RIBA Awards 2015: House

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***Binith Cheeran* tells of how he entrusted John Pardey Architects with designing his award-winning home**

I've always thought that if I ever built a house, it would be a 'sugar cube' – stark, sleek and shiny. Having bought a plot with planning for just such a house, I was puzzled when I couldn't see myself in one anymore.

Somewhere between getting married and expecting our first-born, I had learnt to tolerate (and then love) the inevitable interlopers – shoes, handbags, prams and nappy stations – that had moved in with me. The plot, in an area of outstanding natural beauty where the Chilterns meet the Thames, is dominated by a walled garden that was once part of the historic Basildon Park estate. It would be torn down to accommodate the sugar cube, where we would live on four levels overlooking five of the nine homes bordering our plot.

The hunt for a new architect began with a trawl through the RIBA website. A house by John Pardey Architects in an area of outstanding natural beauty, and winner of an RIBA South East Award in 2011, caught my wife's eye. 'It sits in the landscape, not on it,' she said. She was right. We shortlisted three other architects but, after one meeting on site, cancelled the other appointments. I had arrived on site armed with a long list of things I did not like about the sugar cube and a shortlist of the things we did want.

John had arrived 30 minutes earlier and, standing in the overgrown wildflower meadow that had taken over the walled garden, had reached the same conclusion: the walled garden just had to be saved. I had imagined a two-storey structure that peeked over the wall, at the expense of an upside-down living arrangement. John's solution, illustrated by hand-drawn sketches, was to knit the house into the wall and make it part of the walled garden. There were no compromises, and no looking back. Within three months my long-dreamed of sugar cube was no more and we had the go-ahead for radically different plans, with no objections raised by the neighbours.

People have since asked, often in the same breath: 'Did you enjoy it? Would you do it again?'

My answer: 'I did not enjoy the build, and I now know you're not meant to.' No one employs a star architect to reproduce a facsimile of something that has been done before. A truly novel design will always be in part an experiment; necessarily pushing the envelope to bend physics and blend materials. Somewhere between the vanishing project manager and ethereal 'fixed-price' groundworks contract, I recognised that self-building was more gritty, edge-of-your-seat drama than laid-back sit-com. The architect-client relationship, wedded to the common cause of delivering an outstanding bit of architecture, never wavered. When your architect is prepared to revise an inconsequential cupboard drawing six times to get the details just right, your belief in the worthiness of the endeavour is replenished.

I would do it again. The end result is a unique building, responsive to my family's every need and respectful of its environment. Our house borders nine others but, sat in our courtyard, you wouldn't know it. The building just visible from the road is unmistakably contemporary, but its timber-clad facade is modest and does not look out of place. Most of all, our beloved walled garden is intact, already filled with not just fruit trees and wildflowers, but also unforgettable memories.

Binith Cheeran was client on Cheeran House, west Berkshire, designed by John Pardey Architects

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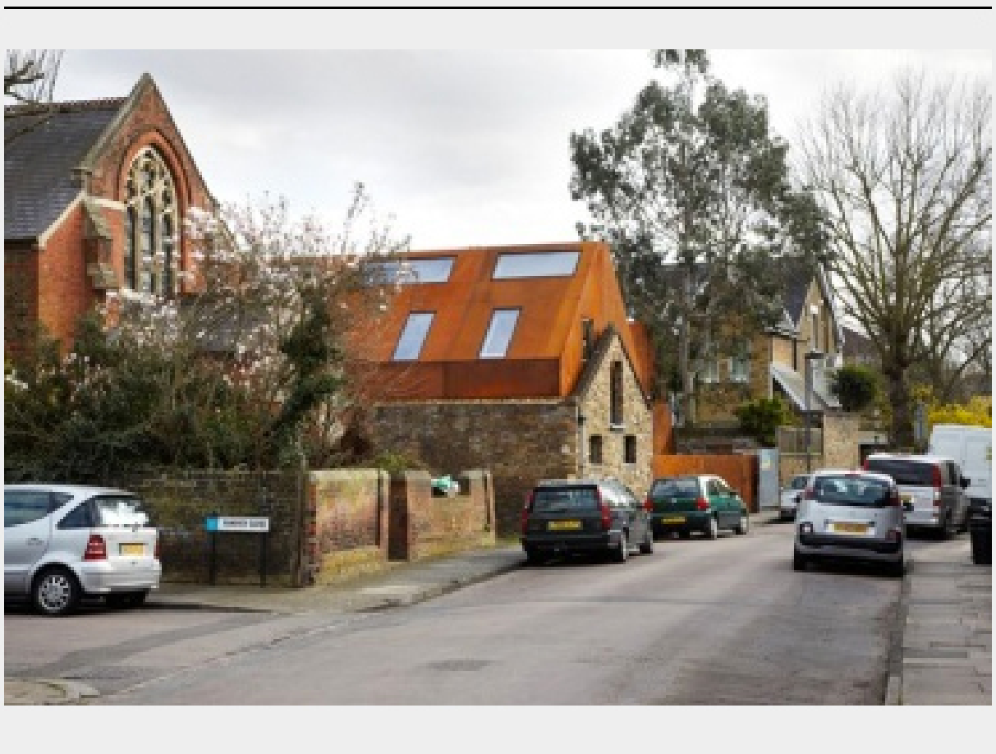
RIBA Award winners

Kew House, London by Piercy & Company

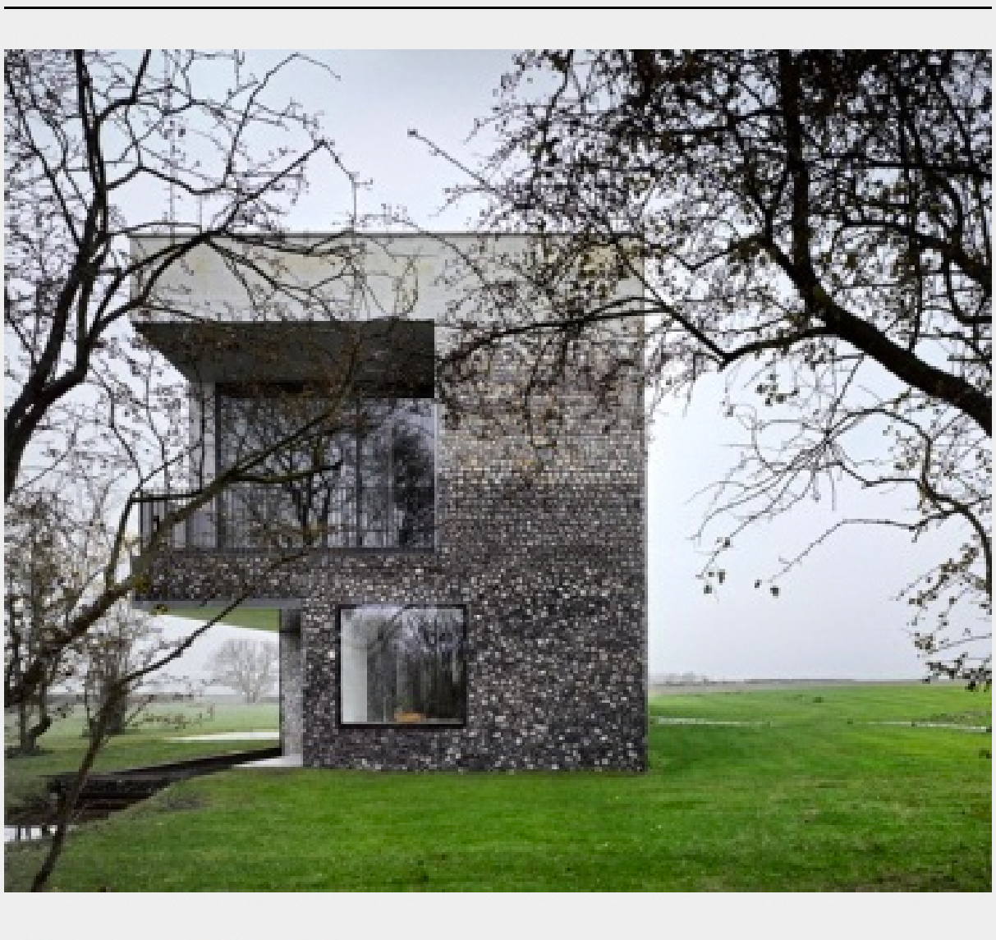


Client Tim and Jo Lucas
Contract value Undisclosed
Gross internal area 368m²
Region London

This house is the product of an unusually close working relationship between the client – a structural engineer and boat-restorer – and the architect, both with an interest in prefabrication. The result is a bold, highly inventive and well-considered intervention in Cor-ten steel in Kew Green Conservation Area, a neighbourhood not known for architectural adventures. An extremely thoughtful process of neighbourhood consultation satisfied local conservation and planning concerns.

The perforated weathered steel cladding not only decorates the interior with dappled light, it is also an experimental sandwich panel roof, with insulation bonded to its underside, fully prefabricated. Gutters and chimneys are formed in the same weathered steel. It is entirely unique, avoiding reference to architectural convention.

Flint House, Buckinghamshire by Skene Catling de la Peña



Client Lord Rothschild
Contractor Kingerlee
Contract value Undisclosed
Gross internal area 580m²
Region South

This is a rare example of a poetic narrative whose realisation remains true to the original concept. The site is a seam of flint geology surrounded by ploughed fields with the flints sitting on the surface. The project is conceived as two wedges of that geology thrusting up through the flat landscape. Their bases are knapped flint and slowly change in construction and texture until they become chalk walling, dissolving into the sky.

The house forms accommodation for family members, guests and artists. Internally the spaces carefully frame the landscape and provide a rich sequence of experiences, including a small rivulet of water that cuts a grotto through a corner of the main house. Magical.

Levring House, London by Jamie Fobert Architects

Client Private
Contract value £2.8 million
Gross internal area 451m²
Region London

This spacious and luxurious house fills a corner plot of a typical London mews with a heady mix of free-flowing space, light-filled voids, fastidious detailing and a brilliant regard for the surrounding context.

200m-deep ground source heat pumps heat the house, which is arranged as a series of volumes stepped around a central lightwell climbing up from the basement and surrounded by full-height sliding glazing.

Externally the building is finished with an elegant palette of Danish hand-made bricks, bronze panels and plenty of glazing to draw natural light into the heart of the house. Internally the architecture is imbued with high-quality materials and elegant detailing, which absorb light, are sensuous to the touch and beguiling to the eye.

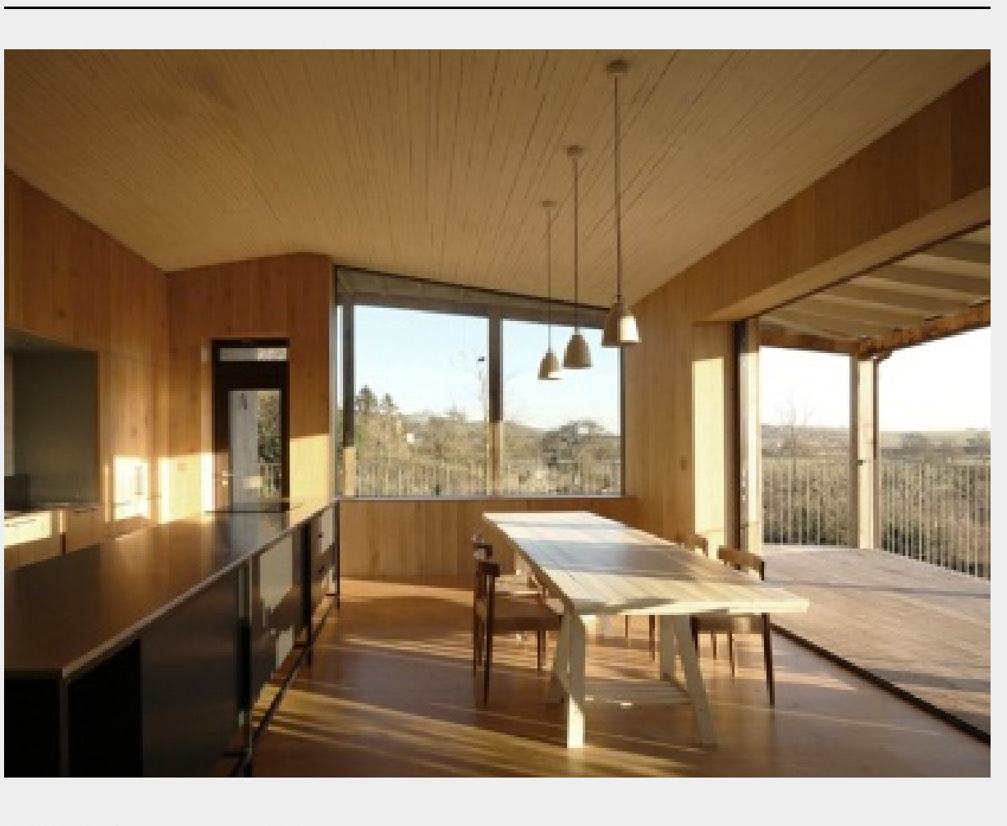
House at Maghera, County Down by McGonigle McGrath

Client Private
Contractor FJ Charleton
Contract value Undisclosed
Gross internal area 475m²
Region Northern Ireland

This family house is on the edge of a clachan, a small grouping of farmsteads, on the leeward side of the Mourne Mountains and is composed of two linear traditional building forms. Each discrete form is displaced and slightly rotated in relation to its neighbour, with a resulting silhouette that anchors the house to the ground and fixes it in the landscape. There is real talent and judgement at work here, and a deftness of hand that goes far beyond a reimagined vernacular.

The front entrance yard has a cool tension reminiscent of Luis Barragán, albeit without the colour. The house provides an empathetic framework of beautiful spaces for its occupants, opportunistically using the site and appropriate technologies to achieve an eminently habitable and sustainable home.

Dundon Passivhaus, Somerset by Prewett Bizley Architects

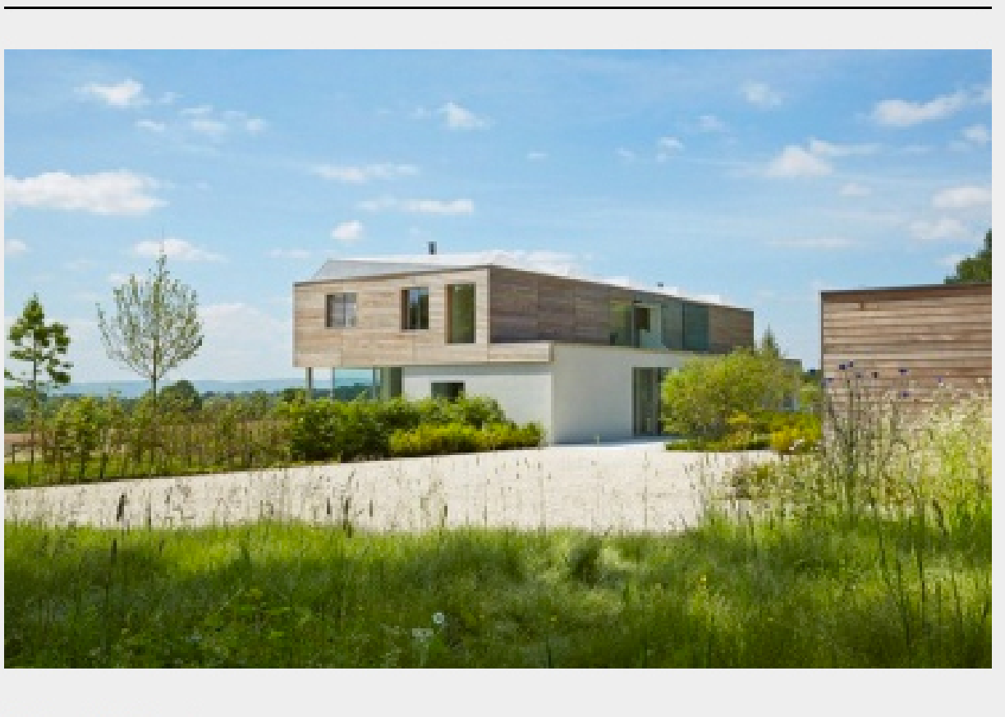


Client Graham Bizley
Contractor Self-build
Contract value £500,000
Gross internal area 226m²
Region South West

Dundon Passivhaus is an extraordinarily understated and unpretentious building set in a beautiful rural landscape. It is a substantially self-built project by the architect for his family's occupation, designed and built to Passivhaus standards but with the scope to open windows as you would in any conventional building.

Entering the house you are greeted with a forest of internal timber cladding. Large sliding folding windows ensure that every ounce of the view penetrates the space. An introverted living room has large log burners, providing heating and hot water to supplement the solar thermal on the roof and an MVHR system. The garden houses a 4,500-litre rainwater tank. The walls are super-insulated using recycled paper. The internal carpentry, joinery and other features are all beautifully detailed and crafted.

Sussex House, South Downs by Wilkinson King Architects

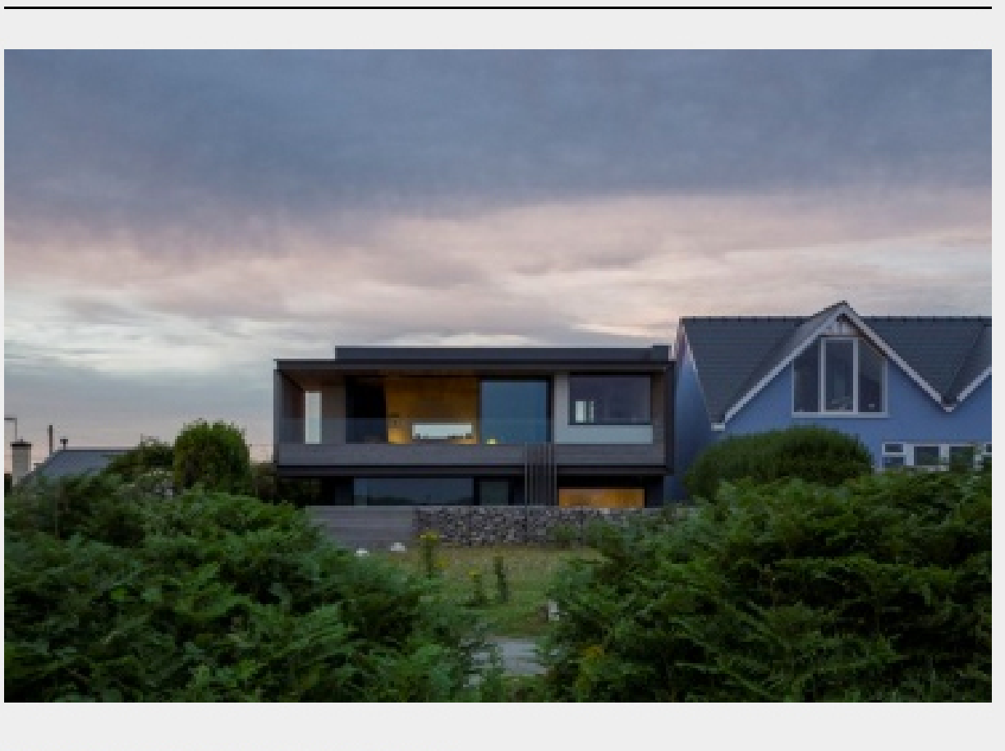


Client Private
Contractor Westridge Construction
Contract value Undisclosed
Gross internal area 472m²
Region South East

This sophisticated barn of cross-laminated timber stands proudly on a ridge overlooking the Sussex Downs. Externally the house – a cross-laminated timber box above a glass base – has all the confidence of a grand villa, with its row of low-profile roof pyramids, windows positioned to take advantage of the views, and muted colour palette of materials. A lack of decoration and ornament make this modern house feel functional, but it is cleverly considered to the very last detail.

Internally, for all it simplicity and airiness, it is homely. A double-height void and stair orchestrate the house effortlessly, organising a contiguous open plan and cellular spaces into a simple but elegant arrangement. The over-sailing first floor produces the feeling of a quiet monastic cloister with sun-filled spaces and views.

Cliff House, Swansea by Hyde + Hyde Architects



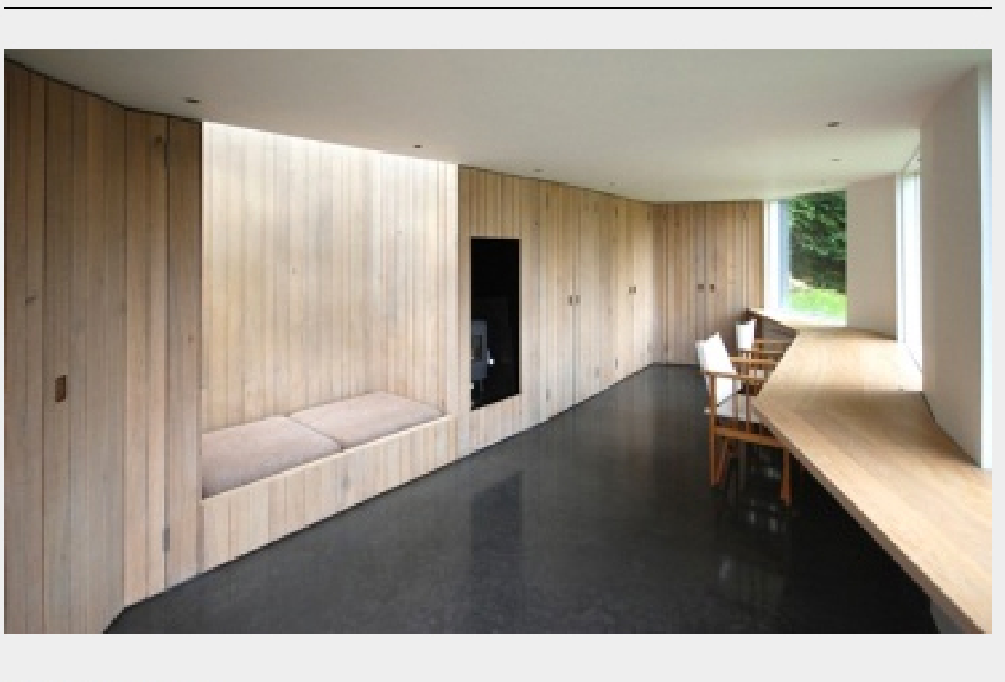
Client Mr and Mrs Beresford
Contractor Self-build
Contract value Undisclosed
Gross internal area 180m²
Region Wales

This collaborative project, with the client's husband having engineered the design, has resulted in a complete yet modest piece of domestic architecture that is exemplary in both process and presence.

It is a pleasure to walk around and discover spatial complexities. The upside-down configuration is unforced, with a suite of three generous bedrooms and a study, all spatially unique, and each with its own direct and particular relationship to the garden. The axial view through these spaces makes everything feel connected. Externally a crisply rendered colonnade frames views and brings pace to the composition and structure to the garden.

All of this is held in a project that is at once strong and singular, yet layered with variety. Nothing screams for attention – but nothing has been overlooked.

Myrtle Cottage Garden Studio, Wiltshire by Stonewood Design



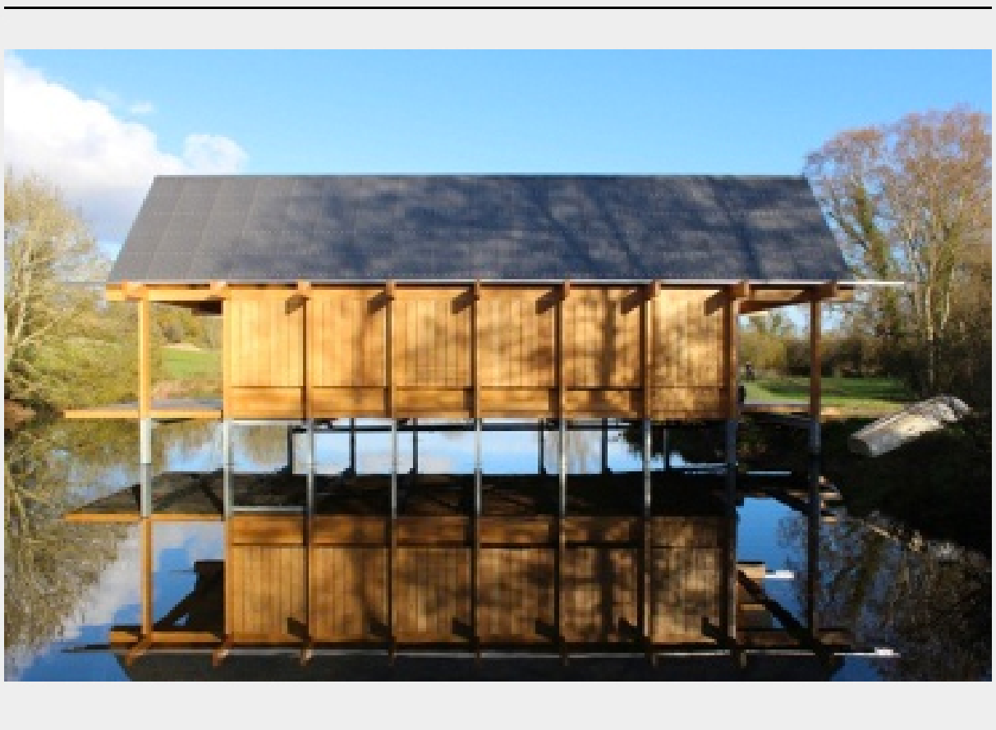
Client Private
Contractor Sadler Builders
Contract value £150,000
Gross internal area 29m²
Region South West

This small, discreet building serves as a space in which to work, sew, play guitar and sleep. It is built into the side of a steep hill below an accessible, flat, sedum roof perforated with flat rooflights. While modest in scale, it possesses a clear and positive presence.

Beautifully and impeccably detailed and crafted inside and out, it is externally clad entirely in patinated copper sheet and internally lined in vertical oak boarding, with limited areas of polished copper. Rough-sawn timber panels with crafted recessed handles open up to reveal storage.

Further investigation unearths a compact, copper-clad bathroom, lit by a carefully located rooflight. To the rear a top-lit seating area provides an atmospheric moment in which to pause from the daily grind.

The Fishing Hut, Hampshire by Niall McLaughlin Architects



Client Private
Contractor Inwood Developments
Contract value Undisclosed
Gross internal area 66m²
Region South

The primitive hut has a long anthropological pedigree as well as an architectural one. This is a sophisticated primitive hut, worthy of Murcutt or Leplastrier, but set not on the edge of the Australian bush but on a Hampshire lake, close to chalk-filtered streams providing watercress beds and fishing. The timber-framed and clad construction on galvanised supports hovers over the lake, intended as a retreat for fishermen and a place for the owner's family to unwind.

But it as much about time passing as it is about fishing. Crafted, slatted timber panels, which allow the building to 'hunker-down' in the winter, open up in the spring to become delicate *brise-soleils*. Timber-framed glass screens slide away and within a few moments a solid building becomes transparent.