

TOY STORY

What does the home of a woman who makes dolls' houses look like? Like this, says **Hugh Pearman**

It's not a question you often get to ask: if your business is making dolls' houses, then what sort of home do you build for yourself? For Jackie Lee, a Derbyshire-based entrepreneur, it's a bold, modern home jutting out from a hillside, overlooking the town of Belper in the valley below.

This is a large, four-bedroom family house that can also be the ultimate singleton's pad. Cute, it isn't; stylish, it certainly is. Dubbed the Light House, and designed by the award-winning architect Anthony Hudson, it is unique, a house for an individualist.

Lee makes her money the old-fashioned way, by making and selling things — in her case, dolls' houses. Some of them are children's toys, others adult collectibles. Her company, The Dolls House Emporium, taps into the slightly obsessive, completist world of the collector. You can buy them ready-made or as kits. It's a natural fit for online selling, and Lee has built it into a big, expanding company.

Lee moved to Derbyshire from London in 1973 with her former husband, Adam Purser, who was then training to be an architect and supervising house renovations. Model-making is something trainee architects do, and when work was scarce, he went on a course to learn how to start his own business. Architecture was forgotten and the dolls'-house idea was born.

By then, it was 1979, and the economy was in free fall, but slowly the two of them built up the company, with Lee gradually taking command. The pair separated in 1995, and she bought him out the following year; since then, the business has gone onward and upward. It now employs about 70 people.

By 2001, with her three daughters, Amy, now 29, Bess, 26, and Sophie, 24, more or less grown up, Lee reckoned it was time to move from the four-bedroom Edwardian house they had bought for £12,000 in 1977.



Jackie Lee in the sun room. Below: huge glass sliding doors lead out onto the balconies

"I'd been looking for something else for years," Lee says, "but in Derbyshire, there are few houses with decent proportions. It's hard to find anything between a large mill-owner's house and a farm cottage. And I'm not into housework — cleaning all those nooks and crannies."

Then she saw an advertisement for a proposed development of five new houses on a large plot of land on the edge of Belper. A local developer was selling the plots with predetermined house designs.

"It was a former quarry that had been used for storing caravans," Lee recalls. "They wanted to sell me a design-build package, but there was nothing I liked, and the designs couldn't be improved.

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In the end, I persuaded them to sell me the plot without the design."

That deal got her three-quarters of an acre of steep, rocky hillside for £167,000. She then lined up a beauty parade of architects, giving them all exactly the same tricky brief — that although the house was to be built on a steep slope, she wanted her main living area, bedroom and bathroom to be on a level with the entrance.

Why? Because Lee wants to live here for a long time, and the idea of finding stairs tricky when she gets old didn't appeal. The other problem was a covenant on the site, stipulating that the building could not rise more than a few feet above the sloping roadway at the back, so as not to block the view from the surrounding houses.

The best solution came from the London-based firm run by Hudson, who suggested sheltering everything beneath a tilted roof that exactly followed the height restriction: a roof that would look good from above, clad in large, richly coloured slate panels.

That left enough room for a palatial single-floor apartment for Lee to live in and entertain. For friends and family who come to stay, the site has allowed for a complete suite of three guest rooms and bathrooms to be slotted into the slope beneath. So, Lee can live on her floor and not have to go downstairs at all unless the mood takes her.

After two years in the planning and design stages, construction of the Light House began in 2004. Lee moved in 18 months later, although the building and garden were, technically, completed only this year.

The feature that marks out this house — and gives it its name — is the daringly cantilevered sun room, all glass and stainless-steel panels, that projects 16ft from the façade over the terraced garden in front. There is a study perched high behind this tall space, with shutters opening into it.

Steve Townsend, David Marsden/Page One

The aptly named Light House is covered with slate tiles. The cantilevered sun room, made of glass and stainless steel, projects 16ft over the terraced garden

Given that the house already has a huge living area, with a full-width balcony and big sliding windows, why the sun lounge as well? It turns out that this was a memory of Lee's parents' house in St Mawes, Cornwall. Her father, who built it, incorporated a sun lounge that the younger Lee had always loved.

When it comes to her favourite part of the house, Lee is torn between here and the positively Pompeian bathroom, in dark-red Chinese stone, that is tucked away at the back of the house. "Lounging in the sun room or lying in the bath," she reflects dreamily, adding: "And in good weather, there are some private parts of the garden where I can see and not be seen."

None of this came cheap, of course. The build cost for the 4,000 sq ft house — excluding the expensive-looking landscaping to the large garden — was £834,000. Lee's old house, which is 10 minutes away, sold for £250,000, so this was a big step up the price league. But

the business was doing well, so this became her personal project. A reward for all those years of hard graft.

"Of course, it turned out to be more expensive than I first imagined," Lee says. "I hope it has been worth it. It's unlikely that I would have found anything I like as much as the Light House. It's lovely to wake up to and lovely to come home to."

If one of my parents had embarked on such an ambitious house in middle age, I would have been quite put out, but it seems Lee's daughters rallied round.

"At first, they probably wondered what on earth I was up to, but they're used to me by now," she says. "They quickly entered into the spirit of it, and they love bringing their friends round."

So, no, Lee does not live in anything remotely resembling one of her company's own products. It's a house that springs from its landscape and makes the most of its remarkable views. This is anything but hair-shirt minimalism, however.

"I'm pleased that, although the Light House is modern, it's not austere," she says, and she's right. This is maximalist architecture: rich, sumptuous stuff.

■ Hudson Architects, 020 7490 3411, www.hudsonarchitects.co.uk. To find an architect, visit www.ribafind.org. The Dolls House Emporium, 01773 513773, www.dollshouse.com

