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Born Again Barn

by Tony MacIntyre

Arriving at the barn is like coming upon a huge inverted Ark; a great heap of red tiles atop single-storey red-brick walls, with scarcely a window in them. It spoke – in the simple manner of the Kentish barn – the single word: shelter.

But of course it isn't the Ark. It's an old Kentish barn belonging to the architect's parents and converted by him into a comfortable and convenient house. The barn is big but not vast. Its useful floor area fast disappears above ground level, where the roof starts to close in, so that fitting a sophisticated house into it and preserving its 'barniness' is no mean achievement. Croft has done this with little stridency, and in a relaxed manner.

Enter the wide barn doors and your feet are adjusting to the ancient timber baulks that form the old roadway that still runs from one side of the building to the other. Ahead, through the opening on the far side, is a wonderfully ramshackle garden, bright vegetation framed in the dark woodiness of the passage. To the right is the untouched barn through enormous sliding doors. The only hint of a modern house here is over the doorway, where a neat white box, with a window in it, projects a little into the space: a new snout prodding into an old room.

Through the passage and into the other side of the barn, you are in the house – and a stylistically modern house, at that. Immediately you see that keeping the old cartway and part of the barn was a good architectural idea, because they contrast with the new interior so strongly that the house appears much more sophisticated than a barn conversion might otherwise seem. Inside, the structure has been preserved, and most of it exposed to view, a move that has in similar circumstances led to fussiness, and uncertainty about whether you are in a barn or a house. Here, by keeping enough of the original in its proper rustic state, you know when you enter at the front door that you are now definitely in a house.

Downstairs you encounter a small double-height sitting room, a dining room and other utility spaces. An elaborate stair winds upwards to the bedrooms and that English extravagance – a second sitting room – extending over the entrance passage, with a small inglenooks study at its far end: the box that sticks into the 'old barn'.

The interior is not made expressive by details or by materials. The gestures of the new work are, rather, a kind of stage scenery medievalism, with the upstairs drawing room given a gigantically high mantelshelf, and the first floor gallery turned into a sort of rampart.

If the barn is a beautiful 'given', the interior is perforce complete invention. The feel of the interior is kept ample by an open plan. The structure that the internal walls rest on is a new steel structure, the Old Barn having been left completely alone. But all the new work is hidden by plasterboard and paint. There are obvious reasons for this. So much is going on with the original structure that to elaborate another structural system within it would be immensely confusing and wearying. But then, hit the circular column in the sitting room with your knuckles – or someone else's if you can – and it rings very pleasantly: steel. There are so many ways of distinguishing materials, it seems a pity we should depend so much on our eyes. The barn has such a particular smell, it says things that purely visual 'architecture' cannot say.

Unfortunately you cannot publish the smell of damp wood and leather, or the sweet ring of steel.
And you need to be rained on a good bit, too, to feel the pleasure of a shelter like this.