

FAY SWEET discovers how townies moving to the country are taking their taste for modern architecture with them

# Country file

**S**O MANY UK city-dwellers — about 100,000 a year — are upping sticks and heading for new lives in the country, they are beginning to have an effect on rural architecture. Says Dominic Bradbury, author of *New Country House*, published this month: "The countryside may be pastoral, but it is no longer parochial. Newcomers are driving the demand for an alternative to the conversions, conveyor-belt period pastiches and kit homes that are choking many rural areas."

For his book, he has trawled the world for inspiring and beautiful, homes in country settings, and he has even found a sprinkling of UK houses, too, where owners have braved the wrath of Nimby neighbours and hidebound planners to build their dream.



Denmark: Henning Larsen's Summer House, in Northern Zealand, is covered with larch slats that collect solar heat.

tastes are certainly changing because Londoners moving out to rural areas have seen loft living and modern homes and want to import some of that to the country. We have enquiries all the time from people wanting building plots."

Martin Herbert, of planning and environmental company Scott Wilson (020 7798 5200), says plots are hard to come by and planning permission even harder. Buying a barn to convert may land you with severe restrictions when it comes to altering the exterior; if you want a new building you have to box clever. You may get permission to build if it

## Where to start

Britain's strict planning rules make it difficult, but not impossible, to build the unusual, especially if you are restricted to building in infill sites in existing villages. But people are prepared to try.

Says Simon Blackhouse of estate agent Strutt & Parker: "We are seeing a rise in interest from people wanting to build their own homes in a contemporary style. It has been slow coming, but

## Westlake House, Peterborough

TERRI Westlake, who works in publishing in Peterborough, used her maternity leave to go house-hunting. She found a wreck of a house in nearly an acre of land backing onto woodland and well away from any neighbours.

Terri and husband John paid £180,000 for the house and called in Andrew Budgen, of young architecture practice SpaceLabUK (020 7684 5392).

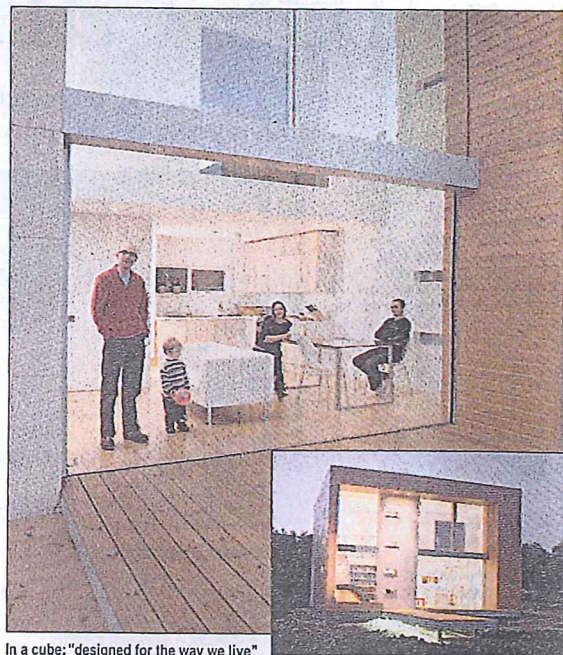
"We talked about renovation and adding a new extension, then Andrew suggested that because VAT is charged on refurbishment projects, it would probably cost the same, or even less, to knock

down the whole thing and start again."

SpaceLabUK came up with a cube wrapped in timber, with a south-facing wall of glass. Inside, the ground floor is largely open-plan with a double-height living space and one bedroom behind the stairs.

Upstairs is the main bedroom on a mezzanine, and bathroom, plus one smaller bedroom. "Here was a wonderful chance to design something for the way we live," she says. "We use most of the space most of the time."

It took just 28 weeks and the cost, including demolishing the old house, was £135,000.



In a cube: "designed for the way we live"

is essential for you to live on the land (because you are running a market garden, for example), but you may have to demonstrate this by living in a caravan or some temporary building on the site for a long time.

Replacing existing homes is another route, but Herbert warns you should never buy a house believing you will be allowed to replace it. Check with local planners first.

## Impressing the planners

Finally, says Herbert, new country planning guidelines, called PPS7 (formerly called PPG7), continue the tradition of country house building by allowing substantial homes to be built in rural locations. "The key words in this piece

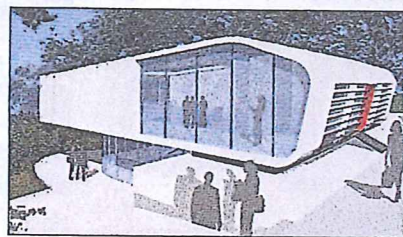
of legislation are that new country houses should be of 'exceptional quality,' he says. "And there is no book of rules you could possibly write to describe the unique set of circumstances that make a design impossible to refuse. This is high-risk, as it is impossible to predict how a design might be received by the planning authority, but for someone with vision, determination and the budget, it is a possibility."



Discreetly dynamic: a house in Zoa, Japan, by Atelier Hitoshi Abe, blends into woodland

*New Country House*, by Dominic Bradbury, is published by Laurence King, priced £30.

## Nicklaus House, Sevenoaks, Kent



GRANTED planning permission last month, and due to be finished by next summer, Nicklaus House in Sevenoaks, Kent, is the astonishing work of M2r Architecture (020 7837 4545).

The 3,500sq ft house includes a huge white rectangular box that sits on a circular glazed base. It will cost about £600,000, and have four bedrooms, two living rooms, a kitchen and dining area. The location is crucial: it is being built on a steep hillside, and the "narrow end" of the upper floor is a wall of glass so the occupants can enjoy the fabulous views.



Open house: the Greys wanted a house that would relate to the surrounding woodland

Out with the new: the Greys wanted openness, not "a ghastly thing with turrets"

## Jacob's Ladder, Oxfordshire

WHILE they enjoyed living in their handsome Georgian rectory in Oxford, David and Shelley Grey hankered after a more modern style of life. "We wanted some open-plan spaces and to do away with so many doors," says David.

They found a wood of 10 acres with a 1920s house and planning permission for demolition and replacement with a traditional-style country home — "a ghastly thing with turrets".

"We wanted to be involved with the woodlands," says David. The 13th architect they spoke to, Niall

McLaughlin (020 7485 9170) understood. A bottle of wine and a pile of architecture books, to identify homes they liked, helped to inspire his clients.

McLaughlin says: "The brief was to make a house to look out of, that would act as a frame for the woodland." And this it does, set into a slope with a long, projecting swimming pool wing.

It is elegant and lightweight — with a timber-clad steel frame and huge windows for the views — and has three bedrooms and an open-plan living area.

David's verdict? "We love the openness. There's not a single curtain or blind anywhere."



Economy: building costs were kept low by cladding a simple steel frame with timber

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