

THE SHACK

NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN

THE SHACK

NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN

Water modulates light. Gina is a photographer who makes fragile still-life images. I showed her my pictures of objects arranged at different depths in a boghole and she began to imagine projects where a pond surface, teeming with life, is captured on film. Water would be used to alter the depth of field and to veil the light. We discussed the possibility of oxygenating water in an old pond, to attract dragonflies. The pond, which stands between her garden and open farmland, was stagnant and lost in a tangle of briar. We began to open up the site, renovating it using fish, water plants and filtration.

The farmland had been used as a US reconnaissance base during the Second World War. Flights of B-24 black 'carpet-bagger' bombers flew clandestine missions from the adjacent woods, bringing supplies to the resistance in Holland, Norway and France. After the war the site was developed as a nuclear missile base and was abandoned in the mid-1960's. The land is now littered with the debris of military hardware. An entire dismantled bomber is buried close to the pond.

We developed a design by comparing the camera lens hovering over the water, capturing images of insects, to the reconnaissance flights from the base bringing back images from remote landscapes. Susan Sontag compares the photographer to a hunter. "Still there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture...Guns have metamorphosised into cameras in this earnest comedy, the ecology safari, because nature has ceased to be what it has always been - what we need protection from. Now nature tamed, endangered,

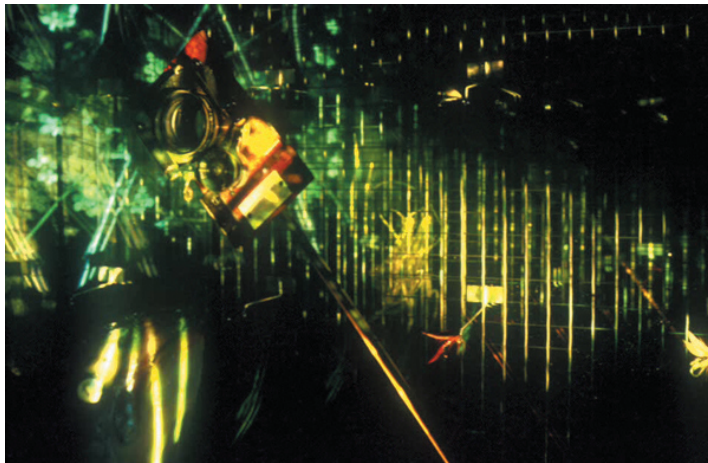
1

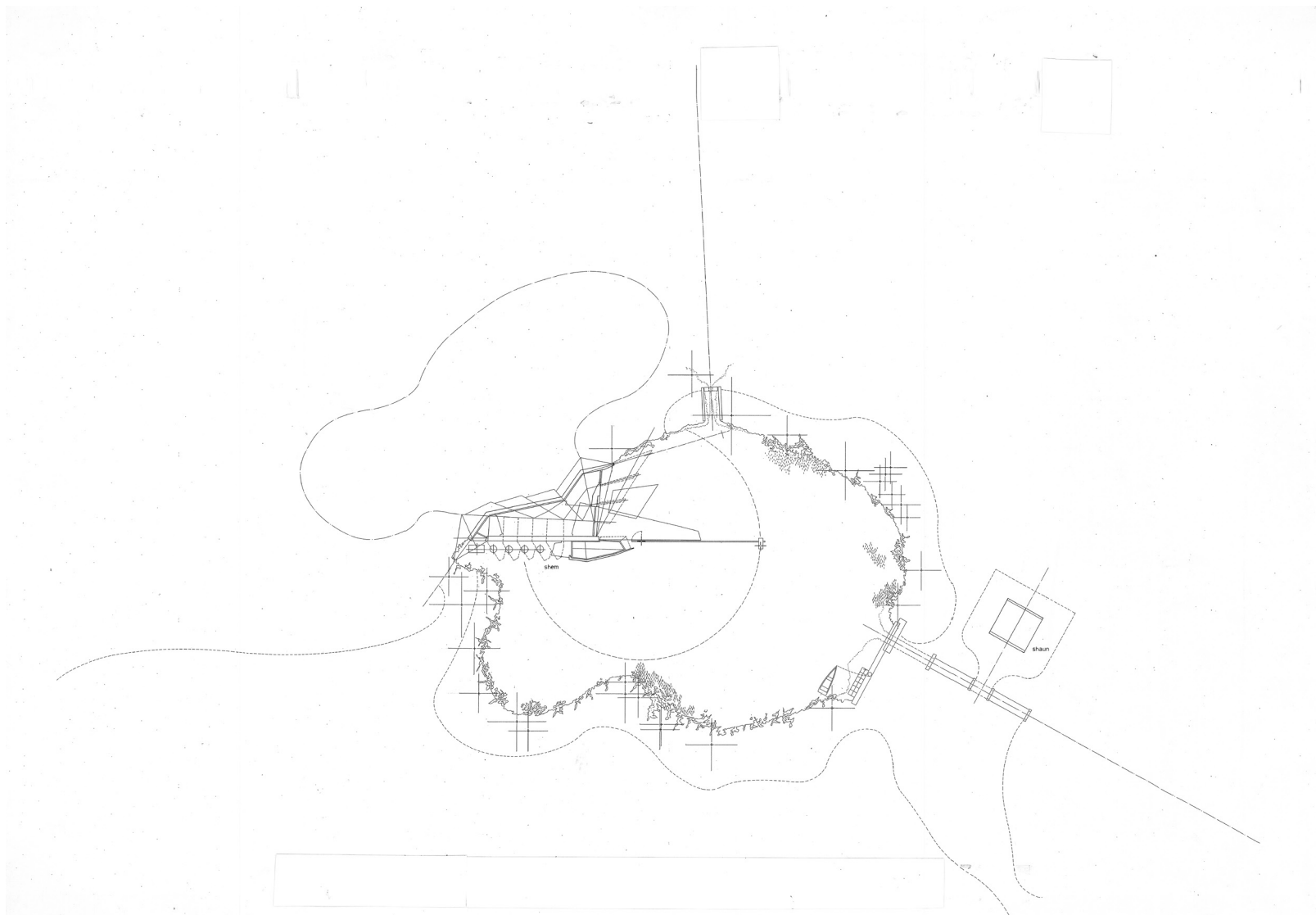
Objects in a boghole



2

Photographic collage



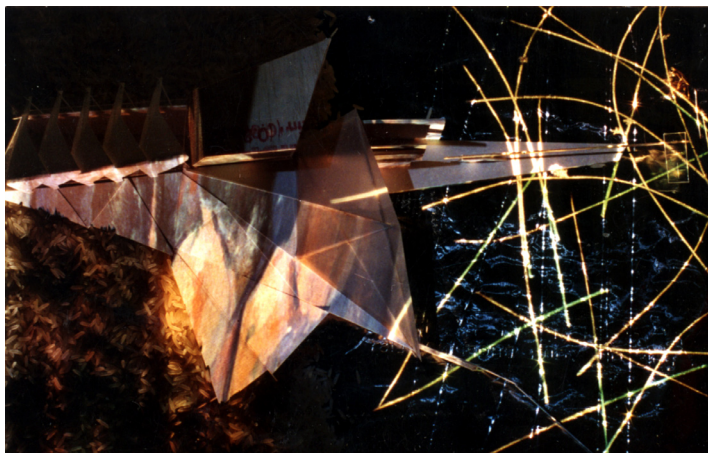






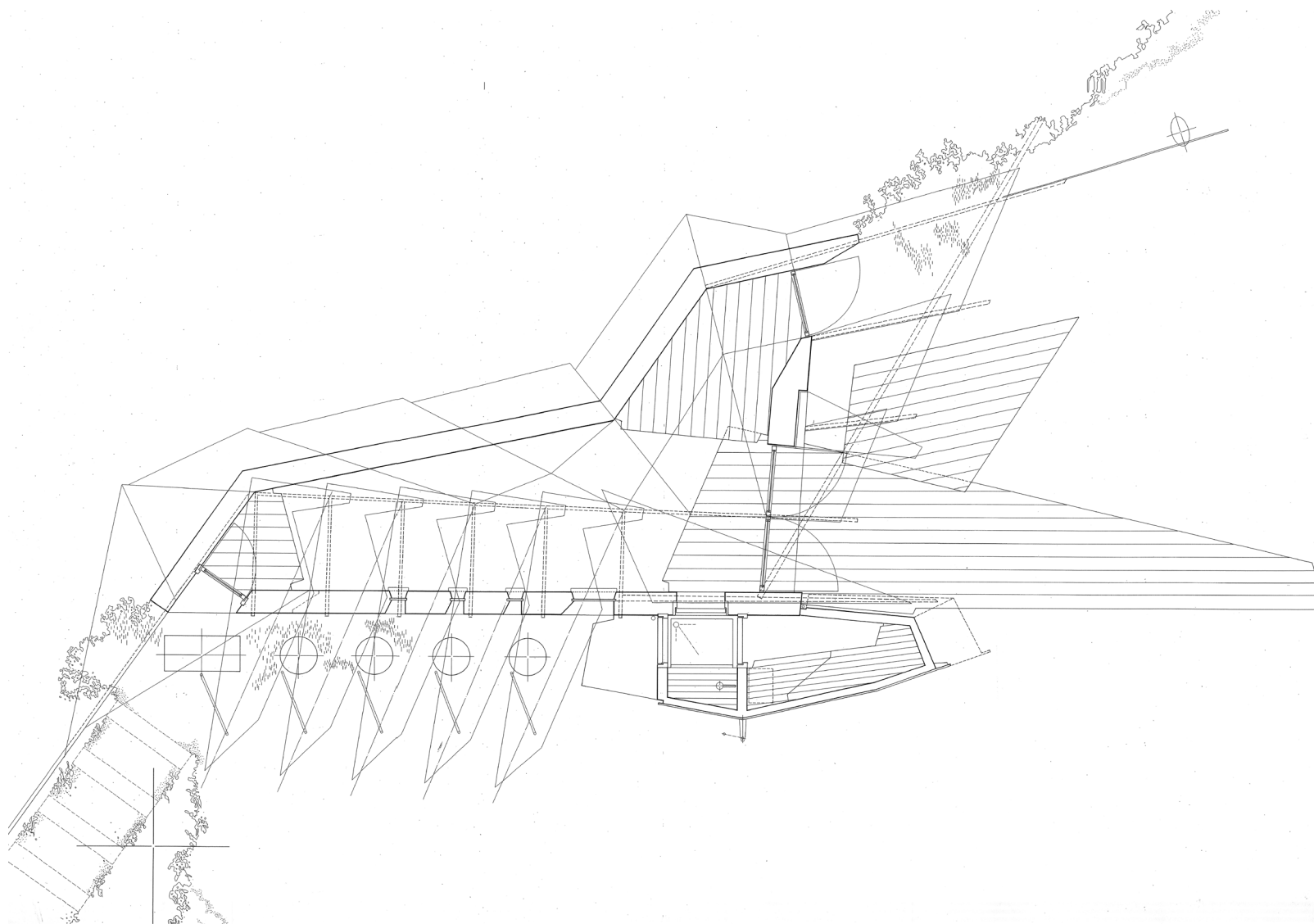
mortal - needs to be protected from people. When we are afraid we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures.”

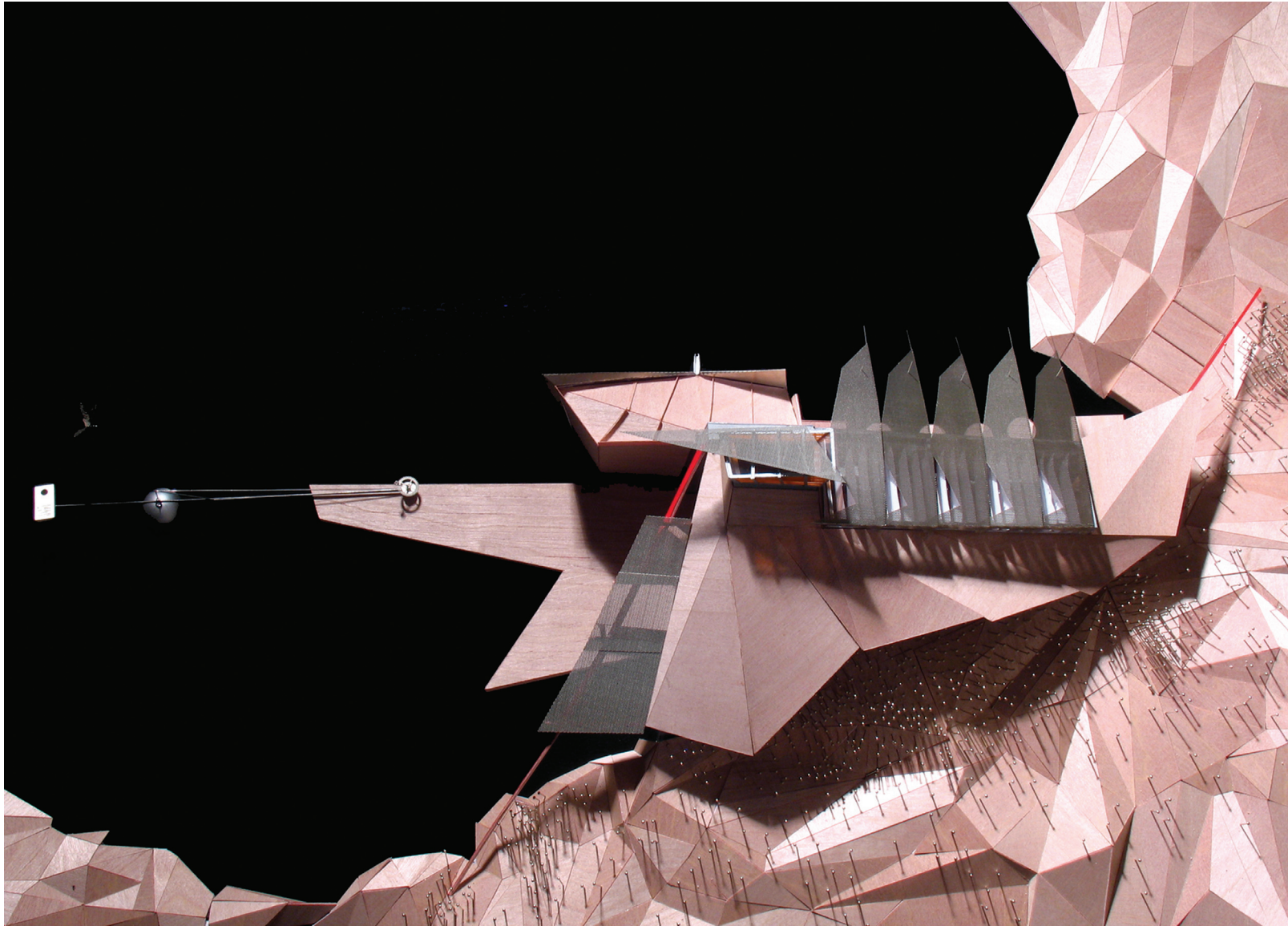
This early collage was intended to fix an image of the building before it was analysed as an architectural proposition. It is a dark wing-like form at the edge of the pond. As we were making the drawing, Simon Storey called by the office on business. He liked the image and the story of the site. His father had been a Spitfire pilot flying reconnaissance during the last war. We discussed ways in which the building might be made using very simple materials. Simon agreed to build it for £15,000 on the condition that no construction drawings were produced.



Models and photographs of models were used to design, explain and construct this small building. Gina is not happy interpreting architectural drawings, but loves to be drawn along by photographs, reinventing the design through them. Simon knows that the model allows him to read the specification more creatively, opening up a gap between the instruction and its execution. The model allows me to invent a building which changes constantly as you move through and around it. These rough little objects opened out the development process, making it available to all the participants.

The brief expanded as it encountered family democracy. Gina’s partner, Geof, wanted a sauna and the children wanted a bed to make the shack a retreat from the house. When a client changes or develops the programme during the design it is initially frustrating for the architect who is formulating an order out of the existing programme. It is also the moment when the project is most alive, laid open to inventive change. The client’s particular life is the most powerful engine of development for an architect who, for good reasons, is absorbed in his own aesthetic discourse.





8
*Retrospective
model*

9

*Wing form of
roof canopy*



The structure is examined in this x-ray image. The wind members are surmounted by perforated metal canopies. Our engineer, Tony Hayes, saw the structural design as stopping the building from floating or flying away, rather than keeping it standing up. A concrete raft and rendered block walls hold the space on the edge of the water. The roof is of plywood, fibreglass, polycarbonate and metal. The structure is allowed to flap, flex and deflect in the very strong winds which buffet the site. It is tethered by slender steel rods.

The building recalls Anselm Kiefer's paintings of the scorched earth of Germany after the war. It is a dark wing-like form hovering over the arable land and marks the boundary of the farm and the garden. The underside of the wing is a luminous cavity which arches over the water, capturing light in its folds.

07

The side of the building which faces the house was developed as a facade. A thick wall acts like an armature, supporting the roof, the lantern, the canopies and the sauna structure. Small openings, set into the wall, admit light which is used in the photographic process. At the lowest point in the wall, tucked under wing, is a tiny entrance door accessed by stepping stones on the pond.

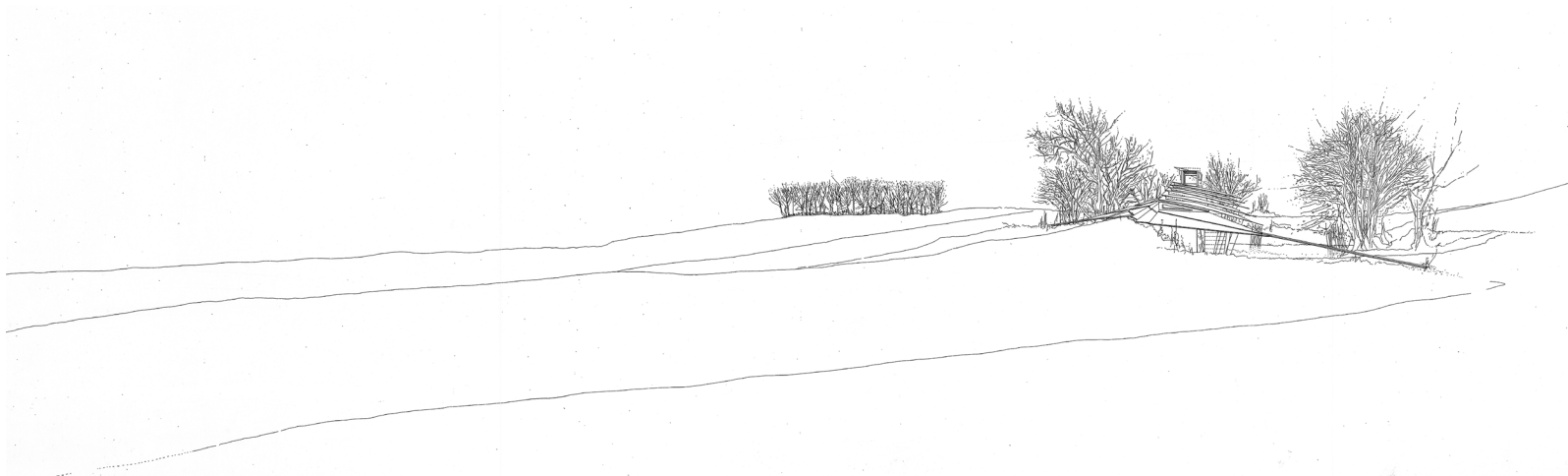
The lantern appeared in an early collage and has remained with the project despite having no vocation in relation to the programme. Construction was suspended for months while I made hundreds of models trying to integrate it into the building. It has been variously interpreted as an eye or a head or a cockpit. As I remember it first, it was something gorgeous set against the swathe of the wing, a brooch to hold the dark cloak in place.

Alan Wharburton made the canopies from galvanised perforated metal. They are designed like petals to flex and lap over each

10

*Facade facing
the house*







13

*Galvanised
canopies*



other. Slender tie rods hold them down and maintain a slight inbuilt bow in the flat sheet. The rods are secured underwater. The freckled pattern of the light cast by the canopies is printed onto the polycarbonate baffles below.

The blind wall is register for collected light. Fantastic multiple exposures overlap on this surface as brightness comes, either direct from the sky, filtered and made to flicker by trees or wavering as it reflects back off the water. The image of each aperture is printed twice, once by direct and once by reflected light. The light moves at different speeds, depending on what has modulated it; water, clouds, branches, canopies, baffles. Occasionally, a slender amber shaft tracks across the composition, sneaking through from the high lantern.

10

Each window acts as a stage for the photographic process. Objects are collected and held in the light. They are allowed to dry, bloom or go off. They are sifted and sorted in the small windows. The large square opening is set at eye level so that compositions can be photographed in it.

Gina and Geof have softened the bleached purity of the interior with rugs and kilims. It is always a surprise to see your building occupied. Often it changes the way in which you understand it. I had a clear, but not articulated, preconception of the architectural pedigree of my design. As soon as I saw the shag rug I realised, “Oh God! It’s Bruce Goff!”

This essay was published in Architectural Design in 1998 with the title ‘The Everyday and the Ordinary’.

14

Blind wall







17

Bruce Goff

12