

## GRAND DESIGNS REVISITED

**Right, the Perry family in their future living room. The ceiling is the underside of the inverted roof. Centre, the roof is supported by six external, vertical, tapering steel columns, inspired by Mies van der Rohe. Below, the modest caravan in which the Perrys now live until construction is over**



'imself as chief contractor and site manager, all in nine months?' Madness! But, like any Greek tragedy, it wasn't entirely his fault. The gods were having a laugh, too. The broken feet, twisted ankles, circular saw accidents, the diabetes, the rain that cruelly fell when the roof finally arrived. Kick a man when he's down... Tom was a very human hero and, like any hero, he never gave up.

Tom Perry clammers up into the caravan that's been the family home since October 2003. He's wearing a Cloud 8 sweatshirt emblazoned with, 'Come and ask me about that roof!' So I do. 'Careful – that's a very loaded question,' he warns. The roof, he says, still niggles him. It's covered in damp damage, though he's about to get busy with some nice veneer, despite, of course, never having tackled the tricky business of veneering before. But it would be cruel to prick his confidence yet again.

The house is, at least and at last, watertight, complete with walls and glass. It looks good. He takes me to the edge of the garden to gaze at it glowing in the twilight. 'I come out here when I'm seriously pissed off. Now, isn't that lovely?' It is. He darts inside, showing off various tricks and his 'gorgeous' steel windows that open on to the countryside. He marches out an imaginary furniture floor plan, partly, I suspect, to keep his hopes up. 'This is where the breakfast bar will be. The sun comes up in the east and hits you on the back. What a way to start the day!' He and Judy are even talking floor coverings and paint swatches. The house may be surrounded by mud from the Battle of the Somme, but Tom's eyes are on the Arne Jacobsen lights he's ordering, the doorknobs he's 'fallen in love with' and the 'desperately sexy' sofa in the pipeline, should Fate not intervene.

Which, of course, it will. That bad luck keeps on coming, as if Tom's built his house on some ancient druid burial ground and seriously annoyed the ghouls. Every day brings a new woe. Today the fridge door in the caravan has come off. A few weeks ago the pipes froze and burst.

Judy has lost 70 per cent of her hearing. And then there was the incident with the broken wastepipe on new year's day. 'The children were asking, "Why is mummy crying?"' Judy recounts. 'That was really the last straw.' I have the impression there have been many last straws. Living in the caravan is stressful. The fetching Formica, a symphony in caramel and beige, and very un-hi-tech mod cons seem to mock the half-baked *grand projet* 10 metres away. At least it's cosy. 'The children can hear Tom snoring.' Aaah.

So, the big question: when will it be finished? I expect the usual 'Oh, three months or so.' But no. 'Have I got the oomph to finish it?' asks Tom, downcast. 'I really question it. I really do.' Tom has industrial reserves of get up and go, but even these, he admits, are depleted these days. He suffers 'near permanent tiredness', and has come a long way from the preening arrogance of the first show's opening bars. He is, if not humbled, then certainly older and wiser, admitting he was far too confident for an 'amateur'. 'Sometimes I'm terribly unreasonable. But I get some lovely emails. They're all probably saying, "What a complete \*\*\*\*", on the side, but if I saw someone doing this, I'd think, "What a pillock", too.' He cheers up a bit. 'In 100 years this will be extraordinary. Right now it's a Liz Taylor and Richard Burton relationship. There are days when I could knock the bloody thing down. But I went straight to Formula One. No wonder I came off track every now and again. Thankfully there have been people to get me back on track. And look at the Scottish Parliament building. That's



10 times over budget, years late. I've worked out I'm way ahead of their schedule. Pro rata.'

Tom would make a fantastic TV champion for modern architecture, a kind of anti-Prince of Wales. Here's a man who looks like he should be living under quaint pitched roofs, wearing golf slacks, yet he's more radical than many half his age. He's learnt the very hardest way, battling the demons of cautious, conservative planning committees and shoddy builders. He's faced the slow, complex, almost medieval business of building in this country. 'Oh, the reluctance to try anything new. It's so de-

pressing. Everyone's against contemporary buildings. The system's set up against it. In London you're starting to see a change. In the country? No chance. Not a thing. What's even more depressing is that people are happy with the junk they get from spec builders.' His wonderful, cult website, [cloud8.org.uk](http://cloud8.org.uk) ('1.2m hits!' he beams), paints his struggle in immense detail, offering a guide for fellow enthusiasts off to an alternative universe where the countryside is dotted in flamboyant modernism, and Buckinghamshire's local planners are damned to hell.

'I was influenced by Mies van der Rohe. I love the Farnsworth House. That really spun my propellers. And you know the length Mies went to build that? That took five years. And Mies's dining room was pretty good. But ours will be amazing.' That's right, Tom, keep that chin up. You're a national treasure.

And by the way, I reckon it will take six months. If the gods are kind. ■

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