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Black beauty: Project Orange in Sheffield

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The new black

Project Orange had to fight free of Sheffield's ubiquitous red brick for its first new build. The result is a sophisticated little black number.

By Eleanor Young. Photographs: Gareth Gardner





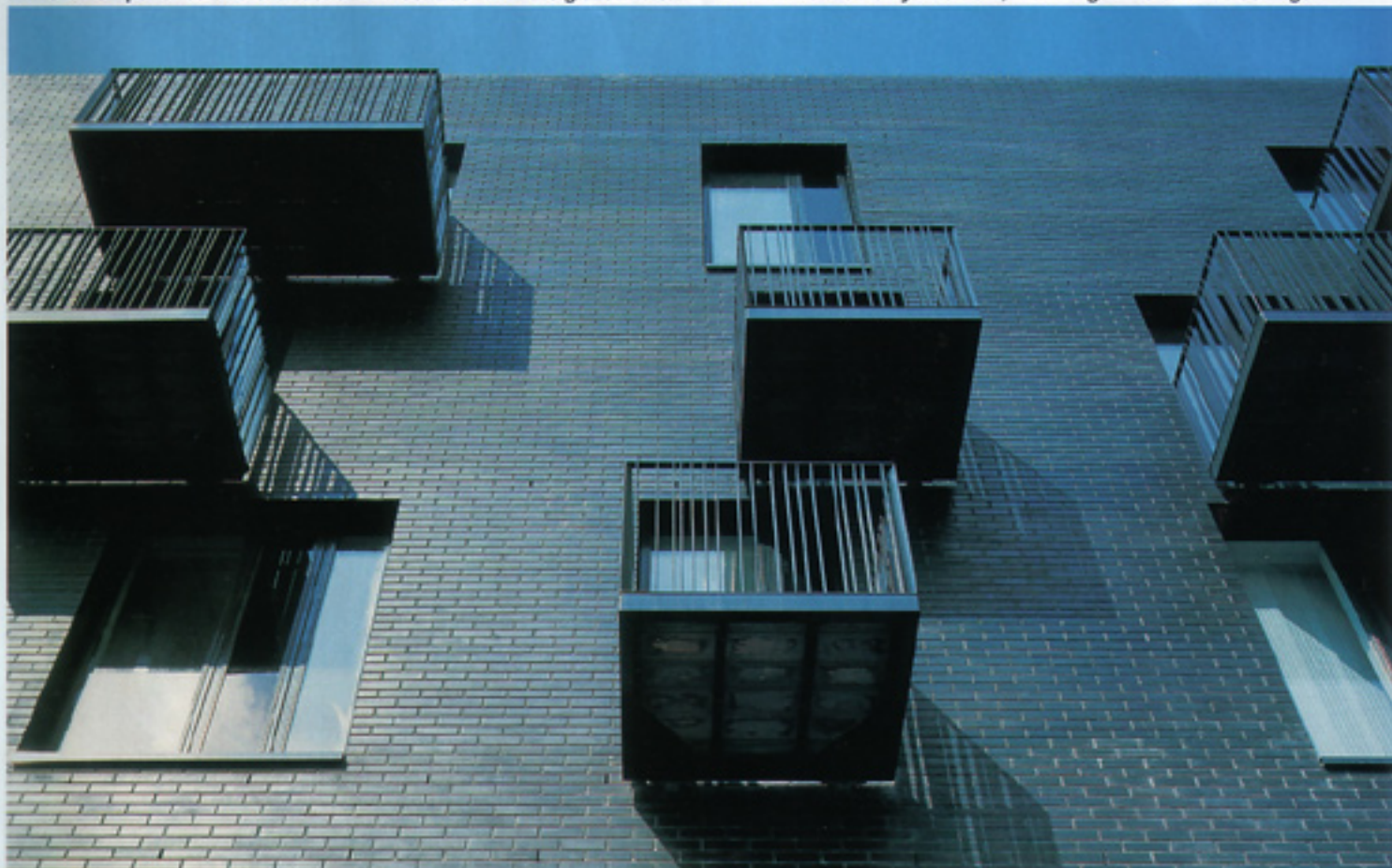
Client John Sinclair Sheffield
Architect Project Orange
Structural engineer Project Design Associates
QS Darwent Shaw



Mirrored strips reflect the chandelier and contrast with the glazed brick.



Bathrooms are richly fitted out, including mirrors to the ceilings.



The facade is lively, with windows and balconies placed apparently randomly, and equally unpredictable balcony railings.



Walkways to the flats, with their glass lenses, are visible through the glazed roof above the shop's mezzanine.

Site plan



Second-floor plan



Sinuous curves of black brick, a lively composition of balconies and coloured glass panels: it is not the setting you would expect for a family firm of china and glassware shops that depends on a loyal market of ladies over 50. And it might not have been what it got, if one of Sinclairs' employees hadn't happened to have an architect son practising in London.

This was Christopher Ash, a director of Project Orange. When the client and the planners wanted brick, he served it up semi-glazed, in black. Both parties needed some convincing it was best to avoid Sheffield's ubiquitous red stock. Sinclairs was prepared to be a bit brave because it wanted the shop to be noticed. 'We wanted a reaction to it, whether people thought it was good or ugly,' explains director Cristian Sinclair.

The curving frontage spans two side roads, pushing out into towers at either end and adding interest to what is essentially a simple five-storey block. It has retail and offices on the first two floors with 22 flats above leading off a central light well. In fact most of the complexity is in the facade, which is cut away at the base, the traditionally laid bricks supported by skyhooks. On the side roads Project Orange sets out the apartment balconies in calm, straightforward patterns, but on the main facade it mixes them up to echo the bustle of Glossop Road. One flat ends up with three balconies, but the effect is not clumsy. Balcony railings are lively too, with

Plans

- 1 Sinclairs shop
- 2 Lettable retail unit
- 3 Lobby to flats
- 4 Ramp to car park

- 5 Residential unit
- 6 Stairs
- 7 Walkways
- 8 Rooftop over shop

rather random verticals – more fun than the structural glass dropped because of cost.

The shop itself takes advantage of the curved corner to offer glimpses through a horizontal slit window (unfortunately not well executed). Inside it flows around the stair to a mezzanine, a relaxed space that incorporates a juice bar alongside the handbags and cosmetics Sinclairs has added to its range. Thanks to the partly glazed roof it has a great quality of light even on a grey day. Stairs to the first floor lead to a hairdresser's and Sinclairs' offices, so there is a feeling of arriving at a destination rather than just a shop. This will be reinforced when the second ground-floor retail unit is let.

The flats were primarily to fund the retail, so when Project Orange suggested deck access there were concerns about saleability – Sheffield's infamous Park Hill estate hasn't won deck access many fans here. But the walkways won through and look good around the courtyard, inset with glass lenses and glistening at night

from a line of blue lights. Project Orange took care to make the entrance equally special – the narrow double-height space off a side street is glammed up with mirror surfaces and silk drapes. There is the feeling you have bought into a lifestyle – the flats are at the top end of the local market, selling at £215,000 for a small two-bed to £325,000 for a three-bed penthouse.

Each floor has a good distribution of different shape and size flats (affordable homes were not a planning requirement). Full height vision panels on the front doors offer glimpses of life beyond; every living room has a balcony and the lavishly fitted out bathrooms are naturally lit from the courtyard. Kitchens are neatly tucked into corners in the smaller flats and the curves adding a pleasant generosity to the larger ones. The latter have an extra sliding door from the second bedroom to the living room, making use as a home office or guest bedroom easier. Most of the flats were sold off plan.

In the four penthouses on the fifth floor the spec goes up, with walnut doors and double basins as standard. Project Orange has tried to break up the skyline with zinc-clad tall boxes linked by lower timber-clad boxes. It is a nice idea and makes for lively balconies, but looks messy from the street. There are some other oddities inside, mostly due to changes in the brief. One office unit originally planned as a flat is accessed through the residential space and consequently has the largest terrace of the building. Sinclairs' offices are scattered and evening access to the hairdresser's, when the shop is closed, feels distinctly back stair.

Christopher Ash and fellow Project Orange director James Soane both used to work at Conran and Partners and this experience won their own firm a lot of interiors projects in its first nine years. Their expertise has translated well into the firm's first new building. It shows an elegant, assured handling of both internal space and the relationship with the street. And it's won local fans too – the practice's next building is likely to be down the street. ■

Section A

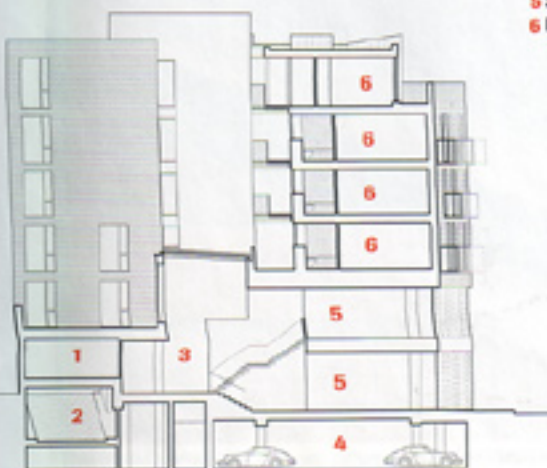
- 1 Store
- 2 Ramp
- 3 Mezzanine
- 4 Car park
- 5 Sinclairs shop
- 6 Unit

Costs

Total costs	£3,800,000
Area	3848m ²
Costs/m ²	£1042

Breakdown

Demolitions	£23,350
Substructure	£305,908
Frame/envelope	£1,804,396
Fit-out	£456,800
M&E	£500,103
Lifts	£32,540
Ext works	£25,197
Drainage	£25,000
Contingency	£50,000
Preliminaries	£576,746



Specifications Black bricks by Taylor Maxwell (no 556), insulated render by StoTherm (551), stainless steel shopfront by Driven Metal (552), zinc cladding by Feinzink (553), windows by Ideal Combi (554), skylight by Bespoke Glazing vision (555), roofing by Kinspan (556), walkways by Luxcrete (557), balconies and railings by Zin-Tec (558), sanitaryware by Duravit (559), ironmongery by Allgood (560).

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