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House on a flood plain: John Pardey Architects

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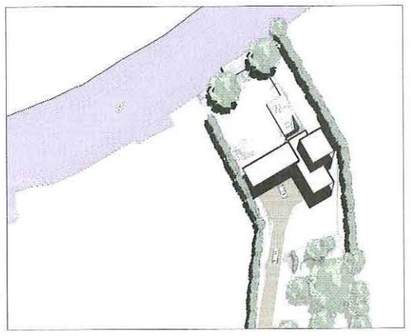
BUILDING

John Pardey Architects' Hind House solves the problem of a flood-prone site while evoking the optimism of an earlier era. More like this, please, says ***Mike Tonkin****. Photos: Richard Powers.*

The Hind House is lifted above the ground on stilts to protect it from the floodwaters of the River Loddon that passes through the back garden. This entirely practical solution must have come as a bit of a shock to the genteel village of Wargrave in Berkshire. The planners protested that the space created under the building might be in-filled to form an inappropriately large house. Was that really their concern? Within a stone's throw of a river that regularly floods, who would want a soggy lower level? It is more likely they were simply afraid of the building's outlandish modernity. Flat roof, timber boxes floating in the air, in Wargrave? Whatever next?

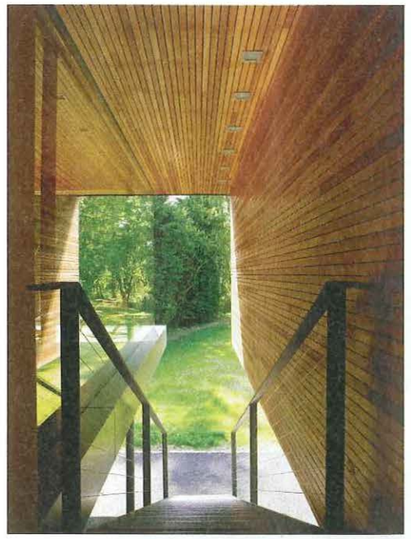
Three years before they employed John Pardey Architects, the clients had bought a dilapidated dwelling with the intention of replacing it with a Huf Haus. But the prefabricated German system was not flexible enough to deal with the site's propensity to flood. The architects were employed on the strength of a completed project nearby and through their knowledge and ingenuity have turned the site's problems into a virtue. The planners stipulated that the new building should occupy the same location as the old.



The restriction had its advantages: the clients had occupied the existing house for some time, and had a good understanding of how the site worked in terms of aspect and views. While there, they had time to let the beech hedges grow high, masking the neighbours and allowing the new house some autonomy to be at one with the fluvial nature of the site. They also persuaded the farmer opposite to let them plant trees on his land, which now conceal plastic greenhouses. Containment complete, distractions removed, planners persuaded: the scene is set for modernity.

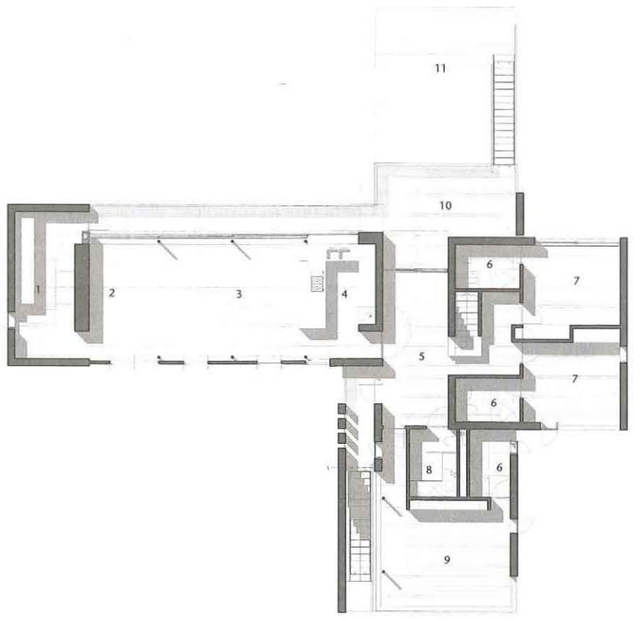
Above *Cedar-clad rear (east-facing) elevation and balcony offering a view of the River Loddon.*
Above right, below *Views from the east and west of the flooded site. The 242 square metre house was built in 12 months and the cost, including external works, was £620,000 (ph: Henry Goss).*

The plan is a pinwheel with four arms that spin in an orthogonal composition around the entrance hall. A long, thin, low block stretches out to the north-west. Its elongated form is appropriate as a living salon that includes a kitchen adjacent to the hall, with a study dispatched to the other end. A full-length balcony connects the kitchen to the study. Recessed into the cedar-clad volume, the balcony overlooks the river in the back garden, while a semi-screened aperture offers more privacy to the front of the building. To the south-west of the pinwheel, a low block



clad in black zinc with slit-like apertures and cantilevered enclosures becomes the entrance pavilion and guest room. To the south-east the main bedroom block is a two-story volume clad again in timber with fixed apertures and concealed opening panels;

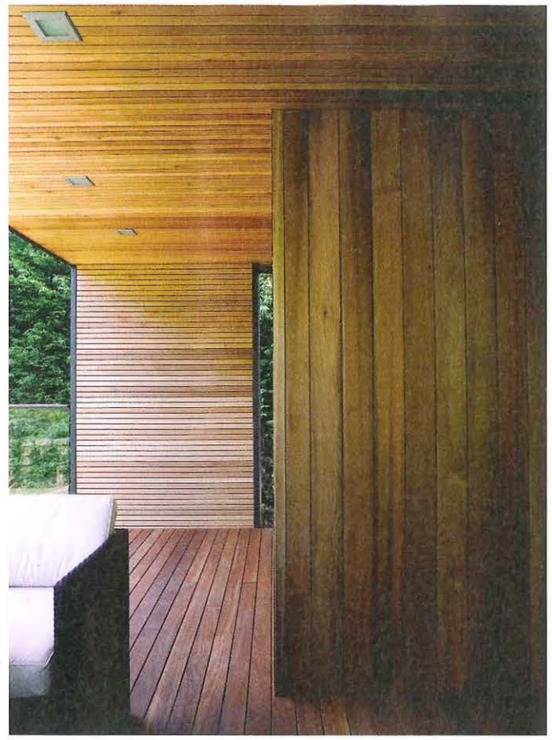
Above *MIO-protected mild steel stringer and marine-grade stainless steel treads.*
Plan *1 Study/games room, 2 living, 3 dining, 4 kitchen, 5 hall, 6 bathroom, 7 bedroom, 8 utility room, 9 gym/bed, 10 raised deck, 11 sun deck. The master bedroom and dressing room is above.*

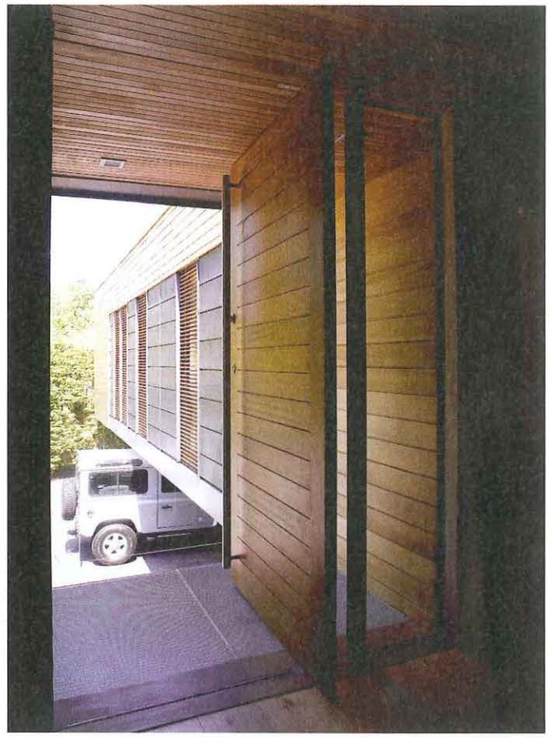


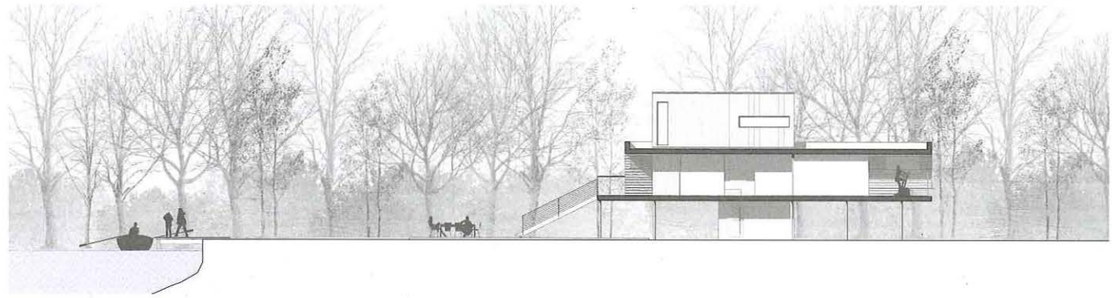
children's rooms below, master bedroom up top. To the north-east the fourth arm is a sun deck at ground level that needs to extend down the garden towards the river to avoid the building's shadow.

A favourite device of early Modernists, the pinwheel typology came to the Case Study generation through the work of Mies van der Rohe. Mies' Brick House (1923), Richard Neutra's Case Study 13 (1946), John Pardey's Hind House (2009): the pinwheel is a wonderfully timeless compositional device that still feels modern.

The structure is steel. Two different systems are at work. In the shadowy undercroft stand thin black tubular steel columns aided by a waterproof concrete core. The core takes care of shear forces, allowing the steel size to be minimized. Under the long living wing the columns are very different in nature. Really hefty I-beams form a vertical cantilever offering rotational stiffness to the length of the wing. These are also painted black and are quite beautiful in themselves but they, too, disappear in the gloom. In the composed volumes the structure is exposed at times but more often disappears behind the cladding. Making the timber boxes float seems to be more important than expressing the structure. The pale concrete finish of the ground level core is at odds with this approach and







from a distance takes away from the illusion of the floating volumes. It is still a very good place to park your amphibian vehicle.

In its conception Hind House owes much to the Case Study houses, though California is hot and dry and Wargrave is often wet and cold – especially when it floods. It is fair to say that one of the main differences between this project and those of post-war California is climate change. America, the lumbering giant, has been slow to act: climate is still not the hot issue it should be. Here in Europe the regulations have made architects change. Post-war buildings that are slow to warm but quick to overheat have forced a retreat in architecture from some of the ideals of Modernism, and the cottage has been postulated by conservatives as the environmental model for the future. Structural expression and visual transparency have been shunned in the new millennium, but the Case Study projects still offer important perspectives. In the post-crunch years, when finance and climate are going to be the primary drivers in decision-making, I hope that the sense of optimism that began the Case Study progamme and inspired the Hind House will prevail.

Mike Tonkin is a principal in Tonkin Liu and was chair of the jury for the 2009 RIBA Awards southern region.

Project team
Architect: John Pardey Architects; design team: John Pardey, Henry Goss (project architect); structural engineer: Barton Engineers; contractor, construction manager: Clive Hicks, Ridgetree Construction; client: Steve and Dee Hind.

Selected suppliers and subcontractors
Zinc cladding: VMZinc pre-weathered Anthra-Zinc (dark grey); stair treads: Belmont Architectural Products; frameless fixed glazing, sliding glazed doors: Schüco, installed by McCan Contracts.