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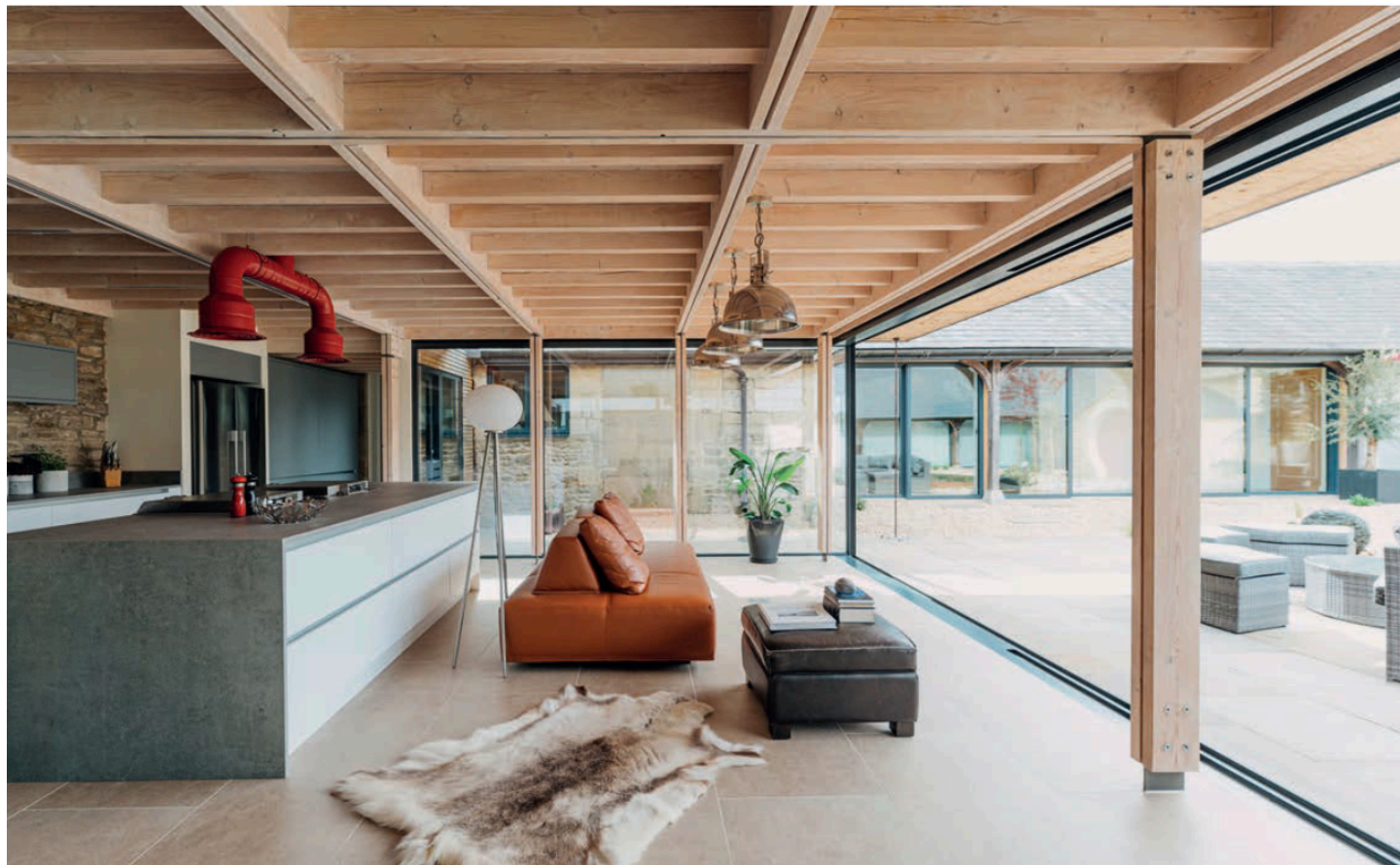
CASE STUDY

AN AUSPICIOUS DECISION

When James and Amy Savage moved from Hong Kong to Wiltshire, they took a chance on a poorly converted byre, transforming it into a unique, futureproofed home.

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Relocating between continents isn't an easy thing to do and when James and Amy Savage decided to return permanently to England in 2019, they started the search for their new home by looking at a map.

"We didn't want to swap Hong Kong for London," says Amy, an accountant who grew up in the capital. "James' sister lives four miles away and we had visited Wiltshire, so we knew it."

Tucked down a private drive among a range of former farm buildings converted in the early 2000s, they found an unusual property. Two single-storey byres were linked by a simple glazed corridor to form a 'U' shape, with a courtyard in the middle, entered via a gate. The building was functional, but uninspiring and their reactions were mixed.

"I loved it," admits James, who, as a venture capitalist, clearly enjoys finding the potential in proposals. "But Amy hated it at first. The planting in the courtyard made it feel closed in, with a little farm gate and an oil tank by the entrance."

Four years later, those buildings have become a single cohesive space that retains the 'U' shape, but the two original stone byres have had a comprehensive renovation, upgrade and changes to layout, while the simple glazed corridor has been replaced by a cutting-edge glass and timber extension housing an exceptional open-plan kitchen and dining room. There are also four bedrooms, two sitting rooms

and a beautifully landscaped courtyard garden that is integral to the design.

The journey to this point was characterised by risks and delays, but the couple have been able to navigate it so successfully thanks to their own financial and management expertise and finding the right architect in Rob Elkins, of architect-led design and build practice, Artel31. Rob's innovative and sustainable approach to design chimed with that of James and Amy.

"We called Rob before we bought it to consider adding skylights [in the stone byres]," says James. The couple then threw the dice and bought the property without planning permission for the extension or other works. "It was high risk," concedes James. "But we could have lived with it as it was, provided we got skylights."

James and Amy's inspiration for the project was their experience of living overseas. "We've spent a lot of time in Hong Kong and also in Australia, where that inside/outside living is normal and it influenced what we did here," says James. "I'm the son of an architect and I love 'glass box' designs."

Rob adds: "When we first visited the barns, they felt very disconnected, which although beneficial from an energy usage point of view, meant that children and guests felt as if they were staying in a separate house. The new kitchen and dining area opens to the garden and forms a wonderful gathering point."

Yet making that vision come to life took four



long years, in part thanks to Covid-related delays. The couple spent two frustrating years living in a rental property nearby before planning was approved. Rob recalls the challenges they faced: "Being a listed heritage property, a very careful design and negotiation process was needed with the local authority's conservation and planning team. We used rustic pole barn/tin-roofed canopies in many farmyards as justification to allow the additional space. A contrasting modern aesthetic ensured it clearly delineates the old and new elements."

Yet the deadline for the installation of renewable energy systems with a government grant arrived sooner than the planning permission and the couple found themselves installing the heating system before other works began. James and Amy opted for a ground source heat pump that involved drilling three 100m deep boreholes in the courtyard before the system was commissioned and certified.

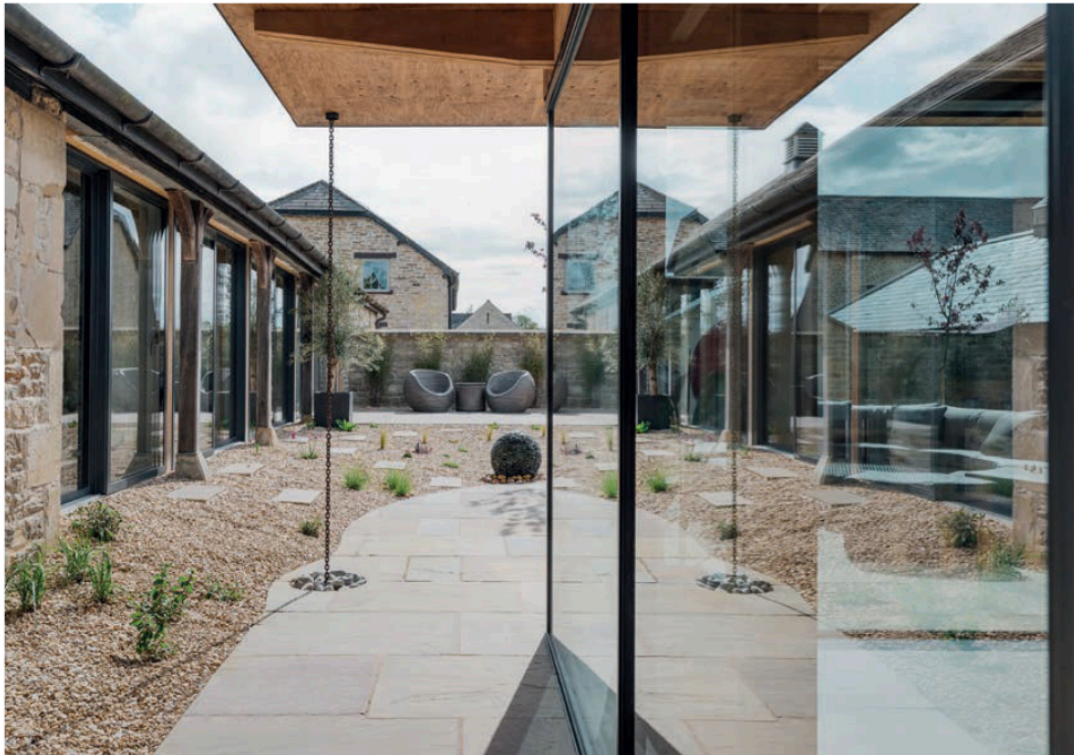
When planning permission for the extension arrived three months later, the couple faced another significant delay if they wanted to follow a traditional tender route. Fortunately, Artel31 had their own construction team, which was available at short notice. "We had already

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worked with them and were happy," says Amy. "I'm a feeling person and you need to have someone you can trust."

Covid didn't just cause delays, it also drove up costs, which in turn impacted the couple's choice of materials. As a result, there is very little steel in the glazed kitchen and dining extension. Glulam beams form the main structure, which features a 6.6m glazed frontage to the courtyard, and this is divided into three sliding panes. Support beams inside are 'flitched'; compound beams in which thin pieces of steel are sandwiched between timber and the three layers held together with bolts. Aside from keeping steel costs down, the feel is less industrial.

Nevertheless, the interior style in this



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extension is 'raw', with exposed beams in the ceiling, and a stone wall in the kitchen, formerly the field boundary. Above the ceiling beam is the decking that forms the basis of the sedum roof, so with no space for cabling, James and Amy's builders routed ducts into the beams and dropped in LED strips from above, before fixing the decking board. "I've always liked beauty in function," says James. "I like the Pompidou Centre."

Another good example of this is the extractor fan above the couple's two Everhot hobs. As Amy does a lot of Asian cooking, this produces smoke and James was quoted £30,000 for a professional extractor. Unwilling to find this in the budget, James was lucky that Rob Elkins offered to design a similar product and have it engineered bespoke, for a fraction of the cost.

The kitchen itself posed another challenge for the couple. While the mellow Cotswold stone brings warmth, texture and character to the home, using an existing wall meant tanking to the height of the countertop. In addition, the floor in the extension needed to be dug out by a minimum of 300mm to get a good ceiling height and also stay within the existing height of the wall. This, however, revealed an electrical cable that turned out to be the undocumented main feed for their and their neighbour's properties.

"It ran right through our kitchen," recalls James. "All work stopped while the electrical company ran three new mains off a pole in our paddock at an absolutely extraordinary cost. It took four months and involved switching off the power to our neighbours. It was quite fraught."

The sedum roof and the ground source heat pump are just two parts of the package of sustainable measures the couple chose to

futureproof their home. Solar panels installed on a shed in the paddock provide power, which feeds into a battery. This in turn powers both the home and charges the couple's two electric cars. In the summer, it is sufficient for their needs. In the winter, the battery draws power from the grid at times of cheaper energy. The entire system is integrated into one control, which can be operated via a phone app. "As a venture capitalist, I'm a futurist," says James. "If I have to rebuild a house, I say let's do it once. The software may be bleeding edge, but energy-wise, it's fine and someone has to be the 'early adopter.'"

The extensive glazing also offers rather more 'low-tech' passive solar gain, particularly as the extension is south-facing. To prevent overheating, Rob designed a roof overhang of 1.5m on the extension, which works beautifully. Around the two 'wings' of the home, there is new glazing throughout. Although glazed during the original conversion, the framing was reaching the end of its life and James and Amy's new aluminium double-glazed units are both attractive and energy-efficient. Now, every part of their home has a view of the courtyard garden.

"When I come through the gate, I think 'I'm here. I'm safe'," says Amy. The courtyard is effectively an internal space and the clever garden design brings visitors directly to the front door, using raised beds and careful planting. "We lived in a flat and we had no idea, so we hired a garden designer," says Amy. "There's also lighting in the courtyard and at night this integrates the courtyard into the house (even if it's too cold to go outside) as it changes the perception of the space."

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the



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home's exterior is the round red "Moongate", set into a newly built stone entrance. The design was Amy's idea, and she found her inspiration in the traditional courtyard homes of rural China. "Red is an auspicious colour," says Amy. "And the circular shape symbolises peacefulness and harmony." Amy also took on much of the interior design of their new home and the Asian influence can be found here, too.

"It's eclectic," says Amy. "We had a few choice pieces throughout the house that are Oriental, such as the coat cupboard, which is also painted red, with a Chinese plate on it. The rest just came together. Some pieces we bought 30 years ago, others I bought because they feel comfortable. It's evolved." Amy was also involved, making all the curtains by hand for the bedrooms, two of which had colour schemes chosen by their adult daughters, who visit frequently. "The children want to come home to relax," laughs Amy. "We've built our retreat."

The kitchen, as in many families, is the heart of

their home. This too was designed by Amy and based on an image she found in a magazine. The huge island has a Dekton worktop which looks like natural stone but doesn't stain. The cabinetry is almost entirely below countertop level, creating an uncluttered, streamlined feel. Yet the storage is impressive.

"Amy had a map of the kitchen layout," says James, "We have both eastern and western cookware, so we have almost twice as much stuff as most people."

Although the couple wouldn't choose to do another project of this size anyway, they also don't need to. "The process was stressful and difficult," says James, "but in the end, it's a place where I feel 100% comfortable. It's built exactly to our needs. We have what we aimed for and it's better than we hoped. We both love the openness and wherever you stand there's space. I don't want to go anywhere else; I enjoy just sitting in the garden, listening to our fountain. It's very peaceful." ■



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