Natural selection

English architect John Pardey's easy style of modernism is the perfect match for a country setting

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POOLEY HOUSE
The windsurfer clients who commissioned the house, which is on Hayling Island near Portsmouth, wanted it to feel like a beach house. The main living space, right, is dominated by the sea views

An elegant modesty characterises John Pardey's houses. They are subtle, sophisticated buildings, grounded and integrated into the landscape, inspired by the natural aesthetic of 1960s Scandinavian design. Pardey has always made his own way and now, after patient years building up his own practice, his work is becoming increasingly sought after. A series of striking new houses on the south coast of England and in the New Forest, which are undoubtedly among Pardey's best, is now taking his reputation for soft, considered modernism to a wider audience.

'It has been a long haul,' says Pardey. 'But that's part of the pleasure now. By the time the work starts coming in, then you really know what you are doing. I've never liked the idea of doing what other people are doing. I have to do my own thing. Most architects over-design houses and make them too involved with contemporary fashion. I don't want to do that. My ultimate goal is to design a timeless building. That's my Holy Grail.'

The Watson House in the New Forest, not far from Pardey's own home and offices, achieves just that ambition. Discreetly set back among woodland, within a rural enclave inhabited by many period and pastiche homes, the house is low-slung, long and slender and takes the form of a crisp, single-storey pavilion clad in sweet chestnut, sitting within the forest landscape. Like all of Pardey's houses, it both respects its context and surroundings and responds to them.

'The clients told me that they wanted to live close to nature,' Pardey says. 'That sticks in my mind and that was their brief. They wanted one big, open space to live in, privacy for their own quarters, and then another wing for their two teenage children and guests. We came up with the idea of sitting the house almost on the ground, just floating above nature, so that it didn't interrupt it.'

With bedrooms positioned at opposite ends of the house, the core of the home is devoted to the open-plan dining room, kitchen and sitting room, with a wall of slender 'Kolumba' bricks that also forms a fireplace, creating a natural focal point. (The bricks were developed by the Danish firm Petersen in cooperation with Peter Zumthor – see page 054 – for the Swiss architect's Kolumba Museum in Köln.) With banks of glass to either side, this key space is enveloped by views of the woodland, and has a sense of warmth and homeliness created by the use of earthy materials.

'The fireplace anchors the house,' says Pardey. 'All of our houses have fireplaces and without one I think there's a kind of sterility. It's that Frank Lloyd Wright idea of the hearth as the home, which Richard Neutra also did so well. It's a wonderful domestic gesture.'

It's the quiet reverence for countryside and context, the splicing of natural materials with up-to-the-minute technology, and the subtle and common sense green agenda woven into his designs that make Pardey's houses so seductive. They are warm and comfortable, yet also tailored, practical and hard-working. They are designed, in other words, with real people in mind rather than as grand gestures or ostentatious styling.

'The house has exceeded our expectations,' says Pardey's New Forest client Charles Watson. 'There were things that we could never quite envisage – like the fireplace – until we saw them. The practice has created something very special and unique for us and the lightness of the house on the landscape is critical. Seeing the house lit up at night is a fantastic way to appreciate the proportions of the building and the way it just seems to float.'

Pardey's approach echoes that of Australian architect Glenn Murcutt, with his houses holding to that famous Murcutt maxim of 'touching the earth lightly'. More than this, Pardey has long admired Murcutt's working method of keeping his practice small and rooted, while spreading his influence – through the quality and originality of the work itself – nationally and internationally.

'When I first came out of college I won a competition and spent the money on a trip to Australia,' Pardey says. 'Murcutt had only had one house published then, but I thought this is what it's all about. So I wrote to him and then »

WATSON HOUSE
The sweet chestnut-clad, single-storey pavilion was designed by Pardey to sit unobtrusively in its New Forest setting

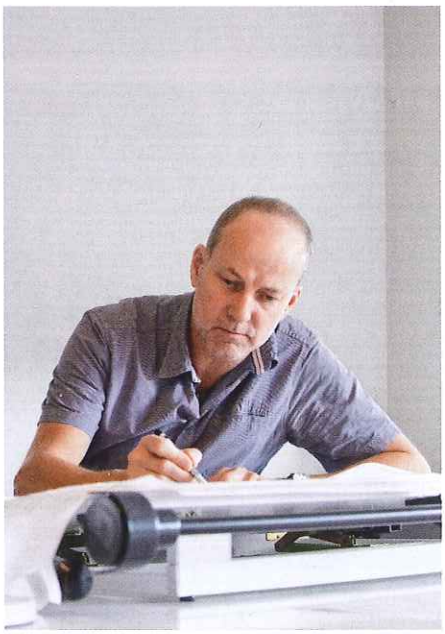
phoned him when I got to Australia and he asked me to come round for lunch. I spent the day with him and it was like being with an evangelical preacher – he was so passionate about his work.

'The kind of grounded working model that Murcutt follows has always been in my head. I've always wanted to practise from somewhere beautiful, like the New Forest, but work on a national level, anywhere and everywhere I can.'

The New Forest was also where Pardey grew up, with his father Eric, who was another huge influence. A carpenter and joiner, Eric Pardey worked on building high-speed torpedo boats, made with plywood hulls, during the war. He then became a joiner and craftsman, able to turn his hand to almost anything from a cabinet to a roof. Pardey would spend most Saturdays on site with his father and assumed for a long time that he would follow his father's path into joinery.

But the legendary De Stijl architect Robert van't Hoff changed his mind. The architect of the Villa Henny – one of the earliest houses built completely out of reinforced concrete – moved to the UK in the 1920s and happened to be Pardey's neighbour in New Milton, and a good friend of his father's. 'Robert kept giving me books about architecture,' says Pardey, who wrote a dissertation on van't Hoff while studying architecture at the Polytechnic of Central London. 'He got me into it and that's what started me off.'

After college, Pardey turned down a job with James Stirling, suspicious of the whole idea of big brand architects. He joined PRP Architects instead, but within four years had left to start up his own firm in 1988, based in London at first, but then moving back to the New Forest, having taken on teaching work in Portsmouth to help fund building up the practice.



EASEL DOES IT
Above, John Pardey believes designing a house is the acid test when it comes to tackling larger scale projects

'I did whatever it took and it was tough,' says Pardey. 'There was never a plan B and I have never had a big, grand idea about being an architect, partly because of my background. I am just another worker.'

Another mentor was Danish master Jørn Utzon, architect of the Sydney Opera House, with whom Pardey had a long friendship before his death in 2008. Pardey wrote a book on Utzon's two houses in Majorca, Can Lis and Can Feliz, spending a good deal of time with Utzon.

'I was convinced he was a genius, but he was also very down to earth, very funny. He cared about his family more than anything,' says Pardey. 'And for me, if I could have been an architect at any time, any place, then it would have been in Denmark in the 1960s. That was the high point and I love that kind of work. It's very human and uses lots of natural materials, but it's also very modern.'

Pardey's newly completed Pooley House, on Hayling Island near Portsmouth, was indirectly influenced by Utzon's Can Lis. Like Can Lis, the Pooley House, which was designed for two devoted windsurfers, faces the sea and the view is everything. Also, like Can Lis, the design of the house would succeed or fail on how the architecture responded to the seascape. 'When »

WATSON HOUSE
The clients wanted to live close to nature, so Pardey created a main living space flanked by floor-to-ceiling windows, with an anchoring wall incorporating a fireplace, which he describes as 'a wonderful domestic gesture'

you are in the living room of Can Lis, you feel as though you are being shot out of the windows towards the horizon, but at the same time everything on the horizon seems to be drawn into the room,' says Pardey. 'You are both pushed and pulled, and it's the same thing with the house on Hayling Island.'

Among the challenges Pardey faced in designing the two-storey Pooley House was dealing with such a narrow site slotted between neighbouring houses, and facing up to the need to protect the house from tidal surge and flood risk. Pardey raised the house on a brick plinth, locating the bedrooms on the lower level. The house then opens up dramatically on the upper level, with the open-plan living room projecting outwards to the sea in the form of a crafted box timber-lined with red cedar inside and out. As with the Watson House, there is an emphasis on craftsmanship, finishing and detailing, but without the expensive gadgets.

'The clients wanted it to feel like a beach house and I had been hankering to do a timber-lined room for ages,' Pardey says. 'It is very Scandinavian and very warm, which I like. The living room is a sleeved tube – like a camera obscura – pushing out into the harbour.'

Looking at Pardey's two new houses, it's little wonder the practice has become best known for these careful, character buildings, tied to a geographical place, although the firm's portfolio includes many larger scale residential and commercial projects as well.

'The houses are maybe half of what we do, but the lessons you learn from designing houses are the key ones,' Pardey says. 'You can learn everything about a city plan from a house. It applies to everything. It's the hardest thing to do for an architect, even though people might think that it's the easiest.'

New commissions include houses in Wales and Norfolk, as well as the Home Counties and the south coast. Pardey is enjoying spreading his wings, with a project in Florida also on the cards. Unlike Murcutt, he has no hesitation in taking his work abroad, but you can always expect a certain integrity, a certain modesty to Pardey's buildings. No matter where he is working, one feels he will carry on doing his own thing.

'It's about scale,' says Pardey. 'I'd love to do an office building and an art gallery, but I don't want to do enormous, blanket corporate projects. There's an instinctive side to it. If you think too much, then you end up copying other people or being trapped inside some kind of fashion statement. I do put a great deal of thought into the projects I undertake, of course, but it's like painting. If you think all the time, then you can't paint. You have to get on and do it.' ✱

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PARDEY PIECES

SPENCE HOUSE, BEAULIEU, 2000
Restoring and extending Basil Spence's former home overlooking the Beaulieu River in Hampshire marked a turning point for Pardey. The house, heavily influenced by Arne Jacobsen and Scandinavian modernism, boosted the practice's profile.

ATTWOOD HOUSE, RIVER LODDON, 2005
A radical redesign of an existing 1960s riverside home in Berkshire for television executive Jane Tranter and her husband, film director David Attwood. 'I loved the house and it was another turning point,' says Pardey.

HIND HOUSE, RIVER LODDON, 2008
This new build near Attwood House is defined by its riverside views and the need to protect it against flooding. Pardey elevated the house on stilts, with all of the main living spaces overlooking the river. The house was widely published, drawing in new clients.

OAKLANDS COLLEGE, ST ALBANS, 2011
Initially recommended by former bosses at PRP Architects for the conversion of seven 1950s college buildings in Hertfordshire into flats as part of a new housing scheme, Pardey then became involved in plans for the entire scheme, marking a major step from smaller projects to larger residential schemes.