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WITHIN THESE WALLS

The owner of this fourteenth-century, oak-frame barn in Essex has constructed inside it a family home and a separate office for his architectural practice, without compromising the original structure



TEXT DOMINIC BRADBURY | PHOTOGRAPHS MARK LUSCOMBE-WHYTE

One of the great challenges of any barn conversion is getting the balance right between creating spaces for day-to-day living and preserving that dramatic sense of openness which draws us to these characterful buildings in the first place. David and Sally Pocknell truly have the best of both with the adaptation of their vast, fourteenth-century, oak-frame barn in Essex into a family home with spacious offices for David's design and architecture company, Pocknell Studio.

David has slotted both a self-contained three-floor house and a two-floor glass box holding the offices into this glorious, historic building, one at each end, while still leaving the large area in between completely open. The volume of the

barn is still there, and so too is the skeletal outline of the timbers, but the Pocknells have this extraordinary live/work space to themselves.

'Barns are such friendly spaces and give you wonderful opportunities,' says David. 'If you are sensitive to them, they are really great places to work with. We live in this great big space, some of which we have left much as it would have been, and some of which we have adapted to live in. I do have a soft spot for barns.'

The Saling Barn is the second barn conversion that David has done for himself; he has also done many others for clients, but none on such a large scale. Having lived in the area for the last 35 years, he had driven past the barn countless

times and had long been fascinated by the possibilities of turning it into a home.

'It was on our route from London and we also had friends in the village, so we looked at it time and time again,' he says. 'It was up for sale nearly 20 years ago, but we were doing a lot of work on our old place at the time and it was not an appropriate time for us to start thinking about buying something else and starting from scratch. But then three years ago a sign appeared, reading "Barns for sale with planning permission". So we came to take a look, and that was it.'

The barn came with consent for a live/work conversion but, as it is a listed building, there was much consultation with the local planners



OPPOSITE Hornbeams and paper-birch trees have been planted round this oak-frame, fourteenth-century barn during the course of its restoration. The corrugated-iron roof was replaced with oak ties.

THIS PAGE Within the barn, the self-contained house does nothing to compromise the integrity of the space; large panes of glass form one side of the staircase, offering views of the soaring oak frame.

THIS PAGE On the ground floor, the semi-open-plan living space is decorated with neutral colours, modern furniture, and, of course, wood. OPPOSITE In the living area (top and bottom left), Le Carbusier's

"Gran Confort" chairs are set off by a coffee table and a rug from Liberty. A block of cupboards separates the seating and kitchen areas (top right). The dining table and chairs are from Aram Store (centre right). The dining table and chairs are from Aram Store (centre right).





and English Heritage. Although both were largely supportive of David's ambitions, 'There were a lot of restrictions and discussions,' he recalls. 'We had interesting conversations about the windows especially, which are always an issue with barn conversions, and about what we were going to put on the roof. We thought the roof could be corrugated – as we had started out with a corrugated-iron roof – and the planners were not against it, but English Heritage was. It said that although the barn would have been thatched originally, it was also practice at the time to use peg tiles. So we went and bought 55,000 reclaimed peg tiles.'

The oak frame also needed restoration –

about a fifth of the timbers were replaced. No roof lights were allowed and windows were mainly limited to existing openings, but in the battle to introduce light, the Pocknells were helped by the fact that at some point – probably in the last 100 years – someone had added windows at one end of the barn without harming the timber frame. These existing openings were maximised in David's design for the self-contained living space.

This consists of a large, fluid and flexible ground floor, with a semi-open-plan sitting room, dining room and kitchen, in which twentieth-century design classics by Marcel Breuer and Le Corbusier are mixed with antiques

and vintage posters. To one side of the kitchen, steps lead down into an annex holding utility rooms, which lead to a separate cart lodge that was converted into a flat for Sally's mother.

The main and spare bedrooms are on the first floor, and David's painting studio and study are on the second, under the slope of the roof. Throughout, stand-alone storage pods and bathrooms help to separate the living spaces, while leaving the frame of the barn untouched. 'That way you remain aware that you are living in this big space,' David explains. 'We didn't want to hang anything off the barn walls or to make anything – structurally – sit on the frame. So neither the house nor office touch the



frame and neither does anything inside them.'

Across the central void of the barn – which forms the most civilised of commutes to work – is David's glass office. Here he runs a multidisciplinary studio, focusing not only on architecture, but also on graphic design and corporate-identity projects. It has worked across a rich range of commissions, from designing the branding for Guy Hands's Villa Saletta estate in Italy and packaging the estate's wine, to creating the brand identity of the National Railway Museum, as well as working on restaurants, shops and private houses.

'It's an interesting way to work,' says David. 'We can do a job for a client and end up doing a

whole variety of things for them – producing a brand identity, designing a building, working on their offices or even the directors' houses. Since doing this barn we have been asked to do a lot more architectural work and now have three barns on the go, plus an Arts and Crafts house.'

The open void between home and office is a flexible space for parties and exhibitions, as well as holding a meeting table and two intriguing, Monopoly-style houses, painted in red and green. These small, prefabricated units, which slot neatly into the barn bays, hold services, such as the boiler, and office equipment, hiding away the technology that serves work and home.

With gardens freshly planted with trees, open-

ing out to views across open farmland, the barn offers an idyllic solution to the live/work combination, providing two independent spaces under one all-encompassing roof, while preserving the integrity of this landmark barn.

'If we hadn't done the work on this building it would have collapsed, there's no doubt about it,' says David. 'I once had a conversation with a planning officer who said that in an ideal world they would love these buildings to be renovated and used for storage. But it would be impossible to justify the costs of renovating for that – it would be such a waste to use something as precious as this barn as a warehouse.' □

Podwell Studio: 01371-856075; www.podwellstudio.com



OPPOSITE Upstairs, the bedrooms are tucked under the roof beams of the barn. The main bedroom (top centre and centre right) is enclosed by screens that hide the bathroom and dressing room. The bathroom (top right) is slotted into the

awkward space formed by the roof's slope. The services for the house and office are in huts (bottom right) within the main space of the barn. THIS PAGE The office is at the opposite end; its upper floor is accessed by an external spiral staircase