

Intro

Is anything going on but the rent?

Emerging build-to-rent developments are giving rise to a new building type with the potential to transform UK housing supply, says *Rob Wilson*



Rehearsal Rooms PRS development, North Acton, London, by Newground Architects

Interior CGI, Rehearsal Rooms, by Newground Architects

The private rented sector (PRS) is predicted to grow by up to 40 per cent over the next 10 years, transforming the UK rental market as well as the culture, not just of housing delivery, but of housing itself. A new study from the British Property Federation shows there are already 40,000 PRS homes in the planning pipeline.

As always, it is economics that has driven the rise of the sector: soaring house prices have wiped out any ability to buy for most of those now coming into the housing market, while institutional investors have been looking to park funds for long-term yields, given low interest rates elsewhere.

But where economics leads, politics usually follows. The government launched its Build to Rent scheme in 2012, and last year Theresa May's government signalled a shift in tone away from the mantra of home ownership and towards private rental.

Now the first crop of schemes is beginning to complete. Over the following pages we examine three PRS projects: GRID architects' Vantage Point, a 118-unit conversion of a 1970s north London office

building for Essential Living, at the higher-specification end of the market; and two new-build schemes, Rehearsal Rooms in west London by Newground Architects for HUB; and Hodder + Partners' considerably larger 282-unit Cambridge Street scheme in Macintosh Mills, Manchester, for Renaker. Catherine Slessor, Owen Hopkins and Jay Merrick provide the respective critiques.

So what are the architectural characteristics that define this emerging building type?

One element of PRS schemes is their shared communal facilities, ranging from lounges, games rooms and gyms, to projects in the pipeline with private dining suites and even cinemas.

But the developing conceptual model for these varies widely. It's either a warm cuddly one of communal, Continental-style shared living, designed for the long term, in a loose-fit style for communities to grow into; or it's a kind of high-end, long-stay boutique hotel, offering facilities as add-on lifestyle benefits and with out-of-the-ordinary flexible packages for tenure.

Looking in more detail at the three featured schemes, other

characteristics can be identified. While they all have relatively unremarkable exteriors, internally two main design aspects are clear, and this is borne out by my conversations with all three architects.

First, is the ability to offer more imaginative and better-laid-out plans – witness the multiple outlooks of flats in Hodder's Cambridge Street scheme and the relative equality in the size of bedrooms. These are schemes that are led more by livability than the strictures of generic criteria. 'We have tried to steer the design in the direction of a demand-based product as opposed to a supply-based product,' is how Jordan Perlman of Newground puts it.

Second is the relative freedom to assign budgets more strategically on quality fit-outs and robust detailing. Take for instance the tiled floors and frameless doors of the Rehearsal Rooms interiors. As Craig Casci of GRID explains: 'We are working for operators who have a long-term interest, and that means better finishes, detailing, budgets, maintenance and control.'

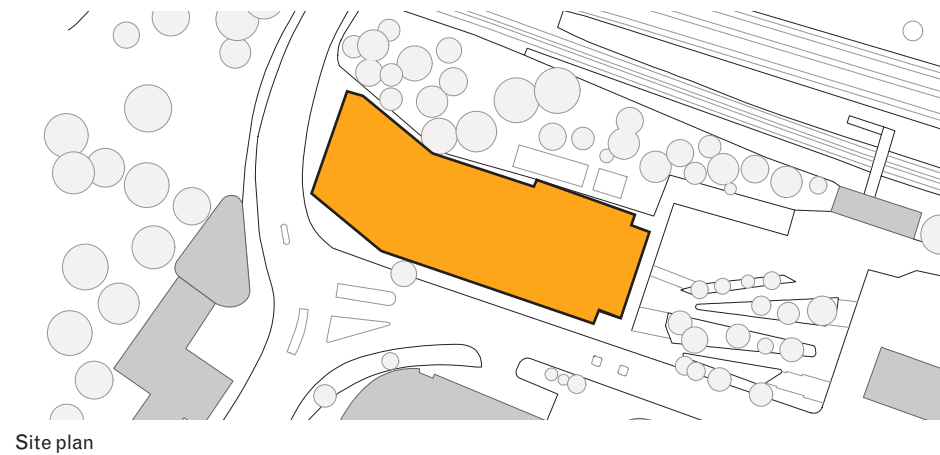
But the economics also work the other way with, as Stephen

Hodder highlights, a diversity of regional variations in the PRS model, owing to rental values varying far more sharply nationwide than build costs. This means it is much more difficult to make the economics stack up for schemes in some smaller cities like Manchester, where rents are lower.

So, while communal facilities may be PRS's most distinguishing characteristic, they are often the first element sacrificed. Witness the one potential communal space in the Cambridge Street scheme, which has for now been earmarked for retail. And, as Hodder describes it, there is pressure to cut back even on the private amenity space of balconies on some schemes.

Overall, the variation and freedom of internal planning bodes well for a developing sense of long-life, loose fit, which could see PRS evolve into an architecturally distinct housing classification.

But for the moment it seems the economics are against wide provision of PRS developing anywhere outside larger metropolitan areas – let alone rural ones – as an effective valve to relieve pressure on housing.



Building study

Flat share

Newground Architects' Rehearsal Rooms aims to establish a long-term neighbourhood of renters

The Rehearsal Rooms is a high-density mixed use development purpose-designed for the private rented sector (PRS). It provides 173 one, two and three-bedroom flats, shared communal spaces, a supermarket and commercial space at street level as part of an emerging neighbourhood centred around North Acton Underground Station and close to future developments at Old Oak Common.

Appraisal Owen Hopkins
Photography Jack Hobhouse

Arriving at North Acton on the Tube, as most of the residents of the Rehearsal Rooms will surely do regularly, is a strange experience. Having passed through Marble Arch, Notting Hill and Shepherd's Bush, the Central line emerges from tunnels into a landscape of low, expansive warehouses and sheds. The small cluster of comparatively high-rise housing blocks around the station feels like a different world to what surrounds it. The naming of the latest addition after the BBC rehearsal studios that formerly occupied the area might seem a typical developer's trick of scouring an area's past for whatever might 'add value' in the present. Here, however, one can see it as pointing to an attempt to do things at least a little differently.

When developer HUB bought the site,

it already had planning consent for a development of 151 flats. However, in the words of HUB managing director Steve Sanham, 'the plan was a mess'. Newground Architects was brought in to rationalise and eventually entirely rework the plan to yield 173 flats, which are tenure-blind, with 30 at affordable rent. That it doesn't feel like a squeeze is testament to the extensive experience in the sector of Newground's directors, Jordan Perlman and Ziba Adrangi. They were previously at PRP, where they had also worked with Sanham in his pre-HUB days, before starting their own practice four years ago. Hearing the three discuss the building, it is clear that part of its success stems from their relationship, a major consequence of which has been the architects' retention through to completion.

The project comprises two blocks, of 16 and 13 storeys, linked by a lower section of four storeys. This configuration allows the building to occupy almost every square foot of the site. While the lower of the two blocks is a simple rectangular box, the taller one reads as three narrow slabs standing on end, which take the building around the corner and provide formal rationale for the three set-backs at its top. There are commercial units at ground level, including a supermarket (already let to Sainsbury's) just

by the Tube station exit, which will open out onto what has been earmarked by the local authority as a new public square. Inevitably, the main material is brick, but it is used simply and well, and is combined cleverly with the similarly restrained steel balconies that further articulate the building's forms without appearing arbitrary.

Despite, and maybe also because of the modest, unassuming exterior, the Rehearsal Rooms scheme has been getting some attention. A few days before my visit housing minister Gavin Barwell was shown around. Its significance from the government's point of view is that, unusually, the development is aimed not for sale, but at the private rented sector. It is institutionally backed by M&G Real Estate, which came on board to forward-fund the project in 2014. Given the shift in policy from David Cameron and George Osborne's obsession with home ownership, we are likely to see more PRS schemes over coming years, with, I would argue, largely positive effects in terms of what the demands of making a commercial success of this tenure type enable in terms of creating better places to live.

While the Rehearsal Rooms is conceived as a mid-market development and specced as such, it is worth noting that, (assuming housing costs to be one third of monthly

salary) to afford a one-bedroom flat you need to be bringing home £49,000-63,000 a year. For a room in a two-bedroom flat you need to be on £31,000-45,000; and to be one of three people sharing a three-bedroom maisonette, £27,000-30,000. These numbers are all after tax of course and, while many people are prepared to spend much more than a third of their salaries on housing costs, it is sobering to think what mid-market actually means financially in London today.

That said, what tenants get for their money at the Rehearsal Rooms is rather more thought-out than might be found renting a new build flat that was designed for private sale, rather than private rental. The flats themselves are well laid-out, and most are dual-aspect. With the budget comparatively limited, Newground has focused its attention on maximising the fundamentals of space and light.

For example, a window is always visible at the end of a vista from the front door. Doors are often frameless and floor-to-ceiling. In the two-bed flats, the bedrooms are the same size – useful in flat shares. Rather than carpets – unsuited to flats that are rented out – floors are tiled. Balconies are generously sized and, on the eastern tower, run diagonally along the step-outs with no need for those unsatisfactory dividing walls separating which part of the balcony belongs to which flat.

Walking around the building, even in its unfinished state, it is hard not to see the clear attempts to create a building that fosters at least a semblance of a community. So, while the four-storey bridge that links the two towers is really a result of the narrow site directly abutting the railway line, its roof provides space for a communal roof garden with barbecue facilities and a function room opening onto it available for tenants' use. The storeys below are filled with dual-aspect flats accessed from external walkways that are not far away from deck access or, dare I say it, streets in the sky.

On their own, none of these elements is a major departure from the norm, but together they make a difference that will be felt by those who live here over time.

Much of what is good about the Rehearsal Rooms comes down to the thought and care of the architects and the approach of the developer. Yet, it is also a function of the tenure type. Unlike much new housing being built in London, these flats will definitely be occupied and, rather than spending money on flashy kitchens and bathrooms, attention has been paid to what really matters.

Renting is now the long-term reality for millions of Londoners. While we might seek to try to change that situation, in the meantime the Rehearsal Rooms development and its ilk show what PRS can actually achieve right now in creating housing that is better tailored to how people actually want to live.

Owen Hopkins is an architectural writer, historian, and senior curator of exhibitions and education at Sir John Soane's Museum.

Client's view

HUB's goal was to make the Rehearsal Rooms – the first purpose-built PRS scheme in Ealing – stand out through sustainable, well thought-out design. After purchasing the site in 2013 with outline planning consent for 151 units, HUB appointed Newground Architects to fully review the consented scheme and propose changes to improve and rationalise the design.

Having worked with Jordan Perlman and Ziba Adrangi in his previous role at Argent, HUB's managing director Steve Sanham was familiar with Newground's ability to design efficient, rational and cost-effective buildings.

The scheme was fully redesigned

to improve gross-to-net efficiency and provide apartment layouts, amenity spaces, function rooms and common areas tailored specifically to the private rented sector. It was important to both Newground and HUB to set a new benchmark of design quality in the sector and to realise the scheme in a way that meant market rent and discount market rent homes could have the same specifications.

Working with Ealing Council, the changes were consented through a Section 96A application and the Section 106 varied to allow the delivery of the affordable housing as a Discount Market Rent product. Steve Sanham, managing director, HUB



Architect's view

The project began with a deceptively simple brief for 'better homes for everyday Londoners'. The clarity we aimed for belies the complex process involved in reconciling design intent, planning requirements, financial constraints and the myriad compliance and technical issues.

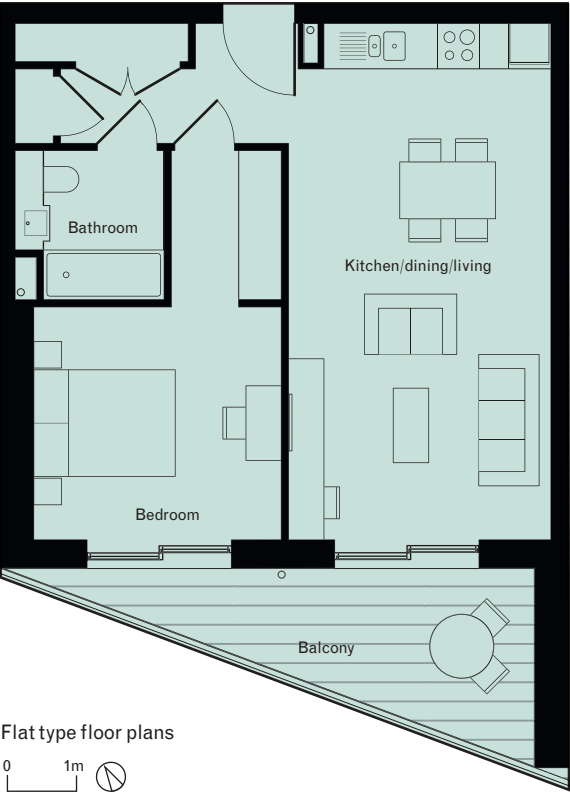
Newground and HUB have worked together on other projects and appreciate that making better buildings involves more than just replicating PRS requirements now commonplace, such as equally sized bedrooms, plentiful storage and amenity space, communal spaces and high-quality materials. Our intention has been to incorporate these without waiving qualitative design aspects.

We looked at things like views through open-plan layouts, emphasising qualities of space and light and allowing connections from inside to oversized balconies.

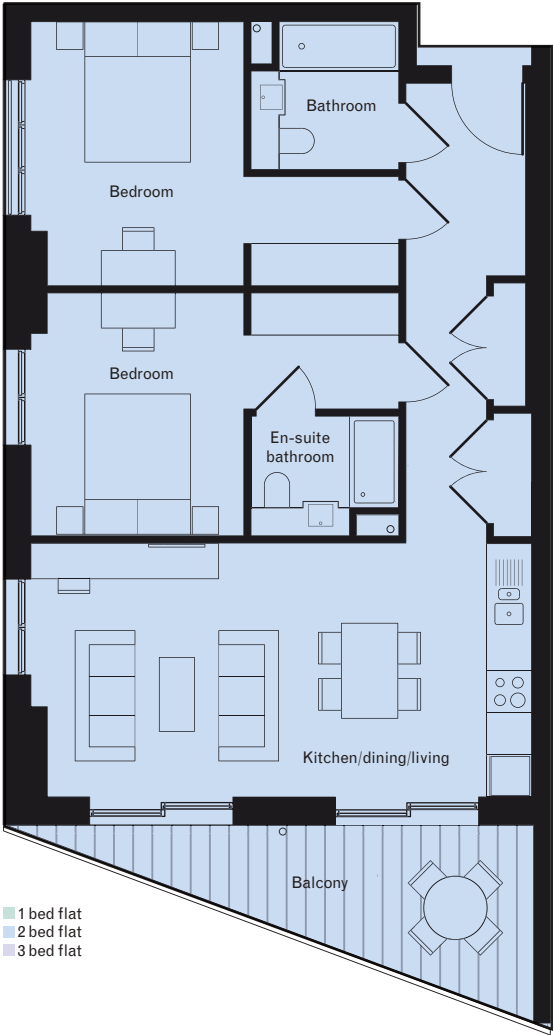
In the common parts, we considered movement through the building to encourage legibility and interaction, providing a range of purpose-designed communal spaces linked to shared external gardens.

The design development process was complex. The collaborative relationship we built up with client and contractor helped them reconcile design, cost and programme issues simultaneously, with the ultimate prize being better buildings.

Jordan Perlman, director, Newground Architects



Flat type floor plans



1 bed flat
2 bed flat
3 bed flat



Project data

Start on site January 2015

Completion April 2017

Gross internal floor area 17,500m² including common areas, services and car parking

Form of contract Bespoke Design and Build

Construction cost £30,450,000 (total project cost)

Construction cost per m² £1,983.58

Architect Newground Architects

Client HUB (developer), M&G Real Estate (end-user)

Structural engineer Price & Myers (design), Manhire Associates (delivery)

M&E consultant Scotch Partners (MEP, design), Beechfield (MEP, delivery)

Quantity surveyor Faithful+Gould

Planning consultant Savills

Energy consultant Scotch Partners

Acoustic consultant Adnitt Acoustics

CDM co-ordinator David M Eagle

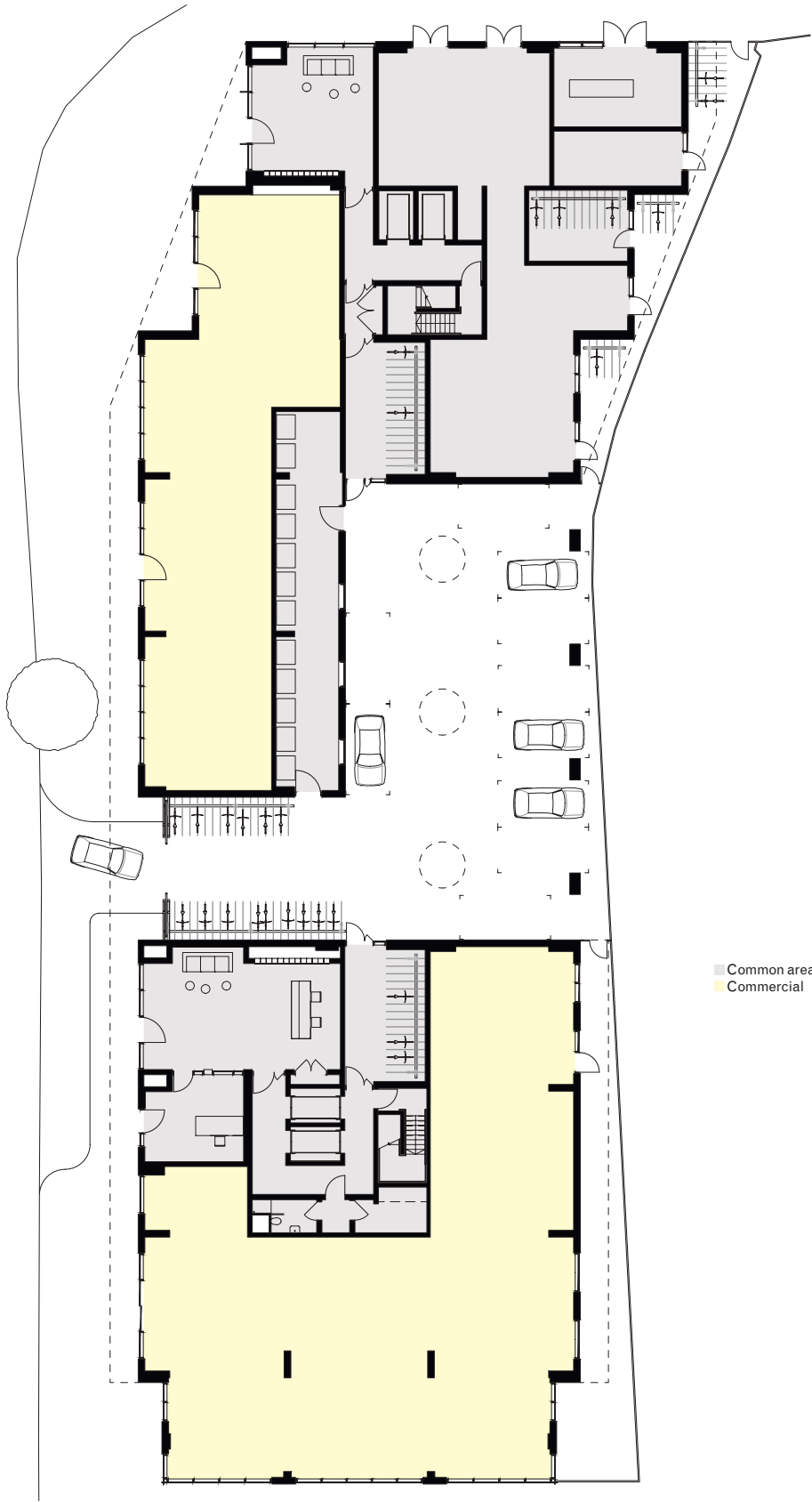
Approved building inspector

Bureau Veritas

Main contractor Henry Construction

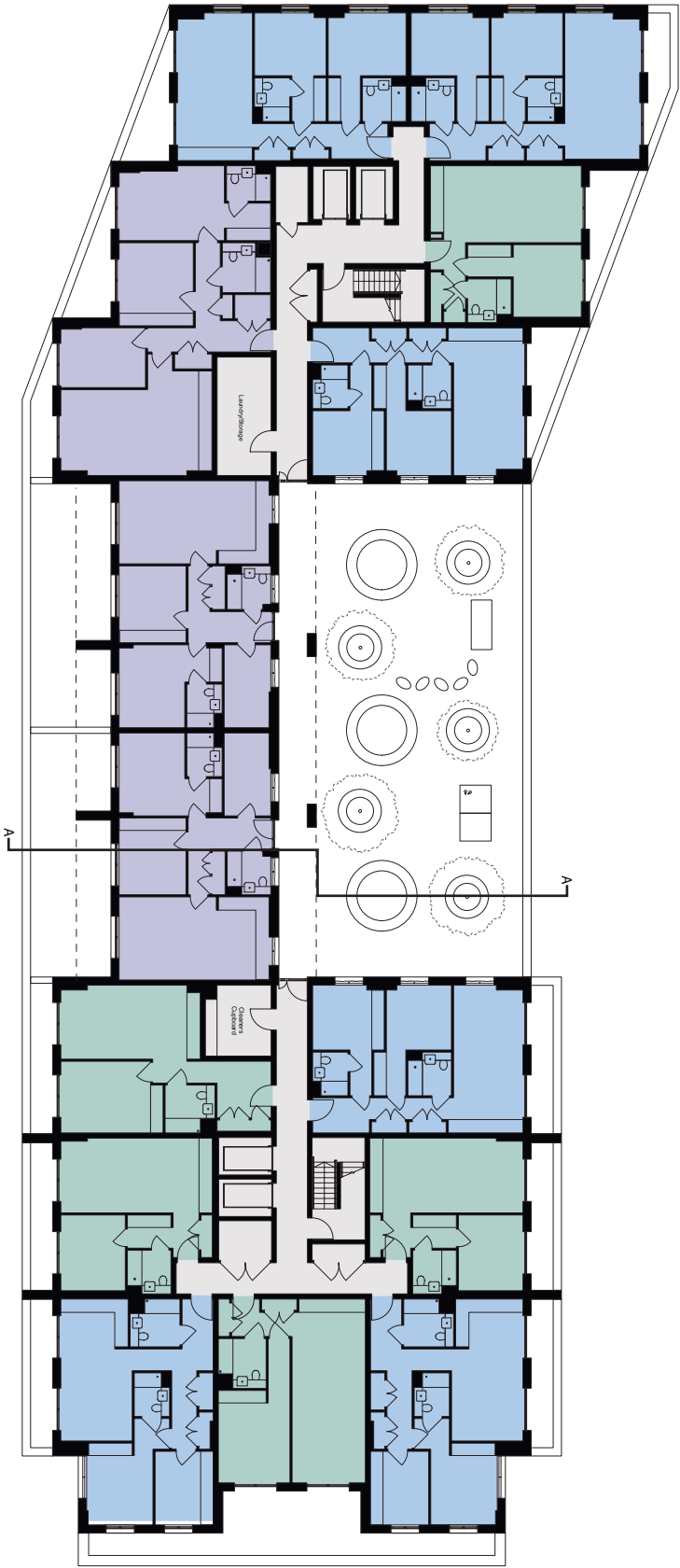
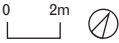
CAD software used Revit

Annual CO₂ emissions 4-5 kg/m² (estimated)



Common areas and services
Commercial

Ground floor plan



Common areas and services
1 bed flat
2 bed flat
3 bed flat

First floor plan



Fourth floor plan

0 2m



Section A-A

0 5m

Landscape architect's view

B|D developed a roofscape strategy of accessible, communal, productive and playable terraces alongside biodiverse areas with green and brown roofs on this confined urban site. Each terrace had to work hard to provide useable amenity space with a distinct character that responded to the nature of the private rental development.

On the first floor, a grid of multi-stem birch trees set within giant flowerpots provides dappled shade to the play and exercise terrace, which is furnished with a ping-pong table, gym equipment and an incidental play set within a patchwork of rubber crumb to create a place to socialise.

The fourth-floor outdoor room is a place to relax, an inviting, south-facing terrace for social gathering and interaction. BBQs, food prep tables and communal dining areas create a space for residents to enjoy alongside a strong landscape character with a copse of umbelliform fruiting and flowering trees and sensory planting within generous but lightweight raised planters.

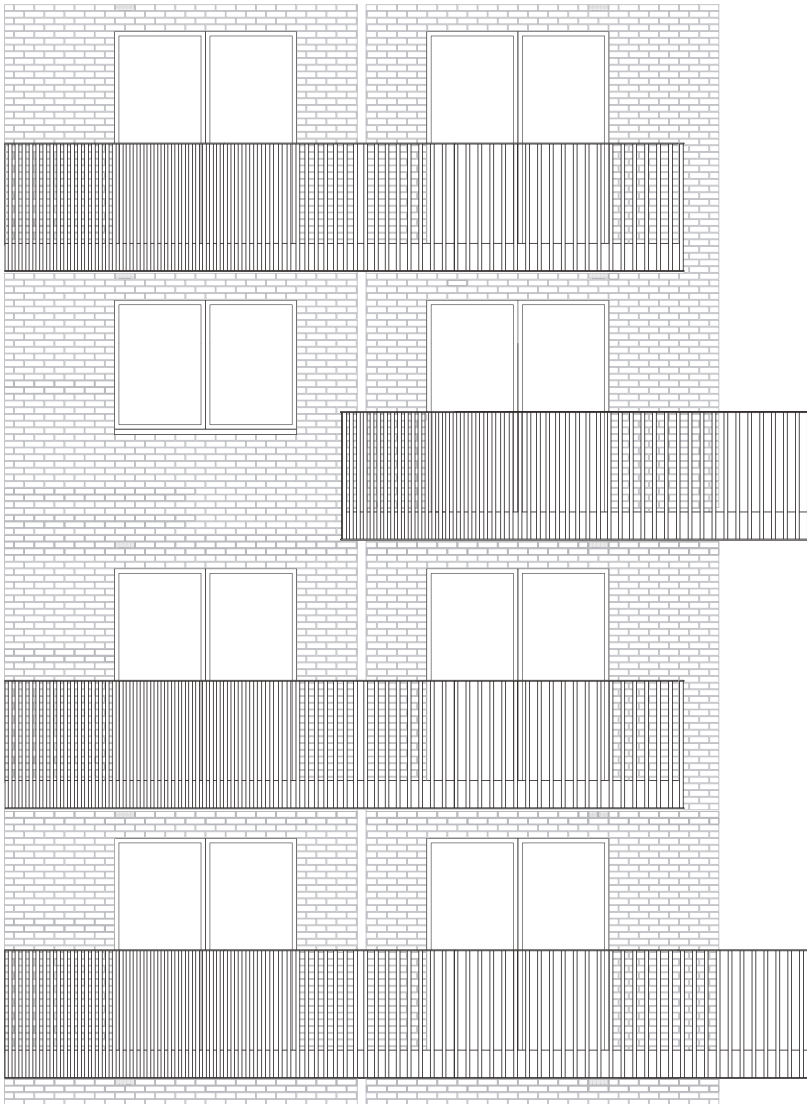
On the 10th floor is a residents' allotment with a series of planters for residents' use, creating a landscape to encourage the growth of the community. Fruiting espalier trees suited to the limited planter depth wrap around the central lift core.

On the 13th, 14th and 17th floors soft landscapes include a mix of wildflower, sedum and brown roofs with plug planting to increase biodiversity.

Rob Beswick, director, B|D Landscape Architects

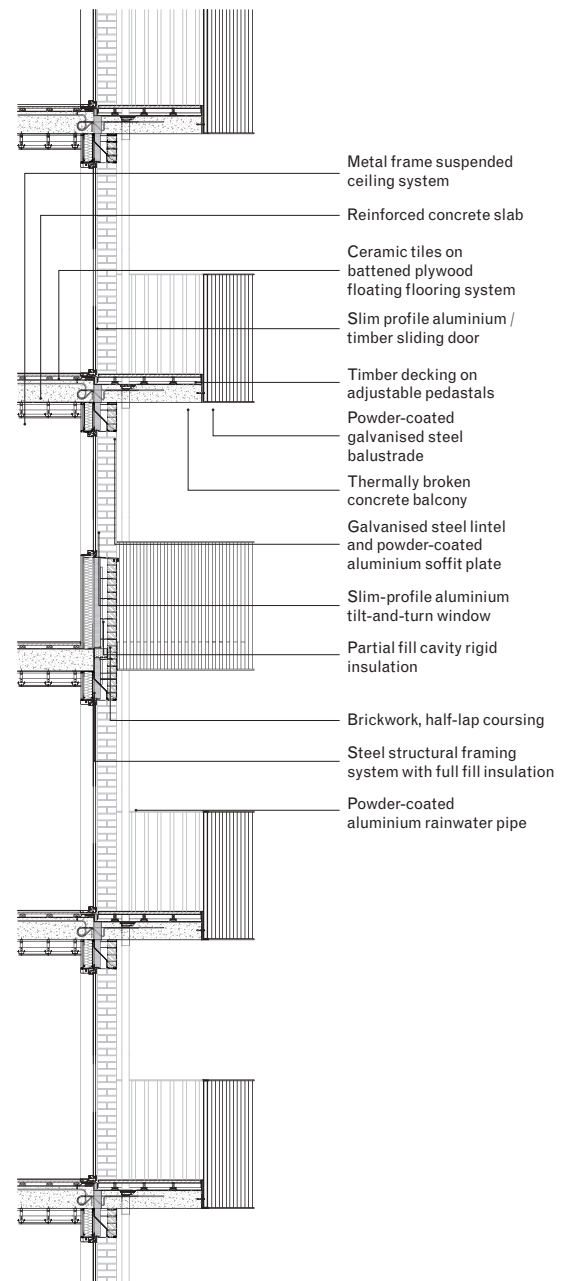
‘Each terrace had to work hard to provide useable amenity space with a distinct character that responded to the nature of the private rental development’





Balcony detail

0 0.5m



Balcony detail

As a practice, we set out to work on projects through both the design and delivery stages wherever possible. This ensures we consider real issues from the outset and also means that, as we grapple with detail in later stages, we are aware of the original design intentions.

Key to the design concept on this project is a rational and efficient plan which expresses itself in a coherent façade. Plan and elevation are integral to one another and attempt to address issues of form and function simultaneously, so the geometry and detail of angled balconies is as much

about dealing with issues of privacy and views as it is about creating visual interest and structure to the elevation.

Balconies are designed to appear as continuous, sinuous objects on the elevation, unifying the stepped elements of the façade behind. To achieve this effect, we developed a simple balcony concept using standard technologies, testing the visual impact at design stage through full-scale mock-ups of the balustrade.

The balcony structure is reinforced concrete, cantilevered and thermally broken

from the main RC slab. The soffit is left untreated and the concrete edge faced with a steel balustrade, comprised of a fascia component supporting 40mm-diameter steel uprights. The variable spacing of the uprights, from close together to further apart, is intended to serve a visual and practical purpose. Visually, it creates interest from outside; practically, it means that from inside, certain parts of the balcony feel more enclosed, while others feel more open.

*Jordan Perlman, director,
Newground Architects*