

ROOMS WITH A VIEW


IT WAS an opportunity too good to miss: a Sussex **CLIFFTOP PROPERTY** in need of renovation, going for a song. *William Wong* snapped it up and turned it into a *glamorous eco-pad* with wraparound views

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THIS PICTURE William enjoys the views from his deck. The weatherproof rattan furniture is from Oka LEFT The exterior of the house is clad with larch panels. Sliding glass doors open directly on to the deck



*'What sold it to me was the garden,
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THIS PICTURE The living area's floor-to-ceiling windows frame sea views. The refectory table and benches are from Oka. A Swedish woodburner provides a focal point **RIGHT** The glass cloth and fish plate are from The Conran Shop

An idle moment surfing the internet first brought William Wong to his clifftop sanctuary in Sussex. 'One day, out of sheer boredom, I was looking at different websites with houses for sale and clicked on this one,' he says with a smile. 'I was really curious, so I came to have a look at it.'

The location, with its shady pines and the sea below immediately charmed him. Undeterred by the 120 steps up the steep cliff to the house and its ailing state, he bought it. 'What sold it to me was the garden, the aspect and the ease of getting down here from London – it's an hour and 40 minutes door-to-door on the train. The steps did not put me off because it's part of the journey to a unique spot. Where else in England can you find something like this?'

Originally known as Bella Vista, the sprawling wooden chalet was built in the 1920s as a changing room for the guests of a smart beach house next door. During World War II, it was a lookout post to detect enemy shipping and aircraft in the



English Channel. Former owners christened it 'Nepenthe' because of its similarity to a celebrated restaurant at Big Sur in California, where they had stayed on holiday. Both locations have high cliffs overhung with Monterey pines and an air of tranquil isolation. Nepenthe is also the name of the magical potion given to Helen of Troy, which was described by Homer in *The Odyssey* as a drug to 'chase away sorrow'.

CLIFF RESCUE

By the time William, an architect and property developer, bought it in 2007, the structure was listing badly – floors were warped and the walls so distorted that doors did not open properly. 'It wasn't tied to the land, so it was slowly sliding down the hill,' he says. 'Financially it was not worth saving, so I decided to demolish it and create something more Modernist.' Having



THIS PICTURE **Glass lanterns and weekend reading combine with objects found beachcombing** RIGHT **In the living room, the Stealth floor lamp and the Spillikins side tables are from The Conran Shop**



worked with London-based FORM Design Architecture on several projects before, he was quite happy to collaborate on the new design and hand over the project management to them. As the area was settled from the Bronze Age and is adjacent to a Site of Special Scientific Interest, planning permission took for ever and came with strict conditions. Wong had to commission an expensive archaeological survey in case the building works disturbed any early remains. 'It dragged on for two years, even though the actual structure took only six months to build,' he says. 'Access to the site was really tricky as there is no road approach, and the plan was to build the house in sections, airlift them in by helicopter and then bolt them together. Then we looked at the pricing and it was cheaper to get a crane and haul the materials up from the beach below, then build on site.'

The house is single storey with a raised roof and is literally bolted into the cliff face. A steel framework supports the building, which half-floats in space and a large deck is cantilevered over the drop. When designing the house, Wong

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intended it to be compact and self-sufficient, a place he could close up and leave for a few weeks if he wanted to. 'If I am away, I don't want to have to worry about maintenance and looking after it,' he says. That ethos led to eco-friendly construction and technology, including an air-to-water heat pump supplying all the hot water and underfloor heating, super insulation, rainwater harvesting, grey-water recycling and a compost loo. A Swedish woodburning stove provides background heat and a focal point in the living area.

CONNECTING WITH NATURE

Outside, the garden is arranged over four levels and is studded with magnificent old Monterey pines that protect the house from the extremes of weather. Camellia-hedged paths wind along the cliff edge and connect the dappled groves and secret



gardens tucked into the hillside. William loves gardening but admits he does not have as much time as he would like. So the space is designed to be low maintenance and is left to nature with the occasional hack-back. Despite being open to the elements, hydrangeas, camellias and even roses thrive in the seaside microclimate and tolerate wind and salt air.

'I love to be beside the sea and I like coming here because everyone's really friendly,' William says. 'You can walk along the beach and chat to strangers. In winter, this place is so atmospheric, especially when it gets stormy. I light the fire and the house takes on a cosiness with the smell of burning wood, and I sit here watching the waves crashing in from the sea.'

For more on FORM Design Architecture, see form-architecture.co.uk.

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THIS PAGE The main bedroom is linked to the neighbouring living room by a sliding door. The checked throw is from The Atlantic Blanket Company OPPOSITE The house is perched under a canopy of Monterey pines

William's PERFECT DAY OUT

- 'There are some lovely cliff walks across Fire Hills above Fairlight Cove. You can pick up the last part of the Saxon Shore Way (kent.gov.uk), which starts at Gravesend in Kent and runs for 163 miles, finishing at Hastings.'
- 'I also might pay a visit to Hastings Country Park (hastings.gov.uk/hcp),

where there are ancient woodlands and grasslands. It's a haven for birds such as Dartford warblers, stonechats and yellowhammers. Fulmars, peregrines and black redstarts nest on the cliffs.'

- 'I'd then go to Rye and visit The George ([01797 222114, thegeorgeinrye.com](http://01797.222114.thegeorgeinrye.com)) for afternoon tea, or The Mermaid Inn

([01797 223065, mermaidinn.com](http://01797.223065.mermaidinn.com)), once frequented by the infamous Hawkhurst Gang of smugglers.'

- 'If I fancy eating in, I'd go to Sutton's Fish Shop at Winchelsea Beach ([01797 226261, Sea Road](http://01797.226261.Sea.Road)) and buy fish or shellfish – scallops are from Rye Bay. They also sell eggs and locally reared game.'