

Timber shapes the future

By David Spittles 02.10.03

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With sustainable housing high on the environmental agenda, wood has found its way into our hearts and homes. Timber frames may have received a bad press thanks to the Great Fire of London, but nearly 350 years later, a refined version is staging a comeback.



Wood: it's the way to go

Increasingly, wood is the preferred choice of architects, developers and planners and has rapidly become a favourite with homebuyers reared on fake Tudorbethan lookalikes. Now they are turning their backs on this tired, old architecture and insisting on something new.

Timber is eco-friendly and renewable but its renaissance is not only to do with save-the-planet overtures. Apart from being the most environmentally benign construction material, when used correctly, timber is also one of the most aesthetic. Properly constructed, well-designed wooden homes can look superbly stylish and last for centuries.

"Like many people, when I was growing up I thought timber homes were a cheap fire hazard," says Bob Hayes of Architype, a practice specialising in timber design. "Only when I started to travel to places such as Scandinavia, Germany and north America did I realise that half the world lives happily in wooden homes."

One recent Architype creation is a low-rise house on a plot of land, formally a carbreaker's yard, sandwiched between Victorian villas in Tufnell Park. It is timber from top to toe: the structure, the fabric and the finish. The frame is Douglas fir, the timber wall panels are insulated with recycled newspapers, the exterior is clad with green oak and flooring is recycled parquet blocks. All the paints and stains used are organic.

Set over two levels with a curved roof planted with hardy sedums, the house measures barely 1,000sq ft and cost £145,000 to build - "Very reasonable," insists Hayes.

Like the best lofts, quality timber homes have acquired cachet and glamour. As well as one-off houses, apartment schemes now often make widespread use of wood for cladding and architectural detailing.

Until a few years ago, timber-frame construction was a cottage industry, sustained by self-builders looking for a quick and inexpensive construction method. More recently, the technique has been embraced by big housebuilders, which are under pressure to conform to higher energy ratings and who also want to overcome skill shortages (this can be achieved by factory-manufactured kits). This has helped transform the image of modern timber-frame construction.

Most timber-frame kits are imported, but domestic production is being beefed up. "The sector is growing rapidly," says David Birkbeck of research consultancy Design for Homes. "The biggest internal investment in the UK during the past 12 months was a £12 million timber-frame plant in Oxfordshire."

An industry website, www.timberframe.org, aimed at homebuyers and self-builders, has just been launched.

Born in the USA

Niche companies are sprouting up to offer bespoke design-and-build packages, with house types often based on American timber homes. One such company is London-based Blackburn Barton (020 7350 2345), agent for a US manufacturer called Deck House.

Numerous house designs are available, from Cape Cod-style bungalows to imposing neocolonial villas.

"Most people customise the property to their own tastes and requirements," says Simon Blackburn, managing director. The post-and-beam construction method that is used was once common in medieval England.

Other UK developers are also mimicking American house design, even hijacking the vernacular for marketing reasons.

But while the house interiors can make a refreshing change to the usual boxy layouts served up by volume builders, often the end result is compromised, with twee or contrived exteriors failing to live up to the original.

Tomorrow an industry seminar on ecological housing takes place at King's Hill, near West Malling, Kent. The location was chosen mainly because of two new residential schemes on the site of this former airfield, which is being turned into a new community.

Both schemes, called Lacuna and King's Hill Park, are a collaboration between developers Sunley and Environ.

Here, too, there is more than a touch of New England about the architecture.

And the properties have the bonus of being "allergy-reducing". A timber-frame building system called Super E has been imported from Canada. The system works silently to draw in and filter fresh air from outside the home at the same time as expelling stale, unhealthy air that would otherwise be trapped inside.

Externally, there is white (non-timber) weatherboarding with coloured panels. The design success lies in the internal configuration. Light-filled rooms flow into each other and feature double-height windows, galleries

and cathedral ceilings. The homes border a new golf course and range from £385,999 to £895,000. Call 01732 871872.

Countryside has used a similar formula at Chatham Maritime, where the waterside location provides an attractive backdrop for the timber-frame, timber-clad homes. Northshore, a development of 106 houses, makes use of white-painted and cedarboarded elevations. Prices are from £225,000. Cheaper apartments (from £150,000) are for sale at the Fishing Village, while houses with double-height conservatories and tower extensions are on offer at Ventura, priced from £250,000. Call 01634 892862.