



GRANDDESIGNS

MAGAZINE

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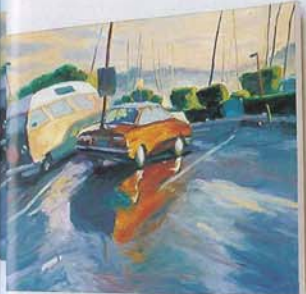
Kevin McCloud's fairy tale castle



PLUS FUNKY FOLK, FRESHER FLORALS AND BEST BATHS

Heaven can wait

Lizzie in the living room. The building is held up by 10 Douglas Fir poles. The furniture is from Habitat: Scala modular seating system, prices on application; Viso nesting sidetable, £125 for three tables; Tones rug, £165



Words by David Redhead Photographs by Paul Massey

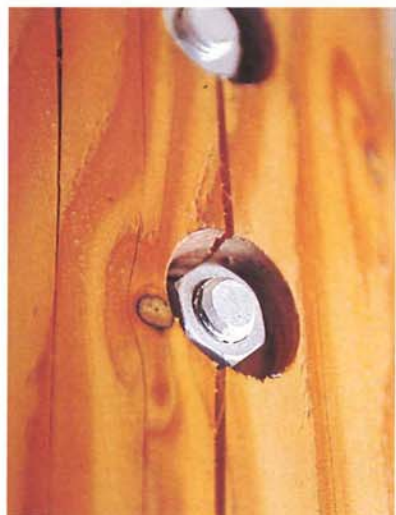
MIKE THRASHER AND LIZZIE VANN SPENT 16 YEARS CONCEIVING AND BUILDING THE FOREST HOME SEEN IN THE LAST 'GRAND DESIGNS' SERIES. BUT IT WAS WORTH THE WAIT



Lizzie Vann and Mike Thrasher have shared an ambition ever since they met. 'Mike said to me 'If we stick together for more than 10 years we'll build ourselves a house,' recalls Lizzie. But, as the recent *Grand Designs* programme about the house revealed, realising the dream has proved a longer, more tortuous process than they anticipated. The couple were unable to find a site for six years then buying the Dorset farm gobbled up so much cash that they had nothing left for the building. As a result, Mike and Lizzie spent seven years living in an, admittedly very picturesque, one-time chicken shed. Even when they had raised the capital, getting planning permission took three more years. 'In the end it took us 16 years,' says Lizzie with a wry grin.

Arriving at Hilltop Farm along a winding drive out in the remote and woody wilds of the New Forest, it's obvious that the prolonged gestation has made for a highly personal home. Architecturally, it's pretty hard to classify. At a distance of half a mile, the place looks less like a house than a zinc-roofed nest of colourful agricultural sheds. From 200 metres, the lush sub-tropical planting, the mysterious stilts and the cheerful exterior colour scheme in dark brown, heather purple and pastel green, resemble a West Indian 'gingerbread' house. And, from the front porch, the overhanging Swiss-style roof of the Douglas Fir main block conjures up a cosy Alpine shed. Step inside, however and the interior defies such ethnic preconceptions. To be sure, there's wood aplenty in the form of the giant half tonne roof trusses and the 10 Douglas Fir poles that support them. But, with its slick German kitchen units, its state-of-the-art lighting and sound systems and its modern furniture, this space feels more like a loft than a ski-lodge or a Caribbean guest house.

So where, I ask Lizzie and Mike over coffee in the sunlit living room-cum-kitchen diner, did they find their inspiration? As the couple talk through the evolution of the building it emerges that the question doesn't have a single or indeed a simple answer. ▶



PAULINE THRASHER'S ORGANIC PASSION CAKE

Mike's sister kept the crew going on site with this

6oz organic butter
 6oz organic sugar
 3 large organic eggs
 1 tsp vanilla essence
 4oz chopped organic walnuts
 or sultanas
 8oz grated organic carrots
 6oz plain organic flour
 1tsp bicarbonate of soda
 1tsp baking powder
 1tsp cinnamon
 1tsp salt
 For the topping:
 3oz cream cheese
 2 oz butter
 1/2 tsp vanilla essence
 4oz icing sugar
 12 walnut halves

Mix the butter with the sugar. Then mix in eggs, vanilla, and dry ingredients. Add nuts or fruit and pour into a greased baking tin lined with baking paper. Bake for about 1hr 15min at 180°C until firm in the middle. Cool for 30 minutes then put on to a baking tray. Mix topping ingredients until smooth and cover top and sides adding walnuts as decoration. *Makes a cake big enough for 10 people.*

Opposite page from top, Lizzie and Mike on the porch; one of the stainless-steel bolts in the Douglas Fir poles; the kitchen has state-of-the-art fittings including a 'nodding' tap system; and a shiny black Aga salvaged from the old house. *This page*, the kitchen is fitted with Rational units. The island unit is surrounded by pastel-coloured Bombo bar stools from Magis

'WE ALWAYS WANTED TO COMBINE THE HAIKU FORM WITH A MORE CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE,' INSISTS MIKE. 'THE CLASSIC HAIKU WAS TOO WOODY FOR OUR TASTES'



This page, Mike is 6ft 4in, and insisted on a bed 7x7ft in the small bedroom. Opposite page, left, the handles for a utility room cupboard were cut out of the basin surround. Other pictures, the compact bathroom has an underheated limestone floor and a cherrywood basin surround



On one hand, the couple clearly have a strong 'back-to-nature' impulse. Lizzie used to be an investment banker but she and Mike have been dedicated country-livers ever since they met. Just above the house, they have planted an orchard dedicated to rare fruit trees, and their 55-acre farm is leased out to organic livestock which is sold for meat locally. Meanwhile, Mike talks enthusiastically about Hilltop Farm's birdlife, among them lapwings, curlews, herons and buzzards. But their interest in the natural world is more than casual. Lizzie is the managing director and Mike the graphic consultant to Organix, a highly successful ethical producer of organic baby foods founded by Lizzie in 1992 and based in Christchurch. 'Making a house that harmonised with the beauty of the surrounding countryside was always a priority,' says Mike.

That's what appealed to them about the unusual kit house they came across on an American holiday. 'We found a company marketing an updated version of a traditional wooden "Haiku house" which had its roots in 14th-century Japan,' explains Mike, flicking through the original American brochure which explains how the form raised on stilts promotes air circulation within the building. 'We loved the way that these houses seemed to blend into the landscape.'

But while the completed house retains the stilts – albeit in the form of concrete plinths which support each wooden pole – it would be facile to pigeonhole Lizzie and Mike's home as a sort of built expression of New Ageism. Lizzie always wanted her house to include a tower, for example.



'There's something romantic in my psyche about princesses and towers,' she says. Mike, himself a graphic designer, also had strong views about the form of the house 'We're not hippies and we always wanted to combine the haiku form with a more contemporary architecture,' he insists. 'The classic haiku interior was too woody for our tastes – a bit too much like a Seventies pine kitchen.'

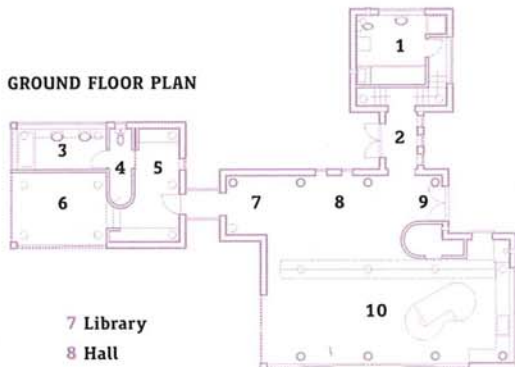
One advantage of the delay was that it allowed Lizzie and Mike time to cultivate a taste in avant-garde architecture. The couple spent their free time in

Australia and America on holidays which doubled as design research trips. 'We visited Seaside – setting for *The Truman Show* – and houses by architects like Frank Lloyd-Wright, Arthur Erickson and the Australian Glenn Murcutt – we love New World architecture and we're inspired by farms and silos,' Lizzie tells me, digging through a coffee-table book dedicated to Murcutt's spectacular, shed-style houses. 'We wanted something a bit like this – unconventional and bold with open interiors, big windows and great views.'

You can trace a touch of Murcutt's agricultural aesthetic in the fractured form of Hillside Farm – the tower bears a passing resemblance to a grain elevator, for instance. But Mike argues that the layout wasn't mere whimsy. The idea of creating three separate buildings – bedroom and living blocks and a control tower – linked by glass-walled bridges was that the 'low-level' house would blend gently into the landscape.

The same applies to the colour scheme devised, according to Mike Thrasher, with Kevin McCloud's help. The brown of the main block – one layer of light oak woodstain and two of teak – was meant to match autumn bracken; the purple of the 'control' tower harmonises both ▶

GROUND FLOOR PLAN



- 1 Tower
- 2 Corridor
- 3 Bathroom
- 4 Shower
- 5 Dressing room
- 6 Bedroom
- 7 Library
- 8 Hall
- 9 Entrance
- 10 Living space/kitchen

DIRECTORY

Cost of build

£350,000

Concept architect

David Underhill
DJA Architecture
01425 278 252

Structural architect

David Scull, QED Architects
01962 842 042

Project manager

Graham Davies
01590 675 900
grahamdavies-online.co.uk

Structural engineers

Andrew Waring Associates
01794 524 447

Piling and substructure

Able Piling and Construction
01489 797 600

Steel structure

Allfab Southern
01794 518 911

Timber frame superstructure

Bluechip Construction Services
01202 419 500

Timber supply: Douglas fir

East Brothers
01794 340 270

Column turning

Spindlewood Woodturners
01278 453 665

Sandblasting

Masterblast Structural
Cleaning
02380 848 339

Window and door frames

TK Joinery Ltd
01258 455 521

Underfloor heating

Warmafloor
01489 581 787

Roofing

Pace Roofing
01794 515 155

Waste treatment plant

Clearwater Environmental
Solutions
01278 433 443

Plumbing and water systems

Clinton Foakes
07712 645 568

Electrician

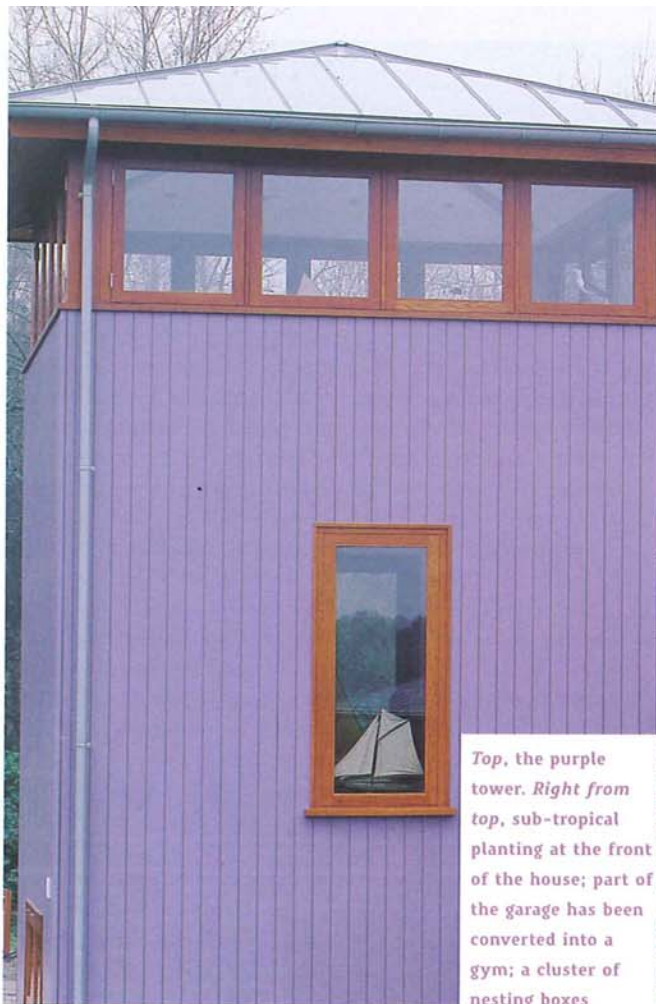
Luke Puckett
07977 298 561

Kitchen design

Kitchen Elegance Ltd
01202 740 630

Cooking appliances

Gaggenau
08708 402 003



Top, the purple tower. Right from top, sub-tropical planting at the front of the house; part of the garage has been converted into a gym; a cluster of nesting boxes

LIZZIE ALWAYS WANTED HER HOUSE TO INCLUDE A TOWER. 'THERE'S SOMETHING ROMANTIC IN MY PSYCHE ABOUT PRINCESSES AND TOWERS,' SHE SAYS



with the June rhododendrons and the summer heather; while the green blends with the sub-tropical planting in front of the house.

But, for all their environmental concerns, Mike and Lizzie clearly have a hedonistic streak. The deluxe detailing of much of the interior is a world away from the eco stereotype. With its underheated limestone floor, its glass mosaic-clad shower, its cherry-topped basin top and its clubby dressing room, the couple's bathroom is the essence of modern luxury.

Elsewhere in the house there are enough boys' and girls' toys to satisfy any overgrown kid. Two kilometres worth of cables feed an automated lighting system that changes colour according to your mood, and a network of flat speakers that feeds music into every room. Lizzie has a stylish kitchen worthy of its role as the testbed for new Organix recipes, and among the state-of-the-art 'extras' are a periscope extractor (to replace the extractor canopy), an 'undershelf' fridge, a 'nodding' tap and a two-drawer dishwasher which allows you to store one lot of plates while the other set is being cleaned.

What started out as a haiku then has emerged as a unique stylistic hybrid. As Kevin McCloud pointed out, few *Grand Designs* episodes have featured a more complex construction process. This single house after all, featured poured concrete blockwork, glass walkways, a timber framed Douglas fir shed, two single-storey buildings and a three-storey tower. The couple took a very active role in the management of the project – Mike supervising the building and Lizzie holding the purse strings and providing a client's critical eye – but how wise they were to take on an efficient project manager: 'That was the best decision we made,' says Mike.

So how do the couple feel about the building now that it's finally finished? Lizzie feels that it still needs a bit more time. 'It needs to age a little so that it blends into the landscape more gently,' she says. 'I think it will look perfect in another 10 years.' This magazine will certainly be back in a few years time to find out. If ever a building proved that good things come to those who wait, this is it. ■



1. Cherry bathroom sink surround made by Peter Naylor



2. Undershelf fridge, about £3,200, by Sub-Zero Refrigeration Systems



4. Wood burning stove, £1,642, by Scan of Denmark



5. Purple and green paint on exterior wood by Sikks



6. Home cinema, £25,000, by Dawson's Home Cinema



7. Aspect black plate plug sockets, £27, by MK Electric



8. Stainless-steel dish washer, £949, by Fisher & Paykel Appliances



9. Down Draft Extractor System, £2,250, by Gaggenau at BSH Home Appliances Ltd

10. Master S mixer tap and spray system, about £535, by Blanco

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