Figure 1: Generic city facade, graphically edited

Creating a sense of a place in contemporary London using site-informed strategies

Illustrated Dissertation

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How can architects use site-informed strategies to ensure that the places they build feel rooted, connected to their history and the communities that inhabit them?

Figure 2: LSE Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, street view

Content

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Abstract

Contemporary cities are increasingly shaped by large-scale developments that prioritise efficiency over civic life, producing environments designed for movement and transaction rather than gathering and living. Spaces that people pass through rather than belong to. This dissertation examines how site-informed strategies can reinforce a sense of place and belonging in cities increasingly shaped by generic developments, asking how architects can ensure that the places they build feel rooted, connected to their history and the communities that inhabit them.

The theoretical framework draws on Christian Norberg-Schulz's Genius Loci and Kenneth Frampton's Critical Regionalism, both used as analytical instruments to identify how architecture can engage with the specific conditions of a site rather than ignoring them.

Two contemporary London projects are examined through close analysis of architectural decisions, direct site observations, and original analytical drawings and diagrams produced by the author. The LSE Saw Swee Hock Student Centre by O'Donnell and Tuomey, an institutional building in a dense city centre environment, and Peter Barber's McGrath Road housing in Stratford, a residential scheme responding to the social logic of historical street typologies.

The analysis reveals that site-informed design is not a single method or aesthetic but a consistent approach. From engaging seriously with what already exists, shows how to produce environments that feel particular rather than interchangeable. It also reveals a fundamental limit - design can create conditions for belonging but cannot guarantee them.

Introduction

Walking through many contemporary cities makes you feel like on an endless road, continuous circulation routes with nowhere to stop, nowhere to simply exist without paying for the privilege. Some streets feel empty despite being full of people. Some buildings feel disconnected from any specific place or time, as if you just saw them a minute ago. This experience is not unique to one city, environments around the world are increasingly designed from movement and transaction rather than for gathering and living, producing a creeping sense of placelessness- a feeling of passing through rather than belonging to.

This unease sits at the heart of this dissertation: how can architects use site-informed strategies to ensure that the places they build feel rooted, connected to their history and the communities that inhabit them?

To address this question, the dissertation analyses the theoretical frameworks of Christian Norberg-Schulz's Genius Loci and Kenneth Frampton's Critical Regionalism, both of which argue that architecture should engage with the specific conditions of a site rather than applying universal solutions no matter the place. While these frameworks are well established theoretically, yet their translation into practice tools remains under explored. The analysis combines close analysis of architectural decisions with direct site observation to identify practical design strategies.

Figure 3: McGrath Road housing, street view

Figure 4: LSE Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, street view

Two contemporary London projects are examined. The first is the LSE Saw Swee Hock Student Centre by O'Donnell and Tuomey, a building that reads as dense and almost closed from the outside, yet inside creates a warm, socially active environment that draws students in and encourages them to stay. The second is Peter Barber's McGrath Road housing in Stratford, a residential scheme that feels human and individual despite its density. The two were chosen because their different programmes, institutional and residential, produce different kinds of site-informed strategies, suggesting that how architecture responds to its context is shaped not only by the site itself but by what the building is for and who it serves.

Literature Review

Contemporary cities are increasingly shaped by large-scale development processes that prioritise efficiency, speed and economic return. As a result, many urban environments risk becoming generic, losing the local characteristics that allow people to develop attachment and a sense of belonging. A number of architectural theorists have examined why cities become homogenised and how architecture might respond by reinforcing a stronger sense of place.

Rogers and Power argue that successful cities require spaces where people can gather, interact and thrive, yet contemporary development consistently prioritises efficiency and profit over civic life. Rogers describes the typical result as a single-activity building, a shopping centre, office block or block of flats, with no public space, no structural expression and no unprofitable qualities (Rogers, 2013, pp. 20-21, cited in Martin and Wilson, 2024). Koch and Latham (2011) support this, arguing that redesigning public spaces can actively generate community, new interactions and inclusive atmospheres, yet the current model is efficient but produces environments that lack social life and urban character. Nowicka and Vertovec (2014) similarly observe that cosmopolitan principles such as tolerance, recognition and openness are what allow individuals to experience belonging in diverse urban settings, qualities that 'efficient' developments rarely foster.

A similar critique appears in the work of Auge (1995), who also argues that contemporary urban environments are increasingly becoming what he calls 'non-places'. These are places that are designed for profit, movement, consumption and temporary occupation, like airports, motorways and shopping centres. Traditional places are often grounded, historical and connected to identity while non-places rarely foster lasting social relationships or collective memory. Instead, they create environments that could exist almost anywhere, contributing to the growth of homogenisation in cities.

Koolhaas (2002) supported this critique in his essay 'Junkspace', arguing that modern development has produced large commercial interiors and infrastructures shaped by circulation, consumption and technological systems rather than civic meaning. In an attempt to serve everyone, architecture loses distinctiveness and cultural depth, becoming matched to global economic systems. The result is spatial experience that is fragmented and detached from the cultural or historical context of a city, weakening architecture's ability to support a sense of place.

In response to this condition, Norberg-Schulz (1979) stresses the importance of place identity. He argues that modern cities focus heavily on technological efficiency that results in environmental chaos and a weak relationship between people and their surroundings.

According to Norberg-Schulz (1979, p.5), human identity is closely connected to the identity of a place, meaning that architecture should respond to the particular qualities of its environment, we have to express our identity through architecture. Importantly, he also suggests that the spirit of the place is not fixed (1979, p. 18). As cities evolve, architecture should reinterpret local characteristics in new ways and allow them to live in new forms.

Malpas (1999, p.33) argues that our identity and sense of self are shaped by the places we inhabit and the experiences and memories they carry. This supports Norberg-Schulz's (1979) argument on a deeper level: when we overlook the unique character of a location, we risk damaging something more fundamental than aesthetics. We ruin the essential connection between our surroundings and our sense of who we are and where we belong.

A related architectural response is proposed by Frampton (1983) in 'Towards a Critical Regionalism': Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance. Frampton (1983) argues that cities are expanding endlessly, resulting in architecture losing its connection to specific sites and cultural contexts. Critical Regionalism therefore seeks to mediate between global technological development and local identity. Rather than ejecting modern technology, the approach adapts to the particular conditions of a place.

Frampton (1983) also highlights the importance of place-forms in fostering a sense of community and identity. However, modern developments often destroy place-forms, replacing them with placeless environments. Critical Regionalism, on the other hand encourages architects to engage with the irregularities of a site, including climate, topography, light and materiality. By doing so, architecture can be experienced through the body and senses rather than purely through visual form. Frampton (1983, p.29) describes how modern architecture often promotes 'rationalised sight', suppressing other sensory experiences such as sound, smell and texture. This produces a 'loss of nearness', distancing people from their immediate environment.

Together, these texts establish a clear tension between global development and the creation of meaningful environments. Norberg-Schulz (1979), Frampton (1983) and Malpas (1999) all argue that architecture must engage with the specific local conditions to support identity and belonging, yet Koolhaas (2002) and Auge (1995) show that contemporary urbanisation often pulls in the opposite direction. What remains less developed is how these theories translate into practical actions. This dissertation therefore examines two contemporary London projects to see how site-informed design strategies and the ideas proposed by these theorists can be used to root buildings in the urban context.

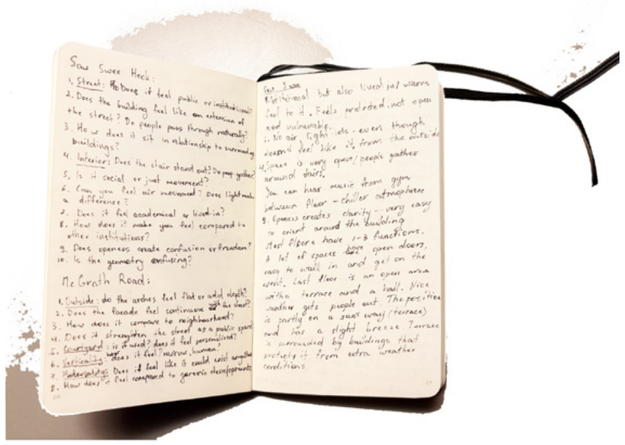

Figure 5: Author's site visit notes and observations

Methodology

To meet the objective the dissertation applies the theoretical frameworks of Critical Regionalism and Genius Loci to two contemporary London case studies.

Case studies were selected based on criteria adapted from the literature: connection between past and present, modern construction and regional expression, urban context, climate, light, materials, tactility and circulation. These criteria were used as a consistent analytical lens across both projects, allowing the theoretical framework to inform the analysis rather than operate as a purely descriptive tool. The two were chosen for their different contexts but comparable scale. Saw Swee Hock is an institutional centre extending vertically in a dense city centre environment, responding to the constraints of a tight urban site. McGrath Road is a residential project in a quieter part of the city, extending horizontally and drawing from the existing street typology. Together, they demonstrate two distinct approaches to site-informed design, shaped by programme, context and the particular conditions of the site.

The primary limitation of this research is its scope. Two case studies allow for depth of analysis but limit the breadth of conclusions, some strategies extracted here will not be applicable across all sites, programmes and constraints. A further limitation is the lack of peer reviewed academic literature directly addressing these buildings, meaning the analysis relies primarily on architecture journals, professional publications and site visits. All analytical conclusions about the buildings are therefore the author's own, informed by direct observation and engagement with the theoretical framework. Another constraint is the inaccessibility of the housing on McGrath Road, as it is private territory and visitors are not permitted. Analysis of the terraces and internal elements was as a result based on available sources.

Precedents are analysed in turn, based on site visits and literature to identify how site-informed strategies are expressed in built form.

Figure 6: Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, aerial context view

Figure 7: Surrounding street context, Holborn

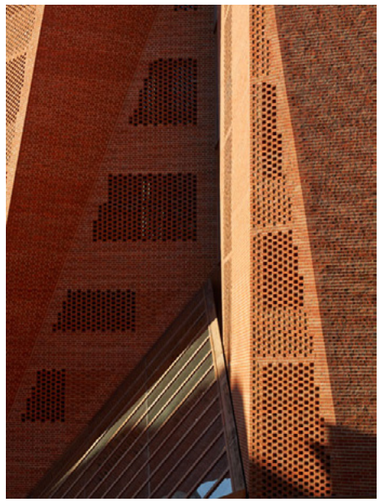

Figure 8: Perforated brick facade detail

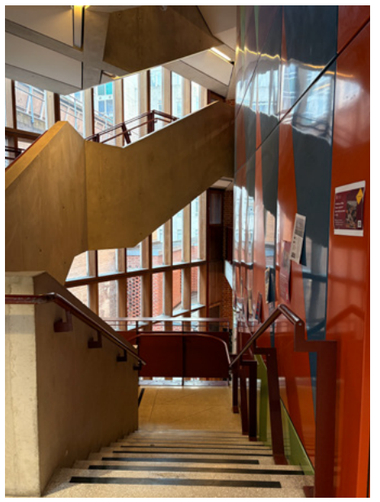

Figure 9: Interior stair and circulation

Figure 10: Street approach to building

Figure 11: Narrow street context, viewing axis

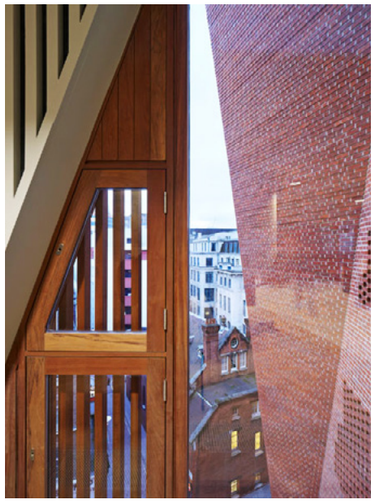

Figure 12: Interior view on the street

Urban Strategy

What first feels like a random shape is actually a response to the existing urban context. The building embraces the constraints of its site; its shape and the slope of its external walls are largely determined by viewing axes shaped by surrounding narrow streets (Magdalena, 2020). Rather than treating these constraints as obstacles, the design uses them to generate form, showing how site conditions can produce distinctiveness. The approach extends the street logic inside the building, creating continuity between public exterior and interior spaces with as few doors and constraints as possible- avoiding the clear separation typical of most contemporary institutional buildings.

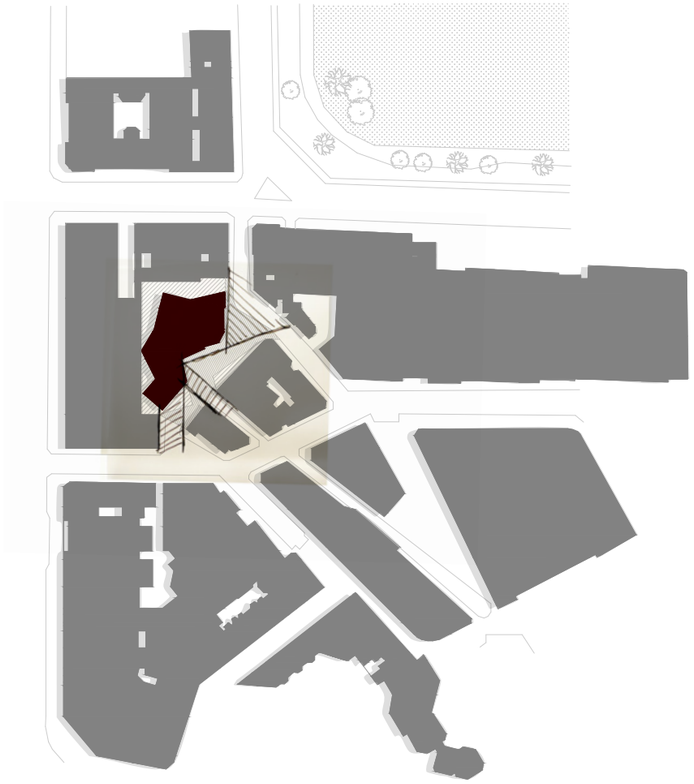

Figure 13: Site plan showing urban context, adapted from original source

Extending the Outside In

From the site visit, this continuity is clearly visible in the vertical circulation. People naturally gather around the stair, encouraged by tables, chairs and benches distributed throughout. Music from the gym spreads softly between floors, creating a layered, informal atmosphere. The geometry, expressive from the outside, guides rather than disorients on the inside. Despite the heavy brick mass and almost closed appearance from the street, the interior is bright and socially active. The contrast between dense exterior and open interior strengthens the experience of entering, the building feels protected rather than exposed, institutional yet genuinely lived-in.

Figure 14: Building section with programme diagram, adapted from original source

Poetics of Construction

The use of locally sourced red brick relates the building to London's material identity without replicating historical forms (Magdalena, 2020). Surrounding buildings use bricks of varied tones and textures, and the project responds by using familiar materials in a new way through complex geometry and perforation. This is what Frampton (1983) called the ‘poetics of construction’, expressing structure clearly and allowing materials to retain their physical weight and texture so that a building resists becoming a generic product. The exposed brickwork creates a tectonic and tactile presence; its familiarity grounds the building in its context, while its application avoids imitation. From the interior, the brick doesn’t feel decorative. It contributes to the sense of protection, making the building feel secure and stable rather than fragile or temporary.

Figure 15: Street context showing brick materiality

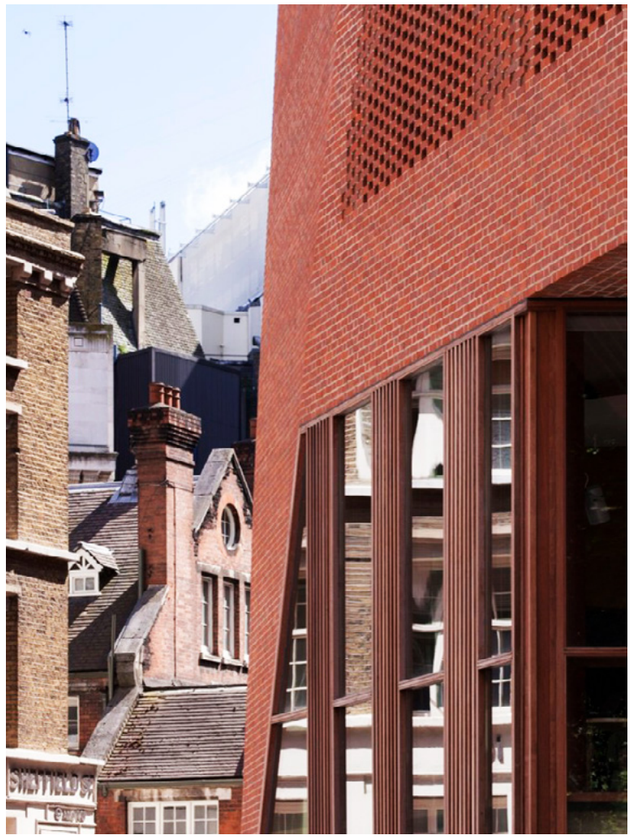

Figure 16: Facade perforation detail, exterior

Figure 17: Interior brick and circulation space

Light and Environmental Experience

The perforated brick facade controls both light and ventilation simultaneously, through the balance shifts with the season. In warmer months the openwork allows natural airflow through openable windows behind the perforation while in colder months users can close them, retaining the filtered light quality without the ventilation. Rather than applying a universal mechanical solution regardless of climate, the facade responds to London's specific environmental conditions by allowing occupants to mediate between inside and outside according to need. This reflects Frampton's (1983, p.27) idea of tectonic expression, the facade is not a purely aesthetic image, it allows materials and structural systems to communicate their role in shaping the space.

During the visit in winter, the perforated brick allows a controlled amount of sunlight in, allowing visual connection with the street, but the internal atmosphere still feels enclosed and protected, the operable windows in front the perforation were closed, as the system intends in colder months. The terrace on the top floor becomes particularly active in good weather. Its position partly follows the sun's path and benefits from a slight breeze, while surrounding buildings protect it from excessive wind, creating a microclimate that supports use.

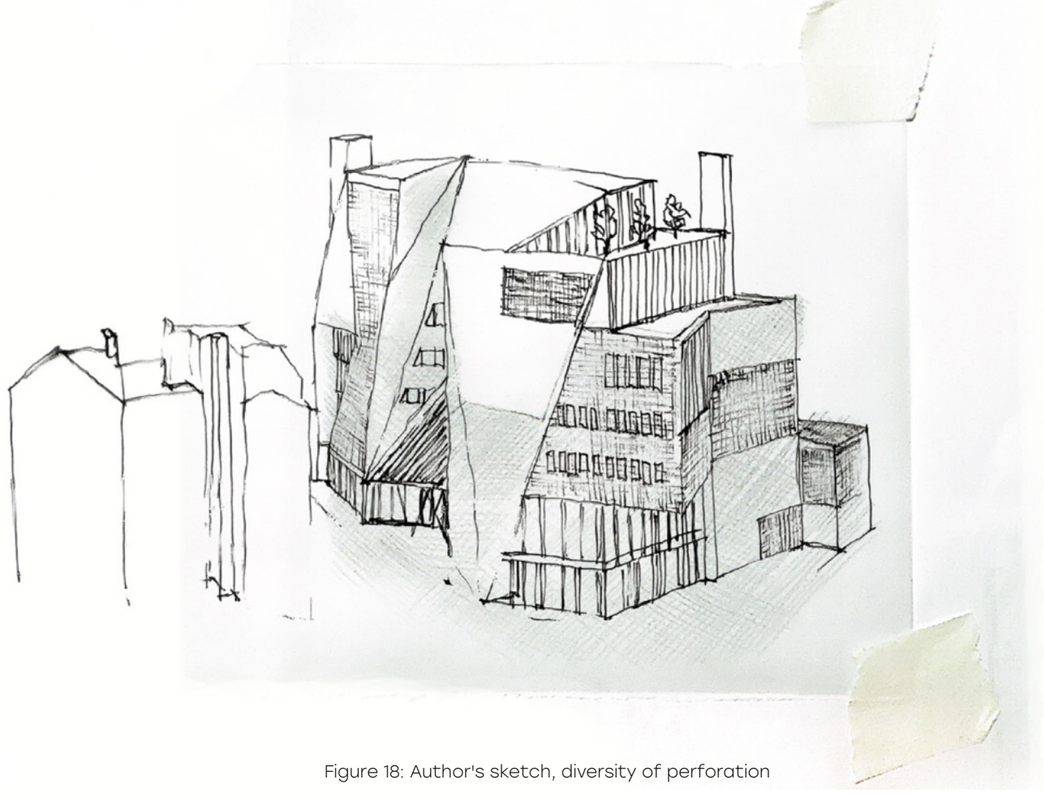

Figure 18: Author's sketch, diversity of perforation

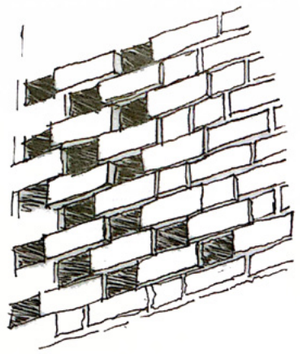

Figure 19: Author's sketch, facade perforation detail

Figure 20: Roof terrace in use

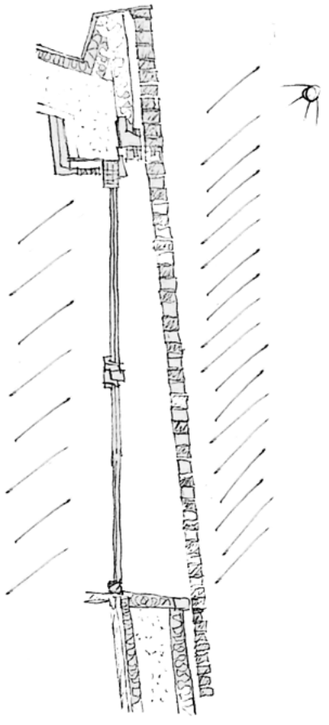

Figure 21: Author's sketch, window and perforated facade section, illustration of the light filtering

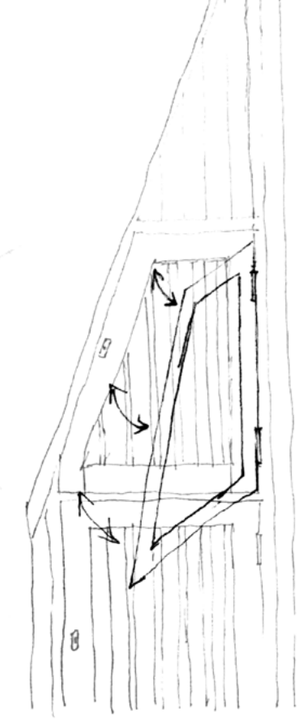

Figure 22: Author's sketch, window detail, ventilation

Social Space and Interior

The interior avoids a corporate atmosphere through exposed brick, concrete, timber and coloured steel creating a robust and tactile environment where the stair becomes the central organizing element, structuring movement vertically while forming spaces for gathering and pause (Hartman, 2019). The intention was a lived-in warehouse shaped by students overtime rather than a fixed institutional interior. The spatial openness combined with differentiated material zones creates varied experiences of light, sound and proximity allowing sensory exchange between spaces without merging them. The building resists Frampton's (1983, p.29) 'loss of nearness' and speaks to Norberg-Schulz's (1979) argument that architecture should engage all the senses to produce a felt sense of place, resisting the uniformity of generic institutional interiors through layered sensory experience rather than pure visual clarity.

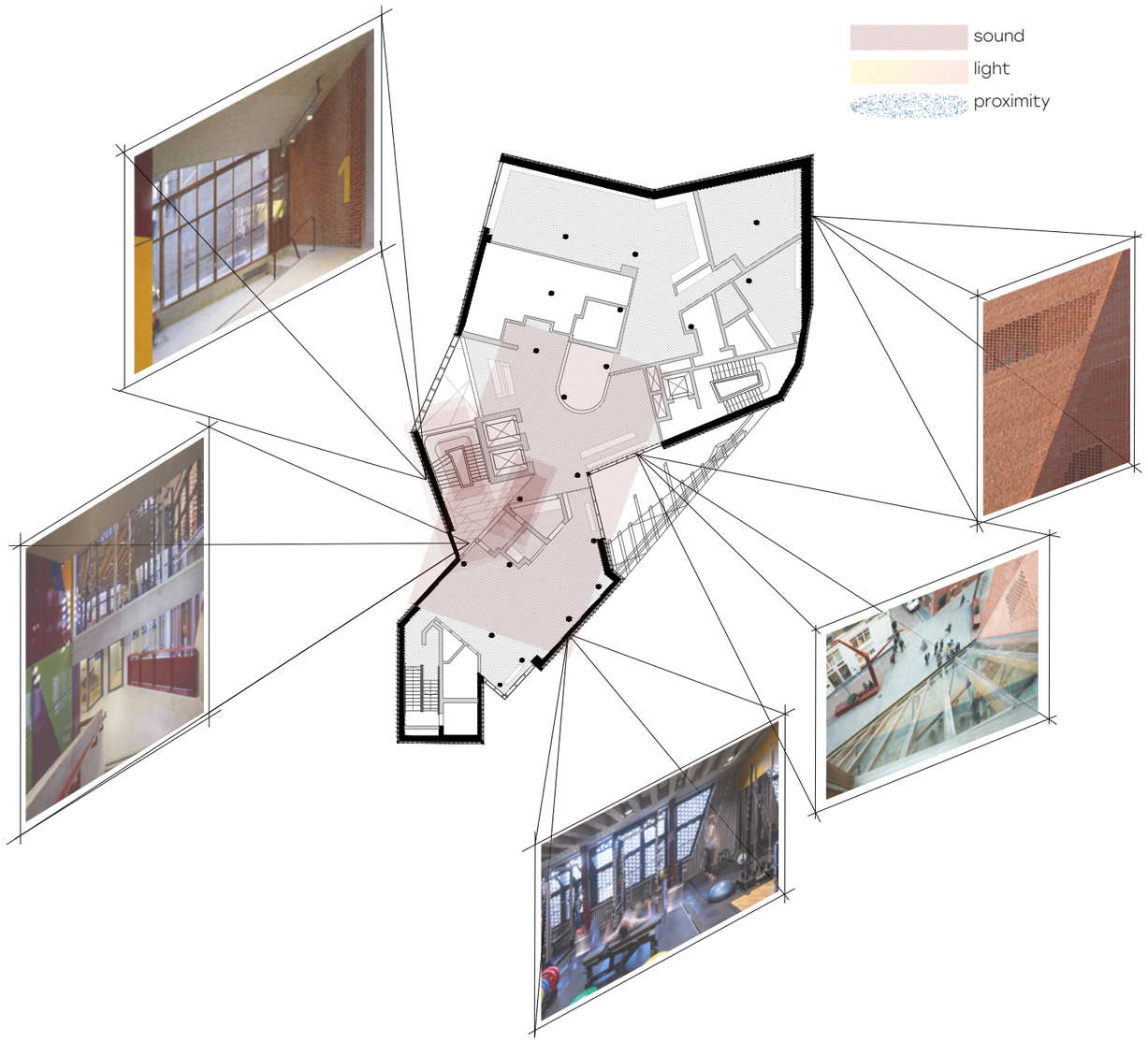

Figure 23: Author's diagram, sound exchange across floors, 4th floor, adapted from original source

Figure 24: 4th Floor plan with light overlay

Figure 25: 4th Floor plan with proximity overlay

Strategies

1. Circulation as a social infrastructure
Organise buildings around visible, shared circulation routes. When movement spaces are open and central, they create opportunities for informal interaction. Circulation becomes a place where social life can happen rather than simply a path between rooms.

2. Designing spaces where people can stop, not only move
Provide landings, edges, terraces, or widened circulation points where people can pause. As Whyte (1980) observed, people tend to gather where there are places to sit and where they feel a degree of shelter or enclosure. Moments of pause along movement routes encourages informal encounters and longer occupation of the space.

3. Create open but protected collective spaces.
Collective areas should not feel exposed. Partial enclosure or defined edges can create psychological comfort while maintaining openness. Spaces that feel protected are more likely to be used for gathering and social activity.

4. Spatial clarity as social openness
Clear geometry and visible circulation help users orient themselves quickly, they feel more confident entering and using spaces which can help to reduce psychological barriers to participation.

5. Use partial separation rather than full enclosure between spaces
Design boundaries that allow sensory and visual exchange: perforated surfaces, open sections, or material transitions that let sound, light and glimpsed activity move between spaces without merging them. This layered awareness resists the isolation of generic institutional interiors where each function is completely isolated from the next.

Critique

Despite its strengths, the building raises several questions when tested against lived experience. The stair was designed as the social heart of the building, the primary means of movement and informal encounter. In practice, students consistently queue for the lifts instead, suggesting that good spatial design alone cannot always reverse human behaviour.

More significantly, one student noted that the building stands out so strongly from the rest of the campus that it produces a sense of not belonging rather than belonging, a direct challenge to the dissertation's central argument. A building designed to create identity through contextual specificity can, if that specificity is too assertive, create disconnection for users who experience it against a broader campus context rather than a street context. This suggests that site-informed design operates most effectively when the site in question is the immediate urban environment.

Finally, the building's energy performance fell significantly short of its design targets, achieving a DEC C rating against an intended A (Hartman, 2019), a reminder that site-specific design might carry a technical cost that more generic buildings do not.

From Institution to Housing

The analysis of Saw Swee Hock shows how site-informed strategies can operate in busy institutional settings, using the limitations of an irregular urban site to create spatial character, social infrastructure and material identity. The outcome is not a building that looks contextual but one that behaves contextually. Structuring movement, light and material is a direct response to what was already there. But these conditions are specific, a tight city centre site and a public programme resulting in an institution ingrained in an existing urban fabric . The question that follows is whether the same underlying approach of engaging with what already exists rather than erasing it, produces meaningful results when those conditions change entirely. Peter Barber's McGrath Road operates with a different programme in a quieter part of the city, responding not to urban pressure but to the social logic of historical housing typologies. The strategies that emerge are different, but the tendency behind them is the same.

McGrath Road: Home Within the City:

Figure 26: McGrath Road street view with surrounding context

Figure 27: McGrath Road street view with surrounding context

Figure 28: Brick texture detail

Figure 29: Courtyard interior view

Figure 30: Tower house facade detail

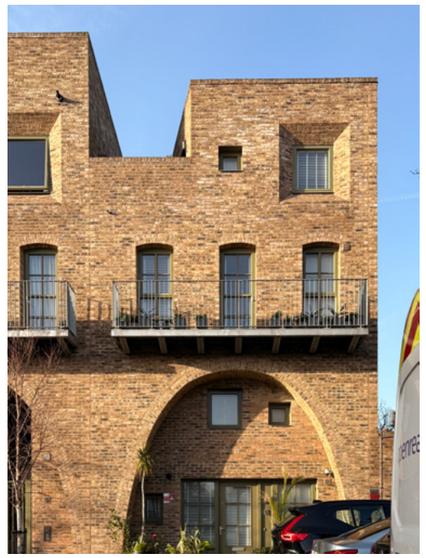

Figure 31: Arch and entrance detail

Urban Strategy

Instead of creating the standard housing block seen across the uk, which is often built of stacked flats with shared corridors, Barber combines modern architectural technology with traditional spatial ideas from Victorian back-to-back housing.

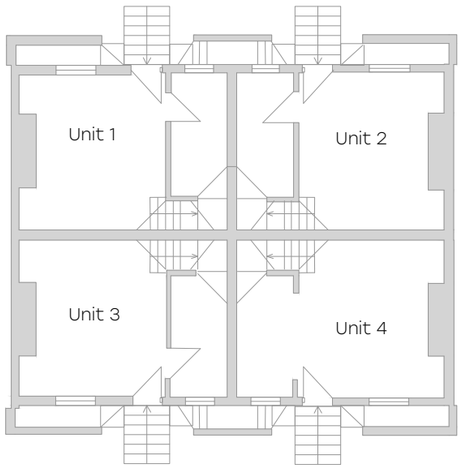

Figure 32: Back-to-back housing floor plan, original typology, adapted from original source

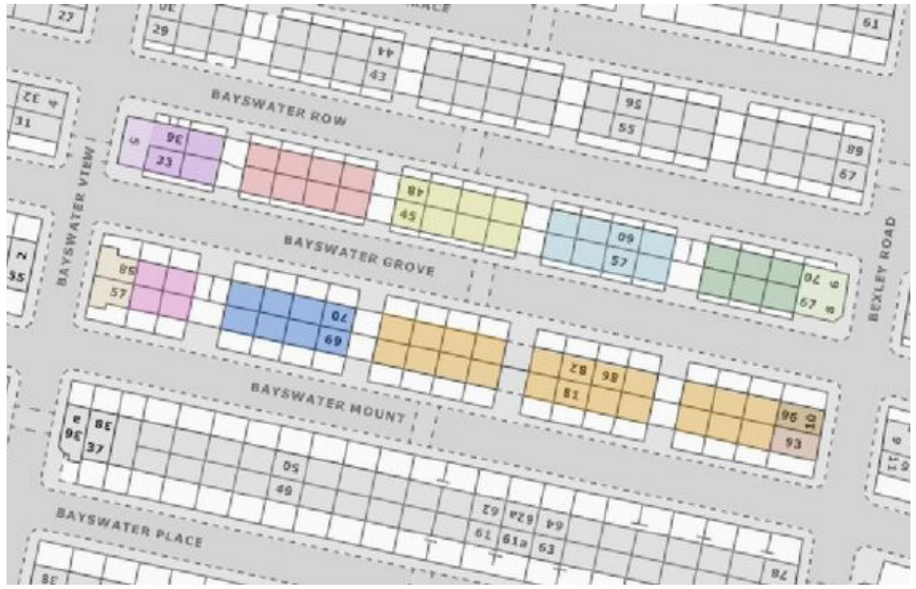

Figure 34: Back-to-back housing urban layout, Leeds

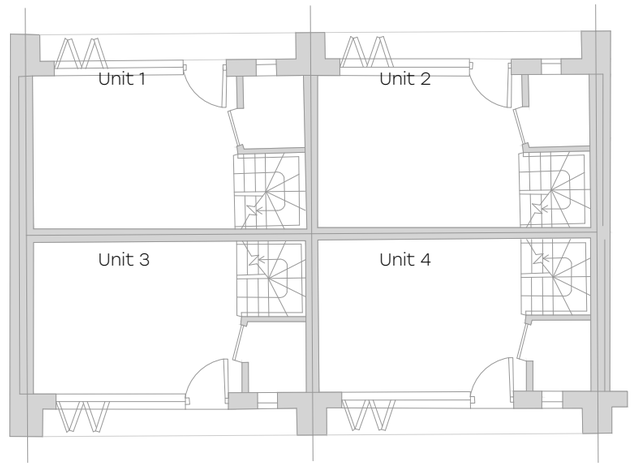

Figure 33: McGrath Road floor plan, adapted from original source

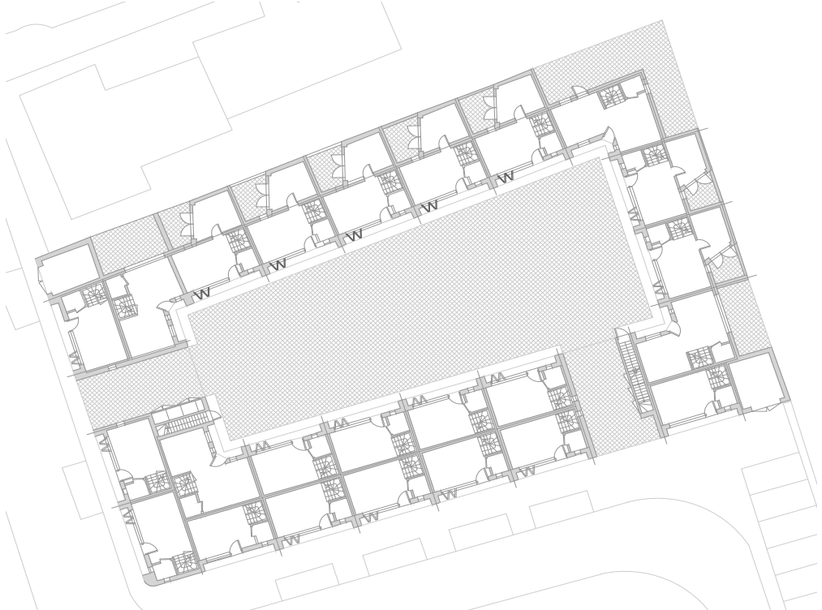

Figure 35: McGrath Road site plan, adapted from original source

Urban Strategy

McGrath Road maintains a hard edge to the street, strengthening its continuity, while turning inward to create a courtyard for its residents. The courtyard aims to create a place where residents can gather and thrive, fostering a sense of community. Seeking to bring people in rather than leaving them as bystanders (Rogers and Power, 2000, p.274). Each dwelling has its own entrance to the courtyard, allowing residents to participate in social life by choice.

From the site visit, the courtyard was gated and inaccessible. Residents had closed off the space designed to foster community, prioritising security over openness. This raises an important question: to what extent can architects influence collective life in their projects? The proportions of the scheme are visible from the outside, the relationship between height and enclosure feels considered and human, secure and reliable, strengthening the idea that density doesn't have to result in exposure or anonymity.

Figure 36: Site location map

Figure 37: Courtyard view through arch

Figure 38: Street elevation

Vertical ‘Tower Houses’

In most high density housing, individual identity is sacrificed to collective efficiency, stacked flats organised around shared corridors produce facades where no single dwelling reads as distinct. Barber’s tower house approach directly challenges this. The idea is to arrange each unit vertically rather than horizontally, making each dwelling easy to read and helps residents to identify with a specific home (RIBA, 2021). Density and identity are no longer in tension. The roof terraces reinforce this further, rare in social housing, they introduce moments of individual peace within collective density, making the difference between inhabiting a system and inhabiting a home.

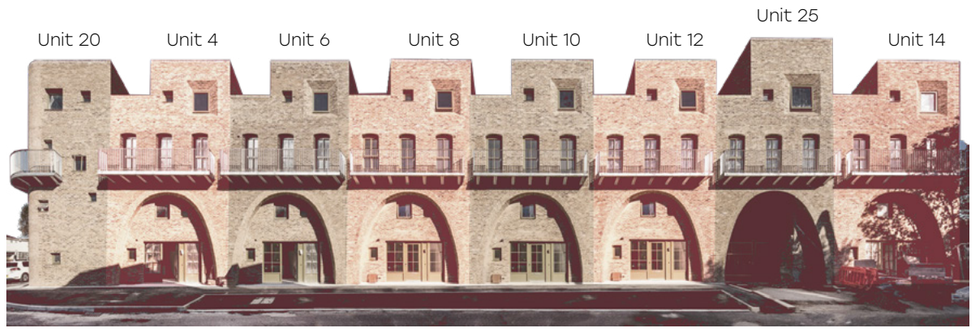

Figure 39: Street elevation showing individual dwelling units

Figure 40: Interior of tower house unit

Arches and Threshold

The arches along the street introduce an occupiable depth between the pavement and the dwelling, creating a transitional zone that is physically outside but psychologically private. Rather than a flat facade presenting itself directly to the street, the building creates a threshold residents can personalise and inhabit, allowing them to be present in the collective without fully entering it. This in-between space softens one of the tensions in collective housing, the hard boundary between public and private that forces residents to choose one or the other entirely.

The threshold usability is enhanced by the architectural language of the arches. Barber draws on the language of Victorian brick railway structures by reinterpreting their language to create rhythm and depth along the street. This connects and adapts the building to its context and site’s needs (Fraser, 2020). The facade resists becoming a flat image, its depth, repetition and weight reinforce a feeling that the building belongs to its context.

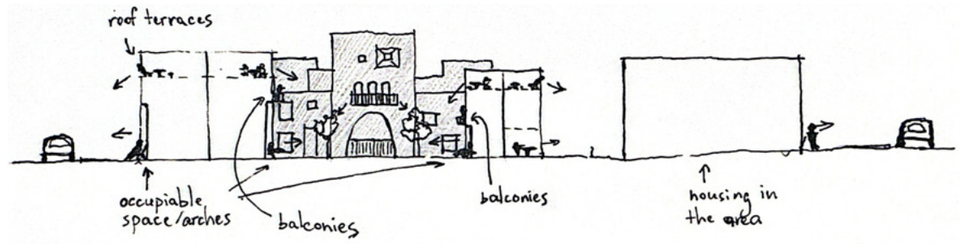

Figure 41: Author's sketch, threshold and section diagram

Figure 42: Arch detail, street level

Figure 43: Victorian railway arches, London

Materiality and Permanence

Like Saw Swee Hock, McGrath Road draws from London's brick continuity but where O'Donnell and Tuomey use it expressively through complex geometry and perforation, Barber uses it quietly. From the site visit, the brick doesn't draw attention to itself but contributes to a sense of stability and reliability that is immediately legible from the street. The building feels human, secure and permanent (Barber for Docomomo UK, 2020) not temporary, which directly affects how residents relate to it over time. In many modern schemes lightweight panelled facades signal temporariness and subtly discourage attachment.

This sense of permanence is reinforced by the way residents already interact with the building. During the visit, many entrances and terraces were visibly personalised through plants, seating and decorations. These suggest that residents feel a degree of ownership and comfort, treating the threshold as an extension of their home rather than a fully public space (Barber for Docomomo UK, 2020). The material clarity of the building creates the conditions for this kind of behaviour, reinforcing attachment to the place.

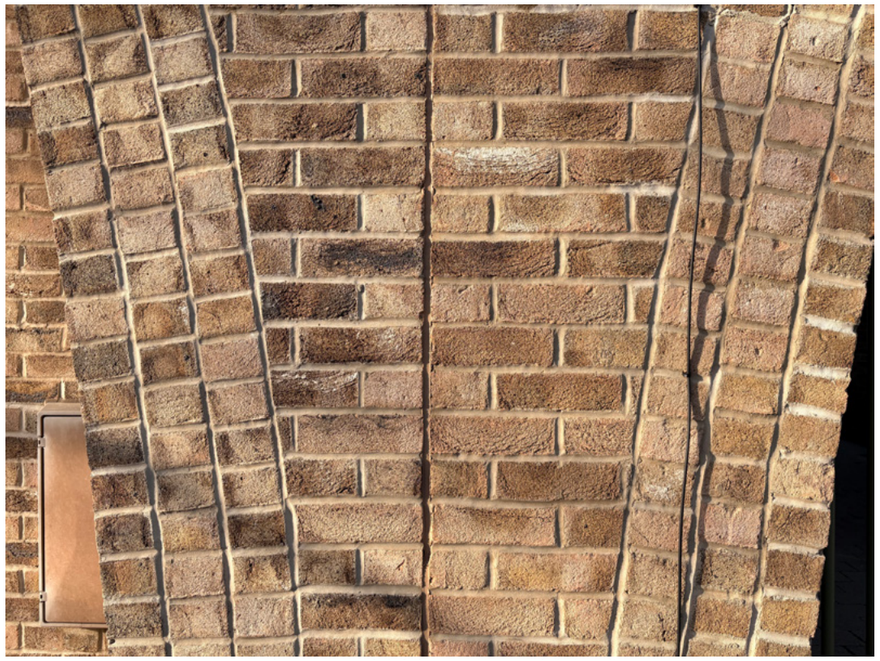

Figure 44: Brick joint and material detail

Figure 45: Brick coursing detail

Figure 46: Courtyard elevation

Figure 47: Street facade with personalised entrances

Past and Present

The scheme draws from multiple historical references without reproducing any of them directly. The arches and notched roofline recall Karl Marx-hof's 'Red Vienna' housing and Victorian brick railway arches (Fraser, 2020), however, Barber reinterprets their language rather than recreating it, aligning with the surrounding height, materiality and rhythm of the street while introducing something new. The result is reminiscent of European streets where activity happens inside a defined, not external edges, creating a sense of arriving at a place instead of moving through it.

Figure 48: Karl Marx-Hof, Vienna

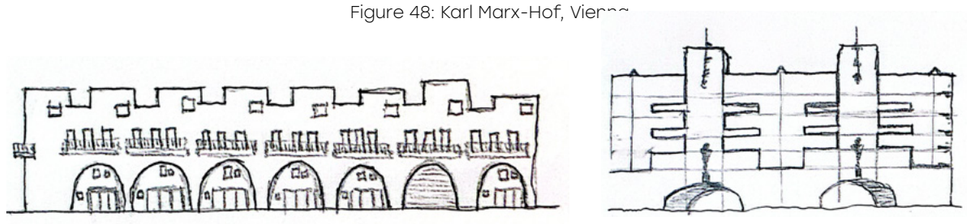

Figure 50: McGrath and Red Vienna massing sketches

The connection to the past is therefore not nostalgic but strategic. It uses familiar spatial structures to reinforce identity while accommodating modern standards of privacy and density. This is the practical application of Norberg-Schulz's (1979, p.18) argument that the spirit of a place is not fixed, architecture should reinterpret local characteristics in new ways rather than either preserving them unchanged or erasing them entirely. As observed during the site visit, the idea can be adapted but not copy pasted, just what McGrath Road demonstrates. Residents can identify with the place not because it recreates something historical but because it speaks a language they already recognise along the street.

Figure 49: Small Piazza in Sperlonca

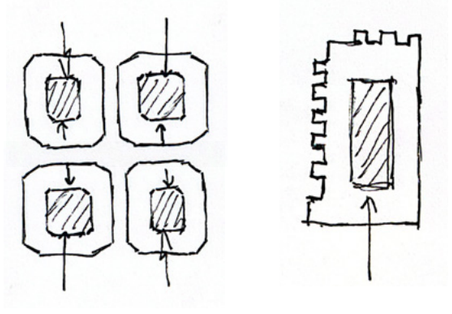

Figure 51: McGrath and European square typology sketch

Design Strategies

1. Use historical typologies as a spatial device, not a style
Rather than referencing historical forms decoratively, borrow their spatial logic. Barber takes the back-to-back housing structure not for its aesthetic but for what it does socially- creating a collective interior space within density. Reinterpreting a typology's spatial principle allows buildings to feel rooted without becoming imitative.

2. Design collective spaces as destination, not circulation
Shared space that lacks definition becomes used only for access rather than gathering. To tackle this, position shared space as the destination of a scheme, giving it enclosure, proportion and definition that it feels like somewhere to arrive at. Collective space that feels protected, encourages people to slow down and settle rather than move on.

3. Spatially resolve the tension between individual identity and collective belonging
Rather than treating public and private as two different things, introduce transitional zones that allow residents to occupy an in-between space. At McGrath Road, the arches create a space that is physically outside but psychologically still private, residents can be present in the collective without fully entering it. Creating a depth as the boundary like recesses, arches or canopies allow people to pause between their private dwelling and the shared space, making collective space feel accessible rather than exposing.

4. Reinterpret the street's architectural language rather than reproducing or ignoring it
Every street has an existing architectural language- a rhythm of facades, a material palette, and a scale of buildings. Rather than entirely replicating this language nostalgically or erasing it, understand its underlying logic and reinterpret it through contemporary spatial needs. At McGrath Road, the arched facades and brick engage with the Victorian character of the neighbourhood without copying it. The building feels continuous with its context while introducing a facade that adds a new element to the street, helping to reinforce a sense of place at the urban scale rather than acting as a random object inserted into it.

5. Design collective spaces for adaptability, not assumed behaviour
Collective spaces should be designed with the potential for personalisation and flexibility of openness, rather than designing for a single social outcome. Rather than treating such outcomes as a failure, architects should foresee residents adapting shared spaces to their needs and design accordingly.

Critique

Despite its spatial and social intentions, McGrath Road has limitations worth admitting. The most significant is that the tower house typology, with its winding staircases and vertically arranged rooms across four floors, is designed for a specific kind of residents. As Fraser notes, these are dwellings for young adults attempting to get onto the property ladder rather than a universal housing solution (Fraser, 2020). Anyone with impaired mobility, young children or elderly residents would struggle living there. Meaning that the site-informed strategies at McGrath Road operate effectively within a specific demographic and context but cannot be transferred to sites with different social requirements.

The courtyard gating raises a separate but equally important question. The design intended the central square to function as a point of gathering where residents could thrive collectively (Barber for Docomoko UK, 2022). In reality, the strategies embedded in the scheme create conditions for community, but whether those conditions are taken up depends on factors beyond architectural control, demographics, management and the particular needs of the people who actually live there.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to ask how architects can ensure that the places they build feel rooted to their context, their history and the communities that inhabit them. To answer this question, it attempted to translate the theoretical framework of Critical Regionalism into practical design strategies, taking two contemporary London projects as examples. What it found is more nuanced than a set of solutions.

What the two case studies reveal together is that site-informed design is not a single method or aesthetic, it operates differently depending on programme, context and scale. Yet across both buildings the underlying principle is consistent: engaging seriously with the specific conditions of a place, rather than overriding them, produces environments that feel particular rather than interchangeable.

It also revealed a fundamental limit. Critical Regionalism as a theoretical framework is powerful and persuasive, but when translated into transferable design strategies it cannot be reduced to a fixed set of rules (Giamarelos, 2021). The strategies extracted here are real and useful, but they cannot be universally applied because site-informed design is by definition specific. A strategy that works at McGrath Road works because of its street, typology, and its residents. Moved elsewhere, it may not work in the same way. The courtyard gating and the lift queues at Saw Swee Hock reinforce this further, design can create conditions for belonging but cannot guarantee them (Sennett and Katznelson, 2014). The value of these strategies is therefore not in their direct replication but in the approach they represent: looking carefully and honestly at what already exists before deciding what to add.

This approach has the potential to create environments where people feel like they belong. This matters both for the people who inhabit cities where much of the built environment is produced quickly and efficiently, and for the cities themselves. What these two buildings demonstrate is not a nostalgic response to modernity, but an intentional, attentive response to it. Architecture cannot construct belonging by itself, it needs to look carefully at what already exists before deciding what to add. This way, it can create conditions in which belonging becomes possible.

Figure 52: collage of being rooted in a city

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