BACK to basics

Nestled in the New Forest, Charles and Fiona Watson's summer house-cum-Modernist pavilion offers a masterclass in contemporary simplicity – and it was constructed in just five days

Words *Sarah Baldwin* **Photography** *Richard Powers*

left *The huge black chimney breast bisects the house, separating the open-plan living area from the master bedroom suite*
right *Careful placement of the furniture divides the open-plan area into three zones: a seating area near the fireplace; dining space with a simple chunky wooden table, and the kitchen*

'We wanted a place and space. We knew we wanted to build a modern house'

There's something a bit off-putting about the word prefab. It carries with it all sorts of negative connotations, conjuring up images of post-war construction and drab mass-market homes. But cast those preconceptions aside, because some of the most striking modern homes are now built from pre-made, modular components – plus, it's a sustainable and budget-friendly construction method. Take Charles and Fiona Watson's holiday retreat in the New Forest: it took only five days to assemble this Modernist masterpiece.

The house is a second – or more likely fourth or fifth – home for Charles, Fiona and their teenage children, who are primarily based in London. Although Charles travels abroad extensively for work (he heads up a global PR company), they wanted a base in the New Forest to cement the family's links with the area – Charles grew up locally, and the plot's previous house (a suburban-style two-storey property) had been in their family for years.

They wanted a house that was the antidote to urban life, connected with the outdoors and very easy to maintain. 'The most important thing for us was that the house was unintrusive,' explains Charles. 'It had to be part of nature.' They weren't interested in building using man-made materials like plaster or brick; they wanted a structure that was in keeping with its forest surroundings. They were also looking for a place where the family could both gather and spread out. 'We wanted a place and space,' he smiles.

right *A specially designed, oversized central island in the kitchen stores all the family's crockery and glassware, while a horizontal mirror behind the sink reflects light to enhance the feeling of space*

It was geography that led them to commission architect John Pardey, but although they initially chose him because he was based locally, they were equally inspired by his Modernist aesthetic. 'We knew we wanted to build a modern house,' says Charles. The couple wanted to be involved in the design process and, according to Pardey, understood contemporary architecture from the outset.

The result is an elegant and simple pavilion that crosses, finger-like, from the north to the south of the site. It's made from cross-laminated timber panels from KLH UK, which have been externally insulated then clad in sweet chestnut strips. The whole process was a project manager's dream; two trucks of panels arrived on Monday and everything was in place by the Friday.

'We were fascinated by the idea of a sustainable product that could make floors, roofs and walls and that would accept crazy cut-out openings to →

precise measurements,' says Pardey. His crazy openings range from floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors that wrap round the living space to a long narrow window at foot level in one of the hallways (a clever way of introducing light without running the risk of being overlooked). And because the panels are cut to precise sizes, it was possible to install the pre-ordered windows just days after the building was erected.

Just as the exterior is modest and minimal, so the interior finish is stripped back and simple. The floors, walls and roof are all made of the KLH timber panels. The ceiling and some of the walls have been clad in plasterboard to cover the clutter of cables and light fittings, but the floors and the walls in the bedroom corridor and main bedroom have been left exposed. This gives the whole house a contemporary-cabin aesthetic; on the warm day when *GDM* visited, it had the gentle woody fragrance of a sauna.

The layout is equally fuss-free. A spacious, open-plan living area and kitchen occupies the central space. The couple wanted a separate area for themselves, away from kids and guests, so their bedroom and dressing room are at one end of the building. Three further →

above and left *The earthy tones of the sofa and rug are perfectly in keeping with the wooded surroundings. The pistol artwork is by Ben Turnbull* ***right*** *Stackable dining chairs add a splash of colour to the dining area. The giant insect photograph is by Mat Collishaw*

bedrooms, all facing east with large windows to catch the morning sun and evenly sized with simple, statement-free furniture, sit at the opposite end. The house is anchored to the site by a large brick chimney and hearth that cuts through its middle; it's built using Danish black bricks which pull in the dark bark of the surrounding pine copse.

It makes for an incredibly harmonious home; even the dimensions are all perfectly in sync, with the length and width of the whole building neatly matching the 1:5 proportions of the black bricks that make up the central wall and chimney breast in the living room (Pardey is a master of detail, but he admits this match up was mere serendipity).

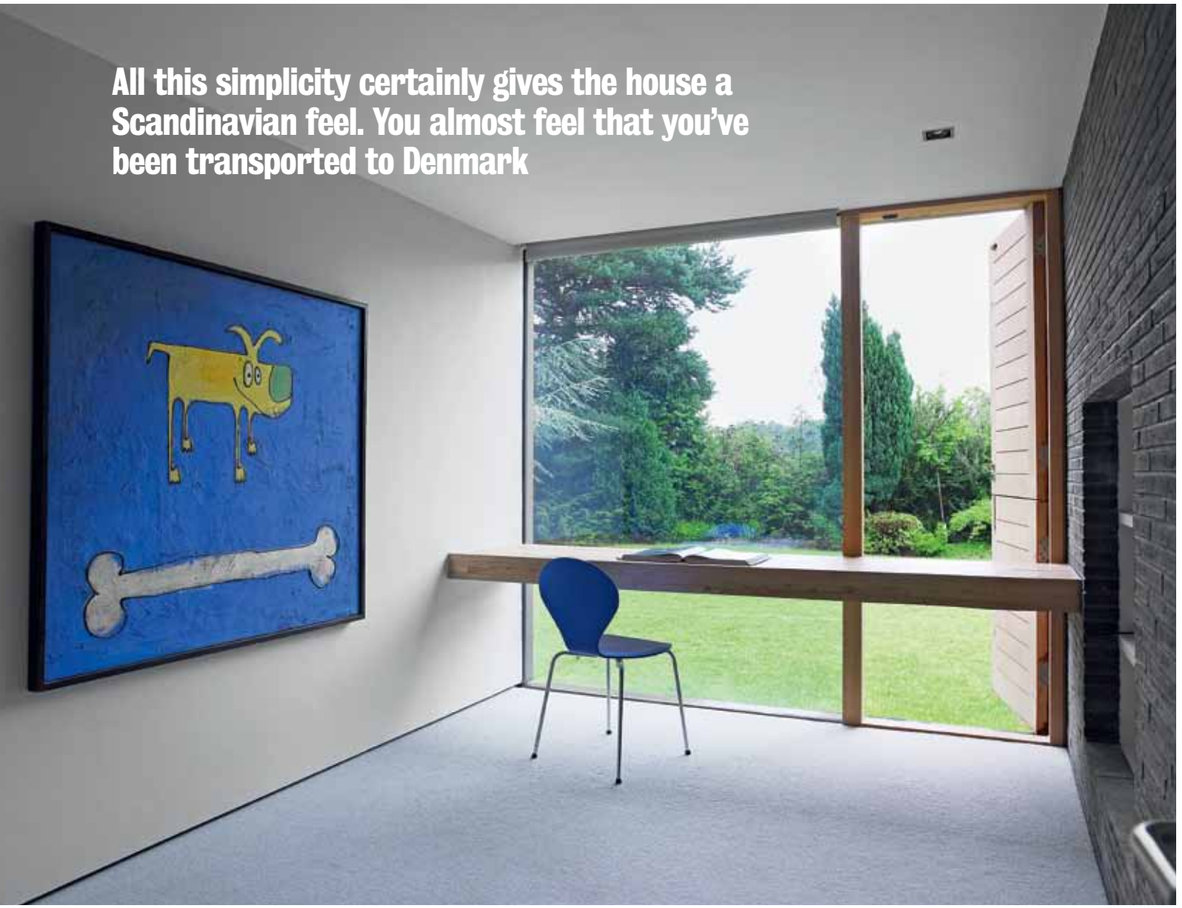
All this simplicity (plus the sauna scent) certainly gives the house a Scandinavian feel. You almost feel that you've been transported to Denmark, which, looking into Pardey's background, shouldn't come as a surprise; he's a major exponent of the Danish school. 'I'm inspired by all things Scandinavian,' he enthuses. He specifically references a guest pavilion in Denmark built in the Fifties by architect Vilhelm Wohlert as his design's driving force. 'It's a little timber pavilion that floats above the garden and has large shutters that open and close with the seasons,' he explains.

Just like Wohlert's pavilion, Pardey's house sits lightly on the land. Rather than digging deep foundations, he designed the house to rest on narrow concrete rails, with the floor panels spanning between the two; the result is a house that appears to be lifted slightly off the ground, as though it were floating. This aspect of the construction was complicated, however, by the extensive basement, a bone of contention between Pardey and the Watsons (it was the family who insisted on an underground cinema). 'I know that John wasn't keen on it, but it's critical to the way we use the house,' explains Charles.

Besides the beef with the basement, when it came to finishes touches there were a few clashes between the architect's vision and the owner's taste. Pardey's particular bugbear is the shower in the guest bedroom, which features the house name in mosaic detail. He admits he sometimes has a problem letting go of his design. 'Most clients have a habit of putting up pictures which are not to my taste; I call it wall acne,' he laughs. 'Sometimes we can influence, and I like to help with furniture choices, but not in this case.'

Where the house is in keeping with Pardey's vision is in terms of its eco credentials. It has a sedum roof, and uses a ground source heat pump and rainwater recycling. The large openings to the living area and bedrooms are deeply recessed to avoid excessive solar gain in summer, while allowing good daylight quality in winter.

For a house that's so sustainable, you'd think it would have had an easy ride with the planners. Quite the contrary, and it took two years – and various appeals – for them to win permission (even though a hideous pastiche house on a neighbouring plot was approved first time). The objection was that this contemporary house wasn't in keeping with New Forest vernacular (although Pardey questions whether this even exists). He jokes that, with the current planning system the way it is, he now →



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below *Charles' office has a very minimal look and features a built-in solid oak desk. The dog and bone artwork is by Dennis*
right *All the bedrooms are simply furnished and have stable doors leading out to the garden*

right *Charles and Fiona opted for a compact en-suite bathroom in the master bedroom to allow space for a separate dressing room*
far right *The design includes a floor-level window in the hallway to let in light*

left and below *Charles and Fiona like to use the house for entertaining friends – the unobtrusive entrance opens on to a decked walkway, mirrored on the other side of the house by a large terrace with a built-in barbecue*

expects his designs to be rejected first-off, but knows that he will win at appeal.

When a house is super-eco, barely visible from the road and melts into its surroundings, it's pretty hard to understand the basis of any complaint.

'The objective was to make a modern architecture that echoes the character of a rural vernacular,' says Pardey, 'and makes a positive yet discrete impact on the site – both environmentally and visually.' It certainly does that, mingling perfectly with the neighbouring pine copse.

It has also had a positive impact on its inhabitants. Charles and Fiona use the house as often as they can, plus their kids are able to invite friends down for weekends. It's a house that works in summer or winter – throw open the doors for al fresco living, or light the fire or curl up in the cinema room for a cosy winter evening in. **GD**

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Suppliers

Project team **Architect** John Pardey Architects (01590 626 465; johnpardeyarchitects.com) **Structural engineer** Ramboll UK (020 7631 5291; ramboll.co.uk) **Services engineer** Energist UK (0845 838 6387; energistuk.co.uk) **Quantity surveyor** APS Chartered Surveyors (020 7614 3200; aps-surveyors.com)

Structure **Cross-laminated structural panels** KLH UK (020 3031 8070; klhuk.com) **Joinery** Quest Timber Products (0845 838 8778; questtimberproducts.co.uk) **Window system** Fineline Aluminium (01934 429 922; finelinealuminium.co.uk) **Bricks** Petersen Kolumba (+45 4014 1236; petersen-kolumba.dk) **Roofing** Bauder (0845 271 8800; bauder.co.uk) **Aluminium cladding panels** PSP Metal Facade Solutions (01388 770 490; pspuk.com) **Insulation** Kingspan (01352 716 100; kingspan.com)

Fixtures and fittings **Kitchen** Interfit Design Studio (01425 623 000) **Bathrooms** Interfit Design Studio (as above) **Lighting** Deltalight (0870 757 7087; deltalight.com) **Blinds** Mechoshade (020 7256 6446; mechoshade.com)

Furniture and accessories **Kitchen table** For similar, try Eaton dining table by Ligne Roset (020 7323 1248; ligne-roset.co.uk) **Kitchen chairs** Series 7 chair by Arne Jacobsen for Fritz Hansen at Aram Store (020 7557 7557; aram.co.uk) **White bed** For similar, try Avignon bed from Feather & Black (01243 380 600; featherandblack.com) **Sofa** Roche Bobois (020 7431 1411; roche-bobois.com) **Pistol artwork** Ben Turnbull **Insect photograph** Mat Collishaw (matcollishaw.com)

Ground floor

1 Master bedroom
2 En suite
3 Dressing room
4 Study
5 Living area
6 Kitchen-dining
7 WC
8 Coat store
9 Utility
10 Bedroom
11 Bedroom
12 En suite
13 Bathroom
14 Bedroom