



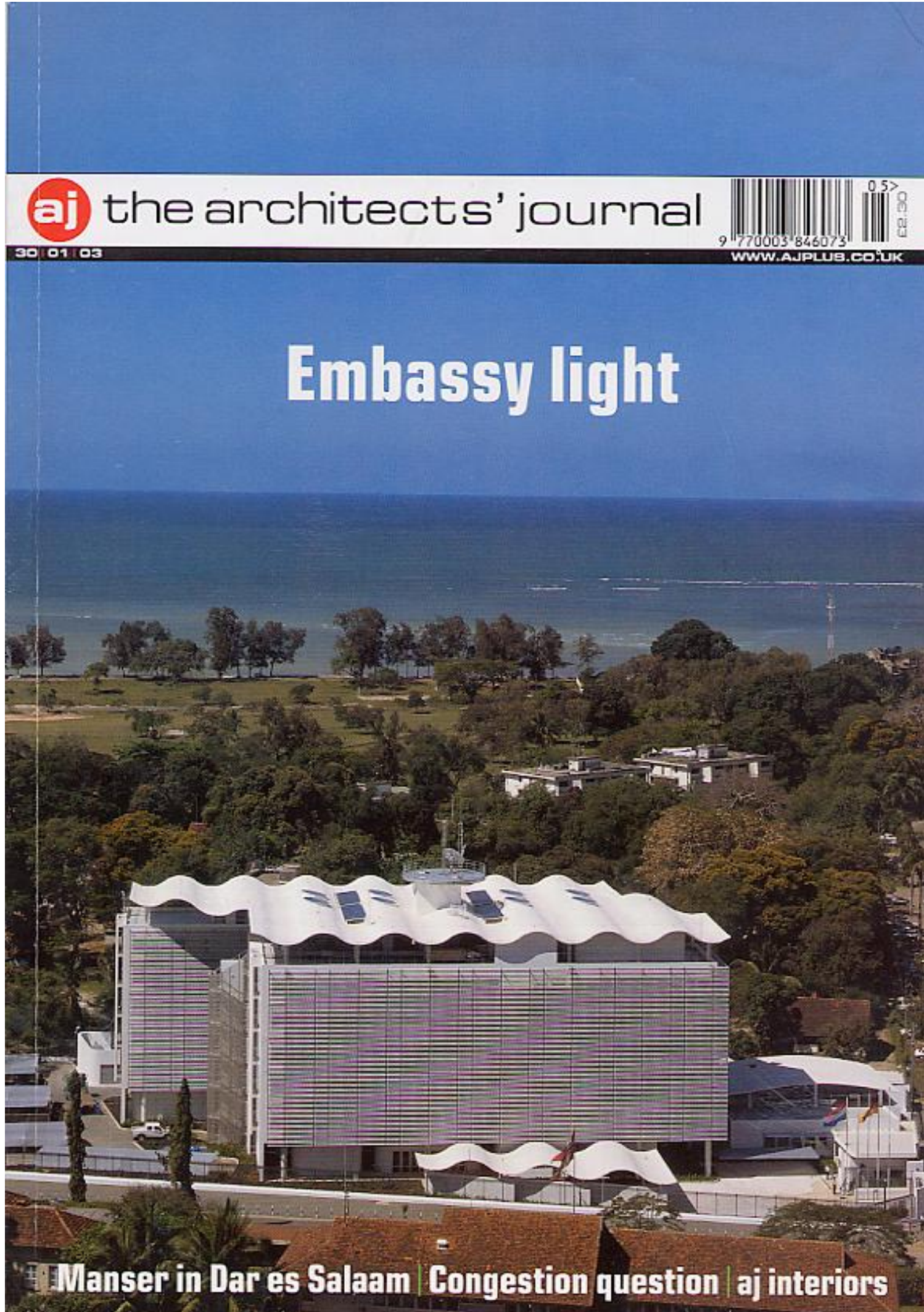
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The Scottish Parliament has released this construction shot of its new Enric Miralles/RMJM building at Holyrood in Edinburgh. The troubled project is now scheduled for completion in November. Official estimates put the final cost at £338 million, including landscaping, although alternative estimates place it nearer £400 million. The scheme combines several different elements, including the lobby with its roof punctured by boat-shaped skylights (pictured foreground), the MSPs office block (right) and the four main towers to accommodate the committees, ministers and their staff (left). The project also incorporates the existing 17th century Queensbury House, and creates a debating chamber and a media tower.

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Cover Umoja House, Dar es Salaam, by The Manser Practice
Photograph by Peter Cook/View

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Solutions that stack up

Why move to a new house when you can simply move your current one? Is container architecture the answer?

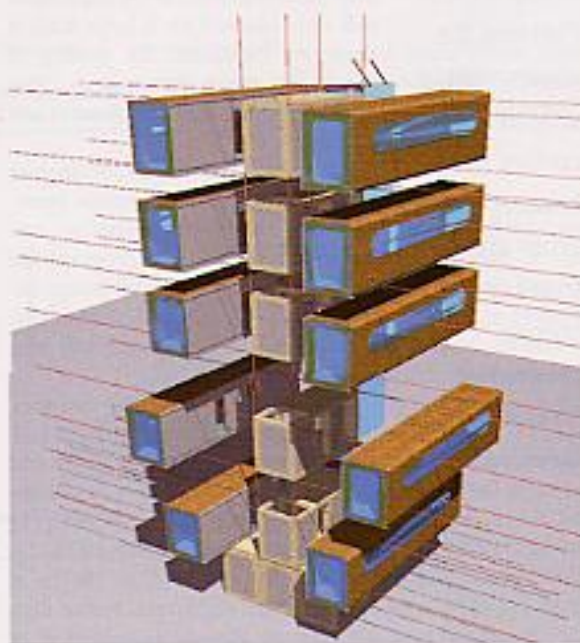
BY LIZ BAILEY

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) announced recently that modular housing projects are '...something we are encouraging, absolutely, though we have a different phrase: modern building methods, or off-site construction.'

Clerkenwell-based practice Bluebase has therefore developed the ultimate 'giant Lego for grown-ups' to fulfil the promise of off-site design and build. The result is the Modular Accommodation System (MAS), which more than easily complies with the requirement for 30 dwellings per hectare, comfortably managing up to 50 (10 dwellings per 200m² of floor plate).

Bananarama

Comprising a fibreglass-clad, steel-framed box the size of a standard sea-freight container that is suspend-



A typical tower has 10 units suspended from a steel core

ed from the side of a steel tower, a typical six-storey tower would hold 10 living units and a ground floor with, for instance, a lobby, bicycle storage and laundry facilities. The tower has a steel core and a 12m² central shaft containing the lift and stairs. The lift mechanism is patent pending: it not only carries passengers and freight but also hoists the boxes themselves up to where they 'side hang' independently from the outside of the tower, so no secondary cranes are required.

When you want to move house, you unhook your container-flat, transport it by truck, train or ship to wherever and slot it into a local tower-frame. 'You can move from London to Paris in six hours,' says Bluebase partner Matthias Hamm. 'Half an hour to take your box off the tower, five hours to drive to Paris and a half an hour to plug it into the Paris tower.' The ultimate in modularity and flexibility. The box itself can be produced anywhere, and, says Hamm, 'like a banana, it comes in its own wrapper.'

The minimum distance between towers is four metres, to allow the lift to manoeuvre the boxes into place and suspend them from the tower. For ease

of manipulation the boxes are also vertically spaced 10cm apart along the tower, maintaining total separation between party walls. The spacing makes it possible for each unit to be individually unloaded and reloaded for repairs or moving house. Just like your car, 'if maintenance is needed, someone just takes your house and gives you a courtesy flat,' says Hamm. If the space above you becomes free you can 'move up in the world' until you're in the penthouse, or even swap downward to save money.'

Feel the quality...

The boxes themselves are completely customisable. The units have windows on three sides, and their well-insulated fibreglass exterior can be patterned to suit the client's preference. 'Inside, the box is fitted out like a yacht or a high-speed train.' Should you want to move further afield, everything in the box, including the appliances, is fitted with universal transformers as a standardised connector.

While MAS more than fulfils the government's newest density restrictions, worries persist that such schemes might be perceived as a 'cheap' alternative to real housing. According to an ODPM spokesman, the minister of state for housing and planning '...has said many times, we're very keen on the idea of improving and increasing the amount of housing available. This sort of thing works very well in other countries. The balance is you want good quality, not things flung together.' Actually, 'inexpensive' might be a more appropriate word. The cost of a 10-unit, six-storey MAS tower is about £500,000, with actual modules costing £15,000 for the shell or £30,000 fitted out. The tower itself costs about £250,000. Additional costs would include between £50,000 and £100,000 for foundations, utilities, telecoms, fencing, surface treatment and minor landscaping. And shipping a module from London to Boston, US, say, would cost \$1,000 (about £630).

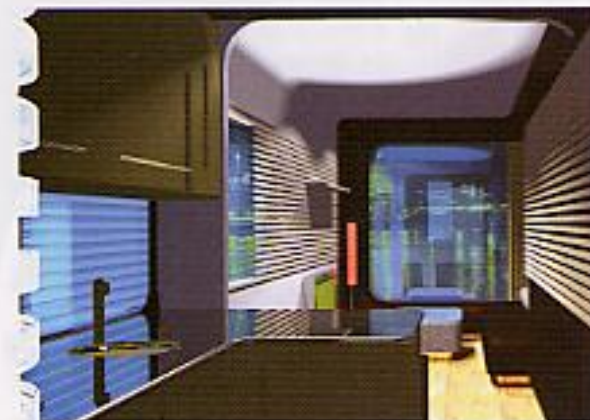
A building frequently cited as meeting both density and design targets is Murray Grove, built off-site by Portakabin subsidiary Yorkon, and slotted together in Hackney. But, argues Hamm, 'Murray Grove wasn't really off-site construction, probably



Units are the size of a standard sea-freight container



typical floor plan



The fully customisable boxes have windows on three sides ...



... and they are fitted out to a high standard like a yacht

just 70 per cent or so. The boxes were still clad onsite. It may have been 50 or 60 per cent quicker, but cost-wise it matched traditional construction. With MAS, we're beating that easily, with no heavy engineering onsite. There's a lot of talk of "microflats" or "prefab" construction, but MAS is truly modular and a reasonable size – 2.89 high x 12m long by 2.45m wide. Most so-called prefabricated buildings are not truly modular but are produced in batches; therefore they are not necessarily cheaper, just quicker.'

Admittedly, the ODPM asserts that the government is reluctant to adopt temporary schemes. 'Sometimes in the rush to find a solution we apply a sticking plaster, then 40 years later we find the sticking plaster still in place. After the Second World War, 'prefabs' were put up and people are still living in them. A 60-year living cycle looks a pretty permanent structure.'

Hamm says: 'There's nothing more permanent than a temporary scheme, but because MAS is detachable, it's different. These towers can be moved to take advantage of lower land prices. Though you would lose the cost of preparing the site, you are not actually blighting the land – instead you are creating a mobile asset, possibly with temporary planning permission. It would be like mooring in a port.'

Bluebase hopes to display a box fitted out by Armani or Gucci at Tate Modern and is also considering a downsized version for cities such as Bangkok and Hong Kong.

Maybe in the near future we will all be swapping tower locations online. At a later stage there might be a website where you can trade your location, your tower, your box, like a stock market. You could buy boxes and hire them out, ship them round, develop them: it would be a bit like Sim City. And this would be possible because it can fit on the existing container system. 'Like a mobile phone that works in the US and the UK,' as Hamm says, 'it is simply a commodity with a clip-on fascia.'

For more information on Bluebase's MAS, visit www.bluebase.com/mas.htm

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