

*Building study*

## Together in eclectic dreams

David Kohn's two buildings for the Greenwich peninsula Design District form a gazetteer of architectural references from Neoclassical to James Stirling and Venturi Scott Brown



This page A4 building  
Opposite top West  
elevation A4 building  
Opposite bottom East  
elevation B4 building







This page and opposite  
A4 building



David Kohn Architects worked with developer Knight Dragon on two new-build creative studio buildings as part of a new quarter for small creative businesses on the Greenwich peninsula. Buildings A4 and B4 share heavy red masonry bases and green gridded glazed façades, and are adorned by figurative sculptures and an illuminated rooftop sign. The architecture is Classically inspired but makes playful reference to other periods, from the palazzi of the Venetian guild houses to the American mid-west architecture beloved of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

**Words** Rob Wilson  
**Photography** Max Creasy

David Kohn is standing looking across at the stumpy orange-red columns and pea green gridded façade of the A4 building, one of two buildings his practice has designed as part of the Greenwich Design District. It's like a Classical portico that's been proportionally inverted, the column shafts squished under the weight of an enormously deep frieze.

Above this, its location is spelt out in 2m-high letters that run along the building's roofline – a kind of pediment-cum-Hollywood illuminated sign. This was Insta-gold when the district launched last summer, meaning the building, while not yet finished, acted as a kind of 'designated driver' for the whole scheme. 'The idea was that the façade is almost over-communicating with you in a slightly OTT way, a bit like with the Japanese concept of kawaii,' he says, referencing the ratcheted-up cuteness of big-eyed over-emoting cartoon faces in manga comics and on Hello Kitty-satchels.

Both buildings (A4 and B4 as they are called) finished around the turn of the year and are

part of the second tranche of completions in the hutong-like huddle of 16 buildings on the Greenwich peninsula that makes up the Design District. The brief for these was to provide cheap creative workspace amid the huge full-on commercial Knight Dragon development that surrounds it. While the district could be seen as just maker-wash for the whole development, it's undoubtedly very thoroughly and impressively realised. All the buildings were commissioned in pairs from a litany of good smaller, design-led practices, and are now occupied by companies and organisations that range from dance groups to games developers, lighting companies to artists.

A4 and B4, which both sit on the site's south-western edge, each provide four floors of flexible workspace, with A4 also incorporating two more retail-type units at ground level. Among the tenants are arts charities, a flower shop, a soap-maker, a 3D printing studio, a fashion studio and an architecture practice.

After the immediate visual hit of shape, colour and pattern, A4's façade also provides a game (at least for architects) of guess the architectural references in its slightly exaggerated elements and features – which Kohn is more than happy to reel off. The most looming presence literally is Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, given the *Learning from Las Vegas*-like Design District signage, making the A4 building look almost like Scott Brown and Venturi's *I am a Monument* sketch. Kohn outlined his fascination for Postmodernism in a recent essay 'Perceiving Postmodernism: Learning from London's Marshlands'. This focused on the plethora of key early PoMo schemes that clustered around

## Graphic designer's view

From the beginning, the team at David Kohn Architects was keen to have an illuminated rooftop sign atop building A4, given its proximity and location facing North Greenwich station and bus terminal.

We developed designs early on in the process with the bespoke large-scale lettering taking into consideration the gridded façade, proportion and scale to the street alongside a mix of high and low architectural references shared in conversation with the team.

The architect's approach to the building references several key architectural legacies to create an eclectic, playful design that nods to the history of a broad discipline. The sign follows suit, intended as more of an installation that refers to the culture of signs than a logo. It recalls the Hollywood sign, writings in *Learning from Las Vegas* and post-war American-influenced car culture. It deliberately eschews any relationship to the wider Design District brand identity so as to feel more a part of the building fabric.

The letterforms are simple metal structures made of straight sections held up by a robust, straightforward, black frame. Wide tracking allows the sign to be read obliquely, suited to viewing from street level or from a moving viewing position.  
*Mark El-khatib, graphic designer, Studio Mark El-khatib*





the river in the 1980s, from One Canada Square downwards, to which these buildings perhaps provide a coda.

The other dominant note is mid-80s James Stirling, specifically his work for the Tate. The green metal gridding channels Tate Britain’s Clore Gallery entrance, while the oversized, squashed red columns evoke those at the Albert Dock warehouse home of Tate Liverpool, which Stirling effectively adopted as part of his oeuvre. It’s evidence of Kohn’s long interest in Stirling’s work – piqued by his having grown up in Leicester, home to Stirling and James Gowan’s Engineering Building. This latter building is quoted in the red engineering bricks that form the columns but also line the floors and crawl up the walls of the shop units. Picked out in pale mortar, these appear almost like a stuck-on pattern of cartoonish bricks. ‘I really like the play between surface and content this creates,’ says Kohn.

The B4 building is a quieter number which doesn’t try to compete with the A4 on the exterior street, indeed decisively turns its back to it. Further architectural echoes continue, however. A single projecting balcony channels a touch of Bauhaus on one side (it’s a bit ‘Mussolini-ish’, admits Kohn), while at its entrance front, facing on to a small yard-like space, six inverted bay windows – based on those from Hermann Czech’s 1994 Vienna State Opera loggia – punch chunkily inwards.

Other architectural referents include a nod to Pierre Chareau’s 1920s Maison de Verre in what appear to be thick glass blocks set into the green metal grid of the façades, though with a twist: the blocks are illusory – a repeat print of a hand-drawing done in Kohn’s office laid on to the glass – another material play between surface and depth. ‘From inside, the pattern oscillates a bit like Op Art,’ says Kohn.

The green grid of the façade scrambles individual storey heights, bigging up both buildings’ scale from afar and contributing to the almost parodic grandeur in the A4 building’s cod-Classical façade, given its ground-floor footprint is barely 10m deep – the second smallest of the district’s 16 plots. This is a building play-acting the monumental to slightly cartoonish and humorous effect. It aptly chimes with a quote of Denise Scott Brown’s that Kohn includes in his essay on Postmodernism: ‘I love monumental buildings that laugh at themselves a little.’

In contrast to the mild material excess of the exteriors, the building’s internal structures consist of a straightforward concrete frame wrapped around a core, with bare, reduced finishes; the use of gypsum or lining materials near eliminated. The spaces are impressively well-finished given this was design-and-build, and well-lit where they sit adjacent to the gridded glazed wall, enjoying far-reaching views out on the upper storeys. There are green accents throughout – from stained wood-wool ceilings in lobbies to door frames, which together with soft-brown hued breeze blocks, give a warmth and character to the spaces that belie their stripped-back nature. Kohn says that designing now (the buildings were



originally submitted to planning five years ago in mid-2017) they would have looked at a timber structure as an option. But while fairly lean in construction, environmental sustainability is clearly not the main focus of attention in the making and detailing of these buildings. Thus the columns of the concrete frame that run along the perimeter and support the façade are shifted 45 degrees à la Smithsons, in order to minimise the perception of inner structure seen from without. The non-expression, indeed suppression, of the reading of the structure in the building’s skin is indicative of how the design of these buildings as a whole appears to be an essay

Project data

- Start on site January 2019
- Completion March 2022
- Gross internal floor area A4: 939.3m²; B4: 1299.6m²
- Construction cost Undisclosed
- Architect David Kohn Architects
- Client Knight Dragon
- Structural engineer Whitby Wood
- M&E consultant Skelly & Couch
- Quantity surveyor Artelia
- Project manager Assemblage (rebranded HNNA)
- Principal designer Stace
- Approved building inspector Royal Borough of Greenwich
- BREEAM consultant Scotch Partners
- Acoustics Pace Consultant
- Planning consultant Pace Consultant
- Main contractor Ardmore Construction
- CAD software used Vectorworks
- Annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (estimated) A4: 17.2 kgCO<sub>2</sub>/m²; B4: 14.7 kgCO<sub>2</sub>/m²



This page and opposite  
B4 building







This page B4 building  
Opposite A4 building



almost in ratcheting up the tension between ‘surface and content’ writ large. ‘A lot of the work went into making the support of the grid of the façade seem effortless,’ Kohn says, pointing in particular to tricky detailing at the junction on B4 where the interior envelope becomes an open exterior screen around the third-floor terrace.

Asked if he thinks of the architecture here as an exercise in PoMo redux, Kohn demurs, preferring to call it ‘eclecticism’ – a play of elements and referents he terms ‘a lexicon of moments’. The licence to play with architectural reference and representation exhibited here, while clearly client dependent, can also be seen in other recent Kohn projects, such as the Red House in Dorset recently completed for a gallerist. It’s an exercise in contemporary Arts-and-Crafts aesthetic that has a faintly comic Hansel and Gretel vibe to it.

At a recent Royal Academy lecture, Kohn talked of how aspects of architecture that were excluded in the 20th century – ‘the strong use of colour, decoration, mannerism, metaphor, ambiguity, symbolism, expressiveness’ – were coming back into contemporary practice. And certainly the evident enjoyment in using a range of references in making this architecture feels something akin to Edwin Lutyens’ enthusiasm in deploying the ‘great game’ of Classicism. Kohn says he sees it as a kind of ‘distribution of value across the building’ with ‘the idea of making everything delightful’. Indeed this echo of values is akin to those of the similarly eclectic late-19th-century Sweetness and Light movement – a recovery of a lost sense of delight and the representation that Modernism ‘excluded’ that is perhaps

## This is an architecture designed to get people to react at an emotional level

as much pre-Mo as PoMo. Part of this is what Kohn has described as the breaking of the ‘last taboo’ of representation: the reincorporation of figurative sculpture into architecture.

On the B4 building, the six small niches created by the inverted bay windows have each been provided with fixing points for sculpture. Kohn originally proposed works by the artist Toby Ziegler, but in the event they have been left empty for a changing series of commissions proposed by the tenants or others. More prominently, on the A4 building’s main frontage, where its corners chamfer back above ground-floor level, two small triangular plinths have been created which have already been occupied by slim cod-Classical female sculptures – headless and nude – by Damien Hirst, apparently a favourite artist of the developer.

One figure is covered in fake barnacles and was bought from Hirst’s flashy 2017 Venice exhibition. The conceit of this was that all the artworks had been supposedly recovered from a fictive shipwreck, so it was presumably seen as an appropriate fit for this estuarine peninsular. Against the representational eclecticism of the façade, the sculptures are not as awkward as might be feared: bookending the whole like Neoclassical torchères.

Kohn says the idea of incorporating figurative sculpture here was inspired specifically by the precedent of Medieval guild

halls, which seemed an appropriate one in a district set up to house arts practitioners and crafts-based small-scale manufacturers. ‘It’s great how figurative sculpture can add another iconographic layer to architecture,’ he says.

It’s an interesting toe-dip into an area of representation that’s become a hot topic since the pulling down of the statue of slave-trader Edward Colston in Bristol during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.

But this idea of architecture creating a slightly theatrical, decorative and occupiable background edge to life has been evident in the practice’s work since early projects like the 2008 pop-up ‘Pompeian-style’ restaurant Flash, which it designed for Bistrottheque at the Royal Academy. This used art packing cases to form niches, shelves and panelling. ‘I like the idea of architecture as being like everyday theatre,’ Kohn says.

While these two buildings aren’t gunning for any environmental prizes, the clear delight their design epitomises is undoubtedly an underappreciated commodity when it comes to architectural sustainability.

This is an architecture designed to get people to react at an emotional level, adding a richness to everyday life and all done with a touch of humour – no bad thing now that all too many projects merely rock hair-shirt aesthetics.

Within the permanent pop-up feel that is the Design District, these two buildings give a vivid, characterful edge to what could too easily have been an exercise in developer branding on a fairly bleak promontory – as well as fulfilling their core brief to provide practical, decent workspace.

## Performance data

**Percentage of floor area with daylight factor >2% and >5%**  
Daylighting has not been calculated

**On-site energy generation**  
Yet to be determined

**Heating and hot water load** A4: 59.72 kWh/m<sup>2</sup>/yr; B4: 45.18 kWh/m<sup>2</sup>/yr

**Total energy load** A4: 69.29 kWh/m<sup>2</sup>/yr; B4: 55.03 kWh/m<sup>2</sup>/yr

**Carbon emissions (all)**  
A4: 17.2 kgCO<sub>2</sub>/m<sup>2</sup>; B4: 14.7 kgCO<sub>2</sub>/m<sup>2</sup>

**Annual mains water consumption**  
A4 and B4: 8.72 m<sup>3</sup>/occupant

**Airtightness at 50Pa**  
A4 and B4: 3 m<sup>3</sup>/hr/m<sup>2</sup>

**Overall thermal bridging heat transfer coefficient (Y value)** Not supplied

**Overall area-weighted U-value**  
A4: 0.66 W/m<sup>2</sup>K; B4: 0.49 W/m<sup>2</sup>K

**Embodied/whole-life carbon** Not calculated

**Predicted design life** Not calculated





A4 building  
in context

Client's view

The Design District, home to 16 buildings designed by eight different architects, now includes two buildings recently completed by David Kohn Architects. The District was conceived to offer permanent workspace for those in the creative industries, and part of making these spaces work is about ensuring that the occupational costs remain low, including rent, service charge and business rates.

David's colourful, Classically inspired buildings have achieved this. They are extremely robust and low cost from an operational point of view, yet full of modern and historical architectural references. They make and break rules, which I'm sure will inspire our tenants to do their best creatively. David also took the initiative to give us our very own 'Hollywood' sign, which helps make it a real landmark.

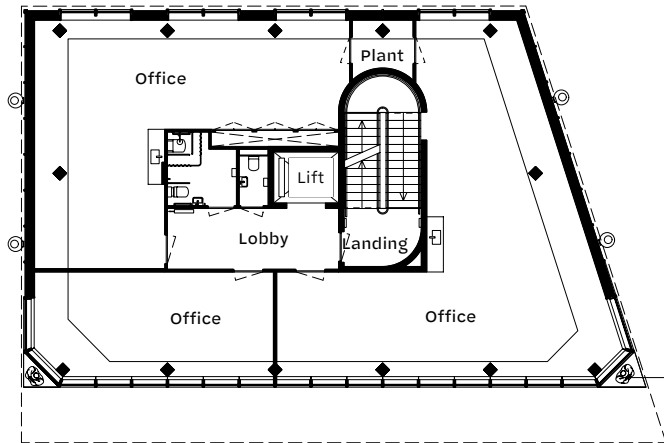
All the buildings in the Design District have a mixture of creative industries represented. Designing spaces that work for such a wide range of tenants has been key in our success – a success that comes from well-proportioned spaces with large doses of natural light, providing a good basis for these creatives to make the space their own.

A4 and B4 were great for breaking up into smaller units meaning that we have ended up with a large number of small businesses in these buildings, ideal for a mixed community across the whole district.  
*Helen Arvanitakis, director, Design District*



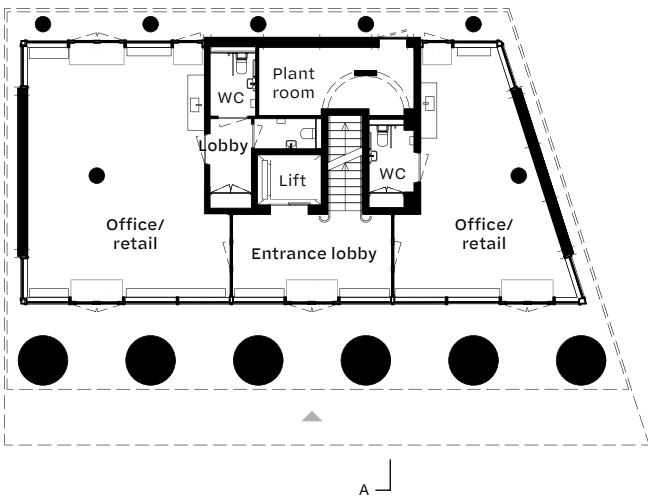


First floor plan



Chamfered corner plinth to take sculpture

Ground floor plan



Architect's view

Historically our practice has focused on the refurbishment of institutional buildings for the arts. The two buildings we designed for the Design District were our first workspace buildings, first building projects for commercial clients, first non-residential new build and first design-and-build projects. As such they have been a big learning opportunity with the client, Knight Dragon, allowing us to test many ideas that are not standard contemporary workspace fare.

A4 and B4 are practical buildings with high ceilings, flexible plans and generous

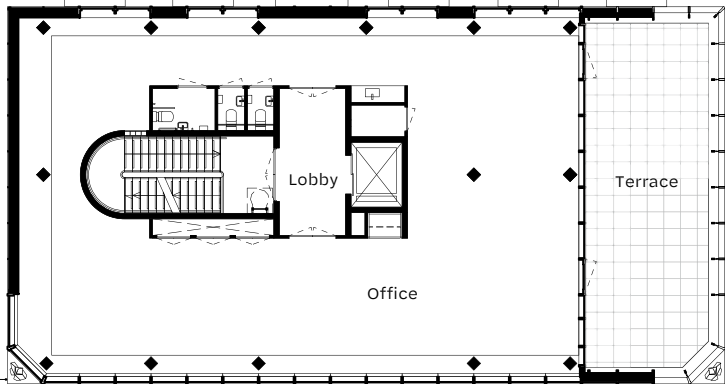
daylight. The façades are more ornate and look to celebrate their situation as part of the district's primary street frontage and their location opposite the bus terminal. This made us think of guild houses and their iconography, of generous porticos and roadside signs. The result is two buildings that deploy many of the communicative devices architecture has traditionally had at its disposal – orders, grids, signs, sculptures, colour, pattern – to give a strong sense of place and character.

It has been a delight to hear from tenants that they enjoy both the function and the

expression of A4 and B4. These now include three arts charities: Migrate Art representing migrant artists, Queercircle representing LGBTQ+ artists and ACAVA which provides over 500 studios for artists. There are artists, a florist, a ceramics studio, a 3D printing studio, a soap maker, a photographer, fashion, digital marketing and broadcasting studios and an architecture practice. The project has allowed us to draw on our experience working with artists and institutions to design other building types – an approach we continue to explore.

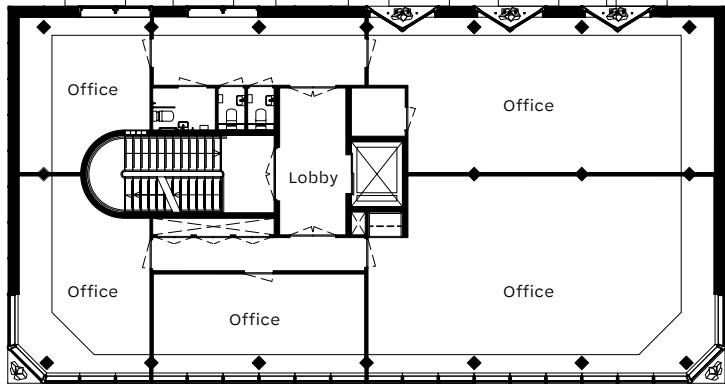
*David Kohn, director, David Kohn Architects*

Third floor plan



Chamfered corner plinth to take sculpture

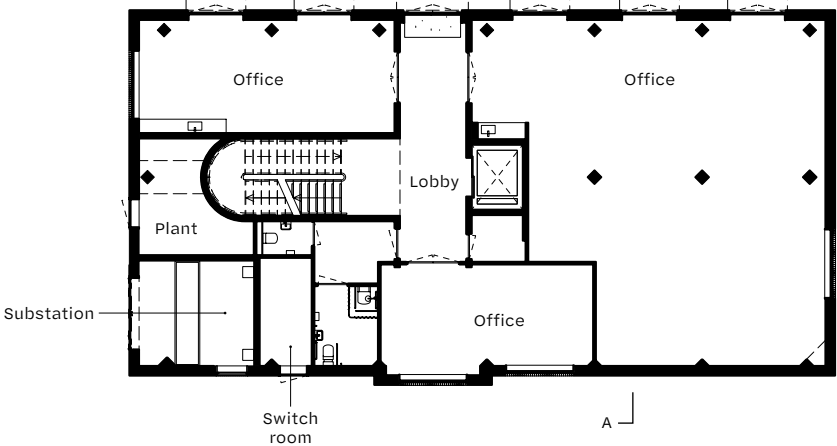
First floor plan

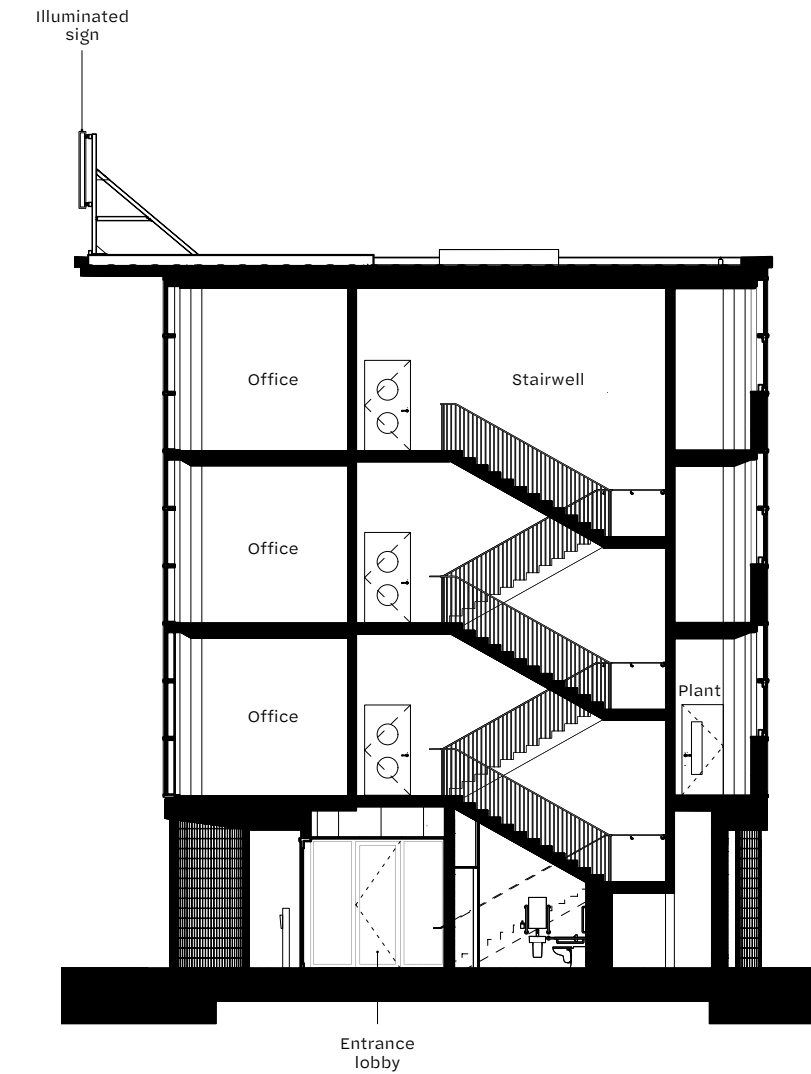


Chamfered corner plinth to take sculpture

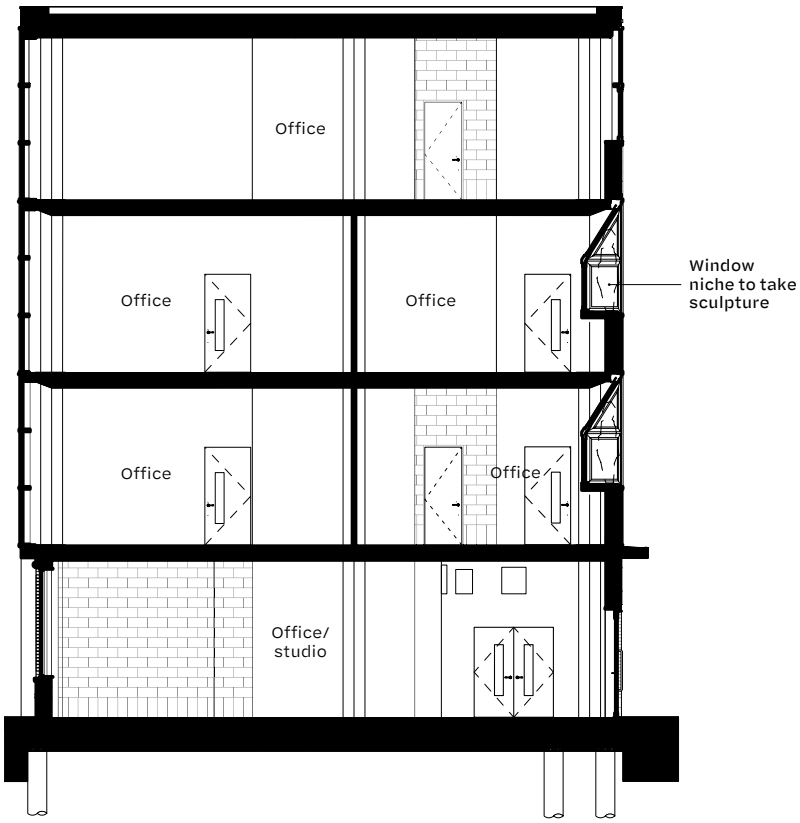
Window niche to take sculpture

Ground floor plan





Section A-A



Section A-A

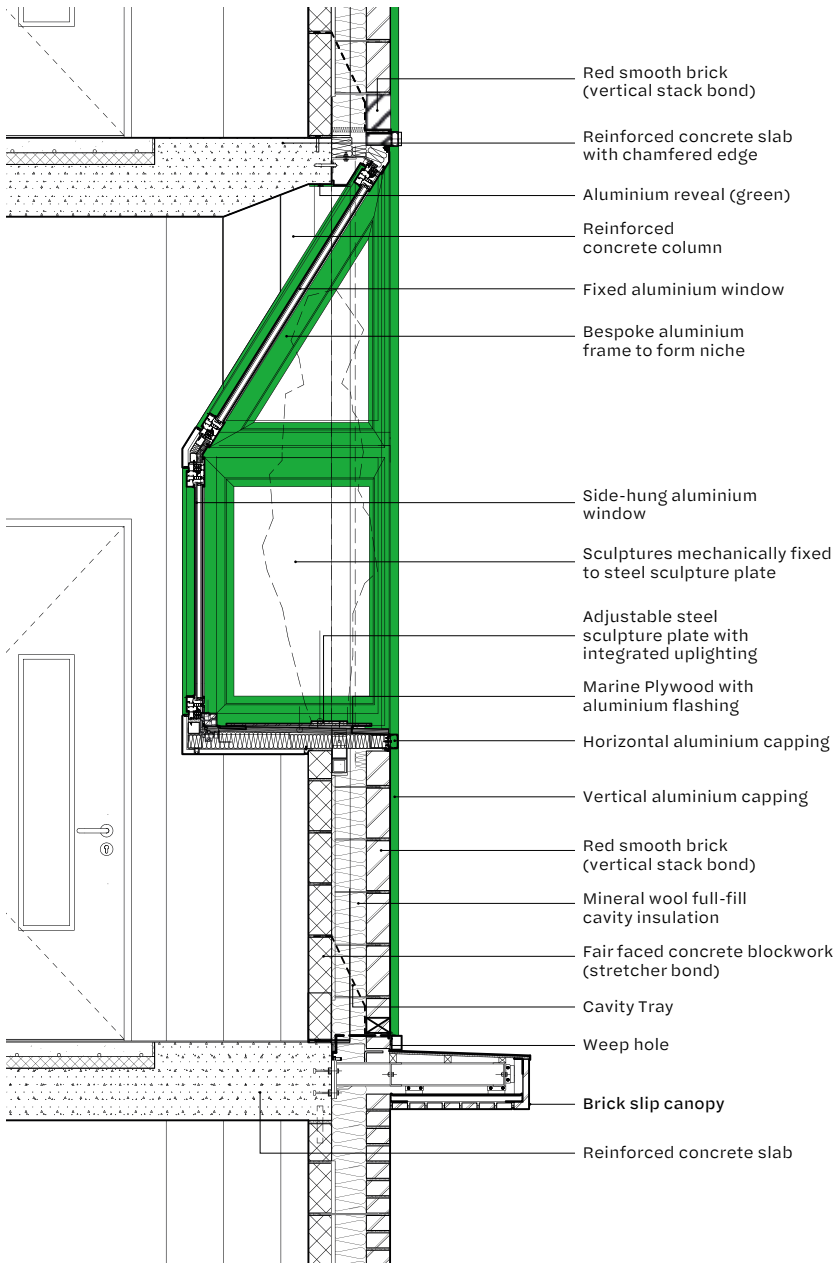




This page and  
opposite top  
B4 building

B4

Detail section through east façade



### Working Detail

The façades of buildings A4 and B4 were designed to incorporate both permanent and temporary sculpture. Each has two corner plinths on their street elevations for permanent installations, two of which have already been occupied by works commissioned by the client.

The front façade of building B4, which faces away from the street and into a courtyard, is animated by six niches designed to display temporary sculpture that will include works produced by artists resident at the Design District.

In future years, artists will be invited to install works in the niches that were in part inspired by Hermann Czech's 1994 winter glazing of the loggia at the State Opera in Vienna.

Each of the plinths has been designed to support a predetermined weight with structural fixings that allow as flexible an installation arrangement as possible using the Design District's cherry picker.

The niches are formed from a bespoke aluminium frame with side-hung lower windows and fixed upper glazing. The recesses are sized and positioned to fit within the green grid and red brick façade composition. The niches can be opened inwards, allowing the sculptures to also appear inside the building. B4 has already been occupied by several artists and arts charities which plan to contribute to the sculpture programme. *Tarn Philipp, architect, David Kohn Architects*