

DETAILS

Brief To build a house that would incorporate all the lessons on light, space and economy of living that Roderick James has learned over the last 35 years

Location Overlooking the Sound of Mull

Architect Roderick James of Roderick James Architects LLP, Devon

Timescale Planning permission took an unproblematic four months. The build time was a relaxed two or three years because there was no hurry

Budget The plot cost £15,000 in 2000 and the build around £200,000

This view of the west aspect of the house [main pic] shows the turf banking, which gives high levels of insulation and helps the house to blend into the landscape. The house is constructed of an oak frame and glass with a slate roof and painted softwood weather-boarding. Their small boat [above] is used for the 10-minute trip across the water to the shops in Tobermory. "There's a fantastic butcher, delicious delicatessen, really good boat shops and the amazing Tobermory distillery," says Roderick



A PLOT OF LAND BOUGHT ON A WHIM, AND A 35-YEAR LEARNING CURVE, HAS ALLOWED ARCHITECT RODERICK JAMES AND HIS WIFE AMANDA TO BUILD THEIR PERFECT HOUSE BY THE SEA

Text Heidi Best Photography Mark Nicholson

SQUARE
DEAL



Architect Roderick James has built countless homes for clients, many in extraordinarily beautiful locations in Britain and abroad. But when he bought the quarter-acre plot on the rugged banks of the Sound of Mull on which he later built Taobh Na Mara ("House by the Sea"), he thought it nice, but not exceptional. "Now I think it's spectacular," he admits. "With the mountains and the water, it's the most lovely place to be."

Roderick was commissioned to design a house for the former owner of the Drimnin Estate and, on a whim, bought himself one of a couple of plots of land being sold by the estate. "There was nothing on the plot and it was at the end of the road," he recalls. "I left it for about four years before deciding to get on with it."

His plan for the flat site was essentially simple in concept but sophisticated in design – a 30-foot square house, with two floors, the upper floor open-plan with about half of the exterior glazed. The open-plan area encompasses the living area, kitchen, master bedroom and en-suite bathroom, while the ground floor has two bedrooms, a further bathroom and a quiet television room. Grassed earth banking around the exterior ground-floor walls, which are heavily insulated concrete block, not only

dramatically reduces the impact of the house when viewed from outside but also relates the first-floor living space seamlessly to the site.

The design for Taobh Na Mara is, Roderick says, more pragmatic than traditional. "It coincided with an architectural move towards a more contemporary style of oak building, which incorporated some of the best oak-framing ideas but combined them with contemporary detailing," he explains.

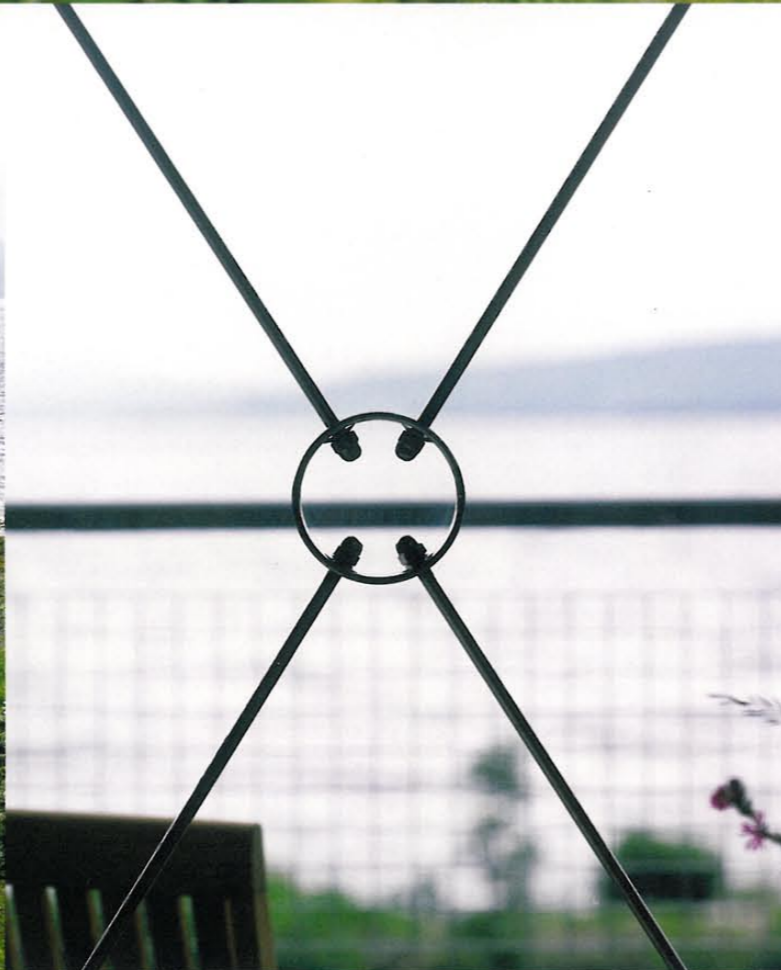
"The first floor has a primary oak frame, although not in the medieval sense: the timbers which are there are simply there for structural reasons. I like the simplicity and softness that oak gives. Bearing in mind that if you're not going to have any internal walls, you're going to have to support the interior roof space, so an oak frame is perfect. We also have a large pyramid lantern in the roof which allows the sunlight to flood down into the living area, then through the glass floor in the living space to the ground floor."

Both ground-floor bedrooms have double-glazed French doors to the outside. "With the sunlight permeating down through the middle of the house, you never feel claustrophobic in those rooms," he adds. "They're light, but cosy."

Rather the doyen of oak-frame construction, Roderick was the first ▶

BEST BIT

"The whole upstairs room, an open-plan area conceived in loft-style, looking out at snow-capped mountains across the far side of the Sound of Mull."



The south-facing balcony [top left] from where Roderick and Amanda can enjoy an ever-changing sea-borne pageant down the Sound of Mull [bottom left] including tankers, freighters, ferries, submarines, whales and dolphins; [this page] the roof has sprocketed eaves, a shallowing of the angle around the eaves that lightens the roof and gives a three-foot overhang which provides shelter and prevents the French doors getting wet in light rain





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director (more than 30 years ago) of the Centre for Alternative Technology in Machynlleth, Wales, before 'eco' had cachet. "That's underpinned much of what we've done since with natural materials and the use of space and light," he says. The first-floor glazing on the south, part-east and part-west walls, which makes the most of the amazing view, has stainless-steel cross bracing, eliminating the need for structural oak bracing. "It prevents the windows from racking, twisting sideways," explains Roderick. "You can engineer out the problem if you want to, but on a cold, wet February day, it's sometimes more interesting to have a little bit more between you and the outside. To the rear of the house we've reverted to traditional bracing."

The first-floor balconies leading from the living space and master bedroom are among his favourite features of the house. "They're wonderful," he enthuses. "We can walk straight out on to them at high level. There was a stream running down the middle of the site. We diverted it to either side so that it encircles the house like a moat before running down to the beach, where the otter lives in the pipe under the road. The rippling noise of the stream is a source of delight."

The gentle rippling was doubly delightful as a sound effect at Roderick and Amanda's wedding ceremony in 2006, held in a tepee in the garden with his children and grandchildren in attendance. "We had a professional cook here, catering for 12, and the kitchen worked perfectly. It's probably only 10 foot by 10 foot but because it's open to the rest of the space, it's completely adequate. Also, it's very cosy just for two. Don't be misled by the simplicity of the plan. It has a complexity that works really well by avoiding corridors, which are simply a waste of space." Roderick is a firm believer that borrowing space from one area to the next in this way achieves wonderfully fluid interiors.

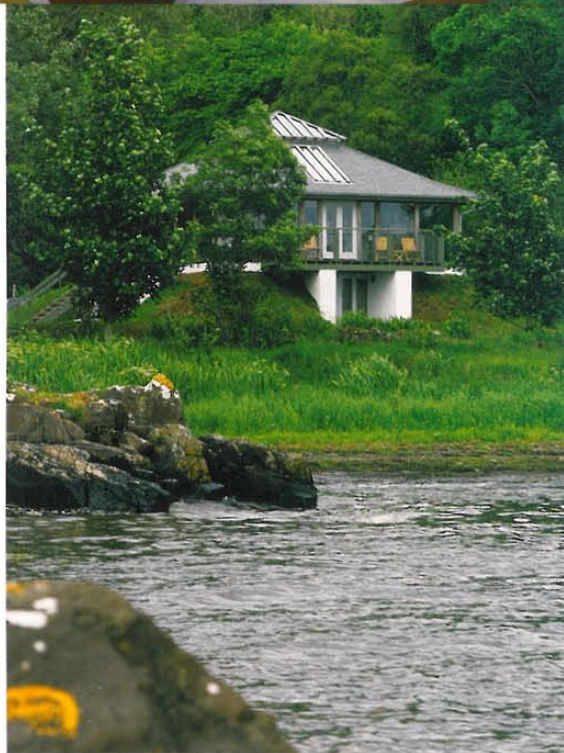
When it came to decoration, Roderick and Amanda planned a clean but comfortable interior. "We wanted it unobtrusively contemporary, not overtly modern," he explains. "The decorative part of it is the view."

Furniture from John Lewis and Peter Jones, a Danish stove and the muted shades of a hand-woven Turkish rug designed by Catriona Stewart fitted the bill. Far from treating it as a holiday home, Roderick and Amanda spend ▶

The view makes the decorative statement, [left & above] while furnishings, mainly from John Lewis, are kept simple

ARCHITECTURE

"THE LIGHT ON THE MOUNTAINS ACROSS THE WATER IS ASTONISHING, ONE MOMENT BROODING AND MENACING, THE NEXT MOMENT PINK, THEN GREEN. IT'S AN EVER-CHANGING SET."



The first-floor master bedroom [top] takes full advantage of the views. Roderick's design, with the turf-banked walls, helps Taobh Na Mara [above] to sit discreetly in the landscape



All of the oak used in the frame is functional, rather than decorative. The kitchen [above] is part of the open-plan living area and the simple kitchen units, in keeping with boathouse style, were made by the builder, David Patterson. Roderick likes painted floors because they don't tie the design permanently into one colour and he wanted to get away from having too much natural wood

part of every month at Taobh Na Mara. He is closely involved in the master planning for 12 new houses looking out over the Sound of Mull as part of a range of initiatives and renewable energy proposals for the Ardtornish Estate at nearby Loch Aline.

"We're doing some very exciting things there with one or two key, well-known architects," he says, "but the emphasis will be to encourage people who are buying them to set up businesses in the area or work with other initiatives being promoted by Ardtornish. We're very keen to encourage full-time incomers."

He is also in the process of building a single-storey curved house on the plot above his for a client, which will have lime/hemp walls and a turf roof. "Lime/hemp is an excellent new material," he explains, "which provides lots of insulation and locks up CO2. It has a beautiful, organic feel to it."

Roderick has just sailed his ketch Vivette up to Scotland from Devon and remarks: "It's an extraordinarily restful and de-stressing environment to be part of. The light on the mountains across the water is astonishing, one moment brooding and menacing, the next moment pink, then green. It's an ever-changing set."

And, of course, for a lover of boats and the sea, it's paradise. "I can lie in the bath, watching the ferry ploughing up the Sound of Mull," he says. "If I hold my toy boat level with the ferry, I can pretend they're racing." ■

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