

Low impact living wins the day

A planning success that could spell good news for low impact fans everywhere

At Karuna, a permaculture project in Shropshire, December 16th 2011 was a great day. Merav and Janta Wheelhouse, and their sons Caio and Soma, were granted planning permission for a low impact dwelling adjacent to their forest garden.



The Council's decision was a milestone for the couple, who had bought 18 acres of land near Picklescott, between Ludlow and Shrewsbury in 2005. They started by planting three separate woodlands (over 9 acres). There are now over 8,000 trees planted, including many traditional fruit trees. The project exists to demonstrate sustainable land management and it is one of the LAND Centres, in the network of projects considered to be great examples of permaculture in practice. Karuna is open to the public and, in addition to the regular courses held on all aspects of permaculture, they sell fruit trees and other products from the land.

Merav and Janta had outbid local landowners at the original auction for the land – the farmers, it seems, were unwilling to pay the higher price that the Wheelhouses realised the land was potentially worth for the organic agroforestry business they planned. It was more than a business opportunity, though, as they put it; “the land seemed to be beckoning to be loved and also, with so little tree cover in the area, was calling for trees.”

The project, named Karuna, the Sanskrit word for compassion, began with the planting of 6000 trees over the first two years, during which time the couple rented a house nearby. Once the trees were planted, work started

on the orchards, vegetable and horticultural areas, plant nurseries, and forest gardens. At this point Karuna began to need some structures.

Normally, as Janta says, any agri-business of more than 5 hectares (around 12 acres) is allowed a shed and polytunnel under the permitted development rights. However, each time Karuna applied, even for a polytunnel, open storage barn, or workshop they were refused by the local planners and had to appeal. Permission was granted, but not before a lengthy and exhausting struggle for each structure. Even worse, after the first structure, a pole barn, was finally approved retrospectively, crops and equipment were attacked – over 100 trees were poisoned, gates torn off their hinges, tools and eggs stolen, and even the mail box and Karuna sign smashed.

Consequently, in order to protect their land and property, in September 2007 the family moved to Karuna, living in an old showman's caravan. They were onsite and able to take better care of the ducks, chickens, fruit and vegetables, and could work in the gardens as and when the weather permitted. Travelling was reduced too. Yet within 24 hours they had a visit from the planning enforcement officers, who were responding to complaints from neighbours. So the family began the long battle to establish their right to live on their land. >>

Comments from the designer

Getting Karuna through the planning system meant jumping a whole series of hurdles.

The policy which made it all possible is designed primarily to ease the shortage of 'affordable' (cheap) houses in the countryside. This shortage is caused by the relentless rise in rural house prices, under pressure from affluent incomers, and because few new rural houses get built. A whole generation of younger agricultural and other workers, on low incomes, now commute from towns because they can't afford rural houses. The policy is called 'Build Your Own Affordable Home - Single Plot Exception Sites'. It originated in South Shropshire in 2006, and now covers all the county, also attracting interest from other authorities. To qualify, applicants have to pass tests of their need, and local connection. In the case of Karuna, we argued that living on site was necessary to enable the project to continue and flourish, and that no suitable affordable houses were available nearby. Local connections were demonstrated by their residence for 5 years. Over the first hurdle.

The policy allows single houses to be built adjacent to, rather than within villages - Karuna just qualified. Houses have to be sympathetically designed for its setting. On this, I argued that the local building vernacular was not relevant, as no other buildings were visible. The materials surrounding the location are trees, plants, grass and earth. What could be more appropriate than a building made from straw, timber, sand and lime, with grass on its roof? Other conditions were easier - high energy efficiency, exacting standards of design, and so on.

Incidentally, a formula is used which values the house at around 60% of its open market value, which is then legally locked in. The house remains affordable and available to local people, forever. We also had to justify building in a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The big surprise here was that the South Shropshire Hills AONB policy was totally supportive. The last hurdle: a councillor who would probably have voted against was off sick. Phew! In by a casting vote.

Philip Pool

They were issued with an enforcement notice, so they appealed and a four day public inquiry was held in 2008. The inquiry was immensely hard work. There was lots of paper work involved, including producing business and management plans. They went on a course to help with these through Business Link. They brought in speakers to support their case. However they lost the appeal and were given one year to find different accommodation off site. They appealed to the High Court, and following two appearances in London, they were still refused permission and were required to leave the site by September 2011.

Fortunately, however, soon after the second High Court appearance, a friend had planning permission approved for an affordable home in north Shropshire. She encouraged Merav and Janta to try using the new county policy; 'Build your own affordable home: single plot exception sites'. This

is a unique and forward looking, recently implemented, Shropshire policy which enables local people in need to build an affordable house in locations that would not normally be permitted for the open market.

The couple applied successfully to the housing enabling officer, demonstrating a strong local connection and local need for an affordable house in this location. This was on the basis of living and working locally for the past four years, plus having children in the local school. A site meeting was then held with the area manager/planning officer regarding the exact location and general appearance of the building.

There is no 'low impact planning policy' in Shropshire, as



MATERIALS

Roof: turf

Plinth walls: stone

Walls above plinth: lime-rendered strawbale construction to main building; and cordwood walls to lobby and store, framed with larch posts.

Verandah: glazed roof supported by larch posts.

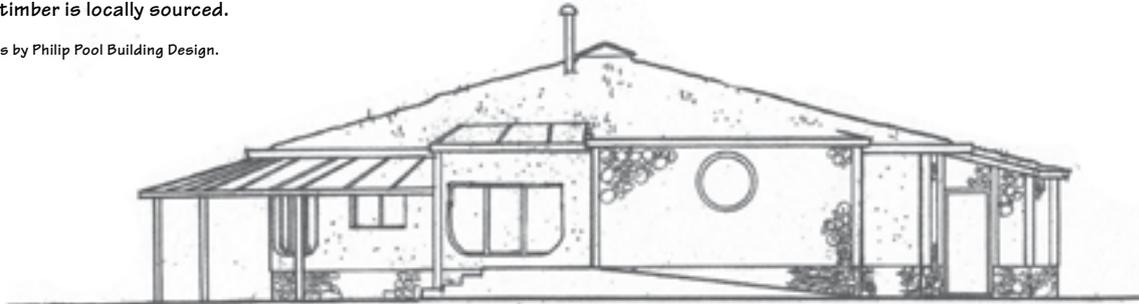
Door and window frames: timber.

All timber is locally sourced.

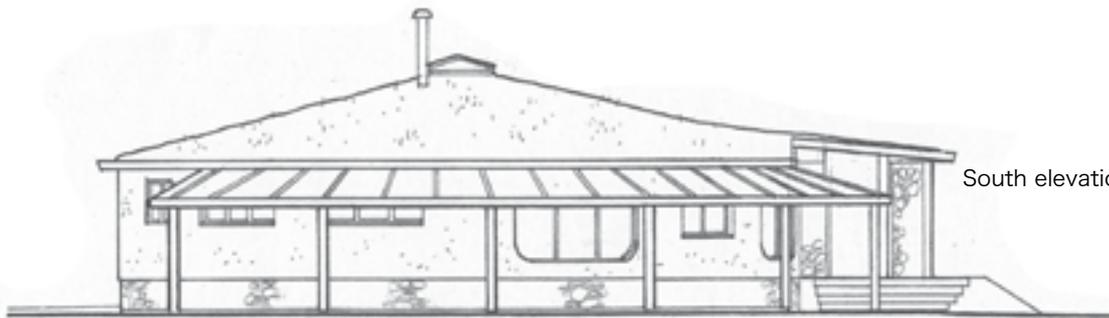
Plans by Philip Pool Building Design.

Being fully compliant with building regulations, the proposed new building at Karuna (a straw bale, cordwood and turf roofed roundhouse) will be a low impact, affordable model for self builders. Through years of hard work and commitment Karuna is now an asset and example of alternative land use actively changing many peoples' lives in both town and country. Because the building will be located at this permaculture demonstration site, visitors will continue to be involved and inspired. You can take an active part: visit www.karuna.org.uk

All photos courtesy of Janta Wheelhouse.



East elevation



South elevation

there is in Wales, for example, but nevertheless, Janta and Merav felt that explaining to the planners from the outset that they wished to build a (straw bale) low impact house probably helped in getting the permission. "There was a kind of understanding that a normal build was not going to be sought here. It would be fitting in with the demonstration site, the permaculture project".

Karuna falls within an area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB). The AONB 2009 management plan supports 'Low impact forms of development, especially where they are associated with sustainable lifestyles, including low energy and resource use/small scale land management using sustainable approaches to food or wood production, and with community or educational uses. Although in previous years the AONB had been used as a reason to refuse permission for structures at Karuna, this time the AONB supported the application, which now 'ticked the right boxes'.

The next step was submitting the actual planning application. All the pre-application talks were very helpful and resulted in an application that the planning officers were able to recommend for approval. Philip Pool, Karuna's agent, had already been granted planning permission for a straw bale office just a few miles away. The submitted-

design of the roundhouse at Karuna was the result of collaboration between Pool and the Wheelhouses. The family are hoping to commence work on the building soon and they say; "A big thank you to all who have offered to come over and get involved at certain stages of the development, where many hands will undoubtedly make light work (lots of fun and cider of course) - we look forward to that. At last we have experienced some forward thinking from within Shropshire County Council and we hope that future dealings with the council will be met with mutual respect and understanding."

Story by Olwyn Pritchard

For more details on the Karuna project and how you can be involved visit www.karuna.org.uk There is more information about the planning process at www.karuna.org.uk/index.php?pageid=20 and a blog at <http://karunaroots.wordpress.com>

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