

Interior: OMI offices,
Blackfriars Street
Exterior: Martinscroft
development, Hulme



LOUDER THAN WORDS

Jonathan Schofield has a quiet chat with **OMI**, one of the least known but most appreciated Manchester architectural practices

Architects love to talk about volume: how can they make the most out of the space they're given? And massing too: how do all the elements stack up to create the best effect?

But more intangible, and more important, than all this is clarity: is a building easily understood and enjoyed? Clarity may be difficult to pin down in words, but it all makes sense when you enter a place and everything feels just right.

It's something that applies to buildings of any era. Sit on a bench in Albert Square and study Alfred Waterhouse's 1877 Town Hall for a moment: nothing jars, nothing is out of place, each window, each chimney is placed just so, with care. Despite the proliferation of high Victorian detailing, the building holds itself together effortlessly.

Several Manchester buildings, new and old, have this happy effect, but none more so than those by OMI, Manchester's most diffident architectural practice. Unlike other city big boys such as Ian Simpson, Stephenson Bell and so on, this lot seem to get ignored.

That may be about to change. Firstly they are the only RIBA Award winners in the city this year with the office conversion of Manchester Baths

on Blackfriars Street - a refurbishment they now partly occupy. Secondly they have a major development of 600-plus apartments going up, also on Blackfriars, which should give them a major city centre silhouette. So are they frustrated at the lack of acclaim?

Dave McCall, the M of OMI, shrugs, "Essentially we're not good at cold calling and that side of it. We've structured the practice so that we're still very much hands on. There are certain players in Manchester who focus on the PR side - all they seem to do is get bigger offices and go out entertaining at lunch. We prefer to get on with it, and in any case we've got families and have lives outside the office."

So what is the secret of an OMI building? It's the aforementioned clarity. Walk into their Blackfriars offices and you get an immediate lift (and we don't mean an elevator). There's a bright space with a low ceiling that opens out into a stairwell which reaches to the rafters high above. In alliance with a sharp use of textures such as a lovely metal rolled bar handrail, the result of this incredible simplicity is that you feel, well, better about the world.

Elsewhere, OMI specials include refurbishes and rebuilds such as the sweet Chinese Arts Centre on Thomas Street

and the incredible Fourth Church of Christ, Scientist on Peter Street - which achieves a level of harmony and spirituality unrivalled in a modern Manchester building. Others that might be more familiar to people include Dukes 92 in Castlefield and the National Football Museum at Preston North End. Great care has also been shown with major new build projects such as Martinscroft, off Boundary Lane in Hulme. This not only marked the first sensible return to red brick in social housing in the city but also created sensitive sheltered

accommodation for the elderly.

The secret to the success lies in bringing clients along on the journey - often bussing them to other buildings up and down the country. As McCall says, "We want to understand where clients are coming from, so they can work in that office, live in that house, use that church comfortably. If the buildings succeed, it's not just magic, but based on a lot of information and research. There's always a creative leap, but once people understand where that's coming from you have an educated and, we hope, a happy client."

That creative leap is crucial, of course. According to Phil O'Dwyer, the O of OMI, influences come from "usual suspects such as Le Corbusier and Aalto. But we also go back a bit before that. There's very much an arts and crafts influence: local people such as Edgar Woods and obviously Macintosh. To have that historical awareness and grounding is a great foil to modernism. Put modernist tendencies with the older approach and you get something that is very interesting."

OMI have proved this easily since 1993. And with a committed team of 15 staff and with several large projects on site or on the board, it's time for the practice to be seen and heard.

