

Stephen Taylor
Interviewed by
Charles Rattray



'we enjoy the diversity that can fit within rigour and repetitiveness'

Themes and variations

The work of Stephen Taylor Architects extends from urban strategies to the individual dwelling. Underlying this continuum is a deep understanding of the city and its component parts and a concern to develop typologies that contribute to civic life. Taylor studied in London at South Bank University and the Royal College of Art (RCA) and worked first for Richard Reid, his former tutor at South Bank and the author of a number of studies of housing types. After brief periods in the offices of Richard Rogers, Stanton Williams and others, Taylor established a partnership with Andrew Houlton in 1993. For several years in that partnership and for the five years subsequently, Taylor has occupied the same site in Shoreditch, east London. To begin with, the practice occupied the basement and he lived over the shop. As the office expanded, it colonised a set of spaces on three floors organised around a small court. We met there in a space at the back, beyond the court, and began by discussing the arrangement of the spaces.

This is a good room. Looking out reminds me of how you see the sky in Manhattan, reflected off other buildings.

When we were planning this courtyard we were very anxious about the width: if it wasn't wide enough it would be grim and dark in the basement. But the extraordinary reflections of sunlight bathe this room in light.

And then there's the long view down and through the ground floor studio back to the street, almost mesmeric – like the movement in a Julian Opie animation – when a car drives past.

The layering is fascinating; there are things happening here, there and in-between.

To be able to occupy a plot like this, to enter at one end and see that beyond the court is another room is simple but powerful.

The other thing I like is that when you are in the lower ground floor room, even at this courtyard end, you have very little sense of the world up here: the view is of the open space and the concrete stair – and those stairs and that space belong to that room. So while we are all conscious of each another in the building I find it an intriguing thing that at different levels, and from a different viewpoint, you can have different ownership of the space. That informed our work on the Chance Street houses. By glazing the full width of the wall to the courtyard in the first floor small bedroom, the external space seems to belong to that room; then, on the ground floor, when you fold all the glazing back, the court belongs to that room. It's the same space, the same void of light. I find that intriguing and, somehow, accidental.

In these projects you've been able to rework the type and densify.

We think we live in a compact city, but it's an amazing thing that this area was much denser in the eighteenth century than it is today; we just face different questions: highway capacity wasn't an issue then.

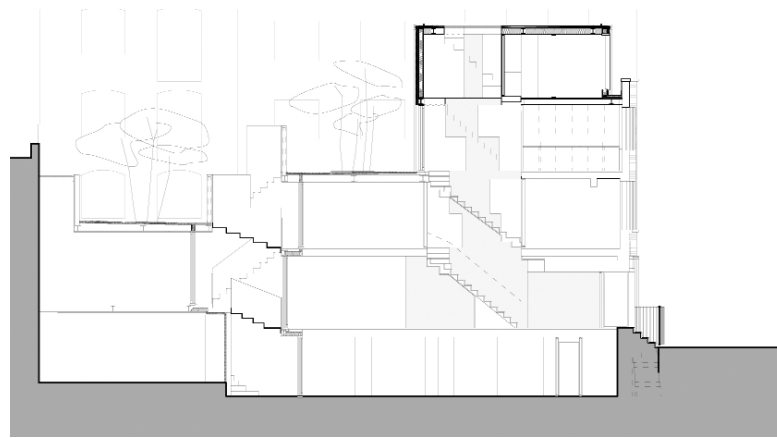
The object now is to give that density while also providing the light, air and transport that people expect.

Basically yes. The conditions of dwellings then were grim, a lot to do with the lack of sanitation, poverty and squalor. But if you apply all the rules to them and add modern things like lighting and drainage, and then you get rid of dampness in the floors and make walls that keep the heat in – things like that – there's lots to learn from them. There's a brilliant book, Peter Guillery's *The Small House in Eighteenth Century London*, that sets out a lot of examples of the ordinary house and the plans are really great. Those typologies were quite an inspiration for our houses in Chance Street; they didn't have to have a fire escape or deal with Part N or things like that, but often they were very inventive.

We visited the construction site for another such 'house' on a land-locked site in Charlotte Road, around the corner from the office. It has one face to the street and buildings of different heights on the remaining three sides. Its ground and first floors are for commercial use (a planning condition), below street level is a basement and the first floor is a self-contained studio. One fire-protected staircase leads to this first floor, from where there is access to a two-storey maisonette above. This gets light to the rear bedroom via a small courtyard and to the back of the stairwell by a slot that doubles as a smoke-vent.

It is extraordinary how much life and variety you can get out of such a small plot, especially with only one side open. These London projects have become a very enjoyable series of variations on a theme each characterised by a courtyard but also by potential flexibility.

Ultimately we don't know how the space will be used, so at Charlotte Road the slab over the basement is cast with three holes: one to one side, a narrower one on the other side and a light slot at the front. We design in flexibility so that it can be used throughout the building's life. For example, maybe the basement is part of the apartment, like a storage space. Or you could imagine splitting the it. Most likely is that it will be used as part of the ground floor gallery or shop and they may or may not open up the front slot. The wider of the other two openings would then become the stair since it is wide enough for disability access for the public and is within a certain distance of the



Dwelling over shop: the re-working an existing type at Taylor's office, Curtain Road, London. The courtyard is cut into the section and drops to the lowest level.

'we think we live in a compact city but it was much denser in the eighteenth century'



Three new houses on a small brown-field site: redevelopment at Chance Street, London [...] at Chance Street, London, ground and first floors

door to the street so that it can work as the sole means of escape from the basement.

It is fascinating to be working at both a large strategic scale in the city and at the scale of the single plot or individual dwelling – the one made up largely of lots of the other – and no doubt the spaces described in Guillery's book also accommodated cobblers and bakers and so on.

Absolutely. The site we are working on used to have small houses and the space at the back used to be a horse and cart yard; the area used to be a carpentry, woodworking, area.

Its character given by its trades.

Yes but what interests me is that, when you look at the eighteenth-century plans of this block, you get a wonderful mix. So you see

these tight-grained dwellings on Charlotte Road, tight-grained dwellings on Curtain Road and, in the backs, access to small industries, some of which went through onto the fronts. I think that's a good thing. In London there is such pressure to build houses, and so many people keen to make money from it, that anything that is not housing, such as industry or commercial use, gets pushed to one side. Industry gets an especially hard time of it, particularly if it is dirty industry.

I suppose the changed scale of much industry is a factor.

I guess so. It's true that there is a big scale, like a carpet warehouse, or a distribution point for Marks and Spencer sandwiches, but things like that are not dirty, they're just big. The idea of trying to combine these scales with a smaller grain is very intriguing. I often look at old plans

of cities such as Manchester, Preston or Bolton, my home-town. They were characterised, and still are to some extent, by big mills – industry on five or six floors – that sit cheek by jowl with tight-grained housing. And if you can put aside the sulphur inhalation of the time and the grim existences that people lived – my grandparents all worked in these mills and they were pretty tough – if you can put that aside and just look at the urban form, those mills can be converted to multi-use workshops (if they've not already gone to residential use) and then dwellings are right there: you live here, you work there.

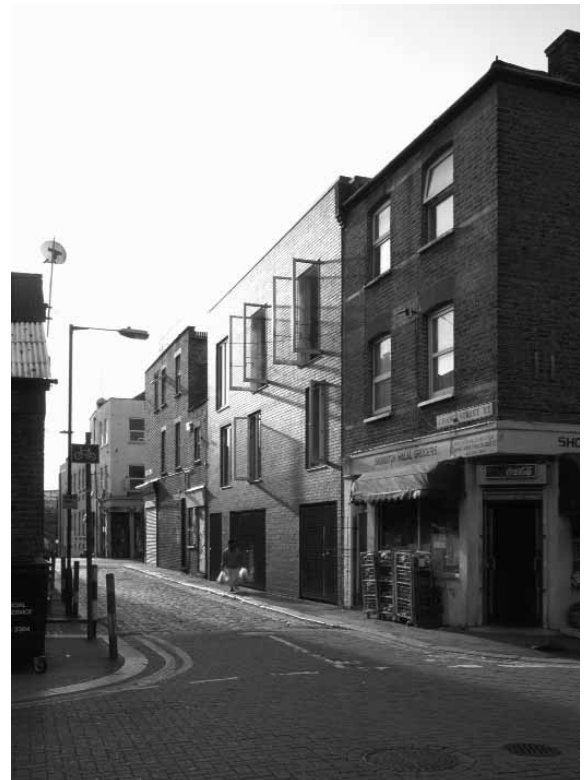
The relationship you mention is an argument against zoning, but if you look at the ways planners have regarded cities since the Garden City movement and especially over the last 60 years since the 1947 Planning Act, the pace of change in thinking has been quite slow. Separation is still popular and is the opposite of what you argue.

What you are saying about scale is very significant because in Rainham, for example, where we are making a masterplan for the village, there is a stretch down the A1306 of about 10 big sites going westward. All of them presently have industry on them and there's a massive pressure for it all to turn to residential use. But if that were allowed to happen, all those distribution systems, which serve all of London, would have to go further out, beyond the M25, which increases the journeys in. The alternative is to envisage a city that is pepper-potted with bits of industry tucked in and among. The arguments are all stacked up against this – there are big artics coming in and supermarkets have deliveries at night that would disturb residents – but there are arguments in favour, and what we've been promoting is a way of trying to work with industry, to line the side of a shed with dwellings that look in one direction, for example. Similarly with supermarkets we've had twenty years of their big buildings, very often single storey with car parks at grade and so very demanding on land. But we can look at stacking supermarket sheds or putting housing on top of them and parking under them. The new Ikea in East London is interesting in this context because it is on two levels, and those are on top of the car park,



Chance Street, London: the courtyard makes spatial opportunities at the back...

'you can have different ownerships of the same space, the same void of light'



... while the front is a subtle play on the ordinariness of the street

so it is stacked three times. Consequently it has a smaller footprint for its volume and you can imagine it being a bit more 'city' rather than 'shed-land' outside city.

How do you deal with other big building types, like the tower blocks in your urban design strategy for Stratford in east London?

One part of that is Carpenters Estate, three 20-storey towers with generally two-storey row houses, from the '60s and not very good. Politically, people hate the towers and so there's talk of knocking them down but one of the issues is that a lot of this housing is in private ownership and it can't be comprehensively demolished. They're also full of asbestos and not insulated so they need a heck of a lot of work. But there's a sustainable argument for keeping them and, since no residential developer would dream of knocking them down because they wouldn't get the scale back, there's a commercial argument for keeping them too. So we've convinced them that the three towers should not be taken down, that we should keep them. We might add on to them, clad them, insulate them or change their character, but the most important thing for us is that we propose a strategy of making and mending the streets and squares. At the moment these towers land in bits of car park or sprawling green spaces that no one inhabits.

Working with what we might call the Corbusian city model, you harness parts to make other types and continuities.

Yes, it's morphing from an ideology of towers in parks to become a kind of nineteenth-century complex of streets and squares and edges. The different opportunities at the base of the towers prompt different configurations. For example, towers land into base buildings that then re-affirm the street along with an existing row of houses. The other idea is about trying to stitch back the ragged terraced housing with a proposition for a kind of new London residential square.

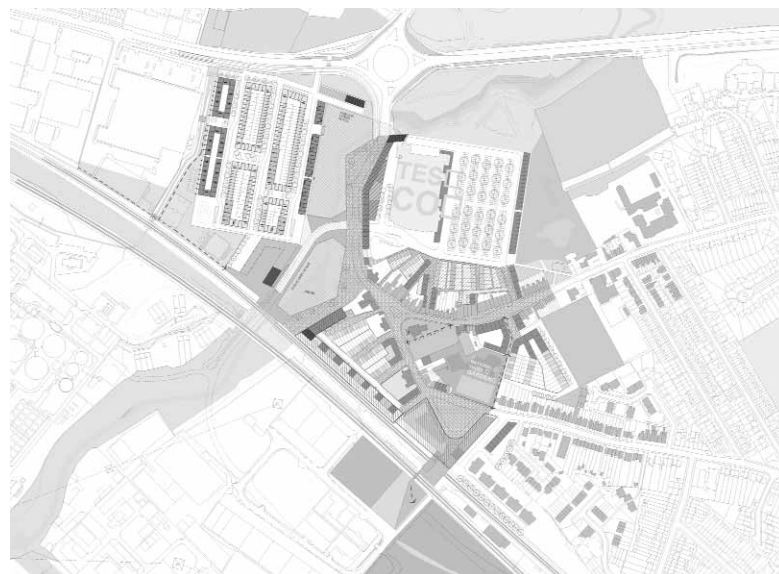
It's like making a jigsaw piece that completes something.

Yes. We proposed this as a way of sorting out the core of this



Dense urban housing at Rainham, London, forms part of an urban design framework plan ...

'to envisage a city with industry tucked in and amongst'



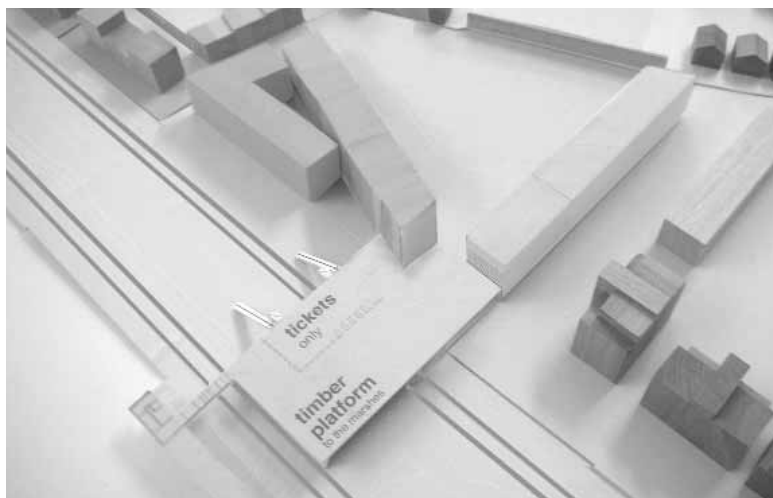
... combining a constructive landscape strategy and a tightened urban grain

neighbourhood. As a council estate it is going to have a lot more private housing brought to it so there is also mix and balance to consider. These estates were something that happened in the '60s as ways of providing lots of housing and somehow there is a stigma attached to them: people are trying to stop calling them estates. The idea of its being an estate of social housing in which there has been right to buy is going to shift and they will become

just a normal piece of London in which there'll be social housing, shared ownership, and private too, and the balance is a crucial thing to get right.

Who makes sure that is right?

The Housing Department, our client for this piece of work. They have absolutely scientific numbers and charts and schedules about not just the relationship between



Reconnecting: the historic village centre at Rainham, London, linked again to its railway station and the Marshes

'the idea of an estate will shift to become just another piece of London'

private and public, but the ratios of one, two, three and four bedroom houses – it's not just apartments. And so we've been looking at London models, East End squares like Sidney Square and Albert Square for example, where you get quite high three-storey (10 metre) parapets, and very hard-edged dwellings with a continuity of surface material. There may be a mix within that and there can be subtle visual clues that they are not all the same. For example in the crescents at Bath, the distance between front doors of houses might suddenly vary because of the plot width – and that's quite nice; the door frame, the door shape and the door treatment can vary a bit in the same way. We are enjoying this diversity that can fit within a rigour and repetitiveness.

At the masterplan stage, you are also then concerned with issues like parking; here at Stratford, for example, with cars beneath the square.

One of the opportunities with the level of development that is coming to this part of the city is that parking can be part of the economic equation of the development. So this strategy is for residents' parking; you can drive in and go down and the landscape treatment might have holes cut that allow light in. There's a need to



Making continuity: an ideology of parks and towers at Stratford, London, is harnessed to make other types that re-affirm the city

relocate a basketball court within the square, but if it is at parking level too then the circulation round the court becomes the way up from the parking. That injects life. In today's context – which might change over the next 10 years – we have to put such ideas forward to help make it safe. But it's a given that if you're doing this sort of development you'll go down at least one or two levels. Within a three-storey scale of development it is not economic to go down a level, which is why there has to be cross-funding between some of the other heavier uses. But as well as it not being economically reasonable with three storeys, there's a lot of

resistance to housing of this scale and basement parking. It's just one of the things we have to grapple with.

At the end of the day all this is connective tissue in the city and in that sense unimportant. It doesn't need to express itself in any pronounced way; it is the opposite of iconic.

Absolutely. But it can be a robust thing.

Peter Guillery's The Small House in Eighteenth Century London (ISBN 978-0-300-10238-3) is published by Yale University Press at £40 (hb)