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Bryan and Kate Pickard say their new home is 'a dream come true'



The Pickards have just sold their old Victorian house, which they bought for £100,000 in 1992

Dream house in my garden

Bryan Pickard thought he would have to build a traditional house behind his Victorian Dorset home, but the planners surprised him, says FRED REDWOOD

Building a brand new house in your own garden is an ingenious way of downsizing. But what if you want the home to be ultra-modern and architect-designed, you live in a rural conservation area and your budget is limited to £250,000? Those were the problems facing artist Bryan Pickard when he set out to build his dream home next to his five-bedroom detached Victorian property, The Knoll, on the outskirts of Shaftesbury, Dorset.

Pickard and his wife, Kate, bought The Knoll in 1992 for £100,000. "The kitchen was pure 1950s bad taste, the ceiling had holes in it and there were cobwebs for curtains when we bought it," he says.

Pickard spent £70,000 over the next 11 years on two new shower rooms, a big family bathroom, retiling the roof and building a conservatory. The house has just been sold for close to its guide price of £440,000, which will more than cover the £250,000 cost of building the new home on the quarter-acre plot he sliced off the side of the original half-acre garden.

Deciding what style of house to build was the biggest problem. "At first I feared that an exciting modern design would be out of the question and we'd have to build something in keeping with the Victorian property nearby," says Pickard. "So I researched the self-build homes being sold by package companies and took their designs of pastiche coach houses to the planners. They threw them back at me. Their mantra was that there's a difference between maintaining the quality of the environment and building copies of houses from a bygone age.

"I explained that I really wanted something more adventurous and the planners couldn't have been more helpful.

"They pointed me towards the architect Phil Easton and positively encouraged me to go for a contemporary look."

Easton was initially taken aback by Pickard's budget — Pickard remembers his exact words being, "For that price I can do you a shed." But

he soon produced a design that Pickard liked. Easton then introduced Pickard to Snibor, a local building company, and the last part of the project fell into place — they built the house in only seven months.

You enter into a high glass atrium, where Pickard will exhibit his work when the house is opened to the public as a studio next year. To the left is a large kitchen/living area opening out onto a patio with stunning views over the Blackmore Vale to Glastonbury Tor. To the right is the studio where Pickard, who has exhibited at the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours in London, works on his paintings.

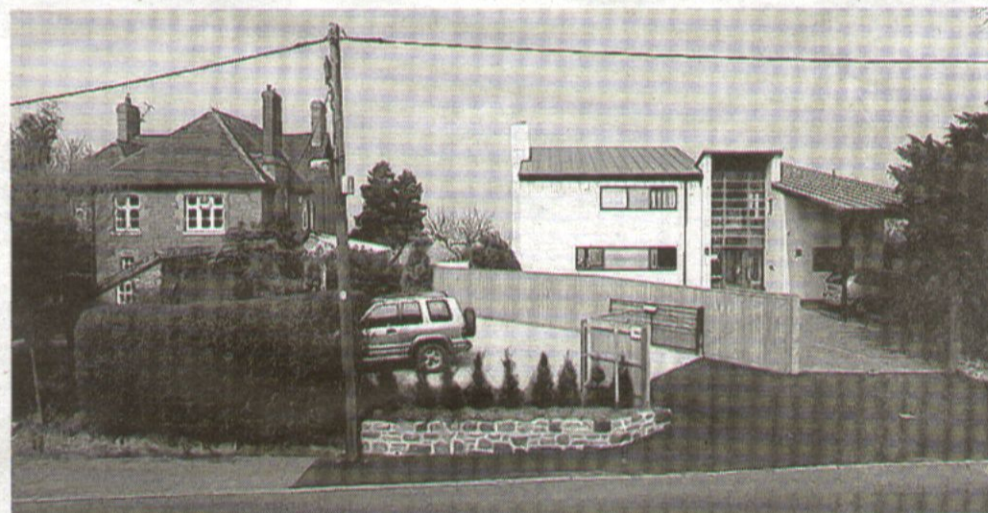
Upstairs, the three bedrooms have high windows and 4.5m high ceilings, creating a loft-apartment feel. There is underfloor heating on the ground floor and the gardens have already been landscaped, with circular plant beds to contrast with the cube-like shape of the house itself.

It's a bold design. "I'm happy with it," says Easton. "I believe it's important to make a statement with buildings. I'm on a mission to stop everywhere looking like Poundbury [Prince Charles's Dorset development built on traditional lines]."

The planners are also happy with the house. It's their job to ensure that the guidelines regarding new-build in a conservation area are upheld. These are to "preserve or enhance the appearance and character" of the environment. "The building is well conceived and a work of merit," says John Hammond, the development control team leader at North Dorset District Council.

Countless homeowners toy with the idea of building another property in their own grounds. What advice can Pickard offer them?

"It's pointless going to planners with a design that runs contrary to their plans for the area. Consult them first. Then ask them to recommend architects. If the planners won't help, find out yourself who has worked successfully with them in the past. Find a



The ultra-modern house sits on a quarter-acre plot taken from the garden of the original property

solicitor and get the boundaries of your two properties clarified as soon as possible.

"Ask people about the quality of work done by builders you have in mind. Ask for references and visit past projects. When work starts, visit the site every day. But don't interfere thoughtlessly, because every time you order some minor adjustment you lose money.

"Keep an eye on the books, which should be presented to the architect every month. Watch for the first signs of overspend in the 'provisional sums' column — this means items the builder can't be expected to estimate in advance. An overspend on one item here must be made up elsewhere if your budget is limited. Don't forget to budget for landscaping.

"Insist on a penalty clause for late completion

and allow for a contingency spend of 10% of the total budget. It won't stay unspent."

Although the market in Shaftesbury slumped with the rest of the UK in 2004, estate agents report signs of an upturn since Easter. Recently judged the country's fifth most desirable place in which to live by Channel 4's *Location, Location, Location*, the town is popular with relocators from the home counties. According to local chartered surveyors Woolley & Wallis, Pickard's new home could easily fetch £450,000.

How does Pickard rate the finished job? "It's a home specifically designed for our lifestyle," he says. "I have wanted to build a brand-new home since my early twenties — it's a dream come true."