Culture

PROPERTY: SPACE, TIME AND CHARACTER

Even for an architect, the process of building your own house can be a nightmare. But, as David Redhead discovers, the rewards are the family home of your dreams, and even the price is right

David Redhead | Sunday 23 November 1997 01:02 |
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Thirty years ago, Erno Goldfinger, an architect whose work some still consider as brutal as his villainous namesake's, set out on an unusual domestic mission. Abandoning the showcase home he'd designed overlooking Hampstead Heath, Goldfinger set up house in the top floor of the Balfron Tower, the concrete council block he'd just completed in Poplar. Three months later, he returned home having, as he saw it, proved his point. High-rise living Goldfinger-style was, in his view, thoroughly satisfactory and by no means the nightmare his critics said it

was.

Goldfinger was a notoriously arrogant man, but were he alive today you doubt that even he would be foolish enough to try the stunt or the self- endorsement that followed. The tabloids would murder him. After all, try as they might, "those bloody architects" still can't shake off their reputation as a favourite national Aunt Sally. The hash they made of tower blocks, many seemed to feel, confirmed that either they didn't quite understand the way we lived or, more perversely, they weren't prepared to let us live the way we wanted. For years the way we have looked at their homes has been coloured by this sense of antipathy. A typical article might be about the hypocrisy of a modern architect who lives in a Georgian terrace, or how a bullying minimalist makes his wife live without curtains. And inevitably, architects have been discouraged from testing out their ideas by building their own homes. For one thing, the caution of planners has made it difficult to find the sites or get the permission to test out anything radically different.

But perhaps a pragmatic young generation of architects can turn the tide. The thirtysomethings whose self-designed houses are shown here all live in a corner of north London where the planners take an "enlightened" view of modern architecture. For most, building a house been a long hard grind, but it looks like their effort has

been worthwhile. These homes are not "built manifestoes" and their architects seem as liberated from the last generation's dogma as their homes are from its leaky concrete. When they've finished, each will have what she or he wanted: a family house with "light, space and character". More remarkably, none of the homes will have cost more than pounds 180,000, including purchasing land. At that sort of price, you sense that their ideas may have a broader currency. After all, "light, space and character" are the domestic attractions that have already so caught the imagination of some homebuyers that it's inspired a loft-building boom. And wouldn't you pay just that little bit extra for "light, space and character ... with garden".

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ANDREW AND FIONA WHALLEY

You'd expect Andrew and Fiona Whalley's house (left and above) to be a high-tech extravaganza. Fiona spent three years working for Richard Rogers. Meanwhile, her husband was masterminding the construction of the Eurostar Terminal at Waterloo, the most prominent landmark yet by Nicholas Grimshaw, Britain's most single-minded devotee of glass and steel.

The home the couple have created together near Finsbury Park in suburban north London certainly looks the part. There's no danger of confusing its bold glass and aluminium facade with the bland bay-windowed suburban terraces that surround it. Even so, Fiona insists the house was not meant to be the Whalleys' miniature "trophy". "Building an icon wasn't the point, at all," she claims. The bottom line was cash. The house cost pounds 180,000, including a plot backing on to Haringey's former greyhound stadium. "We could never have bought a three-bedroom house for what it cost to build one," she says. Well, not one they liked anyway. A Victorian terrace would have been anathema. "Floral wallpaper and a front room is much too formal for us," says Andrew. "We wanted large adaptable rooms and lots of light."

Their house provides plenty of both. Opaque glass bricks conceal the south facing building

from the street but allow sunlight to stream into the double-height hall and, through another glass divider, right into the back of the house too. On either side of this central "core" containing the kitchen and bathrooms is a plywood-skinned "pavilion". This contains glass-walled living rooms on the ground floor and three bedrooms upstairs. "People who come here often say how warm and friendly the house is on the inside," says Fiona. "We wanted to make it a sort of retreat, an oasis in the city."

It's green in more ways than one. In warm weather, hot air from the centre of the house is re-circulated through energy-saving "heat exchangers" into the wooden-walled pavilions. In the winter and at night, metal shutters on either side of the house provide extra insulation and security. "We can close down rooms and open them up to the outside, depending on the season," explains Andrew.

It's cunning stuff. But what do the neighbours make of the eco-friendly spaceship that has landed in their midst? Fiona says they've been more intrigued than irritated. Some strangers have even rung the doorbell to congratulate them. "I'm sure lots of people would like a more modern house, but builders don't offer them the opportunity," she says. They think, though, that the reaction might have been more negative in one of London's middle-class ghettoes.

"Try building a modern house in a bourgeois

area and you struggle with endless opposition from the locals," says Andrew. Fiona agrees: "It's the middle classes," she says. "The middle classes often seem to look backwards."

DOMINIC CULLINAN

In a month's time, Dominic Cullinan will move his family into the sleek glass, steel and concrete house he has designed and built for them in the north-east London suburb of Dalston. It won't be a moment too soon. "It's become a bit of an epic," he admits. "People have compared me to Fitzcarraldo and the house to Gaudi's "Sagrada Familia".

It's not difficult to understand what the jokers mean. So far the 37- year-old architect has spent an astonishing seven years designing and building his home, with most of that time devoted to building. Together with his neighbour and fellow architect, Ivan Harbour, who owns the other half of the "semi-attached" beyond the central "double-helical" staircase they share, Cullinan has cast the concrete, welded the steel and sawn the wood himself to make a house which he confesses with a laugh "is based on the principles of 'fast track' building". More astonishingly, throughout his labours, Dominic, his wife Henrietta, sons Milo, 11, Johnny, 9, and Frankie, 7, and daughter Magda, 5, have all had to live in a lean-to on the building site.

"It's taken so long because we did it without

borrowing money," says Cullinan who does posh barn conversions and is moving a lighthouse on Beachy Head to fund his home building. "A lot of people work their arses off and then borrow money so they can buy a big house. Instead, I've just worked my arse off building it."

Seven years on, Cullinan finds it hard to remember quite how he made the decision to build the place. "It's a bit like having children," he says with a grin. "You do it and find out what it means afterwards." The difference is that Cullinan still finds his children fantastic, but is fed up with his house.

Even so, his wife is still able to describe the place as his "poem in concrete" without a hint of irony and it's clear that his children have not suffered from living in a deluxe garden shed for most of their lives. All three boys are passionate musicians despite some sacrifices they've had to make for their art. "When an uncle left us a piano, Johnny had to decide between it and a bed," says his father. "I think he's had enough of sleeping on the floor now."

Would Cullinan do it again? "Oh yes," he says. "But next time I would use the easiest possible construction method. And," he adds, "I wouldn't lift a finger building it. I'd get someone else in to do that for me."

JOYCE OWENS AND BILL SHORTEN

Joyce Owens and Bill Shorten admit that building a house together hasn't been quite the dreamy experience they anticipated. "Starting was easy," says Bill. "But finishing has been more difficult." Joyce is more to the point. "Two pig-headed architects building a house is a recipe for disaster," she declares.

When it comes to the original concept Bill and Joyce still talk as one. Their plan was to make a squarish building and divide it roughly into quarters, placing the main rooms in "boxes" diagonally opposite each other. A smaller "tower" on a third corner contains the bathroom and "services". A staircase ascends between the "boxes" to the bedrooms above, leaving the fourth quarter as a soaring glass atrium. "We always wanted the place to have an airy inside-outside feeling," says Bill. "So we're both happy with that."

The trouble is that they can't help squabbling over the little things. "I want the kitchen one way and Bill wants it another," admits Joyce with a laugh. "We've fallen out over smaller things than that," adds Bill. "In fact, we've argued for days about whether we should use cross-head screws or slotted ones."

Joyce thinks it's all a natural consequence of growing up. Their ideas have changed and developed since they bought their site - a wooded plot in the garden of an Islington vicarage - three years ago. "We should have

designed it and built it all in one go," says Joyce. "But the fact is that architects aren't well paid and we didn't have the money to do that."

So how can a designer couple fulfil their housebuilding destiny without tearing each other apart? By waiting, Joyce reckons. "The house has cost us pounds 130,000 so far, which isn't much but the optimum age to build is when you're rich enough." Inevitably, somehow, Bill disagrees. "You'll always have aspi-rations bigger than your budget. Wait till you can afford it and you'll die before you've built a thing."

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