

## Heritage

# The joy of ceps: how to live the high life

The magical Mushroom House casts its spell on all who see it. **Harry de Quetteville** discovers why its new owners will need to be 'groovy and far out' to live there

Handel and Gretel were lured to the Gingerbread House. James and his cohorts of insect friends made a home in the pit of that juicy Giant Peach. Mike Gagner, 63, and Theresa Sherrill, 59, however, have chosen to live in a mushroom.

It's not a European variety. No, this fantastical fungus has flourished in Perinton, a town of 50,000 souls not far from the Canadian border in New York State. It was recently named one of the 100 best places to live in the United States.

Not that the Mushroom House, as the 4,200 sq ft complex of sprouting concrete pods is known, was originally their idea.

For something so outlandish one might expect it to have been the brainwork of an eccentric millionaire, or a circus performer.

In fact, the Mushroom House was the idea of a respectable lawyer. Robert Antell was described by a friend as a model of "patience, decency and humanity".

In 1970 he and his wife, Marguerite, a ceramicist, decided to make a break with the norm of what was then a largely rural area. They commissioned the architect James Johnson to come up with something positively bizarre.

In the decades that followed, a host of houses sprang to transform Perinton from farm country to easy-going suburb. But of all the houses that mushroomed there, nothing was quite like the

Mushroom House. Charmingely, Marguerite Antell described the building project with her husband as "the most fun thing we ever did together". And between 1970 and 1972 their vision of five 50-ton concrete pods, built into the side of a hill, took shape.

If it seems extraordinary, it is. Marguerite aimed for a structure that was "groovy and far out". She achieved her aim to the extent that, 43 years on, curious passers-by, assuming it must be a museum or possibly a nightclub, are unable to restrain themselves. They pitch up at the front door for a peek inside.

"Every weekend, practically, people stop and come on to the driveway. Or sometimes they come and knock because they don't know it's a private home," says Theresa. Indeed, the house's owners have been asked to host a fashion shoot and even take students on a tour.

There is a lot to see. To the casual observer, the effect is part Antonio Gaudi, all organic, melting curves, and part Bond-villain lair. Not for everyone, perhaps, but not is the house completely impractical.

The current owners, who bought so there are no straight surfaces to wedge an ordinary sofa up against. Large windows have recently been upgraded to be energy-efficient. They look out on to woods and a waterfall in the grounds – itself modelled on Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater in Pennsylvania. Bespoke cabinetry, made by a local craftsman, Tim Scott, has been fitted throughout.



Another is the furniture, which only adds to the Bond-villain allure. Much of it is built in, as it needs to be the walls of the pods are curved.

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Fungal foray: the Mushroom House, with its quirky interior. Separate pods offer a dining area, top, and the spectacular Great Room



perhaps, who might appreciate that the pods are not so reminiscent of mushrooms as they are of *Ulmus corymbosa*. This is a flowering biennial with a rosette of leaves known in Britain as bishop's lace (Queen Anne's lace in America).

For those really wanting a mushroom house, one came up last autumn much closer to home, on the High Road in Wood Green, London N22. The asking price was £216,995, but it didn't perch on 20ft stalks. Who's better?

What is clear is that the three families who have lived in the house in America have all, for their various reasons, become protective of it.

Robert Antell died in 2002, Marguerite in 2011. But the property was, by then, already in good hands. Steve Whitman, who moved in after the Antells with his wife, Christine, was a cousin of Marguerite. When the Whitmans came to sell two years ago, Christine said: "We're looking for someone who loves art

and will be a good steward" – steward of a house that is very much a feature of the local landscape.

Now Mike Gagner and Theresa Sherrill are themselves looking for someone to whom they can hand over the responsibility of being "groovy and far out".  
"Could it be you?"

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### For sale: quirky conversions



**Rutland, Oakham** This home incorporates a converted windmill, complete with sails, an adjoining house with 15 acres of landscaped garden.

The mill is a self-contained, two bedroom unit, which has been used as a holiday cottage. The main house has four beds and a first floor sitting room with a balcony to make the most of the views. £1,450k. Slutt & Parker (01958 433123; [sluttandparker.com](http://sluttandparker.com))



**Edenbridge, Kent** This former pump house has four bedrooms and plenty of living accommodation over three levels. The main reception rooms are light-filled with vaulted ceilings

and countryside views. Traditional materials have been used in the conversion. The house sits in half an acre of land. E Lin, Howard Cundy (01342 833333; [howardcundy.com](http://howardcundy.com))



**Chulmleigh, Devon** What have we here? Peeli House is a Grade II listed former police station. You can dine in the former cells, keeping your guests

prisoner as there are still grills on the high arched windows. The front door is original too. £225,000. Seddons (01769 581585; [seddons.com](http://seddons.com))



**Ramsbury Wiltshire** This conversion retains features from the original chapel, while adding a modern feel. The front becomes a sink in the doorknob and the sixty outdoor provide storage space. With gardens running down to the Kennel, this would make a charming home. £999,950. 01629 11000

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**Lubreen, Provence** Formerly a pigeon loft typical of the region, this 16th century tower has been converted into a pretty home. It has three bedrooms and a living room with an open fireplace. Outside is a pool and terrace with superb views over the four acres of grounds. £260,000. Home Hunts (020 8144 5501; [homehunts.com](http://homehunts.com))

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