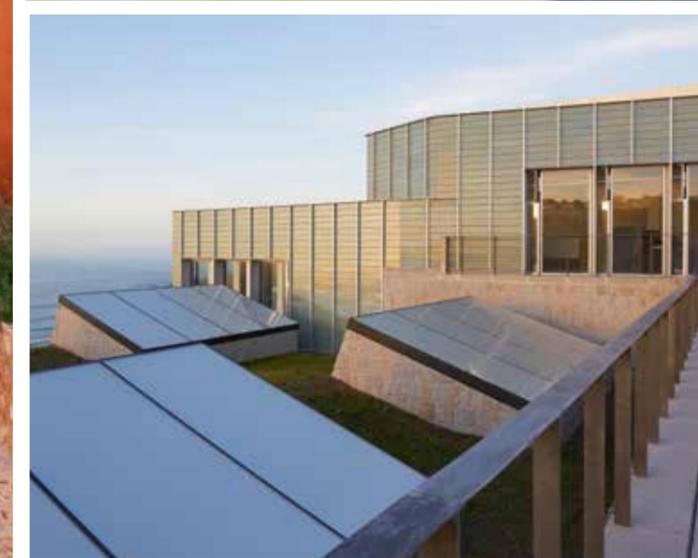


Hands-on architecture

Ceramics are on the rise in architecture, so much so that they featured in a recent exhibition at the Building Centre in London. *Oliver Lowenstein* looks at some recent high-profile projects and discovers the return to craft and making skills behind the designs



LEFT, FROM FAR LEFT: Hawley Wharf, London, by AHMM; detail of tiles by Lorraine Rutt at Metropolitan Workshop, Mapleton Crescent, London **ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** *A House for Essex* by Grayson Perry; The Ringling Museum, Florida, by Boston Valley Terracotta; Tate St Ives, Cornwall, by Jamie Fobert Architects; Assemble and Granby Workshop encaustic tiles at the Laguna Viva, Venice; detail of tiles by Denizen Works at Haddo Yard, Kent

Earth and clay-based materials are a defining characteristic of much of the buildings across British cities, towns and villages. While brick, a Roman workhorse material, has been part of the building palette since the industrial revolution. So too, tiles and architectural ceramics, including the traditional Victorian pub and London Underground's distinctive station tiles.

Now, through the second half of the last decade, a new wave of ceramic-based materials has been appearing and a recent exhibition, *Building with Ceramics: Hand Held to Super Scale* at the Building Centre in central London, has taken stock of this architectural turn of events

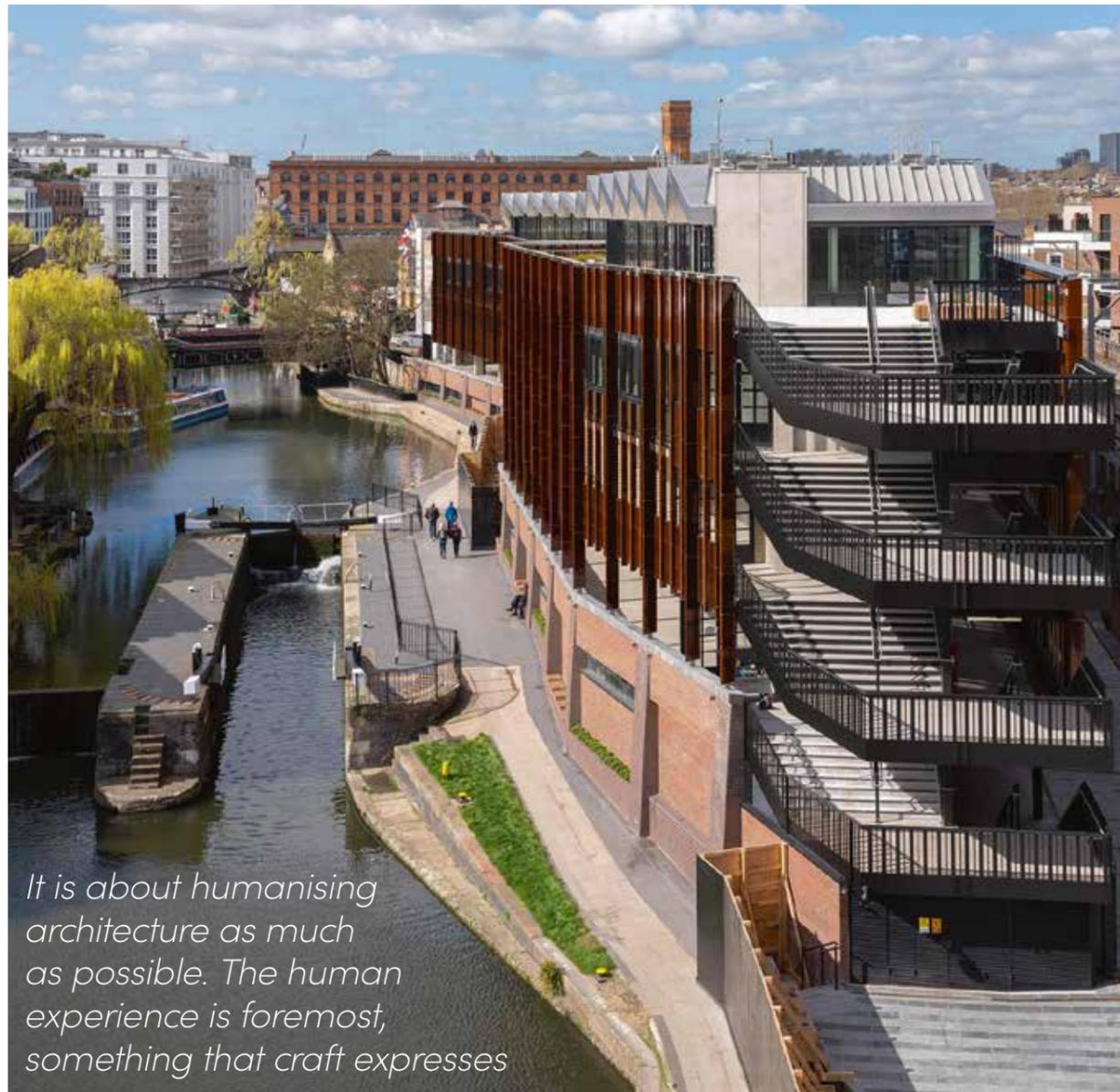
and showcased British, a US, Portuguese and several Spanish examples. Co-curated by Building Centre in-house team member Jenny Watt and architect Lydia Johnson, the exhibition emerged from a mutual passion for clay and ceramics. Featuring 22 projects and spanning mainstream housing, higher education and office buildings, it shows a variety of high-profile showcase developments such as museums and art centres as well as bespoke and super high-end retail and office structures in the centre of London. Alongside, are at least two much more experimental, academic projects involving digital technology – particularly robotic arms in tandem with new media and materials.

HUMANISING ARCHITECTURE

A further strand is represented by 2015 *Turner Prize* Winner, the Assemble Studio's Granby Community Workshop in Liverpool, which shows examples of how making, in this instance ceramic items, can bring communities together. However, although Granby Workshop's encaustic tiles made from recycled materials featured in this exhibition, the return of the 'maker and making' story of the last decade did not. Nor did how, why or indeed if, architecture fits into this zeitgeist shift.

The Building Centre's remit is to promote its industry's products, so perhaps that was to be expected. But scratch

the earthy surface and fault lines of this cultural shift and the return to direct hands-on and full-bodied making – so much part of the ceramic process – turns up time and time again across the architectural landscape. Symbolised by Assemble Studio's influence on the current generation of architects, it is impossible not to interpret the phenomenon in the round, rather than purely architecturally. 'There's a real longing for it,' says Michael Fostiropoulos, from Penoyre & Prasad Architects, replying to my question of why there has been this wave of ceramics architecture. 'With ever more technical and digital design, people are reacting to the computer-dominated world, they



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need it. There's an inner longing to reconnect. It is about humanising architecture as much as possible. The human experience is foremost, something that craft expresses.'

He is hardly alone. Fostiropoulos is project architect on Brunel University's new Learning and Teaching Centre, which will feature specially developed tiles by co-curator Lydia Johnson's Fettle Studio. For the university building opening in 2021, she is experimenting with light white glazes prior to production at the German giant NBK's factory. For Johnson, Fettle Studio was the result of a similar frustration, who after 'a dry spell' as a full-time jobbing architect, signed up to a pottery evening class at the open-access studio Turning Earth in Leyton, East London. Johnson says that she feels 'more rounded and complete,' splitting her working week between her studio and architectural projects at a more hands-on practice. She explains it as a 'holistic way' of balancing her lop-sided architectural experience, and reflects her generation's more fluid, open approach to working across making, architecture and other disciplines.

MATERIALS AND MAKING

Like so many other professions, computers have brought serial technological revolutions to architecture. Designing buildings can feel almost completely given over to digital screen-based processes. 'You hardly have to lift a pencil these days,' says Fostiropoulos. Not that embracing ceramics is rejecting tech. Johnson's MA included a year at Grymsdyke Farm in Buckinghamshire, a maker-space experiment combining vernacular rural materials such as wood, earth and clay, with digital tech including robotic arms and 3D printers. For Grymsdyke's founder Guan Lee, Johnson's work is 'a good example of how student experiments in prototyping can turn into commercial realisation.' More generally, it is clear that younger architects are casting around for ways to engage in the physical and tacit worlds of materials and making.

Take Will Lee, AHMM's project architect on another featured development, Hawley Wharf. 'I wasn't actually aware of the ceramics wave,' he responds, when I ask. 'But funnily enough, I started a pottery course at The Kiln Rooms in South London. I'd always wanted to work on

a ceramics-based building – with the palette, range of clays, finishes and glazes, it felt unlimited.' He also comments that there, 'seem to be lots of architects joining pottery classes, four others joined the first year I started.'

Hawley Wharf comprises two-narrow residential office and retail blocks on a sliver of land just east of Camden Lock market, beside the North London canal. The rain screen façade consists of long vertical terracotta poles in ochre browns, manufactured by another of the small number of UK-based specialist architectural ceramists, James & Taylor, and emphasising the collaborative effort that went into the finishes, the iron oxide producing a transparent glaze, 'quite like a London pub.'

Collaboration is a point repeatedly emphasised. It is particularly evident in the retelling of the three core partners of super-high end 24 Savile Row in Mayfair. Designed by EPR Architects, with the well-known ceramist and former *Great Pottery Throw Down* judge Kate Malone involved, the right chemistry helped deliver, in project architect Stephen Pey's words, 'a finely crafted slick suit.' En route however, they got seriously messy, all in the effort to create Malone's 'abstract nature' crystalline glazes. Looking like exquisite snowflakes, the 1260°C glaze firing process simulated volcanic level heat that turned the clay runny, the crystals seeding and growing as the kiln cooled.

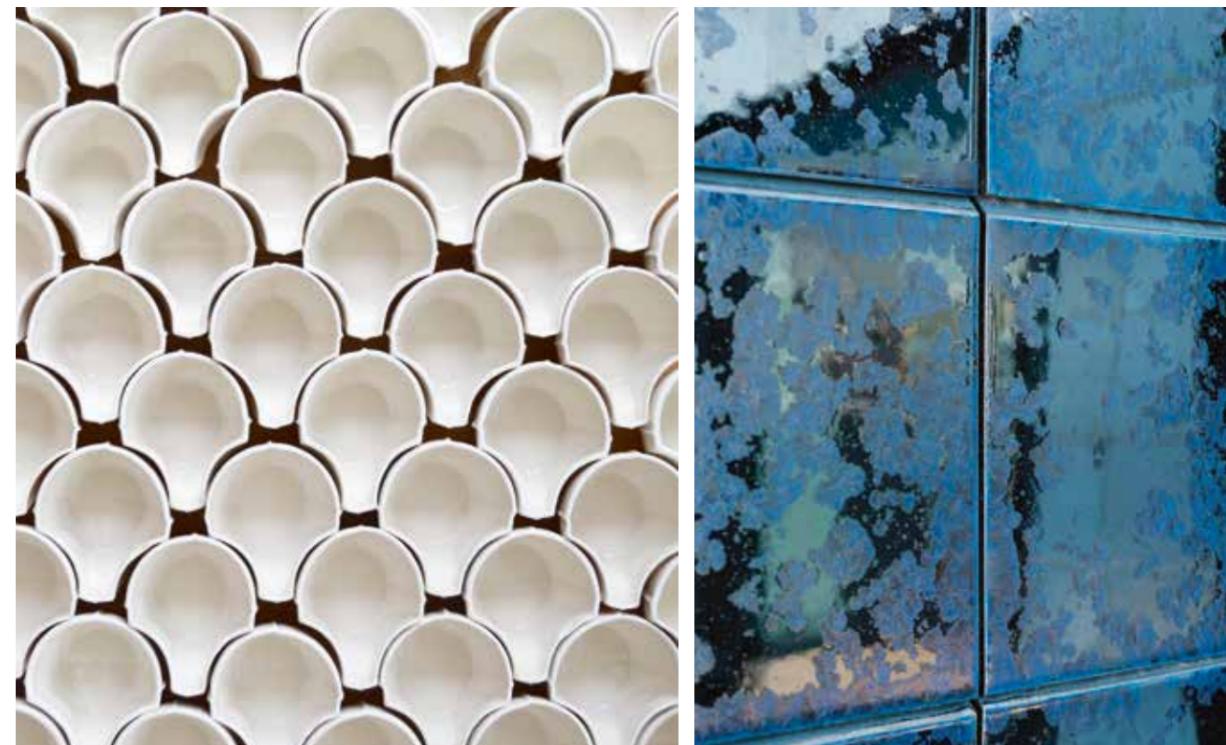
Malone describes the seven-year project as an act of faith. 'Tremendously synchronistic, being in the right place at the right time.' One challenge was that every tile manufacturer

they contacted declined to become involved, until through chance, Malone stumbled on Rich Miller's Froyle Tiles. Savile Row got its sharp suit, Froyle delivered 11,000 white and blue handmade tiles, and the building opened in 2015. 'It was really at the forefront,' says Pey. 'One of the first in this wave.'

ART-ARCHITECTURE COLLABORATIONS

With Malone, the Savile Row building, like other art-architect collaborations such as Eric Parry and Richard Deacon, or Charles Holland with Grayson Perry's almost nightmarish Hansel & Gretel House, is clearly speaking to the wider wave of enthusiasm for ceramics. There has been a mainstream pottery upsurge, from new ceramic maker spaces opening and the success of *The Great Pottery Throw Down* on TV to architects, in AHMM's Will Lee's words, 'getting messy on Monday evenings.'

I couldn't help wonder however, what these showcases, some in the most expensive postcodes in the country, have in common with Toxteth's Granby Workshop, where collaborative ceramics are embedded in the community. Or whether they signal a new, albeit less showy, more restrained and crafted version of 'wow' architecture, expressed in beautiful ceramic clothing. Be that as it may, this wave of architectural ceramics has re-awoken the profession to the value of making and the hands-on. Something full-bodied ceramists of course don't by definition forget. ^{CE}



OPPOSITE: Hawley Wharf in Camden, beside the North London canal, by AHMM **ABOVE LEFT:** Tessellating cups by Fettle Studio **RIGHT:** detail of the tiles designed by Kate Malone for 24 Savile Row, by EPR Architects

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