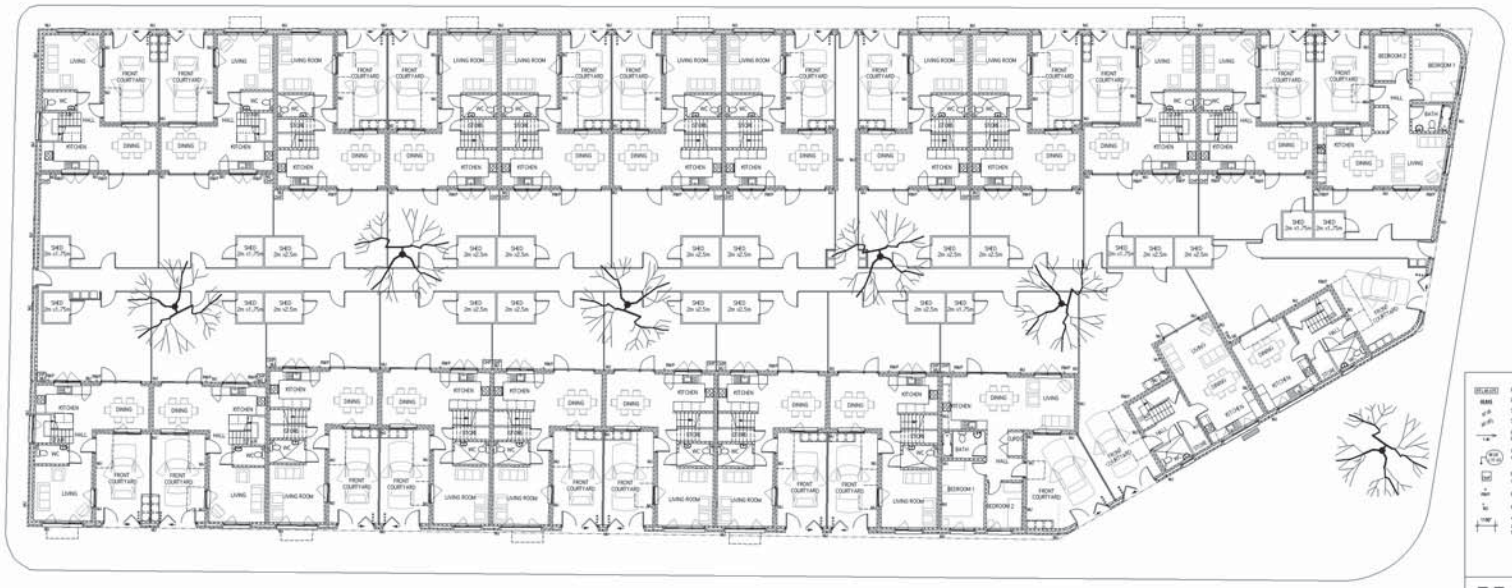
ELEVATION TO ST. VINCENT STREET

Woodward Place Housing
New Islington, Manchester

Elevation

Solid masonry outer leaf
3 brick colours with pattern as shown
Painted text frieze of names
FAT LTD 18/11/04

Image 4: Elevation designs of Wooward Place, New Islington



Ground Level - General Arrangement of Houses on Site

Woodward Place

General Arrangement
Ground Level

WP.F.100-A CONSTRUCTION

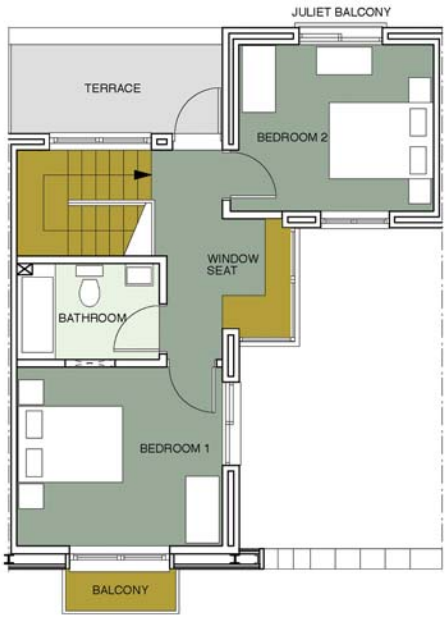
1:100 at A0

31.01.05

A - 31.01.05
Issued for Construction

Image 5: Site plan of Wooward Place, New Islington

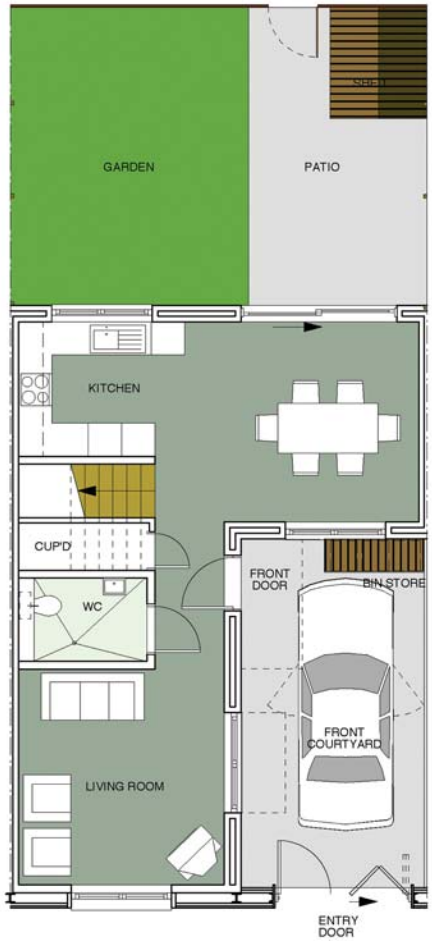
ground floor plan



first floor plan

2 Bed 2 Storey House

Image 6: Plan layout of house type 'A'



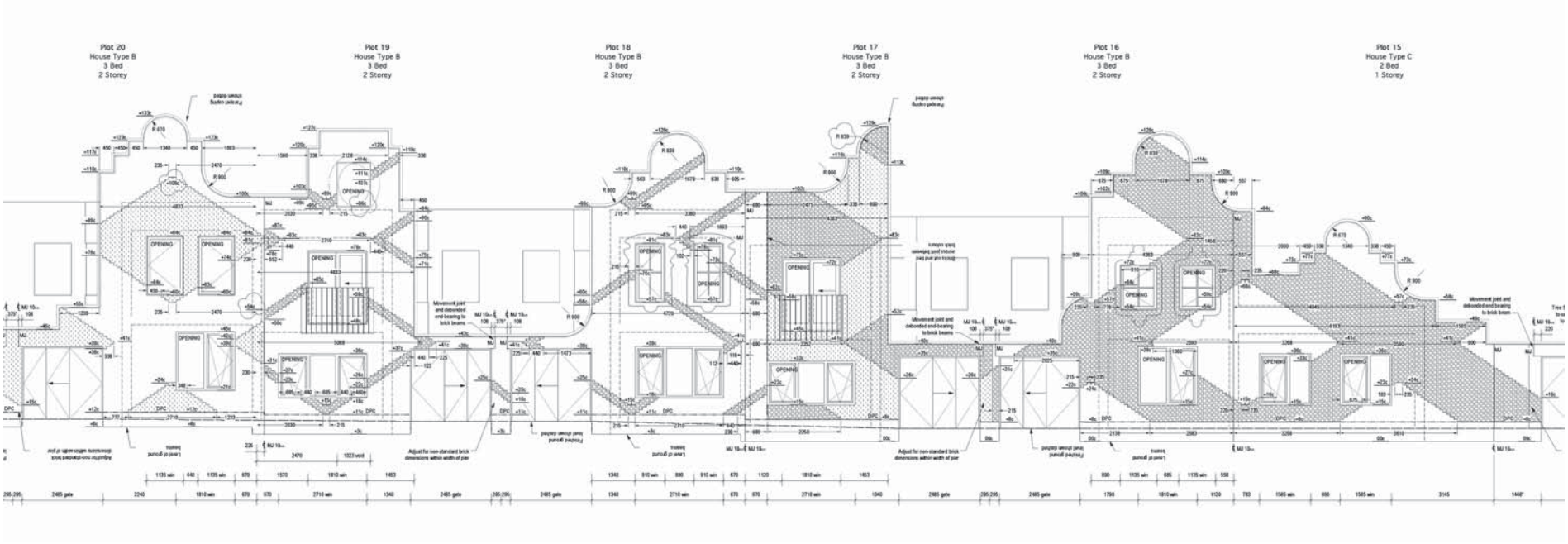
ground floor plan

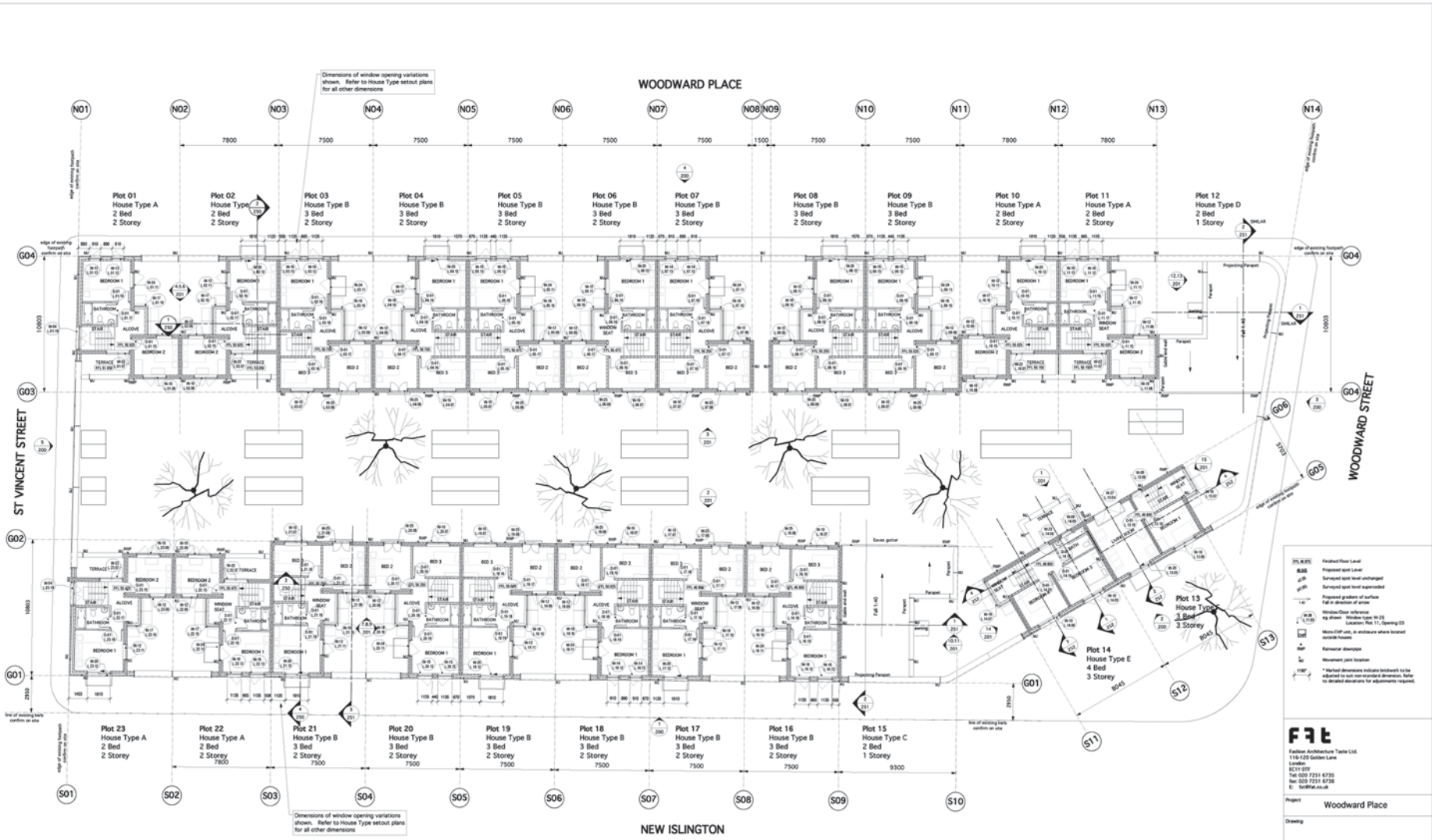
first floor plan

3 Bed 2 Storey House

Image 7: Plan layout of house type 'B'

Image 8: Brickwork facade





First Level - General Arrangement of Houses on Site

Image 9: First Floor site plan

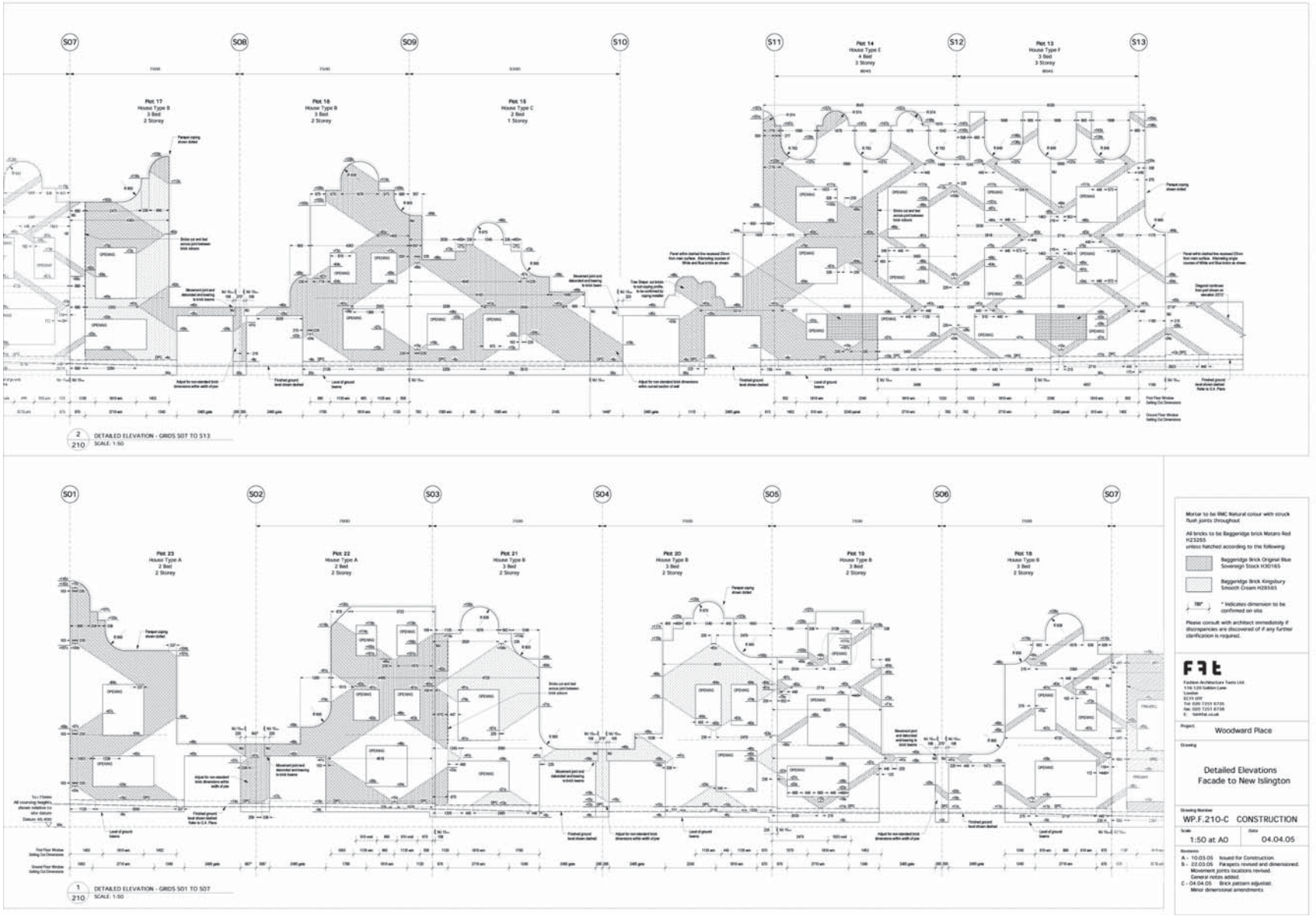


Image 10: Facade details

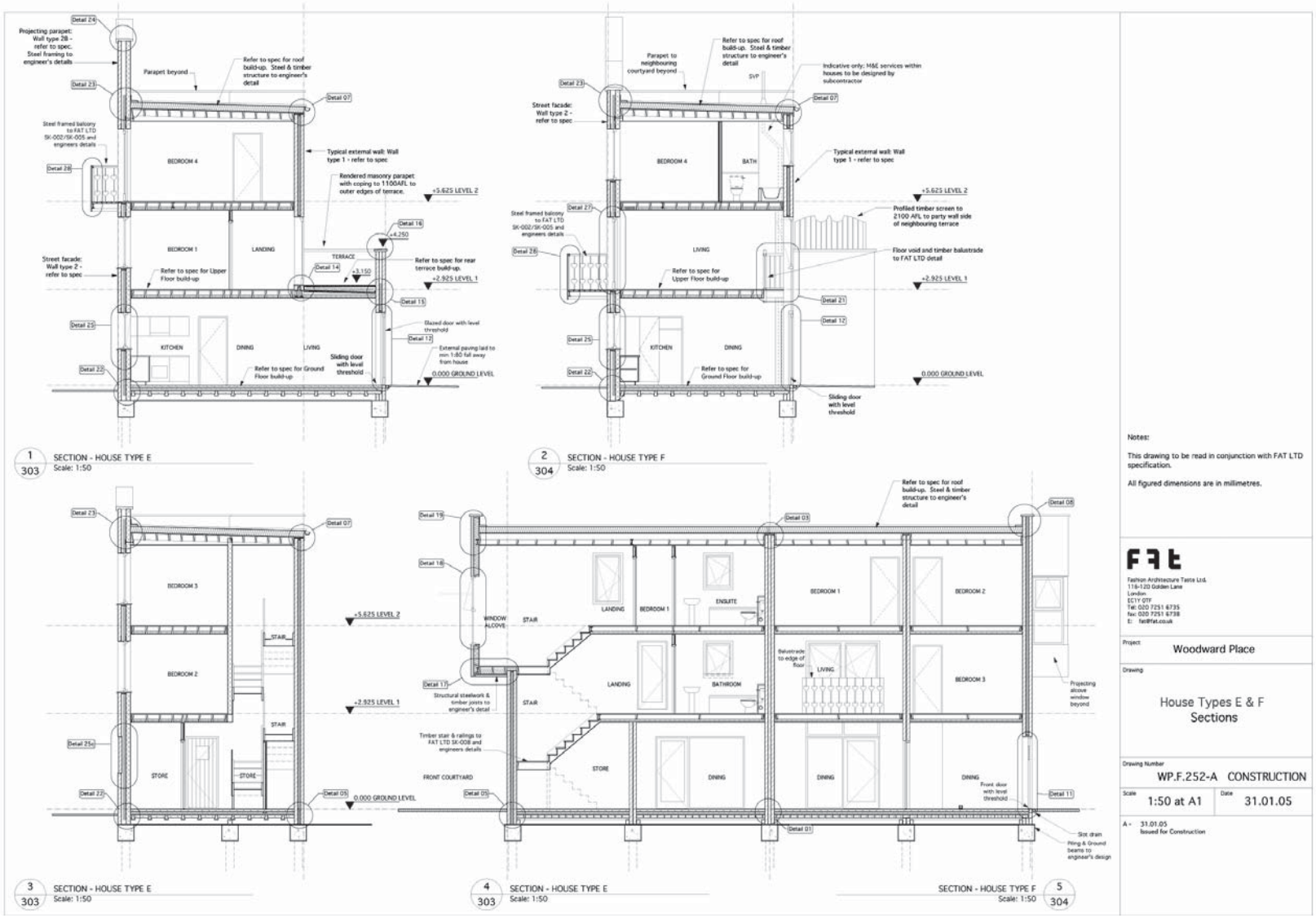


Image 11: Typical sections

Image 13: Sketches for hanging baskets and bird boxes

Image 14: Typical facades in Woodward Place, New Islington

Image 15: Back gardens in Woodward Place, New Islington

Image 16: Photos around Woodward Place