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**The houses issue**

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The Red House incorporates material and spatial references to works by Loos, Aldo van Eyck, James Stirling and the Smithsons as well as CFA Voysey.

# Enjoyably eccentric

David Kohn Architects blends playfulness and pragmatism in an Arts & Crafts-inspired Dorset family house

Words: Chris Foges Photographs: Will Pryce

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After a fruitless search for the perfect country getaway among the chocolate-box villages of Wiltshire, a London couple switched tack and ventured further west, to the working farmland of north Dorset. In the rolling country south of Shaftesbury, they soon struck gold. Driving up a pitted track towards a dilapidated farmworker's house on high ground, they were sold on its isolation and panoramic views even before getting out of the car. Nevertheless, it was to be almost 10 years before the couple – now in their 50s – spent a night there, under the oversailing, almost alpine roof of an extraordinary new house that has replaced the crumbling cottage. It was worth the wait. Not only has David Kohn Architects produced a building rich in incident and ideas, but the project also benefits from the refinement of the owners' aims over time.

That happened through a series of false starts. The couple – Edward and Stephen – first appointed another architect to remodel the house, but there was little

**Above** Red brick echoes Dorset farmhouses, while brickwork patterns recall Aalto's Muuratsalo house.

worth keeping; better to start again. Having only lived in small flats, and with possessions in storage, they asked for lots of space and secured consent for a house twice the size. Something didn't feel right, however, and the project was dropped. Another architect developed a scheme in a traditional style, but that lacked ambition. 'We wanted a house that was unashamedly of its era,' says Edward. A third designer proposed rerouting the adjacent track to make a squarer plot. On reflection, the couple concluded that privacy would be beneficially relieved by the occasional sight of dog-walkers and delivery drivers led astray by errant satnavs.

Somewhat exhausted – and by now thinking of a family home rather than a place for weekend breaks – they turned to Kohn, who they knew from his work on galleries. Their brief was clear. 'It should be practical, not grand,' says Edward. 'A country house that can cope with mud, rain and dogs running through, and which lets you know that you can relax.'

#### IN NUMBERS

**284m<sup>2</sup>**

Gross internal area

**26 months**

Construction period

Kohn's Red House is only slightly bigger than the existing one. 'The aim was to make it compact,' he says, 'reducing the specifics of the previous brief to something both tighter and more flexible.' The clients' desire to avoid clutter was the genesis of an ingenious plan. Three 'cores' are arranged along each of the long sides on both floors, accommodating a larder, laundry, bathrooms and storage, and separating four generous rooms on the ground floor – an enfilade punctuated by deep reveals. Living rooms at either end face north and south. In between lie a kitchen-diner and a grand hall with a fluid, curving oak stair. Each room bulges outward in a rounded bay. That brings a whiff of the arts and crafts, which also inspired the incorporation of various small niche spaces in and outside the house. 'The adjustments to a classical plan in arts and crafts houses are often the most joyful and memorable parts,' says Kohn. 'They can have greater power than the rooms themselves.'

That story starts outside the front door, where an arched alcove shelters waiting visitors. Stepping into a glazed vestibule and onward into the hall, long views open up. With the thresholds between rooms slightly out of alignment, these are tantalising glimpses rather than a full reveal. It lends a pleasing ambiguity to the interior, a delicate balance between the easy informality of an open plan and the sense of protection offered by enclosed rooms. And it seems to work for family life. The couple's daughter can scoot unhindered from end to end, but sound from a piano doesn't disturb someone working in another room.

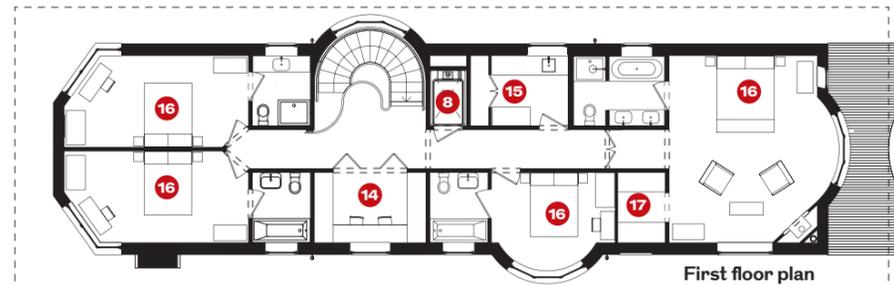
'We describe it as a Dolly Parton house ... It cost a lot of money to look this cheap'

Site plan

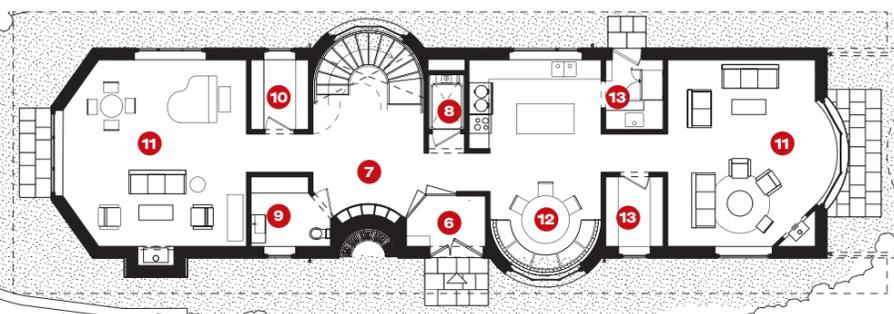


- |                   |            |                        |                    |
|-------------------|------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 House           | 6 Lobby    | 11 Living room         | 15 Laundry         |
| 2 Car port        | 7 Hall     | 12 Kitchen-dining room | 16 Ensuite bedroom |
| 3 Proposed studio | 8 Lift     | 13 Utility/larder      | 17 Dressing room   |
| 4 Garden          | 9 Toilet   | 14 Study               |                    |
| 5 Lane            | 10 Storage |                        |                    |

0 2m



First floor plan



Ground floor plan

Below A glazed vestibule opens on to a generous hall.



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IMAGINE WHAT'S NEXT



By Hydro

Light pours in on all sides, bouncing off a pale wood floor and white blockwork walls, against which verdant views from every window register as bright pops of colour. Like the surface-mounted socket boxes and plywood cabinetry, these humble materials provide a counterpoint to beautiful artwork and furniture, and are elevated by pains taken over detailing. 'We describe it as a Dolly Parton house,' says Edward. 'As she said, "It cost a lot of money to look this cheap".'

Upstairs, the architect's spatial games are most evident in the largest bedroom, where the curved bay window segues into a diagonal chimney breast – turning a squareish room into a pentagon – and intersects with the steep pitch of the roof to suggest a draped, tent-like ceiling. In the adjoining bathroom,

**Right** In the main bedroom, a round window with a slanted reveal gives a view of the sky from the bed.

**Below** On the first floor, the stair banister flares to form a niche space with views over fields.

**Bottom right** North-facing living room.



Edward points out some of the unobtrusive features that equip the house for old age – an important aspect of the project. 'I've seen what happens when a house becomes a prison,' he says. One 'core' contains a lift, and futureproofing extends to many small details: there are two handrails on the staircase, rounded corners on built-in furniture in case of falls, and grab-rails on the fronts of high cupboards.

Pragmatism combines with enjoyable eccentricity outside. Pronounced eaves that provide shade and shelter from rain also contribute to an impression that is both strange and familiar. Each of the functional elements is handled in an inventive or unusual way. Red brick echoes local farmhouses (Kohn was keen to avoid conventional Dorset green stone or the clichéd language

Unobtrusive features equip the house for old age



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**Left** Bathrooms and other functional spaces in the 'cores' have round or lunette windows.

Credits  
**Client** Private  
**Architect**  
 David Kohn Architects  
**Design team** David Kohn, Robin Turner, Tom Whittaker, Matt Volsen, Jennifer Dyne  
**Structural engineer**  
 Momentum  
**Services engineer**  
 SGA Consulting  
**Quantity surveyor**  
 Peter Gunning & Partners  
**Ecologist** AEW/C  
**Arboriculturist**  
 Barrrell Tree Consultancy  
**Main contractor**  
 Ken Biggs Contractors  
**Interior designer**  
 8 Holland Street

of agricultural barns) but is laid both horizontally and vertically. That is not as capricious as it first appears: the former denotes the location of cores within.

Bright green windows and curving downpipes have a geometric order, which is deliberately subverted in a few places: one bullseye window 'drifts' across the south elevation. Windows in the north facade suggest a face. Such playfulness has a serious purpose, says Kohn. 'It's about claiming licence for pleasure, and the extent to which we allow figuration in architecture today. We need to recover what has been excluded.'

The emerald trappings have raised some eyebrows locally, but are intended to ensure that the house is of its time and place. 'It is neighbourly, just not the same as the neighbours - which can seem quite provocative', says Kohn. The clients were committed to the idea that the project should have concerns beyond their own enjoyment. 'We wanted to make a contribution to the landscape,' says Edward, 'and for the house to be seen - once people have got used to it - as a worthy addition'. They have succeeded in making a notable work of architecture, but not at the expense of creating a welcoming home. 'You are asked to think about the house throughout, but not in a pushy way,' says Kohn. 'After all, life comes first.' ●

Curving metal downpipes support a verandah on the south facade.



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