arq (2014), **18.2**, 182–187. © Cambridge University Press 2014

Tim Pitman and
Luke Tozer, directors
of Pitman Tozer
Architects
Interviewed by
Edward Wainwright

Regarding the residential



1–9 **Mint Street Housing for Peabody, Bethnal Green, London, UK. Completed, 2014.**

*Pitman Tozer Architects were founded in 2002, by Cambridge and Mackintosh school graduates Tim Pitman and Luke Tozer. Their 2007 project, Gap House in west London's Bayswater conservation area, won the RIBA's Manser Medal. A small practice, Pitman Tozer have become well regarded for producing high-quality housing in the public and private realm. 2013 saw the practice become one of six to win a place on social housing provider Peabody's Small Projects Panel (***arq** 18.1 *pp 92–96).Their recently completed Mint Street Housing scheme, also for Peabody, has gained widespread interest for its intelligent use of a tight, complex site adjacent to the railway tracks leading into London's Liverpool Street station. Here, the architects discuss the recent competition win, the complexities of housing design, and the role of architecture schools in educating future housing designers.*

Edward Wainwright: **How did you start out together as Pitman Tozer?**
Luke Tozer; Tim Pitman: We started doing a few private jobs whilst working at other places; when we eventually set-up in practice, we had a few jobs under our belt – we've had that common progression of a small practice, building up from private to eventually some public clients.

EW: What's your current portfolio of work?
LT: It's almost all residential, roughly half private and half public housing, with the public housing being largely multi-tenure where registered social housing providers are becoming basically developers and using the market sale homes to off-set the affordable homes. What we find architecturally interesting in this mix is that there are two types of housing that we do with similar components: one is much more regulated in terms of space standards that come with funding requirements and the nature of being public sale housing – things like the Mayor's [of London] Housing Design Guide; and private housing where design requirements are much more associated with the needs and desires of an individual or family and the nature of historic fabric in London.

EW: How did the first Peabody scheme that you designed come about? What was the route into working with the social housing provider?
LT: We did a speculative feasibility study for them previously, for a conversion of a pub near the Old Kent Road in London to become sixteen flats that came to nothing. On the back of that study, they

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commissioned us to do a feasibility on a car-parking site in Bethnal Green, owned by Workspace, and this was the beginning of 2010, when lending was tight, and Peabody actively started looking at projects. [This was to become the Mint Street housing scheme]. We were fortunate in our timing, and because we carried out a feasibility study they had liked, and they had negotiated a deal with Workspace based on our scheme, subject to planning, they then commissioned us to develop our design up to the end of what was then stage E, before going out to tender. We were then appointed by the contractor to build it out.

EW: What excited you about their most recent competition, [covered in Insight, arq 18.1]?
LT: We liked Peabody as a client; they respect, appreciate and enjoy what we think is good design, and they are committed to building quality, which is our experience from them taking the time and the cost of appointing a full design team up to the end of stage E, before going out to tender. It means that the design hasn't been compromised through the build process. With a good contractor, it's been a happy, successful experience. It was also an interesting competition with real sites.

EW: What site did you choose for Pitman Tozer's entry?
TP: We choose the Pembury Youth Hall site. In some ways it was a good opportunity to do more of that kind of work. It's not easy to get into that sector, and although we have built in the social housing sector, we haven't got a ton of work there, and so we saw it as a great opportunity to capitalize on that potential.



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LT: And even though we've been finishing off Mint Street, because we've not been on their framework, we've not been able to work with them for four years. So we're keen to work with them again!

EW: Can you tell me about the proposal for the Small Projects Panel competition?
TP: The first thing to highlight is why we picked the Pembury site. It seemed to be, from our experience of Peabody estates, the most typical. The other two sites, one of them seemed to be a backland site, a strip of land behind terraces, but didn't appear to be a Peabody site – that was the Victoria Park site. The Pembury site really did look like a classic Peabody location, in quite a dense location. One that would test the very typical Peabody problems. And so our site choice was

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generated from that. It was heavily overlooked, so the debate became about how we could put something on that site. Previously, it was a 'c' shaped site, looking in on itself from the outside with gallery access. The properties facing each other are forty-five meters apart, so the conundrum became the problem of disrupting the existing stock. So we put a simple parameter on, a rule of thumb, that took a projection of 18 meters either side as a buffer for overlooking, and what you're left with is quite a skinny little site, on what appears from the figure-ground plan quite a regular, square, ten meter rectangle. And so that forced the design up somewhat, and we ended up proposing a six-story scheme.

EW: What do you see yourselves, as a small practice, bringing to Peabody? And why do you think it's valuable for them to work with smaller practices?
LT: It's genuinely the case that smaller practices are much more likely to devote a greater level of interest, care and attention to a small site, than a large practice can afford to. With small overheads, but experienced directors, it's likely that they'll get a better scheme out of the appointment. We feel that through our private housing and our recent experience on a very noisy site with Peabody [Bethnal Green's Mint Street Housing], and with our Gap House, we enjoy working on heavily constrained

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urban sites. Each of the sites in the competition were heavily constrained, and we suspect that the nature of left-over bits of land in London that may become Peabody sites, is making them work as housing, and making them nice places for people to live.

TP: We've done a bit of that as well. A few years before working for Peabody, we worked for the London Borough of Hillingdon. They had a series of backland car-parking sites on their land that weren't being used as garages, and they wanted us to look at those sites. It's interesting to look at those parameters and see what you can come up with – it's a kind of spatial puzzle.

EW: So you feel that you can dedicate some more time to the specific questions that a complex site will offer up?
TP: Well, take the Mint Street scheme, Luke and I worked on it pretty much full time, giving the project a lot of resources from the office – two directors and a project architect, that's a good level of resource!

LT: It's a good compliment to the other work that we do, and also, as a small practice getting on a framework where we have a slightly longer horizon of relatively continuous work is helpful to be able to plan and look at what future work may be coming up.

EW: What is Peabody like in comparison to working with commercial developers and clients?
LT: The biggest single difference is that they have a longer time horizon, a longer memory. The fact that they've been around for 151 years, and the fact that they intend to be around for a long time in the future, making good places for people to live, they have a different imperative, a different idea of what the important things are. If you're a developer, you're in the main interested in selling at the highest profit as quickly as you can, so you can develop something else; whereas Peabody are only interested in selling at the highest profit in order to provide the most affordable housing. So on our scheme at planning at Bethnal Green there was 35% affordable, comprised of affordable rents and shared ownership, and 65% at market sale. Because of the fact that market conditions improved, and once the sales flat was completed, and people were interested in buying flats, even so close to railway lines, and that they were getting all the flats sold before completion, enabled Peabody to only sell off one third, to allow them to pay for two thirds affordable. Any other developer would provide the absolute minimum, whereas Peabody would use the profit to cross-subsidize the affordable housing.


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EW: Peabody are able to see their developments across a much longer timeframe then, and their investment in good quality design is something they see in the whole context of Peabody. What role do you see architects in having in the newly emerging environments of sometimes quite different tenures living in close proximity to each other in new developments? Is

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10 Competition entry for Peabody's Small Projects Panel, Pembury Youth Hall site, London, UK. Unbuilt, 2013.

there a way of thinking about these spaces with that in mind?
TP: There's a conundrum with different types of tenure architecturally, which is whether you separate them, and they become separate buildings, this certainly isn't Peabody, but in terms of developments in central London, you often hear about the location of the affordable. The conundrum is whether you express the architecture differently – remotely – or whether you keep it all together and then time will tell whether there are issues.

LT: From a spatial, architectural point of view, because the different tenures are governed by the same spatial standards under the Mayor's guidance, the complexity is less tenure split, it's more the dwelling size splits between one, two, three beds, and what the development envelope will permit you to have. That becomes more complicated than the tenure split.

EW: And what of the design and the use of communal spaces within these developments?
TP: Well, do you provide three different play areas for the three different splits, for instance? That doesn't sound very desirable, so you provide one and you share it. But it's the dynamics of people who might be transient and are staying for only a couple of years, and those people who see this as their long term home, and how they interact in these same spaces.

LT: There's an interesting tension of concern from both sides, which hopefully has a similarly positive counterpoint, which is focused on concerns about upkeep and if people are going to look after their spaces. That comes down to management and care and a high-quality specification.

EW: Mass housing, and housing design in its complexity is largely neglected in schools of architecture, it tends to default to one-off houses,

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the elegant beauty of making a space to live-in, and so forth. Do you think there should be more of a role in schools of architecture to look at more innovative approaches to mass-housing, and to address those more challenging questions that architects are faced with, but that schools tend to neglect?
TP: The question comes down to what freedom you have in diploma to tutor a project. Certainly, in my experience teaching at Cardiff University, you would tutor a housing scheme at second year, and part of that would be a dwelling with the qualities you talk about, but also it would begin to look at how you would access from the street, how two units might be next to each other, so not just the dwelling itself, but dwellings together. My experience is that it doesn't often get revisited again. In my first year of diploma you would be set a housing project – stuff that you would have looked at very early on in second year, you'd have another go at. My feeling is that it doesn't get on anyone's curriculum, partly because the diploma has a relative freedom, and you get to choose your own projects. Maybe there's something in that where people just aren't choosing to do housing, despite how interesting and relevant it is.

EW: I wonder if there's a role for a more formalized teaching position to be taken towards housing at diploma level?
TP: It doesn't have to be the final year of the course, but maybe to revisit during diploma when you're a bit more skilled.

EW: Creative housing design, and mass housing design is a very important area to engage with. It's something that Claire Bennie from Peabody spoke about in terms of the Small Project Panel, that she felt would be a benefit to small practices, to give them a platform where their housing designs can be exhibited, but also gain a large amount of media attention in both national and trade press.
LT: In an era where housing in London is talked about as being in crisis, it's recognized generally that the UK doesn't provide enough housing. And while Grand Designs might have elevated people's aspirations for individual houses, there's not quite the same level of aspiration for mass housing.

EW: One of the biggest growth areas in housing seems to be in student housing – certainly in our larger provincial towns and cities with big university populations. That's where you get the production of large amounts of prefabricated housing. Is that something you get approached about designing, or would be interested working on?
TP: We would like to look at it, but if it were something where you have very tight restrictions, then that would probably be too much.

LT: Some of the nicest housing I've ever lived in has been student accommodation. There are some beautiful buildings, both from old Oxbridge colleges to more modern ones. We'd be mad not to want to have a go at it.

EW: Where do you see your practice going in the next five years? A development of this focus on housing with varied clients?
LT: I don't see the housing crisis abating that quickly, so we're expecting to be working on housing for some time to come. It would be nice to do projects further afield than London. Tim and I have been having words about things in Holland, but it's about finding the right projects. We're happy to be on Peabody's Small Projects Panel, so we hope over the next four years we'll be building with them. It'd be good to work with similar types of organizations as well, with a balance of private residential and social housing.

EW: They have different satisfactions to the architect, private and social work?
LT: Yes. You don't quite get to do the structurally gymnastic staircases that you can do in private residential projects with multiple housing projects.

TP: We always try to get into other sectors as well. We've had some school work quite recently. We've got that classic architect training where we think we can have a go at any of it.

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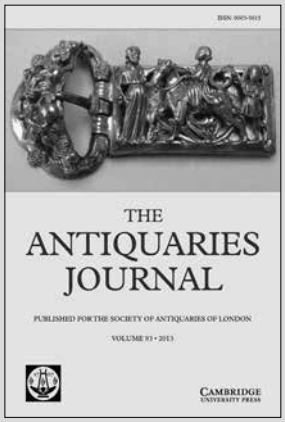
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