



CASE STUDY

HIGH AND DRY

First-time selfbuilders Ben Baglio and Richard Wilson have built a striking timber-framed house overlooking marshland and designed to combat flooding.

Story: **Debbie Jeffery** Photography: **David Butler/Raul Candales Franch/Robin Forster**

In brief

Project New build
Location Suffolk
Land cost
£1.125m in 2012
Spent £1m
Worth £3m

When Ben Baglio and Richard Wilson first purchased a rundown 1970s house on four acres of land, overlooking the estuary of the River Alde in Suffolk, the surrounding landscape was rather different to the views they currently enjoy.

"We'd owned an Arts and Crafts house in Suffolk for 15 years, which we'd renovated, and were looking for another project," explains Ben, a ceramicist. "After viewing a number of period houses we realised that we couldn't find what we wanted, and decided that building a new house might be the answer."

The dilapidated house they purchased, with a view to building a replacement, had a poor connection to the site and the wider landscape.

Hazlewood Marshes is a 64-hectare nature reserve west of Aldeburgh, and was formerly a freshwater grazing marsh, but on December 5, 2013 a tidal surge broke through the river wall and flooded the marshes and part of the site with sea water.

"It was a huge shock, as we had been assured that - although the site was theoretically in a flood risk zone - there had never been any problems in the past," says Ben.

Whole communities of plants, trees and wildlife disappeared, and part of the site - which had previously been used for grazing cows - converted to a salt marsh of tidal mud flats. Reed beds eventually grew, and birds including lapwings and avocets were drawn to the setting, but this breach of the local flood defences further emphasised the need for Ben and Richard's new house to be protected against future flooding.



Location

Flooding of the site in 2013 by exceptionally high tides led to Ben and Richard installing local flood defences and commissioning a flood-proof house. The new brick, timber and zinc house was designed by Mole Architects and has been built on rising land on the north-west corner of the site, offering generous panoramic views across the River Alde estuary.





Landscape

The landscape lies within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and formerly had a 1970s house surrounded by a decayed, suburban-style garden.

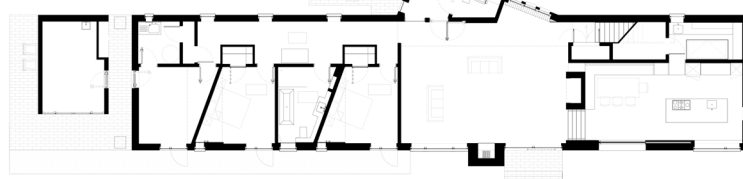
THE FLOORPLAN

The long, 250-sqm house is predominantly single-storey, with a 25-sqm basement level and a first-floor master suite complete with study. Some internal walls have been angled to create unusually shaped rooms.

Basement



Ground floor



First floor





BEN & RICHARD'S TOP TIP

“Try to minimise last-minute changes after the contract has gone out. We went against our own advice and moved the position of the living room fireplace, which also meant relocating the chimney, and was quite expensive to achieve.”

Kitchen

A terrazzo floor and bespoke cabinetry were chosen for the stepped-down kitchen area.



“We’d commissioned a flood risk assessment, and the plan had always been to relocate the house to higher ground out of the floodplain, which would also improve our views of the river,” says Ben.

“It was still a shock when the river wall broke and came close to flooding the existing house, and we were more or less left to ourselves to develop a flood defence. We couldn’t allow the water to keep rising and falling with every tide, so we clubbed together with a neighbour to build an earth defence and drainage. Despite a small grant it was still an unexpected expense.”

Located in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and partially within a Site of Special Scientific Interest, the plot demanded that the replacement house should do justice to the outstanding location. This has been built in an isolated position, commanding magnificent views across marshland to the river, and hovers over the landscape like a seagull’s wing.

“We were already in touch with Mole Architects even before we bought the plot, after admiring some of their local projects,” explains Richard, an archivist. Mole Architects was established by Meredith Bowles in 1996, and is a progressive and innovative architectural practice based in Cambridge. To date, the practice has won 15 RIBA



Living area

A porcelain installation by London-based Brazilian artist Valeria Nascimento was commissioned for the double-height sitting room wall above the south-facing windows. Wood panelling, a brick floor and an open fireplace bring warmth to the space.



Awards for design and sustainability, and was recently awarded the prestigious Stephen Lawrence prize.

"We understand from Meredith that gulls were an inspiration for the design, with its wing-like roof, off-white walls, and beak-orange entrance door," says Ben.

The new house is significantly higher than the previous one at its tallest point, as floor levels needed to be raised to mitigate the risk of flooding. Planning rules stipulated that the impact of the new house on its surroundings should not be materially greater than that of the old property, but did not limit its height.

The site slopes upwards from east to west, and to take advantage of this two-metre change in level the new house is set higher on the site and is predominantly single-storey – with a split-level ground-floor living space enjoying panoramic views across the landscape. The new house maps the landscape, opening up an expansive south elevation to views of the wetlands, and locating private spaces on an upper level in the easterly end of the plan.

"Our previous house felt cramped when we had guests, so we wanted a large living space, with guest bedrooms positioned away from our own bedroom and a studio space for myself, which would double as an additional bedroom," Ben explains. "We didn't really give much input in terms of the appearance of the house, apart from to say that we would like views and sunlight to be optimised."

In detail

PROJECT

Architects Mole Architects:
molearchitects.co.uk

Structural engineer Smith and Wallwork: smithandwallwork.com

Quantity surveyor 3GCC: 3gcc.co.uk

Main contractor Willow Builders:
willowbuilders.co.uk

Landscape architects Todd Longstaffe Gowan: tlg-landscape.co.uk

Lighting design Michael Grubb Studio:
michaelgrubbstudio.com

Interior design Interior Couture:
interiorcouture.com

STRUCTURE

Piled foundations Van Elle:
van-elle.co.uk

Timber frame Anson Timberworks:
ansontimberworks.co.uk

Zinc roof VM Zinc: vmzinc.co.uk

Roof installation Metalex Roofing Ltd:
metalexroofing.co.uk

Composite glazing Velfac: velfac.co.uk

Sliding window Fineline Aluminium:
finelinealuminium.co.uk

Brick paint Keim: keim.com

FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

Joinery – kitchen cabinets, panelling etc

Laki Carpentry Ltd: laki.co.uk

Music system Sonos: sonos.com

Boiling tap Quooker: quooker.co.uk

Sanitaryware supply

The Showroom Ltd:
theshowroomltd.co.uk

Reclaimed brick pammments

Charles Howey Reclaimed Flooring:
charleshowey.co.uk

Underfloor heating installation AES
National: aesnational.co.uk

Hydraulic hatch Bilco UK: bilcouk.com

Ground source heat pump

Kensa Heat Pumps: kensaheatpumps.com

Keypad entry system

Siedle: siedle.com

Neostat thermostats

Heatmiser: heatmiser.com

Terazzo Stone Technique:
stone-technique.co.uk

Granite kitchen worktop

MGWL: mgwl.co.uk

Encaustic tiles Bert and May:

bertandmay.com



Flooring

Reclaimed 19th-century bricks from Poland were imported and cut before being laid throughout the main space to create unusual flooring.



There were some local objections to the planning application, which was referred to the planning committee, and the new house was moved further away from the boundary with the nearest neighbour.

Following a tender process, work began on site in August 2014 and took the chosen main contractor just over a year to complete, with Mole Architects undertaking the contract administration.

“Our site for the house was probably once a disused sandpit, so we had to have piled foundations,” Richard explains. “They did need to go down to quite a depth in places, but it was all fairly straightforward.”

Constructed from a prefabricated timber frame, the house is clad in white painted brickwork and dramatised by a complex sweeping zinc roof which wraps down the south elevation, reflecting both water and sky.

This soft-grey weathered zinc roof twists as it rises upwards – creating a dramatic double-height living space, with the master bedroom located in the highest section of the roof, while guest rooms, a studio and storage nestle to the lower end.

The house is entered from the northern side through a projecting entrance, and the hallway opens up into a tall living space, revealing the twist of the roof. Beyond the main living space, steps lead down to a kitchen and dining area with a large sliding window opening the room to the southerly views.

A generous hallway opens into guest bedrooms and bathrooms to the west, while stairs from the living room lead up to the master bedroom suite and study, nestled into the high point under the roof to the east.

“Our basement was quite a late addition to the scheme, because we had a cellar in the previous house and realised that we would be losing this useful space,” says Richard. “A rather large void beneath the new house wasn’t really accessible, and there was no



space for a fixed staircase, so we've ended up with a hydraulic hatch leading down from the pantry. The cellar also contains a tank for our sprinkler system."

Painted brick features internally, with monolithic masonry blocks separating the living and dining areas and punctuating the guest bedroom corridor.

Reclaimed 19th-century bricks from Poland were imported and cut before being laid throughout the main space – creating an unusual flooring – and a bespoke terrazzo floor incorporating Norfolk flint and slate chippings was laid in the lower level. Elsewhere, encaustic patterned tiles and stained oak bring rich detail to smaller rooms.

"We worked with interior designer Elaine Williams of Interior Couture, who commissioned a joinery company to build the kitchen units, bathroom cabinets and panelling," says Richard. "She also sourced our sanitaryware, bathroom tiles and numerous other items, including the sitting-room fireplace and many of the light fittings."

Environmental strategies are cleverly concealed in the build: a landscape of native coastal planting and meadow grasses hides the ground source heat pump coils which heat the house. Water is supplied from an on-site well, and waste water is disposed of through a treatment plant and drainage field.

The former ornamental garden has been given over to meadow, mown paths and native planting, and a reed bed has developed in a low-lying meadow that was formerly grazed by cows. Salt marsh is developing on the Suffolk Wildlife Trust reserve beyond the flood defence, but grazing no longer takes place following the flooding.

"Marsh Hill has met all aspects of our initial brief, and we're delighted with the end result," says Richard. "We love being in the house, and are extremely pleased with its elegant, innovative design and how well it sits in the landscape."

Bedroom

Underfloor heating has been laid throughout the ground floor, with radiators in first-floor rooms, including the blue-grey master bedroom suite.



Final word

What was the high point?

When the prefabricated timber frame arrived on site it went up very quickly and the house started to take shape. Before that we'd only ever seen it as lines on paper.

...and the low point?

The builders had dug the trenches for our ground source heat pump coils when a high tide filled them overnight, causing them to partially collapse and costing an additional £5,000 to rectify.

The best buy?

The electronic hatch to the basement gives us additional storage space without needing a fixed staircase, and is relatively simple and easy to use.

...and the biggest extravagance?

We have a sliding window in



the dining area, which was an indulgence, but it's quite a windy site and by pushing back the window you almost feel as if you're cooking and eating outdoors.