

Life behind the facade

A retail-to-residential conversion by Brisco Loran and Duncan Blackmore offers hope for our high streets

Words: Simon Henley Photographs: Jim Stephenson



Walking away from Costa's Barbers I wondered how different the world might be if many more people lived and worked as architects Thom Brisco and Pandora Loran do. It seems a monumental question to ask following a brief visit to such a humble project: a Battersea shop unit now converted to their home and office. But there were many things that resonated immediately - ideas about the city, about conventions of use, public and private, social and domestic space, and about forms of practice and its impact on the environment. Again and again, the threshold - be it a wall, window, awning, counter or a step - played a crucial role.

Costa's Barbers, with its bright yellow shopfront and awning on Battersea High Street, is a chameleon. This ground floor space is shop, office and home rolled into one. Put another way it is both public and private. Ten minutes' walk from both Clapham Junction railway station and the Thames, this length of the high street





is quiet on a Tuesday morning, although there is a market on a Saturday.

This collaboration between Brisco Loran and Duncan Blackmore, as Arrant Industries, is a modest but experimental piece of architecture. Blackmore bought the building freehold in 2015, with the flats above already sold on long leases; they remain unaltered. The project to renovate the shop, make a new shopfront, and eke out a number of domestic spaces, began when the ground floor became vacant in 2020. The collaboration between Brisco Loran and Blackmore encompassed both the design and the construction of the project, with the architects living and working on site throughout the build.

The more or less orthogonal C-shaped plan wraps around an existing staircase to the flats above but, due to a curve in the street and the geometry of the party walls, the shopfront is on a tangent to the road and at an oblique angle to the plan. Stepping inside, this dynamic is evident in the pattern of red quarry tiles, which relates only to the shopfront and street. Everything else follows the geometry of the walls.

Opposite The shop, last occupied by a marketing agency, adjoins a covered passage to the yard. Below A new facade to the shared yard is composed of external insulation, render and Thames pebbles.

working well as a living room, office or shop. One step up is the kitchen, a narrower space with counter, cupboards and shelves on the party wall, returning to form a counter between the kitchen and living-room-office-shop. From the kitchen there are two steps up to a shower room and one further step up to two small, beautifully proportioned and daylit bedrooms that overlook the back yard. Every element, every surface, is carefully chosen and crafted. However, this progression from street into shop, past the kitchen, bathroom and on to the bedrooms conjures up many scenarios, and hints at the physical geography of the Thames basin and the broader challenges of climate change. It transpires that the high watermark for flooding dictates the height of the bedroom floors - 960mm above the pavement - a 'tidemark' that is expressed in the gloss-painted timber wearing surfaces that line the space.

This first territory one can imagine

Step back outside to the bright yellow timber shopfront, where the glass panes are arranged in three tiers. The top one is a fine grain of 10 clerestory windows, all fixed but for the two fanlights above



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the front door which are perpendicular to the party walls, and open. Horizontal panes in the second tier are also fixed. Together, they have the same dimensions as the shop windows below. And this is where it gets even more unusual. These are sash windows that open onto the street, and when fully raised are concealed behind the upper tiers. The cill becomes a counter and the living room becomes a stall, this threshold enabling the occupants to participate in the life of the street. Outside, a large canvas awning extends over the pavement, shading and sheltering both the interior and the street. In its various configurations pitched low or high and horizontal - it conjures up variously shaped open-sided rooms, prompting different reactions and situations, stretching out to establish another threshold in public space.

This curious poise between public and private is adjusted further with a second layer of sash windows, this time in a modern interpretation of the leaded window, the view obscured by screens of



Above A secondary internal sash, fitted with obscured glass, allows privacy or visibility to the street.

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Below Wainscotting marks the 1 in 200 year flood level, above which sit the bedrooms.

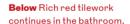
glass shapes bonded together in patterns by the designer and manufacturer Jack Brindley. As he explains, they are made by silicone-bonding hand-cut glass to a single piece of tempered low-iron glass, producing an incredibly strong but textured safety glass. A mix of machinemade and mouth-blown textured glass gives variety to the refraction of light and the privacy afforded. Brindley likens the windows to traditional Japanese rice paper Shoji screens, for their translucency and the quantity of light admitted.

The final adjustments to the building are to be found in the yard, where new windows, insulation and a meter cupboard have been incorporated into a precise and poetic composition of fine aluminium sections, used to frame materials and textures, opacities and transparencies, uncannily like a Ben Nicholson painting. Three panels of pebbles chosen when mudlarking at low tide on the Thames complete the picture.

With the architects living on site, in addition to all the social, spatial and



Design team Brisco Loran and Arrant Industries
Glass design and fabrication Pavilion Pavilion
Shopfront joinery RP Joinery
Structural engineer Elite Designers
Approved inspector Assent Building Control







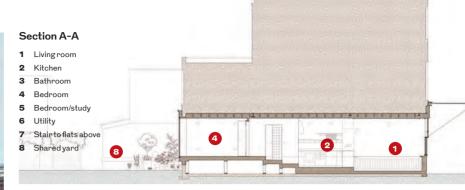
Above New windows look onto a shared yard that was once used as storage for market stalls.

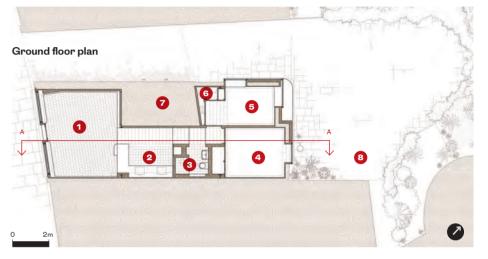
Below East light from a new window enters the second bedroom.

material decisions Brisco Loran and Blackmore made, the intensity of their involvement with the building points to a different type of practice where architects' energies are channelled into far fewer projects, significantly reducing their impact on the planet while making a living. One thinks of Ted Cullinan's self-built house in Camden. Of course, few of us have the ability or the patience to do this.

So many elements make tangible thresholds and territories, and with that a response to the rhythms of day and night, the seasons, home and work, commerce and ritual celebration, time and memory. Each ebb and flow of activity washes back and forth through the plan and the section, much like the tide of the Thames a few streets away. Just imagine a high street full of this type of building, and a city full of this kind of high street, and the vitality, fluidity and ambiguity that could bring to our public and private lives.

Simon Henley is co-founder of Henley Halebrown and author of The Architecture of Parking







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