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## SINGLE-STOREY LIVING

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Left, the form of the building is a simple rectangle which echoes local agricultural structures. Right, prefabrication made large openings such as the corner glazing in the living room possible. The aluminium lampshades are by El Ultimo Grito for Mathmos; the chairs are by Verner Panton



## LATERAL THINKING

PAUL GYSEMAN HAD NO IDEA WHAT TO BUILD ON A PLOT OF LAND IN NORFOLK HE HAD BOUGHT FOR HIS COUNTRY HOME. SO HE TOOK A BACKSEAT AS HIS ARCHITECT AND CONSTRUCTION COMPANY CAME UP WITH A RADICAL SOLUTION: A HOUSE THAT IS NOT ONLY SINGLE-STOREY BUT A BESPOKE PREFAB

Words by **Cathy Strongman** Photographs by **Edina van der Wyck**

**C**edar house is a million miles from the flat Paul Gyseman owns in London. Simple and understated, yet architecturally intriguing, this rural bolthole shares little in common with the converted 19th-century industrial building tucked behind Kings Cross that he also calls home. Whereas the latter rattles to the rhythm of trains and ongoing regeneration work, Cedar House is serene and secluded. The only thing that rattles around here is the occasional grass snake.

Paul is retired and leads a rather schizophrenic life flitting between capital and countryside. The story of the conception of cedar house bares little resemblance to most grand designs. 'I never had any intention of building a second home,' he admits, 'and I wanted as little as possible to do with it during the construction process.' Ah well, at least he's honest.

Paul's friends, Alan Conisbee and Marie Clarke, found the plot and planted the idea of a second home in Paul's head. 'I came up to see it on a summer day, and thought, wow, what a lovely place to have a house,' says Paul. A few phone calls and £125,000 later, and Paul became the owner of a crumbling brick work shed and, more crucially, the land that surrounded it.

Paul's reluctance to get involved in the project resulted in a pioneering partnership between Hudson Architects, and the construction company, Framework. 'It's bespoke prefabrication,' explains Paul, 'and it allows the owner to take a backseat, effectively leaving them out of the equation.' The architect designed the building in detail and then passed the design to Framework. 'The plans were detailed to death,' explains Dieter Kleiner, ▶



## BUILDING ON THE FLOODPLAIN

Paul's house has been built on the floodplain of the River Wensum which meant he had to get permission to build from the Environment Agency. This involved commissioning a detailed report to satisfy the criteria that the risk of a flood was likely to occur no more than once in 100 years, and including flood precautions in the design. A flood refuge, consisting of a mezzanine level with a large window, was built in above the garage. Forming part of the studio, Paul can leap from here to safety in the unlikely scenario that he fails to leave through the door first. The building is also raised 900mm above the external ground level and all the electrical circuits are situated out of harm's way. These sockets and switches are set in a sacrificial wall lining (painted pale walnut) that continues around the building and, in the event of a flood, can be easily replaced.



## 'I USED TO LIVE IN AN ISLINGTON VICTORIAN HOUSE AND I SEEMED TO BE FOREVER GOING UP AND DOWN STAIRS'

**Above, cedar cladding encases the roof and walls of the house.**

**Left, folding doors open one entire wall to the outdoors. The chair in the opening is the Wassily Chair by Marcel Breuer; the side table is by Eileen Gray**

of Hudson Architects, 'there was very little left to chance.' Framework then took responsibility for the whole project on a fixed price contract. They partly prefabricated the building in their factory, constructed the timber shell in a number of weeks and then subcontracted out the other jobs such as the plumbing and electrics. 'At Alan's suggestion I did employ a quantity surveyor to represent my interest,' says Paul. 'We had periodic site meetings with the builder, architect, quantity surveyor and myself, and despite a few snags it all worked pretty well.'

The results are fantastic, especially for a prefab which cost less than £300,000. Perched on raised foundations on the bank of the river Wensum in Norfolk, it is a curious building. The shape is an uncomplicated rectangular single storey with a pitched roof but the cedar cladding, which encases both roof and the walls of the house, gives it a monolithic feel. 'We wanted the building to sit comfortably within the local agricultural landscape,' explains Dieter. 'By simplifying its form we hoped it would evoke a functional farm building.' One of these simplifications is the absence of gutters – a small omission but one which gives the building crispness and clarity.

Windows are generous and scattered randomly across the exterior and are surrounded by hefty, protruding metal frames. The main entrance is ▶

## THE BUNGALOW LOWDOWN

● **The first bungalow** in Britain was built by Colonel Bragg who, returning from the Raj, built a lodge with Indian features in Norwood, south London in the 1860s and called it 'The Bungalow'. 'Bungalow' is an anglicisation of the Hindi word 'bangala', meaning 'of or belonging to Bengal'.

● Bungalows soon became popular as **holiday homes**, with the development of more affordable wood-and-iron versions appealing to the middle classes. Less rigid and formal than a typical Victorian house, the bungalow was associated with a care-free, outdoor, even bohemian, lifestyle and was seen as the antithesis of straight-laced suburban society.

● **By the Twenties**, the bungalow had become a cheap, easily-built form of accommodation and it quickly spread as poorer people from cramped inner-city areas sought respite in the countryside.

At the same time, British manufacturers exported prefabricated versions of the bungalow to America, South Africa, Canada, Australia, and even back to India. They proved particularly **popular in America** where the single-storey property became the quintessential American house: affordable, easy to build, and a defining feature of the American dream.

● The last quarter of the 20th century witnessed a **backlash against the bungalow** as single-storey living became synonymous with cheap, ugly, modern boxes, built quickly with little or no architectural imagination.

● We have seen a **resurgence of single-storey living** in the 21st century. The numerous benefits of banishing the stairs – less wasted space, natural light, ease and convenience, for example – have led people back to the idea of lateral living.



**'BUILDING SINGLE STOREY ALLOWED US TO CREATE DOUBLE HEIGHT SPACES WHICH IS IDEAL FOR PAUL'S STUDIO'**



announced by a ramp that stretches almost the entire length of the building. 'The ramp creates a clear distinction as to where the entrance is,' explains Dieter. 'It provides a hierarchy between the main door and the other doors that lead from the house.'

The interior is divided between living and work space. 'I have been an amateur photographer for years and now I'm retired I'm hoping to sell some pieces commercially,' says Paul. There is a large studio, dark room and small study, clumped at the far end of the house. The rest of the building consists of two bedrooms, three bathrooms and a vast living area with open-plan kitchen. The wood-burning stove was Paul's idea and he bought all the furniture, except for the Eileen Gray table, specifically for the space.

'Building single storey allowed us to create double height spaces, which is ideal for the studio where Paul needed high ceilings and large walls for hanging space,' says Dieter. It also created exciting possibilities in terms of outdoor living: both the studio and kitchen have direct outdoor access and the line of glazed doors on the West side of the building fold back completely on to the decked area that juts out over the river. Living on one level has also made Paul's life a lot easier. 'I used to live in an Islington Victorian house with four floors and I seemed to be forever going up and down the bloody stairs,' he says. 'This is the first time I've lived in a single storey building and it's good, I like it.' ■

*Clockwise from below, the house in its idyllic setting; the bedroom, like the rest of the house, feels like its in the garden; bathroom fittings are from Abacus; Paul in the kitchen area by the wood-burning stove*



**THE PREFABRICATED BUILDING**

Paul's house is made from structural insulated panels (SIPs) which are prefabricated sandwich panels made from two layers of building board wrapped around a core of insulation. Pre-assembled off site, these can be cut to any shape and size. Aside from the obvious advantages of affordability and speed of construction, this method can result in dynamic designs. The panels are incredibly strong and the architects found that large openings, even at corners (such as the frameless corner window in the living room) were possible without the need for additional reinforcement. The panel system also allowed for the absence of beams and trusses on the inside of the roof. 'The idea of prefabrication is ready to be pushed architecturally,' says Dieter Kleiner of Hudson Architects. 'We need to see the potential beyond the boring Portakabin box or model kit home and realise that prefab can be bespoke and aesthetically exciting.'



FLOOR PLAN

- 1 Living/dining/kitchen
- 2 Bedroom
- 3 En-suite
- 4 WC
- 5 Bedroom
- 6 Bathroom
- 7 Darkroom
- 8 Office
- 9 Studio
- 10 Mezzanine/garage

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