

Calm amid the storm



Peter Barber Architects does it again with Edgewood Mews, a peaceful, car-free characterful street right beside a main London traffic artery

Words: Chris Foges Photographs: Morley von Sternberg

Every so often Peter Barber will post snaps of a little brick-built London housing scheme on Twitter, and prompt a response probably unmatched by any contemporary architect. Amid the heart-eyed emojis there are critics, of course, but the general tenor is exultation that Peter Barber Architects' imaginative rehabilitation of familiar urban forms and forgotten building types demonstrates a viable alternative to cynical, identikit new-builds, despite budgets that are modest and the scrappiest, left-over sites.

The latest to go viral, garnering millions of views, is Edgewood Mews in Finchley. It is the largest scheme to date by the six-strong practice – 97 homes, of which half are 'affordable' – and its most challenging. Set hard against the North Circular road, it shelters a car-free street behind what looks like some ancient fortified citadel, replete with bullnosed turrets at the corners.

The narrow, long-vacant plot following the curve of the six-lane highway was offered up by the Mayor of London's Small Sites Small Builders programme, explain practice directors and project leaders Phil Hamilton and Alice Brownfield when we meet outside, shouting to be heard over the ceaseless roar of engines. The expectation was that its setting and tricky topography – storey-height falls from end-to-

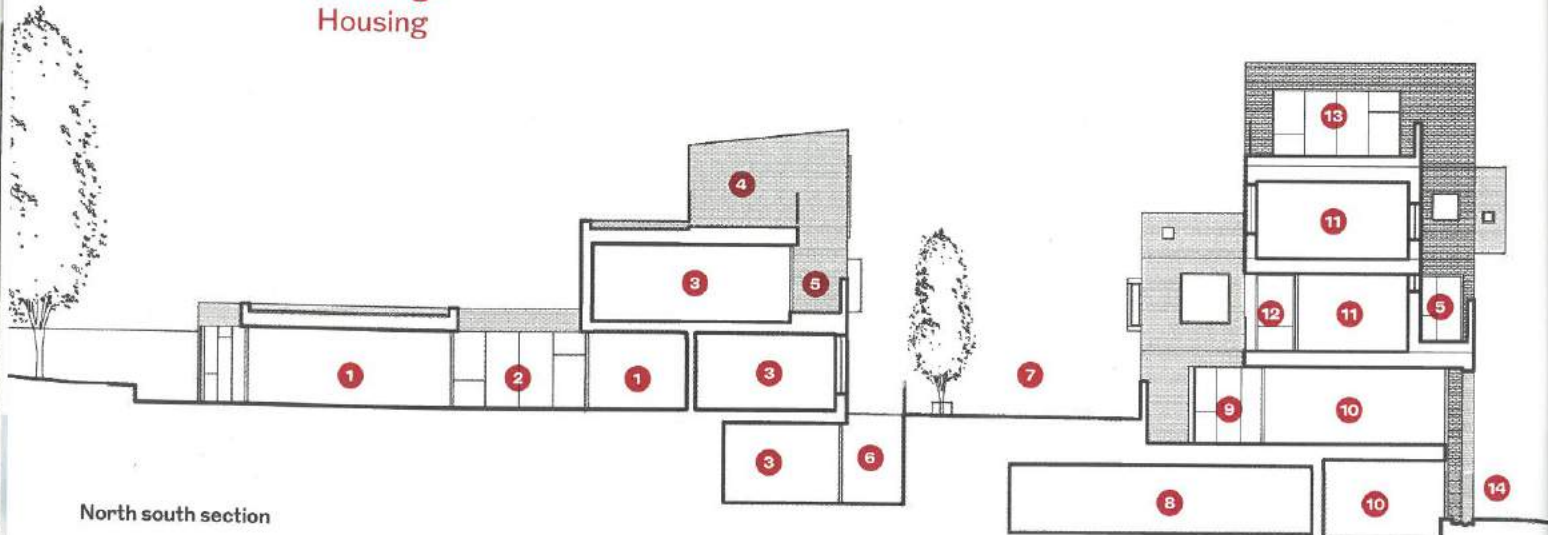


Opposite The scheme incorporates a shop at the western entrance to the mews.

Above The site, near Henlys Corner, runs between Beechwood and Edge Hill Avenues.

Below Bathrooms project over the main road like the privies of a medieval castle.





North south section

end and front to back – would allow about 50 homes in sealed apartment blocks at the three widest points, where the boundary sawtooths against the gardens of neighbouring semis.

Instead, PBA envisaged a dense two-sided mews extending between leafy avenues at either end. Barber is a long-standing champion of streets as the best catalyst for social integration, and argues that as housing comprises the lion's share of the city, its designers have special responsibility for the public realm. 'This project began as a piece of urban design,' says Brownfield. Civic ambitions were buttressed by the instinct that a wall of building would provide the best defence against the harsh conditions.

The 200m-long, five-storey roadside bulwark is mostly one room deep, so almost all living spaces get ventilation from the mews. With the entrances there, it's a rear elevation that faces the North Circular. 'Nevertheless,' says Hamilton, 'it's important that buildings don't turn their back on the city'. Composed at heroic scale from elements that recur in PBA's work – double-height parabolic arches, projecting bays

- 1 Single-storey flat
- 2 Internal courtyard
- 3 Townhouse
- 4 Roofterrace
- 5 Balcony
- 6 Lightwell
- 7 Mews
- 8 Garage
- 9 Entrance courtyard
- 10 Bottom flat
- 11 Middle flat
- 12 Entrance balcony
- 13 Top flat/roofterrace
- 14 North Circular road

Below Flats in four corner 'towers' are served by lifts.

Right Stacked maisonettes in the south block have entrances on the mews and a variety of private outdoor spaces.

and detached upper storeys that make a crenellated roofline – the oddly scaleless facade has the weight to hold its own against an A-road, but with the lively articulation of street-based housing.

Outside, where grime adheres to every surface, it seems impossible that this could be a comfortable place to live. But as you turn into the mews the air seems to clear and traffic noise drops immediately to the faintest hum. And architectural expression flips too, as muscular bombast gives way to a much softer, more intimate scene. Serried 'outriggers' make protective nooks in the southern terrace as it arcs out of sight round the bend, and leafy shrubs sprout from terraces above. Gabled dormers dance along the roofline and little oriel windows jetty over



the meandering edges of the block-paved walkway.

Not even the intricacy of this unabashedly picturesque composition fully discloses the scheme's underlying complexity. Under the mews a 76-car garage steps up along its length, and doubles as a retaining wall. There's no sense of it from the gentle incline of the walkway, which seems to follow the natural lie of the land.

Townhouses on the north side of the mews are fronted by railinged lightwells, like many across London. But upper storeys are manipulated to form a host of little balconies to living rooms on the middle floors, and roof terraces for bedrooms above. These clefts and concavities make the buildings seem porous, so that part of every private dwelling contributes to the theatre of the street.

This terrace is even less conventional than first appears. At the back is a mat of single-storey flats, wrapped around courtyards and hunkered down to the height of neighbours' fences.



Lower ground floor

Upper ground floor

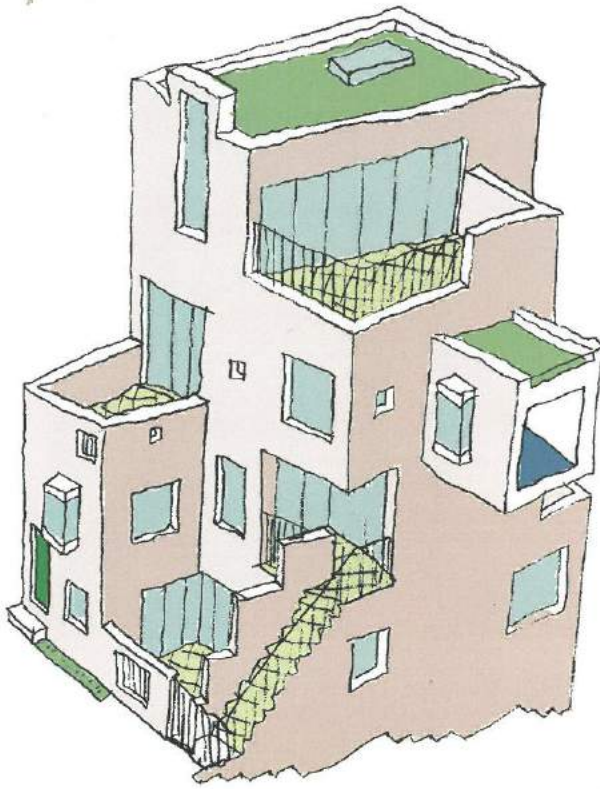
First floor



Above The walkway narrows to a pinch-point of just 3.9m in the middle.

Below Buildings rise from a single storey, adjacent to neighbours' gardens, to five storeys against the main road (second and third floor plans not shown).

- 1 Townhouse bedroom
- 2 Townhouse reception
- 3 Townhouse living room
- 4 Single-storey flat living room
- 5 Single-storey flat bedroom
- 6 Middle flat entrance
- 7 Bottom flat entrance
- 8 Top flat entrance
- 9 Bottom flat living area
- 10 Bottom flat bedroom
- 11 Bottom flat study
- 12 Middle flat living area
- 13 Middle flat bedroom
- 14 Stairs to middle flat bedroom
- 15 Stairs to top flat
- 16 Mews
- 17 North Circular road



IN NUMBERS

7,800m²
gross internal area

102.12 kWp
peak predicted onsite
photovoltaic energy
generation

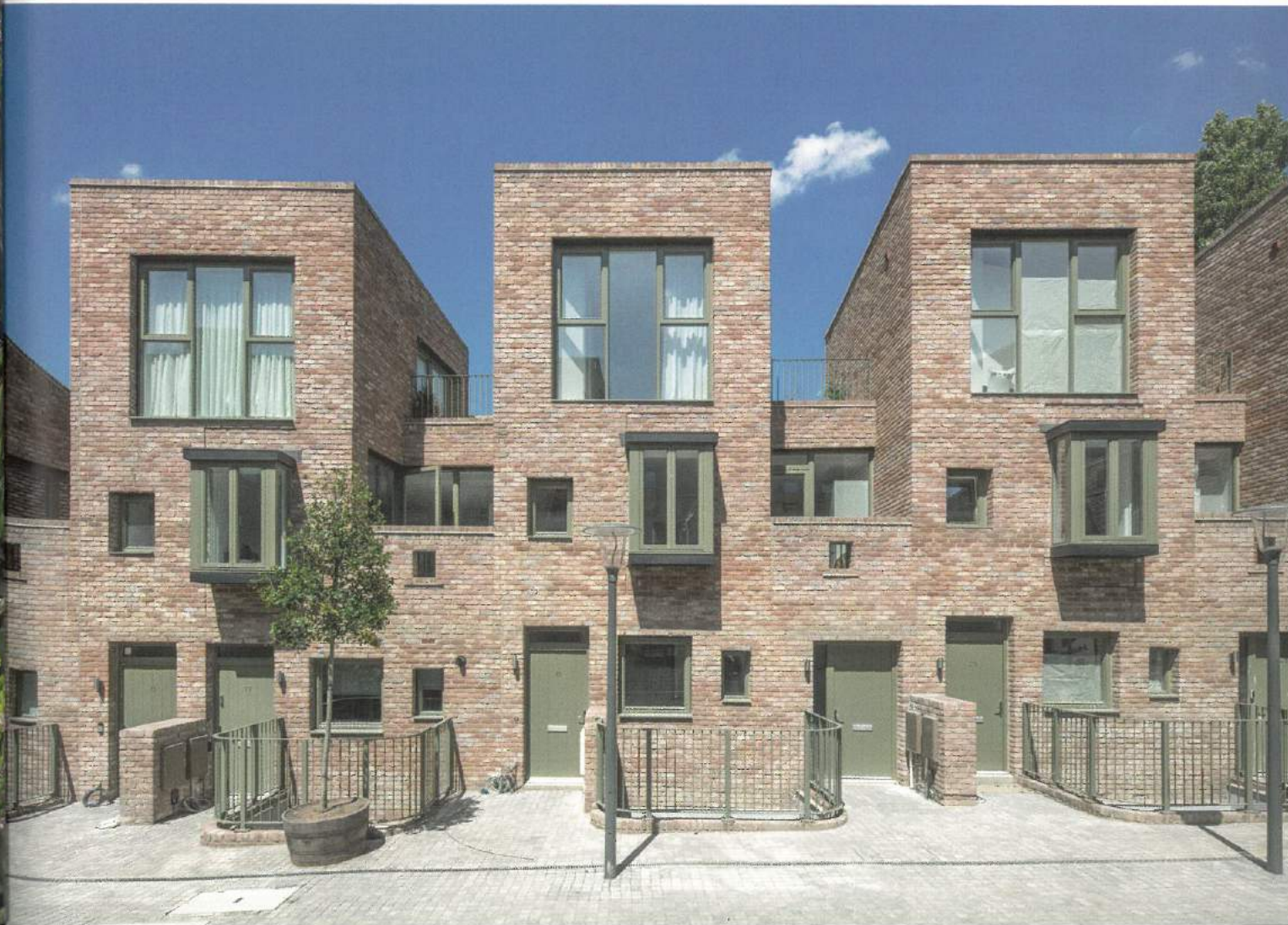
Confidential
construction cost

Left A maisonette
bridges a stair that
descends from the
middle of the mews to
the North Circular.

Below Townhouses on
the north side of the
mews.

Things get even more fiddly in the building across the mews, configured as row-houses with three maisonettes in each. At the bottom are homes for affordable rent. Their ground-floor living rooms, entered through small sunken courtyards, sit one storey above the North Circular. Open stairs connect them to kitchen-diners below, so those rooms don't rely on roadside windows for ventilation. Shared ownership apartments arranged over the first floor and part of the second are served by external stairs up to a sheltered balcony. Internal stairs ascend to market-sale flats with second-floor bedrooms and open-plan living areas on the third, opening onto roof terraces on both levels.

In essence, it's an elaborated version of Edwardian cottage flats. 'What seems like a relatively complex arrangement means that every home has its own front door on the street,' says Brownfield. Dispensing with shared stairwells and corridors means that residents meet in public space, where the architects believe that neighbourly interaction is more likely. The arrangement also ensures that the different tenures are visibly mixed



along the street. Another ambition was for children to play in the mews, which residents say they do.

There are drawbacks and trade-offs, but it's clear they have been carefully considered. Few homes on the south side have a level threshold, for instance, which might have been achieved by a more 'modernist' terracing of the ground, at the expense of connection to the neighbourhood. 'Accessibility is really important', says Brownfield, 'but to get this number of homes and create a route through which is for everyone there needs to be some compromise'.

One criticism sometimes made of PBA's schemes is that the high wall-to-floor ratio is a carbon-heavy architectural indulgence. Again, the architects have a considered answer. The articulation of the buildings allows close proximity and therefore high density at low rise. Without lifts and lobbies, the built area is reduced by a fifth, with subsequent savings on lighting and heating. 'Debate on sustainability is often about reducing carbon per square metre,' says Hamilton. 'But what if we can achieve the project aims with less area?'

The real question is whether the primacy given to big-picture urban ideals is to the detriment of homes. It is not, although layouts are certainly unusual, even eccentric. In a duplex flat in one of the corner towers, for example, an en-suite bathroom has full-height windows onto a balcony overlooking the mews. Privacy is preserved, but it does feel exposed. Most instances are not critical faults, but the sort of quirks many people enjoy in older homes.

There are also places that feel squeezed, as though the architect has tried to do too much with

Right Recessed windows with acoustic glass, floor heights and the location of stairs help to buffer bottom flats from the road.

Bottom left Blind windows in flank walls add texture to the south block.

Bottom right Dormers add character to top-floor kitchens in the south block.



the available space. Those oriel windows are too small to sit in. There's unexpected generosity in such a compact scheme – triple the amount of private outdoor space that local policy requires, for example. In the rooftop eyries of the south block, terraces seem to double the size of living rooms and light floods in from three directions. The biggest window gives a huge view of tree-shrouded hills. Down below, the North Circular is almost out of sight, and easy to put out of mind.

Residents I spoke to were clearly delighted with the place. So is the client. Construction, handled by its own team, was more straightforward than many D&B contractors fear when looking at PBA's plans, and the homes were snapped up quickly. All of which suggests those Twitter admirers are right. To borrow a common response: more of this, please. ●

PETER BARBER ARCHITECTS



Credits
Architect Peter Barber Architects
Client Kurapatwa Housing association Home Group
Structural engineer Hall Davis
Planning consultant DP9
Transport consultant Lime
M&E consultant Mendick Waring
Daylight consultant Point2
Acoustic consultant KP Acoustics

