Architect Piers Taylor’s renovation of an old gameskeeper’s cottage, complete with a castellated roof and sweeping meadow below, is an exercise in dramatic modernization, one that takes advantage of everything its storybook setting has to offer.
The Bath stone of the original building and the timber and glass of the addition form a powerful contrast, yet the combination of natural textures softens the junction. The new part of the house has a transparent quality on the ground floor which allows light and the eye to pass right through and across the valley beyond. The addition includes a large timber deck at the front (opposite), where the family can lounge and enjoy the lush scenery.
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Architect Piers Taylor had always wanted to live off the beaten track. For many years he thought he would end up taking his family from England to Australia—where he once lived and studied—to find a perfect home in the bush, away from everything. But when he came across Moonshine, a former game-keeper’s cottage tucked away in the woods, four miles outside the city of Bath, he knew a continental shift wouldn’t be necessary. With no direct access from the road, the original stone house with a castellated rooftop is reached via a ten-minute walk along a path through the forest and is graced with sweeping views across the green valley spread out below.

“I first went to see the place holding our daughter Lily in a shopping basket when she was just days old,” says Piers, who now has two children with his wife Sue, along with his first daughter Imogen. “It got more and more exciting as I walked down the path to the house, and when I opened the gate and saw the setting and the views, I knew I wanted to live there immediately. I was affected by it like no other place I have ever been to. Within five minutes I had offered near the asking price.”

The family had been living in an end-of-terrace cottage in a nearby village, which they were fast outgrowing. They were thinking about moving to a quieter area, but needed to be near Bath, where Piers has his practice—Mitchell Taylor Workshop—and also teaches. “He came back from seeing the house and told me he’d put in an offer, which is classic Piers,” says Sue. “He had the vision to see the potential of the site. At the time, the path seemed a very long way from the little hamlet where we park our car, but Piers is very good at persuading people, and I soon realized it was definitely the right thing. We moved in during the summer of 2002, and it felt like home very quickly.”

Today the house looks rather different: a striking contemporary belvedere. Although Piers was able to find a local builder for the original stone house with the contemporary belvedere, he decided that a lightweight raised structure would best suit the site and get around the problems of building on unstable land liable to subsidence, and went to work developing plans for a two-story pavilion overlooking the valley below. The extension would include two more bedrooms and two bathrooms upstairs, and a large, open-plan living room, dining area, and kitchen on the ground floor.

Piers decided to oversee the construction himself. “It was actually incredibly liberating to say I will build my own house,” says Piers. “It was also a catalyst to resign from my old job with a larger firm and set up my own practice, partly to build my own house. I thought it was really important to get involved in the construction, to be hands-on, and to see that it was done right.”

While Piers was able to find a local builder and a timber-framing specialist to do most of the work, the house’s relative inaccessibility proved to be the greatest obstacle, as it made transporting materials very difficult. Even his relatively minimal, lightweight design would still require concrete foundations, heavy timbers, and thousands of component parts. The team managed to get a truck through a neighboring field to lay the foundations and used a crane to erect the green oak frame, but everything else had to come along the path by wheelbarrow. “The most stressful thing about the whole experience was actually coaxing people down that path,” says Piers. “I wouldn’t tell people when we placed orders that we had no proper access because otherwise they just wouldn’t turn up. Getting the oak frame down was the hardest; some sections weigh nearly a ton and had to be brought down on a trolley. It was madness but we managed it.”

After six months in exile, the family moved back into their radically reinvented home on time and on budget. Inside, materials are purposefully raw—echoing the barnlike simplicity of the extension—with plywood sections for the walls and floors and bare plaster ceilings. The whole space is bathed in light uptairs and down, with no need for curtains or shutters given the house’s relative isolation. The family has plenty of space and the world is spread out before them, literally, in the valley below.

“It’s very much a simple, direct way of building that responds to the site, weather patterns, orientation, and the desire to spill outside easily,” says Piers. “It’s also a version of an antipodean pole house, raised up above the ground, which is quite Australian, but here it’s clad in black tin, which is a reference to the black barns down in the valley. It is very rooted in this landscape and the site. I wanted to do a building that was really about this place.”

“The house has become part of our daily rhythm,” says Sue. “It does force you to live according to the daylight hours and the seasons much more than being in a house in the city. You are so close to the elements and nature. We can stand in the kitchen and see deer, munjack, and woodpeckers and hear the owls at night.”

Even the path has become a positive element of the Taylors’ day-to-day ritual. “There is something magical for us about that walk—every day, through thick or thin, we make that walk,” says Piers. “It feels as though it’s right to be down in the woods, and [the children] don’t know anything else but Moonshine. Seamlessly blending the vintage with the modern, Moonshine manages to make the unlikely union seem as natural as its surroundings and—to Piers and his family—nearly as impressive.”
Piers built the blue cabinetry in the kitchen and living area; the couch is from Ikea. The classic yellow Robin Day chairs from Habitat (opposite) perfectly complement the purple Jack lamp by Tom Dixon. Piers designed and built the table when he was in architecture school.