



Making places

Factory-made, brick-faced concrete façade panels being installed at City Island, London. (Photo: Glenn Howells Architects.)

There are few areas related to building development that generate as much debate as housing, from the size and type of tenure, location and density, to environmental considerations such as energy efficiency, noise and comfort. A recent report from the Government advisory Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission is stimulating fresh discussion around the subject of beauty. Elaine Toogood of The Concrete Centre reports.

Created to promote and increase the use of high-quality design for new-build homes and neighbourhoods, the commission issued its interim report *Creating space for beauty*⁽¹⁾ in July this year, with final recommendation planned for December.

In the face of pressures to speed up the delivery of housing, one can understand the concern that off-site solutions might lead to a monotonous and dreary environment. The argument that ‘talk of beauty in the midst of a housing crisis is a distraction’ is described in the report as “a fallacy that somehow one precludes the other – that quality and quantity are at odds”. Nicholas Boys Smith, interim chairman of the commission, has admitted that beauty was hard to define, but as the report states, “this is a very bad reason to dismiss it”. The report identifies the selection and design of externally visible materials as one of the key considerations for securing beauty and great place making. Precast concrete cladding offers designers a range of aesthetic options without the need to compromise on beauty, quality or speed of construction.

Unique and local

Contemporary, architectural precast concrete can resemble Portland stone, black polished marble or have a patterned relief in terracotta,

demonstrating craftsmanship and intricate detail. Form, colour, texture and shape of architectural precast concrete can all be selected and designed to suit location. Natural sands and aggregates are the principal means of providing colour – hence its common name of ‘reconstituted stone’ or ‘recon’, thus creating an opportunity to enhance or reference local vernacular, without pastiche.

It may not even be perceived as concrete at all, hidden behind an embedded layer of brick or stone. Elaborate detailing or use of otherwise costly facing bricks, for example, become cost-effective when factory manufactured as brick-faced concrete cladding.

Contemporary craft

New digital manufacturing techniques for formwork, such as five-axis routers, greatly simplify the creation of complex and ornate shapes, texture and pattern.

Formwork liners can also create varied textures and pattern, ranging from stone or timber textures, to bespoke ornamental features. These innovations in manufacturing are a form of contemporary craft. Since most moulds can be used multiple times, architectural precast therefore provides a real opportunity to bring individualism and interest into the built environment cost-effectively.

AESTHETIC PRECAST

To just view façade design in the context of this debate for improving the quality of the building environment, falls way short of the myriad of issues that need to be, and which have been, addressed by the report. Architectural precast concrete offers many opportunities to contribute to the creation of beautiful places, as well as its other acknowledged benefits such as fire protection, low maintenance, durability, safety and speed of installation on-site. Maintaining performance and aesthetic quality over the long term should be equally, if not more important to good place making.

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Case study – London City Island

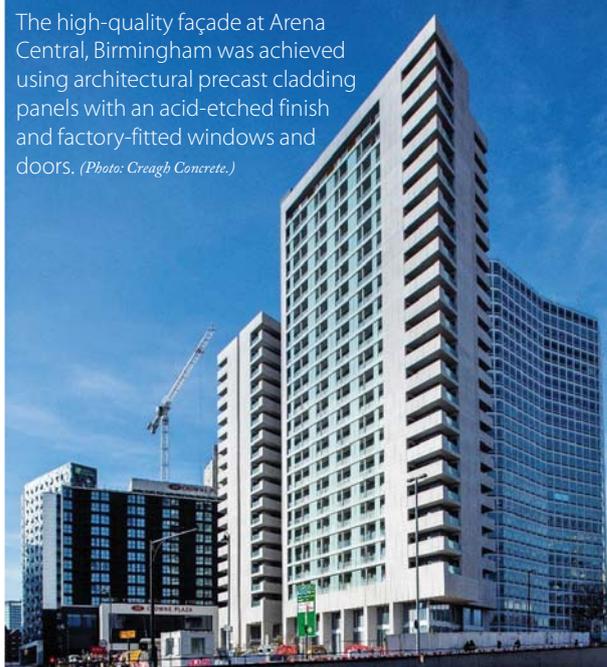
London City Island is a new housing development for EcoWorld Ballymore in East London. Designed by Glenn Howell Architects, the project is located in a tight loop of the River Lea close to the River Thames and although still under construction it has already won numerous awards for its place making. The scheme has a distinct language of simple building forms ranging in height up to 26 storeys. The design of the regularly punctuated façades is influenced by the industrial heritage of the site and surrounding area.

‘Making’ was a key concept in the architect’s design, with creative and cultural industries incorporated into the masterplan, along with other amenities.

The 1706 new homes are being delivered using cast-in-situ concrete structural frames, with prefabricated brick-faced concrete panels and a different coloured brick used for each of the 11 buildings. The use of full bricks permitted recessed windows, which were preinstalled off-site, along with thermally broken stub connections to receive external balconies. The installation of each floor was completed in a seven-day cycle. ■

Reference:

1. BUILDING BETTER, BUILDING BEAUTIFUL COMMISSION. *Creating space for beauty. The Interim Report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission*, July 2019, available at: <https://bit.ly/2XCNZ5p>.



City Island, London. (Photo: Courtesy of Glenn Howells Architects/Rob Parrish.)

