

BRICK PICKINGS

Brick's infinite potential for pattern, colour and formation is bringing an intriguing combination of the known and the new to contemporary homes, says Dominic Bradbury

O

ne of the oldest and most versatile man-made materials, brick is finding a fresh audience with architects and clients being drawn back to its characterful qualities, especially in a contemporary context. Similarly, a new generation of designers is acknowledging the ways in which brick can lend rich texture and warmth to the interiors of a building, while readily adapting itself to a spectrum of modern forms and ideas.

Brick has been around for thousands of years. Ancient buildings such as the 852 AD Malwiya Minaret in Samarra – recalling a spiralling Tower

of Babel – or the great fifth-century Uzbeki fortress, known as the Ark, speak to its sculptural potential. And enduring appeal: it was a great favourite among the Victorians and disciples of the Arts and Crafts movement, and the pioneering modernists Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto saw it as one of the building blocks of a new approach to architecture. But with the late-20th-century push towards a more high-tech approach to design – in which concrete, steel and glass took centre stage – brick was increasingly dismissed as yesterday's child.

In the UK, Scandinavia and other parts of the world, though, it is an old, familiar and reassuring friend, forming part of the built fabric of our lives. Perhaps it's no wonder, then, that architects are now rediscovering the warmth and tactile delight of brick,

Adrian James Architects chose light red bricks for its redesign of the Incurvo house, in rural Oxfordshire, reflecting the orange brickwork of the local area



Clockwise from left: the brick and timber façade of this newly built house in Hertfordshire, designed by Coffey Architects, references the Arts and Crafts movement. Brick is also a key element inside the property, especially in the stairway. Handmade Danish bricks in soft and variegated tones were used on this Carmody Groarke-designed house in north London

Handmade Danish Petersen brick varies in tone and is thinner than London stock



deploying it in unexpected and original ways within new-build houses and apartment buildings.

In Highgate, north London, architectural practice Carmody Groarke has designed a beautifully detailed brick house (pictured above) with a series of fluid and intersecting volumes. Unlike the original Edwardian house that it replaced, the contemporary building features large picture windows that make the most of the views of Highgate Wood to the rear, forging a strong connection between inside and out. Brick has been used to powerful effect for the façade but also pushes, gently, into the property itself, becoming a feature in both the entrance hallway and the swimming-pool wing, where the water reflects its textures.

“It’s a suburban street with a range of houses from different periods, but the predominant material is brick,

so it seemed like a good place to start,” says architect Kevin Carmody. “Today, brick is often used as a veneer, but we wanted to use it as both the load-bearing structure of the house and the finish. We were lucky to find the most amazing builder, a craftsman interested in the detail and quality of everything he did.” Carmody and his clients opted for a handmade Danish Petersen brick, which comes in soft and variegated tones and is a little thinner than a standard London stock brick. The façade was designed to ensure there are no cut bricks within a random brick bond repeated every six courses. The combination of a crisp, contemporary outline with precise design and craftsmanship lends the house a unique quality. Additional texture is provided by “hit and miss” brickwork at certain points, forming privacy screens over windows and apertures while still allowing light to



filter through. “People don’t often build in this way any more,” says Carmody, “so we did go through quite an intensive research period with our engineer. The clients loved the softness of the brick and the proportions; as it went up, it didn’t look like a new house, because we already had variation in the colour of the brickwork.”

For Coffey Architects, the Arts and Crafts aesthetic was a key reference in the design of a distinctly contemporary new house (pictured top) in the Hertfordshire town of Harpenden, which nods to the late 19th-century movement principally through the choice of brick and timber. The façade – of Anglian Light Grey brick from WH Collier – is lent added texture and interest through a series of slim brick fins that project from the surface, while guttering and services are discreetly hidden. Brick is also used extensively within the home, forming a key element in the stairway (pictured above) in particular. “We used brick panels on parts of the house rather than everything being hand-laid,” says project architect Lee Marsden. “It is a material that still relies on a level of craft and has infinite possibilities for colour and texture, which ensures its contemporary relevance.”

Brick has also been used in a number of recent larger-scale urban projects, adding subtle pattern and expressive



Clockwise from left: the brickwork on Marc Koehler's House Like Garden in Amsterdam forms a trellis that will become a vertical garden. Cantilevered black bricks protrude from the property, creating a geometric pattern. A raised, rippled façade on Taka Architects' House 01 in Dublin is a modern take on a mews property

Brick helps soften the impact of contemporary architectural forms



textural character to the streetscape while still tying in with existing period buildings. Architectural practice Groupwork + Amin Taha has designed a striking six-apartment building (pictured overleaf) in Barrett's Grove, north London, resembling an elongated version of a townhouse with a crisp silhouette. It features a perforated façade of Ibstock Beamish Red brickwork that serves as a characterful outer coat on the laminated-timber superstructure. A series of projecting balconies adds another dimension, so that the building becomes a



contrast of apparent mass and lightness that's utterly intriguing. (So much so that it caught the eye of the jury for the RIBA Stirling Prize and has been shortlisted for this year's award.)

"It's a full-height, self-supporting brick façade," says Taha. "But we left gaps between bricks to express the fact that it's a rain screen and not holding up the whole building. The strength of this texture, combined with a palette of materials and colours including large woven-wicker balconies, maintains a sense of elegance and calm on the street."

A dramatic testament to the dynamic plasticity of brick comes in a rural Oxfordshire property, designed by Adrian James Architects. "Incurvo" is a sinuous house (pictured on opening pages) that replaced a 1920s building on the same site; its curved walls were made with Swanage Handmade Light Red Multi brick by Ibstock, with the variations in the material preventing the surfaces, laid in a Flemish bond, from becoming too uniform. "We knew brick would cope with the curves that embrace you on arrival and invite you around the house," says James. "Brick is excellent for cost and for zero

maintenance. It ages well, and there is that critical element of craftsmanship in the laying and the pointing. And as the local town is mainly constructed in a beautiful orange brick, it was an easy choice to make."

Such contextual use of brick helps soften the impact of contemporary architectural forms and ideas by blending the familiar with the new. James Gorst's Brick House (pictured overleaf) in the Suffolk coastal town of Aldeburgh is a perfect example: the linear, geometric precision of this holiday home's outline is warmed by the use of a handmade product that Gorst chose from The Bulmer Brick & Tile Company and which is made in the nearby town of Sudbury. "I was keen to build an abstract, modern home in a traditional material," says Gorst. "It's quite a hard-edged house, but the brick gives it a crafted quality, which is both reassuring and helps answer a contemporary need for crafted buildings. I'm pleased with the rather provocative way it sits in a very conventional suburban street, and with how the soft warmth of the Bulmer brick plays against its architectural sharpness."

Brick is enjoying a renaissance in other parts of the world as well, particularly those with a strong masonry heritage. In Dublin, Alice Casey and Cian Deegan of Taka



“We see bricks as pixels that provide infinite design possibilities”



Architects were commissioned to design a new property (known as House 01, pictured on previous page) for Casey’s sister. Red brick is a common traditional material in the city, so a product called Birtley Old English from Ibstock was used for a modern reinterpretation of a mews house. The front façade was given a raised, rippled pattern with the use of “separated” Flemish bond in which the headers of alternate bricks push distinctly outwards, while the rear elevation was made with an inverse, indented pattern. Internally, bare brick was used for the spine chimney and fireplace.

“The open bonds of the brick were something of a risk, but they have weathered very well over time,” says Deegan. “Using brick, you can create a bespoke design like this without adding excessive cost, as it just takes laying the brick in a different way.”

“The bricks steal the show, both inside and outside,” affirms Casey’s sister Isobel, a psychotherapist. “The huge chimneybreast goes up from the ground floor to the attic, with all the rooms and the stairs winding around it. When I had a new baby, I used to sit by the fire staring up at the beautiful architecture and the exposed brick.”

Amsterdam has a strong masonry tradition of its own, which reached a peak during the 1920s. This was one point of inspiration for architect Marc Koehler’s House Like Garden (pictured on previous page), which is built out of a standard Dutch brick made by Röben. Cantilevered black bricks protrude from the surface of the house, forming an abstract, geometric within a precision design that is not only highly textural but also forms a kind of trellis that allows planting and

From top: handmade brick softens the linear design of James Gorst’s Brick House in Suffolk. The hallway leading to the property’s drawing room. Woven-wicker balconies and a perforated brick façade are striking features on Groupwork + Amin Taha’s six-apartment building in north London

creepers to climb the brickwork, with the aim of creating a vertical garden to complement other green spaces such as the roof terrace.

“The decorative pattern folds around the façade and onto the side, creating an expressive effect that intensifies on one corner,” says Koehler. “We looked at various options for the façade during study sessions, and at one point the client rotated a brick by accident, which created a cantilevered pattern, which then became a key element of the design.” The rotated bricks serve as a backbone layer for nature to grow on, allowing for the connection of cables to support the growth of vines and ivy. “We see the bricks as design pixels,” adds Koehler. “They give you a modular system that allows infinite possibilities to construct virtually any image you desire.”

Above all, brick is a great enabler of creative possibility, opening up myriad opportunities for inventive, original buildings characterised by a high degree of craftsmanship. “Brick was stigmatised for decades as being symbolic of

an old and fusty means of construction and passé styles of architecture,” says Adrian James. “But some of us didn’t buy that argument. We saw it for what it is: an excellent building block with a timeless quality not tied to any style, nor any construction technique. We’ve been true to it for all this time – everyone else is just catching up!” ♦

IN THE BRICK OF IT

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