

### Oliver Draycott finds a party animal in a tranquil setting

**F**inding your way to Janice Gordon's house in summer you must feel a bit like the White Rabbit disappearing down his mystical tunnel. It's set at the bottom of one of those deep, steep Devon lanes where the trees meet overhead, casting a curious dappled pattern of light and shade that somehow gives you a weird sense of disorientation. It feels like the back of beyond, yet it's only four minutes by car to the nearest shop and almost exactly midway between Kingsbridge and Totnes. No wonder Janice and her husband, Andrew, fell in love with the place and bought it three-and-a-half years ago. It's the sort of house that Janice's clients drool over. She is a Home Search Consultant, one of those lucky people who get to trawl through the county's finest properties on behalf of people who want to move down here but are too busy themselves to spare the time it takes to find what they are really looking for. For someone whose passion is property it must be a dream of a job, but there is a strange dichotomy in the household in that, whereas

Janice concentrates on bringing people into the county, her husband is involved in a business which takes people away: he works for Western Air Travel (out of another converted barn somewhere locally), selling flights to places all around the world: one brings them in, the other ships them out. Be that as it may, there is certainly no conflict in the home – and why would there be in a place as serene and relaxing as this?

Quite apart from the fact that Janice and her husband also dabble in speculative development in Plymouth, Janice finds herself seduced by property: she bought her first when she was only 21 years old. This is the seventh house she has owned (and the third in Devon since she moved down here from London's Fleet Street 11 years ago) and she's gone through the whole gamut of styles and periods. This latest is contemporary chic and, before she bought, it had been one of the properties on her books which she had researched for a couple of clients who then variously decided not to proceed further or who could not raise the capital. So she and Andrew decided to buy.

"In a way, I suppose it was meant to be, because of the circumstances," she said. "This is the first contemporary house we've had and we find it a very relaxing environment. Being a barn conversion, I think it was quite brave of the developer who converted it to go for contemporary, because when you think of barn conversions you normally think in terms of oak beams and heavy architecture."

That couldn't be further from the case here. You wouldn't actually guess it was a barn. It feels more like a London loft or a dockland warehouse conversion without the industrial architecture. The light and space is incredible. "It is a very airy house, being completely open-plan," Janice said. "And, with windows on every side of the property, we get the sun all day long." It does feel as if the house gets more than its fair share of light. It was a dull midday at the tail end of January when I met Janice, yet it seemed much brighter inside than it did out, without a single artificial light on – apart from the accent lighting winding its way through an arrangement of branches in the huge lounge, which stretches almost the full length of the building.

# 'Barn' to be wild



# Through the Keyhole

There are two large communal areas in this house, one on the ground floor which, designed as a lounge, Janice and her husband now use as a dining room, and the space on the first floor which they now treat as the lounge. "Although we have underfloor heating throughout, we decided we wanted to have some sort of fire as a focal point to the sitting area. Rather than take chimney flues through the upstairs floor and disrupt the heating lines, we decided to move the sitting area upstairs." It was an inspired decision. The resulting focal point of the lounge now is an ornate cast-iron stove, set off-kilter to the rest of the room on a huge marble slab which gives it an added interest – as if it needed any, because it is a dramatic enough feature in its own right. The barn is between 200 and 300 years old, Janice told me, and the stove dates from much the same period, although it is from Denmark, courtesy of a firm in Dartmouth which specialises in importing fireplaces from all over the world and exporting them again, mainly to America. "When we saw it, it was in bits and completely rusty," Janice said, "but I knew it was just what I was looking for. We had looked at contemporary fireplaces to complement the look of the house, but when they're not lit I find that the modern look can be quite harsh and aggressive. This old cast-iron stove looks pretty all the time, even when it's not lit, and it goes with the décor perfectly."

The décor itself is universally white, another factor that plays its part in the light and airy feel of the house, accentuated by the height of kitchen area which extends all the way up to the roof. Although it is a contemporary house, it can by no stretch of the imagination be termed minimalist. "In fact, I would hate to have an absolute minimal look to the place," Janice said. "I like a house to be a home and I do find minimalism terribly daunting and uncomfortable. I like my friends to feel that they can relax here." The overwhelming impression, emphasised by the striking stove, is sculptural, influenced by Janice's taste in artwork which is liberally scattered throughout, culled from various quarters. This gives it a cosmopolitan look, in no small measure influenced by the many properties that have passed through her hands in one way or another.

"You do get to see all sorts of décor ideas in my line of work and you get to know what works and what doesn't, although in the end it all comes down to personal taste really. I'm looking for something quite wacky and dramatic for the kitchen window at the moment," she said, "although I don't quite know what yet." This window is one set at a high level above the kitchen units and a space that is home, at Christmas-time, to a decorated and lighted tree. Levels are such that it appears part of the upstairs lounge and is one of the playful aspects of a property such as this, where space is there to be explored and used to its best advantage. Windows in the lounge are all Velux, with no direct views, a consideration, Janice thinks, of planning requirements, although she is about to test the theory with an application for a balcony approached from another Velux-type window. Lack of a direct view from the lounge in no way detracts from the enjoyment of the space, however, and is more than compensated for by the views from the four bedroom windows on the lower floor, which look out over various aspects of the garden.

The house itself is approached through the garden, a natural amphitheatre. In January it wasn't looking its best. "But in summer it's gorgeous," Janice enthused. "We've gone for a Mediterranean feel, which I know is not the traditional look for a Devon valley, but we had a lot of old rubble from the demolition and building works that we've put to good use in constructing the beds. In fact, it took Andrew months to clear away all the rubble because when we moved in, which was shortly after building works had finished, it looked like a builders' yard. Now it is totally transformed from what it was. It's very much a gardener's valley here. A friend across the way, who is one of the gardeners at Sharpham, is helping us put the garden together, because it's still very much work in progress, and there's another horticulturalist living here who is about to throw her garden open to the public in the summer."

There exists here what most garden designers sweat buckets over creating: a picturesque ruin. This is actually the shell of another barn that used to adjoin the house in its days as a cattle barn, but which fell into ruination over the years. Today it is the focal point of the garden and scene of many a summer's barbecue and light-night partying, but it very nearly never made it. The builders were just about to take a sledgehammer to it when the developer stopped them just in the nick of time. It's the sort of construction for which anyone who is into outdoor living would give not only their own eye-teeth but those of their guests. Sheltered by two-and-a-bit walls, with nightlights let into the holes left behind by

The open-plan space on the first floor is now used as a lounge





rafters, you only have to close your eyes to imagine a sophisticated al fresco dinner party taking place here, as well as something a good deal louder involving lights and music. "You can make practically as much noise as you like down here without bothering anyone," Janice told me. "That makes it ideal for a party house, and the open-plan layout couldn't have been designed better in that respect. I love cooking and you can be in the kitchen and still be chatting to your friends up in the lounge who might be looking out over the kitchen area. Open plan is made primarily for interaction and communication."

If there is a drawback to an open-plan house such as this, it is a certain lack of privacy – apart, of course, from the bedrooms. Although the property is large enough for isolation in either of the two main areas, the layout means that any music that is playing permeates throughout. It's a factor of open-plan living that has to be considered, particularly if musical tastes in a family differ wildly, and there is always music of some sort playing softly in the background here. As a party house there's not a lot of risk from spillages on the carpets, because there aren't any – in the main communal area at least, which is fully decked out with laminate flooring. Minimalist the house may not be, but there is certainly minimal upkeep. Janice and Andrew do much of work on the house themselves, apart from plumbing and electrical work. They're quite into DIY and there is another element of self-sustainability in that the property has its own water supply from a bore-hole, and very nice it is too, apparently. In fact, the only mains service that is laid on here is electricity.

Another feature of the garden is a 'tree' house; in reality a playhouse on stilts located in a field belonging to the property on the other side of the drive. "We had 20 children here the other week for a birthday party and they had a fantastic time." I suspect that even the furthest neighbour might have heard just a smidgen of noise from that event, hidden away and secret though the house may be in its isolated valley. □

PHOTOS: NEVILLE STANIKK





This picture The house is completely open-plan