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Camera Press/ACP/Alicia Taylor

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*this picture Anna and Xa's farmhouse has been fully renovated, while a new larch-clad wing provides an open-plan family kitchen-dining space*



# Rescue mission

*It was both the charm of the dilapidated farmhouse and its sprawling, untamed garden that seduced Anna Benn and Xa Sturgis into purchasing Starfall Farm in North East Somerset, which they've restored and extended into a modern family home* Words Dominic Bradbury Photography Damian Russell





*this picture* The kitchen area can be fully opened to the outside; the family uses the terrace for summer dining



*right* The original quote for the concrete worksurface came in at £18,000. Architect Piers Taylor saved thousands by asking the contractor to create a wooden mould and pour the concrete, which he then finished himself

**'We wanted to design a house that could take everything that is thrown at it – all the chaos of family life'**

*above* Light spills into the dining area from skylights and the large sliding windows on either side of the building

preserving the essential character of the farmhouse, and the crumbling barn alongside has been replaced by the new addition. This striking building is now the centre of family life, containing an open-plan kitchen and dining room, utility spaces and – at the opposite end – a new master suite for Anna and Xa.

May really had nothing to be upset about, as Starfall has retained all of its charm and is full of delight. It's not only the house itself that is special, but also its location in a tranquil, rural enclave a few miles away from Bath city centre. Anna and Xa were seduced by Starfall and its magical setting when they first came across it four years ago, although for Anna – a garden designer and writer – it →

**W**hen Anna Benn and Xa Sturgis' 10-year-old daughter May saw all the changes her parents had made when reinventing Starfall Farm as a fresh family home, she cried. She has since come round, of course, and now loves the Georgian farmhouse and its striking, contemporary timber-clad addition. It was just that she liked the old ramshackle house and its crumbling barns and outhouses just as they used to be – a romantic, charming tumbledown place that seemed rather lost in time.

Certainly Starfall is a very different home today, since its radical reworking. The house and its Seventies extension have been sensitively rationalised and updated, while still





*left and below A built-in concrete bench in a corner window offers a view over the garden. The furniture includes plenty of vintage and antique pieces. Anna says: 'I have a soft spot for Fifties and Scandinavian design. There's also a Russian influence, especially from Russian cottages'*

was the chance to create a garden, as well as a home, that was so enticing.

'The house came up on a website and I thought it was just the kind of thing I wanted – a small farm, nothing big, in a good location and with a south-west facing garden,' she says. 'It was a run-down farm that had been used as a dog-breeding centre for Jack Russells. There was the farmhouse, a field, dog kennels and an old, trashed cow shed that was being held up by bits of wood and tree trunks. But I was really led by the garden, and we had decided that we really wanted to have a project.'

Anna and Xa moved from London to Bath after Xa was appointed director of the Holborne Museum in the city, where he was soon steering through a new extension project designed by architect Eric Parry. Having rented a house in the city to begin with, the couple soon found themselves with their own major project on their hands as they began reworking Starfall Farm as a family home for themselves and their three children: Theo, 14, Fred, 12, and May, 10.

Architect Piers Taylor of Bath-based practice Invisible Studio was recommended to them and, once Anna and Xa had seen the architect's own home nearby – a vintage gamekeeper's cottage with a new, contemporary wing in glass and wood – they knew that they had found the right man for the job.

The family lived in the Georgian farmhouse for a year, such as it was, before getting planning permission to replace the old barn alongside the house with a new structure that would give them an open living space consisting of →



*this picture Anna sourced the Ercol dining table and chairs from a local antiques dealer*





*left* At the far end of the new addition is the master bedroom complete with freestanding bath. 'We didn't want to keep the children away from us, but we wanted five bedrooms, so we ended up being at the end of the new building with a nice new bedroom on the ground floor,' says Anna.

*below* A slot window above the bath looks out over the wild-flower meadow



*this picture* The living room has a library space at one end, arranged around the fireplace; the picture on the chimney breast was a wedding present. Both the sofa and Orkney chair are family pieces, while the Ercol coffee table came from Tim Snell Antiques in Bath

**'The great joy of the house is its connection to the outside... Anna's wild-flower bank and grass terraces lift the spirits'**



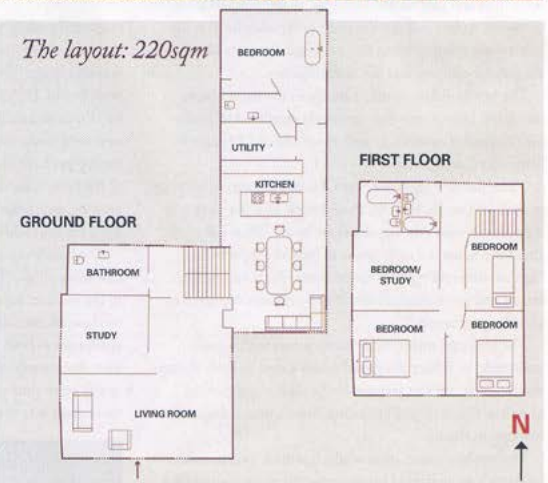
a kitchen, dining room, and seating area while offering a direct sense of connection to the garden.

'We wanted to design a house that could take everything that is thrown at it – all the chaos of family life,' says Taylor. 'The idea was not to create a precious building, but to design something that could accommodate the way Anna and Xa wanted to live. They really wanted a raw, new building that would patina and age well and settle in to the landscape.'

An initial design for a two-storey extension was turned down by the local planning authority, which has strict guidelines and controls on what can be built in this area of green-belt land. Taylor came back with a plan for a single-storey addition clad in Siberian larch, which was also used to coat the old Seventies extension alongside, tying the two elements together while contrasting nicely with the rugged Bath stone of the original farmhouse.

The structure is highly insulated, with underfloor heating and large sliding glass doors that open up to the gardens. The materials are as organic in character and tone as the wood that coats the building, with a mix of raw plaster walls and plywood for the bespoke kitchen units. The island is made from →

*The layout: 220sqm*





## Suppliers

## PROJECT TEAM Architect

Invisible Studio (01225 852 456;

invisiblestudio.org) Structural

engineer Structures 1 (0117

946 9225; structures1.com)

## Landscape and garden design

Anna Benn Garden Design

(07813 717 226)

## STRUCTURE Glazing

Powder-coated aluminium

Smart Systems installed by

Poppy Aluminium (0117 961 1001;

poppyaluminiumsystems.uktc.com)

## FIXTURES &amp; FITTINGS

Kitchen Mitchell Taylor

Workshop (01225 789 033;

mitchelltaylorworkshop.co.uk)

## Kitchen island and units

Bespoke design with polished

concrete island and spruce ply

cabinets by Invisible Studio (as

before) Joinery Bespoke design

by Invisible Studio (as before)

## FURNITURE &amp; ACCESSORIES

Clover-leaf planters Walcot

Architectural Salvage (01225 469

557; walcotarchitecturalsalvage.

co.uk) Ercol dining table and

chairs Tim Snell Antiques (01225

423 045) Russian dolls Habitat

(0844 499 4686; habitat.co.uk)

Built-in bench Bespoke design

by Invisible Studio (as before)

## Fifties dining-room lights

Source Antiques (01225 469 200;

source-antiques.co.uk) Ercol

coffee table Tim Snell Antiques

(as before) Terrace chairs Harry

Bertoia for Knoll (020 7236 6655;

knoll-int.com)



*above Anna used her garden-design knowledge to create a traditional-style cottage garden at the front of the original farmhouse*



*above Earth excavated from around the extension was used to make a terraced garden; from the top there is a view over the whole property to the rolling valley beyond*

*right Larch cladding on the new addition and existing Seventies extension blends perfectly with the clay-tiled roofs*

poured concrete, set in a mould made by the contractor and trowelled smooth by Taylor himself for a fraction of the price quoted by London specialists. 'Our contractor made the mould for £1,000, so we saved £17,000,' says Taylor.

'It's all quite economical,' says Anna. 'We didn't have a giant budget and Piers was very good at helping us manage the costs. Xa was running the Holborne extension at the same time and that taught him a lot, so we finished more or less on budget and did the work in six months. It really worked out cheaper for us to have fitted elements like the ply, the poured concrete and the fitted benches.'

The new building connects neatly to the main house, which has been simply but sensitively reordered to create four bedrooms upstairs, as well as a study and L-shaped living room downstairs.

'I love the new big room,' says Xa. 'It's a great social space to cook and eat in, and one that extends into the garden in the summer when the big doors are open. What I like best about the house is that it seems to have the right balance between different types of space: rooms for comfort, for retreat and for communal life. It's also remarkably good at absorbing teenagers.'

The furniture mixes some family pieces with a good smattering of Fifties chairs and tables found in Bath vintage shops. There are also pictures by Xa's sister and mother, as well as pieces picked up during Anna's time living and working in Russia.

The outdoor space, meanwhile, has been transformed by Anna into a series of inter-connected zones, including a

courtyard garden, a cottage garden at the front of the house and a vegetable garden up on a small plateau on the hillside. Anna explains: 'We haven't put any boundaries to lock ourselves in. It's all very open, like a cottage garden should be.' Earth was excavated from around the house to give the new wing more room to breathe, and a section of the garden nearby has been planted with a wild-flower meadow. Part of the hillside has been landscaped into a series of terraces creating an amphitheatre effect, with lawned spaces up the slope for the children to play on.

The family is now making the most of Starfall Farm's new lease of life. 'The great joy of the house is its connection to the outside,' says Xa. 'The position of the house, with the lane on one side and the bank on the other, offered challenges to both Piers and Anna that have been beautifully met. Anna's wild-flower bank and grass terraces lift the spirits every time you see them and the new extension brings them right into the house.' **GD**

*For a slice of Anna and Xa's style, choose contemporary classics and colourful accessories from the buys on p56*





# STYLE FINDER

Mix vintage furniture with contemporary pieces for the pared-back, cosy feel of Anna and Xa's home *Compiled by Charlotte Loxford*



**1 Textured tartan** Bisley extra-large sofa in solid hardwood, leather and tweed fabric (H74xW230xD102cm), £3,895, by Plant & Moss for Heal's Discovers at Heal's (0870 024 0780; heals.co.uk)

**2 Industrial lighting** Task short-arm wall light in chromed metal and aluminium in black (H32xW36xD16cm), £169, The Conran Shop (0844 848 4000; conranshop.co.uk)

**3 Design original** Nakashima straight chair in solid American walnut and hickory (H75.5xW57xD51cm), £888, by George Nakashima

for Knoll at Nest (0114 243 3000; nest.co.uk)

**4 Charming characters** Wooden dolls in hand-painted pinewood: (from left) doll No2 (H18.5xW7.8xD4.5cm); doll No1 (H27.5xW4.8xD3.7cm) and doll No3 (H14.5xW7.8xD4.5cm), £84 each, by Alexander Girard for Vitra (020 7608 6200; vitra.com)

**5 Cute accessory** Handmade Robin cushion in lambswool in brown (H40xW40cm), £70, by Donna Wilson at SCP (020 7749 7398; scp.co.uk)

**6 Statement planters** Citadel pots in textured fibreglass in stone: large (H45xDiameter100cm), £263; medium (H36xDiameter85cm), £160, Posh Patio (0845 603 4575; poshpatio.co.uk)

**7 Soft surface** Sivanna Li rug in a wool mix in cream (L200xW140cm), £250, Habitat (0844 499 4686; habitat.co.uk)

**8 Painted classic** Le Bain de Bateau bath in cast iron painted in Farrow & Ball pitch blue (H67.5xW165xD70cm), £3,500, Catchpole & Rye (01233 840 840; catchpoleandrye.com) **GD**