

# Wilderness House: a creation that will be the last stately pile

A MODERNIST country home will shortly be built in 40 acres of private parkland near the 17th century Darsham Hall in Suffolk. And it's likely to become famous, not necessarily for its architectural qualities, but because it may become the last sizeable country home to be built on a greenfield site in Britain under a Labour government.

Suffolk Coastal District Council has given planning permission for Wilderness House, designed by London architects Paul + O, just as the Government prepares to block any further building of private country

BY JAY MERJUCK  
Architecture Correspondent

and friends with architectural experience.

The Government claims the clause in Planning Policy Guideline 7, created in 1997 by the Tory environment minister, John Gummer, to encourage the building of "truly outstanding" homes on greenfield sites, is socially divisive and complicated to administer. Lord Rooker, in the Deputy Prime Minister's office, has produced a revised draft of PPG7 which will make it much harder to build country houses.

The local authority's decision reveals a chink in the Government's position: Suffolk Coastal's northern area development committee voted 7-1 against its planning officer's recommendation to spike the planning application – and did so after canvassing the opinions of an architectural consultant

Wilderness House joins an eclectic mix of houses which have been built recently, including Grafton Hall in Cheshire and Nyn Park in Hertfordshire. The local authority's decision reveals a chink in the Government's position: Suffolk Coastal's northern area development committee voted 7-1 against its planning officer's recommendation to spike the planning application – and did so after canvassing the opinions of an architectural consultant

Lord Rooker's planned excision of the so-called "Gummer clause" from

PPG7 might suggest that greenbelt land has been blitzkrieged by rich, jackbooted arrivistes with monkey-on-a-stick architectural lackeys. In fact, only 15 substantial new country homes have been built in the past six years and only five of those have had anything to do with the 20th or 21st century in terms of design. Meanwhile, in Suffolk alone, more than 50 country houses have been lost in the past century due to death duties, disrepair or redevelopment.

The fact that Wilderness House squeezed through the planning net may have had something to do with

## GRAND DESIGNS FOR COUNTRY LIFE



New Grafton Hall, Cheshire

A 114-acre estate is an unexpected place to find a giant starfish. Ushida Finlay's design was the winner of a 1999 competition. With a budget of about £2m, the design is both distinctive and modern. The building is arranged so that the pattern of daily activity follows the movement of the sun. It was granted planning permission in July 2002.

the interventions of Mr Gummer, MP for Suffolk Coastal, and Sir Michael Hopkins, one of Britain's best and most influential architects. Sir Michael said Britain's country house

tradition went back to the Roman villa. "The smaller country house or villa, almost more than any other building form except, perhaps, the medieval church, has reflected the



Wilderness House, Suffolk: Sara Low, owner of the nearby Darsham Hall, has won planning permission to build this modernist country house. It is described by John Gummer as "precisely the kind of house we had in mind when providing for a continuation of the great British tradition of the country house"

architectural and cultural aspirations of its period."

The Government's idea of cultural aspiration excludes the country house for two reasons: because it is supposedly socially divisive,

and because planners' attention should be focused on affordable housing.

The loss of the Gummer clause is opposed by the *Architects Journal*, architects such as the

country house specialist Robert Adam, and by the Government's Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (Cabe). The Royal Institute of British Architects has also

waded in. There is a more salient point. Since the Thatcher government stripped away many of the staff architects in local authorities, there remains a shortage of the skills

needed to assess significant planning applications. This is what actually threatens to destroy a that has produced an extraordinary range of great architecture.

It seems the third



Nyn Park, Hatfield

Julian Bicknell's design will strike you either as an example of the good old days or of new money attempting to buy a piece of bespoke history. Illustrating that not all modern buildings will be as radical as Wilderness House, this proposed Hertfordshire mansion would not look out of place in a Jane Austen television drama

millennium equivalents of Moulton Hall in Yorkshire, Coleshill in Berkshire, and Edwin Lutyns' Little Thakeham in Sussex will not be built in the foreseeable future.