BUILDING ■

Home truths

Architect Hugh Strange's self-built house is an essay in the careful manipulation of space and material, finds ***David Grandorge****.*

There is an extent to which the design of an architect's own house takes the form of a manifesto. This may be with regard to how a material should be used, how the domestic realm should be organised or, latterly, how we might minimise embodied and operational energy use. It is also possible, even within tight economic and planning restraints, to articulate form and space with reference to a particular set of ideas – to build as one would like. The house designed by Hugh Strange for himself, his wife and young child, is exemplary in this respect.

The house is in a cul-de-sac in Deptford, south-east London. It had an unusually long gestation period of eight years, from the first enquiry about the site to completion. This slow burn must at times have seemed burdensome, but it has enabled sustained research and reflection on what might be achieved.

Strange had previously lived in a ground-floor flat immediately to the north of the site, itself a former pub yard. In 2006 he received consent for a live/work planning application whereby the flat, which faces onto the busy Evelyn Street, would become the work space while a new single-storey structure built in the yard would provide the living space.

Confronted with a charmingly ordinary brick perimeter wall to work with, the primary decision in determining the building's form was whether to build against it, creating a courtyard inside, or to build a freestanding object, creating residual space around it. Strange chose the latter course.

The detail of the building was developed and tendered for in early 2009 and the construction, an essay in the use of engineered softwood and planed tropical hardwood, began in the autumn. A concrete raft, a platform on which to build, was poured on top of an existing slab, a process requiring no excavation. (Outside, the existing slab is still visible, complete with sliding door track from an earlier building). The superstructure of solid spruce planar elements arrived in a container from Switzerland and was craned into place in less than a week.

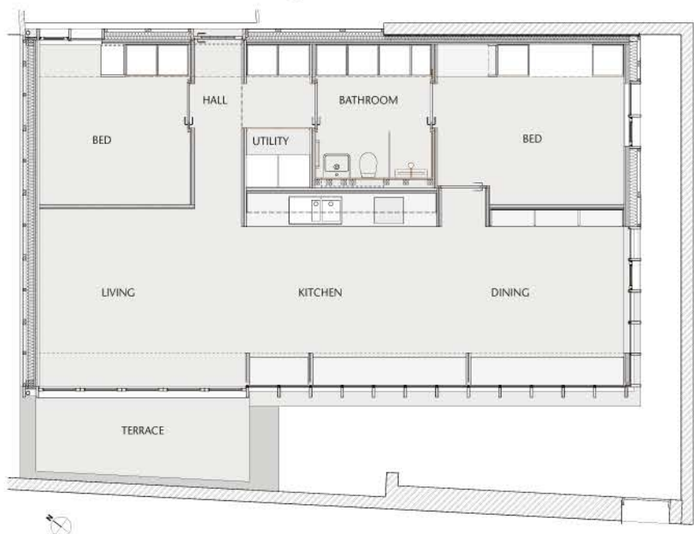
There was then a fourteen week lull in action as the contractor waited for the arrival

Top left *The lightweight timber frame allowed for a concrete raft foundation without excavation. Construction of the 75 square metre building took eight months and cost £160,000 (all photos: David Grandorge).*
Top right *Glass is sandwiched between exposed softwood structure and hardwood frames to form windows. The building has U-values of 0.17 for walls, 0.16 for the ground and 0.13 for the roof.*
Location plan *1 New house, 2 existing house – now workspace, 3 Evelyn Street.*

of the FSC-certified tropical hardwood elements that were being fabricated in a Nicaraguan factory from trees felled by Hurricane Katrina. These form windows, doors, linings and furniture and also arrived – eventually – in a single container.

The resulting building is rich in spatial variety, material and tectonic expression and quality of light. It can be entered from the street on its north side via the newly appointed office and a small residual court space, or from the cul-de-sac to the south, through an opening in the brick perimeter wall that is little more than 600mm wide. Entering from this side, one encounters a variety of intimate interstitial spaces formed between the house and the wall. It is from these spaces that the

Top *North facade – profiled fibre cement panels with galvanised steel trim.*
Above *Interior finished with woodwax oil.*



house derives its subtle, poetic character. They mediate between the domestic realm and the tougher public space that lies beyond the wall. One can imagine the pleasure of a child exploring these spaces or an adult reading here on a balmy summer night with only the sodium glare of the adjacent street lamp to illuminate the pages.

The house has a footprint of only 75 square metres, but feels larger due to its long, high and enfilade spaces. Living, cooking and eating all take place in a tall and relatively thin space. It is lined most of the way along its length with a kitchen and bookshelves that form a deep threshold to the bedrooms and bathroom. Windows on the other side receive ample and often very beautiful south light from over the perimeter wall for most of the year.

The use of an extensively glazed screen here and on the eastern side of the room is appropriate but also paradoxical. It is not just a source of daylight but, in keeping with that prevailing orthodoxy of contemporary

architectural production, a means to amplify the interior's relationship with the external world. How then to interpret the fact that we are a denied a view of the context by the perimeter wall? If man's freedom were defined by how far he could see, then this house might be thought of as a prison. But urban dwellers know better. We grab space where we can and we appreciate the intimacy it enables in contrast to the relentlessly public quality of city life.

The tectonic expression of the building is clearly expressed in the exposed solid timber structure onto which hardwood elements are face-fixed. This constructional strategy was employed to address tolerances between products that were manufactured thousands of miles apart. The junction between softwood and hardwood is detailed exquisitely at every turn, from door linings to benches and, in particular, the large glazed screen that is

fixed only at top and bottom, leaving it distinct from the structural softwood columns.

Though the material from which the building is made travelled long distances, this is still an environmentally thoughtful project. The trapped carbon held within the superstructure amounts to seventeen tonnes even with travel factored in. Underfloor heating is powered by an exhaust air heat pump. The highly insulated building has a good level of air-tightness enabled by the solid timber construction and well-crafted windows and doors.

The Strange House is a welcome, if unusual, addition to a tough neighbourhood. It is a highly bespoke building that exploits an unusual site condition. Its position behind a wall seems, at first glance, rather defensive, but the presentation to its context – the elegant, fibre-cement-clad crown of the building rising flirtatiously above the existing brickwork – feels otherwise. It possesses qualities that are simultaneously abstract, austere, and pleasurable. It demonstrates the application of precise tectonic and spatial thinking and, most importantly, the value of patience.

David Grandorge leads a diploma unit at London Metropolitan University.

Below *Short and long sections: 1 felt roofing on 130-200mm insulation to falls, vapour barrier and 100mm solid timber panel, 2 75mm polished concrete screed on 100mm rigid insulation, three coats of RIW on waterproofing, and 200mm RC slab over existing slab.*

Project team
Architect: Hugh Strange; main contractor: Solmaz; structural engineer: Price & Myers; SAP calculations: LK Accreditation; airtightness testing: Airtightness Testing UK; timber frame contractor: Eurban.

Selected suppliers and subcontractors
Joinery supplier: Simplemente Madera; concrete flooring: Steysons Concrete; ironmongery: IZE, Glutz, Comyn Ching, Titon; sliding door gear: Hafele; cladding: Marley Eternit; glazing: Solaglas; underfloor heating, heatpump: Nu-Heat; roofing felt: Axter; insulation: Ecotherm.