

## Delivering the baby

**Neil Vesma** has to deal with a 'grieving' business partner, after a long-standing project is finally finished

### MONDAY

Serge (the hairy non-English-speaking vocally-challenged eco-consultant) and I had a site visit in the Lot last month and I promised readers a full account of our wasted day. I mentioned the issue of Heavily Discounted Floor Tiles, which for me typified the difference between French taste and English (nearly as well as French taste in 1960's wallpaper which is actually too distressing to go in to).

We had gone out to talk to a landowner with five hectares (ie lots) of building land, and a converted manoir to develop with a joint-venture investor we have had dealings with. Everything was going swimmingly, the owner was a charming enthusiastic Frenchman with a good track record in property development and the site was both spectacular and well positioned for a leisure village.

It was evident from our discussions that the owner wished to be deeply involved in the interior design of the development, and I had no problem with this until he made the mistake of giving us the guided tour of the 'improvements' he had made to the main house. He cheerfully explained that he had saved money by only buying discontinued end-of-run floor tiles, and had laid them out himself in as many different



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**Neil's partner Ziad has given his heart and soul to this manoir project over the past year**

configurations as possible to avoid the tedium of a consistent floor finish in any one room. In one proud instance he had included ten different tiles in one room. While this was amusing at the start, by the time we had got to the fourth flat I had lost the will to live, and would gladly have dived head-first down the three storey stairwell to end it all on the herringbone-pattern turquoise and orange ceramic ware on the basement floor beneath.

The final straw was the formal valuation of the property prepared for the owner by a géomètre expert foncier, a registered professional property surveyor. One would hope that such an expensive document would actually

make sense, but no. The attic flat, admittedly large, was valued at €968,000, a sum that would in fact buy you quite a nice château in the vicinity, or nearly 81,000 five-course lunches at the nearby restaurant. In true journalistic fashion, Serge and I made our excuses and left.

### TUESDAY

Ziad, the French half of Anglo-French Architectes (see footnote) is fed up today. I can tell because, in typical Ziad-being-French style, he is affecting to have no interest whatsoever in any of the delicately humorous or architecturally vital things I have to say to him. (This is not entirely a bad thing as it leaves me free to do some constructive

work without him wittering on endlessly about some pointless event in his working day). I try in a caring, sensitive way to cheer him up. "Get a grip! Do some work! Or at least wash up the coffee cups!", I yell across the office, but to no avail. Ziad's mood continues, moping and sulking until lunch when I dig out the truth. He is suffering from APND.

Architectural Post-Natal Depression strikes when you hand over a finished project to your clients, and Ziad has just completed a beautiful new stone-built manoir set in the vines near Duras. As architectes-maitres d'oeuvres we not only do the pretty pictures and get Planning Permission, we also manage the

building contracts, and Ziad has given his heart and soul to this house. For the last year I've seen him go on site once a week, sometimes twice, to discuss points of detail with the artisans and then work on into the evening doing site minutes and financial updates.

Now it's finished. His beautiful baby has been handed over, admittedly to the people who own it and paid for it, but that's not the point. And sooner or later he will get over it, and be happy again. Until the next time.

### WEDNESDAY

At a barbecue in the evening with a few friends from work and the kids' school, very pleasant now the weather's reliably hot and sunny. The perfection of the afternoon was only spoilt by one incident when the mildly-sozzled barbecuist tried to twirl his tongs on his middle finger à la western cowboy, only to see them shoot humiliatingly off on a low, hard trajectory into a pyracanthus bush, taking out en route a rather nice crystal balloon wine glass which turned out to be from the hosts' only remaining full set of glasses (and a wedding present to boot). This would all have been very funny if the barbecuist hadn't been me.

### THURSDAY

My adventures with Serge in the Lot reminded me of a similarly bizarre meeting I had in the Pas de Calais fifteen years ago, on a Thursday as it happened. I was acting for a non-French-speaking English developer wanting to establish a theme park near the French end of the tunnel on the theme of the Entente Cordiale, that well-

known political and cultural understanding between the French and English peoples. You will not be surprised to hear the park never got built.

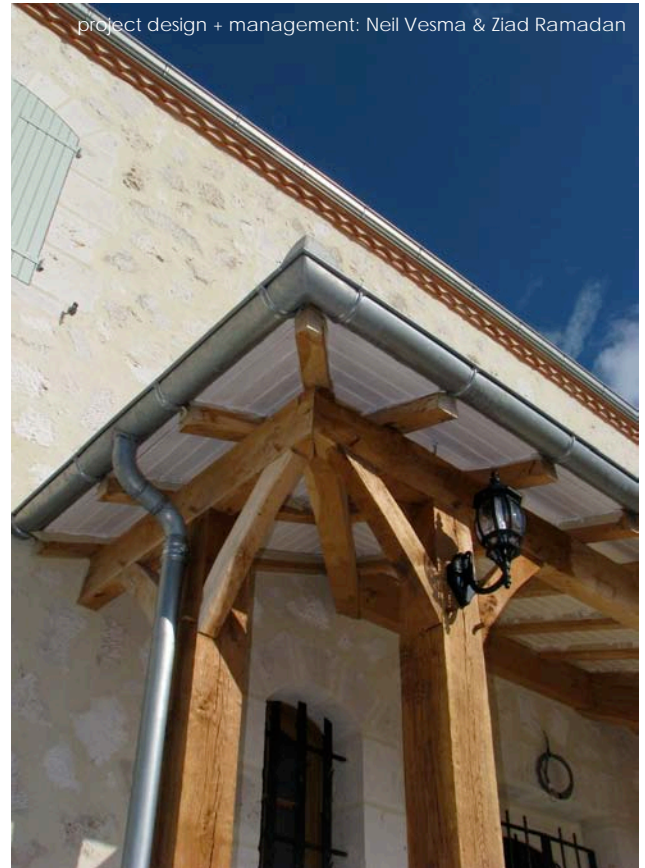
The site was in a national park and close to a Listed château, and it was felt that a meeting with all the interested departments of the administration would be the best way forward to secure a successful development. And so it was that I found myself one morning, the only Englishman sitting at a table with fourteen Frenchmen (not one of them wearing a tie) under the chairmanship of the local Mayor.

He welcomed us all and very fairly suggested that we should make a tour of the table, and that each representative should have five minutes of our time to give his department's view of the proposals. This was agreed, and I sat back and listened to fourteen Frenchmen each taking their turn to say that there was NO WAY this was going to happen, for the most spectacular and the most mundane of reasons. Just. Not. Going. To. Happen.

The Mayor thanked us all, summarised their objections, and said OK we'll do it then. Everyone nodded, and we went and had lunch.

### FRIDAY

Big sign by the side of the road today at Bergerac promoting the new LES SARDINES industrial estate. Presumably the tenants will be packed very close together in tin buildings with ring-pulls. My favourite roadside placard of all time though was promoting a local furniture store's push to sell more sofas with six-foot (1.8m, yes I know) high letter-



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ing proclaiming their OFFENSIVE CANAPES!

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