

## The Selfless Plan: Social Patterns in the Work of Proctor and Matthews

Jeremy Till

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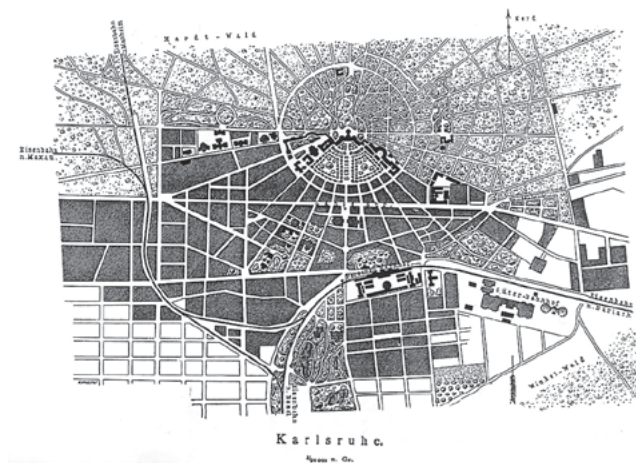
### Good Plans

When I was a student, my tutors used to talk to us about good plans and bad plans. “That is a beautiful plan”, they would say, and as dutiful students we would spend some time working out just why this might be the case. Because our education was phenomenological in its orientation, the plan was perceived in terms of its spatial potential and as a setting for social interaction. It was in pursuit of these qualities that I would pore over plans by Aalto (who gives up his secrets with good grace, with a direct sense of space implied in the plans), Schinkel (whose plans look simple but are actually very complex), and Loos. It was with Loos that I really struggled, because the compaction of the spatial intensity of his houses into two dimensions stretches the limits of the plan beyond breaking point; the plans need support from the other drawing conventions—sections, axonometrics—to understand their three-dimensional richness.

It is with Loos that one is most conscious of Le Corbusier’s warning that the plan is an “austere abstraction... it calls for the most active imagination”.<sup>1</sup> The plan is to architecture what the score is to music: a coded language that acts as a necessary instrument in the journey from the composer’s (architect’s) musical (spatial) imagination, to the listener’s

(user’s) experience. It is no more than that; the plan is not architecture, nor does the plan single-handedly generate architecture. Le Corbusier’s “plan is the generator” is more ambivalent than is usually understood. The quote appears in a section of *Towards a New Architecture* in which Corbusier scathingly dismisses the formalist tendencies of the Beaux-Arts, and rather than simply being a prescription for design, “plan is the generator!” may also be read as an admonishment of the pattern-making associated with classic architectural plans—remembering too that this section appears in the chapter called “The Illusion of Plans”.<sup>2</sup>

It is exactly the illusion that the plan *is* architecture that is so dangerous, because then it becomes an end in itself. It is all too easy to get lost in the making of drawings and see them as aesthetic figures in their own right, in which the act of design becomes focussed on the refinement of the formal gestures initially made in plan. In this world the good plan is the pretty plan, that with the most pleasing composition of shapes. This attitude of seeing the plan as a formal device is well illustrated by the story of Frank Gehry being so captivated by the composition of Hieronymus Bosch’s painting *Christ with Crown of Thorns*, that he simply, and simplistically, transferred the underlying formal structure to make the plan for the Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem.



The consuming nature of Gehry's aesthetic compulsion somehow allows him to be untroubled by the cultural and political intricacies and contradictions that such a formal translation might bring with it.

In many ways Gehry is the last great Beaux-Arts architect, twiddling with form as the world burns. Others at the more 'fashionable' end of contemporary architecture take these formalist obsessions still further. For architects and students concerned with the parametric production of architecture through the computer, the plan is simply a by-product. Starting with the object in space, or at least the virtual space of the computer screen, the plan is the result of a horizontal cut through complex form, just as the section is a vertical cut. The two, plan and section, assume equivalence as mere slices, and in this the designers forget the crucial distinction between the two: the section empathises a vertical, bodily, sensibility while the plan in all its horizontality is necessarily a removal from any phenomenal engagement with space. Maybe they forget this distinction because they are slumped diagonally in front of their screens, but the resulting shapes on the horizontal slices can only pretend to become plans through being labelled with activities. The modernist credo of form follows function is reversed so function follows form. Where the modernist equation is rightly criticised for its reductive and positivist nature, its reversal is a straightforward abrogation of the architect's responsibility for human occupation since function is seen as no more than a way of filling shapes; and so what is trumpeted as formally progressive is revealed as socially regressive.

At the less fashionable end of contemporary architecture, the modernist rule of plan still holds sway, in so much that it is reduced to the 'efficient' arrangement of functions. The plan



of rooms is seen to emerge as the inevitable consequence of data-gathering, room schedules, occupancy rates and furniture layouts, most of which are unthinkingly provided by clients and their project managers in the name of objectivity. The only task left to architecture is to take this information and arrange it (the plan), and then to disguise the paucity of this act by wrapping up the efficiencies in an aesthetic skin (the elevation), hence the demise of the section (the most liberating and human of all the orthographies) in so much of the dross of recent architecture.

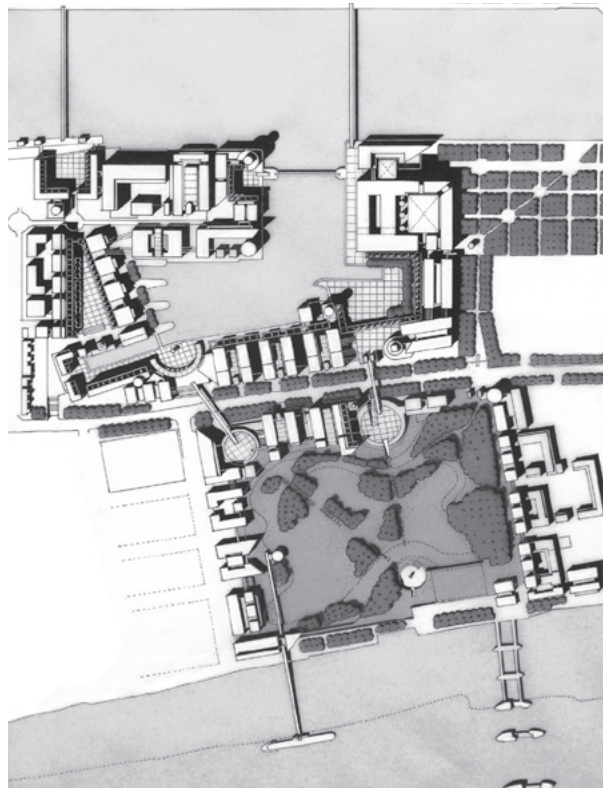
Contemporary architecture's use of the plan tends to flip-flop between these two extremes; either they are the by-products of formal invention or they are instruments of operational efficiency. The most successful architects of the age such as Norman Foster expediently combine the two. It is for this reason that when I talk about the idea of 'good plans' with my students, they look at me blankly. They do not understand the idea of the plan as score, a device that is at the same time a severe abstraction, but with the application of an active imagination becomes something imbued with spatial and social potential. To get through this blankness it is necessary to be direct—to stand, for example, in the intricate spaces of Candilis-Josic-Woods' Free University of Berlin plan in hand, and admire the way that the weaving of the plan as mat is both anticipation and recording of the soft spatiality—and in the same place to despair at Foster+Partners' disruption of that intricacy with a bombastic blob and understand the way that this crudeness is so clearly anticipated and recorded in the plan.

I am not sure, therefore, that my students would share my enthusiasm for the subtleties of Proctor and Matthews' plans, and so it behoves me to be teacherly and explain.

**Opposite left** Historic radial plan, Karlsruhe

**Opposite right**  
Competition entry,  
plan, Karlsruhe

**Right** Framework plan,  
Pontoon Dock, Royal  
Docks, London



### Social Patterns

The first term of the title of this book, *Pattern, Place, Purpose*, might suggest that Proctor and Matthews are interested in the pattern in terms of shape and form, and that this interest is best deployed through the plan as a formal device. There is, of course, a long tradition of architecture's games being played out through the making of plans. How better to keep control than through the apparent order and power that the pattern of the plan exerts? And how quicker to create the fiction of a stable knowledge base for architecture than through the classification of plans? Hence the enduring hold of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand's nineteenth century typological exercises.

An early competition entry by Proctor and Matthews, however, shows that they stand outside this tradition of the use of the plan as formal pattern with its associated trappings of power and type. The setting for the competition is poignant; Karlsruhe in Germany, one of the prime examples of the urban plan as pattern, a starburst of 32 radiating routes emanating all too symbolically from the Margrave's hunting lodge; and if 23 of these served as hunting rides through the surrounding forest and the

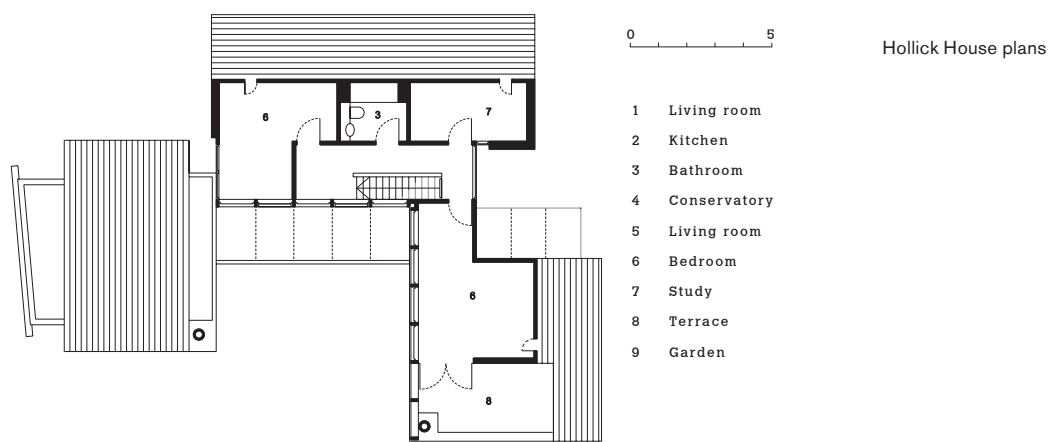
remaining nine defined the structure of roads in the town, then this is just a dispassionate indication of the authority of the autocratic plan as it overwhelms nature and society with equal ease. It is not for nothing that Le Corbusier illustrates the opening page of his chapter on the illusion of plans with the plan of Karlsruhe.

The competition asked for a Garden Festival quarter with a long term legacy of cultural and educational uses, to be attached to this imperial board game. Most of the entries took the given geometry as a starting point and played typological games with it. Proctor and Matthews' scheme firmly resists this temptation. Their interest is not with the fixity of formal patterns but with the dynamics of social patterns, and then how these might be inscribed in space. The resulting competition may look wilful in relation to the rigidity of the historical fabric, but this oppositional stance is only a 'problem' if one privileges form over social occupation. If, however, one starts with the anticipation of social relations as the task of design, then the plan emerges as the result of thinking through the occupation of space, rather than as the precursor of abstract space (and thus consequently as the controller of social space). Proctor and Matthews' entry is a conscious reaction to the idea of the masterplan, which is normally seen exactly as the exercising of overall order and control. Instead their approach is one that proposes a set of what they term "armatures", whose exact formal definition is of less importance than the spatial—and hence social—relation of one to another.

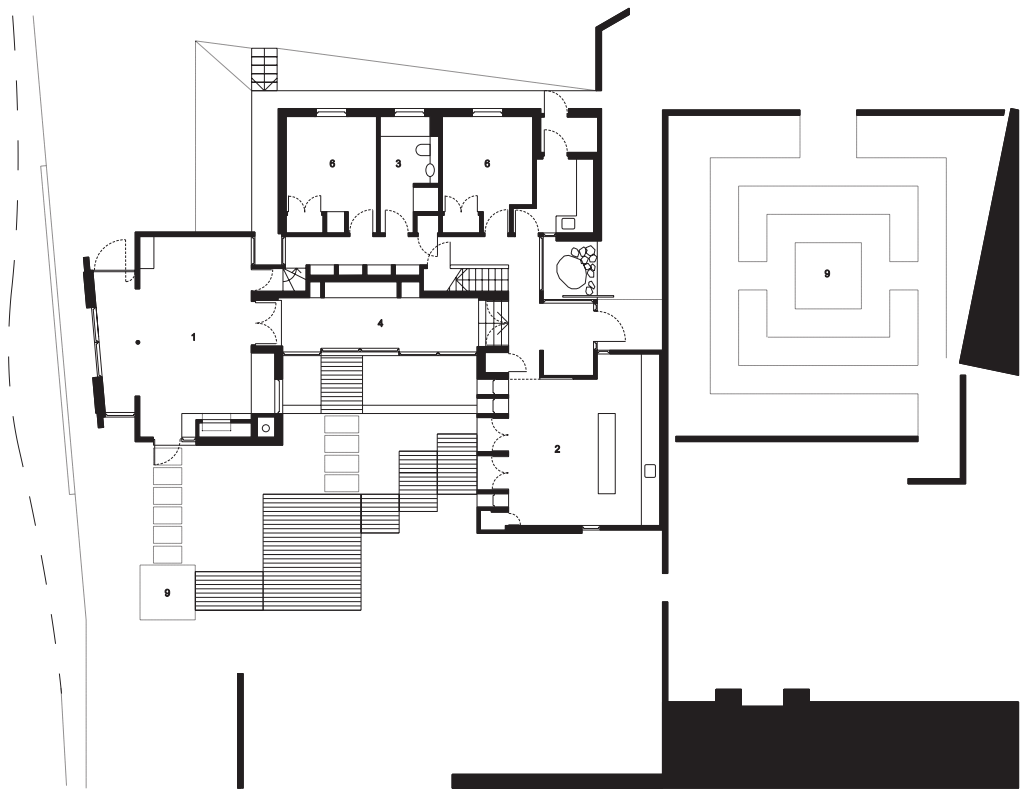
This attitude is still clearer in the work that they did for the London Docklands Development Corporation in contributing to a framework for the future development of the Royal Docks. The word framework is telling here, since it is suggestive of a background support system rather than a foreground ordering system, and so while the urban plans developed by Proctor and Matthews may look quite fixed in their formal language, they were never intended as anything more than catalysts for others to work from.

### The Congenial Dwelling

If we now move from the scale of the city to the scale of the individual dwelling, the question is whether a similar attitude to the plan is carried through—an attitude, that is, of the plan as a rumination on social organisation? Tracking back to the Hollick House, one of Proctor and Matthews' first stand-alone projects as architects, one might expect to find the answer since, as with many architects' early works, it wears its heart on its sleeve and becomes the test-bed for ideas that will be developed through later projects.



First



Ground

## Left

- 1 Dining room
- 2 Kitchen
- 3 Bathroom
- 4 Garage
- 5 Living room
- 6 Bedroom
- 7 Fish tank

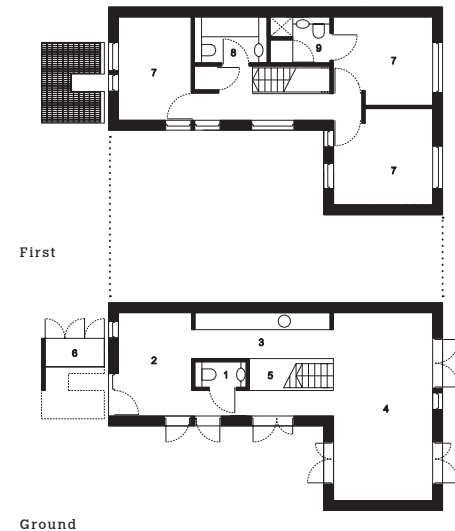
## Right

- 1 Cloaks
- 2 Study/dining
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Living/dining
- 5 Breakfast bar
- 6 Cycle bin store
- 7 Bedroom
- 8 Bathroom
- 9 Ensuite



Ground

Second



First

**Left** Dunbar Wharf,  
Ground and second  
floor plan

**Right** slo (simple  
living opportunities)  
house plans, South  
Chase, Newhall

The Hollick House has a definitively 'good' plan on my terms. It does not at first sight have an elegance or formal refinement but it is a plan that bears study, asking one to read it as a conductor reads a score, so that with some effort one can begin to project oneself into the experience of the spaces. Taking the plan on its own, without recourse to other representations, one can sense the following sequence:

**Through an oversized entrance door into an inside/outside space, courtyard on the right (I guess those are stones in a pond), a suggested niche on the left (for boots muddied in the vegetable garden?). Ahead a small flight of stairs just caught in the slightly thickened walls to form a threshold to the conservatory beyond; round to the left the entrance to the kitchen, maybe partially hidden behind a nib wall (one can only guess at its height), but still open enough to be inviting. Now in the kitchen, on the right are doors set between fins suggesting a thick slab of transitional space (is that where one puts plant pots, in which case are they for lemon trees and other semi-hardy plants?).**

And so on.

As with all good plans, this one is suggestive of a variety of occupations and actions, and if it is reminiscent of Edwin Lutyens, Mackay Baillie Scott and Charles Voysey, this is not accidental, because these architects are also interested in the congeniality of dwelling. Proctor and Matthews are of course very aware of such antecedents, and sensitive to the Arts and Crafts tricks of shifting axes, dual symmetries in rooms and niches to form pockets of dwelling, but even

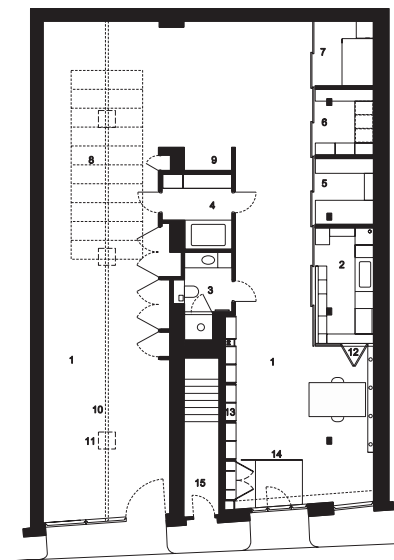
more so they are aware that these planimetric devices are only part of the designer's toolkit. The lesson here is that the Hollick House could not have been developed solely through plan, but the plan is one of many design tools—among them models, axonometrics, sketches, and sections. The interplay between these multiple methods can be sensed in the resulting plan, which at the same time is a recording of the traces of the design process in all its layers and an anticipation of the traces of occupation.

Just as Proctor and Matthews are very well-informed about architectural precedent, so too are they well read. My favourite story is of the two partners when they were teaching at the University of Sheffield. They would set off from London at the crack of dawn and drive up the M1, one reading books to the other. One of these was Martin Heidegger's *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*. The M1 at 6.30 in the morning, fog aside, is pretty much antithetical to a Heideggerian sensibility, but nonetheless it appears as if something of that elliptical text stuck. Where the modernists allegedly reduced living to a set of functions, Heidegger's call is for the restitution of the dwelling as the primal condition of Being. Clearly Proctor and Matthews have not followed the more essentialist followers of Heidegger, but they do understand the house as something much more than an appliance for living, and so see the plan as much more than an instrument of functional organisation; it becomes a setting for congenial dwelling.

### Living Objects

The Hollick House establishes one defining feature of Proctor and Matthews' housing work, namely an attitude to





0 5

Marc Quinn Studio, Ravey  
Street, London

- 1 Studio
- 2 Kitchen
- 3 Bathroom
- 4 Wetroom
- 5 Office
- 6 Storage
- 7 Storage with bed under
- 8 Roof-light
- 9 Mirror to alcove
- 10 Crane rail overhead
- 11 Concrete pads for sculpture
- 12 Screens to kitchen
- 13 Book shelving
- 14 Translucent glass screen
- 15 Entrance to flats above

dwelling, but it also introduces other design devices that are played out in later work. The first is the use of courtyards as external rooms which manage the transition from inside to outside in an easy manner. The second is the way that architectural objects—moving walls, built-in furniture and, as in the Hollick House, staircases—are used to activate the surrounding spaces. They are treated like pieces of furniture, to be moved, sat on, slid. Time and time again in Proctor and Matthews' plans, the staircase is treated as an organising and suggestive element—suggestive, that is, of action on and around it—rather than as a mere tool of circulation. This works both in one-off projects, such as Dunbar Wharf, and in the mass housing schemes such as the very recent slo (simple living opportunities) houses at Newhall, Harlow, in which the staircase is at the centre of the whole plan, brilliantly opening up and extending the spaces around it. The most extreme manifestation of this idea of the living object is in the conversion at Ravey Street done for the artist Marc Quinn, in which an arm of architectural equipment slices through the centre of the plan. Like a Swiss Army penknife, bits extend out of this core, which also contains the quasi-laboratory type spaces that enable Quinn's body-part-art. This central living object acts in just the same way as the urban armatures in the Karlsruhe scheme, stimulating the spaces around it.

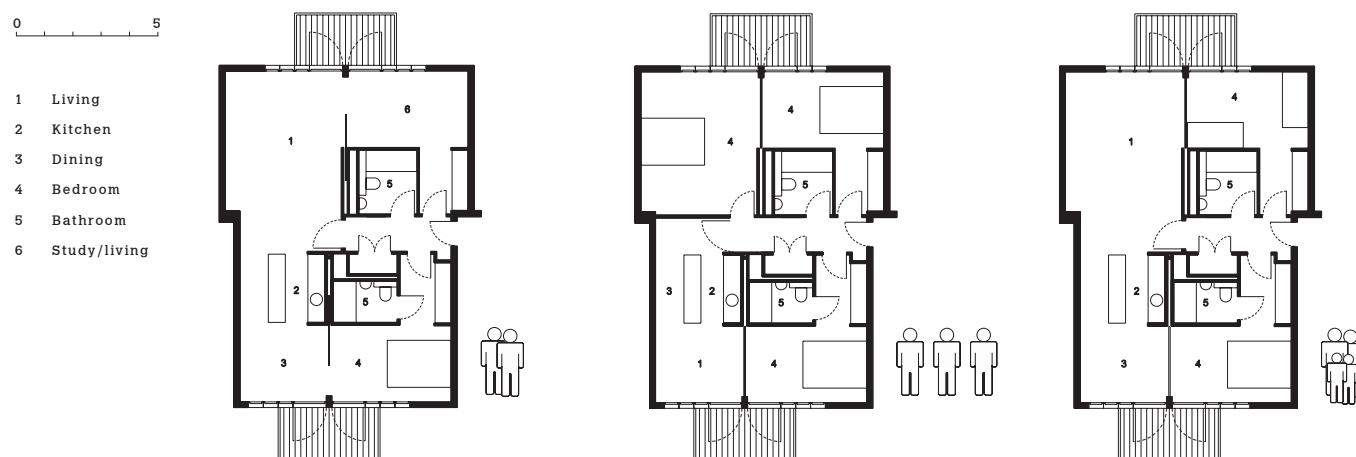
### Dynamic Dwelling

Ravey Street introduces another common theme in Proctor and Matthews' work that of flexibility and adaptability. Flexibility is understood here as capable of physical change

and adaptability as capable of social change.<sup>3</sup> The plan in architecture is often seen as a static given, something that fixes patterns of living. Indeed this determinant role of the plan is part of the architect's arsenal of weapons to wage war on ambivalence and uncertainty. The hard plan marshals its occupants into ordered action. The soft plan, on the other hand, allows its occupants to unfold their lives in multiple ways.

Proctor and Matthews are masters of the soft plan. The most explicit example of this is the plan for the apartments at Greenwich Millennium Village, in which a series of spaces rotate around a central core of services. These spaces can be variously divided up depending on the occupants' needs at any given time. These changes might be frequent (the closing-off of the bedroom at night) or long-term (the gradual dissolving of bedrooms into living space as children leave home).

The plans at Greenwich Millennium Village are a clear tracing of, and expectation of, the dynamics of dwelling, from internal patterns of use to external changes in social demographics. Proctor and Matthews are one of the very few architects operating today who take these dynamics seriously as an issue that the designer must be generous enough to accommodate if today's housing is not to be tomorrow's obsolescence. It is a generous act because the volatility of dwelling and demographics means that changes to the original plan are beyond the direct control of the architect. For many architects these changes are inflictions on their ideals, but a more realistic attitude is not only to accept them but also to positively encourage them.



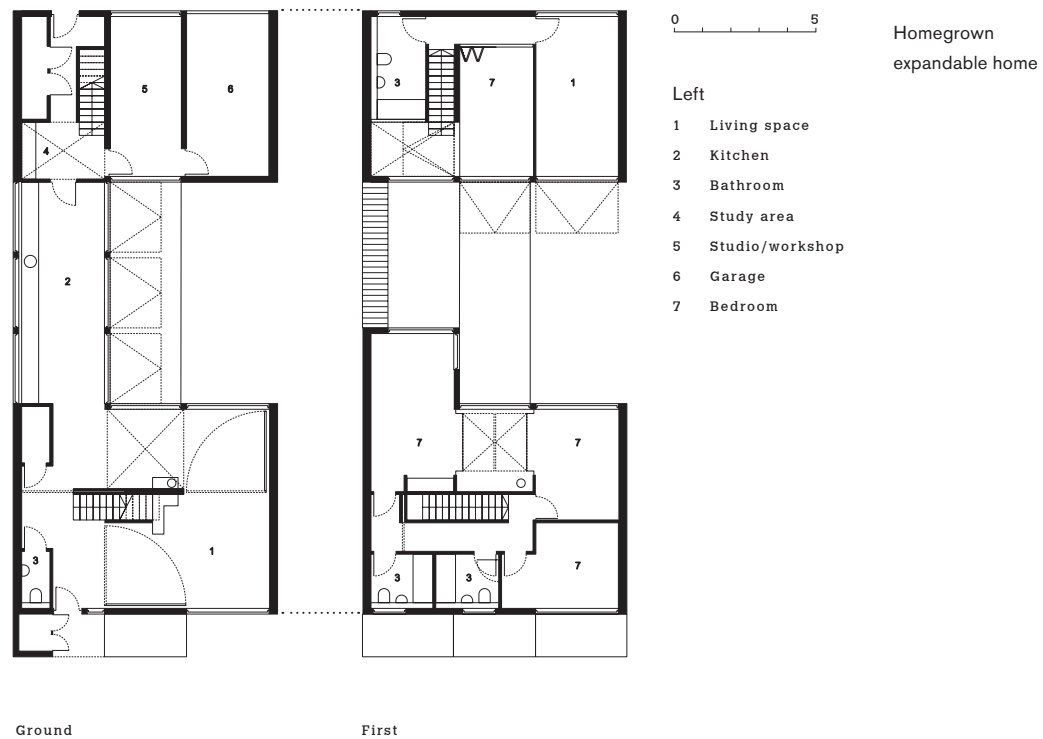
Flexible Apartment  
plan, Greenwich  
Millennium Village

It is exactly this anticipation of change that Proctor and Matthews achieve in *Homegrown*, their most sophisticated take on housing for the twenty-first century. In the explanation for this project, which is essentially a piece of self-funded research, Proctor and Matthews refer to the individuality and unpredictability of the traditional English house as a starting point; homes that might accrue over time and in so doing throw up a variety of living spaces. More poignantly they mention the 'rambling plan' as something to be aspired to. Where rambling might, against normative architectural values, suggest imprecision and woolly thinking (and with this a derogation of professional control), for Proctor and Matthews it is an honest and delightful reflection of the way that multiple lives might be played out in space over time. The rambling occurs in both plan, most clearly in the four-bed mews houses, and also in three-dimensions, most clearly in the smaller houses where a tight plan suddenly opens up to double-height spaces, which are clearly intended to provide for (but not determine) social interaction. The more that one looks at these plans, the more one is asked to occupy them. The magical hinged doors—or are they walls—which in their ambiguity of scale imply an ambiguity as to the way they and spaces around them might be used. Then there is the ever-present premonition that these spaces might be filled in, flat roofs be built on, doors moved, garages turned into offices. All this sense of anticipation is intended by the architects, and to achieve it takes more than a bit of skill. One has to be continually projecting different ways of living, changing family structures, long-term, short-term, and seeing if one's plans can accommodate them. Some things (stairs, kitchens, hearths) act as stable anchors around which these social dynamics are allowed to evolve.

### The Selfless Plan

*Homegrown* is the most extended investigation into the dynamics of dwelling, but one sees the same ideas, and hence traces in plan, in other schemes. For example, the housing in Rochdale, designed mainly with the extended Asian family in mind. Here a five bedroom house can be combined with a two bedroom maisonette by knocking through the party wall on the staircase landing, but each part of the dwelling retains its own sense of privacy through the courtyards round which the elements are arranged; thus an elderly part of a family can be connected to their children but not overwhelm them.

As with all good architects, Proctor and Matthews work best when up against constraints, forcing ingenuity into the tightest of corners. This is clear in their *prefabulous* scheme, and £60k house commissioned by the Evening Standard in anticipation of the UK government's competition, which asked for mass housing to be produced for £60,000. The plans condense many of the *Homegrown* concepts into a high-density compact scheme. The rambling nature of *Homegrown*'s plans may be partially lost, but the use of staircase as organiser, of courtyards as extended living spaces, of the kitchen as the stable focus of family life, and the anticipation of bits being filled in all remain. Where many of the subsequent £60k schemes rolled out spurious technologies or tinkered with elevations, Proctor and Matthews' first concern is the way that people may live their lives in these necessarily economical spaces. Their scheme may be reduced in terms of area but is by no means reductive in terms of the social occupation that it enables.



It is this aspect of Proctor and Matthews' attention to the plan that is selfless. The tendency in current architecture is towards visual excess, be it through the display of technology, the manipulation of plan as pattern and/or through formal gymnastics. Such is the hubbub created by the competing claims of these formalist spectacles that one is distracted from the essential purpose of architecture, that of forming empowering social and spatial conditions on behalf of others. The selflessness comes from the fact that such conditions are not immediately apparent, nor do they have the impact of aesthetic excess, which appears to be the primary value system in contemporary architectural production. Proctor and Matthews thus risk losing a place at the high table of architecture, which is dominated by 'progressive' formalists selling their wares on the global commodity exchange that tragically, and noisily, constitutes so much of the architectural foreground. Proctor and Matthews' plans, in contrast, work quietly in the background but have much longer-term implications and benefits for those who will occupy them.

This attention to the lives of others is of especial importance in the design of housing, but it is also apparent in the Proctor and Matthews' projects for other uses and scales, from gorillas in the zoo to the urban scale weaving of roads,

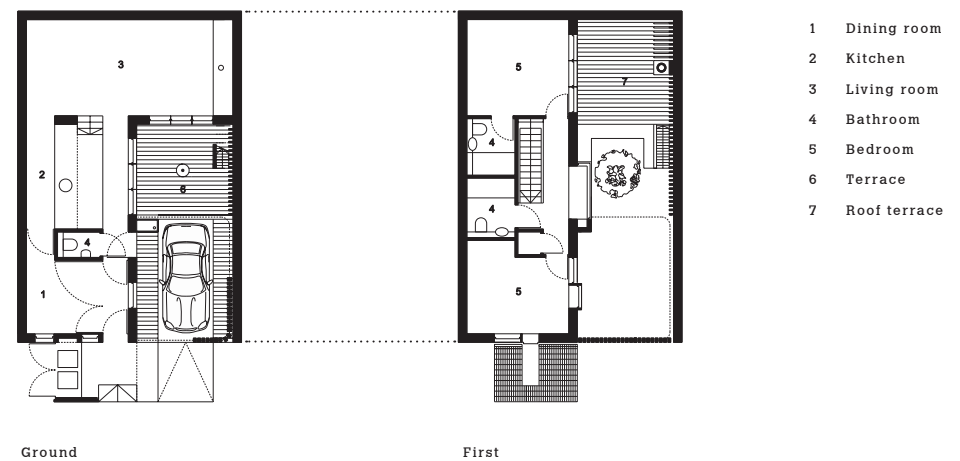
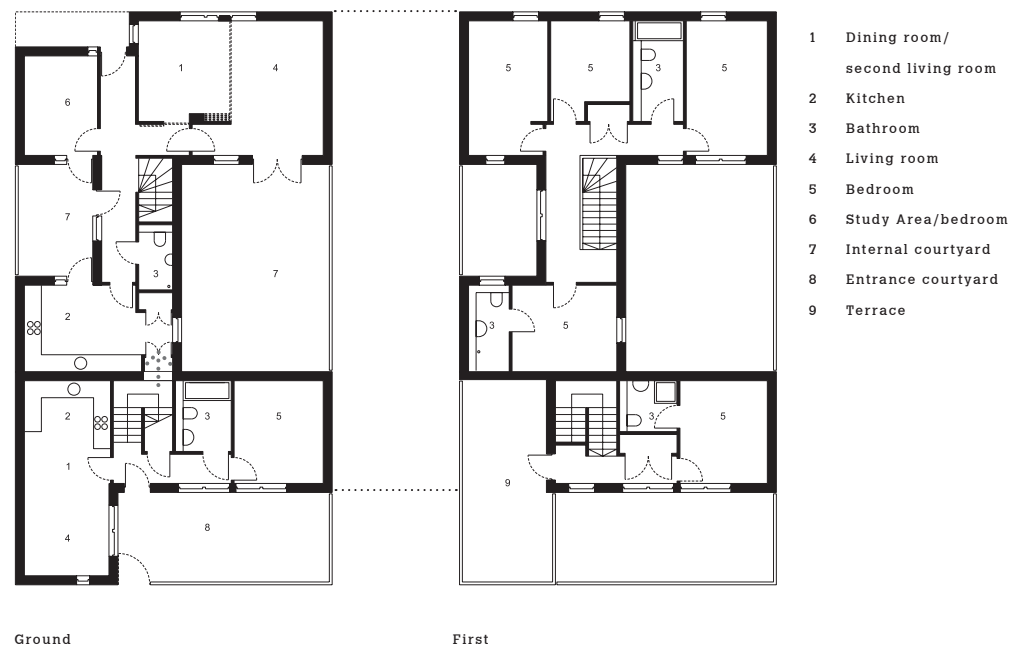
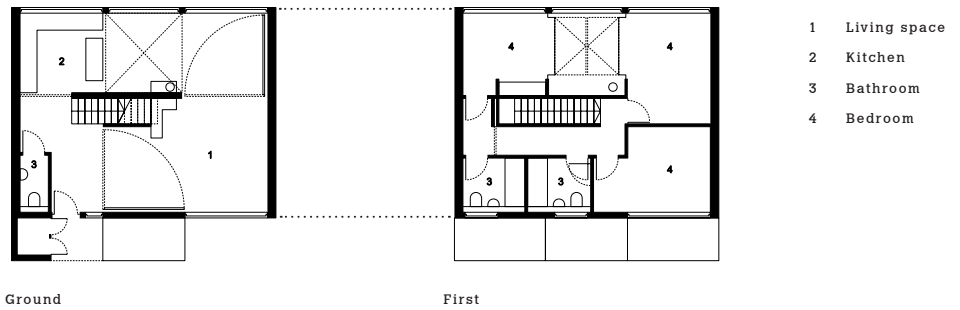
fronts, courtyards and backs at Abode. All these schemes have 'good' plans, and by now we have moved towards an understanding of what this might mean. The 'good' plan is the one that plans (as verb) in the name of others, against the temptation to consider the plan (as noun) as a "pretty thing to be drawn, like a Madonna face".<sup>4</sup> In this respect of making dynamic plans for others, the work of Proctor and Matthews is exemplary because it reminds us of the combination of modesty and skill that is required if architecture is to (re)gain a role as an agent in the betterment of the social realm.



**Top** Homegrown  
'starter' home

**Middle** Dale Mill back-to-back house, Rochdale

**Bottom** 'Prefabulous' plans



Footnotes:

- 1, Le Corbusier, Towards A New Architecture, London: The Architectural Press, 1946, p. 46.
- 2, Le Corbusier, Towards A New Architecture, p. 166.
- 3, These definitions are those of Stephen Groák. See Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, Flexible Housing, Oxford: Architectural Press, 2007, p. 5 for further explanation.
- 4, Le Corbusier, Towards A New Architecture, p. 46.

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Black Dog Publishing Limited  
10a Acton Street  
London WC1X 9NG  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7713 5097  
Fax: +44 (0)20 7713 8682  
info@blackdogonline.com  
www.blackdogonline.com

ISBN 978 1 906155 60 5

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

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