

Feature: Exceptions that roof the pool

July 30 2011

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Homes are constantly borrowing bright ideas from luxury hotels. There's the super-indulgent bathroom, the home spa and the sophisticated bedroom that feels generous and seductive enough to double as an extra sitting room and a private retreat. Add also the notion of a tempting indoor pool that can be used all year round and happens to be beautifully crafted and exquisitely detailed. No wonder, then, that the architect-designed pool house is enjoying a period of high demand, expressed in a series of fresh, innovative and highly individual buildings.

While erratic weather undermines the benefits of outdoor pools in countries such as

the UK, swimming pavilions are a constant delight. They offer all the benefits of one of the best forms of exercise anyone can think of, as well as a focal point for relaxation and family fun. And increasingly design-conscious swimmers are going the extra mile, turning away from claustrophobic lap pools, glorified hot tubs and off-the-shelf products that are little more than a box of water in a greenhouse.

Instead, they are looking for bespoke pool houses that match the quality of design seen within the rest of their homes and that make an architectural statement in themselves, while being gently tailored to their personal needs. Unsurprisingly, such ambitious schemes often cost more than £500,000, though the prices of individual projects tend to be closely guarded secrets.

Last year, Paul+O Architects designed a pool pavilion (£3,000 per sq m) within the grounds of a Victorian country house in Buckinghamshire. The building is constructed out of handmade Belgian brick, topped by a roof in red clay tiles from Turkey. The detailing of the pavilion and the common colour of walls and roof give it a sculpted, monolithic presence,

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and the bricks tie in with other buildings on the estate. Carefully positioned sections of glazing frame views of the gardens, while a long skylight introduces extra natural light.

Inside, there's space for a 15m pool, its multicoloured mosaic base forming a contrast with the crisp, white walls. There's also a gym, a playroom and a glazed corridor linking back to the main house.

“We love doing this type of work,” says architect Paulo Marto, “not least because it's a kind of crossover between landscape design and architecture. And it really pleases us when we see the pool overflowing with inflatables and that it is used all year round, from the bleak winter, when it's still flooded with light, to those hot summer days when the corner windows vanish back into pockets in the wall and the pool is opened to the garden.”

Paul+O designs its buildings to be as sustainable as possible, especially pool houses, which are energy-hungry. This pavilion was highly insulated to maintain a steady water and air temperature, and uses a heat-recovery air-handling system to reduce energy bills. Such measures are typical of the new generation of pavilions, with their high-spec glazing and tight thermal control. This makes them much more appealing – economically and environmentally – than heated outdoor pools.

Sensitivity to the environment also lay behind the thinking for a pool house designed by Satellite Architects in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Devon. The firm was asked to add a pool to a 1912 Arts & Crafts house, along with new living space and a gym and sauna.

The building was carefully positioned not only for views of the landscape, but for a sheltered position with its back to the wind and with windows facing south for solar gain in winter. The highly insulated façade is coated in planks of larch wood, and one of the glories inside is the sculpted form of the folded roof, with a long clerestory window dividing the two separate planes of the ceiling.

“The building is intended to blend into the landscape and surrounding trees,” says Stewart Dodd, director of Satellite Architects. “Wood was chosen for the skin as a material that will weather and sit well with the landscape and the shingle on the existing house. We were able to challenge standard designs and be more adventurous, and also to enhance the living spaces of the house through connections with the pool building.”

Dodd talks of the beauty to be found in the pool not only as a space, but also in the way that the water becomes a feature itself, reflecting the branches of the surrounding trees and the sky. In a good architect's hands, a swimming pool becomes an exciting surface, offering possibilities for optical pleasures and mirror-like illusions.

“We like all those odd angles of the building, which we found difficult to make sense of when we first saw the drawings, but work exceptionally well,” say Dodd's clients. “We use the pool daily for staying in shape, and it's a great draw for our grandchildren. We really like the contemporary design – a standard off-the-shelf design just wouldn't have worked for us.”

Kathryn Findlay of Ushida Findlay Architects is another architect who has found extraordinary potential within the pool pavilion to create exciting buildings. When she designed a pool house in the Chilterns in 2009, it was intended not only as a swimming pool, but as a link between an existing farmhouse and a thatched barn that had been converted into living space.

The pool had to follow the curving form of a garage that formerly occupied part of the site, leading to a fluid, sweeping building and dramatic curved pool about 15m long, while glass walls to both sides are topped with a carefully crafted plaster ceiling and a thatched roof echoing that of the barn. This mix of contemporary forms and traditional materials – a concept that has long excited Findlay – has been dubbed “future-rustic”.

“The curves do make the building more exciting, but it is also much more than just a pool pavilion,” says Findlay. “It is a giant corridor between the two properties on the site, as the client lives in one and a relative in the other, so they wanted a way to get between them undercover, as well as a pool. Then at lower-ground level there's an office, a gym and a changing room, as well as a wine store and a plant room, so a lot of the project is hidden away underground. You want it to be beautifully made and to function well.”

Many new pool pavilions, like Findlay's, include extra elements – especially saunas and gyms – that make them into self-contained leisure complexes. Others become part of an extension to the overall living spaces of a house, adding a whole new dimension to the home.

In Guildford, architect Gregory Phillips created a two-storey extension (£800,000 plus fees) to a listed period house within 30 acres of grounds. It holds a kitchen and family room on the upper level, with a large indoor pool complex on the ground floor. The 10.6m pool leads up

to vast sliding glass doors that open out onto a terrace and the gardens in the summer, so that the family can swim towards the trees.

“The family wanted a pool that was also very light and bright, with a strong connection to the exterior, so that they could have the best of both worlds – an indoor pool that you can also enjoy almost like an outdoor pool,” says Phillips. “They wanted it to be child friendly, so the surrounds are made of rubber rather than tiles, and they also wanted luxury, so there’s a large steam room.

“Swimming is mainly a leisure activity and great for families, but we are also putting one in for a young couple who want to swim when they get home from work. It’s about fitness and leisure; people want their houses to have everything that a five-star hotel offers.”

The idea of integrating an indoor pool with other living spaces in the house is taken a step further in David Mikhail’s striking design for a farmhouse in Suffolk. Here, he created a pool pavilion alongside a new two-storey extension that has living and dining rooms on the lower level and a master bedroom above. The pool building – itself two storeys high, with soaring ceilings and huge sliding doors – is separated from the other sections of the house by glass walls that make it feel like an integrated part of the home.

“Our clients spend time in Africa and they wanted that sense of being outside in the landscape but also undercover,” says Mikhail, who worked with pool technology specialist David Hallam. “A highly insulating and solar-reflective glass has been used on the outside to deal with the excesses of heat and cold during the year, and a lot of unobstructed glass has been used internally to ensure that the pool becomes a focal part of the house. The double-height dining room looks east to the landscape and over the swimming pool simultaneously.”

Encasing the pool in glass has allowed Mikhail to keep careful control over the warm, humid environment pools tend to generate. It’s one of the many technical issues that affect pool pavilions, which need constant air extraction to stop humidity from passing to any living spaces.

“There are major challenges in the management of humidity and condensation in both the air and structure around the pool,” say architects Tony Salmon and Andrew Inchley of Yiangou Architects, which completed an award-winning pavilion within the walled garden of an Oxfordshire home in 2008.

“Pool houses are notoriously difficult to detail and have to be kept constantly warm in the most extreme weather, while the pool water must be kept balanced and filtered. But they are also wonderful projects to design. Architects relish the challenge of finding an appropriate language for the pool house, unconstrained by tradition, and finding an elegant way to tackle the technical challenges.”

The pool house they designed features a retractable glass roof and walls, allowing it to open fully to the elements in the summer, but adding to the complex spec of the building. Any design also has to take into account that space needs to be found – sometimes underground – for a plant room holding all the air-extraction and water-filtration equipment. This adds significantly to the amount of excavation that any pool demands.

Yet building a pool pavilion can still be possible even in city sites, where space is much more limited. Jonathan Freegard of Jonathan Freegard Architects has designed a pavilion with a 16m pool within a generous urban garden in Highgate for clients Stephen and Caroline Alexander and their children.

Coated in a meadow-grass roof and connected to a Dan Pearson-designed garden, the windows of the pool pavilion frame views of the greenery, while a series of grand circular skylights introduce lots of natural light. Automatic blinds control the strength of the light and provide extra privacy, if desired, while the pool cover neatly retracts into the floor. The pavilion links in with a leisure zone in the lower-ground floor of the updated period house, including a sauna, Jacuzzi and gym.

“What really pleases us most about the design of the pavilion is that the use of glass means you feel as if you are in part of the garden in all weathers and seasons,” say the Alexanders. “The skylights allow an enormous amount of sunlight into the pool and give a shimmering reflection on the surface of the water.”

Those concerned about swallowing up sections of their garden – or the impact of a pool house on the landscape – are increasingly exploring the option of semi-submerged pavilions. In the Adirondack Mountains in New York State, Peter Gluck and Partners has designed a pool and leisure building – including a gym, sauna and spa – that is folded into the landscape. It features a sequence of tall windows opening out to the views, but also allows the lawns to flow over and consume the roof of the pavilion, which houses a 25m pool.

“We minimised the potential impact of a large building and found a way to create an exciting series of indoor/outdoor spaces that enhance the experience of the nearby lake and surrounding forests and fields,” says project architect Charlie Kaplan. “Burying the building introduced a central green for net volleyball and lawn matches. It’s now a gathering place, and an open kitchen and lounging areas by the pool, as well as terraces, provide casual entertaining spaces for meals.”

With a home theatre inside the pool house, the building is certainly a discreet leisure complex. It is also a delightful piece of design. Like so many of today’s architect-designed pool pavilions, it combines luxury with an enticing sense of aesthetic originality.

“If you create buildings that not only meet the brief but go beyond it, then this will result in pool houses that will not be torn down or remodelled by the next owner who comes along,” says Paul+O’s Marto, “which helps make them sustainable. Architects need to be responsible, but also to design buildings that sustain the soul – and bring people joy and delight.”

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