



If you go down to the woods today: the design for the ultra-modern Wilderness House in woodland near Saxmundham, in Suffolk, by the young architectural team Paul+O of Paul Acland and Paulo Marto

Is this the last of great new country houses?

By Valerie Elliott
Countryside Editor

AN ULTRA-MODERN home set in 40 acres of woodland could be the last new country house to be built under a planning consent known as Gummer's law.

If the local planning authority in Suffolk backs the scheme next month, the Wilderness House will be the only home in the county approved under regulations introduced in 1997 by John Gummer, the Tory Environment Secretary.

The aim of the law — which permitted grand new houses to be built in the countryside — was to inspire a new generation of architects to revive the tradition of the English country house provided that the designs were of architectural excellence and that the park and garden were "truly outstanding" in terms of landscape.

But this week the office of John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, announced that it intended to scrap the concession, which has been seen as elitist. The decision has outraged the architectural world. George Ferguson, president of the Royal Institute of

British Architects, says it is based "on the politics of envy".

Fewer than 20 sumptuous houses — in stone, brick, glass and concrete with gymnasiums, whirlpool baths, indoor and outdoor pools, dozens of lavatories, environmentally friendly heating and cooling systems, snooker rooms, home cinemas — form Mr Gummer's design legacy. He would prefer, however, to be remembered for them than for handing his four-year-old daughter a beefburger in 1990, at the height of the BSE scare — to demonstrate the safety of British meat.

But he would also like to add another country house to the list before the regulation's demise. His crusade is to see that Wilderness House is built. It is precisely the type of sensitive and innovative house he envisaged when he introduced the planning guidance. There is also a personal touch — it would be a fitting gift to his Suffolk Coastal constituency.

He said: "I think this is likely to be the last house. It really is fantastic, a very nice house on a beautiful estate."

The plan is for a washed lime elegant contemporary home in woodland near Sax-



Gummer: better known for beefburger stunt

mundham, in Suffolk. After 20 years living in a 17th-century 18-bedroomed mansion, Sara Low, a widow, wishes to clear out her past and spend her old age in a home that will be comfortable and easy to maintain.

Like previous generations of wealthy artistic people she is happy to spend her money creating an edifice to the architecture of the day — she is even

willing to dump her beloved Aga for a stainless steel kitchen.

She is ready to sell Darsham House to pay for Wilderness House, which she hopes to build for £15 million, a modest sum for a modern country house. The price of Ushida Findlay's starfish design Grafton New Hall in Cheshire could be as much as £20 million, though no buyer has been

MODERN GRAND

Gummer's law houses include:

The Lake House, near Arlesey, Bedfordshire. Glass and concrete five-storeyed structure overhangs lake

Corbin House, near Burton-on-Trent. A vast family home in geometric sections using lots of glass.

Great Canfield. In the Essex tradition of dignified red brick country houses.

Wootton Hall, Staffordshire. Bow windows in a geometric shape and sweeping staircase.

Ashley Hall, Hampshire. Regency Greek revival style.

Alderley Farm, near Stroud. Conceived as an early 17th-century farmhouse.

found. Most other new country houses fall in the £4 million to £9 million bracket.

Mrs Low, 66, said: "I have thought for a long time that I would like to build a contemporary home from scratch. Here's the perfect opportunity to reflect the architecture of the age we live now."

She was introduced to the young architectural practice



Mrs Low in front of 17th-century Darsham House, which she wants to leave

Paul+O, of Paul Acland and Paulo Marto, and asked them to design a house she could live in. She has already lost any notion of drawing room and dining room and instead is talking about living space and entertaining in the kitchen. There are plans for a library and a swimming pool — "such good exercise for older people" — as well as eight bed-

rooms, six with access to a copy. An office and study suite will be used for craft sons, and her collection sculptures by local artists to be features of the garden.

The New English Country House exhibition is at RIBA, Portland Place, London, until next Thursday

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