

# Turn End

a walk through

This document is a distillation of longer papers by the late Will Howland, architect and founding Chairman of the Trust, and Dominic Cole, landscape architect and a founding Trustee.

## arrival

Peter Aldington's appreciation of Haddenham's intricate streetscape of gable ends and courtyard walls, low massing and individually-roofed, discrete volumes set against a backdrop of trees, all register strongly in the disposition of elements at Turn End. The development grew from Peter's conviction that inspired contemporary house design could reinforce the historic tapestry of the village – unlike the contemporaneous housing estate across the road.

Arriving from the roadside, the eye is drawn in past the pivot of the existing cottage and is led on through and under the canopy of an English Walnut into the Entrance Court.

This court mediates between the public street and the private residences, creating a breathing space and a setting for arrival and departure to take place. It provides for visitor parking; three sheltered spaces in the car-port (Peter's 20thC farm shed) and garaging for four cars in a kind of subordinate enclosed court to one side of the main space.

The houses themselves are glimpsed beyond quite high, curving, roughcast walls. The powerful, horizontal building forms, rising to only one-and-a-half storey height, form a tight-knit group around the entrance courtyard. Existing features and mature trees dictate the geography of the new houses and gardens. The buildings thread through the site creating a variety of enclosures and vistas which draw from and enrich the sense of place. The scale of each house is broken down into separately roofed 'living' and 'sleeping' volumes, boldly and clearly expressed, yet composed to speak of 'community' rather than the standard developers' proclamation of 'individuality'.

The strong geometries of the houses are emphasized by the use of simple materials which resonate with local traditions: profiled red concrete tiles, dark-stained timbers and white roughcast masonry. This is a stripped-down kind of construction – roof tiles are bedded directly on top of render, upstands and lead flashings are virtually eliminated and windows are treated as 'missing pieces of wall' – in order to achieve a visual simplicity and strength in the expression of pure shapes and volumes. The careful composition of long low roofs set in landscape; of continuous garden walls and secret spaces; of powerful verticals of chimneys and clerestory glazing - all announce beautifully crafted living spaces and, most of all, a sense of repose. Comparisons with Utzon's courtyard housing at Friedensborg (a visit to which in 1976 Peter had described as 'a religious experience') are nowhere more apparent.

At the curve in the garden walls the introduction of paving slabs set into the gravel of the courtyard quietly announces the almost secret path to each house.

## the houses

The planning of the houses is spare and functional, yet handled with care and reverence to reveal the poetry which resides in the ordinary and the everyday. The plan is repeated for each dwelling with some modifications, the most significant being the more generous entrance condition at Turn End which allows for a larger courtyard and the third, enclosing, Studio wing.

The spaces are enriched by careful consideration of the section; where adjacent volumes are connected through the careful articulation of roof and wall planes; solid and void; inside and outside. This overlapping of spaces dematerialises the building envelope, with the house becoming, in Peter's words, 'an incident on the outdoor route'. Daylight is scooped into rooms to illumine activities and bring life to surfaces. Exposed, sloping planes of redwood roof timbers, simply put together, mediate the scale of the rooms and flow through the house. The direct expression of structure, material and mode of construction all contribute to a spatial experience of some force.

## threshold

The route to the front door is unobtrusively supervised at Turn End by a small window above the bin store - itself fed directly from the kitchen behind to prevent the need for taking bags of refuse through the house. The solid timber front door with side-flap (for increasing the aperture to allow furniture to pass) is positioned off-axis (to heighten the experience of gradual revelation and discovery) with, to the right, a composition of letterbox, door-lamp, timber boarding and tiled milk-shelf (which physically penetrates the timber panel to form a matching internal shelf). In Peter's words, it all 'builds up to a little picture'.

On entering, the senses focus briefly on the gurgle of water and the flash of reflected light from the pool under the leaves of the Robinia in the Courtyard. And then, suddenly, to the left, in the direction of movement, a view along the backbone of the scheme down the central circulation of the house and out into the Spring Garden foliage where 'glowing birch trunks and branches' frame a large Monica Young pot. This unfolding of experience and early introduction to the structure of the scheme is the key to easy legibility. There is an immediate connection with the spirit of the place - the simplicity and strength of the material elements, the flow of space and the interweaving of inside and outside, the play of light.

## the courtyard

The heart of the whole house. The building hugs three sides of this intimate space, structured around the pool and the overhanging Robinia pseudoacacia – which casts wonderful spidery shadows onto the walls without preventing sunlight reaching the inside of the house. This 'outdoor room' is set on a secondary axis which runs from the bedroom wing through the 'hub' and courtyard to the path to the sundial in No Mans (a splendid, virtually Mediterranean glimpse through an arch in the garden wall). The space is softened by natural planting and the huge

slabs of rock reinforce the impression that the house has been planned around an ancient pocket of landscape. It is here that inside and outside become indistinguishable – it would be easy to imagine heaving the bed out here in summer.

## the 'hub'

Circulation space, dining area and kitchen are linked with the Courtyard - the 'external room at the heart of the house' - via a glazed screen and large sliding/folding doors which can be opened to embrace the courtyard landscape, to form the 'hub' or pivotal space from which all other spaces devolve.

The dining table with its Eames chairs is at the centre of proceedings and is an expression of conviviality - a way of saying that this is the crucial social space where people meet and share and entertain.

The roof sails over the 'hub' and the dividing walls of the cloakroom and the living room (the tops of which become 'object shelves') giving the feeling of one large subdivided volume. This is Wrightian 'flowing space' in an English garden and is emphasised by the continuity of materials and surfaces – where quarry tile floor-planes link all rooms as one including the courtyard; white mass masonry brings order to all spaces both internal and external; and the rich timber surfaces and exposed roof structure echo the presence of living trees in the garden.

One detail in particular reinforces this linking of spaces - the strip of glazing between rafters at eaves and ridge, which allows south light to permeate the building by day and offer room lighting back as a night-time glow (the glass is built into the construction and is therefore irreplaceable, but at 10 mm thickness the detail will not break down and the one piece which has cracked is as Peter says 'only a memory of movement'.

The galley kitchen comprises the high back enclosing wall and the lower, chest high divider unit which addresses the activity in the hub space. The back wall is a carefully composed essay in early built-in kitchen furniture and includes fridge, oven, dishwasher with hot water cylinder beneath and a specially adapted hob arrangement of three individual hotplates, all set in a range of timber wall cupboards and shelving. These storage units are built in solid planks of wood boarded vertically or horizontally depending upon which way the door is designed to open (vertical for side-hung and horizontal for top or bottom hung). They include the 'Pooh Cupboards' (four cupboards with two shelves, each full of honey jars!!!); the complete ensemble constitutes a wall some three metres tall, the higher reaches of which can be readily accessed by any reasonably agile housewife vaulting onto the draining board and bestriding the gap, as Margaret (a former rock climber) even now is very willing and able to demonstrate.

## bedroom wing

Glimpsed from the hallway and guarded by the kitchen, the more private route from the hub to the north leads to the main sleeping area. The threshold space at the top of a flight of three steps from the kitchen is fondly called 'the landing' and leads to two bedrooms, bathroom and dressing room. The rise in level derives from 'old-fashioned, romantic stuff' and paying respect to 'the feeling of going upstairs to bed'. The change of mood is emphasized by the dramatic reduction in ambient lighting levels, restricted to north light filtering through the overhanging branches of a walnut tree 'lifting in the wind like an animated picture on the screen'.

The floor has been raised in the whole of this sleeping area (which reduces the height of the bedrooms under the tall roof and brings a suitably more modest scale to their functions). Views from these rooms therefore always look down onto the garden, providing intimate relationships with individual plants and at the same time a sense of advantage over and privacy from, the world outside. A feeling of being secure holds sway; of being in a calm, private place. This is enhanced by having the same warm envelope of timber walls, floors and ceilings and also by the compactness of the rooms (Frank Lloyd Wright again – bedrooms are principally for sleeping in and therefore can have minimal floor areas). There is considerable emphasis on built-in furniture and continuous walls of storage which provide excellent sound insulation to increase privacy. All of this room-sculpture, including beds, tables, cupboards and shelves is carefully integrated with the structure using the same robust timber detailing.

The bathroom is a small functional space where sunlight floods in from the large south-facing clerestory jutting from the ridge of the house. The concept was that of bathing in water and sun at the same time. Timber surfaces again predominate and provide the setting for the Adamsez 'Lotus Corbel' bathroom furniture, as used in the cloakroom. Much to the surprise of visitors, the starkly elegant lavatory pans have no seats. Their rescue from functional obscurity is thanks to Margaret – 'I love the shapes. It seems a shame to spoil them, they're pieces of sculpture'. Client and architect, architect and client.

## studio

The entrance end of the central circulation axis is terminated by the Studio. Bounded by the remnants of one of the found wychert walls on the site (the evidence of previous occupancy by bees still marking its surface) this traditional construction of chunks of chalk marl rendered with lime still provides the backcloth to habitation in the room. Containing a gallery at high level, this wing of the building forms the western enclosure of the courtyard.

In previous incarnations the room served as an early office /studio for Peter, partner John Craig and secretary and later as a bedroom / playroom / occasional study for daughters Clair and Rachel. Clair remembers them being asked to choose which end of the room they would like (there being two sleeping areas in the ladder-accessed gallery), and both have very clear memories of their father's endless rendition of house favourite Winnie the Pooh, with different voices for each animal.

The room has now reverted to a study cum gallery for Peter's work, with a computer and a battery of low voltage light fittings operated by a TV remote control. The top-lit cactus collection in the plantery on the south wall is Peter's invention and provides an inspired visual stop to the room. The character of the space now somehow manages to combine the calm and focus of a monastic cell with a visual richness emanating from both the materials of the house and the presence in photographs and drawings of Peter's current landscape and previous architectural work.

## living room

The 'pull' down the route along the central axis from the entrance towards the garden leads easily from the hub to the spatial culmination of the design – the living room. This is a long, narrow room placed at right angles to the axis and traversed by it to delineate separate spaces. On one side is the principal focus: the highly crafted sitting area carved from a double-height space, with built-in seats and shelves wrapped around a large fireplace set in the corner of the room. This is the gathering place – a cosy, introverted space which basks in the dappled sunlight filtering through the window-framed trees above.

On the other side of the route, is the quieter, more private living space. Here, the ceiling drops down, reinforcing the primacy of the main sitting area, and there is a broad span of glazed doors to bring the landscaped courtyard into the room – both devices stressing the more recessive, contemplative nature of the space. This is used by the Aldingtons as a sleeping area, although the same space is used differently in the other two houses. At Turn End the bed is built-in, but came as something of an afterthought during construction, when Margaret and Peter temporarily occupied the space in their itinerant sleeping-bags and discovered how nice it was to 'wake up and look at the pond'. As Peter says: 'it's really wonderful if you're ill'.

The whole, long, thin space is carefully articulated - Peter Aldington: 'I like narrow rooms – they have a high wall to floor ratio which allows for a strong architectural presence: a backs- to-the-wall, secure enclosure which can be thought out in detail'. The composition is terminated beyond the bed by a top-lit 'plantery' which extends the view down the room to the old, pre-existing, wychert wall. This area is occupied by an historic 60's cheeseplant, filling the end of the room with reflected sunlight.

The loft space above the sleeping area has at various stages in its history been used as a study space, music-room and store. Accessed by a pull-down ladder and constructed of the same warm, solid timbers used throughout the house, it contains a hatch which opens at eaves level – providing an eyrie, a sort of A.A.Milne place to lie unseen on the floor and gaze down quietly at the pond, the plants and flowers, birds and insect life in the courtyard.

If the living room is the termination of the spatial sequence along the principal axis, then the view to the east along this route and into the Spring Garden is the visual climax. The whole tableau of nature is brought dramatically into the house. At low level, tree trunks shaded by their own canopies rise through ground cover, hostas, bamboo and tree pæony, framed in the glazing of the large garden door. Above, captured in the huge, heavy-mullioned, high- level window over the fireplace, the feathered crowns of silver birch and apple trees dance against the sky. The draw into the garden is almost irresistible.

## spring garden

Emerging from the house, one is led gently into this garden by uneven stone paths which look as though they are the bedrock onto which the house has been set. They are laid ingeniously and have been planted up with crusty or creeping plants. This is more than a series of verticals and horizontals because from January, or even late December, through to late spring a succession of bulbs provides a changing underglow of soft fresh colours to accompany the emerging greens and apple blossom overhead. The basic structure is later enhanced by flashes of colour and texture as plants come and go during summer and autumn.

The Spring Garden, and the borders to the north of the glade are deliberately allowed to become 'controlled wilderness'. Religious pruning is avoided as it is preferred to let plants do their own thing, intertwine with one another, even swamp one another, and then every few years have a good reorganize, cut back and allow it to happen again!

## summer borders

'Traditional' herbaceous borders sweep through this central part of the garden. But they are not 'one season wonders' – the structure is such that the backing plantings of shrubs and grasses maintain the form of the space throughout the year. They perform at their flowery best in June when enormous spikes of Campanula, Iris, Erigeron etc are in full flood.

Walking towards the borders from the house one is enticed left or right by the grass, which occupies the centre ground and snakes off to tunnel-like paths at either side – to the left towards the west borders under the huge horse chestnut, or to the right into the quiet Eastern Glade. But one can also sneak through between the summer borders, enticed by the wooden pergola grown over with Rose, Vitis and Lathyrus, into the Daisy Garden.

## daisy garden

A wonderful unexpected garden – coming after the big sweep of the centre of the garden – and suddenly one is in, virtually, a town garden. Intimate in scale, pots everywhere overflowing with special pet plants – the whole effect a jewel box, pin cushion of treasures.

The strength of the garden's structure – yew hedge, Coach House walls, two cockle shell beeches – prevent it from looking messy or out of place.

The central axis of the Daisy Garden lines up with the walk through the Coach House and into the Box Court – a stunning, small scale vista with light, shade and textures all working together. The Coach House is full of pots, bamboo canes and tools which give the same sense of organized chaos you might find in the hall of a comfortable country home where wellingtons compete with mackintoshes and walking sticks. It smells of wood and compost and is very evocative.

## box court

In any other garden this space might have ended up as the composting/working space but Peter chose to make it the surprise culmination of

the progression from the Daisy Garden. It has its design roots in formal knot gardens or the organized layouts of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch formal gardens. There is a 'central' feature – a pot container planted with a Cordyline australis. The space is divided into three box edged beds which are planted with a mass of single colour bedding plants or bulbs two times a year. An inspired planting against the north facing wall is a morello cherry, fan trained, with shuttlecock ferns (*Matteucia struthiopteris*) and Cyclamen coum at the base.

## office garden

The Office Garden is nearly an anachronism. It has a completely different character with unique (imported) acid soil and is a very urban 1960's space – bold textures of both hard and soft landscape create a courtyard that would work happily in a tight, shady urban backyard.

Returning from the Office Garden via the Box Court, instead of retracing the route via the Coach House, one can take the tight passage alongside the yew hedge with the dovecote as a focus. Just before the dovecote one finds a near invisible gap in the hedge leading into the west borders.

## west borders

The theme here is planting with yellow or white flowering and silver or gold leaved plants – it makes a soft end to the view from the central lawn and contains some real delights.....

The view back into the garden under the horse chestnut focuses on the Monica Young pot in the Spring Garden. Closer to the house are bold plantings of *Helleborus Orientalis* – strong leaf forms which work well under the walnut and look striking against the white walls and dark window frames of the house.

## eastern glade

This garden is approached either from the grass path off the central lawn or from the summer borders via a path made from railway sleepers and gravel and bordered with rocky- textured plants. The Eastern glade is contemplative space – not nearly as busily planted as other parts of the garden - and is terminated by a brick built sitting space with a built-in wooden bench and glass roof – another reminder that this is a garden created in the 1960's..

## small court and rock garden

Once again Peter has made use of a sequence of 'awkward' spaces to create another completely different atmosphere. The wychert walls are perfectly human-scaled and are reminiscent of the intricate detailing found in Japanese gardens. Or is it the combination of walls, gravel and bamboo in this tiny space and the glimpse of the Rock garden beyond - a doll's house garden of tiny alpines – that give the 'sharawdgi' effect of immense and distant landscapes, but captured here in miniature?

The Rock garden must be unique among English gardens – it is not the horrible pile of old broken stuff with ragged weed infestations that have given rock gardens such a bad image. It is a collection of plants placed among 'bedrock' and gravel and interspersed with perfectly normal sized shrubs. The wonderful uniformity and creation of interest in this small space give testimony to Peter's ability to match texture and scale.

## no-mans and the pergola.

To enter No-mans is to leap straight into the Mediterranean. It captures light and, instead of relying on introduced enclosure, Peter has allowed the surrounding melee of sloping roofs and walls of adjacent houses to be the enclosure. The strength of the four square design and the textures and brilliant colours of the hundreds of plants focus the attention in the garden, but it is clear that one is not quite in Buckinghamshire. Peter's knowledge and thirst for plants makes this a plantsman's dream. And they are allowed to wander, seed at will, and thrive. Somehow it appears controlled and always has something flowering or seeding that catches the eye.

The Pergola is made of wood with a floor of railway sleepers and is planted with a mixture of pale coloured roses, honeysuckle and kiwi fruits. It is a lovely, green-lit space – a true foil to the higgledy-piggledyness of the borders of No-mans.

The exit route via the garden gate reconnects with the wychert wall, returning through the garage enclosure to the Entrance Court.