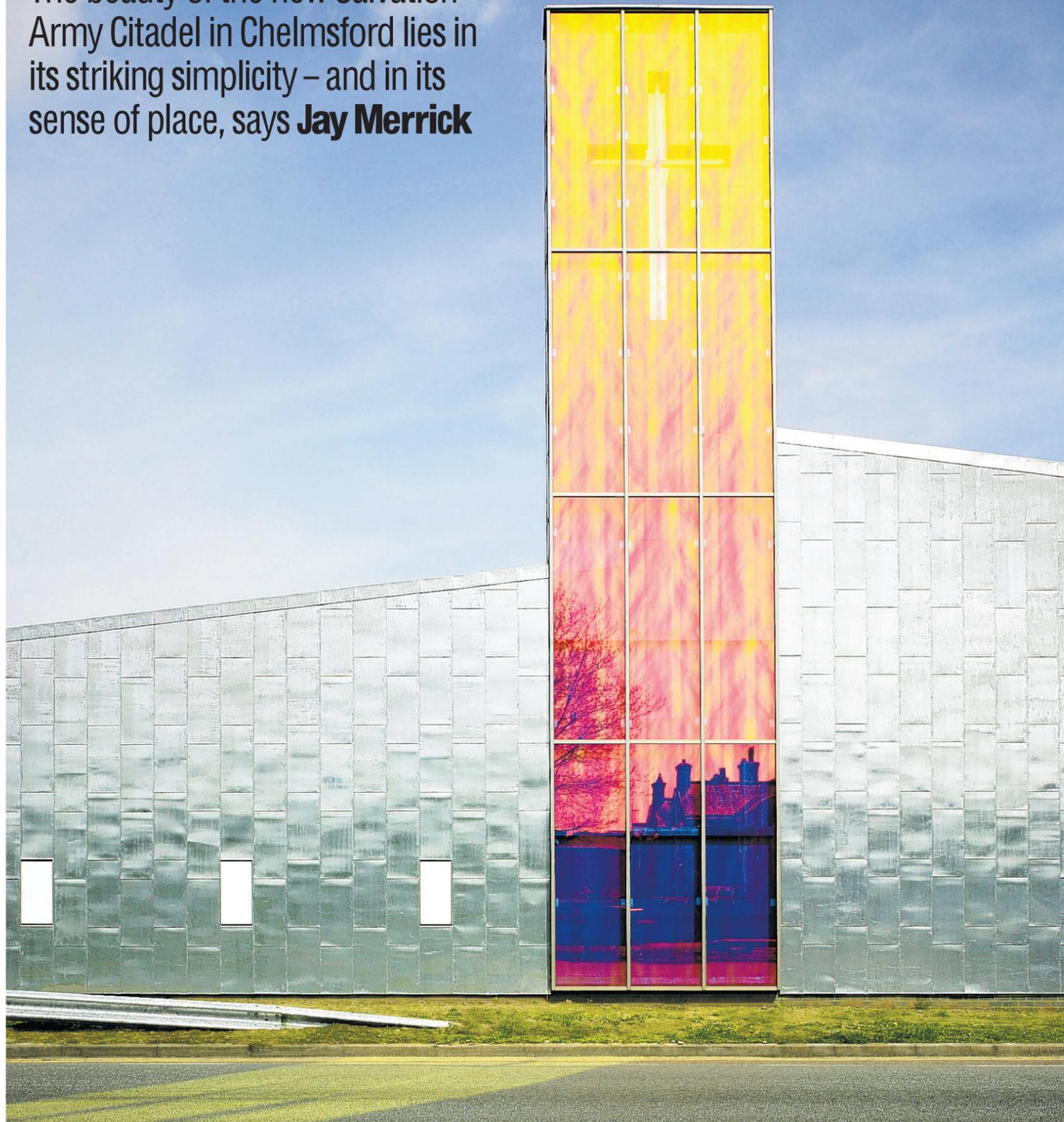


# Tower of strength

The beauty of the new Salvation Army Citadel in Chelmsford lies in its striking simplicity – and in its sense of place, says **Jay Merrick**



**A** new building in Chelmsford is the perfect riposte to the government's just-announced World Class Places strategy, a grimly spun vision portraying Britain's towns and cities as impending hotbeds of, well, world-class buildings. In a poky little street called Baddow Road, the Salvation Army Citadel designed by Anthony Hudson is a remarkable presence specifically because it is not world class. This building is, as it should be, *local* class.

The strangely glinting, zinc-clad building three minutes walk from the Chicago Rock Cafe and the Tottenham Hotspur supporters shop in the town centre may not obviously convey the Salvation Army's motto – "Blood and Fire" – but there's absolutely no doubt that its controversial form belongs here and only here, between the doleful automotive plainsongs echoing from the dual-carriageways of the A1099 and the Parkway that pincer the Citadel.

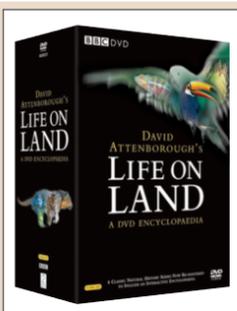
At night, the illuminated cross cut into the slim tower in the Citadel's south facade casts an elongated, softly lucent crucifix across the tarmac of the Parkway, and drivers pass through its momentary flicker. At that precise point one night – tomorrow, or next month, or ten thousand evenings hence – a car radio will be playing the Beatles' song, "Strawberry Fields Forever", named after the Salvation Army children's home in Liverpool. And the Citadel's architecture duly recalls a wonderful gnomic verse in that song:

*I mean it must be high or low  
That is you can't, you know, tune in  
But it's all right  
That is I think it's not too bad.*

The design of this £1.6m building is, indeed, slightly mysterious in terms of some of its parts; one isn't absolutely sure if its high bits should be lower, or its lower bits higher. Ultimately, though, it makes tough, pragmatic, and welcoming sense as a whole. Like Lennon's lyrics, the architectural language has a faintly odd cadence, but it's this very dissonance of form and material that stops the building from being a tricked-up design icon in a dead-end street.

The new Citadel acts rather like the architecture-as-billboard concept championed by the American visionary Robert Venturi, and it's certainly a vivid change from the dull 1970s building it replaces. If you walk past the largely glazed Baddow Road facade today, you'll see anything from Scouts milling around, to mother-and-toddler groups, worshippers, Salvation Army musicians or, as Major Derek Jones put it, "the lovely folk who just want to come in and sit quietly and eat their sandwiches."

Those lovely folk have already taken the place to heart, despite its relative formal and material oddity in a setting that almost defies the crucial notion of



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Shining example: the Citadel's southern elevation, showing the tower's colourful coating (left); cars pass the southern elevation on the Parkway dual carriageway (above); Anthony Hudson has created a practical, spacious interior (right) KEITH COLLIE/HUDSONARCHITECTS.CO.UK



architectural context. There is really nothing else of note in Baddow Road, nothing for the eye to linger on, no building forms or details that give pause for thought; this is not so much a built environment as a dishevelled locale.

So, on the face of it, this is nowhere. But that, of course, is exactly the kind of milieu that the Salvation Army's 19th-century founders, William and Catherine Booth, saw as ideal territory in which to dispense charity, deplore alcohol and social mendacity, and encourage repentance in a ritual-free environment. What the Booths began in the East End of London in 1865 has created a worldwide corps of two million "regulars", 300 of whom can now gather in the worship hall of the Chelmsford Citadel.

Many of them must have thought the new Citadel strange, initially. Metallic, facades like asymmetrical stage-flats, quotes from St John's gospel cut into the red cement-board of the east facade as part of a tree-of-life graphic

that looks more like an electronic circuit-board; and three of the four facades bearing no obvious relationship to one another. You might wonder how on earth this melange won the 2009 RIBA East Building of the Year award.

Simple. By being blatantly subservient to the fabric of this pocket of urban junk-space – and to the Salvation Army's 21st-century need to be noticed in a more strikingly inclusive way. There's a potential design conflict, isn't there? How much easier it would have been to plonk down something like a mini-me version of Herzog and de Meuron's Laban Centre in London – a featureless, crisply translucent architectural lozenge with a big LED Salvation Army sign; none of which would have made any obvious architectural reference to anything around it.

Anthony Hudson has, instead, designed a building whose outline along Baddow Road is an acknowledgement of the messily uneven facades that face

it. The southern elevation facing the dual carriageway of the Parkway is saved from the damnation of architectural muteness only by a single square window and the flaring colours of the prismatic coating on the glass skin of the tower; and the flanking eastern facade has a squared valley and ridge roof whose outline recalls a light industrial unit.

Hudson has taken other design risks. One can easily imagine the main entrance facade as the front of a trendy arts cinema. Where is the imprint of evangelical fervour? Or, rather, why is the evangelical facade the one whose cross-bearing tower faces the dual carriageway rather than passers-by in Baddow Road – the only pedestrian approach to the Citadel?

Inside the building, these apparent contradictions and satirical temptations evaporate into humane architectural agreement. Hudson has not been wilfully eclectic after all. He's managed to create a form, internal spaces, and

outdoor play area, whose unexpected variations are the result of the building's super-simple Austrian timber structural chassis, and the way this has allowed the Citadel's elevations to be modulated to address the urban scenes around the building with deference. It's true that Hudson might have created other equally pertinent, or even more critically engrossing architectural solutions; but his important achievement is that he has made a genuine attempt to introduce something new here, without trying to smother the workaday reality of the scene around the Citadel with an architectural power-chord.

Major Jones seems particularly at ease in the big, wood-lined worship hall. "We wanted this to be an accessible place," he said. "It's not a monument on a hill, or an ornament. The great cathedrals are magnificent, but you might not want to have a cup of coffee in them. We want to get back to the

Salvation Army and the church as the centre of the community. That's what this is – a *community* space. The building's just a series of boxes, but very cleverly done. It's known locally as the Marmite building – you either love it, or hate it. One fellow said: 'Ah, you've bought a site in Baddow Road'. 'No,' we said, 'we've been here 30 years, and you've never noticed the original building. But now you do!'"

And so this is local-class architecture, not world-class urban wallpaper. This is Chelmsford, not Dubai. This is the Salvation Army, not gell-quiffed special forces in three-for-£75 Hawes & Curtis shirts, tracking rogue derivatives on the killing floors of Canary Wharf or Wall Street. The Citadel is a building created by a thoughtful architect for clients committed to serving their community, and to marking out their specific physical place in the community. It sounds simple enough. It isn't. Baddow Road Forever.



Roof with a view: the Citadel's irregular structure mirrors surrounding buildings (left); the play area (above); the tree-of-life on the east facade (right) KEITH COLLIE/HUDSONARCHITECTS.CO.UK

