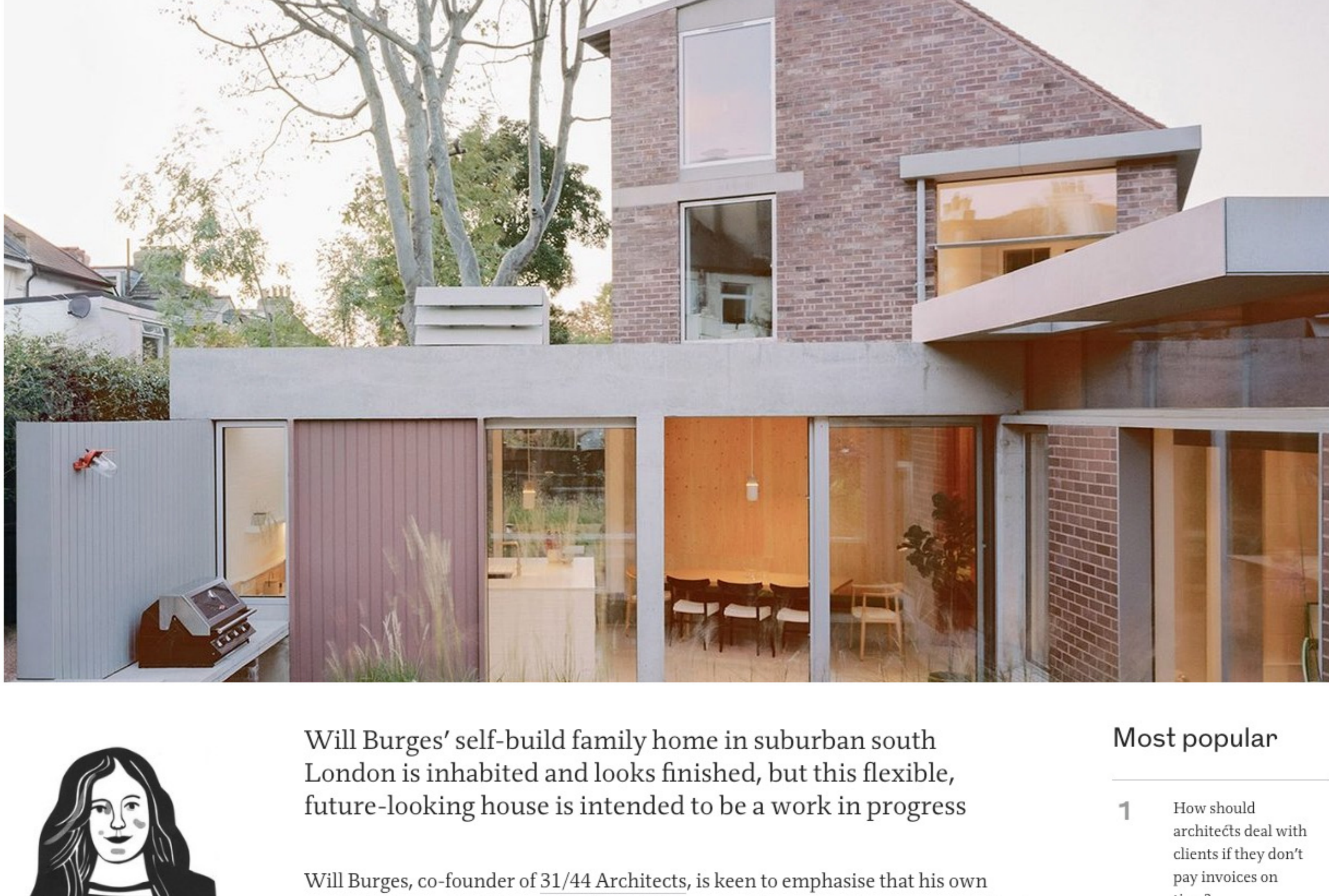


Buildings House

# Six Columns is a home intended to keep evolving



20 February 2024  
Words: Isabelle Priest

Will Burges' self-build family home in suburban south London is inhabited and looks finished, but this flexible, future-looking house is intended to be a work in progress

Will Burges, co-founder of 31/44 Architects, is keen to emphasise that his own newbuild house Six Columns in Crystal Palace, south east London, is not a 'finished house' or a 'manifesto' of all his life's thoughts and interests in architecture. He and his family moved in, possibly slightly prematurely, in the autumn of 2020 when it was still 'raw around the edges'. They were washing dishes in the bathroom upstairs.

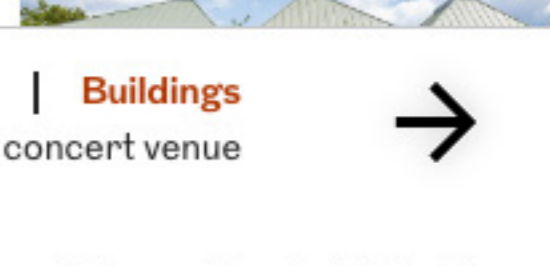
Now, by the usual parameters, the home looks complete – the landscaping is done, finishes are there and I can see no loose ends. However, Burges sees the project as deliberately a 'work in progress', which is what he wanted. What he means is that the design isn't to be preserved in time. It is a starting point from which it can develop and be fine-tuned. One example is the fitted cupboards put in during the build which are being adapted to scoop out a desk niche. Another is that to deal with the 'overwhelming number of decisions' that arise during a self-build, they painted everything white, and now they are starting to think about colour. There are, essentially, a host of mini projects to follow that will gently adapt the building. Adding some steel awnings over the south-facing windows is another.



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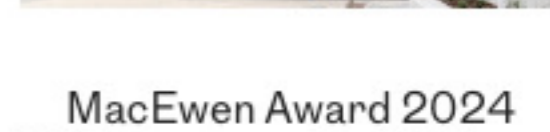
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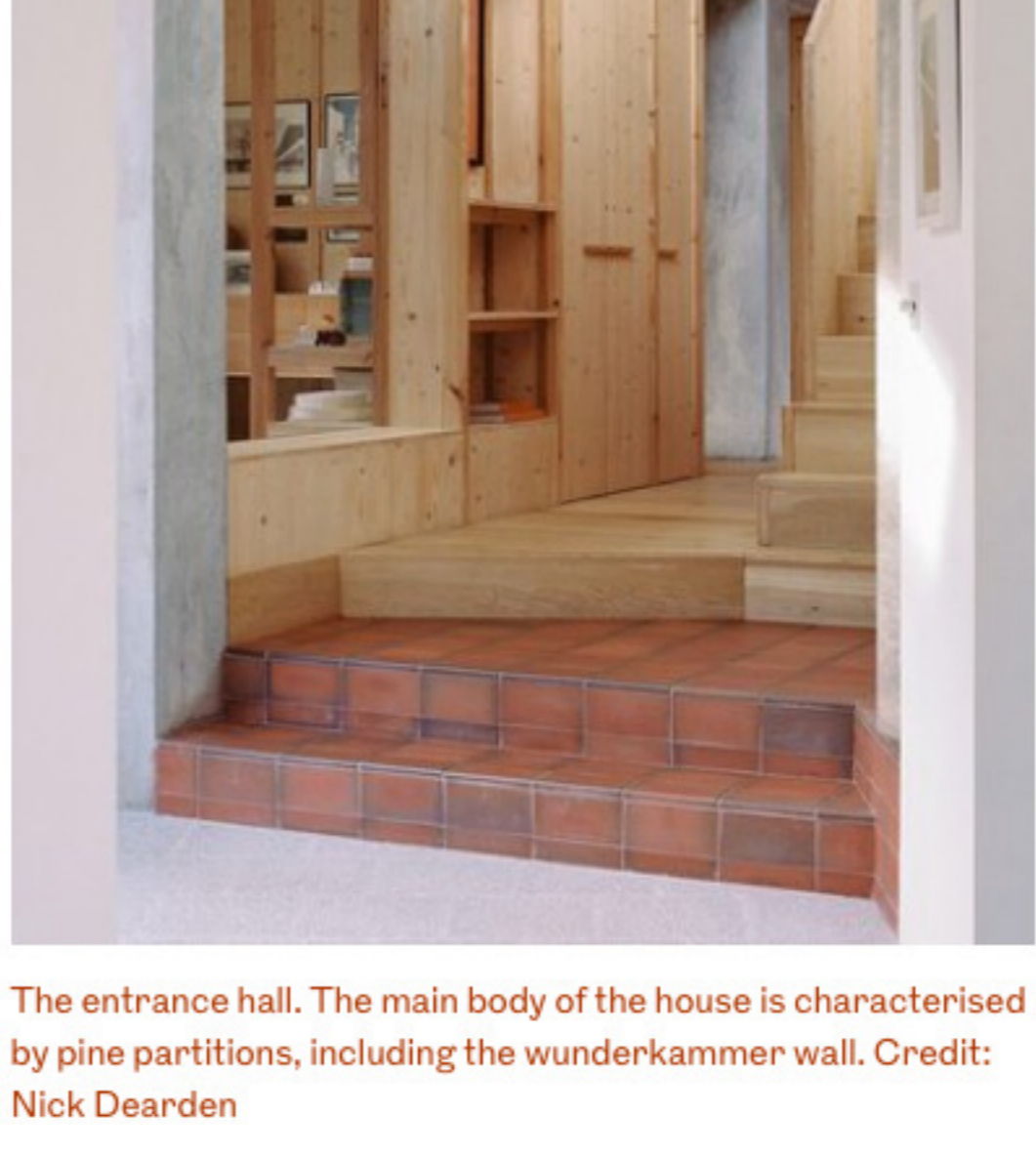
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This centring of Burges' perspective around building and architecture being a potentially lifelong process is not unusual for 31/44, but it is often a tricky concept for regular clients. The firm's barn conversion scheme in Norfolk, for instance, was far more highly polished and decided. However, this desire to continually tinker with Six Columns through future small pieces of work resonates with how its design has progressed so far. It is contextual to its suburban surroundings, taking cues from the established patterns, urbanism and expression of neighbouring buildings. It steps up in height and forward by the same measures as other houses, part of the 1950s estate along the road. The design adopts brick and terracotta tiles. Its pitched roof shape matches. Yet, in its flourishes, the house is also a collection and sequence of smaller set pieces accumulated over time and realised here almost as mini projects in themselves.

Do you recognise, for example, that composition of the column standing in front of the white-veined, dark green marble wall? Yes, it's a touch of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion – a memory of the first overseas trip Burges did with his now wife. The diagonal stepped brick wall to the left of the main entrance with its ceiling raised on chunky LVL panels above the boundary roofline to create a clerestory recalls the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art north of Copenhagen.



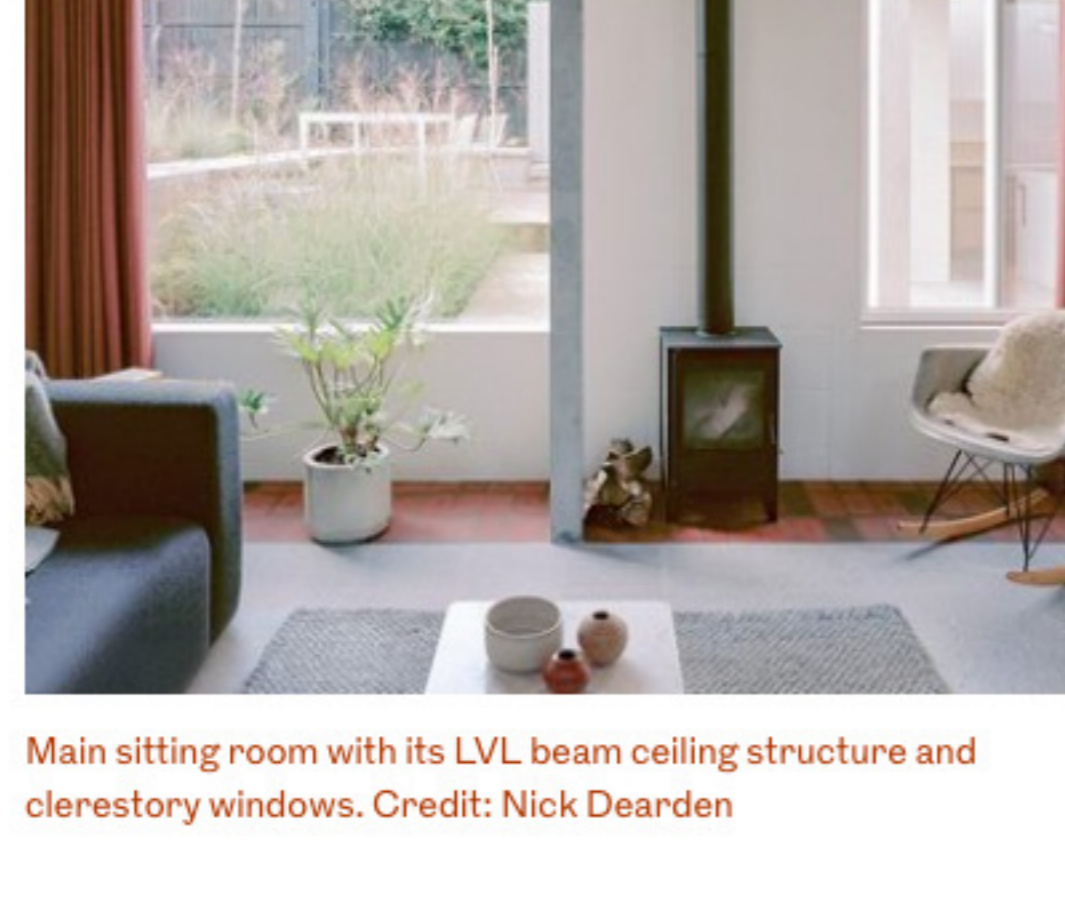
Mies van der Rohe-inspired entrance loggia with Verdi Alpi green and white-veined marble backdrop and concrete column. Credit: Nick Dearden



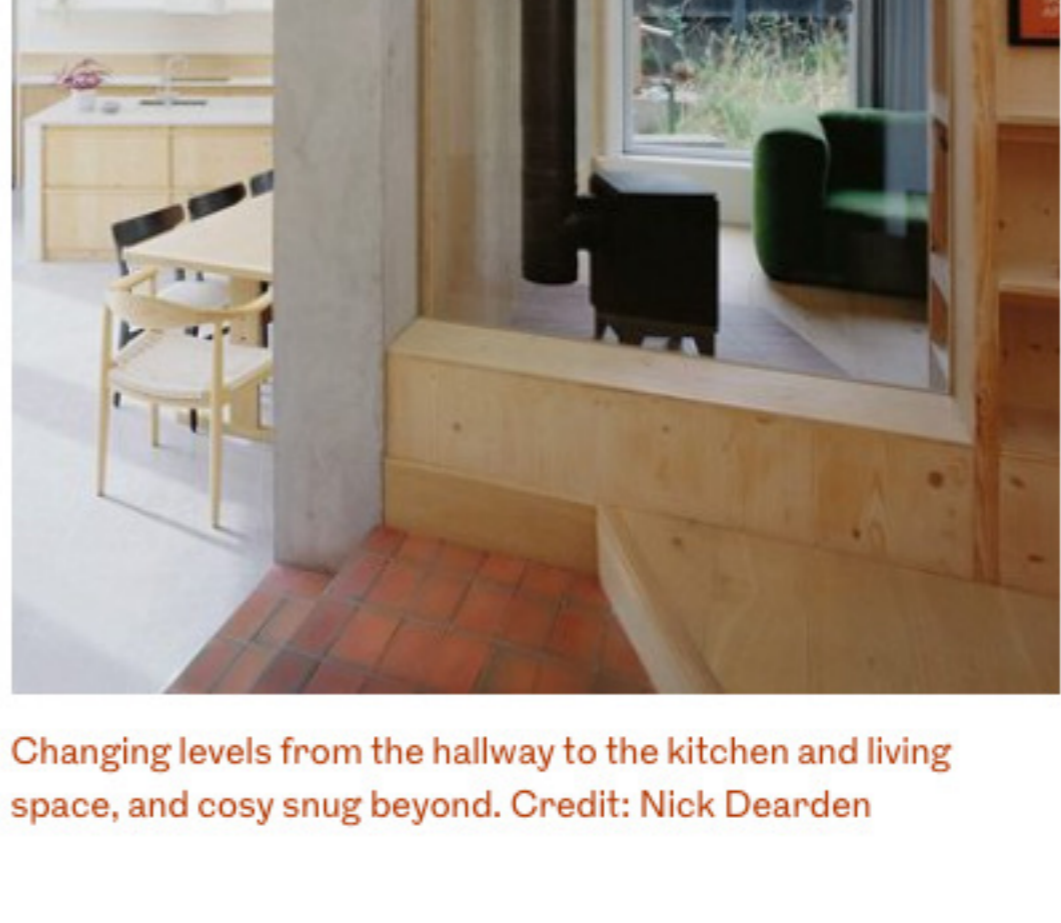
The entrance hall. The main body of the house is characterised by pine partitions, including the wunderkammer wall. Credit: Nick Dearden

Moving round to the back, the building's relationship with the garden fragments like a Case Study house in California. The pine Tilly board kitchen fronts and screwed-on bar handles evoke Burges' experience as a Part 1 having cups of tea in Peter Aldington's house Turn End while working for Proctor & Matthews on a house in the same village. For those in the know, Six Columns is down the road from Lubetkin's Six Pillars. There are six columns ('the practice has an affection for them'), but the building's name is a play on that too – as are the six pilasters on the front elevation.

The references continue, including the concept of the wunderkammer, or cabinet of curiosities, in front of you as you enter the hall. There, the pine walls are three times thicker than usual to become cupboards and shelves for displaying books, artworks and objects. It's no wonder Burges says he doesn't want to self-build again: it gets down all the thoughts he had been ruminating about over many years onto paper and into built form. Does it all sound a bit much for contemporary architectural sensibilities? No, not at all. The hall is the pivot of the house; down steps to the left the more informal single-storey element unfurls into a generous open kitchen, dining and sitting space. Banquette seating is tucked around the corner with a more formal sitting room to the left again. Here the two parts of the garden can be seen, one behind the side addition and the other behind the two-storey part. On a fine day you can pull back the full-height windows and feel the breeze connecting them. There are terraced floors, white walls, Vitra shelving: sharper, harder surfaces and lines.



Main sitting room with its LVL beam ceiling structure and clerestory windows. Credit: Nick Dearden



Changing levels from the hallway to the kitchen and living space, and cosy snug beyond. Credit: Nick Dearden

To the right of the entrance, which looks from outside to be more formal, the interior is in fact cellular, cosy and almost rustic – an atmosphere created by the pine, smaller spaces, white-painted blockwork, doors that bolt into the ceiling when closed and red Ketley tiles. There is a snug with a log burner, the en suite master bedroom and an under-stair WC. The wall of the snug does slide back to overlook the dining table and there are internal glazed panels to the hall. Yet the idea of the pine partitions is that even those could be amended.

Upstairs there is more of the openness of the main living space, with white walls, plasterboard partitions, oak floors and free-flowing connecting spaces, although finishes are continuous in the bathrooms. A bright green stepped ladder stair opens into an attic room in a raised box on the rear roof.

There are two other points of interest at Six Columns. The first concerns the sycamore tree at the back of the plot. This has a preservation order on it (it's also rather beautiful) which significantly influenced the fragmented footprint. The main body of the house is, in fact, suspended over its roof protection area on screw piles. Its close proximity also influenced the rainwater strategy, which is directed from all the roofs to tumble out from a huge spout at the right side of the kitchen roof into a cylindrical Corten tank below. From there it overflows into a pebble bed that quaintly circles the sycamore like a stream, replenishing it.



The snug, where pine sliding partition walls allow the space to open to the kitchen behind the dining banquette. Credit: Nick Dearden

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Sustainability is the other point. As teachers, Burges and 31/44 co-founder Stephen Davies run a unit called Mass and Air, studying how to make architecture that feels robust and contextual yet is committed in its response to the climate emergency. This house has been a long time coming. It was a garden belonging to the semi next door. Burges asked the owners to sell in 2015, with the planning application and broad design done in the spring 2016. There was a pause, then it kicked off rapidly in 2018 when the owners decided to move. Six Columns operates with 436 kgCO<sub>2</sub>eq/m<sup>2</sup> which met LETI's then target, but the design relies on high-embodied carbon concrete and brick. Some features minimise carbon – a structural timber frame, some exposed finishes and some external 'concrete' beams are timber with cement board cladding. But Burges is conscious of it.

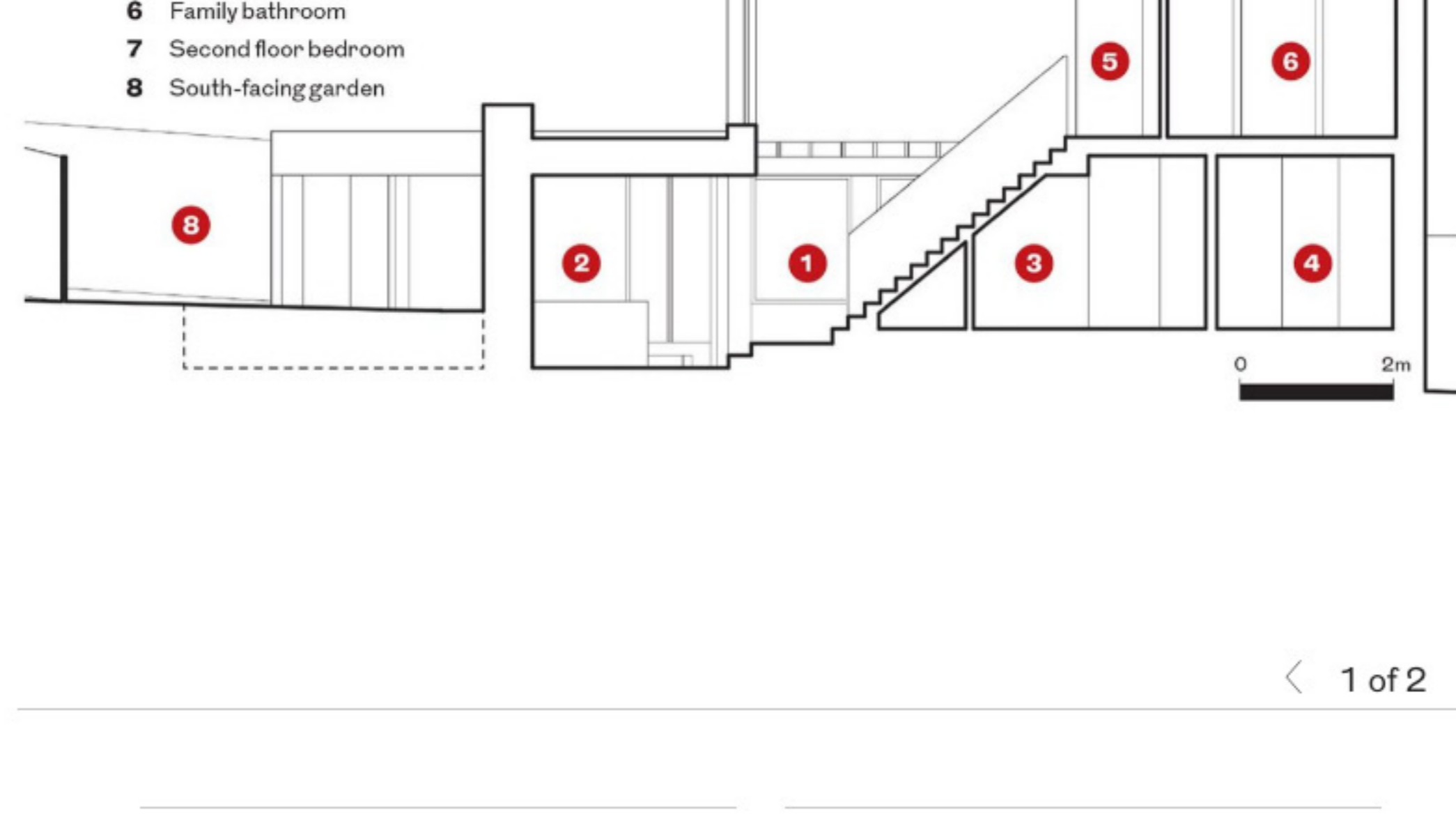
In many ways that's another lesson/object/reference/trinket that Burges can add to his never-finished architecture. At Six Columns, that approach makes a house that didn't exist before 2020 feel like a lived-in, personal home.

### IN NUMBERS

- GIA 164m<sup>2</sup>
- Construction cost £490,000
- Cost per m<sup>2</sup> £2,988
- Whole-life carbon 436kgCO<sub>2</sub>eq/m<sup>2</sup>
- Annual in-use CO<sub>2</sub> usage 1.78t

### Credits

- Architect 31/44 Architects
- Structural engineer Price & Myers
- Landscape architect Aarde
- Contractor Atlant Construction
- Bricks Furness Brick & Tile Company and Wienerberger
- Cladding Swisspearl
- Roof tile BMI Redcland
- Windows Idealcombi UK
- Sliding doors Reynears Aluminium



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