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This cubical house is situated on a mews lane in a south Dublin suburban seaside location. The site we were given occupied the rear section of the long garden of a large Victorian semi-detached house. A 3.7m high wall ran along the southern boundary, and a granite wall faced the laneway.

The client was moving from the main house to the mews house. She had two particular requirements: the house had to be full of light, and the main living room should have a dimension that would in someway match the house she was leaving behind. Because of the high walls that surrounded the site, the client had carefully studied the movement of the sun across the site, and determined that the main living spaces should be located on the first floor to catch the light throughout the day.

There was no suburban pattern established on the laneway, no shared form in any of the houses that had been built sporadically over a thirty-year period, only a common material – brick. This too was to be a brick house.

To date, a large proportion of this office's work has involved additions and alterations to the existing housing stock of Dublin. To build a new house freed us from certain given compositional restrictions. This manifested itself in a desire to formally abstract the house, to make it a simple object, a sculptural form, a cube placed in a walled enclosure.

This cubical form is sleeved in brick. The openings, cut out in glass and lined in satin-anodised aluminium, are detailed in the same manner, but different in proportion. The house becomes a composition in
solid and void. The position and size of windows are determined by function, light or view. At ground floor, the rows of brick that are metaphorically cut from the fabric of the building to make these large openings form terraces in the garden. The Iroko joinery of the windows and doors is expressed internally. Iroko covers the floors, and painted plastered walls provide a neutral lining to the box.

One moves through the deepest of the aluminium recesses to enter the house, passing through a generous hall, which serves the two bedrooms and ancillary rooms at ground floor, to the stairs, then up to the main living platform, the piano nobile. The rooms on the first floor open into each other. This allows the client the freedom to circumnavigate the plan and move from space to space as the light changes during the course of the day.

A tiled indoor/outdoor room, to be filled with plants, is placed behind internal glass screens and under a sliding glass roof. The adjacent living room is entered through a series of doors. This large space is lit in the main part by a long ribbon-window that makes a direct relation to the south boundary wall. The view down Temple Crescent and to the sea beyond is captured by a floor-to-ceiling window on the west elevation.

area – 128m²

design to completion – 2003-2004

photography – Paul Tierney

Longitudinal section and south elevation
ALMA LANE

North elevation

Plans (from bottom) – ground and 1st-floor
ALMA LANE

View from Alma Lane

West elevation

left – View from entrance showing house nearing completion

overleaf and below – East elevation
ASSESSORS' COMMENTS

MATEUS – This is a very interesting house. It’s very clear and it’s very solid. I very much like the way the glass/steel panels work on the outside, because they seem to be like a negative of the presence of the heavy brick walls. It feels like the walls are continuous into the spaces inside, and I think that gives a very good feeling in a house. Spaces like these cores are negative spaces that project the house to the outside. This project is a particularly good architectural way of doing a house in relation to the climate and the context.

RILEY – It’s very tough. I mean, there’s hardly any garden to speak of. It’s a tough thing. But then I don’t know if it’s so simple. Look at the ground-floor plan: in some ways it’s a very complicated thing. There are two things I couldn’t understand because the presentation didn’t show it. The first is, in a house like this, you’d think there would be an image of the stairs. And then, since it is mentioned in the text, what is the indoor/outdoor tiled room?

MURPHY – When I saw it I thought: Is this a very simple building that looks very complicated ... or is it a very complicated building that looks very simple? But I love the dumb, clear geometry. Here’s a square plan, a cubic shape, this type of subdivision... You know, it’s unadorned, it’s severe.

BYRNE – I think it’s the best of the boxes.

MURPHY – Of all of the boxes we have been seeing, yes definitely.

RILEY – It’s very ambiguous. You have these big sheets of transparency, but they’re interlocked with these masses of brick.

MATEUS – I think it works. You can say that it’s not a building approach you could understand, or that they could go further with it, but if you look into those spaces – I like this idea that the bricks are not just a skin as such; they in fact make their heaviness into the house.

RILEY – Of course, there’s massive steel lintels behind that brickwork.

MATEUS – Yes, I know. I just thought that you can read it. It’s not being pushed to the limit, but it’s a small house and a small garden. It’s a very tough combination. Designing something that’s independent in such a small project...

BYRNE – It’s autonomous, and a beautiful object. I just wonder how the old lady will occupy it – perhaps with net curtains and an accumulation of possessions. Will the architecture be able to control it?

MATEUS – It’s such a small project. I think is a very difficult design exercise. Most of the buildings that you see that are in brick are terrible. It’s one of the toughest materials to use well.

KAAN – I agree with you. I think it’s clear and probably one of the best thought-out projects here. I also understand the feeling of it being so hard to work successfully in brick. This building is not just tough...

BYRNE – I think this project is very particular in what it chooses to do. It just ignores a lot of issues, like garden, outside, and front and back. It’s not concerned with any of that. The most revealing photo is the one with the hand placing the house on the site or taking it off the site.
MURPHY – You can see the architect turning it around, like a piece of sculpture.
BYRNE – It is as if the architect is saying: 'I'm going to put my module down here. I could easily spin it round. And it's going to go somewhere else, and it has!'
RÍLEY – I've seen that architectural gesture in one too many OMA presentations, though.
MATEUS – It becomes too common. You should really criticise this kind of gesture.
KAAN – I sort of have the feeling that it looks much larger and much more spacious than it really is. They should have cut out the interior photos – they give away the actual scale of it!
RÍLEY – That's true of virtually all these mews houses, and some of them, when you start looking past the concept diagram, they're so small that's it almost difficult to escape the modesty. This project isn't really modest in a certain way.
MURPHY – There's a monumentality to it because of the cube.
MATEUS – If you imagine the difficulty of doing a small project... This project is so clear. You can make a statement using so little space.
MURPHY – Plus the fact that the severity is carried outside to the site. There's no garden, there's nothing to complicate it.
RÍLEY – I really like this project. You know what I like about it? It isn't this faux, fashionable minimalism. It's something other than the kind of monastery-like white interiors that you get repeatedly.
MURPHY – And the fact that they built it in brick, for a start.
MATEUS – What we have here, the pursuit of the language of a wall, guarantees that it's heading in a different direction. It's very good.
BYRNE – It's a very good project.
RÍLEY – You know, projects like this usually get worse the more the architects work on them. They go from a really simple, beautiful, clear idea to torture. This clearly has been worked and worked and worked, and it's really gotten better. This shows a lot of rigour.
MURPHY – Yes, it is the rigour that makes it.