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# Want a modern house in Islington - First grit your teeth

Architect Joyce Owens didn't just buy her first home - she built it herself. Mary Wilson explains how.

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The Independent

As you walk down Queen Margaret's Grove, a typical Islington residential road lined with two- and three-storey terraced Victorian houses and a smattering of Georgian examples, the last thing you expect to see is an ultra-modern detached house. But there it is, nestling behind a low wall, beside the St Jude & St Paul's primary school and church. This stunning flat-roofed house was designed and built in the Nineties by its owner, Joyce Owens.

Joyce, who is American, trained there as an architect before moving to London in 1989. She now works for Azman Owens Architects, which has designed Alexander McQueen's studio in Conduit Street and redesigned a house for fashion guru Isabella Blow in Waterloo. With them she has designed several contemporary houses in London, but this was the first one she did for herself. "I had been renting up until 1994, when I decided it was time to buy. I knew Islington and wanted to stay in the area, so I bought a large map, jumped on my bike and went round every weekend, putting red dots on the streets where there was a suitable house for restoring or ripping down. At that time, I didn't really intend to build a house for myself," she says.

Joyce found the plot of land in Queen Margaret's Grove, which at the time was

derelict. "People had had fires on it and it was very overgrown. I discovered it belonged to the vicarage and rang up the vicar, who agreed to sell it to me," she says. "I drew up the designs for the house and approached the planners. Luckily, the council was very positive about the idea, and one of the planners even said 'Islington is getting a reputation for modern outcrops and this gives this young architect a chance to build her own house'."

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The planning committee were also very supportive – until she went back to alter the façade. "While it was being built, I realised that the exterior cladding, which was going to be in lead, was not the right thing," says Joyce. "The house is surrounded by listed buildings – even the stone wall at the side is listed – so it is a very sensitive area. The planner said fine, but we had to go back to the committee. This time, there was one man who just wouldn't agree. Like a dog with a bone, he wouldn't give up."

So she drew up two sets of drawings; one with the lead facade, the other with render, and coloured them in to make them look pretty. "I went round all the neighbours, and asked them to sign the one they approved of." This whole business held Joyce up for 18 months, although she was by then living in the house, which was waterproof, but not finished inside. "Eventually I went back to the planners with the signed drawing and the planner said he would overrule that one objector," she says. Now, the exterior of the house is mostly in a creamy render with one tower-like section covered in grey zinc tiles which look like huge fish-scales.

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Joyce wanted a home which was spacious, light and low maintenance – hence its huge expanse of toughened 'Low E' glazing, window and door-frames in steel and open-plan kitchen/dining room and living/conservatory area on the ground floor.

Upstairs there are three bedrooms, two of which overlook the conservatory area with slatted metal balustrades, through which she has entwined bougainvillea. For privacy, shutters can be pulled across. There are cupboards everywhere and the doors to the bedrooms are full height. Also upstairs, she has hidden away the washing machine and tumble drier in a tall cupboard. "What is the point of having these downstairs, when the dirty washing is upstairs?" she says.

The interior of the house must have been very radical when Joyce built it, although now many new apartments have similar features – open-tread staircase with steel wire running up the sides, halogen lights, stainless steel switches, limestone floors and pale wood work-surfaces.

The small garden surrounds the house, and doors open into it on all sides. "The whole idea of the house was to bring the outside in," she says. "In the summer I just throw open all the doors and if it gets too warm, I open one of the two skylights upstairs to let the hot air rush out".

So what tips can she give to anyone thinking of building a modern house in a traditional, conservation area, or perhaps adding a modern extension. "It is very important to use an architect, and preferably one who knows and has worked with the planners," she says. "You need to approach the planners at a very early stage and work with them before you go before the committee. "You need to have the right approach and have a very strong idea of what you want so you can convince them. You also need to be prepared to do a trade, give them something in return, to get what you want".

When the house sells, will she build again? "I don't think so, I will probably buy a modern flat somewhere. But if I did build my own house again, I'd definitely use

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an architect. It's far too stressful and time consuming doing it oneself."

*14 Queen Margaret's Grove, N1 is on the market through Holden Matthews (020-7226 1313) for £595,000*

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