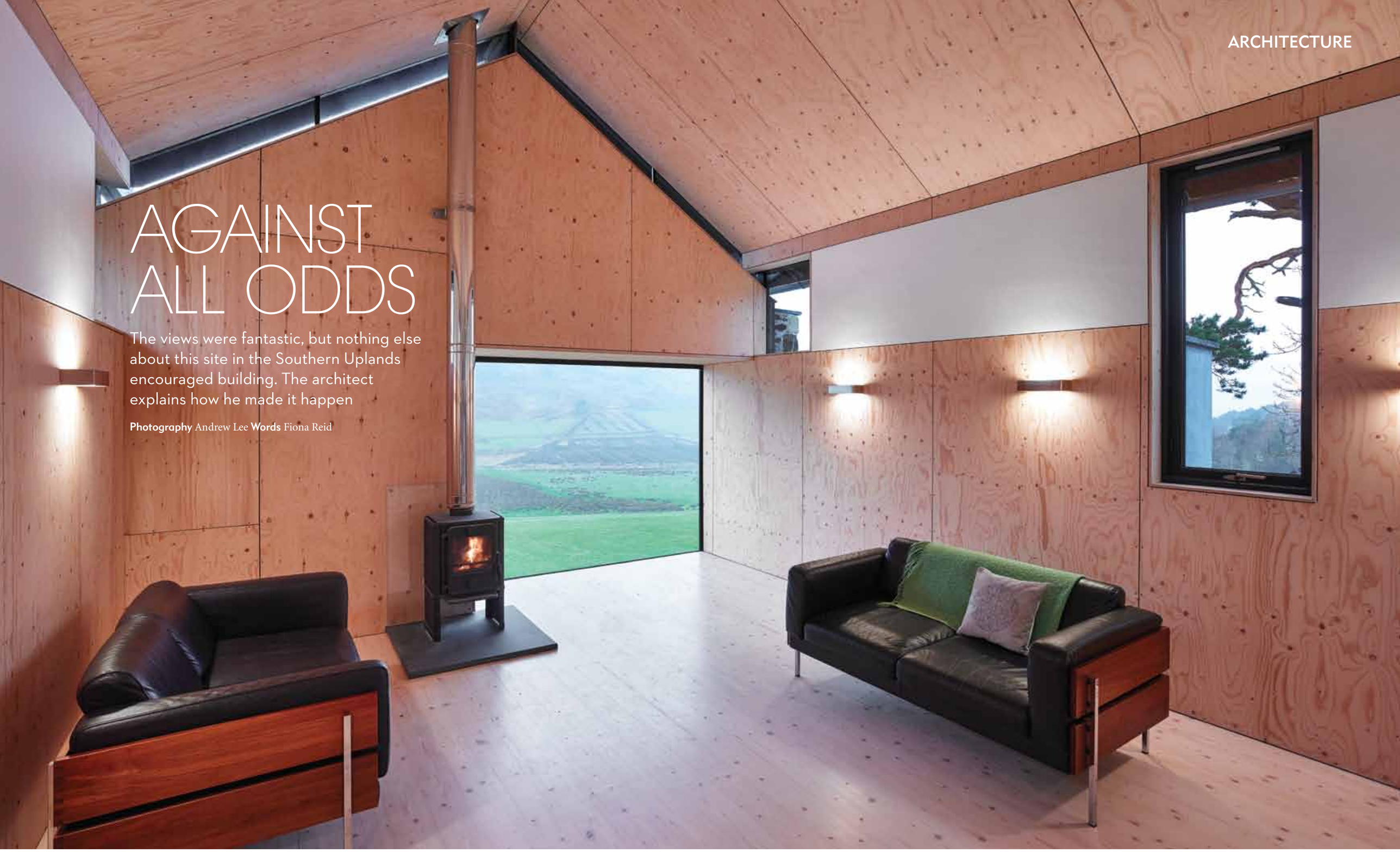


AGAINST ALL ODDS

The views were fantastic, but nothing else about this site in the Southern Uplands encouraged building. The architect explains how he made it happen

Photography Andrew Lee **Words** Fiona Reid

THE CAPACITY TO SEE BEYOND

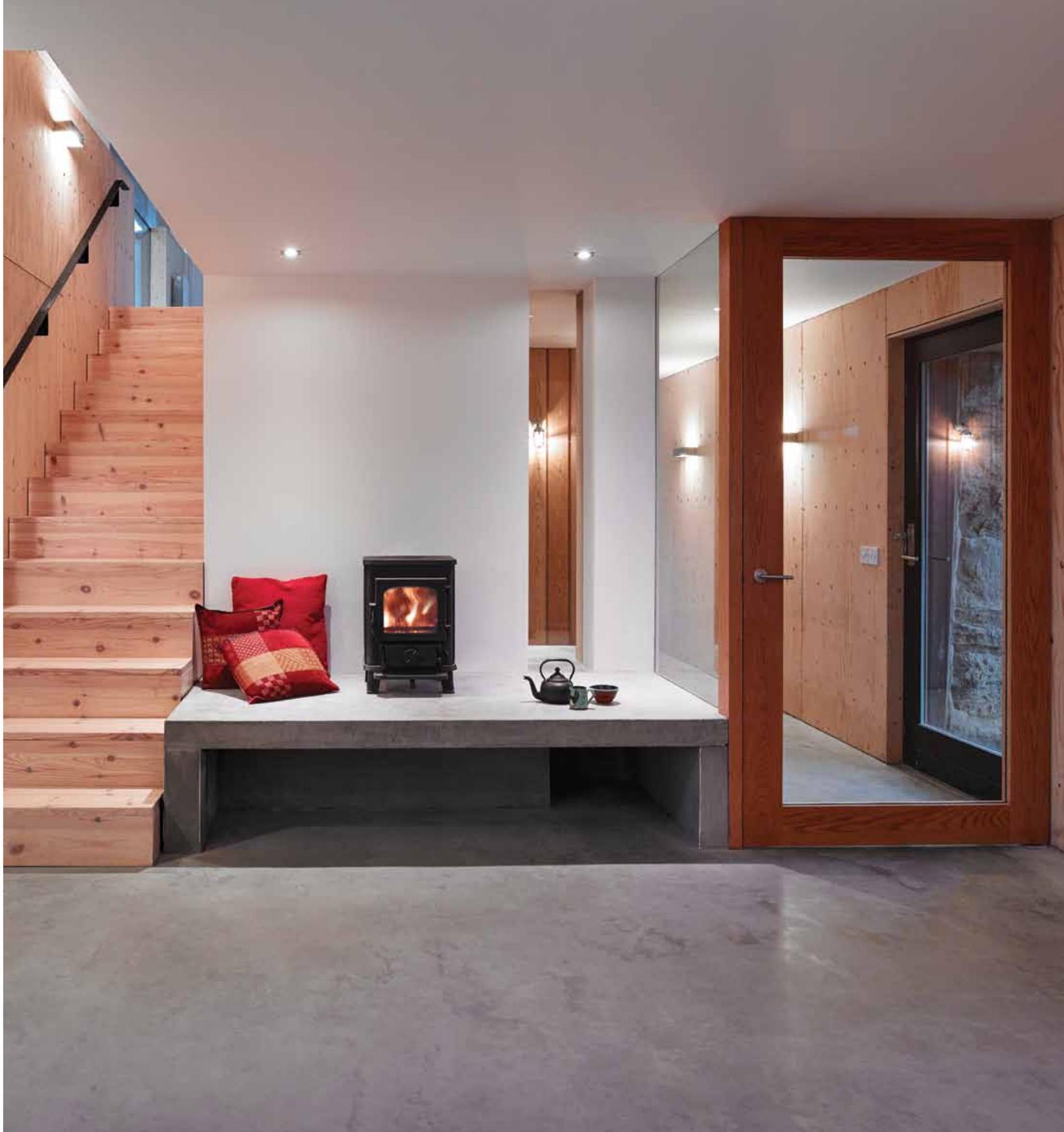
structural issues or access problems to the rich potential a site may offer is a gift shared by the best architects. This project, near Biggar, certainly tested the abilities of Wil Tunnell, of WT Architecture, to their limit. Access to the collection of tumbledown farm buildings was nonexistent, there were no services to the site and the surrounding land was owned by half a dozen different people, making it extremely tricky to negotiate a way forward.

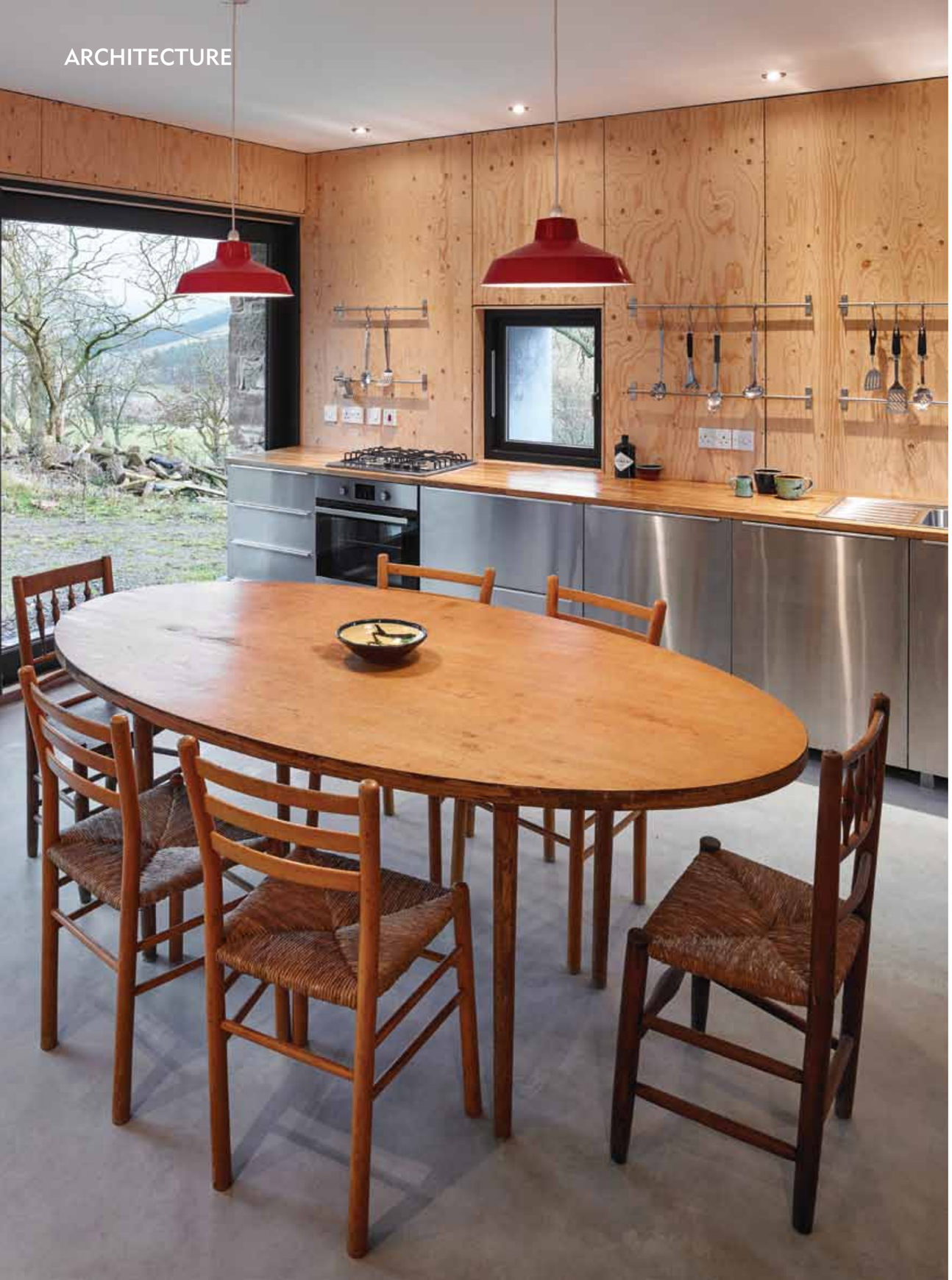
Despite these seemingly insurmountable problems, the plot had been bought by an enthusiastic owner who was determined to press ahead with building a new home. He invited Wil to take a look at it in the summer of 2011. "The original buildings had been unused for fifty years so the roofs had fallen in. There wasn't even a track to the site," he recalls.

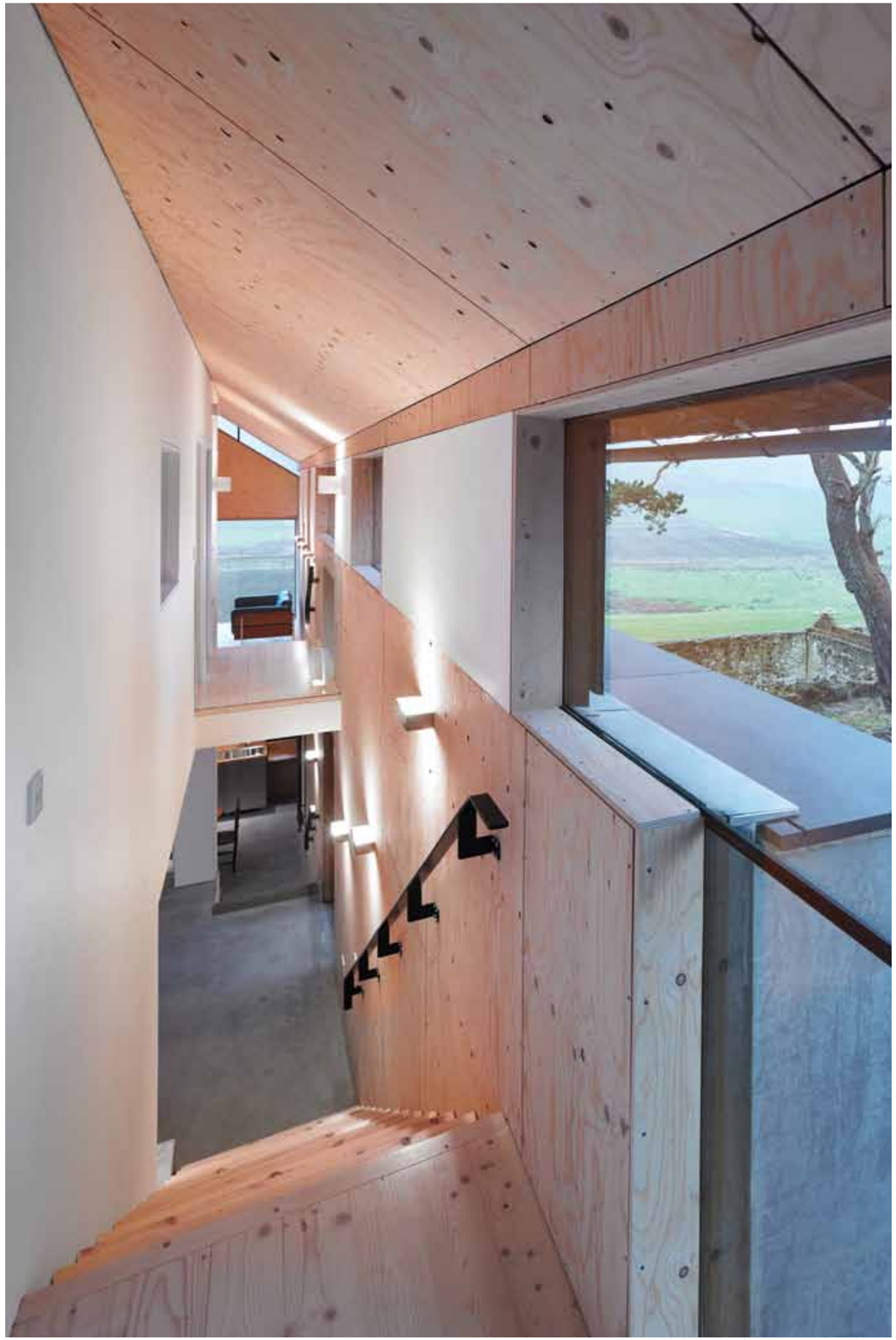
After considering the various buildings, Wil and Susie Turley, the project architect, focused their attention on a long, narrow building that had once been a threshing mill. "Given that the client was looking for lots of light and space, this seemed like the best starting point," Wil explains.

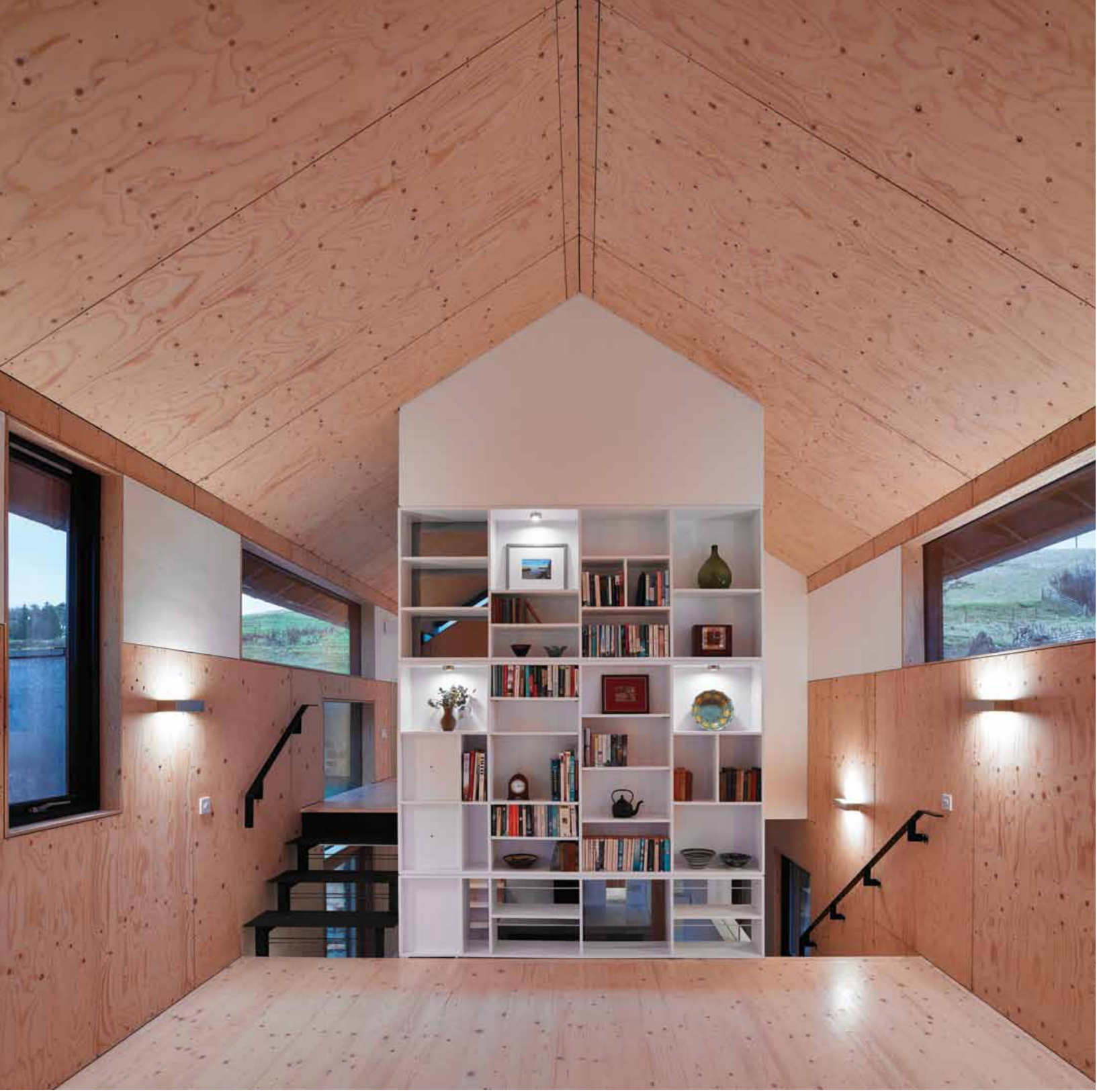
The site then revealed its other challenges: "There is a vicious microclimate here. The wind is always much faster in the glen and the temperature is lower, so there's more snow and rain. The wind sweeps up the valley and hits the house hard. This wasn't the spot for designing luxurious terraces to spill out onto."

The first task was to create a track to the secluded site. The old threshing mill itself was in a poor state. "It was a ▸









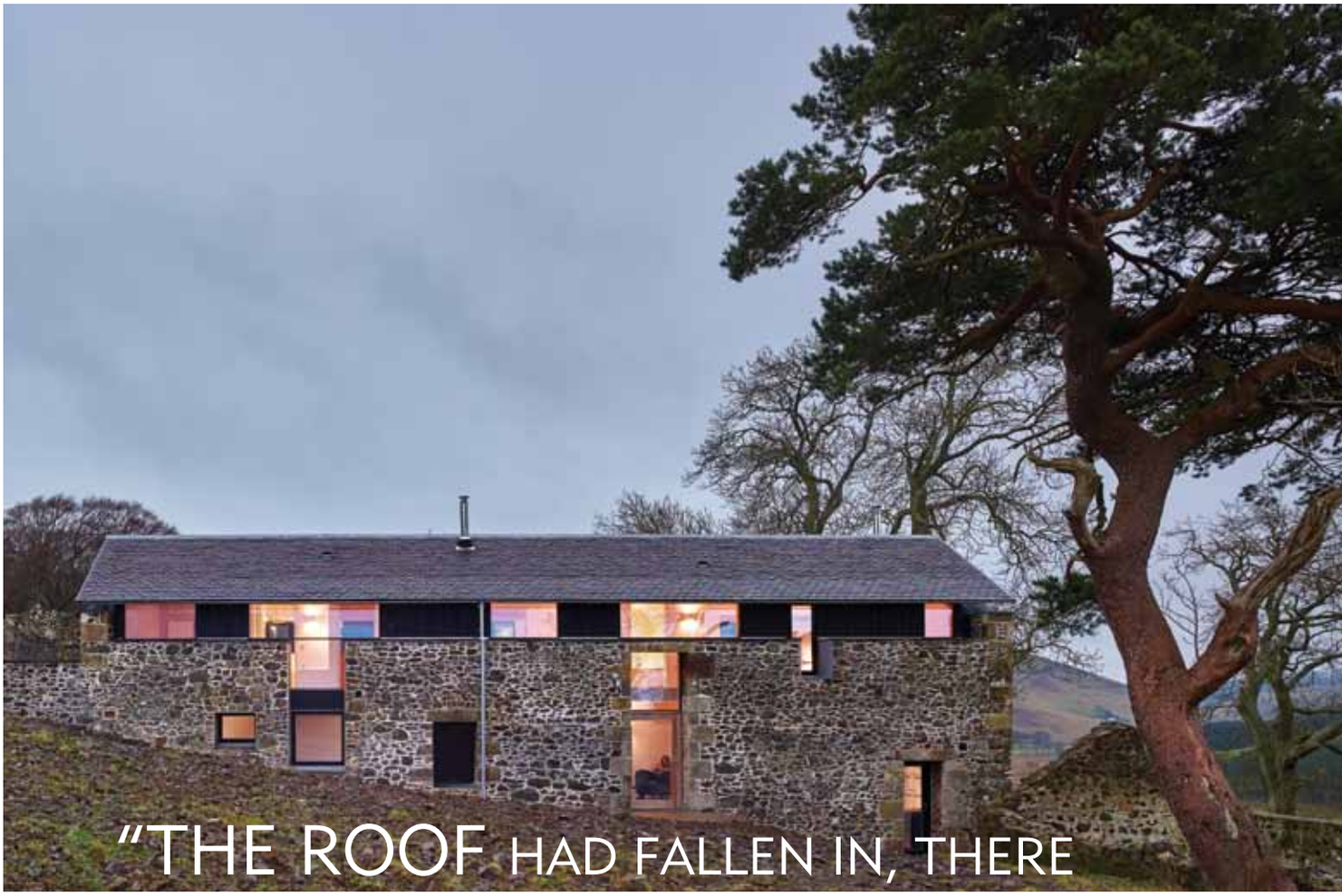
guddle of fallen beams, and there was asbestos present. The land drains had broken all round the building, which meant there was a stream running straight through it," he says. He gives credit to local building firm John Lawrie Construction, the main contractor; to the structural engineer David Narro Associates; and to another local builder, Robbie Leith of Landmarkers. All three spent the first year on site, from 2012 to 2013, consolidating the building, underpinning and shoring up the walls and repointing the stonework.

The house is now arranged over two floors, with the kitchen and dining spaces extending along the ground level, along with one bedroom and shower room, and with the main seating area upstairs, along with three further bedrooms and two bathrooms. The sloping site gave Wil and Susie the opportunity to work with the internal levels in an interesting way, creating long views between the different zones in the floorplan and adding two staircases as an integral part of the flow and interaction between these zones.

"We decided to enjoy the change of height and enter the building in the middle, into a dining-hallway, where you'd get a sense of as many spaces as possible," Wil says.

The client wanted the emphasis to be on social, open-plan living. "It meant the bedrooms could be smaller and the living space could be maximised, so it's a less cellular building," Wil explains. "The interior leant itself to being fairly utilitarian with simple robust finishes such as concrete floors and plywood-lined walls. The latter was an interesting way architecturally to express the fact that we were putting a timber building inside the masonry walls – a timber box dropped into the old walls." The kitchen adds stainless steel to the utilitarian mix with cabinetry from IKEA.

Budgetary constraints meant that as many of the existing openings as possible had to be used. A large glazed slot was ▸



"THE ROOF HAD FALLEN IN, THERE WASN'T EVEN A TRACK TO THE SITE"

created over the doorway where the original wall had collapsed, and a glazed sliding door opens from the kitchen, utilising an old cart opening, while a large new window was added in main living area, taking in the view. "The main move for us was making the building rise up like a soufflé, using the clerestory to bring in as much light as possible," says Wil. The house is highly insulated and the primary heating comes from two Morsø stoves in the main spaces.

The biggest challenge was bringing in services. "All the ground around the building was owned by different people; we kept getting agreements with landowners – who would then sell up. And getting power to the house was a complete nightmare," he adds. "The building was long finished before it was 'plugged in'."

With plenty of patience and commitment, however, the result is a living space filled with great moments and clever details. ■