

FLIGHT OF FANCY

THIS QUIRKY BUILD IS AN EXPLORATION OF NEW CONSTRUCTION POSSIBILITIES, AS WELL AS A COMPACT YET COMFORTABLE HOME

Photography Nigel Rigden
Words Catherine Coyle

Architecture is a serious business, but having an innate sense of fun certainly hasn't held Roderick James back. He and his practice have built more than a thousand houses during his long career, and over the last seven years he has been experimenting with designs that incorporate more than just four walls. He has created affordable homes on the west coast of Scotland built by ex-offenders, for example, as well as aluminium pods and cabins for off-grid living.

His latest build, the impressive and unusual Pilot House in Argyll, combines many of the ideas he has been exploring in recent years. Its design was inspired by an earlier house he'd built for himself on the west coast, Eagle Rock, whose sprawling elliptical shape exemplifies his playful approach, and by his inventive 2017 AirShip project – a modular aluminium-and-glass living pod that resembles a spacecraft and which can be easily dismantled and moved to a new site. The Pilot House was conceived by James and his wife, Amanda Markham, and built by him and their three sons, Dan, Sam and Woody, together with friends and local trades. It's a quirky design that's pared-back on the one hand and a tricky feat of engineering on the other, and all while taking full advantage of some incredible Scottish scenery.

"Amanda and I wanted a funky, idiosyncratic building with a powerful identity," explains the architect. "We wanted to create a structure that built on the aesthetic of the AirShip 002, but which took the glazing and insulation to a whole new level."

The design was inspired by the conning tower of a ship or a submarine – a raised section (often visible above the water line on the latter) that serves as a viewing platform of sorts. During their planning, the ►



DETAILS

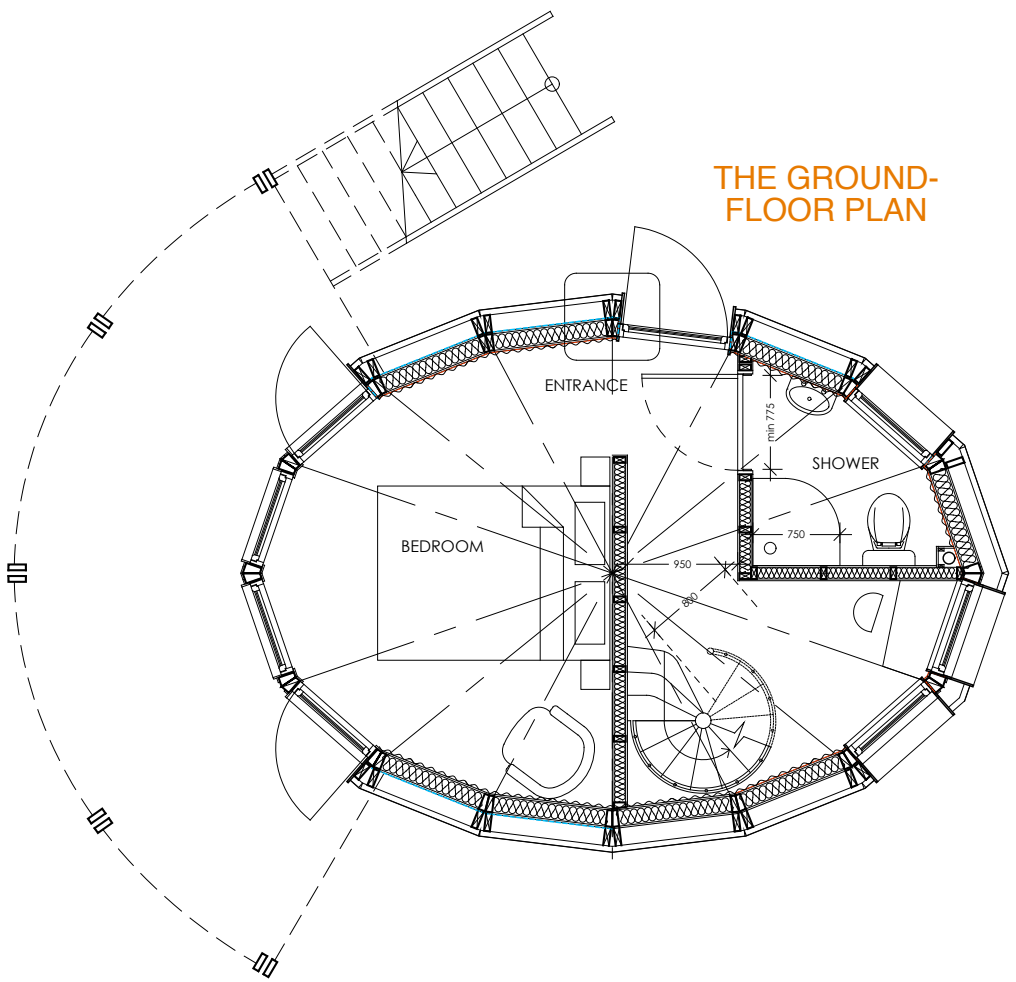
What A one-bedroom new-build home

Where Argyll

Architect Roderick James Architects LLP
Structural engineer Cowal Design Ltd



[Above] The Pilot House shows off its influences in the form of Navy-style lettering and balustrades, along with tapering metal sides. The exterior aluminium is by BSS Stainless. The steps lead up to the living room and its deck, with the bedroom and shower-room tucked away downstairs



couple discovered that this part of a vessel is often referred to as a pilot house. “What we ended up with is an amalgamation of those two concepts,” he says.

As both client and architect, James was able to work at his own pace, developing the idea away from the stress of a deadline-driven project. The four-acre plot enjoys some of the most spectacular scenery in the country, and the Pilot House, looking like a swish bird-watching hide too smart to camouflage, sits in a secluded spot tucked out of sight behind trees and shrubbery, taking in views out beyond Ardnamurchan Point to the Atlantic.

“The response to our AirShip 002 was so positive that we decided to work with aluminium again,” says the architect. The new house’s shiny metal cladding shimmers, reflecting back the ever-changing sea and sky. It doesn’t just look good, though: aluminium is incredibly hardwearing and requires little in the way of maintenance. The building’s SIP core (structural insulated panels) was craned into position and the aluminium sheets were then screwed into place. “The narrow-gauge corrugated aluminium that’s used inside (supplied by Gooding Aluminium) is a complete success, and we’d originally intended to use standard corrugated aluminium outside, too.

“However, the importance of the gently sloping walls, tapered towards the top, made this impractical, so we used flat aluminium sheets instead. The taper is very important; it softens the lines and helps to sit the building in the landscape.”

Indeed, working with curves has become something of a passion for James, ►



[Left] A model Sopwith Camel biplane from the Conran Shop swoops out of the blue-sky ceiling. The ceiling is slightly tilted, the footprint is an ellipse and the walls taper inwards towards the top: "We've become so accustomed to living in houses with square walls," says the architect. The interior is kept cosy thanks to Kastrup triple-glazing throughout and a Clearview logburner. Next to the latter is a circular table made by the owner from a cable drum offcut. The Spitfire leather armchairs are from Modish Living. **[Right]** The ground-floor entrance. The Air Force/Navy theme continues here in the form of prints and painted stripes. **[Below]** As well as the exterior stairs, the two floors are linked by this internal spiral staircase. The corrugated metal on the walls was supplied by Gooding Aluminium



“ARCHITECTURE SHOULD HAVE A SENSE OF ADVENTURE, BUT IT ALSO HAS TO BE COMFORTABLE”

[Right] Like a well-fitted-out vessel, every corner of this compact interior is put to good use. The office has a built-in desk with inspirational views through the double windows. [Below] The same timber has been used for the kitchen. Its simple curve contains all the essentials for two people to prep ingredients and cook in comfort. The dining table, just visible, was handmade by the architect and his sons from torched Douglas fir. [Opposite] The timber-lined bedroom feels deceptively spacious thanks to mirrored panels and floor-to-ceiling windows



following the realisation that rounded shapes offer a cosiness and warmth that straight-forward rectilinear buildings don't always possess. "They're wonderful to be in," he agrees. "We've become so accustomed to living in square rooms, believing that furniture will only sit against walls, but this house shows this is not the case."

Two people can live comfortably here. "It's a compact house that's only as big as it needs to be," he says. On the ground floor is a small study, a double bedroom and a shower-room with WC. The first-floor living space has a galley kitchen and a dining area, with seating facing out past the terrace to the views. A roof-light and lots of windows bring in plenty of natural daylight, making the diminutive interior feel deceptively spacious. For extra cosiness, a Clearview woodburning stove serves as a focal point once night falls, and there's a well-stocked log store – wood is the primary heat source here.

James always puts sustainability at the heart of what he creates, and this house is no ►

exception. It's well insulated and airtight, the plentiful windows (all triple-glazed) ensure useful solar gain, and there are plans to add photovoltaic panels.

In all their projects, James and Markham attack the interior design together, creating pared-back yet luxurious schemes that allow the architecture to speak for itself. They also show an admirable eye for a theme, without falling into pastiche. Here, leather armchairs by Modish Living are comfortable and will weather well; decorative propellers are from Flightstore, and the Sopwith Camel model plane was a Conran Shop find.

Having a family workforce made the project exciting, and James and his creative kids worked hard to bring every element of this unusual build to life. The circular side tables have been fashioned from cable drum offcuts from another job ("We couldn't find what we were looking for, so I made these"), while the dining table was handmade from torched Douglas fir.

"Being your own client makes the whole process far more relaxing," he concludes. "Architecture should be fun and should have a sense of adventure, but it also has to be comfortable." ■



[Below] The deck looks out across the hills towards the Atlantic.

[Above] A bright spot of colour from a vintage petrol pump gifted to the architect by his son

