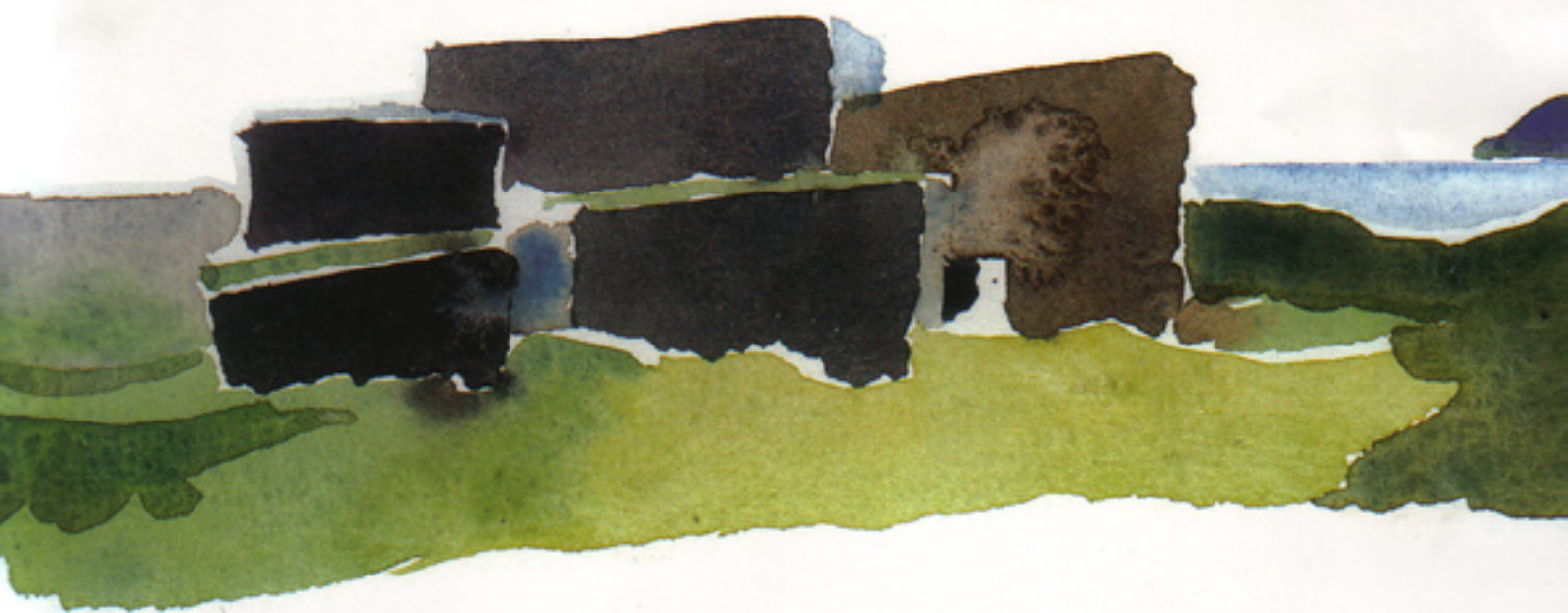


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# JOURNAL



**Living on the edge** O'Donnell + Tuomey catch the spirit of Dublin Bay

Project Orange amid the Tudor timber-frames of Suffolk

Derbyshire country house by Hudson Architects

The fringe: wasteland or community resource?



# Suffolk punch

London practice Project Orange knew it had its work cut out attempting a modern house in Tudor Lavenham, but, by George, they've done it. *By Grant Gibson. Photographs: Jonathan Pile*







Client	James Soene and Christopher Ash
Architect	Project Orange
Structural engineer	Richard Jackson
Contractor	Elford & Sons



**B**uilding a new house in the old Suffolk town of Lavenham is almost as big a political minefield as being an adviser in the Prime Minister's inner circle. The wealth of Tudor houses for which the town is famous today make it a particularly unlikely setting for work by London practice Project Orange, which is best known for its contemporary hotel, bar and restaurant interiors.

Most of the town's timber-framed houses date from Lavenham's prosperous heyday as a centre of the wool trade in the 1520s but their remarkable state of preservation stems from a downturn in its fortunes. Historian Alec Berterton, writing in *History Today*, says that during its slow decline after the reformation, 'Lavenham could not afford any wholesale fashionable rebuilding... A few Georgian facades may be seen to hide older timber frames but almost the only architectural intrusions into the Tudor scene are the small factories and terraces of late 19th and early 20th century houses which were erected (and often dated) by the manufacturers of woven horsehair material'.

So while other towns were transformed by the industrial revolution, Lavenham was left pretty much intact, awaiting discovery by tourists and day trippers of later centuries.

Architects James Soane and Christopher Ash, the principals of Project Orange, were two such holidaymakers. They were so charmed by the place after spending a week there several years ago that they bought a weekend home in 1999 and became fascinated with the notion of eventually building their own house. The perfect site fell into their laps after they bumped into a neighbour in a local pub – she wanted to sell a substantial part of her garden almost directly opposite their old place.



Surprisingly little of the floor plan is devoted to circulation space. The staircase, for example, is elegant but small.







**Above:** a rooflight floods sunshine into the double-height space above the first-floor landing.  
**Right:** the main 50m<sup>2</sup> living/kitchen space leads to the garden.

► That was the easy bit. Then they had to come up with a design that was both sympathetic to the Tudor vernacular – all wattle, daub and wonky timber – while creating a contemporary house without a whiff of ersatz. Getting through planning was an even bigger challenge, as restrictions had become increasingly draconian since the plot first gained planning consent in the 1980s. After trying – and failing – to expand the footprint with their initial scheme, they eventually admitted defeat and designed a house that fitted into the silhouette of the original proposal. (Ash remembers receiving the letter from the planners saying ‘unfortunately they didn’t have sufficient criteria now to reject it’.)

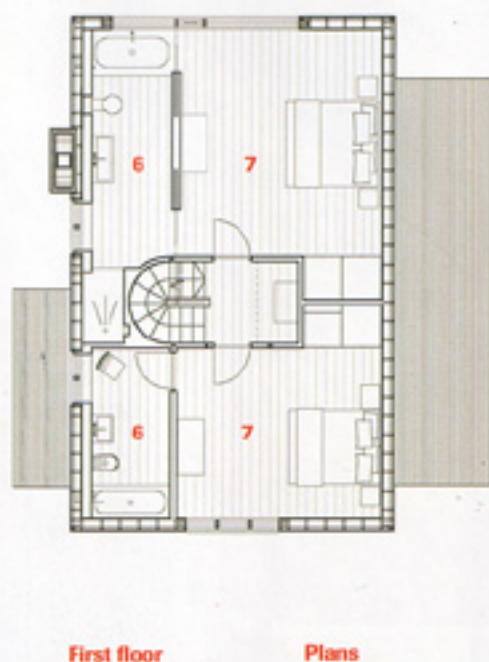
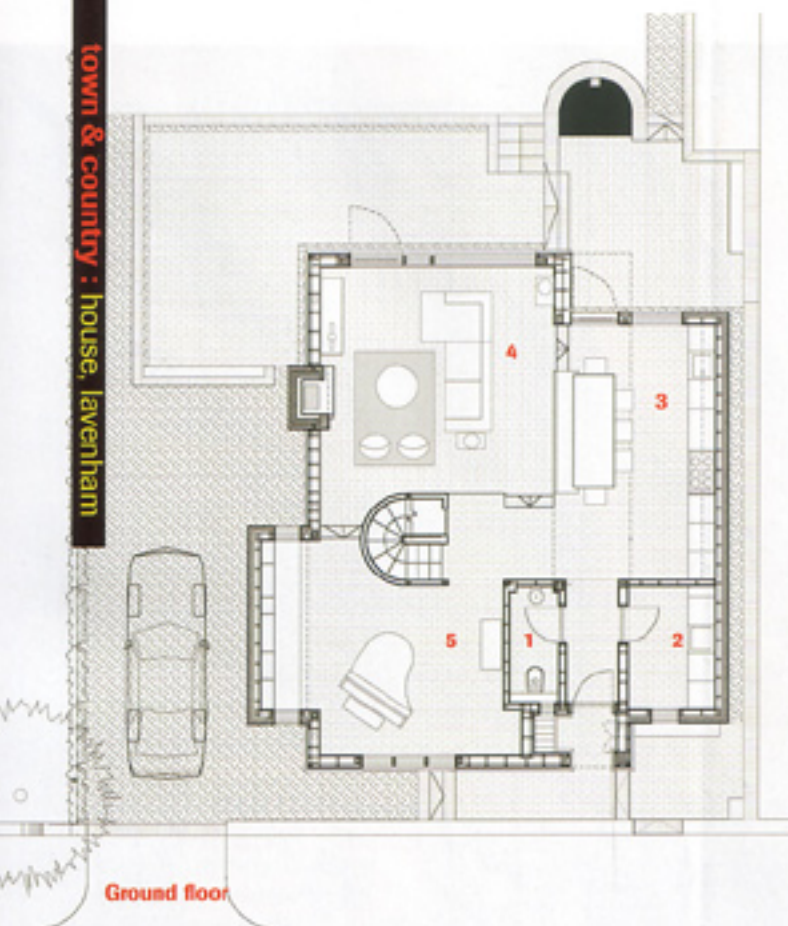
‘If you work it out in a logical way, the things influencing your scheme almost dictate what your plan would be,’ says Ash as we settle back in the pair’s newly finished kitchen. There were a set of intractables such as the requirement for off-street parking, the fact that the house needed to be 900mm away from a listed garden wall, and various trees that had to be retained. The process was further complicated by the decision to excavate the site down to street level, which meant allowing archaeologists the chance to dig for artefacts. When they discovered the base of a medieval fabric dye oven, the project was delayed by six weeks. But Soane and Ash remained sanguine – ►











Costs	
Total costs	£400,000
Area	204m <sup>2</sup>
Costs/m <sup>2</sup>	£1960

Breakdown	
Demolition	£13,773
Concrete works	£9830
Structural steel	£12,291
Drainage	£5083
Timber frame	£44,961
Brickwork	£19,895
Roof	£24,473
Ext render	£4255
Floor finishes	£16,776
Joinery/windows	£101,216
M&E	£61,540
Decoration	£14,464
Ext works	£28,342
Contingency	£18,311

#### Plans

- 1 Cloakroom
- 2 Utility room
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Living space
- 5 Music room/library
- 6 Bathroom
- 7 Bedroom

► it's part and parcel of trying to get anything built in a grade II-listed town.

The finished result, explains Soane, 'is about doing something vernacular and contextual but doing it in a way that is actually of our time. That means constructionally but also challenging the orthodoxy of giving into the planners and copying period details when you might be able to reinvent it – even if it's only slightly.'

And very well it works too. The building's roof height matches its neighbour two doors up the hill, while its pitch refers to the town's architecture. Constructed with a steel and timber frame (Soane describes it not inaccurately as a 'hybrid' building), it is clad in a combination of lime render and brick, with the latter material prominent in the kitchen lean-to and the chimney. The doors and window frames are made from oak that has been treated with boiled linseed oil and will go grey with age.

This all gives the building a pared down, uncluttered aesthetic which still manages to retain an almost Scandinavian sense of warmth – Ash, in particular, speaks of Aalto as an influence. While you're never allowed to forget its context, the house's pin-point clean lines, as well as the size of the windows and their undivided panes, make it clear exactly which century it belongs to.

Inside, the split-level ground floor is dominated by an open-plan living room with a whitewashed brick fireplace and kitchen that uses a similar palette of materials to the exterior. The softwood beams, which are integral to

the structure, are exposed, as are the joists that hold up the kitchen lean-to. An underfloor heating system beneath the brick floor does away with the clutter of radiators. As you turn towards the stairs there's a space for Ash's piano and a library.

This is a house that lacks ego. There are no indulgent flourishes such as a Quaglino-style staircase, and in fact the circulation areas are surprisingly small. 'I think it was very important that it was a house that you wanted to live in and be in,' says Soane. 'Clearly while there is a large element that's architectural in the exterior... with houses you spend an awful lot of your time inside.' 'There were architectural ambitions but also homemaking ambitions,' adds Ash. The house is intended to be somewhere for the couple to entertain friends and family as well as a place for company away days.

A winding wooden staircase leads to landings that are positively Lilliputian. On a clear winter's day, light streams through a roof light into a double-height space above the first-floor landing. The master bedroom has an enormous, linear en-suite bathroom and a huge picture window onto the garden. The downpipes for the plumbing and heating are in the wall, so there's no need for any boxing. On the

other side of the house, the main guest room is almost equally generous. The top floor, under the gables, is in Soane's words a 'fantastical garret'. He's absolutely right. It's the kind of space children will adore.

This isn't a show home, or a laboratory for architectural experiments; it is a house designed to be lived in. It manages to be subtle without being timid, fitting neatly into its environment but not overawed by it. And according to Ash and Soane, it has proved rather popular with the locals, whose taste you would expect to err on the conservative side. It is a really good piece of work.

Lavenham's wonderful Guild Hall will still reign supreme in the affections of the tourists, but this house is a genuinely charming addition to the town.

**Specifications** Bricks by Istock (enquiry no 550); roof tiles by Eternit (551); roof light by The Rooflight Company (552) rainwater goods by Alumasc (553); external render by BRC Special Products (554); engineered oak floorboards by Cathedral Flooring (555); windows and doors by Oakwood Joinery (556); ironmongery by Ize (557); recessed lighting by Modular Lighting (558); underfloor heating by Osma (559)

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