

Move over, Downton...

The English country house has got its mojo back – thanks to teamwork, Swiss timber and more than a touch of romance



Rowan Moore



Downley House
Hampshire

Some art forms, despite the widespread belief in the eternity of art, are mortal – illuminated manuscripts, for example, have had their time, as have masques, miracle plays, or the pyramids on which Aztec priests would rip out the beating hearts of human sacrifices. So too the English country house, which flourished from the mid-16th century, when nobility felt sufficiently secure to put decent-sized windows in their stone walls, until 1938, when Sir Edwin Lutyens's Middleton Park in Oxfordshire was completed. War came soon after, and then the death of Lutyens, the last great country house architect. The genre never got its mojo back.

The death of the country house should not be as conclusive as that of some of the others. Obvious factors such as the invention of printing and a growing squeamishness about heart-ripping have done for the manuscripts and pyramids, but there are still plenty of rich people who want to build large houses in the countryside, and do so. There is even a special planning policy designed to encourage a new era of country houses. But somehow the usual outcome is a gross faux-classical pile which tries to combine the prestige of an old exterior with a modern freedom to install as much air-conditioning, swimming pool, garage, spa and private cinema as money can buy.

So it's refreshing to see a brand new country house that tries to be something other than a phoney throwback, and acts as if new ideas can be contributed to the tradition. Downley House nestles in valley in Hampshire ("nestle" being

a word that can lie dormant in an architecture critic's lexicon for years, until the rare opportunity to describe a country house comes along); at 650 square metres, and a cost of £2.5m, it is not huge for its kind, but big enough for most of us. It's the home of Chris Tae, who has done well in property and wine, and his family. Tae organised the construction himself, putting together a collaborative group of craftsmen and sub-contractors in a way that he would very much like to repeat on houses for others.

The architects of the house, Birds Portchmouth Russum, also revive an idea you don't hear much of these days, which is that a building can be romantic. Downley House has turrets, and an embattled, castle-like exterior, albeit one made with a lot of wood. It has a great hall, without the knee-deep straw and filth of its medieval precedents, and with a modern parabolic form. The ruined wall of an old house has been retained as a kind of folly, helping to enclose an area of garden.

As Lutyens did, it tries to link house and garden through a sequence of internal and external rooms such that both form part of the same composition – its circular entrance courtyard, for example, is an outdoor space, but an integral part of the architecture. Inside it has a wandering, garden-like layout which refers you back to the outside with framed views. It's diffuse but unified, reflecting a brief described by the architects as "contradictory", in that it asked that members of the family could have their own spaces, but also come together. The house feels relaxed, but with moments of drama.

At the same time the corners of rooms are cut away to make big glass windows, a device outside Lutyens's traditionalist range. The structure is built of a thoroughly modern material, cross-laminated timber, a sort of super-plywood that can form solid walls and comes from sustainable sources – it arrived from Switzerland with a statement that the volume of timber used would be re-grown, by the combined growth of all the



Clockwise from main image: Downley House nestling in a Hampshire valley; the 'embattled, castle-like exterior'; a side view of the parabola-shaped dining area, part of a brief that also included separate spaces for each member of the family; and a view through to the garden and the retained wall of an old house. Photographs by Nick Kane

Online

Downley House – in pictures:
observer.co.uk/new-review

trees in the forest it came from, in 32 minutes. The house has sophisticated, environmentally friendly systems of heating and ventilating that lead to minimal fuel bills.

In other words, it's a lot of things. The three partners of Birds Portchmouth Russum once worked for James Stirling, the magnificent British architect who died too young in 1992. Stirling had a fondness for collage and collision, for bringing together chunks of ancient Rome and Russian constructivism in seemingly impossible encounters, and BPR, by running the gamut from castles to parabolas, are at the same game.

They don't quite have Stirling's genius, and some of the combinations clunk: when, for example, a rock-star glass balustrade meets some of the more baronial elements. The house can be raucous: if you seek refinement and resolution in your architecture, this is not for you. It is not evidence enough, on its own, of a resurrection of the country house tradition, but that probably won't be of great concern to its inhabitants and architects. It is heroic, and playful, and enjoyable, which is more than you get in most country houses built in the past 75 years.