

# 2007 REVIEW: BUILDINGS

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## The architecture we deserve?

Are penny-pinching clients forcing UK architects to produce their best work overseas? We look at the year's architectural highs and lows, and ask a selection of architects to name their favourite buildings of 2007



ELLIS WOODMAN

I fear 2007 will not go down in the annals of British architectural history as a vintage year. The clearest indication that we might have a problem on our hands came in July, with the announcement of the Stirling Prize shortlist. Of the six schemes in contention for a prize that serves to recognise "the building which has made the greatest contribution to British architecture in the past year", only two were from Britain. The message was clear: if you want to see the best work being built by British architects, get on a plane to Spain or Germany. In the end, the prize found a worthy winner in Germany's National Museum of Modern Literature by David Chipperfield. Fascism's co-option of Germany's neoclassical tradition, still puts certain forms of expression out of bounds for many German architects. In this context, this explicitly temple-like structure promises to have a far-reaching, liberating influence.

Chipperfield is one of the small band of British architects who truly enjoy a worldwide reputation. And yet, looking back at the meagre handful of projects he has built in this country over his 20-year career, one would be hard pressed to guess as much. The past year did see the completion of his largest British project to date, BBC Scotland's headquarters in Glasgow, but good as it is, it is not the triumph it could have been. Citing fears over costs, the client ditched Chipperfield in favour of a local architect midway through the design process.

### ELLIS'S NEW YEAR HONOURS



- WESTMINSTER CITY ACADEMY**  
Allford Hall  
Monaghan Morris  
An oasis of learning dressed in brightly coloured glazed terracotta.
- BARKING LANDSCAPE**  
Muf  
This faux ruin centre introduced a leavening wit to AHMM's housing project.
- ST JOHN'S CENTRE**  
Buschow  
Henley  
This NHS Lift scheme sets a high benchmark for future health care buildings.
- TECHNOLOGY CENTRE**  
FOA  
Designed to be engulfed in plants, this points to a new direction in the architect's work.
- KINGSDALE SCHOOL**  
dRMM  
The music and sports block for this Dulwich school uses engineered timber panels.

Unfortunately, there are all too many stories like this in the world of British architecture. Richard Rogers, Zaha Hadid, Foreign Office Architects and Tony Fretton are just some of the international-class architects who operate from Britain but build here only rarely — and then often in painfully compromised circumstances. Rogers' Heathrow Terminal Five is a shadow of the airport he was able to build in Madrid, which won last year's Stirling Prize. Likewise, Hadid's ever-diminishing Aquatic Centre — now in its third iteration — speaks volumes about the timidity and ineptitude of many public clients in this country.

All of this is particularly alarming because the country is undergoing a building boom of a scale unseen since it rebuilt itself in the wake of the Blitz. The truth is that

### Hadid's ever-diminishing Aquatic Centre speaks volumes about the ineptitude of public clients

We seem to have learnt precious little from the social and environmental disasters that ensued from the short-termism of that period.

Take schools, for example. Last year Cabe conducted an audit of schools built in the past five years, concluding that half were "not fit for purpose". Given that the £45 billion Building Schools for the Future programme envisages the rebuilding or refurbishment of every one of the country's 3,500 secondary schools by 2020, the consequences of this failure are potentially immense. Indeed, the

news was so worrying that in January the government assigned £3 million to Cabe for it to review every new secondary school design prior to submission for planning permission.

Cabe, it seems, is going to have its hands full. The recent Callcutt Review of Housebuilding Delivery advises that every major housing scheme in the country should be reviewed in a similar manner. That proposal chimes with Cabe's own assessment of the situation. In February, it completed its audit of the quality of new housing in England and concluded that 82% failed to meet Cabe's "good" or "very good" criteria.

In the present circumstances, the fact that a central authority is being charged with the task of upholding design quality across the country is welcome. Yet it also represents a damning indictment of the meagre ambitions of so many of the bodies, both public and private, that are erecting buildings in this country, and of the failure of our local authorities to defend us from them.

But enough gloom and doom. What has been good? The developer Building Better Health has delivered a series of Lift health centres of notably greater quality than the norm. The Buschow Henley-designed project that it built on St John's Hill in south London was a particular success. Its street frontage has an impressively monumental quality, developing from a ground level arcade to a boldly articulated roof canopy. Windows are few but large and freely distributed, making it immediately obvious that this is a public building rather than an office or residential block. The effect might have been overbearing were it not for the fact that the walls are faced in a lacquered timber board, a material which gives the building the seductive

appeal of a piece of French-polished furniture.

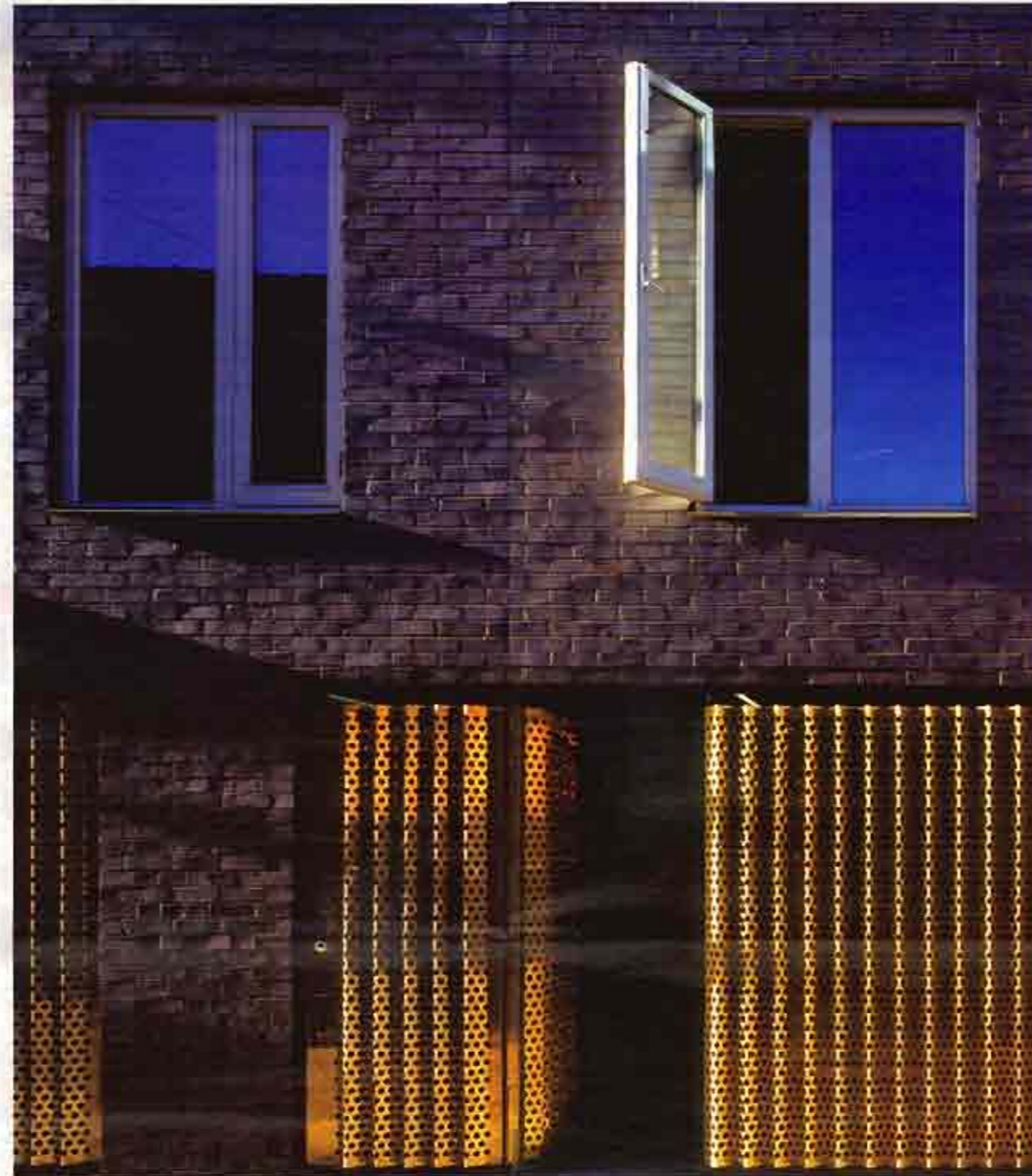
There have even been some good school buildings, although it is notable that the best of them were delivered outside the conventional secondary school procurement route. De Rijke Marsh Morgan's tremendous music and sports block at Kingsdale School in Dulwich followed its earlier remodelling of Kingsdale's 1950s' building under the Architecture Foundation's School Works initiative. The new building employs a structure constructed entirely from engineered timber panels with all the openings pre-cut. It offered compelling evidence that this new technology enables architects to choreograph the kind of structural gymnastics that could previously only have been achieved in in-situ concrete at much greater environmental cost.

### Nightmarish process

Allford Hall Monaghan Morris had a variable year. Its library and housing project in Barking city centre went through a procurement process of nightmarish entanglement, with construction ceasing for a whole year after the original developer pulled out. The tangy colour scheme was touted as a reference to the lemonade factory that had previously occupied the site — ironic, because the hundreds of tiny single-aspect flats had certainly been squeezed in until the pips squeaked.

It was just one of many residential projects built in the capital this year that were the product of a diabolic bargain between planner and developer: the planner's desire to extract affordable housing or community facilities from the developer had been seen as reason enough to allow densities to be pushed above the levels stipulated in the London Plan. Thankfully, Muf's landscaping, which included the construction of a magnificently contrary faux ruin, introduced a leavening wit.

AHMM was much better represented by Westminster City Academy, a new school built directly opposite the Westway. Faced in five different shades of glazed terracotta, the building cuts an engagingly verdant image in this grimiest of settings. Taking its cue from the school's chosen specialism in international business and enterprise, it resembles a particularly stylish corporate HQ. It is a provocative idea of what a school might look like, but the far from affluent student body seems to have readily embraced it. Quite why all Britain's schools can't be designed with this level of passion and care remains a mystery. Of the British projects I have seen this year, Westminster City Academy impressed me the most.



Chance Street houses: Stephen Taylor Architects.

### ROBIN LEE NORD

A building that interested me this year was the second phase of the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green by Caruso St John, in part because of the way it handles ideas about tradition with a contemporary sensibility. I like the way that in the stonework, the architect doesn't just refer to or reflect tradition, but worked with traditional craftsmen to make the architecture. There is an authenticity to the building, even though on another level it questions authenticity.

I also enjoyed the fact that it is a building about the interface between two such distinct realms — the street and the museum. There is optical play in the sequence of movement from the street towards the heavily articulated facade which gradually reveals itself as being sheer as you approach it. As you walk towards the recessed entrance, the walls of polychromatic stonework

are imposing in scale and dominate everything around you.

Despite the surface treatment, it is like entering a sculpture by Richard Serra (for scale) or a Dan Graham (for dislocation). And by the time you have squeezed through the reflective glass door, you still have no clue what to expect inside. That is what I like about the experience: the control the building exerts over the sequence, the withholding and expectation and distraction and delay.



Museum of Childhood: Caruso St John.

### GRAHAM MORRISON ALLIES & MORRISON

The year ends with twin events: the opening of Sanaa's New Museum in New York and of the Jean Prouvé exhibition at London's Design Museum. Both have formidable appeal. The first, a single building, is concerned with composition. Sanaa balances a delicately abstract form with a tough and gritty context, producing a structure that is simultaneously all museum and all New York.

The second is a survey of a life's work of exploration and invention in which Prouvé tirelessly sought accurate rather than stylistic answers to problems. Equal to these, and as enjoyable as it is modest, is Stephen Taylor's group of three small houses in Chance Street, east London. It is cleverly planned, beautifully restrained, and exquisitely judged. It sits firmly in my "wish I had done that" box.

### CHARLES HOLLAND FAT

My favourite piece of architecture this year was not designed by an architect. Mike Nelson's A Psychic Vacuum installation, built inside a disused meat market in Manhattan, was a brilliant antidote to too much good taste and polite modernism. Consisting of a labyrinthine series of interconnecting rooms, each one evoking some generically low-rent space, it represented a dark parody of many of our dreams as architects. Rather than being beautiful or uplifting, it was dark and oppressive. Rather than being shiny and new, it was decrepit and old. Pieced together from junk, it had a maladjusted, creepy quality. It was also highly sophisticated although it probably didn't look good on plan.

Generally we try to make positive, uplifting architecture, so it was a salutary experience to go to a building that had a dark side.



Dutch Embassy, Addis Ababa: Dick van Gameren and Bjarne Mastenbroek.



New Museum, New York, by Sanaa.



Royal Festival Hall refurbishment: Allies & Morrison.

### DAVID CHIPPERFIELD DAVID CHIPPERFIELD ARCHITECTS

I saw the Sanaa museum in New York the other week, which I thought offered an amazing juxtaposition to the Bowery. Its abstractness is at once its strength and weakness, which is often the case with the practice's work, but it is a very powerful move.

I also had a look around the buildings at the Novartis campus in Basel, where we are doing a laboratory. It is something of a mixed bag, but they are all beautifully realised. The one that stood out was Peter Märkli's, which represents an interesting development of his work. The exterior is very convincing and it becomes really playful and experimental inside.

I also liked Christian Kerez's winning entry in the competition for the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. It is a tough design which stands out against the prevalent photogenic tendency.

### RICHARD MURPHY RICHARD MURPHY ARCHITECTS

I was on the Doolan prize jury, looking at the best of architecture in Scotland. As soon as we stepped inside Relach & Hall's extension to the Pier Arts Centre in Stromness, I knew we had a winner. It could be intimidating to build in such a place, but Relach & Hall did the obvious by putting another pitched-roof finger alongside the piers and wharves that make up its rhythm. Exquisite detailing, diffusion of light, unexpected connections with the existing gallery and careful control of vista lift what could be termed the ordinary into the extraordinary. If only more architecture took delight in restraint.



Pier Arts Centre: Relach & Hall.

### DAISY FROUD AOC

Even the most stunning structure needs time to prove itself: that it is more than just an architectural show pony and can work with and for the people who use it. The Royal Festival Hall has been doing that for over 50 years, albeit with shiny new shoes since June. What I love most about the space is its democratic intent, manifested through the "open foyer" policy. I'm lucky to have been working there for much of 2007 on our Operation Soapbox project, watching all kinds of people make themselves comfortable in all kinds of ways: napping, dancing, meeting, reading, popping in to use the loo or the free broadband in the ballroom. The design encourages this ownership not by offering a big blank space, but by being bold enough to assert its own identity. It suggests different things to different people, and takes what each generation throws at it.

### DAVID ADJAYE ADJAYE ASSOCIATES

I have chosen the Dutch Embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, by Dick van Gameren and Bjarne Mastenbroek. Addis Ababa is a city undergoing rapid urban renewal, and it is striking to see such a quality building in a landscape dominated by easy developer-specification projects. These two young architects were inspired by the Lalibela churches and the deep red iron-rich soil of this part of Africa, and have succeeded in making a project that seems at once contemporary and also very specific to the place. The architect resisted "creating a building that sits on the landscape" — it is rather both a continuation of the landscape, as well as a contemporary statement about diplomacy and post-colonial legacy. For me, it is a good example of the potential of contemporary architecture in Africa.