



A lesson in design

When Neil and Louise Barker decided to teach their seven children at home, they set out to build a chic family house that doubled as a modern classroom. **Janet McMeekin** hears how they did it

When the architect Neil Barker and his wife Louise created their contemporary home in West Sussex, they never imagined its cutting-edge design would have such a huge impact on their children's education.

"Our eldest child began struggling at school and, when we started doing some research, we identified classic signs of dyslexia. We realised that she may benefit from a different learning style and environment more specific to her needs," Neil says.

The Barkers decided to home educate, taking their children out of the local primary school. Ironically, while self-building the family's five-bedroom home in rural Nutbourne, the light-filled mezzanine that now forms the children's upstairs classroom evolved more through design

development rather than original design intention.

"This space was initially a 'landing' rather than a mezzanine," Neil says. "But we soon decided it needed to be much larger and challenged our structural engineer to develop the bracing within the steel frame to create a hanging cantilevered floor over the kitchen that would be as big as possible."

"It's actually become one of our favourite areas of the house – a see-saw that's a finely balanced and efficient structure. We had always intended to create a stimulating environment to bring up our children and, now that we home educate, the mezzanine has really come into its own, providing an incredibly dynamic place to learn."

In hindsight, the determined couple is relieved and delighted that, instead of merely extending a "sad and tired" 1930s bungalow, they went the extra mile and knocked down the dowdy

dwelling, replacing it with a home that works exceptionally well for their family and education needs.

While formulating ideas about the type of house they wished to create, a family day out to the National Trust property Standen House proved particularly useful. "We stood in The Orangery and thought 'we could live in a space like this'," Neil says. "We loved all the glass and the roof detailing and felt this would work for our own project."

With this idea in the mind, the couple began liaising with Chichester District Council planning authorities to create a unique home that pushed the boundaries in terms of design and scale within their budget constraints.

When it came to selecting materials for the project, Neil carefully researched what would be the most efficient, suitable, eco-friendly and low maintenance. "It was all about choosing the best materials for the job rather than

throwing needless expense at a problem."

Despite painstakingly preparing the design, once their application was submitted to the planning authorities, it was confronted by an outpouring of objection. "It felt like the world and his wife were against us," he says.

"One minute we're working quietly, the next we're pushing the furniture aside for a drama lesson"

"Unintentionally, we really stirred up a hornets' nest. Written objections from local residents and the Parish Council stated remarks such as 'it would be like a shanty town', that it was 'inappropriate for a rural setting', would be 'out of scale and context' and that there would be 'glare from the windows' and

'overlooking'." To allay the fears, Neil prepared and presented computer-aided visualisations detailing sunlight and shadow analysis, projected vistas from inside the design and contextual street-scene images.

"We felt like the black sheep," Louise says. "There were times when I became frustrated – many of the comments were ill-informed, unsubstantiated and unjustified. We were just normal everyday people trying to create a family home."

Although supported by the planning officer, the application was still referred to the planning committee. Later, when the case was discussed and the architect had the opportunity to speak, his design was met with a torrent of criticism.

"It was like a barrage of abuse with many negative comments from a few particularly vocal committee members," Neil says. "Eventually, one councillor spoke up and said: 'I like it.' There

were gasps around the room before someone else said they supported the design. The tide turned and we were finally awarded planning permission by the narrowest of majority."

Fortunately, after all the angst over gaining planning permission, the build went extremely smoothly, with Neil and Louise overseeing every step of the project. Looking around their home now, it's clear that this dynamic pair has created a stylish contemporary property of which they can be very proud.

On the ground floor, Neil uses one of the two downstairs bedrooms as a home office for his practice, AV Ltd (avtld.co.uk). The large open-plan kitchen/dining/living space to the rear of the house has become ideal for less formal learning as well as playing and



Class sizes: Neil and Louise Barker with their seven children in their lounge which doubles up as a classroom
SIMON CZAPP/SOLENT NEWS

PRIVATE VIEWING KATE WATSON-SMYTH

1 BAY WATCH Windsong Beach, Beach Road, Upton, Poole, Dorset

Price: £730,000
Agent: Palmer Snell
Tel: 01935 814531
They say: Spectacular four bedroom, three bathroom, detached family home with views over Lytchett Bay.
We say: A kitchen/breakfast room is boosted by a sitting room and separate dining room too, so there's no shortage of space.



2 EXTEND AWAY Wandon Road, Fulham, London, SW6

Price: £1.99m
Agent: Haus Properties
Tel: 020 7751 0400
They say: Three bedroom end of terrace house with entertaining area and the possibility to extend.
We say: The kitchen area takes up the whole of the lower-ground floor, which is fabulous, with a reception above and a wonderful master bedroom suite and study over that.



3 MAKING THE GRADE Coombe House, Beckley Nr Rye, East Sussex

Price: £695,000
Agent: Phillips & Stubbs
Tel: 01797 227338
They say: Handsome detached Grade-II listed house of Georgian origin with six bedrooms, five receptions and a tennis court.
We say: One sitting room is 31ft long, and there's another, and a family room to fill too. You may need to add more bathrooms.



4 HUGH WILL LOVE THIS River Cottage, St John's Lane, Great Amwell, Ware, Hertfordshire

Price: £795,000
Agent: Carter Jonas
Tel: 01223 368771
They say: Idyllic Elizabethan cottage with four bedrooms and three receptions. Just 22 miles from London.
We say: Needs work – but find out what work is possible before making a deal, as it's Grade-II listed.



5 BARN STORMER Priory Barn, Binham, Norfolk

Price: £725,000
Agent: Strutt & Parker
Tel: 01603 617431
They say: Barn conversion with stunning views in a popular North Norfolk village. Three beds, three bathrooms, walled gardens with extensive parking and boat space.
We say: Bedroom three is in the annexe with a second kitchen, so might be a better office.

