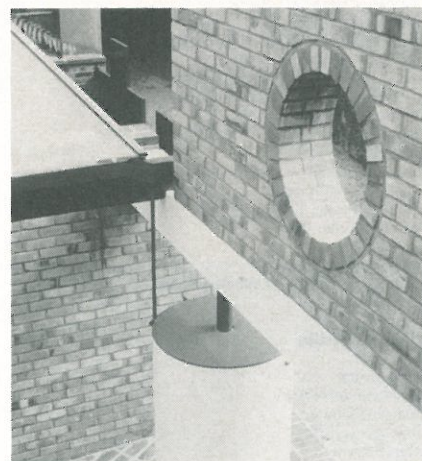


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A speculative house designed by Nicholls Associates in Pimlico, south London, presents a distinct architectural image. Below, Mark Gelernter assesses the building, which is cleverly punctuated by three small courtyards, and considers its market appeal. Photographs by Dennis Gilbert.

COURT APPEARANCE



2

In the speculative housing market today, an unspoken assumption of many property developers seems to be that a strong pervasive architectural image will not sell.

Faced with the problem of designing a house for no particular client, developers apparently try to maximise their potential market by offering a neutral building shell which can become all things for all people.

Amorphous style

The front facade may hint at a neo-Georgian, neo-vernacular or post-modern style, but the character of the interior usually remains undefined until it is imprinted by the buyer. Is this the best strategy for speculative housing design?

Nicholls Associates clearly think not.

In designing a speculative detached house for a mews site in Pimlico, south London, they decided, as the developers, to invest their design with as strong and pervasive an architectural image as possible. From the complex geometry of the plan and section, through the post-modern colour scheme and porthole windows, to the stylish and immaculately detailed fittings everywhere, this house establishes a distinct 'designer' image throughout, which can hardly be modified by any future occupants.

Going against the conventional developers' wisdom, the architects obviously intend to show that a strong predetermined architectural image can find a ready market.

The complexity of the building form is not merely an essay in fashionable

imagery, but derives in large part from the architects' attempts to cope with an exceedingly difficult site. Positioned at the end of a mews between two converging rows of terrace houses, the site is overlooked by four-storey houses close to both sides, and any large building form developed on the site would block light and sun to the adjoining gardens. Nicholls Associates tried to avoid both these problems by spreading a low building over the entire site, punctuated by three courtyards.

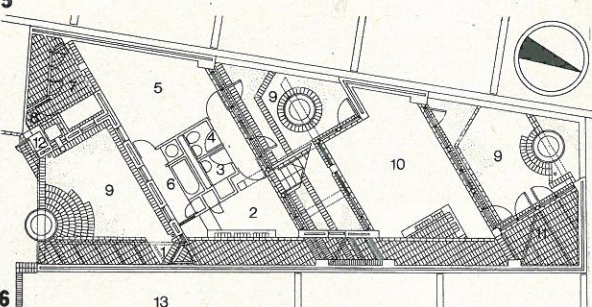
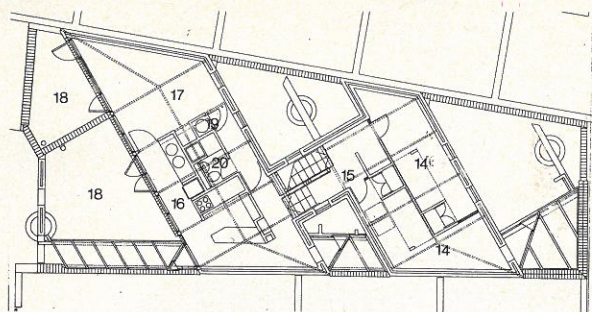
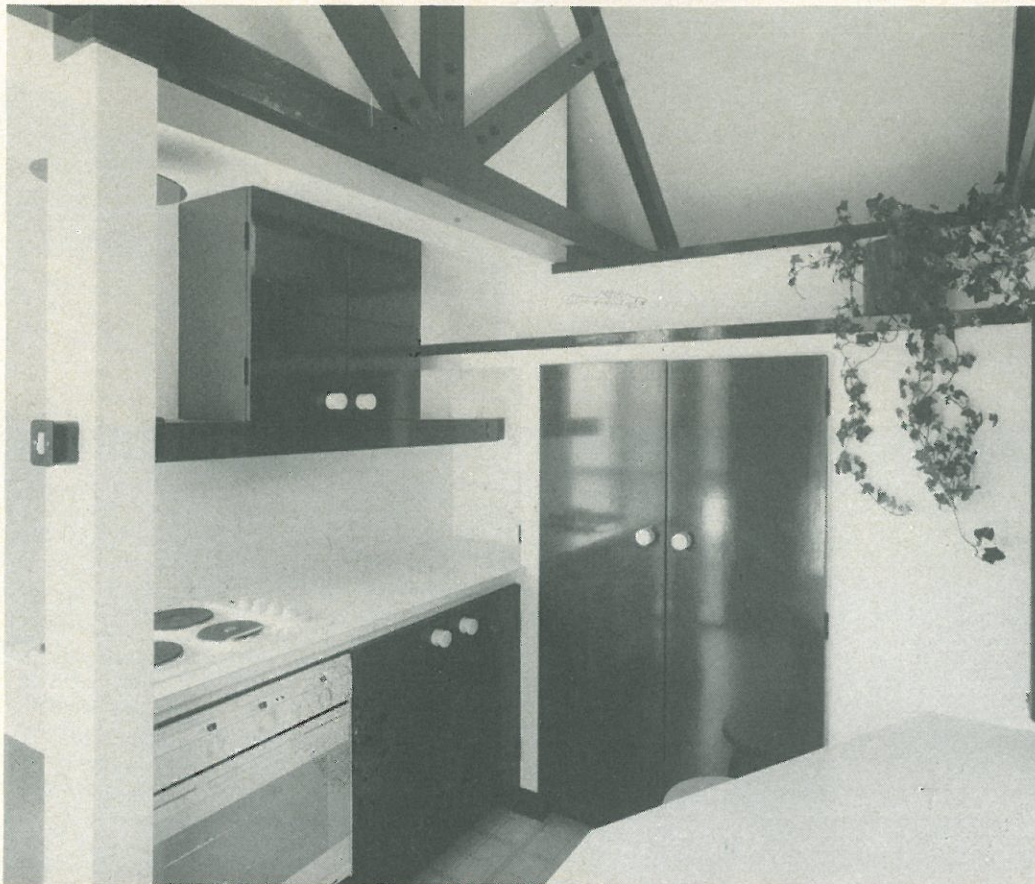
Private lives

This courtyard strategy seems to work rather well. Whereas one big garden behind one big house would have been a visual focus for all the adjacent houses, the three small courtyards are



1 Entrance to the house from Moreton Mews North through the first of three courtyards.
2 Stylish and immaculate fitments and porthole windows throughout the house emphasise the 'designer' image sought by the architects.
3 View from the centre courtyard looking north-east towards the house. The courtyard strategy provides an introspective cloistered setting while creating an increased sense of internal space.

4 The kitchen continues the post-modern imagery. The interior shapes of rooms are often acutely angled because of the skewed plan of the house. 5 First floor plan. 6 Ground floor plan. 7 View from the entrance courtyard into the house. Fragments of space and constructional materials are artfully jumbled together.



- | | |
|------------------|-----------------|
| 1 Main entry | 11 Study |
| 2 Reception hall | 12 Bin, meters |
| 3 Utility | 13 Parking |
| 4 WC | 14 Bedroom |
| 5 Bedroom | 15 Landing |
| 6 Bathroom | 16 Kitchen |
| 7 Dressing room | 17 Dining room |
| 8 Boiler | 18 Roof terrace |
| 9 Garden courts | 19 Linen |
| 10 Living-room | 20 Shower/WC |



sufficiently protected to provide considerable visual privacy.

Breaking the house into two hipped roof blocks helps to reduce the bulk of the development, and without any interesting external views on which to focus, the courtyards turn the house inward to provide a successfully introspective cloistered setting. The alternating sequence of solid house and open courtyard, linked by the glazed circulation spine, gives the impression that it is larger inside and provides a rich variety of internal views.

Geometric complexity

Less successful is the 30°/60° planning grid superimposed upon the courtyards. The architects justify its use on several grounds: it is supposed to help block the neighbours' views

into the courtyards, to align the building more favourably to the sun, to cope visually with the converging edges of the building site and to give a sense of longer rooms within.

None of these reasons seems entirely convincing. Although the skewed plan blocks the view of neighbours on one side, it opens up the view even more to those on the other; shifting the orientation more extremely to the south-east might give some windows more morning and evening sun, but the improvement is insignificant; and, far from helping the interior shapes of the rooms, this geometry creates acutely angled corners and rooms of uneasy, indefinite shape. One wonders how furniture could be arranged in some of them.

Architects who admire conceptual

clarity in design will no doubt find this building too complicated and confusing. Finding one's way about for the first time is no mean feat, and it is often difficult to see the relationship of the parts to the whole.

Constructivist aesthetic

This visual complexity does have its own charm, however, and gives a hint of the new constructivist aesthetic. In places one has the distinct sense that incomplete fragments of both space and constructional materials have been artfully jumbled together, sometimes just touching, sometimes interpenetrating, to create a rich spatial experience. Perhaps in a house, where the occupants will soon learn to find their way around, the visual richness of this style might

8 Glazed circulation spine links the open courtyard and the solid house.
9 View of the site from above, showing restricted boundaries.



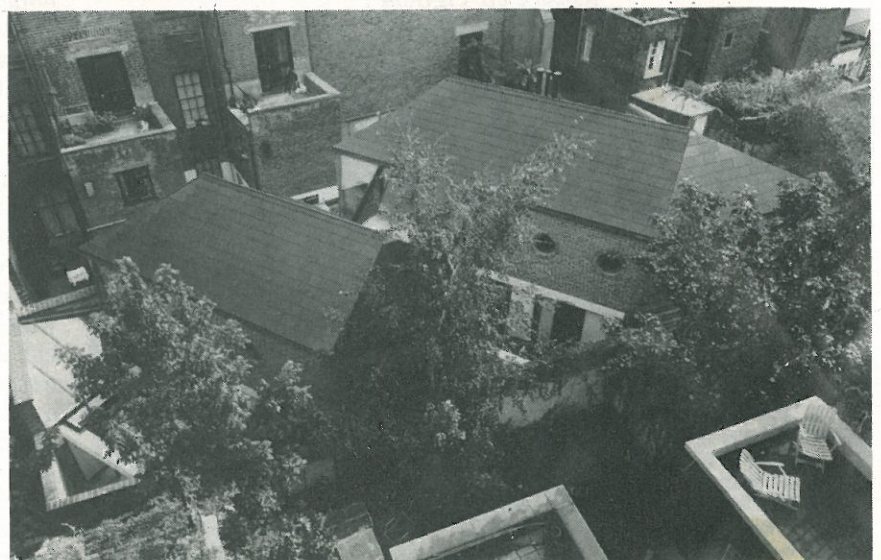
architects Nicholls Associates
partners in charge Cliff Nicholls and Andrew Lee
structural engineers Frederick J. Brand and Partners

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compensate for its apparent conceptual confusion.

Will this house prove traditional developers wrong, and in doing so show the way to an untapped market for other architect-developers? According to Nicholls Associates, early viewers to the house have said that it seems to have been designed for someone in particular.

Looking on the bright side, this could mean that the right buyer will pay over the odds for a 'designer' house which fits his or her personality perfectly; but on the other hand this could signal a market resistance to houses that look as if they were designed for someone else. Architects thinking about entering the developing game should pay close attention to the fortunes of this experiment.



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