

Piers Taylor is the architect behind the proposed new Tree Management buildings. Piers lives in a local woodland from where he engages in international themes around sustainable buildings.



Opposite: Piers sizes up one of Westonbirt's tractors. This, and all other equipment, will be moving into the Tree Management Centre - designed by Piers.

Above: Piers' company, Invisible Studios, has a new - upcycled - magical office space in the midst of trees. Lots of natural light will keep heating and lighting costs low.

Interview by Louisa Lockwood at Invisible Studio near Bath.

Do you know the arboretum? My Dad introduced me to Westonbirt, he used to come almost every day. I came with my kids and to see the trees, but my real introduction was when my dog ran after a squirrel and got lost for three days. I offered a reward of £1,000 – which I didn't have – but luckily he was found by your very important neighbour who didn't need £1,000. I got to know every inch of Westonbirt!

What is your interest in the arboretum?

I've always been interested in woodland, in landscape. I originally studied in Australia where people were building apt, lightweight buildings in an ecological, sensitive way in the landscape. When I came back in 1996 to finish my studies in London, everyone thought I was crazy to talk about building in rural places. I was living at Oaksey, getting the train from Kemble, and I'd cycle and walk all around Tetbury, Malmesbury and Westonbirt.

What is your experience of building in woodlands?

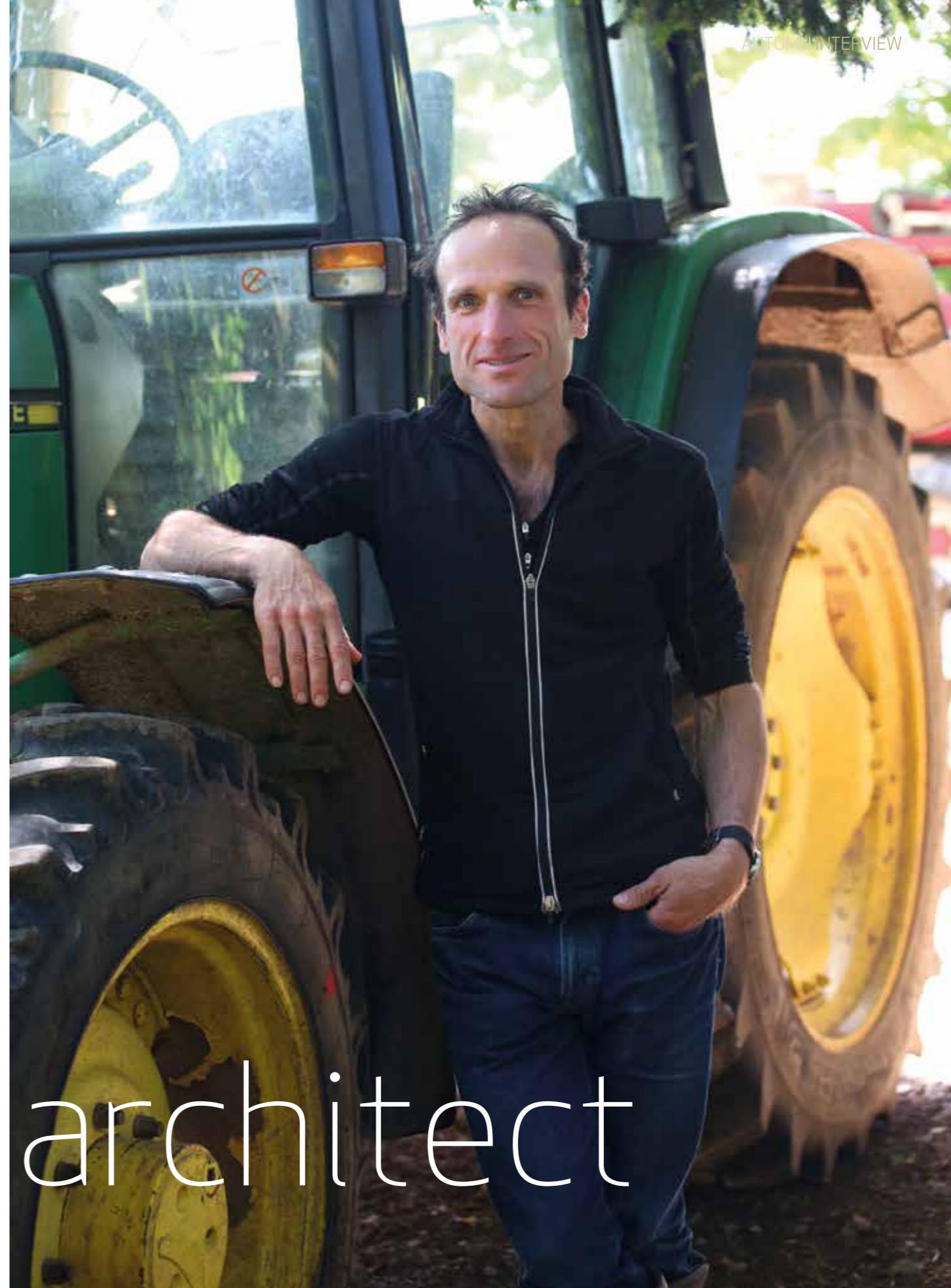
Twelve years ago, I bought a piece of landlocked woodland and built my own timber home – we had to walk 500 yards through the woods, carrying children, possessions, shopping, exposed to the seasons and the landscape. Using timber with my own hands made me realise what an

amazing material it is. It showed me that I needed to use it in a much more interesting and clever way, rather than just bolting a frame together – which is what I did.

At the time, I was teaching at architectural school in Bath and realised that no student had an understanding of where they were studying and that no student ever made something – they never thought about how materials and context might shape a building. So we set up Studio in the Woods, in my woodland five miles from Bath, with a group of interested architects and brought students here to build at full scale.

Then I met Charley Brentnall. Charley makes timber buildings with techniques that had been banished from contemporary architecture. So, when I was asked to set up a Masters programme at Hooke Park, the first phone call I made was to Charley. Hooke Park is where the Architectural Association try out new ways of building with wood. The first building that came out of that was the 'Big Shed' Assembly Workshop – a marriage of the digital world with hand-hewn vernacular techniques.

Studio in the Woods is still running so working with timber, place and landscape has been huge for me. When the Westonbirt Project came along – I really *really* wanted to work on it. ➤➤



Future proof architect



Above left: Twelve years ago, Piers built his home and learnt first hand about the versatility of wood. **Right:** Invisible Studio's new office sits within the woodland.

Is your home a blueprint?

Yes. I had a big idea about catching the first ray of sun in the morning, about making a protected side in a south-west facing valley, about opening up bits of the building at certain times of the day, using transparency to make a building almost disappear in its landscape, how you could use cheap, lightweight materials and find a way of doing things yourself.

Although it was a rather clumsy manifesto for how I wanted to keep building, I do love living there.

What makes your designs for Westonbirt (pages 40-41) unique?

The Tree Management Centre is the first building for probably over 100 years that will use 20m continuous pieces of timber. If you don't have a tree of that size growing on your land, you can't do it because you can't transport it. How that span will be hand hewn in the length of a single tree is really interesting.

Taking a large round tree and making it square takes a highly skilled

craftsman and specialist tools. Modern saws are simply too small to deal with the size of trees we'll be using.

This build will also be a training programme for the Carpenter's Fellowship students, working alongside the main contractor.

The cladding will be made from big and small pieces of timber so will be very robust, hopefully it'll use half a dozen species or more. It will be a prototype for us.

The Mess Room will be lightweight, superinsulated, constructed way over building reg standards, using green timber from Westonbirt and – hopefully – unskilled, local labour. It'll be a simple beautiful building with a pitched roof with a crank in the middle to allow people out into the landscape – like the Welcome Building.

Are you talking to the Tree Team about the builds?

Oh absolutely, that conversation is where the architecture happens! The Mess Room is largely driven by how it's going to operate for the Tree Team... what will happen in a

howling gale in February when you're wet and muddy, how do you come in, how do you take off your coat and boots, get your stuff dry, make a cup of tea and – if the weather is beautiful – how you can use it in a different way.

What are the environmental credentials for the buildings?

The big building is unheated and uninsulated so the big move is using Westonbirt's own trees and milling them on site. Not treating the timber, not processing it, not kiln-drying – all of those things have huge carbon and financial costs.

We'll maximise natural daylight – the best use of solar energy is as daylight, not as photovoltaics (my own house is designed to never need the lights on, even in February). We'll superinsulate the Mess Room so it will only need a 200w panel heater for three months of the year.

What is the biggest challenge?

There's a budgetary challenge! I want to prove that we can do it within

budget – but there's something called 'creeping enhancement' so I'll be the party pooper saying, "Bigger doors will be more expensive".

Unpredictable things will happen. We are dealing with complex operations and we don't know what the raw material will be like! In a way, the fun is navigating through those obstacles.

What inspires you?

Well, Glenn Murcutt is my favourite architect, he has only ever worked out of his front room in Sydney and he won the Pritzker Prize – the Nobel Prize for architecture. He's 78 and he's only done 30 buildings, they are all delicate, humble things but they take on huge themes of place, of the psyche of a nation. He is extraordinary.

Rick Leplastrier is another internationally-known architect and he lives semi-outside, in a tiny pavilion but also takes on these big themes of culture and region. ■

Clockwise from top left: The Caretaker's House at Hooke Park was developed for construction by Invisible Studio in 2012.

A gangway leads out to the timber-built office of Invisible Studio.

Piers' kitchen maximises natural light.

Studio in the Woods students work on real-life projects in these woodlands.

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www.invisiblestudio.com

Hooke Park, Dorset
www.aaschool.ac.uk see Caretaker's House by Invisible Studio and The Assembly Workshop by Mitchell Taylor Workshop.

Piers presents *The House That £100k Built* on BBC2, watch out for the next series starting in mid-September.
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THE TREE MANAGEMENT CENTRE IS THE FIRST BUILDING FOR PROBABLY OVER 100 YEARS THAT WILL USE 20M CONTINUOUS PIECES OF TIMBER.