



Because of its location – a flood plain in rural North Elmham, on the river Wensum – the simple residence was designed to sit a metre above the ground. Fabricated off site, it was erected in just one week under a design-and-build contract.

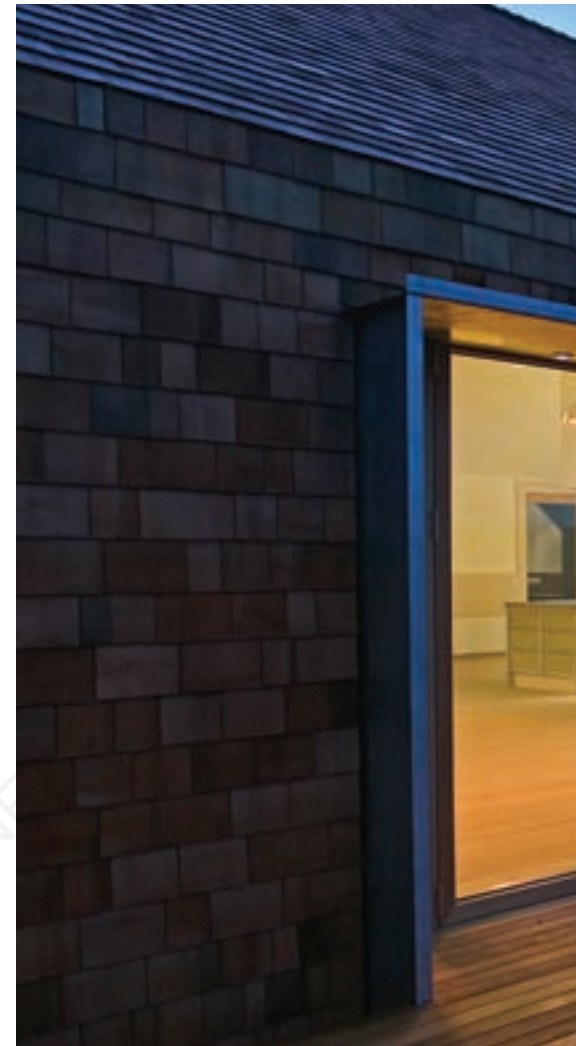
MODERN ENGLISH

WRAPPED IN CEDAR SHINGLES, ARCHITECT ANTHONY HUDSON'S PREFAB
REINTERPRETATION OF A TRADITIONAL BARN BUILDING
SITS IN HARMONY WITH THE ROLLING NORFOLK COUNTRYSIDE

BY TERRI WHITEHEAD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE TOWNSEND



The house is clad in 15,000 untreated cedar shingles, a material that belies the prefabricated system beneath. Fixed to battens over a breathable waste wood chip building board, cedar was chosen as a cost-effective alternative to weatherboard.



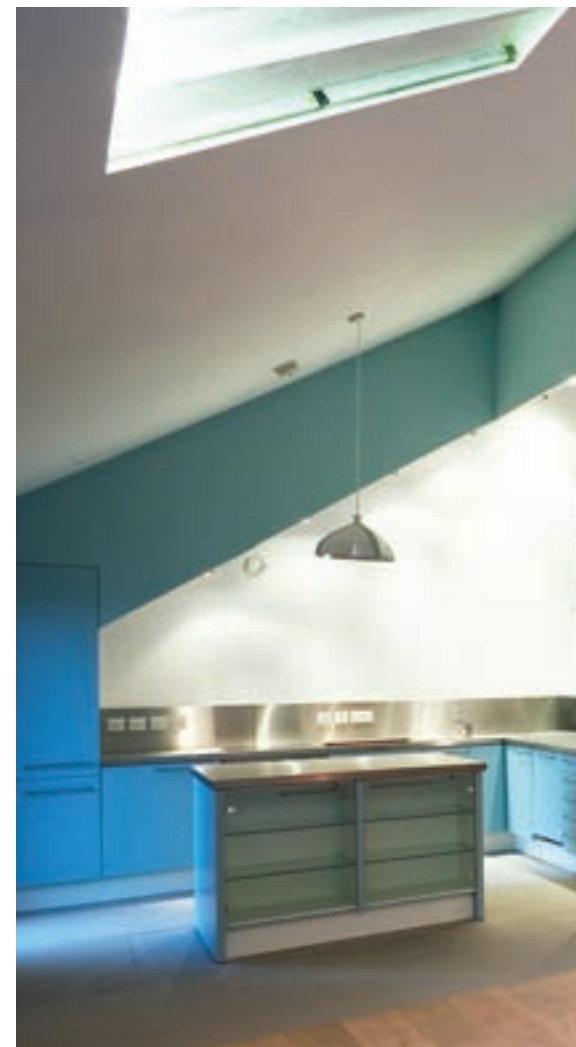
From the outside, the most striking aspect of the Cedar house in picturesque rural Norfolk, England, is the silvery cedar shingles that seamlessly wrap the walls and roof. The unusual reptilian cladding intensifies the building's iconic form, with its dramatic, steep-pitched roof. Local architect Anthony Hudson has reinterpreted the traditional British countryside vernacular, concealing modern open-plan living spaces within what he calls a "sleek protective cloak" of cedar.

Even more significant, however, is the Cedar house's promise as a prototype for an architecturally designed, relatively low-cost prefabricated home. Oriented to frame views of the river running next to the property and designed with dramatic interior spaces, this house proposes a more considered and design-led approach to prefab, with no apparent compromise of design quality in favour of speed, budget and ease of construction. It seems improbable that the Cedar house, a reinterpreted barn building that sits in harmony with the rolling English countryside, was prefabricated off site and its frame erected in a week, or that the building costs for this 225-square-metre home were a reasonable £230,000 (CAN\$474,200).

Too often, prefabricated homes look low budget, and any custom details get streamlined to obtain a generic plan and section. In the Cedar house, the system of construction simplifies and reduces the construction cost, allowing the emphasis to rest firmly on space and light. The homeowner, a photographer who wanted a rural holiday retreat and studio, is thrilled with the results. "It is a pretty amazing window," he says, gazing out of the cantilevered corner window that stretches four metres wide and two metres high, offering views of the grass and river. Across the room, on the west wall, a series of timber-framed glazed doors – which slide and fold open – provide an eight-metre-wide gap, allowing the room to be extended onto the south-facing deck in the summer. This welcoming outdoor space overlooks the river (it served as the main entertaining area for a housewarming party last summer) and can be used all year long. "Maybe I'll get my fishing rod out and fish off the deck," the owner jokes.

Another entry is through the garage, seamlessly concealed in the long, rectangular form of the building, with a large rotating door that opens up and out. Next to the garage, steps lead up to the entrance to the client's photography studio, with a square glazed opening punched out of the cedar skin. Throughout the house, surprisingly complex spaces are formed from the system of prefabricated floors, walls and ceilings that arrived at the building site from the factory with all the structure, insulation and wiring ducts in place.

Lightweight timber roof panels attach to the building's portal frame with a concealed sandwich structure of insulation and cladding. These panels were used as an easy and cost-effective alternative to traditional building methods. Hudson chose the prefabricated system as both a response to the modest budget, and an environmental strategy for reducing time and energy on site.





In the dining area, which floods with light in the afternoon, a cantilevered corner window measuring four by eight metres frames views onto the river.



Top: An eight-metre line of sliding glazed doors, which fold in completely, extends the living room onto a deck on the west side of the house, overlooking the future site of an orchard.

Above: A lightweight roof structure eliminates roof beams, permitting soaring ceilings and seamless open-plan spaces. The main living area's ceiling reaches five metres at its peak.

In contrast to the prefab aesthetic of standard walls, windows and ceiling heights, the house is organized around the open-plan living room and kitchen, with the ceiling reaching five metres at the peak. The kitchen area is marked only by a change in floor texture from English oak timber to an inexpensive, hard-wearing cement board; a wall of services, painted light blue, conceals all ducts and wires.

Leading from this main space, the bedrooms and bathrooms that line the low corridor toward the studio are quite small but well proportioned, with dramatic ceiling heights. There is no compromise to a grid, structural or conceptual, and the house looks as if it can be lived in quite comfortably. The brief included a darkroom, a photography studio and an office. Hudson designed these spaces with natural light and operable windows, and put a small mezzanine in the studio. The house is set on a flood plain, which necessitated its being raised above ground by a full metre, so the studio also serves as an escape route should flooding occur.

Drawing interest from newspapers and magazines before the Cedar house was even complete, architect Anthony Hudson plans to build more prefabricated homes. Busy with new commissions as head of Hudson Architects, he is currently refurbishing a series of experimental ecological "barn" buildings, using straw bales and fibreglass panels. The office has also been selected for prestigious urban regeneration projects in South London and elsewhere in England, comprising community housing, two live performance venues, and cultural facilities with café-restaurants and offices. And high-end residential schemes are in the works in France.

Hudson hopes the success of the Cedar house attracts new clients to this way of building. He is optimistic that future commissions could develop the design and construction lessons learned on the Cedar house into a viable alternative to "challenge the retrogressive nature of the majority of British house builders," and create elegant and affordable custom prefab homes. **AZ**