

BEACH HOUSE DUNGENESS



The recently completed beach house sits directly on the shingle and like most of the houses at Dungeness, doesn't have a defined garden

FIVE YEARS AGO ARCHITECT SIMON CONDER BUILT A CAPTIVATING BLACK RUBBER BEACH HOUSE AT DUNGENESS. HIS LATEST ADDITION TO THE REMARKABLE PLACE IS A TIMBER HOUSE BUILT AROUND A RAILWAY CARRIAGE. **MATTHEW COLLINGS** PAID A VISIT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL SMOOTHY





The shape of the house in plan is loosely based on a wine glass

Dungeness is a shingle foreland on the southernmost tip of Kent. It's now a National Nature Reserve. The feeling is stark – emptiness and bleakness; certainly oddness – but also beautiful if you've got the taste for it. There's the kale, the shingle and the sea, and then all the myriad structures standing up from the vast flatness. Beautiful old boats, caravans, the lifeboat station, smoke ovens, cars (plus miscellaneous remains of the foregoing), two beautiful light houses (each a different design), the old coastguard tower, the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch railway, and sometimes a ship the height of a skyscraper going by out on the horizon. And of course the spooky, enormous nuclear plants, A and B, which were constructed between the

mid-Sixties and mid-Eighties, from plans drawn up after the Second World War.

On the eastern edge of the beach stands B. It's hard to get the scale of it from a distance, or even close-to; you have to be inside to realise how vast its interior spaces are. They contain steam compressors, the nuclear technology of the immediate post-war period. The architect, Simon Conder, visited it recently. There are still thousands of people in there, he told me, mostly drinking tea it seems, but in fact engaged in closing down the station. He asked one of them how long the closing-down would take, and the answer was a hundred years.

Dungeness became trendy about 20 years ago. Previously it was off-putting because of the power >>



The roof deck of the house, gently sloping inland, gives views of France on a clear day



stations, but now the old scariness is a thrill in the mix of elements that attracts lovers of the area. These elements include nature of course: there are all sorts of migratory and coastal bird species, all sorts of plant life and insects. But also culture: artiness arrived with Derek Jarman, who took over Prospect Cottage in 1986. The cottage (a black and yellow shack) is a pilgrimage site now with its surrounds famously populated by found-object sculptures. It was actually the owner of another house a few yards away who started the outdoor sculpture trend, and he's apparently miffed that Jarman's stuff has stolen all the limelight.

Dungeness's feeling of bleakness is emphasised by the wind, which comes up often and strong, and much of the feeling of charm comes from the little dwellings, which are not much more than bits and pieces stuck together over the years. None of the houses is above one storey; they're all interesting and all different. A few yards from nuclear station B stands a row of five of them, one a bit more different than the others.

You park the car and start walking across shingle. As you approach you see a clear, simple outline, a low oblong, which looks rectangular at first but turns out to be curved. It's one side of an overall wineglass shape (in plan): the bowl faces the power station and the rim faces the sea:

a sphere turning into a rectangle. The 'stem' is a path made of half-length railway sleepers. From a distance there's a kind of hazy effect, created by reclaimed timber with multi-toned soft greys and browns (which the wind will soon turn entirely grey) and the structure seems to shimmer a bit, merging with sea and sky. This is El Ray, built by Simon Conder.

It was originally a railway carriage (from the days when railway retirees would be offered such a structure as a gift) that had been extended in several stages to form a larger, ramshackle building. Conder retained the carriage and re-did the extension, and now there's a definite feeling of a structure within a structure: a collage, beautifully carried off.

El Ray (the name of the original structure, no one knows why) is the UK home of a couple that live part of the year in France; one's a painter, one's in business. They wanted environmental sustainability and minimum use of fossilised fuels. So the heating is mostly natural solar gain, and a wind turbine will be going up shortly for electricity, with the surplus sold back on the national power grid (they're amused at the idea of a wind turbine a few yards from one of the biggest nuclear power plants in Europe).

The railway carriage (the only part of the old >>



Above: The railway carriage around which the original house was built has been converted into a kitchen

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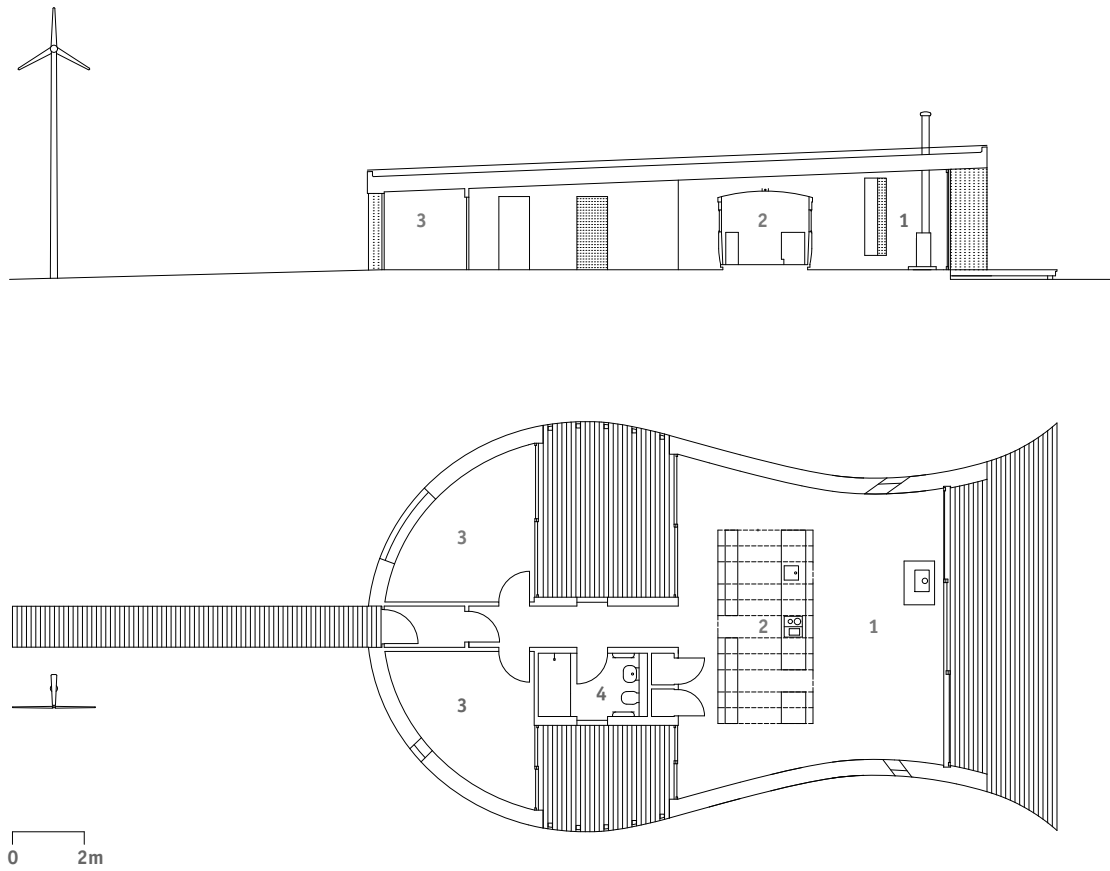


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Contemporary home

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- 1 Living area
- 2 Kitchen
- 3 Bedroom
- 4 Bathroom



Above: Long section and plan

Far right: Sliding glass opens onto a large deck

Right: The interior is faced with bare plywood

Below: The house has two sheltered courtyards – it is the only house in Dungeness to do so



El Ray that was properly made) is now the kitchen, containing new minimal working surfaces, cupboards and drawers. Around it is a minimal, elegant wooden building dramatically opened up to the elements; it has courtyards (the only ones in Dungeness) an all-glass wall facing the sea and a magnificent area of decking from which the whole of Dungeness can be surveyed, wind allowing. The feeling is of a glorified shed, but the glorification is winningly modest. The railway carriage has colour while the surrounds are muted. You're totally won over by the artful naturalness.

You slide back a vast series of windows and there's a panoramic sea view: clumps of reddish greenish kale, endless shingle, vast sky, strip of turquoise sea, white breakers perfectly imitating stylised impasto scrawls by Monet.

I enjoyed my day out with Conder: he's not immediately like the stereotype of an architect in that he's neither flamboyant nor egotistical. At least not outrageously egotistical; he's full of enjoyable fizz as a chatterbox. He's a Sixties-survivor, an old-time progressive. He wears old (well washed) clothes and trainers. It's only natural that he should be into sustainability and energy

efficiency. He says a lot of his most interesting projects since starting up his practice in 1984 (he spent years avoiding architecture, having trained at the AA and Royal College of Art) have been low budget.

His first Dungeness commission was five years ago. The fishermen's huts there tend to be black: wooden structures clad in roofing felt and tar. One of the beach bungalows is a dense black, as if paying homage to the fisherman aesthetic, which in fact it is – this is the black rubber house that Conder designed in 2003.

When the owners, an actor and a lawyer – who'd seen some of his stuff in London – asked him what he could do with their place, it was an accumulation of various kinds of cladding, of make-do repairs and period features. If you tried to remove one bit it all started to come unravelling. He decided to rebuild entirely, retaining only the house's old shed, which is now the entrance to the new house. The building is exactly the same size as before, and the line of the roof and the position of the chimney and front door all repeat the original, but otherwise it's a different structure. You come in the new door and pass through the old shed, >>

smelling vaguely and pleasantly of tar, and then you're in a new, modern place: all plain timber walls, carefully placed side windows and a wide-open beach front with a staggering view of the sea.

But the most striking feature is the exterior surface: black rubber made by a firm in Wales. Conder entered his requirements for the building's new cladding on the internet and this material came up, a synthetic widely used in the construction of roofs, reservoirs and in the car industry as connectors and conveyor belts. Since Conder made use of the material the Welsh firm has had constant requests for it from architects; they're so pleased with him they send his family hampers at Christmas.

He says cinema and music have been more influential on him than architecture, and in fact he's very distanced about architecture in his conversation – he knows which figures he likes, what the greatest buildings are for him – but he hates the idea of the routine of architecture. He wants it always to be a rebellion: do something, change something: make a difference.

He's just built a structure that he describes as a 'cave' for a project organised by the Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei: a hundred hot-shot figures designing buildings on a site in Inner Mongolia.

(Jacques Herzog of Herzog and de Meuron recommended Conder to Weiwei.) He was amazed at the creative freedom of some of the non-European figures he met out there, in particular a South American who was a rock star as well as architect.

I suppose he envies artists, but for me the envy is often the other way around. Contemporary art has become obsessed with a narrow range of challenges to itself: can this really be art – or this – or this? You become irritated with the nothingness after a while. Architecture now seems much more visual than art, and its ideas seem more like real ideas.

In fact if you're interested in materiality and making, El Ray, Conder's railway carriage house, is fantastic. The sheer delight of the contrast of the picturesque carriage, with its distressed surfaces and peeling blue paint, and the clean planes and lines surrounding it, is unforgettable. The effect is like Simon Starling's shed in the Turner Prize 2005, or Tracey Emin's beach hut in the Saatchi Collection. Only much better, because of the feeling that something aesthetically new has been made out of something that already feels right (the natural environment), as opposed to you having to scratch your head and pretend something important is happening ■

The lights of Dungeness power station glow behind the house with its railway sleeper pathway