

# **RANCH** *DRESSING*



WIDE-OPEN VIEWS and the *sweep of an estuary* inform the design of this low-slung, **cedar-clad home** in Sussex. That, and the need for well-lit studio space for its **ARTIST OWNERS**

WORDS *Janet McMeekin* PHOTOGRAPHS *Nadia MacKenzie*



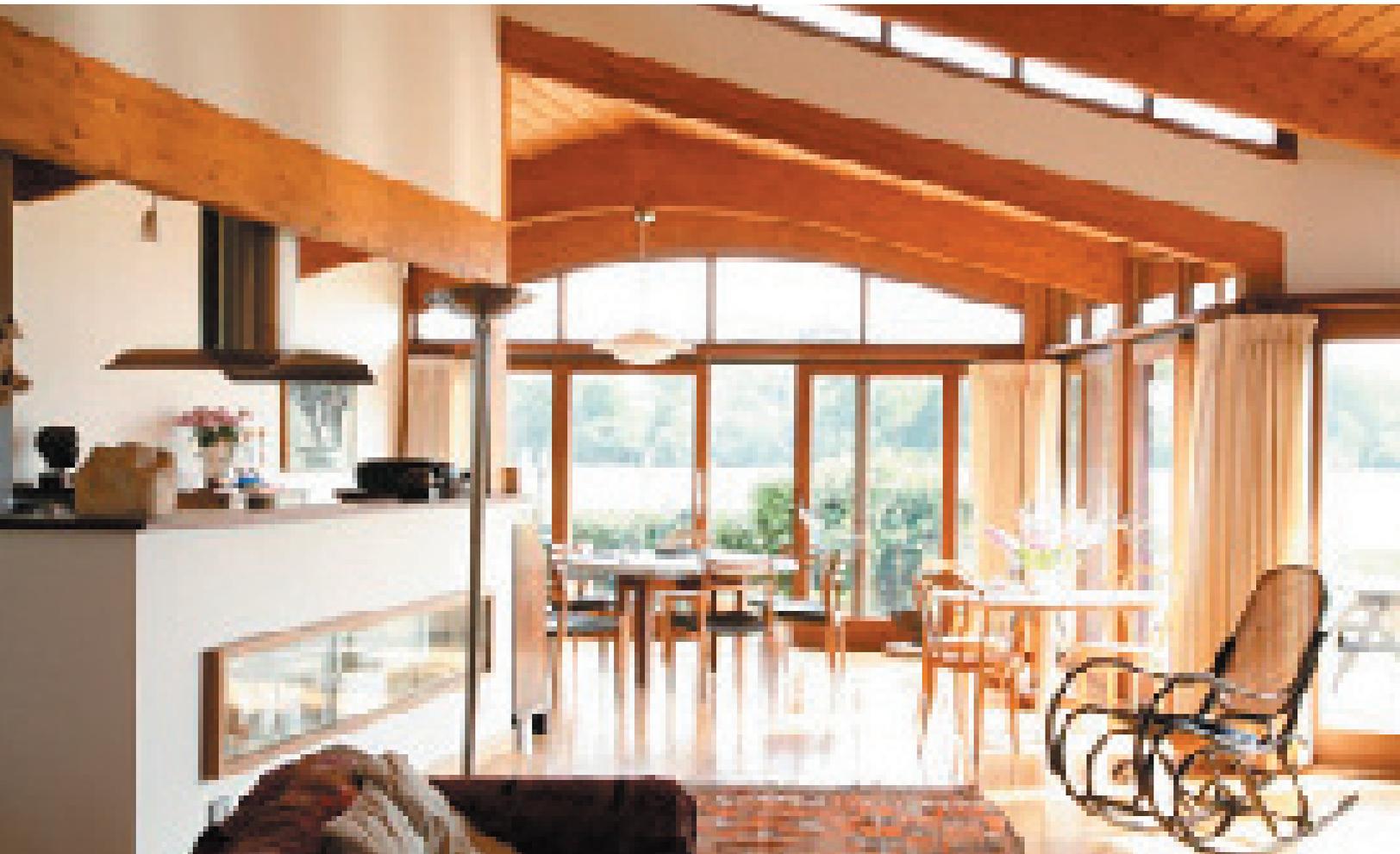
‘Our home has a very special karma, which people sense the minute they walk through the front door,’ artist Willow Legge says of the spacious creekside home in West Sussex she shares with husband Ron King. ‘It creates a calm and stimulating ambience.’

There’s no denying that the artists’ innovative house has a unique style. From the water, the tiered rooflines of this cedar-clad home blend sympathetically with its surroundings. From the

road, the building has the appearance of a big, North American, low-slung ranch house. Large panes of hardwood-framed windows have been thoughtfully positioned, enabling shafts of light to dance into the interior, creating dramatic effects on the artists’ paintings and sculptures.

The central, spacious room boasts a multi-faceted ceiling – with wooden panelling, skylights and differing levels, in parts as high as a church hall. It serves as a gallery and also somewhere for

**OPPOSITE** Home owner and artist Ron King needed a home large enough to house his and wife Willow’s studios **ABOVE** The house is an excellent example of a building that is sensitive to its surroundings



the couple to enjoy an occasional game of table tennis. 'Light is very important to me,' Willow says. 'When I walk out of the bedroom first thing in the morning and the sun is coming through the high-level windows on to the wooden ceiling, it suffuses this part of the house with an orange glow. It's a wonderful start to the day.'

### From bolthole to home

Ron and Willow, who describe themselves as 'fair-weather sailors', first came to Sussex in 1981 while hunting for a coastal weekend retreat to escape from the hustle and bustle of London living.

'We decided to purchase a rundown 1930s thatched cottage close to the water's edge,' Ron says. 'It was in a bad state of repair and views of the creek were obscured by a six-foot-high fence.'

Seventeen years later, they were spending an increasing amount of time working from their studios at the south coast bolthole, and decided it was high time to relocate. Building on their own

plot seemed the obvious solution – 'We needed somewhere large enough for both our studios, but couldn't find anywhere else that was affordable and had such a fabulous outlook,' Ron explains.

### Getting permission

While weekendening in the old cottage, Ron and Willow became friends with Brian Hoolahan, an architect specialising in coastal properties. Both felt that Brian was the right man to design a home in which to start the next phase of their busy lives.

'Attractive as the cottage was, it was damp, threatened by the rising tides and far too small for us,' Ron explains. At first it was planned to keep the two garages either side of the original house, which had been modernised and converted into studios, and build a two-storey structure between them, but the plans submitted were turned down, as were subsequent altered drawings.

'The height of any new structure had to be the same as the old one,' Ron says. 'This is an Area of

**ABOVE** Skylights, tall windows and a wooden ceiling of differing heights cast a warm glow on the living space **OPPOSITE**, **ABOVE** Ron and Willow like to display their own and other artists' work; the house overlooks a creek **RIGHT** Willow's sheep sculpture is a favourite perch for visiting pheasants



## RON AND WILLOW'S WATER WORLD

☀️ 'I love to sit and dream, either in my studio or on the sofa in the living room. I never tire of the view, since every day it's completely different. I see some wonderful winter sunsets from here.' WILLOW

☀️ 'Our grandchildren love to come and stay – particularly our oldest, Ben, who enjoys sailing our dinghies with me.' RON

☀️ 'I love hearing the sound of the curlews when I'm hanging out the washing. Their call never fails to make me stop and think how lucky I am to live here. We spend a lot of time watching the birds and have recorded 44 different species here, from woodpeckers to little egrets and oystercatchers.' WILLOW

☀️ 'We have all kinds of wildlife here; everything from foxes to stoats. We even saw a deer trying to cross the creek once.' RON



## RON'S GUIDE TO BUYING ART

✦ 'Visit the Pallant House Gallery in Chichester (01243 774557, [pallant.org.uk](http://pallant.org.uk)). It won a Gulbenkian Prize for the imaginative development of its Grade I-listed Queen Anne townhouse, which now embraces a contemporary new wing. It also has one of the best artists' bookshops in England.'

✦ 'We enjoy visiting the Sussex Barn Gallery (01243 811301, [westdean.org.uk](http://westdean.org.uk)) in the grounds of West Dean College, near Chichester. It exhibits work by new and emerging artists as well as pieces by students and tutors.'

✦ 'For buying art, there is a flourishing Open Doors organisation in this area where local artists can show their work and studios to the public – great for shopping around and finding bargains.' (See [opendoorsarttrail.com](http://opendoorsarttrail.com).)

✦ 'Collecting comes with knowledge. It's important to visit many shows and learn about the subject over time. Buy from the heart if you like a piece and never because you think it might be worth something one day.'





Outstanding Natural Beauty, so the roofline was to be kept as before. However, permission was granted for an increase of the footprint. Out of the limitations imposed came a third, inspired plan for a dwelling that now sinks comfortably into the wooded background.' Today, the four-bedroom house is used by the local authority as an example of how to build waterside properties sensitively with low impact on the surroundings.

### Harmonious living

After planning approval, building began in autumn 1999. The old house was demolished and the site was raised by one metre to avoid flooding. Underfloor heating and clever lighting were incorporated into the design so paintings, artist's books, bronzes, marble and stone carvings could be displayed properly. Willow designed the kitchen as part of the open-plan living space, which overlooks a stretch of wild grass leading down to the jetty

and has an uninterrupted view of the creek. 'The project went smoothly,' Brian recalls. 'We all kept talking and fine-tuning, and this dialogue not only resulted in happy clients but also consolidated our friendship. It was great to have enlightened clients with vision, who saw the project's potential.'

The resulting home won a West Sussex County Council Building Design Award in 2003 and is a special space where Ron and Willow live and work in harmony with the landscape. 'It's been a very happy marriage of Brian's ideas and our own, and we both love the house,' Ron says. 'The garden is ideal for displaying sculptures such as the sheep, which has become a favourite perch for an annoying pheasant,' Willow adds. 'I feel that the rhythm of the tides coming in and out twice a day gives an added stability to life. It's magic and we wouldn't swap it for anywhere else in the world.' **COAST**  
*Brian Hoolahan, architect (01243 573122, brianhoolahan@talktalk.net).*

**ABOVE** Building regulations stipulated that the new-build be no higher than its 1930s predecessor, so the roof line is varied instead  
**OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT** Ron and Willow are 'fairweather sailors' and enjoy rowing on the creek with their family; Willow designed the kitchen to be part of the open-plan living area; the house is a perfect space to display the couple's art collection