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Building for the

future

British architecture is at last shaking off its habit of looking to the past rather than the future for inspiration. And selfbuilders are at the forefront of this brave new world. Eleanor Wilde reports

Michael Winter's award-winning Boundary House (above and right) was built to fairly 'green' low-energy principles

There is a problem with contemporary architecture which architects are the first to admit. We, in this country tend to be (how can I put this?) somewhat backward looking when it comes to the structures we choose to inhabit.

Not for the majority of Brits – and that includes a large proportion of planners – the modern approach. Instead, we prefer to opt for new homes which persist in aping the 'character' of yesteryear: mock Tudor or cottage designs with ornamental beams and inglenook fireplaces.



But houses will continue to be built to 1950s specifications until the public demands something more.

The architecture of the house is central to our social existence and, in Britain, we used to be leaders in the field. During the 1960s and 70s the growing realisation of the power of computers led to a brief flirtation with futuristic house concepts, and designs were often influenced by space exploration and made of 'advanced' materials such as plastic.

Now, however, the UK is sadly lagging behind other countries when it comes to micro-processor automation and the like, and new ideas for the design of our domestic space has seemed to come to

a virtual standstill in Britain over the past twenty years.

In other countries things are a little different. Take Japan, for example – the home of consumer electronics.

The Japanese love of gadgetry, coupled with a desire by the manufacturers to find new products to sell to a mass market, has led to houses which are smaller versions of their widespread intelligent office buildings.

The main function of these houses is to make life easier and more comfortable for the occupants. Common features include high levels of energy efficiency, advanced communication systems, automation of heating, lighting, cooling and security and sophisticated

home entertainment systems. Highly automated or 'intelligent' houses really are the way forward. Many new self-builds in this country already incorporate 'innovations' such as

ventilation and heat recovery systems, underfloor heating and central vacuums when, only a few years ago, they were unheard of.

But the overall designs for homes of the future are still in the

Open plan living makes for a more sociable lifestyle, whilst double height can create focus



The interior of this Soho loft, designed by Mark Guard Architects, maximises use of space and can be transformed from an apartment to a home office

experimental stage, with only a handful of really noteworthy projects actually built, and frequently these are conceived by architects for their own habitation and as showcases for their practice.

How can we possibly apply the same design principles to the 'average' house – and do we actually want to?

Contemporary houses do not have to be harsh, puritanical places. Clean lines and glass walls can work if enough storage space is provided to contain the usual family clutter. Open plan living makes for a more sociable lifestyle, whilst double height space can create focus and add drama to a room.

These 'tricks' are often used by architects when designing one-off homes, whilst the overall impression may not be overtly futuristic.

There is another aspect to most of these contemporary designs which is worth noting. Large areas of glass and mono-pitched roofs maximise solar heat retention which, coupled with masses of insulation and more environmentally friendly building materials, ensure that these modern houses are far kinder to the planet than their 1960s predecessors.

Gaining planning permission can often prove a difficult task, ▶



The Boundary House won the Daily Telegraph House of the Year Award in 1996 and received a RIBA Award for Architecture in 1997

although some very radical and futuristic designs have been permitted in certain areas and should, theoretically, be allowed in many others.

Modernists lament that traditional brick built homes are still the firm favourites, with most planners wanting new houses to 'fit in' with the style of surrounding properties.

The millennium has given momentum to design initiatives, however. Not only has the government-backed 'house of the future' been featured on the BBC1 series *Dreamhouse* (see case study 1), but the government is encouraging architects to embrace radical and continuous change in the construction industry.

Houses will have to adapt to our

growing demands: bedroom space can double as home offices for the growing number of tele-commuters, with flexibility a key to homes for the future.

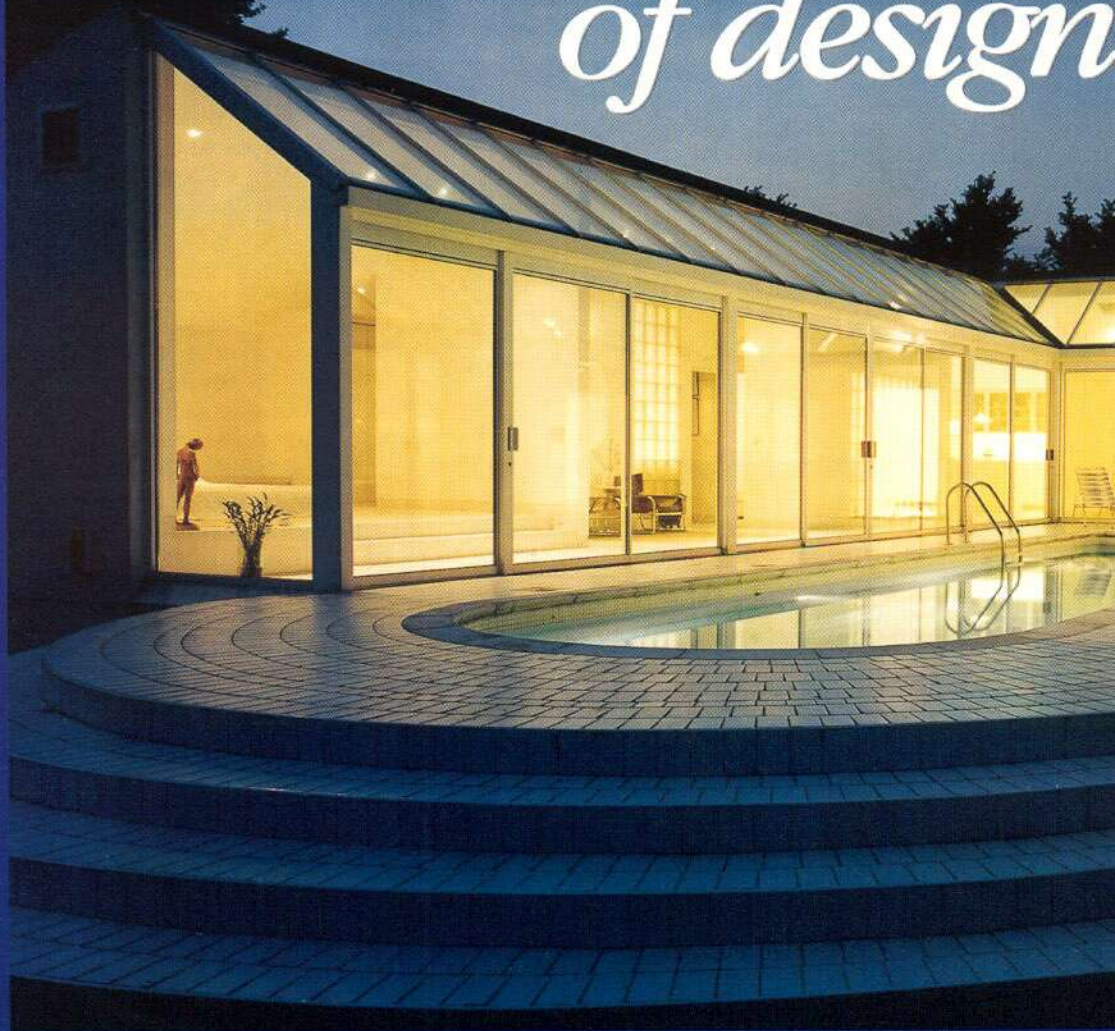
Mark Guard Architects has approached the way our living spaces can adapt to differing lifestyles with their Transformable Apartment – a Soho loft which caters primarily for one person, and measures 90 square metres. This project explores the maximisation of available space through flexibility of use.

The master and guest bedrooms are contained in two free-standing boxes, while a third holds the cloakroom, and the doors to these boxes form the movable walls of the bedrooms.

A 15 metre storage wall contains the TV, hi-fi, kitchen, laundry, drying cupboard, dressing table, wardrobes and wash basin, while the doors to the kitchen can slide back to expose washing up and cooking areas and a coffee/drinks bar. The three free-standing boxes which enclose the bathroom are

The government is encouraging architects to embrace radical and continuous change in the construction industry

The lighter side of design



bisected by a six metre stainless steel table, with the bath, set into the table, separated from the living area by Privalite electric glass.

Such examples are rather extreme, but it is easy to see how the trickle-down effect can gradually change the way we look at our homes. Open a kitchen brochure and notice how flush modern units and stainless steel have captured pole position. Glass blocks, low voltage recessed lighting and plain white walls – all typical of contemporary style – can already be found in many homes, while the once ever-present dining room has given way to the more user-friendly 'family' area, and open plan living and eating spaces become increasingly popular.

Who is to say that, in another ten or twenty years, the British will have concluded their love affair with all things retro and be prepared to accept a new kind of house? We already run competitions to design houses for the future, write extensively on the subject and even host exhibitions to display designs for concept third millennium housing.

Modern homes can be organic and beautiful or angular and shocking. They can also adapt successful elements of the past – in all honesty, the real architecture of the future is far more likely to be a variation on building traditions rather than anything new or radical.

The difference will be more about materials and the way technology is used to improve comfort

and convenience with minimal environmental impact.

And you can be sure selfbuilders will be at the forefront of any innovations, and the first to incorporate these new technologies into their homes. ➤

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Having lived in a five storey Georgian house in Bristol, architect Michael Axford wanted to create something completely different when he built his new home in the country.

Built around an illuminated swimming pool, his stunning creation provides uncluttered living space with minimum wasted circulation, maximum light, privacy and flexibility. It also requires little maintenance.

"We wanted the house to relate to the elements and the landscape by minimising the transition between inside and outside," says Michael. "Flexibility was of paramount importance as we were determined to break away from compartmentalised spaces and to eliminate any redundant areas within the house.

"Although there were only two of us living in the house we have an extensive family and we entertain frequently."

Although supported by the local planning officer, there was considerable opposition from the parish council and local residents. This was resolved by the local authority convening the planning meeting on site. Once the impact of the development was demonstrated to be minimal, because of the landscaped banks, the scheme was passed.

The form and construction of the property relates not to the surrounding houses but to the low level single storey agricultural buildings in the vicinity. Viewed from afar the house could be mistaken for a barn surrounded by woodland.

The result is a house of transparency and light looking across a shimmering blue, illuminated swimming pool and towards open countryside. It challenges the traditional British house, with minimal windows in the external walls, but complete glazing to the walls and roof of the pool court around which the house is built.

"The thought and effort spent on designing the internal layout to capture the movement of the sun has exceeded all expectations," says Michael.

"The quality of light and ever changing shadows have proved to be a joy."