



Paint It Black



Meredith Bowles's Black House in Cambridgeshire is a modern update of the agricultural shed. Once the price of photovoltaic panels comes down, the house will generate its electricity from them. For now, wind does the work.

We English have a reputation for being somewhat eccentric, and architect Meredith Bowles certainly does not let the side down as he drives me across the flat plains of the Cambridgeshire Fens toward his home, known as the Black House. The Fens, reclaimed from marshland in the 17th century thanks to Dutch drainage engineers, look more akin to the wide-open spaces of the American Midwest than to the English countryside and are dotted with large agricultural sheds and barns made of corrugated tin or cement cladding. Bowles slows as we pass each one, enthusing about its uncomplicated design or beautiful decay, or declaring, "Now *that* is a shed."

The Black House, where Bowles lives with his wife, novelist Jill Dawson, and two sons, Lewis (15) and Felix (3), is the culmination of his obsession with these simple structures, aided by his ever-growing collection of photographs of sheds from around the world. English city dwellers moving out to the country usually seek out brick-built, timber-framed barns to convert to nostalgic, rustic dream homes, but forward-looking Bowles wanted

something more contemporary when moving both his home and his burgeoning architectural practice, Mole Architects, out of London. "As an architect, the nostalgia for a world past makes me cringe a bit," he says. "It is not a good driving force."

His Black House is a cross between the sheds he so adores and a childlike drawing of a simple house. Taller and narrower than the single-story agricultural buildings that surround it, the Black House has three floors that look out west across the velvety peat fields and back into Ely, the nearest town. Rather than a style decision, the black hue of the house reflects the color of the weather-proof coating applied to the exterior cement fiber cladding. The stark exterior sits well with the dark soil, the yellow-stained Scandinavian softwood window frames providing a stylish contrast.

As well as affording views of the 12th-century Ely Cathedral and picturesque sunsets, the house's westerly aspect allows for a healthy afternoon solar gain. It is not yet solar-powered, because at \$36,000 Bowles found ▶

A Kitchen to Match the Crops

In the Black House, the splashbacks in the kitchen are made from hard-wearing plastic, which is recycled waste from industrial cutting boards and garden furniture. The bright combination of green and yellow is part of a range called Jazz from young U.K. manufacturer Smile Plastics (www.smile-plastics.co.uk). They make sheets of plastic from recycled cell phones, CDs, water bottles, and toothbrushes and have also recently added a rubber material made from

Wellington boots. The kitchen was designed in shades of green and yellow, as it faced out on to a pea field. This year, the field had a crop of wheat, but the couple is hoping that the peas come back, as they go far better with their interior color scheme. "It did look great with the peas," says Bowles. "It is nice to have a change of view every year, though." Jazz plastic products come in a range of thicknesses from 1/3 inch to one inch. —I.A.



Homeowner (and novelist) Jill Bowles in the dining room (above).

The bedroom window (right) frames a painterly view of the English countryside.



the panels beyond his initial budget of \$300,000. For the time being the house's electricity is generated at a wind farm in Cornwall. This helps run an air-to-air heat pump that takes heat energy from the air, increasing the efficiency of the electricity input threefold to provide hot water and warm-air heating. Argon-filled glazing, which has a low-emission coating to reflect heat back into the house, reduces heat loss in winter, while solar blinds deflect heat in summer.

The house is built atop concrete piles, raising the structure two feet from the ground and aiding in ventilation. This has practical and environmental advantages insofar as the house is above the sodden Fens soil and there is no need for a damp course (a plastic membrane between structure and ground).

"It is like a granary," says Bowles, "which are always raised to stop rats climbing up. Same principle, slightly different reason."

Bowles is something of a fan of simple solutions, reasoning that decisions to install low-energy lightbulbs and domestic appliances all help in the struggle to lessen the property's environmental impact. Those materials that had to be imported were shipped rather than air-freighted, and the Black House has built-in storage for recyclable products such as paper and glass. Recycling is king throughout the house, with the 7.8-inch-thick insulation in the walls being made from recycled newspapers and the acoustic insulation mats between floors manufactured from old car tires.

Bowles's ability to bring in a sustainable project at a reasonable budget has not gone unnoticed in the region. It has in fact resulted in a proposed scheme to create ten smaller "sheds" for a local social housing project. U.K. government guidelines on social housing are pushing developers toward solutions that involve low environmental impact along with the speed and cost savings of prefabrication, so we could yet see stylish shed living become the norm in rural England. Bowles has his fingers crossed that this happens, for both the prosperity of his practice and the inevitable fall in the price of solar panels that would at last see him able to afford to become self-sufficient in power generation. ■