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Building study

Super-louvre

DSDHA has crafted a dramatically veiled workshop for jeweller Alex Monroe

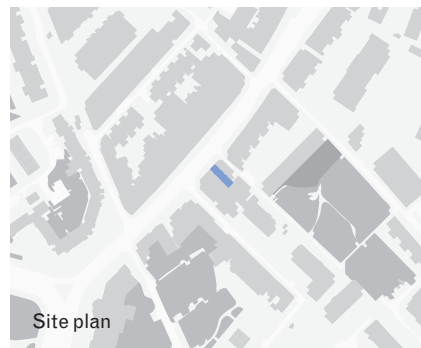
Alex Monroe has been designing and making jewellery in London for three decades. Having completed the award-winning Alex Monroe Snowsfields studio|boutique in London Bridge in 2012, DSDHA was appointed to design a second building for the jeweller: a workshop on Tower Bridge Road.

Appraisal Catherine Slessor
Photography Luca Miserocchi

'Look at this workbench,' says jeweller Alex Monroe. 'For hundreds of years it's been the same design. You can see it depicted in medieval woodcuts.'

Though automation and digitisation have transformed the modus operandi of many trades, jewellery is still an intricate hand-to-eye process, an intimate communion between maker and materials. The bench has a semicircular cut-out (which historically would have been made into a stool), placing the makers in efficient proximity to their tools. A small leather hammock is stretched under the cut-out to collect debris. As the debris is 18 carat, nothing can go to waste.

Though a medieval goldsmith still might recognise the apparatus of their trade, Monroe's new studio consciously reconceptualises the notion of the craftsmen's atelier. For a start, work benches face each other, so people can converse. Lined with panels of birch ply, spaces are luminous and airy, more warm womb than Stygian hole, implanted in the carapace of an existing building that has been gutted and extruded upwards. The façade is wrapped in a protective veil of



Site plan

Cor-ten, its horizontal slats a less surly version of steel security shutters pulled over shopfronts at the end of the day.

In business for 30 years, Monroe produces fine bespoke jewellery, which is especially popular in Japan. This new building is the latest point on a south London trajectory that saw him move from the Dickensian confines of Iliffe Yard near the Elephant and Castle to a workspace and shop at Snowsfields in the shadow of the Shard. Conceived as the public face of Monroe's operation, with a small shop at street level, Snowsfields was designed by DSDHA, which was also commissioned for this latest project. The relationship between architect and jeweller dates back to their time at Iliffe Yard, where both had studios.

Located at the south end of Tower Bridge Road, this new building is only a 10-minute walk from Snowsfields, making it easy for staff to pop between the two. Intended to expand design and production capacity, it also offers other possibilities. 'It catalysed things,' says Monroe. 'Not just about how we work but

how we cultivate a sense of identity.' As at Snowfields, vertical circulation set in a confined footprint is key to the organisation and use of space. Here it is articulated through a ceremonial Cor-ten staircase threaded through the four-storey volume, connecting people and functions. Forming a buffer zone against the street, the stair is effectively transformed into a sociable and dramatic multi-level room, a place for encounter, conversation and display. En route, pockets of space are carved out to house eye-catching cabinets of curiosities, sources of inspiration for Monroe's oeuvre, which draws on forms and imagery from the natural world.

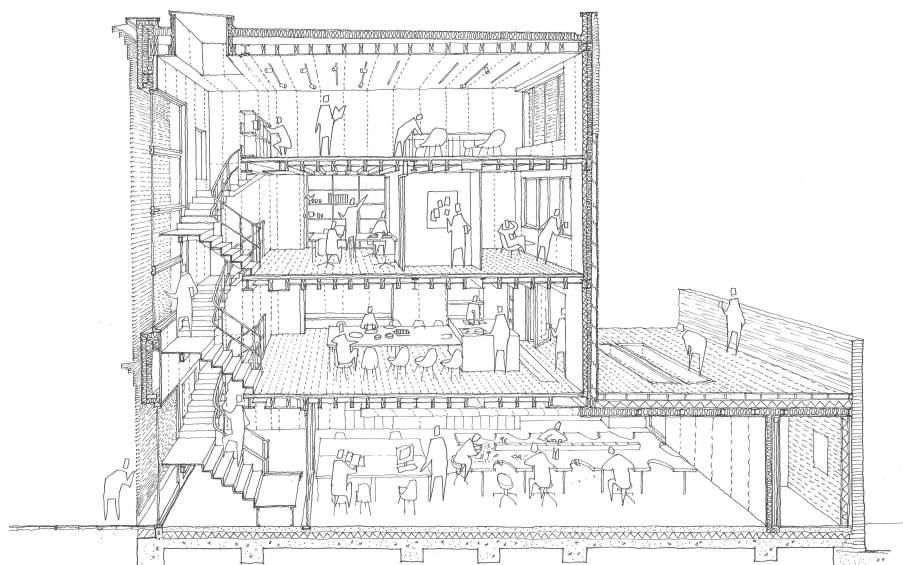
Jewellery-making has an obvious affinity with metal, so Cor-ten was a logical choice, evolving from the more lightweight zinc cladding employed at Snowfields. The zinc came in sheet form and was bent and fitted around a ribbed timber armature by craftsmen 'like lead workers on cathedral roofs,' says Monroe. 'The sense of hand making is important.'

The Cor-ten carapace has a darker, tougher character, more suited to its context, inflected and scarred by the patina of age. 'But we didn't want a dead frontage,' says DSDHA director David Hills. 'It almost becomes a roller-shutter, there's an element of security to it, but it's designed and layered so you can't climb it.' Stretching and compressing, the Cor-ten spoils upwards, terminating in an exaggerated, beetle-browed cornice suggestive of Louis Sullivan's early skyscrapers.

Sandwiched between a pub and a shop, the building originally housed offices for a firm of accountants, so there is something especially satisfying about beancounters being displaced by craftspeople. The metal moiré screen offers tantalising glimpses of activities inside, signposting a function that is neither retail nor residential. Instead, the deliberately rough materiality hints at a different world of creativity and artistry, setting up a new kind of dialogue with the surrounding urban bricolage.

Responding to the city's historic kinesis and how it is wrought and changed over time, DSDHA enjoys capitalising on London's inherent quality of 'dynamic instability' through the exploration of scale, materials and juxtaposition. On one level, adding an extra storey adds functionality, creating an eyrie-like studio space specifically for Monroe. On another level, it gives the building a more calculated civic presence with which to hold its own in a mongrel milieu. Snowfields embodied a similar dynamic,

'The metal moiré screen offers tantalising glimpses of activities inside'





with new storeys of studios stacked above a ground-floor shop. Gutting and extending the building was achieved by inserting a steel frame between the two party walls, like a Japanese building on a gap site. 'Everything is generated by leaving as much space as possible between the two neighbouring buildings,' says Hills. 'But it's not completely controlled; there's an enjoyment of the unexpected, a quality also reflected in Alex's jewellery.'

The original brick walls are exposed in places and the Cor-ten staircase bears the marks of its making. 'We had a battle not to powder coat it, but we wanted a rough finish,' says Monroe. 'Generally, the conversation between contractor and client is about achieving perfection,' says Hills. 'To define something just as it comes means we're happy with imperfection and there's often disbelief that you're willing to engage with the material on that level.'

The modern rentier workplace constitutes a depressing panorama, characterised by the bland uniformity of lettable generic space and soul-sapping proscription. The idea of designing a workspace for a particular purpose may be commercially risky, but it can offer an elusive, Elysian alternative.

'Ironically, it's almost an Arts and Crafts workshop model,' says Hills, 'with plenty of light and a convivial environment.' It also illustrates the wider issue of London's disappearing cultural infrastructure and how it can be sustained against increasingly rapacious commercial pressures. The historic watch and jewellery workshops of Clerkenwell, for instance, have long been colonised by baristas and estate agents, but the active provision of spaces for making and creating is still fundamentally essential to the well-being of the city.

Architect's view

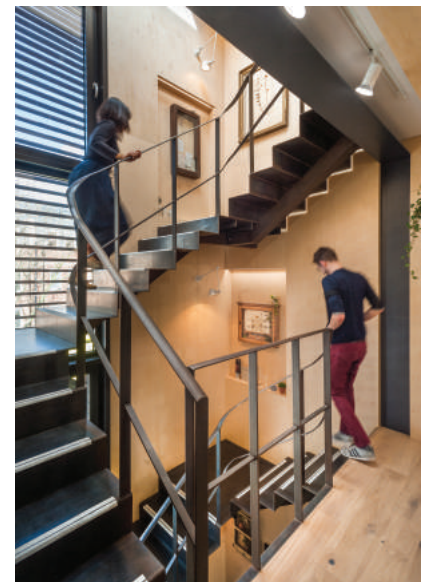
Located between a pub and a shop, this new-build four-storey workshop presents an enigmatic and finely crafted storefront. Its bespoke, weathered steel external skin responds to the eclectic surrounding brick architecture, while clearly signalling the building's function as being neither retail nor residential.

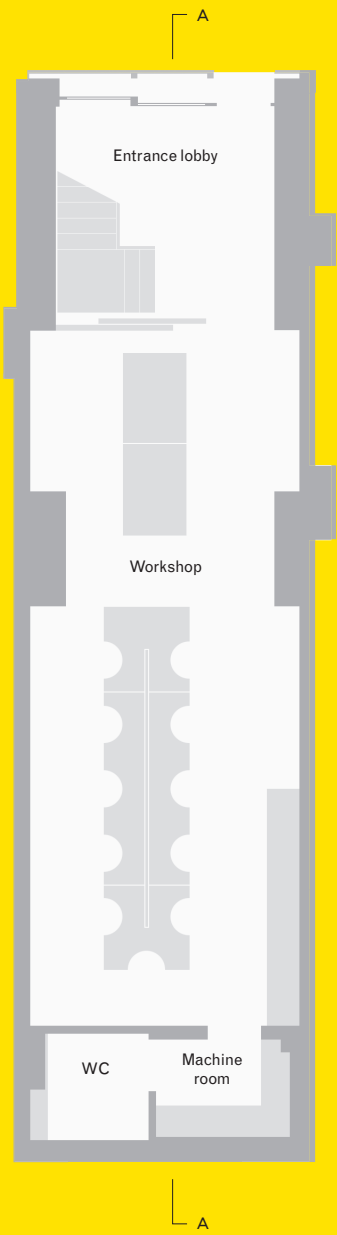
The façade's horizontal metal blades establish a rhythmic harmony with the composition and articulation of the immediate streetscape, while achieving a moiré-like visual effect. This veiled appearance acts as a protective shield, allowing passers-by at ground level to catch a few glimpses of the activities inside. It is architecture in conversation with its context, and also with the people who inhabit the area.

A generous 'social staircase' is located at the entrance next to the workshop just behind the street façade, connecting the different floors, activities and users visually and acoustically. On the first floor a roof terrace provides a verdant refuge for the artisans away from the busy street and the close-work of jewellery-making, and above the web studio and design studios they have views across the city. Light is constantly modulated and captured to reinforce a sense of connectivity with nature throughout the building.

These architectural devices provide convivial workspaces capable of mediating between the interior sphere and the city, between making at a small scale and participating in wider-world networks.

David Hills, director, DSDHA



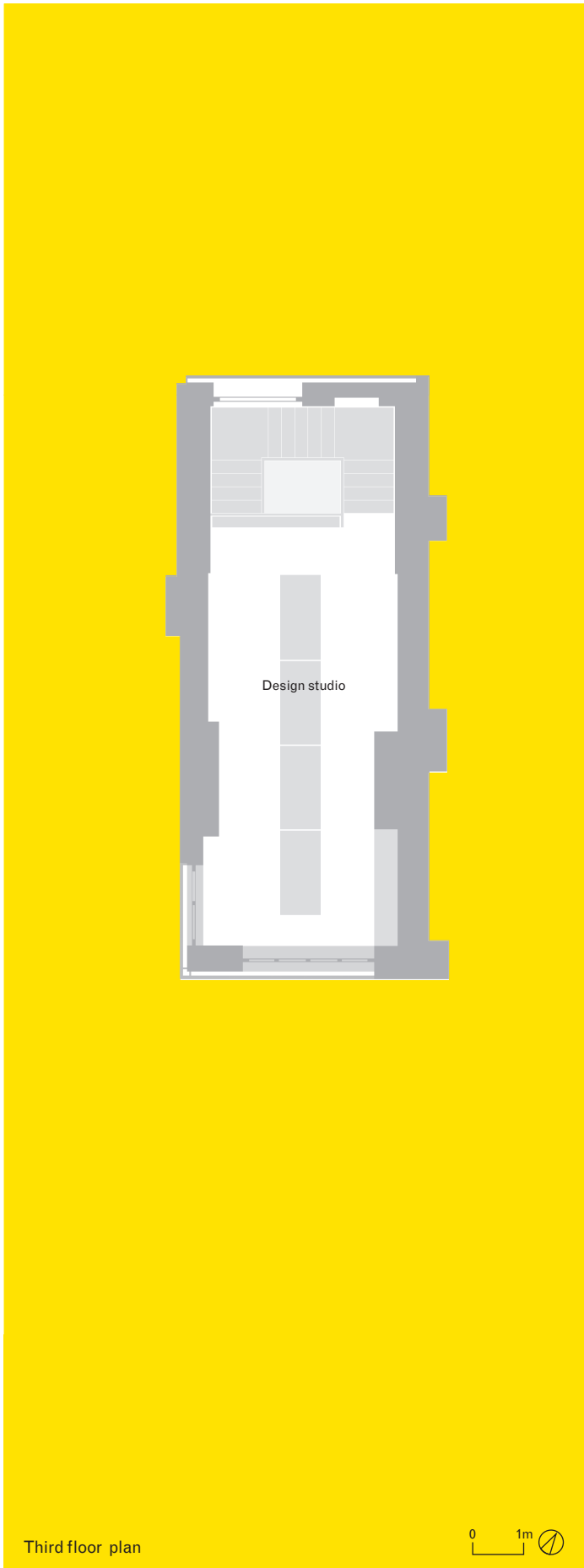
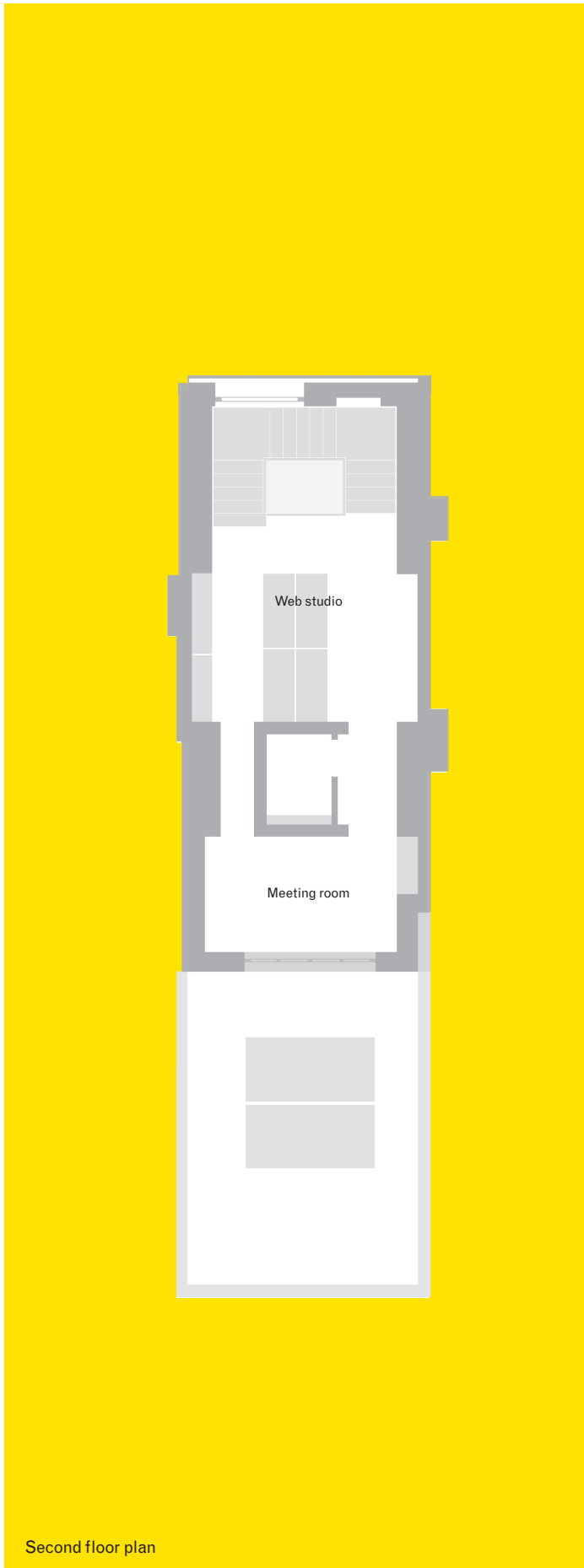


Ground floor plan



First floor plan







Section A-A



Client's view

It wasn't such a long time ago that it was entirely normal for businesses to design and build their own spaces. In fact, our new workshop is only a stone's throw from the old Hartley's jam factory, built in Victorian times.

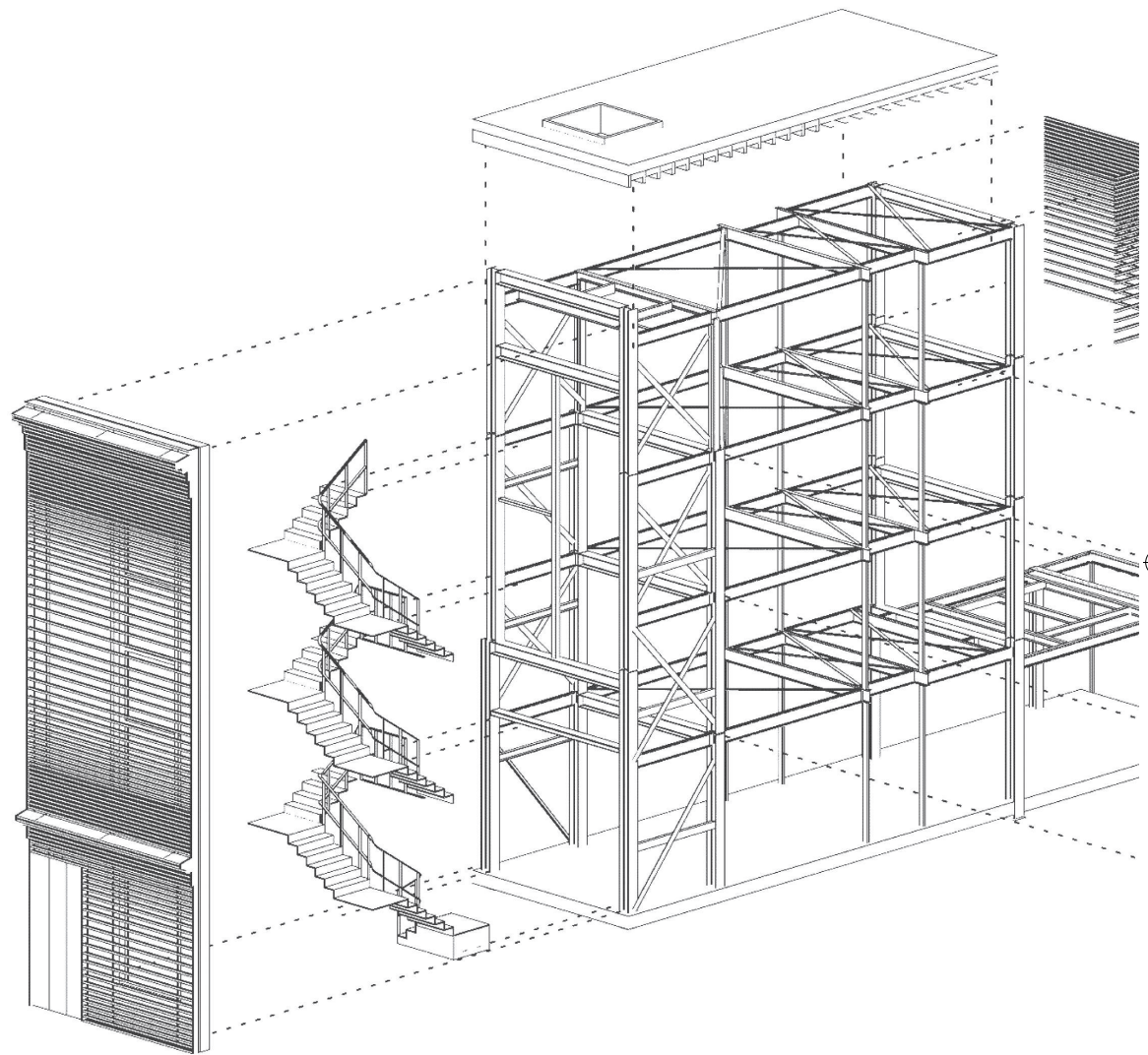
I developed an interest in the relationship between architecture and function for creative business since I first worked with DSDHA in 2009. We designed and built our headquarters in London Bridge and I immediately realised the huge benefits for every aspect of the business: now we were not just a brand, but had a very real presence. The intelligent design impacted positively on our design and work ethos, too. When I realised we needed a new manufacturing centre I was keen to work with DSDHA again. We have designed a space that enhances and improves our design and craft practices, communication and staff well-being.

Alex Monroe, jeweller









Engineer's view

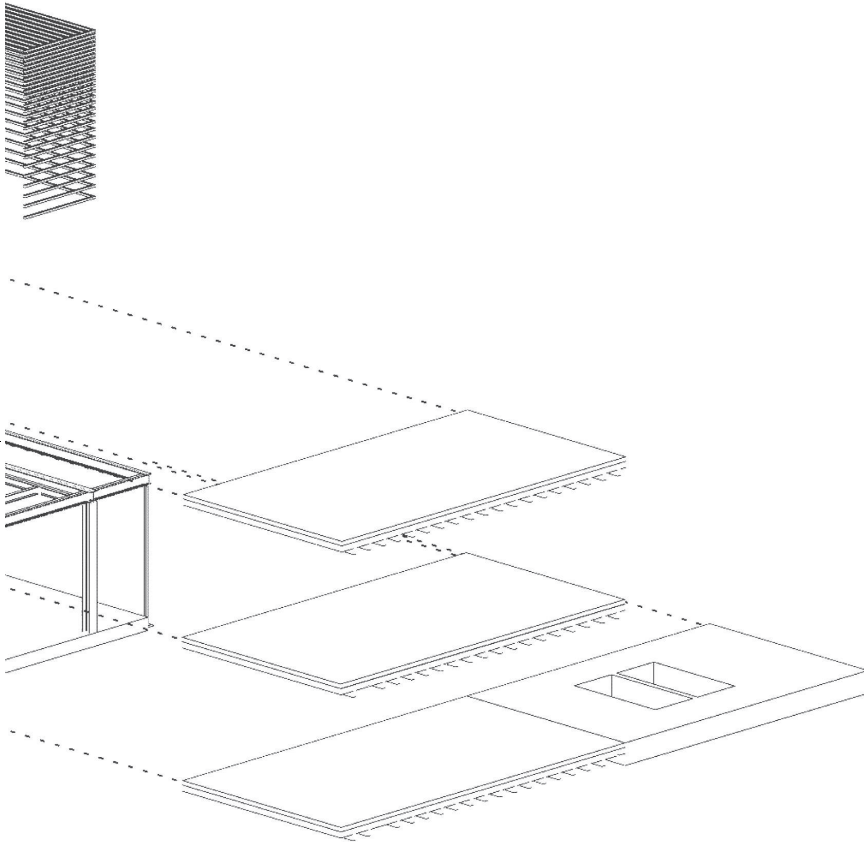
The Cor-ten rainscreen required careful structural detailing to meet the architect's brief for a minimal louvred façade.

Rolled sections are not available in Cor-ten and the louvres were formed from folded sheet. This allowed us to prescribe a bespoke section. A 50 x 30 x 5cm unequal angle profile was selected to balance elegance with robustness. Vertical elements are set back from the front of the façade and were laser-cut with notches to facilitate exact registration of the individual louvres.

The close spacing of the louvres prohibited access for fixing to the structure behind and consequently an interlocking panel system was developed that allowed welded sections of the façade to be positioned and fixed sequentially from the bottom up. The final fixings were concealed behind the upper cornicing. The panels are 'blind-fixed' through a black moisture barrier to a concealed secondary frame, thermally broken within the wall build-up. This basic approach was altered to suit the various conditions around the building.

The façade to the fully glazed shop front is hung from an additional structure concealed within the lower cornice and at the rear of the building a mitered corner is incorporated.

Cameron Bailey, Structure Workshop



Project data

Start September 2015

Completion October 2016

Contract duration 13 months

Gross internal floor area 200m²

Construction cost Undisclosed

Architect DSDHA

Client Alex Monroe

Structural engineer Structure Workshop

M&E consultant Integration

Quantity surveyor PT Projects

Main contractor Philiam Construction

Annual CO₂ emissions 20.1kg/m²

Annual mains water consumption 92.33 litres per person per day

Airtightness at 50pa 8.64m³/h.m²

Heating and hot water load 12.37kWh/m²/yr

Overall area-weighted U-value 0.25 W/m²K

Energy and CO₂ emissions:

Heating and cooling 143 MJ/m²

Primary energy 118 MJ/m²

Building Energy Rating 20.1

Detail

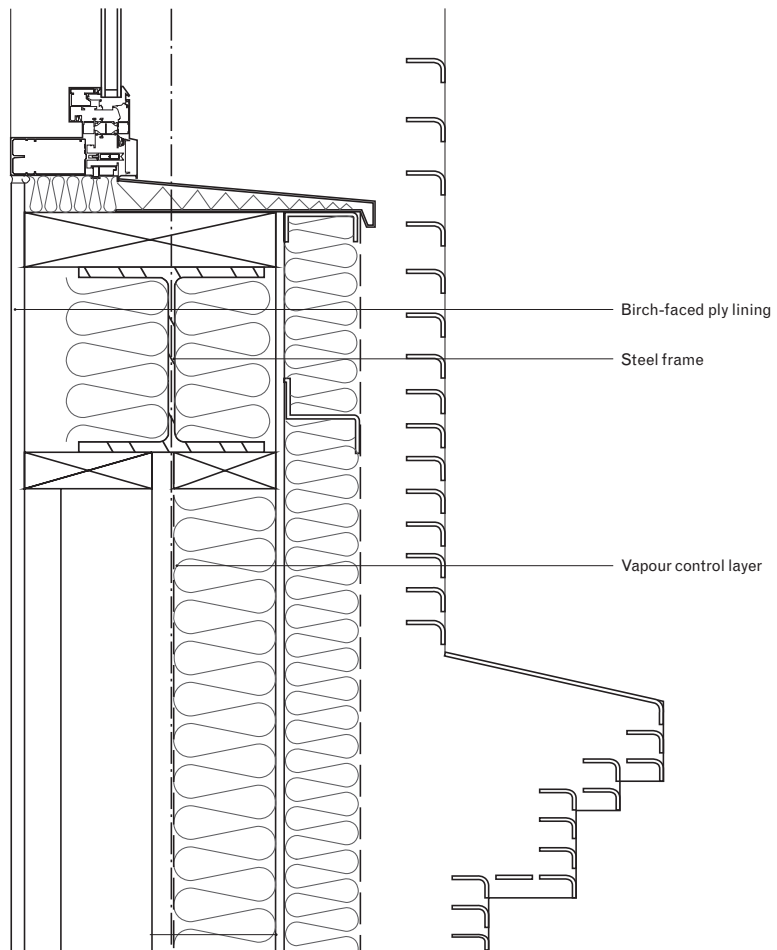
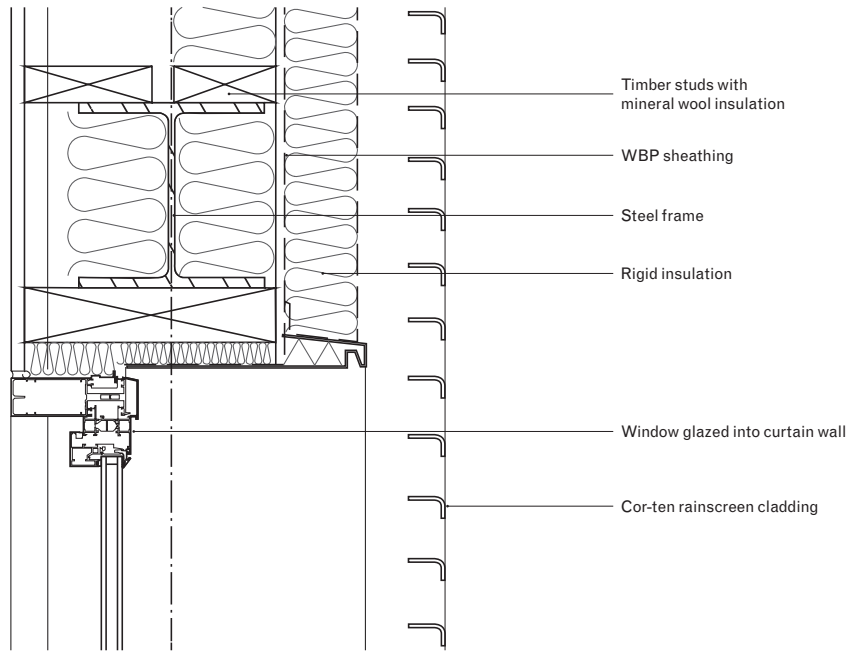
The building envelope consists of the steel frame building structure with timber infill, thermal insulation between and to the outer side and a high-performance breather membrane with a Cor-ten rainscreen cladding.

The folded Cor-ten forms bespoke angled sections carefully designed with varying spacing to control daylight and views in and out. The Cor-ten angles have also been designed to interpret the ground floor and roof cornices of the neighbouring buildings, providing more articulation to the street elevation.

As part of the design development and construction sequencing the Cor-ten rainscreen was divided into panels for transport and installation. These interlock from the bottom up as they are fixed back to the structure. The panels have laser-cut ends that follow the angles and cornices profiles. The Cor-ten screen veils the envelope and openings beyond.

A tall window reveals a stair connecting all the floors and the building users' activities. A dark brown finish was selected for the curtain walling and doors to complement the tone of the Cor-ten rain screen. Internally, the finish is birch-faced plywood treated to achieve the required spread of flame.

Isabel Moreira, lead architect, DSDHA



Curtain wall detail section

0 50mm

