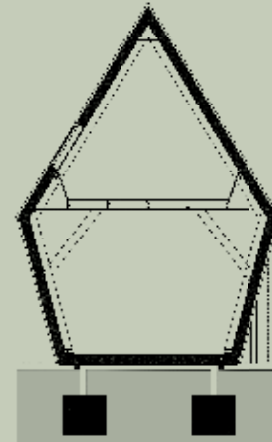


DOWN TO EARTH

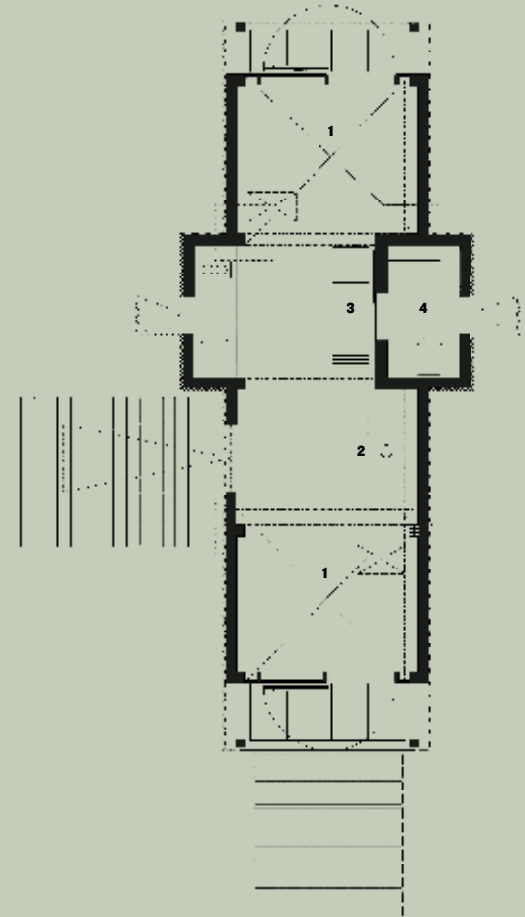
Invisible Studio uses timber from 100 acres of woodland in the west of England to research and build cheap and simple small structures, writes *Laura Mark*







section



Trailer plan

(Opening spread) life at Invisible Studio – deep in a hundred acres of woodland outside Bath – where Taylor constructs timber buildings that encapsulate his work and ideas (Previous spread and this page) the Trailer, clad in corrugated fibreglass and steel, is a prototype £20,000 home with a spruce frame. It is mounted on a steel chassis so it can be moved. It has scavenged insulation, doors found in a skip and roof lights that were seconds



In January 2012, an email made its way around the architectural world. That email, sent to everyone in Piers Taylor's inbox, signalled a major change in his practice and also gave an indication to others that acceptable 'normal' forms of practising architecture were changing. Speaking of a new kind of practice – 'an invisible studio' – Taylor announced his split from Mitchell Taylor Workshop, the award-winning firm which he had founded with Rob Mitchell in 2006. The email came while Taylor was spending a few months in Australia with his family and with the Australian architects who had influenced him from an early stage in his career – Glenn Murcutt, Peter Stutchbury and Richard Leplastrier. It seemed to be a turning point for Taylor, who had grown tired of the commercial and corporate demands of the profession. 'Most architects contacting me at that time recognised that it was a kind of plea for a change within the profession that was becoming stifled by red tape, really boring *OJEUs* [*Official Journal of the European Union*], and practice conventions that stopped us having fun with design', recalls Taylor.

Since then, despite the name of his practice, Taylor has been anything but invisible, appearing on TV shows such as the BBC's *The World's Most Extraordinary Homes* and *The House that £100k Built*. But when Taylor isn't travelling around the world filming, he is very much at home in his woodland on the outskirts of Bath. It seems to act as a conduit for his boundless energy, slowing him down and grounding him while providing a space to play out architectural ideas through making. The fact that his

- 1 living area
 - 2 stove
 - 3 steps to sleeping platform
 - 4 bathroom
- 0 1m

‘The woodland seems to act as a conduit for Taylor’s boundless energy, slowing him down and grounding him while providing a space to play out architectural ideas through making’

(Clockwise from right) the long drop composting toilet uses scavenged materials; Moonshine, 2005, sparked off Taylor’s passion for working with timber. The structure is raised off the ground leaving the clay and water table undisturbed; Ghost Barn, clad in fibreglass and corrugated steel, is a prototype workshop by Invisible Studio using same-section timber; timber is husbanded from the land



of working with timber as opposed to more standard architectural materials. The house displays simplicity. In both its materiality and design it lacks a preciousness, which allows it to adapt to family life and the changing seasons, from days when all are trooping through in muddy wellies to those when the whole facade can be opened up and the air and sunlight let in.

When the woodland around Moonshine came up for sale almost a decade after this project was completed, it gave Taylor the opportunity to move his studio into the woods, using the woodland as a research facility and place for experiment. Now, a handful of timber buildings are scattered through the trees. From a composting toilet made from leftover materials to the experimental temporary structures created by those attending Studio in the Woods – a residential course for architects, students and others testing ideas in timber at 1:1 – each has a part to play in the sequential development of his work and ideas.

His own studio, which he again built himself with help from his neighbours and other unskilled workers using trees felled on



PETER COOK/VIEW

the site, was another trial in timber building. Built for the same cost as a year’s rent of his old studio in the city, the building is crude and has an unfinished quality about it, yet it is cosy. From within this studio, you are deeply embedded in the woodland and acutely aware of the changing environment – you experience the shifting shadows and light, the sound of wind blowing through the leaves and rain pounding on the roof. The walk from home to studio down the woodland track makes you acutely aware of the elements, while there is the possibility for a thinking space between the office and the dinner table.

These are all opportunities that wouldn’t arise had Taylor not chosen to base himself away from the city – a risky and radical move for an architect who shows little interest in the extension jobs so often afforded to rural architects. For Taylor, with the choice to base his work and home life firmly in the rural, comes an added interest in the meaning of this. ‘With projects like Trailer and Ghost Barn, I’m interested in the ambiguity of whether the projects are “architecture” or simply an evolution of a

(Clockwise from below) timber from the woodland is worked on in workshops there; the woodland has given Invisible Studio a base to test out ideas; Invisible Studio’s New Studio was built by the practice with neighbours and friends – the £15,000 building is raised from the ground; the Studio in the Woods residential course where ideas are tested in timber at 1:1



LAURA MARK

method of making a building that resourceful rural people have been doing for hundreds of years’, comments Taylor. ‘In a sense, I’m more interested in the vernacular than seeing the singular narrative of a live architect. I’m interested that locally farmers hardly notice my buildings.’

His latest project in the woodland is a development of this rural vernacular with its precedents set in agricultural buildings. The Trailer – a place for people to stay in the woods – is mounted on a movable steel chassis, enabling it to be repositioned if necessary. Designed to be legally transported along public roads, the structure has a removable steel bogie that slides out from under the chassis when the house is stationary. In the case of the structure in Taylor’s wood, the trailer was driven to the site using his own Land Rover – in itself no mean feat as it had to be manoeuvred down a steep bank and through the trees to its resting place. The bogie was then removed, and used to transport the timber frames to the site. These were subsequently clad in a mix of corrugated fibreglass and steel and internally lined with plywood, which has

also been used to create all the joinery. The Trailer was insulated with scavenged insulation, its doors were found in a skip and the roof lights were damaged seconds.

What Taylor has created is a flexible space which any self-builder could adapt to their own needs. The use of standard sections means it is economical and easy to build, while internally the clear-span space can just as easily be used as a workshop or studio as a domestic space.

The design is open source and Taylor will offer it free to anyone who wishes to improvise around the original designs. It won’t solve the problems of the housing crisis, and it doesn’t profess to, but for those with access to materials, trailer parts and land (even of the temporary nature), this could be a cheap solution. The ideas resonate with his Stephen Lawrence Prize-shortlisted Wolfson Tree Management Centre, yet it is one of the first times Taylor has used his woodland as a means of creating an idea which could be replicated far beyond the boundaries of his 100-acre wood.

For Taylor, much lies in the act of making. He has built a community around it, whether



ANDY MATTHEWS

it be those who take part in Studio in the Woods, his collaborators such as timber specialist Charley Brentnall, or his resourceful neighbours. In creating this very different form of practice – a radical leap away from traditional ways of working – his umbrella of Invisible Studio allows him to carry out projects which others would shy away from. Using his woodland as his home and studio, while working with supportive minds rather than employees, ensures overheads are kept down.

‘I don’t plan anything. I have no goals. I don’t even think I have a career in many ways but I feel that I’m getting into my stride with this thing, after I’d felt for many years that I was just scratching about in the woods with a few sticks’, comments Taylor.

For someone who seems to be making such a success of this alternative form of practice while producing experimental work, it is hard to believe he has no goals or cannot see his work as a career. This ‘invisible man’ has a clear persona – one of a disruptor and someone who won’t be confined by what many believe to be the limits of an architect’s scope.

Architect
Invisible Studio
Photographs
Jim Stephenson, opening spread
All other photographs
by Piers Taylor unless
otherwise stated