

Seaside SENSATION

Built on a steeply sloping site in Cornwall, and enjoying breathtaking sea views, Gwel An Treth is a stunning new house with colourful interiors inspired by Costa Rica.

STORY: DEBBIE JEFFERY PHOTOGRAPHY: PERFECT STAYS

It has taken Jonathan Abdilla almost 10 years to complete his first new build project: an outstanding reverse-level house, built on a perilously steep site overlooking Sennen Cove near Land's End – Cornwall's most westerly point. An entire year was dedicated simply to excavating the rocky cliff-top site, with its one in four gradient – a task so noisy that the neighbours were given ear defenders.

Back in 2006, when Jonathan first purchased the plot, there was already a dated three-bedroom bungalow on the site, which he describes as “the worst house on the street”. It was the beautiful seaside location which inspired him to buy the property, which he and his friends initially used as a party house when they visited Cornwall to surf.

“My father is Maltese, my mother is English, and I was born in Malta and came to England when I was eight,” he says. “Surfing is my passion, and as soon as I could drive I would travel from my home in Plymouth to various Cornish beaches with my friends. For me, the highlight of a trip would be making our way down to visit Sennen Cove and Gwenver. I've always had a

real fondness for the area, and after I started my own company I was in a position to buy a home there.”

The plot stands in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and the small outdated bungalow was built on the road, in line with its neighbours, high at the top of the site. Jonathan's plan was to demolish the building and build a replacement house closer to the edge of the cliff at the bottom of the garden, in order to gain better views of the sea and avoid being overlooked by the houses at roadside level.

“As soon as I walked down to the bottom of the garden and peered through the dense undergrowth, to discover these astonishing views, I realised it would make an amazing home if I could manage to move the house down to this position, creating seclusion but also opening up the entire vista,” he says. “I'd never built anything before, and was a bit impulsive because I bought it within a week without even consulting any architects or builders.”

A local architect then designed a replacement house for the site, and the planning process took two years, after neighbours objected to the contemporary design. Planning consent was eventually granted, but by



IN BRIEF

Plot cost: £407,000 (in 2006) including bungalow
Spent: £1m
Worth: In excess £2.5m

Exterior

From the front the house resembles a beach pavilion-style dwelling, and is sunk into the site for minimum impact. The rear offers spectacular sea views.





Living area

Limestone flooring has been laid over underfloor heating throughout the first floor living spaces, with a double-sided wood-burning fireplace serving as a room divider between the living and dining areas.



JONATHAN'S TOP TIP

“Communication is the key – you have to be aware of what’s going on – constantly. Fortunately, my builder made the project work, and sent me picture updates during the build, a basis for our daily Skype calls.”

everything to the architects, who were superb,” says Jonathan. “During those years I did absolutely nothing to the bungalow, which was falling apart. Visiting friends and family slept in sleeping bags, the garden grew increasingly overgrown and the bungalow became more ramshackle, but I was determined to save all my money for the build.”

By now Jonathan was spending more and more time in Costa Rica, where he had taken over a development project of condominiums and penthouses after the previous developer hit financial difficulties. This prevented Jonathan from spending much time in the UK, meaning that even when planning permission had been granted for the new house, the build was delayed for a further two years because he was so involved with the Costa Rican project.

“I needed a builder I could rely on and trust completely, and chose Daniel Sell, an old friend from Newlyn, to take on the project using local labour and materials where possible,” he explains. “Work began in January 2013, and I managed the build remotely, using daily emails, phone calls and Skype to stay in touch with Dan, and only visiting the site a few times during the two-and-a-half year project. He was absolutely the right choice, despite the fact that this was his first house build.”

then Jonathan had discovered that the design was not practical to build, as the architect had made no attempt to accommodate the gradients and ground conditions.

“It would have been so horribly expensive and complicated that I decided to start again, and approached Laurence Associates, who were recommended to me,” says Jonathan. “They are a planning-led consultancy based in Truro, who have won multiple awards and were able to overhaul the design, working with a structural engineer and landscape architect.”

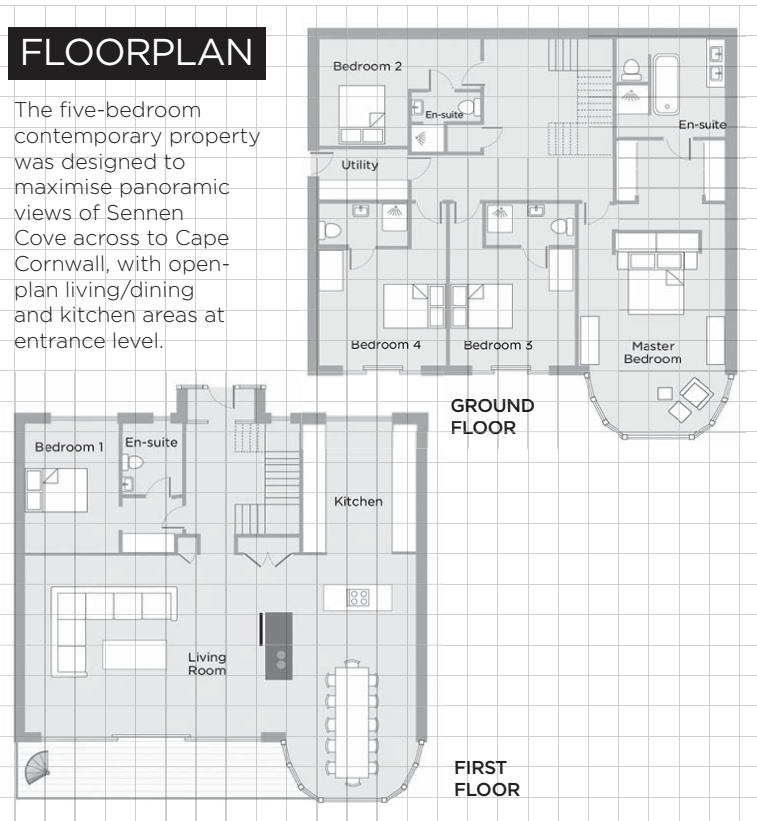
The revised house design was positioned further down the site, and places the main living accommodation at entrance level to enjoy the best views of the sea. A large patent glazed roof in the open-plan living area complements the fully glazed wall on the balcony, with views over the Sennen and neighbouring Whitesand Bay.

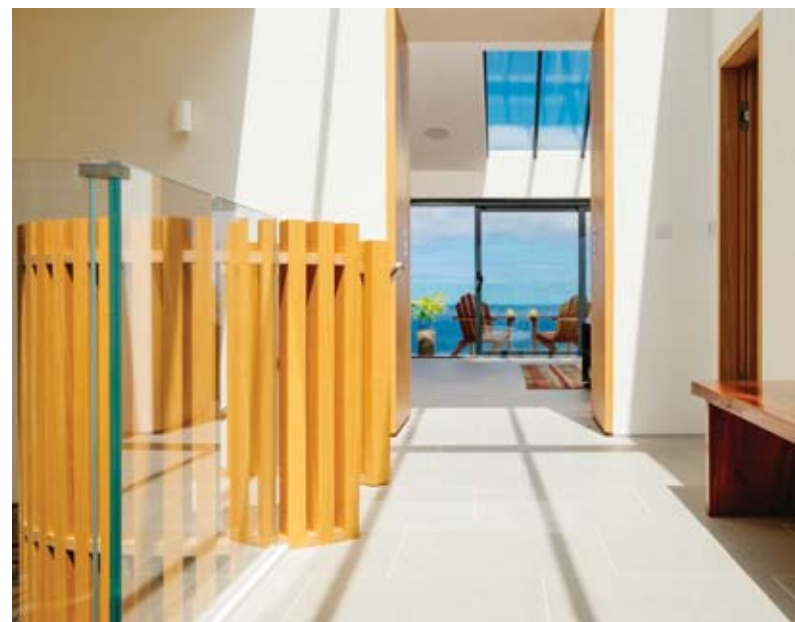
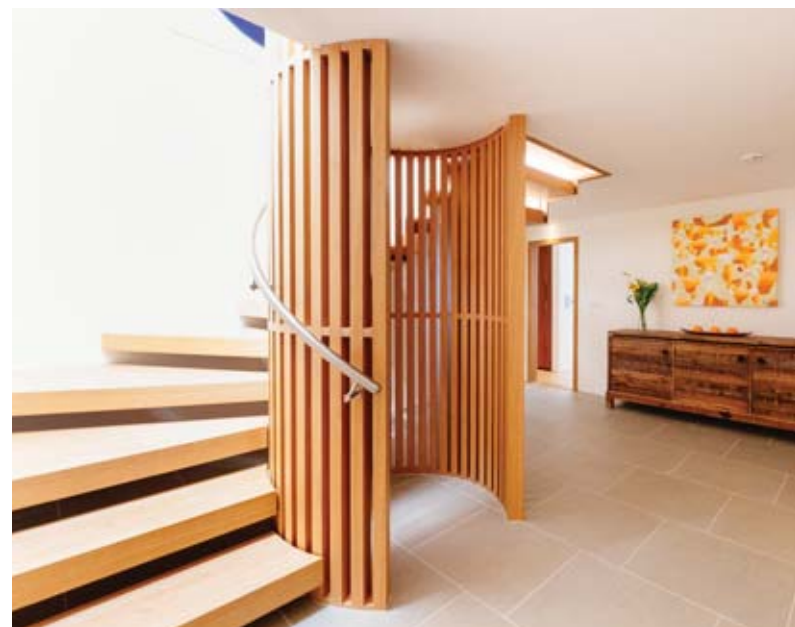
From the front, the property appears modest and single-storey – dropping away to the rear and following the contours of the site. The scheme was accompanied by illustrations and photo-montages showing the design in context, to prove to the local planning authority that it would improve the appearance of the site, and would have no impact on the wider character of the AONB. Numerous meetings with neighbours and the various authorities ensued.

“It took another 18 months to gain planning permission for the new design, but I was able to leave

FLOORPLAN

The five-bedroom contemporary property was designed to maximise panoramic views of Sennen Cove across to Cape Cornwall, with open-plan living/dining and kitchen areas at entrance level.





Dining area

Situated in a curved turret, the dining area opens onto the terrace through glazed doors. The dining table was imported from Costa Rica.



Kitchen

Bespoke American white oak book-matched kitchen cabinets and an island unit were designed by architect Jaime Rouillon and crafted by Devon-based company Touch Design Group.

Stairs

An American white oak staircase was designed and built to curve up through the house.

Jonathan had previously trained as a quantity surveyor, and was able to use his knowledge of budgeting and procurement to employ suppliers and source materials directly. He kept a close eye on the finances, but was still shocked by the initial costs involved in preparing the sloping site.

Major excavation work began as the builders dug down into solid granite to establish the foundations. "Everything had to be manhandled up and down the slope, which made the process incredibly involved and complicated," says Jonathan. "It was at this point that the neighbours were given ear defenders, to counteract the constant noise from the machinery. They were extremely patient."

A sculptural curved retaining wall and terraces were designed by the architects to provide ample car parking, complete privacy, and spacious garden areas on three levels – a unique achievement along this steep cliff-side lane.

"The house was effectively built by six talented stonemasons and carpenters," says Jonathan. "Foundations and retaining walls are all connected to form a giant staircase stepping down the site, at an overall cost of around £400,000. The walls were built from double thickness blockwork, reinforced with steel and concrete, and clad externally in granite making them over 800mm thick in places." ➡



IN DETAIL

Gwel An Treth is available for holiday rental with Perfect Stays: perfectstays.co.uk

PROJECT

Architect Laurence Associates: laurenceassociates.co.uk
Builder Daniel Sell Builders: 07855 328433
Interiors architect Jaime Rouillon: jra.cr/en/
Structural engineers Knevitt Consulting: knevittconsulting.co.uk

STRUCTURE

Timber frame for first floor Weststructure Timber Frame Ltd: weststructure.co.uk
Windows and doors Cornwall Aluminium Windows: 01872 308516
Roofing Bosworth Roofing Ltd: bosworthroofing.co.uk

FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

Kitchen, joinery, cabinets etc Touch Design Group, Exeter: touchdesigngroup.com
Lighting Amos lighting: 01392 677030
Handmade kitchen, bathroom and floor tiles Heath Ceramics, San Francisco: heathceramics.com
Opustone Miami: opustone.com
Air source heat pump Source Energy: 0800 865 4328
Fireplace Bespoke Fireplaces: bespokefireplacedesigns.co.uk



The first floor of the house was timber framed, designed and built on site by a local company, Weststructure, which coped amazingly well with the complexity of wide spans coupled with the low-pitched main roof. Initially Jonathan had tried to gain planning permission for a sculptural planted roof, which was rejected, and so instead a pitched slated design was constructed, with a curved slate roof for the dining turret.

Below this, the faceted bay window was designed to maximise views out to sea through full-height glazing, framed in aluminium. A commercial three-pane sliding door spans the eight-metre width of the living area, opening onto the terrace beyond, with a substantial roof light built into the slope of the ceiling. "I was warned that I'd never use the sliding doors, but during the summer they were open every single day," says Jonathan.

Once the shell of the building was complete he employed renowned Costa Rican architect and friend Jaime Rouillon to design the interiors, and joiners Touch Design Group of Exeter who crafted the American white oak curved staircase, in addition to the kitchen, wardrobes, doors and other joinery.

The soft furnishings and finishes were overseen by Jonathan's American girlfriend, Ashley Laux, who moved into the house with him while the final stages of work were being completed in the summer of 2015. Several items of furniture were imported by container from Costa Rica, including the vast wooden dining table, and other pieces were sourced from Germany, France and the USA.

"It has been a mammoth task to design and build this house, and at times I thought it would never be finished," says Jonathan. "Sennen Cove will always be somewhere I come to escape, to enjoy the surfing and views, and now the house does justice to its site."

Sea views

The rear of the reverse-level house has been built into the contours of the steeply sloping cliff, with large expanses of glazing to take in the sea views.



Bedrooms

Three of the four bedrooms are on the ground floor, and face towards the sea. A double basin crafted completely from solid walnut was installed in the master bathroom.



My self build EXPERIENCE



What was the high point of the project?

Finally being able to demolish the old bungalow and clear the site was a real high point after waiting for so many years to begin.

...and the low point?

Living abroad meant that I could only visit the site on four occasions during the build, which was the biggest frustration.

Your best buy?

The Sonos sound system would have to be the best. So simple to integrate into the house.

...and the biggest extravagance?

Two items really stand out. The solid walnut master bathroom sink and cabinet at £10,000 – it's such a beautiful unique piece of furniture. And the double-sided timber-clad fireplace that cost around £30,000. This, however, did solve the problem of where to mount the TVs without turning your back on the amazing views. It needed to be craned into position due to it weighing over half a tonne!

