



The cabin in (and from) the woods

Parked in a Somerset valley is a mobile home built by architect Piers Taylor for his daughter, using the trees that surround it. Tom Dyckhoff pays a visit

Mobile home. It takes just two words to stir up the contradictions in British attitudes to that most basic of needs: where, and how, to live. On the one hand, prejudice, embodied in the phrase "trailer trash", with all its snobbery and classism, and in the ever-present persecution of traveller communities. On the other hand, middle-class fantasies of shepherd's huts. Yes, David Cameron - pictured last summer, smiling on the steps of his second shepherd's hut, at his second home - I'm thinking of you.

Deep in a wood in Somerset is a 30m sq mobile home designed to expose these conflicts. Clad in corrugated fibreglass and steel, with a steeply pitched roof and two tall gable ends, it is made from materials sourced from construction waste and from the woods themselves. It was designed by architect Piers Taylor. If you only know Taylor from the TV show he presents with Caroline Quentin, *The World's Most Extraordinary Homes*, you probably don't really know him. While the programme usually follows the pair poking round extravagant, expensive houses, Taylor's day job and family life are more about economy, frugality and making buildings that challenge some fairly fundamental assumptions behind how we live and work.

"Six years ago, I had a good old-fashioned, 'what's the point of it all?' midlife crisis," says Taylor, 51, striding through the woods, five paces ahead. "And this trailer is, I suppose, the end result." He was working at Mitchell Taylor Workshop, a firm he set up with Rob Mitchell, doing interesting projects, winning awards and all that. All seemed well. But then Taylor went on holiday to Australia and, he says, "had a bit of a think". He didn't do the full Reggie Perrin; but he did change his identity, in a manner of speaking: he resigned from his firm and set up Invisible Studio, which, he announced, would do »



things differently. "Going to Australia made me see how far I had drifted from where I'd wanted to go." Taylor had studied architecture in his 20s in Australia under perhaps its greatest living architect, Glenn Murcutt, famous for his politically and environmentally engaged buildings that, as Murcutt put it, "touch the earth lightly". And this is what had fired up the young Piers Taylor. This is what fired up the middle-aged Piers Taylor.

"Architects spend a lot of time chasing corporate culture," he says, still striding, "working behind screens. I'd had enough of that." Invisible Studio would, as Taylor put it in his resignation email, be "beholden to no one"; it would collaborate, "down tools when the sun was shining" (architects like working ridiculous hours for peanuts), and, driving everything, be "provocative and polemical". Since his midlife crisis, Taylor has made sure everything he does, he does to test an idea.

He stops striding. We arrive at his provocative and polemical mobile home, which is parked just outside his family home in a wooded valley between Bath and the M4. It is part-made from unseasoned timber hewn from the surrounding wood, which Taylor runs co-operatively with his neighbours: grow your own architecture. Each strut has the same 5x2 inches dimensions, designed to maximise use of the timber cut from each tree. Plywood left over from construction sites was cleaned up for the inside walls and the joinery, including two staircases. The insulation was scavenged. The doors came from a skip. The roof lights were seconds. It is a silk purse made from a sow's ear. Total cost (including labour): £20,000. (The kitchen, bathroom, trailer chassis and smarter finish upped the price.) It is designed to be transported on a public highway; it has a removable wheeled "bogey" that slides out from under the steel chassis when not being moved.

Taylor makes use of the height with two mezzanines for bedrooms; the room above your head adds to the impression of spaciousness. It is efficiently designed, like a ship's cabin, full of storage cubby holes and floor-to-ceiling shelving. It has a bathroom (with a shower); a kitchen, plus a woodburner range as an oven. It's well-made; rough round the edges but beautifully detailed. It's warm: the woodburner glows; the insulation keeps the heat in. It is a home. Right now Taylor's 28-year-old daughter Immy and her partner John are staying. "We had our misgivings," she says. "What, I'm climbing up that ladder to bed every night? Will we have enough space?



Previous pages: Piers Taylor with his daughter Immy and her partner John, who live in the home; the living space and sloping walls. Right: a bedroom. Below: the woodland setting



Will it be cold? Am I going to get claustrophobic?" Well, no, she says. It is romantic and homely. Never doubt your father.

But it also, she adds, has the benefits of temporariness. There's a connection to the outside, explains Immy, that "you just don't get in a normal house. I spend more time outside. We sit on the steps, collect logs. When it rains it's loud, but it's lovely. It's a really hippy thing to say, but you can even hear the leaves falling." In high winds and storms "I'm more worried about our car." It's even changed how she spends the day. "I go to bed earlier and get up earlier."

After a few weeks there, it's taught Immy "there are other ways of living". Her generation, of course, is being compelled to do so, due to the housing crisis. Perhaps bricks and mortar, that illusion of our homes' permanence hardwired into British culture over decades, will become redundant. This mobile home, this microcosm, offers new directions. What if our homes were built co-operatively, elegantly, sustainably, with economy, touching the earth lightly? Immy, at least, "can't imagine ever buying a home. My dream would be to live on a patch of land with a load of trailers like this. I can't imagine going back to living in any other way." ■