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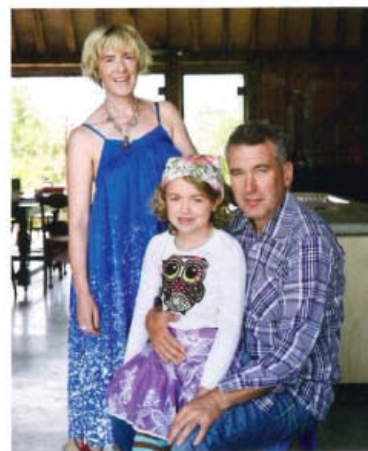
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THE ARTISTS' BARN

Ben Coode-Adams and Freddie Robins took a gamble on their Essex barn conversion, starting with just half the funds their quantity surveyor recommended – but hard graft paid off in the end, rewarding them with a home that's as unique as they come **Words** Luke Tebbutt **Photography** Rachael Smith



above Barn conversions can be dark, but planning restrictions meant that Ben couldn't install visible roof lights. He got round the problem by using a mesh roof
left Owners Freddie and Ben, with daughter Wilhelmina
far left Gaps in the sixteenth-century timber frame have been filled with plywood and strips of alder

Don't be fooled by the modern, £130,000 mesh roof on Ben Coode-Adams and Freddie Robins' barn from the new series of TV's *Grand Designs*. Inside, it feels more like being swallowed by a giant timber dinosaur – 8.5m tall, with all its bones exposed, dating from about 1560. There's no plasterboard, paper or paint to hide the structure – just raw architecture.

'I love that people still think we have to do the carpet or finish off the plaster,' says Freddie, an artist and textiles teacher at London's Royal College of Art. 'I love that it doesn't have those trappings of a normal home – they're too comfortable and cloying and claustrophobic. I love the extremity of it.'

Not everyone does, though. 'Quite a lot of people are horrified. It's against everything they think a home should be,' says Ben, also an artist. 'Friends of my parents said, "God, doesn't look like they're anywhere near finished yet."'

But they are – just. We visit days after the TV crew's final filming, which required a frantic push to clear →

'If you have no building knowledge, you're going to end up spending a shedload for somebody who does'



close to building them. In a normal build, you would have worked that out at the beginning so your contractor could cost it.'

Even better, it also saved them money. For example, a specialist company quoted £35,000 for the concrete floor (which had to be eight inches thick to support scaffolding, in case they need to reach the ceiling) and they knocked off more than a third by cutting out the middle-man and hiring people directly.

It's typical of their can-do (though some would call it foolhardy) approach, which drove the project from the start. A quantity surveyor told them it would cost £1.3million, but they proceeded with just £650,000 from savings and the sale of their London house (with another £150,000 lent by Ben's parents at the end).

'We never had a budget. We just had a set amount of money to work with, so we thought "let's do it and see what happens," says Ben. 'We knew we could save money on the surveyor's quote, which included the builder's profit and risk, but we didn't know how much it would cost to repair the frame. That's an unknowable thing. But what else can you do?'

For others considering a similar project, Ben advises – with hesitation – that it's handy to be handy. 'If you

have no building knowledge, you're going to end up spending a shedload for somebody else who does.'

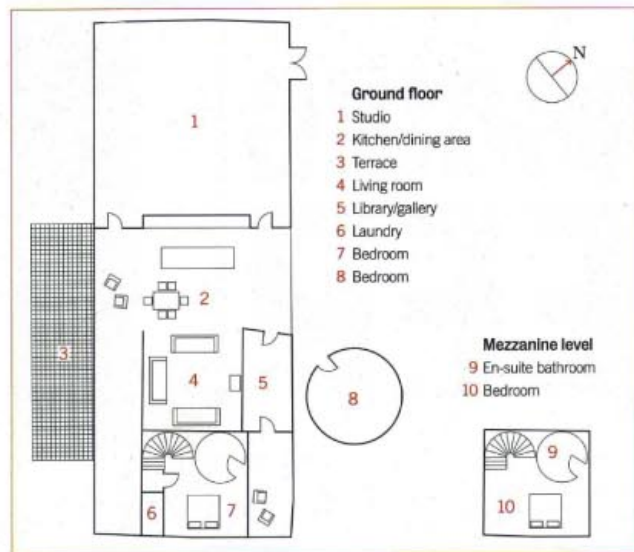
He also says it's important to spend time looking at the building before you start. Time was wasted at the beginning of their project considering a roof design that was unsuitable for their barn, which slopes from one end to the other.

'You need to spend time in the building, getting a feel for it, because it will affect all the design elements.'

By combining these elements with the eco-friendly features, including two wood-burning stoves, one with a back-boiler in case the main biomass boiler ever needs a back-up, Ben and Freddie feel they've checked everything off their list.

So now the hardest work is over, with just a few final details left to satisfy building control. Then they can work out where to put the rest of their robots and stuffed animals – about three quarters of which are stored in a side room. William Morris' often-quoted aphorism – 'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful,' – means nothing here. And, unsurprisingly, Freddie admits, 'I'm not very big on rules', which is probably just as well. **GD**

above Ben says the barn was probably a threshing barn in its original state. Ben and Freddie also have permission to convert the silo next to the barn into another bedroom which they hope to do at a later date and link it to the barn with a glazed corridor



Money matters

Build cost £350,000 **Build cost per sqm** £1,300
Professional fees £80,000 **Glazing** £47,000
Roof £130,000 **Flooring** £22,000 **Lighting** £8,000
Kitchen £5,000 **Bathrooms** £6,000

Suppliers

Project team Architect Hudson Architects (020 7490 3411; hudsonarchitects.co.uk) **Planning consultant** Bidwells (020 7493 3043; bidwells.co.uk) **Project manager** Ben Coode-Adams (bencoodeadama.com) **Project leader** Nick Spall and NS Restorations (07845 921 343; nrestorations.co.uk) **Engineer** Jag Manku at The Morton Partnership (01376 563 883; themortonpartnership.co.uk) **Electrician** RL Lissimore (01206 576 590) **Lighting designer** Andrew Eynon at Eco Light Store (0870 766 9606; ecolightstore.com) **Plumbing and pipe fitting** Chris Chapman at C&C Mechanical Services (01473 612 681; cmec-ltd.co.uk) **Roofer** Paul Grant at PJD Cladding Systems (01206 369 041) **Carpentry** Nicol Wilson (07977 220 903) **Structure** Roof mesh Cadisch MDA (020 8492 7622; cadischmda.com) **Roof slate** Welsh Slate, Penrhyn Quarry (01248 600 656; welshslate.com) **Polycarbonate skylights and cladding** Rodeca (01268 418 456; rodeca.co.uk) **Steel windows and stable roof lights** Clement Windows (01428 643 393; clementwindows.org.uk) **Sliding doors** Glasspace (01268 782 307; glasspace.com) **Fire-screen glass (dividing living space from studio)** Essex Safety Glass (01376 520 061; essexsafetyglass.co.uk) **Insulation** Gutex, supplied by Ty-Mawr (01874 611 350; lime.org.uk) **Concrete (for floor)** Hanson (01454 316 000; heidelbergcement.com) **Concrete pumping (for floor)** Canvey Concrete Pumping (01268 692 808; canveyconcretepumping.co.uk) **Concrete floor polishing** GRC Industrial Flooring (01206 864 000; grcindustrialflooringltd.co.uk) **Crack inducers (for concrete floor)** Permaban (01752 895 288; permaban.com) **Builders merchant** Ridgeons, Kelydon (01376 570 700; ridgeons.co.uk) **Tools** Hilti (0800 886 100; hilti.co.uk); Festool (festool.co.uk) **Cuttering** Evolve Deepflow from Alutec (01234 359 438; marleyalutec.co.uk) **Flame-retardant paint** Thermoguard (0115 976 4455; thermoguarduk.com) **Fittings and fixtures** Biomass boiler Herz Valves (01483 502 211; herzvalves.com) **Wood-burning stove** Morse from Opie's (01245 380 471; opie-woodstoves.co.uk) **Appliances** Fagor (01256 308 045; fagor.co.uk) **Shower, WC and bathroom taps** Roca (uk.roca.com) **Carpet (Wilhelmina's bedroom)** Milliken Contract (020 7336 7290; millikencarpeteurope.com) **Glass display cases** D&A Binder (020 7609 6300; dandabinder.co.uk)

right A major consideration was efficient heating and lighting of such a vast space – Gutex insulating wood fibreboards are on the walls and a large biomass boiler supplies underfloor heating and hot water. The lights are LED and the ones hanging from the roof are specially designed for high-ceilinged spaces – ‘the first dimmable, high-bay lights in Europe, probably the world,’ says Ben

far right Ben and his carpenter built the kitchen, even casting the concrete worktops. To get the size of the island right, they laid out furniture in the space to get an idea of how big it needed to be



the tools, clean away the mud and, of course, wheel out some of their beloved objects – dolls, robots, taxidermy, knitted toys – collected over 17 years and displayed in glass cases, like museum pieces.

‘Most of them are valueless. They’re things we’ve found, or people have given them to us because they know we like stuff,’ says Freddie. ‘They have emotional value, rather than monetary value.’

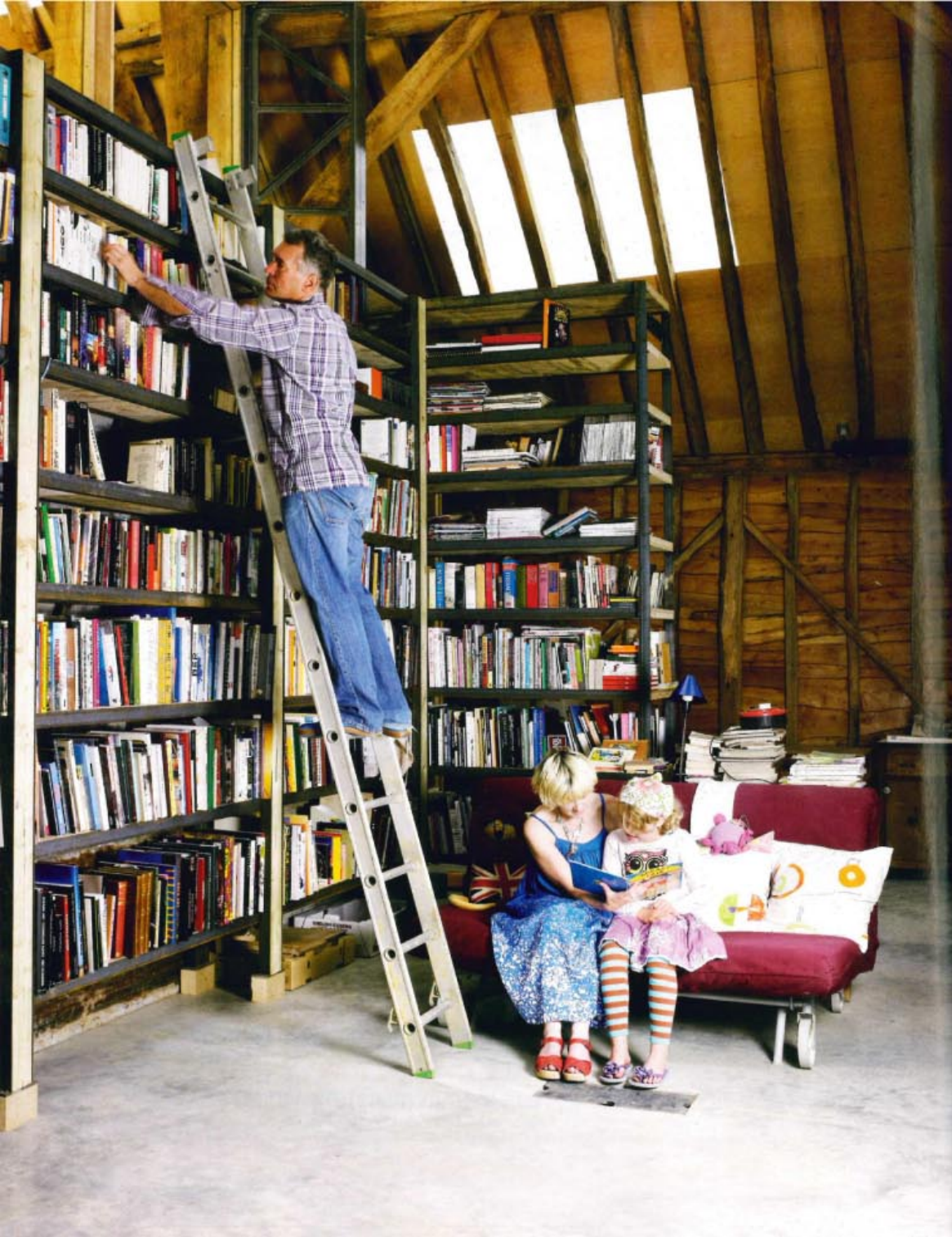
And the internal finishes are similarly sentimental and cost-effective. Old tea chests, bought for 50p each, cover a wardrobe for their seven-year-old daughter, Wilhelmina. Leftover featherboard from the exterior has been washed and sanded for the kitchen cupboards. Wood with deep scratches from cutting

the slate roof tiles forms part of Ben and Freddie’s main bedroom wall.

‘My view is that if a board has been used, it becomes much more valuable, because somebody’s spent hours working on it,’ says Ben. ‘In a conventional house you get scuffmarks and it deteriorates. We wanted ours to get more comfortable and beautiful with time.’

The barn, not far from Colchester, Essex, belonged to Ben’s parents, who live next door and transferred it to his name a few years ago (valued at £196,000 at the time). He and Freddie were looking for a live/work space in London, but were limited, given Ben’s noisy work creating steel sculptures. And London was too pricey, even though it was Freddie’s preference. ‘But →

‘Our things have emotional value, rather than monetary value’



left The studio has sky-high bookshelves above Rodera panels in the workshop bring in light, but maintain privacy. 'They're also more affordable than glass,' says Ben. *far right, above and below* Ben and Freddie's interesting array of collectables are on display

this property's amazing. It seemed churlish to turn down the opportunity just because I wanted to stay in the city. That's crazy. So we embarked on the project – and that was mad, too,' says Freddie.

Hudson Architects designed the striking mesh roof to deal with a planning restriction banning visible roof lights on the barn (the mesh conceals roof lights beneath it, while still letting in light). The side of the building had to be soundproofed, which is just as well as Ben will be doing a lot of steelwork for his art – making sculptures and public installations, such as arches and gates.

Design and planning took one year, from September 2006 to 2007, and building work started in April 2008. Soon after, however, they had to let their architect go to

save money, with Ben managing the build alongside Nick Spall, a timber-frame expert and, Ben says, 'building genius'. Together, they had to work out how to translate a pile of drawings into a home.

'We would draw details using Google SketchUp (a 3D drawing software package), so we could visualise what we were asking people to build.'

And of course, building a home where every surface and pipe is exposed required the builders to take greater care than normal with the details, with Ben usually starting jobs to demonstrate what was needed. 'They got a better level of craftsmanship, and could be more flexible with decisions on site,' says Ben.

'Nick and I were three jobs ahead of the builders, so we only started working on things when we got →



left, above and below Two existing silos, made of concrete blocks, were dismantled and rebuilt, concealing Ben and Freddie's bedroom and en suite on a steel-framed mezzanine, and Wilhelmina's bedroom under it right 'We had to repair a lot of damage to this side of the house,' says Ben, 'which meant the planners were more lenient about the windows here. They did stipulate that they should be Clement Windows, though - favoured for their very thin profile'

