



The Cornish retreat

Petrea Middleton overcame serious illness to follow her heart and build a property with her husband, **Rick Charman**. The result is a graceful, high quality home that the couple adore

WORDS & PHOTOS **ALEXANDRA PRATT**

When Petrea Middleton became ill, she and her husband Rick decided they needed a 'retreat'; somewhere to relax when times were tough and to enjoy some quiet time together. Cornwall seemed like a natural choice – Rick has happy memories of the county as a child, and the couple had holidayed there regularly over the years. "We spent two years looking at everything from terraced cottages to barn conversions, but nothing was ever right," says Petrea. "There was not enough privacy."

Eventually, they went to see a derelict bungalow in a north Cornwall hamlet close to the sea. "We knew we were going to like it when we saw it from down the lane. I thought there must be something wrong with the plot, but it was absolutely fine," says Petrea. The property had planning permission for demolition and replacement, so the couple embraced the idea of a big project. "We never actually planned to self build, but we are so pleased that this is the route we ended up taking," she says.

Rick and Petrea negotiated hard and secured the plot. The existing plans were for a fairly large three bedroom bungalow, but they found the design uninspiring. While visiting a homes exhibition, the couple discovered package company, Carpenter Oak. "The cost of building with green oak is often a stumbling block for those on a



tight budget, but it was important to Rick, even though it was a slightly more expensive option," says Petrea. "He had long nurtured a dream of a characterful wooden house."

Change to consent

As the detailed permission was entirely unsuitable for the couple's needs, they set about making the necessary changes. "We have a deep respect for the attractive location, and we didn't want to spoil it by building something that wouldn't suit the setting," says Petrea. Their focus was on designing a home that would blend seamlessly with the rural plot. The result is a modest one-and-a-half-storey building that is very traditional, both in terms of styling and materials, with a footprint that's actually smaller than the original drawings.

In order to assist its passage through the planning process and avoid objections, the couple made copies of the plans and sent them, with a letter, to all their neighbours. The approach worked and soon after the project was approved. The design – for a 115m² green oak frame building with structural insulated panel (SIPs) infills, cedar cladding and lime render – was drawn up by Suzanne Hutchings from specialist practice, Roderick James Architects.

Their contract with the firm was for both design and supervision (leading to an Architect's Certificate as warranty of build quality)

HOME OWNERS' FILE

NAMES Petrea Middleton & Rick Charman
OCCUPATIONS Petrea formerly worked in retail & Rick is a contracts manager
LOCATION Boscastle, Cornwall
TYPE OF BUILD New build
STYLE Rustic cottage
CONSTRUCTION METHOD Green oak frame, SIPs & lime render
PLOT SIZE 0.75 acres
HOUSE SIZE 115m² (1,238ft²)
LAND COST £165,000
BOUGHT 2009
BUILD COST £207,000
TOTAL COST £372,000
COST PER M² £1,800 (£167 per ft²)
BUILDING WORK COMMENCED January 2011
BUILDING WORK TOOK Seven months
CURRENT VALUE £395,000

“The end result is a property that has truly enhanced the lives of the whole family”



This pic: The kitchen and dining area are located to enable views of the stunning countryside plot. Opposite page: The Queen brace truss was an expensive addition, but one that the couple view as 'priceless' due to the character it adds to their new retreat

WE LEARNED...

BE REALISTIC with your budgeting.

The cost of professional advice on finance will be invaluable. You just need to be honest about what you can afford and have a list of priorities – so know exactly what it is you want from the build.

ALWAYS look for bargains on materials; every pound you save will help you to afford the personal touches that really add character. You need to work hard at getting value for money; research your options and choose your suppliers very carefully.

ARCHITECT FEES aren't cheap, but we think it was money well spent. The input from Roderick James meant the quality of the build was high and timelines stuck to, which adds value in the long run.



The mezzanine floor is accessed via two loft ladders at either end of the property. They were chosen both to save space and so as to not hamper light flowing through the property



and it turned out to be a great decision. "One of the best things we did was to keep Suzanne with us on the project," says Petrea, who valued the knowledge and experience brought by an experienced professional. In fact, Petrea attributes much of the project's success to good relationships with the workforce. "I think that everyone involved with the build enjoyed working on it. We chose people we knew we would get on with, and who would work well with the other trades involved," she says. "Even our choice of main contractor was more about individual character than the tendering process. Although, if it hadn't been for Rick's experience, I'm sure we would have been more cautious."

Always barter

Rick is a trained carpenter and now works as a contracts manager, so is familiar with the building trade. His knowledge enabled the

couple to organise the build fairly easily, as well as specify good quality materials on a modest budget. "We were still able to accommodate some high cost items, such as the striking 'Queen brace' in the main living space," says Petrea. "There were cheaper options, but it was the right thing to choose – it's beautiful."

To keep costs down, the couple cleverly specified materials and products that came in standard sizes. For example, the majority of the windows are of a uniform size, which enabled them to afford the rooflights that bring light right into the centre of the vaulted living space. Savvy negotiating and clever bargaining also played their part, with Petrea choosing the bathroom items she needed, then going to a single supplier and bartering a low price. The kitchen is an inexpensive ex-display model from John Lewis, complemented by good quality oak and Corian worktops.

"We tried to get the most from our budget for everything by just keeping things simple," says Petrea, who, when it came to internal finishes found that a light purse and eco consciousness coincided nicely. For example, rather than choose a conventional gypsum plasterboard and paint finish on the walls, she opted to leave them the natural cream colour of the lime

render. The floor is also finished with an inexpensive softwood, which has been painted with eco products. "Leaving these 'raw' materials on show saves money, reduces environmental impact and is in keeping with the rural, almost agricultural feel of the oak framed building," she adds.



One of the couple's key ideas was to use renewable tech wherever possible. They weren't connected to the mains and didn't want to use oil – which although reliable, didn't attract them. Also, they ruled out some heating options due to the potential for noise, which was an important consideration for Petrea, particularly in a building that is almost entirely open plan. After researching what was available on their budget, the couple looked at solar systems; both thermal and photovoltaics. "If we'd had the money, we would have had both, but we chose thermal hot water panels only," says Petrea. This means that all their domestic water heating needs (including for the underfloor heating) are fulfilled by the tech on the roof.

"It's warm and it works well, but winter is a bit more challenging," admits Petrea. "We have a woodburner, which we love, to provide additional warmth." This is fuelled by logs from a neighbouring farm and has a backburner linked to a thermal store, which ensures that water and heating are always at the right temperature, even on the short, dark days of winter.

Relaxing in style

Inside, the house is bright, open plan and full of character – thanks to the exposed oak beams – and the layout makes the most of the relatively small footprint. Two open mezzanine platforms at either

end of the property are accessed via ladders, rather than stairs, which are both used for sleeping. This effectively creates a three bedroom property (as there is also an ensuite bedroom on the ground floor).

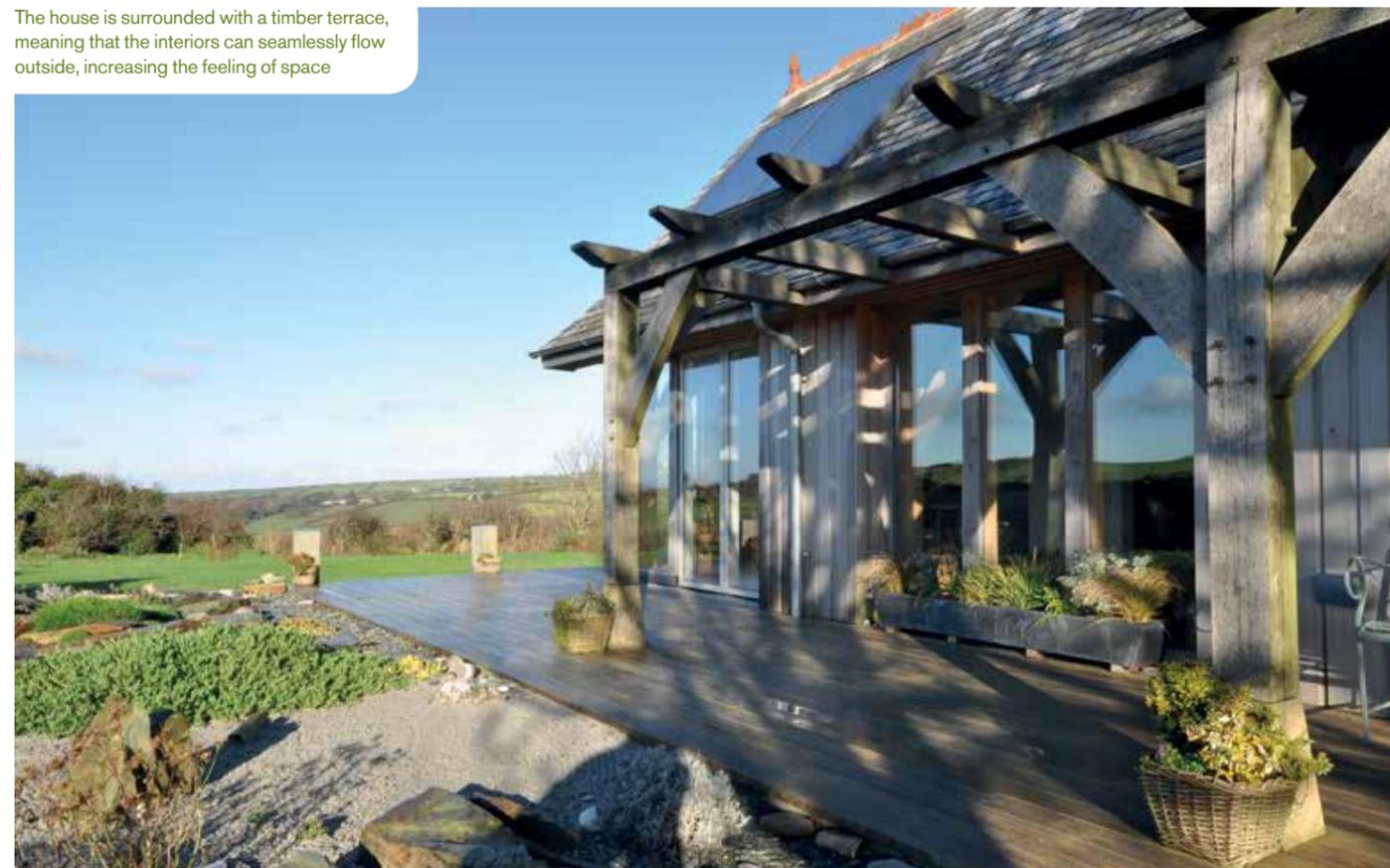
"These two mezzanines are only considered to be 'storage' for Building Regulations purposes and we couldn't sell this as a three bedroom property," says Petrea. "However, what we do with the space is our business."

The couple decided against putting a phone line into the new house. One reason for this was due to the cost of connection, which was quoted at several thousand pounds. "It's quite refreshing not to have such a modern intrusion in our traditional rural haven," says Petrea.

Happily, Petrea has now made a full recovery and, far from being a drain on her energy during a difficult time, she credits running the building project with helping



The house is surrounded with a timber terrace, meaning that the interiors can seamlessly flow outside, increasing the feeling of space



her to get better. "It definitely gave me a focus during my illness," she says. "The end result is a property that has truly enhanced the lives of the whole family. The feeling of achievement is liberating; doing something you've never done before builds you as a person. It's also strengthened our relationship to work together on this."

With Petrea now well, the couple have made the decision to 'share' their dream and make it available as a holiday let until they retire. "For anyone else contemplating a self build, I would advise them to 'follow your heart'. There will be challenges ahead, but that way, the house you build will become a home," she says.

closer look

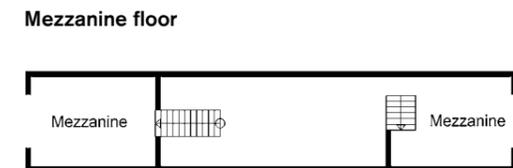
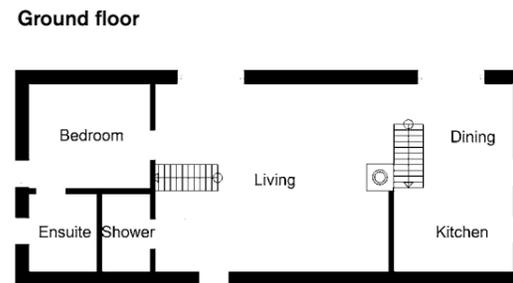
Design elements of this house...

The roof is one of the couple's favourite features, and really is the home's crowning glory. "I adore the reclaimed Delabole slate, which has a history and looks like a shining fish when wet – there are so many colours in it," says Petrea. "Brazilian slate would have been much cheaper, but this was 'greener' and we're using something beautiful." The couple sourced it through their main contractor, Jason Rash Construction. Although the cost of the reclaimed product was three times the price of a Spanish alternative, it was still a third cheaper than new Delabole slate.



Salvaged slate roof

Floor plans



TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

Elements	Cost %	Cost m ²	Total cost
Main contractor	47%	£843	£97,000
Windows:	4%	£69	£8,000
Slate roof:	3%	£48	£5,500
Solar thermal system	2%	£39	£4,500
Kitchen	2%	£43	£5,000
Frame	15%	£269	£31,000
Sips	12%	£217	£25,000
Demolition and site clearance	3%	£61	£7,000
Architect	7%	£130	£15,000
Landscape	3%	£52	£6,000
Fees	1%	£26	£3,000
Grand total			£207,000

Useful contacts

The Retreat is available as a holiday let through Unique Homestays 01637 881183 www.uniquehomestays.com

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