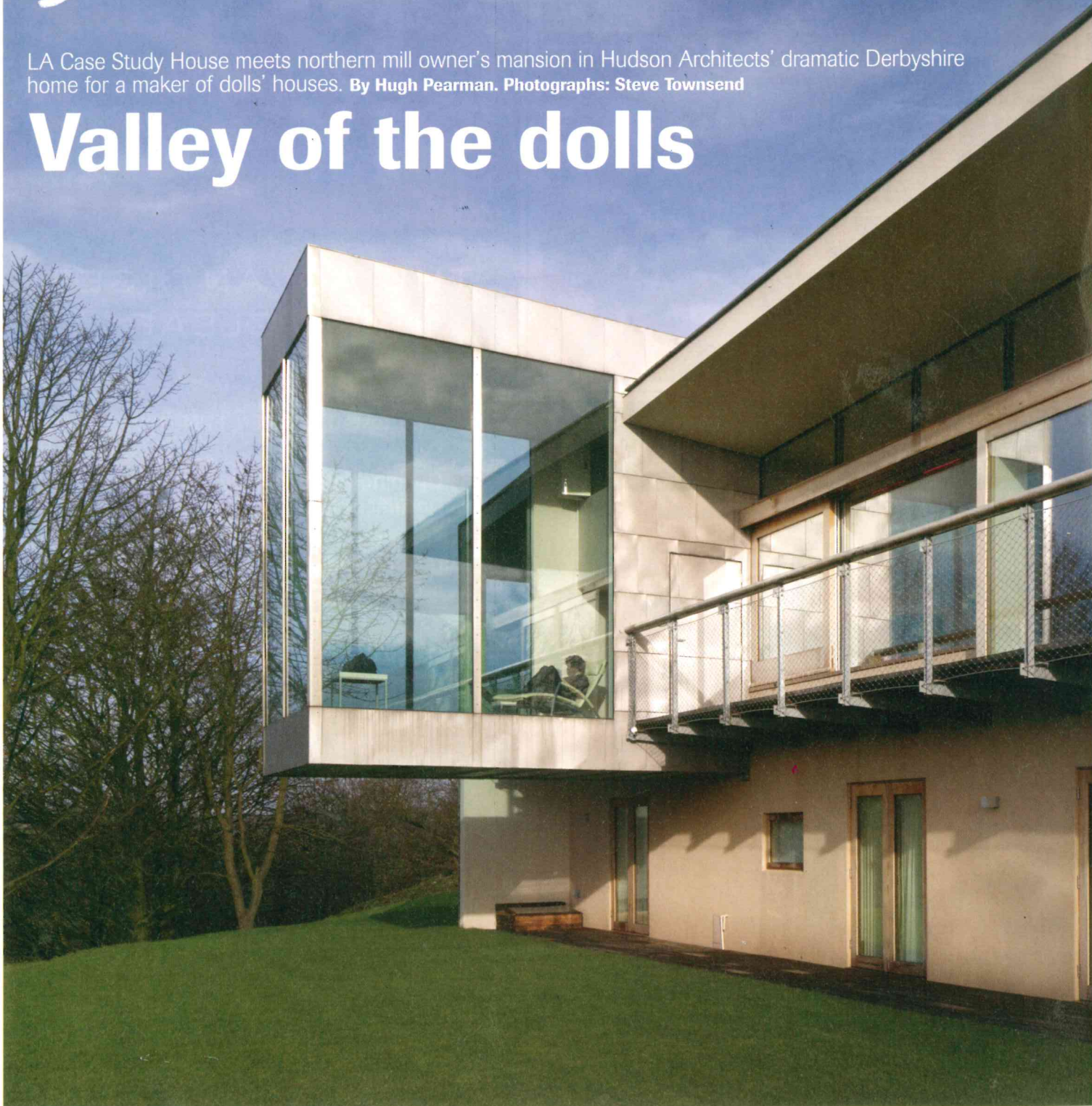


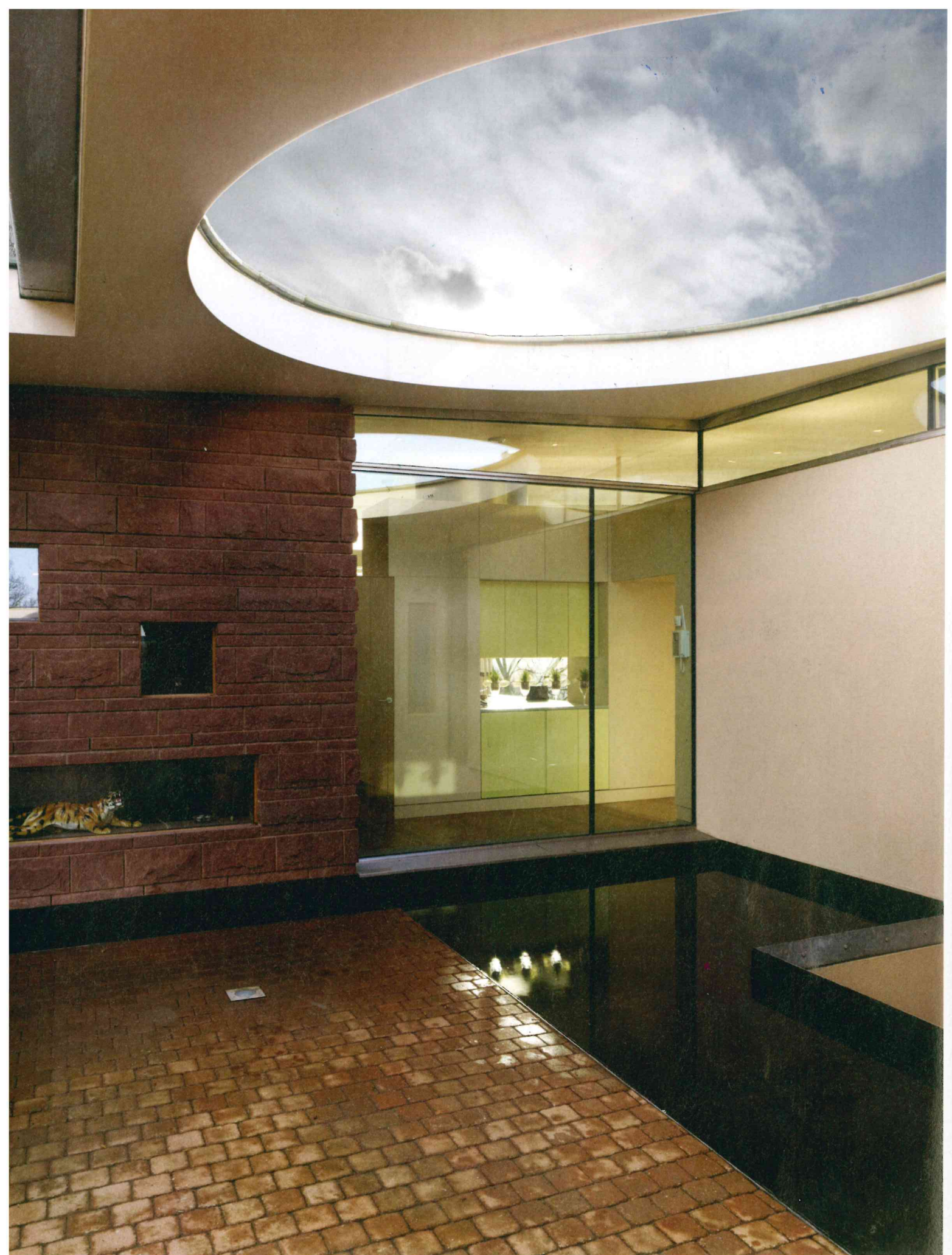
LA Case Study House meets northern mill owner's mansion in Hudson Architects' dramatic Derbyshire home for a maker of dolls' houses. **By Hugh Pearman. Photographs: Steve Townsend**

# Valley of the dolls





Client Jackie Lee  
Architect Hudson Architects  
Structural engineer Techniker





**Left and above: the glass and steel box of a sunroom cantilevers an audacious distance over the lawn below. Far left: visitors arrive in a sheltered courtyard, naturally lit by a circular roof opening.**

**Y**ou have to smile: to win a commission to design a home for a maker of dolls' houses is almost too perfect. In an age when it sometimes seems that every new one-off house is paid for out of an inflated City bonus and dropped into the overpriced Home Counties, the client and the context of Hudson Architects' 'Light House' is very different. Jackie Lee is based in Belper, Derbyshire. She employs about 70 people in her booming niche business. You can buy miniature houses in the style of Lutyens and Mackintosh from her collection. For herself, however, she wanted an original.

This is an unusual and spectacular site – a former quarry, high on the valley side looking west and south across the town and to the distant hills. Having lived in the area for many years, and with her daughters grown up, Lee wanted a house that could work, literally, on two levels. The upper entrance floor is her domain: living, kitchen/dining areas, bedroom, bathroom and utility room all function like one large, luxurious flat. Despite the ▶

► steepness of the site, this part has no level changes. Lee, who wants the option of living here into old age, insisted on that. Downstairs is a three-bedroom sequence for visiting family and guests: she does not have to go down there at all if she doesn't want to. So this is a large (360m<sup>2</sup>) house set on a third-of-a-hectare plot that yields a variety of terraced and sloping garden areas. It is, however, not isolated.

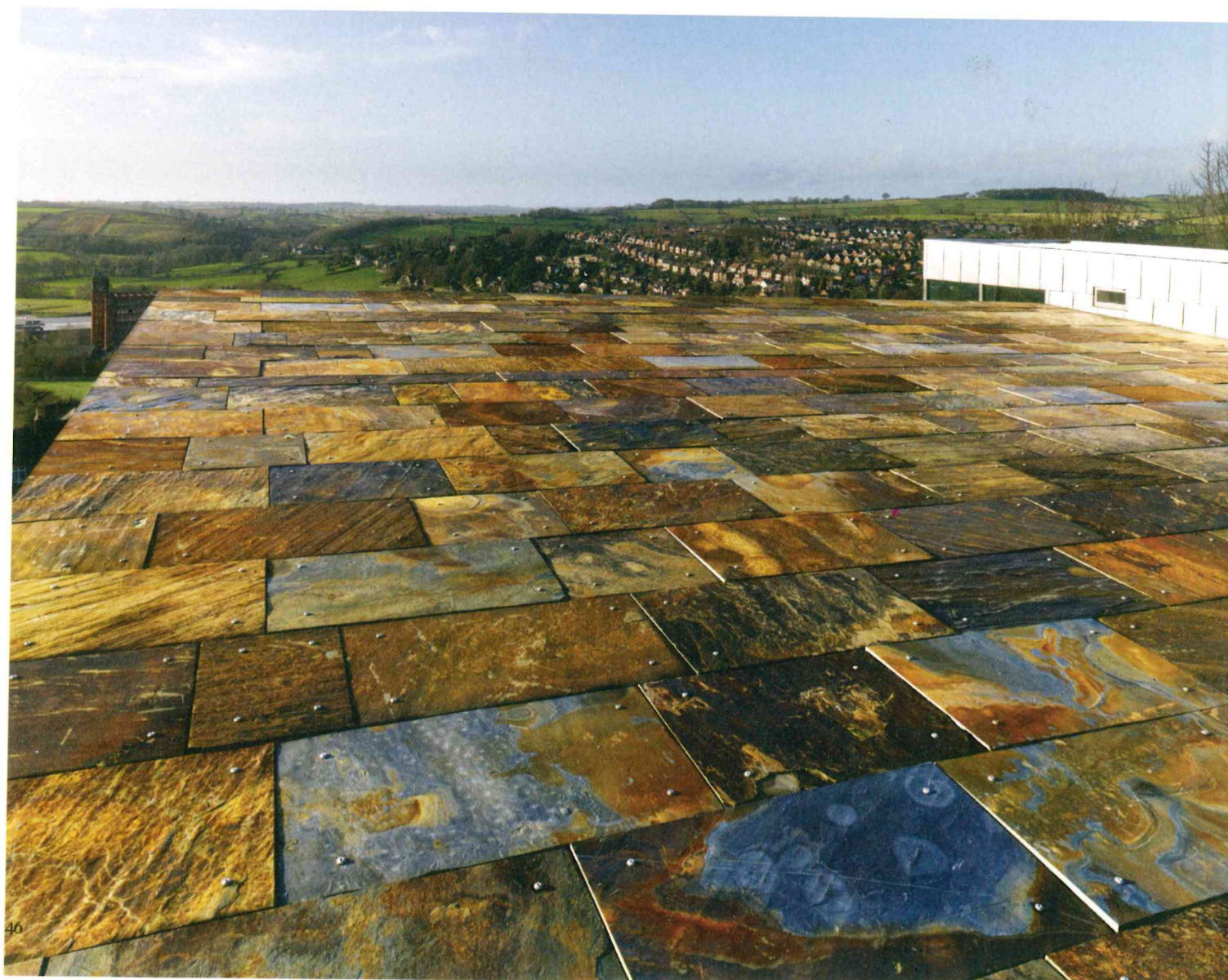
The site was part of a development parcelled up with planning permission for five houses. The original deal was that Lee would buy one of these. Dissatisfied with the design on offer and unable to alter it sufficiently, she struck out on her own, bought the empty plot and chose Hudson Architects from a shortlist of contenders.

The approach to the house makes it clear that it is all about the roof. Because the other houses in this new enclave stand behind and above the Light House, restrictive covenants dictated that it could not rise more than a metre above the road that separates it from them. The roof tilts from one side to the other, following the slope of the road. Since it is also a shallow monopitch draining from front to back, the

roof also tilts at an angle from one corner to the other. And finally – since it is so very visible from above – the roof is treated as a fifth elevation, clad in richly coloured slates that also wrap round the north elevation. The slates are simply riveted through to an industrial corrugated-steel roof beneath.

Two big gestures articulate the form of what might otherwise be a conventional box. The roof forms a porte cochère at the rear: you drive down steep, tightly curving ramps at either end of the site to get to it. Thus you can step out of your car and walk through the oak-planked front door in the dry. To one side of the entrance, where a shallow pool surrounds the area basement, a large circular cut-out in the roof brings daylight to the back of the lower level. That's the first move; the second is the way the tall glass and stainless-steel-clad box of the sunroom cantilevers a seemingly unfeasible distance – no less than five metres – from the front elevation, hovering over the lawn and boardwalk beneath.

This is an indulgence, but not just an architectural one: for the client, sunroom and veranda are memories of her childhood in Cornwall,





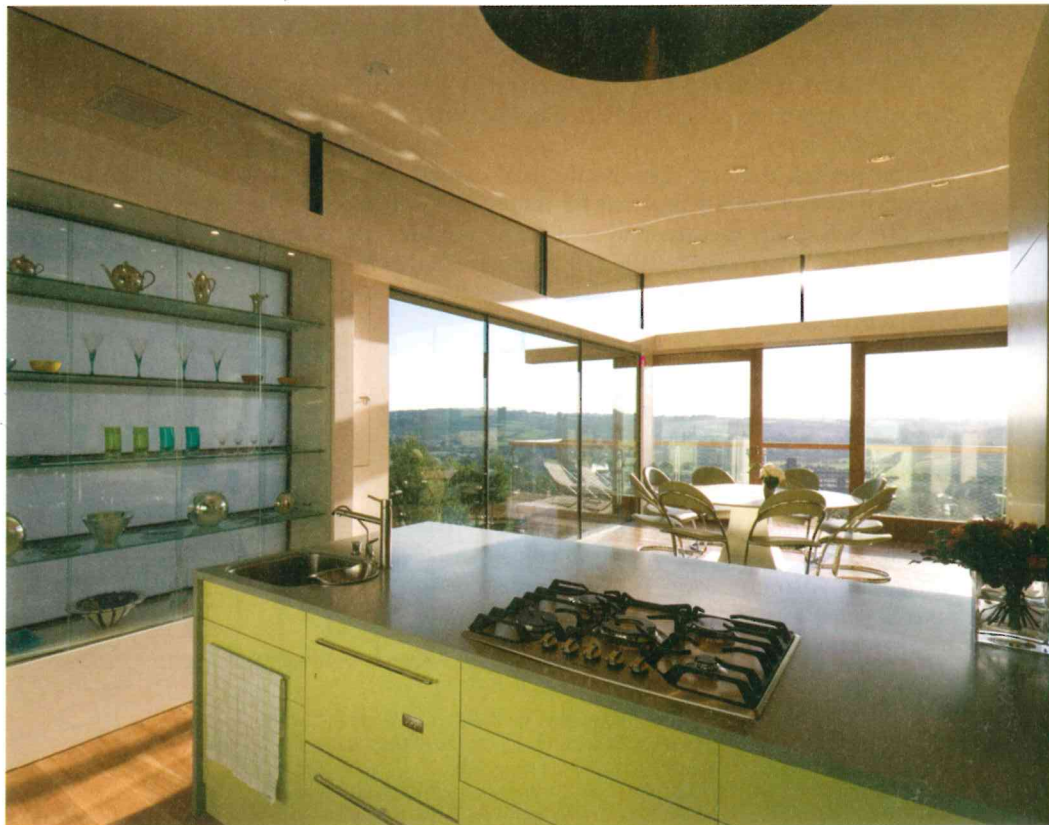
Left and below: the Light House is perched on the side of a valley overlooking the town of Belper. For the client, sunroom and veranda evoke memories of her Cornwall childhood.

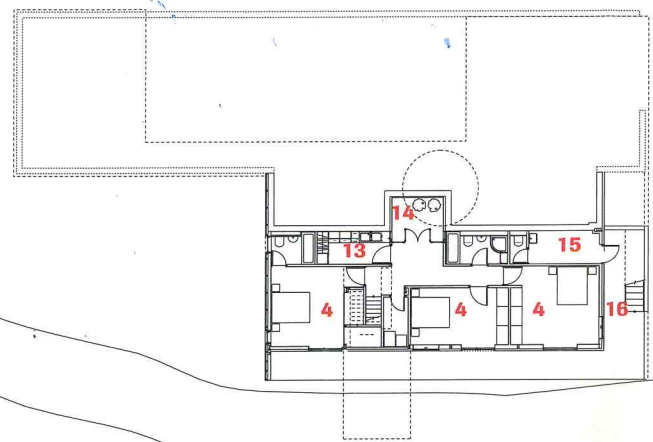
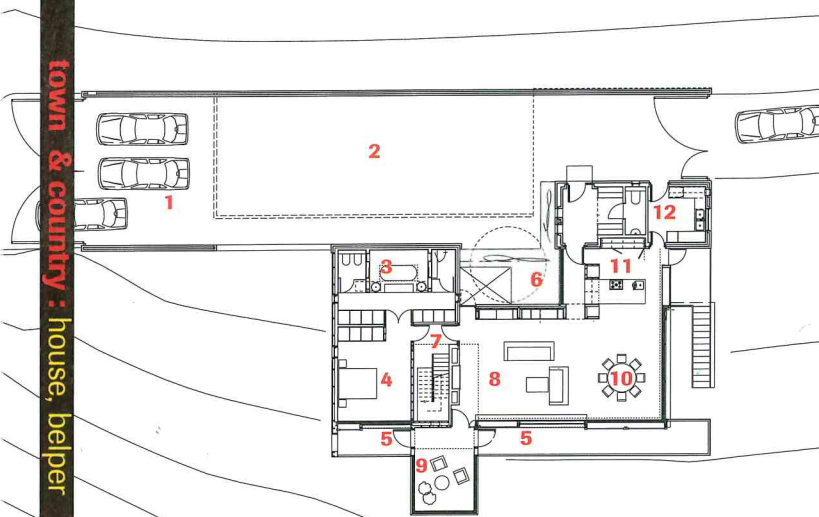
Far left: the roof is treated as a fifth elevation; riveted slate tiles pick up the patchwork of roofs and fields down the valley.

and are thus reinterpreted here. The veranda takes the form of an oak balcony with fat timber handrails and mesh balustrading across the front of the house. Large timber-framed windows slide open onto this balcony, which juts out beyond the southern corner of the house far enough to accommodate the opening distance of the last window in the sequence. External metal stairs at the side connect this upper level with the garden terraces.

The sunroom is pretty much at the limit of what is achievable in a domestic context. The original idea was to have full frameless glazing, but the industry balked at the size of the double-glazed units that would be required, so vertically split sections were adopted instead. Facing south-west, it naturally gets hot, so ventilation panels in the floor work in parallel with high-level shutters at the rear (where there is a small eyrie of a study) to create natural stack-effect ventilation. In winter its function as a passive solar collector reduces the heating energy load.

The external materials – warm slate, oxblood stone, buff render, timber, and judicious amounts of matt stainless steel – make the house relatively discreet against the background of the valley side, though if you know ▶





Upper ground

Lower ground

**Plans**

- 1 Parking
- 2 Forecourt
- 3 Bathroom
- 4 Bedroom
- 5 Balcony
- 6 Pool
- 7 Stair
- 8 Living
- 9 Sunroom
- 10 Dining
- 11 Kitchen
- 12 Utility
- 13 Laundry
- 14 Courtyard
- 15 Store
- 16 Terrace

**Costs**

Total (excluding external areas)	£834,000
Area	367m <sup>2</sup>
Costs/m <sup>2</sup>	£2273

**Breakdown**

Preliminaries	£133,434
Demolition	£6507
Substructure	£16,596
Frame/upper floors	£49,130
Stairs	£14,861
Roof	£60,877
Ext walls, windows and doors	£178,891
Int walls/doors	£28,900
Int finishes	£53,130
Fixtures/fittings	£72,126
M&E	£124,706
Sanitaryware	£20,400
Audiovisual	£50,076
Provisional sums	£24,000

**Section**

- 1 Bathroom
- 2 Laundry
- 3 Stair
- 4 Study cabin
- 5 Sunroom

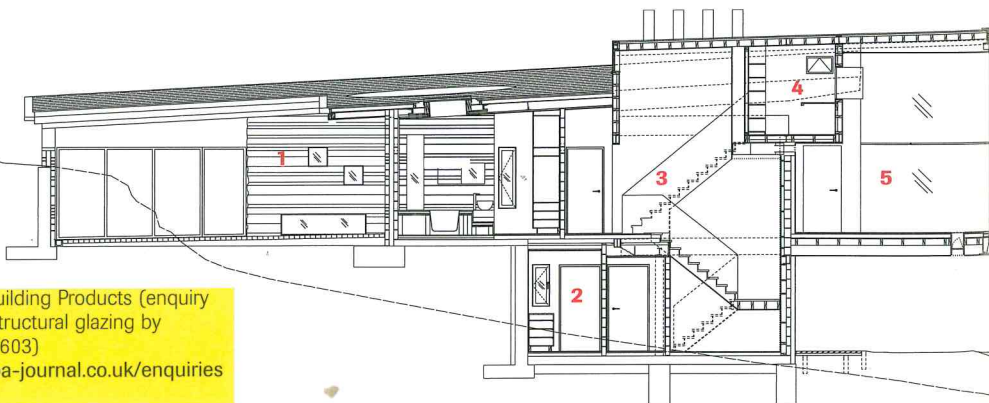
▶ where to look you can clearly see it from the centre of town. Inside, sitting up there gazing across the post-industrial landscape of this former manufacturing centre, the references become transatlantic. Partly you are the northern millowner, looking down across the town your workers inhabit. Partly you are in that Julius Schulman photograph of Pierre Koenig's Los Angeles Case Study house, with the city lights stretching out beneath your feet. Hudson Architects' houses are famously full of architectural references and there are plenty of other subsidiary ones – a dash of Mies, a large dollop of Wright.

It's not perfect. There are signs that the local tradesmen haven't noticed the subtle tilt of the roof where it spans the driveway and have scraped it with their vans at its lowest point. Sealing the clerestory glazing against wind-driven rain proved problematic at first, though it is fixed now. And although that great roof is supported on gratifyingly slender steel struts, nicely aligned with the breaks in the glazing, its thick flat edge is rather clumsy. You wish for a spot of feather-edge chamfering to make it more delicate.

It would perhaps have been better if the landscaping had been done by Hudson rather than designer Diarmud Gavin. Fortunately the final scheme is a great deal less intrusive (and cheaper) than Gavin's early concepts which

would have competed head-on with the architecture. Finally, it's a shame that today's economics made it much cheaper to import that purplish stone from China (used extensively in the roadway and terrace retaining walls as well as part of the house and the positively Pompeian main bathroom) than to specify the handsome paler local stone. That's a universal problem.

Those minor cavils aside, the Light House is a pleasing contribution to the evolution of English domestic architecture. As toymaker WJ Bassett-Lowke commissioned Mackintosh and Behrens in Northampton 90 years ago, so dolls' house maker Jackie Lee has turned to Hudson Architects in Belper in the early years of the 21st century. Such entrepreneurial clients with an appreciation of good architecture are rare. ■



**Specifications** Precast concrete flooring by Hanson Building Products (enquiry no 600), slate roofing by Pomery Natural Stone (601), structural glazing by Solaglas (602), joinery by Ford Joinery and Shopfitting (603)  
For more information on these products, visit [www.riba-journal.co.uk/enquiries](http://www.riba-journal.co.uk/enquiries)