



## TYPOLOGY ■

*Stephen Taylor's work on the house type and urban intensification suggests a timely and important alternative to empty formalism, says Irina Davidovic.*

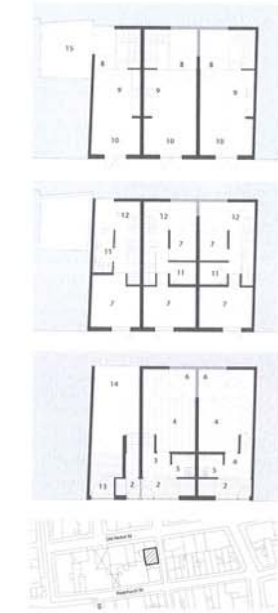
The continued growth of cities and the demand for densification force architects to deal, still, with issues one might have believed were long exhausted. The discourse around city, type and place, ongoing since the theoretical revisions of a commercial and dehumanised modernism in the 1960s, maintains its relevance in spite of countless misinterpretations, of which postmodern historicism is one of the least honourable.

Type, that famously ambiguous staple of 1970s theory, contains the promise of reconciliation between form-making and the deeper layers of a collective urban consciousness, allowing architects to foray a rich repository of images held in common and manifested in the heterogeneous substance of the city. Unfortunately, its widely interpretative range combined with the need to assert one's creative individuality has led contemporary architecture ever further from the delicate balance of architectural autonomy, toward the production of objects that demand attention through their own formal inventiveness rather than anything to do with cultural context. The disappearance of the traditional city



as a unified object of study and its replacement with the dissonant co-existence of various 'urban realities' in close proximity to each other has likewise thrown in doubt the relevance, or very possibility, of a local culture, allowing global networks of virtual information to be created in its place – with the same demand for formal artefacts as a result.

The loss of theoretical ground suffered by type and place is nevertheless constantly challenged by the reassuring fact that, concretely, we are still collective beings relying on the points of orientation provided by familiar,



ordinary urban environments. The deep structures of culture which type promised to reveal are still in place, in spite of architecture's current fixation with abstract form and creative individuality. So it is with gratitude one notes the continuing preoccupation with the fundamentals of human existence in architecture that is often small in scale, modest in scope, yet absolutely rigorous in its search for collective intelligibility.

Stephen Taylor's work is a case in point. Beneath the intelligent, undemonstrative resolution of concrete problems – often the

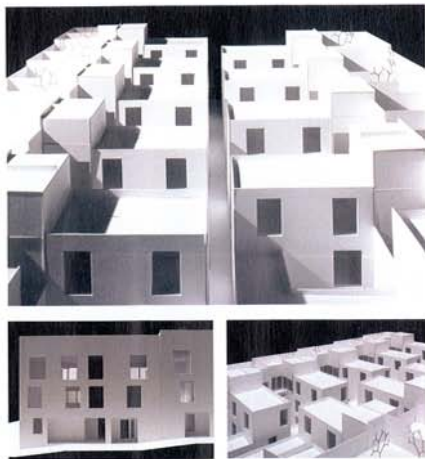


densification of tight urban sites – lies a more implicit research of established types, an ingenuity focused on revision rather than invention. The three terraced dwellings on Chance Street, in London's Bethnal Green, illustrate a search for the limits of type, the boundary line where something deeply known is reassessed through the deformation of its elements or the addition, collage-like, of an element belonging to another typology. In the eighteenth century, this area was one of the densest and poorest parts of the East End with intimate streets defined by small cottages; in the last century the urban grain was eroded by bomb damage and waves of social reform. Taylor's houses replace a post-war single-storey shed in an urban block made up of diverse building types and activities.

The 12 by 9 metre site with a single east-facing aspect to Chance Street is divided into three plots, each occupied by a three-storey house. To the front the houses are unified by a flat brick facade, while light and air are brought into the rear by a series of small courtyards with white clay brick walls. The three 'courtyards' – more like glazed light-wells –

**Chance Street, east London**  
Seen as an instance of urban repair, this project acknowledges and celebrates the patchwork city to which it belongs, its brick facade supplying the missing pieces in the block of which it is a part, writes Stephen Taylor. Themes of compact city dwelling are explored in the design of these houses. The intimate courtyards are animated by the extensive glazed elevations that open onto them. At ground level, folding glazed screens open two sides of the courtyard to the interior of the houses, while on the first floor large bi-folding windows that constitute one side of the bedroom open externally across the void of the courtyard. Like London townhouses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the configuration anticipates a change of use by the occupants over time; rooms are designed to host a range of activities. Inverting the usual order – since there is no ground-level garden – the dining room/kitchen is positioned on the top floor, benefiting from the best light; bedrooms are on the first floor, and the ground floor is available for a variety of uses that may include a small work room.

*Above: Chance Street: dark brick street elevation and white glazed brick internal courtyard (left: Irina Markovina); Chance Street model (right: David Granberg). Plans/sections: Long and short sections, and location, ground, first and second floor plans of Chance Street houses: 1 entrance, 2 porch, 3 hall, 4 work/live room, 5 shower, 6 courtyard, 7 bed, 8 balcony, 9 kitchen, 10 living/dining, 11 bathroom, 12 study, 13 entrance to rear building, 14 lobby to rear building, 15 neighbour's courtyard.*



**Above** Model of *Fronthouse/Backhouse* development in Rainham (gh: DG).  
**Plans** Ground, first and second floors of *Fronthouse/Backhouse*: 1 courtyard, 2 yard, 3 *Re/Work*, 4 *Show/Bathroom*, 5 entrance, 6 *Living/Dining*, 7 *Kitchen*, 8 storage, 9 bedroom, 10 study.  
**Section** With eight courtyards for daylighting and ventilation, the high-density low-rise houses offer amenity spaces on their roof.

that transform the tiny plans into double-aspect units combine two kinds of references. They are introverted, miniaturised versions of the Georgian backyard, and also an improvement on the rather grim ventilation shafts common in the dense urban blocks of old European cities.

Currently, Taylor is adapting the Chance Street typology to a housing development in

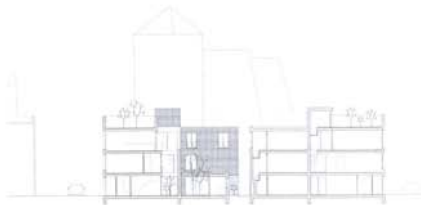
Rainham on the eastern edge of London, where the practice has been involved in a masterplanning project in collaboration with Stanton Williams. There it is proposing an intense land use with the help of alleyways reminiscent of the East End's narrow 'turnings'.

A recently completed project in Charlotte Road, a few hundred metres west of Chance Street, is a single unit that fits in a more complex brief. Three different programmes, with characters ranging from the public to the intimate, are stacked in the volume of a single 'townhouse'. The project illustrates the interpenetration of the typological discourse with thinking on place. Indeed, its urban situation is significant for explaining both its internal configuration and elevational physiognomy.

On the light-industrial periphery of the City, Shoreditch has seen profound changes in the last decade since the influx of the creative trades seeking affordable live-work spaces. Charlotte Road is a straight, narrow street opening towards a dominant City skyline. Intensely parcelled and densely built, it is one of Shoreditch's most coherent thoroughfares, as its scale didn't allow for the casual warehouses and garages that co-exist, on surrounding streets, with small and medium-sized houses. Here, the street frontage consists mostly of three- to four-storey, brick industrial buildings dating back to the nineteenth-century industrial expansion, which gradually took over the plots of much smaller, two-storey cottages. Even though the existing properties' widths vary considerably, the memory of narrow tracts remains imprinted on the repetitiveness and vertical accents of the continuous, undulating street fronts.



**Broadway, Rainham** *Fronthouse/Backhouse* is a compact development of 25 houses and six apartments in the heart of Rainham, writes Stephen Taylor. It follows our recently completed masterplan which aims to bring residential intensification to this historic village, proposing a mix of three-storey house types that are accessed either from a ginnel that cuts through the block from Broadway (backhouse) or from existing village streets (*fronthouse*). Most of the nineteenth century street grain remains, yet many of the tightly clustered dwellings that characterised the village core have now gone, leaving large areas empty and underused. Respecting this existing pattern and abutting the street edge directly with the boundary of dwellings, the project reaffirms the street as a place of habitation and recreation. At ground level the dwellings are configured to contribute life to the street while ensuring privacy for the spaces within. Vehicular access within these streets is limited as part of a wider traffic management scheme.



The brick facade, the regularity of openings, their subtle variation in height and asymmetry constitute gestures towards the city, recalling the implicit codes of Georgian houses and ensuring an unproblematic merger with the urban context. At the same time, the facade detailing quietly unsettles the conventional order, allowing the house, even from the sideways views allowed by the narrow street, to stand up against the terrace in which it is embedded.



**Charlotte Road, east London** This project was built on the site of two original cottages, an eight by nine metre plot built up on three sides, writes Irina Davidović. It consists of an office with shop front on the ground floor and basement, a studio on the first floor and, at the top, a two-storey maisonette with roof terrace. All are accommodated in the unified volume of an ambiguously-fronted townhouse, recalling the capacity of Georgian architecture to adjust to changes in use and allow internal functional divisions that leave the outer physiognomy unperurbed.

Internally, the programmatic divisions are reflected in the vertical circulation: the timber staircase, wide and straight up to the first floor, becomes narrower and twists as it mounts towards the private quarters. From there, a widely-spaced rigid mesh stair, painted white, leads to the roof terrace and doubles as a narrow skylight.

The maisonette is organised around a semi-internal glazed courtyard that connects the two floors, bringing daylight into the drop plan. The private interior opens up towards daylight like a sun-trap-in-a-jar. The apartment is characterised by the tension between this upward thrust and the functional differentiation of the stacked floors: the lower one the more private, the higher a social realm of living/dining, opening to views of the city. The second floor is a horizontal, intimate world, with rooms grouped around a warm, timber-clad hall with access to the courtyard. The top kitchen and dining area are loftier, their vertically accentuated by an unexpected fold in the ceiling that captures the morning sun.

This tight, constructed plan with about six degrees of openness – varying between the very private master bedroom to the fully exposed city views of the roof deck – is entirely masked behind the public conventionality of the street elevation.



**Above** Aerial and east-facing elevation of the townhouse on Charlotte Road (gh: DG).  
**Below** Charlotte Road elevation; E-W section, two S-N sections: 1 retail, 2 wc, 3 residential entrance, 4 living room, 5 void, 6 bedroom, 7 utility, 8 living room, 9 terrace, 10 bathroom, 11 first floor landing, 12 courtyard





**Above** Charlotte Road: third floor kitchen and second floor internal courtyard, both with stairs to the roof terrace (ph. DG).

**Plans** Ground, first, second and third floors of Charlotte Road: 1 retail, 2 void to basement (also with retail use), 3 wc, 4 episodic entrance, 5 landing, 6 lobby, 7 live/work, 8 bathroom, 9 bedroom, 10 hall, 11 manservant entrance, 12 utility, 13 courtyard, 14 void above stair leading to garden level, 15 terrace (in second terrace is on the roof), 16 void above courtyard, 17 kitchen/living room. **Below** View from main bedroom through internal courtyard to second bedroom; the living area wraps around the void above the courtyard, first floor live-work area or piano nobile (ph. DG).



In this narrow street, the header-and-stretcher depth of the reveals means that the recessed windows are almost invisible until one gets very close. Strong, rhythmic shadows give an archaic, private feel to the upper floors while the shop window and glass door, flush with the facade, directly interface with the public territory. The bronze residential entrance door, nail-studded like a medieval gate, reinforces the feeling of privacy while adding a playful note to the formal ensemble.

Closer examination reveals variations in the powerful symmetry of openings on the first and second floor. The piano nobile has four equally-spaced full-height doors relating to the unified space behind, whereas the second floor casement doors' grouping in pairs reflects a potential room division. The raised parapet of the terrace consists of two semi-open sections, woven in brick with the removal of every second header, and stretched between three pillars that continue the tectonic and symmetrical order of the floors below.

Taylor's contemporary re-interpretation of the Georgian townhouse contrasts a formal, restrained, and unified external physiognomy with an abundance of internal provision with regards to convention. The radicalised generality of the interface with the public realm – extended from the facade to the commercial premises – is counteracted by the dwelling's particular character, which sets up a touching game of intimacies through closed, semi-open and open spaces. The architectural approach mirrors an outdated cultural stereotype of Englishness, formal in appearance and eccentric in substance. Indeed this house finds its *raison d'être* equally in the analysis of its immediate situation and the re-interpretation of a predominant urban type (Georgian terrace). Both point towards an underlying deeper cultural substrate, which is unique to its place, and unthinkable anywhere else. The architectural intelligence glimpsed in the Chance Street and Rainham Broadway developments is intensely at work in Charlotte Road.

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