

Peabody Housing, Silvertown, London

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CLIENT

Peabody Trust
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Matthew Holden, Catherine Roberts

FAÇADE ENGINEERS

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Scott Nelson, Philip Wilson

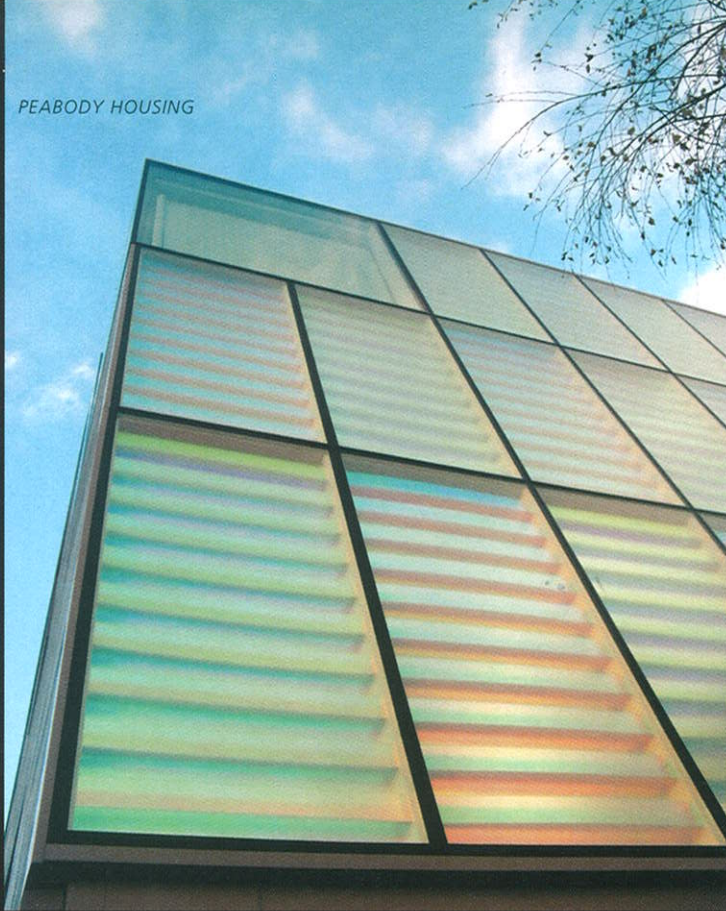
COLLABORATING ARTIST

Martin Richman

DESIGN AND BUILT CONTRACTOR

Sandwood Construction
Richard Garlan, Jerry Lennon

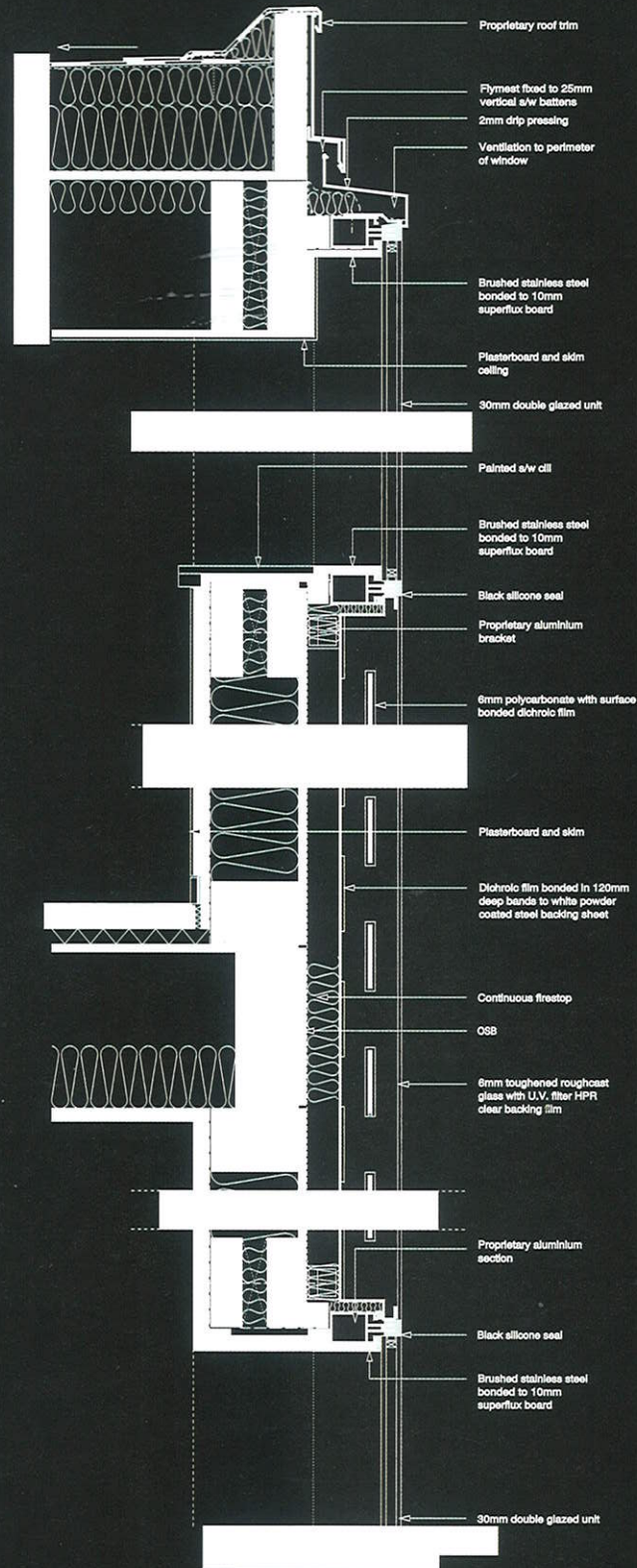




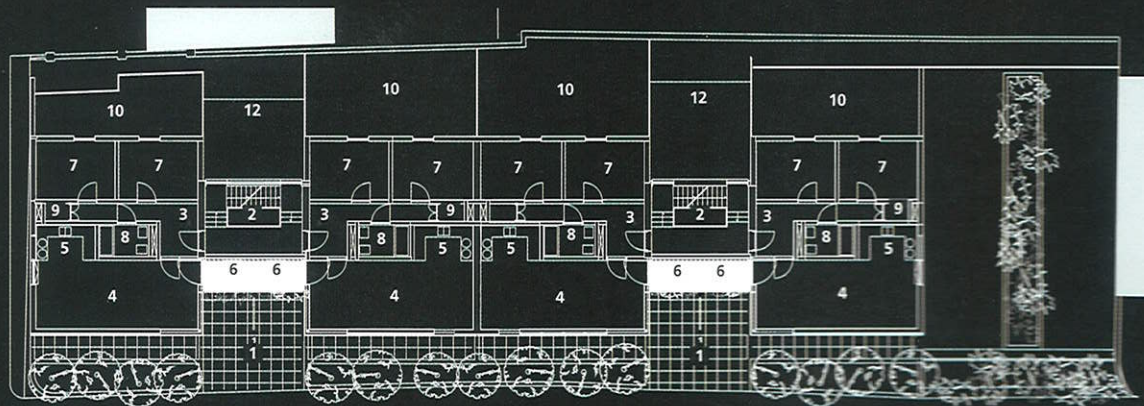
Architects' Account

In December 2002, we won the Peabody Trust's design competition called *Fresh Ideas for Low Cost Housing*. The practice always looks carefully into the history and topography of a site, as each location has something comparable to a DNA, a coded trace pointing towards the future. This site was in Silvertown in East London, between Royal Victoria Dock and the River Thames, and had 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. The glister in the name – Silvertown – comes from Stephen Winkworth Silver, who built a rubber plant on the site in 1852, manufacturing wet-weather clothing. Over the next 50 years, a remarkably consistent range of factories – making sugar, coloured dyes, jam, golden syrup, gutta percha, soda, TNT, soap and matches – sprung up. These factories manufactured chemical sweetness, colour and light.

Today, the area is being repopulated by a rag-bag of yuppie-houses, airports, an IBIS Hotel and a vast conference centre. 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.



Façade detail



Second floor plan

Legend

1. Entrance way
2. Staircase
3. Hall
4. Living space
5. Kitchen
6. Balcony
7. Bedroom
8. Bathroom
9. Store
10. Garden
11. Terrace
12. Communal garden
13. Cycle storage



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1, 2
The south façade of the building is wrapped in a cladding of dichroic material held in glass frames. At times the light effect is robustly geometric, at others it is evanescent and fugitive

3
Light hitting the façade is reflected back from different layers, producing a shifting pattern. Cast glass captures the light as it escapes

4
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



5
Peabody Housing on the site of former warehouses with views over the London Docklands
6
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 reflected coloured light

In Silvertown, 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 the street is partly derelict now, it separated the houses from the warehouses. Our apartments are built on the warehouse side of the street. We concentrated on the following design issues:

- a rational layout of the interior with a large, flexible living space and unusually high ceilings for low cost housing
- the view from the building, over the strange landscape of the London Docklands: London City Airport, Canary Wharf and the Millennium Dome
- the strange 'chemical history' of the site
- 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. Ground floor units have a back garden while all other apartments have south-facing terraces.

Modern low cost housing construction is pre-fabricated timber frame and timber sheeting. We imagined our building being like a row of 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, wood or tiles. The industrial product is returned to a reassuring traditional appearance. For our project we looked at different kinds of industrial wrapping that might be used as the final layer of our building. Given the site history, we wanted something bright and sweet and chemical. It also had to be inexpensive.

We collaborated with light artist Martin Richman for this project 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 oxidizing on the film surface disrupts the reflection of light, producing interference patterns that appear as colour. As the angle of incidence changes, the colour changes. The surface, the light source and the viewer are in an ever-changing relationship. The 18th century physicist and architect Auguste Fresnel discovered this effect and explained the phenomenon of iridescence. It appears naturally in petrol and peacocks wings.

