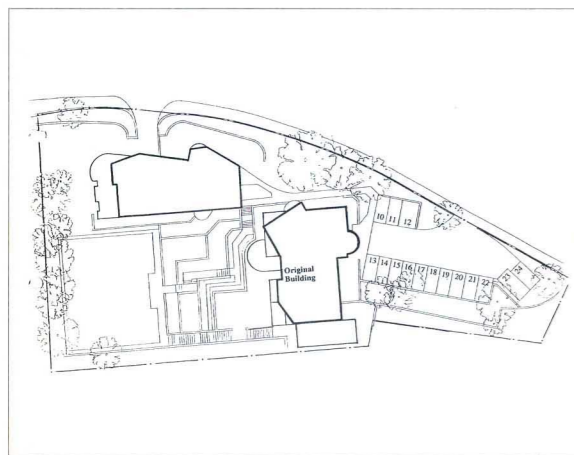




Left: Looking landwards towards the original house with its semicircular sun room, now the reception room of one of the apartments. The additional floor sits under an angular copper roof. The existing landscaping terraces have been extended. Right: The new block of flats in the garden. Even the staircase tower, modelled on that of the original building, has a sea view. Below left: Site plan.

Salty Towers

Conning Towers - a remodelled art deco house overlooking Poole Harbour in Dorset - has been rescued, writes Robert Bevan. Photos by Morley von Sternberg



The brand-new luxury bathroom in the £715,000 showflat of the Conning Towers development just wasn't posh enough to attract a buyer so the pristine porcelain has been ripped out and replaced with a few more acres of marble and underfloor heating.

That's how they like to do things in Poole. It is not called the English Riviera round here for nothing. Ferraris nose around the tight bends in the hills above the distinctly un-British blue waters of Poole Harbour. Pumped-up mansions and apartment blocks kick sand in the direction of the surrounding pine trees. Footballers live around here in increasing numbers.

The area's rich vulgarity is matched only by the less obvious poverty of Bournemouth's bedst land to the east and the sour smelling charity and discount shops behind Poole's seafront to the west.

Flashy bathrooms aside, however, David Quigley Architects' Conning Tow-

ers scheme is a model of restraint in comparison with the po-mo monstrosities that glory in monikers such as Siesta Key and Water Music. Top heavy with balconies, they have more front than Baywatch.

Conning Towers is the remodelling of a 1934 art deco private house called Conning Tower (singular), part of the Harbour Heights development built by local architect AJ Seal & Partners to make the most of amazing views across the harbour to the Purbeck Hills. It must easily have been the flashiest house on this stretch of coast in its time. In addition to seven bedrooms and servants quarters it had its own cinema, a large cantilevered semi-circular sun lounge with a circular column incorporating "built-in loudspeakers, operated from the principal receiving set in the living room".

The reinforced concrete and steel-framed Conning Tower was the last word in moderne; even the skirtings were anodised aluminium. Sale particu-

lars of 1948 described it as an "exceptionally choice, splendidly equipped freehold marine residence". Pevsner was more restrained. "The buildings are admirably sited with prominent glazed staircase curves derived from Mendelsohn," he said in *The Buildings of England: Dorset*.

The building's fortunes soon declined, however, and by the 1950s it had been sold again to the Wellcome Foundation who used the building as a convalescence home. By the nineties proposals were being made to demolish the building despite it being locally listed. Finally, David Quigley Architects was brought in to adapt the existing building to form five large flats. To make the investment stack up, another floor was added to the original building and a new block of flats created at right angles to the original in the gardens.

Externally, DQA has drawn on the smooth white render and W20 window language of the earlier building. The ►





Left: The garden elevation of the new block. Right: The marine lines of the new block's street elevation with its pronounced balconies and porthole windows. Below (top to bottom): Penthouse and typical floor plan of the new block, and a typical floor plan of a new apartment in the original house.

prominent balconies, however, also owe a lot to the nineties. Their sheer size and aggressive directionality reflect the thousands of pounds that can be added to the asking price if a sea view is available. Angled balconies on the flank add to the number of rooms with a view. This is a trick also evident in blocks of 1930s flats around London's Regent's Park.

Internally, the frame structure of the original building has allowed DQA to depart radically from the original plan form; only the staircase compartment remains. Elsewhere curving free-form walls have been used to help the spaces "flow". Quigley says the walls have been pulled away from columns to avoid the structure, and elements such as circular showers have been allowed to impinge on corridor spaces to act as a directional pivot. It is an approach that has been taken forward to the new-build element.

Despite the additional penthouse

floor being deliberately angular in form to maintain a distinction from the earlier fabric below, the new additions and the new block cannot help but swamp the original house. Add to this the scooping out of the interior and it becomes more difficult to see the point of retaining the original structure. The old staircase (the Conning Tower?) with its ribbed patent glazing remains and is reinterpreted in the staircase of the new-build element, but this feels more of an emblematic device – a branding, given the sweeping away of many other of the original elements.

To Quigley, however, it is the spirit of the work that matters: "The thing about modern architecture; certainly about 1930s [building] is that the intrinsic value of the materials is actually very low," he says. "It is the crispness and the sharpness of the architecture itself. It is the lines and the look which make it of its age."

