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THIS PAGE In the barn, which houses the family room and yoga area, french windows open on to the gardens. OPPOSITE At right angles to the barn, with its original entrance, are the stables, which now form a self-contained guest annexe. The rectory (below), just seen from inside the barn, is where the owners live



NEW BROOM

Choosing Seth Stein, an architect renowned for his minimal modernist style, to convert a barn and adjoining stables into a family room and guest annexe, has resulted in a spare design that acknowledges the buildings' historic function

TEXT DINAH HALL | PHOTOGRAPHS LUCAS ALLEN



Many architects have a complicated relationship with their work on existing buildings – perhaps because conversion and restoration work can sometimes feel like playing second fiddle to a past maestro. However, Seth Stein, renowned for his purist, modern houses, felt no compunction about taking on the task of restoring this genteel Georgian rectory, tucked away in an idyllic location at the foot of the Sussex Downs.

It helped that Seth had designed the clients' house in London, and they already had a good working relationship. But the draw of this job was the cluster of outbuildings. The rectory itself needed only to be updated, with a small extension sympathetic to the period, but the brick barn, with its ancient wooden rafters and textured brick-and-flint interior walls, was a perfect framework for a modernist intervention. The clients wanted the barn to house one large family room and yoga area, while the stables that lie at right angles to it were to provide spare bedrooms. 'Something clean and simple, but not cold or austere' was their brief.

Seth points out that most British architects are used to working on listed buildings and that it is not such a challenge for diehard modernists as it may appear. 'It's just a matter of making a clear distinction between what's restored and what's new,' he explains.

From the outside there is no sign of the architect's work, which is of course as it should be with a listed property such as this. The stables – with their lunette windows like demure eyes, peeping out over a landscape that has changed little since there was first a dwelling here in 1600 – have been sensitively converted into a self-contained guest annexe at one end, while the other end has been knocked through to form an entrance hall, with a small kitchen, which leads through to the barn. And

it is here that the drama begins. Barns have often been likened to secular cathedrals and this one, with its overarching beams, evokes that familiar sense of awe and wonder; yet it is also warm and inviting. This is precisely the effect that Seth had envisioned – the barn was always intended to be a convivial space, as a counterpoint to the more classical, conventional rooms of the rectory. And the way to achieve this, he felt, was to use texture and natural materials, while retaining the essential purity and rigour that characterises his new-build work. ‘It’s like food,’ he says modestly. ‘You just need really good ingredients, simply cooked.’

The first stage was to create the shell by restoring and cleaning the existing space. Being sensitive to the barn aesthetic does not mean being timid – the monumental brick-and-flint wall and the ancient timber beams demanded a bold reaction. Seth responded with a free-standing green-oak wall, which divides the family room from the yoga area. Just as the brick-and-flint wall can be read as a giant painting, Seth’s structure, with its rough, untreated timber and rugged dovetail joints, has the presence of a sculpture. It was important that it was free-standing to avoid any feeling of overcrowding, as the barn is not particularly wide, but the space behind it, fitted with mirror-faced cupboards, provides a calm and private space for yoga and exercise.

When the clients found the property, while wandering around the area – ‘it was serendipity and we bought it quite spontaneously’ – it had no garden to speak of, so they employed landscape designer Jane Brown to

THIS BARN EVOKES A FAMILIAR SENSE OF AWE AND WONDER



OPPOSITE From the outside, the listed barn and stables (top) look unchanged from when they were first built. Mirror-faced cupboards in the yoga area (below left) give the space added light and depth. A free-standing oak wall (below right) forms a sculptural partition between

the family and exercise zones. THIS PAGE The soaring brick-and-flint wall in the family room is a dramatic backdrop to the eclectic furniture, which includes an Ethiopian daybed, used as a table, an India Mahdavi sofa and made-to-order chairs based on Thirties Brazilian designs



THIS PAGE To the left of the family room, a hall leads to a small kitchen and there are stairs to the bedrooms in the stable block. The owners added colour to the barn's neutral palette of stone, flint and wood by way of a red Donald Judd desk and chairs and a red wall. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT In the kitchen, a sink and pendant lights made from copper

were chosen for their rustic appeal. The lunette windows lend charm to the bedrooms. The owners sourced the bedside lamp in this room from Alfies Antique Market (www.alfiesantiques.com). Upstairs the cupboards are made from salvaged oak, in keeping with the country theme. Indian furnishings, such as this bone-inlaid chest (centre) from Rajasthan, are a feature throughout

SALVAGED OAK AND A COPPER SINK ADD TO THE RUSTIC LOOK

create a magical concoction of avenues, formal gardens, vegetable beds and wild-flower meadows. The barn provides a good vantage point from which to look at the garden, with french windows opposite the original barn entrance, and in line with an avenue of pleached apple trees. An initial suggestion was to use Crittall windows, but this was alien to the aesthetic of the barn, so instead, Seth commissioned a local blacksmith to make up the bronze doors, which have a suitably 'bashed-up' look.

Upstairs in the spare bedrooms, and downstairs in the hall, salvaged oak has been used to make cupboards with a rough-and-ready beauty. In the kitchen, a beaten-copper sink, together with copper pendant lights found at an antiques market, add to the rustic look. The furnishings were all chosen by the clients; Seth particularly approves of the red Donald Judd desk and chairs, the colour of which is picked up in the staircase wall. Interestingly, though the clients are distinguished collectors of contemporary art, the walls in the barn are bare save for a few Indian textile hangings. But this only serves to highlight the natural, textural beauty of the barn to which Seth has so sensitively responded. The early-twentieth-century American politician Sam Rayburn once said, 'Any jackass can kick down a barn, but it takes a good carpenter to build one.' It also takes, one could add, a good architect to improve upon it □

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