

*Building study*

## An oasis of Douglas fir-lined solace

With the permanent facility on hold, Dow Jones has created an interim Cardiff Maggie's Centre on a car park plot, creating an engaging piece of experiential architecture. *Fran Williams reports*







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*This interim Maggie's Cardiff sits on a triangular site in the corner of the car park at Velindre Cancer Centre in Cardiff, backing on to an existing stand of trees. The building's form seeks to reflect the surrounding topography and provide uplifting spaces with a strong relationship to nature – taking one on a journey from car park bleakness to intimate courtyard garden to more contemplative spaces. The*

*interior is lined with Douglas fir, contrasting with the weathered steel cladding and sleek polished concrete floor. At the heart of the building is the cwtch – a tall and intimate roof-lit space inspired by the simnau fawr (big chimneys) of vernacular Welsh architecture.*

Words Fran Williams  
Photography Anthony Coleman

I meet Dow Jones Architects' directors, Biba Dow and Alun Jones, on site just as the team is hanging artwork for Wales' new Maggie's Centre before it opens the following week. People come and go: ceramicist Lisa Krigel is delivering hand-made crockery inspired by Brutalist architecture and nurses are popping in to take a look. It feels informal and relaxed in the busy little building, perhaps a foresight of how it will feel in use.

The interim Maggie's Cardiff, also known as Maggie's De Ddwyrain Cymru, sits alongside the Velindre Cancer Centre in north-west Cardiff on a triangular site at the top of a car park – probably one of the strangest and most constrained sites Dow Jones has ever had to work with. The practice has designed a strikingly bright tin building with irregular sawtooth roofscape. Shed-like on its exterior, it hides an oasis of Douglas fir-lined solace within, almost turning its back on the bleak tarmac behind.

The building is an interim scheme in the sense that it is not intended to last more than 10 years. Five years ago, the design team won approval for a different site, but this was ruled out after Velindre Hospital was earmarked for a major redevelopment. This includes a new £200 million cancer centre to be built on a site in Whitchurch, just to the north of Maggie's Cardiff.

However, exactly when, or indeed whether, this plan will pull through is uncertain (particularly with its reliance on EU funding). The temporary Maggie's is very different in scale, cost and aesthetics



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to that of the original proposal, and to the other Maggie's Centres across the UK that precede it. Impressively matching the architect's concept renders, the scheme is clad in what Jones calls 'wrinkly tin' – corrugated Cor-ten weathering steel, its rust colour echoing the hues of bracken on the surrounding hillsides. The undulating form of the roofline takes its inspiration from the silhouette of the mountains of Pen-y-Fan, 40 miles north, while its common 'shed' appearance is based on the vernacular of rural south-west farm buildings – what Jones refers to as the 'unexpected side of Wales'.

The full extent of the site has been cleverly used. It's a tight plot whose only redeeming feature is the row of up to 20 leylandii trees lining its northern edge. Since this is the only bit of 'nature' on the piece of land, it seems appropriate that the building faces up to and the architects take advantage of the tree-lined fence, conceptualising the schematic arrangement of the project as being about the experience of moving away from car park to the greenery beyond. The snugness of the plot's boundary is accentuated by carefully positioned Antony Gormley-designed bollards (versions of those placed by his own studio as part of a 1994 £60 million Peckham regeneration project), the cast iron treated in the same way as the building's cladding, their orange bulging forms a bit of fun against the site's dull backdrop.

You enter the centre through a courtyard – small but providing a vital threshold – in

The cwtych – Welsh for both a cubby hole and a cuddle – is a timber-lined alcove that can be shut off from the centre entirely



which a tree has been carefully planted by landscape designer Cleve West. This creates a sense of privacy from the onset, separating one from direct interface with the overlooking reception. The architects were keen to disconnect the experience of arrival from that of a generic health centre in order to be welcoming, and the positioning of the tree was part of a narrative where, says Jones, 'the trees have been taken away and then revealed back to you'.

Once through the courtyard, you pass the accessible WC to the left, and immediately face the 'kitchen table' – the heart of every Maggie's. At 240m<sup>2</sup>, Dow Jones' building is smaller than a typical Maggie's, yet it met the brief by taking out the 'library'. Therefore what remains is essentially three main therapy rooms surrounding the kitchen in cascading scales; small to medium to large. The beams of the ceiling's underside slant towards the trees at the back and away from the car park, almost encouraging you to move towards them. Jones describes the experience 'as part of a narrative connecting you to the







landscape' – as well as continuing to make clear connections to mountains through the ceiling folds.

Spatially, the scheme is conceptualised as a negotiation between 'wooden objects and space'. This is immediately encapsulated by a sort of solid timber-faced chimney structure in the kitchen. This is soon identified as the 'cwttch', the first such space in a Maggie's. 'Cwttch', Welsh for both a 'cubbyhole' and a 'cuddle' or 'hug', is a word that intrinsically evokes a sense of home. Jones describes it as 'like a space under the stairs', riffing on the idea of 'from space to embrace'. This timber-lined, tiny alcove provides just enough space to lie down. It can be shut off from the centre entirely, giving an experience that can only be compared to camping or meditation, providing an individualised relationship with the sky peeking through a high rooflight. On the wall, two drawings by artist Sean Edwards open up like a book, while a thick curtain acoustically screening the door is made out of a Welsh fabric, double-sided to feature two reverse patterns. A unique space in its physicality, it feels mentally restorative.

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associated with temporariness – Douglas fir and corrugated metal – the building feels hard-wearing and solid. This is intentional and helps maintain the desired retreat-like quality. A caravan-like building wouldn't have the same resolve. It's also perhaps a reaction to the uncertainty of its planned permanent replacement – reflecting our own political and economic climate. The architects used the relatively low budget construction method of timber frame and OSB, but with nice finishes, spending money on the things that matter such as furniture, soft furnishings and crockery. The lighting consists of simple light bulbs hanging off purple wires, a wink of fun and quirkiness; though from a sustainability and longevity point of view, perhaps a bit of thought to reuse and design for deconstruction would have been good.

The stories that the art tells constantly remind of the project's purpose. Dow Jones commissioned curator Mike Tooby to choose the building's artwork, which will be rotated every couple of years. They met at a screening of *My Brief Eternity: Ar Awyr Le*, a short film featuring the artist Osi Rhys Osmond, whose mixed-media psychogeographical painting *Self Portrait* (2015) was to become the focal piece of the centre – and was gifted just before



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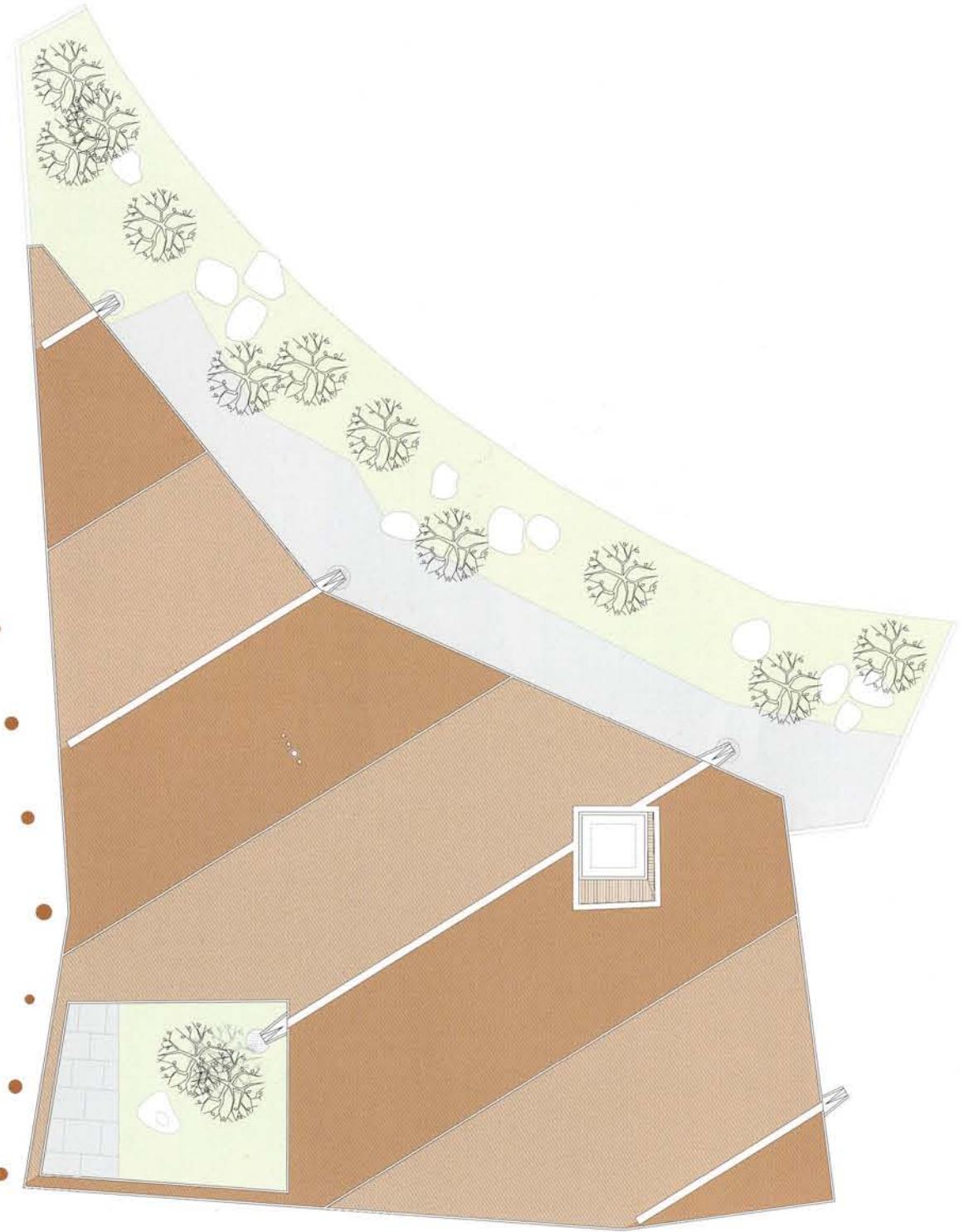
he himself died of cancer in 2015. An overlaying of his memories, the piece coincidentally features a mountain covered in orange bracken in the background. As Osmond says in the film, his art was part of his 'way of dealing with what may seem a hopeless experience'. One hopes the centre's current sense of familiarity and homeliness gives some indication as to what the building will feel like in the long run – sensitive to its cause. It feels like a lovely piece of experiential architecture but not overwhelming in any sense. On a busy day, there seems to be a good variety of spaces with lots of opportunity for privacy and serenity – curtains can be drawn over glazed doors in every room. It's secretive; it turns its back on the outside world; and, as one person pointed out to me, 'you cannot see the hospital from it'.







Ground floor plan

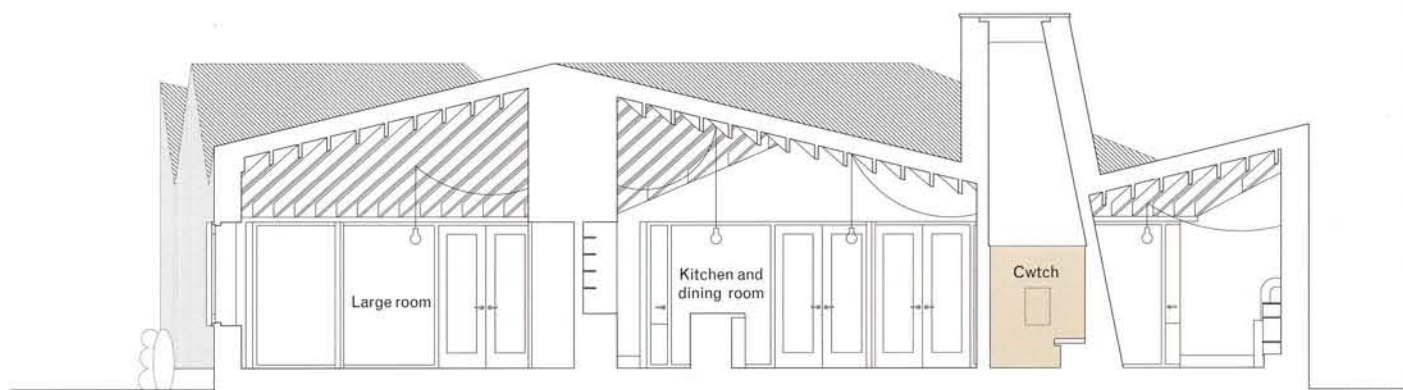


Roof plan



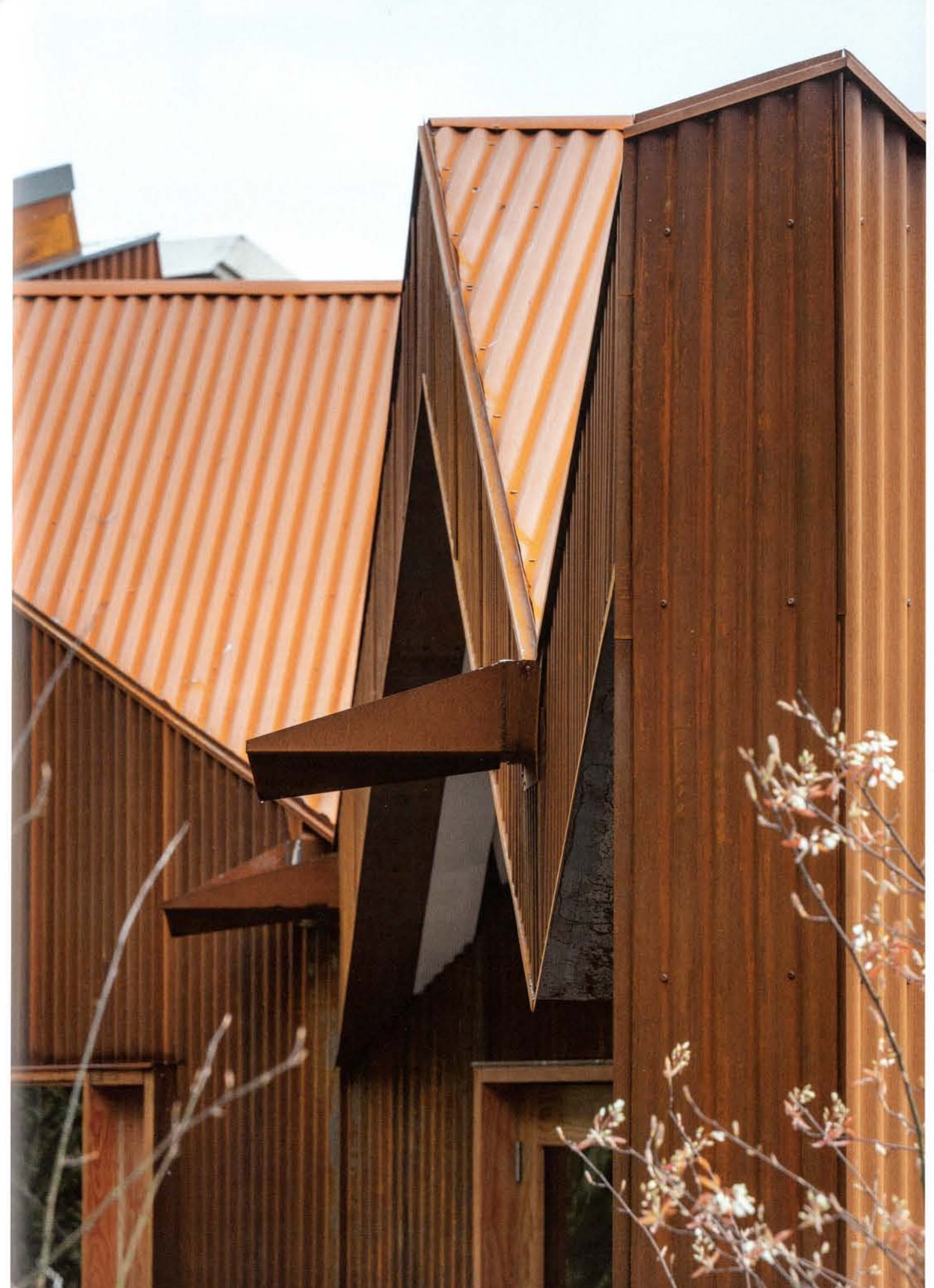


Section A-A



Section B-B

0 0.5m







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## Client's view

Architects often acknowledge that the more constraints they have, the better the building – and we have to say that this is absolutely borne out for our newest centre which opens very shortly at Velindre Cancer Hospital in Cardiff.

A number of visitors to Maggie's Swansea have travelled the 40 miles or so from the Cardiff area and we were desperate to create a similar facility at Velindre. However, finding a suitable site was a challenge in itself. Possibly the only viable site in the entire hospital campus was eventually located, though this oddly shaped site was hemmed in by car park, perimeter road and boundary fence. Add to this our very demanding Maggie's brief which calls for our buildings to be designed to provide hope and inspiration for all those affected by cancer, then the challenge was hugely increased.

We need not have worried! Alun Jones and Biba Dow have responded by creating for us a building that seems to relish the challenge, and which finds virtue from those enormous constraints. The building provides the anti-stress that our visitors need, one that is so light and airy, and which opens to the totally unexpected and beautifully planted garden created by garden designer Cleve West.

Chris Watson, property director, Maggie's Cancer Centres

## Engineer's view

The form of the Maggie's Centre is an interesting combination of being simple yet complex. It appears from certain angles to be geometrically complicated, but when you rationalise it to a series of pitched roofs at an angle to the plan the resolution becomes quite straightforward. The design of the structural frame was driven by the desire to acknowledge this fact and to achieve something that would lead to a simple construction process.

The primary structure is formed from a simple stick frame. The steel beams, which define the ridges and valleys of the roof form, are supported by a mix of local steel columns and sheathed timber infill panels which provide racking stability. Prefabrication of both the steel frame and the structural timber racking panels was developed to reduce site construction time. A detailed three-dimensional CAD model of the frame and collaboration between the steel framing contractor, the timber framing and the architect, meant site modifications were minimised.

Foundations were rationalised into a shallow raft, reducing interaction with local site services and detailed appropriately to accommodate the volume-change potential of the clay ground conditions.

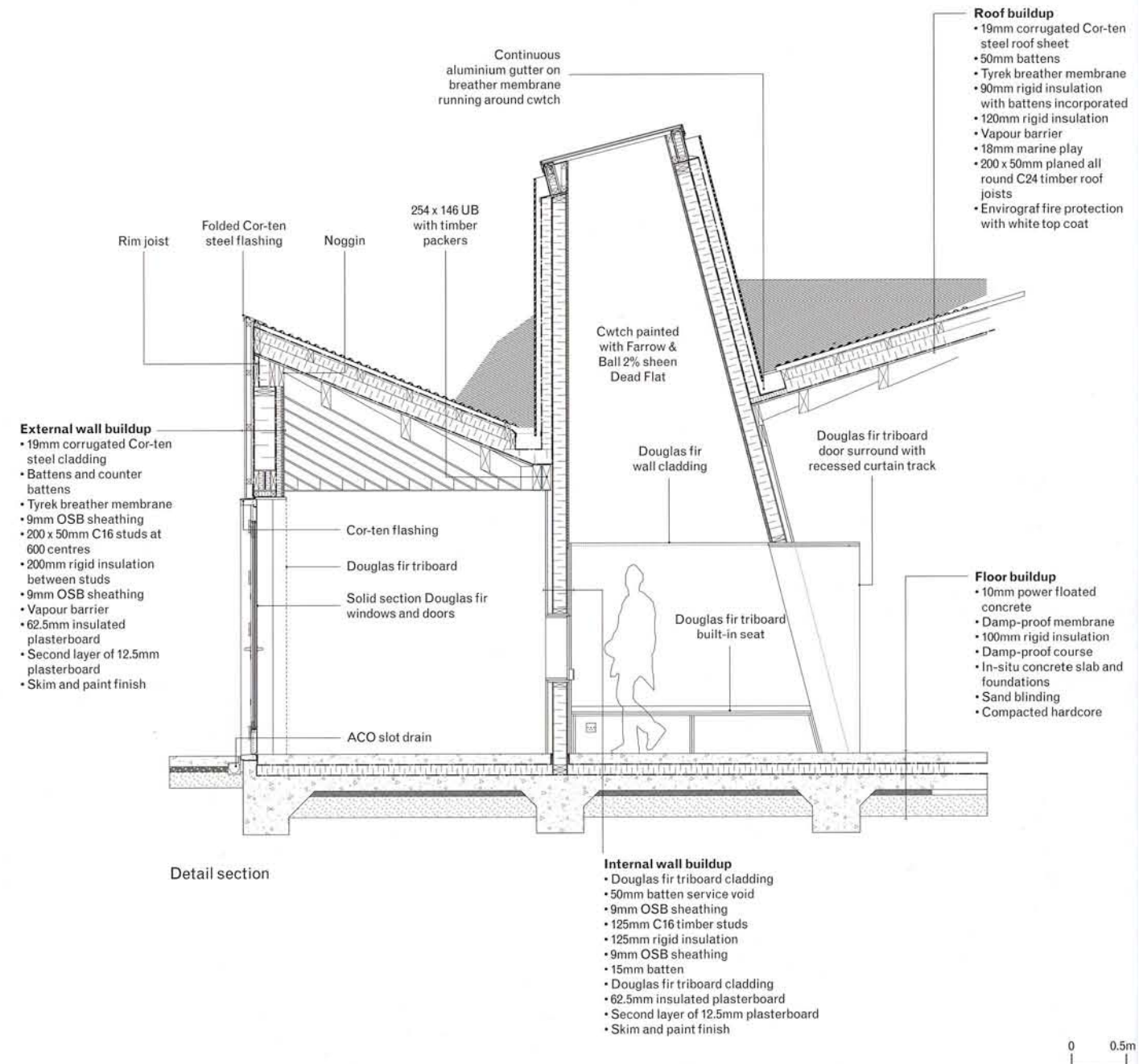
James Still, structural engineer, Momentum Structural Engineers

## Performance data

On-site energy generation Nil  
Heating and hot water load 98.6kWh/m<sup>2</sup>/yr  
Total energy load 165.6kWh/m<sup>2</sup>/yr  
Carbon emissions (all) 27.4kgCO<sub>2</sub>eq/m<sup>2</sup>  
Airtightness at 50pa 3m<sup>3</sup>/hr/m<sup>2</sup>  
Overall thermal bridging heat transfer coefficient (Y-value) 0.025W/m<sup>2</sup>K  
Overall area-weighted U-value 0.25W/m<sup>2</sup>K

## Project data

Start on site April 2018  
Completion March 2019  
Gross internal floor area 240m<sup>2</sup>  
Construction cost Undisclosed  
Architect Dow Jones Architects  
Structural engineer Momentum  
M&E consultant Mott MacDonald  
Quantity surveyor RPA Cardiff  
Project manager Chris Watson, Maggie's  
CDM co-ordinator CDM Scotland  
Approved building inspector Butler & Young  
Main contractor Knox & Wells  
CAD software used Vectorworks  
Landscape design Cleve West  
Ceramic sign Pat O'Leary  
Glass fritting and fireplace tile design Linda Florence  
Bollards Antony Gormley  
Furniture Coexistence



## Working detail

We decided at a very early stage to make the walls and roof of the building from a single material in order to realise the conceptual idea of the building appearing to be a little mountain range.

We have been interested in corrugated steel for a long time, having spent many years walking in the hills of the area, which is where I grew up. Hill farmers of south Wales use it as a cover-all-bases material, for walls and roofs, fencing and sheep-folds; it is so ingrained in the texture of the landscape it seemed an obvious choice for the building.

We were also very aware of the interim nature of the building, and so wanted to make a building that would be very cost effective and quick to build. So we used a prefabricated timber frame system of OSB and softwood, which we insulated beyond current part L requirements, then wrapped the whole form with Cor-ten corrugated steel sheet.

The building's interior makes a distinction between perimeter walls and internal furniture walls, which subdivide the spaces. The perimeter is simply lined with

plasterboard, while the furniture walls are clad with Douglas fir triboard from Tilly in Austria.

The placement of the Douglas fir objects makes a deep spatial relationship with the landscape and serves to frame views through the building.

The building sits on a power-floated concrete floor slab, which drifts out into the landscape to make a terrace and conclude the idea of having a clear connection to what limited garden space was available.

Alun Jones, director, Dow Jones Architects