

# Nerves of steel

This family were lambasted by the locals when they tried to build a metal-clad home in bohemian Lewes – so they held a house party to win them over. By Hugh Graham

First impressions count: just ask the residents of Lewes. These days, the first thing drivers see when they enter the chocolate-box East Sussex town is not some quaint cottage, but an extraordinary modern house clad in Cor-Ten steel, a rusty industrial material beloved of cutting-edge architects. It has a brutalist concrete base and is topped by a wonderfully wonky angular roof. Set beneath a chalk cliff, and above a muddy river, the coppery structure is bold, yet somehow in keeping with its setting.

After all, the town also has a long bohemian tradition. It was once home to Thomas Paine, the radical thinker who backed the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. Its bonfire night verges on anarchy. And it has long lured hippie types from nearby Brighton. Yet it has a deeply conservative streak when it comes to architecture, as the owners, Stephen and Anita Yeomans, found to their cost.

In a town characterised by cobbled streets and a castle that dates from 1067, it seems Cor-Ten does not sit well with the local taste police. The material, also known as weathering steel, was developed in America in the 1930s for use on freight trains and bridges. It requires no maintenance: its rust acts as a protective coating. More recently, however, it has clad avant-garde museums in Europe, and was used on two London properties that were finalists in Riba's 2015 House of the Year competition.

That's all very well in London. But the mayor of Lewes, Susan Murray, called the project "ugly". Locals vented their spleen online, dubbing it a "rust bucket", a "carbuncle" and a "blot on our landscape". The planning committee rejected the application, even though Stephen, a media director from London, and his architect, Sandy Rendel, had carefully crafted designs with advice from local conservation officers.

Rubbing salt in the wound, the planners had encouraged them to be more experimental in the pre-application stages. When Stephen, 47, bought the narrow riverside plot in 2011 for £350,000, he asked Rendel to build him a sleek modernist box. But the conservation officer was underwhelmed by the design, and said that such a visible site deserved a landmark building.

"That's the first time I've had a planner ask for something bolder," says Rendel, who had previously designed the sculptor Anish Kapoor's London home, and was only too pleased to spread his creative wings. "At the same time, you don't want to antagonise people."

Cor-Ten steel seemed a sensible solution. The raw scrap-metal look goes well with the current penchant for rustic and salvaged materials, and it works in the context: the house is on a brownfield site that was formerly a chalk quarry, then a cement works. The rusty tones match the local terracotta-tiled roofs; the earthy hues meld with nearby foliage, which goes auburn in the autumn; and the concrete base matches the textured fissures and



Stephen and Anita Yeomans with their baby daughter, Beatrice, and Thea, Stephen's daughter from a previous relationship

strata of the chalk cliff backdrop, and the concrete of the river wall below. The pitched roof evokes traditional Lewes, but its asymmetrical, expressionist shape makes it feel funky and echoes the jagged cliffs. On the street side, the greyish ash-glazed bricks match some of the town's period buildings.

None of this seemed to matter to the planning committee, despite the fact that the planning officer had recommended it for approval. (Normally, decisions are made by the planning authority, but sensitive sites or controversial projects must be looked at by the committee.) Red tape delayed the £700,000 project by five months, but it was approved on appeal.

"The appeals officer said it shouldn't have been rejected in the first place," says Stephen, who is still irked. "The committee went against all the professional opinion. It was frustrating, as we had spent a year working with the professional bodies to get them on board. Then these people say they don't like it."

Stephen is not a tasteless footballer or reality star. He has a degree in design and architecture, and it shows in the gallery-style interiors: Knoll Barcelona chairs and coffee tables, modular Cassina sofas, books by David Hockney and Tracey Emin. But this is the new softened minimalism: instead of harsh concrete floors, he's used speckled grey terrazzo. There are no stark white walls, but rough-sawn oak boards hint at 1970s rec-room chic. And rather than a pristine glass dining-room table that nobody dares get their fingerprints on, there's a magnificently gnarled, chunky elm affair that still looks like a tree.

The woodiness peaks in the dark, cave-like entrance, where the sawn oak walls and bench are stained black with vinegar and iron filings. When you cross from this soothing space into the bright all-glass living room, it dazzles the senses.

The living room doesn't have much art, apart from a few vast dog photographs by artists such as Martin Parr and Bruce Weber. (Stephen is obsessed with basset hounds; he has two, Gilb and George.) That's to keep the focus on the natural canvas beyond the glazing: the glinting river and the marshy green nature reserve. "It's a calming view," says Anita, 38, a lawyer.

It's also very exposed. A steady stream of dog-walkers gape at the architectural curiosity across the way. Stephen doesn't mind – it seems he's an exhibitionist. "When I lived in Amsterdam, I had this big glass penthouse. When I lived in Bexhill, I was right on the promenade. I had a warehouse in London Bridge with huge windows." Stephen comes across the gawkers when he goes walking on the nature reserve – during the build, he'd canvass their opinion incognito. "I'd say, 'What do you think of that?'"

One woman said, "I'm not sure, I'm not sure." So I said, "It's my house." She said sorry, and I replied, "Don't be sorry. It's your opinion."

"I've met her since, and she said, even though it's not what she'd have built, she recognised the quality of the building. Some developments in

## GET THE LOOK

Shant Conway, Oliver Perrot, Leigh Simpson

■ IMAR Expanded Cor-Ten Steel Mesh costs £39 a sq metre (justfacades.com).

■ The terrazzo tiled floor is Aggitect's Unico Classico in Moncervetto; £130 a sq metre from Janatti Marble (jmg.co.uk).

■ The fixed structural glazing and Keller minimal sliding glazed doors are by IQ Glass; from £1,000 a sq metre (iqglassuk.com).

■ Elm dining table, £15,000, by Jeremy Pitts (jeremypitts.co.uk).

■ Coventry wooden dining chairs, £495 each (chriseckersley.co.uk).

■ The blue upholstered chair in the bedroom is a Fritz Hansen Swan, by Arne Jacobsen; £2,669 (skandium.com).

In the cave-like entrance, the oak walls and bench are stained black with vinegar and iron filings



Lewes have a generic look."

Local opinions softened as the scaffolding came down and people realised it wasn't monster-sized – it's 2,766 sq ft, with four bedrooms. And several neighbours were won over when the couple invited them to an open house, realising that they weren't down-from-Londoners building a weekend show home, but a family who wanted to settle in Lewes. (They have two children, Beatrice, nine months, and Thea, 4, who is from Stephen's previous relationship.)

"We had about 70 people," Stephen says. "We were apprehensive. Lewes isn't big, the house is in a prominent position and there's nowhere to hide. But people were kind and welcoming, and brought gifts. After it appeared on Grand Designs, people stopped us on the street and said, 'We really like your house.'"

"I think it's grown on people," Anita adds. The proof? Rendel was recently outside when a grey-haired gentleman approached, staring at the dwelling and looking incensed. "I thought to myself, 'Here we go.' Then he shouted, 'I f\*\*\*\*\* love it!'"

As for the local taste police, they are at least in good company – Charleston, the genteel East Sussex home of the Bloomsbury set, is getting an extension from the Riba award-winning architect Jamie Foebert. The material? Cor-Ten steel.

■ sandyrendel.com

Material world Top, rust-coloured Cor-Ten makes the house stand out against the chalk cliffs. Vast sheets of glazing open up the house to the great outdoors, and the use of wood in the interiors, including a gnarled elm table, adds warmth