



The farmhouse is the source of a very particular and special kind of affection. It speaks of a rural idyll, closely connected to the landscape, with a sensitivity of design that seeks to tie it both to the countryside and to history, through a respect for traditional materials and vernacular influences. It also embodies many characteristics and qualities that are deeply enticing, including the open kitchen and the all-important fireplace as a focal point for family living – as well as a lack of pretension and a relaxed charm that are highly endearing.

But that's not to say that the farmhouse is purely a period gem, tied to another age. Architects, designers and their clients are increasingly looking to it as a source of inspiration for a new generation of country homes that have a sense of warmth and character, as well as a contextual sensitivity that links them to their rural settings. At the same time, many period farmhouses and their surrounding buildings are being reinvented as contemporary homes, with an emphasis on open-plan living and up-to-date comforts. The modern farmhouse offers one of the most compelling ways of life

This picture: Kinderhook Retreat, created by architect Steven Harris and interior designer Lucien Rees Roberts, on a hilltop overlooking the Catskill and Berkshire Mountains in New York state

BOLD COMFORT FARM

Of its time but rooted within a rustic architectural heritage – the modern farmhouse is a compelling way of life for those who yearn for the rural idyll reinterpreted in a crisp, contemporary way, says Dominic Bradbury

for those who value not only the countryside, but also space, freedom and easy informality.

Architect Lucy Marston has just completed a new-build farmhouse (pictured overleaf) in Suffolk for herself, her husband, Robert, and their two sons, at a cost of £556,000. Situated on the edge of open farmland, it replaces three small, derelict cottages and sits alongside some long, low barns, which have been updated as games rooms and studio spaces. The design is a reinterpretation of the Suffolk long house – little more than one room deep through much of the building – and makes the most of the views out across the pastures. It is timber-framed, with a pitched, tiled roof and rustic-brick walls – traditional materials, but used in a contemporary way.

“I wanted to build a house that felt ‘at home’ on the farm,” says Marston. “It was important that it felt as though it belonged with the group of existing structures, so familiar vernacular building elements and materials were used, but they were detailed in a crisp, modern way and composed to create a house that is clearly of its time but that also feels established.”

Inside, a similar design philosophy has been applied, with farmhouse staples rethought for the here and now. One end of the house is devoted to a large kitchen, which has been given an open-plan layout incorporating sofas, a fireplace and sliding glass doors that lead out onto an adjoining terrace. “Everything



Farmhouses with ancillary buildings that allow space for swimming pools, guest houses or work studios are a particular draw to people looking for flexibility in the way they live



here really revolves around the kitchen, so it suits our family life,” says Marston. “There is a simplicity and an honest character to the house, with the exposed brickwork, a large inglenook fireplace in the sitting room and the exposed ceiling beams. They all give depth and character to a modern home.”

English architect James Gorst also seeks a blend of modern and traditional elements in his work, and is best known for creating a series of contemporary rural homes that have a sense of connection with the landscape and hold thoughtful echoes of the past.

Among his latest projects is a new farmhouse in Northamptonshire (pictured overleaf) that has just won planning permission under Paragraph 55 of the new English National Planning Policy Framework, which allows for one-off country houses as long as their design is “of exceptional quality or innovative nature”.

Set within a working deer farm of 250 acres, the new house (similar projects cost from about £4m) will consist of a small collection of interrelated structures and volumes, as well as other new farm buildings, including a substantial barn. Gorst will use a locally



Main picture and top left: BarlisWedlick's contemporary Hudson farmhouse, which has achieved Passive House status for its energy efficiency. Far left: the dining area at Kinderhook Retreat, with sliding doors that allow the space to be opened to the outdoors



Left and below right: architect Lucy Marston's contemporary farmhouse in Suffolk. Below left: rendering of a new-build farmhouse and ancillary buildings in Northamptonshire, designed by architect James Gorst

Creating open spaces and reinforcing the relationship between indoor and outdoor living lies at the heart of many current updates of period farmhouses



sourced honey-coloured stone for the walls, the prominent chimneys and the roof slates, helping to give a seamless, sculptural quality to the various different elements that form the design. And as well as a generous open-plan living space with soaring ceilings, there will be a swimming-pool pavilion, while landscaping by Dan Pearson will work with the existing topography to make a feature of the lake in front of the building.

"We sought to make it a contemporary house but with qualities that echo earlier, vernacular forms of architecture, through the materials, the pitched roof and the nature of the construction," says Gorst. "But there are little shifts and distortions that stop it from just being an exercise in copying 19th-century farm buildings – the roof pitches are asymmetrical and the geometry has little twists to it. If you came across a

19th-century complex of mill buildings around a stream, you might see similar combinations of volumes and roof pitches and the big chimneys, but the openness of the plan and many other aspects make it modern."

For Gorst, it was partly the compound nature of the project and the chance to design a collection of complementary structures that made it so engaging. Farmhouses with ancillary buildings that allow space for swimming pools, guest houses or work studios are a particular draw to people looking for flexibility in the way they live, and allow them to enjoy a range of different experiences within one property.

"It gives the architect a chance to create a village in miniature, where there's a strong relationship between the main farmhouse and the attendant structures," Gorst says. "So you are making not just a house, but a

little settlement, which is a very enjoyable process. The minor buildings can be used architecturally as a preamble to the major building."

Over in the US, architect Steven Harris and his partner, British-born interior designer Lucien Rees Roberts, created a pair of complementary buildings known as Kinderhook Retreat, on a hilltop within 40 acres of land between the Catskill Mountains and the Berkshires in New York state. The two post-and-beam structures (pictured on opening pages; similar projects cost from about \$2.5m) stand out on the hilltop and have a strong flavour of modernity, and yet the materials and the correlation between the two structures are strongly reminiscent of traditional farm buildings and the kind of relationship one might see between a farmhouse and a barn. The first was completed in 1992 and now incorporates a living space and a painting studio; the second, which is larger, was finished in 2009 and accommodates the kitchen, dining area and bedrooms. Both offer carefully edited views of the landscape and look down onto a large lawn. "The shape of the buildings evokes the idea of a barn, as does the



“My approach has been to combine historic and modern elements in a way that enhances the innate beauty of each by virtue of its contrast with the other”

Top: the swimming-pool and terrace at Shawn Levy’s barn conversion in New Paltz, New York state. Left: the living area in Levy’s property, with Pietra d’Istria stone flooring and original wooden features

shingle cladding and the sliding barn-style doors on the newest house,” says Rees Roberts. “For me, the most pleasing part about them both is their relationship to the landscape, which is always accessible from the comfort of the buildings themselves. The dining room [pictured on second spread] is the most special place for this reason, as the sliding doors allow for the space to be totally open to the outdoors.”

Sustainability, as well as a contextually sensitive design, were key considerations for architectural firm BarlisWedlick when it conceived and built a new farmhouse for a client in the Hudson Valley, New York state (similar projects cost from about \$650,000). The practice is responsible for a number of country houses, of which the Hudson house (pictured on second spread)

is one of the most dramatic. At first glance, the outward form of the building has the look of a traditional farmhouse, with its stone walls and steeply pitched roof. Yet a vast wall of glass encases one entire end of the house, bringing light and warmth into the double-height, open-plan living area, which is overlooked by a mezzanine gallery. The house also incorporates glazing and insulation to Passive House standards – an international benchmark applied to buildings with very low levels of energy consumption.

“The project embodies the ambition to create a modern and sustainable farmhouse,” says architect Alan Barlis. “It became the first certified Passive House in New York state and set national records for performance. It was very important that the house be

in harmony with the surrounding landscape and the historical buildings that define this rural area. But the wall of windows is very contemporary, as well as a key factor in the performance of the house in terms of solar-heat gain, and inside, the house is very open, almost loft-like, which suits the way our clients live today.”

Creating more open spaces, as well as reinforcing the relationship between indoor and outdoor living, lies at the heart of many current updates of period farmhouses. One couple, who prefer to remain anonymous, moved back to the US with their family after 15 years of living in the Netherlands and bought a small collection of farm buildings in rural Connecticut. Chief among them was a 1930s hunting lodge that had been extended in the 1950s. The couple enlisted design practice Uxus to devise a more fluid and open layout, while creating interiors with a fresh, European influence that blends period and modern elements.

A series of interconnected living spaces was instated at the heart of the house, with the lightest of borders between them formed by latticed bookcases or different floor levels. The central element remains the sitting area around a large stone fireplace, with new windows added on either side, increasing the sense of light and space. The furniture and lighting are a mixture of family pieces, bespoke elements and items by Moooi, Piet Hein Eek and other European designers.

“We really wanted an escape,” say the couple, who are now looking at converting the barn into an office



Left: the wood-burning pizza oven and chimney in Tom Givone's Floating Farmhouse. Bottom: the exterior with its cantilevered porch

designers have made upscale but totally liveable," says Levy. "And we adore spending summer days out by the pool. It's a beautifully designed house. But it is first and foremost a family home."

Another renovation project, also in upstate New York, saw architectural designer Tom Givone radically reinvent a crumbling 200-year-old farmhouse. The project, which cost \$750,000, features a dramatic contrast between old and new. Period details sit alongside modern interventions, such as a wood-burning pizza oven in the open-plan kitchen and dining room (pictured left), which is integrated into the existing chimney and faced with a surface of rusting Corten steel. The room, with its high ceilings and floors in polished concrete, ends in a vast wall of glass offering views of the woods, the original barns and the smokehouse. Outside, a new cantilevered porch (pictured below) projects outwards over the surface of a small river, giving the house its name – the Floating Farmhouse.

"My approach has been to combine historic and modern elements in a way that enhances the innate beauty of each by virtue of its contrast with the other," says Givone, who now rents the house to holidaying guests. "The Floating Farmhouse has really been one big experiment in how opposites attract. For me, part of what makes farmhouses so appealing is the economy of design and the honesty of the materials. It's the same kind of simplicity I find so appealing in modern design. That's why combining the two, if done thoughtfully, makes for such a seamless fit." ♦

MODERN FARMING

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and guest quarters. "The house is very private and we are surrounded by conservation land and woods. As you enter the sitting room it has such a welcoming feel. It was quite rustic to start with, but we put more windows in, added more light and more in the way of contemporary design. It's so relaxed here now."

Establishing a stronger relationship between the inside and outside living space was a particular priority for Bonetti/Kozerski Studio when it was asked to rethink a farmhouse in New Paltz, New York, for film director Shawn Levy and his family, who use the property as an escape from their life in Los Angeles. The house (pictured on previous page) consisted of a barn that had been rebuilt in the 1970s and then renovated again in the 1990s. The new incarnation (similar projects cost about \$7,500 per sq m) involved a paring down of superfluous elements to reveal the essence of the building and its characterful timber frame. "As we subtracted parts of the existing building, we were able to improve the physical and visual flow of the space through to the outside," says Dominic Kozerski. "Although the main floor was reimagined as a largely open-plan space, we worked hard to give each area its own identity, while a single sweep of Pietra d'Istria stone unites the barn and the terrace. We also did a lot of editing of the landscape to open up the views of the mountains."

The easy relationship between the indoor and outdoor areas is now a defining feature of the house. "We love the elegance of the space and the decor, which the



SCOTT FRANCES (2); PETER ARON (3); JACK HOBHOUSE (2); JAMES GORST ARCHITECTS LTD.; LUCA PIOLTELLI (2); MARK MHAINEY; © TOMMASO FONDI

WEB EDIT

TAGS

PRIMARY TAG (IT'S "HOME" ON THE SITE, PREF A SUB-SECTION): ARCHITECTURE
TOP-LEVELS TAGS: HOUSE & GARDEN
SUB-SECTION TAGS: ARCHITECTURE
GENDER: M,F

DESCRIPTIVE TAGS

COUNTRY HOUSES, RURAL, ARCHITECTS