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Designs on London: how architectural couple Deborah Saunt and David Hills plan to put their imprint on significant chunks of the capital

A handful of major projects in the capital are set to put husband and wife architect team Deborah Saunt and David Hills in the big league, says Robert Bevan



West End makeover: DSDHA's big project for next year is a new public square created by closing the northern end of Shaftesbury Avenue where it meets New Oxford Street (Picture: Graphic by Dennis Gilbert)

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There is a neat symmetry to an architectural couple who first came to notice by designing an interlocking house for a divorced couple now marking a blooming of their practice by completing their own family home.

That's what DSDHA — Deborah Saunt David Hills Architects — has done. The pair, who met while studying architecture at Cambridge, formally set up practice together in 1998. Now, as well as putting the finishing touches to the Covert House, their sunken home in Clapham, and moving from cramped office space to a three-storey former perfume-essence factory in Vauxhall,

work is due to start on two major projects that will put Saunt and Hills's imprint upon significant chunks of central London.

The first of these is Albertopolis, a project to upgrade the streets around the Royal Albert Hall and its connections across Kensington Road northwards to the Albert Memorial and then south to the Royal College of Music. The scheme is expected to get the go-ahead in the new year. The second is a West End improvements project that will transform streets and create new parks in an area bounded by Tottenham Court Road and Gower Street, Euston Road and Shaftesbury Avenue.

Although the couple are uncomfortable with the notion that with such high-profile projects they've reached the architectural big time, there's no denying that the practice is increasingly making its presence felt. A step-change in their London profile came with the completion of a flat-iron building clad in a thicket of vertical terracotta poles at the corner of South Molton and Davies Streets for Chinese fashion brand Bosideng. The building is a head-turner, the tight angle of its corner designed to make people look up from their phones and take in their surroundings: "It is a specific, deliberate tactic," says Saunt. "It has a super-sharp corner to make you notice it."

It is one of a number of projects that solve complex planning problems in central London. Another, yet to be built, is a mansion block on Marylebone Lane that had to fit its nine floors between a Tube line running just metres below the site and the roof line of Grade I-listed Stratford House next door.



Space shifters: Deborah Saunt and David Hills

(Picture: Daniel Hambury/Stella Pictures)

The closely spaced verticals of the Bosideng building are also a device to play with the apparent scale of the building: “We have a deliberate interest in ‘de-scaling’ a building so that there is some ambiguity about how big or small it is,” says Hills. He suggests that with a traditional office or residential block you stop properly looking after you have taken in the usual layers of floors and windows.

“Modernism loves a stack,” observes Saunt. “For us that’s anathema.”

DSDHA’s studio for jeweller Alex Monroe in Bermondsey — another of the firm’s flat-iron buildings on another corner site — uses similar verticals. Having said that, the practice’s block at the 2012 Olympics Athletes’ Village is a much more conventional stack that slotted into the site’s strict design codes, as does a housing block designed for the Riverside development on the Greenwich Peninsula. However, the Riverside community centre on a triangular site adjacent gets the “scale-less” façade treatment of closely spaced verticals. Much smaller in scope and altogether quieter in its white minimalism is a studio and gallery for Edmund de Waal, the ceramicist and author of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, in a converted warehouse in West Norwood.

Despite the broader West End stage that Hills and Saunt are stepping out on these days, they remain loyal to their professional roots in south London. The 35-strong studio had outgrown its previous home in Iliffe Yard — the community forcing-frame for creative businesses off Walworth Road — before moving into its new building off Kennington Lane. It’s a familiar patch for DSDHA, which has been involved for several years in the various schemes for the former Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. The park remains, for the moment, a scrappy green space but is approached between a pair of tall, illuminated columns by DSDHA. Saunt suggests these should be topped by statues of Lily Savage and Handel, both of whose reputations owe much to the locale.

The Vauxhall relocation is “definitely an anti-corporate move,” says Hills, noting the area’s clubs, pubs, knocking shops and the squattocracy of nearby Bonnington Square. The architectural monochrome of the studio interiors is consciously contrasted with the model shop they have built in the yard out of a shed with fluorescent orange shutters and astroturf roof.

The office itself is entered via a communal kitchen where the team take turns cooking for each other each week: “We’ve gone from a Baby Belling [at Iliffe Yard] to a Falcon range,” says Saunt. The practice also organises surfing trips for its staff — though Hills and Saunt don’t tag along (“Who wants to go surfing with their boss?”).

Years ago, they described their approach as “serious fun” and Saunt confirms “that’s still a mantra 10 years on”.

But the down-to-earth credentials belie a fierce ambition and talent for networking which has helped get the practice where it is, and the studio

makes its presence known with cut-out letters on the rooftop spelling out DSDHA.

Such has been the pressure of their workload that it is only this month that the planted roof on their Clapham home was installed and the house finished. It is an ingenious design and it had to be because it is built in a back-garden site within a conservation area. Only one floor could appear above ground level so the bedroom floor is sunk into the garden, with generous light-wells that maximise views of the sky by chamfering its concrete window sills, mirroring one light-well and creating a pool down the margin of another. There are windows everywhere in the raw concrete spaces and more light bounces off the white resin floor.

The living/kitchen area is a delight, with an Australian feel in its connection with the gardens via sliding screens and roof-lights (Saunt was born in New South Wales and regrets how UK architecture “has become so sealed and air-conditioned”). Slender concrete roof beams recall those installed in a Cambridge lecture theatre by the late architect Colin St John Wilson: “Whether you like it or not, if you make your own house it is unavoidably a manifesto,” says Saunt.

That’s not only true of this small-scale house but in DSDHA’s largest job — the West End Project that next year will create a new public square by closing the northern end of Shaftesbury Avenue, where it meets New Oxford Street. Alfred Place in Bloomsbury will become a new public park that fills the former street with exuberant informal planting of the sort done in the Eighties by the guerrilla gardening squatters of Bonnington Square. It brings a flavour of Vauxhall’s earthy pleasures to central London.