



# Flower power

**GINETTA VEDRICKAS**  
meets Juliette Hopkins,  
director of Best Small  
Housebuilder Fleur Developments, a  
company that puts design detail first



A newcomer climbed the stage at this year's What House? Awards, but you only have to see the quality of Fleur Developments' properties to know that the victory wasn't simply a case of beginner's luck. And, like the judges of the Best Small Housebuilder category, one visit and you may find yourself wanting to "relocate" to the East Anglia region the Norfolk-based company develops in.

On the drive from Norwich, founder and director of Fleur Juliette Hopkins explains how she started the company with Joff Brooker back in 2007: "The recession had hit but we'd built our own house. I'd dabbled in interior design and I thought I can do this; I just wanted to build some nice stuff!" Inspired by the recent birth of her daughter, Hopkins decided to name the company after her, and Fleur Developments was born.

Heading deeper into the countryside, the north Norfolk coast reveals a region peppered with pretty flint-covered period cottages, grand Georgian houses and tasteful barn conversions. There are a few

unremarkable newer developments, but Hopkins is determined that Fleur homes will never be among them: "Whatever we build it has to be design-led. I'm very hands on and our builds always involve using good materials and building homes with great space where people really want to live." Hopkins thinks that Fleur's USP puts them ahead of the competition. "Housebuilders often play it safe and are lacking in design details but here at Fleur my passion is ensuring that we make our mark on the landscape."

And the landscape is spectacular. The Sandringham Estate, the Queen's residence, is here and the region is full of attractive market towns, such as Burnham Market, along with miles of coastal paths and unspoiled beaches. This is prime holiday home territory and many of Fleur's customers have been holidaying in the area, often for generations, and are hoping to recreate their happy memories by buying a holiday home. Many are from London and these sophisticated buyers like what Fleur offers: reimagined traditional architecture combined with luxurious interiors.

"We make sure that our homes have the space that people want," explains Hopkins, "We use a trusted architect who knows our style and – when we design them – I think about how I'd like to live and what I expect when I walk into a hall. For me, that means spacious hallways, a large guest cloakroom, and all the rooms leading off with a snug to work in and at the back of the house a large, open-plan kitchen and dining area where light floods in and which is the hub of the home."

And site visits to some of Fleur's developments show just what makes these properties so appealing. Generously proportioned houses are both visually interesting and cleverly designed. Set in thoughtful



landscaping, with brick and flint elevations, design touches such as barley twist railings and galvanised steel drainpipes set them apart from a standard specification. Surprisingly, no two homes are the same and Hopkins is meticulous in ensuring that space is top of the design list, even if that means sacrificing bedrooms.

"We maximise space rather than squeezing in extra bedrooms; for example, with 1,650ft<sup>2</sup> I'd make that a three bedroom with an en suite and dressing room. Lots of builders would be tempted to make that a four-bedroom house, but it works as we only build in areas that can take the value."

North Norfolk's property values are still rising – as are land values – which has been a driver for Fleur's expansion into neighbouring Suffolk where 14 houses at Lady Fisher's Field in Risby sold within 12 weeks. "We'd honed our product in Norfolk and the sales woman there said it was gobsmacking; all she could say

was 'when can you build me some more?' People were queueing to buy, and these were homes costing £600,000-£700,000."

Five miles from Cambridge and five miles from Bury St Edmunds, the scheme of three-, four- and five-bedroom homes near Risby's Norman church and pretty green are inspired by the village's period houses. The architectural style is traditional, with local materials used in an appealing mix of brick, render, weatherboard, generous barge boards and deep timber fascias. Highlights of flint and steeply pitched clay pantile tile roofs, so far used on all Fleur developments, give them kerb appeal, and double-height ceilings in the barn-style houses – a personal favourite for Hopkins – produce a layout which is "ideal for the rough and tumble of family life".

Planners frequently express surprise over Fleur's use of expensive materials: "One looked at me raising his eyebrows and exclaimed 'clay



tiles not concrete?'," laughs Hopkins, although Fleur must often tread carefully to appease parish councillors, who aren't always keen on the idea of change. Near Burnham Market, a pretty market town often dubbed 'Chelsea by the sea' the planning process for Foundry Field, a scheme of 32 homes, was smoothed by the addition of a much-needed car park to ease traffic in the visitor hotspot. Even here Hopkins carried out thorough research and ensured that this wasn't just any old car park: "I visited lots of National Trust car parks and I've used lamps that are low, planted white birch trees and sleepers with raised beds."

The flint-faced houses have been thoughtfully graduated on the sloping site with careful attention to protecting the view of the church tower sitting on the hill. Pointing to the landscape surrounding the small development, Hopkins says that the colours of nature are her primary design inspiration, which leads to the use of a Farrow and Ball-style palette of greys, greens and duck-egg blue: "We are a north European nation so we've got to reflect that landscape with lots of light

and colours which reflect the skies, sea and countryside."

Heavily designed homes have cost implications, but the company has set new price points for the area: "We're achieving £550 per square foot. It's usually £300," explains Hopkins, "but we're selling the right kind of product that people like."

Clearly Hopkins' eye is one of the main reasons for Fleur's success, but she credits her 'small team' of 16 people who between them have a wide range of expertise. As their reputation has grown, Fleur too needs to grow and the housebuilder is about to move to new premises where it can take on more staff. Hopkins is adamant that it will remain a close-knit operation where staff feel valued. "We're going to have lots of comfy sofas, bicycles so that people can ride into the village and get their provisions and we'll have a masseuse visiting regularly. We're a great team that do a lot together, which I think is important."

In an often male-dominated industry, Hopkins is a rare breed, and she has a typically female deprecation of her talents and skillset: "I fell into it,



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but it seems to be working out,” laughs Hopkins, who has never faced any discrimination: “Everyone has always been respectful but is good to see more women now working in this industry.”

Another keystone to this small firm’s success is its emphasis on marketing. Thick brochures are testimony to its belief in consistency and branding, and Instagram-standard images of the properties and the lifestyle that buyers can expect set them apart. “It’s the only thing that people can go on and if they are spending large sums of money it’s important they know exactly what they are getting,” says Hopkins, who commissions

photographers rather than using library stock images. Fleur’s brochure for Northshore Place, a scheme of just 10 properties at Brancaster Staithe, has ‘the money shot’ – an aerial photo revealing a perfect location near the sailing club and harbour. “I build a portfolio of images, which we then use in all our marketing materials,” says Hopkins, who also uses Instagram and Facebook in the company’s marketing strategy.

The small housebuilder is now starting to build larger schemes of 40-50 homes. “Even a few years ago that wouldn’t have been possible,” says Hopkins, who does have sympathy for planning

departments that she finds are often “overstretched and underfunded” leading to hasty planning decisions, which makes competing with larger companies a challenge: “It’s easy to see why they routinely approve large-scale developments that quickly meet their targets, but there is definitely a need for smaller schemes in this area, where villages can grow organically rather than having a load of homes all plonked together in one place.”

Is there a danger that by growing larger, Fleur could lose its unique approach? “I’m really enjoying growing the company, but my passion is in design and that will never change.” [sh](#)