



This page, Dow Jones Architects' first project, Marshall House in Sudbourne, Suffolk, is a simple timber and brick structure that sets up the practice's conceptual clarity.

BEYOND MODERNISM

It's been five years since Dow Jones Architects finished the influential Marshall House in Sudbourne, Suffolk. **Jes Fernie** spoke with the practice that is forging a way out of British architecture's obsession with modernism



Most architects are scared of language and words. They use words as a daily basis to sell and promote projects, but they seem unable to recognise the power that they have in creating a coherent sense of history and the environment in which we live. There are a handful of architectural outfits working in the UK today for which the use of language is an integral part of the work. Canan St John, Seignior Bates and Lynch Architects are obvious ones, but a relative newcomer is Dow Jones Architects.

You may never have heard of the practice. If you have, your first thoughts might concern materiality or contextual specificity, but don't let that scare you off. In 2009 its first project, Marshall House, hit the pages of the architectural press with beautifully framed photographs of a simple, pitched-roofed, timber and brick structure that oozed conceptual clarity and serious intent. With an exhibition at the Architecture

Foundation and encouraging critical appraisal of its work, the practice was set to make waves in the world of architecture. But five years have passed and very little has been heard of Dow Jones Architects since. Was its postwar brand of austere architecture too much for the British architectural scene and its public?

It seems not. Alan Jones and Biba Dow have been working very quietly and very hard on a number of residential and gallery projects, as well as office refurbishments and public competitions, three of which are currently in situ. Hence this article and, I suspect, the beginning of many more. Poplar Cottage in Walberswick, Suffolk, is 15 miles up the coast from the festival town of Aldeburgh, close to where Marshall House is situated. The cottage sits on a pretty English green, a short walk from the sea in a village that was once a thriving port, but now serves as a holiday destination for well-heeled Londoners.



Three walls of the existing 'Twenties' house have been retained (this is a conservation area of the highest degree). The rest of the house has been built into the walls to create a home for a family of four. As with all Dow Jones projects, the layout and use of materials is simple and direct.

A combined kitchen and living area looks out on to the back garden, while a snug area with a low ceiling and a fireplace for cold winter nights faces on to the green. The three bedrooms upstairs open on to a 'withdrawing' room – an informal space that looks out towards the sea. The extensive use of brick and clay for the walls and oak for the ceilings and stairs lends an air of rugged simplicity that is enhanced by the effect of the pitched roof and exposed chimney stacks.

What makes this building interesting is that at a glance it looks entirely at home in its surroundings, but it is in fact a curious mixture of a premodern and postmodern approach

DOW JONES ARCHITECTS IS DEEPLY ATTUNED TO THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN ARCHITECTURE AND THE IMPORTANCE THAT MEMORY PLAYS IN OUR PERCEPTIONS OF A SPACE



This page, Poplar Cottage in Suffolk features a pitched roof and exposed chimney stacks, and uses materials such as brick, clay and oak to underline the rugged simplicity of the design.





This page and facing page, top: Dow Jones Architects added a third floor studio to the existing structure of the former industrial building in Vinton Road, Cambridge. Facing page, right and below: the remodelled ground floor of a house in Tavistock Road, Batham. Facing page,

top right and sketch, left: Sam Jones, Batham, where two floors of a Victorian clay factory are being reworked into a home. The bathroom and bedroom are on the lower floor, and the living space and kitchen on the upper floor, with a new roof terrace above.

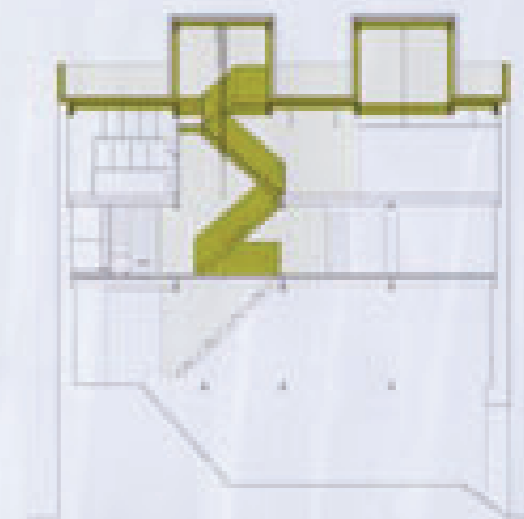
IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO SEE HOW DOW JONES APPROACHED THE DESIGN OF A BUS STATION – SOMETHING DIRTY AND NOISY THAT TAKES IT BEYOND THE SCALE OF ITS CURRENT WORK

to architecture. The scale, commitment, to context, and use of local materials and craftsmen points to an interest in the vernacular of postmodernism, but the detailing and language of the house is postmodern in the broadest sense. For example, unlike any other brick wall that I have seen, all the bricks in this house have been laid flush with the limestone mortar in which they sit. This may be considered to be a minor design statement, but in fact it changes the whole feel of the building, so the walls are a solid mass rather than a surface made up of separate elements.

Here we reach the nub of the issue: Dow and Jones were not educated as modernists but as classicists. Their Cambridge credentials are reflected in their accents. The practice's work is a world apart from the light modernism or high-tech approach adopted by many present-day outfits such as Allen and Morrison, Alfred Hill Monaghan Moore, and Foster and Partners. Dow

Jones Architects is deeply attuned to the role of history in architecture and the importance that memory plays in our perceptions of a place. This interest in cultural sedimentation means that when you look at a Dow Jones building you feel a sense of familiarity, even though the overall effect is contemporary. This approach makes the practice outsiders, something that Jones readily acknowledges: "Unlike most architects we aren't looking to the future, we are trying to make something that has invention in it, rather than something that is necessarily contemporary."

This approach is popular with clients who are equipped with taste and money. The conversion of an early Victorian news building in Wigmore Place in London's West End is being spearheaded by a developer who plans to rent the building out as a single family house. As with Poplar Cottage, the design of the facade is restricted by planning regulations, but behind



the main elevation the building will be gutted and totally reconfigured. The impressive but not inflexible brick vaulted basement is to be converted into a kitchen which opens out on to a garden area. Living and sleeping zones will be on the ground, first and second floors, which lead to an additional upper floor created in the form of a mansard roof.

The three principal spaces are linked by an internal staircase made entirely from oak, which appears as a timber room at each floor. The aim is to create a naturally lit tower which is both enclosed and enclosing, and connects spaces both physically and materially. The piercing of the vaults means the basement is visible at street level. Once again, conversations are set up between interior and exterior spaces, creating a thoughtful dynamic between the public and private rooms.

All this interest in materiality, context, and construction technique is the hallmark of the practice's

mentioned in the opening lines, but Dow and Jones are understandably tired of these parallels. It's too easy to lump them all together as "architects in possession of intellectual high ground" – there are significant differences in their approaches (most notably in Casuso St John's interest in ornament) which results in the construction of very different buildings.

What Dow Jones needs now is a public commission. Luxury houses and private galleries may be a good way of complexing a portfolio of work, but the parameters of the practice need to be tested. It would be interesting to see how it might approach the design of a bus or railway station – something dirty and noisy that takes it beyond the scale and context of its current work. This is something Dow and Jones are eager to do and I, for one, would love to see a Transport for London project managed faced with architects waging lyrical about Heidelberg and his theory of the jaggedness of a jag. ■