

## 51a Gloucester Crescent London.

A 1950s developer's cottage, one of a miniature grouping of three, nestles in a seemingly overlooked patch of land between tall, imposing early Victorian brick and white stucco houses in an otherwise grand North London crescent. Two heavily pollarded lime trees sit inside the front garden wall within a tapering, intimate space which buffers the house from the street. By virtue of being part of a crescent, the back garden looks out onto long, oblique perspectives of the grander houses which overshadow it.

The house itself is a small plain brick box with stucco window surrounds. The new addition consists of a two-storey timber-framed extension to the right of the house. There is new timber fenestration to all existing window openings. The plan has been reconfigured, creating three new rooms—a sitting room, a pantry and a bedroom with a bath—aiming in the process to replace the pretence of this unremarkable, mock-Georgian building with a more credible plainness, which acknowledges the qualities of the square plan and simple, well-placed openings, in order to create a new whole.

The plan form of the new extension has been determined by both exhaustive party wall negotiations and the need to accommodate the length of a double bed. The resultant trapezoidal figure, parallel front and back, spans the depth of the next door building. The overhanging first floor *almost* touches its neighbour, allowing for a very narrow covered passage leading to the back garden through a perforated aluminium gate. Where the two separate buildings meet—each one treated with a new zinc gutter—paired round zinc downpipes discharge into a single drain.

The timber frame is clad entirely in silver-blue anodised zinc panels with vertical standing seams, whose banding rises 25mm beyond the face of the building. This creates a secondary, fragile plane which acts like a delicate veil. The resulting effect is one of a thin, drawing-like, fragile tautness, as though the façade had been traced rather than constructed, in the manner of, say, a wall drawing by the conceptual artist Sol Lewitt. The thin regulatory lines, like knife-edge pleats or ironed creases—disciplined by the minimum thickness required technically for this type of construction—create an improbable depth, which casts narrow shadows on the façade whilst alluding to the timber-frame construction beneath. The softly-shining cladding changes colour under different daylight conditions, resonating with the sky in dull light and paling in sunshine.

On the existing building, the stucco frames around the window openings sit atop the brickwork. With the new windows now very close to the external face, the wall reads as a surface than a solid mass. The window frames of the extension, placed on top of the zinc face, rhyme with the fenestration of the brick box, reinforcing the effect of one impossibly thin surface over two very separate buildings. These new painted timber windows—a cinnamon-like ginger-brown colour—when combined with the blue zinc cladding, result in a palette more akin to a Josef Albers abstract painting than a building in a North London crescent, evoking a changing illusion of space through the optics of colour—either a flatness or a depth depending on lighting conditions and place of viewing.

The thickness—or thinness—of the walls of the extension is revealed at the openings. The oversized window to the small new downstairs sitting room sits in a thin wall, while above, the smaller scaled-down window sits in a thick wall, forming an asymmetric bay or bookend which visually props up the old house.

The brickwork of the existing house will eventually be washed with a milky Danish limestone render, intended, like the new fenestration, to complete the effect of a seamless new whole.

Inside, the door of the new intimate family room is positioned directly opposite the door to the main living space, the symmetry of the new plan bestowing a modest formality on the entrance hall. The new opening sits deep in the old gable wall. This depth, emphasised by oak tri-ply linings, is in contrast to the more private upstairs opening to the bedroom, barely glimpsed from the hall, which lies almost flush to the wall surface and is held by a flat architrave. Each opening implies in some measure the nature of the room behind. A second new opening in the hall opposite the front door provides a view through to the weathered garden wall beyond. Aubergine linoleum unifies the existing ground floor, creating a dark, matt but subtly reflective plane upon which sit the unadorned white walls.

Throughout the house, new vertically emphasised windows allow more light into the previously dark interior and open up views to the front and back gardens and beyond, making a more palpable connection with the outside. The tri-ply linings of the windows and new doors, treated with a pale soap finish, commonly used in Scandinavian interiors, serve as a unifying device throughout the interior.

The three new rooms consist, on the ground floor, of an intimate sitting room at the front and a pantry opening out into the back garden, and on the first floor, a bedroom with a bath. In the sitting room and bedroom, powdery white plaster walls are bound by the oak window reveals and tall oak skirting and picture rails which project a mere 3mm beyond the walls. Like the zinc seams on the outside, the endgrain of the oak triply looks almost drawn on, a secondary two-dimensional frame around the windows and doors. The slightly translucent soaped finish on the oak and the seemingly friable texture and chalky, insubstantial colour of the plaster enhance the overall impression of fragility.

Brass lights and light-switches and grey zinc-plated ironmongery provide a series of faint dotted elements placed strategically on the plain wall surfaces. In the corners of the rooms, at high level on the picture rail, glimpses of light reflect off pairs of brass discs on which sit bare bulbs capped with adjustable aluminium semi-spheres, casting overlapping pools of circular light. These same discs are employed as pulls to operate the ventilation panels, giving a similar reflecting effect. Carefully arranged groups of rectangular off-the-shelf stainless steel light plates frame circular brass toggle switches. These small pieces, carefully placed, give the spaces a particular quality and warm and subdued yellow light which enhances the oak linings and matt plaster. Stubby cylindrical zinc-plated off-the-shelf handles to all the new windows and doors are—like the lights and light-switches—pieces of design distinct from the architecture, intended to be experienced and engaged with through use rather than simply viewed.

While materials and detailing are consistent throughout the extension's interior, each new room has its own very specific qualities. The door into the new sitting room opens to reveal only the external wall where the overscaled window is mirrored by a blank niche. This low-cilled window frames a view of the outside which resembles a traditional Japanese raked garden, viewed but not inhabited, seen and felt vicariously from within. The lime tree's textured, variegated, trunk set directly against the window's smooth oak lining, suggesting a feeling of sitting in among the trees, bound by a walled garden. The pantry is a very small room with a large blocky, glazed, painted oak door opening out into the back garden. This opening fills the space with a bright ambient light, the source of which is out of sight of the kitchen and main living area.

At the top of the stairs, a tripartite folding oak door, operated by means of a square rotating wooden latch with pencil-rounded edges, opens to reveal a still-life like arrangement of a giant bath box and tapering window seat, bordered by tall oak skirting on wide oak floorboards. The skirting bounds the entire room and delineates the height of a bed as well as the bath. The base of the bath is sunk into a timber box while its curved rim rests on the lift-up top whose thin, rounded, articulated edges bely its weight and bulk. When lying in the bath, the low window to the rear, placed directly opposite the one to the front—like two figures facing each other across the room—affords a vista of large mature trees and tall brick backs of buildings tapering off into the distance. An unlined rooflight appears to hover just below the curved ridge of the sheet-like ceiling. The view from the front window is filled with a close-up of a tree-trunk and branches. Both rooflight and front window illuminate the gable end wall rather than the room directly, giving it a subtle, slightly other, light quality.

The existing interior is thus transformed by restrained additions and seemingly simple interventions to the existing fabric. The extension's irregular site geometry creates a distorted and exaggerated internal perspective both in the horizontal and the vertical which is acknowledged in the design as a given. It would be misleading however to think that the architecture is consequently polite or insignificant. The sparse aesthetic of the new rooms conveys a calm but intense simplicity. To enter the spaces is profoundly affecting. Adding to the new-found strangeness of the whole, the façade retains something of its two-dimensional drawn quality which is quite unlike the original house, introducing a new and almost disconcerting quality to the surrounding crescent. This contradiction creates multiple plays between the expected and the perceived.

Projects, whatever their size, pose questions informed by an understanding and knowledge of architecture above and beyond a brief. When adjusting or adding to a house of this kind how does one design and address what is appropriate to the ambition and discipline of the architecture? This act is far from straightforward. 51a's apparent quiet simplicity is deceptive. The underlying ambition of the project is far from modest. This work has brought about significant change, employing both artifice and restraint.

The façade illustrates this deliberate act of making an artifice. No attempt is made to be straightforward or 'honest' about how it is made, despite the precision and accuracy required to achieve such a specific appearance and effect. Indeed, the level of abstraction lent by the material's characteristics and colour properties along with the lack of expressed construction, confounds expectations. The bluish tint sets the cladding apart from the conventional idea of zinc as a dour, heavy, utilitarian material. The uncharacteristically fragile-looking surface has an uncanny resemblance to a drawing of a building façade. Recognisable architectural elements such as gutter, roof, window, frame and door are distorted or emphasised—caricatured even—as part of the act of setting up new relationships with the building's surroundings. The ginger-brown of the wood is a somewhat stylised wood colour—representing the idea of wood. The scaled window sizes—large for a small room and vice-versa—are deliberately and calculatedly improbable. They too confound expectations. This strangeness, caused by counteracting the process of habituation encouraged by everyday modes of perception, is harnessed to generate a heightened, more satisfying awareness of the possibilities for inhabitation.

These transformations are mostly achieved by modest means. Judgements are made by first of all looking hard at what is already there. The idea of limitation as a form of invention, restriction spurring creativity from the recognisable elements of the world around us, can be a source of great wealth—not to do can be as powerful as doing. Restraint is exercised throughout to calibrate the perception of the spaces and to ensure that detail does not overwhelm but is always a supporting element, a spatial beneficiary to the whole. Tempering artifice helps fulfill an ambition for a stillness, a slowness, a seduction even.

One of the most potent characteristics of this project is the way in which the spaces described cannot all be absorbed at once. The first glimpse is arresting without being overwhelming. The transformed exterior is unashamedly new but at the same time the building is a background, its composure and the ambition of its sophistication alluding to but never aping the crescent whose elegant characteristics surround it. Understanding and taking possession both from the street and from the more private and intimate sanctuary of the home inside is intended as a gradual process, an unfolding, open-ended experience, which aims to reveal unexpected subtleties and nuances so as to ensure that the work remains open for particular occupation and reflection.

Viewed more closely it is inclusive of the crescent from where it was found. Its concerns are not the Modern's misguided, architectural truths of transparency but those of the arts: not only the visible but those of the suggestive and the imaginative, where the gaze meets stimulating resistance and provokes second thought; of the function of beauty, pre-purpose, a counterpoint to mechanical and natural necessity but, as with Eileen Gray, that it is not a matter of solely constructing beautiful arrangements of lines but above all spaces for people.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *From Eclecticism to Doubt, L'architecture Vivante, Paris '29.*

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