



Low's 8,000sq ft home makes the most of its woodland views

Sara Low has used a new planning rule to build a stunning modern country house. **Fay Sweet** pays a visit

**I**F YOU go down to the woods today ... what could be more of a surprise than encountering one of Britain's smartest new country houses? Close to the Suffolk coast at Darsham, and surrounded by woodland, stands this majestic Modernist mansion. Its crisp geometry with flat top and view-hugging windows, has been exquisitely tailored for its owner, Sara Low.

"I'd spent my life in old houses with rattling windows, and had always dreamed of building a modern house," says Low, who is retired from a career in TV and theatre.

She is an enthusiastic host and so the new home, designed by young London practice Paul+O Architects, is conceived as a social place. Visitors are greeted by the double-height entrance hall that leads to an 56ft-long living room. There are seven bedrooms and bathrooms — Low's two sons have four young grandsons between them.

While there is plenty of room for parties, the design can be comfortable for Low on her own. In a more private wing



Sara Low (above) wanted a house that would be comfortable to live in on her own, but which would also be a great venue for parties or for visits by her two sons and four grandchildren. Guests eat in an open-plan dining/kitchen area (left), then relax in the home's soft-long living room (below)

**'I like modern design, but didn't want the place looking like a furniture showroom'**

stands a double-height library/sitting room and her painting studio. Every window frames magnificent views into the woods. For such a large house (8,000sq ft), the scale is handled with great flair.

Before embarking on this adventure, Low lived outside Aldeburgh in a 17th century country house that had been the family home for 25 years. Following the death of her husband, she felt it was time to move on. She had an idea about building on the edge of woodland that she owned.

"Someone from the council came and told me there was absolutely no chance," she recalls. "So I started looking for properties for sale." Then a meeting with architects Paul Acland and Paulo Marto breathed new life into the dream.

"I retold my story and they appeared undaunted," says Low. The key to their optimism was a change, 10 years ago, in a planning law then known as PP27, now as PP37. This allowed modern country houses of "exceptional architectural merit" to be built.

Introduced by Suffolk MP John Gummer, the new planning rule, nicknamed Gummer's Law, has allowed a



Low has mixed favourite traditional furniture pieces with contemporary items, such as the pink Egg chair by Arne Jacobsen, and a yellow Polder Sofa by Hela Jongerius



The house is a composition of cubes and rectangles, with large windows and balconies, all sitting on a flint plinth

# Daring to be different

handful of contemporary homes to be built in country locations where their design is considered an enhancement to their setting.

With hope renewed, Low invited the architects for the weekend. Ideas were hatched and designs emerged. "When they made a cardboard model, everything fell into place. The design has hardly changed since."

The concept is an intriguing 21st century reinvention of the country house. Instead of dominating the landscape, it sits modestly in a clearing, with no fancy pillars or pediments and no ostentatious flourishes. The two-storey structure is composed asymmetrically of a sequence of cubes and rectangles rising from a flint plinth. It is handsome and sculptural. Warm-grey rendered walls are pierced by elegant black-framed windows.

When Acland and Marto visited the woodland, they realised its special qualities. "We were blown away" recalls Marto. "The house relates strongly to the woodland; the main wall follows the line of a long hedge, and the windows frame the views." The site and house were considered as one, and planning approval requires that the woodland be carefully managed for at least 25 years.

## Out with the new

The layout of the house is fully 21st century: it would be unheard of in an 18th century country house, for example, to put the kitchen next to the entrance hall. But here, not only can Low watch guests arrive as she is preparing supper, they also eat at a dining table in the open-plan kitchen/dining room.

Local opposition to the plans was outweighed by support, which included a letter from Gummer: "Your proposed new house is precisely what we had in mind," he said.

However, with building work poised, the project hit a stumbling block: the great crested newt. "They are protected, and had to be relocated. I became a newt wrangler," says Low. For three months she collected newts to move them to new territory. Eventually, the project continued, with Gummer laying the foundation stone. Now, after 18 months, the home is complete, at slightly over its £1.5 million budget.

"I envisaged the interior white, but Paul and Paulo had an idea about colours," says Low. "I wasn't sure, especially about a dark grey-green, but they promised to repaint if I didn't like it." She adds: "We didn't disagree often, but

when we did they were usually right." The floors are equally modest: downstairs has black basalt flagstones; upstairs, double-fumed oak.

The house is energy efficient, with large windows to make the most of the sun's heat and light in the winter, and with super-insulated walls. There are also solar panels and systems for rainwater harvesting and greywater recycling. Furnishing large spaces is a challenge, but what has worked here is the mix of new furniture and artworks alongside older pieces. While a fan of modern design, Low wanted a mix of styles. "I didn't want the place looking like a modern furniture showroom."

Low has taken living in a modern home like a newt to water: "I don't miss the old house one bit," she says. "This place is a huge pleasure — lovely to wake up in, lovely to come home to and wonderful for a party." And the bond between client and architects has grown. Says Acland: "We were invited to spend Christmas. It was wonderful to see the house full of people and working well — as a family home, a country house and a sanctuary."

## A MODERNIST/TRADITIONAL MIX: HOW TO GET THE LOOK

■ Architect for the house and landscaping was Paul+O Architects (020 7604 3818; [www.paul-o-architects.com](http://www.paul-o-architects.com))

■ Kitchen and bedrooms units, designed by Paul+O Architects, were built by Mick Willis Woodworking (020 8965 1939)

■ All new furniture was supplied by Crib 5 (020 7749 9567; [www.crib5.co.uk](http://www.crib5.co.uk))

■ Dining chairs, by Charles and Ray Eames, and the living room Polder Sofa, by Hela Jongerius, both from Vitra ([www.vitra.com](http://www.vitra.com))

■ The pink Egg chair and stool, designed by Arne Jacobsen, from Fritz Hansen ([www.fritz-hansen.com](http://www.fritz-hansen.com))

Each room is given a "picture frame" view with double-glazed windows. The walls are super-insulated

■ Dining table by Kristalla ([www.kristalla.it](http://www.kristalla.it))

■ The chandelier in the kitchen is called Dear Ingo and is designed by Moooi ([www.moooi.nl](http://www.moooi.nl)), while the chandelier in the hall, called Iida Chandelier, is by artist Stuart Haygarth (07970 960 715 or 00 49 30 215 4975; [www.stuarthaygarth.com](http://www.stuarthaygarth.com))

■ The curtains in double-height library are by Holland & Sherry (020 7437 0404; [www.hollandandsherry.com](http://www.hollandandsherry.com))

■ Blinds in kitchen designed by Michael Szell for Christopher Farr Cloth (020 7349 0888; [www.christopherfarrcloth.com](http://www.christopherfarrcloth.com))

■ Basalt flooring throughout is by Stonell Architectural (0800 083 2283; [www.stonellarchitectural.com](http://www.stonellarchitectural.com))

■ Bathroom fittings from the Flaminia range, with Agape taps from Original Bathrooms (020 8940 7554; [www.original-bathrooms.co.uk](http://www.original-bathrooms.co.uk))

■ Light fittings throughout by Iguzzini (0208 646 4141; [www.iguzzini.com](http://www.iguzzini.com))



A "private wing" of the house (left) has a library, sitting room and painting studio

The entrance hall chandelier (right), by artist Stewart Haygarth, is made from brightly coloured plastic shards

Pictures by Edmund Summer

