



FEET HOME



Building sight from left): Hampstead; Urwin's home; the No. 10; Muriel and Jonathan; great-value home



From up-to-the minute eco-houses to classical conversions, the Homebuilding and Renovating Awards continue to showcase the best of British design. Christopher Middleton profiles the winners

Everyone knows it can be hard work designing a house for one person. However, in the case of the Stoke Newington development that won the Best Custom Build category in this year's Homebuilding and Renovating Awards, there were six sets of clients that had to agree. "They all bought the site collectively, and we dealt with the whole group," says project director Ken Rorrison, of architects Henley Halebrown Rorrison. "Decisions were made not by a vote, but by consensus. There are six houses all together, and they all sit on their own patch of land, but the grounds are communal.

"In addition, there is a communal laundry, a communal workshop, and a communal hall that can be used for all sorts of events, such as yoga classes and birthday parties. "The thing is, you have to get to a point where everyone is happy. Usually, the group would be represented by one person, on a changing, rota basis. It takes a lot of time, but it is a fascinating process. At the end of it all, everyone felt it had been a great achievement." Not that the site looked that promising when they began: the new houses were built on ground that had previously housed a disused nursery.

And a similarly downbeat, ugly-ducking Sixties property near Hexham was the raw material with which Neil and Anita Turner, winner of the Best Extension/Remodel category were faced. However, when it came to getting decisions on what needed altering, the couple took a rather unusual step. "The way we approached the project, was that I played the architect, and my wife played the client, to whom I would put my plans," says Neil. (The role-play was made easier by the fact that Neil actually is an architect, at the Howarth

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Litchfield Partnership.) “The thing is, we had just missed out on another property, and I couldn’t afford to waste time. I needed a house for my wife and two children. What’s more, although it had been somewhat bastardised, this house stood on a lovely plot, with a beautiful southerly aspect. Hence the name Treetops.

“One day, there was a tap on the door, and it was the son of the architect who had worked on the house in the Sixties. He had photographs of how the place used to look, and our house does definitely give a nod to the original, though the design is much cleaner and whiter.

“As well as now having created a much lovelier house, we’ve got 1.5 acres of grassy grounds, and have introduced a wild flower meadow.”

Speaking of which, the word “wild” definitely applies to the derelict riverside site, in Sunbury-on-Thames, where Jon and Muriel Wallsgrove chose to build their new home, winner of the Best Value For Money project.

“We knew the location pretty well, because we had been sailing past it for about 10 years,” says Jon. “It was overgrown with 8ft brambles, and had about 13 rusting cars in its grounds. Of course, you have to be aware of flooding, so although we have built a former bungalow, like many others in the area, we have taken the precaution of raising it 2m (6.5ft) above ground level.

“Do we enjoy living here? It’s a dream come true. We sit out on our veranda, and enjoy the river, whatever its mood, and whatever the weather.”

Not that chill winds and wintry temperatures cause sleepless nights for architects Catherine Roberts and Stephen Harris, owners of the 2014 H&R Best Eco-Home, which sits nestled among seven hills at Llanfoist, near Abergavenny.

Having moved from south London, where Stephen worked with the carbon-neutral BedZed scheme, they have built a mass of energy-saving features into their home (wall insulation, heat storage, south-facing glazing, thermal panelling). Their solar thermal heating system provides heating not just for the house, but for the water.

“The aim was to do a zero-energy house as cost-effectively as possible,” says Stephen. “And for the amount we paid (£175,000), you’d be hard pushed to buy a starter home in some parts of the country.”

Sometimes, though, you don’t have to travel hundreds of miles from home to find the perfect self-build site. In Michael Walker’s case, he has just moved into his

parents’ back garden, at Shrawley, in Worcestershire.

“I’m a graphic designer, not a builder, but I got hooked on the television programme *Build, Buy or Restore*,” he explains. “It seemed the perfect solution, to buy the plot from my parents and build our own three-bedroom house [winner of the Best Timber Frame Home category].

“We hired a firm called Border Oak to build the exterior, and then I took on installing the services. And it has been great. When my wife, Katie, and I go away, our parents keep an eye on our house – and we do the same for them.”

The net result? Everyone saves a fortune in fuel bills. Mind you, more and more property owners want homes not only to place less strain on the environment, but to look good, as well.

“Being interested in energy-saving doesn’t mean you want to live in a dark, little house,” says Alex Oliver, whose firm Alex Oliver Associates designed dramatic Lantern House, winner of the Best Traditional Style Home section, at Manningford Abbots, in Wiltshire.

“We’ve used the local brick and flint materials, and we’ve also ensured that the house has

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a good level of insulation, and that it’s airtight. At the same time, we try to strike a balance between tweedy traditionalism and exciting modernism.

“This house is owned by a couple who regularly have family to stay, and that involves a number of grown-up children and a large number of grandchildren. As a result, the arrangement of the rooms (with the master bedroom on the ground floor) allows single storey living within a larger whole, with the first floor for visiting family and guest accommodation.”

On top of which, there are built-in surprises, such as the hidden door to the cloakroom, and the first-floor landing, which is used as a library. It has a vaulted ceiling and the whole space is top-lit by a lantern, to allow the owner to display works of art without them being bleached by the sun.”

Not that letting in light is always a bad thing. The winning home in the Best Contemporary Style category is The Nook, near Chepstow. It was designed by architect couple Martin Hall and Kelly Bednarczyk. The judges praised it for having “plenty of light and architectural wow factor”.



NIGEL RIGDEN; SIMON MAXWELL

Clockwise from top: Richard and Gill Harris's 200-year-old farm; Michael Walker's 'cottage in the garden'; James Joll's new Georgian home; the Stoke Newington development that won the Best Custom Build category; Catherine Roberts and Stephen Harris's eco-home in Wales (below)



The same applies to the house that won the Best Conversion category. This is Farningham House Cottage, in Kent, a combination of workshop, stables and a 17th-century coach house, all brought together by a large glass extension (built cost £200,000), with the added complications of Grade II-listing.

“Finding a solution was like putting together the pieces of a large puzzle,” says Glyn Emrys of Emrys Architects, in Smithfield, London. “First, we had some very useful discussions with the local planning department, then we built a scale model, so that it was easy to envisage the project.

“At the same time, we had to bear in mind that our clients often give big parties, so the coach house needed to have plenty of kitchen, dining and living space.”

It’s hard, of course, combining the requirements of 21st-century

living and planning of old buildings taken by Richard and Gill Harris whose 200-year-old Balquhiddie was the Best Restoration.

“We bought a derelict building and we could do anything with it,” says Richard Harris. “We built a lavatory downstairs.”

“We tried to do it ourselves but they asked us to either build a three-quarter house or the nearest to ourselves, building a heating system, attic, and then we recognised



The judge's verdict

“This year, we had more entries for the awards than ever before. There does seem to be a growing interest in renovating the kind of ugly-ducking houses that were built in the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies, and turning them into something much more attractive and modern.”

“The other big trend is what we call ‘critical regionalism’: not just putting up a white box that makes no attempt to fit in with its surroundings, but building something that blends with the landscape. For example, the architect who designed the overall winning scheme (overlooking Loch Awe, in Scotland) talks about wanting the roof line to follow the line of the neighbouring hills.”

“As a result, more and more of the schemes have been spending money not just on materials, but on design. Basically, it’s not so much a matter of telling architects what you do want, it’s about letting them come up with something that you weren’t expecting, but which will unlock value in your property.”

Jason Orme, editor of *Homebuilding and Renovating* magazine



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living and entertaining with the planning constraints attached to old buildings. Witness the care taken by Richard and Gill Harris, whose 200-year-old farm at Balquhider, in Stirling, has won the Best Renovation section. “We bought the property when it was derelict, eight years ago, having been looking for somewhere that we could do up sympathetically,” says Richard. “At one stage, the downstairs byre had been used as a lavatory block for a camp site. “We tried to get local builders, but they all turned us down, either because renovations were too much work, or because we’re three-quarters of a mile from the nearest road. So we did it ourselves, in phases: gutting the building and installing underfloor heating. We’ve converted the attic, and the place is now unrecognisable from how it was.

“It’s all about seeing beyond a building’s present form, to what it might one day be.” And nowhere is that truer than at Uphill House, in Hampstead, north London, where it’s not just the look of the house that’s been transformed, but the amount of space (doubled, to 5,000 sq m/ 53,820 sq ft). Thanks to skilful work from Robert Dye architects, the house has been “folded” into a series of split-level floors, zigzagging up the hill on which it is built. A master bedroom at the very top serves as a lookout tower. By contrast, the view from Mike and Ann Urwin’s majestically panoramic house, at Taynuilt, in Argyll and Bute, is not of urban London, but of lovely Loch Awe. This is the house that has been voted the overall winner of this year’s H&R awards. “A masterclass in how

contemporary homes can fit in well within their landscape,” is how the judges assess this commanding, open-plan construction designed by Alastair MacIntyre, of McInnes Gardner Architects. As for Mrs Urwin, she puts it more simply: “We just wanted a beautiful home in a field, where we could quietly observe nature.”

For full coverage of all the winning schemes, look in the latest issue of *Homebuilding and Renovating Magazine*. First prize for the overall winners, Mike and Ann Urwin, is a stay at The Rubens Hotel in London, opposite Buckingham Palace