

# A new leaf

Words by **Hilary Robertson**  
Photographs by **Chris Tubbs**



WHILE SUE PHILIPS WAS PREPARING FOR MOTHERHOOD, HER HUSBAND PIERS TAYLOR WAS CONTEMPLATING A PROJECT OF A VERY DIFFERENT KIND: TURNING A TINY WOODLAND BUILDING, 300M FROM THE NEAREST ROAD, INTO THEIR FAMILY HOME



Piers had fallen for the view, rather than the existing building, so the move was destined to turn into a project. The house was dark, poky and, with just two bedrooms, too small for a growing family. It seemed to have been built in completely the wrong place as its orientation 'didn't address the light or the view'. Having trained as an architect in Australia, Piers was keen to design the type of contemporary, lightweight pavilion which he had grown accustomed to there. However, two years passed before they were ready to build anything at all.

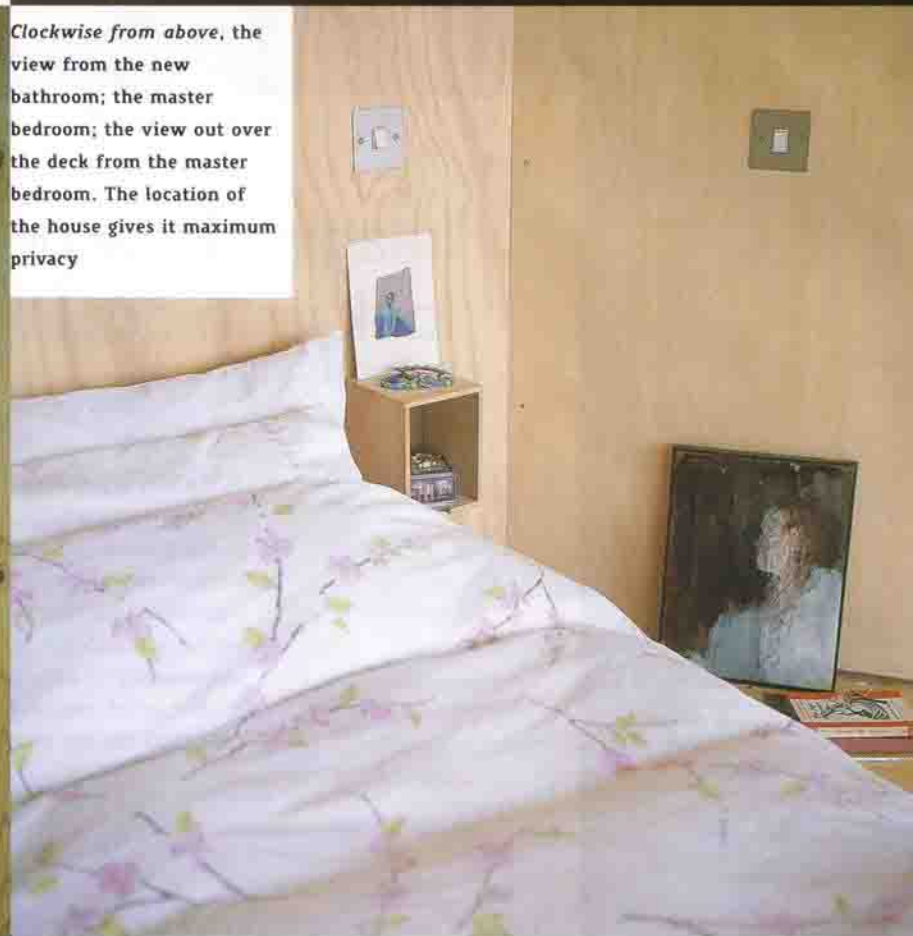
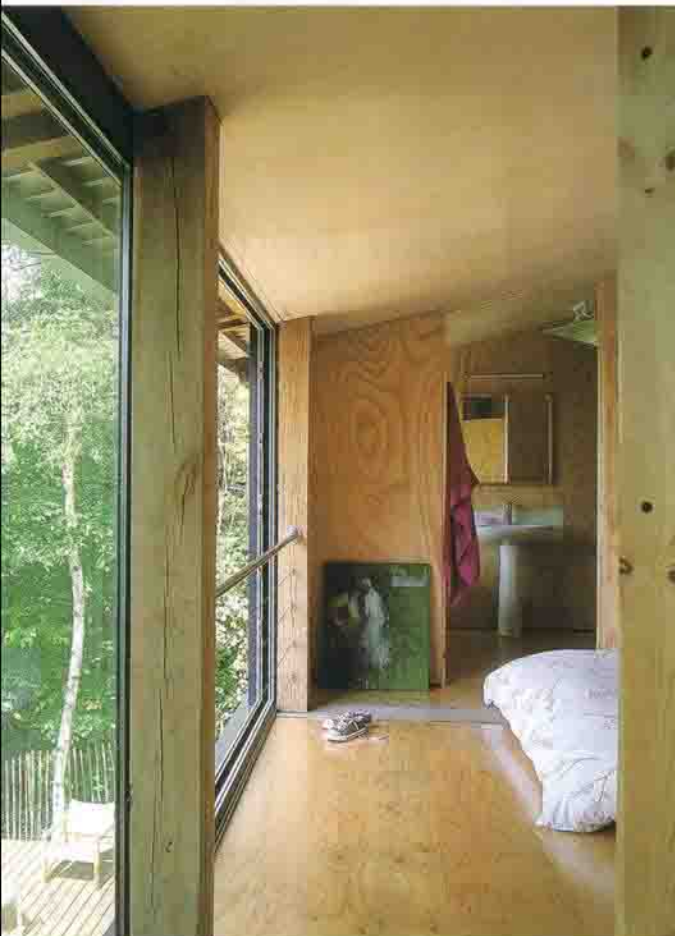
Time spent in the existing house gave Piers and Sue a chance to formulate the ideal solution for the extension. 'At first we imagined that the ground floor would be a posh sitting room but gradually realised that the kitchen is the room we live in most and deserved the largest amount of space.' The whole ground floor of the new building was designed to be a kitchen/dining/play room. Upstairs in the new section, the 'big shed', there would be two bedrooms separated by a bathroom and a shower room with a dressing room and a child's bedroom in the adjoining upper level of the original building. Downstairs, the former sitting room would become a bathroom and separate guest bedroom doubling as a study. It was decided that the old, gloomy kitchen, equipped with a wood-burning stove, would work better as a cosy room to retreat to in the evening.

Planning was easily obtained as the house isn't in a conservation area and the clay soil indicated that any extension needed to be lightweight. Masonry was out of the question. The whole thing had to be designed with the tricky access in mind. Piers chose a green oak frame as he couldn't get the sections he required in any other wood. Pressure to start construction increased when the couple discovered they were expecting another child. Piers hired a contractor, rented a cottage for the family to live in, and promptly went on holiday.

His discovery, on his return, that the builder had not started work precipitated another significant life change: Piers decided ▶



**PIERS WAS SO EXCITED ABOUT THE LOCATION THAT HE MADE AN OFFER ON THE SPOT**



*Clockwise from above, the view from the new bathroom; the master bedroom; the view out over the deck from the master bedroom. The location of the house gives it maximum privacy*



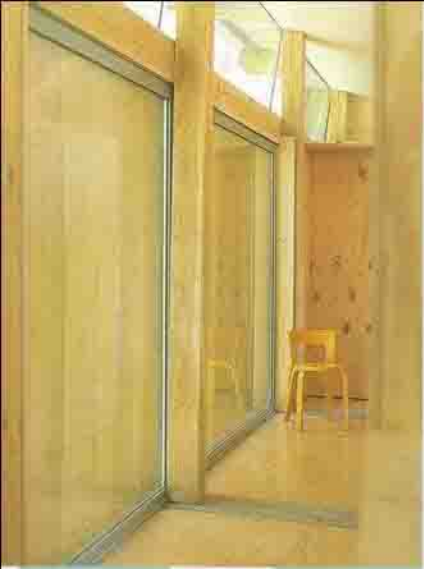


THE PUBLIC SIDE OF THE BUILDING IS FITTED WITH GREEN OAK LOUVRES TO RETAIN SOME PRIVACY



*This page, architect Piers trained in Australia and was keen to reproduce the kind of lightweight pavillion he had become used to there. Opposite page, the old gloomy kitchen has been converted into a cosy living room*



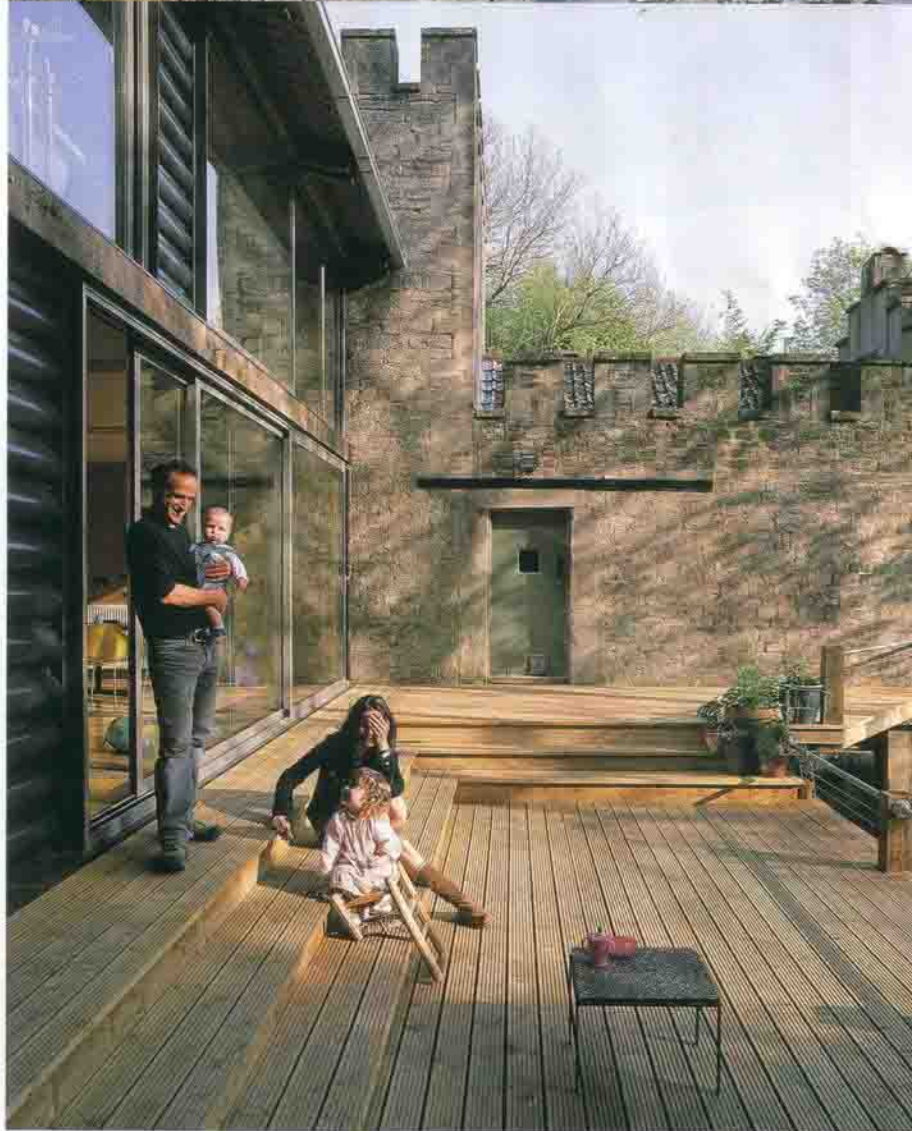


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oonshine is one of those houses that isn't easily found. It's unlikely that Piers Taylor and Sue Philips are ever bothered by door-to-door salesmen. The narrow woodland path, 300m from car to gate, is intriguing, a fairy-tale entrance. The journey whets the appetite for something unusual, hidden – a folly, a gingerbread house or a castle, perhaps? After a steep slope, and the mystery of the approach, the answer is finally revealed: this is no gingerbread house, but it is a kind of a castle – an up-to-the-minute transparent box attached to a diminutive, castellated house.

There's no need to ask why architect Piers chose this site – the evidence is all around: the ancient woodlands, the silence only broken by birdsong and a restful rustling of leaves, the wraparound view of a rolling green valley. But it does seem extraordinary that he and the family – Sue, Lily, 3, Archie, 7 months, and Immy, 14 – are not simply weekenders. It's astonishing that a family with busy lives are based here seven days a week, managing the transition from sylvan paradise to metropolitan life in nearby Bath with the aid of a lot of patience and a wheelbarrow (for journeys that require luggage). But then architects do have a tendency to take on projects that would frighten mere mortals, and sometimes even their own wives.

Piers and Sue had heard about the eccentric collection of castellated houses from friends but, initially had not considered it an option. In fact, Sue, pregnant with their first child, was expecting to go ahead with a scheme to extend their end-of-terrace house. Then Piers spotted an ad for the woodland house in a local newspaper. No one was prepared to take on the property due to the limited access. He visited alone (Sue was preoccupied with their five-day-old baby) and was so excited about the location that he made an offer on the spot. Sue gave herself two weeks to mull over the prospect of moving to such a remote place but finally was convinced by the force of her husband's enthusiasm. 'I knew his heart was set on it and had to trust his vision,' she explains, with the good grace of one who accepts the consequences of marrying an architect. ▶



**Opposite page, top, the glass walls reflect the natural setting; bottom, the kitchen/dining/ play room opens on to woodland on both sides. This page top left, the extension was built using a lightweight green oak frame; the 'shed', as it became known, was designed to be 'legible', clearly displaying its functionality; Piers, Archie, Sue and Lily on the deck**



## HOUSE IN THE WOODS

### WHO IS HE?

After an Arts Foundation course, Piers worked as a builder in London. He was a 'mature student' of 23 when he discovered his vocation as an architect and trained in Sydney and the AA in London. He completed his masters degree at Bath University where he now teaches. He set up his practice Piers Taylor Architect (02225 852 456) in 2004.





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