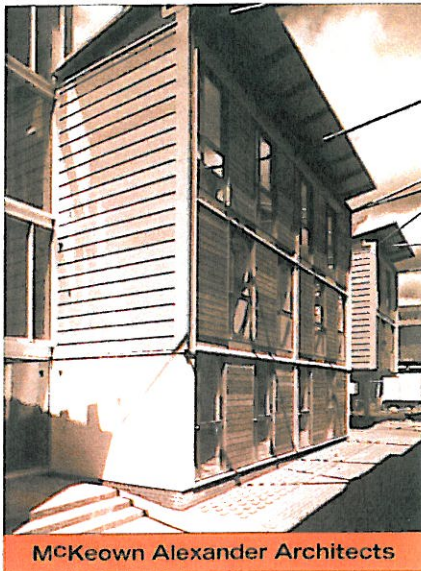


CLEMENT ATTLEE'S POST-WAR LABOUR GOVERNMENT HAD A VISION FOR BRITAIN AT THE CENTRE OF WHICH WERE POLICIES TO DELIVER DECENT HOMES FOR ALL. TODAY'S LABOUR GOVERNMENT, WHETHER AT WESTMINSTER OR HOLYROOD, SEEMS BLIND BY COMPARISON, YET A POLITICAL AGENDA TO DELIVER DECENT HOMES IS EVEN MORE IMPORTANT NOW THAN IT WAS THEN. WITH THE CHANGING NATURE OF PUBLIC SPACE, THE WORKPLACE, SHOPPING AND LEISURE PATTERNS AS WELL AS NEW ECOLOGICAL IMPERATIVES, THE HOME IS MORE PIVOTAL TO THE COMMON WEALTH THAN EVER BEFORE. IN THIS CONTEXT, ONE ISOLATED MOMENT OF CLARITY IS GRAHAM SQUARE IN GLASGOW - ISOLATED NOT JUST IN THE SENSE OF BEING AN EXAMPLE OF EXCELLENT HOUSING, BUT ALSO IN ITS LOCATION ON THE GALLOWGATE IN THE EAST END OF GLASGOW. HERE MOLENDINAR PARK HOUSING ASSOCIATION HAS JUST COMPLETED A DEVELOPMENT OF SIXTY FLATS AND A HIERARCHY OF PUBLIC SPACES AND ARTWORKS WHICH OFFER A MODEL FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT ☒



McKeown Alexander Architects



Richard Murphy Architects



Page & Park Architects

# DANCING IN THE STREET

Graham Square, Glasgow • McKeown Alexander Architects; Richard Murphy Architects; Page & Park Architects

**BETWEEN** Graham Square and the city centre are 25 hectares of brownfield land which Scottish Enterprise Glasgow is currently marketing as a business park location. Rob Joiner, the director of Molendinar Park Housing Association, has a different vision for the site which would see it developed as an area of mixed use development, extending the successful Merchant City eastwards beyond Glasgow's High Street and linking it to the communities of Dennistoun and Bridgeton in the East End. The Graham Square development grew out of late 1980s proposals by Glasgow District Council and the former Scottish Development Agency for the redevelopment of the area. Joiner's achievements in the area are the only parts of the plan to have been realised – commencing with a development of flats on Belgrove Street for Riedvale Housing Association in 1996, the enclosure of the backcourt of this development with the now completed Graham Square has created a new public space off the city's historic Gallowgate.

Yet Graham Square is not a public space in the conventional sense, but rather an experiment to define what public space can be within the context of contemporary society. The 1980s saw the rediscovery of the traditional spaces of the city – the street, the square, the terrace etc. in the work of (eg) the Krier brothers and most comprehensively in the Berlin International Building Exhibition (IBA) of 1984. Today, many architects are questioning the rigidity of these formal responses and experimenting with a more flexible definition of public space.

Rem Koolhaas, Enric Miralles and MVRDV have each provided examples of a new radical abstraction in relation to the nature of public space, and the architects of Graham Square have themselves attempted to ex-

tend the boundaries of plasticity within the constraints of the traditional street. In so doing they have uncovered new possibilities for the relationship between public and private space.

The three architectural practices involved – Richard Murphy, Page & Park and McKeown Alexander (the latter formerly with Elder & Cannon) – were chosen from an invited, design-led competition and their respective contributions, while differing not only in their architectural language and in their relationship to the street, still work harmoniously together. David Page characterises the three buildings as 'dancing around the street', although Henry McKeown emphasises that they are certainly not dancing 'cheek to cheek': a distinction inevitable perhaps between such strong and individual architectural approaches.

The first thing the visitor notices on glancing into Graham Square from the Gallowgate – the main road off which the cul-de-sac of Graham Square develops – are the retained façades of the old Meatmarket. These have been kept as a memory of the history of the site and lend civic scale to the space. Richard Murphy's building is almost invisible from the Gallowgate, hidden behind one of these massive stone portals. The other retained façade, which is seen obliquely, appears unbelievably flimsy from this angle, held up only by a few steel struts which tie it back to McKeown Alexander's lightweight structure. The top and bottom of Page & Park's tenemental infill to the eastern edge of the square respects the height and building line set by its 19th century neighbour. Its middle portion, however, becomes more plastic, pressing into the space of the street with a scalloped façade which project architect Karen Pickering likens to 'the folds of a matador's cloak' – an appropriate metaphor for a building ☐




facing a former Meatmarket. From the street, however, this matador's cloak is strangely frozen and lacking in vitality. The scalloping of the façade has allowed the architect to give all the living rooms a south-facing window with a distant view over the city, as well as a window facing west across the street. All the design attention appears to have gone into creating living rooms and kitchens which stretch the entire length of each flat. This has the unfortunate consequence of creating a very long narrow corridor off of which are tiny bedrooms which fail to acknowledge that people may wish to do more than just sleep in them. The living room windows to the ground floor flats wrap around the corner, but are directly adjacent to the entrance to the close and, whether walking up the street or entering the close, it is impossible to avoid looking directly into the living rooms and kitchens. One reason why people move to suburbs is to have privacy, and urban housing must respond to the same requirement if it is to be successful.

Richard Murphy has addressed this issue and achieved a high degree of privacy while simultaneously encouraging a social dimension within his building. Initially his design aimed to partially convert the Market Hotel, a listed building. However, during the duntakings the building was declared dangerous and the end result is a partial reconstruction of the historical façades with new infill between. Located at the farthest end of Graham Square, it is necessary to first pass through the retained portal of the old Meatmarket before discovering a secret landscaped garden which faces onto an asymmetrical building with something of the appearance of a French chateau. The single off-centre entrance of the old hotel has been retained, and leads to a stone flagged courtyard off which are the front doors to all the flats.

External stairs are used to access the upper level entrances in a manner which explodes the confined space of the traditional tenement close.



Richard Murphy's architecture is rooted in a humanist tradition, and this device clearly owes much to the work of de Carlo, Erskine and Hertzberger in the way in which it provides a hierarchy of threshold spaces intended to stimulate personalisation and socialisation. The device allows Murphy to layer different materials, colours and textures onto the elevation to the garden, an effect simultaneously delightful and striking. The stunning red rendered wall of the infill building is partially cloaked by a rich stone parapet wall to the stairs which is in turn masked behind the simple rendered remnants of the old hotel façade. Powerful, yet unmannered, metalwork supports the flying glass roof over the stair. Inside, the flats are finished to a high standard and flexible in the way in which they might be used. Retaining the existing façades in part of the development has allowed Murphy to develop a split section within some of the flats, with larger volumes to the front and smaller spaces to the rear.

McKeown Alexander's block of 20 houses stretches from the Gallowgate along the full length of Graham Square's west side. The project was only made possible with the assistance of a grant from Scottish Homes under their HAG 2 scheme for pilot projects focused on aspects of sustainability in housing design. For this reason McKeown Alexander's project incorporates a number of strategies aimed at reducing energy consumption. However, the project acknowledges that sustainability should not be measured by energy ratings alone (their flats have a SAP rating of 100), but also in terms of the social dynamic of the buildings and their 



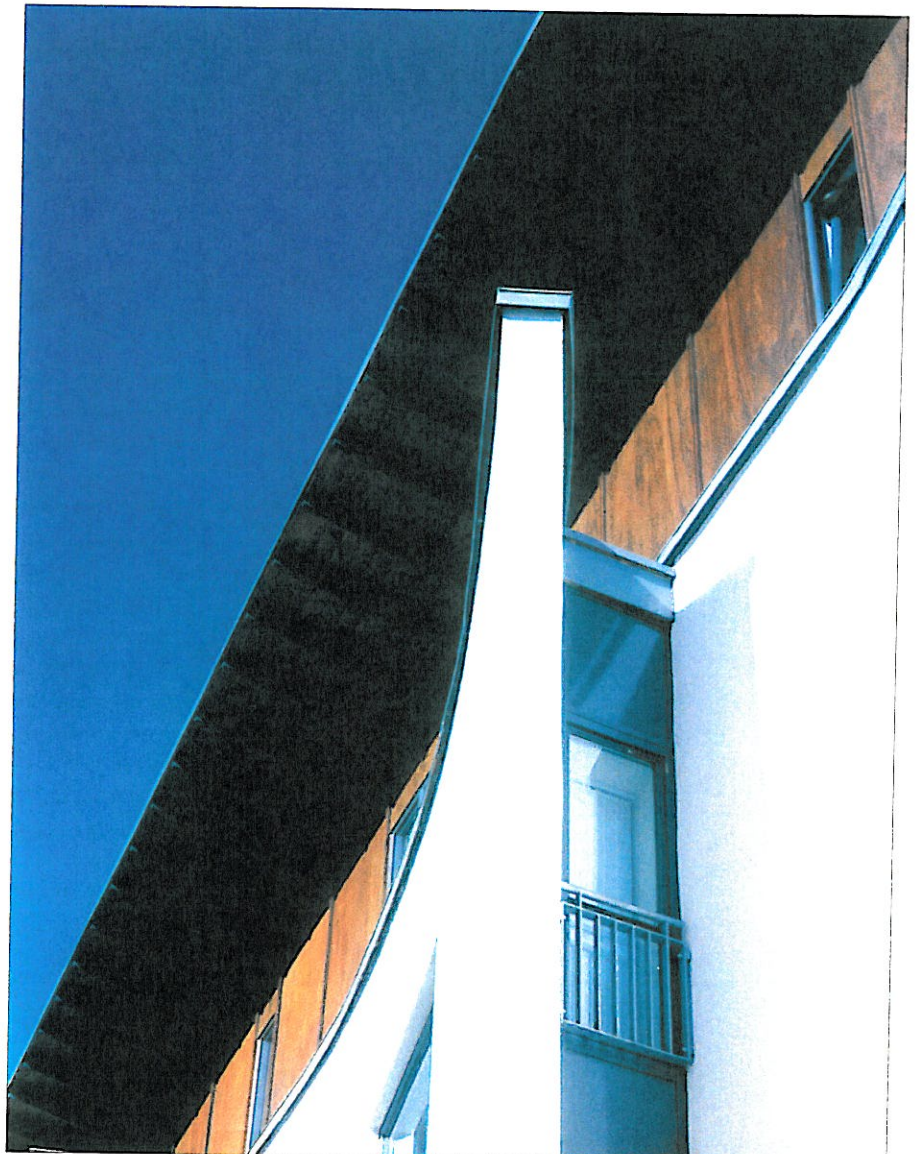
sense of place, memorability, connection to history, etc.

The two main organising principles of the project are the use of a steel portal frame for the structure to allow complete flexibility within the flats, and the creation of a spacious glazed atrium to provide a thermal buffer zone as well as a social space for the inhabitants. These two universals are then manipulated to respond to the particularities of the site, with a constantly fluid relationship established between the public space and the flats.

The flats dance between the openings of the massive stone façade of the old Meatmarket, emerging through this highly sculpted surface to tiptoe on pilotis behind a new, low and in-substantial wall (hiding some of the carparking) before pirouetting around to face the Gallowgate. While this fluidity in the treatment of the interstitial zone between public and private realms may well allow for a flexible approach to its colonisation as a place for human activity or landscape, it can also lead to an uncomfortable and socially-alienating lack of clarity. Ultimately the attempt to use a universal form (the pairs of stacked flats around the glazed atria of the stairs) to meet the needs of such a particular place proves unsatisfactory and results in a fragmented appearance at the beginning of the street – the very point at which it needs more definition and greater scale. There is a disturbing clamour of different materials, forms and spaces where nothing seems to be quite resolved.

Within the flats it is a different story. Here the plans are clearly organised, and the brightness and spaciousness encountered on entry to the living rooms is simply breathtaking – each has a six metre long, fully-glazed wintergarden with spectacular views out over the city centre. Flexibility is the keyword in the design of these flats. The steel portal frame construction removes the need for loadbearing walls within, and allows them to be rearranged – or even re-used for a different purpose – at a later date. Much of the storage is brought together in a single cupboard large enough to use as a home office or for storing all the bikes and prams a family may have. In the stair area, all the services are contained within a large duct and easily accessed behind mdf panels. Space has been allowed for the possibility of preheated warm air ducting to the flats to be fitted at a later date.

While the McKeown Alexander block is innovatory in its energy concepts and achieves a level of energy efficiency which should be standard for all new homes in Scotland, the real



**TOP** Richard Murphy project tucked between existing buildings.

**RIGHT** Sweeping curve of windows on Page & Park building.

innovation is in the treatment of the public spaces and the relationship of public to private. Successful city form is achieved principally by the spaces between buildings – the public spaces – and not by individual buildings alone. Many have argued that urban design should be at the heart of the architecture policy for Scotland, and David Page has suggested that architectural awards should acknowledge this by giving prizes for “bits of city” rather than for buildings. It is therefore significant that Graham Square was one of Glasgow’s “Five Spaces” projects for 1999 (see ARCA 2), and appropriate that its design has received as much attention as the buildings themselves. The main part of the street is treated as a pedestrian priority space and is finished with high quality granite setts and Caithness flagstones. Off-centre within the space is a sculpture of a golden calf by Kenny Hunter. A reference to the former activity of the area, the calf has an ironic smile intended to make us question our own values. Unfortunately it is lost within the grandeur and sculptural exuberance of the retained façades – but perhaps that is part of the art?

Beyond the retained walls of the old Meatmarket, the spaces become more private. A secret garden has been developed in front of Richard Murphy’s building, while a hard dry courtyard space has been formed between the retained façade and the McKeown Alexander building. The substantial steel structure required to support the façade is barely visible, being absorbed by the power of the stone it supports. The materiality of the stone is well parried by McKeown Alexander’s use of cedar-slat panels bolted to the façade of their building and which alternate with the floor-to-ceiling window panels.

The fluidity which exists in the spaces around and below the McKeown Alexander building is critically dependent upon the quality of its landscaping, and it is in the two back courts where more attention to this aspect of the project would have paid off. Both are wide open expanses of carparking where the occasional planted tree hardly does justice to what is otherwise a well-considered development.

All of the projects at Graham Square – and indeed those at ‘Homes for the Future’ 1.5 kilometres to the west – demonstrate that the public is prepared to pay over the prevailing market value for good modern design – even in a derelict area the East End of Glasgow. Without any advertising other than the visibility of the construction site, Molendinar Park Housing Association has a 60 strong waiting list for the six flats for sale in McKeown Alexander’s block. Scottish Homes, Glasgow City Council and Scottish Enterprise Glasgow should have their collective heads knocked together to come up with funding to continue the good work begun here instead of throwing good money after bad in peripheral housing schemes and speculative city centre business parks.

In many ways Graham Square is a model development for the future of urban housing in Scotland: it uses brownfield land on the edge of the city centre; it consolidates an existing community; it retains a link to the past; it sets new standards in energy efficiency; it puts public space at the heart of its considerations; it creates a framework within which the individual talents of architects can thrive and acknowledges design excellence as the prime consideration in selecting the architect. Last, but not least, it provides homes which people clearly want at prices they can afford. ☒

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**ABOVE RIGHT** Clean lines of McKeown Alexander building.

**BELOW RIGHT** Landing: entrance to flats in stair tower, McKeown Alexander building.



**Client:** Molendinar Park Housing Association Ltd, Glasgow.  
**Architects:** McKeown Alexander, Richard Murphy, & Page and Park Architects.  
**Structural engineer:** Ove Arup and Partners, Glasgow.  
**Quantity surveyor:** Brown and Wallace, Glasgow.  
**Clerk of Works:** J Wilson.  
**Main contractor:** John Dickie Construction Ltd, Glasgow.