

Starfall Farm

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PROJECT

location Bath, United Kingdom
design Invisible Studio
text Billy Nolan
photography Damian Russell

Let the light in Architect Piers Taylor of Invisible Studio applies a humble and raw material palette to traditional architectural form in this resourceful new addition to a Georgian farmhouse in southwest England.





Starfall Farm is a handsome stone, slate-roofed, Georgian structure set in St Catherine's Valley, about five kilometres from the city of Bath in Somerset, England. It is one of countless farmhouses of the sort that grace the English landscape and are an inextricable part of rural identity. Striking in its heyday, the two-storey, 100-square metre property and assorted outbuildings had fallen into a state of disrepair, but were bought by Alexander Sturgis, director of the Holburne Museum in Bath. Sturgis wanted to make it a family home for himself and his wife, landscape gardener Anna Benn, and their three children.

At the time, Sturgis was overseeing an extension to the Holburne Museum designed by London-based Eric Parry Architects. Bath-based architect Peter Clegg, who advised Sturgis on the purchase of Starfall Farm, introduced him to another local architect, Piers Taylor. Taylor had recently shown his deftness in his handling of a sensitive renovation and extension in Moonshine, a project in which he added a highly glazed volume to a 1780s stone gamekeeper's cottage for himself and his family on a site just two kilometres away from Starfall.

Looking back, Taylor says he felt some embarrassment carrying out the project

for Sturgis at a time when Parry was extending his museum for 20 times the cost per square metre. But although the budget was certainly modest – the entire Starfall project cost just £210,000 (AU\$320,000) – Taylor amply demonstrated that limited means do not necessarily translate into architectural poverty. Far from it, in fact. The new Starfall boasts a tactile and spatial richness achieved by making a few simple yet smart moves, and taking them as far as they can go.

While on the surface of it, the reworking of Starfall may look nothing like Moonshine, it is nevertheless clear that the same architectural mind is behind both.



Opposite—Invisible Studio's addition to a stone farmhouse near Bath assumes the traditional form of a low barn

Left—A simple, rustic aesthetic in the kitchen is achieved with plywood-faced units and a solid concrete bench



“The Starfall additions respect the integrity of the existing structure and never compete with it.”

The Starfall additions respect the integrity of the existing structure and never compete with it. “The extension is very site specific,” explains Taylor. “There’s a typology here of the long, low barn or cow byre on the side of a farmhouse. Indeed, there was one like this before we started work, which we demolished and used its materials in the new extension. The footprint reinstates and makes clear the original farmyard.”

Vertical ribs of untreated Siberian larch wrap the low 80-square metre wing, as well as conceal an ugly extension

tacked thoughtlessly onto the rear of the main house during the 1970s. This timber skin references the old, clunky cladding seen elsewhere on the site, and also pulls the whole scheme together. What’s more, the cladding acts as a perfect foil for the rather stern-looking house built in Bath stone. Similarly, the pitched roof of the lower wing echoes the roof of the stone building, but its asymmetrical form makes a playful contrast. That asymmetrical roof form and section is not a wilful architectural gesture but,

Opposite—The concrete corner bench in the main living space, at the heart of the new wing

Above—A central staircase sits at the junction between old and new, linking the existing house to the new addition

explains Taylor, “is generated from the need to allow as much light to penetrate into the building from the early morning sun as it pops over the side of the hill above the farm”.

Inside, the main volume has been reorganised. The entrance at the rear now opens into a porch that, in turn, leads to both a living room at the front of the main block and, up a short flight of steps, to the open kitchen and dining area – the heart of the house – in the low wing.



“Sliding glass screens to the dining area allow the main interior space to spill out onto the terraces on both sides of the building.”

Tucked away behind the kitchen is a utility space and the main bedroom with adjacent bathroom, while the stair in the dining area rises to another four bedrooms on the upper floor of the old house.

Sliding glass screens to the dining area allow the main interior space to spill out onto the terraces on both sides of the building, landscaped by Benn into a series of interconnected spaces. The corner window, complete with built-in concrete bench, not only reduces the visual bulk of the volume, but also offers

spectacular views of the Somerset countryside to the south and east. The concrete kitchen island was cast on-site by a carpenter, with the help of the architect, as a cheaper alternative to a pricey pre-cast island. Plywood-faced kitchen units and surfaces of varnished screed and plaster lend the interior a warm and rustic character that complements the simple form of the wing.

Piers Taylor was a co-founder of Mitchell Taylor Workshop, but left last year to set up Invisible Studio. He describes

his new practice as “a more fluid group of people, with no fixed identity, that can ebb, flow, adapt, morph or disappear if the working conditions aren’t right”. He defines his aspiration as one of “freeing architectural design from the tyranny of the sanitised design studio”.

His recent work includes an investigation into low-cost timber exemplar building, and the Big Shed – a structurally daring workshop building, both built on the same site in Dorset and developed with students from the masters program at the Architectural

Opposite—Sliding glass doors on either side of the open-plan living space allow the extension to engage with the surrounding landscape

Above—The living room at the front of the original house

Right—The stone facade and slate-tiled roof of the existing Georgian farmhouse

Bottom right—A skin of Siberian larch envelops the new addition, a textured surface that contrasts the rugged stone

Association in London, where Taylor is a studio master. Both schemes demonstrate the more exploratory and investigative slant of a practice based in the workshop and on the building site, rather than in the traditional studio.

“I think we’re going through a shift where the architect is less of a hands-off lead designer and more someone who knows and can work with actual materials and can benefit from the feedback from hands-on making,” Taylor explains. “Architectural practice needs to be

more agile, able to grow, shrink and adapt as projects or scenarios require, if we want to imagine things differently. I also think it’s important to be part of construction in a way that isn’t just once-a-week site visits, particularly if the architect cares about materials and their relationships to one another, some of which can only be found by working with them on-site. Conventional processes lead to conventional buildings!”

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