

The Middle East's interiors, design & property magazine

identity[®]

ISSUE SEVENTYNINE
YEAR SEVEN
APRIL 2010
A MOTIVATE PUBLICATION



Bathing with art: designs for your eyes only

Fair game: winning trends for global habitats

Surprising retail: the ultimate display case

Underground investments: tracking London's real estate

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Wild thing

A striking, contemporary home has been built on London's greenbelt, drawing admiring glances from many people and, unfortunately, also from some destructive birds. TEXT: **RICHARD WARREN**

Lounge in The Wilderness house.



Left to right: Dining area of kitchen in foreground, lounge in background; entrance hall. Ti de sculpture hangs from the ceiling.



Clockwise from left: Rear elevation of house; library, gallery level which leads to master bedroom; east elevation of house which shows both library levels; looking into lounge from the kitchen.



We can all be victims of our own success or, at least, what we create can be. There is a house in Suffolk, southern England, that has been nominated for awards for its brave design, is loved by its owner and, unfortunately, is also adored by woodpeckers.

One of nature's winged, pneumatic drillers has made 15 holes in the home's outside walls, which owner Jim Ashton has been filling in as fast as the woodpecker can make them. To put the bird off its task, Ashton is sticking strips of reflective paper to the walls of the building at points where the bird might strike – woodpeckers don't like bright flashes, according to experts. However, this woodpecker must wear sunglasses because he keeps coming back, so a new approach is now being considered – installing a plastic woodpecker on the building. Telecommunications company BT puts these plastic imitations on some of its telegraph poles to put off the live variety.

The fact that the house has been attacked by woodpeckers was unexpected. After all, these birds usually only hammer away at timber houses and this is no log cabin. Unfortunately, the skin of its outer walls is a relatively soft insulation render which is easy to peck away and between the render and solid inner walls is a cavity space, which is ideal for a nest. This combined with the house being positioned in the middle of woodland, the bird's favourite habitat, has made it an ideal home for woodpeckers.

Possibly, the colour of the building's outer walls might also have attracted the bird, because its grey hue is similar to that of surrounding trees. Yet, it would be cruel to criticise the architects, Paul + O, for creating a peck-able house as they have only done what so many of us nag architects to do, match a home with its local environment. As the woodpecker's enthusiasm for the house shows, this they have done with great success.

Set in 20 hectares of its own woodland, the 750 square metre house is like a giant hide. Named The Wilderness to reflect its isolated, rural position, it has

been a great place for the family living there to see nature close up. Floor-to-ceiling windows are ranged around most of the ground floor and the south side of the top floor, so the garden and surrounding woodland can be seen clearly from inside – such as the family of stoats that has been seen playing on the library terrace, the several types of deer spotted drinking at ponds a few yards away and the rabbits glimpsed scampering about. A fox also visits regularly.

"The children don't ever watch TV because there is so much to watch outside," says architect Paulo Marto, a partner at London-based studio Paul+O. "We intended to create a sanctuary, preserving and enhancing the landscape."

The hustle and bustle of animals around the house today contrasts with the silent stagnancy that previously marked this spot. The wood was thick, dark and untamed when the house was built, not a good place to live for any kind of creature, whether two or four-legged.

"We wanted to create a habitat," Marto says. "Before it was impenetrable forest. By clearing trees we have allowed light into the woodland, which has enabled more plants to grow and that has attracted insects, which has in turn attracted animals."

Approaching the house along its driveway in early spring, it first appears from a distance as a blur because its grey exterior is lost among the similarly-coloured surrounding tree trunks. The trees were leafless, but in summer when their leaves are out, they hide the house completely from the main road. The plan is to shroud the house in yet more woodland mystery by planting a large oak tree

close to the front to break up the view of this elevation, and to plant 20 ash trees in front of that.

"We did not want a white box," Marto says. "I like the idea of bringing the forest close to the house, so that it becomes integrated into its environment."

While the house is deliberately obscured, the views from it are opened up and in several places windows look directly up old bridal tracks that go through the woodland. The edges of these rides have been cleared, because they are important habitats for small plants and creatures.

But despite its stunning woodland views, the house's most striking feature is its modernity. When asked to visualise a country house, most of us will conjure up images of 18th and 19th century stone or red brick manor houses with huge chimneys, grand entrances and possibly even turrets. We don't usually think of cubic spaces and clean lines like the architect did for this house.

For many traditionalists, a contemporary look in the countryside is enough to raise their hackles, but for some just having this building, whatever its design, is controversial enough, as it stands on greenbelt land where new homes are usually banned. Legislation passed in 1997 allowed the house to come into being. Dubbed "Gummers Law" after then Environment Secretary Selwyn Gummer, the legislation allowed for construction of brand new houses on greenfield land provided they were of significant architectural quality.

The incoming Labour government planned to get rid of Gummer's Law six years ago, but following pressure from Lord Norman Foster it amended it to allow construction of contemporary-looking homes, so emerging architects had opportunities to experiment. While The Wilderness clearly fits this bill,

the design does not slavishly follow Modernist diktats. Traditional materials like render, wood and flint have been used in this house's construction to help it meld into its environment. Indoors, instead of having all white walls, as Modernist homes usually do, many of them are dark, greyish-green or, as the architect calls it "lizard green". These walls' green hue and the stained oak floor help connect the interior to the environment outside.

There are more surprises. In a cheerful twist, cupboard interiors are painted shocking pink, the colour of a "lizard's tongue", Marto says. Another burst of colour is *Tide*, artist Stuart Haygarth's giant chandelier in the double height entrance hall, made from bright, colourful bottles, toys and other plastic debris washed up on the Suffolk seashore. The chandelier is globe-shaped to resemble the Moon – the master of Earth's tides.

This irregular-shaped house is built for entertaining – the entrance hall leads directly through sliding double doors to the large, light, airy, south and west facing lounge, where a range of sliding French doors, the full width of the room, open out onto terraces and the garden. A swimming pool lies close to the building's west flank. A study, kitchen, library and children's playroom flow off a corridor that runs the width of the building and opens out to become the entrance hall halfway down. By keeping sliding doors open these rooms feel like part of a bigger, single space. The double height library has a gallery above lined with bookshelves and two-storey high glazing making it feel spacious and grand.

The openness downstairs is counter-balanced by an emphasis on privacy upstairs, especially for the master-bedroom, which, with the study below, juts out from the rest of the house. Five further bedrooms, bathrooms and a storage room big enough to be a double bedroom line a corridor that runs directly above the corridor downstairs.

Let's hope the woodpecker doesn't ever fly indoors, he may like the house's lightness and spaciousness so much he never leaves. **ID**