

Open House weekend lets Londoners inside hundreds of fascinating homes for free, reports **Hugh Pearman**

Why do they do it? What makes people fling open the doors to their homes — generally intensely private places — to the public once a year?

A number of the people opening their front doors next weekend for London's free annual Open House event, which showcases some of the best new and old buildings in the capital, are architects who have designed homes for themselves. Since architects are born exhibitionists who like to show off their work, it's understandable. Similarly, one of this year's hot new entries — a small block of four sumptuous and very contemporary flats (that means lots of exposed concrete) at Centaur Street, Waterloo, by fast-rising architects de Rijke Marsh Morgan — is a speculative venture, so it's a kind of advertisement for the developer.

But what about real people, who aren't architects or fellow travellers? In most cases the owners wear a slightly startled, even alarmed, expression on their faces as the crowds tramp across their kitchens and thunder up and down their stairs. Many open up for just the one event, and never do it again.

Others, made of sterner stuff, seem to actually enjoy it, and sign up year after year. There are 58 residential homes included in this year's programme of 500 buildings, which range from the Stockwell Bus Garage to Barking Town Hall. Doctors Jeremy Gray and his wife Ros, and their two children, owners of a radical modern conversion of an 1830s house in Stockwell, south London, are opening their home for the third year in a row. Designed by young architect David Mikhail, it was a Home cover story 18 months ago. Jeremy is as enthusiastic as ever about Open House.

It was a tour round architects' own houses that first gave them the idea for their project, says Jeremy, and he feels a duty to pass on his experience. But mostly, it's just fun. "The first time we opened, we'd only been living here a week. It was a great experience for us to see it so smart and sparkling, and to have all these people turn up and say, 'Isn't it wonderful?'" he says. "And partly we do it because we feel it's nice to showcase David's work. A lot of people who come round are thinking of employing an architect themselves and are interested in finding out how we picked David. He gets plagued with people asking him where he found the door handles."

There's another factor, too. "This house is made for a large number of people. It has big open spaces, and when it's full, it really buzzes. At first we let in only 20 people at a time, but then we saw how long the queues were getting and we said, 'Oh

Michael Mack/Keith Collie



New entry: these modern flats on Centaur Street, Waterloo, are on show for the first time

Keys to the capital



Cutting edge: a family home in Aberdeen Lane, Highbury

well, let's just let them all in at once'. And the house absorbed them all."

So it's a big house, and it has to be: last year, Jeremy allowed in about 800 people over the course of a few hours on one of the two Open House days. He makes them remove their shoes when they come in, so floors aren't damaged or scuffed, but finds they're a well-behaved and enthusiastic crowd, even when he goes incognito and nobody knows he's the owner. "We rarely get bad comments," he says. "We've never heard anyone say it's horrible — apart from my dad, who tells us he couldn't possibly live here because it's too big and echo-y."

There's also a camaraderie among those who open up for Open House, and some perks: as a participant you're allowed to queue-jump to view any other property and since the Open House organisation provides its own volunteer guides for your house, it means you can sprint off and see what other people are doing in theirs.

There are several cutting-edge all-new contemporary homes, such as one you'll find down the end of Aberdeen Lane, a rutted track in Highbury, built for a journalist and her family by Joyce Owens of architects Azman Owens. It's a well thought-through new family house made from timber, concrete and glass. And, of course, there are historic examples — whether you mean modern historic, as with the famous white 1930s Highpoint apartment block in Highgate by Berthold Lubetkin, or high-Victorian historic, as with William Morris's Red House in Bexleyheath by architect Philip Webb — a haunt of the Pre-Raphaelite set, a template for the later Arts and Crafts movement, and essentially a dream of medieval England. The Red House has recently been taken on by the National Trust. As with a number of the other houses open next weekend, it's one you have to book in advance. Details are available in the London Open House guide or on the organisation's website.

So why, in the end, do people let the crowds in? That's easy. Everybody likes compliments. Everybody likes confirmation that they've got taste and judgment. Everybody, really, likes to make other people feel slightly envious. And as for we visitors, well, we don't just go to pick up ideas. Is there anybody in the whole wide world who doesn't like nosing around somebody else's home?

Open season

- ☐ Open House takes place on September 20-21
- ☐ You can explore a Grade II*-listed bingo hall in Woolwich, a Wimbledon windmill and an 18th-century gazebo in Wanstead
- ☐ More information on www.londonopenhouse.org and 09001 600 061 (premium rate)