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# Shettleston Housing Association, Glasgow, by Elder and Cannon Architects

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Next thumbnails

The Glasgow practice has designed a ‘thoughtful and open’ home for a housing association in one of Britain’s most deprived and depressed areas. Photography by Andrew Lee

The rediscovery of Victorian urban genius in the 1980s and 90s meant, in Glasgow, the filling of gap sites with four-storey tenements, and a return to perimeter blocks, street facades and urban density.

But over the last decade this enthusiasm for a new urbanism – largely fuelled by the civic-minded patronage of housing associations – has led inexorably to new and arguably more authentic architectural dilemmas. Namely, how do we obey the grammar of Glasgow’s existing built form, repair, upgrade and develop the urban tissue, and at the same time open up city life to light, fresh air and the sort of unrestricted movement that was not possible given the material and technological conditions the Victorian builder worked with?

Elder and Cannon Architects has played an important role in the regeneration of Glasgow over the last 30 years. Its neo-tenements of the 1990s – those on Great Western Road (1997), Duke Street (1992) and Govanhill (1994) – helped reconstruct and bolster confidence in the urban efficacy of the Glasgow grid’s ‘inhabited wall’, and the past 10 years or so has seen the firm join in the questioning of the given architectural grammar and the quest to open it up to new expressions and configurations.

When Elder and Cannon won a mini-competition run by Shettleston Housing Association, however, a whole new set of complicating factors came into the mix. Any internet search for the word ‘Shettleston’ brings up an archive of despair: stories about how Shettleston is the most deprived and depressed political constituency in the whole of Britain, with the worst health record, and how male life expectancy there is the lowest in the country. These dreadful social and economic circumstances are mirrored (or perhaps exacerbated) by architectural and urban decay, mismanagement, poor design and low-quality housing.

Since the 1980s, Shettleston Housing Association has occupied a three-storey, cast-iron-framed, red sandstone building from 1912, designed by James McKissack. It was originally built as a Scottish Cooperative Society hall, with a barrel-vaulted dancehall on the top floor, but the housing association needed to expand and modify its operations. The immediate environment of the hall demonstrates the social and urban problems of the area.

Pettigrew Street lies parallel to the main drag and the feel is residential and Glasgow suburban, but really, there is no coherent measure or texture to the built environment here. To the west of the hall runs a two-storey stone terrace; opposite is a squat 1980s post-modernist take on the tenement; to the east are full four-storey Victorian tenements; and the whole area is blighted by vast swathes of grassed empty land where tenements used to be.

Elder and Cannon's brief was to simplify the existing accommodation within the hall, and to expand. The housing association owned the vacant plot immediately to the east and used it as a car park, but the gap corner site abutting the east side of the car park was not available due to land-ownership difficulties. The architect decided on a new-build on the car park, which would in effect be a hybrid: both an object building in its own right and an extension in dialogue with the existing accommodation. The problems for the practice concerned the construction of the new-build, the reconfiguration of the old building, and the relationship between the two new sets of accommodation.

The old hall admitted three distinct groups of users, tradespeople, the public and staff, so there was some confusion about the articulation of their access, use and way through the building. A ramp to the public entrance had been built across the front facade, and the wall to it obscured the legibility and any user-friendliness of the building. The interior was partitioned into a maze of small rooms and awkward, dark corridors.

In response, the entire ground floor of the new-build was designed as an open-plan public interface, with a long ramp reaching up into the accommodation on the west side, with a waiting room, reception area and interview rooms down the east side. This open, glass-fronted floor allowed the clearing of the awkward public ramp from the front of the old hall and the reassignment of the two remaining original entrances for trade and staff respectively.

The use of the first floor of the new-build as open-plan offices also freed up the spaces in the old hall. They are now reorganised into well-lit and well-ventilated perimeter staff rooms that make good use of the natural light on all four elevations of the building, and into broad, welcoming break-out spaces lit by borrowed light coming through the glazed partitions. On the top of the new-build is an open roof terrace that can be used for receptions and accessed from the spill-out spaces around the committee rooms on the top floor of the old hall. If the need should arise, a new floor could be built here at some future date.

The most striking feature of the project is undoubtedly the precast concrete frame fronting the new-build. As a response to the aforementioned Glaswegian dilemma of creating modern legibility and transparency alongside formal and historical continuity, it is robust yet formalistic; restrained yet playful. In its abstract take on a cornice-height, five-bay portico, it reins in the idiosyncrasies of McKissack's neo-baroque and gives the latter the environmental order and stability it craves. It's classical, it's modern, and it's a logical and mature conclusion to Elder and Cannon's long experimentation with the framed loggia as a type of transparency. In sunshine it looks sharp and pristine, but on a rainy day, and we have a few in Glasgow, it's a touch grim and oppressive, especially when the concrete frame is seen in profile (i.e. without the reflection from the glass walling in the bays).

But most important of all, for Shettleston Housing Association this addition is thoughtful, considered and open; the sort of free but legible space that a modern democracy ought to construct and inhabit.