In our work we are often provoked and inspired by the work of artists, and the title of this text comes from an essay on the work of Claes Oldenburg. We admire Oldenburg’s early work from the 1960s at the Storefront Gallery in New York, where he made sculpture of familiar objects, while distorting scale and using a visceral materiality to give these objects a strong emotional character. Coming immediately after the abstract expressionism of Pollock, this work was not abstract. Instead its poignancy came from its relation to the everyday world.

We like the idea that our work starts with an awareness of the emotional character of buildings. Buildings have a character drawn from the associations of their form and the materiality of their fabric. Obviously, we can never predict what someone’s reaction to a building will be, but above all we are trying to get away from an abstract or a diagrammatic architecture, and to get towards an architecture that is richly associative. The modernist pursuit of the ideal and the new for its own sake seems to us both hopeless and pathetic. We prefer characterful ugliness to calculated perfection.

The choice of a building’s construction, its material and its structure, has a direct effect on the emotional character of its spaces. Although discussions of construction often centre on issues of performance and technique, ultimately construction is about appearance. There is a generation of European architects (Swiss, Austrian) who, through the example of their buildings, have shown the possibilities of construction as a precise media, simultaneous with form. In this work, there are no “good” new materials or “bad” old materials. Instead, all types of construction are open for consideration. To us, the choice of construction is an important first decision, sometimes chosen before the design. In relation to the subject of this conference, for example, we, as contemporary architects, are not worried about the vernacular associations of brick or the historicist associations of terracotta. These associations are to be worked with, reinforced or challenged.

Over the 4 years that we have been working on the design of the New Art Gallery in Walsall, we have travelled endlessly on trains between London and the Midlands. In this time we have become familiar with the particular appearance of the industrial landscape in the Midlands, and these glimpses from trains have often led us to make special visits to factory complexes and isolated structures. We have always been interested in industrial buildings for their unself-conscious, frank construction, and for the relaxed way in which they accommodate change. Of all the building types, these are the most socially awkward in the city, their direct and clumsy placement sometimes generating magnificent situations that architects could never dream of proposing. The relationship of the New Art gallery to the milieu of its town edge site could be said to owe something to the quiet and confident way in which these buildings stand.

The brick of the Midlands is a deep red, with a smooth almost vitreous surface, giving the buildings a harder, more prismatic volumetric presence than those made with the softer brick of the south. The site of the New Art Gallery in Walsall is on the edge of the town centre, overlooking a vast industrial scene, and adjacent to multi-storey brick leather factories whose type is particular to the town. In choosing a material for the cladding of the gallery, it was important that the building should stand out from its surroundings but also resonate with this particular material situation. A terracotta with a light natural clay colour was chosen, which is at the same time a clay-based cladding, but relating in tone to the public buildings in the town, such as the Bath stone St Matthews church or the light sandstone of the town hall.

The terracotta tiles of the cladding are big and heavy, but appear light and thin when placed on the large volume of the building. The dry lapped detail of the tiles and the mitred corners give the cladding a delicate character, like china or the feathers of a bird. The tiles are of 5 sizes diminishing in size towards the top, the average size being 1m long by 0.5m wide. The tiles are all of similar proportion,
but the largest tiles are of narrower proportion to avoid stresses in the firing process which could occur in sheets of the greatest width, causing cracking. The tiles are made of a strong clay with a low moisture content and are manufactured in an extrusion process, allowing a shorter firing time and a lower cost than a mould system of production. A global search was conducted to find companies capable of making the terracotta cladding, and only a few in Germany and USA were considered suitable. British companies were consulted but were not able to make the tiles of the required size at a competitive cost. The tiles were ultimately made by NBK Jahnihoff in Emmerich, near Munster, and the main Cladding Subcontractor was MBM Fabriclad in Mockmuhl.

One of the most difficult architectural decisions of the project, and one which involved the opinions and expectations of a wide range of people, was the choice of colour of the terracotta. The quality of the construction, and the control of the production process was such that the “natural” appearance of the terracotta could have been subsumed in artificial colour pigmentation or in a blank consistency. The final result of a very narrow colour range suggesting the kind of tonal range found naturally in the firing process in older clay buildings, was achieved using 3 different mixes of clay as well as the minimal tonal variation expected in the firing. At the same time the light tone of the tiles makes them very responsive to the colour of the light, and they consequently vary in each visit from a warm ochre to a charcoal grey. A kind of patina is suggested over the contemporary form of the building, hopefully both beautiful and unsettling.

References

1 Claes Oldenburg and the Feeling of Things. Essay by Germano Celant from Claes Oldenburg; an Anthology Hayward Gallery 1995

2 The outline design and performance specification for the tiles was developed in association with Arup Facade Engineering