

**WESTMINSTER**

**RAE 2008, RA2 - H 30**

**GRIFFITHS, Sean**

**Identifier: 0210831865103**

**Output 1 (Design)**

**BLUE HOUSE**

## **Griffiths, Sean (2002)**

### **Blue House, Shoreditch**

#### **General Description:**

This distinctive and much discussed live/work building, affectionately known locally as the Blue House, has a cartoon-like billboard character which communicates its function as a home and office. The front has a miniature scale, but the side addressing the main street is made deliberately big in feel. Built for a sum of £300,000 - which is relatively cheap by London standards - the project in many regards makes an innovative use of standard construction methods. The house contains a maisonette for family of three, as well as an office and separate apartment. The significance of the Blue House as one of the most inventive private houses built so far this century (certainly in London) is now internationally recognised; for instance, it features prominently in numerous publications, including the new edition of Pevsner's *Buildings of England* for East London.

Established in 1995, Fashion-Architecture-Taste (FAT) has since developed a enviably broad approach to architecture. Early work included a series of seminal interior projects and art installations, but today the practice is far more involved in social housing and urban design work. FAT is also run along with Sam Jacobs and Charles Holland, but Sean Griffiths is the founding figure and senior participant in the firm, and he was the exclusive designer for the Blue House project – not surprisingly, since it is his own home. FAT are now gaining widespread accolades for their designs, such as being chosen as the Architecture Foundation's Next Generation Award winners in 2006 and being included in the 'Gritty Brits' exhibition at the Carnegie Mellon Institute, Pittsburgh, in 2007.

#### **Research Questions:**

The research issues involved in the Blue House include the following:

- (1) How to utilise the program requirements and site conditions for this building to create a new model of individual urban housing which can play visually and psychologically on our everyday notions about domesticity, and also address broader issues about our contemporary lifestyle patterns.
- (2) How also to achieve this effect within an undeniably restricted budget, and in face of the restrictive planning regulations in Britain which control form, colour and aesthetic expression in urban areas.
- (3) How to challenge the perceived notions of 'high' and 'low' or 'popular' architectural taste by re-exploring, combining and re-using (both figuratively and abstractly, and in plan and section as well as in outside appearance) existing models and typologies, including those which are seen as unfashionable or low-code alongside those which are deemed fashionable or elite.

Thus the core of the research work behind the Blue House scheme lies in the combination of spatial and technical inventiveness to devise a new kind of prototype for combined live/work activities, and also contribute to the public iconography of what is in general a tough, gritty inner-city area of London.

## **Aims/Objectives:**

(1) To come up with a fresh approach to ways of expressing popular iconography about domesticity, and to incorporate innovative ideas of live/work arrangements for busy urban professionals.

The scheme, through its combination of live/work uses, aims for a more sustainable design that can match with its innovative cultural reading of what contemporary urban lifestyles are like. Here the work of Sean Griffiths and FAT is openly indebted to the pioneering ideas of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown - figures who are usually labelled as the progenitors of architectural Post-Modernism, but who prefer to describe their work as exercises in visual communication within the urban realm. If one accepts that buildings have a duty to express their character and purpose within the city environment, rather than retreat towards silence as in the projects of Adolf Loos, then this puts the onus very much on the designer to come up with a formal expression that can communicate directly with those who see it. If all buildings are in fact read as signs, whether we deny it or not, then how should these signs be created? It is notable that Venturi and Scott Brown share a close affinity with Griffiths, and indeed they all correspond regularly on architectural matters. Out of his interest in visual communication in architecture, Griffiths has also built up links with other erstwhile post-modernists in the USA, leading to him being appointed by Robert Stern as a visiting professor at Yale University. In the case of the Blue House project, it is worth pointing out that it contains a gender reversal not common to pioneering models of live/work arrangements, in that the attached studio space is actually for Griffiths' wife, a well-known landscape designer.

(2) To engage on a consciously eclectic reading of architectural history in order to discover different design prototypes, and then to hybridise these formal sources into an experimental new arrangement.

Thus, for instance, the Blue House refers overtly to, as well as combines and remakes, Konstantin Melnikov's house-come-studio, the circulation patterns of various Arts and Crafts dwellings, the fenestration and heraldic symbolism of English Elizabethan houses such as Hardwick Hall, Robert Venturi's house for his mother Vanna - all alongside American and British vernacular features, dolls houses, and works by contemporary artists like Julian Opie - in order to explore ideas about domesticity and work. Yet at the same time, these explorations are used in pursuit of, and not in denial of, a comfortable family home and an attractive and upbeat piece of urban design.

(3) To use an investigation of physical model-making and traditional construction technologies to experiment architecturally within a tight budget and construction schedule.

Another distinctive aspect of the work of Sean Griffiths and FAT is their Arts-and-Crafts emphasis on the detailing and construction of their projects, which works in a different intellectual territory to their Venturian interest in the ways that buildings communicate visually within the urban realm. Much effort was spent by Griffiths in the Blue House in adapting typical constructional techniques in brickwork to achieve formal innovation and variety while working with a commonplace palette of materials. This interest in the nitty-gritty of construction has led to a number of articles on FAT projects which focus more on the building's details, and to them winning a variety of construction-related prizes for their work. In particular in the Blue House, the ingenious manner of cutting and then fixing the dramatic pattern of blue timber clapboards to the street elevations is a detail which has been much remarked upon and written about.

## **Context:**

Sean Griffiths is well known as one of the most talented, articulate and lively British architects who is operating in the fields of social housing and urban design, linking his research into the nature of contemporary visual communication with the creation of innovative domestic models. The Blue House hence contributes squarely to the research by Griffiths into current social structures and patterns of urban life, and continues in a knowing way the investigations first started by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) and then in the famous 'Signs of Life' exhibition in Washington DC (1976).

Historically, the Blue House project can be seen as part of a long lineage of innovative houses designed by architects for their own domestic use but which have also contained working spaces within the fabric. If in London the foundation stone was John Soane's home in Lincoln's Inn Fields, since then the idea has been pushed by figures as diverse as Richard Norman Shaw, Frank Lloyd Wright, Konstantin Melnikov, Alvar Aalto and Frank Gehry. Part-manifesto, part-prototype, just like its more noble predecessors, the Blue House seeks to follow in this fascinating tradition.

## **Research Methods:**

A great many visits were made to the site in order to understand its inherent complexity and latent potential. Extensive discussions were then held with the local planning officers in order to discover how far the existing land-use regulations would allow the introduction of a novel hybrid live/work typology. Concurrently a variety of programmatic solutions and spatial permutations, as well as the detailed three-dimensional complexity of the building and its surroundings, were tested out through extensive physical model-making and other forms of visualisation. These analyses in turn allowed the refinement of the overall configuration of the building in terms of accessibility, circulation, lighting conditions, external colouration, historical references and general functional viability.

Just as Sean Griffiths and FAT seek to explore, re-use and re-combine existing building forms and typologies, so too they consciously combine and re-adapt representation processes. They explore projects like the Blue House both through traditional forms of model-making, and the drawing of plans and sections, with more contemporary techniques such as digital design using programs like Photoshop and Vectorworks, whose limitations as well as whose strengths they find particularly fruitful. Indeed, a large part of FAT's distinctive visual style is created through deliberately 'flat' signboard images using Vectorworks. In terms of the physical models made by FAT for the Blue House, these were constructed with the same logic as the real construction operations would be on site, and were regularly and quickly updated throughout the whole design process.

It is also worth stressing in terms of design research methods that FAT have developed a collaborative approach which involves an active embrace of group work and participation and collaboration with building users and others, rather than stressing the notion of the 'individual creative genius'. This process therefore involves the active and sometimes confrontational collaboration of all the design directors and members of the practice, as well as clients and other participants in the project; it is seen positively as a source of creative tension, rather than - as by most other offices - as a problem that is to be avoided if possible.

## **Dissemination:**

The Blue House has been widely featured in books, including:

- Cherry, Bridget et al. *The Buildings of England – London Vol.5: East*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 113, 598.
- Powell, Ken, *New Architecture in Britain*. London: Merrell, 2003, p.165.
- Powell, Ken, *New London Architecture*. London: Merrell, 2005, p.163.
- Bullivant, Lucy. *Anglo Files: UK Architecture's Rising Generation*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, pp. 114-7, 123.
- Ryan, Raymond. *Gritty Brits: New London Architecture*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2007, pp. 54-55.

The project has likewise been extensively covered in the architectural and national press, including the *Sunday Times*, *Financial Times*, *Independent*, *Evening Standard*, *Icon*, *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, *Building Design*, *Architecture Today*, etc. It has thus generated a substantial amount of interest and media attention for the construction of ambitious domestic designs in inner-city areas. Of particular note in terms of teasing out the underlying aims of the Blue House are:

- 'Special Issue: External Envelope'. *Architecture Today (Specifiers' Handbook)*, January 2003, pp. 22-24.
- Long, Kieran. 'Postmodernism was all we could afford'. *Icon*, May 2006, pp. 114-20.

Significant exhibitions on the work of Fashion-Architecture-Taste (FAT) have been held since 2001 in places as far apart as London, Lisbon, Stockholm, Tokyo, Los Angeles and Pittsburgh - the latter, as mentioned, as part of the 'Gritty Brits: New London Architecture' show at the Carnegie Mellon Institute (January-June 2007). Furthermore, Griffiths has given nearly 50 public lectures on FAT's work across Britain, Europe and America, covering on each of these occasions the Blue House as being the first building by FAT really to gain widespread critical acclaim. As examples, these lectures include those at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam (November 2005), MIPIM property development fair in Cannes (March 2006), Yale University (January 2006), Royal College of Art (April 2006) and Tate Modern (May 2006 and June 2007).

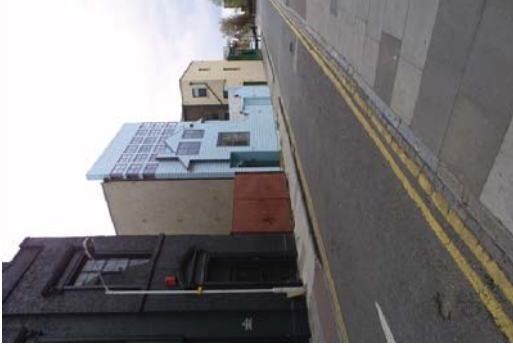
## **Esteem Indicators:**

The Blue House was nominated and shortlisted for the prestigious Mies van der Rohe / European Union Prize for Architecture (2003).

In part due to his work on the Blue House project, Sean Griffiths along with FAT has recently been awarded with the following signs of esteem:

- Winners of Architecture Foundation's New Generation Award (2006)
- Runner-up in the category of Best Affordable Housing Architect in the *Building Design* Annual Awards for Architecture (2007)

And as noted before, Sean Griffiths has also been appointed as a visiting professor at Yale University for the 2007-08 academic year, indicating he is operating at a top international standard. Griffiths along with FAT were recently chosen as one of English Partnerships' Architecture Consultants Panel for 2006-10, to carry out exemplar housing designs.



### **Sean Griffiths / FAT, Blue House, Shoreditch**

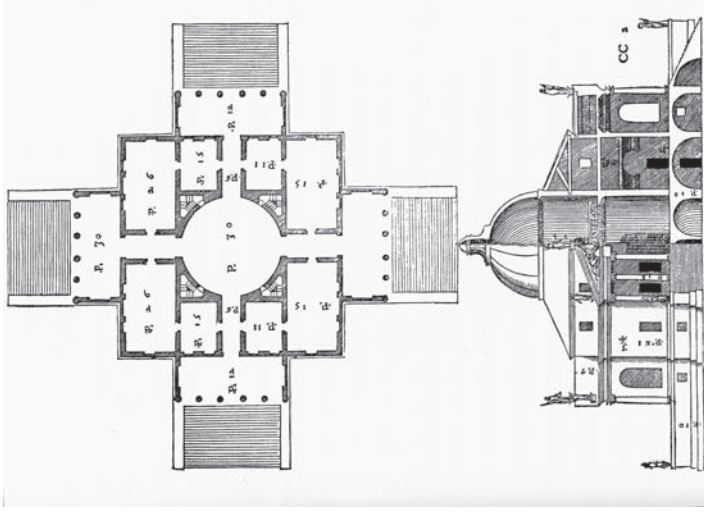
The nature of this distinctive project is shown clearly in the two attached books:

Bullivant, Lucy. *Anglo Files: UK Architecture's Rising Generation*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, pp. 114-7, 123.  
Ryan, Raymond. *Gritty Brits: New London Architecture*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2007, pp. 54-55.

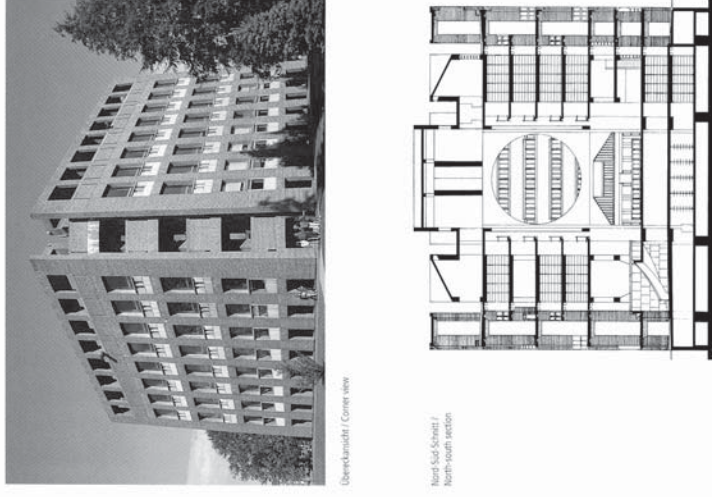
Here instead on the following few pages will be shown some of the historical precedents that Griffiths returns to time and time again in his designs, beginning with the Blue House, as part of his reinvestigation of architectural history through the process of creating contemporary buildings.



Lord Burlington, Chiswick House (1726-9)



Andrea Palladio, Villa Rotonda (c.1556-81)



Louis Kahn, Exeter Library (1968-71)

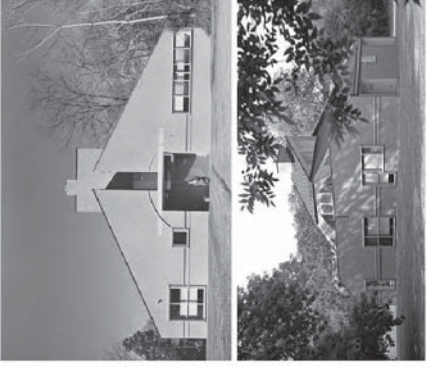
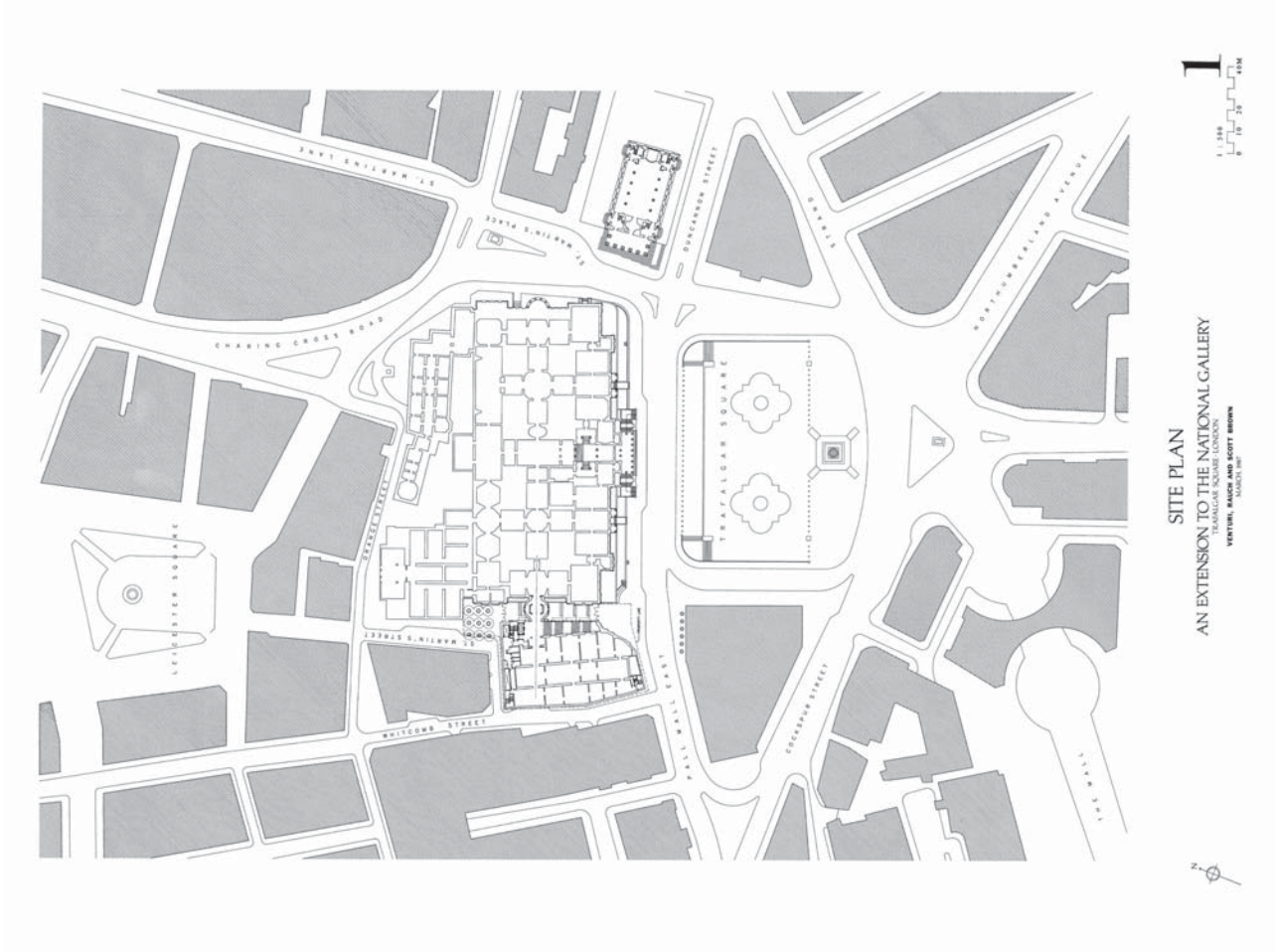


Image 2: Influence of domestic projects by Robert Venturi on the designs of Sean Griffiths/FAT





Image 3: Influence of public projects by Venturi Scott Brown on the designs of Sean Griffiths/FAT

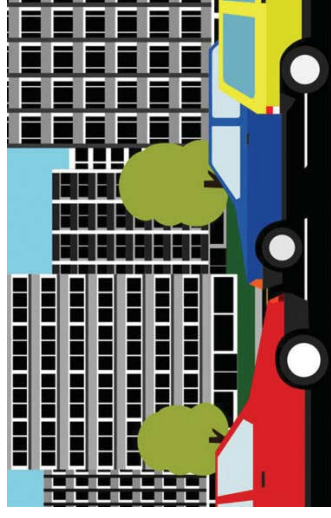




Hardwick Hall



Doll houses



Julian Opie



Melnikov House