

MAKING THE RIGHT CONNECTIONS

Deep in the woods of Sussex, Piers Smerin has replaced a rickety summerhouse with a home that truly connects with its idyllic setting, writes **Ellis Woodman**

Pictures by Tim Crocker

Swethaws Wood in East Sussex is a 22-acre estate of protected woodland, now enclosed by fields but which was once connected to Ashdown Forest. The land here is rolling and cut across by streams whose colour betrays the earth's iron content — an attribute registered in the name of the road by which Sweethaws is reached, Redbridge Lane. In the 1920s, the estate's owners built a plywood summerhouse a short distance beyond the front gate and dammed the stream that ran alongside to form a pond. Around it they planted bamboo, rhododendrons and azalea, forming a curiously suburban threshold to the deep woodland beyond.

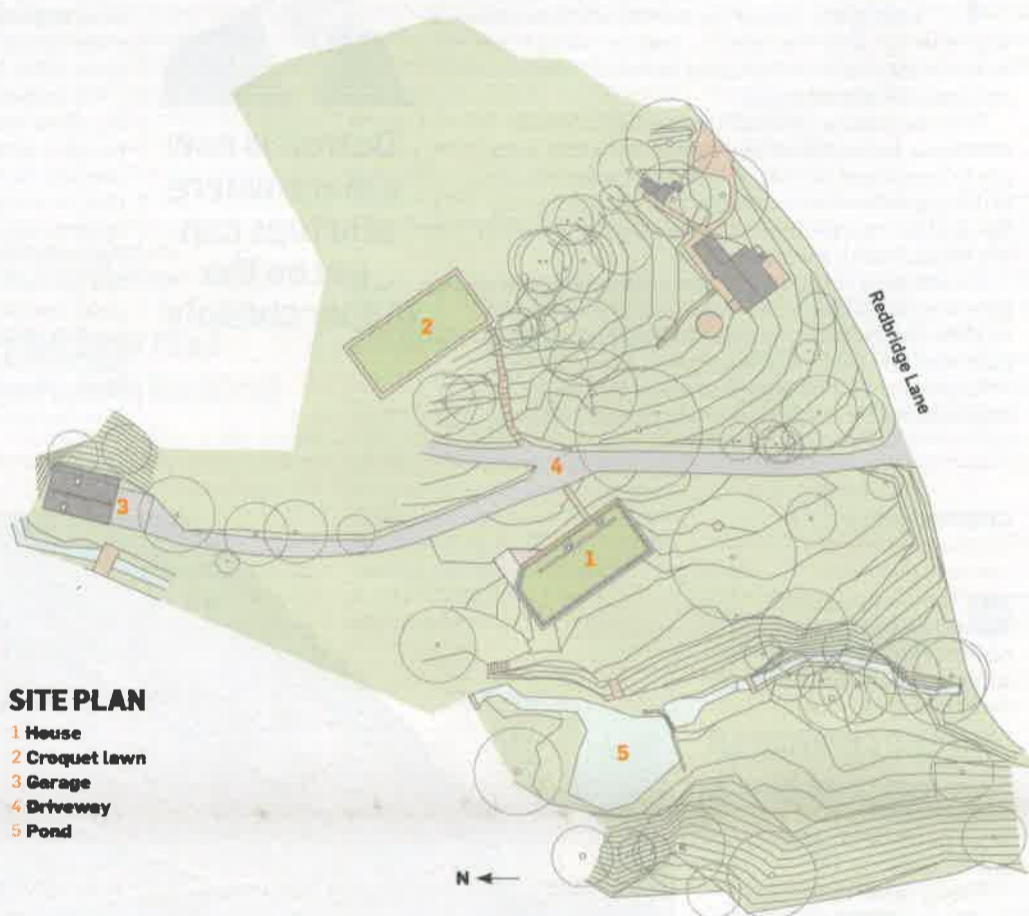
Piers Smerin's clients bought the site four years ago, by which point the summerhouse was on its last legs and the garden and wood had become significantly

overgrown. The planners required little persuasion of the merits of their proposal to rip down the summerhouse, build a new home for their family of five and institute a woodland management plan for the larger site.

They did, however, ask that the new house occupy the site of the demolished one: a condition that has ensured it already enjoys an easy relationship to the mature landscape that surrounds it. It stands close to the base of the narrow valley in which Sweethaws nestles but has still had to negotiate a change of level of three metres from one side of its site to the other. Smerin has exploited this by distributing the accommodation over three storeys, only two of which are visible from the entrance on the uphill side. Here, we are confronted by a facade clad in corten steel, a material that

references the colour of the stream but which the architect had been keen to explore since his former practice, Eldridge Smerin, built a house neighbouring John Winter's similarly-clad home in Highgate. Smerin's facade presents a still more taut effect than Winter achieved, its panels having been glued onto corten top-hat sections, enabling the joints to be reduced to a mere 5mm. Triple-glazed windows, specified with the outer pane bonded to the frame, maintain the flush appearance.

Corten has also been employed for a bridge that straddles between the driveway and the front door, its cantilevered form offering a premonition of the house itself. This too is characterised by its projection away from the slope. Its structure is a hybrid one: part in-situ concrete, part steel. Anchoring



SITE PLAN

- 1 House
- 2 Croquet lawn
- 3 Garage
- 4 Driveway
- 5 Pond



The corten steel-faced east facade.

A **Vierendeel truss** enables the pool to open onto the landscape unobstructed.



The west-facing terrace is suspended by stainless-steel cables.

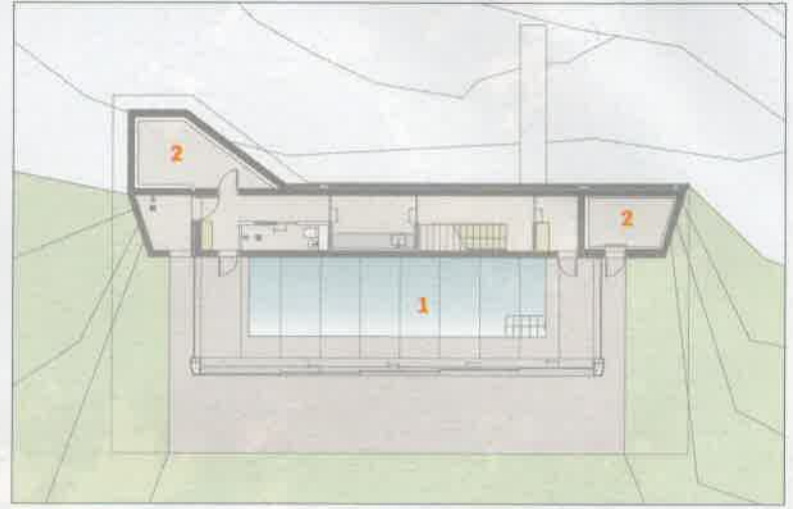


The upper ground floor living space.

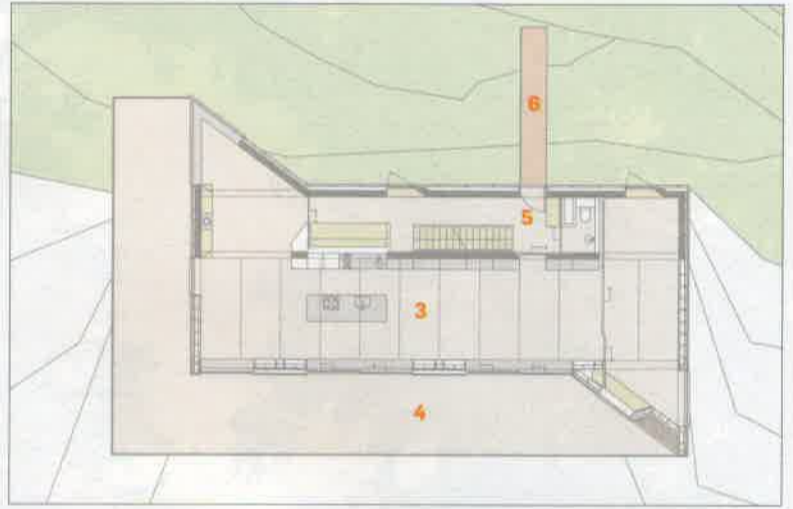


The lower ground level swimming pool.

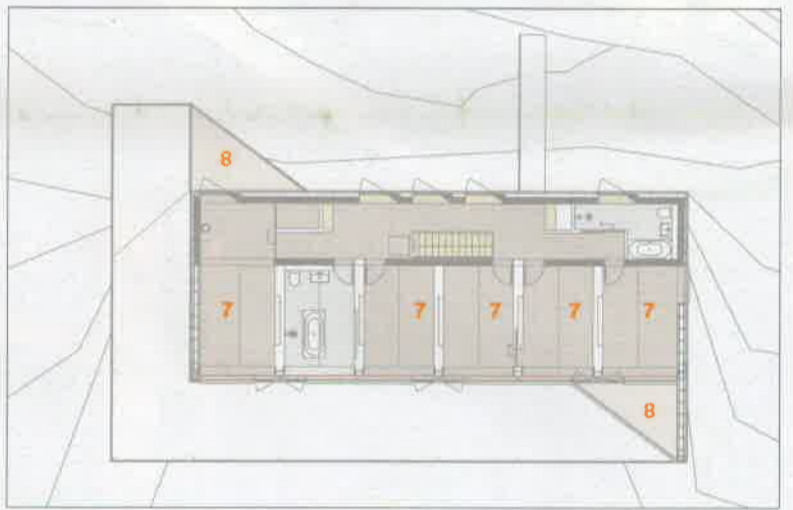
LOWER GROUND FLOOR



UPPER GROUND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR



- 1 Pool room
- 2 Plant
- 3 Kitchen/living area
- 4 Terrace
- 5 Main entrance
- 6 Bridge
- 7 Bedroom
- 8 Balcony

SECTION



The terrace wraps around the house's north elevation.



the building in the ground, the concrete element forms a swimming pool at the lowest level before extending up the building's height as two parallel walls accommodating stairs and generous corridors. This circulation zone extends along the rear of the corten-faced wall, but beyond it the structure reverts to steel.

The change has been motivated by a desire to maximise the interior's exposure to the landscape that lies to the west. The facade on this side of the building comprises a 16m-wide Vierendeel truss propped only at its end points. The swimming pool can therefore enjoy an unobstructed relationship with the landscape by way of a continuous expanse of full-height sliding glass doors.

The floors above are also generously glazed, but areas of wall faced in Thermowood cladding — as all external wall surfaces are, save for the corten elevation — incorporate the Vierendeel's vertical members. Glazing runs from floor to ceiling on all levels but the width of panels diminishes from floor to floor. The sliding doors — a particularly slim-sectioned product manufactured by Keller — are three metres wide at pool level and two on the primary living floor above. On the bedroom storey at the top,

all glass is fixed — ventilation being provided by Thermowood-faced opening vents — while in the interests of economy, the panel width has been reduced to a metre.

It is not just the glazing that ensures the interior enjoys a direct relationship with the landscape. A wide terrace wraps the house's west and north elevations, a structure that has been hung off the far projecting roof by 15mm-diameter stainless-steel rods. The strong horizontal emphasis introduced by these decks counterpoints the pronounced topography, the relationship to the steeply rising farmland to the west being particularly dramatic. The fact that the covered terrace rises to six metres also lends the house a monumental expression that feels more than a little exotic amid the Sussex countryside.

There is certainly a strong North American flavour to proceedings, the house's form language being traceable back to the post-war work of Marcel Breuer, while its scale and expansiveness bears comparison with the more lavishly conceived residences of Gwathmey Siegel and Richard Meier.

Despite the vivid expression of its structural diagram, the design also makes provision for the episodic. The shift between wood and corten cladding is

The high terrace lends the house a monumental expression that feels more than a little exotic

perhaps one more idea than the house altogether requires but there is a welcome variety of material and spatial experience within. The pool room has a particularly pungent character thanks to the specification of a dark, granular screed that covers both the floor and the surface of the pool itself.

The house's upper floors comprise precast concrete planks, the underside of which are left exposed so no bright reflection disrupts the pool's glassy black surface. The effect is maintained by the sparing specification of lighting: LEDs have been sited below the water and beneath the drainage grilles around its perimeter but otherwise the room is unlit.

Smerin had hoped the timber cladding could be sourced from the surrounding woods — which, until the recent appointment of a woodsman, were still littered with trees that had been felled by the 1987 hurricane. The cost of drying proved prohibitive but he

has used locally sourced oak to construct the stair. Each tread comprises a single massive plank that has been cantilevered off the in-situ concrete spine wall by concealed fixings. Stainless-steel rods threading from floor to ceiling offer protection around the perimeter and a visual link to the hanging structure of the terrace outside.

The building's footprint — which is in large part dictated by the presence of the pool — may be fundamentally linear but the plan has been elaborated at either end, militating against an overly extruded expression. On the opposing south-west and north-east corners the volume has been teased out to create areas of triangular footprint.

On the living floor — which is essentially one large room — these provide spaces of a valuable intimacy, while on the floor above they serve as balconies: one for the master bedroom and the other shared between the bedrooms of the two oldest children.

Smerin has also reshaped the landscape immediately around the house, stripping out non-native plants and seeding meadow grass to give the site the more naturalistic appearance of a clearing in a typical Wealden woodland. However, he has also reinstated a croquet terrace which had been built at the same

time as the summerhouse on high ground to the east. From here we can see across the house's sedum-finished roof, which has been equipped with a battery of photovoltaic cells and solar thermal panels supplying pre-warmed water to the heating systems of both the house and the pool.

Smerin's clients also originally wanted to install a woodchip boiler in the garage that stands 100 metres into the wood, and went as far as installing an insulated pipework link. However, it transpired that current technology would not yet allow them to economically transform wood harvested on the site into chips, forcing a reversion to a conventional LPG-powered boiler. The garage has been rebuilt as a larger and sleeker version of its former self, providing space for a future woodchip facility at ground level and shoehorning a guest bedroom into the double-pitched roof. The timber cladding and triple-glazed windows of the main house make a reappearance but the internal fit-out is more straightforward, while the roof-slates and even Velux windows were recycled from the demolished buildings.

Smerin's clients live in London during the week, joining their children — the older of whom are day boarders — at Sweethaws

for weekends. However, having spent their first summer there, they are now reassessing their life plans and are looking to move to Wiltshire to be near another school. Sweethaws has been put up for sale with a guide price of £2.5 million — a surprising outcome given that the project has evidently been a labour of love.

The construction process was not easy, with Smerin being required to terminate the contract of the original builder after its financial difficulties resulted in it all but downing tools. His clients are clearly made of strong stuff, however, and are currently considering building another home. Given the quality of Smerin's work at Sweethaws, I don't doubt that he will find himself presented with another commission if they do.

PROJECT TEAM

Architect
Smerin Architects
Client Private owner
Quantity surveyor
AB Associates
Structural engineer
Lyons O'Neill
Building services engineer & sustainability consultant
Mendick Waring
Lighting design
Light Tecnica