Richard Griffiths' work is both traditional and modern; he captures the feel of a place and runs with that, mixing new and old craft to renowned effect

Words: Hugh Pearman Portrait: Wilde Fry

In the mood

'In theory you could get eight people in here,' says Richard Griffiths. We're in the family cabin he built three years ago in the shell of an old agricultural shed near Blythburgh in Suffolk, one of a pair of buildings he has done on a 1ha patch of land he has, overlooking the floodplain of the Blyth river. The other, now sold on, is a larger earlier barn conversion. The cabin is compact but ingeniously planned. Small though it is, the architectural and artistic references here are ambitious.

There's the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright to be found here which also 'relates to a pre-classical articulation of English interiors,' he says, pointing out that the horizontal banding to the interior is in the manner of Hardwick Hall for instance: panelling to a certain height, and then frieze and ceiling treated in one pale colour. Similarly the way the spaces of the little house connect in an enfilade down one side is like many a country house, while his deployment of elements plugged into one side of the house is derived from the Arts and Crafts houses of Baillie Scott. On the exterior, the way he has integrated a row of 10 dark photovoltaic solar panels into the reddish corrugated Corten roof is, in his mind, a Rothko moment. The whole place is a highly insulated timber-frame construction done to near-Passivhaus standard. Furniture is mostly mid-century Scandi-modern.

Richard Griffiths Architects, a practice now 25 years old, is both a noted conservation and new-build firm. You might think that a Griffiths building is more traditional in character than many but you'll always find he brings something new to the table – even where, as in his gatehouse tower for Brighton College in 2015, he was ostensibly completing an unfinished design by Sir Thomas Graham Jackson, a pupil of Sir George Gilbert Scott whose buildings form the original core of the school (RIBA Journal, February 2015). Now, 125 years after Jackson's original design drawing, some simplification was in order and both modern and traditional construction methods used. The effect is the thing: it is honest and believable.

Griffiths is good at catching the mood of a place and taking it from there. He trained at Cambridge first as an engineer (he was dreaming of bridges and dams, he says) before he switched to architecture. There he started to evolve his ideas: not to be a narrow conservation architect but, as he puts it, to practise 'architecture in the context of old buildings'.


Allende

Naturally enough, he went to work for Julian Harrap who was himself ploughing that furrow, having previously worked as a modelmaker for Jim Stirling. 'It was about new and old together as a way of producing an architecture that is as interesting, if not more so, than all-new building,' he says, citing the example of Harrap's later work with David Chipperfield on Berlin's Neues Museum as an example. Come the recession of the early 1990s, however, the Harrap office was short of work. Griffiths set up on his own in a back bedroom with a project he'd brought in and started at Harrap's: the National Trust's closed and decaying Tudor Sutton House in Hackney. An exemplary community-led project saw it restored (including some 200 year old cobwebs) but in a way that showed the layers of history – Tudor, Georgian, Victorian, 1980s squatted, and Griffiths' own contemporary layer. As part of all this he introduced 43 hinged panels you can open to see what lies behind. Sutton House proved to be his passport to a rich vein of projects. And, he says, 'I did my first five-plank door there. Tudor technology'. In his 25th-anniversary book 'Old Buildings, New Architecture' he recounts how he first encountered an original example of this door type in his restoration of Eastbury Manor in Barking. It's a lamination technique: a typical example would have five vertical planks on one side clenched by 10 horizontal ones on the other, though there are lots of variations, some with vision panels cut out in the squares where planks overlap. Most architects specify doors as ready made products but the bespoke five-plank door is almost a Griffiths signature.

Classic Griffiths is his small complex of new buildings at Southwark Cathedral. He'd become the cathedral's official architect but hadn't expected to find himself in charge of its successfully-funded Millennium project which needed a total redesign. Key to this was a new refectory and library building at right angles to the cathedral, defining a new entrance courtyard, a memory of a cloister. The new north entrance from the river side is set in a second block of meeting rooms parallel with the cathedral. All this involved demolishing some of the 1980s work of the predecessor architect and dean, which was somewhat controversial at the time. Working with the aptly-named Ptolemy Dean (now surveyor to Westminster Abbey) Griffiths evolved an architecture which is a fascinating hybrid of ancient and modern, its materials creamy-brown stone, flint, oak and copper but also paired arched ribs of smooth precast concrete to the library. That's a reference to ES Prior's equally ribby interior of St Andrews, Roker.

'It was about new and old together as a way of producing an architecture that is as interesting, if not more so, than all-new building'

As with his hotel extension at St Pancras Station – done in the manner of Scott, not least because pointed windows fitted into the huge pre-existing two-storey steel lattice truss built to carry a previous rejected design over a 30m loading bay – this kind of work is the opposite of the received idea that a new extension should be an obvious visual foil or contrast to the original architecture. Instead it draws on and blends with the original architecture while not slavishly copying it. This is acceptable practice now and Griffiths' work has done much to make it so. But he does the architecture-as-contrast thing too, and singles out his turn-of-the-century work at Lambeth Palace.

That job sets delicate but still carefully crafted modern elements in steel, glass and pale ash timber against the heavy ancient masonry. 'It's the one that in the most obvious way talks about how old and new can contrast and yet speak to each other,' he says. For him it's a spectrum all the way from careful restoration at one end to clearly modern at the other. 'The criterion is ultimately about architecture rather than morality – which is where most people go wrong I think.'

See examples of Griffiths' work on ribaj.com

The view across the Suffolk marshes with a Griffiths barn conversion to hand.