

# Between the cracks

Piers Taylor's Stillpoint project in Bath is typical of good new architecture in the city – hidden from view, writes *Rory Olcayto*.

Photography by *Peter Cook*

Stillpoint, Piers Taylor's new cluster of riverside buildings in Bath, sits well above the waterline and from the bank opposite, the only place you can get a clear view of the whole scheme, its timber batten-lined facades and zinc roof appear sandwiched between thick layers of stone: the high embankment wall beneath it and the looming terrace of Thomas Warr Attwood's Paragon Crescent behind it.

To its left and right, however, and all along this stretch of river are yards, alleyways and lightweight industrial structures, some quite ornamental. It's not what you'd expect of Bath.

Just like Edinburgh, which it is often clubbed together with because of its UNESCO World Heritage status, Bath is written off as Modernist-free. That's not really true. Just like EMBT's sprawling, craggy blocks for the Scottish Parliament, which undermine the Scottish capital's reputation as a frozen-in-amber

**Right** View towards riverside homes from corner under first floor dojo window

**Bottom right** View of Stillpoint from opposite riverbank with Paragon Crescent behind

townscape, Eric Parry's creepy gothic extension around the back of the Holburne Museum suggests Bath has more to offer than Palladiophilia.

Admittedly both buildings are on the fringes of their city centres and, in Parry's case, hidden from the street. But this low-key presence is a clue for visitors, prodding them to look more closely at the place, dig a round a bit.



Just like the Holburne extension, much that isn't Georgian or stone-built in Bath tends to be shoved round the back of older keynote buildings. Robert Adams' much messed around with Pultney Bridge is the best example. It's north side is barnacled with cantilevered shop extensions added over 100 years ago.

Stillpoint has something of those Pultney extensions – their opportunism – in its blood. And like them and Parry's extension for Holburne, Stillpoint is invisible from the street. You have to wander down an alleyway to an old stone-breaker's yard to find it. Unless you knew where it was, you'd never come across it.

It's typical of the good modern architecture in the city: hard to find, oddly expressive, between the cracks and a bit weird. Its function is odd too. Between them, the four buildings on the Avon-side plot provide a martial arts dojo, alternative therapy business and two homes on a plot overlooking the river. So how did it come about?

Taylor's previous firm, Mitchell Taylor Workshop, was commissioned in 2007 by established alternative therapy specialists Peter Cockhill and Adrian Baker, who wanted to make the most of a site they had bought in the Walcot area of Bath, on the northern fringes of the city centre, to expand their successful business.

The site meant they could locate seven treatment rooms and support offices there, but to make the project stack up more function had to be added, hence the two homes and >>

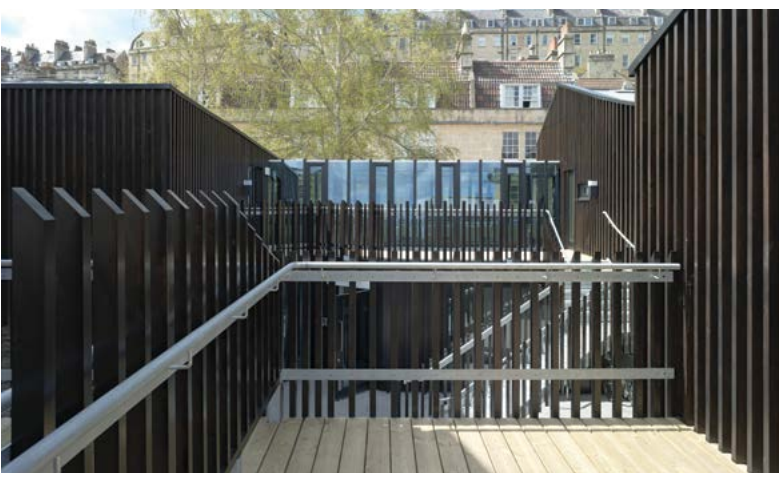
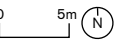




**Stillpoint, Bath**  
*Mitchell Taylor Workshop/Invisible Studio*



1. Reception
2. Treatment room
3. Office
4. Group room
5. Walled garden
6. Plant
7. Garage
8. House
9. Living/kitchen/  
dining
10. Deck
11. Karate dojo
12. Male changing area
13. Female changing  
area
14. Glazed link
15. Void
16. Store
17. Gallery



the martial arts dojo and changing rooms. Getting started was tough. Taylor explains: 'There were several years of negotiation before we were finally able to get on-site. At one stage, the Bath heritage lobby talked of it single-handedly being responsible for Bath's World Heritage status being threatened.' Discussions centred

**Despite the diagrammatic feel of Stillpoint there is a real sense of place here**

on Stillpoint's relationship to a listed building behind its plot, views, rights of light and height limits as well as access and parking. There was also the matter of a public sewer easement running through the site and a number of party wall awards to consider. It's probably why when you first see Stillpoint, you might feel it looks more like a built diagram rather than a finished, fully thought through piece of architecture. That's largely true of much of the interior too, especially in the business block, where the ground floor of treatment rooms is a little cramped and judging by the

aspects afforded, a bit dark in terms of natural light. Upstairs, however, in the dojo, these constraints have been more finely optimised and the result is an unusual, asymmetrical wood-lined volume with a mirrored wall and decon-style rooflight. It's quite unique and clearly crafted with love. Apparently it's a big hit with the local judo choppers. It should prove popular too during the local Doors Open day. Back outside, and despite its diagrammatic feel, there is a real sense of place here. When you find yourself in among the buildings Taylor has wrought (perhaps overwrought –

**Clockwise from left** Each home has a first floor terrace; Dojo corner window; South-facing lead-lined bay windows overlook the Avon; Steps leading to dojo and changing rooms

something he admits himself) from the trying conditions, you sense there is meaning here, that it is more than an speculative profit-led exercise. You can sense the can-do, hand-built influence of Taylor's hero Glen Murcutt here and there, but it also dabbles with a planner-friendly Cabeism aesthetic as well – in its use of a stone base for each of the four buildings, which Taylor says is a nod to the site's original function. But there's another influence at work. Taylor says the plan he created quotes heavily from Peter Salter and during the design of Stillpoint he 'pored >>

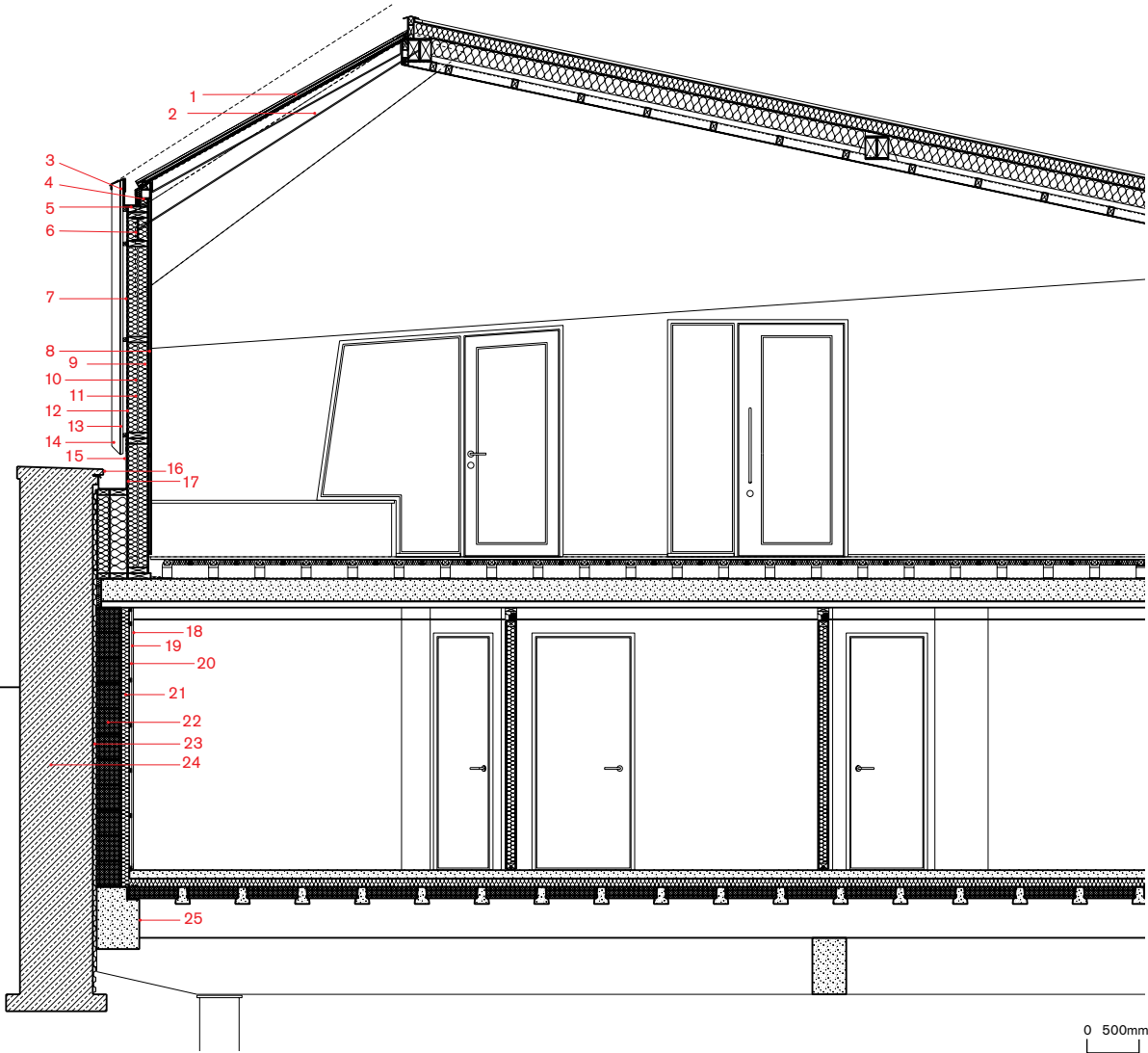


over everything [Salter] had done'. The homes are OK. They make the most of the river views, with upstairs living room bay windows that overlook the Avon (the bedrooms are downstairs). A terrace opens out on the first floor, marred a little by a heavy dividing fence which has supposedly helped let the properties. It seems shared outdoor space is still a step too far for the luxury rental market. Yet Taylor is pleased with this final project for the Mitchell Taylor Workshop and sees it as the springboard for his new Invisible Studio outfit. He says: 'The main thing here is the creation of urban spaces with a series of buildings. It's rare having an opportunity to do this – typically, one gets commissioned to design a singular building. In some ways it's rather overwrought and overcomplicated, but it was one of those projects you design early on in your career where you over-obsess over every tiny detail – I kind of like the complexity.' Bath clearly doesn't mind either – just as long as it remains mostly hidden from view. ■

| Project data                               |                               |
|--|-------------------------------|
| START ON SITE                              | August 2010                   |
| DATE OF COMPLETION                         | April 2012                    |
| GROSS INTERNAL AREA                        | 700m <sup>2</sup>             |
| PROCUREMENT                                | Traditional JCT contract      |
| TOTAL COST                                 | £1.38 million                 |
| COST PER SQUARE METRE                      | £1,950                        |
| CLIENT                                     | Riverpoint                    |
| STRUCTURAL ENGINEER                        | Hydrock Structures 1          |
| M&E CONSULTANT                             | Building Services Consultants |
| QUANTITY SURVEYOR                          | Mildred Howells               |
| CDM COORDINATOR                            | Alistair Bovey                |
| APPROVED BUILDING INSPECTOR                | Oculus                        |
| MAIN CONTRACTOR                            | Pollards                      |
| CAD SOFTWARE USED                          | MicroStation                  |
| ESTIMATED ANNUAL CO <sub>2</sub> EMISSIONS | 22kg/m <sup>3</sup>           |



## Working detail



1. Skyline standard patent glazing with fixed glazing
2. Steel tiles
3. Powder-coated pressed metal capping
4. Steel box section to support standard patent glazing
5. Metal box gutter
6. Steel beam
7. Internal face of sheathing as setting out plane for steel (AL(0)40)
8. 12mm ply lining on 12mm battens
9. 9mm structural ply sheathing on vapour barrier
10. 175 x 50mm timber stud wall
11. 175mm rockwool flexi insulation to west wall of dojo
12. 9mm structural ply sheathing
13. 25mm vertical SW cladding, stained black, on 35mm battens over breather membrane
14. 75 x 50mm SW fin stained black
15. Breather membrane lapped over lead flashing
16. Existing capstone retained in its position
17. Stainless steel channel with lead flashing tucked under existing coping stone and into channel
18. Foamglas Perinsul SL insulating block
19. 12.5mm plasterboard with skim on 20mm battens
20. Vapour barrier
21. 75mm celotex insulation
22. 215mm blockwork
23. RIW cavity drain
24. Existing stone retaining wall to old orchard cottages
25. Detail to bottom of tanking and blockwork wall

### Stillpoint

#### Mitchell Taylor Workshop/ Invisible Studio

##### Martial arts dojo

The site is incredibly tight. The brief comprised far more accommodation than seemed easy to fit on the site, given the constraints of a main sewer running through the middle and prohibiting development within 3m of it, the view corridors through the site that the local authority insisted stay open and the winter light penetration

to the houses behind the scheme that had to remain unaffected. Given this, the dojo cantilevers over the undevelopable sewer easement stealing space and has a cranked and skewed geometry to the roof to permit winter sun penetration to the neighbouring site. The space also needed high levels of natural light while retaining privacy internally for martial arts activities, hence rooflights and other window strategically placed to avoid being overlooked. There was also a planning constraint that the space had to be operable in mid-summer with minimal noise for

the sake of the neighbouring houses. Thus there are a series of passive ventilators in the walls, with grilles concealed behind the ribbed cladding which have internal acoustic baffles that ensure that with 20 people in the dojo and the windows shut, little sound is audible externally. The dojo is a steel frame with timber stud infill sitting on a cantilevered concrete slab – needed to ensure acoustic separation from the clinic below. Internally, the space is a womb-like cigar box, lined in beech ply with a beech sprung floor. *Piers Taylor, founder, Invisible Studio*