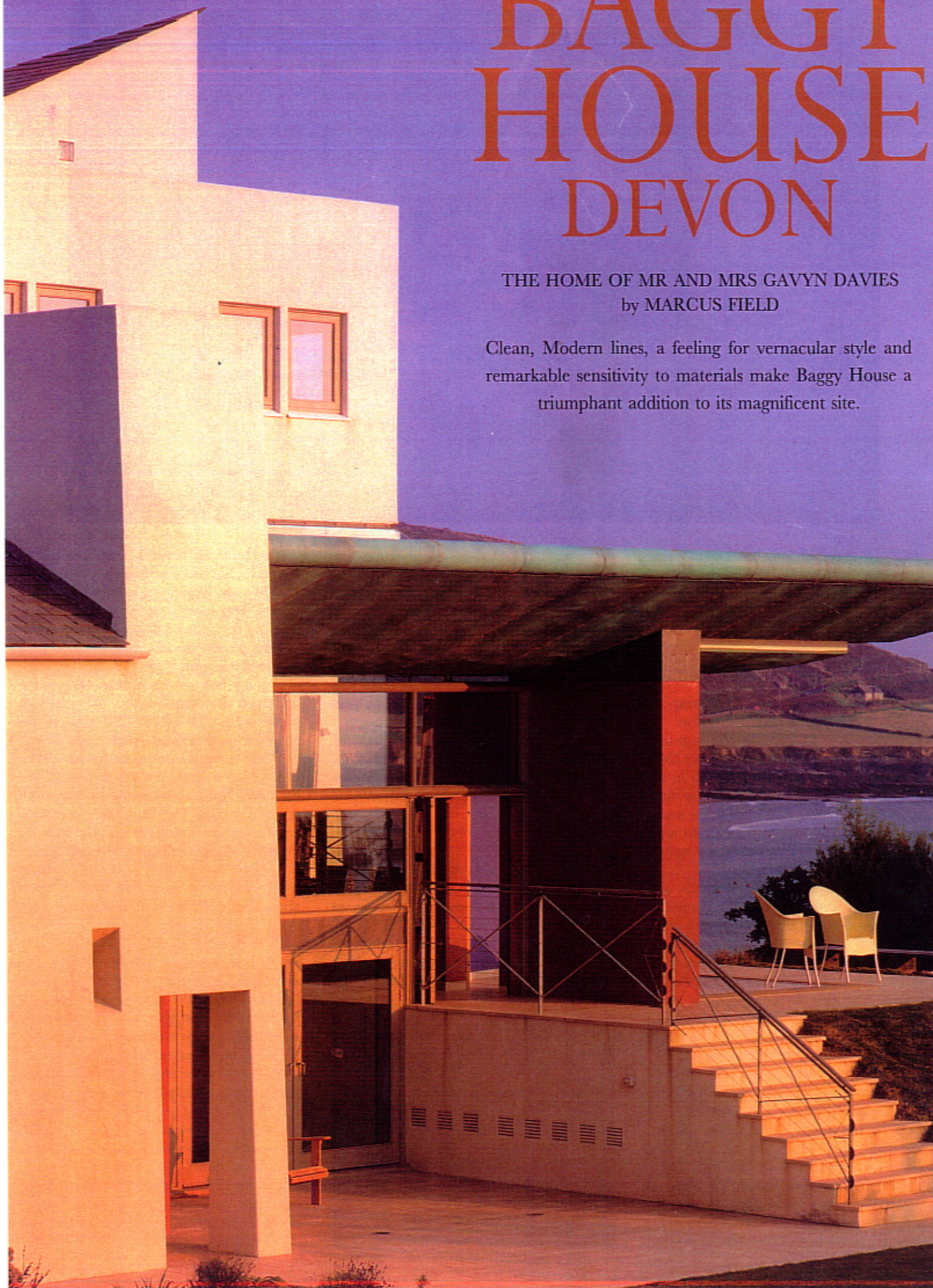


# BAGGY HOUSE DEVON

THE HOME OF MR AND MRS GAVYN DAVIES  
by MARCUS FIELD

Clean, Modern lines, a feeling for vernacular style and remarkable sensitivity to materials make Baggy House a triumphant addition to its magnificent site.





(Facing page) 1—The south front: in summer, its glazed screens are lowered, giving the house the air of an open pavilion. (Above) 2—The easterly approach to the house: its defensive solidity owes as much to the Devon vernacular as to the influence of Le Corbusier



WEST of Barnstaple, the Devon coast proceeds northwards in a series of spectacular sandy bays, each divided from the next by rocky outcrops. Beyond the village of Croyde, the coast road loops round the eponymous bay and follows the land as it rises up to Baggy Point, a grassy promontory which slopes down to craggy rocks as it meets the ocean.

A row of down-at-heel Edwardian villas comes into view across the bay, its line terminated by a striking, cream-coloured building with a soaring chimney and rhythmic series of slate roofs which play on the skyline. This is Baggy House, the recently completed summer home for Gavyn Davies, a London banker, and his family.

The story of this house is one of daring and determination: to build in a contemporary manner in the rural landscape of the late 20th century is to risk public contempt. But the Davies family and their architect, London-based Anthony Hudson, were bold in their aspirations. They had long been searching for a house by the sea, but found little of appeal. Finally, they landed on an old hotel on Baggy Point, which—although not ideal—they hoped might be converted to suit their needs.

The building started life as a Victorian house, built for the founder of *The Birmingham Post*, and was later enlarged. It had little architectural merit, but the Davieses

were attracted as much to the Art Deco lines of the 20th-century additions as to the Victorian elements—an early indication of their Modernist leanings. But if the suitability of the building might have been in doubt, the site, with its combination of country and sea views, was perfect.

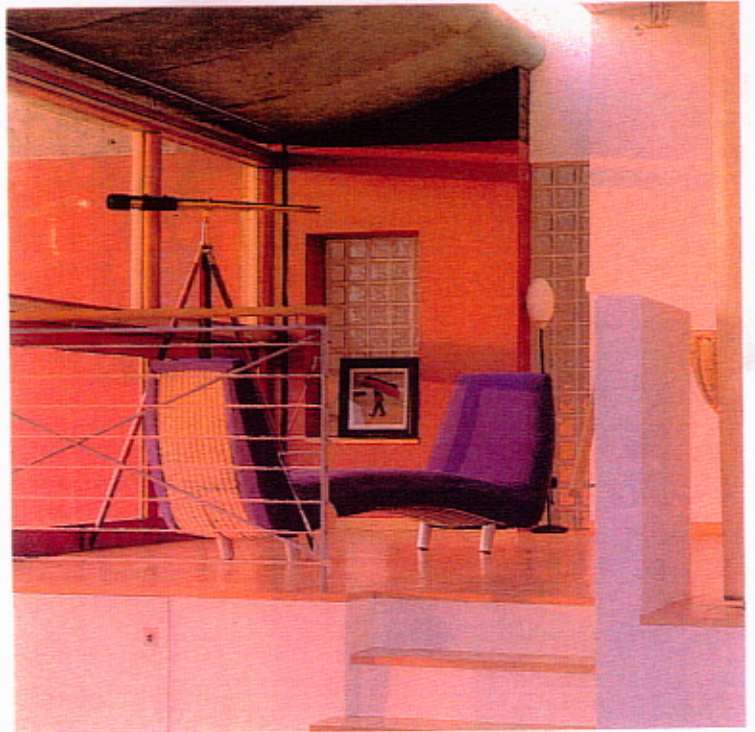
Mr Hudson, whom the Davieses met when he worked on their Georgian home in London, set about investigating the options for the hotel's conversion (his past experience includes working with the architectural practice Purcell Miller Tritton on its restoration projects for the National Trust). It soon became clear that it would be prohibitively expensive to restore the



3—When raised, the glazed screens form the front of the house, and give the public areas a panoramic view of the sea



and 5—The sitting room: a new interpretation of panelling. (Right) Chair by Tom Dixon; chaise-longue and coffee table by Michael Young



and 7—Work commissioned specifically for the house: Louise Woodward's hand-painted raw silk curtains and architect Anthony Hudson's cast-glass-topped table in the dining room. (Right) View up the steps from the dining room to the chaise-longue in the sitting room

uilding, and Mr Hudson suggested that is clients should demolish and start afresh. They needed little persuasion. Sue Davies is an admirer of Modern architecture, and faces its austere and regular spaces directly to the Georgian period. She and her husband gave Hudson a more or less free rein in designing the new house. Their only brief was that it should take maximum advantage of the dramatic coastal setting, have flexible, interconnected living spaces and plenty of room for guests.

All these ambitions and more have been met in the finished building. From the long drive which leads to its easterly entrance (Fig 2), the house appears solid and defensive: its battered, cream-rendered walls and tiny, deeply punched geometric openings recall the cob vernacular as much as the influence of Le Corbusier and his Cubist mentors. From here, the house reads as a series of massive planes intersecting each other, with a monumental chimney rising up in the centre. The front

door, which shelters beneath the chimney and behind the mass of the building, is modest for a house of this size and gives little indication of what lies beyond.

Inside, the hall also gives little away. The slate floor and the barely head-height, lead-clad ceiling suggest the entrance of a traditional Devon house rather than a seaside villa. At the centre of the space, and playing an integral structural role, is a granite stele (Fig 9). This roughly cut column, which seems to resemble one of the



**8—The principal living areas are interlinked: steps lead from the sitting room into the dining room, which in turn leads to a pavilion at the front of the house which can be enclosed by glass screens. The polished maple column has both a structural and aesthetic function**

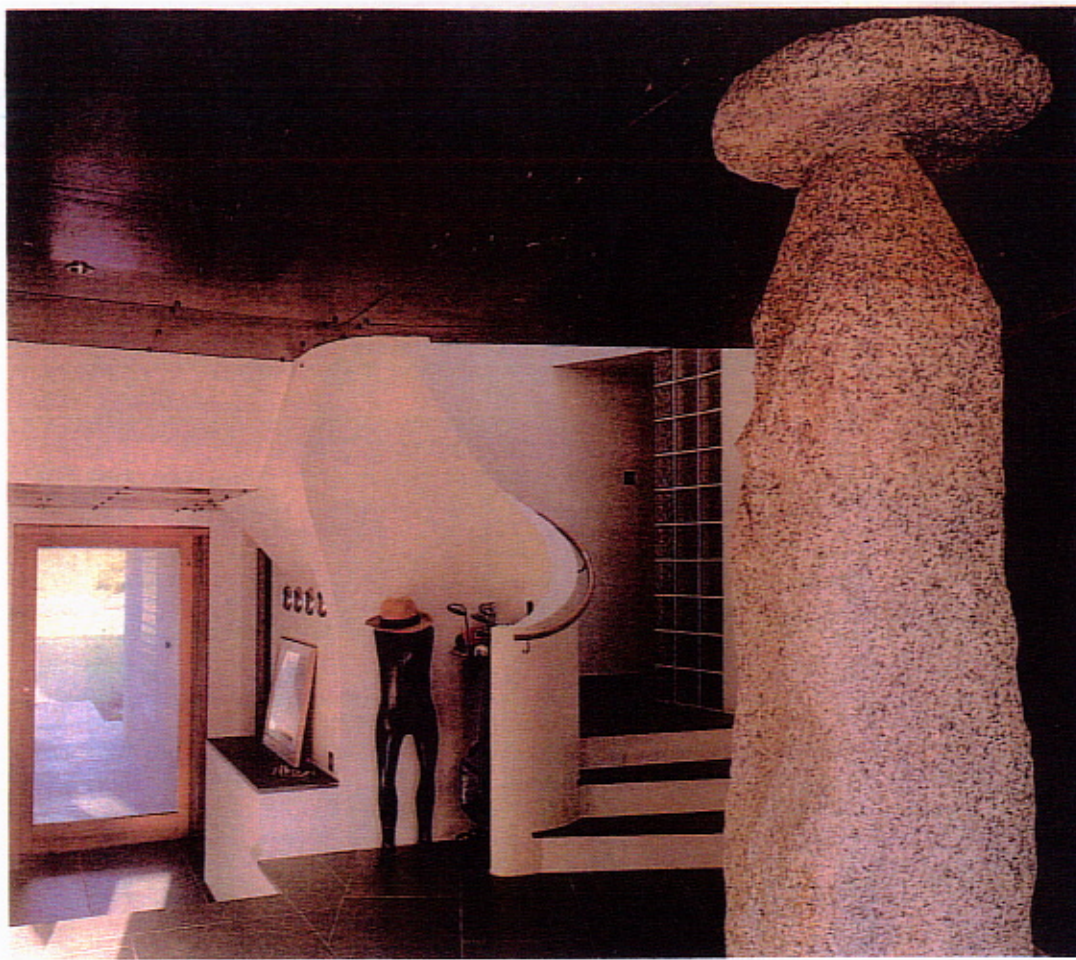
prehistoric standing stones so common in the south-west peninsula, comes from a local quarry and was hand-picked by the architect. Like the contrastingly polished, honed timber column in the sitting room (Fig 8), this column is one of the elements which make the house not just peculiarly English, but determinedly Devonian.

In its plan, the house is both complex and intriguing. From the hall, mere glimpses of light hint at the open spaces which lie beyond: to the left, the kitchen; ahead,

the study and garden. From the dimly lit hall, the effect of moving up the sculptural, curving staircase to the bright and sunny spaces above is intensely dramatic. The upper hall opens onto the principal living areas—first the sitting room, which steps down to the dining room and then pans out through the glazed screens that form the front of the house (Fig 3) to encompass the coast and ocean beyond. Suddenly, the sublime nature of the site is revealed and the house becomes a frame from which to

contemplate landscape, sea and elements. This feeling is intensified in summer, when the screens can be lowered out of sight (Fig 1) to leave the house as an open pavilion where inside mixes freely with outside.

Many of the natural materials used to make the house will become beautifully patinated and textured as it grows older. In the sitting room, the floor is of oak, and in the dining room, the finish is a creamy French limestone. In the manner of architects such as Sir Edwin Lutyens and Frank



9—The entrance hall: the monolithic granite stele is reminiscent of prehistoric standing stones

loyd Wright, as well as of David Lea, his first employer, Mr Hudson has taken traditional elements such as the oak panelling and fireplace in the sitting room (Fig 4) and refined them to create something new. He has also employed local craft skills, but in an inventive way. The builders of the house were the Barnstaple branch of Pearce Construction, and a Devon organ maker turned the maple column that supports the roof above the sitting room.

Also, in the best tradition of private house-building, art and craft works have been specially made. Louise Woodward was commissioned to paint the brightly coloured raw silk curtains for the dining room (Fig 6) after the Davieses spotted her work in a Central St Martin's College of Art and Design degree show, and the *chaise-longue* and coffee table in the sitting room (Fig 5 and 7) are by London furniture designer Michael Young. Mr Hudson himself has designed a cast-glass table top on an oak base for the dining room.

The living spaces are at the centre of the house, not only in plan, but in section. From them, steps pass down to the kitchen (Fig 11) which in turn leads down to the children's playroom. Now that kitchens are no longer closed off as the realm of the domestic servant, they often play a more central role. The open-plan form of the kitchen at Baggy House allows views to



10—Small, framed openings in the guest and family bathrooms give views out to sea

the playroom and dining room, making it the building's symbolic heart. As much attention has been given to detail here as anywhere else in the house, with a range of bespoke surfaces in glass, timber and stainless steel.

Although the house's public spaces welcome the ocean and sun to the south, the architect has placed the family's private quarters to the north and the west. Here, where the building hugs the hill which rises up to the rear, Hudson has created a wing which in form is inspired by the traditional

Devon longhouse. On the ground floor it contains a study and gymnasium, and upstairs a passage leads to the children's and master bedrooms. In the latter, with its vaulted ceiling and open-plan bathroom (Fig 12), an oriel window is orientated to look out to sea and a oak day bed is built in to provide a perfect place for private contemplation. This simple but beautifully detailed feature is a typical example of how every inch of this house has been carefully considered and put to work.

In a slightly formal and quaintly old-fashioned way, guests are separated from the family in the kitchen wing. The bedrooms are reached via a narrow staircase of frosted glass treads which rise up over the kitchen. The narrowness of the stair is countered by the height of the well, which soars up dramatically to the top of the chimney where it culminates in a glazed roof. Light streams down, playing on the walls before passing through the stairs to the kitchen. Like the bathrooms in the family quarters, the guest bathrooms have slate and zinc finishes with playful port-holes or little windows to the outside (Fig 10), big enough to allow glimpses of sea or rocky coastline from the tub.

Just as the composition of openings, planes, light and colour are critical to the inside of Baggy House, so the outside is equally considered. On the garden side to



**11—The kitchen, at the heart of the house, looking towards the entrance to the hall**

the west, the great, transparent fronts of the living areas are surmounted by a patinated copper canopy which projects out to shade the rooms from the high summer sun. Beyond the slab of the house which divides this front from the bedroom wing, the building becomes more vernacular—a long, low, cottage-like form, complete with a slate roof. Looking at it from the garden, it comes as no surprise to learn that Hudson's first experience of making buildings was as a child growing up on a farm in Norfolk.



**(Left) 12—Clean cast-glass finishes in the bathroom of the master bedroom**

On leaving what at first might seem an impertinent addition to the coastline, it is clear that in its form, its materials and its relationship to landscape and sea, this house is more appropriate to its setting than any of its rather suburban-looking neighbours. And it is considerations such as these—without the need to resort to slavish imitations of the past—which are necessary if we are to create new buildings which are a pleasing contribution and not an insult to our most valued rural settings. *Photographs: Clive Boursnell.*