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Building study

Hudson Architects Le Petit Fort



Le Petit Fort sits on the shoreline of St Ouen's bay in Jersey and occupies the site of an earlier farmstead. The previous building was constructed within the walls of a 20th-century fort, and the thick granite walls have been retained, restored and remain a focal point in the design. The house was visualised to complete the concept of a fort, building a missing fourth wall of the enclosure, creating a central element representing a keep. It offers an imaginative response to its setting and historical context through carefully considered contemporary architecture, a rich materials palette and fine craftsmanship.

Appraisal Laura Mark
Photography Joakim Boren

'We wanted a house that was weathered and not white,' says the client of Le Petit Fort. She doesn't want to be named and, despite the house having been filmed for *Grand Designs'* RIBA House of the Year series, is keen to stay out of the limelight. 'Jersey is a small place,' she says. 'Not everyone likes our house.' She tells me she has quite enjoyed

hearing what people think as they walk past the house along the seafront, but much of what she has overheard has been negative.

The house sits in a prominent location on the Jersey coastline, but from the beach it is hard to see. It is heavily fortified and mainly sits beneath the site's existing stone walls with just its roof and the taller ode to the Napoleonic Martello towers, which litter Jersey's coastline, popping up beyond. It's easy to understand why people may wonder what is going on behind the stone wall. It seems quite secretive.

When Hudson Architects' clients found the site, it was up for sale on a private register and they happened across it after an estate agent friend mentioned the plot. It was the site of an old farmstead constructed in the early 20th century and enclosed within massive granite walls. However the existing building was too small for the family of five and was orientated wrongly, with just one small window looking out towards the sea, so they knew from the start they wanted to embark on building their own home on the site.

They chose Hudson Architects following an invited competition. Hudson was already working on a house nearby so automatically made it on to their shortlist (that house can actually be seen from Le Petit Fort's kitchen window). The practice was up against Mole Architects and another firm which forgot about the initial meeting so was instantly ruled out. 'Mole's designs would have been more earthy,' the client tells me. 'But when we started working with [Hudson Architects founder] Anthony we knew he was the right fit for us. He really understood what we were after.'

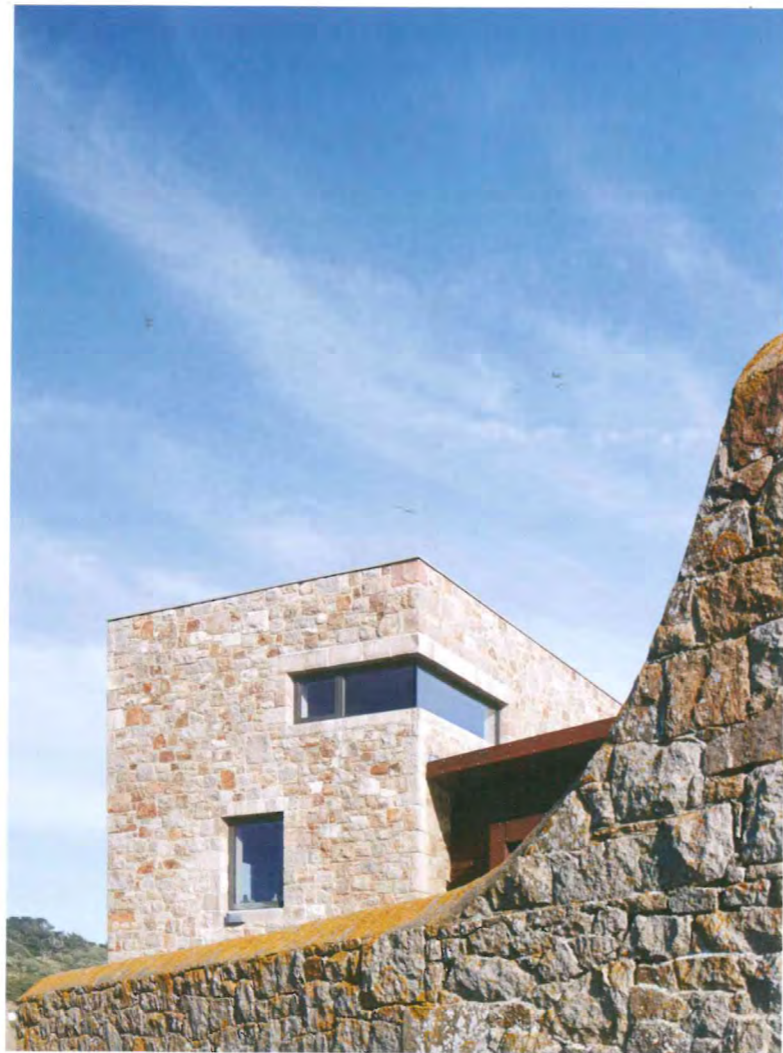
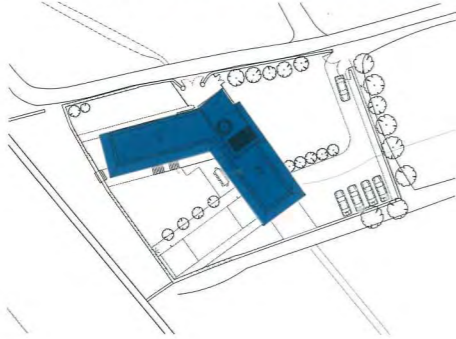
The site already had planning for a house by the late Richard MacCormac's practice MJP Architects. That scheme also kept the castellated walls, but the house was larger and of a completely different style of curved glazed walls and white render – pretty much exactly what Hudson's clients didn't want. These existing plans did, however, make it easier to win planning permission. They knew as long as they kept below the heights allowed for in MacCormac's designs they would be OK. Despite some local opposition it was a fairly simple process. 'The planning minister at the time was in favour of modern architecture,' Anthony Hudson tells me.

The house is orientated on two axes that span out from the tower – a three-storey entrance block constructed from Jersey granite reclaimed from the site's earlier buildings and the surrounding area. The pair of two-storey wings radiate out, creating

'Despite its fortified exterior, internally the house is very open. Each room has a view out on to the landscape, be it the beach or the craggy hillside'

a courtyard within the walls and forming a private garden space largely sheltered from the elements. Despite its fortified exterior, internally the house is very open. Each room has a view out on to the landscape, be it the beach to the west or the craggy hillside to the east.

'The composition offers a lively series of contrasting profiles from different viewpoints,' says Hudson. 'From the entrance the fort-like character dominates, picking up



references to nearby Napoleonic Martello towers and Second World War fortifications.

'From the beach, the house appears as a low-set watchtower, with the keep and first floor peering over the top of the granite walls. From the pool terrace, the building assumes an altogether more welcoming and transparent character, as the two wings embrace the pool courtyard.'

Inside, the children's bedrooms are all located on the ground floor of one of the wings, while the other contains a den-like space and a sauna which link to the outdoor pool in the sheltered terrace outside. The living spaces occupy the first floor above and are accessed from a feature spiral staircase built from oak and Cor-ten steel and capped with a glazed circular rooflight which floods the space below with light. The living spaces flow in a journey from the kitchen, stepping down and creating a false perspective that focuses the eye towards the view and another raised terrace.

The house's joinery is a stand-out feature,



created by a local craftsman. Beautiful built-in oak cupboards hide televisions behind sliding doors while purpose-built shelving units hold the clutter of family life. Full-height doors in the corridors can be clipped back, and allow areas of the house to be separated, future-proofing it as the children grow up. These elements of craftsmanship are equally matched by the cast-concrete elements of the kitchen and bathrooms.

A further storey in the tower adds a guest room and a study. Curved walls hide a staircase, an escape route required by Building Regulations. Dubbed the secret stair, it is a beautiful precast concrete construction but it is tucked away, hidden from sight, and it seems a shame not to be showing this off. I prefer it to the house's Cor-ten feature stair.

This stair is, however, attempting to bring the house's exterior materials inside. The upper levels are clad externally in Cor-ten, aimed at giving the weathered feel the client was after. This steel is broken up with timber cladding, which the large expanses of glass slide behind when the house is opened up to the elements. Beneath all this is the smooth polished concrete finish of the ground floor. This concrete is deceptive – resembling

heavy cast in-situ walls but actually being just a thin covering to a block wall behind.

It feels as though there are too many external materials. With the granite, Cor-ten, concrete, timber and then the steel staircases, brick walls and gravel of the courtyard landscaping, a lot seems to be going on, and I would be happier with a more pared-back aesthetic. I also have a slight concern for the concrete beneath the Cor-ten, worrying that over time it will suffer from staining – the concrete panels in the garden are already showing up an orangey hue. But Hudson's clients aren't worried by the staining.

Shortlisted for the RIBA House of the Year, this building is supposed to represent the best of housing built in the UK over the past year. And at Petit Fort they have built a fort-like response drawing on the history of Jersey's fortifications.

From afar it appears like one of the Martello towers of the Second World War fortifications that scatter the coastline. From the front it is large and expansive with its long façade, while from the beach it appears small and hunkered down. It is deceptive as once you step within the walls the experience becomes very different. It is an interesting approach to an unusual site.

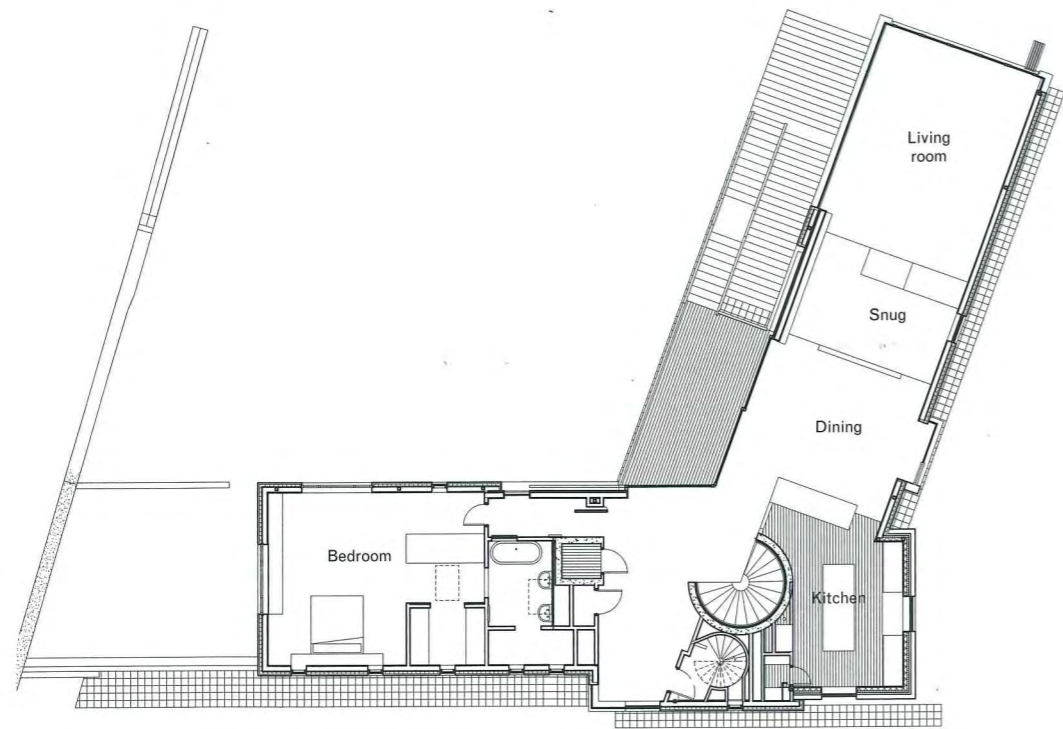
Project data

Start on site January 2014
Completion December 2015
Gross internal floor area 472m²
Form of contract or procurement route JCT Intermediate Form of Contract 2009 and traditional tendering process
Construction cost undisclosed
Architect Hudson Architects
Client undisclosed
Structural engineer Ross-Gower Associates
M&E consultant Henderson Green Partnership
Quantity surveyor Tillyard
Approved building inspector Bob Ferbrache, States of Jersey
Main contractor Mitchell Construction Group
CAD software used Autodesk Revit
Onsite energy generation Approximately 80% taking air-source heat-pumps into account
Annual mains water consumption Approximately 285m³
Airtightness at 50PA 7.762m³/h.m²
Hot water load 21kW input (recovery in 1.5 hours)
Heating load 23.6kW input
Overall area-weighted U-value 0.333W/m²K

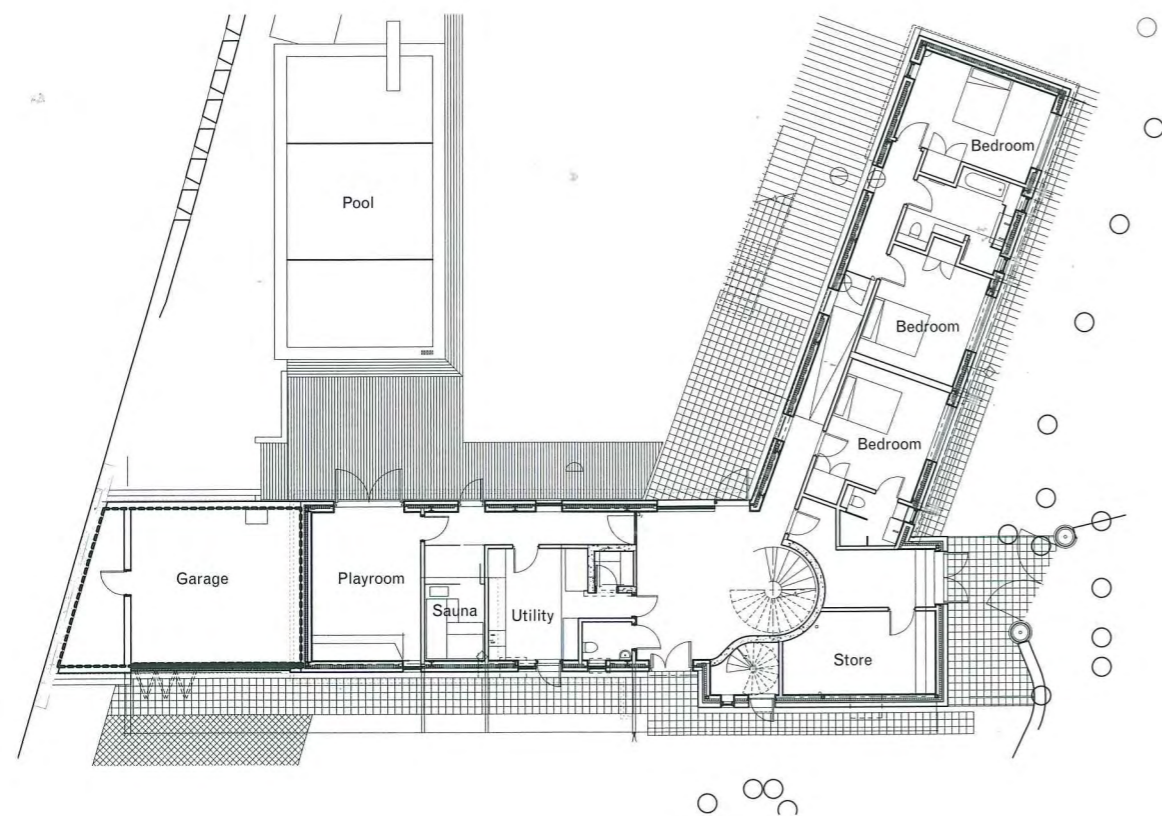


Above The Cor-ten steel stair was left outside to weather before being fixed in place Below The guest room features views out to the sea

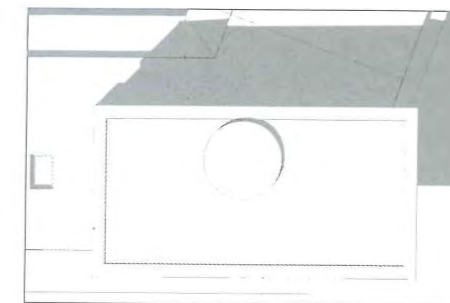




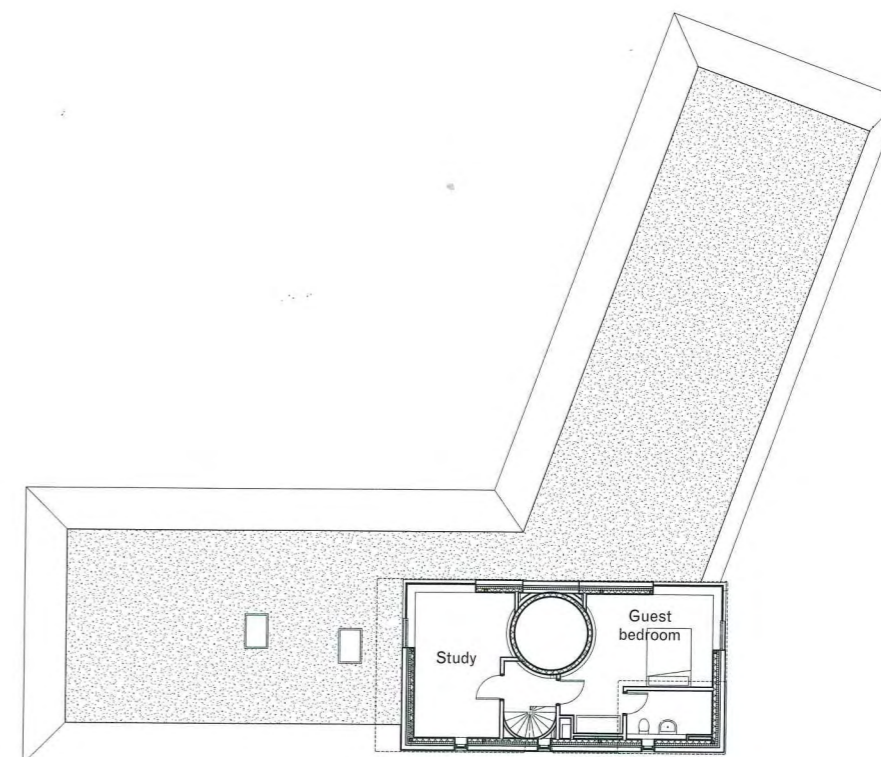
First floor plan



Ground floor plan



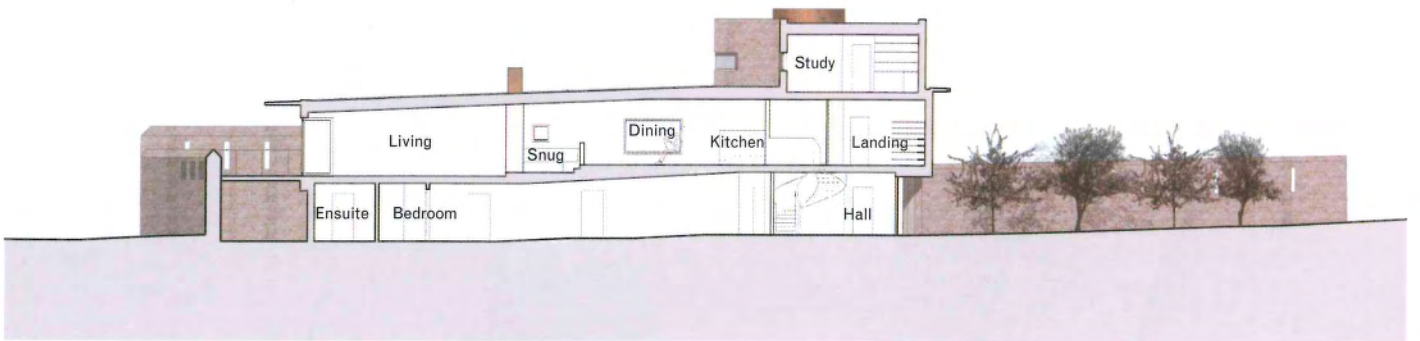
Roof plan



Second floor plan



Section C-C



Section B-B



Detail

Seen from space the main stairwell and helical Cor-ten staircase at Le Petit Fort appear to be the greased axle of an enormous hinge. The building's two wings, angled at 110°, intersect where the staircase and the void above it rise up through the entire building, whereupon it is elegantly capped with a 2m tilted and frameless circular rooflight.

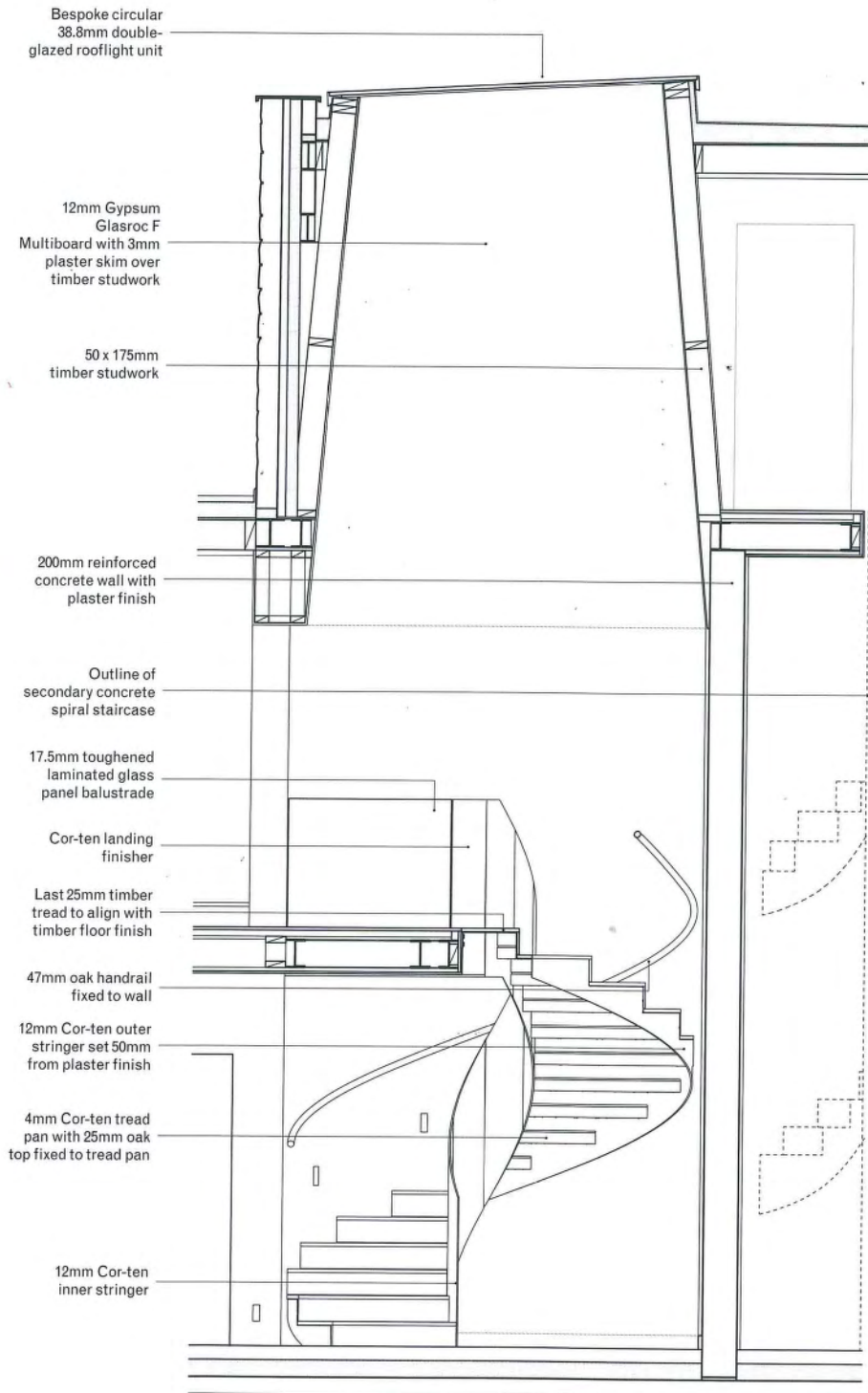
Entering the front door in the east wing, close to the hinge point, the staircase immediately pulls visitors in, spins them through 360° and propels them upstairs and in line with the main axis of the west wing's reception rooms. Having arrived in the west wing, visitors cascade gently through a set of descending levels, eventually arriving at the main sea-facing balcony.

This staircase also has a sense of being the huge rusty screw that holds the whole build down on its windswept and weather-beaten Atlantic beachhead.

Cor-ten, the building's most prominent cladding material, is also used indoors for the large staircase and the main fireplace. Sited amongst Jersey's numerous German Second World War fortifications, it seems appropriate that the Cor-ten of Le Petit Fort has a strong sense of distressed and abandoned heavy industry.

Halfway up the staircase, the truncated cone of the spacious void above creates elliptical shadows. At night the same rooflight works as a high horizontal mirror, and reflects a random array of small LEDs set into the cone's surface.

Anthony Hudson, founder, Hudson Architects



Stair section detail

0 500mm

Specification

Steelwork and Cor-ten cladding

Bardec Steel, Jersey

Staircases

Spiral UK

Windows

Schüco and Velfac

Rooflights

Glazing Vision

Granite

Matthew Thebault

Joinery

Whittingham's Interiors

House management and audio systems

Genesis AV

Swimming pool

Cap Pools & Spas

Kitchen

Bulthaup

Gates and special steelwork

Rylance