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OUR PLANET



Marion Welham visits a house already well into the new century

A BRIGHT yellow door is the only thing that really marks out the Fisher Stevenson House from the others. That is, until you go round the back. Here, in a bold break with convention, an atrium wing rises up in front of you, all shiny glass and a hundred reflections.

This is the vision of John Stevenson and his partner Diane Fisher working with award-winning architect Michael Winter. Last time I visited this couple, the L-shaped house, eco-friendly house was just a concept and the site at Brandeston, Suffolk; just another muddy patch. Now we are inside talking of living spaces rather than rooms, of moveable barriers rather than walls and of furniture on wheels for evolving lifestyles.

Builders Featherstone of Ipswich had a 14-week contract to build the house and completed it in 15, not bad considering they had not built this type of house before. Because Michael Winter lives in Tunbridge Wells, local architect Terry Foster took over the project on site and played a key part in its success. The one supporting wall in the whole building is actually part of a square pod of about three metres square rising up, off centre, through the house. At ground level it houses a utility area on one side and a shower and toilet on the other, on the first floor a family bathroom, and above that some loft storage space.

John draws an imaginary line where they may put a barrier to create a wide passage between kitchen space and pod. "Everything is in transition at the moment," says Diane as she hands their six-year-old daughter Lydia a drink across what seems like a vast stage while Joe, 8, sneaks up on them wearing a paper mask. The ground floor space is 85 square metres which, with the minimum of furniture, is pretty large. The walls took a stunning 50 gallons of white water-based emulsion to cover. The basic and minimal kitchen infrastructure cost just £45 from B&Q and is, says John, "just until we get the feel of the place. I want to build something that doesn't look like a kitchen. We're not into kitchen culture. We're not Aga louts."

With oil-powered, underfloor heating and a Warmcell insulation which pumped dry paper pulp into every nook and cranny, there is no need for dust-absorbing fitted carpets and soft furnishings. John and Diane have simply coated the floor in solvent-free, mid-grey, industrial paint from Watco of Surrey.

And with the solar gain of the atrium, says John, "it is rather like being in California". That's true. Despite the Swedish triple glazed doors standing open, it is remarkably warm in the strong sunlight. The basic structure of the house, apart from the atrium end, uses a Norwegian building



EVEN THE SOFA IS GREEN: The family relax in their new house. Big energy savings should recoup some of the £25-30,000 premium spent on this concept building

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SO WHAT'S NEXT...?

FUTURE projects planned by John and Diane at the Fisher Stevenson House are to build same-level decking round the periphery of the house and perhaps add sails in the summer as a sun shade. In the garden, they will plant the silver birch and the fig tree bought for their respective birthdays. "Otherwise, plants will be formal and architectural such as sea grass and Japanese acers," says John. The garden is to be wild at the end and the builders have left the displaced soil to form a hill to create "a natural step between formal home and countryside".

system called Masonite (American for hardboard) which uses quarter the amount of trees than solid wood. A series of Masonite I-beams are bonded each side with solid timber. That means no big bits and no big trees to be felled. "They are very strong and very light. They keep their shape and won't twist or bend," says John. There was no plaster to dry out, only dry lined plasterboard, the joints filled with webbing and skimmed over. The gal-

vanised steel spiral staircase, from Crescent Steel Company of Cambridge, was the last thing to go in and the family adore it, especially Lydia and Joe. "The house is like a big gymnasium for them," says John.

But the greatest inspiration comes from standing on the first floor gallery with the fabulous view stretching eastwards across the fields to hedgerows and a splendid oak tree. Diane says it looks different every morning. "You're really aware of the sky," says John. "I love to see the weather coming in and out of the house."

Off the large gallery space light and shadow falling on the window recesses make the passageway more sculptural than industrial. "We didn't want a dark corridor with lots of clanking doors."

The minimalist look is rather lost on Lydia whose bedroom is a glorious jumble of toys. She wants pink while Joe aspires to the jungle look.

With vast areas of space in between, there are no doors on the bedrooms. "We wanted a fluid space," says John. "The children are not asking for their privacy just yet. When they do, then we'll put doors on."

Naturally they won't be conventional doors but chicanes weaving in and out, then decking and a ladder to provide a bedding area with hanging space underneath. This, says John, will give them a "privacy barrier".

The main bathroom has a steel bath from Falcon of Colchester with Colourwash fittings, taps off centre, and a perfectly round wash basin with a plug like an after dinner mint.

With a roughly £25,000-30,000 premium for the unconventional approach, this type of house doesn't come cheap although energy savings could recoup some of the cost. Both Diane and John are artists, she an illustrator, he a graphic designer for Genty Fine Decoration of Kent, which is probably why they both enjoy the creativity that comes from having to economise.

"We've bought that kitchen worktop for £12.75 and I'm in a business where people spend £160,000 on their kitchens," says John.

"Friends and family have all been so supportive and given us so much encouragement," says Diane.

"With a project like this, your heads are full of uncertainty. You're thinking: is it going to work?" When they see the house at night from the fields, "like a beautifully glowing spaceship" they know they have done the right thing.

BEHIND THE YELLOW DOOR: Its bright door is the only thing that marks this unusual house from any other. It only has one supporting wall and has been designed to be eco-friendly. Right, Joe and Lydia have fun in the atrium

