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## Want to build your dream home? Here's how to get around the planning laws



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Inspired homeowners such as Natasha Cargill who built Periscope House in Norfolk are realising that to gain planning permission sometimes you have to push the boundaries. CREDIT: TONY BUCKINGHAM

**S**naking through the trees 10ft above the woodland floor, an extraordinary structure appears to hover in mid-air. Two circular glass pods at either end are connected by a series of glass and timber sections, the whole edifice supported by thin poles of steel and wood.

A closer look reveals each section is a room, a bedroom in one glass pod and a study in the other, with sofas seen through the expansive glazing in the centre. This magical construction is a house, or at least it will be when someone buys the seven-acre plot near Cirencester, Gloucestershire, which comes with full planning permission.

It is one of the remarkable houses being granted consent in rural areas under Paragraph 55 (now 79 since a revision in July) of the National Planning Policy Framework. This guide is followed by local planning authorities when they're asked to approve designs – and would-be self-builders' dreams.

Paragraph 79 states that the development of an isolated home in the countryside (outside an existing settlement) should be avoided unless it's "truly outstanding or innovative, reflecting the highest standards in architecture", and "would significantly enhance its immediate setting, and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area".

These words have been endlessly pored over by architects hoping to get a proposal accepted for a rural site, and has led to some extraordinary designs in the quest to be "truly innovative".



The design and plot for Ewen Tree House near Cirencester are on the market with Savills for £1 million

No one knows how to get a Para 79 house approved better than architect Richard Hawkes, the designer of Ewen Tree House, the remarkable home in the woods. His practice, based in Kent, has a 100 per cent success rate, with 16 projects given the go-ahead, including a curved house with a leaf-shaped roof on a hillside in the Cotswolds, and a spectacular angular house above the White Cliffs of Dover. His own home, an astonishing arched eco house in the Kent countryside, was approved under PPS 7, the forerunner to Para 55.

“You have to demonstrate compliance with each of the tests, though ‘truly outstanding’ is similar to ‘highest standards of architecture’, which also includes energy efficiency,” says Hawkes.

“‘Significantly enhance its immediate setting’ and ‘sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area’ are also interlinked. What this means is not copying house designs of the past, but taking cues from the landscape. The Tree House is a clear example of that. The trees around it have quite spindly trunks and the building, supported on its numerous thin poles, reflects that.”



The harmony between Ewen Tree House and its surroundings helped the project gain planning permission

Hawkes explains how they lifted the house up so it wasn't blocking views through the trees. He says the more beautiful the site, the harder it is to demonstrate a building will “significantly enhance its immediate setting”.

“Buildings tend to be regarded as harmful to an open site, which we try to argue against,” he says. “With Ewen Tree House, there is an electricity pylon just outside the woodland, which means the land is not pristine, making it easier to get planning permission.”

Ewen Tree House has been designed as a low-energy five-bedroom home set around a central curved kitchen and dining space, with a huge, circular skylight above the kitchen and peaceful woodland views through the extensive glazing.

### **How to | Build an architecturally innovative Para 79 home**

- ◆ Not all sites are suitable for Para 79, no matter how outstanding the design. Consider getting a planning consultant to do a site appraisal before spending money on architects' drawings.
- ◆ Choose a planning consultant and architect with Para 79 successes.
- ◆ Be clear what the “defining characteristics of the local area” are. The house needs to show sensitivity to these as well as enhance its immediate setting.
- ◆ Don't forget the landscaping: Para 79 houses have to “significantly enhance” their setting, so you'll need a landscape architect.
- ◆ Para 79 homes have to be of “exceptional quality” so your budget needs to allow for that.
- ◆ The planning process is likely to take longer than usual, particularly when applications are sent to an independent Design Review Panel to be assessed.
- ◆ If possible, send plans to the Design Review Panel before submitting your planning application, and take into account their suggestions. It is rare for a council to ignore them.

The land and design plans are for sale through Savills at £1 million, with the build expected to cost another £1 million. “We expect the buyer to be an architecture enthusiast who wants a truly unique home,” adds Benjamin Langridge of Savills.

Planning consultant Rob Hughes, who specialises in Para 79 houses, says the first thing he does is visit the land. “Some sites are never going to work because of local planning or environmental considerations,” he says. “A recent case was an open site within the setting of a listed church; you couldn't put anything on that site that would enhance it.”

Sensitivity to the “defining characteristics of the local area” can include traditional rural buildings as well as landscape. Black Barn, near Woodbridge, Suffolk, which completed this year, is a strikingly modern home that pays homage to the black barns that have dotted the surrounding countryside for centuries.



Natasha Cargill and her son Lucas live in Periscope House, Norfolk which featured on Grand Designs in 2014 CREDIT: TONY BUCKINGHAM

The long house tapers to the northern end and expands at the southern with full-length glazing on to a terrace dramatically overhung by a huge gable. This is angled to both prevent the house overheating in summer, and to capture the lower rays of the sun in winter.

The lower floor is a flint plinth for the upper floor: recessed into the ground, it allows the Black Barn to appear as if it's floating above the landscape. The Barn is clad in local timber, charred using an ancient, natural, Japanese preservation process.

Architect Studio Bark achieved Para 79 approval, with the planning authority commenting that the innovative home “easily raises the bar for the quality of design in rural areas”.



The innovative Black Barn in Suffolk has a floor-to-ceiling glass wall and takes inspiration from traditional barns in the area

“It’s a wonderful house to live in as well as to look at,” says owner James Holland, who shares Black Barn with his wife Laura and their two small children. “We’re surrounded by countryside and have all the living space upstairs and the bedrooms downstairs to make the most of the views. We’re also living sustainably, as the house uses very little energy and runs on bio-diesel from local farming.”

Holland chose [Studio Bark](#) after seeing one of its earlier Para 55 houses, Periscope House near Norwich, Norfolk, on *Grand Designs* in 2014.

Two large, rectangular timber-clad sections jut out of the property from the upper storey, splayed outwards so that their full-height glazing and balconies capture both the morning and evening sun.

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This side of the house faces open country while, because the building is on a gentle slope, only the upper storey can be seen from the road. “It just looks like a farm building from the road,” says owner Natasha Cargill, who lives in the two-bedroom home with her teenage son.

Its innovative design, very high levels of sustainability, and the fact that both the timber cladding and the logs for the outdoor boiler come from adjacent woodland helped to get planning approval.

After four years, Cargill loves the house as much as ever. “The ‘periscopes’ also maximise our fantastic views,” she says. If you want to build a house with these kind of views across open country, it’s going to have to be pretty special.

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23

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