The building overlooks a pair of grain silos that will be adapted into storage space.

Housing an architectural archive on a working farm requires a sensibility both rural and urban, writes Ellis Woodman

Pictures by David Grandorge

COUNTRY PRACTICES

Over the past decade, the once run-down Shatwell Farm in Somerset has enjoyed a remarkable revival of fortune. In 2008 Skene Catling de la Peña completed the refurbishment and expansion of a disused dairy to create a home for its owner and two years ago Stephen Taylor added a cowshed distinguished by a monumental concrete portico. A second barn by Taylor — again sporting a portico, this time in brick — is soon to address the cowshed across the valley that extends away from the farmyard.

The imagery of these new buildings supports the owner’s vision of Shatwell’s remodelling as an act of quasi-urbanisation. This remains a working farm but his ambition is to introduce new uses and greater density. What are currently ill-defined dirt tracks should, in time, suggest a reading as nascent streets.

The latest addition houses an office and a store for the owner’s architectural and family archive. The work of Hugh Strange Architects, it is effectively a new building nestled behind the now consolidated remains of a dilapidated 19th century store that faces the farmyard. A more conventional refurbishment was considered but the structure’s long, narrow plan prohibited its adaptation to anything but its original use. The decision was therefore taken to clear the most heavily damaged fabric — the roof and rear wall — allowing for the introduction of a new structure of more generous dimensions.

Set back from the retained wall and rising above it, the building’s new form is most pronounced outside, as seen from the farmyard, in a fibrous cement roof that extends for the building’s full length (its ridge and eaves dropping from end to end in parallel with the gentle fall of the ground). This gesture maintains the impression of a unified form but the fabric supporting the roof actually comprises two independent enclosures framing a covered entrance yard between them.

As with Hugh Strange’s debut project, a house for himself and his family in south London, these have been constructed in cross-laminated spruce. The significant innovation here, however, is in the use of the material in monolithic form: a choice informed by the massive fabric’s capacity to stabilise the building’s temperature and moisture balance and to better conserve the material on paper stored within it.

The wall panels are 300mm thick and those that form the double-pitched roof a still chunkier 420mm, providing U-values of 0.35 and 0.25 respectively, without recourse to insulation. The fibrous cement represents the only external lining, a ventilated void between it and the timber panels serving to reduce the risk of overheating in summer. It also oversails on all sides, providing a measure of protection to the walls. These have had a preservative applied to them but only in the interests of maintaining a colour match between the internal and external faces.

Identical in volume, the two timber structures each house a single room that extends to the roof — one the office, the other the archive — with small ancillary spaces sited at the far ends of the plan. These stand like Monopoly houses on insitu concrete plinths, the office 400mm higher than the archive. The entrance yard’s location coincides with an opening in the masonry that was made in the last century: a gap wide enough for a van to pass through, now allowing deliveries to be made undercover.

A central opening in the masonry wall provides access to the covered entrance yard.
Doors are face fixed to the outer face of the wall to maintain a reading of the timber’s thickness.

Extending the range of exterior hard products in play, the ground floor is finished in a linear tiling you are conscious with that was developed for pigmenting and incorporation into the pigmented matrix of solid rubber. These tiles, no longer French, have been filled with fine gravel and a mountainous introduction behooves you to prepare plans growing. This treatment is also carried through to a niche cut in the massive concrete partition wall, into which are fished for visual expression. The 20th-century metal frame of the wall was removed, allowing the outer surface to be cemented back to the original direction. By doing so, retaining the frame of pigtails and stained wood graining. Near midheight, three Ahmedian volumes are set to be converted to further storage space.

Workaday materials have been elevated through the attention paid to their assembly.

The bespoke display system. The toplit archive incorporates a splendidly appointed scout hut.

The archive is essentially an inward-focused space: a splendidly appointed scout hut.

Looking from the office to the archive on the far side of the yard.

The toplit archive. The bespoke display system.

A primary building operation — is confident that the cross-laminated timber offers a much better performance than the traditional layer.

For the building’s enveloping layer, a primitive classicism not so far from that at play in the farmyard, the hill-facing aspect has a strong case to be made. The hard edit between farmyard and interior. The hard edit between a world populated by manure-besmirched tractors and the carefully constructed environment provided by Strange’s building. Noise in the project’s principal plasterworks.

Despite their essentially common form and materials, the two interiors present distinct atmospheres. This is largely a product of the different showers that light has been introduced. The one provides a rich, greenish hue, the other a milky, natural expanse.

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