

REVIEW

EXHIBITION

By Alex Ely

Housing Design Awards
2007.

At the RIBA, 66 Portland
Place, London W1, until
8 September



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Supported by such bodies as English Partnerships and the RIBA, the Housing Design Awards offer a unique insight into government attitudes to housing. They're also a means for us to gauge how housing design is evolving, and in this year's awards exhibition, one choice is particularly in evidence – the courtyard house.

This predominance of the courtyard house – or what might be termed the L-house – has resulted unintentionally in pattern-book architecture akin to the Georgian terrace. The plans of such schemes as TADW Architects' Selwyn Street, Oldham, dMFK's Guest Street, Manchester, and Proctor and Matthews' Dale Mill, Rochdale, may not differ much. But they illustrate how architects are tackling the demands of legislation and

economics, while still trying to create houses that enrich domestic life, have civic qualities, and offer the range of architectural expressions that help create a sense of place and cultural identity.

The plans are similar for a number of reasons. There's the need to bring natural light and ventilation into a deep plan driven by high density, but the need too for a fire-protected stair leads to interiors being compartmentalised. A habitable room overlooking the street and an active frontage are necessary to meet the criteria of Secured by Design – the national crime-prevention initiative. Then you have to provide a bit of outdoor space and off-street parking, reducing its presence in the public realm.

As a consequence, it's hard to see what makes some

projects stand out as winners above others. Schemes such as BDA ZEDfactory's Jubilee Wharf, Penryn, and Julian Cowie's Melody Lane, Islington, certainly help to move the debate about housing forward, but many of the other winners leave me underwhelmed.

The categories for the completed projects awards are Winner, Large Housebuilder, Medium Housebuilder, Small Housebuilder, Housing Corporation Winner and Overall Winner; yet the title Housing Design Awards suggests that they should be about the *what* of housing rather than the *who* (the House Builder Awards surely deal with the latter).

The layout of the exhibition gives no clues as to which schemes are eligible for which category and I'm still

trying to figure out why Assael Architecture's Tachbrook Triangle, Westminster, wins an award over JCMT Architects' Benyon Wharf, Hackney, or AHMM's Unity Building, Liverpool – both of which are better planned, featuring double-aspect apartments, flexible layouts, double-height spaces and landscaped courtyards.

Which brings me to the apartment buildings on display. In 1909, the Housing and Town Planning Act outlawed back-to-back housing, declaring it unfit for human habitation. Our equivalent today is the single-aspect apartment off double-loaded corridors, with their resulting high-energy demands for artificial lighting and lack of cross-ventilation.

Rolfe Judd's Tabard Square, Southwark – the overall winner



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1. Julian Cowie's Melody Lane
2. Rolfe Judd's Tabard Square

– is a behemoth. The project description diverts attention from the qualities of the accommodation to describe instead the LED light at the top of the tower that responds to prevailing weather conditions, and the café in the courtyard – described as ‘a piece of functional sculpture’ (albeit recalling the Vorticists of 1915).

The scheme offers good urban design and is carefully detailed and well finished; Berkeley, to its credit, is one of the few housebuilders that retains its architects throughout the project and invests heavily in landscaping. It has provided a generous new public square at the heart of the scheme.

But it is the sheer density of Tabard Square and its inevitable mass of single-aspect apartments (many north-facing) that make me question

whether it is really a sustainable model of housing for today.

Given the involvement in the awards of the RIBA and such agencies as the National House Building Council, perhaps having categories that relate to their priorities – for example, around density (high/medium/low), context (rural/suburban/urban), performance and value – would be more useful than telling us which large housebuilder can build better than the next.

The HDA winners supposedly set the benchmark for what we should be designing – they’re meant to be the models for housing today. But this year I’ll be drawing on lessons from the shortlisted schemes more than the winners.

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