

Ghost of suburbia: houses special issue
Rethinking the built environment
David Adjaye turns up gold

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Full metal jacket

A cosy insulated coat now wraps around Piers Taylor's 16 year old timber and glass home extension, muffling up inner warmth and reorganising the marvellous views

Words: Eleanor Young Photographs: Jim Stephenson

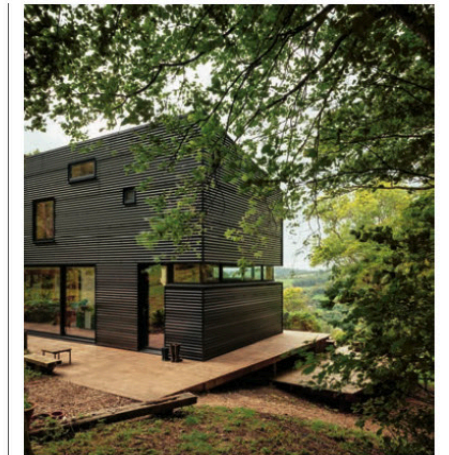
Energy is very light for most people. They get gas piped to their house, electricity zips along wires. Architect Piers Taylor has electricity and gas at his house in the woods outside Bath, but his gas comes in a heavy bottle that must be manoeuvred into place. And when he built the extension to this stone school-house 16 years ago he designed it to be heated by biomass, in particular logs.

A year's supply of wood is a big shed's worth, 20 cubic metres. It is cut from the woods around the house and Taylor chops and stacks it to dry before it gets carried down to the stove. You can see the work and weight in his sinewy arms. It is one reason

why he and his practice Invisible Studio have reworked this slim timber-framed pavilion.

Another is that, even with all those logs, the house felt cold and leaky when winter came and the weather from Wales rushed up the valley to meet it. Visiting on the last truly hot day of September I opted for the shade on the terrace and looking at the chunky oak frame it was hard to believe Taylor depiction of drafts whistling through the gaps between expressed structure and floor. And the expanses of glass to the bedrooms were cold and exposing, he said: 'When you are young you think only about opening up everything on good days.'

The blanket of woodland has been put to use – warming the house, Moonshine. Now, re-wrapped, it should be more of a refuge from the winds coming over the valley.



So he has reclad it, in corrugated metal. Upstairs the valley panorama has changed from glazed vista to framed views; a north facing clerestory and timber panelling have also been wrapped up with a few holes punched here and there. Taylor estimates that upstairs glazing has been reduced by 50%. And at ground level he's put in an insulated floor with electric underfloor heating backed up by batteries, both PV-fed. Sensors let him know temperature fluctuations over-night – so far only minimal.

The log store and stove are still there but the logs will be moving more slowly. This is not about the sustainability of ideals and abstracts, but practicality. New insulation is layered over old, 150mm continuous rigid insulation, plus 150mm mineral wool (no, not sheep's wool or newspaper but straightforward, high performing standard products). Deeper window reveals are lined with ply. New sliding glass doors are double not triple glazed, the weight would have been too much, but the glass has a U-value of 1.2, significantly better than the original 2W/(m²K). Taylor spent a good few weekends working on the airtightness too and ensuring everything was taped down.

Left The clerestory and timber panelling of Taylor's original designs have gone from the north side of the house. The ground floor keeps its transparency.

Above The front entrance is contained, taking you into a hard working space with windows above eye level before you are released into the openness of the living space.

Taylor estimates that upstairs glazing has been reduced by 50%

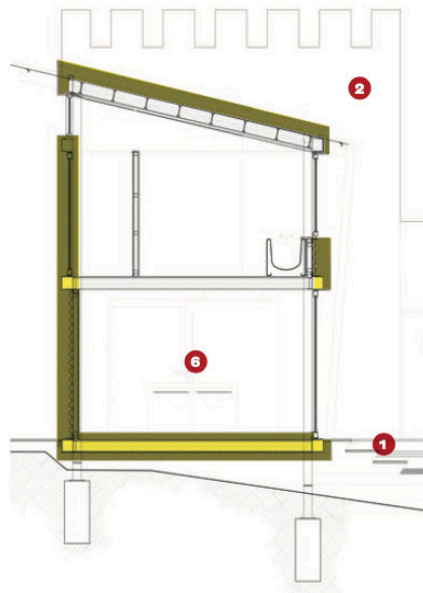
To Taylor there is a certain shame in the building his younger self made with too much in it, too much of Australian pavilions, too much of Glenn Murcutt, too much striving for architecture. And perhaps too long looking at it, even while his architecture was moving on elsewhere. 'It's our home and I don't want it to be about architecture' he says. For those who saw his series *The World's Most Extraordinary Homes* with Taylor perching on a rock explaining and enthusing about some unbelievable cantilever, this may seem unexpected. But that was never the real him, he says.

He had designed the house with the landscape and the view paramount and his architectural apprenticeship in Australia with Glenn Murcutt in mind. And he had spent two years hunkered down in the dark stone schoolhouse with his young family. He wanted architectural expression on this tightly calculated expansion into the greenbelt.

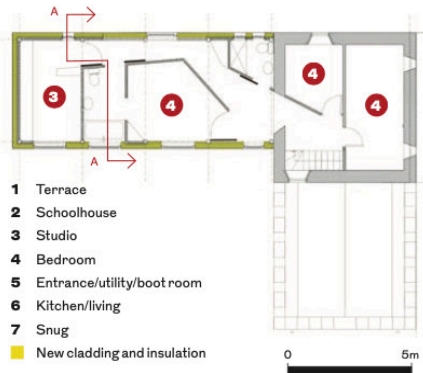


Section AA

Right Dealing with the depth of the added layers of insulation.



First floor



Ground floor



Left It's a climb from the house to the log store (on the right).



This time there were barely any drawings – a mere six, and three just overlays of original drawings. One quick elevation was sketched to order windows and so the builder would know where they went. To the north side where the land slopes steeply up, a clerestory window the length of the pavilion was swapped for others puncturing the crinkly tin at different heights; indecipherable morse code. The same on the bedrooms facing out to the view. But you still see straight through the house on the ground floor as you approach. The gutters set up a more readable narrative, galvanised and oversized straight from an agricultural catalogue – for sudden downpours but more to avoid leaf fall clogging them and causing catastrophic cascades in all the wrong places.

Over the years in this house Taylor has set up a restless rhythm of projects on site, all built under permitted development for forestry use. Barn, studio, quixotic angular caravan, compost loo, store, log stores times six at least, all with an element of the temporary and a propensity for timber and polycarbonate. They are dotted around the woods. You can see similar methods and elements in his RIBA award-winning work as *Invisible Studio* for Westonbirt Arboretum and his live projects with students at Reading University. The house is in a way the least remarkable of these but perhaps the most important marker of time, both the age and experience of its maker and increasing professional knowledge about how to make a house that is both light and warm, a testament to sustainable, practical building. ●

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