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# Living etc

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SUMMER IN  
THE CITY



# Why we chose the country

When Michael and Elizabeth Winter quit the city, they didn't just buy a house – they built one

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Like so many professional couples who live in the city, Michael and Elizabeth Winter suddenly reached a point where they'd had enough. No more traffic, no more pollution, they wanted trees, space, fresh air – in short, they wanted the countryside. But unlike so many couples who dream of upping sticks, this pair were prepared to spend years fulfilling their dream of a country home with tons of character.

Rewind to the early Nineties. Elizabeth and Michael were living in a three-bed semi in Wanstead, east London, when they made the decision to head for the hills. But not for them the cute country cottage – they wanted more of a project. 'We did dally with the idea of converting a barn, but decided it would cost too much and we wouldn't really get what we

wanted for our money,' says Michael.

Instead, they decided to build a home from scratch. Travels to Australia, New Zealand and the west coast of America had already provided plenty of inspiration. There, Elizabeth and Michael had seen stylish deckhouses built on stilts and, impressed by their design, had fantasised about building a similar home of their own. 'It's far easier than working with what you've inherited,' says Elizabeth, 'because you can put in the features you want right from the start.'

So the search for a suitable plot began, but as they both still worked and lived in London during the week, tracking down somewhere wasn't easy. 'It took two-and-a-half years to find the right spot,' says Michael. 'We spent almost every weekend from 1991 to 1993 looking.'

Most people would have given up ►





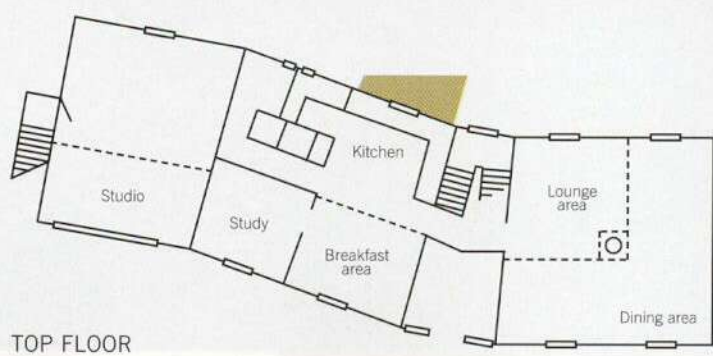
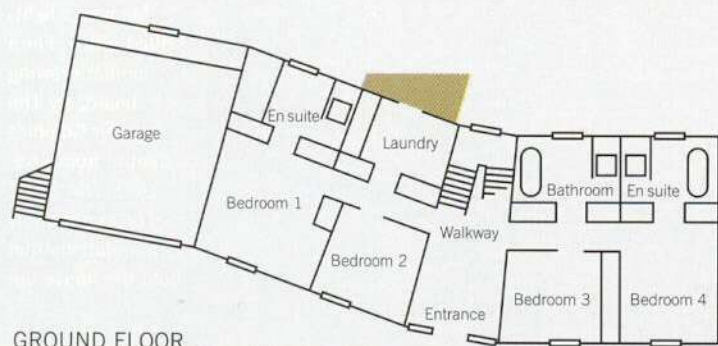
**TOP, FAR LEFT**  
The front door was painted acid yellow to contrast with the black timber. The hall floor is covered in Rajasthan slate tiles from Stonell, around £40 per sq m.

**TOP LEFT**  
Michael's light-filled office. For a similar drawing board, try The London Graphics Centre, from £65.

**BOTTOM LEFT**  
The eco-friendly foundations that hold the house up.

## LIVING SPACE

The circular wood burner was imported from Denmark. Diligence specialises in wood burners, from £1,250. The floor is reclaimed maple from a school in Dartford which was being demolished. You can get similar at Pergo. The leather sofas are from Marks & Spencer. Try David Wainwright for a lookalike wicker chair.





after a year, but not the Winters. 'What we wanted was an interesting site; a bit more than just a piece of flat land. Finding the perfect spot was crucial, because it would affect how the house looked, how big it was, everything.'

In 1993, they finally found a half acre of land for sale in a woodland clearing in the Kent countryside. Unfortunately, another buyer had just put an offer on it, but six months later, the sale fell through. Michael and Elizabeth rushed back with their offer, and the land was theirs.

To fund the project, they sold their London home and in July 1995 building work began. Every penny they had was invested in the £65,000 site and developing it has cost £235,000 so far. It's still not finished, but the house is now worth around £750,000.

Elizabeth and Michael always knew they wanted a contemporary, open-plan home, but they let the plot dictate what form that would eventually take. For example, they put the living area upstairs and the bedrooms below to make the most of the light filtering through the tree tops. They also decided to go down a totally eco route – not something they'd

originally planned – and Michael swotted up on the finer points of the development with help from some environmental organisations. 'In the beginning, we didn't know about most of the eco elements we eventually incorporated. As the design developed, so did our knowledge,' he says. 'We became more aware of ecological issues as we progressed,' adds Elizabeth.

It's been a big leap. 'We've always recycled newspapers and bottles,' laughs Michael, 'and now we have a compost bin and use low-energy lightbulbs.' And that's not all. The very foundations of their home are eco-conscious. 'We wanted to keep the trees that surround the plot,' says Michael. 'Traditional foundations would have cut across their roots, so instead we built on timber piers with a metre-deep concrete pad between each of them so the trees could survive.'

The couple also wanted to make the most of natural heat sources. So, on the south-facing side of the house, they've incorporated a lot of glass. 'We've got triple-glazed, low-reflective windows that keep in the heat, so the house is always warm in winter and cool in summer,' says Michael. 'In the winter, when the leaves ►

## 'THE SITE DICTATES THE SPACE, WHICH WAS WHY FINDING THE PERFECT SPOT WAS CRUCIAL'



ABOVE CENTRE Sliding drawers in the kitchen's island unit provide plenty of storage space. RIGHT The table is from Ikea and the chairs are Heal's. FAR RIGHT The cooker hood is by Danhood, the units are Ikea – try Arlig units, from £453.

fall off the trees, the sun filters through and keeps the place warm. In the summer, it's cool because the foliage keeps the heat at bay.'

This natural solar heating is supported by a log burner in the main living area – a mechanical ventilation system which filters out used air and warms the cool, fresh air coming in – and two radiators in the bathrooms. 'We didn't want central heating, but if we have kids, we may put heating in the bedrooms,' says Michael.

The structural timber was imported from Sweden. Instead of huge beams cut from whole trees, they used 'glulams' – beams made up of lots of pieces of red pine glued together. The walls are insulated with flame-retardant recycled newspaper which is 10 inches thick. As for the roof, Elizabeth got her way. 'I vetoed the grass roof that Michael wanted – I was worried he might fall off when he mowed it and it was one step too far down the hippy trail.'

She sent Michael back to the drawing board and he came up with a roof clad in

copper tiles that will turn green with age and merge with the woodland.

The rainwater that runs off it is channelled through copper pipes, filtered and stored for household use in a 19,000 gallon tank under the garage, meaning the four-bedroomed house is almost entirely self-sufficient and bills for water and gas are kept to a few pounds a year.

There was only one major hitch in all their plans. 'The insulation guy went bust,' says Michael. 'He didn't know what he was doing and he cost us a lot of money.' It was cash they could ill afford, and when they moved into the house in March 1996, it was far from finished. There wasn't even a kitchen. 'We camped here for the first six weeks,' says Michael.

So are they happy with the finished house? 'There are lots of mistakes everywhere,' says Michael, a touch gloomily. His wife, however, is more optimistic. 'It's fantastic. There are still lots of things to do – three out of the four bedrooms for a start – but they cease to be of great importance when you live here.

## home truths

**What was the hardest bit about building your home?**

Michael: Finding a plot. Everybody is after a site, so you have to persevere and use your imagination.

**Are you total greenies?**

Elizabeth: Er, we both run gas-guzzling cars, so we're not holier than thou!

**Is there anything you'd do differently?**

Michael: We'd put in a bigger log burner as it can get a bit cool in winter. A more efficient mechanical ventilation system would be good, too – ours guzzles electricity and doesn't give out much heat.

**So why are there no pictures on the walls?**

Elizabeth: There isn't actually much wall space, although we do have lots of pictures we'd like to put up.

**Who's the tidy one?**

Elizabeth: Michael's tidy. He sticks everything that's lying around in my study!

## 'YOU FEEL CONNECTED TO NATURE HERE. THAT'S WHY WE MOVED OUT OF LONDON'

**RIGHT** Glass bricks in the bathroom help to maintain the feeling of space. They're available from Wickes, £2.99 each. Try Criterion Tiles for mosaic tiles.



**FAR RIGHT** The couple's birch bed with attached pull-out tables was from a local store. Try Ocean for similar.





Even now, when I look outside I think "I'm so lucky".'

Michael agrees. 'Even when you're not outside you feel very connected to nature,' he says. 'That's one of the main reasons we moved out of London. Now we see squirrels, foxes, birds, and we're on the lookout for a badger. It's like living in a treehouse in the summer. It's more exposed during the day in the winter months, but at night it's so dark you can't see out.'

So, curtains aren't a priority then? 'We did intend to have blinds, but it would have been too expensive,' says Elizabeth. 'It does mean we do have to remember not to come up to the kitchen starkers,

as people walking their dogs can probably see inside!'

After they moved in, architect Michael entered *The Daily Telegraph*/Individual Homes Homebuilder of the Year competition – and won. The prize was a week in Venice. 'We hired a gondola and I proposed to Elizabeth on the Grand Canal under the stars,' he says. Ahh, how romantic. 'It's taken me 20 years to get him down the aisle,' laughs Elizabeth.

She says she found the house-building process very stressful and emotional. 'I said never again, but Michael would be happy to build another home, so I'm coming round to the idea – but only if we find an even better site than this.' ■



**TOP** The softwood decking gives a treehouse feel. Try B&Q for benches, from £25.

**ABOVE** One of the reasons for living in the country. **RIGHT** Marine wire reinforces the banisters without blocking out light.