

# A home among the trees

Ken Martin's spectacular energy-efficient new home sports a striking black glass exterior which reflects the surrounding trees.

STORY: **DEBBIE JEFFERY**

PICTURES: **THE MODERN HOUSE/IAN McCHESNEY**

**B**uilding The Tree House – a highly contemporary home, roofed in zinc and clad in panels of black glass – took homeowner Ken Martin many years to complete. First he battled to achieve planning permission, which was ultimately granted despite 68 letters of objection and a tricky Conservation Area setting, then he delayed building the house in order to raise funds and lock down every last detail of the project – an approach which took him to within a nail-biting four days of the planning approval expiry date in February 2012.

The new building was then constructed on its garden site in south-east London using some extremely innovative methods and materials. The most controversial of course, being the giant panels of black glass which form the outer decorative skin of the house. This opaque glass contrasts with the iroko window and door frames, and from certain angles causes the building virtually to disappear into its wooded landscape thanks to the camouflaging reflections of sky and trees.

“What appears on paper to be just a big black box has a far more interesting appearance in reality, because of the reflections. The planning officer was fantastically supportive, but there’s no question that the black glass is what alienated a lot of local people. They took against it because other properties in the area are mainly white stucco or yellow stock bricks, whereas glass is often used to clad commercial buildings rather than homes,” says Ken, who had strong ideas about the design of the house and worked with family friend and architect Ian McChesney to bring these to life.

Ian’s celebrated work encompasses art, architecture and industrial design, and he has completed a number of large-scale public commissions and sculptures – talents which were used to great effect when designing The Tree House.

The setting was extremely important, as the plot is located down a quiet lane and overlooks Albion millennium green, one of 245 millennium greens across the UK, which are protected areas of green space that were created as places of tranquillity in urban areas.



**PICTURES:** The Tree House is located down a quiet lane overlooking woodland in Sydenham Park Conservation Area. Clad in opaque black glass, the façade of the four-bedroom house reflects the sky and the trees and gardens that surround it. Locally-made iroko window and door frames have been triple glazed with low-iron glass which is clear, with no tinge of green.





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*“I just hope that even the harshest critic will come to appreciate what has been achieved.”*

In his proposal for the house on Redberry Grove McChesney wrote: “The reflections of foliage can be seen in the black glass façade, giving the building a lucid quality and helping it blend into its surroundings.”

Not only is the house visually stunning, but it has also been awarded a four-star rating under the Code for Sustainable Homes – a planning condition which was largely achieved thanks to the building’s outstanding energy efficiency. Despite the fact that the house ticks all the boxes in terms of sustainability and design – and even with great support from the planners for a contemporary approach rather than a pastiche – the two-year planning process still proved stressful and involved some fraught and often comical public meetings, such as the ire of the opposition.

“I’m not exaggerating when I say there was actual screaming involved at the planning meeting when the application was finally passed. I just hope that even the harshest critics will come to appreciate what has been achieved,” says Ken, a retired lawyer, who was determined to succeed and has relished almost every moment of the build in spite of the hurdles he faced.

“When I bought the 1830s house next door in 2007 it was my dream to build an exciting new home in the garden,” he recalls. “I fenced off about one-third of the land to make a 30m by 14m plot, which already had its own vehicular access. It also contained two rare and mature turkey oak trees, which inspired the name The Tree House and are the reason the building has been constructed in the way that it has. The structure is raised up on 28 mini piles only 6cm across to avoid disturbing the tree roots. Unfortunately I can’t say the same for the neighbours, though, because for five days the machine-gun noise from the piling was horrific.”



**PICTURES:**

The main living room has high ceilings and full-height windows on three sides, framing views of the surrounding trees. A Dik Guerts wood-burning stove forms the centrepiece of the room. The self-supporting stairs are made from oak-faced plywood.





**PICTURES:** A striking oak-faced ply staircase, lit from above by skylights and clerestory glazing, leads up to the air-conditioned first floor.







A specialist company was brought in to sink the piles 12m into the London clay before the bespoke Scandia-Hus timber frame was delivered. This frame forms the skeleton of the structure, and large glulam beams have been left exposed above the first-floor landing and bathrooms, where they support clerestory glazing and frameless rooflights.

“The frame took two men just two weeks to erect, despite torrential rain, and was conventionally finished

**PICTURES:** Pocket doors open up the kitchen to create an impressive entertaining space. Cabinets were built to Ken’s own design.

with highly insulated Scandia-Hus wall panels,” explains Ken. “To these have been attached an aluminium frame which support the sheets of black glass, some of which measure 3.5m by 1.6m.”

Ken is not a complete novice when it comes to building projects – he had previously created a mansard flat by constructing an entire new floor on top of a building in Hampstead. The Tree House



### The floorplan

Front and rear ground floor lobbies with pocket doors help to retain heat in the building. An open-plan kitchen/dining/living room on the ground floor is ideal for entertaining, and also features pocket doors which create more intimate spaces as required. Upstairs there are four bedrooms, a main en suite and a family bathroom, with roof glazing producing some dramatic spaces.



The dining area has direct access to the large terrace which has a pond.



**PICTURES:** All four bedrooms have been positioned to enjoy views over the woodland. Both first-floor bathrooms were designed with frameless glass roofs and feature Italian sanitaryware.



proved far more ambitious and time consuming than his previous ‘back to the bricks’ renovations however, and although Ken preferred not to become involved with the physical building work he took on the role of project manager and principal contractor, immersing himself in every detail.

“Commercial building methods were used on the house by companies more accustomed to building offices,” he explains. “Despite its luxurious appearance the glass was only a little more expensive to specify for the exterior than, say, reclaimed London stock bricks or insulated self-coloured render. It cost around £25,000 to supply the toughened glass panels.

“The installation was expensive but the team was fantastic, and there was only one breakage – which happened to be the final panel to be fitted, and which the company quickly took care of. Everything had to be manhandled into place because there was no room for craning the large, delicate panels between the scaffold and the structure.”

In order to create flat access to the rear of the house the property has been built up by 1.2m at the front, raising the terrace above the neighbouring park for additional privacy, with generous steel and iroko steps leading up to the front door. These and the other hard-landscaping elements were designed by Ian McChesney – including the striking ‘hit and miss’ Douglas fir boundary fence, which Ken stained black himself.

“I was living in rented accommodation during the build, and moved into the unfinished house at the end of 2013 to save money, but it took another year to complete all the small details,” Ken explains. “My task as the principal contractor was to employ specialist subcontractors, from floor fitters to electricians, who all worked for me. Some were recommended and others I’d used before, but for the highly specialised work I needed to spend hours researching and interviewing firms.”

Not only is the exterior of the house highly unusual for a residential building, but the interior also incorporates some unique features. The staircase was made in the same local workshop as the windows and was delivered to site in one piece. Crafted from oak-faced plywood, the self-supporting structure is not attached to the wall in any way and needed to be moved manually into place. “The air was blue,” says Kenneth. “There were a lot of last minute adjustments.”

The kitchen was inspired by sleek high-end German designs, but was built to Ken’s specifications for a fraction of the cost. “I spent a long time trying to find the perfect work surface for the island and considered glass or marble before finally choosing Corian, which looks fantastic,” he says.

Underfloor heating has been laid throughout the highly insulated and triple-glazed property, which means that the feature wood-burner in the open-plan living area rarely needs to be lit. Air conditioning was installed on the first floor, and the finished house functions beautifully – staying warm or cool as required.

**KEN’S TOP TIP**

**“Get involved with everything – break the project down into components and become as knowledgeable as you can about each and every element. It’s the only way to stay fully in control.”**





*“I honestly loved every minute of the build – problem solving, planning, designing the interiors and generally being involved.”*

After years spent planning and building the property Ken is now moving on, as his daughter Aggie has become a keen rower and needs to live closer to the river for those early starts. Another new build project is on the cards.

“I’ve been bitten by the bug,” says Ken. “My plan is to build a daring house with an internal courtyard garden.” And with his past track record of architectural anarchy there is absolutely no reason to doubt that this next ambitious project could prove even more spectacular than the last.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

Ken already owned the garden plot, which would be valued today at in excess of £500,000 with planning permission. He spent just under £750,000 building The Tree House, which is currently on the market for £1.75m with The Modern House: [themodernhouse.net](http://themodernhouse.net)

**PICTURES:** The Tree House is highly unusual both externally and internally. The project has inspired Ken to embark on another ambitious build.



## Contacts

### PROJECT

**Architect** Ian McChesney: [mcchesney.co.uk](http://mcchesney.co.uk)  
**Code for Sustainable Homes** Simply CFSh: [simplycfsh.co.uk](http://simplycfsh.co.uk)

### STRUCTURE

**Piling** Terrawise Construction: [terrawise-construction.co.uk](http://terrawise-construction.co.uk)  
**Timber frame** Scandia-Hus: [scandia-hus.co.uk](http://scandia-hus.co.uk)  
**Black glass panels and installation** Façade Concepts: [facadeconcepts.co.uk](http://facadeconcepts.co.uk)  
**Front steps** Everton Smith: [esmithmetal.co.uk](http://esmithmetal.co.uk)  
**Timber products** Whitten Timber: [whittentimber.co.uk](http://whittentimber.co.uk) and WL West: [wlwest.co.uk](http://wlwest.co.uk)  
**Zinc roof** Brian Unwin: [bunwin01@googlemail.com](mailto:bunwin01@googlemail.com)

### FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

**Wood-burner** Dik Guerts: [dgfires.co.uk](http://dgfires.co.uk)  
**Appliances** Gaggenau: [gaggenau.com](http://gaggenau.com)  
**Corian** iSurfaces: [isurfaces.co.uk](http://isurfaces.co.uk)  
**Wise wireless lighting controls, LED light fittings**  
 Mr Resistor: [mr-resistor.co.uk](http://mr-resistor.co.uk)  
**Mitsubishi air-conditioning installation**  
 PDM: [pdmaircon.co.uk](http://pdmaircon.co.uk)  
**String shelving** Nils Strinning: [hauslondon.com](http://hauslondon.com)

## Home truths

### *What was the low point of the project?*

I was shocked at people’s reactions to my planning application, and dealing with this for several years was quite depressing at times.

### *...and the high point?*

Everything else! I honestly loved every minute of the build – problem solving, planning, designing the interiors and generally being involved.

### *Your best buy...?*

The black glass, which is the single thing that marks out the property, and the bespoke kitchen, which cost less than half the price of buying something similar from a high-end German manufacturer.

### *...and your biggest extravagance?*

A lot of money was spent on the solar control glass above the stairs. The triple-glazed insulated glass units are over 60mm thick, and each one weighs over 200kg. They were lifted into place by a crane positioned on the back of a small lorry – I couldn’t watch!



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