The greatest bird artist

Three cheers for the village shop!

Martha Stewart’s garden and Barry Cryer’s wit

The American dream: where to stay and buy property
Master in miniature

The tiniest estate buildings can make wonderful homes, says John Tanner, who transformed a 600sq ft gardener’s bothy at Gunton Hall.

Breathing life into unloved estate buildings is an immensely satisfying task. With country estates diversifying income streams and the rise in popularity of using short-let services such as Airbnb, owners are looking more creatively at how to make the most of their properties, turning unmanageable or policy buildings into successful businesses.

I had the pleasure of working on a handful of these projects last year in Norfolk. Among them was furnishing the former servants’ quarters in Heydon Hall, now a three-bedroom Georgian house known as The Old Laundry, as well as sourcing antiques for the East Wing at Wolerton Hall—the largest of a number of new country retreats offered on the estate, under the direction of the owners Keith Day and Peter Sheppard.

Of all the successful conversions in East Anglia, the one that stands out in my mind is Gunton Park in North Norfolk. Today, it’s a thriving estate, but it might have been a different story were it not for the vision of...
Kit Martin, an entrepreneurial architect, who rescued the post-war mansion house, which had been damaged by fire in the 1980s, and converted it—alongside its estate buildings—into 20 dwellings.

Over a period of 20 years, he collaborated on the project with his neighbour, the art dealer Peter Fairchild. Together, they purchased plots of land and brought the estate back to its former glory.

Part of Kit’s genius was that he divided most parts of Gunton Hall vertically—there are many benefits to this, the obvious one being that you’re not the enemy of heavy-footed neighbours upstairs.

I grew up in East Anglia and was based in London, but when my partner Richard Swallow and I heard, via word of mouth, that one of these conversions, a former gardener’s bothy, was available for rent, we decided to take it.

With its floor-to-ceiling exterior, The Vine House was the first property available at Gunton in more than 10 years. It was a tiny space, made up of three rectangular rooms that measured just over 60 sq ft in total. Although it was only a rental, we couldn’t help spending money on unlocking its potential.

The main aim was to thoughtfully inject some age and patina into the property by carefully selecting and sourcing pieces, including a 1950s kitchen sink and arched Georgian housekeepers’ cupboard doors that made it look as if the spaces had developed naturally over time.

It also involved trying to re-use what we already had—a 1980s kitchen was taken apart and reconfigured to make full use of the generous eaves heights on the south side of the house and helps to draw the eyes upwards, giving the illusion of more space.

A plate rack, spanning the full width of the room and filled with blue-and-white china, is both a beautiful and highly practical solution. The yellow and blue are inspired by the late Hogarth Banks’s and we used Delft Blue on the walls, which is hard-wearing, so marks made by muddy dog’s can be cleaned.

We installed a reconditioned Aga that had been converted from oil to electric by a local supplier. This was one of the best things we did early on: it was on all the time and the kitchen was in the centre of the house, so it acted as our heathen—vital for those icy winter mornings.

There’s a high chance that any estate building will be unusual in shape.

Most layers of carpet ever concrete were replaced with Norfolk parquet, the traditional floor tiles of the area. This is another good trick for the eyes: they help create the illusion of space by seamlessly ‘borrowing’ from one room to another.

In 2017, Kit decided he wanted to sell and gave us first refusal. Once the house was secured, we sat about further restoration work. There’s a high chance that any estate building will be unusual in shape. Here, the challenge was the long living rooms, where it was important to be brave and break up the space rather than pushing all the furniture against the walls.

Inspired by Caroline Irving’s Manhattan apartment, where she used low bookshelves to both create intimate areas and introduce scale, we grouped pieces of furniture to create distinct areas.

We also divided the room with a large bookcase. Not only did this provide an extra single bedroom, with a built-in bed and antique-wood plantation walls, but also shelves for books and a collection of French coffee pots that we’d amassed during trips to the South of France. It meant sacrificing room for a large dining table for dinner parties, but a trestle table tucked away in the garage for outdoor entertaining provided the perfect solution.

The bedroom benefits from a tiny window looking out onto the walled garden. An impromptu trip to Suffolk led to the discovery of a 17th-century four-poster bed that had once belonged to the photographer Angus McMillan when he was living at Framlingham Hall in Suffolk. An oversized period piece like this adds drama and atmosphere to what was essentially a very ordinary room.

Storage in such a diminutive house is always going to be a problem so it’s worth thinking creatively here, too. We took advantage of ceiling heights and use ottomans in the sitting room and blanket chests in the bedroom. We created extra storage underneath the built-in bed, which is accessed by lifting the near side up with a piece of rope.

We sold The Vine House to Ivor (who owns The Gunton Arms hotel) with most of the contents in October 2018. He continues to improve the Gunton Park estate: year on year—never in its history has it looked better. Long may it continue! 

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