



McLaughlin's Shack: the shape of things to come

Reflections on a new talent

A bizarre take on a bird hide reveals a great future for a young architect. HUGH PEARMAN reports

Niall McLaughlin lives and works over a shop in London's Portobello Road, looking down on the market-traders' stalls and across at the historic Electric cinema. Inside, the apartment feels like an abandoned building site. McLaughlin has just been declared Britain's young architect of the year by Lord Rogers and others. He was not meant to know this when we met and, if he did, he hid it well.

McLaughlin has produced a steady stream of small projects and art installations in London, supplementing his income by teaching at London's Bartlett school of architecture. The work is the customary young-architect fare — nicely detailed small house extensions — though there are interesting sidelines, such as his exquisite sequence of interiors for a Carmelite monastery in Kensington. But, recently, McLaughlin produced the building he calls the Shack, a project unlike any other in Britain.

The Shack cost only £15,000, is tiny, and sits beside a pond in Northamptonshire, but it is pure, unbridled architecture. In its scaly glass-fibre, timber and blockwork body, it contains memories of the great alternative "organic" architects of the 20th century — Alvar Aalto and Hans Scharoun in Europe, Frank Lloyd Wright and Bruce Goff in America.

McLaughlin's clients, Gina Glover and Jeff Rayner, own a house on a former clandestine US air base at Pytchley in Northants, whence spies and supplies for the Resistance were sent to France in the 1940s. Today it is once again farmland. Glover is a wildlife photographer. Having cleared a weed-choked pond she discovered on the site to encourage dragonflies, she wanted the equivalent of a bird hide to

work in. The family then came in with their own demands: so the Shack grew to include a sauna and a tiny bedspace for children. McLaughlin thought of the hide, of the old reconnaissance missions, and of photography as a kind of spying, and in this way the Shack emerged.

McLaughlin recounts how his builder recoiled at the complex drawings and asked for models instead. The Shack spreads out low towards the surrounding fields and rears up to a sheer wall overlooking the pond. It has wing-cases of perforated metal, a translucent orange conning tower on top, and light pouring in from all sides. "When you're inside and look at the walls, the light is moving at different speeds," says McLaughlin.

The idea of an award for architects under 35 was dreamt up by the magazine *Building Design* and sponsored by British Steel. A large panel of judges included Lord Rogers, Doris Lockhart Saatchi, leading architects Nigel Coates and Chris Wilkinson, and me. The somewhat otherworldly McLaughlin looked like a true original to us, and the Shack holds the promise of great things to come.

The locals, apparently, call it "the opera house" — a reference to Zahar Hadid's aborted Cardiff Bay Opera House, much in the news when McLaughlin was building Glover his shack. But McLaughlin is amused rather than exasperated by the analogy, and confesses he feels it's time to move away from the domestic sphere and get his teeth into a big project somewhere. Just as his hero Scharoun produced the masterly Berlin Philharmonic Hall in the late 1950s, you feel that McLaughlin has a great public building in him somewhere. Why not an opera house? □