



Naturally Inspired

Douglas fir has been used to clad the SIPs (structural insulated panels) and oak frame structure – here, heavy posts support the corners of the veranda – and has been painted in breathable blue Sadolin Superdec to reflect the coastal setting

The Designer's Finest

When leading self-build architect Roderick James and wife Amanda Markham set about designing a guest house – which would also serve as a prototype for 'expandable' living – the results were always going to be pretty special

SELF-BUILD | ARGYLL | NOV 10 - APR 11 | SIZE: 162m²
 LAND COST: £110,000 (£1,728/m²) | BUILD COST: £280,000 | VALUE: £500,000



Kitchen

The in-frame timber kitchen units, which were handcrafted by a local joiner, complement the coastal-inspired, 'lived-in' interiors. They're topped by an elm worktop which was recycled from a previous home and crafted to fit



WORDS: DEBBIE JEFFERY | PHOTOGRAPHY: NIGEL RIGDEN



Living Room

A bank of rooflights and full-height glazing bring in natural light and lend a garden room feel to the living area. An 8kW woodburning stove from Clearview keeps the open plan living, kitchen and dining area cosy on cold nights

Open Plan Interior

The heart of the house is the central open plan kitchen/dining/living area, which is filled with quirky, characterful design details such as louvred shutters above the sink. A separate utility locks away noise-generating appliances



Neutral Scheme

Timber floorboards have been given a wash of diluted white paint and matt varnish, for a rustic, neutral finish which neither competes with nor detracts from the oak frame above



Instant Character

Double-height ceilings and rooflights add to the illusion of space, while brush-finish plaster lends texture and character to the walls. Roderick once made a living from carving timber decoy ducks; several now reside upon the oak beams

An Expandable Home

Key to Roderick's ethos for building this guest house was creating a prototype for an 'expandable home' which could be adapted with ease to accommodate future needs. Two sheltered verandas, which sit beneath overhanging eaves, offer outdoor living (shown), but could be enclosed to provide additional interior space if required.

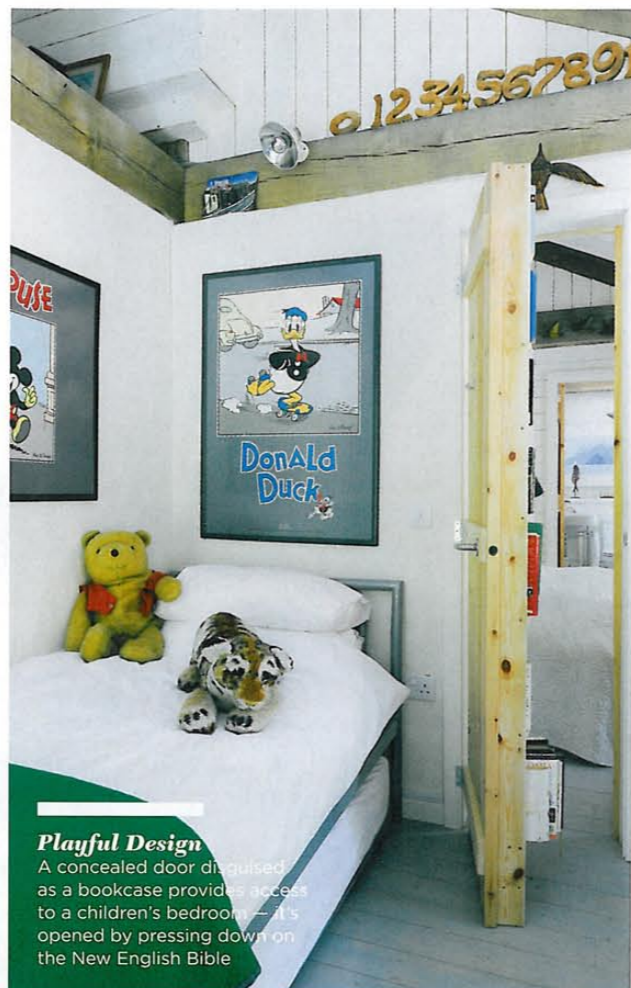


Staircase

The staircase rises up from the dining area to the first floor studio above. The glass balustrade and open treads allow natural light from first floor windows to flood down into the interior below.



Bathroom
Clerestory windows (seen, reflected in the mirror) bring light into the ground floor bathroom, without compromising privacy



Playful Design
A concealed door disguised as a bookcase provides access to a children's bedroom — it's opened by pressing down on the New English Bible



First Floor
The first floor is utilised as an open plan office/studio. Composite windows (which are timber internally and aluminium on the exterior) are easy to maintain and don't sacrifice character

Tigh na Mara (Gaelic for 'house by the sea') was designed and built by Roderick James and his wife, Amanda Markham, to take full advantage of the fantastic views from their seven-acre site on the west coast of Scotland, which looks out across the Sound to the Isle of Mull.

"In 1996, I was designing a house for a couple in the area and on one of my visits from Devon saw this undeveloped woodland site for sale, which stands at the end of a single track road," recalls Roderick. "The land was very affordable in those days, and we built the house eight years ago and felt instantly at home."

People cannot believe it's only been here for a year because it feels completely lived in

Square in plan, with a pyramid roof, the three bedroom house was designed by Roderick, whose award-winning architectural practice specialises in contemporary timber buildings beside the water. The exciting reverse-level structure was built with a masonry ground floor, banked with earth, and a green oak frame on the first floor (see it on page 59). Later, the need for additional office space and guest accommodation led the couple to build a second house in the woods behind, with a first floor studio space where Amanda and Roderick now work.

Despite its square floorplan, the oak frame guest house is markedly different from the couple's home, and was conceived as a prototype for an expandable house, which could be adapted at ease when required. A central two storey starter core of accommodation measures five metres by six metres, and other ground floor rooms radiate off in wings from this core. Corner verandas provide sheltered outdoor seating areas below the overhanging eaves of the lower slate roof, but could be fully enclosed in future to create additional rooms if required.

"The planning process was very straightforward, and the guest house took just six months to build," says Roderick, who chose to employ local craftspeople throughout. The oak frame drawings were produced by Roderick's former company, Carpenter Oak, but he employed local builder Angus Macdonald to complete the build. "Angus learned the slightly quirky way we do things and is now working with us on other oak frame homes," Roderick says.

'Quirky' is also a word which can be used to describe the small design details throughout, like a tiny oak shelf on the side of a post, which is perfectly positioned to accommodate a wine glass. Indeed, the success of the house can largely be attributed to the simple rustic finishes and idiosyncratic features, which are so often



absent in brand new homes. "People cannot believe that it's only been here for a year because it feels completely lived in," says Roderick.

A bookcase in the guest bedroom is in fact a secret door, which opens into an adjoining children's bedroom and has proved extremely popular with visitors of all ages. "You have to press down on the New English Bible to open the door," laughs Roderick, who carefully sawed and glued the books to create an artless display.

Roderick's love of experimentation led to a workshop being built on the site with photovoltaic (PV) panels on the roof, where he makes prototypes and tests out his building theories. As a former director at the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) in Wales, Roderick

Roderick and Amanda's Suppliers

Design Roderick James Architects LLP (offices in Scotland, Devon and London).....	01803 868000 rjarchitects.co.uk
Oak frames Carpenter Oak Ltd. (and Treewrights).....	01803 732900
Windows Velfac.....	01223 897100
Builder Macdonald Joinery.....	01397 713866
Foundations and drainage John Varney.....	01869 343422
Building supplies Travis Perkins.....	01397 705195
Engineering Ian Payne.....	01794 341226
Heat pump consultant John Cantor.....	heatpumps.co.uk
Electrician Neil Malcolm.....	01855 821102
Wall and floor painting Shirley Shaw.....	01967 421700
Douglas fir and larch SoundWood Sawmill.....	01967 421746
Breathable external paint Sadolin.....	0844 770 8998
Woodburning stove Clearview.....	01584 878100

is dedicated to sustainability and renewable energy but urges caution before investing in the numerous technologies currently available.

"The guest house is served by a 4kW photovoltaic array, which produces electricity, and we also installed a ground-source heat pump, but often the savings aren't as great as people think," he explains. "We're currently investigating alternative heating systems, using an entire floor slab as a heat store running on off-peak electricity, which only costs around £500 to install."

Designing hundreds of homes for other people over many years certainly hasn't dampened Roderick's enthusiasm for the process, which he constantly strives to refine and improve. Space-wasting internal passageways and corridors have been eliminated from his own guest house, which is predominantly single storey and centres on a spacious open plan living/dining/kitchen area, around which bedrooms and bathrooms are positioned.

Internally, the guest house walls have been finished in a brush-finish plaster, which creates interesting textures when the wall lights are lit at night. "I try to avoid the stereotypical square room with square corners, where everything is smooth and flat and sharp," Roderick explains. "Light, space and texture are key things for me, and I believe in putting more fun and informality back into houses."

The overall impression is of an informal, comfortable home, which is enhanced by its peaceful waterside setting. "We tend to do everything by boat and don't use the car here," says Roderick. "Building in such a remote location definitely adds expense – perhaps as much as 20% to the overall cost – although the firms here are geared up for it," he believes. "There's always a price to pay for living beside the water, but we really can't imagine being anywhere else." ■

CONTEMPORARY OAK FRAME

"Tigh na Mara, our main house, was one of the first properties I designed which moved away from barn-style oak frames towards a more contemporary approach," explains Roderick. "It worked so well that I decided to concentrate on this type of building, and have 15 architects in the practice currently working on more than 100 individual houses across the country, including Achabeag – a new settlement which incorporates sustainable, affordable houses just a few miles away in Argyll."

Eschewing the mediaeval characteristics of oak framing to achieve a more modern feel has involved replacing curved bracings with straighter timbers or stainless steel bracing rods, which are visually less obstructive than oak. "The posts in our guest house living room are only 150mm square and create a lighter feel," says Roderick, "but they still meet fire regulations."

Structural insulated panels have been used to wrap around the oak frame, which is clad externally with horizontal Douglas fir weatherboarding, painted blue to reflect the coastal setting. Fixed glazing, set between the oak timbers, has been finished externally with cover boards made from local cedar, and composite timber and aluminium windows were installed throughout.

The frame is exposed internally and contrasts with white walls, ceilings and floors. "I feel that one of the keys to building a contemporary oak frame house is not to overdo the oak," states Roderick. "If you have joinery floors they can compete with all the posts and beams. We used a very diluted wash of white paint and a matt varnish on the softwood floorboards, and also painted the majority of the beams white so that the oak doesn't dominate. It creates a rather washed-out but lovely lived-in feeling."

What We've Learned

What surprised you most about undertaking this project?

We were most surprised that this new guest house feels as if it's been lived in for 20 years. We didn't really buy any new furniture but used our existing belongings, which give the interiors a homely feel.



What's your favourite part of the house?

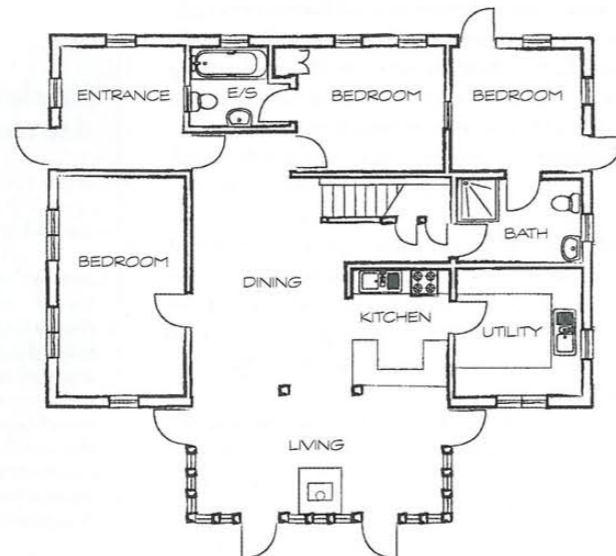
The sheltered verandas are perfect for enjoying a drink after work.

What advice would you pass on to others?

Once I've found a company that gives good service I tend to stick with them rather than shopping around all the time. Loyalty and aftercare are more important than shaving a few pounds off the price.

Floorplans

The guest house is predominantly single storey, with a central two storey core which creates a useful study/studio upstairs (not shown here). Corridors and passages have been avoided; the living/dining/kitchen space is open plan and informal. Bedrooms, bathrooms and the utility radiate off this central space.



RODERICK AND AMANDA'S SELF-BUILT HOUSE

A quick look at Roderick and Amanda's oak frame and masonry self-built home



The Original

The masonry ground floor of Roderick and Amanda's home is banked by earth – which not only acts as a cosy insulator, but minimises the massing of the house in its rural setting. The first floor is constructed in green oak frame and features full-height glazing



Upside-Down Living
 The spacious lounge is located at first floor to make the most of the stunning waterside views. A pyramid-shaped glazed roof ensures the space is full of light, filtered down to the ground floor through glazed flooring.