



#### DESIGNER DEN

The unique playhouse that Amir Sanei built in the garden of his family house in Suffolk began life less as a way of giving his children a treat than as a personal challenge to himself. One week in August four summers ago Sanei, one half (with his wife Abigail Hopkins) of the architecture partnership Sanei Hopkins, set out to create a project worth submitting to the Royal Institute of British Architects Small Projects awards scheme. Starting with a set of casement windows he found in a skip and using simple building materials that cost £750 from the local garden centre, Sanei decided to test RIBA's definition of 'small' to its limit. 'I had the idea of making the windows into small doors,' he explains. 'Small doors require small people. So the project became a playhouse.'

Sanei made no concession to cutesy or kiddy styling. With a cantilevered porch, a glazed facade and sides topped by a 'floating roof' of corrugated galvanised steel, the playhouse is a mini slice of elegant 21st-century modernism. The architect even chose mirror as cladding for the back of the building, a neat way of minimising the impact of the plywood wall by reflecting the surrounding undergrowth.

The RIBA judges shortlisted the playhouse for an award but did Daddy succeed in convincing the judges who really count: his children Zal, 14, Zak, 13, Hana, seven, Nina, six, and one-year-old Ziba. 'The only criticism I had was, "Could I build one with a normal roof next time?"' Sanei says. The following year Sanei created a spectacular treehouse, officially christened the Peter Pan house, but thanks to its curving corrugated form, usually known as the flying pigsty.

Sanei hasn't looked back since, following up

**Above** the back of the playhouse is clad in mirror to minimise its impact on the garden. **Below** three of Amir Sanei's children, Zak, Hana and Nina, sit outside the playhouse, which was shortlisted in the Royal Institute of British Architects Small Projects award scheme

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with a series of homemade small projects, including a tiny garden room for one person and a mobile eco second home, both of which made it to the awards shortlist and cost no more than £1,000 each. Sanei has no plans to put the playhouses on to the market. 'These aren't products I would build for someone else,' he says. Even so, Sanei's playful projects have made a big impact. 'We're working on a complete new-build house in Hove that the client commissioned just on the strength of seeing the playhouse in a magazine,' he says. *Sanei Hopkins Architects: 020-7704 1901; saneihopkins.co.uk*

