

BUILDINGS: HUGH STRANGE ARCHITECTS

Peeling back the layers

Hugh Strange's Deptford family house creates a multi-layered drama which reaches beyond the constraints of its enclosed site, writes **Ellis Woodman**

Pictures by David Grandorge

Once travelled to Kazakhstan to write about a building for BD. This one I see every time I open my bedroom curtains. Hugh Strange is an architect, sometime contributor to these pages and my downstairs neighbour. We share a mid-19th century terraced house in Deptford, south-east London, that has been divided into two. When Strange bought the ground-floor flat in 2003, his rear garden backed on to a vacant plot, which was enclosed by a high wall.

This land had served as the car park of the pub that closed the end of the terrace — a building that seven years ago stood unoccupied and derelict. By 2005, however, a housing association had given the pub an extended lease of life as temporary accommodation for young offenders. It deemed the car park surplus to this new brief's requirements but found that limited access and the close proximity of neighbouring properties restricted the land's development potential considerably.

However, as the owner of the neighbouring property, Strange was uniquely well placed to redefine its possibilities. He proposed building a house there, for the use of himself and his young family, which might effectively share a garden with the flat. More than a year of negotiation followed, but he eventually persuaded the housing association to sell the land to him for a figure that reflected the fact that it was all but useless to anyone else.

While the terms of his planning permission prevent him from selling off the house separately from the flat, to all intents and purposes the new building is independent of its host to the north. A door has been cut into the retained brick perimeter wall, giving it its own access off the residential cul-de-sac



SITE PLAN

- 1 Existing house
- 2 New build
- 3 Cul-de-sac
- 4 Former pub

that lies to the south of the site. Approaching the building down this street, however, you could be forgiven for failing to recognise that the site contained a house at all. Overlooking restrictions limited the building to a single storey, so the only part that is visible above the encompassing wall is a metre-deep strip of grey, corrugated, fibrous cement cladding. Only the precision with which the cladding's stainless-steel fixings have been located suggests any level of refinement.

After this unassuming prelude, **Approaching, you could be forgiven for failing to recognise that the site contained a house at all**

the experience of passing through the door is a shock — with startling suddenness we are immersed in a world quite disconnected from the one we have just left. We are still not quite in the house itself. The building occupies 70% of the plot, allowing slots to be preserved along both the south and east elevations. On passing through the door we find ourselves standing at the junction of these slots. They are of different widths — the one on the east being large enough to admit only light and air while the one to the south forms a more generous passage, with a set of folding doors at the end allowing access to the interior.

So framed, the elevations demand to be looked along rather than at. The architect has dramatised that condition by organising them as three strata, the lines of which converge sharply towards a common vanishing point when viewed lengthways. The first band is an in-situ-concrete base. At £160,000 construction cost, this is a surprisingly cheap house and much of the credit for that lies with the decision to retain the concrete slab that already covered the site. No excavations were undertaken, a second slab simply being introduced as a raft foundation on top of the existing one. The architect has given the new layer greater visual presence by introducing an upstand along its edge, the additional height lending it a visual equivalence with the fibrous cement crown that forms the uppermost band.

Between them spans a zone of glazing, framed in a hardwood that will soon fade to the grey of the concrete and fibrous cement. Vertical mullions project forward by 150mm with the effect that, when the facade is viewed tangentially, the glass is concealed. The run of mullions on the long south elevation demarcates the receding perspective particularly forcefully. That effect owes much to the fibrous cement crown having been stepped back 400mm along this facade so that the head of the glazing becomes the dominant line. This datum corresponds to the parapet of the brick wall, lending the slot-space a more precise and intimate definition.

The interior is overwhelmingly of exposed timber. The primary structure takes the form of engineered spruce panels, brought to site from a factory in Switzerland and assembled in just two days. The adoption of such a light-weight mode of construction was imperative if the raft foundation



Above: The narrow slots between the building and the perimeter wall read as extensions of the interior.

Right: Built-in furniture was fabricated in Nicaragua from FSC-certified hardwood.



solution was to be feasible. It also had the advantage of reducing the risks to which the architect exposed himself; the timber structure represented a third of the construction cost and was procured on schedule and for a fixed price.

On to this massive softwood armature, a more refined language of joinery has been applied. This too was fabricated overseas, although in very different circumstances from the primary structure. While the design was mid-development, Strange attended a wedding where he met an old friend who he hadn't seen for a decade. In the years since, his friend had relocated to Nicaragua where he had set up a joinery business. The firm specialises in the use of the tropical hardwood that had been downed when Hurricane Katrina swept through the country in 2005 — an FSC-certified supply so plentiful that much of it is exported to Cuba for use as roof beams. The architect was persuaded that the company could also undertake more bespoke work and — even given the transport costs — for a price with which UK joinery firms couldn't begin to compete.

The building strives to keep one aware of spaces beyond one's immediate setting

Beautifully fabricated hardwood window framing, doors and built-in furniture were all therefore procured from this source. The dark stain applied to them creates a strong contrast with the spruce, while the two systems' independence from one another is further articulated through their detailing: the door and window frames being baldly face-fixed to the spruce panels. Again, Strange pursued this constructional economy not just as an aesthetic goal but as a means of minimising risk. A large part of the London-based contractor's role was restricted to joining the work of the Nicaraguan and Swiss teams in the simplest possible fashion. The logic of the plan may at first

seem as rigorous as that of the construction. An enfilade of two bedrooms and a common bathroom occupy the north half, while living, dining and kitchen areas are configured in a single room to the south. And yet the character of the interior is more romantic than that diagram might suggest. At 11.5m in length and 3.2m in height, the main space is certainly large but not at all shed-like. The placement of walls, windows and furniture has been carefully gauged to establish different territories within its volume.

Crucially, the building always strives to keep one aware of spaces beyond one's immediate setting. The slots, which the architect has judiciously populated with plants, present themselves as extensions of the interior very directly, while a high-level window at the living-room end captures the one sign of life beyond the site — a church tower that stands 100m to the west. Within the context of an exceptionally constrained site and budget, this spatial layering proves transformative. The world of the house is by no means large but it is exceptionally rich.



PROJECT TEAM Architect Hugh Strange Architects, Structural engineer Price & Myers, Main contractor Solmaz, Timber frame contractor Eurban, Joinery supplier Simplemente Madera, Ironmongery supplier IZE

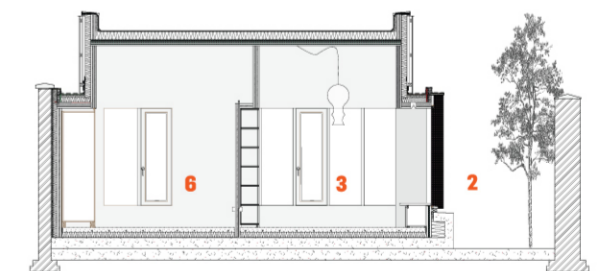


Looking down the south elevation towards the raised entrance.



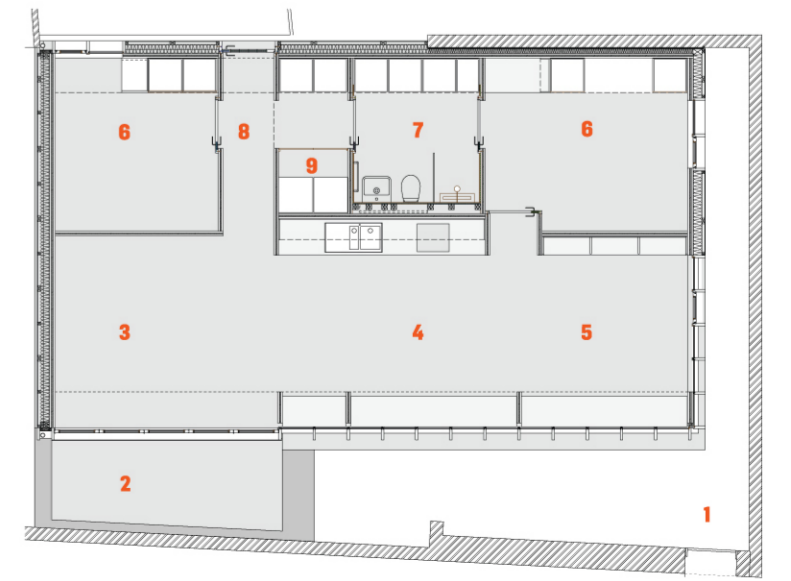
A opening cut into the perimeter wall gives access off a cul-de-sac to the south.

SHORT SECTION



- 1 Entrance
- 2 Terrace
- 3 Living
- 4 Kitchen
- 5 Dining
- 6 Bedrooms
- 7 Bathroom
- 8 Hall
- 9 Utility

PLAN



The west elevation corresponds to the site boundary.