



Proud homebuilders: writers Charles Leadbeater and Geraldine Bedell with their children, (left to right) Harry, Hen, Freddy and Ned



Feast for the eyes: Azman Owens Architects also designed the sleek family-sized kitchen with large glass windows onto the courtyard

Beaut

Instead of expanding her old house, Geraldine Bedell decided to create an award-winning home in concrete and

WHEN the architects started talking to Geraldine Bedell about slabs of beautiful concrete, she confesses she was mystified. "I couldn't begin to imagine what 'beautiful concrete' might look like. To me, concrete was dark, stained and ugly, associated with high-rise tower blocks and multi-storey car parks." Bedell, a journalist, is now the proud owner of one of the capital's most striking new homes, which has been built almost entirely in concrete. Her book about the project — *The Handmade House: A Love Story Set in Concrete* — has just been published.

Tucked away in a mews, sandwiched behind grand Victorian houses and old factory units, this north London family house sits in a landscaped courtyard complete with reflecting pools and elegant, wispy grasses. Set to one side of the plot, the two-storey, flat-roof, contemporary building has walls made of poured concrete that have been left, inside and out, in a natural, unfinished state.

Looking into the courtyard, the main face of the home is a plane of glass with dark-stained, timber-framed doors and windows and window louvres. The place has an air of calm. The sheer surfaces — concrete for walls, limestone for floors — are serene, and the dark timber — also used throughout for fitted furniture, cupboards and bookcases — is a perfect foil for the concrete, adding richness and warmth.

Bedell and writer husband, Charles Leadbeater, are now confirmed concrete converts. "We like the stuff so much, we've resisted putting up any of our favourite paintings," says Bedell. "The walls are great just as they are."

The house story began around the Millennium when the family, with four children, now aged 21, 17, nine and five, was bursting out of its home in Hackney. "With Charlie and myself working at home and four growing children, it was a squeeze," recalls Bedell.

Inspired by the cleverly remodelled kitchen at a friend's house, Bedell contacted the architects responsible for the work — Ferhan Azman and Joyce Owens, of Azman Owens Architects. Along with domestic projects, the practice is well known for high-profile work, including last year's V&A Vivienne Westwood exhibition, Alexander McQueen's previous flagship store in Conduit Street and the series of Konditor & Cook bakeries. (Since completion of the project Joyce Owens has returned to practise in her native America and the company has been renamed Azman Architects.)

"They came up with really original ideas, like making new offices under the garden, but it became clear that we needed to move to get more space," says Bedell.

After months of trawling estate agents and looking at unsuitable places, there came a call one day that every property-absorbed Londoner dreams of. "One of the estate agents rang to ask if we

might be interested in even considered building land overgrown with

She then called the architect designing a new house was affirmative: "Are

With the help of a 55 feet by 70 feet, which even Bedell debridging loan cost £8 permission for two London Borough of Is family home if the design. They relished

The design process The brief was for a



Doll's house: the innovative concept is a simple box with a front and walls like blinkers, and a glass wall fronting the courtyard

for bedrooms," he s unchanged.

When conversation emerged as the arc smooth, uninterrupted

"We weren't sure at costed and needed to suggested ditching th instead. Suddenly m become completely at

"We use all the ground-floor space and are always aware of the sky, the light and the weather"

designed around the for us to work on cupboards and shelv places like the bedro beds, desks and wa already the house ha House of the Year

The move from a fporary, open-plan livi lived in the baseme kitchen was," says B space and are always whole place seems m use the outside a lot m

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Further r

● **The Handmade Concrete** (Penguin) is a compelling, page-long account of the entire project in London. It is required reading for anyone embarking on creating a new home. ● **Catherine Croft** (Laurence King, £12.99) is a book for anyone interested in architecture projects. It is illustrated, and together with global projects of the Diamond Project, Morphosis, to the William Russell.



Natural steps: the materials used for the interior of the house blend into a single, seamless piece of design linked by the undressed concrete

My and the beast

Well started from scratch
glass. Fay Sweet reports

Looking at a plot," recalls Bedell. "We hadn't started from scratch, but went to see this patch of land." Architects to see if they would be interested in Owens's response, in her Chicago drawl, "You kidding me?" A pathetic bank manager, the plot, measuring 100ft by 100ft, was bought for the princely sum of £650,000, which she describes as "a ridiculous sum of money". The day after the plot was bought with planning permission for all houses, but the local planners at the council agreed to give permission for a single house. Architects could deliver an outstanding piece of architecture. And won.

Work began immediately after the site was secured. The house, a bedroom for everyone, and "masses of light, lots of glass, limestone floors". No designs were presented at the first meeting. "Instead we made suggestions about how to make the most of the plot," recalls Azman.

A design soon emerged that Azman describes as a "doll's house" — a simple box with an open front. "Because other buildings were looking into the site, our idea was to make walls like solid blinkers at either end of the house and then have a glass wall looking into the courtyard. The main living spaces on the ground floor would all open into the courtyard. Louvers on the upper level would act as a sunshade and also provide more privacy." This powerful idea remained virtually

unchanged. "We started to turn to materials, concrete and steel," says Bedell. "Then we had the project approved by around £25,000. Ferhan and Joyce started to build using concrete and plaster. They were filled with tears at the thought — I'd finally got the idea of concrete." Cutbacks were made elsewhere.

Conceived as one seamless piece of design, the interior, including all the cupboards, shelves (65 metres of them for the couple's extensive library), kitchen and built-in furniture, were also designed by the architects.

"Because the house was built for the family to live in, it made sense to have the furniture as well," says Azman. "The house is built up as walls and partitions, and in the end, it seemed automatic to design in fitted furniture." The total build cost was £540,000, won a clutch of awards, including RIBA Best

Contemporary Victorian terrace house to contemporary house has taken some adjustment. "We virtually built the old house because that's where the new house is." "Here we use all the ground-floor living space of the sky, the light and the weather. The new house is more convivial than the old house, and we're eating out most of the summer."

Interview by David George

Reading

House: A Love Story Set in London (Penguin, £16.99) is Geraldine Bedell's first book, warts-and-tears-and-all account of building a contemporary home in London. Reading for anyone thinking of building their own home. The new study, **Concrete Architecture** (Penguin), is a must for all fans of concrete, and contains some of the most dynamic photographs from the past decade. Lavishly illustrated with a well-written history section, it draws on the dramatic zigzag buildings of the Los Angeles High School in California by architect Frank Lloyd Wright.



Other things have changed, too. "We parted with at least 75 per cent of our possessions in the move. We didn't need furniture because everything except the table and a couple of sofas is built in, and somehow all of us have cut down on hoarding. We are all much tidier, too — partly because there isn't so much stuff, but also because there is plenty of storage — the house demands tidiness."

And drawbacks? Occasionally, because the hard surfaces are not absorbent, noise levels rise when the house is full. But it has not reached a pitch where the family has felt inclined to line the place with rugs. And then there is the lack of pictures. "I do miss them a bit, but at the moment we prefer to look at the concrete," says Bedell.

Open-plan living: the interiors stay uncluttered and are easy to maintain, thanks to a balance of fitted furnishings and storage space



Play of rays: a mix of wood and glass lets light spill into the spacious rooms without losing privacy



Economy: everything except a table and a couple of sofas is built in

HOW to get the look

- **Architect:** Azman Architects (020 7739 8191)
- **Structural engineer:** O'Callaghan Eckersley (020 7354 5485)
- **Services engineer:** Mendick Waring (020 8446 9696)
- **Concrete consultant:** David Bennett Associates (01279 439562)
- **Landscape architects:** Del Buono Gazerwitz (020 7243 6006)
- **Main contractor (including all external and internal joinery, fixtures and fittings):** Varbud Construction (020 8997 9383)
- **Concrete ready-mix:** Hanson Pre-Mix (020 8269 4900)
- **Ironmongery:** Allgoods (020 7255 9324); TF Sampson (01449 613535)
- **Sanitaryware:** Vola (01525 841155); Sissons (01246 450255)
- **Lighting:** Aktiva (020 7428 9325); Louis Poulsen (020 8397 4400); Erco Lighting (020 7408 0320); Delta Light (01428 651919)