



INTERVIEW...

design and build

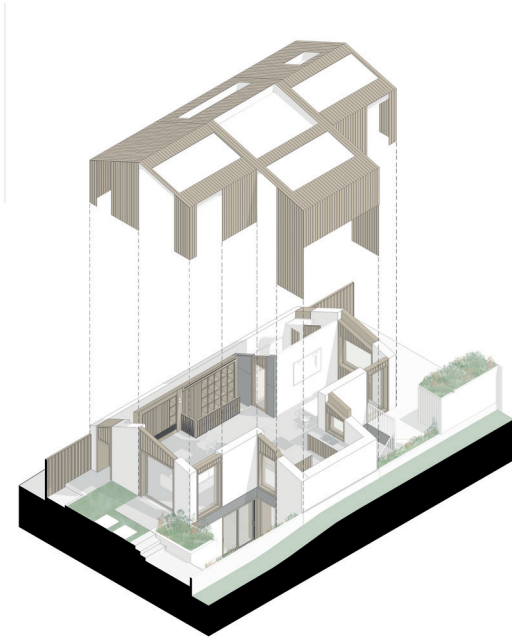
Stylus Architects' **Matt Withers** has a passion for bridging the gap between design and construction. He has two companies: one dedicated to architecture, and the other to executing those designs with the original vision intact



What was the first building to leave an impact on you? The first building I remember having a real impact on me was Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater. I discovered it when I was quite young and was fascinated by the idea of a building being so completely shaped by its relationship with the landscape. It felt like the architecture and the site were inseparable. When I went to university, the Lloyd's Building in London had a different but equally important impact on me. I became fascinated by the honesty of the building, the way its structure, services and construction are expressed rather than concealed. It made me think about architecture not just as form, but as something assembled and made. They are obviously very different buildings, but looking back, I can see elements of both influences in the way I approach architecture today: a strong response to site alongside an interest in materials, construction and how a building is actually put together.

What other influences manifest in your work? Later I became interested in architects such as Carlo Scarpa, particularly his obsession with materials, junctions and the act of making. But I am probably just as influenced by art, furniture, engineering and construction. I paint as well, and I think that inevitably affects the way I think about composition, colour, texture and proportion. Increasingly, I'm interested in what happens when the distinction between designer and maker becomes less rigid. Working closely with craftspeople and builders changes the architecture because you begin designing around

Photos Sisi Burn, James Retief, Chris Snook





"I DON'T THINK AI REPLACES THE FUNDAMENTAL PROCESS OF ARCHITECTURE"



what materials can actually do and what people are capable of making.

What do you prefer working on and why? Residential architecture suits the way I like to work. With a house, you can think about everything from the overall architectural idea down to a door handle, a piece of joinery or exactly how two materials meet. You also have a much closer relationship with the people who are going to inhabit the building. A house is incredibly personal. You are designing around someone's routines, family and way of living, and you get to see very directly how architecture can change those things. I also enjoy the speed and intensity of residential work. You can test ideas, make things and learn from them relatively quickly.

You say you're "designers who build" – what does this mean? It means that design and construction shouldn't be treated as two completely separate processes Traditionally, an architect designs something and then passes it to somebody else to build. Inevitably, information and sometimes the original intent can get lost in that handover. Green Lodge was probably the project where this became clearest to us. The house was designed by Stylus and built through an extremely close collaboration with Bartek Siekaniec and Cast. Because there was so much trust between designer and builder, we could experiment, develop details together and make decisions very quickly. The success of that relationship ultimately led Bartek and I to establish Caelix Works. Caelix doesn't replace Stylus, it sits alongside it. Stylus remains the architectural studio, while Caelix gives us the ability to carry that thinking through into making and construction. Where it is right for the project and the client the same creative thinking can continue through Caelix into how it is actually made. For me, that closes the traditional gap between architect and builder. The closer those two disciplines become, the more opportunity there is for experimentation, craft and good ideas to survive.

Is new technology changing the way you work? AI is obviously beginning to change things very quickly. We are already using it, particularly during the early stages of projects. What is interesting is the speed at which you can explore an idea or communicate something that previously might have taken hours or days to visualise. But I don't think it replaces the fundamental process of architecture. If anything, as digital tools become more powerful, I think understanding materials, construction, context and how things are physically made becomes even more important. The exciting part is combining the two.

What would your dream brief entail? Probably a difficult site, a brave client and enough trust to experiment. It's not defined by size or budget. Some of the most interesting architecture comes from constraints. Green Lodge was a good example. The brief was essentially: "Do what you like, but it has to be quick." That freedom, combined with a complicated site and an extremely collaborative construction process, allowed us to experiment.