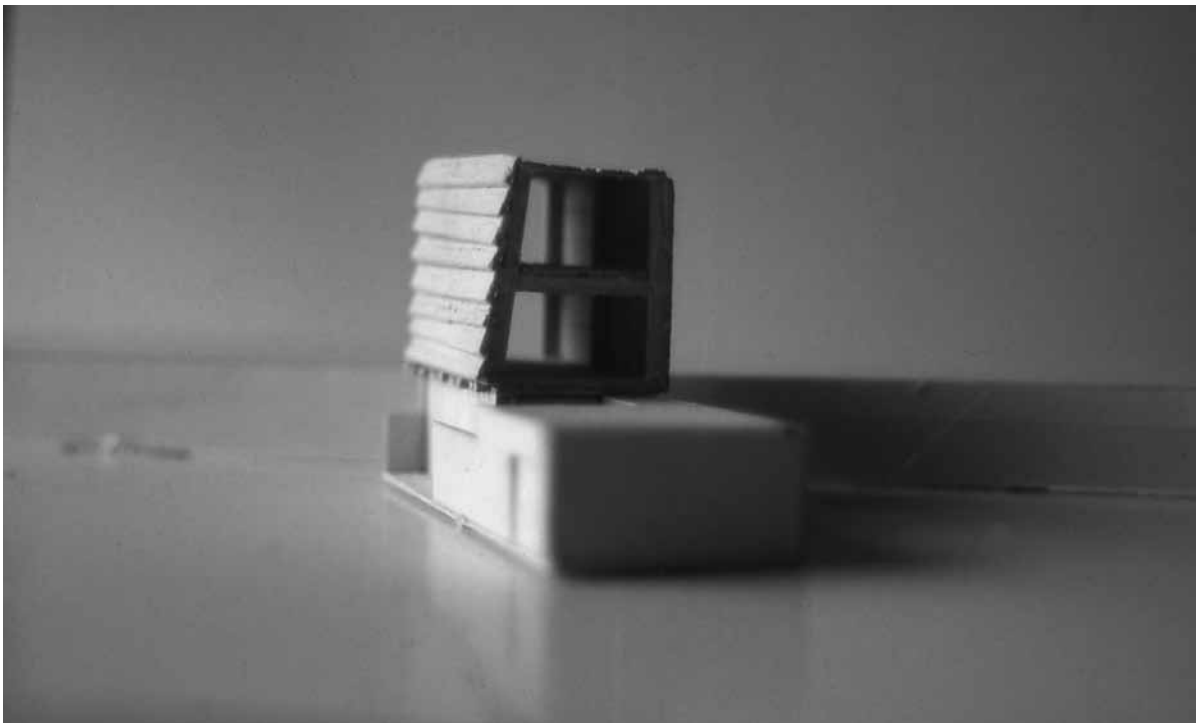
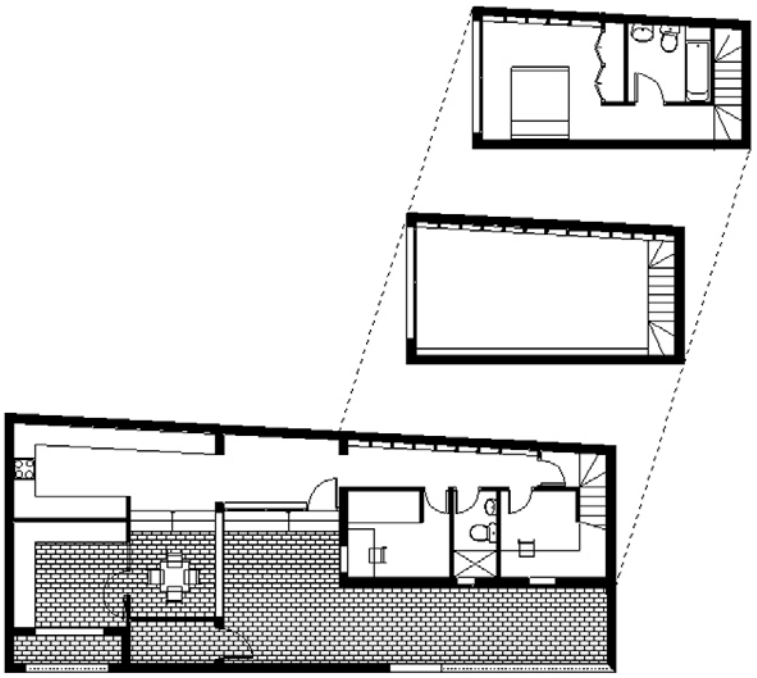


1a

1 **House 1 (1997) model and plans**
House 1 was the first house designed by the practice and remains important in defining their interests. Designed for Bowles' family on a small London site, the house clearly expresses the principle of construction rising out of the earth. The earth bank on the site was the result of spoil produced from the construction of the railway, which was levelled to create a flat area for the Haringey Dog Track. At the edge of the Dog Track (now a supermarket and car park), the level fell down to the Victorian terraced street, creating a bank to one side of the road. The plot of land was a thin triangular shape, used as a builders yard. Part of the house on the ground floor was to act as a retaining wall, pushing into the bank to create a platform for the upper floors. The base of the building is masonry, centred around a small courtyard, where the brick floor extends into the dining room from the outside. Above, the timber-framed box offers views up and down the road, and a sense of intimacy, like being in a boat or a tree-house. The plan steps up across the centre: the brick area is lower at ground level, and the kitchen/lower rooms step up.



1b

Stephen Walker | Mole Architects

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Concerns manifest in the work of Mole Architects are examined, including their developing understanding of boundaries, thresholds, movement, layering and materials.

Mole Architects: thinking and making

Stephen Walker

Mole Architects was set up by Meredith Bowles in 1997, and has become known for well-crafted, contextually responsive and ecologically sensitive projects.[1] One of the claims that Mole make in their practice brochure is that their work is identified by a consistency of attitude rather than a 'house style'.[2] This claim emphasises thinking, analysis and process but this is balanced by the evidence presented in their realised work, which demonstrates an undeniable interest and delight in the materiality and making of buildings. Reflecting on the enduring influence of his architectural education, Bowles acknowledges this balance: 'What I think these formative experiences refer to is a belief in the importance of *things* rather than *ideas*, or rather that ideas reside in the thing itself'.[3]

Although the practice doesn't set out to account for its attitude across the variety of projects it has undertaken, a range of issues common to many of them can be discussed in more general terms. While preparing this article, I came across a useful warning given a few years ago in **arq** by John Brennan: 'How we theorise architecture often entails a diminution of the unexpected and counter-intuitive in favour of deft generalization.'[4] The intention here is not to theorise per se, but to enjoy the particularities of realised work while also drawing out a number of enduring concerns. The challenge, as Brennan sees it, is to approach the idiosyncratic consistently.

An introduction to some of Mole's preoccupations is provided by the practice's first project, the unrealised House I (1997). This project, a speculative development undertaken as the practice was starting up, began with the patient buying-up of small plots of real estate in Haringey, north London. The first proposal on this growing site, awkward in plan and in section, was a house for Meredith Bowles' family. The project was to have had a solid ground floor, sunk into the sloping site *[1]*. On top of this masonry construction was a lightweight timber-framed box that combined a sense of intimacy with long views up and down the road. The ground floor was very much of the ground, announcing a preoccupation with the principles and questions of construction rising out of the earth that subsequent Mole buildings have continued to explore. House I's response to this relationship was to take the whole ground floor as a base, a robust element that supported the more delicate timber 'tower' while also dealing with the awkward site slope and providing a strong boundary to the busy road. Within the base, external space is scooped out in the form of a small entry courtyard, around which the internal accommodation is arranged. From the courtyard, the brick floor extended into the dining room, and the living room was extended spatially across an enclosed 'balcony' space to the boundary. Although set back from the site boundary, the timber tower similarly offered a protective facade to the road, opening up to the west with a full-height window that offered long views already mentioned. This double-height window, the overall form of the tower and the material strip treatment of the tower's facade combined to produce the ambiguous scale of this element. Bowles described the intended experience in the tower as like that of being in a boat or a tree-house.

A platform from which to build

House I was not built. Instead, Bowles sold the site on with planning permission for six dwellings and moved out of London. This enterprise funded the construction of The Black House in Prickwillow, near Ely in Cambridgeshire (2002), winner of the 2004 RIBA Manser Medal for best UK house. This project demonstrates a similar preoccupation with, and careful response to, the issue of touching the ground, albeit in a totally different solution *[2]*. In this case, the relationship is informed by an awareness of forms in the surrounding landscape of the East Anglian Fens. These lands were only drained in the last 200 years, and Bowles talks of The Black House as a homage to the particular vernacular of the area, the unique absence of hierarchies of occupation over the land that exist elsewhere in the country and manifest in the arrangements of manor house, estate and estate workers' cottages that characterise so much of the English landscape. Much Fenland building lacked the stability of these 'typical' English estates (only churches and pubs were

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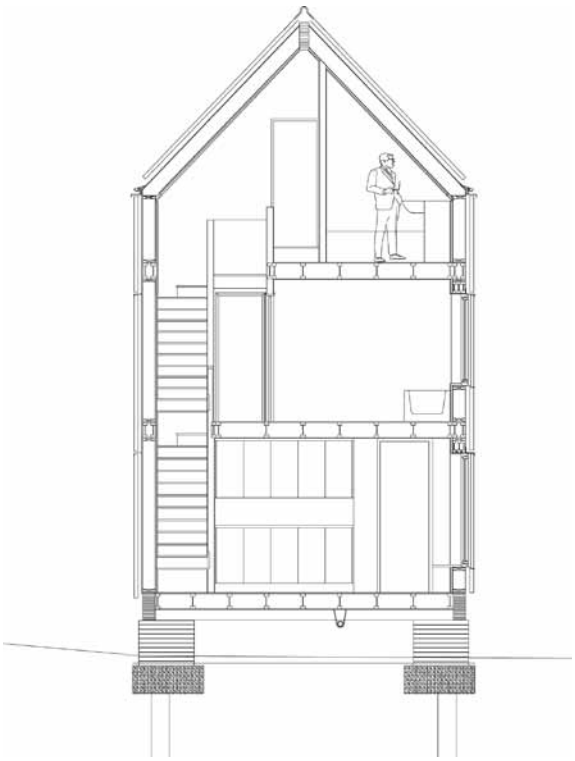


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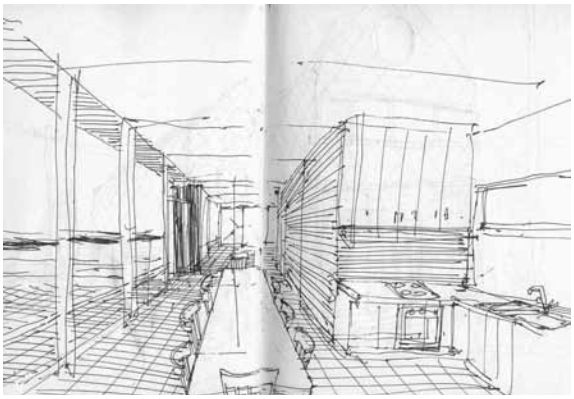
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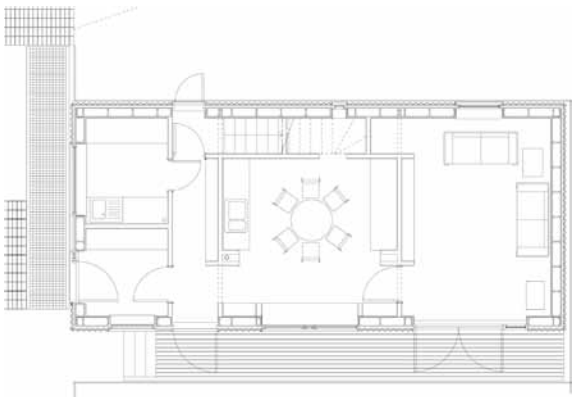
2e



2f



2g



2h

2 **The Black House (2002)**
a Garden
b, c Enfilade completed
d Approach
e Material decided
f Section
g Sketch of living room enfilade
h Plan
i Photographs east (street)
The Black House sits overlooking the reclaimed land of the Fens. It sits high in the landscape, taking as a model the barns and houses that roll out over the flat land, scattering the landscape like dice. The house is clad in standard cement-fibre Eternit corrugated cladding, ubiquitous in the area, painted black. This is set against stained Danish softwood windows, larger on the field (west) side with minimal glazing to the north. The plan of the house is long and thin, with windows lining up at front and back so the rooms are lit from both sides giving a sense of the house being see-through. At the heart of the house on the ground floor is the kitchen/dining room; the ground-floor circulation hub. Vertically, a glazed stairway allows views through all three storeys. The house is raised off the ground on brick clad concrete piers which are extensions of the piles below. The horizontal restraint of the piles is carried in a glulam beam positioned on the piers and bolted down to the pile caps with high tensile steel rods, dispensing with the need for cast concrete beams in the ground. The building itself is a lightweight timber-framed structure, which meant that the number of piles in the foundations could be reduced. The heating is via a Danish made air-to-air heat pump unit, with its intake in the space under the house, which provides heated air at 38 degrees at source. The air extracts in the bathrooms and kitchen, and the fresh air valves are in the ceilings. The extract air passes through a cross-current heat exchanger to extract the energy and transfer it to the incoming fresh air, which is then further heated by the heat pump. The main structure comprises prefabricated timber panels, using engineered timber studs and recycled newspaper insulation. This also allows the simple roof construction and the attic bedroom floor. The walls are 200 mm thick and the floor and roof are 250 mm thick. The windows are double glazed with argon-filled cavities and a low-emissivity coating on the glass. External sun-screens above the large ground floor windows cut out overhead mid afternoon sun in the summer. The first floor windows have a reflective coating on the outside of the glass, and the rooflights are fitted with external sun-screens as well as internal blinds.



2i

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built to last), and the constant erosion of peat has caused many simply constructed dwellings to fall into disrepair or disappear, leaving only impoverished cottages and makeshift buildings.

To the careful reader, however, the social and material history of the Fens is legible despite this double absence. Bowles points to two strategies that inform his own approach to such reading:

> *Two aspects of my own education have remained strongly with me. I studied under Chris Macdonald (partner with Peter Salter at the AA) and Jeanne Sillet for my two Diploma years, and the experience was very formative. It shook away an interest in overtly formal concerns and eschewed the abstract in favour of the concrete. As teachers they dogmatically insisted on a careful observation of place, so much so that the descriptions of the site sometimes were in danger of being more interesting than the proposal. When it worked the description of the site (which of course is selective and also describes a prejudicial view) allowed a proposal to emerge as if it was predestined. They described ideas of opportunity and circumstance as being enough to make a building; ideas can be generated from this alone. This approach – a kind of extreme genius loci – remains with me in the background of the more pragmatic necessities of the work we do.*
>
> *A second idea was about preparing a platform from which to build – the idea that the preparation of the ground itself sets up most of the criteria that will define the building. This is a further reinforcement of the insistence that the relationship of the building to the site determines the way in which it is experienced, and that the site should be described and understood for its geology, topography, ecology as much as in its form and topologies.*

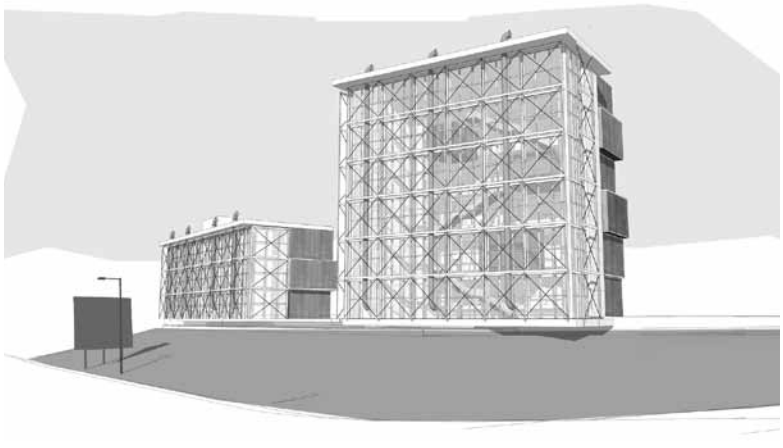
The strategic decisions regarding the architecture of The Black House – how it prepared and sits in its site – involve a knowing reference to the scale and pattern of settlements, and to the solution adopted by the traditional agricultural buildings of the area. The whole house is raised off the ground on brick clad concrete piers, keeping out water and aiding ventilation in the same way as Fenland grain stores were raised on stilts to keep the grain dry. Black painted standard cement-fibre Eternit corrugated cladding, ubiquitous in the area, was chosen in preference to the timber boards that clad an altogether richer and more established world of oak frame barns found on dry land, and reinforces the reference to agricultural expedience.

There are two doors; the experience at both thresholds provides tangible evidence of the way in which The Black House prepared its platform, so much so that the broader importance of this concern might be lost or reduced to a practical understanding. The door on the street (east) facade is in fact an escape door from the vertical circulation space, from which one has to step down onto a long brick platform that extends out from an adjacent brick foundation pier under the building. The main entrance on the approach (north) elevation is reached by a set of brick steps, separated from the building itself by an open mesh ramp and bridge. Entering the house is like getting onto a train or boat, with something of a leap of faith involved as you leave terra firma.

The issues attendant at this small threshold leap, how the platform is prepared, where (physically and conceptually) it is located in the building, how it mediates between the building and its surroundings, and how all these considerations condition the experience of the building, have found differing



3a



3b

3 **i-Hub Cluster Building, Daventry (2008)**
i-Hub deployed a lost base that enclosed a courtyard, raising a buried plinth to accommodate parking, entry and so on, on top of which two separate, framed structures sit. The building is made of two parts: raised landscape-podium building with entrance, common spaces and inner sheltered lawn, and innovation cluster units above. While the building's structure is rational, the innovative use of cross-laminated timber panels allows each unit to be different. The expression of the building is derived directly from passive solar design. The south facade is a solar filter, ventilation ducts draw air into the atrium where meeting rooms and social spaces are located – visible from the outside – with views out to the city. The north facade is made up of the individual units, clustered like honeycomb. Each of the units is unique. Expansion into adjacent units, or exchange for larger units are both possible. A series of different designs accommodate and reflect the different scales of users, providing creative spaces that interpret and embrace the uniqueness of each end user. The building sits on top of a grass bank planted with trees or covered with flowers. Inside the raised bank, sheltered from the noise of the road, is the inner lawn: a place to sit and eat lunch, or to be used as a break-out space for conference delegates, or just somewhere to pause while walking or cycling along the new canal. The podium building accommodates the common spaces: entrance, reception, exhibition spaces and meeting rooms. Central to the podium building is the top-lit conference room and restaurant, with access to the lawn for events.

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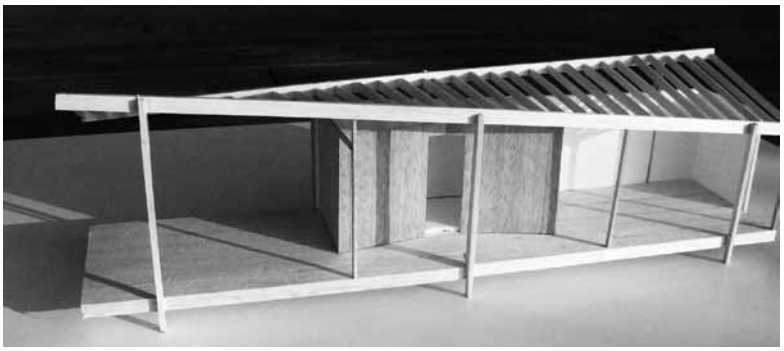
4 **Coton Visitors Centre (2008)**
Short-listed entry in an invited competition for the Cambridge Preservation Society. A linear arrangement of cellular spaces (education rooms, café, rangers' offices, toilets and store) is pulled and pushed towards the south-east, opening up external rooms and circulation spaces from the generous, full-length open porch. Above this a timber roof construction references local oak-framed barns, but here the basic truss size is varied along the length of the building to produce a squeeze towards the centre; open to the rooms, this juxtaposition of robust, cellular geometry and delicate, varied roof space would offer the building's users a defining spatial experience. Walls of cast hemp help produce a robust, simple, low energy building.

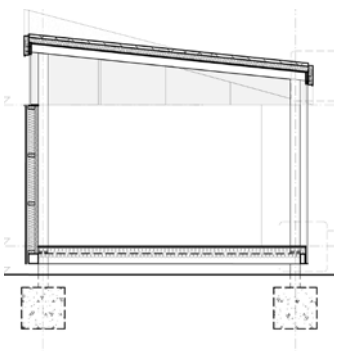

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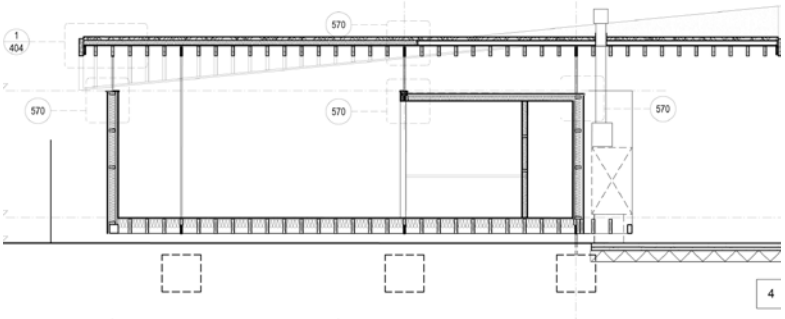

4b

5 **A Potter's Studio (2010)**
This project for a potter's studio develops approach taken with the roof of Coton Visitors Centre, which here oscillates from front to back, opening and enclosing in different directions to accommodate different purposes. Bowles describes this as belonging to a different tradition of modern architecture, a kind of Mies Pavilion but pulling the spaces and the roof around in order to fit more difference in.


5a


5b


5c



5d

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architectural resolution – and been physically expanded – in subsequent projects.

While at The Black House this can be reduced to one moment, other projects extend the architecture of the platform. House I's response to its sloping site of made-up spoil, extending this artificial topography into a massive base within which internal and external spaces were effectively carved, is legible in the platform of Mole's (unrealised) i-Hub project where an artificial earth mound buries a range of shared and ancillary accommodation. Two timber-built blocks sit on top of this mound *[3]*.

Mole's (also unrealised) Coton Visitors Centre *[4]* uses similar architectural ingredients but expands the notion of the platform on which to build towards a platform within which occupation occurs. A single-storey linear arrangement of cellular spaces opens across a full-length open porch, catering for school parties, hikers and naturalists, complete with their mud and kit. Above walls of cast hemp, a timber roof construction references local oak-framed barns, but here the basic truss size is varied along the length of the building to produce a squeeze towards the centre. The truss construction opens to the rooms below, producing a juxtaposition of robust, cellular geometry and delicate, varied roof space that would offer the building's users a varied and memorable spatial experience. This approach to an occupied platform is also evident in a project for a potter's studio due for completion 2010 *[5]*.

Boundaries I: thresholds and movement

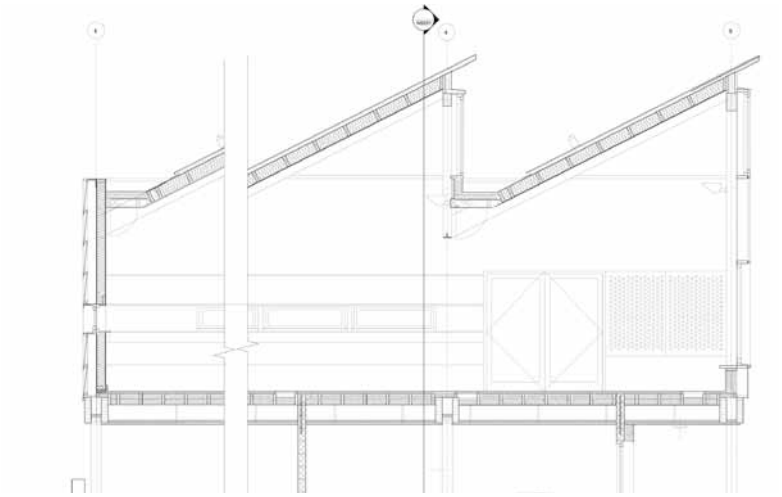
While these projects can be considered to extend the notion of platform through the section, Mole's design for a new studio building at the Cambridge School of Architecture (undertaken in conjunction with Freeland Rees Roberts Architects) *[6]* and for a house in Madingley Road, Cambridge *[7]*, can be understood to develop the interest in threshold experience so apparent at The Black House. In contrast to the finite edges of the latter, recent work has sought effectively to delaminate the edge in order to explore the potential of more layered buildings. This interest in layering operates simultaneously at various scales: organising movement across the site, organising spaces around the building's edge, and informing the constructional logic of the envelope.

At the School of Architecture, the new studio is accommodated in a single space on the first floor of the building. This studio space is a lightweight timber box and (referencing House I) is carried on a robust masonry ground floor which is timber clad. This ground floor accommodation houses the school's workshops, and is significantly smaller in plan, tucked away in the shadow of the *piano nobile* of the studio. This effect is reinforced as the studio level connects into, and completes, a ring of principal accommodation in the school: a slightly undulating route runs through the existing Scroope Terrace buildings (where the discreet main entrance off the street is found) to the new entrance ramp to the studio, the studio, a rear platform, through the late Sandy Wilson extension built in 1958, the school's exhibition space, and back to the terrace. Here, the building has a kind of lost base; conceptually clear from models, sketches and sections. While this relationship with the ground remains important to Mole, the issues that such investigations raise have linked to the practice's preoccupation with boundaries and layers. The new studio, and the broader ensemble of buildings it is in conversation with around the courtyard, emphasise instead the constant movement across thresholds and boundaries that is part of the experience within the school as a whole.

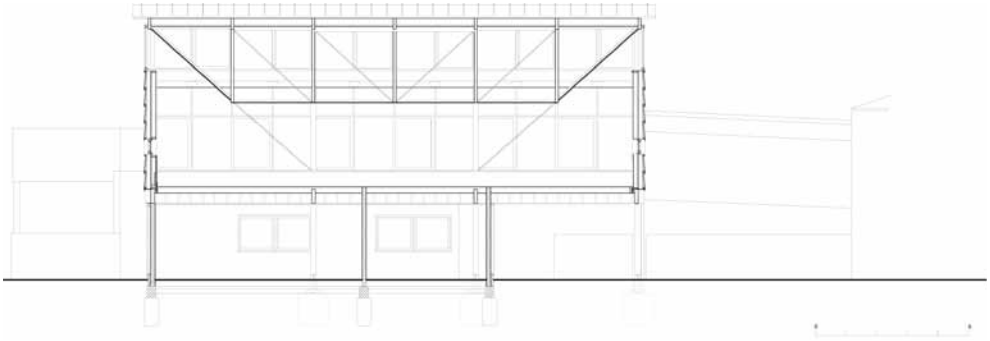
At a domestic scale, a similar response has been deployed at a new house currently on site in Madingley Road, Cambridge. This project involved splitting a large existing garden into two and constructing a single-storey dwelling to the rear half of the site. As with the new studio at Scroope Terrace, the main accommodation for this project is situated at some distance from the road: a new circulation route has been woven through the garages of the existing 1930s house on the site. The progression from the road, across various thresholds and through various layers of space, is continued through the new house itself. Again organised around a courtyard, this circulation route continues right through the dwelling, creating a sequence of enfiladed spaces that culminates in the main living room. Along this route are situated several moments that Bowles refers to as 'pause spaces', produced architecturally by changes in direction, by small views out to the garden and by deliberately tight spaces. Users are aware of moving initially through layers of existing space, partially sheltered or fully enclosed, then through garden space, entrance halls and so on. Rather than being downplayed, distance from the road is embraced as a characteristic of this site, drawn out to its maximum and emphasised as key spatial experience. This developed orchestration of boundaries, thresholds and layers runs four dimensionally, producing a complexity and richness of spatial experience that belies the apparently straightforward schematic planning of either building. Despite the careful consideration of movement, Bowles is reluctant to refer to the design intention or resulting experience in terms of the organisation of a narrative:

> [...] *narrative is an idea I shy away from. I think that there's a difference to the experience of a building and the way we occupy buildings, and the way that they alter through time, and the building itself. We should design with the knowledge that there is a temporal dimension to both experience and weathering, but to design in a 'narrative' to me implies a fixed and prescribed experience. I don't think we do or should control to that degree. I love the fact that existing buildings are re-occupied in a different way to their original intended use: a church becomes a music venue, or a library becomes an art school. We design the backdrop to lives that play out in ways we cannot imagine; a robust building that has its own internal organisation and logic will work* [...] *I design for an episodic experience, certainly, and think about a journey through space, and make spaces that work in relation to one another, and all this implies a*

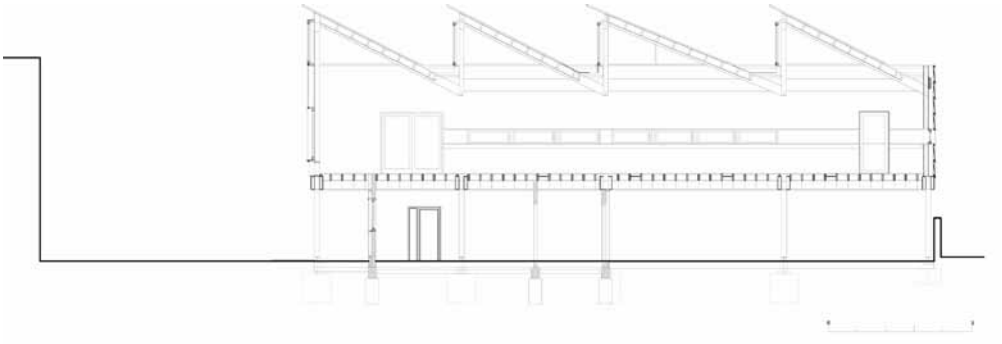
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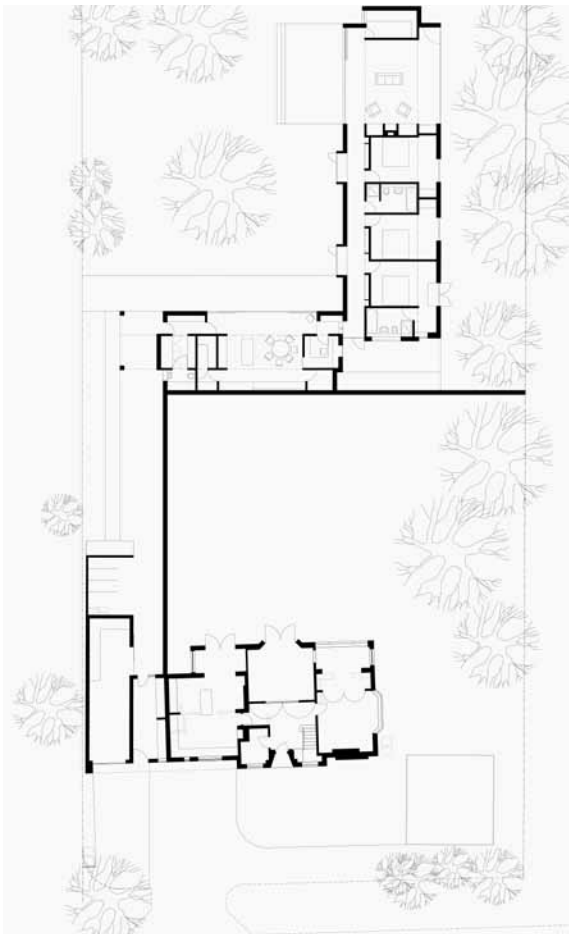
6 **Studio Building, Cambridge School of Architecture, Scroope Terrace (2007)**
a Section detail
b, *c* Sections through new studio building
d, *e*, Views at courtyard level
f Internal view of the studio
This building provides a new undergraduate studio and workshop for the School of Architecture, Cambridge. It is connected to the listed Georgian terrace, adjacent to the 1950s extension designed by Colin St John Wilson and close to existing protected trees. The building expresses the Department's commitment to sustainable design: it is constructed entirely from timber, insulated with hemp, and cooled using innovative radiant ceiling panels with a system that exchanges heat with the ground.

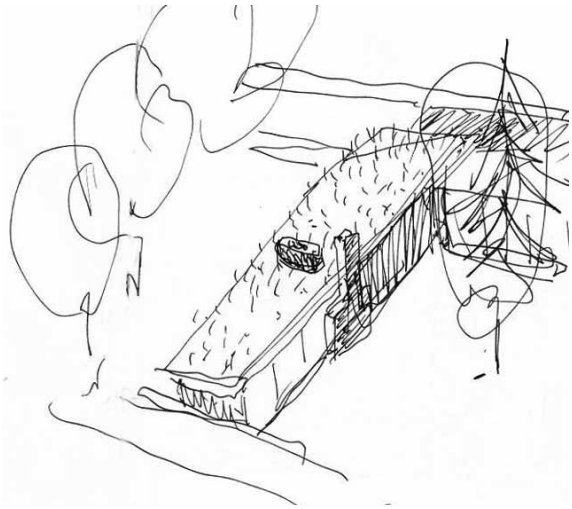
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7 **Madingley Road (2010)**
a, b Photos showing courtyward enclosure
c Plan; *d* Section; *e* Model
A single-storey dwelling designed around protected trees and within a Conservation Area. Internal brickwork provides thermal mass and structural stability. Externally, the house is clad in a mixture of timber and 'green walls', organised around hidden courtyards and with unexpected views. Tree Preservation Orders in force across the site had a bearing on the design. A foundation system was developed that would involve minimal disruption to tree roots. This comprised a set of 'tram tracks' from which floors and roofs would cantilever. Adjacent to the circulation route, relationships to external spaces are carefully orchestrated (large sliding windows to kitchen, deep pocket windows along the final enfilade to the living room, which once again has large sliding windows onto the courtyard garden). A minor courtyard garden to one side of the dwelling is linked in visually to the study and the private bathroom. Along this route are situated several moments that Bowles refers to as 'pause spaces', produced architecturally by changes in direction, by small views out to the garden, and by deliberately tight spaces.


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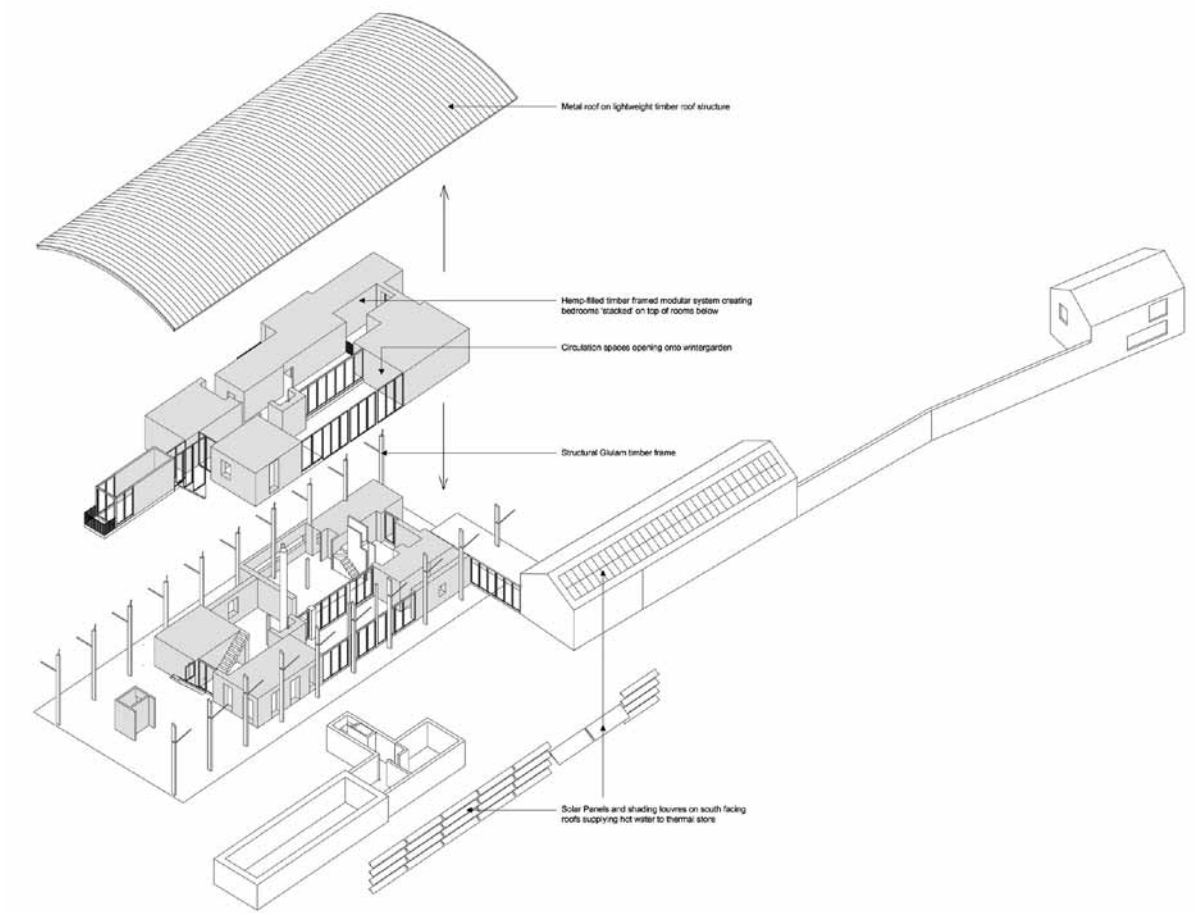

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8 **Great Fern Hill (2005–8)**
Great Fern Hill is a design for an isolated country house, submitted to planning under the PPS 'special justification' clause. The zero-carbon, timber-frame house is designed with layers that are occupied according to the seasons. The forms of the building derive from the stacks of vegetable boxes that are both a feature of the landscape and the childhood memory of making places among bales of straw.



8a



8b

temporal experience involving memory. But narrative implies an order, which gets too prescribed for me.

Following a different temporal rhythm, Mole's (currently) unrealised project for a house at Great Fern Hill offered an episodic experience understood in terms of patterns of seasonal occupancy. The various spaces of the house were arranged beneath an overarching agricultural roof, like 'stacks of vegetable boxes that are a feature of the landscape', and designed so that these 'boxes' could be opened up or locked down in response to a changing relationship with the outside from summer to winter *[8]*.

Boundaries II: layers and materials

The episodic expansion and contraction of the de facto living accommodation at Great Fern Hill reflected seasonal changes in the relationship between the inhabitants and the outside. While this was to be manifest at an almost agricultural scale, it announces an emerging sensibility that has increasingly influenced Mole's attitude towards the building envelope, and can be understood to inform the pulling-apart of the concentrated threshold experience at The Black House. Bowles describes how his interest in the possibilities of exploiting the liminal spaces within the building envelope itself grew in response to an ecological and environmental sensitivity: while mindful of the differences between the intense heat of the Australian summer and the altogether more benign climate of the UK, he cites the influence of Glenn Murcutt and Peter Stutchbury in this regard.[5]

Making evident the layering of construction, and the pulling apart of the building's skin has become something that interests me. In part it was a realisation after [my]

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visit to Glenn Murcutt's buildings; his buildings have to use layers to control the harsh summer sun, and the occupation of this liminal space is critical – the definition of the point of transition is broadened, and is connected to sensory perception. In contrast, our historic position – clearly dividing the inside and outside – is derived from our own response to a very different climate. Glazing technology allows for larger openings, and increased insulation requires us to address solar overheating. This new architectural language offers the possibility of exploiting this space. I don't feel that it's something that I've really done much with, although I've begun to bring it into the work.

Involving less physical movement for their effects than either the School of Architecture or Madingley Road, the recent exploration and exploitation of boundary layering has been a significant factor in two recent single-family dwellings: Cavendish Avenue (2008) *[9]* and The Typographer's House (2009) *[10]*. Both buildings are detached: the former is a new build; the latter a significant refurbishment of an Edwardian house. Both houses take up more or less the full width of their plot, and both are situated near the street (to which they offer austere facades) leaving large south-facing gardens onto which both open through deeply layered construction



9a



9b



9c

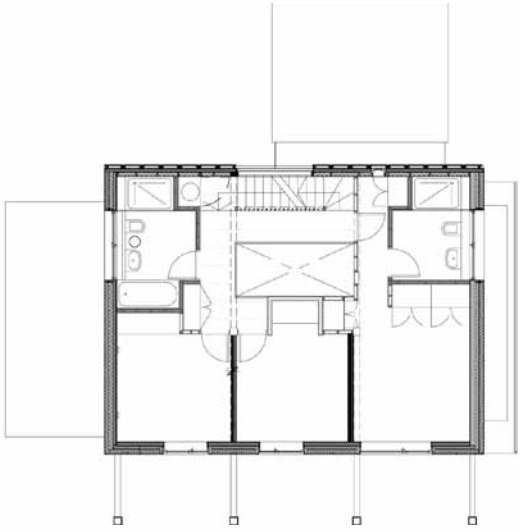
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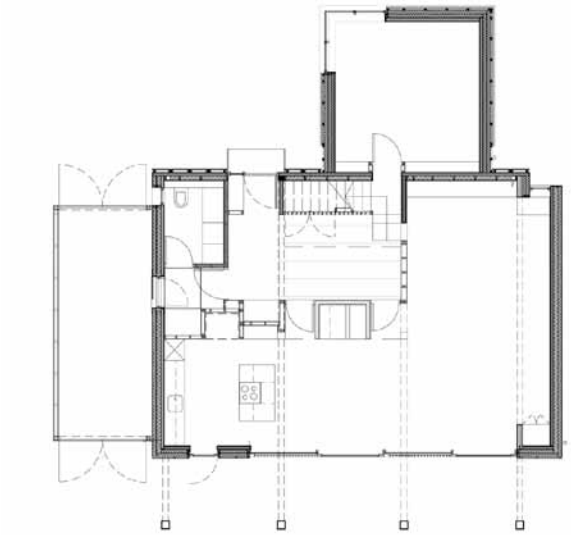
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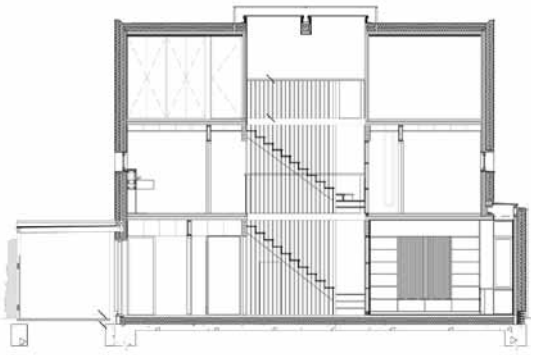
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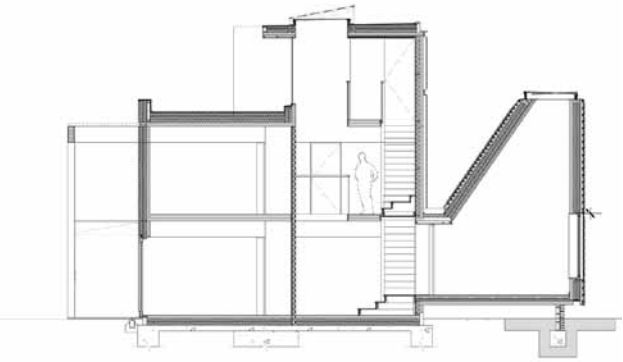
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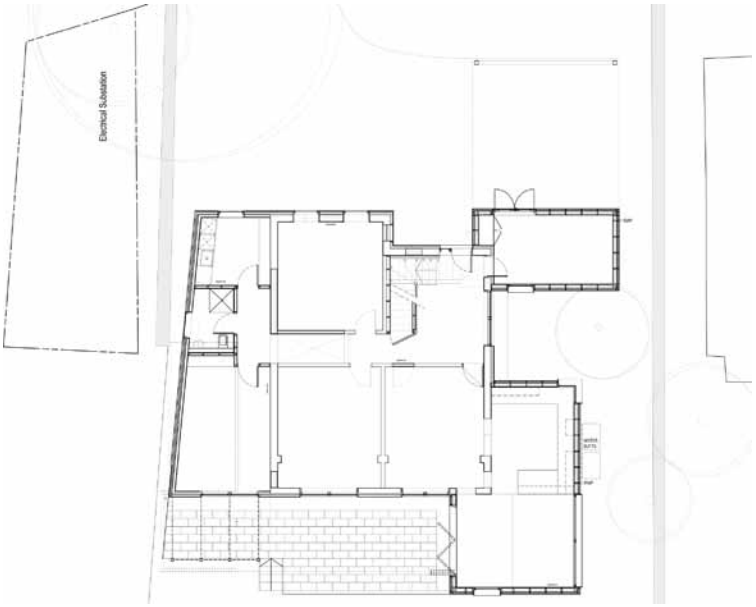


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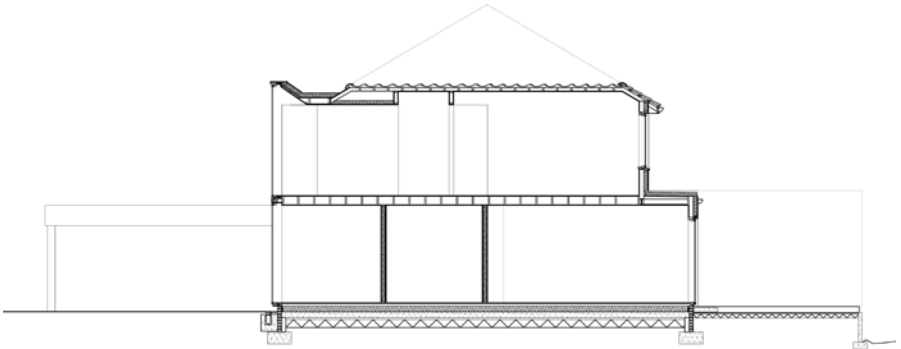
9 **Cavendish Avenue (2008)**
Front and rear elevations; development model; constructional photo and completed building in context
a Front view
b Entrance
c Rear view
d Stair space
e Kitchen
f First floor plan
g Ground floor plan
h, i Sections
This innovative passive solar house is constructed from prefabricated structural timber sheets. The front elevation is clad in a semi-reflective patterned glass rain-screen, while the rear elevation has large openings to the sun and the garden. Here, the structure of glulam beams and posts has been taken through to the outside of the insulated frame, so that the building is effectively pulled apart. The external framework contains the solar sun-screening and creates an external space that is an extension of the living space. These sun-shading devices are coupled with the operation of a stack-effect cooling system operating back through the layers and height of the building. The juxtaposition of the little pavilion and the main facade of the house produces a tense interplay; tactile materiality and informal geometry meet smooth rectilinearity. The interior space of the pavilion provides a marked contrast to the rectilinear spaces in the main house; the height of the rooflight was determined by the elevation required to scoop in sunlight over the height of the main building's roof.

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10 **Typographer's House (2009)**
a Plan
b Section
c Completed project
d Sketch
Echoing the pavilion at Cavendish, a car port softens the approach to the hard materiality of the rain-screened facade (decorated with an abstracted version of the client's own typographical design). The building has been extended to both sides; while the western edge simply extrudes the existing envelope to enclose ancillary accommodation, the eastern extension encloses a semi-interior courtyard and pushes out to the rear, forming an L-shape in plan.



10a


10b


10c


10d

manipulated in response to the needs of sun shading and insulation.

The occupation of liminal space is easiest to witness on the garden facade, though the logic of this layering extends right through both houses. At Cavendish Avenue, the building's structural frame continues through the insulated envelope to define a double-height garden terrace. Bowles explains how this external framework contains the solar sun-screening, and:

> *creates an external space that is an extension of the living space. By extending the structure outside I hope that the space reads more than the typical inside/outside space of contemporary back extensions, with stone detailing that extends to the garden. The extended structure makes the transition space truly neither one or the other.*

On the street facade, liminal spaces are pulled and pushed to both sides of a much more compressed building skin. A large picture window in this skin exposes a slice of staircase behind, bounded by an internal timber screen, while a shingled pavilion (one of several Mole riffs on the garden shed) stands forward, an incongruous outpost that mounts a challenge to the otherwise polite architecture of its

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neighbours and the austere geometry and materiality of the main facade behind.

Movement around this side of the house develops an experience of the liminality of this facade, with circulation through the section organised around several clearly legible and permeable layers, while circulation across the ground floor plan marks another extended threshold or pause moment between pavilion and main house. The layering operates in a different way at The Typographer's House *[10]*, though is no less perceptible and significant in the spatial experience. Here, the refurbishment has effectively wrapped the house in a thick layer of highly insulated screening. To the street facade, this wrap has been distanced significantly from the existing building frontage, allowing a kind of second room, or secondary space, to be included across the width of the house. This addition is evident, for example, in the huge reveals to a window opening above the front door, visible from the hall and stairway. Upstairs, this junction between the existing dwelling and the new slot of space is articulated in complex soffit detailing and fenestration to these rooms. To the rear, the garden facade is given added depth with a new extension to the east, which pushes out beyond the previous building line. This new line combines with a simple framework defining the rear edge and liminal space of the terrace, reminiscent of Cavendish Avenue, while at first floor level the building steps back, emphasising the layered, less formal rear or garden facade.

Although both these buildings are substantial single-family homes, Mole have followed their general principle of sizing much of the space modestly – bedrooms, bathrooms and toilets are all tightly planned. Bowles talks of his determination to 'get more out of space', making certain spaces tight in order to spend space generously elsewhere. This is encountered in the clear range of scales that these buildings enjoy. At Cavendish Avenue, for instance, there is a tiny snug off the main living space, fitted with a small desk, shelf and computer. At Madingley Road, the windows opening from the final enfilade onto the courtyard space are in fact tiny bedrooms, no more than sleeping niches for the clients' grandchildren. Window cills are in fact window beds, sized for a mattress; these tiny rooms have their own light, and when curtained to both sides will be delightful adventures for children. Seen from outside, these projecting 'rooms' will eventually be surrounded by a thick hedge, adding to the slightly secret nature of this excitement.

This determination to get more out of space produces buildings that not only demonstrate a strong architectural rationale, but also, crucially, are great places to live. As Kester Rattenbury has observed regarding Cavendish Avenue, '[t]his is a very accommodating bit of domestic design [...] It is, crucially, a great example of something architects tend not to do: make a real, comfortable house'.[6] These planning gymnastics are encountered throughout the practice's work; their own studio, for example, squeezes in an entrance hall, cloakroom, toilet and kitchen in a narrow strip on the street facade, giving onto one linear workspace *[11]*. While the latter could hardly be described as large, the contrast in scale from the entrance strip is marked, and further accentuated by the long, horizontal strip of windows that opens onto an endless view across the Fens. The studio also includes another Mole motif; a carefully orchestrated connection with the sky, a frequent complement to the practice's interest in touching the ground.

Through these encounters, the practice frequently decouples two architectural concerns: explorations of the principles of in(ter)dependence and interplay between internal spaces and facade are apparent throughout their work. In projects outside London, Mole have more latitude to expand and develop this interplay through the incorporation of liminal spaces, although the treatment of the material facade itself always retains something of this independence, developing a materiality and composition in response to outward context. Bowles talks of learning from Georgian buildings in London – about their scale and processes of construction – where 'one trade covered over the mistakes of the previous one'. Somewhat counterintuitively, Mole frequently reverse this logic with their own reinterpretation and play with layering. (This, of course, has consequences for work on site, where lower tolerances between materials or trades require far higher levels of coordination.) Rather than progressively covering over, the practice set out to deliberately expose and express this process:

> [A related] *interest is the exploration of rain-screen construction, and an expression of the layers that make up a contemporary wall. I have rarely used brick or masonry cavity walls, and have made more of this over the years. From early timber buildings I've used cement fibre a lot, either as a wrapper* [...] *covering everything, or as a version of weatherboarding (Architecture Studio at Cambridge), Gillespie Road (Arsenal Pinstripe) and Cavendish Avenue (reduced to see-through glass). In their detailing all of these* [buildings] *attempt to emphasise the thinness of the construction, deliberately retaining the gaps between boards (using inverted top hats at Gillespie Road, rather than cover beads) and seeing their thinness on overlaps that project beyond edges.*

This expression of the layered process of construction is part of a broader set of concerns that are tied to the ways in which buildings, in part through their material selection and treatment, carry meaning. In addition to the practice's ambition to specify, as far as possible, benign materials with low embodied energy (an approach epitomised in the Wabi Tea House *[12]*, built entirely of reclaimed materials by the client), Mole set out to reinforce the legibility of the construction process through a material registration of the passage of time:

> [I] *prefer materials that show a patina of age. This mitigates against an architecture of abstraction or purity, or one based on form above material.*[7]

These concerns with material legibility return us to the notion of the extreme *genius loci* that was introduced at the start of this essay. Mole's work demonstrates a commitment to making

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11b



11c



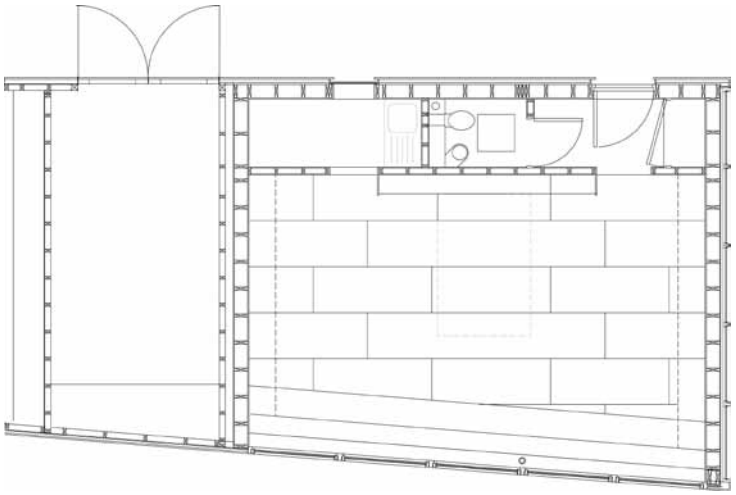
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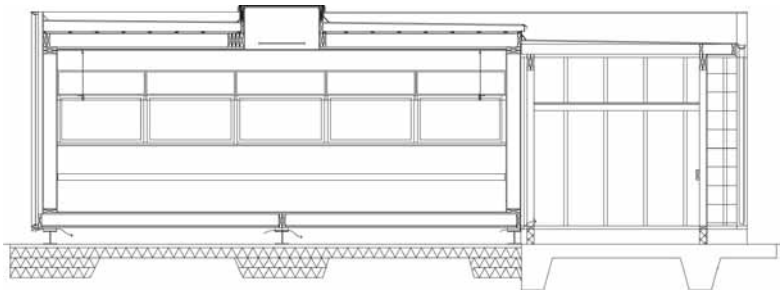
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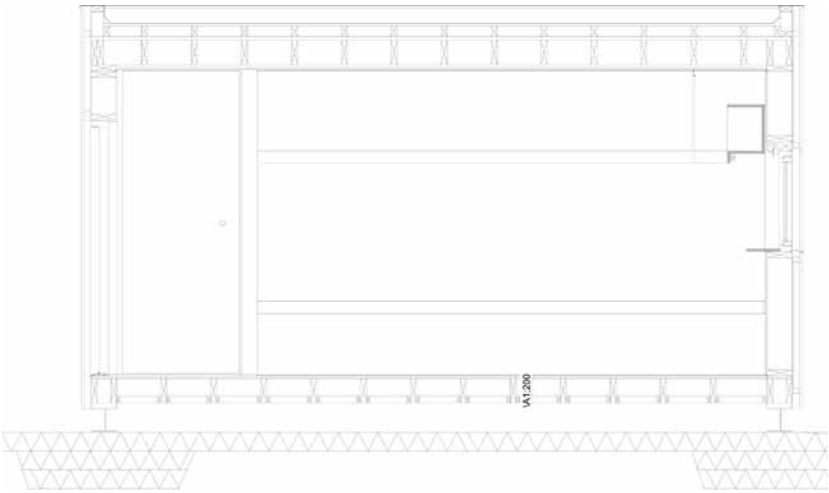
11 **Mole Studio (2006)**
a Garden elevation
b,c Entrance and materials
d,e Interiors
f Plan
g Section
h Construction section
In miniature, the Mole Studio building epitomises many of the practice's interests. The timber-framed studio building sits on a simple steel grillage and compacted hardcore, avoiding the need for piles or concrete. The insulation is hemp/recycled cotton, and the cladding is local rough sawn larch timber. A large openable rooflight gives good daylighting and aids summer ventilation.



11f



11g



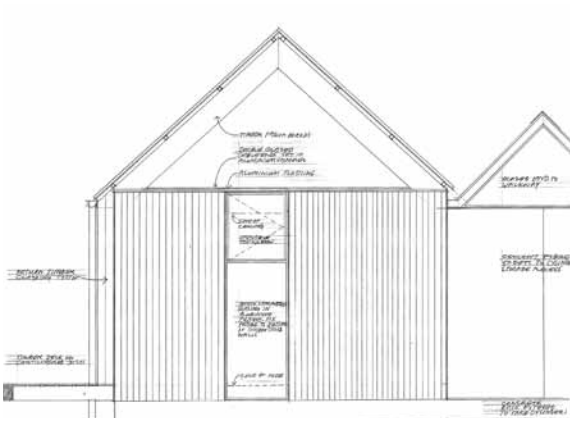
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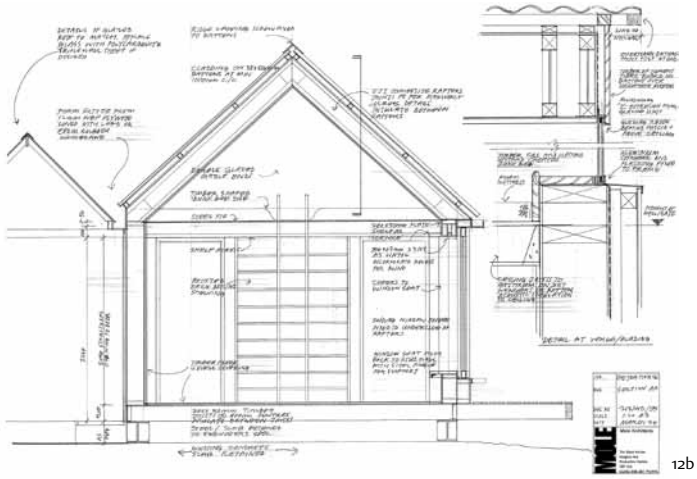
construction the basis of architectural expression but, through a multi-faceted understanding of construction, various broad issues are drawn together. Their contextually sensitive materialist approach is not about pastiche 'fitting in' or slavish copying: echoing something of John Soane's mantra that we must be *artists not copyists*, Bowles emphasises how understanding an extreme *genius loci* will acknowledge the importance of collectively understood social, cultural and environmental meanings, while accepting that these are always in flux and require re-telling. How buildings mean, how they support meaning, comes back to issues of narrative in architecture:

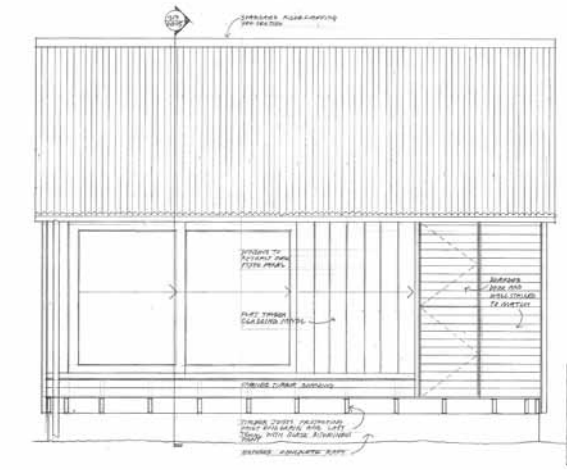
The other possibility implied by a narrative architecture is one where the building carries meaning, symbolically or metaphorically. This is more interesting; I'm interested in what a building conveys and the stories it might allude to. With this too I think we have to assume that it might hit a nerve rather than tell a story, that the way a building is articulated, or decorated, will trigger references that then allow someone to experience the building with this in the back of their mind. The crass way in which postmodernism re-introduced this into contemporary architecture by now has been abstracted and assimilated into architectural debate and affects the manner in which we detail buildings. I think we are acutely conscious now (as a nation, not just architects) of designing with half a mind

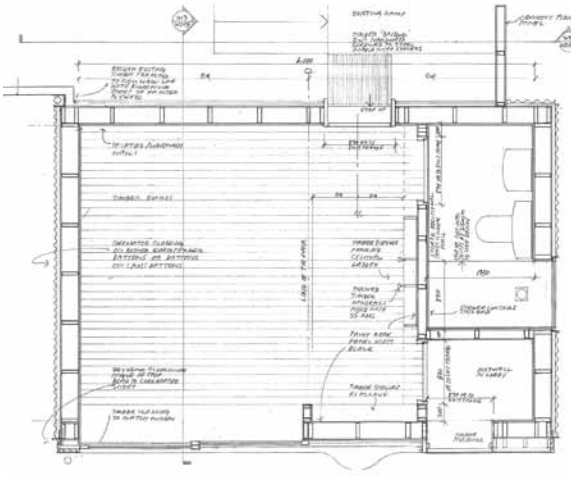
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12 **Wabi Tea House (2007)**
a–d Construction drawings
This little guest room, a deliberate evocation of the Fen shack, is entirely built of reclaimed materials by the client. Inside the room is beautifully made, with views out to the walnut tree and a deck to sit out in the sun.
e external cladding uses corrugated steel sheeting
f internal linings are either timber or earth plaster
g–h oak windows were made by the client, along with furniture and ceramics


12a


12b


12c


12d

to historical precedent and context, and with an implicit 'narrative' – with our contribution being part of a spatial and temporal continuum.

The practice sees this contribution belonging to an alternate tradition of modern architecture, one concerned with putting things in rather than taking them away. A consequence of this approach is the importance of having some sort of organising framework to hold it all together.

Organising ideas

When moving from the general to the specific, Mole's broad range of interests and concerns have to be harnessed by some kind of robust organising idea or hierarchy that comes to define each project. None of the issues discussed so far is pursued as an end in itself, although this movement and interplay does mark the consistency of attitude that characterises the practice's work. Neither are Mole dogmatic about these organising ideas: while it is important for them to be identified, articulated, tested and developed, their role is to accommodate interference from contingent events or situations that emerge during each project's development.

Bowles argues that 'ninety per cent is okay' for an organising or generating idea's application; circumstance and happenstance will throw up unforeseen challenges to such ideas, which need to have the wherewithal to accommodate them. The design responses to these challenges can be integrated into each building as a testament to its development, although this comes with a warning:

The 90%-is-OK philosophy is not to be confused with an acceptance of defeat, that 100% is not possible. The last 10% of a job marks the difference between a building that lives up to the idea, and one that misses it … The 90%-is-OK mantra relates to the idea that if an organising principle is clear enough, deviation from it will not diminish the result, and often will enrich a project by allowing or catering for contingent events. It's the idea that a good building accommodates rather than dictates occupation.

This is more broadly illustrative of the practice's attitude to change over time. These buildings, their

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12e



12f



12g



12h

clients and users, all have lives of their own, and Mole are resistant to exercising control beyond what they see as their remit (they are reluctant, for instance, to specify the decoration or furniture for these buildings, seeing that as part of someone else's life: 'I tell them to do their own shopping', says Bowles). Consistent with this attitude, there is no rule or established pattern regarding the provenance of any particular organising idea. Pragmatic concerns – tree roots, Planning and Building Regulations, cost, sun path, views, privacy, servicing, surrounding architecture and so on – all play their role alongside issues of extreme *genius loci*, movement, thresholds, layering and material treatment, classical geometries and proportion, and the contested histories of modern architecture. Highly tuned, and yet not always apparently in-tune with first impressions of a place, Mole's projects demonstrate the importance of a sensitivity to context. This sensitivity is, however, accompanied by a gently surreal inclination that encourages a confrontation with preconceptions regarding the 'character' of that place.

The constant movement between a broad consistency of attitude and the particularities of each building undoubtedly makes demands on the practice. With a somewhat wry reflection, Bowles observes the price to be paid for this approach:

> *I've often thought it would be better if I was peddling a clearer line that would make description easier to come by, and maybe as a consequence make the work more distinct and memorable. But then I like the fact that the work has developed, and that there are aspects that are idiosyncratic or respond to a one-off event or circumstance.*

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Notes

1. Meredith Bowles started Mole Architects in 1997, having previously worked as a construction manager, theatre designer and artist, as well as doing spells in architects' offices, including Simon Conder, who remains a good friend and inspiration. Mole Architects are currently: Meredith Bowles (Director), Helen Stratford, Hugo Keene and Ian Bramwell. Mole have worked with East Anglian practices Modece and Neil Winder, having a joint partnership named studio**mgm**, and have acted as advisors to Living Architecture, a trust set up to build contemporary houses by world-renowned architects. Mole are partnering the Dutch firm MVRDV and the Norwegian firm Jarmund Vignæs, building two of the houses in Suffolk.
2. Mole's current practice brochure states: 'Each project is approached according to the specific requirements and interests of the client, and in response to the opportunities offered by the site, the existing buildings and orientation. Our work reflects this approach and is identified by a consistency of attitude rather than a "house style".'
3. This and following citations from Meredith Bowles are all from conversations and correspondence between him and the author: 18 January, 19 January and 24 March 2010.
4. John Brennan, 'The Use of Narrative in Contemporary Rural Architecture', *arq* 10.1, 2006, p. 22.
5. Bowles recalls the influence of attending a masterclass with Glenn Murcutt and Peter Stutchbury in 2002. Peter Stutchbury Architects, based in Sydney, Australia, are perhaps less well-known to a UK audience than Murcutt. Stutchbury recently won the 3rd Living Steel Competition's Design for Cherepovets, Russia and his winning entry showed similarities with projects discussed here. It was a single-family partially earth-sheltered house built from simple prefabricated components and with a deliberately low-tech, direct and passive approach to environmental systems. Peter Stutchbury worked on this competition entry with Bowles in Mole's studio while staying with him during summer 2009.
6. Kester Rattenbury, 'Cavendish Avenue House, Cambridge, by Mole Architects', in *The Architects' Journal*, 29 October 2009, p. 29.
7. Mole have a similar attitude towards the investigation rather than fetishisation of contemporary technologies: they adopt a low-tech approach to sustainability, avoiding buildings filled with gadgets, or that are too reliant on user-involvement to operate successfully in environmental terms. Bowles describes how behind his interest in low impact or low energy building, 'I have sought to understand the mechanisms by which things fail, and the figures behind the performance. The best book on low energy houses is [still] Robert and Brenda Vale's *The Autonomous House* (they taught me at Sheffield), which is great because it is so analytical in terms of actual energy use. They aren't content to stick with theory, and use measured statistics heavily in their analysis.' This is not to suggest that the practice shies away from technological challenge: Mole are currently working on a kit-built Passivhaus system with a manufacturer of timber products based near Zurich, providing a challenge to their attitude towards contextual ideas.

Illustration credits

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Biography

Stephen Walker teaches architecture at the University of Sheffield. His recent books on *Gordon Matta-Clark* and *Helen Chadwick* are published by I. B. Tauris. He is currently working on a project on the architecture of fairgrounds in conjunction with the National Fairground Archive.

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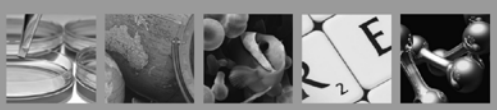
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