



BUILDING ■ Ascetic aesthetics: DSDHA in Deptford

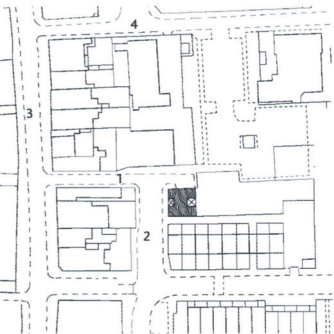
A new south London house and studio successfully reconciles apparent contradictions, finds Chris Foges. Photos: Hélène Binet.

Its neighbours call it the stables. It's the conclusion they draw from seeing the granite-paved courtyard and covered carriageway of the house and studio built by DSDHA for photo-librarian and art historian Geoffrey Fisher. The client is pleased by the confusion: it was always the aim of the project to create a building of indeterminate identity, neither identifiably domestic nor commercial, a piece of contemporary architecture whose references are Cambridge brutalism and London vernacular.

The ambiguous character of the building is evident from first approach: there are two entrance facades but it is not immediately apparent that the building comprises two units. At ground level, all glazing is set back from the street, arranged around two deep niches protected behind steel gates. The building is at once both aggressively fortress-

like and open to the point of indecency: brick and steel resist enquiry, but the cuts allow views deep into the building, through the covered carriageway on Hales Street into the living area of the house, and from New Butt Lane into every part of the studio.

These courtyards are designed to pull light into the building. Each serves as an entrance, and their location, together with the arrangement of windows on the north elevation, suggests that the building might divide into a two-storey northern part, with a single-storey unit to its rear. In fact, the house and studio are divided by a party wall that runs along the crossbar of the H-shaped plan. The plans are roughly reflected across the partition. The ground floor of the house comprises a kitchen/living area and bathroom; the bedroom is upstairs. The open plan studio is arranged across the ground



floor and a mezzanine level. The house, whose courtyard is accessed by a covered entrance and which backs onto a garden, enjoys greater privacy than its neighbour, but makes some generous concessions to openness all the same. With the exception of the bathroom, there are no internal partitions. A curtain running around the three glazed sides of the bedroom will be the only window covering in the building.

Equally, no attempt is made to hide structure or services. No pipes are boxed in nor storage built in. Brickwork is exposed and cabling is surface-mounted in galvanized steel conduit, also used as picture rail in the house. Vents and grills protrude unapologetically from the face of the building. A range of historical references, both overt and implied, are present in the building, but perhaps the most immediately apparent

are suggestions of a strain of British architecture now half a century old. A basin resting in a metal armature, from which hang snaking coils of pipe, is reminiscent of the Smithsons at Hunstanton. And the juxtaposition of exposed concrete and brick on the elevation, like the position of the staircases behind a glazed wall bridging between the two principal volumes of the building, recalls Colin St John Wilson's 1959 extension to the architecture school at Cambridge. That building is a point of connection between architect and client: partners Deborah Saunt and David Hills were both at Cambridge as students and teachers, Saunt going on to work for St John Wilson and both for MJ Long. Fisher's own interest in modern architecture stems from school-boy hitchhikes to observe the university's building boom in the 1960s.

Facing page Covered entrance to the courtyard of the house.

Top left The site is an island, visible from all sides, bounded to the north and west by roads, by a footpath to the south, and by the public garden of an adjacent council block to the east. 1 Hales St.; 2 New Butt Lane; 3 Deptford High Street; 4 Frankham St.

Centre left View of the site from corner of Hales St. and New Butt Lane.

Bottom left View of the house and studio from Hales St. and New Butt Lane; the entrance to the house, via a covered carriageway, is in the north elevation; the workspace is accessed via a three-sided court cut into the west elevation. The monopitched standing seam metal roof falls north to south, allowing light to the housing block.

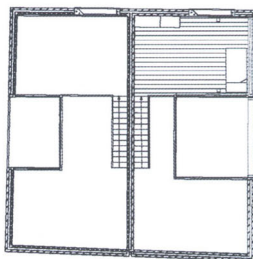
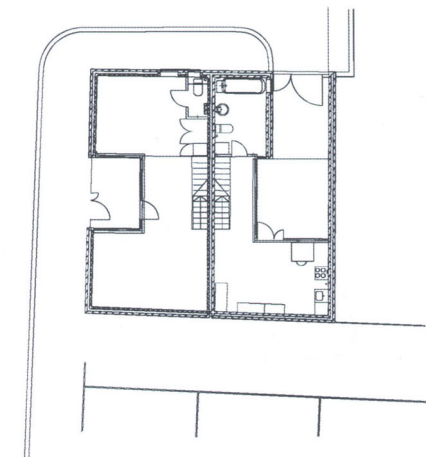
Above Narrow corner windows in the ground floor bathroom and first floor bedroom connect all rooms of the house to the central courtyard.



Geoffrey Fisher writes

The project began with the purchase of the land and the first contact with the architects in 2001; work started on site in March 2003. The impetus was a requirement for a small house for my occupation. The creation of two units was dictated by the nature of the plot, the planners' wish to see a mixture of uses on it, and the need to partially recover costs. The west unit has B1 use and is currently for sale.

As well as vistas within and from the building, of special concern to me is its impact in terms of tones, planes, masses and the defining of spaces. I am especially pleased with the effect on views from Frankham Street, in which a gap has been replaced with a re-entrant volume which pulls together the entire scene. The old character of Hales Street (once a Georgian street of terraced houses extending to Church Street) and streets parallel to it was to a great extent destroyed by post-war redevelopment. A desire to recover street character has guided the treatment of the Hales Street elevation (designed at a time when the former Ragged School of 1913 across the street was considerably better looking than it is now). Industrial connotations (galvanised steel, blue engineering bricks mixed in, and the exclusion of timber and paint as facing materials) reflect personal taste but also refer to uses historically located close to the High Street.



Top The living area opens onto the courtyard. A perforated steel acoustic ceiling compensates for the reflective surfaces and lack of internal partitions.

Left Ground and first floor plans.

Opposite, top Ground floor and mezzanine level of the workspace.

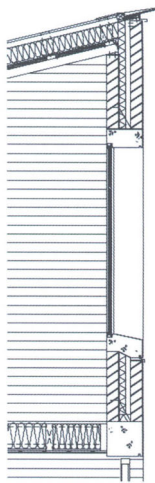
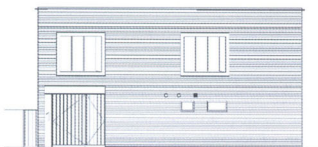
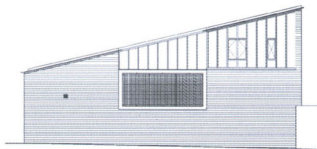
Right Clockwise from top left – south, west, east and north elevations: direct sunlight enters the large east-facing bedroom window in early morning and the west courtyard from lunchtime onwards. Oblique evening sunlight touches the north facade in summer.

Far right In-situ concrete window surrounds on the north elevation: a niche cast into the inside face allows the double-glazed units to be mounted flush with the interior face of the frame. Deep reveals emphasise the mass and solidity of the building. Reveals are splayed, allowing views as far up the road as possible.

The shared frame of reference is significant. Here, a conversation between client and architect has been used as a design tool, propelling the project through 25 iterations. Its development came at a critical time for DSDHA: Hills had just joined as a full-time partner when the building was commissioned, and the project was the first new building in its portfolio, and a test-bed for ideas. Encouraged by the client, the incorporation of cold-bridging concrete window surrounds, for example, helped to develop a position on building regulations: they are to be challenged.

The client has been unusually closely involved in developing the physical character of the building, not least in acquiring materials for the build: the facing bricks and floor tiles were sourced in salvage yards; the setts in the courtyards were scavenged from the Thames foreshore over many years; the marble splash-backs behind the bath were found in a Fulham street and ported home in a taxi. The bath itself, a roll-topped, claw-footed tub, was a gift.

The interest in salvaged materials is not simply economic: it is also about a kind of contextualism. Efforts have been made to acknowledge the immediate context, in pitching the roof to maximise light to the flats to the south, for example, or in matching the eaves height to that of the former Ragged School across Hales Street. The variety of elevational treatments responds to the conditions on each side of the site: a steel grill whose opacity changes according to





Above East-facing bedroom.

Top Right Entrance to the house.

Bottom Right The workspace: materially the house and workspace differ subtly. Where the house has a timber stair with steel handrail, the workspace has a metal stair. Likewise it has a resin floor, birch ply woodwork and wall-mounted uplighters whereas the domestic interior has a reclaimed tile floor, tongue and groove pine joinery and pendant light fittings.

Project team

Architect: DSDHA; design team: David Hills, Deborah Saunt, Claire McDonald, Sam Potter, Max DeRosée; structural engineer: Price & Myers; planning supervisor: Price & Myers; contractor: Emerson Willis.

Selected subcontractors and suppliers

Windows: Crittall; steel frame: Rabco Europe; aluzinc roof: Rabco Europe; reclaimed stock brickwork, reclaimed granite setts, reclaimed quarry tiles: client supply; underfloor heating: Hep20; steel mesh: Thieleco; lighting: SKK.

proximity and angle of view closes the courtyard on the garden side; splayed window reveals on the north elevation set up views towards the High Street. But the building has been designed as much in reference to what no longer physically exists in the neighbourhood as to what surrounds it now. The design moots the possibility that a building can be historically appropriate not just in its appearance (here not least because many pre-war buildings have disappeared) but also in a way that is oblique and associative. References are to the memory of earlier urban forms. Fisher suggests that the house, which forms a termination to the garden of the council block and adds definition to an adjacent car park, begins to redress harm done by post-war planners to the centre of Deptford where open spaces were brought too close to the High Street.



As a lay advisor to Southwark Council on conservation areas and historic buildings for twelve years, Fisher formed the view that an uncompromising modern approach is often better for new buildings in historic areas, as the contrast bring out the qualities of both. The same principle has been applied in this building, where reconciliation of past and present informs the project at every level, from its urban role to the juxtaposition of new and reclaimed materials. By avoiding overt references to its immediate surroundings, the house has an in-built resistance to the sort of changes that are already happening: within a short time after its completion, redevelopment of the building across Hales Street will change views in and out. The result is an enigmatic building, that is both of its time and place, and somehow adrift from them.