

MONIACK MHOR WRITING CENTRE

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*Kiltarlity, Inverness-shire*

FEASIBILITY STUDY

August 2023

*Prepared by Taigh Solais Architecture*



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Cover image: view of Moniack Mhor from approach driveway, watercolour by author

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# 1.0

## INTRODUCTION

### SCOPE OF REPORT

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#### *Feasibility Report*

This document summarises Taigh Solais Architecture's feasibility studies for the extension of Moniack Mhor Writing Centre in Kiltarlity, near Inverness. The report covers RIBA Stage 0, Strategic Definition, and RIBA Stage 1, Preparation and Brief. It establishes the viability of the project by carrying out the following set of investigations:

- Clarify a brief for the spatial requirements of Moniack Mhor emerging from a series of needs identified in conversation.
- Understand the existing site context and the opportunities and constraints that these present.
- Test and explore options for the positioning of new building(s) on the site with a view to building positively and sensitively on the existing character.
- Consolidate this work into a propositional set of spatial and material qualities at a concept level to help inform the next steps.

### PROJECT INTRODUCTION

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#### *The Writing Centre*

Moniack Mhor is a Writing Centre based in the hills West of Inverness. Founded 30 years ago on the site of an old croft, the centre runs a broad programme from week-long residential taught writing courses to youth programmes, retreats and day-workshops. Moniack Mhor also hosts the Highland Book Prize and is a well-loved and established feature of the Scottish literature ecology.

The centre is seeking to improve the existing provision of spaces to better serve its current and future programme. This amounts to improving accessibility, bringing all staff onto the site, and creating a new library / classroom that could be used for writing and teaching as well as visiting school groups and events. An established set of spatial requirements has emerged through conversations with the staff at the centre and written input from tutors and students. These and other site investigations have informed the following architectural proposals.



#### WHY DO PEOPLE COME HERE:

- Time and space
- Tuition
- The landscape
- Being accepted as a writer, part of the Scottish literature ecology
- Networking
- An equal space
- Remove all the trappings of a normal life
- Free from distractions

#### WHY HERE INSTEAD OF ELSEWHERE:

- The team are really welcoming
- Cheaper than other places
- Highlands hospitality
- Feels local. Location is a really big draw.
- Many people walk every day. Writing and walking at the same time.
- Holistic approaches to writing.
- Food is really good, harvesting locally, was a working croft.

#### WHAT ATMOSPHERE DO YOU TRY TO CULTIVATE?

Transparency, informality, a holistic space where people feel nurtured, food is really important, spaces where people can meet if they want. Retreat but also gather. Sharing. Quiet, focussed atmosphere at retreats. Environment and sustainability are really important.

#### A TYPICAL DAY FOR DIFFERENT USERS:

##### Guest:

Help yourself to breakfast, write for 30mins. 10am-1pm tutor-led group workshop (with midmorning coffee break). These happen in living room / hobbit house. 1pm lunch. Afternoon: private writing time, or go for a walk. Guests take turns to cook dinner one day per week. Informal readings in evening. That's a course. Retreat is all just unstructured private writing time, sometimes informal readings in evenings.

##### Tutor:

Meet with staff on Monday to go through the week. Staff do the pastoral needs, tutors just do writing craft. Monday night icebreaker. Teaching 10-1pm. 1-to-1 tutorials all afternoon. Lots of reading in preparation for the tutorials.

Tuesday night tutor reads from their own work, Wednesday night is a guest reading by a visiting author, but tutors present. Thursday afternoon guided walk for whole group led by staff, Thursday night tutors lead an activity. Friday evening is an event dinner organised by staff. The centre normally lets tutors stay a day or two before or after the course week to do their own writing or bring their family.

##### Staff:

Come in 9am, check in with guests, answer questions, set fires, light fires, prep for workshop, workshop starts, sit down at your desk at 11am, ordering things, lunches being prepped in kitchen meanwhile. Card system to select housekeeping tasks, cleaning loos etc, lay out stuff for guests to cook with late afternoon. Finish at 5pm. Constantly on the go. People drop in all the time into the office, asking for stationary or just want a chat.

Staff work Monday, Wednesday, Friday evenings, and on youth retreats, two staff sleepover on site and so occupy two bedrooms.

## SPATIAL QUALITIES

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### *Positive qualities, spatial problems and architectural ambition*

#### POSITIVE SPATIAL QUALITIES

The office at Moniack Mhor is currently located in such a way that staff are easily available to the guests. Guests really like integrating with the team, even those who are working on other projects. The shared use of the kitchen is important for this, for example, the project manager comes in and makes a cup of tea and starts chatting to a guest then they sign-up to become a 'friend' of Moniack Mhor because they realise what other projects Moniack runs and want to support. Anecdotal, incidental, conversations are really important, they can lead to partnerships, projects, and funding. The staff score really well in guest feedback and a big part of that is this culture so the centre doesn't want to change too much in this respect.

These aspects of being able to have meaningful conversations continuously appeared as important in the questionnaire feedback, so the informality of spaces that allows for this is valued. Spaces are humble and unpretentious, which makes the centre feel approachable and accessible.

The living / dining room and the hobbit house are positively spoken of in the questionnaire; people admire the sense of peace, tranquillity and the visibility of the landscape. The outdoors storytelling circle space is also enjoyed. Guests generally like the shared kitchen as a space and the process of cooking together. The distinct names and identities of the different spaces are important, this naming helps to give a sense of ownership of the spaces. New spaces could be added with this in mind, each having distinct identities.

#### CURRENT SPATIAL PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

##### Teaching - Writing - Inspiration

- One-to-one tutorials through the week with the tutors currently happen in cottage and hobbit house. 2-4.30pm every day, and these are the main communal writing spaces which are therefore out of bounds for half of the time.
- There is a strong need for more writing spaces outside of the bedrooms that can be used at various times of day, with particular mention of nooks and crannies, secret kinds of places... also spaces that can accommodate small groups of people for collaboration.
- "More public spaces so that people can spread out or be together while working and don't have to spend all day in their rooms."... "a specific communal writing area with desks that isn't the hobbit house."... "Spaces with lots of natural light. Proper desk spaces for writing."
- The centre would like to have a space large enough to host events for up to 60-70 people for book launches / Highland Book Prize / a mini-festival. Also a space to be able to do more work with school groups that could be carried out during the day concurrently with retreats.
- The garden is mentioned often in the questionnaire as a potential area for improvement, more secret places within the landscape for walking and catching new perspectives, inspiration and coming up with ideas. There are suggestions of creating more sheltered outdoor spots that could be used for writing or teaching and greater connection in general between the outside environment and the indoors.

##### Office

- Staff are currently split over two sites; project staff are based in the WASPs studio in Inverness which is costly to rent and causing problems with communication. The centre wants to



bring these staff back into an enlarged office on site, so as not to divide the team too much. Nonetheless, it is difficult to do focused work in current office as people coming and going. Ideally a new, enlarged office would be split: part front-facing and part focused. A small bookshop within the office to sell the tutors books or lending library has been suggested.

- A space for internal meetings close to the office for staff that could also be used as a tutorial / writing space.
- The Centre is going to inherit Janice Galloway's writing library and would like to be able to create a room that could be devoted to just this.

#### Accessibility

- Accessibility is an issue across the board, with narrow hallways and little space for manoeuvring a wheelchair.
- Distinct buildings that are a little bit away are nice but the landscape itself isn't that accessible. A tutorial space in the same building as the main house would be great to improve access for wheelchair users.
- The Fiction library is currently on the first floor which presents accessibility issues for those who can't climb stairs, it could be brought into a new library space on the ground floor with other books in the centre.

#### Bedrooms

- In questionnaire feedback, more en-suite bathrooms are consistently mentioned as a suggestion, whilst there is little to be done with regards to this in the existing buildings, they could be incorporated into any future ones.
- The youth programme is an important part of what the Centre does. There are sleep-in staff for this, who take up two bedrooms, ideally there would be enough space for two more guests.
- Moniack is increasingly offering courses that provide childcare and any new bedrooms should be large enough to accommodate two extra beds for children.

#### Tutors - Residency

- Ideally the tutors would have the cottage as just their domain, but the downstairs currently houses the library so is communal. It would be good to give them some more space as it is really intense teaching. If the cottage was no longer the library then it could at times be used for tutors' childcare during the day.
- It would be nice to be able to invite the tutors to stay for longer if they needed / give options for a residency, maybe two weeks. Residencies could be a revenue earner.

### ARCHITECTURAL AMBITION

There is a desire to be ambitious with the architecture, mindful that this is a cultural building and Moniack Mhor is an important cultural asset in the context of Scotland. At the same time, the humble, simple, character of the centre as it stands should be retained.

Craft is a really important word, the Writing Centre is all about teaching the craft of writing, it is a school of craft, so the buildings should also be an expression of craft. Craft is about seeing the hands of the maker in the work.

Sustainability is absolutely key to Moniack Mhor. In architectural terms that means embedding sustainability in the design through selection of low-carbon, natural, local building materials. Similarly, an engagement with the natural world and the surroundings can be encouraged through an architecture that is strongly connected to the landscape.

Fundraising: people could donate to particular element of the building, parts. All these different voices being represented in something – similarly with planting imbuing a sense of ownership.

The hobbit house – everybody cared about it whilst being built. The story of the making of the building important as well as the finished product.

## 3.0

# SITE ANALYSIS

### EXISTING ARCHITECTURE

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#### *Three loosely gathered buildings*

The current site houses a collection of three buildings loosely gathered together in a manner consistent with the former crofting use of the location. The site is set back from the public road by a long straight drive. This leads downhill towards the Writing Centre which is visible on approach. Arriving from a higher level, makes the approaching buildings appear smaller, lending the centre a humble, farm-like character consistent with its egalitarian ethos.

#### MAIN BUILDING

The first and main building is the former byre of the croft. This has been extended upwards to form a second storey, and out in a central single storey wing which houses the office and kitchen and encloses two small informal courtyards formed by the elbows. The character of the original mass of this building is long and narrow, a sensation which is felt in the common room which has the original stonework exposed and is both a dining, living and learning space. The extension upwards has created a series of small bedrooms with beautiful views out to the West.

#### THE COTTAGE

The second building visible as you arrive is the original crofter's cottage. This is set further into the site, and peaks out from behind the new wing. It is low lying with bedrooms in the roof and forms a pleasingly proportioned building. To the West, dormer windows have been added, again availing of views, but from the approach you see the very simple original elevation which faces East. A couple of timber lean-to's have been added at either gable to store firewood and garden tools. Both of these buildings are traditional in appearance with whitewashed harled walls, timber-framed sash windows and slate roofs.

#### THE HOBBIT HOUSE

The third building is the 'hobbit house', built in 2013. This is not visible on approach but rather appears as you walk between the two original buildings, it has an oval plan, with a distinctive turf domed roof. The exterior is lime smooth rendered in a pale yellow and there are windows to the south with an external stone chimney. The North elevation has a timber porch, towards which winds a gravel path from the other two buildings. Being perhaps the only double reciprocal roofed structure in Europe, the building is unique in many respects. The interior has been carefully hand-crafted and has an irregular, natural feel, with straw-bale walls and timber exposed throughout; it is also 'off-grid', relying on passive solar gains and a wood-stove for heat. It was built in 2013. The last structure on the site is a drystone dyke that encloses an outdoors storytelling circle with a firepit.



*West elevation of main building*



*Hobbit house viewed from South gable of cottage looking across vegetable beds.*



*View from lunch bench at main house towards the cottage.*

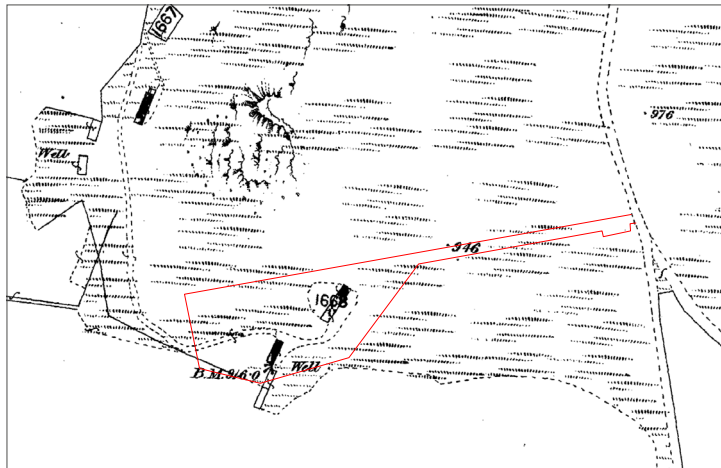


*South gable of main building with kitchen and office extension wing at right*

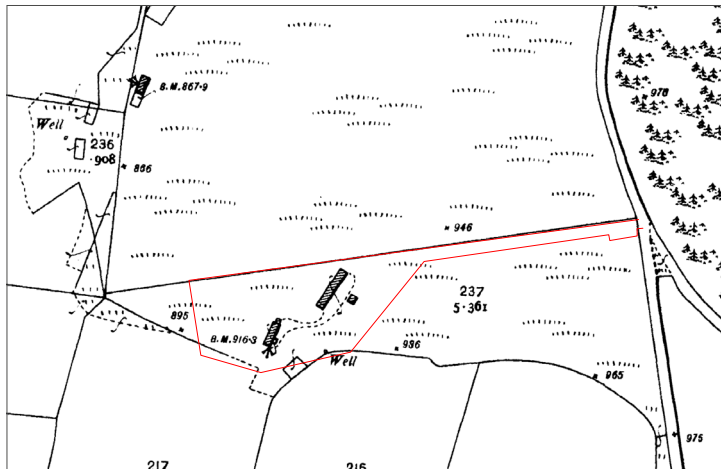
## HISTORIC MAPS

### *The old croft*

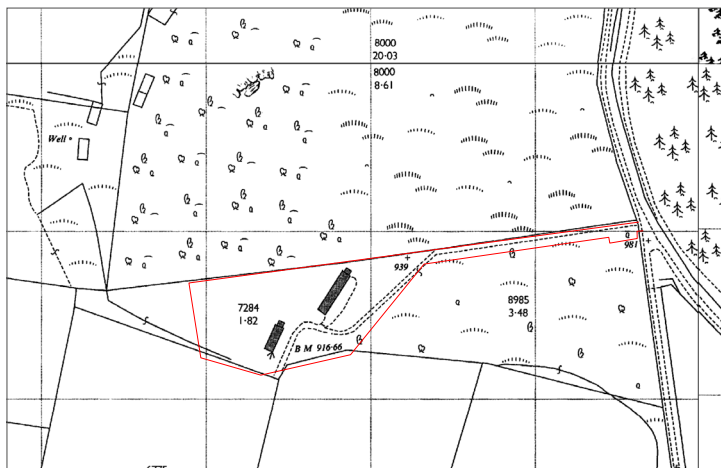
*Map c. 1860. Croft cottage and part of byre + sheepfolds visible. No drive to top road yet, instead a track connecting to other croft to northwest. Note wells.*



*Map c. 1900. Croft cottage and full byre built, small square building to east of byre visible but now not present. There is no drive to top road yet, neither a track to northwest croft. Enclosure of fields in immediate vicinity and forest planted on Creagan Mor to east.*



*Map c. 1960. Croft cottage and byre present, small square building to east of byre disappeared. Other croft to northwest now ruined. Drive to top road now built. Creagan Mor remains forested.*



# TOPOGRAPHY

*Arrival from above*

The land falls gently across the site from the East and North, and downwards towards the West and South. The carpark area is at the highest elevation, being around 2m above the main building. There is a further 3m drop in level between the entrance to the main building and the cottage and hobbit house with the land dropping off more sharply again between these and the drystone circle and boundary. An artificial mound has been raised to the West of the cottage to deal with the soakaway from the septic tank, this acts to level the land in this area, creating a sharper drop in level between here and the boundary.





*The nearby Loch Laide at Abriachan Forest Trust*



*Existing site plan highlighting ecology*

## LANDSCAPE & ECOLOGY

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### *Understanding the existing and noticing opportunities*

#### WIDER LANDSCAPE

The surrounding wider landscape is one of mixed pasture and arable fields, rough grazing, heather moorland and both native and commercial forestry. The fields in the immediate vicinity of the site are used for grazing with an area of gorse scrub bounding the north of the site. The field north-east of the site is reasonably boggy and finishes in a small burn which runs along the northern boundary. To the South, the landowner has fenced off a thin strip of land around the site which has recently been planted with young mixed native trees and is protected from grazing.

#### THE SITE

The site itself is primarily mown grass lawn and is relatively windswept and unsheltered. The few trees and scrub found on the site are largely located at the perimeter. Foremost of these are two mature Scots Pines located at the southern edge, near the cottage; these are reasonably tall and any new building sited nearby would have to be placed outwith their root protection area. Two Leylandii grow adjacent to the north gable of the main building, they soften the building visually in both winter and summer and offer some wind shelter. However, as they are of no ecological importance, they do not place constraints on the siting of a new building and could be removed. Further areas of young mixed native trees and scrub including birch and willow are located near the carpark and along the eastern and southern boundary fences.

The drying lawn to the East of the main building has recently been planted with a number of young mixed native saplings, these are scattered across the lawn and in time will enrich the quality of the garden. As they are still young, they do not place any constraints on siting buildings and could be moved elsewhere if needed, though it would be preferable to leave them in place.

A vegetable garden is situated in the area South and West of the cottage, there are raspberry canes amongst others here. Food grown is used seasonally in the cooking for writing courses, the cook is also the gardener and there is an ambition to expand the kitchen garden along with a greenhouse / polytunnel to improve capacity and sustainability. A rock garden is located between the hobbit house and the drystone circle and on the hobbit house itself, the raised turf roof forms an unusual dry habitat of lichens, moss and heather, though this does not cope well with the dry Summer and may start to be irrigated.

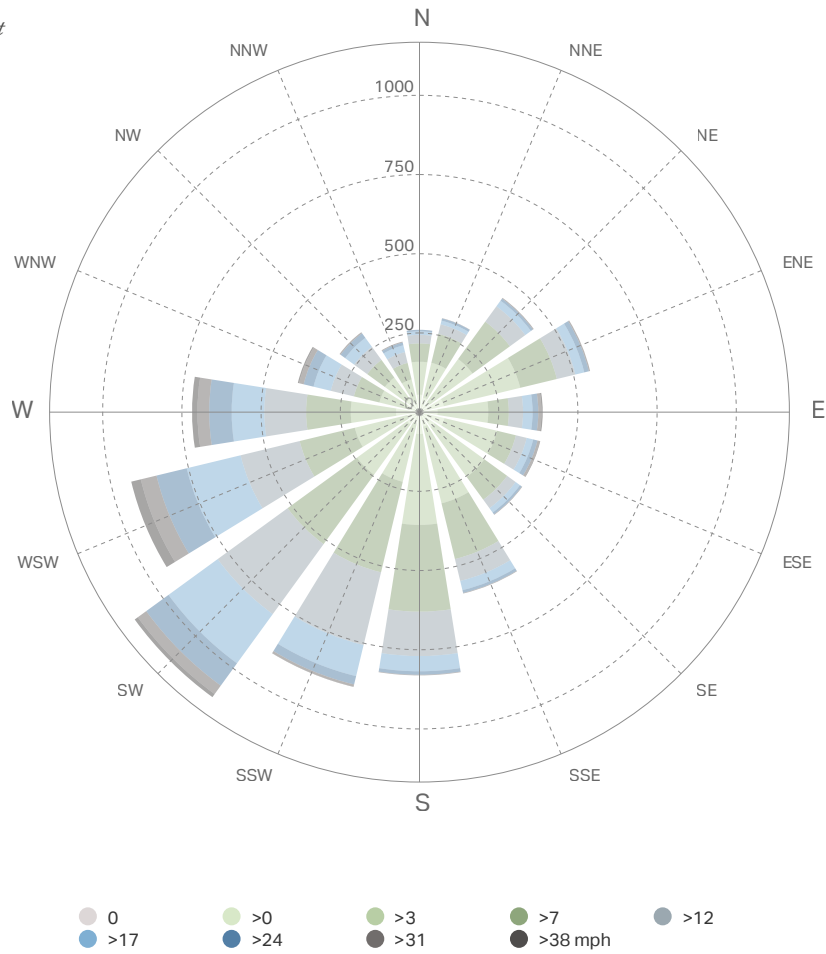
The site is transected by a drainage ditch which runs between the car-park and the main building. A tee off from this serves a small artificial pond close to the cottage which was originally created as a fire-fighting reservoir, but also serves wildlife.

There are no official ecological designations for this site (SSSI etc), however the proximity to other rich wildlife areas presents opportunities to consider how any addition to the site can be part of a strategy to enhance biodiversity both locally and more widely.

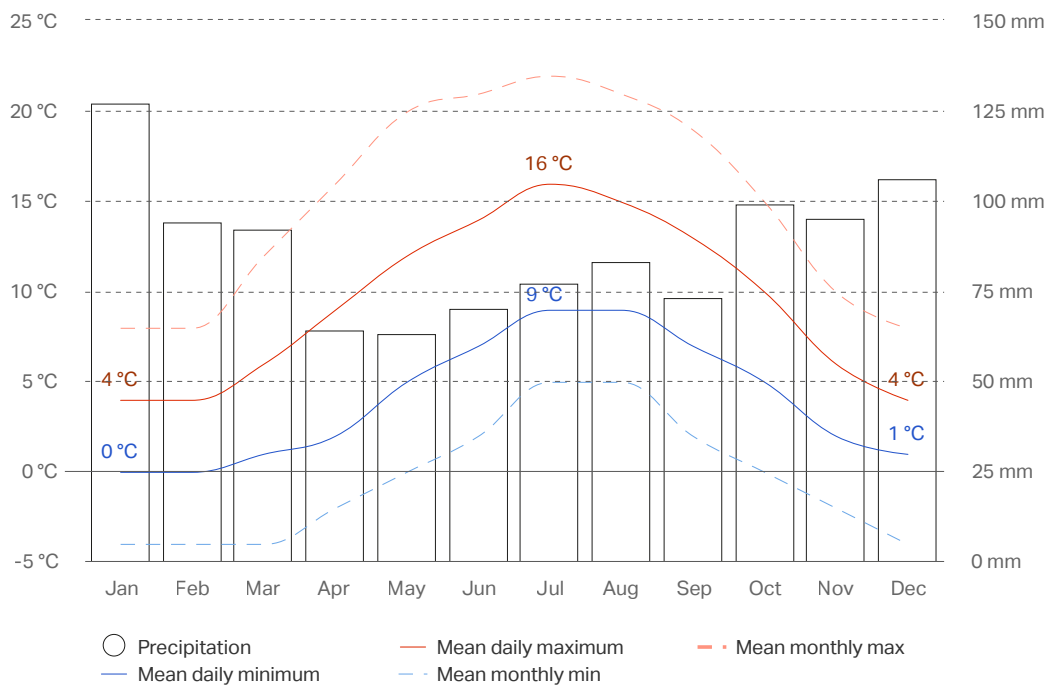
#### FLOOD RISK

Investigation of SEPA's interactive flood risk map for Scotland finds there is no risk of flooding for this site. However care should be taken when considering siting any building or car parking near the boggy ground in the field north-east of the site to ensure that the construction is well-founded, at a reasonable level and designed to drain surface water effectively.

Wind Rose Chart



Temperature and Rainfall Chart





# CLIMATE

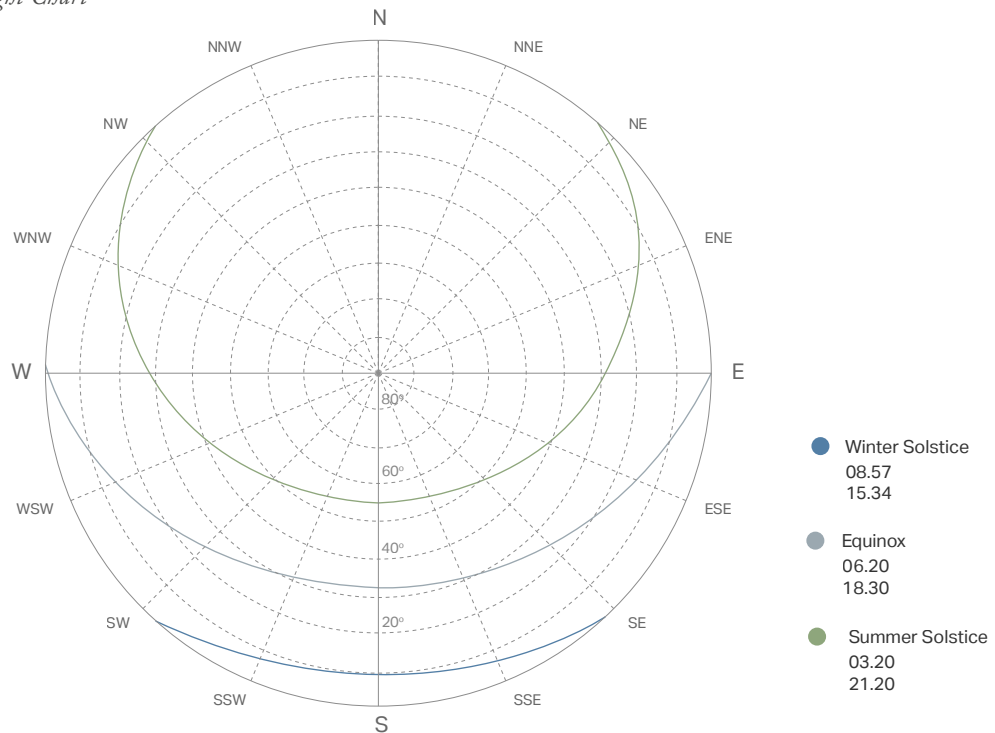
## *Building with the weather*

Moniack Mhor Writing Centre is situated at an elevation of about 280m / 920ft. Average temperatures indicate that heating will be required for much of the year. Consequently, a well-insulated thermal envelope, careful consideration of a low-carbon heating source as well as passive solar design will be important for any new addition to the centre. Extensions to the existing buildings could help to improve the thermal efficiency by sharing walls.

Long Summer days and Winter nights and changeable weather charge the place with a dynamic changing light; an architecture which responds to this magic will do well. Places like this lend themselves to robust material finishes that weather well and come alive in both overcast and sunny weather. In the Winter, the sun is very low in the sky, rising and setting within the SE – SW range and offering few hours of light. For this reason, it will be important to orientate new buildings such that they can avail of this winter sunlight, precious for its rarity.

The prevailing winds are between S – SW – W, with an occasional NE. Given the exposed nature of the site, there is an opportunity to use the siting of new buildings and landscaping to help to create sheltered micro-climates, where suntraps and wind-breaks are able to locally increase the temperature and make sitting outdoors in the Summer more enjoyable. Given the temperature and wind experienced on the site, the kitchen garden would greatly benefit from some kind of covered or sheltered area to extend the growing season.

*Sunlight Chart*



## SITE VIEWS

### *The epic and the incidental*

The current arrival at the site from the public road is dramatic, with the mountains in the distance rearing over the original croft-buildings immediately in front and below. This sequence retains the farm-like character of the centre, something that it would be important to retain. New buildings would be preferentially sited so that they take the lower ground of the site and defer to the collective grain of the place.

The original croft-buildings generally open out to the West. Due to the relatively high elevation of the buildings across the site, there are long views and a broad sky. The Western aspect takes in good views across to the hills above Glen Strathfarrar including Beinn a' Bhathaich Àrd at its Eastern edge, whilst looking to the North, Ben Wyvis and its surrounds are dominant.

There are incidental views from one building to another, between the three existing structures. These help to knit a sense of neighbourliness and identity within the Writing Centre, whilst the distances allow for these to feel set within a wider landscape. An analysis of important views on the site helps to identify areas where the construction of a new building would be less visually intrusive. It also indicates places where a new building would be visible from other parts of Moniack Mhor, helping to knit it into the collection of spaces and foster a sense of community.



*Site plan of views*



*View of Moniack Mhor from approach driveway, watercolour by author*

## TRANSPORT

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### *Car parking conundrum*

Due to the rural location, Moniack Mhor is mainly accessible via car. A public bus service 48A stops at the Foxhole Post Box, 20 minutes walk from Moniack Mhor. However, this runs on Fridays only, with one return service per day to Inverness, so is not really of much viable use to the centre. Beaulieu is 15 mins drive / 7 miles away and has the closest train station. Most guests arrive to Inverness by train or plane and travel from there to the writers centre by taxi. Inverness is around 30 mins drive away.

The lack of public transport means that car parking on site is important. There is currently space for around 10 cars in the main parking area and a further 4 at the entrance of driveway. This currently functions for everyday use, however it is a challenge when hosting events. If the use and programme of the centre expands as is planned, further provision for parking will be needed. One potential option for this would be to widen the driveway to allow for parking along one side, with trees planted between groups of cars to reduce the visual impact.

## SERVICES

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### *Parking, electricity, drainage and heating*

#### Parking & Deliveries

There is currently space for around 10 cars in the main parking area and a further 4 at the entrance of driveway. Provision for more parking will be needed as part of these expansion plans. Assuming the current 14 parking spaces are sufficient for the guests staying at the Writing Centre and 4 members of staff, then a provisional value for extra new parking could usefully be considered as an additional 8 normal parking spaces, 2 disabled parking spaces and 1 space for coach parking. This would allow for an extra 6 staff working in the consolidated office, guests staying in the 2 new accessible bedrooms, 2 visitors and 1 bus carrying schoolchildren serving the new learning centre. These should be sited in such a way as to reduce their visual impact, split into groups with trees planted between. Further calculations would be needed closer to planning submission based on updated plans, and the council might place different requirements.

Deliveries are made regularly and the current set-up allows for trucks to reverse into a loading area near the main building, using the start of the fire engine access track as a hammerhead for turning; this appears to work satisfactorily. Currently, the track to the fire-fighting reservoir is sometimes used for parking. This poses a risk in the case of a fire, restricting fire engine access.

#### Electricity

The site is served by an overhead line which comes to ground at the edge of the site near the cottage. This existing power supply will need to be assessed to ensure there is adequate electricity to power any additional development on the site. Usually it is relatively simply to request an upgrade to the property's power supply from SSE. It should be noted that use of electric heat pumps will typically require 3-phase connection. Further to this, Moniack Mhor might want to consider provision of electric car charging point(s) and / or solar PV panels on a new roof; both of these would have implications for the upgrade of the existing electrical connection. There is likely to be grant funding available for precisely these sorts of initiatives.

#### Drainage

The site is currently served by a 17m<sup>3</sup> Klargaster Biotec 5, which has a max flow of 7000 L/day. It has been currently designed to serve 18 residents at Moniack Mhor on an assumed flow of 3600L/day so the tank looks to have sufficient capacity for any additional load that may be required by an increase in office space or a classroom for occasional events. However, this should be assessed by an expert once the designs have been finalised. The soakaway mound will also have been sized to meet the same number of residents, it is unclear whether it has been designed to allow for additional capacity or not. Again, this will need to be checked by an expert. If required, the soakaway mound could be increased in size. Any new area of roof will need to be drained to new rainwater soakaways on the site separated from the sewage system. There is ample space for locating these on the site.

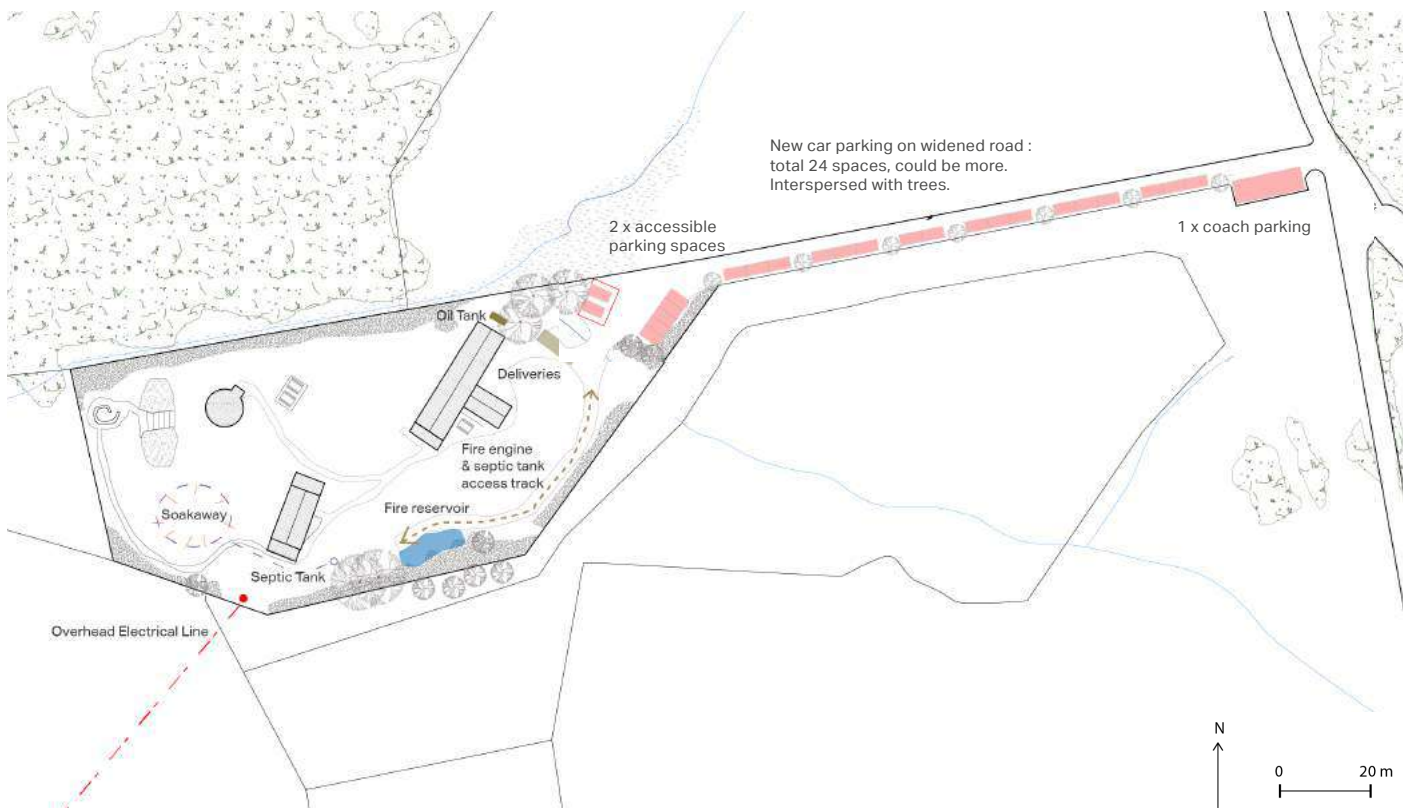
#### Heating

The principal heating system on site is an oil-fired boiler, this provides central heating and hot water for the main building. Additionally, there are wood-burning stoves as space heating in the main living areas in both the cottage and the main building. The hobbit house has a wood-burning stove and no other heating system, being off-grid. In any extension or new building added on site, low-carbon heating and hot water systems should be considered with a view to electric heat-pumps for central heating and/or wood-fuelled stoves as elsewhere in the centre. The centre is currently powered by an oil-fired boiler, it might be worth considering the decarbonisation of this as part of the additional project works. The existing boiler and water cylinders will need to be assessed to see if they can meet the demands of any extension added to the existing buildings.

## ACCESSIBILITY

### *Need for improvement*

There are level paths between the three buildings on the site and level thresholds at their entrances. Generally access between the spaces is good on the ground floor. The first floor of the cottage and main building remain inaccessible to those unable to use stairs. There is provision for an accessible shower room on the ground floor of the main building. This serves both visitors and guests with mobility difficulties who are able to use one of the ground floor bedrooms adjacent. However, as the building is a converted historic building with narrow corridors, these spaces are really not ideal for any wheelchair user, and whilst being usable at a minimum level, they present significant manoeuvring difficulties and do not fully comply with current building regulations. A key ambition of this upcoming set of works is to improve the provision of wheelchair accessible sleeping and sanitary accommodation at the writers' centre to widen access. Two accessible parking spaces should also be designated as close as possible to the main building as part of the plans.



*Site plan of services*

## PLANNING POLICY

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### *Sustainable design and the 'hinterlands'*

The current Highland Council Local Development plan indicates that the Writing Centre is located in the 'hinterlands' zone, this region is defined as being within commuting distance of a major urban centre, in this case, Inverness. This zoning is applicable insofar as it is acknowledged that within these areas there is a certain pressure and need to build, whilst the planning authority aims to prevent these areas from becoming 'suburbanised'. Most planning policy relates to the construction of new housing. Within these areas, new houses will be allowed as part of existing groups of buildings that maintain a cohesive relationship to one another. Despite its non-residential nature, this character of development should also be considered in the siting of any new building for the Writers' Centre. This lends itself to a distributed massing split into a few smaller buildings rather than one large one.

As far as general guidance is concerned, the Local Development Plan is very much in favour of 'sustainable development'. Extensions / additions to the current Writing Centre would have a strong case for receiving planning permission given the work that the centre does in order to support the local community economically and socially. Some key policy points, that it could be argued this development would be meeting are quoted below:

*5.2.3: [Vision for] a Competitive, Sustainable and Adaptable Highland Economy by providing opportunities which encourage economic development and create new employment across the area focusing on the key sectors of life sciences, energy, tourism, food and drink, higher education, inward investment, financial and business services, creative industries, aquaculture and renewable energy,*

#### *18.5.1: Policy 28: Sustainable Design*

*Proposed developments will be assessed on the extent to which they: ...*

- demonstrate sensitive siting and high quality design in keeping with local character and historic and natural environment and in making use of appropriate materials;*
- accommodate the needs of all sectors of the community, including people with disabilities or other special needs and disadvantaged groups; and*
- contribute to the economic and social development of the community.*

*All development proposals must demonstrate compatibility with the Sustainable Design Guide: Supplementary Guidance, which requires that all developments should:*

- conserve and enhance the character of the Highland area;*
- use resources efficiently;*
- minimise the environmental impact of development;*
- enhance the viability of Highland communities.*

A detailed examination of Highland Council Planning Policy and its applicability to this project is outwith the scope of this document and should be carried out in dialogue with the council once the next stage of design commences.

# 4.0

## THE BRIEF



## SCHEDULE OF ACCOMMODATION

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### *About the key spaces*

#### Office

The current office at the centre only fits around four members of staff and as Moniack Mhor has grown to around ten members of staff, these are currently spread over two offices, one on site and the other in Inverness. This causes problems with communication and they would like to combine these into one larger office on site. There is a need for parts of this to be open and accessible for guests to interact with staff and other areas which can be separated for more focused working. A small meeting room would allow for staff meetings in private and could also be used as a further one-on-one tutorial space for the writers. These could be designed to hold the Janice Galloway writing library. Rather than one large office space, a series of interconnected spaces of varying noise levels would serve the needs of the team well.

#### Drying Room

Guests staying at the centre often go for daily walks outdoors in all kinds of weather and some parts of the programme include walking and storytelling in the timetable. Feedback from guests has suggested that a drying room for wet boots & coats would be greatly appreciated. As it stands, guests have to place their wet clothes in their bedrooms.

#### Accessible Bedrooms

We propose two new fully accessible bedrooms, served by ensuite accessible shower-rooms. These are sized so that they could also be used by visiting writers with children. They need to accommodate one double-bed, desk and wardrobe, as well as enough floorspace for two single-beds to be added for children.

#### Further Guest Bedrooms

One further guest bedroom is required, we have allowed for two here as one of these is a replacement for a ground-floor bedroom in the main house that will become office space. These both have ensuite shower-rooms.

#### Library / Classroom / Event space

This room is to be large enough to host up to 70 people seated for workshops with schoolchildren or lecture / talk events. Flexible seating is required so that the space can be used with smaller groups in circular chair configurations and for a range of different activities. Storage space is required to stow away chairs when not in use. At other times, the space will be used more like a traditional library with individual desk-spaces at windows and bookcases throughout. Two entrances will allow for separate access for users external and internal to the centre. The hall will act as a draught lobby to the main space and informal breakout space for incidental conversations.

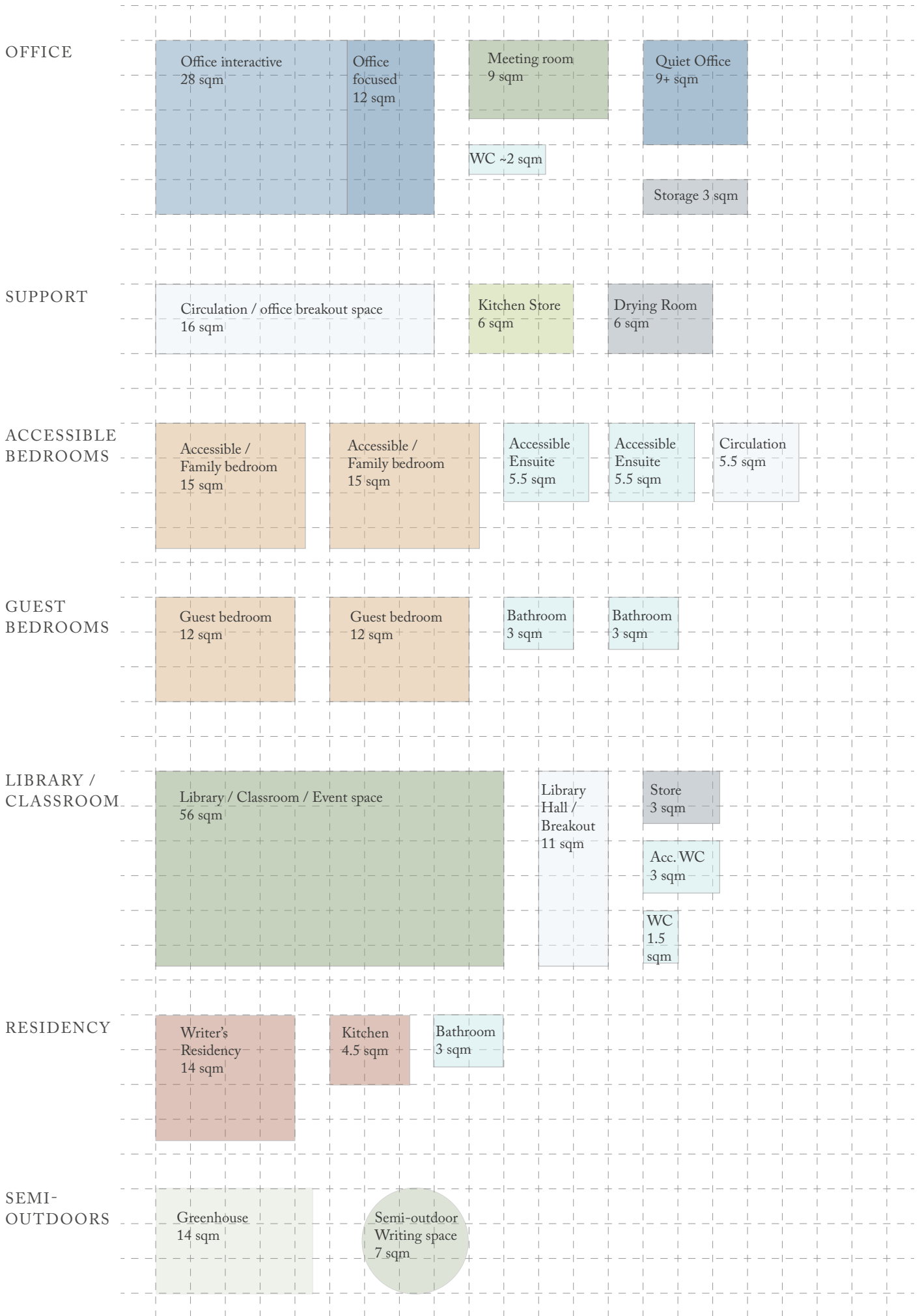
#### Writer's Residency

A self contained unit that could be used for writer's residencies independent from the rest of the centre. A large bedroom served by its own small kitchen and bathroom.

#### Greenhouse / Semi-outdoors

This is required to help grow vegetables which are used on site. The space could also be used for informal meetings and would be a pleasant semi-outdoors temperature in Spring / Autumn. A semi-outdoors, sheltered writing space in the garden could connect with nature and give inspiration.





## ADJACENCIES

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*Which new spaces want to be where*

### Office

Based on conversations about the ethos of Moniak Mhor, value is placed on the opportunities for casual interactions between guests and staff and the sense of community that this brings. At the same time, there is also a need for separation at times to allow for focused uninterrupted work. Consequently, the office wants to be positioned close or attached to the main house. This will also allow for the associated circulation / break-out space to be a place of casual encounter and meeting, shared with the guests on site. The office also needs to be near the entrance to the centre and close to the new classroom / event space as staff are the first point of contact on site.

### Kitchen Store / Drying Room

Kitchen store wants to be close to the main house and site entrance for deliveries and the drying room similarly for access on return from walks.

### Accessible Bedrooms

For maximum ease of access, these should be directly attached to the main building to allow for easy access to main dining / kitchen spaces especially in the winter when weather could make outside manoeuvring for disabled guests difficult.

### Further Guest Bedrooms

One of these is a replacement for a bedroom in the main house that will become office space. These can be located near the other buildings on site, but a bit of distance would not be too much of an issue as guests regularly stay in the cottage and the identity of separate buildings is enjoyed.

### Library / Classroom / Event space

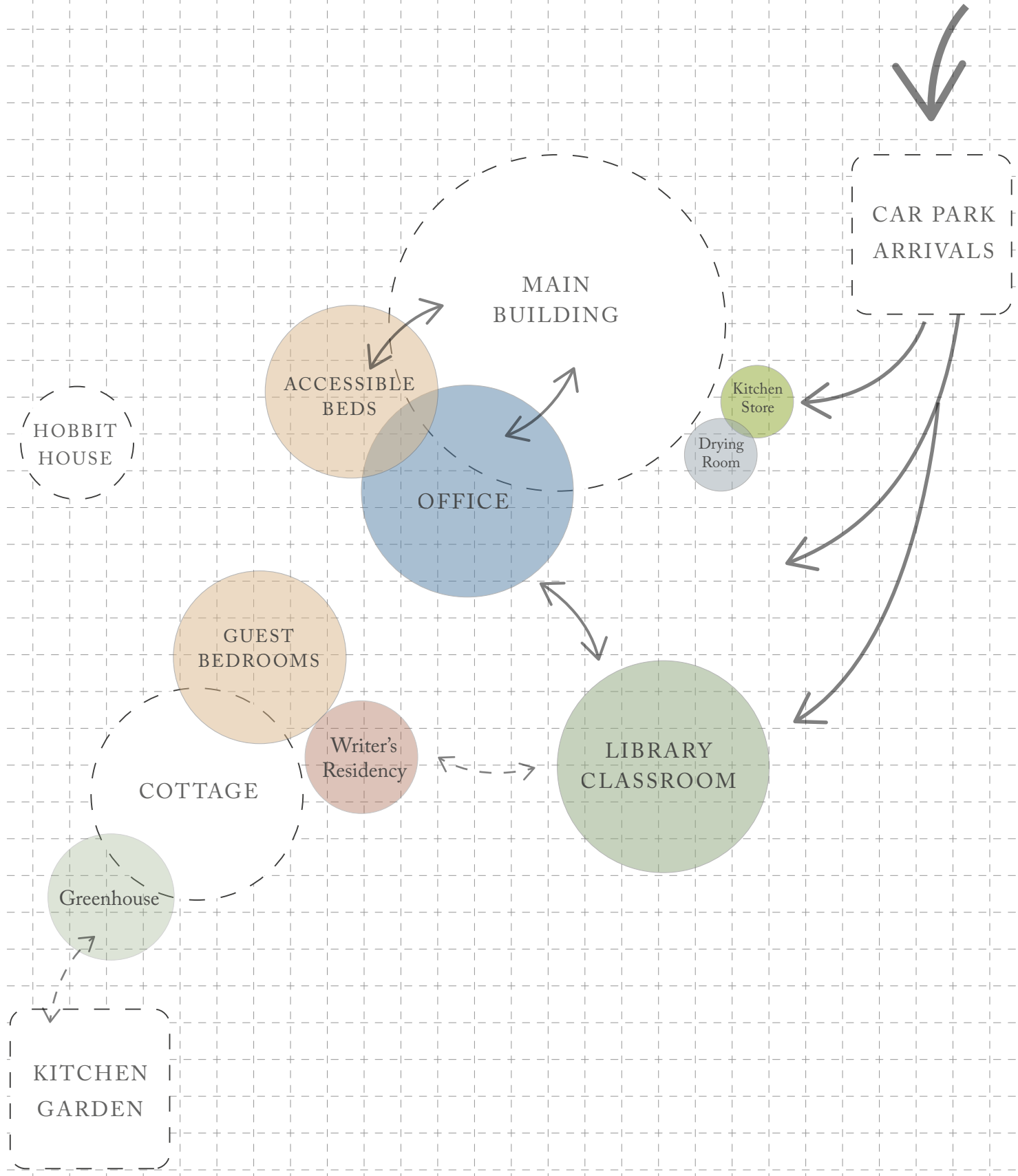
This building is the most public part of the site and will at times be used by an entirely separate set of users from the rest of the Writing Centre. It may host classes of schoolchildren for workshops whilst the rest of the centre is running adult writing retreats. For the benefit of both, it would be better if there was minimal interaction between these groups. Consequently, this space wants to be close to the entrance to the centre, and in a separate building, with an access route that does not cross the other parts of the site. It needs to be served by its own toilets. When not used by a separate school group, it would be a useful space for guests staying at the centre to use for writing so it should also be close enough to the other buildings in the centre. A distinct building with its own identity, yet easily accessed for guests staying on site in poor weather. The space may be used for book launches / prizes associated with Moniak Mhor, or in conjunction with other parts of the Centre for festivals, so it also wants to be embedded into the other buildings at Moniak Mhor.

### Writer's Residency

This is a space that might be occupied on a different programme from the rest of the Writing Centre, so it wants to have a bit of privacy from the rest of the centre. The writer in residence would likely carry-out workshops in the Library / classroom, so proximity to this would make sense.

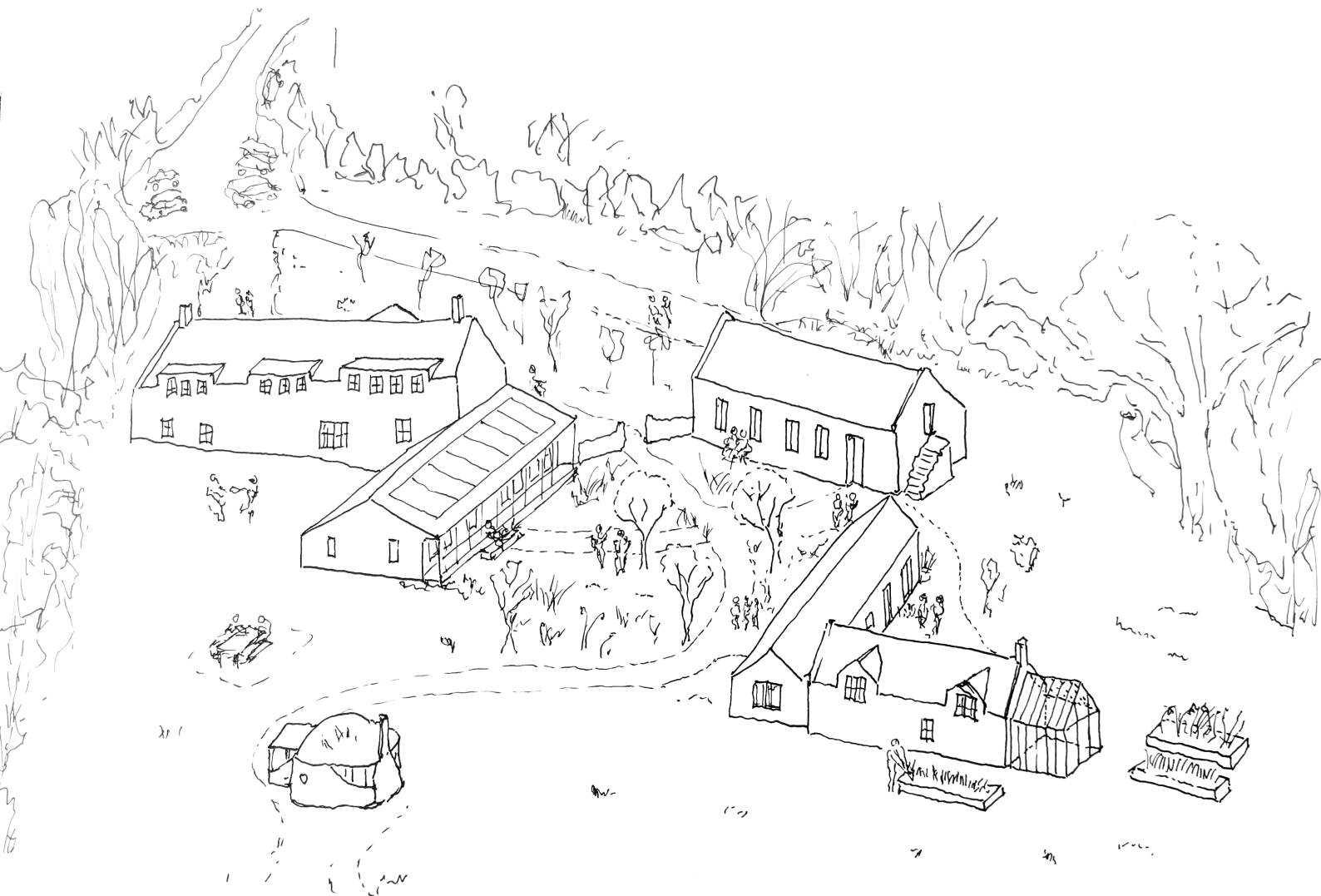
### Greenhouse

Close to the existing vegetable patch behind cottage, with Southerly orientation.





# 5.0 SITE STRATEGIES

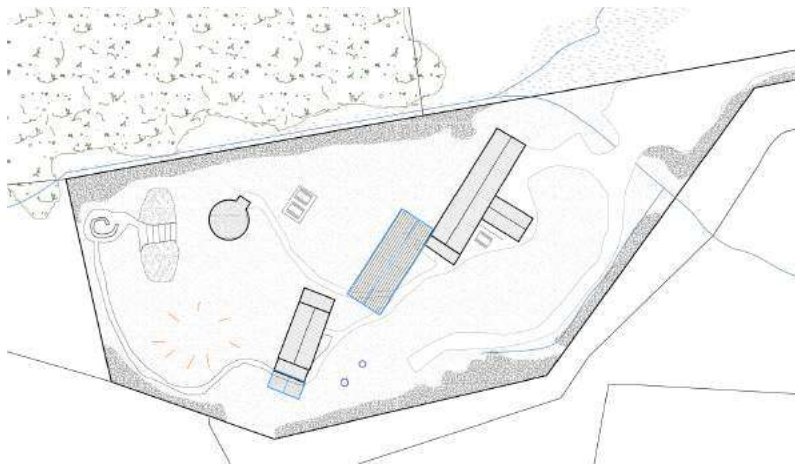


## SITE MASSING OPTIONS

### *Pros and cons*

#### Advantages

- connected to main building
- doesn't obstruct views from existing building
- good views out

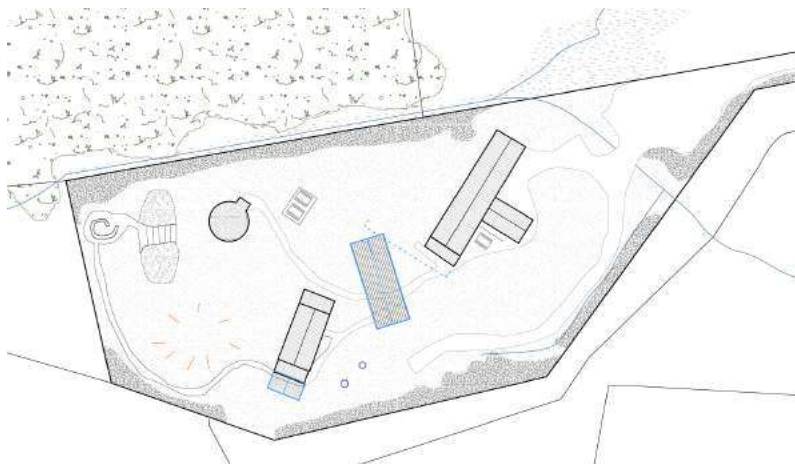


*Option 1*

#### Disadvantages

- prominent from road approach
- monolithic, makes centre feel institutional
- detracts from humble farm-like feel
- insufficient privacy for classroom

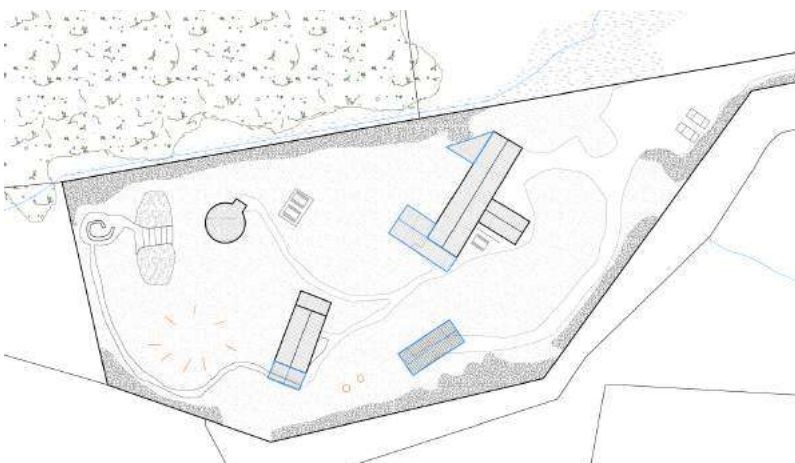
- doesn't obstruct views from existing building



*Option 2*

- prominent from road approach
- doesn't create positive landscaped place
- awkward relationship to other buildings
- insufficient privacy for classroom
- poor views out
- not connected to main building

- doesn't obstruct views from existing building
- subtle from approach
- separation for classroom
- nice courtyard to west

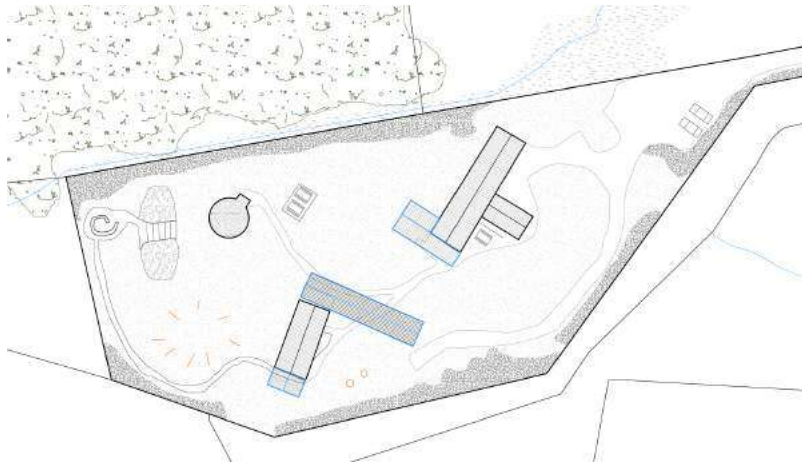


*Option 3*

- extension at north of main building difficult to plan and connect with building
- sloping site means extensive groundworks required for extension at north

Advantages

- doesn't obstruct views from existing building
- subtle from approach

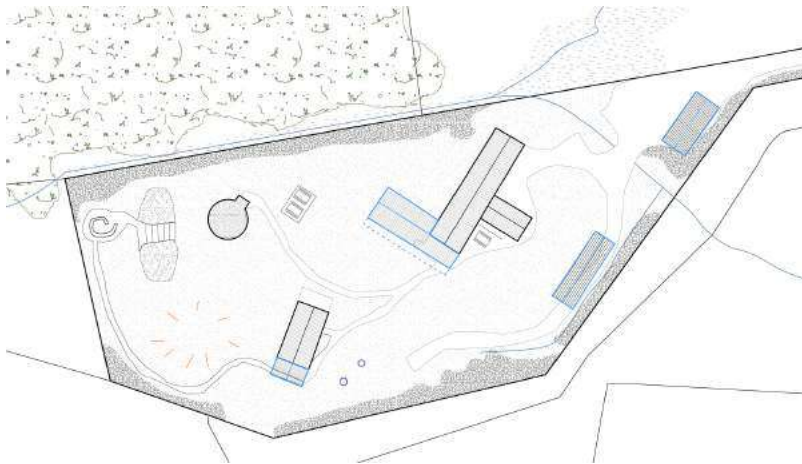


*Option 4*

Disadvantages

- excessive extension overpowers cottage
- office located away from main building
- insufficient privacy for classroom
- feels institutional
- inwards looking

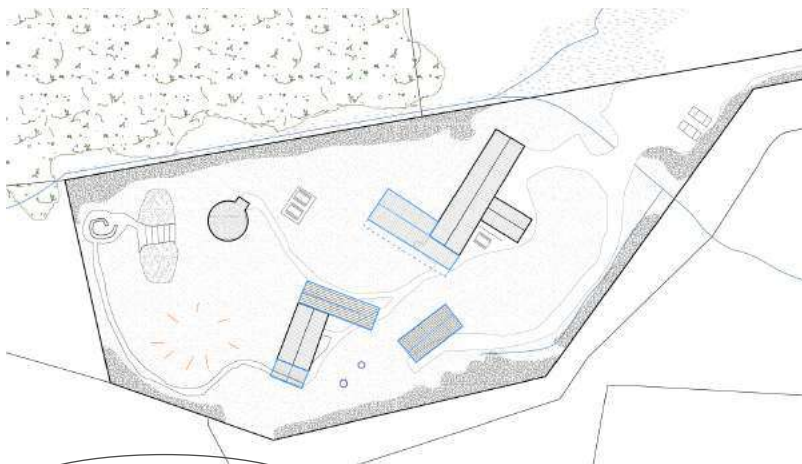
- doesn't obstruct views from existing building
- classroom close to entrance so paths not crossing site
- massing broken down



*Option 5*

- new buildings on higher ground and over prominent on approach
- loss of humble farm-like feel
- loss of parking spaces
- feels fragmented and not coherent
- poorer connections

- massing broken down into smaller volumes
- each building has distinct identity
- positive defining of nearby landscape
- creates sheltered courtyard
- doesn't obstruct views from existing building
- classroom close to entrance so paths not crossing site



*Option 6 - Preferred Option*

- fewer long views

## OPTIONS INVOLVING LAND PURCHASE

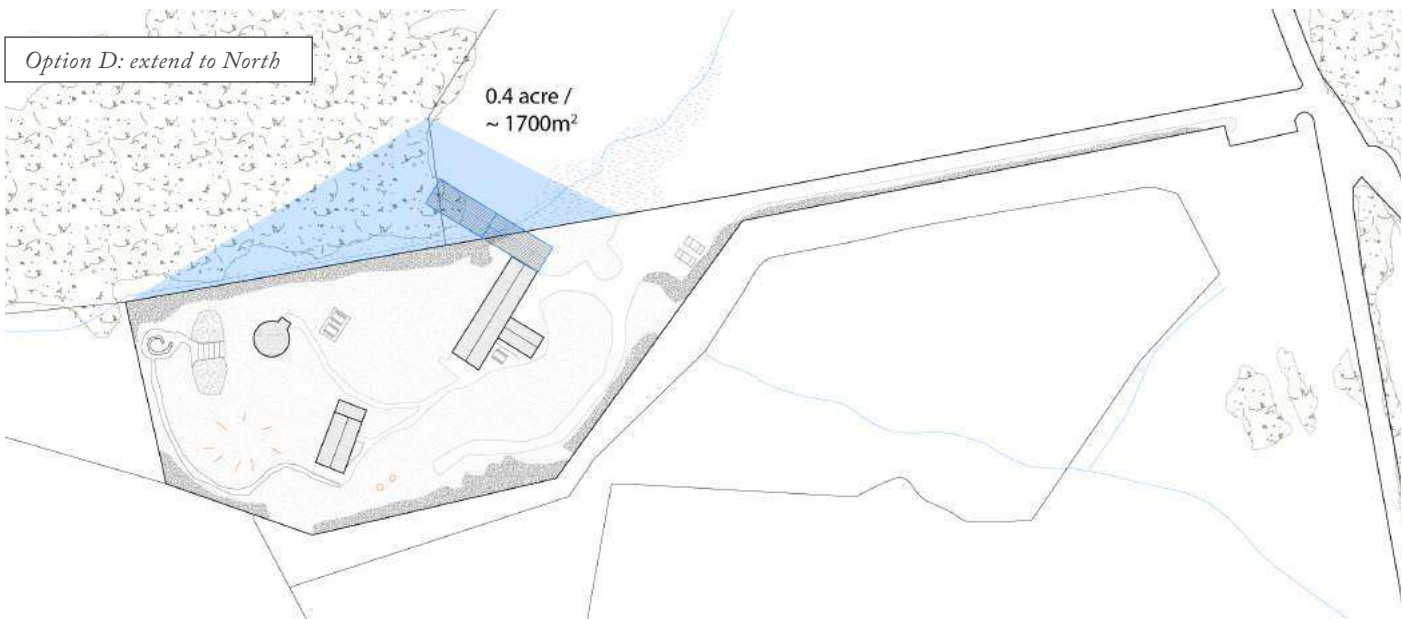
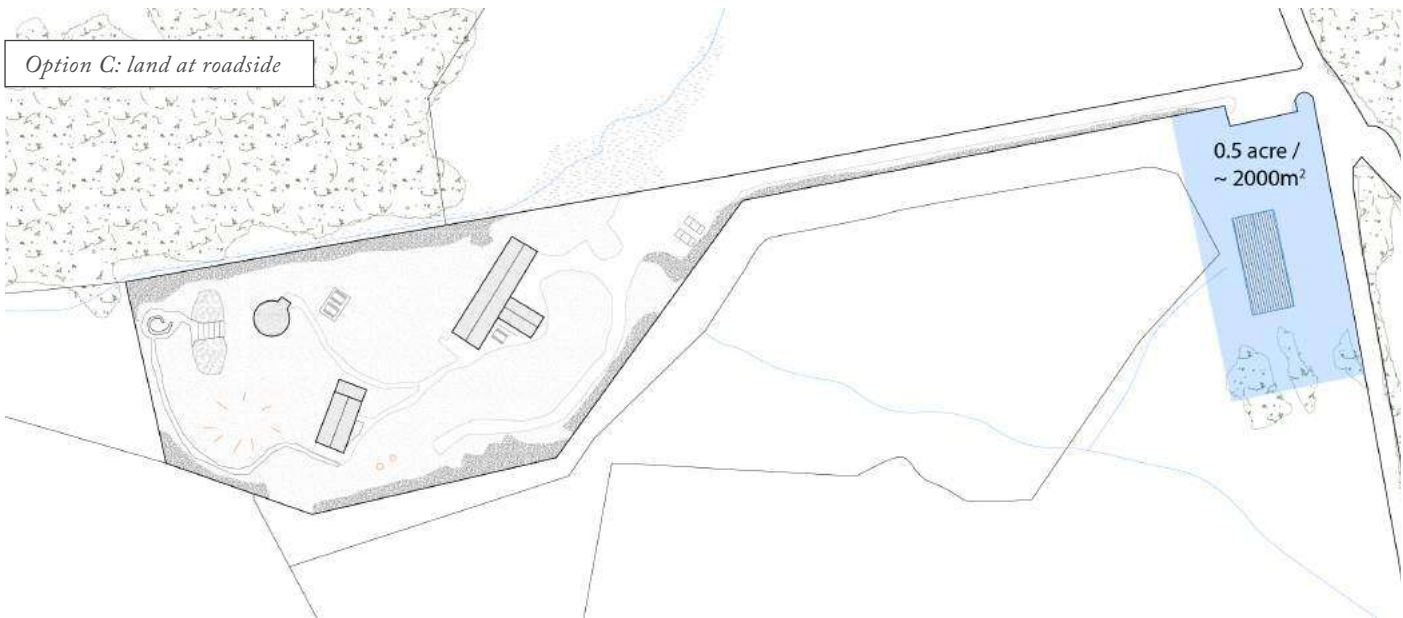
### *Extending the site*

Given the constrained nature of the existing site, at an early stage we explored options for extending the site through purchasing neighbouring land to allow for a new building to be comfortably added to the centre. Four options were identified and used to approach the current neighbouring landowners, none of whom wanted to enter negotiations for sale. The final proposals have moved on from these and there are good reasons to suggest that building within the existing site is actually preferable in the end, maintaining ease of connection between buildings and a sense of community. Nonetheless, advantages and disadvantages are discussed below for completeness.

Option	Pros	Cons
A: land to North	Separate building, space for parking, great views, no disruption during construction	Poor connection to other buildings, doesn't improve landscaping in main site
B: land to South	Combine greenhouse with classroom, good solar gain, less visible as built into slope	Difficult access to road for construction and use. Route for schoolchildren still through site.
C: land at Roadside	Classroom and office distinct from rest of Centre, no disruption during construction, prominent at roadside.	Too far from other buildings, less 'secluded', doesn't improve landscaping in main site.
D: extend to North	Creates south-facing courtyard, best connection to site.	Straddles burn, difficult foundations, connects to wrong part of main building.







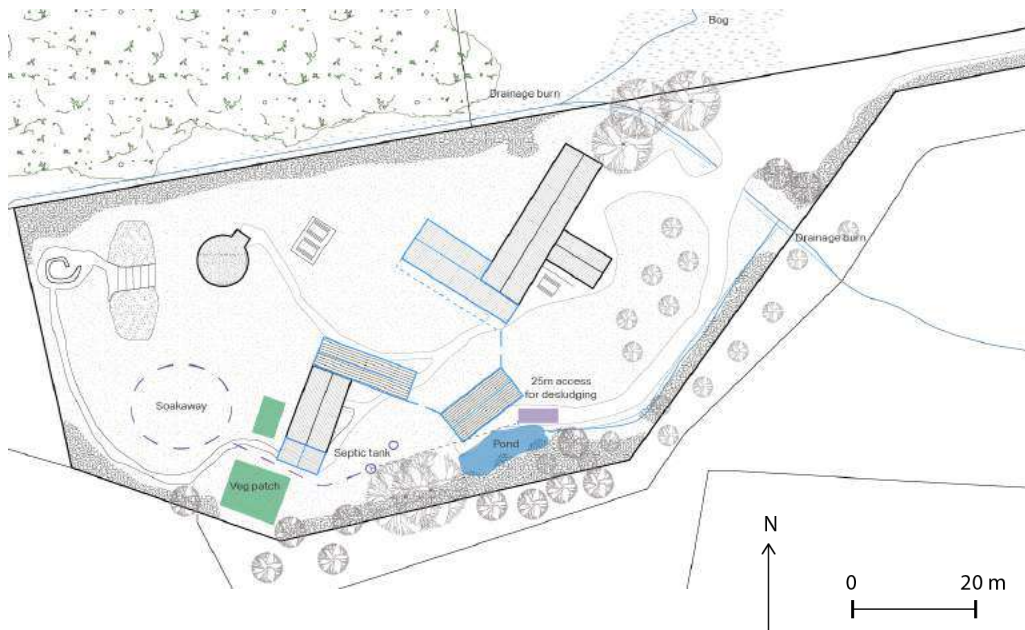
## PREFERRED SITE MASSING

*Breaking down the volume – learning from vernacular*

### UNDERSTANDING THE MASSING

The preferred masterplan layout breaks down the new spaces into three main volumes, which are of a subordinate scale to the existing buildings on the site. By breaking down the massing in this way, additions to the centre retain Moniack Mhor's existing humble, former crofting character, whilst each of the new spaces will have a distinct identity emerging from their siting, surroundings and views. The placement of these new buildings minimises impact on the existing long views out from the site, whilst each of the new spaces balances views out with incidental views from one building to another, helping to reinforce a sense of community. Through their placement, the architectures compress and expand and give character to the landscaped areas surrounding them, creating new nooks and sheltered garden areas, expanding the conceptual and inspirational landscape.

The collection of new buildings sit broadly within the older buildings, this reduces their visual impact from outside but also allows them to define a distinct architectural language at the heart of the centre. Their pitched roof-forms resonate with the other existing vernacular buildings, whilst use of timber or colour will allow them to be identified as a family of spaces within the broader centre.



*Proposed site plan with constraints highlighted*

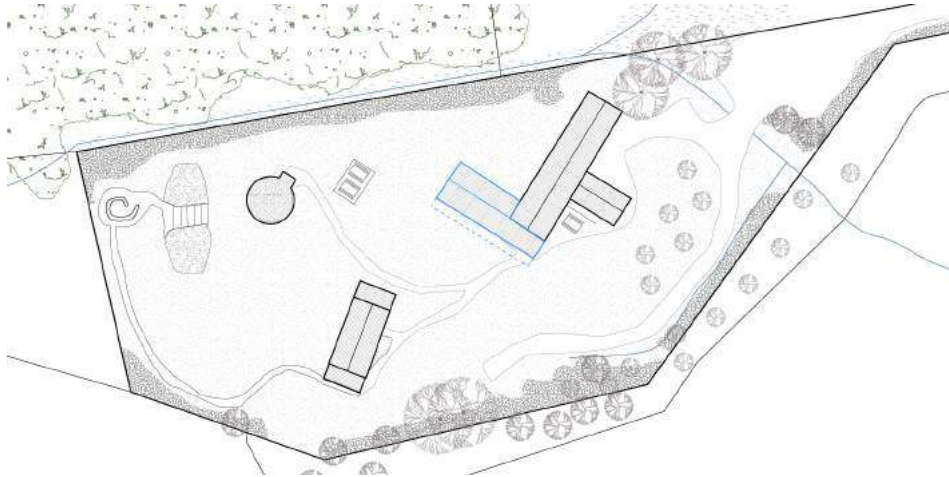
### INTERACTION WITH CONSTRAINTS

Under the proposed scheme, buildings have been placed such that there is no need to fell existing trees on site. The existing pond at the rear of the proposed classroom is retained, and the building angled such that there remains sufficient parking space for a desludging vehicle to access within 25m of the septic tank and a fire engine to access the pond for pumping in the event of a fire. Should Scottish Fire services require additional water storage on site as part of these new developments, there is space elsewhere for a new pond to the north near the car park.

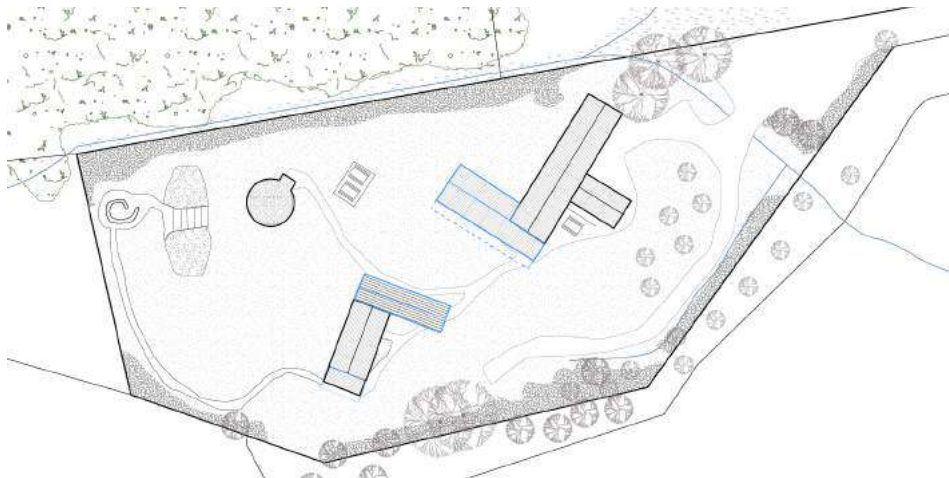
## PHASING

*Adding to the centre in order of priority*

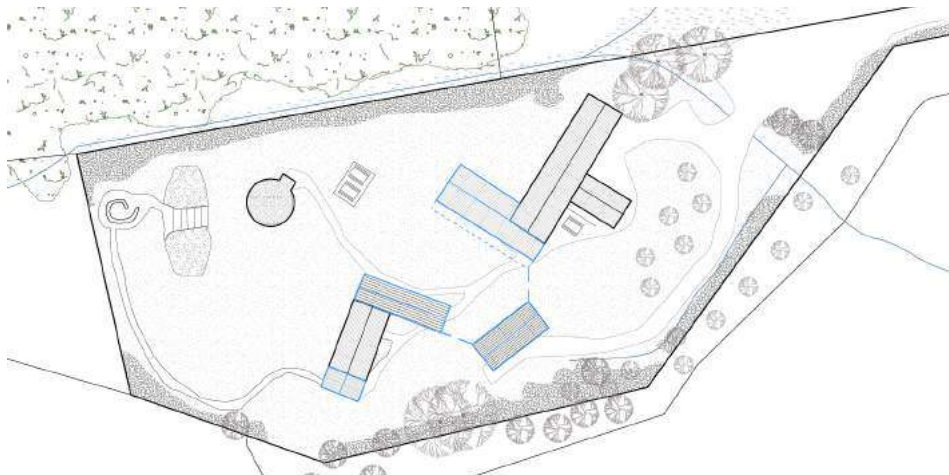
*Phase 1: Office + Accessible Bedrooms*



*Phase 2: Residency & Guest bedrooms*

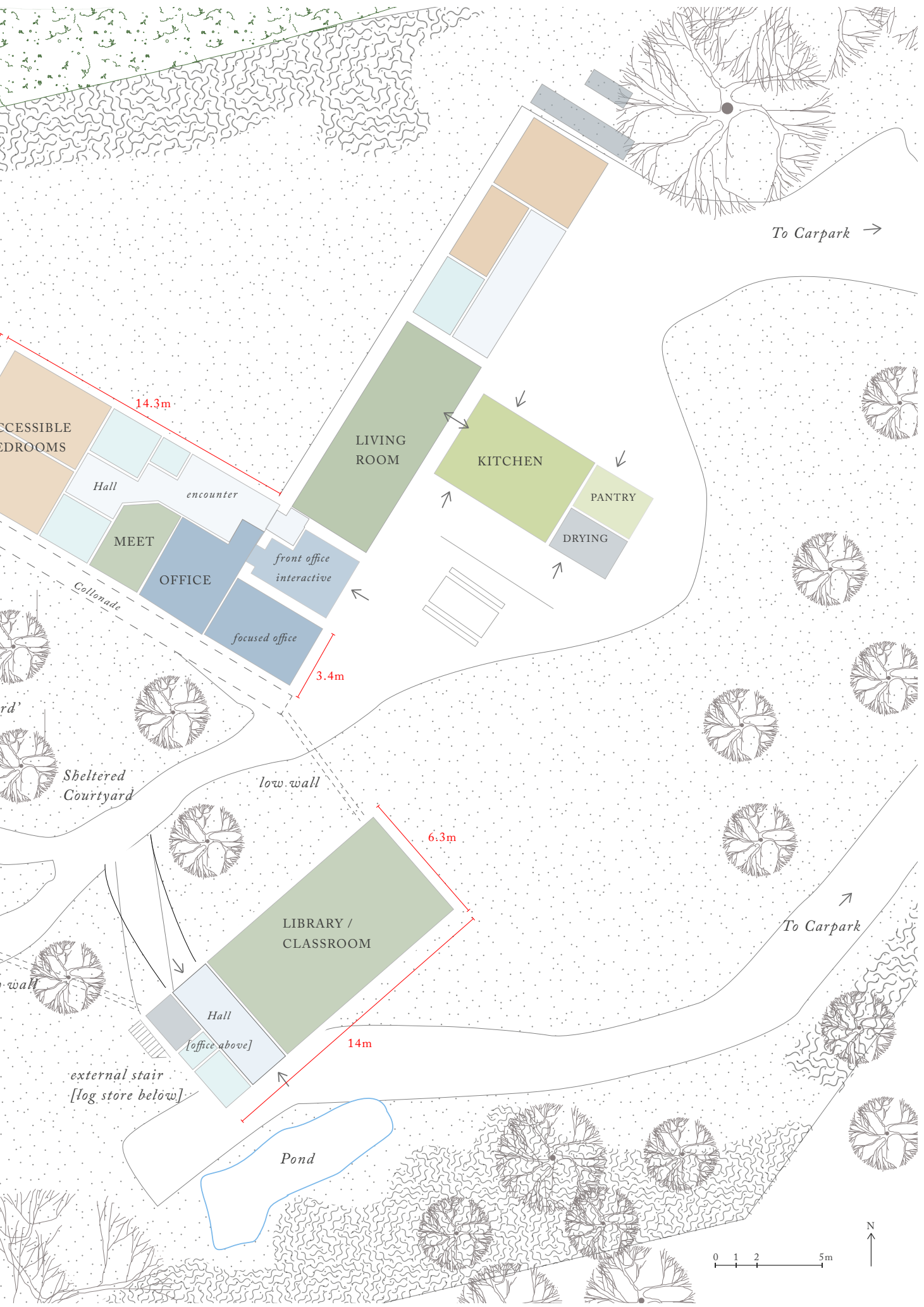


*Phase 3: Library / Classroom + Greenhouse*



GROUND FLOOR PLAN





## DEFINING LANDSCAPED AREAS

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*Architecture creates outdoor rooms with different characters*

In accommodating a series of new internal spaces, the proposed massing arrangement also considers the way in which these define outdoor rooms. These are sheltered outdoors spaces that have distinct characters and will catch the sun at different times of the day. This amounts to a conceptual expansion of the garden space; this is through the creation of nooks and defined character areas. Although there is less space in terms of square metres, there is more 'place'. The planting of these areas with trees and grasses, and landscaping to create gathering areas will help to expand the imaginative area. Meanwhile, strong connections between the new buildings and the landscape surrounding enhance the sense of connection with the surrounding ecology, embedding an awareness of our interdependence with the land outside.

At the centre of this proposal is a new courtyard / orchard, this sits on a South-facing slope and, collecting the sun throughout the seasons. It is defined on three sides by the new buildings with gates and low walls between them and open to the West towards the afternoon sun, the hobbit house and the view.

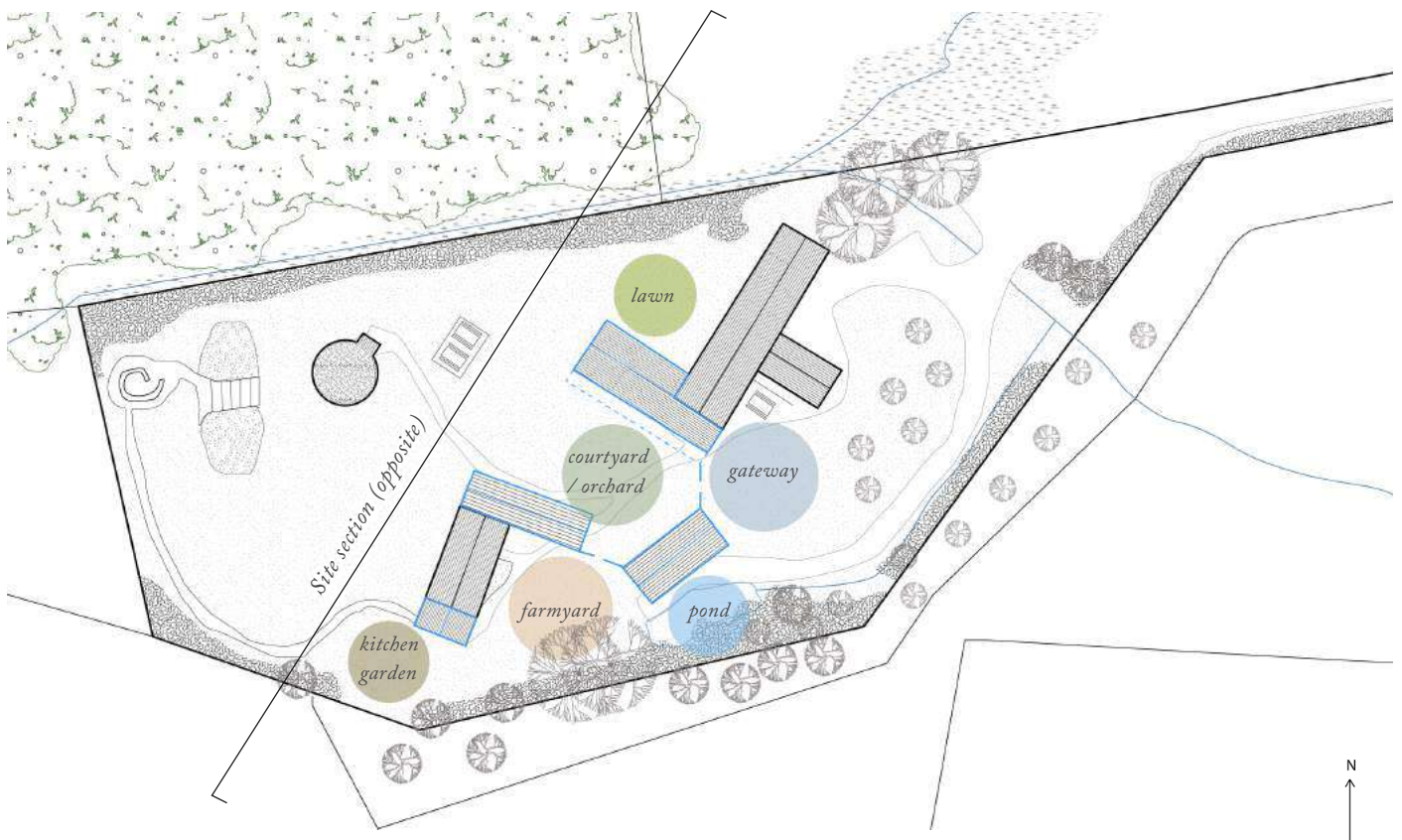
Opportunities for renewable solar energy and heat generation are provided by the South-facing pitched roofs on the office/accessible bedrooms and residency wing.



*Author's impression aerial view of proposed massing seen from West*

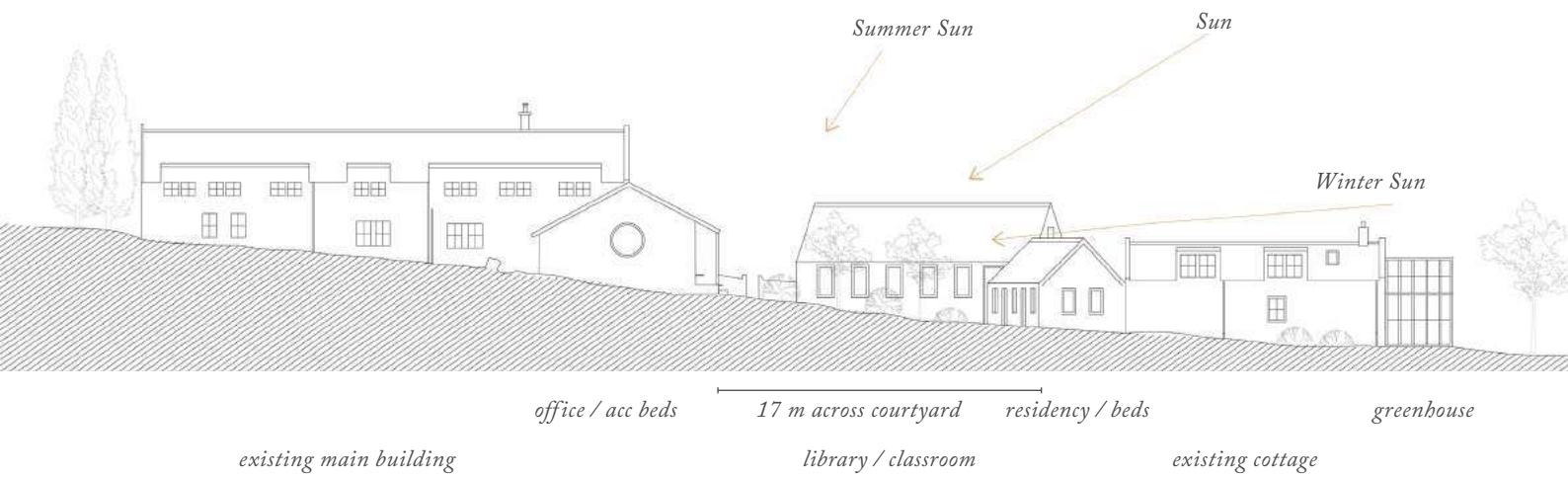
## DEFINING LANDSCAPED AREAS

*Architecture shapes outdoor rooms with different characters*



*Proposed site plan with landscaped area characteristics*





*Proposed site section through courtyard looking east.*

# 5.0

## ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER

### INITIAL DESIGN SKETCHES

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*Office space and relation to courtyard*



*Design sketches, section through office space looking east, with colonnade and overhanging eaves*

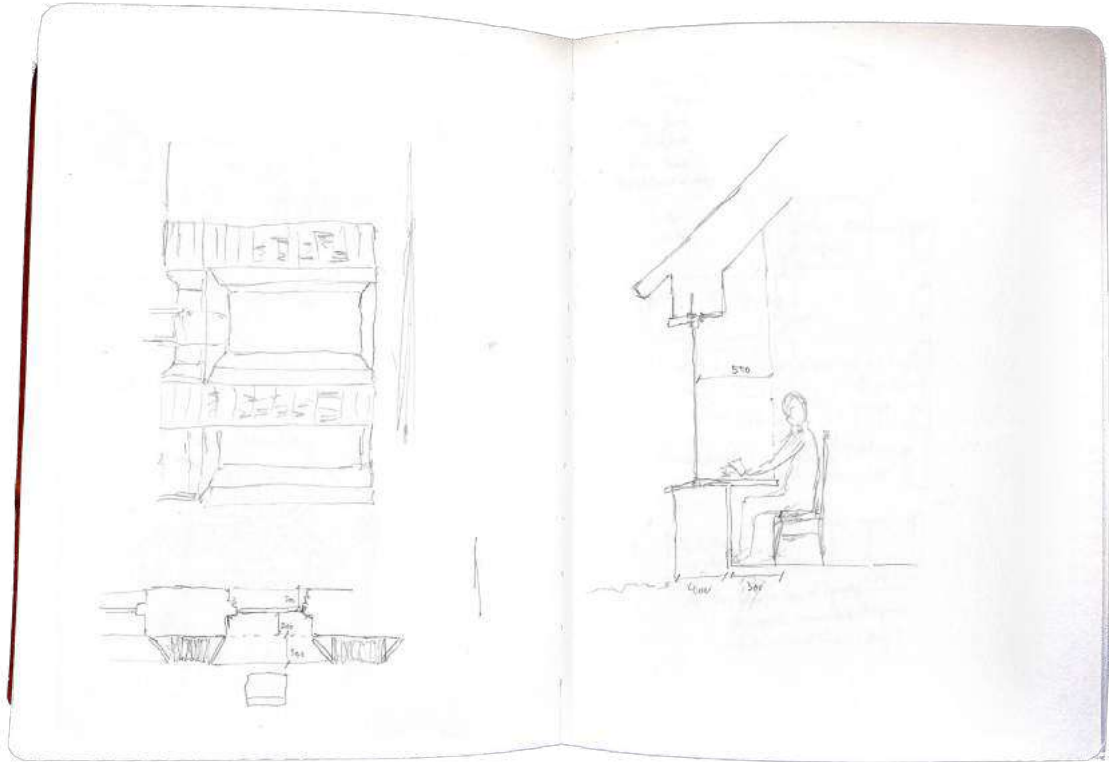


*View into orchard courtyard from West towards library with office and colonnade on left. Colour undecided.*

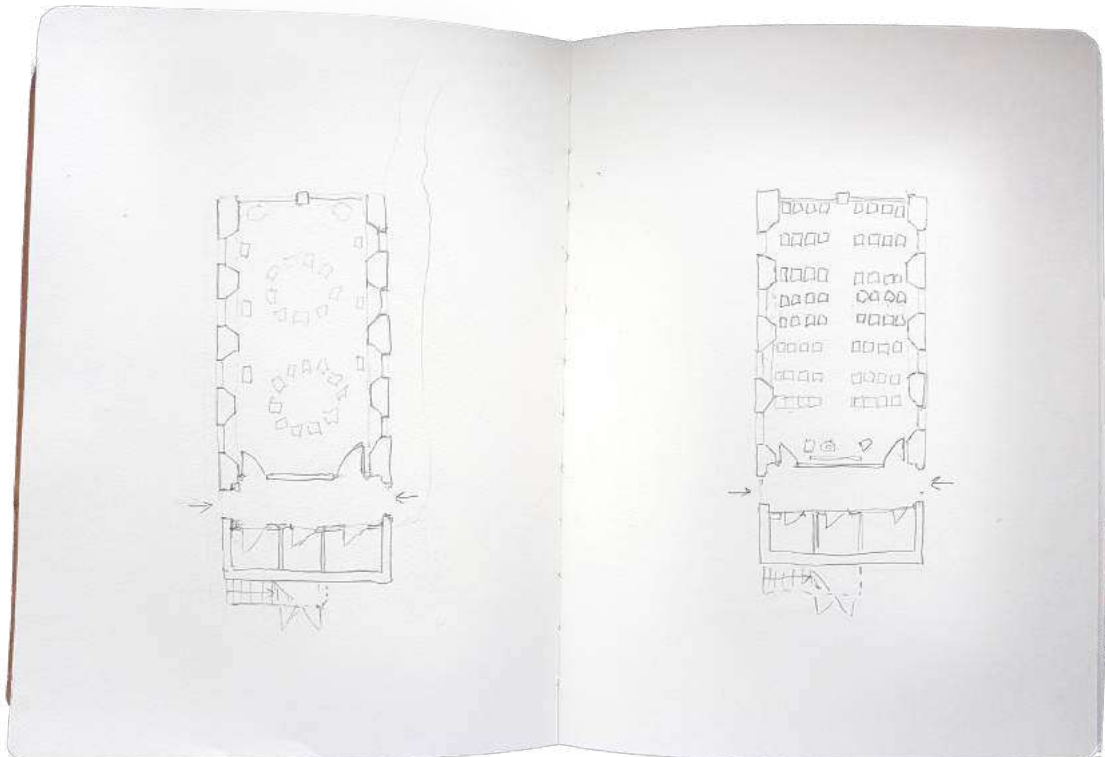
The office is conceived as a lofty space open to an exposed timber roof. Part would act as the front-facing office with printers and conversation, this is more open to the rest of the house, with opportunities for conversations between guests and staff encouraged. Off this space are two smaller areas for more focused working, one in the old building in the former bedroom. The eaves extend past the wall edge to create a South-facing colonnade which acts as a sheltered place to sit outside and think, write, talk, meet. Due to the change in topography, this covered walkway steps down towards the landscaped courtyard, providing seat-height steps.

## INITIAL DESIGN SKETCHES

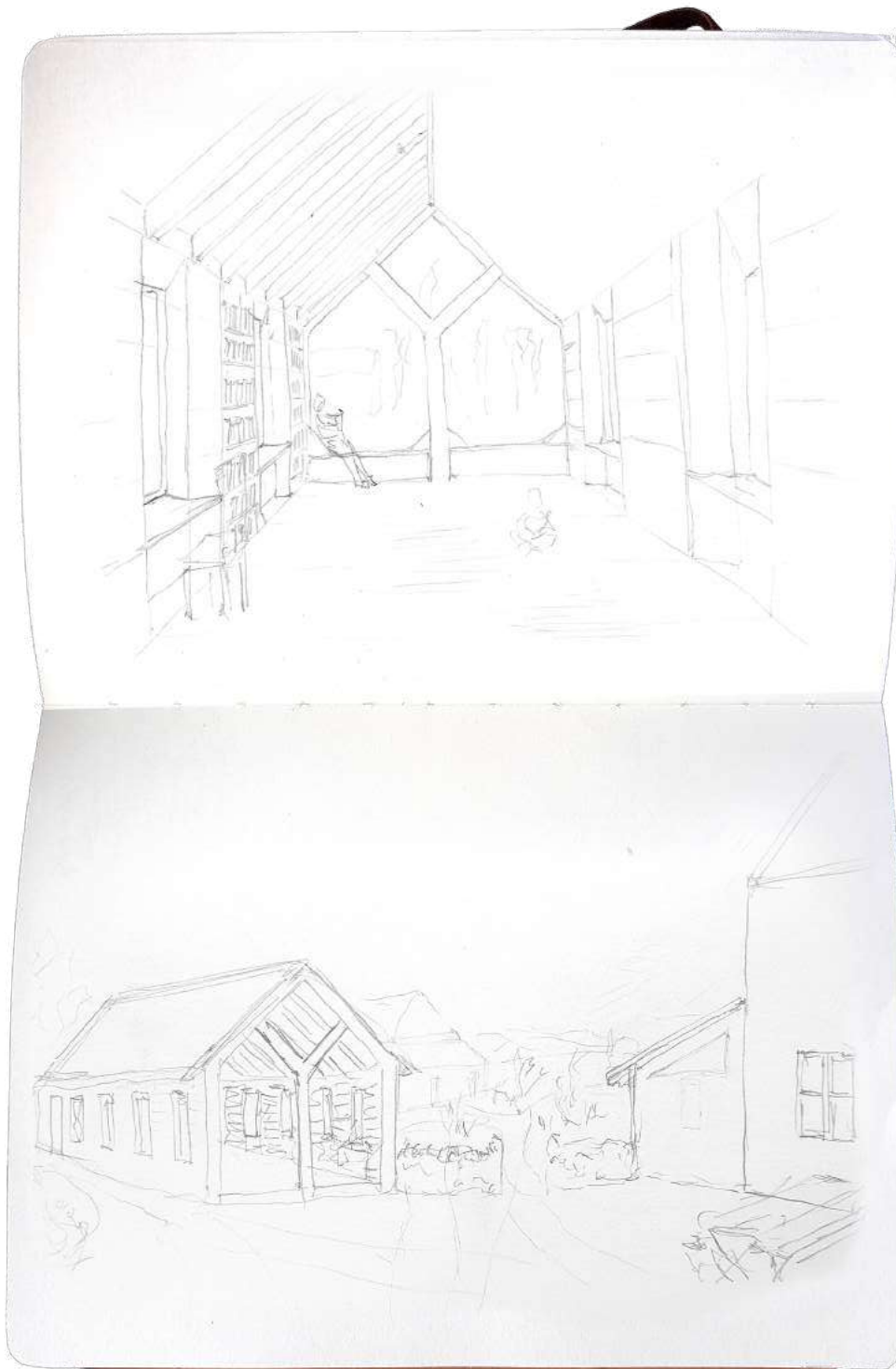
### *The Library / Classroom*



*Design sketches, library writing desk integrated into window with bookshelves in wall depth*



*Design sketches, library floorplan with flexibility for different chair layouts / uses*



*Design sketches, interior of library with expressed heavy timber and glazed gable*

The Library - Classroom is conceived as a flexible space that can be used for quiet writing and study as well as group teaching and talks / events. Open to the pitched roof with expressed timber, the building is divided into bays that alternate windows with full-height bookcases, these create deep walls with writing desks within their depth in the window nooks. This responds to the call for quiet writing nooks whilst also invoking a strong connection to the landscape. On one side, these will look West through the orchard courtyard to the hills beyond and at the East they will look into the pond-willow area. The centre of the room is open with flexible seating to accommodate groups or laid out to seat up to 70 people in an end-on lecture arrangement. On approach, the building announces its presence with a glazed gable with heavy timber expressed structure to bring North light flooding into the space. At the rear, two doors come into a vestibule with toilets and storage above accessed by an external staircase.

## SUSTAINABILITY

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### *Embedding ecological design in the brief*

Sustainable design and environmental thinking are embedded within the ethos of Moniack Mhor and are absolutely central to the work of Taigh Solais Architecture. The reworking and addition of new spaces at the Writing Centre presents an opportunity to create an environmentally-minded architecture that is grounded in the local place.

#### Passive architectural design principles

The positioning and placement of new buildings adjacent to some of the existing ones on site presents opportunities to reduce the heating demand of some of these existing spaces. By wrapping onto what were external walls, the new buildings reduce the amount of wall area in contact with the external air and thus reduce heat losses in the buildings. The greenhouse at the South gable of the cottage will likewise gather warmth from the sun and keep that stone gable warmer.

Passive solar gains can be embedded into the design with well-proportioned windows facing South, East and West allow for high levels of passive solar gains in the winter, gathering any warmth from the sun and retaining it indoors. Overhanging eaves and deep sills prevent overheating in the Summer by shading when the Sun is higher in the sky. Cross ventilation with windows on two sides of most rooms creates a healthy internal air quality.

#### Reducing energy demand

New buildings will be extensively insulated using natural insulation products such as wood fibre that have an element of thermal mass, and so retain heat passively ensuring an even distribution of warmth across the day. In addition to maximising solar gains, the siting and orientation of the new buildings with south-facing pitched roofs presents opportunities for on-site Solar PV electricity generation. The new buildings should be considered in conjunction with the existing ones as part of strategy to decarbonise the whole-site heating system, moving towards electrical heat-pumps or biomass. Underfloor heating and/or low-flow temperature radiators present opportunities to improve thermal comfort whilst minimising heating demands in the new buildings on site.

#### Improving connection to the landscape - designing in biodiversity

The placement of buildings in the proposed scheme starts to define distinctive outdoor landscaped areas with differing access to sunlight and shelter. These will each present a greater variety of habitats for wildlife. The gathering of buildings to form sheltered outdoor courtyards will help to encourage use of outdoors spaces for more days of the year, drawing people out into the landscape, reinforcing connections with the natural world. Rooms with good levels of considered glazing help to bring the outside in, allowing the land around to form the backdrop to the everyday activities indoors.

The choice of natural building materials will be informed by what is locally available, with a preference for construction materials that are grown in biodiverse landscapes in order to support and encourage these ecosystems. The use of local timber, stone etc, reinforces a grounding in place that reminds users of the connection between landscape and architecture.

#### Low carbon construction

Buildings will be designed to minimise the levels of embodied carbon by using primarily nature-based carbon-sequestering construction materials such as timber, clay, hemp and lime. Additionally, the project presents an opportunity to avail of cutting-edge low-carbon construction methods such as concrete-free screw foundations.

As a cultural building, this project will set an example for future architectures as we move towards Net Zero Emissions. As well as embedding a project in place, prioritising local supply chains helps to invest in and support the local economy, it also reduces the carbon emissions associated with delivery transportation.

#### Improving on-site food production

Moniack Mhor was originally a working croft which was known for its soft-fruits. The centre currently grows some of the food it uses on site but has the ambition and potential to do more of this. The addition of a greenhouse would extend the growing season and allow for more efficiency in the planning of growing throughout the year.

#### Social sustainability

As a public building, the improvements at the Writing Centre present an opportunity to share ecological design methods and sustainable thinking through exposure to multiple users from across the country and world. This exchange in ideas is what is needed to create resilient communities that are well-resourced to deal with climate change in their local areas. The project presents a chance to be an inspiring example of sustainable principles embedded in practice and at play in a real working place.



*Strong connections with wildlife: Middleton Park Gate Lodge by Taka Architects, Westmeath, Ireland*

## ARCHITECTURAL PRECEDENTS

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*Overhanging eaves - expressed timber*



*Timber Cabin by Crafted Works in Drenthe, Netherlands*



## OVERHANGING EAVES

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*Overhanging eaves - expressed timber*



*House in the Fields by Jean-Baptiste Barache & Sihem Lamine, France*



*Old Barn by Rural Office for Architecture, North Norfolk*

## ARCHITECTURAL PRECEDENTS

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*Relationship to landscaped courtyard*



*Pen y Common by Rural Office for Architecture, Wales*



*White Eagle Lodge by James Gorst Architects, Hampshire*

## LANDSCAPED COURTYARD

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*Relationship to landscaped courtyard*



*Feilden Fowles Studio by Feilden Fowles, London*



*Turn End by Peter Aldington, Aylesbury*

## ARCHITECTURAL PRECEDENTS

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*Collected vernacular roof forms*



*Vernacular stone gable, Wales*



*Vernacular collections of roof forms and agricultural roofing*

## PITCHED ROOF FORMS

---

*Collected vernacular roof forms*



*Beach Road House by Ryan W. Kennihan, Galway, Ireland*



*Beach Road House by Ryan W. Kennihan, Galway, Ireland*

## ARCHITECTURAL PRECEDENTS

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*Use of colour?*



*Aeron Park by Rural Office for Architecture, Wales*



*School House by Canice Architects, County Tipperary, Ireland*

## NEW INTO OLD BUILDINGS

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*New and old buildings in adjacency*



*Student Village by Lenschow & Pihlmann, Aarhus, Denmark*



*Student Village by Lenschow & Pihlmann, Aarhus, Denmark*

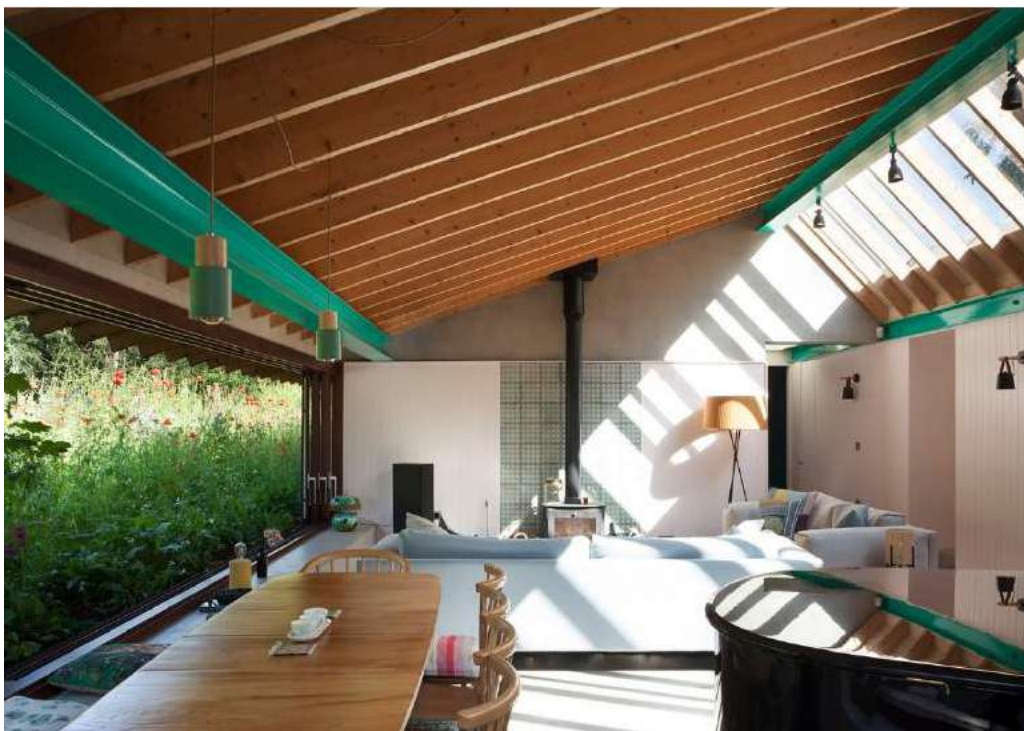
## ARCHITECTURAL PRECEDENTS

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*Office Space: timber & natural light*



*Feilden Fowles, Studio by Feilden Fowles, London*



*Middleton Park Gate Lodge by Taka Architects, County Westmeath, Ireland*



## CONNECTION TO OUTDOORS

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*Office: strong connection to outdoors*



*Feilden Fowles, Studio by Feilden Fowles, London*

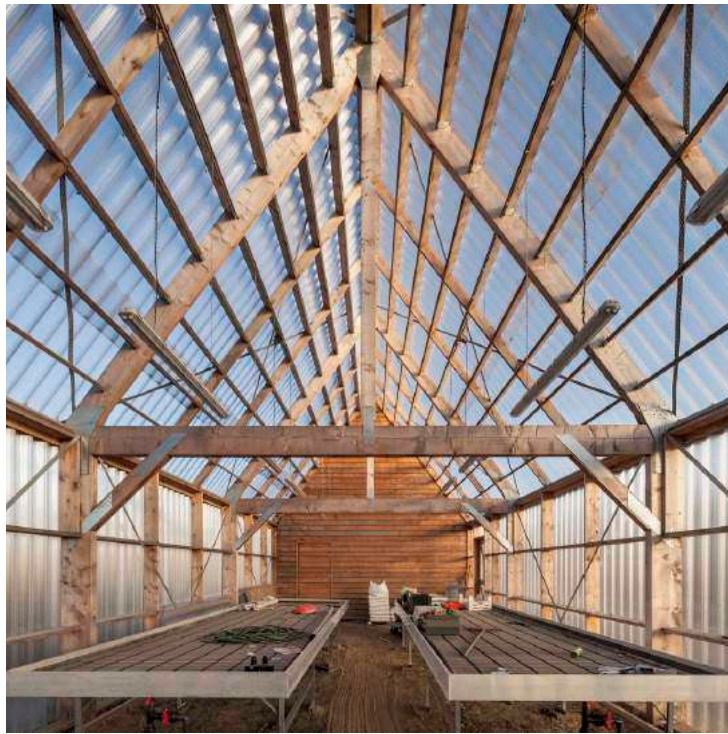


*Middleton Park Gate Lodge by Taka Architects, County Westmeath, Ireland*

## ARCHITECTURAL PRECEDENTS

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*Greenhouse: artistic use of cheap building materials*



*Community-built schoolgarden, RO AD Architecten, Netherlands*



*Sticks by Hou de Sousa, New York*

## GREENHOUSE

*Salvaged windows + study in glasshouse*



*Use of salvaged windows to build greenhouses*



*Study space within greenhouse from salvaged windows, painted to unify*

## ARCHITECTURAL PRECEDENTS

---

*Bedrooms with strong relationship to outside*



*Leaf inlay onto clay plaster by Becky Little, Scotland*



*Middleton Park Gate Lodge by Taka Architects, County Westmeath, Ireland*

## INTERIOR FINISHES

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*Books as wall furnishing, clay and lime plasters*



*The Lighthouse by Taigh Solais Architecture, Edinburgh*

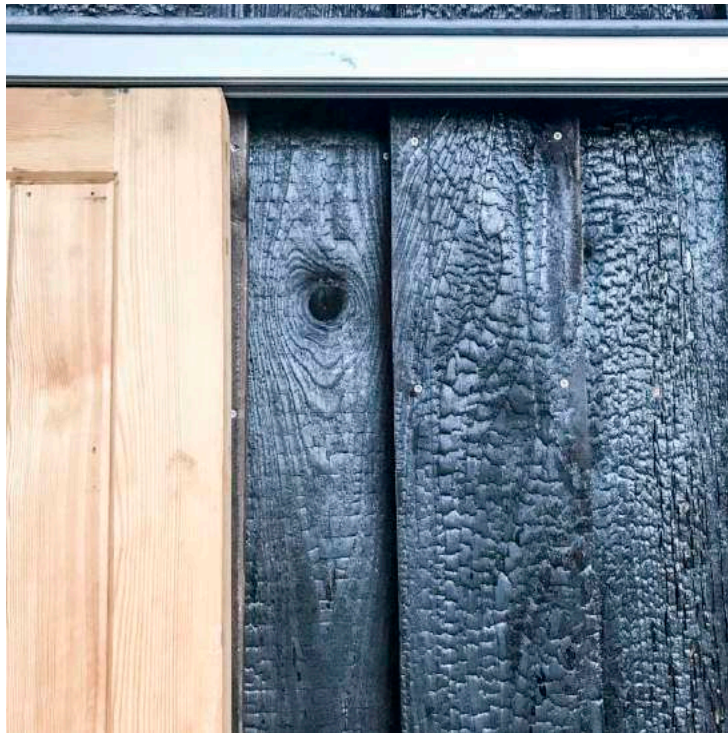


*Lime-hemp plaster, The Lighthouse by Taigh Solais Architecture, Edinburgh*

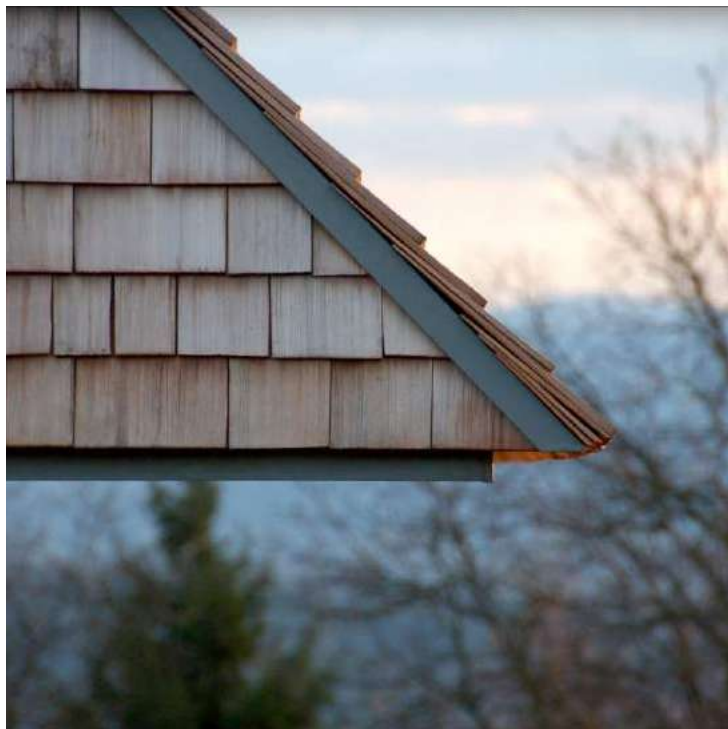
## ARCHITECTURAL PRECEDENTS

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*Timber: charred cladding, shingles*



*Charred timber cladding, Bridgend Community Farmhouse, Edinburgh*



*Cedar shingles, House with a View by doom, Mogilany, Poland*

## MATERIAL IDEAS

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*Timber cladding over roof, integrated solar panels*



*Timber roofing at Lochside House by Haysom Ward Millar, Scotland*



*Solar panels at off-grid Lochside House by Haysom Ward Millar, Scotland*

## ARCHITECTURAL PRECEDENTS

---

*Timber: charred cladding, shingles*



*Timber cladding patterns, Waterloo City Farm by Feilden Fowles, London*



*Stacked firewood logs forming a low wall and marking a gateway by Barbara Samitier*



## MATERIAL IDEAS

---

*Timber cladding over roof, integrated solar panels*



*Expressed heavy timber structure, Waterloo City Farm by Feilden Fowles, London*



*Stacked logs forming a low wall which is a habitat for biodiverse wildlife and will alter over time*

## ARCHITECTURAL METHODOLOGY

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*Text carved into the building*



*Artistic use of text and lettering carved into timber as part of architecture*



*Artistic use of text and lettering carved into stone as part of architecture*

## TIMBER CONNECTIONS

---

*Expressed all-timber connections*



*Dry-fit all-timber connections made with pegs*



*Traditional timberwork always made use of pegs to friction fit joints*

## ARCHITECTURAL METHODOLOGY

---

*Community participation and craft*



*Cob House building workshop by Becky Little, , Scotland*



*Stone to timber connection by Thomas Randall Page, Art Barn, Devon*

## NATURAL BUILDING MATERIALS

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*Historic Scottish building materials*



*Traditional heather thatch used on a wall, photo by Becky Little, Scotland*



*Turf in Glencoe Creelhouse, photo by Becky Little, Scotland*



## 6.0

### NEXT STEPS

This Feasibility Study covers RIBA Stage 1 – Preparation and Brief, the next step in progressing this project is commissioning RIBA Stage 2 – Concept Design. This would involve refining the design, beginning to define materials and construction methods and carrying out pre-planning discussions with the Highlands Council Planning Department. This would give Moniack Mhor a clearer picture of what is possible in terms of planning and what is desirable in terms of architecture.

We would make the case that Taigh Solais is best placed to continue this work as we now have a close understanding of the Writing Centre and its site and a working relationship with Moniack Mhor. Once you have had time to digest this report and establish what you'd like to incorporate going forwards, we would encourage you to engage us in a series of conversations to talk in detail about time-scales and aspirations.

Given the scale of the brief and the sizes of the new built area at around 300 sqm, these new buildings may be considered to have an estimated construction cost on an envelope calculation starting at around £714,000. Landscaping, design, contingency and council fees would be in addition to this. The construction could be phased as discussed to spread the investment over time, or carried out all at once to make savings from economy of scale.

Moniack Mhor will be more on top of the funding avenues and routes available for this project given your current business model. We would propose that we have a conversation regarding what stage you would look to get funding for the design development of the proposal and what information you would like from the designers to be able to progress this in the most persuasive manner.

The current feasibility document goes a long way towards articulating the outline, ambition and character of the new spaces. A pre-planning meeting with the Council would help to ensure that we were all working towards something which would be permissible in planning terms. It would be helpful for us to progress the designs further to reach RIBA Stage 2 – Concept Design and use this information to start a conversation with the planners. A further role that the architect would carry out at this next stage would be informally approaching local crafts, trades and builders who might be interested in being involved in the project. Reaching out feelers in this can really help to inform the design process as it develops, inform build-ability and gain an accurate picture of costs.

Once the project has been progressed to RIBA Stage 2 – Concept Design, and we had feedback from planners, then there would be sufficient information to consider appointing a Quantity Surveyor to produce a Cost Plan for the works to create an accurate picture of the funding that would be required. With this work completed, you would have an increased certainty of the design outcome, planning acceptability and costs, and would be in a strong place to apply for funding to progress the project to the next stage.

# APPENDIX

## QUESTIONNAIRE FEEDBACK

*The feedback from students and tutors to the questionnaire is included in full below. For the ease of presentation, responses are grouped under the question they respond to.*

### 1. 'WHAT FIVE WORDS DO YOU ASSOCIATE WITH MONIACK MHOR?'

Creativity, kindness, Scottishness, food and escape!  
cold, old, library, convivial, books  
Space freedom creativity peace cooperation  
Poetry, peace, space, community, mentorship  
Interesting people, learning new things, nice food, wonderful view, new ideas  
inspiration, wild, community, friendly, creative  
Remote, poor accessibility, inspiring, beautiful.  
Focus, stillness, companionship, inspiration, natural living  
Safe, inspiring, noisy, quiet, home  
Open, fresh, warm, comfortable and starry  
Creative, welcoming, friendship, work, joy  
Poetry, View, Peace, Heart, Creativity  
Writing, Calm  
peaceful - landscape - homely - inspiring - friendly  
Nature, Community, Sanctuary, Rainbows, Friends.  
Inspiration, friends, peace, hard work, hungry  
Friendly safe homely peaceful fun  
Unique inspiring welcoming literary nurturing  
Relaxing, energising, supportive, creative, productive  
concentration awareness stimulation language landscape  
Calm, idyllic, nurturing, rural, escape  
Peace creativity fun friends Scotland  
Escape Nurture Pause Connect Create  
Energising, inspiring, homely, uplifting, nurturing.  
Supportive, authentic, welcoming, secure, enriching  
Peaceful. Magical. View. Joy. Home.

### 2. 'WHY DO YOU COME TO MONIACK MHOR?'

- To write and escape from my own environment!
- to get writing stimulation, feedback, inspiration
- Haven't been yet, but hope to do so!
- Guidance from expert mentors, being part of a community of writers for a week, welcoming and helpful staff, peaceful surroundings, the rooms provide a necessary simple (monastic, in the best sense) space to focus on writing, the countryside provides inspiration, fantastic food.
- To improve my writing and meet other writers
- to get some inspiration and develop skills, make progress with my writing, meet like minded people and interesting tutors, and to enjoy the landscape
- I have been twice on tutored writing courses. A one day and a week course.
- To give myself time, space and permission to write without distractions
- It feels like my writing home, I would stop for good if I could
- It was recommended to me by someone who had been there
- For writing, input, thinking, friendship, recharging, beauty, retreat. To start and finish things made of words.



- For that special feeling of being in a place where my creativity is nourished by other people seeking the same
- For the course / tutors - and because it's in Scotland.
- I love where it is, the team make it so easy to be there, meeting other people who live and breath words is a joy and inspiring.
- To try inspire my writing
- Safe space to reset and learn
- Superb teaching in a fabulous place. Chance to get to know and work with other writers and improve my skills and get some work done.
- To get away from life and work and focus on my writing.
- To work on writing skills, in particular poetry
- Because it's a magic place where I can do far more focused work than anywhere else
- To reunite with awesome writing people: staff & friends. Or to find some peace.
- Fantastic tuition from professional poets, a week to get away and just write, connection and conversation with like minded people
- To get space and time to think and create. To get quiet away from the business of day to day life. To connect with the creativity within me.
- My experience was always as the leader of a group of young people. Moniack Mhor always seemed to work its magic.
- For the mental headspace and supportive people to help me write. And sitting by a roaring fire in the winter.

### 3. "WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF MONIACK MHOR / WHAT WORKS WELL?"

- The other Writers!
- library
- I like it as it is. The group sizes for the courses are just right, not too big, not too small. The rooms are ideally sized and simple, nothing to distract me from writing. The long dining table brings everyone together like a family to eat and talk.
- Hobbit house for get-togethers
- I think the format for meals works well, getting our own breakfast, being served lunch and cooking together once in the week, also being able to buy wine easily! I also think the schedule works well (I've been on two tutored retreats so not sure if it is the same each time) the last time I had my own room which worked very well. Loved the outdoor desks and chairs the first time I went - to be used when the weather was fine. Having the view over the hills from the bedroom is a favourite part.
- I think the hobbit house and the lounge.
- Communal dining alongside solitary spaces for writing
- "Workshops, working together, cooking together, the environment is stunning, the hobbit house is a lovely place to be, the staff are absolutely brilliant  
And thank you for my gluten free"
- The main bit for me is being able to work with the excellent tutors. But I remember one night looking up and seeing the most incredible starry night sky I had ever seen
- In terms of physical space: kitchen- well equipped and spacious, dining/living area- nice flow from kitchen, Hobbit house good as alternative collective space, garden- lovely and evolving, good windows and views in every room. Intimate, informal and warm atmosphere - essential to keep.
- The living area, hobbit house, shared kitchen
- The writing workshops themselves. The format of the days. Access to amazing country walks. The simplicity of the bedrooms. The fireplace in the lounge.
- Sitting by the fire after dinner or looking from the round house out across the Glen.
- Sense of being at home yet inspired
- Kitchen
- The setting and the Hobbit House.
- I do love the en-suite option. The nearby walks are also great. That most meals are catered for is also a big plus.
- Setting
- Love the hobbit house, the bedrooms, the communal dining area and living room, the surrounding area and walks
- Everything. The light, the cooking together, the lunch outside. The staff, the programming, the beautiful gardens.

- The structure of the days - and weeks. The calibre of tutors. The rural location.
- The natural surroundings, walks and wildlife. The communal aspects of staying there and the conversations are very good for sparking ideas. It's a very supportive environment. Good connections can be made.
- It's four years since I've been, but the place managed to avoid anything pretentious, and made all (creative) aspirations possible. It was inclusive in the best possible sense.
- The main lounge and the hobbit house are both amazing spaces to hang out.

#### 4. 'WHAT IS YOUR LEAST FAVOURITE PART OF MONIACK MHOR / DOESN'T WORK SO WELL?'

- The lack of sound insulation
- shared bathrooms, garden is very open--no secret spaces.
- Lack of single bedrooms
- No complaints.
- Sharing bathrooms
- the first time it was a bit challenging sharing a room as there was only one writing desk and it was small. I need to go to the loo in the night and sometimes that was a bit challenging as they are not en suite, but fine if nearby. Also when wet, the area outside can be very slippery - as an older woman I did find that a challenge as almost went flying a few times.
- The toilets, showers and bedrooms.
- Not enough break out spaces for semi-private chats and discussions.
- "Floors are uneven, shower by my usual single room on the ground floor has a step up to it which is pretty dodgy for me. Wet room is a bit cavernous for me (possibly slippery when wet), a bit of a walk from my room which increases balance issues and I don't tend to use it. The rest is noise problems because of the hyperacusis and Ménière's - I look forward to testing out my new AirPods pro 2's. It would be nice to join in the conversation and not have to eat my dinner alone in the kitchen - it is a bit isolating. When the reader comes in on the Wednesday it would be nice if they are introduced to everyone when they come rather than at dinner. I usually have to work it out for myself who they are as I'm not able to join the conversation and I usually eat dinner in the kitchen anyway, so that can be a bit awkward."
- Bathrooms- not great! Noise carries in building. Some bedrooms much better than others- and some too small to comfortably work and sleep in- especially on retreats when little group time. Steep stairs when carrying mugs of tea. It is not good for people with disabilities.
- Having to share a bathroom, and some of the sound-proofing between bedrooms. Poor access to toilets downstairs for people using wheel chairs.
- I honestly can't think of anything.
- Not a fan of sharing a bathroom!
- Food. I'm not fussy eater but on last visit there were days with no breakfasts, no bread at lunch and just very sparse mainly veggie dinners.
- Where printer is
- I have mobility issues and eating issues so the kitchen was very challenging. Ditto dining and teaching space.
- The chairs aren't the best for sitting for long periods of time. Also the length of time courses run for is too short. If you arrive on Monday - sometimes early evening or late afternoon (because of the taxi situation) and leave Saturday morning, that's really only 4 days of writing time.
- Access to public transport
- The downstairs disabled bathroom next to the dining hall needs an update and the flush is loud so if anyone uses it when it's dinner it's quite exposing for them. The back bedroom on the ground floor also doesn't have a great view - right next to the bins
- The seating in the hobbit house: it's so uncomfortable. And taking the two-seater sofa in there made the main sitting room uncomfortable too. :)
- Shared rooms and bathrooms
- Ideally all rooms would be en-suite.
- The showers (but again, I may be out of date...!)
- The shared bathrooms aren't great and there aren't quite enough breakout type spaces for the tutored courses.

#### 5. 'WHAT NEW THINGS / SPACES WOULD YOU LOVE TO SEE AT MONIACK MHOR?'

- A quiet space neurodivergent and other diverse writers to sleep in.

- libraries, study/reading/writing areas
- More single study bedrooms
- If it aint broke, don't fix it. It has a cosy kind of magic about it I'd be worried new spaces would dilute the sense of community.
- More en-suite shower rooms; a quiet room for writing and maybe to hold workshops rather than in the dining/living area at present
- I think more single accessible en suite rooms would be good - all with views over the landscape. Also, I have a motorhome - it would be great to have a parking area with electric hook up for motorhomes and camper vans and reduced rates - this would enable me to participate more often if it was located within easy access of the centre. Also I live alone and have a dog - would love to be able to bring her. I think many people would find it helpful to have at least some of the rooms dog friendly and even an enclosed area where they could run - this would be my ideal, so just putting it out there! Or a small boarding kennel included in the site to look after dogs during the daytime...
- "I don't see how a lot of enhancements can be carried out inside the building. For the older end (myself) there needs to be more ensuite rooms, certainly more grab rails, level access in shared areas like paths and the car park and in the shared bathrooms. When I came on my residential week there was a partially sighted participant whom I know struggled with the bathroom facilities, not being able to see where he'd placed things etc., I am also poor sighted without glasses and lens, neither of which I can use to get in and out of a shower so, its quite treacherous. I think it might be cheaper in the long run to get a 'kit' development with ensuite rooms and site it near the existing buildings rather than damaging those in any way."
- Another Hobbit house or similar
- En suite, noise dampening if that's possible. Wheelchair access for larger wheel chairs. Availability of a bsl interpreter so deaf writers can come and feel included, more ground floor accommodation. Oh and if you could bring the library downstairs that would be nice. I've been 3 times and never had a chance to browse. Hobbit house the sequel? Room for a carer
- Better bathrooms and showers please- or even en suite throughout (know that is a big ask!!! Another working space- with a table...? Any possibility of reorganising and reimagining of bedrooms- one or two are just too small/not enough light and do twin rooms work? More seating areas with tables outside. How about an outside sheltered space for writing- a writing lean to? More attention to people needs re disability (know a visually impaired poet who would find it too difficult to come as currently). Places for small group work. There is space to build something outside to help with any of the above... The outside better connected to the inside in terms of functions would be great, or indeed something built onto outside of main building with big windows...
- I wouldn't want the place to change in its essence or to get bigger, but more en-suites would be good if it could be done without major revamping, and also better access to downstairs toilets
- Would love to see a sauna, steam and jacuzzi on site. For me this is a perfect accompaniment for a day of writing and a way to recharge and share experiences and chats with others in a new space. I also think it's a great way to get new ideas for things to write! Plot problems are seldom solved at the desk!
- Hard to come up with anything... I like it just the way it is and I think it would be a shame to prink it up in any way. Does it need to be expanded? Does it need to be improved? To me, 16 people (I think your maximum) is the most I'd want in a writing group. Bigger groups easily lose the intimacy and cohesion of the group dynamic in my experience.
- Would love to have a functional kind of outdoor working/tutoring space that could be used in the warmer months.
- None; Zip; Nada; Rien; Zilch
- "Love decor in rooms but space with proper computer desk/chairs would help. Ensuite rooms though granted its difficult."
- "Office space for guests for printing. Accessibility into hobbit house"
- A dedicated teaching space that works better for people with disabilities. I have hearing issues too. Also improved kitchen and dining space.
- Arrive Sunday night and leave Saturday morning. Spaces with lots of natural light. Proper desk spaces for writing. More en-suite bathrooms.
- Garden pods, retreat spaces.
- Love Moniack and wouldn't want to see anything changed drastically, but perhaps a specific communal writing area with desks that isn't the hobbit house (cos, wifi free space is good).
- A compost loo in the hobbit house (& new seating).

- A few more writing nooks and crannies for the afternoons. More single room and ensuite options. Enough comfy chair options in the hobbit house.
- All rooms en-suite.
- I loved the 'new' spaces - the Hobbit House and the amphitheatre - that choice of view was so clever in terms of giving writers new perspectives/camera angles for their writing.
- More public spaces so that people can spread out or be together while working and don't have to spend all day in their rooms. Another larger space / hall (perhaps similar to the barn at Arvon's lumb bank) would be useful for readings or other events outside the residential courses.

#### 6. 'HOW WOULD THESE NEW THINGS/SPACES ENHANCE OUR SUPPORT FOR WRITERS OR EXTEND OUR WRITER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME?'

- You'd for diverse writers and encourage more to return.
- writers need comfy chairs and quiet spaces and secret gardens
- See above
- I don't think new things/spaces would be an advantage. It would be better to retain and maintain what is already there.
- More ensuite would make a more comfortable stay and students would be able to use the ensuite whenever they liked - not fit in with others. A quiet room would mean that when a workshop, interview was going on there or perhaps or students writing, the dining/sitting room would be available for another activity. I would not like to see any more students than at present on the courses.
- Even with the bursary, it is a real luxury to participate and having some camping/motorhome spaces would enable people with lower incomes to attend more often. As an older woman, I have been surprised at how the cost of living has impacted me and I lost work during the pandemic - its frustrating to have to limit my participation...
- I think it may encourage more writers to come to Moniack. It was a wonderful experience but I wouldn't repeat it owing to the lack of facilities and the shared cooking programme. People may be willing to pay a bit more for better accommodation and maybe if they were given the opportunity to stay longer.
- As above. More opportunity to have meaningful interaction with tutors and fellow writers
- "Inclusivity is the thing, you've been absolutely brilliant with me and I'll probably never be able to eat with everyone else although I'm going to try my AirPods next time, but I'm aware that every time I've been I'm the only one with a stick, or any obvious mobility issues, which is isolating in itself so I'm hoping that more disabled/chronically sick writers feel like they can come in the future. I love the bring the children retreats and all the work you do for care experienced writers (I worked for years at cyps in Co Durham so I know how talented they are given half a chance)."
- "Making space more disabled-friendly (and not just wheelchair) would support more inclusivity and diversity of those attending. Participants would find their creativity enhanced and supported with better writing spaces in bedrooms or elsewhere. More collaborative/opportunities could potentially result if there was more small group work space. Outside writing spaces would enhance environmental connectedness."
- There's a danger of MM over-extending itself, I feel. Please don't lose the present atmosphere/ethos of being a bit on the wild side, as this does more for creativity than any sleek, wide-reaching programming, though access for disabled people has to be enhanced, for sure.
- "In reality writers mostly get their ideas anywhere EXCEPT at their desk! They get them when taking walks, or doing things that are calming like taking saunas, or relaxing in the Jacuzzi. This is a very serious suggestion. I think it would greatly enhance the experience. These are also far more reasonable than you may think. You could even partially power them with a solar array. And being able to talk about them in the marketing materials would make the venue a far more attractive proposition to potential attendees. Writers want a calm, enjoyable experience. This would certainly aid in that; and I also suspect it would solve quite a few niggly plot problems!"
- Think it could bring visitors even closer to the landscape & nature that surrounds Moniack.
- This whole project (especially this formulaic questionnaire) reeks of professional consultants and, IMHO, runs entirely counter to the original spirit of the place, which is funky, vaguely disorganised, human, interactive and , as a result, fertile ground for creativity. You seem to have let the pencil-necks in. Beware of throwing the creative baby out with your cosily steamy bathwater.
- Make it easier to be productive

- Make it more inclusive
- Take away worry for writers like me so that I fully immerse in the week. Widen access.
- I think it just expands the possibilities for productivity and creativity. Makes everything easier for the writers and gives them every opportunity to focus.
- Solitude is a necessary experience at some phases of writing for many of us
- A communal writing space would make collaboration and different types of learning more accessible
- Just us old cranky ones with the bad backs.
- More people could attend. Afternoons could be more productive when spaces are being used for tutorials.
- Maybe have a few more bedrooms to increase capacity?
- Of course, you need to keep developing and moving forward, but writing is a craft that needs very little in the way of material support. Somewhere comfortable, with opportunities for privacy and conviviality, peace and quiet, good healthy food, kind and thoughtful staff... I actually love it as I remember it. The simplicity, the innate inclusivity, was its great charm, and from all I hear that continues to be the case.
- I think this would add flexibility to how people use the building.