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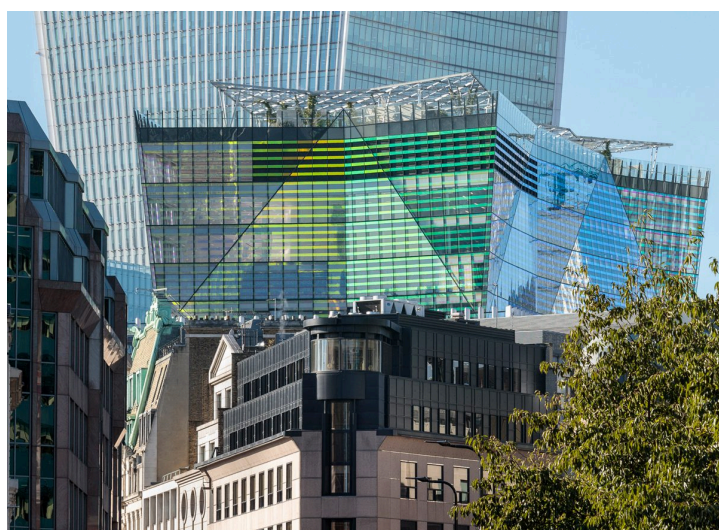


JamesHardie



City Maker

At Fen Court, Eric Parry Architects shows how corporate architecture can regain its social and cultural role, says Louisa Hutton



Words

Louisa Hutton

Photos

Dirk Lindner

The sheer chutzpah with which Eric Parry Architects has placed a vast shimmering crown on the top of its latest building in the City of London both surprises and intrigues. The blatant contrast that exists between the well-

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of the glassy structure above is not exactly what one might have expected from a practice that has established a reputation as the author of serious, finely conceived, highly contextual, beautifully crafted office buildings in the City.



However, it is not only the seductive nature of the building's polychromatic crown that makes a highly unusual and positive addition to the cityscape – there are three further characteristics concerning its place in the city that equally convince: the sculpting and surface treatment of its body, the generosity given to the public realm at street level, and a sizeable public garden at roof level.

There is an assuredness with which Parry has created the lower building's gently zig-zagged form. Approaching in either direction along Fenchurch Street the mass of Fen Court presents itself as four cranked planes that catch the light and one's eye with pleasing alternate rhythm. On account of the double inflection, the pavement area has been increased which is both a significant plus for pedestrians and expands the street's volume of air, now positively sculpted and held by the



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A similar moment is found to the east on Billiter Street, where a single inverted ‘V’ again breaks the body into two. The Fenchurch Avenue facade has a subtler but nonetheless perceivable inflection, while the facade facing Fen Court is the only one whose articulation is a single outward crank that follows the line of the site. Through these inflections the building gains an idiosyncratic morphological language and a certain tautness. The systematic, rhythmic folding of the nine-sided body gives the whole an apparent lightness that belies its actual physical mass.

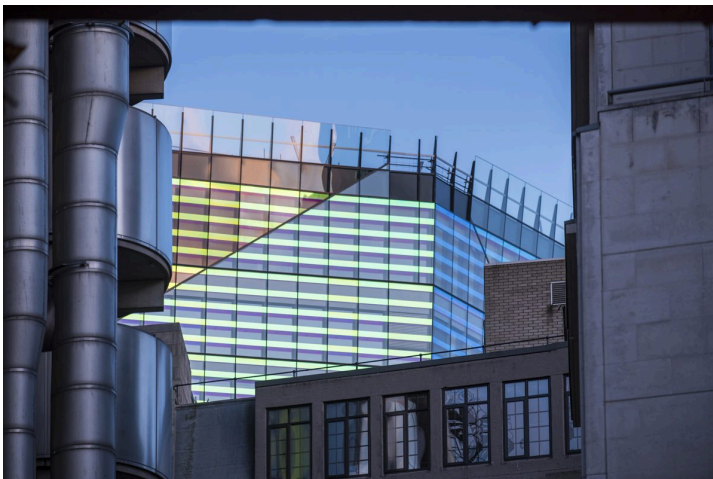


Ground floor plan. Fen Court comprises 10 Fenchurch Avenue, One Fen Court and 120 Fenchurch Street. The 39,670-square-metre building is on a 75- by 55-metre plot. It has a two-storey base and a new public passageway lined with retail, a main body with nine storeys of offices, and a glazed ‘crown’ providing four floors of offices and a restaurant. Inspiration for the building’s massing came from Hamburg’s deep-plan Chilehaus (Fritz Höger, 1924) whose form includes acute angles, punched courtyards and a celebration of sky in its use of copper roofs.

anamorphically. So any three-dimensional treatment of the facade is first condensed and then released as one walks past. A fine-ribbed verticality is given by the pronounced array of engaged columns that rise uninterrupted from the second floor to form their own raw, spiky parapet at the eleventh. In between these, and somewhat set back, short, thick, shadow-creating horizontal brise-soleils are woven in like stitches.

This textile-like character invites a tactile response, and though it is well out of reach, one's eyes are encouraged to roam. Drifting diagonally upwards and across the well-crafted solidity and texture of the facade they eventually land on the slippery face of the crown, whose glassy inclined planes offer no such physical certainties.

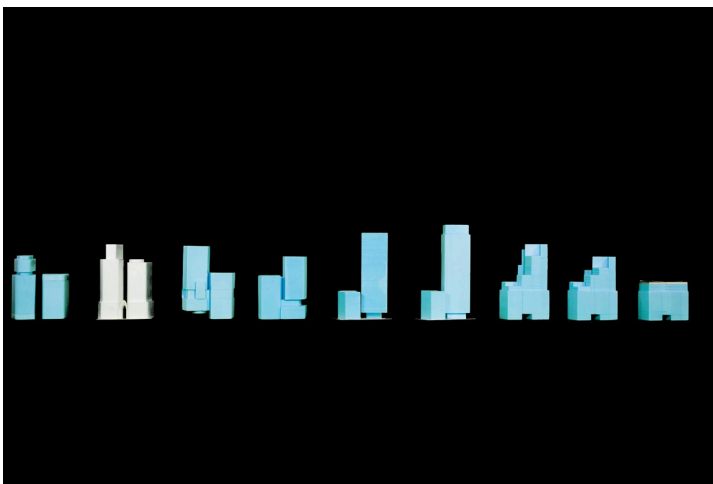
Sometimes disappearing into the sky and at others appearing as a brash neon-striped faceted vase, this five-storied polychromatic crown could hardly be more subversive. While the 11-storey tectonic base building is appropriately and politely sited, the crown with its bright, changing, glassy surfaces introduces a totally new game.



Ph; Grant Smith

the desire for a considerable increase in area. Many rounds of negotiations between architect, client and planners produced a quite brilliant bargain: more square metres – as long as they were in an independent volume that was set back from the main body – in exchange for a publicly-accessible roof terrace.

The inventiveness with which EPA has resolved this challenge is admirable. While the plan of the crown was derived from the form of the base building, its outward splay coupled with additional faceting introduces both formal independence and the offer of varying degrees of reflection. However, it was the bold decision to clothe this sharp-cornered volume in a candy-striped dress of dichroic glass – whose appearance changes according to light conditions and one's angle of view – that brings its unmistakeable character and identity.



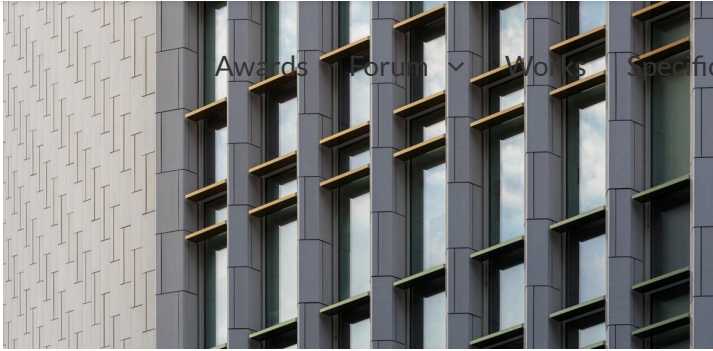
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Model; development of the massing (phs: Sam Ainsworth/EPA).

The crown plainly seduces with its optical tease, one's eye being mesmerically drawn to its ever-changing diaphanous surfaces of greens, blues and purples. Looking closer, the intriguing irritation of instability is further increased by an additional fuzziness given by the pinkish reflection of each dichroic film stripe on the inner surface of its glass cavity.

“The crown seduces with its optical tease, one's eye being mesmerically drawn to its ever-changing diaphanous surfaces of greens, blues and purples”

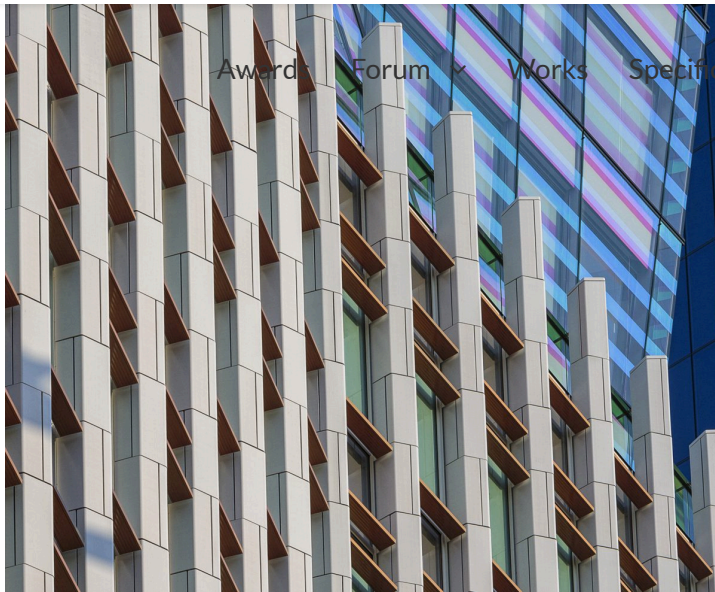
The pairing of the two buildings – the tectonic, material base and the crown with its oscillating ephemerality – awakens the age-old discussion concerning the traditional primacy of (intellectual) form over the (emotional) use of colour, or ‘disegno’ over ‘colore’ – as if the careful pencil drawings that Parry might have produced to describe the base have been challenged by an outbreak of digitally-generated watercolour.

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Engaged columns are clad in an off-white glazed terracotta. Brise-soleils are made of a lightly textured metal whose colour changes from a purplish-green to a warm bronze at the upper levels. "The alternating rhythm of a somewhat unusual detailed articulation of the engaged columns reveals the tectonic logic of the body", notes Louisa Hutton. "Only every second of the columns is structural on a tight three-metre grid".

While there is an adventurous flirt right at the border of good taste (and while one would not want necessarily to encourage less able hands to experiment with dichroic glass) the clearly extroverted, attention-seeking nature of its use here can be fully justified. Celebrating the endurance of the sky that hovers over the ever-increasing density and mundane capital-chasing concerns of the mineral city below as it playfully toys with the light of day, the iridescent crown also announces the presence of the publicly accessible sky-garden.

The building is clearly divided into the classical tripartite: base, middle and top. At street level the generously proportioned double-storied concrete-clad frame defines the publicly accessible areas given over to retail as well as to the pair of office entrances: a grand one situated in the north-western corner at the junction of Fenchurch Avenue with Fen Court Garden and a smaller single-storied one just off Fenchurch Street.

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A historic public passage called Hogarth Court that ran through the site needed to be retained. In its last incarnation it was curved, so one couldn't see the daylight of the streets at either end. This has been revised so that on entering one has a clear view through to the opposing street, which draws one in. Both entrances have an exaggerated 'fishtail' plan, narrowing dramatically towards the centre. The same kind of squeeze occurs in section, so that an effect of forced perspective is given. The sensation of foreshortening is further dramatised by dark interior surfaces and neat, flush detailing, so the rectangles of seemingly hyper-real street life behind become particularly highlighted within their respective black frames. Walking into this passage from Fenchurch Street is a particularly somatic experience; distracted by the visuality of it all, one is surprised to find oneself walking uphill – the natural slope of the land being considerable.



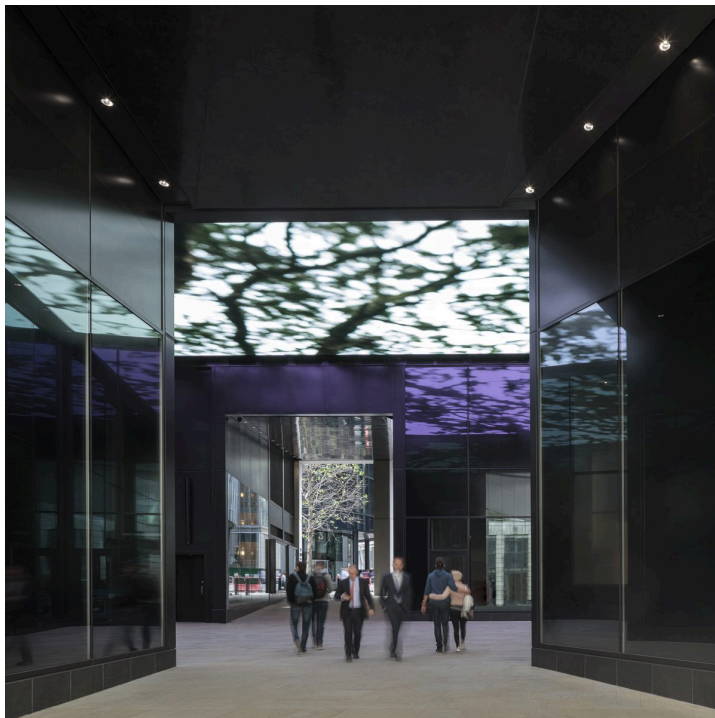
A far greater surprise is the presence of an enormous illuminated soffit at the central space of the passage. Here, within a clearly defined volume that Parry likens to a banking hall, continuously changing images drench the space from above. Sometimes watery with natural or artificial colour, sometimes sky-filled vistas taken from the rooftop, sometimes rather generic views of tree canopies that will hopefully be replaced – these have all been selected by artists Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier.

EPA ran a competition for the idea of a camera obscura that would relay images down from the top of the building into the heart of the public realm at street level. One doesn't need to know that the scheme once promised a clear view to the sky from this point to appreciate the idea. Moreover, the animation – literally the filling with life – of a dark public space via an LED screen whose programme will change with the seasons is perhaps a more sophisticated attribute for this unusual public space than an atrium could ever have offered.



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There is a particularly enjoyable theatricality to the ‘banking hall’ – the quotidian grind of our work-lives is suspended, as the shifting silhouettes of passers-by become the protagonists in a public performance.

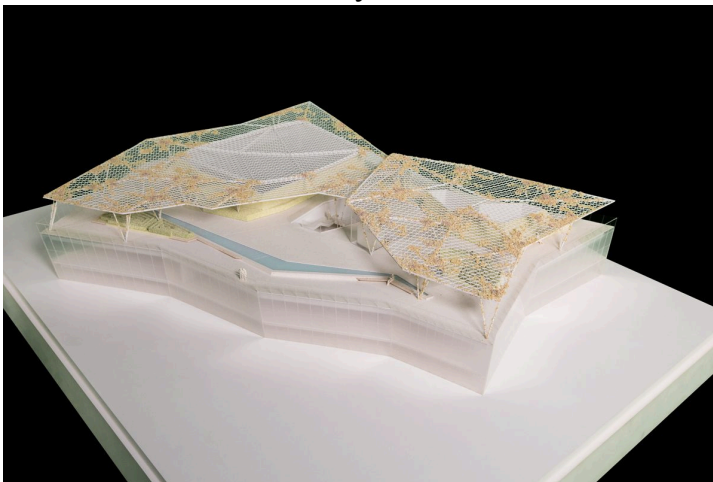


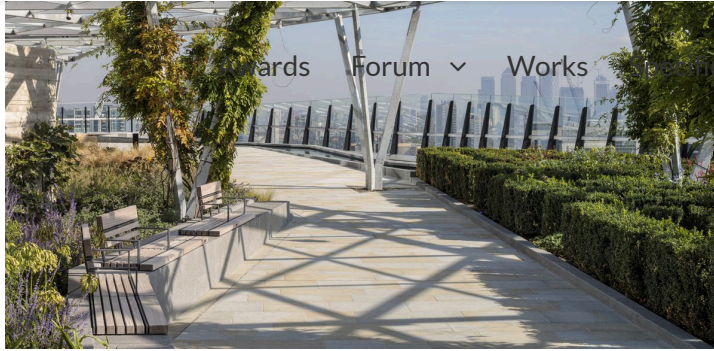
Parry’s comparison of the central space to a banking hall recalls both the mercantile history of the site and its proportional similarity to rooms which “historically included expressive, at best gravity-defying ceilings – here transformed from the physical to the digital”, notes Louisa Hutton. “However, Fen Court’s threshold-less ‘banking hall’ for everyone is surely more accessible than any hall lying deep within the formidable institution of a bank.” “Reflective black glazed cladding of the interior, in combination with reflective qualities of the clear glass at the lift lobbies, adds spatial ambiguities and multiplies the perceived dimensions. Polished plaster soffits at either end harness blurred filmic-reflections of street life. A side view onto the pair of lift lobbies adds a further surprise to the experience of passing through.”

The surprise of the pedestrian’s experience in the ‘banking hall’ more

the neighbouring towers – perhaps closer to the corpulence of the Walkie Talkie than one would rather be – and looking out over the skyline of London is both thrilling and fascinating. Seeing the immediate rooftops of neighbouring structures disfigured by ugly arrangements of plant, one regrets all those missed opportunities.

Planned by landscape architect Latz + Partner, the terrace offers a 360-degree walk around the perimeter, an impressive variety of sensual spaces, timber seating, abundant planting and haptic surfaces. The latter range from the modelled York stone paving, highly textured concrete walls, steel pergolas whose triangulated geometry echoes that of the crown, a long pool of water, various hedges and roses and 80 wisteria trees offering a huge shady canopy. A public restaurant situated on the floor below is accessible by stair or lift.





The 2,800-square-metre roof garden includes planting inspired by English country gardens, with espaliered fruit trees, a water feature and a perimeter walk that gives vistas of London's skyline. Climbing Italian wisteria will soften a canopy designed to give shelter (model photo: Sam Ainsworth and EPA).

Apparently seven of the next 14 towers to be completed in the City will have public viewing galleries; would that even half of them might be as sophisticated and pleasurable as the roof garden at Fen Court.

This is a project with, as Parry puts it, civic soul. It displays an extraordinarily generous attitude towards both the physical and visual public realm that is all the more remarkable in consideration of the fact that the building was not conceived for a specific end user but as a speculative project.

While the quid pro quo barter mechanism of planning gain resulted in the felicity of a public roof terrace, it is the consummate intelligence and skill with which the architect has conceived and executed the entire scheme that makes the difference.

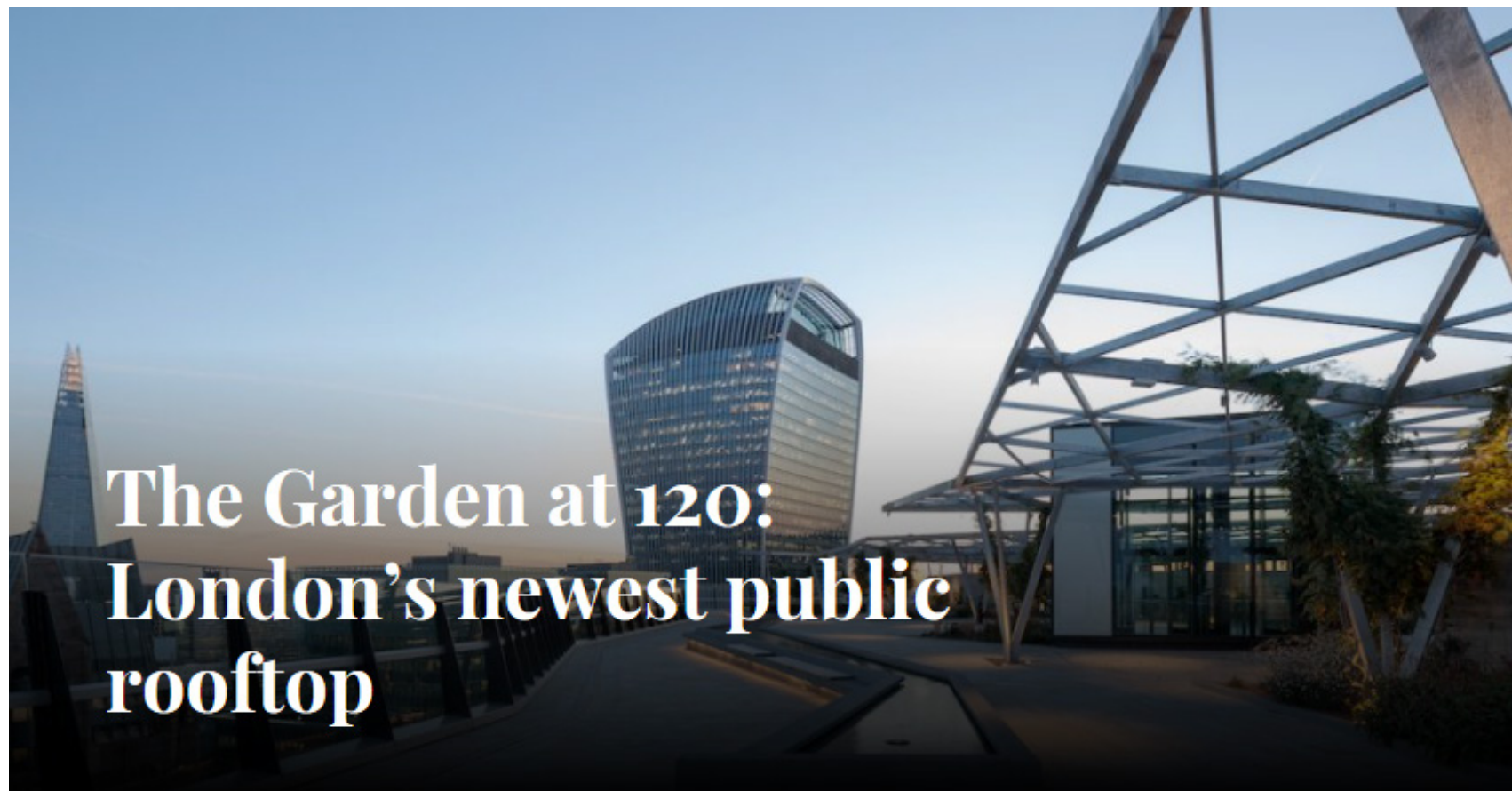


Not wanting to add yet another all-glass office building to the City, whose pathological accumulation of cold greennesses is seen by Parry as a kind of cadaverousness, the architect has created an ensemble that is clearly about enjoying life. One is naturally drawn to things that live: the main body of Fen Court has a clear corporality that we experience with our bodies while the whiteness of its glazed terracotta reflects light down to the street, the civic space of the 'banking hall' engages us both visually and emotionally with the staging of images on its soffit, the crown's neon flicker bewitches us, and the generous, life-through-plants-and-people roof garden can be enjoyed up in the sky.

At last it has been proven that an alternative *modus operandi* is possible: corporate architecture can do the impossible and escape its lazy kowtowing to capitalist greed and the demands of the individual. It can serve the common good in its offer of inspiring buildings and the highest quality of civic space. In this way architecture, in regaining both its responsibility and its role as a cultural artefact, can encourage public life and social interaction and so support the very idea of the city.

CITY MATTERS

Covering what matters to the City



By Tom Oxtoby 21st February 2019

The City of London's largest rooftop public space – The Garden at 120, located atop the newly opened Fen Court office building at 120 Fenchurch Street – has officially opened to the public.

At 15-storeys up, the viewing platform offers exceptional 360-degree views of the City and greater London, and is free for members of the public to visit, with no booking required.

Fen Court includes retail offering at the lower levels, a 14th-floor restaurant, and dedicated public lifts which lead directly to The Garden at 120, which plays host to pergola planting with fruit trees, Italian wisteria, seating, a water feature and a coffee hut.

The 207-person capacity rooftop garden will be open every Saturday and Sunday between 10am and 5pm (for two six-week trial periods), as the City of London continues to strengthen its offering as a vibrant weekend destination.

Monday to Friday access will be available between 10am and 6.30pm until 31 March, and between 10am and 9pm from 1 April until 30 September.

Chris Hayward, chairman of the planning and transportation committee at the City Corporation, said: "I am delighted to add to the 60 green roofs in the Square Mile with this venue, which offers a peaceful retreat from busy City streets and views of some of the world's most recognisable landmarks.

"I especially look forward to the warmer months when the garden will be in full bloom, complementing the success and popularity of the **SkyGarden at 20 Fenchurch Street** and the roof terrace at One New Change as a weekend destination for Londoners and visitors alike.

"Fen Court is an exemplar of the type of developments that the draft local plan (City Plan 2036) proposes for the future of the City. A free public space, a pedestrian route between Fenchurch Street and Fenchurch Avenue creating more space at ground level, and the garden, goes above and beyond our urban greening proposals."

The City of London leads the world in the extent of its free public spaces at the top of its skyscrapers. Half of the 14 upcoming tall-building developments due to be completed by 2026 will have free public viewing galleries and terraces in one district.

Including the opening of Fen Court, these are: 22 Bishopsgate, 6-8 Bishopsgate, 1 Leadenhall Street, 100 Leadenhall Street, 2-3 Finsbury Avenue, located north of the eastern cluster, and 1 Undershaft which will also host a Museum of London gallery at the top of the building alongside interactive learning spaces and London's highest restaurant.

Eric Parry, founder of Eric Parry Architects, who designed The Garden at 120 alongside landscape architects Latz+Partner, said: "Fen Court is a building that represents a sustained dialogue between the planning authority, the client and the architect to create a building that is more than the sum of its architectural parts.

"It is a civic as well as a commercial building and it creates a new convivial horizon within the emerging taller buildings of the Eastern cluster."

City Plan 2036 development guidance will encourage even more economically inclusive and environmentally-friendly development over the next two decades, with policies requiring all new developments to include a greening element and new walking routes through tall buildings to allow the public to benefit from more navigable and less congested City streets.

The document is open for consultation until 28 February.

Architecture

Fen Court review – a candy-striped miracle in the central London skies



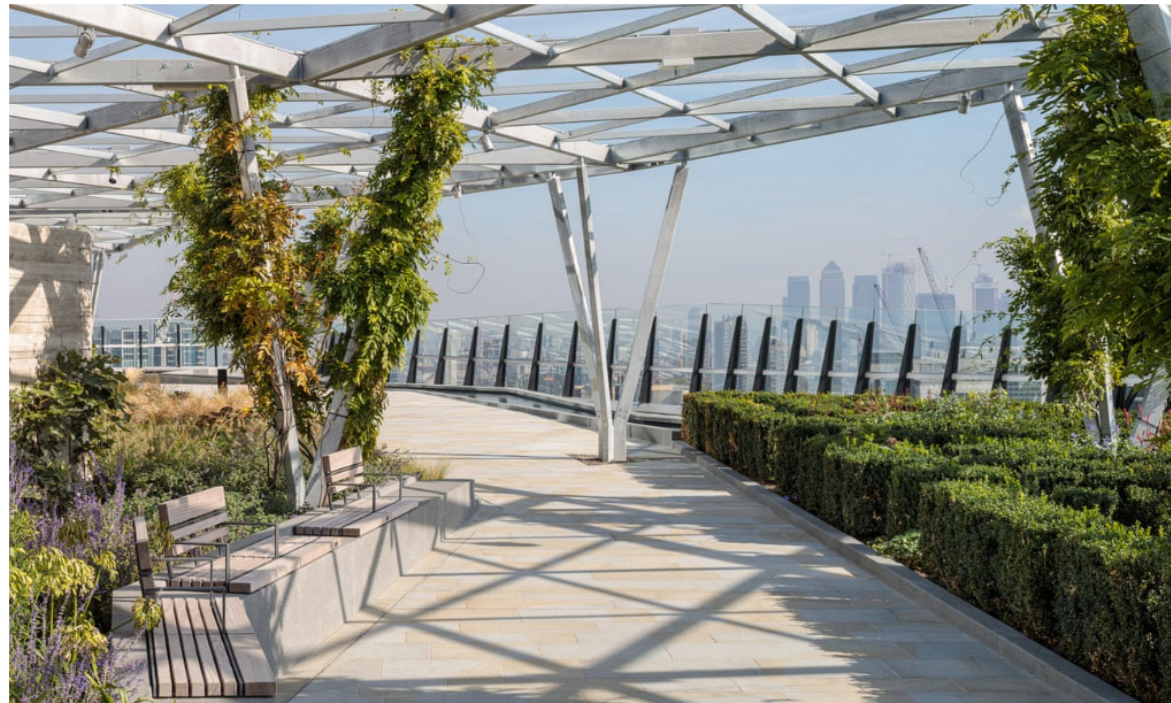
Oliver Wainwright

@ollywainwright

Thu 21 Feb 2019 11.44 GMT



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▲ 'One of the most well-crafted buildings the City has seen for some time' ... Fen Court. Photograph: Dirk Lindner

Squeezed amid the City's garish landmarks is a glorious, free-to-enter roof garden borne of public-private dealmaking ... so what's the catch?

Sometimes the planning system just works. The untrammelled interests of global capital come up against a set of rules designed to ensure maximum public benefit, and something better is spawned in the process. The bounty is usually so small as to be negligible.

Perhaps a few apartments will be marginally less overpriced, and called "affordable", or there will be a tiny garnish of lawn, labelled on the plans as "park". Which makes what has happened at Fen Court, a new office block on Fenchurch Street in the City of London, all the more remarkable.

As a member of the public, you can now sit on a bench beneath a bower of wisteria 15 storeys up in the air, or eat your sandwiches next to a little pond while suspended among the rooftops of the Square Mile. The gothic space-rockets of Tower Bridge rise to the south, while the mad bulge of the Walkie Talkie looms to the west, along with the gleaming pipes and rooftop cranes of the Lloyd's building and the dome of St Paul's beyond.



▲ Fen Court's roof garden alongside the 'Walkie Talkie'. Photograph: Dirk Lindner



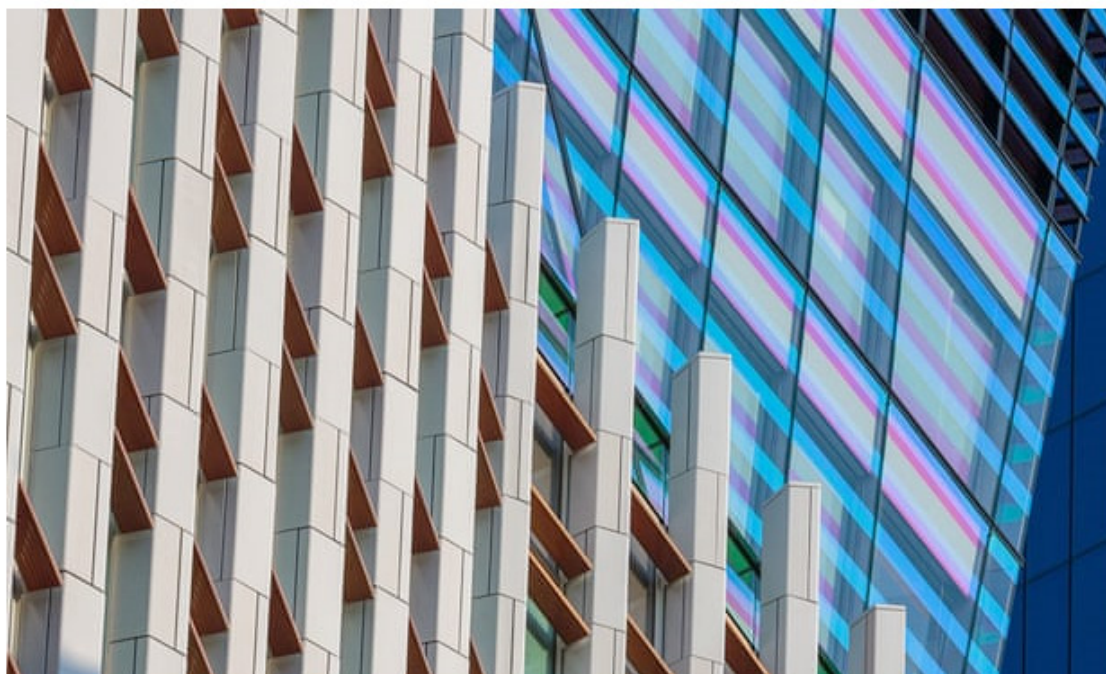
It is one of the most exhilarating vantage points in central London, made all the more so because you are in among it all. From [the top of the Shard](#) (reachable for £27) London looks like a puny train set. In [the Walkie Talkie's Sky Garden](#) (accessible via advanced reservation), you're surrounded by expensive dining concepts and too much steel. But on the York stone paving of Fen Court's roof, you're in the open air with a 360-degree panorama on a terrace the size of eight tennis courts. If it wasn't for the security guard waiting by the elevator, you would be forgiven for thinking this was an Actual Public Space.

In truth, it is as close to being public as the roof of any private building can get. No reservation is needed, no purchase must be made and even photographers with tripods are welcome. It's simply first come, first served (capped at 200 capacity), with the usual brief bag-check before getting in the lift. But this result didn't come easy.

"It was a very difficult journey," says architect Eric Parry, who has brokered his fair share of deals as the middle man between powerful clients and the City of London's planners - including winning permission for the tallest (as yet unbuilt) tower of the bunch, [1 Undershaft](#). When

he was first hired for the Fen Court project by Generali Real Estate, in 2006, he proposed a tower of a similar height to the Walkie Talkie. Despite that now-notorious building being given permission a few doors down, the then chief planner, Peter Rees, decided this was not the spot to go tall. The site was earmarked to be one of the "foothills" of the emerging cluster of towers to the north, a lesser peak in the City's [mangled mountain range of steel and glass](#).

The scheme was cut down to two smaller towers, with an atrium between, then compressed further, following the 2008 financial crisis, into an 11-storey block topped with a four-storey glass "crown" - the additional floors allowed in exchange for the public roof garden.



▲ The building's shimmering two-tone exterior. Photograph: Dirk Lindner



“We thought the building was uncomfortably high for the site,” Rees recalled in a recent Parry monograph. “What was there to compensate for this? A park on the roof ... and open space, plus extra room for pedestrian movement through the City.”

For once, the Faustian quid pro quo has produced a happy result for both parties. The exposed steel pergolas on the roof might feel a little stark, but they will soon be covered with a magnificent violet canopy by the 80 wisteria trees. At ground level, there is a generous route through the site, preserving an ancient right of way in the form of Hogarth Court, a two-storey volume roofed with a huge LED screen that displays a live feed of the view from the roof, interspersed with video art inspired by the changing seasons. One minute you’re under a vast oak tree canopy, the next beneath a sheet of rippling water, or seeing boats glide below Tower Bridge through this digital camera obscura.

It is a surreal encounter that fits with the jaunty gait of the rest of the building. Parry has form in persuading his clients to let rip, from the garish ceramic friezes at [One Eagle Place](#) on Piccadilly, complete with crimson-spattered tiles around its windows, to the [mural-painted balconies of his apartment block in Stratford’s Olympic village](#), which make it look like the residents all decided to hang out their jazzy beach towels at once. The results often sail close to the limits of good taste, and Fen Court is no exception.

The handsome facade of white ceramic mullions is interlaced with layers of horizontal louvres painted in what the architects describe as “Essex hot-rod paint”, variously shimmering in boy-racer two-tone shades of purple-green and red-gold. It sounds like an eyeful, but the effect is quite subtle, and the shock of colour makes a refreshing change from the acres of grey-green glass nearby.

The “crown”, meanwhile, is where Parry’s psychedelic penchant is really unleashed, seeing the [faceted glass walls clad with stripes of dichroic film](#), reflecting a shimmering rainbow of pinks, blues and greens. It is a fine sight to glimpse from one of the City’s narrow alleyways, although it has the unexpected side-effect of bathing its neighbours in a sickly green tinge, as if they’re in the firing sights of the [Mysterons](#) (less malevolent, at least, than the [Walkie Talkie’s death ray](#)). Inside the offices, meanwhile, the result looks more extreme than expected, where the dichroic glass casts [lurid pink candy stripes across the floor](#). It might be a fun feature for the uppermost restaurant level, but one wonders how long it will be, for the employees of chief tenant M&G Investments, before the novelty of a rose-tinted workplace wears off.



▲ Panoramic views ... Fen Court.
Photograph: Dirk Lindner



Nonetheless, Fen Court is one of the most well-crafted buildings the City has seen for some time, and the generosity of its roof garden marks a welcome shift in the balance of private interest and public gain. Half of the 14 forthcoming towers in the City are slated to have free public viewing galleries of various kinds, a long-held ambition that is soon set to be cemented in planning policy. The new draft [City Plan 2036](#), open for consultation until the end of February, states that “the provision of free-to-enter, publicly accessible areas will be required as part of all tall building developments”. It is up to the planners to insist that these new public eyries are as open and accessible as Parry’s pink-blossomed park in the clouds.

A New Roof Garden Just Opened In The City Of London



BY HARRY ROSEHILL



You don't have to scrape the sky to get stunning vistas of London. At least that's the thinking behind The Garden at 120, a new mid-level roof garden on Fenchurch Street. This suspended pocket park lives 15 floors high, atop One Fen Court.

As of today (15 February) it's open to the public. And the best bit? It's completely free. No pre-booking necessary, just turn up and ride the lift up. We took a sneak peek just before it opened.



The steel canopy reflection is the one downside to visiting on an extremely bright day



The roof garden offers 360 degree views, but as it's only 15 floors high, some pesky neighbouring skyscrapers are unfortunately in the way. This is especially bothersome to the north, where a combination of The Scalpel, The Gherkin, The Cheesegrater and other towers in that cluster obscure the view. Still, you do get a pretty unique view of those towers, even if you can't see the greens of Hampstead Heath and Alexandra Palace beyond, like you can from the nearby Heron Tower.

That said, if you're here to get a view of the fringes of London you're doing it wrong anyway. Instead, the views on offer are mostly of zone 1, with a bit of an exception to the east as you can see past nearby Whitechapel — which is very spottable thanks to the handily labelled [White Chapel Building](#) — and Canary Wharf's towers.





Expect this to get rather lush as the wisteria grows

Designed by Eric Parry Architects on behalf of insurance company Generali, One Fen Court is a noteworthy building even if you ignore the roof garden. That's largely thanks to its unusual design — it's almost one building stacked on top of another. The higher level is covered in iridescent strips, producing a vivid colourful effect both inside and outside.

But back to the garden. On weekdays it's open 10am-6.30pm, until summer hours kick in on 1 April, at which point it's open till 9pm. Excitingly, it's trialling opening hours on the weekend too, trying to counter the presumed-scarcity of things to do in the City on non-working days. There are two six-weekend trial periods, for which the garden is open 10am-5pm. The 2,800 sq m roof garden has a capacity of 207 people, so if it's a particularly clear day, you might have to queue.



One Fen Court's exterior as viewed from Fenchurch Street

ERIC PARRY ARCHITECTS | THE GARDEN AT 120

Publication: The Londonist

Date: 15 February 2019

URL: <https://londonist.com/london/great-outdoors/the-garden-at-120>

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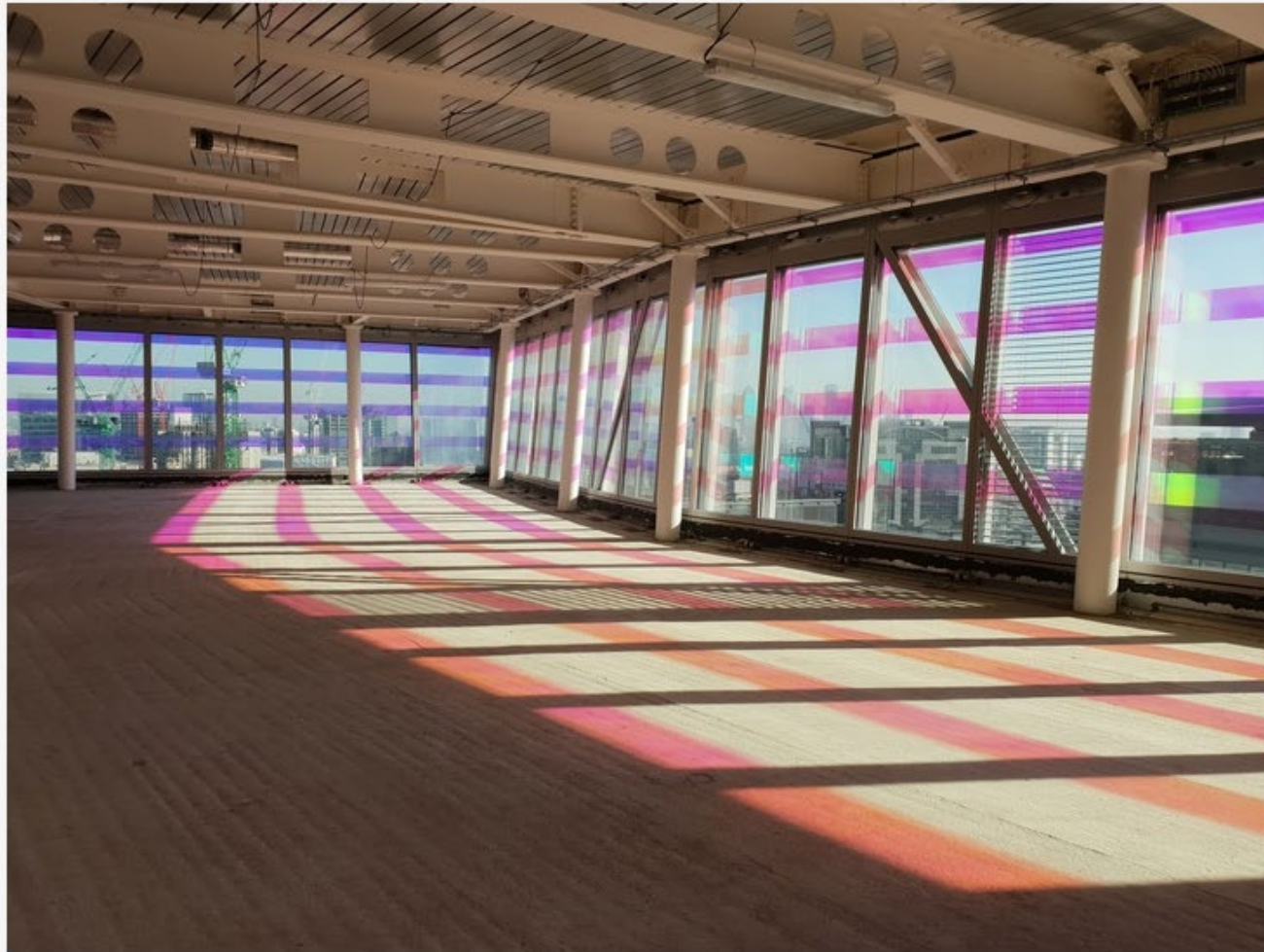
Maybe the best view offered is of the Walkie Talkie



Canary Wharf off in the distance

The final thing worth looking out for is down at ground level. The building has a spacious through-passageway to retain a historic link between Fenchurch Street and Fenchurch Avenue. It's from here that you catch a lift to the roof. But before you do, look up. There's a digital art installation by Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier on the ceiling.

It aims to act as a camera obscura bringing imagery from the garden down to the street. The best moment comes when the image flickers onto the roof's live-stream, trained on Tower Bridge. People walk underneath barely noticing, but stop and stare when it grabs their attention.



The window's iridescent strips, in what [will become a restaurant](#) later in 2019



ERIC PARRY ARCHITECTS | THE GARDEN AT 120

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Cities

A park in the clouds that is free for all to enjoy

Oliver Wainwright

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Anyone can sit on a bench beneath a bower of wisteria 15 storeys up, or eat sandwiches next to a little pond while suspended among the rooftops of the Square Mile, for free. The gothic space-rockets of Tower Bridge rise to the south, while the bulge of the Walkie Talkie looms to the west, along with the gleaming pipes and cranes of the Lloyd's building and the dome of St Paul's.

It is one of the most exhilarating vantage points in the capital. From the top of the Shard (reachable for £27) London looks like a train set. In the Walkie Talkie's Sky Garden (accessible via advanced reservation), you are surrounded by expensive eateries and too much steel. But on Fen Court's roof, you're in the open air with a 360-degree panorama on a terrace the size of eight tennis courts.

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▼ The wisteria-planted roof garden at Fen Court has views of the Walkie Talkie and other London skyscrapers
PHOTOGRAPHS: DIRK LINDNER



'We thought it was uncomfortably high. To compensate? A park on the roof'

Peter Rees
Former planning chief

of a cluster of towers to the north, a lesser peak in the City's mangled mountain range of steel and glass.

The scheme was cut down to two smaller towers, with an atrium between, then compressed further, following the 2008 financial crisis, into an 11-storey block topped with a four-storey glass "crown" - the additional floors allowed in exchange for a public roof garden.

"We thought the building was uncomfortably high for the site," Rees recalled. "What was there to compensate for this? A park on the roof ... and open space, plus extra room for pedestrian movement through the City."

The compromise produced a happy result for both parties. The exposed steel pergolas on the roof might feel a little stark, but they will soon be covered with a magnificent canopy by the 80 wisteria trees. At ground level, there is a generous route through the site, preserving an ancient right of way in the form of Hogarth Court, a two-storey volume

roofed with a huge LED screen that displays a live feed of the view from the roof, interspersed with video art inspired by the seasons. One minute you are under a vast oak-tree canopy, the next beneath a sheet of rippling water, or seeing boats glide below Tower Bridge through this digital camera obscura.

Fen Court is one of the most well-crafted buildings the City has seen for some time, and the generosity of its roof garden marks a welcome shift in the balance of private interest and public gain. Half of the 14 proposed towers in the City are slated to have free public viewing galleries, a long-held ambition that will soon become planning policy.

The draft City Plan 2036, open for consultation until the end of February, states that "the provision of free-to-enter, publicly accessible areas will be required as part of all tall building developments". It is up to planners to insist that these new eyries are as open and accessible as Parry's park in the clouds.

Ofsted chief backs teacher in row over LGBT lessons

Sally Weale

Education correspondent

The head of Ofsted has backed the teaching of same-sex relationships in primary schools after parents mounted a series of protests at a Birmingham school over lessons about LGBT rights and gender identity.

England's chief inspector of schools, Amanda Spielman, said it was right that children were taught about same-sex couples - regardless of religious background - and that not everyone fits "a conventional pattern".

Her intervention came after Andrew Moffat, the assistant headteacher of Parkfield community school in Alum Rock, Birmingham, became the focus of complaints from parents objecting to teaching about LGBT rights and same-sex relationships.

Moffat has developed an education programme called No Outsiders aimed at helping children learn about equalities and tolerance of difference. He has been awarded an MBE for his work and was this week named as one of the finalists for a prestigious global award which celebrates inspirational teachers.

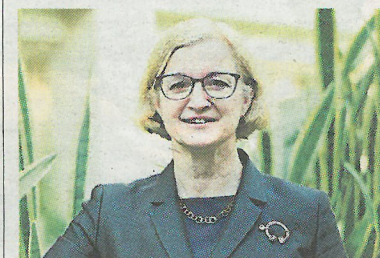
His school, which serves a predominantly Muslim community, has received 80 formal complaints from parents and there have been a number of protests outside the school gates. Last week Ofsted visited the school, which was rated "outstanding" in 2016, to investigate the dispute. The report will be published shortly.

Moffat is one of 10 teachers from around the world to make the final shortlist for the \$1m (£760,000) Varkey Foundation Global Teacher Prize 2019. Last year's winner was Andria Zafirakou, an arts and textiles teacher at Alpertown community school in Brent, north-west London.

The education secretary, Damian Hinds, expressed support for Moffat. "I wish him the best of luck for the final."

Ofsted said: "All schools have a responsibility to prepare children for life in modern Britain and that includes encouraging respect for those who are different, for instance LGBT people or those of different faiths."

Spielman said the vast majority of faith schools were managing to do that. "This is something where we've got to have sane, rational discussion, to say - are there places where it's not working well enough, that we can find better ways? But it's proper conversation that will change it, not protests."



▲ Amanda Spielman has called for 'proper conversation, not protests'