

WORKS: DAVID KOHN ARCHITECTS

A stage for life

Stable Acre, David Kohn's Norfolk home for gallery owner Stuart Shave represents a perfect marriage of architectural and human concerns, says **Ellis Woodman**

Pictures by Ioana Marinescu





PROJECT TEAM Architect David Kohn Architects, **Client** Stuart Shave, **Structural engineer** Alan Baxter & Associates, **Landscape architect/designer** Platform Architects, **Quantity surveyor** Jackson Coles, **Building contractor** H Smith & Sons



The living room looks on to the paddock through a wall of Crittall glazing.

Whenever visiting a newly completed house for these pages, I have come to expect the quiet aside on the outward car journey when the architect warns me about the element of the project that was wrested from their control. It could be the epic Bosch kitchen that the client parachuted in from the showroom at the last moment or the planting scheme by which they are belatedly suburbanising a design that turned out to be a shade more ferocious than they had banked on. Inevitably, the photographer's attention gets directed away from such embarrassments and more often than not the critic's does too – a sympathetic cover-up predicated on the understanding that the process of designing a house is akin to a war between architect and client and that even the best architect can't expect to win all the battles.

At least that usually seems to be the way things pan out. Just occasionally one encounters a real accord between a highly particular built form and a way of life; a sense that the process has delivered both an extraordinary work of architecture and an extraordinary home. Stable Acre, a new house in rural Norfolk, which David Kohn Architects has recently completed for gallery owner Stuart Shave is an example of such a fit.

That is a tribute not only to Kohn's attentiveness, but also to the fact that Shave has proved a nothing if not exacting client. In Kohn's office there are two doorstep-thick files packed with design iterations for the scheme, one of which even secured planning permission three years ago, only for Shave to have second thoughts.

The number of alternatives that were worked through is all the more remarkable given that the house's essential configuration was pretty much determined from the outset. That is because the scheme is a remodelling of an existing structure – a mid-19th century stable block – the 37m-long footprint and double-pitched profile of which were deemed sacrosanct by the planners.

To be strictly accurate, it is a second remodelling. Shave bought Stable Acre from a builder who had turned it into a house for his own use a decade previously. He had made a rotten job of the conversion, but from Shave's perspective the property still had one crucial thing going for it: it was quiet. For over a year, he had been looking to buy a weekend house within reasonably easy reach of London

but had consistently failed to find anywhere unaffected by traffic noise. Stable Acre stands at the edge of an isolated farm, presenting a long wall to the farm track by which it is accessed and opening out to the tree-enclosed acre of paddock that gives it its name. To live here is to hear no mechanical noise more intrusive than the daily post van.

The planners were concerned that the building should retain a convincingly agricultural appearance. The previous owner had introduced vertical slot windows in the wall facing the farm track and they requested that these be blocked up. Since their closure focused the relationship between the house and paddock, Kohn was happy to comply.

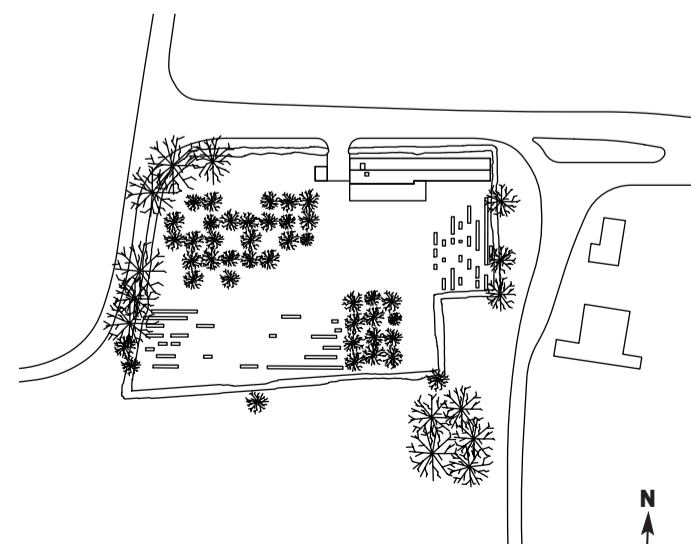
Thankfully however, the planners also allowed some critical departures from the inherited form. The brickwork has now been built up by 400mm, ensuring that the internal meeting of roof and wall is lifted a comfortable distance above the occupants' eyeline. The hips at either end have also been swapped for vertical gables, a change that strips the composition of its earlier emphatic symmetry. In some of

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the abandoned schemes, Kohn develops that open-endedness in the pithy, determinedly dumb manner of one of Donald Judd's converted factory buildings at Marfa, Texas. What he has built, however, is something more fragmented and ultimately more urban – an ensemble rather than an extrusion.

There is more than a little of a train about it. Strip the plan of annotations and you could be looking at a long sleeper carriage being pulled behind a dining car, which is in turn shackled to an engine at the far end. These parts are bound together by the relentless application of the pitched roof, but Kohn has lent them a certain autonomy through the use of different forms of construction. The sleeping quarters are oak-faced, the living and dining area fully glazed, the kitchen-cum-engine a compact brick structure complete with chimney. A detached bike shed completes the picture. Along with the ►

SITE PLAN



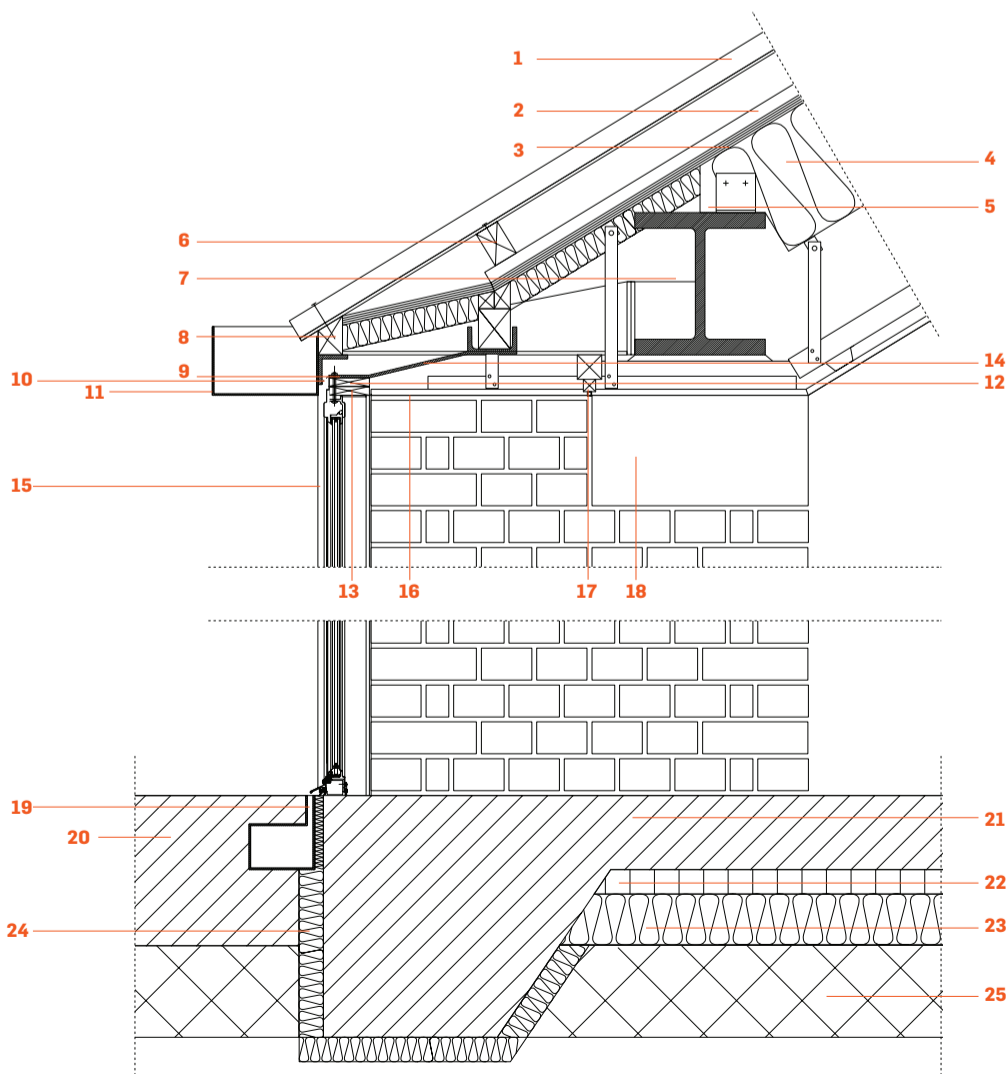
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The site is entered between the house and the in-situ concrete bike shed.



SECTION DETAIL

- 1 Profiled metal roofing
- 2 25x25 counter battens
- 3 18mm WBP ply
- 4 240mm Homatherm Woodflex protect insulation
- 5 225x50 rafters at 400c/c
- 6 50x75 s/w purlins at 1375 centres
- 7 254x254x167 UC steel section
- 8 Solid h/w timber rail fixed to L angle
- 9 Continuous 60x60x8mm steel angle
- 10 Continuous length of insect mesh
- 11 Bespoke ppc galvanised steel gutter fixed to timber rail. Powder coated to match windows.
- 12 Intermittent solid h/w packers
- 13 Solid h/w panel painted grey to match windows
- 14 Compressible strap to compensate for snow loading
- 15 Crittall W20 section windows
- 16 Suspended plasterboard ceiling system
- 17 Curtain rail centred on mortar joint between padstone and brickwork
- 18 Padstone
- 19 Slot drain
- 20 Concrete terrace
- 21 150mm in situ concrete slab with underfloor heating
- 22 50mm concrete binding
- 23 100mm insulation
- 24 Insulation
- 25 175mm compacted sub-base type 2



Double doors open the entrance hall to the paddock.

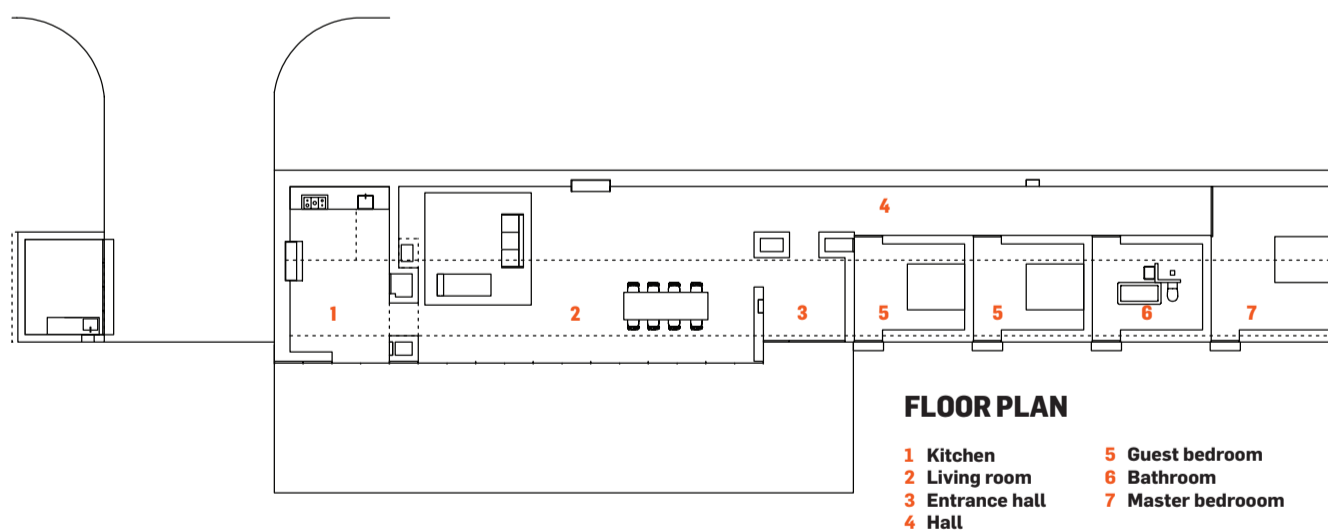
kitchen's brick gable, it frames the entrance to the site; its hilariously substantial in-situ concrete construction and sharply monopitched roof presumably readying it for use as a buffer to the oncoming locomotive.

Having parked in the gap between gable and bike shed, visitors track along the facade, before reaching the entrance mid-way along its length. Full-height oak-faced double doors maintain a sense that this is a building into which you might comfortably lead

a horse. They open onto a little hallway formed in massive white painted brick; an enclosure which, like the kitchen, is conceived as a house in miniature. In the pop-up restaurant Kohn installed at the Royal Academy of Arts a couple of years ago (*Works* January 9, 2009), he used a wall of packing crates to set up a Russian doll-like configuration of different scales of enclosure. Something of that sensibility is at play at Stable Acre too. Within the entrance hall, a concrete aedicule has been set into the



The brick kitchen and entrance hall both accommodate concrete aedicules.



brick: a house-within a house-within a house. Meanwhile, turning round, we realise the entrance has been sited so as to allow a long diagonal view across the paddock and out through a gap in the trees to the fields beyond. The micro and macro are thus related, the understanding of multiple enclosure confirming a sense of the house as a retreat.

The pitch of the roof is experienced throughout the interior but to best effect in the 12m-long living and dining room. This dis-

Strip the plan of annotations and you could be looking at a long sleeper carriage pulled behind a dining car

tance is gauged precisely. Shave wanted this room to address the paddock through a wall of full-height glazing without any structure interrupting the view, which necessitated the introduction of an eaves beam of a depth that could span without support. As can be seen from the detail (left), it only just proved possible. Any greater span would have required a deeper beam, spoiling the admirably terse detailing that elevates the house's external expression.

Initially, the client had sug-

gested some of John Pawson's houses, particularly another agricultural conversion, Tilty Barn, as a model for the kind of living space he could see himself occupying. Kohn voiced his nervousness about the "ecclesiastical" character of those interiors, tabling instead such examples as the Smithsons' Solar Pavilion and Lina Bo Bardi's Glass House — residences conceived, as he puts it, "as stages for life". The house that he and Shave have realised stands very much within that lineage.

What one sees on entering the living space is therefore not so much the architecture — the detailing could hardly be less demonstrative, the volume no more directly shaped — but rather the way that it has been inhabited. It doesn't hurt that the client owns a magnificent collection of mid-20th century furniture, particularly rich in pieces that Le Corbusier designed for use at Chandigarh. The effect is rather like entering a Maharajah's tent. All of this is placed in wonder-

fully immediate relationship to nature. Shave has exploited the verandah-like character of the flat-ceilinged space that runs along the inside of the glazing, by stocking it liberally with plants. He has also introduced an orchard and forest garden within the paddock, their siting further emphasising the long, diagonal view. The relationship between these internal and external plantations is going to be one of the house's great pleasures.

Given the way that Shave makes his living, the biggest surprise is that there is no art. In time, he says, that may change but one does sense an intention in its absence. This is, after all, a house whose three bedrooms share just one bathroom — a gruffly Spartan affair complete with concrete bath.

That strain of asceticism runs surprisingly deep in what, on the face of it, is a luxury dwelling. If that is a paradox it is one that evidently has roots in the client's own life. Having already collaborated on Shave's London gallery, (*Works*, September 5, 2008) client and architect know each other well. One suspects that Stable Acre is a project that could only have emerged from such a longstanding relationship. It gives the impression of a house conceived to allow its owner respite from his own success — a delicate proposition that Kohn has interpreted with tact and affection.