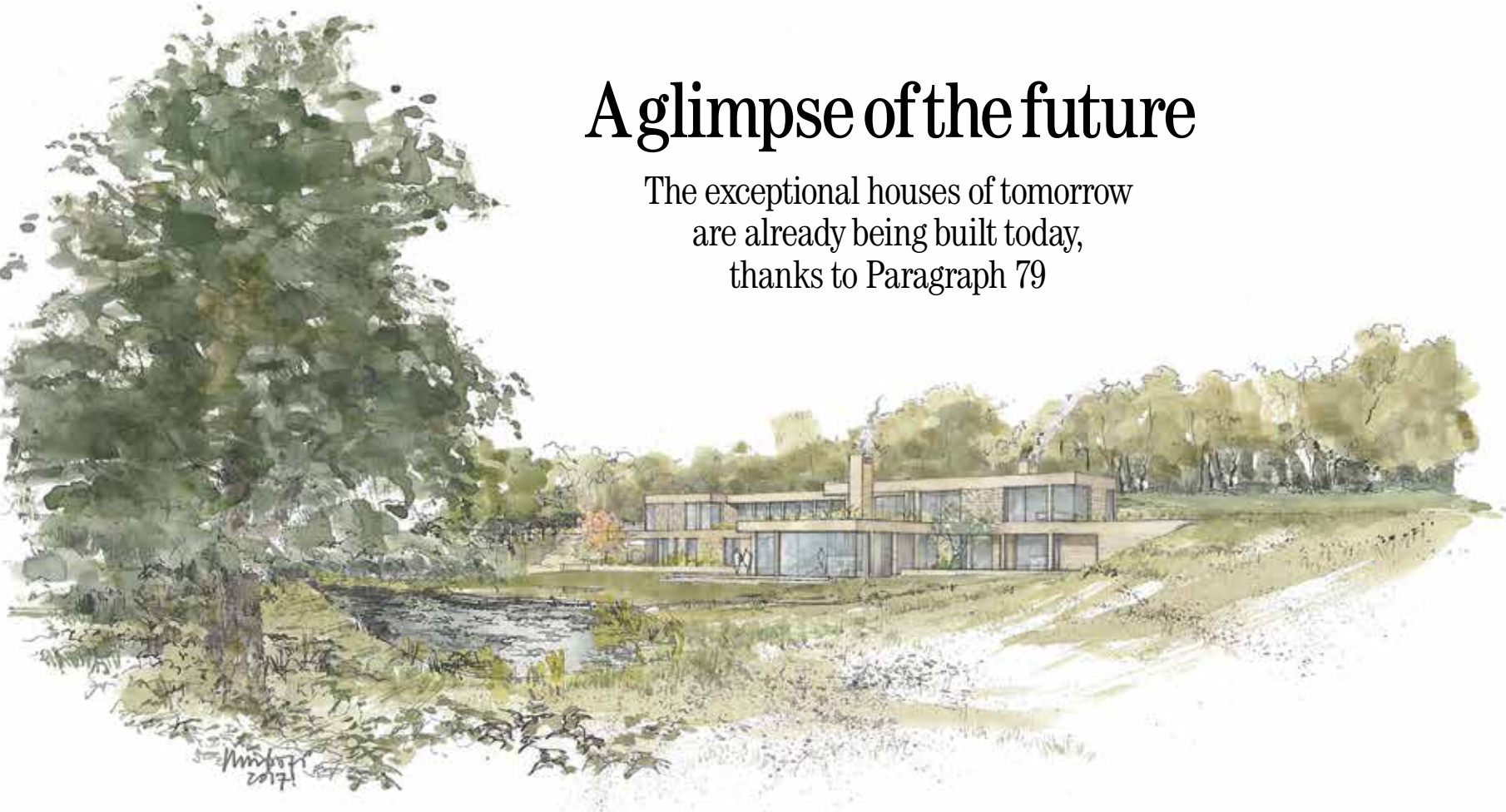




# A glimpse of the future

The exceptional houses of tomorrow are already being built today, thanks to Paragraph 79



‘It’s a pretty good job,’ says Richard Hawkes. ‘I get to go to work every day and design exceptional buildings. It’s not a bad way to wake up.’ Mr Hawkes is the director of Hawkes Architects, a practice that specialises in designing buildings that comply with paragraph 79 of the National Planning Policy Framework, or Para 79 for short. You will have seen these houses if, as I was, you were self-isolating to *Grand Designs* before it was cool. Indeed, you may have seen Mr Hawkes on the very same show.

Para 79 began life back in 1997 as Planning Policy Guidance 7 (PPG7) and was

introduced by then Environment Secretary John Gummer (now Lord Deben). In its original form, the guidance stated that: ‘An isolated new house in the countryside may also exceptionally be justified if it is clearly of the highest quality, is truly outstanding in terms of its architecture and landscape design, and would significantly enhance its immediate setting and wider surroundings’ and ‘This means that each generation would have the opportunity to add to the tradition of the Country House which has done so much to enhance the English countryside.’

**This collaboration between Loyn & Co, SEED and Rural Solutions has just been given planning permission under Para 79**

As years and governments have passed, PPG7 slowly transformed into Para 79, but the initial framework still stands. The current legislation states that a house given Para 79 planning permission must be ‘of exceptional quality, in that it is truly outstanding or innovative, reflecting the highest standards in architecture, and would help to raise standards of design more generally in rural areas’. Perhaps most importantly, however,



Palladian Chineway Farm in Devon, built in the late 20th century, shows that not all Para 79 houses have to be in a contemporary style. The property has a dressed Bath-stone exterior and striking architectural features. £4.95m (Strutt & Parker; 01392 229405)

the building must ‘significantly enhance its immediate setting, and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area’.

Those final two clauses are vital, explains Mr Hawkes. ‘What I think is unique about Para 79 is that it’s a very English piece of policy,’ he says. ‘Because of the final two tests, these buildings demand respect of the landscape, which you don’t see in the architecture of other countries. You see beautiful homes worldwide, but, generally speaking, they contrast with their landscapes. Para 79 demands that you understand a sense of place.’

‘It’s a pretty good job. I get to go to work every day and design exceptional buildings’

‘These will be the listed buildings of the future,’ agrees Rob Hughes, director at Hughes Planning Consultancy, who’s worked on Para 79 for some 15 years. ‘There are very few examples of exceptional new houses in the countryside. Those old buildings we love are part of its history and these new buildings will become a new part of that history.’

The future will undoubtedly be a green one and another benefit of the legislation’s ‘outstanding or innovative’ clause, is that these houses are often testbeds for the green technology of tomorrow. Solar panels, heat-recovery systems and biomass are all examples of now commonplace technology that began life on Para 79 houses. Mr Hawkes tells me of when he was building his own Para 79 home and how a contractor described it as ‘the Formula 1 of housebuilding’.

‘It’s these homes that test things and push the boundaries,’ Mr Hawkes continues. ‘There are various things that Para 79 houses do that are considered a bit avant-garde,



The RIBA Award-winning Ghost House in Warwickshire was also shortlisted for the *Grand Designs* House of the Year in 2019. £2.5m (Savills; 01295 228000)

but it’s the trickle-down effect. What you’ll find on one now will become standard for everyone in 10 years’ time. Everyone benefits in the long run.’

James Ellis, an associate planner at Rural Solutions, agrees. He points to the example of Autarkic in Devon, which will be Europe’s first off-grid hydrogen-powered house when it’s built. Sustainability doesn’t only mean new technology either, but also new materials (*The architecture of simplicity*, page 50).

‘We recently received consent to build a new house in the Blackdown Hills AONB,

the first in the UK to be made out of beech,’ he tells me. ‘It’s an ancient material, but we’ve never used it in housebuilding. So we’ve gone from hydrogen to beech in a week.’

Building on green-belt land or in AONBs is always going to raise an eyebrow from those living in the countryside. We are, rightly, protective of our green spaces and it’s vital that we look after them not only for ourselves, but for generations to come. What justification do we have for building these properties, then? ‘I think Para 79 is the antithesis to the modern housing estate,’ Mr Hughes assures me. ‘Most Government policy is about the delivery of sheer numbers of dwellings. You drive through Oxfordshire and you will see the same kind of housing estate. They look similar and the houses are boxes. The opportunity to do something such as a Para 79, which requires a specific design, for that specific place, in that part of England—that’s special.’

‘Kevin McCloud did a piece of filming,’ Mr Hawkes reminisces. ‘It didn’t make the final edit, but he was talking about the diversity of the English landscape. Our geology, dialect, our botany, materials, styles and heritage are all so diverse and have shaped our architecture and our landscapes, so it’s right that Para 79 should force us as architects to understand and respond to that rich tapestry.’



This plot in Gloucestershire comes with planning permission to create a ‘sustainable living space with cutting-edge modern design’. £650,000 (Knight Frank; 01285 897527)