

FREE WITH TODAY'S Evening Standard

# Homes & Property

Wednesday, 1 March 2006



**Go barmy  
for barns**

Page 8

## DEATH BY PLASTIC

Why is it still being made when London is drowning in rubbish? **see page 7**

## THE SURFACE DESIGN SHOW 2006

Brilliant new ideas are magnetic walls, LED floors and colour-changing worktops, **see page 14**

## BRAD PITT'S BACKYARD

We take you into the Hollywood heartthrob's stunning garden, **see page 31**



From £1,465 a week: the Great East Barn, converted from a massive 19th century granary, includes six double bedrooms, an open-plan kitchen and dining room, three bathrooms, and a spa pool



From £1,467 a week: the five-bedroom Grey's Court building was converted from single-storey stables. The open-plan kitchen leads to a large panelled dining room (above) with views to the Stiffkey River valley

# Countryside goes

Re-using barns for homes and holiday lets can be a sensitive way to preserve our agricultural heritage, says **Fay Sweet**

**A** BARN conversion can be a complex and time-consuming affair, something you might do once in a lifetime. For architect Anthony Hudson and his wife Jenny Dale, tackling these big rural beasts has become something of a habit and has resulted in an impressive series of projects. Their most recent triumph is the transformation of one of the largest range of barns I've ever seen.

The site in East Anglia is a handsome quadrangle of buildings including a huge threshing barn and granary, dairies and animal sheds dating from the mid-18th century right up to the early 20th century. They were bought with planning permission for holiday accommodation. The total completed floor area is around 3,000 square feet, and the complex of

buildings has now been made into five holiday letting "cottages" sleeping up to 48 people.

The work succeeds in being both unapologetically modern and comfortable while also sympathetic to the original buildings in their delicious palette of brick, flint and clunch (hard chalk) with terracotta tiled roofs.

They set a new benchmark in the sensitive conversion and imaginative reuse of this type of building, and for anyone embarking on their own scheme, here's a rare opportunity to test-drive a top-of-the-range conversion.

"The appeal of the barn is its simplicity," says Hudson, who has offices in London and Norwich. "They offer such enjoyable and luxurious spatial qualities, and that's very rare except when you have a huge budget and the opportunity to build from scratch."

His sensitive approach would surely meet the approval of English Heritage and its boss Simon Thurley, who, at the end of last year, described bad barn conversions as a "cancer on the landscape". In its annual report on the state of the historic environment, English Heritage made clear its concerns about the dilapidated condition of so many farm buildings and the inappropriate renovation of others. In April this year, the organisation is planning to publish a document on good and bad practice in the care and renovation of farm buildings.

Hudson's work on these Norfolk barns has been handled with great dexterity: from the outside, they retain their agricultural identity, while inside the spaces are loft-like, generous and open-plan. The huge barn openings now become the main windows, in several cases



Jenny Dale and Anthony Hudson who transformed a complex of five barns in East Anglia to holiday lets

**'Take a realistic view of how much conversions can cost. It depends on the condition of the barn, but we suggest £1,000 a square metre'**

spaces are turned upside down so that living rooms on upper floors are open to the exciting vaulted timber roofs and some walls have been left in their pleasing natural state, although this detail had to be negotiated with local Building Control officials who keep an eye on insulation levels. "These materials are so fantastic, it would have been a tragedy to cover them up," says Hudson, adding that while foundations in many places were minimal, the walls were up to 900mm thick and clearly built to last.

The trade-off with Building Control was to add more insulation to enclosed areas such as bedrooms. The barns are kept warm with underfloor heating, ideal for such large spaces.

The interior of the "cottages" has been designed by Jenny Dale and each has its own character, including one with a Fifties theme, another French in style, and one more distinctly Scandinavian. "We wanted to have fun with the interiors," says Dale. "The themes give each one a strong personality." She adds that the designs seem to have equal appeal to holiday-makers, and that the larger properties — the largest sleeps 14 — are always booked well in advance for parties of families and friends.

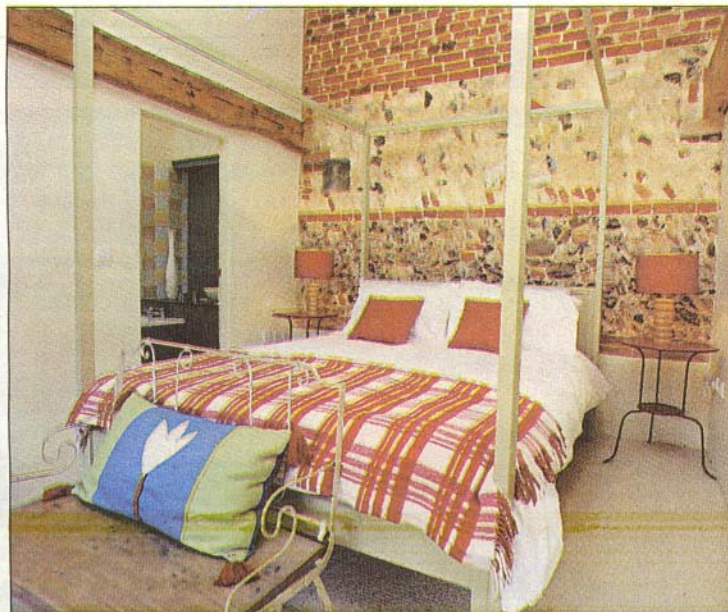
In previous projects the couple worked on a pair of barns near their home in Norfolk, also used for holiday letting, and Anthony has recently extended the barn aesthetic to a new-build prototype prefabricated home recently completed for a photographer and his family, also in Norfolk.

**C**ONSTRUCTED from timber panels, the simple box structure, with its open-plan living spaces and tranquil bedrooms, is wrapped entirely, roof and walls, in cedar shingles.

"Barns with planning permission for conversion always attract considerable interest," says David Clarke from estate agent Strutt & Parker, adding that they are in increasingly short supply.

"Planners like to explore the potential for light industrial commercial use or conversion to holiday units before they will grant permission for full-time residential use," he says. "However, when they do, there is no shortage of people wanting to undertake a conversion project."

He says the appeal of the barn is based on space and location. "Building from scratch is



One of the four double bedrooms in Grey's Court, preserving the original flint-and-brick walls, and with a window seat looking on to the courtyard garden. Underfloor heating keeps the building warm in winter



From £770 a week: Long Meadow was once a milk parlour, and dates back to the 18th century



A long view of the North Barsham barn complex, set in the protected farmlands of Walsingham Priory, which offers holiday accommodation for up to 48 guests

# chic

getting harder and building on the scale of a barn in a rural location is tougher still. Once converted, a barn will offer all that's best in a new house with the feel of a period property."

He adds that anyone considering taking on a project should take a realistic view of just how much conversions can cost. "When making an offer on a place, have an idea what it will be worth when completed and work back from there. Of course it depends on the condition of the barn, but we suggest that refurbishment will cost £1,000 a square metre."

## The key to a good barn build

"Be flexible as you go along," says Hudson. "You are sure to discover hidden features and qualities which can be very important to the finished project, so be open to making changes as the work progresses. Also try to avoid expending huge energy on things that won't work. For example we tried hard to save a warped roof because the weathered beams looked great. In the end we had to admit they were so distorted they had to come down, but we were able to incorporate them elsewhere."

The couple reckon their refurbishment and conversion costs worked out at around £1,100 a square metre.

Pictures by albanpix.com



The panelled sitting room at Grey's Court, combining Scandinavian colours with the original walls of flint, brick and clunch (hard chalk) left in their natural state

## CONTACTS

Numerous traditional barns, including many in a dilapidated state for sale, can be found on the Buildings at Risk Register on the English Heritage website [www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)

Barns for sale also appear occasionally in the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings newsletter. Call 020 7377 1644 or visit [www.spab.org.uk](http://www.spab.org.uk)

Hudson Architects has offices in London (020 7490 3411) and Norwich (01603 755270) or visit [www.hudsonarchitect.co.uk](http://www.hudsonarchitect.co.uk)

To book into one of the barns, call 01328 821744 or visit [www.barshambarns.co.uk](http://www.barshambarns.co.uk) or Rural Retreats (01386 701177) [www.ruralretreats.co.uk](http://www.ruralretreats.co.uk)

## WHAT'S ON OFFER



£300,000: Gidley Stable Block, Newbury, Berkshire. Two brick-and-timber barns with consent for two three-bedroom homes. Strutt & Parker (01635 521707)



£300,000: Ruffins Hill Barn, Ashford, Kent. A Grade II oak-framed barn with ragstone stables and a courtyard garden. Savills (01580 720 161)