



Farm favourite

SpaceLab UK's rural house is a sculptural building that manages to blend the hallmarks of contemporary design with a modest scale, writes David Littlefield. Photos by Jefferson Smith

This small, contemporary cube of a house, commissioned by a young couple who bought the site for its protected views over the Northamptonshire countryside, is just the sort of project that appeals to the programme makers of Channel 4's *Grand Designs*. And this is exactly what has happened, a move which will drag young practice SpaceLab UK into the limelight when broadcast next year.

Unfortunately for Channel 4, this project lacked the telegenic appeal of delays, cost overruns and the sorry sight of disappointed clients spending Christmas in a caravan. The project went on site in January and completed six months later, although finishing touches such as landscaping have been added only very recently. Worse still, the house came in pretty much on budget.

Although SpaceLab UK is a relatively new practice, founded just a year ago, its roots go back to the spring of 2000 when Andrew Budgen and Nathan Lonsdale set up a small design unit within property management company Ambury. Called Ambury Architecture & Project Management, the unit flourished and began producing funky office



interiors for clients including publishing house Emap, bringing the architects into contact with a pair of employees in the market for some domestic work.

This scheme is Budgen and Lonsdale's first new-build project since separating "amicably" from Ambury and striking out on their own. Set on a rise next to Forestry Commission woodland and overlooking a beautiful tract of East Midlands farmland, the 0.3ha site originally

contained a Victorian house that the clients were keen to refurbish and extend. But with some gentle arm-twisting, the duo managed to convince the pair to demolish their new purchase and build another home from scratch.

With a budget of £135,000, SpaceLab has managed to conjure up a neat, somewhat sculptural building that manages to combine the hallmarks of contemporary design with a scale that is not

overwhelming or pompous. In spite of the size conveyed on these pages, the building is small – the 100sqm of living space meets the ground with a footprint of just 7x9m.

This modest scale has become the cause of some regret, and the clients have already asked SpaceLab to draw up concepts for an extension (a smaller box tacked to the side of the less visible west side is looking likely).

Budgen uses the words "object" and "jewel" to describe the house, and there is definitely something uplifting about encountering this unexpected form crouched near a farmer's muddy track. Essentially a timber-clad box raised on a black brick plinth, the house turns slightly away from visitors and only fully reveals itself on its south elevation, where the box is punctured by an asymmetrical composition of structural elements and vast expanses of glazing.

It is here that the building reaches out to the landscape with a pair of piers, one of which turns vertically through 90 degrees to become the only piece of screening on this elevation. Conversely, the entrance is less expressive, found on the shady north side via a door which sits flush with the cladding and is virtu-

ally invisible. This is a let-down.

Up close, there are further disappointments. The magenta panels that break up the north and west elevations and form the main vertical element on the south turn out to be painted plinths rather than the render one expects; similarly, the rows of boxes which punch through the facades as small windows turn out to be, not aluminium or stainless steel, but grey-painted softwood.

It is also a shame that the plinth fail to read as a single mass because the mortar doesn't match the colour of the brick – in fact, black mortar was the original intention and this is an omission of the part of the contractor. By the time the architects arrived on site, the job had been done.

But this is nit-picking. Financial constraints restricted the palette of materials and Budgen insists the practice tried hard to make the most of what was available. They have, for example, allowed the external softwood cladding to enter the building at the south-east corner, wrapping around to form a discreet alcove. Dissolving the barrier between inside and outside has become an architectural cliché, but this subtle move is

Left: The rear (south) elevation of the cube-shaped house has been punctured by an asymmetrical composition of structural elements and extensive glazing.

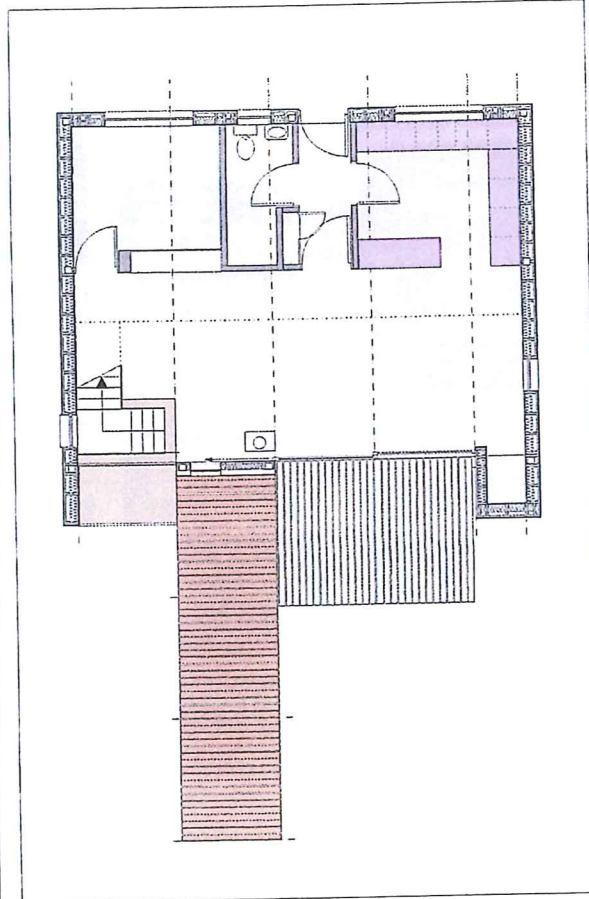
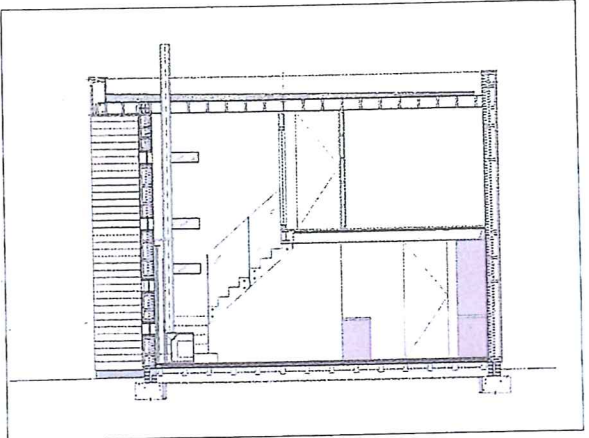
Inset: The less convincing front (north) elevation with its well disguised front entrance.

Near right, top: The timber piers that lead off the ground floor living area reach out to the surrounding landscape providing a sound attempt to expand the perimeter of the house.

Below: Looking down onto the crisp, white living area from the first floor.

Far right, top: Section through the building.

Below: Ground floor plan.



convincing attempt to expand the perceived perimeter of this small house. "Wherever possible, we've tried to use bog-standard materials, but in an interesting way," says Budgen.

If you've already trudged around the exterior of the house, the interior holds few surprises, revealed as it is by the generous glazing in its south elevation. The plan is simple. The ground floor is composed of an L-shaped living area offering lounge and dining spaces on its long axis, and a kitchen around the corner; a small entrance hall, WC and separate office-cum-spare room make up the rest. The first floor is even simpler, where the stairs turn onto a walkway which provides access to a pair of bedrooms and a bathroom.

But what makes this modest sequence of spaces work as an effective whole is the way scale has been employed. Essentially, the rear (darker) half of the building contains the single-height spaces, leaving the south-facing double-height space to admit light deep into the building. Furthermore, the master bedroom, which projects beyond the line of the first-floor walkway as a discernibly separate volume, contains a satisfyingly huge square of glazing which looks down upon the living area and offers a clear

view of the vista beyond.

The crisp lines and architectonics of these few spaces would be more visible were it not for the liberal application of white paint, which has the effect of flattening the interior. Even the Villa Savoye, surely the prototype for all modernist pavilions in rural settings, picks out architectural planes in blue, green and fawn. SpaceLab lobbied against this over-use of white, but the client failed to be convinced.

Although the planning application had to go to appeal, the insertion of this cube into a conservative part of the countryside has since raised very little dissent but quite a few eyebrows. Estate agents, for example, more used to selling picturesque stone cottages in the nearby town of Oundle, don't quite know what to make of it. Valuations range from £350-450,000, which could lead to a tidy profit from the total investment of £318,000 (build costs and the cost of site). But that, of course, is up to the marketplace.

Project team
Architect SpaceLab UK.
Client John and Terri Westlake.
Engineer Peter Dann.
Contractor Granville Building Company Ltd.