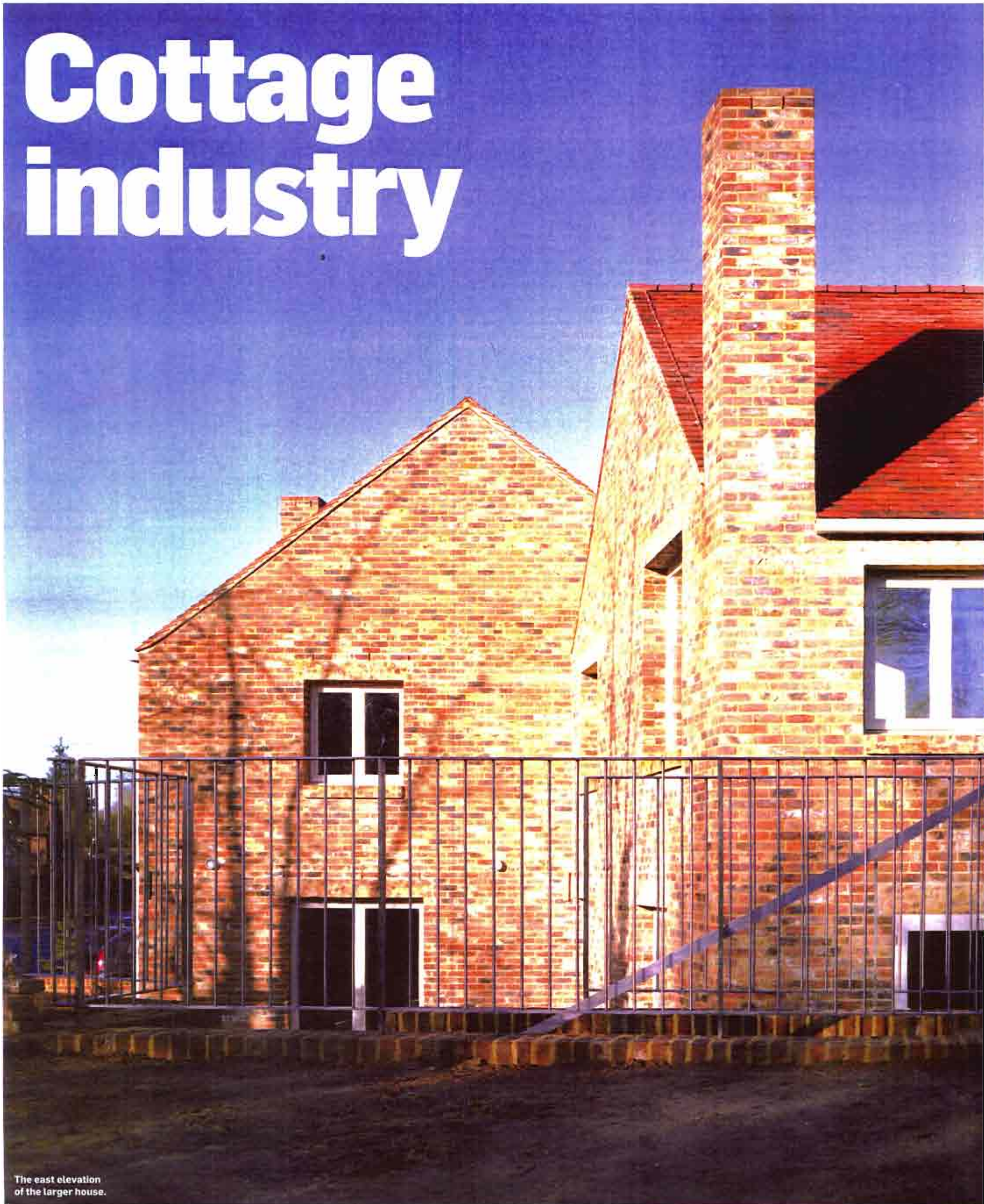


# WORKS: STEPHEN TAYLOR ARCHITECTS

# Cottage industry



The east elevation of the larger house.



**PROJECT TEAM** Client Baylight Properties, **Architect** Stephen Taylor Architects, **Structural engineer** Thomasons, **Contractor** Goldway Properties, **Environmental consultant** Energist, **Windows** Just Swiss, **Flooring** Go Direct Flooring

With the help of a far-sighted developer, Stephen Taylor Architects has revived the cottage as a housing type. Not before time, writes **Ellis Woodman**

Pictures by David Grandorge



**M**easured against the sweep of architectural history, the period during which the cottage has been

deemed a suitable subject for creative inquiry is not great. In his 1775 treatise, *Hints to Gentlemen of Landed Property*, land agent and agricultural reformer Nathaniel Kent painted a grim portrait of the conditions in which the rural working class was then housed:

"The shattered hovels which half the poor of this kingdom are obliged to put up with, is truly affecting to a heart fraught with humanity. Those who condescend to visit these miserable tenements, can testify that neither health nor decency can be preserved in them. The weather frequently penetrates all parts of them; which must occasion illness of various kinds, particularly agues; which more frequently visit the children of cottagers than any others and early shake their constitutions. And it is shocking that a man, his wife, and half a dozen children should be obliged to lie all in one room together; and more so, that the wife should have no more private place to be brought to bed in."

Kent advised his readers that building sound accommodation for their workers could be both a socially responsible and profitable course of action. His argument proved highly influential, not least because it was delivered at a moment when the prospect of revolution was weighing heavy on the thoughts of the landed classes.

In the 70 years that followed the publication of *Hints to Gentlemen*, 110 architectural pattern books devoted to the design of cottages or "small villas" were issued. A number of the principles that would go on to form the central tenets of the modern movement were effectively rehearsed in the pages of these books: the impulse to social reform, the artistic validation of spatial economy, and the picturesque taste for irregularity that would eventually come to be termed the free plan.

Given our desperate inability to engage with the present housing crisis, the culture embodied in the cottage pattern books can only invite envy. These publications effectively promoted the most basic dwelling type to the forefront of the 19th century architectural debate. The alternatives they offered were wildly diverse, extending from James Malton's eclectic melanges of gothic, tudor and vernacular sources to JM Gandy's austere proto-classicism. And yet at core, the pattern books represented a radical commitment to typicality — to the research and

development of the ordinary house.

By marked contrast, the value of typicality is given scant regard by our current culture of housing provision. Arguably, this is a failing of regulation and certainly of architectural maturity, but it is also related to the fact that what housing we are undertaking is almost exclusively on brownfield land. It is a situation where any ambition to create a scheme that might actually serve as a model is frequently confounded by the small scale and eccentric framing of the available sites. Frequently, but not always.

In the past couple of years, architect Stephen Taylor has realised two housing projects (*Works* January 19, 2007 and April 4, 2008) on small plots in east London that were very heavily constrained by their surrounding fabric. Each answered those challenges with a configuration of captivating ingenuity, but what ultimately impressed about the schemes was not their intricacy alone but rather that they succeeded in transcending that complexity. Products of local circumstance they clearly were, but these were also buildings from which one could extrapolate a much larger piece of city.

## The planners found the initial scheme's architectural language bewildering

Taylor has now brought something of this sensibility to the very different setting of rural Surrey. On a site in the centre of the village of Gomshall he has built a pair of houses or, to use the term by which the architect suggestively describes them, cottages. Gomshall is a community of just over 3,000 residents which owes much of its appearance to development in the Victorian era. The success of the local tannery and mill supported that growth, but those industries did not survive beyond the early part of the 20th century.

For some years, Gomshall has essentially been a commuter village serving Dorking and Guildford, both of which lie less than 15km away on the A25. This relatively busy road bisects the village and provides Taylor's dwellings with their address. They stand immediately alongside a much adjusted 15th century cottage on land that previously formed part of its garden. Crispin Kelly ▶

### SITE PLAN



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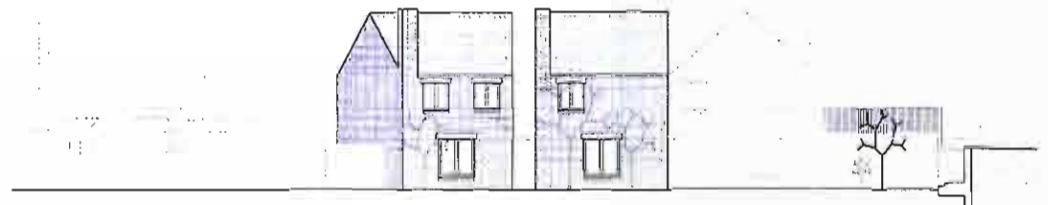


The smaller house addresses a brick-lined courtyard.



The long diagonal views through the ground floor of the larger house.

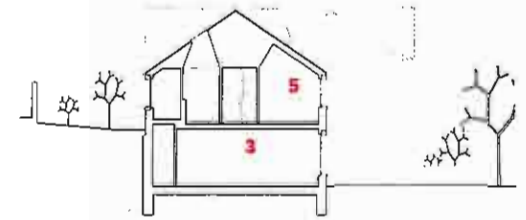
## STREET ELEVATION



## EAST ELEVATION



## SECTION



and Stephen Dodd of Baylight Properties bought the house in 2005 in the expectation that the local authority would be amenable to development. Taylor was duly commissioned to develop a scheme for two three-bed houses. Their language of brick walls, clay tiled roofs, prominent chimneys and punched openings established a direct but subtly progressive relationship to the existing fabric.

Their massing was also carefully gauged in response to Gomshall's predominantly diminutive scale: eaves and ridge lines married up with those of the neighbouring house, while each residence was broken into two linked volumes that the casual observer could well take to be dwellings in their own right. Nonetheless, the planners found the architectural language bewildering — deeming it too stark to be considered traditional, while insufficiently sleek to be judged satisfactorily modern — and felt that the loss of a small copse of trees on the site's principal corner was insupportable.

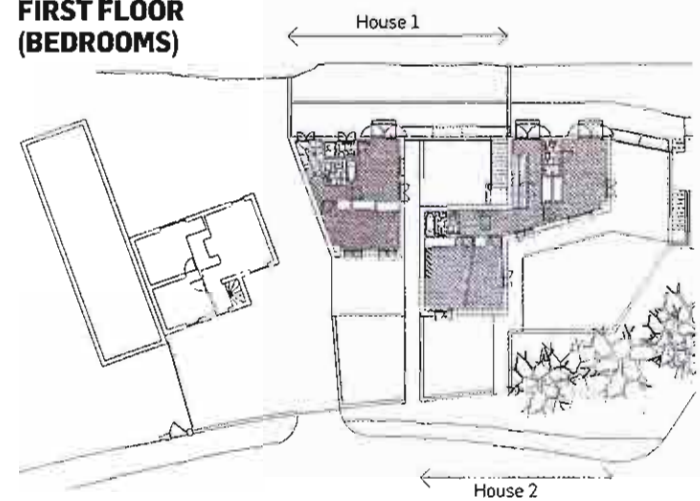
In the end, Taylor and his client won the first point and lost the second. Having had their first application thrown out, they submitted a revised scheme in which the programme of one of the houses had been shaved to the point where it could be fitted into a single volume. This configuration allowed the trees to be kept without fundamentally compromising the scheme's expression and — two years after Baylight had first approached the planners — finally secured the project's approval.

From an urban perspective, one might consider the survival of the (pretty raggedy) trees a poor compensation for the loss of the hard edge to the street that the original scheme would have established. And yet I am not sure the planners' demands — however questionable — have been entirely detrimental. In a sense, what they have created is a context that is every bit as constrained as those in which Taylor built his London projects.

As with those schemes, much of the pleasure of these houses lies in the ingenuity with which their architect has beaten considerable odds to produce something suggestive of wider application. In this respect, it is significant that the newly imposed variation between the houses doesn't detract from the scheme's prototypical qualities — as one might imagine it would — but rather serves as proof of the type's adaptability.

The smaller house gives the impression of a cellular unit, which the larger then replicates and doubles. What, one wonders, might a chain of three or four such units look like? While we can enjoy the project as an ensemble

## FIRST FLOOR (BEDROOMS)



## GROUND FLOOR



- |                  |            |
|------------------|------------|
| 1 Entrance       | 5 Bedrooms |
| 2 Kitchen        | 6 Yard     |
| 3 Living/dining  | 7 Garden   |
| 4 Existing house | 8 Parking  |

that has been meticulously fitted to its site, it also demands to be acknowledged as a generative system of some versatility.

In fairness to the planners, it is not too hard to see why the elevations might have failed to beguile. For all their evident relationship to the local vernacular, these houses present a level of abstraction that translates into a pretty spartan 1:100 drawing. The bargeboards and overhangs that one finds in the neighbouring cottages have here been exchanged for an extremely taut meeting of wall and roof, while some rather demanding detailing has stripped the multiple chimney stacks of any visible cowl or flashing.

Such refinements invite us to recognise the roof, wall and ground as a continuous surface made of a single material — clay. This impression is consolidated by one of the scheme's more demonstrative gestures: the incorporation of a smashed brick-and-tile aggregate into the concrete used for the cills, lintels and areas of external landscaping.

The elemental nature of the volumes is counterposed with a very free distribution of windows. Particularly in the larger house — which effectively has eight elevations — the ratio of external wall to internal floor area is high. This has enabled Taylor to provide most rooms with a double and even triple aspect. However, the siting

of the openings has clearly been judged with the aim of maintaining a sense of the buildings' volumetric integrity. A number of elevations remain blank, while others present just two openings, one above the other, misaligned rather in the manner of a winking face.

These judgments have also been governed by the need to maintain privacy. Like a Morandi still life, the two new houses and their neighbour have been set very close to one another, framing a series of spaces characterised by a highly charged intimacy. The gregarious plan form of the larger house captures a small garden which is screened from the road by the retained trees. Meanwhile, the smaller house enjoys the use of a brick-lined courtyard which is reached from the street via a narrow alley. Two sides of this space are held by the necessarily blank elevations of the neighbouring dwelling, while the third is formed by the high retaining wall that extends along the back of what was originally a steeply sloping site. A brick stair dog-legs around two sides of this space, providing the residents of the smaller house with access to an upper level terrace. In a detail that recalls Taylor's use of finely made brass components to lighten the sober expression of his earlier buildings, it has been equipped with a very beautifully made stainless steel handrail.

With the build cost of £1,150 per

sq m not very far removed from the budgets within which most volume housing is realised, the creative opportunities presented by the interiors were limited. The architect has, however, imbued these often small spaces with a surprising generosity. In part, this is a product of the profusion of windows, but developments in plan and section also contribute.

The ground floor of the larger house is a particular success, the doors having been configured to allow a long, diagonal view across multiple rooms. On the upper floors, a similar sense of expansiveness has been produced by extending the principal rooms into the volume of the roof. In places, the internal walls on this level also veer off the vertical above head height. The device serves to lend the rooms a more articulated sense of enclosure than they would otherwise enjoy, and even equips the smaller house with a tiny attic.

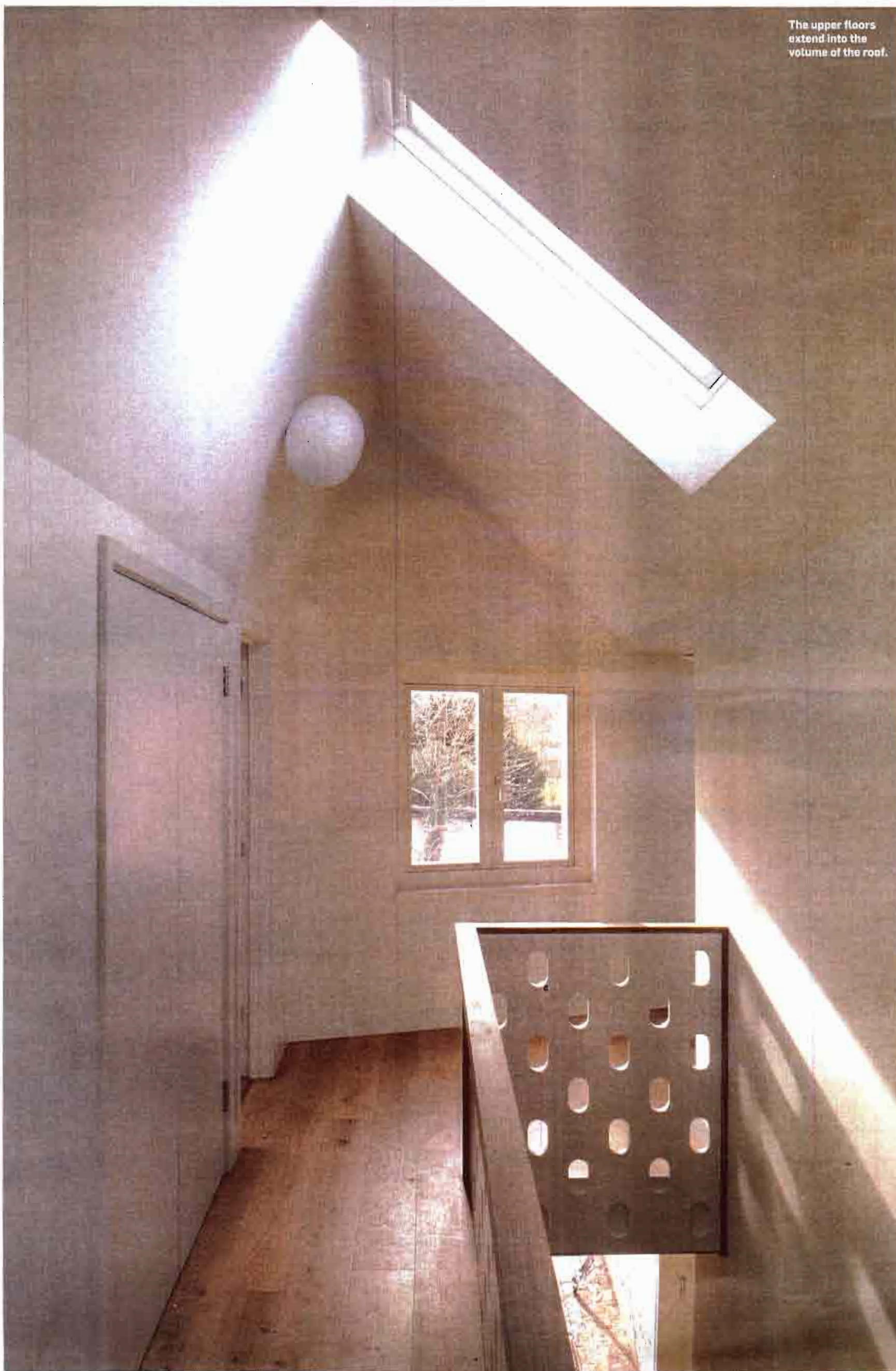
For Baylight Properties, the Gomshall project represents a marked departure from the urban and largely mixed-use schemes with which it has built a reputation as one of the country's most enlightened developers. Over the past five years, the company has redirected its efforts to the challenge of building houses — as opposed to apartments — for a general market, but of a quality that surpasses the desultory efforts of the established volume builders.

## These houses present a level of abstraction that translates into a pretty spartan 1:100 drawing

To that end, it is working on a scheme to build 14 houses by Tony Fretton for sites at Pewsey in Wiltshire, and another to build 21 units designed by Sergison Bates in Aldershot, Hampshire. Most ambitious of all is a Stephen Taylor scheme for 46 houses on a site at the edge of the west Berkshire village of Kintbury. Given the catastrophic downturn that the inner-city apartment market has suffered over the past 12 months, Baylight's shift of direction now seems prescient indeed. However, it also addresses the fundamental challenge that the last property boom so signally failed to meet: that of providing decent accommodation for families.

Baylight's mission has not been confined to pursuing development opportunities. Crispin Kelly is also in the process of completing a two-year research project which looks at the success of past housing schemes such as Walter Segal's St Anne's Close in Hampstead, London, and the development that Phippen Randall Parkes built for the Cockaigne Housing Group in Hatfield, Hertfordshire.

Augmented by some of the schemes that Baylight is currently working on, this document promises to be a form of contemporary pattern book, setting out a range of typological alternatives for the 21st century family house. Taylor's Gomshall cottages represent a significant contribution to this larger project. They are a finely judged response to a very particular context, but they have lessons to impart we can ill afford to ignore.



The upper floors extend into the volume of the roof.