

The Architectural Review

A close-up photograph of several rectangular cookies with a smooth, pink frosting. Each cookie is decorated with two almond slices and two chocolate chips. The cookies are arranged on a gold, textured doily with a scalloped edge. The background is a soft, out-of-focus pink.

FOOD

INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS



Feilden Fowles creates an expressive quarry
vernacular for the first kitchen on Charlie
Bigham's food production campus in Somerset,
writes *Manon Mollard*



‘High-quality food can only be made
in a high-quality environment’



PETER COOK



MAX GREASY



PETER COOK



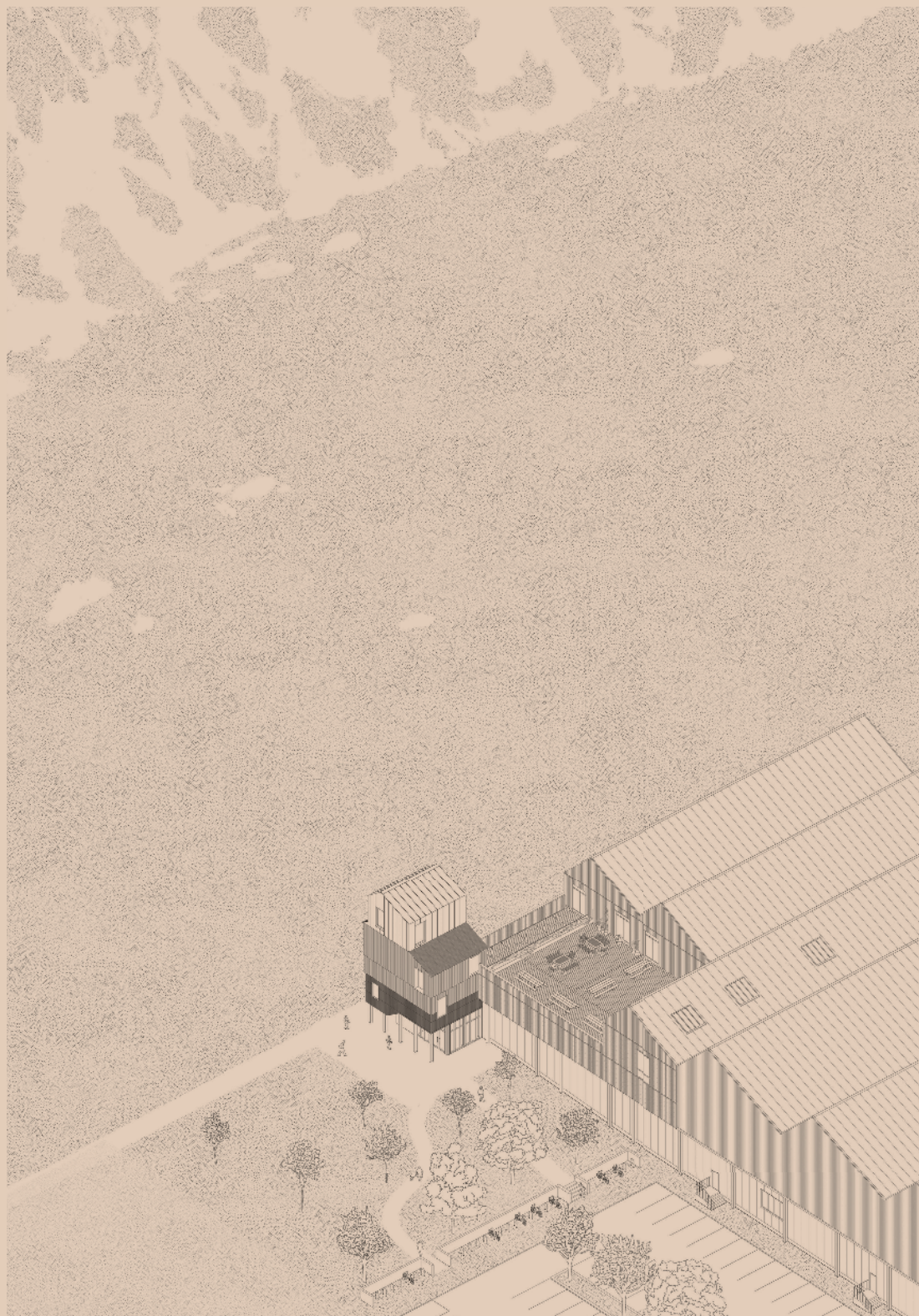
MAX GREASY



PETER COOK

At the top of the entrance tower is a small meeting room overlooking the dramatic cliff walls of the disused quarry. The terrace is the only

eroded corner of the factory, acting as an extension to the café to bring all the staff together for social and work gatherings



The illustrious photographic series of Bernd and Hilla Becher fascinates us because they evoke a disappearing world. Captured on a cumbersome, large format camera, the remnants of a continent's once-thriving industrial activity are revealed as monumental and ominous structures, intriguing in the complexity of their forms, devoid of any signs of life, frozen against a soft and flat grey sky. The world of coal bunkers, mining heads and grain elevators contains a certain dose of mystery, almost exoticism: as spaces that rarely get to be experienced up close, our knowledge of industrial habitats is pieced together by fragments of information and still images, which in turn contribute to nourishing the common imaginary around processes we do not always fully understand.

Dulcote Quarry was not photographed by the Bechers, but snapshots of it from the 1960s depict recognisable forms. Conveyor belts cut diagonally across the sky, a series of crushers appear to be pulverising limestone blocks, and conical heaps of crushed matter are being dumped onto trailers. Akin to a staged composition, the scattering of haul trucks on the quarry floor alludes to the choreography that takes place once the ensemble is set in motion. Each component comes with its own role and a unique identity and expression, yet a familial resemblance transpires: each character a playful silhouette of asymmetric timber volumes perched atop slender steel legs.

When Charlie Bigham found and purchased this disused Somerset quarry site to turn it into a new 'food production campus' for his eponymous business of upmarket ready-meals, he had already chosen the architects he would be working with. London-based Feilden Fowles, considered the underdog among the three contenders for the job, alongside Hopkins Architects and Feilden Clegg Bradley, stood out as 'a dynamic, young practice that I felt would be the perfect fit for the project and would rise to the many challenges we anticipated', explains Bigham.

Beyond the design of the first Quarry Kitchen, it is a vision for the whole that he was after, an ambitious 20-year-long project to create a thriving campus combining the bustling workplace and its imperative logistical efficiency with a series of complementary programmes, some of which are designed to open part of the site up to the public. A nursery for the children of staff members, a cookery school, and a visitor centre are ideas currently on the table.

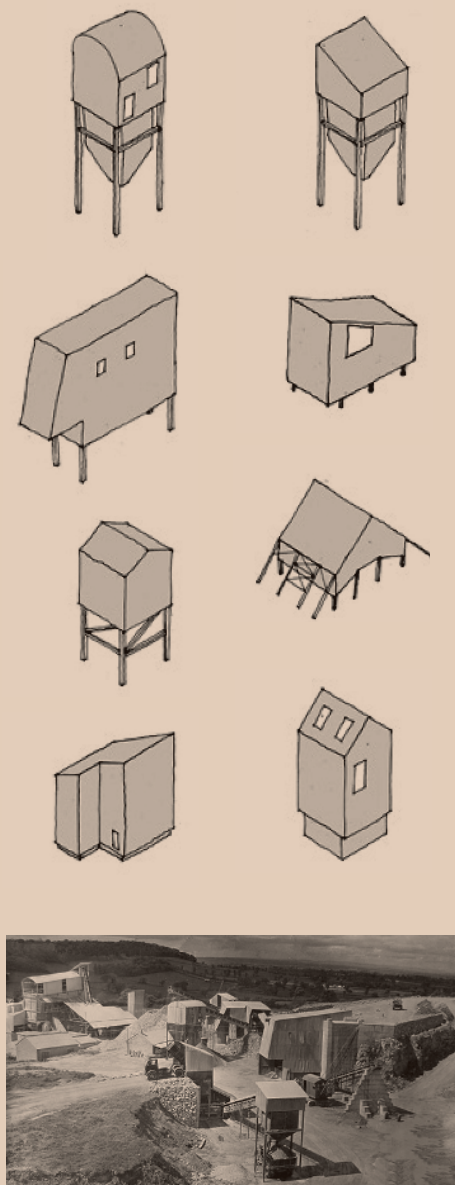
Located between Wells and Shepton Mallet, the Dulcote Quarry site had previously received planning approval for an intellectually undemanding business park, one that would have been dropped on the

site as if on the edge of any town, anywhere in the world. Feilden Fowles was committed to make the most of this unique setting and explore how a piece of architecture could express a sense of specific endeavour. Pictures of early site visits heighten the scalelessness of the space; the cliffs on the northern edge don't look like the imposing 50-metre-tall walls that they are. Streaks of rusty orange and reddish hues reveal the iron rich composition of the limestone and, while the quarry stopped functioning at the turn of this century and its industrial hardware was long gone, other residents had since invaded the overgrown site: bats, ravens, peregrine falcons and a colony of great crested newts in the small pond hidden from view on the north-western corner of the site. 'Does it have a bit of magic?' was the last question on Bigham's list to decide which of the parcels on his shortlist he would settle for, and Dulcote Quarry 'clearly did, in spades'.

To preserve this ecosystem and encourage it to thrive, the architects decided to divide the site longitudinally, containing the built elements to the south and letting nature impose its right to the north. In the drawings, the four larger volumes (three Quarry Kitchens and a dispatch building) are firmly anchored to the winding road, while the smaller ancillary elements are likely to be more dispersed, ignoring the conformation's main axes. A gradation of landscapes is created across the width, from the vehicular access, slightly sunken into the ground at the southernmost edge, to the craggy rock faces of the northern topography, with a rolling sweep of 'communal landscape' and a pedestrian path across the centre helping negotiate between the two halves.

The composition of the masterplan attempts to make sense of the vastness. 'The site feels much smaller now than it did on our first visit,' observes project architect Elli Farrant as we walk towards the Quarry Kitchen, positioned at the farthest end of the terrain, and the sole occupant (completed in September 2017) of this wider vision at the time of writing. 'And you'll see, the closer we get to the building, the larger it becomes.' Perception is misleading, and the unostentatious asymmetric pitched roof line of the elevation indeed becomes significantly more intimidating when up close. To liberate the 'space above our heads', as they like to call it, Feilden Fowles generously stretched the interior volume beyond the conventional 3m height and introduced north-facing roof openings to let the light in from above.

The utilitarian language of industrial structures can sometimes seem too pragmatic to be worthy of the appellation 'architecture' and architect-designed factories unfortunately remain an exception.



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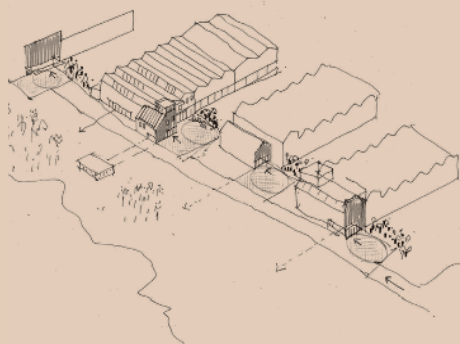
COURTESY OF THE ARCHITECT



The study of aggregate quarry buildings by Feilden Fowles (above opposite) borrows from the Dulcote Quarry machinery in the 1960s (below opposite)

- 1 main entrance
- 2 quarry road
- 3 goods yard
- 4 kitchen building (realised / phase 1)
- 5 proposed dispatch building (phase 2)
- 6 proposed café pavilion
- 7 proposed kitchen building (phase 3)
- 8 proposed kitchen building (phase 4)
- 9 central path
- 10 existing pond
- 11 proposed lagoon

Feilden Fowles envisions a central path joining the three kitchens and the dispatch building (top). The quarry vernacular (centre) created by the architects is inspired by the industrial elevations shot by Hilla and Bernd Becher (bottom)



Technological evolutions have transformed manufacturing methods and outputs, scales of production continue to soar and, with capital fleeing to cheaper labour markets, the rise of global corporate giants has spearheaded the mushrooming of standardised sheds and distribution depots the world over.

In stark contrast, what is so aesthetically appealing about the miscellaneous apparatus photographed by the Bechers, is the sense that it is always a direct expression of what it does – even if what it actually does can remain a mystery. By classifying their subjects into species, the inseparable duo revealed the emergence of typologies across the scope: the form, arrangement and proportions of blast furnaces in the Ruhr displayed a high degree of commonality with other blast furnaces elsewhere in Germany, but also with those in neighbouring countries, or even across the Atlantic. ‘They were not built by architects,’ Hilla Becher used to say, ‘they were just adapted to the situation.’ And although they were not designed, as such, they do bear witness to their function.

Determined to rethink the customary box-shaped portal-framed anonymous shed characterised by an absence of windows and compressed by low ceilings, Feilden Fowles embarked on a search for a suited language to fulfil their quest of an expressive architecture. Delving into the site’s history, they found inspiration in its previous occupants, identifying fragments and borrowing attributes to create their very own quarry vernacular aesthetic. Because the ground is solid bedrock, the building sits on a concrete plinth, the project’s first horizontal datum, while the second datum sits at a height of 5 metres, with some of the exoskeleton’s steel posts protruding below, reminiscent of the long steel legs of industrial paraphernalia. Horizontals across the whole factory not only bring it together as one, but also echo the limestone strata visible in the backdrop.

There is a sensible correlation between the width of the set of parallel bays and what happens inside: broader on the southern edge for storing and preparing food, where the exoskeleton is clad in red metal, but narrower at the opposite end, for the reception, café, offices and staff facilities. Here, the warm, rough-sawn Siberian larch exterior will weather to a silvery hue. Akin to a modest monument, the quirky asymmetric entrance tower stands proud as a beacon in the landscape, echoing the little ‘timber hats’ of the quarry’s earlier limestone-crushing apparatus. It looks like a more designed version of the Becher’s more vernacular ‘Stoneworks’ series on rock-processing plants.

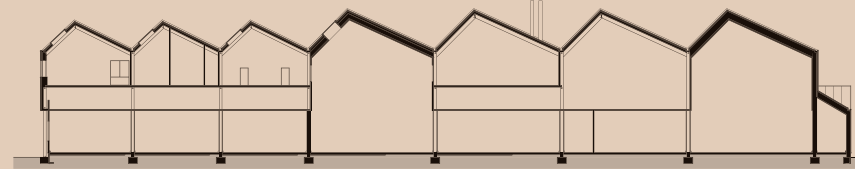
In an attempt to suppress a sense of hierarchy of staff, everyone uses the same

entrance, climbs up and crosses the terrace to access changing rooms, office spaces, the development kitchen and communal café. On the ground floor, storage, cooking, assembling, chilling and packaging are all arranged in a linear sequence to guarantee the efficiency of Bigham’s bespoke production line – his best-kept secret and the reason why our ground floor plan looks rather empty. A flattened white light floods the only full-height production bay, which has come to be known as the ‘hero space’. Here, hot food straight out of the kitchen is assembled in trays, before moving along on conveyor belts into large spiral coolers. And once coriander and chillies have been sprayed on top, the meals can be packaged and dispatched. ‘It makes a huge difference to be able to see out of the window’, explains Bigham’s senior engineer Adam Webb as he shows me around the production floor. ‘Natural light is unheard of in food factories’, but for the architects it was crucial to making a 40-metre-deep plan a pleasant working environment. Throughout, windows are strategically placed at the extremity of visual axes, connecting users to the outside at turning points in their journeys through the workplace.

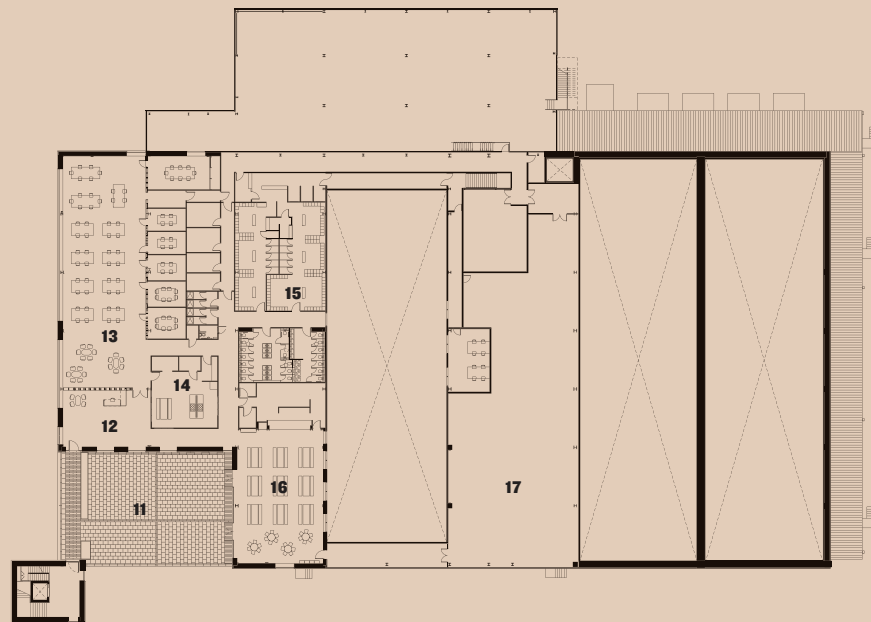
Charlie Bigham’s eponymous business is now 20 years old, but he vociferously rejects the ‘ready meals’ appellation. ‘For me a ready meal is synonymous with compromise, and that’s not what we are about’, he argues. ‘Our job is to make delicious food with real care and attention, giving people the chance to take a night off cooking.’ His entire premise hinges on the meals’ freshness – the raw ingredients of the chicken tikka masala being prepared on my visit had arrived at between 6 and 7am that day, were being packaged just before lunchtime, and were to be found on supermarket shelves across the country the following morning. When asked about the industry’s boom and our changing eating habits, he acknowledges that ‘most of us lead busier lives’, but also adds that he thinks ‘there are some other, perhaps more recent changes afoot: people want to know more about what it is they are eating and how it was made, and are therefore asking themselves the question: What price cheap food?’ It was arguably the horse meat scandal that triggered this shift in mentalities.

Like the carefully composed elevations of the Bechers, the first phase of the Dulcote food production campus plays with the expression of its form, relying on the complex relationship between architecture’s appearance and its performance. ‘I think architecture is a hugely powerful tool (sadly much underused)’, concludes Bigham, who estimates his project to be only 10 per cent more expensive than a standard shed, and is convinced that ‘high-quality food can only be made in a high-quality environment’.

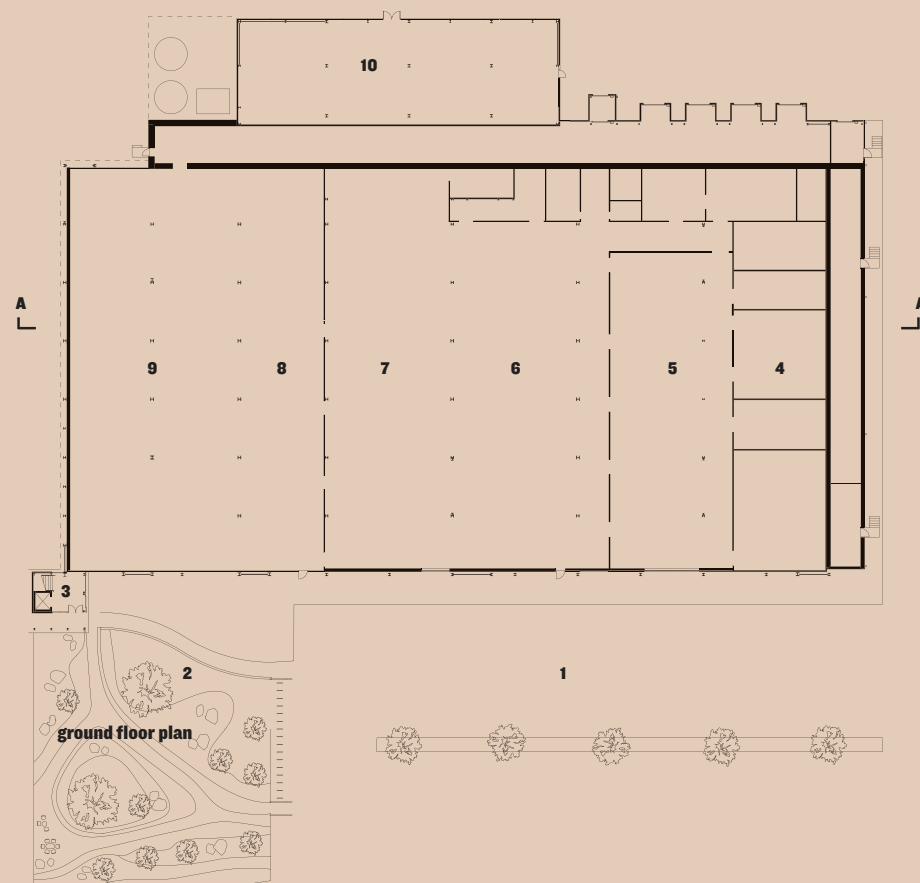
- 1 parking
- 2 garden
- 3 entrance tower
- 4 storage
- 5 food preparation
- 6 cooking
- 7 assembly
- 8 chilling
- 9 packaging
- 10 dispatch
- 11 reception
- 12 office
- 13 development kitchen
- 14 reception
- 15 changing rooms
- 16 café
- 17 plant



section AA



first floor



ground floor plan

Architect
Feilden Fowles
Landscape architect
Grant Associates
Joinery
Timber Workshop