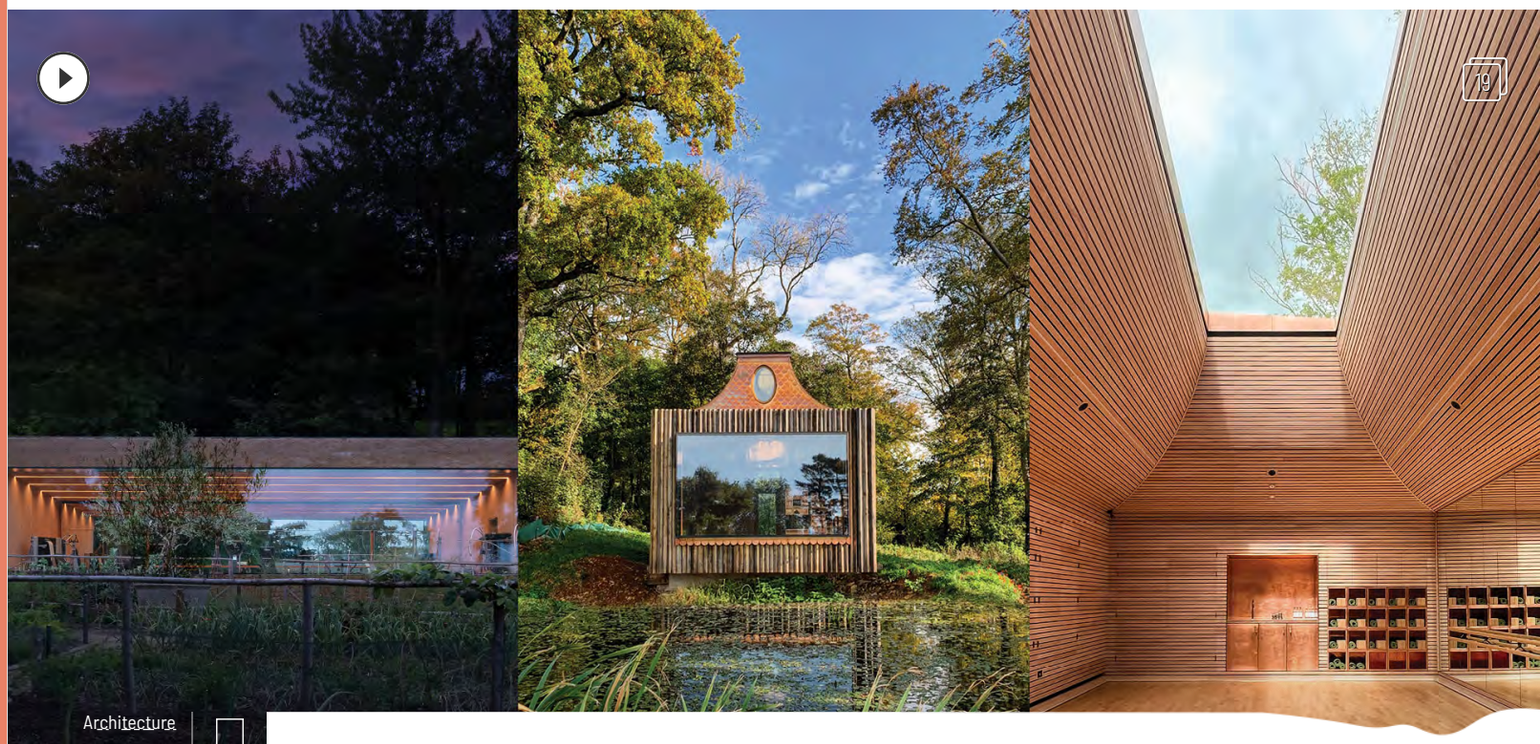

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Tracing Invisible Studio's ingenious experiments at The Newt, Somerset

The UK-based studio designed and built a gymnasium, a bee home, and a yoga studio in the midst of The Newt, a luxury boutique hotel in Somerset.

by Almas Sadique | Published on : Nov 18, 2023

Three structures built by UK-based Invisible Studio enchant the estate of The Newt, a well-known boutique hotel in Somerset. The estate, home to Hadspen House, a Grade II listed building (that has, over the years, been extensively remodelled), as well as various Georgian structures and lavish gardens, hosts a range of recently built infrastructure such as a medieval-style bakery, a Roman villa, cafes, and more. The three structures built by Invisible Studio within the estate are part of recent efforts undertaken to further enhance the services imparted within the expansive hotel. The three projects include 'Yoga Studio,' 'Hadspen Apiary,' and 'Room in a Productive Garden.' They serve as a yoga space, a Beezantium and a gym, respectively.

Invisible Studio, founded and headed by Piers Taylor, and composed of individuals from complementary disciplines, typically strives to integrate research, experimentation and a general desire for sculpting atypical forms, in their design process. The British firm aims to rethink design processes in a manner such that it 'frees architectural design from the tyranny of the sanitised design studio' and involves various collaborators and stakeholders in their process. A lot of work done by the studio is placed in natural terrains sufficiently endowed with ample offsets, permitting, hence, the benefit of spanning views. This also sits in line with the studio's ongoing education and research project Studio in the Woods (undertaken in collaboration with various other architects), which serves as a vehicle for young practitioners and academics to test their ideas in different woodlands each year, helping them 'rethink the relationship between design and making'.

What binds the studio's practice and their research project is the cognizance levied to materials and construction processes, not just as mediums that help shape an architect's designs, but as entities that merit an essential denomination and consideration while designing. "We are not interested in making as a mechanism for simply providing us with some new form-making techniques which are inflected by their material realisation, but instead, in terms of how material practice can address social and political questions. Our approach often takes the materials, available resources and skills from any given context and uses them to make buildings from," the studio shares.

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Invisible Studio's attempt to push the boundaries that demarcate an architect's job manifests through the usage of different vernacular and sustainable materials such as earth, stone, hemp and rammed stone, in the buildings constructed within The Newt estate. The gym designed by the studio also hosts another effort by the studio in material experimentation—the structure encompasses the usage of one of the largest glass panes in the world.

Room in a Productive Garden by Invisible Studio
Image: James Stephenson

The studio's work, perhaps inadvertently, levies added regard to frame views of the outdoors. The fenestrations situated by the architecture studio, in a lot of their work, expand to occupy large stretches or sit in parts across facades and ceilings, offering shifting views of the outdoors. Perhaps instated as a result of these structures' placement on unhindered sites, the apertures offering outdoor sights further help enhance their spaciousness. In the case of structures built within The Newt campus, by Invisible Studio, these fenestrations appear to be oriented in a manner such that the users of these spaces can not only enjoy outdoor views while using the space, but also utilise this avail to enhance their experiences. For instance, the gym is decorated with a continuous length of glazing that offers unobstructed views of the gardens outside. The yoga studio, on the other hand, encompasses a skylight—a feature that can elevate the experience of meditational exercise by offering a view of the limitless sky between the many *asanas*.

STIR individually scans through the three buildings built by Invisible Studio within The Newt in Somerset.

Room in a Productive Garden

An outdoor view of the structure
Image: James Stephenson

'Room in a Productive Garden,' the first of the three structures built within The Newt campus, is a gymnasium. "It is conceived in a manner as 'no building'—more a window onto a mature productive garden with as few distractions from the garden as possible. The building sits in the garden in the manner of an orangery or greenhouse, of which there are several in the adjacent courtyards," the studio shares. The garden, which provides food for the hotel, enhances the arrival experience into the gymnasium as well. The construction of the structure, undertaken under the helm of project architects Piers Taylor and Tara Breen, keeps up with the studio's design ethos, in that they use stone from the site—crushed and rammed—to build the facade. This stone comes from a wall which previously stood on the site, and which was demolished to make space for the gymnasium.

The structure overlooks the garden in front of it
Image: James Stephenson

The gymnasium measures 150 square meters and encompasses a window that measures 15 metres wide and 3.3 metres high. The transparent fenestration covers the entirety of the north wall of the vegetable garden, and offers spanning outdoor views to anyone working out in the space. It is also one of the largest continuous glass panels in the world. Further, the glass window is structured to function as a bay window, complete with a top, glass sides and a seat. It permits the option of reconfiguring the space for alternate usages. The interiors of the structure are continuously lined in beechwood. The service lines for lighting and ventilation, are concealed behind slats so as to avoid a break in the surface.

Hadspen Apiary

'Hadspen Apiary' by Invisible Studio
Image: James Stephenson

Hadspen Apiary, the second of the three buildings constructed by Invisible Studio within The Newt campus, is a wildlife interpretation building. Constructed on a former landfill site, it houses the habitats of various species (of bees), along with their corresponding interpretations laid out for the visitors. Some of the bees housed within this space include wild bees, solitary bees and other species. Stationed at the edge of a water body within the estate, the structure is also referred to as a bee house, Beezantium, or a lakeside apiary. The structure, situated in a highly ecologically sensitive zone, populated heavily with trees, was built with minimal foundations. Following tread to the innovations writ in the previous project, this structure comprises a glass bay window which, instead of being supported on steel or glass fins, is cantilevered from the structural glass floor of the apiary, thus allowing a clear view down into the lake.

Although inspired by the whimsical forms of follies, Hadspen Apiary serves as a home to a bee colony. Shaped in a whimsical mien, the wooden structure is crowned with a curved roof that is wrapped in copper shingles. It glimmers against its flat context, together with the shimmering lake. The two oculi integrated on the roof facilitate the inflow of light and air within the space. The oversized timber panels that clad the structure help in the distortion of the sense of scale of the pavilion—it appears different when viewed from different angles and distances. The wall facing the lake is fitted with a glazed window which offers outdoor views into the natural terrain, while also offering a glimpse of the indoor happening to those passing by.

Interior views of the 'Hadspen Apiary'
Image: James Stephenson

The outer walls of the structure are made of unseasoned oakwood, which is ideal for bees as they can enter their hives through natural holes or even copper pipes integrated in the structure. The interior, on the other hand, is lined with polished honey oak, so as to offer a warm atmosphere that sits in contrast with the rough exterior, and serves as an aesthetic backdrop for the showcase of hives and information corresponding to them. While apiaries are traditionally contained in a glass box in the middle of the room, in this case, they are pushed to the edges in order to create an educational showcase designed in collaboration with Amsterdam-based design agency Kossmanndejong. The immersive showcase housed in this space describes the world from a bee's perspective. The stations that hold these showcases consist of several hexagonal shapes (resembling the honeycomb structure) sitting upon each other.

Yoga Studio

The 'Yoga Studio' is situated right behind the gymnasium
Image: James Stephenson

The latest addition to The Newt by Invisible Studio is the 'Yoga Studio.' The need for the studio was recognised when the Beezantium began to witness informal yoga classes regularly. The hotel, hence, called for the construction of a yoga studio next to the gymnasium. Just like its predecessors, the yoga studio, too, is built using rammed stone made from local limestone (for its walls), copper (in its roof) and beech wood in the interiors). The rammed stone used on the external surface of the structure has a distinct red hue that is derived from the local Hadspen limestone, the dust of which is used to build the walls. A small amount of binder, namely lime, GGBS or cement is used to tether the constituents together. The stone components were mixed on the site and poured into the formwork using buckets. The walls of the structure were set out using a 600

millimetre lift. Nearly four to six pour layers were added in every lift. The external skin of the structure is tied back using SureCav to a plywood sheathing that is fixed onto an internal studwork wall.

Enunciating upon the aspect of framing views, Taylor shares, "While the gym had a single view of the vegetable garden via its enormous window, the Yoga Studio has a single view of the sky via its enormous 11 metre long rooflight, made from a single insulated double-glazed unit." The interior of the studio, with a built area of 100 square metres, is lined entirely with beech slats. This continuously stretching interior surface, which offers a warm sanctuary for those within, culminates at the skylight which frames an enticing view of the sky.

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About Author

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Almas divides her time as a writer between STIRpad and STIRworld, researching and writing on and about the latest creations and creators from the art and design world. An architect by education, she is driven by the curiosity to explore the factors that impact and are impacted by every kind of...

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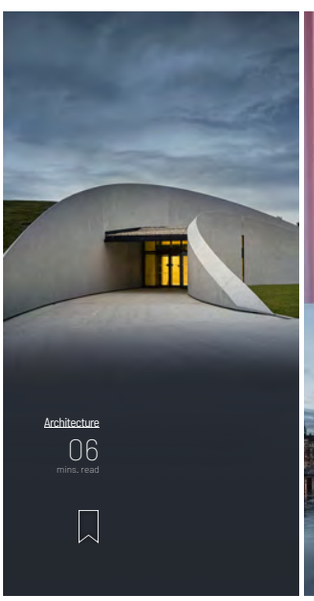

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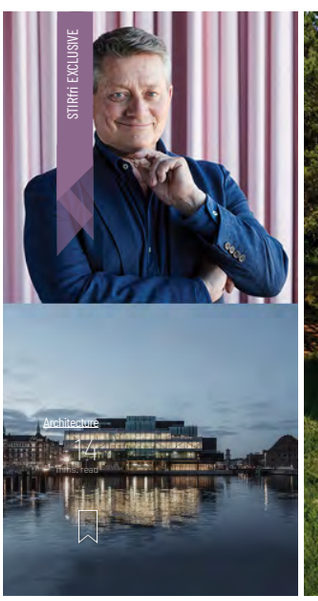

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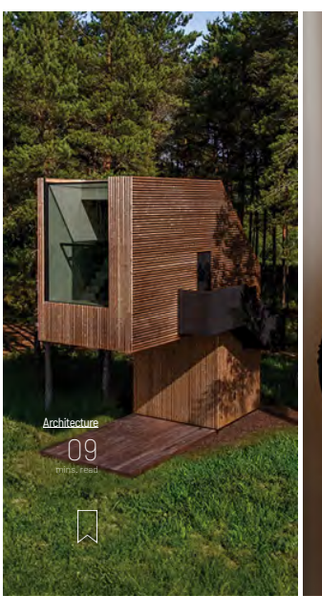

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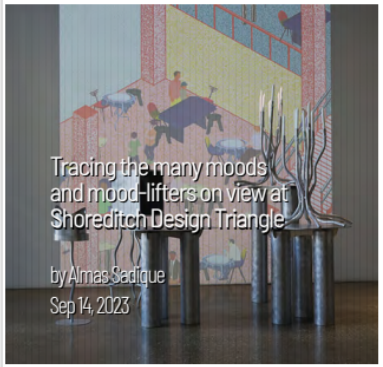
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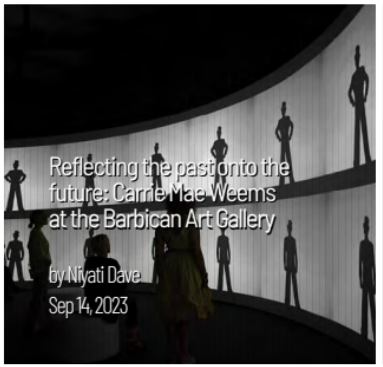
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