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A model development?

Accordia in Cambridge was the first housing scheme to win one of the top UK architecture prizes. With the property market under pressure, Oliver Lowenstein examines its relevance

It was interesting timing. Last autumn, just as the UK's residential property market was falling through the floor, the Royal Institute of British Architects announced that the country's most prestigious architectural award, the Stirling Prize, was going to a housing scheme for the very first time.

Accordia, a development on the edge of leafy inner-city Cambridge, master-planned by FeildenCleggBradley Studios (FCB) for Countryside Properties, was the dark-horse winner amid stiff competition from commercial and public projects by stars including Zaha Hadid and Norman Foster. Some saw it as a much-needed call to architects, demanding they pay more attention to quality housing, especially the 3m new homes the government wants to see built by 2020. But, with the building industry struggling and private-sector architectural contracts disappearing quickly, it was a tough period for the message to get through.

Yet one should still look closely at Accordia. The new thinking applied there is needed now more than ever. And, walking round the handsome and well-thought-through community, which is still being built out by a second developer, Redeham Homes, the reasons the Riba judges chose it become evident.

From the opening tree-lined central drive, past the multi-level courtyard and terraced housing with roof gardens and patios, through to the faux village green and its adjoining four-storey apartment blocks, there is a fluidity to the entire project. It has a coherence and sense of rootedness absent from much housing. This isn't surprising as FCB has been at the forefront of pioneering sustainability over the past three decades. It describes the Accordia project as designing for "living in a garden".

Keith Bradley, a senior partner, emphasises the practice's collaborative approach. Believing that the first 9.5-hectare site to be developed (formerly home to empty government office buildings) needed a diversity of architectural voices working on it, he invited two up-and-coming London-based practices – Maccreanor Lavington, which also has an office in Rotterdam, and Alison Brooks Architects – to design a quarter and a tenth of this initial phase. He also brought landscape specialists Grant Associates on board, realising how important the outdoor spaces would be.

The result is a modern update on Georgian and Victorian terraces and mews, the palette of sandstone brick echoing Cambridge's older university buildings. The main group of primarily three-storey houses faces a central road but each has a narrow 5-metre frontage, discouraging residents from parking and driving in favour of walking or cycling since the city centre, with its transport links, is easily accessible on foot. Most of the mews properties also have ground-level communal gardens, intended as spaces for neighbours to get together, as well as roof gardens and terraces. Bradley calls this courtyard typology "layered houses". "With shared space, you need private space as well," he explains.

The new buildings are set amid trees: a central avenue of mature oaks, saved instead of felled, and further rows hugging the development edges to, as Bradley says, "calm everything down". Beyond are Cambridge's Botanic Gardens; grassy edge land supporting the natural urban drainage system; and pathways that locals use to get from one part of town to another. This is no gated community. And "it's a built landscape; we've worked with the landscape that was there," Bradley says.

Yet there is still visual interest and contrast. With the terraces, stacked chimney sentinels and the austere lines and geometries of the houses, the feel is of an abstracted chequerboard within a woody clearing. "As a case study of a way to approach a brownfield, it is a great example of how it can be done – preserving the trees, using the landscape as the skeleton," Brooks says. "What's brilliant is that it feels quite urbane... It's really good thing that it happened and will be transformative



because the old, super-high-density model is exhausted. It's too dense and the units are too small. They're not for people to live in."

An afternoon wander around Accordia, including invitations to look inside a couple of the flats, brought its fair share of positive responses. Caroline Blake and her husband, who moved from Buckinghamshire, central England, into one of the buildings with a roof terrace said they missed their old ground-level garden but were enjoying the spacious rooms in their new home and the company of their new neighbours. "There are a lot of professionals here and people like it, especially families," she said.

Further into Accordia's heart, Jane Robinson and her daughter were also enthusiastic, though frustrated by a lack of privacy and inadequate rubbish collection. "It's exciting, with lots of space outside, particularly for children," she said.

But there were complaints too. Another woman returning home to Accordia's affordable housing, tucked away from the community's leafier parts and accounting for a quarter of its total units, said she was grateful for the accommodation, where she lives with her husband and two children, but disappointed with the size of the rooms and the lack of nearby shops. She declined to give her name.

The development is also still a building site, with Redeham's phases, designed by CHBC Architects and Design Company Group within the FCB plan, expected to be completed by the end of next year. Meanwhile, outside observers, such as Bill Dunster of ZEDFactory, whose BedZED eco-development in south London was a Stirling prize finalist in 2003, have questioned Accordia's environmental performance, arguing that its relatively low-density nature diminishes its energy savings.

Still, most agree that the good outweighs the bad. Riba president Sunand Prasad cites the "sheer architectural quality, its lasting relevance, environmental agenda, the degree of innovation in the design and procurement and the civic dimension", which included big contributions from the Cambridge planning department. Dominic Church at the UK Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment's Building

HOMES AVAILABLE

A work in progress

Having purchased Accordia from Countryside in 2006, Redeham is finishing the final phase of development, now called Accordia Living. Ninety residences – some complete, some under construction – are still for sale. They range from a one-bedroom, 648 sq ft, second-floor flat with a terrace for £284,000 to a four-bedroom, 2,690 sq ft, end-of-row house with a garage for £899,950, with 2,000 sq ft penthouses in a building designed by Alison Brooks also

available. Interiors include Villeroy and Boch bathrooms, Miele and Eurocucina kitchens, remote-controlled gas fireplaces and under-floor heating.

According to Redeham's Pam Reardon, sales are down due to the recession. But "last month we sold six properties and this month five", she says. "It's very much a local market [of buyers] and our visitor rate has not slowed."

www.accordialiving.co.uk



Winner Accordia's design preserved an avenue of mature oaks, top, and offers multi-level home layouts, above

for Life initiative, also points to the collaborative approach taken on the project. It was "a very robust co-operative approach where developer and local authority worked closely together," he says. "This consensus was about creating a very high-quality built environment. It's a very positive signal."

Indeed, given the current climate for developers, the lessons of public-private partnerships embodied in Accordia are being promoted as prescient. After all, the nationwide housing shortfall is "a demographic fact" that won't disappear, Prasad notes. And, as Church explains, the new austerity is likely to shift the focus to higher-standard homes rather than the low-quality ones generated during the "exuberant phase of the market [when developers had] no incentive to consider design". (According to Cabi's recent audit, nearly a third of UK residences are of "poor standard", while half are "average".)

"The homes may not look like Accordia necessarily but it provides an example," Church says. "There's an opening for architects now, which just wasn't there, in part because developers didn't see a need for [them] for the past 20 years."

Already local authorities round the country are using Building for Life's 20-point measure of quality housing – for

which Accordia received a score of 18, the highest rating yet. All three practices involved with the award-winning development are busy with new design research – even if FCB is also laying off staff and embroiled in a controversial 2,000-unit housing scheme in its home town of Bath. And, to those who say that what's possible in ivory-towered Cambridge isn't so easily transferable to less wealthy regions, Bradley notes that Accordia was built to a tight budget, about £1,500 per sq metre with the total phase-one cost coming in at £38m.

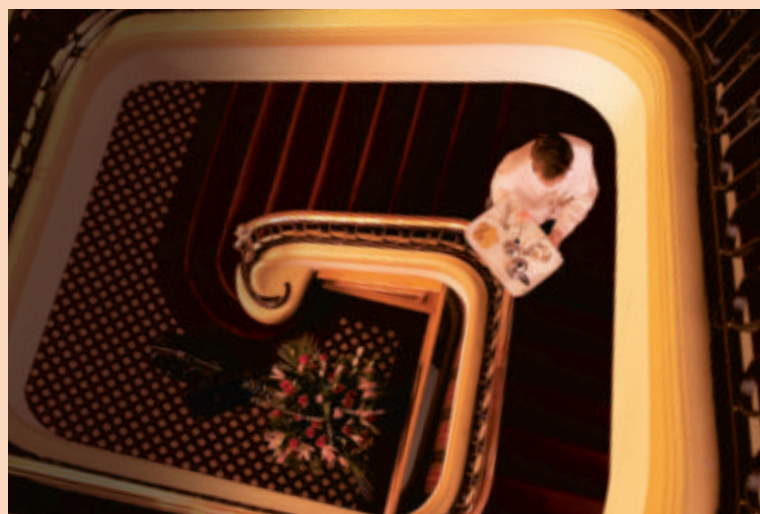
Prasad rejects the idea that Riba intended to send a signal to architects and developers by honouring Accordia. "That's not how the Stirling Prize works," he says. But he thinks renewed interest in housing is natural. "It's multi-level, can be seen and taken as a benchmark," he says. It is attracting older architects who "look back nostalgically at the 1970s, before the neglect of the sector" as well as younger ones – such as Brooks, ORMS, ProctorMatthews, Richard Murphy, dRMM and S333 – who are keen to apply "new urban" concepts to residential projects, inspired by work they've seen in the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland and Germany.

"Cities aren't made by one-off buildings. They're made by 2m buildings, by the housing sector," Brooks says. "If you get that right it makes a huge impact. It took a while to spread but Britain has been on board for about five years."

The key is to adapt those European ideas for a UK audience and environment, Bradley adds, noting that Accordia's planning is "more continental but, in the detailed approach, [also] very English and specifically relates strongly to Cambridge".

He considers this a defining moment for residential architecture in Britain. The awarding of the Stirling Prize to Accordia was perhaps not just interesting timing. For those involved in housing, it was a sign of increasingly exciting times.

Oliver Lowenstein runs the cultural review, Fourth Door Review. The pictures are from the new book 'Dwelling: Accordia' (Black Dog Publishing, £19.95).



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