



Typology Shed

From first building to tool storage
to site of escape from the everyday,
the shed continues to evolve, venturing
beyond the walls of the domestic garden,
writes *Tom Wilkinson*

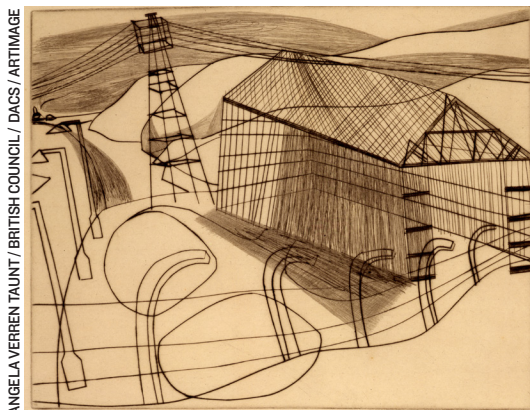




SURENDRA

(Opening spread) Cornelia Parker's shed, exploded at her behest by the Army – annihilated sanctuary (Clockwise from above) built to withstand earthquakes and fires, kura storehouses are dotted around Japan; Ben

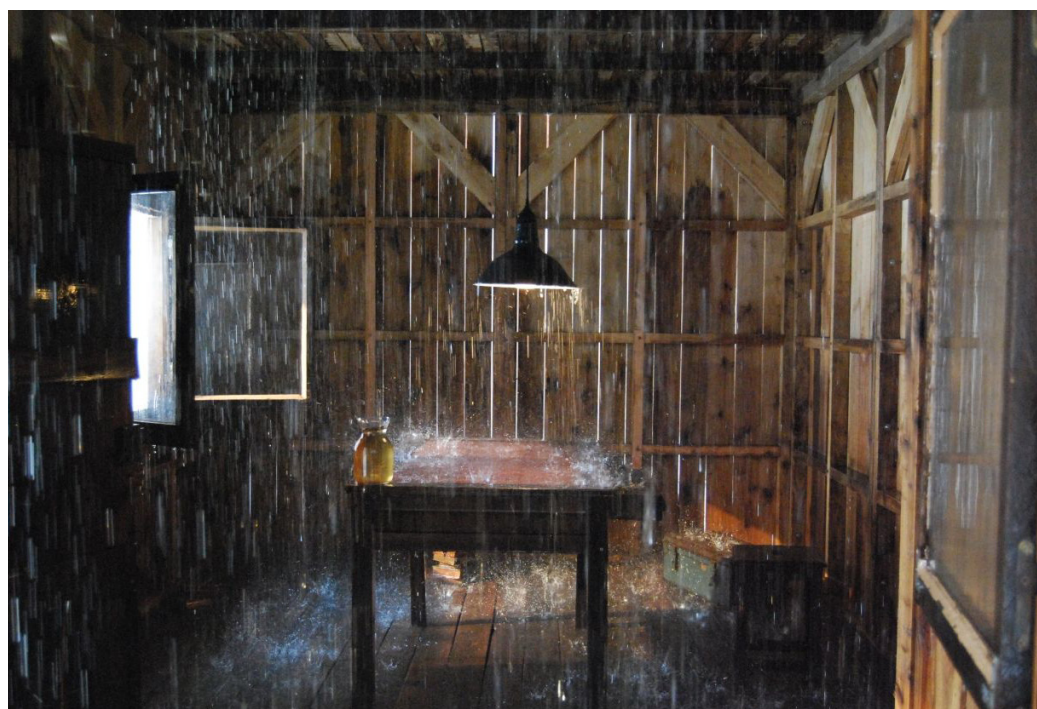
Nicholson's 1948 ICI Shed; Hill House tool shed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh; *Le Refuge* by Stéphane Thidet, 2014, where it rains inside; John Wilkes' *Primitive Huts, or the Origin of Architecture*, 1797



ANGELA VERREN TAUNT / BRITISH COUNCIL / DACS / ARTIMAGE



TIM BENTON / RIBA COLLECTIONS



Those of us fortunate enough to have private gardens need only look from our back doors to see the essence and the origin of all architecture: the shed. For these elemental structures – four walls and a roof, foundations optional – are the domestic iteration of the so-called primitive hut. They are iterated elsewhere too, at the British seaside, in allotments, Russian *dachas*, German *Schrebergärten*, the treehouse and the hermitage.

The basic building clearly has a wide and enduring appeal, ensnaring holidaymakers, part-time Rousseauians and children alike. Artists and writers are also fond of tinkering in the shed, among them Woolf, Mahler, Le Corbusier, Heidegger and, of course, Thoreau, the ur-sheddie. Nor are

architectural historians immune to its charms: ever since we started looking back, we've imagined building beginning so.

Where does the shed begin, though? A 15th-century dictionary provides an early sighting: 'Schudde, hovel, or swyne kote, or howse of sympyl hyllynge to kepe yn beestys'. The shed or hovel is a house fit for beasts, and millions of spiders would agree. But these days the shed is more likely to be home to the machinery that replaced domestic livestock than its smelly antecedents, especially the bike and the lawnmower, as well as half-used tins of paint, boxes of rusty nails, and inquisitive tendrils of ivy. The shed, the latter announce, is a structure closer to nature than our houses are, or at least pretend to be. The lingering aroma of manure lends an

Arcadian top-note to the creosote.

Virgil has the shepherd Corydon offer the aloof Alexis 'Some lowly cot in the rough fields', and ever since the rustic shelter has had a romantic angle. Not all sheds are created equal, however. The poet JH Prynne makes the fine distinction that the bucolic hut is a relative newcomer to the English language, arriving in the 17th century to supplant the hovel (which, as we saw above, was equivalent to the shed). The hovel, Prynne points out, was emphatically unromantic, a shelter for the homeless. Lear ends up in one, with the storm outside and the disintegration of his language echoing on macro- and microcosmic scales the enormity of this dislocation.

For Prynne, the hut is 'not a dwelling and not set up for family life, but estranged from



(Left) a family next to an arbour in their allotment garden in 1919 Berlin
(Right) George Bernard Shaw's rotating Writing Hut in Hertfordshire afforded solitude and followed the sun throughout the day



KEYSTONE PRESS / ALAMY

'There is something about the simplicity of the shed that seems to facilitate (or at least metaphorise) a distillation of ideas'



(Left) Alexander Brodsky's recycled window-frame Pavilion for Vodka Ceremonies,

ArtKlyazma, 2003
(Below) Homer's tool shed in The Simpsons



it and its domestic values', which explains much of its appeal. An escape from home, if only to the bottom of the garden, is essential to many intellectual labourers. Furthermore, there is something about the simplicity of the shed that seems to facilitate (or at least metaphorise) a distillation of ideas. However, turning to Heidegger's famous Black Forest cabin, Prynne points out that the type 'is confederate with deep ethical problematics, and not somehow a purifying solution to them'. The urge to simplify sometimes bypasses essentials – the Gordian knot can bleed. In the 1930s Heidegger hosted Nazi meetings at what Thomas Bernhard called 'that lie of a log cabin'.

What are the implications of this dichotomous hut for the writing of architectural history, of which it is the

supposed source? Source of history and historiography, in fact. Vitruvius contends that building began this way: following the discovery of fire (he was a fan of Lucretius's theories regarding the origin of human society), humans came together as communities, whereupon we started making houses and improving them in a spirit of friendly competition. Intriguingly there was no one ur-hut for Vitruvius: there were burrows, shelters of leaves, and wattle and daub inspired by the work of swallows. He goes on: 'we can see for ourselves that these practices developed from the origins which I have written about because to this day buildings are constructed of these materials in foreign countries'.

This idyllic picture is somewhat undermined by the context in which

Vitruvius encountered these other architectures: he was a military engineer working at the empire's frontiers, a strange place in which to surmise that building began with peaceful rivalry. Indeed, it is very likely that the huts Vitruvius observed were crushed by the Roman war machine of which he was a cog.

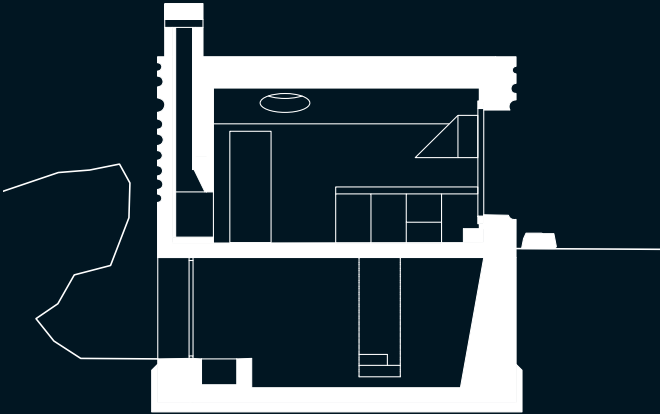
This secret origin of architecture in colonial warfare is echoed in a much later account of the first building. Semper claimed that the four essential elements of architecture – the hearth, the foundational mound, the frame, and its cladding – were present in the earliest structures, the avatar of which he identified at the *Great Exhibition* during his London exile. The Caribbean hut he found sheltering in the Crystal Palace provided the evidence for his

Refuge Lieptgas,
 Flims, Switzerland
 Georg Nickisch
 and Selina Walder
 2012

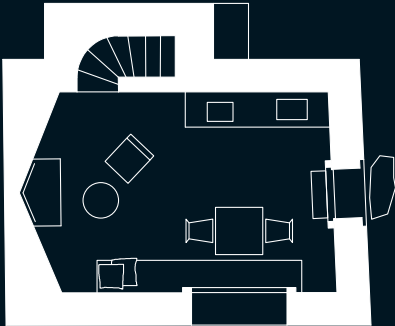


BOTH IMAGES: GAUDENZ DANUSER

The Swiss mountain hut, refuge of cowherds, rebellious peasants and, latterly, hikers and skiers, has a romantic pedigree. No wonder that Rousseau and Le Corbusier are both sons of this alpine nation. Today, however, the architecture of Switzerland is more readily associated with fair-faced concrete structures of a mind-boggling finish than with rude timber sheds perched on high pastures. This ossified version of the latter type brings these elements together, resulting in something like a Rachel Whiteread monument to the twin national traditions of rustic idyll and Calvinist luxury. In fact, this holiday home stands on the site of an abandoned wooden farming shelter, indeed it grows out of it: the old building's timber was recycled for its formwork. Its relative expansiveness is unobtrusive thanks to its submerged lower portion, containing a bedroom and bathroom; the chthonic atmosphere of this space is heightened by the view out onto the boulders that enclose the lightwell.



section AA



ground floor



lower ground floor plan



(Clockwise from right) Jill Randall's *Sheds* series explores notions of territory and ownership, celebrating the ad hoc; the Smithsons' *Patio and Pavilion*, exhibited in 1956

at Whitechapel Gallery's *This is Tomorrow*; Rachel Whiteread's 2012, *Detached 1*, concrete and steel cast of a garden shed, draws on the everyday, rendering it somewhat disconcerting

ARTWORK BY RACHEL WHITEREAD. PHOTO: MIKE BRUCE. COURTESY GAGOSIAN



DAVE BENNETT



JOHN MALTBY / RIBA COLLECTIONS

‘The presence of the Caribbean hut at the *Great Exhibition* was made possible by expansionary warfare, resulting in indigenous Caribbeans being eradicated by the British’

new approach to origins, which nevertheless did not depart from the venerable tradition of imperialistic epistemology – the presence of this hut at the centre of the world’s largest empire was made possible by expansionary warfare, after all, and the indigenous Caribbeans had been eradicated by the British. The birth of architecture, in both of these cases, meant the destruction of someone else’s architecture.

This colonial shadow-hut is first outlined in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, where Kurtz is discovered in his shack surrounded by human heads on stakes. The latter make a ghastly mockery of Vitruvius’s idea that the members of Classical architecture were inspired by the human figure. These bloody finials also reveal a growing self-consciousness on the part of colonialism’s

protagonists, and once again this originary moment takes place in the primitive structure. Can the shed disclose as well as conceal the violence at the origin of architecture?

Primitivity has been cultivated by designers in many ways, with equally various intentions. The frontispiece of Laugier’s famous 1753 treatise shows the hut literally growing out of the ground: like Vitruvius’s origin myth this is a way of making architecture look natural, and we might perceive a similar genealogy in the idealised garden shed. Returning to untainted antiquity is part of the hut’s allure, but rather than a manifestation of a continuous tradition this should be understood as a critique of the present, and not always a reactionary one. The shed leads us down the

garden path, away from the over-civilised house, but the Bauhaus’s Sommerfeld House in Berlin of 1922 leaned the other way; more ambiguous are exhortations to learn from ‘informality’ from anarchists like John Turner or liberals like Alejandro Aravena, and also the more gentrified example of HKPA’s Brutalist common room at Downing College, Cambridge, recently described as primitivising by architectural historian Otto Saumarez Smith. Either way, simplicity is never as simple as it seems.

Few architects have approached the hut with the criticality of Alison and Peter Smithson who, with Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson, exhibited a strange installation titled *Patio and Pavilion* at the Whitechapel Gallery show *This is Tomorrow* in 1956. The structure at the centre of their

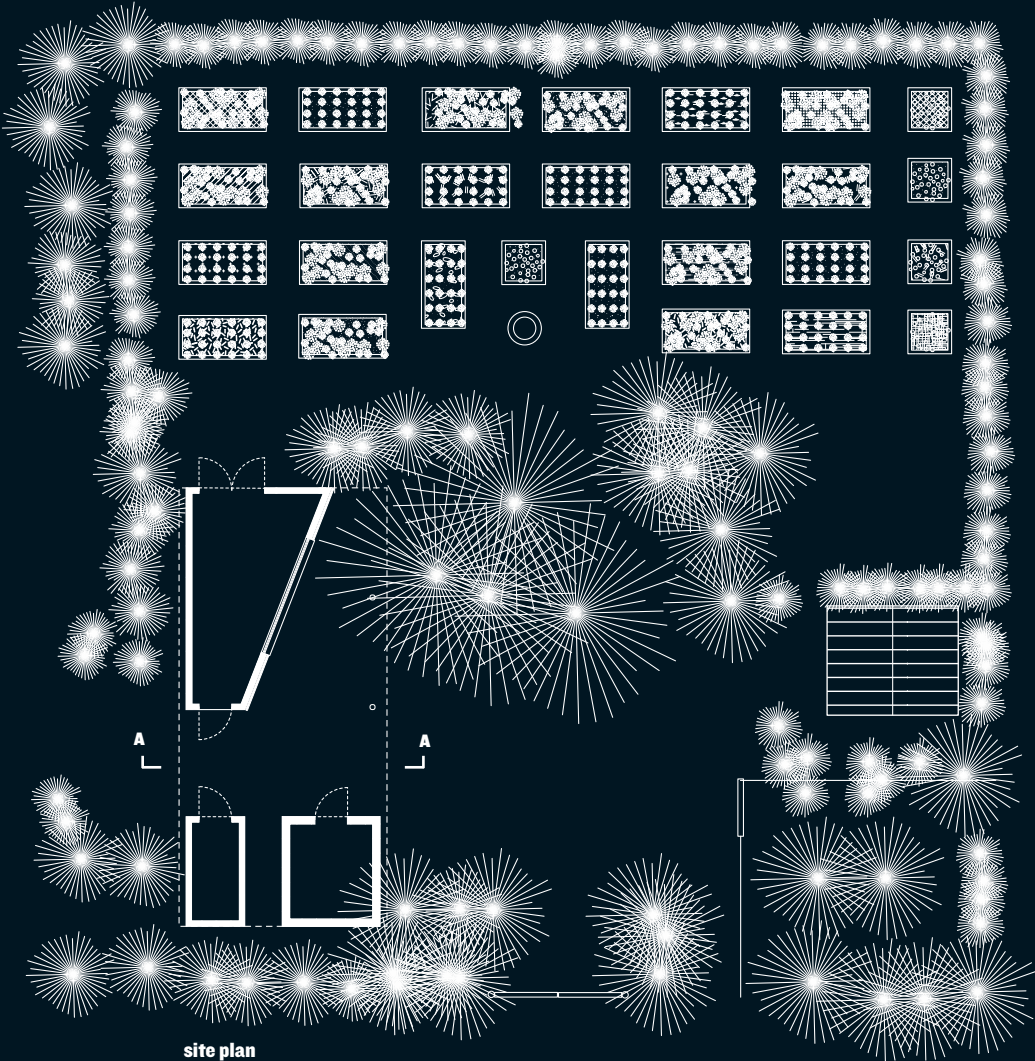
Testbeds, Queens,
New York City, USA
New Affiliates
Ongoing



Architecture's environmental impact is of growing concern. In response to carbon-intensive materials and wasteful demolitions, a turn to adaptive reuse is advocated, but this generally focuses on the modification of extant buildings. What, however, of the components discarded by architects along the way to the finished product? This NYC-based project proposes repurposing mocked-up building elements in community gardens across the five boroughs. Their first project will employ cast concrete facade panels from an apartment building in Tribeca as the wall of a facility in a community garden in the farthest reaches of Queens, thereby adding an element, however modest, of architectural redistribution to the programme: the fragments thrown off by the whirlwind of development rampaging through Manhattan can be used to enrich the lives of those left in its wake.



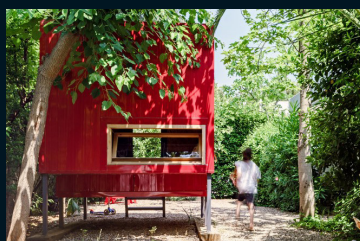
section AA



site plan



**Children's garden shed,
Athens, Greece
Sotiris Hainis and
Vana Krimnioti
2017**

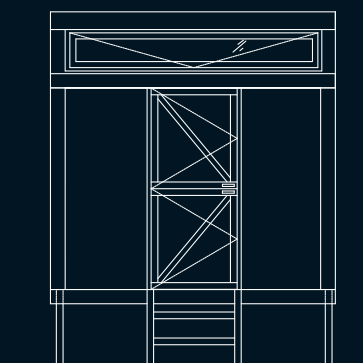


BOTH IMAGES: GEORGE MESSARTAKIS

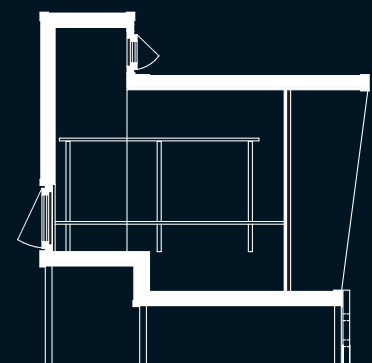
Children seem to have a natural affinity for simple structures, from clothes-horses covered by towels to leaf-hidden treehouses. Like primitivising myths, and stories of the hut's growth out of the ground à la Laugier, this is a questionable assumption, since it functions to naturalise architecture. In fact, the discipline is nothing of the sort. In any case, kids do love huts, and here's a nice one: painted in bold primary colours, with a hint of the Bauhaus to it, and standing on two runners like a sledge, it raises its small occupants above the ground, affording a sense of escape. The tantalising possibility of retreat from the real world lingers in the grown-up shed, and, we might speculate, in architects' attention to the primitive building.



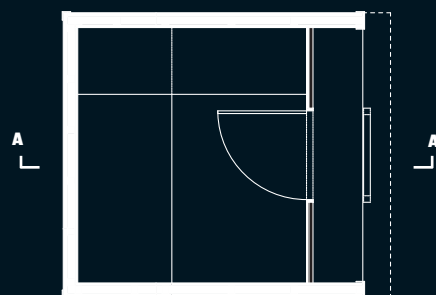
back elevation



front elevation



section AA



floor plan





ROY SHAKESPEARE / LOOP IMAGES

(Clockwise from left)
Dylan Thomas's writing
shed perched uphill of
his boat house in
Carmarthenshire; waiting
and wanting, the humble
floating fish trap floats
patiently, adrift at sea;

The Shed is not always
a shed: Diller Scofidio +
Renfro's shed is more
ostentatious than
understated, with
a movable roof providing
shelter for arts
and culture



EPA / INDOONESIAN CONSULATE GENERAL OSAKA



DAVID DEE' DELGADO / BLOOMBERG / GETTY

'Most American houses are
essentially sheds, with the
DNA of the balloon-framed
McMansion descended from
colonisers' shacks'

contribution resembled a garden shed after the bomb, a stark contrast to the early Pop Art surrounding it, which revelled in the dawning consumerism of the postwar years. Here, on the other hand, there was a look back to the Blitz and also forward to the plausible apocalypse of the near future. The shed's inhabitant was a collaged head by Henderson, its flayed, burnt and ossified form composed of fragments of the industrial culture celebrated outside the structure – as if a new beginning was already being imagined among the ruins of the future. The hut's oscillating historical position comes to the fore.

Today, Prynne points out, 'the hut configuration is everywhere, in temporary prisons and internment camps and militarised frontier posts'. We might add the

garden variety to this list: in London, slums are mushrooming in the form of so-called beds-in-sheds. But it is also the pinnacle of aspiration for the most privileged people on earth. Most American houses, however grand, are essentially sheds, with the DNA of the balloon-framed McMansion descended from the colonial settler's shack. Some more or less refined examples have been produced along the way – Wright designed some interesting flat-pack houses in 1916, for instance – but aesthetics are rather beside the point here. In recent years, this pioneer spirit, already ideologically dubious, has become more clearly questionable on a material level. As Kate Wagner puts it, 'Because we started treating our houses as disposable during the mortgage booms of the 1980s, '90s and 2000s, we ended up with

houses built to last not even 25 years'.

The master's tools will not dismantle the master's house, but it may fall down of its own accord – if the climate change it engenders doesn't burn it down first.

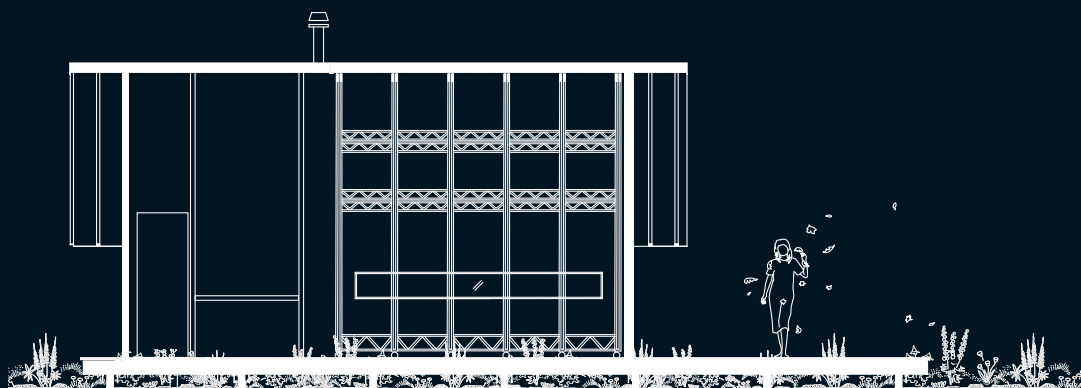
By way of a postscript, let's return to one of our many beginnings, to Vitruvius, and to the uneasy dialectic between nature and the shed. Earlier I mentioned that his origin story was indebted to Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*. This narrative is also referenced by Piero di Cosimo's mysterious painting of a forest fire, but Piero seemingly envisages the circularity with which we are now confronted: the blaze and the hut, which according to Vitruvius the former inspired, are pictured in close proximity, but here the beginning is also the end, as the hut and its fleeing inhabitants are menaced by the flames.

**Cabin ANNA,
the Netherlands
Caspar Schols
2020**

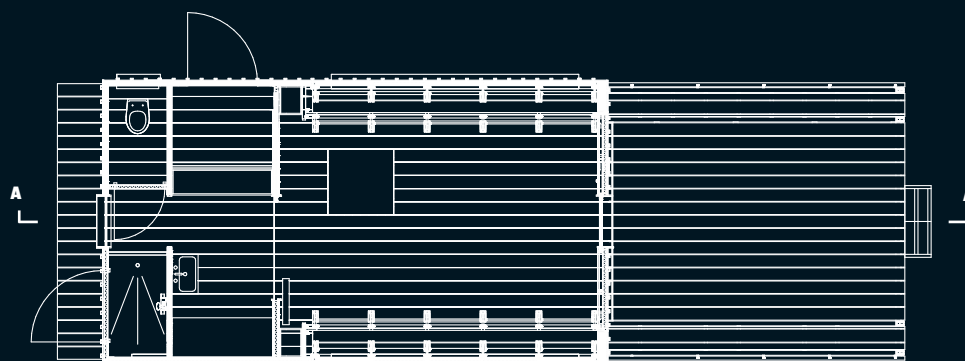
BOTH IMAGES: JORRIT T HOEN & TONU TUNNEL



The shed sometimes seems to grow out of the ground, but that doesn't mean it has to be rooted in place (in fact, as Heidegger's hut shows, there's something rather dubious about this notion). Thanks to their lightweight construction, there's no reason that huts shouldn't move. They don't have to grow chicken legs and walk to do so, either, unlike the legendary hut of Baba Yaga: the writing hut of George Bernard Shaw, for instance, pivoted on its base, allowing him to rotate it to face the sun. And since they are demountable, sheds can be packed up and taken with us, as were Brunel's prefabricated hospital huts for the Crimean War. In the example illustrated here, the hut expands and contracts according to its inhabitant's needs and whims (and those of the weather): the timber shell runs on tracks and can be moved back and forth to expose the inner, glazed volume. The latter can also be pulled apart to open the podium to the elements. Initially drawn and built for his parents' garden, Schols then repurposed his design to propose a flat-pack, affordable cabin for permanent inhabitation, with prototypes for both living and working units – called ANNA Stay and ANNA Meet respectively.



ANNA Stay section AA



ANNA Stay floor plan

