

Lawson Park, Cumbria

DESIGN RESEARCH

10.10.2012

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Sutherland Hussey Architects

INTRODUCTION

The focus of all the work of our practice is concerned with 'context' and the genius loci of place. Our work builds upon our experiences as design assistants within the office of James Stirling back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at a time when his own work had shifted from the technically inventive (eg the Cambridge Library, the Florey building in Oxford and the Leceister Engineering) to an interest in contextualism (such as the StaatsGalerie in Stuttgart and the Tate in London).

Since setting up our own practice in 1996 we have been fascinated with the idea that every place has its own unique qualities, both in terms of its physical qualities and its cultural , political, economic and social characteristics, and that logically the responsibility of the architect is to be sensitive to those unique qualities, to enhance them rather than to destroy them.

As a practice we have been influenced by 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.

And it is in this context that we write about Lawson Park, an artist retreat located atop a steeply wooded hillside in Cumbria. It is one of a trilogy of projects carried out by our practice at roughly the same period and all located in the Lake District National Park - Grizedale Visitor Centre, Lawson Park (an Artist Centre) and Loveshack (a dwelling). All three projects address a common theme - how contemporary architecture can address a rural context in a sympathetic and poetic way, without resorting to pastiche and scenography.

Lawson Park was completed by the practice in 2009 and went on to achieve international acclaim as a significant example of how one might address contemporary conservation and renovation of existing rural buildings.



Love Shack



Grizedale



Lawson Park

NARRATIVE

The focus of the Lawson Park project can be summarised with the broader question, 'what is the context in which we are working and how should we respond'?

'Context' in this instance must be defined in its widest terms, not just the physical qualities of the site but also the specific context in which the project took place. In this instance we had to work within a highly restrictive planning policy and also with the added challenge of collaborating with artists, both of which had a far reaching impact on the outcome of the project.

The topic is examined through the actual built work, photographs and drawings and highlights how one can create a contemporary piece of architecture with authentic architectural character within a sensitive rural context.



View of building from garden

CONTEXT

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.

As farming has gone into decline and tourism, second homes and retirement numbers have increased, the Lake District National Park has witnessed over the past twenty years a proliferation of old stone agricultural buildings and barns being converted to residential use. Most of these renovations have been carried out very unsympathetically, with large openings being introduced in order to get natural light into otherwise dark and hermetic interior spaces.

These poor renovations resulted in the Planning Authority introducing measures prohibiting any major changes to the external envelope and making specific recommendations on rooflight sizes and details, window sizes, details and colour. Indeed their policy stated that they would prefer to see an existing derelict structure be left to disintegrate over time than see it's 'historic character' undermined by unsympathetic renovation.



Typical stone Barns in the Lake District National Park

It is within this context that we embarked on the renovation of Lawson Park, a derelict nineteenth century stone barn located in the heart of the Lake District National Park.

This project is one of a number of projects across rural Britain, that attempts to offer up clues as to how we can re-use existing buildings without a slavish recourse to history through pastiche or by crass and unsympathetic alteration.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There are three key questions that this project explores:

1. How do we add a new contemporary piece of architecture with an authentic architectural character within a sensitive rural context?
2. How do we 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 optimising daylight?
3. How do we 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?

QUESTION 1

How do we add a new contemporary piece of architecture with authentic architectural character within a sensitive rural context of the highest quality?

With construction about to start on the main stone building, the client needed a temporary office building which could serve both as site hut and as temporary office for the Arts organisation. The requirement was for something simple, that would look elegant, would be cheap and would gain temporary planning permission without too much difficulty.

We obtained temporary 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 is now keen to retain it, some three years on from the completion of the project. Furthermore the planners seem happy to turn a blind eye as it now forms an integral part of the context.

Ironically it is this temporary shed that 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.



View of temporary office from main entrance



View of temporary office from forecourt

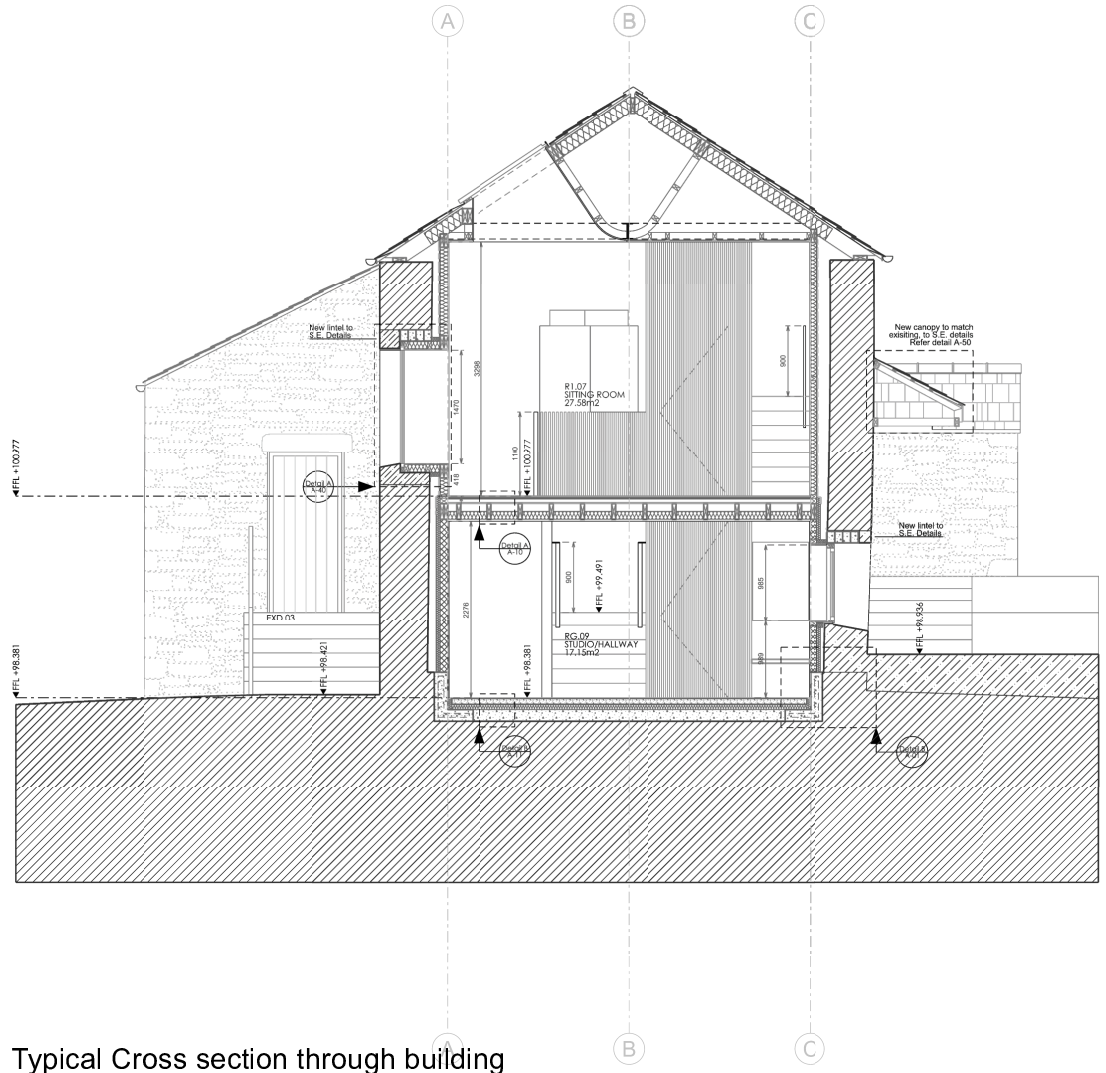
Regarding the existing building, there was enough that had survived the years of dereliction to demonstrate that this could be a fine building without too much re-interpretation to the external envelope. The external walls, though leaning dramatically were constructed of Kirkby slate typical of the region, 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 establish where sleeping quarters would need to be located, leaving the greatest design challenge in getting natural light into the interior communal spaces. In short, this building required the gentlest of touches externally. It's relationship to the landscape already firmly established.

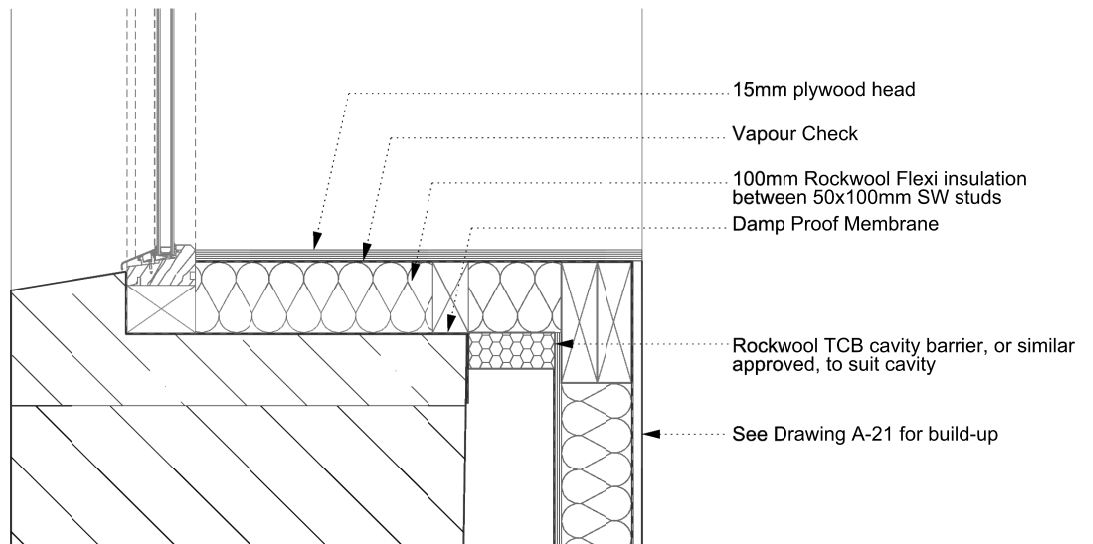
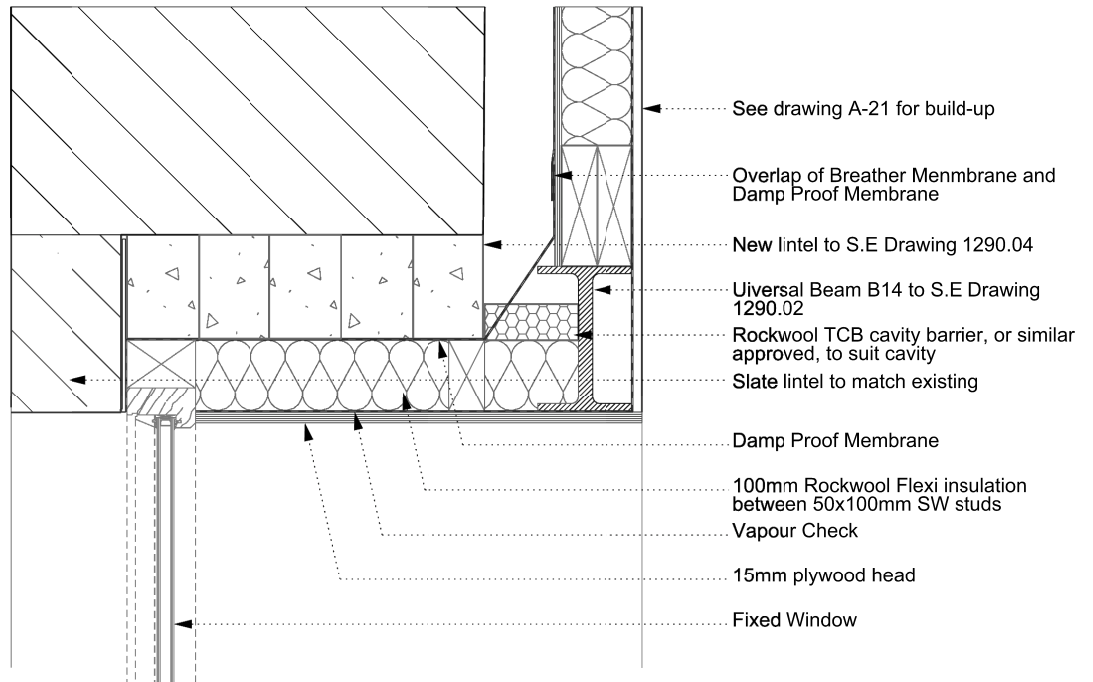
There were of course issues of how one modifies such a building to contemporary requirements. Clearly the building needed insulating, but this could be achieved relatively easily by constructing an inner lining as there was nothing internally of value that would be undermined by such an approach.

Our philosophy with regards to the 'conservation' of the building was based on 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.



Typical Cross section through building



Typical Window and stone wall detail

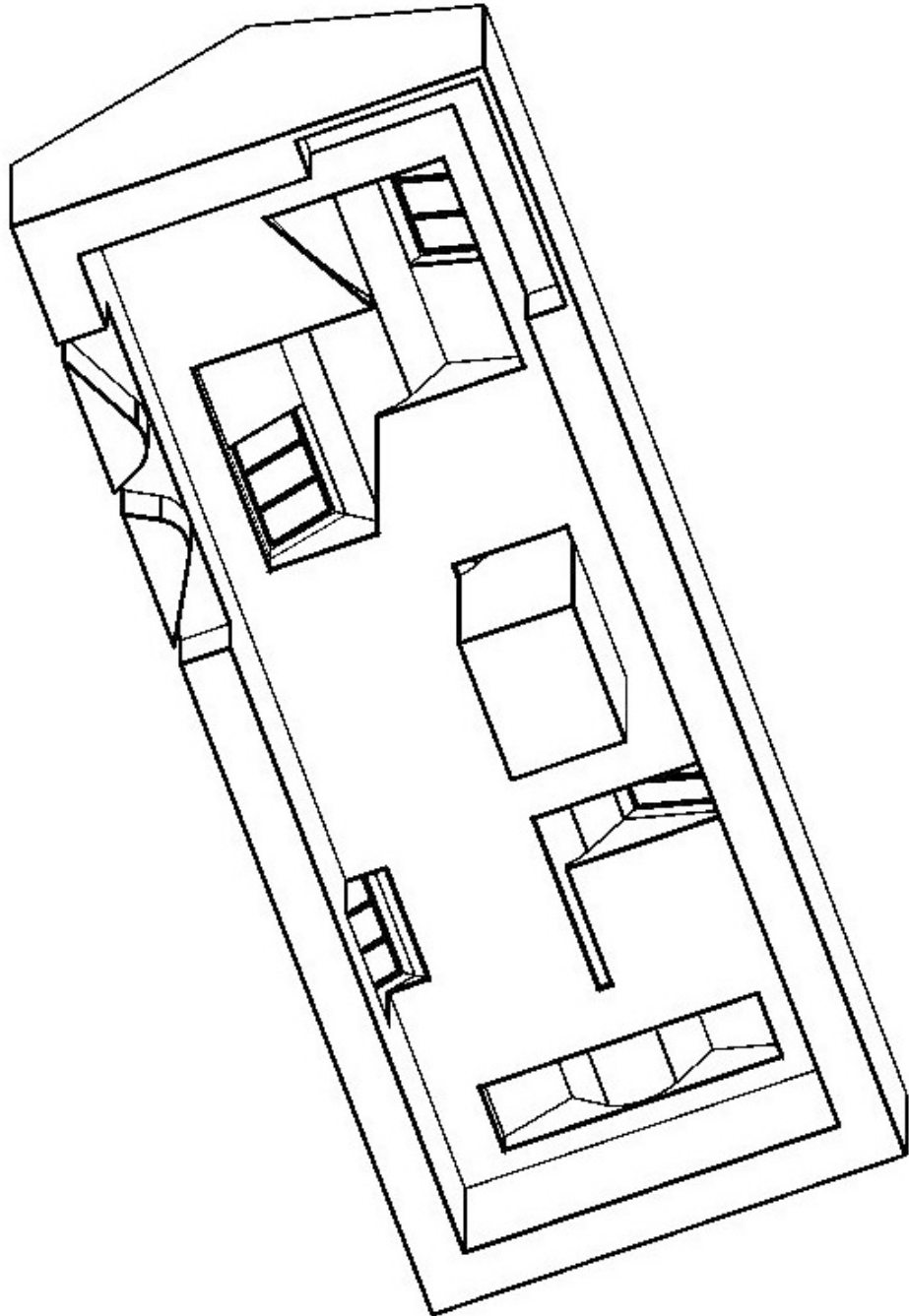
QUESTION 2

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?

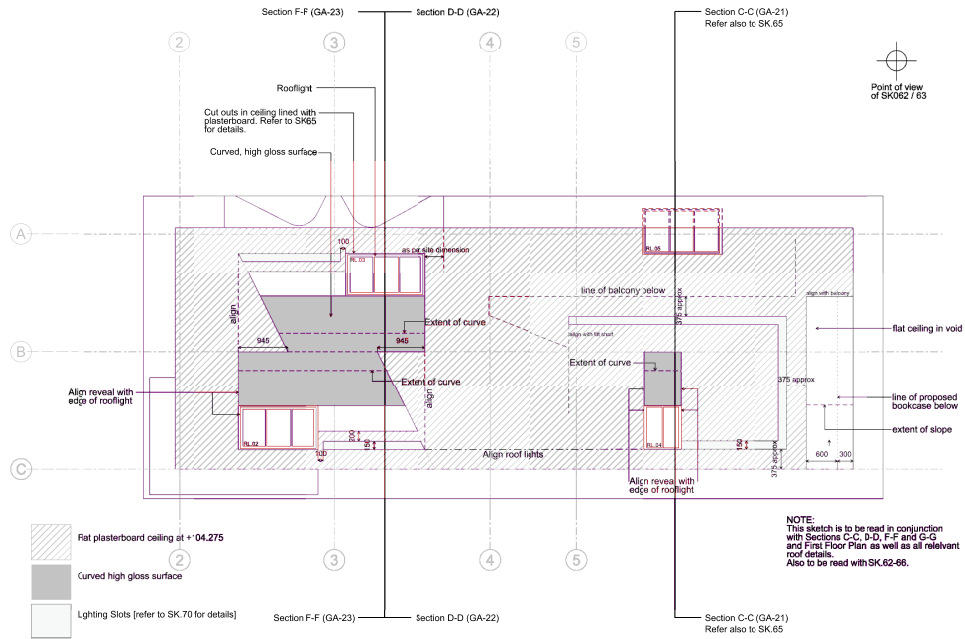
There were a number of meetings with the planners and from the outset it was clear that we were not going to be allowed to make any significant new openings to the existing building. The planning policy vis-a-vis existing barn conversions was that unless the new development in no way undermines or radically 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 nevertheless the prevailing policy at that time.

After much discussion the planners allowed us to incorporate two very small slit windows in the main living space, and to compound matters further, insisted that 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, and forming an internal ceiling and wall profile that would maximise the impact of the limited daylight entering the interior spaces. The resulting interior spaces are rich with detail and highly sculptural, in part to compensate for the lack of view. They are

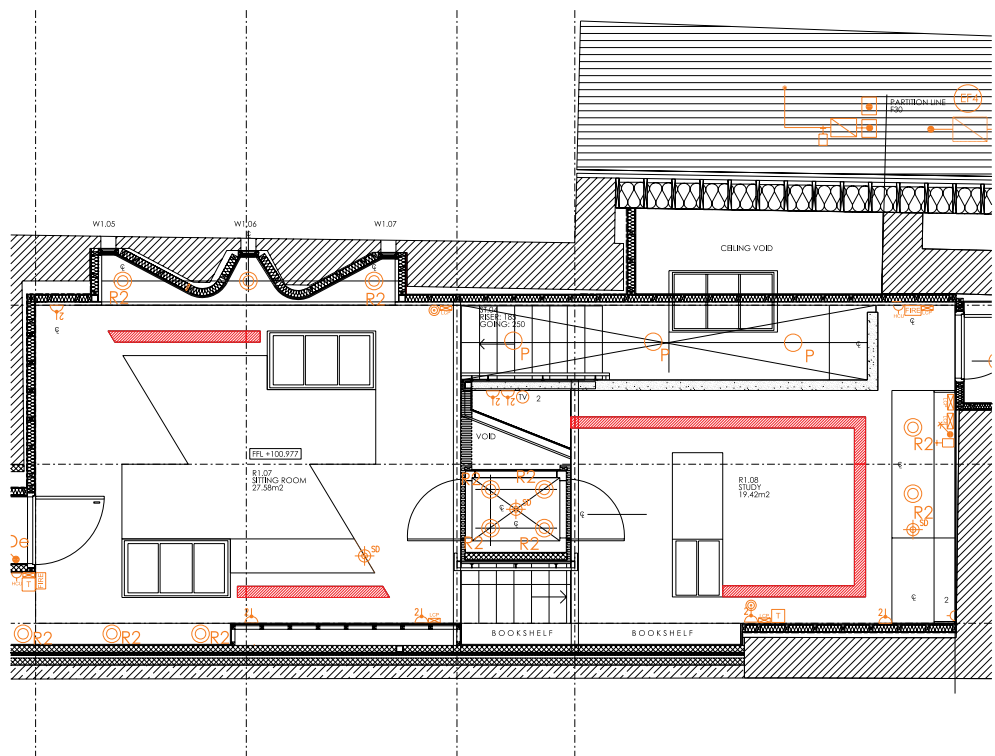
It is perhaps noteworthy that in light of the success of the project, the planning authority have relaxed their policy regarding the alteration of existing buildings and use Lawson Park as an exemplar project. Indeed with a more relaxed (and more reasonable) position taken by the planners in recent years,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



drawing study looking up to rooflights over living space



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Project Name	Lawson Park - Artist's Residence
Client	Chris and Catherine Cummins
Location	LA21 8AD
Scale	B
Disc No	SK.084
Date	10/09/08
Disc Title	SKETCH - Proposed ceiling plan or main space
Disc No	SK.078
Date	15/10/08
Disc Title	SKETCH - Main Space lighting slot layout
Disc No	SK.078
Date	15/10/08
Disc Title	SKETCH - Main Space lighting slot layout



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Disc Title	SKETCH - Main Space lighting slot layout



View of windows in living space



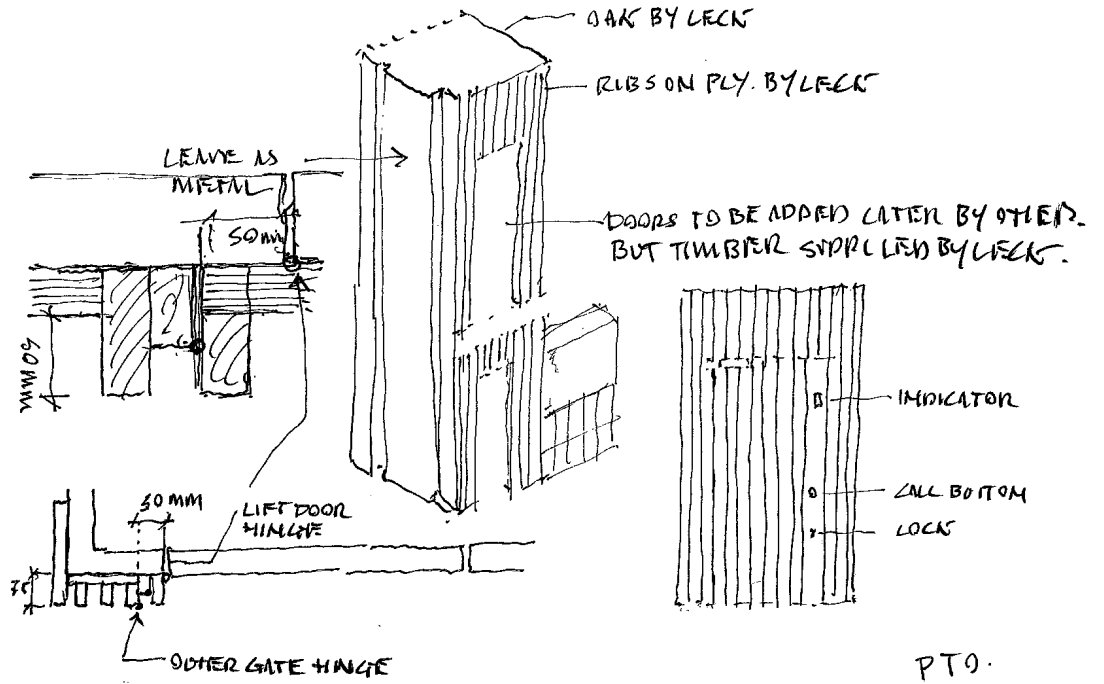
View looking up to rooflights over living space

QUESTION 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.

Every month we would meet the client 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 subsequent meetings combined the precision of the computer model with rough ceramic maquets, 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.

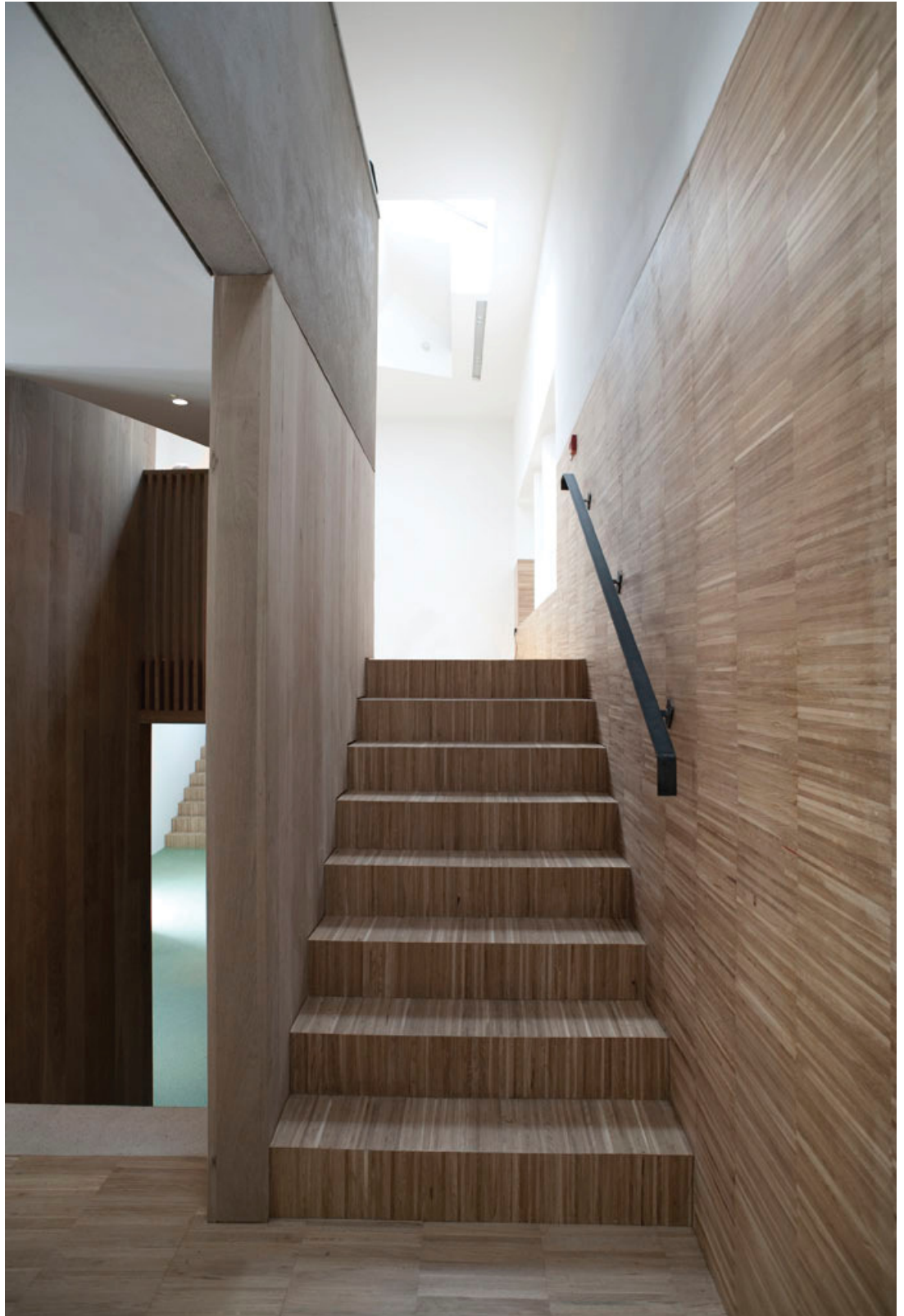


Sketch study of lift enclosure



Sketch study of timber lining up through the three levels

Drawings, photographs



Final timber lining arrangement



Early computer model study of the living space



Early computer model study of the kitchen/dining space



View of final built living space

METHODOLOGY

The design process involved a number of tools and procedures:

1. Accurate topographical and photographic analysis of the site together with a detailed tree survey to fully understand the existing root systems
2. a series of regular face to face meetings with the client in order to establish their needs and aspirations together with the understanding their financial constraints and timetable.
3. a series of 3-D computer models were presented on the laptop at these meetings enabling us to show all aspects of the design as it developed - from general massing and siting to choice of materials and internal views.
4. As the design became more developed perspective renderings showing the building in its context were taken from the computer model and developed using Artlantis and photoshop.

Beyond the merely factual information collecting, we spent some time on site with the client to understand the movement of the sun, the optimum views from the site as well as views back to the site from the road.

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 our 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 are defined, and a palette of materials explored. A selection of these drawings are contained in this document.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

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 layout of the spaces draws from the heritage of the 'big house' and the 'Mains' farmhouse with the principle space establishing a great hall, a kind of semi public space, social interaction and mixing of landowners, site users and workers. Architecturally the principle area of design is this great hall, utilising the big hay barn to create an open plan arrangement of working, leisure and study areas, with through-views and open, readable circulation leading to bedrooms and access to gardens and outdoors.

The intention was to give residents a 'front door' of their own with these live/work spaces connected to a generous social space designed for multiple use, social, work, public, research and discussion.

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.

ESTEEM INDICATORS

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.”

DISSEMINATION

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

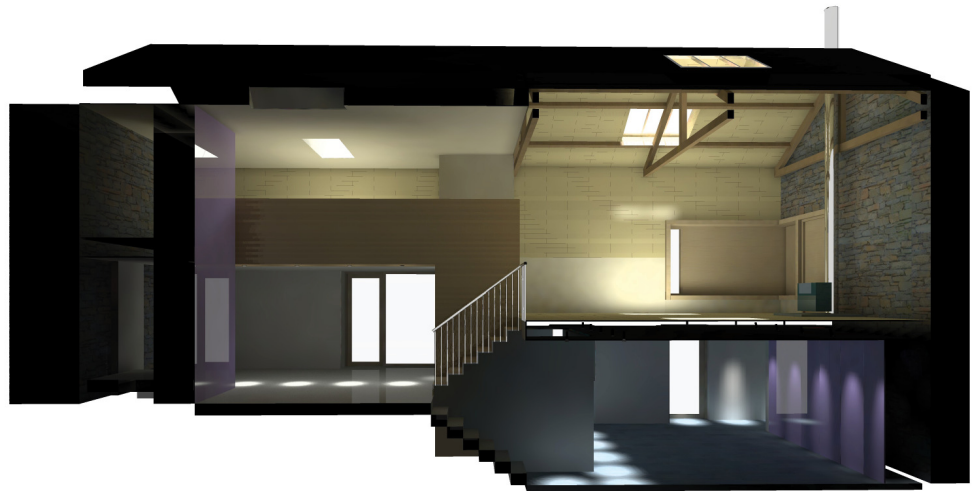
Lectures

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

BUILDING PRIOR TO RENOVATION



EARLY COMPUTER STUDIES

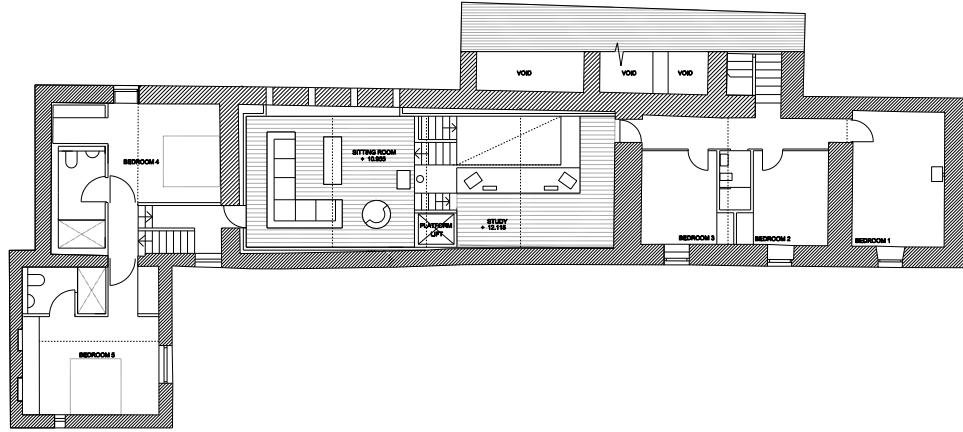


Early computer drawing exploring circulation and interior spaces

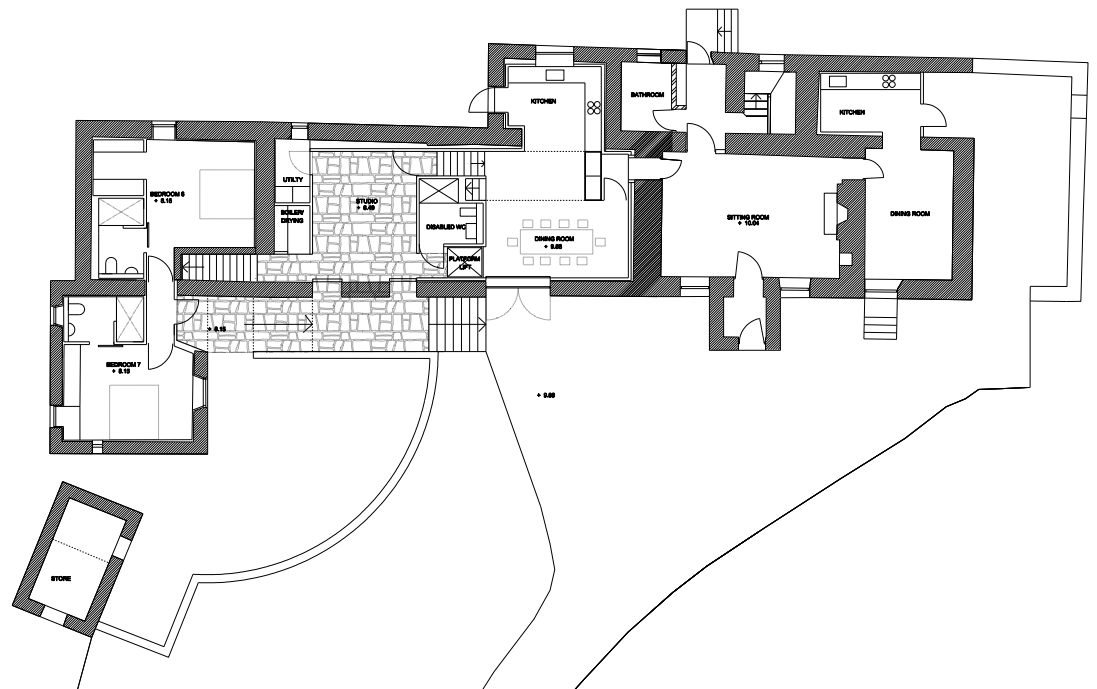


Early computer drawing of living space

DRAWINGS



First Floor Plan

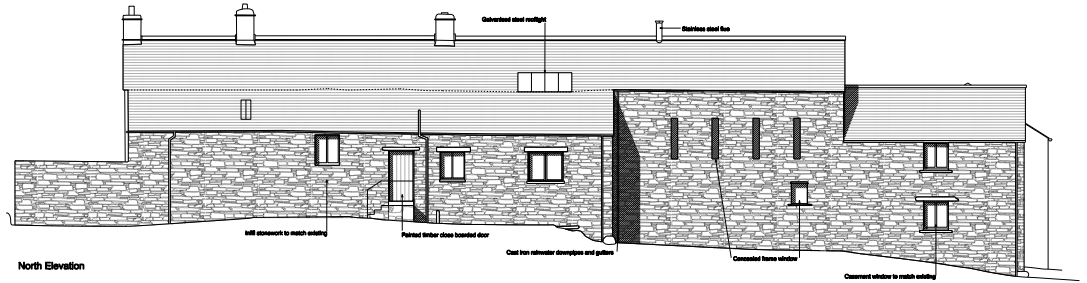


Ground Floor Plan

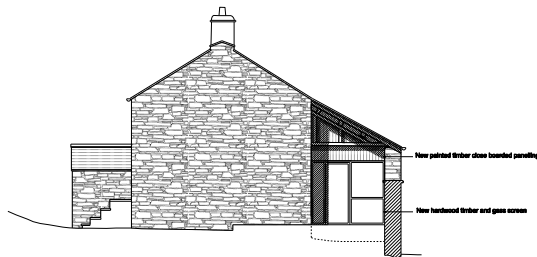
Proposed Elevations



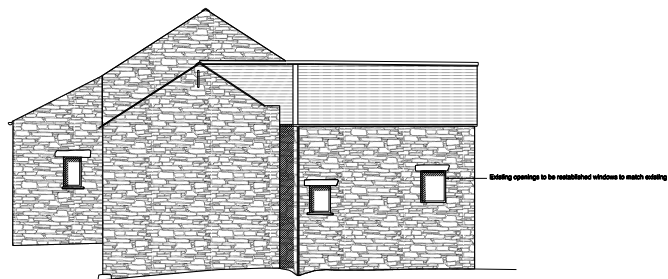
South Elevation



North Elevation

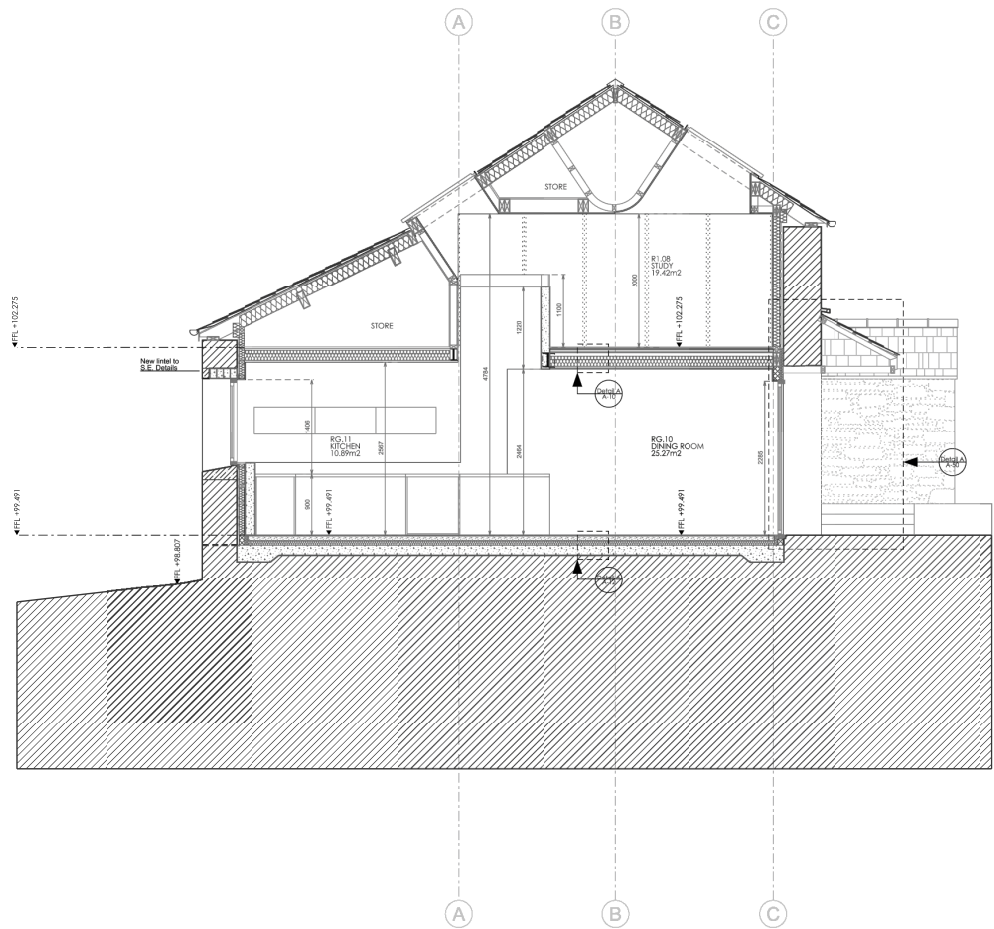
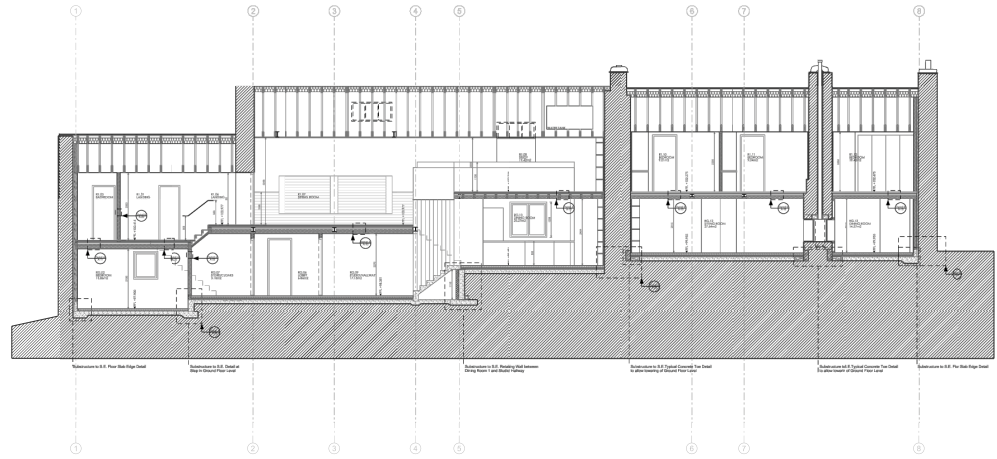


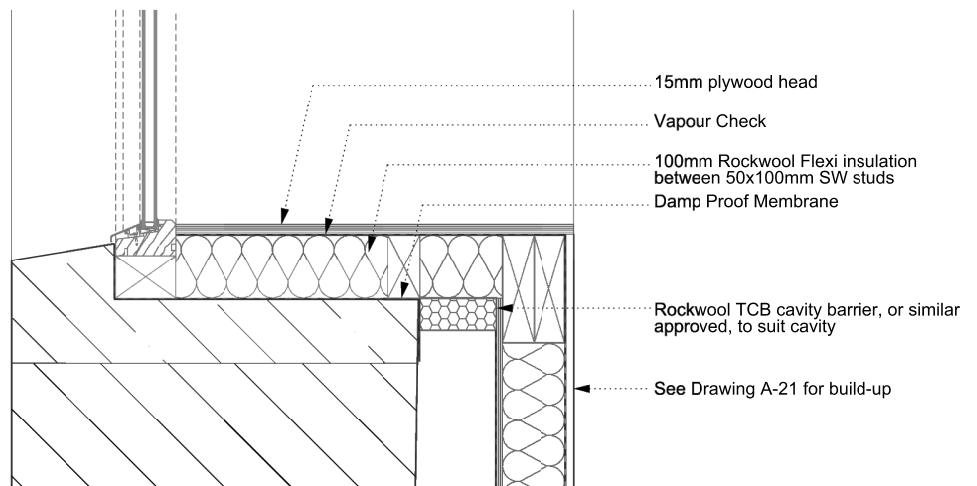
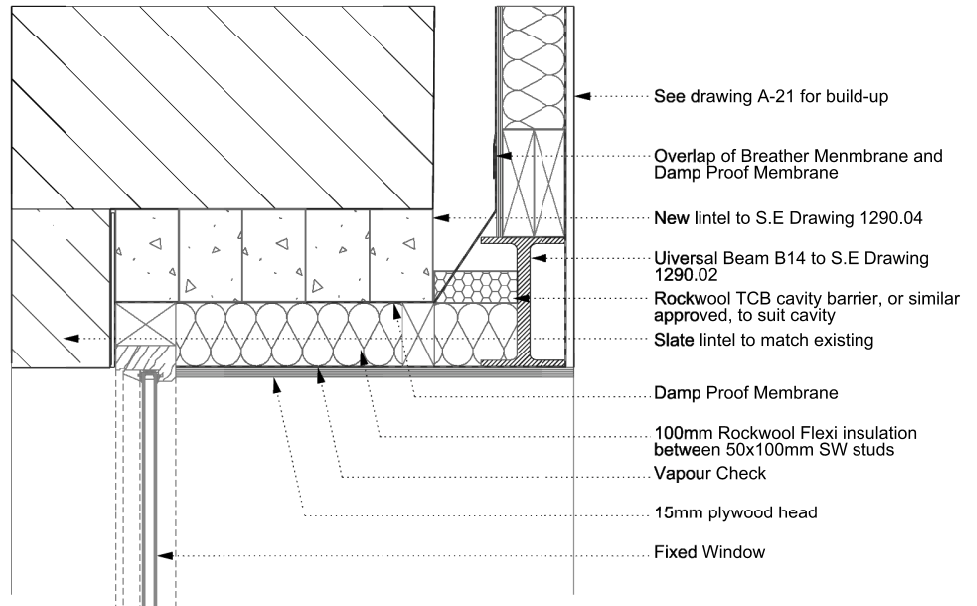
East Elevation



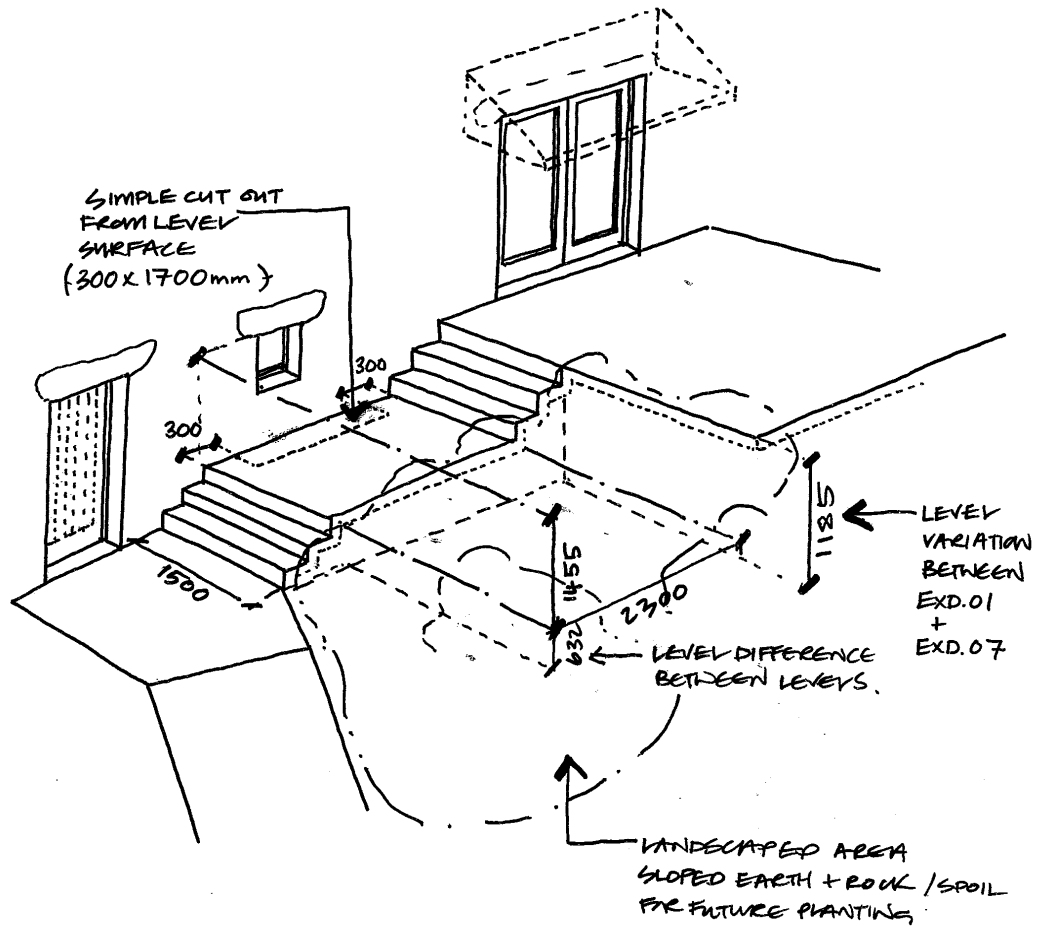
West Elevation

Working Drawings





Typical window detail through existing stone wall



OPTION A.
SECTION CAN EITHER BE SHUTTERED PRIOR TO CONCRETE POUR OR CUT OUT AFTER IF REQUIRED.

* PLEASE NOTE: DRAWING IS SHOWING 3 RISES PER STAIR SET. AND GA-05 INDICATES THAT 4 RISES WILL BE REQUIRED. SKETCH IS INCORRECT BUT SHOWS THE PRINCIPLES OF PLANTER VARIATIONS * FOR DISCUSSION.

SK-180
PLANTER OPTION A
SUTHERLAND HUSSEY ARCHITECTS
0131 553 4321.
18.02.2009.

Site sketch showing principles of landscaping

Photographs of completed project



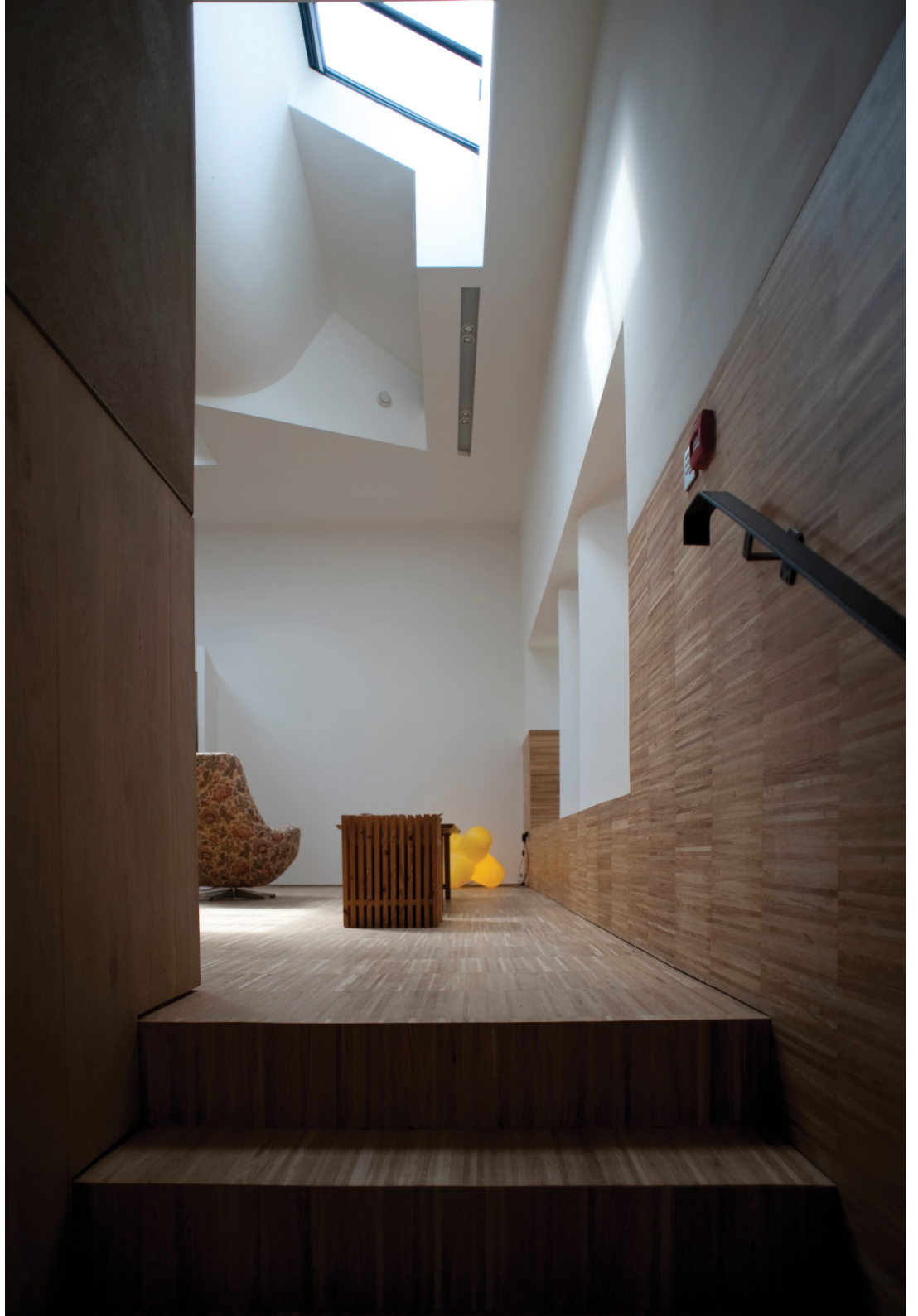
Views from approach



Views of temporary site hut overlooking Coniston



View from forecourt



View of living room from stair

Drawings, photographs



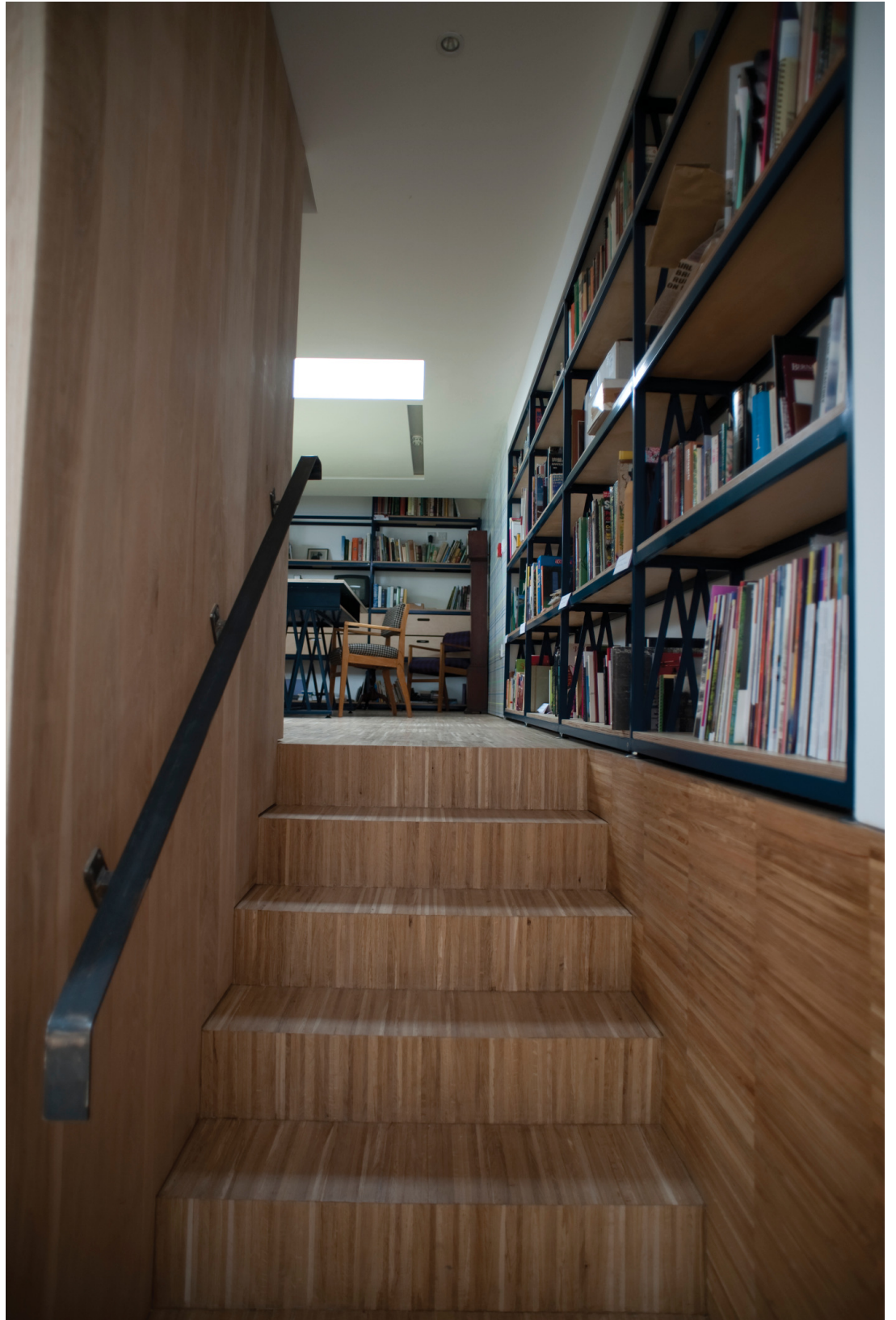
View of living room



View of rooflight



View of living room



View from stair to library
