



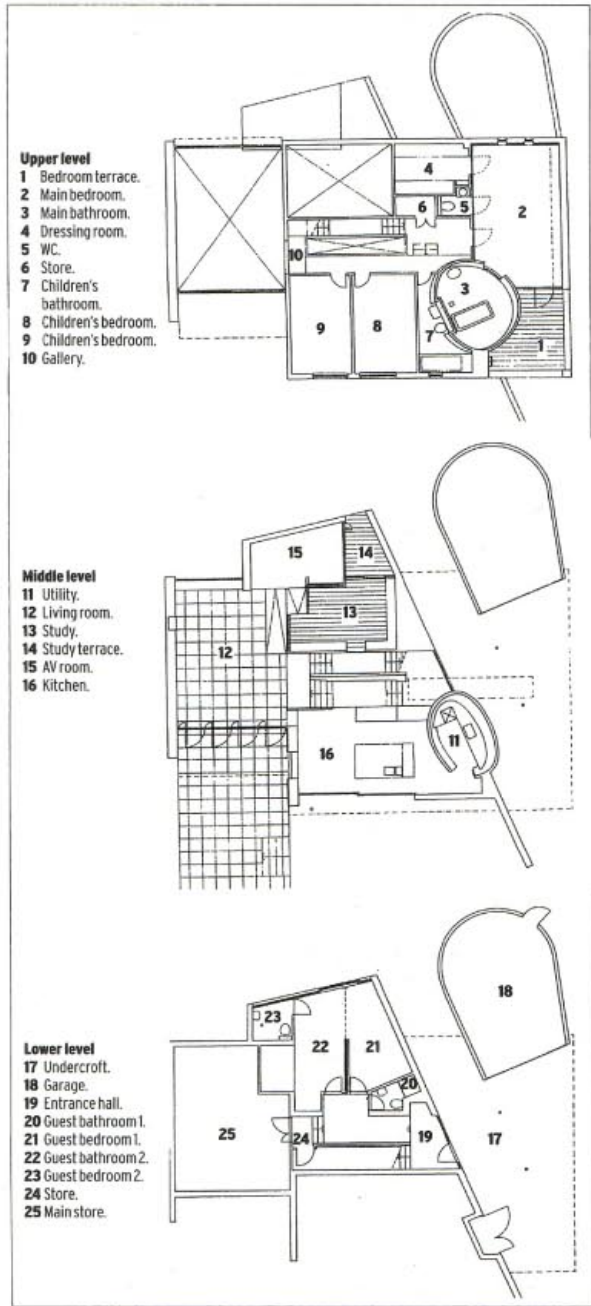
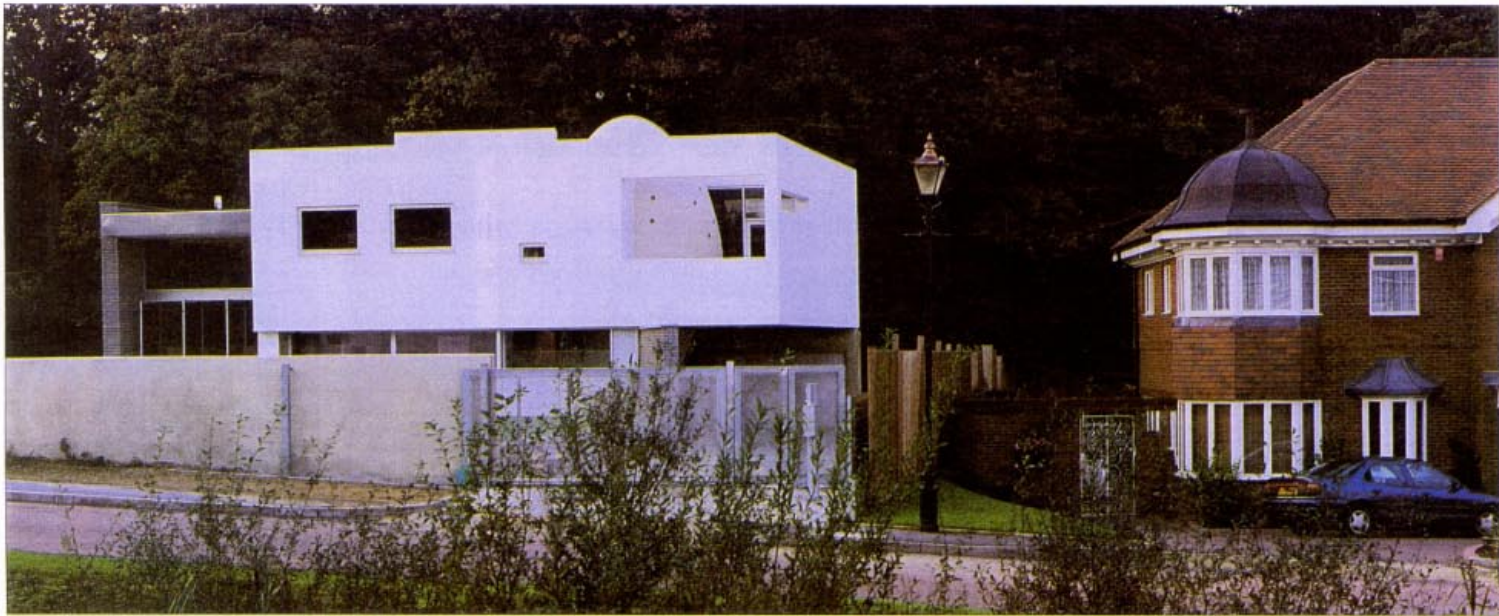
Lofty vision

Since its success with Baggy House, Hudson Featherstone has made a speciality of one-off housing. Drop House shows how a generation educated on loft living might be accommodated in the suburbs, writes Kester Rattenbury. Photographs by Tim Brotherton

Hudson Featherstone's Drop House sits in the grounds of a former country house, in a private road of typical modern houses with the now generic and expensive executive add-ons such as turrets. "Which house do you want?" asks the taxi driver. "Oh, the monstrosity." But after a little more thought he concedes: "Actually, it's probably better than the other ones."

There's something strangely familiar about walking through the Drop House. You go up the drive towards the house, the garage is ahead of you, the house itself forming a covered area between the garage and the modest door. Inside, the narrow entrance hall opens up into a series of complex views through the house, gradually opening up towards the skylit roof. Dropping down to the right is the access to the guest bedrooms at lower levels, which look out over the woods at the back of the house.

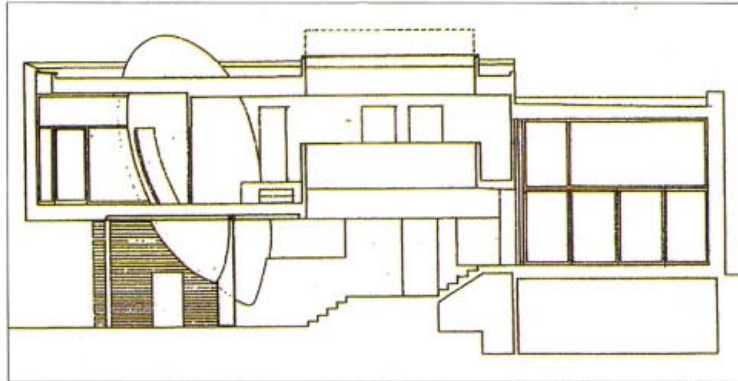
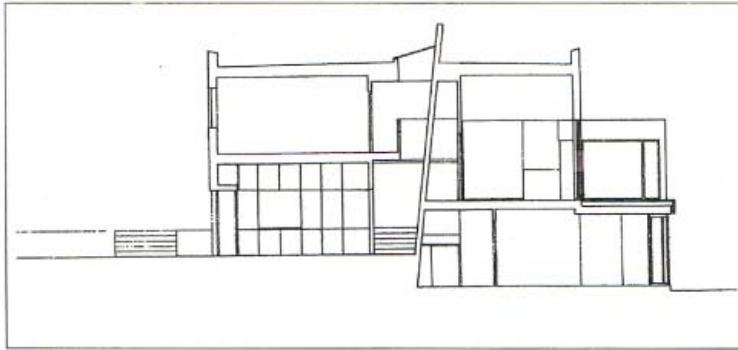
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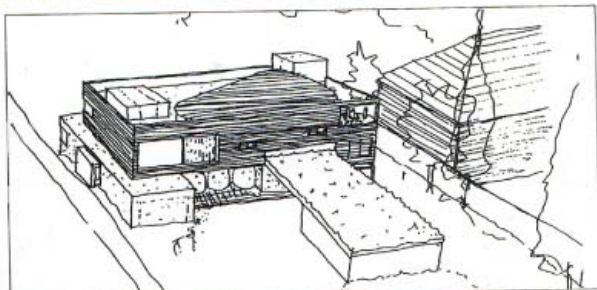
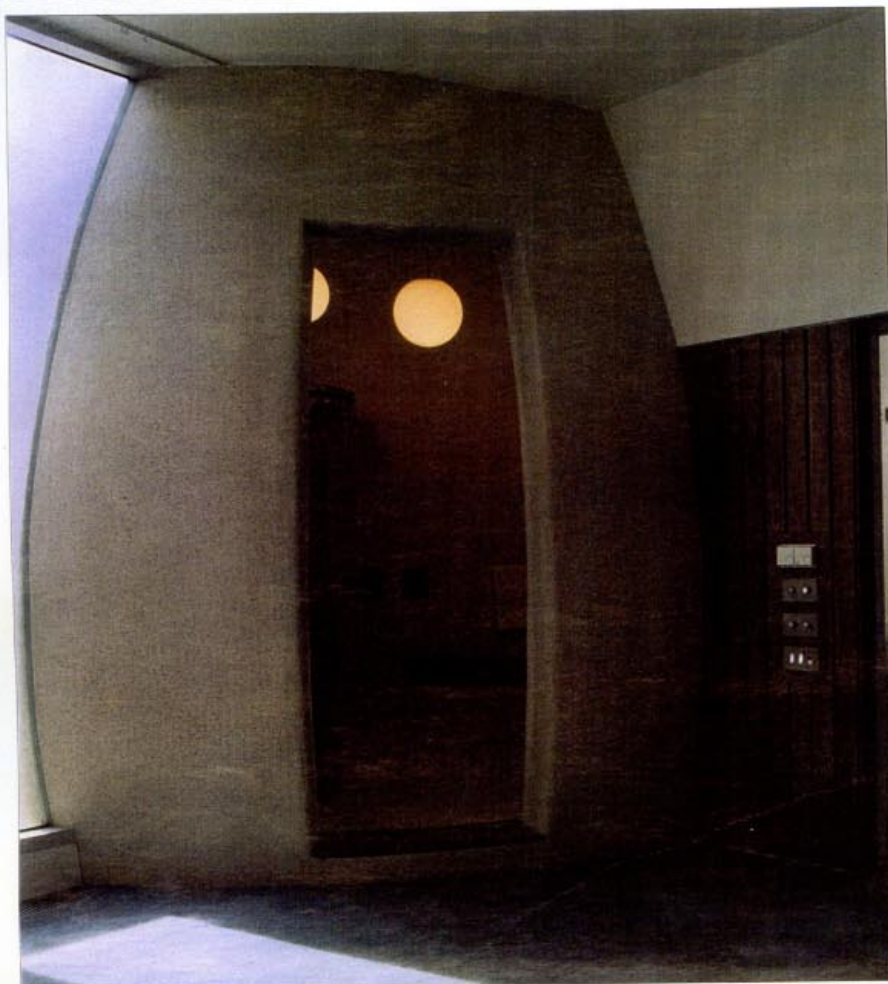


Opening page:
Undercroft and garage of the Drop House, with the drop itself visible through slots in the terrace walls.

Opposite page, top:
The main bedroom looking towards the bathroom that is housed in the drop.
Bottom: Main circulation spine, with its dramatically sloping wall, looking towards the lounge.

This page, top:
The building sits next to an "executive"-style house, but is less imposing than its turreted, red brick neighbour.
Left: Floorplans. Middle: The back of the house, with its grass-crete surround, and the mini study-terrace at first floor level.
Right: Sections.





Golfside: another Hudson Featherstone one-off house, to be built in Sutton.

sequence continues. There's a comfortable kitchen, overlooking the front door. Ahead is the dramatic, double-height volume of the living space, opening out to the south and the view. Turning back from here, the circulation splits, taking you to the upper levels of the house. With the matching, but not recognisable precision of a dream, its disposition of spaces is almost exactly the same as Baggy House.

This is strange because the site – and in many ways, the building itself – could hardly look more different. Baggy House, the spectacular north Devon coast building that made Anthony Hudson's name, is a distilled version of a popular but still unnamed architectural type – arts-and-crafts-ish, Mackintoshish re-working of modernist forms. From the outside, Drop House, near Potters Bar in Hertfordshire, looks like a suburban villa in the classic modernist genre. Inside, it's tongue-in-cheek, loft-living moved out-of-town.

Actually, those are only some of its architectural components. There's a different version of domestic modernism in the rear facade. There's an allegorical "drop" to do with water recycling (the house uses grey water) whose final form is a big ovoid containing the laundry room and the master bathroom. There's a bit of post-World-War-II English-modern use of austere materials; there's a bit of Baggy House spatial opulence. Yet it all feels very comfortable together. In fact, given the almost absurd ecumenicism of this house, it's a surprisingly direct, simple and always enjoyable piece of architecture.

Hudson Featherstone has been working with houses and housing ever since Baggy House finished six years ago: a relatively surprising career route for a practice on the fashionable young-firm circuit. Most interestingly, it is in talks with Wates about ways of developing a generic, modern executive home – Wates has realised it was missing out on a section of the market. Hudson Featherstone beat Will Alsop in the competition to design the new housing next to his Peckham library. And with Drop House and a new house in Sutton, which has just won through planning, it has taken the battle for the modern house onto its home ground; the modern suburb.

Drop House doesn't look like it's trying to tread on anyone's toes. It's pushed to the back of the site, treating the front garden, which faces south with its surprisingly rural-ish views, as the main aspect. (There are screened areas, and the drive is grass-crete). This keeps the north-facing back garden small, set right against the old and beautiful oak trees. The Drop, itself the major formal curio – is pulled inside the wall of the house. It's far less imposing than the neighbouring, function-unknown turret.

The house size – a planning constraint – is a fairly restrictive standard 26sq m. Its uses are standard too: a large main living room, kitchen/ dining with laundry space, TV room, study/library; main bedroom (en suite), two children's bedrooms; separate bathroom; guest suite (1-2 bedrooms) with own bathroom. But the formal arrangement is far from standard.

The central hall is divided by a central, sloping spine wall, so that the circulation is compressed at the bottom and opens gradually up, to a rooflit landing. The guest rooms, "hidden" at garden level, are subdivided by a sliding screen, Unité style, which means guests

can take over their own living arrangements. The "drop" bulges partly into this circulation area, partly into rooms and partly into the outside volumes of the house, sometimes dramatically, sometimes cutely.

There are lots of views and extra ways through the rooms, further breaking down a standard suburban formality. And the slight change in level, though far from visually dramatic, is used actively throughout.

The big living area, with its plain, shiny acrylic-coated panels on one wall and its garden fake-stone wall on the other, opens directly out to the terrace and garden to the south. To the north, and at high level, it overlooks the woods. From here, the main stair returns on itself up past the sloping wall; and a stepping-stone route leads up to the audiovisual room – a funky little den for TV and computer games – sticking out towards the woods. You can slide doors to open or close this from both the living room below it and the library, immediately above it. This also overlooks the woods and has another door leading back onto the staircase.

The bedrooms are more conventionally enclosed, but still maintain a sense of moving round either enclosed or open complex forms which makes the house fun to explore. There's a great mirrored walk-in wardrobe in the main bedroom, and a screened balcony to the front. The Drop opens into the bedroom, and inside it's lovely, rather like the bathroom in Ushida Pindlay's Soft and Hairy House – a big, curved, soft space with an almost religious sense of fun. The children's bathroom, which backs round this, makes virtue of necessity, its curved-corridor shape carrying something of the feeling of secret passages in the modern world. The bedrooms are straightforward, and the ever-opening circulation spiral which originally was to lead up to the roof now ends at the mother's work-desk and looks back down over the main room.

The fun is also carried by the materials. Hudson Featherstone is far from minimalist, but this is a much more easily likeable collection of materials than the Baggy House opulence. This is concrete stone, acrylic on sheetboard and sprayed acrylic as well as travertine. By its standards, it's a cheap and limited palette and far more "tongue in cheek" than Baggy House, according to Sarah Featherstone. It's handled well and visually edited, so you never get more than a few materials in one eyeful. Successfully bringing the concrete rusticated fake stone wall back into the suburban villa as a means of taking it into the modern world and up a notch or two is something of a coup.

Hudson Featherstone says it's never had problems with planners. (It's only the entrenched residents, now, who are fighting the last ditch war against modern design). And now, even the volume housebuilders recognise they've missed a trick and that a whole generation refined to loft living will be moving out of London.

Hudson Featherstone is clearly in poll position for exactly what it's planning to do – to take ideas which emerged from a recent generation of one-off houses into the mass market.

Architect Hudson Featherstone.
Contractor Lad Construction.
Structural engineer Techniker.
Services engineer Mendick Waring.
Quantity surveyor Dobson White Boulcott.

