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By **Mark Cousins**

Malcolm Fraser Architects' transformation of a former Edinburgh hospital site has arguably produced some of the best housing in Scotland. Edinburgh is in the throes of an unprecedented property boom, and spiralling house prices have created a fiercely competitive — and lucrative — market. Certainly any developer fortunate enough to secure a sizable tract of land inside the city's green belt can look forward to a healthy return. But even in a buoyant market, many volume housebuilders believe that design brings risk, and mediocrity brings returns. However, at Princess Gate in Edinburgh, Taylor Woodrow/Bryant Homes and Malcolm Fraser Architects have pursued what the architect calls "a determinedly different approach".

The 26-acre Princess Margaret Rose Hospital site was sold off in 1998 as part of a controversial PFI initiative. Located to the south of the city in the leafy suburb of Fairmilehead, the expansive site benefits from a south-west-facing slope and uninterrupted views to the Pentland Hills. Founded in 1929 as a children's orthopaedic hospital, the site also included a grade B-listed clinical unit (1967) by Morris & Steedman Architects.

When the client sought to convert this iconic building to residential use, the City of Edinburgh's planning department was adamant that any proposal would require the skills of a reputable architect sympathetic to the modernist ethos of the original. Malcolm Fraser's name was mooted, and a commission duly followed. Unfortunately, tragedy struck in 2002 when vandals torched the building. The client then pursued a new-build approach, echoing the clarity of the original building. The planners insisted on a project of discernible quality, and the retention of Malcolm Fraser Architects was a condition of demolition consent.

Project architect Neil Mochrie worked up the final design to accommodate 23 units — six flats and 17 terraced houses — distributed among six stand-alone blocks. (The plan doubles the density achieved in neighbouring developments of detached homes.) The ambition was to create a distinct community appropriate to contemporary needs.

The design takes cues from the early idealism of Morris & Steedman. In form, the houses have a brick-and-block base below a timber-framed box, an arrangement that echoes the hospital building's language of a heavy white base and a lightweight but dark-coloured upper. Another appropriate reference for the architect was Morris & Steedman's Sillitto House (1959), where a timber-clad "living cube" sits on a solid base, and the living, kitchen and dining facilities are sited on the upper floor to exploit the panoramic views across the city.

At Princess Gate, the complete absence of pitched roofs, dormer windows and carriage lamps set these houses apart from their neighbours, and the sense of "otherness" is palpable. Indeed, Fraser believes that an undercurrent of "us and them" between his buyers and those of the detached villas the client built nearby has cultivated a camaraderie amongst residents that has galvanised the burgeoning community.

The houses are grouped into short terraces of three or four houses arranged perpendicular to the north-south access road and stepped down the slope to ensure everyone benefits from the sun and views. The block of flats terminates the development at the top of the slope. A white-rendered perimeter wall helps to unify the development and provides a datum for the oversailing, dark-stained timber cladding of the boxes above.

In the terraces at the top of the slope, the living spaces are on the first floor, with an adjacent terrace to accommodate your BBQ or pet rabbit hutch. The row at the bottom, which enjoys uninterrupted views, has ground floor living spaces. However, the north-facing entrance facade is somewhat stark, and would benefit from greater modelling or a projecting canopy to shelter and demarcate the front doors.

The design creates a careful arrangement of private-to-public spaces. All the homes have south-facing gardens, with "family rooms" — either the primary or secondary living space — opening directly on to them. Parking courts sit to the north of each terrace so that the gardens face the parking area of the terrace in front, generating a sheltered mews that is safe for children's play. A shared community "green" sits at the bottom of the slope.

The internal organisation offers considerable variety and banishes the ubiquitous "corridor". The central, open stair acts as the dynamic heart of the house, and is flooded by daylight from a generous roof light above. The stair links the principal activities of the house, with all the rooms organised off it. The section juggles a split-level arrangement to encourage greater flexibility in how the rooms are used, so that an office in one house can be a kids' play area or a fourth bedroom in the adjoining house.

Although Princess Gate looks bracing and refreshing, under the skin it plays safe, with conventional construction methods and an average eco-agenda. But Fraser argues that technical innovation is a luxury in a sector where good design itself is still innovative: "There's a gap between all the government's exhortations to use modern methods and build zero carbon, and the vast amount of houses being built. I think it's essential that architects engage with the volume market rather than beating them up with exemplars."

## malcolm fraser architects north bridge studios

This is the practice's second venture into volume housebuilding, following the award-winning Drum project in Bo'ness for Stewart Milne Homes. Fraser's experience in working with developers is that "the key to selling is 'kerb appeal'. It needs to look great from the car!" Not surprisingly, the aesthetics at Princess Gate engender a love-it-or-hate-it reaction from the public but, having sold all properties six months before completion in December last year, the commercial success is undeniable.

In paying homage to the pioneers of Scottish modernism, Princess Gate confounds expectations and challenges the housebuilders' conventional notion of what will sell. It has already scooped a Scottish Design Award, and is now on the shortlist for the RIAS Andrew Doolan prize for the best building in Scotland — a considerable achievement for volume housebuilding.

But as Fraser also points out, increasing the density of the development helped bolster his client's profit margin per hectare. When dealing with canny developers, it's this factor as much as the trophy cabinet that is likely to win Malcolm Fraser Architects its next housing commission.

### **Malcolm Fraser:**

What I was trying to do at Princess Gate was build a new version of my own street, a traditional back-to-back terrace in Edinburgh. But one side of the garden gets the sun and the other doesn't, so the kids don't play in that half, and the grass doesn't grow.

Between each front and back, there's a shared courtyard that's useable — you can kick a football around, have a BBQ, or a child can ride a bike there. It's not like a traditional street, which is dominated by parking, and it's not the kind of cul-de-sac you get on a diddy-box estate. Technically, they're "home zones." There's an open threshold that cars can drive into, but they'll know to slow down because kids are playing.

When we talk to planners, we hear a lot about the principles of New Urbanism such as location, density, easy access to services, nuclear communities. All good things, but there's a lot of Victorian dogma, a perception that the best we can do is to rebuild a Victorian city. We find that planners' default options are dough-nut blocks and overshadowed courtyards, but that doesn't take into account the way we live now, or that we should be building our communities around sunshine and social space.

And if you're laying out a development to make it as sunny as possible — the Princess Gate houses have open elevations to the south and closed-up elevations to the north — you're addressing sociability and environmental performance at the same time.

The children really know how to use the layout — there's lots of cricket and football on the green, and the wood at the top of the site is now apparently full of dens.

### **Suppliers' details**

**Windows:** Velfac

**Timber cladding:** Bardage by Cosylva

**Roof:** Sarnafil

**Doors:** Doria

**Metalwork:** Loanhead Engineering

**Render:** Blue Circle

**Brickwork:** Baggeridge Telford Brown

**Roof lights:** Lareine Engineering