

SARA LOW, RECENT RECIPIENT OF THE LAST PLANNING PERMISSION GRANTED TO BUILD A PPG7 HOUSE

In October 2003 the northern development committee for Suffolk Coastal District Council approved an application by Sara Low to build a PPG7 house on the edge of some woodland near the Suffolk village of Darsham. The application was approved against the recommendation of the officers from the Department of Planning and Leisure, with councillors voting in favour by 7 to 1, with 1 abstention.

'Darsham House, where I've lived for 20 years, was built in 1679 and is quite big. After my husband died in 1997 I knew that it was unsuitable for a single person growing older by the minute. Keeping the house and garden going with minimal help is increasingly difficult and I'm very anxious not to let it all go downhill. So I began to think seriously of selling the house and building something easier to manage. As I've grown older my taste has changed and I'm drawn more and more to contemporary art, architecture and music.

I knew it would be difficult to find a suitable site, but one day as I was out

walking the dogs I suddenly thought that the Wilderness, a piece of woodland that I own, would make an ideal spot despite being outside the village envelope. It is a reasonable distance from Darsham House, with good views across open farmland. It had been sold off from the Darsham estate years ago, but we managed to buy it back in the early 1990s.

'I had then never heard of PPG7, but I happened to be talking to John Gummer, my MP, and he told me about his PPG7 clause. I invited a senior planning officer to come and inspect the site. He was extremely nice and helpful but told me immediately that I had absolutely no chance of getting planning approval. So I rather forgot about my idea and started to think about buying a smaller house.

'Then, about 18 months ago, a great friend of mine, Trevor Pickett, came to lunch and brought with him two architect friends of his, Paul Acland and Paulo Marto. I mentioned to them my dream of building a contemporary house and the problems of finding a suitable site. They got very excited and said that they might be able to get the necessary approval, and that is how it all began.

'I liked the idea of working with bright young people who were going to tell me what I wanted, and who shared my views on the horrors of pastiche architecture. Their practice, Paul + O Architects, is a young one and they have never worked before on a project like the Wilderness, but they have been amazing.

'I knew I wanted something in a Modernist idiom; I have been influenced by the Mies van de Rohe exhibition in Berlin, and by the whole Bauhaus ethos. I also love the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Corbusier, but Paul + O have produced a design which is not in any way a pastiche.

'The house will stand on a flint-faced plinth on the edge of the Wilderness, with glorious views both into the woodland and out over the farmland. It will be surrounded by terracing, and water will be introduced, both formally round the house and in a more natural rill. Inside, it will have large, open-plan living areas with a double-volume galleried library. I think it is a beautiful design that will enhance the landscape, particularly the clearing where it will stand, which has become rather a dreary fen meadow since I felled 150 commercially planted poplars a few years ago.

'Mark Rumary, a good friend and landscape garden designer, is closely involved. The conservation constraints have concentrated our minds on designing a garden that will be cleverly planted to blend seamlessly with the surrounding Wilderness and encourage more wildlife.



'My PPG7 application has attracted a lot of attention in the press, both local and national, and I think some of the planning officers were rather surprised by the positive reaction to the project. Of course, a few objections were made: the Suffolk Wildlife Trust put in a hefty last-minute objection, but now that I have approval are being extremely helpful. One or two local people talked about impending environmental disasters, which is rubbish, and someone compared the project and myself to Van Hoogenstraten, which I thought was hugely funny. But I had wonderful letters of support, including one from the architect H. T. Cadbury-Brown, who built his own house in Aldeburgh 40 years ago—now listed Grade II. Sir Michael Hopkins wrote a brilliant letter which was taken very seriously by the committee and I think went a fair way to persuading them of the

integrity of the design. John Gummer was incredibly helpful, as was the Suffolk Preservation Society, and CABE.

'I think the planning department opposed my application because it was outside their experience and they considered it to be opposed to the County Plan (though the PPG7 clause overrides that). But their planning committee took it very seriously and treated it with a great deal of common-sense and respect. Some of them even took the trouble to visit the exhibition on PPG7 houses at the RIBA, and to ask for advice on contemporary design from independent architects.

'I have been very fairly treated. If they had turned me down it would still have been utterly fair. It's been an exciting adventure so far and I'm looking forward to the next phase, though I'm fully aware of the many pitfalls that lie ahead.'

Photographs: Martyn Goddard.

(Top) Sara Low, in the Wilderness at Darsham, where her new house will be built. (Right) a model of the proposed house

