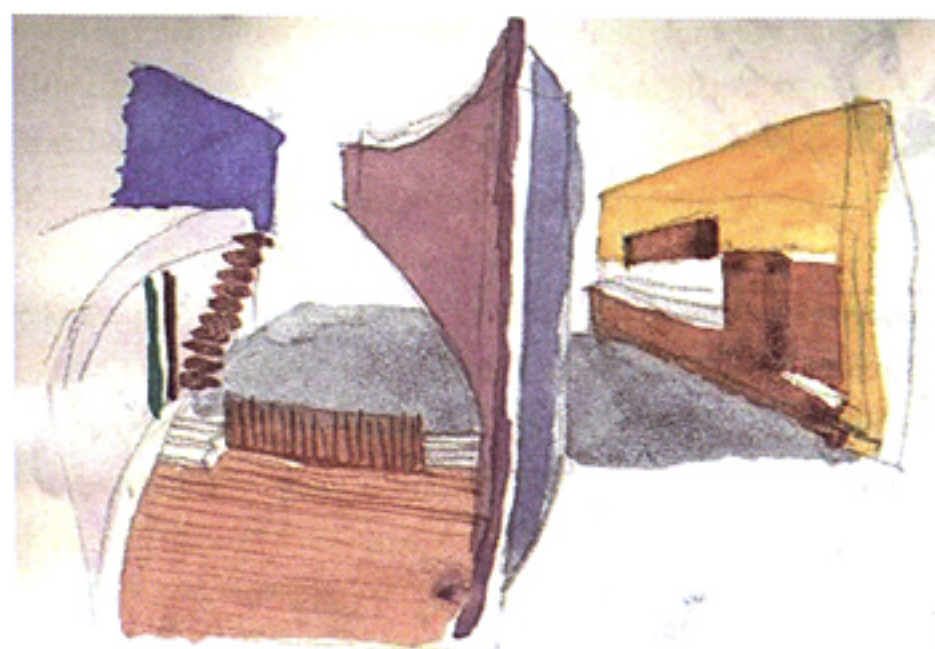
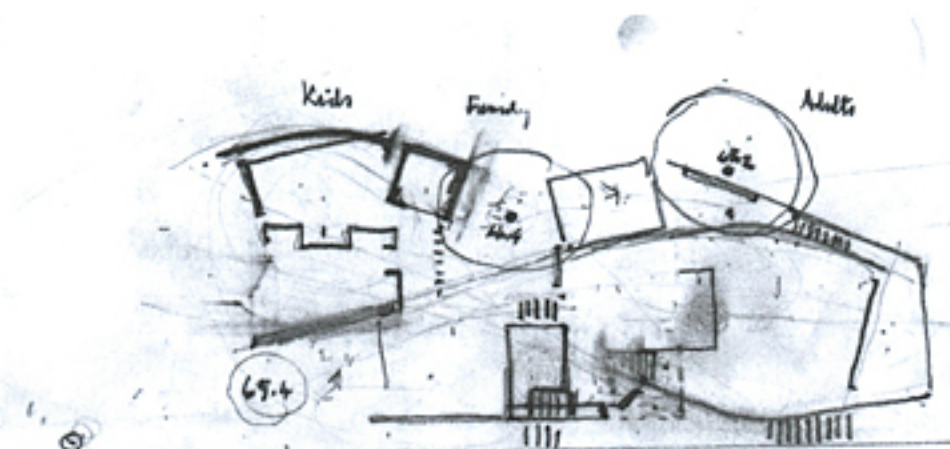


# **Dwelling with Architecture**

**Roderick Kemsley and  
Christopher Platt**

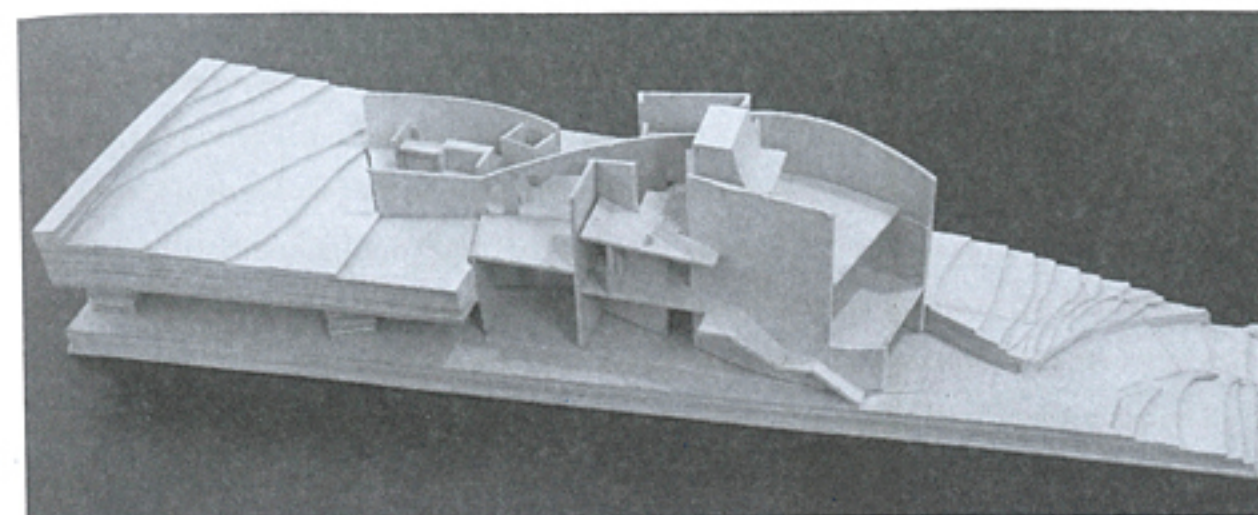




Early sketch (top) and conceptual studies

### Howth House, Dublin – O'Donnell & Tuomey

The Howth House is situated on a site that exhibits some similarities to the site in Stirling-shire where the Leijser House is built. The Howth site also slopes from back to front, is located between neighbouring houses and is accessed by road on a public side that coincides with the primary outlook – in this case a memorable long view towards Balcadden Bay and the distant Irish Sea. Whilst the Leijser House's long view faces south, the Howth's major aspect is a northerly one. Both sites enjoy a dramatic natural physical setting, contrasting an open landscape on one aspect with a strong sense of containment on the other. Both houses are part of

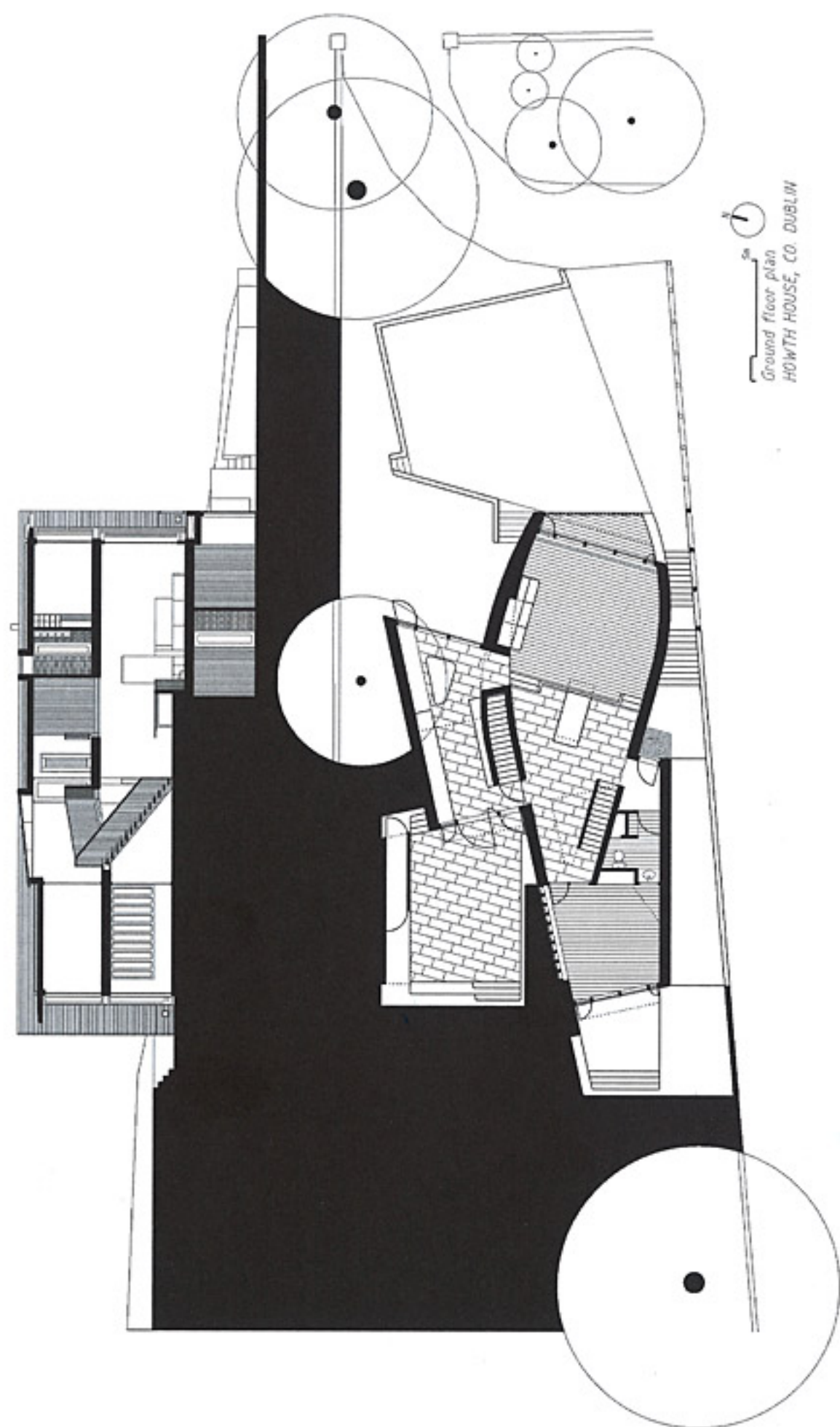


Developing scheme

a row and are therefore constrained to left and right by neighbours, while to the rear they are contained by rising ground and vegetation. In different ways both houses exploit or develop these characteristics to enhance the experience of living on a strongly directional site.

These contrasting qualities on the Howth site, coupled with the presence of two large neighbouring trees and two distant Martello towers beyond, inform the key design moves and the physical setting out of the building. The presence of tall, curved load-bearing brick walls dominate the external character of the house. From a distance, they seem like picture frames or book ends, underpinning glazed walls between them that are screened in part by iroko battens. Up close, they look and feel enormous, an experience akin to being close to some huge beast like a whale. They fashion canyon-like spaces externally, which help form the entrance sequence, squeezing the visitor towards the front door and the subsequent and surprising spatial release that follows within.

Internally, the crafting of this building edits out as far as is possible the presence of the usual products which houses tend to utilise or be made from. Internal and external openings, be it windows or doors, are formed from floor to ceiling level, obviating the need for the polite trimmings of architraves and facings, and giving the spaces a more fluid character and relationship with one another. The spatial enclosure of the rooms is effectively segregated or deconstructed into a series of independent planes (something the owner frequently exploits by a relaxed and experimental redecoration of individual sections, these almost being treated as individual canvasses for colour or material change). This perhaps works more effectively in some places than others; whereas the composure of both kitchen and garden room is almost perfect, the main living space / grand hall is ambiguous, furniture clearly struggling to find its natural place. Carefully selected and beautifully crafted solid, heavy materials enable



Final plan and section

skirtings and cornicing to be eschewed throughout. Thus dark stone or timber floors meet rough plaster on solid brick walls, these in turn running up to a shuttered concrete ceiling, the marking of which carefully echoes that of the floor. There is a complete and refreshing absence of plasterboard – that most ubiquitous of contemporary building materials. Instead, the internal partitioning and fitted furniture subordinate to the main structural walls – necessary in forming those various smaller rooms required for bathing, dressing and private study – are fashioned in solid iroko boards, thus creating a secondary texture of joinery that exists within the primary enclosure. In the kitchen (the intrusion of 'product' again avoided by its bespoke fabrication, also in iroko) the choice and application of materials and finishes are engaged to blur the transition between inside and outside via a generous, pivoted timber and glass screen.

The spatial arrangement in plan and section makes us constantly aware of the presence of the light and view. To the north, a calm and level gaze towards sea and horizon – a sense of calm enhanced by the absence of direct sunlight. To the south, the eye is deflected downwards into and then contained by the foliage of the private garden while clear daylight and sunshine are poured in from above, largely through independent openings. There is an all-pervading presence of those monumental curved walls, screening the neighbouring buildings as the house gathers us together gently in its cupped hands, seducing rather than directing us through a humane and stimulating environment.

While the house exhibits some of the ideas about bringing the inside and the outside together, which characterised early modern as well as traditional Japanese architecture, there is at the same time a tremendously powerful sense of containment everywhere. Not just of being in-between (between harbour-scape and garden or between curved walls) but of being in a distinct, *new* place, a place that takes the site's 'in-between' characteristic, understands its ley-lines and transforms it into a destination in itself. If the existing site could be described as a pause in a conversation between hill and sea, then the authors have turned a pregnant pause into a complete story itself; a narrative in which key characters include elements from both the hillside landscape and the seaside setting. Like La Tourette, this building makes us more aware of what hasn't been designed by the architects, through the medium of that which has.

But what of its qualities as a house and as a home for a family to live out their private lives with each other and their friends and relatives? Externally, it doesn't exhibit any traditional architectural features that might announce it as a domestic building. There isn't the pitched roof common to most houses in this wet and windy outpost of north-western Europe. There aren't any holes in the walls that one could describe as windows in the conventional sense. Bringing light and fresh air in happens mostly in the gaps between these load-bearing







walls – there are no glazed openings framed in timber that can open and which often give a house's exterior its human dimension. Like the Leijser House, the Howth doesn't have a 'face' as such, although it could also be described as having a gaze. Situated amongst its more familiar neighbours, the house looks a little exotic in comparison, having been fashioned by ideas and elements imported from near and far by its well-read and well-travelled authors. It is a sophisticated newcomer to the area.

Inside – after that initial and powerful sense of arrival, of views inwards, outwards and upwards, of spatial complexity and material texture, of contrasting darkness and lightness – there is an insistent, consistent and pervading sense of tranquillity. It is simply a pleasure to be inside. There is a feeling of the building accommodating and welcoming you when you seek to use it, and it is at its most immediate and delightful sitting in the kitchen snug. In some respects this feels like the centre of gravity of the building in its capacity as a home. Both table and kitchen cupboards are made from the same iroko timber as the floors and walls upstairs, playing down their presence as temporary products and linking them more to the family of fundamental building elements that fashion the architecture itself. The same can be said of the ingenious children's bedroom furniture upstairs, wittily designed to accommodate storage as well as access to the bed platforms and seemingly performing an impossible structural feat, until you realise that the small ladder is in actual fact the key supporting element in the composition. A similar architectural editing announces the kitchen snug space as one that has been shaped and created, rather than merely furnished and upholstered. From this delightful corner, there is immediate contact with the glazed view towards the sea in one direction, a powerful vista through the kitchen towards the sun-filled garden in the other direction, as well as a glimpsed shortcut through the wall to the living and dining space in front. It is what we would refer to as an 'inclusive' space, because although discrete, whatever is happening elsewhere you feel included in what's going on. What more would we want from a kitchen in a contemporary home?

This mixture of informality and intimacy within a greater sense of grandeur and even monumentality makes this both a wonderful home and a powerful piece of architecture at the same time. One does not seem to be at odds with the other. Indeed the architects' ability to be able to operate at both these levels is impressive. At no point does the feeling of monumentality appear to crush the house's more delicate qualities and, conversely, the attention to detail and tactile experience never becomes obsessive, upstaging life within or detracting from the bigger picture. It has also happily accommodated the client's own ad hoc furniture and other possessions as the years have gone by. The client, speaking in conversation with us and the architect, affectionately recalled a TV interviewer being aghast that she hadn't any

big ideas about the type of furniture she planned to install. To the client, furniture did simply not deserve the type of attention and status the interviewer seemed to be implying was *de rigueur* for any contemporary house of distinction. The client's attention had been focused on the architectural decisions that would in due course form the very spaces she would live in. These were a far greater priority to her than a showcase kitchen or bathroom fittings.

While the architect, John Tuomey, described the house as exhibiting the beginnings of truly independent thought in their practice,<sup>12</sup> the architecture of the house undoubtedly owes a debt to some of its authors' own heroes. There are lessons learned from Le Corbusier at La Tourette, Ronchamp and India as well as from Louis Kahn's houses and his Salk Institute. But these are observations interesting to us as practising architects, fellow toilers in the architectural vineyard you might say. They would be invisible and silent to most who would visit and live within the house's sheltering walls. But the presence (and at times, the absence) of these walls is the lasting impression of this building. One senses that it will one day, long in the future, turn into a magnificent ruin; a feeling that usually suggests to us that the bones of a building were sound. Its sense of shelter comes very much from that gathering ability its great curved walls provide. Like the mothers protecting their children in Käthe Kollwitz's heartbreaking drawings of Berlin's poor in the 1920s, the house shelters and protects her inhabitants whilst refashioning the world outside, allowing only its positive influences to pervade within. The house feels like some grand benevolent filter, a protective place within which people's lives blossom.

#### NOTES

1. Martienssen, R. D., *The Idea of Space in Greek Architecture*, p. 1.
2. Marshall and Willox, *The Victorian House*.
3. Bachelard, G., *The Poetics of Space*.
4. Heidegger, M., 'Building Dwelling Thinking'.
5. Manzo, L. C., *Beyond house and haven*.
6. Lingis, Alphonso (Lang 1989: 201–213).
7. Bachelard, G., *The Poetics of Space*, p. 6.
8. Moore et al., *The Place of Houses*, p. 82.
9. For a previous exploration of this issue, see Platt, 'The Inhabited Perimeter and the Inclusive Room'.
10. Frampton, K., 'Jørn Utzon', pp. 247–248.
11. [www.dailymail.co.uk/home/moslive/article-1369460/Grand-Designs-Kevin-McCloud-10-greatest-architectural-homes.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/moslive/article-1369460/Grand-Designs-Kevin-McCloud-10-greatest-architectural-homes.html) (accessed 13 September 2011).
12. Conversation with John Tuomey, his client and the authors at Howth, August 2010.