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DSDHA's crafted approach to scale and tectonics has revitalised South Molton Street, writes Felix Mara. Photography by Dennis Gilbert



Outside Bond Street station people wait for friends, tap their phones, and take shelter from wind, rain and relentless footfall down London's Oxford Street. Many gravitate towards a new six-storey wedge at the apex of Davies and South Molton Street, a burgundy tongue in the notional bird's mouth, where they meet to form one of the few public spaces relieving the canyon of Europe's busiest shopping street.

This is what director Deborah Saunt of DSDHA, designer of the wedge, wanted to see when it opened in July, riding a wave of West End retail development targeting visitors to the London 2012 Games. 'It's the sign of a good public space: you can pause and get out your phone', she reflects. Known as the South Molton Street Building, this mixed-use development for the Chinese clothing giant Bosideng doubles the floor space of the pub and offices it replaces. Wanting a landmark to assist orientation, Westminster Council approved increased height to accommodate upper floor offices and flats as well as generous side projections and an elongated prow, even joining those who likened it to Manhattan's Flatiron building. The prow's radius is as tight as double-glazing technology permits.

There's arguably less public realm space now. But could the sitting-out area of the demolished pub, the type of space where children and others feel unwelcome, really be seen as public realm space? Westminster prescribed the project's accommodation mix as well as its urban profile and its form was driven by the surrounding cityscape's geometry and grain.

The diagonal of South Molton Street tracks the course of the Tyburn, a diverted underground stream below, whereas Davies Street follows the Grosvenor Estate grid. It's not just a fancy nose job. DSDHA honed its three-dimensional form, conceived in the round and framed by multiple vistas, with projecting bays inserted to terminate routes. Its upper floors neatly conceal the gables and chimneys of 27 South Molton Street to the south. Apart from the view, its interiors have limited interest and DSDHA had no involvement in their fit out.

Along with most buildings in Oxford Street, the focus of architectural interest is its facade. Much of this work, for example Emberton's H&M building, Amanda Leveté Architects' 10 Hills Place ([AJ 10.09.09](#)) and Future Systems' 187-195 Oxford Street, has architectural quality, although the norm is one or two floors of ephemeral shop-fitting crowned by more permanent but frothy upper stories.

The essential qualities of DSDHA's facade can be seen where it meets 27 South Molton Street, home since 1970 to high-end fashion retailer Browns which helped establish this as one of London's choice shopping destinations. This junction shows how research and imaginative reflection on the context informed decisions involving the facade's scale, grain, proportion, composition, hierarchies, layering, texture and materials. Its motley terracotta army of standing profiles is captured by black metal horizontal bands levelled with its neighbour's creamy stucco cornices and its colour harmonises with number 27's fine brickwork, with gauged blind arches and quoins.

Black back-painted glass spandrels rhyme with cast ironwork and its mullions, vertical rhythm and vertical layers resonate with its neighbour's. Conceived as a red bookend, like the elegant facade at the south end of the street, its projecting bay also acknowledges the way its neighbours, being outside the Grosvenor Estate, occupy narrow freehold plots. On the ground plain, as part of DSDHA's public realm improvements, granite paving to the pedestrianised street, forming a serpentine pattern, has replaced salmon and mustard-coloured cracked concrete.

A feel for scale distinguishes the best architects. This is evident when you visit the best work of Wright, Kahn or Le Corbusier. DSDHA's detailed design responds to the scale of South Molton Street's narrow frontages and finely crafted details, elaborating doorway surrounds and articulating facade components as small units that look like they could be lifted by one or two workers. This counterbalances the development's size, height and vertical thrust. But there is also a deliberate ambivalence when the facade is viewed from afar. Saunt compares it to the late 18th-century facade of Stratford House at the end of a wide close on the opposite side of Oxford Street. Its double height Ionic columns, tall windows and rustication make no concessions to human scale.

Similarly, DSDHA's building, intended to 'talk to' Stratford House, avoids expressing the level of its second floor, masked by glass spandrels flushed into the curtain wall and overlaid by terracotta drapes with hairline joints. The second and third floor offices form a piano nobile below the residential attic storey and rooftop pavilion. Punched in windows are avoided to deny scale. So in a subtle duality, scale is suppressed from afar but expressed close up, an accomplished feat in DSDHA's first large urban building.

The facade's other keynote is its craftsmanship: the choice of materials and the way they are worked and articulated. For lovers of brickwork's imperfections and patina, glazed terracotta is problematic. The most durable of finishes, its brazen character is fixed at birth. DSDHA chose a rich burgundy foundation that resonates with red brick and terracotta neighbours and distant landmarks and then splattered it with a grey that responds to nearby stone and silver aluminium facades. With its reflective finish it is a sensitive index to diurnal and seasonal changes in the weather. The varied configurations of the four batten profiles create movement, with shifting vertical and horizontal rhythms across the facade and the undulations in the terracotta aptly suggest ripples in a pool of

mud. All this transcends the usual rainscreen tectonic of metal sections, boarding, rails and brackets supporting the icing on the cake facade.

The more spindly terracotta profiles, which continue across balconies and cast dark shadows with undertones of half-timbering also traverse windows and, where not backed by curtain wall mullions, are masked from internal view by dot-patterned fritted tape on the glass behind them. Arts & Crafts purists might insist their backs should be expressed, but the notion of craft needn't involve this level of integrity. In another nuance, craft suggests not only skilled workmanship, but deception. Seen positively as multiple readings and ambiguities, this is the milieu of the South Molton Street Building and it is in this sense that DSDHA can be seen as crafting the city.

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