

PORTSMOUTH SOCIETY 5TH ANNUAL DESIGN AWARDS

The Portsmouth Society holds an annual competition for the best buildings completed in the previous year. Nominations are sent in by members of the society and others in two categories: for the best new building and the best renovation or restoration.

This year there were six nominations in the first category and seven in the second. Three of the nominations for Best New Building were in fact for groups of buildings, new housing developments: Gunwharf Gate, a residential development by Ideal Homes on the site of the old power station at Old Portsmouth, Lidiard Gardens, houses and flats by Wimpey's on surplus land within the bounds of the Royal Marines Barracks at Eastney, and a group of one-bedroom houses by the Downland Housing Society between Inverness Road and South Road, Buckland.

New Buildings

The judges liked very much one of the single buildings, Viking House, Townsend Thoresen's office block near the Continental Ferry Port designed by the London architects Gollins, Melvin and Ward. and built by Warings of Portsmouth whose own headquarters building was nominated in the restoration category. We were impressed particularly by the interiors. The entrance was marked by a substantial tower of vertical circulation and the offices themselves, whilst open-planned, had sufficient sealed "cubicles" down either side to give privacy to those who need it and to break up the open plan into reasonably sized "social units". They liked very much the friendly appearance and the colours of the working areas, the fact that the building is narrow enough to allow work by daylight throughout, the bright cheerful modern furniture obviously chosen for the job and the fact that, unlike so many modern buildings, a feature is made of the staircase which has an appropriately nautical air about it. One design feature criticised was that of the sun-visors which, though adding decoration to the outside appearance and preventing it from being just another slab. are ineffective to the extent that internal sun blinds have had to be added after occupation. Viking House is highly commended.

They also liked the housing for Downlands Housing Society designed by Cecil Denny Highton of Old Portsmouth, especially the external features. However the promise of the approach from the north, with its attractive tile-hung facades and inviting pedestrian alley leaving the cars outside, was not quite borne out by what followed. We thought it a pity that the large space between East and Vest Courts made too much provision for cars in the open which could instead have been kept on the periphery. The L-shaped houses themselves were miracles of compression; but the repetition of the L-shaped units facing north, south, east and west meant that some of the houses were most unfortunate in their orientation. We found the living spaces dark and a bit cramped.

We thought some minor design modifications could have overcome the difficulties. The porches which ran from the front doors over the living room windows were tiled over dark wood and could have been translucent; another foot on the dimensions or a foot off the width of the stairs would have made a lot of difference to the space available. An interchange of living room and kitchen and of bedroom and bathroom would also have improved the brightness and brought the sky into view from the living rooms.

Park View, a block of flats designed by Ken Scaddan facing Alexandra Park, had much to be said in its favour. It turned what had been an open corner with truly Victorian skill. The flats themselves had interesting and ingenious interiors whilst the access decks at the back were nicely detailed in timber. But the whole development was inside out! Like Gunwharf Gate, this development needed a "Byker Wail" treatment with bathrooms, kitchens and access decks facing the noisy road to the north so that the inner faces of the L-space could look south on to a tranquil courtyard or garden.

The architect had been prevented by the planners from making these obvious design decisions. So concerned were they that his flats should not overlook the garden of an existing house - which was overlooked anyway from the houses next door, not to mention a whole terrace in the next road - that they insisted on solid timber screens on the access deck and bedroom windows so high that no one could look out of them.

This seemed to us an example of "planning by special pleading", the protection from overlooking of a single home-owner, already overlooked, by spoiling the best features of the environment of a dozen or so families.

The City Architect's extension to Portsmouth Sixth Form College was obviously appreciated by the users for the extra accommodation it made available. It also "marks" the entrance to the college in a bright and cheerful way which the rather drab existing building did not. We welcome the fact that the staff were consulted at the design stage. The additional internal circulation provided by the link to the main block was very much appreciated. Nevertheless in our view the building suffered from a number of surprising environmental problems. The lecture room on the ground floor seemed to us rather low and gloomy. It had a large window in a deep reveal, to the left of the teacher and beyond the door. This served (a) to distract those who could see directly through it to what was going on outside, (b) to tantalise those who could not see through with the possibility that something *might* be going on and (c) to spoil the blackout needed for projecting slides. The interior colour scheme we thought poor compared with the outside and there was the old, old mistake of a fully glazed wall on the east face with the inevitable over-heating problems inside of, of all things, the computer rooms.

We found the residents very happy in Wimpey's Lidiard Gardens. We liked the way the view of the Royal Marine barracks clock tower had been framed between the new buildings but we thought the general appearance was suburban with the road unnecessarily wide. The development could have been more dense or the houses brought forward to give more of an urban feel to the estate.

The winner in the new-build category is the new estate, Gunwharf Gate, a very good contribution to present housing needs. The developers are Ideal Homes (Southern) Ltd and the architects the Manzini / Franklin Partnership of Croydon. We liked the way the space was used. the comparatively generous gardens, and the high proportions of garages and car ports. There is a good mix of ages here from elderly couples to young families. The houses and flats were more interesting and varied than either of the other two estates we visited. The site itself was more difficult in that a large transformer station had to be accommodated. Here a miniature Byker Wall had been used to screen this unfortunate neighbour. The facades had a touch of "kitsch" in the mixture of facings, of plaster and different bricks, and touches of "post-Modern" with "classical" pediments in stained timber but these were used with a lightness of touch not to say. in some cases, humour. The general effect was attractive and modern. We liked the way the turret on the top of the tall block which screens the substation echoed the ball finial on the top of nearby Landport Gate. We had some criticisms about the arrangement of parking and play areas and we thought it a pity that double glazing was not fitted as standard, though one of the owners we met had had it added easily and cheaply. One house we saw had large windows facing north west on to the generous garden but only very small ones on the sunny street side.

But in general, there was more sensitivity than in the Downlands scheme to the orientation of individual dwellings and, although there was less sense of urban enclosure that we saw in that scheme, there was a good deal more than at Lidiard Gardens where the spaces designed for cars seemed to predominate over spaces for people.

The judges were unanimous in giving Gunwharf Gate the award for the Best New Building.

Restorations

In the restoration category the judges were torn between two splendid schemes: Gatcombe House and the former Nazareth House, renamed Brandon Court.

We saw Portsmouth Housing Association's conversion for their own offices of a conversion previously made by Radio Victory of the former St Mary's Parish Institute facing St Mary's Church. The several previous conversions have resulted in a confusing layout of the lower floors. The long room below the vaulted roof has a pleasant air about it but insufficient attention has been paid to the problem of noise in an open office. The designers, we felt, could have learnt from Viking House how to deal with this sort of space.

Jacqeline Court at the Kenilworth Road / Clarendon Road corner had been an Indian Restaurant before a threatened collapse of the whole building. We were pleased to see it saved and converted into flats.

Fratton Buildings, the two blocks of railway tenements overlooking Fratton Station, based on the "Model Houses" for working families which Henry Roberts designed for Prince Albert, had long been threatened with demolition. Howarth Properties have done well to save them from this fate by their ingenious conversion in which the two smaller flats on each floor were opened up to form one large one, while the medium sized flats were kept much as they were except for the addition of kitchens and bathrooms. The result goes towards meeting the great need for reasonably priced rented accommodation; and we found great tenant satisfaction. What is needed now is a use for the fantastic and quite beautiful semi-octagonal wash houses behind them which have been sympathetically restored.

In Merton Road, Southsea, we saw a large Victorian detached house converted by Andrew Kerr of Makins, Carter & Kerr for use as home for the Sisters of Bethany who are very pleased with it. Appropriate ecclesiastical touches have been added - a new tower and a window as focus to the chapel.

Melbourne House and Perth Houses (off Arundel Street), represent part of the City Architect's attempts to give drab medium-rise council flats dating from the early 1950s new images and "defensible space" of the kind identified as a social need by Oscar Newman in the USA and Alice Coleman in this country. In this, it seemed to us, they were rather successful, although our German judge who had long admired from afar the British tradition of balcony access was sad to see it abandoned here. The refurbished flats had carpeted stairs and were much brighter and more colourful than they had been, although on our count only fifty per cent of the "planters" were being tended because of weight-loading problems more apparent than real.

There were, however, serious complaints about the management and what seemed to us a missed opportunity. Some of the residents we met had been "decanted" from an adjacent block which was undergoing the same treatment. Yet this glorious opportunity of having "captive" potential users almost on site was totally ignored by those who could have used them in active and informed "participation". Most of the tenants we met had good things to say about the City Architect's part. The only criticism from them of the design was of the position of the play space - too near the incoming traffic. They were quite unanimous in condemning the quality of housing management, for example that newly carpeted areas were beginning to deteriorate from builders' movements.

Then there was Gatcombe House, Hilsea, an 18th century country house with a chequered history ending in total dereliction, now lovingly restored in all its glory by W arings of Portsmouth as their own headquarters. The work has been beautifully carried out to the design of V. H. Saunders & Son, architects of Southampton, and under the watchful eye of the County Council's Historic Buildings Bureau. Clearly this was a labour of love and the

standard of the rebuilding was quite outstanding. Many rooms have been restored to their former glory whilst others have been divided up in ways which by no means violated the overall form of the house. We were intrigued too to learn of such things as the unobtrusive provision of ducting for computer cabling. We thought it a pity that the splendid furnishings and specially woven carpet of the ground floor rooms were not quite matched by the offices upstairs where the furnishings were not well suited to the rooms. However this is an excellent reuse of a building we might have lost and a fine example to other firms who want to enhance their image and be able to show their potential customers what they can do. Gatcombe House is highly commended. In any normal year it would have been fully worthy of our major award. But this was not a normal year.

For there was also the former convent, Nazareth House, now named Brandon Court, at the Albert Road / Lawrence Road corner, at first sight a most unprepossessing candidate for an award of any kind. This has been most imaginatively converted into residential accommodation by Brandon Properties of Southsea. Other potential developers had shied off the task, daunted by the difficulties presented particularly by the height of the existing ceilings. Although the standard of the external restoration did not match that of Gatcombe House, the inside fully made up for it. Faced with the challenge of some quite extraordinary interiors, including ranges of little rooms, larger rooms, a chapel and even a laundry, Brandon Properties have shown tremendous flair in re-using these apparently intractable spaces with real three-dimensional imagination.

Some of the new interiors have to be seen to be believed. Features - joinery, panelling etc - had been moved from one site and reinstalled in another, and the most astonishing use has been made of the available space, the most spectacular being a penthouse maisonette in the main roof space, maisonettes in the chapel preserving the vaulted ceiling throughout, and the flats and houses in what was the separate laundry building. This brilliant conversion receives the Society's award for Best Restoration.

The judges were: Professor Geoffrey Broadbent, the Society's President and head of the Portsmouth Polytechnic School of Architecture, Celia Dark and Roger James, respectively chairman and secretary of the Society, and Professor Peter Faller of the School of Architecture at the University of Stuttgart. The commemorative ceramic plaques, designed and made by Mr Clive Nethercott, denoting the awards to Gunwharf Gate and Brandon Court will be unveiled by the Lord Mayor of Portsmouth on Thursday October 22.

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