

'We design buildings to be misused'

Edwin Heathcote meets some architects finding new ways to be agents of change

The importance of nooks, of cosiness, of the south-west London suburb of Croydon and of the British culture of do-it-yourself: a conversation with the people at architecture practice AOC (Agents of Change) is far removed from the run-of-the-mill dialogue with architects. It is also coolly refreshing.

AOC's work is an eccentric mix of the intellectual and the everyday, its concerns both high- and low-brow. This is that rarity, a firm of genuinely young architects, the ages of the founders ranging between the late 20s and the early 30s. They are also something even rarer, a group of culturally engaged, serious and talented designers and polemicists with an unusually broad outlook focused not on the development of a house style but on a committed engagement with communities, clients and parts of the city. As they say on their website: "We can design you a home, write you a book or build you a city. Or design you a book, build you a home and write you a city". That is

not, unfortunately, the way most architects speak. That one of the founders is also a town planner at Croydon council and another has a background as a translator gives some idea of quite how diverse their base really is.

At their east London studio, founders Geoff Shearcroft and Daisy Froud show me a scheme that offers a panoramic view of all their concerns. Crown Terrace in Elephant and Castle, south London, is a typically ragged patch of suburban urbanity. AOC's proposal is a quirky set of richly coloured and patterned volumes glimpsed behind a sober screen of brickwork. It is like looking at exotic fish swimming around in a minimalist aquarium. "What we're looking at here," says Shearcroft, "is how you can design housing with grandeur and civic character on a Victorian street while creating a hard edge for the park behind but which also brings in a DIY domesticity."

DIY is a bit of an obsession with the office. "The modernists traditionally

argued for a flexible open box," he says, "whereas it's often the buildings most specific in their function that have proved the most flexible [you need only to think of the warehouses and industrial buildings of east London or New York's Chelsea to see how this has worked]. We spend a lot of time designing buildings to be misused. Le Corbusier built Pessac [a suburb of Bordeaux] and it was very quickly adapted by its residents. The modernist motifs went, the strip windows, the colours changed. Ironically, as architects have bought back into it the original features are being restored. So we're trying to provide a screen, a façade which becomes the civic presence and grandeur, a concrete frame and then, basically, the rest is cheese - stuff which can be knocked about and altered, which can be as adaptable as Victorian terraces have proved to be."

Daisy Froud, billed as a "cultural interpreter" chimes in: "We've also spent a lot of time looking at the semi-de-

tached house. It's a peculiarly English compromise. The English were never going to go for high rise so in the semi, you have this space you can make your own without losing the integrity of the design. So the question is how you design semis at a density that is acceptable on inner city sites?" "Can you stack them up?" asks Shearcroft.



Young ones: the AOC group

croft. "Can they become sustainable?", Froud adds. "We're interested in that. In how we can re-export the suburbs, which are so popular, back into the cities."

The territory they prowl is one fraught with dangers. "We try to design things in which the hand of the designer is not too present," says Shearcroft. "We've

opened ourselves to a lot of criticism when we talk about the suburbs or about cosiness but we look at this as a long-term project. We're interested in aesthetic significance, in what things mean. Why is mock-Tudor still so popular? Why are people still sticking half-timbering on to their homes?"

Moving on to another domestic design, they tell me how the (unbuilt) Black House was conceived. "First we put all the client's furniture into the field, then we arranged it so the views were right and that became the basis for the design. It's extraordinary that when you design social housing you have to take into consideration pieces of furniture yet when you're designing for private developers you never see any furniture on a drawing. That's because space standards are often more generous in social housing. The buy-to-let market has distorted housebuilding so that properties are not viewed as homes but as commodities and investments."

AOC's most recent project

was, at least for a little while at the end of last year, one of London's most visible houses. Plonked in the middle of Trafalgar Square, the wittily named No 1 Lower Carbon Drive (or 1 Trafalgar Terrace as the architects referred to it) was commis-

'The buy-to-let market has distorted housebuilding'

sioned by the London Development Authority as a demonstration of some relatively simple measures that can be taken to bring the standard Victorian terraced house up to 21st century standards of greenness. This is not the overblown green bling of David Cameron's rooftop wind turbine but sensible things such as double glazing and a heat exchanger. Fully glazed on one side, it was, says Shearcroft, rather odd. "The house was based

on [co-founder] Tom [Coward]'s own home, the lobby was an exact replica of his. It was rather eerie standing there in this glass-sided house. But it does make you realise how generous these houses were. We were trying to show that some little measures can make Victorian houses as sustainable as some of the best modern developments."

"We're really concerned with how you can design something that is capable of evolving," Shearcroft says. "I've recently started wearing second-hand suits and I think clothing is a good analogy for architecture. We have all these cheap, throwaway things that are perfectly OK but the Victorians had a good suit made to last a lifetime. And then probably handed it on to their sons. A good suit can be relined, can be patched and it becomes something else. I also think it's a political agenda. If you can allow people to become engaged physically with their surroundings, that can have a profound impact."

Eva Vermandel