White house politics

The contemporary country house may be undergoing a revival, but it is constrained by costs, regulations and the British obsession with property values. **Jonathan Bell** reports on the growing trend to put modernism back into domestic rural architecture

He lives in a house, a very big house, in the country – Blur, Country House, 1995

Cast a cursory glance at the news pages of the architectural press and it appears that the modern country house is undergoing a revival. Design competitions, developer-led speculative building and outlandish schemes for private clients have all come to the forefront of the cultural agenda.

Add to this the constant diet of home improvement and property shows, and the dream of a contemporary house in unspoilt countryside is no longer the realm of the fantasist.

Few truly modern country houses – buildings that transcend our cultural definition of a house – have been built in Britain in the past 50 years. While the terrace has been given a workout – think of Future System's glass house in Islington, London, or any number of radical internal redesigns – the detached contemporary house is a relative rarity. After Britain's role as a crucible of modernity in the inter-war years, and some promising starts after the war, contemporary houses dried to a trickle.

Britain's principal problem is the lack of space. Opposition to building in the despite draconian planning legislation, our precious countryside has been blitzed by identical, pastiche vernacular estates for the best part of a century.

Finally, with the fresh political emphasis on brownfield rather than greenfield development, and the urgent need for more housing, it was decided that stricter guidelines were needed. In 1997, in an effort to finally address the issue of rural design, the Planning Policy Guidance Document 7 (PPG7), subtitled The Countryside, Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development, was introduced.

The document is primarily intended to protect greenfield sites, yet rather than impose a blanket ban on any rural development, it includes a curious clause that reads: "An isolated new house in the countryside may also exceptionally be justified if it is clearly of the highest quality, is truly outstanding in terms of its architecture and landscape design, and would significantly enhance its immediate setting and wider surroundings."

Arguing that "each generation would have the opportunity to add to the tradition of the country house which has done so much to enhance the English

Drop House by Hudson Featherstone, designed to be literally dropped in anywhere, is a world apart from its red-brick neighbours

The legislation has certainly initiated a debate about rural design quality, although cynics claim that PPG7 merely offers nouveau industrialists carte blanche to recreate their fantasies of Georgian splendour.

A recent test case in Hampshire showed the inherent problems of defining PPG7's stated commitment to the "highest quality". Robert Adam's plans for a large country house on a greenfield site was challenged by objectors who argued that its classical detailing was not contemporary and therefore did not comply with PPG7. Adam, a skilled classicist, had no trouble securing the expert testimony of modernist architect Michael Manser at the planning inquiry and the scheme was approved.

The grand British tradition of academic neo-classicism, epitomised by Adam and Quinlan Terry, might be subtly twisted to accommodate contemporary lifestyles, but the results are far removed from the mass market: the sterile, bloated executive mansions marooned among heavily patterned paving and protected by electrically operated wrought iron gates.

These miniature pastiche palaces come complete with multi-car garages, home cinemas and clumsily proportioned pediments, not to mention seven-figure price tags. However, despite the gulf in quality, there is a common benefit. Neo-classicists, whatever their rank, rarely have to struggle through the planning system, regardless of scale, grandeur and competence.

The clients behind a recent country house competition probably had this in mind when they invited designs for a house set in 30ha of the Cotswolds, an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The brief makes specific reference to PPG7, and includes a page of lavishly photographed examples of the local vernacular – think centuries-old handsome stone piles – to guide potential entrants in the right direction.

Country house competitions – once the norm – are now a rarity. But it's not just PPG7 that is luring the big money back into bucolic seclusion. There are sound economic arguments for a return to the days of old, with a large family home potentially providing more jobs and local income than a small farm. Whatever the reason, scale is increasing. The Cotswolds competition required an internal area of 800 sq m, 10 times the size of a standard terraced house.

Size is everything. Modernist domestic architecture, in its widely recognised inter-war "white" aesthetic, never aspired to the scale achieved by the classically planned country house. The big three modern houses to be built in Britain in the past decade – Anthony Hudson's Baggy House, Graham Phillip's Crescent House and Ken Shuttleworth's Skywood – all conform to a vaguely modernist aesthetic, yet are relatively modest in scale. Historically, building big was never the issue: it was the shock of the new that raised hackles, and the modernists' rural forays could be guaranteed to draw fire. The avant-garde was pitched against tradition in a head-to-head battle, established a pattern of opposition that has endured long after the "modern house" had faded from the drawing board. Essentially, it was a battle of styles.

It was an era when the great establishment architect, Sir Reginald Blomfield, could declare in hot-headed fashion that modernism was "essentially

continental in its origin and inspiration … it claims as a merit that it is cosmopolitan". Writing in The Listener in 1933, he continued: "As an Englishman and proud of his country, I detest and despise cosmopolitanism …"

The handful of modern houses that were built still have a heady reputation today but their impact at the time was nothing short of scandalous, a reaction hardly discouraged by the architects themselves. "The house ('… one of the greatest pieces of vandalism ever perpetrated in London') we have designed at 66, Frognal, Hampstead, is now finished," reads the invitation to the opening of Connell, Ward and Lucas' seminal modern house in 1938, proudly quoting Sir Robert Tasker's outraged bluster.

Is the recent spate of "white" architecture a form of heritage modernism? Aesthetically, the Baggy, Skywood and Crescent houses owe a visual debt to the language of inter-war architecture, reinforcing its role as Britain's de facto modernist vernacular.

The publication of photographer Nick Dawe's book The Modern House Revisited – with an introduction by Ken Powell – revisits the bold gestures of the Modern Architecture Research Group-affiliated architects, together with their contemporaries, the speculative seaside builders in love with the dazzling whiteness of jazz moderne.

Dawe's photographs are a seductive catalogue of the (usually) fastidiously maintained concrete facades and white rendered aesthetic of the period. Yet, as Powell points out, of the four million speculative houses built from the late Twenties until the war, barely 2,000 were flat roofed, and of these only 50 per cent were architect-designed. Despite (or maybe because of) this, their iconic status lives on, providing our cultural definition of the "modern". These icons of the inter-war years now enjoy celebrity status, cropping up in advertising, television dramas and the lifestyle pages of Sunday supplements, and the appreciation of contemporary architects. Raymond McGrath's celebrated circular house in Chertsey, Surrey, changed hands for around £1.25m in the late Nineties – before an extensive Munckenbeck and Marshall renovation scheme and extension. John Allan's Avanti Architects have also cornered a niche market in the restoration of modernist classics, and Dennis Sharp Architects revitalised Colin Lucas' little known flat-roofed house at Little Freith.

These inter-war houses might be celebrated, but their underlying legacy is that our perception of the modern stopped nearly 70 years ago, hampering the logical progression of residential architecture seen in other countries. The riotous audacity of Lautner or Bart Prince, or the rich austerity of Campo Baeza or Meier, is nigh on impossible to achieve in the English countryside, hemmed in by centuries of tradition and finely honed bureaucracy, as well as a lack of uncharted space for architectural conquest. But more than anything else, they are anomalies, remnants of the countryside's not wholly successful brush with the modern; an experiment no one was keen to repeat.

Today, however, the resurgence of interest in the contemporary statement is undeniable. From the hard cushions of our sleek Italian sofas we can survey a vast array of lifestyle publications, be they "nesting" magazines or glossy look-books,

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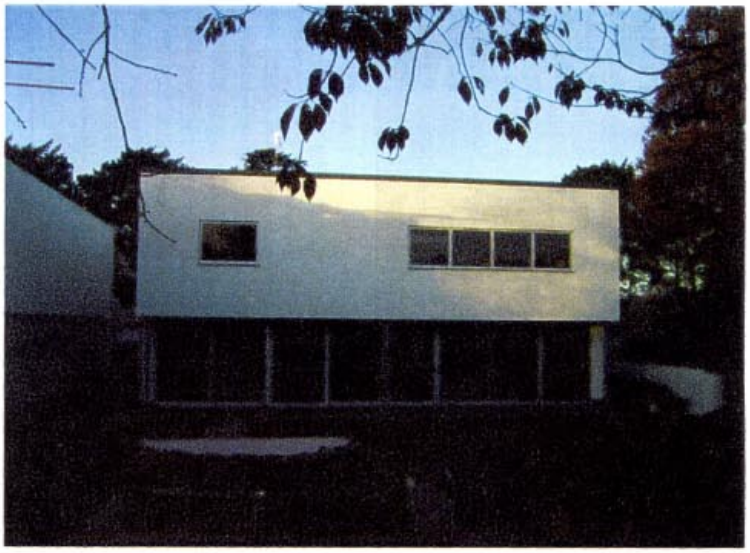
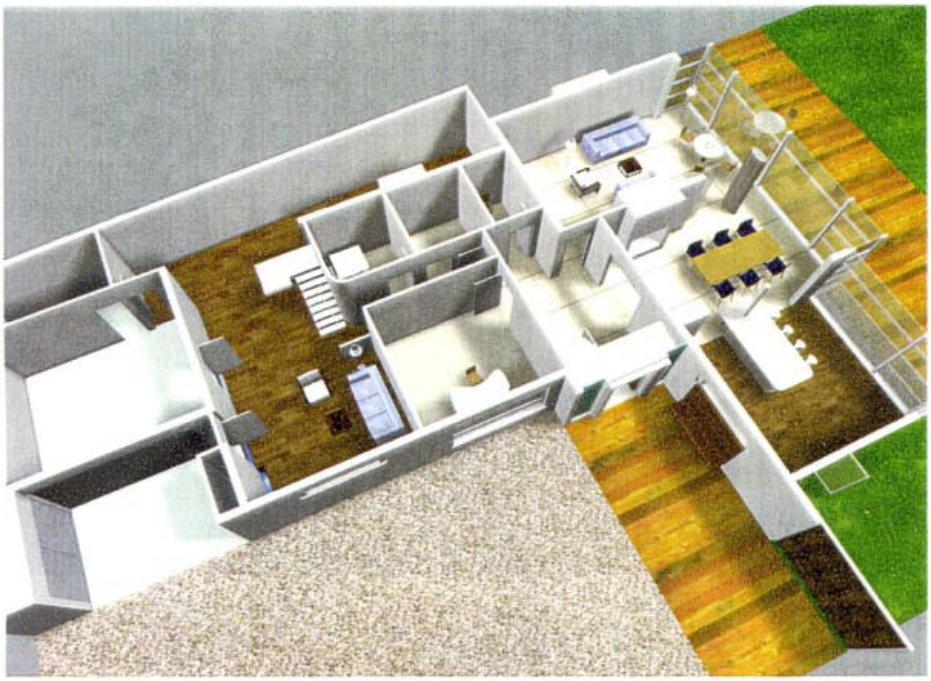
Facing page, top, Abbots Leigh House by Peter Meacock Central Workshop; bottom, left and right, Drop House by Hudson Featherstone. This page, right and below, Abbots Leigh House; Merlin House by Richard Hywel Evans Architecture and Design, bottom





The one-off house still has an important role as a prototype, a test bed for ideas that might one day have wider application

Left and right: Thames House by Richard Hywel Evans Architecture and Design; bottom left and right, Drop House, by Hudson Featherstone, which attempts to blur the boundaries between the outside and inside spaces

with TV showing an unrelenting stream of make-over programmes, some of which even spill over into dealing with real architecture and real architects.

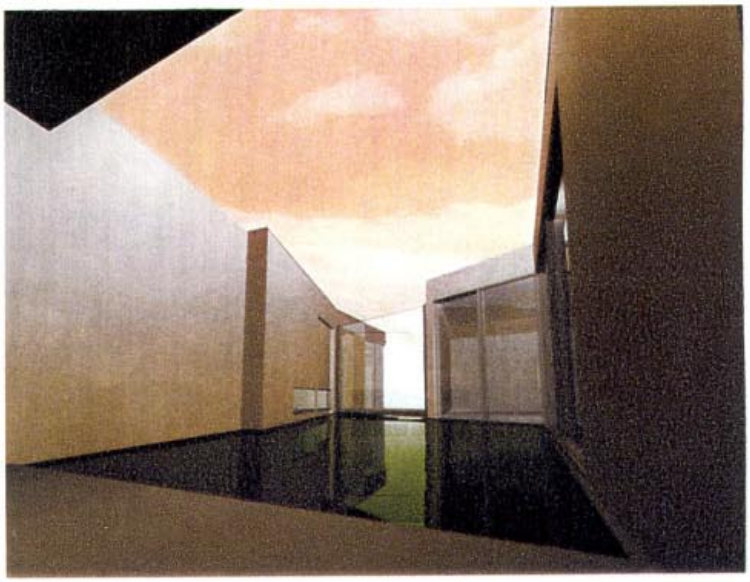
The one-off house still has an important role as a prototype, a test bed for ideas that might one day have wider application. No one has more need for future-gazing than the mass-market house builder but contemporary volume housing is thin on the ground.

Bristol-based architects Peter Meacock Central Workshop is attempting to break out of the mould by working closely with enlightened developers Hyland Properties and Alistair Soper and Kingsley Webb. While Meacock has plenty of experience of negative public and official opinion, he believes genuine innovation is frequently overlooked in the battle for style. "There is little or no concern about design methodology, technological concerns or even environmental issues," he says. "One could be forgiven for believing the whole world was against the modern from the letters page of most newspapers."

Meacock acknowledges that his recently built projects are still heavily constrained by market demands. "We would all love to build and design our own house – only few of us have that opportunity," says Meacock, citing the financial perils of straying to far from the conventional. "Generally speaking, modern houses are not available on the open market and the process of finding a site, getting permission, funding and building the dream home is onerous to say the least. It's only for the brave." Meacock firmly believes the future will place less emphasis on style and more on technology. "I think there will be many great houses to come of a more experimental and less permanent nature."

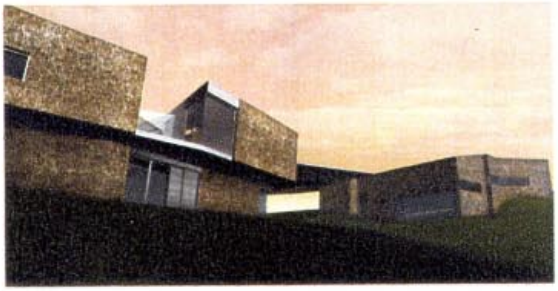
Ultimately, it seems we get the best modern buildings we are willing to pay for. "In Britain," notes architect Richard Hywel Evans, "houses are still seen as very much an investment: what's it going to be worth when it's finished? Therefore a client is only willing to pay for so much personal expression."

Clients need a historical frame of reference to ensure their project fits into society's value system, all the more ironic



"Everyone used to criticise modernism for being about object-buildings, but there's nothing more object-like than the standard detached house" Anthony Hudson

Above left: Sugar Cube House by Peter Meacock Central Workshop; above and right, the BV House by Farjadi Farjadi Architects celebrates new technology and the landscape



given the social concerns of pioneering modernists. Finding a path through planning that does not involve extra expense or compromise the mortgage is more important for them than pushing the boundaries.

Evans also has experience of working in an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, for a large (up to 2,300 sq m) country house in Surrey. So far, planning negotiations have led to three distinct directions, starting with a free-form design, "with no reference to any British building", passing through an interpretation of Thirties modernism, with a soupcon of the languid Long Island style pioneered by Richard Meier, and finishing with a modern reinterpretation of the vernacular.

The house's style is all-important; the local authority passed the responsibility of interpreting design quality to a consultant, who promptly demanded 1:20 scale joinery drawings as part of the submission. The intense scrutiny, none of which addressed the actual functional elements of the house beyond those set out in building regulations, were a setback, as the client was unwilling to spend substantial amounts on fees for a planning submission that had no guarantee of success.

There are other modern mansions in the offing. Matthew Priestman Architects' Melbury Place, a glassy 460 sq m Surrey residence, recently received planning permission. Farjadi Farjadi Architects' BV House in Lancashire's Ribble Valley – also the result of a competition win – was the only UK exhibit at the The UnPrivate House exhibition at MoMA 1999. A celebration of new technology and new direction in domestic architecture, the BV design adamantly rejected the past, eschewing traditional pitched roofs in favour of a covering that echoes the contours of the landscape.

At MoMA, Homa and Sima Farjadi spoke of the contemporary house's need to draw from typologies, such as landscape and industrial buildings, and its role as a test case for new, less exclusive, architectural forms. Big budget private houses can lead the way, but it is mass-market adoption that will make the difference.

Could volume house builders' design combine the commercial acumen of the urban developer with the strategies and technologies developed for private clients by modern architects? Hudson Featherstone is no stranger to bringing innovative architecture to conventional sites. The practice's remarkable Drop House in Hertfordshire demonstrates a rigorous approach to the demands of client, site and environment. A white-rendered composition that stands out dramatically from its traditionalist red-brick neighbours (many barely a few months older), its facade contains a series of organic spaces and free-flowing views that meld the inside and outside spaces.

"Everyone used to criticise modernism for being about object-buildings, but there's nothing more object-like than the standard detached house," points out Anthony Hudson. Hudson and Sarah Featherstone believe that given modernism's established vocabulary, the tactics of the volume housebuilders – providing style portfolios for clients to pick and chose – can be easily updated. More importantly, this might also help tackle technological performance, which suffers from the market's lack of adventurism. "You can bolt a grey water system on to any style of house," says Hudson, "but what you can't do is address the more fundamental issues of orientation, solar gain, and so on."

Described in the local press as a "foul-mouthed punk at a vicar's tea party", the Drop House is arguably more integrated with its surroundings than its neighbours. Hudson acknowledges that developers are getting more interested in design: the practice was recently approached by a volume housebuilder with a view to adapting their progressive ideas for a non-site-specific design: a Drop House that really can be dropped in anywhere.

And perhaps the mother of all modern country houses is waiting in the wings in Cheshire. A competition to chart the future of the country house was recently held by the RIBA and the developer Ferrario Burns Hood. The winning practice was Ushida Findlay, better known for its radical, neo-organic, and small-scale, approach to domestic architecture. Even more surprisingly, the competition brief called for a 2,300 sq m house on a 40ha site, a scale that has hitherto avoided any brush with contemporary design.

Such virgin sites are enormously rare. Planning permission for the vast baroque mansion on a similarly sized site at High Cross Estate in Sussex took seven years. High Cross, however, is the site for Nicholas van Hoogstraten's charmless Hamilton Palace, an endless facade – designed by chartered architects AJ Browne and Company – that claims to be the largest country house constructed in this country for the past century.

It's highly unlikely that Ushida Findlay is planning to dress up its little corner of England with pastiche and backward glances. But in a country where the antagonistic relationship between modern residential architecture and Nimbyism is still extant, we shouldn't hold our breath B

The Modern House Today by Nick Dawe and Ken Powell is published by Black Dog Publishing, priced £24.95