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What do you get when you cross a starchitect with a drab bungalow and a tiny budget? **Hugh Graham** finds out

**G**rand Designs has fuelled a national obsession with home renovations, but not everyone can afford to spend £1m converting a water tower. Yet it is possible to transform a humdrum home into an eye-catching spectacle on a lower budget. Take the case of Mick Sumpter, a freelance computer consultant living in Over, Cambridgeshire: he has turned a boring 1960s bungalow into a cutting-edge piece of architecture for just over £120,000. It all started in 2009, when Sumpter, 62, was planning to downsize for retirement. His two children had flown the nest, and he and his wife, Patricia,



had sold their grade II listed four-bedroom farmhouse in the same village, and bought a two-bedroom bungalow for £270,000. They loved the large garden, but were less than inspired by the dowdy post-war architecture and poky interiors, and decided to renovate. So they contacted Riha for a list of local architects, and were enthralled by the work of Mole, the bold, Cambridge-based practice behind such provocative works as the Balancing Barn, one of Alain de Botton's Living Architecture holiday homes.

"Meredith Bowles [the founder of Mole] is quite famous and we thought, 'Would

he be interested in us?'" Sumpter says. "But I'm a great believer in nothing ventured, nothing gained. It wasn't the sort of thing Meredith normally does, but my wife was so enthusiastic, he came around to see the site and came up with this fantastic design."

The Sumpters craved open-plan living and were thinking of building a glass extension at the rear to bring a garden feel inside. But Bowles advised against it. "I said, 'Rather than putting a glassy room at the back, which is expensive and you'd still have a horrible house at the front, why not rip out all the walls and turn it into one

big open-plan room onto the garden, and put the extension at the front.'" Extending at the front allowed them to hide a multitude of 1960s sins — Bowles refers to the original house as "a real pig" — thanks to the sexy new facade: a striking row of front-facing gables that create a jagged sawtooth roof line, all covered in Scandi-style cedar cladding. The extension houses two bedrooms and a master bathroom, which all have high, pitched ceilings and skylights, and therefore feel bigger than they are. The old house at the back now contains that open-plan kitchen/dining/living room



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## Scandi in suburbia

with glass walls that open onto the garden. The old detached garage off to the side was incorporated into the house and turned into a guest bathroom, utility room and storage for Sumpter's motorbikes (he has three); the former path between garage and house became the hallway. With the money saved from avoiding a pricey glass extension, the Sumpters converted the loft space into his- and -hers studies; in total, their house grew from 1,100 to 1,900 sq ft.

It is the striking exterior, however, that is the talking point: the running gables call to mind both a child's drawing of a house and the set of an expressionist film; the slightly asymmetric roof lines create a sense of rhythm and movement, Bowles says. But this ground-breaking design was actually born of failure. Bowles's original idea — a two-storey frontage with columns — was rejected by the planners, who said it didn't fit in with the suburban streetscape. "At first I thought they were being pernickety, but rather than dig my heels in for a fight, I thought about it again," Bowles says. "The planners said the houses around there all had gables. The existing house had a projecting bay with a gable. The

adjoining house had a gable. So I thought, 'If they want gables, I'll give them gables.'"

And yet the revamped design was rejected by the local parish council. It was finally approved when the Sumpters appeared before a committee at the planning office in Cambridge. "I built a scale model, and Pat actually made a presentation and was given two minutes to speak. She said we want to modernise an old bungalow, and put in under-floor heating, solar panels and a new boiler. They voted 13-to-1 in favour."

The new open-plan living area is sleek and modern, yet has a comfortable, countryside feel: too there's a salvaged wooden church pew, and the full-length Velfac windows look out on bucolic English greenery — magnolia, cherry, apple and birch trees. The wet room and master bathroom are large and luxurious, with skylights that open electronically. The sophisticated LED lighting creates ambience, spotlighting the landscape paintings by Sumpter's artist friend, Jackie Shayler-Webb. The kitchen is cool and clean, with stainless-steel appliances and hidden sockets that pop up from the island when needed. In the living room,

Wick Sachran



Sumpter replaced the old fireplace with an integrated woodburner, which he rarely uses; the house is wrapped up warm with Celotex insulation (so effective it's hard to get a mobile signal), and the nine photovoltaic panels on the roof generate £750 a year in electricity. Sumpter saved money by repurposing old furniture and detritus. He painted wooden cheese crates and made them into bookshelves. In his man cave upstairs, he created a desk by placing an old glass shower door on floor cabinets. He advises other home improvers to make do and mend, but says it's worth

With the help of the architect Meredith Bowles, Mick Sumpter, top, transformed a 1960s bungalow into a striking modern home, complete with open-plan living area and his-and-hers study spaces in the loft, above, all for £120,000

spending on an architect. "Meredith was expensive, but we wouldn't have got this without him. We knew what we wanted, but we couldn't visualise it."

As the nine-month build neared its end, the couple ran out of money for a kitchen. They contemplated going to Ikea for a cheap, temporary one, but spotted one they loved on a buy-now, pay-later scheme. "Pat said, 'We don't have 25 grand.' I said, 'No, but we might in a year's time.' A year later, I was lucky enough to get a decent bonus and we paid for it. So sometimes it's good to push the boat out. You don't want to put something in and take it out later; that's a false economy. It's better to have what you want and enjoy it."

This live-for-the-moment philosophy is especially poignant, as Patricia died in February 2013, two years after the project was finished. "Pat was very pleased with the outcome," Sumpter says. "It was her project, and all of the credit goes to her." Her vision has left quite a legacy. Sumpter says his neighbours was so taken with their design he revamped his grotty old bungalow, while another Over resident has since built a Hut Haus. And the house regularly attracts gawkers. Not all the reaction has been positive, though. "I was talking to a lady in a pub, and when I told her where I lived, she said, 'Oh, we call it the sauna,'" Sumpter says.

Bowles says it's the price you pay for being a pioneer. "This architecture is uncomfortable for people who would rather not be challenged. And it's difficult for the first person to stick their head above the parapet and make a statement. It takes boldness."

Despite his recent loss, Sumpter has no plans to sell, though he recently had the property valued at £460,000. His daughter has bought the house at the bottom of his garden to keep an eye on him, which must be a tall order: he enjoys travelling to America to go off-road motorbiking and talks about taking a campervan around Europe. Clearly, he is not one to sit still. "This was going to be our forever home, but circumstances change. My wife and I loved this house, and now I love it."

■ [molearchitects.co.uk](http://molearchitects.co.uk)

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CGI of an apartment living area at The Landau\*\*

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