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Spence and sensibility

John Pardey updates a '60s classic

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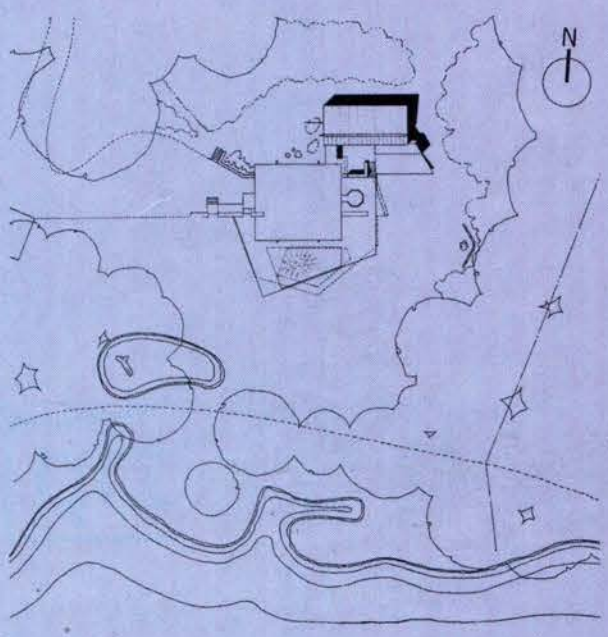


'This must be one of the most beautiful sites in the south,' says John Pardey. He is standing on a paved platform above a grassy, tree-fringed slope beside the Beaulieu River in Hampshire. Sun sparkles on the water, seen through a partial screen of leaves, while boats bob up and down near a long narrow jetty.

Here, in 1961, Basil Spence built a house for his own use, primarily as a weekend retreat. Now Grade II-listed and owned by a London financier, it has just been renovated by Pardey, who has added an extension to the north-east. In the process, the original landscape scheme by Sylvia Crowe has been reinstated.

Spence died in 1976, but the job architect for the Beaulieu house, Anthony Blee, still practices in London and can shed light on the initial design. Apparently Spence heard in a roundabout way that the Hampshire landowner Lord Montagu, needing to raise money, was selling off plots by the Beaulieu River. In Blee's words 'a mad keen sailor', Spence was greatly attracted to that part of the country and duly reconnoitred it.

The eventual site was then 'deep in brambles' with only one other property anywhere in the vicinity. Initially, says Blee, the local planners were minded to refuse permission so Spence suggested a meeting on site. Having hacked his way through the undergrowth,

Riverside renaissance

John Pardey has renovated and extended a house by Basil Spence in the New Forest. Now it is not just an ideal weekend retreat but a comfortable family home

By Andrew Mead. Photographs by James Morris/Axiom

the planning officer told the architects: 'We usually look for something half-timbered.' Pointing to the model of his scheme and leaving the officer nonplussed, Spence said: 'Well, isn't this half-timbered?'

In a sense it is. What Spence proposed and eventually realised was a cedar-clad, slightly monopitched box, cantilevered out from two white-painted brick walls built parallel to the contours of the site. The upper floor contained a large open-plan living area with an adjacent balcony, two modest bedrooms and a kitchenette, while downstairs served as a boatstore and workshop.

Pardey points out the resemblance between the Spence House and two slightly earlier buildings in Denmark by Arne Jacobsen – the Kokfelt House of 1956 and the Siesby House of 1957, both similarly cantilevered over masonry supports. Whether Spence knew these has not been definitely established, although Blee confirms Spence's interest in Scandinavian design: 'He made several visits to Sweden and had a number of Danish friends. He certainly admired Jacobsen and, when the British profession was miffed that Jacobsen had received the Saint Catherine's College commission, made a point of throwing a party for him at his practice in Canonbury.'

But in its timber-over-masonry form the Spence House has other antecedents, particularly in the work of Marcel Breuer – his own New Canaan house of 1948, for instance – and Blee thinks that Breuer was probably 'a much closer influence'.

Whatever Spence's sources, the Bealieu house is one of his most convincing and resolved designs. 'It's a strong statement,' says Pardey, not just in its dramatic cantilever ('almost on the limit') but its overall aesthetic. 'This is Modernism, but it's very human. It's Modernism with an incredible straightforward earthiness. There's nothing fussy – it's direct.'

Spence's long-term historical importance is still a matter of debate. Coventry Cathedral has perhaps been more of a popular

than a critical success and, operating three practices as he did, the extent of his involvement with the buildings they produced varied considerably. But lately James Dunnett has made a case for what he calls 'Spence's personal works' (AJ 15.8.96). He singles out Mortonhall Crematorium near Edinburgh and the Sussex University Meeting House for special praise. To these, Pardey adds the Beaulieu house: 'It's very personal. Spence did all the drawings – and he drew like an angel.'

Pardey became unfashionably enthusiastic about Spence when still a student, admiring 'his willingness to use romantic and sculptural forms, his attempt to humanise a Modernist language by fusing it with historical precedent'. He had long wanted to visit the Beaulieu house and eventually wrote to its owners to ask if he could do so. It was a very fortuitous request. As things turned out, he got not just the desired invitation but an unanticipated commission.

Shipshape simplicity

Spence only occupied the house for five or six years but during that period made several modifications, all to increase its domesticity and comfort. Chief among them were his glazing-in of the first-floor balcony to enlarge the living room, his partial adaption of the ground-floor boatstore-cum-workshop for kitchen and dining facilities, and the construction of an octagonal timber stair tower, with a spiral staircase, at the east end of the house. Moreover, he toyed with the possibility of an extension, which received planning permission but was never built.

In essence, then, the current owners wanted to consolidate changes that Spence had made or at least envisaged. While keeping it as a house for weekends and holidays, a place for relaxation and entertaining, they needed more space and amenity. Pardey's extension provides two bedrooms – one for the owners, the other for their two young children – and a luxurious bathroom. Meanwhile guests can use the bedrooms in the renovated original house, whose ground floor is now thoroughly incorporated into daily life as a kitchen/dining room, but whose spacious first-floor living area is still very much the showpiece – the property's raison d'être.

Pardey's renovation was hardly straightforward. One complicating factor was the subsiding swimming pool a few metres from the house: the engineer advised that if was simply dug out the whole property might start sliding down towards the river. Forty-seven 250mm diameter piles were inserted to form a new retaining structure, 6.6 to 10m deep, right across the front of the house, beyond which the new pool – a reinforced blown concrete shell – was built. 'There's a cliff down there,' says Pardey, pointing out the position of the piles.

But the house itself called for a painstaking approach. To avoid any disturbance to the splendid living room, the upgraded services and insulation were installed from the outside: the first-floor timber box being stripped above and below while protectively enclosed in scaffolding and bubble wrap.

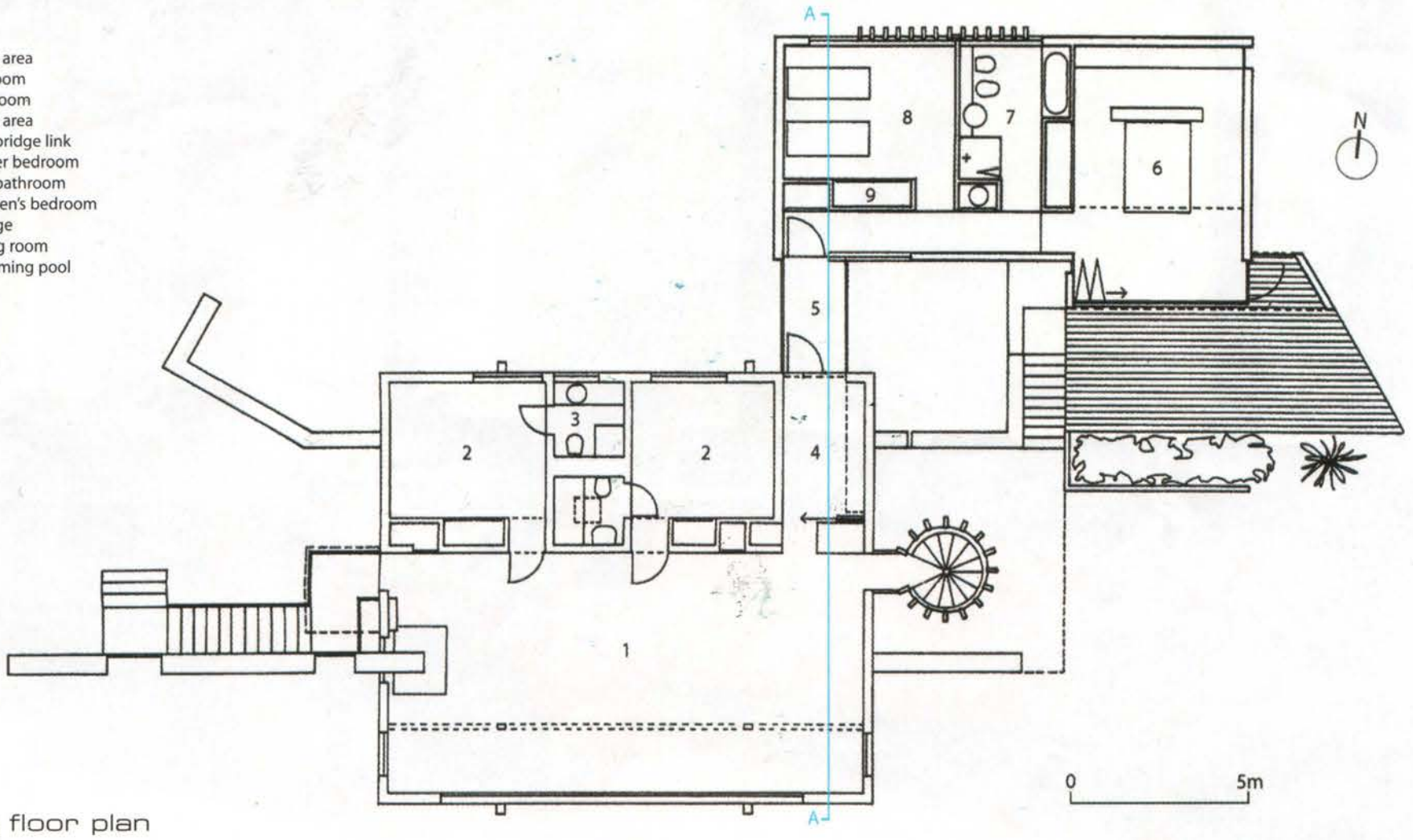
The stripping beneath brought an additional benefit because all the floor joists could then be clipped to the two big laminated timber beams on which the house is cantilevered. This gained an extra 250mm height for the ground floor, so cementing its change from an ancillary to an integral space. One of these beams, when exposed, proved to have badly rotted and was repaired with epoxy resin-bonded, stepped laminations held together by stainless steel ties – 'Yacht mast technology,' says Pardey.

The ground floor was originally a workshop and boatstore. Spence began to adapt it for domestic use and Pardey has cemented the change

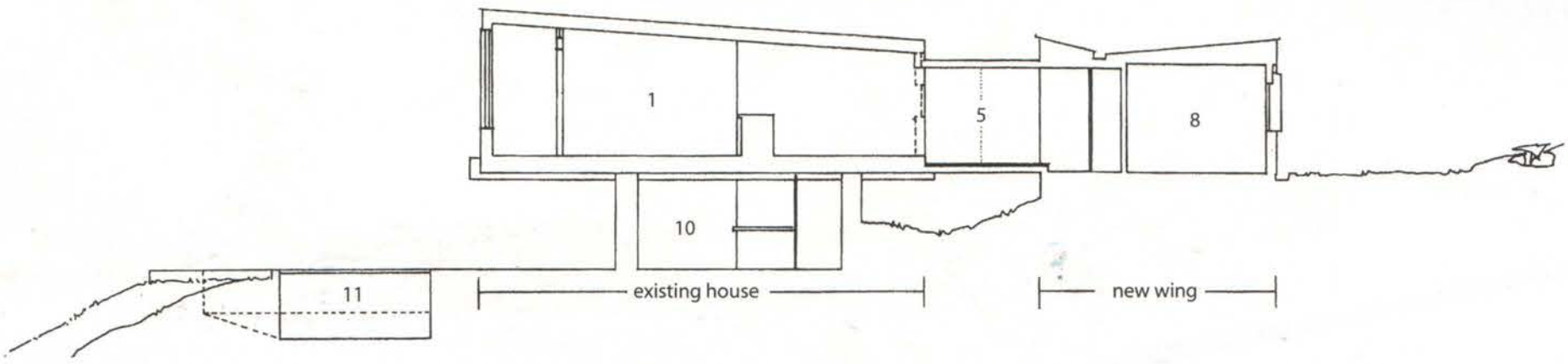
Looking towards the front of the Spence House from the slope leading down to the Beaulieu River

KEY

1 living area
2 bedroom
3 bathroom
4 study area
5 new bridge link
6 master bedroom
7 new bathroom
8 children's bedroom
9 storage
10 dining room
11 swimming pool



first floor plan



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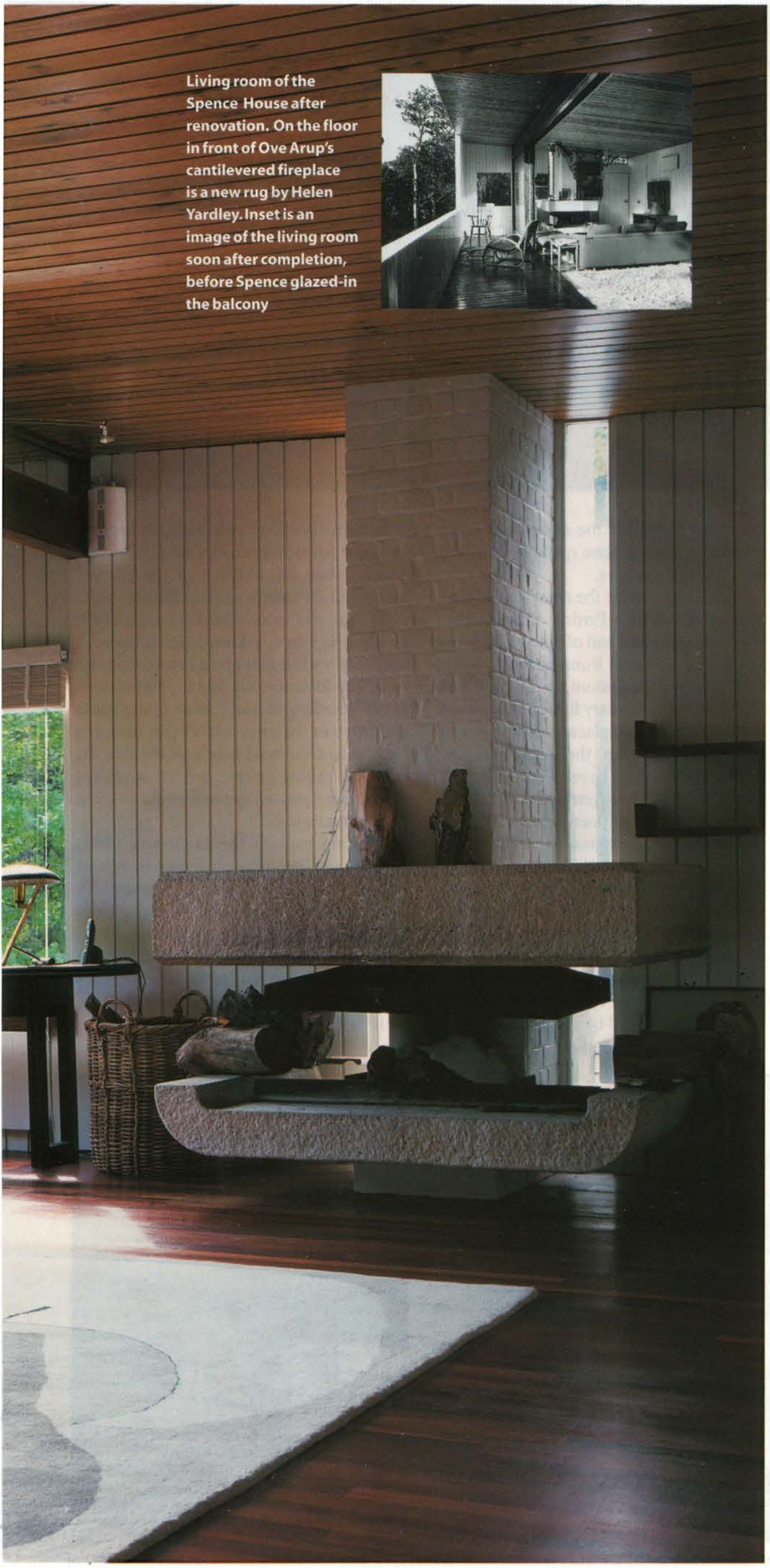


Living room of the Spence House after renovation. On the floor in front of Ove Arup's cantilevered fireplace is a new rug by Helen Yardley. Inset is an image of the living room soon after completion, before Spence glazed-in the balcony

On the first floor there was further rot in the bathrooms, which were completely renewed with more upmarket fittings. Otherwise, apart from discreet evidence of the improved services, the first-floor rooms have not been altered fundamentally. The bedrooms, trim and timber-lined, still have a nautical feel – you could be a guest on a well-heeled yacht – while the living room, generous in its proportions and filled with light, is inviting and memorable. In Pardey's opinion: 'It is perhaps the best 1960s domestic space in Britain.'

Its ceiling is of Swedish redwood, the walls a white-painted softwood, and the floor, afazalia. The ceiling slopes gently upwards to amplify the views through the sliding windows that stretch across the front of the house in a continuous band; there is a strong pull south to the natural world outside. Yet there is a powerful focus to the other axis as well in the monumental bush-hammered concrete fireplace, which Spence's friend Ove Arup cantilevered from the brick wall at the west end of the room. This looks much like a primitive sculpture, a massive gaping mouth. If the house seems initially to demand summer days, here is its heart in the dark and cold; a point emphasised by the placement of the furniture when it was first photographed and published (*Architectural Review*, March 1962).

Pardey replaced the leaking felt and mineral-chipping roof with terne-coated stainless steel, which he believes is 'a bullet-proof solution' in the face of a tough maritime climate. The external cedar boarding had, however, weathered well. Originally it was finished with pigmented silicone liquid, dark grey in colour, but at some later stage it was stained black, which is just how Pardey has kept it, merely sandpapering the cedar and applying a translucent black woodstain.

In view of its waterside setting, this seems an apt decision. One thinks of J M Richards' essay 'Black and White' (AR, November 1937), which Spence almost certainly knew. 'For black and white in its embryonic form we must go to the sea beaches, and to the estuaries where boats lie up at low tide. Here we shall find white paint and tar, the universal contrasts of the sailor's handicrafts,' wrote Richards, who then traced its translation into 'rudimentary architectural form' – white-painted doors and windows on a black-tarred wall, for instance. He concluded that: 'The tradition is still alive for the modern architect to adopt as his own. Its formal qualities are at one with the already established characteristics of the modern aesthetic.'

The renovated Spence House reflects Richards' proposition. Its visual impact comes not just from the bold cantilever but – offset by cadmium yellow on the doors and patches of ultramarine on the brickwork – the simple dramatic contrast of black and white.

Additional refinement

How to extend such a self-possessed house – in Pardey's words, so 'straightforward' and 'direct' – without compromising it or being entirely self-effacing? Pardey's first proposal was rejected by the local planners, and they were right. Placed immediately to the east of the house, at a slight angle towards it, this wing seemed decidedly intrusive, almost in competition with Spence. The revised, built version, situated further back by the north-east corner of the house and linked to it by an elegant glazed bridge, is more deferential – Spence's building still takes centre-stage – but it quietly asserts its distinct identity.

It does so partly by its more pronounced refinement, though without any hint of preciousness. Echoing the existing house it is primarily a timber box, but to avoid what Pardey thinks is the 'slightly clumsy' quality of timber-frame construction, it has a slender portal frame of 120 x 80mm steel sections, while the cedar boarding is left untreated. Certainly the completed extension has a crisp, precise quality – it is built with conspicuous care.

'I wanted to make the most special place to wake up in,' says Pardey, of the owners' bedroom at the east end of his new building. Here, at a distance from Spence's house, where an assertive gesture was not just feasible but maybe necessary for the extension to hold its own, he has placed a large bay window through which the rising sun and downriver views can be seen. For Pardey it is 'a minor homage to Terragni – the way he frames things is so poetic', but unlike the clip-on historical references of Post-Modernism it is integral to the conception of the building and serves its purpose perfectly, whether its allusions are recognised or not.

Inside the extension the owners' bed, designed by Pardey, is a striking piece of furniture: a hovering oak plane, with built-in bookshelves at the back of the bedhead, which is surrounded by an oak frame echoing the Terragni window. The children's beds also incorporate shelving, in keeping with the nautical character of the original house, a place where objects are stowed away neatly and the most is made of limited space.

In this interior, Pardey successfully treads a fine line, acknowledging Spence's vocabulary while managing to introduce his own. For instance, the white-painted softwood boarding of the Spence living-room reappears in the extension's bedrooms, but only up to door-head height; above that the wall and ceiling are painted an appealing blue, giving greater expansiveness to these compact quarters.

Looking back to the 1950s and 1960s, Pardey says: 'While most towns in Britain bear the legacy of failed experiments by architects and planners, they are also likely to contain a church, a library, a community hall, crisply detailed in brick and copper, that few architects have bettered since. They dealt with the ordinary in an elevated way.'

It is this elevated ordinariness, disregarding fashion, that Pardey aims for in his

Top: the new extension. Above left: glazed link between the Spence House and the extension. Above right: the remodelled staircase tower

architecture and achieves with this well-judged extension. Its exactness, its reticence offset by the big bay window, its exclusion of anything superfluous, above all its juxtaposition of materials – untreated cedar that will gradually go silver, terne-coated stainless steel already weathering to a subtle matt silver-grey – all these combine to give the building a presence in excess of its dimensions.

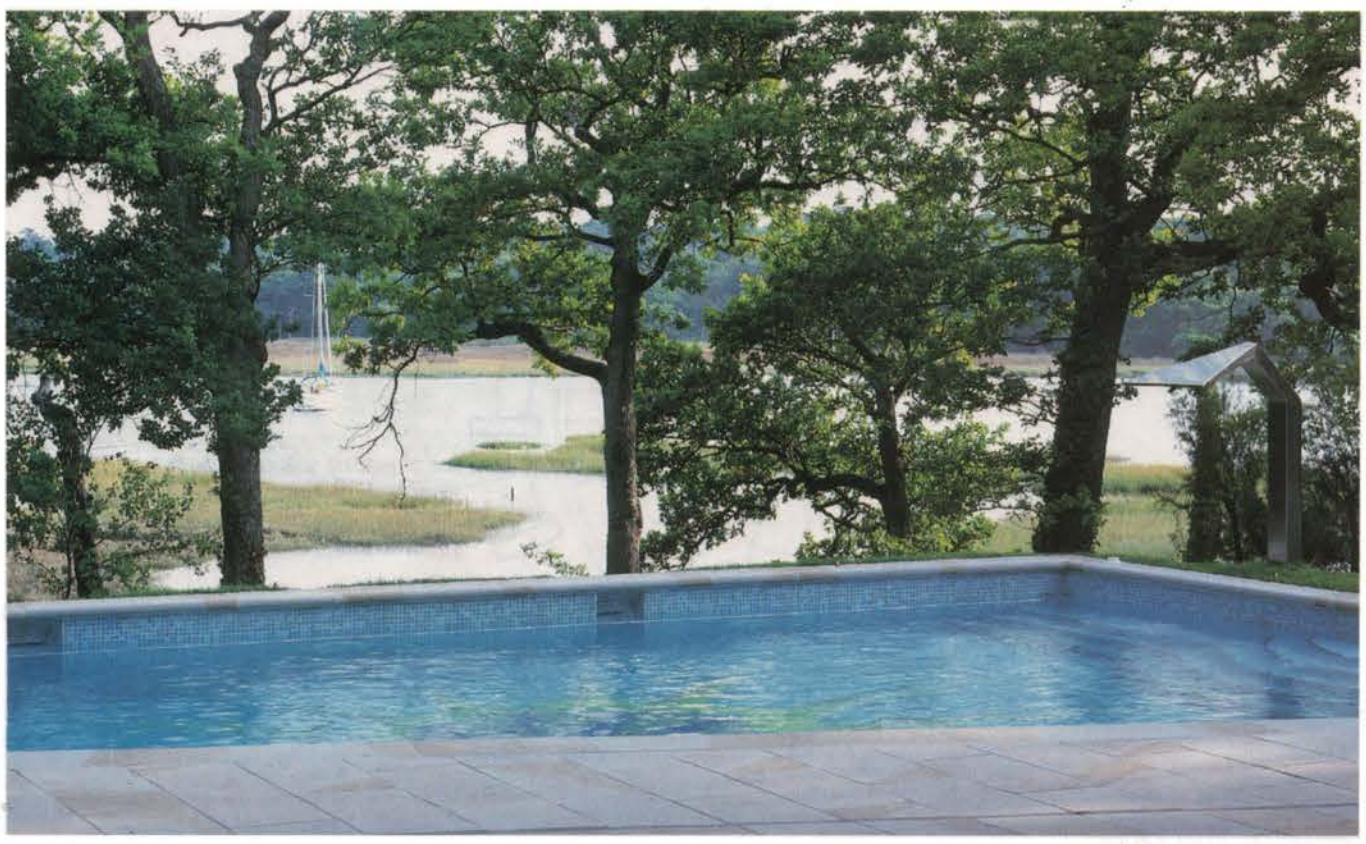
The siting of the extension made the garden just to the east of the Spence House a more overt focus than it had been before. To link the original building more directly to this awakened area, Pardey decided to remodel Spence's octagonal stair tower, replacing its timber container with glass and surrounding it with cedar fins – a conscious reference to the 'Chapel of Industry' at Coventry Cathedral ('the best bit of that building', says Pardey).

This small but significant move was part of an overall strategy for the landscape of the house and its extension. In bringing deliberate design to a wild stretch of riverbank, Spence had involved one of the most distinguished British professionals then practicing – Sylvia Crowe. She accentuated the good points of the site – for instance, creating a new pool to the south-west so that water would always be present even when the tide had withdrawn – while dealing deftly with its deficiencies: planting 'solid sweeps' of rhododendron to conceal obtrusive fencing and blur into the woodlands behind.

Although there are now many more houses in the area (mostly undistinguished), the Spence House still does feel hidden in the woods. It is discovered at the end of a long drive that turns sharply left into the entrance court, fan-shaped in welcome. Slots in the white-painted brick wall at the front of the court frame views of the river beyond, past a stand of mature oak trees which Crowe must have welcomed. Her landscape scheme had become ragged and incoherent – 'Boy, do things grow here!' says Pardey – but it has now regained its former definition. Close to the house and extension, garden designer Patrick McCann has added boulders and bamboo as 'something a little more exotic'. These last elements, however, seem too randomly dispersed.

Early photographs of the Spence House show the importance that its architect attached to art with, for example, a large bronze sculpture by Geoffrey Clarke placed near the front of the building. The current owners have continued that tradition by including, among other things, works by two of Pardey's longtime collaborators – rugs by Helen Yardley and a stone sculpture by Richard Lawrence.

One need not concur with all the specific choices of works to endorse the underlying principle. At a time when architecture, art and landscape are still likely to be treated in isolation, Pardey and his clients, like Spence before them, seek the integration of all three. This site by the Beaulieu river, now fusing the new and not-so-new, is a testament to that.



Top: the master bedroom. Above: view towards the Beaulieu River past the new swimming pool

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A glass and cedar staircase enclosure

Spence House, Beaulieu
John Pardy

working details

Basil Spence designed the main spiral staircase to the house as a separate element linked to the end wall by a short landing and enclosed in an octagon of black-stained vertical cedar slats. These had deteriorated and when the new extension was added the architect designed a new 16-sided enclosure – of glass and vertical cedar fins – around the original staircase. The form is a 'homage' to Spence's slate-finned 'Chapel of Industry' at Coventry Cathedral.

The original stair – a steel spiral with afazalia treads – and landings have been retained. The concrete base has been partly cut back and a new circular edge beam cast. Sixteen 269 x 69mm cedar fins and 9mm toughened glass panels act as a composite structure to support the roof without the need for bracing. At the base of the fins runs a stainless steel ring cut from 10mm plate, which is chemically bolted to the concrete edge beam.

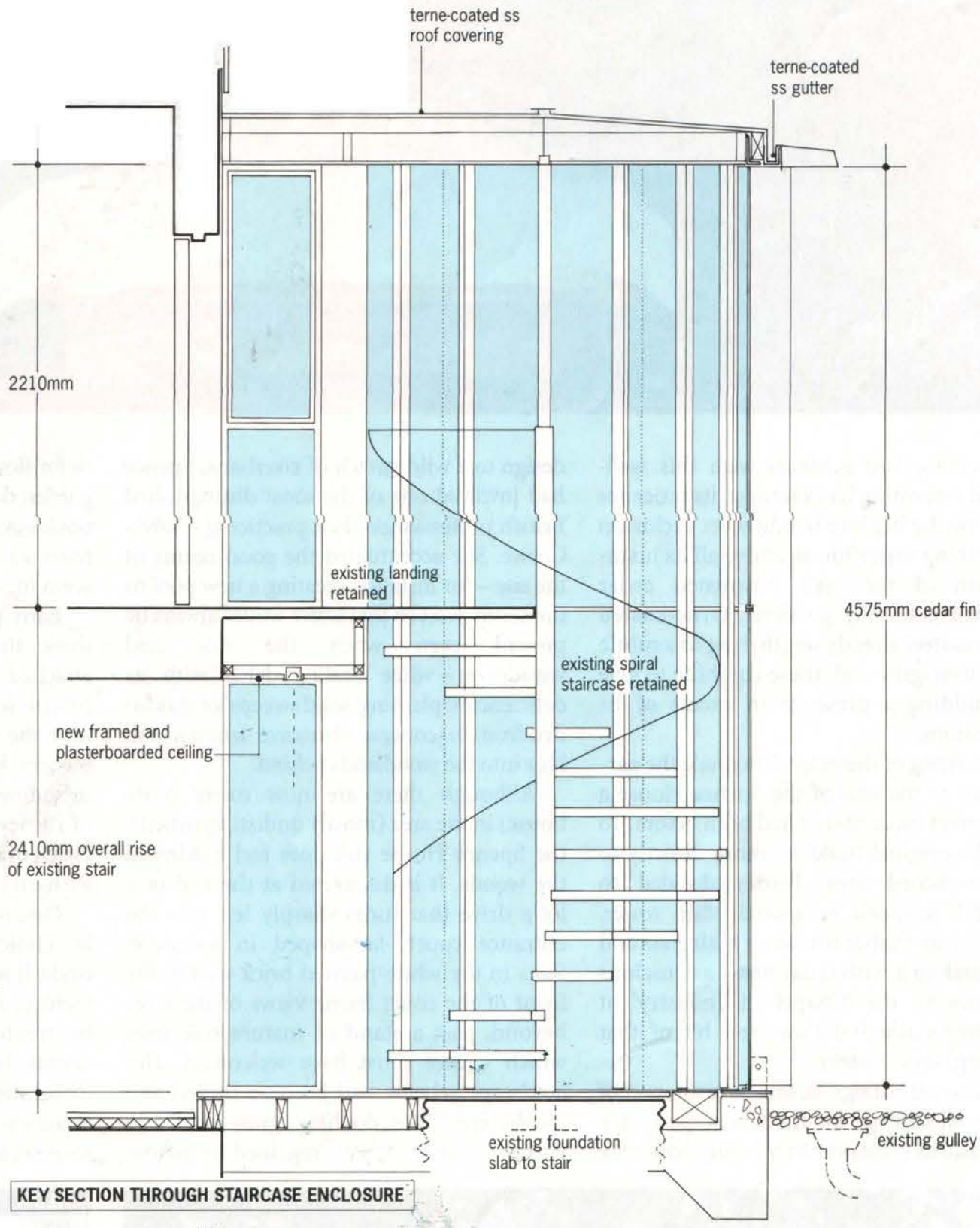
A series of 150 x 10mm steel flitch plates are welded to the ring; the fins are slotted over the plates and are pinned to them with H10 stainless steel dowels, cut flush to the face.

The glass panels are faceted between the fins and set in rebates secured with silicone to form a composite structure. They are covered with cedar beads that are cut at 11.25mm degrees to match the angle of the glass facet. At the head the fins are bolted to a faceted 150 x 75mm steel angle.

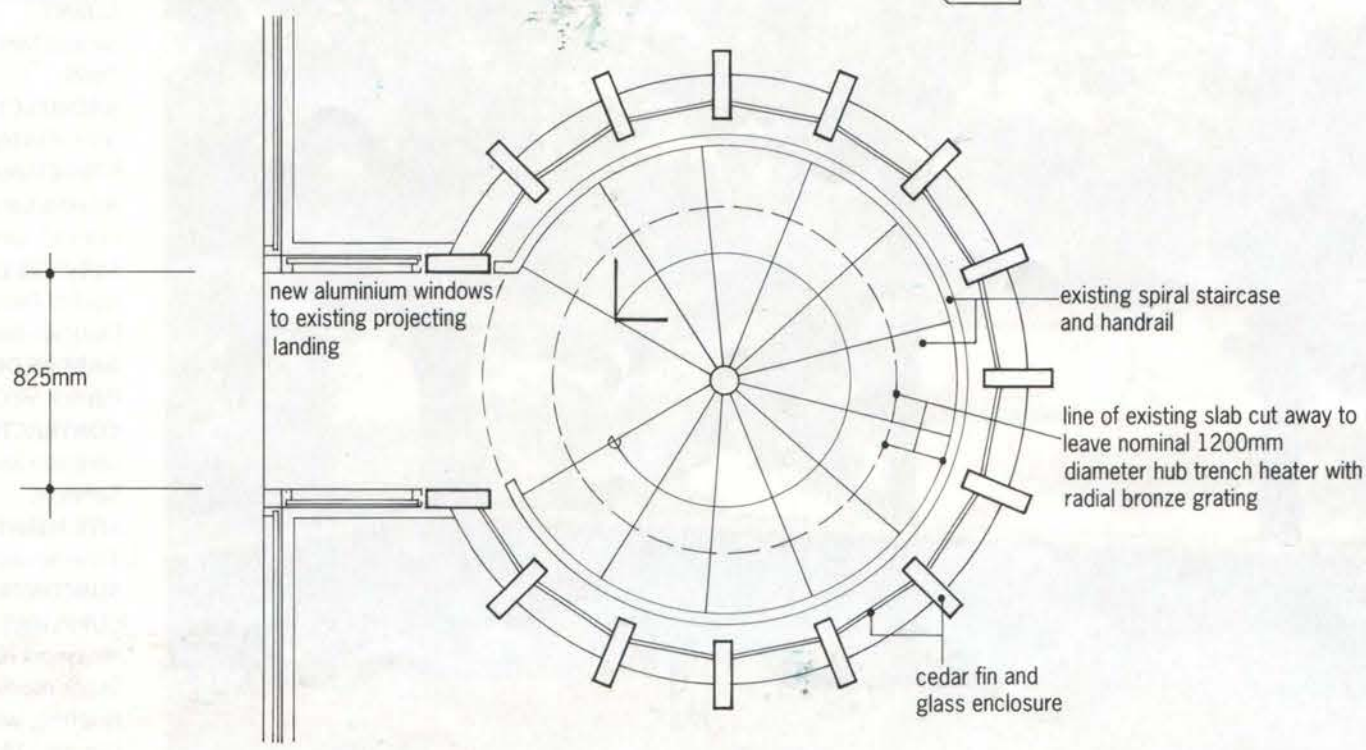
The roof is a stressed skin plywood structure filled with insulation and covered with terne-coated stainless steel.

As the stair is a transitory space the walls are single glazed. A grille-covered trench heating unit in the floor supplies background heating.

Susan Dawson



KEY SECTION THROUGH STAIRCASE ENCLOSURE



KEY PLAN OF STAIRCASE ENCLOSURE