



A work of off-grid genius

We meet 'eco-gypsy' Reuben Leveridge and discover the inspiration and ethos behind his unique and stunning builds

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“Bonkers, crazy, but beautiful.” So said presenter and architect George Clarke, when he visited Reuben Leveridge’s new home in Sea Palling for Channel Four’s *Amazing Spaces*.

Stepping from a wooden living space into the lovingly restored

Victorian train carriage, I can totally agree with beautiful – as for bonkers, well, the build works so well that it seems utterly natural. Reuben has created a family home for his children, age 15 and 11, that fluidly blends his Romany roots with the solidity and comfort of a fixed house.

The timber structure gently encloses the carriage, which forms the bedrooms, giving enough space for a living area and large veranda. The wood is reclaimed, much of it found on the nearby beach after storms, so has an aged look that makes it seem part of the landscape.

“This is about family,” explained Reuben, “As the children have grown, they’ve needed their own space, and caravan-living just wasn’t working any more. This way, we have shared family areas, but they also have privacy.”

The project is highly eco-friendly and sustainable. The family live off-grid with their electricity coming from solar and wind power. Two types of turbine are needed, to make the most of the erratic gusty wind blowing off the coast. Heating is provided by the wood burner, and rain water is harvested and filtered for drinking. Inside, the furnishings are pre-loved, this was important to Reuben; “We live in such a disposable culture and our mending mentality has been lost. I’ve wanted to find new life for



Ten green bottles... filling a window space

old, forgotten or broken items.”

When you realise that Reuben undertook this project himself, with not much more than a pencil and a chainsaw, and no formal plans, then it is even more remarkable. Unlike many builds that are televised, he didn’t have a set budget. Reuben focused instead on acquiring materials

for free or very little and on using his own labour, with the help of friends.

Reuben’s second project was no less ambitious. The site of his home was previously owned by Anglian Water and featured a disused 1950s water-sewage treatment plant, which most of us would have looked at as a redundant structure to be removed. Not Reuben. He immediately recognised that it would make a brilliant space for a communal area that he calls the uni-dome.

The low, circular brick structure with an attractive cedar shingle roof is entered by a hobbit door. I was spellbound; part of the building is underground, the low external profile belying the space inside. In here, unconstrained by the necessities

LEFT

Through one of the ‘portholes’ - the domed glass of a washing machine door

BELOW

Inside the dome with its incredible cedar-tiled roof





“Try and fight the culture that is all about a bigger house and car. It just traps you into a lifestyle that costs money and won’t make you happy.”





ABOVE
No two windows are the same - they're all repurposed

LEFT
The glass dome lets in light

ABOVE LEFT
Adorable hobbit door

of a house, Reuben's quirky, creative vision is apparent in the many whimsical touches throughout.

A central pool is a fish pond, and overflow from the gutters creates an intermittent water-feature. Domed windows are, on closer inspection, doors from washing machines and old watch faces are set in resin to form decoration. It is an utterly charming, relaxing place to be.

Now Reuben wants to share his expertise to enable other people to create unique, off-grid builds, "I can help people who want something a bit different, whether that is a home or a social or creative space for your garden. I can source reclaimed or salvaged materials, help you come up with inspirational, unique designs and make sure you avoid the pitfalls that I fell into when I was starting out."

For those of us who can't plan an exciting project (although I am looking at my small garden differently now), Reuben still has suggestions to help us share in the Eco-gypsy magic. "Firstly, try and fight the culture that is all about a bigger house and car. It just traps you into a lifestyle that costs money and won't make you happy. Instead, think more simply and sustainably. Look at what you have and think how it could be repurposed or mended rather than constantly upgraded. I'm also pleased to say that renewable technologies are getting ever better and cheaper. Solar panels on your home are well worth considering, and LED lighting is a great eco-option."

As Reuben's grandfather once said, "A true Romany adapts to the situation they are in." By providing a sustainable, cosy home for his family, that is

exactly what Reuben has done. As we think about our own lives, and the demands we place on the planet, it is advice we could all learn to heed. ♦

Both Reuben's builds can be seen on George Clarke's *Amazing Spaces*, Channel 4. *The Victorian carriage* features on series four, episode one and the *uni-dome* is on series seven, episode two.

For more information on bespoke off-grid building advice, project management, material sourcing or to arrange a look round Reuben's builds, check out the *Eco Gypsy* at ecogypsy.guru.

Kate Blincoe is a freelance writer with an interest in sustainability, nature and rural issues. She is the author of *The No-Nonsense Guide to Green Parenting* (Green Books, 2015).