

Shock of the new



This futuristic house in Suffolk dares to be different. Is it the shape of rural piles to come, asks **Dominic Bradbury**

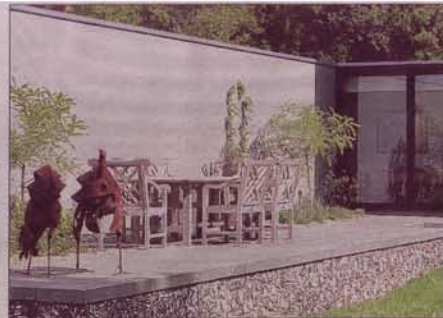
Behind most great houses, there is not only a good architect, but a good client. That is especially true of Wilderness House, a striking modernist country house tucked away in a slice of Suffolk woodland, not far from the coast.

This is a house that wouldn't look out of place in California. Nevertheless, it respects its setting, using local materials, and incorporates eco-friendly features such as solar panels and rainwater harvesting. Its relationship with the landscape and environment is a sensitive one.

Despite all this, it was tough to get planning permission, which is probably why new English country houses, especially modernist ones like this, get built so rarely. For Sara Low, who commissioned it, the project was a labour of love — and an epic test of patience.

Low, who worked as a journalist and agent, as well as in television, developed the building with Paolo Marto and Paul Acland of Paul + O Architects, a London practice. Sadly, she died in the summer, aged 70, having lived in the house for less than a year. Her two sons, Toby, 38, and Nat, 35, have taken the difficult decision to sell, and have put the house on the market for £2.75m.

I first met Low and her architects 18 months ago, when building was well under way. I made a number of visits to the house, interviewing Low, Marto



The strong lines and bold form of the house, top, are softened by landscaping. Above, one of a series of terraces that connect inside and outside space

and Acland earlier this year. I had just finished a book, covering 21st-century modern countryside homes, and had been disappointed by how few examples there were in Britain. Even when approval was given for a new country house, it was most likely to be a pastiche period design, with planners frightened off by the merest whiff of a contemporary project.

Low and her architects managed to get Wilderness House through via a clause called Planning Policy Guideline 7 (PPG7). This allowed for occasional country houses, as long as they were of exceptional architectural merit. The clause was drafted in 1997 by John Gummer, then environment minister. Fortunately, he is the MP for Suffolk Coastal, the constituency in which Wilderness House is located. He became a vocal supporter of the project and a friend of the family.

Low used to live in a 17th-century manor house in nearby Darsham, with

her husband and children. She was widowed in 1997, and, as her children had left home, she decided that she wanted something smaller, but modern and bespoke. She also wanted to concentrate on her own passions for painting and needlepoint.

"I think she came to a stage where she had discovered an interest in modern art and architecture, and wanted to try to live in a house that reflected those passions," says Toby, managing director of a video communications agency. "She was also desperate to stay in Suffolk, where she had a lot of close friends. As you can imagine, modernist houses are few and far between in rural Suffolk, so building her own was the obvious — if rather bold — solution. I also think she was looking for a challenge. If she was bored, she was unhappy. She always hid projects on the go."

Low wanted to build on nearby woodland that the family had bought in the 1960s. The site, at the edge of Darsham,



Contemporary furnishings complement the open-plan kitchen and dining space, above

Sara Low, above, whose determination and passion for modern architecture led to the building of Wilderness House. Full-height sliding glass doors in the living room, above right, make the most of scenic views

could not be seen from a public road or by any neighbouring houses. The initial response of the local planners was less than encouraging — she was told she would never get permission, and to save her money.

"All my life, I had lived in old period houses," she told me one sunny day in May, over coffee at her dining table, looking out across the woods. "I was living in this stunningly beautiful house nearby, but it was rather big for one ageing widow. I decided that the thing to do was to sell that house. Because I owned the wood, which is fantastic, I wanted to build something there — a wonderful modern house."

At a dinner party in 2002, Low found herself talking to Gummer and to the architect Michael Hopkins, who has a weekend home in Suffolk. Hopkins designed Portcullis House, the parliamentary building near the Houses of Parliament, as well as the Glyndebourne opera house. Gummer explained the PPG7 clause, while both encouraged Low to push ahead with her dream.

A few weeks later, she was introduced to Marto and Acland by a mutual friend, Trevor Pickett, the founder of Pickett's luxury goods, and the creative collaboration began.

"It's really entirely thanks to Paul and Sara, and their incredible hard work, that we got planning permission," Low told me at the time. "John Gummer got behind it because there wasn't a single PPG7 house in Suffolk, and because he loved the house. Michael Hopkins also wrote a wonderful letter to the planners. There was so much amazing support for this modern building on a greenfield site. It's still the only one in Suffolk."

The two-storey, seven-bed house — with banks of glass framing the views and a series of terraces maximising connections between inside and out — was carefully positioned in the woods to take advantage of sight lines along avenues

carved out of the trees. Its bold, sculpted form is softened by landscaping.

"We put forward strong arguments to the planning committee, and commissioned a historian to do extensive survey of country houses in Suffolk," Marto recalls. "The conclusion was that, historically, many country houses have been restored and few replaced. If it wasn't for a forward-thinking planning committee, it might have been a different story."

"It was also about building something appropriate to Suffolk in terms of materials — such as the flint and render — as well as the colour, texture and light. We thought carefully about framing the views and bringing light into the house at all times of day. Sara was brave in giving us the go-ahead on quite a rudimentary model, and in choosing the boldest and most modern ideas that we presented to her."

Modernist houses are rare in rural Suffolk, so building her own was the obvious — if rather bold — solution?

Greenfield or new build?

In 1997, in one of the last acts of the outgoing Conservative government, John Gummer, then environment secretary, drew up Planning Policy Guideline 7 (PPG7).

It allowed for one-off houses to be built in the countryside as long as they were "truly outstanding in terms of architecture and landscape design, and would significantly enhance [their] immediate setting and wider surroundings".

Few houses made it through the system under PPG7, partly because of the long, drawn-out nature of most applications, but also because of the hostility of many local planners to building such homes on greenfield sites.

Those designs that did get through tended to be modern reworkings of period styles.

Of the proposed country houses featured in a Royal Institute of British Architects exhibition called The New English Country House, back in 2003, the majority were pastiche houses. Ultimately, few contemporary designs made it through the system.

That all changed in 2004. After heated debate between neoclassical and modernist architects, PPG7 was revised. It became PPS7 (Planning Policy Statement 7), which allows for one-off country houses if they are "truly outstanding and groundbreaking", and reflect

Early on, Low made a modest wish list for the house. It included an open-plan kitchen and dining area, a painting studio, a double-height library (where she tended to base herself when alone), and seven bedrooms with six bathrooms. At the heart of the house is a large sitting room, 50ft long, with a series of sliding glass doors opening out onto the terraces and the landscape. Low planned the house with not just herself in mind, but her sons and their families, including her four young grandchildren.

Planning permission was secured in autumn 2003, although work didn't start on building the house until May 2005. Low sold her former home to finance the build, then rented a cottage in the village. The project was also delayed by the ecological surveys that were conducted on the site, and by the discovery of great crested newts

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Toby believes the house says a lot about his late mother. "It is uncompromising on the outside, yet warm and welcoming on the inside," he says. "The achievement of getting the house built says a lot about her determination and charm. She was keen that her house would be a real 21st-century grand country house — and I think she succeeded in spades."

Wilderness House, near Darsham, Suffolk, is for sale for £2.75m through Savills' Ipswich office, 01473 234800. Paul + O Architects, 020 7604 3818, www.paul-o-architects.com

"the highest standards in contemporary architecture".

The modernists had won the argument. Since then, there has been a modest increase in new schemes, with architects such as Feilden Clegg Bradley Aedas and MKA Architects obtaining planning permission for more radical new designs.

Building a country house that isn't neo-Georgian still isn't a walk in the park, but it has at least become a little easier. Nor is it impossible any more to imagine reinventing the whole idea of the English country home, and revitalising the tradition with innovative new designs.

in the woods — it took six months to relocate them.

Gradually, the house started to come together. Raised on a large plinth, faced with local knapped flint, it has a strong geometric form that pushes outwards into the woods, almost becoming a part of its setting. The terraces and balconies offer amazing views from various aspects of the house. A swimming pool is tucked away to one side of the 35-acre plot. Ultimately, Low spent £1.5m creating Wilderness House.

It is an extraordinary combination of natural materials and high-tech engineering. As the landscaping around the house settles in, the angular form is being gradually softened, intentionally, by the planting and greenery.

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LIVING IN A BOX
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