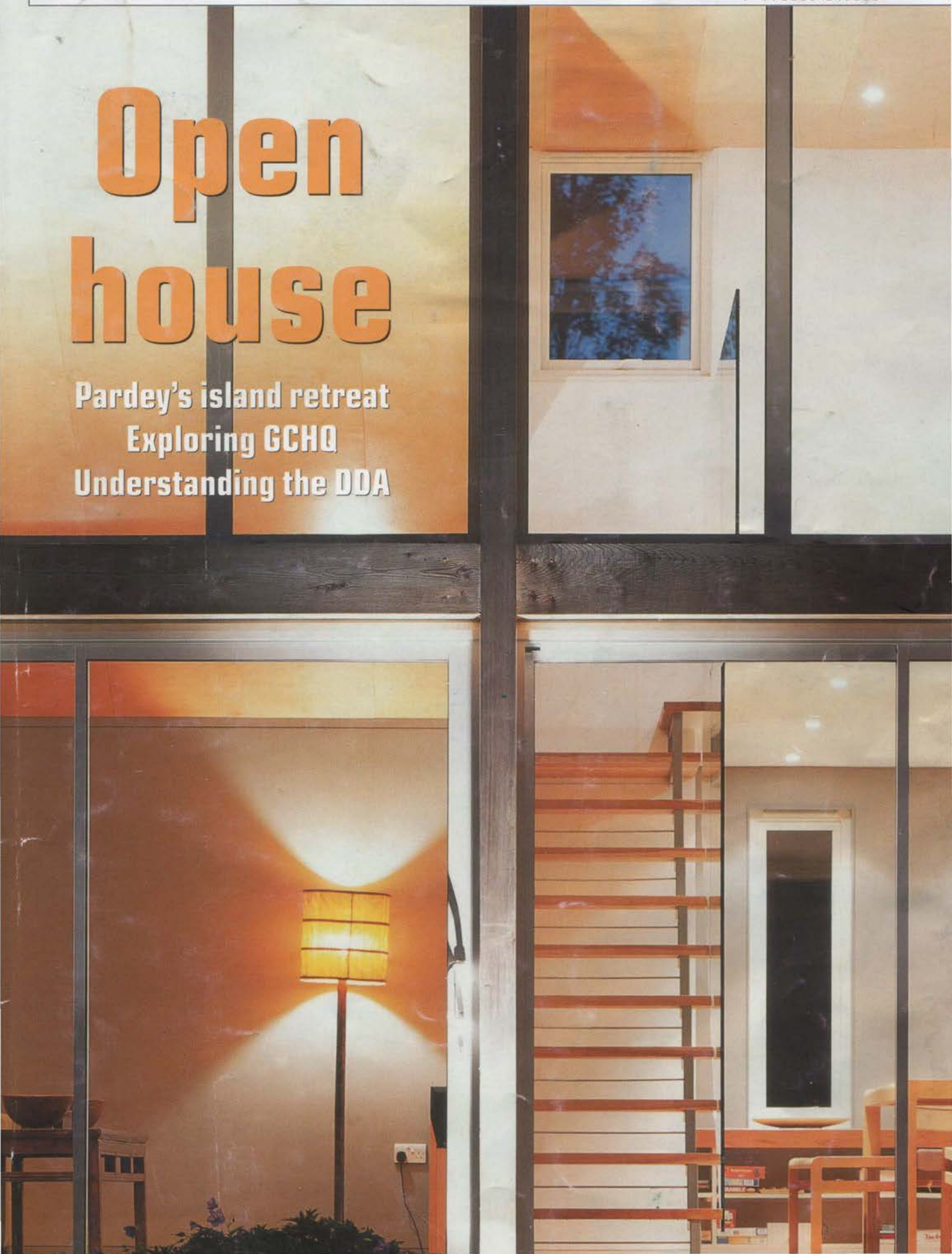


Open house

Pardey's island retreat
Exploring GCHQ
Understanding the DDA



Pleasure island

In Sellers House on the Isle of Wight, John Pardey has deferred his ambition to build the perfect courtyard house, and instead framed the exterior landscape in a calm, impressive country retreat

By Isabel Allen. Photographs by James Morris





A decade has passed since John Pardey built himself a home on the edge of the New Forest (AJ 8.12.93). Writing in the AJ at the time, the then editor Stephen Greenberg commented on the house's maturity, remarking that the architect 'had been around long enough and seen enough over-elaboration to avoid fussy little trims and late 1980s minimalist detailing'. In truth, Pardey has never been that interested in 'fuss' or architectural complexity. His private house commissions are not seen as test-beds for ideas or stepping stones to greater things, but as ends in their own right. Ever since his days as an Utzon-obsessed undergraduate, he has been striving towards a goal which is at once modest and hopelessly ambitious: to design the perfect courtyard house.

Like Pardey's own house, Sellers House on the Isle of Wight, a 195m² four-bedroom weekend retreat for a financier and his wife, gives the immediate impression that the visitor is entering a secret world. A complex entrance sequence – protective wall, timber walkway, pool (although the 'pool' is currently filled with pebbles, as water was deemed too dangerous for the clients' three young children) – is shoe-horned into a domestic scale, exaggerating the ritual of arrival. It turns its back to the street (in this case a gravel track just off the road between Yarmouth and Ryde), and is composed of linear wings (living and sleeping), which are set at right angles to each other and wrap around a secluded outdoor space. But it doesn't have a courtyard.

Despite his best intentions, none of Pardey's houses ever do. The reason, I suspect, is that Pardey's enthusiasm for the courtyard is equalled by his love of the English countryside, and in particular the lush stretch of the Hampshire coast which he has made his home. Where true courtyard houses prioritise their own internalised environment over the outside world, Pardey's houses – often commissioned by clients who, like Pardey

city – are designed to embrace the landscape, and, in true picturesque tradition, to improve on it by framing strategic views.

Sellers House, like Pardey's house, nestles behind an (almost) solid garden wall providing protective armour to the north and east facades and signalling a snuffy stand-offishness towards its rather motley neighbours. To the passer-by it presents a pleasing composition of cedar cladding, blue paint and what was once to have been white stucco but has somehow stayed as unprepossessing yellow brick. But it offers few clues as to what lies inside. Openings on this northern elevation are designed to provide the inhabitants with



A timber walkway breaks through the protective wall and crosses a small pebbled courtyard

a view that is either severely bowdlerised (the small slot window to the kitchen framing an abstract strip of greenery) or entirely manufactured (the full-height bathroom window overlooking a small pool enclosed by a protective wall).

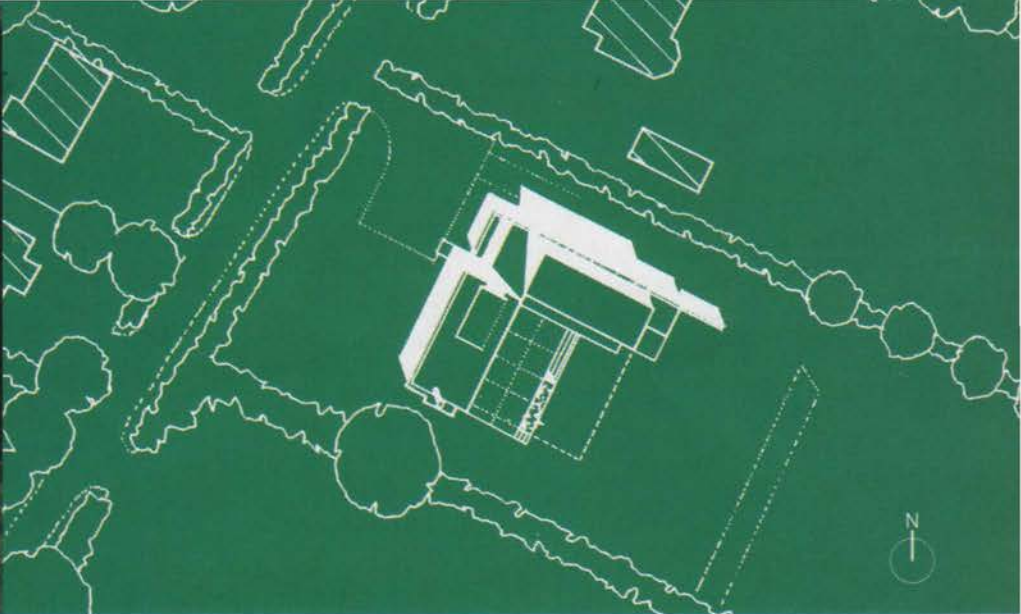
On the north-eastern elevation, which defines the outer edge of the bedroom wing, the windows are not designed for looking though at all; high-level slit windows are

kissed by a shaft of the rising sun. It is a poetic gesture, rendered particularly effective by the simplicity of the rooms themselves, furnished with rather beautiful solid wood furniture purpose-designed by Pardey. The bedrooms are spaces of an almost monastic tranquillity – and a couple of missed opportunities. It seems strange that the raised platforms above the corridor have not been turned into sleeping decks (which would have needed little more than a ladder and rail) and stranger still that the floor-to-ceiling picture windows, which appear to provide each individual room with its own access to a private balcony overlooking the terrace, cannot be opened at all, and are simply there to frame the view.

To this side of the house, the outlook is well worth framing and, in fact, becomes the defining feature of the main living space. The monopitch roof to the living wing rises from single-storey at the front to a generous 5.5m high. Floor-to-ceiling glazing offers panoramic views of an apparently uninhabited landscape. Neighbours are forgotten. The impression is of solitude, immense beauty and infinite space.

True to appearances, the living room does indeed 'spill out' on to the terrace, from where there is ample opportunity to drink in the view. Enclosed on two sides by the wings of the L-shaped house, the terrace was designed to have some of the intimacy of a courtyard, its third side protected by the dense thicket of a working vineyard (the island's last), which previously stood to the rear of the house. But the owners have since elected to strip out the vines, leaving a vast expanse of sorry-looking turf and a terrace which – for the time being at least – is rather exposed. (Pardey himself was pushing for a sketch plan by landscape architect Jenny Coe, which proposed a maze of secret pathways and clearings, creating a tangled garden out of the ancient vines.)

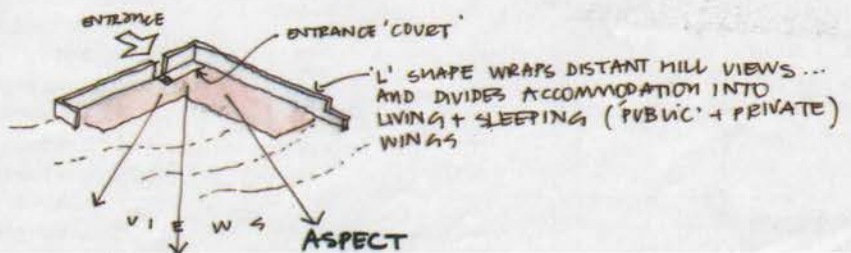
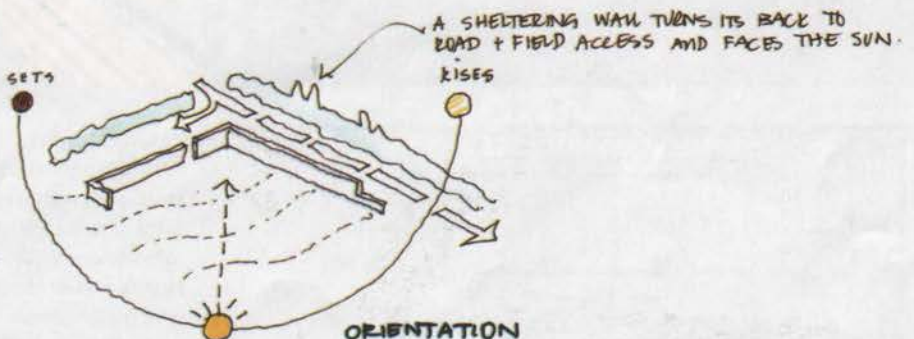
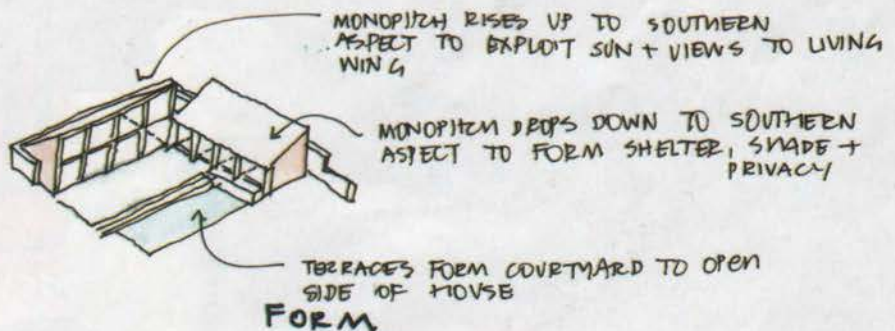
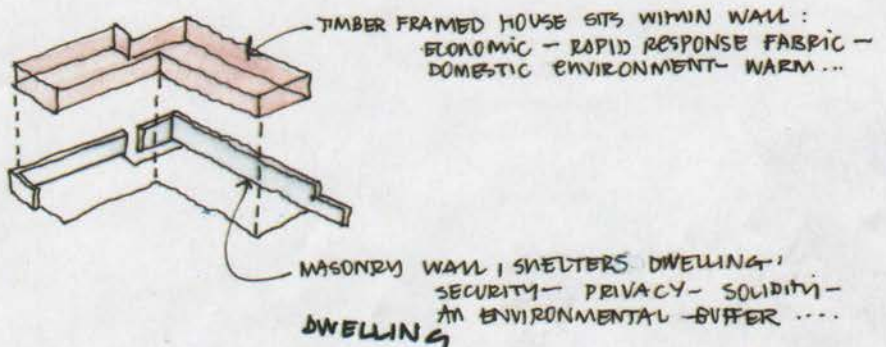
But if the view from the house looking

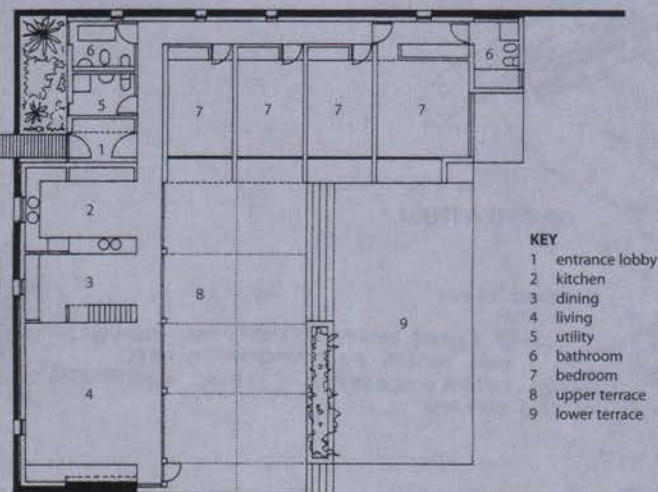


looking in is contained, striking and utterly complete. In stark contrast to the low-slung, rather secretive front wall, the southern elevation reveals all the house's secrets; the double-height cedar frame dissecting and displaying the constituent components of the single-volume living area like the rooms inside a dolls' house. When Greenberg wrote his (generally enthusiastic) critique of Pardey's house, he cautioned that the living room was a little too large, but that otherwise the house was to be commended for being free from 'the usual architectural conceits', in particular 'double-height spaces which rarely work'. Here, the living area is both double-height and vast, but it definitely works.

Part of its success can be attributed to the mezzanine, which was actually an after-thought but which provides some of the spatial divisions implied by the grid of the facade, introducing a degree of complexity and human scale to what could otherwise have been a over-simple, barn-like space. While the mezzanine itself gives a more intimate scale to the kitchen area, the maple slatted screen to its elegant cherry-and-steel stair provides just the right amount of separation between kitchen and living space. The space under the stair has proved to be a favourite play space – a child-size definable territory within the drama of the open-plan room. But credit should also be given to Pardey's feel for colour and texture. Using a palette of materials that doesn't appear to have changed much since he built his own home, he has an unerring and apparently intuitive ability to temper a direct approach to planning with an unexpected earthy warmth.

Pardey does not seem to be any nearer to his ambition than he was 10 years ago. But he is establishing himself as master of a distinctive domestic oeuvre that has evolved from the peculiarities of local character and climate and a particular client base. Sellers House isn't perfect and it isn't a courtyard house, but it is an outstanding response to





Structure

Small residential projects are the bane of designers', including structural engineers', lives but often present the best opportunity to think 'outside the box'. This was especially true in this case, where the remoteness of the setting added to the usual challenges of the client's and architect's aspirations and the need to carry out the work within a limited budget.

The project consisted of demolishing an existing run-down bungalow and replacing it with a new high-specification residential property. The cost and difficulty of transporting concrete around the island, and the expense of building on the site, demanded an unorthodox approach to the structure.

The site revealed shrinkable clays and contained several trees of varying maturity. The foundation solution adopted was derived from spacing out pad foundations based on the length of precast concrete beams available on the island. The width of each pad is based on the bucket width of the excavator, carried out using the same stock,



concrete beams span between the pads and, in turn, support the beam and block-suspended ground slab. The process allowed the contractor to provide an appropriate foundation system in record time and with maximum ease.

The superstructure of the building consists of two distinct areas: the sleeping area and the living area. The sleeping area was constructed using fairly standard timber-frame construction. The living area was far more challenging. This area is open-plan accommodation with a mezzanine level located over the kitchen space. A double-height glazed facade rises to 5.5m high to the eave, with a monopitch roof sloping back to the rear wall. The decision to use timber for aesthetic and environmental reasons had already been made and the structural zones available were incompatible with a portalised solution. The mullions on the glazed facade were used to transmit lateral forces through the roof plane to gable sheer walls. Engineering straps were introduced to the gable walls to resist the induced overturning loads.

depth section was essential to the architectural vision. This was achieved by laminating an aesthetic 145mm x 125mm red cedar post, to a 128mm x 95mm glulam beam. The two sections are used compositely to provide the required stiffness and maintain the architectural solution. All connections were designed to be secret fixings.

One further feature of the project was the staircase to the mezzanine level. This can perhaps be described as a piece of 'engineering art'. Each cherry wood tread is supported on one side by a 40mm folded box section and by three vertical timber slats on the other. The slats were designed to be as slender as possible, while accommodating a single 8mm dowel bar glued into the edge of the tread through the slat to provide a secret fixing detail (see Working Detail).

The project demonstrates how innovation flourishes when one's back is against the wall, with design solutions taking account of local skills and market forces to present workable answers within budgetary constraints, allowing the design to achieve the architectural aspirations with little compromise.



COST SUMMARY

	Cost per m ² (£)	Percentage of total			
SUBSTRUCTURE	214.15	14.48	Ceiling finishes	40.6	2.75
SUPERSTRUCTURE			Group element total	62.10	4.2
Timber frame	304.26	20.57	FITTINGS AND FURNITURE		
Roof	105.12	7.1	Kitchen fit-out	56.52	3.82
Staircases	21.06	1.42	SERVICES		
External walls	102.14	6.91	Sanitary appliances	28.21	1.91
Windows (aluminium screen)	93.85	6.35	Space heating and plumbing	96.5	6.53
Windows (aluminium clad timber)	46.22	3.13	Electrical services	48.29	3.26
External doors	4.45	0.3	Builders' work in connection	26.84	1.85
Internal doors	27.35	1.85	Group element total	199.84	13.55
Group element total	704.45	47.63	EXTERNAL WORKS	64.05	4.32
INTERNAL FINISHES			Preliminaries and insurance	177.67	12.0
Wall finishes	11.67	0.79	TOTAL	1478.78	100

Cost data provided by John Pardey Architects



CREDITS

All costs are based on gross internal area

TENDER DATE

October 2001

START ON SITE

January 2002

CONTRACT DURATION

Ten months

FORM OF CONTRACT

JCT Minor Works

NET INTERNAL FLOOR AREA

186m²

GROSS EXTERNAL FLOOR AREA

201m²

TOTAL COST

£278,020

CLIENT

Paddy and Jacky Sellers

ARCHITECT

John Pardey Architects

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER

Adams Kara Taylor, London

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSULTANT

Dr Kevin McCartney, Portsmouth University

CONTRACTOR

John Peck Construction, Isle of Wight

SUBCONTRACTORS AND SUPPLIERS

Timber frame Sydenhams Timber Engineering; structural cedar frame Graham Richards Joinery Co; heating and plumbing Datawarm; electrical Peter Sexton Co; aluminium screen Architectural Aluminium Systems; aluminium clad windows NorDan; staircase fabrication Island Structural; flooring Kahrs; zinc roofing Pace Roofing

