

## Karakusevic Carson: Claredale Street, East London

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Claredale Street. Photo: Tim Crocker

### **Claredale Street draws on familiar types to make housing that is practical and popular, says Alex Ely.**

Debate about the retention of experimental modernist housing came into stark focus over the fate of the Smithsons-designed Robin Hood Gardens in Tower Hamlets two years ago, as its uncertain future whipped up the architectural community into a frenzy. Only by listing the development could it be saved and architects of a heroic disposition queued up to sign the petition for its retention. Now we wait to see what emerges from the two final competitors earmarked to redevelop the site. It may be that, even without listing, the winner proposes refurbishing the blocks, though somehow I doubt it.

Regrettably, one contender that certainly planned retention is no longer in the running. Peter Exton, development director at Tower Hamlets Community Housing (THCH), not only recognised the value of Robin Hood Gardens' architecture but also evaluated the damage that demolition can do to a community as well as the environment, and concluded that refurbishment was viable.



Location plan

Exton's criteria in judging the value of a project that are particularly interesting in relation to THCH's new scheme at Claredale Street, also in Tower Hamlets, east London. It replaces the Denys Lasdun-designed Bradley House, whose demolition passed with much less notice than the threat to Robin Hood Gardens, though it was part of the same development as the listed Keeling House. We may be more familiar with the iconic cluster design of Keeling but it was Bradley House that more likely influenced the Smithsons' project, designed about 15 years later. The block section was strikingly similar and elevations had a strong banding with a rhythm ABABAC where walls seamlessly became the balustrading to the walkways and the upper floors of maisonettes cantilevered over the decks to leave a continuous unbroken horizontal gash along the elevations. While the architecture may have been clean, simple and well

proportioned, its urban design and typology were unsuccessful. Unfortunately, Bradley House suffered the same modernist symptoms as Robin Hood Gardens: the pursuit of originality over familiarity, and an obsession with the experimental as opposed to the routine, ignoring the fact that the ordinary is often the hallmark of successful housing. The linear block sat back from the road in the middle of its plot with left-over, unusable and unloved public space front and back. Nonetheless, while it was in a sorry state it was salvageable. Had THCH been involved sooner it may well have survived. The group would have considered retention, says Exton, but only took on the site after a previous scheme failed and demolition had already taken place. This may have been a blessing in disguise. Thanks to a delay in decanting residents from Bradley House, a build contract for an underwhelming proposal by Stanford Eatwell Associates for its replacement had to be terminated and the site was offered to THCH, which had recently taken on the management of the surrounding Mansford Estate. A retreat into a bygone era of Essex Design Guide-style architecture was averted.

Exton, an architect himself, had the vision to recognise that retreating to a faux anywheresville vernacular is a poor way of trying to delete an unpopular modernist architecture from the collective memory. He also had a better judgment of how to resolve the urban design of the development, proposing to move an apartment block away from the Keeling House end of the site and fronting it onto the principal road, Mansford Street, with a block of terrace housing behind. Instead of an un-surveyed alleyway he proposed opening up a connection from Teesdale Close to Teesdale Street, reasserting the lost street pattern. 'Successful ordinary' is more about urban planning and typology than the look of the thing. It is rare to get a visual brief from a client but the success of Claredale Street underscores the fact that good projects are the combined endeavour of enlightened clients and thoughtful architects. Exton's appointed architect, Karakusevic Carson, embraced this brief and developed a well-thought-through and dignified scheme that makes reference to the surrounding Victorian terrace housing while offering striking contemporary architecture that matches up to Keeling House.



Sheldon Place, Photo: Ioana Marinescu

The scheme comprises 77 dwellings. A seven-storey apartment building faces Mansford Street. Ground-floor one-bedroom flats have front doors onto the street to keep an active frontage and allowing them to span front-to-back. However with living rooms facing onto Mansford Street and bedrooms facing onto the mews behind, they perhaps lack privacy and the intention to keep eyes on the street is somewhat thwarted as the exposure has resulted in most windows being permanently curtained. The entrance to the upper-level apartments is off the quiet pedestrian mews behind, which neatly allows the refuse store to be accessed directly off the main street. The upper-level one- and two-bedroom flats are efficiently arranged around a central corridor. Generously sized and carefully detailed balconies create attractive elevations as they stagger across the building.



Photo: Tim Crocker

A block of two-, three- and four-bedroom houses sits behind the apartment block. Compact planning has meant that the terrace is able to cleverly turn the corner, though this has led to the three-bedroom houses in the mews being single aspect in order to avoid overlooking, and leaves a blank two-storey wall looming over the gardens behind.

A pedestrianised street with a terrace comprising three-bedroom maisonettes sitting above two-bedroom courtyard flats completes the urban ensemble at the east end of the site, backing onto the Keeling House car park. These are cleverly planned dwellings, though they don't conform to Lifetime Homes conventions as the upper-level maisonettes have narrow entrance lobbies at ground level with no room for prams or bicycles, with living space two storeys up. Does this matter? Standards that protect against the worst might also be an unhelpful constraint on innovation. Moreover, the arrangement at Claredale Street removes the need for shared circulation and the associated management charges this would incur while giving that much sought after 'own front door to the street' that estate agents love to promote.

This is an important point in terms of measuring value. Providing two-bedroom houses with their own front door and garden, as in the terrace facing Sheldon Place, would rarely make economic sense on an inner-city site today. However, like many housing associations, THCH has problems with the under-occupancy of large family properties amongst its stock, where the children have moved away from home. Tenants are often reluctant to move to a flat, preferring to hold onto something that has a sense of 'house' about it. In providing these house types the client has been able to free up much larger properties elsewhere, optimising the occupancy of its properties while keeping tenants happy. Measuring value and gains across an estate or wider property portfolio makes complete sense. It removes the imperative to pack as much density onto a site as possible, thereby creating a more humane and varied urban environment. The scheme was largely self-funding. The 50 per cent affordable housing was paid for by the market sale element, with grant only being required for six additional units added since the original scheme.

The buildings have restrained and considered elevations. A hard engineering brick base to both block and terrace reflects the surrounding Victorian houses, which tend to have dark glazed black bricks from ground to cill level. The copper cladding at upper levels offers something new and surprising to the area but tonally is absolutely appropriate. Timber boarding gives a softer feel to the balconies and garden elevations. Facades are dealt with simply and directly without rhetoric, very much in the manner of surrounding utilitarian housing. The quality of finishes was maintained despite it going to design and build contract.

Despite the drawbacks of some dwelling types, Claredale Street is a fine and well-mannered scheme. It successfully combines a variety of accommodation with high quality contemporary architecture and traditional urban planning. Karakusevic Carson and THCH have produced a quiet and respectful neighbour to Keeling House and a reminder that simple, familiar house types tend to be where most people would choose to live.

*Alex Ely is a partner at Mæ Architects, whose current projects include housing at New Islington, Manchester, and Waltham Forest, east London.*

*He developed the Mayor of London's Housing Design Guide, published in August 2010.*

**Project team**

Architect: Karakusevic Carson; design team: Christopher Fellner (project architect), Paul Karakusevic, Iain Carson, Kyung Hwa Kang; contractor: Hill Partnership; structural engineer: Atelier 1; services engineer: Atelier 10; qs: Frankham Quantity Surveying; client: Tower Hamlets Community Housing.

**Selected suppliers and subcontractors**

Bespoke roof lights: Glazing Vision; Bifold doors on penthouse: Folding Sliding Door Installations; blue facing bricks: Brickability; KME copper cladding: All Metal Roofing; glazed balustrades: N&C Glass; green roofs: Roofline Group; hard landscaping: Esendee Construction; landscaping: Caroline Hay Associates; mechanical and solar hot water: Norman Gutteridge; windows: Rationel Windows (UK); contractors/engineers: Richard Jackson.

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