

Gimme shelter

It's a fairly imposing dilemma. How do you reconcile the sturdy, functional dimensions of a Norfolk barn with clean-cut modernist design? The solution is simple. Find an architect like Anthony Hudson, who has converted a pair of them into holiday homes with dramatic effect. Words by **Doris Lockhart Saatchi**



QUESTION: HOW do you renovate disused, rundown English farm buildings without replicating Olde Englands (although hessian does seem to be making a comeback) and still use thoroughly modern methods to make them comfortable to live in, at home in their rural environment and pleasing to look at?

The architect Anthony Hudson's grounding is solidly in the modernist camp of building design. So when he set about converting a ramshackle cart shed and adjacent disused grain storage barn in Norfolk into houses for holiday letting, he might have been expected to turn them into neat white boxes. In fact, both inside and out they are, by modernist standards, visually rather "messy".

"I wanted to keep the feel of agricultural buildings," he says. "We intentionally let them show their history." The

external walls of the bigger of the two buildings, known as Hall Barn, became, as a result, an exposed patchwork of finishes. Various types of red brick indicate years of successive repairs. There are two pale rectangles where the original ventilation openings were rendered over. Metal "boots" of different heights on the oak support posts show where the timber was rotted by deposits of cow dung (well, we are talking about the country). Glints of sun on the pantiles roof reveal that some of the tiles are glass rather than clay, a clever Victorian device to let light into the interior. Translucent glass-fibre sheeting attached to metal frames protects the straw bales that form the north wall from rain and from bugs and farmland creatures for which straw bales are habitat heaven. When asked whether the metal frames will rust, Hudson says he doesn't mind,

describing his buildings as a "loose-fit" design.

There is, however, nothing sloppy about the thinking behind this project. Throughout, Hudson has honoured the eco-warrior's mantra: use sustainable sources, maximise solar gain, be cost-efficient and minimise CO₂ emissions. Straw bales also make cosy living space for the human variety of creature. Hudson points out that they provide 2-3 times more insulation than a standard house wall. Underfloor heating, supplemented by a cheery wood stove, provides greater warmth for less energy than traditional methods. The sliding windows designed by Hudson have seals supplied by a car manufacturer to ensure their tightness. The glass pantiles are recycled originals, found in ones and twos locally. The lapped cladding on the exterior of the smaller Quaker Barn is green oak, and the sills of the deep windows on the →



Main picture: the south wall of Hall Barn, featuring the rectangular bay window which looks out over the rolling barley fields of Norfolk.
Above: the staircase to the new upstairs bedrooms cleverly "hurdles" an existing oak beam

Inside, a wall of flint from the north Norfolk coast reminds visitors where they are

north wall of Hall Barn are plywood. No formaldehyde-filled MDF here. In any case, says Hudson, the contractor he worked with would have refused to work with it.

From outside, the only obvious clue that a modernist has been at work is the large white rectangular box of a bay window emerging from Hall Barn's south wall. It frames a typically horizontal Norfolk landscape of barley fields and big sky and opens on to a paved terrace, the perfect place for those in residence to eat their own favourite breakfast grain.

Inside the barns, however, the proportion of new to old and sophisticated to rustic reverses. Hudson talks about wanting to avoid "domestication" so there are idiosyncrasies arising from local and traditionally rural materials and methods. Cracks in the lime render on the straw bales have appeared around the timber window frames. Because he retained the original oak roof beams and trusses, even when they were in the way, the staircase in Hall Barn has to hurdle a beam to get to the upstairs bedrooms. But once there, the accommodation is modishly contemporary. Bathrooms are fitted out simply but stylishly, and there is pale carpet on the timber bedroom floors.

In Quaker Barn, a tiny internal courtyard with a cobblestone-covered floor lets light into two face-to-face, glass-walled ensuite bathrooms, while the translucent surface of the glass in one of the bathrooms provides total privacy for occupants of both of them. Throughout this one-storey building, the original beams are painted, but internal walls are exposed brick and, in the kitchen and dining area, a wall of flint from the north Norfolk coast reminds visitors where they are. By contrast, the kitchen is state-of-the-art, and the chairs and table designed by Hudson are the very latest in clean-lined design.

Because these buildings were adjacent to the Hudson farmhouse retreat but designated as holiday rentals, Hudson had to restrain his modernist architect's instinct to experiment, ie spend lots of money. So he appointed his wife Jenny as the client. She was the partner who played bad cop, reminding him that relatively foolproof function was a strong consideration and that furniture and fittings had to be serviceable as well as attractive.

There have only been a few glitches. One holiday tenant insisted on opening one of the sliding windows by pushing it out. He was strong. The glass and handle broke. He was OK. The window got fixed. But here's a bit of advice to anyone who might be considering a stay in either or both of Hudson's holiday houses, with the hope that it won't be necessary: if there's a chill in the air, don't keep pushing the thermostat up, thinking that it isn't working. Underfloor heating warms the air more effectively but more slowly than other forms of heating. Give it time before ringing the landlord. When he's there, he's on holiday too. *

Hudson Architects (020-7490 3411). For information about renting Hall Barn and Quaker Barn, contact Jenny Dale at jennydale@cwcom.net or call her on 01603 754170



Clockwise from top; an exposed wall of Norfolk flint adds to the agricultural feel; a sliding window which proved the undoing of one guest; the wall of straw bales provides insulation while traditional translucent pantiles let light in through the roof