



## Building

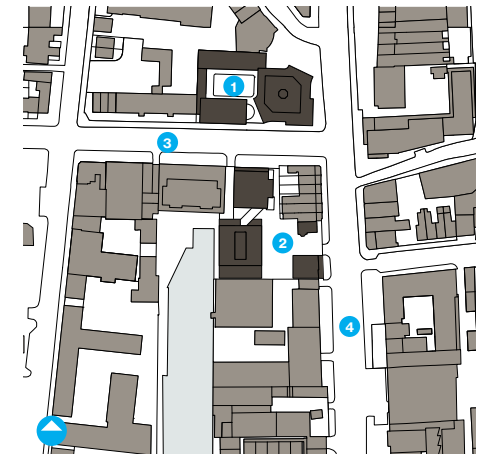
# Serious Delight

Peter Stewart enjoys the rigour and wit of a conjoined primary school and residential tower designed by Henley Halebrown

Photos  
Nick Kane

Henley Halebrown's new project in Hackney, east London, is of interest as much for its approach to urban design as for its architecture. It combines two unrelated uses in a single block: a primary school for 350 pupils, arranged on two and three storeys around a rectangular courtyard, occupying the quieter west part of the corner site; and an eleven-storey apartment building in the form of a point block on the east part, which fronts the busy Kingsland Road, one of Hackney's main arteries. The school and the apartments are separated functionally, but interlocked in cross-section with school accommodation extending into the lower two storeys of the tower where it faces the courtyard playground.

The new primary school joins a related secondary school by the same architects, which is on the other side of the road. The courtyard is entered directly from the street via a gap in the frontage screened by metal gates, designed with artist Paul Morrison. Nearly all of the school's circulation space is external; classrooms open directly off the courtyard and the galleries which run round it at first- and second-floor levels, with shelter provided by linear canopies. The double-height school hall, with high-level windows on three sides, occupies the south side of the courtyard, next to the street.



## Key

- 1 Hackney New Primary School
- 2 Hackney New School (secondary)
- 3 Downham Road
- 4 Kingsland Road

## Opposite

Hackney New Primary School entrance.

## Left

The Kingsland Road entrance of Hackney New School, also by Henley Halebrown, which was completed in 2015 (see AT267); model in brick showing the new primary and existing secondary schools.





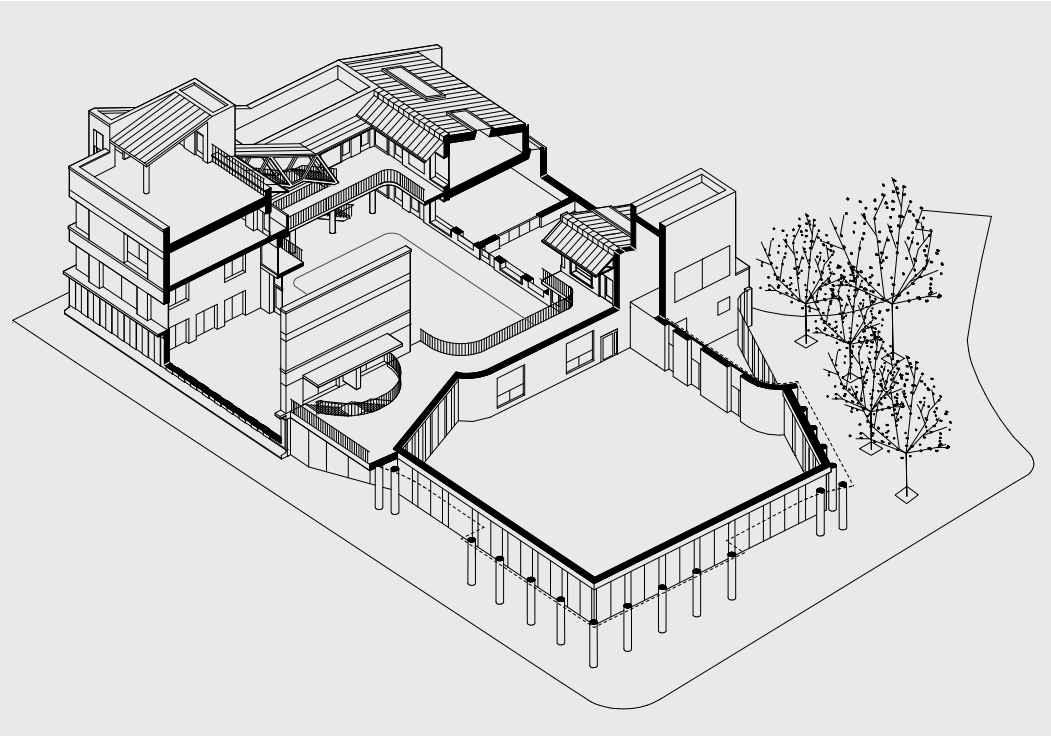
There is good daylight to all classrooms from windows facing into the courtyard, and also from rooflights (including at ground-floor level through use of a stepped section). A landscaped roof terrace on top of the south wing provides a contrasting external space, away from the bustle of the courtyard. The school's three-storey street elevation to the south is windowless at ground-floor level, where an external bench for the use of waiting parents runs along the back of the pavement; a clerestory at first-floor level lights the double-height hall.

The courtyard plan, built out to the edges of this tight site on all sides, with all rooms facing into the centre, deploys an efficient (and traditional) urban form type. It is the inverse of the freestanding building in the middle of its site which was the model for the much admired Board schools found across Victorian London, on sites with more generous dimensions than were available here. With nearly all circulation between rooms taking place within a single external space, comings and goings are in plain sight, with no 'behind the bike shed' space, and everything overlooked from the head's office — shades of the panopticon, but for all its negative connotations, that is surely a good thing in reducing the risk of bullying.

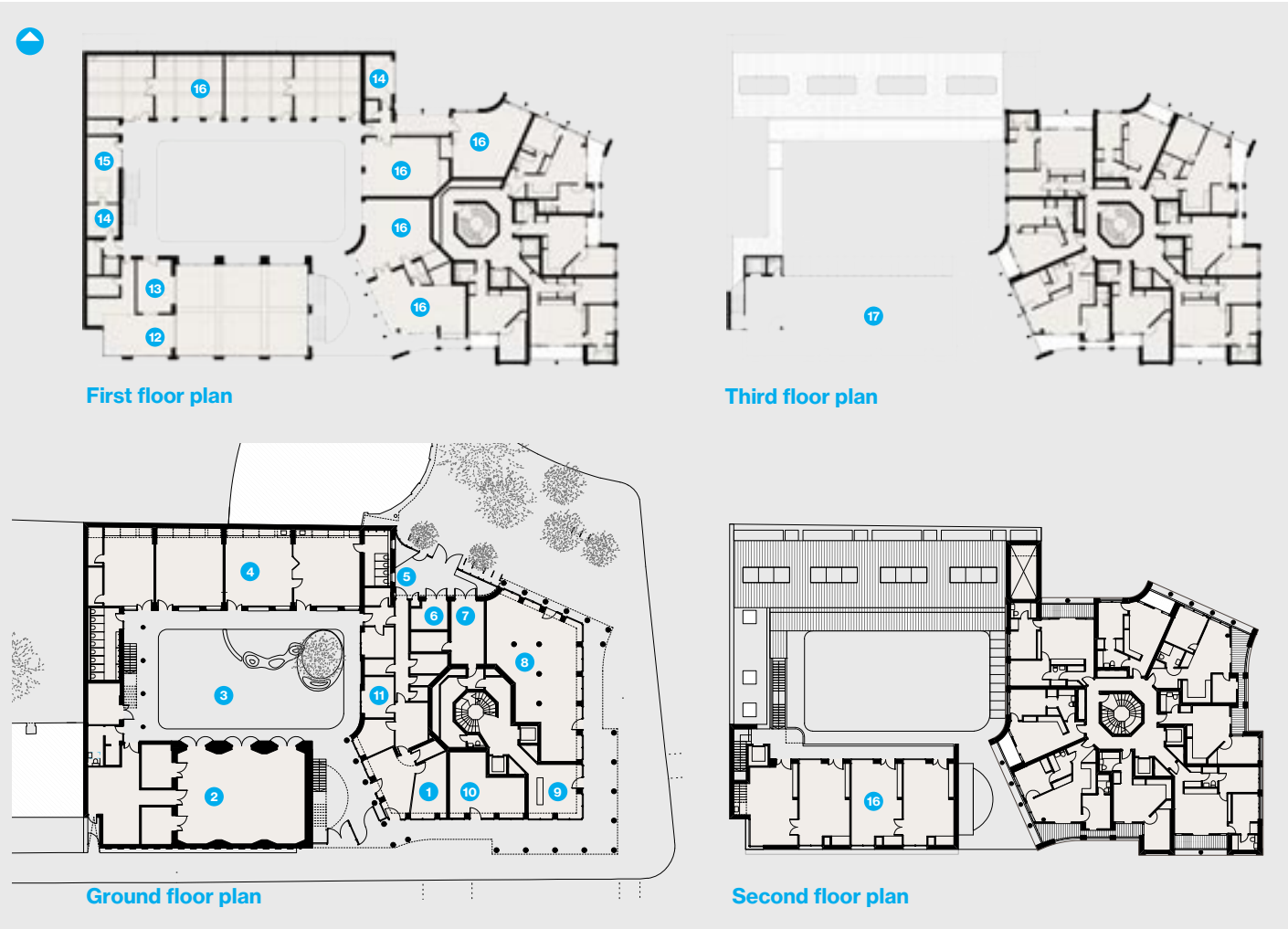
**Right**  
The courtyard playground is overlooked by the head's office in the tower's base.

**Below**  
View north along Kingsland Road from Hackney New School (secondary) towards the residential tower.

**Below right**  
School elevation to Kingsland Road and colonnade at the base of the tower.



Key	
1	School reception
2	School hall and kitchen
3	Courtyard playground
4	Reception classrooms
5	Teachers' entrance
6	Teachers' bike store
7	Residential bin store
8	Commercial
9	Residential lobby
10	Pupil bike store
11	Head's office
12	Staff room
13	Drama/music
14	SEN room
15	Library
16	Classroom
17	Rooftop garden







The architecture is for the most part serious. It is not the sort of school design that that aims to engage with infants through architectural jollification — they are left to add the fun themselves, and they are doing so. But the building contains elements of serious delight nevertheless. The walls that separate the classrooms from the courtyard are built out to a considerable thickness, so that the careful design of doors and windows within them provides architectural opportunities, with sills at different heights for different ages, and the creation of niches where children can feel slightly apart from the main space. An interstitial threshold zone is created, which in some cases the pupils have extended out into the courtyard under the galleries, verandah-style.

The red brick of the school’s exterior, and the same brick combined with rich red precast concrete components in the apartment building, echo the tone of late-nineteenth-century institutional buildings in the area, contrasting with the yellow London stocks which still predominate both in older and in more recent housing. Once within the courtyard, however, the colour palette lies within a narrow range of rich creams and ivories, including glazed brickwork, echoing the use of that material by the Victorians for courtyards and lightwells.

Designed well before the Covid-19 pandemic, the school’s focus on direct access from the classrooms to the outside and to fresh air now looks prescient; the rationalists’ interest in the reuse of traditional typologies is as pertinent as an environmental strategy as it is as a formal one.

The apartment building is entered on the prominent south-east corner of the site, with a retail unit beside the entrance hall, set back behind a colonnade. At the upper levels, eight one- and two-bedroom flats are arranged around a central core, with three duplex apartments at the top, where there is also a communal roof terrace, all set behind a crown of freestanding concrete framing elements which terminate the wall planes. At a height greater than surrounding buildings, the roof terrace has sensational views out over London.

The underlying square plan form of the tower is manipulated — in response to two influencing factors — to provide two prominent splayed elements at an angle to the main grid. That on the north side responds to the siting of an adjacent building, but also reflects the diagonal planning in the layout of the de Beauvoir Estate (on which the site lies); that on the west side is arranged to funnel the space from the main entrance to the school from the street, and also has the effect of allowing more morning sun into the courtyard. The two splays that result are arranged to be symmetrical across the plan’s diagonal, a subtlety — or perhaps conceit — that is hard to read from the street, but lends rigour to the flat planning. This is for the most part handsomely resolved — although some might find the blank panels on the south elevation, which deny potential views out from a bedroom and a bathroom on this corner, a bit perverse.

The tower’s brick and precast concrete elevations, organised with a frame-like expression within a two-storey order which repeats up the building, deploy a number of variations on a basic window bay module, with degrees of modelling and depth, accommodating terraces to many of the flats.

The two splayed faces of the tower, with a grid of two-storey circular columns at an angle to the prevailing grid of the surrounding streets, read from some distance away as powerful, assertive architectural elements in their own right. They lend the apartment building a civic presence that it might not merit on its own, but which makes sense as a marker of the nexus of the two related schools on either side of the road junction.

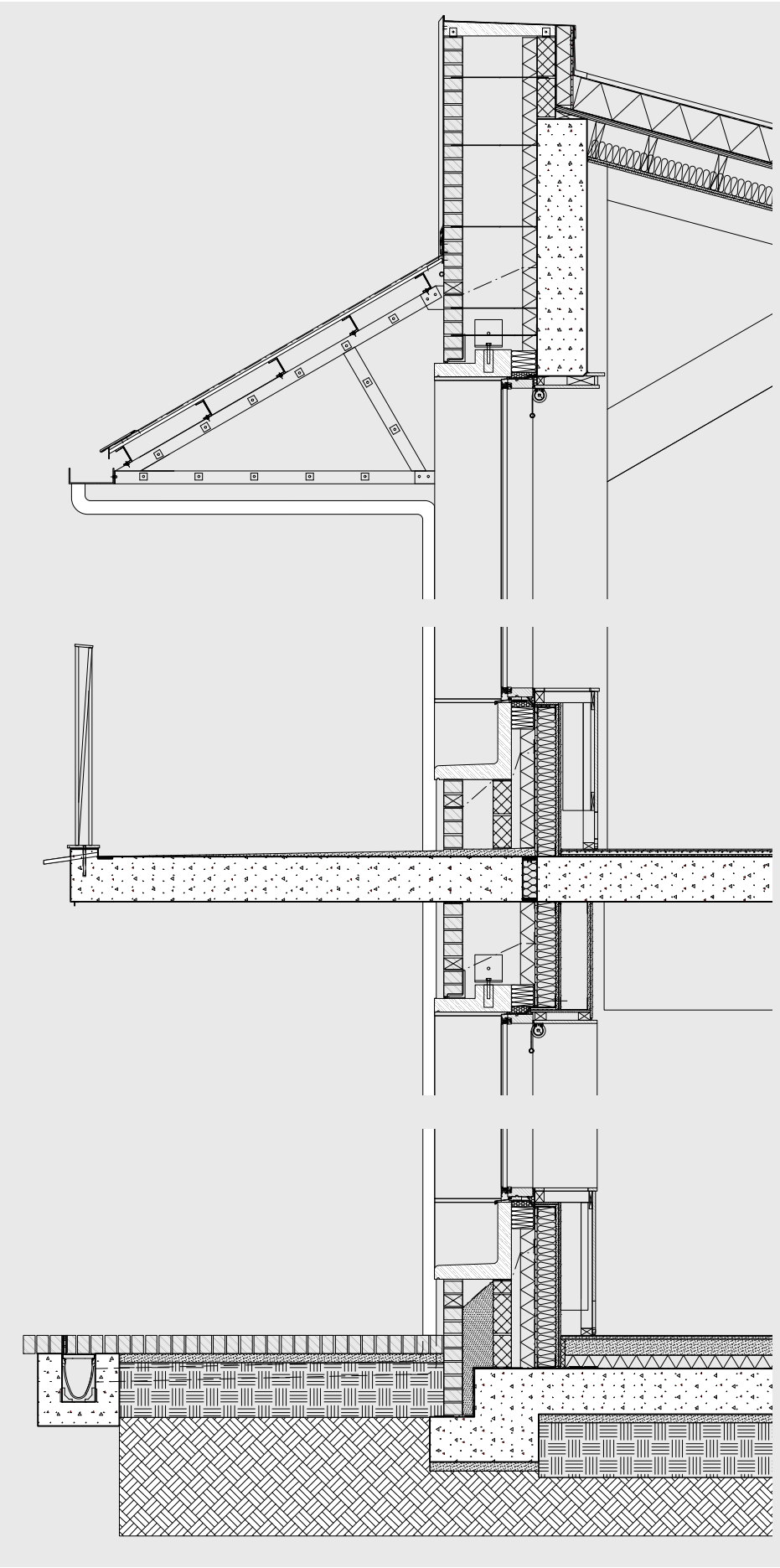


**Top left**  
View of the residential tower over the roofs of the primary school.

**Above, right**  
The first-floor access deck is reached via a stair from the courtyard playground.







**Key**

1	XXXXXXXXXX
2	XXXXXXXXXX
3	XXXXXXXXXX
4	XXXXXXXXXX
5	XXXXXXXXXX
6	XXXXXXXXXX
7	XXXXXXXXXX
8	XXXXXXXXXX
9	XXXXXXXXXX
10	XXXXXXXXXX



**Left, above**  
Detail section through north courtyard facade; cross-section through courtyard; white glazed brickwork within the courtyard, with access deck above.

The calm, dignified and civic architecture of the school derives from the rationalist tradition, though with pleasing quirky flourishes here and there. The architecture of the apartments is clearly part of the same project, but developed with more freedom. The elevations throughout have depth and heft; they appear built to last. This is serious architecture that delights in order — or perhaps more accurately, that starts with a rigorous, systematic set of ideas and derives delight from their elaboration.

**Right, below**  
First-floor classroom; double-height hall.





The site is in a conservation area, but it is the sort of conservation area where designation arrived several decades too late, its purpose to protect the decayed and fragmentary remains of a once coherent late Georgian and Victorian streetscape that lined this former Roman road more or less continuously until about 80 years ago. The last few decades have seen vacant and underused sites along its length redeveloped, some more successfully than others. The historic pattern of continuous frontages is gradually being reinstated, but at a significantly larger scale, at a higher density, and with a more eclectic mix of forms and materials.

Considered as urbanism, this project, with its unusual combination of forms and uses on a single site, is inspired as much by continental European as by English models. Clarity of arrangement of these component parts does not come easily on a constrained inner-city site. Two simple, legible and traditional form types — courtyard and tower — have been brought together into a logical and compelling composition. Henley Halebrown has achieved a skilled and original resolution of the potentially conflicting components of a demanding brief. **▲**

Project team	Selected suppliers & subcontractors
<b>Architect</b> Henley Halebrown <b>Structural Engineer</b> Techniker <b>MEP engineer</b> Elementa (pre-contract) <b>Planning consultant</b> CMA Planning <b>Building control</b> MLM <b>Fire consultant</b> BWC Fire <b>Landscape</b> Tyler Grange (pre-contract) <b>Planting</b> Jennifer Benyon Design <b>Project manager, QS</b> RLB (pre-contract) <b>CDM</b> Potter Raper <b>Acoustic engineer</b> Pace Consult <b>Artwork</b> Paul Morrison	<b>Groundworks and structure</b> Carey London <b>Interior fit-out</b> Stratstone <b>M&amp;E</b> Briggs & Forrester <b>Special Projects</b> Precast Creagh Concrete (residential), Amber Precast (school) <b>Metalwork</b> Alpine Group <b>Glazing and curtain walling</b> Reynaers by Grabex, Velfac