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A SIMPLE VICTORY

Mitchell Taylor Workshop's boarding house for a Bristol school shows a quiet ambition and commitment, writes *Kaye Alexander*. Photography by *Edmund Sumner*



'There's the money shot!' says Piers Taylor, as we pull up in a narrow lane on the edge of Bristol, where I have come to see Mitchell Taylor Workshop's new boarding house at Badminton School for girls. The tableau that practice director Taylor has framed for me in the car windscreen is an arresting sight: the untreated timber-clad first and second floors of the building provocatively cantilevering over the school's stone boundary wall; the project's bulk, and with it all notion of scale and context, obscured by a tree. This is the view where the many little victories of the project come together.

Bath-based Mitchell Taylor Workshop was formed in 2005, and its Moonshine residence,

home to Taylor, won this year's AJ Small Projects Awards (AJ 15.01.09). This building, named Sanderson House, has proved testing for the firm, Mitchell Taylor Workshop secured the commission on its formation in 2005, but two years of negotiating a site strategy in the already cluttered campus delayed any real design work. Project architect Kris Eley describes the multi-headed client (bursar, board of governors, parents, headteacher and boarding mistresses) as 'a difficult beast to satisfy'. And despite Hugh Casson, architecture director of the 1951 Festival of Britain, being responsible for the design of the school's 1960s-built library, Mitchell Taylor Workshop was dealing with >>

an essentially conservative client, evidenced by the prim grounds in which the campus sits.

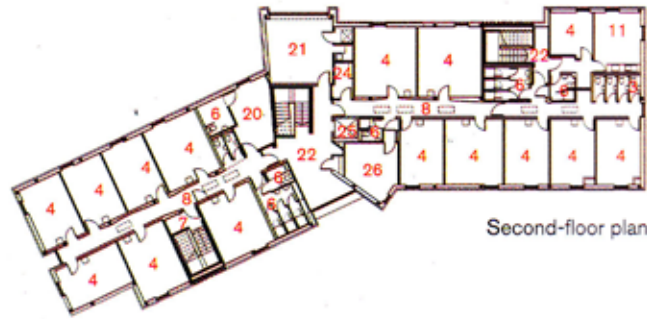
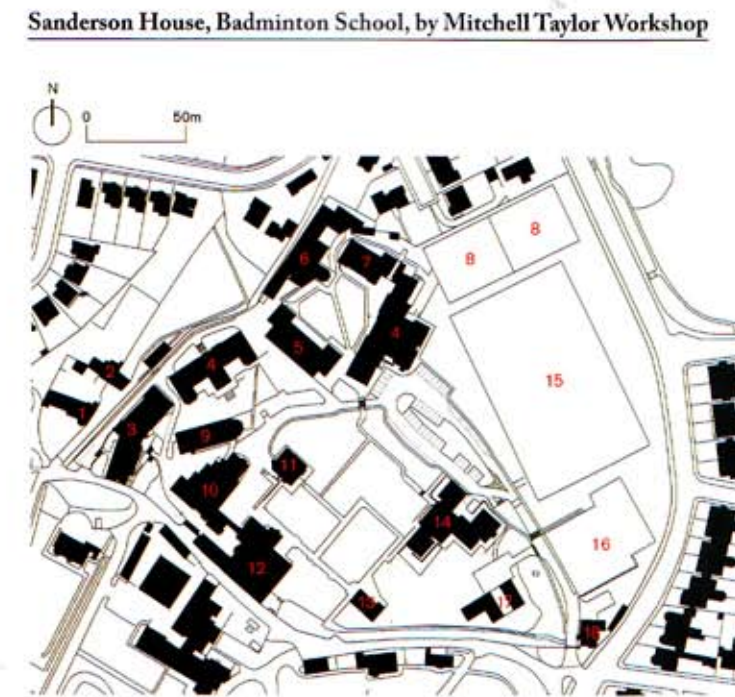
Given the brief – a £2.8 million budget for 94 three and four-bedroom dormitories, four staff apartments and two ‘gap year’ en-suite rooms – the three-storey rectilinear form of Sanderson House is a pragmatic necessity. The austerity of the facade is alleviated by shadows, cast by the eyelash-like solar-shading devices and the dancing overlap-line of the Siberian larch cladding. The latter disguises the junction of first and second floors, seemingly adding a depth greater than its 25mm thickness.

The untreated, close-grained larch has a 75-year-life expectancy, addressing the school’s dual concerns of lack of permanence and heavy maintenance. The larch acts as a rainscreen, so the practice was spared a difficult roof junction, but it was determined not to resort to a default capping solution – the architectural equivalent of drawing a thick cartoon outline around the flat roof to define where the building ends and sky begins. Instead, the raw edges form a clipped border, the slight irregularity of which gives a softness to the grey-sky-coloured Sarnafil parapet behind, containing the sedum roof.

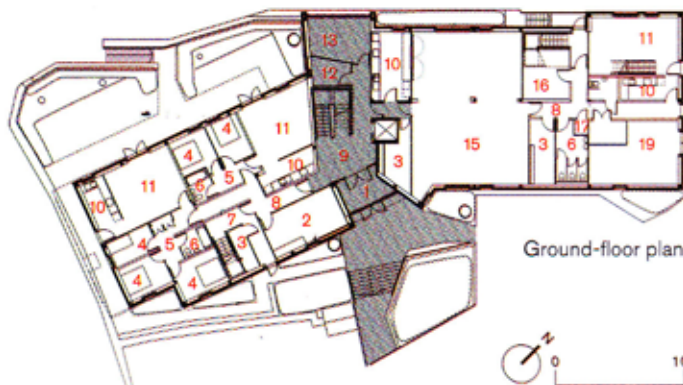
This blurring tactic was to be repeated where the building meets the ground, by turning the brick of the single-storey plinth into a surrounding hard landscape. But by this stage, the client felt that the architect’s job was done, and it was their time to take over. So, in went the tarmac and border planting.

The client’s vague request for ‘a sustainable building’ was seized upon by Mitchell Taylor Workshop as a vehicle for satisfying its own design agenda. While Badminton School may not appreciate the subtle detailing required to make what is essentially a lightweight box perform well energy-wise, it did grasp the realities of natural ventilation and lighting – a combined-heat-and-power unit that is capable of powering most of the school, and unrestricted internal spaces created by absorbing the steel frame into super-insulated walls. >>

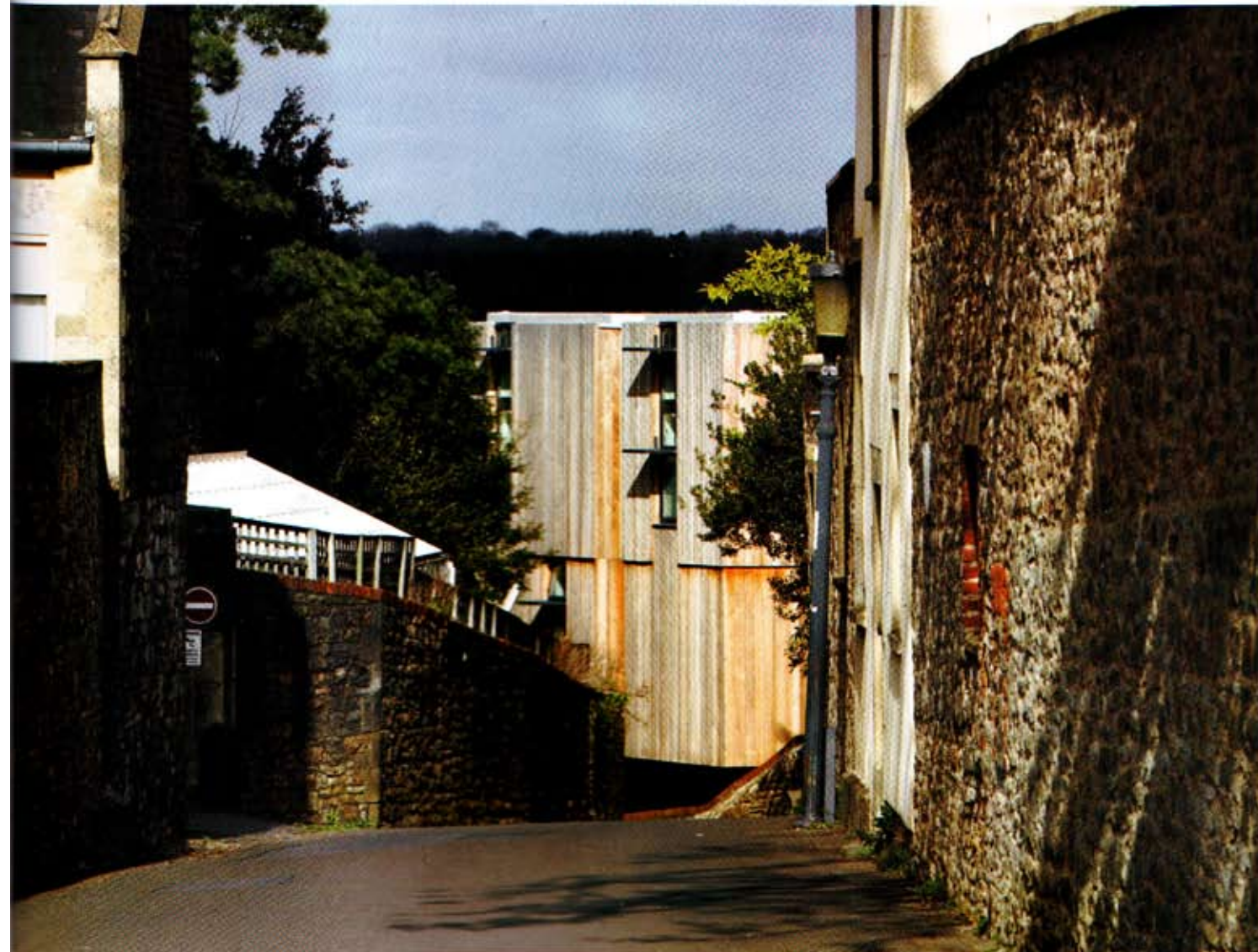
The practice seized on a vague request for sustainability as a way of satisfying its agenda

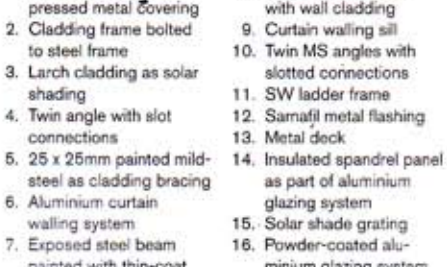
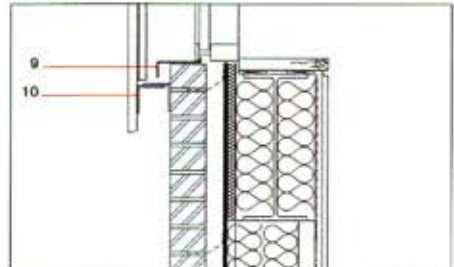
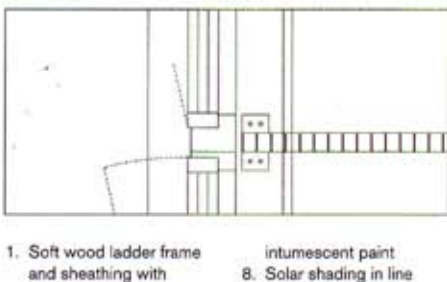
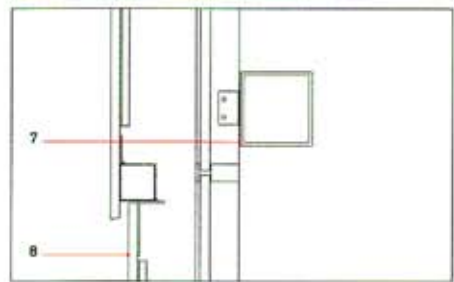
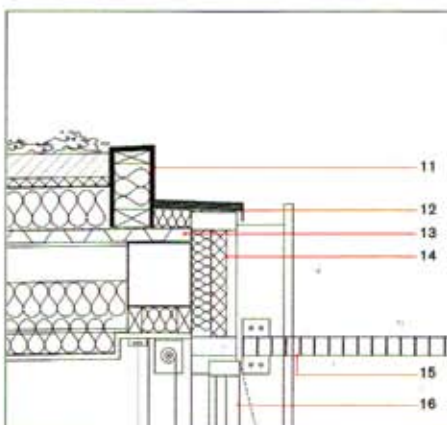
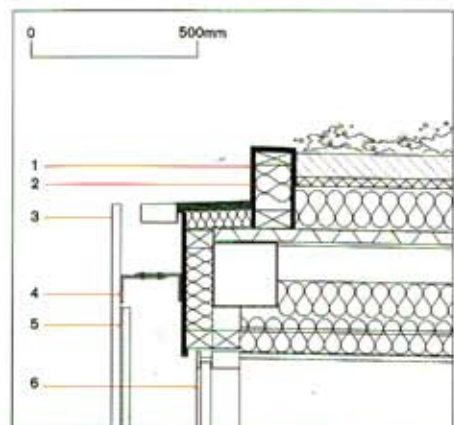


1. Entrance lobby
2. Laundry
3. Store
4. Bedroom
5. Hall
6. Bath/WC
7. Stair core
8. Corridor
9. Entrance foyer
10. Kitchen
11. Living room
12. Office
13. Meeting room
14. Lobby
15. Common room
16. Trunks room
17. Phone
18. IT
19. Plant
20. Gap-year student room
21. Social room
22. Landing
23. Roof access
24. Cleaner
25. Lift
26. Duty room



Above left View of Sanderson House from the north-west, showing the residential context
Above right The untreated Siberian larch cladding breaks over windows on the first and second floors
Right Piers Taylor’s ‘money shot’ - the view where all the small successes of the building come together





1. Soft wood ladder frame and sheathing with pressed metal covering
2. Cladding frame bolted to steel frame
3. Larch cladding as solar shading
4. Twin angle with slot connections
5. 25 x 25mm painted mild-steel as cladding bracing
6. Aluminium curtain walling system
7. Exposed steel beam painted with thin-coat
8. Solar shading in line with wall cladding
9. Curtain walling sill
10. Twin MS angles with slotted connections
11. SW ladder frame
12. Samafil metal flashing
13. Metal deck
14. Insulated spandrel panel as part of aluminium glazing system
15. Solar shade grating
16. Powder-coated aluminium glazing system

Inside, the plan consists of double-loaded corridors on the first and second-floors, serving bedrooms and staff apartments. The space created between the two 'wings' functions as circulation and social space. Social rooms benefit from spectacular views across Bristol through full-height windows.

The client was in complete control of the interiors, and imposed its choice of materials, furniture, lighting and carpets. Mitchell Taylor Workshop's proposed colour scheme was toned down and bedroom doors are now the only splashes of colour. The school's standard-issue oak beds even dictated the placement of windows in the facade.

One telling example of the degree of compromise on the interiors is in the dormitory corridors. Despite double-loaded passageways, the architect created small thresholds by tapering walls towards and away from bedroom doorways. An ugly shadow-gap accentuates the conflict between this non-standard geometry and the square panels of the suspended ceiling.

This project is admittedly full of 'might-have-beens', but Badminton School should be applauded for commissioning Mitchell Taylor Workshop – a small, relatively unknown firm. Bristol City Council's planning department too was cooperative: on a site visit, planners were persuaded that the building they had previously ruled too close to the boundary wall should instead oversail it. But Mitchell Taylor Workshop could have done more to pacify the building's neighbours. One NIMBY-type local threw a stone at the building, damaging the powder-coated aluminium panel of a first-floor window – an as yet unrepaired blemish on Taylor's 'money shot'. ■

Start on site date July 2007

Contract duration 14 months

Form of contract Traditional JCT ICD 05

Gross external floor area 1,909m²

Total cost £2.8 million

Cost per m² £1,550

Client Badminton School Governors

Architect Mitchell Taylor Workshop

Structural engineer/planning supervisor

Hyder Consulting

Services engineer RF & A Consultants

Quantity surveyor Peter Ballingall Associates

Timber cladding Russwood

Main contractor Carter Construction

Annual CO₂ emissions 33.9kg/m²

Clockwise from this image The front entrance of Sanderson House; Detail of the building's roof and cladding; The subtle curved detail of the second-floor corridor is marred by the awkward suspended ceiling; The austere facade is alleviated by solar shading