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Walter Menteth

Two building studies: a colourful garden studio
and a concrete church-turned-art gallery
PLUS Ai Weiwei at Kunsthaus Bregenz

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Dune bug

A grass-topped refuge on the Essex coast brings sand, light and space to Walter Menteth's unique take on shape and colour, writes *Rory Olcayto*

My first encounter with a Walter Menteth building was in my own neighbourhood of Peckham. The bold, sculptural form of the supported housing scheme on Consort Road, amid the light-industrial mess of south-east London's badlands, was a reminder of how good design can turn nowhere into somewhere, space into place. Better

still the building sparkled – literally. The architect had laid vertical slabs of Tarmac, embedded with glistening aggregate, to enhance the white-rendered elevations. This, I thought, was damn good architecture, with an almost Peter Zumthor-like sensuous materiality: simple, imaginative, unexpected and brave.

Menteth's latest project, Dune, a studio in the garden of the Mowings

Above The fine, timber strip weatherboard cladding in Falun light red paint enhance Dune's distinctive look

house in Brightlingsea near Colchester and the focus of this study, is in many ways Peckham's extreme opposite. Where that project was tough, urban, monochrome and brownfield, Dune is a gentle refuge. Its bristling green-roof and render in a rainbow splash of colour sit in the midst of a fairytale landscape in the grounds of a large house. Yet once again, at first sight, the feeling is quite unique.

The site itself is beautiful. The Mowings towards the end of a country lane and because of the surrounding estuarine landscape, its context is defined by the strong horizontals of the sky, water and mud flats, and enjoys a sharp, eastern seaboard light.

The grounds are shaped by a series of terraces, the result of earlier sand excavation since planted to form a landscaped garden with woodland

areas. There are piles of bright orange and yellow sand next to this, which change in shape and colour as the seasons pass. A grass embankment forms the southern edge of the site, evoking sand dunes with its flowing shape. The studio is midway along the embankment, built directly above an existing garage. The ground level of this structure is nearly five metres below – a condition the architect has exploited.

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The building, now transformed with a splash of lime green paint, is essentially a traditional garden room, with a few extras. There are several distinct spaces within. Three of these are placed within the timber-laminated main room and comprise a north-lit painting studio, a window seat and storage archive, and a kitchenette. Menteth says this corner, an eyrie, is inspired by Ottoman houses, 'with >>

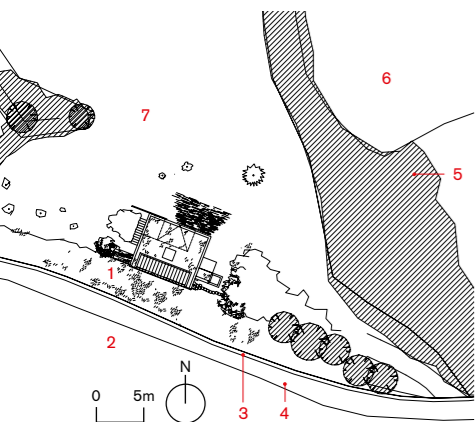
their windows over the water, fine views, low sills and upholstered benches'. The view here is not the Bosphorus of course, but the pretty Arcadian garden and the estuary beyond.

The studio is enclosed under a monopitch roof rising to the eastern corner with a clerestory at its apex. Such is the manner of detailing and its relationship to the overhanging soffit beyond that the ceiling appears to flow seamlessly out of the room.

Projecting south-east from this central room and served by a shallow flight of stairs, there is a top-lit washroom 'tower' nestling into woodland so one can 'shower among the bluebells,' as Menteth says. Its thin, vertiginous form stands in counterpoint to the main building, yet there is also a degree of resonance with the adjacent woodland tree trunks.

Between the tower and the main room there is a small balcony, a secluded external reading and painting space linked to the studio. To the south, and at a lower level, a 'linear conservatory' provides a wind lobby, potting shed and greenhouse for the garden. This space is built into the perimeter embankment and is earth sheltered. 'It sits outside the thermal shell of the main room as an interstitial space,' says Menteth.

The circulation works well and there is a genuine sense of revelation as the garden pathway routes through >>



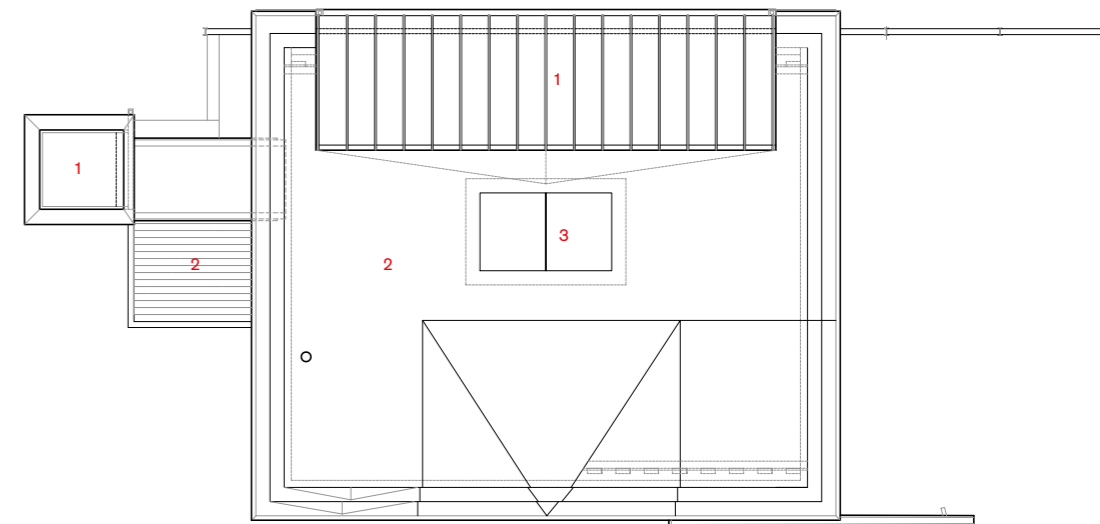
Location plan

1. Sandy bank
2. Field
3. Boundary fence
4. Lane
5. Sand workings
6. Lake
7. Garden

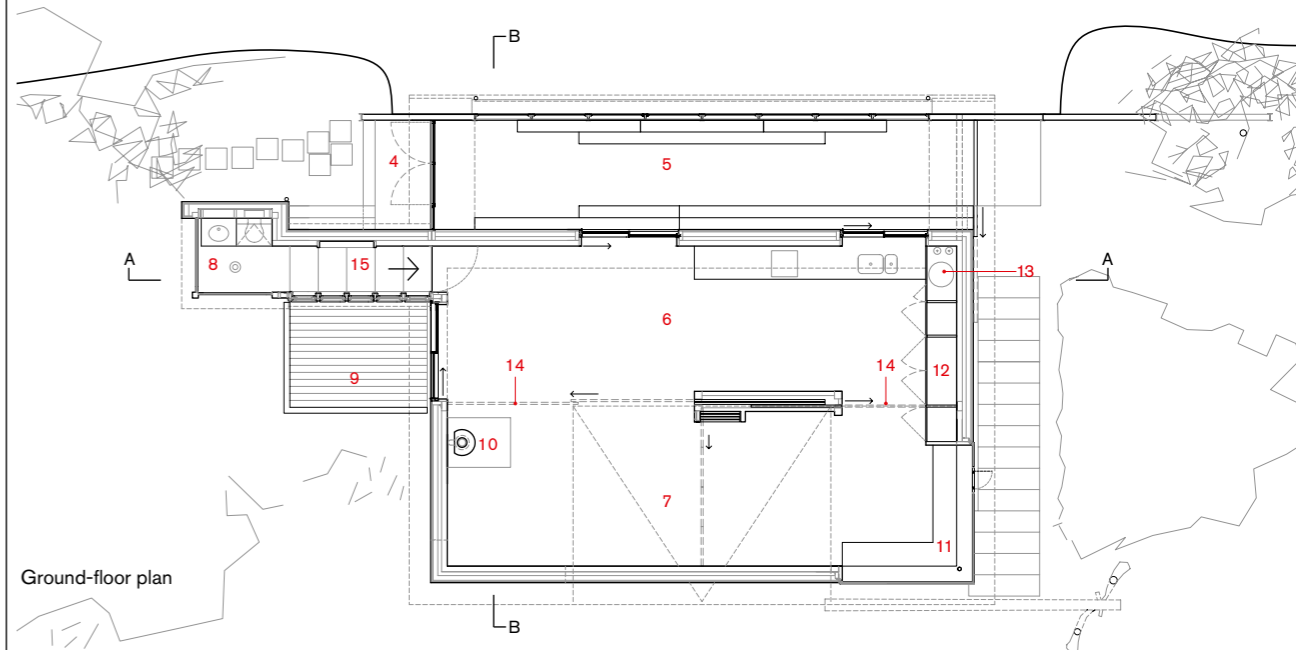


1. Rooflight
2. Landscaped roof
3. Evacuated solar tube thermal array
4. Entrance
5. Lobby/greenhouse
6. Kitchen/preparation
7. Living room
8. Shower room
9. Deck
10. Wood stove
11. Window seat
12. Storage wall
13. Solar cylinder
14. Sliding partitions
15. Stair
16. Forecourt
17. Garage
18. Duct

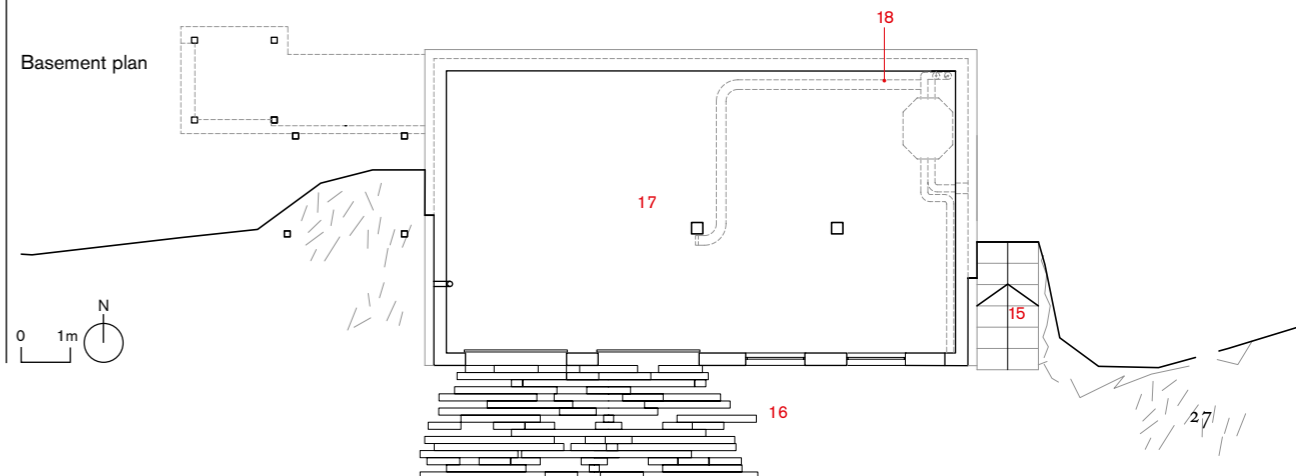
Roof plan



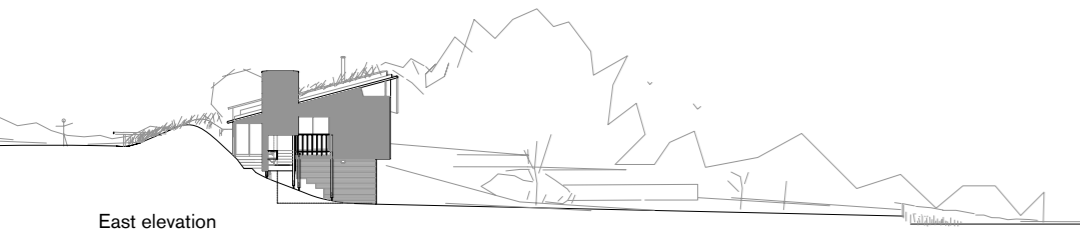
Ground-floor plan



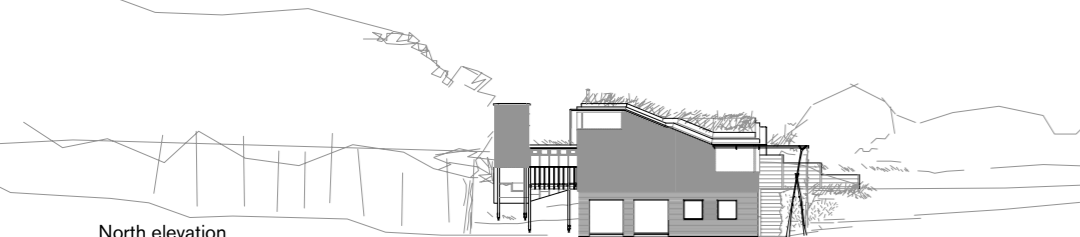
Basement plan



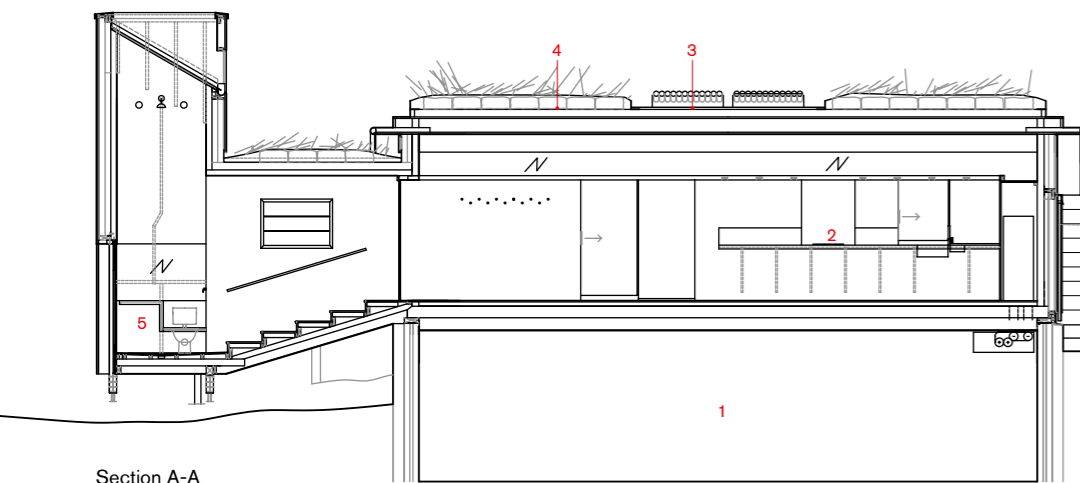
Top left The south-facing linear conservatory to the rear of the studio
Far bottom left North elevation seen from the garden of The Mowings
Far bottom right South elevation seen from lane



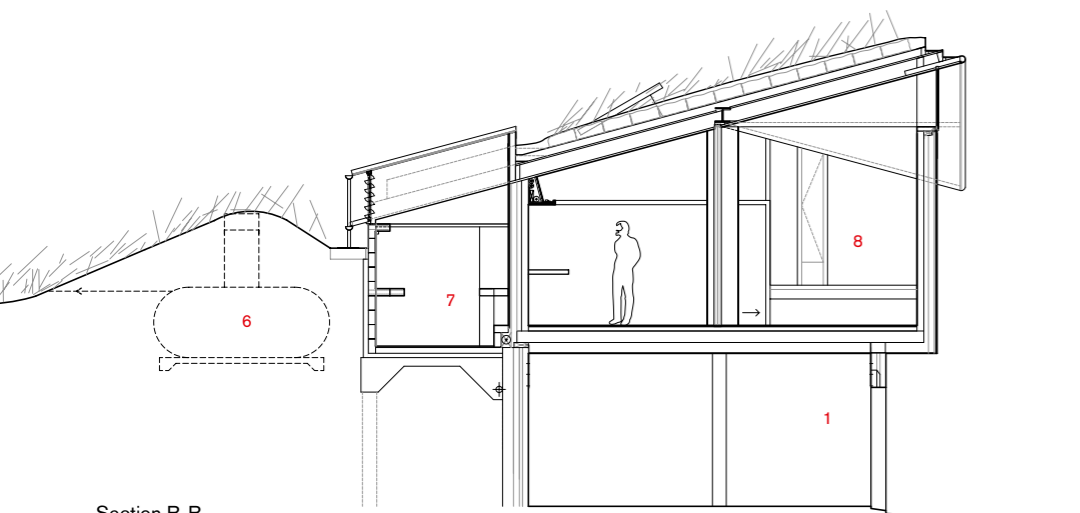
East elevation



North elevation



Section A-A



Section B-B

Main picture Main volume with wood stove, external deck and route to shower
Far right Stairs down to 'shower tower'

1. Garage
2. Kitchen
3. Solar thermal array
4. Landscaped roof
5. Shower room
6. Rainwater tank
7. Lobby/greenhouse
8. Living room

0 1m



the conservatory and spirals into the main volume. The undulating, freeform roof is planted with coastal grasses and resembles an abstracted sand dune. It forms a laminated, solid timber monocoque structure perforated by the rooflight parallel to the embankment.

This design and build contract has led to a few disappointments. An ingenious 'Polish gutter' – a hollowed out log – foxed the builders and was omitted, and the shower tower is compromised a little by standard sanitary ware. The garden path too, has been rerouted away from Menteth's original plot, which means less privacy in the shower should anyone decide to visit.

Are there any precedents? When pressed, Menteth, suggests Gerrit Rietveld's Summer Beach House, 'loose and aberrant from his usual style, sculptural and with multiple facades'; urban 'parasitic structures' and Zumthor, whose use of materials inspired the choice of weatherboard cladding.

The result is a unique, fresh take on contemporary Modernism, the likes of which you are unlikely to have seen before. ■

A bristling green-roof and render in a rainbow splash of colour



Top left Kitchen and preparation space in main volume
Below far left The Ottoman-style window overlooks planted garden and woods (**below left**)
Right Dune's distinctive detailing and aesthetics combine successfully on the west elevation



Credits

CLIENT	Undisclosed
ARCHITECT	Walter Menteth Architects
SITE ENGINEER	Richard F Gill & Associates
MAIN CONTRACTOR	Colne Valley Properties
LAMINATED TIMBER STRUCTURE	Eurban
ARCHITECT'S APPOINTMENT	August 2008 to RIBA Stage G
PLANNING SUBMISSION	October 2008
PLANNING GRANTED	November 2008
START ON SITE	June 2009
COST	Undisclosed
GROSS INTERNAL FLOOR AREAS	Main areas 81m ² Conservatory 26m ² Garage and garden storage (existing) 64m ² Total 171m ²
CONTRACT	The project was managed by the client with assistance from a one-person contractor
DOORS AND WINDOWS	Fineline Aluminium (1.2w/m ² K)
FIXED LIGHTS	Heat Mirror insulating glass units by IQ Glass (U-value of 0.58W/m ² K). Installed by CSG
LOUVRES	Naco Weatherbeta louvres by Ruskin Air Management
ROOFING	System by Protan Installed by Roofline Group
ROOF LANDSCAPING	BBS Green Roofing
INSULATION	Pavatherm Woodfibre Insulation & Sarking from Natural Building Technologies
SANITARY WARE	Ideal Standard
IRONMONGERY	Hillaldam Coburn
EXTERIOR WOOD TREATMENT	Falun paint in light red
STOVE AND BOILER	Monet wood burning stove and boiler by Hwam SOLAR THERMAL ARRAY AND SYSTEM CONTROLLER Kingspan Thermomax HP200

Total internal floor area (m ²)	U-value of doors & windows (W/m ² K)
171	1.2