



When architects have to do homework

We've all seen the dream houses created by leading architects, but how do they adapt existing buildings for their own use? Clive Aslet explores the rural domestic settings of three professionals

Photographs by Dylan Thomas

Far left: A house inside a barn. Left: Tom Croft in his first architectural project, now his home. Above: A new deck overlooks the gardens

Tom Croft's Kentish barn

TOM CROFT'S Whitstable home, occupied with his wife, Max, and daughter Kitty, is a barn that originally belonged to a farmhouse bought by his grandparents. The house has long been sold, but The Barn remains, having been converted by Tom for his parents in the 1980s: 'Houses for architects' parents are a classic first project.'

Only half the barn contains formal rooms. 'One of the mistakes people make is to turn barns into houses; once you put on a front door, it's over—the place is no longer a barn.' Instead, Tom created a 'house inside a barn. You can walk through the big door on the

entrance front and out the other side, into the garden, without ever going into the house'.

Visually, there is an influence from the Postmodernism that then ruled the architectural roost. 'The rooms take the form of bits of abstracted buildings. It's like a ship in a bottle.' The architectural vocabulary is abstract and largely free of mouldings, as, he admits disarmingly, he didn't know how to design them at that stage of his career.

The Crofts senior filled The Barn with family paintings and furniture. Since inheriting, Tom and Max have not seen any reason to change the decor significantly; their only major work has been to create a deck from which to view the garden. Having been designed by Tom's grandfather to be read from the farmhouse, this required a degree of reorientation.

Barns with gardens in the South-East inevitably evoke the romance of Sissinghurst and Great Dixter and this is no exception. It's certainly a contrast to the Crofts' London home, built in the 1970s and renovated in an enthusiastically Modern style.

Tom admits to having a 'bipolar' existence, but The Barn has played its part in developing his career, as many of his projects have involved the reimagining of historic buildings. 'I learnt that the best you can do is not too much,' he says. Friends who recently gathered for a party for a big birthday celebration, seated in the unconverted half of The Barn, will know that minimal architectural intervention is no barrier to having fun.

Thomas Croft Architects (020-8962 0066; www.thomascroft.com)



Sandra Coppin's Modern house in Wiltshire

SANDRA COPPIN lived in Berthold Lubetkin's Highpoint II, a famous work of the early Modern movement, but with a family of two daughters, she and her husband, Nico, came to feel that a small flat in Highgate, N6, however architecturally progressive for the 1930s, was rather cramped at weekends.

The chance opening of a property website sent them to Wiltshire, where a Modern house, in need of love and care, was on the market. This was the Ansty Plum House, built for Roger Rigby and his wife, Patricia, in 1964.

It stands on the side of a steep bank, at the back of which are an ancient trackway and a wood; opposite, behind more trees, are the village's little church and a 16th-century building known as The Commandery, a reference to the Knights Hospitaller who owned the manor in the Middle Ages.

Working for Arup, Rigby was attuned to engineering and design, although he was neither an engineer nor designer himself. For an architect, he turned to his friend and colleague Sir Philip Dowson. Dowson saw the site needed a retaining wall; above this, he tilted a single flat square of roof, supported on a wooden structure. The principal façades of the house are completely encased in glass.

The house was realised by a junior architect in Arup's office: David Levitt (later of Levitt Bernstein), known for the Brunswick Centre in Bloomsbury. Building restrictions and a tight budget meant that the design was pared back to essentials. 'Every element serves a purpose,' says Sandra, tapping one of the wooden posts that supports the roof.



The rigorous economy of the construction creates its own aesthetic, which has an even greater appeal in the wasteful 21st century.

The house was soon finished, but continued to evolve, having engaged the imagination of the Rigbys' friends Peter and Alison Smithson, architects of The Economist building on St James's Street, SW1, who had a house nearby. Among other improvements, Peter designed a gently rising path and a ramp, which double back on themselves, both to ease the gradient and increase the apparent extent of a plot that is only one-third of an acre.

‘A rule of the house is that everything should be repurposed,’

Insulation was hardly considered in an age before the 1970s energy crisis. Although the Coppins wanted to keep their interventions to a minimum, visits on cold winter days convinced them to install heating. The floor of the ground-floor living space—both sitting room and kitchen—was taken up, laid with underfloor heating from an air-source heat pump and, in the spirit of the original simplicity, laid with concrete paving slabs, ground to a smooth surface. A small enlargement was made to the separate studio.

A rule of the house is that everything should be repurposed, where possible, thus the zinc that was stripped from the decaying roof has reappeared as table tops, resting on industrial brackets. The result is a work of reverence, love and ingenuity, whose spare beauty is an antidote to consumerism and excess. *Coppin Dockray Architects (07906 025428; www.coppindockray.co.uk)*

Above and right: A Modern house revived with modern sensibilities. Below: Sandra Coppin has kept its spirit of simplicity





Hugh Petter's Hampshire cottage

IVY COTTAGE, in the Hampshire village of Owslebury, south of Winchester, was built in 1732. It was originally the village forge—a long, thin building of orangey-red brick, with a tiled roof, hipped and half-hipped at the ends. At some point in the 20th century, a conservatory had been added to the north side.

When Hugh Petter, of ADAM Architecture, and his wife, Chloe, bought it, their toddler children, Charlotte and Harry, could sleep in the attic. By 2014, they could no longer

stand up in their bedrooms and Hugh realised that something had to be done.

This was also an opportunity to remove the conservatory—too hot in summer, too cold in winter—and replace it with a big kitchen. This extension shelters beneath a twin gabled roof, with walls that are hung with tiles. Although the new work is only a few years old, it already looks as if it has always been there. 'That is the effect I like to achieve in my architecture,' explains Hugh. 'I am always pleased when somebody

stands in front of one of my buildings and asks what I've done.'

Both Hugh and Chloe enjoyed Georgian country furniture and among Hugh's forebears are two painters: James Leakey, who exhibited at the Royal Academy in the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s, and the wood engraver Josiah Wood Whymper, who was a friend of Ruskin. Many of their works hang on the walls.

These traditional tastes had to be married with a family kitchen, which was not a room type that existed before the late 20th century. The marriage was made through exemplary craftsmanship, provided by the builder

R. W. Armstrong and the cabinetmaker John Kirby of Dovetail. 'Everyone wants a big family kitchen,' comments Hugh, 'and it's much easier to build one on a new site than to fit it into an existing building.'

'I am always pleased when somebody stands in front of one of my buildings and asks what I've done'

Far left above: The extension is barely discernible from the 18th-century cottage.

Far left: Architect Hugh Petter. Above: The family kitchen meets with canine approval

Above the kitchen are two new bedrooms and bathrooms; the old attic bedrooms are now only used when the house is otherwise full. Outside, a brick-and-flint retaining wall, which stopped the view from the end of the garden, has been removed.

'It now looks as if Ivy Cottage owns half of the Itchen valley.'

ADAM Architecture (01962 843843; www.adamarchitecture.com)