

Brick Response: Adrian James

What factors tend to lead you to use bricks?

Brick is our de facto norm. Odds on it's the right choice for the context, the budget and the creative intent. The question is more why not to use brick than why to use it: I might plump for something else if the context or the building method suggests otherwise, but a bigger budget can just mean more fun with brick.

What can bricks offer in terms of creativity?

Brick is dreamily versatile. It is a small, repetitive element, laid by hand without the need for elaborate prefabrication. It can take its own weight so it doesn't need support, but for more gymnastic applications there are fancy systems for invisibly hanging it. A brick skin can warp and wrap around just about anything. Its plasticity makes it a designer's delight.

Which brick projects by your own practice are you most pleased with, and why?

First, my own house, built 20 years ago on the bank of the Thames, was my first solo design foray, and

I still like its meaty pilasters and arches. It was determinedly un-trendy (see the photo on the facing page). I'm not embarrassed by it.

Second, a pair of mews houses in Jericho, Oxford, where we used a long, thin brick with tight joints. The brickies struggled but persevered and the result is crisp and nicely textured.

I'm also pleased with the wide arch over the entrance to our teaching block at Shrewsbury School. There are metre-deep reveals to the whole front facade. It's got serious heft.

And our latest completed brick project, a house called Incurvo, is a sculptural, voluptuous joy.

Which brick projects by other architects have impressed or influenced you most, and why?

Golly, I love a good arch: the Baths of Caracalla, the Balcombe Viaduct, Thiepval, Kahn in India (obvs) and oh yes, Mario Botta's brick cathedral in Paris are all worth the pilgrimage. I'll probably be trolled for saying it, but I love John Outram's outré architecture.

I worked with John on a building in Texas which is truly awesome; a forest of elephantine brick

columns. What most influenced me though were not his buildings but his tenets that: a: What matters most in a building is that it embodies a Beautiful Idea. The strength of the Brutalist idea is what makes its ugliness so, actually, beautiful. b: What matters least is what other architects think. Architects do drearily conform to the current zeitgeist and fear their peers; much better to follow your passion however unfashionable.

Do you see brick as a material of the future?

Right now brick is very 'in', but that is sure to change. The current fad for exotic shapes and colours will pall. But whatever, I'm sure brick per se will persevere. It is quintessentially sustainable, maintenance free, effectively eternal. And key to its survival is its contextuality – brick makes a building belong.

To my mind, the challenge ahead for brick is how to become a true cladding material, applied rather than tied to a structure. We need a brick slip system with integrity and versatility. I look forward to a twenty-first century take on the mathematical tile.



Top
Adrian James, seen here at the Balcombe Viaduct, is a director of Adrian James Architects, twice winner of the BDA Brick Award for the best individual house, alongside many other awards.

Above
John Outram Associates' Computational Engineering Building (1986), at Rice University, Texas (ph: XXXX).

Right
Clockwise from top left: Incurvo (2016, ph: Fisher Studios), Mill Street (James) house (1996, ph: xxxx), Jericho houses (date, ph: xxxxx) and Hodgson Hall at Shrewsbury School (date, ph: xxxx).



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