

Opposite page, the rear of the building. This page, Finlay, the architects' youngest child, climbs the new staircase. The sliding slatted wood door is a reference to local architecture but is also influenced by Japanese design

HOW A PAIR OF YOUNG ARCHITECTS PROVED IT IS POSSIBLE TO TASTEFULLY RESTORE AN OLD ALPINE FARMHOUSE ON A TINY BUDGET. AND HAVE A LOT OF FUN INTO THE BARGAIN

Words by **Clare Gogerty**
Photographs by **Jefferson Smith**





very summer afternoon, a herd of cows chivvied along by a ruddy-faced farmer ambles past Jo Townsend and Rob Holford's converted farmhouse in Praubert near the French border with Switzerland. Around their necks clank

weighty cowbells which draw the attention of the local children who run to watch them.

The scene is so typically Alpine, it could have been staged by the tourist office in nearby Geneva. And, at first glance, Jo and Rob's house looks typically Alpine, too: set in a meadow with the snowy mountains of the Swiss Jura and the Swiss Alps behind, Lake Geneva stretching in front, it has the low, generous roof and bardage (timber-cladding) characteristic of regional Savoyard farmhouses.

But on closer inspection there are subtle, intriguing differences. The chains hanging in front of the house may look functional but are, in fact, merely decorative; a balustrade reveals itself to be made of staves from an old barrel; the original front door cavity has been filled with a huge piece of polycarbonate sheeting; a large picture window sits comfortably but unusually among the smaller windows in the back façade. Inside, the barn looks largely untouched but is dominated by a transparent stairwell that lights up at night like a lantern. The bathroom has curvy, linoleum walls and a funky, pop art feel. The clues are all there: this is a building that has been craftily updated using traditional styles and techniques but with a savvy, modern sensibility.

The renovation and reconstruction of the house is part of a continuing saga (or 'storyboard', as Rob calls it) that began when it was built in the 1800s to house two farming brothers, their family, and cattle (who shared the building for six months of the year) and will continue as Jo and Rob's families adapt it to suit their changing needs. Unlike other Grand Designs, they did not take on the project with a finished product or historical reconstruction in mind. 'We weren't interested in turning back the clock and creating a museum,' says Jo. 'We wanted to create a home for a modern extended family and its future.'

Their page of the storyboard began when Jo's father, John Townsend, a French teacher who had taught in a nearby lycée, began his search for a house that could not only be a retirement home for him and his wife Pat, but also a project for his architect daughter and her boyfriend. This idea was seized upon by Jo and Rob, newly graduated from the Bartlett School of Architecture in London. 'We craved getting some real hands-on building experience,' says Jo.

The family are all great ski enthusiasts, 'but we didn't want to buy in a resort,' Rob insists. 'We thought that would be too limiting. We wanted a more genuine French experience. And, anyway, the slopes aren't far away. During the build, we managed to ski during our lunch breaks.' ▶

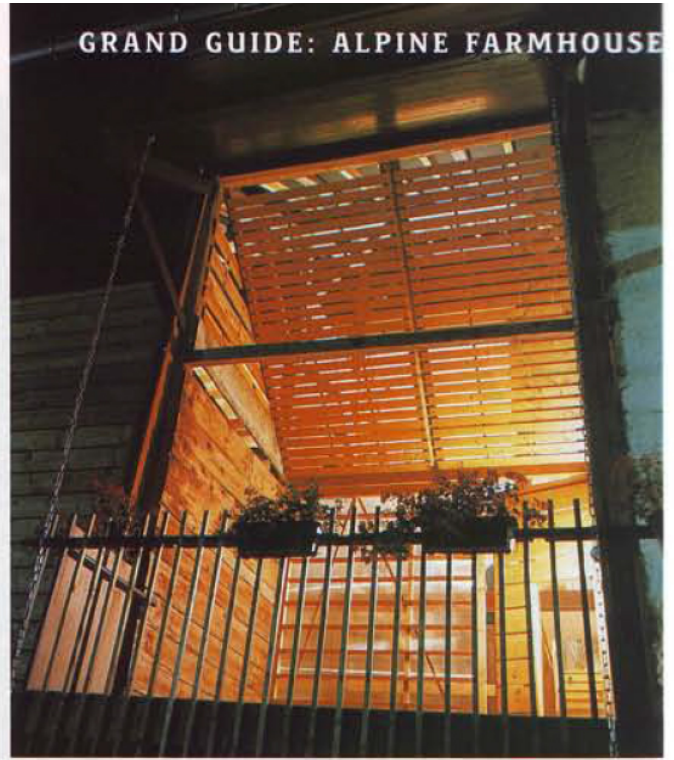


This page, left, much of the timber in the barn has been repaired and replaced.

Below, Rob, Jacques, Finlay and Jo outside the back door. The seat was made from a piece of timber found on site.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left, the front entrance leads to a four-flight staircase; at night the entrance is a cross-hatching of timber, light and shadow; the front of the house – the barn area is defined by the timber cladding





AT FIRST GLANCE JO AND ROB'S HOUSE LOOKS TYPICALLY ALPINE BUT THERE ARE SUBTLE, INTRIGUING DIFFERENCES



MOST OF THE BUILDING WORK WAS DONE BY JO, ROB AND A RETINUE OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY. 'FRIENDS WHO CAME TO STAY HAD TO BUILD THEIR OWN BEDROOMS,' SAYS JO

The family found their genuine French experience in Praubert, a cluster of houses and friendly locals far away from the resorts both in character and in location, but only an hour from Geneva. The house was bought by Jo's dad and brother David for £78,000. This seems remarkably cheap but it was 1997 and, apart from hot water and electricity installed by the previous single lady owner, the building was barely habitable.

Over a pot of bubbling fondue, Rob and Jo relive the two-year build. 'One of our first tasks,' says Jo, 'was to rid the house of its mice infestation. They were occupying the cavities between the original plasterboard walls. When we pulled the walls down it was like a scene of mouse carnage.' But there were far more taxing projects ahead. Like creating a new floor in the barn, building a new roof, fitting a kitchen and erecting the four-flight stairwell with its enormous polycarbonate wall. 'Jo's father and I had to hoist the sheet up to the top of the building and slide it into place. It was incredibly unwieldy,' says Rob.

A couple of deadlines focused their endeavours. The first was Christmas. 'The whole family including little children were coming to stay,' says Jo, 'and the house had to be safe and warm, which it wasn't. We were working in the barn in late November with temperatures as low as -6° C. I remember wailing like a child late one evening after I had walloped my finger with a hammer.' ▶



The fireplace was inspired by Alvar Aalto's Villa Mairea in Finland and is made from plasterboard. The stone

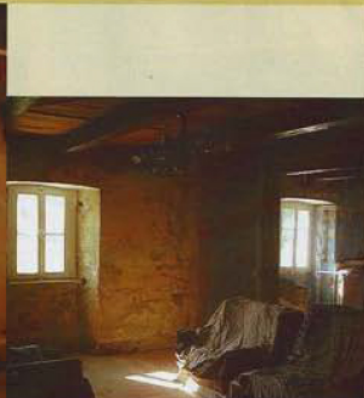
GRAND GUIDE: ALPINE FARMHOUSE



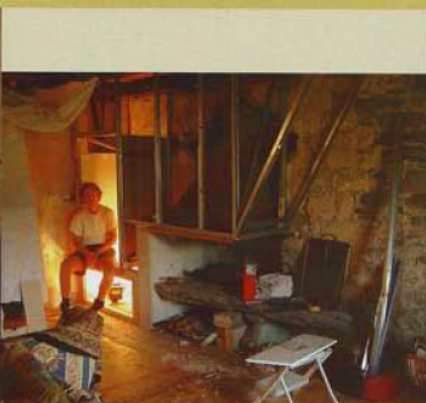
From left, building work begins on the front of the house; Jo's brother David, left, helps their father John Townshend and Rob hoist a timber beam into the barn; the living room before the new fireplace was installed; Jo's dad hard at work; the four-flight stairwell mid-construction



From left, Jo's parents, John and Pat, and the hole they knocked through the original barn wall; friend Andy Humphreys is put to work with a feline helper; the stairwell goes up; Rob cuts plasterboard for the new fireplace



From left, John's hands covered in plasters after timber floor laying; Jo and Rob get to grips with a piece of plasterboard; the living room post-demolition and pre-reconstruction; Jo and Pat proudly peer through their recently created hole. They went on to demolish the whole wall



From left, a ghostly figure behind the polycarbonate sheeting; Rob uses a rolling pin to smooth linoleum over a drainage pipe in the bathroom; Rob in the new fireplace mid-construction; John outside the house during their first winter there before work had begun on the front elevation



The second deadline was even more pressing: they decided to get married and hold their wedding reception in the barn. After the local mayor (who was also their mason) married them in the town hall, guests were due to pitch up at the barn which, at the time of Rob's proposal, was far from ready for an influx of merrymakers. 'The stropky bride-to-be was a very useful role to play when motivating workmen,' says Jo. 'They really responded to that. The same method applied later when I was expecting Jacques. Local artisans became quite protective of me, promising that work would be finished before the baby arrived, although he arrived two weeks early, much to the plasterer's dismay.'

The reception did take place in the barn as intended and it sounds like a very jolly affair with friends camped in the grounds for days, feasting on *michoui* (roast spit of lamb) and *piece montée* (French wedding cake) and toasting the bridal couple with specially written poems and songs while fireworks (a wedding present from Jo's brother) exploded around them.

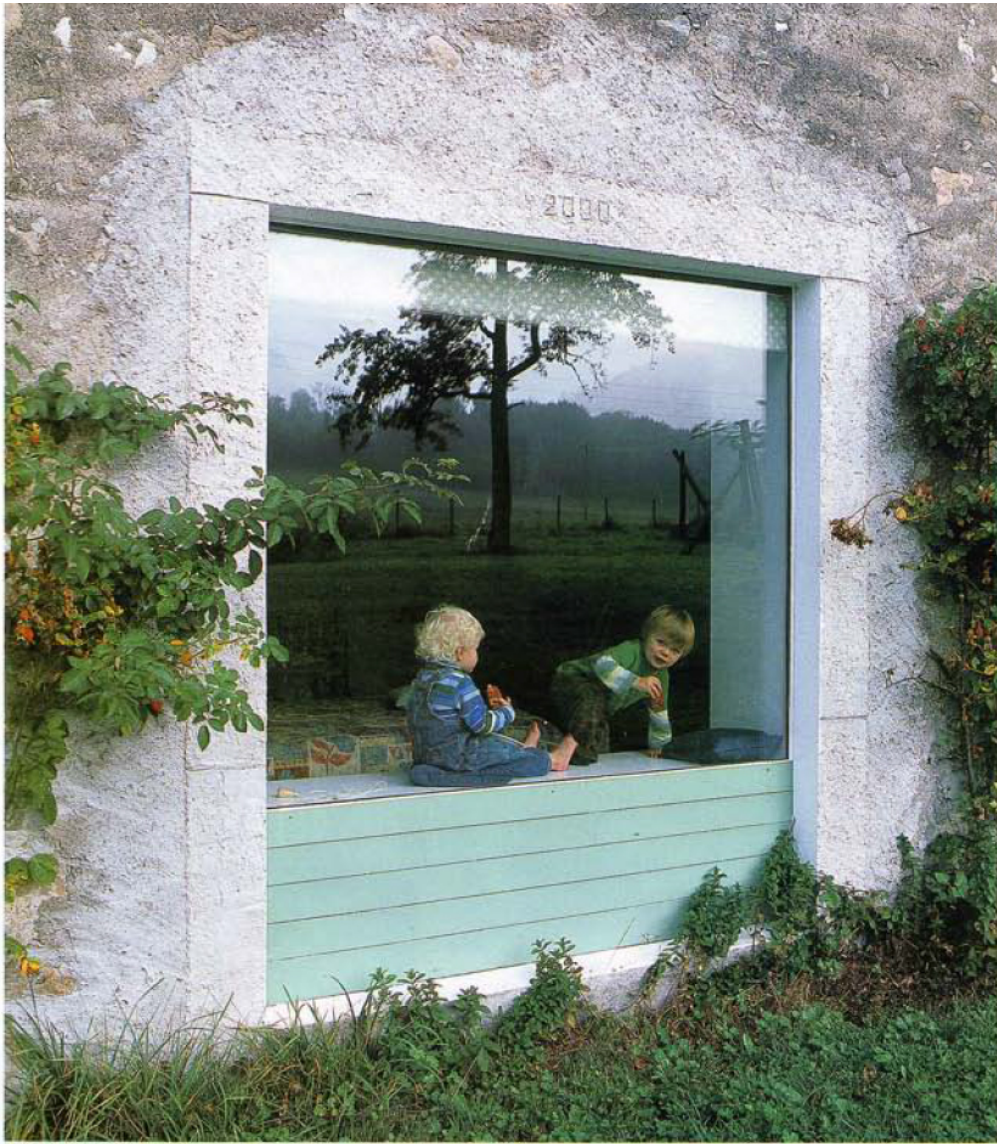
Most of the building work was done by Jo, Rob and a retinue of friends and family. 'Friends who came to stay had to build their own bedrooms,' says Jo. You get the impression that they have a never-ending band of good-humoured friends itching for the opportunity to muck in. 'We allocated tasks according to different skill bases,' says Rob matter-of-factly. 'That seemed to work.' The only irritation was that as soon as they had mastered a skill, ▶



'I REMEMBER WAILING LIKE A CHILD LATE ONE NIGHT AFTER I HAD WALLOPED MY FINGER WITH A HAMMER,' SAYS JO



Opposite page, at night the stairwell becomes a lantern illuminating the core of the building. This page, top, the door to the children's room was once Rob's desk when he was a student. Left, Finlay and Jacques play table football on the front deck



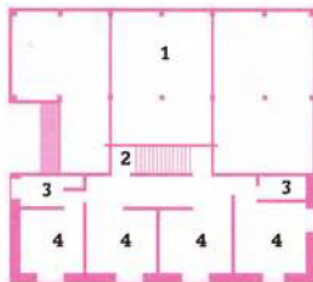
DIRECTORY

Cost of house: £78,000
Cost of build: 'miniscule'

Architects

Architects in Residence

(Jo's company with partner
Kate Cheyne)
020 7378 8118;
architectsinresidence.co.uk



FIRST FLOOR



UPPER GROUND FLOOR

- 1 Barn
- 2 Stairs
- 3 Bathrooms
- 4 Bedrooms
- 5 Deck and entrance
- 6 Utility room
- 7 Living area
- 8 Kitchen

that skill became redundant. 'My father became a wonderful timber floor layer by the time he completed the last room,' says Jo. 'He had finally learnt to hammer the nails and not his hands.' The only areas out of reach were plumbing, electricity and major structural masonry work which were carried out by local workmen.

Lack of funds meant that their budget was miniscule. Materials were either cheap (polycarbonate, plasterboard, plywood, linoleum, MDF) or reclaimed: the hearth in the new fireplace was made from a chunk of granite dug up in the garden; redundant timber from the barn resurfaced as a bench; slate steps to one of the old front doors were repositioned to edge a terrace.

The fact that the couple were living and working on site meant that they could experiment and be playful with materials and construction. 'Although the structural work was pinned down, the design detail was a more organic process. Because we were living in the house we were able to constantly reappraise every move,' says Jo. Rob nods in agreement: 'And there are things we did – like use drainage pipes to create those curved ledges in the bathroom – that you couldn't ask a contractor to do.'

Jo and Rob have moved back to London taking their new skills with them. Jo has used these to set up a new architecture practice with friend Kate Cheyne, another helper on the build. Jo's parents, John and Pat, inhabit the house now and often entertain their growing family, as was always the intention. But the storyboard will continue to be drawn as the building changes. The most immediate task is to cover a wall in a corridor with photographs of the build, the wedding, the cheery friends, the children, John's bandaged knuckles... You get the feeling that this storyboard will go on forever. ■

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