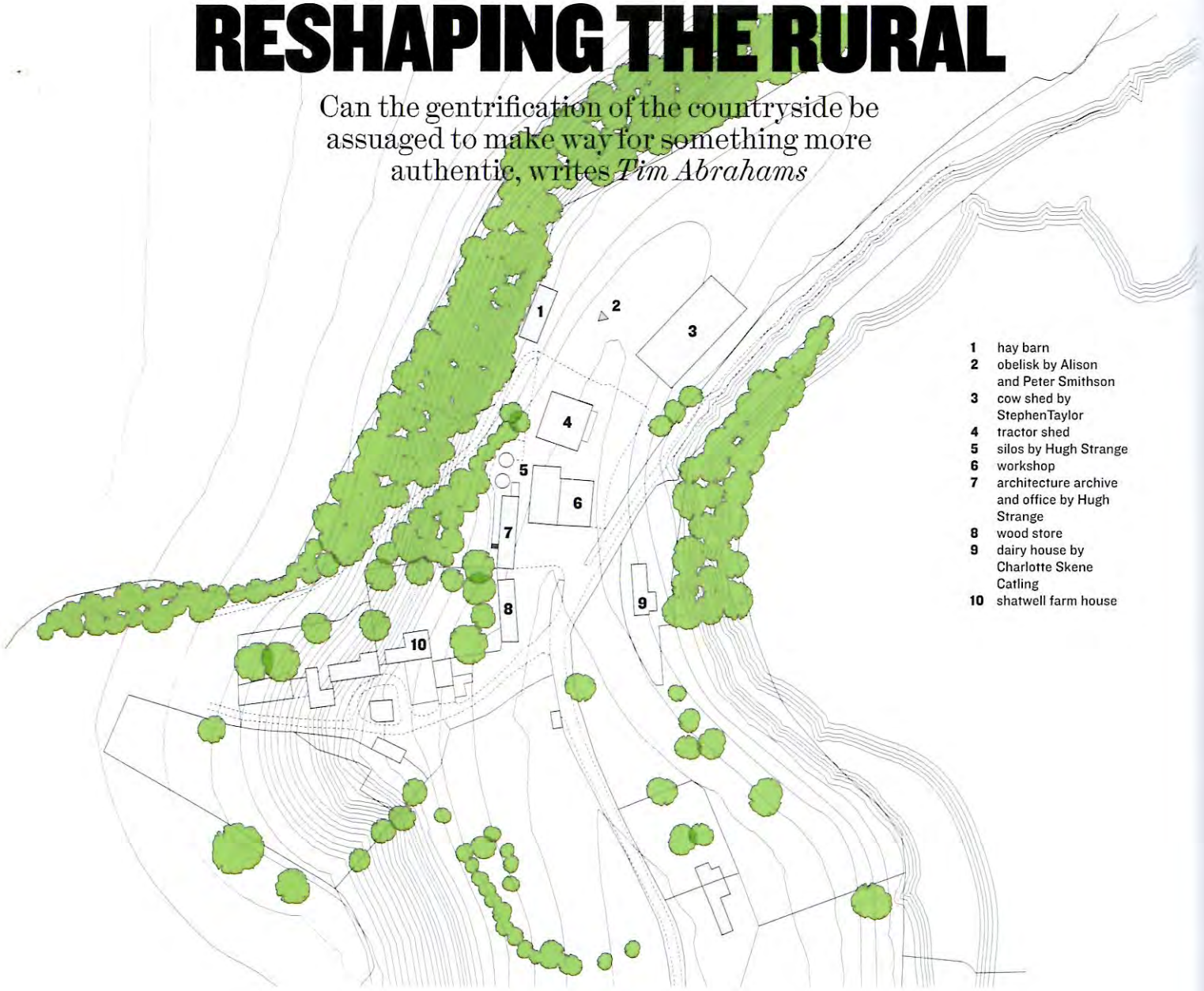
RESHAPING THE RURAL

Can the gentrification of the countryside be assuaged to make way for something more authentic, writes *Tim Abrahams*



1 hay barn
2 obelisk by Alison and Peter Smithson
3 cow shed by StephenTaylor
4 tractor shed
5 silos by Hugh Strange
6 workshop
7 architecture archive and office by Hugh Strange
8 wood store
9 dairy house by Charlotte Skene Catling
10 shatwell farm house

Niall Hobhouse, a thoughtful but irreverent patron of architecture, has a view on the north Somerset countryside: 'My basic position is that all of the south of England is part of the wider London conurbation. Everybody here is in denial – they want to believe they live in the country,' he says.

Sitting in the building that houses his archive of architectural drawings, he is outlining the process by which this farm is to accumulate a new series of architectural invention into a larger assembly, informed by a desire to express, more honestly, what the 'countryside' really is. How to do that?

Hobhouse's focus on what he calls the 'messy countryside' became a full-time project in 2014, when he sold his 850-acre estate at Hadspen (which can be seen from the farm) to a South African hotelier and moved himself and his burgeoning archive to Shatwell. This was effectively a return to the farm on which he had grown up. Although he ran the wider Hadspen estate (of which the farm was formerly part) for 30 years, he realised he was 'not terribly interested in being the squire'. Even though he did a great deal of work on the Grade II*-listed Hadspen House and its estate, he says 'the whole ensemble was very complete, in a way'.

Shatwell Farm less so. When Hobhouse began a conversion of the Dairy House, to the east of the farm, with the architect Charlotte Skene Catling, he realised the site was a better use of his energies –albeit initially in a more discreet way compared with the more recent, more public phase of building. The Dairy House was extended on the opposite side of the valley to the farm and is wrapped in horizontal timber louvres – an aesthetic that emerged from the timber cut on the estate being dried by stacking raw planks, separated by spacers to allow air circulation. One can read in it a seduction with the site taking hold and informing its future. In an astonishing bathroom on the first floor, for example, a ribbon window punctures the facade, framing a view of the landscape to the south of the site.



The move to Shatwell liberated Hobhouse in more ways than one – capital from the sale of the estate allowed him to pursue, in a more dedicated fashion, the creation of an archive of architectural drawings, one formed through his own interests and those of his foundation, Drawing Matter. Planners made it clear they would permit a change of use if the listing (in curtilage with the former farmhouse farther up the valley but not in Hobhouse's ownership) was observed. As a result, two walls of a dilapidated barn have been rescued and a pair of timber structures have been inserted – one for the archive, the other for an office – under a single roof. The building is constructed entirely of a single layer of solid cross-laminated timber with no lining of any kind.

It is not just an acquiescence to planning codes at work here but an active enjoyment of the existing buildings. Hobhouse grew up on the farm, which was worked by both his father and grandfather. There is also a clear sense of a collector of drawings enjoying the idea of buildings as texts. 'I love the idea of these different uses, sliding like palimpsests over each other,' he says.

Once the archive and office are complete, architect Hugh Strange's next task is to convert a pair of silos to the north of the office into a library. Together with his client, Strange has imagined a 'fundamentally internal environment' best described as a Piranesian library.

'Having the buildings here works as a reminder that the drawings project is not a hermetic historical study, but about building more thoughtfully,' says Hobhouse. 'And having the drawings is one good way to stop the overall building project at Shatwell becoming pompous.'

So is there anything from the collection that might inform the building project specifically? Hobhouse smiles and pulls out a drawing for a pigsty by Scottish engineer and architect Robert Mylne. Then one by the French classicist Jean-Démosthène Dugourc of a masonic lodge completely disguised as a



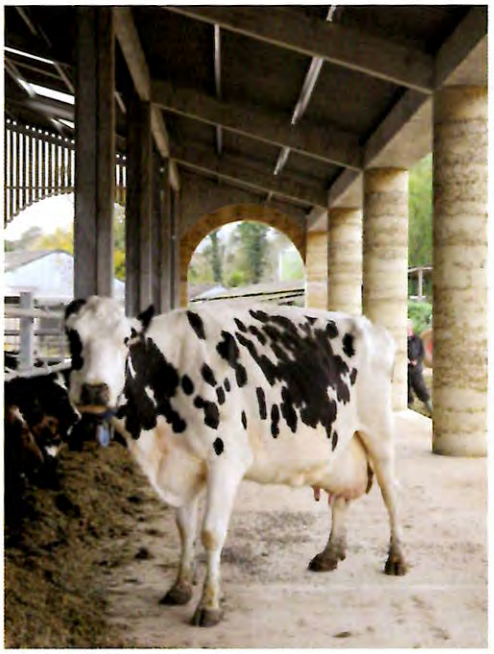
rusticated barn within the grounds of Casa del Labrador in Aranjuez. One of the qualities of the collection is clearly irony.

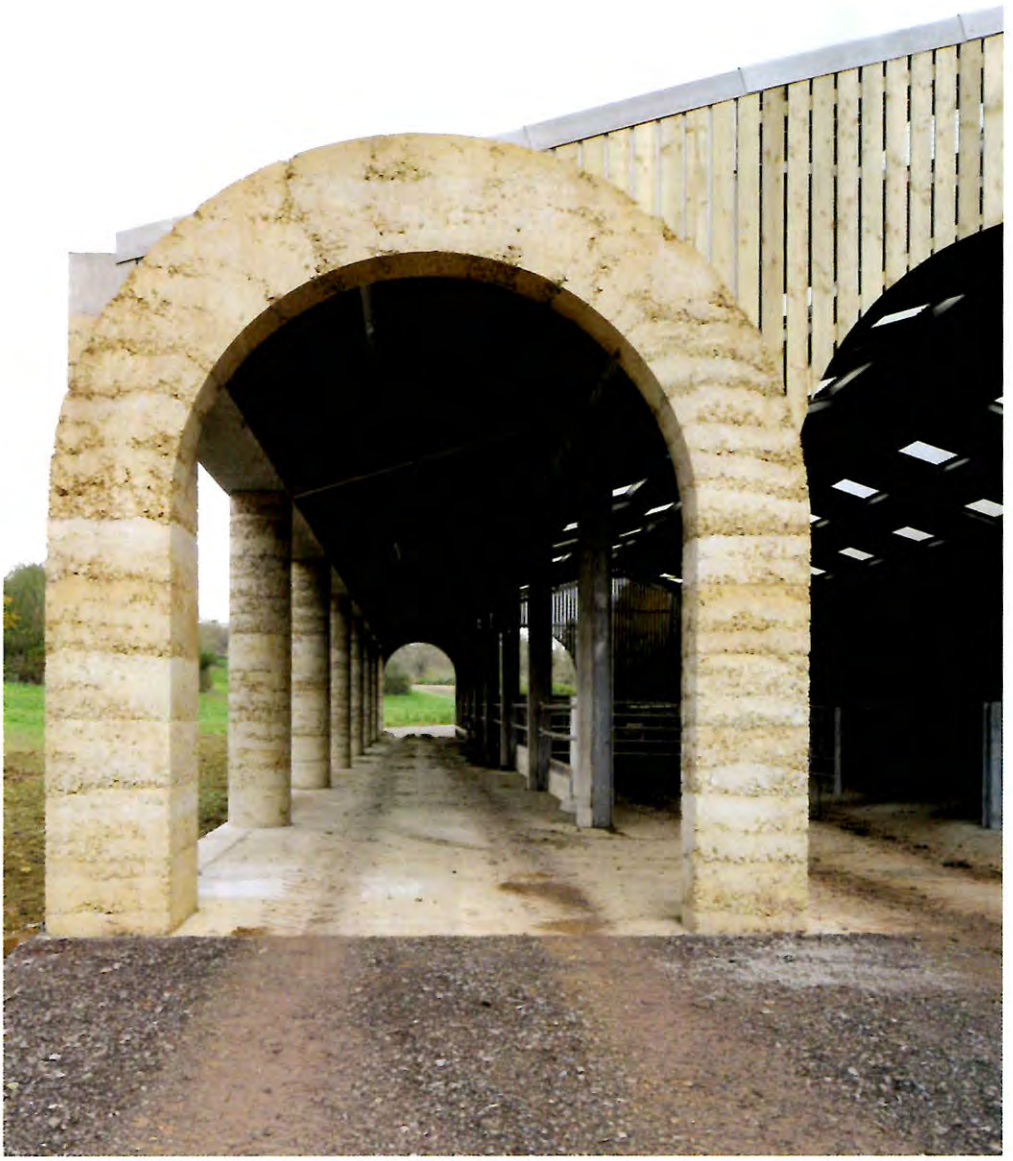
If the intersection between the historical drawings and the building project is ambiguous, one of the more practical ways they relate is how the drawings create a web of intrigued participants. When Hobhouse bought Álvaro Siza's drawings for the Quinta de Malagueira social housing project, he also began a relationship with the Portuguese architect. In 2014, Siza visited the farm to lead a workshop on the drawings and suggested Hobhouse might design a short ramped intervention between the pair of silos. In turn, Hobhouse purchased the columns Siza designed to be placed in the Royal Academy's courtyard for the *Sensing Spaces* exhibition in 2014. In tandem, the small interventions act as a quietly ironic gesture against the increasing banality in the architectural language of rural England.

Hobhouse, though, is interested not simply in making gestures but in the reality of a modern rural economy. Two buildings by Stephen Taylor on the farm were the first real sign of a more public proposition to Hobhouse's statement about land use in rural England. Farming is, after all, the means by which the landscape has been formed by humans. Rather than the situation in which we find ourselves in this century, whereby farmers are paid not to produce but to manage land – a kind of exercise in the Picturesque – Taylor's work is for functioning farm buildings, albeit with an ironic reference to the public role of the industry in moulding the landscape, even as it employs fewer and fewer people.

Taylor, who usually creates innovative housing projects in tight urban conditions, is here gleefully working against type, creating a more robust response to the site than other architects might. Before Hobhouse had decided to relocate to the farm, Taylor was asked to provide a housing scheme for the valley. The cowshed and haybarn, conceived and submitted for planning

(Page 67) the Smithson's obelisk sits at the farm's heart, between the barn and cowshed
(Opposite) the haybarn by Stephen Taylor Architects features studded half-brick columns
(Below and right) the stoa of the cow shed, also by Stephen Taylor Architects, features columns and arches built from a mix of concrete and aggregate





together although delivered five years apart, are the end result of a deeper cross-breeding of urban and rural typologies.

The cowshed, built first, provides the clearest interplay between a seemingly urban gesture and rural building type. The part for the cows was built using precast, pre-stressed pilasters. The columns and arches that form the stoa were built with a dry mix of concrete and a local, yellowish aggregate that is neither exclusively rustic nor a simulacrum of stone. It has its own quality.

Opposite the cowshed is a new building known as the haybarn, made from a precast concrete lintel and brick columns, the studded effect of which are created by an ingenious array of half-brick in a circular jig. The snaggled effect – coarse tweed or sandpaper depending on your perspective – is carried through on the walls, which were built in English bond brickwork but with protruding headers. At the haybarn in particular, the combination of vernacular and classical building technologies is uncomfortable – in what register do farm buildings operate? How do we endow them with value? Should we?

Planning regulations, clearly a constraint to this process, are to Hobhouse 'a constructive constraint'. The building fabric is the site for a friendly discussion with planners. 'They see themselves as protecting the countryside while I see myself as gently protesting the relentless gentrification of the countryside,' he says. And yet the structure and arrangement of the existing buildings permits Hobhouse to operate in a more spontaneous, less planned fashion – something he values. 'I am more comfortable with the provisional or the unfinished,' he admits. He's more interested in sketches than renders for example, and the impact of a building on what is around it rather than the building itself. He has been aided by planning legislation passed in 2013, which permits more latitude in the reuse of existing farm buildings.

Florian Beigel Architects has been







commissioned to design 100m² of office and workshop space within, and adjacent to, a structure to the north of the site currently used as a tractor shed. Subject to planning, the unit has been pre-let to the local Timber Frame Company, with whom Hobhouse has a long working relationship (and who will also act as contractor).

There is a typical familial relationship at work here. This local firm built the obelisk designed by Alison and Peter Smithson, originally on the old estate, and supervised its re-erection earlier this year at the heart of the farm. This act not only creates a visual unity with the existing buildings – particularly the barn and cowshed between which it sits – but creates a continuity with the Picturesque past at Hadspen and signals the way forward to a new kind of rural settlement, with more than a frisson of utopianism.

Hobhouse would baulk at such a description no doubt. He is clearly interested in working with the historic fabric in a manner in which heritage professionals and professionals would approve. According to Hugh Strange, the only issue with the planning department has been one of curiosity. 'At times they've wanted to know what's going on, what's the big picture? It's not how Niall works and, anyway, the valley doesn't have that quality,' he says.

Looking into the background of the Shatwell project it is evident that one of Hobhouse's most important relationships was with the late Cedric Price who, among other things, helped him find the intellectual and architectural grounding to imagine a masterplan and then forget it.

In many ways the new farm revisits the conversations Hobhouse had with Price around 15 years ago, providing a degree of intellectual grounding to Hobhouse's personal preference for spontaneity and informality. The main material evidence of the dialogue between the two is a pair of libraries inside shipping containers, which









(Opposite page, top and bottom right; this page, top right) the building designed by Florian Beigel Architects to provide office space has been constructed from one layer of cross-laminated timber (Opposite, bottom left) timber louvres encase the Dairy House by Charlotte Skene Catling (Above) Álvaro Siza proposed that a ramp form the link between two silos (Right) the original barn by Atcost will be adapted by Clancy Moore Architects to form the main domestic space

Price proposed as a modern version of the travelling bookcases of 17th-century scholars. With an internal layout drawn up by Jamie Macpherson, these were previously arrayed around the Hadspen estate but are now to be found at Shatwell. Nominally mobile at least, they are informal, robust, yet highly cultured - like everything on the farm.

Price's personality lingers here. When the architect first arrived he pointed at a large barn made by Atcost, built around prefabricated concrete trusses, and stated that one of his first jobs had been to draw projects for this manufacturer of rural buildings. This barn will soon be adapted by Clancy Moore Architects, taking advantage of the planning derogation that allows the residential use of agricultural buildings within a certain limit on each holding, provided they rely on the existing structure. The prefabricated members will remain. The project, for which detailed planning was submitted in August, is for a four-bedroom house in the westernmost barn, with a garden and recreational space within the portal structure of the adjoining eastern barn at upper level. The lower level houses an office and storage space.

If there is no masterplan, this is merely another aspect of Hobhouse's ambition for the valley. With a smile, he says 'We've all got very sentimental about messy cities and I understand that. But the truth is, before too long we're not going to have any messy countryside left. Why don't we fetishise that for a bit?'

Architects
Álvaro Siza
Charlotte Skene Catling
Clancy Moore Architects
Florian Beigel Architects
Hugh Strange Architects
Stephen Taylor Architects
Photographs
James Morris (pp67, 70 bottom right, 71 bottom left) and David Grandorge (pp68, 69, 70 top and bottom right, 71 top right)