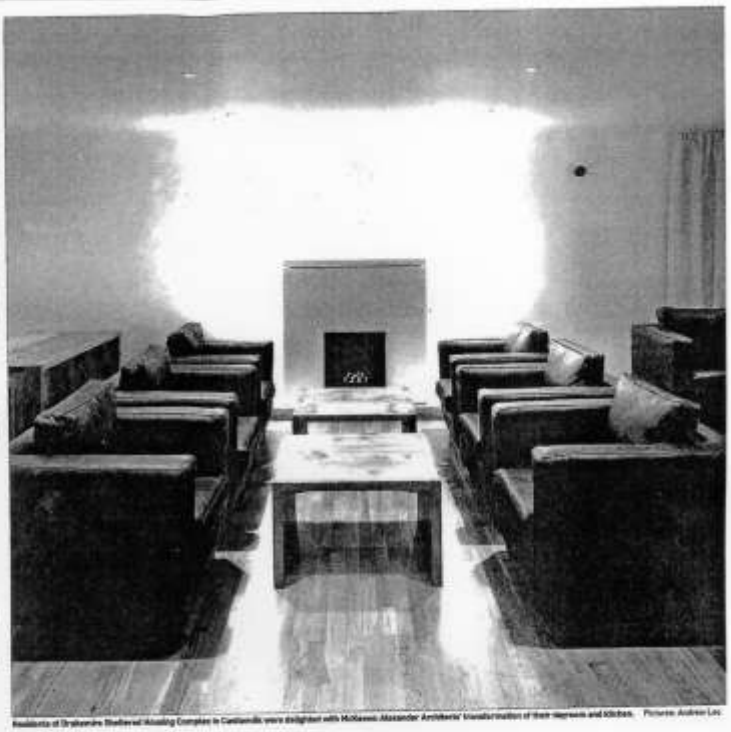

Residents of Drakemire Sheltered Housing Complex in Castlemilk were delighted with McKeown Alexander Architects' transformation of their lounges and kitchen. Picture: Andrew Lee

Adventures in space exploration

Style and chic are key factors for a young and vibrant force in design, finds *Caroline Edrie*

"We like to think of the contemporary as the thing that was never considered to be architecture. And it's true, we were," says Ian Alexander, describing what life was like for himself and architectural partner Henry McKeown in the early days.

Being cooks to architecture, however, has paid off for Glasgow's McKeown Alexander Architects. They are among the crème of the crop of emerging architects in Scotland, thanks, in no small part, to their designs for a series of remarkable homes.

After gaining their teeth-honed working the venerable Glasgow architects Elder and Cannon, not to mention teaching, organising environmental exhibitions, and collaborating on their own projects after hours, the duo finally set up practice in 1997. To date, McKeown Alexander Architects are probably best known for their high-profile new-build residential schemes, particularly the eight terraced townhouses at the Homes for the Future, and the 20 sustainable, mixed tenure houses at Orchard Square, both in the east end of Glasgow.

These projects have become defining moments, not only in terms of the architects' own careers, but in the context of setting a quality precedent for new urban housing many owners in Graham Square, but in terms of new terraced housing in Glasgow, there's nothing to beat it. It's forward thinking and, spatially, the living spaces are successful.

"Graham Square, our biggest project to date, is important because essentially it re-states what housing can be, in terms of energy efficiency and added value, and it works in a way of living.

"The fact that people have actually gone in there and live with it and enjoy it, although it is uncommissioned, is a tremendous thing.

"It's also significant because there was a time in Glasgow that you would never have got planning permission for something like that, so it's a landmark project in that respect."

It is clear from the feedback of the residents and the accolades received by the architects, that they can lay a fairly legitimate claim to being among the most accomplished designers of redactive living spaces at the moment. An enviable position for such a young practice. However, this circumscribes construction of space and light, is all down to keeping it simple, according to them.

"Our approach is very pragmatic, very simple," says Ian. "We are influenced by the belief in the simple ritual of daily life, and looking at iconic forms which present this

A great picture morning perhaps can more order significance than a room in Castlemilk, but in terms of a pre-1914 comparison, our approach would be the same."

The room in Castlemilk to which Henry refers, is the newly unveiled common room for the Drakemire Sheltered Housing Complex, which McKeown Alexander Architects have just completed.

And what an unexpected delight it is. There is an hint of Arne, complete curtains in mustard-coloured nylon-covered armchairs lined up in front of a TV – an image often associated with such places. Instead, there is light and airy space, with oak tables made by local craftsmen and designer leather armchairs. There's even a newly created area, a former broom cupboard, with a hot desk for the residents to used e-mails to their families.

According to the architects, it was important to humanise what was previously a gloomy space with an institutionalised feel. The transformation, they felt, would help nurture the social spirit of the

'We had the dilemma of how to hang on to the integrity of a really charmed interior in its own right'

This respect for the traditional values of sound technical design comes as a refreshing antidote to much of the fairy, unsupervised, conflict-ridden architecture which seems to roll off the production line these days.

Another refreshing aspect of the architects' approach is their commitment to every project, and not just the ones that are likely to catch the eye of the Stirling Prize judges.

In fact, to concentrate only on the villages would be doing a disservice to the architects. A closer look at the lower key commissions such as conversions and tenement re-workings, reveals yet another area the architects appear to have mastered – conjuring up cracking spaces from unremarkable existing ones.

Essentially, McKeown Alexander do not view these smaller commissions as bread-and-butter projects, a term often bandied about by really architects who believe they should be engaged in higher pursuits. Instead, they perceive them as "important ambience" in their own right. "The term bread and butter says something about your mindset, suggesting that you categorise some things not as important as others," explains Henry. "It is our belief, without sounding sanctimonious, that

right minded, the tenants are delighted with their fresh and beautifully crafted, hang up to the minute, contemporary space.

Central to the success of the Drakemire project is the client, in this case the Molendinar Park Housing Association, recipient of the Close of the Year Award at last month's Stirling Prize. As Ian explains: "A client such as Molendinar Park, who are well informed and who have high expectations, set the agenda, and because they set these supporting cost every move, it tasks to create a stronger humanity of decision-making – as well as being a great motivator."

It seems they have also been lucky in terms of clients when it comes to private home commissions, too. In fact, McKeown Alexander have become something of a favourite among the Met Rehtors, with a client list including musicians and composer Craig Armstrong, perhaps best known for his scores for Baz Luhrmann's Hollywood blockbusters Romeo and Juliet and Moulin Rouge.

The Armstrong House, a converted tower, the dilemma of how do we hang right into all the tiny spaces, and how do we hang on to the integrity of a really charmed interior in its own right?" explains Henry.

"So we decided to keep certain elements like the way concrete met, even though we created many new wooden elements. In effect we excavated new space which would not work with the old."

The result, with the help of an impressive glazed wall, is a gloriously light and contemporary take on a traditional dusky mews.

Although McKeown Alexander clearly relish "getting their hacks into" these little gems, they would also like to get their teeth into a public building.

"Housing is a particular kind of brief which is about small cellular spaces," explains Ian, "and although we have gained a lot of experience in this area, we'd also like to get into bigger volumes. A gallery or a new school, a building that is society based – that's what we aspire to."

With plans for major housing developments in Paisley and Govan on the drawing board, not to mention a riverside studio space and small hotel and restaurant at Anderston Quay, it can't be too long before McKeown Alexander "go public".