



Bold, gutsy and vibrant student accommodation makes a statement

STEPHEN MARSHALL ARCHITECTS' UNIVERSITY SQUARE DEVELOPMENT FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX IS A BOLD, COLOURFUL INTERVENTION IN THE SEAFRONT TOWN OF SOUTHEND THAT REVIVES ITS VIBRANCY AND BRINGS A NEW PERSPECTIVE TO THE TYPOLOGY OF STUDENT HOUSING.

The client, Hollybrook Homes, bought the prominent site in central Southend from the former South East Essex College, and handed it over to the University of Essex once the accommodation was completed in 2010.

"It actually started life as a residential scheme for Hollybrook," explains lead architect Jess Paull, "That's what we got planning permission for. And then it was turned into this scheme, which basically took the residential footprint and reduced the size to suit student accommodation."

The site is on a large area of wasteland used as a car park since the college's buildings were demolished some time ago. It sits between Southend's two major railway stations and can be seen from the busy high street. Paull describes it as a buffer zone between commercial and residential parts of the town.

"We tried to resolve the scale issue of going from two-storey residential to four/five-storey commercial," he says, "and we wanted to make the highest part a focal point for the high street."

In total, the blocks contain 561 student rooms in cluster flats and 64 self-contained studios, situated over a 300-space car park. By incorporating the basement car park, which was a requirement of the local council, a landscaped podium was created in the centre of the site which all the buildings look into. Like a modern college quadrangle, the podium forms the platform of entry to the various accommodation blocks, a feature that also makes access to the student housing more secure.

To bring some uniformity to the blocks of varying height, it was decided to treat the exterior design as a "fabric". "Student housing can be quite dull," says Paull. "It's just a series of rooms with windows. So the trick to try and make it look not institutional was to just throw a fabric over it, which, whatever you did to it, would suit the different sizes of buildings."

The exterior pattern is a series of large brightly coloured rectangles, each with a pair of windows at the centre. The tessellated cladding design has been compared both to Lego bricks and a stacked set of Tetris shapes. The only prominent interruption to the snaking pattern is a set of three clocks on of a specific size.



Michael Brookman from Vivalda Ltd, the company that supplied the Trespa panels for the development, states: "Trespa isn't the cheapest when you look at the square metre price. But on site, it far outweighs the competitors. Trespa's jumbo sheet seemed to work really well in terms of the minimum amount of wastage. A few of the competitors don't do a sheet quite as big, so you end up throwing a quarter of it away."

“With Trespa you always know that the lead time quoted is what you're going to get. When you're talking about a project of that size, you need to be absolutely sure when the material is coming in.”

Apart from specifying the Trespa panels for performance reasons, Brookman says architects commonly choose the rainscreen cladding product for its qualities in vandal resistance, impact strength, life expectancy, BBA certification and weatherproofing.

For Paull, there was another advantage to using Trespa for this job. The window reveals of the student accommodation blocks are all designed to be black, to give emphasis to the geometry and colour of the various panels. "The best thing about the Trespa is that a black panel on the face looks pretty much the same as the cut edge of a panel in any colour," he adds.



"Since Trespa's boards are black all the way through, we didn't have to worry about seeing a weird colour on the edge or introducing a trim or something. That would just overcomplicate things."

The student housing market in Britain is facing an uncertain time. With funding cuts to higher education, more investments in improving or providing new student accommodation are being shouldered by the private sector. GVA, an adviser on the student housing market, predicted in its summer 2011 review that university and private sector partnerships like that between the University of Essex and Hollybrook Homes will be more common in the future, and that students paying increased tuition fees are on the hunt for the type of well-designed, contemporary, centrally located student accommodation.

The pressure from wholly privately built and owned student housing projects, which are increasingly appearing all over Britain's university towns, has introduced a competitive attitude to university-owned purpose-built student accommodation; and the effect is shifting the typology towards an ever more daring architecture.

It seems that also abroad there's a trend for associating bright colours and bold patterns with this particular building use. Getting the colours exactly right meant choosing from the RAL chart, rather than Trespa's standard colour list. Brookman says that establishing realistic lead times with Trespa International BV, situated in The Netherlands, where the



panels are fabricated, was key to the project running smoothly.

Unlike the Netherlands, perhaps the British public are less amenable to modern design statements like University Square turning up on their doorstep.

The architecture may not suit all tastes, but the development is ultimately successful at repairing a forgotten piece of Southend's urban fabric in a way that responds to both the local context and the needs of an increasingly demanding student market.

University Square is one clear vision of how student housing should be built in the UK.

Trespa

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