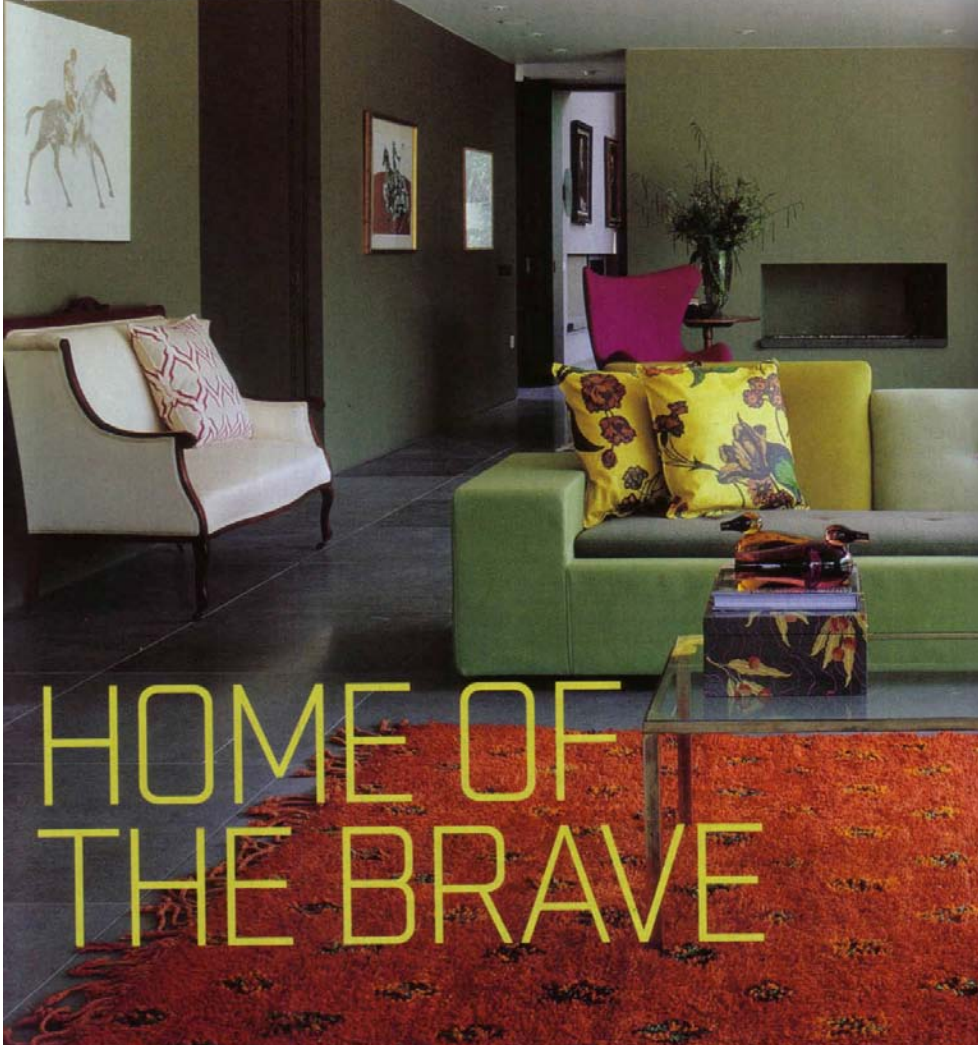


HOME House 3 Wilderness retreat

who Sara Low
what A modern, seven-bedroom country house
where Darsham, Suffolk
how long 14 months to build
budget £1.5m
high point 'Moving in'
low point 'Delays during the final months'
tip 'Be very careful choosing your builder and never believe the time frame they give you. Always add a third again or more'



HOME OF THE BRAVE



WORDS DOMINIC BRADBURY
PHOTOGRAPHY MARK LUSCOMBE-WHYTE

AFTER A LIFETIME IN PERIOD HOMES, SARA LOW TOOK A BOLD STEP INTO CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

To swap a picture book seventeenth-century home for the challenges of building an ultra-modern, eco-friendly house is brave enough. But when the site is also picturesque, and greenfield, and the odds of getting planning permission look difficult to say the least, then such a leap requires more than a little determination, faith and passion.

Sara Low has proved she has such qualities in spades. 'All my life I've lived in period houses,' says Sara, sitting on one of the sculpted terraces, looking out across the woodlands. 'I was in a beautiful house nearby, but with 14 bedrooms it was rather big for one ageing widow. I decided to sell it and because I owned this wood, I wanted to build here. I wanted to build a wonderful, modern house.'

Sara's initial contacts with the local council, Suffolk Coastal, were not encouraging. She was told to save her money, because she would never get permission to build a new house in her woods, just beyond the edge of a small village in Suffolk.

This was the beginning of what became a very long journey. Sara was aware of a planning clause put forward 10 years ago by her local MP, John Gummer. PPG7 allows for one-off new country houses of exceptional architectural merit. The chances were slim, but the sheer fact it was a possibility justified an attempt.

A few weeks later another friend introduced her to architects Paulo Marto and Paul Acland of Paul+O Architects and the three of them set to work. 'They found the precise spot for the house and said "let's have a go at getting planning",' says Sara. 'It's thanks to them and their incredible hard work that we got permission through PPG7. John Gummer got behind it because there wasn't a single PPG7 house in Suffolk and because he loved the design, and Michael Hopkins [one of Britain's leading architects with a home nearby], wrote to the planners.' This, together with further letters to the planners, councillors and to CABE (the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), was enough to sway the decision in Sara's favour.

'We put strong arguments forward to the planning committee and commissioned an historian to do a survey of country houses in Suffolk,' says Paulo Marto. 'Historically, many had been destroyed and very few replaced. Luckily, the planners were very forward thinking - they looked at the proposals in a very intelligent way.' ...

The Hella Jarmann
for Vitroscop
byre.com) matches
the 1970s hues of the
room, contrasting
with the curvy bowl
from Yeast & Honey
(redsaigallery.co.uk)
Wandert is added
with a tribal weave
rug from Larus
(larus.com)

HOME
House 3
 Wilderness retreat



Although positioned in the woods to take advantage of sight lines in the trees, the house can't be seen from nearby roads or by neighbours, it's completely private. Sara's wish list for her home included a double-height library, an open-plan kitchen and dining area and seven bedrooms with six bathrooms. 'I wanted my own bathroom, but also guests to have theirs,' says Sara, who used to work in television and has two sons and four grandchildren. 'We don't have seven bathrooms because we have a nursery beside one of the bedrooms, with a shared shower room, for when the children stay.' Sara and her architects secured planning permission in autumn 2003 but building did not begin until May 2005. One major hold up was an ecological survey which resulted in a colony of newts being relocated. 'I was here every day for six months, helping to move them. I grew to love them but it did delay us rather badly,' says Sara. The house did finally take shape, raised up on a large plinth faced with local knapped flint. Banks of sliding glass doors open up to a series of terraces plus a semi-sheltered swimming pool and balconies. One of the bedrooms has a dramatic shower room partially enclosed by windows that reveal the woodland. Influences range from that of contemporary Portuguese architects Alvaro Siza and Eduardo Souto de Moura through to Modernist masters such as German pioneer Mies van der Rohe. But there are also local references. 'As architects, we like to use traditional building techniques in a contemporary way,' says Marto. 'A lot of the materials follow on from the tradition of the country house and vernacular architecture. We used Suffolk render, local flint, stone for the floors and the spine wall, as well as oak for the floors upstairs.' —

'WE PUT FORWARD STRONG ARGUMENTS TO THE PLANNERS. THEY WERE FORWARD THINKING AND LOOKED AT THE PROPOSALS IN AN INTELLIGENT WAY'



this picture A Moooi light fitting (moooi.nl) puts a modern spin on a traditional chandelier; its utility look complements Sara's Eames DRS chairs (vitra.com) left Arne Jacobsen's Egg chair (scab co.uk) adds colour far left The kitchen was designed by the architects, Paul+O top left An idyllic view of the house

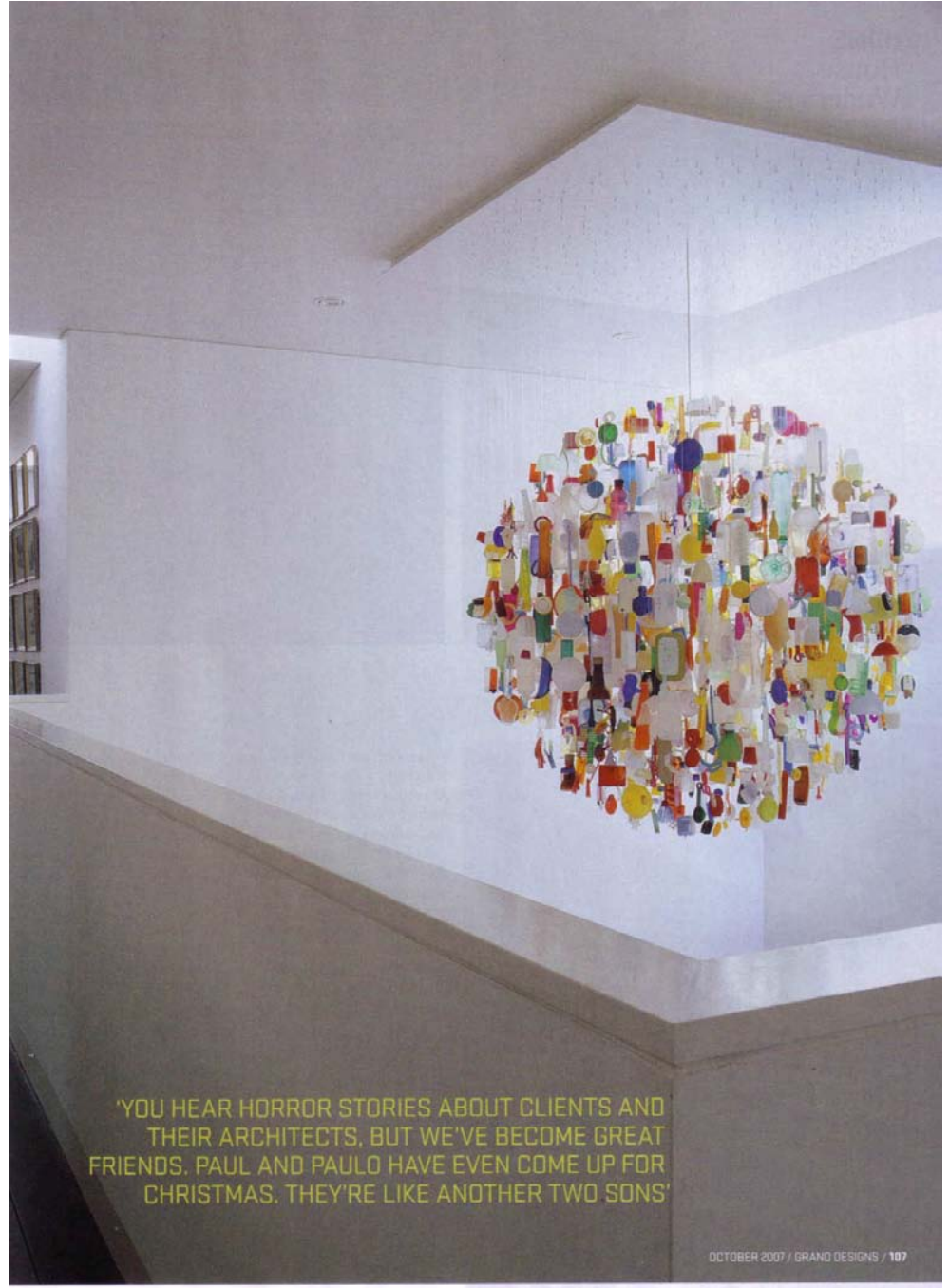
HOME
House 3
Wilderness retreat



left The huge sliding windows blend the living room and garden into one space **below** Sara's dream double-height library features bespoke shelving by her architects **opposite** Stuart Haygarth's striking Tide chandelier above the main hall is made from beach detritus [stuarthaygarth.com]

GREEN LIVING

Sara wanted to make as modest a dent as possible on the environment. There are solar panels on the flat roof which heat the pool and much of the domestic hot water, and there's rainwater harvesting for flushing the toilets and watering plants. 'I'd like to have a borehole and hope to put one in later,' says Sara. 'I'd also like a wind turbine but it'd have to be very tall to stand above the trees, so I doubt I'd get permission.' The house has very high standards of insulation and low-emissivity glass. The sliding glass walls also allow for natural cross ventilation in summer.



'YOU HEAR HORROR STORIES ABOUT CLIENTS AND THEIR ARCHITECTS, BUT WE'VE BECOME GREAT FRIENDS. PAUL AND PAULO HAVE EVEN COME UP FOR CHRISTMAS. THEY'RE LIKE ANOTHER TWO SONS'

HOME
House 3
Wilderness retreat



'EVERYTHING DELIGHTS ME MORE THAN I COULD HAVE IMAGINED. MY BEDROOM IS A JOY, IT'S LIKE WAKING UP IN THE TREES'



Spatially, the house is a voyage of discovery. On the ground floor a dramatic hallway leads to the 50-foot living room and from there to the kitchen/dining area. Then the double-height library, guest bedroom and a painting studio. 'Everything delights me,' says Sara. 'My bedroom is a joy, it's like waking up in the trees.'

As for PPG7, the clause has now been amended to PPS7, and allows for one-off country houses if they reflect the 'the highest standards of contemporary architecture'. This will hopefully mean a smoother passage for occasional gems like Wilderness House.

'Sometimes you hear horror stories about architects and their clients, but for us it's been a great success,' says Sara. 'We've all become great friends. Paul and Paulo have come up for Christmas, for my birthday. They are like another two sons, those boys.' ★

For more information about planning, turn to our self-build guide on p152

A LASTING TRIBUTE

Sadly, Sara passed away in July. On the advice of Paul+D, we decided to feature her home as planned. Here, John Gummer MP talks about his friend 'I remember Sara's bubbling enthusiasm when she came with her plans and asked for my support. Innovative, modern and imaginative, they were the plans of an informed and creative patron and two architects of real quality, they were quite a team. The sadness is that she had so little time to enjoy the house she had planned so meticulously. It respects the countryside she loved and was built with the finest materials, as she insisted. It is a fitting memorial to a great contributor to the arts in Suffolk. RIP'



this picture and left
Sara's bedroom features muted textiles by Larusi (larusi.com). The terraces and vast windows give her home a treehouse atmosphere, and more floor-to-ceiling windows in a guest bathroom give an outdoor showering experience

SUPPLIERS

- Architect**
Paul+D Architects
(020 7604 3818;
paul-o-architects.com)
- Engineers**
Whitby Bird
(020 7631 5291; whitbybird.com)
- Mechanical sub-contractor**
Knights Warner
(01502 740 617)
- Sliding glass doors**
AGB ironmongery by Sampsons
(01449 618 088)
- Roofing**
Sarnafil
(01603 748 985; sarnafil.co.uk)
- Basalt stone flooring**
Stonell Architectural Office
(020 7738 0606; stonell.com)
- Timber flooring**
Double-fumed oak by FPS
(020 8222 6776; fpsflooring.com)
- Carpenters**
Nick Willis Woodworking
(020 8965 1939)
- Bathroom fittings**
Original Bathrooms
(020 8940 7554;
original-bathrooms.co.uk)