

28 April 2007

Newspaper magazine of the year

## **All the presidents' menus**

The White House pastry  
chef spills the beans

## **Invasion of the body sculptor**

Antony Gormley  
takes over London

## **American beauty**

Has Christina Ricci really turned  
into the girl next door?



this issue  
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**Clockwise from above** Christopher Ash, left, and James Soane in the sitting area. The brick floors are in Danish solid brick; the pair of 1950s chairs came from a local antiques warehouse. The cushions were made from fragments of fabric bought on eBay; the sofa in the sitting area is from Espacio, Tottenham Court Road, London; the rug is from Habitat and the artwork hanging over the fireplace was bought at a gallery in Long Melford, Suffolk. Storage was designed by Russell Pinch for SCP. The wooden candlesticks above the fireplace were made by Soane's uncle

## Gently does it

The 'soft modernism' of their hotel designs inspired two architects as they built a new house surrounded by listed buildings.

By **Dominic Bradbury**. Photographs by **Mark Luscombe-Whyte**

**B**uilding a new house in the heart of Lavenham, the historic medieval Suffolk town with about 300 listed buildings, was never going to be easy. But to build one that was also fresh, contemporary and free of pastiche demanded patience, persistence and the skills of both an original designer and an artful diplomat. Christopher Ash and James Soane's new home manages to tick all these boxes and more, but then they are used to this sort of thing.

As the principals of the London-based architectural practice Project Orange, with a string of hotels and houses behind them including My Hotel Chelsea and SAS Radisson's Farnham Estate Hotel in Ireland, they are well known for a softer kind of modernist architecture, big on texture, colour and pattern. 'Serious glamour', Soane once called it. In London the two of them share a loft in Clerkenwell and an office in Old Street, but for many years they have been escaping to Lavenham at weekends. Ash first got to know Suffolk during family holidays as a child and eventually the two of them bought a period cottage in the village.

The property was little more than an 1830s two-up, two-down, extended to the rear, and it served them well as a weekend home until they started to crave more space. Friends had become families and they needed somewhere to put all these guests and their children. They also wanted more space for living and enough room for things such as a piano, which Ash had long wanted to buy yet seemed impractical either in their London loft or for the cottage.

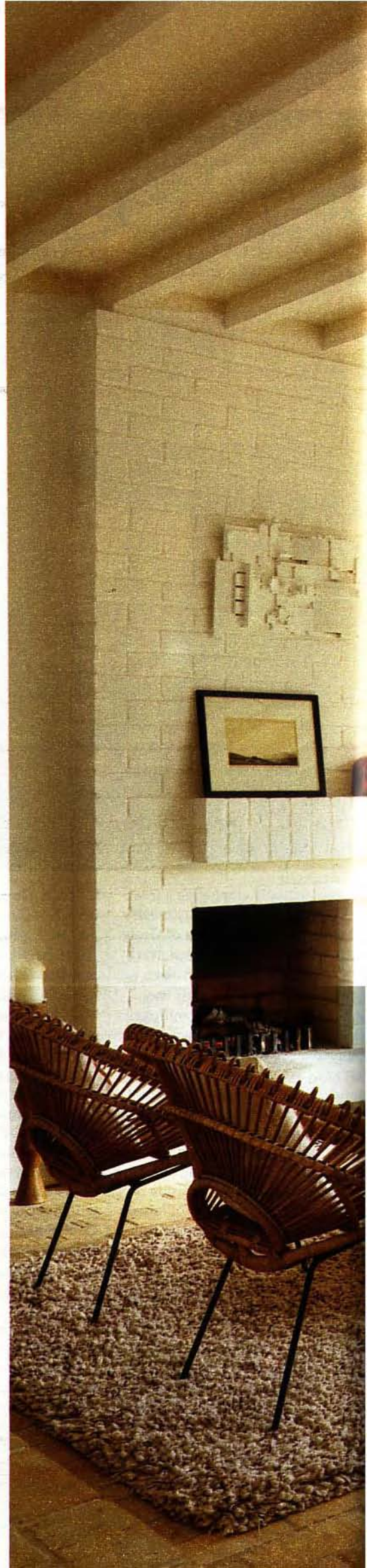
So Ash and Soane then started to think about

building a house from scratch, although building plots in this compact community of 15th- and 16th-century timber-framed houses were like gold dust. They found just one possibility on their newly bought Ordnance Survey map – a garden site just down the road from their cottage, which they later learnt had for 20 years been blessed with planning permission for a house. 'Then one night we were outside the Angel Hotel and got chatting to the woman sitting next to us,' Ash says. 'She turned out to be the owner of the garden we'd just found on the map and was thinking about selling the plot.'

A year later, in 2004, the site was theirs. It sits on a steeply sloping hill, with listed buildings all around, and is – according to English Heritage – not just of local or national importance but, given its close proximity to so many historic medieval buildings, also of international importance. So important, thinks Ash, that if the site hadn't already had a long-standing permission attached to it then they would have had little chance of getting one. Even as it was, there was a year-long battle with the local planners until their third proposal was accepted.

'In terms of the townscape I think the house is very successful,' Ash says, 'because as you look down the street you don't lose the natural rhythm of the gables. It demonstrates that you can be contextual but also contemporary and not be apologetic in terms of scale or design.'

When the builders started excavating the sloping site, another six weeks was instantly lost when archaeologists found the remnants of an oven used in fabric dyeing. Eventually the three-



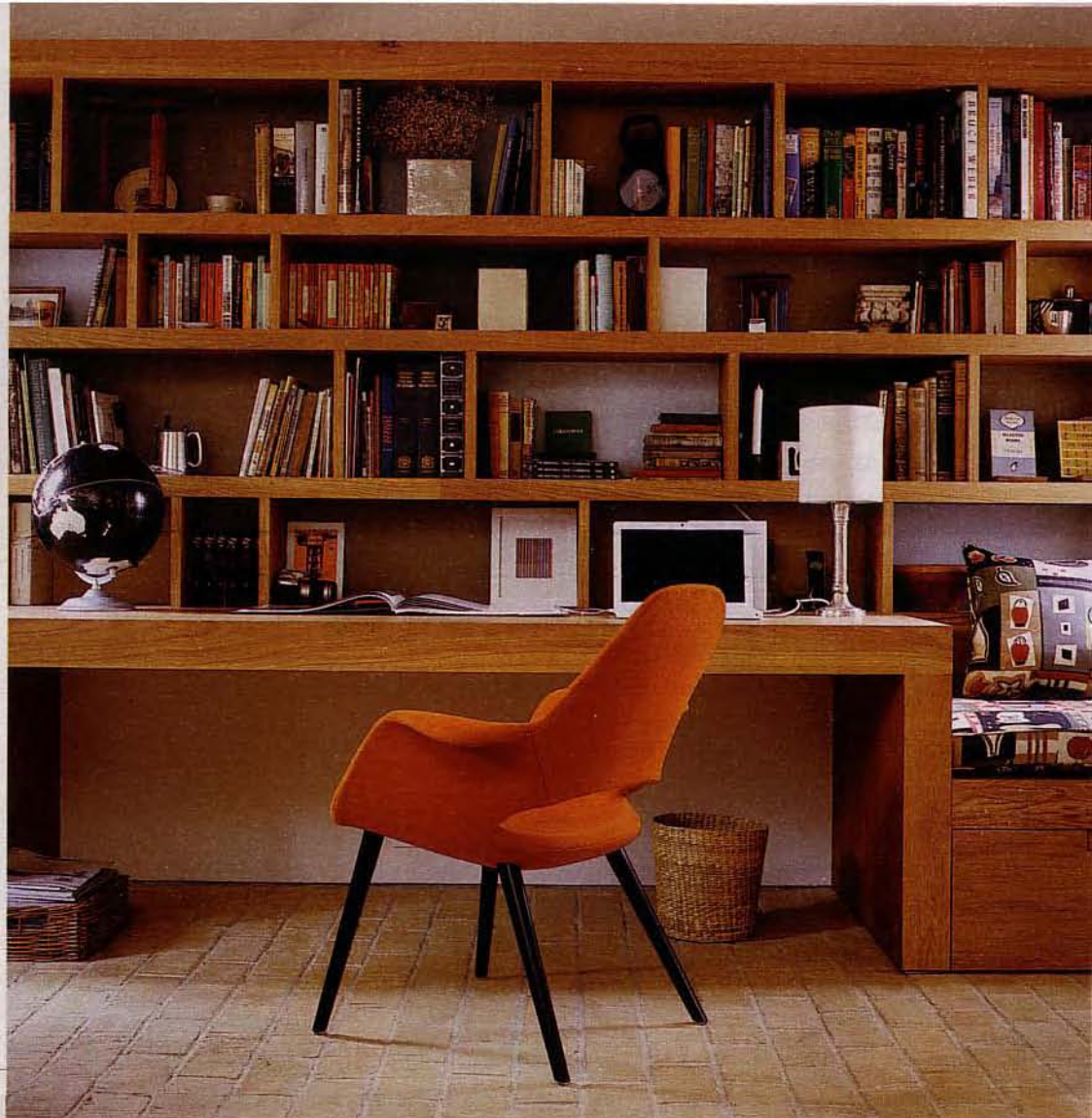






**Clockwise from right** the music room/study, with bespoke desk and shelves by Project Orange. The walls within the rectangles formed by the shelves are painted in different colours. The orange 'Organic' chair, designed by Eames and Saarinen, is from Vitra; in the kitchen/dining area the oak dining table is bespoke, designed by Project Orange and made by Benchmark Furniture. The kitchen itself is also bespoke, mostly in oak; the pendant light over the dining table is by Project Orange; an exterior view of the house

Inside, the feel is rather Nordic, with a sense of sophisticated restraint and plenty of natural textures and finishes



storey, four-bedroom house took shape, with its timber frame, brick-and-lime render and a pitched roof. In outline it maintains a vernacular flavour, but it also has a very modern feeling, particularly to the rear where banks of glazing look out on to the terraces of the garden.

Inside, the feel is rather Nordic, with a sense of sophisticated restraint and plenty of natural textures and finishes. On the ground floor, Ash finally created his music room cum study, dominated by an Edwardian grand piano bought from a household in the village. But the kitchen, dining-area and living-room are all open-plan, with French windows leading out on to a patio. The floors are in Danish brick, laid on their sides, with underfloor heating. 'They are incredibly forgiving,' Ash says. 'The last thing you want in







**Clockwise from left** the floor of the master bedroom is in oak. The headboard was designed by James Soane/Project Orange, originally for a hotel project in Ireland. The bed base with oak frame was made by Benchmark Furniture, as was the bench. Near the bed is a poster from the Whitechapel Art Gallery; in the master bathroom, the sink is by Duravit and the marble-surround bath is by Bette, both from CP Hart; the chest of drawers in the master bedroom was picked up in a local antiques shop

**'The last thing you want in a weekend house is to get a weird cleaning obsession and do the floors after every meal'**



a weekend or holiday house like this is to get a weird cleaning obsession and start doing the floors after every meal. It is really quite low-maintenance as a home.'

At Project Orange, Ash and Soane are well used to taking a holistic approach and handling not just architecture but interiors and often furniture design as well. It shows in the house, where the kitchen, dining table and accompanying bench—with storage hidden in its base—are all bespoke, mostly in oak. Other pieces, such as the headboard and side tables in the master bedroom, were originally designed for hotel projects and there is a flavour of a rustic hip hotel to the house, with some indulgent notes. The master bedroom has been designed around the views across the landscape, and has a sliding wall that tucks away to reveal the marble-clad bath in the bathroom next door. 'It's a real antidote to the speed of life during the week,' Ash says. 'You can have a cup of tea, read the papers in bed and then one can have a bath and still read the papers and be chatting to the other. It's sociable and the bath also has these great views of the garden and fields.'

With projects on the go in India and Russia, a diverse mix of houses, hotels, schools and restaurants, their new home has become a real escape for Ash and Soane. It is a place where they try not to bring their work with them. 'There's something about coming up here,' Ash says. 'However stressed you might be when you leave the office on a Friday, by the time you get here all that anxiety has receded. It's really valuable to have that kind of escapism.'

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