

The Observer
Interiors

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Sun 9 Aug 2020 11:30 BST



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To the lighthouse: an illuminating home conversion



▲ Ahead of the curve: bespoke units in the kitchen follow the shape of the lighthouse, while large glass doors open on to the garden. Photograph: Rachael Smith/The Observer

Contemporary meets historic in a towering design achievement on the Norfolk coast

I remember the first time we saw this place, it looked terrible," says Julian Vogel, owner of a restored 18th-century lighthouse in Winterton-on-Sea, near Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, "but it had such incredible potential." That was almost 15 years ago and now what stands proud at the end of a pebbly drive in a small seaside village, just metres from rolling sand dunes and the North Sea, is a glorious, light-filled space.

The lighthouse had been converted into a residence by a previous owner who'd bought it in the late 1970s, but there was much work needed to give it new life. Aside from poor wiring and very tired decor, the lighthouse no longer had its original lantern, sold in the 1920s and sent to the Bahamas. In its place was a concrete slab, installed during the Second World War when the tower was used as a lookout post. When Vogel, CEO of PR agency ModusBPCM and co-founder of Maison Margaux, a tableware hire company, and his family found it, the place had been unoccupied for years.



▲ Guiding light: the lighthouse, with magnificent lantern room at the top offering views of the surrounding countryside. Photograph: Rachael Smith/The Observer

With the vision of award-winning architect Sally Mackereth of Studio Mackereth, this place is now magnificent. The tower, with its reassuringly sturdy metre-thick brick walls painted bright white and its winding cantilever stone stairs and metal balustrade, is an unexpectedly cosy family home, an effortless blend of pared-back contemporary design and delicious English eccentricity, with enough of its utilitarian past still intact.

"Sally is particularly great at historical research when she starts a project, and found that this place had been mentioned in *Robinson Crusoe*," Vogel explains. "We'd also found a map showing that something would have been here during the Elizabethan age, too."

Mackereth, says Vogel, is also adept at keeping a respectful separation between old and new. "She's so good at restoring what needs to be restored, but maintaining the integrity of the original by making new parts very clearly new."

That skill is exemplified by the modern timber-clad and glass box that, like a jigsaw piece, slots on to the back of the tower to create a large, airy room in which there's a kitchen and dining area with a cosy wood-burning stove, a compact shower room and a family bathroom. The kitchen is particularly clever, with curved stainless-steel units, made locally, that neatly hug the original building.

The colour palette is nicely edited, too, mostly white and natural shades throughout. Vogel has wisely dodged making it either too twee or too utilitarian and cold. It's the carefully selected artwork and plentiful textiles, such as the Missoni rug and Josef Frank cushions in the living room and wooden pieces including an Ercol dining table and chairs and a Cees Braakman sideboard, that lend the necessary warmth.

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Everywhere you look there are pleasing glimpses of the outdoors: a gallery window behind the kitchen sofa and a wall of Crittal bifold doors open on to a beautifully landscaped garden by Chris Moss. “The idea was to create a series of outdoor rooms,” explains Vogel.



▲ Room with a view: Julian Vogel beneath the stone stairs that lead up to the top. Photograph: Rachael Smith/The Observer

“As you look out there are wooden decks that feel like they’re floating over the planting. There’s a hard paved bit with a table - weekend lunches are wonderful out there - and there’s a nice grassed area that was great when the kids were little. I often arrive at the house late at night and have been known to head straight into the garden with a torch to see how everything has grown.”

There are constant reminders, too, of the lighthouse’s imposing round walls that taper as the tower rises and narrows. The living room at the foot of the stairs, which bears the original stone floor, is a calming space with a curved sofa, plenty of cushions and a pair of canvas butterfly chairs. One flight up to the kids’ room and there’s a bespoke curved bunk bed built flush to the wall and additional built-in benches for friends to sleep in. Up another floor to the main bedroom, and a curved wooden door that hangs on a rail slides around for privacy at night. The moody library, painted in chocolate brown, sits on a higher level, floor-to-ceiling shelving and a folding bed part of this invitingly cocoon-like space.



▲ Sleep well: bunk beds built to follow the curve of the lighthouse’s ancient walls. Photograph: Rachael Smith/The Observer

The real magic of this place lies in the spectacular lantern room on the top floor, also designed by Mackereth. This is where the original light once shone. Now, thanks to its glass and steel dome, it’s like a sitting-room in the sky. The original slate floor remains while a custom-made banquette offers a place in which to admire the panoramic views of the coast. One section of wall, facing inland, is lined with grey felt panels, to further focus attention on the beach and sea. The wall is adorned with mirrors to reflect the seascape back into the room. This is the place to pause in for hours, taking in the entirety of the dramatic landscape.

Up a final short flight of stairs and you’re on a semicircular mezzanine that serves as a sleeping platform, thanks to a bed that has been sunk into it. “We decided against curtains or blinds here, so that you’re really in it, at bird-flying height,” says Vogel. The countryside lies to one side, the sandy beach and sea to the other.

“The kids now come up here with their friends to stay. They love it. You can really take in the weather; those big Norfolk skies. For me the winter is just as wonderful as summer, with the wind and the rain. The walls are so thick so you really feel safe. It’s a very special place.”

For more information, see wintertonlighthouse.com and studiomackereth.com

An advertisement for Asana. It shows three people (two women and one man) standing next to a large, grey metal safe. The safe has a handle and a lock. Above them are two buttons: a green one that says 'Finalize media plan' and a red one that says 'Launch brand campaign'. Below the image, the text reads 'Plan more confidently. Organize more effortlessly.' and the Asana logo is shown. At the bottom right, there is a 'TRY FREE' button.

Finalize media plan

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