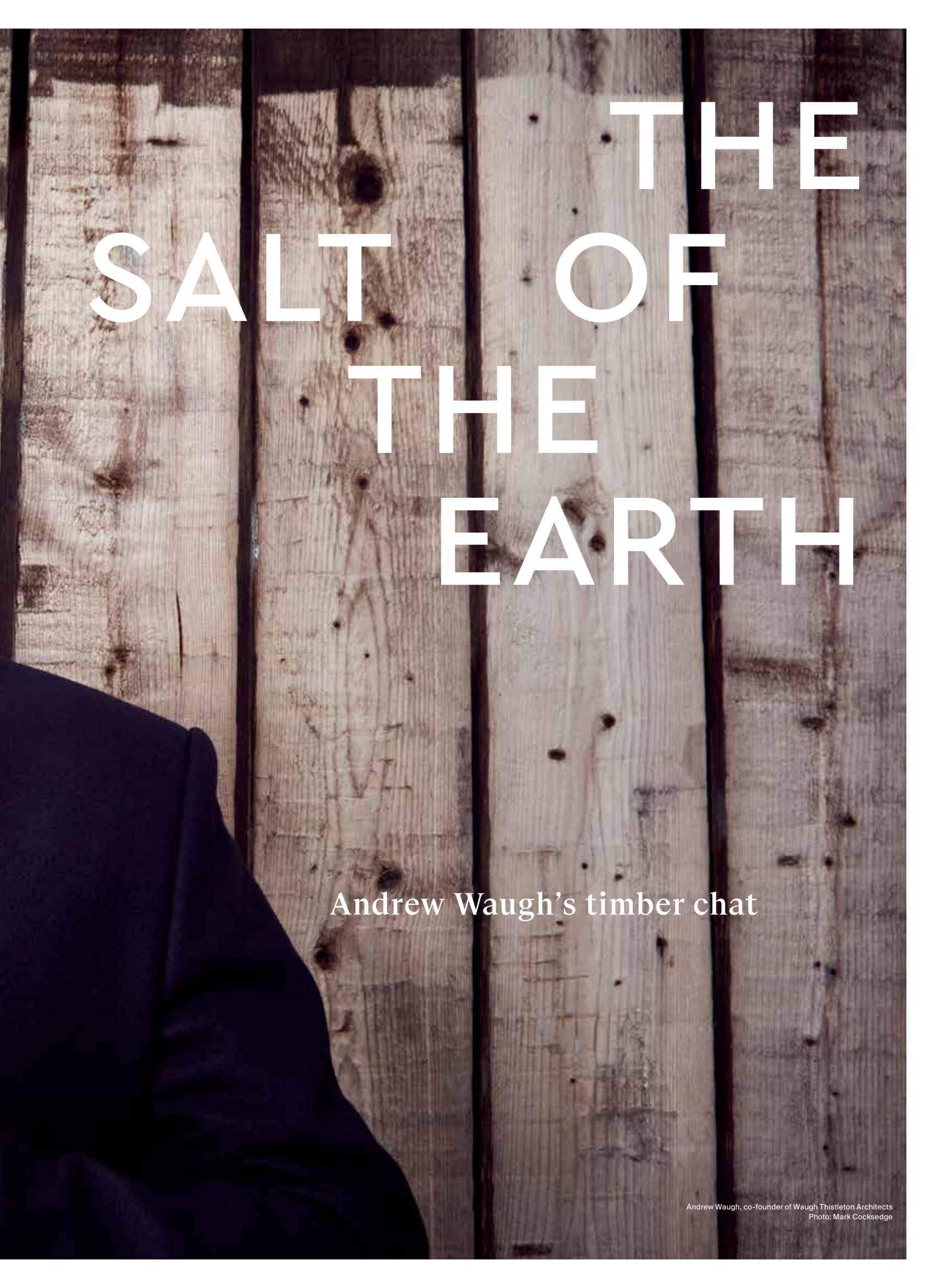


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THE SALT OF THE EARTH

Andrew Waugh's timber chat

In times when anger seems to be the go-to mode for any kind of discourse, it's refreshing to hear someone getting angry about something that actually matters. Andrew Waugh, one of the co-founders of architectural practice Waugh Thistleton, certainly has the bit between his teeth when it comes to sustainable building and the response of both the construction industry and developers. A champion of timber, here we profile his journey to the cause, and in his own words hear how the 21st century could and should be the Timber Age.

TEXT

ELEANOR YOUNG



The Waugh Thistleton's Shoreditch studio with the EU flag hanging on the wall
Photo: Mark Cocksedge

'First I was a nightclub designer not taking things seriously. Now I take things too seriously,' so says Stirling Prize shortlisted Andrew Waugh of Waugh Thistleton. He is a proper designer who really can be serious, particularly about climate change and timber, but also about social housing, mud and faith. But he says it – and many serious things – with a laugh or a broad smile.

His New Year's resolution is to get angry with architects with a campaign to get the profession and the UK to think more seriously about the materials they build from and to cut the concrete, and steel, and likely stone as well. 'We don't just need to cut embodied energy, we need to be talking about a whole new relationship with the planet. A

total rethink.' So how did a trendy nightclub designer become this environmental evangelist? And, even more unusually, how has he become one taken seriously by major developers normally more concerned with return on their investment?

He started up Waugh Thistleton in 1997 with his partner Anthony Thistleton as they finished studying architecture. It was hard at first with no savings or existing clients to cushion the struggles that every new business faces. They worked for friends and people they knew in Shoreditch, east London. Back then it was an edgy place full of grungy corners, derelict buildings and artists attracted by the cheap rents. In the typical pattern of gentrification Waugh Thistleton were early in the curve, designing the Blue Note and other clubs, and going on to work with Young British Artists, designing studios for Gary Hume and Jake Chapman. Loft apartments and ultimately country houses followed. Waugh Thistleton's converted Tramshed restaurant for chef owner Mark Hix saw one of Damien Hirst's famous formaldehyde-preserved animals – a bull with a cockerel perched on top – pushed up into the lofty roof space above diners.

Waugh traces the line of projects gradually increasing in scale: nightclubs, restaurants, loft apartments, roof extensions, small buildings, flats. This might seem like a good trajectory for a growing business but at each shift they stepped further and further away from the client and end user. 'If you don't meet the client then the level of architectural responsibility becomes much higher,' he says. Some of those apparently distant and unrelated architectural decisions will still



Inside the the Tramshed restaurant in East London, where Damien Hirst's Cock n' Bull presides over diners
Photo: Will Pryce

be of great importance to those who use the building day-to-day. He relates how, at his talk for Open House London outside his timber framed Murray Grove project, residents who he has never met have come down to say how much they appreciate the building and that they moved in because it is timber. A contrast to a strict instruction from the developer not to mention this in case buyers were scared off.

Stadthaus, Murray Grove in Hackney, east London, completed in 2009. It was pioneering, a tall, city block in prefabricated timber from stair and lift cores to load bearing wall and floor slabs. It was built fast: 29 flats over nine storeys in less than six months on site. And for Waugh Thistleton it was something of a watershed. As it completed the office was facing a bleak future, with the economic downturn meaning few projects. At the same time Waugh was getting invitations to come and speak about Murray Grove, invitations with speaker's fees. He found it nerve-wracking at first: 'My chin

was wobbling and my hands were shaking.' But speaking about it again, and again, the half-formed thoughts and rationale for the extensive use of the cross-laminated timber (CLT) came together. 'I became more conscious of why we had made decisions,' he says.

Waugh Thistleton survived the recession knowing that it wanted to design buildings that could be built sustainably. One strand is the embodied carbon, timber performing well on this in comparison to other structural options, and timber acting as carbon store. When clients came in, attracted by a solid track record of securing planning permission and a good portfolio, Waugh would sit them down and persuade them of their case. He would say we want to build more sustainably than the odd solar panel. All with the promise of no extra cost, nor extensions to the building programme. 'The office began to call it my timber chat,' he laughs. But it was a question of persuading clients, always selling them the idea.



Model of Stadthaus, Murray Grove, London. In timber like the real building. Photo: Mark Cockseidge

Warm timber: self-finished surfaces of CLT in Stadthaus, Murray Grove
Photo: Will Pryce



In the meantime Waugh Thistleton's drawing together of research on timber for Murray Grove won awards, as did the building itself. Its winning statistic is that the carbon sequestered within the timber, and the carbon saved from not building in concrete, are equal to 22.5 years of the building's use. Regulatory and environmental rating systems outside the UK recognise embodied carbon, it is hardwired into US-based LEED (the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification system) and recognised as a strategy in France. International interest seemed greater than that in the UK - at Harvard Graduate School of Design Murray Grove was a core project for students.

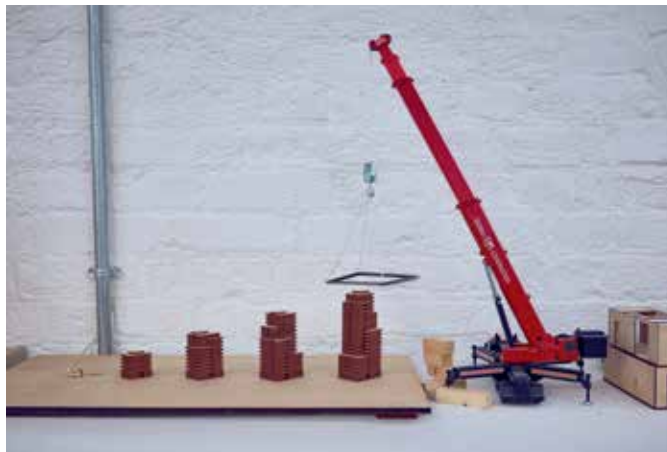
In 2016 the team all went to Austria, to the mountains, and saw trees being harvested for buildings. Enthused by this site, and emboldened by wider success, they decided on a shift in strategy. 'We decided to run Waugh Thistleton not as a business but as a practice with an ethos,' says Waugh. How? 'We put it on the website. Sometimes it is just about putting the T-shirt on.'

It also meant turning down projects. But, in 2019, despite the uncertainties of Brexit, they can see clients are being drawn to them by the ethos; or at least the faster, more cleanly constructed, better performing buildings it promises. They have built for some hard-nosed major housing developers,

and have gone up to 10 storeys high at Dalston Works in east London. And Waugh continues to get invites to speak from all over the world, last year to the US, Chile, Brazil, Australia and throughout Europe. 'I spend a lot of time on the train,' he says. '... And flying,' he adds - ready with defences for what is normally seen as a carbon evil. He doesn't eat beef, he has swapped old sports cars for electric cars and 'I always try to fly new airplanes, the 787s and 380s, which are more fuel efficient than the 747s. It is never going to be perfect but there has to be an aspiration to make it much better,' he says. And, of course, he is spreading the message of how to use less carbon in buildings.



Lightweight wood pulp cladding covers the timber structure with pixelated panels
Photo: Will Pryce



Evolution of tall CLT
The crane with the two boxes on the right is for 'modular housing'
Photo: Mark Cockeedge



Dalston Works in Hackney, London, has 121 homes in brick-cad boxes of varying heights
Photos: Daniel Shearing

But over the last year it has not been climate change and CLT that have pushed Waugh Thistleton to prominence but a small mud building just north of London. Bushey Cemetery was shortlisted for the UK's best architectural award, the Stirling Prize. It was up against the might and budget of Foster + Partners offices in the City of London designed for the financial reporting company Bloomberg. Although Bloomberg won the prize, Bushey came a close second in the people's vote and at the glittering award ceremony, when the Stirling Prize shortlist was announced, the cemetery got the biggest cheer of the night.

The concept for the two prayer halls for the Jewish community, taking the families through the choreographed burial rites, emerged slowly. When Waugh was first taken to the cemetery he was daunted. The extension that was the site was a sloping field of cabbages. 'I had never built without a red line before, I was always fitting between two buildings,' he says. 'I thought what do I do now? It was a complete feeling of terror.'

In the end it was the very earth of the site, the earth that is also shovelled onto the coffins, that seeded the building idea. 'There is no typology, no domes, no spires. But there is a burial process, honed over many ceremonies of entrances and exits, and prayers... and when you have buried someone and filled that five-foot deep hole you come back covered in mud. It is very raw.' The material was all there. The site fell 8.5 metres, so instead of trucking earth out of it (which seemed wrong) it could remain on the site – as the building. Once the idea of a rammed earth building had landed it was hard to shake. Waugh was awed by the faith that was placed in him through the difficult process, which included three years getting planning and was followed by the first sample wall collapsing into a lump of mud overnight.



The prayer halls at Bushey Cemetery are made from the mud of the site in the form of rammed earth
Photos: Lewis Kahn





Bushey Cemetery, the halls are laid out according to well-worn ritual routes
Photos: Lewis Kahn

Waugh Thistleton's design and pioneering spirits seem to have come together. Last year they were invited to design an annual timber pavilion at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London that has always attracted the UK's architecture royalty, from David Adjaye to Alison Brooks. They completed a factory for iconic furniture makers Vitsoe, working with its managing director and designer, Dieter Rams himself. They are collaborating with Japanese architect Shigeru Ban to design a one-off house near Tower Bridge in the city. And away from the limelight they are getting on with housing those in need across London and beyond. During the interview Waugh excuses himself to go down to greet Lithuanian clients and is persuaded to pose with them in front of the EU flag hanging on the studio wall. In this troubled time of Brexit, Europe is another thing that Waugh Thistleton have faith in - part of a world-view that is grounded in London's Shoreditch but stretches far wider, that is concerned for how buildings are constructed but not limited by traditional ways. If there is a hope for Waugh's new, serious, campaign of anger at unsustainable design then it is that he can infuse the profession with a little bit of his world-view.

Perhaps Waugh Thistleton can do no wrong, fighting climate change, innovating building technologies, designing remarkable buildings... But the direction it has set, where the uptake of its ideas seems to have most impact, is in tall buildings. Internationally there seems a race to be the biggest CLT building, as Dalston Works could claim on completion in 2017. Tall buildings over the last few years have seen growing resistance in the UK, particularly in London where they are springing up in clusters in many boroughs. Is enabling greener tall buildings really an oxymoron, can they really contribute to reducing climate change and to the city? Waugh comes out energetically from his corner, citing an increasingly urban world population and the need for density. But he concedes density only works at certain levels. 'Skyscrapers don't make for good cities, they overshadow, are bad for wind, overload transport systems, the net to gross can be terrible and you are pushing services up against gravity... tall buildings over 15 storeys are only right in exceptional circumstances.'

There is another complicating factor. In the UK you just call in Grenfell. This is the name of the 24-storey tower where a small fridge fire engulfed the whole tower in June 2017 killing 72 residents. Most countries have such tragedies in their recent history. It has caused much soul searching in the industry and questions about the flammability of materials. In a country where school children are taught about the 1666 Great Fire of London and how that sparked rules on timber buildings, there were bound to be questions about flammability asked of wooden buildings. The result for CLT is more about perception than the actual codes - although new regulations stop timber being used on external walls of buildings over seven storeys. It seems likely that - in large part due to Waugh Thistleton - CLT is now sufficiently established as a structural system for this not to derail its use. A recent industry-supported book they authored on 100 CLT buildings in the UK proves they are not alone in building with CLT.



Waugh Thistleton office in Shoreditch, London
Photo: Mark Cocksedge

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