



Homes

*Three housing schemes on constrained sites
by AHMM, Emmett Russell, and
FCBS with Matthew Lloyd Architects*



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Building study

Block party

Ten years in the making, Allford Hall Monaghan Morris's slow-cooked mansion block at Weston Street for Solidspace is the latest of the developer's signature split-level eat-live-work projects



Allford Hall Monaghan Morris's Weston Street project provides an apartment and office building in London's Bermondsey, designed to respond to the disparate architectural styles and scales of its surroundings. Its eight two and three-bedroom apartments range in size from 118m² to 155m², and there is 470m² of office space on the ground floor. All apartments are split-level and defined by an open plan arrangement of spaces providing living, kitchen, dining and study areas. Each apartment has a large cantilevered balcony or roof terrace to the south, and its central, double-height area is lit by full-height glazing or a rooflight.



a number of different practices, most recently in London with Jaccaud Zein Architects at Shepherdess Walk in 2015. Unlike that scheme, which was a mix of conjoined terraced houses and apartments that worked along a street edge, knitting it together, here the block AHMM has designed is in the form of two staggered massings of five 2- and three 3-bedroom flats, each massing stacked around a stair and lift core. Lying roughly east to west, the long southern face of the block is formed at ground level by the wall of the original warehouse, continuing to serve as a boundary to Guy Street Park. This nicely solves the siting, providing a plinth or

Words Rob Wilson
Photography Timothy Soar

'It's more than a work of art. More a piece of utter folly!' says Roger Zogolovitch happily as we walk around Weston Street, the mixed-use development built by his company Solidspace and designed by Allford Hall Monaghan Morris (AHMM). The scheme, eight flats above a office space, has been a labour of love for architect-developer Zogolovitch, one 10 years in the making since early conversations with Simon Allford. And that making – of a building Allford describes as a 'crafted urban palazzo' – has been meticulous.

The qualities of its materials and finish and the level of care in the detailing are everywhere evident – from the sharp tracing of timber formwork that mark finely cast concrete walls to the walnut and oak joinery which lines its interiors.

Of course this qualitative sense of care comes at a quantitative cost – these are flats for the seriously well-heeled – but this is not just an exercise in maximising site value. Following in the footsteps of previous Solidspace schemes, it's one looking to maximise spatial and architectural value, too. So internally the flats exhibit what Solidspace describes in its marketing as its DNA: eat, live, work. A series of interlocking living spaces, kitchen-dining, living and home-office/study are arranged at half-levels around a double-height volume, with the main spaces and functions separated by stairs, not doors. Only bedrooms are separated off, often on a different level.

The generator of these spatial dynamics is in part the need to maximise the sense of space available from the tight site, eking out the possibilities of a limited footprint. This is another USP of Solidspace, which specialises in developing smaller gap sites, which Zogolovitch calls 'holes in the city'. This plot, south of the Thames and close to London Bridge, was previously occupied by a warehouse and is bounded by a small green space, Guy Street Park, to the south and west.

Earlier iterations of this Solidspace model have seen Zogolovitch work with



rustication which grounds the block in the history of the site, while raising the flats up, providing privacy. Visually it resembles a turreted town above a city wall. The shorter eastern façade runs along Weston Street, with an entrance to the ground floor office, while the apartments are accessed from the north off a mews-type court, formed with two other blocks.

Allford also describes it as a '21st century mansion block' – using the sedate term that has recently gained traction again as shorthand for quality, 'luxury apartment' having become meaningless through over-use. What exactly constitutes a mansion block or flat remains fairly woolly. One aspect is a stiff price tag, with a 2-bedroom apartment still available at £1.6 million. Another would seem to be a relatively mid-rise stand-alone building, in which a limited number of dual-aspect flats are grouped around shared landings.

Here the overall structure is an in-situ concrete shell, cast using rough-sawn Douglas fir shuttering to give a richly patterned surface where exposed internally. This is mostly faced with a dirty-blond Wienerberger brick, laid with flush white mortar joints to give a sense of mass to the exterior. At ground level to south and west the existing park wall was used as shuttering, with the in-situ concrete walls of the new building cast against them.

The façades are punctured by anodised aluminium spandrelled windows, oak-framed internally and set in deep reveals. On the south side these are arranged into large L or T-shaped groupings – describing the interconnected internal volumes of each apartment – and punctuated by long, almost exaggeratedly cantilevered precast concrete balconies protruding out. They are designed to be long enough, according to Allford, 'so you can stand fully away from the building and look back at it'. Supplementing these at first floor level and sitting along the top of the old park wall is a run of terraces – which, together with the balconies, form a conversation of elements that suggest the potential for communal interaction between flats.

Overall the exterior is satisfyingly chunky. Yet the window groupings and staggered roof profile, both reflecting the internal arrangement of the flats – a stacked puzzle of forms – work against the idea of the grand whole one associates with a mansion block.

Inside, the commercial unit at ground floor level wraps around two entrances and circulation cores to the apartments. It consists of a single, large open-plan space with a meeting room and service spaces tucked between the cores. It has an awkward, elongated wedge shape but makes a virtue of its two dominating window-less raw concrete walls (wrapped by the park wall) – which strip skylights and an oculus set in a terrace above, richly animate with dropped light. Allford recalls that a touchstone for the feel, particular

'AHMM has delivered a beautifully tailored building that contains a wealth of ideas'

of the entrance halls and stairwells, was post-war Milanese apartment blocks, with their simple but highly-tooled and honed surfaces and materials. He describes the limited palette of materials – terrazzo, parquet, aluminium, oak, concrete – as 'durable, honed and restrained'.

Light floods each apartment, coming from three directions in the upper flats, which have generous skylights, with surprisingly cosy-feeling exposed concrete walls predominating again. The Solidspace 'DNA' of interlocked, overlooking spaces is not rocket science, and can trace its credentials back to Le Corbusier's 1925 Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau. But these apartments are on a much larger scale – some over four levels covering 155m².

Joinery forms walls of shelving, cupboards and panelling, concealing storage and bathrooms, which read like deep pochés. There is as a result a rich layering of space – of what Allford calls 'disconnects and connects' – that make these flats feel more like terraced houses that have been stacked and shuffled. To enable this openness, the fire engineering is

active, with 'intelligent mist sprays' around stairwells. In addition all apartment floors have secondary exits to the communal stair as a fire escape – an arrangement that allows an upper or lower floor to function as a discrete unit with its own 'front door'.

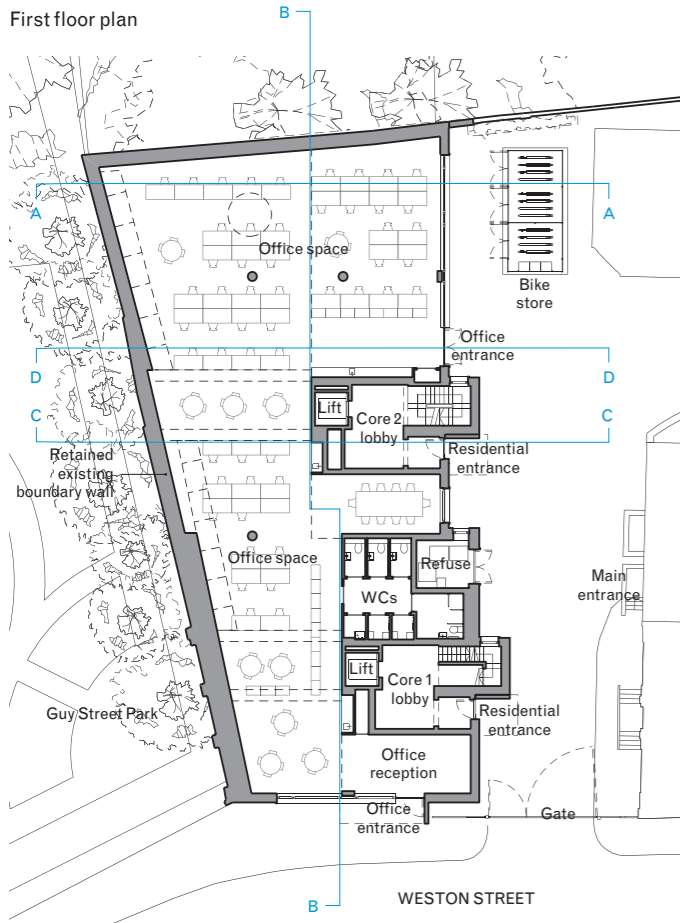
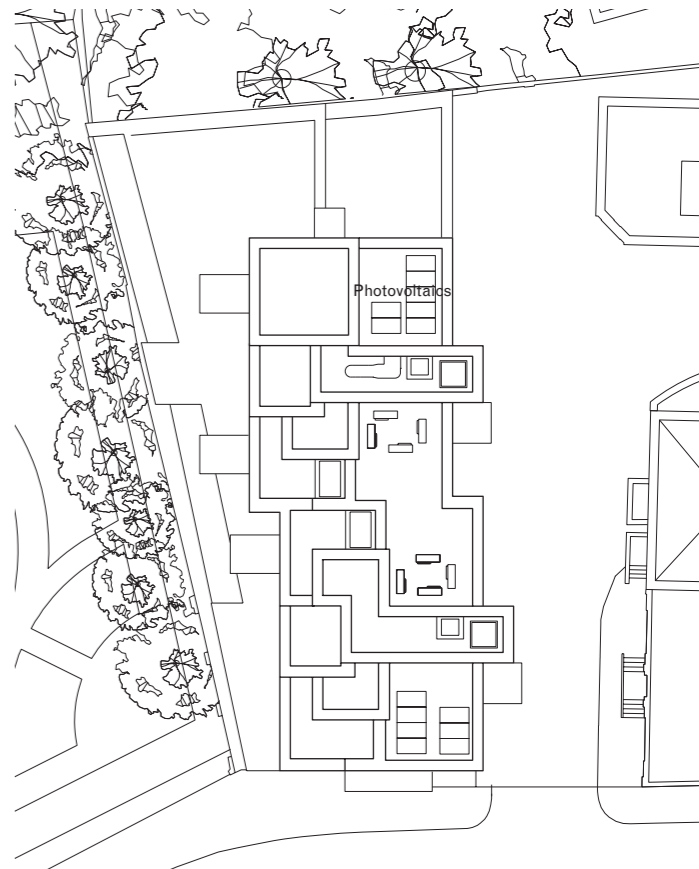
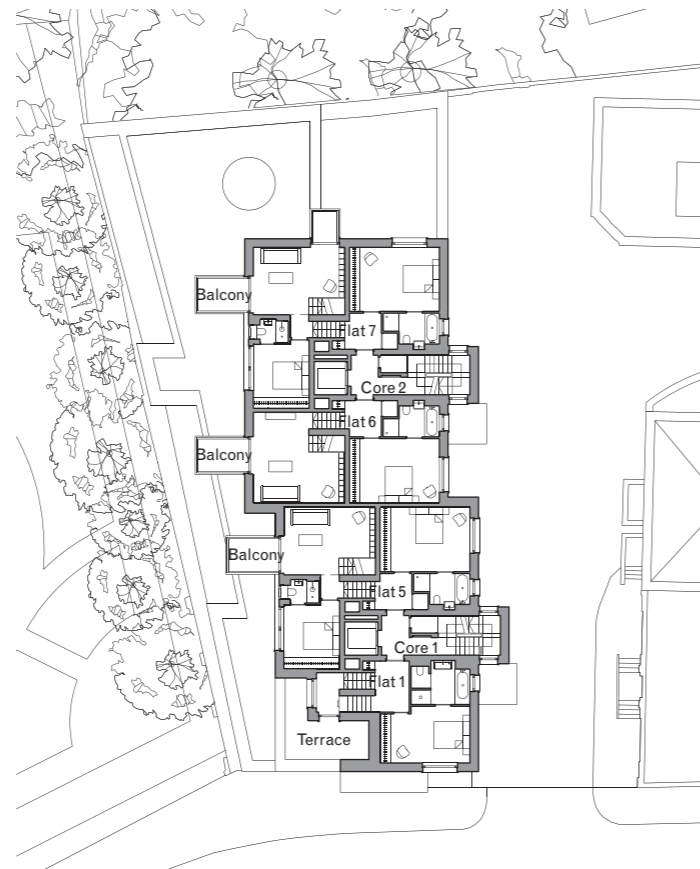
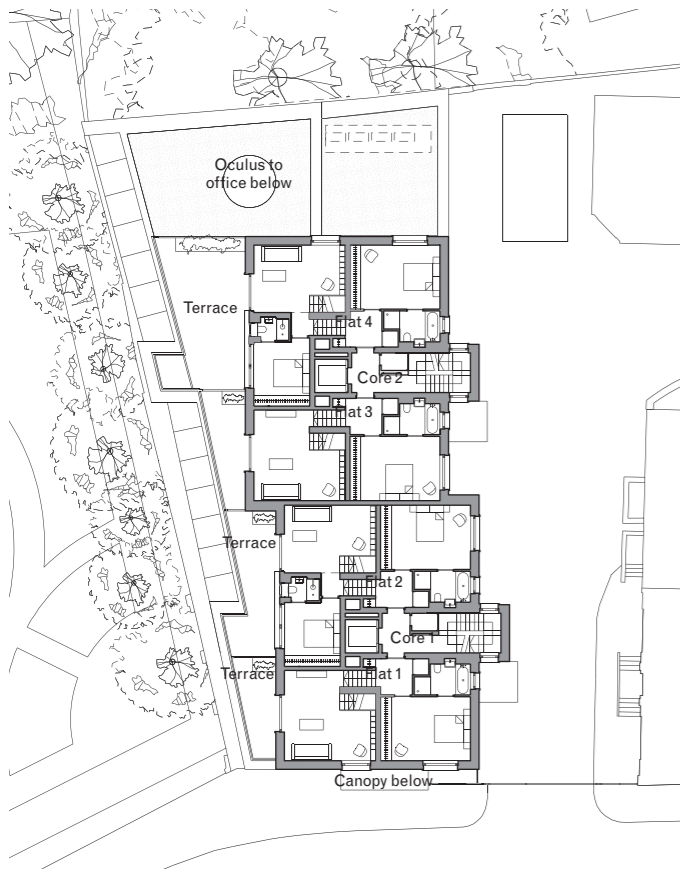
Everywhere there are thoughtful haptic details, like round, oak-flapped ventilation grilles, while some elements reference AHMM's own design history: a desk sitting above a stair echoes the one they designed for the flat of the journalist Jeremy Melvin in an early project. While these are large flats, their generousness is in the vertical spatial flow – not the lateral spread, and some spaces at times feel tight on certain floorplates – if in a precisely tailored way.

While satisfyingly solid and beautifully crafted, the architecture's rich hapticity lacks sensuousness or indeed an elegance which one might hope for given the cue of the Milanese apartment block – with the spaces being unrelentingly orthogonal in form and detail. Also missing perhaps is some of the humour or quirkiness that is sometimes found in Solidspace projects.

But, while this was never designed to be some kind of residential typology to help solve the housing crisis, AHMM has delivered a beautifully tailored building that contains and tests a wealth of ideas applicable for housing more generally. Its material and spatial delights give pointers on how to make a high-density block work very satisfyingly on a tight urban site.







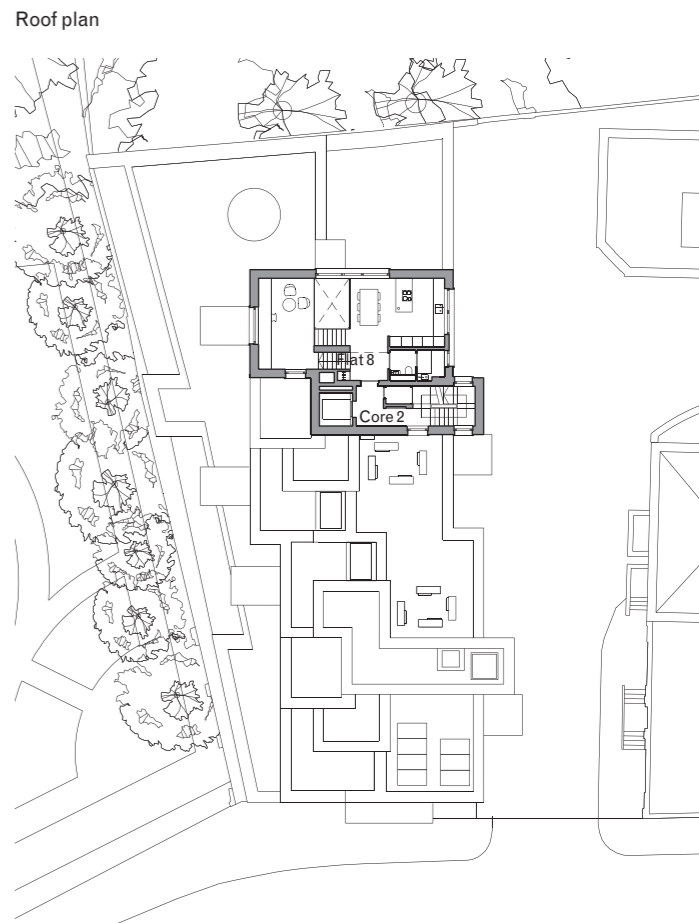
Ground floor plan



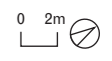
Second floor plan



Fourth floor plan



Sixth floor plan





Architect's view

Weston Street is the conclusion of a long conversation that began many years ago on a train. It took 10 years in the making, so it is what I refer to as 'slow architecture', and yet it is also the most simple of schemes.

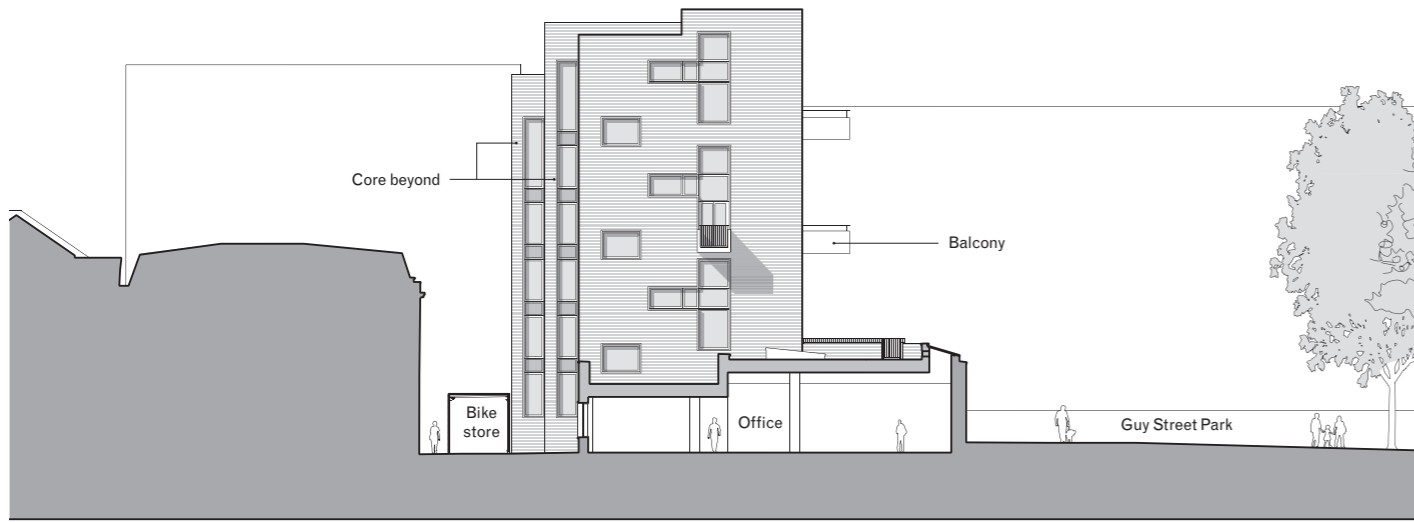
Eight split-section apartments, five around one stair, three around another, interlock with each other and the office below, which is itself defined by an undulating soffit that bears the mass of the volumes above.

In this 21st century mansion-block model, the apartment is also a house, but one with an entry at each level that allows light and people to flow from room to room in a way that fire regulations normally preclude. Each apartment always has through-light and, depending on its location within the puzzle, also has a top or side light, and a terrace, a balcony or a roof garden.

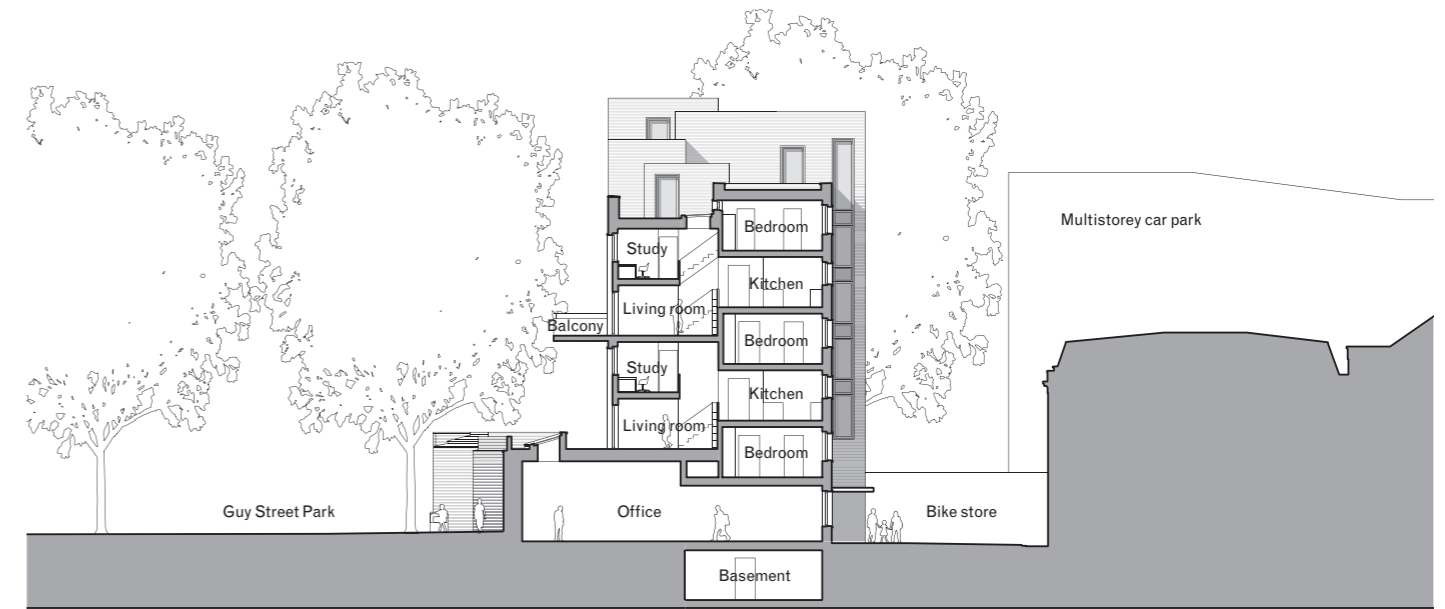
Internally, Weston Street is a celebration of a concrete structure that is both cast against, and then part-lined by, timber. The formal stack of programme is expressed externally in brick, but with the clay and mortar treated to ensure it reads as one giant casting. Its particular silhouette plays out against the context of street, mature trees, Brutalist car park, towers old (Guy's Hospital) and new (The Shard), and sky.

The specifics of place inform the sectional system's beginning (with the office cast against an ancient garden wall) and its end, with the retreating modules of the split section concluding with a place for a desk with a view of the city beyond. It was important to us that this sectional system was made legible in the façade and this is achieved by tying the scattered windows together in the pre-cast concrete-trimmed, folded *fenêtres en longueur* of 'T's and 'L's.

At Weston Street we have made a building as we think it should be made and, as Mies once noted, ultimately we did it like that 'because we liked the way it looked'.
*Simon Allford, founding director,
Allford Hall Monaghan Morris*



Section A-A



Section C-C

Engineer's view

This is the second project Bryen & Langley has undertaken with Roger Zogolovitch incorporating the distinctive Solidspace split-level internal arrangement.

It has been a unique and interesting contract, working on a very confined site and carried out in parallel with the redevelopment of the adjacent London Bridge Station, with all of the logistical challenges that this presented. In execution, the contract was very much carried out in a spirit of partnership between ourselves, the

architect, and the client. The specification called for a quality, board-marked internal concrete finish complemented with high-end bespoke hardwood joinery individually manufactured for each apartment. We believe this has been achieved and as such we must acknowledge the excellent work carried out by our frame contractor, Oliver Connell & Son, and our in-house joinery supplier, The Joinery Workshop.

It should also be noted that all of the finished concrete walls and soffits were

actually cast more than 18 months ago and have been protected throughout the subsequent fit-out stage. The extent and uniqueness of the joinery requirement led us to setting up a joinery workshop on site in the ground floor commercial space, where a team of craftsmen worked tirelessly to template, manufacture, lip, produce and soft-fit all of the bespoke oak and walnut panelling before then sending them off site for veneering and finishing.

Tony Meere, director, Bryen & Langley

Client's view

Our collaboration over 10 years was an iterative process, honing the design. It demanded a shared vision and commitment to the project by the whole design and construction team to achieve a level of bespoke design that is atypical at this scale.

The test for any collaboration on a building project is managing the changes to the design during construction. At Weston Street there were three examples.

Removing sliding doors separating entrances from living and kitchen spaces

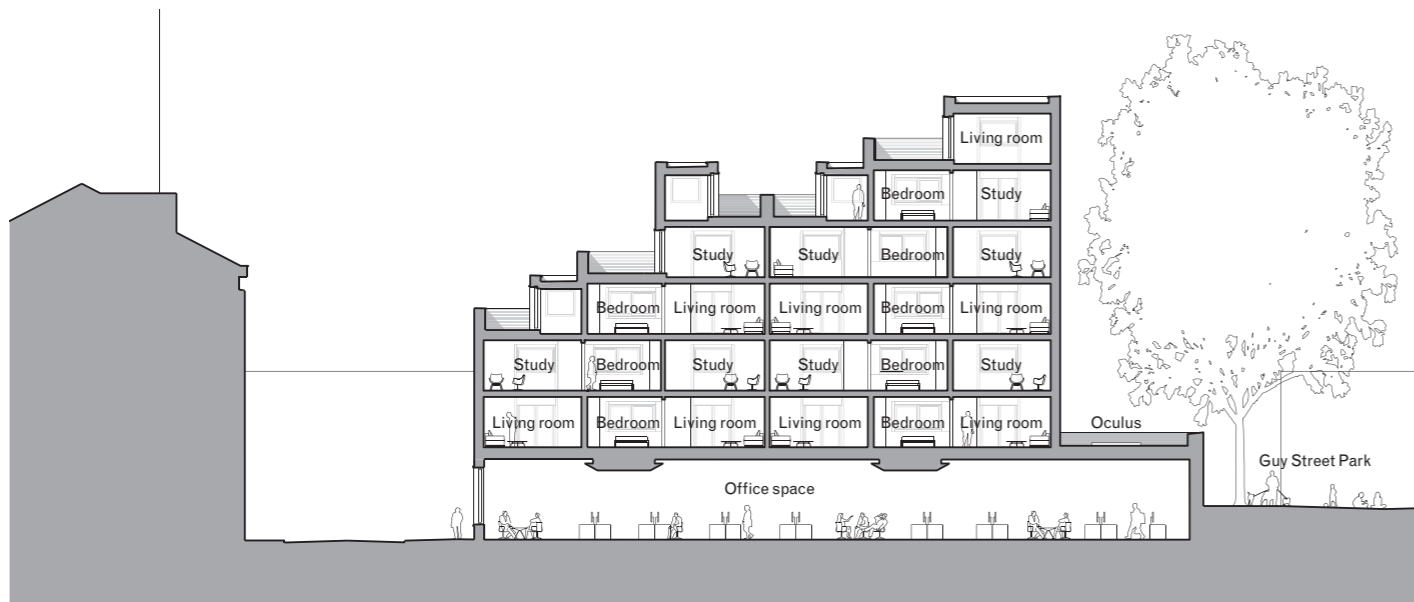
in the apartments and replacing them with a water mist fire-suppression system only weeks before partitions were due to be built resulted in a greater sense of openness across the split section.

A late addition of anodised vertical bars to the spandrel panels involved rapid testing and experimentation with fixing methods by the window manufacturer in Italy, but the impact on the external elevations is huge, creating a subtle interplay of light and shadow across the anodised finish.

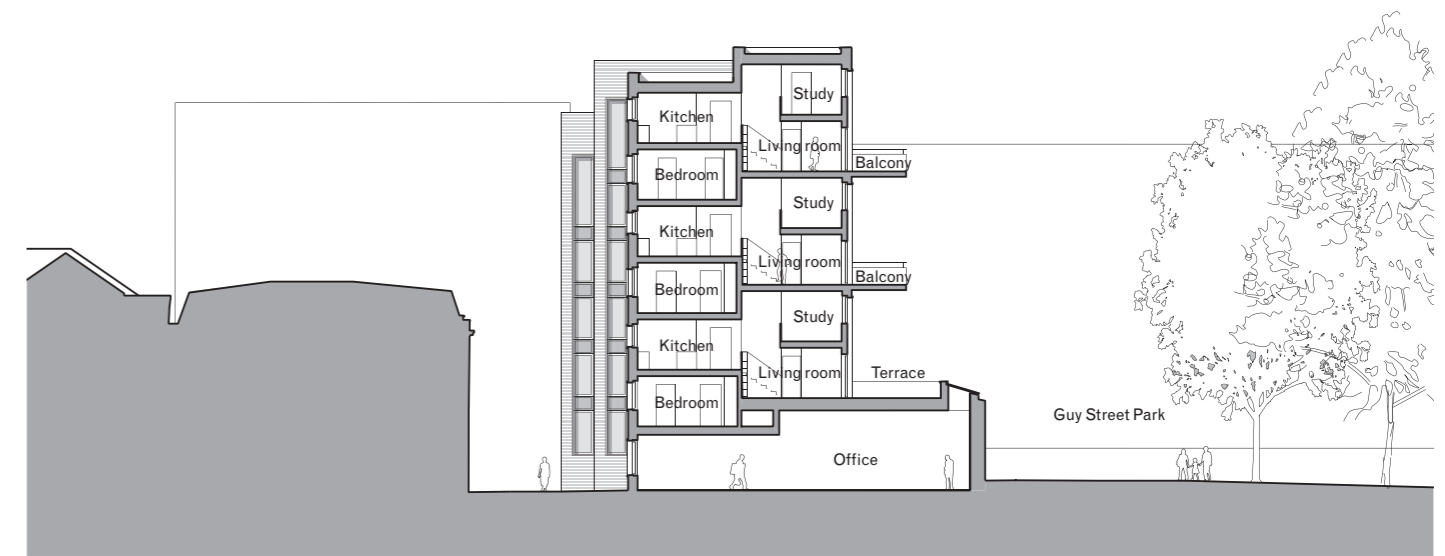
Retaining the boundary wall, with its patina, reinforced the original vision of a podium with new block rising above.

We have had the luxury of time to craft a defined palette of materials: exposed concrete, bespoke joinery, brick envelope and anodised aluminium windows. Weston Street is a challenge to standardisation; it celebrates the work of the joiner and the concrete subcontractor with all the quirks that the hand-made brings over the manufactured.

Sarah Allan, project manager, Solidspace



Section B-B



Section D-D

Project data

Start on site July 2015
Completion February 2018
Gross internal floor area 1,926m²
Form of contract JCT Major Project
Construction Contract 2011
Architect Allford Hall Monaghan Morris
Client Solidspace
Structural engineer Form Structural Design
M&E consultant Desco
Quantity surveyor/cost consultant
 Orbell Associates
Landscape architect Coe Design
Fire consultant Optimise Europe
Acoustic consultant
 Sandy Brown Associates
Concrete frame Oliver Connell & Son
Environmental consultant Hilson Moran
Planning consultant AZ Urban Studio
Party wall surveyor Andrew Karoly
Project manager Solidspace
CDM co-ordinator Orbell Associates
Approved building inspector MLM
Main contractor Bryen & Langley
CAD software used MicroStation
Annual CO₂ emissions (estimated) 9.9kg/m²



Working detail

As a response to grouping together windows in 'L' and 'T' formations, the façade structure is built as a complete in-situ concrete shell, enabling a 'zig-zag' of load transfers around apertures in the building envelope.

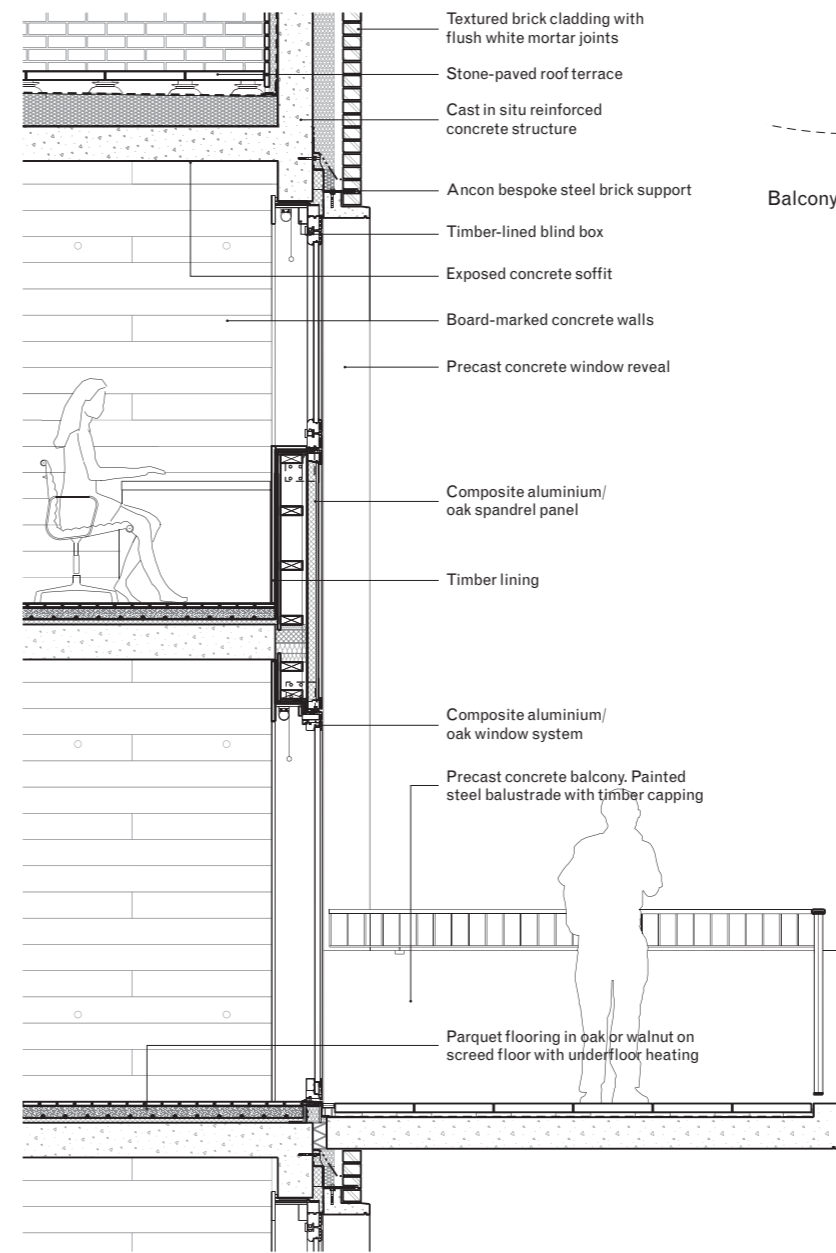
Internally, the exposed in-situ concrete structure was cast with a plank-marked finish, using rough-sawn Douglas fir boards fixed to the internal face of the formwork. Exposed concrete soffits have a matt, smooth finish created by a paper-faced ply formwork. Externally, the concrete shell is clad in a textured brick with flush joints, deliberately specified to create the building's monolithic appearance.

Precast concrete trims line the window reveals and are fixed back to the structure with steel angle bracketry concealed behind the brickwork. A 1:1 mock-up was built on site prior to the construction of the façade to test the fixing detail.

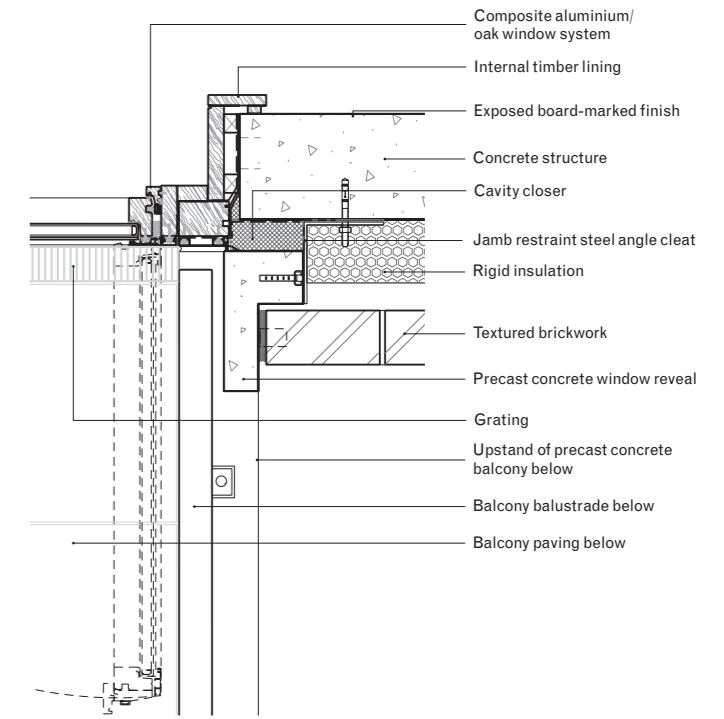
Windows are anodised aluminium composite with a solid oak interior. Spandrel panels have a vertical bar detail that reflects the design of the balustrading on the balcony. The final spandrel design is the result of collaboration with the window manufacturer. A glazing bar is secretly fixed to the face of a standard spandrel panel. Internally, the back face of the spandrel and window surrounds are lined in timber, incorporating a blind box detail at the head.

The balconies project from and are set within the window openings, referencing the goods hoists and platforms of the nearby Victorian warehouse architecture. Made from precast concrete with a medium etch finish, balconies were cast using a single mould. They cantilever about 2.9m from the façade and are held in place with a cast-in thermal break Schöck connection at slab level and thermally broken steel bracket connections to the upstands.

*Jane Ashe, architect,
Allford Hall Monaghan Morris*



Façade detail section through balcony



Balcony door jamb detail plan