



IN BRIEF
PROJECT New build
LOCATION Taunton
COST Site already owned
SPENT £425,000
WORTH £1 million+



A visionary design

A former cowshed has been brought to life with a zinc-clad addition which appears to grow out of the stone walls.

STORY: **DEBBIE JEFFERY** PICTURES: **IAN HASLEM**

Neil Simmons is a sculptor and his wife, Emma de Bendern Simmons, an artist in her own right, so it is no surprise that the house they recently built on their idyllic farm fuses art and architecture to create a unique building. Their individual styles are intertwined throughout the property, with its deep colours, unusual features and lofty spaces.

Back in 2006, the couple bought a derelict farm in a valley at the foot of Somerset's Quantock Hills, surrounded by 50 acres of lush and untouched rolling fields. The West Somerset Railway and its steam locomotives trundle over the bridge and across the western boundary. "We were living in London and had restored one of the old Huguenot houses in Spitalfields," explains Neil. "We'd been searching for six years for a new family home and renovation project in the countryside, when a friend told us about Roebuck Farm."

Situated in a beautiful valley, surrounded by its own land and accessed through woodland by a mile-long private track, the farmhouse had been the estate manager's

EXTERIOR
 Part barn and part zinc, The Railway House is a piece of sculpture set in untouched pasture in the Somerset hills near the pretty village of Crowcombe.



REAR
 Excavated into a hollow below a steep field, the building combines a restored stone cowshed and newly built zinc-clad extension, which appears to grow organically out of the site.

farm for the Crowcombe Estate and stood untouched for 10 years after the previous owner died. "It was a real time capsule," says Emma. "The land was let go and went to rack and ruin. Barns fell down, sheds fell down, and every building had a hole in its roof. The farm went to auction and was the most talked-of property, but nobody had been willing to take it on until we bought it."

After sensitively renovating the farmhouse and most of the outbuildings, the couple, who have six children, decided to restore the old cowshed, which had fallen into total disrepair over many years. Standing across a stream, away from the main house, the ivy-clad stone structure was ideally situated to become an annexe. "The council told us that as long as we kept the roof intact we should be able to get permission for a conversion, so we diligently kept the roof going on the small barn until we were ready," says Neil.

"A local architect was brought in to design a conventional barn conversion, which was a little boring. After much debate with the council, a new planning officer





arrived who decided he preferred a completely different and modern approach, so we started again from scratch.”

Neil and Emma approached their Swiss architect friend Michel Schranz, from design studio MSDA, to work on the project. The practice aims to react to site context, the brief, and other parameters without preconceptions for solutions, and has delivered a varied portfolio of work including residential projects, arts and musical installations, furniture, exhibitions, commercial spaces and performance designs.

The cowshed's location was of prime importance, standing as it does within acres of rural countryside where stags roam freely, with steam trains crossing a bridge at the front of the building. “We worked together to design the house,” says Emma, who has a strong interest in architecture and interiors. “The parish council was fantastic all the way along, and it helped that Neil had previously worked with English Heritage. He has incredible knowledge of construction, and we’ve always tackled projects ourselves in the past rather than employing builders.”

Neil and Emma had roughly sketched their ideas for a barn and a new addition, which their architect then adapted. “He has an extraordinary talent for creating exciting spaces, and understood our wish for a fairly brutal, industrial look,” explains Neil. The result is a



THE BUILD

Most of the stonework was foraged from tumbledown barns found around the farm, and bespoke architectural features can be found throughout. Red stone walls surround the sheltered garden, giving it a Tuscan feel.



FLOORPLAN

On the ground floor of the 160-sqm-house is the first double bedroom, suitable for wheelchair use, and an en suite shower room, plus a separate WC. The sitting room and kitchen/diner are open plan. Up the concrete spiral stairs are two further en suite bedrooms and a study space.

GROUND FLOOR

LOWER GROUND FLOOR



STAIRS
Designed by Neil, and made by the builder from concrete using formwork, a unique spiral staircase winds up to the first floor.



building like no other. A zinc-clad modern edifice with a flat roof appears to grow out of the pitch-roofed stone barn element. The highly glazed structure spans two storeys, with open-plan living/dining/kitchen space on the ground floor, together with a double bedroom suitable for wheelchair use, an en suite shower room and separate WC. Up the concrete spiral stairs there are two further bedrooms, together with a bathroom and en suite.

Once planning permission had been granted, Emma and Neil employed a building company to begin the ambitious groundworks in 2019. This involved mammoth excavation, deep foundations and the construction of an extensive retaining wall at the foot of a sloping field. “Unfortunately, our original builders messed up the substructure of the house, much of which needed to be rebuilt when the structural engineer drilled test holes in the concrete and exposed the omissions. In the end, we invited one of the labourers, Tim Short, to take over the project,” says Emma. “Tim was wary, as it was such an unconventional build, but we promised to support him, and he proved to be a brilliant choice.”

Most of the local sandstone used for the project was salvaged from fallen-down buildings on the farm, which had been left in piles by the previous owner and was mixed with paler limestone. A stone garden wall follows the footprint of what was formerly a small lincay attached to the barn, forming a sheltered Tuscan-style courtyard garden, complete with an olive tree. “We did all the landscaping in the garden ourselves,” says Neil.

Emma recalls that the enormous six-by-eight-metre concrete gable end wall was poured in a single day by an elderly Lebanese opera singer as he serenaded the builders in French from the top of the scaffolding, cigarette in hand, while operating the concrete pump.

Inspired by Brutalist architecture at the Southbank, shuttering forms made from scaffold boards have imprinted onto the concrete to leave their textured

“Neil designed our concrete spiral staircase and made timber moulds to Michel’s calculations which were then cast on site.”

SITTING ROOM

An enormous concrete gable end presides in the sitting room, which is contained in the rebuilt original barn, with new accommodation added in the zinc-clad blockwork extension. High ceilings, soft, organic materials, and large pieces of statement artwork create exciting interiors.



IN DETAIL

PROJECT
Architect MSDA: ms-da.com
Builder T Short Building and Groundwork: 07768 731500

STRUCTURE
Carpenter and joiner Tim Leach: tingleach246@gmail.com
Roofing Channel Rubber Roofing: 07487 522937

Stonework Aran Wilkinson; Adam Cann: 07868 276412
Plumber Somerset Renewables: somersetrenewables.co.uk
Painter Paul Slade: 07816 829124
Electrician Dan Allen: 07771 752690
Tiling Town & Country Tiling: 07966 660585

FIXTURES & FITTINGS
Bath, basins Duravit: duravit.co.uk

Kitchen designer Anneka Schranz
Kitchen Plain English: plainenglishdesign.co.uk
Sanitaryware, taps
Lusso Stone: lussostone.com
Terrazzo worktops, brass sink
Diespeker & Co: diespeker.co.uk
Door handles Dowsing and Reynolds: dowsingandreynolds.com
Curtain poles Jim Lawrence: jim-lawrence.co.uk



“The angles, and the way the light falls, make spending time here really joyful.”

marks. “It was such an important part of the build, and we also wanted the concrete to be mixed with red sand to echo the colour of local soil,” Neil explains.

Douglas fir was used for the roof structure, which is covered in reclaimed slates, and interior ceiling joists were locally sourced, as was the zinc which clads the modern addition to the property. “I’d wanted to use copper, which I thought would look really beautiful once it oxidised, but then I read that very little oxidation would actually occur because of the clean air, and it wouldn’t have happened in my lifetime,” says Neil.

Instead, Michel suggested standing seam grey zinc, which was installed by a specialist subcontractor on timber battens, attached to blockwork external walls. The flat roof has been finished with rubber, ready to support a planted sedum roof which will be added in future.

“We have a ground source heat pump for the underfloor heating, and the water on the property comes from a bore

hole, tested each year, which is pure and delicious,” says Neil. Triple glazing in aluminium frames, coupled with high levels of insulation, and an electric car charging point, further boost the building’s eco credentials. “Neil put in a ground source heat pump for our farmhouse around 16 years ago, when the technology was still fairly new, and our builder installed the second one for the annexe,” says Emma.

Internally, the open-plan living space is vaulted, with oversized Douglas fir timbers finished in a pale limewash. Emma’s Swedish roots inspired the pared-back, natural interiors, including unusual flooring choices. “We didn’t want flagstones or poured concrete, and our architect suggested fired brick tiles in a herringbone pattern on the ground floor, with ash boards upstairs, all laid over underfloor heating,” she explains.

“Neil designed our concrete spiral staircase and made timber moulds to Michel’s calculations which were then cast on site, with our builder making one tread per day.”



KITCHEN
Painted cabinets and warm earthy tones were chosen for the striking open-plan kitchen/diner on the ground floor.

FINAL WORD

What was the high point of the project?

Seeing the cast concrete wall being unveiled from a forest of timber shuttering, after all the hard work and effort.

...and the low point?

When we needed to redo the substructure.

Your best buy?

Making our own concrete spiral staircase was as cheap as chips, and not something you could buy off the shelf.

Biggest extravagance?

Our ground source heat pump,



and the bathroom tiles.

Top tip?

Your builder needs to be open, honest, and not too proud to ask advice. Use local people wherever possible, who can work well together.

The Railway House is available for holiday rental with Unique Homestays: uniquehomestays.com

BEDROOMS

Ash floors and exposed ceiling timbers create two calming bedrooms upstairs, with a third bedroom and shower room on the ground floor.



For the kitchen, Neil and Emma decided against highly contemporary units and instead selected wooden cabinets which were painted in a deep plum shade. Terrazzo worktops were chosen, with Moroccan wall tiles which have also been used in bathrooms.

“In some ways, the whole house was designed around the art. One wall in the sitting room was even sized specifically to take a giant oil painting of the Duke of Cumberland, which had been gifted by my father,” says Emma. “Nothing is reproduction, and every piece of furniture and lighting was carefully selected. We wanted a house where we could enjoy spending time, as well as a property which would work as a holiday rental. The angles, and the way the light falls, make spending time here really joyful.”

