PEABODY HOUSING
NIALL MCLAUGHLIN
In December 2002, Niall McLaughlin Architects won a design competition organised by the Peabody Trust. It was called *Fresh Ideas for Low Cost Housing*. The site was in Silvertown in East London, between Royal Victoria Dock and the River Thames.

We concentrated on the following issues in relation to the design:
1. The rational layout of the interior, giving a large, flexible living space with unusually high ceilings for low cost housing.
2. The view, looking from the building out over the strange landscape of London Docklands. There is London City Airport, Canary Wharf and the Millennium Dome in the distance.
3. The strange chemical history of the site.
4. The nature of modern industrialised construction, in which a timber-frame is wrapped in a decorative outer layer.

Each living unit has two bedrooms and a shared bathroom. The kitchen, dining and living functions are accommodated within a single, large space on the south side of the building. This allows each apartment to make the most of the sun and the view. There is a little south-facing terrace outside each flat, and the ground floor units each have a back garden. Special corner windows on the upper floor flats allow the view to open out along the street towards the Millennium Dome and Canary Wharf in the distance.

The practice usually looks carefully at the history and topography of a site. Each place has something comparable to DNA, a coded trace pointing towards the future. Everything from local
myths to geology can become a starting point for architecture. Looked at in the context of historical time, this site experienced an extraordinary flowering of industry from the time of the Great Exhibition in 1851 to the collapse of British manufacturing in the late 1970s. In 1850 the place was marshland, by 1990 it had returned to almost total dereliction. The industrial flowering, or chemical-flare, lasted for a very brief period of time. Now the area is being repopulated by a rag-bag of yuppie-houses, airports, an IBIS Hotel and a vast conference centre. It is both somewhere and nowhere. This kind of place has been called a post-industrial landscape. We prefer to think of it in the context of emerging and dissolving landscapes. The uncertainty of its identity is the essence of the place. Its properties are fugitive.

Even the name Silvertown plays a trick on you. The glister in the name comes from Stephen Winkworth Silver who built a rubber plant on the site in 1852, manufacturing wet-weather clothing. It’s the kind of stuff Queen Victoria might have inspected at the opening of the Great Exhibition the year before. Raw material from the Empire transformed directly into cheap consumer goods on the shore where it landed. Looking at the map change during the next fifty years, we can see the blooming of a remarkably consistent range of factories making sugar, coloured dyes, jam, golden syrup, gutta percha, soda, TNT, soap and matches. A now surreal photograph from 1900 shows horse-drawn petroleum carts on Knights’ Road, reminding us of the previous life of this most iridescent of materials. The Victorians, through chemistry and trade, learnt to make luxury cheap. These factories manufactured chemical sweetness, colour and light.

In one bizarre incident, a whale beached herself on the North Woolwich shore in 1899. Was she lost, or was she following her nose towards John Knight’s Primrose Soap Works? The
factory workers ran out and stoned or bludgeoned her to death. A photograph shows them standing proudly on her 66-foot carcass. These two emblems of the sublime were clearly incompatible.

The factories lined the river and the warehouses lined the dock. In between lay a zone of industrial worker’s housing. It was low lying, squat and regular. Our site lies on the edge of Evelyn Road. Although it is partly derelict now, this street separated the houses from the warehouses. Our apartments are built on the warehouse side of the street.

Modern low cost housing construction is pre-fabricated timber frame and timber sheeting. We imagined our building being like a row of big packing crates stacked up near the water. Once you make the timber carcass, you have to wrap it in something. This is usually a layer of brick, or wood, or tiles. The industrial product is returned to a reassuring traditional appearance. In our case we looked at all kinds of industrial wrapping that might be used as the final layer to present our building. Given the place, we wanted something bright and sweet and chemical. Of course it had to be cheap.

Martin Richman is an artist and he works with light. He has collaborated with our practice during the last ten years (see Bristol Bridge and Bloom). We asked him for ideas and he suggested a material called Radiant Light Film. It is produced by 3M, who make everything from dental adhesive to post-it-notes. It has dichroic properties so it produces iridescence. Colourless metal oxides on the surface of the film disrupt the reflection of light, producing interference patterns that appear as colour. As the angle of incidence changes, the colour changes. Therefore the surface, the light source and the viewer are in an ever-
changing relationship. The eighteenth century physicist and architect Auguste Fresnel discovered this effect and explained the phenomenon of iridescence. It appears naturally on petrol and peacock’s wings.

The south facade of the building is wrapped in a covering of dichroic material. It is held in glass frames. Light hitting the facade is reflected back from different layers of the construction, producing a shifting pattern. Cast glass is used to capture the light as it escapes. In time, a stand of silver birch trees will add an extra layer to the facade. They will cast shadows onto the surface and catch coloured light on the way back out. At times the effect is robustly geometric, at others it is evanescent and fugitive. We want the building to have a slightly dream-like quality as though its image will not fix completely in your mind. We hope that this connects to the shifting, uncertain properties of the place.

This was a Design & Build Contract where our practice partnered with Sandwood Construction who worked successfully with us on the development of the design, as well as the construction of the building. They gave considerable support in solving the many practical difficulties involved in taking materials that are not building products and putting them on to the front of a building.