

Barrels of fun

A businessman with a background in fine wine gave up a comfortable life in London to create a futuristic South Downs home with a vintage twist, says **Fred Redwood**



The striking oak-clad house has won several design awards

Three years ago, Chris Taeë was just another fortyish Fulham business type, married with two kids, living in a four-bedroom Victorian terraced house and harbouring a familiar pipe dream — to move to the countryside, find a good school for the children and create a new life, far away from the drizzly streets of the capital. He fancied living in a home of some architectural merit and, being mindful of the environment, he imagined something ecofriendly. Other than that, though, his ambitions were a bit vague.

Yet Taeë, 44, has taken that pipe dream and turned it into stunning reality in the form of Downley House, his home in the South Downs National Park, which was finished in January 2012 and has won a garland of design awards. Yet Taeë, who works in property investment, is far from an aficionado of modern architecture. “When I see white Grand Design sugar cubes, I don’t like them,” he says. “I was determined not to go down that route. What we’ve built here is different — it’s contemporary, yet with a natural feel.”

A look around the parking bay illustrates his point. The new oak-clad walls of Downley House

are built alongside the solitary remaining sandstone wall of a ruined farmhouse. In the grounds, chalk boulders poke through the thin turf of the Downs. We approach the property through a pergola. With the ruined old wall at its side and the silence of the countryside stunning the senses, it somehow creates an ecclesiastical atmosphere — like a modern monastery. Then, the shape of the house slowly reveals itself — a neat construct of giant children’s building blocks with a huge arched hall at its centre.

The entrance is devoid of fanfare — just a sturdy wooden front door leading into the

lobby, from where you can reach the guest rooms, the kitchen and the terraced gardens. Nothing here signals what is to come. Indeed, the blank walls, all painted in Brewers’ Albany brilliant white, give a sense of passing through Downley’s engine room or back office. Then comes the showpiece — the double-height dining hall.

Made from enormously strong, low-carbon, cross-laminated timber arches, the 25ft-high room was, the architects say, inspired by giant wine barrels known as *foudres*. I get

more of a sense of the medieval made modern — as he sits at his vast dining table, you half expect

Taeë to throw a bone to a pack of great danes.

So how did a busy City worker swap Fulham for this architectural gem in the most picture-perfect rural idyll? He trots out the story about it all being down to planning — spending months poring over Google Earth to find just the right site, then running a competition to ensure that he shortlisted the most suitable of the Riba-recommended architects for the job before coming up with a winner: Andrew Birds, of Birds Portsmouth Russum (birdsportsmouthrussum.com). Yet what I want to know is, how could he afford to build it?

“The crux of the problem was

that building this house was virtually impossible for a contractor to price, because it was so unusual and it meant deploying such a large number of bespoke methods,” says Taeë, a Yorkshireman who seems a lot more comfortable talking about logistics than aesthetics. “That meant risk, and contractors would have factored that risk into their price. I didn’t want that, so I decided to take a two-year sabbatical and find specialist subcontractors myself. That meant the risk was mine and the price was lower.”

The final figures for the build, on top of the land, which cost £650,000, came to £2.5m — not such a giant leap from Fulham,



Chris Taeë and his American wife, Becky, at Downley House

in west London, where a modernised terraced home with four bedrooms and a pocket-handkerchief garden, much like the one Taeë used to own, costs about the same. In terms of outlook, however, Fulham could be in a different universe.

As we make our way to the gallery above the hall, we catch unbroken views of forests and undulating downland waiting to be planted with wheat. A steep track leads directly up to the prestigious Ditcham Park School, providing a healthy morning walk for Taeë’s children, Nicholas, 9, and Amelia, 6, who are new pupils there. It is the last part of the dream made reality.

We are moving into the building’s northern tower — a finely crafted glass and steel circular staircase casts a faintly pale blue translucence through its crystal treads, and the beautifully proportioned central space leads to doors to the drawing room, media room and “kids’ zone”. On the first and second floors are the children’s bedrooms, a master bedroom and a small study looking north over the roof garden.

Bold in terms of its design, and spacious at 7,000 sq ft, this is a practical house with deft little touches everywhere. The drawing room is neatly divided in two by black American

walnut partitions on industrial railings, so if some of the family want to watch TV, they can do so, while the other half of the room works as a more formal space. The main doors close gently together, with no need for handles and latches — why bother with them, as the whole house is kept at a constant temperature throughout?

In the mini libraries in quiet corners upstairs, hidden seats unfold from among the bookcases. In the gallery, there are polished wooden lecterns where you can read, write or draw as the mood takes you. “These are the bits I get a kick from,” Taeë says. “I love taking the Arts and Crafts ideal of creating things that have a real purpose and giving it a contemporary twist.”

Zanna Westgate, a friend for more than 25 years, was largely responsible for the interior design. A mix of restful, neutral colours gives the property warmth, as do items such as the three Berber rugs from Morocco and the huge quilt, bought in Maine, that takes pride of place on the living-room wall.

Lots of thought has gone into the house’s green credentials — the hot water and heating come from ground-source heat pumps, supplemented by two ventilation heat-recovery systems. It is a surprise, then, to find an enormous, fully stocked and chilled wine room next to the dining hall. It is a reminder that wine is far more than a mere enthusiasm for Taeë — it was the making of him. Brought up in Harrogate, he left school at 17

and went to seek his fortune in Florida. He didn’t get much richer from working on building sites there, but he did learn to appreciate fine wine. So he returned to his home town and worked for the off-licence chain Oddbins. Then, one day, the owner of a local wine company took him for lunch with a representative of the champagne producer Taittinger.

To cut a long story short, that lunch resulted in Taeë going on a study tour of the wine regions of France, which qualified him to take a job with Sherry-Lehmann, a prestigious Manhattan wine shop. He suddenly found himself giving advice on vintages to the likes of Henry Kissinger, Gene Wilder, Michelle Pfeiffer and Woody Allen. It also led to him meeting and marrying a young Bostonian, Becky, now 44. Returning to Britain, he opened a group of restaurants, called Santa Fe, in the south of England. These he sold before becoming involved, with four other directors, in a management buyout of the finance and infrastructure company Grosvenor.

It was a side interest, in the form of wine, that got Taeë started in his business career, and it now seems construction, another pastime, will be the way forward. Having site-managed the creation of Downley House, he is setting up a company that will effectively manage the build of similar “one-off” homes for wealthy clients. Isn’t that a little presumptuous, after just the single success? What does he really know about architecture?

“I won’t have anything to do with the design,” he says. “Clients will be able to go to other agencies to find the best

AS HE SITS AT THE VAST TABLE IN THE DINING ROOM, YOU HALF EXPECT HIM TO THROW A BONE FOR A PACK OF GREAT DANES



The dining room’s design was inspired by giant wine barrels

architects. But is an architect the best person to actually build a house? I don’t think so. My strength lies in getting the best deals from subcontractors and managing people on site.”

Constructing a home of this quality as an investment makes financial sense. Although he is not prepared to guess its value, Nigel Mitchell, a partner at Knight Frank estate agency in Guildford, is uncharacteristically intemperate when assessing Downley House. “It is one of the coolest houses I have ever seen,” he says. “The location is exceptional, it’s a one-off, and if it ever came onto the market, I think you’d have a bunfight for it.”

Yet with the market still sluggish, has Taeë picked a sensible time to go into the property business? “Certainly,” he says. “I reckon there is a large pool of people with expensive houses in London who would love to move to the countryside and build a bespoke contemporary home, just like this one.”

www.downleyhouse.com

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