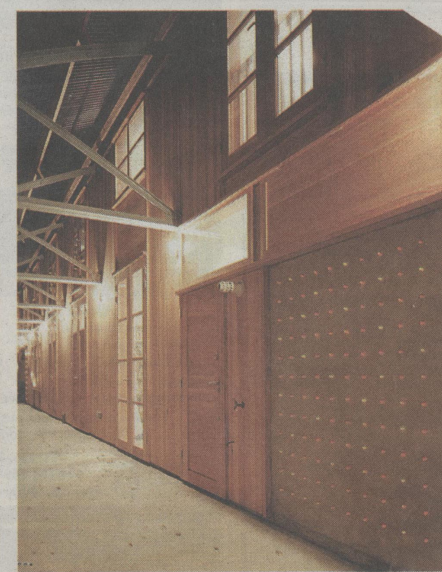




PHOTOS COURTESY LONDON OPEN HOUSE



Joyce Owens, of Azman Owens Architects, is selling the home she designed in Queen Margaret's Grove, far left. The firm also designed 3 Aberdeen Lane, centre, while Knott Architects remodelled a handbag factory, left. Cazenove's modernist design at Clarence Mews, below left, brought light to a dark alleyway

TO PRY AND PRY AGAIN

John Price discovers how architects deal with everyday life in their own creations



EVER WONDERED how architects get on, living with their own creations? This weekend you can find out at first hand. London Open House is back, offering free access to more than 500 buildings across the capital, many of which are not usually open to the public.

They include government offices and corporate HQs, historic interiors and architectural curios. But best of all, in my view, are the contemporary private residences. For architecture buffs and nosy parkers alike, London Open House, now in its eleventh glorious year, is the must-see event of the metropolitan calendar.

Here are the private homes you may have drooled over in the magazines, or even glimpsed inside from the top of a bus. These are the places you may have puzzled about, wrestling with the great philosophical concepts and questions that punctuate 21st-century living. Would white limestone really work with your kids? Can families survive in a glass box with no cupboards? Is a polished concrete worktop rioja-friendly?

And within the Open House list, the discerning nosy parker can devise a bliss list: the homes architects have designed for themselves and

their families. You can mooch about in their space, check on their reading matter or the contents of their fridge and see what brands of toothpaste or cornflakes are in this year. You will be able to imagine them coping with life with only one sock drawer. Oh, and you will be seeing some of the finest new architecture around.

There is something to visit in almost every borough across the capital. Access is free, but some properties require booking. The full list is in local libraries or online at www.londonopenhouse.org or by calling the information line 09001-600 061 (calls cost 60p a minute).

The idea of the London Open House, run by the architectural educational charity of the same name, is a stroke of genius. And with so many buildings on offer it is a masterpiece of planning and coercion just to get so many people to open up on the same weekend. The event keeps getting better and better — so good, in fact, that it could take weeks to do justice to the lot. So be selective. A weekend is all that you can have,

You'll be able to see how they cope with only one sock drawer

although the full list is a valuable tour guide for wandering round the exteriors at any time.

Here is a small selection from the buildings architects have designed for themselves. As Victoria Thornton, the founding director of the Open House, says: "Architects often use their own homes as a laboratory, as an expression of their architectural thinking, and therefore it is no surprise that they would rather design their own homes. It is a never-ending process — thinking, designing, refining."

OPENHOUSES

FIRST, here are two golden oldies where the original architect is still living in the house:

Brooklyn, Lodge Road, Bromley: Built by Ivor Berresford in 1957-58, this cedar-clad house set in woodland was ahead of its time and remains largely unchanged. (Pre-book by e-mail to London Open House via its website: www.londonopenhouse.org.)

Far House, Hillside, Merton, SW19: Norman Plastow's house is largely timber-framed with a glazed elevation to the garden. It was built in 1963, demonstrating that good modern design can last. (Sunday, 10am-5pm. Pre-book on 020-8947 2825.)

For the latest designs that architects have built for themselves, choose from these:

30-36 Clarence Mews, Hackney, E5: A terrace of four live/work mews houses, pictured above right. The design by Cazenove Architects, which is based here, is modernist, using bold colours and natural materials such as oak and copper. The buildings — developed by three neighbours — occupy a previously derelict brownfield site and have brought light and airy spaces to what was once a dark and dangerous alleyway. (Saturday, 10am-5pm. Refreshments. Queues expected.)

5 Crescent Row, EC1: A conversion of a small 1870s warehouse with a roof extension to create a ground-floor architect's office, a first-floor flat and a three-storey maisonette. Good views of the Barbican from the roof. Designed by the RIBA award-winning architect Jamie Fobert, who carried off a prize for his largely underground Anderson House. (Saturday, 10am-5pm. Queues expected.)

23-25 Bacon Street, E2: A new-build, bare essentials family house for the architect William Russell. It has a reinforced concrete structure clad in a combination of galvanised steel, glass and felt. It adjoins Brick Lane Market. Architects: WRAD. (Saturday, 10am-1pm. Maximum 50 at one time. Queues expected.)

3 Talbot Road, Richmond: Transformation of a neglected Victorian cottage. The timber-clad extension by the architectural group 3s contrasts with the old brick building. Look out for gizmos, minimalist furniture and modern lighting. (Sunday, 11am-7pm. Maximum six at one time. Queues expected.)



Knott House, 98B Tollington Park, N4: A former handbag factory turned into two houses, artists' studios and offices for its designers — Knott Architects. (Saturday, 1pm-5pm.)

Quay House, 2C Kings Grove, Southwark, SE15: This is a conversion of a 1930s dairy depot into an architect's office, sculpture studio and home — with a development of three flats above. The house, by Ken Taylor, has appeared in the Open House weekend at various stages of its development. People go back each year to see what's been done. Plus an exhibition by the artist Ken Wilder. (Sunday, 10am-5pm.)

3 Aberdeen Lane, N1: If you are in the Islington area and want to have a look at how some journalists live, don't miss this stunner, which has already carried off a 2003 RIBA award. This is a wonderful-looking contemporary, four-bedroom house designed by Azman Owens Architects for Charles Leadbeater and Geraldine Bedell. It is located behind a bare concrete wall at the end of a lane opposite Highbury Fields. The house is built of concrete (cast in situ), glass and wood, contrasting with its fuddy-duddy, suburban-looking neighbours. (Sunday, 1pm-5pm. Maximum six at a time.)

14 Queen Margaret's Grove, N1: Set in the grounds of a Victorian Gothic church, this stunning open-plan, ultra-modern house was designed by Joyce Owens (of Azman Owens Architects) and has an 18ft-high atrium with glazed roof. (Sunday, 11am-5pm. Maximum 15 people per tour.) For sale for £550,000 through Thomson Currie (020-7354 5224).

55 Butlers and Colonial Wharf, Shad Thames, SE1: Walls that roll, kitchens that unfold, bedrooms that float — a live/work unit with a difference. (Saturday, 10am-5pm.)