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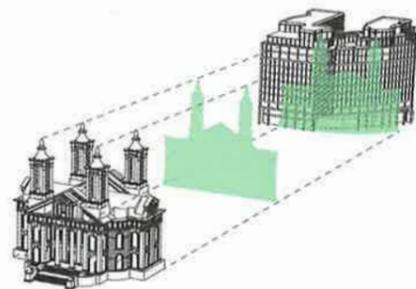
Cover
Central European University, Budapest, designed by O'Donnell & Tuomey (ph: Tamás Bujnovszky)

Abell and Cleland

DSDHA aims for super-density with contextual sympathy in a pair of central London residential buildings

Words
Chris Foges

Photos
Luca Miserocchi



Top
The sites of Abell and Cleland were previously occupied by vacant government buildings (Abell House and Cleland House), which were built in the 1930s and overclad in the 1980s.

Above
Cleland as an 'urban imprint' of St John's church, Smith Square.

Right
View from Smith Square to Cleland.

Opposite
View across John Islip Street of Abell from Cleland (left), and of Cleland from Abell.

Some of the £2m in community payments associated with the development was spent on reshaping the road layout in front of Cleland, smoothing its path and creating a paved walkway between John Islip Street and Thornley Street.



Abell and Cleland, a pair of unidentical twins, face each other across John Islip Street in the sleepy backwater of Millbank, between the Houses of Parliament and Tate Britain. Replacing two former government buildings, the residential scheme designed by DSDHA for the Berkeley Group provides 275 flats — of which around a quarter are designated affordable and managed by the charitable Dolphin Square Foundation — in an arrangement that offers “a new kind of super-density” leavened by landscaping and the careful tuning of the buildings to their context, suggests the architect. The scheme was developed from “an urban perspective, with much consideration given to the impact on a civic scale”.

Three distinct local conditions influenced the design, of which the first is the general character of the streetscape, comprising mostly large, brick-built 1930s modernist blocks. DSDHA mapped their vertical and horizontal emphases, along with the rhythm of openings, and used these drawings to calibrate the compatibility of the new additions. While these are ostensibly quite different, with expressed 'exoskeletons' of pale precast concrete, the architects could make a case that they share underlying affinities with the existing city.

Another reference point was the baroque St John's church in Smith Square, whose southern front has an axial relationship with the convex prow of Cleland. Its four corner towers and broken pediment are reflected in the upper storeys of Cleland as an 'urban imprint', says the architect. Behind a trabeated screen, the roofline is gently pulled back to form an outdoor room, with the topmost four storeys rising on either side.



Right, below

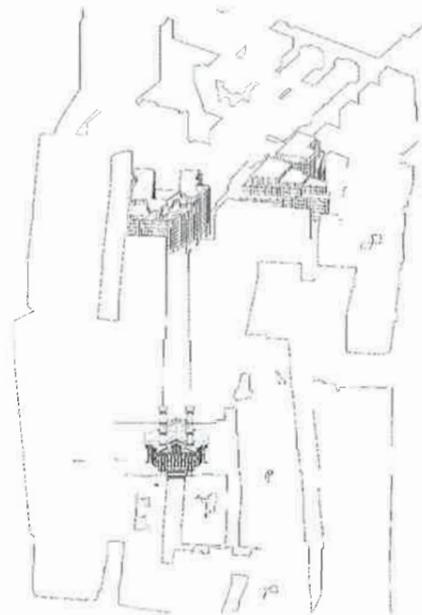
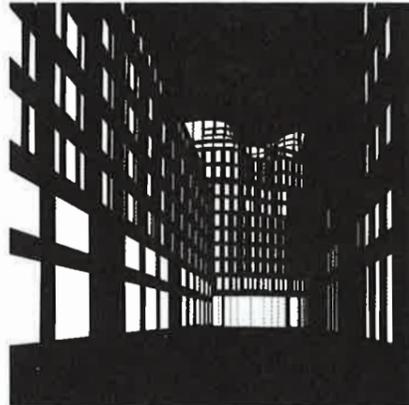
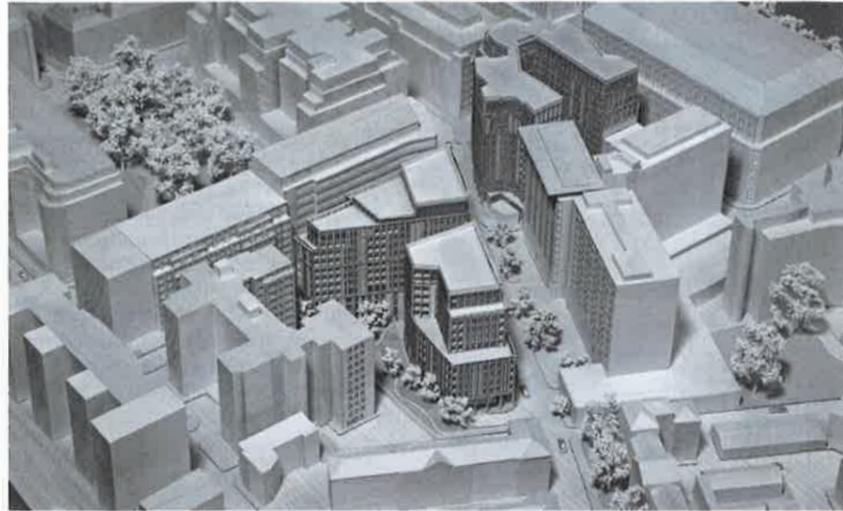
Site model; diagrams showing the relationship of verticality, horizontality and apertures in Cleland to that in neighbouring buildings; perspective illustrating the relationship of St John's, Smith Square, to Cleland.

Opposite

Location plan, axonometric perspectives, floor plans.

At Cleland, cores are positioned to maximise the number of dual-aspect apartments and minimise overlooking across the courtyard. Living rooms are typically on the street with bedrooms and secondary accommodation facing the courtyard.

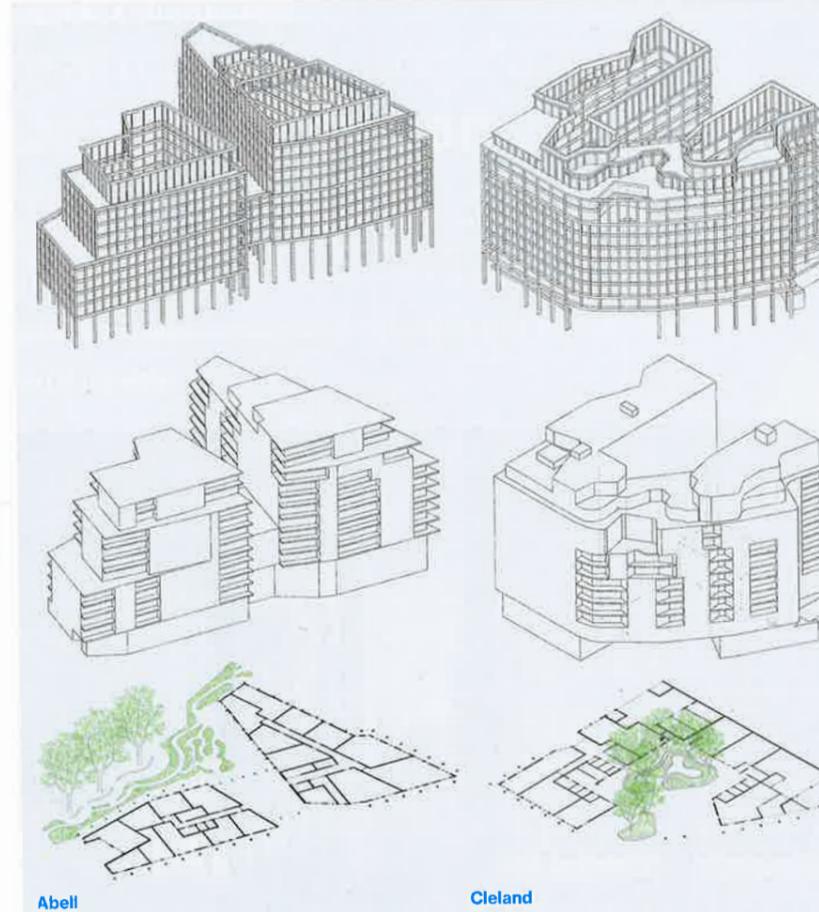
At Abell the cores are positioned to allow for upper floor setbacks while minimising the number of single-aspect apartments.



Hugh Casson said of St John's that its richly modelled facades conveyed "such a turmoil of movement" that it read more as a composition of jostling classical building elements than as walls and windows, and DSDHA has sought something similar in its own facades. The two buildings share a structural and material identity, though Cleland has a more 'classical' expression while Abell is more overtly 'modernist', suggests the architect. Both have expressed dense 'exoskeletons' of precast concrete formulated to resemble Portland stone, in reference to nearby buildings. Behind the primary outer frames, inner layers comprise metal-framed windows (bronze-coloured at Cleland, and greeny-grey at Abell) and semi-glazed ceramic tiles. At Cleland these are fluted, adding a fine grain and apparent depth to the facade. A play of protrusion and recession in this inner face suggests animation, as do cranked and curving plans, cuts in the section and pronounced setbacks.

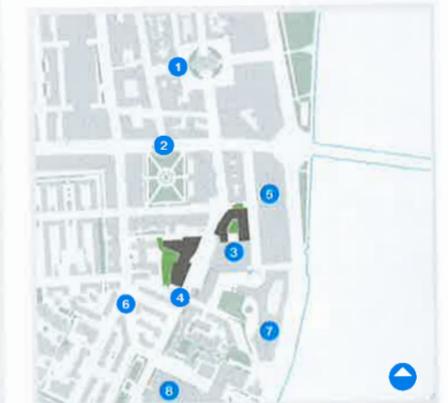
A third significant influence was a local consultation process, which guided not only the form of the scheme, but also its content. Seeking active frontage, DSDHA initially proposed commercial uses on the ground floor of Cleland, but this was dropped in response to feedback from neighbours who valued the area's quietness – which survives despite its central location and high density – and opposed any competitive threat to long-established independent shops and cafes nearby. Instead, DSDHA aimed to provide interest at street level by the inclusion of large entrances that give views through both buildings to lush gardens.

At Cleland the curved end of the building is supported on cantilevered crosswalls between the second and fourth floors so that columns do not obscure views through the double-height lobby that leads onto a central courtyard. At Abell, a triple-height entrance lobby is on axis with a pedestrian route, Art Walk, and frames views of a 1930s apartment building behind.



Key

- 1 Smith Square
- 2 Finsbury Road
- 3 Cleland
- 4 Abell
- 5 M15
- 6 Millbank Estate
- 7 Millbank Tower
- 8 Tate Britain





Above the entrance, a cut in the building's mass was made to admit more daylight to its older neighbour. This notch also serves to articulate Abell as two linked blocks, an impression enhanced by an inflection in the street facade. Pronounced setbacks on the southern block enable the building to mediate between 10-plus-storey structures to the north and the five-storey red-brick Arts & Crafts-inspired Millbank Estate completed by the LCC Architects' Department in 1902, which lies immediately to the south.

The ways in which the buildings are actively conversant with their context are apparent in every view from surrounding streets, through archways and gaps between blocks: horizontal facade banding at Abell aligns precisely with an adjacent cornice, for example. Such synchronicities are the product of extensive 3D modelling, says DSDHA partner Deborah Saunt.



Above, right

A double-height foyer provides views from the street to Cleland's central courtyard garden.

Interior design by Project Orange draws inspiration from the 'timeless' foyers of Manhattan apartment buildings.

The two buildings are linked by a service tunnel under the road, and residents of the private sale apartments share common facilities located in each: a pool, spa and gym in the basements of Abell, and a business centre under Cleland. Both buildings have underground parking served by car lifts,



Right
Garden-facing elevations at Abell.

Below
Street facade of Abell. Horizontal banding of precast Portland concrete breaks the elevations down to a classical composition of base, middle and top. An inner layer of reflective semi-glazed ceramic tiles "responds to the human scale of making", says the architect.



All affordable units are grouped on the east side of Cleland, in accordance with the wishes of MI5, which sits across Thornley Street and did not want to be overlooked by privately-owned dwellings. Though there are no balconies or operable windows (at the insistence of the Security Service), externally this part of the scheme is indistinguishable from any other. Its entrance is set within a tall, shallow colonnade and leads onto a double-height lobby which borrows daylight from the central courtyard via frosted glass.

The other flats are predictably expensive, which is reflected in the quality of material finishes achieved, and allowed some of the complex structural engineering involved. But aspects of this project might inform others with different cost profiles. DSDHA calculates that Abell and Cleland more than doubles the density achieved by Ernő Goldfinger's 31-storey Trellick Tower; a Trellick on this site would need 66 storeys to provide the same external space and floor area ratio. Taking its place alongside the Millbank Estate and Lutyens' chequerboard Page Street estate, as well as monumental buildings of the 1930s, Abell and Cleland adds another case study to a pocket of the city that is already something of a showcase for density with decorum. ↗

Project team

- Architect**
DSDHA
- Interior architect**
Project Orange
- Enabling architect**
EPR Architects
- Landscape architect**
Wirz International
- Structural engineer**
Manhire Associates
- Services engineer**
URS Scott Wilson
- Planning consultant**
Gerald Eye
- Townscape consultant**
Peter Stewart
Consultancy
- M&E consultant**
MTT Consulting
- Client**
Berkeley Homes

Selected suppliers & subcontractors

- Ceramic tiles**
Cerámica Cumella
- Glazing system**
English Architectural
Glazing, Schueco
- Precast concrete**
Techrete