

'THERE IS A CORRELATION BETWEEN SUSTAINABILITY, COMFORT AND ENJOYMENT OF LIFE.'

The Wabi Tea House, made almost entirely from reclaimed materials.

# HOUSE RULES

WE MEET MEREDITH BOWLES OF MOLE ARCHITECTS, PIONEERS IN ECO-ARCHITECTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

WORDS SONIA ZHURAVLYOVA

Mole Architects, with director Meredith Bowles at the helm, have been leaders in sustainable building design since beginning practice in 1997. Championing and creating buildings to Passivhaus specifications (a rigorous standard for energy efficiency in a building, resulting in a low ecological footprint), Mole are also increasingly focused on the impact that design has on quality of life. 'There is a correlation between sustainability, comfort and enjoyment of life,' says Meredith. 'A lot of it is to do with the sun. For example, if the rooms you live in get a lot of sunshine, you get more light and warmth in winter, you feel more comfortable and content - and you use less energy to heat your home.' With sterling work done on one-off family homes, Mole are just as ambitious when it comes to larger developments. One such project can be found in the village of Fulmodeston in Norfolk. The practice was commissioned to design low-energy social housing, which incorporates local materials such as clay pantiles, brick and naturally finished timber boards. The light-filled houses, with south facing gardens, are so energy efficient that no central heating system is required. 'This is vital for tenants who often suffer from fuel poverty,' explains Meredith. And one of Mole's latest projects will see the architects go on-site to oversee

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'THE POSSIBILITIES ARE ENDLESS. I LIKE TO WORK WITH CLIENTS WHO ARE FEARLESS, WHO WANT TO BUILD SOMETHING UNIQUE AND THAT SAYS SOMETHING ABOUT WHO THEY ARE.'



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The Balancing Barn in Suffolk, available as a holiday rental through Living Architecture.

(opposite page, top left) Inside Hawthbush.

(top right) Meredith Bowles.

(bottom, right) Hawthbush, which was built using reclaimed brick from a nearby farmhouse.

(bottom, left) Stackyard, a perfect example of an eco-home whose owners are passionate about energy-saving.

a 40-home co-housing development – one of the largest in Britain. Here the houses, built around a communal garden and a common house, are, again, designed to Passivhaus standards and will use Swedish timber provided by housing manufacturer Trivselhus. 'It's a private development for a community of like-minded people,' Meredith explains, 'that will be provided by a timber-frame company that specialises in low-energy housing. It's doing what we've been practicing for 20 years – but on a bigger scale.'

**Eco-Architecture on Holiday**  
 Apart from a commitment to build green, Mole are also concerned with challenging people's perception of – and making more accessible – cutting-edge contemporary domestic architecture. Partnering with philosopher, writer and The School of Life founder Alain de Botton's Living Architecture, who commission world-class architects to design houses that are available to rent as holiday homes, Mole collaborates with foreign architects to create their projects in the UK. One such is the Balancing Barn in Suffolk designed by Dutch practice MVRDV in collaboration with Mole. 'It's been

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exceptional, in both the way the projects have been realised and the way the public has gone for them. It demonstrates a real appetite for contemporary architecture,' says Meredith.

**At Home**  
 The architect himself lives in the very first house designed by Mole. The three-storey, timber-framed Black House shows that eco credentials go hand in hand with inventive and sensitive design. Overlooking the Fens, it references the barns that can be seen scattered around this rural area. 'One of the things I was pretty obsessed about when building the Black House was minimising the use of concrete and steel – so having less embodied energy in the building,' says Meredith. The long narrow house, with large windows at the front and back that let in plenty of light, was designed as a model for low-energy housing: it is well insulated with recycled newspaper, the interior wall panels are fabricated from pressed sawdust and it has an air-to-air pump heating system that offers an alternative to fossil fuel. The house was so well received that it won the Riba Manser Medal in 2004, which celebrates the best one-off houses in the UK. ➔



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(above) The sun streams through the windows at Hawthbush, providing a lovely spot for the owner's cat.

(top, right) Stackyard harmonises with its surroundings.

(bottom, right) Inside Stackyard.



### Reclaimed

One exemplary project is the Stackyard, a contemporary farmhouse in Suffolk. 'The clients were very passionate about energy saving,' says Meredith. The house was designed using Passivhaus software and uses very little energy: solar panels, high levels of insulation and carefully placed windows that allow in plenty of sunshine all make a huge difference. 'It's very well insulated as it's built by Schoeb, a Swiss timber company and they know how to make houses that can withstand the cold!' says Meredith. The living room is raised a half-level up, which allows a panoramic view over the fields while built-in swift boxes and a sedum roof encourage rooftop wildlife. The extension on Hawthbush in East Sussex is sympathetic to the property's Grade II Listed status and used reclaimed brick from a nearby farmhouse for the extension, yet remains environmentally sound. Another project that Bowles is particularly fond of is the Wabi tea house in his village of Prickwillow in Cambridgeshire. An extension of an existing building, it is built almost entirely from reclaimed

materials in a deliberate evocation of the Fen shack. 'Most of the timber was from reclamation yards,' says Meredith. 'The owner makes furniture from green timber grown and harvested in the woods planted around the house and he even made his own window frames. And he has a belief - that I share with all my clients - in the good sense of using natural materials. The house also has natural insulants, which is a healthier way to build and is plastered in an earth plaster that breathes better.' According to Meredith, his favourite house is always the next one, 'because the possibilities are endless. I like to work with clients who are fearless, who want to build something unique and that says something about who they are, and which is also comfortable to live in and sustainable. That excitement of making something new, that process of discovery - it just gets me every time.' 

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