
MODEL HOMES

Oliver Chapman Architects has developed its style and commercial acumen at this Scottish housing scheme for disabled people, says *Johnny Rodger*.



Todlaw Housing, Berwickshire, by Oliver Chapman Architects

The modest supported housing scheme at Todlaw, on the edge of Duns (population 10,000), a country town in the Scottish Borders, represents a major innovation in provision of care facilities for disabled people in Scotland. The project comprises 14 fully accessible semi-detached houses and a shared-services facility with 24-hour care for people with substantial disabilities and illnesses. As such it is the first care home in Scotland to be based on a housing model rather than on traditional institutional provision.

What is perhaps the most unexpected news for architects however, is that this innovative project was designed by a young

up-and-coming practice whose previous housing experience consists of one pair of semi-detached houses completed only two years ago. Edinburgh-based Oliver Chapman Architects (OCA) is perhaps the best example of a young practice which has benefited from the proliferation of Housing Associations, and the small and specialist types of housing contracts that have come with them.

Chapman (39) was educated at Leicester Polytechnic under Richard Weston, and after working for Richard Murphy set up on his own 10 years ago. OCA really got its foot in the door, as it were, by building the above-mentioned pair of semis in a remote country

village for Berwickshire Housing Association. Those houses duly won the Scottish Design Awards Best Affordable Housing Design prize in 2006, and since then three larger housing contracts – including the one presently under discussion – have come OCA's way from the same client.

Winning these contracts has of course been vital to the life and creativity of the firm. It has not only been able to develop its own language and palette of forms and structures, but perhaps most importantly it has been dealing with serious institutional players. Berwickshire Housing Association was partnered for this care project with NHS >>



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Borders and Scottish Borders Council Social Work Department. Joint funding came from those bodies and also from Communities Scotland. This has meant not only that the firm has had to sharpen its business acumen, but that it has had to adapt its practices to live within the constraints – and meet the benchmarks – of these regulatory institutions.

The brief at Todlaw was for the new supported housing to replace facilities for disabled people which the Housing Association had at Marchmont House. This massive 18th-century former home to the Earl of Marchmont was in remote countryside, three storeys tall, inaccessible, and so unadaptable to purpose that many of its disabled occupants were for years, in effect, prisoners within its walls.

This new care centre is all built at ground level with no need even for ramps. There are footpath links, easily accessible by foot or wheelchair, through the site and across a nearby park directly to Duns town square, and access there to civic and commercial facilities.

The eight individual buildings on site are laid out on a so-called 'tartan grid', with some blocks orientated to imply a predominantly horizontal order, and others on the vertical. This does make for a more lively configuration of views and relationships of forms and pathways between the blocks, but it also, as the architect points out, breaks up the usual serried ranks of cars, gardens, houses that we see in housing estates countrywide. It means that the cars are parked in different configurations at different points, and also partly obscured from view by the buildings.

Supplementing that primary spatial order is the distribution of the buildings on either side of the cul-de-sac. The first building at the south-side entrance is the shared-services facility. The four buildings behind it, all on the east side of the cul-de-sac, are the 'core' units. These houses are for individuals with greater care need and are located closer to the services building, where care managers are based and meals are provided for those who wish to eat communally. The 'core' houses are gathered >>





Above Site perspective
This image Each building has two larch elevations, and two where the slate roof runs down to the ground
Right The houses are connected through footpath links



Todlaw Housing, Berwickshire, by Oliver Chapman Architects



Above and below
The larch-clad facades feature recessed drainage and entrances

Above right Looking out from the interior of a house along the sheltered walkway

Centre and far right
All the spaces in the interior were planned for a 2m wheelchair turning circle





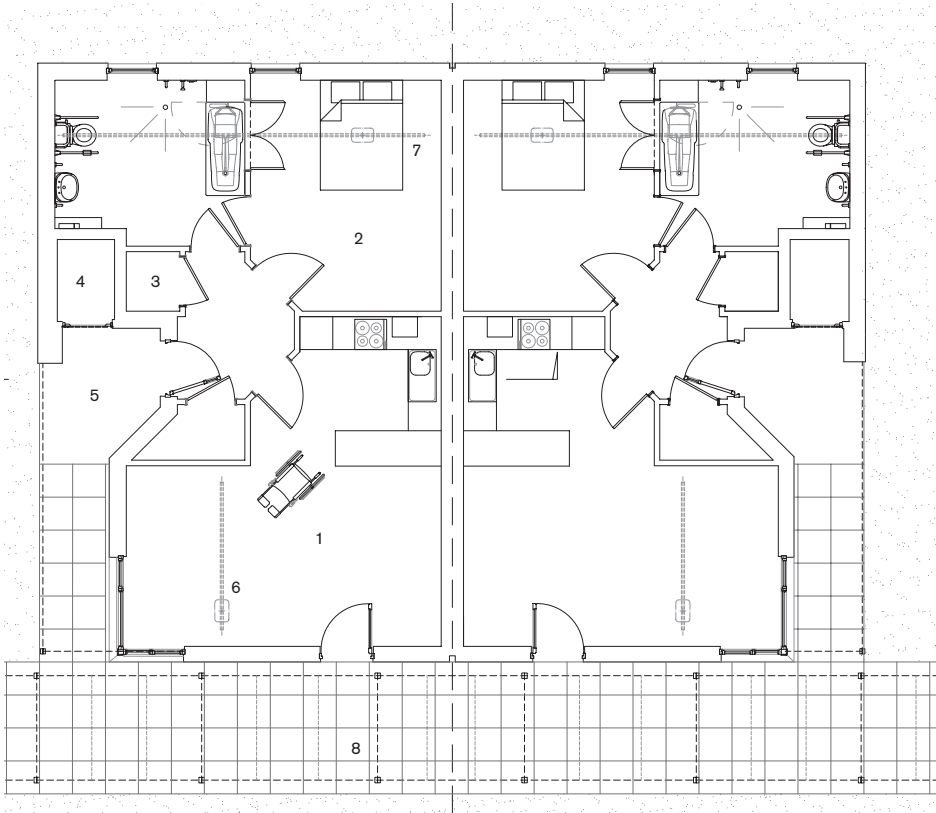
around the services building by a covered walkway almost like a cloister running between them, edged by beech hedges.

On the west side of the cul-de-sac are a further six semi-detached units for tenants who may be able to lead slightly more independent lives, although these tenants also have relatively easy access to the services unit.

All the buildings are timber framed and gabled, with rainscreen cladding in stained larch, and fibre-cement slated roofs with no service penetration. The whole site has a trim, smooth aesthetic which contributes to its quiet, modest but intriguing domesticity.

One telling feature here, demonstrating OCA's delight in playing with forms, is to note how each building has only two larch elevations, and on the other two the slated roof runs literally, and smoothly, down to the ground. The intrigue is heightened when we intuit some pattern in the interplay of these different elevations between all the buildings on site. All is revealed when OCA admits to turning constraints into design features. The two slate-covered elevations on each building are those facing the outside of the scheme, and fully cover fire regulations against timber walls. Thus is imposed another spatial >>

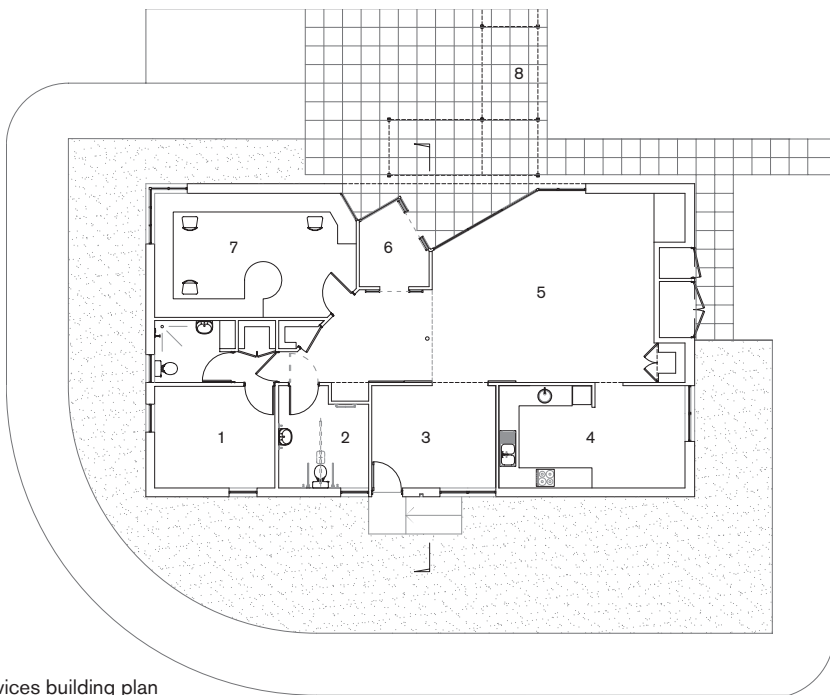
The project's unruffled aesthetic is developed on the exterior



- 1. Living, dining, kitchen
- 2. Bedroom
- 3. Storage
- 4. Bin store
- 5. Covered entrance
- 6. Ceiling-mounted track and hoist for transfer between wheelchair and easy chair
- 7. Ceiling-mounted track and hoist for transfer between bed, bath, wheelchair commode chair and WC
- 8. Covered walkway



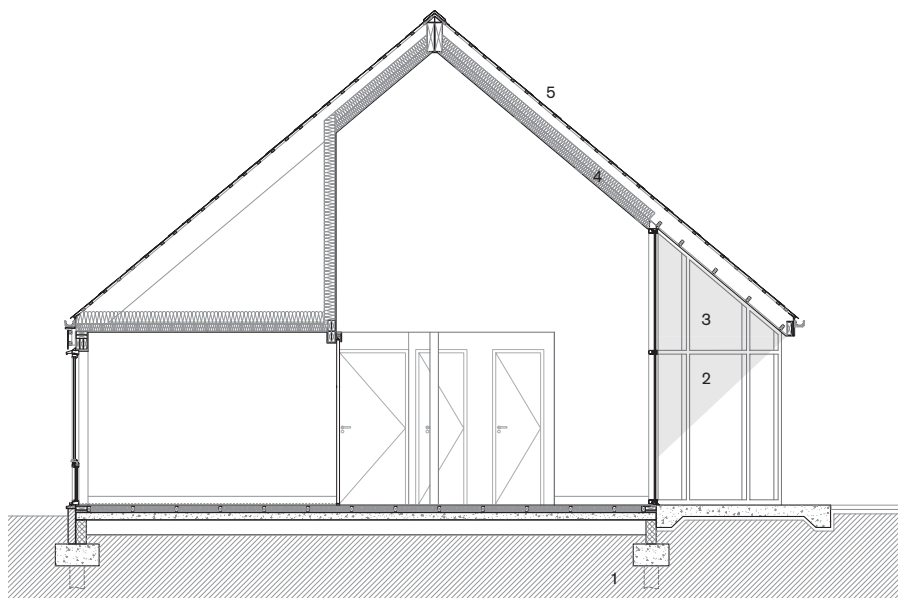
House type A plan



- 1. Staff room/guest bedroom
- 2. Accessible WC
- 3. Storage
- 4. Kitchen
- 5. Living area
- 6. Covered entrance
- 7. General office
- 8. Covered walkway



Shared-services building plan



Section of shared-services building

1. Vibro compacted pile
2. Angeled, glazed entrance
3. Stained larch-clad soffit of entrance
4. Insulated pitched rafters
5. Fibre-cement slates

order whose playfulness belies its utilitarian provenance.

The project's unruffled aesthetic is developed further on the exterior by such details as the recessed downpipes and entry areas to each unit. Those houses with gable entrances are recessed further under the eaves, so that a sheltered patio-type area leads to the doorway, and the overlapping planes of the relatively massive gable act as a clear symbolic demarcation of threshold.

Once inside the house, we find that the architect had to conform to stringent Community Scotland cost parameters and space standards for wheelchair users. All the spaces in the interiors were planned for a 2m wheelchair turning circle (rather than the minimum 1.5m) and just allowing for this factor alone in planning greatly inflated the footprint of the project. Special needs, such as

some tenants' requirement to be washed horizontally in a shower and moved around the bathroom horizontally had to be catered for. This has been done by installing tracks and hoists in the ceilings of all units, which are supported by steel beams running wallhead to wallhead. The hoist is an armature that essentially links the bedroom, the bathroom and the WC, and the room configuration solidified around its operation.

Another interesting feature of this architect's development is how it has allowed its architectural language to develop and cater for different situations. What was originally developed as a language for suburban residential purposes is deployed here to different effect in the shared-services facility. There are several specialist spaces for staff, kitchen, treatment etc., but what impresses most is the main hall. Simply by opening up

the ceiling to the height of the pitched roof, and fitting a glass wall at a welcoming angle, this building – still the same dimension as the others on site – becomes a public building, with authority over the rest.

It is true that there is only a limited palette here and that this is small scale, and off the beaten – and therefore polemical – track, as it were. It's unlikely to provoke anyone to strong opinion that is to say, except its tenants, who do seem immensely well pleased with their new facility. And of course, their carers too, who seem equally impressed.

It seems that this project, and indeed this particular architect's profile ought to be some sort of case study or role model for young architectural talent keen on a breakthrough. If they can only find a housing association to give them the smallest of breaks, then...

Unfortunately the truth is that the heyday of small specialist contracts for affordable housing with local housing associations in Scotland may be coming to an end. The Scottish Government announced in mid-April its intention to greatly expand social housing projects. This may sound like good news. But perhaps it is better news for some than others, for the fact is that this new initiative will probably depend largely on regulation of major contracts between developers and large and established architectural and construction firms. The likelihood then is that new talent will be squeezed out of this market and yet another route to architectural development shut down for good. ■

Start on site August 2007

Contract duration 13 months

Gross external floor area House type A: 61.3m² (four units); House type B: 59.3m² (two units); House type C/D: 75.6m² (eight units); Shared-services building: 154m² (one unit)

Form of contract/procurement SBCC JCT 2005

Total cost £1.4 million

Client Berwickshire Housing Association

Architect Oliver Chapman Architects

Structural engineer David Narro Associates

Services engineer RSP Consulting

Quantity surveyor D I Burchells

Planning supervisor Richard Amos

Main contractor James Swinton and Co

Annual CO₂ emissions House type A: 39.15kg/m²; House Type B: 38.79 kg/m²; House type C/D: 34.39kg/m²; Shared-services building: 32.47kg/m²