The Modern Timber House in the UK

New Paradigms and Technologies

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Sweethaws, Redbridge Lane, Sweethaws Wood, East Sussex (2013)
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Photographer: Tim Crocker

Into this neglected landscape stepped new owners who wished to demolish the decaying building and replace it with a home for their family of five, an aspiration acceded to by the local planners, providing that their design proposals would situate the house on the footprint of its predecessor and be accompanied by a woodland management plan for the larger site. The stipulated plot has a drop of three metres from front to back, a topographical condition that helped to orchestrate the house's accommodation: approached frontally on its elongated north-west face, the impression is of a flat-roofed two-storey dwelling, its lower ground floor being set into the site and largely invisible at this point. Attention, in any case, is more on the materiality of the building's facade and of the bridge leading to the house's entrance: Corten is the generic name given to a group of steel alloys developed to eliminate the need for painting and which form a stable rust-like appearance when exposed to the weather over a length of time. Nowadays, the material can be supplied in pre-weathered form and, in this location, its orange-tinged surface very obviously complements the hues of the landscape it faces onto.

The choice of material for the other three elevations to the house is very different. Looking back at Sweethaws from the bottom of the slope, the house appears as a continuous plate that has been folded twice to turn the ground floor through 90° to form the north-east facade and then turn it again to become the roof. This end elevation is clad from ground level to roof with vertically-fixed Thermowood®, a very durable modified timber (see chapter 4), its surface interrupted only by two very large, asymmetrically-placed and flush-mounted windows. From this viewpoint, the glazed exterior of the lower ground level of the house is visible beneath the exposed soffit of the ground floor's reinforced concrete slab which is cantilevered outwards to form a wide, building-length balcony. Above, the roof has a similarly wide cantilever, with 15mm diameter tensed steel rods dropping from its soffit to bring additional support to the balcony deck. Set back from this six metre-high covered balcony, the south-east facade of the house stands as a well-proportioned balance of the same timber cladding and storey-height triple-glazed window units. In turn, the south-west facade is an almost solid plane of vertically fixed Thermowood®, pierced only by a single door that leads onto the wraparound balcony.