



Jeweller's studio,
Southwark,
London, England,
DSDHA

Perched atop a cornershop, this wedge-shaped, zinc-clad jewellery studio and shop mediates between the medieval street plan and modern towers of south London

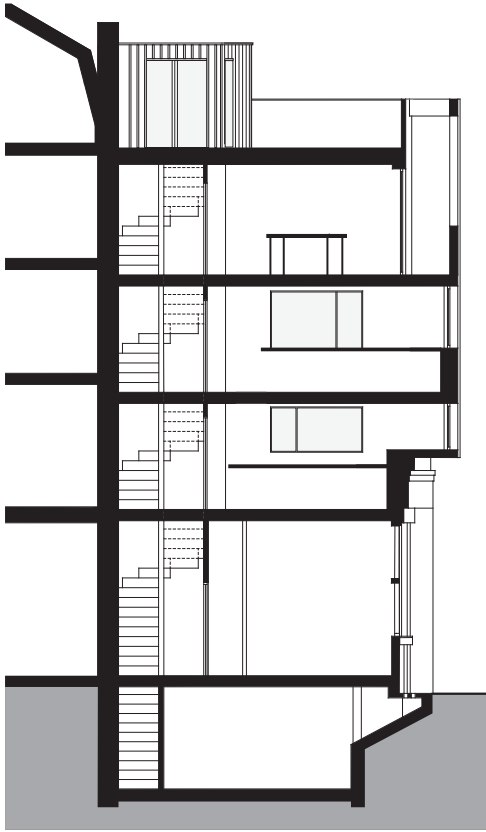


PRETTY IN ZINC

REPORT
ROSAMUND DIAMOND

Compared with some of the recent towering developments at nearby London Bridge, the new building in Snowsfields, Southwark by DSDHA for fashionable jewellery designer Alex Monroe is decidedly diminutive. Yet the planning argument prompted by its zinc-clad facades – which took two years to resolve – must have made it feel to the architects and client almost equivalent in scale to that of Renzo Piano’s soaring Shard.

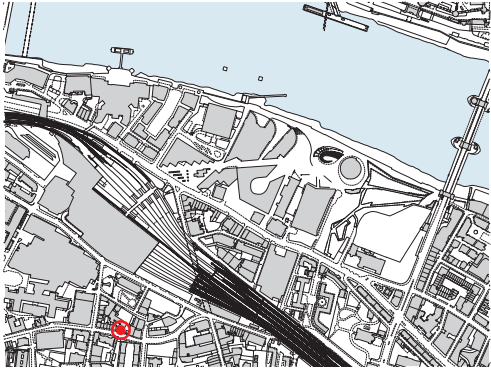
The studio is in an area of mixed use and diverse architecture, on one of Southwark’s oldest streets. In the heterogeneous condition of a ‘continuously transforming’ city, the project addresses issues of appropriate urban form, which are as relevant for inner-city inhabitation as the large scale of the neighbouring towers. An existing single-storey shop at the end of a mansion block terrace has been capped with a new three-storey extension. The modest 20m² wedge-shaped site generated one room per floor with the staircase space, a studio, workshop and meeting room occupying the upper levels. Rather than becoming an impediment, the constricted footprint has been used as a generator of internal spatial tensions, shifting between the fields of tight corners and views.



section AA

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1. (Previous page) the ribbed zinc box, tinted to match the bricks of the terrace at the insistence of the council, forms a much needed link between the medieval street pattern of Southwark and the metal-clad Shard
2. The zinc shell was craftily moulded to its timber frame on site
3. Stained timber lightens the interiors



location plan



‘The project addresses issues of appropriate urban form which are as relevant for inner-city inhabitation as the large scale of the neighbouring towers’

The planners, validating the terrace as a fragment, approved the body of the new building with its semi-aligned window openings, while disputing its skin, which they required to be brick-red (or subsequently terracotta) to match the adjacent facades. In a paradoxical move, they sought to maintain the conservation area’s fabric by demanding homogeneity, yet the area is characterised by a diversity accrued from the street pattern and its architectural variety.

Snowsfields was once an area of tanneries and leather preparation. Its curving medieval form and changing character, with pockets of open space, is the kind of location one imagines the writer WG Sebald describing in one of his late-night meanders, invoking histories and collective memory which Aldo Rossi identified as vital urban constituents. The surrounding buildings include an artist’s house, late 19th-century Peabody-type housing, a mission building, and metal-capped brick-clad industrial sheds.

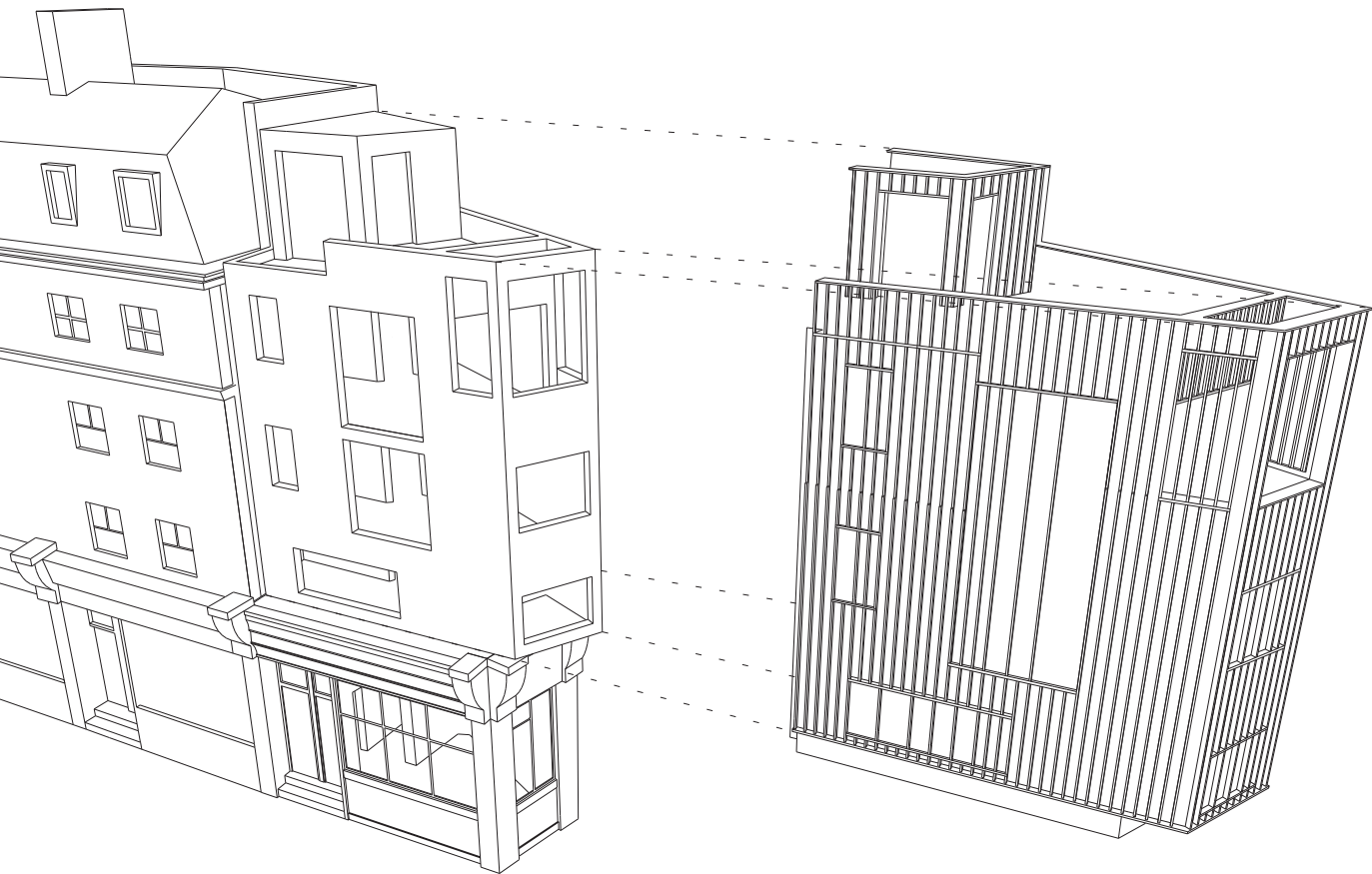
Monroe produces cult fashion and bespoke precious metal jewellery, with a particular following in Japan. The building is for jewellery to be designed, finished, distributed and displayed. Studio spaces are designed to reproduce the sociable character of his existing workshop in a 19th-century mews, where the courtyard becomes a shared meeting space, and its staircase and the meeting rooms and terraces on its upper floors are more sociable still.

The project’s conceptual origins lie in the development of an urban architecture which can be simultaneously uniform and independent. Snowsfields Studios is a building of two parts: the base, replicating the shop front as a discernible urban form sustaining the street’s liveliness, and the zinc-clad block above in which issues of scale and craft are embedded. As an independent entity, the new building, supported on a steel frame, is constructed from prefabricated cross-laminated timber panels: their surface is exposed as the internal finish, and the material has also been used for the studio’s fitted furniture.

For 18 months while the approval for the cladding was negotiated, the waterproofed timber box stood naked, waiting to be clad in its concertinaed zinc skin. This articulated carapace rescales the building, overriding

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4. At ground level, the shop is used to display Alex Monroe’s jewellery: the building as a whole returns to medieval vertical integration



structure and facade diagram





‘The site’s constriction has been used as a generator of internal spatial tensions, shifting between the fields of tight corners and views’

window openings to obscure its functions and internal volumes, and enrobing a double-height loggia and the roof terrace. It recalibrates relationships between internal spaces and their urban fronts, mediating the immediate environment’s relationship with the towers of the middle distance city behind.

At the same time as it respects the uniform sweep of the terrace, the building reveals monolithic tendencies. Its autonomy, manifested in its articulated wrapped cladding with its barely visible joints, presents an architecture of emblematic scale, with the idea that its entity can be maintained whether at the size of a model, a small studio building or a large block.

The tight-ribbed zinc reinforces the abstract inscrutable form. Detaching the material from associations with roofs or bar-tops, its dark reddish-brown pigmented coating matches the neighbouring brick facades. The on-site fabrication of the folded zinc, with its slight inflections and stepping

at the terrace junction, has left the building with an apt sense of handcrafting. There is a directness to this construction, in which materials are not detailed for their own sakes but with smooth utility, acknowledging their weathering and potential for change. The screen resists revealing the building’s functions, but the zinc ribbing conveys a material imagery offset from the fine jewellery crafting conducted inside the building. The elevations are made to be dynamic, to change in different light conditions and from different viewpoints.

The preoccupation with the development of the urban block as an abstract urbane entity links this to other recent DSDHA projects, such as their South Molton Street Building (2012), also on a wedge-shaped site. Each project, capitalising on non-static notions of the city, works with a quality of dynamic instability – a theme already discernible in some of the practice’s earlier works. In Snowsfields, it is present in the building’s explicit suspension above the shop, and its placement in a context of extreme juxtapositions of scale, including the London Bridge towers. As a distinct architectural response to its collaged surroundings, the building flattens its depth of field, not retreating from the city but engaging with it.

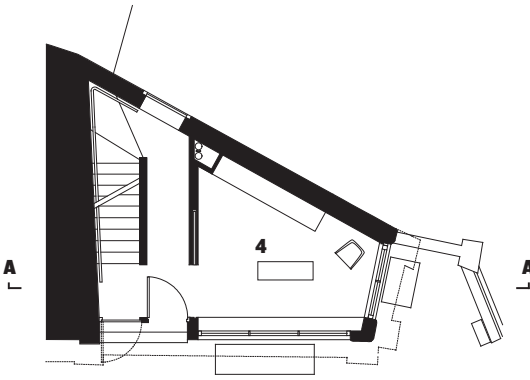
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5. (Opposite) the circulatory spaces, like the rest of the interiors, are panelled with light-coloured wood

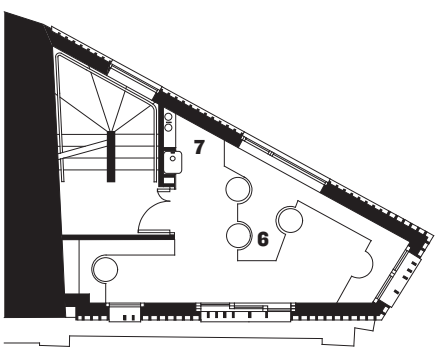
- 1 dispatch
- 2 storage
- 3 WC
- 4 shop
- 5 studio
- 6 workshop
- 7 kitchenette
- 8 meeting space
- 9 balcony
- 10 roof terrace

Architect
DSDHA
Photographs
Dennis Gilbert

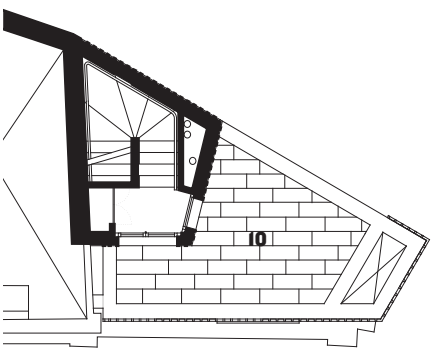
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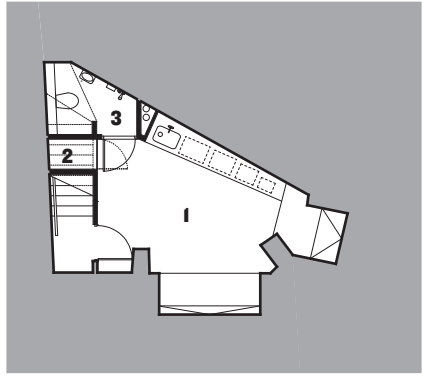
ground floor plan



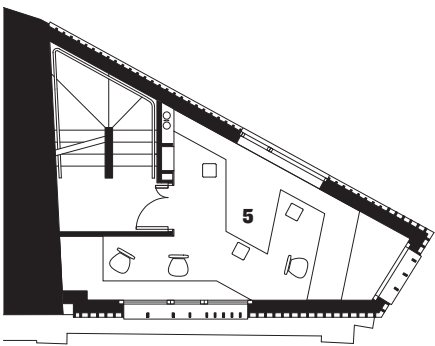
second floor plan



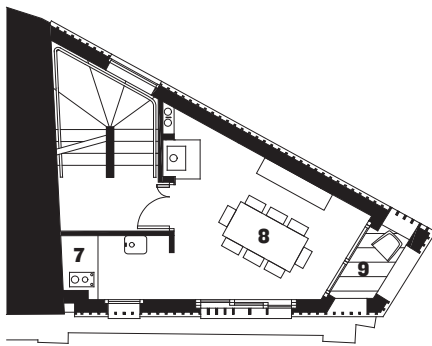
roof plan



basement plan



first floor plan



third floor plan