OUT OF THE WOODS

Wealthy clients avoiding the rat race turn to John Pardey for their dream homes in Elysian settings. The practice's latest project plants timber, glass and concrete in Surrey's woods and fields – modern geometry with rolling views

Words Jan-Carlos Kucharek

JOHN PARDEY ARCHITECTS could never be accused of not understanding the mindset of its clientele. Manser Medal shortlisted architect of choice for the well-heeled desiring bespoke modernist homes set in their own rolling acres or on idyllic riverbanks, Pardey's office shares a similar setting to most of his commissions. Converted farm buildings outside the New Forest village of East End, it sits plum between the woods and the Solent. In fact, it is so remote that Pardey's right-hand man Karl, going home on his bicycle one winter night, ran straight into the back of one of the many cows that freely roam the New Forest's lanes. In a strange form of technology transfer, the impact was of such force that he was thrown over the handlebars and on to the cow. So in case anyone's wondering how much the firm actually knows about the countryside, they even bear the scars.

Interestingly, as part of his argument for the planning permission on his newest, biggest and most uncompromisingly modern luxury home, Northbrook, deep in the Surrey countryside, Pardey cites 'technology transfer' as one of his design drivers. Like his bovine story, it stems from an unlikely source – the Arts and Crafts movement. There's even a Nash precedent nearby. 'As a style, it's always inspired me in my work,' says Pardey. 'Despite its traditional look, I love how they were using the technology of the day and ideas of exposed, functional construction. Also how they defined external space, carving it in negative out of the built footprint. When we put Northbrook in front of the planners, I argued that we were merely doing what Lutyens would be doing now. At least that's what I'd like to think.'

At ease associating himself with the greats, Pardey's no shrinking violet. Maybe it stems from the fact that, despite his youthful ambitions, he abandoned London in 1995 for the New Forest to spend 12 years in the wilderness. During that time he made ends meet by scrabbling around for design work, a bit of teaching at Portsmouth and Southampton with his colleague Richard Weston, and compiling with him books on Scandinavian 'geniuses' Jørn Utzon and Wilhelm Wohlert; whereupon he became their personal friend, and they his mentor. Pardey first came to prominence in 2000, refurbishing and extending Basil Spence's former home in nearby Beaulieu. At that point, the private house commissions started coming in thick and fast. There's a sense that if this self-assured architect's seen further than the treetops of the New Forest, it's been by standing on the shoulders of giants.

Pardey calls the fact that his name has almost become synonymous with one-off high end country residences as 'a double-edged sword', (there's actually a lot of urban housing and schools work on his books), but it worked in his favour when in 2011 his client, a power couple of a German fund manager and his English lawyer wife with a young family, shortlisted 17 architects from the RIBA Directory to approach for the £2.25m commission to design a modern country house on a 7ha sloping site in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, that they had spent five years searching for. The process was helped by a savvy client, who Pardey calls 'forensic' in all his dealings, both in his own work and with him as architect. He was also very proactive. When the couple bought the site, it had a lacklustre 1950s red brick home on which the client set about spending £250,000 to extend in the same manner. He did this just to gain the extra 40% permitted development, as he planned from the outset to demolish the whole lot to make way for the new design. As it is, Pardey's design proposal came in at 730m² – a mere 0.4m² shy of the existing area and more than enough space for five bedrooms, two ensuite, two huge reception rooms, dining hall, kitchen, study, gym/spa and utility spaces and a housekeeper's flat. Pardey seems almost nonchalant that a scheme of this size and extreme look received planning permission last September without even needing to go to appeal. It broke ground last month.

The formal look of the design is very much in line with materials and spatial moves that have informed his output from the start –

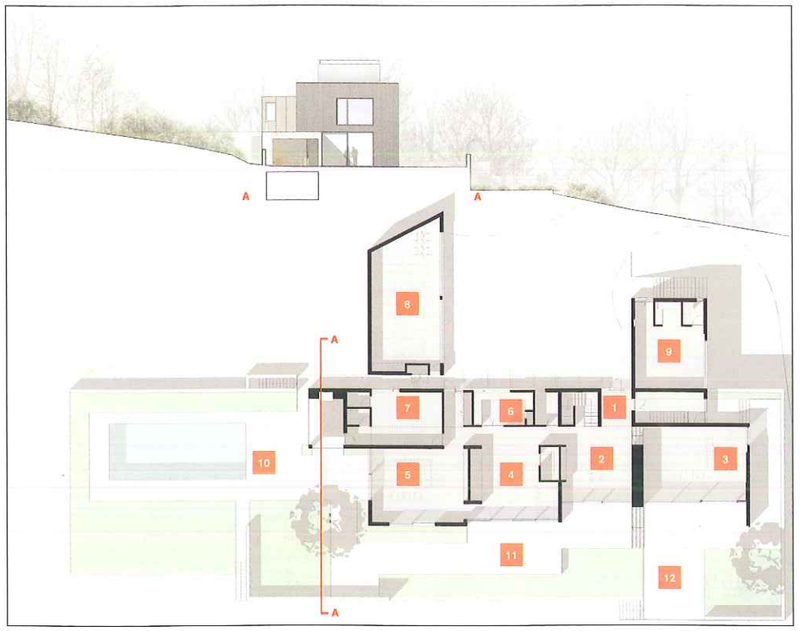
ABOVE: Pardey's 2011 Manser Medal shortlisted Watson House in the New Forest – a precedent for Northbrook (TOP).

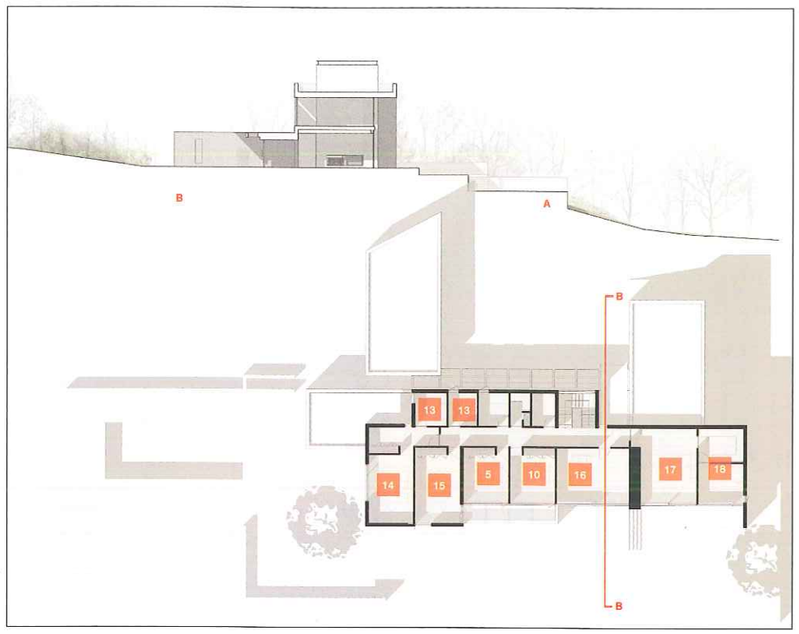
ABOVE: Completed this year, the Owers House in Feock, Cornwall, adopts a similar plan to Team 4's Creek Vean, which it overlooks.

FAR LEFT: Northbrook's huge but predominantly timber south elevation was inspired by the abstracted work of the New York Five.

LEFT: Tom Stuart-Smith's visualisation of Northbrook succeeds in melding the abstracted modern house into a natural landscape.

BELOW: Northbrook's north elevation, its public face, has a more guarded, solid aesthetic.





BELOW: The west elevation viewed from the pool terrace.

driven by the architects who have inspired him since his student days. For Pardey, the home 'forms the centre of every architectural obsession out there. The Villa Savoye is a case in point; Corb embodied his formal and urban theories, his obsessions with modern culture and technology all in the one building, Isn't that what being an architect's all about?' But it isn't Corb or Corb's concrete that's evident here. Pardey's true obsessions lie with the abstraction of the Case Study Houses by the likes of Neutra, whose Kaufmann House 'is an all-time favourite', and particularly with the work of the legendary New York Five (Gwathmey, Hedjuk, Meier et al), whose work he viewed as 'revelatory'. This is due, says Pardey, to the fact that they were actually built of timber and not concrete – he puts his natural feel for the material down to the fact that he grew up with a carpenter father. In this way, his output seems driven most clearly by the iconic 1967 Charles Gwathmey House, its pared-back grey palette embodying a strong sense of ambiguity and abstraction.

Both are evident in spades at Northbrook. At nearly 40m long and 8m high, Pardey's signature timber wrapping makes itself clearly evident here, slats of vertical black-stained cedar defining the framework within which the domestic activity occurs. The Neutra-esque chimney housing the domestic hearth, here in smooth-faced concrete, is another consistent element running through his work. Concrete walls might appear at the lower levels, but Pardey emphasises that this is effectively a timber structure, albeit one reinforced with steel to achieve the spans needed to create the proscenium effect on Northbrook's main south elevation. Within this, facing out to the garden, all functions of the house are expressed – at ground reception, entertaining rooms and kitchen; at first floor bedrooms and more private family study. A generous 1.4m wide corridor runs east west, separating 'served' spaces from the 'serving' spaces to its north.

Ceilings are consistently high, a minimum of 3.6m to the underside of the glulam beams. Finely engineered 65mm steel columns bring the necessary stiffness to the huge expanse of glass on the south face. Northbrook, in its look, would seem to be the antithesis to any notion of the English Picturesque, but Pardey denies this, claiming British modernist Peter Aldington as a big influence. He conceives building as 'abstracted, folded planes rather than volumes', so that once within this envelope 'everything is composed within the frame, like a Mondriaan painting'. It's true to say that planes shift in and out within the proscenium, glass making way for solid panels or timber slats – the sense of formal composition pervades. Similar compositional ideas appear on the north elevation, which will be the public approach, although this is characterised less by glass than by concrete and patinated bronze panels.

No-one inclined to question the liberal reading of the word 'picturesque' for the building would do so for the gardens that surround it. Pardey has worked with landscape architect Tom Stuart-Smith to create terraces of abstracted planes that step down gradually into fields of ash and alder to the south. The architect gives Stuart-Smith credit both for the way he takes the artificial levels of the pool court and parterre on the south side and blends them seamlessly with their natural surroundings, but also for his visual representations of the proposal.

'He's a fantastic renderer and he knew how to draw the building out of the landscape in a subtle way', says Pardey, who thinks that the pencil renders, while not actually the subject of planning, might have been pivotal in securing it. 'If you are in a National Park and submitting computer renders, you are asking the planners to react to it – a pencil drawing can be a much better means of manipulating planners' perceptions of your ideas.' It's true that the drawings do seem to embed Pardey's most expansive private house to date into the landscape. And some might think it should – its design will add over £1m to the overall project cost.

Despite his anointed role as a kind of dreamcatcher to the aspirational classes, Pardey hasn't let it go to his head and he knows that there will always be limits on the architect's capacity to be a 'happiness generator'. He remains a pragmatist: his own daughter, a sparky graduate, is job hunting, as yet without success, and his artistic son is still struggling to find his feet as musician. Pardey's own home meanwhile is a slightly dowdy 1930s house on the coast. He bought it thinking he'd knock it down and build his dream house on the plot, but he knows he'll never do that now. But he also accepts that life's like that – a bit flawed and unpredictable. 'I don't think the perfect house necessarily creates the perfect life,' he concludes, sitting in a meeting room replete with images of long, low orthogonal forms hovering dreamily above Elysian landscapes. 'But it can make it seem like it's as good as it will get.' ■

PLAN

1: Entrance hall
2: Dining room
3: Main living room
4: Kitchen
5: West living room
6: Boot room/utility
7: Games room
8: Garage
9: Office
10: Pool terrace
11: South terrace
12: To garden
13: Bathroom
14: Guest room ensuite
15: Children's bedrooms
16: Snug/study
17: Main bedroom
18: Bath/wardrobe

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