

Lawson Park, 2009

DESIGN RESEARCH

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General Description

1.0

The Site:

Located on the west side of Grizedale Forest, Lawson Park overlooks Coniston Water and across the lake to Coniston village, framed by a backdrop of craggy mountain peaks. Lawson Park is an historic Cumbrian hill farm which was established in 1338 by Furness Abbey to supply wool as part of the abbey's production chain. In the 19th century Victorian polymath John Ruskin - who lived in nearby Brantwood - purchased the farmhouse and land. After Ruskin's death the farm was tenanted by various families until the Taylforth family ended farming in the 1950s. The buildings were used as a student hostel until the late 1980s.

The Client:

Grizedale Arts is a contemporary arts residency and commissioning agency in the central Lake District in rural Northern England. It conducts cultural projects locally, nationally and internationally. Its focus under director Adam Sutherland is on emerging artists and increasing public access to the contemporary arts. The predecessor of Grizedale Arts, the Grizedale Society was founded in 1968 by the Forestry Commission to further the arts within the Grizedale forest. It initially concentrated on theatre and the visual arts. In 1977 it established the Sculpture Project which was noted for its siting of environmental sculptures by artists including David Nash, Robert Koenig and Andy Goldsworthy within the Grizedale Forest.

The Project:

In 2007 the organisation moved its base from Grizedale Forest to the historic hill farm of Lawson Park, overlooking Coniston Water. Once owned by John Ruskin - and a working farm until the 1950s - Sutherland Hussey were employed to transform the farmhouse and barns into an artists' residency base, providing both accommodation and studio workshops for artists to live and work. The project was completed and opened in 2009 by Sir Nicholas Serota, Director of the Tate. The surrounding land is gradually being returned to productive use, and the gardens - designed by artist / film-maker Karen Guthrie - open annually under the National Garden Scheme.

The area would not receive planning permission to make it publicly accessible, and so Grizedale Arts proposed instead to use the existing public spaces as a rich context for artists to both practice and reflect.

There was a fairly straightforward brief - a number of bedrooms for the artists to sleep in, a communal kitchen and dining room, where artists would share in the cooking and dine together. And a studio space, small library and Exhibition space in which the artists could work and occasionally exhibit, all contained within the footprint of the existing building.

The topography of the site and the constraints of the existing building added further complexity to this simple programme of rooms, resulting in a split level section where all shared rooms connected to one another via a centrally located stair and lift.

In our proposal the main stair unifies all the shared spaces, taking the artist from the entrance and studio space, through the dining and kitchen spaces (located on the upper ground level) and then up to a generous double-height living space with the library located at the uppermost level and looking back to the living room below.

Research Questions

2.0

1. How to add a new contemporary piece of architecture with authentic architectural character within a sensitive rural context of the highest quality?
2. How to overcome the physical and planning constraints of an existing stone-built agricultural building to create a suitable setting for an artist residence, particularly with respect to the use of daylight?
3. How to create a fruitful working method between architect and artist in developing and implementing a challenging brief with social, historic, physical, institutional, architectural, financial and climatic constraints?

Aims and Objectives

3.0

1. *How to add a new contemporary piece of architecture with authentic architectural character within a sensitive rural context of the highest quality?*

There were a number of key attributes that this project had from the outset. First and foremost the site is spectacular. Arriving by car the visitor leaves the main lakeside road and ascends up through the forested hillside along a hairpin track. At the top of the hill the forest opens to a clearing and the visitor leaves the car at the edge of the forest and approaches the building. Here there are spectacular views back down to Lake Comiston and the hills beyond. The building is approached via a gravel path and gives little away as to its interior life.

In the first instance there was a need to build a temporary office for Grizedale Arts to operate from whilst building work was to take place. We obtained a planning permission to construct a simple black corrugated metal shed of the same profile and scale as the adjacent stone building. The result was an extremely successful juxtaposition between the new and the old, to the extent that the client has yet to get around to dismantling it some three years on from the completion of the project. And the planners seem happy to turn a blind eye as it now forms an integral part of the experience of the place as a whole. Ironically it is this temporary shed that perhaps offers up the most pithy conversation about the relationship of the new and the old, and can be placed in the modernist tradition (albeit at a very modest *modus operandi*) which eschews pastiche and speaks about the happy co-existence of contemporary and traditional materials and detailing, when issues of scale, colour and proportion are sensitively addressed.

The existing building was fairly dilapidated but there was enough that had survived the years of dereliction to demonstrate that this could be a fine building without too much re-interpretation, at least to the exterior. The external walls, though leaning dramatically were constructed of the beautiful Kirkby slate typical of the region, and the roof likewise. And the few openings that existed meant that the overall impression was that of a sturdy, robust utilitarian building sitting powerfully in the landscape.

Furthermore there were just enough small windows in the two later extensions to clearly define where sleeping quarters would need to be located, leaving the greatest design challenge to the interior communal spaces. In short, this building required the gentlest of touches externally. It's relationship to the landscape already firmly established.

There were of course issues of how one modifies such a building to contemporary requirements. Clearly the building needed insulating, but this could be achieved relatively easily by constructing an inner lining as there was nothing internally of value that would be undermined by such an approach.

Indeed our philosophy with regards to the 'conservation' of the building was derived from a series of quite pragmatic decisions. Leaning walls and window openings were carefully taken down and rebuilt orthogonally because this was the simplest way of 're-constructing' the envelope. Likewise slates were carefully removed to enable a new insulated roof to be constructed and then reinstated, and so on.

Internally there was more scope for a new identity and expression for the building. Liberated from any planning constraints and charged with creating spaces that would be light and airy, our concept for the interior spaces was to offer a complete contrast to the solid, somewhat hermetic and utilitarian characteristics of the external envelope. By contrast the interior spaces offer a surprise to the visitor - clean, white rooms with generous natural light, spatially connected and fluid, constantly giving the visitor a glimpse of what's to come. The main staircase is the fulcrum from which all spaces connect and the materials, though spare, reinforce this fluidity. The walls are white but have a dado of industrial timber parquet flooring which turns into the flooring and the treads and risers for the staircase and helps to unify the design.

2. *How to overcome the physical and planning constraints of an existing stone-built agricultural building to create a suitable setting for an artist residence, particularly with respect to the use of daylight?*

There were a number of meetings with the planners and from the outset it was clear that we were in for a battle. The planning policy vis-a-vis existing barn conversions was that unless the new development in no way undermines or radically alters the existing fabric of the building, the planning authority would be happier to see it fall into a ruinous state than be re-used. Not exactly a policy that encourages renewal and sustainability, but the prevailing policy at that time.

This presented us with a massive hurdle to jump. It is no over-statement to say that the main living space had potentially one of the greatest views in England, overlooking lake Comiston and the hills beyond. However the existing stone building had no openings along this facade.

So, could we persuade the planners that the opening up of this wall would be a positive alteration to the external fabric of the building and one that would create a spectacular interior space? After months of battling we conceded defeat.

We were allowed to incorporate two very small slit windows which would give the viewer no more than a glimpse of what they were missing. And to compound matters further, the planners insisted we could only introduce roof lights that were of a very limited size. This meant we had to think very hard about how we could make this space work as a memorable experience and a place artists would enjoy as a space for reflection and relaxation. The planners were happy to give us a free reign internally and so we developed the idea of juxtaposing a highly articulated, sculptural interior against the simple utilitarian stone box containing it.

It is perhaps noteworthy that in light of the success of the project, the planning authority have relaxed their policy regarding the alteration of existing buildings and use Lawson Park as an exemplar project. Indeed with a more relaxed (and more reasonable) position taken by the planners in recent years, our client is now considering making the opening in the building that we originally intended.

3. *How to create a fruitful working method between architect and artist in developing and implementing a challenging brief with social, historic, physical, institutional, architectural, financial and climatic constraints?*

This was always going to entail a very close collaboration between the two disciplines, but with the difficult design challenge presented to us in light of planning decisions, the exploration of the interior space became the main focus for dialogue.

Initially there was a fairly straightforward brief - a number of bedrooms for the artists to sleep in, a communal kitchen and dining room, where artists would share in the cooking and dine together. And a studio space, small library and Exhibition space in which the artists could work and occasionally exhibit. The topography of the site and the constraints of the existing building added a further complexity to this simple programme of rooms, resulting in a split level section where all shared rooms connected to one another via a centrally located stair and lift. The main stair takes the artist from the entrance and studio space, through the dining and kitchen spaces (located on the upper ground level) and then up to a generous double-height living space with the library located at the uppermost level and overlooking the living room below.

However the challenge was how to make these spaces both memorable (given their limited aspect) and light (given the lack of existing openings)

Every month we would meet Adam and his colleagues in Grizedale and discuss the design work as it progressed. Once the main rooms had been established, sections and plans had been drawn, discussions opened up about how we could manipulate the roof both to create an interesting interior space and to help the small rooflights bring in as much daylight as possible. Whilst we went away and developed computer models which allowed us to explore in three dimensions the implications of various folds and creases within the roof, the artists explored the ideas through more abstract methods, using ceramics and card. The resultant meetings combined the precision of the computer model with rough ceramic maquettes, both mediums throwing fresh light on the problem at hand. As the roof began to develop, a language began to evolve that could then be 'applied' to other elements of the project. The blank wall took on folds and bulges whilst the main stair balustrade became a key element to link all the spaces together, flowing from the kitchen worktop and ascending through the living room to terminate in the library space. Materiality became a key part of the discussion and the use of industrial parquet timber as a finish for the floor, stair and a wall up to dado level, to unify all the shared spaces together.

Context

4.0

The context for this project is 'Rural Britain'. For much of the twentieth century rural Britain has been quietly eroded by a combination of unsympathetic renovations, speculative house builders (with a seemingly free reign to construct large housing estates that have no sense of placemaking across verdant landscapes), and out-of-town commercial developments that have all but destroyed our rural centres. Rural Britain is now a dislocated and with an uncertain future economically, socially and culturally.

Our project, modest in scale and budget though it might be, is part of a number of projects across rural Britain, that attempts to offer up clues as to how we can re-use existing buildings both without a slavish recourse to history through pastiche or by crass and unsympathetic alteration.

As a practice we have been interested in the ideas first expounded by Ken Frampton in his book *'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance'* where he recalls Paul Ricoeur's "how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization". According to Frampton's proposal, critical regionalism should adopt modern architecture, critically, for its universal progressive qualities but at the same time value should be placed on the geographical context of the building. Emphasis, Frampton says, should be on topography, climate, light; on tectonic form rather than on scenography.

We hope that this modest project nestled in the hills of the Lake District National Park is in some small way a continuation of this tradition.

Research Methods

5.0

The office operates as a studio environment, in which contributors are encouraged to explore, investigate and challenge. Designs are initiated from first principles - through an objective analysis of programme, brief and site and the omission of any preconceived ideas. The practice undertakes analytical research into the site allowing proposals to be harmoniously placed into the surrounding context.

A strength of the practice, proven in their built work, is to transpose the initial design concept to the finished product, through details, materiality and construction. This produces coherent buildings with a simple integrity.

With a range of projects completed, we recognise the need for intensive client involvement in the process, from the early sketch to the final built detail. Monthly meetings took place at the site and at each meeting a new computer model had been developed which picked up issues raised at the previous meeting. We tend not to make working physical models which we find to be too slow and time-consuming and have fully embraced the potential of computers for both exploring spatial ideas at the concept stage through to describing each and every detail of construction (BIM modelling).

The early stages of the design therefore moved quickly from the freehand sketch to the computer model and very quickly spaces were defined, and a palette of materials explored. Some of these drawings are contained in this document.

Dissemination

6.0

Awards

2011 RIBA National Award

Publications

16.06.2011 AJ – RIBA Awards 2011

19.05.2011 BBC News – In pictures: RIBA awards 2011

19.05.2011 Guardian.co.uk – RIBA awards 2011: the winners – in pictures by Jonathan Glancey

2011 Architecture and the Built Environment. issue 14 Autumn 2011 P44-45
The technical Forum published by RIBA North West

2011 Included in the AJ Buildings Library

Lectures

20.10.2011 Meet the Architect. RIBA North West lecture given at the RIBA Hub, Cube, Manchester.

Esteem Indicators

7.0

The significance of this project - as a model for how we might apply a fresh approach to renovation of rural buildings - is reflected in it being awarded an RIBA Award, one of only ninety projects across the UK to receive such an accolade, and the first for a project in the Lake District National Park. And the judges summarised as follows:

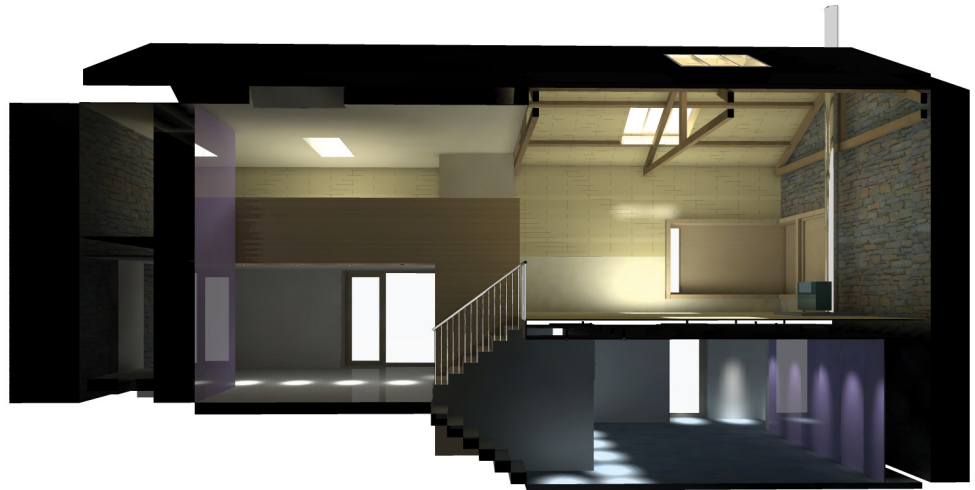
"An ancient farmhouse, outbuildings and gardens on an isolated Lake District hillside have been refurbished to provide both a home for the curator as well as living space, work space and residencies for visiting artists.

A split-level section is employed to resolve the meeting of old and new and provides enjoyable vistas and connections between living, working and eating. The volumes created are celebrated by boldly sculpted ceilings that define space with the light. The limited existing apertures in the ancient walls are similarly sculpted on the inside to draw the eye to the magnificent views.

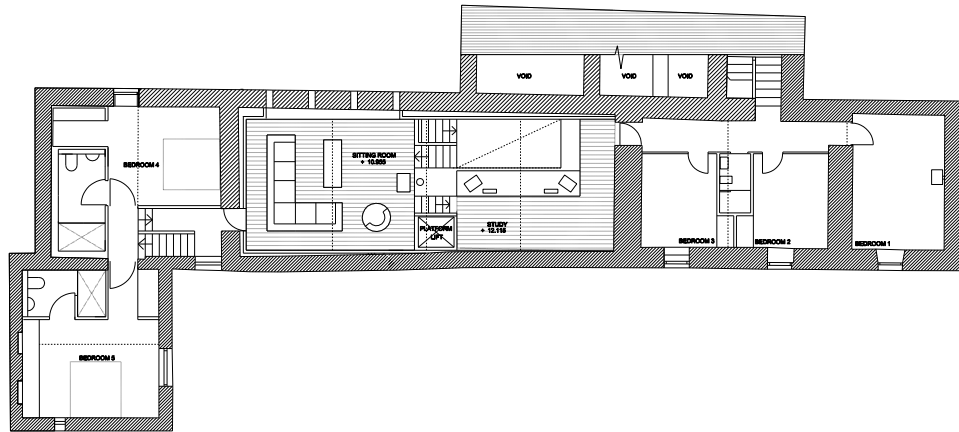
This an ongoing project in which a skilful series of architectural insertions enable, inspire and respond to the making of and thinking about art.

The design project is carried through to the smallest detail; the skilful series of architectural insertions enable, inspire and respond to the project of making and thinking about art. The surrounding landscaped gardens are a live and changing art project. The judges greatly enjoyed this 'live' project that will doubtless continue to redefine and reinvent itself in a way that would have intrigued John Ruskin, a former dweller in the building and site."

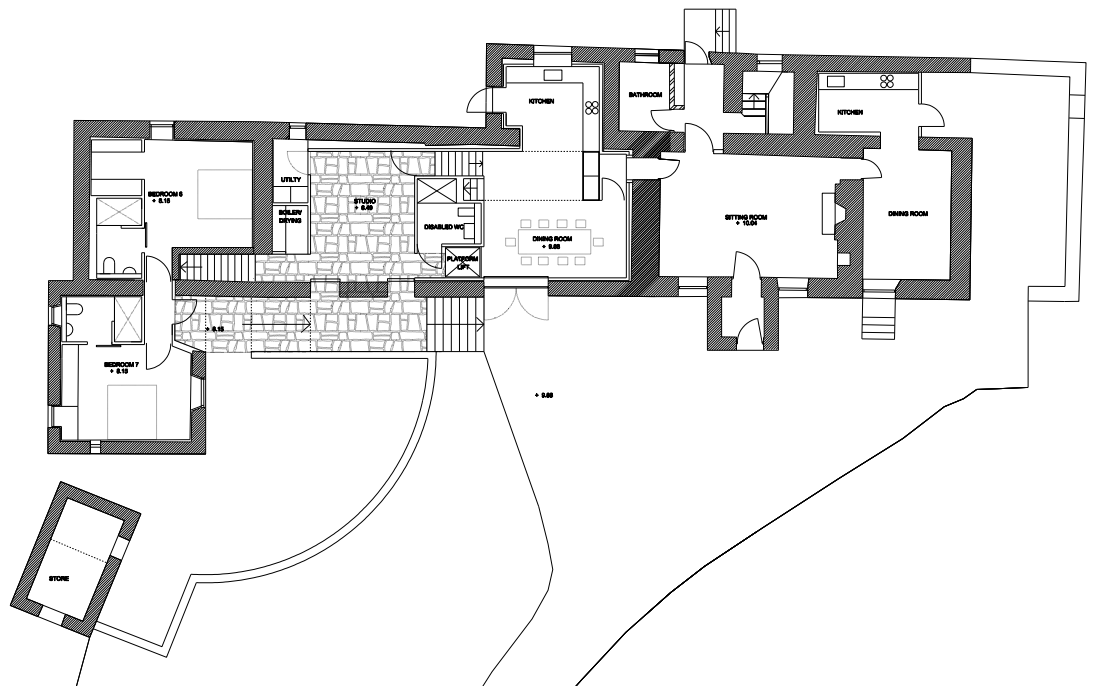
Early Computer studies



Proposed Plans

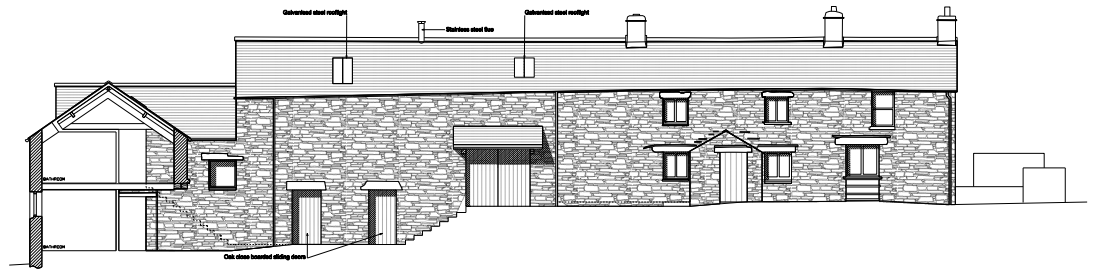


First Floor Plan

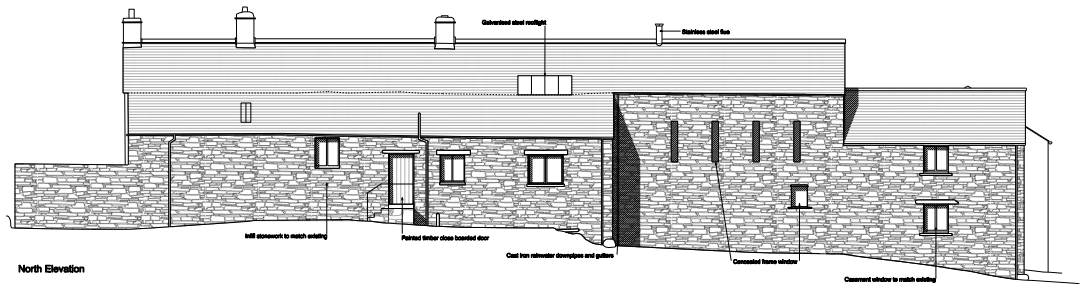


Ground Floor Plan

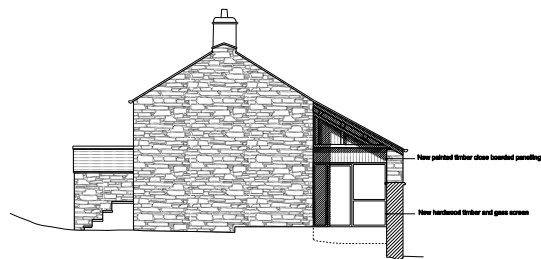
Proposed Elevations



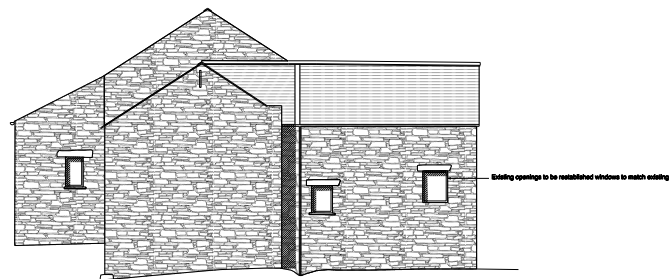
South Elevation



North Elevation

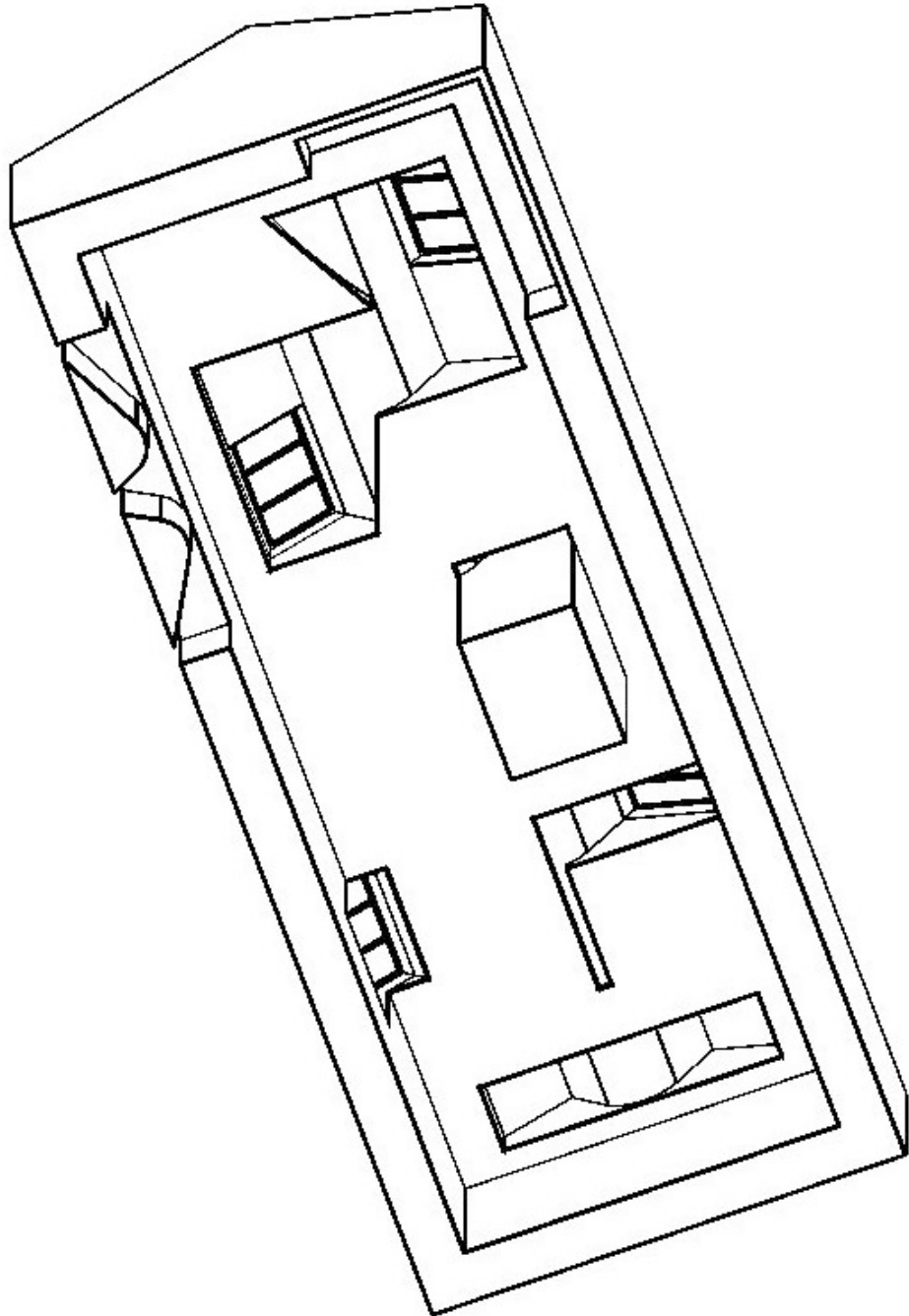


East Elevation



West Elevation

Roof Study

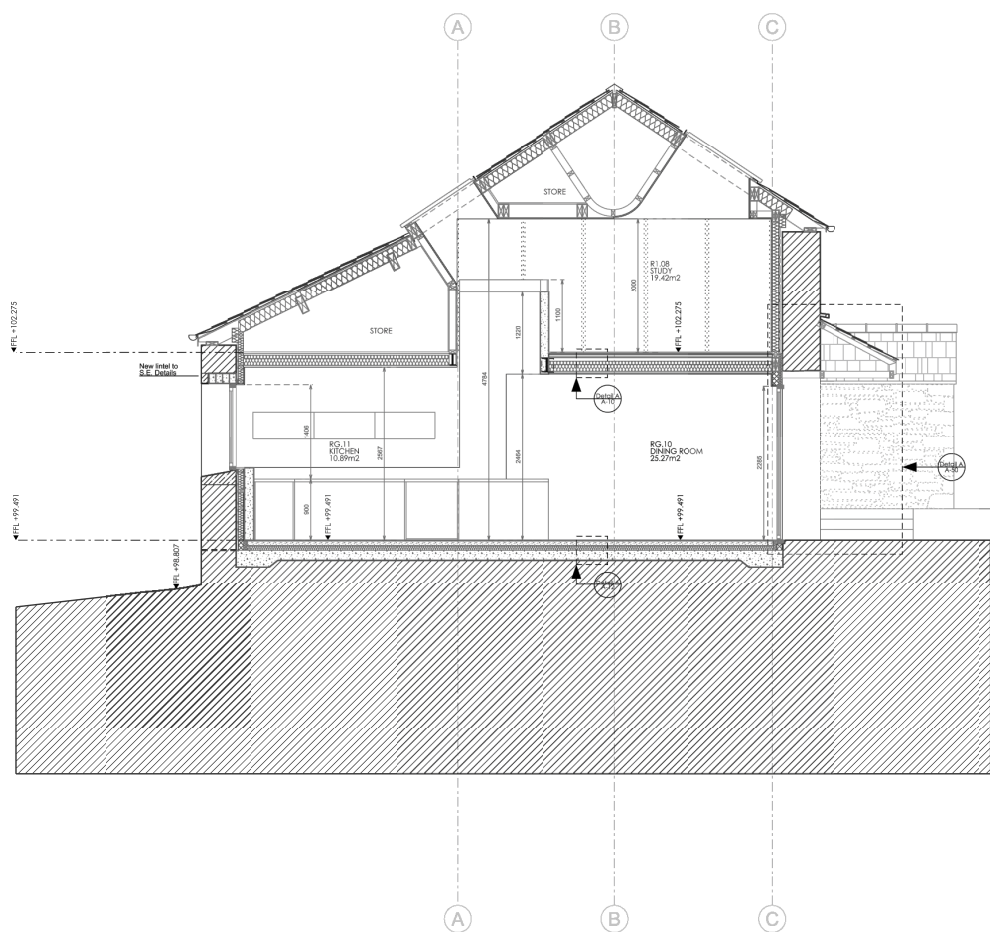
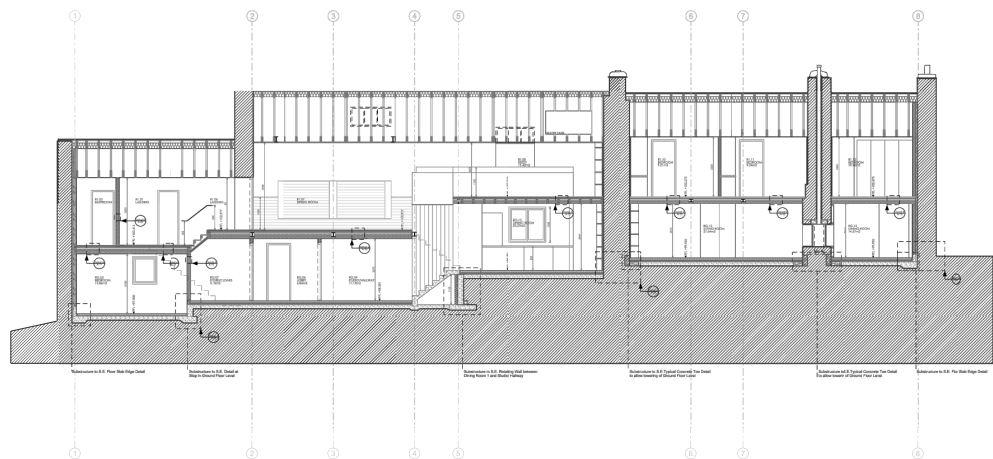


Developed Computer Studies

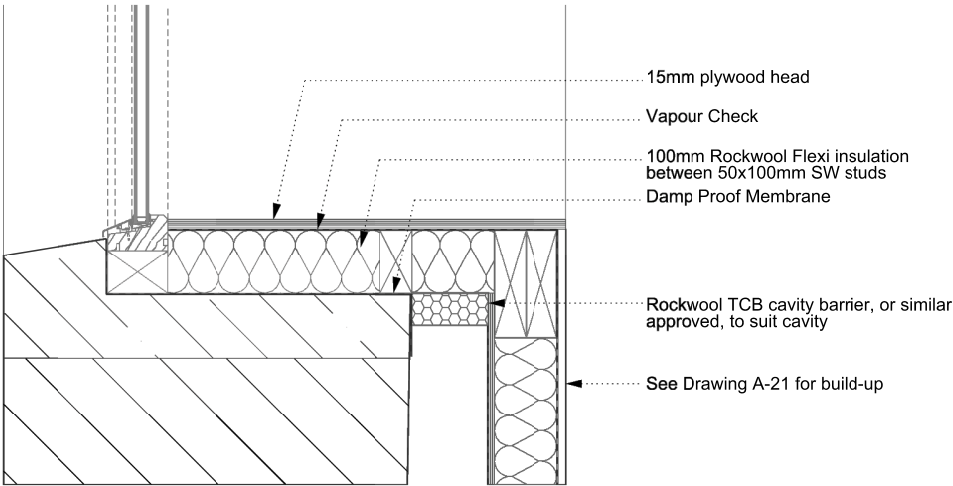
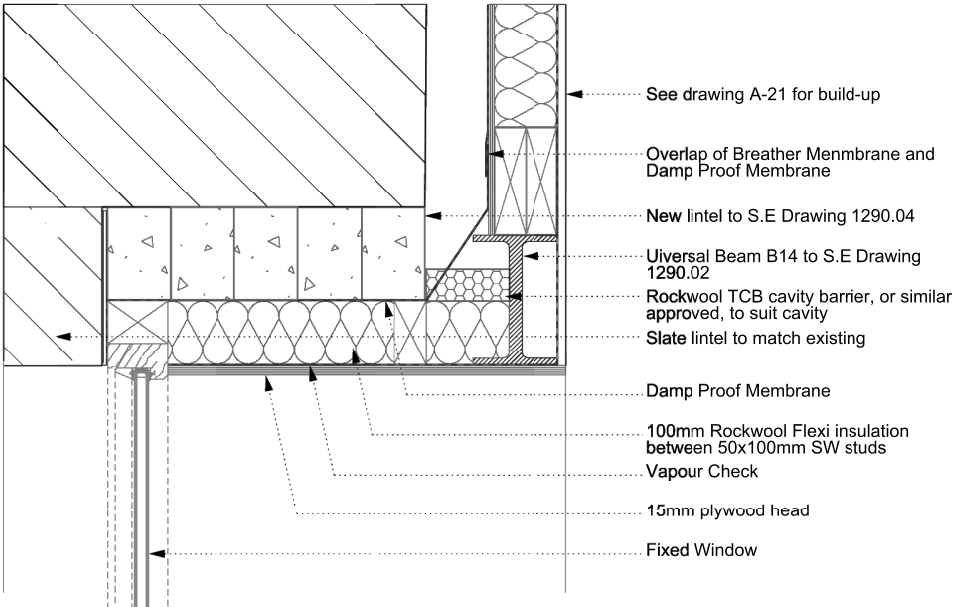




Working Drawings



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Photographs of completed project



Views from approach

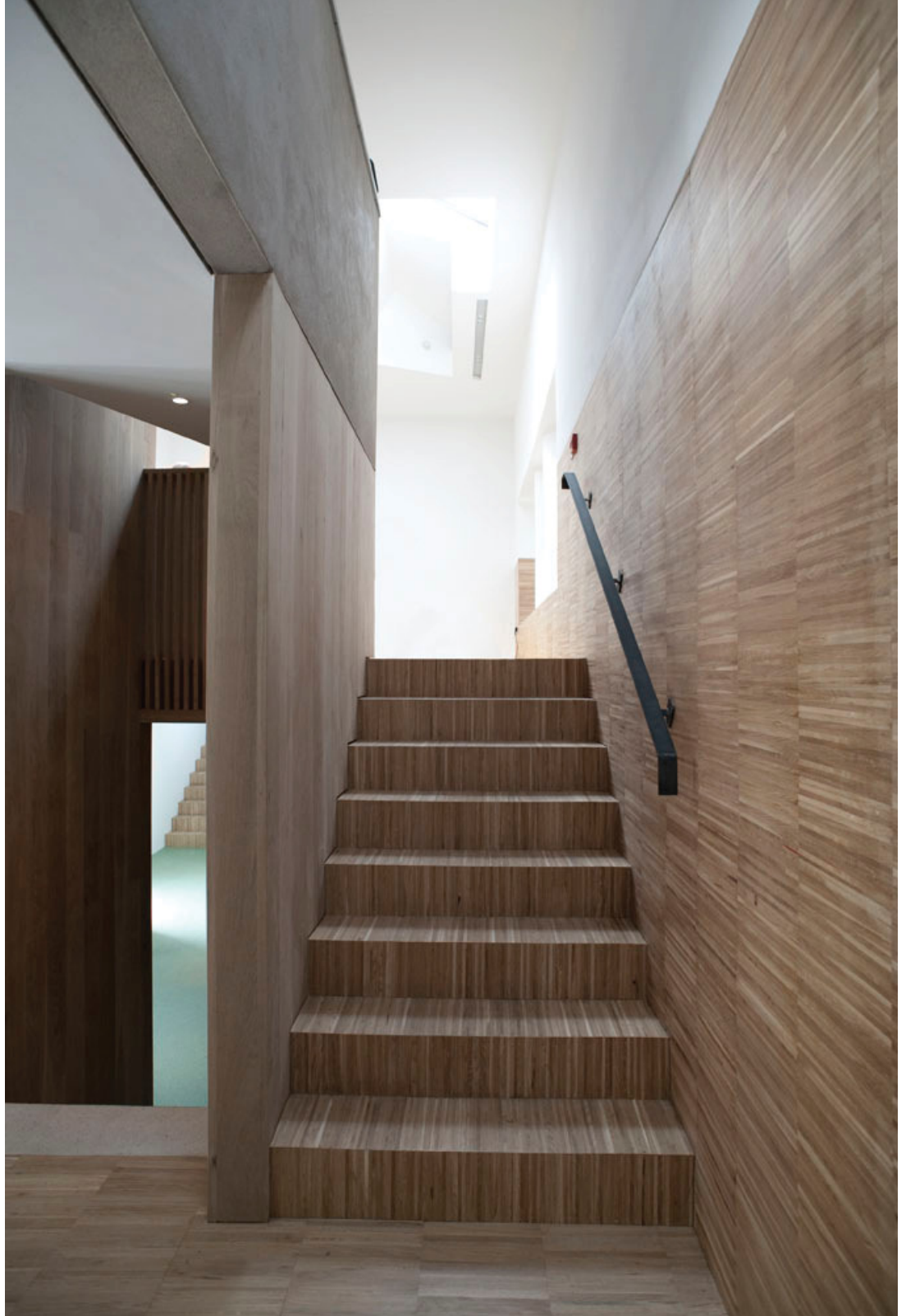


View from garden





Drawings, photographs



View from dining room



View of living room from stair

Drawings, photographs



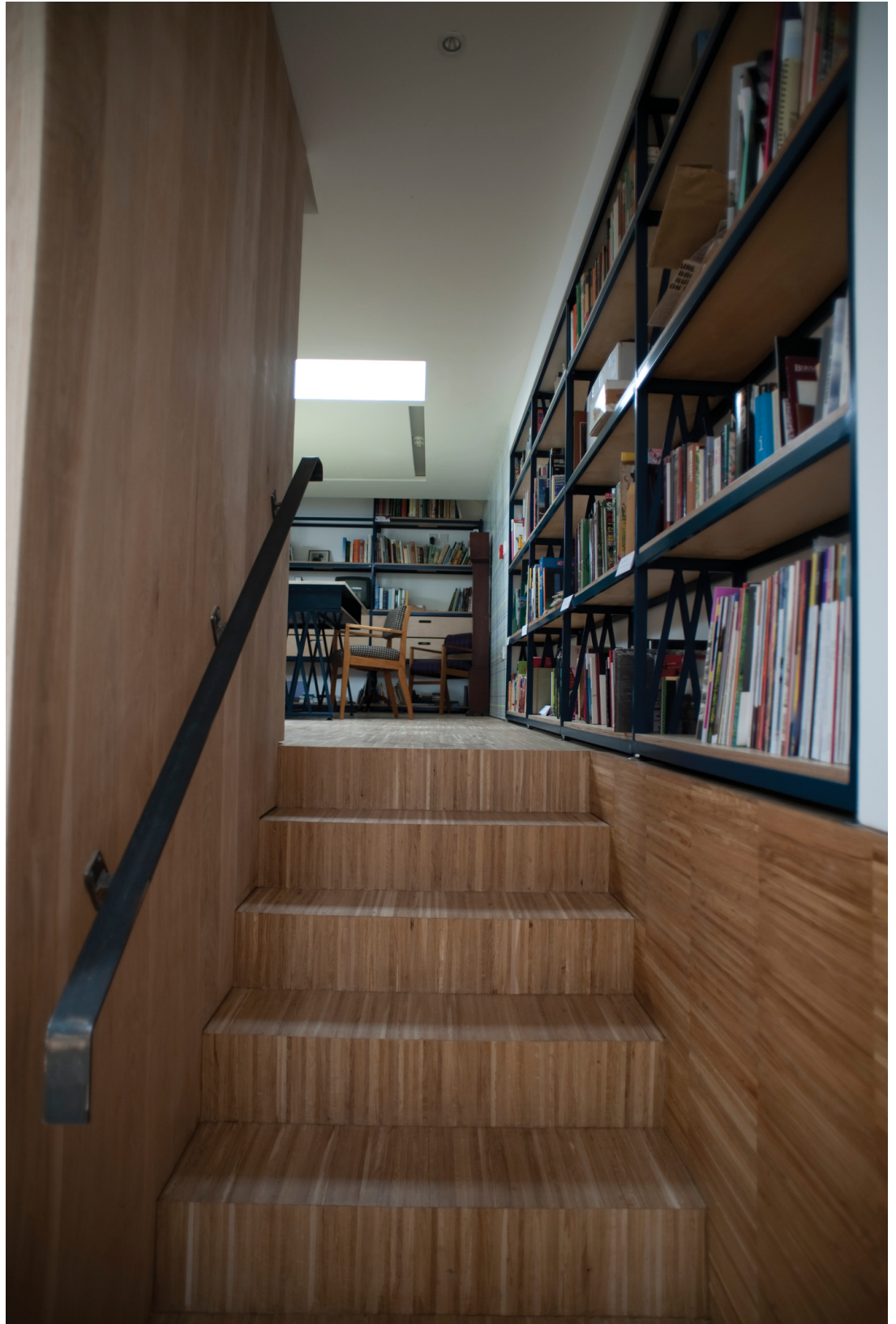
View of living room



View of rooflight



View of living room



View from stair to library
