



Match day special

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Live and let live

Two years ago, this Putney house was almost derelict. Today, thanks to Curtis Wood, it is filled with crisp yet warm living spaces, and ambitious ideas about minimalism. by Kieran Long. Photographs by Paul Semorhyi

MANY YOUNG ARCHITECTS TAKE TIME TO hone their craft on a series of small projects. Jason Curtis and Andrew Wood seem to have learned plenty from their first job at Curtis Wood Architects: the extraordinary reconstruction of a house on Putney Embankment.

'It's been like 20 projects in one,' says Curtis. 'There has been renovation of a historic facade, a new building, making an extension and recreating a period facade, complete with sash windows.'

This home for film director Jeff Stark and his wife Sheila took on dimensions that belie the sober and beautiful interior that is the result. The commission was won in July 2000 after Curtis completed the offices of Stark Films while working for Gregory Phillips. After a break-neck bicycle ride down to Putney to intercept the client and propose a project, Curtis Wood Architects was born.

The existing house was inhabited, but all but derelict. A disabled surgeon had lived there, and the house had been turned into a warren of rooms, with level changes, incomprehensible arrangements and even a lift shaft. The building leaked, and had been kept in just about habitable condition by a series of running repairs. Concrete lintels were ready to collapse, there was a fissure in the party wall big enough to slide a hand into and four inches of water collected on the roof, even on warm, dry days.

The decision to demolish the house and rebuild behind a retained facade had been prompted >

The vertiginous view from the yard shows the interplay of minimalism, renovation and exuberant copper cladding.

▷ by the possibility of saving the VAT that would be levied on a refurbishment. In retrospect, the deterioration of the building was so profound that reconstruction was the only reasonable option.

Curtis Wood's scheme took shape around its proposal to create a new copper-clad stair tower in the yard of the house, freeing the floors to be as open as possible. The copper tower, clad in sheets of horizontal standing-seam TECU patina, is the identifiable new-build element of the house and as exuberant as the scheme gets. As well as solving the problem of floorplates interrupted by a staircase in the middle of the plan, the tower's cladding is one of a palette of natural materials that forms a counterpoint to the whiteness of the majority of the surfaces.

Apart from the stone floors on the ground floor, the floor surfaces are oak, and all the fitted furniture is walnut. This is not back-to-nature stuff – the joinery is as meticulous as any you will see this year – so the timber reads as urbane and cultured in the extreme. This project is not minimalist, but uses the tricks of minimalism to delight in craftsmanship for its own sake, the strength of a beautifully worked piece of wood.

As an interior, the Stark house has clear influences. Curtis admits that he showed his clients John Pawson's house early on. 'They really liked the clarity of Pawson's spaces, but thought it was too clinical,' Curtis Wood is not afraid to talk about a homespun approach to building, tempering the admired concepts of minimal living with warmth and homeliness.

The most obvious Pawson touches are clear to see. The cantilevered stone bench running the length of the ground-floor living space, below a minimal fireplace, is straight out of Pawson's home, as is the skylight above the shower. Also, walls lined with cupboards suggest Pawson's obsession for keeping mess out of sight. Indirect lighting on floors and ceilings also evoke a minimalist aesthetic but, again, Curtis Wood is not doctrinaire about the inhabitation of the house.

'We aren't lighting designers. You can't beat a wonderful floor-standing lamp, so why try to compete,' says Curtis. He adds: 'One of the great things about the client is that they are really interested in furniture. They are talking about filling it with 1950s furniture, each piece different.'

One senses that the architect is confident enough in the spaces to take whatever is thrown at these interiors. There are moments in the building that will survive whether the flat is filled with Chipperfield or chintz. There are moments, too, when Curtis Wood has found solutions that solve problems some might see as inherent to a minimal way of building. Services are ingeniously routed through one central conduit, easily accessed through and kept out of sight by one of the many



This exploded isometric projection shows how a stair tower was slotted into part of an outside yard.





cupboards. Also, the bathroom is designed as a wet room but the walls were not tiled. A waterproof paint was used, leaving the room with a slightly shinier but essentially identical look to the rest of the house.

Curtis Wood prides itself on its pragmatism, but certain details here show the practice's larger ambitions. The shaft of light from the south-facing clerestory above the kitchen adds real poetry to the vast ground floor. The thick and castle-like copper door seems to stand in opposition to the mdf-lined walls of the interior, positing a building that will last for many decades, rather than one that will be subject to the whims of fashion.

It is clear that a meticulous approach to design and construction – together with a contractor that was inexperienced in this kind of building but willing – has paid off. The architect was obliged to draw detail upon detail until it could be sure that its intentions were unambiguous. This has paid handsome dividends. Although there are small details where the critical eye might notice shadow gaps forsaken in favour of ease of construction, the overall effect is extremely satisfying. The clinical shadow gaps give a crispness to the interior that is unexpected behind a period facade, and the natural materials make this a place that invites inhabitation rather than dictating a lifestyle.

Above: Meticulous joinery give the natural materials an urbane identity.

Left: Pawnsesque techniques for dealing with clutter are tempered by warm materials.



Ground-floor plan

- 1 Living room
- 2 Kitchen
- 3 Dining room
- 4 Yard

Projecting onto the fourth storey, the tower gives character to the roof terrace.

Credits

- Client**
Jeff and Sheila Stark
- Architect**
Curtis Wood Architects
- Engineer**
Price & Myers
- Quantity surveyor**
Miller Mitchell Burley Lane
- Party-wall surveyor**
Joel Michaels Associates
- Building control**
NHBC Building Control Services
- Contractor**
Cooper Builders

Cost specifications

Total cost	£620,858
Area of project	291m ²
Area of demolished building	205m ²
Cost/m² of project	£2132
Costs	
Demolitions and shorings	£60,277
Foundations and excavations	£9989
Structure	£15,686
Front facade masonry repairs	£29,765
Brick and blockwork	£18,914
Copper cladding and copper roofing	£26,520
Roof terrace covering and deck	£15,249
Windows	£23,328
Internal walls, floors and ceilings (incl flooring)	£73,174
General internal joinery	£13,593
Staircases and handrails	£13,480
Specialist fitted furniture	£70,961
Ironmongery	£6250
Decorations	£12,940
External works	£3347
Plumbing and heating	£57,615
Electrical services	£47,790
Contractor's preliminaries	£122,000

Specifications

Bricks by Chelwood Brick (Reader enquiry no 750), copper cladding, roofing and doors by KME Europa Metal (no 751), roofing system and gutter by Alumasc Exterior Building Products (no 752), curtain-wall glazing to staircase and kitchen clerestory by Lee Green Glazing Contractors (no 753), sliding folding doors by Pollards Fyrespan (no 754), stone flooring and benches by Stone Age (no 755), timber flooring and stairs by Junckers (no 756), fitted furniture by Opus Magnum (no 757), ironmongery by Williams Ironmongery (no 758), underfloor heating by Wirso UK (no 759), period refurbished bare metal coffin bath by Catchpole & Rye (no 760), sanitaryware by Duravit (no 761), Lefroy Brooks (no 762) and Boffi (no 763), kitchen sink by Jacob Delafon (no 764), kitchen tap by Vola (no 765), ceiling-recessed downlights and staircase lighting by Delta Light (no 766), fluorescent lighting to bathrooms by Encapsulite International (no 767), external wall-recessed lighting by Thorn Lighting (no 768)

For more information on the products used in this project, visit www.rba-journal.co.uk/enquiries

