

The Architectural Review





DUST TO DUST

The rammed-earth pavilions of Waugh Thistleton's Bushey New Cemetery provide an elegant and sober setting for funerals in a suburban idyll, writes *Catherine Slessor*

LAKS

פ"נ
ר' איסר יוסף
ב"ר דוב בעריל הכהן
ת' נ' צ' ב' ה'

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
MY DARLING HUSBAND
IZER JOSEPH
LAKS
WHO FELL ASLEEP
9TH FEBRUARY 1983
AGED 67.

DEEPLY MOURNED BY HIS
DEVOTED WIFE LILY,
SON STANLEY,
DAUGHTER HELEN.

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OUR ALWAYS BE IN
DARLING OUR HEARTS
POPPA FOREVER
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Mourners progress from the rammed-earth prayer halls (below) down a central path (bottom) to the graveside



In January last year, on a bright, cold winter's day, the remains of six Jewish victims of the Holocaust were interred at the New Cemetery in Bushey. No one knew their names, but forensic tests disclosed that they were five adults and one child, all murdered at Auschwitz. Their commingled remains had been in the care of the Imperial War Museum for the previous 20 years, and this long-overdue act of burial was Britain's first public funeral for Holocaust victims, attended by more than 1,000 people. The single coffin was accompanied by a group of elderly Holocaust survivors, who conveyed it from the cemetery's prayer hall to the graveside. Mourners took spades and cut the soil, imported from Israel, shovelling it onto the coffin. Finally, the unknown victims returned to the earth.

Jewish funeral rites are rigorously proscribed. Jewish law, or *halakhah*, states that 'the body in its entirety is returned to the earth in a way that allows for natural decomposition to occur'. Burial must be within 24 hours of death (36 hours *in extremis*), so there is no time to indulge in elaborate funereal choreography. The process begins with the Taharah, a ceremonial washing and cleansing of the body. This is followed by the Levayah, or funeral, in which rituals of assembly, prayer, procession and graveside contrive their own particular emotional and scenographic intensity. 'From earth you came and to earth you shall return', says the Book of Ecclesiastes. In Hebrew, the word for 'man' and 'earth' share the same root. Architecture seems almost irrelevant. Discreetly hovering and well turned out, like a solicitous

undertaker, it is merely required to provide shelter and succour. And in turn, its time will come. When a Jewish cemetery is finally full, its prayer halls are demolished and, like the dead, return to the earth.

At Bushey, this corporeal cycle assumes an especially charged poignancy as its new prayer halls are constructed from rammed earth, a building technique as immemorial as the funeral rites it is intended to house. Designed by London-based Waugh Thistleton, the cemetery complex of two prayer halls, mortuary and reception building, unified by a spinal colonnade, forms an armature for the practical and psychological rituals of mourning. It appears simple enough, an assemblage of modest, low-rise structures marking human presence in what was originally a cabbage field, yet the project took 10 years to complete.

The complexity lay in divining what form it should take, as there are few recognisable precedents for this niche typology. Historically, Jewish cemetery buildings were a specific response to place, time and the community. Getting to know and intimately understand these needs was not a process that could be fast tracked. 'You come to realise the significance of the space that you're making', says project director Andrew Waugh. 'And how it has to be part of that community. So I think 10 years was about the right amount of time to do the job.'

The Orthodox Jewish community of north London and the surrounding shires has been burying its dead at Bushey since 1947. Set on the edge of town, where periphery merges into farmland, the cemetery is an important communal nexus, accommodating generations of families. Thousands of burial

plots marked by marble headstones and slabs are crammed together in almost indecent proximity. Aiming to encourage nature and wildlife, the adjoining New Cemetery is predicated on half the current



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density, but still has space for 8,000 graves, which should see it operational for another 70 years, not far off the span of a human lifetime. Waugh, who is not Jewish, quickly had to become familiar with the nuances of Jewish burial practice. He recalls the visceral experience of attending a funeral for a Jewish friend at Bushey. 'There's a big pile of earth beside the grave and I envisaged being given a silver trowel with which to sprinkle earth on the coffin', he says. 'Instead, you get a spade. It's hard, it's clay soil, you chop into it and shovel, and it's really raw and emotional. You come away from it covered in earth.'

Though the idea of employing rammed earth struck a poetic chord with both architect and client, in practice it proved harder to realise. Following early trials, in which cast wall samples disconcertingly



A tall larch colonnade (opposite) shelters mourners congregating outside the prayer halls. The monolithic quality of the massive walls is broken up by vertically incised joints (this page)

collapsed in heaps of mud, an Australian specialist contractor advised adding a small proportion of cement, around 2 per cent, to the mix. (For comparison, concrete has a 20 per cent cement content.) The final agglomeration, technically known as stabilised rammed earth, combines soil from the cemetery site, sand, aggregate and some heavier clay soil from an adjacent locale, all bound together by the cement seasoning. Layers originally 600mm deep were placed in aluminium shuttering and compressed down with an electric tamper to a height of 150mm. After 24 hours, the mixture sets and can be turned out from the shuttering. Each rammed-earth unit is 2.2m long and 400mm thick, and comprises six tamped layers, which are faintly perceptible on the finished artefact, like delicate ghost strata. The warm hue of the earth blocks and their crisply

inscribed vertical joints temper the monolithic quality of the massive walls.

Traces of making and studied imperfection show through all the materials, including the encaustic floor tiles and English oak which lines that part of the prayer hall occupied by mourners. Waugh relishes the fact that though manufacturing processes might be fixed and repetitive, each rammed-earth block, piece of oak, Corten door panel, glass light-fitting or ceramic floor tile turns out to be slightly different, with its own distinct characteristics, like individual human beings. In this way, the architecture is infused with subtle, meditative meanings. 'When you go to a funeral, you are there to honour the deceased, but also you invariably think about your own mortality', he says. 'So as a place of contemplation, every material has

to have a resonance and a level of integrity around its choice.'

Oriented on an east/west axis, the two prayer halls are mirror images of each other. From the sheltering embrace of the tall larch colonnade, mourners enter each hall from the west, women filtering to the right and men to the left. People usually stand, but there is fixed bench seating along the walls for those who cannot. The tiled floor slopes gently down to the hall's ceremonial east precinct, defined by its dignified 7m height and exposed rammed-earth walls, where the rabbi intones prayers over the coffin. The subtle yet inexorable pull of the sloping floor, reinforced by an equivalently sloping ceiling and a single angled wall, creates a sense of spatial and experiential compression, calculated to focus attention on the deceased and the transition from life

to death that awaits us all. Characteristic of Greek and Italian churches, the sloping floor was also deployed by Asplund at his Woodland Crematorium in Stockholm, which acted as a key exemplar in the quest to devise an appropriate architectural language for the project.

Compared with the rickety kitsch or municipal functionality of many modern churches and crematoria, Bushey's prayer halls have an enviable sobriety and solemnity, achieved through a series of simple yet highly considered moves. Visual connection with the exterior was thought to be distracting, so light is tactfully diffused through two long slots of clerestory glazing, to illuminate both the living and the dead, restating the existential and architectural duality of the prayer hall being, in effect, two worlds and two buildings conjoined in one.

Each prayer hall is also flanked by a Cohanin Room, which has views through into the main congregational space. Orthodox Jews consider Cohens to be the descendants of Aaron, the High Priest, and

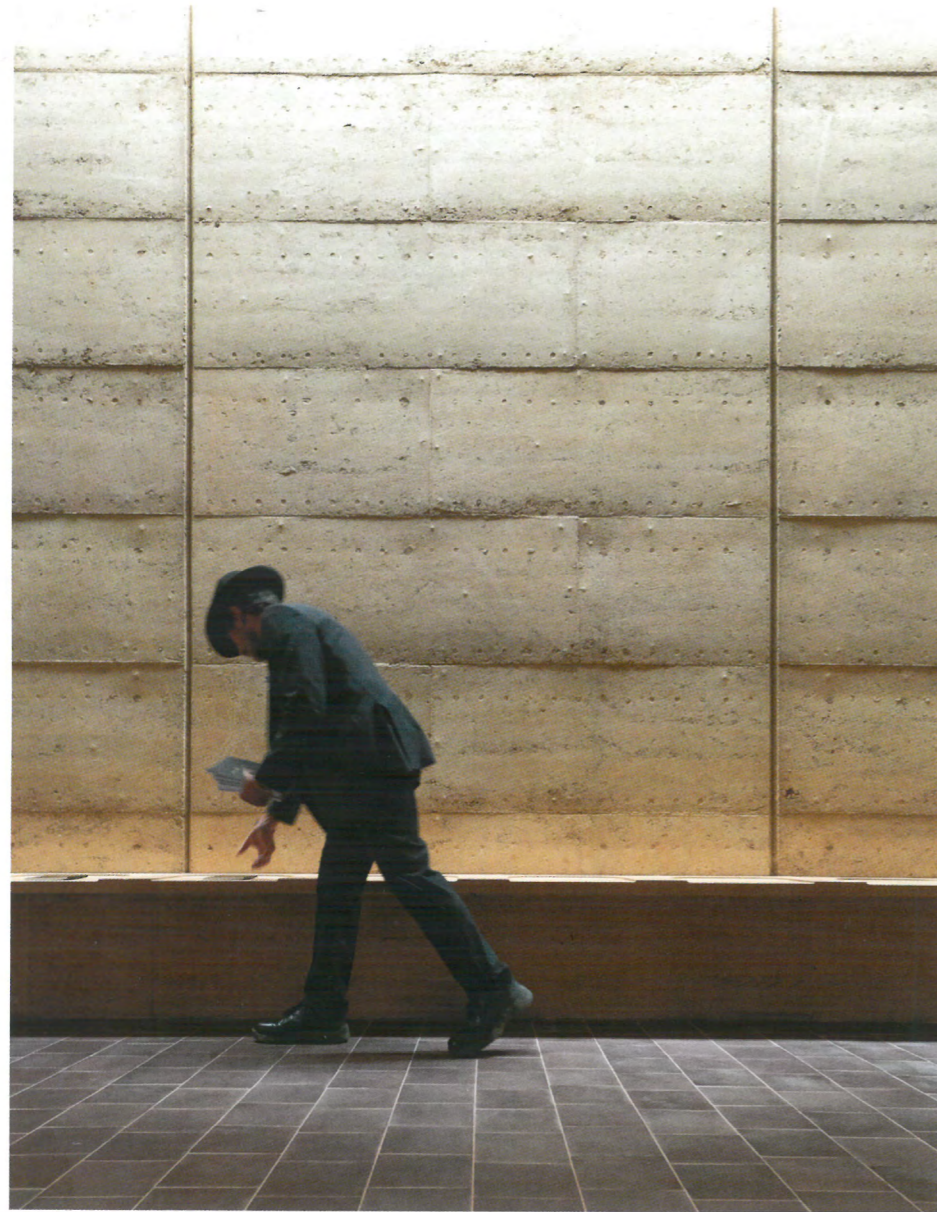


therefore they are not permitted to occupy the same room as a dead body, or be in a space in which one has lain. By providing a physically separate building, which also doubles as a secondary prayer hall for smaller gatherings, they can still be part of the funeral service.

At the conclusion of prayers, mourners accompany the coffin through the rear east door, framed by a portico of weathered Corten steel, and process through the as yet barely touched green sward of the cemetery grounds to the allotted burial plot. The complex of prayer halls and ancillary buildings is carefully positioned at the south-east extremity of the long, sloping site, the horizontal datum of the colonnade acting as a visual marker from a distance. A line of mature oak trees stands sentinel on the horizon, starkly bald in winter, but in

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There is fixed bench seating along the walls for those who cannot stand for long periods (right). The natural pockmarks, striations and the warm hue endow the rammed-earth walls with a humane character



spring they and other newly planted trees and wildflowers will erupt in a cacophony of fertility. To the rear of the prayer halls is a large incipient pond designed to catch storm water run-off, gradually filling over time. Beyond the pond's rim of reeds and screen of trees, the distant hum of a motorway is faintly discernible, a reminder of the insistent presence of the material world, even in this bucolically tranquil enclave.

Though the project spanned 10 years, the physical construction of the rammed-earth walls was surprisingly rapid. It took an eight person team just 46 days to build them. Yet the UK still seems to have little appetite for this form of construction and lacks the expertise to develop it in any meaningful way. Waugh is undeterred, seeing Bushey as an important prototype that could inform future possibilities. 'We're doing a number

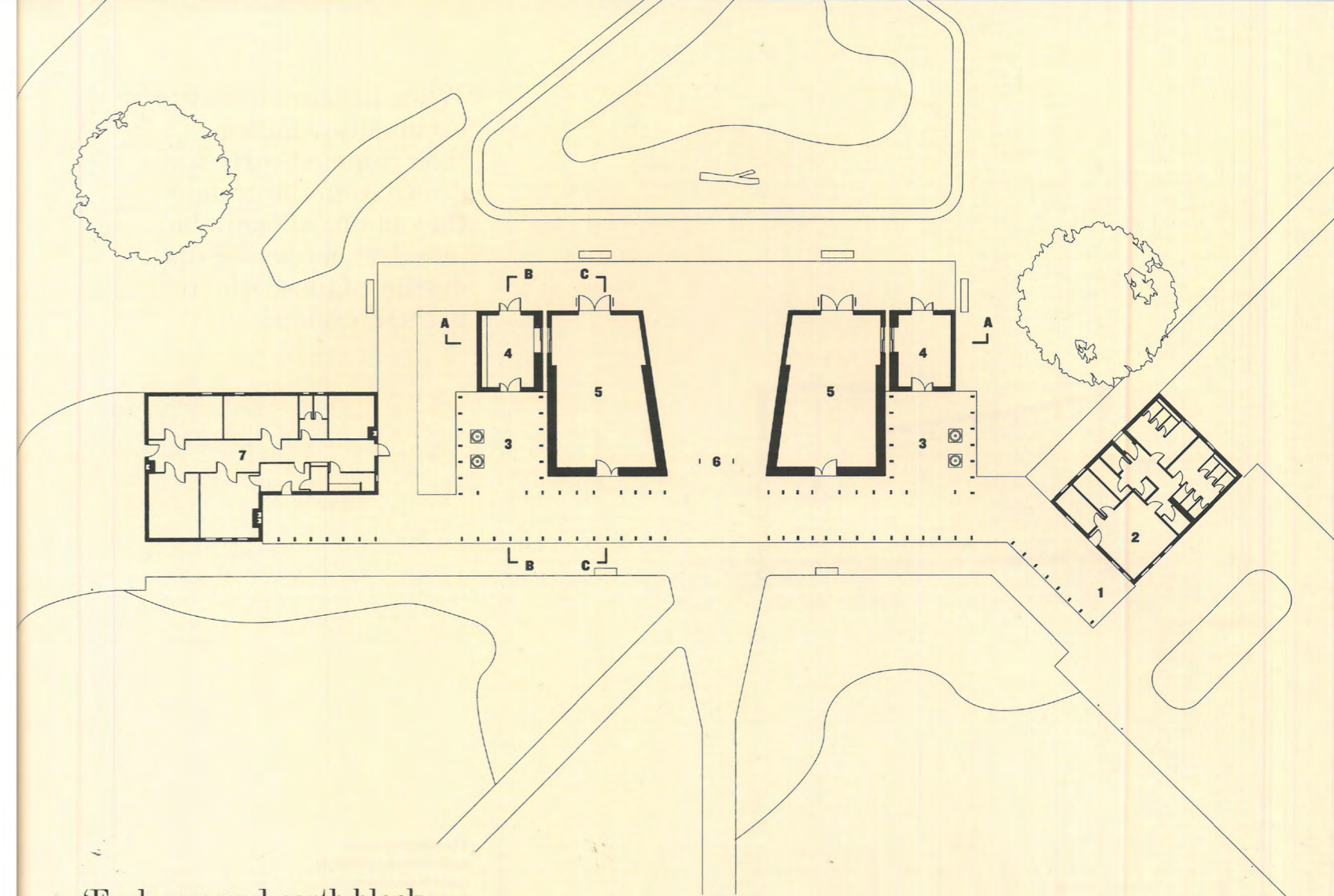
of competitions at present and looking at how we can use rammed earth in different contexts', he says. 'As a natural material it has a more pleasing affinity with building users. You can feel a relationship with earth,



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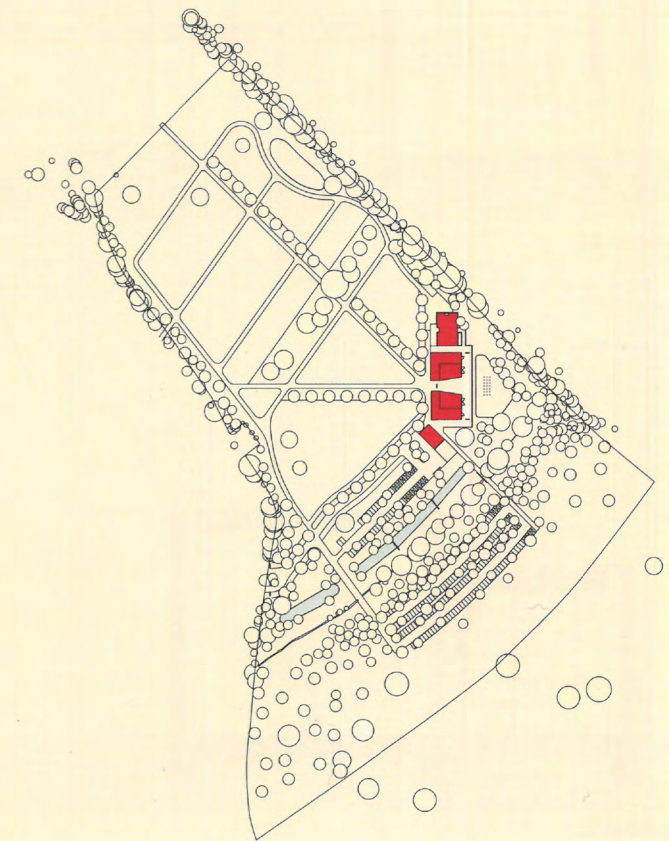
unlike concrete.' It's also more inherently sustainable than concrete, and has the potential to improve its structural properties through reinforcement with bamboo, hemp or other fibrous materials. Bushey's shortlisting for last year's Stirling Prize briefly propelled rammed earth into the spotlight, and Waugh hopes that the momentum generated can sustain further conversations and initiatives.

Architects rarely consider the ultimate fate of their buildings, but in this case it was unusually predictable and a defining factor in the design. When the prayer halls and other structures are eventually demolished, their rammed-earth walls, drawn from the ground they sit on, will crumble into dust, mirroring the destiny of those who rest in their shadow. Bodies and buildings finally and inexorably returning to the earth.

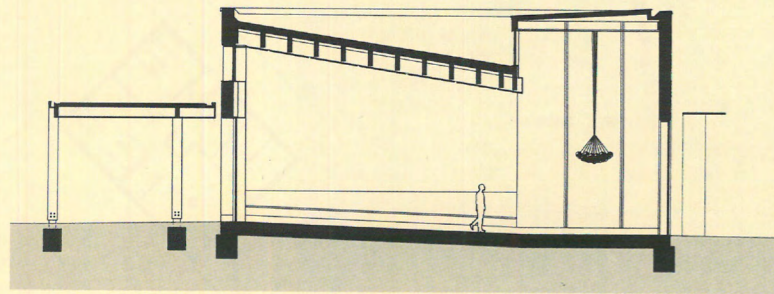


'Each rammed-earth block, piece of oak, Corten door panel, glass light-fitting or ceramic floor tile has its own distinct characteristics'

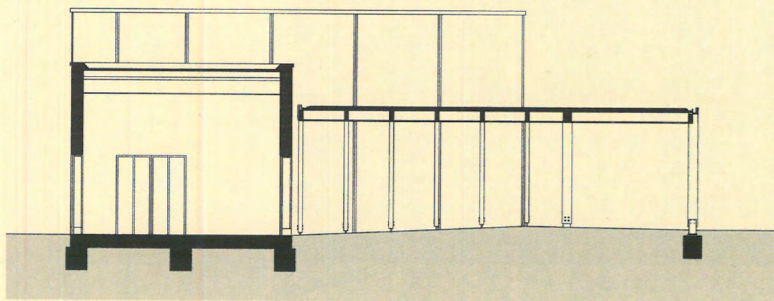
- 1 arrival point
- 2 reception
- 3 hand washing area
- 4 Cohanim Room
- 5 prayer hall
- 6 prayer arch
- 7 mortuary



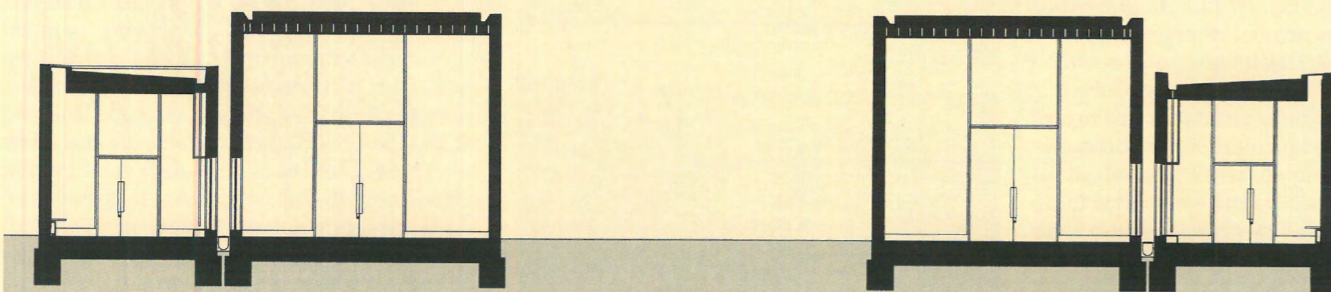
'When the structures are eventually demolished, their rammed-earth walls, drawn from the ground they sit on, will crumble into dust, mirroring the destiny of those who rest in their shadow'



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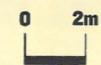


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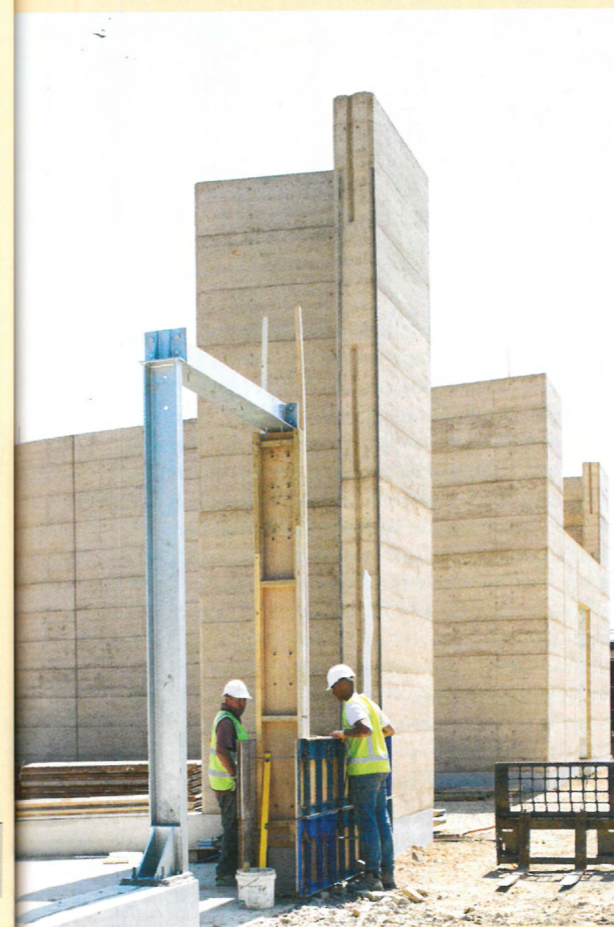
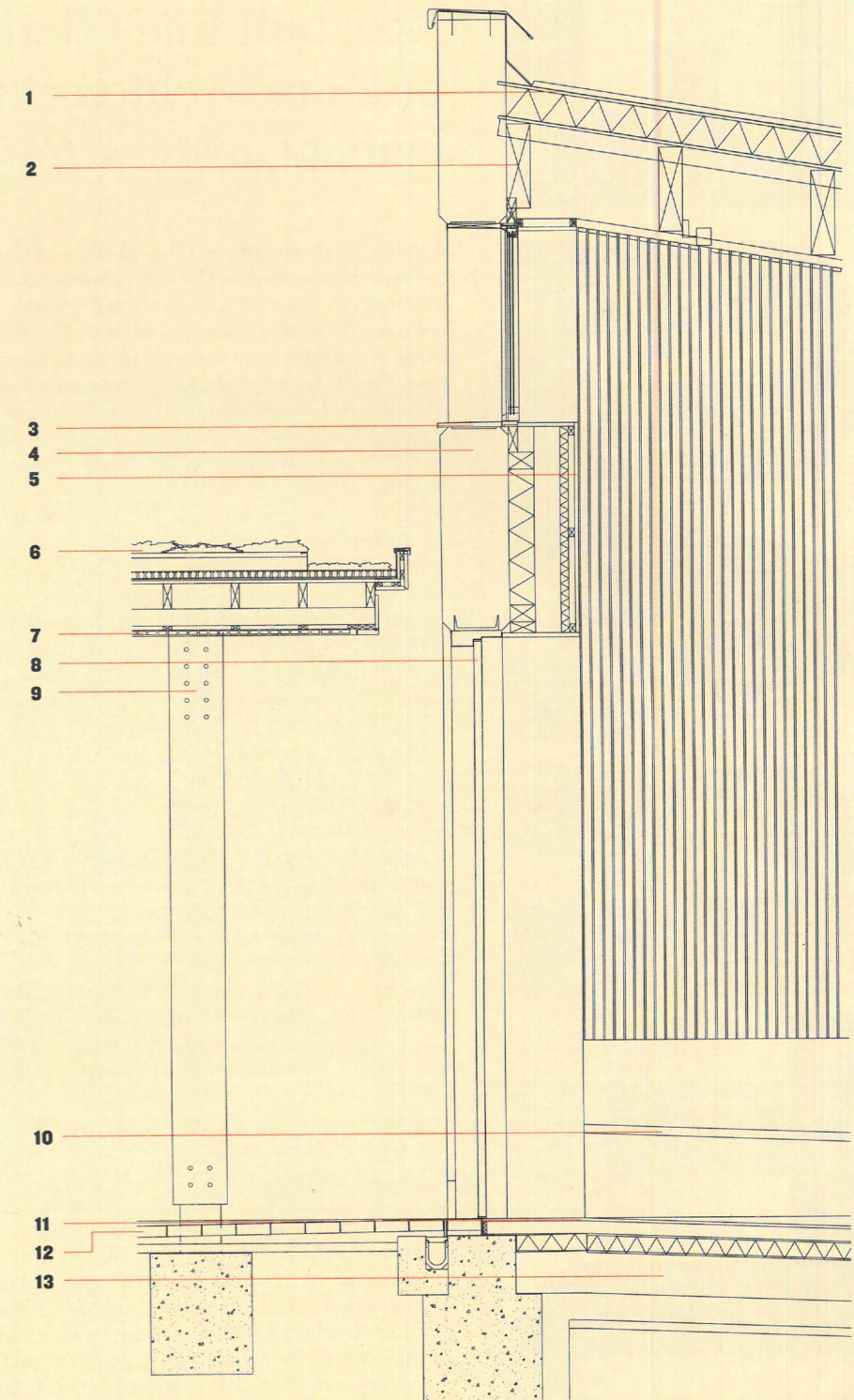


section AA

The rammed-earth walls were surprisingly rapid to construct (right), taking an eight-person team just 46 days to erect



- 1 standing seam zinc roof
- 2 glulam beam
- 3 bronze cill
- 4 rammed-earth wall
- 5 oak slats on battens
- 6 green roof planted with wildflowers
- 7 larch slats
- 8 Corten steel door
- 9 larch glulam colonnade
- 10 oak bench
- 11 cement floor tiles
- 12 clay pavers
- 13 concrete slab



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