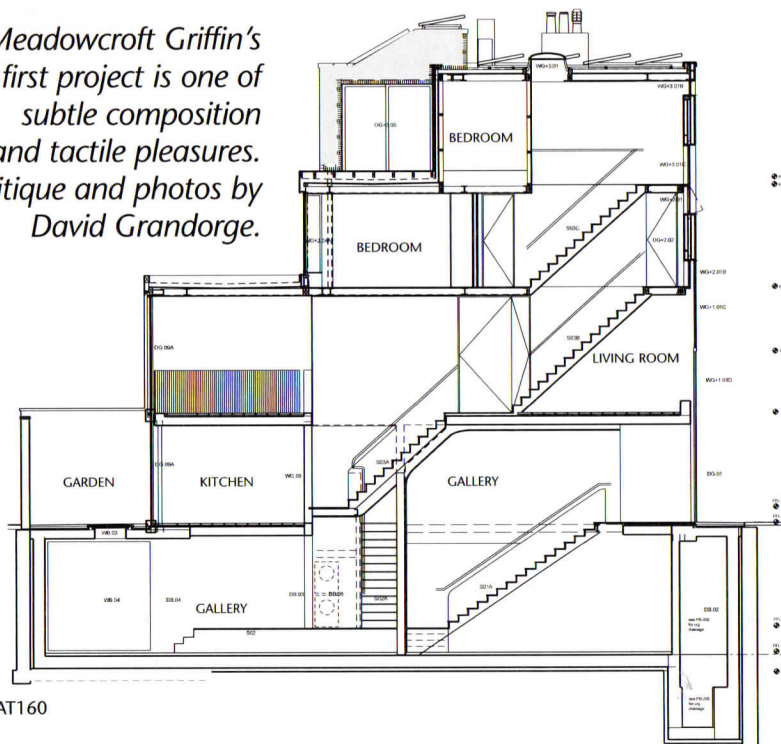




BUILDING ■ Market manifesto

Meadowcroft Griffin's first project is one of subtle composition and tactile pleasures. Critique and photos by David Grandorge.



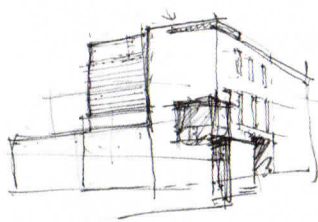
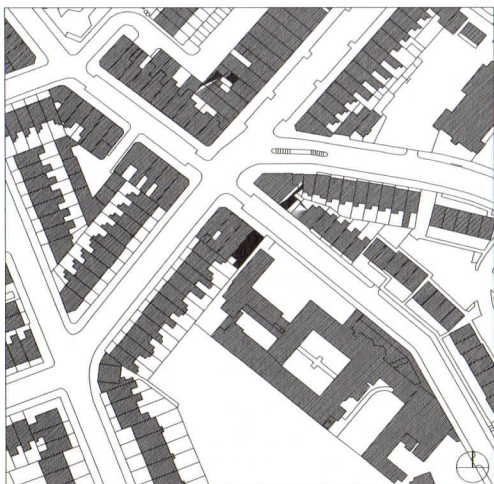
This new house and gallery by Meadowcroft Griffin Architects for rare book and art dealer Simon Finch is sited at the north end of Portobello Road. It has been built on a typically tight London plot, adjoined by the renowned Spanish Catholic school to the south, three simple terrace buildings to the north, a collection of back gardens to the west and the market to the east.

The length of Portobello Road is characterised by a strong mix of retail and residential programmes. The usual arrangement is a separate tenure between street level and the floors above but in this case these programmes overlap and are interwoven. Though at first glance one makes a distinction between a shop front and a house above, the architects have challenged this relationship both in their treatment of the elevation and the way in which the spaces are configured behind.

The facade is characterised by what Ann Griffin describes as the 'faceless voyeurism' of the London terrace. The upper volume of the house is treated with painted render punched by regular, taller-than-wide windows, echoing the basic fabric of Notting Hill. This 'dumb' formal device is then layered – the glass shopfront of the gallery slips up over the concrete structure behind and wraps around the facade to the flank elevation to make a corner window for the main living space above. Furthermore the glazed section above the shopfront holds a reflection of the street where a shop sign would normally exist. The side elevation is clad with a powder-coated steel mesh that gives texture to a surface usually treated with greater anonymity. There is a self-consciousness to this collaged arrangement but it makes a composition that announces itself assuredly and becomes a discreet backdrop to the marketplace.

The idea of collage is evident elsewhere in this project – structurally, spatially and materially. The structure (which has been made separate from those adjoining) is defined by monolithic concrete retaining walls and a concrete stair and service core at basement level, from which rise concrete walls and piers up to first-floor level. In their treatment of the concrete structure, the architects have sought to make reference to the Norfolk coastline, where their client resides (in an important arts

Above/left The main basement-level gallery spaces are reached from the entrance; long section through staircases.
Opposite The new building, which replaces a dilapidated structure, completes the terrace while acknowledging the corner condition; site plan, sketch and 'before' photo.



and crafts house) for much of the year. The structure was cast in such a way as to achieve a deliberately low-grade and imperfect surface that in places is marked by tidal-like scars. These are particularly evident in the basement office for the gallery, where the grain of the concrete wall continues from inside to out. Here a simple aluminium-framed glass screen encloses a gravel-filled yard that provides natural light and air for the basement, as well as being a handy space for staff to take a cigarette break.

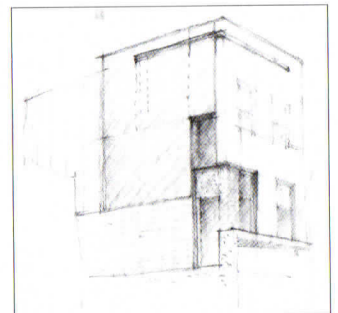
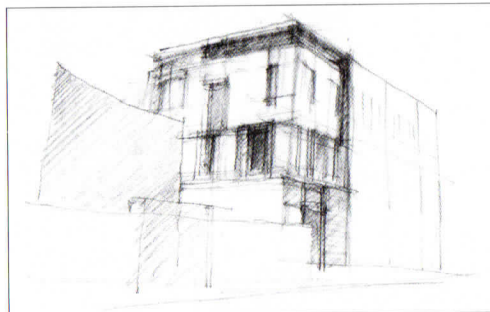
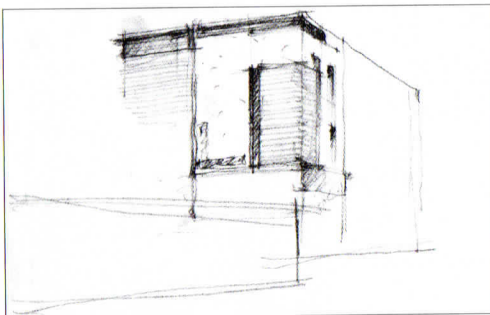
The structure is topped out using a steel frame for the second and third floors. A



concrete floor is used to separate gallery and house. Above this, timber joists, made composite with a plywood deck, span between the steel frame to make thin floor plates for the more private elements of the domestic programme above. All of this serves to squeeze four storeys into a volume where three normally exist, creating a compressed but connected sectional configuration.

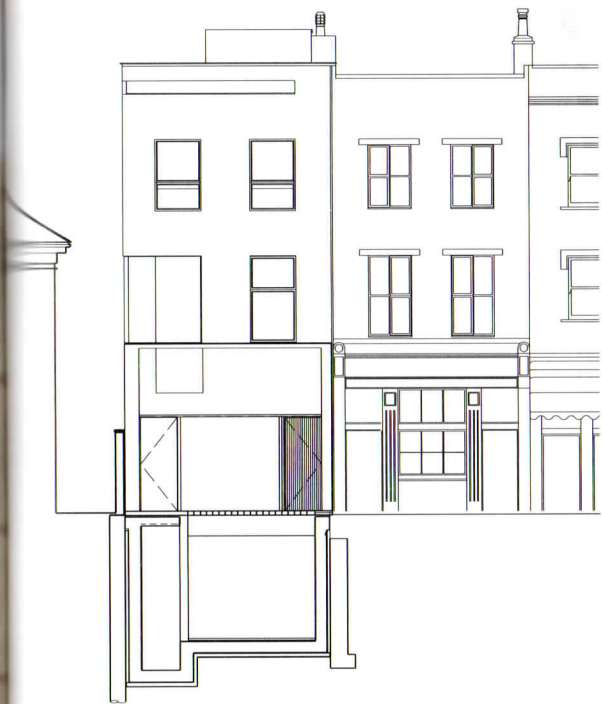
The gallery is entered from the street through a small low-ceilinged lobby, from which one has a view of both near and middle distances. The main gallery space is situated below this in the basement. Although compact, there is a greater sense of space due to borrowed daylight from the street above and visual connections to the light well beyond the core. Between the gallery and office, a tight stair winds upwards towards the double-height kitchen and dining area of the house and continues on upwards in a straight run to the main living space above, a room designed for both exhibiting and entertaining.

Arrival here is marked by light filtered through the mesh screen on the facade behind. Looking westward, there are views to the kitchen below and the borrowed landscape of the back gardens beyond. The client has made a statement about the



Above/left The main window is designed to negotiate the corner condition, reinstate a notional shopfront and reveal the concrete structure within.

status of the house by commissioning works by artists Richard Long and Sam McEwen that are literally applied to its surfaces. Here, a recognisable Long motif, a circular array of handprints, hovers above the kitchen, giving contrast to the flush mdf cupboards and Finch's collection of tableware set out on shelves below. At the other end of the living room, windows frame views of the terrace opposite. One becomes aware at this point that the floor plate cuts through the elevation in such a manner that normative windows one has seen from outside are giving light to spaces above and below each other in section. This deliberate misalignment of section with the external form becomes



Above/right Despite the aligning fenestration, the building accommodates four floors above ground, where the adjacent terrace has three. The building is the first major completion by the practice, whose partners Philip Meadowcroft and Ann Griffin previously worked with Eric Parry and Haworth Tompkins respectively.

Below Living room and basement gallery space.

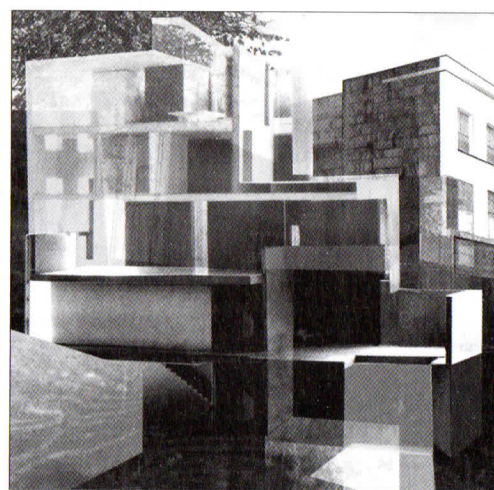
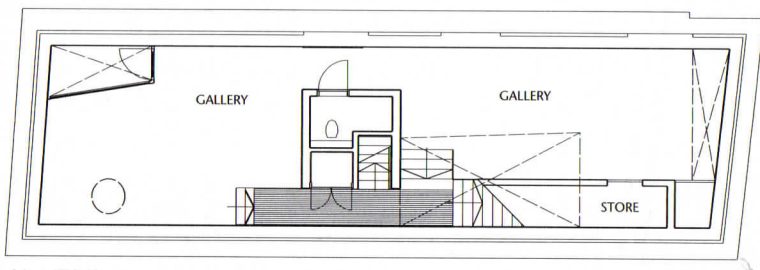
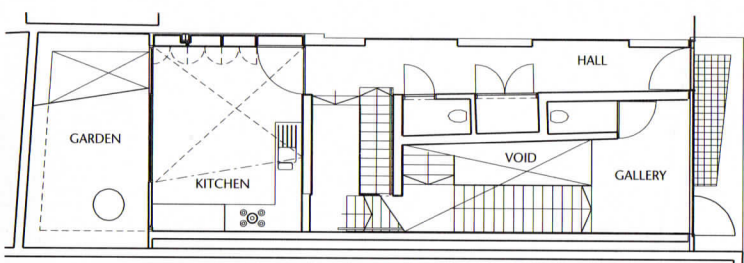
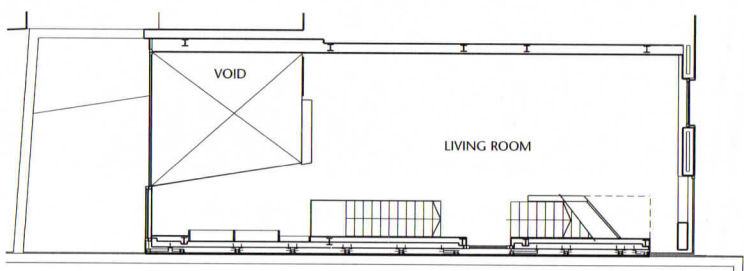
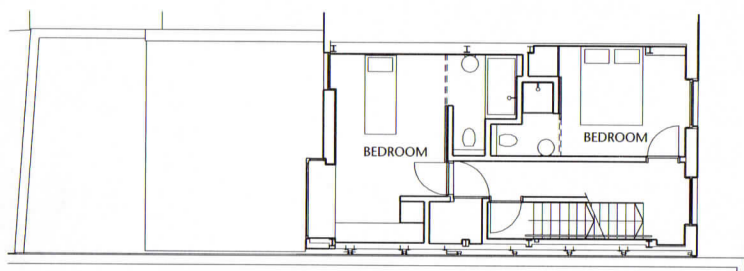
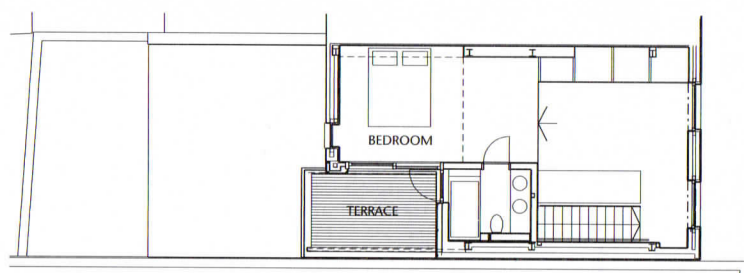
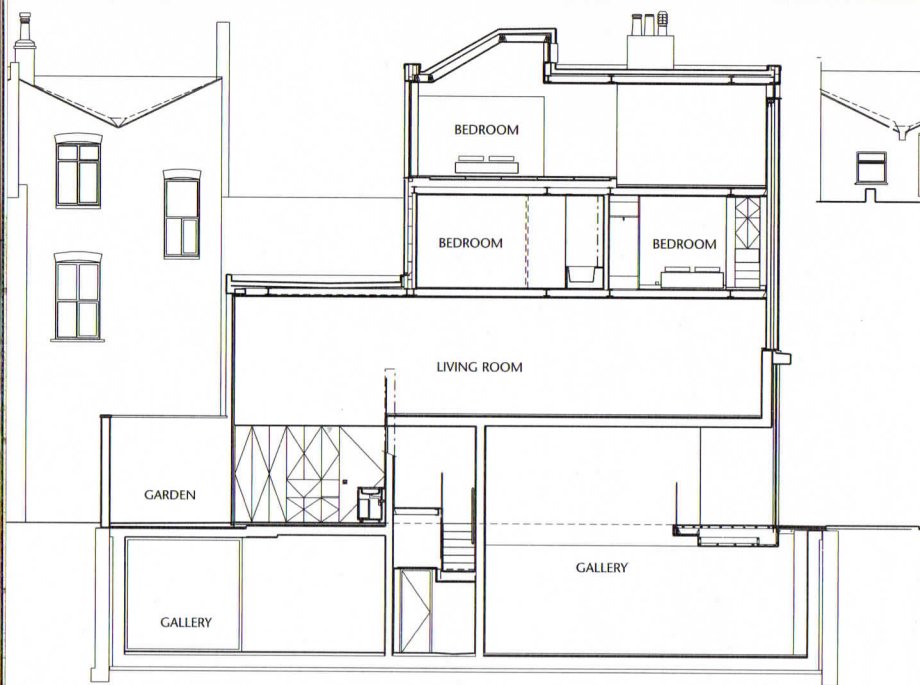


most apparent at nightfall when the interior is revealed to the marketplace.

At the far corner of this space one sees the last remnant of the concrete structure, a lone roughly cast pillar. This reminds us of spaces experienced in the gallery, but also that we have reached the end of the public face of the house. The wrapping window behind it affords a generous view over the market that gives this edge of Notting Hill its special character.

On the second floor is a deliberately unspectacular guest bedroom and bathroom. In contrast, there is an almost audacious moment on the landing where a truncated window at floor level gives a delicious framed view of the pet shop on the opposite side of the street, thereby enlivening the journey to the master bedroom at the top of the house.





Meadowcroft Griffin write

The client for the new house and gallery at 319 Portobello Road is a rare book dealer of international repute. His main UK residence is an arts and crafts house in Norfolk where he retreats when not travelling or in London. He acquired the original end-of-terrace house and shop in 2000 and sought designers via competitive interview, from which our appointment followed in 2001.

The brief was to provide a London home, a place to work, a place for entertaining and an art gallery as an extension of his business. The building had to provide a place of quiet and retreat, as well as having a presence within the context of Portobello Road market which projected his personality and business identity. As the client and family are away for long periods, the aim was to develop a series of spaces that could be used flexibly, changing from house to gallery as required.

Initial investigations concluded that the dilapidated and subsiding condition of the original property would necessitate almost wholesale reconstruction to create sound fabric. The planners stipulated that the above-ground profile of the original



building could not be exceeded and that the integrity and rhythm of the street fenestration of adjacent buildings should be maintained. We were free to change the character of the end-of-terrace flank wall and the rear. We agreed that the new building should reinforce the sense of uniformity of the terrace as a backdrop to the urban room of the vibrant market; but we felt strongly that the corner condition should be recognised and eventually our design for a wrapped corner window was accepted.

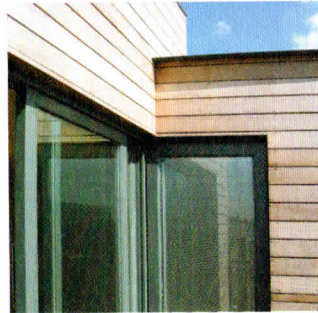
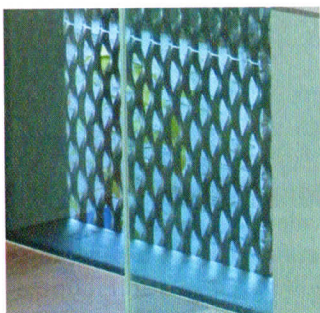
The key horizons of the terrace cornice and shop frontages have been reinterpreted as contemporary elements on the new house facade as a high-level slot window and slipped floor levels respectively. As a

result the street facade is keyed in to the proportion and rhythm of the surrounding buildings. The new basement allowed us to adjust internal floor levels, with the greatest height given to the single-volume living room on the first floor. An additional floor has been gained above street level which, with the basement, has increased the floor area within the original footprint by almost 50 per cent. Spatially, the adjustment to floors in relation to the front windows has created an extraordinary internal pattern of window openings and horizons which offer controlled glimpses of the market, the sky and the nearby Trellick Tower – a piece of urban editing that connects to the outside while maintaining privacy.

The building is a hybrid structure of in-situ concrete construction at the lower levels with a steel frame above. The structure grows from the concrete retaining walls of the basement to a point where the steel frame takes over, to give unencumbered spans to the first-floor room. At first-floor level the effect of the new construction is most apparent: a single uninterrupted high space which is a radical departure from the cellular room typology of traditional terraced houses. This piano nobile space directly responds to the client's requirements: it can be a domestic living room, an entertainment space or an extension to the exhibition gallery. A sequence of double-height spaces connects various levels and

provides the opportunity for their uses to ebb and flow.

The structure reinforces the sense of the building meeting the ground and reaching for the sky and this has been a primary theme in revealing landscape qualities within interiors. The most basic concrete finishes were specified, with a view to finding virtues in imperfections and exposing flaws that have poetic qualities. Materials have been interpreted thematically to recall the life of the client. Areas of raw concrete structure are revealed for their textural qualities, which suggest the remote landscapes surrounding the client's Norfolk home. Stippled concrete on the facade – where city and 'landscape' meet – represents the two worlds of the client, his love for the place of his upbringing and his passion for urban life. On the upper steel-framed levels, materials have been chosen for qualities of lightness and thinness – expanded metal, timber boards, drylining and glass. Through the use of light, shadow, textured surfaces and views of the sky, we have sought to create spaces with a strong sense of nature, notwithstanding this dense urban location.





Above/left The basement gallery space is lit by an adjacent lightwell and a circular rooflight in the roof garden above.

This final space is dense with compositional and landscape ideas. The top edges of the east and south sides of the room are broken with a shallow clerestory window that externally reads as a negative of the cornice of adjoining properties and internally provides for beautiful bounced and direct morning light. This slot also gives a precise and edited view of Goldfinger's Trellick Tower beyond, seen against Sam McEwen's beautifully gauche flower mural. The lower ceiling at this end of the room is reinforced by a flush-fitted wardrobe whose doors extend to the ceiling. The ceiling rises to a greater height in a monopitch above the bed, enabling another small window to be inserted which again celebrates incidental morning light. The bed space can be partitioned off with a simple green curtain which, when pulled back, gives a subdued theatricality to the space, recalling a scene painted by the Delft school.

This project is clearly concerned with ideas and is the product of an architectural view that privileges enquiry over expediency. The chance to make a new house for a strong client is an important moment





in the development of a nascent practice. Inevitably the project becomes a kind of manifesto for their attitude as a whole and there is a tendency to over-emphasise the architectural content. One feels that, at moments, this has happened here. Sometimes, you wish for a more direct and singular means of expression and some plainer spaces.

That said, there is a maturity evident in being able to take on the contingencies of planning requirements and the stultifying enforcements of current building regulations. In doing so, Meadowcroft Griffin have made a building that is materially rich and embraces daylight, creating spaces which recall qualities of landscape in a restricted urban situation and respond to specific orientations and views of the surrounding context. I look forward to seeing how Meadowcroft Griffin develop this sensibility in projects currently in development.

David Grandorge teaches at London Metropolitan University.



Above Kitchen with living room mezzanine, rear view and long section.

Left The top floor master bedroom opens to a roof terrace.

Project team

Architect: Meadowcroft Griffin Architects; design team: Phil Meadowcroft, Ann Griffin, Sam Causer (project architect), Kier Black, Alicja Borkowska; structural engineer: Ingealtoir; qs, party wall surveyor, planning supervisor: Robert Martell & Ptnrs; environmental: WSP Environmental; m&e engineer: Michael Popper Assoc; lighting: VBK; artworks: Richard Long (in situ earth hand painting), Sam McEwen (flower wall); contractors: White Rock Engineering (ground work, concrete frame); RJ Parry (steel frame, envelope, fit-out); client: Simon Finch Rare Books.

Selected subcontractors and suppliers

Steel fabrication: Mr Steel; expanded metal cladding: Cadisch MDA; roofing: Roofing & Building Services; flooring, internal joinery, furniture: EJ Strudwick; external metalwork: Elvin Engineering; internal glass: Pilkington; pavement lights: Luxcrete; electrical: NCSL; plumbing: Ledger & Co.