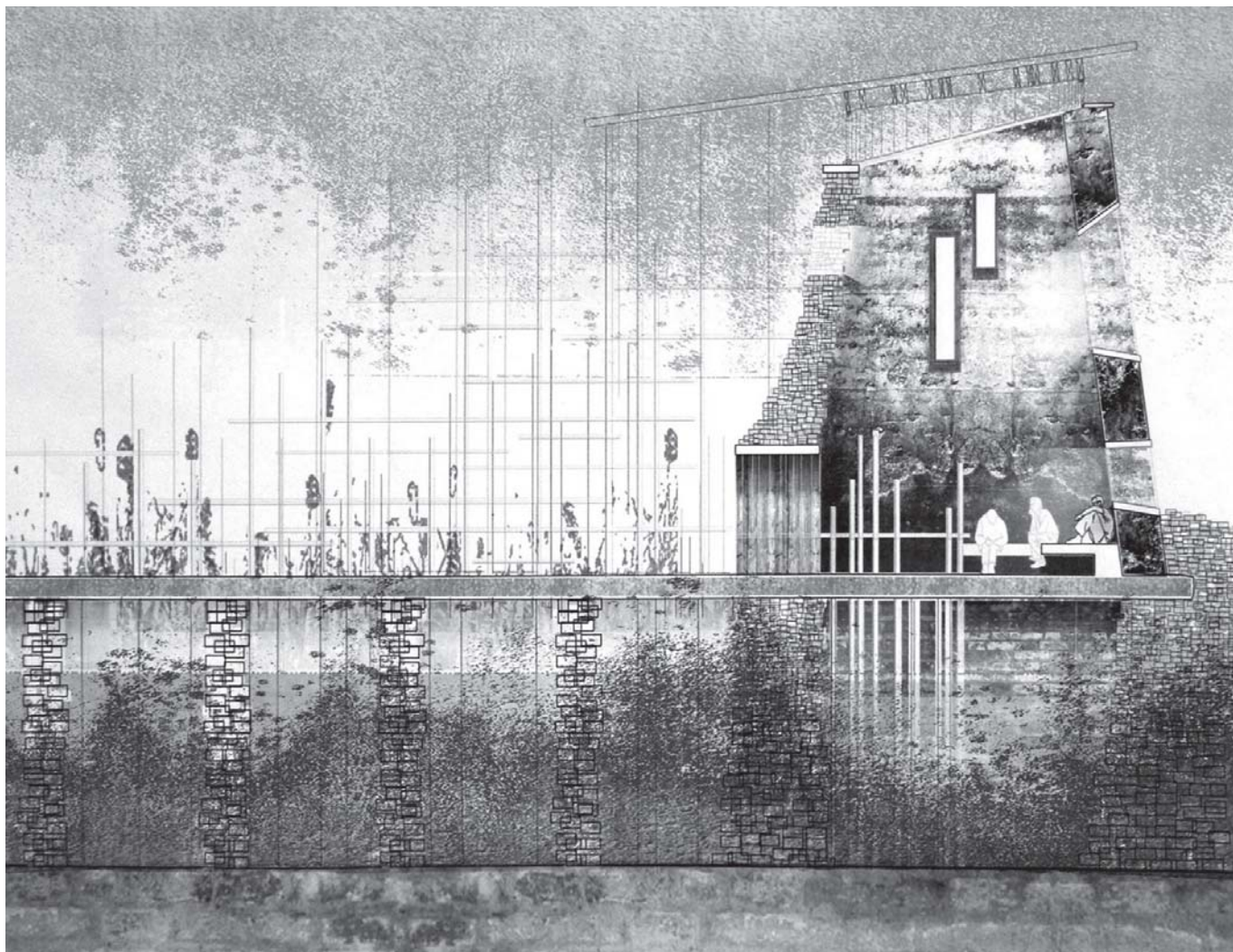


# Interview with Piers Taylor of Mitchell Taylor Workshop

Interview by Ranald Lawrence



What do you think we have to do at the beginning of the twenty first century to redefine the relevance of architecture to society? Is 'sustainability' just a fashionable gimmick?

***As a culture, we need to rethink our attitude to sustainability, away from quick fix bolt on solutions, reclaiming terms like intelligent design from the creationists. By intelligent design, I mean optimising a building to take advantage of where it is, developing a new typology about place, and reclaiming the 'local' from the nostalgists and the neo vernacularists.***

What were the most important lessons you took from studying in Australia and how did you apply those lessons in your approach to practice in the UK?

*Piers Taylor set up Mitchell Taylor Workshop with Rob Mitchell in 2005. Previously he studied in Australia under Glenn Murcutt. He leads Third Year Studio 3 at Cambridge with Meredith Bowles of Mole Architects, and founded the annual Studio in the Woods design charrette. Here he talks to Ranald Lawrence about the central ethos of his work: that it should engage with, and be informed by, its context. Piers's own house, Moonshine, is a self-built extension to a 1786 castellated stone building, 400 yards from the nearest road, constructed entirely out of materials that were carried to site by hand. It won the AJ Small Projects Award in 2009.*



*I studied in Australia before words like sustainability and energy efficiency were commonly used. What was discussed at length, however, were issues of ecological sensitivity, issues of sustainability that were implicit rather than explicit. Words like 'place', in Australia, didn't mean forever mimicking vernacular traditions, but harnessing the intrinsic qualities of a site.*

*I first saw this when I went to visit Glenn Murcutt's Magney House (fig. 1) on the south coast of New South Wales. Murcutt had given the first lecture I went to in the first week of my undergraduate degree, and in a sense, he gave me the road map for what we did when we started Mitchell Taylor Workshop. Murcutt's Magney House had a strategy that allowed the first chink of sunlight to enter the building on the day after the winter equinox (21st March in the southern hemisphere), and allowed, by the middle of winter, the sun to reach right to the back of the narrow plan and saturate the exposed thermal mass with heat. In summer, no direct sunlight was allowed to enter the building, and the building was clad in cheap, locally available, reflective corrugated metal. The roof form was pushed out to encourage air flow underneath it like an aerofoil and to allow a maximum surface area to collect that precious resource in Australia – water.*

How important do you think the precedent of simple agricultural buildings is to the sort of modern vernacular architecture Murcutt is now renowned for?

*The agricultural reference was incidental; Murcutt is utterly un-sentimental about an agricultural vernacular. What he does acknowledge, though, is that farmers have an instinctive knowledge of how to site*



Figure 1. Glenn Murcutt - Magney House

*a building so that rain is kept out, but light and ventilation allowed in.*

What about the 's' word – what do you think it means to design sustainably? Can there be such a thing as truly 'sustainable' architecture?

*When I set up the practice and began teaching, I never really used the word sustainability – my intention was that it was implicit in what we did. We never marketed ourselves as a practice that specialised in environmental design – but of course it just seemed to us that there was no other way of designing than intelligently. To be intelligent a building should have no option other than to engage with where it was and to adapt accordingly. It surprised us when clients came to us wanting a*



Figure 2. Moonshine.

*so called sustainable building, and their eyes would glaze over when we would talk of correct orientation, passive design, shading, day-lighting – to the point when one client said "you just don't get it – I want to feel smug. I need a solar panel even if it won't work."*

Tell us about your work at Moonshine – was that born out of your experiences in Australia? How did the design evolve?

*When we designed Moonshine, we attempted to demonstrate what I'd learned in Australia from masters like Glenn Murcutt. The site had no car access, and was on a sloping woodland site 7 miles outside Bath (fig 2).*

*There was a delicate eco system*

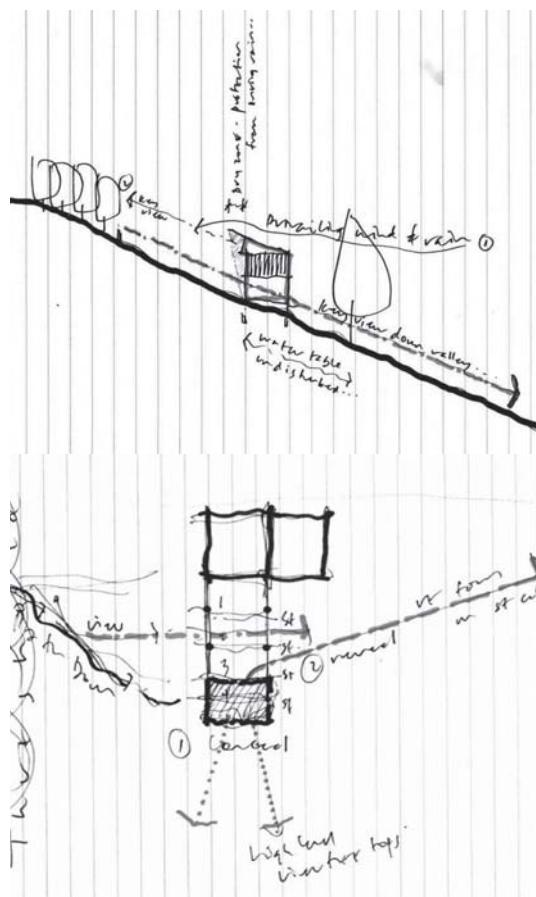
*in that there was a mature moisture hungry ash tree night next to where we wanted to build, as well as rare bee orchids. We had to build in such a way that meant the water table remained undisturbed. We designed the glazing to respond to seasonal shading from the Ash. We examined prevailing winds, and designed spaces that were sheltered from these. The entire building section directed wind some distance from the house. We worked out where the morning sun came through the canopy, and located bedroom clerestory glazing to capture this. We measured rainfall, and the direction that it came in from, and worked out how we could open spaces up to the outside even in a gale (figs. 3, 4). We also looked at how farmers in the valley had built, and how they had responded to the local climatic conditions.*



So what is the environmental strategy at Moonshine – is it a particularly technical building to live in or something much more intuitive?

**At Moonshine, there are no solar panels, ground source heat pumps or PVs, but the building consumes precious few resources. It needs no artificial light in daylight hours whatever the weather. Because of capturing and retaining of heat when we want it, the heating season is very short, and when it does need heating in the severe winter months we use wood grown on site. The building used so little material in its construction (fig. 5), all of which had to be carried down a woodland path by hand, that**

Figure 3. Sketch Section.  
Figure 4 (below). Sketch Plan.  
Figure 5 (right) lightweight construction.

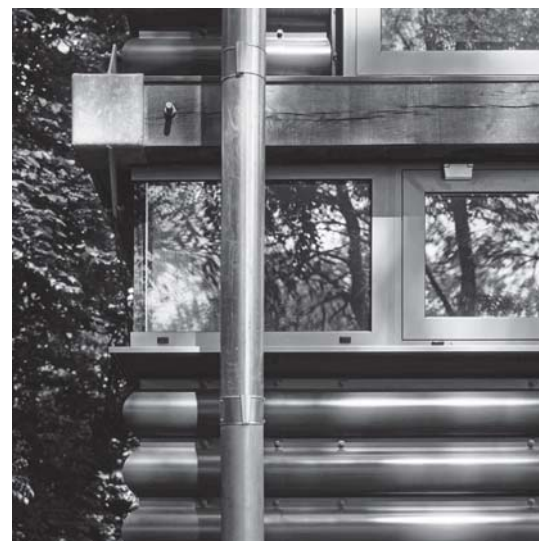


**in severe storms, it has guy ropes anchoring the building down. Conveniently, the building is sited so that we can watch, and predict, the weather coming in (fig. 6).**

**Perhaps most importantly – recognising James Wines maxim “there’s no sustainability without art” – the joy of the site is maintained: the building is completely transparent at ground level to allow uninterrupted views down through the site, through the house, to the bottom of the valley (fig. 7). Similarly although utterly distinct from the site (it is a building ON the ground, not OFF the ground), the building merges with the surrounding canopy (fig. 8).**

And your teaching at Cambridge – is that informed by a similar concern for properly understanding the environment and integrating aspects of it into a design?

**With my teaching partner Meredith Bowles in Studio 3, this is how we work. Our students begin each year by constructing ‘tools’ that allow them to gather data relating to the landscape in which their major project will be set. These tools meas-**



**ure, for example: porosity, topography, wind quality and sound frequency. Armed with this, they design buildings that have an intelligence to how they are located, meaning that few need bolt on quick fix eco-bling solutions to make them perform.**

**For the last two years, we have been working on the edge of Ely where the city joins the fens. Roger Deakin described this area as one of the most mysterious in Britain. It is a landscape defined by water and is in part below sea level. It depends on a complicated series of man made drainage ditches, pumps and dykes to keep the water at bay. Questions of how to site a building, how it meets the ground, where ground level is, how rainwater is collected, become critical.**

What about Studio in the Woods – is that also about the exploration of local environmental characteristics and how they inform what to build?

**We set up the Studio in the Woods (with Feilden Clegg Bradley, Mole Architects, Gianni Botsford Architects, Kate Darby, Ted Cullinan and Erect Architecture) five years ago to explore issues of site specificity (fig. 9). Whilst of course there was an overriding architectural preoccupation and a desire to test idea through making at 1:1, there was also, embedded in the programme, questions of where materials come from, how we could use them, how we could fix them with no mechanical fixings, how much we could do with a finite set of materials.**

**In addition to this, Gianni Botsford’s work at Studio in the Woods has been largely to do with issues of light – exploring how a building volume can be optimised to take advantage of natural light conditions, as evidenced in his Light House on a back land site in Notting Hill, and**



Figures 6, 7 & 8. Moonshine and its connection with its external environment.



*the self shading Casa Kike in Costa Rica. It was rewarding to see how a student from one of his workshops went on, in my studio at University (fig. 10), to design a sublime light-weight structure that was floated into the site (meaning nothing was disturbed), sat on the ground using several slender poles, had a strategy for light penetration developed from his work with Gianni, and that ranged from qualitative and experiential to knowing exactly where to locate the (woven copper) water tank to collect maximum solar gain.*

What do you think the future holds for architecture? Does a drive for greater 'sustainability' imply a return to an earlier, simpler, way of building?

*The past is very definitely not the future. I'm a great believer in technology and modernity. I am resolutely un-nostalgic, but I wonder sometimes whether as a society we've lost the ability to recognise where we*

*are. I'm always surprised when I ask a group of students where north is, how few know. If perhaps we discovered an instinct for where we were, we'd have no option but to design accordingly.*

Figure 9 (below). Building in the landscape.

Figure 10 (right). Studio 3 questions the nature of sustainability, permanence and the experiential qualities of space.

