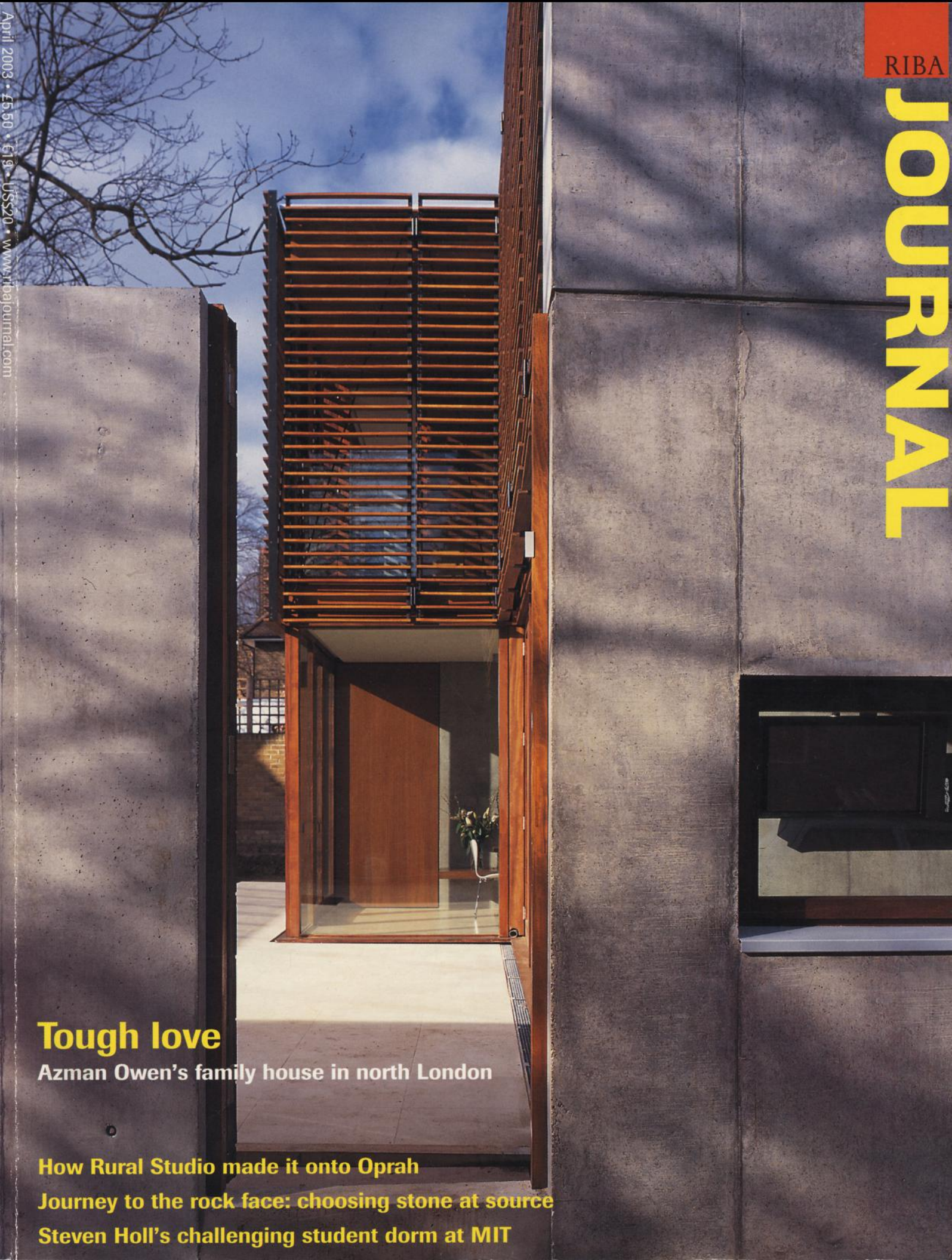


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Tough love

Azman Owen's family house in north London

How Rural Studio made it onto Oprah

Journey to the rock face: choosing stone at source

Steven Holl's challenging student dorm at MIT



Hard luck

Azman Owens wanted to build a concrete family house. Only trouble was, it didn't have any experience of using the material and nor had its contractor. Plus, the client was deeply suspicious. The result was ... something extraordinary. **By Amanda Baillieu. Photographs by Keith Collie**



| | |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| Architect | Azman Owens |
| Structural engineer | Brian Eckersley |
| Services engineer | Fergus Traynor |
| Concrete consultant | David Bennett |
| Landscape architect | Del Bouno/Gazerwitz |
| Main contractor | Varbud Construction |



Big timber shutter panels, which give shade and privacy to the first-floor bedrooms, can be raised 90° for cleaning purposes.



A high concrete wall helps create a hard edge and continues the building line set by an earlier development of mews houses.



The house is an intriguing mix of solid and transparent, with framed views that are cut into the thick concrete walls.



The stair consists of concrete treads that were precast on site and cantilevered from the wall with a glass balustrade bolted to the ends

Concrete finish by David Bennett

The birch-faced formwork panels were lightly oiled with a high-performance chemical release agent before being screw-fixed to the backing ply. Everything was screw-fixed from the back of the panels to keep the contact face free of potential blemishes or splits. Also, the strongbacks and walings that support the inner wall forms were designed with no tie-bolts over the body of the formwork.

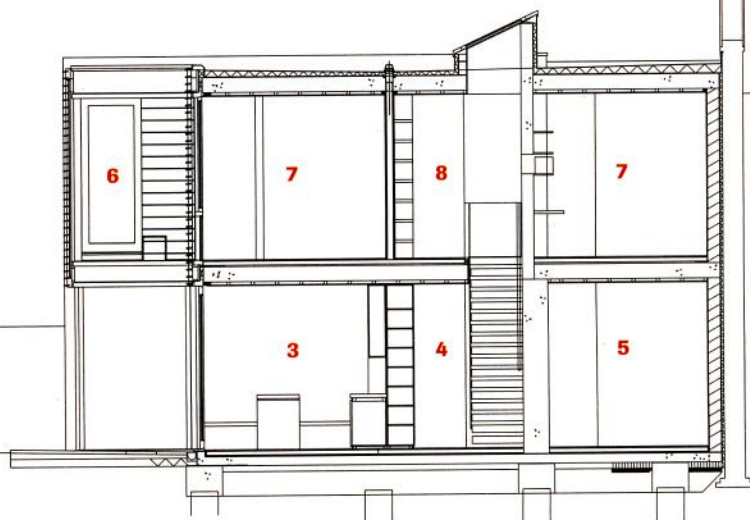
The push-pull props in the mid-span, the close centred walings over the lower half and the double row of strongbacks kept the formwork rigid and true under the 3m head of concrete. The birch-faced ply was used three times before being scrapped. After each use, the shutters were lightly sanded, recoated with lacquer and then lightly oiled with the specified release agent.

The external 150mm wall was cast against the 75mm thick cavity insulation panels with outer form face tied to the 200mm inner concrete wall using threaded bolts. The walls were poured in three lifts to reach the overall height of 6.5m. Formwork panels were removed 24 hours after concreting and came away effortlessly from the hardened concrete with hardly a trace of cement paste on the birch ply. High-frequency, constant-amplitude electric internal vibrators were specified for the compaction, to minimise blow holes and to produce a uniform compaction effort. The coarse aggregate fraction in the concrete mix was proportioned to reduce the 5mm and smaller stone content, the slump was maintained between 125mm and 135mm for workability and the mix constituents were kept constant from one batch to the next, particularly the cement and water content, both of which dominate the finished colour. The more water that is added to the mix, the lighter the shade of grey; the less that's added, the darker the tone for the same cement content. The hardened concrete face was later sealed with a transparent siloxane coating to make the concrete surface water repellent and stain resistant.



Section AA

- 1 Garage
- 2 Garden
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Corridor
- 5 Study
- 6 Terrace
- 7 Bedroom
- 8 Landing



Azman Owens has made a name for itself designing shops and domestic interiors for high-profile fashionista clients such as Alexander McQueen and Isabella Blow. Its work cannot easily be pigeonholed, except perhaps to say that it has a sparseness that comes from a limited palette of materials – mainly glass, steel and timber – used in unexpected ways. In a loft conversion (*RIBA Interiors*, June 2001, pages 24-26), one of the glass floor panels on the second storey doubles as the base of the bath. These projects have been useful calling cards, but the practice has had to wait 10 years for a commission to design a building from scratch.

It was never the client's intention to build a house, just as it was never the architect's plan to use insitu concrete – a material that the practice had not worked with before, except for a counter top for bakery Konditor & Cook. The client, a couple with four children (one at university), had been looking for a five-bed house in Islington from where they could both work, and were starting to give up when their estate agent suggested they look at a site that had planning permission for two mews houses.

Except for its location, close to Highbury Fields and the Tube, the site is not immediately appealing. Access is down a private road that has been developed with varying degrees of success, and the plot is hemmed in by houses on two sides. Opposite is an empty site, shortly

to be developed by an architect for himself.

On the initial visit, the client took along practice director Joyce Owens. She pointed out that the planning permission was for houses with north-facing gardens and that they would need to persuade the planners to allow the house to be reoriented so the garden faced west. Other problems surfaced, part and parcel of buying a plot of land, and no doubt these will enjoy full elaboration when one half of the couple, a well-known journalist, publishes her book on the experience next year.

The proposal to reorient the house got the go-ahead, with the condition that the house be of 'architectural interest'. No one defined quite what this meant but it gave a signal that the council was open-minded and keen to support a contemporary design. With remarkably few caveats, the application sailed through in 2001. It was all the more striking because this was the same council that had set itself against Eric Parry's new building in Finsbury Square on the grounds that it was too modern.

But why concrete? The client's first reaction had been negative. The couple admitted that when they thought of concrete, it was the stained and streaked material of the 1960s rather than the sleek work of Ando or David Chipperfield, which was what the architect had in mind. 'We didn't say, "Let's do a concrete house";' explains Owens, 'but as there were no buildings that we needed to relate to, the loca-

tion gave us the opportunity to create something dramatic and monolithic in appearance.'

The budget did not allow for a specialist contractor, so the architect had to find one that would price the job within a fairly tight budget while achieving a high degree of sophistication and control. In fact, the practice chose a contractor it had worked with many times before on refurbishments. Although the contractor too had no experience of fairface insitu concrete, it was willing to take on the job. The architect also took advice from concrete specialist David Bennett, who advised on the formwork panels, the mix and the release agents, and trained the contractor in how to pour the concrete mix (see Concrete finish, previous page).

The structure is deliberately simple so that the contractor could focus on perfecting the concrete. The starting point was two interlocking cubes, one facing the lane and continuing the building line of the existing mews houses. The west elevation is entirely glazed, the glass set in a timber frame with the upper level veiled in vast timber shutters. The double skin concrete walls of the box structure act as bookends supporting the glass and timber elevation, while the concrete inner walls support the concrete first-floor slab, the flat roof and the staircase, which avoids the need for columns. Internal spaces are divided by cupboards and shelving.

The plan is also uncomplicated: living spaces are on the ground floor with bedrooms and bathrooms above. The living room (based on the proportions of a three-bay Georgian house of the sort the client might have bought) and kitchen both have big sliding doors onto the courtyard garden, which is still to be planted. The bedrooms feel too small, although the master bedroom, with its light-filled ensuite bathroom, is one of the house's highpoints. ▶

Section BB

- 1 Entrance hall
- 2 Living room
- 3 Hall
- 4 Master suite dressing room

