Hidden Depths

The home of Edward Gibbs and Felicity Caning is in disguise. It may look compact, but it’s actually a suburban TARDIS.

Words: Jill Macnair
Photography: Jefferson Smith
HOME
Grand guide
Building in your garden

who Edward Gibbs and Felicity Canning, and their three children
where Finsbury Park, north London
what A Zinc-clad home built on a narrow plot at the end of a Victorian terrace
how long The land was bought in July 2005, the project was completed in September 2006
what budget £600,000
high point 'The prefabrication method. Going from nothing to the structure of a house in less than a week is very exciting'
low point 'Money being promised and then not arriving because someone at the bank had gone on holiday'
tip 'Having a good relationship with your architect is crucial'
Standing outside looking straight at the narrow front facade, you’re fairly certain that the building must lead into the Victorian house next door if it contains all the rooms it claims to. Either that or it must be one heck of a poky space. Neither turns out to be true.

After a relatively compact entrance area, the house opens up like a telescope into a gorgeous light-filled living area-kitchen-cum-dining room with a wall of sliding glass doors at the rear and a long roof light set to one side. This latter feature follows the length of a custom-made resin composite desk, one of three places for Edward (who works from home) to use. ‘You become very aware of the sun’s movements throughout the day,’ he says. ‘It rises at the back of the house and the windows and rooflight are designed to catch the light.’

The building is still technically a little on the tight side for a family of five (brothers Hugh and Jack share a bedroom), but it squeezed as much space as it could from the plot by pushing the structure as far into the back garden – the wider end of it – as possible. ‘I used the extensions on the back of the neighbouring houses as a boundary line,’ he says, in contrast, the front of the building has been set back slightly from the terrace to show respect for the existing architecture.

While light is one of the main contributing factors to the home’s deceptively spacious feel, it’s the plan of the rooms that allows the whole thing to work. And despite its obvious constraints, the bizarre plot has been one of the main driving forces behind this. ‘I like...’

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**WHAT IS PASSIVHAUS?**

PassivHaus is the world’s leading standard in energy-efficient construction, and was the model adopted for this house. There are currently 6,000 homes in Europe that qualify for PassivHaus status – their overall heating is less than 15kWh per sqm per year, and the total energy use is less than 120kWh per sqm per year. The building must also be airtight, have outstanding levels of thermal insulation, and make use of renewable power sources – windows have to be high-performance triple-glazed. It must also incorporate an efficient Mechanical Ventilation Heat Recovery (MVHR) unit – try Wolf Passive Homes (0870 803 0465; wolf-passivehomes.com), or for further details, visit passivhaus.org.uk.
THE LARGE WINDOWS AT THE BACK HAVE BEEN DESIGNED TO CATCH ALL THE LIGHT
THE HOUSE ISN'T THE REGULAR SHAPE YOU GET AT THE END OF MOST TERRACES.
odd-shaped sites because they push you into producing the most interesting buildings," says Bere.

For Edward meanwhile, the site was the starting point of a completely unexpected project. Amazingly, he began with the more modest idea of buying and renovating a flat. "It was meant to be a development that wouldn’t affect us – we’d rent it out or sell it on," says Edward. The first step away from this happened when his agent showed him the Victorian house next door and, more importantly, the odd plot attached to it, which had failed to interest any developer.

Excited by what he saw, Edward bit the bullet, upped his budget and bought the Victorian house along with its quirky plot. The revised plan was to do up the house, subdivide the land, and gain planning permission for a two-bedroom house on the plot – the most he thought he could squeeze onto it – so he could sell it.

In his search for an architect, it hadn’t crossed Edward’s mind that he might end up finding an eco architect like Bere. ‘RIBA gave me five names of north London practices who undertake residential projects. The first person on the list was away and Bere Architects were next,’ he says. ‘We had instant rapport so I never called the others.’

Bere surprised and impressed Edward with his ideas about making more of the site (ie fitting a three-bedroom house onto it), but his drive for sustainable design was the final clincher in enticing Edward to adopt the project as their family home. They achieved planning permission without fuss in August 2005, with Edward’s budget jumping from his original £200,000 to a cool £600,000.

Bere has created space with a stacked plan starting with the large communal living room, which found its logical home at the wider back of the house. This left the narrow front of the building to house the utility areas and the stairs, which lead to the two first-floor bedrooms positioned over the living area.

Building up an extra storey, Bere also eeked out enough room for a third bedroom – in effect a private floor for Edward and Felicity. It’s compact, but lovely, with the bed positioned in front of beautiful oak cabinetry and overlooking a large window so the couple can enjoy...
uninterrupted views of the sky. Just half a level down from here is a small study with another huge window. It’s the only room at the front of the house, and a second potential workspace. ‘It’s perched out over the entrance so it feels like a tree house,’ says Bere.

The whole interior follows a muted palette of greys, browns and whites, which helps light bounce around. This is punctuated by splashes of colour via statement furniture, such as the red Arne Jacobsen Swan chair. Built-in oak storage throughout the upper floors doubles up as walls and there’s a multi-functional element to many of the rooms. For instance, a second building in the garden, which is officially designated as bike storage, is so pleasant that Edward uses it as office number three! The bikes simply live at the side of the house until the family go on holiday and they need to be locked up.

To follow his eco agenda, Bere has stuck as closely (budget permitting) to the German PassivHaus model (see box, p108), an airtight system that uses exceptional levels of insulation to create carbon-zero homes. He also incorporated solar panels to heat water for the house. ‘Being green is easy, you feel good about it,’ says Edward.

After toying with an expensive concrete structure, he decided to use KHL construction (prefab building components, made from 200mm-thick sheets of solid cross laminated timber), which is a far greener alternative as trees suck up carbon dioxide, thus reducing the construction’s carbon footprint. The kit-form structure went up in less than a week, shaving valuable months off the construction period.

Although Edward has an air of debonair acceptance about the family’s lifestyle change, they have had to make big compromises – from moving out of their large, family home (a great exercise in downsizing), to the continual struggle with a spiralling budget. The family moved in during September 2006 and although the building is now over a year old, Edward feels he shares ‘so much history with it having been involved all the way.’ It’s hard to believe he was ever going to let it go.

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**SUPPLIERS**

**Architect**
Bere Architects
[020 7833 3933; bere.co.uk]

**Solid timber construction**
KHL UK
[020 7833 3933; klhuk.com]

**Zinc cladding**
PMF Roofcraft
[020 8506 8698; pmroofcraft.co.uk]

**Landscape architects**
Buckley Design Associates
[020 7200 3897; buckleydesignassociates.com]

**Kitchen and joinery**
Contrax
[020 7166 8189; contraxfurniture.com]

**Bathrooms**
Norman Foster for Duravit, from CP Hart
[020 8902 1000; cphart.co.uk]
“BEING GREEN IS EASY, AND YOU FEEL REALLY GOOD ABOUT IT”