

Never a dull day

From filling in planning permission forms to making clients' dreams come true, **Neil Vesma** finds it's all in a week work

MONDAY

Meeting today with Serge, the eco-technology consultant we work with on low-energy projects. I'm really fond of him, he's a complete enthusiast for his metier, a wiry 50-something with a salt-and-pepper beard and matching hair. We're talking about a site for a hamlet of low-energy smallholdings, and as usual Serge (who doesn't speak English) is in full flow. I like to think I'm fluent bilingual, but his is a high-speed delivery combined with a strong local accent and facial fuzz making lip-reading difficult. I do well to get 40% of what he says first time round, and it's worse on the phone. We do however make good progress today, and I shall ask him exactly what he means by a champ photovoltaïque de trois hectares when I've recovered.

LATER...

Quite astounding. I've actually done some drawing work today!

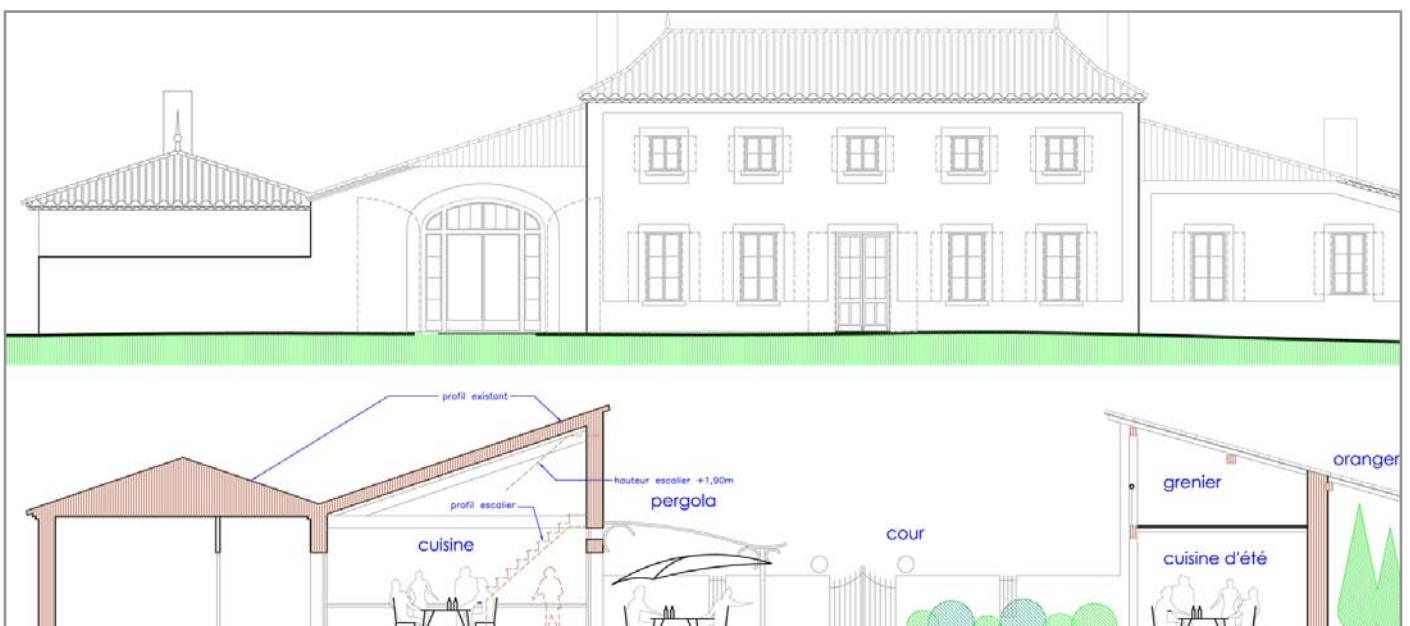
People tend to think of an architect as a pipe-smoking bow-tie-wearing creative type who spends all his waking hours at a drawing board gazing out the window for inspiration. In fact most of my time is spent on the laptop doing financial analyses of projects under construction, on the phone cajoling and threatening builders, or in the car going to yet another interminable meeting where everyone else will turn up 15 minutes late except the one person who everyone else is depending on, and who neither turns up nor lets us know he/she's not coming.

I love the creative side of my work, and its rarity value only increases my pleasure. To be able to convert the half-formed desires of a lay person into something even better than they had imagined is fantastically rewarding. The hard bit, turning it into reality on time and to budget, takes much longer and can be frustrating and stressful for everyone involved. Most of

our clients are private individuals, and their new house or barn conversion is by far the most expensive investment they will ever make. It's my job to be a meticulous and safe pair of hands to help them see it through to realisation.

TUESDAY

A big pressure day today. We have been appointed to seek Planning Permission for the rebuilding of an abandoned stone house and winery in the Entre Deux Mers, and we only have three weeks to design the scheme, agree it with the clients and prepare and submit the entire application. Given that the clients normally live in Suffolk but are currently visiting family in Singapore, we have emailed them the drawings and set up a 9am (5pm their time) conference call with them and the agent, which lasts two hours. At the end, we need to redesign the courtyard, cuisine d'été and orangery wing, as well as other less time-consuming



Neil loves nothing more than letting his creative juices flow drawing work - these are for refurbishing an abandoned house and winery in the Entre Deux Mers

project design + management: Neil Vesma & Ziad Ramadan

changes. And we need to do it within 48 hours. All hands to the pumps. Lunch may be restricted to 90 minutes today.

WEDNESDAY

Our area is marked by circular stone windmills atop the hills that dot the countryside. The one closest to us no longer works but has been lovingly restored by Yvon and Isabelle, its Breton owners. Isabelle inherited it as a near-ruin from the poet Armel Guerne and they use it as a four-storey holiday home. Admittedly each storey is only a single room not much more than an arm-span across, and they have to use the nearby Salle des Fêtes for washing and the toilet, but in hot weather if they leave a tin tub out in the sun all day they have the bath with the most spectacular views in the entire Département. The sails are now permanently fixed diagonally in an X rather than vertically

in a +. Yvon tells me this configuration was traditionally only used to mark the death of the miller. Stone mills like this have two external doors opposite each other, not only so the miller could always exit without getting caught in the sails, but also to ventilate the mill tower and avoid a build-up of flour in the air, potentially explosive as that would have been.

Yvon, who is a surgeon working with aids sufferers in one of the most deprived areas of Paris, is also a maniac Beatles fan. You can't stop him getting his guitar out (even in the bath) and singing tune after French tune at the top of his voice until the wine runs out or Isabelle reminds him he'll get all wrinkly if he doesn't get out soon.

THURSDAY

On Tuesday we had the Entre Deux Mers house and winery scheme to redraw and today it's

done, it's gone to the clients, and they are kind enough to say they are really pleased with the result. We need to crack on now with the Planning dossier, a document of twenty pages of drawings, photos, photomontages and written justifications. This being France, some of the details are required in nonuplicate (is that a word? I mean nine copies). The Planning system was simplified in October 2007 and, this being France, it is of course now more complicated and bureaucratic than ever.

FRIDAY

I've half an hour to spare between calls, so stop off at a hidden lake that I discovered by accident on Google Earth. It's not just a lake, or just a big lake, it's a HUGE one and absolutely beautiful. If Monet had painted the Garden of Eden, this would have been it. Nestled into the folds of the

landscape around it, it makes you want to walk on to see what's round the corner. It's bordered in turns by cow-speckled pasture, stands of poplars and oaks, with a ruined farmhouse as the picturesque cherry on the cake. There are no roads, no pylons or cables, just peace, the lake, the land and the sky. It's the perfect place for picnics, with gently shelving grass down to the water's edge and it's entirely safe for young children.

In all the times I've been there, I've never seen more than three other people around its edge, which must be four or five kilometres in length. It's quite easy to find, you just follow the road from

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