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LIMITED EDITION COVER
BY DOUG AITKEN

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Cone home

A contemporary rethink of the traditional Kentish oast house

PHOTOGRAPHY: JIM STEPHENSON WRITER: JONATHAN BELL



Tucked into the edge of a former orchard in Kent is this striking interpretation of the county's characteristic oast house. Designed by London studio Acme, the new house straddles the uncanny valley of vernacular, pastiche and modernity. This blended approach is not new to Acme, a practice founded in 2007 by Friedrich Ludewig. He was soon joined by his former colleague at Foreign Office Architects, Stefano dal Piva, and the pair found themselves working on a variety of scales in a variety of ways, blending 3D modelling with traditional methods to develop a language that is still firmly rooted in place.

This project's clients, one a planner who had collaborated with the pair in the past, wanted a new-build house. A first set of plans drawn by a different architect didn't pass muster, so they

turned to Acme. 'I said give us three weeks,' Ludewig recalls. 'We presented them with a few options. Some were very apologetic – digging the house in the ground. One was a green-roofed floating donut.' Eventually, they settled on a reworking of the traditional oast. Comprising a cone atop a cylinder, oasts evolved over centuries as the most practical building type for drying hops used to make beer; hops were spread across the first floor of the cylinder, with a furnace below heating the space, and hot air drawn up the cone and out through a swivelling cowl.

Kent might appear to be a bucolic landscape, but scratch the surface and it is all carefully managed, with vast polytunnels of produce tucked away in dips and dales, orchards full of centuries-worth of carefully engineered apples, and architecture shaped by the»

OPPOSITE, FIVE 'ROUNDELS' ARE ARRANGED TO MAKE THE MOST EFFICIENT FLOOR PLAN

THIS PAGE, THE FAÇADE IS GENEROUSLY PUNCTURED BY WINDOWS AND UNIFIED BY A MOSAIC OF 40,000 KENT-STYLE CLAY TILES IN SIX SHADES, SLOWLY FADING FROM DARK RED AT THE BASE TO GREY AT THE TIP

Architecture



LEFT, RISING UP FROM THE GROUND FLOOR IS AN ELEGANT OAK STAIRCASE, SHARPLY DEFINED BY SLIM VERTICAL BANISTERS THAT CONTINUE AND WRAP AROUND THE FIRST FLOOR'S SEMI-CIRCULAR GALLERY

BELOW, THE BEDROOM WALLS ARE CLAD WITH SQUARES OF SLIM BIRCH PLY ARRANGED IN A SPIRAL, FORMING A WARM, COCOON-LIKE RETREAT FOR EACH FAMILY MEMBER

demands of crops and markets. 'There is a ridiculous density of oast houses around here,' Ludewig says. 'They're tough buildings, but the shapes are amazing. The originals certainly aren't designed to live in.'

Acme explored the typology, experimenting with different combinations of circular 'roundels' to make the most efficient floor plan. The eventual solution placed a conventional roundel at each corner, like a castle keep, with a larger cone in the middle. 'By just moving each one apart slightly it gives you many more options,' Ludewig says, pointing out how the slots created by the offset are glazed, helping to open up the interior of these traditionally cloistered forms.

The focal point is the 11m-tall central atrium. Plastered white, it is both lofty and strangely formless; shifting light and glimpses of sky make it hard to determine scale. The adjoining roundels contain the kitchen, a living room, a study/utility area and a guest room. Upstairs, there is another living area and three bedrooms, each a self-contained double-height realm with a sleeping platform accessed by a winding ply spiral staircase, set atop a bathroom and dressing area.

Outside, a dappled façade made of thousands of clay tiles further anchors the house into the landscape. A blended pattern was laid on the computer and translated into drawings, so the roofers could create the apparently random arrangement. 'If you're from anywhere else, you might question it, but if you're local and you see it from a distance, you might think it's a normal oast house,' Ludewig says. For now, the external landscaping is a blank canvas as everyone takes stock after the construction process and predictable battle with local planners. 'They said it was a monstrosity,' he says with barely concealed delight. On the contrary, this very contemporary structure feels truly grounded in the unique traditions of the local landscape. ★

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'Oast houses have amazing shapes, but they certainly weren't designed to live in'

