



STEALTH BUILDER



The architect Niall McLaughlin's designs are inspired and sought-after – his greatest challenge is to sneak them under the bureaucrats' radar. By Giles Worsley. Portrait by Tom Miller

Sun streams through Jacob's Ladder, Niall McLaughlin's recently completed first house perched high on the escarpment of the Chilterns. With the large glass windows slid open it is hard to know where inside ends and outside begins. The house seems to merge into the woodland around it. Then there is the indoor swimming-pool, thrusting away from the main body of the house, as if you could swim on for ever, out into the middle distance. Explaining his creation, McLaughlin is so passionate, intelligent and charming that he makes you want to go out and build your own house. But beware: even if you manage to find a site and the money, the odds are

that the planners will shoot down your dreams, however inspiring the design. It takes luck and a first-rate scheme to get things through. 'At Jacob's Ladder the planners were excellent,' recalls McLaughlin. 'I think they wanted to be onside. But we had this interesting debate about how, if the house could be seen from a public highway, it might have to be more vernacular in construction. It couldn't be seen from the roads but could just be glimpsed from a path through the woods, which we knew people didn't use very often. So there was the question, would these irregular pedestrians be affected by the sight of a modern building? In the end the planners gave

it unconditional consent, but it was allowed because it was like top-shelf stuff, deep in the woods, and so it wasn't going to corrupt the public. I think that's crazy.' This is a problem that McLaughlin faces repeatedly, for the 40-year-old architect has just made that breakthrough from young hopeful to keenly sought-after rising star, and now has about half a dozen new free-standing houses on his books, including three in Ireland and others in London and the Home Counties. Though he now lives off Portobello Road in west London, McLaughlin was brought up and educated in Dublin. He has worked in London

since his mid-20s, setting up his own practice when he was 28 and for years following the familiar path of young architects trying to make it on their own. Teaching at the Bartlett School of Architecture in London was combined with small jobs for friends or friends of friends. 'It was really being a bloke in his living-room doing one-off projects which were very tiny, and just trying to work out what sort of architect I would be.' There was an intensity to these early years, which McLaughlin still misses. One summer was spent experimenting with concrete mixes and hand-casting 700 concrete slabs for a garden in Wandsworth, south London. For the same job he

produced 80 working drawings for a single – admittedly large – window. The Shack, his first building to draw public attention, was a product of this period. 'It was a particularly intense atmosphere, which was typical of that time. I was working directly with one builder, and one client. Looking back, it was unusual.' Built in 1996 on an old American air-force base in Northamptonshire as a studio for the photographer Gina Glover (the client on the Wandsworth commission), the Shack is a cross between an insect and a stealth bomber. There are also influences thrown in from the paintings of Cézanne and the German neo-expressionist

Anselm Kiefer. This was one that he managed to sneak past the planners, to the local public's amazement, and amusement. 'There was a clear implication that the police were there to protect you from burglars, and the planners to protect you from architects,' recalls McLaughlin. 'So people asked how they let me do it, and I told them it's 14.99m² and a photographer's studio, a place of work ancillary to the farmhouse, so therefore it "permitted development". They thought it hilarious that this is how architects have to steal buildings into the world.' On the back of the Shack and some subtle, sensuous work he did for a Carmelite monastery in

Above Niall McLaughlin at his architectural practice in north London, with models and drawings of various works in progress. Opposite Jacob's Ladder, where two reflective shallow pools overlook the Oxfordshire countryside

Kensington (his uncle is a Carmelite priest in Ireland) McLaughlin won the Young Architect of the Year award in 1998. But if he thought his celebrity was going to catapult him to commercial success he would soon be disappointed. 'I was presented to Norman Foster at the next year's awards and he said, "I bet when you won you went home and expected the phone to ring and everything to start happening and absolutely nothing happened." I said, "You're quite right." "Don't worry," he said. "It will work, but it'll take a couple of years." And that's what happened.'

Today McLaughlin has a practice of 12 (unusually, more than half are women) working in a large room in an old Victorian industrial building in Kentish Town, north London. Last summer he won four competitions for public buildings and two RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) awards, one for Jacob's Ladder and one for the bird-like bandstand he designed for the De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill-on-Sea in East Sussex. Among the 20-25 projects in the office, he is building innovative low-cost housing for the Peabody Trust in Silvertown in London's Docklands, a bridge in Bristol (both with the artist Martin Richman, now seen as an honorary member of the practice, an unusually close relationship for artist and architect), a large Alzheimer's day-care centre in Dublin, and a town square and cinema for Didcot in Oxfordshire.

McLaughlin is pleased that his clients (many are in the financial or legal worlds) tend to end up as friends. 'You go through a lot while building a house.' Proof of that is the way clients for whom he first worked 10 years ago with small flat conversions are coming back wanting whole houses,



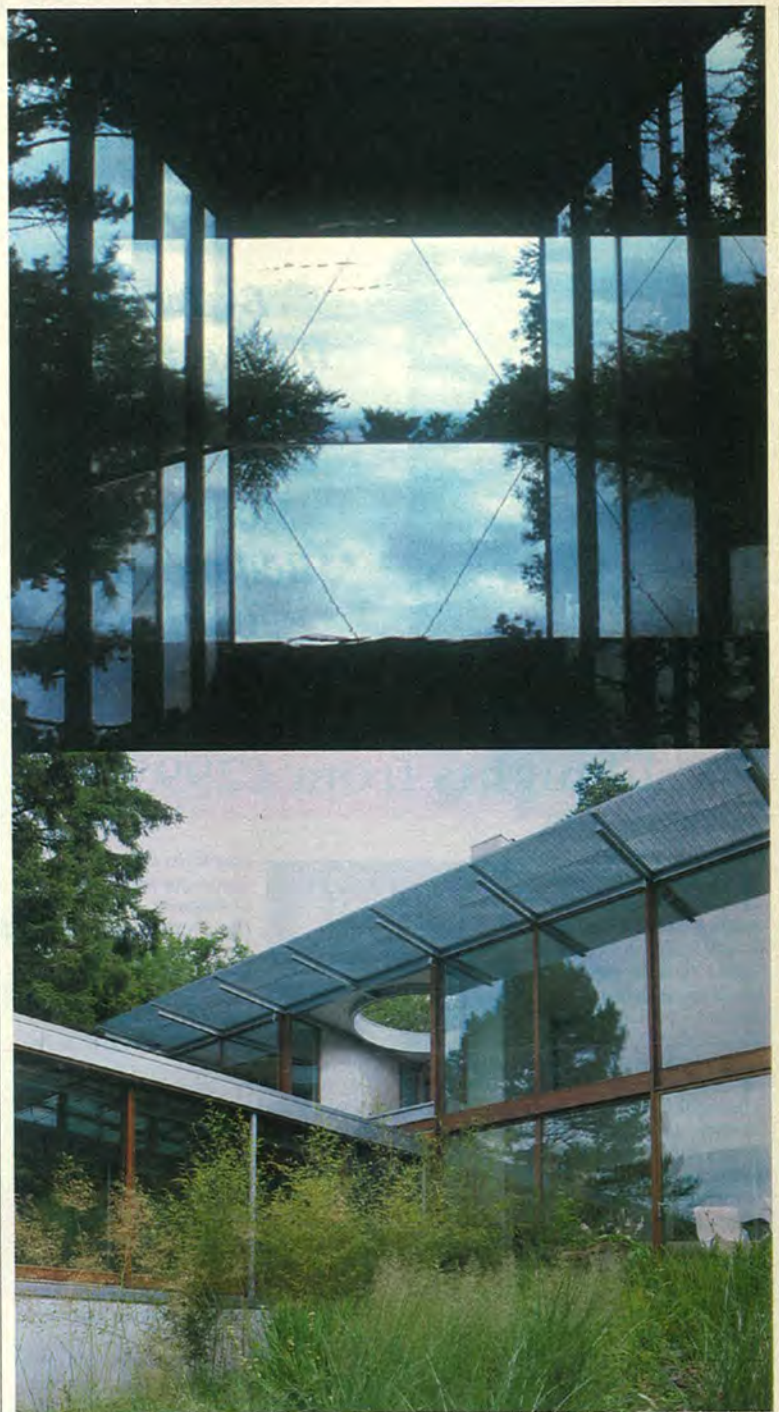
including an all glass building at the top of Inverness Terrace in Bayswater, west London.

But key to the practice's success is its regular appearance on competition lists. David Grey, the client at Jacob's Ladder, picked McLaughlin, along with 12 others whom he also interviewed, out of the Architecture Foundation's *New Architects* handbook. 'We wanted someone young and keen,' recalls Grey. 'Niall said, "I don't want your house to be an object. I want it to be a frame for the woods." That was a really nice start for an architect. I like the fact that Niall didn't have a style. You can't say, that's a Niall McLaughlin house. The influences are taken from lots of houses, but mostly from the site.' Grey is delighted by the result. 'We just love it to death. What's sad is to go to other people's houses with windows and walls and I just wonder how they can live like that. I would never go back to a traditional house, not in a thousand years.'

The clean-glazed elevations and open-plan form of Jacob's Ladder, which McLaughlin describes as being in the 'modernist vernacular', could hardly be more different from the Shack, with its highly wrought form. Both seem far removed from the

Right the swimming-pool at Jacob's Ladder where clear glazed elevations allow swimmers to look through the surrounding Chiltern woodland towards Oxford.

Below right the timber framework and geometric lines of Jacob's Ladder



'I always say to clients, if you want the architect who does one thing, you've come to the wrong place'

Right the Shack, a studio designed for the photographer Gina Glover. Resembling 'a cross between an insect and a stealth bomber', it was constructed for £15,000.

Left a timber summer house in Wandsworth, south London, with an unusually large window for which the architect produced 80 working drawings

